

Imagining the Nation through the Energetic Body. The “Royal Jump”

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For any investigation of German body culture in the interwar period, one would be hard pressed to find a more central document than the 1924 Ufa documentary film *Wege zu Kraft und Schönheit*. With this six-act production, the director Wilhelm Prager and his assistant, Nicholas Kaufmann from the Charité hospital in Berlin, set out to unite nearly all strands of modern athletics – from rhythmical gymnastics to baseball – and make them accessible to a wide audience through the mass medium of the cinema (for more on Kaufmann, see the essay from Sabine Flach in this volume). As one can observe in the film’s opening didactic sequence, Prager and Kaufmann explicitly followed a standard social-Darwinian argument by depicting the ‘revival’ of athletics as the solution to hygienic problems – and particularly the threat of degeneration – created by industrialization (see our introduction above). At the same time, however, *Wege zu Kraft und Schönheit* represented much more than a simple demonstration of body culture’s advantages for the modern age. Coming in the wake of Germany’s defeat in the First World War, the film also exemplified a strategy for reimagining the nation through a new iconography of energetic bodies.

Nowhere, perhaps, is this cultural and political strategy more strikingly evident than in a key sequence dealing with athletic competition among ancient Germanic tribes. In a lavish historic mise-en-scène, Prager and Kaufmann recreated, for modern audiences, a mythic Germanic ritual in which warriors competed by jumping over horses lined up side by side (fig. 1). The sequence then culminates when one of the



WEGE ZU KRAFT UND SCHÖNHEIT - Deutschland 1924/25 Regie: Wilhelm Prager
Quelle: Filmmuseum Berlin - Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek

Fig. 1: “Der Königssprung”: *Wege zu Kraft und Schönheit* (1924).

contestants executes a legendary leap over six horses known as the “Königssprung,” before being carried away amidst the cheers of the gathered crowd. Among the film’s numerous athletic demonstrations, Prager and his associates clearly attached great importance to the Königssprung sequence; of the four articles contained in the brochure accompanying the film’s premiere in 1924, one by August Köster from the Altes Museum (Antiquities Museum) in Berlin was devoted entirely to explaining the ritual of the Königssprung and its historical significance.¹ Following the “case-study” approach set out in the introduction to this volume, I wish to perform a kind of thick description of the Königssprung sequence and its argumentative function in *Wege zu Kraft und Schönheit*. Prager and Kaufmann’s reenactment of ancient Germanic body culture offers a fascinating example of an eminent “invention of tradition” – an invention relying, as I will show below, on distinctly *modern* codes of bodily mise-en-scène and bodily interpretation for its legibility.

1 The other three articles included a second article by Köster on the reconstruction of an ancient Roman patrician bath, a general introduction to the film by Felix Holländer and a defense of the nudist movement by the art historian Max Osborne.

Performing the National Body

Although the body culture movement is primarily remembered today for its Philhellenism, the interest in ancient Germanic rituals such as the Königssprung was widespread in the decades around 1900. A case in point can be seen in the popularity, among early 20th-century body culture enthusiasts, of the so-called “sword dance” (“Schwertertanz”), a custom first described by Tacitus in the *Germania*.² In one article from the journal *Kraft und Schönheit* entitled “Kampf gegen die Entartung der Rasse” (1902), for example, the body culture theorist and early proponent of cycling, Eduard Bertz, described the audacious Germanic dance amidst upturned swords as a potential antidote to the degeneration believed so widespread among the modern bourgeoisie:

“Bei unseren germanischen Vorfahren war das freilich noch anders. Tacitus hat uns erzählt, was bei den alten Deutschen für die Leibespflege der Jugend gethan wurde. Ihre einzige und bei allen Festen wiederkehrende Volksbelustigung war der Waffentanz ihrer Jünglinge, die sich in kühnem Sprunge nackt zwischen Schwerter und gefällte Speere stürzten. Das war der Weg, um Helden zu erziehen” (Bertz 1902: 13).

Bertz was hardly alone in his enthusiasm for the ancient German ritual.³ The dancer Olga Desmond, for example, achieved a near legendary status with her nude staging of the famous sword dance during her “beauty soirées” (“Schönheitsabende”) in the early 20th century (see Wedemeyer 1999).

Like the interest in the sword dance, the increased focus on the Königssprung must be seen as part of an effort to place body culture in the service of a German national imaginary. Although descriptions of the legendary leap over six horses date back at least as far as the writing of the ancient Roman historian Lucius Annaeus Florus from the 2nd century A. D.,⁴ its importance to the modern nationalist imagination can be

2 Tacitus’s description of the sword dance can be found in the 24th section of *Germania* on games.

3 Among other works one could cite here is the 1904 study *Erziehung zur Körperschönheit* by Marg Zepler, in which the author explained: “Neben Speer-, Steinwurf, Sprung- und Wettlaufspielen übten sich [die germanischen Jünglinge] in dem kunstreichen und anmutigen Schwertertanz” (Zepler 1904: 7). See also the entry entitled “Waffentanz” from *Meyers Konversationslexikon* von 1888 (“Waffentanz”: 315).

4 See Florus’s *Epitome of Roman History*, Book II, chapter 38, where he mentions King Teutobod’s habit of jumping over horses “Certe rex ipse Teutobodus, quaternos senoque equos transilire solitus, vix unum, cum fu-

traced back to a single modern source: Gustav Freytag's 6-volume novelistic cycle *Die Ahnen* (1871-1880). Freytag's epic project, which he undertook upon returning from his service as a correspondent in the Franco-Prussian war in 1871, sought to promote readers' national identification by recounting the history of one Germanic family at various historical stages from the late Roman Empire through the Napoleonic wars of liberation and into the mid-19th century. As Freytag's reviewers clearly recognized, what linked all of his protagonists, beyond their bonds of kinship, was a strict patriotic devotion to the German "fatherland" – solidified through their opposition to an ever-present Latinate enemy across the Rhine. Beginning with the Vandal warrior Ingo, who demonstrates his bravery against the Roman army by stealing the emperor's victory banner in the battle of Argentoratum in 357, the cycle ended with Ingo's bourgeois descendants Ernst König, a leader in the armed resistance against the Napoleonic occupation, and his son Victor, who decides to place his pen in the "service of the fatherland" after the 1848 uprisings.⁵

Standing at the beginning of the first and most popular novel in the *Ahnen* cycle, *Ingo und Ingraban*, Freytag's depiction of the Königssprung contest functions to establish the valiance of the Germanic warrior right from the start. Arriving as a stranger among the Thuringians, the exiled Vandal warrior Ingo demonstrates his particular athletic prowess when he executes the rare jump over six horses; as the Thuringian chief Answald tells his new guest: "Ich erkenne, Fremder, wenn mich nicht deine Gebärde täuscht, du bist nicht unkundig des Schwunges auch über sechs Rosse, den sie Königssprung nennen, und der nicht in jedem Menschenalter einem Helden gelingt. Ich sah ihn

geret, ascendit, proximoque in saltu comprehensus insigne spectaculum triumphi fuit" (Florus 1957: 170).

- 5 For a good summary of this thematic, see Lindau 1881. As one of Freytag's French critics pointed out, Freytag's representation of the early Germanic tribes as a culturally and linguistically homogeneous group with a "national" consciousness was highly anachronistic (Réville 1874: 553). Nonetheless, the same critic clearly recognized the stakes of popular national history and called for a similar effort in France in the wake of the recent national defeat: "Nous aussi, nous avons notre esprit de famille, et la pensée de nos frères arrachés malgré eux au foyer de la patrie n'est pas de celles qui s'oublient. [...] Nous nous demanderons plutôt s'il ne serait pas à désirer qu'en France aussi le roman se mît au service de l'histoire de la patrie pour la populariser et la rendre chère aux enfants de notre vieille Gaule" (572).

einmal, da ich jung war, mein Volk niemals" (Freytag 1953: 26).⁶ Answald's very use of the term "Königssprung" – a designation first coined by Freytag for the novel – offers an eminent example of literary foreshadowing: during a banquet after the competition, Ingo will see his real identity as the son of a Vandal king ("König") revealed when a traveling storyteller recounts Ingo's exploits in the battle against the Roman army. Indeed, throughout the novel, Freytag will emphasize the connection between this "son of a king" – after learning of his royal lineage, the other characters in the first novel continually refer to Ingo as the "Königssohn" – and his bourgeois descendants, who retain the family name König in the sixteenth century after trading in their royal status for protection from the German emperor (see Lindau 1881: 272-273). The Königssprung thus sets in motion a chain of royal semantics designed to underscore the valiance of Ingo and his descendants and their ability to lead the German tribes in battle.

One could hardly overstate the popularity of Freytag's patriotic cycle. *Ingo und Ingraban*, in particular, enjoyed an enormous success lasting well into the 1920s and quickly becoming one of the few modern novels taught in public schools.⁷ In recreating the Königssprung for the screen, the team behind *Wege zu Kraft und Schönheit* clearly understood the symbolic stakes the legend had acquired under Freytag's fictional staging.⁸ Where Freytag had inscribed the Königssprung into a narrative of German valiance in its ongoing battle against the Latinate (Roman and French) enemy, Prager and Kaufmann's film staged the ritual in a bid to demonstrate the prowess of present-day German athletes in an international context – and particular vis-à-vis the French. Indeed, in many ways, the film must be understood as the reaction to a specific Franco-German event of the year 1924: Germany's exclusion from the summer Olympic games in Paris. Germany, along with Austria, Hungary, Bul-

6 Incidentally, shortly after the Königssprung sequence, Freytag's novel also included a representation of the famous sword dance (Freytag 1953: 28-29).

7 As Hartmut Eggert recounts, *Ingo und Ingraban* had sold some 600,000 copies by 1920 (Eggert 1971: 182). For the use of *Ingo und Ingraban* in public schools, see Heußner 1892.

8 To judge by Köster's essay, they seem to have taken Freytag as their principle source. Although Köster insists on the historical validity of the legend, *Die Ahnen* is the only source he cites: "Fast jeder Jüngling erlernte wohl die Kunst, über ein Pferd zu springen; auch über zwei nebeneinander stehende Pferde zu setzen, galt noch nicht als besondere Leistung. Berühmt war der Sprung über sechs Rosse, der Königs-Sprung, den aber nur ausnahmsweise ein besonders rüstiger Springer auszuführen vermochte, wie der Königssohn Ingo, als er landfremd als Gast in Thüringen weilte, und an den Kampfspielen der Jugend teilnahm" (Köster 1924: 37).

garia and Turkey, had already been banned from the 1920 games in Antwerp on account of their status as “aggressor nations,” but while the other teams were allowed to compete in the second round of post-WWI competitions in Paris in 1924, only Germany was not invited back. Shot in late 1924, *Wege zu Kraft und Schönheit* sought to redress this international humiliation, as it were, by creating a virtual contest of nations, in which the viewer could judge between various national forms of body culture and dances from around the world: Japanese Judo, American baseball, Scottish soccer, English rowing, Italian fencing and dances from Africa, Spain, India, Hawaii, Russia and Bavaria. While this list is marked by the conspicuous absence of any reference to France or French athletes, Germany receives extensive representation in the film, particularly in the fifth section dealing with competitive sports (entitled “Sport”). This section begins with a reference to the Paris Olympics (in an intertitle accompanying shots of the American winner of the silver medal for high jump, Leroy Brown), but it soon shifts the viewer’s attention to other contests, not least of all in order to demonstrate the abilities of German athletes. One sequence shot at the Berlin stadium, for example, shows the famous German runner Hubert Houben beating four medallists from the 1924 Olympics (Charles Paddock, Loren Murchison, Arthur Porrit and Edwin Carr) in a 100-meter sprint. Not by chance, the reconstruction of the Königssprung forms the culmination of this fifth section, a position suggesting a view of the Königssprung not simply as an ethnographical demonstration of ancient competitive sports, but also and foremost as a symbolic assertion of Germany’s position within a modern struggle of nations.

Like Freytag’s staging of the Königssprung in *Die Ahnen*, Prager and Kaufmann’s reconstruction of the contest for his film served to establish a link between present-day German athletes and their royal warrior ancestry. According to Köster, the filmmakers searched far and wide for someone capable of carrying out the jump in the modern world:

“Galt in der Heldenzeit unseres Volkes der Sprung über sechs Rosse schon als eine besondere Leistung, so ist er heute so selten, daß wohl kaum jemand Gelegenheit haben dürfte, ihn ausgeführt zu sehen. Um so mehr ist es anzuerkennen, daß bei der Herstellung unseres Filmes darauf Bedacht genommen, und keine Mühe gescheut wurde, ihn zu veranschaulichen” (Köster 1924: 38).

Finally, the film team found their prize jumper in the renowned track and field star Arthur Holz, who had set a world record of seven meters in the long jump in 1919. As Köster describes it, Holz’s ability to perform the jump functions at once as a sign of his Olympic material:

“Wie selten jemand war er für die Ausführung dieses Sprunges geeignet, gilt doch Arthur Holz für einen der besten deutschen ‘All round Athleten’. Er wurde deshalb auch von der spanischen Regierung als Lehrer für die von Spanien zu den Olympia-Spielen nach Paris entsandten Kämpfer bestellt. [...] Selbst in der Frühzeit, einer Zeit, die noch nicht die entnervende Hast des modernen Lebens kannte, waren solche Menschen nicht alltäglich” (Köster 1924: 38).

In reminding his readers of Holz’s role in the Paris Olympics, Köster also reveals the real point of the Königssprung episode and of his own accompanying article: a demonstration of Germany’s superiority in competitive sports.

But if the reenactment of the Königssprung sought to redress Germany’s humiliation at the 1924 Olympics on a symbolic level, it clearly also functioned as part of an imaginary overcoming of the wider political defeat of which Germany’s exclusion from Paris served as a reminder. In the midst of Germany’s postwar occupation by French troops (who had taken over the Western industrial zone in 1923 when the German government fell behind on reparations payments), Freytag’s *Ahnen* cycle offered a long gallery of heroic resistance fighters engaged in an ongoing struggle to expel their Latinate oppressors. Where the Great War had ended with Germany’s loss of Alsace to France, the intertextual reference to Freytag recalled the entire glorious context of the Franco-Prussian war, in which Germany had taken Alsace a half-century earlier. Indeed, spectators familiar with *Die Ahnen* would certainly have remembered that Ingo’s initial battle with the Romans had taken place in Argentoratum on the Rhine, or modern-day Strasbourg. As the nationalist critic Wilhelm Scherer had stated at the end of his review of *Ingo und Ingraban*: “Was mit der Schlacht bei Straßburg von 357 begann, das könnte in dem wiedergewonnenen Straßburg von 1870 schließen” (Scherer 1893: 22). In the final sequence of *Wege zu Kraft und Schönheit*, Prager and Kaufmann explicitly reinforced this connection between German body culture and the ongoing battle against France by inserting a series of images of 18th-century German resistance fighters along with their spiritual leader Friedrich Ludwig “Turnvater” Jahn, whose fame rested on having placed gymnastics in the service of the nationalist cause during the Napoleonic occupation. Interspersed with these images, the intertitles unmistakably inscribe body culture within a context of warfare: “Heute ist in Ländern ohne allgemeine Dienstpflicht der Sport die Hauptquelle der Volkskraft. Und wie vor hundert Jahren die Not der Zeit die Banner Jahns entrollte, so weisen uns auch heute wieder deutscher Sportsinn und deutscher Turngeist den Weg zu Kraft und Schön-

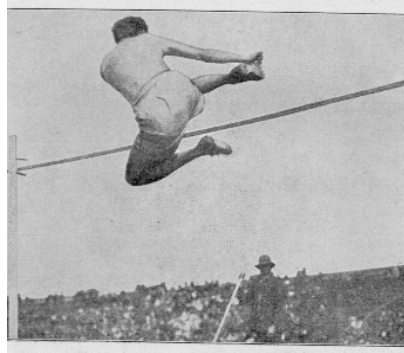


Fig. 2: Illustration from “Der Hochsprung mit Anlauf”
(*Kraft und Schönheit* 1910).

heit.” Against this interpretation of body culture as a source of national power analogous to armies, the images of jumping warriors in *Wege zu Kraft und Schönheit* carry a particularly heavy symbolic charge. As Köster explained in his article, for the “youthful, powerful and battle-ready tribes of ancient times” (“die jugendkräftigen, kampffreudigen Volksstämme der Vorzeit”), athletics functioned precisely as a training ground for warfare, and the jump formed a case in point: “Große Bedeutung wurde [...] dem Sprung beigemessen, da ja die Fertigkeit in dieser Kunst [...] im Kriege von unberechenbarem Nutzen war, sei es zur Verteidigung oder beim Angriff, oder um sich auf schneller Wanderung über Hindernisse zu schwingen” (Köster 1924: 37). Where Prager and Kaufmann’s contemporaries imagined Germanic competitive sports as a preparation for war, one could also say that the filmic representation of the Königssprung participated in a kind of warfare by other means; far from a neutral demonstration of historical body culture, *Wege zu Kraft und Schönheit* – and the Königssprung sequence in particular – took part in a performative-symbolic struggle, during the Weimar years, to redress Germany’s tarnished image in the wake of 1918.

Visualizing Energy: The Jump and the Modern Body

If the reenactment of the Königssprung in Prager and Kaufmann's film offered a symbolic response to cultural and political circumstances specific to Weimar Germany, the very focus on the jump in this scene took up a much broader modern strategy of bodily representation; in the visual iconography of 20th-century body culture, perhaps no other visual topos more directly connoted the *modern* body than that of the jump. Images of leaping bodies were ubiquitous in the pages of body culture journals such as *Kraft und Schönheit* and *Körperkultur*, which also featured frequent articles explaining jumping techniques with images of the individual phases (fig. 2). In the visual representation of dance, especially, the jump became the object of a particularly intense preoccupation. Nijinsky's mesmerizing leaps found numerous echoes in publications such as Rudolf von Laban's *Tanz und Gymnastik* (1926), where the reader could observe photographs of dancers caught hovering in mid-air for page after page (fig. 3).⁹



Fig. 3: Dancers from Rudolph von Laban, *Tanz und Gymnastik* (1926).

⁹ See also Altner, Abbildung 1 in this volume, which was reprinted in Laban's book.

A key document for understanding the early 20th century's investment in images of jumping bodies can be found in a 1911 article entitled "Die Überwindung der Schwerkraft" by the editor of *Kraft und Schönheit*, Gustav Möckel. There, Möckel saw the iconography of the jump, on the one hand, as the modern expression of an age-old human dream of flying, comparable in this respect to classical representations of winged Nikes or angels in Christian art. But Möckel also pointed to a specifically modern bodily imaginary when he interpreted the jump as the quintessential expression of bodily *energy*. As Anson Rabinbach has shown, the opposition between energy and fatigue – and the utopian dream of eliminating fatigue – was crucial to modernity's understanding of the body (see Rabinbach 1990). In his article from 1911, Möckel translates this opposition into visual terms when he describes the light, floating body as the very visual index of health:

"Der Mensch, der schwach, krank und hinfällig ist, der keine Kraft und Energie mehr in Blut, Muskeln und Nerven hat, schleicht träge und erdschwer mit schleppendem Gang über den Fußboden. [...] Wie ganz anders wirkt dagegen der elastische kraftvolle Gang eines gesunden Menschen, dessen federnde Muskeln und Gelenke den Körper spielend über den Erdboden dahintragen, und der schon äußerlich sichtbar ein ganzes Stück Erdschwere durch die Gesundheit und Kraft seines Organismus überwunden hat" (Möckel 1911: 75-6).¹⁰

If modernity is so fascinated by images of the jump, Möckel argues, this is because, within the economy of light and heavy bodies, the airborne body offers the most perfect visual realization of energy overcoming material resistance:

"Welch ein kraftvolles Bild gewährt z. B. ein Hürdenläufer, welche herrlichen Momente gibt es bei jeder Art von Sprung, wenn der Körper wie ein Pfeil von der Sehne vom Erdboden losschnellt, um einen, wenn auch nur kurzen Flug

10 In his depiction of the Germanic warriors, Freytag himself employed the same opposition between energetic and exhausted bodies. As the Thuringian sentry Wolf takes Ingo into his village in the opening scene of the novel, his attention is drawn to Ingo's 'Germanic' gait: "Zufrieden maß der Wächter mit den Augen einen starken Schwung, den der Fremde [Ingo] über den Gießbach getan hatte, und betrachtete darauf die Fußtritte auf dem weichen Grund. 'Du schreitest mächtig für einen müden Mann', sagte er, 'mich dünkt, du hast wohl schon früher weite Sprünge auf blutiger Heide gewagt. An deiner Spur sehe ich, daß du von unserem Volke bist, denn die Spitze des Fußes strebt auswärts, und stark drückt der Ballen. [...] Hast du einmal Römertritte geschaut? [...] Sie schreiten mit kleinem Fuß und kurzem Schritt auf ganzer Sohle wie müde Leute'" (Freytag 1953: 10).

durch die Luft zu tun. Jeder gute Turner und Sportsmann, der ein bißchen weiter denkt und fühlt, als wie über die rein körperlichen Leistungen, kennt auch jenes innere Hochgefühl, das in jenem Unterbewußtsein der Überwindung der Schwerkraft liegt" (Möckel 1911: 77).

Möckel's euphoric focus on the body's "short flight" ("kurzen Flug") in this passage finds its echo in the repeated efforts to body culture artists and photographers to capture the body hovering in mid-air. Within the codes of bodily legibility set up by the new discourse on energy, the body's ability to attain this airborne state – or in Möckel's terms, to "overcome gravity" – stood as a visual index of the internal energy that its owner possessed. As Rabinbach observes, such bodily energy appeared as entirely analogous to the new energy unleashed by industrial technology, and it is hardly by chance if Möckel compares the energetic and gravity-defiant body to the newly invented technology of the airplane:

"Seit Beginn des neuen Jahrhunderts stehen wir mitten drin in einem der gewaltigsten Kämpfe, die der Mensch jemals geführt hat, nämlich im Kampf um die Herrschaft der Lüfte. Wohl haben schon die Gebrüder Montgolfiere vor 130 Jahren den ersten Aufstieg in die Lüfte unternommen, aber erst der Flugmaschine wird es vorbehalten bleiben, den dauernden Sieg zu erringen" (Möckel 1911: 74).

No doubt, the interpretation of the jump as a symbol of energy overcoming material resistance helps to explain the popularity of jumping motifs in artistic works after 1900, even in the heavy medium of sculpture.¹¹ Möckel's comparison of the weightless energetic body to the new "flying machines," in particular, resonates with artworks such as the photomontage *Perspektiven einer Strasse* (1926) by the Bauhaus photographer Umbo (Otto Umbehr); there, hovering high above the city streets, the leaping bodies of acrobats and divers appear intertwined with the flying bodies of airplanes, the whole ensemble competing with the skyscrapers in the background to conquer the city skies (fig. 4).

Indeed, Umbo's photomontage is significant in another respect; for although practitioners of traditional media took interest in the jump, its prevalence as a topos in modern body cultural iconography was linked,

11 A good example can be seen in Gerhard Marcks' sculpture *Springer* from 1912 (Georg-Kolbe Museum, Berlin). Inasmuch as images of the jump serve to visualize the body's energy, they form a particular category of a more general tendency in body culture art in the early 20th century which – as Klaus Wobert has shown – displayed a distinct predilection for images of energetic bodies *in movement* (Wobert 2001).



Fig. 4: Otto Umbehr: "Perspektiven einer Strasse" (1926).

above all, to the development of *photographic* technology, and specifically to the emergence of high-speed photography in the late 19th century. As Rabinbach has demonstrated, dating back to Eadward Muybridge's first snapshots of animal movement from the 1870s and Etienne-Jules Marey's chronophotographic studies of the phases of motion from the 1880s, the search for faster shutter speeds to capture phases of movement on film was largely bound up with the desire to visualize energetic bodies in action (see Rabinbach 1990: 84-119). Ever since Muybridge's revelatory snapshots of a horse hovering in mid-gallop, all four hooves off the ground (1876), the jump had come to form a privileged motif in snapshot photography, chronophotographic studies and zootropic sequences (fig. 5). Given this link between photographic technology and the new iconography of energetic bodies, it should come as no surprise that, as Sabine Autsch has shown, the enthusiasm for high-speed photography was nowhere greater than in the pages of body cultural journals such as *Kraft und Schönheit* and *Körperkultur* (Autsch 2001: 305).

This effort to visualize the energetic body would also influence technological developments in moving pictures. In particular, the emergence of slow-motion cinematography, first patented in 1904 by the Austrian priest and inventor August Musger and developed over the next

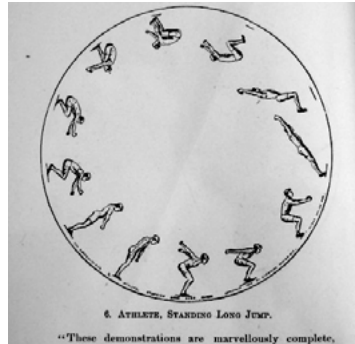
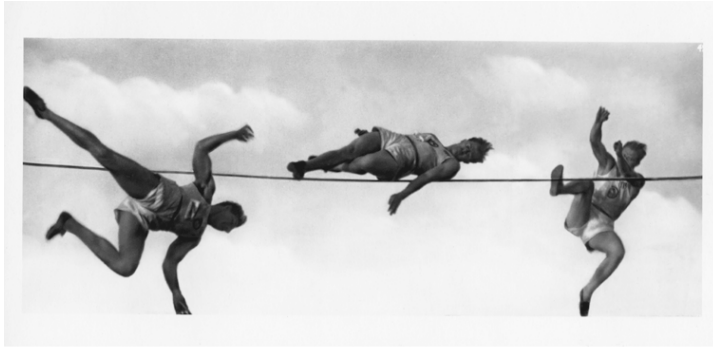


Fig. 5: Eadward Muybridge, Sequence illustrating jumping body for a zoopraxiscope, from *Descriptive Zoopraxography or the Science of Animal Locomotion* (1893).

few decades, seemed to many the logical continuation of high-speed photography on account of its ability to render visible aspects of movement otherwise imperceptible to the naked eye. Thus in a 1916 article for *Die Umschau*, the film theorist Hans Lehmann compared slow motion's optical revelations to those of chronophotography in the late 19th century. Just as the earlier technology, made possible by rapid exposure times, had revealed certain phases of a movement for observation, Lehmann argued, so slow-motion allowed viewers to observe certain forms of movement previously inaccessible:

“Wie in den 80er Jahren die ersten Momentphotographien großes Aufsehen erregten, da sie z.B. von in Bewegung begriffenen Menschen Phasen festhielten, die infolge ihrer großen Schnelligkeit bisher unserem Auge entgangen waren, so zeigen auch die neuen Filme neben diesen merkwürdigen und charakteristischen Stellungen ebensolche Bewegungsformen” (Lehmann 1917: 428).

With its ability to visualize imperceptible forms of movement, slow motion appeared particularly well suited to displaying the energetic body; Lehmann recommended its use to technicians, kinetic artists, military trainers and above all gymnasts wishing to study movements occurring too rapidly for the unassisted eye (Lehmann 1917: 428). Body culture enthusiasts, for their part, were quick to pick up on the potentials of the new technology. Around the same time that Prager was filming *Wege zu Kraft und Schönheit*, one could find picture books that reproduced the stills from filmic sequences of track and field activities shot in slow-motion, such as Julius Sparbier's *Die Leichtathletik in Film und Zeit-*



WEGE ZU KRAFT UND SCHÖNHEIT - Deutschland 1924/25 Regie: Wilhelm Prager
Quelle: Filmmuseum Berlin - Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek

Fig. 6: High jump sequence from “Wege zu Kraft und Schönheit”.

lupe, which included three volumes of images of running, throwing and jumping respectively.

To judge by the frequent use of slow motion in the demonstrations of athletic bodies in *Wege zu Kraft und Schönheit*, Prager, Kaufmann and their associates were clearly aware of the role of filmic technology in visualizing the energetic body. Indeed, as much as anything else, the film is really about this new technology. Not only do the opening credits include a separate listing for the slow-motion cinematographers (Schatzow and Stöcker), but the intertitles also frequently draw the spectator’s attention to the use of slow-motion in filming the body; during one slow-motion sequence demonstrating the leaps of the Russian dancer Tamara Karsavina, for example, we read: “Nur die Zeitlupe kann die ganze Schönheit und Kraft von Karsavinas Kunst vorführen.”

It is hardly by chance that such slow-motion demonstrations focus most frequently on the jump; images of jumping bodies recur throughout the film like a leitmotif. The first of these, occurring towards the beginning of the athletic demonstrations, shows an antelope jumping over a fence. Repeated four times (twice at normal speed and twice in slow motion), the shot of the antelope offers, on the one hand, an implicit reference to Muybridge’s famous horse, suggesting in the process a reconnection, through body culture, to a lost “primitive” vitality. On the other hand, the jumping antelope foreshadows the myriad images of leaping athletes – many shown in slow motion – that will follow: dancers, gymnasts, pole-vaulters, hurdle jumpers, etc. (fig. 6).

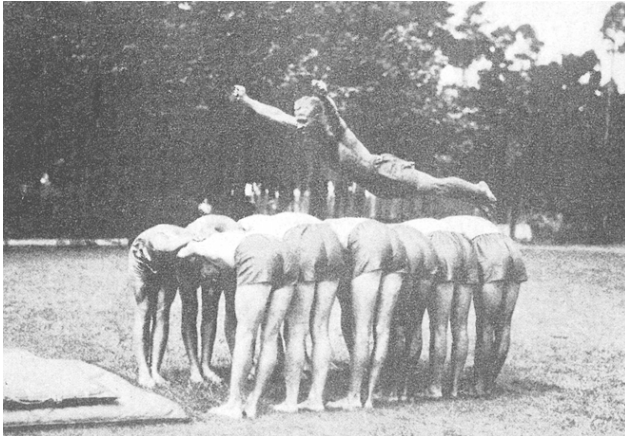


Fig. 7: Athletes from the Berlin Hochschule für Leibesübung performing the Königssprung, from *“Der Querschnitt”* (1928).

The Königssprung sequence represents the apogee, as it were, of this series of gravity-defying bodies. As if to enhance the airborne effect, the filmmakers show many of the leaping warriors from below. Precisely this filmic construction of the jump as an index of energy, however, constitutes the real paradox in Prager and Kaufmann’s filmic reenactment of the Königssprung; for in undertaking their invention of tradition, they could hardly have chosen a more modern code of bodily construction and bodily legibility. This paradox becomes less perplexing, however, if one remembers that the staging of the Königssprung in *Wege zu Kraft und Schönheit*, like all inventions of tradition, was motivated by concerns specific to the cultural and political context in which the film was made. By inscribing the legendary Germanic leap into a complex visual iconography of flying bodies, the film attempted to redress Germany’s humiliation on the athletic and political stage by suggesting a vision of Germanic body as the least susceptible to the laws of gravity and – by extension – the most energetic in an age when “energy” was seen as the key to meeting the demands of industrial life. Prager and Kaufmann’s Germanic warriors were not just mythic heroes; rather, like the athletes that played them, they were above all taking part in a modern symbolic competition.

Epilogue: Königssprung as Nationalist Topos

Although *Wege zu Kraft und Schönheit* offers the best-known representation of the Königssprung, Prager and Kaufmann were hardly alone in their desire to harness the legend for the nationalist imaginary. A photo printed in 1928 in *Der Querschnitt*, for example, shows a member of the Deutsche Hochschule für Leibesübung performing the famous leap over six rows of athletes, who are lined up side by side in imitation of the ancient horses (fig. 7). In 1927, the popular author of body-culture literature, Karl Gühne, published *Der Königssprung. Ein Spiel aus germanischer Vorzeit* as part of its “Turnerbühne” series of short plays for gymnastic clubs. There, the Königssprung once again functions as a guarantor of the historical continuity of Germanic identity, as the young hero Aribert pulls off the leap over six horses before the eyes of his father Hugbald, who (as the reader learns in the dialogue) was known in his own youth as one of the few warriors able to execute the Königssprung. There, too, the Königssprung appears as a singular training for the defense of a Germanic identity against a threatening Latinate enemy; while watching the athletic competition, Hugbald recounts the famous Germanic victory against Varus in the Teutoburgerwald to his younger son Sero, adding: “Germania braucht an allen Orten / der starken Söhne starke Wehr. / Sonst machen römische Kohorten / uns unser Dasein bitterschwer” (Gühne: 6).

Given this status of the Königssprung as a key nationalist topos, one should hardly be surprised to find it enjoying a continued popularity under National Socialism. In one 1939 study, for example, the Nazi anthropologist and classical scholar Paul Hans Stemmermann set out to demonstrate the feasibility of the legendary leap. Stemmermann claimed to have calculated the total height and length of six average ancient Germanic horses placed side by side and found the result to match almost precisely the German record for the high and long jump set in 1926 at 1.6 meters high and 3.2 meters long (Hunke 1941). Like preceding representations of the Königssprung from the Weimar period, Stemmermann’s experiment was meant to demonstrate the persistence of ancient Germanic prowess in modern German athletes and, by extension, Germany’s superiority in a modern-day struggle of nations.

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