In the Zone: Sport as Performance

The thrill of being there . . .

“It is”, as they say, “never the same unless you're there at the game”. Or is it? And what of the discourse of the zone pervading sport. The zone is a state of heightened and yet, simultaneously, diffuse intensity: a loss of self in an unfolding, performative total being; a collective, intercoporeal assemblage drawing together not only team-mates and competitors, but spectators too--those there, at the game, and those leaping off their couches as their team threads one through the big sticks.

Why is there not a Performance Studies literature taking up these kinds of questions?

Jon McKenzie argued in Perform or Else (2001), that the discipline of Performance Studies has more or less completely overlooked the pervasive use of an idea about performance in the field of business and management. The increasing managerialising of the Higher Education sector makes this omission all the more troubling: imbricated as we are in institutionalised discourses about performance management, research performance, key performance indicators and the like, it would seem that there indeed may be some mileage in turning the insights of Performance Studies to this field, if only to offset the subtle edging out of human agency, in favour of a bland 'systems-speak' of passive constructions and dehumanised flow-charts.

No less puzzling is the discipline's failure to engage systematically and imaginatively with sport. Sports journalism, sports training, sports medicine, everyday talk about sport is constructed around the paradigm of performance. Individuals perform, teams perform, bodies--most often construed as musculatures--engaged in a struggle with a psyche--perform. Sporting events are readily understood as species of theatre or spectacle; sports journalists eagerly indulge dramaturgical metaphors and folk versions of actantial and narratological theories to explain the allure and excitement of sporting events.

And yet . . . google “biomechanics” and you are more likely to get an analysis of Muttiah Muralitharan's suspect bowling action than you are to find Meyerhold's etudes. Look up "Sport" in the index to Richard Schechner's 2002 overview of the discipline, and see 11 page references--when you turn to those pages, witness any actual reflection upon or consideration of sport itself evaporate in front of your eyes.

We invite proposals for a panel taking up the rubric of sport as/and performance. Such a project could embrace the totality of the theoretical and methodological resources of Performance Studies, from performance analysis to rehearsal studies; from ritual and play theory to reception theory; from phenomenology to sociology.
If there is sufficient interest, we will circulate contributions and a discussion paper prior to the conference, in order to stimulate a panel canvassing the potential for Performance Studies to contribute to our understandings of what must stand as one of the most global of global phenomena.

Contact Ian Maxwell Ian.Maxwell@arts.usyd.edu.au