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Blurred Boundaries: Sport, Art and Activity

By Benedict Seymour

Is the convergence of art and sport under the pressure of pseudo-participatory spectacle undermining the utopian potential of both? Benedict Seymour goes back to the future to recover the new kind of activity which, in different ways, informs them still

Contemporary art is almost identical with contemporary sport. If one considers artistic practice and reception in its specificity this may sound like an exaggerated claim. Clearly most art is still not much like most sport. But from the perspective of the UK government it is sport against which the arts – including fine art – must compete in terms of validity and hence for funding. £30 million of lottery money was cut from the Arts Council of England's (ACE's) budget last year and redirected to the 2012 Olympics, presumably on the assumption that all the things art was supposed to be good for – urban regeneration, social cohesion, self-esteem, entrepreneurial ambition, economic vitality and health – would be done better by sport.

Last year's cut reflected the instrumentalised definition of art (and sport) advanced by the New Labour government and increasingly internalised by artistic institutions, not to say artists. The fact that art and sport could swap places in the government's funding priorities reflects a utilitarian conception of culture in terms of 'benefits to communities' which, in practice, interlocks with processes of urban restructuring, cultural tourism, and financialisation that may benefit some 'communities' but rarely the ones named on the funding application forms.

Institutions such as ACE were already used to citing art's sport-like qualities when appealing for funding to the Department of Culture Media and Sport, but with the Olympics large-scale looting operation demanding ever-larger potlaches of State expenditure, any difference between art and sport, rather than constituting a bonus, appeared as a deficit: sport is good for health, art, if not necessarily as bad as smoking, is at best neutral in terms of obesity reduction; sport is more closely associated with audience participation than art (despite the claims of relational aesthetics), gets more TV viewers and can pull bigger crowds; finally, sport is said to contribute more to the economy and can also mobilise volunteer labour on a scale that the arts can only dream about.

The fact that much data exists to contradict the official claims for sport – for instance, stadiums are a waste of money in terms of local economic growth, and of space when considered in terms of community involvement – is by the by. The point here is that the claims made for sport are strikingly similar to those made for art, it is just that art is (even) less effective than sport at delivering on them.

Still from multi-screen video *Deep Play*, Harun Farocki, 2007

Of course were we looking at art from the perspective of the private sector, at art's value in terms of the art market, auction sales, etc., rather than sheer audience-community-participation power, then art might have a better chance to justify itself. But funding bodies are supposed to be about supporting that which the market cannot. While encouraging artists to think entrepreneurially is an increasingly prominent part of funding policy, a focus on access, visibility and audiences as a measure of cultural value, rather than sales, only highlights art's weakness when contrasted with sport.

So, how did it come to pass that art and sport should now be interchangeable competitors for State money? And if their current role reversal is in part a sign of these hitherto polarised forms of leisure mutating under the pressure of commodification, with sport emphasising its aesthetic component (the beautiful game, etc.) and art emphasising its sport-like qualities (spectacle, involvement), is this a realisation of earlier utopian projects for sport and art, a liberatory dissolution of historic boundaries and exclusions, or a perversion of both?¹

Sport, Politics, Activity

To begin answering these questions about sport and art today, I want to take up a series of propositions from Loren Goldner's remarkable book *Herman Melville*, identifying sport as one site of the emergence of an epochally new form of human activity. Goldner develops C.L.R. James's observations regarding Melville's famous novel *Moby Dick* and James's provocative reflections on the place of sport in the life of the working class.² In his autobiography *Beyond A Boundary*, James remarks the simultaneous birth of modern sport and modern politics in the mid to late 19th century: the Football Association was founded in 1863, the first all-professional US baseball team organised in 1869, in 1866 the first athletic association. Around the same time, Disraeli's Reform Bill (1865) introduced popular democracy in England, the slave states were defeated in the American Civil War, the first modern organisation of American labour appeared, and Marx and Engels founded the First Communist International (1864).

As Goldner relates, James saw this historical conjuncture as not only a significant intersection of novel forms of sport and politics, but as a moment in which an intimately related mutation in the aesthetic was occurring. James, who grew up in Trinidad, was well placed to register this transfusion between art and sport, raised as he was on a steady stream of English novels and constant games of cricket. James became fascinated by what he called the 'social aesthetic' of cricket:

men from the neighbourhood described by his aunts as 'do-wells' were transformed into aristocrats of self-mastery and brilliance at bat in cricket matches.³

Goldner discerns in this vignette not simply the grace and cooperative activity celebrated in today's paeans to football but an intimation of the sovereignty of the working class, a new social relationship manifest in the 'at once collective and highly individualized' tensions of men at bat.

James was unusual among Marxists in that he attributed a positive value to the working class's passionate interest in 'organised sports and games'. Unlike his comrades, rather than seeing workers as deflected from politics by sport, or believing that workers needed 'raising' up to some cultural level set down by the bourgeois radical intelligentsia or avant-garde, James recalled the 'do well' sporting aristocrats of his youth, and refused to accept this one-sided evaluation. James differed from both Lukács 'who saw the works of high bourgeois culture, up to the watershed of 1848, as bourgeois society's legacy to the working class' and currents such as the Frankfurt School, 'which saw that legacy more in the modernist revolt against classical bourgeois culture', as Goldner succinctly sums it up.

Still from *Deep Play*, Harun Farocki, 2007

For James, not only was sport not a diversion from revolutionary politics but it contained within itself, a new, higher rationality for the organization of society that superseded the capitalist antagonism between work and leisure, says Goldner. James, like Melville and Marx before him, see in working class labour and leisure a new form of activity which overcomes the very work/leisure, and individual/collective oppositions. James may not have known it at the time, argues Goldner, but in his meditations on working class sport and games as a new social art form:

he had reproduced Marx's own fundamental idea of the supersession of the work/labour split in the *Grundrisse*:

Capital's ceaseless striving towards the general form of wealth drives labor beyond the limits of its natural paltriness [Naturbedürftigkeit] and thus creates the material elements for the development of the rich individuality which is as all-sided in its production as in its consumption, and whose labor also therefore no longer appears as labor, but as the full development of activity itself (Grundrisse, p.325)

Here we should note that capital, rather than simply instrumentalising or subsuming creative activity, is seen as one of its preconditions. The emergence of this rich individuality as all-sided in its production as in its consumption derives not from the development of artistic activity by isolated bourgeois individuals of genius but from activity itself the identity-in-collectivity of the proletariat whether at work or at play, in the hold of the whaling ship described by Melville in *Moby Dick* or at the wicket on the patch of grass outside James's childhood home.

If James sees sport as taking over the mantle of literature as a vehicle of a (truly) social aesthetic (compare Lukács on the social mission of the novel), Melville is the first, and perhaps one of the few, modernist artists to recognise and describe this new form of human activity. In *Moby Dick* Melville captures this category-breaking form of labour/leisure as praxis, not in a socialist-realist celebration of heroically accelerated production but as a grace of total activity, the collective development of a full individuality rather than its subsumption under Party, State or punch card:

In strange contrast to the hardly tolerable constraint and nameless invisible domineerings of the captain's table, was the entire care-free license and ease, the almost frantic democracy of those inferior fellows the harpooners. While their masters, the mates, seemed afraid of the sound of the hinges of their own jaws, the harpooners chewed their food with such a relish that there was a report to it.

Notably, the mind and the body, like the individual and the collective, work and leisure, are literally cheek by jowl in Melville's Rabelaisian descriptions of the crew. Abstractions such as democracy become lip-smackingly substantial, the crew's easy movement between separated spheres of activity constituting the real overcoming of the frozen antitheses that structure the lives of Captain Ahab and the ship's officers.

James's comments on Melville's description of the crew at work in the red heat of the whaling ship's hold strongly imply that, for him at least, this new form of activity is not aborted by the real domination of capital the full integration of the labour process in the process of accumulation in the 20th century, let alone by the massive destruction of workers and fixed capital in the '30 and '40s of which *Moby Dick* is a premonition:

That at first sight is the modern world the world we live in, the world of the Ruhr, of Pittsburgh, of the Black Country in England. In its symbolism of men turned into devils, of an industrial civilization on fire and plunging blindly into darkness, it is the world of massed bombers, of cities in flames, of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the world in which we live! But when you look again,

you see that the crew is indestructible. There they are laughing at the terrible things that have happened to them. The three harpooners are doing their work. True to himself, Ishmael [prototype of the bourgeois intellectual/artist] can see the ship only as an expression of Ahab's madness!

This latter comment pivots on the gap between the external bourgeois viewpoint on production as no more than a "dark satanic mill" and the viewpoint of the workers whose praxis seems to (mentally and physically) transform their conditions. This point is crucial. For Goldner, Melville's insight marks a Copernican revolution in perspective which most "Marxist" cultural criticism has itself failed to register.

Why were such insights into the centrality of proletarian activity so rare in modernist art and, more scandalously, socialist politics? One general answer given by Goldner, again drawing on James's analysis, is that modernism saw *itself* as the crucible of revolutionary activity, in the position of a vanguard in relation to the working class. His critique of this attitude encompasses the intellectual tradition of western Marxism as well as the more obviously anti-working class intellectual currents of the 20th century:

There can be no question that through the classical humanist tradition as defended by Lukács, and one arguably traceable to Marx's scattered writings on art and literature, a separate aesthetic external to the project of all-sided activity was at the center of the Marxian discussion until quite recently.

In short, even (or sometimes, especially) orthodox Marxist aesthetics was preoccupied with the specialised discipline of art and ignorant of or even hostile to a conception of working class "all-sided activity" as a kind of "social aesthetic" in its own right, whether manifest in the individuality-in-collectivity of work or sport.

Goldner claims that, with leftist intellectual and political indifference or hostility to the working class as agent of its own (and the species's) destiny, this possibility of overcoming the labour/leisure opposition undergoes a kind of repression during the era of artistic and political modernity:

Only the definitive demise of high bourgeois culture and of the modernist coda and consequently of the desire of pro-working class artists and intellectuals "to see their creations as somehow directly revolutionary, has made possible an approach to culture like that of James and more in keeping with some of Marx's less developed or implicit views. This shift can be defined succinctly as the transformation of the question of culture from an aesthetic to an anthropological viewpoint.

On this account the very abandonment of a modernist conception of art as a directly revolutionary force reopens the possibility of comprehending the (repressed) aesthetic-political activity at the core of Marx's communist project. After the vanguardism of modernism "aesthetic and political" with its distorted attempt to overcome the reified social condition of which it was itself a part, the "social aesthetic" of working class activity becomes perceptible again.

Art and (Bourgeois) Crisis

Rather than seeing the same avant-gardism or radical newness in aesthetic modernism that James detects in the self-organisation of working class sport and work, Goldner seems to view aesthetic modernism as the critical reaction of the bourgeoisie to its own crisis. Its novelty and its critical power, then, is a reaction to the tendential obsolescence of bourgeois culture and society. After Melville's moment of profound social and political insight in *Moby Dick*, modernist art is itself split between a rearguard action against industry, science and consumerism "the numbing effect of market society

with its quantification, fragmentation and disenchantment of experience, destruction of social and temporal continuities, etc. — and an attempt to renew an ever-fading nostalgic ideal of integral, not yet rationalised, social existence which might heal these wounds:

— what danced in the fantasy life of the Parisian romantic just before or after 1848, or in a different way (as has been argued) for the New England Transcendentalist [writers such as Thoreau or Emerson], was a —memory— of a life intensely and collectively lived, perhaps best captured for Western traditions by the pageantry of the Renaissance urban festival.

Subjugated by the increasingly industrialised rationality of work with the rise of capitalist societies during the 16th and 17th centuries, argues Goldner, the unitary social —play— of Renaissance pageantry disappears as a social reality, to be replaced by a —pale mythical flicker—. This takes the form respectively of pseudo-sacred and diminishingly auratic —homunculus Napoleons— in politics and an increasingly alienated romantic unhappy consciousness in culture. Melville—s Ahab and Ishmael are exemplars and prototypes of these two intimately related figures.

Ahab, whose irrational authority and will to power foreshadows the Bonapartist, fascist and Stalinist dictators of the 20th century, enlists the isolated intellectual, Ishmael, who, repelled by the petty commercial activity of his own class, has run away to sea and spends his life dreaming at the mast-head. Admiring of but separated from the activity of the crew, Ishmael hovers between a reactive sympathy for his working class shipmates and a fascination with Ahab with whom he shares what Goldner terms the —absolute I—. This later term requires some explication but we can briefly and inadequately gloss it as the bourgeois ego, an —I— defined undialectically against collectivity, self-sufficient and self-destructive. When it comes to the crunch, Ishmael is willing to sycophantically comply with Ahab—s tyrannical and self-destructive power, identifying with him precisely as the —man of action— he feels impotent to be himself.

Action is, once again, the key word here. In Goldner—s reading, *Moby Dick* presciently and emblematically plots a historical matrix of activity, false versus real, in which the totalitarian Ahab, the —pragmatic liberal— Starbuck, and the —alienated intellectual— Ishmael represent interdependent forms of a bankrupt and self-destructive bourgeois individualism (—different manifestations of the ultimately asocial ego of bourgeois society—) counterposed to the crew of the Pequod who embody —the real individualism of — collective social relations, in work and in play.—

On the Horizontal Bar, Alexander Rodchenko, 1935, © DACS 2008, © Rodchenko archives

However, as we know, this agent of a new form of activity and all-sided creativity beyond the limits both of aesthetic creation and state redistribution, did not fare as well in the 20th century as Melville or Marx might have hoped. The bourgeois ego, though shattered, continued to suppress identity-in-collectivity in the form of fascist, Stalinist and Third World Bonapartist states, heavily influencing the working-class movement through the identification of the latter two types of regimes as —socialism—. Intellectuals glorified these regimes, just as Ishmael ultimately sided with Ahab against the crew, developing —artistic forms external to the general social activity of the proletariat—, argues Goldner. To the extent that modern artists sought to produce populist works in the service of the state, their art was ignorant of or hostile to the social aesthetic intuited by James, Marx and Melville. One only has to think of the athletic photos of a Rodchenko, let alone a Riefenstahl, to see how artists could miss the specific character of sport as a (different) —social aesthetic— even when taking sport—s —beauty— as their subject.

Submitting the working class (collective) body to a simultaneous glorification and reification, artists played a âbiopoliticalâ role in socialist states where the cult of the worker and of exemplary bodies is always shadowed by the same statesâ mass production of working class corpses. Here again Rodchenko, who turned his lens away from the collective graves of workers as he celebrated their achievements in production, might constitute an archetypal figure.

In this grim light it becomes clear why sport, insofar as it offered a space of working class âidentity-in-collectivityâ, as opposed to identity subsumed beneath state collectivity and an image (whether *neue sachlichkeit* or neo-classical) of idealised labour, might appear to James and Goldner as a more primary form of âsocial aestheticâ activity than the productions of the avant-garde, even if one can list, with Adorno, the many ways in which sport was itself reduced to a commodity and tool of labour discipline.

Anthropological Culture?

Goldnerâs suggestion that we invert the hierarchy of sport and art â in which sport has become, for Adorno, a ritualised passion for subjection, and art alone possesses a critical self-consciousness of its own compromised status as a commodity â throws up some interesting questions. Are Goldner and Adorno talking about the same âartâ and âsportâ? Is art defined by its specific commodity status and its individuated mode of production/consumption against sportâs collective one? And what happens when sport becomes commodified and individuated on a level unknown even in Adornoâs time? On the other hand, may not both art and sport resist the violence done to their different or opposed forms of âaestheticâ (social and, in Adornoâs case, âanti-socialâ), offering a âcritiqueâ of, or alternative to, statist instrumentalisation without simply lapsing into varieties of privatised, religious or quietist evasion? Iâm not sure what the sporting complement of artistic retreat from state-instrumentalised collectivity would be. Perhaps the relatively desocialised âkeep fitâ sub-sports such as jogging and (asocial) climbing? Aestheticised sports such as synchronised swimming where the individual seems subsumed under the collective âeffectâ?

Here the relations between sport and class may be decisive, with sports exhibiting different meanings depending by whom and how they are practiced â think of the working class love of kung fu and its latterday assimilation as a middle class (spectatorial) pastime. Is this a form of âgentrificationâ, in which the same sport takes on a different social âcontentâ once transposed into the lifeworld of the middle class professional? According to Marx, a particular type of manufacture colours all the others in a given mode of production; is sport in general now overdetermined by the qualities of the most aesthetic and individuated sports? In short, is narcissistic attention to bodily health and efficiency a dominant logic re-organising formerly competitive but also collective/cooperative activity, turning working class pride and antagonistic self-assertion into middle class respectability in its contemporary, biologised forms? If this is the case, then ironically sport itself is âproletarianisedâ when it is bourgeoisified, its character as a harbinger of fully social âactivityâ replaced by a new objectification.

Benjaminâs dialectic of the image as magician/surgeon might be a useful tool here: the increasing quantification of experience in both the privatised sphere of keep fit and the ostensibly social sphere of mass sporting events, sees physical-social-aesthetic play/work reduced to biological-individuated-unitised self-management; this apparently coincides with the production of a new kind of aura, a new âspellâ of the commodity, with the aesthetic gloss and euphoric buzz of mediatised and âlifestyleâ sport perhaps complementing the loss of its âsocial aestheticâ. Thus, as one can observe in other no longer separate but promiscuously communicating spheres of life today, an aesthetic intensification coincides with a social reduction, as if blocking and pornographically

preempting the dimension of social imagination. More concretely, the job of maintaining one's physical health, which is sold with the promise of a narcissistically gratifying perfection of the body but ultimately answers to the state's need to reduce the bill for reproducing the labour power of the masses, is increasingly one's own individual responsibility. The gyms of the world a reticulated replay of the 1936 Olympics in which the participants never meet.

Returning to the origins of this long transvaluation and recomposition of middle and working class culture, Goldner's analysis might be faulted for not giving art its due. Is modernism universally on the side of the state against the working class? Some 19th century literature can be read as responding directly and critically to the repression of working class activity by the emerging socialist movement. Flaubert's *L'Education Sentimentale*, for example, turns an omnivorous irony on the parallel submission of romantic art to commodification and the republican socialist betrayal of the working class. Like James, Flaubert questions the impulses of bohemian and leftist intellectuals, pinning in the figure of SÃ©cal the authoritarian socialists' condescension and lethal hostility to the poor they pretend to speak for. Here the pioneer of modernist aesthetic 'demoralisation' gives one of the most incisive presentations of the state instrumentalisation of art - the same SÃ©cal who calls for art to uplift the morals and ideals of the masses shoots down a working class former comrade in cold blood during the June Days of 1848, bitterly encapsulating the relationship later analysed by James.

Goldner's argument regarding the externality of art to working class 'activity' is compelling but, on the other hand, artistic and intellectual dissidence in the interstices of the state, socialist or otherwise, is also a characteristic of modernist art. Art could and still can offer a site of critical self-consciousness on the part of those who are solicited to do Ahab's work, although it is clear that self-consciousness is not necessarily equivalent to solidarity in collective political praxis.

Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (28), Paul Pfeiffer, 2007

If there are arguments to be made in defence of 'aesthetic' culture, it is also possible to see the post-68 era as one in which the 'anthropological perspective' identified by Goldner itself becomes problematic. Is our present era not a dystopian caricature of the potential collapse of the opposition between leisure and work identified by Marx and later James? The mid-20th century revolt against the Keynesian integration of some factions of the working class in which James was himself a major figure has issued in our present phase of capitalist reaction. With Fordist/Taylorist socialism at once dismantled and radicalised into systemic non-reproduction and financialisation, the social meanings of both sport and art have transformed again in an expanded, populist notion of culture which, ironically, coincides with the destruction of much of the working class cultural resources and solidarities which made this revolt possible. A libertarian, anarchistic ideology of diversity and pluralism coincides with a material process of infrastructural, political and cultural looting and recycling which either obliterates or assimilates that which the state previously suppressed or ignored and that which resisted or ignored the state (whether in the form of Party, government or football league). The supersession of the older bourgeois 'aesthetic' perspective on culture by the reemergence of an anthropological perspective is contemporary with its inversion and denaturing by an acritical aestheticisation, a convergence of art and sport that seems to condense the worst aspects of both practices. The signs of working class struggle against the Ahab's and Ishmael's are commodified, collective forms of resistance cannibalised and regurgitated along with the modernist avant-garde. One thinks of Paolo Virno's bleak vision of the present era as 'the communism of capitalism', a dystopian live/work realisation of the passage from Marx's *Grundrisse*.

However, the earlier ability of the working class to regroup and resist both Fordism and the culture industry remains an immanent potential of capitalism today. As long as capital reproduces the alienated form of production Marx identified as the precondition for all-sided activity, can an era of phony dis-alienation, repression and dis-organisation definitively solve capital's contradictions? Perhaps we should look instead for signs of working class activity in the present and attempt to help these develop as much as we can.

The bourgeois moi absolu, bombarded by the lysergic forces of anti-bureaucratic schizophrenia in the 60s-70s and now stuck in a ketamine loop of lucid paralysis, scans a territory populated by armies of newly proletarianised peasantry while helplessly contemplating its own dubious future as the massive tranquillising doses of liquidity begin to wear off. Even in the advanced/declining capitalist powers, struggles such as the movement of immigrant workers in the USA may grow to challenge the entrepreneurial individualism of gangs and the communitarian pseudo-collectivity of states and NGOs. On a less epic scale, remembering Mike Davis's reports on Latino workers in the US service sector and the image of proletarianised emigrant Mayan villagers at (baseball) bat in California suburbia makes one wonder if individuality-in-collectivity is not a renewable resource after all.

Meanwhile, the assimilative powers of capital keep us topped up with ambivalent images of working class cooptation, ever new amalgams of revolt and invention. From *Pimp My Ride* style individualised aestheticism and Lady Sovereign's combative but typically isolated ne'er do well stance, to celebrations of favela dwellers' creative ingenuity so beloved of the World Bank, the working class as expansive force of individuality-in-collectivity is replaced by unconscious figures of austerity and survivalism. All-sided activity that is more than a parody of its potential remains, for capital, a threatening figure perceptible in its very absence from media and political analysis. What, for example, do we know about the culture of Bangladeshi garment workers and rickshaw drivers engaged in pitched battles with their employers and the State? And why are such spectacles of working class activity barely reported? Working class victims make good copy, and the culture of the gangs is as fascinating as it is destructive, but organised and angry workers not subject to forms of vanguardist command or civil society patronage seem to resolve less easily into empathic icons.

Likewise, South African shack dwellers fighting their government for the right to water and basic amenities embody forms of social aesthetic that the left finds suspicious not to say intolerable an image of its own failure to cohere (if necessary by subtraction) a People which reveals to us that the black middle class inheritors of the 20th century state are no more tolerant of the working class in their actuality than were their white predecessors.

Still from multi-screen video *Deep Play*, Harun Farocki, 2007

The Non-Reproduction of the Avant-Garde?

Marx famously claimed that history repeats itself, first as tragedy, second time as farce. Are we witnessing a non-reproduction of the artistic and political avant-gardes, in which the critical resources of modernism, tragically entangled with the mythologies of statist socialism and fascism the first time round, today reappear in homuncloid form at the service of the post-Fordist farce? And if we must repeat the failures of the last 150 years, perhaps we may also repeat the revolutionary potential that was left unrealised and undestroyed by the modern socialist and artistic movements.

One would not want to disparage the cultural output of societies suffering primitive accumulation at the hand of IMF-imposed regimes of under-development (African music today, for example, shows that one cannot make a simple point-for-point relation between the extension of capitalist looting and aesthetic impoverishment; culture is part of the resistance to such brutal processes as well as being intimately affected by them). However, we should not deny the devastating impact of the current regime of accumulation on many established working class and bourgeois forms of culture.

In this light, the mirroring and inversion of art and sport appears to index the increasing dominion of exchange value — both art and sport need to keep and expand their markets — but it is also a sign of a regime of what Loren Goldner has elsewhere analysed as ‘non-reproduction through the exchange of non-equivalents’. Today’s caricature of the dialectical overcoming of art/sport, life/work (not to mention technical/creative, manual/mental, sensuous/rational, etc.) oppositions through working class activity is not just a ‘logical’ outcome of increasing commodification but a result of the decomposition and involuted development of already commodified practices. Artistic efforts to mimic sport’s mass appeal tend to compromise art’s residual critical capabilities, whereas sport seems to retain its constitutive populism while garnering a ‘beautiful game’-style caché and prestige among the corporate aristocracy. Echoing the detrimental effects of an aesthetics of ‘access’ on art, sport is now thoroughly exclusive at its highest level yet functions — in quantitative terms — all too well as a kind of spectacular social relation mediated by images (not to say networks, ring tones, and facebook pages).

If art’s always illusory (but critical) autonomy is under pressure from state and market forces, sport loses its character as a direct social practice, as participation, when subject to the imperatives of fictitious capital. Sport as TV and/or real estate opportunity replaces sport as physical-social-aesthetic practice. An ironic dialectic seems to dictate that sport becomes aestheticised and atomised at the expense of its physical-social dimension at the same moment that art becomes socialised and physicalised at the expense of its critical-aesthetic dimension. Major sporting events now destroy or displace the very preconditions of sport as working class activity. The imminent concreting over of the famous east London community football pitches in Hackney Marshes to make way for the 2012 London Olympics is one blatant example. As Nike released its range of Hackney sports wear, complete with looted quotation of the Hackney Council logo, the now auratic training ground of future champions faced extinction. (Similarly, the former Arsenal stadium, like the former Hacienda in Manchester, is now encrusted with yuppie apartments. Sport and art converge as ‘cultural capital’ on which to build real estate fortunes). The case of the disappearing football pitches is a striking example of ‘non-reproduction’ in sport, an eating up of the resources for the renewal and expansion of sport as activity (its ‘use value’) and, indeed, as global industry (exchange value), in the search for immediate and increased revenues. Ironically this process is validated with reference to the very social activity it destroys.

The change in the social content of sport is not an overnight result of the Olympics coming to town, of course. The Thatcher-era liberation of the star player from the team marked the beginning of a new phase of repression of working class activity in sport. The rise of an individualised and increasingly beautiful game coincides with an eruption of apparently depoliticised crowd violence (‘hooliganism’); an ‘ugly game’ whose supporters’ bad spectatorship is both a symptom of the destruction of class-based individuality-in-collectivity and the ‘anti-social’ obverse of socially sanctioned vicarious consumption as a mark of prestige and aspiration. The destructive tendency of this caricature of Jamesian ‘activity’ (as Alan Clarke’s film *The Firm* suggests, the reflex of a 9-to-5 of social climbing, and a violent collective compensation for a solitary career path away from one’s former class identity) could be summed up in a grim contemporary counter-image to the vignette of the aristocratic neêr do well at bat: the pensioner stoned to death by hooded youths as he bowled to his teenage grandson on an East End playing field last year. Sport’s Jamesian promise of ‘a new, higher rationality for the

organisation of societyâ seems to have degenerated into a fratricidal nightmare.

But despite the undeniable dehumanisation resulting from a prolonged contraction of social reproduction â the destruction of jobs, social structures, political organisation â sport can still function as a site of working class collectivity and identity, even if most of the left has long disowned this often depressing terrain preferring symbolic protest and visions of the multitude to encounters with the actually existing working class (cf. Emilio Quadrelliâs âTerraces & Peripheries: Left Snobbery & the Radical Rightâ, <http://www.metamute.org/en/Terraces-and-Peripheries>).

If sport is not today as edifying to behold as it might have appeared to C.L.R. James, one should remember that it is the âneâer do wellâ as much as the disciplined industrial worker who has his sympathy and attention. Similarly, Goldnerâs evocation of the sovereignty of the Pequodâs proletarian crew is not based on their *politesse* but their resilient, self-assertive and at once cooperative and autonomous characteristics. These may be hard to discern if one looks at contemporary sport through the blinkers of the neoliberally (under)developed social democratic state, but where New Labour dichotomises football into âbeautiful gameâ and âanti-social behaviourâ we should remember James and Melvilleâs focus on the possibilities of self-coordinated class disobedience and sociality; the non-reproduction of sport may not have extinguished these as much as the New Labour fear-and-loathing machine would have us believe.

Beyond a Boundary

To return to our initial reflections on State funding, the UK government may have chosen sport over art this year, but it is unclear if this marks the beginning of a larger shift in State priorities. With the publication of the McMaster report in January 2008 the government seems to be developing the tentative swing toward artistic âautonomyâ announced by former New Labour culture minister Tessa Jowellâs earlier references to artistic âexcellenceâ as a stimulus to âaspirationâ. As the terms might suggest, this was not so much art for artâs sake as a radicalised instrumentalism. That aside, it is possible that a larger shift away from quantitative assessment of artâs contribution to social and economic policy goals toward âqualitativeâ valuations of formal âinnovationâ is now underway. While many artists and arts institutions have wished for an end to the tick boxes and quotas of Blairite âsocialist realismâ, if they now get what they wished for in the form of a flight to âqualityâ (and the market), will this create more latitude for critical and political art or open the way for unaccountable cuts and capricious, commercially-based funding decisions? In short, what will happen to the money if art stops being sport?

As arguments for the economic and âsocialâ value of creative activity and cultural industries are exposed as inflated by economic downturn, both art and sport may turn out to have been mere contributors to the emerging crisis, factories (or at least âdigital workshopsâ) of fictitious value whose stream of liquidity is now drying up. However, State funded art, as a relatively weak contributor to major league capital projects such as the Olympics, is likely to feel the squeeze before aestheticised mass sport does. Either way, a swing back toward notions of artistic autonomy will not represent an end to the convergence of art and sport. In a depression, the arguments for state support are likely to become more not less subservient to a repressive process which pre-dates both âneoliberalâ privatisation and the recent proliferation of ârelationalâ art (and sport) claiming to offer an exemption from it. Whether or not the farcical replay of modernism is now leading us all the way back to the Jamesian moment of working class activity in its unrecuperated form or getting snagged up into an expanded version of the 1930s totalitarian destruction of the working class, may in part depend on whether artists and sports fans continue to serve the state in its projects for managing crisis through

âsociallyâ and âparticipatorilyâ disguised forms of destruction and austerity.

If relational and socially engaged art seeks to make good the deficit in social relations, resources, and public space which âneoliberalismâ produces, it all too often colludes in the process of destruction it would arrest, offering its false immediacy in the place of the ignored or disparaged really existing social relations of people lower down the economic scale. The coincidence of relational and socially engaged art with state backed gentrification and social engineering in regeneration projects sees art playing the same role, if in a more âmolecularâ way, as corporate brands in annexing and evacuating former social spaces. The romantic and melancholic conviction that âpeople need experienceâ and âsocialisingâ and that it is artâs role to restore experience and sociality to them, not only accelerates this process but often serves the state project of imposing âtoleranceâ and âsocial cohesionâ on supposedly demoralised urban populations (viz Artangel funded fantasias such as *The Margate Exodus*). Art that seeks to facilitate âparticipationâ while overlooking the contemporaneous material contraction or non-reproduction of society is stuck in the same instrumental role as the productivist aesthetics of the Stalinist era. This time, however, the state it serves is presiding over a gutting of the productive forces rather than their expansion.

While todayâs agents of Ahab are more likely to see themselves as making small, communitarian and civil society contributions to rectifying the wider social disaster than leading the vanguard of the revolution, they remain isolated from the working class and more often than not convinced of their leadership role, if only in matters of nutritional science. There is no guarantee that this loss of scale and purpose is the same thing as a loss of egotism â âmoi absoluâ in mini-me form remains as asocial as myspace (*moispace?*) â but right now Jamesâ inversion of the art/sport hierarchy may at least serve as a reminder of how far we have to go to begin constituting some kind of bulwark against future, not to say ongoing, repression of this ârich individuality â as all-sided in its production as in its consumptionâ.

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Footnotes

1 It is also interesting to note the current proliferation of art works dealing with sport as their ostensible subject matter. The most critical, however, also reflect the microcosmic nature of sport as a prism for a wider transformation of social relations under intensified commodification. Harun Farockiâs remarkable multi-screen dissection of a single World Cup football match, *Deep Play* would constitute a perfect object on which to test the hypotheses in this article. Here a particular instance of sport as social activity is subsumed under forms of measurement and analysis that proceed from an atomistic and positivist epistemology. This denudes it of its social, not to say its ludic, character in a way that evokes the ongoing restructuring of the sport more generally. Similarly, Paul Pfeifferâs works digitally abstract the individual player from the matrix of the team and chart their now isolated movements for the course of the match. Is this the reduction of sport to a form of âbare lifeâ in which the individual is once again separated out from the collective and âplayâ to become âworkâ? Broken down into its atomic components and recomposed, âDeep Playâ means a pornographic evacuation of a complex social texture of relations. The exhaustive enumeration and reiteration of âeventâ as a series of animated points of stasis reminds one of Adornoâs comments on the relentlessly measured sporting body as animated corpse. Measurement means management means the suffocation of the tendency to a new fully social form of life. On the other hand, does this penetration of semblance and play by a mortifying hyperrealism really mark the death of sport as a holistic social process? What, such art

works seem to demand, does 'social' mean? Perhaps the power of films like Farocki's is to expose a negative image of sport beyond its conceptualisation – for all this 'depth' of representation, of modeling and mapping, something always escapes – the experience of the game, not least.

2 Goldner's principle references here are from James' *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways*, New York: C.L.R. James, 1953, and his autobiography *Beyond a Boundary*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1961.

3 This, and subsequent quotations unless indicated otherwise, is from Loren Goldner's *Herman Melville: Between Charlemagne and the Antemosaic Cosmic Man: Race, Class and the Crisis of Bourgeois Ideology in an American Renaissance Writer*, New York: Queequeg Publications, 2006.

Image Credits

Deep Play images courtesy of Harun Farocki Filmproduktion, www.farocki-film.de. Rodchenko's *On the Horizontal Bar* is currently on show at the Hayward's Alexander Rodchenko: Revolution in Photography exhibition, 7 February-27 April. Pfeiffer's *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (28)*, courtesy of Thomas Dane Gallery, London