

# **Bending, Flirting, Floating, Flying: A Critical Analysis of Female Figures in 1970s Gymnastics Photographs**

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During the 1970s, a new corporal and aesthetic standard emerged in women's artistic gymnastics. No longer was grace and elegance the main feature, but acrobatic and somewhat robotic performances. These exercises were increasingly performed by highly trained and sexually immature girls. The Western audience was fascinated by the athletic and innocent-looking gymnasts. The emerging corporality and performance trend combined youthfulness and slimness with physical fitness and muscular tone, a combination that reflected the idealized woman of the 1970s. Sports photographs played a key role in distributing the "new" ideal of femininity. In this article, we consider how gymnasts' performances of the 1970s were visualized by examining a sample of professional sports photographs. We demonstrate how sports photographs construct and establish gender and body standards through their visual construction of gendered and de-gendered gymnastics performances.

Au cours des années 1970, une nouvelle norme corporelle et esthétique est apparue en gymnastique artistique féminine. En effet, les performances acrobatiques et quelquefois robotiques ont remplacé la grâce et l'élégance comme caractéristiques principales. Les exercices ont été de plus en plus effectués par des filles hautement qualifiées mais sexuellement immatures. Le public occidental fut fasciné par les gymnastes athlétiques aux airs d'innocence. La tendance émergente aux plans de la performance et du corps combinait la minceur, la jeunesse, la forme physique et le tonus musculaire ; une combinaison qui reflétait la femme idéalisée des années 1970. Les photographies sportives ont joué un rôle clé dans la diffusion du « nouvel » idéal de la féminité. Dans cet article, nous examinons comment les performances des gymnastes des années 1970 ont été visualisées à partir d'un échantillon de photographies de sport professionnel. Nous démontrons comment les photographies sportives construisent et établissent les normes corporelles et de genre par le biais de la construction visuelle des performances de gymnastique genrées et non-genrées.

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Previous research has demonstrated how women's artistic gymnastics (WAG) changed from a callisthenic- to an acrobatic-type sport during the 1970s (Barker-Ruchti, 2009; Varney, 2004). With this development, the gymnasts' physiques also changed. While adult women dominated competitions during the 1950s and 1960s, highly trained and sexually undeveloped girls became victorious during the following decades. According to Varney (2004), the Western audience was captivated by the slim, muscular, and innocent-looking gymnasts who performed complex acrobatic exercises. We observe that the emerging corporality and gymnastics performance trend reflected the "new" female ideal of the 1970s. This new ideal included slimness and muscularity and represented a symbol of Western women's emancipation (Didou-Manent, 1998). We argue that sport photographs played an important role in popularizing this image.

Sport photography and mass-media distribution of photographs, including those of female athletes, had become part of public discussion during the 1920s (Beck, 2006; Schmalriede, 2004). With these developments, the dynamic and healthy body was popularized and became a symbol of beauty (Cowan & Sicks, 2005). We thus suggest that it is safe to assume that 1970s visual media representations played a crucial role in disseminating the new social female body and emerging WAG ideal. Visual studies scholars have demonstrated how photographs are vehicles of sociohistorical and cultural processes and ideals (Maassen, Mayerhauser, & Renggli, 2006; Mayerhauser, 2006; Renggli, 2007; Türk, 2010). To date, however, the production and dissemination of sports photographs has rarely been researched. In this study, we investigate the photographically constructed gendered and de-gendered gymnastics body against the background of 1970s gender ideals. We assume that photographs represent a space of struggle within and through which different visual images of femininity are negotiated. We ask: How were gymnasts' performances visualized and which complementary visual codes of femininity and masculinity did 1970s photographs combine? Which visual-aesthetic representations emerged during the 1970s and which power-knowledge relations did they reflect?

In the following, we introduce the theoretical lens we employed for our examination of a sample of WAG sports photographs. This is followed by a section on the methodology and a section on the interpretation of our results. First, however, we place (sports) photographs within contemporary scientific discourses and discuss how such images construct and establish gender and body standards.

## **Media Representations and the Gendered Sporting Body**

The gendered nature of sports coverage has been widely researched (e.g., Daddario, 1998; Daddario & Wigley, 2007; Hartmann-Tews & Rulofs, 2003; Koivula, 1999; Markula, 2009). Two media analyses have also examined the representation of female gymnasts. Borcila (2000) examined NBC television coverage of the 1996 Olympic WAG competitions and related these to the responses in print media. This cultural studies scholar formulated how the television coverage produced a "'feminine' subject position that becomes emphasized as a way of looking, a place of viewer identification" (Borcila, 2000, p. 143). She further found that the coverage and texts were used to construct national identity. In particular, the presentation

of the gymnasts as little children suggested “female” vulnerability. This vulnerability was, however, contrasted with the team’s gold medal win and translated into notions of invulnerability and strength. According to Borcila, the vulnerability of contemporary America could, thus, be countered and national identity reinforced.

Chisholm (1999) also examined the successes of the 1996 American gymnastics team. She observed, on the one hand, how the American team members were represented as having achieved success despite differences in social class and race. On the other hand, Chisholm observed how the American gymnasts’ different ethnic backgrounds (one gymnast was of African-American and one gymnast of Asian descent) were presented to reflect America’s multicultural society and used as a sign of how “(true) American diversity” had apparently been achieved (Chisholm, 1999, p. 138). The gymnasts were presented as limit figures to mediate cultural anxieties regarding national identity, while also cultivating desirable (white bourgeois) femininity.

As mentioned earlier, sports photographs have seldom served as sole empirical material. Exceptions are a handful of sport historical analyses. For example, Schmidtke (2007, 2008) collected and researched sports photographs that emerged during the German national socialist era. He found that photographs of women and girls reflected an ambivalent ideal that included beauty and procreation, but also work and physical training. In her research, Walther (2007, 2008) sampled historical sports photographers that captured male and female winners on podiums (1895–1935). Her research showed how various photographic techniques (particularly camera angle and choice of backgrounds) enhanced men’s achievements, while others devalued those of women, and thus strengthened dominant gender norms. Last, Kinsey (2011) collected photographic portraits of Australian women cyclists to reconstruct the history of women’s cycling. Her research demonstrated how female cyclists of the 1890s used this sport to negotiate feminine identity.

In this article, we approach sports photographs in a similar way to those presented in the above articles. We acknowledge that media representations are products of historical, cultural, social, and techno-optical conditions and are embedded within particular relations of power. We, however, adopt a slightly different theoretical approach: To frame our investigation, we locate the WAG photographs of our sample within so called “gender dispositive.”

## **WAG Photographs as Elements and Vehicles of Gender Dispositives**

Several German and Swiss visual cultural studies scholars have used photographs to research social issues (Maasen, Mayerhauser & Renggli, 2006; Mayerhauser, 2006; Renggli, 2007). These authors understand photographs to “emerge from socio-historically specific power-knowledge constellations (dispositives) and in their inter-medial interaction with texts, distribute visibility, create political relevance and enable the positioning of respective subject positions“ (Maasen, Mayerhauser & Renggli, 2006, p. 19). As products of dispositives, images hold strategic power and create particular objects of knowledge.

In drawing from these theoretical assumptions, Renggli (2007) problematized how physical disability is represented. Using participant observation research, she

deconstructed advertisements (both images and texts) along their common-sense ideas and assumptions. Her interpretations showed the discursive strategies and techniques (i.e., dispositives) of which the images were products. In a similar way, Mayerhauser (2006) used a Foucauldian lens to understand today's media images as strategic techniques of communication. Using the example of how poverty is visualized in French media, he theorized that media images produce perceptive possibilities—to see something as something—that is, to make some information visible, while other information is kept hidden. Mayerhauser further argued that media images define what is normal and desired, and what is abnormal and undesired. Such normalizing processes function to generate specific knowledges and make such knowledges visible, but also to make certain disciplinary and self-technologies possible. How can we study the representation of female gymnasts in sports photographs?

While discourse-theoretical tools for the analysis of visual material have recently emerged, a gender-discursive perspective has not been developed. For the purpose of this study, we thus assemble our research methodology from previous discourse-theoretical approaches and extend it with German sociologist Andrea Bührmann's (1998) gender dispositive. Her concept of gender dispositive can be used to study photographs as cultural images within knowledges and other systems of statements. Through this compilation of texts and events, gender is naturalized and *emerges as a product*. Bührmann developed her theory in critique of Foucault's discourse of sexuality. She accused Foucault (1977) of taking for granted the duality of sex, despite his deconstruction of sexuality (through the body, desire, and the relationship between man and woman). According to Bührmann, Foucault did not problematize *how* and *why* the human body is categorized along biological criteria. She, thus, aimed to deconstruct the prerequisites of sexuality: the knowledges associated with the male and female sex. Bührmann (1998) drew on the human sciences of the 18th century to explain the basis of her theory of gender dispositive. She indicated how (predominantly medical) scientists specified and classified differences between female and male biology and how these were used to define gender identity. Men were represented as the norm for humanity and women as a subspecies of men. These biologically-defined gender differences normalized and hierarchized gender duality: Compared with men, women were represented as "other" and "lesser". The arguments regarding biological unsuitability and otherness served to justify the exclusion of women from sport, which has meant that women were banned from participating in various sports codes. Some exclusion still remains today and demonstrates the persistence of female athletes' biologically defined "otherness" (Pfister, 1997b).

Drawing on Bührmann's theory, as well as recent developments by visual cultural studies scholars, we assume that WAG photographs are elements and vehicles of gender dispositives. They naturalize the sporting body as a gendered, feminine body. Through their mass-media replication and distribution, they strategically hierarchize, classify, and normalize the viewers' bodies, thinking, and feeling. WAG photographs, however, not only negotiate, but also challenge knowledges about gendered, "normal," and socially desired gymnastics physique. This means that the female gymnastics body embodies traditional gender characteristics, but also includes boundless possibilities of movement, endless perfection, and infinite performance enhancement.

How is the gendered gymnastics body represented in sports photographs? To answer this question, we draw on German photographic historian and theorist Schmalriede's (2004) conceptualization of figuration in sports photographs. This scholar defines a figuration as a visually typified, normative, and de-personalized body constellation. According to Schmalriede, we have learned to understand body constellations in sport photographs as dispositions of specific sport codes and gender affiliations. In our study, we extend Schmalriede's conceptualization of figuration by understanding figurations as visually fixed corporal movements. According to Klein (2004), corporal movements are performative acts that make the body perceptible and socially effective. In addition, we differentiate corporal movements along Heinemann's (1998) levels of corporeality: Body technology, body language (mimicry, gestures, body composure), and body ethos (conduct of the body). We assume that these levels of corporeality define and structure body formations in sports photographs and allow for differentiated figurations to become visible.

In short, we assume that visual-aesthetic gender-figurations are visible surfaces of the gender dispositif. Their codified, normalized, and typified corporal movements (body technology, body language, and body ethos) represent the gender order as they become perceptible and experienced. The visible corporal codes structure an image through which the anatomical body is naturalized. Visual-aesthetic gender-figurations function to (re)produce social power. They are "statements of power and are not only traceable inter-subjectively, but also socially distinctive" (Klein 2004, p. 146). Through their mass-media replication and distribution, figurations provide gender-related arrangements as well as social relationships and hierarchies. Using this theoretical approach, we gain insight into the sociohistorical construction of gender through sports photographs. We analyzed WAG photographs using Ulrike Pilarczyk and Ulrike Mietzner's (2005) *Serial-Iconological Method for Photographic Analysis*.

## **Empirical Material and the Serial-Iconological Method of Photographic Analysis**

The sample for this research consists of WAG photographs from 1952 to 1984 that were collected from four Swiss photographic agencies: *Ringier* (est. 1962), *Photopress AG* (est. 1931), *A.T.P. Bilderdienst* (est. 1937), and *Keystone* (est. 1953). Photographic agencies regulate the production, manipulation, and dissemination of photographs to newspapers and magazines (Melone, 2010). The photographs in our sample were either taken by photographers directly employed by the four photographic agencies or bought by the Swiss offices through contracts with other (international) organizations.

We selected photographs from the Olympic Games and World and European Championships from 1970 to 1979. Pictures of the gymnasts who placed in the top three of the individual all-around and individual apparatus competitions were chosen. Approximately 500 negatives and positives were viewed. Pictures of gymnastics performances were digitally photographed (240 photographs), while images from award ceremonies, private life, training, and before and after per-

performances were ignored. To facilitate access, the 240 images were transferred to the commercial digital asset management cataloging program *Expression Media 2* and categorized according to relevant criteria, including origin, apparatus, and gymnasts' physical performances (e.g., acrobatic/in-flight, mount/dismount, handstand, pirouette, leap, roll, artistic pose).

Following the visual cultural scholars mentioned earlier, we interpreted each sports photograph as a discursive event. Single images, however, always emerge within series of specific types of representations and can be placed within historically-specific power and knowledge constellations (Renggli, 2007). Following our research questions, we identified series of distinct types of feminine gender-figurations and the gender dispositive these reflected. To do this, we adapted Pilarczyk and Mietzner's (2005) serial-iconological method of photographic analysis. Drawing from Erwin Panofski's (1978) art-historical method, these two scholars combined individual image with serial image analyses. The tool, thus, provided an ideal method to analyze images in their uniqueness and discursive integration. Continuous exchange between single image interpretation and serial analysis was necessary, however, to gain synchronic interpretation.

Through the individual interpretation, we reconstructed individual visual gender-representations on the background of sociohistorical emergence and application contexts. This allowed us to develop "supra-individual" and discursive meanings. The process required us to describe and interpret the contents of the image along four levels. In the first step, the *pre-iconographic description*, the images were described in all their details, but without including contextual information. In the second step, the *iconographic description*, we related the individual elements of representation with each other and formulated a theme for the image. Third, within the *iconographic interpretation*, we embedded the photograph in a sociohistorical context. Information concerning the photographs' materiality and construction were considered and included. In this step, we also asked how a representation is portrayed and which messages it may have generated. To do this, we also reviewed television recordings found on *Youtube* and used the Code of Points<sup>1</sup> of WAG to gain information about behavioral and performance-related criteria of 1970s WAG. We further relied on personal WAG-specific knowledges that the second author had developed through experiences as a gymnast and coach. Last, we included interpretations of the photographs' titles and commentaries and Swiss newspaper articles within which the images of our sample were published to relate the visible and speakable to patterns of feminine gender representation. In the fourth step, the *iconological interpretation*, we related the sociohistorical context, the image construction, the role of the photographer and the captured contents with one another. The deciphering of the "supra-individual" and discursive meanings of the image—the sociohistorical conditions— which influenced the production and use of the images, played a decisive role. While the single image analyses highlighted the discursive meanings of unique gender-representations, the serial analyses helped place the representations within the sample we had selected. This way we were able to recognize distinct types of gender-figurations and demonstrate how, within the sociohistorical space of the 1970s, these were replicated.

## Results

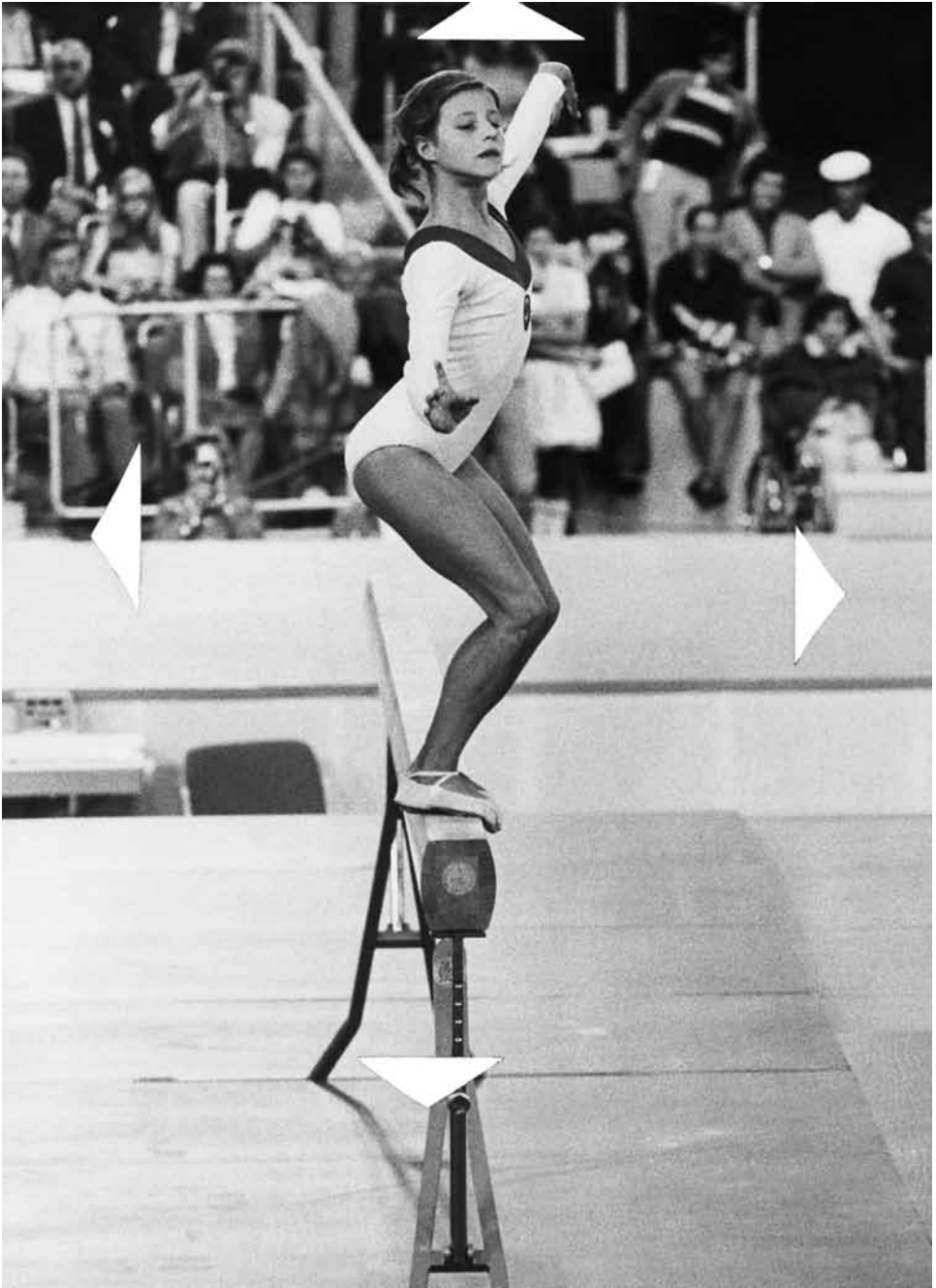
The serial-iconological method of photographic analysis showed that the sampled WAG photographs constituted a historically specific visual order of gender within which competing visual-aesthetic models of gendered representations existed simultaneously. An examination of this multiplicity, as well as their relationships, showed that the gymnasts' bodies existed within conflicting representations that included the dichotomies child-woman and man, machine and human, and culture and nature. In what follows, we discuss these contradictions through four gender figurations: The bending gender-figuration; the flirting gender-figuration; the floating gender-figuration; and the flying gender-figuration. We illustrate these by providing analyses of a selection of four photographs of the gymnasts Olga Korbut, Nadia Comaneci, and Natalia Witaljewna Schaposchnikowa.

### The Bending Gender-Figuration

The bending gender-figuration involves traditional forms of gymnastics movements. Such movements were particularly prevalent in the decades leading up to the 1970s. The photograph in Figure 1 pictures a gymnast during her balance beam exercise. The movement the photographer captured is shown side-on. The gymnast places her body weight on both legs. Her back is arched and her knees are bent to a plié. She pushes her chest outwards, her arms are lifted to the side of her body with her fingers being spread and strained to the fingertips. Her head is turned to the right and the chin is lifted. Her eyes are downcast. The gymnastics movement appears posed, yet is part of a small hop that the gymnast executed before standing in the photographed position. The image was taken with a slight above-perspective. The background consists of a floor mat, various indefinable objects and spectators.

At first sight, the photographed corporal expression demonstrates harmony and elegance. The gymnasts' facial expressions seem relaxed and somewhat drawn inward. She appears concentrated and focused on her performance. Her bent arms that are caught mid-movement accentuate this softness. Her closed eyes and slightly opened mouth emphasize calmness. The gymnasts' bent knees and narrow foot positioning suggest emotional fragility and insecurity. She appears fragile, a state culturally attributed to female self-portrayal: "Women do not tend to be emotionally stable, stand facing vis-à-vis and in a broad stance" (Mühlen-Achs, 1998, p. 47, translation ours). The image in Figure 1 further leaves the impression that the gymnast is about to kneel down. This performance can be read as an act of dedication or devotion to an imaginary powerful (male) authority.

The image includes four red arrows that a photo editor would have added to exclude some of the background. This cropping increases the focus on the gymnast and places her bottom at the center of the image. The cropping can, thus, be interpreted as an act of photographic sexualization. Further, the red arrows suggest that the image was in fact published. The following commentary was attached to the photograph: "Russian gymnast Olga Korbut (15) in action during her golden exercises last night. Thursday, she got a gold medal for her fabulous performance in gymnastics, individual events" (Olympic Service [EPU], 1972). The gymnast is praised for her ability and performance and she is labeled "golden." The photographic commentary contradicts the photograph's meaning. The visually constructed "passivity" of the gymnast is textually described as an athletic feat.



**Figure 1** — Figure 1: Olga Korbut, Olympic Games Munich, 1972. 'Munich' (1.9.1972) © EPU (Olympic Service), Keystone AG, Zürich.



The bending gender-figuration is representative of the mode of gymnastics performance visualizations of the 1950s and 1960s. Gymnasts performed in ballet-like, organic and fluid ways transmitting images of mature grace and elegance. The bending gender-figuration constructs a passive and fragile gymnastics body that is only perceived capable of executing easy graceful movements.

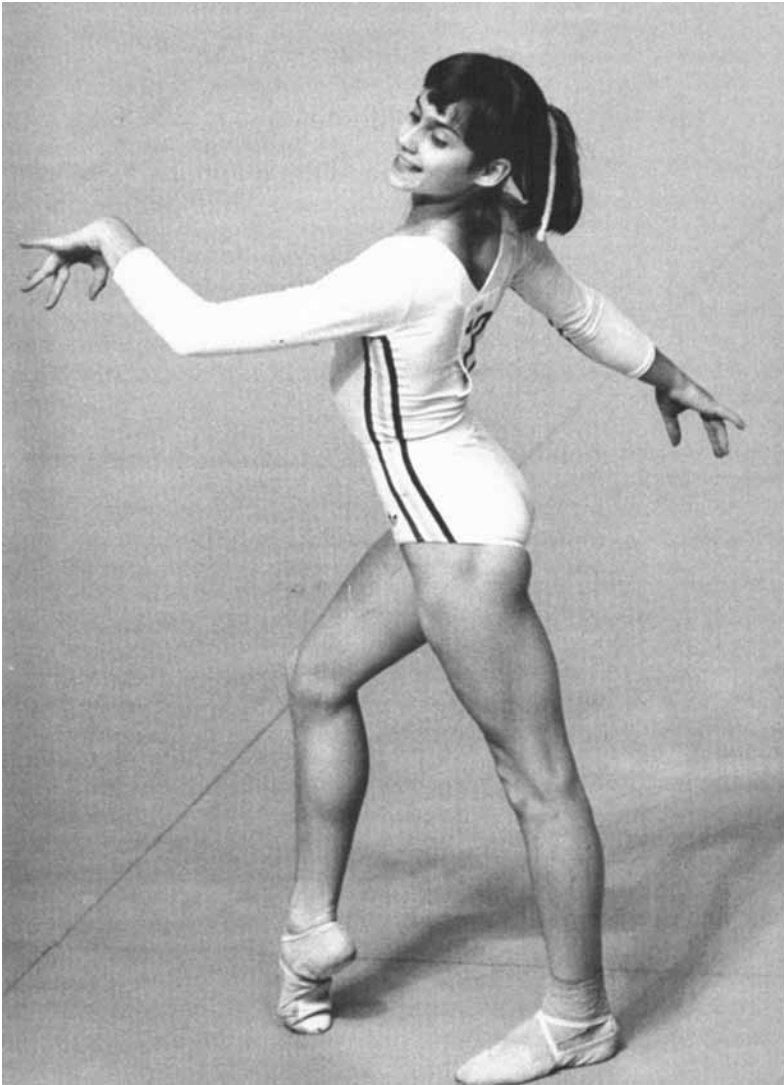
## The Flirting Gender-Figuration

The flirting gender-figuration emerged during the 1970s and represents the staging of a heterosexual gymnast. The photograph in Figure 2 shows a gymnast during her floor performance. The photographed movement is the final position this gymnast performed in her exercise to a medley of the American songs *Yes Sir*, *That's My Baby* and *Jump in the Line* (Simons II, 1995). The movement reflects how the gymnast interpreted the staccato music—various little kicks, hip flips, hops, and fast-moving steps and turns. The photographed position shows the gymnast standing on her left leg, while her right leg is bent and placed on the foot's toes. Her back is slightly arched and her arms are placed horizontally to the side of her torso. Her fingers are spread and tensed. The upper body and head are turned to the left and her chin is lifted. Her eyes are downcast. She smiles and her teeth show. The photograph was taken from a slight above position. The background consists of the floor mat and is neutral. There is little perspective other than the girl (captured through a telephotographic lens). The body of the gymnast and her aesthetic gymnastics movement is the focus of the image. The photograph shows Nadia Comaneci at the 1976 Olympic Games in Montréal.

In the first instance, the gymnast seems to represent charm and lightness. This ease is, however, countered by her upright position, through which she pushes her chest slightly forward and lifts her chin. Her fingers are split in a conscious effort and her upper torso and head are twisted to the left. The movement appears unnatural as it seems to require purposeful positioning of individual body parts. Her smile seems trained and fits perfectly with the movement she is performing. We suggest that the gymnast applies feminine-connoted body techniques in strategic and instrumental ways and the photographically constructed corporal expression can be interpreted as a signal of flirting. She appears to wish to approach men and to be available for male desire. The photographic commentary states:

Strutting like the star that she is: Romania's Nadia Comaneci captures the hearts of the fans as she performs during the gymnastic competition of the XXI Olympics 7-21. After capturing the Olympic gold, with undoubtedly more to come the 14-year-old said: *I feel just as I felt before; I feel pretty good normally – nothing special* (United Press International [UPI], 1976, emphasis in the original).

The first sentence illustrates the gymnast's superior and confident aesthetic pose. This star status is also related to an apparently unbelievable performance, which, in contrast to the athlete's self-descriptive quote, highlights the gymnast's young age and inexperience. The star status the gymnast is credited with creates a level of sensation. In contrast, the perfection of her convincing performance is not made visible. Rather, her stereotypical feminine way of self-representation is pictured.



**Figure 2** — Nadia Comaneci, Olympic Games Montréal, 1976. ‘Olympic Games Montreal’ (21.7.1976) © UPI (jls-iopp), Ringier Bildarchiv/Staatsarchiv Aargau.

The photograph in Figure 2 was printed on the front page of the Swiss newspaper *Der Bund*, an independent liberal daily newspaper, on 23 July 1976. The commentary included above was not published. A second photograph, placed to the left of the one in Figure 2, shows Comaneci sitting deep in thoughts and holding a doll. The title of the article states: “Gymnastics queen Nadia Comaneci: Her only hobby is collecting dolls“ (translation ours). The commentary of both photographs reads:

Almost perfect: Nadia Comaneci, the new gymnastics queen from Romania, missed the maximal score by only 25 hundredth. This unparalleled performance, our enthusiasm may allow us to forget too quickly, are uncountable hours of extreme training. Who is surprised that Nadia Comaneci, in her little spare time, has but time to collect dolls (Der Bund, 23 July 1976, translation ours).

The above descriptions are paradoxical. On the one hand, the gymnast is portrayed as a gymnastics queen. The publication of the article on the front page of a daily newspaper supports this status. On the other hand, the descriptions refer to the gymnast's young age and gender. Collecting and playing with dolls is an activity perceived specific to girls. Whether Comaneci actually collected dolls is unclear. Maybe she used the doll pictured in the image as a mascot during competitions? In any case, the application of the photographs brings forward the ambivalent textual descriptions: They oppose the description of gymnastics queen with that of doll collector. The flirting gender-figuration combines feminine-connoted mimics, gestures, and body practices with a theatrical use of the body.

The photograph of Comaneci at the 1976 Games demonstrates the gymnast's excessive corporal employment to embody playful and flirtatious codes of femininity, an impression that reflects both dedication and avoidance. Her active self-stylization appears trained and routinized as she resorts to using perceived feminine body language (e.g., smiling, tilting of the head, downcast eyes). This visual-aesthetic gender-figuration constructs the gymnast as an *active* object, one that actively seeks heterosexual desire.

## The Floating Gender-Figuration

The floating gender-figuration refers to gymnasts being represented as majestic beings and emerged in the 1970s. The photograph in Figure 3 shows a gymnast during her beam performance. She stands on her right tip-toe while the left leg is lifted to above 45 degrees. The photograph is taken from a slight under view perspective. The background is mostly black, except for a bar of lights at the top of the image. The image portrays a concentrated gymnast who perfects a somewhat easy gymnastics movement. The gymnast in the photograph is Natalia Witaljewna Schaposchnikowa at the 1978 World Championships in Strasbourg.

In the photograph, the gymnast lifts her body to a one-legged stand. Her posture is upright and her arms are placed at a 45 degree angle to her body. Her body is tensed to her toes and fingers. It appears as though the gymnast carries her entire body weight on her right tip-toe. Her expression is relaxed, yet concentrated. Her eyes are downcast. On closer examination, her sight is aimed at the beam. This attention suggests that the gymnast is focused on performing. The movement is not a static position: the gymnast is lifting her leg in between other gymnastics elements. At the center of the photographic frame is the gymnast's crotch. If we consider that the gymnast's movement is visually transformed into an aesthetic movement figuration through the photographic act, then we can assume that the visible sexual organ at the center of the image eroticizes and sexualizes the gymnast. The photographic commentary is simple: "For her, the balance beam is not an apparatus of insecurities" (translation ours). This annotation refers to the apparatus'



**Figure 3** — Natalia Witaljewna Schaposchnikowa, World Championships Strasbourg, 1978. ‘Turnen. Kunstturn-WM in Strassburg’ (25.10.1978) © Sven Simon, Ringier Bildarchiv/ Staatsarchiv Aargau.

height and small surface, and the risks beam performances involve for gymnasts in terms of injuries and point deductions made by competition judges. The gymnast is, in contrast, referred to as a master of this apparatus. Her gymnastics ability is highlighted as extraordinary.

A further context of materiality is provided by the publication of the photograph in the Swiss newspaper *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (NZZ), an independent liberal newspaper, on 27 October 1978. The image was part of a series of four images printed at the bottom of a 3/4 page article. Each image portrayed a gymnast in an aesthetic gymnastics movement on balance beam, each photographed with a slight under view perspective by the same photographer. The series took approximately a quarter of the newspaper page and each image was referenced by the gymnast’s name and

nationality. The text of the article does not specifically refer to the image of Figure 3. Rather, it appears to have had decorative character. The text of the NZZ article describes how the Soviet gymnasts dominated gymnastics competitions and created new forms of creative movement ideas and technical perfection. New revelations were expected from these gymnasts, which offered spectators new ideas of what is possible in this sport. In contrast to this glorification, Soviet gymnastics is criticized for its supernatural and somewhat utopian performances. Success through child drill and discipline is mentioned and the “child stars” of this country are described in a demeaning way. The author of the newspaper article even suggests that third parties force the gymnasts to train and perform.

The floating visual-aesthetic gender-figuration transmits weightlessness and gracefulness. It appears as though the gymnast’s elegant control over her body is able to defy gravity. The slight view from below makes the body larger than it is, which provides the gymnast with dignity, majesty, and grandeur. At the same time, however, the photographic content could be interpreted to mean that the gymnast’s performance is visually fixed as a heterosexual pose: The gymnast lifts her leg, which exposes her sexual organ that is covered by her leotard, yet placed at the center of the image.

### The Flying Gender-Figuration

The flying gender-figuration refers to gymnasts performing in the air. The photograph in Figure 4 shows a “weightless” gymnast in an acrobatic movement on the uneven bars. She is pictured in-flight. Her torso is arched backward to a 45 degree angle. Her legs are maximally straightened and the tensed arms and hands, as well as the individually split fingers, point upwards. Her sight is directed to the ground on which she is about to land. The photograph was taken from a slight under view perspective and shows a black background. It represents Nadia Comaneci in her dismount from the lower uneven bar at the 1976 Olympic Games in Montréal.

The visual representation dramatizes and aestheticizes the gymnast’s performance. As the floor is not pictured, the gymnast appears to plummet into a void. The choice of this perspective, as well as the black homogenous background, strengthens this impression. Her body appears de-materialized. The photograph transmits a corporal condition of weightlessness, within which gravity does not seem to affect the gymnast. The gymnast’s body does not exist as a languid mass, but as a freely modeled and plastic entity. Actual effort and physical exertion, as well as potential performance set-backs, are left unrepresented.

The photograph was accompanied with the following commentary: “Romania’s Nadia Comaneci shows exquisite form as she went off the uneven bars. She received a perfect score of 10.00”. The commentary suggests that the photograph presents the gymnast in a delicate movement on the uneven bars. The adjective “exquisite” refers to the photographically captured movement, which indeed appeared uncommon at the time and demonstrated a “new” opportunity of body modeling. The text also recognizes the gymnast’s achievements. Her becoming the first gymnast in the history of WAG to receive a perfect ten for her performance is highlighted. This best mark demonstrates gymnastics perfection, virtuosity, and originality.

The photograph was printed together with the article *Wonder Children* (translation ours) in the newspaper *Berner Bund*, on 20 July 1976. The photograph



**Figure 4** — Nadia Comaneci, Olympic Games, Montréal, 1976. Montréal (18.7.1976) © UPI (jls-iopp), Keystone AG, Zürich.

was printed in the middle of a newspaper page. Short articles of diverse sports (male soccer, men's gymnastics, male ice hockey) surrounded the image. The text *Wonder Children* is positioned to the side of the image in a narrow column. A citation within the article says: "Nadia, born on 12 November, a diminutive person of 1.53m height and 39kg weight, practices gymnastics since the age of 8 and since then is able to keep up with superlatives" (Berner Bund, 20 July 1976, translation ours).

Her weight and height are defined as anatomico-physiological bases for the new athletic and corporal ideal of WAG. It is, thus, of little surprise that Nadia Comaneci is identified as diminutive, yet a wonder child. In addition, the citation refers to the gymnast possessing grown-up personality and corporal characteristics such as self-control, strength, robustness, and agility. Moreover, these qualities traditionally connote masculinity. The gymnast maintains her "feminine" expressiveness through delicate movements, but incorporates masculine characteristics in her performance (Klein, 1990; Pfister, 1997a, 1997b). The contents of the image and text confirm these meanings including the positioning of the photograph in the center of the newspaper page: The gymnast's body is stylized to a high-performance attraction and sensation beyond traditional norms of gender.

The flying gender-figuration points to an athletic act, through which the gymnast appears to risk her body. The visually fixed movement, an acrobatic aerial gymnastics element, historically belongs to masculine movement and presentation spaces (see our discussion of the sociohistorical context of WAG). The captured performance signals autonomy and a willingness to risk, without being placed in immediate relation to an imaginary male body ideal.

In the following, we discuss the paradoxes of the visual-aesthetic gender-figurations we have developed. We will refer to what is visible (visual gender representations) and what is said (imaginary gender representations in newspaper articles and photographic commentaries) during our discussion.

## Discussion

Our examination showed how the WAG photographs and the newspaper articles of our sample represented the gymnasts in very specific ways. The gymnasts were described as diminutive “child stars,” “wonder children,” “gymnastics queens,” and “gymnastics artists.” The representations glorified and degraded, as well as feminized and belittled the gymnasts. The gymnasts’ age, their strength and self-control, as well as their physical performances, received particular attention. Newspaper passages such as: “She moves along the 10cm beam without the slightest insecurity, so controlled and graceful, as a mannequin on the catwalk” (NZZ, 21 July 1976, translation ours) emphasized gymnasts’ elegance and precision. There was also critique of the “child stars” created by the Soviet sporting system, which was seen to drill very young gymnasts toward aesthetic and technical gymnastics standards: “If we consider the small child stars as protagonists of female gymnastics, then doubts whether the taken path of gymnastics is right emerge, and one is tempted to mention the success of drill along that of sport” (NZZ, 27 October 1978, emphasis in the original, translation ours). These statements referred to a specific gender disposition that situated the gymnasts in paradoxical relations between child-woman and man. The gymnasts’ athletic performance was described as a link between “feminine” grace, childish expression, and “masculine” body control and physical strength. In addition, the Soviet regimen was perceived to assume inhuman training methods that were seen to produce extraordinary performances. As other scholars have suggested, the fear of Soviet dominance was used as a space for political negotiation (Borcila, 2000; Wiederkehr, 2009, 2010).

Our observations showed, however, that none of the examined newspaper articles directly referred to the image(s). The photographs seemed to have had a decorative function. In comparison with the written descriptions, which contained explicit contradictory meanings, the photographs presented the gymnasts in normalized and de-personalized ways. Our systematic single image and serial analyses demonstrated that the bending, flirting, and floating gender-figurations included aesthetic movements that represent socially expected and desirable heterosexual femininities. The visually fixed performances appeared to fathom both heterosexual desire and being desired. The photographs captured gymnasts being playfully coquettish (flirting gender-figuration), majestically able (floating gender-figuration), or humbly bowing (bending gender-figuration). Heterosexual desire was denoted through the combination of young girls’ anatomical bodies and adult sexual behavior. Through the visual presentation, these ideas fulfilled socially coher-

ent expectations. The bending, flirting, and floating gender-figurations combined asymmetric gender differences (the flexible but “flirting” and weightless body) in a seemingly natural way. In contrast to the visualization of heterosexual femininity, the flying gender-figuration constructed acrobatic gymnastics performances where the gymnast was pictured to risk her body in an athletic, aerial, and highly controlled act. The gymnast was not represented within an imaginary heterosexual relation to men, but rather, the image demonstrated deviant gender practices that had the potential to extend heterosexual gender and body standards.

Nevertheless, the emergent “newly” visually-coded gymnastics body represented “feminine-child” fragility (for similar arguments, see Chisholm, 1999; Borcila, 2000). The gymnasts appeared mechanical and robotic, and even somewhat strained. Their necks and legs were particularly tensed and the muscles of most parts of their bodies protruded, which, at least within a sporting context, suggested connotations of masculine self-control and –management. The mechanical use of the body reflected traditional masculine gymnastics techniques, a trend that became part of WAG during the 1970s. The photographically constructed biological and anatomical stature of the gymnasts’ bodies can be associated with sexual immaturity and slimness. The gymnasts’ breasts, for instance, seemed undeveloped and flat. The genitals were also exposed through tight-fitting gymnastics attire. Light colors, particularly white, can be associated with immaturity, purity, and innocence. The positioning of arms and fingers (bent arms and wrists, split fingers), borrowed from ballet, further supported the visual impression of dainty weakness. This classical form of body stylization undermined the connotations of masculine body codes (e.g., toughness and assertiveness). Last, the captured relaxed and playful expressions concealed the gymnasts’ effort of executing risky gymnastics exercises.

These WAG representations ruptured, yet also made perceptible, traditional boundaries of gender duality. We argue that on the level of the visually fixed body technologies and body language (bending, flirting, and floating gender-figuration), the gymnasts’ representations were normalized. These relate to an imaginary counter image of men’s bodies. The flying gender-figuration, on the other hand, represented a body technology that transcended heterosexual standards, albeit somewhat concealed by codes (e.g., clothing, facial expression, posture) perceived typically “feminine”. In contrast, the general mode of performance (instrumental and mechanical body ethos) downplayed the discursive meaning of traditionally gendered body technologies, body language, and clothing. Further, the shape of the gymnasts’ bodies—steered and asexual, cool and controlled emotional expressions—appeared unsuitable for woman- and motherhood.

To further understand these visual presentations, we reflected our findings against the 1970s sociohistorical context of WAG. Previous research has demonstrated that WAG performances of the 1950s and 1960s were performed by adult women whose bodies were sexually mature (Barker-Ruchti, 2009). Beginning in the early 1970s, highly trained and immature girls entered competitions (Barker-Ruchti, 2009; Varney, 2004) as a result of what scholars have termed an acrobatization of WAG (Barker-Ruchti, 2009, 2011; Kerr, 2006; Varney, 2002, 2004). This development emerged predominantly from the former Soviet Union, where coaches were under great political pressure to produce winning performances. These coaches recognized that a “new” style of gymnastics would stimulate innovation and provide opportunities to garner medals (Barker-Ruchti, 2009). As many coaches were



active in male gymnastics, which already included acrobatic performances, they began to adapt it to WAG. A mature woman's body was, however, seen unsuitable for acrobatic exercises. For instance, the coaches assumed that adult women were less flexible, kinesthetically adaptive, and willing to experiment and practice risky acrobatic gymnastics exercises (Blue, 1988). Hence, coaches began to work with young girls who were seen to fit the demands of the new trend (e.g., small body size with long limbs, great flexibility, stamina). A highly specialized training system, which included early selection, continuous long-term and scientifically-based training (mostly in boarding institutions) was developed to support the development of young gymnasts (Riordan, 1980). Despite isolated opposition from some coaches, judges, and national federations, the gymnastics community began to value complex acrobatic movements over rhythmic and ballet-type exercises. The International Federation of Gymnastics (FIG) eventually followed suit and incorporated acrobatic gymnastics movements in the Code of Points (Barker-Ruchti, 2011, 2009; Golubev, 1979; Simons II, 1995).

Against this history, we suggest that sports photographs actively supported the changes of WAG in the early 1970s. Sport photographs mediated the socially desirable athletic female gymnastics body as "real and existent." As photographically captured bodies are "perceived and interpreted as the real: The physical movements of expression, gestures, mimicry and looks of the photographed individuals bring about memories and experiences" (Pilarczyk & Mietzner 2005, p. 46, translation ours), sport photographs provided "objectivity" (Raab, 2008; Türk, 2010). The "girly" acrobats became to be seen as the most effective and productive performers of gymnastics. Sports photographs, thus, preserved knowledges and truths about the boundaries of the practices of self-movement (Gebauer, 2004) within WAG. They created the current dominant knowledges about gender in WAG and made these "new" standards of the gendered WAG body available to a broad audience. Together with textual elements, the visual-aesthetic gender-figurations fed individual and collective gender knowledges and thus, advanced a particular sporting femininity.

## Conclusion

In this study, we asked how gymnasts' performances were visually constructed in 1970s professional WAG photographs. We conclude that the female gymnastics body was photographically constructed as consisting of corporal codes of feminine-childishness and masculine-acrobatics. The four movement-related patterns of visual-aesthetic gender-figurations—the bending, the floating, the flirting, and the flying gender-figurations—emerged from these codes and symbolized competing social definitions of female ideality. When represented through photographic images, the figurations had disciplining and normalizing effects. They acted as representations of truth about the most effective ways of performing as a gymnast. We argue that the competing visible gymnastics performance standards were designed to seduce (female) spectators to evaluate, observe, and train their bodies in a particular manner. We demonstrated how the gymnasts' bodies represented gender and functioned as biological bases from which processes of inclusion and exclusion can be justified. It is a space of negotiation, one that involves various levels of the body that define and structure corporal movements. This negotiaton

is shaped by particular socially expected and desired characteristics, yet can also be challenged.

The analysis of sports photographs opens avenues of sociological analysis of (the history of) gender and the body. “Real” muscles and “real” flesh are visually captured as corporal realities. We suggest that they present ideal sources for the observation and analysis of cultural performances. Deconstruction of such performances, inclusive of the various corporal levels, enables scholars to analyze bodies as material and (aesthetically) performing entities. Such investigations can achieve new hypothetical contexts of meaning between media production and distribution of sports photographs. Further research is necessary, however, to clarify how a discourse-theoretical perspective can be used to understand, describe, and explain fractures and continuities of the visual order of femininity against the background of the history of social context. Important questions, such as when and how specific visual-aesthetic gender figurations emerge, how they change over time, or how they disappear, remain to be investigated.

## Note

1. The *Code of Points* refers to the document that regulates gymnastics scoring. It classifies all elements according to their difficulty. General requirements regarding appearance and execution are also included. The Code is updated following each Olympic Games, although this was not done regularly before 1985. After the Munich Olympics, however, several acrobatic movements were incorporated.

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