

**“ALLURE” CONSTRAINED BY “ETHICS”?**  
**How Athletic Events Have Engaged Their Spectators**

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Whoever tries to describe, with serious intellectual ambition, the multiple dimensions in which athletic events have engaged their spectators will soon discover a surprising lack of both open minded and complex enough positions from the past to connect with. For if the history of modern sports, as an institutional continuity, began around 1800, with professional boxing events in London and with new forms of physical education at exclusive British colleges, its trajectory has been accompanied, for over two hundred years, by a steady flow of ill-humored and condescending commentaries from intellectuals. For them and until recently, sports seems to have been the absolute Other, and a despicable Other that is. There were few exceptions from this rule, among them some authors who desperately tried to be “original” by going against the mainstream of their peers (like the German playwright Bertolt Brecht who did his best to convince the world that boxing really mattered to him), or like representatives of different ideological stands who wanted sports to function as a medium of moral betterment (as it was the case with the high-flying vision of a cosmopolitan elite of practicing athletes that motivated the Baron de Coubertin towards the foundation of the modern Olympics, or with Carl Diem, a teacher of classics at first and later on the protagonist in charge of inventing the rituals for the Nazi Games of 1936).

Much more abundant and repetitive (but at least equally shallow) have been the mostly left-wing discourses of a “political” critique of sports. Three obsessively recycled motifs are dominant among them: the view of sports as a spectacle

essential for the production of bourgeois ideologies, i.e. for keeping their fans in a state of “false consciousness;” the consideration of sports as an alienating activity, one that averts the viewers’ attention from their own “objective” concerns and interests; and, finally, the image of sports as a cash-making machine of capitalist exploitation, based both on overpriced tickets to be paid by humble fans and on skimming off the larger part of the revenue produced by performing athletes. None of these accusations is specific to what we call “sports” -- nor did any of them ever provoke the true excitement of intellectual innovation.

But now, all of a sudden, the tide has turned, both dramatically and grotesquely, within only a few years. If back in the late twentieth century a young academic or an emerging artist were expected by their different professional environments to keep silent (if not secret) any possible passion for ongoing World Cups or National Championships, not exhibiting at least a certain degree of sports expertise makes them look anti-social and hopelessly old-fashioned today. AS THIS CHANGE IN ATTITUDE DOES NOT SEEM TO RESPOND TO ANY EXPLICIT INTELLECTUAL SHIFT OR PROGRESS, A palpable embarrassment surrounds the now inevitable question about the intellectual merits or the legitimacy of this new compulsory fascination. For a lack of better answers, intellectuals will claim to talk about sports as a symptom of contemporary social structures or of ongoing social change; as a paradigm for a new type of economy; as an expression of national or regional identities; or, quite pretentiously, as a practice to be improved by the contributions of their thinking. The most visible and least artificial relationship between sports and their spectators, by contrast, gets hardly ever mentioned. I am of course referring to the sheer pleasure of watching sports, of sports as a modality of aesthetic experience – as its most popular modality today. The appearance of words like “allure” or “fascination” may be quite telling in this context. For they evoke, on the one hand, the raw and often irresistible attraction of athletic events for so many millions of spectators while, on the other hand, they keep them at a distance from

a certain connotation of exclusiveness attached to the concepts philosophical aesthetics.

Where does this apparent need of a distance between aesthetics and sports come from? Why is it so difficult to take the pleasure of watching sports seriously? WHY DOES SUCH A SENTENCE SEEM TO HAVE THE RING OF AN OXYMORON? Why does it require introductory speech acts like “acknowledgments” or “admissions” to say that we enjoy going to the stadium? My best guess is that many intellectuals are still struggling with a heritage from the nineteenth century when aesthetic experience and its intentional objects had quite literally developed into a secular version of those sacred functions previously covered by religious rituals. Even today, we tend to breathe deeply and to feel elevated during moments of aesthetic experience – and this specific status may well be the reason why many of us still have a hard time associating aesthetic experience with those proverbial fans from the supposedly lower educational or financial levels who fill the stadiums (although they now begin to be excluded by the ever rising ticket prices). At the same time, I imagine that those old-style fans, for the paradoxically identical reasons, would show a similar resistance against being associated with aesthetic experience.

This strange situation, i.e. a type of aesthetic experience not wanting to admit its own existence, has a potential of turning into an additional – aesthetic – quality. For if athletes and spectators in general make up for events of aesthetics experience without the otherwise typical “dignified” attitude, we can say that, quite often, they embody grace, in the sense of a specific touch of beauty belonging to those who are not aware of it. This might also explain why athletic events that imply an explicit “aesthetic component,” gymnastics, for example, diving or figure skating, have never been among the most popular sports.

Our initial reflection triggered by the surprising degree of resistance against a serious and unprejudiced way of thinking about sports does of course not yet

fully account for the – spontaneously plausible – intuition regarding their role as an object of aesthetics experience. Are there really parallels between watching a baseball match and listening to a Beethoven symphony? And what precisely would it be – about a baseball game or a track and field competition – that so fascinates us, in the literal sense of paralyzing our eyes and our entire apparatus of attention? I will begin my answer to this question by explaining, step by step and with some conceptual rigor, how the specific phenomena behind the allure of sports indeed correspond to some of the most canonical descriptions of aesthetic experience. Like all other forms of aesthetic experience, watching sports has had all kinds of impact on the spectators' everyday lives. We can refer to this impact as the "ethics" of sports (in the most open sense of the concept) – and these ethics tend to have a potentially stifling effect on the allure of sports as soon as the open variety of their effects undergoes any transformation into explicit sets of values and rules of behavior with normative claims. Wolf Kittler's analysis of "Gymnastics as Preparation for War," Sarah Panzer's documentation regarding the reception of Japanese martial arts in Germany between the two World Wars, but also Stefan Willer's ironic description of the Soccer World Cup 2006 in Germany turned into a narcissistic tale about the host country's national identity, all illustrate, from different historical angles, that long-term tension between the allure and the ethics of sports.

During the past few decades, however, the status of sports as a specific (and specifically informal) enclave for aesthetic experience seems to have undergone a deep transformation in the larger socio-historical context. Almost unnoticed, the roles of the athlete and of the spectator as well as the status of aesthetic experience have become less socially eccentric than they had used to be since the early nineteenth century. This change may not only account for a new, increasingly central position of sports in present day societies and for a different attitude among intellectuals; it has also made the athlete and the spectator less exceptional and more paradigmatic figures within our present, thus easing the traditional tension between the allure and ethics of sports. This indeed is the

observation and the thesis that I will try to describe and to comment upon towards the end of my text.

### Athletico-Aesthetic Dimensions

Given how endlessly far away from sports Immanuel Kant's EVERYDAY LIFE must have been, It is astonishing, not to say funny, that the three central features making up for Immanuel Kant's concept of "aesthetic judgment" fully converge with the involvement of our cognitive apparatus when we are in the role of sports spectators. What Kant, firstly, refers to as the "disinterestedness" of the aesthetic judgment is its distance from our everyday intentions and concerns, a distance synonymous with what the eighteenth century began to describe as "aesthetic autonomy" (and structurally similar to the status of religious sanctuaries as typical sites of athletic competition in classical Antiquity, as Sofie Remijnsen shows in her essay). We intensely care about our teams to win – but neither our income nor our professional reputation depends on it. Secondly, we have no quantitative or clear conceptual criteria for what strikes us as beautiful or sublime in a moment of classical aesthetic experience – or in sports. A high scoring game is not necessarily a good game, for example, and there is no evidence or consensus about those potential qualities of a boxing event that we find more impressive than others. Finally and despite this lack of objective criteria, it is difficult for us to imagine that anybody could not agree with how we see and evaluate an artwork – or, for that matter, an athletic performance. They both presuppose and thus "require" (Kant uses the word "erheischen") a consensus of taste.

Another perspective that we often imply in speaking about "aesthetic experience" has to do with a specific conception of its object of reference (we may therefore call this angle "ontological"), and it also explains why aesthetic experience did not start to become a separate dimension in society before early Modernity. Only from that time on, human self-conception and our relation to the objects of the

world became predominantly spiritual within European culture, meaning that men began to see themselves as outside observers and interpreters of their physical environment, while the (mostly spatial) relationship between human bodies and their material environments got increasingly bracketed. Ever since (and until recently), we have been calling “aesthetic” and considered exceptional those situations where the material dimension of an object of experience seems to impose itself to our attention, in addition to (and in oscillation with) its interpretation. When we listen to a song or when we concentrate on a painting, these acts are more complex than the mere deciphering of what the song or the painting may “mean” – for they include a focus on the sensual perception of their sound and their color. The same is true for our relationship with sports. Some movements of a player in a certain position will fulfill specific functions for his team that we can identify -- and they will give him an individual position within the game. At the same time, however, we entertain a spatial relationship and a corporeal affinity with the athletes that we watch – and this precisely has made their status eccentric within the mind- and interpretation-centered world of Modernity.

A third dimension in the role of a sports spectator refers to our psyche. I like to associate it with the legendary butterfly swimmer Pablo Morales who once spontaneously described his attachment to sports as “the desire of being lost in focused intensity.” These words from an athlete seem to subsume, quite perfectly, the experience of the spectators. “Being lost” of course corresponds to the situation of “aesthetic autonomy.” But the spectator is also “intensely focused,” which means that she expects a certain type of movement or event whose specific form she does not know yet – and this expectation can her make existence more intense, that is more incisive, fuller, and more captivating than other moments of life. The appearance of the yet unknown play or movement may take quite long to happen (as it is, for example, quite normal and even part of a specific beauty in baseball games) -- and they may also not happen at all. If, however, such an appearance occurs, we often call it “epiphanic” because what

we perceive is embodied and will only happen suddenly, that is without the frames of predictability that characterize most of our everyday life. But how can we describe the objects of our attention that are specific to sports and that, by showing themselves, provoke aesthetic judgment? How are they related to certain “ethical” effects that the aesthetic experience of sports may produce in our everyday lives, outside the margins of aesthetic autonomy?

### Athletic Events and their Forms

What we see in athletic events is of course always and invariably human behavior -- but human behavior experienced under the premise of aesthetics, and that means a behavior not only (or mainly) interpreted in terms of possible intentions or strategies of those who are embodying it, but also perceived as presence, i.e. behavior that relates to other bodies and to other material objects in space. As for its motivation, athletic behavior is typically driven by a convergence of “agon” (competitiveness) and “arete” (self-improvement), by impulses of agon and arete, however, that are set apart (“aesthetic autonomy,” “being lost”) from everyday interests and intentions. As for the forms of behavior that we associate with sports, I don’t believe that there is any natural or primary selection. In other words: under the premise of aesthetic autonomy and within the oscillation of agon and arete, any behavior can be perceived as “sports.” But over the centuries a broad variety of different events have emerged, received specific resonance, and thus become representative for the complex phenomenon of sports as we know it, a phenomenon always supplemented and changed by a steady flow of innovations (recently, it appears, such innovations occur above all in winter sports).

All these different athletic events are staging bodies in multiple situations and under different rules – producing different types of competition and drama, with subsequent variations in spectator interests and in the modes of participation,

whose only common denominator, beside a broad and rather incoherent range of “ethical” effects, is indeed a specific intensity that one feels while watching sports. As I just said, there is neither a limited range of possible athletic events nor a basic formula that one might consider to be their foundational matrix. In order to illustrate the variety in play here and without any claim of completeness, I will briefly describe a few of them. Only since the mid-nineteenth century have team sports begun to occupy the international center stage of athletic events, and I believe that in the core of the attention they provoke is less the winning or the losing of the two opposing teams (or those short moments that seem “count,” like goals, touchdowns, baskets etc.) -- but the beauty of individual plays. Beautiful plays can be described as the emergence of forms consisting of different bodies in movement, that is forms articulating themselves against the resistance of the other team (its “defense”); forms also that are events because we always seem to see them for the first time and can never know ahead of time whether they will actually happen; forms, finally, that begin to vanish from the moment on that they begin to appear. In the end, we will always enjoy or at least appreciate a game with many beautiful plays -- even if our favorite team is losing. Being on a team and performing beautiful plays cannot of course fail to have an ethical impact on those who play and on those who are watching but there is empirical evidence that, turned into a coherent and explicit structure of normative rules of behavior, the so called “team spirit” will yield neither success nor beauty – as the flagrant pre-1989 failure of the Communist States shows who wanted specifically excel, according to their ideology, in team sports.

Boxing, by contrast, wrestling, and other confrontational sports are certainly not about the emergence of beautiful plays. One part of their fascination, without any doubt, lies in the exhibition of violence (under conditions of mutual agreement that makes violence largely unproblematic). But rather than producing the much-feared effect of giving to violence an aura of normalcy in everyday life, there is evidence in the history of these sports that what spectators most admire about them (and profit the most from) is their athletes’ capacity to face physical threats



that could be lethal for them. Unavoidably, the legends of the greatest boxers of all times include great moments of defeat – like those suffered by Muhammad Ali, Jack Dempsey, or Marcel Cerdan.

The allure of boxing is again different from those events, mainly in track and field, where an individual body tries to maximize its efficiency in relation to a function that remains strictly within the world of sports: throwing a javelin, jumping high, running fast are sports and can become beautiful to the degree that they are disconnected from practical purposes -- exactly like the eighteenth century running races described by Rebecca Mallinckrodt and very different from the military function of gymnastics in the German early nineteenth century. Or think of horseback riding, car racing, and shooting as events that converge in the structure of a human body trying to achieve an always-precarious balance with an animal body or a complex technical device. It is a balance that cannot be achieved by the absolute will to dominate and control but only through a much more subtle negotiation between dominance, on the one side, and, on the other, the adaptation of one's own body to an animal body or to a technical array.

I end here although, as I said, we are far from having covered the full range of athletic events. What above remains stunning is their dynamic diversity – and the corresponding variety of their potential ethical effects. If we go back for a moment to Immanuel Kant's canonical description of the aesthetic judgment, then we can further ask, using his concepts, to which, among the two general modalities of aesthetic experience, athletic events seem to have a greater affinity, to the sublime or to the beautiful. The sublime, as the more popular (and more highly esteemed) option today, refers to those objects of attention that, during moments, can become overwhelming for us. The beautiful, by contrast, is defined as "purposiveness without representation of an end," that is as an object or as a movement that looks functional although, due to aesthetic autonomy, it does not have a functional place in the everyday world. All sport fans of course remember some breathtaking, overwhelming, and thus sublime moments that they

experienced in the stadium. In the long run, however, I believe that the modality of the beautiful dominates over the sublime in sports. For the beautiful (“purposiveness with purpose”) has an affinity with the basic condition of most athletic events, as being staged around different intrinsic purposes – purposes that are all suspended in the everyday world outside aesthetic autonomy.

Likewise, all athletic events have their intrinsic temporalities which set them apart, as forms with a beginning and an ending (“sixty minutes,” “five sets,” “six attempts” etc.), from the endlessly running everyday time. Each specific temporality of course produces specific temporal economies that athletes have to take into account and can use in more or less sophisticated fashion. From this angle, athletic events are similar to most other – religious, juridical, or political -- rituals in human culture: a clear awareness and economy of time, therefore, is essential for who wants to win. And yet I do not believe that there is any single or specific aspect of temporality that brings together all types of sports and separates them from all other rituals.

Finally, is there anything that we would call an “ugly athletic event” -- as opposed to the beauty expected (unknowingly or in full awareness) when we go to the stadium? In some sports, we do speak of ‘ugly fouls’ – but we then refer to the intention of an athlete to hurt another athlete (or to accept this risk), rather than to any specific feature in his body movement. By contrast, a pass in a team sport may not reach its targeted goal or a gymnastic routine may not manage to embody the form demanded – and yet we would not call them “ugly.” If, however, an athletic performance does ultimately not provide the type of form or the type of drama for whose epiphany we have been waiting “in focused intensity,” then we will be disappointed and say that our time in the stadium was boring, tedious or flat – even if our favorite athletes or our favorite teams ended up winning (and even if we learnt something practical from their behavior).

## History

Is it possible to explain why, around 1800, that departure towards the development of modern sports started to take place on different levels, after almost two millennia during which, since the vanishing of Greek and Roman antiquity described by Sofie Remijnsen, sports had occupied a comparatively marginal position in different societies? We certainly don't have a consensual answer to this question. But it may be worth to imagine a link between the beginning of modern sports and the emergence, around 1800, of a new collective frame of mind that we normally refer to as the "historical worldview." In this new attitude to the world and in its discourses, the purely consciousness-based human self-image, as it has been developing since early modernity, found its ultimate institutional consolidation. So we can speculate, in the first place, that a more intense allure of watching and of practicing sports might have been a non-programmatic reaction to and a compensation for an everyday life that, in a growing number of social contexts, was becoming almost exclusively spiritual. Another innovation related to the historical worldview was a future that appeared to be an open horizon of possibilities, a horizon that men believed they could shape. Based upon *agon* and *arete*, sports had always presupposed this type of open future as its internal structure – but we can speculate that its sudden affinity with a much larger social context may have helped to bring sports into a culturally central position. After all, betting on the outcome of athletic events, which is reacting to their open future, became part of the modern phenomenology of sports, right from the start.

Within the historical worldview as new framework, sports developed during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Europa and in America, and subsequently began to spread all over the world to become a truly global set of rituals. But as I believe that the historical worldview is no longer the dominant (let

alone the one and only global) frame of our cultures today, I want to ask whether we can identify an impact, on sports, of such a possible transformation in our cultural frame conditions. At least within our everyday existence, we no longer experience and presuppose the future to be an open horizon of possibilities that we can shape. Rather, our new future seems to be occupied by multiple threats that are slowly (or not so slowly) coming towards us. At the same time and partly due to new electronic technologies of knowledge storing, the past, more than ever before, seems to invade the present. Between this aggressive past and the new congested future, our present seems to expand into a broad dimension that contains absolutely everything and thus confronts us, collectively and individually, with a new, unheard of degree of complexity. For the first time since the middle ages, therefore, we no longer see ourselves as pure minds confronting and interpreting the world from outside. Rather, we feel surrounded by (and part of) that ever broadening and ever more complex present, and we thus try to reintegrate, both practically and theoretically, the body into our self-image. Early morning jogging as well as the contemporary intellectual attempts to bring together neuro-sciences and philosophy could be symptoms of this ongoing change.

As for sports, the frame of the new temporality, seems to have only accelerated and strengthened the expansion and allure of athletic culture, as it had already begin to emerge around 1800. But this change may also have modified the premises under which we practice and watch sports. If the awareness of having and of being a body is now becoming less exceptional again, then athletes should become more paradigmatic for our contemporary self-understanding. At the same time, the new broadening present, in its overwhelming complexity, provides us with a new freedom and with more choices of behavior – which, in spite of increasing our agency and our power over the world, may also trigger an unprecedented existential desire for situations and institutions that give us security, for situations and institutions to hold on to, for moments in which we are

precisely exempted from the freedom and burden choice. Without any doubt, being part of a crowd in a stadium belongs to these moments.

In other words: both from the athletes' side and from the side of the spectators, sports may appear closer today to our self-reference and to our existential concerns than they used to be. Although nobody has yet thought through this historical transformation in its full complexity and in all its consequences, it may explain why the allure of sports has only grown and become more central than ever before. But this new intensity of athletic allure may also be less distant from our everyday practice as an ethical dimension than ever before. Perhaps the insistence of keeping sports separate from politics and from the economy, for all of its good intentions, is no longer really adequate, as sports have developed into a state where they are positively intertwined with our everyday, rather than autonomous from it. All of these dimensions are in flux now – but it is still impossible to see where exactly this complex movement may end up leading.

#### Athletico-Aesthetic Dimensions, Changing

As the awareness of having and being a body is becoming less eccentric, we no longer find it to be out of the democratic order, for example, if a gold medalist profits from her fame to run for an office in politics; nor does the transition from a world-class career in sports back into normal life appear as precarious and as difficult as it used to be in the past. Without being its one and only “cause,” electronic technology once again appears to play a complex role here, a role of accentuating and enforcing certain effects in this process. On the one hand, it has pushed to an ultimate limit the long-term development towards a lopsidedly mind-based form of human existence, by making a fusion between consciousness and software the predominant working situation in many (if not in the majority of) contemporary professions. This status produces a broader desire than ever for activities that involve and engage our bodies, and it thus

accentuates the allure of sports. At the same time, the quantitative leap in computational power provided by electronics, together with the push towards a recuperation of our existence's physical dimension, has profoundly changed our relationship to the material and natural environment. There is no comparison, for example, between our present capacity of predicting and even, to a certain degree, manipulating the weather and what was possible in this context only a few decades ago. Although the word may look strange for a technology-mediated transformation, I think we have become endlessly more "familiar with" (and also much more sensitive for) our environment than in the past, we have indeed rediscovered ourselves as part of the environment instead of being its outside observer.

To use a distinction that is central in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, we seem to have moved from a "present-to-hand" relationship to the physical and biological world, a relationship that had been typical for the natural sciences, to a "ready-to-hand" situation as it characterizes the hands-on attitudes of such professions as engineers and surgeons, gardeners – and athletes. Their embodied existence lived in closeness and in familiarity both with other bodies and with the material world, is less eccentric than it used to be – and, seen from the angle of the fusion between consciousness and software, also more eccentric and more desirable than ever. This complex duplicity (of being both more exclusively spiritual than ever and, at the same time, closer to the material world) can perhaps explain why athletes, today, are more admired and more paradigmatic for the latest state of the human condition than they used to be. Within this historical transition, our views on how a person can and should be productive or even "creative" are now changing. Under present-at-hand conditions, we admired as "genius" fellow humans who, from an outside position, were able to interpret the world in unforeseen ways, obtaining true insights and thus motivating the hope for incisive changes in the future. Albert Einstein and "Relativity" are but the most proverbial example here.

The person, by contrast, who has arguably had the most sustained and sustainable impact on the global everyday during the past decades, i.e. Steve Jobs, did not fit the pattern of the present-at-hand. He never produced any new insights that we would celebrate as “truthful,” nor did he invent any truly unprecedented products or forms of behavior. Constant variation under the premise of a ready-to-hand relation to the world of objects was the formula through which Jobs, profoundly and in multiple ways, transformed the attitude of a new generation towards our environment. And this precisely has long – if not always -- been the attitude of the most outstanding athletes. Paavo Nurmi and Jessie Owens, Jack Dempsey and Muhammad Ali, John McEnroe and Roger Federer, Giuseppe Meazza and Lionel Messi changed their sports through accumulated (but individually small) variations – with non-dramatic variations whose practical relevance and lasting impact became obvious only in retrospect.

The question is whether we will be able to learn, for our “ethical” lives outside the autonomous world of sports, from the athletes’ new ways of using space and engaging with other bodies; whether we will be able to learn from them to the same extent that we have finally begun to appreciate the beauty of their movements. Some new perspectives and discourses that analyze, put to good athletic use, and celebrate athletic achievements (like most of those brought together in this volume) may be but first steps in this very direction – while we have arrived to write about Champions League games with a sophistication that nobody was able to only imagine a quarter century ago and while not only military strategists are discovering sports as a promising and practice-oriented object of study. Here, perhaps, lies the reason for the ever more vehement and less productive storms of protests about different methods of physical enhancement in sports. Granted, trying to preserve the athletes’ body in a state of ideal purity (and thus in grotesque contrast to contemporary everyday life) was the present-at-hand attitude of Coubertin’s age. But can we not imagine a radical change for the better, a change of direction towards a ready-to-hand situation where research and methods towards maximizing the athletes’ performances

could converge with concerns for their health and where, in the long run, the effects of athletic competition could become “ethically” beneficial outside the world of sports. This scenario may seem unlikely (and therefore all too provocative) at this point – but I do not see why it should be considered a vision impossible to reach.

As for sports spectators, the most literally eye-catching development within the past few decades have been stadiums that are fuller than ever before – although we are offered to see and understand endlessly more about any athletic event by the market of TV broadcast. Those sold-out stadiums belong to a larger contemporary desire to be part of gatherings that bring together tens of thousands of human bodies, a desire that also accounts for the so-called “public viewing” events, for open-air masses read by the Pope or for rock concerts on the beach. We can therefore safely assume that stadium crowds are symptoms of the already mentioned new collective longing for rituals, in the function of social frameworks “to hold on to.” Using the oldest self-description of Christianity as “Christ’s mystical body,” I like to refer to the substance of such rituals as (secular) “mystical bodies.” With these words, I want to emphasize that, different from the typical modern concepts of sociability that are exclusively based on shared interests or life conditions (i.e. “society,” “class,” or “club”), and as a counterpoint to individual existence under the burden of constant freedom of choice, such crowds include and emphasize human existence as being a body. This is how they provide us with a sense of concreteness and pertinence, and with that reassuring impression indeed of having “something to hold on to.”

Not unlike sports during its earlier modern history, such “mystical bodies,” under the names of “crowds” or “masses,” have had the worst possible reputation among intellectuals. To automatically associate them with Fascism is one of the milder standard reactions whenever they get mentioned (especially when they get mentioned without the – in some circles redeeming -- adjective of being “proletarian” masses). To argue for a more differentiated view of “mystical



bodies” appears to be an upcoming challenge to which some contemporary philosophers have now begun to react -- among them, within CONCEPTUAL UNDERPINNINGS, QUITE DIFFERENT FROM MINE, the philosopher Judith Butler. IN HER “NOTES TOWARD A PERFORMATIVE THEORY OF ASSEMBLY,” FIRST PUBLISHED IN 2015, BUTLER DEVELOPS HER MUCH DEBATED CRITIQUE OF GENDER STUDIES’ AND CONTINENTAL SOCIOLOGY’S FIXATION ON DESCRIBING COLLECTIVE HUMAN BODIES AS MERE ‘MENTAL CONSTRUCTIONS,’ BY CLAIMING THAT WE HAVE TO TAKE INTO ACCOUNT, FROM A NON-METAPHYSICAL PERSPECTIVE, THEIR PHYSICAL SUBSTANCE AND ITS ARTICULATION IN REAL SPACE, IF WE WANT TO FULLY UNDERSTAND THE POLITICAL ROLES THAT THEY ARE CAPABLE OF PLAYING. Starting to develop an aesthetics of the crowds that occupy stadiums during athletic events could be a productive COMPLEMENTARY step in THE SAME INTELLECGUALLY PRODUCTIVE direction.

Similar to some other organic phenomena and not only on a microscopic scale, mystical bodies in the stadium may adopt different shapes. They can consist, particularly in moments where the flow of athletic events gets interrupted or derailed, of all spectators minus the performing athletes (these are the moments when “the wave,” as a collectively produced form, becomes the symptom of happy boredom); they can split into two antagonist bodies when the players of one team, together with their fans, stand against the players of the other team together with their fans (here, obviously, lies the greatest risk of violence); and there are finally those rare and often sublime instances when all athletes and all spectators in a stadium become one single body, a body whose outer shape molds itself to the stadium’s architectural shape.

It is always possible (much more for traditional low-income fans than for the new-age dwellers of VIP-boxes) that rhythms of collective movement, but also words and songs performed together, give additional internal structures and contours to

crowds as mystical bodies. Being part of a collectively embodied rhythm will lower the individual “tension of consciousness,” to use a concept created by Husserl, of those who stand in the crowd, and it will also reduce to a minimum their individual agency (and if it were only due to the sheer physical impossibility of having full control over one’s own body in such narrow proximity with so many other bodies). Needless to say that “lower tension of consciousness” and “reduced agency” are the two main reasons for the crowds’ (or the mystical bodies’) bad reputation among intellectuals and among other heirs of Enlightenment.

As a counterbalance, I like to invoke the unique intensity of lived experience that being part of a mystical body can facilitate. We certainly know, from many accidents not only in the history of sports, that such intensity always implies a risk of violence. On the other hand, crowds are well capable of producing sublimely moving ethical effects. Towards the end of the German professional soccer season 2014 / 2015, the famously raucous standing-only part of the crowd in the stadium of my favorite team, Borussia Dortmund, remained completely silent during the second half of a home game. Then, ten minutes before the game ended with a 2:0 victory of the home team, close to thirty thousand fans intoned the song “You Never Walk Alone” – to commemorate, honor, and mourn a fan in the crowd who, during halftime, had died of a heart attack. There was no conductor, let alone a “committee” who had decided on this collective action that, at least for a few weeks, changed the tone in which commentators talked and wrote about stadium crowds.

Part of this particular intensity that we sometimes sense even before the actual event begins, may have to do with a normally overlooked (although reiterated) structure of contrast. It is quite remarkable that, for the past two or three decades, stadiums have been returning from the periphery of the cities to more central neighborhoods, to those zones indeed where the real estate prices are particularly high – although they are only being used during very limited time

spans each week. Such locations have the effect of underlining the double contrast between, in the first place, the rush of downtown everyday life and the empty stadium and, in the second place, between the mostly empty stadium and those few hours when it is filled with high-intensity action and its crowd's mystical body. The same motif makes up for the contrast between the field as stage of the game and the empty field before and after the players' warm-ups, during half time, and after the game.

When I think about the allure of the stadium, about my never-ceasing desire to be there and about the unique pleasure that this framework of contrasts never fails to provide for me, I often associate it with another intensity-producing contrast from a different existential dimension. I am referring to the question which, according to Heidegger, is both systematically and historically at the origin of all philosophy as an existential practice, i.e. the question why there is Something (at all) as opposed to Nothing (at all). Due to the reiterated contrast between emptiness and plenitude that belongs to the stadium ritual, we can become part of precisely this question and this condition – by embodying and by being it, without being its representation or living allegory. We certainly do not actively think about this implication while we are part of an athletic event – and why should we? For wanting to represent this ontological contrast, instead of just being it, would certainly weaken the specific intensity it is able to produce in us.

Our description of the historical emergence of aesthetic experience may help to grasp what is specific about being in a stadium. From this perspective, it would indeed appear as yet another case of the oscillation that characterizes aesthetic experience, i.e. of the oscillation between being a physical part of the world and making sense of the world, between being and interpreting as the two elementary modes of our existence. But what's at stake in this intellectual step, what do we (or anybody) gain from describing the stadium experience as a case of aesthetic experience? As I said earlier, I do not believe that we make the experience of sports any better, any more intense, or more socially acceptable by calling it

“aesthetic.” But doing so helps us understand why so many of us find the allure of sports truly and irresistibly fascinating. Both for athletes and spectators, being in a stadium, by giving them back to the physical part of their existence, can become a situation that assigns a concrete place and a grounding to their existence. However unaware stadium spectators may be of this effect, it also often produces an atmosphere of serenity in the crowd, an effect where allure and ethics begin to converge.

Meanwhile and in an even larger context, it seems likely that what Western culture has been calling “aesthetic” since the seventeenth century is becoming less eccentric and autonomous again – if the impression is true that we increasingly manage to re-integrate the body into our self-image. At the same time, more and more instances of aesthetic experience are permeating the everyday (without much “autonomy”), ranging from the technologically facilitated omnipresence of music in our individual lives, via design, fashion, and a new ambition in the production of food, to the world of sports. There is a larger market and a greater supply for aesthetic experience – and for sports in particular – than ever before.

As a consequence, active sports and spectator sports have ceased to occupy a marginal place in our individual existence and in our social environment. On the contrary, almost everywhere sport occupies a central place today, and it is increasingly intertwined, on multiple levels, with politics, with the economy, and with the production of knowledge. Rather than interpreting this picture as a symptom of crisis and trying to push sports back to its formerly eccentric place, we should try to face, to understand, and to react to this new situation. Sometimes we begin to feel and to fear that, due to its new centrality, omnipresence, and perhaps also oversupply, the allure of sports may lose some of its former intensity. An attempt towards resisting this tendency could lie in trying to redraw a new and clearer line of separation between the allure and the ethics of sports. If it is not realistic to assume that politics, business, and

research will refrain from using athletic events and their allure for their own purposes any time soon, all we can do is to emphasize their difference – and to return to organizing and celebrating athletic events as timeouts from the everyday and its ethics. In this context, I find inspiring John Zilcosky's intuition that an active engagement with the ethics of sports as a realm of analysis, distinctions, and transparency, might in the end enhance their allure as the intoxicating, Dionysian, and existentially fulfilling effect of being open towards being a body as the ground of our existence.