

Till Wittwer

Johnny's Yodel

People have forgotten who Johnny Weismuller is. Let me tell you about Johnny. Born as Peter Johann Weißmüller, he first set foot into the USA in 1905, at one year of age, when his family emigrated from Romania and entered the US through the immigration hub of Ellis Island. Doesn't that pave the ground for a sensational success story, with a touch of emotion, perhaps?!

Well, here goes: Johnny grew up to be one of the most prolific and successful competitive swimmers of all times. He won five Olympic gold medals and set more than fifty world records. Throughout his swimming career he never lost a race. He also was a film star, an entrepreneur and a passionate golfer. So far, so Wikipedia. Alas, I am not planning on telling you a story you could read online just like that.

The story I am trying to excavate from the piles of gold-medals, honor-rolls, cardboard boxes of breakfast flakes, swimming-pool-supplies, Hollywood Walk of Fame-marble plates, Beatles record covers, and rollercoaster spare-parts¹ is about loincloths, yodels, and identity. The story is set in the year 1942 and its first shot goes like this:

¹ Johnny was a fan of John Harvey Kellogg's ideas of a healthy lifestyle, he founded a swimming-pool company, he was honored with a star on Hollywood's Walk of Fame, he is one of the characters depicted on Peter Blake's legendary sleeve for the Beatles-record "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band", he was co-owner of a theme park called "Tropical Wonderland".



**Tarzan's New York Adventure [1942]
Johnny Weissmuller Kopie.**

Johnny Weismuller climbs the facade of a New York skyscraper to escape a handful of clumsy police officers. How this chase came about is of no importance at this point, it's all about the action. Having reached the skyscraper's flat rooftop, Johnny runs to the ledge on the roof's far side and gets hold of a rope dangling from a flag pole. He uses this rope to swing across the concrete jungle's urban canyon and crosses the image frame from left to right – the typical direction of escape in movie semiotics. Weismuller swings across the screen like a pendulum – without swinging back, of course, as his motion is an ever-forward escape.

If we haven't recognized it before, we recognize it now, hearing a high-pitched yodel: Johnny Weismuller is Tarzan.² New York's picturesque concrete jungle is his playground; somebody put him into a grey suit to blend in but underneath he is wearing his signature loincloth.

Next shot. We see Tarzan swing into the frame (from the left, of course). He lets go of the rope and lands in the center of the screen. The scenery he has entered from above is a roof hosting a huge billboard on steel girders which obstructs a good view into the distance. The viewer's gaze is stopped on the big wooden advertisement surface; the cinema screen becomes the billboard itself, Tarzan smack in the middle.

Tarzan turns his impressive and well-dressed body a bit, hastily looks back over his shoulder and all of a sudden it is completely unclear whether he takes this look as Johnny or as Tarzan: Is Tarzan turning his head because he fears the chubby policemen might be right behind him, having traversed the vast urban canyon on a rope, Tarzan-style? Or is his look rather a consequence of having landed right in the middle of an advertisement shoot and now poor Johnny – who thought he was doing a decent job embodying the escaping Tarzan but has apparently touched down in the wrong frame – is being yelled at by the ad shoot's production assistant to get the hell out of the frame? Either way, Johnny-Tarzan proceeds as ordered and exits the screen (towards the right hand side, naturally), leaving us viewers alone with the bare advertisement message. “PLUS.

2 The film is “Tarzan's New York Adventure”, directed by Richard Thorpe.

ECONOMY”, it mysteriously reads.

Is that what Johnny is? Is Johnny the “plus-economy”? I mean, in his days he was one of the most celebrated stars in sports, he was a huge celebrity, everybody wanted a piece of him. In total, Johnny Weismuller shot fourteen Tarzan movies and his Tarzan-yodel, that was pressed from his lungs with a strangling Hollywood-contract was immediately canned and actually is still used in Tarzan flicks today. Whenever we hear that yodel, we are listening to Peter Johann Weißmüller, the immigrant kid from a German ethnic minority in Timisoara, Romania, who gives us his most sincere “AYAYAAAAAY” in a desperate attempt to please the production manager on the one hand and to get rid of the last bits of this very Peter Johann Weißmüller – the immigrant kid – inside of him, and of the last bits of Johnny Weismuller, the swim-star living the American dream on the other. With the yodel, he wants to change into a meta-species, transcending his voice and emancipating it from all the “thank you” and the kind and humble words at the press conferences and the sponsorship meetings held to praise Johnny for his physique, for his achievement, for his embodiment of an ideology, for being proof that a mythological narrative can turn into reality, that man can overcome the most difficult obstacles and that a nobody can become a somebody just by working hard. His yodel, this sincere and desperate yodel is the yodel of someone looking for freedom: At this point Johnny Weismuller has become in the USA what Alexey Grigoryevich Stakhanov had become in the USSR only a few years earlier: an overachiever, a model worker, a superhuman proto-citizen, material for ideologic modeling, embodying the values of his patria. Johnny has become a living example – and an object to exhibit – that the American Dream is real.

And now we see: Maybe the Johnny/Tarzan-confusion didn't only occur when he touched down in front of the billboard. Maybe the fugitive we thought to be Tarzan in a suit wasn't Tarzan at all: it was Johnny all along. And maybe the officers in pursuit weren't actually actors playing policemen, but

Till Wittwer (cont'd from pg. 11)

instead they were representatives of some committee, intending to hand poor Johnny yet another medal of honor. The fiction film turns into a documentary and we witness an escapee yodeling his way into freedom.

Or at least attempting to do so: Disturbingly, this desperate yodel, this cry for freedom, which Johnny believes is emancipating him, which he believes is relieving him from the weight of being a mere pawn for ideology, ironically becomes *the* marketed element. It is recorded and reproduced and thus the yodel is what ultimately remains from Johnny Weismuller's great career way after he is dead and his name is forgotten.

And every time we hear Tarzan's signature cry today, we are actually hearing a tragically failed attempt of leaving all of this behind: Appropriation, exploitation, ideologization, incorporation. It's the cry of Johnny "plus-economy" Weismuller.