

Erik Levine: *More Man*

I quit my JV football team about the same time I started going to hardcore shows. The coach at my school was brutal—kicks to the head during pushups were his specialty. My mother would have complained to the principal, but I had chosen the path of disaffection, thank you very much, and preferred dark rooms where other alienated kids, mainly boys, hurled their bodies at one another in communal disgust. In my mind, a Cro-Mags concert was the exact opposite of the whole jock scene. But male bonding takes many forms, and in suburban America their differences are often degrees of the same. Eventually, it was hardcore itself that taught me this lesson, through the self-critique of masculinity I found in Minutemen, Rites of Spring, Bikini Kill, etc, etc. But that was later. As a fourteen year old I thought I was escaping macho domination, even as I was learning it in other ways.

Erik Levine's 2005 video *More Man* is a complicated portrayal of the ways boys are formed within the behaviors and rules of masculinity. In a literal and a metaphorical sense, this is a meditation on "practice": the former, because it is woven from footage of youth football drills and games; the latter, because its deep issue is the rehearsal of masculine rites of passage—the yelling, the humiliation, the submission, the shame, the adrenaline, the confusion, the individual failure, and the triumph of coming together, as a team and as a gender, to become "more man" than one's rival. Though it unfolds in a mode that resembles documentary, the work is reminiscent of films by David Mamet and Neil LaBute in its unflinching attention to what is most repugnant—and possibly fascinating—about men. It is far less certain than *Glegary Glen Ross* or *In the Company of Men*, however, and the viewer must rely on Levine's tight range of editing effects—rather than plot or character—to tease out whatever judgment is to be had.



MORE MAN (VIDEO STILL)
2005



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Levine's point, as I take it, is that gender roles are neither natural nor easily inhabited, and that struggles over them play out in forms of bodily violence. (Three decades of feminist thinking have slowly disseminated the notion of gender-as-contest. Artists such as Vito Acconci in the 1970s or Matthew Barney in the 1990s adapted this point to the male body, and in some sense Levine is their benefactor.) One might think that his video sympathizes most with the young football players who appear to be the victims of their coaches' efforts to make them men. Indeed, the boys are pushed both physically and psychologically. But the more one watches *More Man*, the more the adults seem just as trapped by the logic of masculinization. Can we pity a stamping, bullying muscle-head who screams *pussy* and *crybaby* at a fifteen-year old geek? If, of course, there are better ways of spending empathy, there is something surprisingly subtle about Levine's picturing of these men. Their brutality is mesmerizing. It is also banal, common, expected, and familiar (which is not to say forgivable). The coaches are victims too. And Levine allows this possibility by treating them as objects.

My first viewing of *More Man* was easy: adults bad, kids pathetic. My second and third and fourth viewings were increasingly fraught. What happens in Levine's editing and arrangement of images is interesting, especially so in his use of close-up, slow motion, digital blur, and a technique that segments the image horizontally and vertically. These manipulations relate in some way to the manipulations that occur in the exchanges between coaches and players. The objectification of the image mirrors the objectification of bodies and psyches. Close-up and slow motion are often effects of grotesquerie, distorting natural vision to exaggerate characteristics of emotion like fear, anxiety, and trauma. They are usually the tools of pedants. But in Levine's hands they become tools of fascination and intrigue, qualities that forestall judgment rather than precluding it.

Sympathy is extended here, even if it becomes hallucinatory in the tight framing of a middle-aged man's jaw. Occasionally *More Man* does prompt our responses—as when the camera fixes on a kid's shamed face, bobbing rhythmically in his helmet—but just as often the video levels its positions by slicing the image into sections or repeating footage in short twitchy loops. Watching it recalled for me Dara Birnbaum's epic trilogy *Damnation of Faust*, 1984, one of the most sophisticated video treatments of gender ever made. Like Birnbaum, Levine succeeds by slowing down, by *denaturalizing* documentary footage, and by contrasting the hesitant, beautiful movements of the human form with the ideological extremity of social life.

A final note on Levine's use of sound. As with Birnbaum's, it is distinct and separate from the images it complements. Even when sound is synched to footage, there is mobility, differentiation. The image is treated, but the sound remains. The image is untreated, but the sound carries off or fades into silence. Levine allows his sound to slip around and estrange his pictures. On the football field, of course, sound is a world unto itself: whistles, clashing bodies, barked orders, heavy breaths. Teams chant in unison and pound their pads. Coaches fume. The sound world of *More Man* is almost more frightening, which is to say more compelling, than its images. Perhaps this is because sound is a visceral *product of the body*—a response to pain, to others—whereas images are secondary representations. When the final portion of the video goes to black, leaving the noise of a game to continue for thirty seconds or so, *More Man* becomes verité. It is here that one feels the poignancy of victimization most powerfully.

Bennett Simpson
2007



RESPECT ALL FEAR NONE (DETAIL)
2006
Giclee print mounted on aluminum
24 x 36 inches