

WOMEN, SPORT AND IMAGES: FROM LITERARY EKPHRASIS TO AUDIOVISUAL MEDIA

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At this time, when both recreational and entertainment sports are being increasingly characterised by quantification and monetisation, it is difficult to separate sport from what Susan Sontag once described as the image market (1977: 178). Without attempting to appraise the positive or negative aspects of the phenomenon, which transcends any simplistically dualistic interpretation, it seems reasonable to assert that the most contemporary feature of sport today is the way that its (everyday) performance and (mass) consumption are determined by their value for audiovisual production and social exchange. Sport is not just played or watched, as it was before; now, it is also fragmented, quantified in clicks and mediated. The special connection between sport and moving images was identified by two of the founding theorists of film aesthetics, Béla Balazs and Siegfried Kracauer. Balazs explored the act of moving and walking to distinguish between functional beauty in sport and truth (or soul) in cinema (1931:

137), while Kracauer highlighted its revolutionary and artistic potential, with reference to Bertolt Brecht and Sláta Dudow's film *Kuhle Wampe* (1932), in which sport plays a key role (1947: 262). However, as Miriam Hansen points out (2012: 198), it was Walter Benjamin who most clearly characterised the ambivalent symbiosis between film and sport as two related forms of a "test performance" (2008: 30) that would shape the future of everyday life in capitalist societies. Nearly 100 years before any amateur athletes were able to go online to check their running time, generated instantly by a microchip and shared on social media, Benjamin had already discerned the intrinsic tendency towards quantification and evaluation shared by cinema and sport:

This aspect of filmmaking is highly significant in social terms. For the intervention in a performance by a body of experts is also characteristic of sporting performances and, in a wider sense, of all test performances. The entire process of film produc-

tion is determined, in fact, by such intervention. [...] These tests, unlike those in the world of sports, are incapable of being publicly exhibited to the degree one would desire. And this is precisely where film comes into play. Film makes test performances capable of being exhibited, by turning that ability itself into a test. The film actor performs not in front of an audience but in front of an apparatus. The film director occupies exactly the same position as the examiner in an aptitude test. To perform in the glare of arc lamps [...] is to preserve one's humanity in the face of the apparatus. (Benjamin [1936], 2008: 30-31)

In those days, this interweaving of technology and play, of capital and entertainment, did not have to be interpreted solely in the negative terms in which Theodor Adorno understood it (Hansen, 2012: 200); it could also be viewed as an agent for social change and political mobilisation, as Benjamin himself and Brecht suggested. However, today the relationship between the "apparatus" and the "test performance" has reached levels that make it difficult to separate the relatively spontaneous act of playing a sport from its viewing, statistical and monetisation systems, and therefore, to distinguish playing sport *per se* from its value as an audiovisual product. Without any intention of indulging in nostalgia, it is worth remembering that just a few years ago it would have been unthinkable to come across a person running on a mountain trail who, instead of slowing down to enjoy the landscape, looks obsessively at the screen of his watch to check his average running speed or heart rate. Not so long ago, before the rise of the mobile phone, the ratio of time spent actually playing a sport to time spent photographing ourselves playing one was very different: the image was an exceptional phenomenon (the team picture taken once a year, the blurry snapshot of a race), and taking a photo did not involve the complex network of economic, technological and sociological interactions brought into play by the mere fact of sharing an image on social media.

It was only very recently that filming and broadcasting major sports like football turned into the mechanism of geopolitical control and corporate and institutional whitewashing that it is today, so utterly inextricable from its sources of funding and power structures. The problems were there in embryonic form decades ago (Rigauer, 1981), but images were not yet operating on a feedback loop that monetises everything. Sport was not so completely defined by its status as (or desire to be) an image:

A capitalist society requires a culture based on images. It needs to furnish vast amounts of entertainment in order to stimulate buying and anesthetize the injuries of class, race, and sex. And it needs to gather unlimited amounts of information, the better to exploit natural resources, increase productivity, keep order, make war, give jobs to bureaucrats. The camera's twin capacities, to subjectivize reality and to objectify it, ideally serve these needs and strengthen them. Cameras define reality in the two ways essential to the workings of an advanced industrial society: as a spectacle (for masses) and as an object of surveillance (for rulers). The production of images also furnishes a ruling ideology. Social change is replaced by a change in images. The freedom to consume a plurality of images and goods is equated with freedom itself. The narrowing of free political choice to free economic consumption requires the unlimited production and consumption of images. (Sontag, 1977: 178)

However, although the relationship between sport and audiovisual production today is so tied up in this image market, important changes to its underlying power structures are taking place, producing rifts and cracks in the heteropatriarchy at the top. In parallel with this age of mediatisation, we are living at a productive and promising moment for sport played by women. It is a period still marked by the sexist behaviour and authoritarian outbursts of those in charge (the events surrounding Spain's 2023 World Cup victory offering an obvious example), who take refuge in fake news

and conspiracy theories of false feminism because they can see the battles being won in the area of gender rights and are reluctant to relinquish the power they have always enjoyed. The notion of the “grass ceiling” posited by the historian Jean Williams (2007) is enlightening in this sense, as on the one hand it evokes the aspirations and constraints of the “glass ceiling” historically imposed on women in the business world, thus highlighting the connection between sport and economics mentioned above, while on the other it posits a larger context in which the fight for gender equality is characterised not as an upward climb, like ascending a hierarchical ladder, but as a level playing field: not a level to aspire to, like the glass barrier that women seek to smash (i.e., the current world of business), but a shared green space on which they can pass the ball to each other and play (the *utopian* world of sport). Navigating the tensions and ambivalences between these two worlds is of course no easy task.

DESIRE AND PROHIBITION: THE PATRIARCHAL GAZE

This issue of *L'Atalante*, titled *Women and Sport in Audiovisual Media: Bodies, Images, Politics*, is positioned precisely at this historical intersection between the market of images that surround us (as Sontag describes it) and the new prospects for sport played by women, with the aim of documenting and interpreting key visual icons (in the various articles) and giving a voice to different generations of sportswomen (in the interviews). But before presenting this issue's topics and contributions, it is worth taking a moment to consider a key issue that can help shed light on the origin or foundation of the historical tension between the sport imaginary and gender discourses: the ban imposed on women by a heteropatriarchal power fascinated with, yet at the same time fearful of, the visual and performative agency of the sportswoman's body. Or looking at it from the

opposite perspective, the revolutionary, liberating potential of sport played by women and its depiction in images as a means of disrupting the male gaze and its scopophilic pleasures. Such images possess a transgressive power that Tatiana Senta-mans identifies in her fascinating study *Amazonas mecánicas: engranajes visuales, políticos y culturales* (2010: 140), which analyses archival photographs of sportswomen in Spain, opening the images up to multiple interpretations that transcend the limiting yet omnipresent male/female binary. Indeed, as the football coach Natalia Arroyo points out in one of the interviews featured in this issue, it is outrageous that we continue to talk about “women's sport”, an expression that implicitly assumes that the default version, requiring no modifying adjective, is men's sport.

One of the most oft-repeated fallacies in discussions about sport played by women today is its description as a “developing” field (a term borrowed from economic terminology) that does not receive more media or public attention because “it is still getting started” and therefore “cannot attract” the kind of audience that sport played by men is able to draw. This condescending language that feigns sensitivity to gender issues is commonplace on TV and radio talk shows and in conversations in the street. The problem is that this idea, so frequently repeated by those who seek to undervalue or undermine sport played by women, is historically false, as it is the bans imposed by men that have prevented sports played by women from reaching more people and receiving more attention in the public sphere: not a supposed *lack of public interest*, but a whole regime of male (in this case the qualifying adjective is worth including) restrictions and repressions that prevented women from playing certain sports, such as in 1921 when England's all-powerful Football Association officially banned women from playing the sport, with medical and eugenic excuses, but with the obvious objective of cutting short the stunning success (in terms of audiences and social impact)

THE COERCION AND CASTIGATION IMPOSED BY THE HETEROPATRIARCHY REFLECTED AN OBVIOUS DREAD AND DISTRUST OF THE AGENCY OF SPORTSWOMEN AND THE SOCIAL ADVANCES THAT AGENCY MIGHT ACHIEVE

that football played by women was enjoying at the time (Williams, 2003; Arroyo, 2022). Leaving aside the positivist and evolutionist assumptions of this conception of sport (as if it were something that has to *progress* in terms of economic power and media attention), it is important to stress that the coercion and castigation imposed by the heteropatriarchy reflected an obvious dread and distrust of the agency of sportswomen and the social advances that agency might achieve. It was a mixture of fear and fascination of female athletes that recalls an image from one of the greatest works in the history of literature *Journey to the West: The Monkey King's Amazing Adventures*, written in China in the 16th century:

He had no choice, then, but to go on. Although it seemed wrong to do so, he crossed the bridge at last. After taking a few steps, he noticed a sandalwood pavilion in the middle of the compound of the house. In the compound, three girls were juggling a ball with their feet. These girls were completely different from the other four. Their bright turquoise sleeves waved rhythmically, revealing their delicate jade fingers like bamboo shoots. The swaying of their embroidered golden skirts offered glimpses of impossibly tiny slippered feet. Their every movement was vested with the most extraordinary perfection and smoothness as they passed the ball from one to another. To do so, they had to calculate the distance precisely and measure the amount of force needed to kick the ball. Each move had a name of its own. A turnaround kick was an “over-the-wall-flower”, while a backward somersault was

“crossing the sea”. The game demanded the deftest of skill, particularly to stop the ball with the feet and attack without raising a single speck of dust from the ground. But one of the hardest moves of all was “the pearl that rises to the Buddha’s head”. To achieve it perfectly, the ball had to be caught between the toes and passed repeatedly from one foot to the other. But their repertoire was not limited to such a peculiar move. Indeed, the players would sometimes drop to the ground to strike the ball, or squat with bended knee while keeping the body most straight, or twist like fish out of the water and hit the ball off their heels to the far side of the field. With shouts and applause they would celebrate such magnificent footwork and then strive to outdo it. As if by magic, the ball would then roll up a player’s legs with ease and stop at her tender neck, where it would spin around a few times before falling at last to the ground. (Wu Cheng’en, [1592] 1992: 1599-1600)

This description, which goes on in more detail, constitutes one of the earliest extant literary images of a sport being played by women, perhaps its first ekphrasis (a concept worth invoking here, as there appear to be no existing scholarly publications on the question). Although there are paintings pre-dating this work that depict women playing *cuju* (a traditional Chinese sport that was a precursor to football), such as a work by the artist Du Jin painted during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), the passage from *Journey to the West* is significant and highly relevant to the subject of this monograph, not only for its precise and detailed descriptions of the sportswomen’s movements, but especially for what happens immediately after the scene of the game. A few pages later, we discover that these same young women are in reality malevolent she-devils, who pretend to cook for the traveller who stumbled upon their game, serving him “a little salted human flesh fried in human fat” and “human brains, still covered in blood” ([1592] 1992: 1602). But the most emblematic moment comes when, after presenting

the women first as expert footballers and then as pitiless cannibals, the author sexualises them in an extensive passage marked by the voyeuristic gaze of another character who, having magically transformed himself into a fly, watches the women bathing in the nude—the very quintessence of a male gaze that sexualises women’s sport:

On seeing them, the Pilgrim smiled with delight and flew straight to one of the women and landed on her. When they saw how clear and warm the water was, the women wanted to swim in it at once. Without a moment to lose, they took off their clothes, tossed them carelessly onto the posts and dived into the pool. With eager eyes, the Pilgrim watched them unbutton their blouses, loosen their silk sashes and take off their skirts. Silvery white were their breasts, and their bodies had the unattainable perfection of snow. Their limbs wore that blue tone that makes ice so lovely, while their shoulders looked as if they had been crafted by hands at once expert and delicate. Their stomachs were as smooth and supple as would be expected of such beauties, a fleshy counterpoint to the tautness of their shapely backs. Their thighs and their knees were perfectly rounded, and their tiny feet were no more than three inches long. A flame of desire shone from their sweet caverns of love. Once in the water, they began to jump and splash one another, while the more daring swam to the middle of the pool (Wu Cheng’en, [1592] 1992: 1599-1600)

The purpose of citing the whole passage here is to highlight its historical importance as a precursor to many of the images analysed in this issue, and also to demonstrate the common features of the previous description of the women’s bodies while playing *cuju* (a genuine sport description) and this description of the same women swimming in the pool (explicitly sexualised). This way of simultaneously praising, demonising and objectifying women through sport, beginning by extolling them, then eroticising and finally condemning and punishing them, is reflected in several articles in this issue, such as Elena Oroz’s exploration of the depictions on film of the activities of the Franco regime’s women’s branch, Sección Femenina, or the analysis of the film *Las Ibéricas F. C.* (1971) by Elena Cordero and Asier Gil. *Journey to the West*, with its incomparable iconic force (and its ability to make us laugh), is light years away from the grim prudery of Francoist Spain that Carmen Martín Gaité analysed so insightfully in her novels and essays: the *cuju* she-devils are much more empowered than the women that the Franco regime sought to mould, as they fight, repeatedly beating the men they face, and using powerful magic techniques and martial arts. But what is significant in this case is how, as different as the contexts may be, many canonical patriarchal depictions of sport played by women share this double-edged sword of desire and interdic-

Figure 1. Scroll painting by Du Jin (circa 1465-1509) showing women playing *cuju*



tion, highlighting the significance of *men's fears and prohibitions* as a historical constant.

With this in mind, before turning to a consideration of sports images created by women that question and reverse such gender restrictions, it is worth highlighting the presence in the passage from *Journey to the West* of what Barbara Creed refers to as the “monstrous-feminine” (1993). The seven young women described in the story are not just extraordinary sportswomen but also powerful insect-cannibals with the power to shoot silken threads from their stomachs and trap men in their webs. This connects to a whole tradition of monstrous images of women that runs throughout the history of art, threatening the heteropatriarchal power structures, as Pilar Pedraza (1991) has shown. In the identification of this idea of female *otherness* in sport, it is highly revealing that the chapter of *Journey to the West* in which these she-devils appear also presents them as mothers, with a menacing and monstrous image of motherhood: “Each of them had adopted a child, to whom they had given the names Bee, Hornet, Cockroach, Centipede, Grasshopper, Worm and Dragonfly. At one time, the women who were now their mothers had woven an enormous web and all these unlucky children had suffered the misfortune of falling into it” ([1592] 1992: 1615). As Miriam Sánchez and Alan Salvadó point out in their article exploring the connections between menstruation and the sport imaginary, the patriarchy's fears, prohibitions and propaganda regarding women's agency in sport give considerable attention to menstruation and motherhood. The question of controlling bodies connects with the constraints imposed by the canons of beauty, normativity and gender binaries, as several of the sportswomen interviewed by Nuria Cancela, Laia Puig and Ariadna Cordal in this issue's *(Dis)Agreements* section observe.

READING ON THE DIVING BOARD: SWIMMERS AND FEMINISTS

Fortunately, these othering and sexualising gazes are gradually giving way to spaces of reconstruction and sisterhood that place sport played by women—and not the voyeuristic gaze on it—at the heart of the matter. Returning to the example of the menstrual education films analysed by Sánchez and Salvadó in their article, it is reassuring to see that finally, after decades of silencing or explicit stigmatising of menstruation in sport (consider, for example, the infamous white dress code imposed on tennis players at Wimbledon), some institutions and clubs are beginning to naturalise or even analyse the influence of menstrual cycles on sports performance and injuries (Bonals, 2022). However, as Tatiana Sentamans demonstrates in her aforementioned research (2010), the performative and political agency of the sportswoman's body is not a recent or contemporary “achievement”, as over the course of the 20th century (in parallel with the exponential rise in popularity of sport in capitalist societies) there were numerous female athletes who acted as important forerunners in audiovisual media, opening up new possibilities for women with their sporting careers and images. For example, this issue includes two articles that explore the imaginary of women's sport at two key moments in history: Weimar Germany in the late 1920s and early 1930s, in Albert Elduque's article about the well-known genre of the mountain film or *Bergfilm* (which provided Leni Riefenstahl with a platform to launch her career, first as an actress and then as a director); and the Czechoslovakian New Wave of the 1960s, in Nora Barathova's analysis of Věra Chytilová's first feature film, *Something Different* (*O něčem jiném*, 1963), which juxtaposes the patterns and emotions of the day-to-day lives of a professional gymnast and a housewife. Far from offering a monolithic view, these two articles underscore the complexity and ambiguities

(especially notable in the case of the *Bergfilme*) reflected in different films and characters.

Having cited the ekphrasis of the she-devils in *Journey to the West* as an example of the spaces of mystification and castigation that the patriarchy imposed—and still imposes—on sport played by women, this introduction would not be complete without balancing it out with an image that has the same iconic power but is articulated from a female and feminist perspective. Given that the final passage cited above portrayed the girls swimming in a pool, it seems fitting to invert the male gaze of that scene with images of female swimmers who short-circuited the sexualised charge of the female swimmer motif (present in iconic images from the birth of Venus right up to the bikini-clad women in James Bond films) to invoke gender identities, body politics and articulations of desire produced (rather than merely embodied) by women. The image of the female swimmer has had a particularly potent force in contemporary European cinema, from the unforgettable images of Juliette Binoche letting herself go as she swims laps in a pool in *Three Colours: Blue* (*Tres couleurs: Bleu*, Krzysztof Kieslowski, 1993) to Céline Sciamma's first film, *Water Lilies* (*Naissance des Pieuvres*, 2007), about two teenage girls on a synchronised swim team, whose protagonists subvert heteronormative canons through an ambivalent haptic and biopolitical experimentation that empowers the actors' bodies and complicates the filmmaker's (desiring, but collective and feminist) gaze. To reappropriate the motif of the female swimmer and historicise its literary forerunners, the origins of its images, it is impossible to overlook Concha Méndez, who in addition to being a poet and editor was also a champion swimmer in the 1920s:

On one of my last summers in San Sebastián, I won the Las Vascongadas swimming competition. I had already published my first books, *Inquietudes*, *Surtidor* and *El ángel cartero*, and I had just sold a film script. The newspapers mentioned that the

swimming champion was a poet and a filmmaker, and they published my picture. When my father saw me in the papers, he said to me: "That picture makes you look like a common criminal." That was what my family was like, but I imagine that deep down my father would have been proud that I was a writer. The day of the awards ceremony, I gave my second poetry recital. Over the sea they had set up two diving boards against a rock, one for women and the other for men, both more than twenty feet high. I arrived at the bay in a swimsuit with the poems wrapped in oilcloth. I climbed up to the diving board, unfurled the roll of poems and began reciting. When I had finished, to get the applause and so they could see that I was daring, I had to dive off, despite my vertigo, and I plunged into the sea and swam away with the poems wrapped around me. (Méndez, quoted in Ulacia, 2018: 52)

Here, in contrast to *Journey to the West*, it is the voice of a sportswoman that controls the pacing, direction and nuances of the narrative, without ever submitting to the *rules of the game* of an objectifying gaze. It is hard to imagine a richer and more powerful scene: the swimmer's body is charged with desire and intensity on its own, in contact—literally—with the poems she wrote and reads. It is the woman writer's words that clothe her, instead of stripping naked like the she-devils to satisfy some man's desire (Méndez spent her summers in San Sebastián with her partner at that time, Luis Buñuel). The only small concession to the patriarchy, if it can be so described, is her wistful recollection of her father offered as evidence of family pride; as Carrie Dunn points out (2014), the father-daughter connection is a recurring theme in oral histories of professional and amateur sportswomen, which are often characterised by strong parent-child relationships. But beyond this minor detail, the passage possesses an extraordinary iconic power, while at the same time being open to a certain playful irony much like the burlesque films that Méndez so adored (inevitably recalling Buster Keaton standing on a

high diving board preparing to jump off in *Hard Luck* (1921), as if she were seeking to balance the ordinary and powerfully feminist seriousness of the scene with a hesitant humour that points to suspense, doubt and vertigo as experiences common to both art and sport. It is a clinical, deadpan gaze that is also evident in her poems:

Female Swimmer

My arms:
the oars.

The keel:
my body.

The rudder:
my thought.

(If I were a mermaid,
my songs
would be my verses).

Swimming

(No mermaids.
No Tritons).

On high, the diving boards.
And the water, bathing in the white
pool
—a bath of transparencies.

In the stands,
expectation, murmurs.
And the Olympic loudspeaker
firing out words:

“Standing back flip with momentum!”

Agile shapes fly
silhouetted against the spacious blue.

Emotion drowned in
voices, voices, voices.

The crowd
—polychrome jerseys.
And the muscle
in athletic contractions.

Rhythm; rhythm of
arms and spirals.
Now,
the winner, the winners
—laurels without laurels.

And the anonymous hearts
throwing (javelins?) at the sublime afternoon.

(Méndez, [1928] 2018: 43, 110)

For a monograph like this one, focusing on images of women and sport, Concha Méndez’s poems are of huge historical value, as they connect not only to contemporary productions that place sportswomen in the leading role, such as the Norwegian series *Home Ground* (Heimebane, 2018-2019, NRK1), which is analysed in one of this issue’s articles, but also very especially to the testimonies and experiences of the six sportswomen interviewed for this issue: the former footballer and current coach Natalia Arroyo, the basketball player and Olympic medallist Laia Palau, the Alpinist and mountain runner Núria Picas, the volleyball player Omaira Perdomo, the para athletics player Adiaratou Iglesias, and the boxer Tania Álvarez. Both the collective perspectives contained in the *(Dis)Agreements* section and the extensive interview with Arroyo evoke the relationships between sport and image woven into Méndez’s poems. It is a form of self-conception and self-representation as a sportswoman that is reaffirmed in the first person, juxtaposing three parallel lines: the physicality of the sporting act itself (“my arms,



Figure 2. *The Cyclist* (1927), a painting by Maruja Mallo inspired by her athlete friend, Concha Méndez, along with a photograph of Méndez herself reading

the oars”); the control over her direction and *telos* (“the keel, my body”); and the ethical and philosophical consciousness that underpins both (“the rudder, my thought”). Thus, while reading the sportswomen’s answers to our questions about role models in audiovisual productions (films or series), visual motifs (during sports broadcasts), media bias (in the press and in public forums), canonical narratives (such as success or individualism) and forms of self-representation (on social media), it is exciting to think of how a century earlier other women, like Concha Méndez, were tackling similar possibilities and barriers, on the edge of the diving board, questioning themselves and us through sport. This may be why only someone who knows and loves the energies and rhythms of sport in the first person (like Pasolini [2015]) can reflect on it in a way that is both intimate and critical, free of prejudices.

With this in mind, to conclude this introductory article it is worth returning to the two concepts invoked at the beginning, Sontag’s image market (1977:178) and Benjamin’s “test performance” (2003: 75), to bring them into the much larger battlefield that is sport played by women today. It can hardly be coincidental that several of the women interviewed for this issue, such as Natalia Arroyo with her discussion of the salaries

and lifestyles of women footballers, or Omaira Perdomo with her reflection on how her image as a trans sportswoman is aestheticised and monetised, stress the socioeconomic intersection that conditions (and sometimes endangers or limits) the achievements and gains they are leading in the area of gender equality. One thing that this monograph has sought to

avoid is to offer a superficial or depoliticised tribute to sport played by women as if it were a phenomenon unrelated to the (nearly always economic) problems and contradictions that characterise the contemporary world. It is an individualist, monetising spiral which, as David Graeber points out in his compelling anthropological and historical analysis of debt (2011), always sacrifices human interests at the altar of financial interests, using the sport imaginary both as a vehicle and as a distraction. The demands by sportswomen for better salaries and working conditions (such as the recent case of the US women’s football team) are not merely “success stories” that can be isolated from their historical or class context and packaged for any corporate motivational talk; on the contrary, they are complex economic and gender signifiers that often end up perpetuating the narrative of capitalist effort and the cult of individual success. As Sara Ahmed explains in her thoughtful analysis of *Bend It Like Beckham* (Gurinder Chadha, 2002), they also perpetuate a whole range of deceptions and expectations, associated with *the promise of happiness*:

The freedom to be happy is thus directive: it involves an act of identification in Jacques Lacan’s sense of “the transformation that takes place in the subject” when assuming an image. The freedom to be

happy is premised on not only the freedom from family or tradition but also the freedom to identify with the nation as the bearer of the promise of happiness. To identify with the nation, you become an individual: you acquire the body of an individual, a body that can move out and move up. This is how happiness becomes a forward motion: almost like a propeller, happiness is imagined as what allows subjects to embrace futurity, to leave the past behind them. (Ahmed, 2010: 137)

The intersections of race, class and gender explored by Ahmed in the chapter of her book (the fourth chapter, “Melancholic Migrants”) that analyses this undervalued British film provide enough material for a whole article, or even a whole monograph. But what is of particular interest here is how, after praising its success in expanding the horizons and imaginaries for young sportswomen and its power to evoke the contagious dynamism of team sports, Ahmed shifts the focus onto the pressures imposed by the very concept of “happiness” on racialised women, migrant families and non-heteronormative identities. And most importantly, she does so by pointing to the very heart of that image market defined by Sontag, to *the promise of happiness* as a form of cultural assimilation (the migrant who “adapts” to the national English sport), globalised commodification (the female footballer who “progresses” by being selected by a US team) and sex-affective domestication (the teenage girl who “redirects” her desire towards the clever, handsome white coach of the women’s team). None of this detracts from the pioneering nature of this film, directed by an Indian woman, or its powerful impact and legacy: Ahmed highlights, for example, how the director was forced to give in on aspects such as the female protagonist’s gender identity in order to receive funding, underscoring the force of the ideas and stances that underpinned the project. These are, of course, the same types of pressures and economic seductions that many sportswomen face today.

ONE THING THAT THIS MONOGRAPH HAS SOUGHT TO AVOID IS TO OFFER A SUPERFICIAL OR DEPOLITICISED TRIBUTE TO SPORT PLAYED BY WOMEN AS IF IT WERE A PHENOMENON UNRELATED TO THE (NEARLY ALWAYS ECONOMIC) PROBLEMS AND CONTRADICTIONS THAT CHARACTERISE THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

In short, what this issue of *L’Atalante* seeks to do, albeit in only a partial and introductory way, is to compile historical evidence and professional experiences of sport played by women that have photography, cinema or other audiovisual formats as a common denominator. But rather than appeasing and depoliticising in the style of motivational speeches or institutional whitewashing (like the politicians and bankers of the day cheering on *women’s sport*), these experiences preserve the complex ambivalence of a sport imaginary which, although increasingly centred around and conceived of by women, is still subject to the homogenising supply and voracious demand of the image market. By highlighting them here, it is hoped that professional or amateur sportswomen will be able to look the heteropatriarchal monster in the eyes, reverse its historical prohibitions, and aspire to construct a common project on the sports field. ■

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WOMEN, SPORT AND IMAGES: FROM LITERARY EKPHRASIS TO AUDIOVISUAL MEDIA

Abstract

This article situates and prologues the special issue *Women and sport in audiovisual media: bodies, images, politics*, contextualizing its main themes and case studies as well as relating them, comparatively, with key visual precedents in the history of literature. By using two examples of literary ekphrasis where the practice of sport by women is central: on the one hand the heteropatriarchal, sexualized and objectifying portrayal of the woman's sporting body (exemplified by a chapter from the Chinese classic *Journey to the West*), on the other, the liberatory views and gazes of sportswomen that, like the poet Concha Méndez, defied the limits and impositions of the male gaze with their own explorations of sport and images. Moreover, the article rethinks Walter Benjamin's comments on the link between cinema and sport, and Susan Sontag's concept of the "market of images", reading both of them from the perspective of affect theory and Sara Ahmed's analysis of the class, race and gender signifiers of women-practiced sport in her book *The Promise of Happiness*.

Key words

Images; Sport; Women; Media; Literature; Feminism.

Author

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MUJERES, DEPORTE E IMÁGENES: DE LA ÉCFRASIS LITERARIA A LOS MEDIOS AUDIOVISUALES

Resumen

El presente artículo abre y prologa el número monográfico *Mujeres y deporte en los medios audiovisuales: cuerpos, imágenes, políticas*, presentando los casos y temas abordados en el mismo y relacionándolos, comparativamente, con antecedentes clave de la historia de la literatura. Acudiendo a dos ejemplos de écfraasis en los que el deporte practicado por mujeres tiene un papel central, se contraponen una visión heteropatriarcal, cosificante y sexualizada del cuerpo deportivo femenino (representada por un capítulo de *Viaje al Oeste. Las aventuras del Rey Mono*), frente a las miradas de diversas deportistas mujeres que, como la poeta Concha Méndez, desafiaron las imposiciones de la *male gaze* a través de sus propias exploraciones de la imagen deportiva. Asimismo, se actualizan las ideas de Walter Benjamin sobre la relación cine / deporte, y el concepto de «mercado de las imágenes» de Susan Sontag, releyéndolos desde la teoría de los afectos de Sara Ahmed y su análisis sobre los condicionantes de clase, raza y género del deporte practicado por mujeres, en su libro *The Promise of Happiness*.

Palabras clave

Imagen; Deporte; Mujeres; Audiovisual; Literatura; feminismo.

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