

# *THE ALL – INCLUSIVE BODY*

**Excerpted from: Kenneth Dutton's *The Perfectible Body:  
The Western Ideal of Physical Development.***

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**ED NOTE: WE ARE DELIGHTED TO BE ABLE TO OFFER OUR READERS THIS EXCERPT FROM KENNETH DUTTON'S THOUGHT-PROVOKING ANALYSIS OF OUR WESTERN IDEAS OF PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT. SEE *IGH* 4(4) FOR DAVID CHAPMAN'S REVIEW OF *THE PERFECTIBLE BODY*.**

The term “erotic numbness” used by Rudofsky to characterize our response to heroic art applies equally well (but for different reasons) to the effect produced by the bodybuilding display.<sup>1</sup> In both cases, this observation must obviously be confined to “typical” responses, since as we have already noted the possible range of human reactions to the sight of the body, whether in art or in real life, is determined by the psychological disposition of the individual at the viewing end of the transaction. Though the Laocoon, the Farnese Hercules or Michelangelo's David can in no meaningful sense of the term be considered erotic art, it is at least conceivable – and probably factually the case – that some people would find these statues irresistibly exciting in sexual terms. So too with the bodybuilding display: the phenomenon of “muscle eroticism” is well known to psychologists dealing in the area or psycho-sexual fantasy, and such a disposition makes the very sight of muscularity a powerful source of sexual arousal. In this area, any general propositions that one may advance will apply only within the bounds of what can be considered typical or “normal” human reaction.

With this caveat, it is possible to suggest that there is a curiously asexual quality discernible in the advanced muscularity of the bodybuilder's physique, and it could be argued that this is a central element in the symbolic language of the developed body. It is not so much that the body is here devoid of sexual connotations, as that it combines in a unique fashion elements of both male and female sexuality, or that by simultaneously affirming and denying male and female messages it manages to escape or even transcend the male-female duality and attain a symbolic completeness which comprehends them both. Implausible though such a theory may at first seem, it not only accounts for some of the particular conventions of bodybuilding display which defy explanation on other grounds, but also corresponds to a deep-seated aspiration towards sexual unification which has found expression in various forms since antiquity.

It should be noted that this is a somewhat different concept from that of unisexuality or the elimination of visible differences between the sexes, a tendency which has been found in certain ide-

alistic movements from the apocryphal writings of the First century AD., through medieval and Renaissance mysticism to modern incarnations as disparate as the rock musical *Hair* and Maoist China. It differs also, at least in mode of presentation, from the androgynous or sexually ambivalent characteristics and mannerisms adopted by a number of male pop performers from David Bowie in the 1970s to Michael Jackson and the artist formerly known as Prince in the 1980s and 90s. What is suggested by the bodybuilder's physique is not a diminution or denial of masculine qualities, so much as their explicit affirmation in a context which simultaneously suggests complementary messages associated with opposite qualities. There is a basic principle of selective perception involved here, one long recognized by traditional scholastic philosophy which neatly encapsulated it in the maxim *expressio unius rei est exclusio alterius*: the presence of a characteristic or quality implies the absence of an opposite quality (hardness implies the absence of softness and vice versa) and thus suggests incompleteness of being. Conversely, the reconciliation of opposing characteristics can lead to our apprehension of a sense of completeness or self-sufficiency. Kenneth Clark, for instance, has observed that “the disposition of areas in the torso is related to our most vivid experiences, so that abstract shapes, the square and the circle, seem to us male and female.”<sup>2</sup> In this context, “the old endeavor of magical mathematics to square the circle” is related to the ancient cosmology which saw the union of opposites as a restoration of primordial harmony and perfection.

The combination of male and female characteristics has been noted by a number of observers of the bodybuilding display. George Butler has vividly described one of his photographs of Arnold Schwarzenegger as follows:

**He seems to float, suspending himself palms down on the rails of two back-to-back chairs... His upper body — trapezius flexed, deltoids rolled forward, abdomen vacuumed into a small shad-**

**ow — is an accumulation of striking details. The pectoral muscles beneath are large and sweeping. They glisten so shockingly in the air of the shabby room that the figure who bears them seems neither man nor woman. . . .**<sup>3</sup>

Equally, Lisa Lyon had characterized the image projected by the female bodybuilder as “neither masculine nor feminine but feline.”<sup>4</sup> Margaret Walters has commented that “for all his super-masculinity the bodybuilder’s exaggerated breast development, as well as his dedicated self-absorption, can make him look unexpectedly, surreally feminine.”<sup>5</sup> Whilst the latter comment is part of Walters’ dismissal of bodybuilding, which she sees as “the most narcissistic and, in that sense, most feminine, of pastimes,”<sup>6</sup> it is nonetheless possible to endorse her perceptive identification of the crucially suggestive elements of the bodybuilder’s physique without sharing her distaste for this form of bodily manifestation.

The three elements identified here are the basic shape or outline of the body (“super-masculinity”), the modeling of the body’s surface (“unexpectedly. . . feminine”), and an overall air of self-absorption (characterized as “narcissistic”). With regard to the last-named characteristic, it is no doubt possible to draw different conclusions as to the extent to which it is a universal trait of bodybuilding performance. For one thing, there are considerable individual differences between bodybuilders in the degree to which they seek to interact with their audience, and in any case the extent to which such interaction is possible differs in the “compulsory” and “free” posing of which competition is made up. The extreme concentration required by any high-level competitive sport is here directed towards the body itself, in maintaining the “pump” and flexion of the muscles. In this sense, the self-absorption of the bodybuilder may not differ greatly from that of the diver standing on the platform and mentally rehearsing the movement of his body in a high-dive.

If the term “self-absorption” accurately conveys the self-directed concentration of the posing display, a more revealing indication of its distinctive and perhaps unique character as a form of spectacle is the alternative term “self-containment.” The pose does not look beyond itself, it is meaningful only in terms of the body’s ability to suggest, by its inherent expressivity of mass and gesture, the exaltation of physical existence.

In this sense, the bodybuilding display can be compared to ballet, not to those scenes in which the performers advance the action by way of a superior and aesthetic mime related to the events of the plot, but to those in which the body expresses nothing beyond an inner mood. Even here the analogy falters, however, because what the bodybuilder seeks to express has about it nothing cerebral, no reflection of an interior life, but the evocative power of the body itself,

the ability of visible form to conjure up in the minds of those who understand its language deep-seated images and fantasies of perfection and completeness. There is little difference in principle between such a form of contemplation and the delight of the mathematician confronted by a “perfect” theoretical equation, the rapt wonderment of a musicologist studying a Bach fugue, or the intent admiration of an art-lover standing before an abstract sculpture by Brancusi. In each case, the intimation of formal perfection is real, though it can be appreciated only by those who have learned the language of the medium by which it is conveyed. In each case, as in the so-called classical ideal of art, form takes precedence over content; in one sense, indeed, the form is the content.

The posing display suggests self-containment. It is not “about” anything other than itself. The so-called “archer” pose, for example, mimics the bodily attitude of a person drawing a long-bow in a lunging position; its reference, however, is not in any sense to the sport of archery but purely to the muscular configuration and line of the body which can be displayed in that particular position. The “three-quarters twisting back pose” is precisely that of the antique Torso Belvedere and of one of the *ignudi* (sometimes known as ‘The Athlete’) from Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel ceiling. Once again there is no sense in which the pose “refers” to these artistic works, of which the bodybuilder (and no doubt most of his audience) are more likely unaware given their cultural background; it is rather that the bodybuilder, like the artist, has chosen that pose because it expresses a potentiality of the body. Handed down to the contemporary poser by his predecessors (the art-studio models), it reveals in Clark’s words “a compelling rhythmic force [which] drives every inflection of the human body before it.”<sup>7</sup> Like its artistic forerunners, the pose indicates nothing beyond the power of human anatomy to transform itself into an instrument of expression.

Pursuing the terms of Margaret Walters’ analysis, we can discuss in closest detail her reference to the coexistence of “super-masculine” and “surreally feminine” characteristics in the bodybuilder’s physique. In its fundamental shape and outline, the latter is unmistakably, even aggressively, masculine, emitting super-normal stimuli of masculinity. The ideal bodybuilding physique, says Robert Kennedy,

**should have wide shoulders, trim hips a small waist, arms with balanced development from the wrist to the shoulders, legs that flow aesthetically from the hips to the knees, and then into a full calf development. The lats should be wide, but not too much at the lower lats. The neck should be developed equally on all sides. Pectoral muscles should be built up in all aspects, especially the upper and outer**

**chest region. The glutes should be rounded but not overly heavy in appearance. The overall muscle separation and definition should be clearly visible when contracted or flexed.<sup>8</sup>**

The broad shoulders, trim hips, wide latissimus dorsi, small buttocks and relatively thick neck are all super-normal masculine stimuli. All of them, it will be noted, are characteristics of body shape and are visible features of the body when seen in silhouette. The development of the pectoral muscles, on the other hand—what Walters refers to as the “exaggerated breast development” of the male bodybuilder — seems somehow to be of a different order, having more to do with the modeling of the skin surface and the tactile quality of body-texture than with the outline of the body. It is here that we enter into a world of body-imagery strangely different from that of masculine stimuli.

The tactile quality of the body’s surface is clearly an important component of the messages emitted by the bodybuilder’s physique. The skin as psychologists have recognized, has a vital role in erotic stimulation, related as it is to the considerable suggestive power of the sense of touch. Physical love-making is intensely reliant on touching and certain parts of the body (the so-called “erogenous zones”) are especially sensitive to erotic messages conveyed by stroking, kissing, fondling or other forms of skin-to-skin contact. The powerful imaginative force of tactile messages is so great that the mere sight of bare skin can act as an erotic stimulus, without the need for actual touching to take place. (The same applies, it should be noted, to tactile experiences involving non-human objects: fur, leather, silk and velvet as well as garments associated with another person, can all act as erotic agents and take on the pathological dimensions of fetishism). The erotic role of the skin itself is intimately associated with the polarized attitudes towards the display of nakedness which we saw above to be characteristic of Western society.

While skin is not of itself a purely female characteristic, as a mode of conveying bodily messages it belongs to a different order from that of super-masculine stimuli. The latter are all related to the outline of the body, and are observable even when the body is clothed, indeed, some male clothing (from padded shoulders to tight-fitting jeans) is designed to accentuate the super-masculine body-shape. Bare skin, however-endowed with all the erotic overtones mentioned above — is suggestive of the body-as-object rather than the body-as-agent, of the “sex that is looked at” rather than the “sex that looks.” To present the skin-surface as ‘object of the gaze’ is not a traditional male dominance-signal, but on the contrary a sign of submissiveness or seductiveness. Not for nothing did the erotic tradition in art, from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, typically depict a clothed male in the presence of a nude female — never the other way round.

That a man should bare his body for presentation to the objectifying or fantasizing gaze of others —whether women or (even more) other men—is so signal a departure from Western sexual convention that it would almost be unthinkable as a public spectacle but for the simultaneous display of super-masculine stimuli which obliterate or even deny any suggestion of female role-play and provide a sexual “neutral ground.” The legitimizing context of the posing display leaves the spectator’s mind, if not “erotically numb” at any rate erotically uncertain. Not so much transcending sexuality as rendering it illegible, the bodybuilder’s performance aims at a kind of sexual self-containment which sublimates desire.

## The Transfigured Body

Over the years of its evolution, bodybuilding has adopted a set of conventions related to the grooming and attiring of the body for competition and public display. Designed to enhance the visible muscularity of the physique, these measures have an obvious cosmetic purpose and can readily be understood in terms which apply also to other types of public spectacle; the bodybuilder, like other performers, must appear in character. Like stage make-up and costume, these are part of the accepted practice of theatrical presentation and are aimed at the improvement of the performer’s appearance. At a deeper level, however, the conventions of presentation can be related to the implicit metaphorical language of the developed body, and can be read in symbolic terms as significant (if subliminal) elements of the message it transmits. Some of these practices have subsequently been transposed from the specific context of competitive bodybuilding into other, more general spheres (such as film and advertising) which make use of the expressive character of muscular development.

The shaving of body-hair is a case in point. Since the super-normal stimuli of masculinity are to be found in those characteristics by which male and female bodies are most sharply differentiated, one would expect that the presence of male body-hair would be an important component of the messages of the muscular body. Yet the reverse is the case. Competition bodybuilders shave all exposed parts of the body including the chest (where necessary), legs and armpits. The common and most obvious explanation of this practice is that body-hair tends to conceal muscular shape, so that the definition and striation of muscles are not visible. In this and a number of other aspects of body-presentation, however, the obvious practical explanation, while entirely valid so far as it goes, is only a part of the total picture. If its practical purpose were accepted as the complete explanation of the practice of body-shaving, there would be no reason why the underarm should be shaved, since it is not the site of a muscle-group. The practice of body-shaving, in both men and women, clearly has

an additional set of connotations connected with the heightened messages conveyed by hairless skin.

In this respect as in several others, the conventions of bodybuilding have merely articulated in somewhat exaggerated form a set of widely held, if latent, cultural attitudes towards the body. Given the significance of facial and bodily hair as biological markers of masculinity, the male ideal images portrayed in Western media as ideal models are those of lithe, smooth-bodied youths. Only by reference to the symbolic language by which the body has been interpreted in the Western cultural tradition can we understand the conventions underlying this shift.

The shaving of the whole or parts of the body has been practiced in human societies since primitive times, sharpened stones having originally been used as a form of Neolithic razor. The practice has possessed various kinds of significance — religious, political, social or sexual — from one culture to another. In ancient Egypt, both men and women commonly shaved their heads and bodies, possibly as a matter of hygiene. In ancient Greece, the athletes who appeared naked in the gymnasium or arena were known to go so far as to shave (or pluck out) their pubic hair. In contemporary western society, certain parts of the body only (the face for men, the legs and underarm for women) are commonly shaved. The wearing of a beard is more frequent amongst certain male groups — academics and students, for instance — just as unshaven legs among women may be a social sign of feminism. The shaving of the head has often been required by authorities as a mark of submission: prisoners of war have had their heads shaved to humiliate them, and men and women who join religious orders have traditionally received the tonsure as a sign of humility and devotion.

Although the various messages involved in shaving are complex and disparate, it is possible to hazard some suggestions as to those connected with the modern bodybuilding display. The anthropologist Robert Brain has suggested that the shaving of body hair is associated with man's desire to make "cultural" human qualities prevail over "natural" beastly attributes, to distinguish us as human from brute creation around us: "A hairy body is an animal body. Wild men, like Esau the hunter, are hairy. Body hair is beastly and has to go in the interests of humanity."<sup>9</sup> This distinction appears to have prevailed in fifth century Greece, where the civilized, "Apollonian" bodies of gods and athletes were hairless while those of more elemental "Dionysiac" figures were often misshapen and hairy. Other ancient cultures used a somewhat different symbolism: R.D. Guthrie notes, for instance, that in earlier and more authoritarian Western societies "full beards, woolly chests, and rancid odors reinforced the lines of authority by giving a rather awesome even fearsome visage."

**Hairiness, says Guthrie, is associated with most of the more important components of status**

**— sex, age and size. It is easy to see why, in the locker room, a hairy body is nothing to be ashamed of. In a society that must emphasize co-operation and de-emphasize direct serious competition, excess hair may be too gross for most tastes, because it is a symbol for rough masculinity. If the best key to physical prowess among humans is the amount of body hair, the corollary is the more body hair, the greater the intimidation.**<sup>10</sup>

In relation to facial hair, Guthrie's observation certainly accords with a number of social practices, from that of the heavily-beamed kings of Persia and the Pharaohs of Egypt (who wore false beards on ceremonial occasions to emphasize their power and authority) to that of the bike-gangs of today who often cultivate beards as part of the image of fearsomeness.

In the case of the bodybuilder's shaven body it is doubtful that the message has directly to do with co-operation as the opposite of intimidation. On the other hand, it could have a good deal to do with a slightly different antithesis proposed by Guthrie: that between the older male and the baby or new-born, baby skin being "our standard of inoffensive child-like beauty." He suggests a variant form of the behavior known as *neoteny* — the reversion to an earlier state of evolution or life-cycle — which he calls "social neoteny."<sup>11</sup> This is a particular means of reducing the messages of intimidation by reverting to a more childlike appearance. Nakedness, a hairless body and smooth skin texture are all forms of social neoteny, signaling a childlike non-threatening quality and thus denying messages of aggression. In the light of such suggestive (if not conclusive) evidence, it could be argued that the point of shaving the body is to contradict, and thus neutralize, the aggressive or intimidating message of the super-normal adult male body-shape: to demonstrate, in other words, that this is not a body to be feared on account of its dominance, but rather to be looked at or touched — a body that places itself in the submissive role of "object."

The distinction being made here has been closely paralleled in the film world by the distinction which Michael Malone has noted between the dark-haired and blond-haired male movie star. Here, says Malone,

**the blond is the more spiritual, more "feminized," more childlike half. The male's blondness give him an iconographic chastity. He seems more vulnerable, more fragile. . . . He lacks the self-protective (because conventional) camouflage of dark virility, and so he is visually connected, probably on a subliminal**

**level, to the female sex role, with its cultural cognates — among them passive desirability.<sup>12</sup>**

Malone contrasts the “wholesome boyishness” of the blond Hollywood pin-up (such as Tab Hunter and later Jan-Michael Vincent) with the dark, mustached, macho star (Clark Gable, Burt Reynolds), who is always the seducer, never the seduced.<sup>13</sup> That many dark-haired film stars are hairy-chested and most blond stars smooth-chested may suggest a link with the messages of the hairless body, particularly as the removal of male body-hair was insisted upon by some film directors for actors who appeared with barer torsos. Some stars have even presented themselves in both guises: William Holden appeared with shaven chest in 1957 (*The Bridge on the River Kwai*) but with chest-hair in 1958 (*The Key*),<sup>14</sup> and the naturally hairy John Travolta has also “shaved down” for the photographer. There has been only one hairy-chested Tarzan (Mike Henry), while Stallone and Schwarzenegger have very obviously been influenced by the bodybuilding convention and always appear with shaven bodies.

It is clear, then, that the hairless body conveys a particular message or set of messages, possibly related to the attenuation of hyper-masculinity by the enhancing of those submissive tactile qualities associated with the skin of the infant. So pervasive has the association become that body waxing and electrolysis for men is becoming increasingly common in some Western societies. The proprietor of a firm specializing in men’s skin care has reported a marked trend towards hair-free torsos and limbs:

**. . . the increase in hair removal for men (she says) reflected a reversal of roles While women had undergone treatment for years, men were following suit. Women’s aesthetic expectations of men were such that many gave their husbands or boyfriends gift cards for treatment. ‘A lot of the women tend to send the guys to have it done.’<sup>15</sup>**

It would appear that the influence of bodybuilding on the presentation of the male body has extended, possibly by way of the film and television screen, into the wider world of social fashion, and that it has been affected at least to some extent by the increasing acceptance of the male body as an object of aesthetic or erotic contemplation.

In a number of its manifestations — from heroic art to the erotic pin-up — the history of muscular body-display has been that of the nude male body. On the other hand, the one part of the bodybuilder’s physique that is always kept covered is the genital region. Again, the most obvious explanation — social mores, the need for decency and a respectable sporting image, the avoidance of erotic overtones — is entirely correct but not entirely complete. It is well known for instance, that penile display is an important part of the

intimidation behavior of primates other than man, and it would follow that it, like hairiness, must be reduced to the minimum if the messages of sexual (or other) aggression are to be neutralized. We noted earlier the unusually small size of the penis in many nude sculptures of the Classical period, and more than one commentator has pointed to the apparent discrepancy between the bulging muscles of the bodybuilder and the apparent tininess of the male organ hidden beneath the posing trunks. Those who have seen professional bodybuilders naked will attest, not only to the unfoundedness of this assumption, but also to the remarkable adaptability of the male sexual organs and the compressive powers of Lycra. According to the interpretation proposed here, this is precisely the point of the exercise: once again it is to neutralize the aggressive sexual message of the male body, in this case by giving the genital region the inoffensive and undeveloped appearance of the baby or pre-pubertal youth. In contemporary bodybuilding practice, posing trunks are worn as brief as possible, as if to reinforce the neutralizing message.

In the ancient world the diminutive and almost childlike penises of Greek vase paintings (and to a lesser extent, the often disproportionately small sexual organs of the heroic statuary) contrasted markedly with the exaggerated phalluses seen on satyrs, in pornographic figures and in Dionysiac celebration. The latter tradition is still reflected in homosexual toilet graffiti, of which Delph writes: “if one compares the proportions of the penis and testes to the rest of the torso in these drawings, they assume enormous size. . . the larger the penis, the more virile the individual is thought to be, enhancing the amount of attention he receives.”<sup>16</sup>

At a more generally acceptable level of eroticism, it is a fact well attested by those “in the business” — though seldom publicly admitted — that the G-strings and posing trunks worn by male strippers are commonly padded so as to give the genital region an appearance of greater size. This practice, which is often the source of fascinated speculation by viewers (“What do they keep down there?” . . . asked one TV host, “their lunch?”), is a further illustration of the contrast between the conventions of erotic display and the more complex messages of bodybuilding. As distinct from the bodybuilder’s miniaturizing trunks, the “posing pouch” favored in the sexually provocative physique magazines of the 1960s tends to draw attention to the genital area, often revealing a few tufts of pubic hair. The subsequent banning of this form of dress in competition bodybuilding may have had less to do with what it actually revealed (modern posing trunks are practically just as abbreviated, and any visible pubic hair is shaved) than with the extent to which it accentuated the bulge of the genitals.

Over the last ten years or so, male posing trunks have tended to be cut higher at the rear, exposing at least the lower half of the buttocks. This practice has become more common since a number of leading bodybuilders, beginning with Richard Gaspari, have made a feature of their impressive gluteal striation (the visible separation of muscle-bands in the gluteus maximus or large muscle of the but-

tocks). As in previous instances, however, there are perhaps more latent suggestions underlying the development in fashion. Unlike the male sexual organs, the buttocks are seen as non-intimidating, a symbol of passivity associated with infancy or childhood: a baby's bottom can be patted, smacked or even admired for its "dimples." Women's bodybuilding costume (like some women's beachwear) is often cut so as to leave some, if not all, of the buttocks exposed: the recent adoption of this fashion for men, as in the G-strings or "thongs" which are now worn on some beaches, can here be seen as a further shift in gender-roles which has rendered the male body an acceptable object of aesthetic or erotic curiosity.

The skin which the bodybuilder exposes to our gaze is hardly ever the 'natural' skin, but rather a skin-surface which has been subjected to processes designed to enhance the message of muscular development. In Sandow's generation, the practice was to cover the already pale skin with a coating of white powder, in order to stress its resemblance to marble statuary. By the 1930s, however, social customs had undergone considerable change as the leisured classes had both the time and the means to take summer holidays, usually in a sunny cli-

mate. This meant a complete reversal in fashion as compared with earlier generations in which tanned skin was the mark of the peasant or the outdoor laborer: the tan now became the badge of the upper classes, as the French Riviera and the beaches of Rio became the

favorite resorts of the wealthy. Pale skin was the sign of the lowly office or factory worker, whose long working day was spent entirely indoors. The association with leisure and exercise gave rise to the notion of the "healthy tan," which soon took over from the earlier pale skin as the new bodybuilding convention. By the time of the leading American bodybuilder of the 1940s, John Grimek, it had established itself completely and has since become almost mandatory.

Even in the present age, where the dangers of exposure to ultra-violet light are well publicized and the medical profession issues frequent warnings of the risk of melanoma or skin-cancer, there is no sign of a change in the convention of bodybuilding, and the tanned body is the universal norm. This being the case, it is probably fortunate from the medical point of view that those who do not tan easily have access to a wide range of chemical body dyes, tanning lotions,



THIS PHOTO, ONE OF A SERIES TAKEN OF JOHN GRIMEK IN THE 1930s, REVEALS THE DEEP TAN FOR WHICH HE WAS FAMOUS. MORE THAN ANY OTHER MAN, GRIMEK, NICKNAMED "THE GLOW," MADE TANNING AN ESSENTIAL PART OF BODYBUILDING.

vegetable-based “body-stains,” canthaxanthin (or Vitamin A) tablets and a host of other artificial means of producing the desired color. That the tan is “fake” is unimportant: it is essentially a form of stage make-up. The skin need not be tanned, but it must look tanned.

The metaphorical meaning of the convention is not far to seek, and is even clearer when seen in conjunction with the other chief mode of skin-preparation, the oiling of the body. Though much disputed as late as the 1960s the coating of the skin with a light layer of oil is now standard practice. If inexperienced bodybuilders tend to overdo the effect and present the glistening spectacle of a body which appears to be wrapped in cellophane more seasoned competitors seek the effect of a low sheen rather than a high gloss.

The tanned and oiled body replaces the symbolic associations of marble with those of polished bronze: the glint of light on the rounded muscle-surface contrasts with the deep color of the depressions, so that the musculature stands out in dramatic and highly tactile contrast, a dark and polished surface which emphasizes the rises and hollows of the muscles more vividly than can be achieved by the pale, matte texture of marble. The association is even more obvious in French, where the terms bronze and bronzage are used to refer to tanned skin. The rise to eminence of a number of black bodybuilders in recent years, though mainly attributable to their genetic endowment and often formidable muscularity, has no doubt been assisted by the fact that their deeply colored and naturally polished skin allows them to achieve the sought-after effect without resort to artificial means.

The visual effect in question is often described by bodybuilders themselves as “looking hard”, an optical impression which suggests the tactile firmness of the flexed muscle. At the level of metaphorical suggestion however, the aim is not simply to resemble the appearance of burnished bronze, but to convey what the bronze statue and the bronze-like body alike suggest to us. No art-form, not even sculpture, is more purely concerned than the bronze with the visible surface of things: it is in its surface, says Jennifer Montagu, that the supreme quality of bronze resides, its particular effect being chiefly dependent on “the interplay of its shapes and the movement of light and shade on its modeling.” The frequently-made bronze copies of marble statues seem to speak a different language from that of their originals, the translation of light-absorbing stone into light-reflecting metal concentrating all attention on the outward play of highlights and shadows. Its dark, gleaming surface is suggestive of impenetrability or even invulnerability, as Jean-Paul Sartre recognized when he made the bronze statue in his play *Huis Clos (In Camera)* the symbol of the inanimate world of fixed being as distinct from the human world of shifting inner consciousness.

Yet the body we see on the stage is not a statue, an attitude captured at a moment of time. We are in fact conscious of opposing and neutralizing messages: this medium of representation is not impenetrable metal, but living and resilient flesh. The body moves, it breathes, it is part of our human world of mutability and transience. The muscles flex and unflex, limbs are extended and retracted, the abdominals turn suddenly from a cavernous vacuum into a glistening washboard, the pectoral muscles are bounced up and down. The performer’s face is at one moment serene and smiling, at the next contorted with effort: the body is now a road-map of vascularity, an anatomical drawing, now a series of soft and rounded planes, as

sweeping as though drawn with a compass. At once aloof and intensely present, the body we see before us belongs to both the world of inanimate objects and the world of subjectivity and feeling, to the world of fixed being and the world of becoming.

It is obvious that this sophisticated array of self-canceling messages of affirmation and denial could never have been designed or introduced as a pre-planned system. Despite its relatively recent origin, bodybuilding (like most sports) has evolved over the years more by experimentation and the processes of trial and error than by deliberate design. As innovations were introduced, they would either be adopted because they seemed somehow “right” or would be abandoned. As with any internally consistent but outwardly hermetic code, the elements can be developed and elaborated only by those who speak and understand the symbolic language by which it operates. Had anyone set out in advance to devise a means whereby the human body could suggest, purely by its own visible configuration and presentation, a totality of physical being which by subsuming and reconciling opposing qualities both completes and somehow transcends them, one may well doubt that such an enterprise could ever have been successfully achieved. Only the accumulated and refined perceptions wrought by centuries of cultural tradition could have endowed the developed body with such imaginative potential.

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup>The reference is to Bernard Rudofsky’s statement that: “The erotic numbness that emanates from a perfectly proportioned body assured generations of city fathers that all the mythological statuary that clings to public fountains or dots a town’s parks, and all the caryatids and atlases carrying sham loads of palace porticos, are incapable of arousing sensuous pleasure.” From: *The Unfashionable Human Body* (New York Doubleday, 1971), 74.

<sup>2</sup>Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study of Ideal Art* (Hammondsworth: Pelican 1960), 25.

<sup>3</sup>George Butler, *Arnold Schwarzenegger: A Portrait* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 13.

<sup>4</sup>Lisa Lyon, *Lady* (London: Blond and Briggs, 1983), 12.

<sup>5</sup>Margaret Walters, *The Nude Male: A New Perspective* (New York: Paddington Press, 1978), 295.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup>Clark, *The Nude*, 199.

<sup>8</sup>Robert Kennedy, *Reps!* (New York: Sterling Books, 1985), 98-99.

<sup>9</sup>Robert Brain, *The Decorated Body* (London: Hutchinson, 1979), 146-147.

<sup>10</sup>R.D. Guthrie, *Body Hot Spots: The Anatomy of Human Social Organs and Behavior* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1976) 67.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>12</sup>Michael Malone, *Heroes of Eros: Male Sensuality in the Movies* (New York: Dutton, 1975), 73-75

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 75-79.

<sup>14</sup>See Tony Crawley, *Screen Dreams: The Hollywood Pin-Up* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1982), 62 & 77.

<sup>15</sup>Suzanne Mostyn, “In trim for the hair-free alternative,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 October 1991.

<sup>16</sup>E. W. Delph, “The Silent Community Public Homosexual Encounters,” (Beverly Hills: Sage Sociological Observations, 1978), 8:71.