
Resonant Antiquity: Collective Memories and Normative (Re-)Constructions of the 'Classical' Body among Sport Students

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Résumé

The Western World often regards itself as indebted to classical antiquity (Hanink 2017; Blecking 2025). From a reception-theoretical point of view, antiquity itself is made up in retrospection and constitutes a multifunctional "resonance offering" (Tausend 2025) that forms cultural capital and can be used to establish legitimacy, nobility, legacy, as well as demarcation. With the body being an important element in this context (Squire 2011), the question arises as to how deeply readings of the 'classical' body remain inscribed in today's sport and physical education contexts.

Based on the theory of historical transformation and the concept of allelopoiesis (Böhme 2011), this empirical study examines university sport students' conceptions of bodily ideals and attributions of normativity in relation to ancient representations of the body. The following draws on group discussions in which students were given the fictional task of creating a statue representing their studies in relation to ancient Greek depictions of the body. The discussions were analyzed using the Documentary Method (Bohnsack et al. 2013). By combining the theory of transformation with an empirical method developed in the social sciences, this study ventures into relatively new interdisciplinary territory.

In investigating the formation of collective memory (Halbwachs 1985) within a specific social milieu, mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion inscribed in ancient images of the body become apparent. The data show that students' collective space of experience and memory is shaped by classicist clichés and pre-reflexive ideas of ancient sport. The (re-)construction of ideals sometimes reproduces nationalistic and fascist(oid) readings of the 'classical' body in modern Western history. Overall, the findings demonstrate that ancient body representations resonate with sport students, while the male, able-bodied, and epicized physique is marked as a hegemonic ideal of social order through which the "classical" is constructed to stabilize and legitimize one's own position.

Mots-Clés: classical reception, bodily ideals, collective memory, physical education, sport students

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