

## THE MOST POSTMODERN OF SPORTS: BODYBUILDING IN THE CULTURAL MIRROR

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*Abstract: At the crossroads between athletics, arts and modern freak-show there is bodybuilding, a sport which attracts millions of die-hard fans and millions of harsh, hyper-critical remarks. The present paper discusses the reflection of bodybuilding on the fragmented mirror of contemporary popular culture, through the lenses of postmodern theories, against the background of a multi-faceted, ever-changing global community.*

*Keywords: bodybuilding, aesthetics, popular culture, postmodern theory, global village*

The contemporary social and cultural reality is dominated by two simultaneous processes, the emergence of local narratives and the sophisticated structuring of globalization with its entire mechanism of conformity. In a typically postmodern fashion, boundaries, limits and definitions all lose clarity, becoming contextual, constructable or, more often than not, easier to erase than to acknowledge. No category is rigid, no content is stable. Sports have become one of the most visible pieces in the complex puzzle of (post)modern fast-forward, go-online social environment, being subjected to a variety of culturally constructed conventions.

As open to novel views as possible, postmodernism is apparently still not flexible enough to include all visions and to voice all perspectives – bodybuilding, especially professional bodybuilding, occupies a blatantly bipolar position in the hierarchy of sports and in the interests of the general audience in the global hall of entertainment. From a cultural/ historical point of view, postmodern rhetoric, undermining modernist assumptions, labels and concepts, eventually began to affect the way in which assumptions were being constructed, the manner in which labels were being attached. The black-and-white dichotomies, functioning as basis for the grand narratives of modernity, challenged by postmodern distrust and relativism, have been redefined in multiple shades of gray, decomposed and built over through a continuous metamorphosis of their conceptual boundaries. Subjective perception became as valuable as the meta-narrative of former allegedly fundamental or objective truths; truncated visions became as rich in expression as universally valid perspectives. Extremes have accomplished a relatively common status, whether in simplicity or in sophistication; the multiplicity of styles and approaches in all fields has broadened each context and turned each interpretation into an inevitably transforming and self-recreating discourse. However, “extreme” has also become the very label collectively assigned to bodybuilding, accompanied by an entire rhetoric of irony and crude criticism.

The postmodern features of bodybuilding as a sport can be highlighted if we analyze the duality of what happens inside the bodybuilding community – like-minded individuals, striving towards the same goal – and how this community is perceived by the outsiders (usually, as narcissistic, obsessed, divergent). The evolution of a bodily utopia has suffered from the same influences that shape and reshape contemporary concepts. The effects of postmodernism on the concept of utopia are triggered by the very nature of the former: it is not merely a style, or a pattern of interpretation, but a cultural dominant, affecting each and every ideology, utopianism included. Late capitalism, with its emphasis on fragmentation and a centre-to-margin trajectory of discourses, has also shaped utopian visions up to a point where they mirror the two processes

that Jameson considers fundamental for this particular period: commodification and recycling.<sup>1</sup> The old is not forgotten, only metamorphosed by the mechanisms of a new cultural configuration. Styles and discourses are progressively marked by patterns of consumerism, with commodification being the main phenomenon regularizing all aspects of social and cultural life. If modernity was centred upon the production of art, postmodernity focuses on the infinite multiplication of art, according to the needs of the consumer. This particular element in the cultural arena, the consumer, is viewed by Jameson as being the pivotal norm for all developments, the very means to contextualize artistic production as well as its endless duplication. The newly-evolved Consumer Culture is grounded in a series of perpetual presents, as time is already too fragmented for natural evolution – history becomes just another item inscribed in the schematism of commodification. If the self-induced paranoid delusions of a science fiction writer are added to this complex equation, the result becomes the epitome of fragmentariness, with a quasi-psychiatric twist, and all individual quests seem to be condemned to perpetual futility, since they inevitably dwell in simulation.

The bodybuilder's individual utopia is the perfect physique – achieving the flawless combination of muscle mass, definition and proportions that would allow him to conquer the stage, professionally, and be content with development, personally. Inevitably, comparisons between himself and the others are simultaneously the source of frustration, satisfaction and motivation. Each beginner bodybuilder looks up to the images of all the Mister Olympias<sup>2</sup> before him. Arnold Schwarzenegger did the same – but, unlike the vast majority of lifters who quickly learn that becoming the best is almost impossible even for the best athletes and definitely impossible for themselves, Arnold also managed to win a world competition against his idol, Reg Park, before going on to become Mister Olympia seven times, successful businessman, actor and governor. Such an unbelievable story further fuels the dreams the countless other bodybuilders, who desire to replicate, at least partially, Arnold's fame; we mentioned Arnold because his name is inherently tied to the world of bodybuilding, being the most visible missing link between the seemingly obscure gyms around the world and success in life at all levels.

The contemporary media culture focuses on the visual – so the infinite replication of images on all kinds of screens bears more importance than anything else when it comes to propagating cultural myths and creating role models. The cinema and the Internet both construct a powerful association of images, in the case of modern action heroes, and place an equality sign between success and spending time in the gym.

The postmodern framework of social adaptation places the bodybuilder in a schizophrenic, aggressive state – adapting to the mainstream cultural environment is difficult, since bodybuilding is inherently regarded as an extreme and approached suspiciously. The entire equation of daily life becomes altered by the disparity between the athlete's perspective and the one shared by “non-lifters”. In this scenario, staged by postmodernity, with proximity being an invasive influence on the subject, existence is simultaneously transparent and coded (through media, culture and the overflow of images, exceeding one's capacity to properly interiorize their meaning).<sup>3</sup>

Professional bodybuilders live in-between two different visions of the real, one idealistic – the perfectly shaped physique they would present on stage, before the fans and judges – and one realistic, represented by the not-really-perfect stages of preparing for a competition. Their identity is constructed, partially, on purely physical grounds, since they can never detach themselves from their idealized body or their personal records in lifting weights.

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<sup>1</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Logic of Late Capitalism*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1991

<sup>2</sup> Mister Olympia is the title given to the best professional bodybuilder, each year.

<sup>3</sup> Jean Baudrillard, “The Ecstasy of Communication”, *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ed. Hal Foster, Bay Press, Washington, 1983

Muscular perfection functions as their own utopia, and, just like any utopian enterprise, achieving perfection is impossible. First of all there is the physical side of the sport – the endless hours of training, complex nutrition, specially designed daily schedule, plans regarding adequate routines, finding the right combination of supplements. Secondly, the very ideal they strive for is a shifting one – there is not black and white description of an ideal physique, judging is subjective and the notoriety of each competitor, difficult to assess in the age of social media, also comes into play.

The problem of identity is also rather confusing when it comes to bodybuilding. On the one hand, there is a need for the athletes to define themselves, in all contexts, with the feature of being a bodybuilder always prominent (it is enough to observe the case of Arnold Schwarzenegger, who irrespectively of the position he occupies or the activity he gets involved in is always perceived through the lenses of bodybuilding: actor, governor, environmental activist, business man or government official, he is perceived as an exponent of bodybuilding). The configuration of individual identity in bodybuilders always includes the sport. Like any utopia, bodybuilders' utopia has to remain intangible in order to preserve its existence, but in the age of social media and Photoshop the representation of any reality, subjective or objective, cannot escape a pervasive. The utopia of identity should function as a better (or perfect) alternative to a present reality, but for the bodybuilders it simply represents an endless source of frustration – and if there is a special design in the architecture of frustration, it exists in the realm of bodybuilding: motivational frustration. The athlete in relentlessly trying to adjust his micro-universe to fit his image of perfection, and incongruities, failures and even hopelessness only manage to make him train harder.

In the world of bodybuilding, each gym-goer has to face the permanent struggle of juggling the elaborate cynicism of the people and the programmatic energy he needs for completing the regimen of training and nutrition. A postmodern particularity of bodybuilding is the fact that its practitioners are perceived as a group, as a community, almost as a cult with strange rules – the lenses used belong to the same postmodern “anonymous perspective”, where individuals are analyzed as a community, at the societal level, and hardly at the personal level.<sup>4</sup>

Having physical perfection as personal utopia can be apprehended using the same functional norms that are applied to all types of utopia. The “ideological subject-positions” discussed by Jameson build up the basis for apprehending each utopian context, with the actual understanding of it being inevitably bordered by a particular type of perspectivism.<sup>5</sup> The relationship between the utopian text and the socio-cultural reality that served as background for its emergence is also difficult to articulate coherently, as long as the transformation of utopianism as form of social dreaming<sup>6</sup> into the actual hypostasis of utopia is not linear, each instance of utopia being derived from the issues in the real world, but these issues are amalgamated with a certain individuality of perspective and blended with a variety of cultural and historical myths. For bodybuilding, the utopian text might be the sum-total of all the cultural myths about the sport, all the legendary athletes, all the imagined accomplishments, while social dreaming is replaced by active pursuit, and the desired results stem from the complex collection of icons provided by the media.

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<sup>4</sup> Fredric Jameson (“The Politics of Utopia”, in *New Left Review*, No. 25, January – February 2004): “The citizens of utopia are grasped as a statistical population; there are no individuals any longer, let alone any existential «lived experience»”.

<sup>5</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Gregory Claeys, Lyman Tower Sargent, *op.cit.*, p.1

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