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Embodied Thought of the Month: November 2015

Gym Bodies (2): CrossFit

James Brighton

Back in July, Ian and I took a break from our everyday routines to take a trip to Malmo in Sweden to concentrate on some fieldwork for our new book on gym cultures (with Amy as third author). Ian has always loved the area for its clean living, outdoor life and freer attitudes towards bodily presentation and performance. We hoped that escaping our claustrophobic academic environments and the confined ideologies of the body that pervade contemporary British society would be fruitful to encourage critical thought and also allow us to experience alternative fitness cultures. The plan was that Ian would attend a few of the gyms in the city and I would sign up to the local Crossfit 'box' and attend some classes and we would be able to share our experiences. This month's ETM therefore focuses on my first-hand experience of Crossfit, and follows on from Ian's reflections last month of his experiences using gyms and being 'trained'.

CrossFit Malmo: "Home of the good guys"

Exhausted and unable to move I lay flat on my back, my arms lifelessly spread out next to me, my knees bent and my feet tucked up underneath me. My ribs are violently pumping up and down as my chest expands and contracts. Gasping for air my throat is dry and I have the familiar metallic taste of blood surfacing from my screaming lungs¹. Droplets of sweat on my skin have joined together to form little salty streams that make their way to ground forming small puddles next to me. My t-shirt is saturated and I am grateful for its wetness clinging to my body cooling me down. The muscles in my arms and legs are weak and shaking from the intensity of the physical exertion I have just undertaken. Closing my eyes, I have little consciousness of where I am or who I am – my attention is solely focused on recovery and returning my body to a more comfortable state of being.

¹ This common feeling is termed 'CrossFit lung' or 'Iron lung' at my regular box in the UK

All I can think about is how much this fucking hurts yet simultaneously how much I love this feeling and am becoming addicted to it.

Laying forlorn for 30 seconds or so I manage to lift my arm and extend the fingers on my hand to 'touch 5'² the coach and a couple of others around me who have seemingly recovered far quicker than me. After a few more seconds, lifting my head off the matted floor, I am just about able to sit up and wrap my arms around my legs and comfort myself in a childlike position in an attempt to make me feel more secure. After a couple of attempts I feel ready to consciously enter the material and social world again. Putting my weight on one leg and then the next I half stand up, stopping and resting for a few more seconds by bending over and supporting myself by placing my hands on my knees. Sweat continues to cascade over my face as I stay motionless watching the droplets drip onto the dirty black mat and mixing with chalk dust as they land. Feeling more like a toddler who is learning to walk than an adult man, I look behind me at the 'sweat angel' that has formed in the shape of my body on the floor and manage to walk over to the window and the promise of fresh air.

Sticking my head through the window I take big gasps and let the late afternoon Scandinavian sun flood over my body. Lifting up my still heavy head and opening my eyes, I see rays of light shimmering on the surface of the ocean in the distance creating little dancing angels. Wiping the saliva away from my lips with my t-shirt, the aridness of my mouth is now calling for my attention. Still stumbling, I make my way to the wooden bench at the side of the 'box' and search for my bottle amongst the others that have been placed on the floor. Locating the correct one, I unscrew the top and lift it up to my desiccated lips, tip it vertically and attack the fluid inside and the promise of rehydration. Letting the water pour down my throat and spill over the front of my t-shirt I rest more easily. Others are already busily taking the brackets off Olympic weightlifting bars, sliding off the blue, yellow and green plates and returning them to the designated stacks.

² Like a high 5 but done with the arm straight out and lateral to the body

Feeling obliged, I stand up and start to dismantle the bar in front of me that has 84kg of weight on it. I grip the shiny silver bracket between my fingers and my clammy palm and ease off the end of the bar, then repeat on the other side. Taking the plates off one by one I join the other sweating bodies clearing the area before the arrival of the next class. A few of the younger, fitter members are chatting to each other in Swedish and laughing. I make eye contact with one or two and they seemingly acknowledge my pain in a friendly and knowing way having just experienced the same physical brutality. Still soaked, my body is now recovering, my breathing becomes more regulated, muscular movement more controlled, and blood pumps around my body more slowly and purposefully.

Just as my mind is beginning to look forward to the pleasures of basking in post-exercise glow, waves of nausea begin to spread over me. I head back over to my spot on the bench and take a few more gulps of water knowing I need to fight this feeling again. I run my hand through my drenched hair and focus again on what needs to be done next in an attempt to ignore the pain and sickness my body is producing. I manage to slide off my Reebok Nano trainers (which everyone else in the class seems to be wearing in a multitude of differing colours and patterns) and slip on my flip flops in the hope that just putting them on will relax me further. I stand up again and walk over to the reception desk and thank the coach in English. When asked "how was the work out?" I respond "I think I need an Ambulance!" Although joking, I am seriously wondering if I am able to ride the bike I had hired the few kilometres back to our hotel through rush hour. After a few more minutes' recovery I find the strength to take some photos inside the 'box', limply walk to my bike and free wheel through the industrial estate and onto the cycle path and back to meet Ian in the city.

In the account above I have attempted to describe my embodied experiences immediately after taking part in a *WOD (workout of the day)* at CrossFit Malmo. The class consisted of the following structure which is aimed at metabolic-conditioning (*Met-con* for short):

Warm Up:

800m run followed by:

12 reps > 9 reps > 6 reps

1) kips 2) kettle bar swings 3) strict pull-ups

WOD:

7 burpees > 5 power cleans (84kg) > 3 muscle ups

To complete every second minute for 20 minutes (total exercise in 20 minutes is therefore 70

burpees; 50 cleans; 30 muscle ups

My intention in this months' ETM is therefore mainly to provide embodied insight into the 'intense embodiment' (Allen-Collinson & Owten, 2015) I was experiencing at this time and hint at further thoughts which require analysis in the chapter in the forthcoming book. Of course deeper experience and interpretation is required to provide a more considered conceptualisation of CrossFit but here I hope I have at least illuminated a sense of empathy to the embodied pains, pleasures and addictions that were evoked by this work out. Just so that you don't worry for my wellbeing, it took me a few hours and lots of cold drinks to fully recover and I'm afraid to say I was poor company for Ian for the rest of the evening!

References:

Allen-Collinson, J. & Owten, H. (2015) Intense Embodiment: Senses of Heat in Women's Running and Boxing. *Body & Society*, 21 (2): 245-268.

Next month: Amy continues the theme of gym bodies, by exploring her experiences of 'spinning'.