

## **Throwing like a boy - consequences of Iris Young's article “Throwing like a Girl” for male motion and behaviour**

In her essay *Throwing like a Girl* Iris Young describes differences between women and men in bodily activities, especially such that involve the whole body using strength to accomplish a task. She focusses on modalities of female bodily existence in contemporary, industrial, urban and commercial society (Young 1980, 140).

In this essay I describe Young's approach, summarize the observed differences in motion and attitude, and her conclusions on modalities of female motility. I then raise critical questions, and ask, what consequences for male modalities of bodily movement we can draw from her analysis?

Young opposes the idea that these differences come from a “feminine attitude” (Strauss in Young 1980, 138) in relation to the world and space. She holds against with the feminist situation-theory developed by Simone de Beauvoir, that differences in behaviour and psychology cannot be “attributed to some natural and eternal 'feminine essence'” (Young 1980, 138), but that every human existence is defined by its situation. The socio-historical set of circumstances, the state of education and custom, make differences in the way of comporting themselves and moving of women intelligible. Young suggests, that the tension between immanence and transcendence, that defines feminine existence, influences feminine comportment, motility and spatiality as well (cf. Young 1980, 141). 'Feminine existence' is no “mysterious quality or essence which all women have by virtue of their being biologically female” but rather a “set of structures and conditions which delimit the typical *situation* if being a woman in a particular society, as well as the typical way in which this situation is lived by women themselves” (Young 1980, 140).

The modalities of female bodily comportment, motility and spatiality “have their source in the situation of women as conditioned by their sexist oppression” (cf. Young 1980, 152), in which girls are less encouraged to use their full bodily capacity to free and open engagement with the world and to develop specific bodily skills.

Referring to Merleau-Ponty's *theory of the lived body*, Young is convinced “that it is the ordinary purposive orientation of the body as a whole toward things and its environment which initially defines the relation of a subject to its world” (Young 1980, 140). Contrasting Merleau-Ponty's analysis that the body as a transcendent presence to the world is not a thing amongst others, Young

claims that women have the additional problem of the body as “[...] both subject and object for itself at the same time and in reference to the same act” (Young 1980, 148).

She believes that this insight can help to understand the observed differences in comporment, motility and spatiality between women and men.

## Differences in female motion

Referring Strauss's and her own observations, Young reports differences between female and male motility from the early age of five. More recent studies find differences already at a much younger age:

“Other findings from detailed analyses of movement and coordination at 6, 12, and 18 weeks are consistent with the later female advantage in fine motor skill and the male advantage in gross motor activity (Piek, Gasson, Barrett, & Case 2002 in Alexander and Wilcox). An early female advantage in fine motor behavior is also suggested by more accurate imitation of finger movements in neonatal girls than in boys” (Nagy, Kompagne, Orvos, & Pal 2007 in Alexander and Wilcox).

Young states there is a typical style of throwing, running, climbing, swinging and hitting like a girl, that has in common, that the whole body is not put into fluid and directed motion, but is concentrated in one body part. She describes the following differences (Young 1980, 144ff):

- Generally women do not make use of the body's spatial and lateral potentialities. Women tend not to put their whole bodies into engagement in a physical task.
- In throwing women do not bring their whole bodies into motion. They do not reach back, twist, move backward, step, and lean forward. They tend to wait and react to the approach of a ball, rather than going forth to meet it. They respond as if the ball were coming at them, and flee, duck, or otherwise defend themselves. They move as if a space surrounds them which they are not free to move beyond, and tend to remain in one place. They don't jump, reach, or run to approach a ball.
- When walking they are less open in their gait and stride. The feminine stride is shorter proportional to their body. Their arms swing less and they have less up and down rhythm in their step.
- In feminine sitting postures (also if wearing pants) legs are relatively close together and arms are crossed before the body.
- In standing or leaning women tend to keep their feet closer together and their arms and hands touching their bodies.
- Women carry books or parcels embraced to their chests. Attempting to lift something

women fail to plant themselves firmly and make their thighs bear the greatest proportion of the weight. Instead they tend to concentrate their efforts to the arms and shoulders.

Not due to measurable differences in strength, women approach tasks that involve the use of strength in a different way. Young suggests that some of these differences are induced by women's double awareness of the body as subject and object at the same time.

- Women do not perceive themselves capable of manipulating heavy things with force. They lack trust in their bodies. Their attention is directed upon their bodies to make sure it is doing what they wish, rather than paying attention to what they want to do *through* their bodies.
- Women approach things with timidity, uncertainty, and hesitancy. They tend to underestimate their bodily capacity, decide beforehand that tasks are beyond them and therefore give it less than full effort. In this way they fulfil their own prophecy.
- They have a grater fear of getting hurt. Women's attention is split between the the aim and the body, saving it from harm.
- Women often are self-conscious about appearing awkward and at the same time do not wish to appear too strong.

## Modalities of feminine motility

Young extracts three modalities that feminine movement exhibit:

- Ambiguous transcendence

Young states that according to Merleau-Ponty the body rather than pure consciousness is the locus of subjectivity and intentionality. The capacity of bodily motion orienting itself and interacting with its environment creates subjectivity in a transcendence “which moves out from the body in its immanence in an open and unbroken directedness upon the world in action” (Young 1980, 145). Young claims that feminine bodily existence is overlaid by immanence, even as it moves out toward the world in its motions. As signs for that she names the relative immobility in throwing, where women tend to use only parts of the body, that are directly involved, and her proposition that women often do not trust the capacity of their body and feel it to be a burden.

- Inhibited intentionality

“The possibilities which are opened in the world depend on the mode and limits of the bodily 'I can'” (Merleau-Ponty in Young 1980, 146). Young claims that women have an inhibited intentionality, which makes them see possibilities as *someone's* and limitations as

*theirs*. They underuse their bodily capacities both in strength and skills, so their bodily commitment ends “in a self-imposed ‘I cannot’” (Young 1980, 146).

- Discontinuous unity with its surroundings

According to Merleau-Ponty the body organizes the surrounding space and unites itself with it by projecting an aim toward which it moves (cf. Young 1980, 147). Young claims that feminine bodily existence stands in discontinuous unity with both itself and its surroundings as can be seen in the discontinuity of female motion, where active engagement and coordination of the whole body is required. She concludes that the undirectedness and wasted motion manifests a lack of body unity.

## Critical Questions

A problem of Young's analysis may be that she shows the influence of social conditioning on female bodily experience in very complex interpersonal situations, by referring to very basic experiences of bodily existence as analysed by Merleau-Ponty. Every person can be objectified by others and by itself, and being watched and rated changes the experience of an act for women as for men.

This leaves undeniably that in a patriarchal society women are denied the same rights and are not encouraged to develop in the same way as men. Since we develop in a social environment, I do not doubt that this influence can be traced down to very basic capabilities.

*When women are* encouraged and have the chance to practice specific bodily tasks, I believe the differences between men and women to be smaller than the differences between trained and untrained persons. The focus on stereotypical differences between the sexes may well maintain differences, where they could be dispersed.

Young neglects purposeful activities which involve the use of the whole body and strength that are more traditionally ascribed as typically female, for example gardening or scrubbing stairs. As she notices, many differences are enhanced by a lack of practice in using the body and performing tasks. Do women also approach such activities with lesser confidence, coordination and a more ineffective use of the body?

## Can we draw direct consequences for male motility?

Many of Young's observations are comparisons to a male way of moving, interacting with things and aiming at projects. She relates the way women bodily act with assignments made by male look on women's body and roles imposed on them in a patriarchal society. She states, women are defined by the circumstances as “‘Other’, as the inessential correlate of man” (Young 1980, 141).

This view constructs men as the essential subjects, who actively approach and fulfil projects using the capacities of their whole bodies with uninhibited confidence and strength. Obviously this does not apply to all men, although it is a widespread and easily observable ideal, that is held high and projected on certain men in certain situation, like for example athletes in competition. As does Young, I will not address the fact that such 'male' standards are also applied to women in these fields and are not limited to a physical sex.

She describes male motion as:

- Generally more bringing the whole body into the motion. Even untrained men engage in sport generally with more free motion and open reach
- A masculine stride is longer proportional to a man's body. Men swing their arms in a more open and loose fashion. They have more up and down rhythm in their steps
- Standing or leaning they keep their feet further apart
- Boys and men swing books or parcels along their sides
- Men move out toward a ball in flight and confront it with their countermotion
- Men easily bound across a harmless stream

As it is with women, men also develop in situations of socio-historical circumstances. They on one hand should fulfil the virtues of the male ideal, on the other hand they also meet restrictions of social, political, economical and bodily requirements. However we judge the distributive justice, men as well as women are encouraged to develop certain capabilities more, while others are inhibited.

What typical attributes are men ascribed by education and custom in a patriarchal society? Along with Young's attempt, I try to describe that by using an ideal image of male soccer players.

Male soccer players are some of the top gladiators of our time. They do not have to fight for their lives any more, nevertheless they take big risks of bodily injury. They have well developed wholly trained muscular bodies that are capable of a mixture of using strength and endurance.

- They show strategic overview and form opinions of situations and chances quickly. They interact with others.
- They fight, use force. They show no fear of getting hurt.
- Their actions are aimed at achieving a goal.
- They move quickly and accurately.
- They show precise control over the ball, if necessary with great strength.

It may well be that this ideal is also effective with average men in everyday life. Even if most men never achieve such a level of bodily performance, we may still take it as potentially possible for somebody like us. A sign for that could be, that many men watch soccer games on television in the manner of identification: *we won!* Interestingly on the other hand it is not: *we got hurt*. Traces of the exemplary function and subsequent imitating behaviour and can be observed with youngsters spitting on the street or scratching their testicles in public.

Of course there is also another side to this behaviour: boys may more than girls be ready to take certain risks, when overestimating their capacities. Deadly tests of courage like riding on top of trains are rarely performed by girls. If men are afraid, they often are ashamed to show it and it reduces their self esteem the more they believe it to be inappropriate. It may be especially difficult for men to show that they are incapable of achieving something and seek help.

Men may as well as women have no unambiguous transcendence, no uninhibited intentionality and no continuous unity with their surroundings. Closely scrutinized their advantage in these modalities may shrink to *a little more than women*.

On the other hand we may well have a more ambiguous immanence, less awareness of our body as resistance and more difficulties with surroundings we cannot change?

Young's research is based on values. She for example sees men's engagement in the world as more natural than women's (Young 1980, 142). However there are so many angles under which human behaviour can be scrutinized that the analysis of such relations will always be influenced by values. Her essay shows very well the influence of social ascriptions on complex social behaviour, but also on the development of the most basic bodily skills and possibilities.

Direct conclusions from Young's analysis to male motility, will lead to a construction of male stereotypes in comparison with stereotypical women's motility in a predetermined area of actions. This focus can be useful to describe differences of the sexes due to socialization.

## References

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