

A Philosophy of S(p)orts

A review essay on *A Philosophy of Sport*
by Steven Connor

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Published on the Internet, www.idrottsforum.org/articles/jonasson/jonasson120509.html,
(ISSN 1652–7224), 2012–05–09

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Above the door leading to the library at Christ's Hospital School, a boarding school in West Sussex, near Horsham, is the inscription *Turpe nescire*, a Latin phrase meaning that it's a disgrace to be ignorant. There's no way of knowing what kind of impression this maxim has made on generations of students at that school since 1552, nor do we want to speculate on what young Steven Connor made of it when he came there at the age of eleven in 1966, to be expelled six years later for reasons unknown to us. In any event, after completing his schooling at the local comprehensive school in his hometown of Bognor Regis, Connor came to Wadham College, Oxford where he studied literature for, among others, Terry Eagleton. In 1980 he wrote his DPhil thesis on Prose Fantasy and Mythography. Later that year he was appointed lecturer at Birkbeck College, London, where he still works today, now as Professor in Modern Literature and Theory. Connor has published widely over the years, mainly in his chosen academic field but also on its outskirts, such as a book on the cultural history of ventriloquism, and *Paraphernalia: The Curious Lives of Magical Things*. He came to our attention by yet another excursion outside the field of literature with his latest book, *A Philosophy of Sport* (Reaktion Books), the only one of his nearly 170 published texts with the word 'sport' in the title. (However, available on his website are three lectures that, in various ways, touches upon the topic of sports.)

In *A Philosophy of Sport*, Steven Connor presents his own philosophical understanding of sport based on the definition of sport as something that involves exertion and exhaustion, and that is a fundamental part of modern human life where we negotiate our relationship to nature. He deals primarily with the sports of rugby, soccer, cricket, baseball and tennis, and he musters a team of prominent philosophers, including Hegel, Freud, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Adorno, Sartre, Deleuze and Serre, to support his case. We asked Kalle Jonasson for a review, and he submitted an essay, no less, in which he relates his own philosophical musings, rooted in Bruno Latour's understanding of modernity, to Connor's carefully crafted, comprehensive, and partly provocative grammar of sport. Our reviewer is not completely convinced all the time, but, some reservations aside, he is actually quite happy with the book – "a gem".

The systematic use of continental metaphysics in sport philosophy is rare. In the editorial introduction to a recent continental philosophical sport study, *Bodily Democracy*, Mike McNamee, Jim Parry and Heather Reid explain this by stating that ‘the founding scholars of the Philosophy of Sport came from the analytic tradition which dominated the 20th century Anglo-American philosophy’.¹

However, continental philosophy seems very apt for dealing with sport. To assert this, one could only list continental philosophers who have utilized sport metaphors to demonstrate different concepts of process, albeit *en passant*. In their treatise of philosophy in general, the French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari describe philosophers’ utilization of etymology as a form of athleticism.² Deleuze himself famously, although occasionally and only briefly, refers to surfing in his musings about what characterizes life and knowledge in ‘societies of control’.³ Michel Serres, also a French philosopher, describes the course of the ball between the players in rugby as a process of subjectification. This leads him to the conclusion that objects/things are required for subjecthood to emerge.⁴ The concept in question, ‘quasi-object’ has been decisive in the formation of influential theoretical strands such as science and technology studies (STS) and actor-network theory (ANT).

This list is stocked up in the recently published book *A Philosophy of Sport* by Steven Connor, Professor of Literature at Birkbeck, University of London. Given the low frequency of continental sport philosophers, Connor’s addressing of this lacuna makes this book a welcome contribution to the field. Connor’s oeuvre so far spans over widely differing themes, such as air and flies, and is now enriched with a thorough scrutiny of sport.

But is it philosophy that Connor offers us? At the outset the author admits that neither is he a philosopher, nor does he strive to investigate the subject via the highways of sport philosophy: ‘sport as ideology; sport as ethics; sport as art’ (p.14) and ‘sport as problem of definition and categorization’ (p.12). Instead his point of departure is that sport is a ‘weirdly coherent parallel universe, which is not so much a mirror for as an anagram of human life in general’ (p.14). Thus, with a cultural phenomenological approach, he endeavors to enter the subject with the view of the proverbial Martian observer, puzzled by the fact that all of the twenty-two players on the soccer pitch aren’t given a ball.

Nevertheless, as becomes evident throughout the chapters, this stance becomes less sustainable every time Connor’s fascination for sport reveals itself in the anecdotes of his own humble athletic experiences. The fact that many of the chapters are based on previous lectures and papers perhaps is a further aggravation for being able to apply this fabled perspective. And, were he a Martian, he’d be the most well read of aliens, for this is clearly the work by a scholar of the terrestrial canon. Several prominent authors throughout the history of man are cited and used to illuminate the idiosyncrasies of sport in *A Philosophy of Sport*. This, it must be asserted, in no way diminishes the quality of the book. I’m glad Connor is not from Mars, since the cadre of men of letters mustered makes this book a joyous philosophical reading of sport that has as much poetic as metaphysical qualities (although a “Venusian” reading might have featured more female philosophers, writers, and athletes).

1 Eichberg, H. (2010) *Bodily Democracy-Toward a philosophy of sport for all*, p.1.

2 Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (1994) *What is philosophy?*, p. 8.

3 Deleuze, G. (1992) *Postscript on the Societies of Control*, p. 6; Deleuze, G. (1995) *Negotiations*, p.121.

4 Serres, M. (2007) *The Parasite*, pp 224-234.

Ludic, rather than lucid

Speaking of the relation between philosophy and poetry, one of Connor's main sources of inspiration, the "troubadour of knowledge" himself, Michel Serres, when "accused" of being a poet rather than a philosopher – and indeed, he holds a chair at *Académie française* – exclaimed that '[p]oetry comes from the Greek, meaning 'invention', 'creation' – so all is well thank you!'.⁵ With a vocabulary that is quite demanding for a reader with a non-English mother tongue, Connor applies an abundance of beautiful analogies and esoteric associations. Here exemplified by a thought on sport stadia:

For all its celestial annulations and concentricities, the stadium has a stronger affinity with the gorge, chasm or quarry, and other spaces of chthonic excavation, than with the heavens (p. 62).

Etymological passages often pop up in Connor's prose, and his use of language is playful. The demonstrations therefore, often tend to be ludic rather than lucid. A typical quote in this vein follows here:

Not only is the space of play put into play by the fact of its being-for the crowd in front of whom it transpires, this play of contention is itself increasingly drawn into relation with a set of other audiences, near and far, in space and time (p. 66).

The complex prose (or poetry) of continental philosophy is what the analytic side of the aisle shuns. This could be exemplified by a recent chronicle in *The New York Times*, in which the American philosopher Gary Gutting contends that "[t]he continental-analytic gap will begin to be bridged only when seminal thinkers of the continent begin to write more clearly." However, Graham Harman, another American philosopher, invents a hypothetical counterclaim to this statement by saying that:

"[T]he continental-analytic gap will begin to be bridged only when seminal thinkers of Anglo-American philosophy begin to write more vividly." Or "only when seminal thinkers of Anglo-American philosophy begin to write things that people outside their narrow professional clan are interested in reading".

Harman furthermore suggests that maybe the gap shouldn't be bridged, and that it all boils down to if one sees philosophy as science or art. But then again, maybe it's neither, at least if we follow Deleuze & Guattari's argument that philosophy, art and science are distinct practices.⁶ Those singularities are certainly important in Connor's scrutiny of sport. Starting from Connor, and given the impact of sport in modernity, perhaps we could argue for sport to be added to this list. This idea is supported by the "investigative character" that sport philosophers like Sigmund Loland has claimed that sport, as a study of human bodily properties and performances, possesses.⁷ To put a bit vulgarly: Could we pose sport as a sort of folk-science, folk-art, or folk-philosophy?

⁵ Serres, M. & Latour, B. (1995) *Conversations on Time, Science and Culture*, p.44.

⁶ Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (1994) *What is philosophy?*

⁷ Loland, S. (2002), *Fair Play in Sport: A moral norm system*.

A general theory of (team-)sport

Beyond the introduction, the book contains seven chapters thematized under the titles (and in that order): *History, Space, Time, Movement, Equipment, Rules* and *Winning*. The demonstrations are shot through with the ‘philosophical athleticism’ of etymology, a practice that actually begins the first chapter, where Connor discusses the root of the word sport, which is to be found in the Latin word *disportare* (to carry away or apart).

The history (and etymology) of sport teaches us that the meaning of sport has been altered since its emergence in medieval France. It is noteworthy that Connor doesn’t begin with a “Hellenic” phase of sport, but instead is guided by the arrival of the term sport itself. A simple categorization can structure this process (the words in this paragraph that are bracketed by quotation marks are not Connor’s, but mine). Under the Middle Ages there is the “hell” phase, when sport was used to describe the capricious work of the devil, from where we move to the “hunting” phase during early modernity, in which sport necessarily had to do with some activity containing animals (such as blood sports and cock fights). The phase that we are in now, beginning in the 19th century could be called the “human” phase. What becomes perceivable through this overview is a sort of purification process that is coherent with the intense ‘work of purification’ during modernity that increasingly sharpened the distinction between humans and nonhumans.⁸ The next phase might be called the “hybrid” phase, in which what counts as human and nonhuman properties must be renegotiated. Gene doping and athletes with prosthetics in regular sport competitions point to that we are already on the threshold of this era.

All chapters are beautiful essays on the world-making qualities of sport. Concepts like ‘space of play’, ‘play of space’, ‘absolute’ and ‘immanent time’ creates an all-encompassing framework for the spatiotemporal aspects of sport in general. However comprehensive his theory strives to be, the sports favored by Connor have by now announced themselves.

Rugby, soccer, cricket, baseball, and tennis are the sports most frequently referred to in the book. These games are organized around the interaction of two opposing sides fighting for the control of a ball. Connor’s way of historicizing sport probably leads to the emphasis on those sports, since they, to a larger extent than, say athletics and aquatic sports, are oriented to a maximum number of human actors (save for tennis) in the game-play. Also, they have outcomes that don’t revolve around the exact measurement of temporal and spatial units.

And since Connor’s theory is cautiously sketched as a universal theory of sport, this heavy relying on so similar sports is a bit problematic. He, however, explicitly claims that it isn’t strict categorization that is sought for, but

that there is something, if not essential, then at least oddly insistent that runs through all instances of sport, despite the fact that it seems so hard to pick out precisely what it is that darts and skiing, Tae Kwon-do and dressage, boxing and synchronized swimming, has in common (p. 14).

⁸ Latour, B. (1993) *We have never been Modern* pp 1-12.

There is no categorizing concern in this report on sport. Connor's fashion of fathoming sport is a search for a synthesis, similar, again, to the peregrinations of Monsieur Serres, who states that his encyclopedic endeavor must be accompanied by swift movement:

I am racing towards synthesis. [...] this synthesis will no doubt be made more through comparitivism than by sequential linking, more through Hermes's swift travels than by deduction and solid construction. [...] The synthesis will be made, more probably, among fluids.⁹

Connor is indeed Serres's "running mate", and since they both seek knowledge *in flux*, it is no wonder that they both favor open-ended sports as their preferred material of demonstration (although Serres admits his considerable debt to mountaineering for reviving his body and thoughts late in life¹⁰). However, having Connor's own statement, 'in modern sports, man must be his own other, relayed back to himself by objects rather than other beings' (p. 34), in mind, this is perfectly logical. Given that the focal point of Connor's study is modern sport – i.e. practices organized within the frame of what was stipulated above as the "human" phase of sport –, it is not surprising that sports maximizing the number of human actors in its internal organization enters the scene more often than Tae Kwondo and Dressage.

Processual definitions

So, given the Martian approach and the synthesis made *in medias res*, what is sport in Connor's usage of the term? According to the operational definition, i.e. the analytical tool applied in the book, sport is a competitive practice that physically exhausts its practitioners. From this rather conventional understanding of sport, many new definitions are found along the way. The peculiarity of sport is thus demonstrated by a curious passer-by. All these "processual definitions" form a synthesis bearing the seal of a swift Hermetic travel.

In the chapter *History*, sport during its "hell" phase is endowed with the meaning 'to mock or make merry at some object other than oneself' (p. 28), and therefore should be understood as having at its heart 'the very turning, deporting or perversion of sense that is involved in deriving pleasure from pain' (p. 29). Regarding the "exhaustion criterion of sport", Connor, in the chapter *Time*, claims that:

Sports are always played with the encroaching horizon of the fatigue that would ultimately bring them to a standstill. All sports are game-like, in that they play with time, but only those games that synchronize themselves with the movement of time towards exhaustion can be called sports (p. 84).

⁹ Serres, M. & Latour, B. (1995) *Conversations on Time, Science and Culture*, p. 73.

¹⁰ Serres, M. (2011) *Variations on the body*.

This necessary feature of all sports is according to Connor ontologically favorable, since it, as it is contended in the chapter *Movement*, doesn't 'restrict it only to its most competitive forms or its most expert and highly trained exponents' (p. 100).

In the chapter *Rules*, Connor compares sport with conceptual art, and holds that the latter 'typically makes rules for itself. Sport in this respect is exposed and conceptual art is insulated' (p. 147). More processual definitions are strewn out on the pages of this chapter. For instance when Connor speaks of the factor of chance and open-endedness of sport, we are told that 'sporting events often seem to have the function of the disclosing of destiny, the making clear of what had to happen ... Sport literally involves taking your chances, not in order to triumph over chance, but in order to take it into yourself, to make it your own' (p. 171). Pushing further the hypothesis of sport as a modulator of fate, Connor asserts that 'sport is the forcing into being of a condition in which it is impossible to deny what is really happening' (p. 175). In the same section, sport stands out almost as a philosophical school in its own right relating to the musings of thinkers like Gilles Deleuze who have written extensively on the relation between the virtual and the actual:

The playing of sports involves a complex and contentious alternation between motivations, intentions, and possible choices on the one hand, and choices, actions, and actualizations on the other, but the aim and tendency of all sports is always towards the reduction of the virtual to the actual. Sports may have the reputation of encouraging aspiration and self-transformation, but their action is governed by the desire for the absolute coincidence of being and meaning (ibid.).

This absolute coincidence necessarily is connected with the production of winners and losers – a distinguishing practice at the heart of sport that is illuminated in the chapter *Winning*. In a discussion about the ambivalent protagonist/antagonist character of one's opponent in sport, Connor holds that sport could be defined 'as a circumstance which makes it possible for there to be a loser, who loses as absolutely and definitively as possible while remaining almost entirely unharmed (p. 191)'. To conclude, and apostrophizing Angela Patmore, one of the few female writers quoted in the book, Connor sees sport as a sort of experiment: "Sport is a way of assaying (hence the language of trials, tests and contests) the degree of resistance to stress (p. 205).

Unnecessary animals at play

Connor wants to pinpoint *Homo ludens*, Man, the player. This might seem like an obvious perspective for someone studying sport, but there is a noteworthy distinction to make here. There is a great difference between taking for granted that sport revolves around human beings, and investigating how humanness is produced and promoted in and through sport. Connor does the latter. But who is this human and how does sport serve her?

The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben speaks of a human as someone who is formed while questioning what her being might be.¹¹ Humans are those creatures that are aware of

¹¹ Agamben, G. (2004), *The Open: Man and Animal*, §7

and admit the non-necessity of their own existence. Even the Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus, who christened man as *Homo sapiens*, was uncertain of how man should be distinguished from other apes. Connor treats sport as an “anthropological machine”, i.e. as a sort of animated diorama in which human beings can recognize themselves as precisely human beings. To observe and distinguish, as the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann would say, is that which constitute and reproduce a system.¹²

This perspective is very fruitful for the analysis, also since sport is so obviously oriented toward human affairs. Proceeding with the French philosopher Roland Barthes’s exquisite treatise on sport,¹³ in which it is stated that winners in sport are inaugurated in order “to give the world to all men”, Connor says that ‘it is not so much the mythic making of the human as the giving the world to all men that I am struck by in Barthes’s words’ (p. 47). However, to me, these elements seem inextricably linked; the only way of engaging in the mythic making of man is to repeatedly give that which is not man, i.e. the world and its nonhumans, to man. The easily repeatable geometries of sport stadia have, then, made possible not only the global diffusion of sport, but also ‘the pantopic and panchronic ubiquitization of man’ (p. 66). And sport seems very apt for this, at least in the phase that we are now in, when nonhuman elements are thoroughly accounted for in any sport competition.

Sport is a reasonably sure way of distinguishing man from the rest. But, there is a twist here. Humanness in sport competitions is not an *a priori*, but an *a posteriori*. The point of departure in sport is, in other words, a fuzzy set of objects, which are sorted and organized in and through trials. Its procedures, constitutions and rules orient action towards ending the game and producing the winner. The sport result is at the same time more absolute and supple than any other truth produced by men. Compared with the scientific fact, the sport result is never as contested. A world record is what it is, unless it becomes known that it was assisted by the wind or an illegal substance, or it is legitimately broken. But, should the wind interfere, it doesn’t deprive the competition and the winning athlete of the result. Other than winners and losers, humans and nonhumans are the main outcome in sport. Supple and absolute, just like Agamben’s human observing her own non-capability of finally deciding how she differs from the world.

The mandatory *coda* on lifestyle sports

It is a tedious tradition for scholars of sport to throw in an appendix of “new sports” (cf Allen Guttmann),¹⁴ also known as lifestyle and extreme sports (a crime now committed by me also, although for the sake of the argument). These physical cultural practices deserve a better fate than being staged as an appendix to sport.¹⁵ But in Connor’s case it is all the more severe. In *Glissade*, this book’s obligatory “lifestyle” section, the implications of the conclusions risks denying the rest of the book its splendor!

12 Jonasson, K. (2011) *The system of sport studies*, http://idrottsforum.org/reviews/items12/jonkal_wagneretal.html

13 Barthes, R. *What is sport?*

14 Guttmann, A. (2007). *Sports – the first five millennia*

15 Anthologies such as Wheaton, B. (ed.) (2004) *Understanding Lifestyle Sports*, vividly demonstrates that “new sports” aren’t that “sporty”, i.e. that we need other perspective to uncover their specific structures.

Not only does the author undermine his prior demonstrations by saying that lifestyle sports ‘seem to be prompting the most interesting philosophical reflections’ (p. 210), he also asserts that ‘these newer sports ... may help to equip us for the adjustments we may need to make in our attitudes towards nature’ (p. 214-5). As for the first statement, I would not concur since throughout the book he has proven otherwise. Also, when applied to lifestyle sports, continental theories tend to become even loftier than its analytic critics might have expected, while, when applied to “common” sport, as in Connor’s book, those theories thrive. My final remark on what kind of sport “prompts the most interesting philosophical reflections” is that it reverts the aim of the book, namely to be immersed in the strangeness of sport, and not, as the statement implies, to assess which sport is the better leverage for philosophy.

Regarding the second statement, my doubt relies fully on the theories of Bruno Latour. If I hadn’t read his *We have never been Modern*,¹⁶ I would never have reacted to statements about nature such as Connor’s. What Latour has done for decomposing our notions of nature in his deliberations of the laboratory, Tim Morton, a British-American scholar of literature has done for deconstructing our notions of nature as constituted in romantic art-forms. Morton’s argument will have to be explicated briefly here for my own argument. Romantic attitudes, says Morton, toward an awe-striking pastoral nature (such as the untainted frontier lands of lifestyle sports) may reproduce exactly the opposite of Connor’s claims.¹⁷ It is more than acceptable if one wishes to leave a quotidian life to visit all sorts of vistas. However, heralding such behavior as a role model for how to look upon the world is not as innocent. The danger of romantically cherishing primordial surroundings – that is definitely *not us*, but a *sanctum* where one goes to evade the restrictions, angst and stress of urban life – lies in the affirmation of the division between nature and culture. According to Morton, the way in which these snippets of pristine earth are seen by old and new romantics are rather part of the problem than the solution to it.

We would be unable to cope with modernity unless we had a few pockets of place in which to store our hope.¹⁸

Et in Arcadia ego... lusit? To affirm nature and culture as absolute in themselves, and moreover distinct from each other, is the most modern of practices.¹⁹ The act of reinforcing the “work of purification” hinders us from seeing that we are not distinct from our ecologies. The likes of Morton and Latour argue that

the globe is warming; the ozone hole persists; people are dying of radiation poisoning and other toxic agents; species are being wiped out, thousands per year; the coral reefs have nearly all gone²⁰

According to Latour such disasters could be traced to modern ideas of the world, viz. that there are two absolute and fundamental categories: culture and nature. And this “sin” is

16 Latour, B. (1993) *We have never been Modern*.

17 Morton, T. (2007). *Ecology without Nature*.

18 Ibid., p. 11

19 Latour, B. (1993) *We have never been Modern*.

20 Morton, T. (2007). *Ecology without Nature*, p.10

one that Connor doesn't commit in *A Philosophy of Sport*. Sport, in Connor's treatment of it, actually doesn't finally decide what the human is, even if that is what it sets out to do. This might sound like a paradox since Connor explicitly emphasizes the human phase of sport, foremost represented by sports with a maximum number of humans participating. The answer to this conundrum lies in his conception of humans – namely, that they are animals that are certain of only one thing: that they cannot finally decide wherein their difference from the world lies. But we can try, and we should do so, not in order to finally establish that we are not of this world, but in order to claim our place is in this world. It is not we that are visitors in nature; it is nature and culture that visit us. In lifestyle sport the human element is an *a priori*, in sport an *a posteriori*. At least this is my perspective, also after reading *A Philosophy of Sport*.

Letting the concluding section on *sport de glisse* slide away to bushwhack along quaint off-pist routes, it must be said that Connor's book is a gem.