

## Artistic Mimesis or Mimetic “Play” in Relation to Sports Theory

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**Abstract :** *I shall briefly discuss mimesis in sport in order to compare the use of the term in art with its use in the context of sport. I do this through the application of the “four orders of mimesis” within the general categories of the premodern, the modern and the postmodern as applied to sport. This is achieved through a rehearsal of arguments gleaned from theorists of sport which converge as aspects of mimesis. The reason for doing so is that if a similar mimetic quality can be found in both the disciplines of art and sport, then it appears that there is a relationship between them and, in agreement with Huizinga (1949), I concede that this common “element” is “play” and more specifically that this commonality can be described as mimetic “play”. However, we first need to discern a common mimetic quality historically associated with sport. Once that is achieved, an analysis of “play” follows and I close with two deductions that the art-sport dialectic, via the lens of “play” suggests conceptually.*

**Keywords :** *mimesis; sport theory; art*

### I. Introduction

In what follows, I outline the pre-modern-modern and post-modern triad as an imaginary reflection of how that might be applied to sport, thus suggesting that such constructions (and the various definitions of mimesis that apply therein) usually thought to develop as an account of higher culture, namely art, in fact applies as well to more everyday aesthetic modalities such as sport. It is this that determines a kind of continuum between the everyday and art.

### II. Review of Literature

#### 2.1 Orders of Historical Mimesis consisting of:

##### 2.1.1 The “Premodern” Paradigm

The “premodern” paradigm is that sport can be conceived at a root level as a kind of mimicry of the movement of animals, a copying of nature first developed as hunting-methods and evolved historically in the cultural form of sport. We can include in this category the pre-discursive; Arnold’s<sup>1</sup> “integration of parts” necessary for movement whereby certain sports are said to require a diverse range of movements within a sustained and coherent body-language; Welsch’s<sup>2</sup> concept of sport as signifying the “drama of existence” (a hunting-dance) or as a kind of metaphor for the range of human emotions within life itself; Vanderzwaag’s<sup>3</sup> argument of sport as a releasing of the aggressive impulse (with the welcome after-effect of hunting/sport/movement), and Noakes’s (2010 interview) notion of sport as pre-analytical and

<sup>1</sup> P.G. Arnold, “Sport, the aesthetic and art: further thoughts”. *British Journal of Educational Studies* xxxvii, 2 (1990), pp160–179.

<sup>2</sup> W. Welsch, Sport – viewed aesthetically and even as art? From *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*, Light, A & Smith, J.M. (ed.). (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), pp135–155.

<sup>3</sup> H.J. Van der Zwaag. *Toward a philosophy of sport*. (Fort Worth: University of Texas Press, 1972).

trans-rational. In this regard, war/hunting/sport/movement can be conceived as mimicking the deftness of animal agility among others. This copying explains Weiss's<sup>4</sup> thesis that sport is a nostalgia for the past insofar as though we no longer hunt for food, our sporting contests offer us a semblance of our primitive roots. Thus the premodern uncritical (mimetic) correspondence to a pre-established pattern is in sports correspondence to the instinctive "wiring" of someone.

### 2.1.2 The "Modern" Paradigm

The "modern" paradigm is sport as engendering a kind of modernist utopia. This category could thus include: Weis's argument that sport brings people together; Womack's<sup>5</sup> contention that sport is a cultural code beyond verbal language and therefore, like Weis, can have universal significance. Also included here is Hyland's<sup>6</sup> argument that the sportsperson stands for a level of perfection or in other words, the sense that we aspire to be *like* the sportsperson that has attained a certain level of perfection and consequently top athletes are held in high esteem. They become, in effect, role-models. Moreover, Olivova's<sup>7</sup> argument that sport is a social body-language having evolved from primitive festivals means that through sport one "copies" or acts out the codes and hierarchies invested in a particular culture. In this light, Markowitz & Rensmann<sup>8</sup> are optimistic that sports may in fact be a certain "bridging capital", an inclusive activity that socially brings people together (a common humanity) and thus serves to reflect (mimetically mirror) a culture that is (supposedly) based on high ideals, akin to the artistic modernist polemic of the so-named "brave new world".

The "modern" sees sport in terms of its formal harmony. This is evident drawing from the work of the significance of form and formal beauty in Gumbrecht's<sup>9</sup> analysis in which he maintains that sport can be beautiful. Weiss too argues for the concept of "formal harmony" in sport and Smith<sup>10</sup> applies this idea of beauty in sport through his analysis of cricket. As with the use of the formal elements of the visual arts in and of themselves (Art-for-Art sake), so here too one recognizes and acknowledges the individual and holistic components that feed into, as it were, a particular sports activity. This also includes the capacity to imagine as one projects oneself into the sporting arena, and in so doing conceptualizes and visualizes a better image (read: representation) of self. Furthermore, one might also include in this category the scientific and reductive analysis of sports in terms of psychological focus and fitness. These are the components or constituent elements of the game analysed in order to attain the best results. To do this requires a certain *abstracting* (parallel to the abstracting of the visual world for artistic purposes) necessary for sports science, dissecting sports movement and for developing a sports management system. These are the formal devices of sport that parallel the elements of art which in turn are derived or map the visual terrain and thus are mimetic instances (mirrors) of the external world, albeit not explicitly but rather in abstract, intellectual terms.

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<sup>4</sup> P. Weiss. *Sport: a philosophic inquiry*. (Illinois: South Illinois University Press, 1969).

<sup>5</sup> M. Womack. *Sport as symbol: images of the athlete in art*. (London: McFarland & Co, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> D.A. Hyland. *The question of play*. (Washington: University Press of America, 1984).

D.A. Hyland. *Philosophy of sport*. (Maryland: University Press of America, 1990).

<sup>7</sup> V. Olivova. *Sports and games in the ancient world*. (London: Orbis, 1984).

<sup>8</sup> T. Markowitz, T. & L. Rensmann. *Gaming the world*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> H.U. Gumbrecht. *In praise of athletic beauty*. London: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> A. Smith. The conception of the beautiful: C.R. James Glasgow's cricket articles, 1937-38. *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 23 (2006), pp46-66.

### 2.1.3 The “Postmodern” Paradigm

The “postmodern” Paradigm analysed thus far as a counter-argument to modernism and the metaphysical postulate of “deep” metaphysics can be found to gain theoretical leverage, when one concedes that sport does not engender a metaphysical stance through the medium of philosophy or *as art*. Rather it the body itself which is performed, contested or perfected and through which philosophical (and political) structures may change – though this is not achieved with the “vocabulary”<sup>11</sup> of metaphysics especially of the modernist variety. The body thus does not necessarily correspond (mimetically exemplify) an already given system<sup>12</sup>. In this sense sport may be a means through which to experience one’s freedom and the emotions associated therein within the safety of a “first order” removed from the immediacy of life. Kerr’s<sup>13</sup> attribution that sport includes a range of emotional dispositions other than just the aggressive impulse means that sport can refer to and mirror a plethora of human emotions and thus show us, both as participant and viewer who we are or what we can be in the context of heightened physical (and mental) activity, a freedom one may not experience in a less well-defined segment of life. Secondly, insofar as sport is cultural rather than simply aggressive warfare, it offers us a useful metaphor such as that of the overcoming of barriers, of not simply being in competition with others, but rather the improving of oneself and increasing confidence and self-belief.

The “everyday” meaning of the above allows us to think of sport in a postmodern age as allowing one to enjoy sport without concern for “mimetic accuracy” (or correspondence) but rather mimetic – and bodily – “play” which forms the basis of the following section. The significance of “play” is a necessary insight insofar as an intensely visual, textual and positivistic society is in need of *movement* and *participation* in sport in order to reclaim the body, as it were, rather than exist in the fantasy defined as Baudrillard’s<sup>14</sup> simulacrum; the real reduced to zero and one. Rather than a world consisting of “watching” or consuming sport after the fact, we are summoned, as it were, to act upon, to do and to “play the game”. In this sense, perhaps one needs to revert “back” to a kind of premodern consciousness. In this respect, I think the notion of “play” that Huizinga<sup>15</sup> articulates encompasses both a premodern uncritical (pre-discursive) awareness and a postmodern refutation of the “serious” (with the implications of “reality”, “truth”, metaphysics, and the “original”...) so that both art and sport share a feature which itself captures a sense of movement, appearance and becoming rather than a stable, “essential” “indestructible” feature (“truth”). I believe this is what Nietzsche (1997:88) was articulating/expressing when he said: “...nihilism, counts as ‘truth’, but truth does not count as the supreme value, even less as the supreme power. The will to appearance, to illusion, to deception, to becoming and change...counts as more profound, primeval,

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<sup>11</sup> Even Gumbrecht’s argument of sport as aesthetic does not smack of modernist assumptions and, in fact, is a “down-to-earth” account of the aesthetics of the everyday without grand metaphysical postulates.

<sup>12</sup> This may contradict the institutional basis of art and/r sport” and “the will to form”, that is, the discipline, the system that each sport requires to perform a specific move/form optimally, and of course, the rules of a sport. I do not think you can separate the United States’s or China’s success at recent Olympic Games without the argument that such sporting excellence does not reflect political systems or adherence to the discipline required for a particular sport or sports-move and to the rules themselves. The point I am making here, however, is that there is a degree of *freedom* in bodily sporting performance (at whatever level) that defies the social, and that is more important than “formal excellence” or that does not need philosophical justification.

<sup>13</sup> J.H. Kerr *Motivation and emotion in sport: reversal theory*. (Brighton: Psychology, 1997).

<sup>14</sup> Baudrillard, J. 1994. *Simulacra and simulation*. Michigan: Ann Arbor (University of Michigan Press).

<sup>15</sup> J. Huizinga. *Homo ludens: a study of the play element in culture*. (Suffolk: Paladin, 1949).

‘metaphysical’ than the will to truth, to reality...” This then requires further explication of what this transience and flux may mean in terms of the common root of art, namely play. To this end, Huizinga and Nietzsche are instructive and suggest that philosophically art and sport are forms of bodily play, requiring both aesthetic and extra-aesthetic dimensions. This requires a certain mimetic “play” – we play according to a structure (rules, codes, traditions) and try to represent one thing via another in a sort of mimetic loss in translation, for games are mediated. Therefore ontologically and epistemologically there is always a limit and uncertainty to what can be known – there is no ultimate deep structure.

## 2.2 Mimetic “Play”<sup>16</sup>

In terms of art/sport not reflecting a deeper structure, it can be described as a “play” of surfaces and appearances (endless copies) or as Nietzsche’s “will to appearance”. In other terms, it is an enjoyable activity for many and offers a playful release (Hyland 1984) that has its roots in childhood game-playing<sup>17</sup> (fantasy) and also, ironically, mirrors a social fabric obsessed with images, economics and power-relations. It is not clear whether art/sport merely mimetically “shows” that reality rather than pier beneath it or subvert it or even change the status quo. The point, however, is that playing is central to art/sport and is a mechanism whereby we, in a sense create reality or rather there is no clear distinction between reality (appearance) and the games (we play). Thus one frees oneself from a certain kind of philosophizing (‘metaphysics’) and claims to knowledge (epistemological certainty) and it is the notion of mimetic “play” (in art and sport for example) that allows for this. Huizinga and Nietzsche (1956) in various ways highlight this “play” element. Implicit in both theorists is the idea that “play” entails a mimetic quality for the way we “play” constitutes a game and games are predicated on rules *more or less* so that to “play” is to exemplify (mimetically instantiate) some kind of structure, though we need not call this “reality”. This is so as rules are arbitrary and decided by convention. In analyzing “play” one can expand on the interpretations of the notion of mimesis.

### 2.2.1 Huizinga’s Homo Ludens

I shall explicate an account of “play” as integral to life that does not appear to derive from postmodern thinking (the fourth “order”), being a work produced before the middle of the twentieth century. Huizinga appeals to notions such as “civilization” and man’s “essential” nature. However, there is also a premodern unification of the dimensions of a society (artistic, sporting, scientific, legal and so on) under the rubric of “play” and I would argue that it is in this “horizontal” equalizing of all aspects of human endeavour, that his work coheres in some way with the postmodern, which is precisely a kind of equalizing of differences<sup>18</sup> through the very notion of “play”, a term that is not riddled with power,

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<sup>16</sup> I have placed “play” in inverted commas in most contexts throughout in order to make the point that art/sport is play and is not play. In other words, “play” does not exclude a kind of war or aggression and the like. Yet it is none of these things either, being at a remove from war proper and the like, so that play dominates as a concept.

<sup>17</sup> One could also argue that play is integral to childhood development (c.f. Piaget [1955] and Freud [1933])

<sup>18</sup> This does not contradict the idea that postmodernism also acknowledges difference. The reader is referred to the preface in which the “law of non-contradiction” is not always upheld. In a similar vein, my argument concerning mimetic “play” upholds both a universalizing, natural kind of concept *and* that it is arbitrary or conventionally constructed. One should and

oppression and certainty. In analyzing mimesis as “play”, one deconstructs mimesis as a correspondence to an enduring “truth”; rather it is an arbitrary vehicle for meaning-making.

Huizinga<sup>19</sup> notes that “play” has various meanings. He writes that “play” is more than just rational, it includes language as metaphor which is a play upon words, sacred rites, mythology, law, science, commerce, art and games. But there is no exact definition, either logically, biologically or aesthetically. Generally, it is an interlude in daily life and the contrast between “play” and seriousness is always fluid. There is also an arena in which “play” takes place (the stage, the court of justice, the screen).

Furthermore, “play” creates order; it is order and may be connected to beauty/aesthetics<sup>20</sup>, law, war, poetry (beyond the reach of reason), while including opposites – the tragic and comic. We refer to music as playing, dancing as essentially “play” and he argues that the plastic arts are less a matter of “play”, though in terms of the search for new forms, the “play” element is crucial. Sports as “play” reveals itself in the form of games and bodily exercises. In all these cases, he considers true “play” as knowing no propaganda, and being a kind of “happy inspiration”<sup>21</sup>. I would argue that this “happy inspiration” is no less than a kind of reflecting of oneself through certain kinds of games (more or less well defined) which are aspects of mimesis.

He traces the origin and fundamentals of “play” as a “discharge of superabundant vital energy”, or as the satisfaction of some *imitative* instinct or again as simply a “need” for relaxation. According to one theory “play” constitutes a training of the youth for the serious work that life will demand later on. According to another, it serves as an exercise in restraint needful to the individual. Some find the principal of “play” in an innate urge to exercise a certain faculty, or in the desire to dominate or compete. Yet others regard it as an “abstraction” – an outlet for harmful impulses, as the necessary restorer of energy wanted by one-sided activity, as “wish-fulfillment”, as a fiction designed to keep up the feeling of personal value. However, the above explanation of “play” starts with the assumption that “play” must serve something which is not “play”, that is, a biological purpose. But, asks Huizinga, why is a large crowd aroused to a frenzy by a football match? And he therefore concludes that “this intensity of, and absorption in, “play”, finds no explanation in biological analyses.”<sup>22</sup> Yet in this intensity, this absorption, lies the very essence, the primordial quality of “play”. It could have been that purely mechanical exercises, that is, useful functions may serve to discharge energy, but, nature gave us “play”, “with its tension, its mirth, and its fun”<sup>23</sup>. He describes “fun” as the essence of play, even though the word “fun” is only really found in English and is of recent origin. “Play” is therefore concerned with a spirit of cultural

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should not accept this paradox. Another way of saying this is that differences are maintained but not linked in any ascending or descending hierarchy.

<sup>19</sup> J. Huizinga. *Homo ludens: a study of the play element in culture*. (Suffolk: Paladin, 1949), pp7-8

<sup>20</sup> By “order” one could easily substitute “pattern” or “symmetry”. All such terms convey an aesthetic dimension to art and sports, both in participation and viewing. So far as the latter is concerned, modern technologies such as television certainly consists in an ordered, aesthetic dimension. “Order” also reveals an expressive intent in that it satisfies the emotional need for structure and avoiding chaos. By “order”, I also mean that sporting events often mark out time, certain sports events are a kind of island in time, a reference point. This latter sense of “order” perhaps applies more to sport than art, but the popular arts, such as film, also serve to impose order in that, by virtue of their popularity, one could say that specified times are devoted to their consumption.

<sup>21</sup> J. Huizinga. *Homo ludens: a study of the play element in culture*. (Suffolk: Paladin, 1949), p21.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, p3.

<sup>23</sup> J. Huizinga. *Homo ludens: a study of the play element in culture*. (Suffolk: Paladin, 1949), p2.

exchange as this “fun” is more than just a biological response to the natural world. We can thus deduce that creating an image or playing a game represents (or is itself a mimesis) of aspects of human “play” that are, in simple terms, “fun”.

It seems to be a valid view that “play” is a cultural phenomenon (not simply biological, but historical) because in a world wholly determined by the operation of blind forces the way early man may have perceived it, “play” would be altogether superfluous. “Play” only becomes possible, thinkable and understandable, when the influence of the mind breaks down the absolute determinism of the cosmos. As Huizinga<sup>24</sup> puts it: “The very existence of ‘play’ continually confirms the supra-logical nature of the human situation. Animals ‘play’, so they must be more than merely mechanical things. We ‘play’ and know how we ‘play’, so we must be more than merely mechanical things, for ‘play’ is irrational”.

“Play” is irrational in that it seems to serve no purpose. The disinterestedness of “play” seems to be outside the immediate satisfaction of wants and needs, appetites; it is an interlude in our daily life. Our games/“play” is played out in a certain time and place, often with a “consecrated spot” – the arena, the table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court and the court of justice. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world. Rather than the imperfection of life we have a temporary, limited perfection. Hence we may also say it is aesthetics and involves a certain tension, poise, balance, contrast, variation, solution and resolution, It may be enchanting, captivating, rhythmic and harmonious. It may also be an ethical training as “play” tests one’s fairness in adhering to the rules of the game. “Play” therefore promotes the formation of social groupings; it is cultural.

If the reader should retort that cultural “play” is actually a rather serious business, one would do well to recall that such terms of seriousness such as that of the ideal of “zeal”, “exertion”, “painstaking” and so on are all qualities that may be found associated with “play” as well. Even in law and the juristic wrangling of a modern lawsuit, the seeming bastion of seriousness, one observes a sportsmanlike (“playing”) passion for indulging in argument. And in war, surely terribly serious, fighting may yet be bound by rules and therefore it “bears the formal characteristics of ‘play’ by that very limitation”<sup>25</sup>. For example in Greek history, when two Euboean cities, Chalcis and Eretria were at war in seventh century BCE, there were rules laid beforehand in the Temple of Artemis, that all missiles were prohibited, and that only the sword and lance were allowed. Also a specific time and place was appointed. And in music, concurring with Huizinga, the perception of the beautiful and the sensation of holiness merge and therefore the distinction between “play” and seriousness is weakened in that fusion.

Music is also called “playing”. In Arabic, German, Slavonic and Semitic languages, music is referred to as “playing” and since this semantic understanding between East and West can hardly be ascribed to borrowing and coincidence, we have to assume some deep-rooted psychological reason for such remarkable symbol of the affinity between music and “play” ).

Aristotle also recognized the importance of the “play”-function. Music, drink, sleep, dancing is of such a nature that it requires us “...not only to work well, but idle well”<sup>26</sup> and moreover, this leisure is preferable to work, indeed, it is the aim of all work. Aristotle speaks of the free man having leisure time, a noble occupation, if you like, which recalls the modern polemic, art for art’s sake. Aristotle continues that the nature of music is, perhaps, for the sake

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* pp3-4

<sup>25</sup> J. Huizinga. *Homo ludens: a study of the play element in culture.* (Suffolk: Paladin, 1949), p89

<sup>26</sup> Aristotle in J. Huizinga. *Homo ludens: a study of the play element in culture.* (Suffolk: Paladin, 1949), p173.

of “play” (which we might render here by “amusement” or “distraction”) and recreation, that we desire music as we desire sleep and drink, which are likewise neither important in themselves nor serious, but pleasant and potent to dispel care. To music, wine and sleep, he adds dancing. Or should we say that dancing conduces to virtue in so far as, like gymnastics, it makes the body hot, breeds a certain ethos and enables us to enjoy things in the proper way? Or lastly, may “play” of this sort not contribute to material recreation and to understanding?<sup>27</sup>. In this sense mimetic “play” has a significant meaning in a particular culture and as culture.

Huizinga argues that the plastic arts, as opposed to music, dancing or some types of sport, are such that “play” is less evident. The plastic arts in Ancient Greece were not under sway of the muses (Apollo) but Hephaestus or Athena Ergane – the Athena of work. Such art is bound to matter and the limitation of form inherent in it. However, as much as the plastic artist is inspired by the creative impulse, he has to work like a craftsman, serious and intent, always testing and correcting himself (though this may not apply to the conceptual and other art post-Huizinga). Though Huizinga does maintain that there is an element of “play” in enjoyment and the contemplation thereof, even if the art is not free, that is, it is commissioned. The visual arts may be considered less a matter of “play” as unlike the musical arts which live and thrive in an atmosphere of common rejoicing, the plastic arts appeal to silence, an inner language, if you will. However, Huizinga does go on to say that there are traces of the “play”-factor in the plastic arts. That buildings, garments, weapons beautifully ornamented contain a sort of mystic identity, a magic power, in their functional role as part of a ritual context – in this there is “play”. In this sense, like music, to decorate an ornament or make resplendent is to create a culture of “play” (though we should be weary if it is used to adorn a political regime that is dangerous, for example). Huizinga’s point is simply that the instinct to decorate – forms of plastic art – “suggest play” and this is further corroborated because plastic art is developed through competition (received in social milieu, commissioned work) which is the primordial “play”-function of the contest itself. However, I would disagree with this as agon perhaps limits individual expression.

Dance, according to Huizinga, reveals an even greater “play” element and he calls it “the purest and most perfect form of play that exists”<sup>28</sup>, and that play is necessarily integral to dance. Dancing is musical (rhythm, movement) and plastic (bound to matter, dependent on the human body and its limited manoeuvrability). The body becomes a focus of beauty, in particular the moving body and this is where, I believe, many sporting-codes find their aesthetic meaning and intersection with the arts.

Huizinga concludes that real civilization or culture cannot exist in the absence of a certain element of “play”, for civilization presupposes or understands that it needs to be enclosed within certain bounds freely accepted. Civilization will, in a sense, always be played according to certain rules, and will always demand fair play. “Fair play” certainly refers to sports-play. In relation to the arts, cultural norms also seems to convey the notion that art has moral import, that art ought to “play” with the meanings and values of a given culture, at once reflecting, absorbing, criticizing or endorsing that – or other – cultures. Huizinga’s analysis of “play” argues for the fact that we naturally construct arbitrary rules/conventions as a form of mimetic game-playing.

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<sup>27</sup> Adapted from J. Huizinga. *Homo ludens: a study of the play element in culture*. (Suffolk: Paladin, 1949), p160

<sup>28</sup> J. Huizinga. *Homo ludens: a study of the play element in culture*. (Suffolk: Paladin, 1949), p160

In conclusion, such mimetic game-playing may be applied to sport and art with the following considerations: We may say that sport is a fully voluntary activity set arbitrarily in time and place, that it is separate from ordinary life, refreshing mind and body. The “salubrious effect theories of sport”, point to the increased mental and physical well-being of the individual and group (as culture). The “recreation theory” argues that one deals with life better by restoring energies through “play”. The “diversion theory” argues that play is an escape from work and other tedium’s of life. There is also the obvious kinaesthetic satisfaction – that one feels good about physical acts of performance, a kind of healthy tiredness, an increase in vigour, improved outlook, that one is more amiable, and is released from emotional and metabolic disorders and finally, that there is an aesthetic quality of movement. Art-making/“playing” too should be regarded in this holistic light, which is nothing less than the integration of the mind and the body.

I now turn to Nietzsche as he provides further insight into the concept of “play” and mimetic meaning and is often regarded as a precursor to postmodern thought, wherein the body and the “surface” is not hierarchically denigrated in favour of mind and “depth”. A confluence between art and sports suggests that in the non-correspondence between “surface” and “depth”, but a mimetic play (a struggle), so the empirical, the aesthetic and the sign compliments (as in complementary – Niels Bohr’s interpretation of the Quantum universe and now applied in this context) the idea, theory and the various disciplines by which one can understand the phenomenal (the sciences and the humanities, and other knowledge systems/narratives/traditions).

### 2.2.2 Nietzsche’s “Play”

In *The birth of tragedy*<sup>29</sup>, Nietzsche tries to resist the philosophical wedge between culture and nature. Culture, he says, is the perfection of nature, the refinement and not the replacement of instinct (the Dionysian spirit). Nietzsche’s Dionysian concept of the arts not only lead us to the life of the “free spirit”, but one that learns to “play” (an instinctual drive) with intellectual and rational matters on a more conventional level. Furthermore, that when carried to its logical conclusions, what Nietzsche offers through the learning of the “...Dionysian arts is a mystical or experiential solution for blissful living on earth”<sup>30</sup>. It is not without reason, therefore, that Nietzsche regarded himself as an earth mystic. He seems to be trying to integrate nature and culture and with Huizinga’s argument of the essential human drive of “play”, one can argue that Nietzsche recaptures such notions of “play”. This section therefore argues that play entails the creation of a space for the intersection of mental states and bodily awareness, even celebration of the latter. Insofar as both Nietzsche and Huizinga achieve this, my premise, namely the relevance of sport - a bodily activity - in theorizing and indeed in the practice of art itself, is enriched. The following brief analysis of Nietzsche’s views, then serves to demonstrate that the mimetic function is to be found in “play”, rather than “seriousness” and that this “play” (including thinking and writing) is grounded in the body, in *activity*, rather than as a transcendent mirroring of “mind” and “reality”

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<sup>29</sup> F. Nietzsche. *The birth of tragedy and the genealogy of morals*. Translated by F. Golffing. (New York: Anchor, 1956).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p13.



Nietzsche dubs the conscious self, the “little reason”, and what is unconscious to us, “great reason”<sup>31</sup>. The “great reason” he identifies as a kind of bodily consciousness. Regarding the despisers of the body (Schopenhauer and Christianity, according to Nietzsche), Nietzsche clearly distinguishes an unconscious self (“great reason”) from the conscious ego (“little reason”) as he says: “...behind your thoughts and feelings, my brother there stands a mighty ruler, an unknown sage whose name is self. In your body he dwells; he is your body”. The “little reason” says “I”, but the “great reason” of your body does not say “I”, but does “I” and “there is more reason in your body than in your best wisdom” (Crawford 1998:312). The true self, if you like, laughs at your ego and its bold leaps: “what are these leaps and flights of thought to me it says to itself. A detour to my end. I am the leading strings of the ego and the prompter of its concepts”<sup>32</sup>. Underlying the self is, according to Nietzsche, the bliss of the will to power which is what a human being is, when speech becomes song and the dancing body, that is when culture does not simply take the form of reason, but of art and the bodily cultural form that is sport.

To unpack his Dionysian world view we can make the following distinctions: Firstly, there is the language of conscious intellect, namely speech (tone combined with gestures of the lips, and thought, which is remembered speech without tone and gesture of the lips) including writing (thoughts devoid of tone and gesture). This is the language of the ego or “little reason”! Secondly, there is the language of unconscious psychological feeling, exemplified in dance, the whole body, in gesture and song and the heightened tone and gesture of the lips, which is music, rhythm, dynamism and harmony. This is the (true) self, the creative body. Nietzsche believes that the latter is greater than the former or at least underlies the former (its psychological reality). This bodily perspective is given substance when he says: “...a dancer wears his ears in his toes”<sup>33</sup>. Moreover, Nietzsche’s philosophizing about language ends in dance and his critique of morality as Christianity would have it, ends in dance. That is, his notion of the “will to power” is understood as the rhythm or energy underlying all movement and the eternal recurrence of the same is also figured in the image of dance. The spirit of the philosopher is thus transformed from the heavy and grave to lightness, delight, the unconscious self over the conscious ego, like a game you “play” with dance. As he argues, the “little reason” merely is a dancing with words and ideas. Speaking is thus a type of beautiful folly, a “play” with which “man dances over all things....How lovely is all talking, and all the descriptions of sounds! With sounds our love dances in many-hued rainbows”<sup>34</sup>. To write is to dance with the pen, that is, to dance with concepts and words. But dancing with the body is the province of the self (“great reason”): “...it is not the ego, the ‘little reason’ that should write and learn, but the body, the self – writing, speaking – to be enjoyed as descriptions and delightful folly and a dancing over such ‘serious’ things as ‘truth’, ‘certain knowledge’ and other desires of ‘little reason’....”<sup>35</sup>. In this sense “play” reflects a mimesis of the [S]elf.

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<sup>31</sup> S. Kemal & I. Gaskell (eds). *Nietzsche, philosophy and the arts*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p310

<sup>32</sup> G. Crawford. *Consuming sport: fans, space and culture*. (London: Routledge, 2004), p310

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* p314

<sup>34</sup> F. Nietzsche, F. *The birth of tragedy and the genealogy of morals*. Translated by F. Golffing. (New York: Anchor, 1956), p44

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p110

Nietzsche celebration of bodily awareness as it forms a knowledge closer to – or more in harmony with – the forces of nature, exhibit a marked scepticism regarding true knowledge of the cosmos and a not a wide chasm between nature and culture. This being so, art and sport form the voice of both such reasons (a mimesis of [S]elf), even as they are held in check by cultural norms. The element of “play” is the binding concept that unites art and sport or describes the artistic impulse to make images, music, dance *and* the sporting impulse to run, wrestle, and engage in games. They are united by “play” in that pre-discursive bodily activity and the cultural codification of both these disciplines is aesthetically and historically a marked feature of all human societies, present and past.<sup>36</sup> Nietzsche offers a “reason” for the ubiquitous nature of (bodily) “play” or mimetic activity. Nietzsche’s valorisation of bodily “play” and the unconscious asserts itself over the dominant Enlightenment paradigm that sought to reify mind, the conscious, “rational” intellect and seriousness, and can be viewed as a precursor to postmodern themes taken up by other philosophers. As such, Nietzsche is considered a forerunner of postmodernism and of a revised notion of mimesis, one not construed as that of correspondence, but as a “play” of “surfaces”.

### III. Discussion

I have argued that “play” is inherent in art and sport, but that this “play” does not accord with a truth-claim, a mimetic resemblance or correspondence to “reality”. Sport, in particular within a postmodern context, offers art theory a way of understanding “play” and mimetic meaning in creative ways without totalizing theories (‘metaphysics’) and in this respect I deduce two aspects of mimetic “play”, namely its self-referentiality (“surface [bodily] play”) and paradoxically, that art and sport may *suggest* that which is not present (“absent”). However, the latter is said with circumspect as that which is not present does not imply the need for a kind of Kantian “In Itself” (something transcendent). In this respect I use Foucault’s historicizing of knowledge to argue that this “absence” is not itself transcendent. These two deductions will be developed in the foregoing.

#### 3.1. Deduction one: Self-referentiality

Kant’s postulate of an “in-itself” cannot be known. This means that one’s sensory experience and even concepts/ideas in the mind, while satisfying conditions of knowledge to an extent, cannot grasp “things-in-themselves”/the *Noumenal* and hence the mimetic function cannot be considered as a Platonic mirror of “reality” so conceived.

So what then is meant by mimesis? Or rather what is meant by mimesis in art and sport when it is not defined as a transparent mirroring of “reality”?

In answer to the above, and considering “play” as central to both, I deduce that one could see art and sport as exemplifying concepts via sensory impressions and/or movements that are self-contained (as a game of a game, if you like), rather than pretend to “point to” a reality beyond itself or proclaim knowledge about the supersensible or the like.

In such terms, it appears that Kosuth pointed to this idea and “argued” that a work of art is tautological as opposed to traditional art being typological (“it is art because it looks like other paintings”). The tautological nature of art (or conceptual art, specifically) is expressed in his work *Leaning, clear, glass, square* (1965)<sup>37</sup>. There are four panes of glass, 100 times 100

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<sup>36</sup> M. Womack. *Sport as symbol: images of the athlete in art*. (London: McFarland & Co, 2003).

<sup>37</sup> Vares, Panza di Biumo Collection

centimetres each with each description (“leaning”, “clear”, “glass”, “square”) embossed on each pane of glass. Kosuth isolates art radically from non-art and art thus describes itself only. Each statement corresponds to a fact and “anything beyond that is falsification of the hermetic model of art as aesthetics. Art is the epistemological criticism of art”.<sup>38</sup> In this sense, art does not refer or resemble anything; the medium itself is the medium itself<sup>39</sup>. And yet, this medium is not significant in the sense of illustrating aesthetics (quo formalism); *that* is not crucial in the presentation of the concepts. In other words, conceptual artists were not bound to create objects (unless one describes them as “objects of thought”), or to use traditional art media. The primacy of “idea” abolishes concern for “style”, “quality” and “permanence”. Conceptual art need not “behave” as a label and need not apply to painting as Ad Reinhardt could be considered a conceptual artist (painter) in his rigorous “art-as-art” polemic in which art does not mirror life. It is self-contained and self-referential. Art *shows* concepts (for example in Kosuth’s work – “leaning”, “glass” and so on).

Sport too *shows* concepts. It instantiates concepts such as “fast” (or its opposite), “precision”, “strength” and so forth. To say that they exemplify in movement and through physical means a concept or many concepts, is not as a result of their resembling anything, rather it (sport) is a language unto itself. It is thus also tautological; it is structured in terms of its own language or constituent parts, though it may imply “concepts” and thus borrow from verbal language or form part of a culture (like an Olympic event, for example). Like art, sport may be seen as irreducible and not merely constructed. But is sports-appreciation and activity thereof (like art) not learnt languages, thus arguing against an unmediated understanding as a natural instantiation of concepts? The fact of sporting activity (the universality of game-playing) and the fact of art (the universality of some kind of aesthetic and/or symbolic structure) imply that although indeed one would need knowledge to play or appreciate sport (art), there is an aspect of sport or art that we intuitively grasp. This is because sport and art need not include knowledge of extra-sensible concepts, metaphysics or even (social) rules. We might not know what we see. We see what we see. This perhaps explains why as children we are naturally inclined/ attracted to a particular sport or art or an art-form without prior knowledge (of concepts, culture).

### 3.2. Deduction Two: “Absence”

If one wants to understand why one paints or wrestles and the like appeal to the natural (something contained and self-referential) does not explain why one so engages in these activities. There is a sense that if one knows what one is painting or why one runs, for example, one may not have the need to paint or run. I believe that this may be the case, because such activities reflect the fundamentally unknowable akin to Kant’s<sup>40</sup> analysis that the artist does not know where his or her ideas come from. The appeal to a “will to form” explains to an extent the need to make art or play sport. Perhaps one should revise the understanding as “a will to will”. But the problem is that it ends in an infinite regress, like an

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<sup>38</sup> R. Ruhrber, S. Schneckenburger, A. Fricke, & N. Honnef. 2005. *Art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century*. (Cologne: Taschen, 2005), p535

<sup>39</sup> I am not here implying that meaning is saturated as the second deduction as a kind of antinomy to this one, makes clear.

<sup>40</sup> I. Kant. *The critique of judgment*. Translated with analytical indexes by Meredith, J. (New York: Clarendon, 1952 [1790]).

infinite array of copies<sup>41</sup> from one order or level of reality into or through another. Auyoung is hopeful that we can “point to” the “unrepresentable” (something behind endless copies) or that which is “absent” predicated on that which is “present”. She says: “... something more lies beyond a suggestive but ultimately limited body of representation, and finding oneself arrested at this epistemic impasse”<sup>42</sup>. Like a sketch or a partial sports movement one “fills in” the complete image, that there is something more, via the limited mark or word or movement. However, she concludes rather pessimistically: “... she cannot move beyond the fixed, finite representation of the page (painting, sports-movement), despite all that it may seem to promise”<sup>43</sup> and hence she argues for the limitation of recognizable form. Therefore, the “absence” itself is itself only partially known, “apprehended” or “present”.

One cannot even elide this “lack of foundation” (lack of “presence” or quantified “absence”) with the notion that the artwork or sports-movement *suggests* a “truth” (a complete “presence” or known “absence”). The general sense is that art and sport are languages whereby material “things” are used to express an “idea” or thought-complex and/or emotional quality. And yet, since an infinite array of materials may be used and a further set of infinite combinations laid down, there is no transparent rendering of this “idea” or thought or feeling in that form it so assumes. Meaning proliferates; the content remains nebulous or inchoate and the “origin” is no-where to be found. In other words: a “presence” (the form, the movement) may represent (mimetically refer) what is “absent” (another form, movement or the “idea”), but as Nietzsche understood this is itself part of a process (rather than a stable truth, a static picture, a final game) as the postmodern shift implies.

Nevertheless, one need not consider it an impossibility that one language cannot express another, that is, mimetically reveal and bring into sharp focus what one wishes to communicate. It would appear that the moment you make art – and thus no longer question art, it stops being philosophy. The moment you “make” philosophy (that is, write in rational terms), it stops being mysticism. The moment you make music, that is, articulate/order sound, silence is no longer. Or perhaps precisely the opposite: art brings philosophy into focus; philosophy articulates the mystical urge; music accentuates the existence of silence. They are what can be called “embedded concepts”, one order of perception acting in relation to another. In this sense, sport could be seen to “hold” philosophical, social and aesthetic concepts similar to those usually associated with art. Therefore, the “presented” can “hold” or *suggest* what is not apparent or the “unrepresentable” (“absence”), but since we do not trace these “(re)presentations” to an origin there is no truth-claim contrary to Plato’s agenda. There can, however still be meaning in the (formal) bodily play of “presences” (“absences”) or a mimesis of infinite “surfaces”. Regarding these “surfaces”, I believe that Foucault was theorizing a way to argue for the necessity of the interplay between “presence” and “absence”. Or in other terms, to theorize a view of “truth” that does not assume a transcendental monism, an accurate mimetic “presence” or ultimate “absence”. In Foucault’s analysis, the production of “truth” becomes inseparable from the production of power. Therefore, rather than the

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<sup>41</sup> Another way of saying this is that we cannot speak of an original. IJsseling (1990:29-30) aptly expresses it thus: “...now, the fact is that what is called an original act or event only *becomes* original in and through the doubling, or repetition of this reality, act or event – that is to say, in and through mimesis, which makes the origin into an origin and at the same time implies a withdrawal of the origin”. I would like to suggest that the notion of “absence” captures the idea of the “withdrawal” implicit in acts of expression or (re)presentation.

<sup>42</sup> E. Auyoung, . The sense of something more in art and experience. *Style* 4, 44 (2010) pp547–565.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* pp547–565, brackets my inclusion.

modernist project wherein power lies “within” the unique, cloistered aesthetic object that is the artwork, the artwork (or sports-act) becomes a text to be unravelled by the viewer in terms of social history. Art may not have this modernist, transcendental value and in the focus on reception more than creation, cultural forms embody a temporal relevance. Reez and Borzello put it this way: “... rather than a space in which such an understanding, achieved elsewhere by another process, is reflected (mimetic play) ... it permits cultural historians to argue that cultural artifacts make the world, as well as being made by it; it gives the cultural form under scrutiny historical, as opposed to eternal, significance (that is, as on-going mimetic [bodily] “play”).”<sup>44</sup>

#### IV. Conclusion

One can thus conclude that while sport, like art need not be concerned with a correspondence paradigm, it can say something significant, albeit within its own terms or as a game. But this is not to say sport has no claim to knowledge or significance to life itself. Drawing from a rich cultural tradition of aesthetics and philosophy (and this essay only scratches the surface) one can develop an account of sport inspired by ideas and formal appreciation usually reserved for fine art. In the process, the growing field of everyday aesthetic (or AEL) is strengthened and in particular the argument in favor of a healthy dialectic between art and sport. By focusing on the changing mimetic paradigm from correspondence to a play of surfaces in sport and not only high culture, one can perhaps deduce that, in particular a post modern world (if indeed this is accurate in the first place), lends itself to an overlap of such disciplines pointing to further inter and transdisciplinary models.

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<sup>44</sup> A. Reez, & F. Borzello (eds). *The new art history*. (Camben: Camben, 1986), p70, brackets my inclusion.