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### The white man's muscles

Until the 1980s, it was rare to see a white man semi-naked in popular fictions. The art gallery, sports and pornography offered socially sanctioned or cordoned-off images, but the cinema, the major visual narrative form of the twentieth century, only did so in particular cases. This was not so with non-white male bodies. In the Western, the plantation drama and the jungle adventure film, the non-white body is routinely on display. Dance numbers with body-baring chorus boys (up to and including Madonna's videos) most often used non-white (including 'Latin') dancers. Paul Robeson, the first major African-American acting star (as opposed to featured player), appeared torso-naked or more for large sections in nearly all his films, on a scale unimaginable with white male stars. The latter might be glimpsed for a brief shot washing or coming out of a swimming pool or the sea (at which point they instantly put on a robe), but a star like Rudolph Valentino (in any case Latin and often cast as a non-white) or a film like *Picnic* (1955) stand out as exceptions,<sup>1</sup> together with two genres: the boxing film (not really discussed here) and the adventure film in a colonial setting with a star possessed of a champion or built body.

This latter form is found in three cycles. One is the Tarzan films, beginning in 1912 with *Tarzan of the Apes*, continuing through forty-six further features, along with two television series and several Tarzan lookalikes (e.g. *King of the Jungle* (1927 and 1933) and *Bomba the Jungle Boy* (1949-)).<sup>2</sup> A second is the series of Italian films produced between 1957 and 1965 centred on heroes drawn from classical antiquity played by US bodybuilders, a cycle that has come to be known as the peplum.<sup>3</sup> Third, since the mid-1970s, there have been vehicles for such muscle stars as Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone, Claude Van Damme and Dolph Lundgren.<sup>4</sup>

The two common features of these films - a champion/built body and a colonial setting - set terms for looking at the naked white male body. The white man has been the centre of attention for many centuries of Western culture, but there is a problem about the display of his body, which gives another inflection to the general paradox, already adumbrated, of whiteness and visibility. A naked body is a vulnerable body. This is so in the most fundamental sense - the bare body has no protection from the elements - but also in a social sense. Clothes are bearers of prestige, notably of wealth, status and class: to be without them is to lose prestige. Nakedness may also reveal the inadequacies of the body by comparison with social ideals. It may betray the relative similarity of male and female, white and non-white bodies, undo the remorseless insistences on difference and concomitant power carried by clothes and grooming. The exposed white male body is liable to pose the legitimacy of white male power: why should people who look like that - so unimpressive, so like others - have so much power?

At the same time, there is value in the white male body being seen. On the one hand, the body often figures very effectively as a point of final

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explanation of social difference. By this argument, whites - and men - are where they are socially by virtue of biological, that is, bodily superiority. The sight of the body can be a kind of proof. On the other hand, the white insistence on spirit, on a transcendent relation to the body, has also led to a view that perhaps non-whites have better bodies, run faster, reproduce more easily, have bigger muscles, that perhaps indeed 'white men can't jump', a film title that has both a literal, basketball reference and an appropriately heterosexual, reproductive connotation. The possibility of white bodily inferiority falls heavily on the shoulders of those white men who are not at the top of the spirit pile, those for whom their body is their only capital. In the context particularly of white working-class or 'underachieving' masculinity, an assertion of the value and even superiority of the white male body has especial resonance (cf. Walkerdine 1986, Tasker 1993). The built body in colonial adventures is a formula that speaks to the need for an affirmation of the white male body without the loss of legitimacy that is always risked by its exposure, while also replaying the notion that white men are distinguished above all by their spirit and enterprise.

I will look first at the connotations of this kind of body and then at the colonial setting, before discussing the relation between them. In the final part of the chapter I look in more detail at the particular instance of the peplum, bringing the class address of colonial muscularity into focus and opening up the latter's relation to an avowedly white form of politics, fascism.

Tarzan, Hercules, Rambo<sup>5</sup> and the other heroes of the films in question here are all played by actors with champion and/or built physiques. The first Tarzans, and the stars of an earlier (c.1912-26) Italian muscle cycle, were drawn from the strong man acts of the variety stage. Thereafter, however, sports proper generally provided the performers. Of the Tarzans, James Peirce (1926) was an All-American centre on the Indiana University Football Team, and Frank Merrill (1928 and 1929) a national gym champion; Johnny Weissmuller (twelve films between 1932 and 1948) had five Olympic gold medals for swimming; Buster Crabbe (1933) was also an Olympic swimmer, Herman Brix (1935 and 1938) an Olympic shot putter, Glenn Morris (1938) an Olympic decathlon champion, Denny Miller (1960) a UCLA basketball star and Mike Henry (three films between 1967 and 1968) a star line-backer for the Los Angeles Rams. Although Lex Barker (1949-55), Jock Mahoney (1962-3) and Ron Ely (TV 1966-8) were beefy rather than sculpted, Gordon Scott (1955-60) was clearly a bodybuilder, while Miles O'Keefe (1981) and Wolf Larson (TV 1991-3) are manifest creatures of the Nautilus age. The stars of the peplum and recent muscleman films are also obviously gym products. In two notable cases they are explicitly champions of bodybuilding: Steve Reeves (the most famous peplum star) won the Mr America contest in 1947 and Mr Universe in 1950 and Arnold Schwarzenegger was seven times Mr Olympia.