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Johnny Weissmuller

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From swimming pools (five Olympic gold medals) to Hollywood, including his appearance in Tarzan, Johnny Weissmuller (1904-1984) became the symbol of America and a transatlantic cultural icon in the inter-war years.

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In the era of "false news" and partial truths, Johnny Weissmuller (1904-1984) is mostly remembered, when he is remembered, as the actor who made Edgar Rice Burroughs' *Tarzan* character world famous. But Janos Weissmuller had a previous notoriety: as a five-time gold medalist for the United States at the 1924 and 1928 Olympics, as a champion freestyle swimmer. Born in Szabadfal, Romania (also known as Freidorf in German, due to the large German population), his "family belonged to the group of *Donauschwaben* (Danube Swabians), who came to the United States after the turn of the twentieth century." [1] Weissmuller used his brother's citizenship documents (his birth certificate, as record keeping was less rigorous in the early 20th century) to avoid questions when he represented the United States in the Olympics. Though truths are partial and often complicated, they still remain truths: the fluid rules of citizenship mean that "facts" need interpretation within a cultural, social, and legal context.

In tracing his biography, of course, it is always an important *caveat* to note that lives are complicated and complex. Public images often belie the individual, everyday lived life of a person, and, as an example, Johnny Weissmuller's 79 years were filled with an array of areas that biographers have sectioned off as discrete from one another: but, at core, one's life remains holistic and interwoven. Biographers, historians and cultural theorists, have characterized Weissmuller's impact on the world in four main ways: he was a champion Olympic-level swimmer; he became a vehicle for promulgating American culture to the world in the 1920s and through the 1940s; he grew into a much revered and admired Hollywood film star; and, in sum, Weissmuller emerged as an American and international cultural icon to millions of citizens throughout the world. A fifth, more personal facet of his life included the fact that he was married five times (some speculate an early, sixth marriage, as well): to Bobbe Arnst, Lupe Velez, Beryl Scott, Allene Gates, and Maria Bauman. As in most life accounts, these seemingly-discrete "bits" weave together to form the whole man.

In fact, theories abound as to the "logical" weavings of his life. For example, he became an international cultural icon, somewhat "feminized" in his portrayal by MGM, but as a leading man emerging during the 1930s, his virile manhood and "available" status (he was married at the time, but this was downplayed) was played up. The logics of Edgar Rice Burroughs' "jungle" versus "civilization" dynamic within the Tarzan books may have imprinted themselves upon Weissmuller: he sought a grounded stability within marriage, yet was attracted to a certain wildness, as exemplified by his volatile marriage to Velez.

Swimming career

Johnny Weissmuller took swimming lessons at Lincoln Park's Fullerton Beach (a bay fed by Lake Michigan) at age eight. He continued to play at swimming and diving on and around the beaches with friends (including "the Rocks" and Ocean Street Beach). He competed, with his friends the Miller boys, at Stanton Park Pool, and began swimming competitively in Chicago at the age of 12 for the YMCA. He "not only won all of his swimming races but also was the champion at running and high jumping." [2]

In the United States in the 1920s—and particularly when the modern Olympic movement was a relatively "youthful" entity, having begun in 1896—there were no "age group" teams to speak of (they came in during the post-WWII 1950s), but Coach Peters, of the Hamilton Club, asked him to join their team. Weissmuller's swimming potential was eventually noticed by William Bachrach, who was then the coach of the Illinois Athletic Club (IAC) swim team. In 1920, at age 17, Weissmuller "auditioned" for the IAC, swimming a 100-yard "trial" for Coach Bill Bachrach. He later admitted his form was atrocious, and related that "Bachrach told me to swim for form and not for speed. Throughout my career I swam for form. Speed came as a result of it." [3]

According to David Fury's biography of Weissmuller, he trained and internalized the lessons for the crawl stroke Bachrach taught him for eleven months without any competition. Bachrach had him isolate his arm stroke, mindful of keeping his elbows high and bent; not over-reaching (and crossing over) in the catch phase; remembering to pull, then push; and constantly being reminded to "relax" during the recovery phase. He emulated his diving start from a teammate, Olympic gold-medallist (1920 Antwerp) in the 400-meter crawl, Norman Ross, [4] and his turns from watching Olympian gold-medallist backstroker and freestyler Harry Hebner, who won three medals over the 1908, 1912, and 1920 Olympiads. [5] His six-beat flutter kick, an improvement over his admission that "my legs were used in a 'mongrel' way," [6] was an adaptation from the great Duke Kahanamoku (named "the father of modern surfing"), an Olympic gold medallist freestyle sprinter from Hawaii. [7]

The famous Johnny Weissmuller freestyle stroke was made of many factors: his long (6' 3"), skinny but powerful frame, based on his genetics; his ability to concentrate on a singular goal; his eclectic role modelling of other successful athletes' styles; his coachability, and the brilliance of his coach, Bill Bachrach. But, in Fury, he is quoted as saying, "'It's the greatest secret of my success. Relaxing at the same time you are swimming at maximum speed'". [8] He claimed that Bachrach drilled that principle into him: it carried him into a career in Hollywood film, and relaxation—and at least appearing relaxed under pressure—seems to have been a philosophical thread and goal that ran throughout his whole life.

As a swimmer, Weissmuller was said to be a "natural": that is, he was superior (and enhanced through training these capacities) at comprehending what Counsilman terms "three main sources for stimuli": "the feelings of touch or pressure, the vestibular sensations that inform him [sic] of his body position, and the kinaesthetic sensations that arise in his muscle tendons and joints." In sum, Weissmuller, according to his coach Ernst Bachrach and "Doc" Counsilman both, possessed "this nebulous quality of *feel for the water*." [9] If he had to work too hard for this feel, it would have undermined the concepts he valued so highly—and learning to relax and to emphasize "naturalness" were lessons he carried through his career in Hollywood and golfing.

Johnny Weissmuller, touted for his six-beat style flutter kick and his planing effects in the "American crawl," as a member of the United States Olympic teams of 1924 and 1928, won five gold medals. In the 1924 Paris Olympics, he was a member of the bronze medal men's water polo team. But he also set an Olympic record in the 100-meter freestyle race (time: 59.0 seconds), with Duke and Sam Kahanamoku finishing second and third for an American sweep of the medals. The 7000-strong Parisian crowd cheered for nearly three minutes for his 1.4-second margin of victory. Weissmuller also won the gold in the 400-meter freestyle, beating Swede Arne Borg in an Olympic record 5:04.2—in an extremely close race. His third gold medal at the Paris Olympics was as the anchor for the 4x200 meter freestyle relay. The USA team's closest competition was from "Boy" Charlton-lead Australia: the USA men's relay team time was a new world record of 9:53.4. In the 1924 Paris Olympics, Johnny Weissmuller was the emergent star, and

the USA's men's and women's swim teams dominated the field: "An analysis of the Olympic games swimming events show the great superiority of the American swimmers, both men and women, over all their rivals." [10]



Johnny Weissmuller in Paris for the Olympic Games (1924)

Source: Library of Congress

The incredible American sweep of the medals in the men's 100-meter freestyle and the overall dominating performance of the USA swimming and diving teams at the Paris Olympiad brought Johnny Weissmuller into high relief for Europeans. In a retrospective of the Olympics, *Tri-Color Magazine*'s Norman Ross, wrote: "Johnny Weissmuller, of course, was the outstanding star" in the swimming events, "winning both the 100 and 400-meter free style swims and holding down the anchor position on the relay." [11] Weissmuller continued breaking records in between Olympics: for example, in August of 1926, in rather picaresque language, *Time Magazine* reported:

> *"John Weissmuller, ferry-finned pool-plasher of the Illinois A. C., is swimming faster than ever before. Last week he leaped into the Miramar pool, Manhattan, lalloped nine times up and down, clipped 1 1/5 sec. from his own world's record for the 220-yd. dash by traversing the distance in 2 min. 14 2/5 sec."* [38]

He was never defeated in official swimming races in his career—he became a symbol of the modernist era, a success-story of American immigration.

Returning to the United States, Weissmuller continued training with the Illinois Athletic Club, pointing for the 1928 Amsterdam Olympiad. In 1927, he set a new world record in the 100-yard freestyle (51 seconds): this record held for nine years; he set the American record for the 100-yard freestyle (49.8). Four years later, he won gold medals in the 100-meter freestyle (in a time of 58.6), and on the 800-meter freestyle relay team (4 x 200-m freestyle relay). The relay team improved its Olympic time by 17.2 seconds over the 1924 effort.

His success and total dominance in swimming—he was never beaten in a sanctioned race—lead to his being named 1922 American Swimmer of the Year and 1923 Athlete of the Year (given by the US-based Helms Athletic Foundation in 1949); being inducted into the Helms Swimming Hall of Fame (in 1949); and named the "Greatest Swimmer of the Half-Century" in 1950 by the Associated Press and the Sportswriters of America. He was also the first inductee into the Swimming Hall of Fame in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, in 1965, and received an honorary sixth gold medal at the 1972 Munich Olympiad (the Games where Mark Spitz won seven gold medals). Weissmuller is quoted as having said, "I was better than Mark Spitz is." [12] He went on the qualify that statement: the rules for turns had changed, so that swimmers did not have to touch the wall with their hands; lane line technology had improved, to dampen the echo effect of waves in a pool; pool technology (and starting blocks) had changed, to advantage swimmers' times: "it all adds up," he said.

Symbol of Americana

Johnny Weissmuller came to fame through his swimming prowess. In Europe, his dominance of Olympic swimming at the Paris and Amsterdam Olympiads established him, during the era of the "Roaring 20s," as a prototypical (and somewhat deliberately stereotypical) American: leisured, seemingly carefree, (unspoken) *white*, and representative of an upper-middle class sport. The United States State and Commerce Departments, Dyreson convincingly demonstrates, worked together in 1923 to "spread American products and American lifestyles around the world through sport". [13] And Weissmuller's extraordinary success at the 1924 Paris Olympics—indeed, all of the American swim/aquatics team's success—fitted in nicely with the scheme: his four medals brought him European, and ultimately world-wide, recognition.

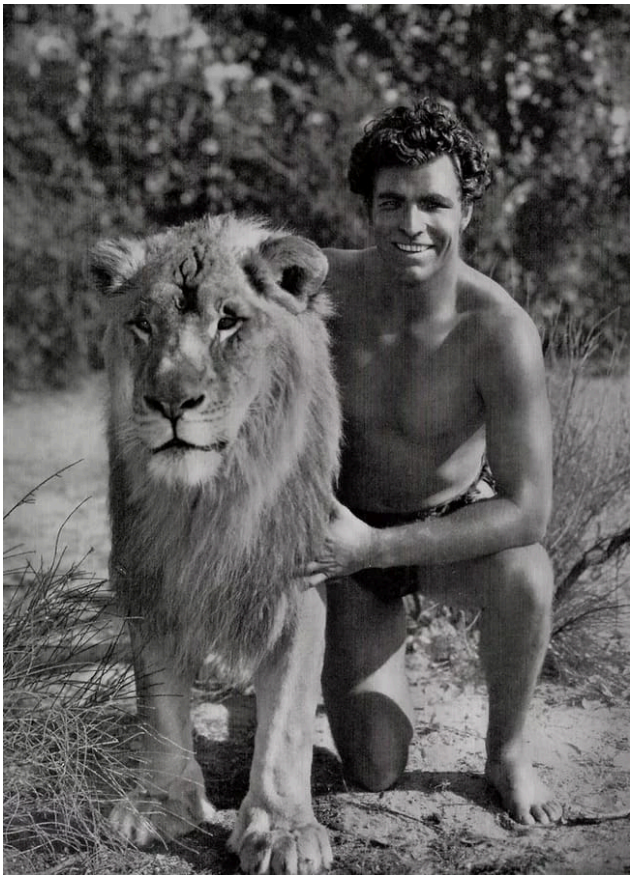
The United States government plan was predicated on the success of their athletes on the playing field, the track, and, in Weissmuller's case, the swimming pool. Thus, much was invested in this new form of "soft manifest destiny". In attempting to open "new markets by promoting American Olympic teams as international advertisements for American ways of life" [14] , athletic success and correspondence with stereotypical "American ways of life" were dependent upon successful young American athletes—like rowers Benjamin Spock and James Stillman Rockefeller, swimmer Gertrude Ederle, tennis players Helen Mills and Helen Wightman, and swimmers Duke and Sam Kahanamoku—and of course, Johnny Weissmuller. Their excellence provided the linchpin that held together the more overt capitalist motives of the State and Commerce Departments and the American Olympic Committee.

At the same time, the eighth summer (modern) Olympiad "testified to the growing worldwide appeal of the Olympic Games. These were the first Olympic Games to use an Olympic motto and to conclude with a closing ceremony and the raising of three flags, those of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the host country, and the next host country." [15]

Author and former sportswriter for the *New York Daily News* Paul Gallico called the 1920s the "Golden Decade," and included Weissmuller in his list of thirteen "Golden People" within this period. He wrote that "The era alone would have to be set down as unique, since it was practically the last time we believed in anything or anyone, including the happy ending." [16]

It was the sense of this affective feeling, the deliberate and determined sense of hope after the First World War on which the State and Commerce Departments—and the American Olympic Committee—meant to capitalize. As Dyreson puts it, "Johnny Weissmuller represented the best-selling brand produced by the American Olympic industry. He promoted American civilization as the embodiment of the common belief that sport produced social capital." [17] Weissmuller, of course, was more in the right place at the right time: but his Olympic success served to demonstrate what the State Department was pushing.

His actual Olympic successes, the deliberate and intentional push for synergies between sport and promotion of "the American brand" by the federal government, and his non-plussed personality helped to shape Weissmuller into a sporting cultural icon—in the jargon of the age, the "bee's knees," the "cat's meow," the "eel's hip"—representing the United States. But the linkages between sporting success and the cultural industry of Hollywood cinema, deliberately connected early in the decade of the 1920s, continued unabated through the Great Depression and early war years. Olympians Duke Kahanamoku and Buster Crabbe also worked in film.



Buster Crabbe in *Tarzan the Fearless* (Robert F. Hill, 1933). German advertisement (Paramount, Ross Verlag)

Source: Library of Congress

It is interesting to note that General Douglas MacArthur became the head of the American Olympic Association (AOA, earlier the American Olympic Committee, later the United States Olympic Committee) after then-president William Christopher Prout suddenly died a year out from the 1928 Olympics. MacArthur told the United States Olympic Team in Amsterdam about individual and the country's manifest destiny:

> *"We have not come so far just to lose gracefully, but rather to win, and win decisively. I rode them hard all along the line. Athletes are among the most temperamental of all persons, but I stormed and pleaded and cajoled. We have not come 3,000 miles just to lose gracefully."* [39]

Of course, this approach, by an up-and-coming general of the Army who had aspirations to the Presidency, fell right in line with the State and Commerce Departments' edicts. According to Lucas (1994), "the general's approach to these Olympian Games was to treat them as a national crisis, a patriotic 'war without weapons'." [18]

Weissmuller's victories in the 1924 and 1928 Olympics propelled him into the European and American public consciousness, but they only formed a segue into what would turn out to be his most celebrated recognition of his life. As a 24-year old five-time Olympic gold medalist, Johnny Weissmuller began to look around to what he might do to earn a living.

The "rules" for amateurism (particularly for the Amateur Athletic Union, the Illinois Athletic Club, and the Olympics) precluded him from directly earning any income from his notoriety. Like many athletes of the time period, Weissmuller was "unofficially" sponsored by the members of the Illinois Athletic Club: the membership in the club elevated his status, in a socio-economic sense, yet his livelihood was all contingent upon his health and continued success in the water: it was precarious "employment":

> *"His spending money, the clothes he wore, every meal that he ate in a restaurant, were paid for by William Bachrach and the I.A.C. Wealthy financial supporters of the IAC donated money to the club; because of Johnny's immense popularity, there was enough money flowing into the club to take care of the athletes."* [40]

The system of wealthy benefactors providing patronage for talented athletes was a common method of circumventing the letter, if not the spirit, of the ethos of amateurism.

When he officially "retired" as an amateur swimmer, the IAC gave him a farewell dinner, which included speeches by C. F. Biggert, president of the club; Coach Bill Bachrach; Athletic Committee Chairman George T. Donoghue; former Athletic Committee Chairman William Gibbons Uffendell; local Otters President John Banghart, who gave Weissmuller a "substantial present inscribed upon a slip of paper that will make him welcome at any bank teller's window"; [19] Frank W. Blankley, Chairman of the Bath Committee; and Andrew McNally II (of Rand-McNally map-making fame), who sang Weissmuller's praises. Johnny, McNally said, "has always conducted himself as a gentleman, always been a good fellow in the highest meaning of that term. He complimented Weissmuller upon his discipline, his strict obedience". [20]

It was a typical male club send-off, with promises of futures sewn into the social capital Weissmuller had earned through his Olympic achievements. Somehow, the son of an abandoned family—his father left his mother in 1916—and the boy who was born in Romania (his citizenship wasn't questioned for the Olympics, as he took on the papers of his brother), parlayed his deficits into one of the most world-recognized names in international swimming.

After the 1928 Amsterdam Olympiad, and through Coach Bachrach, he "dabbled briefly in vaudeville-inspired water shows." [21] In 1929, he became a spokesperson, model, and representative for BVD underwear and swimwear. [22] The elision from international sports star to Hollywood star had already begun, in some ways, when he cameoed as "Adonis" in Paramount's *Glorifying the American Girl* (1929); he also appeared in "*Crystal Champions*, a series of short films profiling American Olympic champions," produced by Grantland Rice. [23] These preliminary efforts were to form the basis for his even-greater worldwide recognition as Tarzan in the *Tarzan* films.

Hollywood

> *"somewhere inside the roar and the mighty muscles*
>
> *Death approaches."*
>
> *—Noel Rico, "On hearing of the ailing Johnny Weissmuller," 1981.*

The story goes that Weissmuller was swimming laps in the Hollywood Athletic Club (HAC) when screenwriter Cyril Hume, who was coincidentally working for MGM on a Tarzan movie script, "discovered" him. What made Hume think this swimming and diving man could play Tarzan? It is said that "when he saw Weissmuller's powerful athletic build and still-blazing speed through the water," [24] Hume was certain he had found his Tarzan. Largely, his intuition was based on Weissmuller's body: he embodied the stereotypical visual of what Hume (and, it turned out, many others) thought was Edgar Rice Burroughs' Tarzan. As a swimmer, Weissmuller had what was seen as a classical physicality: he had played Adonis (really, posed as) in *Glorifying the American Girl*, and, even though "talkies" were the most recent mode of filmmaking, visual embodiment for characterization was still the dominant way of bringing the written word to film. As with actresses of the increasingly-glamorized era of filmmaking, Weissmuller's primary attraction to Hollywood was his visual: for studio photographs, he was portrayed as somewhat androgynous, with a glamorized face and body.



Johnny Weissmuller in *Tarzan The Ape Man* (Woodbridge Strong Van Dyke II, 1932)

Source: Library of Congress

All told, he made twelve Tarzan films: *Tarzan the Ape Man* (1932), *Tarzan and His Mate* (1934), *Tarzan Escapes* (1936), *Tarzan Finds a Son* (1939), *Tarzan's Secret Treasure* (1941), *Tarzan's New York Adventure* (1942), *Tarzan Triumphs* (1943), *Tarzan's Desert Mystery* (1943), *Tarzan and the Amazons* (1945), *Tarzan and the Leopard Woman* (1946), *Tarzan and the Huntress* (1947), *Tarzan and the Mermaids* (1948). The first six films were produced by MGM, the second (and more cheaply-produced titles) six by RKO. His *Tarzan* persona was strictly controlled by MGM: he was "loaned out" to Billy Rose for three "Aquacades". He made sixteen more films, this time in the *Jungle Jim* series, and some assorted cameo appearances.

After the first, highly-praised film (*Tarzan the Ape Man*) achieved resounding financial success for MGM, a second was planned. Weissmuller received great reviews, but his "acting" was rather constrained, and, as Tarzan, his dialogue was minimalist. He was, admittedly, not an actor with great range, but the films were meant to be action films, and the simple plot lines were balanced with romantic interest between Tarzan and Jane, played by Maureen O'Sullivan.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the Spaghetti Western and the "classically-inflected action films [which] constitute a major cinematic form" based in Greco-Roman cultural norms [25] reflected some of the traditions, industry standards, and strategies of *Tarzan* films. Producer Sol Lesser (who later produced the lesser-admired RKO *Tarzan* films) expressed one key element to his *Tarzan*-produced films:

> *"Tarzan is an international character and about 75 per cent of the film grosses came from foreign countries during the period I was producing the films. Their demands were for action, not words. Too much dialogue would only serve to slow up a Tarzan picture and weaken its strongest appeal to the foreign theatregoer—the universal understanding of action and pantomime."* [41]

Much like the Spaghetti Westerns, the Greco-Roman *peplum* genre [26] (aka, "sword and sandal" films), and the "action" cartoons that were easily dubbed in (like, more recently, *Power Rangers*), the Tarzan films relied on a formulaic emphasis on action, not dialogue. Dubbing in from English would reduce long speeches to comedic effect (as in the *peplum* genre).

However, the resounding success of the MGM *Tarzan* enterprises ensured that Weissmuller would be typecast throughout his whole career. MGM would not release him to do any other films: they wanted to protect the almost-mythical relationship of Weissmuller to Tarzan. Even when rights for the cycle of the so-called "MGM Series" of six films, characterized by the 1932-1942 Johnny Weissmuller, Maureen O'Sullivan, and eventually Johnny Sheffield, were sold to Sol Lesser, this tight control confining Weissmuller to action/cartoon, children's B movies. In fact, Cheatwood states that:

> *"Within the [MGM] studio the Tarzan movies were progressively seen as children's fare and non-characteristic of the tone or maturity of the earlier films. Externally, World War II caused the loss of foreign markets which made up around 50% of the market for these films."* [42]

One of Cheatwood's main points—that the Tarzan series itself is remarkable in its singularity of product, longevity, and adaptations to market demands—could also be applied to Johnny Weissmuller's own career in Hollywood.

As he became world-famous to generations of sporting enthusiasts through the 1920s, he unselfconsciously reshaped his image during the 1930s and 1940s. But even within his Tarzan film-six, making (12 films), the first were viewed as somewhat more complex characterizations than the latter six, which were more formulaic and where the Tarzan character became more uni-dimensional, more cartoonish.

This trend, according to Cheatwood, reflects MGM and RKO's financial concerns more than any artistic or aesthetic concerns. RKO sought out a family and youth-oriented, more cheaply-produced, product, meant to create income streams by engaging an action-hungry, youthful market. MGM felt that the *Tarzan* cycle was at an end: RKO saw the films as an opportunity to produce films cheaply, and made a profit. Having played Tarzan for six films, frustrated with little dialogue in many of the films, Weissmuller was, nevertheless, a willing accomplice to RKO's—and Sol Lesser's—plans.



Capture from *Tarzan's Secret Treasure* (Richard Thorpe, 1941)

Source: Library of Congress

Simultaneous to this shift from adult to youthful *Tarzan* incarnations was a cultural shift (as evidenced by the tightening "moral" codes surrounding Hollywood films) which worked to restrict the way males were portrayed on film. In a compelling work examining Hollywood photographic studio shots (as well as other "publicity" photos), Willis-Tropea makes the case that Weissmuller was caught on the cusp of filmic, strategic transitions from a more fluid masculinity to portrayals of more rigid masculinity.

For example, the earlier MGM Series' *Tarzan* films, coming Post-Depression, "began offering models of more defined, traditional gender roles" where "strength, virility, and power [were] the highest standards for manliness". [27] In films of this time, reflecting "America's economic, political, and social discontent, formerly upheld values of honesty, hard work, chastity, and unquestioned patriotism were trumped by the individual's physical and psychic survival at any cost". [28] Thus, the transition from softer-imaged—and arguably more complex—leading man roles (dominant in the 1920s) to clearly-discriminated masculinities was reflected in Hollywood film making.

Much of Weissmuller's image was "constructed" by his studio management. Just as he listened to Coach Bachrach while a competitive swimmer, he remained highly "coachable". Thus, it was not surprising that, in order to be Tarzan—a leading man—the focus on his body and physical image (including voice lessons to "deepen" his voice) were paramount:

> *"The bodily focus, rhinoplasty, make-up skills, and fashion spread all attest to the precarious balance of gendered characterization that surrounded Weissmuller over the course of his Hollywood career. Sexualized, objectified, and celebrated as a body in a manner typically reserved for actresses, Weissmuller encountered the experience of being 'glamorized' just as he served as an icon of white male masculinity."* [43]

Later, as the cultural codes shifted and the *Tarzan* films morphed towards family and juvenile vehicles, Weissmuller, Willis-Tropea argues, portrayed two forms of idealized masculinity: "the 'active, virile warrior type' and 'the graceful and more or less feminized ephebe'", which "provid[ed] the possibility of both a 'masculinized' and a 'feminized' masculinity". [29] The framing of Weissmuller, Willis-Tropea contends, is a cinematic representation of these two types: Weissmuller's lack of dialogue reinforced the impression that he was both active agent (powerful, virile, carrying a knife, dominant in the jungle) and passive innocent (representative of idealized nature).

He continued playing Tarzan until 1948 (*Tarzan and the Mermaids*), and appeared in a cameo role in *Stage Door Canteen* (1943), and in a Paramount film (with Buster Crabbe), *Swamp Fire* (1946). He then married Allene Gates, his fourth wife, and they honeymooned in London, where he combined performing in a "new British 'Aquashow' from February 23^rd through March 27^th [1948]." [30]

Weissmuller had arranged a production partnership with Sam Katzman and William Berke to make "Jungle Jim" low-budget films for Columbia Pictures, with Weissmuller starring in the title role. Weissmuller starred in sixteen "Jungle Jim" films: *Jungle Jim* (1948), *The Lost Tribe* (1949), *Captive Girl* (1950), *Mark of the Gorilla* 1950), *Pygmy Island* (1950), *Fury of the Congo* (1951), *Jungle Manhunt* (1951), *Jungle Jim in the Forbidden Land* (1952), *Voodoo Tiger* (1952), *Savage Mutiny* (1953), *Valley of the Headhunters* (1953), *Killer Ape* (1953), *Jungle Man-Eaters* (1954), *Cannibal Attack* (1954), *Jungle Moon Men* (1955), and *Devil Goddess* (1955). The last three films Weissmuller starred as "Jungle Johnny," as the rights to the Jungle Jim series had been sold to Screen Gems for a television series of that name. He starred in the television series during 1955-1956, in 26 half-hour episodes. In 1950, he wrote, "I'm not trying to throw rocks at Tarzan by picking Jungle Jim as my top role in pictures". [31] He enjoyed having actual lines to say.

Weissmuller continued to endorse swimwear, like goggles and fins for swimmers; perform in various water shows; and take on assorted guest appearances on television and cameos in several films. He had accrued little retirement funds, and pretty much spent what he earned. In 1948, Sol Lesser, re-released two *Tarzan* films: though twice as profitable as when they were first released, sadly Weissmuller did not receive any income from them. This pattern of others capitalizing on Weissmuller's fame continued through the 1950s, as reruns of *Tarzan* made enormous profits, continuing to influence, primarily, a new generation of young boys as his primary audience.

Cultural Icon

Internationally, Johnny Weissmuller was first recognized as the premier Olympic swimmer of his era. He was renowned in the United States, but also in Europe—his Olympiads were in Paris and Amsterdam—where his resounding victories created his sporting celebrity. In swimming circles, of course, Weissmuller is viewed as the premier swimmer of his age: in fact, in 1950, the Sports Writers of America voted him the World's Greatest Swimmer of the First Half Century, 1900-1950. [32]

The trajectory of his life, however, propelled him beyond aquatic feats: he was recognized throughout the world during the 1930s and 1940s (and, with re-releases, easily up into the 1960s) as Tarzan. He epitomized Tarzan, especially to children and youth during their formative years: for example, Edward Said conflates Weissmuller and Tarzan, ultimately deciding that Johnny Weissmuller embodies the "hero diverted from worldly success and with no hope of rehabilitation, in permanent exile". Said further states: "Weissmuller's face tells a story of stoic deprivation. In a world full of danger this orphan without upward mobility or social advancement as alternatives is, I've always felt, a forlorn survivor." [33]

Said, born in 1935, was influenced by both Edgar Rice Burroughs' *Tarzan* books, but also by Johnny Weissmuller's portrayal of Tarzan (there were other actors before and since Weissmuller took the role) to the extent that he wrote, "The fact, however, is that anyone who saw Weissmuller in his prime can associate Tarzan only with his portrayal". [34]

He touched a generation of young men, who modelled Tarzan as an integral part of their playtime activities. The histrionic Tarzan yell, breath-holding under water while pretend-fighting a crocodile, swinging from "vines": all these were imitative behaviors of Weissmuller's young audience (including his own co-star, Johnny Sheffield as Boy). With Weissmuller, fans could imitate a sports star as well as a Hollywood star—at the same time.

VIDEO

View online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MwHWbsvgQUE&ab_channel=Mernerwastaken

Johnny Weissmuller Tarzan Yell

Source: Youtube

But the deeply-felt belief system that truly made Weissmuller an international cultural icon may have been the fact that Johnny Weissmuller the man was deeply conflated with Tarzan the character. The doctrine of "Manifest Destiny," long inbred in American self-belief, included certainty of their "rightness". The Edgar Rice Burroughs' version of Tarzan followed four admirable tenets:

> *"1) Tarzan must not kill, except in self-defense or for food; (2) he must never drink or smoke, and must always remain pure in mind and body; (3) he must never fight except in defense of the oppressed; (4) and Tarzan, pure at heart, must never cast a romantic eye towards any woman but his Jane."* [44]

It was a much simpler time. The belief systems that brought this fervent, stereotypically-American surety would not last through the decade of the 1960s, but during Weissmuller's era, his image embodied American hope, generosity, freshness, naiveté, and innocence.

Conclusion

Weissmuller's connections to Europe and to the modernist project of globalization are several-fold. First, he was born in Romania/Germany, and with his family emigrated to the United States in the early part of the 20th century. Second, he made his "swimming" name at the Paris and Amsterdam Olympiads, drawing

cultural notice to his easy-going good looks and humility. He was yet another positive representation, post-World War I, of the "good Yank".

There are several contestable "facts" about Johnny Weissmuller's life. His place of birth, his real nationality: these were both pieces of his biography that he disguised, or played with, depending upon the situation. As well, he may have been married a fifth time (before his first certified marriage). But his swimming records—"52 National Championships, 67 World Records, and over 100 American Records" [35] —are not arguable. His playing Tarzan and subsequently Jungle Jim are also factual. What is also apparent is that Weissmuller gained a worldwide audience (of 1930s adults, and 40s and 50s younger people) for his stoic, imitable portrayals, and these put him into the realm of imagined cultural icon for literally millions of young boys and viewing audiences throughout the world. As Depauw and Biltereyst wrote,

> *"these international blockbusters (together with the novel, comics, radio shows and many other forms of popular culture) helped to construct a powerful emblem of Western imperialism, colonialism and white supremacy. The MGM series occupies a special place in pre-war audience's imaginative encounters with the unknown wilderness."* [45]

Initially through his unquestionable swimming prowess, and then through the careful crafting of the Edgar Rice Burroughs' Tarzan character for a Hollywoodized action series, Weissmuller rose to world-wide recognition for four decades in the mid-twentieth century.

The interpretations of what *Tarzan* means change over time. Scholarly interpretations of Weissmuller's place in that specific place and time may vary as well, but they are not "false news"; they are simply fascinated scholars mining the intricacies of meaning that may surround Johnny Weissmuller (1904-1984). To contextualize many of his career decisions, and, more specifically, the attraction of his particular Tarzan characterization, Weissmuller was quoted as saying, "I have an idea it was the freedom thing. People say, 'Boy I wish I could live in a treehouse without any problems and have all the animals in the world as pets. And no worries. Gee, that'd be great!'" [36]

His death, after a stroke in 1977 and various hospitalizations, came in Acapulco, Mexico, and the listed cause of death is pulmonary edema. Weissmuller's last seven years were not happy-go-lucky: after his stroke, he was moved into the Motion Picture and Television Country Home and Hospital in Woodland Hills, California, where he was resident for almost two years. He and Maria moved to Acapulco in late 1979, where they resided until his death. His personal physician, Dr. Eustasio Ordaz Parades, however, believed the cause was due to a cerebral thrombosis, or "blood clotting of vessels in the brain". [37] When he died, mainland China's state-run television devoted nearly four minutes to Weissmuller. He is buried—with his wife Maria and step-daughter Lisa—in the Valley of the Light Cemetery, Acapulco, Mexico.

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NOTES

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3. David A. Fury, *Johnny Weissmuller*, 78.
4. Ross won three gold medals at the 1920 Antwerp Olympiad: for the 4x200 M freestyle relay (men), the 400 M freestyle (men), and the 1500 M freestyle (men).
5. Hebner won a bronze medal in the 1908 London Olympiad: for the 4x200 M freestyle relay (men); in the 1912 Stockholm Olympiad, he also won a silver medal for the 4x200 M freestyle relay (men) and a gold for the 100 M backstroke (men). He also was a member of the fourth-place men's water polo team (USA) at the 1920 Antwerp Olympiad.
6. David A. Fury, *Johnny Weissmuller*, 79.
7. In the 1912 Olympiad, representing the United States, Kahanamoku won a gold medal in the 100 M freestyle (men) and a silver in the 4x200 M freestyle relay (men); two gold medals in the 1920 Antwerp Olympiad, for the 4x200 M freestyle relay (men) and the 100 M freestyle (men); and a silver in the 1924 Paris Olympiad for the 100 M freestyle (men)---second to Johnny Weissmuller. Kahanamoku, at age 42, also was an alternate or the USA men's water polo Olympic team in the 1932 Los Angeles Olympiad.
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