

The Genealogy of Beefcake: Or, Having Your Beefcake and Eating it Too.

Theodor Adorno, in his book *Negative Dialectics*, reminds us that “objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder”. In other words, every time we create a concept there is always something left out, something that doesn’t fit in, something lopped off in order for the concept to function in its ideal form. Like the ugly sisters hacking off toes to squeeze their bloodied feet into the glass slipper and so marry the handsome prince, our standard ways of conceptualizing inevitably distort the realities they purport to describe in order to establish a seamless identity between the concept and its object. Every concept requires conformity to its idealized form, and what doesn’t conform to the ideal is violently amputated in the rush to define. In other words, to define is to limit. It’s never the full picture. The full picture is messier, more complex, and includes all those things that don’t conform to the concept in its idealized form.

Adorno calls this remainder the non-identical and it is here, where what doesn’t fit in is discarded, that something approaching the truth can be found. It is, he argues, precisely the things that do not fit in that will provide the supplement necessary for the full picture to

emerge. Every definition thus shapes reality at the expense of the truth, peddling as somehow natural or inevitable what is, in actuality, a conglomeration of ideology, cultural assumption, and embedded historicity. Concepts have a history which is always political, charged with implicit values whilst nonchalantly parading as self-evident, as purely and simply 'what is'.

With this in mind, I'm going to talk about some of the things erased or removed from our conceptualization of the term "beefcake". I'm going to focus on the non-identical, on the excluded or erased aspects of that concept. On what isn't being said when we use it. In this way, I hope to expose the ideological oppressions, the violent hierarchies, that lurk just outside the ring fencing of that concept.

An online slang dictionary gives as a definition of 'beefcake': "a muscularly handsome male", offering as an example of the word in use the sentence, *"She's been going out with a real beefcake."*

Immediately, we are given highly gender normative and heteronormative co-ordinates with which to frame and focus the concept of beefcake. It is always male. And its sexual orientation is towards women. Thus the concept of beefcake is, on the most basic,

definitional level, saturated with cultural assumptions about the gender and sexual orientation of the subject to whom it is attached. In other words, there is an active, semantic exclusion of beefcake as gay, lesbian, female, queer, or bisexual.

If we turn our attention to the classic visual signifiers of beefcake, as exemplified by Bob Mizer's iconic photography for *Physique Pictorial* magazine in the 1950s, other layers of exclusion is added to these conceptual erasures. For we find, almost without exception, in the most cursory search on Google, for example, page after page of white, able-bodied males flexing their guns for the world to see. I trawled through a good couple of hundred images before I came across a black face, and there were no images of disabled body builders at all.

As Michel Foucault has shown, power relations have an immediate hold upon the body; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs. He writes:

"The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated self (adopting the

illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration.”

Foucault developed Nietzsche’s methodology of genealogy, “as an analysis of descent”, which is “situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history’s destruction of the body.”

The genealogy of beefcake can be seen to originate in the 1880s, with Eugen Sandow, who entertained the American public with his musculature and feats of strength, inspiring a fascination with the perfect male body which consolidated a modern, commercial form of masculinity predicated on strength, resilience and self-empowerment as the keys to success. In 1899 the magazine *Physical Culture* warned: “Weakness is a crime: don’t be a criminal”.

From the beginning, then, body-building culture and corporate America were fuck buddies. Beefcake is a capitalist fetish used to characterize the American dream turned nightmare.

Furthermore, Sandow’s personal narrative evoked a sickly childhood transcended by self-determination, his strength an overcoming of

personal deficit. He recounts being “a slight and sickly child” whose chances of survival were slim. This narrative of strength and determination was mainlined into popular culture; it was at the centre of Charles Atlas’s success: the seven-stone weakling, target of sand-kicking bullies, transformed into the muscle man whom no one would mess with.

As John F. Kasson comments: “The theme of metamorphosis lies at the heart of bodybuilding; and a longing for male metamorphosis lay deep in the culture of the United States and much of western Europe at the advent of the modern age.”

Rampant corporatism is thus intimately related to a vision of musclebound masculinity the development of which is coterminous with these narratives of transformation from puny boys to men of strength, confidence and command. Weakness is criminalized as capitalism stakes a claim on the power and success to be had once one has acquired the right body: images of heroic white male superiority are used to dominate women, people of colour, disabled bodies, queer bodies, and less technologically advanced societies.

The underside, or negative, of this narrative of transformation, however, is one of shame. An unexpressed shame. Beefcake as the signifier of the sickly or bullied child. This shame articulates and informs a specifically modern form of capitalism centred on the visual. It is a shame the overcoming of which necessitates buying into the very discourse which created it, thus perpetuating the cause and the effect in a vicious circle that continues, with every turn, to reinforce and duplicate the violent hierarchies it attempts to transcend. The abjected figure of the skinny child is buried underneath a mountain of muscle that denies its shameful origins, and in so doing perpetuates a heteronormative and capitalistic standard as destructive as it is compelling. It is the kind of “kill or be killed” mentality at the heart of corporate capitalism. And we are all its victims.

The question remains whether – given its origins within heteronormative & corporate discourse - the concept of beefcake can be somehow reclaimed, or queered, in any useful way. I’d offer the work of the female artists Francesca Steele and Heather Cassils, who use an exaggerated physique to intervene in various contexts in order to interrogate systems of power, control and gender; or the

work of Buck Angel, a female-to-male porn star, “The Man With a Pussy” - as examples of ways in which the concept is being interrogated in interesting and challenging ways.

But what about gay men?

In his study of sport and homosexuality, Brian Pronger tries to argue that “gay muscles” are a subversive take on orthodox masculinity, saturated with postmodern irony. In truth, gay muscles only reinforce the status quo by fetishising our oppression, contributing to the ongoing commodification of the body, and reinforcing orthodox masculinity by worshipping it even as it crushes us in its over-developed arms. It’s a form of Stockholm Syndrome: we love our captors. In a very real sense, our investment in the concept of beefcake reinforces an ideology that ultimately oppresses us, perpetuating a sense of shameful inadequacy, reproducing discursive overvaluations of an idealized masculinity in whose shadow we all wilt, and measured against which we can only ever fall short.

We need to address this poisonous problem of capitalism and idealized masculinity before it’s too late. It may well be too late. But

as the drag artist Taylor Mac says, The Revolution Will Not be
Masculinized.