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Muscles and Fishnets: Exploring the Similar Autoerotic Elements within Body Image Expression

by Jack Beutler

(English 1102)

Pursuing happiness is an activity almost anyone can relate to. Personal fulfillment and self-esteem are typically required to accomplish this pursuit. However, the means that may be taken to arrive at these psychic destinations vary wildly. Generally, when the means of the pursuit are neither detrimental to the individual, or to society, they are accepted and supported. However, innate feelings of aversion and fear can generate hate and disgust toward certain activities and the subcultures that take part in them. Two undertakings, similar in their expression and gratification, can be viewed with polar emotional opposites and thusly receive the benefits, or detrimental consequences, according to their level of acceptability and the “set” designations they are accorded. A double standard is applied to these pursuits of happiness, with common belief slipping into the void of ignorance and obscurity. The two activities are viewed as opposites based on the conflicting emotions they inspire, not on empirical analysis of the similarities the two phenomenon¹ share. In specific terms, the process of admiring one’s own appearance is common in supporting this pursuit of happiness. Two typically male² activities that interact with this self-admiration process are cross-dressing³ and bodybuilding. In these specific instances, satisfaction is provided by the image or thought of oneself as having a set of desired features, colloquially known as auto-erotic behavior.

Both the discipline needed to maintain the ascetic lifestyle⁴ and the muscular proportions held by the bodybuilder are often regarded in a positive light. Achieving muscular proportions can also be “associated with various rewards” societally, such as preferential “social standing” and increased access to “potential sexual partners” (Heath et al. 303). In contrast, cross-dressing is regarded as a disorder, or disease and for the dilettante,⁵ is often-time considered a revolting activity reserved for “weirdos” and “perverts.” Paraphilia can be generally defined as sexual interest in unusual objects, activities, or individuals. The criteria⁶ for an activity to qualify for this list are obscure and arbitrary; at the time of this writing, cross-dressing, or autogynephilia,⁷ was still among those on that list. However, bodybuilding, or any similar activity, has not yet qualified for the same categorization. It can be argued that both phenomena share the same interest in the self and that this interest deals with an idealized-self, which has a certain set of desirous features. When attained and viewed, these features cause a form of sexual excitement or “high” for the individual. If this is true, any sort of diagnosis resulting from the process, if applied to one, could certainly be applied to the other. The relationship between the auto-erotic paraphilia experienced by males, within the mediums of bodybuilding and non-homosexual autogynephilia are so similar, that it can be said they are different forms of identical phenomena, directed at the same pursuit of happiness.

Cross-dressing is an activity that can conjure up unique, subjective images in mainstream thought. Even metal professionals and academia have not yet agreed on set designations and definitions for the activity and the various subgroups that take part in it. This paper aims to focus on non-homosexual autogynephilia, which is the process of heterosexual males fetishizing the image of themselves being portrayed as women.⁸ It does not extend to any sort of transgender⁹ phenomenon or homosexual activity,¹⁰ which may include various forms of cross-dressing. According to Lawrence, characteristics of non-homosexual autogynephilia include primary sexual attraction to females, the absence of living “full-time as women” (191), an explicitly “erotic dimension” (192) associated with the act of cross-dressing, and an intense interaction with an eroticized “feminine self-image” (194). This voyeuristic, auto-erotic viewing of an alternate, “idealized self” (Lawrence 197) has deep ties to

personal identity and inspires a drive to inhabit these spaces of the other-self. It would follow that a person interacting with their “preferred paraphilic stimuli” (Lawrence 196), who also achieves the desired “feminine self-image” (Lawrence 194), attains feelings of “delight, ecstasy and passion” (Lawrence 202). This personal transformation is gratifying and titillating, when it manifests itself in reality. In addition to the erotic elements, emotions pertaining to positive well-being, such as “comfort, and security” (Lawrence 194) are enhanced. When the need to view oneself as this alternate, ideal-self comes to fruition, auspicious personal fulfillment comes flooding in. Attaining this is happiness for the individual gripped by the psychological need to cross-dress, within the non-homosexual autogynephilia phenomenon.

As with cross-dressing, the specifics of bodybuilding can be misunderstood by those without a direct affiliation to it. Within the practice of weight-lifting, bodybuilding is a specific style of training, which is the practice of making the muscles as large and shapely as possible, while maintaining symmetry and a certain aesthetic.¹¹ Different types of training are required to achieve different anatomical and physiological results, such as extreme size, or strength.

As these training methods affect and mold the body, they also shape the mind. They have the ability to forge neural pathways, resulting in feelings of euphoria and gratification, such as a “runner’s high.” According to the research by Köteles, et al. taking part in a recurring physical exercise program has been seen to generally increase “subjective well-being, and self-esteem” (39), in addition to improving “mood state” and “body awareness” (40)¹². A large part of this increase in self-esteem was related to the individual’s “satisfaction with body image” (Köteles et al. 45), undoubtedly calculated from the admiration of one’s own physical progress. The results went so far as to connect this exercise and increased bodily awareness, to the development of a more “intense sense of self” (Köteles et al. 44). The representations of “one’s self-concept” are actualized in reality, being enhanced and inflated as the hypertrophic results pile up and come into alignment with the preferred “body image” (Köteles et al. 40) sought after. This would support the conclusion that bodybuilding is as much a psychological activity, as it is a physical one.

While these positive psychological elements occur when the bodybuilder interacts with the newly-formed self-concepts, conditioning from repeated visual stimuli and repeated reactions to body image begin to take place. According to the research by Heath et al. on the “drive for muscularity” and its relationship to “self-objectification,”¹³ these reactions can either lead to positive or negative conditioning¹⁴ in regard to the act of “body surveillance” (298),¹⁵ which can be defined as conscious thought about one’s own appearance. The body becomes objectified by the self and is seen as an “aesthetic object” (Heath et al. 303) to be viewed from an “outside perspective” (Heath et al. 301). The manifestation of this process takes the form of an “internalization of [a] mesomorphic¹⁶ ideal” (Heath et al. 303), which is held as a standard for the individual, while they engage in a growing “preoccupation with their own physical appearance” (Heath et al. 298) - a similarity shared with cross-dressing, however in the former case, a hyper-masculine ideal is pursued, rather than a hyper-feminine archetype, as in the latter.

It is possible to partake in physical exercise without achieving the positive psychological elements described. It is also possible, that not all bodybuilders arrive at a destination of self-objectification. However, for the purposes of this paper, it is assumed that a statistically-significant number experience these psychological side-effects. That number will undoubtedly grow, as societal and media influences continue to promote “appearance, particularly a muscular physique, as central to males’ sense of self” (Heath et al. 303). The fact remains that self-objectification is a real phenomenon and it is one that bodybuilders are heavily predisposed towards. Attaining this ideal image is important for the bodybuilder that has fallen within the self-objectification model. The chase can become a “pathological pursuit” (Heath et al. 305) when these ideals, that have become intertwined with self-image and the sense of self, rely on the disconnected judgement of the other, outside self. Bodybuilding is, therefore, not only a heavily psychological exploit, but it holds

significant mental and conceptual gravity for the individual(s) experiencing the obsession.

Thus far, the conditions surrounding the desire to bodybuild and the reasons for its continuance have been explored. However, the relationship between the self-image and act of body surveillance can “elicit selective and self-focused attention” (Heath et al. 304) that also takes a sexual form. The “perceived benefits” (Monaghan 351) of attaining this physique provide pleasure from the thought of oneself in the role of the “everyday pragmatic embodiment” (Monaghan 351) of male sexuality and power. This psycho-sexual endeavor, performed without a partner, would be classified as “masturbatory sexuality,” (Richardson 58) or auto-erotic behavior. In this instance, the ego “takes itself as the object of its own libidinal drives” (Richardson 59), which has the potential to qualify as extremely narcissistic. Richardson goes on to classify bodybuilding as a “queerly sexual activity” (58) with erotic excitement being obtained by the image and symbolism of one’s body. In the 1977 documentary film *Pumping Iron*, Arnold Schwarzenegger famously describes the feelings of attaining a pump in the gym as follows: “It’s as satisfying to me as coming, as having sex with a woman and coming” (Schwarzenegger qtd. in Monaghan 345), which supports the prevalence of sexual undertones within bodybuilding.

Despite the psychological elements, there are very real sensual pleasures derived from the neurological stimuli encountered in the gym. Lee F. Monaghan interviewed several amateur bodybuilders, one of which expressed that bodybuilding was better than drugs; he came out of the gym feeling “high as a kite” (347). Another recounting, provided by a recovering drug addict, added the viewpoint that bodybuilding “gives [him] a buzz, similar to what heroin” (Monaghan 348) use can yield. When viewed from this perspective, the erotic nature of these interactions with “body surveillance” (Heath et al. 298) and the muscular physique can become eerily similar to that of non-homosexual autogynephilia. They relate through satisfaction arising from the self-modified portrayal of gender; an alternate physical form of the self is fetishized, and powerful interactions with an eroticized self-image are provided.

Insofar as attaining sexual excitement and sensual pleasures by one’s own level of aesthetic muscularity is not a “usual practice,” this process could also be classified as a paraphilia, a designation shared with cross-dressing. The research Bettcher provides on this topic describes the vessel, by which different paraphilia and “erotic fragments” (618)¹⁷ can allow different people, interacting with different mediums, to arrive at a similar mental destination. The manifestations of “erotic content [are] highly variable” (Bettcher 611) and a practice of “recoding” (Bettcher 611) can allow many different psychological needs to be met, in a variety of ways. While she discounts concepts of autogynephilia, Bettcher agrees that an “eroticized self” (618) is an integral part within most forms of sexuality. This erotic-self interacts with a wide variety of “erotic fragments” (Bettcher 618), which “can be found in the fantasy lives of ‘normal’ people” (Bettcher 618), such as bodybuilders. The surrogate role these fragments play in sexual fantasy allow a common end to be reached by everyone participating in sexual activity. The commonality of this practice can normalize cross-dressing and fetishize bodybuilding, among other activities, to a degree.

However, in contrast to cross-dressing, bodybuilding is a socially-accepted paraphilic activity. When the juxtaposition of the two activities’ status as auto-erotic paraphilia and the level of social acceptability they are accorded are viewed, a double standard is implied. In addition, when the similarities in the androgynous qualities of the two activities are observed, the disparity within the contradiction is augmented. Within an activity that supposedly espouses masculinity, the enlarged pectoral growth stands out as strangely feminine. Richardson points out the potential confusion arising from the “curvaceous and voluptuous” (55) nature of the bodybuilder’s chest region, which is typically a signifier of female sexuality. The feminine qualities of the pectorals are enhanced by the use of oil and cosmetics applied to the skin, during competitions (Richardson 55). When the context regarding a made up and oiled chest region is considered, conventional male fantasies regarding women are typically aroused. When paired with the objectification process of the bodybuilder’s

physique, the “submissive role” (Dutton qtd. in Richardson 56) of being on display, also presents certain androgynous qualities. Finally, the hairlessness and tanned skin of bodybuilders evokes further examples of what might be more seen as typically “female” qualities being represented in a “male” format.

If the blend of gender qualities weren't enough, the fetishization of this androgynous image presents a striking similarity to the fetishized female appearance cross-dressers seek. It is not just a process of taking on these female characteristics that is shared; it is a tenet of the two phenomena that a manipulated self-image is fetishized in the first place. In this sense, both the cross-dresser and the bodybuilder “force the spectator to consider what a supposedly ‘normal’ body, clearly delineated along the sex-gender-sexuality matrix, actually is” (Richardson 64). The double standard of socially-acceptable androgyny is that bodybuilding “has been assimilated by mainstream” (Richardson 63) culture, which extends to it a level of normality. However, acceptance of the application of more ostentatiously “female” qualities has not yet been granted to the paraphilia of non-homosexual autogynephilia.

In the physical sense, a cross-dresser applying fake breasts in the form of a “chest-plate” would be identical to an exercise regimen devoted to growing the pectoral muscles; the bosom of the individual is enhanced. However, in the psychological and metaphorical aim, the motivations could be said to be different. Despite the potential objections, if the superficial reasoning is disregarded, the main focus of both activities is to “gender-bend.” This would even apply to the individual who is focused on muscular growth: The activities are undertaken to adjust the physical self to match an appropriate gendered self-image, whether that be at the masculine or feminine end of the spectrum.

Not only do both activities gender-bend, but they also contain auto-erotic elements. This suggests that there is a level of sexual enjoyment received by both parties, in this androgynous expression. However, the erotic manifestation in a bodybuilder does not cause disgust and shame from the general populace, in the same way cross-dressing can. Only cross-dressing seems to arouse unpalatable sexual connotations of “perversion” and “sexual-deviance,” when these ambiguous gender representations are encountered in an auto-erotic format. With differing mediums, but with identical auto-erotic enjoyment, methodological means and psychological ends, one could certainly come to the conclusion that the level of acceptability or disgust could be just as identical.

The open-ended concepts of representation have thus far been explored in this paper. Both bodybuilding and cross-dressing symbolize different things to different parts of the ego and pleasure centers of the brain for the self, while providing a similar sense of fulfillment. In addition, both activities offer themselves up to differing patterns of consumption for spectators of the activities. To the spectator, whether bodybuilding signifies masculinity, pseudo-sexuality, femininity, androgyny or fetishistic paraphilia, it also commonly elicits descriptions such as “alien” and “bizarre.” Perhaps it signifies a parody of masculinity, or just seems to be a shocking oddity of nature. It inspires confusion, like a circus sideshow, where one is “both attracted and intrigued by it, yet repelled and nauseated” (Richardson 60) at the same time. The befuddlement arises at the form of spectacle encountered. However, there appears to be a tolerance for the perplexity bodybuilding imposes, even though it seems to “celebrate grotesque, physical freakiness” (Richardson 63). However, when the oddity becomes a man dressed in women's clothes, the ostentatious nature of *this* form of drag is heavily discouraged within society.

The duplicity in the perception can be highlighted by an examination of a thread on a *Bodybuilding.com* forum, where a heterosexual crossdresser self-identifies and extends the offer for questions to be asked. In response, many forum commentators cannot fathom that it is possible for a man to wear a females clothes, without being homosexual. Terms such as “sick demented, twisted, [fucked],¹⁸ piece of shit,” “it,” “closet homo” and “[faggot]”¹⁹ are used (Crossdresserguy 13-18). It appears to be a commonly held belief among those on the forum that having the desire to wear a woman's clothes is synonymous with “trying to be a chick,” which in turn is synonymous with being

“gay” (Crossdresserguy 18). The ignorance aside, the level of social acceptability is obviously low for cross-dressing within this particular bodybuilding community. However, as another crossdresser on the forum points out, there is a paradox in that this forum, built around males who partake in bodybuilding, who admire the bodies and accolades of other bodybuilding males, find cross-dressing to be a homosexual activity (Crossdresserguy 14). In this instance, it is pointed out to be “absurd” that the admiration of males, as males, is not homosexual, but the admiration of a male, or oneself, dressed as a female is homosexual (Crossdresserguy 14). If it were a sliding scale, males admiring males for their masculinity would seem to be more qualified as a “homosexual” activity, compared to the admiration of female characteristics. It is accurately qualified as a “double standard” (Crossdresserguy 14).

Indeed, the efforts to qualify bodybuilding as a heteronormative representation, may provide some insights into its large-scale acceptance. Richardson brings up the style in which photographic depictions of bodybuilders “strain...to promote a sense of normative” (52) expression. The pictures in these publications always seem to contain a semi-nude female posing with the male, or place a large emphasis on the performance of heavy lifts. The “phallic mastery” (Richardson 53) promoted by images of heterosexuality and extreme strength attempt to “diffuse [the] anxieties” (Richardson 53) that arise when males find themselves admiring and envying the bodies of other males. The “subversive potential” of representation, within bodybuilding, highlights the power of illusion within modern society. It also shows how far the “normalizing” activities reach with a non-existent gestalt.

In concluding this examination, the phenomenon of bodybuilding and cross-dressing share many characteristics in their methodology and psychological destinations. Desired destinations can vary greatly; “what some people find particularly sexy might leave some others totally numb” (Richardson 58). Both activities are largely psychological and provide self-esteem and personal fulfillment to the individuals taking part. Within the two scenarios, an other-self objectifies the body and views it through the lens of an idealization process. In both cases, these idealized forms provide auto-erotic, sexual enjoyment; when they are interacted with. While bodybuilding and cross-dressing should not be regarded as diseases, if the *American Psychiatric Association* insists cross-dressing be designated as a paraphilic disease, then it could be argued that the similar qualities shared in bodybuilding cause it to qualify as a paraphilic disease as well. The psychological vessels described by Bettcher promote the similarities the two phenomenon share, in both their process of eroticization and their means to arrive there. Androgyny and provoking a sense of spectacle also seem to be hallmarks of both activities. However, due to “culturally refined paradigms” (Richardson 53), the level of social acceptability and tolerance differs for the two. Unfortunately, while both bodybuilding and non-homosexual autogynephilia share an ironically-similar process of fetishizing the desired self-image and promote “plasticity of the body” (Richardson 51), the current climate dictates that cross-dressing should be an activity best performed behind closed doors and spoken about in whispers. Awareness and unbiased reasoning are needed to reverse the perception that crossdressers²⁰ are outcasts and oddities. If “normality” remains a process defined by “cultural systems” (Richardson 51), then the zeitgeist should be awakened to this phenomenon. In doing so, the pursuit of happiness will prove more attainable for those with alternative interests.

¹ An activity, which is not easily defined by the common language and the motives behind it are often obscure, however they are commonly acknowledged as a “thing”, typically that happens (somewhat frequently).

² Autogynephilia is an almost exclusively male activity. Bodybuilding is more common among males and male bodybuilders were the focus in terms of research.

³ Within the focus of this paper, defined as a male's sexual arousal achieved by dressing in a women's clothing. The existence of this phenomenon is debated and if it is qualified, those qualifying it typically regard it as a disease or disorder. Alternatively referred to as Autogynephilia.

⁴ In addition to the endless repetition and pain experienced in the gym, a high volume of high-protein, low fat food must be consumed on a regular basis.

⁵ The uninitiated, a person having a superficial interest in a branch of knowledge.

⁶ The criteria and classifications put forth by the American Psychiatric Association are used in this analysis.

⁷ Latin, literally meaning "love of oneself as a woman."

⁸ Most commonly by dressing in women's clothes, applying makeup and wearing wigs.

⁹ Commonly thought of by the idiom "a female trapped in a male's body" or vice versa. This would encompass several different variations and forms of gender identity and gender expression.

¹⁰ While not all drag queens are homosexual, this designation would encapsulate the activity of "performing" as a woman, as well as the act of dressing as a woman, with the aim of engaging in sexual activity with a man.

¹¹ The aesthetic is subjective and fluctuates (see Dexter Jackson beating Jay Cutler in 2008 Mr. Olympia), but is generally defined by the IFBB and the judges of that year's major competitions. The size and proportions are expected to be accompanied by an extremely low body fat percentage.

¹² "Body awareness is a mental representation of one's own body, based almost exclusively on internal (i.e. proprioceptive and viscerosceptive) information. Body awareness is regarded as a core component of self-concept and it is connected with positive affect, wellbeing, and everyday functioning. Although regular physical activity might improve body awareness, the construct is rarely investigated or even mentioned in the context of exercise psychology."

¹³ "manifests as persistent body surveillance involving habitual monitoring of one's body for adherence to internalized cultural ideals, and can, in turn, result in feelings of body shame for failing to meet those unrealistic standards."

¹⁴ Negative conditioning was referred to as muscle dysmorphia in the research. Men with this condition are upset with their bodies and would like to have more muscle/less fat than is currently present on their bodies.

¹⁵ "Body surveillance. The 8-item Body Surveillance subscale of the Objectified Body Consciousness Scale (McKinley & Hyde, 1996) measures the extent to which participants view their bodies from an outsider observer's perspective (sample item: "During the day, I think about how I look many times")...Among male bodybuilders, weight trainers, and non-athletes, this subscale was found to yield acceptable internal consistency (.81) and demonstrated validity through positive relations with males' appearance anxiety and body dissatisfaction (Hallsworth et al., 2005)."

¹⁶ A body type; broad shoulders with a narrow waist.

¹⁷ Sexuality is complex and simple traits, practices, or attractions cannot be extrapolated from the convoluted process. An erotic fragment is a motif, within the larger body of complex sexual attraction - i.e. a person with a fetish for leather incorporates the material into sexual activity. Simply being around leather is not enough to constitute a fulfilling sexual interaction.

¹⁸ Spelled phukced to avoid censorship within forum.

¹⁹ Spelled phaggot to avoid forum censorship rules.

²⁰ among others displaying a gender-queer appearance.

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