Sport, Spectacle and Spectatorship

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Jean Baudrillard suggests that one of the defining characteristics of contemporary society is that we "live at the pace of objects, live to the rhythm of their ceaseless succession" (Baudrillard 2003: 25). In other words "Today it is we who watch them as they are born, grow to maturity and die, whereas in all previous civilizations it was timeless objects, instruments or monuments which outlived the generation of human beings" (25). Much the same can be said regarding sporting teams, competitions, traditions - and even individual sports. For most of the twentieth century in the southeast of Australia, for instance, a large proportion of the working-class population grew up with an allegiance to the local rugby league side, which predated them and (they presumed) would outlive them. The local sporting team was a cultural and narrational (gender, demography, colours, nicknames, stories, religious affiliation, achievements, styles of play, legendary players, rivalries) as well as a material (geographical location, stadium, transport grids that linked the area of competition) constant with which they were familiar and identified with, and through and across which they passed (as spectators, officials, players). This was a culture of continuity, familiarity, place and stasis: the movement of players between clubs, for instance, was relatively infrequent and frowned upon (although not unknown), largely because it vitiated the links between team and the person concerned, and called into question their loyalty and integrity; and fans of a particular team were rarely drawn from outside the traditional demography/geography. It was easy for fans to identify with players not only because they tended to play for the one team, but also because they were sometimes from the same area (for a time a player was only eligible to play for a side if he lived in that suburb) and usually of the same class. Moreover, this non-differentiation extended into areas such as educational level, language spoken, income, work (players usually had full-time jobs) and bodily shape and hexis (unlike contemporary professionals, they were recognisably human - they could be short, overweight and skinny, and were not the products of weights programs).

That set of relationships and culture was on the decline by the 1960s, when live television coverage, and the media exposure and revenue it provided, started to influence salary levels, fixtures and scheduling, player movements and rules. Rugby league was a relatively static game in which one team could easily dominate possession if good enough: accordingly during the 1960s and 1970s the rules were changed to encourage a more open, flowing, high scoring and competitive (and television-friendly) contest, awarding extra points for tries, and limiting the time in which a side could hold the ball. The traditional game-as-culture passed away completely in the 1990s, when the media proprietor Rupert Murdoch organised and financed a rival competition - dubbed 'Superleague' - which was tied to his Sky satellite sports network. After a season the two competitions merged, but Murdoch's television interests, imperatives and money, along with those of the Kerry Packer owned and terrestrial Channel Nine network, effectively owned rugby league from that point on. During and after the struggle for control of what had been a one stage a quintessential working class sport, teams that had been members of the league for most of the century were jettisoned or forced to amalgamate and completely new sides formed from scratch, sometimes in traditional league areas (working class Newcastle) and sometimes in areas that had never supported the game (Adelaide and Melbourne, where Australian rules dominated). The Adelaide and Melbourne sides attracted paltry crowds, but that wasn't the goal. Their complete dependence on Murdoch revenue meant that their matches could be (more or less entirely) scheduled to suit television - in short their existence was predicated on Murdoch's need to find content and fill up the time for his pay television subscribers.

Despite having no tradition, no Melbourne-born players, very little crowd support and a completely new team, the Melbourne Storm were initially successful on the field, but the Adelaide side soon disappeared without trace - which is, in the mid-term, likely to be the same fate that befalls the sport. The Murdoch media organization has no intrinsic interest in or commitment to rugby league - it's a commodity and form of capital, and nothing more. Worryingly for rugby league, its value is limited: the audience for the game is almost entirely confined to the east coast of Australia, Auckland and a few other parts of New Zealand, Papua-New Guinea and (rapidly diminishing) pockets of the north of England and the south of France. It has already maximised its television audiences (and subscribers), and there is little or no chance of the game expanding internationally. Australian rules has a much higher media profile, receives more exposure and attracts higher advertising and sponsorship revenue within the Australian market, and the recently launched soccer 'A League' is set to capitalise on the global popularity of that game, the high pop-star status of players with Premier League and Italian Seria A

clubs (Harry Kewell, Tim Cahill, Marco Bresciano) and Australia's creditable performance at the 2006 World Cup. The biggest threat to the sport, however, and one which will almost certainly send it into (professional and eventually complete) extinction, is the rise of professional rugby union.

Rugby union offers perhaps an even more exemplary case study of the contemporary transformation of a traditional sport into a media-and-business enterprise and spectacle. Rugby union and league split at the end of the nineteenth century over the issue of professionalism, and union culture remained steadfastly amateur and participation-oriented, although shamateurism was rife at international level. In the 1990s, and in response to rugby league consistently poaching its best players, it went professional. The three southern hemisphere powers (South Africa, Australia and New Zealand) came together as SANZAR and signed a lucrative and long term television rights deals with Murdoch's News Corporation that brought two major competitions into existence - the Tri-Nations (involving home and away internationals) and the Super-10 (then super-12, now the Super-14, which is made up of provincial sides). This was an example of competitions that completely bypassed and in a sense made redundant the old structure and networks of competition (mostly suburban club games attended by a few thousand spectators, with the occasional interstate or international match): it was set up with and for television (Murdoch wanted a(nother) product to help bring in pay subscribers not just in the competing countries but also in the UK), and financed predominantly through television rights revenue and sponsorship (in 2006 the Super-14 will be known by different names in the three countries, corresponding to the company that has acquired the naming rights).

This development boosted rugby in Australia (at the expense of league) because first it had an international dimension; second, the standard of play increased through the professionalising of the game and the widespread importation of quality players, particularly from Pacific nations; third, News Corporation heavily publicised the game across the country; and fourth and finally, rugby rules were changed (and refereed in such a way) as to produce entertaining, high scoring games. The consequences for Pacific rugby playing nations and for rugby league, on the other hand, were potentially disastrous. Rugby (both fifteen-a-side and Sevens) is a major sport in Fiji, Samoa, the Cook Islands and Tonga, but because none of those had significant media or sponsorship markets they were excluded from both competitions. Moreover their best players tend to move to Australia and New Zealand or to rich northern hemisphere clubs to make a living from the game, and they often qualify and play for their adopted home. School age players showing promise are increasingly being enticed to New Zealand through the provision of scholarships, and stay on. When Samoa (very occasionally) plays New Zealand and Australia in internationals, for instance, it is usually beaten by big margins, with much of the damage being done by ex-patriot Samoans.

Professional league administrators, team officials, and sports journalists often refer to sport as a business. This presumption is commonplace, even though it is also antithetical to the discourses, values and ethos fundamental to sport: for one thing it transforms fans with a very specific orientation (a team allegiance which is theoretically inalienable) into abstracted consumers. In 2003 the National Soccer League in Australia was supposedly in crisis: attendances were falling, the best players were leaving for overseas, charges of corruption and incompetence were levelled at the administration, the national team had failed to qualify for the World Cup, and the league had failed to secure a live television contract. A panel was gathered together on the SBS television network to discuss what had to be done to 'save the game'. Curiously, while the panellists (who included journalists, media commentators, administrators and players) were ostensibly discussing a sport, any reference to the game itself (as an activity, a set of skills, the site of communal allegiance and identity) was absent: soccer was a business, and it had to be treated and run as a business. Even the value of World Cup qualification was articulated predominantly within a business discourse (it would help to increase revenue, open up marketing opportunities, and secure a television contract). In other words the panel promoted sport-as-business (and business-driven imperatives and logics) as the necessary basis of a social ethos (sport as the space where inalienable community identity was played out).

What looks like a contradiction - sport as simultaneously both inalienable culture and a commodity - is perfectly explicable if we make use of Arjun Appadurai's insight that the commodity is not so much a thing as a situation or phase:

Let us approach commodities as things in a certain situation, a situation that can characterize many different kinds of thing, at different points in their social lives. This means looking at the commodity potential of all things rather than searching fruitlessly for the magic distinction between commodities and other sorts of things. It also means breaking significantly with the production-dominated Marxian view of the commodity and focusing on its total trajectory from production, through exchange/distribution, to consumption. But how do we define the commodity situation? I propose that the commodity situation in the social life of any 'thing' be defined as the situation in which its exchangeability (past, present, or future) for some thing is its socially relevant feature (Appadurai 1988: 13).

The value of this definition is that it renders irrelevant

the question of whether sport-as-communal identity was colonised or produced by the media in tandem with capitalism; and concomitantly it also means that spectators at sporting events are partaking of a form of social life and activity even when the subjectivities on which this is predicated are entirely manufactured. So the crowd that gathers to watch and cheer, sing and scream, wears the sweatshirts and waves the flags, responds to scores and referees' decisions, idolises and identifies with players, and most importantly watches and experiences the game as if it were a crucial part of their lives has been carefully taught and disposed (through newspaper reports and articles, and by watching at games and rallies and learning, unconsciously, how and when to move and shout) to show and experience unmediated and unpremeditated passion.

This is the inalienable and the production-distribution-consumption (not to mention marketing and advertising) nexus all rolled into one self-perpetuating process. While pre-modern (that is to say, nineteenth century) games were partly integrated into the logics and apparatuses of entrepreneurship and the market, they weren't a commodity per se, nor were they the departure point for new forms of production, distribution and consumption. The pre-modern crowd was neither homogeneous nor easily interpellated on any consistent basis, and therefore couldn't function as a commodity; if anything it was a kind of anti-commodity, since its ephemeral and volatile nature threatened or vitiated the commodity status of the game itself.

What was missing from pre-modern sport was a mechanism that taught, inculcated and disseminated identities, dispositions and forms of behaviour beyond the limitations of time and place, and then integrated them into an ongoing cycle of commoditisation. In short what was lacking was the mass media and its ability to transform its (literate) audiences into sports' spectators with a passionate and/or enduring attachment to the events at hand, which in itself became part of the process of production and commoditisation. This in fact is the real significance of the media to the field of sport - it creates both games as spectacles and, equally importantly, spectators-as-consumers.

In Jonathan Crary's reading of Debord's notion of society of the spectacle (Crary 1998, 2000) attention becomes the point of focus - it must be garnered and maintained. Vision is arranged, organised and disposed within various hegemonic visual regimes, the most influential and pervasive of which is that of capitalism - everything is (potentially) reduced to the status of commodity. There is an emphasis on necessary, repetitive and mobile (visual) consumption: the subject or spectator relates to the social and to the self through the commodity and the act of consumption, and the commodity and consumption comes to stand in for, or replace, or functions as a simulation of, the social. Spectacle is not primarily concerned with looking or content, but rather with the "construction of conditions that individuate, immobilize and separate subjects, even within a world in which mobility and circulation are ubiquitous" (Crary 2000: 74). From this perspective, spectacle is best understood as a form of architecture, the purpose of which is the production of "the many as passive observers" (Schirato and Webb 2004: 413); in other words, with the spectacle populations are arranged and disposed in such a manner that their understanding and (visual) experience of the world and themselves is directed through and by the process of the consumption of and participation in the event - whether it be theatrical displays, film, world fairs, exhibitions or sporting contests.

Like the media and the large-scale section of the field of cultural production of which it is increasingly a part, sport-as-spectacle must address and satisfy three imperatives: first, appeal to the widest demographic in order to maximise revenue; second and third, and by way of facilitating the first imperative, hyperbolise everything, and create dramatic effects in a time- (and hence financially-) economical manner. How does this play out within the field of sport at the various levels of practice? In a sense the three imperatives listed above are articulated through and with regard to the question of spectatorship and its place and development within the field of sport. The transformation of sport into a commodity and media event has implications not just in terms of who the field accepts and/or interpellates as belonging to it and how it disposes them (how and what they see, what is valued), but also in terms of what is expected, both of those who 'belong' to the field and those who more or less pass through as tourists. As Bourdieu writes, one only has to think of what is implied:

> *in the fact that a sport like rugby … has become, through television, a mass spectacle, transmitted far beyond the circle of present or past 'practitioners' … to a public very imperfectly equipped with the specific competence needed to decipher it adequately. The 'connoisseur' has schemes of perception and appreciation which enables him to see what the layman cannot see, to perceive a necessity where the outsider sees only violence and confusion, and so to find in the promptness of a movement, in the unforeseeable inevitability of a successful combination or the near-miraculous orchestration of a team strategy, a pleasure no less intense and learned than the pleasure a music-lover derives from the particularly successful rendering of a favourite work. The more superficial the perception, the less it finds its pleasure in the spectacle contemplated in itself and for itself, and the more it is drawn to the search for the 'sensational', the cult of obvious feats and visible virtuosity and, above all, the more exclu-*

sively it is concerned with the other dimension of the sporting spectacle, suspense and anxiety as to the result, thereby encouraging players and especially organizers to aim for victory at all costs (Bourdieu 1991: 364).

How do these various developments (the increase in casual viewers, the dominance of business logics, technologies and techniques that take you 'to the game') dispose the way sport is seen and experienced? One general response is that the field of sport now has two quite distinct audiences - what Bourdieu terms 'connoisseurs' and 'laymen' (Bourdieu 1991: 364) - that correspond roughly to the autonomous (of and for itself) and heteronomous (tied in to and with imperatives and logics from other powerful fields such as business and the media) poles of the field. The connoisseur identifies strongly with a team or sport, almost at a level of idealisation, while the laymen will only identify with and show interest in a sport, team or player 'of the moment' - that is, when it is fashionable to do so, or when the media hyperbolise an event or story. A good example of both types of relation 'to the thing' - as abstraction and fashionable media entertainment - as well as the different ways of seeing this engenders, can be found in tennis' 2006 Australian Men's Open. The story of the tournament, as far as media coverage was concerned, was not so much Baghdatis' successful run (beating seeded players such as Andy Roddick and David Nalbandian) as the passionate, colourful and noisy support he received from Melbourne's very considerable Greek community: television coverage, newspaper reports and web sites all concentrated on the way Baghdatis played to, fired up and generally interacted with the crowd. For the casual viewer tuning in to the final, Baghdatis' opponent Roger Federer was a bit player, and his technically non pareil backhand, his all court game and skill were at best an irrelevance, and at worst an interruption to a good story. For the serious and literate tennis spectator, however, that skill was the focus of attention, along with mental comparisons that might be made between Federer and Rod Laver, the last man to win a Grand Slam and the player that Federer most resembles technically. While the casual viewer read the tennis match-as-text in terms of Baghdatis' heroics and the crowd antics, the connoisseur reacted to and savoured the moment when Laver presented the trophy to an emotional Federer: their embrace could and would be read as the handing on of tennis' tradition from a past to the present. To the layman Federer and Laver and that embrace would only have been significant or worthy of attention if the media coverage, aware that the wheels had fallen off the Baghdatis wagon, had switched their emphasis to and hyperbolised (and quickly educated their audience about) Federer's chance of achieving the Grand Slam.

The same kind of bifurcation can be found in cricket, where commercial and media imperatives have led to the game splitting into three distinct forms: test and first class, one-day and twenty-twenty matches. Test matches are played over five days, with no limits on how long a team can bat or the number of overs a bowler can bowl, white clothes are worn, and the scoring rate is usually somewhere around two to three runs an over: they have been played since the mid-nineteenth century. One-day matches are played in a day or day-night, teams play in coloured clothing, the number of overs (for the batting team and individual bowlers) is limited, and there are additional rules regarding the kind of deliveries that are legitimate, and fielding positions: they date from the 1970s. Twenty-twenty is simply an ersatz and more frenetic version of the one-day game (with innovations such as 'super-subs' etc), and has only been played on a regular basis over since the new millennium. Test matches usually attract crowds that have an attachment, and are highly literate with regard, to the rules, skills, techniques and traditions of the game: the long duration (usually from 11am to 6pm each day) and the relatively slow pace of the play where - to the untutored eye - an hour can go by without anything dramatic or significant happening makes it unattractive, as well as incomprehensible, to the casual viewer.

Because of this test match cricket appeals to what we could designate as a niche market. The 2005 Ashes series, however, is a good example of the way in which a traditional sporting form-as-capital, once it's brought fully within the media-business nexus, can be commoditised and hyperbolised - and in the process capture attention and audiences. England's improbable victory over Australia achieved unprecedented television audiences not just in Britain but also in the Indian subcontinent (through the ESPN-Star satellite network), set off a wave of 'Jerusalem' singing not seen since the 1966 soccer World Cup, and gave Andy Flintoff pop star status. This went against the trend, however: test matches have been supplanted in popularity - both in terms of gates and television ratings - by the two limited overs games. The latter are better suited both to television programming and to generalist audiences: they take up less time, a result (weather permitting) is assured, and the entertainment imperative is catered for because the batting side has to score quickly.

How precisely does media coverage of sport help facilitate, promote and naturalise sports' spectatorship at what we might term a technical level? The imperative to 'bring the game to the fans' required newspapers and television to take it upon themselves to teach their readers about sporting competitions, players, categories, genres, discourses, practices, activities, rules, rhythms and traditions (if they existed - if not, they had to be invented, as was the case with the numerous 'traditional football rivalries' that came into being in the late 19th or early 20th centuries). In short, attentive readers acquired literacy with regard to the

field at a micro- (distinguishing between rugby union and league, understanding the difference between a 'centre half forward' and a 'ruckman') and macro-level (appreciating the ethos of sport). When we refer to literacy here we are using the term in the sense of a wider cultural literacy, a concept that implies "not just familiarity with a body of knowledge; it also presupposes an understanding of how to think and see in a manner that is appropriate to the imperatives and contexts of the moment" (Schirato and Webb 2004: 18). The notion of how to see is particularly relevant here: an untutored and illiterate eye that tries to take in what is happening in a rugby maul or a ruck contest in a AFL game will see nothing - or at least nothing that makes sense.

This imperative, on the part of newspapers and other media, to educate spectators is a requisite part of getting and holding the attention of the public: readers and viewers need to be caught up by, drawn into, and care passionately about, games and teams and players and competitions and issues; and the more they knew and saw, the easier it is to effect and maintain this attentive and affective response. The sports' spectator bothers to become literate with regard to the field precisely because they consider that the game, in the wider sense (say, watching and seeing with a knowledgeable and cultivated eye, then demonstrating this to others - and accruing capital), is worth playing. The non-sports spectator who accompanies a friend to an AFL game or watches cricket on television while channel-hopping is differentiated from sports' spectators not just by a lack of technical expertise ('what's a googly?') and overall literacy ('why does the bowling team have eleven players, and the batting side only two?'); even more importantly, they can't see the point. Sports' spectators, on the other hand, take the game 'at its word'. They are, in their acts and roles of spectatorship, simply testifying to, as well as extending and manifesting, the field and its articulation of in its own self worth. In Bourdieu's terms, they believe, and see it as if, 'it's worth the candle' (Bourdieu 1998).

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