Dr Andrew Edgar
The Athletic Body

Centre for Applied Ethics,
Cardiff University,
John Percival Building,
Colum Drive,
Cardiff CF10 3EU
UK

edgar@cf.ac.uk
+44(0)2920874935

I can confirm that I have no potential conflicts of interest.

Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the attraction and the beauty of the contemporary athletic body. It will be suggested that a body shaped through muscular bulk and definition has come to be seen as aesthetically normative. This body differs from the body of athletes from the early and mid-twentieth century. It will be argued that the contemporary body is not merely the result of advances in sports science, but rather that it is expressive of certain meanings and values. The visual similarity of the contemporary athletic body and that of the comic book superhero suggests that both bodies carry a similar potential for narrative story-telling, and that their attraction is bound up with this narrative potential. The superhero and athlete live meaningful lives, pursuing clear and morally unambiguous goals. The aesthetic attraction of the body lies in its capacity to facilitate the articulation of a story of a meaningful life, and to do so in the face of the growing anomie and thus meaninglessness of life as experienced in contemporary society. Athleticism offers an illusion of meaning, serving to reproduce dominant justificatory narratives and social stereotypes. Yet, as an illusion of meaning, it may be challenged and negotiated, not least with respect to its bias towards a certain form of the male body. The female athletic body disrupts the illusion, opening up new existential possibilities, new ways of living and being, and thus new, and potentially disruptive, narratives.

Key words: beauty, health, Johnny Weissmuller, Michael Phelps, monomyth, superheroes.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to articulate the difference between two athletic bodies. Johnny Weissmuller won five Olympic gold medals in swimming between 1924 and 1928, and reputedly unbeaten as a competitive swimmer. He subsequently became the actor most immediately identified with the role of Tarzan. Michael Phelps won 22 gold medals in swimming between 2004 and 2012. While Phelps has won more gold medals than any other Olympic athlete, he and Weissmuller may be seen as equally dominant in their respected periods, and thus comparable in terms of their athletic achievements. However, comparison of photographs immediately reveals a difference in their physiques. While both are highly muscular, Phelps body is more precisely sculptured. His muscles have 'clean bulk', in comparison to the 'dirty bulk' of Weissmuller, to use classifications from body building.

This is not merely a comparison of two particular bodies. It is rather to recognise that their bodies are representative of the (male) athletes of their respective periods. The Weissmuller-type can be seen, not merely in sport, for example in swimming and boxing, but also in the cinema up until at least the early 1960s.[1] Phelps's clean bulk becomes dominant and increasingly visible, not merely in swimming, but also in sports such as athletics, various codes of football and in tennis, in the early twentieth century. Further, it is not merely the body of athletes, but also one that is increasingly prevalent in cinema, fashion and, perhaps crucially, in the advertising of male health and fitness products. It is by no means the only visible body-type in sport or elsewhere, but it has a dominance reflected in the high media profile given to athletes such as Phelps, Usain Bolt and Rafael Nadel. The heavily and cleanly muscled body of the sprinter and power athlete has a normative priority over that of, say, the more slender endurance athlete. Clean bulk is the norm, against which others are judged, and towards which even non-athletes should aspire. It is the healthy body of the autonomous individual.

The Phelps body-type is a body which is overtly displayed. It is, as it were, presented to the spectator's gaze. This occurs not merely in sports such as swimming, that permit the display of the naked male torso, but also in other sports. The clothing worn by athletes develops, with the increasing prevalence of this body-type, to cling more closely to the body, and thus to emphasise the sculpting of the muscles. This may be seen in rugby, association football, and cycling. Track cycling is particularly telling, in so far as the contemporary uniform resembles that of the early and mid-twentieth century, Golden Age, comic book superhero.[2] Publicity and advertising images of

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1 See, for example, Kirk Douglas' performance in Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus* (1960).

2 The 'Golden Age' of comic books is typically the period between 1930 and 1960. The narrative innovations of Stan Lee, at Marvel Comics, in the early 1960s' led to more vulnerable superheroes, at times lacking heavily muscled bodies (e.g. Spider Man), and frequently morally uncertain or acting in the face of moral challenge (e.g. as to their vigilantism). (On the history of American comics, see Duncan and Smith, pp. 20-84 [1])

Chris Hoy (of the UK and Sky teams) seem intentionally to invoke Superman.[3]

It may be argued that Phelps' body is simply the result of developments in sports science. It is a more efficient, powerful, and ultimately better trained body. Similarly, it may be argued that tight fitting sports clothing is more aerodynamic (in the case of cycling), or more functional (as in rugby, where a loose shirt can more easily be grabbed in a tackle). The normativity of both the body and its clothing would thus be scientifically grounded. While this may be a partial explanation, it will be argued below that this athletic body-type cannot be understood merely as a product of science. This is immediately suggested in the matter of clothing, where the tight shirt could be seen as a disadvantage in soccer. (A loose shirt is something that can be grabbed at in an attempt to halt an opponent, but as such a temptation to a foul.) It will be argued, therefore, that the clean bulk body-type, with its attendant clothing, reflects a series of culturally normative choices beyond the issue of mere technical efficiency. In being presented to the spectator's gaze, it is a body that is shaped by a specific aesthetic and politics. It is the image of a powerful and autonomous body, regardless of whether or not it genuinely is powerful. It will thus be argued that this body-type may be understood in terms of a precise, but highly contestable, narrative of the athletic hero.

My analysis will proceed through the following stages: drawing on Kant and Hegel, it will be argued that appreciation of beauty is not immediate, but mediated by narrative structures or myths; the concept of the monomyth will be introduced, as the archetypical narrative structure; a brief history of the representation of the body will allow for the articulation of a number of strands contributing to the modern 'athletic monomyth'; from this an interpretation of the Phelps-body will be offered, as the personification of a meaningful life. Finally the illusion of the athletic monomyth will be exposed, not least in terms of its patriarchal assumptions, and hence the impoverished account it offers of sport and the human condition.

Beauty and Myth

For Kant, it is in the representation of the human body that one finds the perfection of beauty, or 'ideal' ([2] p. 63 [marginal number 232]). Kant justifies this conclusion in terms of the expressive possibilities of which the human body is capable. To judge a human body beautiful is never be a matter of mere 'charm'. That is to say, not a matter of finding the body to be immediately sensually attractive. Aesthetic judgement of the ideal, rather, must invoke reason (p. 66 [235-6]). Humans have the freedom to determine their own ends, and to do this according to reason. The human, uniquely amongst animals, can judge itself and its goals according to 'essential and universal ends' and thus aspire to perfection (p. 65 [233]). As such, the human is a uniquely moral being (p. 66

3 See http://www.cyclingweekly.co.uk/news/latest-news/hoy-i-believe-the-french-have-pastries-for-breakfast-91433 [accessed 16th February 2016]

[235]). The results of this choice and self-judgement will be manifest in the movements and gestures of the body. The beauty of a representation of a human body lies, therefore, not in the reproduction or mimesis of an actually existing and charming body, nor yet in that of a mere statistically average body, but rather in capturing the body as the personification of moral action. Representation of the human body allows the artist to find an image that corresponds to the idea of moral freedom, that would otherwise be thinkable only in the abstract, but not available to perception.

Kant is arguing that it is the role of art to give sensuous form to rational ideas (and what are otherwise empty concepts without intuitions ([3] A51/B 75)). Somewhat similarly, Hegel argues that the task of art 'is to bring the spiritual before our eyes in a sensual manner' ([4] p. 78). Hegel's claim is broader than Kant's. The content of art is not composed of rational ideas but rather an understanding of the divine, so that beauty is truth given a sensible form. For Hegel, religion, as the quest for absolute truth or Spirit [*Geist*], finds its articulation, in part, through the invention of the artist. The artist does not merely illustrate pre-existing theological or philosophical doctrines. Rather, the doctrine is worked out in the artistic image. Further, while Kant's conception of beauty and art is largely ahistorical, Hegel articulates the historical and logical unfolding of art as it strives for an ever more adequate grasp of the spiritual. Yet, like Kant, Hegel saw in the representation of the human body the perfection of beauty, and more precisely, in Hellenistic sculpture, the 'pinnacle' of what art could achieve ([4] p. 79). Again, the point is not that Hellenistic art perfected the mere imitation of the empirical human body, but rather that the form of the sculpture is uniquely harmonious with art's spiritual content, which is to say the Greek understanding of the divine, as found in its mythology (p. 78). The form of the perfect human body – purified of 'contingent finitude' (p. 78) – is that of the Greek god, and as such it is in the human body that the artist finds, not simply an expression of Kant's moral reason, but rather of the Spirit in its only adequate sensual form.

The precise details of Hegel's metaphysics are not at issue here. Rather, his importance, and indeed Kant's, lies in the claim that the beauty of the human body does not reside in its immediate sensual appeal. Rather the judgement of the beauty of the body presupposes that it is expressive of a broader rational or spiritual construct. The beauty of the body for Hegel is judged in terms of the story or mythology which it articulates, and through which it is understood. But Hegel is also offering something still more subtle. The 'pinnacle' of art, its most perfect achievement of beauty, occurs in Hegel's history, somewhat oddly, in what he calls classical art, and not, as one might expect, at the end of art (and thus, for Hegel, Christian art). Hegel's argument is that, as theology develops, the spiritual content outstrips the capacity of art to give it adequate sensible representation. Hegel's final stage of art, the Romantic, is thus an art that forsakes beauty in favour

of deeper self-consciousness and awareness of its inability to use its necessarily sensual media (such as stone, paint, sound, or even the literary image) to grasp a necessarily purely spiritual (and thus non-sensual) divinity. Again, the details of Hegel's metaphysics are not the point. The point is that the perfect beauty of Hellenistic art is an illusion. Its perfection is made possible only by the inherent defects of its grounding theology ([4] p. 79).

From Hegel, two arguments will be developed. Firstly, it will be argued that the beauty of the body of the athlete can, like that of the Hellenistic sculpture, only be understood in terms of its mediating myth, which will be labelled the 'athletic monomyth'. This myth, it will be argued, is attractive because it belies and distracts from a specific experience of meaninglessness (or anomie) that is prevalent in contemporary society. So, secondly, precisely in that the beauty of the athletic body rests upon a culturally specific myth (rather than upon a Kantian universal), it will be argued that this body, and the judgement that it is beautiful, is a potential site of tension and negotiation. The athletic monomyth can be contested. Just as Hegel's Romantic art develops through self-reflection, so alternative and more self-conscious interpretations and realisations of the athletic body (and thus what it means to participate in sport) are possible. These alternatives offer a disruptive 'beauty' in comparison to the largely affirmative athletic monomyth, and a beauty that opens up a space through which the athletic body can be reconstructed and narrated anew as something critical of both sporting and non-sporting norms of bodily appearance and health.

The Athletic Monomyth

Campbell proposed the concept of the 'monomyth' as an attempt to grasp an archetype or metastructure to which particular mythical hero narratives conform. This 'classical' monomyth is summarised so: 'A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man' ([5] p. 30). The concept has been taken up by Jewett and Lawrence [6], in order to argue for a more specific 'American Monomyth', which is exemplified by stories of, amongst others, comic book superheroes.[4] This variant is summarised so: 'A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil. Normal institutions fail to contend with this threat. A selfless hero emerges to renounce temptation and carry out the redemptive task, and, aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisal condition. The superhero then recedes into obscurity' (p. xx). Without necessarily making any commitment to the metaphysical baggage of Campbell's original argument, these two outlines of mythical narratives may nonetheless serve as stepping off points from which a

4 It is perhaps most clearly exemplified by the Western. Novels and movies such as *Riders of the Purple Sage*, *Shane*, and even *Fist Full of Dollars* come to mind.

further variant, an 'athletic monomyth' may be articulated, as the archetype to which dominant sporting narratives correspond. In brief, the modern athletic hero – the figure of reportage, journalistic profiles and fan adoration, as well as of certain fictions – the hero possessed of the Phelps body-type, will be argued to be a hero who comes from nowhere (in the sense that they have no life outside of sport), entering a region of wonder (the sporting arena), in order to secure a decisive victory in defence of a community (the supporters of their term or nation). The hero then recedes into obscurity (falling from public view once their athletic career finishes). Crucially, as such, the hero personifies a meaningful life. It is a life wholly dedicated to a single, clearly defined purpose, and is fulfilled in the achievement of that purpose.

Representations of the Athlete

The depiction of the athlete, be this through narrative or image, has a long history. In the Western tradition, the early representation of the athlete may understood in terms of both Hegel's Classicism and Campbell's monomyth, precisely in so far as these images articulate an understanding of the gods. The athlete is the explicit subject-matter of a number of surviving Hellenistic sculptures, such as the *Discobolus*, the Boxer of the Quirinal, and *Apoxyomenos* (the Scrapper). The body here begins to anticipate that of Phelps. Muscles are emphasised and cleanly defined. This body-type is lent to gods and heroes, and an overt link to athleticism is made in certain examples. The *Artemision Bronze* (c. 460 BCE) represents Zeus or Poseidon in the pose of a javelin thrower. The *Riace Bronzes* of the same period, while described as warriors, again offer images of the athletic body. However, it is important, following Kant and Hegel, to recognise that the beauty of such bodies lies, not in their being mimetic copies of actual bodies, but rather in their being ideals, purified of contingent finitude. It may be suggested that this musculature (even of the exhausted and battered Boxer of the Quirinal) is more precisely and cleanly defined than it would be in any flesh and blood athlete.[5] The Hellenistic sculpture, nonetheless, offers an image of perfection towards which the flesh and blood human may aspire.

It may be suggested that an important alternative model for muscular development is found in images of Heracles. Here the muscles are exaggerated and much less cleanly defined. This exaggeration may be interpreted as expressive of both the physical power and a divine influence. Heracles' father is Zeus, his mother the mortal Alcmene. Excessive muscular bulk is the mark of superhuman or divine strength. The Phelps-type may be seen to go beyond the cleanly defined musculature of the *Artemision Bronze* and towards the bulk of a Heracles.

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5 The tension between the aesthetic ideal and empirical reality is illustrated by Discolobus. The sculpture has, in the past, been mistakenly taken as a model for the pose of a successful and efficient discus thrower. It was treated, as it were, as a training manual. In practice, the pose of the real athlete has been distorted for aesthetic effect. The pose of Discolobus is more harmonious and elegant than that of a real athlete.

The development of modern sport, from the nineteenth century onwards, reveals two contrasting approaches to the body. In one, the body itself is the focus of athletic attention. In the German *Turmverein* tradition, founded by Friedich Ludwig Jahn around 1811, gymnastic training is used to develop the body. For Jahn, gymnastic training would make for a healthier and stronger population, and crucially one that would not again suffer the sort of military humiliation that the Prussians suffered under Napoleon. The emphasis falls, not upon competition, but rather upon the beauty of the body and its movements. An association may be drawn between this gymnastic body and that of the Greek sculpture. The opening sequence of Leni Reifenstahl's 1936 film *Olympia* makes much of the relationship between modern Germany and ancient Greece and its art.[6] The inclusion here of synchronised gymnastics, albeit by female gymnasts, suggests that the *Turnvereine* work towards the bodily ideal of the Greek sculpture.

An alternative form in which the body is the focus of aesthetic attention arises in body building. As in the *Turner* tradition, the body is not primarily competitive. Body building emerges as much from the circus tradition of the strongman as from competitive weight lifting. The body is being shaped, although for the entertainment of spectators rather than for the health benefits of the athletes themselves. The musculature of a body that can perform remarkable feats of strength is put on display. The reputed father of modern body building, Eugen Sandow, develops a body that approaches the muscular exaggeration of Heracles, and not the elegance of the *Apoxyomenos*.[7]

Neither the gymnast nor the strongman are obviously heroes of classical 'monomyth'. The narrative of the *Turnvereine* is a narrative of political development. The gymnast is the citizen of a somewhat homogeneous utopian community, cultivated physically and morally through exercise. (Jahn was explicit in his political aspirations for the *Turnvereine*, and in his xenophobia and anti-Semitism he has been understood as a source for Nazi ideology). In contrast the body builder or strongman is an entertainer, and perhaps as such a mere object of charm (in Kant's sense) rather than genuine aesthetic pleasure.

The second approach to the body is found in genuinely competitive sport. This largely Anglo-American tradition, with roots in English public schools and the American Ivy League Universities, as well as working class movements such as the development of Association Football in the mid-19th century, received a crucial articulation in the work of various modernist artists. Organised competitive sport is embedded within the narrative of modernity. This may be seen most clearly in Robert Delaunay's series of paintings, *The Cardiff Team* (1912-13). Here rugby players merge with other symbols of modernity, such as the ferris wheel, the biplane and crucially the

6 The relationship between ancient Greek culture and the modern (German) athlete is articulated in *Olympia's* opening sequences through the transformation of *Discobolus* into the flesh and blood Olympic decathlete Erwin Huber.

7 See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Sandow_ca1894.ogv [accessed 16th February 2016] for a brief film of Sandow posing.

advertisement. The emphasis here is not upon the body, but rather upon what it can perform. In Umberto Boccioni's 1913 paintings, *Dynamism of a Soccer Player* and *The Dynamics of a Cyclist*, the athletic body disappears behind its movement and speed. The bicycle (and subsequently the racing car) become central to this celebration of the experience and enjoyment of modernist technology. Modernist art shows little interest in anything like the muscular body of classical sculpture, as modernism increasingly abstracts from the physical and perceptible body in order to grasp power itself. The modernist sense of beauty or aesthetic worth is thus grounded in a radically different narrative to that of the classical monomyth.[8]

Weissmuller and Phelps

Johnny Weissmuller's body-type may be situated in relationship to this complex of ideas, as a body that goes beyond the display of gymnastics and body-building, while not yet being reduced to the mere performance of the modernist. Something of the sporting monomyth is already in place. The very institution of sport serves to constitute certain properties of this archetype, and thus the sort of stories that can be told about sport. While the American monomyth, as defined by Jewett and Lawrence, presupposes a pre-existing crisis, a threat to the community, into which the hero intervenes, the sporting monomyth is grounded in the fact that competitive sport constructs this moment of crisis. The agreement to compete, and the determination of a place and time for the competition, constitutes an agonistic opportunity. There is something importantly artificial about this. The competitors are always already playing. It is, as it were, the ritual re-enactment of a myth. The very nature of the crisis is thus constituted by the agreed upon conventions that are the rules of the sport. Nonetheless, in so far as the athletes, be they in a team or as individuals, have supporters, they represent communities.

Weissmuller is not the anonymous athlete of Delaunay~~Delaunary~~'s or Boccioni's paintings. He is a hero, a person representing a community (at least in Olympic competition). As such, he comes to personify certain aspirations and ideals. As Lang and Trimble suggest, the hero of the monomyth personifies the way the members of a community wish to see themselves [8]. In the American monomyth, where this is exemplified by real people rather than fictional heroes, the achievement of social mobility, and thus of the idea of the self-made individual, forms a core. Weissmuller, who comes to America as a young boy, the son of German immigrants, fulfils this requirement. As a sporting hero he fits in alongside figures such as Babe Ruth. As Lang and Trimble summarise this: 'The real monomythic heroes come from the lower-classes…. They achieve their greatness through their own physical actions and by depending on an inherent native

8 Marinetti, in the 1909 *Futurist Manifesto*, asserts that a racing car (which is to say, the speed and power of the modern machine) 'is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace' ([7] p 147).

wit'. They are 'almost anti-intellectual in their simplicity and appeal' (p. 159).

The subtlety of Weissmuller's case lies in his cinema career, and the fact that he goes on to play, in Tarzan, a superhero. Here native wit and anti-intellectual simplicity lie at the centre of the character, and this aspect of the American monomyth is fully articulated in the Tarzan movies. Nonetheless, Weissmuller's body is also important. It is as a fictional hero that his body becomes at last something to be displayed. Weissmuller's real body is, as it were, lent to Tarzan. Here a important distinction may be made between the body in cinema and the body in comic books. Like the Greek sculptor, the comic book artist has the freedom to create an ideal. Superman is thus at once exaggerated and clean in his muscular definition. His body is impossibly perfect. Tarzan is represented by a real, empirical human body. Like that of other 1930s movie heroes (the Lone Ranger, Flash Gordon), Tarzan's body cannot be this ideal. Instead, it approaches something like the Heracles body, which is to say, the human body touched by seemingly divine attributes. The bulk of the muscle, and the tradition of the strongman, matters. Perhaps only retrospectively can Weissmuller's athletic career is understood, not merely in terms of its performance (its modernist power and speed), but also in that this performance should be substantiated by a certain body-type.

Michael Phelps appears in a different sporting age. Most significantly, it is an age in which sport has become an integral part of the entertainment industry (where in particular television displaces radio and newspapers as key sources of the experience of sport). Due to this sport has become an increasingly professional activity. A commodified sport becomes a spectacle, where the modernist themes of power and speed are packaged for easy consumption. More subtle versions of games, designed for the pleasure of the players and a cognoscenti rather than the excitement of spectators, are threatened.[9] Spectacle may in turn encourage the exaggeration of the athletic body. Further, modern technology and sports science begin to make possible exactly what, in the 1930s, was impossible. The flesh and blood athlete can now realise the perfect body of Superman, in effect fusing the muscular definition of the *Artemision Bronze* with the bulk of Heracles. The gymnast and the strongman become one.

The professionalism of sport allows for the development and refinement of the sporting monomyth. It was suggested above that this archetype entails that the athletic hero comes from nowhere, enters a region of wonder, and secures a decisive victory in defence of a community, before receding into obscurity. In reflecting on the Golden Age superheroes, Jewell and Lawrence add that the protagonist of the American monomyth is typically an individual, acting autonomously and possessing an ethical certainty that serves to objectify their opponent. This autonomy and certainty leaves the hero unchanged by their encounter (see [10] pp. 16-21).

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9 On the application of Kant's distinction between pleasure and agreeableness, from his aesthetics, to sport, see Edgar [9], pp. 92ff.

In the sporting monomyth, as an archetype according to which narratives about sporting events are constructed, television coverage and the modern stadium provide the 'region of wonder', which adds a quality of spectacle to the conventional constitution of a sporting event. Perhaps more significantly, because the athlete is now a professional, and will have been training for their professional career from early childhood, they have little or no life outside sport. In contrast, one knew from whence Roger Bannister had come on the afternoon of 6th May 1954 (and the breaking of the 4-minute mile). He was a doctor. He had come from completing his morning hospital rounds. Even professional athletes would have a non-sporting life prior to and parallel with their sporting careers. Thus the England cricketer of the 1930s, Harold Larwood, had come from the Nottinghamshire mines (where he had been working underground since the age of 14).[10]

Within the monomyth, the professional athlete is an autonomous agent. The athlete has made a series of self-defining choices, successfully overcoming obstacles, and thereby realising a coherent and meaningful life. Like the superhero they have, ideally, an unerring awareness of what is the right thing to do. In practice, athletic narrative will allow for something more subtle. Even heroes make mistakes, lose matches and miss penalties, and something of a sporting character may develop over a career, thanks to greater experience and growing maturity. But at core, the hero such as Phelps or Bolt is seemingly invincible. The hero wins. As such, their lives thereby come to exemplify a series of good and meaningful choices. Their life has a single, clearly defined purpose, and one that has been there, as noted above, since childhood. If the protagonist of the monomyth personifies how members of a community would want to see themselves [8], then it may be suggested that the appeal, and indeed the beauty, of the modern athlete lies in the manner in which their lives defy the anomie most people experience in everyday life.

Durkheim characterises anomie not simply in terms of a lack of norms or values, but rather through the overwhelming number of ways of living that modern society makes possible [12]. Contemporary society allows its members' aspirations to outstrip any possibility for realising them, and with no mechanism, within public opinion, to discipline or prioritise them. The individual is disoriented by choice, losing any sense of direction or purpose in their lives. This condition is experienced as 'a sort of natural erethism' (p. 214). Mestrovic places this experience at the centre of his account of contemporary 'post-emotional' society, stressing the way in which an agent's epistemic beliefs, as well as the values and goals that they might espouse, are continually criticised and debated, and clear action becomes mired in self-doubt [13]. The athlete, in contrast, is seemingly immune from anomie. They live lives of purpose and direction, asserting individual autonomy over and against the plethora of choices that bewilders the lesser person. Their bodies

10 David Storey's 1960 novel (and Lindsay Anderson's film [1963]) *This Sporting Life* [11] challenges the monomyth in its profound exploration of the entwining of the private and sporting lives of a professional rugby league player.

are the sorts of bodies that can realise this sense of purpose and meaning (and indeed the body that the advertising of health and fitness products offers to all). The body is the product of their recognition of what will give their lives meaning, and the instrument through which that meaning is realised and affirmed.

In summary, the Phelps-type body is beautiful because it personifies the athletic monomyth, which is to say that it offers the spectator the possibility of a meaningful life in the face of anomie. Jewett and Lawrence argue that power of the American monomyth, and thus the story of the superhero, lies in the fact that it offers the image of someone acting when you, the reader, cannot. It suggests that there is always someone more capably of acting than oneself ([6] p. 215). The athletic monomyth offers something different, and does so because of the commodification of sport and its integration into advertising. The myth offers the promise of a body, and thus a meaningful lifestyle, that can be purchased. As such, the athletic monomyth mirrors a different quality that Jewett and Lawrence attribute to the American monomyth. Jewett and Lawrence's hero restores the community to its original, pre-crisis, condition. The community is thus unchanged by the adventure ([10] p. 20). The athletic monomyth works, ideologically, to leave not the fictional community but rather the real community of the reader unchanged. It is politically conservative, asserting both that the problem of anomie is soluble, and that the solution lies in the hands (or muscles) of the individual. The possibility that anomie is a social and cultural problem, and that the core of the cultural problem lies precisely in its excessive individualism, as Durkheim argues, is concealed or rendered unthinkable. The myth thus reproduces anomie in the very promise of its dissolution.

The Dissolution of the Athletic Monomyth

The athletic monomyth offers only the illusion of meaning. It is ultimately an impoverished understanding of sport, and thus of the athletic body that personifies this understanding. As Hegel argues with respect to the beauty of Greek sculpture, it contains the seeds of its own dissolution within it. This tension may be articulated along a number of lines. Firstly, the very source of the athlete's achievement and supposed autonomy, and thus the place of sports science in the constitution of the Phelps-type body, is ambiguous. Secondly, the monomyth neglects the necessary complement of winning, which is to say, losing. Finally, the monomyth is patriarchal, failing to understand the female athletic body, and thus the body as a moment of resistance.

The parallel suggested above between the athlete and the superhero may open up the question of the source of the athlete's abilities and thus their autonomy. Superheroes have typically three sources for their powers. They may be born with them, for they are not human (Superman, Wonder Woman). They may acquire them through training and discipline (Batman, the Black Widow). They may be the subject of accidental, or occasionally intentional, technological intervention

(Spiderman, the Hulk). The sporting monomyth exalts the athlete as self-made, a product of training and hard work that builds upon innate talent. Yet, the more clearly the modern athlete is understood, the less clear is their status as the hero of the athletic narrative. Talent itself is reinterpreted, in the light of modern biology, as a genetic inheritance. Sports science analyses the potential of the body into a multitude of quantifiable psychological (and indeed psychological) components. In part, this reinforces something of the monomyth and its relationship to superhero narratives. The athlete is a genetic outlier Genetic inheritance thereby serves to place the athlete as much outside the run of typical humanity, coming as it were from nowhere. as is Superman. But as such, the achievements of the athlete may appear to be little more than a matter of genetic luck. A superior set of inherited genes beats the inferior. Further, by quantifying~~y~~ potential, science takes the mystery and romance out of sport.

Yet talent is only one component of the athlete's success. The talent must be trained, and the monomyth can reassert the autonomy of its hero, and thus the validity of their athletic achievement, if that depends upon hard-work and dedication. The more dedicated athlete defeats the less dedicated.[11] Further, superficially, if the athlete is a product of training, then potentially anyone can (still) become an athlete. Perhaps more relevantly, given the use of this body-type to sell health and fitness products, anyone can aspire to this healthy body. Yet, professional athletic training is highly technical. The athlete stands at the centre of a technologically mediated support team, and it is here, precisely, that the nature of the hero becomes unclear. The athlete comes to appear, not as the autonomous victor, but as a necessary component within a competitive machine. The vision of Boccioni and the futurists is realised, as the flesh and blood body disappears behind the support machine, or more precisely, the scientifically quantified body – and here the Phelps-body – itself comes to appear as machine-like, akin perhaps to Jacob Epstein's 1915 sculpture, *Rock Drill*, rather than to anything genuinely human.[12] Such a body is alien, once more unachievable, and in terms of the comic book, as much the body of the technologically engendered supervillian as of the superhero.[13]

If consideration of technology begins to expose the naïvety of the monomyth, more damning is its concealment of the most basic element of sport. The monomyth encourages the spectator to focus exclusively upon the winner. The Phelps-body type is that of the winner. This ignores the necessary fact that for every winner there is at least one, and in the cases of sports such as

11 Martina Navratatliova expressed this famously: 'The difference between involvement and commitment is like ham and eggs. The chicken is involved; the pig is committed.' The hero of the athletic monomyth is committed.

12 The Team Sky is considered unpopular amongst cycling fans, in large part because of its very public use of technological support.

13 The intensity with which the boundary between legitimate and illegitimate technologies, and thus the boundary between heroes and villains, is guarded, not least with respect to the use of performance-enhancing pharmaceuticals, is perhaps symptomatic of the tensions and ambiguities here. (See [14].)

swimming, golf, cycling and track and field athletics, multiple losers. At best, the monomyth is the single, affirmative, side of a dialectical argument. A recognition of the depth and profundity of defeat in sport is vital to understanding its importance, but also begins to disrupt the illusion of a meaningful life that the athletic hero would personify.

The experience of loss runs deeply in sport. Losers are not merely the defeated competitors in a particular race, or indeed a particular competition (such as those defeated in qualifying rounds). The defeated will include all those who failed, despite great talent and dedicated training, to qualify, and perhaps most disturbingly, those who sacrificed a childhood, like the Williams sisters, but who, unlike them, did not ultimately exhibit mature talent and ability. At the other end of the athletic career, all athlete's eventually lose (or retire once they realise that victory will soon be beyond them). It was suggested above that the monomyth ignores the retired athlete, allowing them to disappear into a nowhere. Occasionally, retired athletes will retain a certain fame and public profile, either because of their post-sporting successful (for example as sports journalists) or failure (in stories of physical and mental decline and death).[14]

The monomyth constructs an illusion of a life that has meaning in the face of anomie, but does so only by focusing on winners. The beauty of the winner's body is illusory, not least because it is indistinguishable from the bodies of numerous losers. Yet, if the narratives of sport are inverted, to embrace the depth of risk and loss, something of sport's importance as an articulation and challenge to anomie – sport's importance as a genuine reflection on the human condition – begins to come to the fore. For Durkheim, anomie, as noted above, is grounded in the overwhelming nature of the choice that confronts the individual. Conversely, it may be argued that, at least within the appropriate narrative framework and communal support, that choice can become one of freedom and radical reinvention, and one that sport can reflect and help to articulate. This may be seen, most significantly, in the negotiation of the female athletic body.

The monomyth, as I have constructed it, is a male story. The body at its centre has its origins in sculptures of the male Greek athlete (and I have suggested, the male comic book hero). While the muscular male body is relatively unambiguous in its expression of strength and power, a muscular female body is more ambivalent. This is perhaps most clearly revealed through the gendered nature of the rules of modern gymnastics. While male gymnastic competition rewards the Phelps-body, female gymnastics favours an adolescent body, its musculature concealed behind the subtlety and grace of its movement – the power celebrated in the strongman and by the modernist artist are thereby marginalised. The expression of such power and autonomy, and thus an emphasis on the agency of the athlete, disrupts patriarchal stereotypes of womanhood, where the woman is

14 The film *Friday Night Lights* (2004), itself inspired by Bissinger's journalism [15], reflects effectively on this, challenging the monomyth. It concerns a high school (American) football team. While only 18, this season will be the high point of their lives.

the observed patient, rather than the active agent.

If the male, Phelps-body, inherits something of the tradition of the circus strongman, then it too is a body that is observed. It is a spectacle, but crucially a spectacle of power. It personifies a masculine ideal. This moment of spectacle find a new articulation in the body of the muscular female athlete, transforming the meaning and thus 'beauty' of the body. This is seen most clearly in beach volleyball. Male beach volleyball players wear shorts and singlets. Female players wear bikinis. The bodies of elite players of both genders are characterised by the cleanly defined muscles of the Phelps-type. Yet, the uniform of the female player displays that musculature, turning the woman's body into a spectacle, but not of power. The display of the female body distracts from the athlete skill and power that is being exercised. The transformation of the active athlete into a sexualised spectacle is more extreme in the 'Legends (or originally Lingerie) Football League'. Here a form of American football is played by women in uniforms that very deliberately emphasise cleavages, and through crop tops and shorts, display abdominal and thigh muscles. Even in mainstream track and field athletics, woman competitors tend increasingly to wear crop tops. Only in triathlon do male athletes regularly wear similar uniforms, suggesting that the choice is dictated as much by aesthetic values – displaying the sexualised female body – as by issues of performance and efficiency.

The above examples are intended to suggest that the disruptive threat of the muscular female athletic body is compromised by turning it into a object of a male sexual gaze. The sporting achievement of the female athlete is in danger of not being taken less seriously.[15] Female body building challenges this. Here the female body is sculpted as a spectacle. However, the muscular exaggeration and definition, as well as attendant changes in the very texture and tone of skin and flesh, disrupt preconceptions of the female body, not least as it is offered to the spectator's gaze as an object of beauty. Here, it may be suggested, is an alternative beauty: in Hegelian terms, a Romantic beauty as opposed to the classical beauty of the monomyth. It is a 'beauty' that eschews the affirmative and conservative quality of the monomyth in favour of a demand for self-reflection, and a genuine engagement with the freedom to construct one's body and life differently. The fearful anomie from which the male monomyth retreats is embraced in the glorious risk of being physically different, with all the implications that this has for how one's life is lived and how it is interpreted by others.

Conclusion

I have argued that the modern athletic body, represented by Michael Phelps, with its heavy and cleanly defined musculature, personifies the hero of the athletic monomyth, which is to say the

15 The gross under-reporting of female sports is symptomatic of this.

archetype of much story-telling and sports journalism. It is presented as the healthy body, expressive of power, success and autonomy. It is the body of a male, achieving a meaningful life in the face of anomie. The monomyth is, however, an illusion of meaning, offering only an impoverished account of the experience of sport. Stories told according to the archetype ignore the risk of defeat, and the potential futility of a sporting life. They ignore the diversity of athletic bodies, and crucially stifle the possibility of articulating diverse engagements with sport. Not least, the female experience of sport, and the challenge that female participation poses to patriarchal preconceptions of female agency and embodiment, are marginalised and at worse serve merely the objectification of the female body. The best story-telling about sport, be it reportage or fiction, can still defy the monomyth. It is this story-telling that can bring to consciousness the profundity of sport, legitimating diverse and innovative sporting practice, and so breaking down the barrier that the monomyth establishes between between sporting and non-sporting life. Such story-telling and practice allows sport to be more than merely a charming entertainment, becoming rather a source of critical reflection on, amongst other things, what a beautiful, healthy human body might be.

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