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The woman is perfected: A psychoanalytic reading of systemic abuse in women's artistic gymnastics

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Abstract

This article brings forward a psychoanalytic reading of the recent abuse scandals in women's gymnastics. By taking into consideration wider psychoanalytic literature on sport as well as gymnastics' historical development, this structural analysis of systemic abuse focuses on two overarching questions: firstly, what is the libidinal economy of perfectionism underlying the sport, and secondly, what is the role of sexual difference and gender ideals within this economy? The paper argues that women's gymnastics, as a sport which aims at performing perfected femininity, is submitted to deeply patriarchal structures of gendered oppression and subordination.

Keywords

applied psychoanalysis, women's gymnastics, abuse, perfectionism, gender ideals

In 2020, the world of gymnastics was shaken when Netflix aired *Athlete A* (Cohen & Shenk, 2020), a documentary on the serial sexual abuse of gymnasts by renowned USA Gymnastics doctor, Larry Nassar. Over two decades, Nassar had abused hundreds of athletes, women and girls, under the guise of medical treatment. While attempts had been made by survivors to report the crimes, institutions such as USA Gymnastics (USAG), Michigan State University, United States Olympic Committee and even the Federal Bureau of Investigation had covered up complaints and enabled Nassar to continue his medical malpractice (Cohen & Shenk, 2020). The documentary revolves mostly around Nassar, but it also exposes USAG's wider culture, the ways in which world-class gymnasts are trained, treated and exploited. Sharing a glimpse of the effects of this structure, it tells stories of gymnasts being deprived of water and food, undergoing physical punishment, belittlement, and their bodies being pushed beyond any limitations of injury or pain. Watching the documentary, it becomes clear that coach behaviours can neither be justified by a scientific framework, nor by the idea that it takes tough training methods to produce Olympic athletes. Many of the coaches' actions and inactions, including not reporting claims of sexual abuse, have no rational reason for how they contribute to producing the skills of an elite gymnast.

Athlete A triggered an international wave of athletes coming forward to share their experiences. In Australia, Holland, New Zealand, Switzerland and the UK legal reviews were conducted as a result (Gymnasts For Change, n.d.). Gymnasts spoke about eating disorders, being beaten, shamed and punished for their supposed failures and imperfections. In the UK, a group lawsuit was made by 17 gymnasts including former Olympians in 2020. Their claim was that they, too, had been subjected to the abusive structures of the sport. British Gymnastics (BG), the sport's ruling body in the UK, had provided the structural conditions for people in authority to do with athletes what they doomed necessary to produce Olympic medallists, upholding a system in which a coach had total control over handling the gymnast.

In 2022, the Whyte Review was published, a detailed report, commissioned by UK Sport and Sport England, which evaluated BG's culture between 2008 and 2020. It collected data from over 350 accounts given by gymnasts, parents, coaches and welfare officers, who contributed information mostly related to the treatment of female elite gymnasts by female coaches. The review clearly identifies systemic emotional and physical abuse and the prevalence of a "culture of fear" that defines the sport in the UK (Whyte, 2022, p. 102). Interestingly, it also highlights the outstanding success of British gymnasts, and that "the board presided over significant financial and membership growth" during the period of review (Whyte, 2022, p. 26). Gymnasts seemed to not only have survived the maltreatment, but performed better than ever, earning their home country an Olympic medal for the first time in history and the organisation they represented financial prosperity. Despite identifying some of the sport's problematic key features such as perfectionism and early-specialisation, the review concludes that the reasons for the organisational malfunctions that led to the abuse are to be found in shortcomings with coach education, policy implementation and safeguarding strategies. It states:

> From the limited coach training resources that I was able to access, it was not obvious that physical punishment or chastisement had been the subject of clear guidance in course materials. The 2013 level 2 coach training material did make clear that slapping was inappropriate, but this was an isolated reference. If the offending coaches had read BG's Child Protection Policies, as they were required to, they would have known that any form of physical chastisement was prohibited. (Whyte, 2022, p. 60)

In this paragraph, we can see the assumption that if coaches had been better educated, if they had been aware that their behaviour was inappropriate, the abuse would not have happened.

But is this position tenable? Can we presume that if educational materials had been more elaborate and if BG had made sure policies were read, coaches would not have slapped or starved gymnasts, or threatened to "put their seize 9 feet up [their] arse" (Whyte, 2022, p. 75)? Was the problem simply that they did not know, or should have known better? A further interesting detail in the review is that despite remarking that data derived mainly from female gymnasts regarding female coaches, it mentions sexual difference only peripherally. Curiously, sexual abuse is discussed as the only non-systemic kind of abuse, dedicating only half a page to the issue as compared to 25 pages on emotional abuse and 15 pages on physical abuse.[1] At the same time, the relevance of the problem of femininity and comparisons to the male version of the sport are implicitly stated throughout the text. From a psychoanalytic perspective, we may want to problematise these two assumptions, namely: that abuse is seen as resulting from a lack of conscious knowledge about rules, and that the questions of gender and sexual difference are considered only tangentially. Regarding the first point, we may note that, from a psychoanalytic perspective, the transgression of rules is less a matter of knowledge than of enjoyment, as cultural philosopher Todd McGowan (2022) explains: "We enjoy at odds with how we know. That is to say, we enjoy not in spite of knowing better but because we know better", which is why "instruction alone cannot alter how we enjoy" (p. 20). In this sense, looking at the problem of abuse as related to enjoyment as opposed to (a lack of) knowledge challenges the discourse underlying the Whyte Review, as well as the mainstream understanding of abuse in gymnastics. The second point regarding the supposedly minor role of sexual difference and gender also requires our close attention. Psychoanalytically, we may be alerted by the fact that gender and sexual difference are absolutely foundational in the way the sport is structured, and yet almost absent when key issues of abuse are identified, as is the

1 The Whyte Review (2022) claims that 49% of received data describes physical abuse, 67% emotional abuse and 9% sexual abuse. Each form of abuse is discussed in a dedicated section. Calculating the ratio between the quantitative prevalence of the type of abuse and amount of pages analysing it, emotional abuse is discussed more than six times, and physical abuse more than five times as much as sexual abuse.

case in the Whyte Review.[2] This becomes particularly relevant if we follow Ian Parker's (2014) idea that absences in a text may indicate how a discourse is unconsciously structured and where power and authority are located. Therefore, in order to conduct a psychoanalytic reading of systemic abuse within women's gymnastics, this article will raise two questions: How can we theorise the economy of enjoyment underlying the sport? What is the role of sexual difference within it? While the global scandals emerged within all forms of women's gymnastics, this article focuses on women's artistic gymnastics (WAG) specifically, recognising that some of its ideas may be applicable to other branches of the sport, too. I begin by thematically reviewing the literature which underpins my analysis, with regards to the wider dialogue between sport and psychoanalysis, ideals and aesthetics in sport. This is followed by a historical overview of WAG to show the close entanglement between the sport and sociopolitical factors. Subsequently, I bring forward a psychoanalytic reading of WAG's libidinal economy, and explore the role of sexual difference within it. Importantly, this analysis will draw on material and events that occurred before 2020 as this is when the scandals were made public. My insights, therefore, are limited to this particular time period.

Ideals and Aesthetics in Sport

Research tends to acknowledge the general lack of writing on sport and psychoanalysis. In fact, when it comes to the field of gymnastics specifically, psychoanalytic accounts become even more scarce. For this reason, the following review highlights those themes in the literature on sport and psychoanalysis that may be applicable to WAG. James Hansell (2010) describes sport as applied psychoanalysis par excellence, seeing sport as a cultural practice in which libido is operative in an economy which is outside socially accepted parameters. This particular libidinal economy is discussed as allowing for the centrality of aggression,

2 One may argue that *Athlete A* indeed addresses the question of gender and sexual difference by illuminating the sexual abuse of girls and women specifically, however, the documentary does not explore the constitutive role gender ideals carry within the structure of the sport.

narcissism, sexual difference, pre-Oedipal fantasies, and post-Oedipal submission to sociality (Garratt, 2015; Hunt, 1996). Daniel Dervin (2016) suggests that training in sport directs an enormous amount of aggression towards the self, manifesting through muscle activity, coordination, speed, stamina and interaction with equipment. Similarly, Heather Sykes (2007) thinks of athletic training as a culturally validated sublimation of aggression into determination to train and succeed. Sport exists as a space where libido can both be left uncensored and learnt to be regulated, which is why it plays an important role within education in Western societies, helping children overcome challenges in their psychical and embodied development (Hansell, 2010). Some psychoanalytic accounts consider sport as a form of play that helps us escape the realities of life by operating in a psychic space that is both external and internal (Rubinstein, 2018). Importantly, Joseph Reynoso (2021) highlights that such escapism ought to be considered within its political dimension, whereby both athlete and fan are always submerged in a particular sociopolitical context. The relevance of sport as a political practice is discussed by Sykes (2001) and others with regard to sexual difference and gender ideals. This is crucial within WAG, as it is one of the most gendered physical disciplines in which the aim is to perform ideals of femininity (Barker-Ruchti, 2009).

Thinking about the role of ideals in sport, Moisy Shopper (2014) analyses the function of sports for male children in the latency period. He speaks about how, besides the regulation of aggression and narcissism, sport contributes towards the development of the child's ego ideal and superego, facilitating "a major step forward in psychic development, that is, an agreed-upon adherence to a set of rules and regulations" (p. 264). Marcus Free (2008) also uses Freudian concepts of the ego, ego ideal, and superego, however, he does so by drawing on cultural philosopher Slavoj Žižek's theoretical frame. Žižek (2001) famously mobilises Lacanian psychoanalysis in order to explain how ideology operates through and within cultural phenomena. In particular, he reconceptualises the function of the superego,

highlighting its perverse and sadistic dimension, as opposed to seeing it as a form of conscience. In order to do so, Žižek focuses on the relation between ego ideal and superego. In his theory, the ego ideal provides the ego with the illusion of a possible full satisfaction – if it is ever to be reached. Importantly, the ego ideal functions as the obverse of the superego, meaning that while the ego fails to match the ego ideal, the superego derives enjoyment through its punishing function. However, there is a further twist, which is that the superego not only demands but also prohibits enjoyment. Thus, it is understood as "an injunction to enjoyment with which it is impossible to comply" (Žižek, 2001 p. 183).

It is important here to clarify the use of the term "enjoyment", which has stirred much debate within psychoanalysis (see, for example, Leader, 2021). Néstor Braunstein (2003) defines the Lacanian notion of enjoyment as a development of what Freud theorised as a form of satisfaction which is beyond the pleasure principle, a satisfaction tied to an increase of tension, "a nature of forcing, of a spending, even of an exploit" (p. 103). In this sense, enjoyment is understood as a modality through which satisfaction and suffering, pleasure and pain, lack and excess, are structured subjectively as well as socially. Sport can be seen as embodying the pairing of contradictory forces, insofar as the function of the ideal lies in keeping the athlete bound to an ever-increasing drive to train (Free, 2008). On the one hand, this process is sustained by a constant process of transgressing limits, and on the other, a strict adherence to disciplining rules. Following this idea, Andrew Blake (1996) speaks about the transgression of rules as integral to sport's lived culture. In the wider context of ideals in sport, Rubinstein (2018) views the particular status of the coach and their relationship with the athlete as the motor for transmitting ideals. This may be applicable to the field of WAG, where the coach-athlete relationship has been discussed as indicative of the operational structures underlying the sport (Stirling & Kerr, 2014). Similar to how Freud (1921/1955a) examined group dynamics within the church and the military in *Group Psychology and the*

Analysis of the Ego with regards to the function of the group leader, psychoanalytic literature reads sport as an institution where the coach inhabits the position of the leader or substitute parental figure (Rubinstein, 2018). In this way, analysing the coach-athlete relationship can speak to the relation between the individual and the social structures of a group, and vice versa. Rubinstein (2018) points out that the function of ideals plays a more pronounced role in individual sports as opposed to group sports where "the peer group serves as the necessary contrast to distinguish the real and objective from where the subject finds him- or herself" (p. 78). Thinking about WAG as an individual sport, we can add a further defining feature, which is that it is an individual aesthetic sport, where the measuring and judging of a skill depends on its proximity to an aesthetic ideal (Mazumdar, 2021; Lord & Stewart, 2020).

To speak about the narcissistic investment in the (body) image from a psychoanalytic perspective, Bruce Erickson (2005) refers to Lacanian theory. French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan is known for his innovative return to Freud, using a set of theoretical tools including structural linguistics, anthropology, philosophy and logic. Lacan developed the idea of three registers to account for human psychic experience: the imaginary, the symbolic and the real. Within the limitations of this article, it might suffice to outline those concepts somewhat schematically. The imaginary register was developed in Lacan's (1966/2006) essay on the mirror stage, in which he emphasised the dual narcissistic relation between the ego and its specular image. Since the ego emerges through the identification with its counterpart, the imaginary order has an inherently alienating effect, evoking both rivalry and an illusion of wholeness. The symbolic register is the linguistic field, a differential system made up of signifiers which structures the social space. The third register, the real, is that part of bodily experience which escapes both imaginary and symbolic representation. It is thus a "left over" which functions as the locus of subjective enjoyment. Authors writing about aesthetics in

sport tend to draw particular attention to the imaginary order, such as Free (2008), who describes aesthetic sport as:

> the inadequate narcissistic attempt to capture an Imaginary "self" through fantasied mirroring of the always as yet un-realized, unattainable ideal body and the expression of this aspiration though the "Symbolic", which ensures that the "Real" is always beyond direct "knowledge". (p. 290)

Others have used this theory to analyse discourses in sport through the construction of specific sporting identities (Helstein, 2007). Sykes (2007), for example, discusses processes of identification in sport by taking into consideration intersections of race, gender, sex and other social categories, drawing both on psychoanalysis and queer theory. She utilises psychoanalytic theory of the bodily ego to explain "the mechanism by which cultural representations, unconscious fantasy and corporeal sensation coalesce to form the body image, or more broadly, a person's sense of embodiment" (Sykes, 2007, p. 128).

By reviewing the literature on sport and psychoanalysis with regards to ideals and aesthetics, it becomes clear that despite the fact that many of the ideas discussed are applicable to WAG, surprisingly, research has not yet established this dialogue. WAG, as a highly gendered, individual and aesthetic sport, can offer a rich field of enquiry to investigate how psychoanalytic concepts of enjoyment, ideals, and sexual difference are useful when thinking about sociopolitical structures through the lens of sport. In order to remain focused on the close link between WAG and sociopolitical factors, the next section offers a brief outline of the sport's history, which will inform my subsequent psychoanalytic reading.

A History of Embodying Perfection

The ancient Greek term “gymnos” means to train naked. The gymnasium of the old Greeks was a place to exhibit the youthful male body’s aesthetic in order to reach excellence of the soul. An important factor of this training was the erotic dimension of athletic bodies whose sexual impulses were educated through engaging in sexual relationships with older males. Besides this sexual education, gymnastics served as a practice to prepare men for war. Heather Reid (2012) suggests that women were generally excluded from the classical athletic aesthetic and did not train naked. She writes: “There were not many to begin with, most of the time they seem to have competed in clothes, and their athletic days generally ended once they ceased to be virgins” (Reid, 2012, p. 291). It wasn’t until the eighteenth century that the sport re-emerged in Europe in its current form. While male gymnasts participated in the first modern Olympic Games in 1896, for women the sport did not become accepted as a competitive discipline until 1928. WAG was the result of a feminist pursuit of opening a space for femininity in sport, as Georgia Cervin (2021) explains:

> Created by women, for women, and governed exclusively by women, gymnastics demonstrated that women could participate in physical activity and competition without comprising their femininity or health. (p. 13)

Indeed, gymnastics was considered the ideal sport for females as it was developed precisely to portray and perform gender ideals through a particular physical aesthetic (Wright, 1991). Like no other sport, it became adapted to sociocultural definitions of sex through differences in equipment, costume, language of coaching and media commentary. In the early days, male gymnasts exhibited predominantly muscular strength, while the female side highlighted elegance and grace. The task of performing and perfecting a gender ideal is what has remained central to WAG until today. This becomes most evident when examining how gymnasts are scored, or in other words, the structure in which they compete. The official

scoring criteria is encapsulated by the Fédération Internationale de Gymnastique (FIG) Code of Points. In contrast to sports where points are added up to calculate a competitor's final score, gymnastics is based on a system of deduction from perfection. That is to say, while other sports use a score mainly to determine a winner, in WAG the goal is to approximate the ideal starting score, indicating that in addition to using the score for comparative reasons there is the further intent of reaching a pre-existing idea of perfection. In this context, the risks of a preoccupation with perfection have been discussed in historical accounts as well as recent inquires, as the Whyte Review (2022) explains: "These features [of perfectionism] of the sport are not of themselves barriers to a positive culture. They do however have clear welfare ramifications which, as my report demonstrates, have not been adequately scrutinised for the purpose of devising mitigating or protective measures" (p. 9). I return to this potential connection between perfectionism and the sport's abusive culture in my later analysis. For now, let us continue to trace its historical development. In the original FIG Code of Points there was a starting score of 10, from which subtractions were made for any imperfections in the gymnast's execution. Due to the increasing difficulty of elements that gymnasts began performing over time, in 2006 the FIG changed the system by separating the overall score into two subcategories: the E-score (based on the traditional idea of assessing accuracy of execution, starting from 10) and the D-score (based on the level of difficulty, which is variable for each gymnast, and also based on deduction). This change indicated that while the scoring system continued to be based on striving for perfecting an ideal, this ideal became harder to reach and more ambiguous in its definition. It is out of this article's scope to speculate on the historical reasons for this change (see, for example, Cervin, 2015), however, it is important to note that from the 1970s there emerged a turning point. While the 1950s to 1970s had been an era where gymnastics had pursued the display of women's bodies as maternal and elegant, from the 1970s onwards WAG underwent radical changes. Skills

became more acrobatic and spectacular, like the men's version of the sport, requiring increasingly smaller and lighter bodies, leading to "a contemporary style that caricatured child's play" (Cervin, 2021, p. 144). The emerging ideal of high-risk movements performed by children's bodies was taken to such an extreme that at the world championships in 1988, 17 gymnasts ended up in medical emergency care due to serious injuries; gymnasts had become too small to safely use the equipment (Cervin, 2021, p. 153). In her famous book, which revealed the culture of gymnastics during that time, Joan Ryan (1995) discusses the implications this ideological shift had on gymnasts' bodies: life-threatening injury (including broken necks and paralysis), severe eating disorders and sometimes death. From this overview, we see that what defined WAG throughout its evolution is the striving towards the perfect embodiment of an aesthetic ideal which changes according to the sociocultural circumstances of a particular period. As stated previously, the Whyte Review (2022) indicates a potential correlation between perfectionism and the abusive culture of the sport. However, instead of questioning what perfectionism is and how it operates, the review contends itself with promoting better rules. In order to open up this problem psychoanalytically, the next section looks at perfectionism through the lens of enjoyment, investigating how its structure does not just allow for abuse, but is fuelled by it, precisely because of a transgression of rules.

WAG's Libidinal Economy of Perfectionism

As we saw through its scoring system and historical development, WAG is based on striving for perfection on two levels: aesthetic execution and a continuous drive towards higher-risk movements. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* Freud (1920/1955b) reflects on the commonly held idea that there is a human drive towards perfection, which explains civilisation's intellectual achievements and ethical sublimations. In contrast to the prevailing view of the time, Freud argues that there is nothing natural about this drive, and that it is merely the result

of repression in specific libidinal economic circumstances. He explains that the drive never tires of aiming to return to the original state of satisfaction. The barrier preventing the drive in this backward motion is repression. Thus, the drive operates towards the direction where growth is still possible, an ideal, which is defined as the ego ideal. Importantly, what drives the ego towards its ego ideal is the discrepancy between the demanded pleasure of satisfaction (from the ego ideal) and the actually achieved satisfaction. Freud says that the greater this gap, the stronger the drive. Following this line of thought, we can see that the less pleasure is experienced, the larger becomes the gap, the stronger will be the drive. In other words, failing and dissatisfaction are what keeps the subject bound to a cycle of repetition. It is at this point that we need to introduce the function of the superego as the agent that pushes the ego towards the ego ideal. It does so by deriving libidinal energy from the darkest sadistic and masochistic depths of the id. In this sense, it is not the ego that drives itself towards an unattainable goal through its determination and ambition, but the id through its close entanglement with the superego. Importantly, the ego believes itself to be in charge, while it is mercilessly submitted to the forces of the id. This idea is clear in Freud (1961/1923) when he writes:

> The functional importance of the ego is manifested in the fact that normally control over the approaches to motility devolves upon it. Thus in its relation to the id it is like a man on horseback, who has to hold in check the superior strength of the horse; with this difference, that the rider tries to do so with his own strength while the ego uses borrowed forces. The analogy may be carried a little further. Often a rider, if he is not to be parted from his horse, is obliged to guide it where it wants to go, so in the same way the ego is in the habit of transforming the id's will into action as if it were its own. (p. 25)

Importantly, the superego does not only instruct the ego in a certain way; its instruction simultaneously carries its own prohibition. From a Lacanian perspective, it thus becomes impossible for the ego to meet the superego's demands of enjoyment. Let's remember that the energy for this process derives from the id, the most powerful source of libido within the psychic apparatus. Žižek (2022) writes:

> Superego is real, the cruel and insatiable agency which bombards me with impossible demands and which mocks my failed attempts to meet them, the agency in the eyes of which I am all the more guilty, the more I try to suppress my "sinful" strivings and meet its demands. (p. 14)

To apply this logic within a structural reading of the libidinal economy of perfectionism in WAG, we may place the gymnast in the position of the ego who is driven towards the ego ideal. As an individual aesthetic sport, this ego ideal exists in the form of an aesthetic image. Indeed, it is the image of the performance that matters, not the skill on its own. This striving towards the image does not come from within the gymnast. Rather, she is pushed towards it by the superego. In our analysis, we can say that the superegoic position is occupied by the coach. While the ego (gymnast) believes itself to be in charge of its ambitions, it is the superego (coach) that drives the ego towards its ideal and its destiny of failure to reach it. Through this analogy, we can see that the coach's task is to make sure that the gap between the satisfaction that is demanded of the gymnast and her actually experienced satisfaction remains as open as possible. In that way, the coach increases her gymnast's drive towards perfection by making her believe that she is as imperfect as possible. In her memoir, Dominique Moceanu describes how her coach Béla Károlyi instructed her parents to avoid showing pride for their daughter in moments of success. After winning Olympic gold for team USA for the first time in history, Moceanu details her experience: "Here I was, heading into

the Olympic Games, feeling less confident than ever before with coaches making sure I knew I wasn't that good" (Moceanu et al., 2013, p. 120). A few pages later, she adds:

> I realised then that no matter how much I wanted to feel happy, my happiness depended on what my coaches and parents thought of my performance and whether or not *they* were pleased with me. It was hard to be happy when I felt I wasn't perfect enough for them. (Moceanu et al., p. 141)

Moceanu's account shows how being in the position of the battered ego enables the gymnast to thrive within a structure that is based on perfectionism. To apply this logic within the specificity of WAG, we can think of the aesthetic dimension of the sport and, related to that, the frequently mentioned abusive weight management. The Whyte Review (2022) identified that the ways in which gymnasts are weighed, such as weighing frequencies of several times a day, have no scientific reason, such as injury prevention, and are used predominantly to exercise emotional control. This becomes clear in the language that coaches use to describe a gymnast's imperfect image: "*'fat arse', 'you look like a whale', 'you look like you have a beer belly', 'your thighs are disgusting', 'you are spilling out of your leotard'*" (Whyte, 2022, p. 81). If we see the process of weighing as an attempt of measuring the gymnast's image as a number on the scale, it makes sense that the coach weighs the gymnast not for the purpose of monitoring her weight, but more importantly, to accuse her of not matching the imposed image, over and over again. Given that the number on the scale can always be lower, the gymnast inevitably ends up in a position of failure. It is this position, not the individual agent occupying it, that is marked by guilt, feeding off the punishment by the superego, for example in the form of starvation or humiliation. In Rachael Denhollander's memoir, she addresses abuse survivors, stating the words: "It is not your fault" (2019, p. vii). The fact that the

gymnast's position is one of guilt is precisely what sustains the unconscious structure of perfectionism in the sport.[3] This situation is further complicated when we think of the inherent imperative of transgression within that position. A strong superego demands equally strong transgressions for which the ego feels responsible. Since she is forced to transgress the rules, for example by hiding food (Whyte, 2022), it can only be down to her that the perfect image fails to be achieved. Illuminating these unconscious structures enables us to look beneath the conscious ideal of perfectionism in WAG, which relies on social discourses of limitless self-improvement, efficiency, and resourcefulness.

This analysis is important as it points towards how enjoyment operates within a structure because of transgressions, not because there is a lack of knowledge about rules. That is not to say that improved processes for regulation and policymaking are unneeded, but rather, that they are insufficient. A psychoanalytic perspective allows us to see which positions need to be occupied in WAG in order for the sport to work within a logic of aesthetic perfectionism. These positions exist within and because of their structural relations with one another, regardless of the individual agent occupying them. And that is why substituting bad coaches for good ones is not enough if the unconscious structure of perfectionism is to remain unchallenged. The recent abuse scandals are examples of individual agents taking advantage of their positions within the sport's structure for their own subjective enjoyment, which is easily done when this abuse, if the gymnast survives it, leads to success. And here it is important to highlight the great asymmetry between the enjoyment of the coach and that of the athlete because in WAG the athlete is a child, the coach an adult. A female gymnast's professional career peaks between the age of 14 – 18. She can compete in the Olympics at 15, two years younger than her male counterpart, and by the time she reaches adulthood her career is likely to come to an end. Her position of the child is crucial for the

3 One may add a further dimension to this analysis which is that of shame. Authors (see, for example, Kohut, 1972) have discussed shame within the realm of narcissism, relating it to the revealing of the body's imperfect image, i.e., the imperfection of the grandiose self.

sport, so that even if she becomes legally an adult during her sporting days, the way she is treated and addressed keeps her bound to this position of dependency nonetheless.

The Woman is Perfected

We have identified how the gymnast is pushed towards an ideal, in the form of an image, which she is trying to match. Our next question will be what actually is this ideal image? As we discussed in our historical overview, WAG's central focus is and always has been to perform femininity. This ideal is contingent to cultural and historical circumstances, and thus changes over time. Nevertheless, the underlying purpose of the sport seems to always remain the same: to answer the question of what a woman is. In order to understand how the pursuit of a certain kind of femininity might be functioning within WAG, let us draw attention to what psychoanalysis has to say about gender ideals.

Feminist psychoanalytic theory asserts that Freud's texts offer tools to illuminate and criticise the patriarchal structure underlying the function, construction and performance of gender positions in society. Indeed, Juliet Mitchell (2000) encourages us to "return to the original project of using psychoanalysis to help understand the transmission of sexual difference within 'ideology'" (p. xxvii). Following a Freudo-Lacanian view, Jacqueline Rose (1982) explains that sexuality comes to emerge within the subject's fundamental division, a lack which leaves the subject fragmented. That is to say, sexual identity is shifting and precarious, and can only be seen as wholesome within an ideological world. Her criticism rests on the idea that absolute sexual categories of "male" and "female" are what prevent us from recognising our fundamental division by mystifying it. In the patriarchal fantasy, the man secures his sexual position as complete by fantasmatically constructing a second sex, the not-man or woman. Rose (1982) writes:

> Woman is constructed as an absolute category (excluded and elevated at one and the same time), a category which serves to guarantee that unity on the side of the man. The man places the woman at the basis of his fantasy, or constitutes fantasy through the woman. (p. 47)

In this sense, the woman is defined purely against the man, as the negative of him. She becomes a way for him to close off his own division, providing an illusion of the missing piece which complements and satisfies him. We can take this psychoanalytic perspective into the realm of WAG, where the pursuit of the ideal of perfected femininity carries a central focus. In so doing, we can identify this ideal precisely as "not man". If we return to WAG's history, we see that there was a moment, beginning in the 1970s, in which performances of female gymnasts began approximating those of men: difficulty and strength levels increased, movements became more spectacular. A wide range of literature argues that it was this "acrobatisation" that led to prepubescent girls becoming the ideal body type, as the only physique capable of performing the new high-risk and strength-based skills. However, we could put this ides on it head and wonder about the kind of acrobatisation gymnastics promoted. Indeed, spectacularisation could have happened in many different ways including those that would have put fully developed women's bodies in advantageous positions. We can see, however, how this might have posed a potential threat to the aesthetic distinction between male and female gymnasts as we can assume that an adult woman's body who is training to maximise her strength and muscle growth may end up looking similar to her male counterpart. The promotion of a new ideal, the child-like body, might have served as just the right solution to this problem. As a child's physiology is unable to develop muscle growth as that of an adult, the child will remain sufficiently distinguishable from the man despite performing similar movements. That is to say, defining the new ideal body as prepubescent was not a natural consequence to acrobatisation, but determined by a specific ideology. A

good example that shows this tension is Dominique Moceanu's attempt to make a comeback to elite gymnastics when she was 24 years old. Growing up as an Olympic champion at age 14, Moceanu was very aware of what it would entail for her to return to the sport at the elite level. After fulfilling all physical requirements that had been imposed on her, USA Gymnastics changed their impositions, so that she could not return to elite competition (Moceanu et al., 2013). Her story points towards the deeply-rooted ideological frame of hindering adult women from participating in the sport, even when their bodies *are* able to perform increasing difficulty levels. This shows how it was not the "acrobatisation" of the sport which led to the prevalence of child athletes, but the underlying ideological frame which shaped the sport's particular response to it.

Through this analysis we can trace how an ideal femininity as "not man" is operative in WAG as a way of defining what a woman is. In order to take a closer look at this kind of femininity in the contemporary version of the sport, I will introduce another psychoanalytic idea from Freud's (1912/1957) paper "On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love (Contributions to the psychology of love II)". In this text, Freud speaks about the position women adopt in love relationships.[4] He explains that in order for the subject to take up a sexual position in society, the sexual desire for the mother needs to be repressed. According to Freud, this necessary incestuous repression puts women in a particular position within love relationships that are defined by two different currents in love: the affectionate (deriving from the earliest relationships with the mother), and the sensual (the inherent eroticism in those relations that become split off through repression). Because the sexual desire for the mother has to be repressed, but the love for her has to be kept alive, the subject comes to be confronted with a paradox: "Where they love they do not desire and where they desire they cannot love" (Freud, 1912/1957, p. 183). In that way, in order for the woman to

4 In this paper, Freud adopts an evidently heterosexist perspective. In so doing, his argument is restricted to the constrains of patriarchy where the woman's position is equated with that of the (potential) mother. Due to WAG's sociopolitical context, we can apply Freud's comments on patriarchal relations to the sport.

function as a desirable object she has to become debased, in other words, not loved like the mother. Katherine Angel (2021) writes about the idea that women lose their right to refuse sex once they have lost their virginity:

> A woman's (presumed) desire – even just once, for one man – makes her vulnerable. Her desire disqualifies her from protection, and from justice. Once a woman is thought to have said yes to something, she can say no to nothing. (p. 4)

This idea points towards an underlying understanding of women as responsible for being sexually violated. The unconscious assumption being: if she is sexually active, she must be a slut, seeking sexual consumption. The alternative position women occupy as the desirable object of "not mother" is that of the virgin. In both instances, the virgin and the slut, it is through a negation of the incestuous wish for the mother that it becomes possible to sexually desire the woman. Applying this idea to the context of WAG allows us to see a complicated double bind: the (dependent) child gymnast must provide a definition of femininity which conceals the image of the mother by portraying both innocence and seduction; she is not only a child, but also flirtatious (Blue, 1987). The imperative of performing her pleasure in being a woman (as encouraged by the FIG Code of Points), by demonstrating ease in her performance and simultaneously seducing judges and audience, is dangerous as it takes away her potential protection from being violated, or to put it differently: if she is violated, it will be her own fault. As Denhollander (2019) tells us in her memoir: "I ask myself how I could have let this happen with someone in the room every time, I thought, guilt rushing over me. How could I not know? Why didn't I fight back?" (p. 77). This dynamic speaks to the inherent guilt as a crucial reason for why abuse scandals can go unnoticed for so long, and why abuse survivors cannot straightforwardly identify and accuse their abuser.

In our analysis, it is important to highlight that answering the question of what a woman is on the level of a solid sexual identity, is a risky endeavour. We saw in Rose's (1982) Lacanian reading, that the woman becomes perfected in order to offer the man an illusion of wholeness in his own sexual identity, which patches over his fundamental lack as a speaking being. In this sense, patriarchal ideology displaces the subject's internal division onto an imaginary binary between two genders. The patriarchal fantasmatic construction of the woman as other puts her in the position of the object, in Mitchell's (2000) reading as the object of exchange. In this process, she becomes the reason for why the man is lacking, while remaining politically nonexistent. As Alenka Zupančič (2017) writes:

> Feminism did not start from trying to affirm some other, female identity (and its rights), but from the fact that roughly half of the human race, referred to as "women", was nonexistent in a political sense. … The traditional division between masculine and feminine worlds (domains, spheres: for example, public / private) actually does not see sexual difference as difference, but as questioning of belonging to two separate worlds. (p. 36)

In this sense, a feminist psychoanalytic reading of the sport has to focus on its underlying ambition of perfecting the sexual category of "femininity" as contributing towards maintaining a unity of the world whereby women are structurally suppressed, subordinated and excluded in a political sense. WAG upholds a logic in which the athlete, as a fantasmatic construction, disguises the imbalance and injustice of patriarchy, by acquiring a special status of the ultimate woman (athlete): competitive, resourceful and successful, enchanting the world through her superhuman body and the pleasure she finds within it. What is important here is that the reason for her oppression is not to be found in *how* her identity is filled up (for

example by the image of the mother [1950s – 1970s] or the child-virgin [from the 1970s-2020]), but in the sport's ambition of constructing and perfecting this category in the first place.

Conclusion

This article brought forward a psychoanalytic reading of the discourse that underpins WAG's recent abuse scandals with regards to two key features: perfectionism and femininity. This is by no means an exhaustive account. In fact, I hope to have opened up these two issues in order to evoke new questions and new ways of asking them; this may include explorations of the function of fandom (i.e. how the spectator's enjoyment is mobilised in WAG's libidinal economy), and how my findings might be applicable to other disciplines. Since the writing of this article, which looked at WAG before 2020, the sport has certainly undergone change. Most notably, Simone Biles' comeback at age 26 and record-breaking performances in 2023 have challenged many of the assumptions that are held with regards to early-specialisation and racial ideals in WAG. However, it remains a question as to what extent those developments are simply expressions of new sociocultural definitions of what a woman is, and in what ways they might indeed be signs of a more fundamental disruption of the sport's underlying structure. In my elaboration of WAG's unconscious structural elements as deeply patriarchal and oppressive, I avoided considering the individual psychic circumstances that may lead a person to enter the world of gymnastics. However, my analysis of perfectionism made it easy to see that individuals may take advantage of their structural position for their own subjective enjoyment, which is precisely what happens in cases of abuse, and what has knowingly been happening for at least 30 years, most of the time without coaches ever taking responsibility or getting punished for it. Coaches starve, slap, insult, belittle and humiliate elite gymnasts. The problem is that in the cases where it doesn't break them, it makes them. In

such cases, the tormenting actions of coaches bring into being a fearless competitor, who embodies an (imposed) answer to the question of what a woman is. Her answer is an attempt to patch over the fundamental lack inherent to subjectivity, at the cost of forever taking her fantasmatic place of complementing the ruling sex, the man. This position makes her particularly vulnerable to being abused as the ideal sexual object, and guarantees for guilt to be found only on her side. This dynamic structures gymnastics regardless of how ideals of femininity were defined in different historical moments. It is hard to see how a sport that is constructed on ideals of binary sexual identities can break with a patriarchal logic and allow for emancipatory ways of practising it. It will require further research to illuminate how the recent scandals as well as contemporary sociopolitical factors are shaping the sport today.

Author statement

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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