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The Sports Narrative: Phenomenology and Deep Structures of Meaning

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Abstract

The essay takes into consideration some types of sporting events intended as narratives, and analyzes their meaning structures trying to identify some archetypes that could be at the basis of their strong meaning and social impact.

Keywords: sport, anthropological structures of the imaginary, archetypes.

1. Introduction

The term sports narrative may be interpreted either as a story that engages with a sporting event through description or interaction, or a symbolic aspect of the event in its own right. This second reading encompasses a series of signs, symbols, and meanings emanating directly from the event in progress rather than in a subsequent descriptive account. In other words, while a sports narrative is sometimes a text with a descriptive or interactive approach produced by a participating actor, who is not usually one of the leading players, it can also relate to the event itself with derived meanings that are essentially separate from descriptive or interactive narratives, although some interaction is possible.

Research has often focused on the sports narrative as an event-based text. Rhetorical registers and recurring words have been identified, while literature on sports journalism has frequently examined the style and lexicon used by prominent writers in the field. Although this article will not analyse such

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matters, it will be of subsequent benefit to dwell briefly on these texts. On one hand, they can be elements of the event itself with synchronic reports like radio and television commentaries that contribute to the experience. This contribution can be direct if the listeners are also present at the event or indirect if the event is experienced through media platforms. On the other hand, texts on sporting events can be written away from the action either as an advance preview or a subsequent description or commentary. Even though there is less contextual interaction between such texts and the event, they are naturally part of an even broader and potentially long-term narrative featuring different events of the same type in a more extensive narrative scenario. Examples of episodic sporting events viewed as overall narratives include football championships and national cycling tours.

Rather than analysing these event-based texts as independent narratives, it is preferable to consider them as elements of a broader narrative which might be connected to a single event or a sequence of similar events, constituting a long-term yet unitary mega event. The distinct nature of the latter is ensured by the non-contextual narratives that document single events, placing them in the broader temporal perspective of the meta event. Examples of such texts are reports on individual football matches, which form part of the overall unified narrative of a championship.

This article argues that sporting events are themselves narratives in the sense of sequences of signs, symbols, and generated meanings. These are combined to produce an overall connotation that is greater than the sum of individual meanings. Importance is thus assumed by both the different symbols involved and the way in which they are contextualised and sequenced. This set of actions, symbols, signs, and meanings, arranged in a significant way, depicts the sporting event and constitutes the sports narrative *par excellence*. It is this narrative that produces the social function of a sporting event rather than any subsequently constructed spin-off texts. All the actors involved – athletes and spectators alike – naturally contribute to this narrative, along with the spatial context in which it all happens – an indoor or outdoor venue – and form taken by this location. These meaningful elements all contribute to the overall narrative as it unfolds; they define its overall sense of depth and meaning regardless of the superficial phenomenology of the sequence of events.

This is the key to analysing the sociology of the imaginary, which is wont to define itself as the sociology of depth as it strives to identify networks of symbols below the immediately visible phenomenology in the surrounding world, a system of latent symbolic structures. It applies the theory that the world of meanings in which we live features different levels sequenced horizontally or vertically depending on the preferred perspective in order of generality and profundity. In accordance with the teachings of anthropology, it supposes that

there is a network with a few simply arranged deep meanings that support the infinite phenomenology of immediately apparent meanings in everyday life.

In this respect, it can be suggested that the sporting event – seen as a narrative – possesses this depth of meaning, an aspect that provides substance by defining its impact and social importance. A similar hypothesis also explains why sport has always been both widespread and important in almost all known cultures.

The initial assumption is thus that the sporting event is a ritual narrative in the same way as religious or civil rites like processions, demonstrations, political rallies, and civil celebrations. Initially it can be observed that the choreographic frameworks in which events take shape tend to blend into each other. In this way, some elements of religious processions can also be found in trade union or political marches and indeed vice versa.

Before developing this reasoning further, I will provide a brief overview of the different types of sporting event, or at least those that are best known and most consolidated in tradition. As I am by no means an expert in this field, I apologize in advance for almost inevitably having excluded certain event types.

Starting from the premise that competition is one of the essential characteristics of a sporting event, two categories can be identified forthwith: direct and indirect competition. Direct competition offers a face-to-face simultaneous challenge and has a simple dichotomous structure that is instantly understandable, accessible, and discernible. By contrast, indirect competition features participants competing individually, with the competitive element entrusted to a system involving points, tables, and judges outside the competitive context. The structure is more complex and lacks the charisma of the direct clash. The event is also more difficult to follow and triggers far fewer emotions than direct competition. Indeed, clashes between opposing groups of fans are extremely rare at such sporting events.

Indirect competition is not decided through face-to-face challenges. Instead, it relies on a system of points awarded for each performance. In this way, results are accumulated on an individual basis – think of athletics – rather than the direct, immediate dichotomy of victory or defeat. The indirect mechanism at play in such events leads to the idea of athletes “competing against themselves”. Nevertheless, the ultimate goal of the complete narrative, which includes individual performances, is the competition between athletes rather than each one engaging in a self-centred battle. The winner is not the person with the most improved personal best but the athlete who has done better than all the others.

This competitive mechanism received criticism for measuring performances in terms of advantages over others rather than individual improvement; it was said that the aspect of competition destroyed the element

of socialisation generally inherent in physical exercise. Non-competitive sporting events have developed as a result, focusing more on socialisation and equality than on competition and difference. However, such events receive almost no coverage either in the mainstream or sporting press, or indeed in the imaginary surrounding and sustaining the world of sport. This reiterates the importance of competition in generating the depth of meaning of sporting events.

Naturally, competitive sport also contributes to socialisation and social integration insofar as it becomes a product of peaceful societies; violence and supremacy are framed within a system of rules that allows the socially controlled expression of brutality and reinforces the important social effect of the internalisation of a system of shared rules. Acting as a guarantee of social life, this is applied to all associated experiences after it has been internalised.

To recap, then, sporting events can be classified in two large groups involving direct and indirect competition. The direct category is in turn divided into two subclasses: individual and team competitions. There are therefore three groups of competition-based narrative events to consider: direct competition between individuals, direct competition between teams, and indirect competition between individuals or teams.

2. Direct competition between individuals

This category includes sports like boxing, chess, different forms of wrestling, tennis, and table tennis. Swimming and running can also be included as the competition to decide who finishes first and second takes centre stage despite the lack of physical interaction between competitors. Cycling and motor racing fall into this category to a certain extent as the mechanism of stages and final sprints emphasises competition between individual riders and drivers more than the efforts of their support teams.

When theoretical categories are applied to reality, various situations are often partially excluded. My reasoning views sports as ‘ideal types’ (Weber, 1974) which fit into my framework by dint of a central highlighted feature, although more detailed analysis would undoubtedly also reveal some aspects that do not coincide. Furthermore, as a non-expert, I may certainly have made some erroneous attributions. If this is the case, I apologise forthwith in the hope that it will not invalidate the thesis presented herein.

Direct competition between individuals is immediately reminiscent of the archetype of the duel. Regularly used when describing such sporting events, this term can be ascribed to the second level of signification immediately underlying visible phenomenology. As this layer is closely linked to the society in which the

event occurs, the duel can take on different nuances of meaning: fair play between gentlemen or a no-holds-barred fight. While the former tends to prevail in our cultural norms (Coppi passing his water bottle to Bartali, or vice versa), the latter is dominant in other cultures. There is also a series of intermediate shades of “fairness” associated with the different socio-cultural contexts in which events occur.



The term “first-level archetypes” is used here to refer to the layer of organisers of meaning immediately below visible phenomenology. Called first-level to emphasise the vertical configuration of layers, they often coincide with the structures of meaning known as “frames” in communication theory.

The duel is deeply ingrained in our culture as a (first-level) archetype. It is an encounter-clash of individuality that, however, allows room for mutual respect and a kind of fellowship of difference. This concept of the “honourable” opponent derives from the fact that the merit accorded to the winner is influenced not only by compliance with written and unwritten rules but also by the stature of the adversary.

This model of competition is strongly codified in different cultures as a model of “noble” battle that was historically the privilege of the dominant class rather than the dominated social ranks. It is closely related to the concept of social and symbolic “parity”, which is mutually acknowledged by the competitors. The fact that this parity is often “sportingly” referenced by the winner is also because the value of victory in a duel lies more in the valour of the vanquished than the prowess of the victor.

A certain type of duel therefore generates recognition and reciprocity, with the duellists “united” in the “sacred” separation between them and the rest of the world that is guaranteed by the rite, generating the “enclosure” effect. This characteristic feature of the sacred occurs through the hallowed element of fellowship between participants in certain confrontation-based rituals which are associated with danger, above all the risk of death. Indeed, brushing with death is a key feature of the sacralisation of a ritual or behaviour, which is upheld when death appears in the foreground or background (as happens with the figure of the hero).

A simple role is usually played by the context, the venue where the event takes place, and the technical equipment used because of the need to highlight individual supremacy. Should the technological differences between competitors become too pronounced, they are usually restricted in the rules; in any case, the reputations of those employing such technological superiority are

tarnished (see, for example, the motor racing regulations). Indeed, the concept of “equal footing” is closely linked to the rhetoric of the duel as an archetype. Along with the notion of blood, this ensures that the battle is fought at a physical rather than a technological level, thereby generating the appropriate narrative.

With regard to the figure of the hero, a crucial role is played by the aspect of suffering and its bodily incarnation. This physical agony must involve the spilling of bodily fluids, whether blood, sweat, or tears. Anything goes, but it must incarnate death and suffering, making them visible through a means originating from the hero’s body. Rarely does a hero – a symbol of perfection and divine favour – lose body parts. Indeed, a crippled or armless hero would not be accepted in modern or ancient aesthetic culture, probably due to a symbolic association with the figure of the holy king.

The duel is therefore an underlying element in all forms of direct competition, accompanied by the characteristic shades of meaning of the relevant culture and all their related implications. This general model of competition between equals defines direct competitions regardless of the specific ways in which they take shape. Through the duel narrative, the sporting event becomes part of the general relational model of the duel in society, which is strengthened as a result. Sporting events contribute to the generalisation process also in terms of competitive relations outside sport, with reciprocal reinforcement of meaning in the two-way flow between event and society. In this sense, the sporting event is a specific expression of a general narrative model that characterises a society and a group, organising and subsuming the specific narrative along with the procedure for interpreting and decoding. The sports narrative reconfirms – often in a particularly powerful way – a general model that is globally present in society, forming part of the collective imaginary. This model is also applied to ordinary competitions as a comprehensive common model of appropriate behaviour.

3. Direct competition between teams

This is undoubtedly the most dynamic and productive category in communicative and economic terms, encompassing sports such as football, basketball, rugby, and ice hockey.

The first-level archetype that can be identified in this form of competition is naturally the battle, which has a strong influence on the vocabulary used to describe these events: “attack”, “defence”, and “fortress”, to name but a few examples. There are essentially three key elements of battle: the physical encounter, the coordination of the troops, and the capture of enemy

possessions. Physical altercation plays a significant role in these events, and it is no coincidence that medical staff and stretcher bearers are often seen at the side of the pitch on standby. Coordinating troops is an equally vital aspect as the team must attack or defend in an organised manner; the key elements here include the need for discipline and loyalty, and an undisputed leader. There are also naturally warrior figures, who can be identified as the attackers, above all those who accomplish the ultimate goal of capturing the opponent's trophy.

The trophy in question is usually something that is invaded like the goal area in football or ice hockey; its importance is underlined by the fact that it is defended by a player unlike all the others (the goalkeeper). The aim of collective hunting and organised group confrontation is to invade the opponent's sacred space and to defend one's own. The aspects of violence and sanctity are also related to the lexicon used: goals are "breached", while goalkeepers are often associated with "sacrifice". There is such clear evidence of a symbolic sexual metaphor that the matter is not worth exploring further. With regard to compliance with the rules and fair play, the transition from individual clash to group encounter leads to a lower level of propriety in accordance with the well-known theory of crowd psychology, whereby the sense of personal responsibility decreases in group behaviour. This is partly because individuals feel protected by the collective identity of the group and partly because group loyalty is paramount.

The narrative which develops is therefore less "noble" than its counterpart associated with the archetype of the duel. Although these encounters are naturally also bound by rules, they are much less clearly separated from fighting, and spectators behave in a radically different and much more violent manner; the encounter is always finely balanced between an orderly battle and a violent brawl. The basic model for the type of violence used in human societies is an organised system of opposing groups, and I would say that group clashes have been the most consistently practised social activity during the evolution of our species.

The setting is also distinctive, as sporting venues usually take shape as bowl-shaped containers. This coincides with nocturnal female symbology (Durand 1972), which constructs a sort of cup of fermentation into which the event is absorbed, with nocturnal and emotional aspects developing and intensifying freely. The context is female according to the logic of archetypes (cup). Indeed, the referee is the only vertical male diurnal element of judgement, raising his arm (sword) and whistling to caution players and to signal the beginning and end of the event. As a differentiating and judging diurnal element, the referee initiates and concludes the rite as well as judging and validating what occurs; it could be said that the referee is the rational element controlling and structuring the nocturnal side of the rite.

Excursus 1 – The sword and the cup

The co-existence of diurnal and nocturnal aspects is exemplified here by the two main symbols specified by Durand: the sword and the cup. They appear in the same ritual with their functions and symbolism subdivided according to Durand's indications. While they seem to be present in the football rite, other varyingly binding rituals in our society also feature the same combination with the same functional differentiation and symbolic characteristics: the cup, associated with the fermentative aspect of transformation and creation, and the sword, related to the aspect of distinction, boundaries, governance, and judgement. One of the most significant observable cases is the representation associated with classical music and the relationship between orchestra and conductor.

There is a clear-cut relationship in the classical orchestra: representing the diurnal principle in our framework as the sword that regulates, judges, and validates, the figure of the conductor was a recent introduction. Previously, the orchestra was conducted by the first violinist, and, in any case, an orchestra of professional musicians can play perfectly well without a conductor by using sheet music. The aspect of judgement, governance, and validation is highly evident: with everything already in place, the conductor is the last to arrive, using the baton to initiate, regulate, and conclude the performance. The conductor stands on a podium holding a baton while the orchestra is hidden in a bowl-shaped pit, from which the sound emerges. For more detailed analysis, see my short article on classical and popular music (Secondulfo, 2016). Furthermore, the contrast between sword and cup is also found in the Eucharist, especially in the Catholic ritual of transubstantiation.

Secondulfo D., "Music of the Eye, Music of the Ear", in *ITALIAN SOCIOLOGICAL REVIEW* – ISSN:2239-8589 vol. 6 (2), 2016.



The figure of the referee in direct team competition can be perceived as the emergence or introduction of a diurnal element into a possibly prior

nocturnal event in order to provide standardisation and regulation, transforming a fight into a socially acceptable contest. Despite their intrinsic role in the event, referees fall outside the nocturnal dynamic, acting purely as regulators and adding rationality to the emotional dimension. The referee can be compared to the second in a duel to a certain extent, although the latter figure plays a far less significant role. Indeed, duels feature a much stronger ritual emphasis on self-regulation between equals; without a group to alleviate individual responsibility through the need for collective loyalty, the relationship between duellists has far stronger semantic and ritual connotations.

The verticality of referees is judgement, but their presence is somewhat limited during the unfolding of the event when the most prominent features are the nocturnal female symbolism of the cup and fermentation (the witch's cauldron). The setting therefore favours the expression of emotions and collective ferment, as shown by shouting in the stands, flares, choreographies by fans and players, and frequent physical confrontation. As mentioned above, fair play is applied less stringently than in individual competition in the battle to breach the opponent's sacred area, and the context of the encounter becomes less "noble". With the involvement of organised groups, the element of team loyalty tends to take precedence over integrity and acknowledgement of the adversary. The value of victory is still connected to the defeated opponent, but fair play plays a less important role in obtaining the win. The combination of the context and symbolic aspects of the competition generates an event of great emotional intensity which provides a socially controlled context for one of the most uncomfortable human narratives: war and the breaching of enemy lines. While individual competition is reminiscent of the duel, team sport is closer to the model of the battle and the fight. Indeed, it is played out in a setting (the cup-bowl) where outbreaks of sometimes fierce emotions are more acceptable, if not openly encouraged.

Here too, there is naturally a series of nuances. Just as there are differences in the relative importance of the individual and the group within the category, there are also variations in the violence associated with such events. For example, while the individual is more prominent in baseball than in football, ice hockey, rugby, or basketball, the level of physical confrontation is also proportionately lower.

Although rugby is a sport with much greater physical intensity than football, there is far less violence both on the pitch and among spectators. This can be explained by the difference between the containers in which the nocturnal element occurs: in rugby, there are no goals that must be breached in acts of direct penetration. Indeed, the opponent's area is invaded by touching the ball down beyond a given boundary line rather than by invading an area strenuously defended by a special player. This distances the ritual from the

metaphor of breaching the opponent's sacred area (rape), thereby reducing the emotional intensity and the overall violent significance of the rite; the social conviviality of the "third half" in rugby would be unthinkable in football. Nothing is breached, even in the descriptive lexicon. In basketball too, the physical configuration of the event greatly diminishes the effect of sacred violation, and the level of violence both during the rite and among spectators is significantly lower than in football. This reasoning can also be supported by the case of ice hockey. As in football there is a goal – a sacred, hidden, nocturnal place, defended by a player who is different from all the others – which must be breached by the opposing team through direct penetration. Similarly, the level of violence both on the rink and in the stands is decidedly greater than in rugby or basketball.

Therefore, in sum, the general cultural model for the competitive relationship between individuals is the duel, fixed in the imaginary of our society as an overall framework. Instead, the go-to model for team competitions, recounted and reinforced by the corresponding sports narratives, is somewhere between a brawl and a battle, along with all the differences outlined above. It is interesting to observe, even in team events, that the "duel" narrative is revived when individuals take centre stage, such as in small episodes in team competitions. This transforms the perception of the event (naturally only partly, as the dominant frame still derives from the collective clash), with the re-emergence of certain elements of fair play.

4. Indirect competition

This is perhaps the most elitist category, far removed from the sweat and blood of direct competition and hieratically populated with intense single events featuring silent inwardly focused individuals. These competitors are alone within a sacred enclosure, unlike in group competitions where many individuals are simultaneously confined. This highly individualised backdrop generates a much stronger aura of sacredness than the previous two groups of sporting event; in the indirect format, which is distanced from the competition through judges, points tallies, and tables, the private and individual aspect of the sports performance is emphasised to an even greater degree. Collective emotions and dynamics thus become less important than the hypostasis of the sportsperson in terms of personality and predominantly internal effort (competing against oneself, aiming for a personal best, and so on). The descriptive lexicon, however, still conjures a sense of competition during the event in order to arouse empathy and emotions among spectators and retain the link to strong archetypes, especially those related to competition.

The corresponding first-level archetype here is naturally the solitary hero or Prometheus (someone singlehandedly exploring and extending human boundaries). Indeed, athletes engage in a personal struggle for self-improvement almost as if they were on a solitary, introverted journey more akin to meditation than competition. This aspect can be perceived, for example, in the role played by silence and noise. Whereas noise prevails in team and individual encounters, the focus shifts to silence in the individual micro-bubbles of indirect competition. Even in direct competition, silence descends during the most intense moments of the rite when, as the conclusions will show, the Gods feature more prominently in the element of ritual judgement. This can be seen during a penalty shoot-out in football (comparable to the killing of the bull in a *corrida*) or at the start of a *grand prix*.

The setting also helps to foster this impression since these are the only sporting events that take place at venues shrouded in silence. As simple spectators, the crowd cannot be categorised in the two groups mentioned above. In this case, sporting events become pervasive and fragmented in the stadium-cup, which is thus unable to catalyse or fulfil its function of emotional fermentation.

This category includes sports like gymnastics, diving, and athletics disciplines other than running events. The overall narrative, which is indirect and unfolds over time and space, is thus difficult to follow and perceive emotionally as a single entity. It consists of multiple short and intense micro-narratives in which competitors appear alone for their performances to be judged; their hopes and years of training are jeopardised in the space of



a few minutes. There is great intensity but also intimacy, which encourages identification with the individual subjectivity of the competitor rather than the competition as a whole. The most emotionally and symbolically compelling events in this group of sports are micro-narratives. The symbolic archetypes associated with the individual and personal sacrifice are maximised here, even though the emotional impact of such events is reduced by the lack of direct experience of victory and of overcoming the opponent. Furthermore, there is a weaker level of identification than in direct competition, as well as fewer fan-related phenomena, which are almost absent here. This is a highly sacrificial ritual in which the competitor – simultaneously victim and priest – toys with personal destiny in the presence of spectators acting as silent witnesses of the event and its epilogue. The first-level archetype calls to mind individual sacrifice and judgement. As the latter is not immediately transformed into victory or

defeat, it is inevitably related to the individuals and their intrinsic value. In this metaphor of acquisitive individualism, the individual is at the same time defendant and judge, independently setting ever-increasing objectives. Although these goals are clearly linked to the broadest narrative of the competition, they are relegated to the background of the intense micro-narrative of the individual performance and its success or failure by the indirect mechanisms of competition and the event. The archetype is connected to the responsibility of the individual, who faces personal triumphs and defeats alone; as both victim and judge, the individual is only accountable person. Another model dear to liberal individualism develops maximum emotional narrative impact in the collective and irrevocable judgement of the individual sporting performance and in the common mechanism of reciprocal reinforcement of the meaning of the sports narrative and the meaning of the archetypal models consolidated in the collective social imaginary.

To this end, I find it highly significant that the aesthetic aspect of the performance in such events is of paramount importance. This can be seen both in the description and often in the accumulation of points determining overall victory or defeat. The emergence of such aesthetic awareness is probably aided by the fact that the result is some way off, as well as by the individual nature of the performance. By contrast, direct competition shows very little consideration for aesthetics either in individual or team sports. In fact, appreciation is sometimes shown for the unaesthetic quality and lack of harmony of the performance, together with the element of physical exertion and suffering.

5. Victory ceremonies

The nocturnal female aspect and everything surrounding sporting events as a narrative can also be found when trophies or medals are awarded. These ceremonies are indispensable for definitive confirmation of the winner (consecration) even though they often happen in an emotionally drained context; after all, it is almost always already clear who has won and lost at the end of the event, especially in direct competition. There is still, however, the ritual moment that seals the supremacy of the winner in sacred form – the sports lexicon often uses the word “consecrate” in association with victory.

This aspect is similar to the figure of the referee inasmuch as it is part of the extended rite but extraneous to the key rite – what happens inside the stadium-cup or competitive container – as the winners and losers are evident well before the ceremony. The trophy or medal ceremony is a form of consecration external to the nocturnal rite, just like the referee, deriving from the diurnal principle that enshrines and regulates its nocturnal counterpart. In

its fermentative dynamism, the nocturnal rite defines the winner and loser internally and with its characteristic nocturnal dynamics. At the same time, though, it “allows” the diurnal principle to regulate the beginning and end, and consecrate (validate) the result.

It is interesting to note that the prize is a medal, cup, or comparable object (like a salad bowl in tennis), thereby keeping the entire symbolic narrative within the nocturnal-female dimension. In other words, stadia are cups or bowls, which are also prizes. With regard to external symbolism, female flower bearers and white foam spurting from champagne bottles are clear indications of the points of reference but also of the profound symbolic meaning of many victory ceremonies.

After conducting a brief partial investigation, I have the clear sensation that a cup is usually awarded in sports featuring direct competition, especially when



this element is emphasised, while medals are generally more common in sports based on indirect competition. Nevertheless, as I have already mentioned, I am by no means an expert on the matter, and my impression may be mistaken. With regard to the symbolism of cups, it is, however, interesting to note that the captain of the Italian football team and a teammate

went to bed with the trophy won at the European Championship, an act that received extensive coverage in the press.

Excursus 2 – The hero

Even though the sporting hero is not central to my argument, this brief aside will focus on this figure, a cornerstone of the sports narrative in general on which there is an excellent body of sociological literature for those interested in exploring the matter further (Bifulco, Tirino 2018; Camorrino, 2018).

The sporting hero can be found in all the aforementioned types of competition. Although there are naturally different phenomenological characteristics, common features can also be identified.

I would suggest that there are two heroic “archetypes”: the hero that challenges death and the hero that wins through suffering. In the first case, suffering is not required, and the hero also has a certain level of bodily and performative aestheticism. The defiance of death is a form of *hybris*, a challenge to the ultimate human master, who almost

always triumphs in the end; the hero confronts death despite knowledge of impending loss. This forms the mythical basis, a human being that does not submit to the divine, a figure that lives in a separate world, distant and exclusive. In the second case, the suffering needed to achieve victory ennobles the hero as “the best among us”, an exceptional equal that we can identify with and feel close to thanks to the suffering and pain. Furthermore, this type of hero does not challenge the Gods but “earns” a halo through suffering. While this type of hero is usually poorly equipped in technical terms, the death-defying hero can also benefit from exceptional technological equipment and defy limits.

(Thanks to Dr Camorrino for the enlightening conversations in which these concepts took shape.)

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Marchesini D., *Eroi dello sport. Storie di atleti, vittorie, sconfitte*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2016.

Excursus 3: The cup and the medal

As mentioned above, trophy presentations generally feature either cups or medals; although plaques are sometimes awarded, they can be likened to medals for our purposes at least.

Cups naturally recall the nocturnal ritual, which takes concrete shape in the stadium, and are related to the Dionysian realm of emotional fermentation, transformation, and orgiastic sexuality, as embodied by white foam frothing out of bottles of champagne. It is no coincidence that the ritual with a cup and spurting champagne also features hostesses on either side of the winner. Indeed, this privilege is only accorded to the victor. Although trophy presentations are connected to the Diurnal Order, the cup firmly reintroduces the nocturnal ritual through the symbolism of a victorious leader with the spoils of war, in this case represented predominantly by sexual abundance, sexual supremacy, and the prerogative to spread one’s seed, as happens with all social animals.

With regard to medals and plaques, the closest reference in Durand's monumental classification relates to armour, which is placed within the Diurnal Order in the same category as the sword. It can be assumed at this point that the use of the medal is an evolution from the cup because it incorporates and symbolically saturates the entire trophy presentation ritual, thereby arguably returning to the diurnal ritual without leaving room for the nocturnal bubble related to the use of the cup. The diurnal aspect thus remains outside the sports narrative as a "deed" that also makes a powerful return in the trophy presentation itself. It is surely not coincidental that medals are used instead of cups at sporting events where the diurnal aspect of fair play and Apollonian "nobility" play a more prominent role, for example in athletics, most notably at the Olympics. This also provides a counterpoint to nocturnal fermentation.



6. Spectators

There is a negative perception of the simple spectator in all rituals that are based on deep archetypes and that feature collective action and high levels of empathy and emotions. This figure is morally questionable and viewed with suspicion as the rejection of empathy leads to detachment from the collective ritual and thus from the group formed either in reality or in the imaginary. It is difficult to adopt a third position in such cases, and those who are not in favour are firmly opposed. As in religious and civil rituals, participation in such rites is necessary as they create a special bond between the participants. Being absent is one thing but attending without participating is another matter altogether as it undermines the concept of identification and loyalty at the heart of the group. The spectator is thus rapidly transformed into the fan. This is not necessarily a sectarian or violent figure but one that is empathetically united with the effort, suffering, success, and defeat of the actors on the pitch. This is shown by the

rhetoric of football *ultras*, who often use the word “faith”. Moreover, spectators are part of the spectacle in this type of liturgy, just as in Greek tragedy; it is performed for them and can only exist in their presence. Indeed, if the spectators are removed, the sporting spectacle collapses in terms of meaning and is downgraded to a simple race for supremacy rather than a sanctified ritual.

If the sporting event is in itself a narrative, it is predominantly cathartic. This is demonstrated, I believe, by the fact that these events have maintained their charm and attractiveness despite the numerous cases of corruption, doping, backroom deals and so on that have characterised the history of many sports over the years, particularly the most popular and cathartic ones like football. The impact and social importance of sporting events does not lie in the fairness of what surrounds them or even in the reality of the competitive action. Instead, as with all rituals, it depends on the sequence of actions, which fulfils its narrative duty even if it is “false”. This occurs because the sporting event is a closed archetypal narrative. Indeed, like the theatre, its effectiveness lies in the unfolding of the ritual and the participation of the actors, including the spectators, rather than in compliance with the rules, except for those which ensure that the ritual is conducted correctly. Even if they are important, external events seem colourless when viewed from within the ritual because they are only part of the diurnal element, not the nocturnal aspect. They are therefore incapable of influencing the charismatic and symbolic strength of the event itself. In truth, these contests continue to be held successfully despite frequent demonstrations of falseness, with a predetermined competitive element. In any case, the unfolding of the ritual itself is more important than this aspect, as shown by the continuing popularity and charisma of a clearly staged sport like pro wrestling.

7. The realm of depth

The label “sociology of depth” can only be applied to the sociology of the imaginary if a further layer of meaning is perceived below the two aforementioned levels of the instantly visible phenomenology of the sporting event and the immediately underlying structures of meaning. The latter are referred to as frames in communication studies, while I have termed them first-level archetypes. They organise the narrative and the way it is perceived, controlling its major areas and sometimes steering it overall. They constitute the meaning of the narrative that is grasped “unwittingly” and absorbed through the terms used, the action taking place, and the containers in which the action occurs. This meaning also regulates the decoding of events by tapping into the models in the common imaginary of the society in which the happening occurs.

These models thereby strengthen and regroup society every time the ritualised narrative complies with the expected ritual.

Such models lie below visible phenomenology; as part of the shared imaginary of a given culture, they are used for a simplified interpretation of the surrounding reality. Some rituals, such as those in the realm of sport, are packaged as narratives that broadly coincide with some of these models, which are thus reinforced. The fact that the content of the ritualised narrative coincides with models stored in the collective imaginary reinforces the sense of reassurance and belonging, along with the social and symbolic bonds in the ritual. This makes a powerful contribution to the constant process of the construction-reconstruction of reality as social representation (Berger, Luckman, 1969, Durkheim, 2013).

The sociology of depth has not contributed much thus far, as most of the above was already known. What could a more in-depth examination offer? The theory I am developing aims to show that there is a further level of meaning below the “first-level archetypes” that could be termed “second-level archetypes”. Situated below the organisers of meaning, this structure can provide the narrative with an even stronger symbolic cogency, which I believe explains its significance in different societies. In other words, I am convinced there is a level of meaning that unifies the previously described three categories of events and archetypes. This combination creates a narrative whose symbolic value and impact is greater than the sum of the parts it subsumes. Everything is thus bestowed – including the resulting narrative – with a symbolic weight and depth of meaning greater than many other events, allowing the inclusion of this category in the broader but limited group of essential rituals in human societies. As these rituals have one foot in reality and the other in mythology, they access the realm of the sacred and become vital elements of a society by tapping into the stored narratives that constitute its very meaning.

My suggestion is that there is something below all this – akin to Atlas – that supports the entire bubble of meaning, including the sports narrative, and sustains it in terms of depth of meaning. In my view, this Atlas-like figure is embodied by the idea of the ordeal, or rather divine judgement.¹ It could be said

¹ The terms “ordeal” and “divine judgement” are often considered to be synonyms, but this is inaccurate. Such an attribution restricts the historical significance of the appeal and the importance of divine judgement in competitions and human combat; their combined weight is considerable and has a far more extensive temporal influence than the word “ordeal” would suggest. By contrast, the latter term describes a specific “judgement of God” established by medieval Lombard legislation. “Judgements of God” are documented in various civilisations from 2000 BCE onwards, above all in Mesopotamia but also in Etruscan and Roman society.

that all sports narratives share the concept of supremacy and victory on one hand, and the notion of defeat and sacrifice on the other. Although this is undoubtedly true, sacrifice and victory are not linked in the sense that the latter derives from the former but in that the victory of the winner is based on the sacrifice of the loser. Indeed, the elect have the right to sacrifice defeated opponents and are acclaimed for doing so rather than condemned. This is not because the victory has been earned through personal “sacrifice”, which is an overly modern moralistic reading of the event, but because victory is a sign of the favour of the Gods and thus has a “consecrating” function. Therefore, the competitors at every sporting event who become the officiants of the ritual in question are exposed to divine judgement by competing against each other. As in the medieval ordeal, victory is a sign of favour and consecration beyond any logic or law, which is why rules are nuanced and flexible. Various Protestant sects are also convinced that the certainty of elect status derives precisely from the performance of good works as success is a sign of divine favour (Weber, 1977).

This explains the tension in individual sports in which competitors appear alone for divine judgement: their performances decide whether they will be favoured by the Gods or cast into oblivion. It also accounts for the violence in team sports in which the behaviour of each player determines collective favour or obscurity, and indeed the aura surrounding the figure who reveals divine favour to determine the winner. Finally, it explains the tragic burden of individual competitions in which competitors must destroy opponents to obtain the divine favour of victory, as well as the symbolic affinity between the athlete consecrated as the winner and the athlete sacrificed through this consecration. It therefore forms a fundamental part of the consecration itself and of the sacralisation of the winner, which, lest we forget, is the basis of the concept of fellowship underlying the archetype of the duel.

The narrative also has a cathartic dimension in which the relationship with the Gods is re-established at the end through the recognition and sacralisation of the winner. At the same time, the defeat removes everyone’s wrongs and sins, which are cleansed through the sacrifice. This is perceived as just as it is desired by the Gods of many religions, not least the so-called “religions of the book”.

Even in its judicial form, the ordeal is a sacred space; it is one of the moments when the divine penetrates everyday life with its power to raise to life and plunge to death. The relationship between the imminent and the transcendent is thus reconsolidated, with the latter entering the former. The ordeal is therefore placed among the founding rituals of the transcendent cornerstone of a given society, which are, after all, acted narratives. This would also explain the nocturnal-female symbolism of the cup and fermentation,

related to transformation and rebirth. Indeed, the cup unites everyone – athletes and spectators alike – in a single narrative. The Gods could also be added to the equation: in Ancient Greece, sports games were always held in a sacred open setting, interspersed and closed with processions and sacrifices.

Excursus 4 – The harmony of opposites

In closing, I will venture a hypothesis about one of the major components of the sacred realm which needs to be confirmed through further studies. I feel that one aspect of the sacred flourishes when the ritual combines the deep polarities of the diurnal and the nocturnal, counterbalancing them in a single key rite. For example, the cup and the sword co-exist and synergise in football, the Eucharist, and the symphony concert. The rituals which succeed in this undertaking not only access the sacred but also feature a strong diachronic and synchronic stability by creating the basic narrative of the harmony of opposites. This may or may not be the case; I will endeavour to return to such musings in due course.

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