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Recursive Art

Sports and Theatre as Adaptations

Chris Althoff

On Super Bowl Sunday, 2018, I sat on my friend Todd's couch watching an old film on TCM. After some gentle prodding, Todd flipped over to the largest American sport event of the year, but it was clear he wasn't very concerned with the action taking place in the matchup between the New England Patriots' veteran super-star quarterback and the surprise backup who led the Philadelphia Eagles to their chance at making history. Despite the drama developing in the football game, my friend's interests remained with TCM—in theatre and film. Don't get me wrong, I also enjoy films, but not to the exclusion of sports. Todd also is not unique by any means. I know plenty of people who detest watching sports. There was even a point in my own life that I wasn't that fond of the activity myself. As I started to think about what I have come to like about both viewing sports and watching theatre/film, and why other people might like one but not the other, I realized that both make me feel an endless variety of emotions: excitement, joy, pride, elation, anticipation, hope, disappointment, heartbreak, inspiration, etc. Sports and, specifically, theatre are both forms of live entertainment. They have similar emotional, cathartic impacts on their audiences. Yet despite their many similarities, we hold theatre above sports as a higher form of culture. In other words, we consider theatre to be art, while sports remain, for most of us, a distinctly low-brow form of entertainment.

Not that sports haven't been seriously considered for their possible merit as art. Wolfgang Iser looked at the aesthetics of sports and how they might fit into the ever-evolving modern definitions of art and sport. In his article "Sport—Viewed Aesthetically and even as Art," Iser opens sport up to critical examination by giving "some reasons why—in today's conditions of art as well as of sport—many people find it highly plausible to call sport an art," (236). In our post-modern culture, art no longer defines the aesthetic but merely represents instances of the aesthetic. Modern art looks to be intermixed with normal life, and "low brow" pop art has been reevaluated and accepted as aesthetically valuable (220–22). But even if the changing view of art allows sports to be in the same conversation as art, it does not mean that sports reach the level of aesthetic significance as traditionally-recognized artforms like theatre.

Defenders of art, or dissenters of sports, recognize the aesthetic values of sports, but segregate them from other art forms by saying they don't have the same "semantic and syntactic density" (Mandoki 84). Objects or activities whose "utilitarian value is greater than its artistic quality or the aesthetic concept behind it" (Kosiewicz 73) should be distinguished from those whose artistic qualities are of greatest value. These distinctions seem to suggest a semantic difference within art itself, a difference that distinguishes between a form of art and an artform. The way Mandoki and Kosiewicz define art seems to emphasize a focus on the form of art, the end product of creation. It is the completed painting, statue, and novel that constitutes art and allows for significant interpretation of meaning. Others might choose to look at artform, or the action itself in the process of creation, as the art. For them, the art lies in the brushstrokes of the painter, the chiseling of the sculptor, and word-choice of the writer. Is it within the product or process that art should be defined?

Performing arts, where the process or act is also the product, complicates the dichotomy between a form of art and an artform. There is no artifact, for instance, in dancing or acting in the same way there is in painting or writing. The action or process of performing arts cannot be separated from the product: the performance. Lev Kreft builds on Paul Woodruff's definition of theatre—actions that are worth watching in a measured time and space—by breaking down the actions into three distinct categories (standard action, mimetic or imitative action, and complex action), thus narrowing down the aesthetics of drama (Kreft 226). The aesthetics of drama

Kreft constructs are the performance of speech, movement, and character in a play. These aesthetics combine sights and sounds and come together to create an example of “Guy Debord’s ‘spectacle,’ emphasizing the role of images as cultural ciphers that carry meanings beyond the people and things pictured” (Little 44).

Perhaps it comes as no surprise that sports share the same attributes that create spectacle in theatre. Both versions of spectacle are created by groups of people working together to perform and reach a specific outcome. The interest in the performances of a sports match and a play, especially one frequently performed like *Hamlet*, does not come from *what* is performed but from *how* it is performed. Once you have seen one soccer match or one performance of *Hamlet*, you have most definitely not seen them all. Each match, each performance, still captures the audience’s interest even though we know that the soccer match will end in victory for one team, and the performance of *Hamlet* will end with a pile of dead bodies on the stage. What changes from performance to performance are the athletes’ and actors’ actions on the playing field and stage. With this in mind, and since “every live staging of a printed play could theoretically be considered an adaptation in its performance” (Hutcheon 39), looking at the relationships of sports and theatre as adaptations can further contribute to the debate on sports as art. Sports and theatre as adaptations become recursive acts of creation through processes of interpretation. Players, as well as audiences, must interpret idyllic forms, player roles, and narrative arches. This creative recursion allows for comparative analysis, and it is this comparative analysis of cultural ideas and values that is one of the aspects most cherished in the arts. Therefore, the performance of sport and of theatre captures a fundamental human pleasure found in experiencing art, what Linda Hutcheon describes as pleasure coming from “repetition with variation, from the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise” (4).

To begin, I am going to establish sports and theatre within a frame of platonic idealism. Plato theorized that the physical world was a series of imperfect imitations of the absolute, eternal essences of all “Ideas” or “Forms.” All trees, tables, and chairs are different variations of the metaphysical ideal that they are based on. That metaphysical ideal is difficult to nail down, though. It is an abstracted concept created by combining all the versions of an object into a single entity in the mind. The different versions morph into each other with a palimpsestuous effect that leaves a foggy version of the object

created by the density of overlapping commonalities and the blurred edges of less frequent attributes. Every new experience with a different version of an object adds another layer, giving further details that both distinguish and muddy the abstract ideal.

Applying platonic idealism to activities, there are abstract essences of a play like *Hamlet* and a sport like soccer. Though the use of the term “essence” has had a problematic history in the study of adaptations, as it has generally been applied to describe an absolute, core substance inherent in a text, Paul Woodruff points out the term’s usefulness in trying to define an “essence,” even if it be a relatively abstract ideal the way I have described it above. Woodruff states, “For *Hamlet*, the question is what makes this piece of theater *Hamlet* and not any other thing. Philosophers have used the word ‘essence’ for this kind of importance, and they have held that the aim of definition was to state an essence,” (Woodruff 50). The abstract ideal is an attempt to define the essences of *Hamlet* and soccer, and the script of *Hamlet* and the “Laws of the Game” (the title of the official soccer handbook) are physical representations of those essences. As such, every performance and match is an adaptation of the abstract ideals of the play and sport. To arrive at this physical embodiment of the metaphysical paradigm, everyone involved—the players (in both senses of actor and athlete), coaches, and directors—combine their many experiences watching and performing *Hamlet* or soccer. Thus, the adaptation of a sport or play’s essence is not an interpretive act of a single person but one split across the many different persons participating in each activity.

Each person involved in this collaborative creation has a specific and unique role they must fulfill. The coaches and directors have the perspective to be able to see all the action on the stage or field. They give direction to the players about how they should carry out their roles. The players know that the coach and director have visions they are trying to accomplish, but it is ultimately up to the players to decide how they will choose to portray their roles. Considering every player will have had different experiences with a play or a sport, each of their ideal versions of their particular activity will be slightly different. Each player’s ideal is further complicated by the fact that they are not formed just about the play or sport as a whole but also about the different roles each participant plays in each activity. Before performing their roles, every player must first interpret how that role will function within the context of the greater goals of the activity—to push the plot forward

in a play or to score more points than the competition in a sports match. A defender in soccer must decide if he/she will play an aggressive style and push up with the ball, overlapping with midfielders to create more offensive opportunities, or hang back to make sure the other team's offense doesn't get a fast break. An actor playing Hamlet can choose to portray the titular character as a man who takes brash action in obtaining revenge or as a more pensive, contemplative man willing to enact a slow-burn approach to his vengeance. In every soccer match and performance of *Hamlet*, the different interpretations of each role are constantly interacting and bumping up against each other, requiring each player's interpretation to be continuously adapted in reaction to other players' interpretations.

In order to react to the interpretations of other players, each individual must be prepared to adapt as they perform their roles. Theatre has dress rehearsals; sports have scrimmages. Players are given direction by the people with the vision of the whole stage/field, practice their roles, and learn how their fellow collaborators perform their own in order to learn how to react to each other's strengths or weaknesses. Given the example above of the aggressive defender, the midfielders on that defender's team must be able to anticipate and recognize that that player has the tendency to push forward. That way the midfielder will be ready to fall back to a defensive location and cover for the defender who is out of position. In theatre, actors must be aware of how their colleagues will deliver lines of dialogue so the timing of their response will match the tone they desire. An emotional scene might require a dramatic pause, while a witty quip should be given in quick response or even in interruption of the fellow player. In both activities' practices, players must be able to work together and anticipate the actions of their collaborators in order to realize their common goals.

Sports practices, however, have an extra element to prepare for that theatre does not: an opponent. Though up to this point I have been talking about sports and theatre interchangeably, both can be broken into different offshoots of the same cultural branch of live entertainment: sport is the ludological (the theoretical study of play) offshoot and theatre the narratological. For the facts that sports are games and competitive in nature, athletes must prepare themselves to face and overcome the skills and vision of the other half of the players on the field. Both teams are actively working against each other to impose their visions for the conclusion of the match. There is no guaranteed winner or loser; the game's outcome depends on

the abilities of each opponent to overcome the obstacle that is the opposing team and accomplish the goal of scoring. Each event in the game happens in direct reaction to the events prior to them. Not only is there an element of reactionary physics from the movement of the players and the ball, but players learn and adapt to their opponents' strengths and weaknesses over the course of play. The randomness of the inexact physicality of the game and the element of impromptu decision-making done by the players results in great variations in the way sports matches unfold. While the character parts in a play's script are predictable due to their nature as segments of a linear narrative experience, sports—due to opposing players' determination—exist within a realm of uncertainty that creates suspense and spectacle that entertains in a similar but distinct fashion from the narrative of theatre.

In theatre, adaptations of the narrative structure, which can be broken into basic units called narremes (Dorfman 5), happen before the actual performance. The director and actors in a play can decide what they want to change in a script to accomplish their particular goal in performing the play. They can include, exclude, or change characters, scenes, subplots, specific plot points, and certain setting details like time period or location. Sports do not follow a script but are contained to a certain time, space, and collection of actions by the game's rules. A sports match equivalent of narremes are everything you might keep statistics on or that you would see on a highlight reel: penalties given, points scored, momentum-shifting plays, throws, catches, shots, etcetera. While a sports match does not have a script the players follow in order to tell a narrative, the game events listed above can be selected and interpreted as narremes for a specific match, during or after the fact. The selection of these key moments in a sports match could be referred to as the para-narrative, or the chosen narrative thread that permeates through but is secondary to the main action.

A para-narrative can be created from every sports match. The process of creating that para-narrative is split amongst multiple people with their own ideas as how the narrative will play out and half of which are unwilling to compromise with the other half. The narremes of the para-narrative happen spontaneously and, to some extent, randomly. It reflects the clashing of opposing wills. In some instances, one side's wills, desires, and efforts will overcome the opponent's until the tidal momentum of competitive energy shifts the other direction. The unpredictability of two skilled opponents battling it out in their respective sport can organically create

a fiercely emotional drama that rivals the best of novels, plays, and films. Kosiewicz claims that the emotional drama of sports “inspires various art forms. . . . However, sport is not as significant or powerful a source of artistic inspiration as love, war, or family relationships,” (77-8). What he fails to recognize, though, is that sports can be representative of the universal human experiences he mentions. Art is mimetic; it mimics, represents, recreates artificially, and depicts nature or life. Art as such is a form of culture. Sports are a part of life but also reflect culture within them. Art can depict sports and sports can then in return reflect art through a para-narrative.

While sport is action and theatre is the mimetic imitation of action, they both require an audience to interpret meaning within them. In the 1966 World Cup Finals, England met against Germany on the pitch. David E. Little describes it “as much a political event as it was game,” saying:

With the violence, trauma, and outrage of World War II fresh in everyone's mind, two formally warring nations were competing on a new battlefield. The 1966 match took place at Wembley Stadium, a relic of the British Empire Exhibition of 1924, and in London, which had endured Germany's nighttime bombings of civilians—ideal sites for this symbolic war. England's victory over Germany, 4-2 in overtime, was the country's first World Cup victory (and to date its only one). This was more than a simple victory. It represented a cultural triumph and signified a broader return of social order in the world. (48)

Little's interpretation of that World Cup final transformed the match into an allegory for the Second World War, giving a physical representation of the struggle of two nations within the confines of the regulations of the game in the same way a play represents a war within the parameters of theatre. More often than not, matches are interpreted as the struggle of good vs evil or civility vs anarchy but whose heroes and villains are decided solely through perspective of the audience. This is the major difference between a play and a soccer match representing World War II: the play has someone controlling the fictitious narrative to make sure the correct side wins; there is no guaranteed victor in a soccer match.

Fictional narratives happen within a fictional world, and as such, we don't have access to the events that the author doesn't deem important. At the moment that we as an audience interact with the work for the first time, the author has already selected what matters. The audience can then interpret those worthy events. In sports, which take place in real time, it is

up to the audience to sift through all the moments as they happen and decide for themselves what is important. In the real-time creation of narrative that happens when viewing sports, there is an extra step of deliberation before one can begin to interpret. This deliberation causes narremes to be generated through instantaneous retrospect. You might hear a fan say, "That was it. That was the game," after a team goes up a goal in stoppage time or, "That was the turning point," seconds after a momentum-shifting play. Sports must first develop a para-narrative through the exclusion of moments from the complete narrative of the sports match before relevant plot points in that para-narrative can then be sifted through and interpreted for more cultural and existential significance. Each moment of the match could be considered a narreme, making for a personally crafted para-narrative for every member of the audience.

The intimacy an audience has in creating the para-narrative of a sporting event causes the emotions they experience while watching to be closer to the source. The audience is, therefore, more invested in the acts themselves rather than a retelling of the events. The audience feels anger at bad officiating, excitement from scoring, and heartbreak at their team's loss. Though not active participants, they are invested in what is taking place in the sports match. This description starts to blend with the experience of theatre or watching a narrative. The audience in these situations are certainly invested in the events that take place, but there is a difference. In a medium that depends on narrative, there is an author who chooses the events with the hopes to create a controlling idea—a specific effect or emotion—in the audience (McKee 112). Sports and their events are created spontaneously by individuals with their competing agencies. The author (or narrator) in a play acts as an intermediary of interpretation that controls much of what and how the audience experiences the narrative. Sports are limited by the laws and nature of the games, but those laws provide for an infinite outcome of scenarios that are only predetermined by the player's style of play and skill level. Each individual member of the audience then takes the role of author to highlight the various events that they personally deem important in creating an emotional narrative from the sports match.

This representation of creating narrative in sport is under the assumption that the audience is viewing the match directly. In the modern form of sport entertainment, the audience does have a mediator of the action, even if it is live. When watching a professional sport on television, there are commentators,

a camera crew, and a director giving instant interpretation and creating a para-narrative in real time through descriptions of the action and players' histories, through camera angles and cuts, and through instant replays. The television media team become the intermediary for the audience in the same way the author of a play is. They decide how to direct the attention of the audience to the specific narremes they believe matter most in making a captivating narrative worth watching.

Thus, we see that both sports and theatre are a series of interpretations that lead to a unified adaptation of spectacle and entertainment. Individual players interpret the metaphysical ideal of the role they play on the field or stage. Each player must then adapt their role in reaction to the other players interpreted roles. The audience then interprets the combination of all the roles being performed. In theatre and sports, players act and make decisions in the way they perform. There are varying degrees of agency and control in both. But the audience then observes the players, analyzing and critiquing them. Are the players subjects or are they objects? Are they artform or form of art? Do they create the art through their movements or are they themselves the art? Whether or not you want to believe sport is art, comparing sport with theatre as adaptations gives us insight into what art is and who the creator is.

Consequently, who can be a creator of art? Is it they who perform the action—the players? Is it they who guide the action—the director or coach? How about the mediators of the action throughout the narrative—the author or media? Or the interpreters of the action—the audience? The truth is, meaning within art does not lie in any single part of the creation process; all these agents have a hand in the art experience. Though we can distinguish each of the parts and look at them individually, we cannot separate them and remove them from each other. In other words, this atomistic breakdown does not help explain the nature of meaning creation in art let alone the ways in which a sporting event functions as an artistic artifact. Every member of the audience sitting in the stands or on the couch in a living room, every player on both sides of the ball, every coach and trainer, every referee officiating the game, and every member of the media covering the game contributes to a network of contextual nodes that influence each other over the course of the event. Art, entertainment, aestheticism, and spectacle are the culmination of that network of shared experiences formed between creators and audiences, and meaning is created through the interpretation of those experiences. Therefore, “knowledge is co-created rather than received, [and]

meaning is made rather than transmitted" (Moe 75). But of course, there has to be something to interpret in the first place. There has to be a catalyst for meaning to be made, and that catalyst being the actions of those involved in performing a play and playing a sport. Meaning can come from and even be contingent on action, but it is not created by the actions being performed. The movement and interactions of players on a field or the acting in a play become concrete images which an audience can 'see as,' projecting their life experiences and knowledge onto those images and creating a *Gestalt* (Ricoeur 252). It is the experience-act of 'seeing as' where meaning is created, not in the playing or performing. In this way, meaning is created from the interpretation of actions or, in other words, acts and actions are understood beyond their physical forms and in conjunction with the greater human experience.

The concept of 'seeing as' also applies to the way actors are viewed. While their actions can be motivated by emotions (in the sense that emotions drive the action), the metaphysical outcome, rather than physical outcome of those actions, must be created through interpretation. The act of performing in sports or the physical motions within acting create opportunities or exigences that compels the audience to then analyze and create meaning. This leads us to a new perspective on what makes a piece of art. An object's capacity to compel an audience to interpret will indicate its value as art. There will certainly be a range of depths and subjects of interpretation that an object can possibly incite, but is the question of what constitutes art a judgment of form, or of outcome, or of quality? Does a play, dance, novel, or painting only reach status of art if it reaches a specific intensity of interpretive urgency? If these other mediums can reach the status of art despite their inability to constantly inspire high standards of interpretation, certainly sports across their many variations and iterations can be considered in the same league of artistic expression.

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