

*What other people may find in poetry or art museums,
I find in the flight of a good drive.* ■ ARNOLD PALMER

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Aesthetics

Aesthetics captures a culture's ideas of beauty, proportion, and taste. It fulfills a purpose like politics, the economy, and religion, similarly addressing the social tasks a society must resolve. Vince Lombardi, the legendary coach of the U.S. professional football team, the Green Bay Packers, urged, "Winning is not everything; it is the only thing." Aesthetics appears in the injunction that, "It is not whether you win or lose, but how you play the game."

Eminent philosophers seriously contemplate aesthetic standards. Aristotle (384–322 BCE) is honored for his theories of knowledge and his political philosophy, but his *Poetics* develops his idea of beauty with consummate rigor. Immanuel Kant's (1724–1804) total philosophical system includes guidelines for evaluating knowledge (*Critique of Pure Reason*) and ethics (*Critique of Practical Reason*) but also his theory of aesthetics (*Critique of Judgment*). Standards of the good, proportion, and beauty infuse a culture with ultimate goals— aesthetics. Sport is physical, rule governed, usually an end in itself, and matters deeply to those who compete and watch. The activity is a serviceable medium of a culture's memories through stories, performances of athletes, and rituals surrounding sport.

Sport serves economic, political, and, possibly, religious ends. But in the forms of social memory, sport is most efficient when meeting expectations of a culture's aesthetics. Sport is especially serviceable as a vehicle of

social memory, since it is a common vocabulary for citizens, it evokes attention from all our senses, and the characteristic clear winner rivets our interest within an ordinary world where performances are usually indistinguishable. Identifying the standards of quality in this type of social memory gives sport its potential for maximum importance in carrying its moral load; compromising of aesthetic standards portends loss of this vehicle of cultural memory. Two hundred countries participated in the 2004 Olympics; the outcome for each was heightened when the athletes faithfully embodied the cultures' aesthetic standards.

The Value of Stories

Stories appear exceedingly early in human civilization and are general; hence, they offer efficient entry into what is considered good in a culture. They do this by selection of topics, adequacy in evoking responses of accuracy by audiences, and their serviceability in showing the values of a society—what is prized and what is deplored. A very early sport story occurs in the *Iliad* (approximately eighth century BCE) when Achilles memorializes his fallen friend Patroclus with a round of athletic events, including a chariot race, boxing, wrestling, a footrace, javelin and discus throwing, archery, and sword fighting. Elaborate descriptions of the site, competitors, events, and prizes create an aura of authenticity (verisimilitude). Then, there is a narrative for each event that conveys not only the facts of performance but also the style and quality of conduct in each event.

SPORTS WRITING

For sixty years the best sports stories have been collected for North American sports, with the present series, *The Best American Sports Writing*, occurring since 1991. We know how the editors of the series evaluate sports performance by selection of type of sport, the degree of accuracy in evoking a sense of reality, how they sharply mark off prevailing values of society (intelligence, perseverance, motivation, self-sacrifice, for example) and how they negate bad values such as laziness, deceit, and personal aggrandizement. Cultures

produce, select, and retain stories that encapsulate the values of their peoples. Often the achievements of a team or an individual are foregrounded as heroic, and the basis of the special achievement encapsulates the aesthetic of a culture.

CINEMA

Movies and critical evaluation of the cinema also convey aesthetic ideals of a society. While they may be driven by primarily commercial objectives, the themes occur and remain depending on the tastes of consuming publics. Several recent lists of the “best” suggest the operation of norms of goodness. The electronic version of *Sports Illustrated* listed these as the magazine’s top ten: *Bull Durham* (baseball, 1988), *Rocky* (boxing, 1976), *Raging Bull* (boxing, 1980), *Hoop Dreams* (basketball, 1994), *Slap Shot* (hockey, 1977), *Hoosiers* (basketball, 1986), *Olympia* (Olympic Games, 1936), *Breaking Away* (cycling, 1979), *Chariots of Fire* (1924 Olympics, 1981), and *When We Were Kings* (boxing, 1996). Their listing in 2003 includes within-sport ordering of films in addition to the top-ten aggregate list, as well as a provision of aesthetic standards used in judgment.

The Body in Shape, Attire, and Performance

The rules of sport intend equal chances for competitors and some protection for participants, yet they must establish barriers for physical acumen so that the test creates a challenge that yields differences in success. Despite these factors, periods and sites display variations in the aesthetic features of performance. Artistic gymnastics and figure skating are examples where whole events include express and implied aesthetic criteria of performance. Derogatory comments on performances that technically accord with rules occur in all sports, such as displaying poor manners (one could not remove an article of clothing without penalty in the 1924 Tour de France), insufficient effort, clumsy execution, mean-spirited demeanor, or an inadequately flashy end (“the victory of a moribund,” said Henri Degranges,



Statue of *The Archer* originally located in Dresden, Germany. Source: istockphoto/heizfrosch.

the race director, of Maurice de Waele’s victory in the 1929 Tour de France).

Body proportions and comportment themselves may produce reasons for aesthetic valorization or criticism. The body of the gymnast was of a mature woman through the early 1970s, but with the performance of Nadia Comaneci in the 1976 Olympics, the women’s-gymnastics body was required to conform to new standards. Dress conventions for athletes required to meet the same physical demands of contrived hazard show how standards of aesthetics override demands of the sport itself. While purity was expressed by nudity in the ancient Olympics, dress conventions of participants since that time reflect prevailing national standards. Participation in sports and interest itself may depend on

a minimal preoccupation with the body as a medium of cultural identity and memory. Restrictions on clothing suitable for maximum athletic performance may exist in current cultures (Islamic, for example) that exclude women from performing since they may have to display, inappropriately, anatomical parts.

An athlete's nonathletic identity and orientation may enter into an aesthetic evaluation of the performer's sport proficiency and success. One's sexual orientation, for example, though entirely unrelated to eligibility to perform, quality of effort, and event success, may affect evaluations by other performers, journalists, and spectators.

In the mid-twentieth century, when public views of age- and sex-appropriate activities stereotyped older, married women as unfit for sport, aesthetic evaluations of momentous athletic accomplishments done by mothers could be muted or negative. Francina "Fanny" Blankers-Koen won four gold medals for Holland in the 1948 Games in London (100m and 200m runs, 80m hurdles, and the 4×100m relay). But her initial entry into the Games was strongly criticized by the public and press in her country, because she was married, had borne two children, and was thought too old to compete. (Aesthetic guidelines for tastes are often mutable, of course, as once this athlete had won, her country liberally welcomed her home as a heroine.)

Ritual in Sport

It is difficult to report a sporting contest where no rituals precede and conclude the events and punctuated revered activity. The ancient Olympics included several days of purification of athletes prior to the events, regularized procedures before and after the events, and closing ceremonies. The current Olympic Games set aside massive resources for rituals before and after the official schedule of competitions. Even impromptu sporting contests everywhere in the world include mechanisms of selection of sides, starting the action, and symbolizing venerated performances. Each day of the Tour de France ends with an elaborate ritual of the



Aesthetics

Bill Tilden on Tennis

Tennis is more than just a sport. It's an art, like the ballet. Or like a performance in the theater. When I step on the court I feel like Anna Pavlova. Or like Adelina Patti. Or even like Sarah Bernhardt. I see the footlights in front of me. I hear the whisperings of the audience. I feel an icy shudder. Win or die! Now or never! It's the crisis of my life.

stage winner and leader, wearing the yellow jersey. Softball players at the Olympics elaborately queue at the end of a game to shake hands respectfully with each of the opposing team's players.

Deviations from aesthetic standards yield strong censure among governing bodies and audiences. Tommie Smith and John Carlos won, respectively, gold and bronze medals in the 200m race in Mexico City in 1968. On the medal stand they displayed civil-rights badges (as did the silver medalist, Peter Norman of Australia). Smith and Carlos made the "black-power salute" with gloved fists during the playing of the U.S. national anthem. Their breach of ritual form infuriated the International Olympic Committee, which demanded the United States Olympic Committee send them home and banish them from further competition.

The Dark Side of Aesthetic Standards

Aesthetics defines the good in athletic memory, as found in stories, performances, and collective rituals. Defining the good marks off, in turn, the less valued aspects of sport for social valuation. These can be compromised by other forces such as economics and cheating, and the aesthetic ends of sport can vanish when a sport is expunged from a culture. Three instances show aesthetic standards warped, compromised, or lost altogether. They illustrate a certain dark side of these evaluations and prompt social vigilance in retaining aesthetic standards for sport in its role in storing venerated cultural memories.

A retro sign for a bowling alley, showing pins and a ball. The sign is illuminated with neon at night.

Source: istockphoto/Acerebel.

DEVALUATION BY EXCLUSION

First, aesthetic standards that valorize groups and performances in stories, bodily ideals, and ritual celebrations may intentionally or by inattention devalue other groups and performances. The culture's aesthetics, that is, may compromise other central social values such as equality and social justice—on the face not different from the “level playing field” component of sports at their core. The widely praised anthologies of sports writing examine each year thousands of potential stories. The inclusion, though, is of male sports endeavors. In the sample of fifty-nine entries in *The Best American Sports Writing of the Century*, there is no entry about a women's-sport performance. Among the twenty-five entries in *The Best American Sports Writing* of 2003, one focuses on a woman. The *Sports Illustrated* list of best films includes women participants only in *Olympia*. The sport television station, ESPN, extends its list to twenty films, and an investigator has to search through the continuation list to number 22 to find a film about women in sports (*A League of Their Own* records women's baseball played during World War II). There has been movement of female visibility in sport at secondary, collegiate, and international levels throughout the West and much of the East over the last decade. The virtual absence of valorized stories about women in sport shows a disturbing corner of omission of social valuation concerning women.

COMPROMISED STANDARDS

Second, have structural factors of increased volume and diversity of labor, advanced technology, and economic capital created an aura of compromised performance norms for elite athletes in international events? Rigid guidelines existed for competitors in the ancient Olympics for correct conduct before, during, and after the events. Rule violation in competition resulted in



disqualification and public condemnation and could elicit flogging. While there were material rewards given at the early sport event at Patroclus's funeral and many of the early Greek minor-games sites, there was not at the main games—the “crown” games at Nemea, Isthmae, Delphi, and Olympia. The award to the winner denoted the supreme physical and aesthetic characteristics of *arete*. The victor embodied the credential, which “includes the concepts of excellence, goodness, valor, nobility, and virtue . . .” (Miller 2004, 242).

The valorization of *arete* in the early Olympic cycle when contrasted with the preoccupation of testing for drugs and exclusion of participation has to give warning that the very idea of an aesthetic standard within international sports is diminishing. By the end of the 2004 Olympic Games, twenty-four athletes, the most in any Games, had been cited for drug violations. The Tour de France is considered by event organizers and

huge sectors of the French population as a cultural treasure. But since the notorious drug scandal in the 1998 race, which led to half of the competitors being forced out through some association with the drug arrests, the specter of drugs has continued to compromise the aesthetic integrity of the event through the last occurrence in the summer of 2004.

ROLE OF SPORT IN CULTURAL INTEGRITY

A third example comes from a district of Sudan where sport and a rigid cultural aesthetic carried by sport have been all but obliterated, with consequences for the integrity of the people. The Republic of the Sudan achieved independence from the United Kingdom in 1956. A military Islamist government has ruled since 1989, with continuous resistance from Christian groups and peoples with native religious beliefs. This conflict is being brokered in Kenya just now, with an apparent armistice between the government and the non-Islamist groups. But recently, Islamist rebels in the Southwest have violently attacked black groups and Christians, with the apparent acquiescence of the government in Khartoum.

The Nuba are a black population living in the Nuban Mountains, a remote area within the Kardofan district in central Sudan. Traditionally they had lived in an uneasy peace with the Arab groups to the north and west. But during the recent rebellion, comprising Nilotic groups to the south and east, both sides conscripted Nuba into their armies. One estimate is that as many as 40 percent of the military of the ruling Muslim/military government [National Congress Party (NCP), formerly the National Islamic Front] are Nuba. The opposition Christian group in the south, the Sudanese People's Liberation Party, have conscripted Nuba males and children as well.

S. F. Nadel, an anthropologist, was commissioned to study the Nuba in 1938. Following World War II, George Rodger, a Western photographer, began a journey across Africa seeking a certain humane purity, after his photographic work during the world conflict. He located the Nuba and in February and March 1949 cap-

tured vestiges of their disappearing life, including wrestling, in a series of photographs. Leni Reifenstahl, having encountered imprisonment and censure for her involvement with Nazi Germany, saw Rodger's work and sought to locate the Nuba in the 1960s. Between 1962 and 1969, she spent time among these tribes and produced her famous photographic volume, *The Last of the Nuba*.

In Nadel's commentary on wrestling in his study, and other forms of ritualized combat such as stick fighting, the sports assume an important role within the order and pace of the society. Wrestling in both Rodger's and Reifenstahl's recording occurs after the harvest season in the late fall and may continue through the spring. The sport of wrestling among the Nuba contains relatively noncomplicated rules for victory—simply throwing the other to the ground. But the ritual and meaning define age relations and relations among the sexes and mediate violence among subgroups of Nuba. The aesthetics of the sport, that is, are central to the integrity and social existence of this group. During the last ten years, wrestling has been prohibited. Nuba men have been conscripted into warring factions in the tragic conflict in the Sudan. The centrality of sport, as practiced within durable norms of form and proportion, is ending. Its loss for the Nuba signals diminution of the core of this people's civilization.

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See also Art; Beauty

Further Reading

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