

**Is there anything wrong with violence?
About the Beauty of Rugby and American Football**

Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht
Stanford University
Estados Unidos

Resumo: O elemento estético atrativo singular do Rúgbi, sem dúvida, é o movimento da linha dianteira avançando, várias vezes, e o amontoar-se de um lado para outro do campo. Esse mesmo belo movimento não pode, é claro, tornar-se sublimidade se não surgisse perante uma ameaça da violência e da entropia incorporada pela defesa do outro time.

Key-Words: Coetzee; Rúgbi; Beleza do Rúgbi e do Futebol Americano.

67

Abstract: Rugby's uniquely attractive aesthetic element, without any doubt, is the movement of frontline advancing, several times, and drifting from one to the other side of the field. This very beautiful movement for sure could never turn into sublimity if it did not emerge against a threat of violence and entropy embodied by the other team's defense.

Key-Words: Coetzee; Rugby; Beauty of Rugby and American Football.

*Is there anything
wrong with violence?
About the Beauty of
Rugby and American
Football*

Hans Ulrich
Gumbrecht

From some of his former colleagues at the University of Capetown, I had heard that John M. Coetzee likes – or at last used to like -- watching rugby which, given his notorious ethical and intellectual seriousness, came as a pleasant surprise. But watching and enjoying Rugby does certainly not prevent him from being critical about the game. Among the three main observations in his reflection on the appeal of Rugby, one at least one provokes Coetzee's protest. This sport would be more beautiful, he writes, if the rules of Rugby managed to exclude its obvious elements of violence, together with the all too frequent interruptions of its flow. He is much less concerned about a second feature, i.e. about the game's traditional role in South African history where it allowed "a

magical self-affirmation,” as he says, “for the economically underprivileged Afrikaner against the English.” Finally Coetzee praises the external form of Rugby: its eighty minutes, without any stoppage nor time-outs, promise to liberate players and spectators from everyday time, that is from a temporal progression without beginning nor ending. Rugby, by contrast, constitutes an island within the endlessly running time on the watch, an island of time that one can divide into smaller units, possess or lose, administer or waste, always producing a side effect of “meaning” in the process.

I certainly agree with Coetzee’s third point. Within limited stretches that manage to set themselves apart from the flow of time on our wristwatches, the use of the time on the game clock becomes strategic and thus appears to turn into a function of agency. Besides avoiding the feeling of never ending transition and loss as it is inevitably caused by the normally running time, that other time which comes in limited usable portions may also convey a specific aura, at least a highlighting of contours, to the objects and bodies that it contains. But by no means is this effect specific to Rugby. It pertains to soccer within its slightly larger frame of ninety minutes as well as to games like Basketball, Ice Hockey or American Football where each interruption of the game and the possibility of calling time-outs will stop the clock and open up for additional techniques and more complex strategies of using time.

Equally widespread if not universal in all popular sports, especially in team sports, are the functions of social promotion and compensation. As a result of several decades, some outstanding athletes in Baseball, Basketball, and American Football (think, among others, of Willie Mays, Michael Jordan, and Jerry Rice) but also in Track and Field or Boxing (think of Jessie Owens and Muhammad Ali) have not only helped to increase the visibility and the standing of African Americans in the culture of the United States; even those who hold athletic glory to be a mixed social blessing, will admit that the obligation, in some American sports, of going through college as an intermediary stage in order to reach the highest levels of professional performance (and of remuneration, above all in Basketball, American Football, and Women’s Soccer) has given numerous young people the opportunity of an education and a culture that would otherwise have been neither accessible nor desirable to them. One may add that, if similar social effects are not exclusive to Rugby, they are not even specific to sports in general. I, for once, do not know of any institution whose daily functioning will not

*Is there anything
wrong with violence?
About the Beauty of
Rugby and American
Football*

Hans Ulrich
Gumbrecht

have some (mostly unintended) effect that slowly transforms the environment of which it is a part.

But I want to come back to the question regarding the open and even constitutive display of violence in certain sports, such as Rugby, American Football, Ice Hockey, and Boxing – I want to come back to the presence of violence that so irritates John Coetzee and, with him, the majority of present-day intellectuals. Let me start with a definition which, instead of claiming that violence is a ubiquitous, mostly unwelcome but often purely spiritual phenomenon (as for example Michael Foucault’s use of the concept suggests), will highlight the supposed “scandal of physical aggressiveness” without confirming, on the other hand, the frequent association between violence and criminal behavior (in other words: my definition implies that, under certain conditions, violence can be perfectly legitimate and even useful). I propose to call “violence” all acts and all forms of behavior that occupy or block spaces through bodies, against the resistance of other bodies. It is an almost banal observation that in many historical periods and cultures large numbers of people enjoyed watching events, rituals, and games that included violence – which does not prove, however, that it was invariably and necessarily this component which accounted for their fascination. The one question more often avoided than openly asked, at least today, is therefore why and in the name of what values violence in sports should be condemned. My opinion is that in many sports the fascination of the spectators, which I understand to exist thanks to aesthetic experience, would disappear without the display of violence. Let me explain.

Why have team sports so irresistibly fascinated billions of people for the past century and a half? We are clueless as to the historical reasons for this dominance of team sports that did not start before the third quarter of the nineteenth century. But the most frequently given explanation for its lasting existence points to a desire of identification with winning teams as the spectators’ central motivation. This explanation does not convince me because, by the most banal logical necessity, fifty percent of them would be regularly excluded from such a benefit (and how about those quite numerous spectators who indulge in supporting teams who have a tradition of losing?). The central but mostly preconscious appeal of team sports, I claim by contrast, lies in the expectation and hope for beautiful plays as objects of experience (and this hope is normally motivated by the memory of former beautiful plays). What is a beautiful play --

in any team sport? It is the emergence of a form materialized and produced by more than one body, a temporalized form that is, because it begins to vanish as it comes to the fore. Besides that, beautiful plays have the status of events, which means that their emergence can never be predicted or even guaranteed with full certainty. Events they become thanks to the fact that their form (as negentropy) has to be achieved against the other team's (against entropy's) effort not to let happen, to repress, to stifle and even to destroy the emerging beautiful play.

In Rugby and in American Football (and on both sides of these games) the battle for the beautiful play is fought in two dimensions that are inseparably intertwined: it is fought through a high number of often very complex "set plays" – and this is where American Football, in specific, for coaches and coordinators as much as for the players, becomes (not only metaphorically) comparable to chess. The other dimension is unsanctioned violence, as opposed to the existing but illegal (and therefore hidden and always ugly) violence in Basketball or in Soccer. Players in Rugby and in American Football (like in Ice Hockey and Lacrosse) conquer and block spaces by hitting the other players' bodies, and as such violence is largely unsanctioned, there even exists a specific aesthetic appreciation of the "clean hit," that is of a hit that affects the other player's body at the right spot, in the right moment, with an immediate and decisive effect. What should be wrong with that, as long as the players involved acquire their right to violence (under conditions of play and disinterestedness) by conceding the same right to the players of the other team? This is the one decisive condition under which the use of violence becomes legitimate – similar to the exclusive right to use violence conceded to the Military and to the Police in the name of Society as the Sovereign in most present-day States. One can of course discuss, on behalf of physically damaging long-term effects, whether young people should be allowed at all to expose themselves to the physical dangers of violence – but this is a different problem, a problem, by the way, that also applies to some sports where no violence is implied, such as gymnastics or mountaineering.

As I said before, the aesthetic appeal that makes up for the fascination of Rugby and American Football lies in the simultaneity and intertwinedness of a geometrical type of chess-like rationality with unsanctioned violence. I insist on the functional coupling between these two major components because I do not believe that there are many

*Is there anything
wrong with violence?
About the Beauty of
Rugby and American
Football*

Hans Ulrich
Gumbrecht

players or spectators who are only attracted by violence, and therefore find themselves ready to “accept” strategy as an unavoidable price (or the other way round). Fascinating for players and spectators are precisely the multiple ways in which strategy and violence work together, so much so that those involved do not seem to perceive the two dimensions separately. This indeed corresponds to the potential aesthetic appeal of war, only that war, I repeat and insist, does not take place under the conditions of play and disinterestedness. In Rugby and in American Football (even more obviously than in Ice Hockey and in Lacrosse) individual movements and the complex strategic interplay of the players will not take place without the constant and omnipresent threat of violence. This adds tension and existential drama to each movement, each play, and each strategic decision. A quarterback “in the pocket” knows that even the best offensive line will only be able to protect him for very few seconds against the violent attacks of the opposing defensive players, and it is this threat which gives a heightened value to his pass attempt and, for analogous reasons, to his wide receiver’s effort to catch the ball, a value that Soccer or Basketball cannot offer (of course I am not denying that other team sports have other specific attractions that Rugby and American Football, by exchange, are not able to match).

For all these reasons, whoever wants to eliminate or only bracket violence in Rugby or American Football, as John Coetzee does, would make them lose their specific aesthetic fascination and their identity. In the long run the prohibition of violence might also produce the well known “ugly” effects, like in Basketball and Soccer, of plays with hidden violence (where all that matters is to deceive the referees). I would like to add that the simultaneity of strategic rationality and violence, as it constitutes Rugby and American Football, can be seen as a specific case of a very basic general formula for aesthetic experience today, in an everyday culture like ours that has become almost unbearably “spiritual” through the fact that most people are spending their days in front of computer screens and thus live in a never-ceasing fusion of consciousness and software. In such a context, I believe, aesthetic experience seeks the concrete and palpable. It indeed often appears to focus on the simultaneity, on the tension, and on the oscillation between world appropriation through concepts (“experience”) and world appropriation through the senses (“perception”). Perhaps we should not go so far as to

*Is there anything
wrong with violence?
About the Beauty of
Rugby and American
Football*

Hans Ulrich
Gumbrecht

say that the centrality of this formula gives American Football and Rugby the status of contemporary aesthetic experience *par excellence* – but at least I hope it has become clear why I believe that, without violence, their aesthetic appeal and their fascination would necessarily vanish. This said, everybody of course has the right not to enjoy their specific type of aesthetic experience – but this is a different question, a question regarding the difference between different flavors of taste, not a question of fundamental [il]legitimacy.

So, with all due and sincere respect for John Coetzee who, among so many others things, has an endlessly larger and more intense experience with the game of Rugby than I have, my challenge to him lies in the claim that if modifications in the rules of Rugby would ever have to change the game, they should definitely not try to bracket violence. To use Coetzee’s own language, this is not where I see the “dilemma” of Rugby. There are other moments when, in the midst of the impressively beautiful flow of the game, it becomes virtually impossible for a spectator, during more than just a few seconds, to know where exactly the ball lies and how players from both teams are struggling for its possession. For my part, I would not mind if such moments were minimized – but perhaps I am spoiled from watching too much American Football where individual plays are isolated from each other and therefore quite distinctly visible in their individual structure.

Rugby’s uniquely attractive aesthetic element, without any doubt, is the frontline advancing while passing the ball back, several times, and drifting from one to the other side of the field. This very beautiful movement for sure could never turn into sublimity if it did not emerge against a threat of violence and entropy embodied by the other team’s defense.

*Is there anything
wrong with violence?
About the Beauty of
Rugby and American
Football*

Hans Ulrich
Gumbrecht