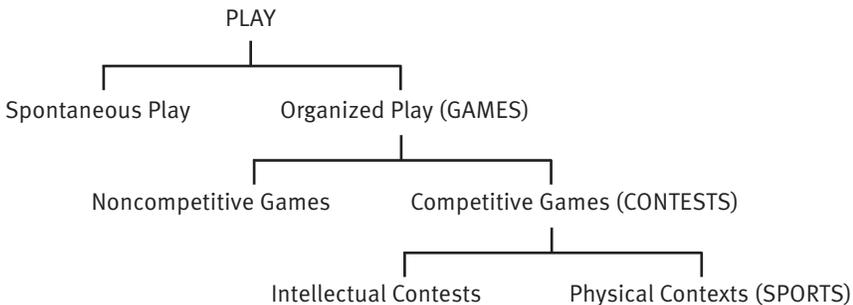


Hommes de métier

Riccardo Giacconi

Carl Diem (historian of sport, sports administrator and chief organizer of the 1936 Olympic Summer Games) expressed himself in these terms; ‘play is purposeless activity, for its own sake, the opposite of work’¹. The English language, unlike Italian, German or French, differentiates between ‘play’ and ‘game’. It is this distinction that inspired sport theorist Allen Guttmann’s attempt to come up with the definition of sport, through three successive distinctions:



¹ Carl Diem, *Wesen und Lehre des Sports*, Weidmannsche Verlags-Buchhandlung 1949.

A classical definition of a play is the one provided by Johan Huizinga in his essay *Homo ludens*;

play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is 'different' from 'ordinary life'.²

The idea of separation from 'ordinary life' is at the core of another definition of play, which appears in the same book. Huizinga describes it as a 'free activity, [...] 'not serious' but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it.' While trying to adjust Huizinga's definition that he considered somewhat inadequate, Roger Caillois in his *Les jeux et les hommes* agrees that play is an *inoperative* activity, and in that it differs from work or art ('il ne crée aucune richesse, aucune œuvre³'). Later on, however, Caillois brings into question professional sport, a social mechanism that spoils the inoperativity of play:

Quant aux professionnels, boxeurs, cyclistes, jockeys ou acteurs qui gagnent leur vie sur le ring, la piste, l'hippodrome ou les planches, et qui doivent songer à la prime, au salaire ou au cachet, il est clair qu'ils ne sont pas en ceci joueurs, mais hommes de métier. Quand ils jouent, c'est à quelque autre jeu.⁴

Professional sports is defined as destruction of play in sport – a *spoilsport*. For the '*hommes de métier*', professional athletes, to play becomes a job. This statement appears paradoxical; anyone who has ever attempted to define 'play' initially paid extra care to distinguishing it from 'work'. Is professional sport no longer play, then? The articulation is complex as it brings into question elements that are not intrinsic to the play-practice itself, but regard the social mechanism around it. It is *outside the playing field* where the dipolarity between work and play is established. The following pages attempt to study the mechanism that allows play and, consequently, sport, to be '*different from ordinary life*'.

² Johan Huizinga, *Homo ludens; a study of the play-element in culture*, Beacon Press 1971.

³ Roger Caillois, *Les jeux et les hommes*, Gallimard 1967, p. 35. Even for what regards gambling activities, the author states that; "Il y a déplacement de propriété, mais non production de biens", p. 35.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

Temenos (un espace pur)

*Magic is sometimes very close to nothing at all. Nothing at all.
When I retire, I will miss the green of the field, 'le carré vert'.*

Zinédine Zidane, in *Zidane, a 21st Century Portrait*

templum = *consecrated piece of ground, enclosure. Usually referred to Proto-Indo-European root *tem-, 'to cut', on notion of 'place reserved or cut out', that gave as an outcome, in Ancient Greek, τέμενος (temenos, temple), derived from the verb τέμνω, 'I cut'.*

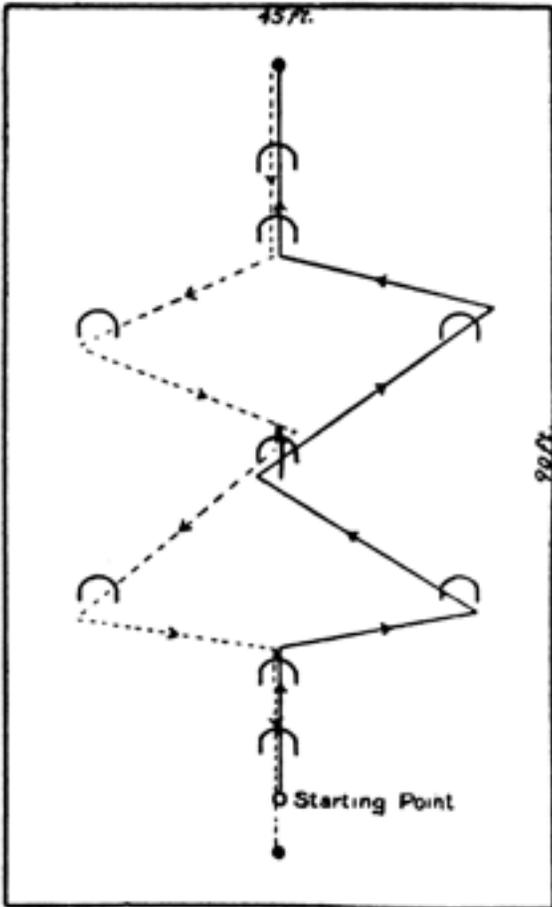
The etymology of the word 'temple' refers to an act of separation: a space is separated from what surrounds it. It is easy to trace the religious acceptance that the act of cutting has assumed. The temple (*temenos*), a space dedicated to the cult of the gods (therefore to kinds of practices that need to be separated from the common space in order to assume a specific social status), inevitably refers to the category of the sacred. The space defined by the temple circumscribes and produces the conditions of existence for a series of acts that are removed from common reality and to the mechanisms of everyday meaning in order to embody a language of their own. The sacred is a category that contains actions that are separated from life (others, different than the ordinary) and that, at the same time, enjoy a sort of precise and *sanctioned* validation⁵). Both of these characteristics exist because of the separate space, the *temenos*.

Games and the sacred both define a space inside which certain activities exist in a separate mode, and which determines their connections with the outside world. In his analysis Roger Caillois provides us with some tools to further define this affinity:

Le jeu est essentiellement une occupation séparée, soigneusement isolée du reste de l'existence, et accomplie en général dans des limites précises de temps et de lieu. [...] Il y a un espace de jeu: suivant les cas, la marelle, l'échiquier, le damier, le stade, la piste, la lice, le ring, la scène, l'arène, etc. Rien de ce qui se passe à l'extérieur de la frontière idéale n'entre en ligne de compte. [...] Le même pour le temps : la partie commence et prend fin au signal donné. [...] Dans tous les cas, le domaine du jeu est ainsi un univers réservé, clos, protégé : un espace pur.⁶

⁵«Le sacré est un élément de la structure de la conscience et non un stade dans l'histoire de cette conscience. L'expérience du sacré est indissolublement liée à l'effort fait par l'homme pour construire un monde qui ait une signification. Les hiérophanies c'est-à-dire les manifestations du sacré exprimées dans des symboles [...] constituent un langage préreflexif qui nécessite une herméneutique particulière.» Mircea Eliade, *Fragment d'un journal*, Gallimard, 1970-1978.

⁶ Roger Caillois, *Les jeux et les hommes*, Gallimard 1967, p. 37.



With regards to professional sport, what are the implications of placing a *temenos*, a pure and separated space, at the centre of a community that gathers around it? What a community gathers around is, similarly as in religious temples, nothing more but *an empty space*.⁷ Or, more precisely, a space of exception that eludes the regulatory mechanisms on which a society is based, but that, at the same time, involves the society itself. It is from this perspective that we can fully appreciate the relevance of former footballer Zinédine Zidane's words; for him, the *espace pur*, the *carré vert* of a soccer field, is very close to nothing, that nothing in which magic may happen.

⁷ Cfr. Peter Brook, *The empty space*, Touchstone 1968.

*Flamean las banderas, suenan las matracas, los cohetes, los tambores, llueven las serpentinas y el papel picado: la ciudad desaparece, la rutina se olvida, sólo existe el templo. En este espacio sagrado, la única religión que no tiene ateos exhibe a sus divinidades.*⁸

Thus Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano portrays the soccer stadium; as a temple. Inquiring further on the similarity between sports and religion, he explains the ways in which soccer resembles God; “En la devoción que le tienen muchos creyentes y en la desconfianza que le tienen muchos intelectuales”⁹.

A man just doing his job

*It is not only the measure of what someone can do, but also and primarily the capacity of maintaining oneself in relation to one's own possibility to not do, that defines the status of one's action. While fire can only burn, and other living beings are only capable of their own specific potentialities—they are capable of only this or that behavior inscribed into their biological vocation—human beings are the animals capable of their own impotentiality.*¹⁰

Giorgio Agamben

In the film *David* (2004), a work commissioned by the National Portrait Gallery of London, artist Sam Taylor-Wood portrays English footballer David Beckham while he is asleep. The shot is fixed, there are no cuts, and it lasts one hour and seven minutes. The portrait is a clear reference to Andy Warhol's film *Sleep* (1963), except that in this case the emphasis is on the celebrity of the protagonist; David Beckham may be considered an icon of English popular culture between of the nineties and early 2000s. Warhol's 'real-time films' were mentioned as a reference also for *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait*. Both portraits show their subjects absorbed in an action.¹¹ Unlike what Gordon and Parreno did with Zidane, however, Taylor-Wood's portrait does not show its subject absorbed in the activity that determines his social importance and rank. On the contrary, Beckham is pictured while performing the most basic activity.

⁸ Eduardo Galeano, *El fútbol a sol y sombra*, Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1995, p. 7.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *Su ciò che possiamo non fare*, in *Nudità*, Nottetempo, 2009, p. 68.

¹¹ “The portrait as a genre was singularly ill equipped to comply with the demand that a painting negate or neutralize the presence of the beholder. [...] One strategy that painters adopted to overcome this limitation was to depict persons in a portrait as absorbed in thought or action.” Cfr. Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*, University of California Press 1980 and Michael Fried, *Absorbed in the action*, on ArtForum, Sept, 2006.

The portrait is thus devoid of an essential feature: the subject's role in their community. *David* has always been described as a piece of art referring to the body and the inner substance of an individual, leaving his social *persona* (in the ancient meaning of 'mask') out. Conversely, we could refer to Beckham's *persona*, to his excellence in performing a certain social task, precisely in order to determine the status of a portrait that is no longer dealing with such a *persona*. We know that the subject is an excellent soccer player, yet this excellence is disabled; it has no place in the image of a sleeping man. We witness a potency that does not drip at all in the act itself. David is a portrait of an impotentiality (of a perfect potentiality¹²).

*I accepted because I didn't have to play a role. I just had to be myself doing what I do every Sunday... and that's it.*¹³

Zinédine Zidane, talking about *Zidane: a 21st Century Portrait*

Douglas Gordon, while introducing the film *Zidane: a 21st Century Portrait* during the Basel art fair, described it as a portrait of 'a man just doing his job'. This statement reminds us of the opening words of Eduardo Galeano's book about soccer, *El fútbol a sol y sombra*; 'La historia del fútbol es un triste viaje del placer al deber'. Is it possible to find the point where practicing a sport may start to be defined as a job?

Operari / opus

One's intimate and inoperative relationship with the body is expressed in its pure form in training, in which the athlete-to-be (not-yet-competitor) experiences their own potentiality. In training, even a world record is nothing more than a personal accomplishment, an inoperative and momentary discovery of one's pure potentiality. In order to become a professional athlete, one needs to access the validation mechanisms of professional sports that use measurement conventions and public certifications of an athlete's work.

The creation of a universal terrain for modern sports led to a comprehensive quantification of an athlete's performance. All professional sport activities are nowadays immediately translated into a result, into a series of data; sports records are a "marvellous abstraction that permits competition not only among those gathered together on the field of sport but also

¹² "...vi è, infine, una potenza compiuta o perfetta, che è quella di uno scriba perfettamente padrone dell'arte di scrivere, nel momento in cui non scrive". Giorgio Agamben, *Bartleby, o della contingenza*, in Gilles Deleuze and Giorgio Agamben, *Bartleby. La formula della creazione*, Quodlibet 1993, p. 50.

¹³ Interview with Zinédine Zidane in the extras of the DVD *Zidane: a 21st Century Portrait*, Artificial Eye 2007.

among them and others distant in time and space”¹⁴. This transition from the continuous to the discrete determined the need to quantify also sports performances that are essentially not possible to measure objectively, but that have to be assessed on the basis of an adherence to a model, to an idea of movement. In such disciplines (such as gymnastics, diving, figure skating, synchronized swimming, horse dressage...) an aesthetic appraisal turned into an athletic evaluation, supposedly objective. One can fully appreciate the existence of a ‘sports institution’ in these sport disciplines clearer than in others. The transition from the aesthetic to the athletic may be validated only through recognition by an established authority. *Judges* reach an agreement on the results of competitions through a real judicial verdict, whose truth and objectivity are based on conventions.

Work of professional sportsmen is thus validated and given shape through these mechanisms, which transform potentiality into act. The record (registration, document), once made official, is no longer connected to the intimate relationship of an individual with their own potentiality; entering a social contract as a document, an act of a sportsman becomes a piece of *work* (an *œuvre*).

The relationship between records and training can also be approached through the dipolarity between one’s *studio* and their *work* or, using Latin terms, *operari* (working) and *opus* (work). What is trained during training is the availability to enter the regime of work – to become an *opus*. Training is therefore the stage that would in other professions coincide with the *studio*, that is the exercise of one’s own faculties – the *operari*.¹⁵ In the case of an athlete – as in the case of a musician – the *opus* exists only an exception. One has spent all of their time *studying* oneself, repeating an exercise, but it is only in a particular context (a competition, a concert) that they are provided with the opportunity to transform the exercise into a performance, to actualize their potentiality and turn study into work. The athlete’s doing, their *opus*, is destined to specific social, conventional, temple-like settings that are “separated from life”¹⁶. An athlete’s *opus* is not in itself different from its *operari*; the action of running 100 metres is the same in a competition and in training. In order to be identified and acknowledged as an *opus*, the action needs validation *outside of itself*; sports records essentially need measurement mechanisms and accurate, non-debatable procedural conventions. The *opus* of an athlete (as the one of a priest) exists only within a social institution.

¹⁴ Allen Guttman, *From Ritual to Record. The Nature of Modern Sports*, Columbia University Press 1978, pp. 52-53.

¹⁵ In Judaism there is a clear distinction between *melacha* (activity aimed at a productive purpose, usually translated as ‘work’) and *menucha* (a term usually translated as ‘Sabbath rest’ but which, to be more precise, denotes the sphere of inoperativity – all activities devoid of a productive purpose).

¹⁶ “A man walks across this empty stage whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged”. Peter Brook, *The empty space*, Touchstone 1968, p.11.

Inoperativity

In short, what separates a game from professional sports is their relationship with work. The mechanism underlying a soccer match can be perfectly well described as a game: what discerns between the playing of a game and the performance of a work cannot be intrinsically grasped in the activity itself. The distinction has to be made outside the playing field, in the social space that the activity occupies, and within the social conventions measuring its effectiveness. Precisely because this distinction is not substantial, these two statutes necessarily continue to coexist. Inside the field, there is no substantial difference between a soccer match in the suburbs, and a World Cup finals – both are instances of the same game, defined by the same rules. The greater or lesser degree of ‘operativity’ is decided in the social space that surrounds these two practices. The study of sport as a social event needs to start from the values assigned by a society to certain activities intrinsically characterized as *games*.

Inoperativity [...] is neither a consequence nor a precondition (the abstention from labor) of the feast day but coincides with festiveness itself in the sense that it consists precisely in neutralizing and rendering inoperative human gestures, actions, and works, which in turn can become festive only in this way. [...] The inoperativity that defines the feast is not mere inertia or abstention; it is, rather, a sanctification, that is to say, a particular modality of acting and living.¹⁷

The movement between work and inoperativity has been extensively studied by Giorgio Agamben. In a series of considerations on the feast, he speaks of “simple, quotidian human activities” which are “suspended and rendered inoperative. [...] Thus, the procession and the dance exhibit and transform the simple gait of a human body walking, the gift reveals an unexpected possibility within the products of an economy and labor, and the festive meal renews and transfigures the hunger of an ox.”¹⁸ Human activities are removed from their common use and introduced into a different field, in which they are withdrawn from their usual purpose and from the external mechanisms of value, assuming an alternative mode of existence. Actions are emptied of their ordinary uses and made inoperative in play too; the playing field then creates a new purpose (*telos*) for them, which is different from the usual one, and connected to the mechanisms of the field itself. Play, just like feast, defines a sacred, separate space inside which action exists in an alternative mode.

¹⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *Una fame da bue. Considerazioni sul sabato, la festa e l'inoperosità*, in *Nudità*, Nottetempo 2009, p. 154, 149.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

As far as inoperativity is concerned, similarities between feast and play go even further. A new *telos* is assigned to playing activities when they pass from the regime of play to the regime of professional sports (when players become *hommes de métier*). A parallel development occurs during the passage from feast to a religious ceremony:

*Signifiers with “zero symbolic value” may correspond to human actions and objects that the feast emptied out and rendered inoperative and that religion then came to separate and recodify through its ceremonial apparatus.*¹⁹

The conventional-ceremonial apparatus that marks the passage from feast (inoperative) to a religious ceremony (operative) is similar to the one that regulates the passage from play to work when a game becomes an official competition, professional sport. The parallel between sport and religion finds its *raison d'être* in this double movement; just as religion recodifies acts that had previously been *separated* and rendered inoperative, social mechanisms in sport apply a value (emotional and economic) to a series of acts that, in their *playful* nature, had previously only had a value *within the field* in which they were happening. A set conventional-ceremonial value is, in both cases, applied to a *temenos* in order to produce operativity – a work (*opus*). We define this value as conventional-ceremonial by virtue of the fact that the new *telos* applied to these practices cannot be intrinsic to them, but only linked to a *convention shared by a community* that surrounds them.

Roland Barthes suggests that “all our modern sport can be found in this spectacle from another age, inherited from ancient religious sacrifices”²⁰. A sport event, just like religion, is able to establish a community insofar as it locates itself outside of it and carves out a temple-like ‘empty space’ from which the community is excluded. In order to demarcate this *temenos*, the violence of a sacrificial rite is used, and it has the characteristics of a game; it is sublimated and regulated. The practice of such a game assumes the sacrificial function, as much as a community assembles around it. Just as a religious sacrifice provides a community with the *mise-en-scène* of its origins, similarly a playing field provides a sports community with a founding ritual that repeats itself.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 158.

²⁰ Roland Barthes, *What is sport?*, Yale University Press 2007, p. 3.