

Disorder and Devastation: Searching for the Sublime in Horrific Sports Injuries

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Immanuel Kant's third critique, the *Critique of Judgement* published in 1790, establishes a complex schema for the judgements of pure aesthetic experience, placing such judgements into three primary categories – the agreeable, the good and the beautiful – and a fourth elusive category called the “sublime”. It is this latter category which has borne the richest philosophical and aesthetic fruit over the past two centuries, leading countless thinkers, critics, and artists into deep engagement with its mysterious ungraspability. Something in its boundless formlessness, its disorder and devastation keeps the sublime relevant, and yet simultaneously outside the bounds of full theoretical apprehension; by its very nature the sublime evades any bounds set around it. Yet the pure aesthetic experiences that were the basis for Kant's schema are harder to come by in the contemporary world. In a form of late capitalism where nearly every experience and object is incorporated into a process of accumulation or indoctrination, the aesthetic experience is rarely pure. What this paper seeks to explore is whether a sublime experience can be found hidden in the hyper-mediatized and commodified experience of the sports spectacle, particularly within horrific sports injuries. I will argue that the horrific injury, by breaking the bounds of the idealized human body and perverting the purposive shape we associate with that ideal and with the human body in general, smuggles the Kantian sublime into contemporary mass media culture – offering an explanation for both the discomfiting appeal of such images and the popularity of sports spectatorship generally. Through the disjuncture of horrific injuries purity can enter into a late capitalist subjective space.

In this inquiry it is important to identify the function of sports spectacles. I am not interested in an aesthetic evaluation of *participation* in athletics, but in sports viewing, fandom, and spectacle as a site of potential engagement with aesthetic experience. As has only become more apparent since the coronavirus pandemic led to the shutdown of most major sports leagues, sports spectatorship plays a central role in late capitalist media production and consumption. Indeed, it's difficult to think of another form of live spectacle with anywhere near the popularity or cultural significance of sports, and considering that the vast majority of sports engagement is through spectatorship rather than participation, it seems straightforward to read major sporting events as massively popular aesthetic texts. While there is much to be written about sports participation, such analysis likely has little to do with aesthetics. We will be thinking of images of sports, rather than sports themselves in their material realities. Spectatorship, for our evaluation, can be through any format – live in-person, mediated through a television screen, through a radio, or a news article or internet video – all of these potential engagements will fit within our area of inquiry into aesthetics in athletics. The basic question is, can the viewer of sports experience the beautiful or the sublime in a Kantian sense?

Of course, before we begin to engage with the question we must first understand the terms. Specifically, what do we mean by “pure” regarding aesthetic experience? For this we will be primarily distinguishing between Kant’s three categories: the agreeable, the good, and the beautiful. The agreeable is simply enough, that which in looking causes direct pleasure, through the faculty of sensation. Like a good taste or a pleasant color, the agreeable is the most basic, direct representation of pleasure and it operates through pleasing “the senses in sensation” (*CJ*, §3.1, 205, Translated by Paul Guyer, Cambridge University Press, 2008). The agreeable, has little relevance in our experience of sports spectatorship, which relates more to representations than it does to sensations. Perhaps the roar of the crowd, the nostalgic taste of a ball park hotdog, the appealing color of one team’s uniform, or the attractiveness of a particular athlete would function as agreeable, but for most engaged sports spectators these elements are secondary to the drama of the represented competition.

Kant’s second relation is much more prevalent in sports spectatorship. The good, for Kant, is a concrete category that relates to a judgment of an object of taste and incorporates an element of cognition or reason. An evaluation of something as good refers to its ability to achieve a certain end, purpose or goal. This involvement of purpose as a part of the evaluative process is limiting, and thus not “pure.” As Kant puts it: “If one judges objects merely in accordance with concepts, then all representation of beauty is lost” (*CJ*, §8.6, 215). It’s fairly easy to see such pleasure in sports – any play can be judged as good if it is conceived with its goal in mind, for instance scoring points or winning the game. Any evaluation of sports that keeps in mind the rules and structure of the game must necessarily be limited and thus good instead of beautiful.

The pure aesthetic experience is reserved for the beautiful and the sublime. The beautiful is something completely separate from reason. A pure judgement of beauty involves no purpose or end for the object being judged. It is purely an evaluation of an object in terms of its purposive form, its form that implies a purposiveness without relating it to a specific purpose. “That is beautiful which pleases universally without a concept” (*CJ*, §9.10, 219), Kant writes, meaning that no element of the cognitive function, which assigns ends or purposes to objects, is engaged in an evaluation of pure beauty. This does not mean, as it could be read, that the beautiful must be agreed upon by all people to be considered beautiful. The universality of beauty exists not in the external world but in the mind experiencing the beautiful. In order for a subject to find an object beautiful, such a subject must see this object’s form as universally, *a priori*, pleasing. It must be, at the same time subjectively beautiful, beautiful to the specific subject observing it, and objectively beautiful, that is universally pleasing without relation to a concept.

Such a conception may pose a problem in the evaluation of an athletic spectacle as an example of the beautiful, especially when we talk about “interest” in such spectatorship. For Kant, “Any interest spoils the judgment of taste and deprives it of its impartiality” (*CJ*, §13.1, 223), and partiality is often an essential function of sports spectatorship. Rooting for a team or a player, a form of emotional and personal interest, or in fact, having bet money on one team or the other as many sports spectators do, certainly can be seen as a spoiling interest in this sense. Yet there are other ways to watch sports that can look past such personal investment. Hans Gumbrecht, in his 2006 book *In Praise of Athletic Beauty* attempts to conceive of sports as aesthetic beauty in this sense, by pointing out that no matter what personal emotional investment, sports fans cannot gain anything real or measurable from the pleasure of sports spectatorship. As Gumbrecht writes, “On your

way home and the day after you may continue to indulge in exceptional happiness about what you saw, but you will not harbor any illusions about the positive consequences of these feelings for your social status or your savings account" (39-40). Yet there certainly remains some interest in such an exchange, even if the benefit is only internal, in a sense of pleasure or satisfaction in seeing "your" team succeed.

How then can a sports spectacle surpass the good and reach the purely beautiful? Simply put, a play in sports can be found beautiful only if it is considered without its purpose. The *beauty* of the play, as opposed to its goodness, is not determined by this purpose, but is instead determined by the form of its movements. A play becomes beautiful only when abstracted from interest and ends, only when we understand it like a dance. Like the botanist who finds a flower beautiful despite knowing its purposive ends (see *CJ*, §16.2, 229), a sports fan can find a play beautiful while knowing the purpose behind its movements, only when the form is abstracted from that purpose. As Kant explains it specifically, "A judgment of taste in regard to an object with a determinate internal end would thus be pure only if the person making the judgment either had no concept of this end or abstracted from it in his judgment" (*CJ*, §16.8, 231). Here we can see that to reach a pure evaluation of the beauty of a play, we must abstract it from its determinate internal purpose, that is the intention to win the game.

The limited scope in the way sports can be found beautiful actually seems to fit well with the parlance of sports media and discourse. "Beauty" usually has little to do with the outcome of the game, and refers instead to the form or style of play. A play may be beautiful in the way the ball and bodies move, or an individual player's form may be beautiful if it is abstracted from the context of a particular moment or goal, like the phrase "he has a beautiful jump shot." It is not beautiful because the shot goes in, in fact an ugly jump shot may have the same chance of going in, but it is beautiful because of its form. And indeed, beauty tends to supersede our personal interest; I may find a play undeniably beautiful even if I am rooting for the other team. I am much more likely to experience the awe of aesthetic beauty at such a moment than the more concrete pleasure of the good, since the purposive ends I have in mind call for a different outcome. Indeed, Kant's motivation to write the Third Critique came from a similar inquiry into the colloquial use of the word "beautiful" and a desire to logically delineate such forms of judgement, so taking our cues from the linguistic particularities of sports media is in keeping with Kant's underlying aesthetic project.

Now to throw a wrench into this line of reasoning, Kant also argues that pure beauty can never be found in the scale of the human being, specifically because the purposive ends of humanity can never be fully abstracted. The human, tied to a teleological destiny, always has the essential purpose of perfection. So, with regards to the human body, the closest that we can come to pure beauty is "adherent" beauty. The play can be beautiful in the way a dance can, adherently.

So while a play or an individual player's form (while playing) may be beautiful when abstracted from the specifics of such a context, this is not the same thing as finding individual players to be beautiful in themselves. Such an evaluation would have more to do with the agreeable, or else with Kant's "beauty ideal." Kant derives his ideal of beauty from a comparison of thousands of similar bodies conducted within the imagination, finding amongst them a mean of the normal, beautiful body. As he puts it "the average size becomes recognizable, which is in both height and breadth equidistant from the most extreme boundaries of the largest and smallest statures; and this is the stature for a

beautiful man" (*CJ*, §17.5, 234). This seems fairly irrelevant for the individual athletes involved in sports, as the bodies of athletes tend to be the extremes of such an evaluation: the tallest, the strongest, the fastest, the most agile, etc. but the beauty ideal, and its creation of an ideal of a beautiful human body is essential to the rupture that occurs in the horrific injury. It is the violent disruption of this ideal that leads us to the sublime.

But how can we get to the sublime in sports spectatorship? Gumbrecht ties Kant's sublime to those sporting events that are 'beyond any comparison', like Babe Ruth's famously called shot during the 1932 World Series. Such events have an aura of otherworldliness and incomparability, but are also very uncommon. As such, Gumbrecht finds that the sublime has little to do with most athletic spectatorship. As he writes, "We should reserve the concept of the sublime, then, for the breathtaking singularity of events and achievements of this kind [those 'beyond any comparison']. But in general, I believe that the sublime has less of an affinity with sports than does the concept of beauty—however trendy the sublime may have recently become among professional intellectuals" (48). The main problem in his analysis is that he thinks of the history of sports as a string of glorious accomplishments, of great athletes surmounting world records and towering opposition, yet he ignores the important other side of athletic experience. What happens to the aesthetic experience of sports when the spectacle of athletic spectatorship causes displeasure instead of pleasure? What happens when the beautiful, or the possibility of the beautiful, is disrupted by the gruesome or the grotesque through the intercession of a horrific injury? Could such moments constitute the sublime? It is important to remember the focus of this inquiry is not on the individual athlete, for whom the horrific injury can hardly be called disinterested, but on the *spectacle* of athletic spectatorship. For the spectator, watching the disfigurement occur, there is a certain disruption of the dance-like beauty of the sports spectacle; the search for the pleasure of good and beauty that exemplifies most sports viewing is replaced by a displeasure, a grotesque horror that is painful to see, often causing viewers to wince or avert their eyes, and at the same time hard to ignore. Such occurrences, fairly common in most major sports, provide a far better example than Gumbrecht's for the dynamic and mathematical functions that constitute the Kantian sublime.

For this investigation into the sublime in grotesque sports injuries, we'll be looking specifically at a case study: a gruesome injury that took place in October of 2017. Gordon Hayward, an All-Star forward, playing his first game for the Boston Celtics, got his leg tied up with another player's in midair, and landed awkwardly, breaking his tibia and dislocating his ankle. His foot ended up pointing in the wrong direction, with what looks like an extra joint in his leg between ankle and knee. Players from the Celtics and the opposing Cleveland Cavaliers scattered, the game stopped, and medical staff rushed to the court to strap Hayward to a gurney. The "good" elements of the game, those devoted to the success of plays and the interest of players, fans, and gamblers, were abandoned at the sight of this injury. The injury is certainly horrific, leading to content warnings from announcers before replays, and yet it also contains a gruesome and ambivalent attraction – we *want* to see such an image even though it may cause us displeasure. Indeed, in reading this you may have already looked up such an image, driven by a perverse desire to see something you know will be upsetting.

Yet, before moving forward, we should expand our definition of Kant's sublime. The experience of the sublime is caused by a sensation that surpasses the understanding, a sensation Kant refers to as the mathematically sublime. The imagination perceives

something that is absolutely great, great beyond all comparison, and fundamentally infinite in experience (*CJ*, §25, 248-50). As opposed to the aesthetic evaluation of the beautiful, which concerns exclusively a purposive form without purpose, the sublime relies upon an object that is formless and boundless. When the imagination can find no limit to such an object it is seen as boundless and when the imagination can find no definitive form to it, it is formless. It may be hard to associate such magnitude, such a sense of majesty, with an individual grotesque injury, but as Kant establishes, "That is sublime which even to be able to think of demonstrates a faculty of the mind that surpasses every measure of the senses" (*CJ*, §25.8, 250), so it is clear that the constitution of the mathematically sublime exists not in scientifically measurable magnitude – indeed in the following section of the analytic, §26, Kant distinguishes between mathematical measurement through numerical concepts and aesthetic measurement through intuition – so it is not the literal scale as much as the intuited boundlessness that exemplifies the mathematically sublime.

If we remember Kant's concept of the "beauty ideal," that imagined normality based on the comparison of all human bodies, we can see the truly horrific injury as a disruption of that ideal constituting such boundlessness. The true disfigurement is so far from the normal that it doesn't shift the average of that ideal in the direction of distension but instead ruptures it entirely. Through this break, the horrific injury achieves a formlessness similar to the mathematical sublime, itself produced by a disjunction between the apprehension and the comprehension, by observing something whose aesthetic infinitude exceeds the ability of the imagination to cognize. It is only through the delayed intercession of the faculty of reason that we can conceive that this truly is a totality, a thing and not just a wrongness. While claiming a connection between a singular horrific injury and the infinite magnitude may be counterintuitive, it is worthwhile to remember that Kant's mathematical sublime is not figured through mathematical estimation of magnitude but from aesthetic estimation of magnitude, in which the absolutely great and infinite magnitude is simply the product of the apprehension of scale exceeding the comprehension (*CJ*, §26.2, 251). The wrongness of the horrific injury, in its disruption of the beauty ideal of the human body, produces an aesthetic absolute magnitude, exceeding the limitations of mathematical estimations of magnitude – when we look at the limb with too many joints, we see a wrongness that numerically exceeds comprehension, and produces a mathematically sublime effect in much the same way as the Great Pyramids or a towering mountain range does.

And, because this wrongness constitutes a disruption of the beauty ideal, it also implies within it all of the other ways in which such an ideal could be disrupted. We can't help but look at a disfiguring injury and feel a sensitivity to the way our own body could be broken or destroyed. Indeed, the monstrousness of the mathematically sublime is produced in exactly this annihilation of purposive ends: "An object is monstrous if by its magnitude it annihilates the end which its concept constitutes" (*CJ*, §26.5, 253). If Gordon Hayward's shin can break in such a way as to suggest that he has an extra joint, then what is to say that all of the concrete intuitions of the human body wrapped up in our beauty ideal couldn't be similarly, and infinitely, broken and made monstrous? The purposive ends of the human body, themselves tied directly to the beauty ideal and the teleological destiny of humanity, are disrupted when the body is distended in this way, suggesting potential disruptions that are limitless in their possibilities. Our concept of a leg, constructed by the beauty ideal from encountering many other legs, is thus annihilated

by such a sight. These injuries also seem to surpass the limitations of the human body, those limitations that made the beauty in sports constitute only an adherent beauty, specifically because through their disruption of the beauty ideal, they are no longer a part of the human body. As if the camera pulled in closer, we see the horrific leg injury as a totality, not as a piece of the human body it is connected to, thus ignoring humanity's inherent tendency towards perfection. The wrongness of the injury becomes a freestanding wrongness, a wrongness without a body attached to it that functions like the mathematically sublime, an immeasurable wrongness that surpasses every measure of the senses.

The sublime also functions through what Kant refers to as the dynamically sublime, that which Kant describes as a vibration, "a rapidly alternating repulsion from and attraction to one and the same object" (*CJ*, §27.3, 258). The object is a source of fear for the subject because of its boundless formlessness; the fearfulness repels but at the same time a sense of safety or mastery over that fear attracts. The mental faculties experience pain in not being able to comprehend something, and, as reason intercedes by introducing a concept of totality to the object, there is a delayed pleasure, produced through initial displeasure. As Kant puts it, "the object is taken up as sublime with a pleasure that is possible only by means of a displeasure" (*CJ*, §27.6, 260). Horrific sports injuries present a clear example of Kant's dynamically sublime. In fact, it might be hard to imagine a better example than spectacular disfigurements. Like car crashes or natural disasters, a disfiguring injury is horrible to look at causing displeasure and fear, yet at the same time it has an undeniable appeal. This appeal can be measured through the millions of times YouTube videos of Hayward's injury have been viewed – a YouTube search for "Gordon Hayward injury" results in hundreds of uploads of the same footage, the most popular of which ("First Take reacts to Gordon Hayward's injury during Celtics vs. Cavaliers | First Take | ESPN") currently has 1,817,716 views. Looking at the footage, we can see the immediate fearful response felt by many players on the court with him. Indeed, the injury – which occurred in front of the Celtics bench – led the rest of the team to flee the sight of it, clearing the bench as they saw the gruesome injury in front of them. While these players may not describe such a reaction as sublime, their fear indicates some element of the dynamically sublime response. Indeed, for Kant fearfulness is essential to produce the dynamic sublime, but only for those who are protected from the source of that fear. As Kant describes it in his discussion of the fearsomeness of mountain peaks:

"the sight of them only becomes all the more attractive the more fearful it is, as long as we find ourselves in safety, and we gladly call these objects sublime because they elevate the strength of our soul above its usual level, and allow us to discover within ourselves a capacity for resistance of quite another kind" (*CJ*, §28.5, 261).

And of course, as with Kant's pure sublime, there is a delay in achieving this state of experience as the mental faculties apperceive that which surpasses comprehension. We can see this fairly clearly by looking at the responses of players on the court moments later after their initial fear; no longer running from the sight of this injury, players and fans are certainly experiencing something powerful. Whether that response is revulsion, pity, or shock, it is extreme and very different from the initial response of direct fear. The delayed function of apperception has transformed that fear into a sublime understanding of totality. This delay is even visible in the play-by-play commentating. Announcer Kevin Harlan repeats himself several times and pauses for long periods, unable to process or find the words to describe the experience:

They're going up – Oh my goodness! Hayward came down so hard. Okay – Hayward broke his leg. Hayward has broken his leg. Hayward has broken his leg.

[8 seconds of silence]

Oh my gosh. Oh my gosh.

[6 seconds of silence]

And that is how quickly a season can change... (NBA, YouTube).

Quotes from other players involved seem to mirror these sublime elements in the aesthetic experience. In interviews following the injury, both LeBron James and Kyrie Irving listed other similarly gruesome injuries they had experienced, pointing to the power and singularity of this experience, and Kyrie Irving's response, calling this injury "[one] of the worst ones" (Forsberg), bears with it an implication similar to the boundlessness of the "absolutely great." For viewers at home, the immediate desire to flee the sight of such a fearsome object may be diminished somewhat by the intermediation of the screen. The screen's delivery of safety to those viewing is what allows us to enjoy scary movies or news coverage from warzones without actively fearing for our lives. The lessening of the immediate fear, despite the fearfulness of the image itself, gives the viewer the sense of safety required for experiencing the sublime. Like Kant looking at mountains, the gruesome injury becomes all the more sublime and attractive for its gruesomeness, specifically because viewers are safe behind the mediation of the screen.

Such gruesome atrocities are even more prevalent in sports with regular injuries, like MMA fighting or NASCAR. Indeed, the experience of the sublime may explain the longstanding claim that fans watch NASCAR "for the wrecks." In the moment of disjunction represented by the wreck, spectators gain access to a pure aesthetic experience, unmarred by interest. Such a drive for purity could go a long way to explain the centrality of sports spectacles in contemporary society. Within the hypercommodified media environment, the adherent beauty and occasional sublimity of sports spectacles offers us a brief glimpse of "pure" aesthetic experience so lacking in the rest of our lives.

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