

THE GROTESQUE FEMALE BODY(BUILDER): MUSCLE MESSES UP BOUNDARIES

By

Dominika Milanovich

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Supervisor: Professor Anna Loutfi

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates female bodybuilding as a practice, and the body being produced by this activity. First I introduce the figure of the female bodybuilder by using the concept of “the glass ceiling of muscularity” (Dworkin, 2001), then I provide a short history of women’s participation in this arena based on the work of Lowe (1998) and Heywood (1998), and I summarize the institutional attempts to normalize the hypermuscular female body. After that, I focus on the theorization of that body by exploring its possible connections to the notion of the queer (Richardson, 2008), and the “female grotesque” (Russo, 1995). The empirical part of my thesis based on a feminist research method consists of the analysis of seven interviews conducted with bodybuilders, and is aimed at the investigation of three topics: 1) the way the hypermuscular female body is perceived by people both inside and outside of the bodybuilder community 2) the way bodybuilders justify steroid use, and their understandings of the diagnostic category of muscle dysmorphia (Pope, 1993) and exercise addiction 3) the motivations and meanings that can be attached to this activity. In this last part, I also include the notion of the cyborg (Haraway, 1991) to illuminate the intimate relationships between female bodybuilders and machines. Finally, I apply the existential psychological framework of Yalom (1980) to present a possible interpretation of the accounts of my interviewees related to the four final concerns of being human: death, freedom, isolation and meaninglessness.

Keywords: female bodybuilding, grotesque, queer, gender, steroid-use, muscle dysmorphia, existential psychology.

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I. Introduction

Sport has been a popular terrain for the investigations of gender researches. In the beginning, it was seen to be a huge achievement of the feminist movement that women could enter the domain of sports in the first place. In addition, the relevance of examining topics related to sport can be due to the phenomenon that there is still a strict gender segregation which might be less manifest in other areas of life according to Pfister (2010). On the other hand as Pfister (2010) points out: “Bodies and physical differences are at the very centre of the sport since sport is a system which systematically reveals differences and establishes a ranking based on the individuals’ performance”. Indeed, the difference in “objectively measured” bodily achievements might contribute to the strengthening of the misogynist attitudes toward women. Nowadays, there is less and less sports where women’s participation is formally banned, and there are some sports predominantly occupied by women.

To me, since I did judo competitively for more than ten years, the growing literature¹ on women doing traditionally male-dominated sports is very significant. I think the examination of female bodybuilding on some level is built on this tradition, because these women are doing an activity that is considered to be masculine. On the other hand, there is an important difference. It must be pointed out that most of the sports create a certain kind of body type, or a visible sign of engagement in the activity inscribed on the body. For example, the cauliflower ear of wrestlers was something to be very proud of in the case of men, and something that must be hidden in the reports of women (Sisjord and Kristiansen, 2009), but the development of such an ear could be justified by women by claiming that it is only a side-effect of being a good wrestler. Similarly, broad shoulders, and a muscular female body is

¹ I would like to recommend the qualitative researches conducted with the representatives of judo by Guérandel and Menneson (2007), with wrestlers by Sisjord and Kristiansen (2009), and with hockey players by Theberge (2003).

usually seen to be unfeminine, but the women can say that it is only a precondition and the instrument of achieving success in handball, or football etc. In contrast, the body of the female bodybuilder is not only much more muscular (hypermuscular), but the development of such a body is the aim of the activity, because in bodybuilding the way the body looks is central, instead of what the body can do (Richardson, 2004). So the existence of huge muscles becomes detached from their functionality.

I am going to start my discussion by introducing the figure of the female bodybuilder who is excessively muscular. I provide a short description of the way women occurred in the arena of bodybuilding, and of the institutional attempts to normalize these bodies. After that, I focus on the theorization of this body, and I explore the possible connections with the so-called female grotesque (Russo, 1995).

In the empirical part of my thesis by analyzing interviewees I conducted with bodybuilders, I look at the way people both inside and outside of the bodybuilder community react to these bodies. I find it important to focus on the experiences of women, and how they are coping with the possible stigmatization and marginalization. Similarly, in academia bodybuilding is often associated with different kind of pathologies such as muscle dysmorphia (Pope et al., 1993) and exercise addiction, and the supposedly unhealthy practice of steroid use. I investigate how bodybuilders negotiate these notions, and the way they legitimize their steroid use. After discussing the intimate relationship on the one hand between the female bodybuilder and the mirror, and on the other hand between the female bodybuilder and the power machine, I elaborate on the cyborgian characteristics of the female bodybuilder (Haraway, 1991). I will close my thesis by giving a possible interpretation of the life and death struggle of the bodybuilder competitor by applying the framework of existential psychology (Yalom, 1980).

In my research, the term ‘female bodybuilder’ refers to women who desire to be hypermuscular and reached this level of muscle size by being engaged in bodybuilding practices. I won’t examine more closely the differences between recreational, competitive, natural, or unnatural bodybuilders in their motivations and experiences. What hypermuscularity means and how the female bodybuilder exceeds the norms will be discussed in the next chapter.

II. The figure of the female bodybuilder

1. The glass ceiling of muscularity and the development of female bodybuilding

The shift of the female beauty ideal over time from a well-rounded, larger body which used to symbolize wealth in times when enough food was not available to a thinner body which was connected to self-discipline, control and success is widely known. Choi (2003) goes one step further when she claims that recently it is not enough to the perfect female body to be thin, but it must be relatively muscular, healthy, well-toned and fit.² The emphasis here is put on being *relatively* muscular. Choi argues that female muscularity is still rejected, because muscularity is associated with masculinity and serves to sign visible differences between men and women. Training has become a desirable lifestyle choice for women, but physical exercise is usually suggested to reduce body size, not to increase it. So women often experience a line of muscularity that they should not cross. Parallely to the phenomenon of the glass ceiling many women have to face in male-dominated professions, Dworkin (2001) uses the term “the glass ceiling of muscularity” to describe this reported line. She states that many women working out in the gym “may find their bodily agency limited not by biology but by ideologies of emphasized femininity.”³ (333) The expression emphasized femininity refers to the work of Connell (1987) who applied the term to conceptualize the most privileged form of femininity which changes in correspondence with hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is defined by Connell as (1995, 77): “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of

² The example of Madonna can be mentioned who despite her age is in a very good shape. Her training schedule is often discussed in magazines, and many rumors exist about her being fit. It is said that she fires those bodyguards of hers who cannot run fast enough beside her when she goes to her daily jogging. Her video clips are intended to demonstrate her bodily achievements and dancing skills, as well. In addition, I would like to point out the popularity of the new action heroine who is extremely athletic and thought to be very attractive by many, such as Lara Croft.

³ Of course, some other explanations also occurred such as functional reasons, or some women simply thought that being muscular is not necessary. But the amount of these arguments was relatively small compared to how many times the glass ceiling of muscularity was mentioned.

patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.” Hegemonic masculinity serves to legitimize men’s domination over women as a group. In contrast, we cannot talk about hegemonic femininity. As Connell (1987) writes: “All forms of femininity in this society are constructed in the context of the overall subordination of women to men. For this reason, there is no femininity that holds among women the position held by hegemonic masculinity among men”. (187) Instead, there is the notion of emphasized femininity. Connell (1987) provides the following definition: “One form [of femininity] is defined around compliance with this subordination and is oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men. I will call this ‘emphasized femininity’. (184). It means that in the case of the glass ceiling of muscularity, women’s muscularity is not biologically limited, instead they want to accommodate the “desires and interests of men” related to a less muscular female body. Dworkin conducted in-depth interviews with more than a hundred women about their training plans. The interviewees considered weight work as masculine, and cardiovascular work as feminine. Some of them expressed desire for muscular strength, but simultaneously they did not want to increase their muscle mass. These women often checked their bodies for the signs of excess in their musculature. They used different techniques to prevent growing in size. As the author summarizes “these strategic practices were to ‘keep the weight the same’ across weight sets instead of increasing weights, to ‘stop lifting’ weights for a period of time, to ‘back off’ in terms of the number of days or time spent in the weight room, and to ‘hold back’ on the amount of weight lifted.” (341) So the message of “Just do it” used by many Nike advertisements is altered to “Just hold back” as Dworkin suggests. Interestingly, the figure of the female bodybuilder was frequently evoked by the respondents to make clear the upper limit of muscularity what they do not want to approach and what they could never be identified with.

The amount of accepted female muscularity has always been a central question in the development of female bodybuilding. Heywood (1998), herself a feminist female bodybuilder, discusses that the women's liberation movement, the increasing popularity of women's sport, and affirmative action legislation such as Title IX led to the occurrence of female bodybuilding. In 1977 the United States Women's Association was established by Henry McGhee, and this year the first bodybuilding competition was also organized in Ohio where the first official winner Gina LaSpina was celebrated. It must be added that the first wave of female bodybuilders were not so big, they resembled more the body of a fitness competitor of our present time. Two years later, in 1979 George Snyder promoted the "Best in the World" competition modeled on beauty pageants where bodybuilders were asked to pose in high-heel shoes and not to flex their muscles lest they will be unfeminine. This was a noteworthy moment in the history of female bodybuilding, because Carla Dunlap-Kaan, the later Ms. Olympia, started a mass rebellion and encouraged all women to kick off their shoes and perform front-double biceps poses on stage. As Heywood writes (1998, 28): "Women's bodybuilding began with women kicking off their heels in a grand statement of self-empowerment and claiming to compete as real athletes in a real sport".⁴ Later, as female bodybuilders started to possess a more increased muscle mass, there appeared more concerns about their participation in bodybuilding. The peak of these tendencies and the turning point happened in 1991: the year when the Ms. Olympia contest was held in Los Angeles, and which was the first female bodybuilding competition that could be followed live on TV. According to Lowe (1998) many women were big, cut, and ripped what led to negative responses among television viewers who found these bodies disconcerting, repulsive, even disgusting, and they did not hesitate to express these opinions in various letters and calls. This competition is also famous for the failure of Bev Francis (starring in the film *Pumping Iron II*:

⁴ The conceptualization of bodybuilding as a sport is still highly debated; I will further elaborate on the question in this chapter.

The Women) who was extremely muscular and who lost after leading the first two rounds by seven points. Her unusual defeat and the reactions of the viewers meant that ‘too muscular’ women were not marketable anymore and facilitated the leaders of the International Federation of Bodybuilding to move back to a more feminine-looking, smaller bodybuilder type. That intention can explain the happenings of the Ms. International championship one year later: in a sport where the aim is to build muscle the most muscular women did not even place in the top six. The judges chose an ex-fitness-show competitor, who performed the signs of traditional femininity such as blue eyes and long, blond hair and who was one of the least muscular among the bodybuilders. Paula Bircumshaw who was truly symmetrical and extremely muscular could not handle her disappointment and shouted obscenities to the Weider brothers which caused practically the end of her bodybuilding career.⁵ These attempts of restricting the body size of female competitors can be mentioned as a good example of what Susan Bordo writes (1993, 166, cites Heywood, 1998): “Viewed historically, the discipline and normalization of the female body....has to be acknowledged as an amazingly durable and flexible strategy of social control”.

The attempt to normalize the body of the female bodybuilder manifested not only in the rankings of the participants. According to Boyle (2005), the gender norm violating hypermuscular woman caused a moral panic among the spectators and the judges, which led to three main institutional responses from the federation: 1) the creation of the ‘Figure’ and the ‘Fitness’ categories 2) the delimitation of female competitors from the significant bodybuilder media forums 3) the formalization of femininity as a judging criterion in the competitions. In order to understand the difficult situation of female bodybuilding and to

⁵ The leadership of bodybuilding in the USA and in the whole world was highly centralized, most power gathered in the hands of Joe and Ben Weider. As Lowe (1998, 67) claims: “Indeed, it would be virtually impossible to discover another sport in which a single family so completely and utterly controls and dominates the past, present, and future of the sport and its members.”

provide ideas of what processes are in operation in the background, I would like to further elaborate on these issues.

2. Institutionalized attempts to normalize female bodybuilders' muscularity

2.1. The bodybuilding-fitness debate

According to Choi (2003) historically women's fitness show was intended to entertain the predominantly male audience in the breaks between two posing rounds of male bodybuilding championships. The fitness category is closer to a beauty contest than to bodybuilding: hair-style, facial beauty, charisma, skin condition and charm are evaluated. Heywood (1998) discusses the creation of fitness genre as an alternative to female bodybuilding. She cites an interview with Joe Weiner published in the September 1994 issue of Flex, in which the bodybuilding magnate states the following: "[The Bodybuilding Federation has the intention to] involve those women who present a leaner, more streamlined look than the more muscular, more genetically gifted women." (44) This argument reflects the common-held opinion that fitness competition is primarily for those whose genetics do not make it possible to grow enough muscles to compete in the bodybuilding category. In this sense, this rhetoric suggests that the purpose of the creation of the fitness category is to include genetically less talented women. Thinking from a different angle, I agree with Heywood (1998, 44) when she points out: "What Weider's language of diversity obscures is that what he is actually including in the repertoire of female bodybuilding is the conventional femininity that female bodybuilding used to help question, disturb, make more 'inclusive'." The claimed diversity of bodies who can participate in competitions obscures the process of normalization aimed at the female bodybuilder's body. The figure of the fitness competitor becomes a counter image of the female bodybuilder. The fitness woman is more marketable, and her increased media representation and moral support both within the bodybuilder

community and outside of it is legitimized by the statement that she is closer to the dominant⁶ feminine ideal. Of course, this might be true, but reflecting the dominant feminine ideal was never the point in female bodybuilding⁷. If we put our doubts aside for a moment and believe that female bodybuilding is a sport, then measuring the distance of these bodies from an ideal feminine body is irrelevant. As Choi (2003, 78) formulates: “whether the musculature of the bodybuilder, male or female, reflects how the average male or female wants to look is as irrelevant as the question: does the world record for the 100m sprint reflect how fast the average person wants to run?” So fitness and bodybuilding are two different genres, and dismissing bodybuilding because it does not reflect the dominant feminine ideal seems to be unfair, because the aim was never to approach this ideal (this is the goal of the fitness genre), but to build as big muscles as possible.

In contrast to fitness, this activity can create a new language of speaking about women. As Laurie Schultze (1990, 71, cites Richardson, 2008) writes in her essay ‘On the Muscle’: “female bodybuilding is a direct, threatening resistance to patriarchy at its most biological foundations.” As I understand this quotation, these hypermuscular women are subversive in that they transcend the glass ceiling of muscularity (Dworkin, 2001) and display signs that traditionally can be connected to masculinity. Furthermore, if I think about the work of Judith Butler (1990) and that she thought the sexed body was already socially constructed, then the existence of these women might mean that we should continuously reconstruct our notions of the masculine and the feminine body. Butler (1990) expresses the fluidity of gender identities:

⁶ In my work I use expressions such as normative, dominant, emphasized, conventional, traditional femininity as synonyms referring to the viewpoint of the white, heterosexual, western middle-class in determining the characteristics of the feminine.

⁷ Indeed the definition of the goal of female bodybuilding as to find an ideal female physique became later included in the rulebook, as a part of the formalization of femininity as a judging criterion which is the topic of my discussion in the next chapter.

“If gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification, are performative, then there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction.” (141).

The performativity of gender is influenced by regulatory discourses such as the regulatory forces of the International Federation of Bodybuilding. I argue that the female bodybuilder can be compared to the drag artist in the sense that they can both “reveal the imitative structure of gender” (137). In addition to being extremely muscular, these women can further facilitate the growth of muscle tissues by using anabolic steroids that can lead to serious side-effects: the lowering of the voice, the growth of body hair, the angularity of jaws. Lewis (2004) mentions that in some (rare) cases “the facial hair and the clitoris is so enlarged that she [the competitors] must tape it to her body to prevent it from protruding through a scanty bikini bottom”. Though as Schippert (2007) points out these side effects do not really mean risks to the health of the athlete (others are of course dangerous to their health), but the concern over them is much greater, than over the consequences of doping in other female sports. He claims that in this case indeed the object of the anxieties is that these women become too much like men, and disturb the traditional gender division.

On the other hand, bodybuilder women themselves negotiate normative femininity within their sport. Boyle made interviews with 6 bodybuilders in Vancouver in the fall of 2002. As it turned out, these participants used the rhetoric of ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’ bodybuilders to justify the normality of their own activity and their own bodies. ‘Unnatural’ bodybuilders were the ones who went too far, who used drugs and suffered from its side-effects, and confused binary oppositions such as masculinity-femininity, homo-heterosexuality. ‘Natural’ bodybuilders who do not disrupt normative gender identity thought that unnatural ones meant a danger to the entire sport. The contradiction was that these bodybuilders also wanted to be bigger. A different kind of ‘Other’ was also mentioned in their

interviews: the stripper bodybuilder, women who pose in an overtly sexual way. They were thought to come from lower classes and risked penalty. As Boyle writes (2005): “Although athletes are tacitly expected to exude a certain amount of (hetero)sexual appeal in their posing routines and magazine images, they risk being stigmatized as cheap, classless, or immoral if they exceed the boundaries of middle-class sexual morality.” (145-146). So middle-class respectability appears even in the context of a bodybuilding competition, indeed some women conceptualized it as a nice family event. Of course, race also influences the notion of the female bodybuilder. Schippert (2007) illuminates an important paradox in her article. The tradition of tanning the skin results in the darkness of originally white-skinned competitors, while the naturally black bodybuilders are still sidelined. The only possible way for them to become successful is to use the rather racist stereotypes of the animalistic and exotic black woman and perform these images in their representations in significant bodybuilding magazines.

To sum up, in this subchapter I wanted to draw attention to the phenomenon that female bodybuilding not only reproduces normative femininity, but also reveals its constructed nature and has a subversive potential which I think is missing more or less in the category of fitness. The growing popularity of fitness indeed means a threat to the existence of the entire sport of female bodybuilding. The originally lower prize money for a competition is also divided between the categories of female bodybuilding, figure and fitness. For example at the Mr. Olympia Weekend (the name of the event is also telling) in 2011 the distribution of the total prize moneys developed in the following way: Mr. Olympia - \$600,000; Ms. Olympia, Ms. Fitness and Ms. Figure: \$60,000 - \$60,000 - \$60,000; Ms. Bikini - \$20,000.⁸ I admit that \$60,000 can seem to be very much money at first glance, but bodybuilding

⁸ Source: <http://www.getbig.com/headlines/2011/04/17/2011-mr-olympia-weekend-prize-money/>

involves enormous costs that must be paid for vitamins, nutrition supplements, lotions, gym-use, and the competitors have usually been training for at least five years to be able to participate in such a serious competition. Female bodybuilders must obtain media appearances in order to be able to finance these expenses.

2.2. The representation of female bodybuilders

In order to be photographed in magazines, bodybuilder women have to display the signs of hyper-femininity. Long, dyed hair, makeup, high-heeled shoes, and miniskirts foster their gender recognition offstage. One special case is the breast implants. Bodybuilding means a process of brutal training, disciplined nutrition, and losing all the possible fat cells and being dehydrated for the day of the competition. Of course, it also implies that these women can't have 'naturally' shaped bigger breasts, instead they use plastic surgery. As Lewis (2004) states: "Convincing or not, breasts are the marker of choice for femininity in this community." (631). Those who are considered feminine enough get represented, usually in a sexualized way.⁹ Patton (2001) points out the special characteristics of female bodybuilders' media appearances. They are depicted usually in nature, or at home, rarely at the gym. The message is usually to get the impression that their muscles are accidentally produced, or the manifestations of a natural gift and genetics, rather than hard work. In contrast to women in other sports, here an opposite logic can be seen: the body of the female bodybuilder is eroticized by dressing it up. As Richardson (2008) argues quite often the image of the

⁹ The media representation of female athletes has been widely researched and discussed. For further information, please refer to Pfister (2010); Urquhart and Crossman (1999); Billings (2008); Crolley and Teso (2007); Kennedy (2000); Messner, Duncan and Cookey (2003); Buysse and Embser-Herbert (2004); Jones, Murrel and Jackson (1999). In Hungary Gáldiné Gál Ildikó examined the media occurrence of female Olympians and included her findings in a dissertation (2007).

dominatrix is evoked.¹⁰ By redressing the female bodybuilder, Patton (2001) claims that the male spectator is enabled “to recover his fantasy of her undressing for him alone” (127), since at the competition she is almost naked in front of many male spectators. On the other hand, this situation of ‘nudity’ is strictly controlled by the rules of the International Federation of Bodybuilding (Rulebook, 2009 Edition, 44):

“2. Female competitors

- In the first round, the female competitors will wear bikinis of a solid, non-distracting colour which must conform to accepted standards of taste and decency. The bikini bottom must cover at least half of the gluteus maximus. The fastenings of the bikini will be plain, with no attached ornamentation. Metallic materials, such as gold or silver lamé, may not be used to make up the bikini. The use of padding anywhere in the bikini is prohibited.

3. [...] G-strings are strictly prohibited. [...]

5. Except for a wedding ring, competitors will not wear footwear, glasses, watches, bangles, pendants, necklaces, bracelets, earrings, wigs, distracting ornamentation or artificial aids to the figure.

The prohibition of the use of props and ornamentation aims to de-sexualize and de-contextualize the uncovered body of the female bodybuilder in order to facilitate looking at the body with the eye of an anatomist and measure more ‘objectively’ the qualities of the built body. Thus in the context of the championship, the female bodybuilder is less sexualized, though more naked, whereas, in the media representations, photographs, she wears more clothes, and therefore becomes eroticized by evoking male fantasies about undressing her. The sexualization of these bodies outside of the competition context serves to enhance profit, whereas the de-sexualization of the body at championships is intended to enhance the sport side of bodybuilding. As I would like to demonstrate in the next part of my work, the objectivity of the scoring system which would be an important precondition to call

¹⁰ Muscle worship is a kind of fetish used by female bodybuilders to earn extra money. Here, the bodybuilder woman is usually dressed as a dominatrix, and flexes her muscles and displays her poses in a private situation to the muscle worshipper who pays for this service (sexual act is usually not included). Female bodybuilders differ from a dominatrix according to Richardson (2008, 295): “Unlike the dominatrix who may remove her phallic shoes, whip and furs and cease being the all-powerful mistress, the female bodybuilder cannot remove her huge muscles”. For further information I would recommend the above-mentioned author.

bodybuilding a sport and the question of which qualities should be focused on is highly debated in the subculture of female bodybuilding.

2.3. Femininity as a judging criterion

According to Boyle (2005) the formalization of femininity as a judging criterion can be seen as another attempt to normalize women's muscularity and sport participation. As the IFBB Rulebook (2009 Edition, 48) says:

“28.3. Assessing the Female Physique:

First and foremost, the judge must bear in mind that this is a women's bodybuilding competition, and that the goal is to find an ideal female physique. Therefore, the most important aspect is shape - a muscular yet feminine shape. The other aspects are similar to those described for assessing the male physique, but muscular development must not be carried such to such an excess that it resembles the massive muscularity of the male physique. Definition of a woman's muscles must not be confused with emaciation resulting from extreme loss of weight. Competitors shall also be assessed on whether or not they carry themselves in a graceful manner while walking to and from their position onstage.”

The emphasis put on femininity makes the scoring criteria more subjective. It means a huge frustration to bodybuilder women, because the evaluation of their achievement is totally dependent upon “the satisfaction of a majority, white, male, heterosexual, and middle-class panel of judges” (Boyle, 2005, 143). As Lowe (1998, 90) reports “people who are obviously the most muscular do not come in first in the muscularity round”. The expectation of carrying their body in a graceful manner can be connected to the gender differences described by Lowe (1998) in the music selection and the posing style.¹¹ Female bodybuilders apply more fluid, almost balletic movements, smile more, and tend to chose more popular and sentimental songs. Some of them may incorporate seductive glances, poses, or lyrics. Whereas male

¹¹ Of course, I do not argue that these gender differences are created by the rules themselves, but I think displaying them can be connected to the desire to meet these demands, thus the expression of gender differences are reinforced.

bodybuilders usually pose for rock music, and move in a harder, more distinct manner. There exist some poses such as the crab¹² which are hardly ever displayed by women in the free posing round, because they are thought to be too powerful and masculine. So among males being freaky, big, muscular, symmetrical and neat is supported. Masculinity is not included as a judging criteria, because the association between muscularity and masculinity is taken for granted in spite of the phenomenon that the body being on display is considered to be a traditionally feminine position (Richardson, 2004), and male bodybuilders possess conventionally feminine characteristics such as hairlessness, using body lotion and being sun-tanned. Furthermore, many male bodybuilders turn to plastic surgery to remove gynecomastia, the development of large breasts as a result of excessive steroid use.

On the other hand, female bodybuilders must face multiple demands to be successful competitors: they must be neat, lean, muscular, but not too muscular, feminine, and attractive in the minds of many male judges. The subjective nature of the scoring system makes their preparation for a competition rather difficult. I agree with Patton (2001, 119) when she states: “if we believe that bodybuilding is a sport, the refusal to set clear judging criteria for the women’s division is incomprehensibly unfair”. She uses spectatorship theory to examine the issue of judging as an ethical problem. The peculiarity of bodybuilding is that although it contains the elements of tough physical exercise, in the end what counts is not what the body can do, but how it looks (Richardson, 2004). So to use Cindy Patton’s expression, this activity is a “part sport and part spectacle” (2001, 120). In the case of female bodybuilders this dimension develops toward the spectacle edge, whereas considering male bodybuilding, the sport side is more dominant. According to Patton (2001) it can be explained by spectatorship theory. She argues that “masculine spectacle is stabilized by defining men’s bodybuilding as a

¹² Lowe (1998, 190) offers a clear description of the crab-pose: “The crab allows bodybuilders to show off their trapezins, pectorals, and muscles in the upper bodies. It is considered one of the most muscular and vascular poses and may be performed either with teeth clenched or with an accompanying growl.”

sport” (123). The male spectator can use the following justification to avoid the possibility of homoerotic responses while looking at uncovered male bodies: “I’m not looking because I desire these men, but because I judge them.” (124) In addition, as the male spectator looks at the male bodybuilder he realizes that he himself can also be the object of a homoerotic look. “By contrast, in women’s bodybuilding, the love of the sport is blurred with desire for the women who enter it”. (124) Here the heterosexuality of the spectacle is intensified¹³: judging is less needed as a justification for watching these bodies. Of course, male judges could be worried that women viewing female bodybuilders take erotic pleasure in it, but Patton claims they are busier with handling their own homoerotic tendencies and to protect their heterosexual status. Female bodybuilding, “half sport and half spectacle” (120) suffers this inner contradiction. Although the IFBB Rulebook (2009 Edition, 40) clearly states: “Women’s Bodybuilding was officially recognized as a sport discipline by the 1982 IFBB Congress in Brugge, Belgium”, the scoring system does not reflect this recognition. I think the note of Choi (2003, 73) is worth considering: “In a sport where the aim is to build the biggest muscles one can, the competitive female bodybuilder can be penalized for being too big¹⁴ and not feminine enough. A similar situation would be limiting the speed at which women runners can run or the height the women high jumpers can jump lest they become unfeminine”. So if we conceptualize bodybuilding as a sport, as the federation does, then this critique built on the analogy with other sports seems to be relevant. At this point the question might arise: why these criteria cannot be changed? Indeed, there are more and more female judges working in competitions. However, the system does not leave too much space for change. As Lowe (1998) explains, in order to achieve this qualification, future judges must take an exam. To prove their competence, they must score within 85% of the scoring points given by other

¹³ Although, as I discussed in the previous subchapter, there are attempts manifested in strict rules of nudity to decrease the sexual component of watching.

¹⁴ In the language of bodybuilders, “the aesthetic of bigness combines muscle mass, muscle definition, and a particular body shape” (Linder, 2007, 452).

judges in the panel. These homogenizing tendencies can serve two purposes: 1) by using the paradigm of the will of the majority, some objectivity, or at least the pretense of it can be maintained 2) the once established judging trends can hardly be altered. Besides, judges are continuously checked by a head judge (the contact person to the top leadership) and their membership card can be easily removed depending on the given scores. The fluctuation of the preferred body type in female competitions can also indicate an intention to attract wider audiences.

Although the judging criteria can be criticized, they refer to an ideal bodybuilder body which of course can be approximated but never achieved. The dimensions of examining the body such as vascularity, symmetry, striations are relatively unknown or not consciously used by outsiders. So there is an underlying concept when these bodies are evaluated, the ability to see beauty in them is a learnt skill, as Roussel, Monaghan, Javerlhiac and LeYondre (2010, 104) argue: “Of course an athlete’s first muscular bulges do not appear instantaneously and the ‘taste’ for it must be learnt as a part of a subcultural social process among like-minded others”. They connect this kind of evaluation to the Kantian ‘adherent beauty’ as opposed to ‘free beauty’ that presupposes no concept that would serve as a base for the appraisal of the object of observation. In their interpretation “adherent beauty is no longer a mere judgment of taste, it is also a judgment of value.” (105) So the members of the community developed a more sophisticated look functioning through given categories of exploration. I think this creation of categories brings a sense of order in the evaluation of the body of the female bodybuilder and makes this body less irrational. Otherwise this body can be seen as messing up gender boundaries, and can hardly be localized in the readily available concepts of the ‘natural order’. This leads me to the discussion of the next topic: the exploration of the female bodybuilder as a queer embodiment and her possible belongingness to the notion of the female grotesque.

3. The hypermuscular feminine body: queer and grotesque

While Patton (2001) claims that dressing up the body of the female bodybuilder contributes to contextualize and eroticize it, Jagodzinski (2003) argues that the purpose of this dressing up is to hide this body from the homophobic gaze of the male spectator. Male judges are homophobic¹⁵, and the female bodybuilder's body reminds them of a phallus in the interpretation of the author. As he writes: "We could call this the 'penile pump' as the bodybuilder tries to display as much tumescent muscle as possible; the skin must be well-tanned and oiled, the physique rock-hard, showing striations and bulging veins – in other words to look as much a giant erection as possible." (24) Then the question arises whether female bodybuilders just simply want to imitate masculinity, the poor copies of men. According to Jagodzinski, and I am in great agreement with him, there is much more at stake here. "Women bodybuilders are not so much parodying male bodybuilders, and thereby sustaining some sympathy with the original which they copy; rather they are enacting a pastiche which disputes and puts into question the very possibility of an 'original'". (25) This argument can be compared to how Judith Butler (2004) illuminated the ways heterosexuality naturalizes itself. It sets itself up as the original, the authentic and the true identity, whereas gay and lesbian identities are seen to be imitations, derivative and secondary bad copies. Butler argues that the claim for originality is merely illusionary, because all gender identities are indeed copies, and results of imitations, for which no origin exists. Heterosexuals imitate the "phantasmatic ideal of heterosexual identity" (127) which can never be fully achieved. So

¹⁵ Of course, whether male judges (whose group consists almost solely of former competitors) are homophobic or not, we cannot know for sure, it is the interpretation of Jagodzinski, which seems to be supported by the huge discussion on the high prevalence of homophobia in sport, especially in male-dominated areas in the literature. As Atkinson (2009, 209) calls attention to: "The silence surrounding homosexuality and bisexuality in sports is deafening. The irony of the silence about sexuality and sports is that sports are a highly sexualized arena, even though it is presented in cultural mythology as asexual or nonsexual; the sexuality of sports is often denied because homophobia does not allow it to be recognized". I think homophobia must be displayed in order to deny the homoerotic content of locations such as the locker room, or of practices such as in the case of contact sports (wrestling).

to turn back to the case of bodybuilding, following this logic I point out that the originality of male bodybuilding against female bodybuilding is “merely illusory”, because “no origin exists”: male bodybuilders themselves are copies imitating the “phantasmatic ideal” of a perfect muscular body which can never be totally achieved. Since every origin needs its derivative to affirm itself as origin and both male bodybuilders and female bodybuilders are copies without origin, the two identities strongly presuppose each other. Just as heterosexual and homosexual identities, male and female bodybuilder identities are also performatively constituted, through compulsive and compulsory repetition which can fail. Jagodzinski (2003) cites Aoki (1996, 61) whose idea is that the female bodybuilder “looks like a woman who fails to look like a man who fails to look like a woman”. I think this line could be endlessly repeated, and demonstrates the imitative structure of gender and the possible failures of these performances. The combination of masculine and feminine traits can make the hermaphroditic body of the female bodybuilder a strange spectacle. As Richardson (2008) puts it: “Therefore bodybuilding’s resistance lies in the way the sport represents a body which is ‘queer’ in that it combines both the masculine ideal of phallic muscles with a hyper-feminine iconography and, in doing so, draws attention to the construction (quite literally ‘building’) of gender”. (291)

To define the term ‘queer’ I would like to quote Michel Warner (1993, xiii): “[Being queer] means being able, more or less articulately, to challenge the common understanding of what gender difference means, or what the state is for, or what ‘health’ entails, or what would define fairness, or what a good relation to the planet’s environment would be.” So queer is not only “a way of cutting against mandatory gender divisions” (xxvi), but most importantly it “can be understood as protesting not just the normal behavior of the social but the idea of normal behavior” (xxvii). In my understanding, queer is a way of messing things up, and to stand against normalization. But what does the female bodybuilder resist, disrupt or subvert? As Richardson continues (297-298):

“Bodybuilding is surely one of the ‘queerest’ activities within postmodern culture as, dependent upon its context, the flexing female bodybuilder may be read as either embodying feminist politics and challenging traditional feminine beauty or as a strangely erotic spectacle. Either way bodybuilding challenges the traditional sex/gender/sexuality continuum not only by de-essentializing the gendered body but also by challenging the narrow perception of heteroetics.”

In this quotation the subversive potential of the female bodybuilder is expressed through the empowerment of these women, their resistance to the female beauty ideal, and the ability to cross the glass ceiling of female muscularity, thus their body size cannot be normalized. The disruption of the sex/gender/sexuality continuum destabilizes taken for granted identities, questions their illusory seamlessness. The queer activity involves queering norms, exceeding them (such as the limit of female muscularity, the practices she should be engaged in, the locations and spaces she is supposed to reserve).

According to Mary Russo (1995) grotesque is also recognizable in relation to an existing norm. In her book *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* she gives voice to her concern that “the expression ‘female grotesque’ threatens to become a tautology, since the female is always defined against the male norm.” (12) So here again the male norm is primary in defining what the female is, the male seems to be an origin, the point of reference as in the case of female bodybuilders. As I discussed above, the originality and exceptionality of the male norm is destabilized through the imitation of these norms by women that mimic results in the confusion of gender differences. In addition to define female grotesque as the deviance from a male norm, it also refers to the grotto-esque, the cave, things must be hidden, because they do not exist within the frames of the ‘natural’ order. Russo argues that the cave, the grotto-esque can be interpreted in more ways. On the one hand, it is connected to the hidden inner space, the visceral parts of the body. Abject materials, excrement, blood, urine is associated with the female. On the other hand, etymologically the grotto-esque can refer to a concrete historical event, to an excavation in Rome in the 15th

century. In this period of the Renaissance when the emphasis was put on harmony, and perfectness, in that cave was something very different found: “a series of strange and mysterious drawings, combining vegetation and animal and human body parts in intricate, intermingled, and fantastical designs.” (3) I think that similarly, one way of describing the meaning of grotesque is that it can present combinations of things, irrational connections, that is outside of the natural order such as for example the Bearded Woman (actually, the most often mentioned side-effect of steroid use in the case of female bodybuilders). The ‘senile, pregnant hag’ is the foundational figure of grotesque in the theorization of Bakhtin whose pregnancy is impossible biologically. In addition, Russo cites an excerpt from Sherlock Holmes, where the term grotesque is used to describe an experience, so the notion of the grotesque moves also to characterize an inner psychological state, but the body can still remain central in this sense of the grotesque such as in the example of the hysterics in which case the altered state of mind is also manifest in grandiose, almost epileptic movements. In her book, Russo lists various symbolical figures of the female grotesque such as the Crone, the Unruly Woman, the Bearded Woman, the Medusa, the Fat Lady, the Siamese Twin, the Tattooed Woman, the Hottentot Venus, the Female Impersonator or the Dwarf. Continuing this row, I would like to add the figure of the Female Bodybuilder and argue that she can belong to the category of the female grotesque, predominantly because she displays the combination of femininity and hypermuscularity: an irrational connection.

Russo (1995) distinguishes two kinds of grotesque: the carnival based on the theorization of Bakhtin (1984) that can be found in his book *Rabelais and His World* and the uncanny which can be associated with the work of Wolfgang Kayser: *The Grottesque in Art and Literature* (1963), and with the essay of Sigmund Freud called *The Uncanny* (n.d.). In the first sense of the concept, the notion of the grotesque can be best understood by comparing the classical and the grotesque body. As Russo summarizes the difference (1995, 8) :

“The classical body is transcendent and monumental, closed, static, self-contained, symmetrical, and sleek; it is identified with the ‘high’ or official culture of the Renaissance and later, with the rationalism, individualism, and normalizing aspirations of the bourgeoisie. The grotesque body is open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple and changing; it is identified with non-official low culture or the carnivalesque, and with social transformation”.

At first glance, the above described classical body can exactly reflect the ideal muscular physique which is “monumental, closed, static, self-contained, symmetrical and sleek”. In my opinion, this can be surly applied to the case of male bodybuilding. Indeed, as Maria Wyke (1997) illuminates the occurrence of the strongman was interwoven with the rhetoric of classicism in different genres (in the circus, in early Hollywood movies, in magazines). One of the first representatives of bodybuilding was Eugene Sandow who imitated classical statues in his shows and was celebrated as the “most perfect man” (55) of his time.¹⁶ In the 1890’s his audience being acquainted with these ancient pieces of arts was ready to appreciate purely the aesthetics of his physicality, instead of the strengths and functionality of this body. “Wearing only a fig leaf and some bronze body paint, he would step into a glass case and perform, on an animal skin, a series of classical poses set to music.” (54) This performance is similar to the free posing rounds of bodybuilding competitions.

According to Wyke (1997) this kind of rhetoric serves as a rationalization of the celebration of the naked body. Movies also used these muscular bodies in the role of ancient heroes in historical films. But these effects functioned back and forth, as Wyke (1997) claims: “[t]he modern bodybuilder has thus borrowed much of his body image from the classical world, but he also added to popular conceptions of ancient bodily identity itself.”¹⁷

¹⁶ His strong connection to the eugenics movement must have contributed to his success advertising the perfectness of humankind as it turns out from the article of Wyke (1997). Since his name is a stage name, not his given name at birth, it makes me wonder whether the chosen first name Eugene is not a reference to Eugenics.

¹⁷ Her example is how bodybuilder Steve Reeves became the representation of Hercules. Of course, consumerism played a huge role in the strengthening of this connection: all Hercules pictures occurred on sport shirts, hamburgers, records in the United States had the contours of Steve Reeves, instead of its classical representations.

On the other hand, to build that kind of a tradition for female bodybuilding seems to be very problematic. “If muscles have been constituted as ‘essentially’ and ‘traditionally’ masculine, as the direct inheritance of a classical tradition, what form can a classicizing rhetoric of validation take for the muscled female?” – asks Wyke (1997, 70). It seems that the classical rhetoric cannot be used in the case of female bodybuilders. Instead, one possibility is to start this process of finding tropes through art. In 2000, there was an exhibition, *Picturing the Modern Amazon*, held in the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York. The topic was the bodybuilder woman and the program was very popular. From the roundtable discussion with the participation of the curators, artists and bodybuilders, an article was published (Kaplan et. al., 2000). In this article Fierstein states: “There is no historical prototype for the hyper-muscular woman. There’s no historical prototype in flesh, and there’s no historical prototype in art.” (89). As I understand the quotation, in spite of the phenomenon of the changes of the female beauty ideal from the hourglass to the very thin and nowadays to a more muscular woman, that kind of hyper-muscularity does not have a history. In contrast, the whole exhibition is called the modern Amazon which indicates their attempt to search for such a connection in the ancient times.

The figure of the ancient Amazon contained a subversive potential, a threat to the order of ancient Greek males. As Donna Haraway formulates (1991, 180): “Monsters have always defined the limits of community in Western imaginations. The Centaurs and Amazons of ancient Greece established the limits of the centred polls of the Greek male human by their disruption of marriage and boundary pollutions of the warrior with animality and woman.” The disruption of the existing order, of gender norms, the pollution of boundaries are characteristics of the figure of the female bodybuilder. So I would like to argue that the classical body can be associated with the body of the male bodybuilder, whereas the body of the female bodybuilder shows a stronger connection to the grotesque body. This body does

not only exceed the norms of body and muscle size of the female, but this body is: 1) irregular - which can be best demonstrated by the irregularity of the menstrual cycle. Similarly to the anorexic body, it happens quite often that the menstrual flow of female bodybuilders ceases to appear monthly. 2) Secreting - which means that the spectator never knows what the female bodybuilder took to catalyze the development of her muscles, whether she used steroids, hormones, natural nutrition supplement, vitamins or all, or none of them. 3) Changing – this body goes through dynamic and radical changes from the initial, relatively untrained body to the dried, striated, vascular competition shape. After the excruciating dieting, it often happens that the psychologically tired bodybuilder is engaged in binge eating episodes which can result in a sudden increase of her weight, if she is not careful enough. All these changes take place within a relatively short time: in a year or two, the whole composition of her body can be dramatically changed.

In what follows, I would like to turn to the second kind of the grotesque and explore its link to the female bodybuilder. Russo (1995, 9) writes about the grotesque as uncanny:

“In the second case, the grotesque is related most strongly to the psychic register and to the bodily as cultural projection as an inner state. The image of the uncanny, grotesque body as doubled, monstrous, deformed, excessive, and abject is not identified with materiality as such, but assumes a division or distance between the discursive fictions of the biological body and the Law. The strange image of the body which emerges in this formulation is never entirely locatable in or apart from the psyche which depends upon the body image as a ‘prop’.”

As I understand this quotation, the “doubled, monstrous, deformed, excessive, and abject” body which is outside of the natural order, presupposes a similar inner self. The idea of the “sound mind in a sound body” changes to distorted mind in a distorted body. So the female bodybuilder must compensate for a flaw in her gender identity, her latent homosexuality, and her childhood traumas. Thus the female bodybuilder can be seen as a freak, and according to Russo (1995, 85) “the freak can be read as a trope not only of the ‘secret self’, but of the most

externalized, ‘out there’, hypervisible, and exposed aspects of contemporary culture and of the phantasmatic experience of that culture by social subjects.” I think this hypervisibility is a very important issue when thinking about female bodybuilders. These bodies cannot remain unnoticed, it is so inevitable not to look at them.

Being ‘out there’ as a grotesque body triggers various kinds of reactions on the macro level of the wider society and on the micro level of the female bodybuilders’ closer social environment. In the empirical part of my thesis, I make an attempt to explore these reactions experienced by female bodybuilders by conducting interviews. As Mary Russo eloquently claims (1995, 79): “A spectacle, by definition, requires sight lines and distance. Audiences do not meet up face to face or mask to mask with the spectacle of freaks. Freaks are, by definition, apart as beings to be viewed. [...] In the traditional sideshow, they are often caged. They are silent, barker narrates their exotic life”.

If I see deeply in myself, I wanted to step out from the role of the audience and approach these women in order to meet up at least “mask to mask”, though I hope we could let each other to see our face for some moments. By no means did I want to be their barker “narrating their exotic life” in my thesis. On the other hand, saying that these women are speaking for themselves is also illusionary, because conducting interviews is always a dialogical process, and the interviewer plays a huge role in what is being produced in every stage of the research. I would like to further elaborate on my position as a researcher, on ethical issues, and on the processes of collecting data in the next chapter.

III. Methodology

1. Participants of the interviews

In my research, I tried to get in contact with female bodybuilders through the Hungarian Fitness and Bodybuilding Federation, although my attempts were not really successful. I think the following major factors could play a role in these difficulties: 1) as some women communicated through a common acquaintance, many of them do not really trust in people outside of their community, because they use steroids and talking about it is a strict taboo. 2) In Hungary, a female bodybuilder cannot earn a living by doing this sport, so they usually have to work beside spending hours in the gym. It means that they simply do not have the time for the interview. 3) Not verbal communication, but rather their body is used to express who they are or who they want to be.¹⁸ 4) As my interviewees reported, there are only maximum 10 Hungarian female bodybuilders, and more of them compete abroad, so they are not available in our country.

Keeping this in mind, I managed to conduct interviews with one active competitive female bodybuilder, and with one recreational female bodybuilder: in this work I will mainly focus on what experiences they shared with me. On the other hand, by using triangulation, I had the intention to include other perspectives on female bodybuilding: a coach of female bodybuilders, a judge, male bodybuilders, and a woman performing in fitness and another competing in the body-fitness category also helped me with their participation. I would like to shortly introduce my interviewees¹⁹:

¹⁸ I will further elaborate on these dilemmas when concluding the experiences of the research.

¹⁹ The given names are pseudonyms to protect their real-life identity.

- Nora: 37 years old, she has been doing bodybuilding since she was 20. She is a three-time World Championship medalist. She works in a gym as a personal trainer in Budapest after having finished a coaching course.
- Emily: 41 years old, she has been doing bodybuilding for 20 years. She wanted to be a competitor badly, but unfortunately she got injured. She still continues as a recreational bodybuilder. She has a college diploma, and teaches in a secondary school in Budapest.
- Daniel: he is the coach of Nora, and has been the trainer of other female bodybuilders. He is 32 years old, and he has been a member of the bodybuilding community since he was 16.
- Sandra²⁰: she is doing her MA studies in ‘recreation and event organizer’ major in Budapest. She won the Hungarian National Championship in body-fitness category in 2010, the year after she achieved a 6th place in the European Championship. She is 24 years old, and has competed in this sport for 4 years.
- Janos: 54 years old, and he has been doing bodybuilding for 27 years. He has won more than 10 times the Hungarian National Championship, but he was also gold medalist in European – and World Championships. Nowadays, he works as a trainer, and he has a qualification as a judge. He is the common law husband of Julia.
- Julia: She is 41 years old, her main sport was boxing, but for 5 years she has been competing in the fitness category, though she is a Romanian Female Bodybuilder Champion. She is the common law wife of Janos. They both live in Győr, and completed secondary education.
- Attila: he is 41 years old and has been a bodybuilder for 20 years. He managed to win the Hungarian Championship in 2004, and he is also a winner of the WABBA (another

²⁰ In the end, I did not include any interview excerpts quoting Sandra. But I do not want to leave her out from this list either. Talking to her helped me a lot in understanding some basic information in bodybuilding, thus I could ask more complex questions in the later interviews.

bodybuilder organization) European Cup in Serbia. He has a small gym in Csorna, a tiny town close to Győr. He completed secondary education.

2. Instruments

In order to have flexibility in my research project, I decided to conduct semi-structured topical interviews. I prepared a set of questions related to certain topics I wanted to investigate, but it served more to increase my self-confidence during the interview. I focused on remaining open to the issues the participants wanted to share with me (for the set of preliminary questions, please, refer to Appendix I). When the interview took another direction, I usually let it. The new or unexpected findings became included into the questions of the next interview. In this sense, the interviews were built on each other as the research developed. The questions were open-ended in order to get thick descriptions that can capture the multiple meanings inherent in any experiences, and the emotional and biographical nature of these meanings according to Denzin (2001).

3. Methods

I decided to make a qualitative research, because it deals with the examination of particular cases, and it is more idiographic than a quantitative research. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2003, 4): “The word qualitative implies an emphasis on processes and meanings that are not rigorously examined, or measured (if measured at all)...Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry.” The quotation is important to me, because I was interested in how these women construct meanings out of their bodybuilder experiences. I also applied a feminist research method, because I wanted to explore the situated everyday experiences of a marginalized group of

women. As Joan Scott (1991) argues that experience cannot and should not be treated as evidence. Indeed by conducting interviews we are not searching for facts, and for truth. Experience is always mediated. As Joan Scott writes (1991, 793): “Subjects are constituted discursively and experience is a linguistic event (it doesn’t happen outside established meanings), but neither is it confined to a fixed order of meanings. Since discourse is by definition shared, experience is collective as well as individual.” In my understanding it means that I have no access to someone’s experiences or what ‘truly’ happened, but I can analyze the way she makes sense of her past, what kind of language she uses, what discourses she is influenced by. So when bodybuilders apply scientific discourses to legitimize their steroid-use, I do not want to examine the truth of the content of these statements, but the way these vocabularies function.

The interviews took place either at my home, or the interviewee’s home, or at the interviewee’s workplace (at the school for example). It gave me an opportunity to explore the behavior of these people in different locations. After conducting the interview, the taped material was transcribed.

4. Ethical Issues

Anonymity was an important issue related to conducting interviews. Though after we were ready with an interview my interviewees agreed to take part with their names in the research, and they gave me permission to include photographs about them, I decided to use pseudonyms. Especially the two female bodybuilders shared rather personal stories and experiences with me, so I would like to protect their identities. Before starting each interview, I explained the aim and purpose of the research, that the thesis will be available electronically at the CEU website and that they can withdraw at any moment without hesitation from the interview (for the detailed consent form, please, refer to Appendix II). When I asked them

about doping issues, I again warned them to tell me only as much as they can on the topic without consequences. Sometimes they asked me not to write something in the thesis, of course I respected these requests.

As far as my position as a researcher is concerned, I am in absolute agreement with Portelli (1995, 43) who writes about the relationship between researcher and informant: “Only equality prepares us to accept difference in terms other than hierarchy and subordination; on the other hand, without difference there is no equality – only sameness, which is a much less worthwhile ideal. Only equality makes the interview credible, but only difference makes it relevant.” I was an outsider in the community of bodybuilding which made it more difficult to me to get in touch with them. It could lead to distrust and suspicion, but on the other hand it could also contribute to develop a fresh eye and sensitivity. It had the advantage that bodybuilders explained me everything in detail, and they did not simply refer to issues as a part of the common knowledge. In addition, my background in judo (another traditionally masculine activity where dieting is also involved) and my education as a sport psychologist helped me to develop rapport with them. This latter had also the positive message that I accept their practice as a sport. My middle class belonging was not too problematic, though I felt that most of my interviewees came from lower classes, or they were at least less educated. But it caused no difficulties in the communication, since I am used to talking to athletes doing various sports, and in this situation the bodybuilders were the experts whom I could learn from. This doesn’t mean that power relations could or (should be) erased from the relationship between the interviewee and the interviewer in my opinion. As Sangster writes (1998, 92): “While detached objectivity may be impossible, a false claim to sisterhood is also unrealistic.” I think I managed to treat the interviewees with the honest respect of mine, but I also find it impossible and illusionary that the power inequality could be avoided.

Before the first interviews, I was rather nervous. Especially, when the meeting point was somewhere in the city, I was afraid how I could recognize them. But it was always so easy: bodybuilders cannot be unnoticed, they are hypervisible: even on the street one can discover them from far distances. I remember when I was waiting for Emily at the reception of the secondary school where she teaches. And there she was: a huge, muscular woman, so special and unusual in this location. She was a strange and powerful image at the same time. I turned to her with excited curiosity while trying not to stare at her. In the next chapter, I would like to summarize what basic reactions male bodybuilders, and female fitness competitors showed related to the figure of the female bodybuilder. I will close the next part by exploring the women's experiences of the way their social environment responded to their hypermuscular bodies in various locations. I find this analysis important, because the female bodybuilder is a rather stigmatized figure of society, and these women have to face a lot of difficulties every day. If we make these reactions conscious, there is an opportunity to change them. On the other hand, I will also focus on what strategies the women use to cope with the negative comments, and gestures. Investigating these coping skills can help other women to handle similar situations.

IV. The perception of the female bodybuilder inside and outside of the bodybuilding community

I would like to argue that at least two reasons contribute to the hypervisibility of the excessively muscular female body. On the one hand, this body is huge in size. On the other hand, what cannot be located in the 'natural order' always catches the eye. The grotesque body of the female bodybuilder is nonsense and irrational on some level, as it was discussed above. The creation of certain dimensions, the vascularity, symmetry, striations of the muscles brings order into the evaluation of these bodies. This phenomenon can be related to the Kantian distinction between 'free beauty' and 'adherent beauty' as it is described by Roussal et al. (2010). In the case of 'adherent beauty', the person looking at an object (or here at another person) knows what to see, (s)he has a clear underlying concept, characteristics central to his or her evaluation. According to these authors, people outside of the bodybuilding community do not have this knowledge to evaluate these bodies. The ability to see beauty in them develops through acquiring cognitive schemas which is the result of a longer learning period. As one of my interviewees, Daniel said:

Daniel: "If someone walks out there in the world, and suddenly comes in a gym, his or her eyes are not developed to see it. [On the other hand] it is unnecessary to ask a male or female bodybuilder whether (s)he sees it beautiful. If (s)he has been already living down there at the cellar for 10 years, (s)he has eyes to this. So it is absolutely natural to me that female bodybuilders exist. I went to the gym for the first time when I was 16, and I have gone there five times a week since then."

This quotation suggests that the members of the isolated (cellar) world of bodybuilding learn how to appreciate female bodybuilders, or at least these bodies are seen to be natural. On the contrary, my other male bodybuilder interviewees found these bodies unnatural and repulsive. They expressed the opinion that female bodybuilding has started to disappear, because of the growing popularity of fitness. Female bodybuilding is too much, these women lose their

femininity. The glass ceiling of muscularity was nicely expressed by the male bodybuilder Janos and was also shared by Julia despite she is a former bodybuilder champion in Romania.

“Janos: In my opinion male and female bodybuilding is slowly merging, as far as the bodybuilding category is considered. So now I am not thinking about the fitness culture. So much that

Julia: you don’t know, which one is a man, and which one is a woman.

Janos: they posses horrible sizes, the women too, and the limit is the sky as they say, so more, further, further, further, it is too much for me, repugnant. And it is ME [pressing the world] who says this, me, who is doing this sport, and as a man I would like to achieve monumental sizes, and I am amazed by men possessing these sizes, I am looking at them reverently, especially when he is developed, symmetrical, proportional, defined, has an imposing appearance, but if I see something similar on a woman, this..... Indeed where is femininity? So they should mix it, and put together with men.”

Janos is aware that while he finds enormous musculature desirable on men, he totally rejects it on women. There are no limits of male muscularity, whereas female bodybuilders are too muscular. They lose their femininity so much, that they can be put together with men.²¹ Janos is conscious of this discrepancy between his expectations related to male and female bodybuilders. He among other male bodybuilders works also as a judge at female bodybuilders’ competitions, so it can be imagined that the excessive muscularity of female bodybuilders is not supported.

This tendency is apparent in the distribution of the prize moneys between female and male bodybuilders. The following interview excerpt demonstrates the way a claim for authenticity is used by Attila to legitimize these inequalities:

“Domi: I have just read that the total prize for the Mr. Olympia was \$600,000 if I remember well, and the Ms. Olympia got \$60,000. What do you think about it?

²¹ Of course, I asked them how it comes that Julia is a bodybuilder champion, but she is against hypermuscular women. They explained that the Romanian Championship is not that strong, so the body type of competitors resembled more the bodies of fitness women.

Attila: No, I don't know how much money the Mr. Olympia got this year, but actually a couple of years ago the first place meant \$120-130,000. But I don't know, he might have got that much.

Domi: But what do you think about this difference between the two sides?

Attila: Maybe, maybe, maybe.

Domi: And what can stand in the background?

Attila: I think it is the same as with box. You know, female boxing is more and more popular, but indeed real box is the box of men. And because this is also a power sport, moreover it dominates even more among men than box in my opinion. Because you know a man is a man, because he is muscular, but a woman is a woman, not because she is muscular. I don't know the exact reasons, but I think this is the reason."

The first reaction of Attila to make the prize money of male bodybuilders seem less might be explained by a misunderstanding between us whether I meant the total amount of money, or what the winner gets only. On the other hand, Attila clearly uses the justification that in a male dominated power sport the sport of men counts as real sport. It could mean that female bodybuilding is a copy, though he does not articulate this clearly. The comparison with another sport makes the legitimization of prize differences more valid, or at least decreases the responsibility of the sport, since it works similarly in other sports.

Emily also reported that the situation of female bodybuilding is very difficult nowadays. She met various reactions after having started to be involved in the sport, and develop a bigger and hypermuscular body. She recalls her first experiences as the following:

"Emily: So in the beginning many people thought, that I was more like fat, but later I dieted to be nicely shaped besides this [her muscles]. Hmm People are staring terribly, so I don't say it is good. Because they do not stare at someone as they would stare at a beautiful woman. Mostly people don't like it, or they communicate this negativity outwards, they don't like it."

The skill of evaluating the muscled body is so related to learnt skills and cognitive schemas that many people simply mistook a muscular yet not dried body for a fat body. Emily is not

enjoying the continuous staring she is objected to, because it is not due to her beauty, but her being a spectacle. She tells me that she usually dresses up, in order to cover her body and to hide it from the curious gazes. But buying clothes is difficult, she has to have her dresses re-tailored: what fits her down she cannot pull it on the top. Her muscularity caused some trouble in using other services as well: her breast implants couldn't be put under muscle (the implant could be damaged while working with huge weights), and she needed much more botox to treat her extremely strong wrinkles developed due to continuous strains. At parties, where she shows more of her body, usually those people go up to her who has something positive to say. Girls tell they like it, she is sometimes approached by lesbians. Whereas boys ask her whether she is aggressive, and they want to compare their biceps with hers. Emily does not care much about these guys; she is in a relationship with a male bodybuilder. But considering how would it feel to get to know a new man, she says:

“Emily: Now it would come to my mind that I would be reluctant to be together with a man who does not have any experiences in that. Because he might experience it differently or he might be surprised. [...] On the other hand this is not good either, and I have met something like this, these perverse kids...wow it would be so good... they say. But I don't want to be an ornament in a sexual relationship. So that the other is watching her, or staring at her, so no, no...”

Emily wants to be careful, when being involved in a new sexual relationship. She would like to avoid being the object of fetishism, or the instrument of satisfying someone's curiosity. She is aware that her body can cause surprise to somebody who is not a member of the bodybuilding community. She tells a story about how her brother reacted when touching her body once:

Emily: “I will never forget when first... we usually do not palpate each other, siblings, so there was not really bodily contact between us. But for some reason, I had pain in my shoulder, so I asked him to give me a massage, because it hurt so much. So much I could not turn my head. And he touched my shoulder, started to push it, then he said: I stop it, because you are like a man. So the touch of a woman was so much different to him who was used to his girlfriends. And usually

he makes me recognize, that when I put on a strapped dress, he comes and I ask him how it looks. So you are again dressed as a transvestite [he answers] So...[laugh]”

This excerpt suggests that the sensation of this body is different, not only the visual component should be emphasized when thinking about the female hypermuscular body. The image of the transvestite is evoked, that can be connected to what Aoki (1996, 61, cited by Jagodzinski, 2003) said that “the female bodybuilder fails to be a man who fails to be a woman”. So the confusion of the gender binary is salient, when Emily tries to wear dresses which are meant to emphasize her femininity, but at the same time it uncovers her muscular shoulders.

Not only her private life is influenced by her hypermuscular body, Emily has also gone through difficulties at her workplaces, as the following story indicates:

Emily: “So I have been working for them since then, they pay me relatively well, so absolute. But I do the work in the background. I appreciated my immediate boss, because (s)he told me face to face that I am nice in her or his opinion, and (s)he knows everything, (s)he likes me, we talk on the phone if something does not progress as we started to do, or something is wrong, but no. So this layer of people does not accept my form. So I said it was their problem. So it is not sure, that only the size, or my sizes, but maybe my whole style was it, but I tried really to approach things in a solid way. So this is very prevalent in this country, I don’t know, how it is abroad.”

In the case of a multinational company where women have to wear costumes that unify and homogenize them, Emily’s body could not be accepted because of her inability to perform normative femininity. She appreciates the honesty of her boss, who otherwise still rejects her to be present there, though she is absolutely capable of the work. On the other hand, Emily states that it is not her problem; she could not do anything, so she tries not to deal with it. It might also contribute to the devaluation of the workplace in the eyes of Emily. She attributes this episode not only to her size, but to her whole style (actually, she has some tattoos, one visible on the right part of her face). She remembers, one of her best friends has always

warned her not to be so salient in life, it will mean no good. She mentions the school where she teaches as an example: if she is missing, immediately everybody notices it. I ask her also about the way her students react to her appearance:

Emily: “We are wrestling, we are wrestling with each other. I am trying not to dress like it would be a problem. Many of them [the students] come to ask for suggestions. Boys, too, that’s why I know a couple of things, they relatively trust me.”

She reported earlier that students get used to her body shape relatively easily, after the first shock. She has the advantage to get closer to some of the students through their common interest in bodybuilding. Male students often ask her opinion about steroid use, more concretely which one to take, so she has a chance to turn them toward nutrition supplements instead of steroids.

She also shares a story with me located in another setting, the kindergarten that did not happen to her, but to another female bodybuilder:

Emily: “This was a girl from Szeged, who told me this story. In the kindergarten, where she took her daughter, she is a relatively big female bodybuilder lady, the mothers created fables that she must have been a man, and now she is a woman. So a rumor started, and the kindergarten teachers told her: they do not know how to say it in a nice way, but she should not be surprised if she hears something like this from her daughter because the mothers are talking about it.”

So again, in this feminine role of the mother, the figure of the female bodybuilder is suspicious. The image of the transgendered occurs: the bodybuilder is a strange body among the mothers. Little children of course are very sensitive to this gender confusion. The last story I would like to include here from Emily is about her and a little girl:

Emily: “I will never forget, back then I worked out at the Fitness2000 gym, and once a little girl entered the locker room with her mother where I changed my clothes. She stopped in front of me and stared. Her mother asked her to come: we are leaving. Then the little girl stood there, and asked me: are you a girl? I answered: aha. I said: of course, yes. She said: You sure? [laugh] And her mother

heard it, so by the time I went out, everybody was laughing at the reception. They pulled my leg with this after that for a long time: You sure? So she was this little honest someone, I was not angry at her. So children react like this.”

This story demonstrates me not only the curiosity of smaller children, but that these episodes can be treated with humor, and the gym serves as a safe place where Emily can laugh together with other members of the community.

Compared to Emily, Nora who is a competitive bodybuilder and a personal trainer mentioned not so many stories. I think it could be attributed partly to her deep involvement in the community, so she is not present at such various locations as Emily. She shared with me what is the response of her family to her bodybuilding activity. Age can play an important role here too:

Nora: “So to tell the truth, my father and my grandmother do not like it at all. The others avoid expressing their opinion; they say I know what I would like to do, just take care of myself. But my granny... it must be very strange for them. Because competitive sport is for them something like you must play football competitively, and there are cups, and matches, and playing table tennis, or I don’t know, but not that you so drastically.... [embarrassed laugh] change your body for a competition. So I think they do not really understand, and they do not like it, if a woman is so muscular. Yes. The others have no problem with it. [smile]”

This quotation suggests the incomprehensibility of this activity in the eyes of outsiders that can be even more prevalent in the case of older people. Nora thinks her grandparents conceptualize a sport more in connection with what the body can do, not how it looks. So for them this very drastic change of someone’s body is strange. Interestingly, in her positive story an old lady occurs as a possible counter image and a compensation of the lack of appreciation of her own grandmother:

Nora: “I am much more definite and self-confident now, for sure. I have my own weak points, but... So last year [laugh] I was waiting at the stop of the tram when an old lady came to me, that I must do some kind of sport, because not only I look sporty, but I crossed the street with such definiteness and self-confidence, that she had to come and tell this.”

Nora happily and proudly reports this story, because this woman recognized not only her bodily strengths, but her strong-mindedness, too. Here, body and mind does not constitute a binary opposition, instead they are in close connection. Practicing the activity has influences on the inner state of the female bodybuilder.

On the other hand, in most of the existing readings of bodybuilding, developing huge muscles is associated with the overcompensation for a psychological flaw or a trauma, a survival strategy of a woman who cannot control the happenings around her, she can only practice control over her body. In this sense the strong body is meant to cover a weak mind. The grotesque, strange spectacle of the hypermuscular woman was thus medicalized, connected to different kinds of pathologies such as muscle dysmorphia and exercise addiction. The secreting body of these women facilitated the imagination about the amount of steroids these women might use. In the next chapter, I would like to examine the practice of steroid use, and the notion of muscle dysmorphia, and exercise addiction in order to explore the possibility of criticism related to them, and the meanings bodybuilders attach to these diagnostic categories.

V. Bodybuilding as a pathological practice

1. Steroid and doping use

Monaghan (2002) examined bodybuilders' vocabularies of motives for using banned substances. Taking steroids is a subculturally normalized behavior in this community, so his interviewees did not use excuses while speaking about anabolic-androgenic steroid use, rather they made justifications by accepting their responsibility, but denying the negative quality attached to drug using. Monaghan found three different types of justifications. 1) "Self-fulfillment accounts". In this case, the constructive instrumental use of steroids was emphasized. They pointed out their ascetic lifestyle, and contrasted steroid with other categories of drugs, which are not used for self-improvement, only for recreation. They claimed that they don't want to get away from reality, and emphasized that they take part in production and consumption, many of them work in full-time jobs besides bodybuilding. Also, steroids do not solve everything: bodybuilders must still put a lot of work into their activity. 2) "Condemnation of condemners". Bodybuilders sometimes attacked back by illuminating that condemners themselves are usually in a worse physical condition, and they use licit drugs such as alcohol, tobacco, and coffee quite regularly. Lay people are also seen to be ignorant in these questions related to banned substances. According to bodybuilders the media also contributes to the misinformation about their activity. 3) "Denial of injury". Bodybuilders often denied the side-effects of steroid-use. They also employed certain strategies to decrease the possibility of side-effects: they avoided the particularly toxic drugs, they took steroids in cyclical periods, and they carefully tailored and monitored each other's dosages. They denied that these drugs would increase their level of aggression, and that steroids would be physically additive substances.

In my research the interviewees used a similar rhetoric to justify their steroid-use. In addition, they applied vocabularies other than the ones can be found in the Monaghan study. In the following excerpt, Attila gives an account that can be seen as a mixture of the categories of ‘self-fulfillment’ and ‘denial of injury’:

Attila: “So drugs have a catabolic effect, so a dismantling effect: physically, psychically, morally, they dismantle the person in every sense. Steroids are, as it in their name, anabolic, so they have a ‘building up’ effect. So you know they encourage the person to do harder what (s)he does, and hmm....and... it has all kinds of stimulating effects, so besides it gives power, it encourages the person to bring out the maximum from him- or herself, which is in the person. I don’t disapprove steroids, and I have always said that if I am asked about them, I always tell what the advantages and disadvantages are, but I have never talked anybody into it, or I will never dissuade anybody who wants to use them. [...] But when the person does harm or good only to him- or herself, this is... I disapprove smoking much more for example than the use of steroids. Because you know by smoking the person does harm to his or her environment, by using steroids, (s)he does no harm to anyone, maybe only to him or herself if (s)he overdoes it. But this is like, if the person knows what (s)he does, then it cannot be a problem. And this is true for everything, even snake venom is a medicine in small dose, and poison in big dose. And this is true for eating. If the person eats in a normal way, there is no problem, but if (s)he gormandizes more times a day, (s)he will die of it sooner or later, because it is not good either, excessive, excessive eating. So it is like that, with the steroids.”

In this report steroids are contrasted to drugs which dismantle the person in all senses of the word, whereas steroids help the self-fulfillment of the bodybuilder. In a kind of liberalist framework, Attila indicates that the free choice of the individual to use these substances must be respected as long as it does not cause harm to other people. Another counterpoint of steroid use is smoking, which has a negative influence on the environment of the smoker. The ‘denial of injury’ can be also found in his speech, because whether this process will lead to harms or positive effects depends on the level of the dose someone takes. In this respect, he makes an analogy with snake venom and with excessive eating, maybe a bit overemphasizing the negative effects of the latter (dying of excessive eating). In his opinion, the person must keep

a limit in all of these practices. He also suggests that the effects of steroid intake can be controlled (“if the person knows what (s)he does, then it cannot be a problem”).

The comparison with drugs often came up in other interviews, but the function of evoking the differences and similarities varied on a huge scale. As a teacher, Emily made an analogy between steroid use and drug use in order to express the necessity of prevention and intervention among teenage boys. She says:

Emily: “People should be enlightened about what can happen if they use these substances similarly to drug prevention. But not like that, scaring women that they will have a moustache. It won’t be the biggest problem, but that she will have a masculine vascular system, and when she does not menstruate, she will die of a heart attack.”

Emily’s concern is similar to what was emphasized by Schippert (2007), namely that more attention is paid to female bodybuilders becoming masculine, than to those side-effects of steroid-use which are really health and life threatening: in this report the alterations in the vascular system. Emily also claims that there is a tendency to overlook similarly unhealthy practices that are being done in order to achieve a thin body, which is a much more accepted ideal:

Emily: “I think (s)he does not cause more harm to him- or herself by using a not totally natural substance in a cleverly planned way, than if (s)he does the same for the reason to be very thin. And it is important that bodybuilders pay very much attention to the side effects. [...] So they know if I take this, I must also take this to protect my heart, this to protect my kidney, this to protect my liver. [...] And the other thing is that these kids can do this steroid use for 365 days a year. So there is no empty period of the body, it is very dangerous. In my opinion for example, I see much more danger in that than in drugs.”

Her account can be further categorized as ‘the denial of injury’ in the system created by Monaghan. According to this, the side-effects can be reduced by applying certain strategies. But in Emily’s talk, ‘these kids’ don’t follow these practices in contrast to bodybuilders. The students she is in contact with do not use other vitamins and substances to prevent the side

effects of steroids which they do not take cyclically, so their body cannot have periods of being empty of it. Further, many of them think that they do not have to do that much work besides taking steroids, or they do not have to develop every part of their musculature. According to my interviewees the difference between a real bodybuilder and someone who just simply wants to impress others is the muscularity of the legs. Fiáth et al. (2010) also observed that the type of the ‘prison bodybuilder’ only developed his muscles on the shoulders, arms and breasts, because these body parts were visible in their uniforms. In contrast, a “real bodybuilder” pays attention to his or her body as a whole:

Emily: “We should make them understand that their body is a whole thing, and they should train it holistically. There is no sense in taking steroids, if you don’t train and eat in the right way. So this is an important thing that people think we inject the testosterone into ourselves, and the muscle grows on us while we are sleeping at night.”

So there is a misunderstanding outside of the bodybuilder community: people think that eating and working out in the right way can be avoided by steroid use in developing huge muscles. But hard work and self-discipline is still needed to achieve these goals.

In a different connotation, Janos and Julia held the opinion that steroids should be legalized similarly to the way drugs became legal in Amsterdam for example. Then the state could benefit financially from selling it and people could buy more pure substances. In addition, they used a rhetoric of victimhood in order to legitimize the steroid and doping use of sports(wo)men which vocabulary was not present in the Monaghan article:

Janos: “The audiences go out there, because they want to see RESULTS [pressing the word]. They are not interested in anything else at all. So if the wretched competitor makes a sacrifice, even throws away his or her health, because you know it is said to be unhealthy, (s)he dies of it.

Juli: (S)he only wants to achieve a result.

Janos: (S)he produces result, so it means (s)he must be even respected, because (s)he risked even his or her life to satisfy those who wants to see circus and blood

from the grand stand. But we never go that far. We don't care. [...] So if we talk about the purity of the sport, why don't they dare to check the American competitors [at the Olympics in Peking]? The Russian, and the others, and the others? Why always the small fry? So then either everybody or nobody, if we talk about righteousness, equality, right?"

In this account the sports(wo)man occurs as a victim who just wants to satisfy his or her audience and entertain them. Since the possible achievements of the human body are finite, (s)he has no choice, if (s)he wants to reach the desired result. Janos refers (in other parts of the interview more clearly) to the famous phrase of Caesar Nero: "Panem et circenses" or "Bread and Circuses". It can indicate that the athletes of our present time can be compared to the figure of the gladiator who was instrumentalized in order to amuse the audience with his life and death struggle. According to Janos, there are much more at stake here, namely the interests of powerful countries, but the responsible and the victim is always the athlete who should be respected instead for undertaking this sacrifice.

Similarly, Attila argued that steroid use is prevalent in all competitive sports, but it is highly visible in bodybuilding, so this is the reason why it is connected to the figure of the bodybuilder in the public imagination.

Attila: "Unfortunately they [bodybuilders] cannot achieve a result without using them. But it is natural that... and not only in bodybuilding. There was a research conducted about who used steroids, so who used steroids the most, and bodybuilders were the 10th on this list. Cyclists finished at the 1st place... even athletes before bodybuilders... But you know it is spectacular in bodybuilding, so visible on them. So if now a cyclist appears and (s)he is lean, sporty, nobody suppose this about him or her. Whereas a bodybuilder, oh (s)he must be full... for sure..."

This excerpt suggests that the use of banned substances is as prevalent, or even more prevalent in other sports, as it is in bodybuilding. But in bodybuilding it is salient, because it is inscribed on the body. In other sports, where doping helps to enhance the fitness or the aiming capability, it is more difficult to notice. Of course, we could say that these substances

are not steroids (instead Beta-blockers or blood doping), but bodybuilders themselves do not only use steroids to increase their achievements. In Daniel's speech this is exactly the reason why they cannot become an addict:

Daniel: "A competitor can't be an addict. If we talk about a professional competitor, it is strictly defined when and what. If (s)he becomes addicted to one component, then the process stops there. [...] So there are fluctuations of the psychic condition in each stage, and one can be addicted to each of them, each of them creates a deficiency state, but a competitor, (s)he surely has the will power. They have undergone once a serious death experience, and all of them has undergone, so they don't fool around anymore. Who injects, injects when (s)he must, and puts it down, when (s)he must. We are not talking about being trendy. And we are not talking about irresponsibility."

As Daniel explained to me, at the different stages of the preparation for a competition such as growing body mass, burning fat, and make the muscles dry, different substances can enhance the performance of the bodybuilder. So he or she must be able to stop using one kind of them, to shift for another. On the other hand, most of them have already had life threatening experiences related to doping, so they become much more careful, and try to control the effects.

As my interviewees indicated, results can hardly ever be achieved without the use of doping in any kinds of sports. This is the case with bodybuilding where doping free competitions do not really attract bodybuilders, and the audience who would like to see big and freaky muscles. On the other hand, the existence of doping free competitions would presuppose the existence of free doping competitions as Attila argues:

Attila: "There is no 'doping free' competition. Not because they really don't use it, but because there is no such a thing as a 'free doping' competition. So there is no such competition where they say that it is a free doping competition. There is no doping free competition, because there is no free doping competition. [...] Competitors cannot be encouraged to use doping."

So officially it is not acceptable that a bodybuilder competition would promote steroid use. On the other hand, as Emily told me, there is no doping test in the master's category (bodybuilders older than 40), and promoters who organize the championships are responsible to arrange doping tests. But it clearly does not serve their interests, because testing keeps the most muscular bodybuilders and thus the audience and the profit away. Besides, in the natural or doping free category many competitors were caught to use banned substances.

So the prevalence of steroid use was not denied by my interviewees, similarly to the findings of Monaghan. In their justifications, the mixture of the 'self-fulfillment' and 'denial of injury' category was frequently used, whereas the 'condemnation of the condemners' was not represented. A liberal framework was applied to legitimize the use of banned substances as a possible lifestyle choice, their freedom to be enormously muscular, even though it might mean risking their health. The possible influences of steroid use on the social environment, the aggression which might occur as a result of the changes in the hormone system was not mentioned. In contrast to drugs which are associated with the criminalization of the individual, the use of steroids can cause harm maximum to the person taking them. In addition, they emphasized that doping use can be equally found in every competitive sports, but it occurs in less visible forms. I think it can be nicely connected to the hypervisibility of the grotesque body, discussed in chapter II. Indeed, as Lowe (1998) points out, testing for doping was always stricter for women, and steroid use was much more rejected, despite it had a longer history and a higher prevalence in the case of male bodybuilding. Moreover, focusing on the hypervisible bodybuilder sometimes obscures the importance of other manifestations of steroid use that might be even more dangerous such as the case of younger boys who starts working out in the gym. In contrast to them, a competitive bodybuilder might use steroids, but cannot be addicted to them due to the periodical use of various kinds of substances. Thus the possibility of psychological addiction is denied in (most of) the cases of professional

bodybuilders. In what follows, I would like to explore the way my interviewees negotiate the possibility of being addicted to the activity itself, to the rigorous exercise of the body.

2. Exercise addiction and Muscle Dysmorphia

The diagnostic category of muscle dysmorphia was first described by Pope et al. (1993) and was called ‘reverse anorexia’, because it functioned in an opposite way compared to anorexia nervosa. Pope et al. conducted researches among male bodybuilders, and observed that some of them despite of their muscular body still saw themselves to be too small. So there was a discrepancy between the self-perceived and the ‘real’ or measurable body size of the individual.²² Because of the body image distortion, later the diagnosis was located within the body dysmorphia category. The diagnostic criteria for muscle dysmorphia are the following:

Preoccupation with the idea that one’s body is not sufficiently lean and muscular. Characteristic associated behaviors include long hours of lifting weights and excessive attention to diet.

The preoccupation is manifested by at least two of the following four criteria:

- (1) The individual frequently gives up important social, occupational or recreational activities because of a compulsive need to maintain his or her workout and diet schedule.
- (2) The individual avoids situations where his or her body is exposed to others, or endures such situations only with marked distress or intense anxiety.
- (3) The preoccupation about the inadequacy of body size or musculature causes clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational or other important areas of functioning.

²² The most objective technique to evaluate the body image distortion of prisoners is to ask them to draw their life-size contours on a white wall (Fiáth et al., 2010). Then the person is asked to stand in front of the drawing. In the case of a serious body image distortion, the drawn body can be approximately the half of the present body.

(4) The individual continues to work out, diet or use performance-enhancing substances despite knowledge of adverse physical or psychological consequences.

The primary focus of the preoccupation and behaviors is on being small or inadequately muscular, as distinguished from fear of being fat as in anorexia nervosa, or a primary preoccupation only with other aspects of appearance as in other forms of body dysmorphic disorder.²³

Since the diagnostic category was created by researching bodybuilders, it is not surprising that this group shows the highest prevalence. I think the key component remains the body image distortion in diagnosing muscle dysmorphia, because I find both the eating disorder and the obsessive-compulsive components problematic. The emphasis in bodybuilding is on the improvement of the muscles, and dieting plays a great role in achieving this aim. So these practices seem to constitute the specificities of the sport, and not merely the signs of an eating disorder. On the other hand, exercise addiction, the sacrifice of other activities, getting annoyed when the person cannot work out is easily observable among competitive sportsmen.²⁴ Jo Nash (2006, 323) by searching for common motivations behind health enhancing and health denying fasting practices expresses a similar dilemma of diagnosing a practice as pathology:

“It appears that for some, fasting is a practice expressive of secularized desire to experience an expanded state of consciousness, that is then reconstructed as either pathological or therapeutic, depending on the socio-cultural context and who is involved in constructing the meaning of the practice. There is clearly a common desire in all three practices to expand and extend the limits of the body.”

This quotation suggests that whether the fasting practice - or in the case of bodybuilding the exercising the body - is pathological or therapeutic is a question of the context in which the practice occurs and of the person creating the meaning of it. In order to demonstrate this, I would like to point out the counter image of the bodybuilder used by Emily and described in the previous subchapter. She was much more critical in the case of teenage boys using

²³ 4th ed., text rev.; *DSM-IV-TR*; American Psychiatric Association, 2000.

²⁴ A similar argument could be made to diagnose many researchers with workaholism for example, maybe a less stigmatizing label.

steroids than she was with competitive bodybuilders. I must also admit that not only the context was different in these two cases discussed in her speech: the practices themselves were altered when done by the kids. On the other hand, all my interviewees stated that being an exercise addict is not only desirable, but it is a necessary precondition in the occupational context of being a successful competitive athlete. Daniel goes even one step further:

Daniel: “You are always strictly categorized in somewhere as a competitor. [...] The best combination if it [muscle dysmorphia] is coupled with an addiction. [...] There is always a date [time component] in it. This is a huge difference: differently from other periods of life, it always has an end, and you know that there will be a new one.”

According to him, the combination of muscle dysmorphia and exercise addiction is the best prognosis of being a good bodybuilder. If we take the official criteria of muscle dysmorphia, then Daniel contradicts himself. If someone’s body is strictly categorized in competitions, it must give a very strong feedback about the body size of the person, thus it strengthens the realistic perception of his or her body. Daniel illuminates another important point that in contrast to anorexia, the dramatic dieting in bodybuilding has an end (which is usually death itself or medical intervention in the case of anorexia), so the time component must be emphasized. The aforementioned two arguments decrease the possibility of muscle dysmorphia, what is considered to be a valuable characteristic of a good bodybuilder in Daniel’s opinion. The contradiction can be explored if we have a look at the meanings my interviewees attach to the notion of muscle dysmorphia:

Attila: “So I say it can cause an addiction, just because as we talked about it, the bodybuilder looks into the mirror and (s)he says: oh I am not that muscular, as the outsider perceives it. It is like, when someone once achieves a level, then it is hard to be satisfied with a lower one. If (s)he was a bodybuilder and (s)he was a good one who has already won competitions, (s)he says I was better than that why shouldn’t I continue, why shouldn’t I do it... so I think it causes addiction. But not in the bad sense of the word. [smile]

In Attila's account the desire for muscularity is judged from the viewpoint of the outsider who is likely to see the muscles of the bodybuilder being already too big. What Attila (and Daniel too) means by muscle dysmorphia is more like the continuous attempt of the bodybuilder to improve his or her muscles according to his or her own standards (which strongly differ from the standards of a non-bodybuilder). It doesn't mean that the bodybuilder would not be able to perceive the size of his or her body in a realistic way. So in this excerpt, not the perception of the body is different between bodybuilders and non bodybuilders, but the evaluation of the muscular body which is not big enough in the eye of the bodybuilder, and too big for the outsider.

A different kind of dissatisfaction was mentioned by Emily that can be read in the following quotation:

Emily: "You cannot always be in a competition shape. You know it is a fully different body image. If you look at the body of a bodybuilder outside of the competition period, there are some of them, for whom the difference can be 20 kg. But I think they still look absolutely nice. But the person's body image distortion will be a result of it, that (s)he is fat compared to his or her competition shape. This is truly the case, because it is not a state which can be maintained. [...] I wouldn't be a good bodybuilder in this sense, because I don't like being unsatisfied."

The time component of bodybuilding practices is again relevant here, but now from a different angle. The competition shape of the bodybuilder can be maintained only for a very short period of time, so the feeling of dissatisfaction is frequent among bodybuilders. The evaluation of the body made by the bodybuilder and an outsider is again different: the bodybuilder compares her present body to the desired competition shape. Enormous changes happen to this body within months as I already mentioned when discussing the female grotesque. I think these changes are so quick, that it must be a challenge to handle it both cognitively and emotionally.

Nora communicates in the following excerpt the positive emotions she gains from looking into the mirror while getting closer to her competition shape:

Nora: “I like watching myself in the mirror during my work-out. I simply must check: how I hold my arms, how I hold my shoulder, how long should I let it down. So actually in order to be able to complete the practice in a good way. It is absolutely perfect for control. Another thing, when we are already close to the competition, and the person is being shaped, then because [laugh] she likes what looks back from the mirror. So indeed I see myself every day, and I would like to perceive myself to be bigger. [...] But if people stand next to me, I see there is a difference [in the musculature, in size]...”

Nora wants to achieve a bigger body size that must be strange to the outsider. On the other hand, she perceives how muscular she is when people stand next to her for comparison. I find it very important what thoughts she formulates about the mirror. The notion of the mirror, and thus the practice of bodybuilding are often connected to narcissism. Therefore it is very noteworthy that Nora emphasizes the role of the mirror as a tool to have a visual feedback on how effectively the bodybuilder completes a training practice. On the one hand, the mirror is inevitable to perform the right motions. On the other hand, it can also show how far she has reached in preparing for the competition. So following the logic of Choi (2003) related to the analogy between bodybuilding and running, I would say that in bodybuilding where the aim is to build huge muscles, the mirror has the same function as the stopwatch in running where the purpose is to run faster. In the next chapter, I will start my discussion by exploring the female bodybuilder's close relationship to another instrument: the power machine. This leads me to think about the possible connection between the female bodybuilder and the notion of the cyborg described by Donna Haraway (1991), and to explore the meanings my interviewees attach to the practice of female bodybuilding.

VI. The cyborgian female bodybuilder and the existential concerns of life: a possible interpretation

As I discussed in the previous chapter, the figure of the female bodybuilder is surrounded by mirrors in the gym which can give her a strong feedback about the continuous changes of her body, and the preciseness of her motions. There is another instrument what the female bodybuilder is in an intimate relationship with: the power machine. This gives me the opportunity, to make some comparisons with the notion of the cyborg described by Donna Haraway (1991).²⁵ As Haraway eloquently writes:

“Intense pleasure in skill, machine skill, ceases to be sin, but an aspect of embodiment. The machine is not an it to be animated, worshipped, and dominated. The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment. We can be responsible for machines; they do not dominate or threaten us. We are responsible for boundaries; we are they. Up till now (once upon a time), female embodiment seemed to be given, organic, necessary; and female embodiment seemed to mean skill in mothering and its metaphoric extensions. Only by being out of place could we take intense pleasure in machines, and then with excuses that this was organic activity after all, appropriate to females.” (180)

In my understanding, this quotation can be connected to the historical phenomenon mentioned by Lowe (1998) that the weight room of the gym was such a gender-segregated space. Women who dared to work out there were seen as “out of place”, their “intense pleasure in machines” was not supported, because it was not seen to be “appropriate to females”. Even nowadays, working with heavy weights, or doing certain exercises such as bench press or squatting with weight is considered to be unfeminine. Similarly to the statement of Haraway: “the machine is us”, I argue that the machine can be found in the female bodybuilder. On the one hand, her body is rock hard; she has iron muscles, the touch and composition of her body is firm. On the other hand, her endurance and her capacity to tolerate monotony in her training

²⁵ Heywood (1998) also mentions this possibility, but she does not go into any detail in her book.

remind me of a well functioning machine. Besides, the isolated improvement of certain muscle groups is only artificially possible, and this can cause a great pleasure for women:

Emily: “What I really love in bodybuilding is that exactly that muscle works what I want to make work. I think in case of women the connection between nerves and muscles are not developed, and I see it on my personal trainees that when we are doing a simple biceps practice, their back, scapula, everything is flexed. The person cannot concentrate on purely one muscle, it comes with the many-many years of work.”

By the help of machines, the isolated training of certain body parts can be achieved that would be not possible otherwise. Moreover, bodybuilders could by no means achieve the desired high level of muscularity without using them. The meaning of this hypermuscular body can be further connected to the cyborgian argument. As Haraway continues (1991, 181): “The regrown limb [of salamanders] can be monstrous, duplicated, potent. We have all been injured, profoundly. We require regeneration, not rebirth, and the possibilities for our reconstitution include the utopian dream of the hope for a monstrous world without gender.” I think the regrown monstrous limb can take the form of huge muscles in the case of the female bodybuilder, whose regeneration might confuse the gender boundaries. This is in harmony with what Emily said about bodybuilding: “Somebody grows fat, somebody grows muscles. I think it is a story of self-defense.” Similarly, Heywood (1998) as a survivor of sexual abuse focused on the self-healing potential of bodybuilding.

My two interviewees did not report that kind of experiences, but both of them expressed the feeling of enhanced self-confidence, and strong-mindedness as a result of bodybuilding. The meaning Emily attached to the desire for being muscular included the notion of power:

Emily: “I have always loved power. In everything: in nature, I love the enormous waters, the huge mountains, so everything. And the symbols of power are always the muscles, so I think this was the reason. That was the story. My boyfriend at the time did it too, so I started to work out.”

The role of her boyfriend can be emphasized. In the case of Nora, also a male figure, her brother took her to the gym, and she was discovered later by a male bodybuilder trainer (Daniel). According to Lowe (1998) this is the most frequent scenario: the final impetus to start the activity is provided by a male mentor. In the beginning, both women just wanted to lose a couple of kilograms. According to Monaghan (1999) these initial motivations are transformed through the learning of different ways to look at physical bodies, thus the ongoing practical involvement in bodybuilding leads to the production of motivations for hypermuscularity.

The aforementioned personal growth accounted by the female bodybuilders, is not only the result of the strengthening of the body. In my opinion, it can be also connected to experiences when the competitive bodybuilder faces death. According to Daniel, on the day of the championship, the bodybuilder is almost “half-way between life and death, the diuretic period is an extremity, there you are struggling for your life. It is about non-drinking, which can sometimes last from 24 hours up till 60 hours.” This victory over death might contribute to the enhanced sense of self-strength of bodybuilders in my opinion.

The phenomenon that bodybuilders are intentionally so close to death grabbed my imagination. In what follows, I would like to apply the thoughts of Yalom (1980) who is a representative of existential psychology, in order to search for the possible deeper meaning of practicing bodybuilding. Of course, what I am going to discuss here is only one possible interpretation of the activity. Yalom’s starting point in his book *Existential Psychotherapy* (1980) is the conceptualization of anxiety as a response to the four final concerns of humans: death, freedom, isolation and meaninglessness. Writing about death, he borrows the distinction of Otto Rank (n.d.) between “life fear” and “death fear”. The prototype of life fear happens at the moment of birth, which can be seen as the first trauma in the life of the person, the first experience of separation. Life fear is in a sense the cost of standing out from the

environment. Death fear on the other hand is the fear of losing yourself, to be absorbed in something, to dissolve into a whole. It can be associated with fusion, with giving up your autonomy. The basic idea of the Yalom work is that the individual continuously oscillates between these two poles. It seems to me, that the female bodybuilder chose to handle life fear, instead of the fear of fusion, the fear of nothing. She stands out, her presence is always hypervisible, her hypermuscular body draws a thick boundary around her emphasizing her individuality, but it simultaneously separates her from the environment. As Heywood (1998, 16) formulates:

“Female bodybuilders take up space. Their bodies are armored. They say ‘I am here I do exist my outlines are fixed you can’t mess with me, mess any openness around ‘cause I’m already here and I’m saying it. Female bodybuilders are disturbing because they stand against the abject openness associated with traditional femininity and give themselves some borders, a reality stark as a stone. Maybe this is what labels ‘gross’, ‘monstrous’, ‘ugly’, ‘unfeminine’ are about.

As this quotation suggests female bodybuilders can be in opposition with traditional femininity not only in the sense of their excessive muscularity as discussed in the second chapter, but in the respect that their body is closed. Being relational, so central to the traditional image of femininity which is associated with the care for others, the children, and the husband, is not compatible with the female bodybuilder if we think about the amount of time she “wastes” for herself: hours dedicated to herself in the gym (the pleasure of machines).

According to Yalom, even when life-fear is possibly more prevalent in the life of the person, death fear is inevitable inside everybody in somewhere deep down. He makes a difference between two mechanisms universally used by people to deny death. One is what he calls “the faith in the existence of a final savior” in which case the person is likely to show dependence, fusion, and puts the locus of the control outside of him- or herself. The other version is called “the faith in the uniqueness of the person” which refers to the invulnerability

of the person, to the belief that (s)he is not the one who can die at any moment. According to the description, this person is more likely to be narcissistic, obsessive, strong, and (s)he thinks the control is in his or her hands. I think in the case of the bodybuilder this defense-mechanism dominates. The hard work and the long hours spent in the gym decreases the possibility of free time, the structuring of the time is an often reported advantage of this practice. Yalom claims that exactly free time is the moment when death anxiety occurs to the individual.²⁶ On the other hand, the person who has faith in her own uniqueness gives up the belief that she can be re-created by someone, other than herself. Heywood (1998, 63) points out something very similar: “The assumption of plasticity, control, and constructability seem to offer the consumer subject the chance to create something out of nothing, literally to create herself through the act of constructing her body, and this creation is a liberatory act that subvert traditional gender paradigms.” Now I would like to focus on the following elements of the quotation. Bodybuilding is in a strong connection with consumerism: it is a world of nutrition supplements, vitamins, carbohydrate shakes (and in some cases illicit substances). Through the intake of these products and the rigorous exercise, bodybuilding becomes an act of self-creation in order to be unique in which the person has a faith. As Emily said:

Emily: “In some way, everybody wants to be different, or many people. And then she might find it in that. I don’t think there is anything pathological in this.”

The desire to be different can be associated with the thought of Heywood (1998, 170): “The fear of being like others is the fear of being others, and the fear of being others is the fear of nonbeing.” After the discussion of bodybuilding as the freedom for self-creation by which the female bodybuilder can construct her uniqueness, and can stand out from the masses, I would like to explore the complex relationship between the near-death experiences of the bodybuilder and the possibility of another final concern, isolation.

²⁶ One can think of the phenomenon of the Sunday neurosis, widely discussed in psychology.

Bodybuilders ridicule death by undertaking the serious risk of functioning without water intake for a significant period of time. They are pushing the boundaries not only in the sense of the limits of the body, but also in the sense of the symbolical borders of that body. So other human beings can be close to the individual, and the symbolical border contouring her is moved to include a group of people instead. As Daniel reports:

Daniel: “The diuretic period is an extremity, there you are struggling for your life. If you go backstage in a competition, competitors who used not only diuretics will be anxious. The others will be like little children. Everybody loves everybody, and everybody is so really happy for the other. Everybody is struggling for his or her life, and everybody has fears of not only him or herself, but for all the others as well. But this is understood by only the most prepared competitors. So there are things impossible to be spoken about, but it must be experienced. There are only a few things being more serious torture than waterlessness.”

Being near to death, the bodybuilder’s need to belong is increased, and in these moments of the competition, on the verge of her existence in a regressive state, despite her fears she can relive the lost unity experienced in early childhood. In this altered state of mind, the result of the lack of food and water, it does not count anymore that the others might be her adversary. “The most prepared competitors” are those who were able to miss the most amount of water, and who went through the most killing diets, and thus their boundaries start to dissolve and they can fusion with others in the shadow of death.

Near-death experience or facing strongly the possibility of death, what is called border situation in the Yalom book, has influences on the person in the long-term run too. The priorities previously directing her life can be revised, and changed. Her personal relationships can be deepened.²⁷ I think this appears in the speech of Nora as the following:

²⁷ In the growing literature of Posttraumatic Growth, there are very similar topics being discussed from a cognitive perspective. According to Tedeschi and Calhoun, who created the term, after a near-death experience the person can show the following changes: 1) increased appreciation for life 2) more intimate and meaningful relationships 3) general sense of increased personal strength, but parallelly with experiencing vulnerability (the case of bodybuilders is very relevant here) 4) new possibilities in life 5) spiritual changes (2004).

Nora: “I went to the locker room and the girls were chatting there about who did what with whom, what happened to whom. And I was there wanting to change my dress, go to the training, because I knew I must do it, the competition is approaching... and the chatting irritates me! You simply realize the nothingness of what they are talking about. And it makes you angry, or at least it made me. [laughs] So I told Daniel that I had not noticed it earlier, but now it appears that it is nothing they are talking about. It is a waste of energy...”

If you are in constant lack of energy due to your hard diet and training, you rethink what is worth telling or doing. The shift in the person’s worldview can result in her moving away from more superficial relationships. The lack of energy also implies, as Nora told me, that sometimes she simply does not have the capacity to talk to anyone, she learnt to enjoy being alone.

The bodybuilder has a very concrete goal every day: to fulfill her training plan, to keep her diet. She continuously sets up goals. This leads me to examine the last final concern in existential psychology: meaninglessness. Related to this notion, the basic question arises according to Yalom: how someone who searches for a meaning can find a meaning in a world, which is meaningless. He states that in our present time, the importance of religious meaning has lost its significance in the Western world, so non-religious personal meanings are prevalent. I would like to connect this tendency to the work of Jo Nash (2006) on mutant spiritualities. Nash by examining fasting practices in the form of anorexia, breatharianism, and living on light argues that repressed spirituality comes back in the form of mutant spiritualities in a secularized, bourgeois society, when “most of the consumers...have no clear conception of what their soul is, and are not interested whether or not God exists” (317). I think bodybuilding can be also considered as one of the mutant spiritualities, because it is clearly an ascetic lifestyle, but has no religious connotation in our present time, except what was called “the profane religion of physicality” by Wacquant (1950, 163). Moreover, according to the Schippert article (2007) in the end of his life, Foucault showed growing interest toward the analysis of ascetic practices, because they were also regulatory

mechanisms, but functioned in a quite different way as it was pointed out by Halperin. He goes one step further when he states (1995, 111, cites Schippert 2007): “The study of Greek sexual morality discloses, in short, the possibility of an ascetic discipline whose effect – unlike that of modern disciplines – is not to normalize. But, if anything, to marginalize: that is, to queer.” So if I translate it to the case of bodybuilding, it can mean that the highly rigorous perfecting the body results in queering the body, results in a freakish hyper-muscular, non-normative body, a body I described earlier by connecting it to the notion of the female grotesque (Russo, 1995). Importantly, the person does not lose her agency in practicing self-discipline. To demonstrate the relation between docility and agency, Mahmood (2001) uses the example of the virtuoso pianist, but I think her argument can be applied to the figure of the bodybuilder; where docility is not the abandonment or lack of agency, but something required for agency. Docility can be conceptualized as the ability to be taught, as in the case of the pianist (or the bodybuilder), the person is exposed to disciplinary practices, and he or she is involved in highly hierarchical relationships in order to learn something. Therefore this kind of malleability cannot be considered as passivity, it carries “more that of struggle, effort, exertion, and achievement” (210). I argue that the aim of learning something, and to follow these ascetic practices in this case of non-religious personal meaning construction is self-actualization.

The concept of self-actualization can be associated with the work of Abraham Maslow (1943). I would like to point out what I found important related to my discussion on the female bodybuilder. In the Maslow pyramid, the physiological needs such as breathing, food, water, shelter, sleep, and clothing are located in the bottom. On the top of the needs is self-actualization which according to the author refers to “the desire for self-fulfillment, namely, the tendency for him to become actualized in what he is potentially. This tendency might be phrased as the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is

capable of becoming.” (383) He claims that self-actualization happens, when “the individual is doing what he is fitted for. A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately happy. What a man *can* be, he *must* be. This need we may call self-actualization.” (383) In Maslow’s writings, the stage of self-actualization can be achieved when the other lower needs (physiological, safety and security, love and belonging, self-esteem, cognitive needs) are satisfied. In the case of the bodybuilder, these mechanisms function in a different way, because her self-actualization is simultaneously associated with the denial of her basic physiological needs: she has almost no food and water intake. So the logic of “what she can be, she must be”, the realization of the competition shape presupposes the dissatisfaction of the needs in the bottom of the pyramid. Hypermuscularity becomes a relevant possibility for the female bodybuilder, a purpose of life worth striving for. Self-actualization can become the meaning of life: the female bodybuilder lives, because she wants to realize her inner possibilities.

As Yalom eloquently writes (1980, 378): “The sensation of the meaning of life is the by-product of involvement”. So I think sometimes the outsider can hardly see any sense in female bodybuilding. But these women by being dedicated to this practice could increase the meaningfulness of life. In my opinion it is true, even if the sense of order is illusory, and this is a self-imposed system they are living in. Yalom uses the metaphor of Frankl (n.d.): this meaning construction is like holding on to a rope, which was thrown up to the air by the individual herself. To avoid this discovery, it is more comfortable to believe that the aim comes from outside, and the person just recognized it, as it can be caught in the following excerpt:

Nora: “My life developed so much in this direction: I was just unemployed at that time, I got help just at that time, I won the competitions just at that time, I happened to meet Daniel just at that time...[...] So these are such coincidences, such lucky things, there were too many things simultaneously at that time to make

me do this thing, that I think, as if it were offered from somewhere above. Anyway I love it, and I am happy that it developed that way. I am happy, I will surely regret, if I don't have a family... but the world is simply like this. I don't see the conditions safe enough to be able to say that yes, I can give my child everything 10 years later. But I would like to have one.”

Nora constructs her narrative retrospectively from her present position to justify her life choices. As a 37 year-old woman she counts with the possibility of not giving birth to a child. To accept this version of her future more easily, she makes the legitimization of her bodybuilding career more powerful: it served not only her self-actualization, but it could be the manifestation of a will outside of the world of human beings. Thus the non-religious personal meanings described by Yalom can be so strong, that even if they don't take the form of a religion, they can be slightly transcendental: the separated unique figure of the female bodybuilder becomes connected to extramundane forces.

VII. Conclusion

“This chapter [thesis] is an argument for pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for the responsibility in their construction.”
(Haraway, 1991, 150)

In the previous chapter, I discussed the way female bodybuilding can be related to the existential questions of life, especially to the fear of death. As my interviewees reported, there is a great importance attributed to good photographs that must be taken of them. I think it can be interpreted on the one hand, as an attempt to reach symbolic immortality in the sense that the picture will exist after the person does not live anymore. On the other hand, photos can capture the momentary achievements of the desired competition shape. The self-expression of the female bodybuilder can be dominantly defined by the way her body looks. The question arises why I did not choose to take the examination of these representations central to my analysis.

One possible answer is that the topic of female athletes' media representation has been widely investigated, as I mentioned in chapter II, and the implications of these researches for bodybuilder women was highlighted by Patton (2001). Besides, altering the appearance of the body might be the primary way of communication with the world to bodybuilders, but to me, as a psychologist, a significant method of approaching and exploring my (social) environment is through talking with somebody. To meet bodybuilders face to face created an opportunity to me to be at least a bit involved in the community of bodybuilders, and thus the activity which previously seemed to be rather incomprehensible from outside became more and more meaningful.

The findings of the interviews directed the choice of theory used in the sixth chapter where I wanted to understand how it can happen that bodybuilders go that far, even risking

their life to fulfill their goals. In other parts, the starting point was theory itself, what I tried to accommodate and alter to the case of the female bodybuilder. I think my main contributions to the existing literature beyond the explanation of the death and life struggle of the bodybuilding competitor by using the frameworks of existential psychology (Yalom, 1980), consist of my attempts to connect the figure of the female bodybuilder to the female grotesque described by Russo (1995), and to consider the cyborgian (Haraway, 1991) characteristics of these women.

As the above-written Haraway quotation indicates, I found pleasure in writing about female bodybuilders who confuse (gender) boundaries. This figure also made me rethink the constructed nature of these boundaries, our responsibility to draw these lines, and the way people tend to react to those, who are outside of this created order. From a different perspective, the ‘pleasure in the confusion of the boundaries’ refers to my disciplinary position. I found it exciting to use some of the theories I met while doing Gender Studies, but on some level I remained loyal to my background in psychology, too. I think this interdisciplinarity gave a unique taste to my work. Of course, this eclectic use of theory can be criticized, and one might miss the presence of a clear approach in the pages of my thesis. To me it made it possible to explore this phenomenon from different angles.

There is no need to say, that more authors could have been included to use in the analysis: such as Foucault or Kristeva, more connections could have been explored between the grotesque and the queer. This can be the object of future inquiry. Similarly, it might have been more useful to ask different interview questions such as asking male bodybuilders not about doping use in general, but about female bodybuilder’s steroid use in particular in which case I am sure they would have been more critical. This is an important weakness of the methodology. In my opinion it would be also worth asking the representatives of this community about their conceptions of death, their fears of aging; or conducting a research

with old bodybuilders (the experiences and motivations of the 74 year-old Ernestine Shepherd the ‘officially’ oldest female bodybuilder, must be interesting).

In this thesis I wanted to introduce the figure of the female bodybuilder, who might be grotesque, but not necessarily pathological, on the one hand cyborgian, and on the other hand extremely human. But beyond any doubts, she demonstrates enormous persistence and she dares to be independent, separated, and different from her environment by growing huge muscles. Similarly, during the process of thesis writing, I had to strengthen the symbolical and virtual boundaries around me (by continuously using earplugs and by not visiting community pages) in order to be isolated enough to concentrate on my goal. The self-discipline and self-control of female bodybuilders was very motivating to me during the development of my thesis which might be not as well-structured, symmetrical, defined, and big, as the musculature of the female bodybuilder, but I hope it could draw and keep some attention.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX I: List of Preliminary Questions

I am interested in the personal experiences of Hungarian female bodybuilders. I will ask you questions about different topics. You have as much time as you like to answer them. I will just make some notes on the things that I would like to ask you more about later, if we haven't got enough time today, perhaps in a second interview.

I. Motivation

1. Could you tell me about who you were before starting bodybuilding?
2. How did you become engaged with bodybuilding?
3. What do you think, in which ways your life has changed? (Who you are now.)

II. Identity

4. What is means to you to be a bodybuilder?
5. Who is an ideal bodybuilder in your opinion?
6. What do you think of the way female bodybuilding is perceived compared to male bodybuilding?
7. What kind of relationship do you have with male bodybuilders?
8. Tell me about your experiences of discrimination or stigmatization, if it has ever happened to you.
9. What kind of advantages and disadvantages do you experience as a female bodybuilder?
10. Have you ever felt any tensions or difficulties because of being both a woman and a bodybuilder? If yes, how did you try to solve them?

IV. Body

11. What kind of body practices do you have? How do you train? Describe me an average day of yours, please.

12. What happens to you before, during, after a competition? Tell me please your most memorable competition experience!

13. How does it feel to be that muscular? What kind of feeling and thoughts do you have while using your muscles?

14. What kind of appearance do you prefer in different situations of your life (training, workplace, competition, dating, going out)?

IV. Sexuality

15. What is your beauty ideal either male or female?

16. What kind of responses have you got considering your look from people of the same or the other sex?

17. What kind of advantages and disadvantages derive from being a hypermuscular woman in that respect?

18. How do you experience the possible stigmatization as being a Lesbian?

V. Context

19. What is the difference in being a Hungarian bodybuilder compared to other parts of the world?

20. What are the sources of support/stigmatization?

21. What do you think of the popularity of female bodybuilding in Hungary?

VI. Future

22. What do you think how the position of female bodybuilding will change in the next 20 years in Hungary?

23. What are your plans with bodybuilding for the future?

24. Imagine yourself 30 years later. How do you imagine who you will be?

APPENDIX II: Informed Consent Form

Research about Female Bodybuilders

Informed Consent Form

1. You are being asked to participate in an interview as a part of the Case Study of Hungarian Female Bodybuilders Oral History Project. You are being asked to participate because:

- a) You are one of the competitors in female bodybuilding
- b) You are a male bodybuilder being asked about female bodybuilding
- c) You are one of the leaders in female bodybuilding
- d) You are one of the coaches in female bodybuilding.

The main topics you will be asked about are the following: what are the motivations of a woman to be engaged in bodybuilding; what it means to be both a bodybuilder and a woman; female bodybuilders' experiences of stigmatization and discrimination inside and outside of the bodybuilder community; the relationship toward your body if you are a female bodybuilder; an average day of a female bodybuilder; the process of preparing for a competition; the experience of a competition; your beauty ideal, the appearances you prefer in different locations; the advantages/disadvantages the hypermuscular female body can cause in approaching someone from the opposite, or the same sex; the perceived support a female bodybuilder gets from her relatives and friends; the concept of health.

2. The interview will be audio-taped, transcribed, and parts of it will be quoted in my MA thesis in Gender Studies which will be available on-line for public and scholarly use at the website of the Central European University. Any member of the general public will have access to these interview excerpts and your words may be quoted in scholarly and popular publications.

3. The interview will take approximately one and a half hour and can be repeated for a second time based upon the agreement between interviewee and interviewer. There are no anticipated risks to participation in this interview. However, you can withdraw from the interview at any time without prejudice prior to the execution and delivery of a deed of gift (see the attached form). During the interview you may request to stop the recording at any time to discuss or clarify how you wish to respond to a question or topic before proceeding.

In the event that you choose to withdraw during the interview, any tape made of the interview will be either given to you or destroyed, and no transcript will be made of the interview.

With your permission, a photograph of you will be taken or borrowed for duplication. If you withdraw from the project, all copies of the photograph will be given to you. Any negative or digital image will be destroyed.

5. Anonymity is provided by the use of pseudonyms. Personally identifiable information that might be a threat to one's employability, financial standing, reputation, criminal or civil liability will be handled as confidential information. In case of information indicating a threat to the life of the interviewee or any other individual, the authorities will be informed.

6. Upon signing the deed of gift, the tape, photograph, and one copy of the transcript will be kept in the possession of Dominika Milanovich, dominika.milanovich@gmail.com. Further copies of the tape and the transcript will be housed elsewhere only with the permission of the interviewee.

7. If you have questions about the research project or procedures, you can contact Dominika Milanovich, student of Gender Studies at the Central European University, Budapest.

e-mail: dominika.milanovich@gmail.com

Interviewer signature _____

I agree to participate in this interview.

Interviewee Printed Name _____

Interviewee signature _____

Date ____/____/____

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