

Sport, Performance and Constructing Identity – Review Article

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Rinehart, Robert E., *Players All: Performances in Contemporary Sport*, Drama and Performance Studies Series, ed. by Timothy Wiles (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), pp.188 + xiii. ISBN (alk. paper) 0-253-33426-8 (pbk.: alk. paper) 0-253-21223-5. *No price.*

In his recent *Players All: Performances in Contemporary Sport*, Robert E. Rinehart — a lecturer in the Department of Kinesiology and Physical Education at the California State University in San Bernadino — argues strongly in favour of the use of an avant-garde metaphor for sport in its analysis as a cultural product. The study focuses tightly upon the notion that sport was once, weather played in front of an audience or not, a test of strength, skill and courage; contrasting that imagery with arguments that today's sporting events have lost such meaning and become something more akin to audience geared spectacles within which the athletes serve perhaps only a secondary function to the broader nature of the sport-performance. Rinehart proposes the use of an avant-garde metaphor for sport studies. In this process the text moves towards assimilating the current sport-as-drama metaphor into a metaphorical avant-garde framework not dissimilar to currently employed rubric for the analysis of non-narrative art.

Despite Rinehart's primary reliance on sports that might be considered as 'marginal' within Australian society — such as *The American Gladiators* (pp.41-54), American Football (pp.69-83), and paintball (pp.84-97), — this text and the theories proposed within it must hold special interest to Australian social critics as sport is often broadcast on Australian television more than current affairs, information, children's programmes or news (Australian Broadcasting Tribunal, *Annual Report 1980-81* (Canberra: AGPS, 1981), p.67).

Rinehart frames such case studies with both an impressive discussion titled 'Sport as Performance: Setting the Stage' and an insightful foreword which explores the sporting philosophy of the late (Baron) Pierre de Coubertin. Within that framing device the tone of the work is set quite sternly by Rinehart stating that:

Ideologically, to nations of people, the idea of Pierre de Coubertin's "triumph" still matters, but pragmatically, from sport entrepreneurs, it

is difficult to imagine a more rampant cynicism. And people know it.
(p.xii)

Rinehart further identifies participants ranging from hot dog vendors to spectators, and from sport scholars to the athletes — as the ‘players’, perhaps in the theatrical sense of the word — within this singular sporting social discourse. (p.xiii.)

This initial discourse constructs a theoretical framework, which strengthens the arguments presented throughout the case studies, and provides the reader with a solid platform from which to explore the work. The text however does make the assumption that its readers are familiar with the theoretical heritage of, and modern debate regarding, theories of interpretative research in anthropology, sociology and cultural studies.

Rinehart’s basic premise that audiences have become an essential element of sporting presentations is a sound assumption and has been accepted by modern critics for some years. In 1995 John Bale convincingly argued the case for Cricket to be viewed in such a manner, within the well respected text *The Theatre of Sport*, suggesting that ‘Cricket had become theatre: two teams were not enough, the spectators became a *necessary* part of the activity’ (John Bale, ‘Cricket’, in *The Theatre of Sport*, ed. by Karl B. Raitz (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p.85), by the early nineteenth century. The swiftly developing technologies of recent decades have aided this process for many other sports. When we examine the theatrical nature of modern sports we simply need to consider: the extensive and ever present debate over television, both free to air and cable, sports broadcasting rights; the focus of radio coverage of sports such as horse racing, and the growing market for internet sports commentary and live broadcasts. Furthermore, highlighting the important position that such theatrical media presentations of sport hold within modern society is the fact that the longest running programme in the history of broadcasting is *Hockey Night in Canada*.

As Rinehart recognised, the Fox Network has recently even prompted radical advances in the development ice hockey as an audience centred theatrical spectacle, as opposed to a player centred sport (p.8). Fox inspired the use of a new computerised puck (, or ‘ball’), that produces coloured lights for the singular purpose of making viewing easier for television audiences. To borrow a quote used by Rinehart when stressing the significance of this change, Kevin Maney of *USA Today* recently explained this use of new technologies as an attempt to:

‘ get better ratings [, as...] Fox and the NHL believe[d] that one barrier to hockey’s popularity [... was] that [... it was] hard to see the fast-

moving, little black puck on a TV screen. The compu-puck lets computers track the puck and then lay graphics on top of it. Fox will experiment with making the puck into a glowing blue ball and a blue hoop. It will also give the puck a comet tail that changes colours depending on how fast the puck is moving.' (p.8)

As a long-time player of that sport the present writer would argue that the puck is actually relatively easy to keep track of for those who are playing the game at the time.

The fourth chapter of Rinehart's text, 'Sport as Avant-Garde: A case study of the World Wrestling Foundation' (pp.55-68), further explores the role of the modern audience, examining features suggestive of the Avant-Garde. The reader is reminded constantly within the chapter that 'televised sports are no longer strict reportings of a game or sporting event; rather, they are framed to tell a story, to provide a classic rise and fall of action, to create tension' (p.59), and of course to provide entertainment. In that way the presentation is driven through audience desires and response through necessity. Dramatic lead ins to 'big bouts', commercial breaks timed at crucial points in order to raise suspense levels and the creation of both heroes and anti-heroes or villains all contribute to the process and become important parts of the sport presentation for television audiences.

The idea that strategies such as these have allowed for the creation of modern 'super-heroes' such as Hulk Hogan is argued as well, perhaps reminding readers of the mass-marketing of products including action figures, posters and video re-runs of major wrestling performances by such personas in recent years. We are also reminded of the stereotypical nature of the imagery employed by professional wrestling promoters and broadcasters in developing marketing their products. The most notable examples of such stereotypes would include events such as the 'Match made in Hell' – which drew on patriotic sentiments created by operation 'Dessert Storm' – featuring opponents such as Col. Mustafa and the 'all-American' Hulk Hogan, or a bout between the Mountie and Big Boss Man which included the unusual tenet that the looser was to spend a night in jail.

Within the chapter Rinehart also explores notions of audience involvement at an at-the-venue level, labelling professional wrestling as 'self-conscious "sports entertainment" which allows spectatorial participation, much as avant-garde art allowed spectator involvement and apprehension' (p.66). The argument is extended by drawing upon similarities in fan/player relationships within perhaps more widely accepted sports such as ice hockey, noting that at professional and semi-professional ice hockey matches fans are almost expected to assist in the building of atmosphere, by participating through interaction with each

other and indirectly with the players. Rinehart states that at such ice hockey matches fans 'gesticulate, yell obscenities, and generally behave quite differently'.

Performance aspects within professional wrestling are also considered yet perhaps not as thoroughly as other themes within the chapter. While noting that the professional wrestler is required to make broader strokes and more theatrical gestures than his mainstream counterpart Rinehart does not fully explore the issue in the broader context of the inherent theatricality of such sports performances (p.67) – a context to which such actions obviously belong. In raising these issues however Rinehart does present the reader with sound materials from which to launch into a deeper exploration of the topic.

Technological developments in broadcasting also feature as a significant factor in the advancement of modern sport generally, and professional wrestling specifically, as an audience based performance medium within Rinehart's arguments. He claims that professional wrestlers have 'been innovators for televised sport, not only providing athletes with models of how to create audience, but also providing directors with new visions for presentation' (p.67). His discussions of innovations in the broadcasting of professional wrestling point to both the later development of the now well known *NFL Media Relations Playbook* and the growth of regional markets which has created profitable enterprises for regional wrestlers, directors and savvy promoters as results of the success that professional wrestling has achieved through those techniques.

In his chapter 'Sport as Postmodern Tourism: Warp Speed in Barcelona (Olympism, Ideology, and Experience)' (pp111-138) Rinehart explores the way that new technologies in the fields of broadcasting have facilitated the development of sports tourism and the development of regional identities being manipulated through the dissemination of cultural images and information during broadcast sporting performances. Rinehart argues throughout the chapter that such examples of 'sports tourism' should be viewed within the rubric of 'tourism of desire' as suggested by Edward Bruner within his article 'Of Cannibals, Tourists, and Ethnographers' (*Cultural Anthropology*, 4 (1989), p.440). The chapter draws upon Rinehart's experiences as a tourist and spectator at the 1992 Summer Olympics in Barcelona, Spain, allowing him to explore the role of storyteller as he recounts his tourist experience (pp.118ff).

Rinehart's analysis of the modern, broadcast centred Olympic movement, presents an interesting ethnological debate that explores the relationship between nationalistic sentiments and notions of international goodwill. Obviously those forces thrive within such an environment, creating an intriguing juxtaposition of otherwise seemingly opposed ideologies. The text analyses theories of the Olympic host nation being

placed in the role of 'creating' an idealised view of their culture controlled by pre-planned displays and organised settings, with which to 'sell' their nation to the world. In some ways such displays must be considered as a cousin to the more elaborate process of folklorismus. This in turn is balanced with the presentation of the 'global village' ideal of the worlds elite athletes marching in unison at opening and closing ceremonies. Notably a fascinating derivation from this structure occurs during years within which some nations choose to boycott the Olympic Games due to political grievances with the host nation.

Furthermore Rinehart also clearly displayed that participating, as a live spectator at Olympic sporting performances is becoming a tourist experience only available to members of more affluent socio-economic groups. Rinehart presents clear and succinct evidence in support of this point, recounting details about the accommodation costs associated the Atlanta Games. The Atlanta Olympic Games Committee's 1996 Olympic Games Travel Network reported that the cost for a family of four's accommodation over six days during the Olympic Games period, some 80 to 140 miles from Atlanta itself, was approximately US\$2,390 (p.11). Substantial daily commuting costs would need to be added to that figure due to the large distance between the accommodation and the actual sporting events.

The restrictive nature of this socio-economic factor would further add to the artificiality of broadcasted portrayals of the host nation's culture. Perhaps most significantly, it presents a means for the host nation to be portrayed as being much more affluent than may be the case. Media crews covering the opening and closing ceremonies will in the main part be presented with crowds who are comprised of members of the middle or upper classes. Hence a large section of the population would be excluded from being portrayed within media based visual representations of the events.

The presence of advertising and corporate sponsorship within Olympic performances also takes a key role within Rinehart's debate. The text explores the ways in which 'Cobi the pooch' – the mascot of the Barcelona Olympic Games – was developed and then used extensively during the Olympics as an advertising tool, noting that 'visitors to Barcelona need[ed] only travel a few hundred feet from the airport to be bombarded with Cobi billboards – Cobi drinking a Coke, Cobi wearing Ray-Ban sunglasses, Cobi pecking at a Brother typewriter, [even] Cobi drinking a Damm beer'(p.137). Within the larger framework of the modern Olympics mascots have come to symbolise each Olympic Games in very real and long lasting ways. Corporate sponsorship that influences portrayals of Olympic mascots is also a very strong factor in influencing people's perceptions about the Olympics and what it means to participate within them. In some ways this process allows for the

manipulation of perceptions of the Olympic movement as a cultural object through the images presented due to such large scale corporate sponsorship.

Such debate – concerned with the Olympic sporting movement and broadcasts of its events – is an appropriate conclusion to a text that began by discussing the notion that sport has veered from Pierre de Coubertin's ideology. The other lasting impression from Rinehart's concluding material comes from his comments suggesting that modern sports performances manipulate a myriad of factors such as these, then present the viewer with a seamless display of sport interwoven with corporate advertising, identity creation and re-creation and ratings-generated gimmicks — such as the Fox Network's glowing blue ice hockey puck — in a seamless 'series of "Been There, Done That" T-shirts, masterfully woven into the fabric of contemporary life' (p.138).

Notably, as Rinehart acknowledges, many sections of the text have previously appeared within academic journals and then been re-worked for this publication. The second chapter of the book appeared within the *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 13 (1996), pp.159-175 as 'Dropping Hierarchies: Toward the Study of a Contemporary Sporting Avant-Garde'; chapter three within the *Journal of Popular Culture*, 28 (1994), pp.25-35 as 'Sport as Kitsch: A Case Study of *The American Gladiators*'; chapter six within *Cultural Studies: A Research Annual*, 1 (1996), pp.241-255 as 'The Emergence of Contemporary Sport Forms: Paintball'; and, chapter eight within *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*, 16 (1994), pp.123-159 as 'Warp Speed in Barcelona: Olympism, Ideology, and Experience'.

In sum, while *Players All: Performances in Contemporary Sport* is largely a collection of Rinehart's previous work it presents a penetrating discourse that analyses the social structures surrounding contemporary sport with an informed and detailed approach. The text presents a central thesis that the athlete is essentially an entertainer, and that the sporting 'stage' extends past the oval, track or, to include the areas that commentators, cameramen, and officials participate within, applying the argument to both 'new' sports such as paintball and more 'traditional' sporting events such as the Olympic Games.

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[Rinehart is furthering his research in this area with his follow up project, a joint work with S. Pope, titled the *Encyclopaedia of Extreme Sports* (ISBN: 1576072282) – a text which is expected to be published on 1st April 2002 and which shall be priced at \$75US according to www.Amazon.com.]

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