

# *Aristotle and Cricket*

Lev Kreft\*

*University of Ljubljana*

ABSTRACT. Anthony D. Buckley's article "Aristotle and Cricket: Drama in Retrospect" (Buckley 2006), extending discussion initiated by F. Keenan (Keenan 1972) concludes that "Although not a work of art, a token game is likely to have an orderly unity with the form of Aristotle's 'complex drama.'" At the same time, David Osipovich addressed the question "What is a Theatrical Performance" (Osipovich 2006) extending discussion initiated by a symposium (Saltz, Hamilton, Carroll 2001) into opposition to interpretational and literary theories of theatrical performance. If theatrical performance has its own aesthetic identity, how could modern sport game be without it, being just something similar to theatrical performance, and shaped according to Aristotle's Poetics as an interpretation?! Comparison between theatre, artistic performance and sport game, however, can be useful, because it can show different ways of production of reality in theatre and performance, and in sport games.

## ***I. Philosophy of Sport and Aesthetics 1***

As an academic discipline, philosophy of sport emerged in the 1960s. It had to fight for inclusion into two established university sub-systems: philosophy, and sport sciences. Its launching was in troubles with philosophy because sport was believed to be a body activity without philosophical relevance, and it was not accepted by kinesiology because philosophy of sport could not help athletes to become swifter, higher, and stronger.

Therefore, philosophy of sport had to find a way to get approval from both sides, and one of ways taken at its very beginning was to follow the path previously cleared by aesthetics, another discipline at first humbled by its bodily and insignificant object which quickly proceeded to much

---

\*Email: lev.kreft@guest.arnes.si

loftier academic status. That is why the field of aesthetics was reduced from all phenomena of sensitivity to art only, and why art was claimed to be a sovereign and autotelic activity: it not only approved aesthetics' object as philosophically important one, it also approved aesthetics as the only discipline able to touch and articulate art's highest philosophical meaning, purpose and end. To follow aesthetics' example, some of philosophers of sport claimed that sport is art, or, that sport is something similar to art (Frayssinet 1968; Lenk 1985; Grupe 1987). While philosophers of sport mostly started from modernist idea of art as an end in itself, there were others who claimed that sport is art from completely different positions, from Roland Barthes to Wolfgang Welsch (Barthes 1957; Welsch 2005). Barthes understands art as an event and artist as an artwork, and finds sport can still offer a tragedy, while in art it is over and dead. For Welsch, in our own time, art and sport develop in two opposite directions: while art is loosing its aesthetic profile and introduces more and more moralizing, sport is getting away from its ethical ideals and becomes pure aesthetic activity. These kind of views never got any response from philosophy of sport where traditional and even conservative views on art prevailed, until circumstances changed and, especially in new millennium, offered better affirmation of philosophy of sport through — ethical issues. Well known symbolic farewell to thesis that sport is art, or similar to it, was David Best argumentation against such views (Best 1978; Best 1980) “denying that any sport is an art form” (Best 1980: 69) and failing to understand “why it should be thought that sport would somehow be endowed with greater respectability if it would be shown to be an art.” (Best 1980: 69) Here are his four main headings against belief that sport is, or is similar to art:

1. a. The logical distinction between purposive and aesthetic sports, which is commonly and confusedly formulated in terms of
  - b. a *supposed* distinction between the aesthetic and the competitive.
2. The common misconception of the aesthetic as essentially or necessary *contemplative*.

3. The suggestion that sport could be art as in the *objet trouvé* sense.
4. The important but largely overlooked distinction between the *aesthetic* and the *artistic*. (Best 1980: 69-70)

Purposive sports are those where purpose can be specified independently of the manner of achieving it, aesthetic sports are those where there is a requisite manner of achieving their purpose (like gymnastics, diving, skating etc.). The aesthetic is involved with both kinds of sport, but with purposive sports it is incidental, while with aesthetic sports it defines the character of the activity. Two of Best's headings, i.e., that the aesthetic is not the same as the contemplative, and that there is no simple equation between the aesthetic used by philosophers of sport before.

Best's writings became a threshold in philosophy of sport: after 1978, to claim that sport is art, or, that sport is similar to art, was criticized with the help of his argumentation.

## ***II. Philosophy of Sport and Aesthetics 2***

It came as a surprise when Anthony D. Buckley's article "Aristotle and Cricket: Drama in Retrospect" (Buckley 2006) re-opened discussion on sport games and tragedy, starting from much older text by F. Keenan (Keenan 1972) where Keenan used Aristotle's notion of tragedy to discuss athletic performance. Buckley announces that he will "similarly show than an enjoyable game will be, if not a tragedy, then a 'complex drama' with features described in Aristotle's discussion of theatre." (Buckley 2006: 21) Buckley does not defend a position that sport is art, and he does not claim that each sport game is similar to tragedy — but it can so happen that certain sport game contest could be recognized in retrospect as having all necessary characteristics of a 'complex drama', as in Aristotle's analysis of tragedy in *Poetics*. His example is from cricket: a famous game between Ireland and West Indies played at Sion Mills in 1969. West Indies belonged on top of world cricket at that time already, and Ireland was just a proverbial underdog. Playing in Ireland, with some wet grounds, might allow for a more dignified Ireland's defeat, but that was the best possible outcome locals expected. Alas, when play started, Ireland succeeded to get

in front, and, astonishing all present (and there were only a few, without extended media coverage because expectations were so low), kept its winning distance well into the second half of the game. Unbelievable! Spread by phone, this surprising news brought more spectators and journalists to the grounds, but there was still no camera to record what was going on. Then, things have begun to change, and West Indies started to play. When turn-over seemed to be unavoidable Ireland overcame itself once more, decided not to play for a more possible draw, went for victory and won the game. Wow!

This game is a case for Buckley who claims that here the whole Aristotelian complex dramatic structure is revealed. He mentions some other characteristics from Aristotle (unity, imitation, heroes) and concludes his argument announcing that:

1. the rules of sport like cricket transform a sequence of separate, improvised actions into an orderly unified game;
2. sport is in certain respect mimetic and can be used as a commentary on “life issues”;
3. players and spectators of sport have at least provisionally to decide for themselves who they will take to be a hero(s) of sport game;
4. whether in sport or in theatre, at the heart of a complex drama are complication and overcoming of complication through denouement;
5. still, in sport neither spectators nor players know how the game will turn out: only after conclusion of a game, it is possible to have a retrospective sense of the structure of the plot, and see that it is the structure of a complex drama.

This calls for some observations and some criticism. To begin with, drama (together with complex drama as its special case) is not a sort of theatre, as we have it after Diderot’s and Lessing’s non-Aristotelian innovations. It is a manner of narration. This means that any kind of narration, and even any kind of non-linear sequence of events could have a structure of complex drama as the case cricket game proved to have in retrospect. Further, retrospective sense of the structure of the plot mentioned by Buckley underwrites a fact that sport game is an event of life, and not some mimetic

piece of theatrical representation. Furthermore, there is substantial historical distance and gap between Aristotle and contemporary theatre, as it is between ancient sport games and contemporary sport. We know that *poiesis* in its specific notion of production of poetry was not among ancient arts, because *technē/ars* meant human skill executed according to rules, and therefore something one can learn: poetry was a divine gift. But it was Aristotle with his treatise on poetry who introduced the idea that lyrical, epical and theatrical poetry have its “technique” as well. Still, what theatre and sport had in common at that time was not just execution of skill according to rules but competition: they were both important moments of *agon*. Today, we believe that art is something above competition, while sport is often believed to be competitive sport only (Kreft 2008). Before Aristotle’s inclusion of poetry among human skills sport was part of art, while poetry with theatre was not, i.e., their position was directly opposite to what Buckley wants to prove, but both belonged to ancient competitive games. In Aristotle’s time, tragedy as part of Dionysian festivities and games was already in decline. What remained were texts of tragedies which were staged only once, when they entered competition; these texts were studied by Aristotle, and these collections of texts enabled later staging introduced after original cult and competition of which this kind of theatre was a part have disappeared. Aristotle wrote his *Poetics* at the turning point when theatre as part of cult and *agon* was disappearing, together with Athenian democracy. It is quite a mantra of philosophical interpretation that Plato loved beauty but expelled art and especially theatre from his ideal community, while Aristotle put art, especially poetry, well above factual truth: poetic narration reports on things as they could happen, while history narrates only what did happen. But Aristotle is quite poisonous source if we take his *Poetics* as a starting point for contemporary research of theatre, or for comparison of sport games with theatrical performance.

At the end of discussion and analysis of tragedy, Aristotle stops to evaluate epic and tragic poetry. He introduces difference between vulgar and less vulgar art, and an objection against in favour of epic against tragic poetry: “If the less vulgar art is superior, and in all cases what is addressed to a superior audience is less vulgar, then it is perfectly clear that the art which imitates indiscriminately is vulgar...Tragedy is like that” (Aristotle

1996:46). Aristotle dismisses this objection, but in a strange way which diminishes theatrical art: “First of all, this is not a criticism of the art of poetry but of the art of performance” (Aristotle 1996:47). Second, art of performance is meant as movement of persons on the stage, together with all the other spectacular ingredients, and “not all movement is to be disparaged,” but only “that of inferior persons.” (Aristotle 1996:47) Third, “tragedy has its effect without movement, just as epic does: its quality is clear from reading (Aristotle 1996:47).

This is a source of literary or interpretation theory of theatre which shaped and controlled theatre for quite a while: literary, because its gravity is not on stage but in literary text, and interpretational, because it understood theatrical performance in terms of interpretation of previously existing artwork. These kind of theories, while diminishing theatrical representations or at least describing theatrical art as dependent and literary art as independent and sovereign, cannot help us to understand theatrical art beyond limits of — literary theatre, which is, as we well know, just one of historically and culturally specific sort of theatre.

Aristotle could be misleading starting point for comparison between theatre and sport games. This is proven by Buckley’s example: following Aristotle, he has to question where the text is in case of sport games, and one of his possible answers is that rules of cricket have this function, providing for orderly unified game of cricket, which at least in some cases allows for the appearance of theatrical structure in retrospect. Here, Buckley is obviously wrong: a game of cricket is not interpretation, or staging of *The Laws of Cricket*. *The Laws of Cricket* are in a sport game what Aristotle’s *Poetics* is in theatre. Developments in theatre and in sport went in reverse direction: while theatre got rid of restrictive rules which were imposed on it especially during 17<sup>th</sup> Century in French classicist court theatre, in sport, starting from 19<sup>th</sup> Century, more and more restrictive rules were introduced in all games and sports together with institutionalisation of sport disciplines. Still, we cannot imagine that anybody could get the whole effect of sport game from reading *The Laws of Cricket*. To get closer to a possible comparison between theatre and sport games, perhaps, instead of Aristotle, we should introduce some other philosophy and aesthetics of theatre.

### ***III. Theatrical Performance and Interpretation***

Helpfully, the same year when Buckley's article appeared in *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, with background in previous Keenan's text, David Osipovich published in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* article "What is a Theatrical Performance?" (Osipovich 2006), starting from previous symposium "Staging Interpretations" (2001) in the same journal, with participation of David Z. Saltz, James R. Hamilton and Noël Carroll (Saltz, Hamilton, Carroll 2001). We could say that among their different approaches, Noël Carroll defends non-Aristotelian kind of theory of interpretation developed from Richard Wollheim's study *Art and Its Objects* (Wollheim 1968). This approach claims that text is a type and staging produces a token of this type. This relationship of token and type echoes in Buckley's term for particular game "a token game" (Buckley 2006:33), which opens a question of where is the type of a token game, in the same manner as the question of where is the text has to be answered if we follow Aristotle's instead of Wollheim's theory. One of the problems of such theory of theatre is that it is too narrow to include all kinds and genres of theatre. It is useful mainly for literary theatre which emerged with European modernity and achieved its most regulated form in bourgeois theatre; Diderot and Lessing were Aristotles of this kind of theatre. Against the dominant view of theatrical performance "that it is primarily an interpretation of a literary work" (Osipovich 2006:461) Osipovich announces that his aim is

to present a theory of theatrical performance. On my view, a theatrical performance is a particular kind of interaction between performers and observers (actors and audience members) in a shared physical space. A necessary component of this interaction is something other than what it actually is and that the observers are aware of this pretense. (Osipovich 2006:461)

Theatrical performances are therefore "nearer to performances than they are to interpretations" (Osipovich 2006:464), because their ontological situation is quite different and specific: "the necessary condition for theatrical performance are liveness and enactment" (Osipovich 2006:469) Liveness means that performers and observers share the same space at the

same time. Enactment means a pretense on the part of the performers that the interaction between performers and observers is somehow other than it actually is, and an awareness on the part of the observers that the pretense is occurring (Osipovich 2006:465), or, to put it simply, “an attempt on the part of the participants to create an alternative reality out of their co-presence.” (Osipovich 2006:469) The difference between television or other means of transmission of image, and theatrical audience is that theatre is a public space. Here, all present share a pretense, and through it produce an alternative reality.

“Theatrical performance”, the term used by participants of the symposium and by Osipovich himself, suggests that theatre is a special case of performance.

#### ***IV. ‘Phenomenological Reduction’***

Aristotle reduced theatre to reading, claiming that all fundamental effects of tragedy still function. We may ask what is a sufficiently dramatic situation of sport game analogous to “mere reading” in case of theatre. The existence of bodily performed competition in space is a necessity, but is an audience a necessity as well? Allen Guttman points out a crucial difference between sport and fine art: “Play, however, needs no audience because play expresses an exuberance that need not be communicated... Nonetheless, sports have existed, do exist, and will continue to exist in situation without an audience.” (Guttman 1978:12) Theatrical play, says Aristotle, needs no staging to achieve its goals — sport game, on the contrary, needs no spectators. Have you ever heard of a theatre being punished for its proverbial shamelessness, or for provocative political behaviour of its audience, by having to appear in front of an empty theatre? In sport, however, it makes sense. The wedding can’t take place if the bride is not there: the bride of theatre is its audience, the bride of sport games are their players.

Still, this kind of ‘phenomenological reduction’ (I beg phenomenologist to excuse my abuse of the term) has to be reconsidered. Aristotle’s reduction of theatrical play to mere reading of a text is an expression of his, and many other philosophers, bias against the art of performance. Could it

be that reduction of sport game to a situation without spectators is of similar biased origin, in belief that exercising the body is a healthy move for individual and society as a whole, while watching the others doing sport as a multitude of sport spectacle is a dangerous phenomenon which should be put under control? It is possible that we enjoy a play just by reading, as it is sure that we can enjoy ourselves playing a sport game without spectators. This is a reduction of real fun to its basics, not what we long for really. We long for dramatic fiction to be represented as real, or, as already Edmund Burke knew, “we shall be much mistaken if we attribute any considerable part of our satisfaction in tragedy to a consideration that tragedy is a deceit, and its representation no realities. The nearer it approaches the reality, and the further it removes us from all idea of fiction, the more perfect its power. But be its power of what kind it will, it *never* approaches to what it represents.” (Burke 1987:47) Speaking of sport, it is attractive to watch a sport game, but it is extremely pleasurable to be seen as well, and this goes for spectators and athletes alike. Sport games can be played without spectators, but it is still a joy of watching as well, because players like to see themselves in the eyes of their team-mates and opponents, and to be seen by those non-involved just adds to this pleasure. In theatre, actors likewise want to be appreciated by the gaze of the audience, and even the author of the text is expecting the event with greatest expectations possible because it is obvious that the real birth of theatrical text is on the stage and in front of an audience, not in print and with readers. There is no greater tragedy than an empty theatre. And the reason why people like to be there, be it sport or theatre was determined by Tertullian at the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century already: “Nobody would even think of going to spectacles if not to watch and to be seen.” (Tertullien 1986:286)<sup>1</sup>

After his description of powers of tragedy, Edmund Burke added:

Chuse a day on which to represent the most sublime and affecting tragedy we have; appoint the most favourite actors; spare no cost upon the scenes and decorations; unite the greatest efforts of poetry, painting and music; and when you have collected your audience, just at the moment when their minds are erect with expectation, let it

---

<sup>1</sup> In Quintus Septimus Florens Tertullianus original from cca. 180 AC: “Nemo denique in spectaculo innuendo prius cogitate nisi videri et videre.” -

be reported that a state criminal of high rank is on the point of being executed in the adjoining square; in a moment the emptiness of the theatre would demonstrate the comparative weakness of the imitative arts, and proclaim the triumph of the real sympathy. (Burke 1987:47)

I don't know about the irony of real sympathy here, but it is certainly a kind of Brecht's V-effect which, among other things, proves that real thing has more power than its representation, which was one of the reasons for performance art to develop out of and against visual and theatrical representations. But Burke is right: no art can approach what it represents, or, it ceases to be art. This brings us back to Buckley's characterisation of sport compared to theatre as "not even half-pretence" (Buckley 2006:24), because it is a real-life activity with real people, who don't pretend, but "what goes on in a game does resemble what goes on in nongames." (Buckley 2006:25) That is why sport games express "what Best calls life issues, relating to morality, society, and politics." (Buckley 2006:25)<sup>2</sup>

Different life realities, as morality, economy, politics, sport, whatever you want, are similar: why would sport, itself not even half-pretence, be more similar to politics than politics is similar to sport? And in this case, what is the difference between sport game and theatre? Here, we arrive back at Osipovich's "alternative realities" created by co-presence of actors and spectators. Buckley claims that sport game players do not represent fictitious characters: they are themselves, and consequently actors in theatre are not themselves but pretend to be fictitious characters under condition that all present share this pretense. Which sounds true enough, but what "being your own self" means, and what "sharing a pretense" means? Ancient Stoic philosophers, those who claimed that life is similar to theatre (and therefore taught what Erving Goffman developed much later), were also the first to claim that all human beings are equal in one respect: we are all *persons*. *Persona* (or Greek equivalent *prosopon*) means theatrical mask and a body wearing it together; as usually, Latin translation was provided by Cicero. It would be easy to say that we are persons because we always wear masks, once as players in sport game, another time in theatre,

---

<sup>2</sup> What Buckley has in mind is another David Best's article »The Aesthetics in Sport« published in *Philosophical Inquiry in Sport*. (Best 1987).

yet all the time in real life where, as Stoic philosophers say, we wear two masks at once: one for the others and another for ourselves. Where is the real, authentic self then? There are two possible solutions: authentic self is invisible both to the others and to us, or, it is a constantly changing product of constantly changing masks—persons on both sides. This paradox entered fundamental Christian dogmas on Trinity, and on much disputed nature of Christ. How can you be monotheist with three Gods? You can, because all three are just God's three persons/masks. Is the real God then behind those three masks, a fourth and only real God, while Father, Son and Spirit are just his apparitions? No, there is no fourth entity wearing those three masks, these three God's persons are one and only God. Is Christ human prophet, divine being, or both? Both, with divine and human person in full capacity. Alternative realities co-exist.

Both in theatre and in sport games we have both realities present: the "real" reality of life, and the alternative reality of play and game. In theatre, we share the pretence that what is going on at the stage is not what it actually looks like, therefore we are thrown out of our pretence if the actors are constantly forgetting their lines and the voice of prompter is too loud, or, the actor, as in Brecht's plays, instead of playing his part steps out of it and starts to explain *didaskalia* of the play. In sport, quite the contrary, we are not disturbed by seeing the coach yelling his instructions, and mistakes in performance are part of the game. Quite the contrary, in sport game it is most dissatisfying if we conclude that the game is staged, not played for real: both teams agreed upon result in advance, and players are just acting their parts. In theatre and in sport game, we engage in half-pretence. The framework of both theatre and sport, as their space construction and division from outer space prove, is the cosmic whole: we pretend that where we play and what we watch is the whole world and the totality of life.

We may conclude that limits of our world are the limits of our pretence, and that limits of our pretence are limits of our world. Theatre and sport games are two ways of making this fact visible and spectacular.

### **References**

Aristotle (1996), *Poetics* (transl. by Malcolm Heath), London, Penguin

Books.

- Barthes, R. (1957), *Mythologies*, Paris, Le Seuil.
- Best, D. (1978), *The Philosophy of Human Movement*, Boston, Allen and Unwin.
- Best, D. (1980), "Art and Sport", *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol. 14, No.2, pp. 21-36.
- Best, D. (1987), "The Aesthetics in Sport", *Philosophical Inquiry in Sport* (Eds. Morgan W. J. and Meier K. V.), Champagne, Human Kinetics.
- Buckley, A. D. (2006), "Aristotle and Cricket: Drama in Retrospect", *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, Vol. 33, No. 1, pp. 21-36.
- Burke, E. (1987), *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell.
- Frayssinet, P. (1968), *Le sport parmi les beaux-arts*, Paris, Dargaud.
- Grupe, O. (1987), *Sport als Kultur*, Osnabrück and Zürich, Fromm and Edition Interfrom.
- Guttman, A. (1978), *From Ritual to Record. The Nature of Modern Sport*, New York, Columbia University Press.
- Keenan, F. (1972), "The Athletic Contest as a 'Tragic' Form of Art", *Philosophical Exchange: The Annual Proceedings of the Center for Philosophic Exchange*, Brockport, State University of New York-College for Art and Sciences.
- Kreft, L. (2008), "Martin in the Field", *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy*, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 71-83.
- Lenk, H. (1985), *Die achte Kunst*, Osnabrück and Zürich, Fromm and Edition Interfrom.
- Osipovich, D. (2006), "What is a Theatrical Performance", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 64, No. 4, pp. 461-470.
- Saltz, D., Hamilton R. S., Carroll, N. (2001), "Symposium: Staging Interpretations", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 59, No. 3, pp. 299-316.

- Tertullien (1986), *De spectaculis*, Paris, Les Éditions du CERF (Sources chrétiennes 332).
- Welsch, W. (2005), "Sport — Viewed aesthetically and even as an Art?", *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life* (Eds. Light A. and Smith J.), New York, Columbia University Press, pp. 135-155. (Also available at: <http://www2.uni-jena.de/welsch/SPORT.pdf>)
- Wollheim, R. (1980), *Art and Its Objects*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.