'...I recommend it to any reader wanting to understand how the cultural field of sport both reflects and informs the world in which we live.'

Brett Hutc' lia

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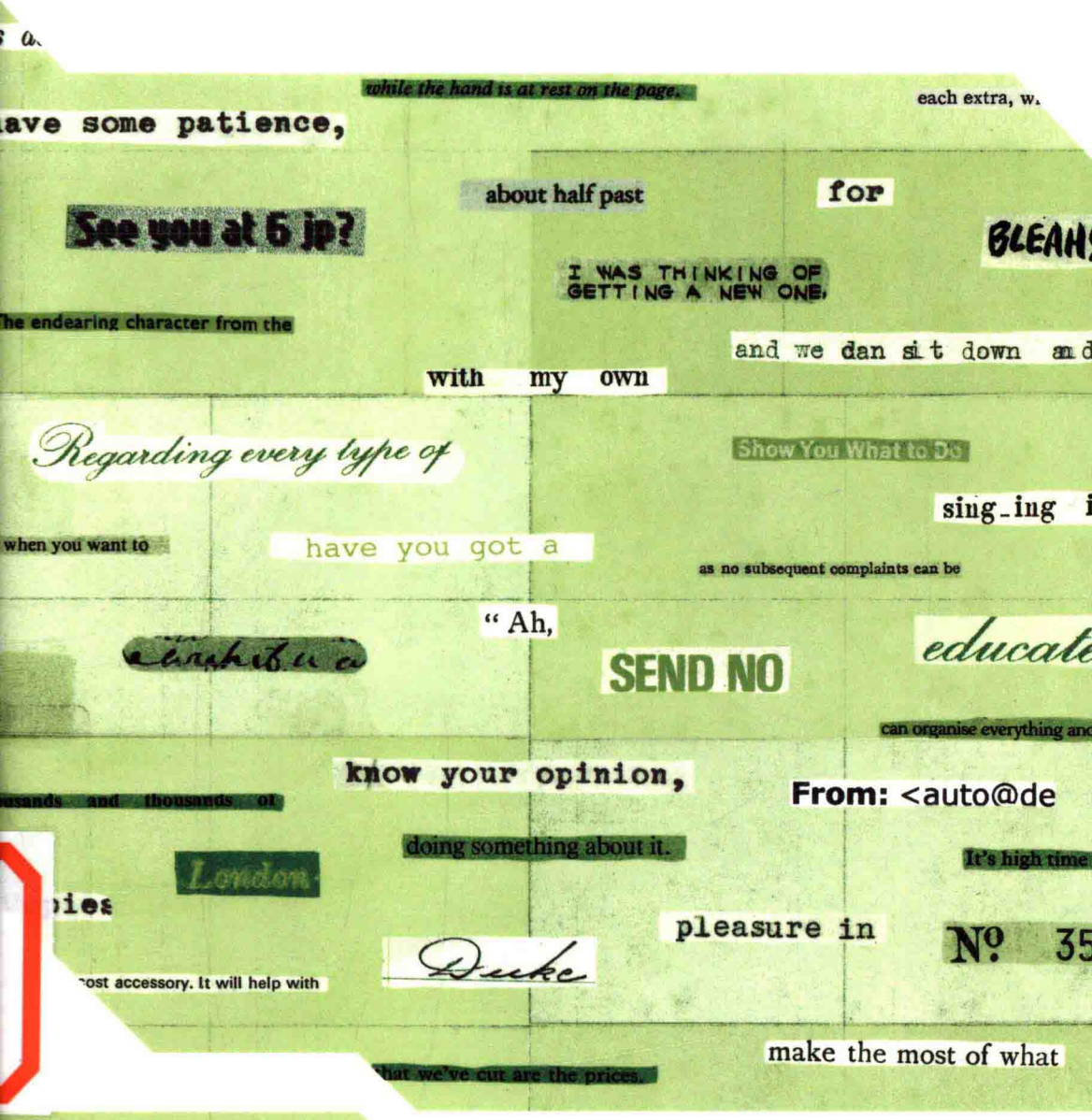
TONY SCHIRATO



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This book both defines sports discourse, and provides an account of the different discourses that are utilized and come into play when the field of sport speaks. It shows how the sports communities have been addressed over time by various speakers, across various multimodal genres. Tony Schirato looks first at how discourse can be viewed as a form of work, something that produces and naturalizes meanings, and habituates the way we see the world.

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Tony Schirato is Associate Professor at Victoria Wellington University, New Zealand.

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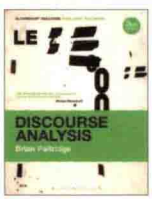

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Sports Discourse

TONY SCHIRATO

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CONTENTS

1 Discourse and critical theory 1
2 Play and sport 19
3 Public school athletics 33
4 Victorian sport 51
5 Gender and sport 65
6 Global sport 81
7 The modern Olympic games 93
8 Television genres and sport 113
9 Media interactivity and fantasy sport 127
10 Conclusion 139

Bibliography 147
Index 155

CHAPTER ONE

Discourse and critical theory

Introduction

This book aims to give an account of the cultural field of sport by way of a consideration of the discourses (both historical and contemporary) that are specific to, and play a significant role within and across, that field. We can justify this approach – specifically this emphasis on discursive practices and regimes – by invoking Michel Foucault's statement that discourses are not just a collection of signs, but 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault 1972: 49). What this means is that the events, sites, contests, organizations, rules, infrastructure, technologies and bodies that constitute the context, materiality and the visual and emotional realities of sport, from an impromptu kick-about in a backstreet to the media-intensive coverage of a World Cup or Olympic final, are experienced and rendered explicable and meaningful by way of the discursive frames applied to them. We can elaborate by considering what exactly is at stake in Foucault's statement on discourse. For John Frow:

> Each element of this sentence matters: discourses are practices in the sense that they carry out an action; they are systematic because they are relatively coherent in the way they work; they are formative of objects in the very act of speaking of them, not in the sense that they create objects out of nothing but in so far as they build a weight of meaning around the categories of the world. Discourses . . . are performative structures that shape the world in the very process of putting it into speech. (2006: 17–18)

Discourses are not simply a reflection of something that is already there, or a representation of existing meaning and form; rather they determine how

we experience, order and evaluate the world. They are able to perform their work because they are seemingly consistent and continuous (although subject to historical and contextual change and variations) in terms of both their internal logics and relations, and their forms of addressing and interacting with subjects; so, for example, watching a game of football, either live or through the media, is to be involved in a communicative practice that presumes certain discursive categories of identity (fan, player, spectator), as well as performatives associated with those categories. These categories never appear or accrue meaning naturally; rather, they are produced and maintained, and acquire meaning, through the workings and movements of power. As Nietzsche (1974) points out, these changes can be read as the traces of power's historical trajectories across fields, societies and cultures.

The discourses and practices of a cultural field are constituted by and through relations of power, which produce the categories, forms and mechanisms that subjects use to understand and negotiate the world. As Pierre Bourdieu writes:

> I, as a thing for which there are things, comprehend this world. And I do so . . . because it encompasses me and comprehends me, it is through this material inclusion – often unnoticed and repressed – and what follows from it, the incorporation of social structures in the form of dispositional structures . . . that I acquire a practical knowledge and control of the encompassing space. (2000: 130)

Discourse acts as a facility, a medium and a technical apparatus that enables the perception, categorization, differentiation and explication of the world. We live within and experience a world which is given to us by and through discourses; and subjects are necessarily shaped, constrained and disposed towards thoughts and actions through their immersion in, and their incorporation of, the discourses of a cultural field (such as school, the family and most particularly the media).

In this chapter, we will provide an account of and demonstrate the ways in which discourse does its work – that is, functions as a practical, systematic and performative structure that produces the world-as-meaning. We will begin by looking in detail some relevant theoretical issues and accounts relevant to discourse and social practice. We will deal with language games and communication, and theories of the relation between discursive regimes, cultural fields and subjectivity.

Language games

Ludwig Wittgenstein proposed that language can be understood as a form of work, or a 'set of instruments for particular uses' (Wittgenstein 1983:

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99); and that representations and accounts of the world are constituted from and arranged in terms of a systematic logic, what he calls 'a distribution in space' (187) that is not natural or immanent to the world. For Wittgenstein, all language systems – visual, verbal and scriptural – are not connected by any one set of formal properties (shared forms of grammar, for instance); rather, they are cognate in terms of their relation to the things they produce and manifest. Wittgenstein explains this by describing language as a game, not in the sense that it is playful, trivial or non-serious, but because like any game it is made up of systematic rules that practitioners commit to and follow. Take the example of two workers who devise a game based on throwing a ball against an office wall and catching it. The rules will complement their circumstances and context, which would include the dimensions of the playing space, the time allocated, the consistency and materiality of the ball, and the contours and dimensions of the wall. The basic rules – the ball must be propelled with an upward motion, land above a point on the wall, be caught before it hits the ground and land within a designated area (corresponding to a section of the office carpet) – produce effects in the form of bodily movements and trajectories, tactics and strategies, and affective experiences (tied in with the results and performances). Above all else, however, it produces a specific form of 'between us' on the part of the players, in the sense that every move in the game constitutes an expression of the rules which must elicit a response or reciprocity if the game is to continue. In short, the players' movements, thoughts and feelings in time and space are derived from and commensurate with regard to the architecture of the game.

For Wittgenstein all the things of language are basically an 'expression of a rule in a language game' (1983: 26), and his work attempts to show how this relation is fundamental to and inflects all communicative practices, and to 'bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use' (48). He identifies and deals with four issues that are germane to this project. First, he argues that the disjunction between language and the world they claim to deliver up is erased or covered over through techniques of reception, such as reading, listening, hearing, seeing, identifying, categorizing, analysing and interpreting. As Wittgenstein observes by way of example 'we do not find the whole business of seeing puzzling enough . . . If you look at a photograph of people, houses and trees, you do not feel the lack of the third dimension in it' (213). Second, when we read, analyse and interpret communication acts and discourse practices, there is a tendency to presume that we are talking about, arguing over and dealing with the status, characteristics, meaning or value of things, when in fact the objects of interpretation are also the mediums of interpretation, not the world itself. As Wittgenstein writes 'One thinks one is tracing the outline of the things of nature . . . when one is merely tracing round the frame through which we look at it' (48). Third, and by way of extension, giving an account of or reporting about something is a practice which, rather than telling us about that thing, informs us

'about the person making the report' (190). What a person says to another person, say in a romantic situation, may not be true, accurate or remotely reliable ('I promise to love you forever', 'My partner doesn't understand me'), but it does allow us to analyse, identify, categorize and evaluate what the speaker is doing, and how they are trying to produce a particular social form of 'between us'. Fourth and finally, making sense of texts (including visual texts) is both a form of work and the product of a regime of training; what is seen, the meanings that are identified or made, and the evaluation of the text is predicated on the wider cultural trajectories, dispositions and literacies of subjects. Every text signals to the reader, usually in a manner commensurate with the relevant genre (obvious with children's literature or a training manual, more subtle in scientific, literary or scholarly works), and utilizes conventional signposting to inflect or guide the reader's train of thought. For Wittgenstein, reading and interpretation can be defined as 'the relation between training and reacting' (80).

Discourse and cultural fields

Everything we have considered with regard to the relation between language-as-discourse and everyday thoughts and practices applies both to sport as a cultural field, and to the experiences of the members (sportspeople, administrators, fans, spectators) of that field. A cultural field is an imagined community in Ben Anderson's (1991) sense of the term; it is consequent of a successful act of discursive articulation that disposes subjects and institutions to identify with the name and the concept of sport. The values associated with this concept produce the 'between us' that facilitates communal identification: they constitute the glue that binds the community together.

It was the production, articulation, dissemination and acceptance of certain orders of discourse, ones that emphasized fair play, *askesis*, competition, team work, amateurism, the benefits and pleasures of play, rationality, uniformity and standardization, that 'systematically formed the object of which they spoke', and brought the cultural field of sport into being in the mid-nineteenth century. This did not mean that there was a necessary articulation or congruence between the practices, identities and discourses of sport; or that the field and its practices and practitioners were all committed to, believed in, and acted in accordance with, dominant beliefs, rules and values. However those discourses, and their norms and prescriptions, came to constitute the standard against which practices and performances could and would be judged; and in the process they determined who was to be included in or excluded from the field. Cavalry officers, for instance, could compete in early Olympic equestrian events because it was assumed that they did not acquire their skills for monetary

gain; their subordinates, on the other hand, were tainted, and disqualified from competing, because of their need to work and earn a living.

Sports discourse also constituted the basis on which members of the field came to see and understand their relation to the field and the wider socio-cultural sphere: they worked to naturalize and universalize a particular world-view and set of attitudes, produced bodily forms and praxis, and disposed subjects with regard to their desires, pleasures, tastes, interests and aspirations. The masculinist character of sports discourse, for instance, completely orients and disposes a reading of the athletic body. The sight of male athletes staggering or collapsing while finishing a race effectively reinscribes and naturalizes the link between competitiveness, endurance, resilience and self-overcoming, and masculinity; in other words, a semiotics of distress, pain, suffering and discomfort is what is expected of, and commensurate with, the male athlete. The same physical symptoms, situated on the female body, have functioned to disqualify women as part of sport (or at least physically taxing sports).

Capitalized ideas

We can demonstrate how this regulatory process works by way of reference to what Claude Lefort calls 'capitalized ideas', a theoretical position commensurate with Foucault's notion of the regulatory function of discursive regimes. John Thompson writes that for Lefort, in the nineteenth century:

> bourgeois ideology gradually broke its links with religious discourse and discarded the reference to a spiritual or physical elsewhere. In place of this elsewhere it substituted general, abstract ideas; the text of bourgeois ideology . . . is written in capital letters: Humanity, Progress, Science, Property, Family, Nation. These ideas are both representative and rules, in the sense that they imply a certain way of acting which is consistent with the idea. The ideas thus give rise to an opposition between the subject who speaks and acts in accordance with the rule, and the 'other' who has no access to the rule and is therefore deprived of the status of subject. (1986: 17)

The regulation of social practice through the appropriation and deployment of these capitalized ideas is one obvious way of loading the dice of cultural politics because it acts to literally exclude certain groups (woman, children, non-whites) from the game itself (by designating them as less than full subjects). Capitalized ideas are deployed as signs that authorize an argument, position, categorization, policy or course of action. The term 'sportsmanship', for instance, constitutes one of the most significant of the

many capitalized ideas that characterize the field of sport. It is also, for that reason, one of the most difficult terms to challenge, to engage with, or even to bring to discussion and analysis. It does its work quickly and without fuss, precisely because any questioning of what the terms mean, how it is being used, and for what purposes, is effectively foreclosed. In this way it largely resists critical inquiry.

It is not correct to say that capitalized ideas are empty of content; rather we can characterize the status of the content associated with them as arbitrary, but motivated. 'Sportsmanship' has no natural content of its own; rather it is filled in by and becomes associated with the discourses, narratives, stories, examples and meanings of truth, produced by and through networks of practices of power. The content is arbitrary in the sense that it can be changed, transformed, edited and replaced at a particular historical time and place. It is motivated because the meanings, narratives and exemplifications are oriented towards performing a certain discursive work; for instance, the association of some thing (a group, an action, an attitude, a form of bodily hexis) with natural meaning and value.

Discursive regimes

The site where this relation between training and reacting, and by extension the production and negotiation of meaning, is most intensively played out is at the level of discourse. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault refers to discourse as the 'What was being said in what was being said' (1972: 28); by which he means, among other things, that it constitutes the rules that bring about the emergence of, and order and make meaningful, the things of language. For Foucault, discourse is language that manifests itself as a specific architectural form, and which has been assigned certain tasks and forms of work. One of the tasks that discourse analysis takes on, from this perspective, is to demonstrate that discourse is not:

> a slender surface of contact, or confrontation, between a reality and a language, the interaction of a lexicon and an experience . . . in analysing discourses themselves, one sees the loosening of the embrace, apparently so tight, of words and things, and the emergence of a group of rules proper to discursive practice. These rules define not the dumb existence of a reality . . . but the ordering of objects. Of course, discourses are composed of signs; but what they do is more than use these signs to designate things. It is this more that renders them irreducible to . . . language and speech. It is this more that we must reveal and describe. (48–9)

In order to explain and demonstrate the relationship between discourse as an organizing principle and a set of communication practices, Foucault

makes uses of the concepts of the 'discursive regime' (or 'formation') and 'discursive event', which he more commonly refers to as a 'statement'; by way of analogy, he suggests that 'A statement belongs to a discursive formation as a sentence belongs to a text' (1972: 116). Statements need not be sentences or linguistic utterances in any conventional sense: Foucault (1972) refers to the arrangement of keys on a typewriter, and graphs and other statistical devices, as statements. With regard to the field of sport, we could say that the records of the fixture lists of English County Cricket could be read as a history of statements that reflected significant changes to the discursive regime of sport from the mid-nineteenth to the twenty-first century. Until 1890, fixtures had been arranged in a more or less arbitrary (although motivated and traditional) manner, and there was no consistency with regard to the number of games played or the range or quality of opponents. The question of who could claim to be champions had to be considered retrospectively, and by various non-official means (in the newspapers, by general acclamation, by a club referring to itself as champions without being challenged), because the fixture list was not oriented towards producing results that could form the basis for, or were commensurate with, determining a champion team. The fixture lists of the period from the eighteenth to the late nineteenth century gradually (but inconsistently) took on and exhibited the characteristics (bureaucratization, standardization, continuity, consistency, quantification) of what Allan Guttmann (1978) has called the modernization of sport. At the same time they indicate that, contrary to the contemporary situation, the field of sport was slow to embrace the notion that winning, or determining an ultimate winner, was a paramount concern. However, in 1890, fixtures were reorganized so as produce official champions; and by the end of the twentieth century they had taken on an even more complex form of arrangement, one that emphasized economic considerations, most particularly the need to sell the game to and accommodate the interests of spectators and the media.

These reorganizations of fixture lists functioned as discursive statements; changes to the rules of play, the composition of the championship, the collection and availability of certain forms of statistical information, and the logic used to allocate points could also be singled out as examples. They were tied to, and derived from, significant movements that occurred within the discursive regime of the field of sport. Discursive regimes systematically regulate the production, organization and deployment of statements; and when a statement appears its particularity (this statement, rather than another) is at the same time an extrapolation from and a practice commensurate with regard to the rules of the discursive regime. The history of the choice and deployment of one statement over other possibilities, and the identification of the 'systems of dispersal' (Foucault 1972: 37) that govern these activities, is the primary focus of the study of discursive regimes. For Foucault, this analysis of discursive regimes needs to consider and address two complex methodological issues. First, it has to

demonstrate their relation to everyday life; in other words, to show how discursive regimes (and their statements, logics and imperatives) produce, naturalize and maintain a world-view and a set of practices. Second, it needs to incorporate an explanation as to why statements appear at certain times and places, what legitimates them, and what accounts for their success or failure.

Genealogy

Foucault utilizes the Nietzschean concept of genealogy to help explain the processes and logics whereby discourses and statements are produced, activated and dispersed within and across fields, and over wider historical periods; and by extension how beliefs, rules and dispositions are embodied and maintained at the level of the everyday. What constitutes 'sportsmanship', for instance, is open to genealogical inquiry: we could trace it back to its points of origin, and identify the various inflection, changes and forms of emphasis that the term underwent during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and analyse the circumstances, contexts and forces that produced them. It is interesting to consider how, when and why, for instance, the sport of cricket became synonymous with sportsmanship, and how this imbrication took on various forms of socio-cultural work. Keith Sandiford (1994) refers to the Rev. Thomas Waugh book *The Cricket Field of a Christian Life* as an example of how:

> Cricket, morality and religion had become intermixed in the Victorian ethos. In Waugh's book . . . the Christian team is batting against Satan's devious and immoral bowlers who blatantly disregard the rules of the game. The godly batsman must therefore cope not only with the quality of the bowling itself but also with the attitude of the ungodly bowlers. It is significant, in analysing the late-Victorian frame of mind, to notice that Waugh chose to write about cricket rather than soccer and that his Christians were batsman and not bowlers. He adopted, in other words, the Victorian habit of glorifying the bat at the expense of the ball, while also supporting the popular view that soccer led to too many emotional excesses. (36)

Sandiford's point is that batting and cricket had strong discursive affiliations with the upper class, while bowing and soccer were considered more suitable and appropriate to the lower classes; this example parallels Nietzsche's observation that the genealogy of the notion of 'nobility' brings to light a process whereby a particular class group (the aristocracy) managed to make themselves synonymous with cultural value; in other words the circulation of the idea of noble character and behaviour as a

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