

**Convention, Audience, and Narrative:
Which Play is the Thing?**

Leslie A. Howe

ABSTRACT: This paper argues against the conception of sport as theatre. Theatre and sport share the characteristic that play is set in a conventionally-defined hypothetical reality, but they differ fundamentally in the relative importance of audience and the narrative point of view. Both present potential for participants for development of selfhood through play and its personal possibilities. But sport is not essentially tied to audience as is theatre. Moreover, conceptualising sport as a form of theatre valorises the spectator's narrative as normative for sport experience over that of the participant athlete or player, eliding player experience. Imposition of external narratives over experience risks fossilising interpretation and inhibits the beneficial effects of play for self-realisation, especially as a form of self-examination and creation through internal self-narrative.

Sport is frequently described in theatrical or dramatic terms, or as a kind of theatre, or even declared to *be* theatre:

“Sport is theatre, and through it we can see the human condition cut to the bone. Sport has peace and stillness, drama, comedy, and tragedy. It conveys more vividly than any other branch of human activity the elation and despair in every person's emotional range.” (6: p. 9)

Certainly, there is drama in sport, and comedy, because there is passion and humour experienced by its participants and which appears to the spectator as a play presented for the observing. But, while it is clear that there are parallels and analogies between them, is the equating of sport with theatre really fair to either sport or theatre? The “theatricalisation” of sport can be linked in a great many cases to the selling of sport, as experienced with the broadcast of every Olympic Games, World Cup, Superbowl, and not a few local minor sport rivalries. Certainly, the desirability of tickets to a sporting event is increased if spectators can be persuaded that it has world historical significance or profound human interest. While both the mechanisms and the reasons for these phenomena are worthy of close examination, these will not be my target in this paper.¹ Instead, I shall explore several fundamental characteristics of sport as play that I shall then put forward as constituting evidence that many of the most

¹Providing a better show is not only motivated by filthy lucre: the ancient Roman *munera* could hardly be called sport (in the modern sense) though they required considerable athletic training, but however we classify them, such shows were motivated by (a) religious-judicial requirements for the punishment of criminals and (b) political expedience for those who paid for them to be put on. See (13).

familiar interpretations of sport as “theatrical” are misguided. I argue that not only are such interpretive efforts destructive of sport as play, but they commonly misinterpret those respects in which sport really is like theatrical-play, thereby also failing to grasp a significant value of sport for its individual participants. These failures of interpretation to which I here refer are, interestingly, not so prevalent in the literature of theatrical performance theory, but are commonplaces of an externalist or objectificatory, in many respects, a journalistic, approach to the understanding of sport-performance. As I shall argue, the principal error in this approach and in its sometime characterisation of sport-performance as “theatrical” develops out of a tendency to approach sport and its play from the point of view of the spectator, that is, externally to play itself, rather than from the perspective of the playing subject.² Insofar as the purpose of play is seen to be the telling of its story to an audience, its focus shifts away from the player as an independent human self exploring and developing its own possibilities for expression and toward the consumer of play as completed product, and play itself is transformed from self-narrative to other-narrative. It is at this point that sport does become most truly “theatrical” in the sense of *show* rather than play, i.e., *playful*.

In the following, I will consider, first, the distinctions between and the role of different kinds of convention in sport, concentrating primarily on what I take to be the fundamental convention of play, namely the pretence of reality (analogous to the “suspension of disbelief”), and its centrality in explaining the value of sport-play. In the second section, I discuss whether sport or theatre require an audience, and in the third, the effect on sport of the demand for narrative. What I hope to show by the end of this discussion is that while sport is often theatricalised by external pressures, it is not *as play* inherently or necessarily theatrical in the sense of being a performance produced for the gaze of others, though it will also be argued that sport-play and theatrical-play do share some important structural characteristics and existential possibilities.³

Convention

Sport is a highly structured form of play. If we are to play some sport together, we engage in an activity that is governed by a set of explicit or tacit rules and conventions of behaviour that we either negotiate between ourselves or that are already culturally available and that we adopt in order to provide structure and meaning to our physical activities. Suppose

²Note that this adoption of the observer perspective is not necessarily restricted to the non-participant; players themselves, particularly in professional sport and its non-professional feeder systems, have been known to take on the external appraising perspective as well, even with regard to themselves, thus referring to themselves in the third person. I would contend that this is an affectation borrowed from and to an extent encouraged by the tendency to view sport as primarily entertainment for the fans rather than self-activity on the part of players or athletes.

³The relation of sport to theatre would also seem to raise questions about the relation of sport to art. I shall not deal with that much larger question in this paper, mainly because I am primarily concerned here with the player’s experiential and agential role in narrative development in relation to the demand for an audience-centred, externally accessible, narrative.

we decide to kick a ball around together: if I suddenly pick it up in my hands and throw it, you might complain that I'm not playing anymore, or if your skills are so superior to mine that I never get a touch on the ball I am likely to make a similar complaint. Whether or not we go through an explicit process of making up game rules or not, we settle on a set of practices and expectations concerning our interactions. The conventions that any group of sport participants adopt, although the product of a process of social negotiation, may be inherited rather than invented, may or may not involve explicit discussion, and the consensus so achieved may be rough or fragile rather than sturdy.

David Hume's example of two men "agreeing" to row a boat together offers an apt illustration of the point:⁴ his claim is that the two men don't have to make any explicit agreement between themselves to row together in order to succeed in doing so; they will simply do so out of common interest and, one supposes, make whatever ad hoc adjustments to each other they need to as they go, or else go rather badly. Of course, there are examples of sports that are, at some point in their history, the result of *fiat*, whether because an historical game is regularised (association football) or because it is deliberately invented (e.g., basketball or ringette).⁵ Whether a sport is explicitly legislated into being or it develops "organically" over a long stretch of years, it is not an independent *natural* object but the outcome of human communicative interaction; sports are artificial cultural creations, but that does not mean either that they need have explicit structures or that they are irrational or immune to rational scrutiny and revision. Nor does the conventional fluidity of sport and play rule out the possibility that each possesses certain necessary conditions or characteristics; "convention" here refers primarily to the "unspokenness" and context-dependence of a structure that might nevertheless be practically or rationally necessary for performance, as in Hume's example.

⁴"Thus, two men pull the oars of a boat by common convention for common interest, without any promise or contract..." Hume offers the analogy in aid of his argument that justice, while artificial, cannot be the result of a promise or contract, not least because such things are themselves a product of the convention of justice itself, but "if by convention be meant a sense of common interest; which sense each man feels in his own breast, which he remarks in his fellows, and which carries him, in concurrence with others, into a general plan or system of actions, which tends to public utility; it must be owned that, in this sense, justice arises from human conventions." (12: Appendix III, p. 306).

⁵Both basketball and ringette are sports for which there is a more or less definite date of inception, and thus both may be deemed "artificial" game constructions, though it must be conceded that all games are artificial constructs—the distinction is a matter of degree. Ringette, for example, is a game invented in 1963 in North Bay, Ontario (see (24)), and was conceived as a female substitute for ice hockey (as hockey was deemed too violent for girls). Hockey itself is reputed to have been invented as an organised, rule-bound game, in the 1870s by rugby and lacrosse players who wanted a winter sport, but (like association football) the structure and rules so devised were superimposed on already existing informal games and game practices (shinny and related field games) (see, e.g., (22) and (23); it should be noted that the origins of hockey continue to be a matter of dispute).

The most obvious conventions of sport are those that set out the structure of its play: those rules determining the place, shape, length, and overall conduct of the competition or contest: whether it is to take place on grass, ice, water, or pavement; will the contest occur within a fixed time limit or whether it is distance that matters; whether the players use objects (bats, weapons, balls (what kind); is movement spontaneous within certain boundaries, with fouls incurred for violations (as in football or hockey), or rigidly prescribed (as in diving or triple jump). Without these basic defining elements there can be no game, no race, no contest.⁶ Some sports are less rigidly rule-governed than others, but none are without any bounds at all. Thus, running track leaves the participant with relatively little room for individual interpretation or expression of the sport's basic movement, whereas most game sports give one greater scope in this respect in virtue in part of their dynamic aspect, and even remote sports set out activities as definitive of their specific sports, e.g., ice-climbing is distinct from alpine climbing is distinct from bouldering, and so on. This circumstance aside, any sport exists as such in virtue of the rules and conventions that define it as the particular sport that it is. Despite the greater areas of indeterminacy in many games, as opposed to the stricter definition of movement in other sports, rules are most obvious in the former, as are the looser conventions, the *ethoi*, that govern accepted practice in a given sport, or in its (often very) local variants. These include the unspoken social expectations that underlie the cooperative process of play, such as how forcefully one is expected to challenge an opponent in a friendly pick up game, whether one should pass rather than attempt to score, or whether one owns up to disputed or undetected rule violations. For my purposes here I will refer to all of these as "conventions."

Play can be indeterminate, as when one plays with a coin in one's pocket or a blade of grass, but sport is normally a good deal less so.⁷ Not all play is sport, of course, and not all sport is play (though this paper will offer some grounds for thinking the latter should be the case). For present purposes, I shall distinguish "play" as the embodied expression of individual intention within a context that sets such movement apart from ordinary activity and interaction, especially as having a meaning other than its literal meaning; it is a convention that allows a meaning shift out of that set of conventions that govern ordinary interactions. This is, admittedly, vague and I shall have more to say about this later. "Sport", on the other hand, I take to refer to one of a number of possible formal structures within which play may take place and that (ideally) ought to facilitate the develop of play activity (others include theatre, music, and dance), while individual sports are defined by their constituting rules and conventions,

⁶On these issues, see, for example, Suits (18, 19, 20). While the question of how rules define games and other sports is of considerable importance in the philosophy of sport, it is less important to the present argument than is the broader recognition of their (rationally justifiable) conventionality: we can only play games or sports because we "agree" to be bound by such rules, though the rules themselves are (relatively) arbitrary restrictions of movement, i.e., there is no reason to accept such restrictions except insofar as we desire to play in a particular way, which entails having a particular set of embodied experiences.

⁷Indeed, most play is not so indeterminate either; even if one plays with a cat or dog, one normally makes some kind of game out of the play ("catch the pretend-mouse" or "shake that rat") or when one plays by oneself at catching a ball or makes a game of mowing the lawn.

which may be variously encouraging of play activity on the part of their participants.

One should also distinguish between those constitutive rules that make a sport the specific sport it is and those more specific technical rulings that are promulgated by that sport's current governing bodies. Thus, hockey, for example, may have variations in rules depending on which governing body happens to have jurisdiction over its official iterations, but we can still recognise all these versions as versions of hockey, along with those versions played without any official sanction whatever. Likewise, more innately informal sports such as rock climbing may be pursued without any regard to formal sport structure and yet be no less a sport for that, just so long as its participants actually *climb* rock-faces rather than being hoisted up and down by cable-car.

As suggested, there is always some set of more informal conventions in any given sport in addition to its constitutive rules. Normally, these are both sport- and socially-contingent, and so may vary between sports and within a sport in different societies. They usually have to do with participant conduct and permissibility: what is considered good sportsmanship and who can or should play (class, race, sex) and how (style), all of which expectations can be quite local in variation.

Sport also carries the remarkable characteristic of being a social convention that permits and even encourages its participants to violate social conventions and this is the aspect of its conventional structure that will interest us the most. It is a commonplace observation that one is allowed, even encouraged or required, to commit acts in sport that would be morally or legally wrong elsewhere. Boxers, hockey players, and even cricketers regularly do things that would not be tolerated outside the worlds of their respective competitions. Sport is not unique in this; theatre does the same.⁸ What is really of interest in this situation is not the permission to violate normal social conventions *as such*, i.e., the *mere* contravention of them, but two further aspects of that permission. First, there is the circumstance that the meaning of the players' actions must be understood and interpreted in relation to this convention of exception, the play-context, rather than the larger world from which the convention of play is quarantined. The actions of any given variety of play are meaningless or absurd if not grasped within their appropriate convention. Second, this prepares the ground for an enabling of expression on the part of the player; in fact, this permission is the permission to *play*: to act hypothetically and without commitment except to play itself. The truly crucial aspect of sport-play, and the one that makes all the others possible is this: that sport, in common with certain other forms of play, particularly theatre, proceeds on the basis of a fundamental constitutive pretence, namely, that the world of play that is defined by its constitutive rules is *real*.

The rules of sport-play define a world apart, one where normal social conventions are contravened without punishment, and which are closed rather than open-ended, where the

⁸See Saltz (16: 33, 35). An important difference is that theatre performance does not commonly countenance contraventions that do legally actionable physical damage to other performers *in fact*. The question of at what point the suspension of convention becomes *morally* unjustifiable is beyond the scope of this paper; on the subject see, for example, (3).

participants assume roles that are abandoned at the defined time for close of play, and in which time has exaggerated significance and bodily movements mean something completely different than they do elsewhere. Moreover, no matter how absolutely important it all seems at the moment, it might all disappear or be unnoticed and nothing would alter in the larger world encompassing that of play. The “suspension of disbelief” holds as vitally for sport as it does for theatre.⁹

The point being stressed here is not simply that one ought to pretend that the game, the race, the bout *matters*, but that the participants in the event, if they are to get out of it all they might, have to take it as if it were as real as the world outside the artificial one of the sport-play event, not a world set apart. There is a crucial distinction here: it is not a matter of treating the sport-play world *as* real, but *as if* real.¹⁰ The tennis player who is fully committed to playing the game with the seriousness required to play it well must play *as if* her whole world is confined within the space of the court or else fail to do her self or the game or her opponent justice, yet she must also know when the game is over. A player ought not to be delusional, but her pretence must be serious. To play seriously requires the deliberate adoption of the pretence that the world of play is not merely conventional or hypothetical while at the same time knowing perfectly well that it is. This second-order awareness of play’s contingency is crucial. Where there is this higher-order awareness, there is the possibility for the player to play on an ontological level. That is, if the player is reflectively aware of the pretensive structure of play, she can use play to play at her own experience of play, and thereby her experience of her self. In other words, by taking on various roles in play, which may be ones that she would not take on away from the arena of play, the player is enabled to experiment with and to explore her own possibilities for being. She can gain insight into what it would be like to be aggressive, creative, defensive, etc., and all without the social cost that such experimentation might have in ordinary interpersonal exchange.

The self-creative value of play is in its offering of possibility. In effect, if one commits to *play*, one gains the possibility of being (for the span of play) other than oneself outside of play.

⁹Yet, sport may seem more “real”. This may be, in part, because the outcome of any given sport contest is (ideally) unknown, or else it is not sport. We may not know how a play or movie ends either, but it is nevertheless fixed in the sense of previously determined. Where sport-play is fixed because predictable (because the competitors are hopelessly poorly matched) we may be bored, but if fixed because rigged, we feel cheated, not only because the course of play in determining the better competitor is subverted, but because the sense of anticipation attaching to an unknown, even if probable, outcome is thwarted. Of course, these comments refer primarily though not exclusively to the spectator’s experience; for the participant, this distinction may be less compelling, insofar as a performance is still to be performed.

¹⁰This use of “real” is, to say the least, potentially ontologically problematic, but is meant only to indicate the distinction between the conventionally explicit apartness of the various worlds of play and that which is explicitly taken to be normative reality.

And this can allow one to discover not only who one *is* but who one *might* be.¹¹ It is in this respect that play opens up self-creative possibilities. It is not so much that one can pretend to be someone else, but that one can discover modes of self-expression that are other than those one would otherwise employ. One cannot *be* someone else, either in sport or in theatre, but one can express *oneself as if* one were another. And it is in this process that one may both expand and sharpen the sense of who one is and could be.

It is, however, worth re-emphasising this proviso: the player has to take the pretence seriously. To play at play is not to play. Breaking the play-spell might be a consequence of misunderstanding or incompetence, or it might be an ironical withholding of self, or deliberate sabotage of the predominant convention. Whichever is the reason, such failure to play the game of play can excite considerable irritation in those who do, or wish to, commit to the convention. The crucial point here, though, is that authentic play requires that the player engage spontaneously in the fundamental conceit of the play-world, namely that it is the only world that matters or that even exists.

Audience

The preceding section outlined some of the ways in which theatre and sport mirror each other, in particular, in the conventional separation and provisional character of their respective play-worlds, with the permission given to their participants to explore alternate self-expressions, in the first instance as an integral component of the play process itself and secondly as an opportunity to understand and create one's self through the experience of play. In the present section, we turn to some critical ways in which sport and theatre diverge. Ironically, perhaps, this parting of ways will come at just that point where it might seem that they are most comparable, namely, the presentation of play before an audience. As I shall argue, the question of audience and for whom play is engaged is a critical and transformative one: is it the player or the spectator that is central to play, and is play possible without an audience or is the presumption of spectatorship by one not inside the play itself a precondition of its meaning? I shall not be able to offer more than speculative suggestions with respect to theatre, but I hope to be able to make a more definitive case concerning sport.

The second part of the question is the more easily answered. Theatrical production, it seems, must presuppose an audience, whether or not it succeeds in finding one in any given

¹¹There is an ambiguity here: if one discovers what one *might* be does that mean that it is “really” who one *is* already? Not exactly. I reject the notion of a static self, but I do not think that we can make ourselves into anything we choose, either. The issue is more complicated than can be tackled here, but some apparent possibilities will be false, dead-ends; some will point to further choices that must be made. For the most part, I think that the discovery of live possibilities for oneself is a process of discovering aspects of oneself that for one reason or another one was not aware of or that one chose not to see, in other words, that did not feature in one's own narrative account of one's self.

instance, and whether or not it does so in a traditional way.¹² Insofar as theatre is concerned with telling a story,¹³ it must do so on the assumption of an at least hypothetical other. Its production is constructed around the concept of a presentation to an other, even when it is performed or its text read entirely for private enjoyment. Thus, while the playing of theatrical roles has its intrinsic value for those who do so, the larger work of which that individual performance is a component *ordinarily*, though admittedly not necessarily, has a purpose and value that is extrinsic to those experiences. This claim presupposes a fairly conventional and Western approach to theatrical performance and it can be objected that as such it is of only limited effect. It is true that a number of non Western theatrical practices presuppose the centrality of the performers' experience of the drama self-enacted.¹⁴ Indeed, in the case of Japanese Noh, we have a practice that comes closer to athletic play than much, though by no means all, Western theatrical production. However, while all this must be admitted, it remains true that the narrative or expository character of theatre remains paramount in a way that is not true of sport-play. Even if the audience is only the artist, the performance comes into being as a telling-to, whereas sport-performance is primarily a telling-of the character of the performer as performer, even if it is also a telling-of an assumed character. Moreover, although some theatrical forms and instantiations provide for the self-realisation of their performers in an explicit way, it remains true that the means of their doing so is the telling-to an audience, hypothetical or actual, of a (self) narrative. In this respect, then, we would have to say that for theatre, the concept of audience takes precedence over the experience of self-play.

The situation frequently seems to be the same for sport performers as well, and Christopher Lasch, for example, claims that an audience is crucial to the ritual of recognition of athletic excellence.

“In all games, particularly in athletic contests, display and representation constitute a central element—a reminder of the former connections between play, ritual, and drama. The players not only compete; they enact a familiar ceremony that reaffirms common values. Ceremony requires witnesses: enthusiastic spectators conversant with the rules of the performance and its underlying meaning. Far from destroying the value of sports, the attendance of spectators makes them complete.” (14: 405-6)

¹²See Grotowski: “At least one spectator is needed to make it a performance. So we are left with the actor and the spectator. We can thus define the theatre as ‘what takes place between spectator and actor.’ All the other things are supplementary...” (8: 183). Also Wilshire: “Reflecting, we realize that no written script is necessary for a theatre event, and that at least one actor is necessary...There must be at least a one-member audience, for an audience—actual or possible— is ingredient in all art (we do not here question the status of the artist as his or her own audience).” (21: 6).

¹³By “story” I do not mean to imply any particular structure that must be assumed present in a work of theatre, only that something *is told*.

¹⁴See Monica Bethe and Karen Brazell, “The Practice of Noh Theatre,” (1: 167-193). Also, Richard Schechner, “From Ritual to Theatre and Back”, (17: 196-222).

Such a view, however, is difficult to sustain. I shall have more to say in the next section about the sort of public narrative of performance to which Lasch here alludes, but it should be evident that sport, even of the most commercially committed sort, can always be played in the absence of audience and without losing any of its character *as* sport. A nice example is furnished by professional football, in which bad behaviour by a team's fans can occasionally cause the sport's governing bodies (FIFA, UEFA) to order a game be played in an empty stadium. While the experience may be somewhat unsettling for players unaccustomed to such an atmosphere, it by no means follows that they do not play a genuine game. In such circumstances, we would not therefore claim that the players are now playing for themselves, as they still do so in order to fulfill the commercial ambitions of owners, sponsors, and broadcasters on the one hand, and to satisfy the vicarious desire for victory of their fans on the other. The closed stadia are irrelevancies; whether the audience is present in the flesh or only via electronic means, or even if it can only await notification of the result, play in such cases remains not for self but for others.

Most sport, however, is not played under these conditions. Every day amateurs play, in most cases, utterly without audiences or any species of other-regard beside their own. Indeed, the vast majority of sport is played in this way. It is true that much amateur sport is directed to socially-defined ends: engaging with friends, pleasing parents, making a name for oneself at school and perhaps winning a scholarship or national standing, and so on. Although a sport can be pursued for the sake of external goods, however, it *need not be*, and this is the only concession needed for the point being pursued here. The play that underlies and fills the formal structure of sport is, fundamentally, an activity that need not refer to any purpose other than itself, though sport, the specific structure that gives it shape, is frequently engaged in out of or with an admixture of extrinsic motivations.¹⁵ Among these is its performance for others, for an audience.

The case can perhaps be made clearer by considering those sports undertaken not only in the absence of an audience but, in some cases, its impossibility. Remote or adventure sports, such as ocean kayaking or high altitude mountaineering, can only under rare and extraordinary conditions be observed by others and are undertaken primarily by those who are interested only in the process of performing the constitutive activities for themselves. And although in principle observable, it would be a stretch to try to make the case that audience figures in any coherent manner into the activities of the dedicated amateur runner or the rower doing dry land winter ergometer-training. The only way remaining to argue that audience is a presupposition of sport is to claim that these examples are not sport (recreation, perhaps). But this not only cannot be convincingly done, it requires stipulation of a definition that makes it tautological to connect audience and sport, so that the only sport that counts as sport is that which is performed for an audience.

Narrative

Sport is not inherently theatrical. Most sport is in fact the tedious repetition of narrowly described training movements rather than those moments or gestures that seize the emotions and imaginations of spectators, and the decisive moments, or the deeply revealing ones, for the

¹⁵There is a very large literature on this subject. As a sample, see Johan Huizinga (11); Roger Caillois (5); Bernard Suits (18, 19, 20); Klaus V. Meier (15); Warren P. Fraleigh (7).

participants are often those that pass unnoticed by external observers. But this points to the truth of the matter. The “theatricalisation” of sport does not originate in sport itself but issues out of an external demand overlaid on sport-play. This demand arises out of two circumstances: the commercial exigencies of modern professional and international sport, including the consumer orientation of modern sport (i.e., it’s not so much something one does oneself but that one pays someone else to do), and an apparently profound human need for dramatic narrative. Sport, like theatre, can be used to tell vital human stories, but doing so requires a certain distortion of sport itself as an activity of play, and commonly proceeds by way of a confusion.

Theatre, let us say, tells stories about, amongst other things, what it is to exist as a human being. In doing so, it implicitly or explicitly acknowledges its interpretive distance from the reality it interprets—there is no question about whether what occurs on stage is itself the reality of which it tells. While literary and literally theatrical story-telling about sport likewise maintain this interpretive awareness, much popular culture “theatricalisation” of sport does not, but naively collapses this ironic distance, confusing the story with the activity upon which it builds its tale. Thus, the audience cannot distinguish one from the other, and comes to believe perhaps that in experiencing the narrative they are also experiencing the sport itself. Why not, after all, since it is all *show*? In effect, the pretence of play is extended so far that even the reality of play itself, as the actual activity of play, is put into doubt.

Sport does lend itself to such narrative efforts because of the extremes of human expression, experience, and emotion that it can encompass, but as with the self-narrative that is built out of an individual’s everyday life, the sport-narrative is a selective interpretation of experience, one that has no inherent guarantee of veridicality. And insofar as it is unaware of its distance from its subject, its likelihood of veridicality and authenticity are diminished. What all this means in more concrete terms can be illustrated by some all too familiar examples.

Of course, the soft target here is always professional wrestling, but another is U.S. network television coverage of the Olympic Games. The familiar scenario is redrawn for each Olympiad: an athlete’s personal story or family tragedy is made the focal point of the network’s coverage of a particular sport discipline, to the extent that the event itself is presented entirely in terms of that athlete’s triumph or failure with respect to this single personal obstacle. For the spectator, this *is* the sport; not technique, not training, pacing, nutrition, not the other competitors, all of which, it would seem, have arrived solely for this one story to be told, and for the spectator to be able to conclude that the athlete in question is a “champion” or a “loser”.

The other perennial narrative is that of *us* versus *them*. This can play out in local rivalries (the derby game) or in the international arena as the symbolic battle between my country’s way of doing things and yours. As I have argued elsewhere (9), the shift of control over the meaning of sport from the athlete to the spectator transforms the athlete into a symbolic being, whose subjectivity is insignificant save as something that can be objectively accessible, as in the prepackaged narrative of media and fan commentary. Here, athletes become “champions” not so much for having succeeded in athletic competition but by being the spectator’s champion, his vicarious representative, the one who acts out his passion play of victory and defeat.

My point in making these observations is to emphasise that in all of these cases, the

sport itself really doesn't matter, much less the player or athlete's own experience of effort or self-expression.¹⁶ What matters is the narrative and that the player or team or sport fit that narrative. If all this is true, then it must be admitted that this kind of "theatricalisation" thoroughly distorts or misunderstands the sport to which it is applied, and is inimical to sport itself as play, where we understand "play" to refer to spontaneous self-expression and the exploration of self-possibility.

Play, at least of the sorts that concern us here, is a deliberate embodied expression of intentionality and, thus, whatever narrative others tell, one also has one's own. To simply practice kicking a ball against a wall generally involves aiming to do so, possibly with some self-account to oneself of what one is doing, whether that account is flat and pragmatic or fanciful. To engage in the full complexity of some extended sporting activity such as a game is to understand oneself as engaged in certain physical activities; self-reflection, insofar as it takes place, involves, in effect, telling oneself a story about what one is doing, interpreting one's events and giving them meanings. Thus, to play, even in sport-play, is to take on the narrative (both in the sense of the point of view and the self-story) of "being a player in this game" or "being a runner/swimmer/climber/etc." It is to introduce into one's internal narrative of self this additional narrative thread of oneself as doing certain actions in a certain way, and of perhaps being this way or that. In this way, the player's actions are not only elements in an external intersubjective narrative of what is happening (about which the spectators may differ) but a subjective one that interprets and apportions personal meanings to what he or she does.

The extent to which self-narrative requires conscious reflection is a question I shall not settle here. I do not, however, see self-narrative as requiring a kind of simultaneous translation of one's actions and intentions. A player may very well not self-reflect during play (or after) and may seek out play precisely to stifle such reflection. Narrative may be coincident with play but it is just as likely to be a subsequent self-reflective interpretation. Thus, for example, a player experiences unexpected defeat or victory and reflects on the surprising emotions, fitting them into a new narrative or a chapter of her narrative of self. Or, perhaps, she finds herself wondering at her own unprovoked aggression toward an opponent and needs to find an explanation that coheres with her current self account or rewrite it altogether.

It has been argued that this kind of self-accounting occurs as a response to an external demand to account for oneself. Self-accounting, then, is a component in the process of social recognition (4: 3-40).¹⁷ In this context, one can think of the player's opponent as being the one who asks "Who do you think you are?" Play is itself a response: "here—let me show you..." The opponent then is the one to whom one relates one's self-narrative in the embodied form of play, challenging the other to respond in kind. This is one reason why play is valuable in developing any individual's self-narrative, i.e., because it provokes response and (to some degree) self-

¹⁶Except insofar as this becomes reified as a public persona, which then plays its part in the construction of the public drama. Not all personae are equally acceptable (comprehensible) within that narrative, however.

¹⁷Butler argues that self-accounting only takes place in response to the demand of another; while I find much of Butler's account persuasive, I part company with her on this point.

reflection; play is self-creation in this respect. Does this then make of the opponent an audience, so that we are forced, in the end, to concede the centrality of audience to sport-play? No, because such an “audience” is in this case a player, engaged actively in changing as well as being changed by the play. Of course, players are also observers, but never only observers, both because of their creative role in play and because players can play alone. Again, remote individual sports comprise forms of play in which no audience can be assumed; mountains and rivers might be said to “pose” questions of the sportsperson but these are not observers and whatever questions might be posed are really posed by the individual of herself.

If external narrative is available and normative, one is perhaps less likely to seek one’s own interpretation or to be confident in its truth. Simply, if everyone tells the player that his actions mean x, he is likely to be inhibited from understanding them as y, regardless of any truth of the matter. The risk then is alienation from his own play as the explanation of his play and of himself do not fit his own experience of playing. Or he fails to see play as an expression of his own self and is alienated from its performance in this way. This kind of alienation would, I think, be undesirable for human beings; it is also undesirable for play as certain kinds of creativity in play, especially spontaneity, require a conviction of the meaning of one’s own actions apart from what others tell one they mean.

Insofar as sport, or a given sport event, is interpreted *in advance* as having a certain character or meaning, the possibility of experiencing it as otherwise is inhibited. And insofar as those expectations constrain the actions of those participating, if sport is not about *playing* but about realising an external story-line, the fundamental benefits of sport-play for self-realisation and its integrity as sport both may be lost or weakened. Insofar as players accept this external narrative as descriptive of their activity, their experience of it may well be less open than it would be otherwise. The public narrative then takes over as determinative not only of the public meaning of play, but of the players’ own experience of their own play. And this seems to be limiting of the possibilities of play as self-experience and of self-possibility.

The problem with superimposing narrative on play is not, of course, narrative itself; narrative is the fundamental way in which we structure existence, of both self and world. However, play is a means of developing self and world narrative in a creative, hypothetical, and relatively spontaneous way. As such, it opens possibility for self-expression, self-development, and both self and other discovery that might not otherwise be available. The danger of an imposed narrative is that these benefits might not be realised. If experience has a pre-instituted interpretive orthodoxy, its potential is restricted. Children playing shinny on local ice rinks have for decades played at being their big name hockey heroes, complete perhaps with their own versions of radio or television play-by-play commentary (“he shoots, he scores!”). As genuinely ironic play, this is harmless fun. But such socially sanctioned narratives frequently become embedded as the standard, sometimes even as the only possible, lens through which sport-play can be seen and understood. The domination of our understanding of sport in terms of its professional iterations contributes to this, but the influence of socially prescriptive narrative is more thoroughgoing than the mere erasure of amateur sport. Narrative orthodoxy constricts both spectator experience of play and performer experience. If the player can only interpret his or her own self experience in play in terms of this orthodoxy, this experience can become exclusionary. The player must make himself fit the role written for him in advance or abandon

play as unsuited to self-expression. Thus, those who want to play must learn to conform to the social expectations and roles offered to them and to understand their own success at play in terms of how well they fill these limited roles—as young recruits to professional sports teams learn to say the right things as well as develop in themselves the currently marketable skills. To fail to fit positively into these narratives is to fail to be understood, which may well have considerable social as well as sport costs.¹⁸

Conclusion

In the end, what we can say is this. Despite the considerable number of parallels between theatre and sport, there are significant differences as well and the most important of these goes directly to the issue of the “theatricality” of sport: the centrality of audience. Theatricality is most commonly a characteristic of spectator sport, but not all sport is either spectator oriented or even spectator accessible in an uncomplicated way, and “theatricality” as applied to sport signifies a narrative overlaid on the sport experience, or more exactly, the *spectator’s* sport experience. I have argued that this external narrative, insofar as it bears little relation to the player’s own experience but caters more to the sport consumer’s expectations of a good story, tends to fossilise the interpretations of experience and self and works against the beneficial effects of play for self-realisation.

Before leaving this question, it may be worth considering a possible contributing factor to this situation, namely, the ambiguity attaching to the word “performance.” “Performance” refers to an embodied representation that combines (in its best instances) both technical excellence and creative inspiration. Performances are delivered and they are observed, and it is not always clear which is being referred to in any given instance. Suppose that an actor or athlete performs some action; the performance of this action is observed by another. The audience sees the performance in its character as product, as representation; it does not see the subjective effort, the lived endeavour. But for sport, at least, this is the central core of athletic experience. Granted, there are those who think that sport is nothing but wins, losses, and points scored—performance in the objective sense—but this is a sadly deficient and impoverished view of sport and its possibilities for human expression. Sport, I contend, is about the athlete, her abilities, her character, her endeavour, and even the most unsuccessful sportsperson, where success is measured in points and wins, is able to gain immeasurable value from that endeavour and the knowledge of self and other, as well as the physical, emotional, and mental benefit it provides. Remote sports illustrate this point particularly well, as they frequently lack any possibility for *winning* save within the participants themselves.

Finally, to put matters as simply as possible, if the purpose of sport is *show*, then the show is about nothing other than show—it is empty. Show must be *about* something and this is as true of theatre as of sport. Perhaps there are those who are entertained by nothing more than shiny lights and loud noises, but insofar as entertainment must be *about* something, that something must first exist and function in its own right. Sport, like theatre, entertains, but it does so because, like theatre, its subject matter is the human experience and endeavour that

¹⁸I cannot develop this point here, but see (10) for an extended discussion of the issue of transgressive play in relation to both sport and gender performance.

allow for the construction of dramatic, or comedic, narratives.

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