Arrow and
Superhero Television

Essays on Themes
and Characters of the Series

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Working Out as Creative Labor, or the Building of the Male Superhero's Body

Juan Llamas-Rodriguez

"A new breed of onscreen talent is closing the gap between actors and real-life superheroes," reads the byline of a *Men's Fitness* article about the protagonists of the superhero television series premiering during the 2014 fall season. A recent *Men's Journal* feature on Hollywood male stars also describes these actors' bodies as "superhero physiques." Likewise, in an *Entertainment Weekly* piece on *Arrow'*s Stephen Amell, the writer concludes that Amell "pushes himself through a workout so grueling it would discourage anyone from becoming a superhero or an actor." As these quotes illustrate, the relation between the body of the male superhero and that of the actor that portrays him is no longer merely symbolic. Actors increasingly display bodies befitting a human with extraordinary abilities, and these days the on-screen superhero's body is also an advertisement for the actor's physicality. The suggestion that the gap between actors and the superheroes they play is closing spurs a number of questions. How is this new talent different from previous generations of onscreen superheroes? What makes these actors seem more like the extraordinary characters they portray? Which industrial shifts and wider social trends have led to this new breed of onscreen talent?

In this essay, I approach these questions by focusing on the process that renders the actor's body into a superhero's physique: the workout. Scholars have attended to the role of the superhero's body in its onscreen representations, noting its performative aspects and queering potential. The increased attention to and commodification of men's bodies in popular culture has similarly attracted academic inquiries. Yet these two approaches rarely intersect. Arguments about the influence of media images on perceptions of male
bodies abound, but less attention is given to the interrelated mechanisms through which both these images and these bodies are produced. The work that makes the actor's body into the superhero's body is ignored when focusing solely on the body as image, while the exclusive focus on men's bodies as exemplars of physicality obscures their mediated construction.

By using the example of Arrow (2012–) and Stephen Amell, I propose considering the physical work of actors and the promotional work of the industries they work for in tandem. I begin to do so by rethinking the work involved in "working out" as a form of creative labor. Working out, particularly at the current moment, must be understood within the structural arrangements in the industry that extracts economic value from this work. This is most evident in the case of actors portraying superheroes, for whom being exceptionally fit is both a job requirement and a feature on which their employers capitalize. Working out as creative labor must be further contextualized within the new creative economy, where risk is outsourced to the individual worker and rewards are postponed under the auspices of doing something for the love of it. The costs and risks of working out that aspiring actors face are rarely acknowledged as labor despite the integral need of a fit body for their work.

In order to understand the centrality of Arrow in this argument, I place it within two broader contexts: first, the closely related, growing global trends of fitness culture and superhero franchises; and second, the CW's branding practices of interactive social media engagement and industrial self-reflexivity. The case of Arrow, and its star Stephen Amell, is exemplary because it foregrounds the work of working out on multiple levels: for the actor, as part of his craft in preparing for the role; for the character, as intrinsic to his origins story; and for the series, as a way of producing paratexts to engage with its audience. Exploring the convergence of fitness culture and superhero mania through the case of Arrow reveals the hidden work for actors in producing the superhero body and illuminates the continued precarity of contemporary screen labor.

Global Superheroes and the Rise of Fitness Culture

The significance of working out in a series like Arrow must first be understood within the rise of fitness culture in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Broadly defined, fitness culture refers to physical culture based on different kinds of strength training, aerobics routines, and workout techniques, which are posited as causes for and indicators of health and well-being. While the 1970s are usually marked as the beginning of the "fitness craze" in the United States, the post–World War II era set the stage for this development as jobs became more sedentary and exercise underwent a makeover from "dark, smelly gyms and compulsory physical education classes" to "modern, luxurious-feeling health clubs and an emphasis on fun." The importance of fitness was further cemented once public stakeholders, such as government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and education organizations, framed physical exercise to be a central factor in the health status of young people in the nation. By decoupling exercise from sports and building an industry around it, fitness came to be viewed as "its own object."

The culture of fitness has only intensified in the early 21st century, evidenced by the steady increase of gym and health club memberships and the growing significance of personal trainers. At the turn of the century, American men spent over $2 billion on commercial gym memberships and another $2 billion on gym equipment for the home. Likewise, the paid circulation of the popular magazine Men's Health skyrocketed from 250,000 in 1998 to 1.8 million in 2005. The establishment of a full-fledged fitness industry depended on and mirrored the wider shift to service jobs and a consumption-based economy. As the convergence of health and beauty, the fit body is sold as the ultimate marker of affluence, status, and power. The conflation of consumption with affluence and its signification through the body have led to men's increased self-reflexivity towards their bodies and the processes needed to shape their physiques.

In many ways, fitness culture is also a global culture. Training techniques, diets, and what is termed the "philosophy of the gym" are spread globally through magazines, online blogs and discussion forums, and international competitions. Images of beautiful bodies and ideals about body measurements are also manufactured, modeled, and sold on a global market. One example of this trend is the growing popularity of the so-called "sporno," sports players who become international brands through their heavily sexualized publicity. Actors in screen industries around the world are similarly converging on the one global ideal of male beauty: bulging biceps, defined broad shoulders, and six-pack abs. Given that Hollywood studios favor what is termed the "universal language of violence," films filled with explosions, international storylines, and beefed up action heroes, it should not be surprising that a recent Men's Journal article on Hollywood male stardom claims actors "simply don't get [their] name on a movie poster these days unless [they've] got a superhero's physique—primed for high-def close-ups and global market appeal."

It is telling that superhero franchises have proliferated alongside the establishment of a global fitness culture. Hollywood productions are not merely the creators and distributors of these new fitness ideals; they are also
subject to and dependent on the commercial practices that result from this
cult of fitness. Positioned at the intersection of the fitness and entertainment
industries, screen actors function as promoters for both industries through
their performances, their participation in promotional campaigns, and their
own lifestyle, extensively detailed in glossy magazines and online forums.

The narrative of the perfect body delivered by the fitness industry, where
"the body can be molded, sculptured, and trained into perfection," is perfectly
compatible with the entertainment industry's traffic in exorbitant beauty and
body standards. Both industries' ideals are equally normative: fitness mag-
azines' paragon of an athletic, well-built, white, and healthy man is com-
mensurate with the generic mold established for actors onscreen superhero
adaptations.

Yet actors portraying superheroes embody a paradoxical relationship to
global fitness ideals. On one hand, the superhero actor should possess an
extraordinary physique, worthy of a character with superhuman capabilities.
On the other hand, the actor's training regimen should garner significant
interest as something the everyman can adopt. Whereas superheroes and
bodybuilders were once closely related as two forms of more-than-human
strength and power, the physiques of today's superheroes are simultaneously
pitched as both exceptional and attainable. The norms for what is considered
aesthetically attractive become increasingly narrow, and the fusion of these
norms with the superhero mythos only exacerbates this trend. The irony of
the superhero physique is thus that, although its dutiful pursuit never leads
to the promised results, that frustration paradoxically fuels the continued
search for this elusive accomplishment. Arrow presents a slight departure
from this trend. As a superhero who depends on his own strength rather
than superpowers, the hero's physique is conceivably more attainable by a
regular man—provided he has the same wealth and leisure time as Oliver
Queen.

The union of fitness and superheroes also depends on the rhetoric of
individual responsibility. The emergence of fitness culture during the latter
part of the 20th century was tied to an increased individualization of health
issues, particularly the belief that health should be a matter of personal
responsibility rather than a collective or reformist cause. Superhero adap-
tations, especially those where the hero is posited as a lone vigilante, reinforce
this ideal of personal responsibility for the care of the self and of the society.
The personal responsibility adjudicated to training a fit body and securitizing
society inevitably acquires a militaristic dimension. The much-touted disci-
pline required to pursue ideal fitness regimens is presented not unlike a sold-
der's discipline. Such a connection is not merely symbolic, as exemplified
by promotional campaigns like a "Soldier's Workout," sponsored by the
National Guard and featuring Henry Cavill's training for Man of Steel (2013).

Arrow and Stephen Amell are similarly enmeshed in these intersections
between fitness culture, superhero performances, and the healthy/militarized
body. Yet the case of Arrow remains distinct from these other superhero
screen adaptations because of its industrial context; namely, the fact that it
is produced under the CW brand.

Sex, Self-Reflexively and Social Media
in the CW Brand

To promote its 2014 fall lineup, the CW developed a campaign titled
"Heroes Within," a transmedia effort that included radio spots, magazine
ads, billboards, and social media blasts, and that was intended to "refocus
the CW brand around its current programming." Although at the time the
CW only had two programs about superheroes, Arrow and The Flash
(2014–), this purported refocusing of the network's brand brought the rest of
the series under the same umbrella. The main television commercial for this
campaign opened with a shot of Grant Gustin, the star of the new series The
Flash, and placed Arrow as the first in a succession of title cards depicting
the entire fall lineup. The CW's focus on its superhero offerings during the
2014 fall season is not surprising. Since its debut, Arrow has succeeded in
attracting a young male audience to the network, and CW president Mark
Pedowitz admitted that in its first season the series performed positively not
only in ratings, but also across digital platforms and social media
engagement. The Flash, introduced as a spin-off of Arrow, was expected to
carry on this tradition, and the "Heroes Within" campaign reinforced the
idea that these two series would become the network's new signature prod-
ucts.

Still, the refocusing of the CW brand may be overstated. Despite the
targeting of these series to a young male audience and the increase in comic
book adaptations, the network branding of the CW remains consistent
throughout its programming, and Arrow is no exception. In spite of the influ-
ence of The Dark Knight franchise (2005–2012) on the series' style, structure,
and tone, Arrow presents a continuation in the genealogy of the "CW formula"
inherited from the WB and refined through series such as Smallville (2001–
2011) and The Vampire Diaries (2009–2017) in at least two ways. First, the
cultural imagination of the CW as the "network of sexy primetime soaps"
remains unchanged and Arrow borrows as much from the aesthetics and
stories of soap operas as it does from other screen superhero adaptations.
Second, the characterization of the CW's audience as what they once called
"generation digital" is visibly strong in Arrow, prompting all sorts of digi-
tal platform and social media engagement with fans. These two intrinsic
characteristics of the CW brand, I contend, are part of what makes *Arrow* distinct among screen adaptations of superheroes.

From its initial network launch, the CW has branded itself as the sexy network, producing promotional materials with scantily clad male and female actors in suggestive poses, and then featuring these actors in sex scenes that tease as much as possible within the constraints of broadcast television censorship.²² Partly inspired by its influence of teen television and soap operas, the CW has always relied on sex to sell its brand as distinct from the other networks. Increasingly, these branding practices have become more self-reflexive about the network’s reliance on sexiness to promote its series. Showrunners openly discuss when they write shirtless scenes into scripts and actors jokingly call attention to their semi-naked scenes. Despite its emphasis on targeting *Arrow* to a young male demographic, this brand strategy prevails, for instance, in the individual character posters for season two featuring leading men Stephen Amell, David Ramsey, Manu Bennett, and Colton Haynes posing topless against a dark background.

This brand self-reflexivity is most evident in the network’s social media paratexts. Elaborating on its initial promise to target a generation committed to digital media, the CW continuously touts its commitment to social media engagements as part of its distinct brand.²³ The two aspects of this brand—sexiness and social media—come together most clearly in instances of “industrial reflexivity,” audiovisual paratexts through which the network presents itself and negotiates its brand with audiences.²⁴ Undoubtedly, the epitome of this trend is a humorous promotional video titled “Give a Shirt.” Intercut with scenes from the network’s programs where its actors are shirtless, the video features Wilson Bethel, the leading actor from *Hart of Dixie* (2011–2015), explaining that the CW is combating climate change by having its actors wear fewer shirts.²⁵ As one of its more conspicuous instances of this industrial reflexivity, the promotional video serves the double function of poking fun at the network’s brand while simultaneously reinforcing its distinct identity as a sexy network.

Given this juncture in the network’s brand between sex appeal and self-reflexivity, the CW is perhaps the closest thing to pornography on broadcast television. As opposed to the sexploitation present in cable networks, the softer pornographic sensibilities of the CW often have less to do with sex than with displaying semi-naked bodies for the audience’s visual pleasure.²⁶ These scenes are explicitly presented to be looked at, often with little or no reference to plot or character development, and the network prides itself in this flaunting, even folding it back into its brand identity. It is the fact that it is porn that makes the CW exciting, to paraphrase scholar Richard Dyer.²⁷ In other words, what makes it exciting is the fact that you are watching people perform semi-naked, that they are semi-naked for you, and that you know they know that they are performing semi-naked for you.²⁸ Sexiness and self-reflexivity are intertwined as markers of the CW brand, and these markers are further played up in the network’s social media engagements. *Arrow’s* enmeshment in these industrial practices places the series in an exceptional position from which to analyze the depictions of the superhero and the male actor’s bodies.

**Arrow and the Prominence of Working Out**

Positioned at the intersection of these two contexts, the rise of superhero franchises and fitness culture on one hand and the self-reflexive, sexy, transmedia brand identity of the CW on the other, *Arrow* is an exemplary case to consider the confluence between the bodies of the male actor and the superhero. *Arrow* also proves illustrative in this regard because it extends self-reflexivity about the superhero and the male actor’s body to the very construction of these physiques, particularly to the constitutive role of the workout. The relation between *Arrow* and working out extends throughout its text, yet it is especially salient in the origins narrative of Oliver Queen, in the fan interactions online, and in the star image of lead actor Stephen Amell.²⁹ These three instances shed light on the workout as its own object and on the importance of this practice to the character, the actor, and the series.

Throughout the first two seasons, the origin stories of the *Arrow* are established primarily through the flashbacks to Oliver’s stay on the island, where his character’s journey consists of an emotional and a physical transformation. Five years pass within the story world, transforming Oliver into a vastly different person. Yet, because the shooting of the flashbacks and the present-day scenes occurs simultaneously, the series must represent the contrast between pre- and post-training Oliver in other ways. Two standout features are the costume design and lighting. In the island, Oliver tends to wear loose clothing while, in Starling City, he dresses in more fitted outfits, when he is wearing any clothes at all. The island scenes are shot in brighter, more diffuse lighting, which allows for less contrast and delineation, while the present-day city scenes show a higher contrast between shadows and light, an effect that makes features such as body creases and muscle tone more prominent. In this view, the constant shirtless scenes of Oliver in the present day are more than a moment to show off the actor’s physique; instead, they also function diegetically as a way to recall the changes in the character and the implicit training that occurred between these two stages.

There is also an inherent seriality to the shirtless workout scenes in *Arrow*, which directly corresponds with the story world’s needs. The Arrow, like DC’s Batman or Marvel’s Hawkeye, belongs to the category of superheroes
without superpowers who become extraordinary through ordinary means. By continuously showcasing Oliver working out, the series therefore makes explicit the ongoing work that the character needs to perform in order to maintain his role as the city’s protector. This seriality is also tied to the medium of television. In contrast to The Dark Knight trilogy, which serves as an influence for the series, Arrow repeatedly comes back to the importance of working out for its hero while the Batman films largely ignore this fact after the first installment. In this way, Oliver’s body literalizes the mythology of remaking the self, more so than those of his superhero contemporaries. The self-making aspects foregrounded in Oliver’s constant workout scenes also stand in contrast to the purported artificiality of superhero bodies that achieve their form by ingesting steroids. A common comic superhero storyline presents villains as ordinary people who acquire their extraordinary powers through strange substances. These villains then become worthy adversaries of the superhero, who is already stronger than the average person tends to be. However, since the Arrow is a superhero without superpowers, the intrusion of a villain who gets his power from substances is rendered as a double transgression: wreaking havoc on Starling City’s civil order and “cheating” in order to gain the upper hand on the city’s protector. The second season’s main villain, Slade (Manu Bennett), pointedly embodies this idea because he derives his strength, and that of his army, from the Mirakuru super-soldier serum. In fact, Slade’s narrative arc is presented as the exact inverse of Oliver’s experience: once a formidable ally and self-made strong man, Slade’s descent into villainy is intrinsically tied to his acquisition of the serum. Oliver’s victory over Slade at the end of season two is thus also a victory of natural fitness over artificial substance abuse.

The importance of the workout extends beyond the story world into online fan interactions. Fan message forums and social media posts focus on aspects such as the verisimilitude of Oliver’s workouts, the specific training needed for his signature skills like archery, and the prevalence of exercise equipment in the series. The Reddit forums dedicated to Arrow are full of entries that share workouts inspired by the character’s or the actor’s regimen. Such minute consideration of the workout elements in the series is best exemplified by the response to the water-slopping scene in the season one episode “Unfinished Business” (2013). The comments sections in recaps and reviews of the episode generated extended discussions on what the purpose of that activity was, whether it benefitted archery training, and under which martial arts traditions it fell. Fans with various claims to expertise on training and martial arts chimed in to dispel ideas that this type of training would result in making Oliver a better archer. Discussions like these perpetuate the view that working out is a distinct feature of the series and an object of analysis in and of itself.

Nowhere is this most evident than in the rising popularity of the salmon ladder. The salmon ladder, a series of metal rungs on two parallel columns that a person climbs up by holding a long bar and hoisting himself with body core strength, first appeared in 2012’s pilot episode. Since then, it has gained notoriety among social media and fan sites where any appearance of the salmon ladder on the series immediately spurs hundreds of gifs. The ladder has become a litmus test for the strength of a character, such as when it was used by Sara Lance (Caity Lotz) in the season two episode “Heir to the Demon” (2014) and by Ray Palmer (Brandon Routh) in the season three episode “Draw Back Your Bow” (2014). It is furthermore an indispensable icon not only of the series, but also the character of the Arrow, as signified by the Flash mockingly using a salmon ladder in the crossover episode “The Brave and the Bold” (2014). The apotheosis of the salmon ladder’s significance surely came about in the season two episode “Tremors” (2014) when production designers installed lights on the ladder itself, which illuminated Amell’s torso as he climbed up the structure. By casting the workout technology as literally revealing of the character’s physicality, this clever instance of production design further cements the reflexive nature of the Arrow’s relationship with working out.

The salmon ladder stunt was first included in the pilot after the episode’s director learned that the exercise was already part of Stephen Amell’s training. Any discussion of working out in relation to Arrow has since also become a discussion of Amell’s own workouts. Arrow thus reverses the notion that the superhero body is self-referential because it can only be compared to those of other superheroes, but not to “the common world of flesh, blood, muscle, and sinew.” As previously discussed, the superhero body in Arrow increasingly becomes self-referential and self-reflexive, but it is also continually compared to the body of the actor bringing life to the superhero. Amell used to be a fitness instructor, and many of his previous roles foregrounded his physical attributes, but it was not until Arrow that his star persona became so inextricably linked to training and working out. Much of the coverage of the series and the actor invariably returns to his workout routines and his hard, highly muscular body. For instance, during the question and answer section of the panel for Warner Bros. and DC Entertainment at the 2014 San Diego Comic-Con, an audience member famously asked Amell to show off his ab work in preparation for the third season, and the actor readily obliged to the request. Amell himself perpetuates this aspect of his persona in a series of videos titled “Superhero Workouts” where the actor performs brief stints of a parkour-based training circuit. Following on the CW’s tradition of promoting self-reflexivity in their stars’ online interactions, many other actors talk about their workouts on social media, but Amell’s case remains significant given how intense and varied his workouts are.
Amell’s discussions of working out are also noteworthy because he theorizes this work as functional and emphasizes its application in everyday fitness and strength rather than being “just for show.” That the actor frames his workout as purposeful and quotidian while simultaneously showcasing its exceptionality echoes the reflexive initiatives of other areas in the television industry. John Caldwell has noted how the impulse to be self-reflexive at various levels of industry work increases at times when the pace of obsolescence accelerates, and laborers feel the need to reinstate their importance within the industry. Amell’s efforts in foregrounding the importance of working out for his character are undoubtedly part of Arrow’s promotion, but linking this workout to the actor’s own star persona reinforces the exceptionality of Amell’s physicality as well.

Such reflexivity nonetheless conceals as much as it discloses. The “Superhero Workout” series is illustrative of the type of workout that Amell can do, but not of the type of work he previously did in order to become physically fit enough to perform that particular routine. These workout videos are performances themselves, more akin to the workout scenes in the program itself than to the sort of behind-the-scenes look they are presented as. The same kind of reflexivity as performance permeates much of Arrow’s online paratexts and the CW brand in general. Reflexivity, once synonymous with a rational form of “estranged thought,” has morphed in the age of hypermediation and is no longer tantamount to a critique of illusionism. Given digital media’s and fan practices’ inherent use of self-reflexivity, studios now include this reflexivity, even profit from it, in their productions. In order to account fully for the work that working out represents, particularly for the actor as laborer, the absences in these self-reflexive texts merit more attention. The industrial relations and precarious labor conditions that modulate the role of working out for the actor are excluded from these texts, and they will not be apparent unless we consider working out both as its own object and as a distinct form of creative labor.

**Working Out as Creative Labor**

“Hanging leg lifts. Overhead squats. Dead lifts. Side-plank push-ups. Medicine-ball push-ups. Front rollout with barbell. Rowing machine. Running. More. And again,” reads an *Entertainment Weekly* feature on Amell’s workout. The reporter notes that Amell looks shelled and pale and by the end, he admits, “I feel like I have to barf.” The piece ultimately celebrates Amell’s efforts, but the behind-the-scenes look at the taxing aspects of the actor’s workout contrasts with the effortless look promoted in Amell’s own videos. It is further suggestive of the role that working out more commonly plays in actors’ careers: as a form of invisible labor. Working out has functioned as invisible labor for actors in at least two ways. The first is a straightforward lack of recognition, wherein working out was something actors did only in their spare time. The rise of fitness culture, superhero franchises, and reflexivity have foregrounded the role of working out in actors’ lives and thus made this aspect less invisible. Yet working out still functions as invisible labor in the sense of a non-waged form of work that serves as a precondition for industrial waged labor. That is, the labor undertaken as working out stands outside the employer-employee relationship so it is rarely remunerated, but it is also a precondition for paid work given the insistence by studios of only hiring actors with greatly developed physiques.

Scholars have previously argued that working out functions as legitimate form of labor. As the contradictory synthesis of work and leisure, “the workout isolates the individual for the optimal expenditure of selectively focused effort aimed at the production of the quintessential body object,” argues Susan Willis. Kenneth Saltman suggests bodybuilding as a form of labor has the “productive function of mobilizing consumption within the capitalist economy” since it expands “a capitalist morality of hard work, meritocracy, discipline, competition, and progress defined through quantifiable and empirically confirmable results.” For the average person, working out is a form of invisible labor in the sense that exercise and fitness make for a more productive worker, yet employers rarely reward these activities within the industrial relationship. The growth of the fitness industry relies on the neoliberal promotion of health and wellness that a person is individually held responsible for being fit, despite the fact that the benefits of this fitness are spread throughout that person’s other interactions within society. Willis concludes that, in a consumerist society, exercise has devolved to such an extent that its once purely positive features are now severely limited and contained.

In the case of actors, and particularly television actors, the invisible labor accorded to working out is also a form of creative labor, or the uneasy marriage between material and immaterial labor that arises in what has come to be termed the new “creative economy.” The new creative economy dematerializes both the commodities produced by consumers and the labor that goes into producing these commodities because the work undertaken by the creative worker becomes packaged as leisure. The creative worker represents the synthesis of two ideals previously thought incompatible: the uniquely talented artist on the one hand and the alienated industrial worker on the other. Employees in the screen industries are increasingly considered creative workers, characterized by their personal artistic sensibilities and their business considerations to produce salable products. The creative worker is further divorced from the historically defined laborer and presented as an entrepreneur, an ambitious individual dependent on no one but himself who is
accountable for not only the profit but also the risks accumulated by his labor.62

The form of labor that a creative worker performs thus becomes "equipped with a wide array of aptitudes and values," but also falls under a "broader spectrum of pressure and exploitation."63 One newfound source of pressure and exploitation is that creative labor is rendered "radically private."64 Despite the fact that no labor can be productive on its own, that it is always embedded within the chains of industrial production and meaning making, creative labor is usually presented as something the worker takes on an individual basis, as part of their leisure activities, and thus it often remains unpaid. This is certainly the case for young television actors, for whom being in shape is a precondition for even getting to the casting room. Main actors and big stars may have a personal trainer and working out perks written into their contracts, but bit players and other supporting actors certainly do not, despite the fact that their chance of getting a job will continuously depend on their staying in shape. Further pressures placed on these actors include the emphasis on a "natural" way of getting fit since the industry publicly disavows the use of substances like steroids, despite their prevalence and at times indispensability for anyone seeking inordinately muscled physiques.65

A critical examination of the importance of working out for Arrow begins to shed light on these sorts of pressures. For instance, the salmon ladder, a staple of the series and its character, is also the epitome of the convergence between physical labor and upward mobility. Only through strenuous bodily work can the actor achieve employment rewards. Even more so, the salmon ladder with built in lights, as metonymy for fitness culture and as metaphor for the entertainment industry, represents the actor's relationship to self and to labor: the workout requires energy and effort, yet negates its function as labor because nothing is produced but the body itself.66 Another instance is the casting of Bennett as Slade, a metacommentary on the relationship between working out and sterooid use. Bennett has been upfront about having used steroids to prepare for a film role that never materialized and the resulting physical and economic toll that this decision had on his life.67 Having him play a man who wreaks havoc as the result of using steroid-like substances reinforces the industry's position against substance abuse while making evident the fact that this abuse repeatedly occurs. The role that Amell plays in promoting working out both within and beyond the series is also indicative of the pressures of creative workers. In the words of famous Hollywood personal trainer Gunnar Peterson, physical fitness has to be a lifestyle: "Train it, eat it, supplement it, sleep. That's what you do. That's just part of who you are."68 The identity of the actor as a creative worker thus resides not only in his output—his body—but also in the fact that he acts as a consumer and tastemaker.69 Working out for Amell plays a double, mutually constitutive role: on one hand, it is the precondition for his job portraying Oliver, while, on the other hand, it is also the product that he is selling, through the series, his workout videos, and other promotional materials.

At the same time, Arrow perpetuates the ideological effacement of the conditions of creative labor through its story world and paratexts. In the case of its star, for example, endowing him with the elite status of the artist and that of tastemaker ignores the fact that both roles are subsumed under his commitments to his job. The "Superhero Workout" series are no more than extensions of Arrow's promotion, even though they are filtered through Amell's star persona and the working out he performs outside of his role. Singing out Amell as being inordinately physically fit, a replica of the logic of the individually exceptional superhero, also obscures the predominantly precarious conditions for television actors. Emphasizing that Amell's distinctiveness lies in his physical prowess suggests that labor opportunities are tied to the capacity of an actor to shape his own body. This ideal further implies that working out in this manner will result in standing out among the horde of actors vying for roles, an ideal contradicted by the fact that the CW brand depends largely on a specific kind of look rather than any specific actor. The "conclave of CW Hunks," as Amy Doherty calls them, "encompass an array of attractive male beigeness" that vary only "from tall, dark, and handsome to tall, fair, and handsome."70 Across the industry, studios agree that even the scrawniest of actors can be physically transformed into an action hero given the right training so, on some level, any of the hundreds of "indistinguishable, barrel-chested, eight-packed aspiring stars" can fit a part.71 The exceptional status of the physically fit star is thus more an illusion than a reality. If all main actors on a CW program are increasingly expected to subscribe to a certain standard of fitness, there will be no singing any one of them out for meeting this requirement. Working out returns to being an invisible form of creative labor.

The case of Arrow represents just an entry, albeit an inclusive one, into the complexities of actors' labor conditions under the new creative economy. Working out is only one in a myriad of other requirements actors need to fulfill before even being considered for a role. Yet, as a form of invisible labor, working out saliently embodies how risks and costs are off-loaded onto—often still-unemployed—actors whereas the results are later capitalized on by the media industries to sell these bodies as commodities. There is undoubtedly a utopian dimension to the promise of working out for the actor, perhaps even a pleasurable sense of self-realization. Still, this analysis of the role of working out in Arrow illustrates how the celebration qua commodification of this practice remains insufficiently critical of the industrial, cultural, and economic contexts within which it is embedded. In a New York Times article on the disposability of contemporary action stars, the sole mention of Stephen
Amell warns, “at 32, he might have to be satisfied with his lead role in CW’s Arrow.  He’s the exemplary physically fit superhero actor can thus have as few chances as any other hard-bodied, highly muscular rising star. The scars and markings that Amell wears to portray Oliver’s body stand as permanent reminders that the process of transforming the actor’s body into the superhero’s body is laden with hardship, risk, and, ultimately, precarity.

Notes

Working Out as Creative Labor (Llamas-Rodriguez)

Amell’s body is a product of a broader cultural discourse on masculinity, health, and performance. His body is not only a tool for his performance as Oliver Queen, but also a symbol of the ideal male body type in contemporary culture. This body type is characterized by a muscular and sculpted physique, often referred to as the “six-pack.”

The construction of the superhero body is a reflection of the broader sociocultural values and expectations placed on men. The superhero body is not just a physical ideal, but also a cultural and social one. It is a representation of strength, power, and control, and it is often associated with ideals of masculinity.

In conclusion, the superhero body is a complex representation of identity, performance, and cultural values. It is a product of a broader discourse on masculinity, health, and performance, and it continues to evolve and change with the times. The superhero body is not just a physical ideal, but also a cultural and social one, and it is a reflection of the expectations placed on men in contemporary society.
Part Two: Muscles, Scars and Tattoos


43. By calling the salmon ladder a "revealing technology," I am somewhat perverting Heidegger's original notion of technologies as revealing man's relationship to the world. However, as argued below, further scrutinizing the salmon ladder does shed light on the ideological function of working out within the show. Martin Heidegger, The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Garland, 1977).


47. The videos can be found in Stephen Amell's YouTube account, https://www.youtube.com/user/captainamell.

48. In Spitznagel, "Game Changers 2014," for instance, the L.A.-based Tempest Fearruning Academy where Amell trains is described as "brutal."


51. John Caldwell has more recently stressed how media industries have incorporated oppositional modes, such as reflexivity, which once were tools for scholarly critical practice, and thus new forms of thinking about these productions are necessary. See John T. Caldwell, "Para-Industry, Shadow Academy," Cultural Studies 28.4 (2014): 720-746.


53. Jeff Jensen, "Building a Better Superhero."


58. Willis, "Work(ing) Out," 54.
