

## **Flow Conference**

### **Response to Session 4b: Televised Sports and its Contexts**

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Televised sports –which generally indicates modern institutional/competitive sports– are rarely treated in terms of their link to a larger thematic organized around the principles of what may be labeled masculine-primitive play. I propose positioning modern sport programming beside a related reality-based television genre which figures prominently the male body mobilized in space, dramatizing masculine prowess, male bodies at play, at risk, in extremity, and testing ordinary thresholds and limits often to masochistic degrees. Here I am thinking of the emergence of shows such as: *Man vs. Wild*, *Survivor Man*, *Jackass*, *Going Tribal*, *Tribal Life*, *Human Weapon*, *Last One Standing*, *Wild Boyz*, and others. This grouping of shows figure prominently the male body mobilized in spaces, dealing with themes of survival or forms of “primitive” contact or expression; of challenging the boundaries and habits of the male body in extreme, exotic, and threatening places and situations; of escaping the modern socially disciplined male body to one more “natural” or “untamed” by subjecting it to “wild” environmental elements, sometimes animals, sometimes climate, sometimes “native” peoples, and sometimes one another.

By linking modern institutional sports programming (NFL, NBA, MLB, WBC, etc.) to the aforementioned reality programs that might be viewed as returning the male sporting/adventure body to "natural" or primitivistic origins, televised sports articulates a primitive/modern dialectic, something arguably synthesized in mixed martial arts (MMA) generally and the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) brand in particular. In the case of MMA/UFC, ancient sporting traditions are hybridized and re-contextualized for the

purposes of commercial exploitation. This generic reframing of modern sport programming addresses the present moment's global/local, primitive/modern, and social/natural discursive situation of televised sport. While a show like *Last One Standing* appears to reflect an opposite impulse, that of the modern western athlete traveling to indigenous and tribal communities to learn their traditional sporting games, rituals, and contests. While MMA has sampled from the world's most effective combat traditions and combined them, *Last One Standing* implies a desire to access the primitive or primordial antecedents of modern sports -- to have contact with this primitive in both the Other and in the self.

I propose this discursive maneuver of dissolving or extending the generic boundaries of what constitutes televised sports in response to the proliferation of reality – based programming which exploits as its underlying subject “techniques of the body” (to borrow from Marcel Mauss’s piece), yet without the same rules, supporting institutions, and commercial base as professional sporting spectacles. This move requires redefining sports in generic terms by expanding it to encompass all televisual spectacles of body culture or movement culture – what we might call body-movement genres (inspired by Linda Williams essay on film). Modern sporting institutions, arriving concurrently with modern, rational, bureaucratic industrialized society, marked a transition from play, ritual, and sensual body movement to, rationalized, rule-bound exhibition and spectacle. or as John Bale puts it, “from play to display” (1994, “Landscapes of Modern Sport). By dissolving the essentializing sport/non-sport dichotomy we can extend our examinations of sporting culture and sociality to include body-movement genres, something suggested by the proliferation of these reality programs. A key benefit of this position is to enable

cross-genre examinations that help situate televised sport texts as cultural performances with implications extending beyond professional sports programming.

In many respects I am advocating the privileging of a social semiotics of the body (and its techniques) over the category of “sports” per se. By extending televised sports into the realm of cultural performance avenues are opened for interrogating continuums between work (i.e. professionals) and play (tourists, adventurers, etc.), primitive and modern, and various points of intercultural contact (as the examples I provided above suggest). Surely this is not an comprehensive proposal –the example of masculine-primitive play but one potentially productive intersection, in this case between modern sport and the recuperation of primitivistic play forms (and in this I mean ones not organized on the basis of commercial imperatives)– but one that encourages viewing sport programming within a wider semiotics of the televised body.