



Skin Gods: Circumcising the Built Male Body

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Is the body of the male bodybuilder a substitution for his penis, that one part he cannot enhance through weights? Conventional wisdom would have us believe that it is, but I am not so sure. In search of an answer I slide from body, then to penis, to foreskin and back again. On that search I make use of both Lacan and Freud. Lacan gives me a theoretical key with his idea of the 'little object a' (objet petit a), the item that simultaneously is excluded from the system in question and what keeps that whole system together. It would seem that the body-builder's penis is precisely this objet petit a. However, Freud suggests to me that objet petit a is not so much the penis as the foreskin that is cut away in circumcision. The catch is that circumcision, the mark of the religion of Moses, also points to nothing less than the absence of God's body. From that point I return to the built body to argue that the ideal body is in fact a circumcised body, but one that is ultimately as unattainable as God's body.

A personal story, if I may. Writing and pumping, even preparing to write by pumping, I was sweating it out in the tiny corner in which I write. In my amateurish way I work through a regular routine with my collection of dumbbells and barbells, having heeded Arnold Schwarzenegger's advice that all he ever worked with were free weights. As I labored away at the various pull-ups, rows, presses and curls, a recurrent pain in my left elbow asserted itself. The pain persisted, so I went to the doctor. An X-Ray ensued and a small protrusion on my radius that rubbed the tendon near my elbow showed up, causing an inflammation. The prescription: rest or a steroid injection...

My particular, somewhat self-indulgent reflection is on the male body in bodybuilding, but I am going to play around with that body through the five sets of my argument, each time adding another few kilograms to either end of my barbell. I begin, then, with those big, round, and all too feminine built male bodies, only to move on to the next set of repetitions where I focus on what sticks out, or rather doesn't, the penis. After considering the penis of the male builder I find that those who have thought about such things fall short, and so I turn, in my third set, to Lacan's notion of *objet petit a* in order to make sense of that little thing that sticks out from the body-builder, his penis. But Lacan can only get me so far. For the next set I ask Freud to add a few more weights, and as he does so he mentions the idea of circumcision. It is not so much the penis that is the key, it seems to me, but the foreskin that is cut away. Yet, Freud also points out that circumcision signals the absent body of God, and this takes me to the final set where I return to the

built body. That ideal body turns out to be a circumcised body, as unreal and as unattainable as God's own body.

I am accustomed to reading with the help of Jacques Lacan and Sigmund Freud, although I must admit I like to play with both rather than follow one or another orthodoxy (and there are plenty of those in scholarship on Freud and Lacan). Freud certainly loved his jokes, and collected them with zeal, telling them whenever he could. Lacan too was often given to playfulness, punning, teasing, laughing. Rather than engage in what we might call Lacanian or Freudian hagiography, I prefer to engage their more playful spirits.

Posing

Let me just say one thing, guys, it was as good as an erection. There I was, on stage in my posing oils and black trunks, and the crowd really loved me. I mean I *moved* 'em with my posing exhibition. It was just my fuckin' time. ('Vinnie' cited in Fussell, 1991, p. 135)

Nothing is more masculine than the built male body, all muscle and power and heterosexual aggression. Or is it? Is not that built body more like the female pin-up or the beauty pageant? Are not male bodybuilders there to be looked at, gazed upon and admired, especially by men. These bodies demand the gaze, for is not the whole purpose of body-building, with its posing routines and competitions, finally to have other men look at and assess the bodies on display? The skin – rippled, stripped and cling-wrap tight – is nothing but a screen upon which the bodybuilder is projected and looked at. This skin/screen is therefore an object of passivity: the beefcake has everything done to him. All he does is flex and pose. Yet, in order to be looked at and assessed, a jock sweats it out for two, four, six hours a day: an intense program of eating, vomiting, pumping and imbibing 'the juice' so that, in the end, he may be gazed upon by other men. And then in the posing routine itself, it is not so much the best body that wins, but the one who succeeds in best producing the emotive fantasy of muscle, power, grace and poise, especially in the final 'pose down.'

Yet, if his being looked upon, his passivity, codes him as conventionally female, so also does the body shape. For bodybuilders seek immensely rounded body shapes. The curving shoulders, rippling backs, bulking upper and forearms, shapely thighs and watermelon calves – all of these give off a series of contradictory messages in relation to dominant conventions regarding body shape. For the rounded and curved shapes of male bodybuilders evoke the now older Western expectations of the curved female, with large breasts, rounded belly, fuller arms and thighs, and a small waist.¹ Indeed, the desire for silicon implants in male pectorals mirrors the use of such implants in female breasts. To complicate matters a little further, in female body-building, but also in male gay body-building, the desire is not so much for rounded bulk, but for definition, for the 'cut' body, in which the angles are sharper and the lines more angular – older conventions for heterosexual males are now appropriated for women and gay men.

What then of the aggressive masculinity of these bodies, of the action figures dressed in combat fatigues, of Stallone as Rambo, of Schwarzenegger as Terminator,

Commando or Conan? Anyone who has been to a muscle show will attest to the overt heterosexuality that is obsessively foregrounded. Yet, I suggest that what lies beneath this chest-beating is a practice that is coded as feminine in Western culture – the presentation of curvaceous bodies to absorb a penetrating male gaze – and queer – the enjoyment of watching and desiring male bodies, and of being watched.² Bodybuilders may then be said to protest too much: the overkill, in more than one sense, of aggressive masculinity nervously attempts to efface the underlying queerness of body-building. It is as though these men think that if they shout their heterosexuality loud enough, then the other codes will be effaced, forgetting that such efforts merely foreground the deviance of male body-building. They are heroes and sissies all at once.

Penis

You looked like a human fucking penis! Veins were poppin' every which way! ('Vinnie' in Fussell, 1991, p. 235)

A good pump is better than coming, ... the best feeling you can have. (Arnold Schwarzenegger in Gaines, 1977, p. 48)

What, then, of the penis? Is that not supposed to be the anomaly, that which sticks out and abruptly halts the feminine slide of male bodybuilders? Concern with the builder's penis comes rippling through Kenneth Dutton's *The Perfectible Body* (1995), in which much space is given over to the question of the penis, from the small appendages on Greek statues and paintings, to its strategic covering in early beefcake shots to current discussions in psychoanalysis. The irony for the male builder is that it is precisely the penis that cannot be strengthened, enlarged or built up by lifting weights or working out on a machine. What happens, argues Dutton, is that the body replaces the penis: in being able to build its strength and potency, and thereby being able to exhibit masculinity, the body becomes a huge penis, as it were, the location of sexual power and exhibition. What the built body represents, then, is the builder's penis, or at least the ideal penis the builder would like to have but cannot have.

For Rosalind Miles, the body, especially those of actors like Arnold Schwarzenegger,

becomes a public phallus, huge, rock-hard, gleaming and veined with blood. And as the phallus first stirred and came to life in the primeval swamps of the male imagination, so males above all are uniquely alert to its siren call and baleful power. Becoming an athlete, bodybuilder or 'jock' is therefore a clear and overt statement of manhood and male potency, and the clearest possible message to other men. (Miles, 1991, p. 111)

The usual sequence for such an argument begins with the suggestion that the penis is a symbol of male power. However, the inability to enlarge it through body-building creates a problem which is solved by displacing the penis with the whole body, which then becomes the site of displaced prowess and power. The particular penis makes way for a

universally suggestive phallic body, which is a much more appropriate signifier of universal power and potency. And here body-building comes into its own: the larger the body, the greater the power. Through its displaced representation of the penis, a male body is able to accrue power directly in proportion to body size. So in the end, all that a bulking body represents is its own penis.

The Little Object

Those who have seen professional bodybuilders naked will attest, not only to the unfoundedness of this assumption [the apparent tininess of the male organ hidden beneath the posing trunks], but also to the remarkable adaptability of the male sexual organs and compressive powers of Lycra. (Dutton, 1995, p. 308)

One of the striking characteristics about symbols is the discrepancy between the symbols and what penises are actually like. Male genitals are fragile, squashy, delicate things; even when erect, the penis is spongy, seldom straight, and rounded at the tip, while testicles are imperfect spheres, always vulnerable, never still. (Dyer, 1993, p. 112)

It is not as simple as it appears, not so directly correlative. The built male body does not represent the penis so purely and simply, and this is where arguments like those put forward by Dutton and Miles lack stamina. Rather, the penis is but a little thing that holds the whole regime of body-building together. In order to make that argument, I turn to Jacques Lacan, for it seems to me that body-building for males is a very Lacanian activity. In my local gym, dog-eared copies of Lacan lie on the small table near the door, there for the occasional jocks to peruse in between sets.

The key term is one that Lacan himself insisted should not be translated, namely *objet petit a*. He notoriously refuses to define it, letting the sense emerge from his continual references to it. But that is precisely what *objet petit a* is: it is 'lost object' (Lacan, 1994, p. 180) that one can never quite locate. In order to get a sense of it, let me use an example Lacan borrows from Freud, the famous *fort-da* game of Freud's grandson (see Lacan, 1994, 239).³ Freud noticed that whenever his mother was away, he would throw objects away and cry a drawn-out 'o-o-o-o', which he interpreted as *fort*, 'away.' One day he did this with a cotton-reel out of his curtained cot, except that this time he pulled it back and said with great satisfaction '*da*', 'here' (Freud, 2001, vol XVIII, pp. 14-15). Freud interprets the game as a compensation for the absence of his grandson's mother, as revenge for her absence and as a desire to be an adult – all things that are out of the child's reach. For Lacan, this little cotton reel is an excellent instance of *objet petit a*, that item that is expelled and excluded, and yet precisely because it is excluded, *objet petit a* is crucial for the system as a whole.

Objet petit a is, then, that which 'sticks out,' the item (thought, detail of a picture, word in a text) that cannot be incorporated within the whole picture, that cannot be explained in the usual way, and thereby becomes the focus of anxiety and repression. Yet

this thing that 'sticks out,' the inconsequential and unnecessary item, is in fact crucial for the structure of the whole (text, picture, pattern of thought etc.).

Let me give two examples of *objet petit a*: picture a well-heeled lawyer, for whom 14 hour days are traded off for some of the best accommodation in town, an expensive car, well-cut clothes from designer boutiques, and a sharp mind that enables her to rise quickly through the ranks of legal professionals. At the same time, she is a heroin addict, easily able to afford the cost yet unable to break the habit. In fact, her addiction threatens her whole career, and the few who know about it tell her so. If only she could break the habit, then that threat would disappear. However, another perspective – the one I follow here – suggests that it is precisely this heroin habit that holds her life together. It is the linchpin: without it everything would collapse – high life, sustained concentration, long work days, and so on. Or take the case of a mundane, suburban middle-class man, with a spouse, three children, home mortgage, two cars and a middle management job with the local branch of a multinational company. Each weekday he works regular hours, while on the weekends he watches his children play sport, mows the lawns, washes the cars and reads the newspapers. An ordinary, thoroughly boring and unexciting middle-class life, except that he has a liking for S/M, both as a personal experience and as an item of pornography. So he searches the Internet late at night, slips away for the occasional Sunday afternoon or weekend 'conference.' A foible that threatens to undo his calm life? Not so: rather, the very unexceptionality of his life is based upon his S/M; the bondage and discipline he so much enjoys ensure that he can maintain his boring, normal, life. These examples flip the usual perception around, suggesting that what is excluded is actually central and crucial; after that it is possible to notice the influence of what is excluded on everything else – the lawyer's habit and the middle-class man's foible.

So it is with body-building, which turns out to be a classic example of Lacan's arguments concerning *objet petit a*. It is an inverse relationship: the more the body is built in order to compensate for the inability to build up the penis, the more the penis stays outside the body-building regime. The more the voluntary muscles of the rest of the body can be pumped with blood, the tighter the skin and more clearly defined the striated muscles and veins, the less the penis itself becomes.⁴ (Eugene Sandow, who seems to have set the agenda in so many ways for contemporary body-building, including the use of classical postures like those of Michelangelo's *David*, used to pose for photographs with a fig leaf strategically placed over his genitals.) The phallic body is that which is hard, erect and firm, while the penis is squashed into ever smaller posing trunks, drawing ever nearer to that dreaded medical condition, micropenis (Gad et al., 1997).

Yet as it shrinks before the bulk of the built body, as it is compressed into the tightest Lycra, the more crucial the penis becomes. Without it the body-builder would not undergo all the pain, discipline and devotion to build his body in the first place. Like Freud's grandson who desperately wanted to recover that little reel, so also the body-builder wants desperately to recover a potent penis. Indeed, most, if not all, men imagine that their penises are inadequate in some sense – too short, too narrow, too bent, and so on. So, they imagine some ideal penis that they would like to have – long, thick, straight and with an immense stamina, able to come all the time and satisfy the imaginary man or

woman or... What happens here is that their real penises, soft, impotent, short, thin and struggling to come, are wished away in favor of an ideal other.

So all the attitude, the anger required to lift and press massive weights, the posturing and modeling on other builders, the shouting and screaming at the weights, 'the Walk,'⁵ the aggression and 'roid rages' – the desire, in short, to be gods – turn out to be futile efforts to recover that little object, the penis, even in the gym to which builders escape to run through their sets.

Foreskin

I feared that complete exposure might reveal a lagging body part to the judges.
(Fussell, 1991, p. 143)

Yet, I have a lingering doubt about all of this. Is the penis really *objet petit a*? Or rather, is it the only version of this little object that forever eludes the body-builder? I suspect not. Thus far I have slid down from the rounded, bulging, rock-hard body of the builder to that small, squashed object that cannot be built up, no matter what spam emails might promise. There is, however, one further slip to make, and that is to what is at the end of the penis, or rather, what *was* at the end of the penis: the foreskin.

The foreskin is that little flap that can be, and often is, sliced away. Is this not the proper *objet petit a*? Let me pick up a small hint from Lacan (in an untranslated seminar from 1963 called *l'Angoisse*) and then pick up Freud. Lacan suggests that circumcision is an excellent rendering of the work of *objet petit a*.⁶ Let me playfully suggest that what Lacan means is that the foreskin is really that little object. Yet, for a deeper sense of what this means, I need to let Freud come forward, especially his astonishing discussion of circumcision in *Moses and Monotheism*.

Moses intrigues Freud: circumcision is, he suggests, the clear mark of Moses' monotheism, and yet it also indicates the nature of that belief. Circumcision is the sign of a religion that forbids representing God in any way. No image, statue, or any other representation of God may be made. In other words, circumcision marks the absent body, especially the absent body of God. Or, as I will rephrase it, the foreskin cut away in circumcision represents the absent body of God. That is why Moses' God commands that it be cut away and discarded.

Let us take a moment to see how Freud gets to this point. For Freud circumcision is the direct link to the monotheism that the Egyptian Moses brought to the Israelites. It is, as he points out in *Moses and Monotheism*, the 'key-fossil' (Freud, 2001, vol 23, p. 39) that allows him to unlock his own hypothesis about Moses (that he was an Egyptian, that the Israelites killed him and elevated him to divine status, that he gave the Israelites a variation on the monotheism of Akhenaten although this did not emerge properly until later).⁷ Circumcision was a distinctly Egyptian practice that Moses bequeathed to the Israelites in their journey from Egypt into the wilderness. It is circumcision that links Moses to Egypt: practiced by the Levites, the core group from Egypt who first adopted the practice at Moses' instigation, it was passed on to other groups that joined their ranks later.⁸

The religion of Moses brought a 'far grander conception of God, or, as we might put it more modestly, the conception of a grander God' (Freud, 2001, vol 23, p. 112). Moses did this by banning any images of God. The ban on seeing, hearing or touching this God is crucial for Freud, for 'it meant that a sensory perception was given to second place to what may be called an abstract idea – a triumph of intellectuality over sensuality or, strictly speaking, an instinctual renunciation, with all its necessary psychological consequences' (Freud, 2001, vol 23, p. 113). Abstract and intellectual, such a notion of God led to a far higher feeling of self-worth, but it also checked 'the brutality and tendency to violence which are apt to appear where the development of *muscular strength is the popular ideal*' (Freud, 2001, vol 23, p. 115, italics mine).

Who is this God of whom no images are allowed? It is none other than Moses himself. Freud's own myth is that in a rage of rebellious jealousy the Israelites killed Moses, and then, in order to assuage their guilt, elevated him to divine status. The sons kill the father and then make him a god. This father-god is then the one who may not be represented in any way; he is the one whose body is absent in order to overcome brutality, violence and orgiastic celebrations of the body. And the sign of the absent body of that father-god is none other than circumcision – a rite ordered by the father-god as a sign of holiness. God has no body, in fact cannot have one, and circumcision marks its removal. Cut away the flap of skin, discard it, and you throw away the possibility of representing God's/Moses' body.

Body

Thanks to my diet, my skin was thinner than airmail paper. And with my varnish, I was browner than a buried pharaoh. (Fussell, 1991, p. 197)

What is the useless piece of skin at the end of a penis? A man. (Anonymous)

I have slipped all the way, from built body, down into the posing trunks to search for the penis, and then out to the tip in a vain search for the foreskin that Freud's Moses has already sliced off and discarded. And I have gone searching for that little object, *objet petit a*, the one that is excluded in some fashion only to be crucial. Thus, as the one muscle that cannot be built up, the penis looked for all the world like that little thing. Lagging behind, it refused to join the crown. But then, with a little help from Freud, it seems as though the foreskin might just be that *objet petit a*, for it really is outside the system. (Perhaps the ultimate foreskin outside the system is that of Christ, for it would not have been resurrected with him. That Christological anomaly has sent more than one person searching for his holy foreskin, albeit to no avail (see Shell, 1997).) Yet, Freud has delivered me an unexpected twist: he has taken me all the way back to the body, to God's body. Or is that Moses' body? Or...

So, as a final step, we need to return to the strapping body of the builder. One might be forgiven for thinking that the ultimate aim of body-building is indeed to circumcise the body itself. For body-builders do all they can to minimize the skin. To begin with, the male bodies of builders are completely hairless, although it is a topic not openly

discussed in the magazines. Depilation is, after all, still largely a female affair, but what it does is remove a distinctive feature of the skin – its hair. Even more, before a posing session, bodybuilders will seek to produce a ‘shrink-wrap’ effect, reducing as far as possible subcutaneous fat and water so that the skin will cling as closely as possible to the muscles and veins that stand out on the muscle surface. This involves starvation dieting, avoiding sodium and calories in the weeks leading up to an event, and then, a little over a week before, loading up with protein before switching to a high carbohydrate load in the last few days. It also requires the reduction, if not complete stoppage, of steroid intake to avoid water retention. The desired result of such a carefully balanced program is ‘elasticized, parchment paper for skin’ (Fussell, 1991, p. 186). Further, in order to highlight under the harsh lights of competition the curves, dips, crevices and mounds of muscle beneath the skin, the tan is crucial, gained in tanning beds and with a host of specialty tanning products, clogging up the skin and staining everything the builder touches. The posing oil finishes off the effect, sealing the tan in place and making every bump and gully glisten.

Then there is the unending attention to the alteration of the shape and the size of the muscles ‘beneath’ the skin. (In fact, it is only the voluntary and striated muscles, not the smooth and involuntary muscles, that seem to be of interest.) The talk is always of muscle size and definition, and in body-building circles there is much interest in muscle anatomy – the lats and pecs and traps and so on. Whatever can be done by the bodybuilder will be done to make the muscles look how they should – steroids and endless chemicals, food cramming, muscle tearing, rectal bleeding, vomiting, ammonia fumes, inflammatories, extraordinary diets, tanning agents, oil and so on. Indeed, I would argue that the skin is pared down to the point where it marks its own absence. Tanned, paper thin, the body-builder desperately tries to circumcise himself.

Yet, there is one final question: for all the efforts to circumcise the built body, is this not a present body, in contrast to God’s absent body that circumcision signals? The answer is disarmingly simple. The *ideal built body is ultimately unattainable*. No matter how hard they train, how much they torture themselves, no matter how much pain, there is no gaining that ideal. In the same way that circumcision of the penis signals the absent body of God, so also the circumcision of the built body shows that it is always beyond reach, that it too, is a version of *objet petit a*. And what is that ideal body? If you happen to peruse muscle manuals in your vain search for the ideal body, then you will find, usually in the last pages in an appendix, a series of pictures of the muscles without skin, or rather whole human bodies with the skin cut away (e.g. Laura & Dutton, 1991, pp. 222-38). Of course, they are meant to show the muscles underneath, the ones that you should build up, the ones to which you should devote specific routines. But what we have is a grotesque, unattainable body, for it is a circumcised body, a ‘cut’ body. This would mean that the perfect, divine and unattainable body is skinless. And the perfect posing routine would have a group of men on stage, with only bare, bulging and bleeding striated muscle for us to gaze upon.

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Notes

¹ 'He had achieved the look gained only by the most advanced builders. While my body was a mess of straight edges and right angles, his, so preposterously muscled, was a mass of curves, fleshy ellipses and ovals' (Fussell, 1991, p. 50).

² In the two versions of this paper presented at different conferences, my oral delivery is part of a larger performance piece, in which I strip down to gym jocks or G-string, throw a set of classic poses and juxtapose them with slides of vast bodybuilders in the same poses.

The audience is then asked to judge which bodies they prefer. Apart from the sheer narcissism of such an act, there is an immense pleasure in being watched and ogled.

³ See further on *objet petit a* Lacan's *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (1994), especially pp. 263-76. He also discusses it in the almost impenetrable Seminar XX, *On Feminine Sexuality* (1998).

⁴ So I worry about another of my great loves – long distance cycling – where 'bicyclist's penis' is a risk. In that crucial zone of the perineum, compression and damage to the nerves may lead to impotence (Andersen & Bovim, 1997; York, 1990).

⁵ 'They swept their arms out to the side, as if the sheer massivity of their lat wings necessitated it. They burrowed their heads slightly into their shoulders to make their necks appear larger. They looked bowlegged, absurdly stiff, and infinitely menacing' (Fussell, 1991, p. 55).

⁶ I am thankful to an anonymous reviewer of this essay for this point.

⁷ Elsewhere Freud speaks of circumcision as a symbol of castration (Freud, 2001, vol 23, p. 91). It is an act with other parallels such as knocking out a front tooth (Freud, 2001, vol 15, p. 165) or blinding (Freud, 2001, vol 23, p. 190). Alternatively, it is a 'recognizable relic' of the primeval castration visited by a jealous father on growing boys (Freud, 2001, vol 22, p. 86-7). He interprets it as a sign of submission to the father's will – the one who carries out the symbolic castration. This is reinforced by the observation that in many primal societies circumcision takes place at puberty as a rite of initiation (Freud, 2001, vol 13, p 153).

⁸ This is also a distinctly masculine holiness. Rashkow, for instance, argues that circumcision, as that which asserts the possible threat of castration and its denial, allows the son to emulate the father while being dependent on the deity's power. Circumcision ensures the chain of male connection, yet it also is a feminizing process, threatening to make the Israelite male female through bleeding and castration (Rashkow, 1993, p. 91-5).

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