

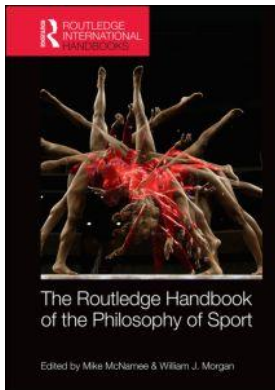
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### **Aesthetics of Sport**

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## SECTION II

# Philosophical theories and sport

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# 5

## AESTHETICS OF SPORT

*Andrew Edgar*

### Introduction

Aesthetics, as a philosophical discipline, covers two related but distinct issues: beauty and art. Thus, on the one hand, aesthetics is concerned with the nature of beauty and other aesthetic qualities, and the perception of such qualities through the faculty of taste, wherever they may be found. On the other hand, aesthetics is concerned with the nature of art and our appreciation and interpretation of art works, regardless of whether beauty is a core quality of that work. This dichotomy leads to two areas of study for the aesthetics of sport: an evaluative inquiry into the nature and relevance of aesthetic qualities (beauty, grace, drama, and so on) to the experience of playing and watching sport, and an ontological inquiry into the nature of sport and its relationship to art. At its extreme, the latter argues that sport is one of the arts, and so to be judged and assessed as such.

Aesthetics was a core concern of the philosophy of sport throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The first issue of the *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, for example, carried four papers on aesthetics (Kuntz 1974, Geakin and Maasterson 1974, Thomas 1974, Ziff 1974). Edited collections of philosophical papers on sport typically carried a section on aesthetics (see, for example, Gerber and Morgan 1979; Morgan and Meier 1988), as did monographs (Hyland 1990); edited collections devoted to the aesthetics of sport were published (see Whiting and Masterson 1974) and Lowe (1977) published a monograph, the culmination of work that began with his doctoral studies. While the aesthetics of sport was somewhat eclipsed by ethics in the following two decades, a number of recent publications – including special issues of both the *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* (Lacerda 2012) and *Sports Ethics and Philosophy* (Mumford 2011; Edgar 2013) – signal a revival.

This chapter rehearses the core debates that have developed within the philosophy of sport over, firstly, the aesthetic evaluation of sport and, secondly, the possible identity of sport and art, before commenting on recent developments within the aesthetics of sport.

### Sport and aesthetic quality

Evaluative and ontological questions have been debated side by side throughout the history of the aesthetics of sport and it is therefore little more than a matter of convenience to begin this

exposition with the evaluative issues of aesthetic qualities such as beauty. C. L. R. James's 1963 essay, 'What is Art?' (a chapter from his paean to cricket, *Beyond a Boundary*, 1983: 195–211) is a case in point. James wants to establish an identity between sport and art and does so on the ground that both have qualities that yield what he calls 'aesthetic pleasure'. In the philosophical literature, aesthetic pleasure is typically understood as the response to the experience of beauty. An object is beautiful precisely in that one experiences aesthetic pleasure upon beholding it. For James, sport and art are alike created and performed to yield the experience of aesthetic pleasure and thus to be beautiful.

James illustrates this through cricket. The rules of cricket, like the rules of any sport, shape the possibility of the players' physical movements, albeit, for James, cricket realises this with unique subtlety. The movements of the bowler, constrained by the prohibition on straightening their arm during delivery, and of the batter, who while free to choose a range of shots is yet typically disciplined by the paradigmatic side-on stance of the coaching manual, are conventional. That is to say that, in comparison with the freedom of our mundane movements, they are constrained and shaped by conventions adopted simply for the purpose of playing cricket. So, just as a work of art, a sculpture say, refines the appearance of the mundane human body, posing it and shaping it so that it is beautiful, so too the rules of cricket, and sport in general, pose and shape the athlete's body. By highlighting only certain bodily gestures and behaviours, as well as through its repetitive structure of balls and overs, and in the core confrontation between batter and bowler, cricket, James argues, encourages a life-enhancing and pleasurable aesthetic contemplation closely akin to our experience of great art.

Despite its early date, James's argument is a subtle and sophisticated contribution to the aesthetics of sport. As such, it may be taken to highlight a number of the more fundamental issues within the discipline. Firstly, the essay implicitly raises a question as to exactly what the relevant aesthetic qualities of a sport might be. 'Beauty' may seem a self-evident aesthetic quality, yet James in fact only passingly refers to 'beauty', preferring the more sophisticated and rather technical terms, 'significant form', 'tactile values' and 'movement' borrowed from the art critic, Bernard Berenson. James's argument indeed works, in part, because Berenson understands art works as stirring the imagination of the viewer, so that one may feel the bulk of the objects represented in the art work, 'heft their weight, realize their potential resistance'. The art work encourages 'us, always imaginatively, to come into close touch with, to grasp, to embrace, or to walk around' the objects represented (Berenson 1950: 60). There is an embodiment to Berenson's engagement with art that readily lends itself, in James's hands, to articulating the spectator's involvement with the physical struggle and discipline of the athlete.

Others offer a more straightforward list for the appropriate aesthetic qualities of sport, such as Elliott's (1974: 112) 'swiftness, grace, fluency, rhythm and perceived vitality' or Aspin's (1974, 126) grace and elegance. It may be suggested here that the focus lies very much on the movement of the athletes and the formal patterns that they epitomise. While Hohler (1974: 55) similarly focuses on movement, his appeal to the integration of conflicting components broadens the scope of the aesthetic quality of the sport to the game as a whole. Kupfer (1995: 392–6) suggests a hierarchy from simple 'linear' games, such as the 100 metres or javelin, in which quantitative distances or times alone matter, through 'qualitative' sports, such as gymnastics, that are judged in terms of discipline and elegance of bodily movements, through to sports that entail direct competition between individuals or teams, such as tennis or soccer. These are 'dramatic' sports (Kupfer 1995: 396). The aesthetic possibilities become more subtle and complex as one moves up the hierarchy, and indeed the aesthetic qualities themselves, on this account, vary from sport to sport. The aesthetics of sport is then not merely a matter of the gracefulness of individual movements but of the dramatic development of the competition as a whole.

Kupfer (1979: 359) characterises the well-played and thus aesthetically pleasing game as a 'see-saw scoring, the delicate balance between offences and defences, the entire rhythm of the game ... fulfilled in the ending which is, in addition to a terminus, a climax'. In effect, Kupfer's drama and James's significantly formed cricketer are alike picking up on a core theme that runs through much of the literature in philosophical aesthetics. This is the argument that beauty lies in the bringing together of disparate elements into a harmonious whole. It may be noted that such an approach presupposes that the aesthetic judgement of sport is, in fact, exclusively to do with the harmonious. There is, for Kupfer, something aesthetically troubling about a game that is won by the team that played less well and so deserved to lose, or perhaps even a win ground out against a more talented opponent.

Edgar (2013: 100–20) has argued that the exclusive focus on the harmonious and beautiful leads to a very narrow and rather conservative approach to the aesthetics of sport. It neglects the fact that much sport is ugly and not merely in the distorted physical gestures of athletes but, more importantly, in the ever-present threat of defeat and failure. Not everyone can be a winner, and there is a danger that an aesthetics akin to Kupfer's will see sport only from the perspective of the (deserved) winner. Edgar therefore argues for the aesthetics of sport to embrace something akin to modernism in the arts and thus to recognise that the aesthetic worth of much sport, like much modern art, lies in its defiance of simple harmony. A sporting aesthetic would then focus upon disruptive or, to use Nietzsche's term Dionysian, elements – such as the bitterness of defeat, the undeserved victory and an awareness of the everyday pain and suffering that underpins sporting achievement – that spoil the Apolline surface of coherence and harmony. More radically, this might suggest that sport requires an aesthetic language that is distinct to that of the arts (and especially the more traditional arts). Lacerda (2011) has begun to explore this by arguing for 'strength' as an aesthetic category.

The second issue that James's essay raises lies in his appeal to 'aesthetic' pleasure. If sport is pleasurable in this sense then it is something more than a mere entertainment or recreation. Philosophical aesthetics has linked the experience of beauty to the feeling of pleasure since at least the work of Shaftsbury (2000) and Hutcheson (2008) in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As Ghose (1974: 68) notes, in everyday language and in the language of sports reporting, 'beauty' is frequently used as little more than an exclamation of 'private ecstasy'. As such, it would suggest little more than excitement or surprise – and a subjective one at that, which no one else need share. Yet for James, aesthetic pleasure is 'life enhancing' and, as such, has a weight and significance well beyond mere excitement or entertainment. The distinction is articulated by Kant. He differentiates the pleasure (*Lust*) that one experiences before an object of beauty from the mere agreeableness (*Annehmlichkeit*) that is derived from an object that satisfies sensual desires (see Kant 1952, section 3). A flower judged for its beauty yields pleasure, while an apple that is enjoyed for its flavour and for satisfying hunger is merely agreeable. Kant's point serves to emphasise the depth of the claim that an aesthetics of sport is making. In appreciating beauty, one is not indulging animal appetites – or, put more mildly, seeking mere entertainment – but rather engaging the rational and most dignified aspect of one's nature. This suggests that a genuine aesthetic appreciation of sport, as proposed by James, takes us well beyond sport as a merely entertaining diversion to touch upon the very dignity of what it is to be human – in James's terms, to experience sport is to have one's life enhanced.

The third strand that emerges from James's argument concerns the nature of aesthetic judgement and thus the role played by taste. A typology such as that derived from Kupfer, presented above, implies that aesthetic qualities are properties of the sport itself and, thus, that beauty or drama are akin to red or fast – qualities that can be perceived by any one with more or less well developed perceptual faculties. A more subtle position (and one that Kupfer may hold: see

Kupfer 1995: 398) entails either that aesthetic qualities are ascribed to the object in the act of tasteful judgement or that there is some interaction between the objective qualities of the object and the act of judgement and this interaction yields a perception of aesthetic qualities. Aesthetic qualities would not then be objective in any simple sense and the recognition of aesthetic qualities in sport would require of the spectator and even competitor some appropriate capacity to make judgements of taste.

While anyone with normally functioning sensory faculties can judge the sensible properties, such as its colour or motion, it is typically argued that the recognition of aesthetic qualities requires something more. This may be expressed as saying that aesthetic qualities are supervenient upon sensible properties (Sibley 2001: 52). Such supervenient qualities are recognised only through a judgment of taste. It may then be argued that, in judging something to be beautiful or pleasing and thus in exercising taste, one must take a distinctive stance towards that thing. One appreciates beauty only if one is within an aesthetic attitude. In Kantian aesthetics, this is an attitude of disinterestedness (Kant 1952: 50).<sup>1</sup> To exercise taste presupposes that one has no interest in the object judged. One does not desire that it should fulfil some pre-existing purpose or, indeed, that it has any extrinsic purpose. One brackets out all interest in its practical applications. Thus, an apple that is judged to be beautiful is so judged merely as a harmonious arrangement of colours, shapes and textures, and not as something edible. Such an account of aesthetic judgement poses two problems for the aesthetics of sport. Firstly, there is a danger of rendering the whole discipline trivial, for one may take an aesthetic attitude to (almost) anything. One may readily judge the beauty of apples, cars and mathematical proofs. That one can judge sport aesthetically is thus unexceptional, and potentially says nothing about the special quality of sport. Therefore, the second problem is to articulate what, if anything, is distinctive about the aesthetic appreciation of sport. Does sport, as it were, pose particular challenges for its aesthetic appreciation?

One approach appears, problematically, to sunder the sporting experience from the aesthetic experience. To judge sport in the same way that one judges any other potentially aesthetic experience – by adopting an attitude of disinterestedness – might fundamentally distort the experience of sport, precisely because it entails marginalising what otherwise might seem to be key elements of the sporting experience. An example that highlights this problem is offered by Eliseo Vivas (1959). In discussing the aesthetic attitude, he notes that he had once watched a hockey game in slow motion and, putting aside any interest in who was winning, he focused merely on ‘the beautiful rhythmic flow of the slow-moving men’ (Vivas 1959: 228). Vivas’s claim is that, to treat hockey disinterestedly and thus aesthetically, one must bracket out precisely what makes hockey a sport: competition. Kovich (1971), explicitly addressing the relationship of art and sport, makes a similar claim. If athletes and spectators are made aware of the aesthetic aspects of sport, then they will become aware that ‘the greatest significances of sports experiences can come, *not from the score*, but in man creating art in movement through the medium of sport’ (Kovich 1971: 42 [emphasis added]). Ziff (1974) rejects the aesthetics of sport on precisely these grounds. If sport is essentially competitive (or at least involves the athlete in struggling to meet some physical challenge, such as climbing a mountain), to ignore that competition – and thus the score – in favour of the aesthetic entails a disinterest that ceases to take sport seriously *as sport*. For Ziff, sports therefore have no significant aesthetic qualities. Vivas, in fact, watches not an ice hockey game, but a slow-motion film. The implication is that hockey watched in the raw, as it were, is not aesthetic – the action is perhaps too violent or confused.

It may immediately be observed that certain sports do actually incorporate explicit aesthetic elements in their competition. These are Kupfer’s ‘qualitative’ sports, including ice dance and

artistic gymnastics, for example. Such sports are classified by Best as 'aesthetic sports', in contrast to 'purposive sports' such as tennis and soccer (Best 1974: 201). His point, echoing something of Ziff's argument, is that while a goal in soccer will count, whether it is hit majestically from 20 yards out or scrambled over the line in a goal mouth melée, it matters in gymnastics how a vault is performed. The contest in vaulting does not simply entail getting over the horse but, rather the vault is judged in terms of the very shaping and movement of the athlete's body. The vault must, in Kupfer's terms, have a certain 'quality'. To recognise that quality, the judges of aesthetic sports must cultivate a faculty of taste, much as would be attributed to the connoisseur of art works. That is to say that judgement goes beyond merely sensible properties, to the judgement of the aesthetic qualities that are supervenient upon them. Thus, a judge of figure skating must be able to discern not merely precisely quantifiable movements made by the athlete but also such aesthetic qualities as 'carriage', 'style and individuality/personality', 'projection' and 'unison, and "oneness"' (US Figure Skating Association 2012: 294).

Even in gymnastics and skating, however, the place of aesthetic judgement is strangely curtailed. Firstly, judges in these sports are rather more conservative than their artistic counterparts (Kuntz 1974: 11). The connoisseur has a greater freedom to debate aesthetic qualities and to welcome innovations in art works, while the judge of gymnastics or skating must all look for the same aesthetic qualities – and, crucially, the qualities upon which the competitors know that they will be judged. Put otherwise, it is not *sufficient* for an aesthetic athlete to be beautiful, for they must be beautiful in accordance with the rules and culture of the competition. The athlete will, consciously or otherwise, internalise the judges' expectations, thereby making their own performance aesthetic conservative, and necessarily so in order to compete effectively.

Secondly, it may be noted that one can watch, say, artistic gymnastics with no regard to the competition. As Kupfer suggests, it lends itself far more readily than most sports to being treated as something purely beautiful. Yet to do so is to distance oneself from the event *as* sport. The disinterestedness of the aesthetic spectator, taking no account of the competition has consequences for how they might respond to certain events. The gymnast tripping or dropping a piece of equipment would, for the disinterested spectator, spoil the event. The movements were not as beautiful as they might have been. However, for the sporting spectator, interested in the competition, such events are as significant as perfectly performed routines, for they impact upon the competition. The dropped piece of equipment entails lost marks and a change in positions on the leader board. Perhaps even more problematically, the aesthetic spectator is missing something fundamental to the gymnast's performance. They are missing the point, made above, that the gymnast is not simply striving to be beautiful – as a classical ballerina might – but rather to comply with the rules of the sport. The aesthetic spectator misses something of the discipline and thus significance of the athlete's movements.

It might be concluded that the aesthetic is indeed, as Ziff argues, irrelevant to purposive sports, and actually highly curtailed even in the case of aesthetic sport. In support of such a conclusion, Best (1974: 201) suggests, as self-evident, that a hockey player would rather 'score three goals in a clumsy manner' than 'miss them all with graceful movements'. Kupfer (1995: 394–5), however, offers a crucial counter-argument to Best. He suggests that an approach such as Best's presupposes that winning is the extrinsic purpose of a game. That is to say that the game is played to achieve the goal of a win and thus that scoring, however it is achieved, precisely because it contributes to the possibility of winning, is an instrumentally good thing to do. Kupfer suggests that this presupposition rests upon a confusion. Winning and scoring are not purposes *of* the sport but purposes *within* the sport. For Kupfer there are no external purposes of sport. That is to say that there is no purpose that exists independently of playing



the sport. Only once one begins to play, acceding to the highly conventional rules of the sport – and thus crucially to rules that constitute the particular sport as the sport it is – does one acquire a purpose. Purposes are constituted within the sport, not prior to it. But, more subtly, the implication here is that a sport makes possible a multiplicity of purposes, and not just the single purpose of winning/scoring.

A rich sense of playing well recognises the range of human action that is made possible by the sport and celebrates it. To play well will entail that an elegantly executed goal is indeed better than a scrambled one, just as a game characterised by fair play is better than one marred by bad feeling and fouls. Kupfer (1995: 390–1) suggests that the reduction of sport to the supposedly extrinsic purpose of winning is little more than a reflection of professionalism and the commercial pressure on professional teams to win. The aesthetic would therefore seem, in Kupfer's hands, to offer something more than the brute entertainments or recreations of commercial sport. A well-played game is, as James suggests, life-enhancing, yielding an aesthetic pleasure that touches upon the very dignity of what it is to be human.

Yet such remarks, however noble in tone, remain somewhat vague in content. Again, Edgar's (2013) focus on the relevance of modernist aesthetics to sport may be significant. An aesthetics that takes sport seriously *as sport* – so one that does not disinterestedly bracket out elements of competition – must take into account the suffering and violence that underpins much sporting experience. Even if Vivas cannot cope with an ice hockey game as an aesthetic experience unless its complexity and violence has been stripped away in a slow-motion film, such a game may nonetheless be an aesthetic and richly meaningful experience, if viewed appropriately – and crucially, not as a harmonious classical drama.

Substance may be given to these arguments by turning away from the issue of sport's aesthetic qualities, in favour of an examination of the relationship between sport and art. At the core of debates about this relationship lies the argument that art can say something about the world. Those who seek some degree of identity between sport and art are at their most plausible when they argue that sport, like art, can express something about the world.

### Sport and art

It was noted above that C. L.R. James (1983: 195) argues that sport should be seen as one of the arts, and does so on the grounds that sport, like art, yields aesthetic pleasure. This argument echoed by a number of more recent philosophers of sport, including Wertz (1985) and Welsch (2005). Best (1974) and Kupfer (1995) reply that this approach rests upon a fundamental confusion between the 'artistic' and the 'aesthetic'. While it may be accepted that sport, like almost anything else, can be judged aesthetically – and as such does indeed yield aesthetic pleasure – it does not then follow that it is one of the arts.

In accusing Wertz and others of conflating the aesthetic and the artistic, Best is suggesting that they are appealing to what is known as the 'aesthetic definition of art' (see Carroll 1999: 159). Here, art is defined as anything that yields aesthetic pleasure or, put otherwise, has aesthetic qualities such as beauty or grace. The inadequacy of this definition is revealed by noting that there are numerous objects and events – 'sunsets, cornfields, streetlamps, people' (Kupfer 1995: 48) – that are not art but nonetheless yield aesthetic pleasure. The argument does not end here, however. The definition of 'art' may be further qualified by holding that the status of art is ascribed only to objects and events that are intentionally designed to possess aesthetic qualities. This allows the examples of natural objects, such as sunsets and cornfields, to be dropped as red herrings. The defender of the association between art and sport may then point out that the participants in at least aesthetic sports – and, as noted above, perhaps well-played

purposive sports – also intend their actions to have aesthetic qualities. Such athletes would then be akin to artists, who intend an aesthetic effect from their work. But still, the argument fails once it is recognised that there are objects created intentionally by humans to be beautiful, and yet are still not typically regarded as art. Pottery, cars and indeed streetlamps can be intentionally designed to be aesthetically pleasing, without thereby becoming art.

Best's (1978: 116) criticism of the aesthetic definition of art rests, therefore, upon the claim that the artistic must entail something more than just the recognition of aesthetic qualities in the object or event. This something more is the illusory or imaginary quality of art (Best 1978: 119). The imaginary quality of art is seen in Berenson's (1950) argument, noted above, that art works demand an imaginative response on the part of the audience. The everyday objects and events that confront the audience, be they people in costumes carrying props on a stage or stretched canvases covered in pigments, have to be actively interpreted as art works, and their subject matter has to be imaginatively reconstructed in that audience's mind. The actor who stands upon the stage is not Hamlet, they are merely playing Hamlet and the audience must recognise this distinction between actor and character both to understand that they are watching a play and to begin to interpret what the play may be about. In contrast, Best argues (1978: 117–18), there is no analogous distinction in sport. There is no distinction between an athlete and the role or position they are playing.

If an actor falls ill on stage (as once I saw happen to Michael Pennington while playing Hamlet), this illness is not transmitted to his or her character (and in this particular instance, the play was halted while Pennington recovered and then continued as if nothing had happened for, in the play, nothing had happened). Conversely, Hamlet dies, and yet the actor playing him survives unharmed for tomorrow evening's performance. Best's point is that, in the case of the athlete, there is no such divide. If the quarterback breaks his leg, Joe Theismann, playing in that position, also breaks his leg. Hamlet's death is imaginary but there is nothing imaginary about an athletic injury. While the audience to *Hamlet* must be aware that it is the character and not the actor, who dies, a sport's spectator who is indifferent to the quarterback's broken leg, because it has happened only to a quarterback and not a real person, would be disturbingly adrift in their understanding of what is happening.

The importance of this analysis lies in the justification that it gives to the claim that an art work, unlike a sporting event, can be about something – art has the possibility, in Best's (1978: 117) phrase, of being 'the expression of a conception of life issues, such as contemporary moral, social and political problems'. Best's paradigmatic art work here appears to be Picasso's *Guernica*, a work that is expressive of the traumas of the Spanish civil war (Best 1978: 117). A sporting event may betray or be symptomatic of moral, social and political problems. Here, one might consider the Louis/Schmelling bouts as symptomatic of political tensions between the democracies and Nazi Germany; or the 1956 Hungary/USSR Olympic water polo final and the Soviet invasion of Hungary that year. Yet a sports match cannot express those issues. Expression presupposes the artist's intentional composition of the art work and as such the intentional construction of a work that has imaginary content. This content is made available to the audience through the material and perceptible medium of the art work, but only in so far as the audience can imaginatively reconstruct the art work out of that material base, and thus reflect upon its subject matter. While the athlete may intend their movements to be beautiful, they cannot, as an athlete, intend them to be expressive. Best (1978: 121) notes that the ice skater Toller Cranston lost marks in competition precisely because he sought to express 'his view of life situations' and, as such, failed to perform movements that were defined as beautiful and worthy of points within the rules of the sport – as well as in the expectations of the judges and his fellow competitors. While there may be beauty in a sports match, there is nothing that needs

to be imaginatively interpreted. It is then meaningless, in Best's account, to ask what the sport is about.

Best (1978: 115) illustrates this with his own experience of watching Indian dance. His modest but significant claim is that, because he was unaware of the conventions that determine the precise meaning of the dancer's gestures, he was unable to respond to the dance as an art work. His response was therefore merely to a beautiful and thus aesthetically pleasing sequence of movements. Unaware of the appropriate conventions and intentions of the dancer, he is unable imaginatively to reconstruct the subject matter of the work and thus, for him, it was purely aesthetic and not artistic.

It is perhaps Best's claim that sport has no subject that has been most vigorously contested. In particular, philosophers such as Roberts (1992, 1995), Gebauer (1994) and Krein (2008) have appealed significantly to Nelson Goodman's (1978: 1–22) concept of 'worldmaking'. For Goodman, there is no possibility of an immediate experience of a real world. Rather, our worlds are always already mediated by descriptions, drawn from our sciences, mythologies and arts. We thus live in a plurality of possible worlds, because different descriptions will be relevant to different contexts and activities, and existing descriptions are always open to revision and development. So, for Goodman, art is essentially a resource for such redescription, or worldmaking. Roberts, Gebauer and Krein therefore raise the possibility that sport is also such a resource. While sport may not comment, in Best's sense, upon specific life issues, the athlete can still act as a 'strong poet' (in a phrase that Roberts [1995] borrows from Harold Bloom and Richard Rorty) and, as such, through their athletic actions, provide resources for re-describing, and thus expressing something about, the non-sporting world.

This argument may be outlined by firstly considering Best's contrast between the imaginary status of art, and the comparative reality of sport. The question of sport's reality has been much debated (see Fox 1982, Cordner 1988: 34–5). The special spaces and times within which sports matches occur, segregating them from everyday or non-sporting life, suggest that sport is unreal, at least in the sense that it is not a part of the normal course of our lives. Here, sports shares something with art, insofar as art too is typically segregated into theatres, concert halls and galleries. Such institutional configurations are nonetheless perhaps deceptive, leading too readily to an identification of sport and the arts. A more rigorous response to Best can therefore be derived from formalist accounts of sport (see Suits 1995). In the formalist account, what matters for the identity of sport is *not* the institutional setting of the actions but, rather, the constitutive role of the sport's rules. Thus, the sequence of movements that make up, say, the scoring of a try are largely meaningless outside the constitutive rules of rugby. Put otherwise, scoring a try is impossible outside the game of rugby. This entails that the spectator (and indeed the players and officials) must be aware of the rules of the sport to understand the actions occurring before them. Here, already, there is a parallel with Best's experience of Indian dance. Just as he is unaware of the rules that govern the meaning of the dancer's actions, so the spectator uninitiated into a particular sport may find the action before them meaningless. This action may nonetheless be beautiful and exciting – and thus be perceived aesthetically – but it will not be understood and appreciated as sport.

To accept this basic formalist account does not immediately undermine Best's position – and indeed his own argument is not overtly inconsistent with formalism. The injury to the quarterback is still real, in a way that the Hamlet's death is not, and is so despite the fact that the action he was performing at the time of injury could only make sense, say as a 'flea-flicker' play, within the rules and strategies of American football. Further, it may be argued that formalism reinforces Best's claim that sport cannot be about anything. The rules of sport serve as a syntax that determines the meaning of any given action only in relationship to other actions within

the game. As such, sport seems to have no semantics – which is to say, no way of referring beyond itself to the non-sporting world. Kupfer was noted above as arguing that sport has no extrinsic goals. He sums up his position by borrowing Kant's definition of beauty as a characterisation of sport: sport is 'purposiveness without purpose' (Kupfer 1995: 405, Kant 1952: 80). Sport is a structured and disciplined activity, with rules that determine the meaning and legitimacy of a given action within the game, but no external purpose that could allow the sport to hook, meaningfully, on to the non-sporting world.

Formalism can, nonetheless, suggest how sport does have content. The rules of a given sport present a particular physical challenge for the athletes. The rules do not merely determine the objectives within the game (to beat one's opponent by scoring more goals or to climb a given mountain) but also delimit the conditions under which those objectives are to be achieved (such as scoring goals without touching the ball with one's hands or climbing mountains without certain mechanical aids). Consequently, the rules will specify the materials, equipment and technology with which the game is played. As such, the game is using – and also prohibiting – resources from the non-sporting world. It may then be suggested that sport is, in some relevant sense, about these resources. Cricket is about the interaction of a leather-covered cork sphere and a willow bat; dressage is about the training and disciplining of a horse and rider to perform certain movements and is thus more generally about the training and control of horses. Lawn tennis is skilled action upon grass, not clay. More generally, sport may be seen to play with our experience of time and space: consider here the different temporal and spatial experiences provided by sports such as basketball (see Elcombe 2007) and golf; with our sense of embodiment: consider body-building (Bell 2008) and, indeed, James's reflections upon the way in which the athlete body's movements are disciplined and shaped by the rules of the sport – or free will and fate – consider the mathematical precision of the snooker or pool table compared with the oval rugby ball and thus its promotion of the lucky bounce. Sport has been described as a 'moral laboratory' (see McFee 2000) and, here again, it may be suggested that the rules of the sport constitute an artificial space that forces the player to focus on certain moral temptations or challenges – such as dealing with the usually prohibited violence of the boxing ring or how easy it so often is to move one's ball in golf to a better lie, without being seen.

These illustrations can be easily supplemented, but the core point is that sport does not exist in utter isolation from its ambient culture. It draws into it itself, and plays with material, technological and moral resources from that culture. Precisely because the rules of specific sports are constituted to highlight and focus upon different aspects of that culture, sports are not merely symptomatic of those cultures but are an imaginative reconstruction and expression of them. As such, sport may be considered to be 'worldmaking'. The descriptions of worlds current outside of the sport are embraced and refigured within the sport, thereby opening up new ways of describing, and thus making, those non-sporting worlds. This is, in effect, to argue that thanks to sport we can come to think differently of the capacities and nature of the human body, of gender and of age; of the way in which social interaction is organised; of what it is to have free will and responsibility; of the relationship between the human being and animals or between the human and natural worlds, and so on. It is here that Edgar (2013) argues for a shift from the aesthetics of sport to a hermeneutics, and thus to a concern with its meaning and how that meaning is interpreted.

It may be noted that the above argument is grounded in a subtle shift in the analogy that is typically drawn between sport and art. It is tacitly assumed that a sports match is analogous to an art work, and much of the argument for the identity of sport and art rests upon this assumption. Here, it is being claimed that a sport is analogous to an art work – so that each sports match is akin to the performance of, say, a piece of music or a play. On such an account, it is

the sportswright who is analogous to the artist – even if the sportswright is typically a combination of traditions and the committees of governing bodies, rather than an identifiable individual. As Krein (2008) recognises, new and alternative sports such as skateboarding, kite-surfing and snowboarding crucially open up new worlds – and not least through embracing new technologies and sporting spaces.

If the sportswright is the artist or composer, then the athlete remains a performer and interpreter. Cordner (1988: 33) thus notes the creativity of certain athletes, who find new ways of playing their sports, citing Arnold Palmer's attacking golf and Bjorn Borg's topspin in tennis (and on creativity in sport, see Lacerda and Mumford 2010). The constitutive rules of the sport do not determine the way in which it is played and this, as Roberts (1995) expresses the point, opens up the possibility of the athlete as strong poet. The point is not merely that the great athlete can achieve that which is denied the physically less able. It is rather that, in realising these achievements of skill and strength, of strategic nous and an awareness of space and time and, indeed, of maintaining dignity under pressure, the athlete poses a challenge to the way in which what it is to be human is described. The creative response to the athletic achievement thus makes a new world.

### Concluding thoughts

It may be suggested that the increasingly rich work being done in the aesthetics of sport still does not close the gap between sport and art. Indeed, a significant essay by Elcombe (2012) does not argue that sport is one of the arts but, rather, explores the consequences of instituting 'art' as the dominant metaphor in our description of sport, and all importantly thereby replacing the currently dominant metaphor of 'war'. Welsch (2005) argues for an aesthetics of sport by grounding aesthetics in the experience and judgement of everyday life, rather than of art. While Welsch's arguments are not wholly convincing (see Satoshi 2009), Kreft (2010, 2012) following to some extent Buckley (2006) offers a more promising articulation of the aesthetics of everyday life, not least by situating the 'dramatic' as the core aesthetic quality of sport. This category of drama is not the mere application of drama to an event in everyday life but, rather, recognises that sport is a performance and, as such, is executed under special circumstances – and here both the institutional separation of the sporting event in an arena or stadium and its peculiar constitutional rules may be considered – that separate it from everyday life and give it a distinctive history and tradition (Kreft 2012: 228).

Sport may have aesthetic qualities but, as Kreft's argument demonstrates, it is important to identify and clearly articulate the qualities that are of relevance to sport as sport. Otherwise, an aesthetic concern with sport is in danger of being trivial or of distorting the true nature of sport. Sport presupposes the pursuit of a precisely defined physical challenge but, most significantly, further entails the acute possibility that the athlete may fail in this challenge. As noted above, with respect to the potential ugliness of much sport, if a competition is a genuinely sporting one, then there must be the possibility of losing to one's opponent. Non-competitive challenges, such as conquering a mountain or swimming an expanse of wild water, must similarly entail the possibility of failure if they are to count as sport. The risk of failure is fundamental to sport. To neglect this, as Vivas neglects the score of the ice hockey match so as to appreciate it aesthetically, is to miss the point of sport as sport. Certain sports can take this risk of failure to extremes, for failure may entail physical injury or death. The very reality that Best points to in the athlete's, as opposed to the fictional character's, injury ultimately may give sport a pathos and importance that art cannot rival. This unique character of sport explains both why it is not art, and why at its most profound it is rarely beautiful.

## Note

- 1 On the tensions between the committed attitude of the fan and the aesthetic attitude of a 'disinterested' spectator, see Mumford (2012) and McFee (2013).

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