

Breaking the Body Image Stereotype: Female Bodybuilding and Muted Group Theory

The sport of women's bodybuilding has a much shorter history than its male counterpart, with the men's Mr. Olympia contest starting in 1965 (International Federation of Bodybuilders, Mr. Olympia, 2006) and the women's Ms. Olympia not starting until twenty-five years later (International Federation of Bodybuilders, Ms. Olympia, 2006). However, the lack of acceptance of the sport, and the lack of the female athletes' control over their own event, has less to do with the event's relative age but more to do with a male domination paradigm. With male hegemony over the female sport, the female athletes become a muted group, in terms of the theory put forth by the Ardeners in anthropology (2005) and extended to communication by Kramarae (2005). This paper will examine the applicability of Muted Group Theory to the sport of women's bodybuilding and present means by which the women of the sport resist being muted.

Muted Group Theory

In 1968, anthropologist Edwin Ardener presented research on the difficulties in articulating model of the world generated by women, if those models did not sync with the prevailing world view generated by men (2005). Three years later, his wife Shirley extended this theory to show the use of body symbolism by muted women (2005). Beyond its place as a theoretical base for feminist thought, Muted Group Theory can be applied to numerous other areas as Edwin Ardener's students applied it to criminals, schoolchildren, and Celts. Shirley Ardener went on to point out that muting is done by dominant groups who control dominant discourse in many social spaces (2005).

Cheris Kramarae extended Muted Group Theory into the study of "communication patterns among and between women and men in Great Britain and the United States" (West and Turner, 2004). Her three central assumptions are:

- “1. Women perceive the world differently than men due to differences in experiences and activities.
2. The male system of perception is dominant which impedes the female ability for self expression.
3. To participate in society, women must adapt their models to accommodate the perceived male perspective.” (West and Turner, 2004)

As women’s bodybuilding has become a professional sport with televised contests and a variety of books, magazines, and video products, it is a communication phenomenon as much as major league baseball, college basketball, or any other athletic contest. Kramarae's theoretical assumptions and their applicability to female bodybuilding are as follows:

1. *Women perceive the world differently than men due to differences in experiences and activities.* Women have long been considered a minority in weightlifting gymnasias, whereas it is a natural expectation that men weight-train for different sports, for careers such as in the military or fire service, and as an end in itself.

2. *The male system of perception is dominant which impedes the female ability for self-expression.* In male-run mass media, the ideal female physique, as portrayed by cultural icons from Barbie dolls to Playboy playmates, runs contrary to a portrayal of women as strong and athletic.

3. *To participate in society, women must adapt their models to accommodate the perceived male perspective.* Therefore successful competitors in women's bodybuilding or success as a fitness model requires that women adapt their bodies to fit the aesthetic desired by males and not attempt to reach their own potential.

Kramarae (2005) stated that “recent books of feminist theory have pages of discussion of body, desire, difference, sexuality, globalization, queerness, postcolonialism, pleasure, identity, and gender --- but relatively few explicit discussions of the ways language and communication practices impose restrictions, and offer some solutions, to social problems.” If inequity in sports

can be considered a social problem, then muted group theory has potential in helping understand the issues in the competition, commercialization, and performance art of women's bodybuilding.

Women's Bodybuilding's and its Male Perspectives

Perhaps, the watershed event in the twenty-five year history of professional women's bodybuilding was the release of the documentary "Pumping Iron II: The Women," based on the book Charles Gaines and George Butler (1984). This was a follow up to their successful previous film, "Pumping Iron," which launched Arnold Schwarzenegger into the mainstream. The film centers on the 1983 Caesar's Cup, an unsanctioned women's bodybuilding event that was produced strictly for the purpose of filming it. In it, the sport has all the trappings of current reality television with characters cast in convenient roles, such as two-time and reigning Ms. Olympia Rachel McLish as a "villain" and Australian powerlifter-turned-bodybuilder Bev Francis cast as the "underdog." Throughout the film, McLish is presented as the competitor who most captures the female aesthetic and Francis is controversial because she presented a degree of muscle development heretofore unknown in the sport.

At one point in the film, the male judges have no idea how to score Francis, since her musculature is so radically different than the more mainstream toned physiques presented by the rest of the field. "There hasn't been a perfect female bodybuilder yet, so you've got to create one in your mind," according to Francis. "The body should have a lot of the muscularity of the male bodybuilder, because the muscles on a woman and man are the same: the same number of muscles, and they're in the same position basically" (Gaines and Butler, 1985). Francis still finished eighth, behind the winner, former dancer Carla Dunlap, who would also win that year's Ms. Olympia. Francis would finish her competitive career with other contest wins but never capture the Ms. Olympia, achieving runner-up position in 1990 and (International Federation of Bodybuilders, Ms. Olympia, 2006). This was even with Francis cutting her competitive career to only one contest a year, the Ms. Olympia, and training only for that event. "I've been working for

seven years on changing my physique since (the filming of “Pumping Iron II”),” Francis said while in preparation for the 1990 contest (Pennix, 1990), the first of two straight runner-up finishes.

However, muscle mass was a key component for the men’s contest from the beginning with the 1965 and 1966 Mr. Olympia champion Larry Scott having “arms too big to believe” (Berg, 2004). Further, Ben Weider, head of the International Federation of Bodybuilders, took the lead in inhibiting the aspirations of female bodybuilders. He took the position that “clenched fists and double biceps poses are out. So will the most muscular pose disappear. There has to be a difference in the judging of male and female bodybuilders.” (Snyder & Wayne, 1981). This would be like outlawing the overhead smash for female tennis players or the use of a driver for female golfers.

Continuing the discrepancy between the two contests, the 2005 total prize money for the Mr. Olympia contest was \$550,000 while the women’s total purse was \$71,000, less than half the \$150,000 to be garnered by the men’s champion (International Federation of Bodybuilders, 2005). In contrast, three of the four Grand Slam tennis events have equal prize money for the male and female champions with only Wimbledon still paying a lesser amount (by only 4.5%) to the Ladies Singles champion (“Wimbledon,” 2006). Billie Jean King, six-time Wimbledon champion and pioneer in the founding of the Women’s Tennis Association, commented that “Wimbledon needs to join the modern world on this issue.”

In the early days of women’s bodybuilding there were a few seminal female figures, both as athletes and promoters. The most recognized early competitor was Lisa Lyon, winner of the 1979 Women’s World Bodybuilding Championship, predating the Ms. Olympia by several years (Wennerstrom, 1995). She was the subject of a notable photographic essay by the late Robert Mapplethorpe (1983). Rebellious in nature, Lyon’s collection of nude and fetish photographs represented her “Houdini act to escape the shackles of womanly stereotype, it is in the nonjudgmental precincts of these photographs that she has been able to complete an emotional

breakthrough that is still impossible in life” (Wagstaff, 1983). Lyons also parlayed her popularity into an appearance in Playboy magazine in 1980, the first female bodybuilder to appear. Later pro bodybuilders Anita Gandol, who appeared in Playboy’s February 1984 issue, and Erika Mes, who appeared in the August 1987 issue of the Dutch edition of Playboy, earned one-year suspensions from the International Federation of Bodybuilders (Wennerstrom, 1995).

However, the artistic portrayal of nude female athletes dates back to the days that inspired the very name of the Mr. and Ms. Olympia contests. The Aphrodite of Cnidus, circa 340 BC, was the first prominent female nude sculpture (Blundell, 1995) and there were many Spartan depictions of women engaged in athletics, nude and clothed.

The most prominent behind-the-scenes woman in the early days of women’s bodybuilding was Florida’s Doris Barrilleaux, who created the Southeastern (later Superior) Physique Association, and her newsletter was the official record of the women’s sport (Wennerstrom, 1995). Also a noted physique photographer, she was one of the first to speak out about the male domination of the women’s event, saying “We have a small group of males who because of their sexual preferences and the money they’re making off the sport, they want to see it go in a particular direction which is not what the women themselves wanted” (Gaines and Butler, 1985).

As the sport developed a few female bodybuilders achieved limited crossover appeal. McLish went on to co-star in the film “Iron Eagle III: Aces,” with Louis Gossett, Jr. (Harrington, 1992). Washington Post reviewer Richard Harrington referred to McLish as “Beautiful and gracefully muscled, McLish often comes across as a distaff Sylvester Stallone – call her Rambie – but her acting is on a par with the script, which comes in on a wing and a prayer.” This harkens to another of Kramarae’s principles, where she has stated “the uses of muted group theory are more often directly focused on the ways women’s and men’s world views are reflected or not in the language and at the amount and type of speech practices of women and men” (Kramarae 2005).

From this conceptual framework, it is possible to see differently how a male reviewer might use a male action hero as a point of reference for a female character.

The other great “crossover” star from women’s bodybuilding was Cory Everson, undefeated Ms. Olympia from 1984-1989 (International Federation of Bodybuilders, Ms. Olympia History, 2006). She hosted her own program on ESPN in 1988 called “Bodyshaping,” (Everson, 1990) had a recurring role as the mythical sportswoman Atalanta (Blundell, 1995) on “Hercules: The Legendary Journeys,” opened her own chain of women’s fitness centers, did fitness home videos and lent her name to a variety of workout products.

Other female bodybuilders had to switch to “sports entertainment” to break into the mainstream, from Joanie “Chyna” Laurer, Christy “Aysa” Wolf, and Nicole Bass who made their mark in pro wrestling, to Raye Hollitt, who starred as “Zap” on American Gladiators (Hayden, 1993). Hollitt also had a small part in the John Ritter movie “Skin Deep” and a featured role in the pilot episode of the television series “J.A.G.” The female gladiators “created a new context for themselves within pop culture,” according to Hayden (1993), spawning trading cards, video games, action figures, and a live dinner show in Orlando.

Conversely, mainstream actresses have turned to bodybuilding to portray the power of their roles. Notably, Linda Hamilton, previously the star of the television romance-fantasy show *Beauty and the Beast*, added a more muscular look in reprising her role of Sarah Connor for *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (Gillis, 1991), to correct a weakness she perceived in the first film. Her new muscle showed “now I’m playing a deeper, more powerful and troubled character.”

The Men of Women’s Bodybuilding

A pattern emerges when examining the influential people behind the sport of women’s bodybuilding --- they are almost entirely men. This includes promoters, officials, and trainers, with many of the trainers having the additional role of husband or boyfriend. The promoter of the first Ms. Olympia contest in 1985, Wayne DeMelia, went so far as to blame the men for getting

the women on steroids, saying “Most are doing it for the trophy. Ninety-nine point nine percent of the time, their lovers or husbands want their women to win at any cost” (Salcedo, 1986). DeMelia was also the manager of Lori Bowen, one of the competitors featured in “Pumping Iron II” (Benson, 1988).

One of the more interesting tales to come out of “Pumping Iron II” was the relationship and eventual marriage of Bev Francis to Steve Weinberger. He had been cast in the movie to play the part of Francis’ boyfriend because, in his words, “they were afraid of how she would look, that she was too masculine or whatever.” (1988) Francis was not Weinberger’s type, at first, as he stated “when I met Bev, I thought she was way too big. I liked shapely women with muscle tone,” which is what Francis ultimately had to do, dropping the muscle she built in her powerlifting career to eventually win a pro bodybuilding title in Toronto.

Kevin Lawrence, boyfriend and partner in mixed pairs competitions with Diana Dennis, stated that women in bodybuilding can go too far and lose their appeal. As he put it, “Look at some of the amateurs. It’s getting scary. Some are as big as me. It just isn’t feminine. It has to be nice to look at. That’s the bottom line.” (1988)

This notion was echoed by Roy Kincaid, husband and posing partner with pro bodybuilder Penny Price. He commented “There is a fine line they are walking. I like the girls big --- but I like them feminine.” (1988) Another prominent man in the sport, Brian Moss, became involved as an agent for female bodybuilders seeking magazine and advertising work. He said that “I think of what she can do outside the bodybuilding world --- that is, will her body cross over into a mainstream situation without sacrificing its competitiveness on a bodybuilding stage...” (1988). So, even from men who are intimately involved with the sport’s female athletes, there is a boundary that the men are setting for just how far a woman can go in physical development. This is clearly an illustration of Kramarae’s second and third theoretical assumptions (West and Turner, 2004), where these female athletes are limited by the dominant male perception and women are forced to adapt.

Through the Male Lens

The expression of female physique athletes through modeling for photographs is one way of celebrating their accomplishments. Bodybuilders make excellent models, since they are already trained posers, through their contest routines (Thomas, 1991). Other than the previously mentioned Barrilleaux, the photographers for female bodybuilders have primarily been men. The consumers of female bodybuilding media (contests, photographs, videos, and other products) have also been men, in fetish/niche market explored by Katie Arnoldi (2001) in her novel *Chemical Pink*. The protagonist becomes obsessed with a female bodybuilder that he sponsors but ultimately controls and directs into a series of fetishistic scenes.

“Like sexual voyeurism, (photography) is of at least tacitly, often explicitly, encouraging whatever is going on to keep on happening,” wrote essayist Susan Sontag (1977). “To take a picture is to have an interest in things as they are, in the status quo remaining unchanged” which can be taken to suggest that male photographers reinforce the preferred athletic aesthetic for women by their very choice of which bodybuilders are appropriate artistic or commercial subjects. In the feminist dictionary (1992) she co-edited with Paula Triechler, Kramarae includes a definition of photography from Barbara DeGenevieve that strikes at the confounding of sexuality and photography:

Prior to 1839, sexual imagery had a completely different character. After the invention of photography, any kind of photographically derived sexual imagery, including pornography, could no longer be interpreted as a manifestation of the artist’s fantasy or imagination. Now the fantasy had the added proof of human flesh.

Paul Goode (1993) wrote in the introduction to a collection of his female bodybuilding portraits, “I see an athlete who has styled herself for power, beauty, and grace. The muscle does not detract from her femininity --- it redesigns it.” Also from the feminist dictionary, McKinnon defines femininity as “attractiveness to men, which means sexual attractiveness, which means

sexual availability on male terms” (Kramarae & Triechler, 1992) In Goode’s collection of photographs, only three athletes use the IFBB-forbidden clenched fist in her poses. The rest of the 30 plates are glamour-style poses that would be appropriate for any swimsuit calendar. Only two of the athletes are even pictured with weight-training equipment, clearly showing a preference for the beauty and grace part of the quote and minimizing the power aspect of these women.

In a collection of bodybuilding photographs by fantasy artist Boris Vallejo, he admits a preference for female over male bodybuilders because “male bodybuilders are not as graceful as women” (1996). Although he denies that he has any sexual feelings during the shoots, women are pictured with swords and knives (symbols of power) only eight times, while fetish gear such as whips, ropes, chains, and a stripper’s chrome pole appear eleven times.

Ironically, Vallejo’s wife and frequent model is bodybuilder and artist Julie Bell. Her paintings feature the same muscularity on the subjects but there is a subtle difference. “In her own way, she is a staunch feminist, and her paintings aim to project the empowerment and independence of women” (Suckling, 1996).

The movie camera’s lens is no different than the still camera in distorting the portrayal of female bodybuilders. Rachel McLish found Butler’s “Pumping Iron II” film to be “very dishonest; it was edited to create controversy,” (Teper, 2006). “The movie was very misleading. It didn’t do anything but set the sport back.” In an interview after her featured role in “Iron Eagle III: Aces,” McLish crystallized her view of that film, saying that “it was a man’s perspective on what a woman ought to be” (Dayton, 1992).

Female Bodybuilders Exerting Their Power

Kramarae (1981) suggested that the whole notion of powerful women, while an increasing trend, was at the same time fearsome. She stated that “women have not been rewarded for trying to obtain power or to use power for their own interests.” In bodybuilding, the power is only partly physical; the bulk is financial, through promoting contests, sponsoring athletes, and

publishing magazines and other media. As women become more involved in these aspects of their sport, they engage in one of Kramarae's strategies of resistance by members of a Muted Group, by using their own creativity to celebrate their achievements (West & Turner, 2004).

The first Ms. Olympia, Rachel McLish, intends to enter the world of promoting, with plans to host a "Rachel Classic," along the lines of the existing "Arnold Classic" for male bodybuilders (Teper, 2006). Her contest would include both a bodybuilding and fitness division, provides opportunities for each kind of athlete.

A more resistant approach is taken by professor/performer/author/bodybuilder Joanna Freuh. In addition to teaching courses on body image, she poses as model herself, using her own nude, weight-trained physique as the subject in self-portraits and work by other photographers.

My situation as a feminist scholar who publishes self-portrait nudes is unique and unconventional: people find the situation and the work provocative. That perception generates two primary responses: a dearth of critical writing and a generous understanding from the few scholars who have written about the photos. (2005)

Her work, which appears as a section in her book *Monster/Beauty: Building the Body of Love* (2000) is clearly unapologetic, showing that she can be strong, artistic, and feminine at the same time. It is also clear that the definition of what is feminine is hers to make and hers alone. This carries over into her discussion of the "real nude," (1999) separate from the idealized, airbrushed or otherwise artificial creations that are so artistically and commercially accepted, stating that "The real nude, whose flesh is ample and hard, does not fulfill Western civilization's requirements for the appearance of the female body."

Ultimately, rejecting those imposed requirements and reshaping their bodies is the whole point of women's bodybuilding. Champion Laura Combes remarked on her first contest experience that "I was out to prove a point that women bodybuilders should have *muscles* --- and *big ones* at that. I also felt that any bodybuilder, man or woman, should be able to display his or

her hard-earned muscular development” (Combes & Reynolds, 1983). As they continue to achieve their athletic, commercial, and artistic goals, the female physique athletes can continue to combat the silencing process and find non-verbal voice through their literal body language.

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