

TRANSCENDENCE. BODYBUILDING AS POST- OR META-SPORT AND POST-RELIGION

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It has often been argued that in modern physical culture since the 19th century, the valorization and aestheticization of the human body has correlated with profanization, i.e. the loss of transcendence. This essay shows that modern physical culture remains deeply rooted in the ideas of transcendence. Especially bodybuilding, the epitome of modern physical culture, can be interpreted as an attempt to transcend the deficiencies of the given body through rigorous training, asceticism, and aestheticization, and thus to sublimate it into a timeless statue. In this connection, photography plays a crucial role as, metaphorically speaking, an amplifier of the ‘iconogenic’ characteristics of bodybuilders’ physiques.

KEYWORDS: Bodybuilding, physical culture, transcendence, religion, biopolitics/biopower, photography.

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

A conventional history of physical culture in Western modernity could read as follows: in the 18th and 19th century, Enlightenment, materialism, secularization, industrialization, and progressivism started their triumphant victory in Europe and America. Notwithstanding various conservative backlashes and interferences, they teamed up with burgeoning consumer culture, liberal-democratic politics, and innovative art forms such as impressionism to create an earthly paradise. In the course of those developments, modern physical culture emerged. Progressive mentality necessitated a corporeal sidekick, and thus along

came gymnastics, fitness, bodybuilding, wellness, etc. New, modern bodies for new, modern humans. Sport alone did not suffice for ‘all-round development’ envisioned by modern physical culturists¹, since sport usually does not involve all parts of the body to the same extent. Eugen Sandow (see next chapter) stated in 1902: ‘Physical culture and sport go hand in hand, but physical culture should come first, because a well developed, robust constitution is essential to lasting success in sport. A systematic course in physical culture fits a person wishing to excel in any branch of sport

¹ Eugen Sandow, *The Gospel of Strength*, Melbourne: T. Shaw Fitchett, 1902, p. 6.

[or in any other branch of life, as he argued elsewhere in the same text].² Moreover, physical culture, according to Sandow, was inextricably linked to aesthetics and ‘making the physique more beautiful.’³ Viewed from this perspective, physical culture would have to be considered as the literal embodiment of modern Western materialism, progressivism, and secularization, oscillating between politics and aesthetics, function and form, collectivism and individualism.

This essay calls the just outlined profanization theory into question by tracing religious and spiritual leftovers in modern physical culture in general and bodybuilding in particular. Training and transcendence are not mutually exclusive; on the contrary, modern physical culture might as well be regarded as a field of ‘transcendence’. In this respect, bodybuilding, as an extreme form of physical culture, shows stronger transcendent features than many other forms of sport and physical training. On the one hand, it is firmly rooted in the profane logic of competitive sports and the underlying military and economic logic: bodybuilding is all about physical growth and earthly success. On the other, it breaks the written and unwritten laws of conventional sport and is often ridiculed as a freakish non-sport. Bodybuilding valorizes aesthetic to a point where it comes close to beauty contests, albeit awarding sublimity rather than beauty. It entails a lifestyle that is reminiscent of cloisterly practices full of rules and taboos, for instance regarding various foods, at the same time celebrating lust for life. Strength and power are reassessed as the mere preconditions for the possibility of the desired aesthetic. By distancing itself from sport-as-sport and moving first towards sport-as-culture and then towards sport-as-art, bodybuilding develops a reflexive relationship to physical culture and transcends sport under the umbrella of sport. As a primarily individualistic and ritualistic lifestyle that requires strong self-observation, it is more closely connected

to asceticism, self-reflection, introspection, spirituality, or meditation than those common (team) sports which rely on numerically measurable performance and require quick reactions in unforeseeable situations. In short, bodybuilding reveals and exemplifies the non-sport aspects of sport, the meta-physical aspects of modern physical culture. Therefore the terms ‘post-sport’ or ‘meta-sport’ seem more appropriate than the term ‘non-sport’ with regard to bodybuilding.

MODERN PHYSICAL CULTURE:

THE PROFANE HISTORY

In the German ‘Turner’ movement established in the 1910s, the human body was considered as a means to a political end, namely, the consolidation of the German people in order to overcome the French dominion. The central figure in this connection was the nationalist activist Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, better known as ‘Turnvater Jahn’⁴ [image 1].

Physical culture in England around 1900, in turn, was political and national as well, but showed stronger liberal and commercial traits. One of the most influential figures in this connection was Eugen Sandow, a Prussian-born strongman and businessman who resided permanently in London from the late 19th century onward⁵ [image 2]. It was mainly he who popularized physical culture in general and bodybuilding in particular for broader audiences through subordinating performance to the aesthetics of the body⁶. Sandow posed as a classicist tableau vivant in vaudeville shows and published books which stressed the ennobling aspects of physical training. He thus anticipated the postmodern era of liberal, aesthetics- and art-oriented

2 *Ibid.*, p. 61.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 25.

4 Cf. Oliver Ohmann, *Friedrich Ludwig Jahn. Frisch, frei, fröhlich und fromm!*, Erfurt: Sutton Verlag, 2009.

5 Cf. David L. Chapman, *Sandow the Magnificent. Eugen Sandow and the Beginnings of Bodybuilding*, Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994.

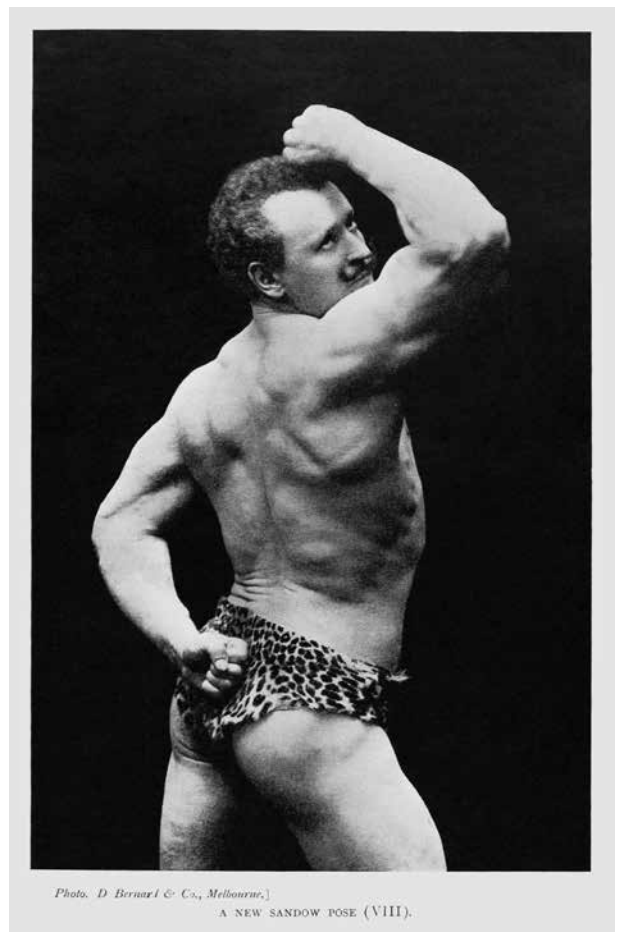
6 Cf. Jörg Scheller, *No Sports! Zur Ästhetik des Bodybuildings*, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2010, p. 158–195.



1. Friedrich Ludwlg 'Turnvater' Jahn, lithography, ca. 1850. Courtesy Jahn Museum, Freyburg
Friedrichas Ludwigas „Turnvater“ Jahnas, litografija, apie 1850

physical culture which spread from North America first to Europe, and then to the entire globe in the second half of the 20th century.

In 1946, the first bodybuilding federation was founded in Montreal, Canada. It solely judged body aesthetics and developed a multimillion-dollar industry with Arnold Schwarzenegger as its figurehead in the 1960s and 1970s. Notwithstanding the usual claims to serve the health of the people, or even to build the nation through bodybuilding, and despite commodification, the body was now treated as an individual artwork. The image and art of strength and health became more important than



2. Eugen Sandow, photograph, ca. 1900. D. Bernard & Co, Melbourne (photographer) Adam Cuerden (restoration) [CC BY 4.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>) oder Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons
Eugenas Sandow, fotografija, apie 1900

actual strength and health. Consequently, Schwarzenegger performed at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1976 and befriended Hollywood stars and famous artists such as Andy Warhol. Lisa Lyon, who became the first female bodybuilding champion in 1979, graduated from UCLA and established herself as a nonconformist freethinker. She viewed bodybuilding not only as a sport, but rather as an art form⁷. Arnold Schwarzenegger gave similar statements in the book *Pumping Iron* (1975):

⁷ Cf. Bruce Chatwin, 'An Eye and Some Body', in: Robert Maplethorpe, *Lady Lisa Lyon*, New York: Viking Press, 1983, p. 9–14.



3. Lea Rasovszky, *Fresh Squeeze*, crayon and acrylic on paper, 2014. © Lea Rasovszky

Lea Rasovszky, *Fresh Squeeze*, spalvota kreida, akrilas, popierius, 2014

‘You form it [the body]. Just like sculpture.’⁸ In the eponymous docudrama (1977) he said: ‘When it comes to sculpting, good bodybuilders have the same mind that a sculptor has.’⁹ It is not surprising, then, that the sculpted body has inspired numerous postmodern and contemporary artists, among them the aforementioned Warhol as well as Robert Mapplethorpe and Eduardo Paolozzi, or, more recently, Ali Kazma, Konrad Smoleński, Martin Schoeller, and young emerging artists such as Lea Rasovszky and Ana Hofmann¹⁰ [images 3, 4].

8 George Butler and Charles Gaines, *Pumping Iron: The Art and Sport of Bodybuilding*, London: Sphere Books, 1977, p. 54.

9 Quoted after: George Butler and Robert Fiore, directors, *Pumping Iron*, Warner Home Entertainment, 2004 (DVD).

10 Obviously I am sketching these shifts and differentiations very

Sandow, Lyon, and Schwarzenegger are good examples of the close relationship between the aestheticization of the human body and the secular, materialist, liberal, and biopolitical mindset which aspires to a richer, more productive, more powerful, more intense, and more complex earthly life while also retaining the sharp contour of an individual person. Their bodies can be interpreted as paradigmatic forms of biopolitics in modern Western societies – politics that, as Foucault famously stated, revolve around ‘the power to “make live” and “let die.” The right of sovereignty was the right to take life or let live. And then this new right is established: the right to make live and to let die.’¹¹

The new biopolitical right typical of modern Western societies has, according to Foucault, succeeded the power mechanisms of earlier top-down disciplinary societies. Certainly, life continues to be annihilated in disastrous wars or, in Foucault’s words, ‘vital massacres’—¹². In Foucault’s opinion, however, these massacres take place in the name of ‘biopower’, i.e., in the name of the enhancement of life. Biopower is working ‘to incite, reinforce, control, monitor, optimize, and organize the forces under it’¹³. In this connection, physical culture is of paramount significance. Sport, fitness and bodybuilding promise vitality and power, they promise vigor and control over the body, they promise multi-optionality—the American fitness guru Bernarr MacFadden, for instance, advised his readers in 1904 to ‘cultivate the happy faculty of getting as much out of life as you can [through physical training]’¹⁴.

roughly. There are many structural and semantic overlappings between these phases that I cannot mention here due to limited space.

11 Michel Foucault, ‘*Society Must be Defended*’. *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76*, New York: Picador, 2003, p. 241.

12 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. I: *An Introduction*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1978, p. 137.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 136.

14 Bernarr MacFadden, *Building of Vital Power*, New York: Physical Culture Publishing Company, 1904, p. 230.



4. Ana Hofmann, film still from *The Holy Pump*, 2015.
© Ana Hofmann

Ana Hofmann, kadras iš filmo *The Holy Pump*, 2015

MODERN PHYSICAL CULTURE: THE SPIRITUAL HISTORY

What I have just outlined is, in short, the assumed birth of modern and contemporary physical culture from the spirit of secularization, profanization, materialism, liberalism, and life-enhancing biopolitics. In the following, I would like to propose a different view on physical culture, although I do not repudiate the above or similarly founded diagnoses. On the one hand, I agree that modern physical culture only became possible through secularization, materialism, liberalism, biopolitics, etc. However, what I will put forward in the next paragraphs is a thesis that biopolitics and its correlates in physical culture carry strong transcendent, spiritual, and religious overtones. Just as the modern nation-state inherited some traits from pre-modern, religious-dynastic forms of governance – it

reinterpreted the imaginations of religious communities in terms of territory, blood, and language, –modern physical culture literally incorporated certain aspects of the religious and spiritual heritage.

In his novel *Submission*, Michel Houellebecq has a protagonist say: ‘Transcendence is a selective advantage in sexual reproduction.’¹⁵ Through provocatively linking biology, sexuality, and transcendence, Houellebecq argues that transcendence is not necessarily restricted to the spiritual or metaphysical sphere, but extends to the realm of the body. One could call this form of transcendence ‘physical transcendence’ – an at first sight paradoxical form of transcendence that remains within the realm of immanence. In this regard, it comes close to Aristotle’s concepts of entelechy andhylomorphism.

¹⁵ Michel Houellebecq, *Unterwerfung*, Cologne: DuMont, 2015, p. 61. Quote translated by J. S.



5. Bodybuilder Skadi Frei-Seifert, photograph, 2010.
@ Jörg Scheller

Kultūristē Skadi Frei-Seifert, fotografija, 2010

Physical transcendence would imply an attempt to transgress the boundaries and deficiencies of the given individual or collective body without – necessarily – referring to the spiritual or metaphysical dimension. This attempt is not limited to sexual reproduction which allows the individual to transcend itself, at least genetically, through its descendants, but may also include individual or collective asceticism and exercises aimed at transforming and elevating the body – in short, any attempt intended to reshape or restructure the body consciously.

Bodybuilding, as the culmination point of modern physical culture, is best described as an attempt to transcend the contingency of the mortal body through

rigorous training, discipline, asceticism, and aestheticization, and thus to turn it into a timeless statue, to sublimate it into an artwork or an invulnerable image of the vulnerable self [image 5]. In this regard, one could think of Hans Belting's statement that 'the human body itself is an image even before it is reproduced through images.'¹⁶ Although this is probably too generalizing, it certainly makes sense with regard to the aestheticized bodies in bodybuilding. Bodybuilders form their bodies strategically and relentlessly, they go from flesh to form, from matter to ideal. Rather than being reproduced through sex, their aestheticized bodies are first and foremost made to be reproduced in and through images, especially through photography and thus through a medium that shows strong analogies to physical transcendence.

Photography can be interpreted, very roughly, as a medium of immanent transcendence, as a means to establish an afterlife in life itself by separating the form – or the image – of something from the presence – or the body – of this very something. It is telling that Sandow was often photographed for the early mass media, among others by Napoleon Sarony and Benjamin Falk. However, Sandow's body was not only photographed in abundance, but was, as I would argue, inherently photogenic. As a built and aestheticized body, it facilitated and anticipated photographic reproduction. In contrast to then common strongmen, who were often overweight, hairy, and unkempt, Sandow had almost no body fat, no body hair, a picturesque, landscape-like muscularity and a sharp, classical, i.e. timeless contour. To highlight it, he often had himself photographed against dark backdrops. In general, the contour distinguishes an entity from its context. Through this separation, the respective form can more easily be reproduced and re-contextualized than open, painterly forms.

¹⁶ Hans Belting, *Bild-Anthropologie*, Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2001, p. 89. Quote translated by J. S.

Wolfgang Ullrich defines photogeneity as that element ‘which appears as immaterial and perfect in an image, which overcomes vulnerability and thus becomes an ideal.’¹⁷ According to Ullrich, the term photogeneity may refer not only to objects that lend themselves to photography, but also to those features of objects which emerge only through photography. Both aspects are certainly true of Sandow’s physique and the photographs taken of him. The same accounts for Lyon and Schwarzenegger or any other bodybuilder.

In general, photogeneity, as defined by Ullrich, and bodybuilding belong together. Bodybuilding is focused on creating bodies that are ‘perfect’, that ‘overcom[e] vulnerability’ and ‘thus becom[e] an ideal’. On the other hand, the desired features of the body realize their full potential only through photographs since a living body, no matter how many re-shapings and transformations it has undergone, will never appear as ‘ideal’ or ‘timeless’ as its avatars in photographs. Thus the photograph is in the bodybuilder’s body and vice versa.

A fitness body still looks ‘human’. Bodybuilders, however, strive towards the superhuman, in terms of mindset as well as body aesthetics. Arnold Schwarzenegger once said: ‘When I’m training for a competition, I can be what some people call inhuman, but really I think it’s more like being superhuman.’¹⁸ ‘Super’ means ‘above’ and ‘beyond’, thus resonating with transcendent meanings. Common strength athletes – e.g. weight lifters – prove to be ‘super’ with regard to physical performance. Bodybuilders prove to be super with regard to iconic ideality and perfection, and their ability to produce superimages and supersculptures.

Sandow and subsequent bodybuilders embody photogeneity, they live and breathe the eternalizing logic of the photographic image: the human body in



6. Bodybuilders in Hong Kong, photograph, 2012.
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/af/Blondie_%28287452174860%29.jpg. Author: istolethtv from Hong Kong, China (Blondie Uploaded by Fæ)
 [CC BY 2.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0>)], via Wikimedia Commons

Honkongo kultūristai, fotografija, 2012

the age of mechanical reproduction. If we extrapolate this feature, a photogenic physique supports the thesis that the more built, sculpted, shaped, and (trans-)formed bodies are, the more photogenic or, to use a neologism, the more ‘iconogenic’ they are. They exist, consciously or unconsciously, to be photographed, reproduced, distributed, discussed, and evaluated, just like artworks.

Although the body of a common athlete – sprinter, football player, boxer, etc. – can certainly be photogenic as well, a bodybuilder’s body is – ideally – sculpted and designed to the full extent and thus bursts with picturesque details. Her or his physique forms a veritable landscape with deep, shadowy valleys, bright peaks, and veins that run like nervures beneath a flimsy skin. Such a body is grotesque and noble, irritating and attracting, magnificent and repulsive at the same time. It evokes ‘negative pleasure’, to use a term by Immanuel Kant. Besides the aforementioned contour, perfection, and idealization, the conflicting combination of these features innately lends itself to being photographed, whereas other bodies might

17 Wolfgang Ullrich, *Raffinierte Kunst. Übung vor Reproduktionen*, Berlin: Wagenbach, 2009, p. 70. Quote translated by J. S.

18 George Butler, *Arnold Schwarzenegger: A Portrait*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990, p. 145.

need props and masquerade to ‘make a good picture.’

Against this backdrop, it turns out that the seemingly materialistic discipline of bodybuilding in particular and aesthetics-oriented physical culture in general are characterized by immaterial features: form(s) and photogeneity. Ever since Plato and Aristotle, form has been considered as an immaterial aspect within the material world. Form was and is believed to come closest to the idea of timelessness. Friedrich Schiller, for instance, wrote in 1795: ‘The actual mystery of the master [artist] is that he overcomes matter through form’¹⁹ [image 6].

Isn’t it ironic that it is bodybuilding, the alleged epitome of materialism, that transcends the body within the body, the flesh within the flesh? That it seeks to render mortal flesh eternal, just like photography seeks to freeze fleeting moments? Only from a superficial point of view, bodybuilding is about flesh-as-flesh. Bodybuilding is a trans-bodily practice.

Furthermore, bodybuilding is all about systematics, order, and control. Sandow wrote in his book with the telling title *The Gospel of Strength*: ‘Exercise, to be of proper avail, must be systematic, to secure an even development and symmetrical proportion of all parts.’²⁰ In contrast to earlier forms of physical culture, the modern perfectible body is under constant surveillance and is subject to systematization. It is analyzed, optimized, and measured, for instance, with the help of anthropometric procedures, statistics, training systems and exercise regimens, ephemeral mirror and permanent photographic images, x-rays, supplements, diets, computer software and smartphone apps – in short, methods and tools that are said to be scientific, rational, reasonable, objective, and efficient.

Now, one could once again argue that this is just another proof of the close connection between materialism, profanization, and physical culture. On the other

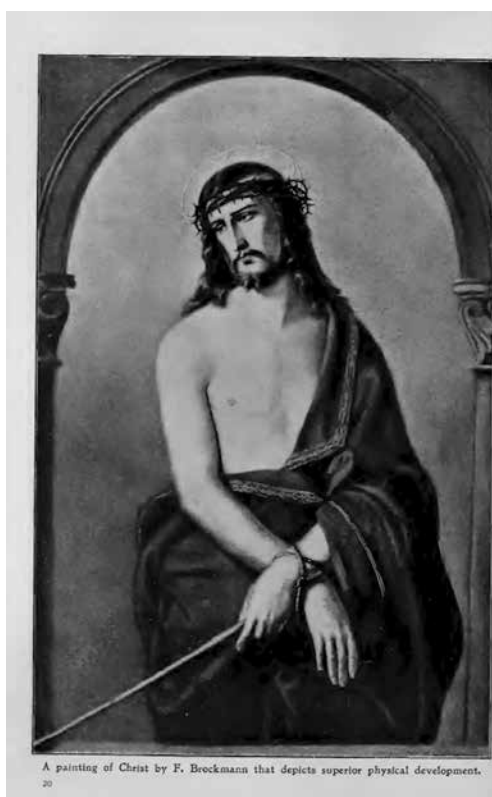
hand, the sense for order and systematics in modern physical culture can as well be related to transcendence. The political philosopher Eric Voegelin, for instance, emphasized the strong relationship between (political) order and transcendence. For Voegelin, a good form of political order depended on the knowledge of the irreducibility of transcendence and on the renunciation of the arbitrariness of individual opinion or doxa. In reference to Solon, he wrote: ‘Through openness toward transcendence, the passion of life is revealed as the Doxa that must be curbed for the sake of order.’²¹ Of course, Voegelin was anything but a theoretician of modern physical culture, let alone bodybuilding. He probably would have considered it as kitsch, trash, and frivolity. His observation of a fundamental connection between transcendence and order may nonetheless lead to the hypothesis that, despite its emergence in a time of a seeming conflation of immanence and transcendence, bodybuilding is also in fact structured on the principles of order and transcendence. In the case of bodybuilding, however, order is a means to transcendence, not the other way around.

For bodybuilders, transcending the given, contingent body and elevating it to a body in perfect, symmetrical form is not possible without systematics, order, knowledge, and mental strength. While Voegelin saw transcendence and order as the two key distinct, but interconnected elements in the overcoming of personal passions to achieve political order, Sandow stressed order as a means of transcending personal weaknesses, reconfiguring the fundamental role of order and transcendence around an irreducible interplay of body and mind, around a biopolitical governmentality, as it were: ‘There can be no doubt, either, that one of the greatest elements in making for a pure mind and a lofty imagination is a pure, healthy body’, and: ‘It is the mind-all a matter of the mind. The

19 Friedrich Schiller, *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen*, Stuttgart: Reclam, 2000, p. 88.

20 Eugen Sandow, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

21 Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, Vol. 2: *The World of the Polis*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957, p. 197.



JESUS AS A PHYSICAL CULTURIST 21

as a guide for right living. Surely, the supreme purpose of the Bible is to teach man his right relationship to God and to his fellow-man. In the Bible, therefore, we may expect to find precepts and principles and examples of the certain reward of living in harmony with Nature's laws of health, and the inevitable penalty of living in disobedience to those laws. We have already considered some of these precepts and principles; now let us call to mind a few striking examples.

In the lives of such men and women as Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Samson, Samuel, Ruth, Esther, David, Solomon, Elijah, Jezebel, Daniel, Zacharias, Elizabeth, Mary, John the Baptist, Peter, Paul, James, and John, we have examples of healthful and un-

healthful habits of life, obedience and disobedience, the rewards of righteousness and the evil consequences of sin, examples of right living and of wrong living. In addition to all these examples, and many others, we find in this precious Book, the world's one example of the perfect life, perfect in obedience to the laws of health and purity and power, perfect in love toward God and man, perfect in loyalty to truth, perfect in service to mankind. Let us study, therefore, carefully and conscientiously, the life of this perfect man.

One of the biographers of Jesus, in writing of His boyhood, gives us this suggestive statement: "Jesus advanced in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men" (Luke 2:52). Do all boys grow that way? Do all have a

"Raising of Lazarus," from the painting by L. Dei Frontabo.

7. Double page from *Physical Culture*, Vol. XXII, July 1909, No. 1.
 Scan from *Physical Culture*, Vol. XXII, July 1909, No. 1
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 1909 m. liepos mėn., Nr. 1

muscles really have a secondary place.²² The transitory phase in which Sandow lived and worked becomes obvious in these lines: it is not clear if the order of the body allows for the transcendence of the mind, or if the order of the mind allows for the transcendence of the body. However, one thing is obvious: in Sandow's days, a good mind was increasingly less often regarded as the precondition for a good body, as was the case in Plato's philosophy, but rather the other way round: a good body was now said to be the basis of a good mind. Thus, physical culture adapted and inversed the Platonic-Christian dualism of body and mind.

As for arbitrariness and individuality, in bodybuilding the desired bodies may be considered as

individual artworks – this body is what I and only I have created! – but in fact they are characterized by a non-individualistic aesthetic – low body fat, bulging muscles, hairless bronzed skin and dehydrated flesh are mandatory – that adheres to the above mentioned timeless, photogenic ideas and ideals rather than fashionable trends or idiosyncratic preferences. Asymmetry or polychromy, for instance, are banned. Appropriating Voeglin's words, one could argue that in bodybuilding the doxastic body must be curbed for the sake of order.

From a critical perspective, the proponent of radical materialist European Enlightenment philosophy Philip Blom remarks that 'the believers in the western gospel of capitalist joy hate their bodies almost as much as yesterday's nuns and monks. [...] Their

22 Eugen Sandow, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

modern, secular successors no longer fast in order to save their immortal soul – they diet, abstain from mundane enjoyments, strive for the ideal of a youthful body which they will never really have again, feel constantly guilty of being so old, too flabby, not in shape, not the way they want to be.²³ Viewed in this light, modern physical culture is in fact still rooted in the paradigms of spirituality and religious transcendence with the exception that the paradise and the perfect, immortal body which Christian thinkers such as St. Augustine promised their followers only in the afterlife, is sought here and now, in this earthly paradise.

Eugen Sandow, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Lisa Lyon can thus be considered not only as bodybuilding idols and living symptoms of liberal biopolitics, but also as mundane saints devoted to the trinity of body, form, and order. They tra(i)nscend(ed) flesh in and through the flesh, they – attempt(ed) to – eternalize themselves through training, form, photogeneity, and photography. Against the background of a continuum between transcendence and immanence (Voegelin would have disapproved of this continuum and would have stressed the incommensurability of transcendence), it comes as no surprise that an article in the magazine *Physical Culture* from 1909 went so far as to proclaim Jesus Christ ‘a physical culturist’ via retrojection, concluding with the remarkable sentences: ‘Evidently, very evidently, He lived a simple, outdoor, natural, healthful life – a physical culture life, if you please. [...] Before He began His public life, He worked at the carpenter’s trade. When He began His public life, He had a strong, healthy body, a body capable of enduring hardship, exposure, and other severe demands upon His strength’²⁴ [image 7].

Declaring Jesus Christ a pioneer of physical culture might at first glance seem utterly absurd, especially

when one equates Christianity with dualism and contempt for the body, as Blom does. However, in her studies on the body in Christianity, Caroline W. Bynum argues that ‘for most of western history, body [sic] was understood primarily as the locus of biological process. Christians clung to a very literal notion of resurrection despite repeated attempts by theologians and philosophers to spiritualize the idea. So important indeed was literal, material body [sic] that by the fourteenth century not only were spiritualized interpretations firmly rejected; soul [sic] itself was depicted as embodied.’²⁵ Accordingly, Bynum diagnoses a ‘psychosomatic understanding of the self’ in medieval theology²⁶. Physical culturists and especially bodybuilders, even when rhetorically referring to dualistic understandings of mind and body, follow the trail of this psychosomatic self into modernity and add the element of art and aesthetics to it. A modern Jesus, however, is not equipped with the aforementioned ‘strong, healthy body’ by default. Thus, in most cases, she or he has to form it all by herself or himself. Body-building means self-sculpting.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In this essay I have argued that bodybuilding, as the epitome of modern physical culture, is deeply rooted in the ideas of transcendence by showing that bodybuilding strives for – alleged – timeless ideals and attempts to overcome contingency and arbitrariness through a ritualized art of self-sculpting. Accordingly, notions such as ‘form’, ‘shape’, ‘order’, or ‘structure’ are of major significance for the bodybuilding lifestyle. The notion of ‘form’ has, since Plato and Aristotle, commonly been related to meta-physical notions such as ‘soul’, ‘ideal’ or ‘spiritual’. The notion of ‘order’,

23 Philipp Blom, *A Wicked Company: The Forgotten Radicalism of the European Enlightenment*, New York: Basic Books, 2010, p. 18.

24 Harry G. Hedden, ‘Jesus as a Physical Culturist’, in: *Physical Culture*, Vol. XXII, July 1909, No. 1, p. 17–23.

25 Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1995, p. 18.

26 *Ibid.*

which is highly relevant for bodybuilding as well, was associated with ‘transcendence’ by Eric Voegelin, albeit in a different, yet nonetheless revealing connection. Although a superficial dualistic Platonic-Christian rhetoric concerning mind and body prevails in some testimonies of bodybuilders, the actual bodybuilding lifestyle is characterized by a hylomorphic or psychosomatic understanding of the self. This, however, is not an obstacle to transcendence. In bodybuilding, transcendence means the transgression of the boundaries of the contingent body towards a reshaped, restructured, ordered and optimized body – an ideal body that once was expected in the afterlife yet, in modernity’s quest for an earthly paradise, is sought for here and now. Photography is used to amplify the inherently photogenic and ‘iconogenic’ characteristics of the bodybuilders’ physiques, respectively; aestheticized physiques that lend themselves to the eternalizing reproduction through images. Eugen Sandow, one of the originators of bodybuilding, and his post-modern successors, e.g. Arnold Schwarzenegger and Lisa Lyon, can be regarded as tra(i)ncendence artists, prompting that the will to transcendence is still at work even in the allegedly most secular corners of Western modernity. This is why I propose to define bodybuilding as a ‘post-’ or ‘meta-sport’. In a 2015 video essay about the Zurich bodybuilding scene, the aforementioned artist Ana Hofmann came up with the most fitting title for this complex of entangled phenomena: The Holy Pump²⁷.

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TRENSCENDENCIJA. KULTŪRIZMAS KAIP POST- AR METASPORTAS IR POSTRELIGIJA

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SANTRAUKA

REIKŠMINIAI ŽODŽIAI: kultūrizmas, fizinė kultūra, transcendentija, biopolitika/biogalia, fotografija.

Šiame straipsnyje teigiama, kad modernios fizinės kultūros pavyzdžio – kultūrizmo – šaknys glūdi transcendentinėse idėjose, parodant, kad kultūrizmas siekia tariamai belaikių idealų ir bando įveikti kontingentiškumą ir arbitrariškumą per ritualizuotą kūno formavimo meną. Taigi tokios sąvokos kaip „forma“, „pavidalas“, „tvarka“ ar „struktūra“ turi didžiausią reikšmę kultūristiniam gyvenimo stiliui. Nuo Platono ir Aristotelio laikų „formos“ sąvoka įprastai buvo siejama su metafizinėmis sampratomis, tokiomis kaip „siela“, „idealas“ ar „dvasingumas“. „Tvarkos“ sąvoką, kuri taip pat yra labai svarbi kultūrizmui, Ericas Voegelinas siejo su „transcendentija“, nors ir kitokiais, bet daug atskleidžiančiais ryšiais. Nors iš pažiūros dualistinė platoniškoji ir krikščioniškoji proto bei kūno retorika vyrauja kai kuriuose kultūristų pasisakymuose, tikrajam kultūristo gyvenimo stiliui yra būdingas hilomorfistinis arba psichosomatinis savęs suvokimas.

Kalbant apie kultūrizmą, transcendentija reiškia kontingentinio kūno ribų peržengimą link performatuoto, restruktūrizuoto, pertvarkyto ir optimizuoto kūno – idealaus kūno, kokio kadaise buvo tikimasi pomirtiniame gyvenime. Tačiau modernybei ieškant žemiškojo rojaus, jo yra siekiama čia ir dabar. Fotografija yra naudojama sustiprinti jau ir taip fotogeniškas bei „ikonogeniškas“ atitinkamas kultūristų kūno sudėjimo savybes, estetizuotą kūno sudėjimą, kurį galima įamžinti vaizdų reproduktivumu.

Vieną iš kultūrizmo įkūrėjų Eugeną Sandow ir jo postmodernius pasekėjus, tokius kaip Arnoldas Schwarzeneggeris ir Lisa Lyon, galima laikyti tra(e)nscendentiniais menininkais, o tai reiškia, kad transcendentijos siekis slypi netgi tariamai labiausiai pasaulietiniuose Vakarų modernybės kampeliuose. Būtent todėl kultūrizmą reikia apibrėžti kaip „post-“ arba „metasportą“.