

**Play, sport, and the creativity of sublimation:  
Understanding the importance of unimportant activities**

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**Play, sport, and the creativity of sublimation: Understanding the importance of unimportant activities**

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## **Play, sport, and the creativity of sublimation: Understanding the importance of unimportant activities**

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To what extent can we make sense of the phenomenon of play? We have all, to a greater or lesser degree, partaken in “play”, either as children or, perhaps, as adults. Play is something that we make time for, both with ourselves and with others. There are subsequently many ways in which play has been defined and understood.<sup>1</sup> Whether it be conceived as spontaneous action, done for no other purpose than its own completion; a practiced form of physical activity, conducted in order to “let off steam”; a desire for some relaxation, separate to the world of “work”... understandings of play are frequently tied to a sense of instinctual gratification—a something that must be completed, that all humans, young or old, should or need to partake in.

Whereas it is possible to imbue play with a sense of spontaneity, it is also apparent that its use has been applied to more functional contexts, with it frequently being referred to as a source of education. This goes beyond the idea that education can be playful—in short, that education should be fun—towards the assertion that it is through the act of play that we can be educated. Forming part of a child’s learning process, it is through play that the child learns the importance of “role-playing”, which, across a variety of social relations, allows them to identify appropriate social restrictions. In effect, “Play prepares children for the experience of playacting by teaching them to treat conventions of behavior as believable” (Sennett 2002, 266). In either case, whether we prescribe play an innate function or endow it an educational or social importance, what is clear is that understanding the inherent purpose of play, beyond its biological or social application, requires us to appreciate that play may hold no inherent purpose or value.

Such thinking underscores Bernard Suits widely cited claim that playing is “a voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles” (2005, 10). Specifically, it is these

obstacles which constitute the game of play, for which Suits draws a distinction between a game completed for some instrumental purpose, and, the alternative, intrinsic value that a game avers when completed, unnecessarily, for its own sake. From this distinction, it is the latter that Suits prefers, embedding it in his conception of utopia: a utopia in which the only activity that would be possible would be the playing of games that hold no instrumental purpose. In Suits's utopia, games and playing would be subject to their own inherent value.

Despite Suits's assertions, it is difficult to fully follow his distinction, if only for the reason that overcoming some unnecessary obstacle would in and of itself provide some instrumental purpose beyond the simple performance of some ordinary activity. If anything, Suits confirms the separation between the value of play as a unique form of activity and the lesser, more ordinary, activities that constitute our day-to-day lives; it reasserts the assumption that play pertains to some type of haven, one marked by a lack of seriousness when compared to our "normal" lives (Caillois 2001). Though such separation is unhelpful, it nonetheless maintains a certain importance in how play is conceived: for many, play is characterised as a unique activity that stands apart from the ordinary and every day.

Indeed, such assessments prefigure a clear demarcation between the fun of play and the more laborious, boring aspects of profane life. Yet, what this distinction alludes to is a greater sense of the creativity that underlies play. Play's uniqueness does not stand separate to the boredom and mundanity of our of day-to-day existence, but remains intricately related to it: "Boredom opens up the space, for new engagements", from which "Without boredom [... there is] no creativity" (Žižek 2014). This points to the creativity that is enveloped in our understandings of and relations to play. For Freud (1908), it is this sense of creativity that resembles "the child at play". Through play, "a world of phantasy" is established, which, in the case of the creative writer, stands separate to "reality" (Freud 1908).<sup>2</sup>

Jacques Lacan undertakes a slightly different approach; separating his understanding of creativity from any romanticised notion of inherent human endeavour and instead locating it in the signifiers we employ (Lacan 1997a; 1997b).<sup>3</sup> Importantly, the extent to which the subject has the ability to creatively define their world through the act of

signification is not one of mere functionality. On the contrary, “Lacan envisions creativity in terms of the subject’s capacity to take a poetic approach to the world—an approach that is content to play with meaning without attempting to arrest it in unequivocal or transparent definitions” (Ruti 2008, 492).

In such a poetic approach there remains a certain understanding of play that steers clear of romanticising its transgressive capacity to create something outside the confines of the symbolic field, and a more functional application that sees our creativity as fulfilling some preordained objective—a creativity that fails to ever achieve the new. Against these two contentions, we can consider how the act of creativity is intricately tied to the very lack that constitutes the Lacanian subject. Ultimately:

it is because we lack that we are prompted to create, and it is through our creative activity that we manage, in an always necessarily precarious manner, to withstand our lack. On this view, the signifier is not merely what mortifies the body, but also what empowers the subject to move to an existential space beyond mortification by granting her the gift of creativity. (Ruti 2008, 491)

This gift stems from the subject’s “symbolic castration”, a castration which not only constitutes the subject with an unabating sense of loss, but which also provides the basis for a generative and creative process of continually propelling the subject to overcome their lack; a nonetheless futile endeavour that proves fundamental to the subject’s capacity to create.<sup>4</sup> Drawing from a Lacanian perspective, the following chapter will determine that an essential aspect of play and sport is the creativity it provides.

### Play, sport, and creativity

It is with regards to such creative activity that a more significant contention in our understandings of play can be identified: specifically, to what extent does play require a function or some attributable result? This underscores Richard Sennett’s account of play, where he notes, “One has to see play activities preparing for creative activities, in order to maintain a sense of the differences about the quality of the results” (2002, 317). Such quality undergoes a sociological priority in Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning’s account of the lack of excitement that characterises our everyday lives (Elias and

Dunning 2008). Over time, greater levels of social interdependency have resulted in greater levels of self-control, for which a decrease in opportunities for excitement has led to a corresponding rise in “mimetic” activities (Elias and Dunning 2008). Where such activities provide a “make believe” setting, bounded by an “Excitement ... elicited by the creation of tensions”, it is through a controlled decontrolling of emotional restraint that a range of leisure activities provide the opportunity for “imaginary or controlled ‘real’ danger, mimetic fear and/or pleasure, sadness and/or joy” to be performed, enacted, and embodied by its participants (Maguire 1991, 28).

This is continued somewhat in the distinction Todd McGowan draws between play and sport. For McGowan, “Although animals of all stripes spend time playing, none invest themselves in sport the way in which speaking subjects do” (2018, 186). He elaborates:

A lack of seriousness defines play: While at play, animals and humans engage in activities that could be serious without treating them seriously. A cat playing at trying to seize a piece of string from its human partner does not really want to have the string but merely wants to play at having it. Two dogs playing with each other act as if they are fighting but do not try to injure the other. While just playing, humans hit the tennis ball to each other without starting a game or keeping score. These cases all exemplify play rather than sport. Play becomes sport at the moment it becomes serious. Sport is play taken seriously—for example, when a tennis match begins after two friends stop just hitting the ball back and forth. (McGowan 2018, 186-187)

Importantly, what underlies McGowan’s distinction between play and sport is that “sport engenders an excessive investment because of its seriousness” (2018, 187). As he describes, it is this sense of seriousness which results in the subject making decisions that may in fact threaten their social relationships (such as, missing a family occasion in order to watch “the game”), or, in the case of the athlete, their own personal health (such as, when an athlete continues to play through injury). Consequently, if sport is performed for the sake of releasing tension via an outlet that is separate to our profane, everyday existence (Elias and Dunning 2008; Maguire 1991), and, if these tensions serve to underwrite the excessive seriousness that is attributed to sport, thus separating it from mere play (McGowan 2018), what remains central to this distinction is that

“sports fans *avoid* confronting the fact of this excessiveness” (McGowan 2018, 187, italics added).

Indeed, if our relation to sport’s excessiveness remains predicated on a clear sense of avoidance, then it becomes clear that our very passion for sport does not follow a path of rational judgement. Equally, though sport may provide an opportunity for risk, aggression, and wild moments of physical excursion to be performed, the extent to which these opportunities become “second nature” rests upon the opportunities that sport makes available for moments of unrestrained creativity. Accordingly, it may not necessarily be the case that the distinction between play and sport occurs from the fact that “play” is evacuated at the point at which sport becomes serious. Instead, while we can think of numerous sporting examples where a professional athlete has suddenly, almost spontaneously, displayed a moment of unbridled brilliance—a performance that exhibits the creativity that play endows—we can also think of those incidences where an excessive seriousness and tactical proficiency has in fact hindered creativity; where the capacity to play “freely” is expelled from the sporting spectacle. We can consider the various occasions where an athlete or team has become so frustrated that it is their creativity that is being hampered by the opponent; or, how a particular manager, coaching regime, or performance style may be hindering the creative talent of a particular player.<sup>5</sup> Though, competitively, such frustrations remain an important part of sport, and the seriousness in which it is endowed, it remains apparent that one’s very competitiveness emerges from the codified restrictions that both limit and constrain the opportunity for play, and, specifically, the creativity it prescribes.

For this very reason, rather than stand opposed, the relation between play and sport is one that remains in continuous tension, so much so, that what makes a sporting endeavour exciting, or what endows it the seriousness in which it requires, is itself forged through the creativity that play can provide. It is in the context of our capacity for creativity that our understandings of play and sport, and, specifically, the relation *between* play and sport, can be reconsidered. Importantly, this creativity does not need to be applied to some instrumental purpose or prescribed achievement, both of which remain essential characterizations of sport (McGowan 2018), but can instead be perceived as working in accordant with the subject’s inherent lack and the subsequent excesses and opportunities for creativity that this lack produces.

Bound together, it is in the interlinkages between lack and excess that “Sports, games, and intense bodily pursuits, as well as other activities, such as gardening, stargazing, and caring for and playing with pets, enable us to rediscover and retain our connection to an essential source of creativity and vitality” (Greif 2010, 560 see also Reynoso 2021). In fact, while, for McGowan, “The naturalization of sport enables subjects to disavow their excessive investment in an inherently insignificant activity” (2018, 187),<sup>6</sup> this can in fact overlook how such an investment in insignificance provides the opportunity for the intersection of lack and excess in play. Indeed, while the very purpose of play is that it remains an activity done purely for its own sake, it nonetheless remains an important site for the intersection of lack and excess to be revealed. By way of elaborating on this intersection, the following discussion will extend McGowan’s contention that “More than any other activity, sport is the site for sublimation” (2018, 187). In doing so, it will consider how it is through the act of sublimation that our creativity is related to examples of play and sport.

#### Sublimation in play and sport: The irrational, the ridiculous, and the mundane

Lacan’s well-known definition of sublimation describes it as an act which raises an object “to the dignity of the Thing” (1997b, 112). Attached to the subject’s lack—the very loss that characterizes the subject’s entry into language—“the Thing is merely a retroactive fantasy of everything good, whole, and plentiful” (Ruti 2023). It is thus in the act of dignifying this Thing that a certain object or objective—and this can include a goal, ideal, or belief—is creatively elevated beyond the mundanity of everyday life. In effect, the object elevated to the Thing remains a substitution. The crux of this substitution lies upon the fact that, while, in and of itself, the Thing can never be obtained—its essence forever unobtainable to the subject—it is the subject’s sublimation of the object that nonetheless “comes closer to the Thing than other objects” (Ruti 2023).<sup>7</sup> For this reason, it is not necessarily the object which is important, but the desire towards this object that remains significant. Indeed, while so much of sport remains directed towards a particular goal or objective (the success that is attributable to the win that sport requires), what may be lost is the sense of play and creativity that characterizes sublimation.



This is brought to bear when we consider the levels of training that is required to become a competent competitor in a certain sport. Drawing upon the work of Dervin (1985), Sykes proposes that “we can think of athletic training as [a] culturally validated sublimation of aggression into determination to train and succeed” (2007: 137).<sup>8</sup> While this “determination to train and succeed” may stand apart from the characterization of play, we must “also be alerted to the ambivalent aspects of such determination, or the aggression driving athletic mastery” (Sykes 2007, 137); in other words, to the fact that such training can very easily become a monotonous activity, for which sport carries the threat of desublimating one’s desire to participate. This reveals how “The overanimation or overagitation that can accompany our creative endeavors” follows closely the mundanity of repetition that sport relies upon (Ruti 2023). When so much of sport requires repetition—repeated drills in training sessions; repeated tactical arrangements; the repeated tournaments and seasons—it is through this process of repetition that the opportunity to play, as well as the creativity that sport requires, can be obscured or even lost.

With this in mind, we can recall the assumption that, today, sport has become too serious. Advancements in sport science, an over-reliance on statistical analysis, technological improvements in the use of equipment, and tactical innovations have resulted in the over-professionalization of sport. We can assert that, following the Frankfurt School philosopher and sociologist, Herbert Marcuse, sport has suffered from a process of “repressive desublimation” (Marcuse 2002). Such repression is apparent in the disciplinary and restrictive practices that sport enacts upon the body (Brohm 1978). Needless to say, while such frustrations are routinely expelled, the popularity of sport has not abated.

Instead, what we must return to is “the arbitrary nature of sublimation” (Žižek 2019); or, as Ruti notes, “the irrational manner in which we at times remain devoted to objects that we know are likely to make us miserable, sometimes because they are unavailable (already lost) and sometimes because they are obviously injurious (such as hurtful lovers)” (2023). Such remarks speak directly to the sport enthusiast. Too often, sport is “likely to make us miserable”, when the opportunity for success seems unobtainable, or “obviously injurious”, such as the inevitable sporting injury. For many, we attach ourselves to sport in full view of the fact that it may not make us happy.

By “explain[ing] why we attach ourselves to objects that do not even bother to promise happiness, that are frank about the fact that they will never make us happy” (Ruti 2023) is to appreciate the fact that the arbitrariness of sublimation is itself closely related to the irrationality of a necessary failure that characterises the sublimated object. McGowan explains:

The act of sublimation occurs when the subject creates an object that is out of reach, but it is precisely the status of being out of reach that serves to animate the subject. If we did not have an object that we could not obtain, we would cease to be active subjects because we would find ourselves with no incentive to act. Everything would be attainable, and nothing would be worth attaining. Sublimation provides a way for the subject to fail, and the subject satisfies itself by repeating a necessary failure. It produces satisfaction for the subject, but this satisfaction is never that of obtaining the object. (2016, 215).

Notably, it is the necessity of failure that closely characterizes both play and sport. Given that so much of sport is steeped in failure and the inevitability of loss (even when one “wins”, there is, almost immediately, a new season, a new tournament), what characterises play is the sublimation of this very failure—the fact that play remains an unnecessary activity, where, in its most general capacity, the failure to achieve anything substantial, beyond its own completion, is characteristically what makes it play (Black 2023).

Therefore, in the same way that Russell Sbriglia highlights how “Žižek frequently sees works of literature as animated by and grappling with miserable/ridiculous sublime objects” (2017, 7), we can turn to Alenka Zupančič’s contention that, “To raise an object to the dignity of the Thing is not to idealize it, but, rather, to ‘realize’ it” (2003, 77). This underscores the paradox at play when considering sublimation and one’s relation to the Thing, as exhibited in Žižek’s account of Kafka:

The Kafkan Thing is either transcendent, forever eluding our grasp (the Law, the Castle), or a ridiculous object into which the subject is metamorphosed and which we cannot ever get rid of (like Gregor Samsa, who changes into an

insect). The point is to read these two features together: *jouissance* is that which we cannot ever attain *and* that which we cannot ever get rid of. (Žižek 2005, 164, italics in original)

It is on this basis that we can conceive of what Lacan meant when he referred to the “problem of sublimation” (Lacan 1997): a problem enacted by the fact that in view of the transcendent Thing, which can never be represented or grasped, we are nonetheless left with the elevation of a “ridiculous object”.

This is apparent when “Individuals give outsized importance to an activity that has nothing to do with human survival, self-interest, or sexual satisfaction” (McGowan 2018, 187). In fact, when McGowan asserts that “Looking at what fans do without the lens of sublimation renders everything completely ridiculous—the costumes, the painted faces, the dyed hair, the wasted money” (2018, 186), it is this very ridiculousness that underscores the sublimation of such unimportant endeavours to the dignity that is characteristic of sublimation. While one’s devotion to a particular team may be explained by geographical location, family allegiance, or a particular liking for a player, coach, or playing style, it is the *irrationality* of the sport’s fan that characterizes their fandom. This fully acknowledges the fact that what sport and play provide is an opportunity to creatively partake in activities that inherently bear no significance or importance (the hours spent training or years spent watching one’s favourite team), so much so that, in the case of sublimation, the subject “derive[s] all their satisfaction from an otherwise mundane process” (McGowan 2018, 183).

This is best expressed when we consider that, in the case of “true love”, “while the beloved remains a Thing, it is simultaneously ‘desublimated,’ accepted in all her ridiculous bodily imperfections” (Žižek 2020, 162). In this sense, the sublimation of the object (that ordinary Thing which constitutes the beloved), is itself countered by, or read alongside, its mundanity (Black 2021c). Importantly, this conceives of the inherent paradox that underscores sublimation as occurring not when a sublimated object is simply made mundane, but when a desublimation functions to accentuate the ridiculous triviality of the sublimated object; thus, revealing the very “problem” at its core (Lacan 1997), or the lack that constitutes it. What is more, while “true love doesn’t idealize”, we can nonetheless consider how “A true miracle is thus achieved: I can hold

the Thing-*jouissance* in my hands, making fun of it and playing games with it, enjoying it without restraint” (Žižek 2020, 162). In the act of sublimation, it is the capacity to “make fun of” and “play games” that constitutes the creativity inherent to both play and sport. Though, practically, there are clear differences in the extent to which play and sport may be organised, when considered together, what characterizes their inherent unimportance is the fact that it is the very unimportance of a ridiculous, mundane activity that is creatively affirmed through the act of sublimation.

### The creative intensity of play

It is this devotion which becomes clear when we consider how it is through play that sport is endowed with “an inherent intensity that seizes players even more strongly than everyday life, and even leads them to disregard all considerations of that life” (Pfaller 2014, 87). Such intensity, such seizure, bears a resemblance to Lacan’s account of *jouissance*, which, for Ruti, remains “both an animating and destructive force” (2023). While this force can be “derailing, dislocating, and disorienting”, the creativity it can unleash is one that proffers “an enormous creative energy” (Ruti 2023).<sup>9</sup> Here, “the rigor of Lacan’s notion of sublimation[,] as a mode of welcoming *jouissance* without letting it engulf us” (Ruti 2012, 163), is encapsulated through an act of creativity that immerses the subject in the “inherent intensity” of play (Pfaller 2014, 87).<sup>10</sup>

To better understand how sublimation requires a certain level of *jouissance*, we can return to the assertion that for the subject lack is always dialectic to excess (Black 2023; Reynoso 2021). It is the noncoincidence between lack and excess that defines the Lacanian subject, from which “The subject’s [excessive] attempts to name her lack are transient at best, giving her access to no permanent meaning, no solid identity, no unitary narrative of selfactualization” (Ruti 2023). This provides a unique perspective on the assertion that one’s involvement in sport can form an important part of one’s “identity formation” or as a “quest for self-realization and the presentation of self” (Maguire 1991, 30). While “mimetic” activities “provide a ‘make believe’ setting which allows emotions to flow more easily, and which elicits excitement of some kind imitating that produced by real-life situations, yet without its real dangers or risks”, the extent to which such activities can delimit a “socially permitted self-centredness” may in fact stand opposed to those excessive forms of behaviour that in the case of sport are

generated from, but also fail to elide, one's inherent lack (Maguire 1991, 28). In sum, it is not that sport provides the subject its identity, but, rather, an unending level of creativity that fundamentally fails to confer any form of self-actualization or self-centredness. Indeed, "far from being a hindrance to existential vitality, this intrinsic impossibility—the fact that every attempt to redeem lack unavoidably falls short of its mark—is what allows us, over and over again, to take up the endless process of signifying beauty" (Ruti 2008, 491).

In sport, such an "endless process" is brought to bear by the fact that sport requires one to try and try again. Whether participating in a regular training session, or, in attempting, once again, to break a certain record, or win a particular tournament, sport requires one to get back up and try again. For, as the former Liverpool midfielder, Steven Gerrard, proclaimed, "We go again!"<sup>11</sup>

#### Knowing better and the creativity of illusion

To help supplement our understanding of the creativity endowed in sublimation we can turn our attention to the Dutch historian, Johan Huizinga, and his study of play in human culture (Huizinga 1980). According to Huizinga play displays a number of important characteristics: play is a voluntary activity, that allows one to enact their freedom, within certain rules; play is separated from what can be considered to be "ordinary life", occurring in its own designated spaces and providing opportunities for imaginative creativity and experimentation; and, finally, play creates and requires a certain level of regulation, not some preordained order, but what Sennett refers to as "disinterested activity" (2002, 317). Here, Sennett explains, "Disinterested does not mean uninterested. Children at sport could hardly be called bored. Huizinga means disinterested in the sense of stepping away from immediate desire or instant gratification. That stepping away permits people to play together" (2002, 317).

On the face of it, Huizinga's thesis echoes those that would see a distinction between play and sport, with Huizinga privileging the former over the latter. In fact, for Huizinga the disappearance of play from culture is attributable to the professionalization of sport (similar to the repressive desublimation of play that sport encourages). Indeed, what is lost within sport is what Huizinga refers to as its "ludic quality". This refers to the

playful, game-like elements that are present in various aspects of human culture, including language, art, and religion, as well as in how societies are structured and organized. Yet, on this point, Robert Pfaller observes:

even professional athletes, in spite of high material stakes, are occasionally utterly and completely absorbed in the ludic sphere—football players and ice hockey players become ‘intoxicated by play’ in the best cases, and in the worst start violently attacking their opponents; highly paid boxers bite their adversaries’ ears even though this might lead to a suspension or ban from the sport, severely damaging or even ending their careers. (2014, 108)

For this reason, Pfaller goes further, emphasising that in order for play to emerge, the distinction between play and sport doesn’t really matter. Essentially, “what is decisive is that those carrying it out treat it as play, regardless of what it might actually be” (Pfaller 2014, 108).<sup>12</sup> Here, Pfaller extends Huizinga’s account of play in order to identify how “Huizinga’s theory makes plausible a new type of conviction: the type of illusion that is kept suspended by knowing better, yet thereby adhered to with even greater devotion” (Pfaller 2014, 95).

We can elaborate upon the effects of this devotion via the “suspended fiction” that play requires (Pfaller 2014, 113 see also Huizinga 1980). This “suspended fiction” forms an important part of Huizinga’s account of play, later drawn upon by Pfaller, who asserts: “all play operates with illusion, and requires a moment in which this illusion is seen through” (2014: 94). What this reveals is that our involvement in play posits a unique relation to one’s knowledge. For example, according to Pfaller, “All play acts as if it were real and, in order to play, all players must know that this is not so. When players know (or at least believe) that it is not real, but rather just play, then they succumb to sacred seriousness” (2014, 94).<sup>13</sup> By following closely Huizinga’s thesis, Pfaller asserts that the “fascination of play depends upon the knowledge that it is ‘just’ play”, and, more importantly, “This knowledge essential for play consists in ‘knowing better’ about an illusion” (2014, 91).

The significance of this illusion is that we can now begin to assert that what characterizes play, and what seems to underlie play’s capacity for creativity, is a unique

illusion, which is not simply “accepted” by the subject, but which is simultaneously acknowledged *and* unacknowledged by the subject. Whereas one would usually interpret knowledge as working against illusion, in the case of play, *one’s very knowledge functions to maintain the illusion* (Black 2021b). As a result:

The astonishing part of Huizinga’s discovery is this dependence of the affective moment on the intellectual one: *we will be absorbed by the illusion of play only if and when we see through it*. Knowledge does not help us gain emotional distance—on the contrary: our intellectual distancing from play pushes us into the throes of the affective captivity of play (Pfaller 2014, 93, italics in original)

We can reinterpret this final sentence as describing play’s affective creativity; a creativity which is predicated on a certain self-sacrifice or “intellectual distancing” from the act of play itself; it is by sacrificing our own knowledge that the “creative power of sacrifice” can be achieved (McGowan 2016, 110).

Further still, in the case of sublimation, we can now begin to determine how the elevation of the mundane object is not ignored by the subject, but, rather, forms a constitutive part of the creativity it is prescribed. That is, rather than the subject being unaware of the object’s inherent ordinariness, it is its very ridiculousness, its desublimation as a mundane object, which nonetheless holds the power for creative agency. It is this same process that “Huizinga detected as the ‘sacred seriousness’ of the [football] game” (Pfaller 2014, 104). Ultimately, while “the crowd is roused to a frenzy when a goal is scored precisely because they have not forgotten where they are, they know they are dealing with ‘merely’ a ‘foolish’ game in a football stadium” (Pfaller 2014, 104), it is, nonetheless, the unimportance of the “‘foolish’ game” that sustains the act of sublimation on behalf of the fan.

Accordingly, what this reveals is a unique form of self-decentration inherent to the performance of play and the creativity it endows.<sup>14</sup> Importantly, what is unique to this self-decentration is the fact that one’s acknowledgement of play requires that one adheres to an illusion that would, at first, contradict one’s very knowledge (one is, in a way, “decentred” from one’s knowledge).<sup>15</sup> Such self-decentration is confirmed when we consider that “play ... is a practice that is based on the *illusion of others*” (Pfaller

2014, 90, italics in original). While the subject remains in full knowledge that play is merely play—a “knowing better” that endows them the capacity to play by seeing through its illusion—this nonetheless requires that the very fiction that play relies upon demands an Other who *does* believe in play’s illusion. It is here that the Other occupies an important role in the process of sublimation and the creativity it provides. Indeed, “it is through the Other that we come to constitute ourselves as creatures of sublimation, that is, creatures who possess the capacity to resculpt the world” (Ruti 2012, 159).<sup>16</sup> Moreover, it is through the Other that play can be referred to as an “illusion of the Other”; an Other for whom the playing subject remains interdependent to (Black 2021b). It is through this illusion that one is afforded the opportunity for creativity. That is, in the case of play, our reliance on the Other is displayed through the illusion *it* upholds.

For this reason, we can begin to determine how this reliance is related to the rules and regulations that govern a particular sport, but which all the while function as “an accepted illusion that allows one to fully participate in the game” (Black 2021b, 100). Rather than inhibit one’s enjoyment, and, thus, one’s capacity to play, it is in relation to sport’s “accepted illusion” that its rules allow for the creativity that can occur. Here, sport’s unimportance is acknowledged via a variety of contrived rules and regulations that paradoxically bestow it a certain level of importance, perhaps best reflected in debates on “fair play” (the fairness of which should not matter if sport was simply considered to be “unimportant”). Again, “It is in this way that our involvement in sport presents a form of ‘self-decentration’: indeed, a space between sport’s objective adherence (i.e., following its rules) and our subjective divestment from the demands of its illusion (an illusion of the Other)” (Black 2021b, 100).

What the illusion of the Other provides, therefore, is a form of self-decentration that functions to provide the very space in which one’s creative sublimation occurs in play. Indeed, while the Other remains essential to the work of sublimation and the creative act, in the case of play, this is observed in the extent to which the Other’s ignorance—let’s say, the Other’s stupidity (its inherent *lack* [of knowledge])—is required to maintain the subject’s relation to play. Where such ignorance resides is in the illusion it adheres to—the illusion of the Other. Without the Other shouldering this illusion there would not be the creative space available for the subject to play. Note, how a similar



process is outlined in McNulty's account of the Jewish law and the role of the "absent Other":

Moses founds an institution (the Jewish law), and this institution is the legacy of his desire. It provides a structure or a space in which the subject can encounter and explore the lack in the Other in a creative manner, without being so consumed by his anxiety that he violently rejects and represses it. This is what we see in the practice of the oral law or Talmud, where the collectivity engages in the exploration of God's absence as the creative foundation of the rabbinic community. The law is a structure that allows for a work on the absent Other, and in this respect functions as a sublimation for the age (and indeed for subsequent ages, as Kant attests: the sublimation functions not only for members of the Mosaic religion but potentially for anyone who takes up this object). (2014, 105)

Much like the law, it is the illusion of the Other—an Other absented from the knowledge of the illusion—that provides the very structure for play and for the creative work to occur.

This points to an important characteristic in our understanding of play and sport, one that is perhaps best expressed in considerations of sport. Indeed, in accordance with the sublimation of sport, there resides the undeniable love-hate relationship: in the act of following a particular team, there is the frustration and anguish that undoubtedly, and more commonly, follows a team's potential decline or repeated lack of success. Yet, as emphasized by Geal "does even the fan of a club who has never won a major trophy shirk from singing that they support 'by far the greatest team the world has ever seen'" (2023, 7). While so much of this love-hate relation can be observed in the sacrifices sport requires, we can also consider how such "hate" nonetheless provides an important part of the "love" one has for the beleaguered team. Whereas this can be observed in the playful manner in which one may approach their team's prospects,<sup>17</sup> it is also apparent in those incidences where one's performance and success is tied to a team that may not necessarily be very good. Though the athletically gifted amongst us may have the ability, and sense, to join a better team, for many, playing in a losing side is not something that one can simply give up on, despite the aggravation it can cause. Rather,

as Pfaller asserts, what play prescribes is a principle of: “I love it so much because I hate it” (2014, 105). Pfaller adds, “This explains why a person’s better knowledge not only creates a possible opportunity, but even becomes a necessary requirement for a greater amount of passion, ... since without the knowledge that the matter is nonsense, there would be no contempt felt for it” (2014, 105).

The venture to be made here is that such ambivalence does not serve as a hindrance to creativity. In fact, it is this same, “I love it so much because I hate it”, which underlies how the very act of sublimation requires the elevation of a desublimated, mundane object: a nonsense object that is *unacknowledged* by the unknowing Other, while, at the same time, *acknowledged* by the subject who is left free to enthuse their passion for the object itself. Despite a run of bad luck, despite the failure to achieve any sporting success, for many, such nonsense does not negate or put a stop to one’s sporting participation or fandom. Analogous to the very way in which sublimation can bring to light both the positive and negative aspects of a particular object, this same contradiction is brought to bear in the sporting performance. Instead, “precisely because the game is ‘nonsense’ in their eyes, a mere game, and because they therefore disdain and hate the game (while simultaneously loving it, whether for the suspended illusion that is presented in it or for the suspension of that illusion), they [‘we’] fall under its spell” (Pfaller 2014, 104).

### Creativity and the limit

It is in accordance with this love-hate paradox that we can begin to reflect on one final significance in the relationship between play and sport. As has been discussed throughout this chapter, one widely recited characteristic of play is the opportunity it provides for creative expression. While sport provides an avenue for such expression to be displayed, the tension between play’s capacity for spontaneity and innovation, and its subjection to regulation and order, remains an important point of contention (Gruneau 1980). Indeed, as Gruneau asserts, “The real subject in question here is the relationship of play, games and sports to the broader problems of freedom and constraint, liberation and domination in human existence” (1980, 69). To the extent that “Play allows us to be totally frivolous about important things in our work-centered lives or else completely serious about things that are trivial” it is “because we so deeply enjoy

such freedom, [that] we are frequently prone to celebrate play's expressive spirit and creative autonomy" (Gruneau 1980, 68).

Yet, as the preceding discussion has sought to elaborate, what comes to underscore our very act of creativity is the sacrifice it requires. Though play may provide opportunities for what seems like an open field for free agency and unbridled expression, it is in the act of sublimation that our ability to endow play and sport with a sense of creativity is itself concurrent to the elevation of one's lost object (or, one's inherent lack). Notably, sublimation does not provide the subject with this lost object, but instead remains creatively enveloped along a path of continually aiming for this very object. On this basis, what proves so alluring about play, and what comes to characterise the excessiveness of our sporting endeavours, is the sacrifice they require and the self-decentration they enact (Black 2021b).

This does not act as a hindrance to the subject, but can instead be conceived "as the quest for an impossible" (McNulty 2014, 89)—be it the impossible sporting achievement or the unencumbered capacity to play "freely". In so doing, sacrifice reveals a fidelity to creativity. Whether it be in sacrificing one's knowledge of the illusion that play requires, or in sacrificing the knowledge that one's acquirement of the lost object can never be achieved, what comes to characterise our relation to both play and sport is how one's very creativity and freedom relies upon the space in which this sacrifice can be averred and expressed (what is more, whether it be the performance of a live sporting event, a theatre production, or the act of writing for some imagined reader, these spaces are inherently social).

The importance of this space is helpfully revealed in the "fundamental paradox" that Gruneau conceives in play:

When people organize their play in order to play with or against others they create rules whose expressed purpose is to define standards for playing that are binding on all the players and insulate the activity from the society at large. These rules are not spontaneous individual creations, rather they are cultural products that stem from the collective social experiences of the participants. Thus, while one of the purposes of rules is to separate play from reality, the very

act of rule construction has the effect of embedding play deeply in the prevailing logic of social relations and thereby diminishes its autonomy. For this reason, the study of play is haunted by a fundamental paradox. Play gives the impression of being at once both an independent and spontaneous aspect of human action or agency and a dependent and regulated aspect of it. (1980, 68)

In effect, whether revering the freedom of expression that play can provide or in critiquing the codified rules and regulations that sport both asserts and requires, what is ignored is the importance of the limit. Rather than conceiving of this limit as a barrier to creativity, what is revealed in sublimation is how this limit proves constitutive of our very creativity. That is, the ability to sublimate—to creatively perform unique displays of physical or artistic expression—lies in the mundanity and the utter importance of the playful and sporting activity and, more importantly, in the inherent restrictions and constraints these activities impose. While such restrictions are easily recognised in the case of sport—it's there in the very rules and regulations that codify any sporting practice—in the case of play, it is the enjoyment that is required in the act of self-sacrifice that provides one with the capacity to creatively endure one's freedom. It is in accordance with the limit that one's creativity can expose an emancipatory potential in the context of play and sport.

This is perhaps best expressed in the sporting failure; failures which, however common, in no way inhibit or restrict the act of play itself. Instead, what underscores the desire that sport evokes is the very way in which it encounters the drive: the enjoyment obtained not when one obtains one's desired object—the sporting achievement, in whatever form—but the unconscious satisfaction derived from loss itself (Black 2023). Here, “Creativity manifests itself in the act of repetition that enjoys the postponement of the solution, of fulfilment” (Finkelde and McGowan 2023, 9). Thus, it is in the creative act of repetition that “the pursuit of subjective freedom may be enabled—and not impeded—by the struggle with limits, obstacles, and constraints” (McNulty 2014, 1). Where these obstacles are integral to the arbitrary rules, regulations, and codification that constitute both play and sport, it is “the enabling function of constraints” as fundamental to creativity, which sustains our acts of sublimation (McNulty 2014, 13). In the context of play and sport, what sublimation reveals is “the fecundity of the limit” (Engley 2023, 3)—both as a restriction and a source of our creativity.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The theoretical intervention undertaken in this chapter will be a decidedly Lacanian one and will, therefore, stand separate to the object relations theorist, Donald Winnicott. Winnicott's distinctive perspective on play and its importance in child development is well-known within psychoanalytic theory. For Winnicott, play is not just a leisure activity but a fundamental process through which children explore and integrate their internal and external worlds. For more on the relationship between play and sport, see Steve Tuber and Karen Tocatly's, "Why do we act like fans? What would Winnicott say about it?" (2023).

<sup>2</sup> In the case of Leonardo da Vinci, what characterizes his creativity, and, for later purposes, what characterises his art as an object of sublimation, is his capacity to render his own fantasy, his own psyche, visible in the context of the collective field (Freud 1910).

<sup>3</sup> Importantly, "sporting activities ... operate within [a] symbolic and linguistic milieu" (Geal 2023, 2).

<sup>4</sup> This is taken-up by Slavoj Žižek, for whom, the very capacity to be human is marked by an inherent alienation that both constitutes the human, while, at the same time, establishing the very process that encourages human creativity (Žižek 2016; 2020).

<sup>5</sup> This criticism is often levelled at football managers, where, in the case of the highly successful, Pep Guardiola, criticisms often refer to his tendency to 'tinker too much' with team formations and tactical ambitions that end-up inhibiting the creativity of notable players (at the same time, there is the counter-claim that Guardiola's coaching talent rests upon identifying and encouraging the unrealised creativity of certain players) (Onuoha 2023; Ronay 2021). In most cases, however, criticisms of poor performance are, in the case of football especially, levelled at the team's lack of creativity and the manager's decisions (Olley 2021).

<sup>6</sup> Such disavowal can be perceived as perpetuating the separation between lack and excess (Reynoso 2021).

<sup>7</sup> Importantly, the relation to the Thing is not beholden to the individual subject, but can take on a symbolic significance, such as the symbolic identification that occurs when supporting one's national team (in addition to the fact that supporting a domestic team is itself a collective endeavour). Here, the national team comes to imbue a shared relationship amongst a particular population, for which the national Thing encapsulates the apparent essence of the nation through various forms of substitution (such as, national chants and attire) (Black 2021a).

<sup>8</sup> Sykes adds, "The training involved in playing a sport is immense. Training is an explicit acknowledgment of athletic embodiment as an achievement. Training is what sets apart athletic embodiment from mundane, infantile or geriatric embodiment" (2007, 137).

<sup>9</sup> As Ruti (2012; 2023) considers with regards to Lacan's account of the Irish novelist, James Joyce.

<sup>10</sup> Certainly, the capacity to welcome *jouissance* is acknowledged by Ruti when she asserts that "No doubt there are times when this mechanism fails, when the anxiety

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generated by jouissance gets the better of us. But it may also succeed more often than we realize. After all, it succeeds every time we manage to deal with multiple tensions, multiple stimuli, in a manner that grants us a sense of aliveness. And during our most creative moments, we may even be able to draw productive connections between the various stimuli that threaten to overpower us, thereby turning their pressure into a resource for originality” (2012, 163-164).

<sup>11</sup> After beating their title rivals, Manchester City, during the 2013/14 English Premier League season, Liverpool captain, Steven Gerrard, rallied his teammates with a post-match speech that was, thankfully, caught on camera. Gerrard can be heard saying to his teammates, “This does not fucking slip now! This does not fucking slip! Listen: we go to Norwich, exactly the same! We go again!”. Following their win over Norwich, Liverpool then played Chelsea. During the game, an unchallenged Gerrard slipped while in possession, giving the ball to Chelsea striker, Demba Ba, who subsequently scored. Liverpool went on to lose the game, with City eventually winning the league.

<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, Pfaller highlights how one’s “‘knowledge’ in this case even seems to be reversed idiosyncratically. Rather than representing the attitude *I know perfectly well that it is only a game, but still I attempt to make it seem as serious as possible (for the benefit of the paying audience)*, these professional athletes assume exactly the opposite, paradoxical attitude: *I know that it is only my secular profession, but nonetheless I am caught in the spell of the ludic sphere and have to do something monstrous*” (2014, 108).

<sup>13</sup> With regard to such “sacred seriousness”, it is the “excessive happiness, which is the ‘sacred seriousness’ of play, [... and] is bound to the condition that the practising persons are initiates who see through the illusion of the game” (Pfaller, 2014, 90).

<sup>14</sup> Here, “*Decentrement* indicates that a position of nonidentity of a nonsubstantial concept of subject always will support it in the presence of representational spaces, of reflexive auto-apprehension and social identification” (Safatle 2016, 71, italics in original).

<sup>15</sup> This echoes our discussion on sublimation where the object’s ordinariness is acknowledged, yet also unacknowledged, as part of its sublimation.

<sup>16</sup> Ruti adds: “While it is true that a specific subject can be defiled in specific ways by its relationship to the Other/others, the belief that this relationship is intrinsically defiling overlooks the fact that it is this very Other/other that gives us access to the meaning making capacities of language—that, more broadly, gives us the gift of sublimation” (2012, 159).

<sup>17</sup> After losing their first three games of the 2021/22 English Premier League season, I remember seeing an Arsenal fan with a shirt that read, “Keep Calm, I’m a Gooner”, a playful reworking of the (rarely used) 1939 U.K. government “motivational” poster, “Keep Calm and Carry On”.

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