

# BE MORE HUMAN

An Anthropological Analysis of Subject Formation in a Late Modern Crossfit Community

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*Lund University - Department of Sociology Social Anthropology -SANK02*

*Author: Wiktor Hansson*

*Supervisor: Tova Højdestrand*

*Examiner : Nina Green*



## Abstract

This article explores the ideals and motivations behind the increasingly popular physical practice of Crossfit. Through an analysis of data collected through interviews, observation and deep hanging out (and working out) this article attempts to thicken the conventional analysis of lifestyle practices in late modern capitalism. A product of the contemporary *Culture of the Self* —that illusive thing in the centre of the matrix of consumerism— Crossfit cultivates a Culture of the self best understood through Nietzsche and Foucault's de-essentialised notion of the subject, as explored in the concept of the *Übermensch* and, respectively, the *Care of Self* and *Aesthetics of Existence*. This article, in its tentative contribution to the anthropology of the self, shares with mentioned authors, an underlying criticism of the present. We learn that the dynamic mix of rules and openness in Crossfit, situates the Crossfitter in an oppositional stance to the discourse on the self of late modern capitalism, in that she, through continuous inventory into her thoughts, actions and decisions, questions her shaping of herself and that which has shaped the conception of *Her* in turn. The Crossfitter's critical self-mastery through means of ascetic practices, in combination with visceral ruptures of collective self-surrender, cultivates a radical intimacy with her body as a sentient, living subject. It forms a somatic philosophy which transcends the Cartesian separation of body and mind, but also subject and object. Through joyful affirmation of the progressive abilities of a continuously developing, affective, materially embedded and collaborative subjectivity, the Crossfitter forms a confident yet critical relation to what it means to be more human.

*Keywords:* social anthropology, Crossfit, body, pain, material anthropology

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## Table of Content

Abstract	
Acknowledgement	
Preface	
Introduction	6
1.1 Purpose	8
1.2 Previous Research	8
<i>Perspectives on Extreme Sport</i>	8
1.3 Theoretical Framework	12
<i>Late Modern Capitalism</i>	12
<i>Letting go of the Self</i>	12
<i>Body Meets World, World Meets Body</i>	14
<i>Be (More) than Human?</i>	15
2 Methods of Inquiry	18
<i>Native's Gaze and Navel Gazing</i>	18
2.1 Interview and list of interviewees	19
2.2 Disposition	20
3. Contextualising the Visceral World of Crossfit	21
<i>What is Crossfit?</i>	21
3.1 Crossfit South	23
<i>Primal, Dirty, Raw</i>	23
<i>Ritualistic Undressing; or, How to find the Kitchen</i>	24
<i>Preparing for Life - The Workout</i>	26
4. Pain, Pleasure and the Importance of Dying	30
<i>Pain is the Language of Crossfit</i>	30
<i>Culture of Pain</i>	31
<i>Daily rituals of dying</i>	32
5. Community	37
6. <i>Letzte Mensch vol. 1.0</i>	39
6.1 <i>Letzte Mensch vol. 2.0</i>	40
7. Freedom is control - A New Materialistic Subjectivity	42
8. Conclusion	46
References	

## Preface

*TIME FOR BREAK!*, signals a spandex clad woman with a physique that would have compelled Michelangelo's David to cut the carbs. Like in one of those fast food commercials, where the hamburger is slapped onto a bun in a sensual 240fps slow-motion, my body — taxonomically alien to the demigods around me — descends towards the floor. Landing with my face in a thick puddle of sweat and magnesium powder, with the flickering and most unflattering fluorescent light dancing on the lumpy, moist surface, I try to catch a reflection of my face, as to assure that I am still alive. Chipping for air and staring into the abyss of the puddle, I realise that the sweat is not mine. I know that since I am unfit to the degree that my body regards regulating its temperature by sweating as a superfluous activity, preferring instead temporary black outs and dramatic fainting. Or that is what my coach told me.

Before I have time to contemplate any further whose sweat is moisturising my face, the woman shouts “BREAK-TIME IS UP” and resets the enormous, omnipresent timer, hung above a mural stating WE LOVE BRUTAL WORKOUTS. Swallowing the acidic and bloody secrete building up in my throat, and with flaky lips painfully throbbing around the water-bottle, I stand up and glance across the monastic, industrial space of concrete, steel and rubber. It contains no mirrors, no internal walls, no TVs, no reception area, no bar for protein shakes; simply, no space for privacy or me-time, nor any of the taken-for-granted luxuries of a contemporary commercial fitness centre, such as showers, sauna or expensive machines.

Instead the sinisterly bare and post-apocalyptic space is thick with an aura of cultish devotion; a self-imposed, yet shared, secular asceticism, where the search for physical and mental catharsis is constant. Do it again, and again, and again is the mantra (referred to as AMRAP: as many reps as possible) “You can rest your breath when you do the sprint section” the woman shouts at me, and I wobble away.

This is not merely a space for bodily transformation; it is a space in which one, through seemingly oppressive rules and rigid regulation of diet, body and mind, secures a sense of freedom and enlightenment through control, which transcends the boundaries of this room. It is a space in which to become more human. Again, again, and again. It is the Crossfit Box.

## 1. Introduction

According to Reebok's interactive fitness website, called *Be More Human-Physical Fitness Transforms Your Life*<sup>1</sup>, I have 19,606 days to live. I am also, according to the same site, 84% human. By the time this thesis is handed in, I will have spent 90 or so of my numbered days, adhering to the latter part of the mentioned websites name, that is, physical fitness. But the point of departure for this thesis, is not to be found in any personal experience of sport as a transformative practice. The reason as to why I found myself in a Crossfit Box, can instead be traced to an English secondhand bookstore in central Tokyo. It was from two books purchased in the little shop, Leonard Koren's *Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets and Philosophers* (1994) a western take on the Japanese aesthetic of wabi-sabi, and Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1891/2006) that my interest in the aesthetics of existence arose. The two books meet in a philosophical synthesis of the will to achieve a way of life that one cannot but want to live again and again. A life in which the facts of morality, the absence of self-nature, and the physical and mental scars gained by a life lived, are to be reconciled and celebrated as they underline the importance of suffering for the development of a fuller life. According to the wabi-sabi, nothing lasts, nothing is finished, and nothing is perfect. According to Nietzsche, humans are a non lasting, not finished, and a non perfect specie.

If one was to compress these ideas and rephrase them into a catchy slogan to be printed onto a t-shirt, it would probably spell out something like this: Train hard, Look good, Get laid, Feel better. That is also the aesthetic philosophy of Crossfit. It is my belief that Crossfit presents a fruitful setting to study what seems to be a broader cultural shift towards a greater emphasis on community through value driven consumption, in which people seek a sense of belonging, creativity, accountability and personal and social transformation. That and more will be explored in the ensuing chapters.

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.reebok.se/sv-SE/be-more-human/#/home>

TRAIN HARD  
LOOK GOOD  
GET LAID  
FEEL BETTER

WWW.CROSSLITEVINKISTEN.FI

## 1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of the increasingly popular practice Crossfit. Particularly, I want to examine the aesthetic ideals and ascetic practices which underline the sport, and why, in a commercial fitness landscape where options are ripe, such practice have amassed a diverse and global following. There has been considerable ethnographic analysis on commercial fitness and, to some extent, extreme/risk sport (RES) but few studies have applied an ethnographic methodology to explore Crossfit, and the majority of studies written about the practice have focused almost exclusively on the cultural, gendered and ideological representation of Crossfit as presented in its official marketing. Therefore, of specific concern for this study as to contribute to the blind spot in existing research, but also to further my own exploration of aesthetic and ascetic lifestyle practices, is to immerse myself in a local Crossfit Box and its community. The ensuing chapters intend to provide an answer to the following questions.

- What new forms of subjectivity does Crossfit engender?
- What features of late modernity necessitate a physical exercise philosophy such as Crossfit?
- In what ways does Crossfit affirm or reject a neoliberal and materialistic subjectivity?

## 1.2 Previous Research

In order to position this thesis and guide its research questions, it is crucial to lift forth and examine some of the existing research on Crossfit. Despite an increase in scholarly interest in what can be categorised as extreme sports, Crossfit has not shared the same popularity in academia as related practices. The few studies written on Crossfit, have almost exclusively depicted the sport and participation in it, as a superficial appropriation of a working class morale, with the repeated conclusion that the sport is a symptomatic expression of an individualistic neoliberal risk society, in which the elevation of health is related to the dismantling of welfare structures (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009; Heywood, 2016; Washington & Economides, 2016). A possible explanation to this recurring perspective can be that Crossfit originates in the US, and the majority of studies on the sport can be traced to American scholars in an American context. My field — a Box in small town in southern Sweden — is geographically, socially and politically different from that of contemporary United States. Below I present previous research of particular interest to the nature of my questions.

### *Perspectives on Extreme Sport*

A popular sociological explanation of extreme sports such as Crossfit is that it is a form of resistance against unfulfilled promises by contemporary society, and that agents utilise extreme

sports to escape into alternative lifestyles of adrenaline and extreme presentism (Fletcher). Such conclusion, of deviance and conflict, is often built on the theoretical legacy of the Chicago school or Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies<sup>2</sup> (Williams, 2007:573-575). Both schools looked at marginalised groups whose alternative affiliations “[can most likely]...be reduced to birth or material necessity” (Abramsson & Modzelewski, 2011: 147). But although Crossfit can be regarded as a form of normative deviance, there is, as pointed out by Abramsson & Modzelewski’s study on middle-class cage fighters, a critical distinction between comparatively volitional groups, that is, groups with social and financial access to normative means of status, and groups who by birth or constraining social factors, belong to bounded groups. Crossfitters, like cage fighters, largely belong to a comfortable professional middle class (ibid:144)

Sport sociologist Robert Fletcher (2008) attempts to offer an alternative explanation as to why people from the professional middle class (PMC), with access to conventional means of acquiring social and monetary capital, opt for a life of social, financial and body sanctions. While some scholars have attributed the appeal of risk sport to the PMC to individual factors<sup>3</sup>, such as addictive personality, or need for constant sensational stimulation, Fletcher argues that these propositions fail to acknowledge the social dimension of RES (ibid:313-314) Instead he proposes that the appeal of risk sports to the PMC, is precisely because of the PMC's, schematically, shared values and social codes. That is, the PMC habitus has socialised individuals who strive for and find value in self-reliance, self-discipline, continual progress, and an orientation toward experimental accumulation of capital other than monetary (ibid:319). Agents from a less privileged background, are arguably denied the same possibility to practice risk sports, as one cannot afford, socially or financially, a broken leg or wrist. The milieu of risk sport, argues Fletcher, thus provide but an illusionary escape from the essence of modernity and the bourgeoisie habitus; it differs but in content, not form (ibid: 317-318).

Abramson & Modzelewski’s (2011) study on cage fighters second Fletcher's argument. To the fighters, who are overwhelmingly middle class, the cage offers a ritualistic space in which they can embody, enact and uphold the meritocratic ideals of their moral world, that is, of American society. Participation in cage fighting is thus not a rejection of normative society, argues Abramson & Modzelewski, but a reaffirmation of its very core values, as attained by alternative, and most visceral means. Through the rigid rules of cage fighting, the fighters find a freedom to build, rather

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<sup>2</sup> Non of the schools were homogenous groups as such, but the Chicago school tended to adhere to structural-functionalism, e.g Trasher (1927) *The Gang*, whilst CCC preferred a neo- marxist framework, see Clark et al(1976) *Subcultures, Cultures, Class*.

<sup>3</sup> There seem to be a broad institutional tradition of granting non-conformist behaviour by people of relative privilege (eg. race, social or financial) an individual assessments, while marginalised groups are often judge as a face-less group of one, e.g muslim terrorists and white lone-wolfs.

than to consume, a truer, more authentic self, propose the writers (ibid:165-169). But, and this is something both Abramson & Modzelewski and Fletcher arguably denies their informants, or fails to question: could their participation, perhaps, be an affirmation of something new, that is, a transmutation of values rather than resistance, reaffirmation or retro-nostalgia? Informants in both studies partake in ascetic practices and appropriate values in grave opposition to both the professional middle class and ideals of The American Dream. I would tentatively suggest, with regards to Abramson & Modzelewski cage-fitters, that the non-consumeristic, egalitarian and communitarian nature of the practice, calls for a new concept: The New American Dream?<sup>4</sup>

Leslie Heywood (2006) Professor of English, frames Crossfit as a cultural practice which mirrors a neoliberal ideology of deregulation, privatisation and where individual responsibility trumps solidarity. I do not disagree with Heywood — there are elements of Crossfit from which such an interpretation is plausible — but I do question argument for it being so. On the one hand, she acknowledges that Crossfit is based on a community and comradeship, which she considers to be positive. The fact that coaches are informed to be friendly and affective, not authoritarian, is also considered a favourable trait (ibid:120). What she cannot accept, is that a piano is played in one of Crossfit Inc.s Youtube commercials, and not deafening rock music (ibid:124). A charitable interoperation could be that Crossfit, like piano playing, cultivates a character who can appreciate the affective nature of physical endurance and music. Heywood argues it to be strange, if not deceiving, and proposes that an egalitarian society, who mix stringed instrument with physical actives, is “antithetical to autonomy and agency” (120). It is also quite possibly antithetical to the ideology of neoliberalism, which she argues Crossfit to be a representation of.

Heywood concludes with sociologist Robert Hassan’s<sup>5</sup> concept network time; an abstract always-on space in which physical presence, due to a connected information society, is not necessary in order to be engaged in a lifestyle. Network time’s proposed effect on Crossfitters, argues Heywood, is that “CrossFit can reach into every aspect of an athlete’s life – all CrossFit, all the time” (ibid:120, 126). and thus it represents an omnipresent, negative form of power and surveillance. A fallacious argument based on the premise that we can somehow “withdraw” from social life if we unplug our gadgets. As Bourdieu has shown, you don’t need Instagram to be influenced by your habitus (Bourdieu, 2010).

Washington and Economides (2016) furthers Heywood’s reading of Crossfit but adds a critical feminist perspective. Through a discursive analysis of Crossfit media, they critique the postfeminist

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<sup>4</sup> The Centre for a New American Dream is a non-profit organisation, who works to recompose the American dream to focus more on social and environmental justice, and reduce consumption as the holy grail. See <https://www.newdream.org/>

<sup>5</sup> Hassan, 2003: 229

proposition that practices such as Crossfit can further the prospects of framing an agent who is in control and ownership of the construction of herself (ibid:148). They conclude that Crossfit, despite its effort to portray transgender athletes and athletes of colour, elevates “...docility as a source of empowerment” (ibid:156). That is, Crossfit pushes for a body framework in which the content may be different, but the heteronormative and commercialised gaze of that frame itself, is left unchanged. The authors argue that rather than broadening the ideals of the bodies and femininity, it further neutralises conventional ideals of beauty (ibid:155-156). Although I do not question their analysis, it also highlights the need for qualitative studies, in particular ethnography. I have not been in a Box in which the representation of bodies would not shame one of those supposedly inclusive Dove campaigns.<sup>6</sup>

Other texts of interest include sociologist Marcel C. Dawson (2015) who, through a textual analysis, applies a Goffmanian total institution to the social organisation in a Crossfit Box. Sociologist Anna Aalten (2007) writes how dancers are made through an intimate relationship with pain and the ideal of the Sylph, while Chris Shilling & Phillip Mellor (2010) ask if we are saved from or through pain. Clair Moxham (2009) critiques the individualising structures that treat the self as an autonomous a priori individual. This epistemological fallacy is particularly obvious in commercial gyms, where the autonomous self is encouraged to create herself, something she can only do, argues Moxham, by abiding so over-individual body ideals and discourses on health. As such, the 'I' in the individual is but a name on a vessel which carries material and social relations.

Pointing in a multitude of creative directions, most of the previous research on risk and extreme sport (RES) has shown an interest either in other practices than Crossfit, or, if Crossfit is the topic, a preoccupation with its media and representation, as explored with methodologies other than ethnography. Although my results show many similarities to the work done by Abramson & Modzelewski and Fletcher, they fail to question their implicit assumptions about humans and subjectivity, and, subsequently, offer but a thin and, I would argue, flawed reflection of RES. I believe that some RES are not merely expressions of a sub or alternative lifestyle of resisting or affirming the status quo, but an affirmation of an alternative epistemic milieu, through which a new, or a more, holistic subjectivity is formed. It is therefore my hope that the engaged and affective methods used in this thesis, as explored in the methodology section, will provide an advantageous epistemic perspective in presenting the — or a — Crossfit experience.

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<sup>6</sup> For picture of Dove campaign see <https://callensm.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/dove-real-beauty-campaign.jpg?w=1200>. See also Dye(2009) Consuming Constructions: A Critique of Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty

### 1.3 Theoretical Framework

It became evident during my field work that in order to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of Crossfit, it was necessary to approach the field with an interdisciplinary toolbox. Theories informing this paper come from anthropology, sociology, philosophy and kinesiology, and touch upon health, Cartesian dualism, community, power and posthumanism. It is, I believe, this rather creative mix of theoretical concepts through which I can best capture a reflection of the world of Crossfit. What follows is a brief introduction of the chosen principal theoretical texts and an outline my theoretical vocabulary.

#### *Late Modern Capitalism*

Zygmunt Bauman (2007) argues that late modern capitalism is a machine; a perverse force which profits from the production of illusionary differences for the sake of commodification (ibid:19). Not one to shy away from the high art of academic pessimism, Bauman furthers that we live in a society that has pathologised the human; there is a pill for every ill, and the biggest ill is unhappiness, and its pill is consumerism (ibid:43-45). Bauman makes a distinction between consumption and consumerism; exchange of ownership through some sort of transaction is necessary, but in consumerism, pleasure is derived from the desire to acquire something, not owning, and therefore the window of archived pleasure is separate from the material value and the lifetime of the items acquired (ibid:25-52). Commercialism and commodification *is* our culture; it is the lens through which we see the world and ourselves.

Consumerism is also, argues Graeber, the reason why capitalism creates pointless jobs (2016). Although society has reached a technological proficiency which could bring about a reality in which we work 15 hours per week or less, most of us still work 40 hour weeks in professions from which no meaning or creativity can be elicited. As such, meaning must be sourced from somewhere else. That elsewhere, argues Graeber, is in consumerism.

Although mentioned authors are, arguably, more known for their preference of a feisty essayistic elevation of contemporary concerns, and not academic humility, Bauman and Graeber's scathing comments on the lesser life, as if were, of late modern capitalism, along with scholars such as Giddens (1991) and Beck (1986), is a vital prelude to the subsequent chapters, which attempts to map the effect of this society of consumerism and individualisation on the Crossfitter, and how Crossfit might influence and cultivate a dispositional change to the consumeristic subject enthralled in Bauman's liquid modernity(2000)

#### *Letting go of the Self*

Classic philosophical and anthropological thinkers have long dealt with the nature, or artificiality, of the self. But whether reading Mauss or Levi-Strauss conceptions of *moi*, Descartes' dualism and

Kant's a priori rational and autonomous subject, tend to hover in the bibliography. To fulfill my aspirations for this essay, I look to Daniel Miller, Nietzsche and Foucault. Of particular interest for this text is Miller's *Humility of Things*, but also Foucault's concepts of "Care of the Self" and "Aesthetics of Existence", of which the two latter can be traced to Nietzsche's attempt to not only reconstruct contemporary ethics- and, in an extension, society- but to rid us from them all together. This by conceptualising a subject as a *procedural project*, rather than an essential substance. It is a practice of ethics without the presumption of an autonomous subject. The subject is but in the acts. To this, both Miller and Foucault adhere.

In the reconceptualisation of the self, Foucault argues against a presiding, a priori sense of 'I', that is, an autonomous, substantial subjectivity or self innate in all humans. Instead, Foucault positions the self to be a historical, cultural and linguistic construction, fundamentally a sort of fiction in constant flux. The self is "not consolidated but fragmented" he argues "not sovereign but dependent; not the absolute source, but a function"(Foucault, 1969, DE 1: 789/ Huijer, 1999:66), and is best cared for in the ascetic techniques (techne) of the ancient Greeks. In contrast to the life denying and hermetic Christian ascetics, the ancient Greek word 'Askesis' (ἀσκησις) translates into a life affirming exercise or training. Through physical and intellectual inquiries under the ethos 'know thyself', one aspired for 'Kallos' (κάλλος) roughly translated to the *good* or *beauty* (Foucault, 1981-82: 16, 315-316). To make his point clear, Foucault often refers to the artist. The creation of a piece of art is the creation of the artist making the art; take away the artwork, and the artist has no identity. Take away the artist, and the object created is but inert matter (Foucault, 1969). As such, what he proposes when suggesting that one ought to make life into a work of art and care deeply for the self, is not to, like a dandy, aestheticise or pamper a *true* self; there is none. Instead one is to, perpetually, alter and edit one's choices and acts, as if it were a painting that never dries. The self, according to Foucault, is composed of a web of multi-layered forms of cognitive, affective and emotional relations, which — temporarily — coagulate into an individual (which is a more of a di or multi-vidual) This is what the Deleuzian school would call rhizomatic subjectivity or nomadic subjectivity<sup>7</sup>. It is through techniques, disciplinary practices and discourses of consumption and confession, that we are produced as unitary subjects, and we carry on constructing confiding truths about ourselves, argues both Nietzsche and Foucault, although the truths rarely seem to fit or last (Foucault, 1981-1982; Nietzsche, 1881/2012: pg 102, 105)

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<sup>7</sup> Rosi Braidotti (2012) *Nomadic Theory: The portable Rosi Braidotti*

In contrast to Mr Foucault, Daniel Miller (2010), a champion of the material-cultural turn of anthropology, leaves most abstractions behind. He has constructed a theory of materialism in which he incorporates most of the most cited men of the past 200 years. In the theory we find elements of art historian Gombrich's frame analysis paired with Goffman's dramaturgy. Miller fuses the two scholars ideas to highlight the often unnoticed imperative of how material contexts, that is, metaphorical frames or stages, mediate *what* self we can will ourselves to perform (ibid:49-50). And through the ideas on habitual socialisation and domains of practice à la Bourdieu, fused with historical archaeologist James Deetz's recognition of how trivial and negligible objects mediate our social relations and ourselves, Miller constructs a theory of *The Humility of Things*: that is, objects are the most pervasive and powerful when we do not care or see them. When we've come to take for granted the presence of tangible and intangible structures and internalised their symbolic value, we blissfully live within or upon the quietly coercive framework of the mentioned frames and stages (ibid: 50-53, 155). What he proposes is that objects matter, not because what they allow us to do with them, but because we do not see what they do with us. At the centre of the theory, there is a Hegalian notion of externalisation, objectification and internalisation, as read through Marx and Simmel. Through Hegel's model of the dialectic relationship between the subject and object, Miller brings down Foucault's discourses and power genealogies, to our relations with objects, born or designed (ibid:7-8, 61). Take away the clothes from the Emperor and there is no Emperor to be found. It is not that he has no clothes; he ceases to exist. In other words, wearing one's self on the sleeve, is the only style available. There are no subjects covered in objects.

### *Body meet world, world meet body*

The body, having been discarded as static and lacking in dimension by earlier scholars of the humanities and social sciences, it was once again positioned in the very centre of the arena of theoretical battles in the latter part of the 20th century (Shilling, 2007)<sup>8</sup>. The most eloquently theorised conceptions on the body, embodiment and transcendence of dualism, however, is at the courtesy of phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who postulated that "The body is our general medium for having a world." (1945/ 2002:169) as it is the fore and the background to our existence. But *being* of a certain biological anatomy, the body is in itself dependent on the material world around us, which points to a materially embedded and relationally dependent subjectivity. It is through an affective and embodied subject we interact with other. Like cognitive memory, somatic knowledge can be both gained and lost, as showed by Marcel Mauss in his cultural genealogy of the techniques of bodies (1935/1973). As such, the training of the body, as in Crossfit, can arguably

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<sup>8</sup> See Turner(1992) *Regulating Bodies: Essays in Medical Sociology* and Berger & Luckman (1967) *The Social Construction of reality*.

unlock new ways of being in, and new ways of thinking about the world. Mearlu-Ponty will be accompanied by Drew Leden (1990) and Elaine Scarry (1985) for their studies on pain and torture, respectively.

### *Be More (than) Human?*

To approach Crossfitters's desire of perpetual betterment of the body and mind<sup>9</sup> under the proto-philosophical ethos of *Be More Human*, and to identify an applicable framework to understand such an ethos, a brief theoretical outline of ideas on more-than-human is necessary. Long is the history of myth, songs, films and novels which tells the stories of the human desire to be more than mere human, and many are the reasons as to why and what this being beyond our perceived boundaries would be. Most, if not all, end in miserable failure or morally discouraging disaster. Caution is understandable when terms such as super, over, trans or post are added to human, as one is balancing dangerously close to what has often ended in not superhuman, but the *inhumane*. The most horrid quest of creating a society of, and for a superhuman, does not belong to a myth nor fictional story, but an event in history which bared the fragility of the very concept of human. That is, the eugenic programs of the Nazi regime. Thus, to this day, discourses on the topic of bettering, or rather, enhancing the human condition, whether through genetics, cybernetics or artificial intelligence, tend to be met with collective revulsion.

The majority of contemporary theoreticians, whether for or against a posthuman, transhuman or cyborg future, have focused almost exclusively on actual or possible technological advancements, and whether this would result in progression or oppression of humanity (Braidotti, 2006, 2013, 2015; Boström, 2005; Haraway, 1991). In particular the boundary between human and robot has been a fertile source of inspiration for academics and artist alike. Perhaps because it is in this liminal, intersectional space of the organic and the artificial, the born and the designed, that the definition of human can to be found. Cyberfeminism Donna Haraway argues that "...machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines" (Haraway, 1991:p153). And if machines such as the pacemaker is *the very* thing which keeps a person alive, in which life itself without it would not be possible, then differentiation based on a mechanical core of not, as is often

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<sup>9</sup> Throughout the essay, terms such as body and mind, subject and object will be used as my informants generally *talked* of their reality with these terms, although they often — explicitly and implicitly — acted in ways in which this dualism was questioned or problematised.

then distinction, is a flawed one<sup>10</sup>. But most theorisation is future oriented, as the technological advancements which can augment the human condition are far from sophisticated enough to have a large scale impact on the human as a biological specie. We are far off from a future depicted in *Terminator*, *Blade Runner* or HBOs *Westworld*. But perhaps by scanning the horizon after a fusion powered auto-driving car who can transform into a female human<sup>11</sup> we miss what is happening in the now.

What is unquestioned in some of these movements is the very thing that perhaps ought to be questioned; the term human. Not whether it is obsolete due to a mechanical arm, but that *human* was never a neutral concept to begin with. In line with cyberfeminists, most noticeably Haraway, Rosa Braidotti — a student of Foucault — argues that *human* has always indexed access to privileges and entitlements, and existed on a continuum of more, less or non human (Braidotti, 2015:1-2) As such, she continues, the supposed neutrality of humanism, as adopted by the transhumanists, with the founding Director of Oxford's humbly named Future of Humanity Institute Nick Boström as its secular shaman, escorts the patriarchal structures and ageing dichotomies contained in *human* into the future (Braidotti, 2013:30). The transhumanist movement theorise and support the end-goal of achieving the perfect human, and the fact that transhumanism focus on superintelligence, that is, on the enhancement of our mind through implants and synthetic neurones, is terribly indicative of who is lurking in their intention; the rational man of the enlightenment, who thinks and therefore exists. It is a preservation and bettering of what is and has been, rather than questioning what should be and can be (Boström, 2006:3). What is needed, argues Braidotti, is innovation in technology *and* ethics.<sup>12</sup>

Therefore posthuman is a more accurate tool in the application to Crossfit. According to Braidotti, posthumanism “aims at experimenting with what contemporary, bio-technologically mediated bodies[and selfs] are capable of doing” by removing the centrality of The Individual as fixed (Braidotti, 2013: 61). Another reason why posthumanism is interesting with regard to Crossfit, is that although “the posthuman predicament enforces the necessity to think again and to think harder about the status of the human”(ibid:186) its practical application is less clear cut.

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<sup>10</sup> One could quite successfully argue that our mobile devices, such as our smartphones, make all of us cyborgian (cyborg is a etymological mix of *cybernetics* and *organism*) Many of us feel a sincere loss of selfhood when its battery runs out or if we are in a place with no data coverage. I myself call my husband to inform him when I turn off my phone, so he doesn't think that I'm dead. No, that a lie. I don't call him, I message. Is that a cyborgian method, the almost code-like language we use over social media?

<sup>11</sup> Ten out of 11 of The Future of Humanities Institute, University of Oxford's research staff are men.

<sup>12</sup> Technological enhancements is a multi-billion dollar industry supported by governments, universities and private interests, and it is arguably not merely for the interest in enchaining the human contain *on a global scale*. Enhanced bodies also creates a myriad of ethical and legal issues

The core of Crossfit is to creatively and collectively think, again and again, about the status of human, and to practice it even harder. Rather than letting the body hang in its 19th century costume and await the coming of the transhumanists, Crossfitters creative experimentation with perpetual bettering, can perhaps foster a new link between theory and practice to inform each other.

Another figure lurking behind the theorisation of more-than-human, is Nietzsche. Probably with a gun pointed at the other lurking figure, The Human. Nietzsche's Übermensch(overhuman) and Letzte Mensch(last man) is most applicable on a contemporary context, and it would quite accurately describe the Crossfitters relationship with their ever moving ideal. But it is Rosi Braidotti who has most eloquently brought the critique of *The Human* and *humanism* into a useable tool to tentatively sketch what this more-than-human would be like, and, arguably, is like. But Nietzsche, and a number of other scholars, will be used throughout the text.

## 2. Methods of Inquiry

The analysis is based on an active ethnographic study of members of Crossfit South. The main part of the study was conducted between early October 2016 to mid January 2017, and mid April 2017 to mid May 2017, in southern Sweden. Due to the nature of my questions and my desire to examine the embodied experience, I opted to immerse myself in the physical, cultural and sensorial world of Crossfit, by subjecting myself to a workout schedule and diet, as constructed by my sister Julia, who is one of the three owners of The Box, and a licensed personal trainer and Crossfit coach. My entry into the Crossfit community's social sphere, that is, earning their acceptance of my presence, was established by me taking photographs of competitions arranged by The Box. Crossfit is a visual sport, and qualification to The Games<sup>13</sup>, transnational collaborations, work-outs and pass-outs, are documented and distributed on platforms such as Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram. Thus, the photographs were most appreciated, and although this did not exempt me from their many *rite du passages* and moral codes, I was — or my body was — accepted as a collective project of the group.

My accepted presence in The Box, both when working out and sitting in the lounge and kitchen area, meant that I could choose between active interaction or passive eavesdropping, discussing and listening in on topics ranging from Crossfit, spouses, kids, old sexy teachers, food, Donald Trump and what brand of peanut-butter one should buy. In total I spent on average eight to twenty hours a week in The Box, spread over the entire day. Active participation, that is, physical exercise, was conducted on an average two-three days a week, with an additional two-three days of “deep hanging out” (Geertz, 1998). But due to the close proximity to the field, and the fact that a number of my informants were friends and family, discussion on Crossfit and discussion with Crossfitters took place daily ( ).

### *Native's Gaze and Navel Gazing*

The field was, in a sense, both at home and away (Davies, 2008:42-3). Coming from an intellectual and methodological school still occupied with a focus on the ‘exotic other’, and with a residual concept of *The Field* as a distant, clearly defined geographic place, I initially felt strange by the fact that there was nothing ‘other’ to be bedazzled by in what is the fore and background of my everyday-life. I had not arrived to the distant shores of Papa New Guinea or Polynesia on a rusty banana boat; I simply had to exit my own front door. And with no headhunters to be found, what

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<sup>13</sup> Every year, Crossfit Inc. hosts a competition in US for “the fittest athletes in the world”. At the inaugural Games in 2007, the first place prize money was \$500, this year(2017) its \$275,000. The first step to qualify is through Crossfit Open, followed by Crossfit Regionals(regions loosely based on continents) where the top 10, 20 or 30 athletes compete to get to the Games.

was initially awkward for me, was the lack of awkwardness. Now, anthropologists have problematised the notion of the bounded field and the fetishisation of the exotic or subaltern; we have, as it were, moved beyond the postmodern hangover, into a reflexive position of critical examination of our practices (Davies,2008:39-40; Dellenborg, 2013a:p22-3; Ehn et al, 2016:p4,115-6). But I believe that we, in relative open secrecy, still long for that one insular field of exotic beauty. And Crossfit South proved to be, if not insular or peculiarly beautiful, then exhaustingly exotic.

No one is a *carte blanche* when operating in the field, and on top of my status as a white, middle class and university educated homosexual man, I was also the younger brother of the owner of The Box, as well as the son of one of The Box's more charismatic regulars. According to Leon Anderson (2006) I'm somewhere in-between opportunistic complete member researcher, and a convert. So rather than veiling my identity -which would have been impossible- I hoped that my liminal position as professional stranger and informal friend could instead secure a methodologically advantageous insider *-emic-* perspective, and where I could use my own experiences of the field — as a native of it, and a research in it — to understand others (Davies, 2008: 42-43)

As my observations are, inevitably, subjective, and the interpretation of the field most contextual, this study is perhaps best described as a thick reading of particular practice in a particular context. Although I do not agree with Davies that one needs to be an ontological realist to conduct social research, that is, to assume that there is an ontological reality existing independently of our conception of it, I do agree that if one has the intention to actually say something about something and to stay clear of the infinite regress of some postmodern thinkers, a slight trust or temporary acceptance of the observable reality, is necessary (Anderson, 2006:387; Davies. 2008:10, 15-18) But to what degree this essay tells the truth of these practitioners, is of secondary importance; it is but an interpretation, although, one with the most sincere attempt to represent what I saw, as I saw it. I do not wish to make universal claims of the behaviour of Crossfitters, but claims of a broader burgeoning moral practice that is mirrored in Crossfit South.

## **2.1 Interview and list of interviewees**

Observation and participatory observation were complimented with extended biographical interviews, semi-structured interviews, group-interviews, informal conversations during workout and hangouts in The Box, backstage at competitions or when interacting with practitioners outside of The Box. Unlike other sports where there is often a clear separation between spaces of workout and spaces for social interaction, interaction in Crossfit is an integrated part of the workout routine.

As such, my style of interviewing when in The Box was mainly of a virtually unconstructed or semi-constructed nature.

Six in-depth interviews, ranging from one to four hours, were conducted with Crossfitters I deemed to represent a wide, yet, particularly engaged selection of partitioners. I have talked to approximately 30-35 people from three different Boxes, although the majority from Crossfit South. Most interviews followed a relatively standardised selection of questions with regard to Crossfit and their personal backgrounds. The gender ratio in The Box was 84 women to 100 men, and the age range was from 15-55, with a majority between the age of 25-40.

The monthly membership fee, cost of work-out wear and shoes — often specially developed for Crossfit, and therefore, in general, more expensive — and the social privilege to be able to take the risk and partake in a time consuming and injury-inflicting practice, makes the practice exclusionary to groups with a limited leisure spending. It would therefore be a balanced generalisation to categorise the participants observed and interviewed as predominantly white and relatively affluent middle class.

All names, such as those of informants, geographic locations and the name of The Box, have been changed as to protect the privacy of my informants. My relation to some of the informants make shielding their identity impossible, still, I opted to change their name as a precautionary measure. I have sought to act in accordance with the ethical guidelines as recommended for the humanities by the Swedish Research Council<sup>14</sup>.

## **2.2 Disposition**

The thesis is loosely divided into two parts. The first part is devoted to an introductory contextualisation of Crossfit. I will present an overview of the practice's history and development, its methodology and, subsequently, I will introduce my field, Crossfit South. The ensuing chapter will demonstrate the centrality of extreme pain and metaphorical rituals of death. In Chapter 5, the imperative role of community, and the dynamics within it, is presented. In chapter 6, which can loosely be considered as the opening of part two of this thesis, I attempt to situate Crossfit the practice and Crossfit the subject in the larger social and material context of what is often referred to as late modern capitalism. With the assistance of Nietzsche's concept of *letzte mensch* (last man) I will offer a critique on the self of late modernity. Following, I will examine how an embedded and embodied materialism offers a recomposition of a different, if not a new, subjectivity. The final chapter will consist of a brief summary and conclusion.

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.vr.se/amnesomraden/amnesomraden/humanioraochsamhalle.4.12fff4451215cbd83e4800021032.html>

### 3. Contextualising the Visceral World of Crossfit

#### *What is Crossfit?*

Crossfit is a multidisciplinary, functional fitness regime, developed out of a small Southern Californian garage by the libertarian minded former gymnast and personal trainer Greg Glassman. Sometimes referred to as a cult or secular-church (there are religiously affiliated Crossfit boxes<sup>15</sup>) Crossfitters are infamously fiercely devoted followers, who often adhere to an insular diet, a limited array of accepted clothing, a technical and to them unique usage of language, all framed by a shared moral system (Glassman, 2001; Glassman, 2002). Internet memes and Crossfitters themselves often joke about the evangelical enthusiasm many athletes develop, with the saying “*How do you know someone does CrossFit? Don't worry, they will tell you.*”

According to the official Crossfit website — an online representation of the now global Crossfit brand — Glassman, or Coach as is he is often referred to, was “*the first person in history to define fitness in a meaningful, measurable way*” and that the sport prepares you “*not only for the unknown but for the unknowable, too*”<sup>16</sup>. Claims of this kind, often with quasi-mythological narratives that follow the classical *Hero's journey*.<sup>17</sup>, along with ironic memes and slogans, frames the self-image of the sport. In the *Crossfit Journal*, one can read about a member with a chronic disease thought to not live past the age of 30, but who is now expected to have a full lifespan, partly due to Crossfit (Cecil, 2016). Another article features a practitioner who hopes the sport can help him walk again after a car accident left his lower body paralysed (Beers, 2016). At events, t-shirts with prints such as ‘*Train hard, Look good, Get laid, Feel better*’, ‘*Don't you wish your girlfriend could squat like me*’ or ‘*Crossfit is cheaper than therapy*’ can be seen and bought.

The now global Crossfit brand is the fastest growing fitness regime in the last three or four decades. In just over 16 years, since its inception in the year of 2000, Crossfit has grown into a four billion US dollar business, with over 13,000 affiliate Crossfit Boxes all around the globe (Ozanian, 2015). You find Boxes in small towns in southern Sweden, orphanages in India, and in certain

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<sup>15</sup> See <https://faithrxd.org/>

<sup>16</sup> What is Crossfit <https://www.crossfit.com/what-is-crossfit>

<sup>17</sup> The protagonist — willingly or unwillingly — leaves the ordinary world for a special, liminal one in which he (it is often a he) overcomes challenges with the help of a mentor, only to return to the ordinary world rich in wisdom. This is American mythologist Joseph Campbell's structure of the mono-myth (1949) a structure which is, he argues, close to universal. Campbell was heavily inspired by the ethnographer Arnold Von Gennep's threefold structure of the rite de passage (1909) and anthropologist James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890)

cosmopolitan areas, Crossfit affiliates have popped up with a density rivalling Starbucks.<sup>18</sup> The affiliate Boxes create a web of relations which the members talk of as a global family, and one can break bread with fellow Crossfitters on vacation at Mallorca, Spain or on a business-trip in Luanda, Angola. To open a Box, one must submit a written application about what Crossfit means in one's own life and how it could contribute to the local community.<sup>19</sup> Amazed by the sheer number of Boxes, my fiancé asked me to search the interactive map of Crossfit affiliates, doubting that there would be a market in his home county in post-Thatcherist North East England. And it is undeniable that Crossfit serves an affluent, mainly urban, white population, a population in which a broken finger might be a badge of honour, not a health and safety liability threatening one's livelihood. But despite the comparatively hefty monthly membership fees in a Crossfit box, which range from £60-300 per month (the individual affiliate pays a yearly fee to Crossfit inc., ranging from a few hundred dollars to \$3,000) there were, as of now, 18 boxes within an hour of his home town.

Despite its success, the Crossfit community still profiles itself as a grassroots fuelled movement in contrast to, in Glassman's words, the commercialisation of fitness. In order to protect the spirit of this global grassroots movement, Greg Glassman took his partners to court in 2012, so to secure complete independence and ownership from the private equity firm his former partner sought to make a deal with (Nolan, 2012). In a lecture at Harvard Divinity school<sup>20</sup>, Glassman informed that one of the reasons as to why there is "no role for private equity" in Crossfit, was that it would damage the community of supporting companies that operate through, but independent from, Crossfit, such as the global Scanian retailer Northern Spirit<sup>21</sup>. Investors, he argued, had the intention to turn Crossfit into a multi-platform brand-for-profit company, which he strongly opposed. Crossfit is an open-source community where members can, and are encouraged to, develop the sport, but also food products and equipment. In the same Harvard talk, Glassman talks about how in the US Crossfit Inc. is actively funding legal initiatives to ban sodas and candy in schools and hospitals, and uses both legal and activist avenues to encourage policy to prohibit private interest from meddling in public studies on health. In light of this, it would seem more logical of Heywood to replace neoliberalism with anarcho-socialism, in the title of her article (see bibliography). In many ways Crossfit is an anti-establishment, anti-individualistic, yes, grassroots movement. Glassman's aim is for Crossfit to have a profound impact on health, and monetary success is but a recipe on whether they are succeeding, or not. Nevertheless, the brand is

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<sup>18</sup> See <https://map.crossfit.com/> for a map of affiliates.

<sup>19</sup> How to open a Box <https://affiliate.crossfit.com/how-to-affiliate>

<sup>20</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9oc8ZRKDCyU>

<sup>21</sup> See Northern Spirit <https://www.shopnorthernspirit.se/>

proliferating at such a speed that, according to Glassman, a new affiliate starts a Crossfit box every 144th minute (Ozanian, 2015). My Box, Crossfit South, was opened at a 144th minute in 2013.



### 3.1 Crossfit South

#### *Primal, Dirty and Raw*

Crossfit South is situated in a mid-sized, former industrial town in Scania County, Sweden. It is one of more than 150 certified affiliates in Sweden, but the first — and only — affiliate in this post code. The Box was founded in 2013 by former wrestler and personal trainer Julia Hansson, Henrik Olsson, a competitive fitness model and prison guard, and Oskar Nilsson, a formerly obese truck driver. Having met in a commercial fitness centre which hosted an uncertified functional fitness box in the basement below a standard gym, the trio wanted to break away from what they considered to be an individualistic and impersonal gym world, that cared more about profit, than the wellbeing of its members. The three had a desire themselves to be a part of a community driven organisation, and saw a broader need for a business model aimed at working with members rather than for them. Their aim with The Box was to create an inclusive and accepting space, and on Crossfit South's website one can read that The Box is not only a “*space for working out, but it is a meeting place, which some call their second home*”.

The Box is housed in a 450m<sup>2</sup> industrial hangar just outside the city centre. The majority of the space consists of one enormous, starkly lit room made of concrete and steel, floored with matte black rubber. The white painted walls are since long covered in patterns of dirt, sweat and geometric



The entry into The Box follows a strictly prescribed *ritual of separation*; the first of the threefold structure developed by folklorist Arnold von Gennep's classic model of the rite du passage, which consist of a 1) pre-liminal separation, 2) liminal transition, and 3) post-liminal reincorporation (1909/1977:11-12). Once inside the carport, the Crossfitter starts with removing her shoes. The Box may look dirty, but it is the right dirt in the right place (Douglas, 1966). After initiated removal of attire worn in the world outside, the Crossfitter then makes sure her presence is seen and heard by delivering a projected 'Hello'. Regardless of the number of athletes in The Box and respective affiliation, everyone responds with an equally affirming 'Hello'; she sees, and she is seen.

She then progresses to the spartan lounge and kitchen area, which is also the space in which most members strip off the final layers of clothes worn in the outside world. This stripping is done in public. For it is here she truly steps aside from the normative structures of the outside. Regardless of gender, age or weight, few choose to take cover in the bathrooms when changing clothes. Instead, the shedding is done in conversation with other members who hang out in the lounge.

In sociologist Susie Scott's account on the interactional order in a public bathhouse, she presents how the near naked body of the swimmer goes through a process of contextual purification in order to neutralise the body (Scott, 2010: 145-147) The Crossfitter applies similar dramaturgical strategies and rituals of interactions, such as changing clothes in front of each other while conversing, as to re-naturalise the body and de-sexualise the space. One is, as it were, performing obliviousness toward the nakedness, gender, age and physical form of others by being equally oblivious to one's own nakedness, gender, age and physical form. Codes of conduct and contextually specific cultural meanings, rather than clothes, veils the social order of the outside world, and rules of looking ensures a reciprocal gaze of disinterest (Scott, 2010:152; Scott, 2011:235). But this oblivion does not equate no differences, quite the contrary. As the varied workouts are often performed in pairs or groups, differences are positively celebrated as differently abled bodies compliment each other . There is, as it were, no singular ideal of United Bodies of Benetton, or "we are all the same" standardisation, as postulated by both Heywood and Washington & Economides(2015). Bodies are categorised, but according to fluctuating possibilities, and these categories-in-process can be said to offer a creaolisation of alternative standards of situatedness. Most necessary alternatives, as the dichotomies of the outside world felt incompatinble with the dynamic in the box. This egalitarian and liminal stage, or anti-structure, is what Gennep refers to as a liminal transition; a state of betwixt and between<sup>22</sup>, a pocket in the normative social reality

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<sup>22</sup> Like Campbell (1949) Victor Turner was heavily inspired by Gennep's in his own writing on liminality.

existing actually and metaphorically outside the world of Crossfit (Genep, 1909/1977; Turner, 1967:98-99).

After a work-out, most people stay for a chill-down, and topics from the outside world, e.g complaining about the school's holiday system or recommending housing contacts to a member who's going through a divorce, starts to seep in. This post-workout brings us to Genep's post-liminal stage or re-interaction with normality (Genep,1909/1977: 21). But as will be explored in chapter 5, some of my informants transcend this rite du passage and enter a state of constant liminality. But first, how does the Crossfitter prepare for life?

### *Preparing for Life - The Workout*

The Box offers instructor leads WODs<sup>23</sup> (work-out of the day) three to four times a day. A new WOD is written daily by a certified trainer, and is designed to challenge both a newbie and the professional athlete. Everyone follows the same WODs, but depending on desired functional outcome, variables such as load and intensity is calibrated, in Crossfit referred to as 'scaling'.<sup>24</sup> Although the WODs are popular for beginners and competing athletes alike, the more advanced members tend to combine class sessions with Open Gym, where one can either follow the set WOD from the local Box, one of the free WODs posted on [crossfit.com](http://crossfit.com) or configure one's own. Crossfit South also offers Crossfit Kids for children between the age of 5-9, and Crossfit Mom, which is developed in cooperation with local paediatrics for women postpartum.

The exerting methodology of Crossfit is built around an infinite combination of high intensity workouts and, unlike the general philosophy of sport which is to become the best in one's niche, Crossfitters pride themselves on their speciality of not specialising. That is, the regime encompasses cardiovascular/respiratory endurance, stamina, strength, flexibility, power, speed, agility, balance, coordination, and accuracy through practices as varied as gymnastics, weightlifting, running, rowing, climbing and swimming. The WODs — and competitions — are constructed on the principle of equal consideration through broadness. No physical advantage ought to be a determining factor in who is performing best in a WOD or a competition. "I can lift heavy, but I do not have the stamina to lift many reps" argued Henrik, and although Julia is a master in the gymnastic sections, he continued, her skills in the swimming pool are less than noteworthy. But configuration to a routine in time, weight or number of reps, that is, the number of repetitions of a particular exercise, can make the same exercise won by differently abled bodies.

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<sup>23</sup> A WOD consist of a set of exercises design to improve fitness and strength.

<sup>24</sup> There is a complex science to the scalability in Crossfit, involving equations (e.g Power = F x D/T) metabolic rates, load, time etc. For more information, see Gordon(2015) *Scaling Crossfit Workouts*



When The Box is full, men and women of all ages, sizes, abilities and an ever increasing level of 'undress' (see attached photographs) fill up the central space. It is a most visceral experience, surreal even, as it exposes and challenges the spatial differentiation and demographic segregation of society which one has accepted as conventional, that is, what position, interaction and performance expected from and between certain groups (Goffman, 1967:6-16). And The Box is not conventional. Due to the sport's community based element, and the fact that there are no internal walls, topless middle aged men are rubbing their sweaty shoulders with equally sweaty teenage girls; postpartum mothers mix kettlebell swings with baby-as-weight squats<sup>25</sup> and women well past retirement age grunt like Olympic weightlifters as they thrust more than their own weight above their salt and pepper hairdos. How much they are thrusting, you can see on the 3x2m score-table.

Practitioners keep a constant check on load, distance, speed and number of repetitions, in order to track how they are progressing. Crossfit, argues Glassman in an explanatory essay on the sport, is “empirically driven, clinically tested, and community developed”<sup>26</sup> and all exercises are constructed around data. Offering no references other than a link to a Wikipedia page on empiricism, one will have to take his word - or not. Some of my informants kept a daily journal to scribble down their results in detail as they execute their workout, others use their phone to take down notes, to film technique and to exchange ideas over social media. Documenting ones own and other's bloody knees, urine leakage or minced palms, seemed to be a way of communicating with each other and outsiders, about the severity of one's commitment to the sport.

But accountability goes beyond counting metric improvement, that is, one did exercise X in 4,25 min, now in 4,10 min. Showing up and not giving up, is of equal importance, and of course, related. If you show up, you will move up the score-table. Johannes, a 40 year old industrial worker, said with regards to the dynamics within the group “I can never compete with those freaks [pointing at Julia and Henrik, Crossfit Games: Fittest on Earth athletes] but I know that when I have done my best...when I push to the point where I want to kill myself, but I am too tired to do it, even though the pain is R-E-A-L, I know that I have done as much as they have”.

It takes some time to understand the lingo in The Box and names of exercises. Thruster, deadlift, push jerk, ass to grass or sumo deadlift high pull, all sounded like the names a bully would call his tormenting tricks or bedroom activities. Listening in on a discussion was like trying to read a poorly subtitled movie:

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<sup>25</sup> Instead of squatting without or with a weight of some sort, e.g medicine ball or kettlebell, one instead uses one's baby as an added weight.

<sup>26</sup> See [http://library.crossfit.com/free/pdf/CFJ\\_56-07\\_Understanding.pdf](http://library.crossfit.com/free/pdf/CFJ_56-07_Understanding.pdf)

**Julia** I can't even do a strict pull-ups. Did Filthy 50 yesterday  
**Guy** I don't have time today" [he just dropped by during lunch to have a coffee]  
**Julia** But you can do a Karen?  
**Guy** Nah, that will take at least 13 min. By the way, did you see Philip? He did 200 wall balls unbroken.

To give an example of an exercise, an 'Angie' is fairly straight forward; you do 100 pull-ups, 100 push-ups and 100 sit-ups *for time*, meaning, you execute 'Angie' as quick as possible within a given time. 'Wall balls unbroken', I learnt, was to repeatedly throw a medicine ball 2m up in the air, until you pass out. It quickly became clear that concepts such as 'hobby' or perceptions of pain and injuries were continuously expanding. Some of my informants who considered themselves to be ordinary 'vardagsmotionärer' (hobby practitioners) spend 15-35 hours/week in The Box. William, a 22 year old former hockey player, now the third out of a six-member team qualified for European Regionals, still considered himself to be a hobby practitioner. This, despite that he is a full-time student who works evenings, yet spends 30 hours in the Box off season, and an additional 5-10 hours during qualification season.

Now, there are as many topics mentioned in this contextualisation worth examining, as there are suitable perspectives to do so. But it is in the question Crossfitter's ask themselves, that I find my topic, that is, what is human about human and what are the limits of this being. The question has long been lurking in the caves of the philosophical mountain, but it is here awoken in an industrial hangar in the outskirts of a formerly industrial town. And in contrast to the philosopher, or even the anthropologist who sits comfortably halfway up the mountain ridge, the Crossfitter — the most accidental philosopher — starts her existential inquiry by humbly stating: "I wanna feel like I am dying!"

#### 4. Pain, Pleasure and the Importance of Dying

##### *Pain is the Language of Crossfit*

As briefly laid out in chapter 3.1, Crossfit is a practice of extreme perseverance. Scars and cuts, throwing up, passing out and pushing oneself dangerously close to the limit of a physical melt down, did not seem to deter the Crossfitter. In fact, it was only stepping over the line of dangerous melt downs, which tended to stop the athletes, if only temporarily. I had been baffled about this culture of pain ever since I attended my first competition in the beginning of the study, where, in the final tasks, one of the female competitor fell onto the floor, shaking, screaming and crying in heart wrenching agony. But fellow participants and present audience remained relatively oblivious.

In the latter part of my fieldwork, a teammate of Julia, William and Henrik, in a weekend of qualifying for the Crossfit games, collapsed during a workout and had to be taken to the hospital in ambulance. Talking to other Crossfitters about the traumatic experience — the woman went in and out of seizures and consciousness for almost an hour before the ambulance personnel could move her to the hospital, and her legs were paralysed for a month — the general response was that yes, it was horrible, and accidents do happen, but that one must know one's boundaries."In a sense you're scared, and it isn't always safe the things we do. But this is what we do", concluded a man in his mid 50s who was present when it happened. When I rhetorically asked if what Crossfitters do is not essentially about pushing *beyond* one's boundaries, rather than staying clear off them, the question was met with silence, as if accepting the obvious answer to the question: Yes. Does it have to be so dangerous and painful, I then asked. Once again, I was met with silence. Finally, Julia said:

Pain is the language of Crossfit. When the body is silent or just tired [after an exercise] it is...weird. I had a bad day today, so I had to lower my expectation. Or that is what my mind told my body. I was like 'I'll be easy on you, just do this rep and then you can rest'. And although my body sent signals that it was giving up, that is it was in pain, my mind kept saying try one more, it is nothing but pain. Try it, try it, you never know. Of course I did not rest when I finished that rep, because you just proved to yourself that you can do more than you think. And only by pushing yourself, do you get to know yourself

Pain as language seem to have a multilayered function in Crossfit; to feel pain was normal, thus looking and pushing towards pain become vital, and by succeeding with the later, you secured a piece of knowledge about yourself. It is a circular proposition; if you want to know about yourself,

pain is the way to do it, as such, being in pain was normal. Knowing one's boundaries thus meant knowing when pain felt is of such kind that the perpetual transcendence towards the ideal, threatens the ideal, i.e the becoming of you. By failing to recognise the “somatic manifestations [such as] fear, anxiety or a sense of insecurity ”(Braidotti, 2006:5) informing her that she had reached her threshold, the woman who passed out had failed herself, as it were, by not knowing herself.

### *Culture of Pain*

Drew Leder, who draws heavily from Merleau-Ponty and Husserl, defines pain to as short, episodic events with an intensely heightened experience of the body-as-a-thing, that is, the body becomes a perceived object, rather than elusively hidden from our consciousness. Whereas pain is rarely experienced in contemporary life, its sought out frequency in Crossfit forms an overall *continual experience of pain*, rather than episodic, and thus a *continually heightened experience of the body* (Drew Leder, 1990:72). As such, the body is always “on”. This culture of the malleability of the body, and silencing when in great pain, is shared by the dance community. In Aalten’s essay on the occupational culture of dancers, the young dancers learn from a young age about the



correlation between pain and success. Hunger equates increased lightness and repetitive stretching and injury causing workouts, are proofs of your commitment (2007:115-116). If you fail, it is due to the fact that you haven't stretched or dieted hard enough. This culture of constantly pushing beyond perceived limits has cultivated a belief that when it hurts, you are doing it right, thus the more it hurts, the better you will become. But what is striking in Crossfit is that, in comparison to dancers, the Crossfit sensibility is not a long process of socialisation. It is often relatively ordinary people, who within weeks of their first WOD, find themselves, amongst many things, scarred, bloody, and doing things they never knew they could.

Whilst Leder argues that the interiority of pain isolates one from others, as one shifts the experience of being in the world, to having a fleshy body in pain (1990:74) I would suggest that pain in Crossfit has an intentionality similar to that of pleasure. Intense pain, proposes Scarry in her writings on torture (1985:35) is “experienced spatially as either the contraction of the universe down to the immediate vicinity of the body or the body swelling to fill the entire universe”. In Crossfit, which is voluntary, it is with other people this intense pain is experienced.

The intensity of the workout, the constantly changing exercises and the broad dynamic in The Box seem to erase not only the boundaries between the feeling of 'i' as an autonomous, immaterial dot-like being, and one's body, but also the distinction between bodies in general. The affect of such strong pain cannot sustain the dualistic distinctions, and the feeling of feeling so much — in a culture where people turn into “..unfeeling spectators of their own decaying selves”(Illich, 1976: 271) — turns pain to into collective pleasure. Joan, an American woman who has been working out in The Box since it opened in 2013 believes “..the self is blurred. It does not matter who you are, but what you will...you become the will of The Box” and further describes the group workout as “a transcending experience”. The pain/pleasure similarity is further linked in that there is a culture of complaining in the box. Rather than talking about how fun, pleasant, exciting or inspiring an activity was, people talked about how hard a WOD was, how much their legs hurt, or that one couldn't reach the cereals this morning, and they do so with affective laughter. When Oskar, the truck-driver, came in to the box after a dramatic fall from the olympic rings, which put him in hospital for three days, he was met with “That wasn't the height of your career” to which he answered “No, but three years ago I could barely get up the staircase[he was morbidly obese] — look at me now, now I'm flying” It is a cultural expression, in which pain is the mediator, which, in contemporary Western Europe, arguably only exists in extreme sports and the army<sup>27</sup>.

### *Daily rituals of dying*

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<sup>27</sup> The army and recruit training are considered particularly effective means of re-socialisation. See Goffman(1957) *Characteristics of Total Institutions* and Foucault (1977) *Discipline and Punish - The Birth of the Prison*.

At first, I found it difficult to understand, let alone give up my body, to this bizarre hunt for pain. It was only when I took a step back and started taking photographs of the Crossfitters, that I saw what I, after a few weeks of working out, had started to feel. There is an acute familiarity in the poses frozen by the camera. We have seen them before, in paintings, sculptures, movies, performances, as well as in photographs. The positioning of bodies in the space almost looked rehearsed, as if put on display to articulate “*Reflections of pain in Western art 1500-2015*”. Wherever you turn, there are climatic moments of human expressions, as internalised through a Western social and material habitus (Bourdieu, 2010). People fall dramatically on the floor, screaming, crying as if, yes, they are dying. The feeling of being reduced to the intimate immensity of bodily pain, also gives a profound feeling of being: an acute sense of wholeness, of not just *knowing* that I was alive, but *feeling* alive.

Although it became a routine for me to go to the Box, what happened inside The Box was never routine. The thrusting bodies and voluntary blood letting revealed a surreal and, at times, painfully beautiful depiction of a multiplicity of human emotions, best described as a ritualisation, or an elevation of ordinary feelings through the visceral enactment of socially agreed upon symbolic poses. When participating, one is in a state of constant adrenaline rush, with the advent danger of injury or failure. Moral dilemmas are put on display to be seen and experienced; a concentrated and messy display of trust, courage, failure, euphoria, anger and reconciliation, as underlined and, arguably, heightened by the sensation of pain.

You attempt to reach an aesthetic exhaustion, and you have a picture in your mind how you should look, and you try to become that feeling. Success is being one with pain, that is, a full pass out on the floor crying.

William

According to Socrates, only death can achieve the restoration of a pure, just soul, and figuratively speaking, the Crossfitter dies everyday, if only in an aesthetic, rather than final, exhaustion. The theme of death in Crossfit, understood by Crossfitters as the unexamined life of the complacent man of late modernity, becomes a lower threshold one escapes by pursuing an examined life. But death is also an upper threshold which confirms, by symbolically dying in The Box, that one has lived. In other words, the Crossfitter resists the spiritual death brought about by late modern capitalism, by symbolically dying in physical and mental catharsis. But arguably more important, is that living is understood as a collective property; it is only with others one can reach the upper threshold. This mimesis of human life and suffering is not too different from that of the Greek tragedy. A good play, according to Aristotle, was short and unified as well as limited in terms of narratives. Death was a favourite. The structure was relatively fixed (and we have heard it in chapter 3.1) a) entry b) execution of story with cathartic movement c) concluding remarks and exit. Aristotle believed that



art, poetry and sport, in describing motivation, acts and consequences, can tell us about ourselves and elevate our understanding of our existence by looking suffering straight in the face. The role of tragedy was to, through mimesis, show that we live in a flawed world, but that those flaws are of our own making, and one can either do something about it, or accept them (Aristotle, 1449b20-145a15/2001). Through engaged viewing, one got cleansed, purged of emotions too hard to verbalise, and otherwise left unexplored. As with Li, a woman who had just found out that her child had leukemia. Talking about body, health and physical as well as mental wellbeing was, I thought, a sensitive matter in light of their family situation. But her answers were filled with compassion for the practice.

To me, when I work out I feel like I tie or...merge my body with my mind. You become one, something singular and fuller. I'm not bettering my body when I Crossfit, I'm bettering me. Period. It is when my body and mind are connected that I can fully face the...you know, and the difference how I feel when I've worked out or not, with regards to the situation we're in now, is huge.

Asked to elaborate Li developed the above merging as a feeling of control, but also an elevated sense of being in the world. "You bare your entire emotional register" she said "and then you need to put that back together, like a sculpture." Like more extended rite du passages and Greek Tragedies, the workout conveys a sign of personal progression, for Li, as well as a deepening sense of connection with something larger than oneself, the Crossfit community, if not also a universal source of life itself.

After one of the postpartum classes, I had arranged a group interview with the new mothers. Once sat down in a circle of sweaty women and suckling infants, I opened with the question: "Why do you Crossfit?" Seconds passed with some of them offering a comforting, yet silent smile, whilst staring at their dusty sneakers. Others played with their babies. Just when I opened my mouth again, the mom who seemed the least comfortable being asked the former question, said in affirmative tone

"I do Crossfit because I wanna feel like I am dying when I work-out, and when I do, I know that every part of my body has performed, that I pushed beyond my perceived limits. And how can you not like every part of a body that can do that?"

For the Crossfitter, the daily rituals of dying because something of a bookmark in their lives, and the body a physical memoir whose stories of struggle and success is written on the skin you're in. It is the same scarred hand that grazed your weeping child's cheek that took you through the mud and ice cold water at the race course. There is no shortage of transformative stories in Crossfit, but the scars situate the transformed Crossfitter as the owner of that story, as the owner of a past in which

the overcoming of hardship was possible, even a child's leukaemia. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche lays out a thought experiment which is imperative in his writings on the aesthetics of existence. He asks: how much of life could you bear to live, if you were to live it in eternal recurrence, over and over again? Is the life you have created the life you wish to live in eternity? (1882/2008: aphorism 341) The experiment potency lies, partly, in that we *cannot* return after death, hence we have to say affirm life. The Crossfitter lives according to this principle, but she *can* return after her metaphorical death, and ask: did I die a happy wo/man, or can I do better tomorrow. Nietzsche, openly inspired by the ancient Greeks and their Dionysiac<sup>28</sup> tragedies, then goes on to say "Only great pain is the ultimate liberator of the spirit... I doubt that such a pain makes us "better," but I know that it makes us more profound" (1882/2008: aphorism 3). Although not explicitly stated, a feeling of profundity seemed to be the word Crossfitters were looking for when silently biting their lips, trying to answer why one did Crossfit and how one justified the pain caused by the sport.

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<sup>28</sup> Dionysus was the God of fertility, extent and theatre in Ancient Greece

## 5. Community

Beyond the physical element, although not separated from them, it was community which in particular seemed to answered to the needs of the Crossfitter. Crossfit is a business model built on the offering of a deep, powerful and most creative community. Unlike the business plan of a commercial fitness centre, which profits from having more paying members than active (often there are fewer treadmills than treadmillers) a Crossfit Box depends on a fully engaged community.

Crossfit is community. It is the reason why we opened The Box and continue to run it, even though it is still pretty much pro bono (...) I mean, yes, we warm up together, work-out together, cool down together and, you know, do Crossfit together (...) but members also support each other through personal difficulties and people come to The Box to just to hang out, drink coffee and talk and, yeah, its like a family. And (...)it is not like you can choose. One is not a part of The Box, but one is The Box. People understand that if they support and accept support from each other, everyone will do and feel better. Of course people start working out for egoistic reasons, but I think if you feel good, you want to make others feel good . It makes you a better human, I think, both inside and outside The Box.

Julia

It is a form of community which answers, I believe, to something more profound than a temporary swarming of a “third place”, to mix Bauman’s comment on contemporary engagements with Ray Oldenburg’s concept of a socially important context beyond home and workplace (Bauman, 2007:76-77; Oldenburg1989). The labouring together offers a formative and immersive community, which extends beyond the walls of the box. It becomes not the first, second or third place, but the “thing” which saturates and informs the former two. In Durkheimian terms, Crossfit seems to offer a collectively shared effervescence, an *extraordinary* experience similar to that of a religion, which elevate the consciousness of the agent from egoistic dimensions of the perceived self, to a supernatural realm where being a part of something mutes being a particular someone. One moves from individuality, to di- or multivoidality (Durkheim, 1912/2001:158-163) The repetitive experience of this interconnection seems to cultivate qualities which are transferred from the domain — that thing — of Crossfit, to other domains in the Crossfitters life. William talked about how he, after “...*starting to work out with people*[racialized, older and sexual minorities] *in the box*” felt a greater understanding and compassion for others and their particularities, in a way that he had intellectualised, but not felt before. This shows how, even though one can rationalise matters of morality and prejudices, William’s feeling of discomfort towards the “other” was somatically situated. But as a somatic feeling of a phobia or racism is a product of habitual training, it can be habitually retrained. I suppose one could argue that the Crossfit community offers a slow detox of the layered and somatically embodied sociocultural ‘facts’ outside the box. An unlearning of norms and prejudices held in the body(Shusterman, 2008: 130-133)

It is so hard as an adult to make new friends because you do not have those ice breaking events, but here you do. You experience things together here (...)In one WOD you can have former criminals, CEOs, teenage girls, students, divorcees and old grannies with chronic illnesses, so you have to accept and respect others (...)and listen to their stories (...)You don't just learn that you can expect more from yourself, but others too  
Henrik

It is a communitarian philosophy of *we-are-in-this-together-but-we-are-different*. In this togetherness, success is understood as the accumulated knowledge and emotional and social commitment of the other members of The Box. There is no homo universal in crossfit, nor any hierarchal differentiation, but a lateral. The communitarian dynamics reminds me of a text I read on the cynic in ancient Rome, in which some relatively ordinary middle class men left their 9-5 stability on the weekends to walk around the city and, like their master Diogenes, masturbate in public. Weekend-cynic. Not everyone can live in a barrel with stray dogs. In Crossfit, the shared identity of the community rest on the inner circle of the internationally competing athletes, who, in their daily dietary and exercise routine, take on the role to represent Crossfit's severe commitment to ascetic practices. Not everyone have to be Crossfit-crazy all the time, everywhere, even if participation tend to escalate, as mentioned on page 29.

## 6. *Letzte Mensch* vol. 1.0

In Nietzsche's *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, Zarathustra offers to man a gift. Human is but in the middle of a rope hung between our past and our future. Zarathustra's gift is that of a vision of the übermensch, the overman; an experimental figure, hungry yet humble to his own possibilities, who aspires to fashion a life he cannot but want to live again and again. A life in which the opening of one's eyes uncovers the veil of the meaninglessness of life, but in which the fact of death — and the death of God — turns life into a blank sheet of paper on which poetry can be written. The overcoming of 'human' will be a struggle. It is optional, says Zarathustra, but to pass, is also fatal. What awaits in the decision to remain human, is the *Letzte Mensch*, the last man. It is the man who lacks the capacity to will, who show perverse complacency, happiness, contentment and indifference. A man who bears witness to his own destruction, but does nothing, since he wills nothing. A man who prefers the veil of ignorance. When offered the gift, the men in *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, chose to will nothing. They chose the path of the last man (1891/2006: aphorism 1-10).

For Nietzsche, the overman was a response to — and a creative vision away from — the tumultuous social, spiritual and political interregnum of 19th century Europe and the hollow “bloodless fiction” of the singular Human of humanism (Nietzsche, 1881/2012: pg 102, 105). There are a thousand ways to be more human, argued Nietzsche, as we are “...unexhausted and undiscovered” (1891/2006: 1:22).

A century later, in what is arguably the haute period of the *Letzte Mensch*, that is, late modern capitalist consumerism, the American sportswear brand Reebok launched an immersive multi-platform campaign. The campaign, called *Be More Human*, set to reconnect the company with a new consumer, the functional fitness athlete, by the offering of a philosophically framed grassroots movement. The message was meant to awake the inner human and guide her to her specie's full potential and, yes, Reebok's stores. But the term has evolved into a fluid lifestyle philosophy which permeates the Crossfit community, and I believe it frames the philosophical inquiry that Crossfitters, individually and as a movement, partake in.

There are more than surface-level-similarities with the philosophy of Nietzsche — and subsequent thinkers inspired by him- and the philosophy of Crossfit. But the Crossfitter is still firmly located in a globalised, neoliberal economy. Therefore, before any further elaboration, I believe it is vital to contextualise what has come to be known as late modern capitalist consumerism. And whatever happened to Nietzsche's *Letzte Mensch*.

## 6.1 *Letzte Mensch vol. 2.0*

The main character of Western modernity, the elusive *Individual*, is in late modernity conceived of as a borderless agent managed through the intensified discourse of individualisation and consumption. Left with little else than the faith in a true self, she is not forced to *be* what she is — what is one to be when the taxonomical categories of industrial modernity, such as gender and age, are faux pas — she is forced to ever perform the task of *becoming* what she can and ought to want to be. She is to perpetually prosper, progress, consume and change for a better, truer self (Moxham, 2009:187-189). And she must be happy doing so. Free from the capricious coercion of dominant structures, the self of late modernity is instead a slave of options, subjected to the constant possibility, and thus responsibility, of making the right choice. The result is that the self locked into a constant liminal state, uncritically manoeuvring through the infinite number of options offered as imperative to the ever changing narration of true self (Bauman, 2007; Hansson & Alftberg, 2012:p419; Hylland-Oskarsen,2004:p 9).

In the shadow of this happy individual, a medicalised approach to any form of physical and mental suffering has emerged in Western contemporary culture, and pain is viewed as an unproductive, rather than illuminating, liability in the effectivisation of bodies and structures. The technopolitical and pop-cultural gaze, internalised by institutional structures as well as individuals, has, according to the ethnologists Hansson & Alftberg, objectified and pathologised *all* humans, whether sick or healthy. Rather than shielding off the flawed bodies and minds from the rest of society in total institutions, society itself can be argued to be an institution gated by correction facilitators — therapists, personal trainers, psychologists, healers and life coaches — one voluntarily interacts with. The mentioned gaze continuously imputes disgust and situates the human body and mind as fundamentally sick and unhappy, ever at the risk of pollution (Hansson & Alftberg, 2012:p416-18; Hansson, 2013:p118-9). This aversion of difficulty and the no-pain, feel-good mentality permeates all spheres of society, and has produced a docile promise of happiness (Shilling & Mellor, 2010; Habel, 2012:p78).

According to Bauman, the deferral of gratification of earlier traditional and Fordist societies has morphed into one where happiness is no longer positioned in a celestial realm, postponed to retirement age or understood to be the greater sum of interrelated challenges and achievements over a lifetime. Happiness is promised in this instant, and we are told that we have the right to be immediately, painlessly and perpetually satisfied. Luckily, he continues, consumerism is a system that capitalises on the provision of instant satisfaction. It connects a discourse of uniqueness and hyper-individualism through the offering of quantitative options not qualitatively *different* or *unique*; personalised mass-produced multiples of ones (2007:10,30,86). Humans are completely submerged into this capitalist political economy of commodification, making it impossible to see

that we are standing on the brink of extinction, as the thought of not living in the consumerist world, seems as existentially threatening. Our desire for novelty and change is directed away from what new I can be, to what new I can buy, and movements of resistance are “instantly reduced...to objects of commodified consumption”(Braidotti, 2006.p11). While *Letzte Mensch* of the 19th century were told that happiness was to be found in the next life and thus they discarded the earthly, the *Letzte Mensch* of the 20th century believe they find a better life it in the next purchase, thus discarding earth.

The critique of consumerism and consumer society is not new. Contradictory tendencies towards material consumption have followed human development for millennia, and like an existential yo-yo dieter, the human specie has tickled the bellies of both asceticism and hedonism, and this long before SMS loans and decluttering consultants (Albinsson, Wolf & Kopft, 2010:p 412-14; Peeters et al., 2011). In *The Republic* Platon argues that our limitless desire for more is, if not killing us, then making us terribly unhappy. So unhappy that Durkheim in his *Le Suicide* - notwithstanding its inferential fallacy- proposed there to be a correlation between consumer capitalism and a steep increased in suicide (Durkheim: 1897/2006).

In a polemic essay, David Graeber (2016) blames this consumerism for the fact that even though society has a reached a technological proficiency which could bring about a reality in which we work 15 hours per week or less, not working the maximum amount of hours legally and physically possible *on the labour market*, is in late modern capitalism marked as morally dubious, if not an act of social suicide. The consequence is the creation of pointless jobs, that is, the growing group of “professional , managerial, clerical, sales and service-workers”. These people — mainly from the non-producing professional middle class — are, argues Graeber, coerced into working in professions which reduces them to anonymous cogs in a system from which no meaning or creativity can be elicited. These comparatively well paid cogs have to look for meaning somewhere else. That elsewhere, argues Graeber, is in consumerism. Consumerism, as phrased by Nietzsche “dangles unimportant aims before the eyes of the worker and affords easy and regular gratification” (1888/1212: p177). The great majority of the Crossfitters in my box, belong to this group of professional, managerial, clerical, sales and service workers. And consumption is central in the fostering of the Crossfit subjectivity, and as such it can most clearly be analysed from the point of consumption. Yet, I would argue that the Crossfitter is in stark opposition to the above depicted late man. An opposition which is, yes, performed through consumption, because lets face it, capitalism doesn't look like it's going anywhere, but the more materialistic the Crossfitter become, the fewer things they purchased. Lets go shopping!

## 6. Freedom is control - A New Materialistic Subjectivity.

“I do not think that I am strict. It is not like I do not do things. But I want the choices I do make to matter, to have a purpose or mean something. And when you examine your choices, a bad choice is not even a choice conceivable(...)I do not think people dare to reflect on their lives. They might ask ‘What do I want’ but not ‘Why do I want what I want’. In Crossfit, you examine and you are examined. I am actively editing my reality, as I know that I can learn how I want to think, feel and see things, and that is a freedom. Freedom is control(...)Physical exercise is but a mean... it forces you to confront your perceptions of yourself.

Julia

The colloquial usage of the word materialism, as used by the media and the non-philosopher, would imply that we are extreme materialists. We are surrounded by — drowning in, according to Bauman — material possessions. The obvious conclusion would be that we are, like in no other era, supremely materialistic. But I would pose the question, if we are materialistic at all? To be materialistic, would seem to indicate — necessitate — a love for the material. But as seen in chapter 6.1, we do not love the material, we love *acquiring* the material. In US alone, the self-storage industry is estimated to make 38 billion dollars in revenue as of March 2017<sup>29</sup>. Does it matter, if we are materialistic? I would argue that it matters for two reasons. First, capitalist consumerism has pushed the world into the era of the anthropocene, that is, an era in human activity is the main cause for planetary change. Global existential crises have followed (he wills his own extinction, remember?) but this first reason is not for this essay. So, paraphrasing Braidotti I will provide a second reason; a conscious awareness of the imperative importance of material objects could, arguably, offer a recompositioning of self-perception, in which we could end the endless search for a true self that does not exist, and focus on a self that does exist, and it does so in the choices we make and the relations we nurture, which includes our relation to planet Earth (Braidotti, 2013:24:66; Foucault, 1986:43-47; Nietzsche:) If the emperor ceases to exist without his attire, then the purchase and temporary owning of cheap, pollutive and valueless objects soon to be discarded, must also be the foundation we see fashion our self. That much is implied by Bauman in his commercialisation of relations (2007:57, 120-121). Looking at Crossfit through Millers concept *Humility of things* and his concluding dialectic postulation that we are the creators of what creates us, Crossfit seems to offer tools to bring about such a subject recompositioning.

By making life art, that is when the Crossfitter start to rearrange the content within the Gombrichian frame (see theory, page 14) by changing how, when and what she eats, sleeps, walks, socialises, works and, arguably, thinks, she also starts to question the fit of the frame of this particular artwork (Miller, 2010:49-50). That is, the Crossfitter starts engaging with her material surrounding as if it is a mirroring of herself. Crossfit ‘removes’ the veil of the humility of things,

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<sup>29</sup> <https://www.ibisworld.com/industry/default.aspx?indid=1351>

thus making the Crossfitter aware of her own constructedness, as suggested in Julia's quote on the top of this page. The malleability of mind and body and its porous boundaries, as experienced both through pain and transcendence, was in the box a non-topic.

This critical mirroring often started with food; where is it from, what is in it, who produces it, what will it do to my body and, perhaps most importantly, is it me? Because by means of pain as an alternative source of self-knowledge, with the resulting cultivation of a more intimate relationship with the body as a perceptive tool, the shopping Crossfitter looked to be *affected* and to identify with the goods she consumes. Not on an intellectualised and sanitised level of "*I ought to*" nor giving in to a spontaneous binge. The affect felt in a specific context, is built on an enfolded memory of the past and virtual projection of the future (Braidotti, 2006:3). A woman in her late 20s who worked within the health industry, described the weblike interrelatedness of choices like this:

One is honouring ones body by making good, examined choices. You learn that even small choices have consequences, like, if I eat bad food the day before a work out, I will perform badly in The Box the following day, which will make me tired and annoyed, meaning I will probably lash out on my boyfriend. It is like...circular. These activities make up your day, your week, your month, your year. And instead of practicing [what looks like] self-control, you are...you become self-control. Female, 27

The quoted woman did have binges, but they were saved for when she was with friends who did not Crossfit. One could say that carbs and Ben & Jerry's worked as a conduit to the mortal world of non-Crossfitters. The two quotes below on grocery shopping, both by mothers, seem to support this shift of perspective from *The good life is goods* to *The good life is only as good as thy goods*. One woman, Janni, who had done Crossfit for around 3 months, explained the strange sensation of feeling helpless to the point of suffocation when, no, not in the box, but at ICA (Swedish grocery store).

After following my food schedule for a couple of weeks, I started googling, you know, [tyngre.se](http://tyngre.se) and other sites, reading the scientific journals they quote and other random nutrition blog. I never read Swedish books, but English essays on metabolism and muscle tissue! And I remember this one time when I was shopping at ICA Maxi, and I found myself looking at what other moms had in their baskets, and felt like Neo in Matrix, you know, like only I could see behind the veil how corrupt and unhealthy our food culture is. Kate Moss will have a greater chance of passing a drug test than a chicken fillet.

This relatively sudden awareness — and active interest in knowing more — of what was formally an accepted food culture, was brought forward by the experimental nature of Crossfit, where few things are prescribed, but most things are encouraged to be questioned and discussed within the Community. Like a fold in the Jani's previously neatly internalised reality, things started to speak up, shout, rather than stay humbly silent and unnoticeably coercive. Another mother said:

I walk through the grocery store and I don't even see bread, candy, cookies or sugary dairy products. By limiting my choices, I've cut out the noise of choices (haha) You know, it is like the food advertising on TV and in the store speak another language, Chinese or something. So I no longer hear what they want me to want, but I see, yes, I see what I am...I see and buy the food that built the body that makes me a better mother. Does that make sense?

The ability to adapt ways to close off the onslaught of advertising to not be dominated by the appetite of the moment, gave this woman a sense of freedom through a self-ascribed visceral austerity. But she, like the others quoted, also saw herself in the goods consumed. It is an, arguably, accidental cultivation of a materialistic subjectivity akin to the anthropomorphic spirituality of “traditional societies” where objects have agency or are inhabited by spirits. And that is not far from what Miller proposes. Glossing over Latour, Miller argues that a cartesian clarity fetishism has cleansed our understanding of humans from complexity and relational hybridity. Instead, subjects have been elevated to the metaphysical heights where no objects are allowed entry (Miller, 2010:75). Behind an object, argue most anthropologists, hides a relation to a subject. Hence *social* anthropology. But no, says Miller: born or designed, what matters is the relational agency a thing has on another thing, — human or not — and that these relations cannot be reduced to a social projection. We're not merely imputing anthropomorphic agency onto a non-human object, but that object, such as a crashing computer, has an agency, and it gains status as an agent or actor through yet more relations (Miller, 2010) A form of radical immanence, which would take four of these thesis to explain.<sup>30</sup>

What Crossfit is doing, is not changing beliefs about consumerism to anti-consumerism, rather, it is changing behaviours *towards* consumerism. As forcefully presented by Bauman, capitalist consumerism is not selling you products, but an idea: the more you buy, the happier you will be. And for a brief second you are aligned with the product. But as soon as the credit card is swiped, it can no longer sustain the promise of happiness. The desire in capitalism is, as discussed, not to own but to acquire. Hence, your happiness never coincides with the present. It is always “over there” (2001:36). The de-activation of the humility of things, which occurs within the Crossfit community, instills a personal, temporary nihilism in the Crossfitter.

Similarly to the alienating feeling of immense pain, but with a dramatic sense of separation from the universe rather than a contraction, she becomes, fundamentally, unknown to herself. What is she *really* like? What does she like? Is she a she? The fold in reality forces the Crossfitter to ask by what values *she* want to live (Miller:2010:54-68). What comes out of the experience, is a desire to organise oneself into a coherent identity, an identity I believe is best understood as a commitment

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<sup>30</sup> If you want company this summer, see Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1980) *A Thousand Plateaus*

to certain values or ideas, not to an inner, static self. Janni, the first of the two mothers quoted on page 43, said with a stern face "In some way, it seems like you have been tricked, tricked into a way of living, eating and sleeping. Tricked into a way of consuming, tricked into a way of not thinking". Not everyone I talked to had the same rupturing experience as the women quoted, but the ones who did not, tended to be former professional athletes. Sport, according Ancient Greeks, was the twin of philosophy<sup>31</sup>. And on the topic of Ancient Greece, many of the Crossfitters practice what Foucault would call 'techniques of the self', in which they imposed affirmative regulations and restriction in all areas of their life (Foucault. 1981/1982). Affirmative as, although the choices people made were negations from the norm or how they lived before, that is, eating less, shopping less, watching less TV, the choices they did make were instilled a sense of ownership, that one was not merely living life, but living *a* life.

And it is an edited life, in which the smallest of decision is of greatest importance. Like a drop of water in a lake, every decision expands in increasing width over time and space, to encompass — and allocate meaning from — past experiences, and a future dreamed up. For the dedicated Crossfitters, this relational, materially embedded and affective sense of being in the world, means that there is nothing in her empirical life that is not part of her role as a Crossfitter. There are no experiences as a Crossfitter and others where she is not a Crossfitter, which relates back to Heywood's proposed cultural shift from clock time to an omnipresent network time. But I think the shift is a shift of perspectives on subjectivity, rather than temporality. They do not search for a self but, more or less consciously, consider themselves to be creating a self. A self that is "*not consolidated but fragmented*" he argues "*not sovereign but dependent; not the absolute source, but a function*" (Foucault, 1969, DE 1: 789/ Huijjer, 1999:66).

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<sup>31</sup> For a fascinating overview of sport as a moral and political practice in Ancient Greece, see Reid (2007) *Sport and Moral Education in Plato's Republic* and Austin (2016) *Sport as Moral Practice: An Aristotelean Approach*

## Conclusion

This thesis has tentatively approached the question of whether Crossfitters, in their relentless questioning of what it means to Be More Human, have cultivated a new way of being just that: more human. What can be elicited from spending 90 days in a Crossfit community is that Crossfit is, essentially, a movement built around the belief that the concept *Human* is a generous, but uninspiring guideline. In line with the posthumanist movement, the Crossfitters do not accept the concept of human as a given. By using their body as something to enhance their ability to affectively relate to the world, I believe the Crossfitters are cultivating forms of perception and sensibilities that we — nor they — are aware of being capable of. On an individual level, Crossfit provides adequate tools to the individual so that she can explore what her body and mind can do. On a macro level, these individual quests feed into a critique on perceived material inscribed limitations of the body.

Crossfit may not seem like a radical departure from other extreme sports: they're not bringing about a Marxist revolution, and Crossfitters do not necessarily reject the normative society, or see it as a threatening "*other*". But I believe that their active dis-identification from the late modern man, and their equally active identification with the abstract ideal of *Be More Human*, cultivates something far more potent than what one would get out of trying to fit Crossfit into the frames of a subculture, a flawed escape from the bourgeoisie or as a symptomatic expression of a neoliberal world order.

Their ideal is of *becoming* more, more human, rather than *being* more human. This process of ceasing to be — letting go of a diet, patterns of thinking, negative habits, previously perceived limits of body and mind — and seeding to become, constructs a future affirmative force, as the ceasing of the past and the becoming of the future intensely saturates the present as a movement with agency and possibilities. Here it is important to make a distinction from the late modern self's endless search for something newer, truer and better self. The perpetual bettering of the Crossfitter is not a manifestation of change, but the faithful commitment to a sustained self. Perpetual bettering, or becoming as Braidotti phrases it, requires endurance, and endurance comes from the joy of recognising and believing oneself to have potential to succeed in task undertaken. Or as one of the Crossfitting mothers said "*You must really like yourself, or learn to like yourself, in order to fight so hard for yourself.*" The caring of that self, means sustained commitment to the relational factors which situate the subjects in a position to progress, that is, diet, friends, The Box and relentless editing of choices she makes. This sustained self means that she is able to stretch her self over temporal and spatial dimension, and by doing so, the Crossfitter shuffles her perspectives from

instant gratification of needs and wants, to a sustainable, or a more stable, futurity in which gratification and happiness is elicited from a multidimensional, accumulative whole.

Although the cognitive and bodily enhancement achievable through Crossfit are low impact in comparison to some of the futuristic ideas at the frontier of science, the practice and philosophy of crossfit, that of actively questioning and trying to exceed, ad infinitum, perceived capacities of humanity, still feeds into and resonates with a broader aesthetic perhaps best categorised as posthumanism. Ever since Plato (Phaedo, 65c-67a) argued for the separation of the supposed purity of the ideal form of the mind from the flesh of the corporeal body, Western ontology, epistemology and the ordinary conception of *The Human*, has been structured on a dualist conception of body and mind, subjects and objects and a constitution of the self as an autonomous, a priori construction.

Posthumanism seeks to elaborate new ways of conceptualising the human subject. Crossfitters can be a part of this recompositioning. Their elevation of pain as an epistemic source of deeper selfhood, is fascinating, and requires further research — participatory research. I believe that we in Crossfit we can begin to see the thickening contours of a *practiced* posthuman condition. To be human, argued Julia, “*is to know that you do not know what it is to be human. To be humble and...curious, curious to find out what is hidden behind the veil. Is there a wall, can I get past the wall? Is this what it is?*”

To get behind the veil — or wall — of the grand theories of social science, I believe it’s vital to stay clear of what Miller referred to as Cartesian clarity fetishism. That often means venturing into the philosophy department. It is not always productive or fruitful, but, like the challenges the Crossfitter faces, it makes you think, again and again. As mentioned at the end of chapter 3.1, the Crossfitter, too, is a most accidental philosopher. While the philosopher looks down at the village from the mountain top, but finds truth in the abstract clouds, the Crossfitter looks with her attentive gaze at the cloudy mountain top, lives her life in the village. The anthropologist in this analogy is the messenger-boy who runs between the two. And I will keep on running.



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