

SIGNS OF LIFE
IN THE U.S.A.

Readings on Popular Culture for Writers

SONIA MAASIK

University of California, Los Angeles

JACK SOLOMON

California State University, Northridge

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McCrea Adams, "Advertising Characters: The Pantheon of Advertising." Reprinted by permission of the author.

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ethnicities, whom you see on campus wearing caps, questioning them about their stylistic choices. Remember to be wary of functional responses.

2. Why do African-Americans have such an impact on fashion, according to Bryant? Do you agree with his explanation?
3. In class, discuss how fashions have changed among African-Americans since Bryant's essay was published. What do the new styles say about their wearers? What do they say about other ethnic groups that may have adopted such styles?
4. To what extent could B-boy style be considered "oppositional dress," in Elizabeth Wilson's terms (see p. 45)?
5. Using Richard Majors's thesis in "Cool Pose" (p. 471) as your critical framework, write an essay in which you explain the motivation behind the choice of "B-boy" style.

STUART EWEN

Hard Bodies

In this selection from All-Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture (1988), Stuart Ewen (b. 1945) analyzes the way our bodies themselves can be signs of cultural desire. Focusing on the body sculpting popular among urban professionals in recent years, Ewen argues that the "hard body" fad reflects a postindustrial transformation of the body into a kind of industrial product, something you "build" every day at the gym. Health clubs thus can be seen as factories that produce the sorts of bodily objects that America values, with Nautilus machines standing in as the tools of mass production. Ewen documents the pulse of American culture as a professor of media studies in the Department of Communications at Hunter College, and he also serves as professor in the Ph.D. program in sociology at the City University of New York Graduate Center. He is the author of numerous books and articles on American popular and consumer culture, including Channels of Desire: Mass Images and the Shaping of American Consciousness with Elizabeth Ewen (1982) and Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture (1976).

Writing in 1934, the sociologists George A. Lundberg, Mirra Komarovsky, and Mary Alice McInerney addressed the question of "leisure" in the context of an emerging consumer society. Understanding the symbiotic relationship between mass-production industries and a consumerized definition of leisure, they wrote of the need for society to achieve a compatibility between the worlds of work and daily life. "The ideal to be sought," they proposed, "is undoubtedly the gradual obliteration of the psychological barrier which today distinguishes work from leisure."¹

That ideal has been realized in the daily routine of Raymond H——, a thirty-four-year-old middle-management employee of a large New York City investment firm. He is a living cog in what Felix Rohatyn has termed the new "money culture," one in which "making things" no longer counts; "making money," as an end in itself, is the driving force.² His days are spent at a computer terminal, monitoring an endless flow of numerical data.

When his workday is done, he heads toward a local health club for the relaxation of a "workout." Three times a week this means a visit to the Nautilus room, with its high, mirrored walls, and its imposing assembly line of large, specialized "machines." The workout consists of exercises for his lower body and for his upper body, twelve "stations" in all. As he moves from Nautilus machine to Nautilus machine, he works on his hips, buttocks, thighs, calves, back, shoulders, chest, upper arms, forearms, abdomen, and neck, body part by body part.

At the first station, Raymond lies on the "hip and back machine," making sure to align his hip joints with the large, polished, kidney-shaped cams which offer resistance as he extends each leg downward over the padded roller under each knee. Twelve repetitions of this, and he moves on to the "hip abduction machine," where he spreads his legs outward against the padded restraints that hold them closed. Then leg extensions on the "compound leg machine" are followed by leg curls on the "leg curl machine." From here, Raymond H—— proceeds to the "pullover/torso arm machine," where he begins to address each piece of his upper body. After a precise series of repetitions on the "double chest machine," he completes his workout on the "four-way neck machine."

While he alternates between different sequential workouts, and different machines, each session is pursued with deliberate precision, following exact instructions.

Raymond H—— has been working on his body for the past three years, ever since he got his last promotion. He is hoping to achieve the

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1. George A. Lundberg et al., *Leisure: A Suburban Study* (1934), p. 3.

2. *New York Times*, 3 June 1987, p. A27.

body he always wanted. Perhaps it is fitting that this quintessential, single, young, urban professional—whose life has become a circle of work, money culture, and the cultivation of an image—has turned himself, literally, into a piece of work. If the body ideal he seeks is *lean*, devoid of fatty tissue, it is also *hard*. “Soft flesh,” once a standard phrase in the American erotic lexicon, is now—within the competitive, upscale world he inhabits—a sign of failure and sloth. The hard shell is now a sign of achievement, visible proof of success in the “rat race.” The goal he seeks is more about *looking* than *touching*.

To achieve his goal, he approaches his body piece by piece; with each machine he performs a discrete task. Along the way he also assumes the job of inspector, surveying the results of each task in the mirrors that surround him. The division of labor, the fragmentation of the work process, and the regulating function of continual measurement and observation—all fundamental to the principles of “scientific management”—are intrinsic to this form of recreation. Like any assembly line worker, H— needs no overall knowledge of the process he is engaged in, only the specific tasks that comprise that process. “You don’t have to understand *why* Nautilus equipment works,” writes bodybuilder Mike Mentzer in the forward to one of the most widely read Nautilus manuals. “With a tape measure in hand,” he promises, “you will see what happens.”³

The body ideal Raymond H— covets is, itself, an aestheticized tribute to the broken-down work processes of the assembly line. “I’m trying to get better definition,” H— says. “I’m into Nautilus because it lets me do the necessary touchup work. Free weights [barbells] are good for building up mass, but Nautilus is great for definition.”⁴ By “definition,” H— is employing the lingo of the gym, a reference to a body surface upon which each muscle, each muscle group, appears segmented and distinct. The perfect body is one that ratifies the fragmentary process of its construction, one that mimics—in flesh—the illustrative qualities of a schematic drawing, or an anatomy chart.

Surveying his work in the mirror, H— admires the job he has done on his broad, high pectorals, but is quick to note that his quadriceps “could use some work.” This ambivalence, this mix of emotions, pursues him each time he comes for a workout, and the times in between. He is never quite satisfied with the results. The excesses of the weekend-past invariably leave their blemish. An incorrectly struck pose reveals an overmeasure of loose skin, a sign of weakness in the shell. Despite all efforts, photogenic majesty is elusive.

3. Ellington Darden, *The Nautilus Bodybuilding Book* (1986), pp. viii–ix.

4. Style Project, interview I-13.

The power of the photographic idiom, in his mind's eye, is reinforced, again and again, by the advertisements and other media of style visible everywhere. The ideal of the perfectly posed machine—the cold, hard body in response—is paraded, perpetually, before his eyes and ours. We see him, or her, at every glance. 10

An advertisement for home gym equipment promises a “Body By Soloflex.” Above is the silent, chiaroscuro portrait of a muscular youth, his torso bare, his elbows reaching high, pulling a thin-ribbed undershirt up over his head, which is faceless, covered by shadow. His identity is situated below the neck, an instrumentally achieved study in brawn. The powerful expanse of his chest and back is illuminated from the right side. A carefully cast shadow accentuates the paired muscle formations of his abdominal wall. The airbrush has done its work as well, effecting a smooth, standardized, molded quality, what John Berger has termed “the skin without a biography.” A silent, brooding hulk of a man, he is the unified product of pure engineering. His image is a product of expensive photographic technology, and expensive technical expertise. His body—so we are informed—is also a technical achievement. He has reached this captured moment of perpetual perfection on a “machine that fits in the corner” of his home. The machine, itself, resembles a stamping machine, one used to shape standardized, industrial products. Upon this machine, he has routinely followed instructions for “twenty-four traditional iron pumping exercises, each correct in form and balance.” The privileged guidance of industrial engineering, and the mindless obedience of work discipline, have become legible upon his body; yet as it is displayed, it is nothing less than a thing of beauty, a transcendent aspiration.

This machine-man is one of a generation of desolate, finely tuned loners who have cropped up as icons of American style. Their bodies, often lightly oiled to accentuate definition, reveal their inner mechanisms like costly, open-faced watches, where one can see the wheels and gears moving inside, revealing—as it were—the magic of time itself. If this is eroticism, it is one tuned more to the mysteries of technology than to those of the flesh.

In another magazine advertisement, for Evian spring water from France, six similarly anatomized figures stand across a black and white two-page spread. From the look of things, each figure (three men and three women) has just completed a grueling workout, and four of them are partaking of Evian water as part of their recovery. The six are displayed in a lineup, each one displaying a particularly well-developed anatomical region. These are the new icons of beauty, precisely defined, powerful machines. Below, on the left, is the simple caption: “Revival

of the Fittest." Though part of a group, each figure is conspicuously alone.

Once again, the modern contours of power, and the structures of work discipline, are imprinted upon the body. In a world of rampant careerism, self-absorption is a rule of thumb. If the division of labor sets each worker in competition with every other, here that fragmentation is aestheticized into the narcissism of mind and body.

Within this depiction, sexual equality is presented as the meeting point between the anorectic and the "nautilized." True to gender distinctions between evanescent value and industrial work discipline, the three women are defined primarily by contour, by the thin lines that their willowy bodies etch upon the page. Although their muscles are toned, they strike poses that suggest pure, disembodied form. Each of the men, situated alternately between the women, gives testimony on behalf of a particular fraction of segmented flesh: abdomen, shoulders and upper arms, upper back. In keeping with the assembly line approach to muscle building, each man's body symbolizes a particular station within the labor process. 15

Another ad, for a health and fitness magazine, contains an alarmingly discordant statement: "Today's women workers are back in the sweat shop." There is a basis to this claim. In today's world, powerful, transnational corporations search the globe looking for the cheapest labor they can find. Within this global economy, more and more women—from Chinatown to Taiwan—are employed at tedious, low-paying jobs, producing everything from designer jeans to computer parts.

Yet this is not the kind of sweatshop the ad has in mind. The photographic illustration makes this clear. Above the text, across the two-page color spread, is the glistening, heavily muscled back of a woman hoisting a chrome barbell. Her sweat is self-induced, part of a "new woman" life-style being promoted in *Sport* magazine, "the magazine of the new vitality." Although this woman bears the feminine trademark of blonde, braided hair, her body is decidedly masculine, a new body aesthetic in the making. Her muscles are not the cramped, biographically induced muscles of menial labor. Hers is the brawn of the purely symbolic, the guise of the middle-class "working woman."

While the text of the advertisement seems to allude to the real conditions of female labor, the image transforms that truth into beauty, rendering it meaningless. Real conditions are copywritten into catchy and humorous phrases. The harsh physical demands of women's work are reinterpreted as regimented, leisure-time workouts at a "health club." Real sweat is reborn as photogenic body oil.

The migration of women into the social structures of industrial discipline is similarly aestheticized in an ad for Jack LaLanne Fitness

Centers. A black and white close-up of a young woman wrestling with a fitness “machine” is complemented by the eroticized grimace on her face. Once again, the chiaroscuro technique accentuates the straining muscles of her arms. The high-contrast, black and white motif may also suggest the “night and day” metamorphosis that will occur when one commits to this particular brand of physical discipline.

In large white letters, superimposed across the shadowy bottom of the photograph, are the words: “Be taut by experts.” With a clever play on words the goal of education moves from the mind to the body. Muscle power is offered as an equivalent substitute for brain power. No problem. In the search for the perfectly regulated self, it is implicit that others will do the thinking. This woman, like the Soloflex man, is the product of pure engineering, of technical expertise:

We were building bodies back when you were building blocks. . . .
 We know how to perfectly balance your workout between swimming, jogging, aerobics and weight training on hundreds of the most advanced machines available. . . . Sure it may hurt a little. But remember. *You only hurt the one you love.* [Emphasis added.]

These advertisements, like Raymond H——’s regular visits to the Nautilus room, are part of the middle-class bodily rhetoric of the 1980s. Together they mark a culture in which self-absorbed careerism, conspicuous consumption, and a conception of *self* as an object of competitive display have fused to become the preponderant symbols of achievement. The regulated body is the nexus where a cynical ethos of social Darwinism, and the eroticism of raw power, meet.

Reading the Text

1. Write a one-paragraph description of the 1980s’ “hard body” style.
2. How, according to Ewen, is the body treated like a machine in the “hard body” exercise regimen?
3. Why does Raymond H—— exercise so much?

Reading the Signs

1. Ewen accuses those who follow the hard body trend of conceiving the self as “an object of competitive display.” To what extent do you find his accusation valid? To support your argument, draw on your own habits of exercising and those of your friends.