

The Performance of Sports Commentary:

Post-dramatic theatre as a model to examine the performance of the sports commentator

Introduction

As a live artist, theatre-maker, performance studies academic, amateur runner and avid armchair sports fanatic this paper is framed by a simple proposition – that the performance of the sports commentator can be usefully understood from a postdramatic theatrical tradition. Broadly, my research is concerned with the ways in which the academic and artistic field of performance studies might usefully intersect with sport – to think more closely about how sport *performs*.

The focus of this paper is the sports commentator and how, through a reconsideration of the role from a postdramatic theatrical tradition, the mechanism of sports commentary can be considered as being performative. There is an existing body of research providing fascinating insights into the performance of the sports commentator from the field of sports media, all of which consider sports commentary from a dramatic perspective. Whilst these analyses highlight important features of the dramatic content of sports commentary, the use and frequency of ‘dramatic’ language, the focus on enmity or on particular narrative drives, the dramatic form doesn’t fully account for the performative mechanism of the sports commentator – what the commentator *does*. I would like to propose that the mechanism of sports commentary, what the commentator actually *does*, is more akin to the language-games of event-based, postdramatic theatre.

I will begin by introducing the notion of postdramatic theatre and how this categorisation emerged in contemporary performance practice since the 1990’s in response to the dramatic. Through the introduction of a few examples from my field, I will attempt to articulate how aspects of postdramatic theatre provide a more useful lens to examine the performance of sports commentary. My claims are deliberately modest, aware, as I am that I am speaking outside of my field. So this is a slightly tentative step, a way of introducing how one might look at sports commentary from a performance studies perspective, to provide a position and a set of languages to examine how sports commentary changes the way an event is received and subsequently perceived.

Postdramatic Theatre: a quick introduction

The term 'postdramatic theatre' was introduced into the performance studies lexicon in the 1990's by German theatre researcher Hans-Thies Lehmann and is widely accepted within the field. Lehmann uses the term to reflect more clearly a variety of trends in contemporary theatre that up until the 90's had been broadly categorised as 'post-modern'. However, Lehmann asserts that these trends are not so much a departure from the 'modern' as from the 'dramatic' – not postmodern then, but postdramatic. Theatrical performances that could be categorised by Lehmann's notion of postdramatic theatre rejected the hallmarks of dramatic theatre; notions of character, dialogue between characters, fictional stage worlds for the characters to reside in, mimetically enacting dramatic conflict. This trend away from 'the straightjacket of *re-presentation*' (2013: 4) is a well-acknowledged and understood shift in the contemporary theatrical landscape and is driven by a reaction against the way representation could be seen to 'relegate the phenomenon of theatre to an always 'secondary' status' (2013: 4-5), never as significant as the real world. The shift to postdramatic theatre owes a debt to the emergence of the field of Performance Studies as a discipline. The emergence of neo-avant-garde art forms throughout the second half of the twentieth century, such as happenings, Fluxus events, performance art and live art all foreground the materiality of performance in theatre, shifting the attention away from the dominance of the text – a hallmark of the dramatic tradition – into an increased awareness and focus upon the event of theatre, the bodily co-presence of performers and spectators, where, as Professor of Theatre Studies at the Free University of Berlin Erika Fischer-Lichte describes, 'the artistic and aesthetic nature of performance...(derives) from its nature as event' (2008: 162).

Postdramatic Language Games: Stan's Café & Forced Entertainment

In order to demonstrate some of the key features of postdramatic theatre that are applicable to my aim, to present this theatrical paradigm as a useful lens to understand the performance of the sports commentator, I'm going to introduce you to a couple of examples. These theatrical performances, not only can be considered as postdramatic, but also provide useful contexts for the application of postdramatic theatre to sports commentary itself. It is important to note that this narrow selection of examples is not indicative of the broad field of postdramatic theatre performances – my aim here isn't to fully classify or quantify postdramatic theatre tropes, but to introduce a couple of examples to help highlight the connections to the performance of sports commentary.

The first performance I want to show you is particularly apt, an interactive performance intervention called *The Commentators* (2009). The project was originally conceived as part of Birmingham-based theatre company Stan's Café's performance *24 Hour Scalextric* (2009), where live webcast commentary accompanied a durational re-staging of the annual 24-hour car race in Le Mans. This interactive durational project encouraged audience members to take shifts driving the cars and was observed live from a seating bank whilst simultaneously being live broadcast on the internet. Artistic director James Yarker playfully frames the 'birth' of *The Commentators* (2009), through his reflection on this event in a 2013 interview in which the commentary was created to justify the status of *24 Hour Scalextric* (2009) as 'art'. He notes;

The answer came with *The Commentators*; if Craig and I delivered an uninterrupted webcast radio commentary on the whole proceedings then THAT would be art. (Yarker, 2013)

Whilst this, clearly 'tongue-in-cheek', response is a lovely description of the playful irreverence that is contained within much of Stan's Café's work, it also poses a useful question about the nature of sports commentary. What is it that Yarker suggests about sports commentary that *makes* the performance into art? Whilst the nature of the relationship between sport and art is contentious and much debated and beyond the scope of this paper, Yarker is pointing towards an interesting feature of sports commentary, which does serve as an important question posed by this paper, and that is: 'How does sports commentary make events perform?'

The Commentators (2009), emerges as an adaptable intervention into public space, where the two performers, acknowledging the commentator-pundit relationship common to most sports broadcasting, are dressed in sheepskin coats (made famous by English football commentator John Motson), attend public events or spaces and commentate upon these everyday events as if they were sporting events. Yarker describes the key criteria for the performance being the dislocation of the commentary away from its usual home within the elite sporting event. Rather, *The Commentators* is a piece that is located deliberately within the amateur sporting event; such as the school sports day, rather than elite athletics; observing the crowd watching a world cup football match, rather than commenting on the match itself; or, in what can be seen as a fundamentally non-sporting location, the activities taking place outside of a library or at a village fair. Their performance is almost entirely improvised and framed by its extended duration – the focus being, what happens if we subject the everyday and the mundane to the

heroic and dramatic languages of sports broadcasting. *The Commentators* provides an incredibly rich examination of the performance rhythms of sports broadcasting, by performing the game of commentary out of its usual context, describing what is happening and *making it* interesting. Here 'the game' is exposed, or perhaps the commentary itself is exposed, in the manner in which its performance draws attention to the details as it focuses upon the everyday and makes us see the world differently. *The Commentators*, as well as providing an interesting and playful examination of the performance of the sports commentator, also usefully highlights some of the key features of postdramatic theatre, as discussed earlier. The performance is largely improvised, in a deliberate shift away from the primacy of the text in dramatic forms. The performance then, rather than being the enactment of a pre-written dramatic narrative, is a game of sorts, the performers 'playing' the game of commentary, rather than delivering lines written by a playwright, embodied through psychological processes of acting. The idea that postdramatic theatre can be characterised as a language game, rather than the embodiment of a hitherto already complete play-script, is a key principle in my application of postdramatic theatre forms to the analysis of sports commentary.

There are plenty of examples of postdramatic theatre practices that are framed by games of language. Artist-academics, Cathy Turner and Synne Behrndt in their 2008 book *Dramaturgy and Performance* use Wittgenstein's notion of 'language-games', to describe contemporary performance projects that have, in some form, a structural relationship to the mechanisms of language. A strand of Sheffield-based theatre company Forced Entertainment's work has, since the 1990's, explored the dynamics of language through a series of often durational, paired back performances that use language as a game or a task-based structure. *Speak Bitterness* (1995) is framed around the improvised live structuring of a vast text of confessions, *Quizoola!* (1999), is a durational game of question and answer and *And On The Thousandth Night* (2000), is a durational improvised storytelling performance. These performances work with texts, some written, some improvised, and the delivery of these texts is shaped through a series of rules forming the task or game of the performance. Theatre researcher Annemarie Matzke's characterisation of the Forced Entertainment performer, in relation to the construction of performance materials through playing within a set of rules, is a mechanism that echoes strongly with the phenomenon of sport, which Matzke draws attention to. She writes;

As in a good football match, performances are understood in terms of how well the players handle the rules... The performers are not good actors, but

players in their own game, in which they falter or triumph, following the rules only to be able to bend and break them on stage. (2004: 173)

In the characterisation of the performer in this way, we start to see the connection with the performance of the sports commentator, that there is an action to complete, a task to be done, a game to be played by the speaker in the moment of reception.

All of these examples start to map out how the conditions of postdramatic theatre might contain useful contexts to examine the performance of the sports commentator; postdramatic theatre's attendance to the live event, its reaction against representation and tropes that recalibrate the primacy of the authorial text, which is achieved in the examples I have shown through the performance of language games. So, whilst we might see comparable traits between sports commentary and postdramatic theatre, one might be tempted to suggest that this doesn't necessarily make sports commentary a *performance* – and that's not what I'm suggesting. But whilst we might acknowledge that sports commentary isn't in and of itself a postdramatic theatre performance – that doesn't mean it isn't *performative*.

The Performativity of Sports Commentary

The proposition that frames this paper follows a performance studies tradition whereby the inherent performativity (Loxley, 2007) of everyday activities is positioned as a means to complicate the distinction between 'real life' and theatrical representation, to examine the ways in which sports commentary might be considered as performative.

Literary critic James Loxley traces the notion of performativity through J.L. Austin's speech act theory, originally formulated in 1955, and the distinction he makes between 'serious' and 'non-serious' language. For Austin a 'performative' utterance has a real world consequence, saying 'I do' in a marriage ceremony for example, in contrast to 'constative' utterances, which, following Loxley's reading of Austin, are simply representative – without actual impact in the real world. Austin separates real utterance, which he calls 'serious' from fictional speech acts, or 'non-serious'. Through an infamous public exchange between American philosopher John Searle and his French contemporary Jacques Derrida concerning their conflicting reading of Austin, Loxley describes how the latter complicates the distinction between the 'serious' and the 'non-serious', claiming that all speech, all language in fact, is citational. That although fictional discourse is a citation, so too is 'real' speech – even Austin's 'performative' utterance is citational, and that without its citationality (the fact that we already know 'I

do' means 'you are married') the 'performative' would not have its real world impact. Derrida's deconstruction of the serious/non-serious speech act distinction proposed by Austin creates the context through which performance studies can usefully interrogate performative aspects of real life.

In the case of the performativity of sports commentary, the paper argues that despite its existence in the fabric of the real world, the mechanisms of commentary, through its inherent performativity, plays a significant part in the construction of its subject. It is the position of the commentator that is, to a certain degree, responsible for the framing, reframing and enframing (Žižek: 2014) of the sports event. For Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek the notion of the event implies a frame, a framing is the way we see an event. Through the very consideration of something as event, it is framed. The notion of reframing implies a change to the frame, a shift in how we view the event, Enframing relates to a radical shift, through the evental moment, in our relationship to reality. This notion of the way an event is framed, reframed and enframed is crucial, in that it presents a context whereby we can address the relationship between the commentary and of the sports event. How the commentary impacts the way the sport is received and thus perceived.

Sports commentary: an event of text

Sports commentary is a phenomenon that is aligned with the development of sports broadcasting in the early twentieth century. It is part of a series of mechanisms that transform and represent the live event for the broadcast audience. Originally conceived through radio broadcast, the move to television helped to further shape and refine the main conventions of sports commentary. Gary Whannel in his 1992 book *Fields of Vision* writes,

The conventions of good commentary included: keep up the interest with suspense; keep it simple; there is a need for explanation and interpretation; there is a need to shape material into a logical order; blend descriptive and associative material as imperceptibly as possible; it must sound spontaneous; vary the pace; let sounds (crowd noises, etc.) speak for themselves. (1992: 25)

Already within these simple conventions identified by Whannel, are the impetuses for the rules of a performative language game of the sports commentator. I am particularly interested in the directive for the commentary to 'sound spontaneous' –

rather than simply *be* spontaneous. The implication here is that the commentary is not simply improvised, rather that there are already some pre-existing materials that are delivered in such a way as to give the illusion of spontaneity. The necessity to prepare language for the commentary in advance is part of a strategy to deal with a problematic dichotomy within the role of commentary; that is the tension between realism and entertainment. As Whannel writes,

...there is on the one hand the impulse to describe the scene, show what's happening, give the audience an accurate picture, and on the other the impulse to get people involved, keep up the interest, add suspense, shape the material and highlight the action. (1992: 24)

This tension between the accurate description of events for the absent audience and the translation of those events to *entertain* that audience, is a fascinating paradox. The commentator is encouraged to actively interpret, create and construct aspects of the commentary, to keep us engaged in the event – but what is the event we are engaged in? It is not the original sporting event, *per se*, but another event, a broadcast event – an event of commentary. If the commentary is shaping and changing our experience of the sports event as a direct strategy to keep us engaged, then perhaps we are actually engaged in a commentary event, where the commentator can be seen as storyteller, as creator, as shaper, as constructor of the event.

A range of studies from the field of sports journalism in the late 1970's and early 1980's explore the performance the sports commentator. Bryant, Brown, Comisky & Zillmann conducted a series of investigations into the types and frequency of dramatic embellishment in sports commentary, establishing the conclusion that 'a sizeable portion (of commentary) is devoted to a dramatic embellishment of the game' (1977: 40). It is this gap between what happens and what is said that is of particular interest. And it is in this gap between what happens and what is said, in how pre-prepared language *sounds* live, that I propose we encounter an event of language, or more specifically an event of text.

Performance studies scholar Cathy Turner's concept of the event of text explores the relationship between the pre-written text and the live event. Turner asks,

Could the pre-written text come to have some of the same qualities as improvisation, seeming to be 'written' in the moment of speaking, so that we might consider 'speaking, writing and composition as shared activities, taking place in the present and creatively infiltrated, at times deconstructed, by the physical and visual presences of the performers and *mise en scène*'? (Turner and Behrndt 2008: 193). (2009: 106)

Although from a different perspective, Turner's reflections on the relationship between the pre-written and the live moment echo the instruction for sports commentary to *sound* spontaneous, the difference being the clear acknowledgement of the pre-existing text. The notion of the sports commentator working with pre-existing texts and improvised games in the attempt to *sound spontaneous* resonates with the ways in which Annemarie Matzke describes the special mode of delivery of the aforementioned British theatre company Forced Entertainment's performers. Matzke describes the way in which the performance style of Forced Entertainment, a company synonymous with the notion of postdramatic theatre, is composed of multiple elements, 'enacting characters, relating text and narratives, improvising and playing games, alone and with others' (2004: 170). It is through the live construction and juxtaposition of these various elements by the performers that brings forth what Matzke calls 'a special form of delivery, which gives an impression of immediacy' (2004: 170). If we equate Whannel's *sound of spontaneity* with Matzke's *impression of immediacy*, we can start to see a correlation between the performance of the sports commentator and the approach taken by performers in postdramatic theatre. This correlates with Turner's proposition that we might consider the spoken, the written, and the way these languages are composed as shared activities, all taking place in the present. The blending together of prepared statements, historical contexts and pre-emptive narratives alongside live, spontaneous utterance provides a useful context to consider the performance of commentary – and specifically, in this case, the consideration of sports commentary as a performative language-game from a postdramatic theatrical tradition.

Bryant, Brown, Comisky & Zillmann's studies on the performance of sports commentary, draw a useful comparison between the live stadium audience and the media audience, who are the consumers of the live commentary. They write,

Whereas the viewers in the stadium perceive the event as is, the home viewers are exposed to a “media event” that is the product of a team of professional gatekeepers and embellishers. (1977: 150)

The sports commentator takes up a dual position, both present at the sports event (most of the time), whilst broadcasting their liveness to a non-present spectator. They are present at the live event and present that presence in the broadcast event. Acting as a conduit between watchers and watched, a translator of the live for those not present, the commentator takes up a fascinating position *between* the live event and the broadcast audience, an in-between position whereby the commentator can ensure the meaning of the event. But it is not just this physical gap that allows the commentator to maintain control over the meaning of the event. Comisky et al. indirectly imply that the commentary actively reframes the action of an event in their 1977 study. They conclude that,

On the strength of the sportscasters’ play-by-play account, the viewers may “see” fierce competition where it really does not exist. (1977:150)

Here, Comisky et al. describe how the commentator’s account of the action directly impacts on the game being watched by the spectators. They continue,

These findings are suggestive of the great potential of sports commentary to alter the viewers’ perception of the sport event. The viewers seem to get “caught up” in the way the sportscaster interprets the game, and they allow themselves to be greatly influenced by the commentator’s suggestion of “drama” in the event. (1977: 153)

The event of the commentary is a separate texture from the sport itself, necessarily after each event of the game or match; something happens (sport), something is said (commentary). It is in this gap that the commentator enacts a performance form that is comparable in structure to the approach of the performer in post-dramatic theatre. And it is through this performance that they are able to frame, reframe and enframe the meaning of the sporting occasion.

Conclusion

My proposition here is twofold. Firstly that the performance of the sports commentator, what the commentator actually *does*, can be usefully understood

through a postdramatic theatrical tradition. Sports commentary as a kind of language game, a live improvised task, a performative rendering of a live sporting occasion through language. Secondly, that the structural mechanism of sports commentary creates the conditions whereby the sporting event can be framed, the nature of the event is defined through the presence of the commentary; reframed, the *meaning* of the event and the story being told can be shaped and changed by the commentary; and potentially even enframed whereby our understanding of the position these events takes up in the world can be altered.

The ideas proposed by this paper are part of a wider cross over in my thinking between sport and performance. The mechanisms and performances of sport have been influential in my own artistic practice and performance studies scholarship. Today marks a shift where I hope to reciprocate, using my experiences and thinking around these connections between sport and performance from a performance studies perspective, to usefully contribute, in a small way, to the field of sports media.

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