

ATHLETIC BODIES AND THE BODIES OF ATHLETES: A CRITIQUE OF THE SPORTING BUILD

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The sculpture is very aptly called *Representation of Sport*. All six figures are strong-looking men: oversized arms capped by broad shoulders, well developed and defined pectoral muscles, a strong and taut waist of transparent skin, and bulging calves and thighs of perfect proportions that end in those small and hard buttocks that support a thick back carved by deep ridges of muscle. They are also young. One cannot help but relate it to the Greek and Roman statues that have acted as canons of male beauty and power through history. The fact that this is an obscure work by an unfamiliar sculptor from Navarre, a small province in northern Spain, actually underscores the point that for all its provincialism it actually embodies a universal “understanding” of what athletes are supposed to look like. Unlike soft, overweight bodies that are scorned, emaciated ones that are scoffed at, or ordinary builds that are “too plain” to deserve a second look, the body of the athlete elicits a conscious, long, and desiring gaze. These are beautiful, powerful bodies that we should marvel at, lust after, and strive for.

—F. Orduna *Representation of Sport*, in *Arte Navarro 1850-1940*. Departamento de Educación y Cultura. Gobierno de Navarra.

Mainstream and orthodox views present both the bodies of athletes and bodies that look athletic as innocuous and attractive ideals for the rest of us to admire, desire, and even emulate. Moreover the endorsement of these bodies concurrently divests them from political and normative overtones that might raise a questioning eyebrow with regard to their docility at the hands of the powers that be, or even their status as *the* beautiful bodies *par excellence*. This artificially narrows down the range of acceptable somatotypes at our disposal, both conceptually and physically. Presently, I take a critical look at these bodies and the conventional postures that support them. An initial analysis of the distinction between the bodies of athletes and athletic bodies is subsequently followed by the conceptual and historical development of our current eulogizing discourse of the athletic body. The inquiry is primarily done on (of) the surface of these bodies, reflecting and focusing on two of the allegedly most conspicuous meanings that first meet our gaze when we look at them: their power and beauty

Three caveats apply to this discussion.¹ One: appellations such as “neoclassical body” or similar soubriquets will refer to the officially sanctioned athletic physique, a description of which is given in the narrative next to Orduna’s *Representation of Sport* above. Two: it must be unequivocally emphasized the neoclassical athletic physique is male. As Miller states “the male body is the standard currency of sporting discourse” (1995:1). This brings attention to an absence that concretely shows how the *status quo* favors certain body types and represses others, both overtly and implicitly: in this instance, the female body is invisible from the “sanctioned” athletic discourse—narrative and pictorial. The forced imperceptibility and silence of actual—not idealized—women athletes’ bodies should shine and resonate brighter and louder than lightning and thunderclap, but is generally ignored at best or vilified at worse.ⁱⁱ Three: another hushed topic concerns race. In the West, at least, stereotypes and superficial glances only reveal a loaded set of dice that roll, unerringly, on the side of bodies whose skin mirrors the white surface of marble

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statues. Even the much lauded black athlete is celebrated more for the “animality” than the sense of classical beauty.ⁱⁱⁱ In the end, the wish is that these comments echo in readers long after the reading is over, with the insistence of whispered but persistent reverberations condensing into memories.

Training: The fabrication of the athlete and the athletic body

It is customary to speak of athletic bodies and the bodies of athletes interchangeably, reflecting common conceptions of what athletes look like and representations of them in the media and the popular imagination. Moreover, there seems to be a *prima facie* plausibility for such a conflation on linguistic and even conceptual levels. This seems incorrect, for there is an actual, embodied marked difference between these two types of builds. To state it bluntly: not all bodies of athletes are athletic, and not all athletic bodies belong to athletes.

The goal of those who covet the athletic look is to possess, to *incorporate*, the kind of body incarnated in our idealized Ordunian representations of sport. These bodies are sculpted according to canons underwritten by prototypical Greek sculptural standards, whereas bodies of athletes have been shaped by the particular motions of sporting activity and may or may not resemble statuesque portrayals. The athletic physique profusely adorns the covers and pictorials of exercise and health magazines, advertisements of cologne, jeans, and exercise equipment, and is also sported by many assiduous gym-goers. Usually, the goal of those seeking that look is to sculpt an athletic body that is neither too muscular nor displays any of the common physical imbalances of *actual* athletes. This kind of build engages in body sculpting, not bodybuilding: symmetry, definition, controlled hypertrophy, appearance—versus functionality—and its display are its trademarks. Much like the Romans strove to copy the perfect proportions embodied by the Greek statues today many seek to clone such proportions in the flesh. This is hardly surprising as for many people the athletic body displays a spectacular appearance that captures gazes and imaginations the way the athletic feat does.

On the other side, the somatic goal of the athlete lies in the particular *telos* of a specific sports activity: The athlete seeks to produce a body that will *perform* best for the athletic or sporting contest of choice. Particular sports emphasize different movements, muscles, and skills that will typically get in the way of actually developing a statuesque aspect *à la Discobolus*. Hargreaves states “the primary focus of attention in sport as a whole is the body and its attributes—its strength, skill, endurance, speed, grace, style, shape and general appearance are tested and /or put on display” (1986: 13). However, we should be discriminating at this point and realize that, unless engaged in a sport where corporeal aesthetics are overtly constitutive, athletes are primarily interested in furthering their progress in their sport regardless of the aesthetic effects such pursuit has. Appearance is definitely secondary to

and dependent on the performance: winning, or setting a record or personal best is the objective. Indeed, even those attributes that bespeak of bodily grace are for the most part determined performatively.^{iv} Among those primarily seeking the athletic body, they may or may not engage in a sport with competitive goals, the crucial difference lying in their unwillingness to sacrifice their look for the primary and specific goals of the sport. Narcissus would make for a poor athlete. In short, one prizes an aesthetic aspect that seeks perfect proportions, the other favors a purely sporting activity centered on athletic contest.

A perfunctory visual analysis of putative members of both groups, athletes and athletic-bodies, shows a certain overlap. Some athletes do possess a neoclassical body. Track and field star Carl Lewis, swimmer Mark Spitz, or diver Greg Louganis are so constituted. But the athletic body among athletes is the exception rather than the rule. The somatic reality of actual athletes is dissonant and unharmonious, and contrasts sharply and loudly with the perfect and melodious tones attained by athletic “models.”

Real athletes usually manifest imbalances and developments that foreclose the symmetry demanded by paradigmatic athletic bodies. Close attention reveals that even putative athletic bodies are less balanced than a cursory gaze reveals. For example, swimmers tend to develop their upper bodies, especially back and shoulders, disproportionately to their lower body. Road cyclists usually have strong, muscular legs and underdeveloped torsos. Unsurprising since the emphasis is not on looking good but on performance. It is not only a lack of symmetry, but of outright corporeal anathema that we find on the physical make-up of most athletes. They evince a great somatic diversity



As the picture of the 1996 US Atlanta Olympic athletes by Annie Leibovitz shows there is more disparity and variation than the unifying epithet “athletic body” seems to surmise in our minds. The physiques of Alex Rousseau, the swimmer on the far left, and Michael Johnson, the runner on the far right, which seem to embody the stereotype and fittingly frame the rest, have little to do with the bodies of Tinker Juarez, the cyclist, colossal weightlifter Mark Henry, seated, or petite Dominique Moceanu, the gymnast perched on Henry’s shoulder.

With permission from Annie Leibovitz (Jeffrey Smith, agent). This photograph originally appeared in *Vanity Fair*, May 1996.

that as a rule fails to exemplify the athletic body that looks like a Greek statue. We need only consider the massive bodies of heavy weight lifters or sumo wrestlers, whose round limbs and generous adipose layer would not elicit any admiring epithets denoting athletic beauty from most people. At the other end of the spectrum we can look at marathoners, who have wiry limbs, paper-thin skin, and emaciated faces. Alternatively we can look at the disproportionate bodies of basketball players who display very long extremities, oversize hands and feet, yet relatively normal sized torsos and heads. Or the case of jockeys, who are petite and weak looking, the antithesis of the powerful masculine build sought after by the “aesthetes of the physique.” Even within sports that seem more predisposed to the production of classical bodies like track and field, diving, or gymnastics, we find many a fine but not spectacular body. In fact, some may look quite ordinary however great their prowess. British athlete Jonathan Edwards, erstwhile triple jump world-record holder, was hailed as a superhuman athlete who looked “normal” by the Spanish media when he broke the world record in 1995, most notably by television commentators in both state sponsored stations during the retransmission of his performance, and the sports journal *Marca*. None of these corporeal instantiations fulfill expectations about the exemplary athletic look. In fact, most athletes are an exception rather than paradigmatic athletic physiques.

The etymology of athlete and athletic traces them to the verb ἀγωνίζομαι, which means “to contend for a prize,” its secondary meaning being “to be an athlete, contend in games.” The noun ἀθλοπαιχτήριον means “prize of contest” (Greek Lexicon 1968: 55). The reference to the body of the athlete is missing, and as we see in the case of the noun the primordial meaning has to do with the notion of competition. The adjective athletic would then refer to a contestant or a contest related affair. The contemporary meaning of athlete corroborates my contention since it is defined as a competitor in physical exercises, and it is only the third meaning—a later historical semantic development—that denotes the athletic as “characterized by heavy frame, large chest, and powerful muscular development: MESOMORPHIC” (Webster’s, 55). The original meaning referred then to a competitive event, not simply or especially to a certain body type. In its inception the athletic body is dependent on the bodies of actual athletes, few of which fit the idealized athletic model, as I have already noted. It is after the athlete’s exploit, often conceptualized as “athletic feat” that we invest the cosmetically correct athletic body with that aura of power, admiration and desirability. Being an athlete and exhibiting athletic qualities was not, is not, and does not have to be synonymous with a neoclassical body.

However, it is clear there has been a conflation of meanings that has posited the athletic body as the paradigmatic body of the athlete. This is unwarranted on a variety of fronts and is conceptually unjustified because, despite the apparent ease with which the athletic body can be identified, a valid definitional criterion cannot be found. It cannot

be defined in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. If we try to accommodate the bodies of all athletes and establish some sort of objective standards then we end up with too wide a definition and many a body that does not fit the neoclassic standard would qualify (and then we would have to switch to a performative criterion that discards the Hellenistic look). On the other side, if we try to make it narrow enough for it to be useful then we exclude many a body that should qualify. It can be retorted this criticism is ultimately irrelevant because we already have a working concept we are competent enough to apply. It is easy to pick the traditional neoclassic bodies: they look like the bodies in Orduna’s sculpture. In other words, this could be worked out by reference to paradigmatic cases. Although this is a *practical* solution it is unwarranted. Stipulating some sort of family resemblance or enlarging our criterion to a wider set of central cases does not work in this instance either, unless we are willing to commit to a *petitio principii*. This stipulation would beg the question by already assuming the ideal neoclassical body as the canon to be observed—a canon that incidentally varied greatly even for the Greeks.

Competition: power and beauty against reason and fairness

There has been a transformation that has switched the logic of this relationship between the athletic and the athlete’s body, so now the word athletic does not denote the bodies of any type of athlete, but rather the strong, firm builds we recognize in Orduna’s *Representation of Sport* while alternative looks are excluded. This body type was first glorified and popularized in Ancient Greek renditions of the male body, particularly later Hellenistic ones. Its somatic aesthetic was reinstated first by art, under the banner of Neoclassicism, when the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries sought the roots of “high culture” in the old classical cultures of Greece and Rome. As Gruneau, citing Kidd, points out “[the perfectly proportioned bodies of Greek male athletes, revealed in the paintings and sculptures being recovered from classical antiquity [...] became the idealized bodily aesthetic” (1993:90). This aesthetic was not truly propelled to the fore of the popular consciousness until the middle to end of the nineteenth century, when sport became part of a modernist cultural project that in several European countries sought a promotion of exercise and the healthy body in the interests of the state (see Vigarello 1978; Gruneau 1993; Boscagli 1996; Hargreaves 1986; and Harvey & Sparks 1991). The leading European countries of the turn of this century, France, England, and Germany implemented statewide programs of physical development for the population, specially the young males, supported by an eugenicist discourse that, as Boscagli points out, “aimed at strengthening the body of the nation against racial and national physical decay by eliminating any degenerate “foreign” body: the unhealthy poor, the savage colonized, even the “weakling” (1996: 16). Although each country had their idiosyncratic way of effecting this the common and most immediate result was, as Hargreaves mentions, this “cult

of athleticism reproduced a sense of national identity among dominant groups” (1986: 219). In this case the political undertones that lie beneath the genesis of this resurgence of the neoclassical body are patent. Here we have for the first time the engineered body of a whole population at large.

As Boscagli argues, England—which found out the inherent weakness of its youth in the Boer Wars—moved quickly to redress this by recuperating the virility of the neoclassical body (1996: 56). This already points to a misinformed appropriation—whose *ad hoc* nature is patent—of a certain type of body that in the minds of those advocating this sort of program embodied the nationalistic values they needed: virility, strength, love of country, purity. Boscagli shows this when she documents how Rupert Brooke, at the turn of the century, became an icon for the national imaginary of England when his upper-class athletic body was Hellenized and promoted as embodying a Greek statue to advertise the pure and strong manliness that could save England from degeneration and from its enemies as well (1996: 75–76).

The complexities of how the social and class struggles were played out in Britain are carefully exposed and analyzed by Hargreaves in *Sport, Power and Culture*. He presents the development of individual and team sports vis à vis social class, and the subsequent institutionalization of physical education programs that served to establish a hegemony that served the bourgeois class objectives and which by means of commerce, the media, and state intervention implements divisions based on class, gender, and ethnicity (1986). The strategies instituted by these countries privileged the body as a central site of political denotation that maximized their propagandistic efforts. Moreover, Gruneau argues the aim of such programs was to consolidate manly physical robustness with social solidarity (1993: 91).

A discourse in vogue today, only all the more conniving because it has been internalized in such a way no official program can be said to enforce it. The state “sponsored” eugenicist project begun in the nineteenth century was naively adopted and popularized last century, particularly its closing decades, as well as today, by the mass media in all its expressions: magazine advertisements, television commercials, sports programs, newscasts, sports magazines, comics and the superhero aesthetic, films like *Rocky*, music (e.g., Donna Summer’s *I want muscles*), literature, etc. All this exerts enormous pressure to conform to the bodily standards set by a dangerously uncritical mainstream culture.

What initially might seem but Procrustean and obsolete methods of old colonialist countries worried about their ability to enforce their supremacy over their colonies has very much become a part of modern mechanisms of power that are enforced not only by particular governments or states, but also by more slippery entities such as consumer and popular culture (paralleling Foucault’s view power structures are not localizable in actual enti-

ties). The United States is a clear, concrete contemporary instantiation of this phenomenon, as Cole makes clear when she explains:

[t]he promise of a transformed self is perhaps made most visible in Rambo’s trickle-down and everyday counterpart: the hard, muscular body produced in fitness clubs. As America’s border’s became increasingly permeable, the body with firm boundaries promised social mobility and United States recovery. (282)

Nowadays the enemy is not found outside in the manner of foreign powers threatening United States interests, or in the social engendering of obscure governments. Rather it is located within, in the idealizations and aspirations absorbed by people from countless sources provided by consumer society and which find their most vehement expression and power when they crystallize as needs: “I need a hard, fit body not because Uncle Sam wants me to, but because I want one.” Whereas for Walter Benjamin the advent of the age of mechanical reproduction brought about the loss of aura for artworks, it seems repetitive exposure to the charms of Neoclassic corporeality has invested it with a divine halo that blinds the masses.

Athletes, in the guise of the pervasive athletic look that spuriously takes the place of the legitimate *corpus* of the athlete, act as cultural icons at the service of the prevailing “aesthetic authority,” promoting those meanings that serve the interests of the dominant social groups or systems. Athletes are a part of this hegemony “[i]n so far as body appearance and usage are integral to the conduct of sports... [which] as ritual practices may function to symbolize and uphold the social order and thus feed the power network” (Hargreaves 1986: 13). Their appeal in terms of the power and beauty they exude, prompting us to fancy them in several senses, highlights this. How these bodies are produced, literally and ideologically, is best understood in terms of a Foucauldian framework. The historical and efficient genesis of the bodies of athletes is tied to certain practices that produce them, sport practices, which emerge out of mechanisms based on power relations—some repress while others create—and technologies that result in social and individual manifestations of a dynamic social character. Foucault showed the historical production of a number of different bodies when he demonstrated how training and disciplinary regimes emerged in the eighteenth century giving rise to the regulation of human bodies as: criminals or soldiers in *Discipline and Punish*; mentally ill people in *Madness and Civilization*; or homosexuals in *The History of Sexuality*. The athleticized body was one of those bodies also.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault shows how repressive and censoring practice gives rise to the modern criminal and the institutions that control and define such a fiend (1979). Although he is concerned with the production of docile bodies in connection with the “criminal establishment,” his method can be readily applied to the athletic world. The techniques used to deal with the criminal are at work in the production of muscular physiques as well

as in the conceptualization and socialization of such bodies. After all there is a means of *correct* training for both. “The chief function of the disciplinary power is to ‘train’, rather than to select and to levy” Foucault says (1979: 170). The seven procedures he identifies as required for a proper penitential condition can easily be adapted to the world of sport (1979: 170ff.). Of course this does not mean there are no relevant differences between athletes and convicts. The issue is the *structures* that are in place to produce one type of population or the other follow the same disciplinary method of production, both instances resulting in docile subjects. For Foucault, power besides being repressive can also be generative and productive (as we see in both *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*). If power can stifle, the other side of the coin is constituted by the entities that it creates: the criminal as criminal, the modern understanding of the athlete’s body as incarnating the divine in the flesh. However, we must be aware this disciplinary system is neither an institution nor an apparatus. Indeed, for him the power that ushers this practice is not “real,” that is, reified in an institution one can concretely isolate, rather it is a nominalization in the most pure scholastic sense. It is not an illusion either, it is “the name one attributes to a complex strategic situation in a particular society” (Foucault 1980: 93). It must not be reified into the manifesto or the rulebook of a particular institution as if it were the result of a conscious and deliberate effort. This strategic situation amounts to “a type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets; it is a ‘physics’ or an ‘anatomy’ of power, a technology” (Foucault, 1979: 215).

The production of athletic bodies depends on the application of two kinds of technologies: scientific and cultural. The medical and scientific establishment plays a direct, literally hands on, role in the production of the bodies in the athletic realm: the physiologist and the expert in biomechanics devise training methods, the chemist and pharmacist develop ergogenic aids. The social and cultural technologies conceptualize such bodies, provide the scientific establishment with their agenda, and create the bodies for our retinas and minds. We see athletic bodies instead of active bodies. The engagement in athletic practices that emphasize certain exercises carries out the actual corporeal production. As Foucault says: “Exercise is that technique by which one imposes on the body tasks that are both repetitive and different, but always graduated” (1979: 161). And these exercises are repeated *ad nauseam*. In connection with this Miller points out there is an excellent match of systems for controlling bodily activity and marshaling it, a focal point of which is found in the “timetables” that were adapted from monasteries, with their rhythms, cycles, and repetitions (1995: 5). This is concretized in the relentless circling of the track by the runner, in the Sisyphean routine of sets and reps of the weight lifter, in the mechanical motions of the tennis player practicing the serve, the backstroke, the volley for hours on end. The medical and scientific technologies

guide this process that the body carries out, sweat pouring down. These repetitive activities produce certain bodies that are conceptualized as corporeal signs by means of a narrative. Here the cultural and social technologies invest these bodies with a meaningful discourse that builds the legend around them.

Cory Johnson’s *Bodies of Evidence* illustrates this excellently (1996). Her pictorial presents photographs of different body parts as (over)developed by some athletes—the corporeal signs through which we will interpret the bodies and body parts—and then proceeds to narratively explain such development in terms of the repetitive framework mentioned (inordinate amount of time, reps, sets, kilometers, laps). Some of her images depict the back of a swimmer, the forearms of a woman climber, and the legs of several cyclists. Accordingly, our narrative will see the broad back and massive shoulders of the swimmer splitting the waters the way the dorsal fin of a shark parts the waves, the ripped and nimble arms of a woman free soloing a boulder of impossible verticality that Spiderman himself would be pressed to climb as steely beautiful branches, and the strong and shiny legs of cyclists as moving pistons that power up the road bringing images of human “iron horses” who conquer geography’s most formidable obstacles. After all, as Hoberman says quoting Yukio Mishima, that Japanese writer who adored his own body, “it is a special property of muscles... that they [feed] the imagination of others while remaining totally devoid of imagination themselves” (1986: 26). The muscles need to be interpreted as muscular, strong, beautiful and desirable before they are visually sculpted into the mold of a powerful athlete.

For the popular imaginary the bodies of athletes produced in the above manner are supposed to be powerful. Unsurprisingly, the embodiment of a strong political state is often identified with the achievements of athletes in international competitions, specially the Olympics. The athlete’s body is supposed to exemplify such strength by winning *and by* looking and being powerful (hence the athletic body of the non-athlete feeds off the mystique of the former). However, the historical genesis of the modern athletic body shows these physiques are not powerful but docile bodies that play into the hands of prevalent power structures that reward compliance and punish deviance. As Miller argues:

There is a clear nexus between obedience and utility as the emergence of disciplinary knowledge exerts control over the body’s timing, operation, and potential for labor. At the same moment as these knowledges enable the body by honing it to a peak performance of tasks, they also disable it through an invisible subordination. (1995: 5-6)

The heretofore positive term of disciplined bodies turns out to be the usher of a repressive practice—whether self-imposed or not. The discipline required to produce such bodies drains those subjects of energy: the very acts of becoming physically powerful renders those engaged in serious athletic activity spent and tame. Moreover, the

disciplinary regime is most successful—indeed that is its goal—when it becomes internalized and the panoptic surveillance is performed by one’s conscience, that all-seeing, omniscient (in principle) sentry Foucault develops in *Discipline and Punishment*. Unsurprisingly, athletes, who are under the constant surveillance of coaches, trainers, the public, and the media, also excel in monitoring themselves. Indeed, there are few people who are as apt at internalizing scrutiny as athletes are.

The powerful athletic body is only so at the surface. It is the body of the circus’ strongman who looks big and strong yet lifts phony weights; it is physically strong, it is lauded as powerful, socially speaking, but ultimately it is a puppet whose strength is no bigger than the tension accorded by the strings that sustain it.

If the bodies of athletes are not (as) powerful in the way we think, at least they seem to be serious candidates for the canon of male beauty. A beauty with roots firmly planted in Ancient Greece that has taken hold of many an artist through history, and the popular imagination today. Pierre Coubertin remarked: “Sport produces beauty since it creates the athlete who is a living sculpture” (Hoberman 1986: 25-6). The beauty of these athletic bodies is grounded on an ideal body type. However, we may wonder rightly, whose ideal?

The notion of the ideal body, cashed out in terms of a beauty that is normalized and set as desirable standard, is a chimerical construct. The historical relativity of this concept attests to this since even the most cursory examination shows how tastes with regard to which bodies were thought of as beautiful and ideal have dramatically changed through history. In fact, there have been periods that favored each of the main somatotypes: endomorphic, ectomorphic and mesomorphic. In Ancient Greece, strong bodies we would consider athletic today were the preferred ones, which contrasts with the preference for thin bodies in Ancient Egypt or the American female population of today, and with the popularity of plump bodies in the Roman Empire or the 17th and 18th centuries in Western Europe (among those who could afford to develop them, since they were a conspicuous sign of opulence). To further understand the falsity of this ideal, we need only consider that even within a given body type, in this case our “familiar” athletic look, standards changed greatly within the same culture. It seems only proper to look at how Ancient Greece, where we encounter the first and most exacting examination of what the ideal body is to look like. What we find is that there is a patent elongation of the ideal body type which in less than a century goes from the massive athleticism of Polykletus’ Diadoumenos, whose body is six times the size of its head, to the finer lines of Praxiteles’ Hermes with a body seven times the size of the head to finally, in less than ten years, Leucippo’s Apoxiomenus, where the ratio becomes eight to one. The adjective “radical” does not capture the magnitude of these changes within the already narrow confines of a very specific body type.

Needless to say few if any ever embody any of these ideals. Urla and Swendlund show, in their anthropometric study of Barbie and Ken, that the average army female and male recruits are quite removed from the “ideal” bodies those dolls represent. The problem is not real people rarely if ever match such proportions (compounded by the fact the favored proportions change every so often), but there is an implicit and unwarranted inference that accompanies the exaltation of such exemplary physiques. Namely, there is a shift from the ideal to the normal. The ideal body is seen as the body one should strive for, something that, as Hausman indicates, “collapses the distinction between the normal and the ideal” so that one claims to describe the normal when in fact one prescribes the latter (1995: 56). In this way the ideal body is turned into a normal one, with all the nefarious consequences of such an illegitimate move that imposes the impossible aspiration of the ideal body to people, most of us, with bodies that are unable to (re)produce these “divine” measurements.

The portrayal by the media of athletic bodies and how they are packaged and presented also present such physiques as beautiful and desirable: they are beautiful in their performance and desirable on their skin. Additionally they tend to be constructed so we tend to interpret them along predetermined, safe, stereotypical ways. Typical media images of athletes exemplify this. The male athletes almost always shown in powerful moves, in effort, grinning, flaunting their muscle, whereas the female athletes are usually shown posing and evoking grace and femininity—thereby divesting them of athleticism. Obviously this takes place without being critically engaged by “the powers that be,” rather it is *actively* endorsed.^v

Typically, the implicit standards of popular taste demand that not too much muscle be present in females. The muscle required for women to excel in athletics in many disciplines is regarded as neither beautiful nor attractive on the female physique. Most of the women in Leibovitz’s picture would fail to be genuinely appealing by most popular standards, cyclist Rebecca Twigg’s legs (seated) being too muscular, the diminutive child-like frame of Moceanu being too nubile, the broad shoulders and powerful back of swimmer Jenny Thompson looking too manly, and the build of track athlete Sheila Hudson (wrapped in the flag) being too trim and powerful looking. Popular culture and tastes, particularly through the “multi-venue” mouthpiece of the mass media, presents as adequate only tame images of female athletes who embody a narrow conception of feminine finesse, such as they did with tennis player Gabriela Sabatini in her heyday. When the woman fails to fit the expected safe look she is showcased as some sort of freak, as happened to the powerful looking runner Jarmila Kratochilova in the 1980s or another tennis player the “buffed up” Mary Pierce. In short, the not so muscular athletic yet feminine (whatever instantiates this) body is preferred to the athlete’s real body. Nonetheless, the *ideal*—again not real—athletic body pertains to a male as the image Orduna’s statue unerringly shows. It is regrettable yet fittingly ironic

that precisely what constitutes reason to praise a man's performance, namely his powerful look, his lean body, his aggressiveness, is turned on its head to criticize the successful woman athlete by pejoratively categorizing her as masculine, overbearing, unattractive, or unfeminine. In actuality, the bodies of athletes are male bodies, female bodies, masculine women's bodies, feminized men's bodies, and transsexual bodies (as instantiated by Dr. Renée Richards, formerly Richard Raskind, who attempted to play in women's tournaments in the late seventies and challenged contemporary tests for femaleness upheld by sporting bodies) (Hyde 1986:476).

To open a legitimate place for athletes and their bodies I offer two suggestions. First, against the disciplining processes and politics that produce the powerful bodies, I propose an engaged politics spearheaded by us, the theorists, to vocalize a *new discourse* on and *by* athletes. Second, to the aesthetics of the athletic body, that posits a narrow model that is extraordinary—not ordinary—as if it were the norm, I proffer an acceptance, rather a celebration, of the rich and varied reality of the bodies of athletes, all of them legitimately athletic.

This celebration should overcome beauty as the standard to incorporate interesting, outrageous, fun, and alternative bodies as part of our corporeal aesthetic world. Actual athletes have an advantage over the mere athletic-looking body (and over most of us) because their essence lies in a performativity they can exploit thanks to the prominence it earns them, and which provides them with the opportunity to be vocal and engaged entities, and not mere puppets.

A bit of help from us is more than desirable so that in the end we make room for every body.

ENDNOTES

i Another caveat concerns issues raised by evolutionary psychology. It is not addressed here because even a cursory treatment, let alone a properly balanced one, requires changing the focus and nature of the paper. Let the following comments serve as suggestions to be taken up at another time. The basic idea is that bodies favored by humans aesthetically, in this case the neoclassic build, are somehow hardwired in us through evolutionary processes: wide female hips or male broad shoulders are seen as more attractive in potential mates. Even if, for the sake of the argument, we assume this to be the case (it is contestable), this is not where the buck stops. 'Culture' is a rich crucible that sublimes even the strongest "impulses." There are plenty of cases where culture modifies initial "hardwired" tastes, thus acting as counterexamples. For instance, Chinese bound feet, the elongated necks of the Kayan people of Myanmar, or the stretched lip discs of the Lobi and Makonde in Africa. The preferred aesthetic is neither evolutionarily advantageous nor something found attractive by outsiders, but much like other developed tastes (atonal music, coffee, spicy food) these *are* attractive to the germane groups while not conforming to the "evolutionary norm". Moreover, even if they were developed for some utilitarian reason, such as to prevent kidnapping by other tribes, they do evolve into a standard of beauty aesthetic ultimately.

ii An example of how this project can be fruitfully carried out is found in Honi Haber's *Foucault Pumped: Body Politics and the Muscled Woman*, where she uses the female bodybuilder figure to disturb fallocratic ways of seeing women (Hekman 1996:143).

iii As in the case of the female body, this requires to be developed on its own. The following resources shed some light on the issue: Richard Dyer's "The White Man's muscles" in *Race and the subject of masculinities*, 1997, edited by Harry Stecopoulos and Michael Uebel. Durham & London: Duke University Press, (and other articles therein), or the fifth chapter in Michael Messner's *Politics of Masculinities*, 1997, Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

iv Bodybuilding is the one exception where both aesthetic and athletic concerns are ostensibly combined. Other sports may value grace in movement, as in gymnastics. However, and while the gymnast's body is often lauded as attractive, this aspect is not a de facto determinant on how the performance is evaluated as a performance by judges and public (the more attractive candidate is not given points on account of such attractiveness—at least not explicitly and fairly).

v It is to Annie Leibovitz's credit that her pictorial of 61 Olympic athletes for the 1996 May issue of *Vanity Fair* plus her pictures of athletes in action for another article in the same issue tend to break with such nefarious and stereotypical representational mores.

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