

### Sport SF and the Male Body: Estranged (Non-)Consent in Swanwick's "The Dead"



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There is now a near-universal consensus in the sociology of sport that athletics may be wholly characterized in terms of hegemonic masculinity. From this perspective, for male athletes “see[ing] the body as an instrument often accompanies violence expressed toward others and ultimately toward oneself” (Lesko 160). Moreover, as Michael A. Messner suggests, the threat is always present that this competitive violence will occur beyond the bounds of the sport spectacle, because “the culture of the athletic team constructs sexist attitudes and fears that sometimes result in assaults against women” (6). In my recent (2019) book *Sport and Monstrosity in Science Fiction*, I challenged this conflation of sport, masculinity, and violence by reading the athlete as an embodied and monstrous Other. Here I would like to augment this argument by inverting the gaze of the critic of sport and suggesting that the sweeping sociological equation of sport and violence toward oneself and others elides the very notion of the agency and consent of those participating. In this elision, too, the spectator is implicated, as the gaze that watches sport may not always be the male gaze. But this is no less problematic, especially when the sporting spectacle coincides with the issue of sexual violence. In highlighting the ways that consent is estranged in sport criticism, the speculative mechanism of the various genres of the fantastic are particularly useful. This brief article will first examine this estranged consent in sport sf through an examination of Michael Swanwick's 1996 short story “The Dead” and then make connections to more recent fantastic media.

Nominated for a Hugo in 1997, “The Dead” follows the perspective of Donald, a publicist being “headhunted” by his former lover Courtney to work at a new company creating reanimated corpse workers, or as Courtney puts it, “postanthropic biological resources” (Swanwick). There are essentially three scenes, the first being a dinner meeting setting the stage for the latter two, which are the most important here. The centerpiece of the story is a bare-knuckle boxing match—a combat sport in which violence is central—between a living fighter and one of the “resources” being produced by Courtney's company from African bodies. Donald finds this fight particularly difficult to stomach, but it pales in comparison to the final scene of the story. After Courtney rebuffs Donald's advances, he returns to his room to find she has left him an undead sex slave. Horrified, he goes to Courtney's room to confront her, only to find she has her own undead sex slave, which she nonchalantly tells him to “cultivate a taste for” (Swanwick). While the story is about many things, not least of which are labor conditions under a racist, globalist corporatism, it also artfully combines sport and sexuality in ways that allow the reader and critic to parse out an all-too-common elision of consent by presenting them in estranged, hyperbolic form.

It is worth noting up front, however, that this article does not mean to equate the violences faced by various genders, nor does it mean to negate or distract from the prevalence of sexual violence faced by women specifically. But I do argue that the majority of critical treatments of sexual violence, even in sf/f studies, discuss it in a gender-specific manner that borders on a problematic essentialism every bit as much as sociology's appraisal of sport. As Brian Attebery put it (rather tongue-in-cheek) in *Decoding Gender in Science Fiction*, "Men, it turns out, belong to the sex that rapes and abuses" (7). More recent examples from various fantastic media bear out that a gender-specificity in popular and critical responses to sexual violence in fantastic tales has left us with blind spots regarding our appraisals of men and the male body in speculative genres, as well as the male (athlete's) ability to consent. Thus, the second half of the article will offer brief treatments of non-consent in more recent fantastic media including fantasy (*Game of Thrones*), historical romance (*Bridgerton*), and horror (*Midsommar*). In each, one finds a similar coincidence of sport or games, even violent sport, entered into willingly, paired with the often-violent and coercive violation of a man's consent. This coincidence, I argue, reveals the importance of sport sf in increasing our awareness of our critical elision of male consent and a lingering essentialism regarding gendered sexual violence.

### **Zombie Sports and Rape**

Combat sports—U.S.-style football in particular—are an especially popular topic among critics of sport, whether from the academic sociologist or the journalist. Recent discussions surrounding concussions and Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE) are only the latest in a long story of imagining an end to—even a banishment of—the “barbaric” violence of combat sports such as football, a tradition in which sf has played no small part. George R.R. Martin, whose work is discussed more below, once even wrote a short story called “The Last Super Bowl.” But for all the discussion of boycotting and banishing combat sports in light of CTE, or the effects of these sports upon participants, there has not been a mass exodus from the games. Partly, the continued popularity of combat sports may be due to the fact that, despite the sensationalism of recent reporting, the effects of head trauma have been known and studied, especially in combat athletes, since at least the 1920s. Popular films such as the Rocky series, for example, have depicted the condition long known to the boxing world as *dementia pugilistica* since the 1980s. In such depictions of the boxer continuing to engage in the sport despite the warnings of doctors, one might find precisely the image of “hegemonic masculinity” that sociologists emphasize. Yet I contend that this position is also ironically paternalistic and that it prefigures the athlete's consent to participate in combat sports in the negative context of hegemony. Symbolically, it is the spectator, the critic, and even the academic who post-facto creates the conditions by which athletes are denied the possibility of consenting.

This denial plays out in interesting ways within Swanwick's short story. The central bare-knuckle boxing match, which Donald finds such an “alienating experience,” is between a “grey-skinned and modestly muscled” zombie and a “big black guy with classic African features twisted slightly out of true...[who] had gang scars on his chest” (Swanwick). Interestingly, this

racialization reverses the critical histories of zombies and their origins in Haitian slavery mapped by Lauro and Luckhurst. But this reversal is not what alienates Donald. Rather, he is far more affected by the lack of human response from the zombie fighter, who “stayed methodical, calm, serene, relentless” (Swanwick). How disorienting such a combat athlete must be to Donald, or indeed to all of us, conditioned to expect an essentially masculine violence? In other ways, however, this fight fits a larger paradigm of the corporatized sporting environment and, given the zombie’s inability to consent, resonates with frequent criticisms of revenue-generating college athletics. However, it is also worth considering Donald’s appraisal of the living athlete, who “must’ve known early on that it was hopeless, that he wasn’t going to win, but he’d refused to take a fall. He had to be pounded into the ground. He went down raging, proud and uncomplaining” (Swanwick). While the rage might fit our expectations, it is uncomplaining that should trouble us more. Herein lies the hegemonic acquiescence that sport studies would signal, but that elsewhere one might also simply read as consent. The latter is all the clearer when one considers the final scene of the story.

In this story, sport in the science fictional context of zombie boxing serves to highlight the notion of consent being negotiated whenever the undead and sexuality collide. Steven Jones has written that “Zombie-rape involves a power relationship, then, since the zombie’s desires are negated, and the violator’s are prioritized. This power bias is evinced by the rapist’s perception that only their desire is a valid expression of subjectivity” (528). Approaching “The Dead” from the typical perspective on sexual violence might focus on Donald’s and Courtney’s prior sexual encounters in which “there was always this urge to get her to do something she didn’t like” and he would talk her into something because “when she was aroused, she got pliant” (Swanwick). And it is clear that in these moments Donald is doing precisely what Jones suggests above—prioritizing his own desire and subjective experience over even an acknowledgement of Courtney’s sentient desires. But this memory also sets the stage for the story’s later reversal of power. In the final dramatic confrontation, Donald yells at Courtney, but she is not alone. She is with Bruno, “a muscular brute, pumped, ripped, and as black as the fighter I’d seen go down earlier that night.” And when Donald becomes violent, Courtney orders Bruno to hurt him: “In the body, Bruno. He has to look good in a business suit” (Swanwick). It is important to note that power has shifted, but not disappeared—even the violence of the scene is subject to a corporate power structure, Donald’s body and all of ours being a worthy sacrifice. Thus, it is from the perspective of power relations that one should appraise Bruno as what he is: a sex slave.

Interestingly, the story calls attention to Bruno’s lack of ability to consent rather directly, and via the least likely of speakers: Donald. As he screams at Courtney, “That thing’s just an obedient body. There’s nothing there—no passion, no connection, just physical presence.” And to this, Courtney calmly responds, “We have equity now.” The latter statement is clearly suggestive of her supposed pliancy during her and Donald’s prior sexual encounters, and once again underscores the distinction between mere bodily presence and active consent on which the image of zombie rape relies. But in figuring this moment as a kind of rape revenge narrative in which the act of

vengeance is more rape, this statement also echoes the worst of corporate liberalisms, power relations now “equitable” but still very much traditional power structures. I would argue that while many critics would rightly recognize the economic power relations at play—that is, patriarchy may be negated in Courtney’s equity, but Courtney is still Donald’s boss and a corporate reality still reigns—the interpersonal structures remain elusive in criticism. Jones, for example, examines the film *Deadgirl*, in which two teenage boys keep a female zombie as a sex slave, against a cultural history of misogyny. As Jones writes, “The female zombie’s monstrosity thereby concretizes discourses that have been employed to suggest that women are ‘animalistic,’ or lacking in rational control. This discourse is also bound into sex inasmuch as women are presumed to be unable to control their bodily urges” (530). But are these not the same charges leveled at the male athlete with which this article began, that they are mere brutes, animalistic in their violence and unable to control it outside the sporting arena? And as Swanwick’s story has demonstrated, the athlete’s body is also objectified and often no less problematically sexualized.

Once again, the point is not to suggest that the critical histories of sexuality are similar or equally fraught between men and women or non-binary genders. Rather I suggest that popular and critical discourses surrounding sexual violence, including in studies of popular culture, tend to focus and essentialize the gendered power relations surrounding sexual violence. All too often, this formula is oversimplified such that perpetrator equates to man and survivor to woman, and without taking into consideration other aspects of identity. Yet it is possible to capitalize on and extend these discourses, to use them in a more expansive manner. This is particularly true, as Jones also notes that “films such as *Deadgirl* implicate the viewer (male or female) as part of an ideological system producing such attitudes [i.e. dominant, toxic masculinity] in young people: our unspoken complicity supports these social biases” (533). It is even possible to note this unspoken complicity in cultural arenas such as sports, which are supposedly and problematically characterized as hypermasculine and violent. The speculative nature of Swanwick’s “The Dead,” its inclusion of the zombie whose rape is also gendered but in the context of “equity” among genders, opens a critical possibility for us to reexamine our discourses surrounding sexual violence in the speculative genres. The final section, therefore, will further point out the need for this expansion across genres, as well as the recurrence of this combination of sport, speculation, and sexual violence.

### **Dukes and Squires and Sacrificial Lambs**

One recent piece of fantastic media that appears to achieve more than equity in its doling out of violence is Ari Aster’s 2019 folk horror film *Midsommar*, which tells the story of a group of American tourists who find their way to a traditional Swedish village and are sacrificed one by one to the old ways of a Harga cult. In the dramatic final scene, the main character, Dani, wins a maypole competition and is crowned the May Queen, only to immediately “[discover] that her lover has been unfaithful” and preside over his sacrifice (Kennedy). It is this apparent gendered reversal—which, it is important to note, combines a sporting competition with violence—that had critics such as Caitlin Kennedy celebrating it as a feminist masterpiece that “celebrates the

empathy and communication shared by women, [and] punishes a more masculine idea of lacking empathy.” Yet even more specifically, the Harga cult is celebrated because in it “women hold all sexual power; they choose their mates, they use ancient magic to sway outcomes” (Kennedy). It is well worth considering that final scene, however, with the notion of consent in mind. The “ancient magic” that critics see as a symbol of women’s sexual power is, in that final scene, a drug given to Dani’s unlikeable boyfriend Christian before a pregnancy ritual in which he is surrounded by women. That he is drugged should be enough for criticism to recognize that he is not a “cheater” and that this is a rape scene as he cannot consent, but in case that was too subtle, one of the women can be seen behind him forcibly pushing him into the woman who was to be impregnated. Much like Bruno in “The Dead,” he is shorn of his ability to consent, reduced to “just physical presence.” On one hand, the film may be read as a gendered reversal of the equation of sport with a violent masculinity that rapes. However, audiences clearly missed that point, as they cannot escape a stereotypical appraisal of sport and an essentialized gender paradigm that will not allow women to be perpetrators. Violence, even in speculative sport, seems to flow only one way.

By stark contrast, much has been written about sexual violence in recent fantasies such as HBO’s *Game of Thrones* series, based on George R.R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* books. Entire critical volumes are dedicated to violence and rape in these series. This attention is due to the fact that, as Sylwia Borowska-Szerszun summarizes, “Although *A Song of Ice and Fire* features female characters that are much less stereotypical than many fantasy heroines, its script of rape follows a dominant pattern that features women as passive and helpless victims of violence” (17). While I would not dispute the recreation, even amplification, of rape culture in the *Game of Thrones* universe, nor the claim that sexual violence is “directed primarily at female characters,” this is hardly universal (4). Some criticism has noted, for example, the treatment of Theon Greyjoy by Ramsay Bolton in the context of sexual violence. But in the context of this article, the example of Lancel Lannister is perhaps more fitting. In both book and television series, Lancel is introduced in the context of combat sport: as the inept squire of Robert Baratheon during the tournament of the King’s Hand, given that service only because he is Cersei’s cousin. Yet later, in a moment that does not occur in the books, Lancel interrupts a conversation between Tyrion and Cersei, who tells him to “Stop talking. Get back into bed.” And even later, a conversation between Tyrion and Lancel in both book and show confirms that Lancel was not given the option of consenting to this sex, that he was ordered by the fearsome Tywin Lannister “to obey her in everything” (Martin 447). Even without Tywin’s order, Cersei has a body count as high as anyone’s in the series and is a Queen whose authority is unquestioned. Moreover, it is Cersei in both series that offers the aphorism that “when you play the game of thrones, you win or you die”—it is she who characterizes the political maneuvering of the series as a violent game, one that she is ready to win in order, like Courtney in “The Dead,” to achieve equity. Once again, we find the convergence of the sporting environment and the obviation of male consent to be largely glossed over by criticism.

But perhaps the most recognizable of recent examples of this convergence was in the first season (2020) of the Netflix historical romance *Bridgerton*, based on the 2000 novel *The Duke*

*and I* by Julia Quinn. Noted in particular for its inclusive casting, Anne M. Thell wrote of it that it “is an eminently watchable series that obviously struck a chord with the escapist needs of our lives in 2020. With its pop colours, strong cast and brisk pacing, this is the sexy—that is, the Shondaland—version of the Regency marriage market.” That the film, whose speculative nature is evidenced by the inclusive casting and experimentation with history, is meant for titillation is clear from the critical reactions to it. One review headline even declared “It’s Time to Binge *Bridgerton*—82 Million Vibrators Can’t Be Wrong” (Engen). Yet, uniquely, the show also faced critical backlash for its sixth episode, in which the young Daphne, on her honeymoon with the Duke (who does not want to have children), clearly plans and carries out his rape. This moment was noticed partly as a result of pushback that the novel received from the Romance community already in the early aughts. But this latter fact makes the show’s portrayal of the scene all the more challenging to some viewers, which—like Swanwick’s story—even more noticeably dramatizes a white woman raping a black man. However, one other detail is of note in this context. In the following episode, the Duke is shown dealing with the trauma of his rape by engaging in combat sports—both boxing and trap shooting.<sup>1</sup> As in Swanwick’s story, the boxing match in particular stands in as a foil to the rape scene, the active consensual violence of the sport as coping mechanism in contrast to the clear violation of consent. And once again, this convergence should inspire us to rethink our critical trajectories in both our appraisals of sport and of sexual violence in the fantastic genres.

A reading across the fantastic genres allows us to see a certain consistency in their approaches, and that of their critics, towards this convergence of sport and sexual violence. I suggest this consistency and the blind spots it produces are wrapped up with the notion of estrangement. Even within Suvin’s notion of cognitive estrangement within science fiction, the genre was defined by the alternative system: the novum that produces an alternate reality no less complete than our own—Swanwick’s, for example, is a world in which advanced cognitive technology has produced undead slaves and a more totalizing domination of global capitalism over the human body. Interestingly, this systemic approach has become a standard against which fictions such as those examined here are measured and found wanting: if the worlds of fantasy, horror, and sf may offer complete alternatives, then their inclusion of racism, sexism, rape etc. equates to a moral failure or retrenchment of regressive ideology. For example, to Borowska-Szerszun, with “claims of historical authenticity, Martin dismisses any criticism [of rape in *GOT*] irrespective of the fact that the logic of his secondary world does not necessarily need to mirror the logic of a truly historical narrative” (4). What then to make of the historical romance that has otherwise adjusted a history of race? Or of the horror text, with its return of the repressed matriarchy, and their inclusion of rape? Or the zombie boxing match and sex slave? The consistency among these generic examples of the athlete and his rape suggests another totalizing system within our critical approaches to sport, one in which the athlete and his essentialized violent masculinity has already had his ability to consent estranged, subject to his animalistic whims. This system, however, exists within the body of our criticism of these genres and, according to the standards of that very criticism, may be found wanting.

But it does not have to be this way. At a time when conservative legislation in the U.S. and elsewhere is foreclosing on the rights of those with wombs to maintain autonomy over their bodies, it may seem trite to discuss the bodies of athletes, male athletes in particular, and their autonomy over them. Yet I suggest there is a power in the discourse that surrounds sport, in the gaze that watches the sporting competition, and that finds its desires expressed clearly in our fantastic fictions and their criticism. The power to assess the essentially violent nature of a gender within a cultural arena such as sport finds itself uncomfortably aligned in fantastic stories with the desire to dominate sexually, to achieve “equity.” Some of this alignment may be effected to ambivalent (Martin) or even perhaps critical (Swanwick) ends, but some of it is clearly meant to titillate, some in the interest of establishing the “sexual power of women.” And to a certain extent this sexualization exists outside of the fantastic story—the website [balleralert.com](http://balleralert.com), for example, was once a surveillance website meant to track athletes for potential sexual enticement. Even within academic criticism of literature or sociology, we ought to question the discourses of power and dominance that we apply toward the male, athletic body, as it too resonates deeply with rape culture. I suggest that sport sf may even be a useful tool in countering discourses of power that normalize or trivialize non-consent, as long as we acknowledge that each of us potentially belongs to a “gender that rapes and abuses.”

## Notes

1. Some might rightly raise questions about the aptness of “combat sport” to describe trap shooting, as there is no interpersonal violence, though animals do die. However, because sociologists generally argue that sports are a proxy for war and nationalism, I would argue that the presence of firearms itself signals a kind of combat-oriented sporting environment inasmuch as that term has any meaning.

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