

Psychoanalytic-autoethnography:

Troubling *natural* bodybuilding

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Abstract

This paper presents a psychoanalytic-autoethnography of embodied masculinity. It examines the sport of competitive *natural* bodybuilding as a means to pursue relevant ontological questions as part of a wider philosophical project. The embodied narrative addresses three overlapping themes: an examination of the discourses defining a crisis of masculinity relating to an evolving body project; an analysis of the subject's ambivalence towards the spoken ideal of 'physical culture' while imagining other forms of desire and risk taking practices; an analytic autoethnographic account of a competitive body experiencing temporal feelings of 'loss', reflecting on fragmentary experiences connected to socially conditioned roles. Enframed by psychoanalytic theory, the analysis draws inspiration from the work of Lacan and supporting cast of Butler, Kristeva and Agamben.

Introduction

This is an autoethnographic story of embodied masculinity, the story of a struggle to understand the concept of competitive *natural* bodybuilding as ethical sport seen through a psychoanalytic lens. Its narrative methodology, inspired by a bricolage approach (Kincheloe and Berry 2004), draws on a wide range of qualitative sources, including informal and semi-structured interviews – (with competitive natural bodybuilders past and present across the UK), internet 'forum talk', shared anecdotes and chance conversations, as well as significant personal experience and observation spanning a period of fifteen years. Such bricoleurship abandons the quest for certainty by deferring to a state of complexity; the need for truth by an ontological disposition and movement towards polyvocality; and the concept of naïve realism with fictional multiplicities and narrative impressionism.

The story itself is a composite-pastiche of the various participants: a medley of the voices, private whispers, nods and winks, coded silences, privileged confidences and chameleon-like behaviours coupled with deeply intuitive personal knowledge (Polanyi 1962) of the sport. It offers an accompaniment of ethnographic fiction and autoethnography (Anderson 2006; Reed-Danahay 1997), of the conjoined self and ‘Other’ inseparably interwoven and reflexively entwined. As embodied author, I am thus everywhere about the text. My interpretive omnipotence is imbued in the fragmentary moments of fictive and corporeal reality, where meanings associated with, and attached to others’ actions arise in an ethical context that initially promises, but ultimately defers ‘truth’.

Philosophically and reflexively, Jean-Luc Nancy’s (1991) concept of community is especially relevant. The ‘indivisible individual’ is the ‘self’ that cannot exist apart from ‘Other’: ‘there is no singular being without another singular being’ (28), and hence no ‘absolute immanence’ (4) for-itself. Thus, my identity, as life-time natural bodybuilder, exists only in respect of its event and compearance: my relational co-appearance of *being-with* those who comprise the *natural* bodybuilding community. Paradoxically, then, on Nancy’s reckoning, the idea of narrative autoethnography presents something of an ‘impossible interiority’ (4) and logical impossibility, for the ontological status of the conjoined self and ‘Other’ is to produce a relational identity and corporeality. The corollary is the impossibility of connection devoid of relation. So, to declare narratively ‘this part is me’ and/or ‘this part is Other’, or, alternatively, that ‘this is a composite fiction of multiple others not including me’, would be nonsensical since such issues are lost to infinite reflexivity. At the same time, however, it would be disingenuous also to suggest that some parts of the narrative were not more personally resonant than others in the event of being-in-common-with the *natural* community, and so, for heuristic reasons, while breaking my own injunction, I intend to indicate such resonant events with occasional footnotes interspersed throughout the narrative.

With these methodological issues in mind, the narrative addresses three overlapping themes, incorporating the following configuring elements: an examination of the discourses that define a crisis of masculinity in the context of an evolving body project; an analysis of the subject's ambivalence towards the spoken ideal of 'physical culture', while imagining other performative risk-taking practices, producing ethical tensions and troubling temporal identities; an analytic autoethnographic account (Anderson 2006) of a competitive body experiencing temporal feelings of 'loss', reflecting variously on fragmentary moments and experiences connected to socially conditioned roles. Theoretically, the piece is enframed by psychoanalytic theory, focusing mainly on the work of Lacan (1962; 1977), while drawing inspiration from Butler (1993; 1997), Kristeva (1982) and Agamben (2005; 2009). The story begins with a philosophical exploration of the concept of competitive *natural* bodybuilding and of the ethical frameworks that locate the sport. Then, it reflects critically on how the sport's code of ethics and conduct, a code of integrity, conscience and moral compunction, is translated psychoanalytically through an autoethnographic account of the murky and mercurial context of *natural* competition.

The ethics of natural bodybuilding: an authentic chimera?

Natural bodybuilding as distinct from wider, conventional bodybuilding, covered extensively in the sociology of sport literature (Sparkes et al. 2012; Bridges 2009; Monaghan 2001; Weigers 1998; Klein 1993; Fussell 1991), posits itself as the 'clean, pure and innocent' counterpoint to the pharmacologically enhanced 'Other': put simply, bodybuilding *without* drugs. Currently in the UK, there are three natural bodybuilding organizations, which are represented by the following formally recognised bodies: Natural Physique Association (NPA); British Natural Bodybuilding Federation (BNBF); United Kingdom Drug-Free Bodybuilding Association (UKDFBA). These organizations emerged as self-proclaimed, authentic representations of the hyper-real and hyper-masculine (Klein 1993), as alternative

institutions symbolising the ‘good, clean and proper’, a space of unblemished innocence at the locus of perceived excess. While individual claims to moral virtue reside in the nuanced ethical frameworks that regulate the sport, in practice the concept ‘natural’ is not as pure or complete as it seems. The status of natural organisations, as the embodied representation of drug-free competitive sport, produce a *prima facie* appearance of equality that in actuality reflects a ‘dividing practice’ (Foucault, 2002, 50). The spoken purity of the ethical claim allied to a differentiated testing protocol in turn produces a moral hierarchy of difference between the governing bodies. Such technologies are observed through key differences in the rigour and authenticity of different testing protocols.

The NPA operates a lifetime natural policy and follows World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) guidelines for drug testing. This entails a full spectrum urinalysis for banned substances, anabolic steroids and recreational drugs, where such tests are processed at a WADA accredited laboratory at Kings College in London. The NPA also employs selective rigorous polygraphing conducted by the company: Forensic Vetting. This involves a computerised test of approximately ninety minutes’ duration at a cost of £400 per subject. The claimed accuracy is in excess of ninety-eight percent, where the two percent margin of error is reported more likely if someone is lying than if telling the truth¹. In contrast, the BNBF operates only a seven year drug-free testing policy, but still claims the status of a natural federation. The NPA’s urinalysis is WADA regulated, though not all winners are tested throughout the competitive season. On the other hand, the BNBF claim higher moral ground, testing all class winners of qualifiers and finals. Such tests are not WADA accredited - as with the NPA, but samples are instead frozen and dispatched to the United States for laboratory analysis.

1

Source: personal correspondence with the NPA’s anti-doping officer.

Like the NPA, the BNBf and UKDFBA - the UK's newest drug-free bodybuilding organisation, also employ a polygraph test. In the case of the BNBf, this is a precondition for all qualifying athletes who must pass the test before competing in the British finals. However, despite a surface appearance of being both complete and comprehensive compared with the NPA protocol, where only selected athletes are tested due to limited resources, the test has been quite heavily criticised. This is due to a symptom that constitutes an ethically 'divided practice', as the testing protocol of the BNBf is of much shorter duration than either the NPA or UKDFBA, in fact only ten to fifteen minutes long², and so while most would acknowledge its important deterrent value, its accuracy is often more widely disputed.

It is also noteworthy that none of the UK's naturally affiliated organisations is able to test all athletes due to high costs and limited financial resources, and so this procedural flaw itself is enough to raise the ethical query of when a natural bodybuilder is *de facto* natural? While the NPA stipulates that athletes should be lifetime free of performance enhancing drugs and all such prohibited substances, the folly is that there is no test anywhere that can validate the claim to lifetime natural status, and so, ontologically, the question of credibility inevitably collapses into a moral argument regarding the integrity and conscience of particular individuals. In a sense the BNBf presents a more modest, yet accurate and morally compelling conception of 'natural' by deferring to a policy of seven year drug-free status. However, even here the claim is notably shaky and, as such, arguably ethically untrustworthy, since the concept 'drug-free' cannot encapsulate all that being natural morally presupposes – (vis-à-vis the BNBf's title). In theory, the UKDFBA offers perhaps the most

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This is according to my experience of the BNBf's polygraph test conducted in 2004. More recent anecdotes and conversations with contemporaries suggest the procedure remains, by and large, the same.

authentic spoken account of an ethical vision for the sport, accompanied by a framework of testing which avoids over-claiming that its athletes are anything other than drug-free. However, since not all winners are subject either to a polygraph test or urinalysis, with only a selection receiving a mixture of procedures, the UKDFBA is unable to establish a minimum common threshold of drug-free status and so ultimately also falters ethically³.

Psychoanalytic-autoethnography: troubled bodies, masculinity and psychosis

‘Who are those guys? How did they get like that and why would they want to look that way? These questions and others closely related have followed serious bodybuilders since they emerged as living cartoon characters going back as far as [Eugene] Sandow ... it has been a continuous psychological barrier traversing time and culture that has separated the natural athlete from those wanting a greater metamorphosis through a constantly evolving chemical arsenal’ (Roach 2008, 280).

‘Are you coming to the gym sometime today, Dave?’ snapped Mick impatiently.

‘Yes, I’ll be right there, mate, just let me finish this coffee, grab my bag and I’ll meet you at the car in five’.

*Washing down a handful of branched-chain aminos⁴ with the last few gulps of tepid espresso, Dave pondered the idea of a ‘greater metamorphosis’. His mind raced enthusiastically to the opening of chapter sixteen: *The Psyche of the Bodybuilder*⁵, and*

3

As the founder of the UKDFBA put it via personal correspondence: ‘as an association we are realistic and honest about our testing programme and are clear that neither the polygraph and [sic] urinalysis methods of testing are a 100% conclusive way of proving drug free status; so even applying both of these methods to every competitor is not an absolute guarantee that a contest is “drug free” in accordance with the rules’

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Branched-chain amino acids are a sports supplement used by bodybuilders to facilitate protein synthesis and offset catabolism prior to, and following intense exercise.

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paused for sustenance. Emerging reflections, mirroring and melding with the monochrome images of old-school bodybuilders, gave timely impetus. For ‘the mind is the limit’⁶, and where the mind goes, the body will follow echoed a wise old man. Contemplating the great physical culturists, Sandow, Pandour, Poole and Grimek, the real men of iron whose marvellous physiques and great chiselled bodies were entirely the product of ‘good genetics, tenacity and a great appetite’ (Roach, 2008.). These fine monuments served as role models of an historic era predating the chemical explosion of anabolic steroids, exogenous testosterone and human growth hormone. When men pumped iron simply for the joy: health physical culture and one’s own hedonistic pleasure.

Thumbing through a back issue of Muscle and Fitness⁷ magazine, Mick mesmerised as Dave moved hurriedly into the car. Adorning the cover, the ‘Golden Eagle’, Tom Platz, so named after the American symbol and his own tenacious attitude: ‘never saying no, flying higher and higher, no matter what’ (Platz 2009). Locks bleached-blond and charismatic smile, Platz, one-time professional bodybuilder, was the archetypal representation of the hyper-masculine body: big, tanned and unfathomably muscular. Dave stared intently at the photo. Hitting a signature side-chest on the golden drift of Venice beach, hamstrings hanging against the Pacific backdrop, waves rippling in, and the Californian sun beating down, reflecting off the living legend’s lightly oiled and deeply bronzed statuesque physique; the hyper-masculine in all its magnificence. Dave and Mick had grown up in the halcyon days of the 1980s professional bodybuilding scene, the twilight of a ‘golden era’, an indelible image of character, physicality and aesthetics⁸.

Chapter 16 – The Psyche of the Bodybuilder, *Muscle, Smoke and Mirrors* – volume 1. (280-291)

6

This is a quote from multi-titled, former professional bodybuilder Arnold Schwarzenegger.

7

Muscle and Fitness is an American bodybuilding and fitness magazine, formerly part of Weider Publications Inc., dating back to 1936.

8

Dave stared at the image of the affable ‘monster’: ‘Platz’s legs again, eh?’

‘No better inspiration on leg day’ piped Mick, incredulously. ‘As the Golden Eagle would say: “Dare yourself to Dream”, think big, get big, Dave, and don’t let your mind be the limit of your physical development. Train hard and live the lifestyle’. Mick winked, fixing a cheeky grin on Dave’s ironic smirk.

Dave knew Mick was sending him up, for they both recognised the physiological limitations of the human body restricted to the modesty of natural training. Nevertheless, Platz, Padilla, Zane, Bannout, Mentzer and Haney, all top-echelon ‘pros’, were, in the mind’s eye, still the image of the masculine ideal to which most naturals would compulsively aim, if not so sensibly aspire.

In Lacanian (1962) terms, all this makes perfect sense. Significant gaps in the ethical frameworks that define the sport are exacerbated through the syntactic juxtaposition of ‘natural’ and ‘bodybuilding’ as terms producing an uncanny paradox of the familiar and strange. It is a type of seduction in which the ‘normal’ body infiltrated by the image of the hyper-real desires to become a caricature of itself. The bodybuilding subject is thus trapped in a narcissistic impasse in which the ‘natural’, so called is made irreducibly contingent upon the image of the hyper-masculine self, a bigger, stronger and more muscular body. This is exemplified by Lacan’s (1977: 74) mirror stage, where the image of oneself reflected back produces a distorted perspective that occasions a mental permanence, yet in being just an image marks the subject’s profound *méconnaissance*. Such misrecognition, born of the accumulation of forged images, of one’s ideal ego and self-satisfaction, produces an untrue truth for the subject and means of identification and abridgement, through the imaginary order, between self and ‘Other’. In this uncanny sense, the sport of natural bodybuilding is

Drummond (2003, 138) notes how young men identify aesthetically with ‘specific forms of physicality as a masculinized virtue’.

duly dependent on the hidden object of the hyper-masculine, which serves to engulf the subject in a realm of excess without dissonance. Put differently, '[t]he principle of difference understood as difference in the concept does not oppose but, on the contrary, allows the greatest space possible for the apprehension of resemblances' (Deleuze 1994, 14); that is, where the putative *natural* devoid of pharmaceutical assistance, seeks to imitate the achievements of the hyper-masculine bodybuilder in a context free of contradiction, if not ultimately crisis. The corollary tension, real or imagined, emerges at the nexus of the ethical and corporeal: to what extent can the natural body become the object of its repressed desire? And by what measure can the seduction of the hyper-masculine be realised within the ethical parameters of a pharmaceutically unaided sport? Paradoxically, flaws in the foreshadowed ethical frameworks create the very spaces within which it is possible to engage crisis, the phenomenon of 'muscle dysmorphia' (Pope et al. 1997), in the corporeal reality of the hyper-masculine.

This was Dave's dilemma. For "Daring himself to Dream" appealed to the imaginary and hyper-reality of Platz's characteristic cartoon-freaky quads. Bigger legs, more muscularity, and more deeply etched separation and "cuts". Yet in truth, Dave knew, symbolically, he was physically limited, hormonally unsupported and genetically situated somewhere at the back of the queue.

As insecurities and self-perceived deficiency kicked in, Dave's mind flicked to the great physical culturists. In the face of acute self-doubt they had always helpfully grounded him. A shared affinity for the ethics of physical culture produced a certain spiritual transcendence and imagined kinship. It had to be, for in some ways he was no closer in the gene pool to these freaks of nature than the pharmaceutically aided Platz. In truth, it did not matter. Six weeks out from the British finals, the climax of yet another competitive season would eventually soon unravel, and with weariness rapidly setting in, he was happy to accept any

kind of visual inspiration, chemically assisted or otherwise, if only to conquer another excruciating leg-workout. It was all or nothing. And there could no excuses again for trailing in fifth. He was driven to succeed, but at what potential cost?

Spit and sawdust gym ...

The monster of all workouts, Dave hated leg training with a deep and intense passion⁹, and his resentment spread to all who dared cross him in the grip of these tense and often moody weekly physical ordeals¹⁰. Always vaguely amused, Mick just cranked up the tempo and pushed on. Dave's legs would never be his strong point, only his symbolic undoing a constant source of shame rather than emblazoned pride¹¹. A wiry build and natural ectomorph, long-levers and slender quads were hardly the foundations of ideal bodybuilding material and typically not in the idealised image of the hyper-muscular male (Frank 1991). But what he lacked in lower body size, shape and separation was more than balanced with a breath-taking torso, broad shoulders tapering to a tiny wisp-waist. For sure, his upper body had some of the hallmarks of a well-proportioned, high quality physique. Yet this only served to accentuate the problem, his shame, his very lack and deficiency; he knew it, the judges knew and so now did everyone else.

Following a recent regional qualifier, in which he'd placed a creditable second to last year's champion, results were posted up on the internet at 'uk-bigmuscles.com'. Dave stood

9

As Bridges (2009, 85) notes, for training purposes legs are often regarded the most 'commonly despised muscle group'.

10

While openly despising the prospect of leg training on a regular basis, ironically, in physique terms, I was generally considered strong in this area genetically. So, unlike Dave, I wasn't often mocked or ridiculed, although I knew plenty who were and so a spectre of their embodied corporeality is reincarnated here for ethnographic authenticity.

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See Sparkes et al. (2012) for an account of the 'muscle self and the dynamics of shame and pride', and Probyn (2000) in the context of sporting bodies more widely.

proudly behind his second place trophy, striking a pose and faking a smile for the big lens man opposite. Underneath the thread grew to several pages, reducing Dave's pride and self-satisfaction to intense ridicule and further cruel and unreserved mockery. About his legs, one perceptive critic noted a comedic resemblance with the image of the predatory bull-dog of Tom and Jerry cartoon fame: "all top half and puny little legs". Another, known only as "cheat-seeker", had referred to him as "Chicken George", drawing attention to his out of synch spindles and painfully high calf attachments. It was all so puerile, but the reference to cartoons presented an interesting paradox, one not easily reconciled with the image of the hyper-real, the superstars of muscle Dave had grown up worshipping.

When 'clients encounter the feelings, thoughts, and memories their own photos evoke in them, they are usually able to then better understand, express, and resolve their problem—and begin to explore the underlying feelings and background reasons involved' (Weiser 2005, 6). However, in the absence of any such simple resolution or easy reconciliation, how is it possible to live both with and through the tensions? To engage, in Lacanian (1977) terms, simultaneously with the imaginary order, the forgery of images comprising the ideal ego, the very lens through which it is possible to see similarities and differences between self and other in relation to the 'person I imagine myself to be'; and the symbolic order, that which is anchored to the rules and cultural expectations which define the community of which I am a fully-fledged member, produces an irreducible tension and opposition of 'jouissance expected' and 'jouissance obtained' (Lacan 1982 [1972-1973]). That is, where the seductive aura of the object of desire inevitably disappoints, producing a form of enjoyment that is not without pain. In fact, for Lacan, actual pleasure lies beyond the pleasure principle in a surplus known as the 'real': that which 'resists being symbolized, a ... leftover which remains when reality has been thoroughly formalized' (Eagleton 2008, 144).

Drawing on Žižek's (1991) reading of Lacan's pleasure principle, the only apparent consistency between the polymorphous identities of the competitive male bodybuilder is the symptom, the symptom of desire, the deceptive lure and enigma of the masculine Other, which organises the suffering in which the competitive athlete believes, bringing the imaginary, symbolic and real into endless negotiation (Ragland-Sullivan 1991a). For the natural bodybuilder, such *jouissance* produces suffering that is double edged. On the one hand, an irreducible symptom of Foucauldian (1988) technologies of the self: a government of the body in which the *jouissance* of muscle dysmorphia produces an exacting approach to bodily practices and dietetic schedules, 'an ascetic exaltation of sobriety and dietetic rigour' (Lupton 1997, 144); on the other, a kernel of pain, in which fascination with the deceptive lure of the hyper-masculine, involves a reflexive reaching for the Other, a *jouissance* that can result only in further suffering, insofar as the Other's defects, the caricature of the grotesque, feminine and obsessively compulsive, turns back on itself, reflecting the lack in one's own masculinity. In this sense, the fantasy of the real (here, hyper-real) eclipsing the symbolic runs the risk of a state of unfettered psychosis, lest the 'paternal function' – (the perceived authority of the ethical framework of natural bodybuilding), and realm of the symbolic come unbound from the imaginary and real (Lacan 2004).

And on the theme of the grotesque and feminine, is bodybuilding truly a sport or really a pageant? In the era of the great physical culturists bodybuilding emerged almost synonymous with weightlifting, but subsequently, in the mid-late 1950s, developed along the lines of Miss America, as a beauty pageant, where not only muscle but general appearance and character were also judged (Roach 2008). As Monaghan has argued elsewhere 'the public spectacle of the bodybuilding show, similar to the burlesque ballet in seventeenth-century baroque culture, opens up the possibility of the feminisation of male 'dancers' and the representation of grotesque bodies' (2001, 35). This represents a further uncanny paradox insofar as strength

in the pursuit of ‘beauty’ is often apt to be conceived feminine, whereas beauty in the service of strength or courage is regarded solidly masculine (*ibid.*). However, as Lacan (1977) reminds us, there can be no pure feminine or masculine essences, only a learnt set of gendered fictions¹², whose jouissance is reflected in the ‘effects of language and taboos written on the body ... the assumption of a gender identity elaborates fantasies around jouissance experiences that keep any subject from being fulfilled by ... his desires’ (Ragland-Sullivan 1991b, 51). Thus, whereas competitive bodybuilding is apt to be mocked for its feminine sensibilities, with its so-called dancing ‘mirror athletes’ (Roach 2008, 282; Frank, 1991), sports such as boxing or gymnastics, karate and taekwondo, despite their obvious art-forms and choreographic functions and features, are more readily regarded masculine (Monaghan 2001).

Deflated and even a little depressed, Dave understood the nature of his problem as complex and painful. Doubts, insecurities and bruised pride however, stirred his anger and competitive ego. Today was leg day and he needed to improve. In fact, he knew he had to, simply to secure a podium finish at the finals.

‘Come on Dave, two more reps for the British title, squeeze them out’ cried Mick, more in the vague hope of a miracle, than any grounded sense of reality, where reality is more a montage of the symbolic and imaginary.

‘Just a touch Mick’ he gasped, forcing one last final assent on the leg press.

Letting out an audible cry, at the top Dave racked the weight, the imprint of strain leaving his face and nervous energy dissipating. Rolling out sideways, pallid, gaunt and cadaverous-faced he tried to stand, then doubled over the nearest bench. Eyes closed, gasping, spluttering

¹²

This is in contrast with White and Gilbert’s (1994) assumption that men pursue muscle in the name of their ‘true masculinity’, to be powerful, defined and hyper-muscular.

but just about managing to block out the pain, his stomach first churned then wretched.

Regaining composure he scanned the gym.

‘Oh shit’ he blurted out, catching Roger’s eye in the far corner.

Roger was a work colleague who had recently taken up weights to ‘get fit’. Not long ago, he and Dave had casually conversed about the possibility of Dave writing him an exercise programme. Roger wanted to ‘lose a bit of weight’, but obviously ‘didn’t want to get too big’. The more Dave thought about this, the more his contempt grew for Roger, whom he already regarded a bit of a ‘ponse’, or as the Urban Dictionary states: ‘pretentious twat’, and therefore preferred to keep him at arms’ length. Dave knew his contempt for Roger was reciprocated. Roger thought natural bodybuilding entirely self-indulgent. At worst, unadulterated narcissism, and while he was able to appreciate the value of moderate exercise, in order to preserve one’s long term health, fitness and physical well-being, building the body for no particular reason, represented, to his mind, ‘the study of applied arrogance’ (Vince Gironda cited in Roach, 2008, 282). Worse still, getting up on stage depilated, tanned and lightly oiled, and then flexing for the pleasure (?) of other people was simply the most preposterous idea ever conceived. Indeed, the most utterly pointless sport ever invented, for the benefit of the most insignificant minority community of insecure individuals, freaks and personality disorders that one could possibly imagine! Not that Roger had ever actually said any of this to Dave personally. Nor, for that matter, anyone else, just that Dave felt or rather presumed to know Roger’s mind and innermost thoughts¹³. Either way, Roger still very much wanted Dave to write him an exercise programme. ‘Bollocks to that!’ thought Dave, which

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This was, and remains a salient issue for me: ambivalence poised at the axis of pride and shame, of the simultaneous desire to embrace and abject natural bodybuilding from my ontological status and identity. Tension, insecurity and plain embarrassment emerge at the nexus of a narcissistic self and perceived crude Neanderthal identity, producing, in both cases, the need to manage a wider public perception of an imputed ‘lack’.

on reflection proved an unfortunate vulgarity, as Roger bounded over in crotch-hugging Spandex sports tights, the colour now slowly returning to Dave's pale cheeks ...

In the *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva (1982) discusses the space of abjection, which lies outside the Lacanian notion of the symbolic order. To engage with the abject, the marginalised, is to engage in trauma. The abject is that which 'beseeches, worries and fascinates desire' and further represents that which is opposed to I (Kristeva 1982, 1). From a psychoanalytic perspective, abjection is done to the part of ourselves that we exclude in order to construct an identity. However, this is not an essentialised self, but rather an identity that aligns with the cultural expectations of the symbolic order, on whose truth I depend in order to live a 'normal life' (Zizek, 1991: 5). In actuality, this produces tension or dissonance, a type of dislocation between the 'jouissance expected' and 'jouissance obtained' (Lacan 1982 [1972-1973]), which as noted above is a symptom at the core of desire, the deceptive lure of the hyper-masculine Other. Feelings of angst, worry, anxiety and sometimes even embarrassment can lead to the concealment of 'certain forms of discrediting information about [the self] for the purpose of passing as "normal"' (Goffman 1968, 58). This has been referred to as the strong trope of the bodybuilder's 'insecurity' (Bridges 2009, 94). Indeed, the potential distancing of the self from the self is but a veiled attempt to assuage negative out-group assessment. To emphasise the health and fitness-related merits and artistic features of physical culture, and at the same time displace the grotesque and imputed feminine characteristics of natural bodybuilding, is to abject the symptom at the core of ridicule and/or shame (Monaghan 1999), simultaneously recognising that gender capital is apt to be 'read' differently in different social circumstances (Bridges 2009). In seeking to displace this perceived vulgarity with the more revered somatic concept of physical culture the natural bodybuilder is reconstructed a 'semi-bourgeois hobbyist'. For the lifelong project of the self, a commitment to physical culture is dependent upon material security and advantage

(Monaghan 2001, 67), to be embraced and rejected (as utterly pretentious) at the locus of the male psyche. The manoeuvre away, in Lacanian (1977) terms, in the image of Freud, is to assign 'transference' to the imaginary, where the 'Other' located as 'ponse' represents a closing of the unconscious: the abjected/transference of 'ponse' from the self, the 'semi-bourgeois hobbyist'. As Kristeva (1982, 3) suggests the crisis of identity is paradoxical: 'I abject myself within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish myself'. In this respect, the male natural bodybuilder may both desire and reject those aspects of masculinity through which they are simultaneously established and abjected from themselves.

Identity is thus a performative act, in Butler's (1999, 173) sense a fabrication, purely 'manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means ... it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality'. The performative natural bodybuilder is thus a veritable chameleon, reconfiguring for the audience, and further adapting behaviours to suit the assumed expectations and requirements of particular social situations. Accordingly, the gym 'self' is as much artifice as the fabrication and performance of self in multiple disparate contexts beyond the physical realm.

Sustaining a fast pace for greater metabolic impact, Dave shifted quickly over to the leg curl station, where he and Mick would next blitz hamstrings, an aura of Platz lurking somewhere about their own corporeality. Momentarily, Ben and Jay held them up while finishing off.

Glancing at Mick, Dave raised an eyebrow and within earshot remarked 'Ben seems to have lost a lot of weight, probably the best part of a stone (fourteen pounds)'. For sure, it was a dramatic transformation in appearance. Dave hadn't clapped eyes on him for a good six weeks or so and Ben certainly looked smaller, softer and altogether different, almost impalpably the image of a pre-pubescent boy having never before picked up a weight.

Shamelessly shrugging, Ben beamed a smile, winked at Jay and added ‘yeah, I’ve been on a diet’. Jay just sniggered, while Dave looked on perplexed, unable to fathom quite how Ben had changed so radically in such a short space of time. He was, after all, openly natural, having successfully competed much earlier in the season, qualifying and yet later electing not to pursue the finals for apparently ‘personal reasons’¹⁴.

Pushing on, the gym now filling up, Dave and Mick brushed shoulders with ‘big Dave’ on the adjacent apparatus. The ambient temperature and artificially high humidity enhanced the perception of a corresponding high-pitch training intensity, as well as the appearance of big Dave’s rough, rosy-cheeked complexion. Big Dave, the alter ego of natural Dave, was the gym’s resident walking-steroid guru, the only man who appeared hot in the freezing conditions of mid-winter, his elevated blood pressure providing a permanently warm glow about his blotchy-face, bull-neck and barrel-like chest. Physically he resembled a mini-Michelin man as he waddled back and forth across the gym, bum-bag tied around his waist, smiling from ear to ear, arms splayed from his sides as though carrying carpets beneath the crevasse of his seemingly always odorous armpits.

What big Dave didn’t know about ‘gear’ simply wasn’t worth knowing and he could lay his hands on almost anything anybody ever wanted. Turning towards natural Dave, forcing out the last couple of reps, he asked how his preparation was going.

‘So Dave, do you think you’ll be ready on time? And more importantly, do you reckon you’ll hang onto more muscle this time around?’

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Over the years, I observed widespread deceit, always subtle and never quite explicit but regardless a palpable tension hanging between the ethical and hyper-real. Assisted athletes masquerading as naturals and covering-up, howsoever literally and/or figuratively, to hide dramatic, yet no doubt improbable changes, were never far from view.

Perceptibly shrinking, natural Dave replied ‘Yeah, I think so, it’s just a question of dieting more carefully and creating a sensible calorie deficit so I don’t lose too much (muscle) in the final few weeks’.

‘Hmmm, you see I was talking with Sean the other day’ replied big Dave, ‘you know Sean who competed in the natural finals last year?’

‘Yeah I know Sean’ said Dave, wondering where all this was going ...

‘Well, he came to me about five weeks out last year, and also again last week wanting some advice and a bit of “help”. Claims to be “natural” just like you but says he needs some gear in the final few weeks, just to harden up and retain a bit more muscle. Nothing much, you’ll understand, just a bit of clen(buterol) or masteron with a couple of ius of growth (hormone) a day. Otherwise he’s “natural”’, smirked big Dave, whose initial snigger then erupted into a wheezy, full-blown belly laugh.

Composing himself, big Dave continued: ‘You should try it, mate, it’d make the world of difference to your physique, give you an amazing buzz too, especially when you feel like shit in those last few weeks. Strength will erupt from nowhere. I see a lot of your mates, you’d be surprised’

Natural Dave was stunned, Mick too. Ben breezed past, winking at the pair of them stood like idiots paralysed. A long and painful silence ensued. In all his competitive days, Dave thought natural bodybuilding a veritable utopia, the exclusive province of authentic natural athletes. With every part of his interior essence he believed that natural for life was true by definition: no more, no less, no embellishment, conspiracy theory or sordid little secret, but just what it said on the tin. His disappointment was palpable as it hung in the air circulating not quite returning to orbit the sensory mechanisms of a now scrambled symbolic order¹⁵.

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With barely a murmur, Dave and Mick finished off, before sharply exiting the gym and returning to Mick's car.

Mick looked at Dave, who reclining into his seat with a deep sigh of resignation, remarked 'I just don't get it'.

'No, it's despicable' blasted Mick.

'I'm lost, I just don't know now, my heart isn't in it anymore, how could it be?'

Mick agreed. It was a sham, a corruption of ethics and morals, mind and body, held together by a circle of trust and complicity, where seemingly almost everyone, except the naïve and inane, knew the score. From what big Dave had said it was clear the scale of the problem, of drug use in competitive natural bodybuilding, was wide and pervasive, and that the drug testing protocols were merely a smokescreen for the appearance of authenticity, a fake legitimacy. Even the polygraph was suspect. On many occasions previously big Dave had apparently handed out valium and beta-blockers much like 'Smarties' to naturals who needed to pass the test, which they did so successfully. Indeed, in one case the polygrapher remarked that the athlete concerned was without question the most honest person he had ever encountered. An amazing result indeed for a man who only a fortnight earlier had slipped big Dave a 'tenner' for some of his magic 'Smarties'.

The corruption of the sport of natural bodybuilding is comprehensible only in view of the idea of a pure interior essence that might be disclosed. That is, a utopia of moral decency and propriety, that all natural athletes are disposed to conduct themselves with honesty and integrity. The ethical frameworks that govern the politics of the sport are intended to conjure this object: the interior (natural) essence and locus of evaluation. However, as noted, the

The tensions reflected here have a galling and somewhat unpalatable resonance with my experience of the sport.

uncanny juxtaposition of the concepts ‘natural’ and ‘bodybuilding’ produce a complex symptom, irreducible to any such interior essence in the Lacanian sense. Indeed, the deceptive lure of the real and imaginary, of the hyper-masculine, raises a question of why any ostensibly rational individual would resist temptation in the presence of desire. As one put it ‘we all lift to get bigger [and] drugs make you get bigger more than not using them’.

Thus, in the absence of an interior truth, the concept of performativity, in Butler’s (1993; 1999) sense, provides a powerful explanation of the natural bodybuilding ‘scene’ and its multifarious fabrications. Reflecting on Derrida’s reading of Kafka’s “Before the Law”, she argues: ‘There the one who waits for the law, sits before the door of the law, attributes a certain force for the law for which one waits. The anticipation of an authoritative disclosure of meaning is the means by which that authority is attributed and installed: the anticipation conjures its object’ (Butler 1999, xiv). The analogy with natural bodybuilding lies within the symptom of the anticipation of practice of the masculine Other, ‘an expectation that ends up producing the very phenomenon that it anticipates’ (*ibid.*, xv). Accordingly, performative naturals anticipating the transgressive predilection of the hyper-masculine ‘Other’, to engage subversively in the consumption of performance enhancing drugs, becomes a self-fulfilling empirical reality. It produces just that which is posited outside itself. The sport is thus performative insofar as its practices, gestures and enactments that point towards all that is ‘clean and proper’ are merely the fabrications of ‘the reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains’ (Butler 1993, 2). In precisely this sense, the ‘cheat’ is a product of performativity, whose repetition, as Deleuze (1994, 19) reminds ‘is truly that which disguises itself in constituting itself, that which constitutes itself only by disguising itself. It is not underneath the masks, but is formed from one mask to another’. On this interpretation, the performative natural bodybuilder is but a moving object whose subjective repetition has no true ontological status, only a reality linked to the very

‘acts’ that constitute its repetition. In practice, the sport thus functions through a ‘public regulation of fantasy’ (or ‘régime of truth’ [Foucault 1980]), ‘a surface politics of the body’, which while seeking to institute ‘integrity’ of a moral masculine subject, simultaneously invokes the illusion of a natural essence, a deception or fake immanence maintained only for the spurious purpose of dividing ‘naturals’ from the ostensibly enhanced ‘Other’.

Back home, Dave wondered what advice the great physical culturists might have proffered. In reflective mood, he recalled one of his most favourite films: Sliding Doors, a movie which alternates between two parallel universes and the two paths the central character's life could take depending on whether or not a train is caught. This was a powerful analogy, as Dave pondered whether or not to succumb to the act finally of using drugs to compete successfully under the auspices of natural rules. Essentially, there were two choices, the surplus of which in both cases would produce a certain, irreducible tension. Listening carefully to the echoes of friends' voices heard over the years, Dave rehearsed all the reasons why he should stay natural:

‘As a person I'd consider myself upstanding and have always associated that side of things with people whom I'd not like to be associated with – i.e. stereotypical characters that can be found in gyms up and down the country. I don't necessarily think that I'm a better person than these individuals but it gives me great satisfaction knowing that I have something that they will never have. Anyone can use chemical assistance and get results but not everyone has what I've got genetically’

‘I have seen the “also ran” types succumb to cheating in order to play catch up with the top guys more than I have seen top guys get where they are through cheating’

‘I have always been intrigued and fascinated by natural bodybuilding and many of the older 50's and 60's physiques. My motivating factor has always been how good could I be naturally without the use of synthetic chemicals and hormones’

'I have never been tempted to take chemical assistance to win or even to compete. I believe in integrity and playing by the rules'.

'I would rather be a smaller bodybuilder with shape and symmetry than pursue the size at all costs'

'be the best you can with what you have got - anyone can inject or swallow a compound!'

He wrestled with the idea of levelling the playing field, yet balked at the notion of just making up the numbers, in effect playing 'catch-up'. His motivation and pride were situated rather within the ambition and moral appeal of simply being the best he could be¹⁶.

In the *Psychic Life of Power*, Butler suggests there can be no subject without subjection, that desire exists in a paradoxical relation: 'the desire to desire is a willingness to desire precisely that which would foreclose desire, if only for the possibility of continuing to desire' (Butler 1997, 61, 79). In this sense, the urge to cheat occurs in a repetitive cycle foreclosed by prohibition - the desire to stay natural, ethical and true to oneself, the recursive dilemma of natural bodybuilding. Simultaneously, in Lacanian (1977) terms, the foreclosure of the paternal authority, the sport's ethical frameworks, eventually exposed as a sham, produces a displacement in which the very fabric of Dave's reality is pulled apart and thereafter no sense made of the symbolic. The idea of reality as merely a fabrication, that natural bodybuilding is predicated on a series of untrue truths produces an opposition to the subject and hence 'normal life' leading to a state of potential psychosis.

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On several occasions, I contemplated crossing-over to the chemical universe of bodybuilding pharmacology, each time yielding to the ethical Law of the symbolic. To use drugs in the context of natural competition, while no doubt following the practice of *some* athletes in the being-in-common, would nevertheless serve to deceive others and also, significantly, displace myself from my-self. There can be no pleasure in prevailing over a community under false pretences. Although if such illicit practice is indeed more widespread than generally acknowledged, then an individual, in being-with the natural community, may have no other option. In such circumstances, the symbolic is penetrated, its structure breaks down and over time mutates, moving the being-in-common from natural to a dubious 'natural', thus inexorably slipping the term into inverted commas.

Dave's thoughts would remain perpetually in flux: to succumb to the hyper-masculine would, in effect, reduce him and the truth of his existence to a mere chimera, a fabrication of status and self. While in one sense the easier option it jarred with his interior essence as a man of integrity and self-worth. In contrast, staying natural would ironically transpose him to the outside of the natural bodybuilding community, alienated and positioned as a 'docile body' (Foucault 1977), the butt of everyone's jokes cast 'irreparably astray ... in a region that is beyond perdition and salvation ...' (Agambon 2009, 6).

In *State of Exception*, Agamben (2005) speaks of the concept: 'exile', which serves here as a propitious metaphor for the paternal authority of natural bodybuilding organisations whose predisposition to exile outspoken naturals creates a space of 'not belonging'. This space or non-place serves as the masculine 'Other' in the context of the authorities' (natural bodybuilding organisations') surplus of desire to preserve the illusion of the public fantasy of natural bodybuilding as legitimate ethical sport.

In Dave's mind it was now, finally all starting to make sense: 'The concept of "not belonging" can be read not only as a metaphor of my displacement from mainstream culture', he thought; 'but also as a metaphor for my displacement, obsessively practised through the demanding discipline of its aesthetic, from my-self'⁷.

Troubled? For sure, Dave knew he was fucked up.

Conclusion

Methodologically, this paper presents a challenging set of paradoxes through an intricate fusion of self-other interactions. It is a conceptual hybrid of self (*auto*) and sub-culture

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My excursion through *natural* bodybuilding has produced the effect and outcome of a certain tension and liminality. The state of not-belonging, either within the mainstream or, indeed, the so-called *natural* community has produced ontological insecurity, and is something I continue to wrestle-with.

(*ethnos*), theoretically informed and analysed (*grapho*) (Holt, 2003) through the sport of natural bodybuilding located within a troubled masculine space. In one sense a highly personalised narrative of the ‘evocative autoethnographic’ tradition (Anderson 2006), what Drummond (2010, 374) might call ‘the story of a life so heavily invested in sport’, replete with reflexive sensibilities, fictional assemblages and deferred meanings and truths. In another, an analytic and composite of plural masculinities, lived, breathed, experienced, and studied ethnographically over fifteen years.

While Ellis and Bochner (2000, 744) describe ‘evocative autoethnography’ as a ‘mode of storytelling ... akin to the novel or biography’, ignoring ‘the boundaries that normally separate social science from literature’, since the ‘narrative text refuses to abstract and explain’, this story deliberately foregrounds key elements of abstraction, analysis and theoretical illumination. Indeed, it meets all five criteria of Anderson’s (2006, 378) notion of ‘analytic autoethnography’. For not only do I occupy the status of complete member researcher - (‘being there’ [379] as international champion, organisation co-founder, committee member, report writer and one-time head judge), but also meet the extant criteria of analytic reflexivity, narrative visibility, dialogue with informants beyond the self and commitment to theoretical analysis. Indeed, the latter is exhibited most perceptibly through an attempt philosophically and psychoanalytically to understand the nuances of a sport which presents itself as one thing, while ostensibly practising another.

Moreover, the nature and ontological status of the account is drawn from the locus of an experienced competitive body. For close to thirty years I have lifted weights, trained in more than twenty five gyms in the United Kingdom and abroad and enjoyed a competitive career spanning two decades, consisting of one British and two international natural bodybuilding titles. Thus, ethnographically the account carries significant cultural capital of the embodied sub-type (Bourdieu 1977), acquired over time, and applied to enable a discerning, self-

reflexive observation and authenticity. Connecting the personal to the cultural and social world, parts of the embodied self are narratively styled and written into the characters' sensitivities and felt vulnerabilities in the story, simultaneously reflecting the being-in-common-with the natural bodybuilding culture and community at large. Methodologically, such assemblages provide a voice that is both present and absent through the *mélange* of perspectives, constructed from the lived experience of a long and successful embodied apprenticeship.

Moreover, analytically the paper can be considered a bold and deliberate attempt at self-conscious introspection (Anderson 2006) and provocation, where analytic reflexivity is dynamically enacted and performed through a 'fractured-I' (Deleuze 1994, 145). The narrative provides not only an original look at the sport of competitive natural bodybuilding, of a world simultaneously 'Other' to, and imbued within the masculine self, but that dares also to engage in a realm of excess – (a feminine voluptuousness in a masculine order, as Lather [1993] might consider) - of expressing what many have thought or shared privately, but from which they have felt howsoever compelled to demur publicly. Through a partly fictionalised, autoethnographic account, I am thus able to engage with relevant ontological questions as part of a broader philosophical project and movement towards revealing an apparent deceit. This is one that allows the sport to countenance the notion of an 'untrue truth' or 'public regulation of fantasy' (i.e. pharmacologically enhanced bodybuilding masquerading as clean sport), producing a simulacrum of the body through compliance and shared acquiescence of a dubious ethical framework.

Substantively, in terms of the twin mandate of identity and masculinity, early sociological literature around bodybuilding tended to focus on the inscription of a 'crisis in masculinity' (White and Gillet 1994, 20) upon the male body aligning with a benign pathology of the neurotically insecure (Klein 1993). Thus, all men who build their bodies do so to address a

perceived deficiency or self-identified ‘lack’ in which self-esteem is supposedly enhanced by (hyper)muscularity or ‘muscular mesomorphy’ (Weigers 1998), doubling as an archetypal masculinity (Fussell 1991). Weigers (1998) and Monaghan (2001), on the other hand, acknowledge that the desire to body build is multiply motivated and so argue it is a mistake to regard masculinity as either monolithic or crudely homogenous. Indeed, the male *natural* bodybuilder while in part aligning with the hyper-masculine is also strongly motivated by the appeal of the *aesthetic* and *ethical* ideals of physical culture, thus ostensibly departing from the drive of the pharmacologically enhanced ‘Other’. This is perfectly consistent with Lacan (1977), insofar as he argues that the imaginary is driven by words and meanings organised symbolically to establish identity, albeit one that is inevitably in tension and incomplete, for the gaze of ‘Other’ upon the natural bodybuilding subject is one that requires a certain duplicity and further ability to shift from a state (or ideal-ego) of hyper-reality to ethical ideality. In the case of Sparkes et al.’s (2012) study, for example, it is the ‘shame’ of muscular atrophy (the transformation of the athlete back from the hyper-muscular and masculine self) induced by injury that produces the loss of athletic identity and further radical displacement of the athlete’s symbolic order. In this story, however, it is the displacement of Dave’s ‘paternal authority’, the ethical framework, that produces the conditions of potential psychosis in the Lacanian (1977) sense, and which paradoxically challenges the exclusivity of the bodybuilder’s identity aligned with the hyper-real. In Bridges’ (2009, 101) sense it offers a different type of identification with ‘hegemonic masculinity’, a form of gendered capital that is ‘much more fluid or regime specific’. This problematizes the default ‘normative’ position with a more nuanced ethical (and feminine) sensibility. Indeed, an ethic of care, ‘regard or inclination toward that something or someone’ (Noddings 2003, 9) is encapsulated here in the presumed moral character and integrity of competitive natural bodybuilding as clean, ethical sport. Thus, paradoxically, it can be argued that the ethical

frameworks that locate *natural* bodybuilding represent more the ‘maternal’ than ‘paternal’ authority and sensibility, whose precarious occupation is but a broken promise away from ‘psychosis’, such is the fragility of muscled men and their disparate masculine identities.

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