New things are happening at the interface of sport and media that may barely be visible from the perspective of regular sport, whether you’re a player, a fan, or a spectator. If your sporting pleasures are mainstream—if, for instance, they involve any combination of men, a ball, and a team—then you might want to insist that an activity from which men are excluded, that requires smiling, a flamboyant costume, and trying as hard as possible to appear exactly the same as everyone else involved, can’t be a “real” sport. But while that seems obvious today, the days of ball-assisted male combat as the ideal type of sport may be numbered.

Instead, growing up unnoticed in the thickets of popular entertainment and “reality” TV are new sporting attributes. They celebrate not individual heroics but spectator-oriented teamwork, where no matter how strenuous the performance, it must look effortless and stylish. Instead of objective measurements—“faster, higher, stronger,” as the Olympic motto puts it—winners are picked by how they look to a panel of judges; by consumer choice, as it were. Sporting values are feminizing.

Sport and media are converging and integrat-
As they do so, what counts as sport, why it is valued, and what it symbolizes for contemporary culture are all changing. I take these changes to be emblematic of something emergent in the culture at large. The modernist paradigm—four hundred years in the making—is shifting toward a new consumerist paradigm, and this is symbolized in new sports, of which the paradigmatic example is synchronized swimming.

Mars to Venus

I think I was the first scholar of cultural and media studies, possibly of any sort, to publish an analysis of synchronized swimming, in my 1992 book *The Politics of Pictures.* That book’s cover features a production still from a famous Hollywood film celebrating—perhaps originating—this most unlikely sport. It shows Esther Williams, surrounded by mermaids, at the climax of *The Million Dollar Mermaid* (1952). In other words, in my book, whose subtitle is “The Creation of the Public in the Age of Popular Media,” synchronized swimming is literally taken as the *emblem* of the contemporary mediated public.

In this context, one aspect of a strange sport stands out as especially peculiar—compulsory smiling. I made it stand for other contemporary jobs in which smiling is compulsory, ranging from PR and TV presenters to retail assistants. Synchronized swimmers are an appropriate metaphor for the “smiling professions”; modern professionals in media, marketing, and the services who *represent the public to itself.* The smiling professions address and call into being, and also personify and embody, “the public” for large, diverse societies where the community can no longer experience itself as self-present. They do the work of holding together—by strenuous but invisible effort—the Andersonian “imagined community.” They turn work into spectacle, competition into desirability, the imagined community into smiling faces. Synchronized swimming is their sport. But like synchronized swimming, which suffers a “reputation deficit” compared with ball-centered sports, the smiling professions are among the most despised of all contemporary occupations. In both cases the put-downs bear no relation to the levels of training, skill, and dedication required to perform the job well. Socially, the reputation deficit also masks how important the smiling professions are to the daily functioning of hyperdemocratized societies, just as the jocular dismissal of synchronized swimming masks the extent to which combat models of sport may be under threat from apparently weaker forces as sporting values migrate from Mars to Venus.
It was Robert Kagan who coined the memorable line about Americans being from Mars and Europeans from Venus:

On the all-important question of power . . . American and European perspectives are diverging. . . . On major strategic and international questions today, Americans are from Mars and Europeans are from Venus: they agree on little and understand one another less and less.\textsuperscript{4}

Of course this is a simplification, and it refers to strategic rather than sporting power. Nevertheless, as Kagan says, “the caricatures do capture an essential truth.” He draws attention to two divergent models of strategic policy: one based on unconstrained power (Mars), the other on the arts of weakness: “negotiation, diplomacy, and commercial ties, on international law over the use of force, on seduction over coercion, on multilateralism over unilateralism” (Venus).

In Kagan’s analysis, Europe has embraced Venus (miraculously, the “German lion has lain down with the French lamb”), while, since the Second World War, the United States has taken over the Martial mantle from imperial (“Old”) Europe. Kagan’s own interest is confined to strategic power—military supremacy and the willingness to use it on the world stage. He does not expand his analysis to include other spheres, including culture. But a parting of the ways has occurred in that sphere as well. Some countries—notably France—want to protect their national culture by using the Venusian arts of negotiation and law (diplomacy, negotiation, “seduction, not coercion”). Others—notably the United States—see culture in market terms, and market strength has become a metaphor for military might, following a “Hobbesian” model of power where competition produces winners and winner takes all. From this perspective it’s easy to see the values of Venus as illusory. But equally, many countries and individuals across the world reject the “power” model of competition in favor of the “law” model. It seems to me that the same forces are at work in sport. Here the distinction between Mars and Venus is drawn not along national borders but in the differences between different types of sporting endeavor. To put it simply, there is hegemonic, modern, power sport, and there are “seductive,” postmodern, law sports.\textsuperscript{5} It’s the difference between football and synchronized swimming.

Why should we care? My argument is that the turn from Mars to Venus in sport is an instance of more general changes, amounting to a paradigm shift. What interests me here is the “reputation deficit” that emergent forms suffer at the hands of those whose values they may be supplanting. I’m
making synchronized swimming a metaphor for other forms that have suffered, and continue to suffer, a reputation deficit, namely the smiling professions and the popular media they serve. Compared to the world of official (political) power, popular media are Venusian synchronized swimmers. But just as the Venusian value of “seduction, not coercion”—despite its apparent weakness—is challenging Martial notions of power, so the popular media are a challenge to existing political and intellectual elites.

**A Sprinkler System**

Many of the components of what we recognize as modernity were assembled during the seventeenth century, including secular science based on reason and the theory of the modern state. A leading theorist in both of these endeavors was Thomas Hobbes, whose great work *Leviathan* was published in 1651. Hobbes thought the natural condition of humankind was “war of each against all” and that only a strong state—Leviathan—could maintain order. Hobbes was interested in power; like Kagan, he was on the side of Mars, not Venus.

However, it was Hobbes himself who identified—by their very absence—the need for the smiling professions and popular media within his constitutional arrangements for the modern state. He imagined their political and cultural functions, the need for some sort of societywide mediating system to teach the lay public the political and moral truths of the day, long before technology or a suitably trained profession were available to deliver them.

Hobbes was obsessed by the inadequacy of the only mechanism available in his own day to teach civil and moral doctrine to the population at large, namely the universities. He saw the universities as fountains not of truth but of error (papism and sophistry). He could only conclude *Leviathan* with this rather forlorn hope: “For seeing the Universities are the Fountains of Civill, and Morall Doctrine, from whence the Preachers, and the Gentry, drawing such water as they find, use to sprinkle the same (both from the Pulpit, and in their Conversation) upon the People, there ought certainly to be great care taken, to have it pure” (728).

A fountainhead from which both professionals and opinion leaders (preachers and gentry) drew ideological principles (civil and moral doctrine) to use for teaching the lay population (sprinkled upon the people): This is a succinct description of the social-cultural function of mass media in modern nation-states. Hobbes just lacked the technology. He was very skeptical about uni-
versities. They weren’t up to the job; they were more likely to define themselves against the authority Hobbes wanted people to “obey” in order to achieve “concord” in the body politic (380). Hobbes thought the universities were inclined to papism, to which he objected not on theological but on political grounds because it fostered allegiance to a foreign prince. He also criticized “Aristotelity” (scholasticism or sophistry) in the universities, in contrast to what would now be recognized as modern empirical science based on mathematics and observation (708, 688). Thus, at the very outset of modernity, there was perceived to be a tension between the need for popular instruction in the service of a state of “concord,” and the means to deliver it. Formal (university) education was divergent from necessary civic and moral education.

It was exactly this gap that popular media came to fill, starting during the same early modern period with popular entertainments like the theater (including bearbaiting) and various forms of news—from juicy murders to constitutional debates—circulating via print and song. As industrialization kicked in, the media developed “mass” forms, from the radical “pauper press” to the commercial media empires that dominated the twentieth century. Such media were popular not because of the purity of their doctrine, however, but because they proved good at storytelling and spectacle; they often found a way to couch the great questions of turbulent times in a popular idiom, and by no means always to the advantage of the government of the day. Media professionals were not endowed with the authority of the state—quite the reverse in many cases—but this may have made them seem more trustworthy to laypeople, even when their commercial might rivaled that of countries.

While Hobbes despaired of the official institutions for the mediation of ideas, the popular media were establishing a new “fountainhead” from which the population came to draw ideological water because they liked it. Media professionals had to strive above all to maintain people’s goodwill toward the media themselves, their stories and sights, to keep them coming back for more not out of “obedience” but “concord.” Because there was no compulsion, popular media had to seek approval from their users ahead of the political and ideological authorities. Perhaps this is why Hobbes missed them—he was a modernist, concerned with political theory, government, and the state, not with “smiling.” Of “doctrine” he only thought that it should be “pure.” It did not occur to him to make it palatable too, even though he understood that Leviathan (i.e., the monarchical state) depended not on
the mere existence or mere assertion of the rights or powers of the king, but on the people accepting those rights and obeying authority in “concord” (380). This failure to connect “concord” with consent, and consent with communicative media that people liked and trusted, left Hobbes’s political theory incomplete at the end of *Leviathan* and perhaps made his vision of the modern state much more authoritarian in the matter of popular instruction than it needed to be.

*Leviathan* was never put into practice as Hobbes imagined it. Instead, two independent systems for the creation and control of “the public” grew up across the span of modernity. One was the formal domain of politics and learning (including the tensions between them). The other was the informal arena of popular entertainment. The latter was essential to the constitution but intensely disliked by the denizens of the former. Perhaps this explains why “civil and moral” teaching, using a popular idiom to “sprinkle” ideas on the people, remains despised by institutionally placed political, civic, and moral professionals. The popular media are disliked (by cause-effect rationalists especially) precisely because they are media—they come between political purpose and its object. They can be fun and they can’t be directly controlled, and what’s more, they reach another part of the body politic that the authorities can’t control—the hearts and minds of laypeople.

**Reputation Deficit**

Popular mediation as go-between, both connecting and disconnecting power and people, also offends the Protestant work ethic, another invention of the seventeenth century, because “consuming” media is taken to be part of the world of private pleasure, not public affairs. Compared with sober public duty and the industrious creation of wealth, taking pleasure in stories and spectacle, the dissembling arts of acting, the seductions of music and rhetoric, and the necessary lies of fiction seemed literally sinful, especially when such means were used to convey weighty public truths in the vehicle of entertainment. How, in short, could bearbaiting teach citizenship?

This vein of Puritan suspicion of the most popular media remains. It is manifest in the endless game of invidious comparisons where there’s a reputation deficit on one side of any given pair of terms: quality versus trash, art versus entertainment, production versus consumption, serious versus sensational, and so on. There’s a hint of the same in the disciplinary suspicion expressed by some social science or political economy approaches
(where media are work, a problem of control) toward the humanities (where media are culture, a source of pleasure).

Since Hobbes’s time and especially since the nineteenth century, when the press became fully industrialized, the media themselves have grown and prospered, and some of them have become an accepted part of the governmental administration of life. The “deficit” model also operates here to distinguish the sheep from the goats; invidious comparisons are designed to accord “official” status to serious outlets and approved modes of address and to label disapproved versions (often the most popular) as aesthetically, educationally, politically, and/or morally deficient.

From within this modernist/workerist tradition that values power over rhetoric, decisions over drama, comes a strongly expressed disapproval for mediation of any sort. The same mental settings are evident in sport. Modern sport celebrates power, so it can’t deal with a sport based on aesthetics—like synchronized swimming. The response is standard: Many within the system refuse even to recognize it as sport, or they treat it with dismissive humor:

Swimmer: I get really annoyed watching Roy and HG and the Olympics... I feel that they don’t really appreciate what we do. They’d never do that to the swimmers or the track athletes, they’d never criticize them the way they criticize us; but I think it’s just being a little bit naïve, I guess, because they don’t really understand what goes on behind the scenes. . . . here we are making it look easy when actually it is really, really hard and it takes years and years of training to get it to look easy.

Leviathan to Mermaid

But times are changing again. Industrial society has evolved beyond the need for strong states and territorial loyalty (nations and their national games), while media have evolved beyond the broadcast era. The “business plan” of modernity, based on power and control and on one-to-many, “read-only” ideological communication, is drawing toward the end of its useful life. The Hobbesian model of social life as “war of each against all” is shifting to a new model of Venusian, feminized competitiveness. New sports are emerging to symbolize the change.

Economic and symbolic emphasis has shifted down the value chain toward the consumer. This is part of a much more general process that can be observed across many cultural sites and communicative contexts, along
what I’ve called the “value chain of meaning.” The “behavioral” consumer of the long-dominant “media effects” model of communication—the despised or vulnerable feminized figure who for most of the twentieth century stood passive and manipulated at the supermarket shelf or in the polling booth, responding to commercial and political campaigning designed to make her behave as causal agents farther up the value chain wanted her to—is giving way, even in marketing literature, to a new model of the consumer as “action.” This much more interesting figure is the user, who is able to make as well as consume and write as well as read, who interacts with peers and organizations, and who drives innovation and co-creation in many dynamic sectors of the cultural and information economy from the open source movement to games and online journalism.

It does seem to me that symbolic meanings can be associated with this historic shift down the value chain. For instance, the modern era differed strongly from the premodern or medieval period, when the source of meaning was thought to be divine and unarguable and truth was revealed as an article of faith. In contrast, realism, whether factual (journalism) or fictional (the novel, screen drama), suits the modern era’s preoccupation with locating the source of meaning in objects—as, for instance, scientific observation of the properties of things in themselves, documentary evidence in law and history, the primacy of the text in literature and philosophy. But now it seems that an epochal change is under way again, in which the modern certainty that the source of meaning is to be found in objects, texts, and evidence is undergoing attrition. In the contemporary (“globalized”) era, realism is shifting to “reality.” Instead of one scarce truth, there are plenty. Instead of one type of subjectivity, there is difference and diversity. There’s a kind of hyperdemocratization of meaning going on. Instead of investigating objects to determine what they mean, we ask consumers. The more who buy, vote, or choose, the more something is worth. Instead of using criticism and aesthetic judgment of the internal qualities of an object, artwork, or text to determine its value, we use the plebiscite.

Symbolic values associated with sport are not immune to change. The long-term historical drift in the location of the source of meaning can be discerned in sports. They are drifting toward “reality,” consumer-plenitude, and the plebiscite. Some developments that seem pertinent:

• **Synchronized** sports—where choreographed collaboration within a team is prioritized, and where teams don’t play each other as they do in many ball-centered sports (here the difference between synchro-
nized swimming and water polo may be instructive). A telling example
is formation skydiving: The current women’s world record, where 151
skydivers held a pinwheel formation for 4.8 seconds, is held by a group
called “jumpforthecause.com,” which gained the record in aid of breast
cancer research.¹¹

• Feminized sports—there’s a drift from male solo combat hero to fe-
male collaborative competitive being-looked-at, a shift from Mars to
Venus.

• Plebiscitary sports—where winning is an outcome of voting, not de-
feating an opposition directly but impressing spectators. An extension
of such sports from the era of “realism” to the era of “reality” is the prac-
tice of throwing open voting from empaneled experts to spectators at
large. Consumers determine the winner. Here ballroom dancing leads
the way.¹²

• Consumer-integrated sports—where, for example, fashion (the cos-
tume) is integral—as in ballroom dancing and synchronized swim-
mimg, of course, but also and increasingly in tennis, women’s beach
volleyball, surfing, and so on. Consumer integration extends to sports
where merchandising and mediation are pivotal, possibly primary, al-
though this may apply to all sport now.

Synchronized, feminized, plebiscitary, consumer-integrated sports include
ice-skating (figure skating/ice-dancing), rhythmic and artistic gymnastics,
trampoline, diving, synchronized swimming, ballroom dancing, surfing,
and equestrian dressage.

Fascism to Fashion

Synchronized sports should not be confused with regimented fitness. I
vaguely remember people talking about calisthenics in my youth, and de-
spite the fact that calisthenics had its origins in ladies’ colleges in the mid–
nineteenth century—the word comes from the Greek for “beauty” (kallos)
plus “strength” (thanos)—the dominant image is of mass physical exercises
on parade grounds.¹³ Such displays were “synchronized,” but on an indus-
trial scale: regimented and standardized. The type of new possibilities being
explored in synchronized sports is evident in the difference between those
1984-style proletarian triumphs of the will and synchronized swimming
itself, where makeup, hair gel, music, and nose clips are specified equip-
ment. Economic dynamism has shifted from production to consumption,
from industry to services, from work to entertainment. Media have begun to open up to interactive, DIY, user-led, or consumer-cocreated inputs. The spheres of public politics and learning are both migrating away from traditional institutions and professions, toward private identity and the self. Perhaps there’s less of a structural imperative now for adversarial combat sport, for masculine heroics and outdoor collective militaristic bonding.

The integration of sport into consumer culture is not just a matter of persuading teenagers to buy each season’s upgrade of their team’s kit. Fashion values as well as marketing gumption are at stake when sporting icons swap shorts for gowns, and fashion icons swap gowns for swimsuits. For instance, tennis champion Serena Williams has launched her own fashion label, Aneres (which is Serena reversed). Or, in a stunning transformation where all trace of “sport” seems to have been erased, fashion photographer Daniela Federici has taken Olympian athlete Cathy Freeman—a world icon of power sport (Mars)—and made her over as Venus for Charlie Brown’s winter 2004 collection (fig. 1).

We’ve become so used to seeing fashion models in swimwear that it’s hard to remember a time when sportswear was not regarded as fashion apparel. But when fashion was “modern,” sportswear rarely if ever featured on the catwalk or in Vogue. Those days are long gone. Fashion and sport are so integrated that you can’t see the seam where they join. For instance (not quite at random; but no one origin can be offered from distributive media like magazines), witness recent sets featuring fashion icon Kate Moss, who has no sporting background. She starred on the cover of an issue of Vogue (Paris) that was devoted to the proposition “Mode/Sport” (by Mario Testino). Her set showed her on the athletics track in starting blocks; throwing a javelin; being handled by a trainer; looking almost antifashion in running shorts and tracksuit. Soon afterward she appeared for W magazine in the United States as “Glamazon” (by Mert Alas and Marcus Piggott), variously modeling sumptuous gowns and swimwear, sometimes indistinguishably, as in a shot of an Yves Saint Laurent jacket worn over an Eres bathing suit. Throughout the set her hair is coiled, synchronized swimming–style. And so on, throughout the distributive media.

It is noteworthy that while sports and fashion are integrating, many of the sports in the “synchronized” category are at or beyond the edge of what is accepted as a “proper” sport. Synchronized swimming in particular seems to attract uncomprehending teasing from the locker-room jocks of competitive team contact sport. Like rhythmic gymnastics, it is also one of the few women-only sports to have achieved Olympic status. There’s more than a
whiff of gender politics in the refusal to see a women-only event as a sport at all, especially one where compulsory smiling and fashion-linked costumes and makeup emphasize what some see as feminine traits rather than sporting prowess. In terms of reputation deficit, the feminized and spectator-oriented style of synchronized swimming is to masculine combat-contact sports as popular media entertainment is to serious politics.

Airbrushed, or History?

So where did such a strange fish come from? It transpires that the origins of synchronized, feminized, plebiscitary, consumer-integrated sport go back to just one person, and an Australian at that. She was identified in her own day as Venus. Her name was Annette Kellerman.\(^\text{18}\)

Kellerman was Australia’s aquanaut, the beauty who—long before Elle Macpherson—was known as The Perfect Woman. The self-promoter who—long before Madonna—got herself arrested, knowing the com-
commercial value of sensation. The thespian who—long before Nicole Kidman—was a Queen of the Screen. The fitness guru who—long before Jane Fonda—showed middle-aged women how to stay sexy.19

This catalogue of claims may seem hyperbolic, applied as it is to someone who is now largely forgotten even in the country of her birth. But in fact even this list falls well short of what Kellerman achieved. Not only was she the contemporary equal of Macpherson, Madonna, Kidman, and Fonda, but she was also a world champion sportswoman in both swimming and diving, and she was a sporting innovator, developing what was known at the time as “water ballet”—the precursor to synchronized swimming—and popularizing it worldwide via stage, screen, and stunt. As if all that wasn’t enough, Kellerman is also credited with the invention and popularization of the one-piece swimsuit for women, making her an icon of fashion history too. And there’s more. It is likely, however, that more people today have heard of the film made about her life than have heard of her. For the film was Esther Williams’s Million Dollar Mermaid (1952), which, as we’ve seen, is itself the very emblem of the contemporary mediated public.

Esther Williams herself admired Kellerman as “a pioneer of women’s rights.” Williams told an interviewer in 2004:

She knew there was more to being a woman than being kept in corsets. She wasn’t content to float. She was determined to swim. . . . She was a woman who had a different opinion of what women could achieve. . . . Women have told me they learned to swim because they saw Million Dollar Mermaid. I loved that, and I know Annette would have loved it too. What she did was to persuade women to get in the water. I’m a continuum of that.20

Williams met Kellerman (then in her sixties) while she was making Million Dollar Mermaid. She asked her:

“Do you like the idea of me playing you in the movie?” because I was a champion swimmer and a dedicated athlete like she was. She told me: “I wish you could have been Australian.” I replied: “Annette, I’m all you’ve got. I’m the only swimmer in the movies. There won’t be another one. So let’s see what we can do with an American girl playing an Australian.”

Kellerman was born in Marrickville, New South Wales, in 1886, suffering rickets (some accounts say it was 1887, and polio), for which she had to wear
leg braces until she was seven. She took up swimming to overcome this condition. She began to break records in her midteens. It was her swimming prowess that opened up the possibility of a career as a professional swimmer, an opportunity she took by sailing for England in 1904. She worked in Britain and Europe for the next few years, with three attempts to swim the English Channel; river races on the Thames, Seine, and Danube; and a coastal swim from Dover to Ramsgate. She emerged as a world champion in both distance swimming and high diving. While still in her teens, according to the citation in the International Swimming Hall of Fame, she attracted the “largest live audience ever to see a swim race”: Half a million Parisians watched her race seventeen men down the Seine. Then she went to the United States, where she became the “million dollar mermaid” (fig. 2). And the rest is history.

To the Macpherson-Madonna-Kidman-Fonda list must therefore be added one more name to signify her sporting renown and influence, which far
exceeded that of Australia’s current greatest swimming hero, Ian Thorpe. But where Ian Thorpe is famous for swimming (and big feet), it remains the case that Kellerman was also famous as a beauty (Macpherson), self-promoter (Madonna), film star (Kidman), and fitness guru (Fonda).

Her reputation for beauty is based partly on her contribution to fashion—the invention of the one-piece swimsuit. This innovation also explains the reference to Madonna-like self-promotion. It was this garment—or lack of very much of it at all—that attracted the attention of both the Prince of Wales and Lord Northcliffe (owner of the *Daily Mirror*, which sponsored her appearances) while Kellerman was in the United Kingdom. The Powerhouse Museum marks the moment:

> At a time when female swimmers wore restrictive, cumbersome bathing costumes, Kellerman came up with the idea of a more practical one-piece swimsuit. When invited to give an exhibition of swimming and diving before members of the Royal Family at London’s Bath Club, she was forbidden to show any bare leg. Her solution was to buy a long pair of black stockings and sew them onto a boy’s short racing swimsuit. The women’s one-piece swimsuit had arrived.23

After she went to the United States in about 1910, it was this garment (boy’s shorts, with or without sewn-in stockings) that got her newsworthily arrested on a Boston beach. In turn that incident attracted academic attention, leading to her reputation as “The Perfect Woman.” Her biographer Emily Gibson tells the story:

> [Harvard professor Dr. Dudley Sargent] actually heard about her because she was doing a swim from Revere beach in Boston, and she went down in her Australian boy’s bathing suit, and was arrested for indecent exposure because nobody liked seeing legs in those days. So it was in the papers and Dr. Sargent heard about her and asked her to come along to Harvard where he measured her. Before her he’d measured thousands of women, which I don’t think would have been such a bad job for a Harvard professor. What his standard was, was the Venus de Milo, and none of them had even come close to those measurements; and Annette Kellerman did. He even measured Annette’s wrists. There are wrist measurements in Dr. Dudley Sargent’s little jottings, and the Venus de Milo, as we know, didn’t have any wrists, but anyway.24

Annette Kellerman had one more claim to fame up her sleeve: she prefig-
ured the exercise video (Fonda). In 1918 she published a book called *Physical Beauty—How to Keep It*, and later in life ran a business called Physical Instruction by Mail.25

The International Swimming Hall of Fame makes it clear that her place in history was secured because of the all-too-corporeal nature of her swimming achievements:

Annette Kellerman starred in motion pictures such as the *Diving Venus, Queen of the Mermaids, A Daughter of the Gods*, and *Neptune’s Daughter*. She crisscrossed the US and circled the world in the famed “Annette Kellerman black one-piece suit” which made swimming attractive to men and liberated for women. She performed stunts and dives which made her first among the fore-runners to synchronized swimming and women’s high diving.26

She commented on her own fame later in life: “I come from a nation of swimmers but no one remembers me now, yet I was once one of the most famous women in all the world. They called me the ‘diving Venus,’ the perfect woman, a daughter of the gods.”27 Officially modeled on the goddess Venus, attractive to men, liberated for women, world champion, star of stage and screen (and river), inventor of a film genre, progenitor of two sports (synchronized swimming and women’s high diving), inventor of the one-piece swimsuit, inventor of home-fitness instruction—and forgotten. The modernist era of sport didn’t know how to deal with an attractive celebrity entertainer who contributed to fashion, films, and female fitness. Kellerman was ahead of her time. That time has come.

**Synchronized Voting**

The combination of publicity, showbiz, skimpy costumes, and a perfect body, masking but also popularizing world-class athleticism and female achievement, was too much for traditional sporting culture to handle. But now we are witness to the integration of all such values into sport. Synchronized sports are on the rise.

Here the shift from sports based on Mars (power, victory) to Venus (law; “seduction, not coercion”) is complete. The “law” component comes into play in the mechanism used to decide winners. Instead of literally beating the opposition, sports like ice-skating, diving, and synchronized swimming require a choice to be made in a rule-governed environment. Judges are understood to be partial, so they too are multiplied, up to seven from differ-
ent nationalities, whose scores are combined and sometimes discounted, to ensure that national interest or hegemonic power does not prevail. The mode of scoring brings such sports into the realm of media, where the arts of Venus, performance, look, style—and smiling—can carry the day.

Somewhere beyond what we currently recognize as sport lies “reality” TV, some of which is strongly based on sports values. Plebiscitary sports are beginning to draw from “reality” TV the image of consumer choice as the ultimate arbiter of sporting achievement. These not-quite sports represent a dispersal of competitiveness itself from the individual combative hero to the feminized image of the consumer. For a taste of things to come, behold synchronized dancing.

The progenitor of this emergent form is one of the oldest and longest-running shows on international television: the BBC’s *Come Dancing*, which debuted in 1949 and lasted until 1995. Its demise was short-lived, however, for in 2004 the BBC replaced it with *Strictly Come Dancing*. The title borrows a bit of glam from Baz Luhrmann’s 1992 movie comedy *Strictly Ballroom* to enliven the rather naff image of *Come Dancing*. It worked wonders. The show immediately became a major hit in the United Kingdom and internationally. It has been spun off and reversioned ruthlessly by the BBC, making it one of the corporation’s biggest export earners. In Australia it topped the ratings as *Dancing with the Stars*. In Italy it scorched the floor as *Ballando con le Stelle*. It has been bought by Belgium, Poland, Denmark, and New Zealand. There’s a children’s version called *Dance Factory*, and there’s an amateur-only version called *Strictly Dance Fever*. There are one-off specials like *Strictly Ice Dancing* (a Christmas show) and *Strictly African Dancing*. The latter was screened in July 2005 to coincide with Live8 and the G8, as part of the BBC’s “Year of Africa.” It featured sporting and showbiz celebrities of Afro-Caribbean background, paired with traditional African dance troupes. After training and visiting Africa to see where the dances came from, each one performed their dance live in front of a studio audience, with a panel of experts judging their skills while viewers could vote for their favorites.

Finally, the ultimate citadel has fallen—*Dancing with the Stars* has conquered the United States. The Disney-owned ABC bought it to rival *American Idol* on Fox. It became the surprise summer hit of 2005—a surprise because no one in the United States thought it could succeed. The ABC even had to bring over the original BBC team to make the local version:

“I am fully aware that this may sound like the craziest show anyone in
the US has ever heard of,” Andrea Wong, ABC’s vice-president, said. . . .
Ms Wong said: “In a world where it’s easier for reality series to imitate than innovate, I just love how fresh this format is. And the show’s
global success demonstrates how audiences around the world find it surprising and, undeniably, fun.”

In all of these versions the basic proposition is the same: viewers get to see someone who can’t necessarily dance being put through their paces, in synchronized competition with other pairs who are eliminated by a combination of expert judges and viewer plebiscite until a winner emerges at the end of the series. The format is usually a celebrity paired with a dance professional (Strictly Dance Fever used all-amateur couples). Often the viewers’ vote is at odds with the judges’ score. It seems that viewers enjoy watching people who dance as badly as they do, so frequently an incompetent but plucky celeb will survive long after rivals who can dance.

Voting is a matter of public interest. In Australia a major national scandal broke out when teen celebrity Nikki Webster was eliminated from the 2005 series of Dancing with the Stars. Webster shot to international fame in 2000 as the thirteen-year-old in a sundress who aerially guided 4 billion TV viewers through the Sydney Olympics opening ceremony. But she was booted out of Dancing with the Stars when a judge on the show awarded her tango a score of one out of ten—too low to be offset by the other judges’ scores or viewers’ vote. A tabloid feeding frenzy ensued. Ratings soared.

Competitive dancing is not new (They Shoot Horses, Don’t They? is a vision of dancing as Mars, not Venus), but as a plebiscitary sport, the Strictly/Stars format is a pioneer. Whatever the version, the key to commercial (if not competitive) success is consumer choice. Elimination is achieved not by brute endurance but by the extent to which skill, attractiveness, fashion, and the human appeal of flawed celebrity or plucky amateur combine into an SMS-able vote. Given the controversy surrounding judging panels in both accredited sports and reality TV, can we be very far away from the plebiscitary Olympics, where the winners will be made in the image of the feminized viewing-voting consumer-citizen? Conversely, when can we expect politics to abandon Martial Leviathan and embrace Venusian synchronicity? When will we see Strictly Come Voting, where politicians waltz in an election special? At the moment that’s only a spoof imagined by some wag at The Times. But it can’t be long before it becomes politico-sporting “reality.”
Notes


2 For more information on The Million Dollar Mermaid, see www.imdb.com/title/tt0044903/ and www.ncc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/6.2/Lucy.html (both accessed September 21, 2005).

3 Hartley, The Politics of Pictures, 137. Tom Streeter notes my "description of the growth of the 'smiling professions' in the twentieth century..." Hartley wittily uses synchronized swimming—a strenuous, highly skilled activity performed with a contrived smile—to illustrate the internal character, artfulness, and improbability of this new form of professionalism." Thomas Streeter, Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television (June 1996), available at www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2584/is_n2_v16/ai_18897276 (accessed September 21, 2005).


5 See Robert Cooper on the difference between premodern, modern, and postmodern countries: Robert Cooper, "Why We Still Need Empires," Guardian, April 7, 2002, available at observer.guardian.co.uk/worldview/story/0,11581,680095,00.html.


12 Ballroom dancing is already a world sport: see dancesportinfo.net and www.dancesport .uk.com/world.htm (both accessed September 21, 2005).


14 For more information on Serena Williams’s fashion label, see www.aneresdesigns.com/aneres.html (accessed September 21, 2005).
15 For more information see Charlie Brown fashion house: www.charliebrown.com.au/ (click on front door; wardrobe; catalogue/clothes rack; Winter 2004); and for more information on photographer Daniela Federici see www.danielfederici.com/ (both accessed September 21, 2005).
16 Vogue Paris, November 2004 (no. 852).
18 Kellerman’s surname was often rendered “Kellermann” in her own day, especially in the United States; see www.stairstars.com/dyn/detail.php?listingid=20 and www.whitehat.com.au/Sydney/People/Kellerman.asp (accessed December 4, 2005). The sport’s governing body in Canada claims that “ornamental swimming” was invented by Canadian water polo player and diver Margaret Sellers in the 1920s, but they also concede chronological primacy to Annette Kellerman: www.synchro.ca/history.htm (accessed September 21, 2005).
26 Kellerman biography, International Swimming Hall of Fame (Fort Lauderdale, FL): www.ishof.org/74akellerman.html (accessed September 21, 2005), my emphasis.
For more information on Strictly Come Dancing, see en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Strictly_Come_Dancing (accessed September 21, 2005).

The Oxford English Dictionary defines naff as “unfashionable, vulgar; lacking in style, inept; worthless; faulty.” For more information on Strictly Ballroom, see www.imdb.com/title/tt0105488/ (accessed September 21, 2005).

Adam Sherwin, “Come Dancing Set to Have a Twirl on American Television,” Times Online, March 24, 2005: www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,2–1538643,00.html.

For more information on Dancing with the Stars, Channel Seven Australia, see seven.com.au/seven/041005_dancing_FAQ (accessed September 21, 2005).


For more information on Strictly Dance Fever, see www.bbc.co.uk/strictlydancefever/dancefever/news/2005/06/04/19761.shtml (accessed September 21, 2005).

For more information on Strictly African Dancing, see www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2005/06_june/20/dancing.shtml (accessed September 21, 2005).

For more information on the U.S. version, Dancing with the Stars, see abc.go.com/primetime/dancing/vote.html (accessed September 21, 2005).

Quoted in Sherwin, “Come Dancing Set to Have a Twirl on American Television.”

For more information on Nikki Webster, see en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nikki_Webster (accessed September 21, 2005).


For more information on They Shoot Horses Don’t They? see en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horace_McCoy and see imdb.com/title/tt0065088/ (both accessed September 21, 2005).

Sherwin, “Come Dancing Set to Have a Twirl on American Television.”