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Through Mirrors and Windows in the gym:

Manhood in the making

Visual Ethnography

VOLUME XIII | No 1 | 2024
dx.doi.org/10.12835/ve2024.1-141

Abstract
The purpose of this paper is to present an insider ethnography about the construction of the self around the appearance of an ideal of manhood in a gym, revealing the *spetacularization* of the self through gymnastic exercises. Performances of gymnastic techniques and social media posting show the gendered way they are practiced and conceived, and how the embodiment of those practices and discourses reflects a set of contemporary values. The simplification of life through individualism and self-centering leads to a subjectivity deprived of the large spectrum of social affection, reducing the individual to a somatic entity instead of a sensitive embodied being. The allegory of mirrors and windows represents the tacit game of gazing and being gazed at in a gym, where the performances take place. Through embodiment theory and gender studies, this ethnography revealed the subtleness of the subjective dimension in the embodiment of techniques / world views / dispositions among the gym-goers, unveiling the symbolic and material interplay between the individual and the social environment. Thus, a conceptual frame interlinking this triad is presented as one possible understanding of how a stereotyped masculinity is practiced repeatedly through gymnastic sets, unveiling the paradigmatic spirit of our times.

Keywords
body; embodiment; gender studies; masculinities; gymnastics

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* This study was financed in part by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior – Brasil (CAPES) – Finance Code 001

Introduction

To understand better how the ideal image of the male body carved through gymnastic exercises was set and how it reproduces its social structure, I propose a framework that includes gender studies and a perspective of embodiment theory. Csordas (2003) presented a set of premises for an embodiment theory, considering the body as the 'existential ground of culture and the self.' This existential ground is also a relational ground; between space and the way it is inhabited, between form and function, and agency and structure. It implies a symbiotic ontological conception between the *materiality* and *immateriality* of space construction, inhabited by the symbolic representation of the body.

It is a premise of my argument that the intersection between the abstract and the material dimensions constitutes a dynamic ontological condition. A liminal area: 'power vs powder,' as Harris and Robb[1] point out. The Foucaultian dilemma about the disciplinary power as constraint and as empowering technology is considered, providing a balanced approach to embodiment and its cultural 'milieu.'

My claim is that a certain type of masculinity is performed in the gym embodied and practiced through gymnastic body techniques; it reflects a part of the contemporary society and its visual culture through social media posts. These displays of 'hyper-masculinity' are associated with a set of ways of being and the materiality of their practice through an interpretation of their 'body techniques.'

Although it would be interesting to investigate a broader gender perspective and its relations, other models of masculinity, I chose to focus on this particular stereotype when my attention was drawn to understanding why some guys slammed the weights in the machines and dumbbells on the floor, screaming and growling while exercising. I knew that exercise could be somewhat cathartic, but this was something else. This was a desperate call for attention, the ultimate kind. Or at least, the loudest. I wanted to understand what else was behind it. I knew that it was possible to train heavy without such a performative display. Working as a personal trainer, both in fancy health clubs and small gyms in the suburbs, I knew it transcended class.

Another aspect of the contemporary culture that contributes to understanding the values and attitudes associated with this hyper-masculinity is the 'corpolatria' - idolatry of the body and individualism. Some of these values were demonstrated in social media posts, that generally portrayed individual success related to an emotionally distant and indifferent masculinity, which lifestyle reflects an exaggerated sense of agency.

The ethnographic data presented here was collected in a gym (HC Club) in the central area of Lisbon, Portugal, where I had previously worked as a personal trainer. I returned one year later as a client to conduct this ethnography.The purpose of this paper is to present an insider ethnography about the construction of the self around the appearance of an ideal of manhood in a gym, revealing the spetacularization of the self through gymnastic exercises. Let us have a quick look at the beginnings of bodybuilding as a physical activity developed in the United States, which shaped the aesthetics of a way of life through mass media all over the world, including in Portugal, where it established itself as a growing industry that gave rise to multinational companies.

The forge of men

Near the end of the XIX century, the new demographic, economic and social conditions in the United States demanded a renewed entrepreneurial spirit, within the new industrial order. Sports and entrepreneurial spirit would replace the frontier spirit in the minds of many American men (Courtine 1995), becoming since then a measure of self-appreciation, dignity, and manhood. The self-made man became a tale of effort, hard work, and success.

1 "Ontologies are materially constituted, and materials are negotiated ontologically. There is never a clear gap between a material thing and a person´s ontological engagement with it." (2012: 677)

Jean Jacques Courtine's study about the bodybuilding[2] culture and American puritanism indicates that bodybuilding was also boosted by a response to the significant groundbreaking advances of the feminist movement. To compensate for the feeling of 'loss' of the symbolic and social ground, men turned to building up themselves, occupying more 'physical space,' becoming a muscular presence that must be recognized.

The popularity of bodybuilding could be an ostensive demonstration of that phenomenon, besides its undeniable physical benefits. Bodybuilding set the standard of the ideal body type to the modern man all over the world. In order to understand this process, let us take a closer look at the origins of bodybuilding.

Where it all started

Venice, California, home of the iconic Gold's Gym[3], might be considered the birthplace of the bodybuilding movement of the 80's. Ed Connors, former owner of Gold's Gym, explained in an interview[4] for Ric Drasin's YouTube channel in 2012 how the gym came to life, with the assistance of bodybuilders in the construction and planning of the building:

> (Ed) I played architect on this and hired the bodybuilders from the gym to do the building. (Ric) So one can say that bodybuilders designed that room, in the sense of how the mirrors are placed, how the images are arranged. Is that correct? (Ed) Yes, the mirror layout and the photos, that's all basically the bodybuilders' doing.

Connors' and Drasin's conversation nostalgically revealed a glimpse of the mentality that ultimately gave birth to the entire phenomenon of bodybuilding and the healthy lifestyle culture it nurtured. From Connors' perspective, a sense of community still seemed to linger, with memories of training sessions and meals they shared together, although he recalled that the infrastructure was completely different.

Remembering the gym itself, both Connors and Drasin emphasized remarkable differences back then. For instance, there were no female showers; it was a milieu almost exclusively dominated by men. The locker rooms were very basic, and the gym itself was much less equipped. There were no stationary bicycles or treadmills, only weightlifting equipment. When they wanted to do some aerobic exercise, they would go running on the beach.

Connors pointed out that with the changing times, it was necessary to adapt to a new clientele, who sought a healthier lifestyle but did not aspire to be bodybuilders. Thus, the gym acquired treadmills, stationary bikes, step machines (which simulate climbing stairs), etc. They reserved a dedicated space for this, called the cardio theater, where the machines were usually equipped with TVs with touch screens and internet access.

At 10:30, Connors speaks about bodybuilding, commenting about the lifestyle changes that the sport has undergone: "I don't like where it is right now [...] it's taken to extremes. People are overeating, overtraining, over supplementing [...] it's not a lifestyle I'm comfortable promoting right now."

His interviewer, Ric Drasin, a former bodybuilder and professional wrestler himself, was responsible for keeping some of the 'old-school' bodybuilding culture alive. In another video[5], he comments on the striking difference between magazine covers and photos of bodybuilders from the 1940's to 1970's comparing to today's generation: in the past, bodybuilders' poses were always accompanied by a beautiful and healthy smile. Nowadays, you see them grimacing, perhaps trying to look tougher. Drasin does not understand what changed; he wonders why, if someone has a good and healthy lifestyle, they would not be smiling. "You wouldn't see a woman go to Miss America and growl at the camera, they all smile, they show their teeth, and they're pretty."Top of Form

2 "Curious postures, which seem to resurrect classical statuary, just when the immoderation of anatomies rises as an affront to the art of the ancient sculptor. Unusual muscular masses, purely decorative, which serve neither to run nor to throw, and thus break with everything that, within the sporting logic, associate muscle with movement. Impressive confrontations in heavy choreographies, duels of images without contact or violence, pure fights of appearance" (Courtine 1995: 83).

3 Gold's Gym, https://www.goldsgym.com/, is considered one of the most prestigious sites for popularizing bodybuilding in the 1980's and the associated healthy lifestyle. Today, it is one of the largest franchises in the world, with approximately 600 gyms in 27 countries. However, the original gym is considered a tourist attraction to this day. In 2012, it entered into an acquisition phase by Google but remained part of the TRT Holdings company.

4 Ed Connor´s Gold Gym in studio. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LiZmU78diUA

5 "why do modern bodybuilders...". https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c45FU-3J3qZY

6 originally delivered in a radio broadcast in 1966 and published in 2004.

Figures 1 and 2 Bodybuilding magazines, February 1984 and April 2012. Examples of smiling and grimacing expressions in magazines, referred to in Ric Drasin's video.

When I heard his statement, what struck me the most was a question left unanswered: what happened? What caused this change in male perception about the body and the presentation of the male image as an icon of health and beauty? Why was the friendly smile replaced by a grimacing, angry expression?

Something had definitely changed.

Body representation and meaning

If the magazine covers reflect society's ideal of body type at their time, they also indicate its spirit. To better understand how the image of the ideal male body changed, it is important to understand a deeper meaning associated with the representation of the body. Let us review Foucault's understanding[6] of the utopian body, and the relation between a utopian self and its representation. Foucault considers that the omnipresence of the body in itself and the inseparability of lived experience is the very impetus for all utopias. Utopia owes its richness and beauty to its embodied condition, the possibility of a place where an incorporeal body can exist, without the limits of mundane conditions. Foucault (2004) points to the construction of the soul as this utopia, as a kind of photographic negative of the body, an Other, or its double:

> [...] the most powerful of these utopias by which we erase the sad topology of the body, it is the great myth of the soul that has provided it to us from the depths of Western history. The soul operates in my body in a wonderful way. It resides there, of course, but it knows well how to escape to dream when I sleep, to survive when I die. It is beautiful, my soul, it is pure, it is white; and if my muddy body - in any case not very clean - comes to soil it, there will be a virtue, there will be a power, there will be a thousand sacred gestures that will restore it to its original purity. It will last a long time, my soul, and longer still, when my old body rots. Long live my soul! It's my luminous body, purified, virtuous, agile, mobile, warm, fresh; it's my smooth body, castrated, rounded like a soap bubble (Foucault 2004: 2).

The soul as the utopia of the body creates a metaphysical space, where its potentiality comes from a projection of the perfect body; but primacy of the soul can only be conceived from the possibilities of the body. So if the ideal

of the male body, presented in the media with a friendly smile, was replaced by a grimacing, even ferocious expression, what does it tell us about that ideal of manhood, and how it is reproduced in gyms?

In the following sections, I present the context of the study, the theoretical background and the ethnographic vignettes that inspired this argument.

Context of study and theoretical background

In Portugal, the social progress that followed the revolution of 25 April 1974 led to increased leisure time and work regulations, creating ideal conditions for cultural changes and the search for new body practices. It was a striking difference from the normative physical culture promoted by the Estado Novo regime: hygienic and moralizing gymnastics, where health was also seen as a duty to serve the nation. For the regime, the 'new trends' coming from across the Atlantic Ocean were practices that promoted frivolous aesthetic and hedonistic values: "In a context where men and women began to exhibit and carefully attend to their appearances, the private forces of capitalism ended up contributing more than the public hygienist institutions to the spread of new habits and bodily care." (Ferreira 2011: 238)

In the 1990's, Portugal saw noticeable growth in the fitness sector, leading to the emergence of new service models and market-oriented operators, many of which were multinational franchises with millions of Euros in revenues. The individualization and customization of services related to health and fitness became highly specialized.

A central figure of the highly specialized services was the personal trainer, who catered to the aesthetic desires of body sculpting of businessmen – the greatest consumers of this service. They envisioned the attainment and projection of the perfect body as a symbol of success. This corporal capital delineated the contemporary distinction between the successful individual, who maintained control over their lifestyle and habits, and others.

Body studies related to body image and gym culture display the body as dominated by and subjected to power mechanisms, "corpolatria" – the commodification of beauty and extreme individualism through obsessive perfection. (Sibilia 2004; Ortega 2003; Castiel and Álvarez-Dardet 2006). Sibilia (2004) denominates these strategies of subjectivity as bio-asceticisms: ways of purifying the body of its abject ugliness in pursuit of a utopic ideal of appearance, practiced in the gym and presented on social media.

This social phenomenon is fostered by a health promotion narrative. This is described as 'healthism' by Illitch (1990)[7] – consisting of a massification of a concept of health turned into a commodity, and an exclusively individual pursuit and responsibility – the result of neoliberal policies. Therefore, businessmen seem to be more inclined to accept responsibility for their health, and to monitor and self-regulate themselves.

Traditionally in Western societies, masculinity is also related to athleticism, in a competitive and aggressive way. Through a very detailed historical analysis, Segal (1990) traces back to 19th century England, the birthplace of the sportsman, pointing out how this affirmation of manliness[8] was born, too:

> [...] a pure masculinity cannot be asserted except in relation to what is defined as its opposite. It depends upon the perpetual renunciation of 'femininity' [...] the capacity for sensitivity to oneself and others, for tenderness and empathy, the reality of fear and weakness, the pleasures of passivity – all, of course, quintessentially 'feminine.' (Segal 1990: 114).

Physical strength was praised as a masculine attribute, associated with agency and power, in a broad sense.

Therefore, this hegemonic masculinity grants only certain men social prestige and privileges over all other men – and all women. (Vale de Almeida 1997). So, how about non-hegemonic masculinities? And the fluidity of all cat-

7 "In the same way as this happiness, modern-day health is the fruit of possessive individualism. There could have been no more brutal and, at the same time, more convincing way to legitimize a society based on self-serving greed" (Illich 1990: 3)

8 "Crippling levels of manliness" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wogb2ctOfV4

egories, how is it experienced by the subjects? The author also highlights the importance of studies about the body that interlink social context and subjective dimensions, and studies about the embodiment process that surpass representational approaches that envision the body as a passive structure of power.

Let me present some insights about how these social phenomena can express themselves through embodiment. I used to have coffee in the cafeteria nearby the gym and often had a chat with Joana (an instructor) and Marcos (a gym client). We chatted about a lot of issues, but mostly about working out and the gym.

Joana is a 34-year-old gym instructor who works as a personal trainer and teaches swimming and water aerobics, as well as other group classes. She considers herself fit and has a strong physical constitution. She has always worked in the fitness industry and says she really enjoys what she does. She practices weightlifting, among other activities.

Marcos is a 63-year-old retired engineer who stays in good shape due to the good habits he has always sought to maintain in his life. He considers himself in good shape and looks much younger than he is, although he has recently experienced some ailments that he attributes to age. He started practicing Pilates, although he played sports in his youth and practiced weightlifting for many years.

What I present now is an analysis of conversations and recorded interviews with Joana and Marcos, followed by my fieldwork observations and final remarks.

Gendering gymnastics and what it means to be active

One afternoon, I saw the two in fits of laughter, as I was entering the cafe. It was about Marcos' experience with Pilates, and how he felt after trying pelvic floor exercises. It got interesting when he shared his perception about gender, sexuality, and his pelvic floor.

Marcos said that at the beginning it felt 'strange,' joking about a homosexual 'conversion.' He was quite clear about not having any issues regarding people's sexuality: "equal rights for everybody," he said, "I am comfortable with my boring, old-school manhood." But the implicit association between pelvic floor exercises (contraction of both the urethra and the anus) and the idea that these exercises were designed for women, felt strange to him: "[...] at first, I thought...this is strange, these exercises. I never thought someone could train their [...] pelvic floor like this, you know (laughs, imitating the gesture). I felt weird at first. Now, jokes aside, I understand the effects, and I think the 'iron head guys' in the gym should try this too!" (Marcos).

It is interesting how the exercise went from sexuality to affirmation of manhood. Marcos' perspective changed after the practice.

But nevertheless, Marcos talked about the 'iron guys' as being 'tough' and femininity as being associated with softness. For weightlifting enthusiasts, all the other gymnastic activities where you do not 'give it all' – meaning going for the maximum effort – are considered feminine. A common joke about what is considered 'training lightly' is, "You should be doing ballet."

Next, Joana presented her perspective on gender boundaries. Regarding group classes, attended mostly by women, she considered the workouts 'too soft.' She recalled how men used to stare at her when she was doing heavy deadlifts: "I remember that sometimes the guys looked at me strangely when they saw me training...you know, like 'ok, she's cute but too muscular.' Maybe they still think that women should only do cardio or butt exercises! (laughing)."

Maybe the class instructor might not be inspired; or maybe the whole concept of this kind of class is designed to be lighter? Craig and Liberti (2007) pointed out through an extensive bibliographic review that women's engagement in these activities is perceived by them as self-empowerment, but also

as subjugation. However, the authors emphasized that in practices generally understood as 'feminine,' the organizational process and the glorification of cooperative practices accompanied by the relative absence of competitive traits "emphasized femininity in which women are constructed as nice and niceness is the absence of pushiness or competition." (Craig and Liberti 2007: 686)

Thus, 'feminine gymnastics' – or rather, feminized – is in this sense "[...] nonthreatening, nonathletic, nonexpert and noncompetitive – but they are nice" (Craig and Liberti 2007: 686), making their practitioners somehow show that they don't like to exercise.

And Joana liked to exercise. That was another reason why Joana used to train in the afternoons, before her own group exercise class: it was that only time of the day she could use most of the equipment in the heavy weights area. In the end of the afternoon, the heavy lifter men would arrive, and 'take over the multipower hack, the 45º leg press, and most of the dumbbells', leaving Joana with few options for her heavy leg day.

Even though it is more common each day to see women in the heavy weight training zone of the gym, Joana stated that her strong arms and muscular look garner a lot of attention. Joana likes to train heavy and acknowledges what she describes as a 'healthy addiction'.

Joana considers herself a very energetic woman, and regrets not having enough time to do even more activities. She says that the problem with most people is that they don't follow their dreams and worry too much about what other people think. I asked her if she didn't also see the opposite nowadays: when people live their dreams and personal desires disregarding others, aren't they feeding the feeling of 'not caring about each other?' Joana then responded by giving the example of her dance classes: she is the oldest person there, but simply doesn't care what others think of her. Joana says she has never felt discriminated against because of her age, she insisted on mentioning her boldness in continuing to train hard, even when the doctor told her to slow down because of her lower back pain. I asked Joana what she takes away from her physical training, what impact it has on her way of living. She then highlighted the constant feeling of pushing her own limits, challenging herself even when she feels like giving up:

> [...] Sometimes I'm so tired, you know... I just feel like collapsing on the couch and sleeping... a lot!! (laughs)... but I also know that I feel worse staying at home, and I tell myself: 'get your butt off the couch and go to the gym!' [...] You don't get anywhere if you don't push yourself every time. I think that's what I've learned, and I've tried to pass this on to the members, when they get a little lazy. (Joana)

Joana said that people are afraid of suffering and that you need to 'enjoy suffering' to get results. She mentioned that she has cried even in cycle and rpm classes. She then explained how people cheat in cycle classes: it seems like they are 'riding,' that is, swaying their hips from side to side without really putting force on the bike pedals. It happens when the bikes are 'unloaded', or with a very low resistance on the wheels: "People are just bouncing on the saddle!"

Joana's social media posts (Fig 3) are humorous and joyful, often highlighting values and attitudes associated with 'hard work / working out hard' in the gym and life in general, the value of investing in oneself, and motivational phrases related to enduring challenges:

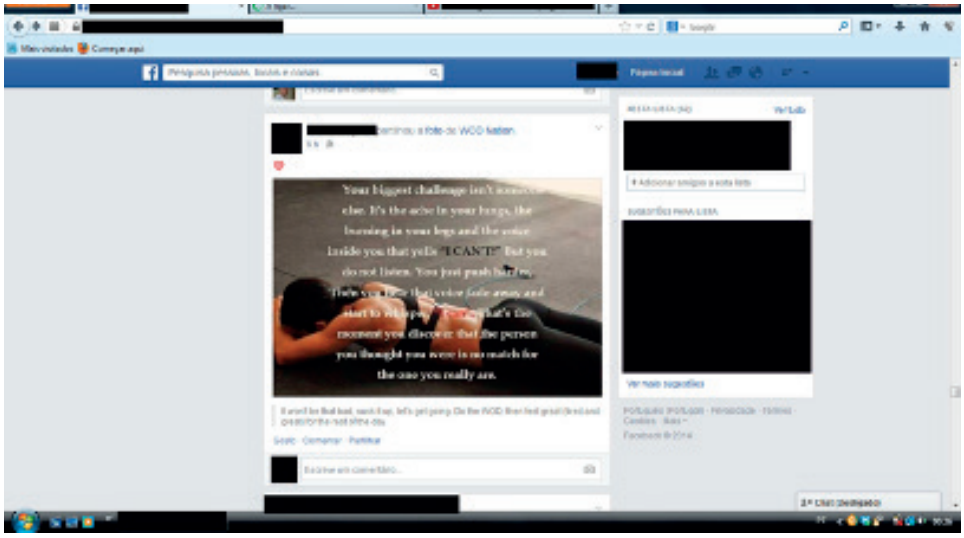

Figure 3 "Your biggest challenge isn't someone else. It's the ache in your lungs, the burning in your legs, and the inner voice that yells at you "I can't". But you do not listen. You just push harder. Then you hear that voice fade away and start whisper "I can". That´s the moment you discover that the person you thought you were is no match for the one you really are.
Comment: It won´t be that bad, suck it up, let´s get going. Do the WOD, then feel great (tired and great) for the rest of the day. "

Figure 4 "I´ve had a longer, healthier and more satisfying relationship with crossfit than any man, and someday I´ll have the six-pack abs and two dozen cats to prove it"
Fitness devotion, a busy life and solitude: The comment below says: "And a thought just popped into my head while I was finishing a task... 'So what now... I have nothing to do!?!?' It's gone now, it lasted exactly 3 seconds... Lol Busy Life!!!"

The content of Joana's post somehow reflects a sublimation of affection for practicing gymnastics (CrossFit), reminding one of some kind of neo-asceticism. An interesting comment from a client of the club, who also shares a busy lifestyle, emphasizes the value of an active lifestyle / an active body. To have an active agenda, and to be – especially to appear – active, is one of the greatest signs of achievement and success on social media.

Marcos, in turn, advocates that you need to be born with this desire/motivation to train. I asked if it was easier for one to 'cheat' at the gym than in group classes – meaning 'not putting much effort into it'. Then he told me

the story about the 'rowing guy', who was seen sliding in the seat, but with minimal effort. When he extended his legs to row, he would pull back his arms. It appeared like he was exercising when he was just sliding.

Marcos' posts (figure 5) showcase his progress in training, both in performances with weights or difficult exercises, and in the bodily changes achieved. For Marcos, the reward only comes for those who work hard.

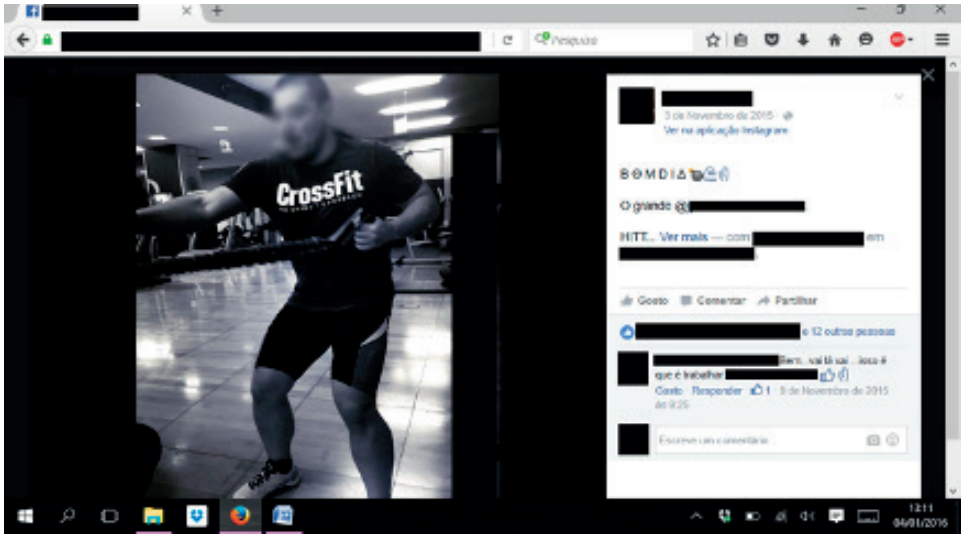

Figure 5 Working out hard and legitimacy.

Joana and Marcos provided interesting insights about the materiality of the exercise, and how social values were associated with body capital. The understanding of the 'gym economy' and its inner logic implied that the way of doing the exercises – going hard or soft – was an element of a distinct lifestyle.

Being 'in shape' or 'out of shape' can personify the representation of a 'good person,' balanced and self-disciplined – which obviously highlights, by default, its negative side, or its antithesis: the condemnation of laziness and pretentiousness.

Being someone 'active' implies an association with being active in life – the agency of someone who accomplishes and masters their schedule, their time, and their appetite. As a highly valued characteristic, simulating being active implies an active attitude towards life, as opposed to a passive one. Therefore, hypermasculinity means more than being merely active.

If body capital is associated with being active, when being passive is 'quintessentially feminine', like Segal demonstrates, hypermasculinity is about going the other way: 'go hard or go home'. The masculine conquest of his own health, looks and fate in general, involves the idea of struggle and suffering. That is why some exercises are disqualified as 'not real training' because they are considered too gentle, meaning too feminine.

In the following section, I will present the observation and analysis of these ways of performing masculinity in the gym and on social media (Facebook). At the end, I will present a final analysis from an embodied perspective about the ways of executing body techniques in the gym, and their association with performances of masculinity.

Gesture and gaze: posing code

There is tacit code of permissions and intercessions about how and when to look[9] at other people's bodies in a gym, and also, when it is allowed to show yourself.

The episodes described below illustrate how a certain type of masculinity is practiced through a certain way of performing weightlifting

9 A note about observation: to qualify my observation in the field work, I employed an allegory of the differences between looking around through mirrors and windows. Mirrors are part of any gym in the world – except for, as far as I know, women-only gym franchises that specifically advertise not having mirrors in the weightlifting room. A mirror in a gym serves as a technical resource but also multiplies the observational angle, preserving the anonymity of the 'voyeur,' to a certain degree. It also allows a gym-goer to check his postures and perform gymnastic movements – and be seen while doing it. The window works differently: a direct but subtle gaze, through the frames of the equipment and its moving parts, and people passing by, allows multiple gazing opportunities. This is the space where the performances take place, and the tacit game of gazing and being gazed at.

exercises, and through gestures and poses that assert and legitimize this masculinity.

Here is a perspective about the way that hegemonic masculinity expressed itself in the fieldwork, establishing legitimacy and exclusion among the male practitioners.

One day I was entering the locker room bathroom when I saw Tiago (a very assiduous member of the gym) posing away from the sink and right in the middle of the bathroom, staring at himself in the mirror. To be precise, I witnessed the transition from the pose to his gesture of dissimulation. I greeted him briefly and chatted about something random – noticing how uncomfortable he was with the scene.

There is a code of conduct regarding how a man should look at himself in the mirror. In the gym, the gaze at oneself in the mirror (during resting periods, meaning there is no need to correct exercising postures) simulates an 'external' perspective, the gaze of someone else. This type of gazing, nevertheless, must obey some rules: one does not block the image of whoever is using the mirror to control the technical execution of some exercise, and the posing is generally discreet (preferably, with no one noticing).

This code for posture and gazing reveals the legitimacy in belonging and conformity with the hegemonic masculinity.

In the episode in question, Tiago seemed apparently embarrassed to be caught in this moment. Maybe he did not consider himself 'fit' or having a shape 'worthy' of being gazed at. Or maybe he did not want to be identified as narcissistic or shallow.

Perhaps that is why Tiago was posing in the bathroom. When one is not part of the spectrum of hegemonic masculinity, one must avoid excessive posing in public. The penalty for that 'transgression' is to be labeled as a show-off, a pretentious beta-male, trying to be something else.

A good example of how this logic is perceived in the gym happened when Bruno, a mid-thirties, tall and muscled guy, joined the gym at the time of my fieldwork.

His training routine used to be the center of attention, when he performed very heavy lifts followed by guttural sounds of effort and the noise of dropping barbells and weights on the floor – usually extremely heavy loads were dropped in a spectacular and loud way, resembling a 'mic drop' gesture, as displayed in figure 7. Showing no signs of shame, Bruno posed in the mirror and seemed to be quite aware of all the people staring at him.

Bruno was praised as someone who knew how to train hard, since he was always pushing himself to the maximum, even using extra loads on the machines. The posts on Facebook (which were becoming trendy in the gym at the time) were quite illustrative of the individualist values and the way of living associated with having body capital (figure 6).

Social media posts portrayed a way of being of an individualist masculinity reduced to a body shape that sums up its values and lifestyle. The embodiment of those practices and discourses reflects a simplification of life's social and emotional dimensions, resulting in a shallow subjectivity.

But of course, this is just one side of the story. After all, some people enjoy hitting the gym more than others and can become quite 'addicted.'

So where can we draw the line between empowerment and subjugation?

Gymnastics and its healthy lifestyle involve both an embodied process of internalizing techniques and improving physical conditions. It implies adopting rituals and norms of behavior that reflect/promote ideological dispositions and worldviews. As previously mentioned, the commodification of beauty and health creates a body idolatry, reducing the subject to the shape of his body, as shallow and stiff subjectivity.

But for many, hitting the gym is a promise to completely change their lives. In Foucault's considerations about self-cultivation and improvement, body and soul are interlinked in the same process:

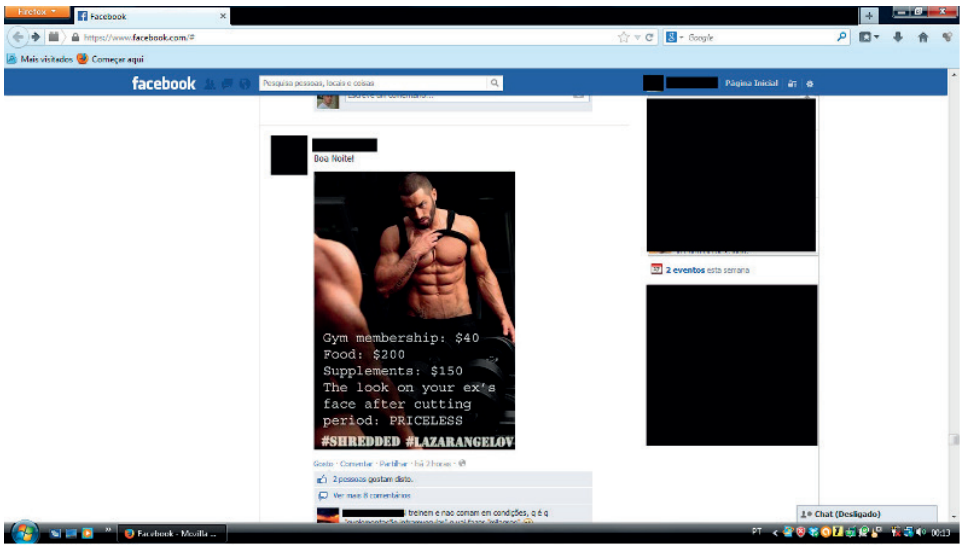

Figure 6 Body capital

Figure 7 The spectacular masculinity – 'mic drop gesture.

> Technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality (Foucault 1982: 1).

The dilemma about which side of the coin – empowerment of the individual or its submission to the mass media appeal to pursue an ideal image of perfection – still stands[10] as an interesting challenge for gym studies.

It seems to be certain though, that techniques have an agency of their own; or in other words, they have a profound and inconspicuous effect on the subject as well. Let's take a closer look at how it works, and the analytical proposal of qualifying body techniques in the gym, to understand their role in the performativity and display of hyper-masculinity.

10 Questions about the causality were not addressed in this essay, but I believe the dynamics between agency and structure could be a good investigative lead.

Notes on a microscale: qualifying the effort in body techniques

The interviews and conversations with Joana and Marcos, and field notes about how gender was perceived and performed through body techniques in the gym, but I wanted to know one more question. How is it done? What are these techniques/technologies, and how are they executed? I would like to propose an analysis of the body techniques, qualifying the effort applied in each method.

In a large study, Ulseth and Seippel (2011) presented a typology of gymnastics based on a survey conducted at a gym in Norway. Figure 8 shows a graphic representing their typology:

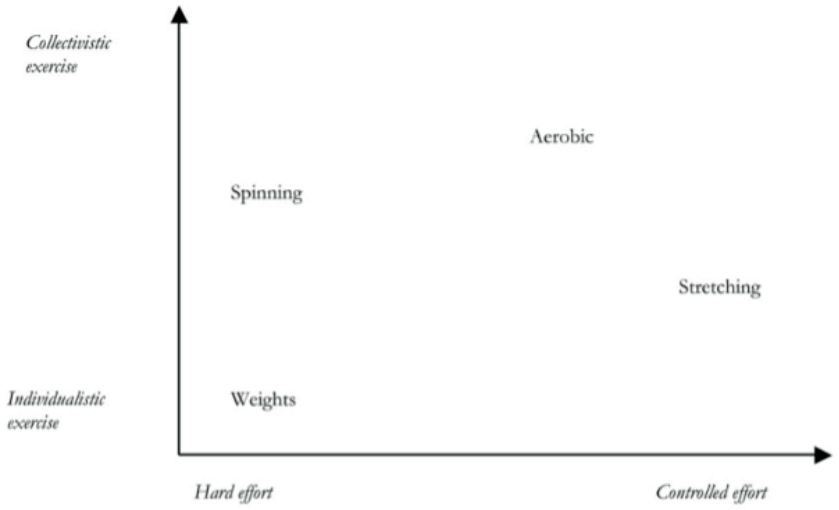

Figure 8 Gymnastic typologies (Ulseth e Seippel 2011:7)

This study correlated age, class, educational level, gender, and cultural consumption. The authors observed that these factors influenced the choice of the participants for each activity including the quality of effort (hard vs. controlled). Cultural consumption was also determinant:

> Cultural consumption was included to see if there are links between factors pertaining to lifestyle and fitness activity, and two of our fitness activities were clearly associated with culture: stretching was more of a music-omnivore activity, and thus closer to 'traditional' high-brow culture, and weights was more of a 'rock and roll' male culture (Ulseth and Seippel, 2011: 13).

This data presents how other cultural factors relate to each other and express distinct gym 'tribes' or groups, and how they choose their activities. I would like to add that not only the practices, but the way one engages in them, is quite determining for the cultural dynamics of identity processes. The way of engaging in those tasks basically relates to the level of effort applied, which determines the level of control and skill of a certain movement[11].

I denominate the ability to apply maximum force with high commitment as 'will power' and the ability to flow with other surrounding forces, applying just enough force, as 'flow power.' These categories relate the materiality of the techniques with abstract and subjective qualities.

The best way to explain this concept is with a practical example where one can spot a striking difference between two gymnastic practices, focusing on the embodiment of each technique.

11 The studies of JJ Gibson about the concept of affordance are fundamental for embodied approaches, but this topic will be explored another time. Tim Ingold and Csordas provide fine examples of applying this concept in anthropology.

Weightlifting is the most archetypical form of exercise in a gym. The straightforwardness of just lifting heavy objects is appealing, where strength is all. Despite technological advances in the exercise machines and training methods, in the fitness universe, willpower is the ideological pinnacle and the path through which anything becomes possible, for those who are willing to work hard.

Pilates, on the other hand, like other mind and body activities, values optimum, not maximum effort. Mr. Joseph Pilates was himself a dancer, a boxer, and a gymnast. The control, wholeness of movement, proprioception, and stretching are principles of this practice.

I will refer here to this practice/way of being as flow power. The popularization of yoga from the counterculture of the 1960's paved its way as clever and efficient gymnastics, especially among women. Figure 9 below shows a graphic representation of the association between subjective traits and the materiality of each way of doing / physical attribute.

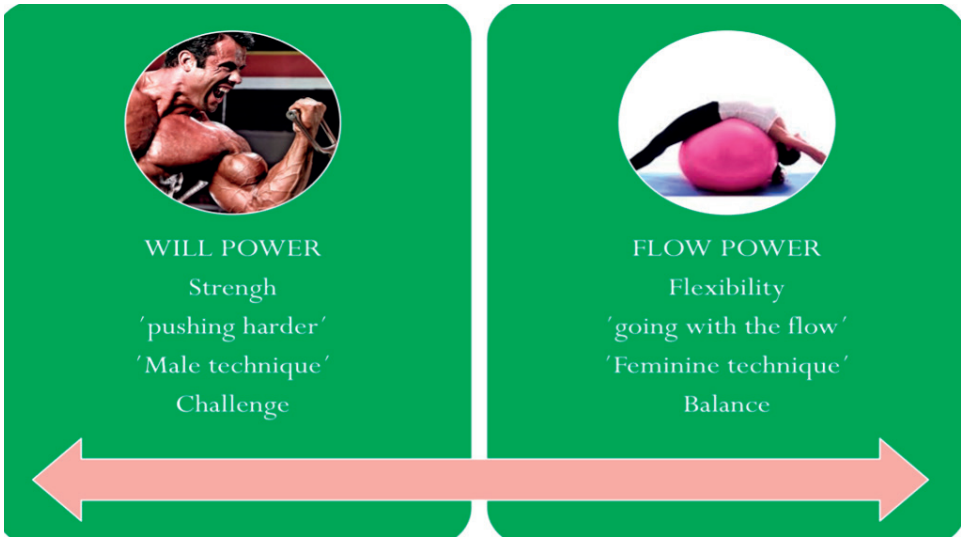

Figure 9 Ways of being and body techniques.

Final thoughts

In this paper, I presented some field notes and interview analyses that provided a broader understanding about how gymnastic activities are gendered, and how a certain type of masculinity is performed and reproduced.

Through embodiment theory and gender studies, this ethnography revealed the subjective dimension in the embodiment of gymnastic techniques / ways of being among gym-goers, revealing how these activities are gendered, and the expression of shallow and selfish hyper-masculinity.

The conceptual framework interlinking practices and ways of being was presented as an analytical proposal of embodiment theory, qualifying body techniques with its subjective dimension.

In this hyper-masculinity, pushing harder is a way of performing their will power as a definition of a manhood in 'beast mode,' a subjectivity reduced to a shallow somatic entity instead of a sensitive embodied being. Distancing itself from any trace of femininity, it reveals how a stereotyped masculinity keeps being practiced repeatedly through gymnastic sets, unveiling the spirit of our times. Maybe the 'grimacing' of the new generation of bodybuilders, which puzzled Ric Drasin, was a reflection of hyper-masculinity's reaction to the late social and political advances promoted by feminism.

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Crippling Levels of Manliness: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wogb2ctOfV4
Ric´s Corner – Youtube Channel
Ed Connors Gold´s Gym Venice in Studio: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LiZmU78diUA
Why do current bodybuilders make such a facial grimace when posing as apposed to years ago?:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c45FU3J3qZY