

WHAT IS SPORT? : A BARTHESIAN GAZE

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ABSTRACT

Sport is unique platform that gives recognition to the social identity and self-esteem in the society. It deals with several kinds of emotional metaphors and primer issues which is a part of athlete's experience. The cultural semantics of the sport deals with the sociological perspective, such as, the socio-cultural aspect of the sport, its textual and contextual meaning, Sport's environment and the individual's experiences.

Roland Barthes, in his seminal text *What is Sport* deals with different types of Sport, for example, Bull-fighting, Bicycle race, Car racing and Hockey. According to Barthes, Sport is a "false theatre" that amalgamates the various nuances of the 'sport drama' such as the rule of the combat, the strength of the opponent, Athlete's personal knowledge, and courage as well as the supremacy of the religious sacrifices. The paper attempts to study the politics of sport, in the light of different games discussed by Roland Barthes. Through the game of Bull-Fighting, Roland Barthes deftly hints on the superiority between the animal's strength and the man's knowledge. In the car racing the victory is subtle and precise. In this game the machine is the fulcrum of the victory which is subtle and precise. Thus, the successful car racing is the sum of 'the swiftest force is only a sum of various kinds of patience, of measurements, of subtleties, of infinitely precise and infinitely demanding actions'. Bicycle Race is a prodigious spectacle encapsulating the traits such as drama, humor, and emotion. The study aims analyzing these sports and understanding its representation in the different society.

KEYWORDS: Bull-fighting, Car Racing, Bicycle Race, Sport

INTRODUCTION

Sport is a structural framework that affiliates the social identity and self-esteem in the society. It is a spectacle that anticipates the social identity as well as emotional complexes, such as, attraction, competence, and morality. Sport is often perceived as nostalgia for 'the lost Hellenic ideal of youth perfection'¹ (Slusher 129). 'The athlete-scribes and scholars such as Bouton, Meggyesy and Scott describes sport as nothing more 'than an arena for machoistic self-indulgence'² (Slusher 129). Sports deals with many types of emotional metaphors and the primer issues that have been so far about the athlete experience, such as talking about the athlete experience as a development of a self-image. Thus, it is a normative structure that is constantly altered because it is associated with its own subculture. The study of sports on the sociological perspective deals with the four prominent aspect:

- The socio-cultural aspect of the sport
- The contextual understanding of the sport
- Sport's environment

- Individual Experiences and the associate groups

The theory of sports deals with the sport as an uncovering of cultural semantics. As Guttman remarks: the intersection of sport and politics has been a major focus of contemporary sport history”³ (Jeffery 355). He decodes the semiology of sports by emphasizing on the politics of sports rather than considering sports as a contribution to the wider political process. However, in the essay ‘Sport: An Historical Phenomenology’, Anthony Skillen, defines that “sport often seems to teeter on the edge”⁴(Skillen). It serves the dual purpose of entertainment industry as well as cheating violent aggression from a ‘make-believe simulacrum of serious play to a nasty chemically enhanced descent into a Hobbesian state of nature’⁵ (Skillen, 1993). Roland Barthes, his seminal text, *What is Sport?* theorizes about the various reflections, descriptions, analysis and applications of sports in various fields. A brief text is an intriguing Canadian documentary film called *Les Sport et les Hommes*. The book is a collaborative contribution of two scholars, a ‘Quesbecosis writer and Roland Barthes.

At the very outset of the book, ‘*What is Sport?*’ Roland Barthes interrogates about the emotional disturbance and commitment to a certain act: “why are men disturbed by this spectacle? What are they totally committed to it?”⁷ (Barthes 3)

Citing example from the bull-fighting which according to Roland Barthes is hardly a sport, he tries to sketch the parameters of defining the sport. For Barthes the sport can be defined as

- The game with a strict rules of Combat
- Strength of the opponent
- Athlete’s Personal ‘knowledge and Courage’
- The supremacy of religious sacrifices.

Sport as a ‘false theatre’ (Barthes 3) amalgamates all these perspective. Roland Barthes through the game of bull-fighting showcases the entire drama of sport by dividing the sequence of game in four acts where the epilogue is death. The ratio of the strength versus knowledge exercises the winning or demonstrates the failure in the sport.

Bull- Fighting: The Game of Combat between ‘Knowledge’ and ‘Mechanical’

Winning by awareness is the first exercise taught in the game of bull-fighting. The athlete must learn to know the bull. One requires competence to play with bull. As Roland Barthes says, that an athlete should know ‘To play with him: to provoke him, to avoid him, to entangle him deftly, in short to ensure his docility in fighting according to the rules’ (Barthes 5). In the game of bull-fighting, it is essential to be acquainted with the strength of the opponent and make it exhausted. Thus, it may subsidize the violence by ‘blocking his charges’ (Barthes 5).

Animal in the game of bull-fighting is mechanical, mindless, repetitive, and the ultimate phenomenon in its engagement is the loss, disposal or consumption. Alternatively man in this game *works* and requires skilled production. Hence, here the man’s awareness is ‘labour-extracted clay” ⁶(Snyder and Spreitzer 469) which is athlete’s personal knowledge of handling tools and situation in the sport.

The use of weapon as a tool of strength also demands a degree of skill and awareness to win the game. The bull fighter in the game of the bull-fighting uses ‘a slender berribooned hook to tease the bull: call out of him stab him

lightly...insouciantly slip away' (Barthes 4). The death of bull against Knowledge (by man) is a sign of winning with the final epilogue of death as its signifier. The mechanics of winning the game is accompanied by the awareness. It is through the knowledge; the man uses the tool and wins the game. The physical strength of the bull is more yet it is subjected to die because here the strength is not passing through the catalytic treatment of knowledge.

Hence according to Roland Barthes:

- Man's courage is followed by the awareness. Awareness never comes alone, it develops through the fear, acceptance and through the sense of overcoming the situation.
- Knowledge is again a precious and exclusive trait that man possesses. This knowledge in bull-fighting is one-sided. The animal is not familiar with man but man knows the bull. Hence, the strategy adopted by man is accompanied by both the knowledge and the courage. "man knows the bull, anticipates his moments, their limits, and can lead his adversary to the site he has chosen, and if this site is dangerous, he knows it and chosen it for this reason" Barthes 5).
- Style in sports: Style is an inevitable part of sports. Style in sports can change the entire course of the game. 'Style makes a difficult action into graceful gestures, introduces a rhythm into fatality' (Barthes 9). The style in sports is a synonym of courage. There should not be any 'disorder' in the appearance of courage as it gives the 'appearance of freedom'. Style in the sports is adhered by the courage, knowledge and beauty. This is how he stands out of presence of the animal strength.

The dichotomy of the combat of sport between the knowledge and strength is that all the rules are formed for appealing to the intended audience who are human, ultimately 'the knowledge'. These strategies reflect the values of the spectators and contribute or subordinate the athlete's self-expression. Thus, attacking the opponent within the certain rules and conventions is noted with both the aggression and the exuberance which is necessary for the success in the sport. As quoted in the text, 'the bull entering here will die. The man wins over the animalistic strength by his courage, knowledge and beauty' (Barthes 7)

Car Racing: The Game of Winning

According to Roland Barthes with each game the politics of winning changes. In the case of Car racing the victory is subtle and precise. The entire intelligentsia of the winning the game is concentrated on the machine, a weapon and time, which is an opponent. As Barthes says: 'by the machine man will conquer, but perhaps by machine he will die' (Barthes 11).

The machine in the game, i.e. the car runs very fast but 'must first be tested very slowly'. The important organ of the machine is gear, which is tested deliberately with all minute observation on the ground of the sport. Interestingly for winning the game of car racing one has to win over the three enemies, time, and 'to confront in this effort both the machine and the terrain together', for it is all three at once that the racer must first of all conquer before triumphing over his human rivals' (Barthes 15).

The phenomenology of the entire game is governed by 'each atom of the movement' (Barthes 15). The machine, a tool of fight is pregnant with the deposited energies of people who have been constantly checking its each part to formulate the perfect equation of 'an extreme power, a minimal resistance, whether of weight or of wind' (Barthes 17) the racer is space against time. One should learn to cheat space or take decision regarding sparing it and brutally cut down.

'He must have the courage to drive this wager to the brink of the impossible' (Barthes 19). Unlike bull fighting, the car racing is a winning with a support of the team. If the tiers are worn down, then the team manages to change it in a one and half minute and thus shares the contribution in the final victory. The secret behind winning the game is that racer is confident and focused only on the 'inertia of things'. As a result with each loss, the 'participle of perfection' vanishes from the world. As Barthes puts it:

"It is these preparations for starting that give car its race meaning: that of a victory over weight and the inertia of things. At rest, these cars are heavy, passive, and difficult to maneuver: as with a bird hampered by its wings, it is their potential power that weighs them down. Yet once lined up, approaching their function, which is combat, they already become lighter, grow impatient...once started, these machines will gradually transform their mass into agility, their weight into power; no sooner are they in their element, which is speed, than they will wrap the entire world in it, on the most varied tracks and circuits: at nurburgring, the most dangerous; at Monaco, the most tortuous; from monza, the most exhausting, to spa, the fastest.

(Barthes 19)

Consistency is again an important factor in the car racing. One has to simply move on as 'to stop is virtually to die' (Barthes 23). However there is some defect in the machine then it must be reported to the concerned authority with a certain precision. According to Barthes, the great racer is a person who tames the machine. 'He is not only the winner; he is also the one who destroys nothing' (Barthes 23). A bad machine is a wretched object which neither alive nor dead.

Thus, in the successful car racing 'the swiftest force is only a sum of various kinds of patience, of measurements, of subtleties, of infinitely precise and infinitely demanding actions.' (Barthes 25)

The vital formula which Roland Barthes here gives is that in the car racing "victory is not over his rivals, but on the contrary *with them*, over the obstinate heaviness of things, the most murderous of sports is also the most generous". (Barthes 25)

Bicycle Race: The Game of Adventure

The third sport that Roland Barthes takes up in the text is Bicycle race.

"Each year, in July, there occurs in France a spectacle that captivates the entire nation: the bicycle Tour de France. Glamorous stars....a dozen teams, regional or national...a month of racing, some twenty stages. A formal start like a military revue or the arrival of a head of state.

(Barthes 27)

This ride is an admixture of 'great combats that free rhythm of serious efforts and amused idleness'. Bicycle race is a 'prodigious spectacle' in the beginning as it encapsulates the unique trait of sport such as drama, humor, and emotion.

The cycling race among Frenchmen give them the opportunity to tour around their “own houses and monuments, his provincial present and his ancient past”. It revolves round the myth that Frenchmen are not geographer; he does not know geography through books but by the tour each year. By this tour he is informed about “the length of his coasts and the height of his mountains”. “Each year he recomposes the material unity of his country; each year he tallies his frontiers and his products.”

However, the entire sport becomes “theatre of combat”.

It is in the setting of a great war that a whole army of followers will play a part of the general staff and the commissariat. This army has its generals who stand, eyes fixed on the horizon. It has its light cavalry, entrusted with liaisons, it has its thinkers and its mathematicians...it has its gymnasts....its historians...and its press correspondents.”

(Barthes 29)

The game of cycling is not cruel, here the game its commissariat, who supplies machine and food. The racers must always eat and drink without stopping. This idea is being compared with the old wartime images, where “someone hands the marching combatant something to drink”. Obviously the racers cannot drink in the middle of the race, but wine must be available to them in the tour, “for the tour is France”.

This great month long war consists of successive campaigns. Each day has its battle, each night its victor: water, flowers, kisse all this before the day’s winner dons the yellow ritual insignia of his victory. War has its peaceful moments, the tour its happy ones: as in the earliest combats, at evening weapons are suspended, once more everything weapons are suspended, once more everything becomes peaceable: this is the warrior’s rest, these are the warrior’s ministrations”.

(Barthes 33)

There is a huge gala during the month’s time. There is dance on the public square, the crowd strolling and enjoying during the publicity cortege during the tour. The narrative of the each day is broadcasted across the country, and its own select writers and poets.

“Tour broadcasts across all France, for the Tour has its writers its inspired poets. Elsewhere there is the combatants’ fraternal meal, the winner’s commentary, the silence of those who are defeated. Finally there is the preparation of tomorrow’s weapons. For tomorrow, at sunrise, everything must begin again.”

(Barthes 35)

However, it sounds like a splendid story but in the real scene it is a serious struggle. Without any conflict, the competition takes the mood of resistance not against the man but against the things. Ironically this is a combat of everyone, and “men’s mutual assistance overflows the barriers of the spectacle and of the combat”³⁴. This actively

participates in assisting them, feeding them and racing with them. In the case of giving up in the middle of the game, one needs to hold out.

To hold out against anger, against suffering. To hold out, which means to begin again. The racer's real enemy in time. Time is usually other men's time. But sometimes, in certain cruel stages, it is pure time, watch time".

(Barthes 39)

The last moment before winning the game is that the racer sets out alone. He struggles against the time and himself. The feeling of the victory is lost but it is the watch that reminds him about his position in the game. As the sports are commenced with the resistance of the things not men, so unlike other games, the men are held by men even if they know that they are competitors.

For the stake of the combat is not to know who will defeat the other, who will destroy the other, but who will best subjugate that third common enemy: nature. Heat, cold, it is these excesses, and worse still their opposites, which the racer must confront with an even, inflexible movement; it is earth's resistance he must add to the resistance of object"

(Barthes 41)

One of the most challenging scenes in the cycling race is that of racing on the mountain. "the mountain: weight".

Now to conquer the slopes and the weight of things is to allow that man can possess the entire physical universe. But this conquest is so arduous that a mortal man must commit himself to it altogether; that is why-and the whole country knows this- the mountain stages are the key to the tour: not only because they determine the winner, but because they openly manifest the nature of the stake, the meaning of the combat, the virtues of the combatant."

(Barthes 41)

The end in mountain is a centre of human adventures, the centre of the winners. However, there would also be unlucky ones, who are simply left in the despair. The entire game is governed by the idea of self-control. In this game the muscle is nothing more than the raw material. 'it is not muscle that wins'.

What wins is a certain idea of man and of the world, of man in the world. This idea is that man is fully defined by his action, and man's action is not to dominate other men, it is to dominate things.

(Barthes 42)

The athlete of the game is superficially jolly outside, but intolerant of spirit in the young people, especially in athletics. Sport is a social institution, is hostile to the very values of spirit and self-determination in stresses.

The reason for sport has never been discussed that precisely on what is that motivates the performer to make the sacrifices during the sports. The answer of this question is that sports vents to the unfulfilled human need for the activity and outlet that is basic to human existence that not even language can bring it to the surface. Most of the cultures have become aware of these needs in the form of dance. However, individual activity in sport might well be communicating a truly profound message which is often overlooked by even the most sensitive of the coaching fraternity.

The organization of sports is different in a segmented or polarized society as compared with fairly unified and homogenous society. There is a plethora of examples to show that the fragmentation of sports organizations according to class, ethnic, or linguistic divisions is rooted in underlying social and political polarization of the society. Sports have an ideology of their own, which ideally stresses fair competition between amateurs on equal terms, but which in reality is modified by underlying political and social interests. In a fragmented society sports become an instrument, wrapped by ideological arguments, by which various groups of the society try to promote their own goals and interests. From this point of view sports are the collective social competition, in addition to competition between individuals and teams. This is a conflict perspective to the role of sports in society.

Sports do not, however, only reflect existing social contradictions of a society, but they have a strong unifying function. Sports provide linguistic symbolism and kind of social drama by which people can be socialized into the dominant culture. In the words of Richard Lipsky, “the symbolic resolution of tension in sports drama preserves the group’s energy for positive social action, overcoming the danger that social order will collapse in the wrangle of insurrection and pent-up frustration.”⁸ In his opinion sports provide a symbolic refuge in which potentially dangerous political conflicts can be resolved and the legitimacy of a polity bolstered.

An athlete in good physical and mental shape is an ideal citizen because his or her abilities to convert sport achievements to “good citizenship” in everyday life. These comments open an integrative perspective to the role of sports in society.

CONCLUSIONS

Sport is the representation of the society. If a society is fragmented by social and political cleavages, it is less probable that a unified sports culture will develop. Sport is a channel for the smooth processing of the national, economic and the military motives of the nation. It acts as a collective consciousness, where through sports one observes the various strands of the social nuances for example, the visible class cleavages, more bureaucratic transformations in the society and the collectivist approach to the societal development. As defined by the Webster dictionary, sport is an act of “diversion, amusement or recreation”. This perspective have been applied to describe the evolution of the role of sports in the “administrative capitalism” in which new social needs give rise to collective rather than individual performance. There must be thus being additional factors that regulate the diversion of economic and social resources for sports achievements. One such factor, which is obviously with the level of economic development, is the level of social mobilization which generates attention and human potential to promote competitive sports.

It is often claimed that a socialist political system, because of its more centralized effective, and goal conscious steering system, is better able to divert economic and social resources to sport achievements.

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