

The Erotic Gaze, Violence and "Booters with Hooters"

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SINCE ALLEN GUTTMANN PROVIDED THE IMPETUS to organize this forum on "The Athletic, the Aesthetic, and the Erotic," let me begin where he does—at the doors of postmodernism theory and its pressures upon academics to become more self-critical by interrogating their own procedures and methods of inquiry. This requires recognizing the power relations within academe and within intellectual debate and demands the end of the assumption of the superiority of "the West over the best"—or as one of my feminist colleagues puts it, relinquishing the "British colonizing card." Part of postmodernism's power, states Terry Eagleton, "is the fact that it exists. . . . [I]t is the period we are living in . . . though how far down this goes, whether it is wall-to-wall is a matter of debate."¹ Not just a simple rejection of modernity then, postmodernism involves a very different modulation of its themes and categories. In particular it helps feminists (and others) to maintain what Lyotard has called "an incredulity toward metanarratives," which of course is an essential notion toward accepting a multiplicity of viewpoints and diverse subject positions in the histories we write.² What is at stake then is not so much the nature of the past and the status of discourse about it, as a change in the present and the consequent impossibility of maintaining earlier forms of discourse about the past (especially the seemingly universalist principles of the West giving rise to romantic narratives of classical Greece where powerful men with "intuitive wisdom" worshipped Eros through their love of the young male athletic body).³ I take this to mean that any discussion around sport and the erotic is by

definition an unfinished project—and that Allen Guttman's definitive conclusions and what could be seen as an "essentializing" of sexuality in his own study of the topic is regarded by his feminist postmodern critics as antithetical to such a notion.

I too remember being fascinated by stories of hardy sporting Spartans in my schooldays, but it was not their athletic bodies that inspired my girlish interest. Rather it was the story of the young Spartan boy who hid his pet fox under his cloak for fear of reprimand and, although bitten savagely, kept stoically silent while enduring the pain. It was a classic story of strong and silent masculinity, mentally tough and indifferent to pain, and it stayed with me as part of my British education about manliness and the body. Whenever I see Degas' beckoning painting of *Young Spartans Exercising*,⁴ I think about that boy's "manly" behavior rather than the nicely formed breasts of the feisty athletic girls (who look very "Marseille" to me!). I know that according to Plutarch, the famous Spartan lawgiver Lycurgus promoted public games for nude boys and girls for the express purpose of encouraging eroticism, leading to matchmaking and procreation. The emphasis upon heterosexual relations and eugenics can be seen in the background of Degas' picture where adults are pictured holding their young children—the desired product of the fit youth at these staged co-ed games.⁵

But from a different vantage point, the picture also reminds me of the pervasive misogyny of many of the Impressionists when it came to portraying women for the public gaze. Art historian Andrea Cullen, for example, has suggested that some of Degas' paintings, especially those of his female dancers, were misogynist attempts to express Lombrosian characteristics of the degenerate female body. (He made explicit use of prevailing images in science and medicine to make his female figures recognizable as prostitutes—members of the "classes dangereuses"—using acute facial angles, jutting jaws and prominent cheek bones as signs of their degeneracy.)⁶ Above all the picture of Spartans exercising reminds me of the use of wrestling and other sports as the preparation for the constant threat of war in those societies. As Guttman points out, the confluence of military and athletic motives guaranteed that masculinity for most Greeks meant active physicality.⁷ The young, beautiful, competitive and nude male athlete's body that was the object of the elite Greek male citizen's erotic gaze was also the soldier's body primed for violent assault.⁸ The pleasure with which the Greeks lingered on a highly articulated physique was related to an admiration of warriors and their keen interest in the struggle (*agon*) with their preference for the "hard" (rulers/male/European) over the "soft" (slaves/females/Asians).⁹ It was all about strength, male dominance, power relations and violent conquest. Surely then it is the manner of the "erotic" gaze upon beauty and skill in competitive physical activity (along with the relation of the beholder to the object of his/her desire) which is of the essence,¹⁰ and the behavior which results from it the arena of concern for those who object to the ways in which human beings, especially women, have been subjected to violence, especially sexual violence.

Feminists such as Mariah Burton Nelson in *The Stronger Women Get the More Men Love Football* (1994), argue that men have culturally sanctioned rights to violence, often learned in sports. Manly sports are more than games, states Nelson, a point Guttman acknowledges when he discusses the role of "natural" male aggressiveness and testosterone in stimulating the erotic element in sport.¹¹ The male character, as we have learned, was forged in

the crucible of athletic competition, and sports came to comprise a male preserve—a world where men are in charge and women are irrelevant. On the playing fields male athletes learn to talk about and think about women and women's bodies with contempt. Sports journalist Laura Robinson states that in the rape culture of the hockey locker room female fans are referred to as "groupies," "puck bunnies" and "dirties."¹² "From the pin-up girls on football players' lockers to the very language of scoring, many men associate sports with male sexual virility and female passivity"—and then sometimes act upon these deeply rooted assumptions in violent and abusive ways.¹³

I hasten to add that sport, of course, is not the only arena where these assumptions are played out—sporting/sexual metaphors are redolent in studies of the construction of the embodied worker. Look at Linda McDowell and Gillian Court's description of Future's trading for example:

The trading floor was a jungle of chest-pounding males where the most successful traders were known as "big-swinging dicks." This heavily masculinized identity compensated for the excessive hours and fast pace of trading work. Success at work was described with sexual metaphors: the thrill of conquest, and "consummating a deal." On the trading floor, women, often subject to sexual harassment became the "Other." Sometimes women coped by inscribing their bodies as masculine. "I always wear a suit. I like to look as male as I can or at least neutral."¹⁴

There are numerous studies that show male athletes have disproportionately high rates of sexual assault on women, and I do not need to recap them here or point out society's ambivalent approach to many of these "crimes." The connections among gender, sport, violence and sexuality are extremely complex, and it is here especially that Guttmann has been criticized as presenting too simplistic or essential a view of the matter. Nor is it possible to do more than barely scratch the surface here. Elspeth Probyn points to this complexity by suggesting that sport reaches parts of the body that analyses of embodiment have shied away from. She calls for a revitalizing of the study of body, sport and sexuality (with its overwhelming pull toward the normal) and a reemphasis of the promiscuous nature of the body as a sociological object. In an obvious manner, she states, as have numbers of feminist scholars, sports highlight the fact that bodies do something.¹⁵ Yet it is also the case that we remain fairly ignorant of the bodies' capacities. Gilles Deleuze puts this nicely as "on ne sait pas ce que peut un corps"—we just do not know what a body can do.¹⁶ Michael Messner and Brian Pronger have used the insights of Deleuze and Felix Guattari to argue that it would be more helpful if we looked at sport as part of a matrix wherein the free flow of energy is restricted and desire is disciplined in a variety of ways.¹⁷ Messner blames sports organization and the codifying effects of capitalism for this while Pronger goes further to condemn organized sport as operating within the same libidinal economy as rape.¹⁸ At this point, states Probyn, Pronger's argument shows a limited understanding of rape and this severely hampers his ability to think through the connections between gender, sport, violence and sexuality.¹⁹

The fact of the matter is that society's condoning of some of the violent aspects of male sports and the impetus to objectify women within the sports culture, sexualizing and exploiting their bodies, has been terribly harmful, and men have disproportionately conducted the harm. Lenient date rape penalties and sexist fraternity posters press women

students to take defensive postures. The possibility of being harmed, especially raped, has left many, many women living under a feeling of threat particular to their gender. The American Psychological Association estimated that approximately one in four women would be the victims of sexual assault during her lifetime. And rape is most likely to happen to the young. States Colette Dowling, "Rape's power to hold women captive, to keep them constrained and fearful in their lives, grows in proportion to the depth of the belief that women are incapable of standing up to a rapist."²⁰ The anger of feminists to such violence is not misplaced for it is very difficult to separate "pure celebrations of male and female sexuality in motion" from the ever widening rippling effects of the voyeuristic male gaze upon the nubile bodies of young female athletes being presented, or presenting themselves as sexual objects for consumption.

The differential treatment of male and female athletes' sexuality in the media is a case in point. The media often portray female athletes, not as powerful or strong but as charming and seductive, vulnerable and sexy. Bikinis, leotards and cute sports outfits place women and girls—at an ever-younger age—clearly in the role of an object of desire. Indeed the exposed female body appears ubiquitously as our primary public symbol of eroticism.²¹ Women who subvert gender norms in and through sport by developing and displaying an athleticized muscular body are often labeled as "butch," "dykes" and not proper women.²² *Sports Illustrated's* infamous annual swimsuit issue demonstrates a thinly disguised form of pornography, basically consisting of little more than "tits and asses."²³ Here we see the soft-core porn sportscape emerging as a feature of mainstream media representations of women athletes such as Brandi Chastain, U.S.A. World Cup champion soccer team member, appearing nude behind a soccer ball in *Gear* magazine, or Olympic swimmer Jenny Thompson represented topless in *Sports Illustrated*, her breasts barely covered by her clenched fists.²⁴ Katerina Witt, whose "come hither gestures" grace Guttman's book was featured in a nude portrait in *Playboy Magazine* as part of her successful sale of sexuality—a female subject desiring to be desired by men—the ideal, fully oedipalized, heterosexual woman.²⁵

We have to consider very carefully why we are so obsessed with linking our women athletes with traditional views of female beauty.²⁶ "Does anyone really believe that *Playboy* magazine is interested in showing women as powerful, natural and confident," states Robinson. "Its quite amazing that there is a never ending demand for *Playboy* given that it has been delivering the same product over and over and over for so many years."²⁷ Toby Miller refers to Chastain and her winning team as "Booters with Hooters," a term he has borrowed from the popular media. "On the one hand," he admits, "lies the grotesque sexism of reducing women to breast size associated with the word hooter. On the other is a sense of sexual, sporting and cultural power that comes from this improbable rhyming syntagm." There can be no better encapsulation of the ambivalence of "sportsex."²⁸ Yet there are many who will argue that such a reification of women, as empowered sexual objects—as sexy women athletes—cannot possibly be a positive development for women in sports (or in fashion either). But then debates around these kinds of issues have long split the women's movement.²⁹

Girls' gymnastics are said by some to have become "kiddie porn" in the world of competitive sport. Young, skimpily clad female gymnasts and ice skaters too incorporate (are required to incorporate?) sexy dance moves and erotic poses into routines while the

men typically do not. Their routines beg the spectator to "look at me, lust after me, but judge me the best!" The media unerringly seeks out multiple shots of crotch and butt. One has to ask then about the differences between eroticism and pornography. "Porn actors and actresses do not act," states Loic Wacquant, "they perform in the same sense that athletes do, putting their bodies on the line and tailoring their physical and emotional categories to the requirements of the task at hand."³⁰ Porn directors (and gymnastic coaches, skating choreographers and *Playboy* centerfold designers) must have an intuitive grasp of the minds of the clientele that buy their merchandise (and judge the concocted performances of the athletes).³¹ They understand that erotic excitement is energized by fantasies of hostilities, "the desire to harm the subject of our desire." While a single sexual image might be arousing, an industry has been built upon the willingness of men to pay for multiple, standardized looks at women's bodies. And like any distraction, porn can be used to the point of abuse.³²

Of the 500 or more exercise videos produced every year in the U.S. say Antonia Losano and Brenda Risch, the portrayal of female sexuality comes close to soft porn. The first televised exercise routines on *The Today Show* were aimed primarily at male passive viewers rather than active female participants. Recent videos have become subtler, situating the female body in an explicitly sexualized position "even if it is not one designed to be immediately erotic for viewers. The female body is reconstructed to be looked at, implicitly by male eyes . . . the do-it-for-yourself theme fail(s) to hide the do-it-for-men message."³³

There are some who present strong arguments that sexual objectification is not always problematic (and I take it that Guttman's critics see him as falling into this category). When athletes pose nude in North America or Europe it's not against any law to do so. States Robinson, "[T]he women from the Canadian Nordic ski team are free to pose naked to raise money to help defray the costs of competing. Some may think it's a foolish and exploitative thing to do, but it is their choice to do it."³⁴ "The very process of commodification in all its tentacular display," suggests Miller, "has truly transformative effects on the play of sex and gender in sports."³⁵ On the other hand, many radical feminists oppose all sexual displays of women *for men* on the basis that they are heterosexist and support hegemonic masculinity and the current gender order. This is not to say that they are opposed to sexual imagery per se nor does their exasperation at displays of gender asymmetry and homophobia provide any logical reason to couple them with the "religious right wing." Lesbian scholars, as Guttman points out "have affirmed and celebrated the female gaze as it contemplates the wedding of Eros and athleticism." But is he reading lesbian scholarship as it is intended to be read? Is it about "girl watching"? Rather, the prose he quotes is largely about learning, as a woman, how to look at another woman and see something entirely different from what one was educated to see—what one might, *tout court*, refer to as "lack." It is perhaps utopic, and maybe even reveals internalized misogyny, wanting to see a female body that does not announce femininity in the conventional sense. But it is about learning to see gender differently.³⁶

This brings me back to Guttman's main question that, from this perspective, fails to fully acknowledge the hegemonic impact of the male gaze and the traditional space of sport as a heterosexual landscape. "What is a heterosexual man supposed to do? Look

with admiration and be unmasked as a voyeur and as a potential rapist? Or avert his eyes and be accused of elision, erasure and symbolic annihilation?"³⁷ I agree with Guttman that aesthetic admiration and sexual attraction cannot easily be separated, though as Thomas Scanlon points out the existence of certain widespread aesthetic ideals does indicate a cultures common approval of and attraction to certain body types.³⁸ In trying to detach aesthetic movement from the dancing bodies that performed it, the father of expressive dance, Rudolf Laban, tried to counter the popular perception (or misperception) by both sexes that female bodies veil a unique (sexual?) mystery that aesthetic movement reveals or expresses.³⁹ Similarly, when he watched the aesthetic movements of dancers, expressionist artist Ernst Ludwig Kirchner focused upon trying to paint what he felt rather than what he saw. He felt that dance made the body naked in such a way as to make his own desire naked, though his desire was to "see dance" rather than the bodies of dancers.⁴⁰

For all the complexities, it is difficult to overlook the isomorphism between white, male sexuality and power (and its abuses) in a discussion of aesthetic admiration and sexual attraction regardless of the fact that times are changing in a postmodern age and gendered practices are being rearticulated on many fronts. A thorough deconstruction of the portrayal of "booters with hooters" would perhaps tell us as much about sport, eros and the exercise of gendered power as Degas' *Exercising Spartans*.



¹Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), ix, 20.

²Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

³Mark Poster, *Cultural History + Postmodernity: Disciplinary Readings and Challenges* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 67. Myths of beauty and ugliness have been crucial in laying the foundations for normalcy, especially through the powerful tradition in western art of representing a preferred mode of envisioning the body—using a set of idealized conventions on how the body should look. The systematization of the body by artists and critics suggests linearity, regularity, and a completeness that belies the fragmentary way the body is constitutively experienced. Lennard Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness and the Body* (London: Verso, 1995), 131-134.

⁴Hilaire Germain-Edgar Degas, *Young Spartans Exercising*, c. 1860, London National Gallery, U.K., Degas NG3860.

⁵Thomas Scanlon, *Eros and Greek Athletics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 220-222.

⁶Andrea Cullen, *The Spectacular Body: Science, Method and Meaning in the Work of Degas* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995), xii.

⁷Allen Guttman, *The Erotic in Sports* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 17.

⁸In his discussion of the erotic power of athletics in Greek culture and society, Scanlon points out that the gymnasium and athletics were natural byproducts of an elite class of warrior-nobles whose values, including sexual orientation and ideals of beauty, were preserved and transmitted by those institutions. Scanlon, *Eros and Greek Athletics*, 209.

⁹The taut lean bodies of Europe were the bodies of hardy conquerors and the individualized, articulated physique embodied European identity. Shigehisa Kuriyama, *The Expressiveness of the Body and the Divergence of Greek and Chinese Medicine* (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 139-141.

¹⁰We know that any invocation of the "naturally" attractive presumes a generalized mainstream appeal.

¹¹Of course there are serious dangers in discussing the naturalness of hormonal behavior or the biological basis of violence. Nelly Oudshoorn in *Beyond the Natural Body: An Archeology of Sex Hormones*

(London: Routledge, 1994) shows how the notion of the hormonally constructed body since the early decades of the twentieth century has been the dominant mode of conceptualizing bodies to the extent that we now assume that it is a natural phenomenon. Science, more than any other investigative and descriptive activity, creates and conceals the contexts from which it arises. For a discussion of the dangers inherent in the new biology of violence see Pat Spallone, "The New Biology of Violence: New Geneticisms for Old," *Body and Society* 4 (1998): 47-65.

¹²Laura Robinson, *Crossing the Line: Violence and Sexual Assault in Canada's National Sport* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1998), 5.

¹³Mariah Burton Nelson, *The Stronger Women Get, The More Men Love Football* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1994), 98.

¹⁴Linda McDowell and Gillian Court, "Missing Subjects: Gender, Power and Sexuality in Merchant Banking," *Economic Geography* 70 (1994): 229-251, quoted in Mark Bahnisch, "Embodied Work, Divided Labour: Subjectivity and the Scientific Management of the Body in Fredrick W. Taylor's 1907 Lecture on Management," *Body and Society* 6 (2000): 60.

¹⁵Elsbeth Probyn, "Sporting Bodies: Dynamics of Shame and Pride," *Body and Society* 6 (2000): 14.

¹⁶Gilles Deleuze, *Critique et Clinique* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1993), 154.

¹⁷Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. B. Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

¹⁸Michael M. Messner, "Studying Up on Sex," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 13 (1996): 221-236; Brian Pronger, "Outta My Endzone: Sport and the Territorial Anus," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 23 (1998): 373-389.

¹⁹Probyn, "Sporting Bodies," 26n3.

²⁰Colette Dowling, *The Frailty Myth: Women Approaching Physical Equality* (New York: Random House, 2000), 251.

²¹Joanne Meyerowitz, "Women, Cheesecake and Borderline Material: Responses to Girlie Pictures in the Mid-Twentieth Century U.S.," *Journal of Women's History* 8 (1996): 9.

²²Doug Aoki, "Sex and Muscle: The Female Bodybuilder Meets Lacan," *Body and Society* 2 (1996): 59-74.

²³Susan A. Speer, "Sports Media and Gender Inequality," *Body and Society* 7 (2001): 110.

²⁴Jack McCallum, "For Jenny Thompson: Unflagging," *Sports Illustrated* 93 (2000): 52; *Gear* (1999).

²⁵Katerina Witt, "Fire and Ice," *Playboy Magazine* 45 (December 1998): 174-183.

²⁶And of course we also have to ponder why "beautiful" athletes have been more accepted and celebrated than athletes that did not have the same public image. Then again the highest paid women are models and strippers.

²⁷Laura Robinson, *Black Tights: Women, Sport and Sexuality* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 2002), 79.

²⁸Toby Miller, *Sportsex* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 128.

²⁹See for example, Meyerowitz, "Women, Cheesecake and Borderline Material," 25-26.

³⁰Loic Wacquant, "Porn Exposed," review of *Coming Attractions: The Making of an X-Rated Video* by Robert J. Stoller and I.S. Levine (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993) in *Body and Society* 3 (1997): 119.

³¹The complicated operations of identification and desire, or being and having that are at work in the social production of female as well as male spectatorial subjectivity requires much more analysis in the sporting domain. For a view of this issue in the fashion world see Diana Fuss, "Fashion and the Homospectatorial Look," *Critical Inquiry* 18 (1992): 713-737.

³²It is not happenstance that porn performers, like many professional athletes are universally treated like kids by their employers; infantilization is an effective technique of manipulation in a line of work where gross coercion is ultimately self defeating—and where there is little possibility of erotic joy amid the threat, sweat and degradation. Vicky Funari, "Naked, Naughty, Nasty: Peep Show Reflections," in *Whores and Other Feminists*, ed. Jill Nagle (London: Routledge, 1997), 30, 121.

³³Antonia Losano and Brenda A. Risch, "Resisting Venus: Negotiating Corpulence in Exercise Videos," in *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*, eds. Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 117.

³⁴This right to choose, of course, is not available to women in Muslim fundamentalist countries who have had their lives threatened for the dual crimes of running and revealing their bodies. Robinson, *Black Tights*, 223.

³⁵Miller, *Sportsex*, 134.

³⁶Personal communication, Mary Bryson to author, April 2003.

³⁷Allen Guttman, "Spartan Girls, French Postcards and the Male Gaze," Forum: "The Athletic, the Aesthetic and the Erotic," annual conference of the North American Society for Sport History, Ohio, May 2003.

³⁸Scanlon, *Eros and Greek Athletics*, 210.

³⁹Karl Toepfer, *Empire of Ecstasy: Nudity and Movement in German Body Culture, 1910-1923* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 72.

⁴⁰Ibid., 70.