

Gender as Experience: Transcending Female and Male Expression in Sports

Monika Roscher

Faculty of Social Science, Media and Sport, Johannes Gutenberg University

Published on the Internet, www.idrottsforum.org/articles/roscher/roscher100127.html
(ISSN 1652–7224), 2010–01–27

Copyright © Monika Roscher 2010. All rights reserved. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purposes of criticism and review, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the author.

Physical movement is a primordial and fundamental human activity, whereby we convey important aspects of who we are, and most importantly, perhaps, our sex/gender. A human being that is classified as “woman” can, by choosing a physical expression traditionally considered as male, create confusion regarding his or her sex or gender. Thus, it’s reasonable to assume that gender can be constructed through physical movement and its aesthetics. This argument is the starting point for Monika Roscher’s new article for idrottsforum.org about physicality and aesthetics. In her last article, Roscher presented an attempt at capturing the inherent aesthetics in the athletic movement, ideas originating from her dissertation, *Reflexives Bewegen: Phänomenologische Studien zu einer Ästhesiologie körperlicher Bildung*. In this new piece, gender is central to her argument.

“Everything is gendered, but gender isn’t everything”, writes Lisa Diane Brush, arguing for including the categories class and race/ethnicity in analyses of the position of women in society. In all likelihood, body movement can tell us something about other organizing and stratification principles, but in Monika Roscher’s analysis gender is the point of departure, and she discusses whether it’s possible, through phenomenological analysis of the physical, aesthetic movement in a sporting context, to study the potentiality of transcending the typical male and female physical expression. Both Pierre Bourdieu and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, independently and in different ways, formed the fundamental idea of an aesthetic reflexivity, an education through the body. The distinct feature of sporting activities is the dialectic structure of the possible and the given, and by challenging the individual and cultural boundaries of what is possible, the potential to transcend traditional perspectives arises. The physicality, as well as the gender, of a person is a social construction, and gender as experience occurs when female strengths are transformed into male strengths, and vice versa.

1. Introduction

Movement and motion are simultaneously the most overt and the most subtle of bodily expressions. They are the most *overt* in that it through movement that human beings present themselves to the world. How this movement is perceived leads to assumptions, their confirmation, or the questioning or rejection of preconceived ideas. If a human being is classified as “female“ it could potentially be confusing if her movements were perceived as typically “male“. But movement as such is also *subtle*, solely due to the fact that it is seldom questioned. Adult movements in particular are rarely discussed except in relation to sporting activities, therapeutic contexts or technique training (cf. Beier, 164 f.). The absence of inquiry is significant, as it is the fine structures that constitute everyday motor movements that fundamentally shape the constitution of the self. Conversely, it could be assumed that precisely this hidden authenticity has resulted in the paucity of movement research into the way that bi-gender is construed by society, how female and male expression is constructed and understood. Consequently, one could further assume that gender is construed through movement, even as this same movement conceals the construction.

The phenomenological significance of physical development in the constitution of the self has been widely discussed in sports philosophy, sports sociology and sports pedagogy. The construction of gender raises questions linked to aesthetic practice. The nature of physical development, its role in the construction of self and gender should be further examined.

Sport provides an ideal viewing ground for the incorporated allocations of meaning of practical actions and thus the practical logic of actions. Therefore, an examination of the aesthetic practice of movement in sport provides a valuable starting point for examining the possibilities of transcending typically ‘male’ and ‘female’ expression.

2. Physical Development

The basic assumption of physical development is that the experience of motor actions leads to profound recognition if the various personal and societal references revealed during the act become actively reflexive. This reflexivity, however, requires a dependence on a qualitative difference of specific basic experiences.

To prevent confusion, a clarification and categorisation of aesthetic practices as discussed above is required. This sport philosophy discussion will then be followed by a discussion of the underlying theories that shape the field in order to draw conclusions for the role aesthetics play in gender construction.

The aesthetics of an action is not solely considered to be in the beauty of a performance, although this may also be one result. Instead, it refers to realisation through perception. This recognition can manifest itself in the observation of beautiful movements, although these are no more than isolated specific occurrences. Likewise, the moment of realisation could manifest itself in a graceless tripping. The aesthetics of physical acts takes all forms, from grotesquely awkward to magically gracious. As long as aesthetics continue to confuse and defy expectations, this disruption provides a potential new structure of interpretation.

Realisation in sensory perception and its categorisation was already a subject of discussion in Aristotelian times. Later, philosophers with a propensity for phenomenology took up the idea of realisation through perception, which in turn led to experiments in “aesthetic thinking” and pre-predicative capacities in judging a situation. The sum of these parts is the knowledge that philosophical thoughts on aesthetic reflexivity are not modern phenomena. Recently, such thinking has been evident in sport related discourse which further incorporated the body into aesthetic thinking. This is not to imply that the body had not been an area of discussion in philosophical discourse, or that sport science has already run its course. Perhaps, it would be more appropriate to state that “aesthetic thinking” in sport scientific discourse has recently been examined specifically for its corporeal dimensions.

3. Theoretical background

This section seeks to integrate the pedagogical aspects arising from sport specific studies and contexts, particularly through an examination of the work of Käte Meyer-Drawe, whose concepts are also based on phenomenological assumptions.

Meyer-Drawe provides a thorough analysis of the thinking of centuries on sensory realisation, ranging from Plato and Aristotle to New Age phenomenologists, transferring the idea of a bodily comprehension into the notion of learning. In her book “Diskurse des Lernens” (Discourses of learning) she outlines an approach based on the concept of learning as experience (2008, 214). According to this approach, learning does not result in measurable/recognisable neurological structures of sensory experience. By referring to the fact that the semantics of learning are accessible to the learner while the syntactical structures of the brain are not, she outlines the constraints of these cognitive views of learning as memory formation. Instead of trying, inadequately, to reverse engineer neuronal images into possible meaning contexts, educational theory focuses on the process of the experience itself, as perception in itself is meaning allocation, and thus learning is experience.

Clearly, this is not intended to suggest that learning could be observed and functionalised by new methods. Rather, it draws our attention to the conditions and dynamics of learning from a pedagogical perspective, as devising a mechanism to objectify learning remains a mammoth, if not impossible task. However, there is also a potential to consider one’s own gender.

The analysis of learning raises many questions regarding aesthetic meaning. Firstly, if realisation begins in perception and, secondly, learning is experience with realisation itself occurring through sensory acts, it therefore becomes necessary to focus on aesthetic formation processes in order to gain a closer understanding of learning from this point of view.

In sport pedagogy, there are two possible explanations of how physical development constitutes itself: symbol and rhythm. Although they point to different structural backgrounds, both share the same core developmental theory. Both the theory of symbolic formation of knowledge (symbol) and the movement rhythm theory (rhythm) focus on specific changes in the order of things in a split second of the actual movement. Simply put, the moment when meaning is formed could be said to lie in the transition from one order of things to another. This is only a rough outline; however, it suffices for the purposes of this

paper. This transition is not a random change, but describes a “threshold state”, genesis of a higher level of being. The higher level should not be misunderstood as a predicative, but rather as a clarifying act that describes a more differentiated and more comprehensive order.

This act is initiated by a break with the expected, the expected being based on the culturally incorporated knowledge of things. In the broadest sense, this break can be understood as an incident that questions this order. The learner faces doubts and later, a certain confirmation e.g. the repetition of the unexpected, which leads to a genesis of meaning in which the facts are reinterpreted – leading to the potential development of a new mode of being.

4. Aesthetic Practice in Sport

Pierre Bourdieu has put forward an action theory which explains that it is not intentions that form the underlying principles for an action but acquired attitudes. His theory makes it possible to interpret actions as goal-oriented or purposeful without having to assume a specific purpose for executing the action itself in the first place (cf. 1998, 68). To clarify, he draws on the meaning of sport, as the athlete, if the rules of the game have been internalised, will behave in a way which is consistent with the rules, without having to make explicit conscious decisions. Furthermore, the athlete does not have to question the future actions of the other players, with the exception of having to deal with critical situations.

The habitual movements of players incorporate perceptions and actions, rules, meaning that judgements, considerations and the basics for decision-making processes are internalised. The players constantly make decisions during the game; however, contrary to what rationalist theory implies, this is not an intellectual process. Rather, the incorporated structures provide players with a guide, acting as a form of “practical reasoning” that acts as practical logic in the decision-making processes.

In this sense, Bourdieu’s theory of habitual movement aligns with the concept of the body as the origin of practical reasoning as promulgated by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Bourdieu, however, approaches the question of the structural conditions of perception predominantly from a socio-structural perspective, whereas, from a phenomenological perspective, the bodily dimension of perception and action is potentially more significant (cf. Waldenfels 2000). However, both schools of thought share the basic idea of an aesthetic reflexivity, an education through the body.

In sport, aesthetic reflexivity manifests itself in a particular way. The distinctive feature of sporting activities is the dialectic structure of the possible and the given (cf. Bietz & Böcker 2009, 119). In experimenting with individual and cultural boundaries of the possible and challenging these boundaries, the potential to transcend traditional perspectives arises. These transcending actions, arising through sports, therefore create a dynamic of socio-cultural development (see Huizinga 1938; Sutton-Smith 1978).

5. Transcending Gender

The physicality of a person is always formed by society (Bourdieu 1998). Consequently, a person's gender does not only begin with actions, but the perception and movement inherent in these actions displays traces of social formation. However, gender constructions can be manipulated and circumvented. Taking this into consideration, attention should be given to the fact that people develop their habitual actions as a result and a means of interacting with society; actions are not formed in isolation as an "I", but rather as a "we". Furthermore, following the approach taken by Bourdieu, the habitual actions that can be observed are always shaped by social and gender constructions, and one cannot scientifically distinguish what is assigned by society and what is assigned by gender (cf. Dölling & Kraus 1997, 225).

The actions of an individual and the culture in which these actions take place are interdependent (cf. Villa 2000), rendering any examination which did not take this into account, incomplete. The following thoughts on the process of a "gendered body" reflect this interdependence, in which unavoidable social structures are constantly inscribed on the body and the body in turn creates structures through its actions.

If one takes aesthetic education as a dynamic process, consequently, from a theoretical perspective, thoughts on the conditions of gender formation need to start with the question of how differences and borderline experiences can be facilitated systematically.

One systematic analysis has been provided by Elk Franke (2008). The following categorisations are based on Franke's structural approach to development through the body.

- Difference between movement conception and movement realisation
- Difference between motivation (intentions – want to) and ability (can do)
- Difference between performance expectations and performance limitations
- Difference between known and new situations (form of actions)

Based on this approach, conclusions can be drawn for the reflective potential of female and male expression in the aesthetic movements in sports. A female water polo player may experience herself as a very aggressive attacker, perhaps as a direct result of playing against a proactive defence player. Should her game strategy result in an opportunity to score a goal, this new form of action is confirmed as successful.

In team ball sports, a boy may experience that his own incorporated body language prevents him from incorporating recent rule changes, which should assign him a more dominant role in the game, into his playing style. The intention to express and the capacity to do so differ greatly, but incapacity does not preclude recognition – a football player may perceive a graceful move by his opponent as exceptionally well performed. The realisation shows an appreciation of a perceived outstanding ability to handle the ball smoothly.

However, the formation difference outlined here are not automatic conditions for a reflexive moment. The moment which initiates doubt is in fact the condition for the experience of difference, but only a specific confirmation of the unexpected enables the clarifying act, transcending gender specific expression. In terms of learning as experience, gender is not understood as the result of the experience process but as experience itself: *gender as experience*.

This however, does not clarify how habitual self-constructions are structured. Yet, certain structural elements of the display of gender in sport do exist. The specific understanding of the concept of ‘expression’ (*Ausdruck*) which shows in the formation of difference, refers back to Christoph Menke’s thoughts on power (*Kraft*). In Menke’s thinking, strength offers the ability to transcend from the One to the Other, the emerging of the Other from the One. The Other, however, is simultaneously an inherent construct of the individual, and as such is a permanent feature of the individual (see Menke 2008, 52 f.). Menke refers to Herder’s thinking of expression as the interaction and effect of the One on the Other (Herder 1993) rather than the relationship between the internal and the external influences.

While physical power, understood as mechanical strength, is relatively easy to measure, and to implement, aesthetic power goes beyond its own expression and into another. Since no laws of nature, no norms guide the power of the aesthetic, as is indeed the case with mechanical power, the effect of aesthetic power is play in and of itself (cf. Menke *ibid.*, 62).

Basically, transcending female and male physical expression in sport is an extension of the pre-existing ‘Other’ in the individual. Consequently, gender as experience occurs when female strengths are transformed into male strengths and vice versa. It is the mere act of playing sport that allows one gender specific expression to transform into another.

References

- Beier, S. (2006). Männerkörper vergesellschaftet. Bewegungserfahrung als Körperkonstruktion als Bewegungserfahrung. In R. Gugutzer (Ed.), *body turn. Perspektiven einer Soziologie des Körpers und des Sports*, 163-186. Bielefeld: transkript.
- Bietz, J. & Böcker, P. (2009). Spielen und Spiele spielen. In R. Laging (Ed.), *Inhalte und Themen des Bewegungs- und Sportunterrichts*, 108-136. Baltmannsweiler: Schneider Verlag Hohengehren.
- Böhnisch, L. (2003). Gender confusion? Beckham, Kahn und die Folgen. In *ibid.*, *Die Entgrenzung der Männlichkeit. Verstörungen und Formierungen des Mannseins im gesellschaftlichen Übergang*, 225-229. Opladen: Leske + Budrich.
- Bourdieu, P. (1998). *Praktische Vernunft. Zur Theorie des Handelns*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp (1956).
- Dölling, I. & Krais, B. (1997). Eine sanfte Gewalt. Pierre Bourdieu im Gespräch mit Irene Dölling und Margareta Steinrücke (March 1994). In *ibid.* (Ed.), *Ein alltägliches Spiel. Geschlechterkonstruktion in der sozialen Praxis*, 218-230. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.
- Franke, E. (2008). Erfahrungsbasierte Voraussetzungen ästhetisch – expressiver Bildung – zur Entwicklung einer domänenspezifischen „Sprache“ physischer Expression. In *ibid.* (Ed.), *Erfahrungsbasierte Bildung im Spiegel der Standardisierungsdebatte*, 195-215. Baltmannsweiler: Schneider Verlag Hohengehren.
- Herder, J. G. (1993). *Werke. Vol. 2, Schriften zur Ästhetik und Literatur. 1767-1781* (ed. by G.E. Grimm). Frankfurt a. M.: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag.
- Huizinga, J. (1938). *Homo Ludens. Vom Ursprung der Kultur im Spiel*. Leiden (ed. by E. Grassi. München).
- Menke, C. (2008). *Kraft. Ein Grundbegriff ästhetischer Anthropologie*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.
- Meyer-Drawe, K. (2008). *Diskurse des Lernens*. München: Fink.
- Sutton-Smith, B. (1978). *Die Dialektik des Spiels*. Schorndorf: Hofmann.
- Villa, P.-I. (2000). *Sexy Bodys. Eine soziologische Reise durch den Geschlechtskörper*. Opladen: Leske & Budrich.
- Waldenfels, B. (2000). *Das leibliche Selbst. Vorlesungen zur Phänomenologie des Leibes*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.