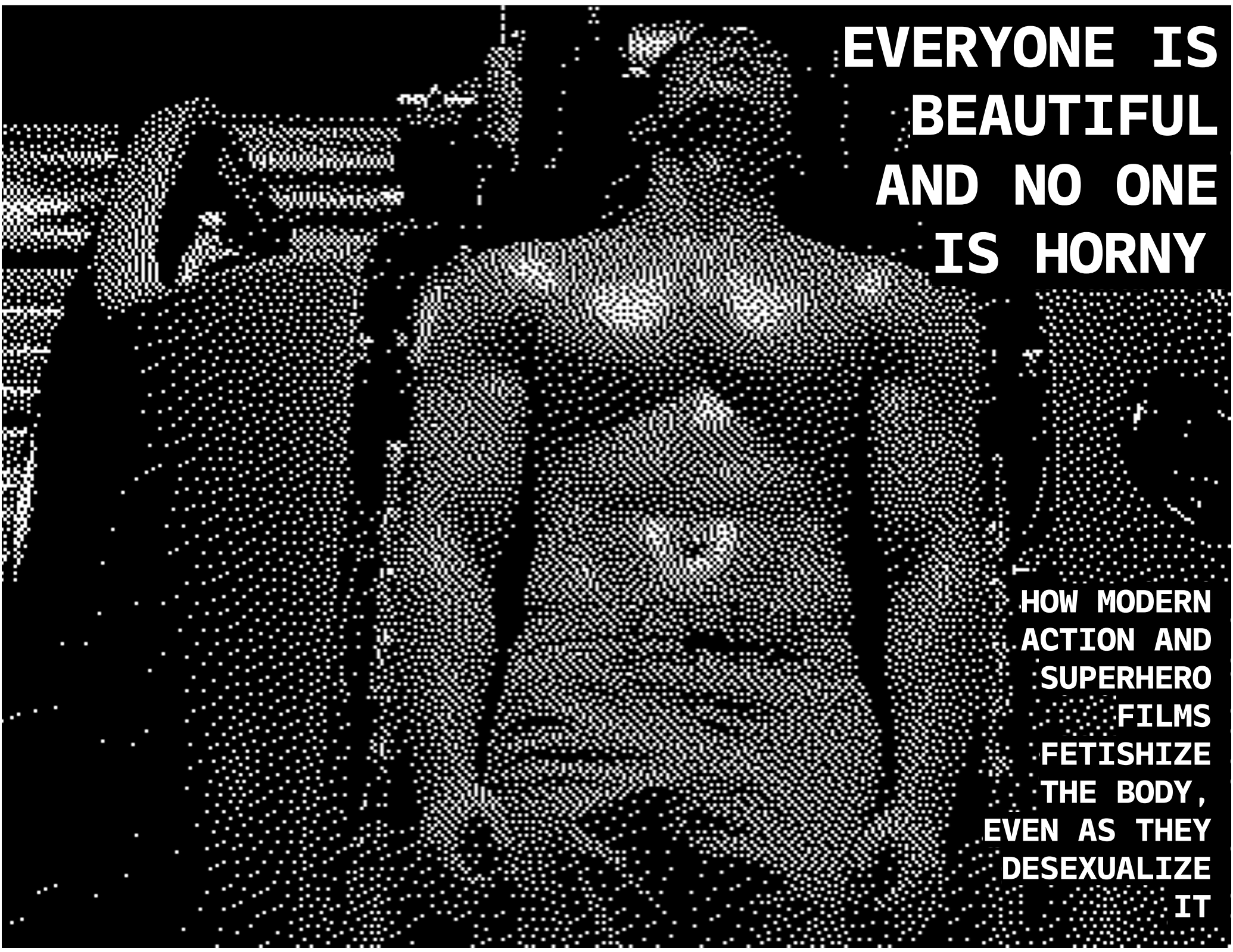




**EVERYONE IS
BEAUTIFUL
AND NO ONE
IS HORNY**

**HOW MODERN
ACTION AND
SUPERHERO
FILMS
FETISHIZE
THE BODY,
EVEN AS THEY
DESEXUALIZE
IT**

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Robert Pattinson is playing the next Batman in a film set to release in 2022. He has proudly bragged about his refusal to bulk up for the role, despite an outcry from superhero movie fans.

In a 2019 interview with *Variety*, Pattinson said, “In the last three or four movies, I’ve got a masturbation scene. I did it in ‘High Life.’ I did it in ‘Damsel.’ And ‘The Devil All the Time.’ I only realized when I did it the fourth time [in *The Lighthouse*].”

Perhaps he will be the hero we need.

When Paul Verhoeven adapted *Starship Troopers* in the late 1990s, did he know he was predicting the future? The endless desert war, the ubiquity of military propaganda, a cheerful face shouting victory as more and more bodies pile up?

But the scene that left perhaps the greatest impact on the minds of Nineties kids—and the scene that anticipated our current cinematic age the best—does not feature bugs or guns. It is, of course, the shower scene, in which our heroic servicemen and -women enjoy a communal grooming ritual.

On the surface, it is idyllic: racial harmony, gender equality, unity behind a common goal—and firm, perky asses and tits.

And then the characters speak. The topic of conversation? Military service, of course. One joined for the sake of her political career. Another joined in the hopes of receiving her breeding license. Another talks about how badly he wants to kill the enemy. No one looks at each other. No one flirts.

A room full of beautiful, bare bodies, and everyone is only horny for war.

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In the early 2000s, there was a brief period where actresses pretended that their thinness was natural, almost accidental. Skinny celebrities confessed their love of burgers and fries in magazines; models undergoing profile interviews engaged in public consumption of pasta; leading ladies joked about how little they exercised and how much they hated it. It was all bullshit: no one looks like that without calorie restriction. We knew it then, and we know it now.

We don’t pretend anymore. The promotional cycles for blockbuster movies now include detailed descriptions of the performers’ fitness regimens. We watch actors doing burpees or shaking ropes with expensive personal trainers. There is some talk of diets, though not terribly detailed—and no mention of steroids or other hormonal supplements, even though male actors’ suddenly ultra-swollen selfies on Instagram suggest physiques crafted with chemical assistance.

Actors are more physically perfect than ever: impossibly lean, shockingly muscular, with magnificently coiffed hair, high cheekbones, impeccable surgical enhancements, and flawless skin, all displayed in form-fitting superhero costumes with the obligatory shirtless scene thrown in to show off shredded abs and rippling pecs

And this isn't just the lead and the love interest: supporting characters look this way too, and even villains (frequently clad in monstrous makeup) are still played by conventionally attractive performers. Even background extras are good-looking, or at least inoffensively bland. No one is ugly. No one is really fat. Everyone is beautiful.

And yet, no one is horny. Even when they have sex, no one is horny. No one is attracted to anyone else. No one is hungry for anyone else.

When revisiting a beloved Eighties or Nineties film, Millennial and Gen X viewers are often startled to encounter long-forgotten sexual content content: John Connor's conception in *Terminator*, Jamie Lee Curtis's toplessness in *Trading Places*, the spectral blowjob in *Ghostbusters*. These scenes didn't shock us when we first saw them. Of *course* there's sex in a movie. Isn't there always?

The answer, of course, is not anymore—at least not when it comes to modern blockbusters

We're told that Tony Stark and Pepper Potts are an item, but no actual romantic or sexual chemistry between them is shown in the films. Wonder Woman and Steve Trevor utterly lack the sexual chemistry to convince us that either of them would be thirsty enough to commandeer a coma victim's body (as they do in *Wonder Woman 1984*) so they can enjoy a posthumous hookup. In defiance of Norse mythology, Chris Hemsworth's Thor smiles at Natalie Portman like a dumb golden retriever puppy without ever venturing to rend her asunder with his mighty hammer, so to speak. Not that the competition is any better. Despite accusations of being an incel icon, it is Heath Ledger's Joker, not Christian Bale's chaste and sexless Batman, who exudes the most sexual energy in the Dark Knight trilogy.

And speaking of Christopher Nolan's inexplicably sexless oeuvre—did anyone else think it odd how *Inception* enters the deepest level of a rich man's subconscious and finds *not* a psychosexual Oedipal nightmare of staggering depravity, but... a ski patrol?

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Let's not pretend that Old Hollywood was a progressive haven of body positivity. Since the departure of voluptuous vamp Theda Bara from the silver screen, actors have always gone to extremes to

to bellow at us for being too fat to defeat al Qaeda: *Honey, We're Killing the Kids*; *Supersize Me*; *You Are What You Eat*, in which a bony harridan screeched at Britons whose feces did not meet her exacting standards; *The Biggest Loser*, where lean coaches bellowed at fat contestants in a manner strikingly similar to that of a stereotypical drill instructor. And muscles—giant, pulsating, steroid-enhanced muscles—returned to screens. But the new muscle era lacks the eroticism of Eighties action cinema. Arnold Schwarzenegger showed his glutes in *Terminator*; Sylvester Stallone stripped for *First Blood* and *Tango & Cash*; *Bloodsport* shows more of Jean Claude Van Damme's body than that of his love interest.

For the most part, though, today's cinema hunks are nevernudes. The Marvel Cinematic Universe is strictly PG-13, as one expects from a Disney product. And even in the DC universe, there's very little of human sexuality. Capefans' demands for more "mature" superhero movies always mean more graphic violence, *not* more sex. They panicked over Dr. Manhattan's glowing blue penis in *Watchmen*, and they still haven't forgiven Joel Schumacher for putting nipples on the batsuit.

Today's stars are action figures, not action heroes. Those perfect bodies exist only for the purpose of inflicting violence upon others. To have fun is to become weak, to let your team down, and to give the enemy a chance to win, like Thor did when he got fat in *Endgame*.

This cinematic trend reflects the culture around it. Even before the pandemic hit, Millennials and Zoomers were less sexually active than the generation before them. Maybe we're too anxious about the Apocalypse; maybe we're too broke to go out; maybe having to live with roommates or our parents makes it a little awkward to bring a partner home; maybe there are chemicals in the environment screwing up our hormones; maybe we don't know how to navigate human sexuality outside of rape culture; maybe being raised on the message that our bodies are a nation-ending menace has dampened our enthusiasm for physical pleasure.

Eating disorders have steadily increased, though. We are still getting our bodies ready to fight The Enemy, and since we are at war with an abstract concept, the enemy is invisible and ethereal. To defeat it, our bodies must lose solidity as well.

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But there is hope.

whoever that may be.

The United States is, of course, not immune to this. The Presidential Fitness Test sprang up in the mid-20th century after studies found that American children lagged behind Europeans in certain tests of flexibility and calisthenic ability. Cold War paranoia only amped up this anxiety, particularly as we entered the 1980s. What if our kids were too fat to defeat communism? This obsession meshed beautifully with boomer yuppie narcissism and birthed the aerobics fad.

Then the Nineties hit, the Berlin Wall fell, and spandex and sweatbands became hilariously passe. While America still obsessed over thinness, it was not for the sake of strength. Two things happened at the dawn of the new millennium to bring back physical culture.

The first occurred in 1998, when BMI standards shifter aa few points. Formerly, one needed a BMI of 27 (for women) or 28 (for men) to be classified as overweight, but the new standard lowered the cutoff to 25 points. Twenty-nine million Americans instantly became overweight without gaining an ounce. Under the new guidelines, doctors could prescribe them diet drugs or recommend weight loss surgery.

A nationwide panic rose; headlines screamed about a new plague of fat people whose bodies were ticking time bombs destined to deliver death and destruction at any moment. Stock footage of fat people ambling about in public, filmed from the neck down to protect their identities (and more effectively dehumanize them), became a common sight on television news as bony broadcasters droned about the horrors of the Obesity Epidemic. Curiously, hardly any of the reports on this sudden increase in overweight/obese Americans bothered to mention the BMI standard shift.

The second event was, of course, 9/11.

The attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon sparked a new War on Terror, and America needed to get in shape so we could *win that war*. The USA's hyper-militaristic troop-worshipping post-9/11 culture seeped into the panic over obesity and gave birth to a terrifying, swole baby. Public school gym classes featured special military fitness days in which students practiced throwing mock grenades. George W. Bush added an Adult Fitness Challenge to the Presidential Fitness program. On American and British television, a new wave of documentaries and reality shows sprang up

maintain a certain look. Rita Hayworth underwent an ethnic makeover to appear more Caucasian so she could get leading roles. Stars of the 1920s limited their fluid consumption to two glasses a day to avoid water weight. Jane Fonda suffered from severe bulimia at the height of her sex symbol status; so did Marlon Brando.

But old films still featured recognizable human bodies and human faces—bodies that could theoretically be achieved by a single person without the aid of a team of personal trainers, dieticians, private chefs, and chemists.

In the films of the Eighties and Nineties, leading actors were good looking, yes, but still human. Kurt Russel's Snake Plissken was a hunk, but in shirtless scenes his abs have no definition. Bruce Willis was handsome, but he's more muscular now than he was in the Nineties, when he was routinely branded a bona fide sex symbol. And when Isabella Rosselini strips in *Blue Velvet*, her skin is pale and her body is soft. She looks vulnerable and real.

And yet, these characters fucked. *Blue Velvet*'s Dorothy Vallens and Jeffrey Beaumont fucked. Michael Keaton's Batman and Michelle Pfeiffer's domme Catwoman fucked. Kyle Reese and Sarah Connor fucked. Snake Plissken didn't fuck on screen, but the character radiates overwhelming sex-haver energy. And I defy you to find a mainstream film with a moment as horny and gay as the sexy saxophone solo from *The Lost Boys*.

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Seen today, one of the most striking scenes in 1982's *Poltergeist* is not the evil clown doll or the monster tree, but a moment of relaxed affection between the parents. The father—a bald, beer-bellied Craig T. Nelson—cracks jokes and prances for his wife, who wears a frumpy nightgown and smokes a joint and yammers weed thoughts and laughs at her husband's silly display. Finally, the husband playfully dives onto the bed. Neither character is glamorous in this scene, but their relationship feels frisky and lived-in and charismatic and *real*.

The house looks real, too. There are toys and magazines scattered around the floor. There are cardboard boxes waiting to be unpacked since the recent move. Framed pictures rest against the wall; the parents haven't gotten around to mounting them yet. The kitchen counters are cluttered and mealtimes are rambunctious and sloppy, as one expects in a house with three children. They're building a pool in the backyard, but not for appearances: it's a place

for the kids to swim, for the parents to throw parties, and for the father to reacquaint himself with his love of diving.

At the time, this house represented an aspirational ideal of American affluence.

Compare this to homes in films now: massive, sterile cavernous spaces with minimalist furniture. Kitchens are industrial-sized and spotless, and they contain no food. There is no excess. There is no mess.

In her blog *McMansion Hell*, Kate Wagner examines precisely why these widely-hated 5000-square foot housing bubble behemoths are so awful. Over and over again, she reiterates the point that McMansions are not built to be homes; they're built to be short-term investments.

Kate writes, "The inside of McMansions are designed in order to cram the most 'features' inside for the lowest costs." These features exist to increase the house's resale value, not to make it a good place to live. No thought is given to the labor needed to clean and maintain these spaces. The master bathroom includes intricate stone surfaces that can only be scrubbed with a toothbrush; the cathedral ceilings in the living room raise the heating and cooling costs to an exorbitant sum; the chandelier in the grand entryway dangles so high that no one can replace the bulbs in it, even with a stepladder.

The same fate has befallen our bodies. A body is no longer a holistic system. It is not the vehicle through which we experience joy and pleasure during our brief time in the land of the living. It is not a home to live in and be happy. It, too, is a collection of features: six pack, thigh gap, cum gutters. And these features exist not to make our lives more comfortable, but to increase the value of our assets. Our bodies are investments, which must always be optimized to bring us... what, exactly? Some vague sense of better living? Is a life without bread objectively better than a life with it? When we were children, did we dream of counting every calorie and logging every step?

A generation or two ago, it was normal for adults to engage in sports not purely as self-improvement but as an act of leisure. People danced for fun; couples socialized over tennis; kids played stickball for lack of anything else to do. Solitary exercise at the gym also had a social, rather than moral, purpose. People worked out to look hot so they could attract other hot people and fuck them.

Whatever the ethos behind it, the ultimate goal was pleasure.

Not so today. Now, we are perfect islands of emotional self-reliance, and it is seen as embarrassing and co-dependent to want to be touched. We are doing this for ourselves, because we, apropos of nothing, desperately want to achieve a physical standard set by some invisible Other in an insurance office somewhere.

Contemporary gym ads focus on rigidly isolated self-improvement: be your best self. Create a new you. We don't exercise, we don't work out: we *train*, and we train in fitness programs with names like *Booty Bootcamp*, as if we're getting our booties battle-ready to fight in the Great Booty War. There is no promise of intimacy. Like our heroes in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, like Rico and Dizzy and all the other infantry in *Starship Troopers*, we are horny only for annihilation.

A lesser-discussed side effect of extreme calorie restriction is the loss of libido. Bodybuilders experience this as they go on crash diets to quickly cut fat so that their muscles will show during competitions; though they look like physically perfect specimens of manhood, they don't dream of women, but of cheeseburgers and fries. Many eating disorder patients lose their sex drive completely and even stop menstruating.

When a body receives fewer calories, it must prioritize essential life support systems over any function not strictly necessary for the body's immediate survival. Sexual desire falls into the latter category, as does high-level abstract thought. A body that restricts food and increases exercise believes it is undergoing a famine, which is not an ideal time to reproduce.

Is there anything more cruelly Puritanical than enshrining a sexual ideal that leaves a person unable to enjoy sex?

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When a nation feels threatened, it gets swole. Germans and Norwegians became obsessed with individual self-improvement through physical fitness around the end of the Napoleonic Era. British citizens took up this Physical Culture as the 19th century—and their empire—began to wane. And yoga, in its current practice as a form of meditative strength training, came out of the Indian Independence movement of the 1920s and 30s.

The impetus of these movements isn't fitness for the sake of pleasure, for the pure joys of strength and physical beauty. It's competitive. It's about getting strong enough to fight The Enemy,