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The Re-enchantment of the World: The Relationship Between Sport and Aesthetics Illustrated by Two Classic Cycling Films

Ask Vest Christiansen

This article invites historians to reconsider the nature of sport, which is here defined as essentially aesthetic. The sporting aesthetic, however, is a by-product of competition as athletes struggle to outperform their rivals and to overcome their own limitations. It is argued here that these aesthetic qualities have been captured in two documentaries by the Danish film-maker Jørgen Leth – Stars and Water Carriers (1974) and A Sunday in Hell (1976) covering the 1973 Giro d'Italia and the 1976 Paris-Roubaix cycle races respectively. Leth's films effectively challenged contemporary Marxist views that sport was simply a banal distraction or a means of legitimizing the capitalist system. Their power, it is suggested, lies in their depiction of grand, heroic themes that echo classical myth and legend. Indeed, sport's enduring popularity may reside in its capacity to offer a glimpse of an mythological universe that has been marginalized by modernity.

It seems to be a common opinion that sport is not quite what it used to be. Since the doping scandal of the Tour de France in 1998 and the war on drugs that has followed, both traditional critics and governing bodies have voiced concerns about sport being in crisis. This feeling is probably due to the fact that certain ideals associated with sport, such as sportsmanship, fair play and exemplary behaviour, have been mistaken for sport itself.

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If this is the case, then this 'crisis' could be understood as a fundamental uncertainty about what actually constitutes the basis of sport. What is sport and how might it best be understood? In seeking an answer to these questions I will first introduce a distinction between the 'essence of sport' and the 'spirit of sport'. Thereafter I will argue that sport might be best understood if it is recognized that aesthetics forms its basis. This argument is carried through via an analysis of two sports films from the 1970s by Danish director Jørgen Leth.

I recognize that this approach might be different from that of many sports historians, since the primary sources used in this paper will not be analysed in order to better understand the past but rather to contribute to our comprehension of the present. Furthermore, when films are analysed as historical documents it is often for their ideological significance. This will only partly be the case here. Leth's films will, as a first step, be discussed in relation to the historical context in which they were made – certainly a time rich with ideology – but the wider objective is to let the analysis of the films function as a vehicle for enhancing our understanding of the nature of sport. For historians the primary benefit of this exercise is that the nature of sport is redefined in a way that is applicable to both contemporary and historical contexts.

Sport

When using the notion 'sport' in this paper I refer to competitive sport where athletes first and foremost strive for victory. I thus deliberately disregard versions of sport and games that are undertaken primarily for educational, recreational, social or health-related purposes. However, an often-used rhetorical trick when sport is praised in after-dinner speeches, for example, is to (more or less deliberately) confuse these two levels of sport. The language used and the norms, virtues and values referred to on such occasions are taken from educational, recreational, social or health-related sport and then applied uncritically to competitive sport. By this device competitive sport is able to buy into positive values more evident in other sectors. The assimilation that this implies, however, is based on false premises.

This can be seen when distinguishing between the concepts of 'the spirit of sport' and 'the essence of sport', as outlined by Danish sports scholar Verner Møller. [1] *The spirit of sport* is here understood as an expression of the ideals that have been ascribed to sport from outside. These constitute conventional ideas of what sport should be and what purpose it should serve. Sport in this sense is of the kind often associated with the 'English

gentleman' or 'the good sport'. Virtues such as courage, honesty, leadership, loyalty, camaraderie and joint responsibility are emphasized. For more than a century philanthropists, teachers of physical education and representatives of sports federations, in England as well as in the rest of north-western Europe, have been telling us that these virtues are the cornerstones of what constitutes sport. Both the meaning and the value of sport have thus been externally founded primarily in moral and social concepts, so that it has come to represent what is good.

This has proved advantageous to sport by rendering it worthy of support from patrons, governments and other sponsors who have seen it as part of a general educational project in which the ideals of modest behaviour in victory and magnanimity in defeat are embedded. However, the spirit of sport contains an inbuilt ambivalence as it encourages athletes to perform at their best but finds the too ambitious 'will to victory' reprehensible. Thus the spirit of sport does not contain the key to an understanding of what motivates athletes in their efforts to fulfil their ambitions. Mistaking the spirit of sport for sport itself is therefore unhelpful if one wants to understand sport and the problems dominating it today.

Instead, it would be more productive to look at the *essence of sport*, which attempts to explain sport in its own terms and for itself. Here sport finds its most famous expression in the Olympic motto *citius, altius, fortius* ('faster, higher, stronger'), ideals that make it appear anything but temperate and moderate. According to the founder of the modern Olympics, the Frenchman Pierre de Coubertin, sport needed 'freedom of excess'. That was 'its essence, its reason for being, the secret of its moral value'. [2] To de Coubertin sport was an arena for excess. Hence, it did not represent moral good, even though it might promote it incidentally. It was rather to be viewed as a '*voluntary and habitual practice of intense muscular exercise based on a desire for progress and extending as far as risk*'. [3] He connected sport with drama and aesthetics and defined it by reference to five characteristics that he considered essential: 'initiative, perseverance, intensity, search for perfection, and scorn for potential danger'. [4] De Coubertin's emphasis on these defining elements helps to explain why we describe sporting events as dramatic and the performance of famous footballers as creative and sublime, using words more often associated with other artistic and aesthetic activities. [5] This suggests that sport belongs to the sphere of beauty rather than the sphere of virtue.

Sport and beauty

This relationship has been emphasized by Hans Keller, a musician who has also written extensively about sport. He goes so far as to suggest that beauty is inherent in sport to a far greater degree than in art. For Keller, sport is concerned with beauty, art with communication:

Sport, on the other hand, has essentially nothing to do with communication – which may be incidental to sport, as beauty is incidental to art. But whatever its motives, it depends for its existence on our aesthetic appreciation of it, whether we watch it, practise it, or both. If we did not find sport beautiful we would not be involved in it. So the conclusion we may reach with regard to the question of the relationship of beauty and sport from the aesthetic point of view is paradoxical. We may say that sport is more artistic than art, more artistic, that is to say, in the sense in which we wrongly describe art, in the sense of beauty. Sport depends on beauty, art does not. There are certain aspects of the art of music, for example, such as virtuoso performances on the part of an instrumental or vocal interpreter, which in themselves do not have very much substance or do not communicate very much. When we encounter such a performance, if we are musicians, we may tend to say this is merely sport, because it merely has its own beauty – that of the virtuoso performance which is not at the service of communication. This is why, whereas sport is inevitably beautiful, art is only incidentally so. [6]

Keller may present his point of view rather bluntly by saying that sport ‘has essentially nothing to do with communication’, but the main point in his argument is that sport is inextricably linked with beauty no matter what external meanings might be imposed on it. At the same time some form of communication is necessary in order for us to ‘*find* sport beautiful’. Naturally, there will be communication between athletes – and between athletes and spectators – in any competitive situation. The point is, however, that sport is not created or driven in order to promote good or to deliver a particular message but is in its very nature aesthetic.

Obviously this does not mean that its purpose is the production of aesthetic quality. If this was the case dancing, figure skating and synchronized swimming would be paradigmatic sports activities as opposed to, for example, the high jump, football or cycling. Competition and the quest for victory remain the ultimate purpose of sport. The aesthetics are subordinate to the efforts to win but arise as a consequence thereof.

In this paper I wish to investigate Keller’s assertion that aesthetics is the nature of sport. I will do this by considering two feature films about cycle

racing – *Stars and Water Carriers* (1974) and *A Sunday in Hell* (1976), both by Danish director Jørgen Leth. [7] The premise is that these films contain a range of aesthetic qualities. I hope to demonstrate that these qualities are not present simply as a result of the cinematic techniques preferred by the director and production company but because the films highlight some *essential details* inherent to sport. Thus, my thesis is that the aesthetics of these films are not only derived from the means of communication but also from the subject communicated. My choice of these two films is not accidental. Firstly, they are made using a simple documentary style rather than relying on cinematic techniques and special effects. Secondly, due to the documentary style, there is no external plot imposed on the sporting action depicted which might otherwise complicate the analysis. Thirdly, the films communicate the experience of the sport without vulgarizing the aesthetic elements by making them over-significant, as is so often the case. The fourth and last reason is that the films concentrate on elite performance and are thus concerned with an important part of our fascination with sport: the athlete's will to excel and to maximize personal achievement. Both films focus clearly and directly on the sporting activity itself. Thus they function as examples of how the aesthetics of sport can be revealed through film.

Jørgen Leth's documentary style

Jørgen Leth (born 1937) has been involved in a variety of artistic activities. He has written newspaper reviews, poetry, books and music. He worked as a commentator for Danish TV's Tour de France coverage from 1988 to 2005, and is considered a leading figure in the development of experimental documentary film making. [8] His most acclaimed work is the short film *The Perfect Human* (1967) which was recently featured in *The Five Obstructions* (2003) by Lars von Trier. [9]

In his films, Leth's own commentary forms a basic element, both as authoritative interpreter of the pictures and as poetic basis to establish atmosphere. This also applies to the cycling films. Thus they are not just a presentation of a cycle race but a presentation of the *experience* of a cycle race. Similarly the documentary style of the cycling films is not quite what it seems as it is based on strict editing and verbal interpretation of the factual pictures. The narrator of the story is all-knowing. He knows the race, its development and end, and he has thought about the events.

Leth's approach to the sport is an entirely personal mixture of factuality and ecstasy – or an ecstatic factuality – which shapes the commentary and makes the films different from other sports films. He is a spellbound

aficionado, watching a drama where human qualities and abilities are ritually refined, at the same time as supplying solid reporting in a low and almost monotonous voice. As such, he is not a fan of the riders in the traditional meaning of the word. He is instead a fan of – and hence searching for – beauty. His choice of sport as subject matter in this search is, he explains, due to the fact that its ‘encyclopaedia of competition gives us a joyous sensation of breaking limits and enables us to understand the greatness of an inspired performance, which is transient by nature. It enables us to appreciate the effort of sacrifice, suffering, imagination and courage.’ [10] That is why Leth is more interested in the stars than the water carriers, in the outstanding individuals rather than the anonymous crowd behind them. They are the ones through whom we can experience the sublime – the ones who, through the strategic application of their strength and their professional knowledge, are the creators of races. Leth’s approach to sport is thus neither objective nor neutral, but rather characterized by a feeling of being familiar with sport in general and the sport of cycling in particular. This feeling is the point of departure of his films.

However, although Leth’s cycling films are acclaimed today, they were much criticized when they first appeared. In order to understand them it is therefore necessary first to look at the political and ideological climate in which they were made.

Sports criticism

In 1974, when *Stars and Water Carriers* appeared, it was not *comme il faut* among left-wing intellectuals to show any fascination with or enthusiasm for sport. It was considered banal, but it was also seen as a means of legitimating the capitalist system and hence oppressive. Thus they viewed sport as a reactionary business, just as noxious as the bourgeois culture from which it emanated. Sport was seen as a consequence of capitalism’s need to impose discipline and its wish to control the body and the world through technology. Similarly, the separation of sport into different disciplines was seen as a way of breaking up human physical activity in a manner similar to the way in which that capitalists separated work processes in order to maximize their exploitation of workers. Elite sport in particular was therefore criticized for its lack of ‘political consciousness’ and its reproduction of the alienating power structures of capitalist society. [11]

It was in this ideological climate that Leth made his films about cycling. The idea that anyone should find elite sport interesting raised suspicions

and was regarded by some intellectuals as provocative. Leth, however, defied the left-wing critics of sport by making a film that openly expressed his fascination with the subject and his fascination with elite athletes. Given the prevailing sports-critical ethos of the time it was hardly surprising that *Stars and Water Carriers*, the first of the two cycling films, appeared to a mixed reception. A few reviews were enthusiastic, but many wondered how it was that Leth, contrary to the revolutionary spirit of the time, could take an interest in the masculine sport of cycling and moreover produce a 93-minute-film on the subject. One hostile reviewer suggested flippantly that 'it would have been much more fun if the participants in the race had been on foot, pushing prams and their contents in front of them'. [12] Others took a more serious stance and castigated Leth for his uncritical fascination with sport and his promotion of individualism to the detriment of collective values. The admiration of sports heroes in itself was unpopular because it was seen as preventing people from seeing 'the truth' of the matter. It was a hindrance to criticism. Thus another review of *Stars and Water Carriers* suggested that 'just as [Leth's] cinematic techniques are docile, there is also no actual criticism in his attitude to the events during the film'. The clear implication was that there should have been, when dealing artistically with such a decadent subject as sport. [13]

Despite criticism from those with a more politically informed view of aesthetics, the film was praised for its artistic and cinematic qualities. This is important when considering *A Sunday in Hell*, which was generally more favourably received. It is, however, necessary to be aware of two aspects of the film that made it acceptable to aesthetes who were critical of sport and which may have had an impact on the reception of the film. Firstly, it includes towards the start a demonstration by locked-out typographers from the sponsoring newspaper *Le Parisien Libéré*, who stopped the race twice in protest against job cuts. And while some of the workers seize the opportunity to get autographs from their heroes, others lecture the professional actors on their bicycles on how they too are oppressed by the monopolies, just like the typographers. Secondly, a *domestique*, a helper with an otherwise unrewarding and difficult role, takes the victory after his team captain and 'master' has crashed. The suspicion that such unforeseen events probably helped frame the media's reception of *A Sunday in Hell* is strengthened when one realizes that critics of the time, such as Denmark's Oluf Gandrup, were emphasizing that films should be relevant in such a way that they 'can or could be able to help society in the direction of socialism'. [14] Aesthetics thus needed to be politicized as a revolutionary counter-reaction against capitalist society.

[15] With such views being common currency in 1970s intellectual and artistic circles, it is not without importance that it is the 'little guy' who is victorious in Leth's *A Sunday in Hell*, or that the riders are stopped by typographers lecturing them on the exploitation of workers by big business.

The fact that this film was well received by the critics thus may be seen as the result of mitigating circumstances which form a basis for a convergence between competing views of art. What is encountered here is what Pierre Bourdieu calls 'the Doxa Paradox'. [16] *Doxa* means opinion or knowledge, but it is a knowledge that, contrary to *logos*, is not scientifically justified. It is the kind of knowledge about right and wrong, normal and abnormal, qualification and disqualification that everybody has, but which cannot necessarily be made explicit. *Doxa* represents those facts that are considered so natural that there is no need to discuss them. It is, in other words, a knowledge that exists as a given in a culture, in 'a field' in Bourdieu's terminology, and for the agents in such a field. It is a characteristic of the field of art and art criticism that a fight about *doxa* is played out between the established agents in the field and the newcomers, in this instance between politically informed aesthetics and Leth's aesthetics. According to Bourdieu, the newcomers in a field always represent a certain amount of *heterodoxy* while the dominant agents primarily represent the *doxa*. The heresy of the newcomers forces the established agents to break their silence and let *doxa* take the form of *orthodoxy*, a defensive monopoly-maintaining discourse, which ensures that conventional ideas which predate the arrival of the newcomers are upheld. The fight between *heterodoxy* and *orthodoxy* leads to a range of competing *doxas*, or *paradoxes*, before a new consensual *doxa* can finally be established. In the case of *A Sunday in Hell*, coincidence solves Leth's struggle, as the locked-out typographers and the victory of the *domestique* fall within the *doxa* of the critics, thus opening up the possibility of acknowledging Leth within the field.

Stars and Water Carriers

Leth's intense focus on the sport of cycling is an expression of his interest in the epic and the fact that the stories are already present in the races. There is no need to make them up. The aesthetic qualities, therefore, do not have to be produced; they are already there in the shape of the actual narrative created by each race and the frame of history that surrounds it and its participants. The race contains more than what meets the eye:

Figure 1 Danish Team Bianchi rider Ole Ritter struggles up a mountain during the Tour of Italy in 1973.

Source: *Stars and Water Carriers*. Copyright: Nordisk Film Production A/S. Photo courtesy of The Danish Film Institute/Stills & Posters Archive, photographer Paul Coerten.

In my opinion, sport is the most living and fascinating theatre we have in our time. I think that the major sports events contain a fantastic epic material and an amazing splendour. The reason why I am interested in something like the Tour de France, for example, is that it appears to me to be the *Iliad* or *Odyssey* of our time. . . . It appears to me to be the only place where an authentic drama unfolds, in contrast

to the dead structures and shapes of theatre. There is a pattern that repeats itself infinitely, a drama that is always fresh, because there are always people risking everything in order to exceed themselves and conquer difficulties and rivals. In order to achieve some form of catharsis or unison with the biggest achievements of the past in the same terrains and surroundings lit up by history. This is the form of ritual and absolutely real. [17]

This attitude to sport as representing a ritualized form of reality originates in the view that the world is an arena of basic conflicts between man and nature, rise and fall, ambition and sacrifice. With its narratives seen as representing essential themes of the human condition, cycling produces meaning; thus the mythologizing of terrains, races and riders becomes a central aspect of the films. The comparison between sport and a mythological past is obviously not Leth's invention but something that has been a tradition since the rise of modern sport and the establishment of the modern Olympics. In connection with film, Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympia* is probably the best-known example. However, where Riefenstahl draws a direct line to Greek antiquity, for example by opening her film with scenes from the classical temples and dissolving from Myron's discus-thrower to a contemporary discus-thrower, Leth's mythologizing derives from the races themselves. The ritual and mythological order seen by Leth as being reflected in the structures of the races unfolds before the camera for the first time, and most distinctly, in *Stars and Water Carriers*, which follows the 1973 Giro d'Italia (Tour of Italy).

As in other epic dramas there is a set cast of characters. The riders play themselves but first and foremost, however, they are representative of certain qualities and thereby become like mythological figures performing on a ritual stage. This is sometimes evident in the nicknames given to prominent riders, which are representative of their particular style or personal characteristics. [18] Moreover, each of the great classic races is connected with certain rituals that riders in certain roles are expected to perform and is framed by its own history in which the riders can locate themselves. Hence when the route runs over a 'classic mountain' the riders will remember former events on that mountain, their knowledge of the race's history inspiring them to new achievements. In this way the most prominent riders do not only want to win, they also want to write history.

In *Stars and Water Carriers*, the Belgian Eddy Merckx, the rider who has won the most races to date, represents the lead character in every way. During the period from the late 1960s to the middle of the 1970s, he completely dominated professional road racing. He was a rider who,

throughout his career, possessed a will to victory and fought like no one else. His determination to win everything worth winning without consideration for the livelihoods of other riders earned him the nickname 'the cannibal'. In *Stars and Water Carriers* his role is therefore to maintain the status he had achieved. An important passage in this connection is the one describing the Monte Carpegna stage in the Apennines, introduced by the words: 'The most beautiful and moving pictures offered to us by cycling deal with extreme performances in classic terrain.' In a lengthy sequence, Merckx demonstrates his class during this stage by slowly breaking – and almost crushing – his rival, the Spaniard José Manuel Fuente, who is writhing with agony on the ground at the finish. The race up the mountain is accompanied by Leth's commentary: 'For Merckx is merciless. He torments his companions with this ruthless move.' [19] The sequence works perfectly as film epic, because Fuente is the antithesis of the enduring, machine-like Belgian. He is a fiery, anarchic and light racer, trying to break free in explosive moves. Thus Fuente also has a clearly defined role: he is the challenger, the climber, a rider fighting with the perspective of history in his attempt to earn himself a position amongst the classic *grimpeurs*, such as his Spanish predecessor, Bahamontes. And when Fuente's time has finally come during the last mountain stage, he breaks free in one explosive move up a mountain and rides the last 145 kilometres to the finish on his own.

Merckx seemed invincible in this era, but the combatants were made 'more beautiful by the battle' against him, as Leth writes in one of his essays. Merckx needs great riders with the courage to challenge him. He needs their resistance; the challengers define the nature of his achievement. The other riders – as well as spectators – constitute this resistance, the conquest of which is a primary attraction of the sport. Therefore Merckx is annoyed that he does not get the expected trial of strength with Luis Ocaña in the 1974 Tour de France: 'I missed him in Tour de France, it was frustrating for me to miss out on the confrontation with last year's winner.' [20] The grandeur of the battles between the riders arises in relation to their reciprocal respect. Hence Leth is not one-sidedly focused on Eddy Merckx, for example, in his films. He always shows great sympathy for the attackers in the mountains. Climbers such as Fuente, Ocaña and Bahamontes, who dare challenge the superior rider in the race, create surprises and new structures.

In *Stars and Water Carriers*, Merckx and Fuente constitute the main figures in the mythological narrative, while riders such as the Italian champion Felice Gimondi, the newcomer and challenger Battaglin and the

sprinter Basso act in the main supporting roles together with former champion Gösta Pettersson and Merckx's Belgian rival De Vlaeminck. However, on the periphery of the mythological play, the main character of the film is the Dane Ole Ritter. Ritter's tour de force is the time trial. On the day of the time trials, the film devotes a whole sequence to him, without doubt the climax of the narrative. The time trials give occasion for a study of a range of the aesthetic qualities of cycling, differing from the narrative derived from mythology and the heroic qualities that were apparent in the mountains. As they originate from the movements of the athlete himself, the aesthetic qualities of cycling are immediately visible. With the focus on the individual rider, this section of the film becomes a study of rhythm, power, speed and lightness. Ritter fully fulfils his task. He does what he is best at and with great virtuosity. Through the changing visual perspectives that are presented, the person behind the monotonous effort stands out, defining and humanizing the mechanical movement of cycling. Ritter's performance thus represents the general aesthetic qualities of cycling while also expressing his achievement as an individual. [21] Through the cinematic techniques and effects utilized by Leth, the time-trial sequence captures Ritter's gliding and powerful ride through the blurred landscape as an art of suffering.

Ritter performs optimally in the time trial, managing his energy well, and is able to accelerate during the stage and finish in second place, just in front of the otherwise untouchable Merckx but behind the Italian champion Felice Gimondi. The time trial stands out as one of the most powerful parts of the film, both because it is superbly crafted and because, in just one sequence, we are presented with a whole range of the aesthetic parameters prominent in cycling, such as rhythm, power, speed and lightness.

A Sunday in Hell

The second film, *A Sunday in Hell*, documents the events of the 1976 version of the classic spring race from Paris to Roubaix. This is probably the world's hardest one-day race, partly due to the fact that the last third of the 270-kilometre-long route (which varies from year to year) runs over the so-called *pavés*, rural dirt tracks with uneven cobbles, normally used only by farmers and cattle on their way to and from the fields. The film does not have the same epic scope as *Stars and Water Carriers*, as Leth focuses much more on the basic thrill and drama of the event, choosing not to comment in the somewhat turgid, mythologizing tone of the Giro d'Italia film:

Figure 2 Riders fight the dust and the uneven cobbled stones in ‘The Northern Hell’ in the race from Paris to Roubaix in 1976.

Source: *Sunday in Hell*. Copyright: Leth Film. Photo courtesy of The Danish Film Institute/Stills & Posters Archive, photographer Vibeke Winding.

[T]here was no reason to load too much on, as the drama runs on its own. The story simply unfolds with an enormous power, and as such that is the only real narrative I have ever told. That was the whole fascination for me: Here is an adventure which starts at one place in the landscape and ends somewhere else, and within six or seven hours quite a few things would have happened – but of course we didn’t know what. [22]

Thus the director’s approach is fundamentally different from what it was during the filming of *Stars and Water Carriers*. The artistic work here is subject to a further limitation since it is dependent on events whose course is unknown to Leth, although they take place within a certain framework and unfold in just seven hours during a single day. No scenes can be re-filmed, neither is it possible to supplement or compensate footage with pictures from a later stage of the race, as it was in *Stars and Water Carriers*. Whereas Leth made the earlier film with just one camera, he used many cameras in *A Sunday in Hell*, so that their eyes could be like his own. Therefore, the film was made from raw material produced by a total of twenty-seven cameramen and seventeen light and sound technicians with the aim of achieving omnipresence and a precise

relationship to real time. [23] Furthermore, five main characters were chosen (Merckx, Maertens, Godefroot, De Vlaeminck and Moser) who were to be followed irrespective of the development of the race. Thus Leth had established certain fixed working conditions in advance while still making it possible to cover any unforeseen events that might occur. The use of multiple cameras and a large crew of technicians make it possible for Leth to give his account of the event; a structure that might otherwise have been lost as the chaotic and confusing race unfolded.

The film opens coolly and calmly with the preparation of a racing bike. Hub and gears are cleaned and brushed. Then the riders arrive and prepare themselves with a studied thoroughness and pedantic meticulousness while passing through all the rituals attached by tradition to a classic race. Early in the morning they are on their bikes passing the castle of Chantilly in a gliding movement, a scene filmed in beautiful orange backlit pictures. These are mild and gentle pictures suggesting an unsentimental affection for the riders who, some hours later, will be fighting like gladiators. These pictures later come to form a stark contrast to the superior aesthetic precision of grainy, slightly blurred pictures of the hectic drama in the dust clouds of *L'Enfer du Nord*, the 'Northern Hell'. That is Hell with a capital H, because this is also a film about religious feelings. And for the riders, Hell is only too real on the day of the race, which is the reason for their many calming rituals and conjuration, most clearly demonstrated by Merckx's constant adjustment of the saddle position.

While the tension of the film rises as the race continues towards the cobbled tracks up north, the mythological perspective to some degree becomes narrower. In *Stars and Water Carriers*, there was a concordance between the mythological contours as interpreted in the commentary and reflected in the confrontations between the riders. In *A Sunday in Hell*, however, these contours are to some degree removed from the events themselves and located in Leth's verbal commentary. He is the one directing our attention from the hellish cobbles in Flanders to Dante's *Inferno*, and he is the one charging the mythological excitement with references to legends and martyrs. But in this film there is also an emphasis on the mythological elements in the semi-religious 'aris-Roubaix Mass' performed by the opera choir of the Royal Danish Theatre. The choir literally comments on the pictures in a very powerful and suggestive fashion, for example with the repeated verse 'Paris – Roubaix', as we watch from the height of a helicopter the beautiful spectacle of the *peloton* passing a medieval bridge and squeezing into a village. And later, as a contrast to this, the verse 'L'Enfer du Nord' is

chanted as the riders, all contorted faces and shaking flesh, appear from the dust-clouds on the cobbles in blurred but very powerful slow-motion pictures.

The pictures from the cobbles are a study of self-tormenting machismo. The mad frame of Paris-Roubaix with its clouds of dust and obstinate and ruthless *pavés* invites Leth to his celebration of pain as an emblem of nobility and the masochistic super-masculinity of the riders. Hence, it is the aesthetics of the sublime rather than the beautiful that unfold in these scenes – man's fight against stubborn nature, against exhaustion, despair, pain and loneliness. The point most clearly evoked by the commentary's evocation of the mythological 'Northern Hell' and underlined by the pictures and music is that this sport does not represent or originate from good. Moreover, as the event unfolds, sport leaves common sense behind. Its moral credo is not to be found in reason but in de Coubertin's litany of 'initiative, perseverance, intensity, search for perfection and scorn for potential danger'. It is not good but evil (Hell) that characterizes the performances of the riders and lends the race its power of fascination. Paris-Roubaix has therefore very appropriately been described as the most beautiful and most disgusting of all cycle races. [24]

Aesthetics, films and sport

Leth's ambition with his cycling films was to communicate an experience of sport in its own terms with honesty, depth and poetry. As mentioned, he had no time for the 'Marxist fumblers' who, more than anyone, dominated the contemporary view of art in the 1970s. Instead, he concentrated on communicating his fascination with the great races as ritual plays performed in legendary surroundings, in which the racing heroes have strictly defined roles as stars and water carriers, and the background conglomerate of commercialism is unconditionally accepted. Leth shows solidarity with the riders. He seeks to understand their ambition, effort and sacrifice. He is especially fascinated by their willingness to make sacrifices, which elevates the sport beyond the mundane level of exercise and triviality.

However, the ability to produce fascinating and beautiful sport pictures captivating us by their power, elegance and lightness is due not only to the perspective of the director or the possibilities created by technical equipment but also to the aesthetics that are a basic element of the sport and thereby make the images possible. With their production restricted by a number of limiting rules, Leth's cycling films have a clean, dry documentary style. Yet they are also films of great aesthetic quality, and

this corresponds with the fact that the simplicity of the documentary focuses precisely on the basics of sport. We are thus able to discover the basic attraction of sport: aesthetics. Leth has created not only aesthetic films with sport as their subject matter but also examples of the aesthetic dimensions of sport itself, captured on film. These aesthetic dimensions emanate from the will of the athletes to surpass themselves and produce their maximum performance. This forms the basis for performances that are essentially aesthetic as, for example, in the time-trial sequence with Ritter in *Stars and Water Carriers*. At the same time, it should be emphasized that the individual rider is not alone in the races. He is part of a complex connection, whereby the aesthetics are found not only in the individual rider's patterns of movement, flexibility, lightness, stamina, balance, strength and strength management but also in the overall structure of the race and the frame of history and mythology in which it takes place. When the *domestique* Marc Demeyer crosses the line as number one in Roubaix, it is not beautiful in itself. The beauty of the moment consists in the connection of the race with the road behind him and is therefore dependent on a previous set of events – the breakaway, the tactics, the individual's estimation of his own and other's strength and resources, the understanding of positions at certain times and the calculated actions of teams and individual riders. Moreover, the riders often appear to act out a range of basic existential conditions in the great races, such as empathy, possession, sacrifice, obligation, victory and loss; these conditions form underlying themes relating to the aesthetics of the sublime rather than the beautiful. The movements and abilities of the individual riders, the basic existential conditions acted out and the overall structure formed by the race, together with the artistic work of the film, thus all contribute to giving the audience the complete aesthetic experience.

Re-enchantment

Even though the movement from *mythos* to *logos* in the Western world is the formula for enlightenment, it is also ambiguous and ambivalent because it is not solely for the good. An often-used expression for this ambivalence is Max Weber's phrase '*die Entzauberung der Welt*' ('the disenchantment of the world'). [25] This should be understood as an even mixture of triumph and sorrow: the breaking of the spell which once bound the world. This dis-enchantment is the *raison d'être* for enlightenment and modernity. Through knowledge, the myths must be dismantled, thereby putting an end to the delusion. This is the founding

thought in the philosophy of Kant, Hegel and Marx, for example, and their belief in the continuous advance of Western society. Its purpose is to change man's attitude to his existence through enlightenment and science, replacing the belief in *providence* with the belief in *progress* as means of emancipation. This is a cognitive movement from a world with a metaphysical foundation to one with a scientific foundation – a movement from a reality of divine powers to a condition in which everything is subject to man's pleasure.

The danger of this movement, which is the premise of secularization and modernity, is that dullness in a literal sense – and without understanding this as a judgement of value – threatens to overpower us. The radical, and almost self-contradictory, question to be asked is therefore: is there, in a world where everything is humanized, a modern grandeur? This is the question posed by the French philosopher Luc Ferry in his book *Man Made God*: 'How are human beings to draw from within themselves, without any reference to a radical beyond more imposing, than themselves, the stuff of any modern grandeur? This, I believe, is the crucial question.' [26] The tentative answer to the question of 'toward what sublime horizon' we should lift our eyes in order to find the answer is provided by Ferry himself:

Considering those areas of life that escape the contingencies of taste and sensibility may, I believe, point us on our way. Sports, for example, a democratic spectacle if ever there was one, but fascinating for their capacity to reconstitute aristocratic glories in a world that essentially has been stripped of them. . . . In sports . . . hierarchies do reconstitute themselves . . . from a purely human base and even, it must be said, a certain grandeur. Some players really surpass others, unexpectedly and in inexplicable ways, and they arouse admiration. Yes, this is a partial transcendence, but it gives an image – and it is only a question of such an image – of an unfathomable human grandeur. [27]

It is this grandeur that Leth sees in sport. Not possessing modern man's fear of exceeding the facts, he is able to turn around the arrow of disenchantment by reintroducing the mythical heroic epic as narrative form in his cycling films. The fragmented and chaotic picture of the world brought to civilized man by secularization and dis-enchantment is, through the consistent mythologizing of the films, turned into a simple and structured reality, which creates overview and anchoring. In the world of cycling, Leth finds a mythological universe, which opens up a possibility of rediscovering the enchantment of the world dissolved by enlightenment. This might be described as re-enchantment which is, of course, incomplete – we are not talking about a total relapse from

enlightenment to mythology – but a re-enchantment which appears sporadically in sport. Thus sport can be viewed as a simplified segment of human experience that offers an alternative perspective to the detachment of science. For Leth the purpose of the sports film is not to communicate the ‘objective’ reality of sport, but its grandeur.

As mentioned, Leth does not wish to lecture us on the issue of professional racing cyclists being victims of a ‘false consciousness’ or on sport as an illusion, in the sense that the ideological critics emphasized so strongly. Yet his wish to reach an understanding of the world of cycling, in particular the riders’ ambitions and sacrifices, nevertheless implies a desire to portray the illusion of elite sport in a more basic sense. *Illusio* means to be part of a game (*ludos*); a game in which you invest, and which you take so seriously that you forget it is a game. The illusion, or *illusio*, to which the riders fall victim can be understood as their enchanted relation to the field in which they act, their relation to each other and their sport – their game.

Thus the popularity of sport may be based on its ability to offer us a mythological universe. It provides a form of experience, and thus possibilities for deriving meaning, that have been marginalized under the pressures of modernity. The reason why the cultural critics reacted so strongly to Leth’s cycle films in the first instance may, therefore, very well be rooted in the fact that sport posed a serious challenge to the political myth adhered to by the critics.

Conclusion

This paper has pursued the hypothesis that sport is best understood if regarded within the sphere of aesthetics. For this purpose two 1970s cycling films by Danish director Jørgen Leth were analysed for their capacity to portray the aesthetic qualities inherent in sport. In shifting our view of sport from a primarily moral enterprise based on the *spirit* of sport, to a primarily aesthetic one stemming from the *essence* of sport, two aims are achieved. First, on an epistemological level, the unmistakable popularity of sport, despite the current talk of crisis, can be described as being based on sport’s ability to offer a mythological universe that has been marginalized as modernity has progressed. Second, on a pragmatic level, the tightening of control and surveillance of athletes implemented as a consequence of the threat to the *spirit of sport* embedded in each new doping scandal, could be avoided, and replaced by a calmer adherence to rules derived from an understanding of the *essence of sport*.

Notes

- [1] Verner Møller, 'What is sport: Outline to a redefinition', in Verner Møller and John Nauright, eds, *The essence of sport* (Odense, 2003), pp. 11–33.
- [2] Pierre de Coubertin, *Olympism – selected writings* (Lausanne, 2000), p. 556. De Coubertin elaborates on this relationship elsewhere, as he emphasizes that sport is 'a *passionate movement of the spirit* that can range from "games to heroism". Picture this basic principle, and you will come to see the athletes whose excesses you criticize and censure today as an elite who radiate energy, people who are far more idealistic (and therefore, necessary for the public) than those who claim to stick to simple physical education to guarantee the future. These educators are people whose faith is flat, a faith that, left to its own, will have no followers in the near future, and no altars after that' (ibid., p. 576).
- [3] Ibid., p. 565.
- [4] Ibid.
- [5] Møller, 'What is sport', p. 24. See also Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *In praise of athletic beauty* (Cambridge and London, 2006).
- [6] Hans Keller, 'Sport and art – the concept of mastery', in H.T.A. Whiting and D. W. Masterson, eds., *Readings in the aesthetics of sport* (London, 1974), p. 90.
- [7] In my analysis I have used the original Danish versions of the films: *Stjernerne og vandbærerne* (*Stars and water carriers*) and *En forårsdag i Helvede* (*A Sunday in Hell*). Both films are available in English versions.
- [8] For a detailed introduction to Leth see M. Hjort and I. Bondebjerg, *The Danish directors* (Bristol, 2001).
- [9] The Danish Film Institute (DFI) is publishing six DVD box sets of Jørgen Leth's films. Two sets are released at present: 'The Anthropological Films' and 'Sports Films'. The latter contains the two cycling films analysed in this paper.
- [10] Leth's introduction in Verner Møller, *Dopingdjævelen – analyse af en hed debat* [*The doping devil*] (Copenhagen, 1999). The English translation of the book (without Leth's introduction) is available online at <http://www.doping.au.dk/en/resources/books>, accessed 2 March 2009.
- [11] For examples on this school of thought see for instance Jean-Marie Brohm's *Sport – a prison of measured time* (Worcester, MA, 1978), Paul Hoch's *Rip off the big game – the exploitation of sport by the power elite* (New York, 1972) or Bero Rigauer's *Sport and work* (New York, 1981).
- [12] Keith Keller, 'Film review: Stjernerne og vandbærerne' ['Stars and Water Carriers'] *BT*, 2 March 1974.
- [13] Leif Petersen. 'Film review: Stjernerne og vandbærerne' ['Stars and Water Carriers'], *Kosmorama*, 20 (121) (1974), p. 234.
- [14] Oluf Gandrup. 'Filmens og sportens dobbeltkarakter' ('The double character of film and sport'), *MacGuffin* 8 (35/36) (1980), p. 22.
- [15] Ibid., p. 43.
- [16] Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a theory of practice* (Cambridge, 1977), p. 159.
- [17] Cited in Jens Frederik Kragholm, 'Jørgen Leth – et interview' ['Jørgen Leth – an interview'], pp. 20–31, in *Film-uv*, no. 15 (1973), p. 26.
- [18] Thus Gino Bartali had two nicknames: 'The Iron Man', due to his strength, and 'The Cycling Monk', due to his religious convictions. The climber Federico Bahamontes became known as 'The Eagle of Toledo'; the Italians simply called

their champion Fausto Coppi 'Il Campionissimo', the champion of champions. Due to his abilities in the time trials, Jacques Anquetil was called 'Monsieur Chrono'; Eddy Merckx, who 'devoured' his rivals one after one with his enormous appetite for victory, was called 'The Cannibal'. The reckless and anarchist racer Claudio Chiappucci received the nickname 'The Little Devil', while Laurent Fignon with his characteristic spectacles was called 'The Professor', and Miguel Indurain, who never showed any emotions, was nicknamed 'The Man with the Stone Face'. As an addition to their civil names, the prominent racers thus receive names which are indicative of their role and characteristics, and which make them recognizable and easier to place in the historical-mythological order.

- [19] *Stars and Water Carriers*. Both quotations are from the chapter: 'En smertens vej' ['A Road of Pain'].
- [20] Jørgen Leth, *Det er ligesom noget i en drøm* ['Like something in a dream'] (Copenhagen, 1976), p. 70.
- [21] V. Hohler, 'The Beauty of Motion', in H.T.A. Whiting and D.W. Masterson, eds, *Readings in the aesthetics of sport* (London, 1974), pp. 49–56; and Gumbrecht, *In praise of athletic beauty*.
- [22] Anders Leifer, *Også i dag oplevede jeg noget . . . Samtaler med Jørgen Leth* ['Again today I had an experience . . . Conversations with Jørgen Leth'] (Copenhagen, 1999), p. 258.
- [23] Henrik Jul Hansen, 'Dagbog fra et forår i helvede' ['Diary from A Sunday in Hell'], *Levende billeder* 2 (4) (1976), pp. 19–21, 36–7.
- [24] 'It is the most beautiful of all races', as both Eddy Merckx and Roger De Vlaeminck have said. 'It is disgusting', as Bernard Hinault has said. Quoted in Jørgen Leth, *Den gule trøje i de høje bjerge. En personlig beretning over 25 år om Tour de France* ['The yellow jersey in the high mountains. A personal account over 25 years on the Tour de France'] (Copenhagen, 1995), p. 192.
- [25] Max Weber, *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism* (New York, 1905/1958).
- [26] Luc Ferry, *Man made God – The meaning of life* (Chicago and London, 2002), p. 121.
- [27] *Ibid.*, p. 121–2.