

Stories in sports commentary: How narrative strategies of sports commentary reframe fun-runners in the Big City Marathon.

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Introduction

As a live artist, 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 post-dramatic theatrical tradition. There are several fascinating insights into the performance of the sports commentator from sports media, all of which consider sports commentary from a dramatic perspective. And whilst these are welcome, I would like to propose that the mechanism of sports commentary is more akin to the language-games of event-based, post-dramatic theatre.

To fully articulate how the sports commentator functions I borrow Slavoj Žižek's description of the way events are framed, reframed and enframed. For Žižek the notion of the event implies a frame, a framing is the way we see an event. 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 paper positions the Big City Marathon as an event that is reframed through the mechanism and narratives of the commentary. For the purpose of this paper I use the phrase Big City Marathon to describe a group of annual marathon races that have both elite runners and fun-runners, that take place in major cities and are broadcast on TV. The most prevalent example and the one I refer to in the paper is the London Marathon. In the first part of this paper I propose how we might consider sports commentary as a kind of post-dramatic theatre form. In the second part I describe how the commentary reframes the meaning of the BCM making it perform as a charity event. The notion of enframing is used to articulate how the fun-runner is made to perform as complicit in neoliberal ideology through their enactment of the charity event.

Part 1. 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 seminal British Theatre Company, Forced Entertainment's performers. Matzke describes the way in which the performance style of Forced Entertainment 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.

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.

Part 2. Reframing the fun-runner in the BCM

The London Marathon is one of the single biggest charity fundraising events in the UK. The narrative of the marathon event has two distinct threads, an elite race *and* a charity event as articulated by John Bryant (2006) in his historical account of the London Marathon. He writes,

Long after the African superstars have loped their way through Docklands, you can hear the crowds enthusiastically bellowing, ‘Come on, Fairy, come on, girl, you can do it.’ The London crowd are there for the rhinos just as much as for the record breakers... (2006: 123)

The iconography of the London Marathon was created to perform as a spectacle. Beyond simply a sporting occasion, the marathon performs as a charity event, with the Virgin Money London Marathon website describing the iconic image of the event as ‘the thousands of runners traipsing the streets to raise money for charity, many in fancy dress, hoping to stand out as a rhino, football mascot, giant tree, or escaped convict.’ (Virgin Money London Marathon, n.d.) The fun-runner in the charity event is also contextualised by broader notions of leisure that are themselves dependent upon neoliberal ideologies of productivity and self-improvement, leisure in neoliberalism cannot be *unproductive*. The fun-runner’s *performance* is made *productive*, through the accumulation of charity donations.

Writing in the midst of the post-financial collapse recession, Nicola Livingstone (2013) outlines the notion of capitalist charity, identifying that this period of economic downturn had seen the state ‘rely more on the voluntary sector and charities in a shifting of responsibilities from the state to society, as a consequence of poor decision-making by the former.’ (2013: 348) The voluntary sector in the UK has been promoted and marketed heavily in recent years as an integral aspect of recent UK Prime Minister David Cameron’s political manifesto the Big Society, introduced in the election campaign of 2010. The Conservatives actively encourage ‘charities, social enterprises and private companies to get involved [in creating] our Big Society’ (Cameron, 2011) (2013: 348-9). Charity itself, is reframed by Big Society rhetoric as part of the neoliberal solution to social problems. According to Livingstone, by making charity part of the state solution, the state diverts responsibility away from itself as we begin to see charity as the best way to deal with inequality. She writes,

Charity and volunteering have become pawns to the state form, adopted as a smokescreen, an act of positivity and potential, but an act which seeks to misdirect and distract us from the destructive welfare reforms being enforced.
(2013: 349)

The notion of charity as a part of the capitalist system is even more clearly embedded through Žižek's notion of cultural capitalism (2009a). According to Žižek, in cultural capitalism, 'one no longer sells (and buys) objects which "bring" cultural or emotional experiences, one directly sells (and buys) such experiences' (2009a: 139). In outlining examples of these 'experiences', Livingstone includes 'participation in apparently life-affirming events such as marathons, or 'races for life', in which registration fees are paid and money raised for specific causes' (2013: 350). Samantha King (2003) in her analysis of the 'Race for the Cure' movement – (akin to the UK based 'Race for Life'), articulates how these kinds of events are complicit in the values of neoliberalism. King suggests that 'Race for the Cure' events perform a post-Reagan ideal for neoliberal citizenship because it 'demonstrates commitment to the nation-state by embracing bourgeois, humanistic values such as the need to perform organized, charitable works' (2003: 297).

According to Livingstone, our relationship to the charity experience, such as the BCM, is one of interpassivity (Livingstone, 2013), we are 'helping' in a capitalist way, consuming the experience in the knowledge that it will 'help others', although we are disconnected from that help. I buy the right coffee, I eat organic apples, I run the marathon for charity, my choices of what to consume are presented as *enough*. I delegate responsibility to the charity form.

The television broadcast of the BCM is fundamental in the representation of the marathon as a spectacular charity event. The coverage is live and uninterrupted, underpinned, through its status as a sporting event with live sports commentary, provided in recent years by former champion runners Brendan Foster and Steve Cram.

And the masses, people like you and me, running for a reason, running for fun, running to improve their life (and fitness) and to help others, and later we're going to talk to so many of those people, hearing their stories and their reasons for running. (*London Marathon*, 2015)

This fragment of commentary from the broadcast of the 2015 London Marathon sets the tone for how the fun-runner is reframed. The dynamic of sports commentary is tied to the goal-orientated ontology of elite sport; the sporting occasion has a clear purpose, in the case of the marathon, as a race to cover the distance of 26.3 miles before everyone else. The commentary of the elite race follows this pattern; the narrative builds towards the *finish*, and an inevitable climatic moment, in narrative terms, when someone wins. The purpose of the commentary is tied to the purpose of the event – but in the case of the fun-runners – the *race* cannot be defined in such simple terms. In the foreword to Bryant's book on the London Marathon, Olympic rower Sir Steve Redgrave writes 'The London Marathon will never be a race that I or nearly 30,000 others are ever going to win.' (2006: 1) There are a multitude of reasons why people run BCM's, too many to mention here: what is of interest is not the specific reasons for running of individual runners, but the way in which their participation is framed, through the commentary, as *having* meaning.

The fun-runner in the BCM is meaningless in terms of the event as a purely sporting occasion; they barely warrant a mention, so minuscule are their chances of victory. But such is the dynamic of sports-style commentary, that *meaninglessness* is not acceptable. How then does the sports commentator deal with the meaninglessness (in sporting terms) of the fun-runner? Sociologist Jean Baudrillard, reflecting on the experience of witnessing fun-runners crossing the finish line of the New York Marathon in the 1980's doubts that these scenes contain any meaning. He writes,

I would never have believed that the New York marathon could move you to tears. It really is the end-of-the-world show. Can we speak of suffering freely

entered into as we might speak of a state of servitude freely entered into ...?
(1989: 19)

For Baudrillard it is the scale and spectacle that is the problem, he writes 'there are simply too many of them and their message has lost all meaning, it is merely the message of their arrival' (1989: 20). If we follow Baudrillard's assessment of the fun-runner in the marathon as quintessentially meaningless because they don't fit the *meaning* pre-ordained by the sporting context, then the commentator is required to impose meaning in the broadcasting of the mass-participation spectacle.

And what is particularly interesting about the way in which meaning is imposed on the fun-runner in the marathon through the rhetoric of sports commentary, is that *meaning* itself is guaranteed, 'everyone IS running for a reason'. Through the repetition of this phrase 'running for a reason', which is a reoccurring theme in the commentary, we see an affirmation that this *does mean something*, a guarantee that this isn't *meaningless*. If we think about the relationship between time, use and value in capitalist exchange, we can see that the insistence that the fun-runner in the marathon is *meaningful* is consistent with neoliberal ideology.

As we have already seen, the BCM event is split into two halves. The elite race exhibits the tropes and rules of sports commentary; add to the picture, give some context, highlight moments of drama, embellish specific narratives etc. Although these mechanisms are still present (to a degree) in the second half of the broadcast, featuring the fun-runners, the commentator relies a great deal more on predetermined narratives – the story of the woman running as the Mona Lisa, the couple getting married, Colin in the pink velour dress, Blind Dave etc. All of which are researched before the event and sign posted by the event organisers in the information provided for media partners. So there are two mechanisms going on here, the pre-scripted narrative and the enforcing of that narrative frame onto what the commentator sees. Both of these mechanisms frame the fun-runner in the same narrative type – a version of the overcoming the monster narrative.

In his 2004 book *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories*, Christopher Booker outlines the seven basic storylines that he suggests all narratives fit. One of the narratives he identifies is called Overcoming the Monster, defined as a story with a ‘terrifying, life-threatening, seemingly all-powerful monster whom the hero must confront in a fight to the death’ (2004: 22). Booker’s structuralist approach to narratology is reductive, and by no means the only model which could have been used to analyse the narrative framing of the fun-runner of the BCM. However, as I hope to demonstrate, this reductiveness is part of the point I am identifying in relation to the commentator’s framing of the fun-runner – in the application of meaning onto the actions of the fun-runner, the commentator uses an extremely narrow narrative pallet. So much so that one could argue that all the *individual stories* told by the commentator are in fact the same story – echoing the Baudrillardian perspective discussed earlier. By framing the *individual stories* as an example of a narrative that is essentially the same story told over and over again, Baudrillard’s indictment that ‘their message has lost all meaning’ (1989: 20) is violently imposed by the commentator.

In the commentary on the BCM, there are a number of ways in which the commentator utilises the overcoming the monster narrative to frame the *meaning* of the fun-runner. We see the ‘laziness monster’, where the commentator directly addresses and attempts to inspire the future-fun-runner, watching at home on their sofas. We see the ‘limits-of-your-own-body monster’, where the most extreme feats of endurance are highlighted, often featuring stories of multiple marathons run by one person. We see the ‘charity fundraising monster’, where the most lucrative or extreme fundraising is highlighted. Instead of the monster being represented by one’s own laziness, or by an extreme physical feat, it is here represented by the abstract notion of raising a ‘huge sum of money’. We see the ‘trauma/recovery monster’, where the biggest traumas that are overcome to enable the runner to compete are celebrated – the monster here is a cancer diagnosis, or an injury sustained in the line of duty. Finally, we see the ‘cumbersome costume monster’, where the most awkward and cumbersome costumes are celebrated. A self-imposed

monster in the form of a fridge on your back, or a diving suit, or a rhino – the more elaborate and awkward the costume, the more potent the monster, therefore the more compelling the narrative.

In the BCM these narratives are demonstrably pre-determined through the moments where the broadcast cuts away from the live action to a pre-recorded segment with a fun-runner – where the ‘monster’ is set up. These narratives are then continued through the commentary, even inter-spliced with live still-jogging interviews en route with the subject of the narrative. Thinking back to the relationship between speaking and writing outlined in part 1, and Turner’s notion of the event of text (2009), the gap here seems significant. Not only are the narrative threads determined in advance, actual broadcast materials are pre-recorded. It is the commentator, speaking live, around and through these predetermined narratives, combining the pre-written as a strategy within a live language-game, that reduces the gap between the written and the spoken.

The narrow and repetitive enframing of the fun-runner through the overcoming the monster narrative presents performances of mass-participation that support neoliberal ideologies of the fetish of individualism and Big Society rhetoric of all being ‘in it together’. Look at this ‘normal’ person with one leg/with cancer/with a fridge on her back, look at what they have achieved, all on their own, through nothing but their own hard work. The monster is the marathon – but for the broadcasting of the fun-runner that isn’t enough, they can’t cover the distance fast enough for the ‘celebration of human excellence’ narrative that frames the elite race. The marathon, as a monster, needs to stand in for something else, so even the slowest, most cumbersome, most un-athletic fun-runner can still be framed within a neoliberal ideal.

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