

# The Cult of Buff and Lean

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We see the image constantly. Handsome, young, *sculpted* men staring at us from magazines, billboards, television and movie screens.

This sexual image of men is relatively new. Thirty years ago, the male body was usually covered. Men didn't concern themselves with the shape of their bodies. That was a women's burden. But Marlon Brando changed all that when he appeared sexy and shirtless in "A Streetcar Named Desire." The sculpted male body re-emerged strongly within 1970s gay culture, and by the mid 1980s this image of manhood had become the dominant male media image.

Now gyms and body shaping through exercise and diet is the norm for middle class Western men, both straight and gay.

## Why has this happened?

Anthropologists argue that the body is a bearer of signs. People have, traditionally and in modern society, adorned their bodies. These adornments—clothing, jewellery, or scarification, tattooing and piercing—are all "signs" that express a particular person's sense of social belonging. Individuals negotiate the relationship between themselves and their society by manipulating their bodies; they reflect the wider social macrocosm *within* their individual being. Body sculpting—the cult of buff and lean—is the way in which many modern men express their sense of self in contemporary society.

Michele Lelwica says modern *media images* of the body function like the traditional icons of the church. In other words, people read themselves and their place in the world through the *pictures*. Modern media trades in the icons of *modern, secular, culture*.

## What do these pictures signify?

"Buff and lean" signifies successful contemporary manhood. Thin, sculpted, male bodies represent the ideal to which men within this modern culture must aspire.

Martin Heidegger has pointed out that the hallmark of modernity is its *technological* approach to life. But he contrasts two markedly different technologies.

Heidegger calls *ancient* technologies "poetic." He argues that they seek to uncover the *intrinsic* reality of things in a way that respects their deepest nature. Ancient Greek

sculpting was conceived in this way. The sculptor didn't turn marble into a statue. Rather, he "found" the statue inherent in the marble.

*Modern* technologies are more aggressive. They aren't geared to revealing the intrinsic nature of things, and people. Instead they aim to *turn them into* something that is useful for something else. Modern technology, for instance, turns a forest—a living organism in its own right—into a *resource* for the pulp and paper industry. Clear-cut logging is an example of aggressive modern resource management.

This modern approach is underpinned by the belief that reality should and can be controlled, and that it is humankind's role to do this. The accompanying "emotional" economy is modern man's fear that things will get out of control, that the human will to dominate will falter, and that we will be shown that we aren't masters of our own destiny. This, modern man fears, is the abyss that must be avoided.

The cult of "buff and lean" is a manifestation of this modern technology and its associated emotional economy. It represents the idea that we must have power *over* the body: the power to avoid the abyss of aging, change and decay. Rather than giving in, this cult suggests that the body take over.

The sculpted body is testimony to the technological power to transform the body into a resource. The body, like all other resources, is turned into a form of capital that will purchase respectability, status and demonstrate the wearer's power to take charge.

## **How does the body function as capital?**

The body has become a modern *resource* that is developed for its symbolic and commercial value.

In our youth-centred culture, the lean and buff body signifies the power to avoid the inevitable. It demonstrates that the will to *power* is stronger than the aging process. It is, as Susan Bordo argues, a testimony to the disciplined life. Muscles and lack of fat show that we have not given in to the easy life; instead it symbolises our *productivity*.

The buff body is also a visual indicator of our middle class life; it is the body of a sexy, hedonistic, consumer culture. And, in a society where the power to make sexual connections is ever more tied to marketability, this "buff and lean" body becomes a highly desirable resource.

The body also plays an important role in reproducing a particular image of masculinity. The current popularity of bigger and bigger musculature serves the interests of *heterosexual, patriarchal, masculinity*.

Bordo has said that anorexia nervosa among women reflects misogynist culture. She argues that as women take up more cultural, economic and political space in what is still a patriarchal world, the disappearing body of the anorexic works as a kind of apology. The masculine corollary of this is that the drive for ever *bigger* bodies is an attempt to compensate for the diminished *cultural* space by the occupying more *physical*, “embodied,” space.

Among gay men bodybuilding became popular as a vehicle for claiming the masculine space that was traditionally felt to be the preserve of heterosexual men. Muscles signified the power of masculinity for gay men, and many have pursued it. In the context of AIDS, the buff and lean body also came to be seen as a signifier of health, even though paradoxically many of the buff gay men of recent years got to be so as a result of the AIDS drug cocktail, which often includes steroids and testosterone. More recently, a generation of younger gay men have rejected the ubiquitous buff body of gay culture, and shape their bodies in decidedly lean and skinny ways.

What is common in all these stories is the aggressive re-shaping of men’s bodies as a *resource*. In turn, this “new” body is a signifier of one’s sense of self in the macroscopic landscapes of gender and sexuality.

## **Where does all this leave us?**

Heidegger says that the destiny of the modern technological mode is nihilism. This is so because this mode of thinking fails to appreciate and foster the *intrinsic* nature of being. In the case of anorexia this is explicit in terrifyingly obvious ways: the body is literally annihilated.

In the cult of “buff and lean” nihilism is the way men *deny* the intrinsic nature of the body in order to create a body that would *seem* to be in control. It is also evident in the ubiquitous use of the body as a resource for commerce. “Buff and lean” is everywhere regarded as a sign of success, in gender, class, discipline, productivity and health. The irony, of course, is that this “commercialization” of the body is a sign of our profound failure to live authentically. As such, the buff and lean body represents the body of nihilism.

We need new technologies of the body, technologies that share some of the gentleness of our predecessors. In this culture of embodied nihilism we need a *poetic* technology that reveals a more authentic body, one that is comfortable with its ultimate lack of control, that celebrates the process of aging, and that helps us appreciate what we really are and will inevitably become.

## Suggested reading

Bordo, S. 1993. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Bordo, S. 1999. *The Male Body: A New Look at Men in Public and Private*. N.Y.: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

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