

## Gumbrecht Enters the Zone

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It was a chilly evening in late September 2006 at Yankee Stadium in the Bronx. The game was not really significant for the Yankees, who had bigger fish to fry a week later in the postseason. Early in the game the Baltimore Orioles put some runs on the board, and they were comfortably taking care of business. But the game was on our home turf, and I and the 54,045 other fans were not exactly pleased to see the Yankees losing. This was definitely not the night for their hitters: they were walked a couple of times, and reached base a couple more times on errors. As for hits, zilch. We knew the game was over for the Yankees, and that was when a sudden fear started to crawl along my spine, because at this point, in the middle of the game, the O's pitcher Daniel Cabrera was flirting with a no-hitter. Inning after inning the embarrassment gave way to nervousness, nervousness to excitement, and suddenly the imminence of a no-hitter breathed new life into the game. We were not rooting for victory; we simply did not want the pitcher to be transformed into a hero and, paradoxically, if the pitcher could not achieve his goal that would be a very important victory for us.

Sometimes friendship can be dramatic. With one out in the ninth inning, the no-hitter was broken up by Robinson Canó with a lined single into left field. Cabrera was so close to notoriety, and the player who denied his achievement was none other than his close, hometown friend (both players grew up about two minutes from each other in San Pedro de Macoris in the Dominican Republic). Cabrera's grief was our joy: after 8 1/3 innings of hitless suffering we jumped, embraced, shouted, and screamed. The Yankees lost the game, but we were incommensurably happier than the Orioles who actually won it. It was a night to remember, because you don't want anybody to throw a no-hitter against your team, especially at home. This was a sports experience of *schadenfreude*, that devilish pleasure one derives from an opponent's misfortune. As Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht puts it in his passionate, stimulating defense of sports *In Praise of Athletic Beauty*, ballgames are not exactly connected with moral development.

The pleasure derived from reading a book, contemplating a building, or observing a photograph is intrinsically cerebral, whereas the pleasure of watching sports requires intelligible bodily movements. In order to appreciate a sports event in its full magnificence, one needs to use more than words—to operate with feeling and imagination—and this may be the reason why there are so few good books about the aesthetics of sports. Roland Barthes loved sports, and he explained why:

it must be remembered that everything happening to the player also happens to the spectator. But whereas in the theater the spectator is only a voyeur, in sport he is a participant, an actor. And then, in sport, man does not confront man directly. There enters between them an intermediary, a stake, a machine, a puck, or a ball. And this thing is the very symbol of things: it is in order to possess, to master it, that one is strong, adroit, courageous. To watch, here, is not only to live, to suffer, to hope, to understand, but also, and especially, to say so—by voice, by gesture, by facial expression: it is to call the whole world to witness; in a word, it is to communicate. (59–61)

To communicate the splendid experience of sport: this is what Gumbrecht does in *In Praise of Athletic Beauty*, and he does it with superior refinement and enthusiasm. For the author, a hockey player who checks an adversary against the boards is as brave as a gladiator, and a vigorous slam dunk raises a basketball player to the level of an Olympian athlete whose feats were sung by Pindar.

*In Praise of Athletic Beauty* is a book whose author is a participant in the events about which he talks. He is a spy in the world of sports, and so in order to communicate what he feels and sees he has to enter the zone just like any player in a crucial moment of a game. Gumbrecht is no Brechtian fan; on the contrary, in order to appreciate the beauty of sports he eliminates the distance that separates him from the players, by unapologetically immersing himself in a crowd. Here's how Gumbrecht communicates his feeling of adhesion to the crowd, and how he handles the stress that comes with it:

Happy over a victory or depressed over a defeat, I never feel completely sober when I leave Stanford Stadium after a football game, never mind that no alcoholic beverages have been consumed. I may not always wish to do so, but I know that I need to cool off before driving my car. This is why I make sure to park ten or fifteen minutes' walk away from the stadium gates. (218–19)

Sports inebriate: that ball hitting the cross bar infuses your body with energy; that acrobatic catch by the centerfielder over the wall makes your blood boil inside your veins; that impossible three-point shot with just less than one second on the game clock simply drives you crazy. To cool off here means leaving the assembly of fans, but also letting yourself gradually readjust to the other world, the world that is waiting for you when the remnants of the game disperse. The train trip from Yankee Stadium in the Bronx to my home in lower Manhattan takes approximately thirty-five minutes, and most of the time I am so fired up that I need a loud dose of Guillaume de Machaut, Carlo Gesualdo, or Heinrich Schütz to simmer down.

Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht makes no secret: he is a diehard fan of the Stanford Cardinal football team. This fact is all the more extraordinary when we learn that he grew up in Europe watching football games. (A quick note: I abominate the word “soccer”; for me, football is the most popular sport in the world, with grandiose teams like Manchester United, Real Madrid, and AC Milan—whereas American teams like the New York Giants, New England Patriots or Dallas Cowboys play what I refer to as “American football.”) The addiction to sports (Gumbrecht’s expression) usually does not travel from one continent to the other, and Europeans in the United States tend to be very nostalgic about their own kind of sports, thereby ignoring the magnificence and splendor of American sports. Yet the author managed to transport his childhood enthusiasm into adult life, and in *In Praise of Athletic Beauty* we find a rare juxtaposition of analysis of sports from all over the world, from boxing to rugby, track and field to baseball, and gymnastics to swimming, among many, many others. (I personally regret the absence of handball, a mesmerizing activity that is inexplicably and inexcusably absent from mainstream American athletics.) That Gumbrecht is able to go from one sport to another and from the ancient to the contemporary, combining irreconcilable worlds, only adds to his stature as an essayist. And he is not ashamed to use the word “fascination” throughout the book. I dare say that he may have written this book to understand his fascination with sports, because what we have in these lovely 263 pages may also be described as an essay on fascination. For Gumbrecht, understanding fascination is a way of intensifying the pleasure of watching sports, which thereby allows him to give more credit to the deeds of his heroes, the athletes.

Watching sports is, therefore, a beautiful addiction, and Gumbrecht borrows a more poetic way of expressing this idea from one of his idols, the

swimmer Pablo Morales, who says that the euphoria associated with sports is like “being lost in focused intensity” (51). A game is not just a game: the moment the ball leaves the hands of the quarterback in its trajectory to reach someone who is going to catch or intercept it, time slows down for the fan, allowing him to notice things previously overlooked. Being able to reflect on this moment of enthusiasm is what also makes the fan a brilliant critic of the game. In a way, watching a game is undoubtedly an absorbing act of self-gnosis. The real presence and the real time of a ballgame are adapted by the fan to his own anxieties, pleasures, and desires, given that he is alone in the game, immersed in himself, lost in a world of private performances and sportive fantasies. For fans, every game is comprised of an “analytical gaze” and an “emotional investment,” and in this combination resides the beauty of sport. This being so, it is important to add that fascination, beauty, and pleasure in games belong to the realm of the unexpected, because it is not guaranteed that the ball is going to reach its destination: a myriad of other possibilities may occur, and both players and spectators have to readjust themselves to unforeseen plays and, consequently, unanticipated states of mind.

One of Gumbrecht's main goals in his work is to praise athletic beauty through analysis. This means that he interprets a sports team like a literary critic interprets a literary movement, and he analyzes plays in the same way an art critic evaluates paintings, and he talks about individual players just like philosophers talk about Aristotle, Kierkegaard, or Bataille. Brazilian football legend Mané Garrincha is analogous to William Shakespeare. To praise here means to appreciate, to be enthralled, to see the sports experience as an aesthetic experience. The author is well aware that both traditional academics and the most trivial sports fans are going to disagree with him, the former because they don't see enough dignity in sports for them to be labeled an aesthetic experience, and the latter because they simply don't care about discussions of aesthetics. Nonetheless, Gumbrecht is very cautious; no, he says, sports are not an art form, but they do share with art the idea of fascination. He may be fascinated by the technique of a player, but he does not consider the player's achievements a work of art, because—and here Gumbrecht is unquestionably Kantian—the player does not conceive his act to be a lasting object. While this is a captivating argument, I am not quite convinced, not because I have reasons to think that a sports play is a work of art, but because I suspect that this argument excludes non-canonical artistic experiences (such as the interpretation of a musical composition or a contact improvisation dance) from being considered art.

To write about sports is to “keep my eyes and my mind focused on athletes’ bodies,” Gumbrecht says. He does so precisely from the perspective of a fan, just as I do from the perspective of a reader when I talk about his book. Pleasure is naturally our common ground. Yet the pleasure Gumbrecht derives from sports leads him to thank his athletic heroes by praising them. In my case, I also obtained pleasure by reading *In Praise of Athletic Beauty*, and so one question immediately emerges: can a book that praises sports as a non-work of art be a work of art? Put differently, if a play, a player, or a game is not a work of art—and so far we still don’t have any reason to believe they are—then how can it be that a writer, a painter, or a sculptor who praises the player or the play may produce a work of art? Gumbrecht relates this issue to an obsession in Western metaphysics according to which we give primacy to what is beyond one object. Therefore, “[f]orms produced by body movements and the presence of these bodies [...] simply cannot be important enough to care about, much less write about.” But the fact is that people write about dance, heavy metal concerts, and performances of all kinds, activities that depend enormously on bodily expressions. The point I wish to make is that Gumbrecht is well aware that he is writing against academia, which generally considers sports a frivolous activity. The white-gloved-slap comes when he subtly affirms that European poetry began with the praise of athletes.

It is not difficult, therefore, to consider *In Praise of Athletic Beauty* a chapter of the author’s autobiography. He confesses his love of sports, his admiration for the beautiful bodies of the athletes, his fascination with the historical figures who contributed to the development of his sportive addiction. The funny thing is that the more Gumbrecht talks about sports, the more we become aware of his love of poetry. Stealing a base in a baseball game, for instance, is the image of a body in space that “can be thought of as a kind of epiphany.” As for the pitchers, sometimes their changeups or knuckleballs are so special that what he sees in their faces is the “smile of the angels that we see sculptured into the stone of medieval cathedrals.” It is at these moments that we see Gumbrecht in the zone, and he remains there even when he describes his wanderings through empty stadiums, where in his mind the players of the past are summoned up to interact with the athletes of the future. His gratitude towards the players is so elevated that he even refuses to conceive of the notion of an “ugly play.”

Allow me to question this last impression with a crucial example: the penalty kick missed by the Serbian Miroslav Djukic in the last minute of the final

game of the 1993–94 season of the Spanish Championship. Deportivo de la Coruña needed this goal to win the championship for the first time ever, but in the end Barcelona, a team for which the game was not decisive, won it, shocking an entire region. What I recall most vividly are the players crying compulsively in disbelief. Does this not qualify as the ugliest play in the history of both Deportivo and Djukic? Further, isn't New York Giants' player David Tyree's famous catch in Super Bowl XLII with just fifty-nine seconds left on the clock a revolting play? I mean, is a player supposed to pin the ball to his helmet with just one hand and then pull it in before he hits the ground? In the final analysis, an ugly play for one team is a beautiful one for the opposite team, and so we return to the idea of *schadenfreude*. As Gumbrecht rightly states, in sports, bodies achieve the impossible: "Something happens to bodies in the great moments of sports, something bodies were not made for." The more impossible, the greater our joy. This is why the athletes in Gumbrecht's book are treated like demigods.

With his beautiful, enthralling, and passionate book Gumbrecht also achieves the impossible. He is not afraid of providing his heroes with an aura of splendor. He does not hesitate to paint sports images with the most effervescent colors, and he defiantly elevates athletic bodies to the stature of poetry in motion. This is a tribute to his heroes, but at a certain moment, more precisely on page 81, I get the impression that Gumbrecht is so generous that he wants to please me too, to make me a happy man. Oh, how I wish the Yankees had won the World Series in 2003! Much to my chagrin, the Florida Marlins did. But isn't this a book that mixes sports with poetry? I truly thank the author for reminding me that in sports we also need an intense, ardent suspension of disbelief.

### Works cited

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