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**Session 13/6 2007, kl. 9.00: “Popular Culture and Social Change”**

**Chair:** Ulrika Holgersson, Helena Tolvhed

**Session description:** With a newfound distance to the 20th century, the period is beginning to be studied from a historical perspective. This brings popular culture in focus – for what other remnant is more typical of the past century? Through the old conflict between structuralism and culturalism, a tension grew between history and Cultural Studies, where the latter’s engagement with semiotics and textual analysis was seen as incompatible with history. In the session, we will advocate the benefits of combining and integrating the two. The tools of contextualization and genealogical method are useful in order to explore how social change is always connected to power. From a historical perspective the case can be made for popular culture to be treated not only as an interesting object of study in its own right, but also as an important remnant of identities and experiences in all social contexts.

**ABSTRACT:**

**Swedish Self-images in Representations of Soviet Athletes in the Cold War Era**

Helena Tolvhed

In my forthcoming dissertation I analyse coverage of the Olympic Games 1948 – 1972 in the popular press, combining a text-oriented analysis with social history’s attention to historical context. In my conference paper I will focus upon how, in a “Cold War” context, Soviet athletes were represented in ambiguous ways, emphasizing alternately their distance and closeness, difference and similarity to “us”. Furthermore, I argue that fears of sport’s masculinizing effect on the female body and mind were negotiated by displacing images of
unsexed, mannish women onto Soviet athletes. A specific conception of “Swedish femininity”
was constructed: western, white, heterosexual and middle-class.

**PAPER**

In my PhD-project I analyse coverage from the Olympic Games 1948 – 1972 in the popular
press. This is a time when more and more nations are competing in the Olympics, and also
when female and Black athletes become more visible.

Gender, sexuality, Race and class are used as analytical perspectives. I argue that these, in
intersecting ways, are vital in the construction of the nation and a Swedish self-image.

What makes sport an interesting object of study is the potential to study how bodies are
represented and constructed.

I will start with some examples from the summer Olympic Games in Helsinki 1952, and argue
the importance of historical contextualisation; that these texts and images have to be
understood with the "Cold war" political and cultural climate as a frame of reference.

Helsinki 1952 was the first time that the Soviet Union competed in the Olympics.

The articles in Swedish popular press drawed very heavily upon the meeting of and
competition between the two social systems of Communism and Capitalism.

There was a lot of curiosity surrounding the athletes of the Eastern bloc, which were lodged in
a separate camp, apart from the rest of the Olympic village.

I argue that what is happening in the text and images is that a Swedish self-image is
constructed; it’s about negotiating a position, an identity in this very polarized context,
between communist Soviet Union and Capitalist west.

And the representations are ambivalent:

On the one hand, there is a *discourse of west-as-the-free-world* where Sweden is constructed
as a part of this free world.

This discourse is stated through the common use of military- and machine metaphors when
Soviet athletes and sport leaders are represented, and descriptions of a soul-less, disciplined
collective.
Resolute seriousness characterise the Russian sports troop that watches the flag ceremony in Otnäs.

While discipline is usually seen as something positive when it comes to western athletes, as a proof of masculinity, the Soviet Olympic troop seems to simply be too disciplined. I think this is because their discipline is not seen as an individual, autonomous choice, forced upon them, and therefore it is not a sign of a highly advanced – or manly – mentality or will-power.

The Eastern bloc Olympic camp is described as an extremely controlled environment, with political propaganda and pictures of Stalin everywhere. These representations become metaphors for a political system marked by a repression of the individual. The Soviet Union is also accused of corrupting sport and the Olympics, by bringing politics to what was traditionally portrayed as a non-political arena (definitely by the Olympic movement itself)

But what I find more interesting is that there is also a parallel discourse of *people meeting across borders*, where sport and the Olympics are thought to have the capacity to *override the differences* between people on different sides of the “iron curtain”.

What I have found is that this *discourse of the possibility of meetings* across borders is structured by the binary of *the collective versus the individual* when it comes to the Soviet Union.
That is: taken as a collective, they are politicised and perceived as frightening and different, but as individuals, there is a possibility of meeting and even forming friendships.

Friends for life? Russian shot-putter-aces Machbajev and Grigalka are here flanking their American colleague Jim Fuchs outside of the Stalin-ornamented Russian camp) Note that the American’s full name is given but only the last name for the Soviet shot-putters (suggesting that they do not have quite the same status as individuals?).

Individual Soviet and American athletes were imagined to tell of these individual meetings, and spread the message of “them” not being so unlike “us”. Soviet citizens are constructed as repressed by the political system, but similar to “us” underneath. The potential for global harmony and peace is placed in the individual meeting one-on-one, where a better understanding for each other can emerge.

I think that there are several ways to understand these representations of the possibility of meetings. I will offer three “hypotheses” which all have to do with context:

One is obviously the Olympic ideal of peace and friendly competition, where the Olympics are seen as having a potential to contribute to world peace.

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1 VR 1952, nr 30, s. 20, ”Mot samma mål” av Rune Ernstad och Paul Melander.
Another way to understand this is that the discourse of a world in harmony is most clearly spelled out in popular press, and perhaps particularly at this time.

When compared to the news press, the popular press tends to represent happy, smiling people, and to downplay conflicts and politics (downplay threat of cold war).

I have found a similar ambiguity when it comes to constructions of race at this time, where discourses of racial difference (stressing black athletes natural ability for sport as more “physical beings”), is combined with discourses of global harmony that seem to downplay differences in living conditions (this changes dramatically in the sixties where global injustices and racial relations are highlighted). So – I would argue that representation of harmony is favoured by the popular press.

And finally, I think also that this has to be understood in connection with the cultural and political climate of this Folkhem-era, with a general tendency to downplay conflicts of interests: harmonizing and denying class-conflicts and a gender-ideology which emphasized harmony-in-difference (distinct gender spheres creates a harmonious whole).

This gender order, with distinct and separate concepts of masculinity and femininity, will be apparent as I now move on to the very problematic issue of female athletes, problematic because they posed a challenge to the gender order.

When it comes to the issue of female Eastern athletes, distance and difference does seem to be emphasised. Female athletes from Communist states were held out as contrasting examples that defined the borders of gender.

The bourgeois ideal of femininity was a slender, passive and physically weak body – and obviously this has made women's sport problematic. Feminist historians like Anne McClintock, and also sociologist Beverly Skeggs, have pointed out that respectable femininity has been created through a historical process of distancing it from what it is not, the anti-thesis of the respectable woman: black women, lesbians and working class women.

I will here make the point that the discursive construction of gender in representations of Soviet female athletes was structured by class and sexuality.
This is from the Olympics in Melbourne 1956, Swedish high-jumper Gun Larking and Russian shot-putter Diskowitz (her first name is not given in the text, which further points to the de-gendering of her as it is usually only males that are referred to by surname only, and it’s never done with western females) are contrasted and the difference between their bodies is pointed out and highlighted.

In this feature it is obvious that fears of sport’s masculinising effect on the female body and mind were negotiated by displacing images of unsexed, mannish women onto Soviet female athletes.

This works to assure that the “our” women, the Swedish female Olympians are proper women, and that they would not challenge the gender order – even though they were involved in an activity that was coded as masculine.

The reader is here guided towards taking note of the contrast between the two women: the different poses and sizes: the larger image of the Russian emphasize her size in comparison with the Swede. It also shows the Russian in strenuous activity in a way that is uncommon for images of western female athletes at this time. I would argue that this representation is structured by class: this big, active, muscular body is clearly not represented as an embodiment of the ideal, respectable, middle-class femininity.

The Swedish woman, on the other hand, is portrayed in a very hetero-feminine pose and described as "our own soft and feminine", and the text encourages the reader to judge between them with the ironic formulation: “It’s unnecessary to ask which one you prefer isn’t it?” (the reference to "Olympiad 1996", a serial story in that issue, a horror vision of future Olympics in a scientifically advanced world, with genetically bred athletes on drugs)

So – the boundaries of the acceptable and respectable femininity are spelled out clearly, and the gender dichotomy is thereby preserved.
“The Swedish sports girls are certainly not masculinised – none of the five hundred in this house were. There were, on the other hand, a few rather pronounced cases in Otnäs, the Russians and other eastern states camp, where also their female troupes have stayed. Before the Swedish gymnastic girls competed, a Swedish hair dresser […] came and did everybody’s hair […] All the Swedish girls have done their make-ups very well and discretely – or not at all – but they have generally been meticulous with the nail varnish on fingers as well as toes.”

_Idun (women’s magazine) 1952_

This quote also creates a distance between "them" and "us", and assures the readers that sport will not make "our" women become masculine.

In this quote, we see the same contrasting of the Swedish and Western against the eastern women. **Swedish, heterosexual femininity** is here constructed through markers of the attention to the body and a heterofeminine presentation of the body. The grooming and taking care of body are also **markers of class** – a respectable, middle-classmarked femininity with discrete make-up.

In conclusion: I have tried to show some parallell discourses – on closeness and distance, sameness and difference.

The 1950’s was in many ways characterised by a cultural climate that favoured harmony and non-conflict, but where, at the same time, concepts of difference were used to negotiate and displace threats, such as the threat of a devastating war and the threat to the gender order posed by (amongst others) female athletes. In this way, at least harmony was preserved close to home.