Critical Readings in Bodybuilding

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The Bodybuilder as Body-Garde[1]

Adam Locks

This chapter examines the aesthetic implications of extreme (i.e. competitive) bodybuilders. Elsewhere I refer to such bodies as "Post Classic" (see Introduction, this volume). By this I refer to a body that remains rooted in the classical style – but a style which has been applied very selectively, creating what I consider to be a new ideal, a hyper-muscular, but essentially fragmented body, in which the sculpting of individual body parts and the display of body poses have come to supplant the whole body. I want to debate whether such an aesthetic can be recuperable, particularly as bodybuilding is palpably transgressive and adheres to certain features of the avant-garde.

MUSCLE AESTHETICS

Aesthetic images of the muscular male have been evident throughout history; more specifically, in ancient Greece, the Renaissance, the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century, the muscular male body has been celebrated in sculpture, painting, drawing and latterly photography. The contemporary is marked by the ubiquity of images of such bodies in magazines, television, cinema, adverts and other forms of media and so to possess such a look is to be considered to live up to what is known as the "mesomorphic" ideal, a term signifying a man who is lean with high levels of muscular definition – assumed to be the result of healthy exercise. However, as many commentators have noted, men desire to be mesomorphic not for reasons of health and fitness, but for the symbolism this muscularity has latterly come to signify: sexual attractiveness, self-discipline, and personal success. There is nothing new in seeing the body being linked to socially and culturally motivated ends as evinced by Nazi Germany's idolization of the muscular male. The Renaissance was also a key period where various depictions of the muscular male were established. The art historian Margaret Walters comments how Florence 'put a new premium on aggressive individualism, mobility and competitiveness' and, she continues, 'those qualities are seen as defining a man' (1978: 11).

Thus commentators have suggested that the 1980s also reflected a similar period where such “individualism” was significant. For instance, John Rutherford suggested that one ‘of the nastier fall-out effects of the Thatcher (and Reagan) revolution [was the] glorification of strength and masculinity which comes as a side effect of the culture of success’ (1992: 175). This did seem especially evident in the Hollywood action films during the 1980s and early 1990s, many of which featured bodybuilders in the leading role. In ascending order of size, Jean Claude Van Damme, Sylvester Stallone, Dolph Lundgren, and Arnold Schwarzenegger all possessed bodies whose hyper-muscularity was critically considered to reflect the politics of America at the time. As Yvonne Tasker observed of the *Rambo* series of movies: ‘The pumped-up figure of Stallone seemed to offer more than just a metaphor, functioning for various cultural commentators as the literal embodiment of American interventionism [in Vietnam]’ (1994: 92). Commentators have also noted that this muscular representation was also palpable when looking at toys sold to young boys (see Richardson, Chapter 9, this volume). According to a study by Harrison Pope, Kate Phillips, and Roberto Olivardia, bulked-up action figures in the toy market – exemplified by the G.I. Joe doll and *Star Wars* action figures – have ‘acquired the physiques of bodybuilders, with bulging “pecs” (chest muscles) and “delts” (shoulders)’ (2000: 43).

At the same time, since the late 1980s there has been much discussion over a so-called “crisis in masculinity” and there has been much debate about what the rise of the mesomorph means. Considered as a crisis, by 2000, Anthony Clare could identify the male predicament as follows:

> Serious commentators declare that men are redundant, that women do not need them and children would be better off without them. At the beginning of the twenty-first century it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that men are in serious trouble.
>
> (2000: 3)

For Clare and other cultural commentators such as Robert Bly and Roger Horrocks, this crisis has come because men have lost their dominance in the home and in the workplace. The reasons for this loss are varied, yet the main factors can be related to increasing levels of consumerism, feminism, and a pervasive abhorrence for traditional versions of masculinity (Whitehead and Barrett 2001: 6). As a result of these changes in gender roles and, also, the value placed upon the body itself, body ideals have become increasingly exaggerated (Dutton 1995: 346). It is often noted that this is marked by an application to the male body of the types of advertising images which were once reserved for women. Certainly, from the mid-1980s onward, advertising has become notable for featuring muscular men, for instance in Calvin Klein’s advertising campaigns. Although there are other different images of masculinity on

offer – for example, androgynous males and muscular males – the mesomorphic figure is the more ubiquitous in media imagery and so allegedly the more desirable (for men and women). Indeed, an ideal of men that are muscular and women that are slim has become noticeably more pronounced, especially since the 1980s. Again, thinking in terms of "crisis," the psychologist Marc Mishkind discusses these changes via his "polarization" model where such ideals 'may be a reaction against sexual equality, an expression of a wish to preserve some semblance of traditional male-female differences' (quoted in Persaud 2001: 537). Female bodybuilding provides an example of the complex relationship which men and women have gained toward the modifiable body.

These issues surrounding the body have necessarily been tied to issues of identity. Discussing consumption and identity in 1991, Mike Featherstone claimed that individuals today were increasingly being encouraged to follow practices of 'body maintenance' (1991: 182). As Featherstone defines it, 'body maintenance' refers to a process whereby men (and women) are encouraged to adhere to 'idealised images proliferated in the media' which, in turn, increases the body's own 'exchange-value' (ibid.: 177). The key characteristic of 'body maintenance' has been the hard muscular body – the antithesis of which is fatness, often projected in the media as signaling personal failure and apathy (Ewen 1985: 189). The hard and muscular body has become an indicator of social and cultural worth in film and advertising where idealized images of the mesomorph have been most commonly represented. However, in the same year (1991) Anthony Giddens argued for a concept of the body which positioned it not as a victim, but as a territory to be reclaimed. Giddens claimed that since these changes in social roles were a product of late modernity (rather than postmodernity) they offered a 'reflexive project of the self.' This means, as Giddens wrote, that: 'the body is less and less an intrinsic 'given', functioning outside the internally referential systems of modernity, but becomes itself reflexively mobilised' (ibid.: 7). This theme of the reflexive project of the self has been expanded upon considerably by many critics since (see Richardson, Chapter 9, this volume). For instance, Susan Bordo defines the contemporary body as 'cultural plastic,' in reference to the various ways in which bodies can be modified and manipulated through exercise, diet and also surgery (1999: 246). As such the body becomes the contemporary site of what is quite literally to be considered as *self-expression* (even to the extent that obesity has been argued to be a justifiable state). Most recently, the role of modifications of the body which are transgressive has gained considerable critical attention and practices such as piercing, tattooing, and branding have likewise been considered to be part of a self-reflexive attitude to the body.

Yet in women's professional bodybuilding, this transgressiveness has been curbed. Since 2000, the IFBB has placed a cap on the degree of size and "rippedness" permitted in women's bodybuilding, with the emphasis

placed on smaller and more "feminine" competitors illustrated by the Dutch bodybuilding champion Juliette Bergmann (see Bolin, Chapter 1, this volume). Upon winning the 2000 Ms. Olympia title, Bergmann announced: 'The future of this sport is to promote women who are sexy and beautiful – that's the example I will set as the reigning Ms. Olympia' (Rosenthal 2002: 114).

For male bodybuilders no such compromise has emerged – indeed as I have argued elsewhere (Locks 2003), these developments in female bodybuilding themselves acted as a concession to the men, and so have not slowed down the male quest for even greater mass and ultra-shredded muscularity in the least. At the 2002 Mr. Olympia, Ronnie Coleman faced a competitor who threatened to usurp his Mr. Olympia crown: Jay Cutler. Cutler was a bodybuilder who showed a size and level of conditioning that seriously contested Coleman's position. Journalist Ron Harris observes: 'How could anyone even come close to beating Ronnie Coleman, a genetic mutant who trains with heavier weights and more intensity than any other bodybuilder alive today (or in the past, to be sure)? Jay Cutler was actually ahead of the now four-time Mr. Olympia after prejudging ended for the 2001 contest' (2002: 110). Cutler, who has since won the Olympia title three times, is viewed by many as heralding an even greater phase of extremity in the sport.

Thus, as I asked at the beginning of this chapter: does this reveal that even if it is the result of near perverse social practices, the aesthetic *image* of the contemporary male bodybuilder can be considered recuperable? Bodybuilding, like the body modification subcultures from which it is often excluded, blatantly rebels against definitions of the "normal" and conventional. Look no further than the comment of the psychologist quoted by Kenneth Dutton who described competition level bodybuilders as 'straining, fleshless monsters with ugly knotted and veined torsos, suggesting nothing so much as flayed animals in an abattoir' (Dutton 1995: 278). Bodybuilding has not only always been open to such criticism, it has already successfully challenged these boundaries with the example of Arnold Schwarzenegger in the 1970s. In doing so, it transgressed ideals of physical perfection and, conversely, ugliness and extremity. As such, perhaps questions of art ought to intervene.

Relevant here is Lisa Lyon. Lyon was the first female bodybuilder to gain critical attention from the major magazines. As bodybuilding journalist and photographer Bill Dobbins once gushed: 'She combined bodybuilding poses with a series of graceful, aesthetic, and athletic transitions in a style that became the model for presentation still used by women today' (1994: 26). Lyon perhaps became one of the better-known female bodybuilders because of her work during the early 1980s with the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe. Of their initial encounter, Mapplethorpe recalled: 'I had never seen a woman like that before . . . It was like looking at someone from another planet' (Morrisroe 1995:

231). A woman 'like that' had also never been seen working out at Gold's Gym and although the owner – bodybuilder Ken Sprague – was most keen to rid the gym of its gay image, he was less willing to encourage the opposite sex to take up membership and Lyon remained exceptional (231–232). Highly unconventional in her training at Gold's Gym – for example, she would regularly use LSD rather than steroids to help her weight train – Lyon attracted a significant amount of media attention (232). She also became the first female bodybuilder to be given a color photo feature for Joe Weider in the 1979 July edition of the magazine *Muscle Builder*. Lisa Lyon aimed to surpass gender and Judith Stein notes that Lyon perceived herself as first a 'Performance Artist' and second a bodybuilder (Stein 1999: 21). For Lyon, her body *was* art. Stein places this in a wider artistic context when she explains:

> During the 1960s and 1970s, many avant-garde art works prominently featured performing bodies. Performance Artists, who were not necessarily trained as actors or dancers, used their bodies as their medium, gleefully scrambling distinctions between art and life, subject and object, and artist and model. One of the earliest examples was the British artistic team Gilbert and George, who in 1969 began exhibiting themselves as Living Sculpture.
>
> (ibid.: 24)

Although postmodern artists such as Gilbert and George have gained recognition and notoriety for proclaiming to be the first examples of "living sculpture" since the late 1960s, in fact they belong to a considerable artistic tradition which bodybuilding popularized (Farson 2000: 49). For example, popular interest in the muscular male body was such that in the early 1880s famous boxers such as John L. Sullivan and William Muldoon acted as examples of "living statuary" in which they were paid to be viewed by audiences standing in "artistic" poses considered to be evocative of ancient Greece (Budd 1997: 36).

Art critic James Hall comments how it was during the latter part of the nineteenth century that many public "heroic" statues were erected in a period of, what he terms, 'statuemania' (1999: 230). Hall remarks statuemania became usurped after the Second World War due to 'an increase in abstract monuments' typified by the prolific Henry Moore (ibid.: 243–244). A return to the representational art might therefore be found displaced into the flesh sculpture of bodybuilding – as the term "body sculpting" which has been used in American and British gyms instead of bodybuilding suggests (see Heywood, Chapter 6, this volume). (It should also be pointed out that numerous bodybuilders have compared the process of bodybuilding to a sculptor at work, most notably Schwarzenegger in *Pumping Iron*.) However, bodybuilder Frank Zane's comparison of his body with sculpture was ridiculed by an art

academic who replied: 'If you are a work of art, you had a bad teacher because, to me, your poses are the personification of nineteenth-century camp' (Stein 1999: 24). However, it is only in artistic referents such as camp or performance art that a potential recuperation of the image of the contemporary bodybuilder might lie.

In this respect – and here we come to the crux of the chapter – bodybuilding shares a selection of traits with the avant-garde which similarly aimed to disturb and disrupt. In his *Dictionary of the Avant-Gardes,* Richard Kostelanetz defines the term thus:

> Used precisely, avant-garde should refer, first, to rare work that on its first appearance satisfies three discriminatory criteria: It transcends current aesthetic conventions in crucial respects, establishing discernible distance between itself and the mass of recent practices; it will necessarily take considerable time to find its maximum audience; and it will probably inspire future, comparably advanced endeavours.
>
> (2001: xix)

Professional bodybuilding generally adheres to these criteria. First, considering the history of bodybuilding, those viewed as the top bodybuilders in the sport have always transcended the more moderate aesthetic conventions of the mesomorphic body; most notably, Eugene Sandow during the Physical Culture movement in the nineteenth century. The admiration accorded Sandow's physique was such that his body was examined, detailed, and recorded by scientific authorities. In 1893 the Director of Gymnastics at Harvard University, Doctor Sargent, took measurements from Sandow for his research, while, shortly after Professor Ray Lankester made a plaster cast of his whole body for exhibition in the Natural History Museum in London (Webster 1982: 32–33).

More recently, there has been the example of Greg Kovacs who competed for just over ten years from 1995. Canadian Greg Kovacs allegedly weighed 350 lbs in competition and managed to be ripped (if not yet shredded). His popularity in hard-core bodybuilding magazines such as *Flex, Ironman* and *MuscleMag* came from his embodiment of two key features of bodybuilding: one related to the competition arena and the other to the training gym. Bodybuilding has always been concerned with increasing muscle mass and, thus, Kovacs' size apparently made him symbolize the future of the sport. However, in another way, admiration for him functioned more anachronistically. All top bodybuilders lift tremendous weights, yet Kovacs' ability to lift was legendary within bodybuilding: barbell rows of 545 lbs, flat dumbbell presses of 250 lbs, squats of 855 lbs, and leg presses using up to 40 plates are typical (Schmidt 1997: 149, 151). The focus in the magazines on his exceptional ability is reminiscent of the early physique

contests in which strength was seen as a vital demonstration of successful bodily development. Thus Kovacs, even though he was not a consistent winner of major titles, and indeed never won a Mr. Olympia, nevertheless remained – and still remains – a source of fascination for bodybuilding fans.

A further factor to realize is that body weights refer to bodybuilders who have dieted down for competition. During the off-season (when a bodybuilder is not competing) most bodybuilders are many pounds heavier. Kovacs, who weighed in at over 400 lbs in the off-season, was 100 lbs heavier than any other professional bodybuilder out of competition (Hesse 2001: 179). Bodybuilders in the past were often exceptionally heavy in the off-season, typified by Bruce Randall in the 1950s who weighed up to 410 lbs (and stated that he could have reached 500 lbs if he so wished) (Webster 1982: 100–101) and although off-season is traditionally a period when a bodybuilder could, ironically, sometimes be considered fat, continual advances in training, nutrition, cosmetic alteration, drugs, and perhaps relatively soon, gene manipulation may make a 400 lb ripped competitive bodybuilder a reality. Until then the apparent genetic advantage possessed by bodybuilders such as Kovacs will suffice. It is noticeable that Kovac's genetic inheritance was lauded in the following fantastic description of his birth given in the August 1997 edition of *Flex* magazine: 'In the silent, brittle, predawn cold of December 16, 1968, on a tranquil farm muffled with snow outside Ontario, Canada, the great northern tundra cracked, a caldera gaped, a fissure hissed, magma spewed to the heavens and Greg Kovacs was born' (Schmidt 1997: 146). With such blatant (though probably unconscious) vaginal imagery, Kovacs' emergence is given all the resonance of Greek myth, with his propensity toward size given all the wonderment and unfeigned splendour of the birth of a god; he was quite simply represented as another "authentic" wonder of the world (and this has strong echoes of the constructed nature of the "freak" as discussed by Richardson, Chatpter 9, this volume). Such divinity apparently comes from the fact that Kovacs was "naturally" big and muscular. As the reader was told in a 1997 issue of *Flex*, this 'plinian eruption of muscle' already weighed 240 lbs at the age of seventeen before even starting weight training (Schmidt 1997: 146). At his largest, Schwarzenegger's chest measured 57 inches, his biceps 22 inches, and his quadriceps 28.5 inches (http://www.bodybuilders.com/arnold.htm, accessed August 18, 2010); this compares with Kovacs' chest that was measured at 70 inches, biceps 26 inches, and thighs around 35 inches (http://www.bodybuildingpro.com/gregkovacs.html, last accessed August 16, 2010). Bruce Randall's off-season weight was 400 lbs and at this he looked obese, and yet at this same off-season weight Kovacs remained muscular (Schmidt 1997: 148). What is evident here is how Greg Kovacs' hypermorphic size reveals

changes in the sport which have rendered past academic research and enquiry often outdated. Alan M. Klein wrote in 1993 that:

> Comic-book depictions of masculinity are so obviously exaggerated that they represent fiction twice over, as genre and as gender representation. But for bodybuilders these characters serve as role models.
>
> (1993: 267)

Klein's comment is verified by the nicknames bodybuilders are given once they reach a certain level of fame. Hence, Dorian Yates becomes the Shadow, Schwzarzenegger the Oak, Lee Priest the Blond Myth, Branch Warren the Quadrasaurus, and Dexter Jackson The Blade. However, given the size of Kovacs and other professional bodybuilders, these roles have reversed. Australian bodybuilder Lee Priest's physique was used as the model for the computer-animated version of *The Hulk* (dir. Ang Lee, 2003), a superhero with gargantuan physical development (http://www.elitefitness.com/forum/entertainment-movies-tv/lee-priest-works-computer-double-new-hulk-movie-164450.html, accessed August 8, 10). Certain comic strips during the late 1980s, particularly those of *Image Comics*, began to exaggerate the size and shape of their male heroes to such a degree that as Scott Bukatman remarks in his analysis of masculinity and this medium: 'the superhero body becomes auto-referential and can only be compared to other superheroes bodies, rather than the common world of flesh, blood, muscle, and sinew' (1994: 106). Kovacs again proves this verdict premature. It is not comics but professional bodybuilding that has become auto-referential, since the hypermorphism on display is now beyond the archetype drawn upon by the comic book.

Second, although the popularity of professional bodybuilding remains subcultural, muscularity in general has become a desired commodity exemplified in various media discourses that can be seen as directly influenced by bodybuilding. This is also true athletically; athletes in other sports have also significantly increased in mass in recent years (palpably in American Football and rugby, especially since the latter's professionalization in the late 1990s). However, bodybuilding is atypical in that its competitors prize size for its own sake, and can still dramatically surpass previous achievements and records.

Thus, third, and to paraphrase Karl Frederick Robert writing on modernism, bodybuilding, like the avant-garde, is always 'point[ing] toward the future' and the further transgression of aesthetic standards, thus confirming its avant-garde status (1988: 15). Additionally, T.S. Eliot claimed that the roots of the avant-garde lay in a turn toward art as a means to combat the 'immense panorama of futility and anarchy

which is contemporary history' (Pegrum 2000: 24); likewise bodybuilding magazines continually turn to the body to regulate the chaos of the world outside. For example, in response to the terrorist strike on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, a number of bodybuilding magazines (most notably *MuscleMag* and *Flex*) discussed bodybuilding in image and practice as a means for combating the terrorism. The editor-in-chief of *MuscleMag* responded to 9/11 thus:

> At times like these there is much for our elected leaders to do. Each of us, on the other hand, must renew our own resolve to become as strong in mind and body as we can . . . Try to be courageous in the presence of danger, and keep a cool head – but above all, keep up those visits to the gym! The best way to survive the destruction of what surrounds us is to not self-destruct. What every successful man thrives on is self-confidence against all odds – and superior muscle power takes you more than half way there.
>
> (Fitness 2002: 14)

Bodybuilding is often presented in magazines such as *Muscle and Fitness* as using the aestheticism of the body for personal and public salvation. This echoes Nietzsche's notion of the "Overman" (or Ubermensch), a difficult and often confusing term, but one loosely referring to what Dave Robinson calls those who are 'artistic creators of themselves that strive to go beyond human nature' (1999: 30). Daniel O'Brien reads the contemporary overman as concerned with the 'enhancement of the human species [using] technology, the modern Ariel, to aid him' (2000: 39). The most frequently imagined development is the cyborg, which is a human who has been technologically modified. The body-builder might be understood as a proto-cyborg: a body aesthetically redesigned through chemical and cosmetic surgery – and so in body-building magazines, the sport is often presented as in the vanguard of social change in its receptivity to the bio-technology which promises to transcend the human form.

However, notions of the avant-garde are themselves suspect. Steve Best and Douglas Kellner define the avant-garde as: 'a military metaphor that implies that artists are in the "front line" in bringing change . . . [in] existing culture and society in the project of creating new forms of art and life' (1997: 190). Such a definition is profoundly modernist in ambition and suggests why the avant-garde is often seen as no longer possible in postmodernism in a period where artifacts from the past are suggested to be constantly recycled. However, art critic Matthew Collings offers another possibility when he comments that the objective of postmodern art has become increasingly to shock its audience. In art, states Collings, 'the grim stream has become the mainstream'[2] an observation that I think applicable to the enormous, ripped, diced, sliced, and shredded

appearance of bodybuilders. Although it may seem facile to compare bodybuilding and the work of the contemporary postmodern artists who for Collings exemplify this move toward the provocative and sometimes unpalatable – Damian Hurst, Jake Chapman, Dinos Chapman, and Paul McCarthy – there does appear a shared interest in an aesthetic of shock and a focus on the visceral. Whereas the avant-garde attempted to break the boundaries of representational art (for example, with Cubism, Vorticism, Futurism, Dadaism, Surrealism, and so forth), postmodern art has often attempted push at the boundaries of taste. We read something very similar in this description of the Post Classic professional bodybuilder. Greg Zulak writes:

> These guys are trying to become monsters and freaks. Their goal is to shock the audience with their level of size, development, and ripped-to-shreds muscularity. If this means the waist is blocky, or the abdominals are thick and bloated and hang out if not consciously held in, or the thighs are so big that they touch when a bodybuilder walks, but the guy's traps [trapezius] are up to his ears, or his upper arms are bigger than his head and out of proportion to his forearms, or the pecs bloated with bitch tits . . . so be it.
>
> (1997: 59)

There are some fascinating relationships to performance art here, ones which differentiate bodybuilding from body modification. Paul Sweetman notes that certain body modification practices – namely tattooing and piercing – represent an attempt to 'fix, or anchor one's sense of self through the (relative) permanence of the modification acquired' at a time where postmodern notions of identity suggest a play of surfaces and shifting signs (in Featherstone 2000: 71). But such permanence is precisely the identity which the professional bodybuilder cannot achieve. This is never more apparent than at the moment of contest when a bodybuilder is seen at his most dramatic, most ripped and shredded, most muscular, most vascular, and most fleeting. Several professional bodybuilders now compete for just the Mr. Olympia contest; Dorian Yates was well known for this. This meant that Yates' grueling exercise and diet regime over a year was all for a competition held on one day. The day of competition represents a climax so acute that bodybuilders appear noticeably more shredded and cut in the morning than the evening or vice versa. During his brief period as a competitive bodybuilder Sam Fussell noted: 'Even standing was excruciatingly painful. The soles of my feet, without their padding of fat, couldn't take my body weight' (1991: 22). Caught on camera, the photograph captures the transitory moment of 'peaking' where the bodybuilder is huge, sharp (or cut) and dry (dehydrated enough to reveal muscle separation). The photograph alone provides the bodybuilder with what he cannot have: lasting vitality.

As such does professional bodybuilding become an example of a naïve performance art? Andrew Graham-Dixon once described Francis Bacon's paintings as 'something like the manic celebration of someone who knows he does not have long to live but has decided (what the hell) to enjoy being alive while he can' (1996: 225). The bodybuilding aesthetic is certainly composed of the manic: manic eating, manic dieting, manic working out, and manic drug taking. All this is done for the singular moment of competition. Therefore, bodybuilding has, especially since the late 1970s, pushed against its own "classical" limits. Hence the irony that bodybuilding's continued move toward a kind of anti-aestheticism – a primary characteristic of the avant-garde – has made it derided and scorned (inside and outside the sport) as unacceptably transgressive, but equally not accepted by the art avant-garde.

NO LIMITS?

One final issue remains: how far can bodybuilding go? Andrew Blake has remarked: 'the performance curve is beginning to flatten. The strength and malleability of the body must have finite limits, whatever the resources of equipment, training, sports psychology and drugs: in the case of the male body in particular it may be close to those limits' (1996: 154). Is there a similar cul-de-sac in professional bodybuilding? When is big enough big enough?

In 1995 (former) magazine editor Bill Philips predicted the Mr. Olympia 2005 with a body weight of 335 lbs and 2 percent bodyfat at a height of 5'10" (1995: 11) while five years later, bodybuilding journalist Greg Merrit foresaw a future Mr. Olympia of 2010 who would stand 6'3" tall, weigh 405 lbs and have next to no bodyfat (2000: 91). Such predictions construct bodybuilding as a sport with muscular definition aplenty for many years to come, making bodybuilding noticeably different from other sports. Blake continues: 'it is beginning to appear that an end is in sight to the constant and astonishing rollback of record times and weights which have so far characterized the century of modern competitive sport. The pace of change in most men's records has slowed dramatically: new records are set in tenths of a second in many events' (1996: 154). But what is being dealt with here has two parameters: the limits of the *literal* and the limits of *judging*. In a 100-meter race, the literal limit does seem to have almost been reached and so it is extremely difficult to imagine an 8 second race ever being run. Bodybuilding may also have reached such a literal limit, however, its continued drug abuse and now other interventions such as Synthol have allowed increases in size to continue – in effect, if the International Olympic Committee were as lenient about the use of drugs as the IFBB, then times would be pushed back and records would be broken. However, it could be argued that in

another way professional bodybuilding has reached a limit. The quadriceps of Branch Warren, the shoulder width of Markus Ruhl, the overall size of Jay Cutler, and the biceps of Lee Priest are already so big that fans are running out of superlatives and judges out of criteria. Hence, the second limit lies in judging, and an instructive comparison can be made to other aesthetically based sports, for instance ice-skating, a sport with similarities to bodybuilding since both are performed to music in front of a crowd, each is closely linked to show business, and both have judging criteria that rely on aesthetics. Until 2004, ice-skating marks ranged from 0.0 to 6.0, but recent debates provoked by the increasing award of perfect scores begged the question: how much better than a perfect 6.0 can a performance become? However, in bodybuilding this problem has existed for years and judging has been far from trans-historical. Scores sometimes stand still, but the aesthetic being assessed has not. Thus Schwarzenegger's perfect score of 20 in 1975, Lee Haney's score of 20 in 1990, and Ronnie Coleman's score of 20 in 1999, all gained the same marks, but they are clearly not the same bodies.[3] In other words, the problems for bodybuilding are compound: the invalid limits of the judging criteria would only be exposed if the limit of the literal were valid, but that would only happen if judges genuinely enforced the rules about substances, or at least did not reward their manifestation.

Somewhat ironically, the catalyst for the Post Classical trajectory – Arnold Schwarzenegger – has suggested that the only way forward is to curb the use of drugs by altering the IFBB's rules so as to penalize size. He recommends:

> The fastest way to get rid of performance enhancing drugs in bodybuilding is to change the rules to pay less attention to size. You can't simply say, "We're going to test you all". That hasn't worked with any sport, from the Tour de France to the Olympic Games. Not only should the judging criteria change for judging physiques, but also performances should become a large part of the equation. If a guy hits 30 perfect poses, including splits and handstands, to great music, he gets a perfect 10. Anything short of that is a 9, or an 8, and so on. If a guy lumbers out with a distended stomach and hits three or four perfunctory poses before falling apart, he gets a zero! He can be the biggest guy in the world, but he doesn't get a point in that round. Posing would become critical, and training would head off in a much different direction, placing more emphasis on cardiovascular fitness to sustain extended, more elaborate posing routines.
>
> (O'Connell 2000: 50)

What other options exist to control or halt bodybuilding's ever onward moving dynamic aesthetic? One preference might be to radically amend

the judging criteria in a similar fashion to that of women's bodybuilding in 2000; such a sea-change did dramatically stop the forward direction of the female aesthetic (admittedly with negative implications for the cultural critic). However, it is far more difficult to see this applied to the male. Perhaps the only means might be a rebellion by bodybuilders against the IFBB. This has happened once before in 1993 when many of the Weider's top athletes temporarily defected to the WBF for financial reasons. If enough bodybuilders expressed concerns over health issues and refused to get larger or more ripped and shredded, then changes would occur. Both these remain (so far) unlikely options, given that the sport is what John Romano calls a: 'sports entertainment, not a sport' (2003: 242). This option would require not just a new aesthetic for professional bodybuilding, but a new professional organization to support, administer and judge it. Bodybuilders do not belong to a union. What is on offer, beyond bigger is better? Schwarzenegger suggested a different emphasis on extended posing and penalties for excess. Another answer might be "Retro" bodybuilding; in other words, an aesthetic in bodybuilding which looked backward to the American Classic ideal of Steve Reeves, and where lesser size and less radical definition would combine with symmetry and proportion. The problem here is that in many ways this ideal is already apparent in "natural" bodybuilding and, although there are numerous organizations and several well-known "drug-free" bodybuilders, fan interest is limited. Also, bodies of the mesomorphic male is visible in advertising and other discourses outside competitive bodybuilding. For the aficionado of the Mr. (and Ms.) Olympia, what is there to compete for? Thus at present it seems unlikely that any of these changes will be implemented.

CONCLUSION

In his book on the world of professional bodybuilding, journalist Jon Hotten discusses 'tigers' and 'lambs' as labels for those who watch and those who compete at bodybuilding contests (2004: 259). Initially, he sees professional bodybuilders as the lambs, a term clearly not complimentary when taken into consideration with the bodybuilder's unhealthy condition during competition, the physiological side-effects and appearance induced by pharmaceuticals, and the control wielded by the IFBB; all suggest a set of personal restrictions within the context of a competitive professional sport. Such a derogatory labeling also seems apt as some professional bodybuilders have expressed their unease about having to become ever larger and more defined each year in order to win any competitions, fearing the dangers this poses to their health, but their doubts give way given the circumstances of bodybuilding's economic and ideological imperatives. But then Hotten changes his mind remarking

how the audience who watched these men 'with five per cent body fat standing between them and disaster . . . were the lambs, living . . . soft lives and staring up at all that muscle' (ibid.: 260). The word 'soft' suggests not only a non-bodybuilder, but more importantly, one who doesn't take risks.

The professional bodybuilder has always been a body pioneer, pushing at the limits of physical development. Perhaps bodybuilding should be thought of as analogous to the participants in "extreme sports" in which the activity is undertaken with awareness of considerable risk of injury or even death. In their discussion upon extreme sports, Robert Rineheart and Synthia Sydnor remark how extreme sports 'connect the athlete and audience with ineffable meanings with life and the universe' (2003: 12).

By the 1980s and the emergence of the Post Classical body, professional bodybuilding can be viewed as supporting the ultimate transgressive – and hence avant-garde – act of all: suicide. The fact is that bodybuilders are now recorded as often taking enormous dosages of substances, the consequence of which cannot easily be known. This exemplifies one of bodybuilding's most "freakish" characteristics: its drive toward self-destruction, a subject often recounted in bodybuilding texts. Steve Michalik, a professional bodybuilder who also appeared in the film *Pumping Iron*, illustrates one typical example in a newspaper article from 1998 (Solotaroff 1998). Hit by a tractor in 1975, Michalik was told that he would never walk again and could no longer compete as a professional bodybuilder (p. 9). But following the notion oft-discussed in bodybuilding magazines that one needs to fight on (often against the wishes of the medical establishment), he secretly injected himself with testosterone while lying in traction in an effort to hasten his recovery (p. 9). Out of hospital, his legs regained some sensation, which allowed Michalik to begin a relentless exercise and dietary regime. Several months later Michalik entered one of his last competitions. An account described it as follows:

> Steve Michalik only wanted two things. He wanted to walk on stage at the Beacon Theatre on 15 November, 1986, professional body-building's Night of the Champions, and just turn the joint out with his 260 pounds of ripped, stripped, and shrink-wrapped muscle. And then, God help him, he wanted to die . . . and leave a spectacular corpse behind.
>
> (p. 8)

Michalik did not die on stage, and today is an active campaigner against steroid use. However, there have been numerous deaths attributed to excess drug use. Andreas Munzer died when, according to Jon Hotten, his liver 'dissolved almost completely' from the drug Erythropoetin (2004: 16); Michael Hall likewise died of liver disease, and Don Ross

and Mike Mentzer allegedly both died as a result of prolonged use of anabolic steroids. And Mohammed Benaziza managed to fulfill Steve Michalik's ideal by expiring from the over use of diuretics within hours of winning the Night of the Champions in Holland in 1983; he achieved the ultimate transgression – dying for your "art."

Notes

1 'Flayed animals in abatoir' is coined by psychologist Ronald Conway, cited in Dutton (1995: 278).
2 Quote is taken from Matthew Colling's documentary, *This Is Modern Art* (1999), Channel Four.
3 All statistics are taken from http://www.getbig.com/results/e-mroly.htm (last accessed October 15, 2008).