Swimming the Crawl to Educate the Modern Body: Visual Material and the Expanding Market for Participatory Sports in the USA, 1890s–1930s

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Abstract
This essay outlines how sports photography and film from the early twentieth century have been used to introduce US-Americans to a scientific understanding of human bodies and their motions. It asks how certain groups tried to make sure that this modern perspective became not only ubiquitous but also a marketable commodity. The essay focuses on crawl swimming because its motions became increasingly related to discussing modernity and modern bodies. Furthermore, crawl swimming was densely charged along racial and gendered lines: The modernity of the sporting body and its visual appeal rested significantly on ideas of racial hierarchies and a changing as well as problematic perception of women’s roles in public. In that sense, swimming was doing gender as well as doing race.

Keywords: crawl swimming; Crystal Champions; sports photography; sports film; sports marketing; modernity; gender; race; whiteness; technology.

During the summer and fall of 1929, film audiences in the United States as well as in Europe could watch amazing, even spectacular scenes on the silver screen while waiting for the main picture. A popular short film of that season, Crystal Champions, took cinemagoers under water: Shot at a lakeside in Silver Springs, Florida, and using the newest photo technology (such as a high-speed underwater handheld camera) and an integrated soundtrack like those becoming more and popular in Hollywood productions, the
eleven-minute-long film depicted water sports from mostly previously unseen perspectives. With the help of this cutting-edge photo equipment, the film’s opening sequence follows a group of teenage boys and girls on a diving treasure hunt to the bottom of the lake, showing underwater motions that had been impossible to depict before. Fascination then shifts to the expertly executed swimming styles of two world-record-holding champions, Martha Norelius and Johnny Weissmuller, who are shown demonstrating their skills in astonishingly detailed close-up shots from a variety of angles. While this part of the film celebrates underwater efficiency and elegance, the following sequence returns to the fun of water sports and tells the story of Newton Perry, who makes a living by diving for turtles—an occupation truly suitable for introducing new photo technology to a broader public. In its final minutes, Crystal Champions takes its audience airborne: Starring the two well-known high divers Helen Meany and Pete Desjardins, the film uses slow motion as well as shots from both above and below the divers to present close depictions of jumps from platforms located some 60 feet above the water (Figure 5.1).¹

¹ Crystal Champions: A Grantland Rice Sound Sportlight for Van Beuren-Pathé, 1 reel (11 min.), directed by Jack Eaton; performances by Pete Desjardins, Helen Meany, Martha Norelius, Newton
While contemporary reviews highlighted the amazing images of *Crystal Champions*, the fact that it was a sound short received even more praise.\(^2\) Produced by Grantland Rice, the famous sports columnist also served as the film’s narrator, and, given the novelty of sound film as a signature development of the film industry, it is no wonder that the synchronized words and orchestral music aroused a special curiosity. All in all, the release of *Crystal Champions* served several interrelated interests: First, the film was a valuable advertisement for Florida’s tourism business; it depicted one of the state’s main vacation spots and underscored its natural beauties as well as its recreational opportunities to an all-American and even international audience of potential visitors. In this regard, the film operated clearly within economic reasoning. Second, the film featured technological progress and linked it to creativity, success, achievement, and personal pleasure, using the world of sports as a well-established reference for that relationship. In doing so, it emphasized a certain understanding of American modernity that strongly rested on the idea of success and self-fulfilment through progress and ingenuity.\(^3\) Since the First World War, American sports had increasingly been understood within this worldview, assuming that winning athletes were the result of technological superiority and intellectual reason, resulting in scientifically guided training. *Crystal Champions*, a fitness expert stated, served as a perfect example, because it ‘helps intermediate and advanced swimmer[s] in improving skill’.\(^4\) Third, *Crystal Champions* celebrated the potential of the human body, its capabilities and beauty, and charged it as a reservoir for achievement as well as pleasure. The film achieved this by building on the persuasiveness of visuality—narration and music were undoubtedly very important for the attractiveness of the film, but it nevertheless drew its overall appeal from its images of bodies in motion in, under, and above the water’s surface. That this fascination with the human body rested on unmarked gendered and racialized assumptions establishes a core starting point for the analyses I am going to unfold on the following pages. Finally, as a fourth aspect, *Crystal Champions* pointed towards swimming as an activity that linked white, middle-class family life to a growing leisure time and vacation industry. Swimming here emerged as [Perry, and Johnny Weissmuller; released in May 1929. For another Grantland Rice water sports film production, *Aquatic House Party*, cinematographer Ernest Corts and director Jack Eaton received an Academy Award for best short film (1949).](#)
\(^2\) Bradley, *First Hollywood*. Reviews of *Crystal Champions* were published in *Motion Picture News*, 27 April 1929, p. 1410 and *Variety*, 16 October 1929, p. 17.
\(^3\) Susman, *Culture as History*, esp. chapter 7.
\(^4\) Schutz, ‘Motion Picture’, p. 376.
a social action, a multigenerational lifestyle of consumption that expressed a gendered and racialized class identity.

In this essay, I will outline how sports images from the early decades of the 20th century, and especially photography and film, have been used to introduce Americans to a scientific understanding of human bodies and their motions, and how certain groups tried to make sure that this modern perspective became not only ubiquitous but also an attractive, sexualized, marketable commodity. The actual example I am going to focus on will be swimming, mostly because the motions of swimming became increasingly related to discussing modernity and modern bodies in the United States, an aspect that, moreover, addresses the capabilities of photography and film as modern media technologies in particular ways. Furthermore, swimming has been, and, in some regards, still is today, densely charged along racial and gendered lines: The modernity of the sporting body and its visual appeal, I argue, rested significantly on ideas of racial hierarchies and a changing as well as problematic perception of women’s roles in public. In that sense, swimming was doing gender as well as doing race.

I will develop my argument in two steps: First, I am going to focus on popular advice literature published in the United States during the early 20th century, arguing that printing photos of bodies in motion significantly aided in establishing an understanding of what a modern body should look like and how it should function efficiently in a changing social and cultural setting. A combination of technological developments, a changing media environment, economic interests, and social trends all addressed the body as some sort of interface between individual and society, as a personal project to incorporate changing social values—or relate to them in a less affirmative fashion. In the second part of this essay, I underscore the rising importance of film after the First World War, with an emphasis on developments that accentuate the relevance of gender as a lens for understanding modern perspectives on American bodies.

The Science of Swimming: From Advice Literature to Moving Images

In the silent film comedy College (USA, 1927), starring Buster Keaton, we see the freshman protagonist, Ronald, arriving at his new school fully prepared to become a popular athlete. Ronald brings along all the necessary equipment needed to make the college’s baseball, football, and track teams. Moreover, his suitcase contains copies of several advice booklets, all published in Spalding’s
Athletic Library.5 Since the late 1880s, more than 300 separate publications on sports and physical activities had been published by that company, which was part of the A.G. Spalding and Brothers’ sports goods emporium, a Chicago-based but, at that point in time, nationally and internationally operating corporation that dominated the sale and marketing of sports apparel and equipment. These advice manuals were not peripheral to the company’s activities, but were, instead, produced to create ‘the greatest educational series on athletic and physical training subjects that has ever been compiled’.6 Titles ranged from the simple How to Play Baseball to the more specialized How to Play Shortstop, from Home Exercising to How to Live 100 Years to Ten Minutes’ Exercises for the Busy Men. Priced from 10 to 25 cents, many of these pamphlets saw multiple editions over the years, sold several hundreds of thousands of copies, and made their way into numerous school and public libraries. When freshman Ronald came to college in 1927, almost two generations of Americans had grown up reading sporting advice from Spalding’s Athletic Library.

In offering a complete line of sports equipment, the mother corporation Spalding and Brothers’ was an almost ideal example of a large-scale, ever expanding, vertically integrated, diversified, expertly managed, modern corporation. The large majority of its Athletic Library manuals fitted perfectly into that design: They were usually written by well-known expert authors such as former athletes, coaches, journalists, or other pundits; they claimed to contain state-of-the-art and practically tested knowledge; they almost always included advice pointing to embedding very specific corporeal practices into a much larger concept of taking care of one’s body by observing questions of nutrition, hygiene, or sexuality; and they offered information relevant to different kinds of readers, from school kids and adult beginners to advanced athletes, to those seeking health and relaxation in physical activities, as well as to those wanting to push their personal records, to men and—increasingly important, especially after the First World War—women. Yet despite its wide appeal and distribution, one should keep in mind that those publications were almost completely marketed towards a white American middle class; references to racialized groups within society remained rare even during the 1920s and 1930s, when the world of sports started to acknowledge non-white athletes, at least sometimes.7

While the Spalding booklets dominated the market, many other publishing houses held important shares in it as well. Taken together, one comes
across a financially lucrative segment of advice literature, which aims to place sports and physical activity within a dense discourse that linked health, nutrition, hygiene, and fitness to an active understanding of what a modern, white, urban American citizen should look like and should do.\textsuperscript{8} A variety of magazines further broadened this objective, spanning from middle-class lifestyle publications such as \textit{Vanity Fair} or \textit{Collier’s} to less expensive and less fashion-oriented outlets like \textit{Physical Culture} (published by the both popular and controversial fitness advocate Bernarr Macfadden) to the many different special interest sports magazines.\textsuperscript{9} And, in their aim to charge the moving body as modern, all these publications greatly relied on advanced printing technology and especially on photography. Drawings and engravings had been established features in advice manuals for a long time, but photography promised not only a more realistic but also a more detailed perspective on bodies in motion. And a focus on detail, on separating individual, specific elements of motions from one another, analysing complexity in synchronic and diachronic movements, became a core epistemological concern for the developing sports science after 1900.\textsuperscript{10} Photographic and later filmic time-motion studies carried an enormous argumentative weight in expert discourses, and advice manuals for the ordinary sportsperson, plus magazine articles, were immensely influential in transmitting that notion to a larger American public.\textsuperscript{11}

A perspective on swimming helps demonstrate that aspect. In some regards, this sport/fitness practice is a very suitable example because swimming boomed in the US during the early decades of the 20th century.\textsuperscript{12} What made swimming especially appealing to many white, middle-class Americans was its twofold character that made the practice a serious sport or fitness pursuit as well as a leisure activity done for socialization—its popularity rested on the fact that one could spend a day at the beach but still claim to go swimming. A widely circulating safety discourse linked the two practices of swimming and bathing together, strongly demanding that, in order to enjoy the latter, one has to master the former. Although still heavily segregated along lines of race, gender, and class, the overall number of facilities and opportunities to swim increased greatly, and many commentators underscored the value of swimming for what they considered

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{8} Green, \textit{Fit for America}; Mackert, ‘I want to be’; Martschukat, ‘Pursuit of Fitness’.
\item \textsuperscript{9} Stiegitz, ‘Ikonen einer neuen Freiheit’.
\item \textsuperscript{10} Hoberman, \textit{Mortal Engines}; Massengale and Swanson, \textit{History of Exercise}; Carter, \textit{Medicine}.
\item \textsuperscript{11} Braun, \textit{Picturing Time}; Prodger, \textit{Time Stands Still}.
\item \textsuperscript{12} Wiltse, \textit{Contested Waters}.
\end{itemize}

In other regards, though, swimming presents an unlikely and rather complicated example for my point. The technical possibilities for visualizing in- and underwater motions remained difficult until well into the 1920s. Photographic and filmic technology capable of depicting what usually remained invisible parts of swimming motions were usually too expensive and too much part of laboratory studies to find their way into commercial publications, but authors and publishers were very creative in dealing with that problem. The speed of some swimming styles, plus the necessity to protect the valuable camera equipment from getting wet, added to the difficulties—undesired sprays of water became a constant issue in depicting swimming in several advice manuals.

The process of modernizing what had formerly been called the ‘ancient art of swimming’ relied on the language and imagery of workplace studies and scientific management. A drawing taken from a 1934 publication (Figure 5.2) illustrates the constantly growing urge to split up the motions of swimming
in general and the crawl in particular into several individual analytical units. The language used the vocabulary of scientific management:

[The crawl stroke] must enable [the swimmers] to so reduce the effort that they can develop greater speed and endurance than was possible [before] on the same output of energy. It would be illogical to believe [...] that methods which allow the contestant to travel faster and farther without increasing the strain, will not render equal service to the man or woman who swims for pleasure, exercise or necessity.\(^{14}\)

Many advice texts actively established a close relationship between both the textual descriptions and the visual material they deployed, on the one hand, and the actual training practice of athletes and coaches on the other, a relationship based on a carefully guided cooperation between the human eye and camera lenses. In many sports, and swimming is no exception, coaches often remained reluctant to trust camera-produced images, arguing that their experienced expert eyes were able to detect more details and nuance than any technical device could. Confronted with this opinion, manual authors argued in favour of a reasonable compromise, and so, when author Gerald Barnes appealed to his reader to ‘get someone to watch you’, he pointed towards an all-round visual arrangement of analytical gazes that included instructive images, coaches’ perspectives, and the self-observation of swimmers.\(^{15}\)

Nevertheless, depicting in- and underwater motions in photographs remained problematic (Figures 5.3 and 5.4). Well into the 1920s, most manuals relied on two strategies to deal with that technological inadequacy. The first made use of a long-established practice of swim training, the on-land, so-called dry drill. From the perspective of authors and publishers, it served a valuable purpose, because it allowed for a combined illustration of three important aspects: Photos like these could be produced without the confusing effects of water; they could be staged by prominent, role-model swimmers; and they underlined the analytics by focussing on the detail arrangement of watching oneself and others. With the second strategy, manuals tried to combine studio photography with the explanatory opportunities offered by drawings. The artificially superimposed waterline, separating above- and underwater movements, indicated, at the same time, the limits of photography and the strong desire to use all visual means available to depict a scientific understanding of the sport.

\(^{14}\) Handley, Swimming and Watermanship, p. 20.

\(^{15}\) Barnes, Swimming and Diving, p. 5.
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5.3. Daniels, *Speed Swimming* p. 30.


**Visualizing the Gendered Modernity of Swimming through Photography and Film**

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were considered modern and very much gendered understandings of beauty and personality. The increasing importance of women’s swimming was one influential part of that process.\textsuperscript{16} A growing number of magazine articles and book chapters conveyed the message that learning to swim was the thing to do for young, white, middle-class women, often indicating that the newly gained political and social rights for women were well represented in the swimming boom.\textsuperscript{17} Manuals now regularly included individual chapters on women’s swimming, and many were indicative of the ambivalences that came with integrating women ‘into citizenship in the sporting republic’, to quote a phrase by historian Mark Dyreson: ‘As women’s sports boomed during the 1920s, American culture transformed female athletes into icons of liberty. At the same time, American culture also transformed female athletes into objects of desire.’\textsuperscript{18} Photos of successful female swimmers and divers served as often-recurring examples of the ‘modern athletic woman’.

‘One of the weirdest of the many phenomena attendant upon the American sport scene is the worship [...] accorded to lady swimmers’, wondered sports columnist Paul Gallico, observing that they ‘have been photographed, biographed, feted, pursued by millionaires, popped into the movies, lionized, and [...] glorified, beyond all bounds of sanity and reason’.\textsuperscript{19} Especially after the mid-1920s, these images became more sexually suggestive in character, presenting young sports-women in their swim-suits that indicated both athleticism and eroticism. A dense visual arrangement thus linked women’s swimming to fashion, beauty, and physical attractiveness. Moreover, many advice texts and magazine articles underscored a close relationship to questions of conscious nutrition and dieting.\textsuperscript{20} A Physical Culture magazine essay serves as a suitable example: If ‘Business Girls Should Swim for Better Posture’, to quote its title, they were supposed to do it as knowledgeable swimmers, as costumers of fashionable sportswear and the ‘right food’, and thus as promising dates and potential future brides. Many advice books also manoeuvred along that thin line separating empowering women through teaching a new, exciting, even liberating bodily practice on the one hand, and asking them to adjust to the new sexualized demands of the post-war years, on the other. Handbooks used photography for the twin purposes of teaching technique and displaying sex appeal at the same time. This combination

\textsuperscript{16} Bier, Fighting the Current.
\textsuperscript{17} Corsan, ‘Learning to Swim’; Ford, ‘Swimming for Ladies’.
\textsuperscript{18} Dyreson, ‘Icons of Liberty’, pp. 435, 438.
\textsuperscript{19} Gallico, ‘Babes in the Drink’, p. 49.
\textsuperscript{20} Macfadden, ‘Business Girls’.
was regularly used, for example, by Spalding’s sports booklets. In a volume authored by Louis Handley, one finds photos inspired by time-motion studies next to several pages of advertisement for Spalding swimsuits, all visually emphasizing the erotic appeal of an athletic body wearing this outfit. This visual strategy became influential even in magazines such as *Vanity Fair* or *Physical Culture*; outside the realm of textbooks and without the necessity to claim the images’ instructiveness, the staging of female swimmers in bathing costumes increasingly lost its reference to the actual practice of swimming. Although labelled as the result of an active, ‘healthy’ lifestyle in and around a pool or a beach, the mise en scène of many such images meant that the sport itself became an empty signifier.

Nevertheless, eroticizing the body in motion was not limited to women. One person in particular lifted the visual representation of crawl swimming and of the capable white modern athletic body on another level. Without any doubt, Johnny Weissmuller was the embodiment of American swimming during the 1920s, and, in addition to Hollywood actor Douglas Fairbanks, he constituted the most visual example of a modern, white masculinity. His fame as a five-time Olympic champion was just the basis for his body being highly visible in magazines, advertisements, and newsreels during the ‘Golden Age of Sports’ era that produced and consumed (white) sport stars in unprecedented ways. Weissmuller’s underwear and swimwear advertisements had almost pin-up quality; and when he became an actor and started to portray Edgar Rice Buroughs’ Tarzan in twelve motion pictures from 1932 onwards, the public visibility of a crawl swimmer within US popular culture peaked in the most modern media available.

In 1930, Weissmuller published his bestselling half textbook, half autobiography *Swimming the American Crawl*. Compared to its precursors, Weissmuller’s manual broke new ground in actively bridging the gap between three media; it took photographs explicitly extracted from motion pictures and used them as illustrations in a book. These filmstrips demonstrated the publisher’s desire to characterize Weissmuller as the ultimate product of scientific training methods supported by the newest technology, the true climax of swimming’s ‘modern’ development, the fastest swimmer of the world using the fastest style photographed by the fastest cameras available. For that purpose, text and images corresponded closely with each other, as did autobiography and educational passages.

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21 Handley, *Swimming for Women*. See also Wright, ‘Spectacular Bodies’.
22 Pendergast, *Creating the Modern Man*.
23 Kirkham and Thumim, *You Tarzan*. 
EIGHT SHOTS FROM THE MOVIES SHOWING MY BACK
(Read from bottom up in each column)

Swimming the American Crawl contained several image series representing state-of-the-art photo technology, images of swimming that most Americans had rarely seen before (Figure 5.5). Shot by high-speed film cameras designed for depicting fast action under difficult circumstances, these illustrations made readers believe they could actually watch one of the educational films that the Olympic champion had earlier produced. The time gap between individual pictures within one series was significantly reduced compared to prior attempts, and together with a much more sensitive and stronger telephoto lens, the water spray now was no longer a handicap in visualization but an asset that added speed and authenticity to the focus on breathing technique. Moreover, Weissmuller used long paragraphs of text to comment on these images. He did that not only in a mode of explanation, for a detailed description of what readers could detect in and learn from them, but also to elaborate on the limits of representation: ‘This clean recovery is not always apparent in the movies I have reproduced, as there is a lot of spray flying around, and the action is sometimes too swift for the camera.’

Within the star persona of Johnny Weissmuller, several elements of the visual arrangement of modern bodies in motion merged. As scholarship on sports marketing during the 1920s and 1930s shows, his ubiquitous media presence made his body a marketable international icon of white Americanism. With Johnny Weissmuller and his Tarzan films of the 1930s, the processes of Americanizing the crawl and labelling it as specifically ‘modern’ came almost full circle. Showing the masculine physique and actions of Tarzan in Hollywood films, starring the most famous swimmer of his times literally crawling through the African jungle, underscores the entangled genealogy of crawl swimming and its close relation to discourses of modernity, or, more precisely, to the multilayered contemporary debates involved in negotiating what that term was supposed to signify. Swimmers and coaches adopted the motion from a supposedly ‘native’ body movement, made it available to a larger portion of the American population, analysed it scientifically with advancing techniques of visualization, and ultimately refined it by American expertise into a motion perfectly suited for both speed and endurance. It became the stroke of its time—fast, efficient, successful, streamlined. In the 1930s, Hollywood, with its worldwide appeal

24 Weissmuller, American Crawl, p. 17.
25 Dyreson, ‘Marketing Weissmuller’.
26 Historians Gary Osmond and Murray Phillips documented the early history of the crawl in Australia around 1900 and underscored the importance of studying and adopting what were considered ‘natural’ motions of natives born in the Pacific islands. As Osmond and Phillips show, that process of appropriation was structured along notions of racial hierarchies. See Osmond and Phillips, ‘Look’.
and commercial power, depicted the myth of the crawl, a myth of a white stroke with roots in nature that was capable of progressing ‘Western’ civiliza-
tion into areas not yet touched by American spirit—and money.

Not only Hollywood but film in general added important new layers to that discourse. Before the First World War, depicting swimming was only marginal among the already immensely growing field of sports film that catered to the audience’s desire to watch bodies moving on-screen. The reason for this was mainly technical—because cameras could not be brought close enough to the water, and lenses were not advanced and fast enough to catch the ongoing action precisely. Moreover, much of the relevant motion happened below the water’s surface and thus remained beyond the reach of the standard camera’s view. This changed dramatically during the 1920s and the 1930s. Successful college coaches like Robert Kiphuth from Yale University or David Armbruster from the University of Iowa started to use visual techniques to optimize their training sessions, and textbooks began to include photographs used explicitly for visualizing motion occurring too fast to be grasped without it. At the same time, a market for tutorial films developed in the field of physical education, including productions used for swimming classes in high schools as well as colleges. Still, despite an increase in productions and the growth of distributive channels, educational films in the realm of sports and physical education only reached a limited audience of aspiring young athletes enrolled in sports programmes. Commercial films produced for release in cinemas all over the United States proved to be more influential: Over the course of the 1920s, ever more newsreels included sports in their programmes regularly, and, after short films became a common part of the overall moviegoing experience in the later years of that decade, sports-related examples became popular.

During the summer of 1926, the increasing significance of newsreels for the popularization of swimming became especially evident. In August of that year, the 20-year-old Gertrude Ederle from New York succeeded in her quest to be the first woman to swim the English Channel, and she did so faster than any man before her. To promote and finance the event, Ederle and her management relied upon cooperating with powerful media agents, making sure that the American public was not only constantly aware about

27 Streible, Fight Pictures.
28 Hughes and Stimson, ‘Motion Pictures’.
29 Dear et al., Motion Pictures in Sports, pp. 29–30. Orgeron et al., Learning.
30 Bradley, First Hollywood.
31 Vertinsky and Job, ‘Breaking Traditions’; Dahlberg et al., America’s Girl.
what went on in Europe but was also able to get new visual impressions of the athlete’s efforts. Newspapers and magazines covered the story closely, and when Americans watched the newsreels of her accomplishment, they could see how much preparation went into it: The film shows a young woman who is adjusting her body to the task by wearing special glasses and covering herself entirely with protective grease. The swim itself is depicted as complicated by waves but nevertheless easy—while it lasted, she crawled without much visible discomfort alongside the boats that transported her aids. This impression might, of course, be the effect of the brevity of the newsreel and the long-distance shots of the cameras. Still, Ederle became a star, and swimming for women reached its peak in popularity.

Compared to those often rather frantically produced newsreels, professional short film productions had huge advantages for selling corporeal practices to moviegoers. Depicting swimming in such productions was not exactly a novelty in the 1920s, the Australian-born swimmer Annette Kellerman already performed successfully in front of film cameras before the Great War, becoming a star in feature films and semi-documentaries with titles such as *The Mermaid* (1911), *Neptune’s Daughter* (1914), or *A Daughter of the Gods* (1916). But, while these films certainly aroused (erotic) interest in female bodies performing ballet in the water, their actual imagery remained very suboptimal, leaving more to fantasy than to clear vision. Productions from a later period allowed for improved representations, and *Crystal Champions*, shot only three years after Ederle’s channel crossing, is a suitable case in point. A well-financed collaboration between a prominent sports journalist, a gifted cinematographer using cutting-edge technology, an experienced director, the chamber of commerce of a popular vacation resort, and a handful of both successful and good-looking athletes, *Crystal Champions* made use of twin developments within American culture. It related a changing cinema experience that incorporated the short film as a valued part of an evening’s entertainment, and a new emphasis on actively combining the biopolitical obligation on fitness and health to notions of pleasure and self-fulfilment. Nevertheless, the collaboration at that particular moment is also a strong reminder of how much remained excluded from the circulating images. At a time when Silver Springs, Florida, was still a strictly segregated vacation spot that allowed non-white Americans only as

32 The newsreels are available among the Universal Newsreels on the Associated Press Archive website, http://www.aparchive.com. Moreover, Universal also features a channel containing their material on https://www.youtube.com.


34 Mrozek, ‘Sport in American Life’.
servants in their hotels, when journalists such as Grantland Rice still served as gatekeepers making sure that African-American athletes held marginal roles at best in what they described as ‘America’s Golden Age of Sports’, and when Hollywood and other players in the film industry clearly separated between a ‘white’ and a ‘black’ cinema, Crystal Champions was indicative of the contemporary whiteness of bodies in motion.

To generalize, it becomes evident that the practice of swimming and its representations in visual media became intrinsically linked. The popularity of swimming, as both a sport and a leisure or vacation activity, rested on constant and high-quality visibility, and the inherent difficulties in depicting in- and underwater action stimulated crucial technological developments in photo and film technology. Its close affinity to the realms of fashion, nutrition, and fitness allowed images of swimming to become omnipresent elements within these areas of white middle-class identity politics.

Conclusion: The Athletic Body as Future’s Project

Visual representations of fit, white, middle-class families grew increasingly prominent after the First World War (Figure 5.6).

The modern, athletic body became a project for the immediate generational future, and many sports and physical-culture publications and films pointed at the necessity for developing an active, healthy lifestyle from early on—the first few sequences of Crystal Champions depicting youngsters swimming and diving are strong reminders of that. Parents were supposed to take responsibility and educate their children in matters of health-related physical culture. Again, swimming played an important role for that development, for several reasons. The number of public and private pools was increasing and learning the crawl was continuously described as accessible and easy, so parents could teach their children themselves. Moreover, learning to swim was, by now, strongly linked to urbanization and suburbanization, and the ever-recurring hint at life-saving techniques added a notion of safety to living in a changed, modern environment. Most of all, though, swimming fitted nicely into established illustrations of eugenic appeal in interwar popular culture.35 Already strongly associated with notions of purity, hygiene, and a ‘balanced’ ideal of the body, swimming American children signified a true promise for good citizenship: ‘[T]he best ideals may be inculcated’ by swimming, one manual stated, ‘such as courage, self-confidence, leadership,

35 Currell and Cogdell, Popular Eugenics.
a democratic spirit, good sportsmanship, self-sacrifice and heroic service’.36
At a time when the promises of modernity became increasingly uncertain for white, middle-class Americans, a fit, beautiful body in motion was reassuring; at times when ‘weakness was a crime’, to paraphrase the motto of fitness entrepreneur Bernarr Macfaddens, swimming seemed to keep that promise, and, in closely interacting with texts, visual culture underscored this concern immensely.37 Photos and film were considered superior educational instruments in circulating notions of ‘modern’ bodies in notion, and, as this essay shows, this sort of modernity rested on an unmarked whiteness. Not only did the visual representations exclude non-whites to a large degree, but, even more importantly, they helped normalize the idea of white bodies as endowed with certain abilities and a certain beauty. Moreover, the motions of swimming and its representations were also and more clearly coded along lines of gender. Swimming in the US not only mirrored gender relations, it took an active part in negotiating and developing notions of masculinity and femininity within an intersectional social structure that related aspects of race, ethnicity, age, and capability to these categories.

36 Sheffield and Sheffield, Swimming Simplified, p. xii.
37 Ernst, Weakness is a Crime; Adams, Mr. America; Stieglitz, ‘Man of Your Years’. 
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