

Thus spoke Monica Aldama

Cheerleading and Nietzschean transcendence

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This article is a philosophical examination of the six-part documentary series, *Cheer*, which debuted on Netflix on the 8th of January 2020 to widespread enthusiasm. It centres around a dedicated young cheerleading squad at Navarro College in Corsicana, Texas, and their celebrated coach who rules the team with an iron fist, as they prepare for the annual college cheerleading championship. Part of the attention garnered by the documentary series was directed towards the coach and her unconventional, stern methods of leadership, which, to some, seemed to forego the best interests of the cheerleaders in favour of the pursuit of results. In applying the philosophy of Nietzsche, notably his perhaps most famed work, the enigmatic *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, I present an alternate interpretation of the events. Through concepts like the overman, self-overcoming and the will to power, I discuss the possibility of attaining meaning, purpose, self-satisfaction and ultimately happiness through suffering. I then conclude by letting the argument prop-

agate into and include the field of sports in general, likening the arduous training and attainment of mastery in sports to what I call the Nietzschean transcendence.

AURÉLIEN DAUDI is a Ph.D. student at Malmö university. The subject of his research is the thriving domain of social media, particularly the digital culture surrounding fitness which, through the advent of social media, has grown immensely in popularity and appeal, recruiting into its midst young people from all over the world. He posits a dialectical synergy between fitness as a social practice and the governing values at the heart of social media, leading to the legitimization and promotion of cultural norms utilizing the body as an object of social validation. Channelling existentialist philosophers such as Nietzsche and Baudrillard he aims to critically examine from a philosophical perspective the social media culture surrounding fitness and its primary means of expression, seemingly being that of self-promotion through sexualization.

Behold! I am weary of my wisdom; like the bee that has gathered too much honey, I need the hands that stretch out for it ... Bless the cup which wants to overflow, so that the water flows golden out of it, carrying in every direction the reflection of your delight! Behold! This cup wants to become empty again and Zarathustra wants to become a man again.

–Thus spoke Zarathustra.

These are the words of the enlightened Zarathustra, in Friedrich Nietzsche's magnum opus, *Thus spoke Zarathustra* (1996). It is none other than this, the occasionally titled “most misunderstood philosopher in history”, and nothing more so than that, his perhaps most illustrious work, that shall constitute the inkwell in which my quill is dipped in order to formulate today's reflection.

“6000 feet beyond man and time”

Cheer is the name of a six-part documentary series that on the 8th of January 2020 debuted on the popular streaming service Netflix and garnered widespread attention across the globe. The documentary series follows the young cheerleading squad at Navarro College in the provincial small-town of Corsicana, Texas, whose days and minds both are absorbed in a single cause: training for the annual college championship in Daytona, Florida – the dreaded, long awaited, feared and fantastic competition that every aspiring cheerleader has been visualizing since the first time they garbed the glittering leotards bearing the prestigious, and compelling, emblem “Navarro” on its chest. Responsible for all of the nowadays legendary cheerleading team's successes, with a whole host of championship titles to her name, as well as the documentary series' storied star, is the head coach named Monica Aldama. Inspiratory, ruthless, tough but fair – such is the manner in which she leads the troop towards what, in the culmination of the series, results in a harrowing showdown between Navarro and the best that the sport of cheerleading has to offer. It is a gripping tale, drenched in blood, sweat and tears, about a group of young individuals who, in the pursuit of a singular goal, are willing to risk it all, about the adversities they conquer in the name of this pursuit and about the person they do it all for – calling upon them from atop the mountain, “6000 feet beyond man and time” (Nietzsche, 1996).

The coveting of greatness

After ten years of solitary contemplation, Zarathustra one morning leaves his cave among the mountains. Filled with love and insightful wisdom he decides at last to descend his mountain and pass along his acquired knowledge to the people. Zarathustra has in his reclusive confinement peered into the essence of man and discovered his true purpose on this earth, the purpose that will prepare the way for mankind's natural usurper and intellectual evolutionary reincarnation – for the overman, *übermensch* (Nietzsche, 1996). Far from the twisted, distorted interpretation that his sister Elisabeth projected on the German people during the early twentieth century, this overman constitutes an idea central to the philosophical heritage of Nietzsche and represents a symbol of his thoughts on self-control, self-cultivation and self-overcoming. In Zarathustras speech to man we find not a sermon, nor the seeds of a new religion, but an exhortation, founded in a deep concern for the condition and trajectory of mankind that tormented Nietzsche for most of his life: how does one reinstate the coveting of greatness in a world that, bereft of the holy and all higher values and ideals, has all but grown inhospitable towards it? Elaborating on this, Zarathustra proclaims: “The time is coming when man will no longer shoot the arrow of his longing out over mankind, and the string of his bow will have forgotten how to twang [...] I teach you the overman. Man is something that must be overcome. What have you done do overcome him?” (Nietzsche, 1996).

There are several loupes through which an examination of a story such as *Cheer* might be conducted. It seems to me not too presumptuous to presume that a Nietzschean analysis of the matter is likely not the first to commonly candidate for the role. The greater the reason then, in my opinion, to explore just what might come of such a perspective.

Many of the young members of the Navarro cheerleading squad still bear the marks of tragic backgrounds. During the course of the documentary series the viewer is given insight into some of these sad stories. They are of broken family conditions and shaky upbringings that in certain cases have resulted in questionable life decisions and feelings of perplexity concerning one's place in life. This in turn is contrasted with the reality of the lives they currently find themselves inhabiting, characterized by discipline, devotion and hard work, where everyone is kept on a short leash by head coach Monica. She is a tough leader; at times, some would argue, possibly too tough. She demands everything and more from the participants, a complete commitment without compromise and excellence in everything that they do,

and this places a great amount of pressure on them. In return, however, she is rewarded with a nigh on fanatic love and reverence. Something that distinguishes this level of sports commitment within cheerleading in particular is that it occurs completely divorced from the otherwise common soaring dreams of professional careers, sponsorships and wealth prevalent within other sports. For each and every one of them it holds true that when life at Navarro has run its course, life as a cheerleader will have done the same. In spite of this, these young cheerleaders, through their incredible feats of acrobatics and gravity-defying leaps, expose themselves to a level of risk normally reserved but for the most perilous of sports. Without the promise of glamorous careers in sports beyond the confines of Navarro College, is it instead the stern coach and a burning yearning for her acceptance and affirmation that drives them? There is a moment during one of the episodes where one of the members, regardless of Monica's urging him not to, has chosen to take part in a cheerleading show with another team during which he injures his back. We are then shown Monica, disregarding the painful condition he is in, pressuring him to take his place on the mat and perform the challenging exercises with the rest of the group to the point where he, pressing his forehead into the mat, declares the pain to be too much, and only then is he allowed to step aside. Subsequently we hear him resolutely professing to the camera his unwavering love for Monica: "Monica's not only like a second mom, she's more like a first mom", a proclamation that cannot help but be contrasted with what one prior to this witnessed him endure.

One possible interpretation is that these young people's thirst for love and acceptance, on account of the exiguous circumstances whence they have come, is driving them to extreme expressions in their search for that which they have thus far been denied in life. One might then be inclined to commiseratingly lament the fact that these poor participants' desire for affection and stability exacts such a heavy toll on their mental and physical well-being. However, perhaps it is in this very suffering that we uncover the true core of *Cheer* – the indirect source of love and the drive to overcome the suffering. Nietzsche challenges the commonly held notion of suffering as something that is innately evil, that it is bad because it is painful and uncomfortable. This he deems to be a false conclusion, something which in *The Gay Science* (Nietzsche, 1975) he expresses through the idea that there is in pain the potential to derive just as much wisdom as there is in pleasure; "that it hurts is no argument against it, but its very essence [...] what if pleasure and pain should be so closely connected that he who wants

the greatest possible amount of one must also have the greatest possible amount of the other?”. What is good and what is evil? What is the purest favor that the truest of friends can do for you, and can it indeed be so uniformly categorized according to this dichotomous division? Something is only categorized as “evil” within the context of a given system of morality. Were one to transcend such a system one would gain the ability to view the entire world differently, a world wherein that which would otherwise be condemned as “evil” might instead be considered “good”, wholly dependent on the nature of the consequences of the deed. Monica challenges, pressures and puts obstacles in the paths of the participants which she then encourages them to surpass and overcome so that they might grow and in turn overcome themselves.

According to Nietzsche (2017) it is in the nature of every living being to do everything in its power, not merely to preserve itself and its life, but to become *more*. The fulfillment of this, he claims, occurs inexorably through what he describes as the fundamental force which drives all life on earth, “the will to power”. In lieu of the more familiar notion of power, power over others and of things external to ourselves, this in particular entails the ultimate form of power, represented by intellectual and spiritual power, the power over oneself and the ability to overcome ones weaknesses and improve oneself to the point where one becomes the master of everything in ones life, and therefore free. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* the idea of self-overcoming is described as woven into the very fabric of the universe. “And life confided the secret to me; behold, it said, I am that which must always overcome itself” (Nietzsche, 1996). Because the attainment of great power can be achieved only through formidable self-control and self-conquest, it can be derived that the foundational spark of all life – its will to power – is a will to self-conquest. Therein lies the ultimate freedom, the liberation to which we all, consciously and unconsciously, strive.

I see reflected in the documentary series *Cheer* the most pervasive themes from the commandments of Zarathustra. To be and to want to become more, progress and expansion of the boundaries of the self, is life itself. *Cheer*, in that regard, becomes a celebration of life. Let us therefore return to the inquiry as to what drives these participants; without monetary and otherwise more worldly reasons for fighting as hard as they do and enduring the not uncommonly intrusive pain and suffering that it is costing them, what then is it that drives them so? Are the participants, because of the many hardships of life they have already had to withstand, driven by a longing for something beyond themselves, a longing that is now being satiated by

means of the demanding yet motherly coach? What if the thing they yearn for is in fact something which instead lies deep within them. What if it is the uncompromising leader's symbolic reflection of the prophetic Zarathustra, as if she possesses fragments of the prophet's ability to pave the way for the overman, the higher purpose, which intuitively awakens a calling within each of them and motivates them to lift themselves by the hair and elevate themselves to higher ground. What if they in fact sense and listen to the calling of Zarathustra, beckoning them from atop the mountain, "6000 feet beyond man and time" (Nietzsche, 1996).

The chosen ones

After initially being met with laughter and ridicule, Zarathustra arrives at the decision that he shall no longer bestow the gift of wisdom upon mankind, for it is not susceptible to it. He will instead gift it to a select few exceptional individuals with the potential of rising above the narrowness of "the herd", who follow him because they want to follow themselves, and who want to go where he wants to go (Nietzsche, 1996). The breaking free from the black hole that is the conformism of contemporary society, which feeds on the annihilation of each and every small embryo of sublimity and singularity, demands a unique willingness to suffer for it, since only suffering can uncover the path to the Nietzschean transcendence. If one were to view the participants of *Cheer* as the chosen few that, through rigorous trials of admission and non-discriminatory culling processes, have been granted access to the gift of wisdom, possessing the true will of self-overcoming, it should follow that they follow Monica because they want to follow themselves. They want to go where she wants to go – and not because she commands it, but because deep down in the depths of their hearts they feel drawn there, like a moth to a flame. As Dante did through purgatory, they too have found their path to paradise. This, then, is what is unconsciously expressed through the desire to please and do whatever Monica wants them to; because it is in actuality what they want. They merely lack the means in their current states to manifest this will in any other way. Human beings are not meant only to seek comfort and avoid pain at all cost (Nietzsche, 2017). All beings strive through different means to increase their power, and driven by this desire they will tirelessly seek resistance; they require that which opposes them – "displeasure as an obstacle to their will to power is therefore a

normal fact; human beings do not avoid it, rather they are in continual need of it” (Nietzsche, 2017).

We meet the participants of *Cheer* at a turbulent time in their lives. Each individual is trying to find meaning in their life and their place in the world, those whose lives previously have lacked that very meaning and purpose which they have so longed for and needed. Through Monica, through self-control and overcoming themselves, it is now as if they have obtained a higher purpose, a meaning to the pain, both that which they currently endure and that of their past. At last they can understand and reconcile with it, themselves and its place in the broader perspective of the narrative of their lives. To be able to hone his being, Zarathustra urges us, man must turn his inclination for cruelty upon himself and create something deeper, that which lies dormant in us all, by whittling away at his superficiality, his prejudices and truths, his weaknesses, and thereby attaining his true freedom (Nietzsche, 1996). Nietzsche bases his conception of the overman on this ideal of complete freedom; nothing limits or controls the overman but himself, and this renders him the creator of everything in his life. Is it possible, then, that the harshly pressured, occasionally suffering, youths of *Cheer* through their self-overcoming seek liberation from the emotional chains of their past? To no longer be burdened by what they have endured, by that which they have been robbed of in their lives, to escape the *ressentiment*, the resentment, sense of inferiority (Nietzsche, 2008), which binds them to both the shackles of their past and the conformism of “the herd” that prevent them from “becoming who they are” (Nietzsche, 1996). Since *ressentiment* and the concern for and escape from the pain are among the characteristics of “the herd”, escaping these inclinations is tantamount to escaping “the herd” itself.

Transcendence

The esteemed duo Elias and Dunning (2008) regard sports partly as an expression of a deeper human essence, the creature within us that in the struggle against the process of civilization has found catharsis in sports; the violence of battle orchestrated within the bounds of society, an inescapable law of nature – mimesis of this most cardinal of instincts. If this is the irrefutable essence, and sports are an ultimate expression of it, is it not then this very same essence which is nurtured and realized by the concept of self-overcoming, by the will to power? Might we surmise then that there ex-

ists within sports traces of an embodiment of the ideal that Nietzsche holds in such high regard? Could this be what we are witnessing while watching *Cheer*? The persevering through hardship, persevering in order to “become who you are”? For what is training if not hardship, if not conquest and overcoming, the embrace of your stronger self through the defeat of your weaker one, that which stands between you and the higher version of you waiting to be demasked? If not on the transcendental intellectual plane to which Nietzsche invites us to ascend, then on a physical one, that in turn structures and emboldens the spiritual core; so, in a sense perhaps we do start to approach something akin to what Nietzsche speaks of. Everyone operates according to their own conditions and has their personal challenges and obstacles to overcome – everyone has their mountain, “6000 feet beyond man and time”. Perhaps it is of less import what shape the mountain assumes, surpassed instead by the significance of the actual ascending of it, whatever its appearance, that hides the path to self-overcoming and the Nietzschean transcendence.

Finally then, as was the case during the concluding episode of the documentary series, and the dramatic culmination at the Daytona competition, so too shall I conclude my reflections with the Navarro cheerleading squad’s very own motto, which appropriately enough in some ways summarizes both the core of the show and this rumination on it:

“We can, we will, we must” – thus spoke Monica Aldama.

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