



CREaTE

Canterbury Research and Theses Environment

Canterbury Christ Church University's repository of research outputs

<http://create.canterbury.ac.uk>

Please cite this publication as follows:

Wellard, I. (2015) Boxing, violence and sadism. Embodied Thoughts of the Month, 1. pp. 9-11.

Link to official URL (if available):

This version is made available in accordance with publishers' policies. All material made available by CReaTE is protected by intellectual property law, including copyright law. Any use made of the contents should comply with the relevant law.

Contact: create.library@canterbury.ac.uk



Embodied thought of the month (ETM) – March 2015

Our embodied thought of the month is offered as a regular brief discussion point and will be presented by members of the sport and body cultures research group about topics that we feel are interesting, relevant, topical and important.

Boxing, violence and sadism!

Last month's ETM raised the idea of 'pleasurable suffering' and how there are complex dynamics going on in the way an individual may experience pleasure and pain. Michael Atkinson's descriptions of fell running were used as an example to highlight the dovetailing of the physical with the emotional and the environment. What this tells us is the way that pain and pleasure become inextricably bound up with the embodied experience but this is not just a physical sensation it is also something that can be influenced by social discourses as well as the historical and social context of the way in which pleasure or pain can be understood.

However, where we might possibly consider pleasurable suffering in a kind of 'masochistic' sense, there is also an element of pain that we need to understand in the way that it is not always something that is experienced purely by the individual but can be inflicted upon others. In this way, we can take into consideration other elements that relate to issues of power and maybe even sadism. Boxing provides a useful example of this, particularly in light of recent academic interest in broader forms of martial arts, not just professional boxing but also seen in wider society with increased popularity of various versions of combat based physical activities (such as boxercise classes, punch bags next to cardio equipment in mainstream gyms etc). So, while these forms of engaging in physical activity are promoted in a positive way, chiefly through the health related benefits to be gained, the underlying darker side of sadism and uncritical exploration of human power relationships remain hidden (I could be writing a critique of 50 shades of Grey here!).

In his forthcoming chapter exploring boxing, Christopher R. Matthews provides an account of his experiences 'in the ring' and reveals some of these darker messages relating to the complex embodied relationships that are negotiated within the context of boxing. In this particular sport, the notions of pleasurable suffering, mentioned above, can be considered in relation to the two-way process of both experiencing pain and inflicting it. Consequently, complex notions of power relationships are brought to the table in a much more direct sense. By entering into the ring, it could be argued, one has to embody a particular way of being where any conscious forms of critique are blocked in order to preserve one's right to be there. Thus, more reasoned questions about why one wants to engage in an activity where the aim is to cause physical harm to another person or why one feels the need to dominate another person in an aggressive manner are left to the side. Unpacking the initial intentions and motivations, as well as being possibly disruptive to the desired outcome of

the contest, reveal more uncomfortable 'truths' about the human condition. Attempting to understand the motivations for taking part in boxing makes me think of an analogy like the 'Lord of the Rings' – where one slips on the ring (or slips into the metaphorical ring) and becomes seduced or overtaken by the 'dark side'. In some way this is similar to the seductiveness of complicit masculinity as described by Raewyn Connell. There are aspects of society that become so embedded in our being that we sub-consciously mask them, or are, indeed, too cowardly to confront. For example, even though I would not consider entering into the boxing ring, precisely because of my anti-violence beliefs, I am still occasionally seduced by the dark side of sport. In my book on *Sport, Masculinities and the Body*, I provide an example of when I played a tennis match against another gay guy in a singles league and then became so carried away with the whole match that I ended up wanting to 'beat the guy up' on the court. In this case, I described it by talking about complying with hegemonic masculinity in a situation where things seemed to take over without me knowing. In his chapter, Matthews talks about similar forms of complicity when he enters the ring. Here, though, there is a more defined element of the physical where there is a hint of enjoyment gained through both inflicting pain and receiving it. To an extent, one could explain this with the notion of 'rough and tumble' play, which is a key element in childhood play where giving and receiving physical knocks are part of the whole experience. Only the other day, I was having 'rough and tumble' play with my dog. We end up sort of wrestling on the ground and I invariably come out of it worse, with cuts and bruises. But I consider it fun and although the cuts may hurt they can be justified in terms of the whole game (and I know he didn't mean it). However, where it may be more reasonable to align rough and tumble play with a sport like rugby, it is less convincing when considered in relation to boxing or other martial arts when there is a clear intention to physically harm the opponent – no matter how the rule books may express this. Thus, for me, although I can understand the arguments offered for why boxing remains popular, I still cannot ignore its underlying *raison d'être*, which is ultimately about dominating another person through the use of physical violence. Nevertheless, despite my personal take on it, boxing is interesting because it offers us a fascinating example of much more complex forms of embodied pleasure and pain - that cannot simply be described as either pleasure or pain.

Notes:

1. Christopher R. Matthew's discussion on his experiences researching boxing can be seen in his chapter in the forthcoming book on *Researching Embodied Sport: exploring movement cultures* to be published by Routledge later this year.
2. Ian Wellard's book, *Sport, Masculinities and the Body*, was published in 2009 by Routledge.
3. Raewyn Connell describes 'complicit masculinity' in her book *Masculinities* published in 2005 by Polity Press.

Next month – Continuing these embodied experiences of pain, in April's ETM, James will provide reflections on the disabled sporting body in ways that help us to question the normalcy of inhabiting an 'able' body.