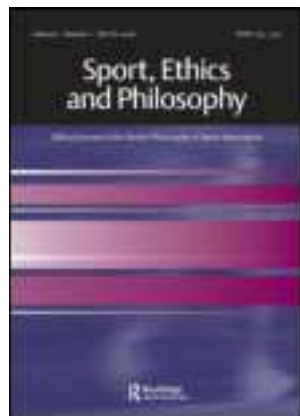


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THE COMPETITIVE PERCEPTION

João Tiago Lima

This paper aims to define what competitive perception is. Using Dufrenne's phenomenological analysis of the art spectator's experience, namely the concept of aesthetic perception, I will claim that it is useful to apply this phenomenological approach to the experience of watching sport events. I will argue that the concepts of uncertainty and auto teleology, being two main features in sport competition, are helpful to define competitive perception.

Resumen

Este artículo tiene como objetivo el definir la noción de "percepción competitiva" [competitive perception; en el sentido de percepción de la competición]. Utilizando el análisis fenomenológico de Dufrenne en cuanto a la experiencia del arte por parte del espectador, en concreto el concepto de la percepción estética, argumentaré que es útil el aplicar este enfoque fenomenológico a la experiencia que se da al presenciar eventos deportivos. Argüiré que los conceptos de la incertidumbre y la "auto-teleología", siendo éstos los dos aspectos principales en la competición deportiva, son útiles para definir la percepción competitiva.

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel beabsichtigt, den Begriff Wettkampfwahrnehmung zu definieren. Mit Dufrennes phänomenologischer Analyse des Erlebens von Kunstbetrachtern, d. h. dem Konzept der ästhetischen Wahrnehmung, werde ich darlegen, dass es sinnvoll ist, diesen phänomenologischen Ansatz auf das Erleben beim Zuschauen von Sportveranstaltungen anzuwenden. Ich werde zeigen, dass die Konzepte Unsicherheit und Autoteleologie zwei wesentliche Aspekte im sportlichen Wettkampf hilfreich sind, um Wettkampfwahrnehmung zu definieren.

Résumé

Cet article aspire à définir la perception compétitive. En utilisant l'analyse phénoménologique de Dufrenne sur l'expérience du spectateur d'art, à savoir le concept de perception esthétique, je prétends qu'il est utile d'appliquer cette approche phénoménologique à l'expérience du spectacle sportif. Je soutiendrai que les concepts d'incertitude et d'auto-téléologie, deux caractéristiques principales de la compétition sportive, aident à définir la perception compétitive.

摘要

本文主要目標在於去定義何謂競技觀點。藉由 Dufrenne 對藝術觀賞家的經驗現象學分析，亦即美學觀點概念，我認為較實用的方式是去應用這樣的現象學方法與觀賞運動賽會經驗。我將主張不確定性及自身目的的概念，做為兩種主要運動比賽的特色，這會有助於定義競技觀點。

KEYWORDS Dufrenne; sport; aesthetic experience; competitive perception

1. Introduction

The main purpose of this paper is to define *competitive perception*. It does so by focusing upon the implications of Dufrenne's philosophy beyond the aesthetic experience, namely his analysis of the spectator's experience. Mikel Dufrenne (1910–1995) developed a philosophical methodology from a phenomenological matrix. Using *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* (published in Paris in 1953) as a starting point, and Dufrenne's distinction between the aesthetic object and the work of art, I will argue that it is possible to apply this phenomenological approach to the experience of watching sport events.

I must begin by highlighting that Dufrenne's main concern was not to study art's audience from a sociological point of view. Instead, Dufrenne shows how the work of art becomes an aesthetic object only when it is perceived by a specific recipient. According to Dufrenne, the work of art itself is not enough for perceiving an aesthetic object. He claims that the work of art is merely that which has the potential to be perceived aesthetically. Thus, the work of art *demand*s an aesthetic perception from the spectator to become an aesthetic object. Could these methodological tools, used by Dufrenne to define the aesthetic experience, help us approach other human experiences such as watching sport?

Sport is a great and global spectacle. There are several researchers who study sporting audiences from a sociological standpoint. Nevertheless my aim is different, because I attempt to apply what Dufrenne calls the aesthetic perception to sport spectator perception. Therefore, this paper introduces the concept of *competitive perception* in order to describe the specificity of the sport watching experience. It must be emphasised that *competitive perception* and watching sports are not the same experience. We can watch a sports event without a competitive perception of it.

According to Jerome Stolnitz, 'we cannot understand modern aesthetic theory unless we understand the concept of *disinterestedness*' (Stolnitz 1961, 131). Stolnitz emphasises the *disinterestedness* of the aesthetic experience because in this kind of experience there is *no concern for ulterior purpose*. Eliseo Vivas defines the aesthetic experience as an *intransitive* experience and shows us how a sports event can be aesthetically perceived:

Having once seen a hockey game in slow motion, I am prepared to testify that it was an object of pure intransitive experience – for I was not interested in which team won the game and no external factors mingled with my interest in the beautiful rhythmic flow of the slow-moving men. (Vivas 1959, 228).

The competitive perception can certainly be analysed in sports (synchronised swimming, artistic gymnastics, figure skating, for example) similar to dance, theatre or the performative arts in general. However, the focus of this paper is not to consider the so called *aesthetic sports* or even the *beautiful sports*, given the difficulty of achieving a consensus about these and other similar categories.

When we talk about *aesthetic sports*, we are always thinking of *beautiful sports*. Isn't it true that is very hard to evaluate what is beauty? That the concept of beauty is very controversial? What are beautiful sports and non beautiful sports? What are beautiful sports and ugly sports? Can we sustain, in theoretical terms, that the *purposive sports* don't have aesthetic qualities? That their movements or their actions don't show any beauty? (Marques 1993, 35).

Instead, this study concentrates on the competitive perception in those sports events where the members of the audience usually encourage and support their athletes or their teams. Our focus of concern is on sports such as tennis, football, basketball or rugby, where two players or two teams compete against each other and the audience follows the match from stadium seats or even from TV.

Vivas's example proves we can watch every sport event for aesthetic reasons only, but this paper's main concern is to describe other peculiar experiences by answering to the following questions: What really happens that makes us feel and act as if we were the 12th player in a football match? What really happens that makes people laugh and cry, dance and bite their nails or support and insult the players, the coach and the referees during a match? These are the most important issues and the ones I would like to study in this paper. But firstly I wish to return to Dufrenne's definition of aesthetic experience.

2. Dufrenne's Definition of Aesthetic Experience

There is a lack of consensus about the concept of aesthetic experience or aesthetic attitude even if the two concepts are not exactly synonymous. George Dickie maintains that 'the aesthetic attitude is a myth and ... is no longer useful and in fact misleads aesthetic theory' (Dickie 1964, 56). Dickie also points out that it is widely acknowledged 'that the notion of the aesthetic attitude has played an important role in the freeing of aesthetic theory from an overweening concern with beauty' (ibid., 64).

I believe that Dufrenne's definition of *aesthetic experience* is very helpful for this paper's aim. Dufrenne begins by distinguishing the *work of art* from *aesthetic perception*. But what is a work of art? Dufrenne argues that 'the work of art is whatever is recognized and held up as such for our approval' (Dufrenne 1973 [cited hereafter as *PhAE*], lvii). By defining the work of art in these terms, Dufrenne (at least in *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*) accepts a work of art's conservative view. On the other hand, for him, it's also possible to consider an aesthetic perception apart from the work of art's experience, by watching a natural phenomenon, for example. Anyway, for methodological reasons, Dufrenne sets aside definitional problems surrounding a work of art. Thus he considers the aesthetic experience in terms of the experience of the work of art. But what about the *aesthetic perception*? According to Dufrenne it's the only perception that does justice to a work of art: 'At a concert, I face the orchestra but exist in the symphony [Au

concert, je suis en face de l'orchestre, mais je suis dans la symphonie]’ (PhAE, 56). Between me and the music, there is a *reciprocal possession*, because music’s physical presence is something we experience pre-reflectively, bodily.

Within the work of art (e.g. a symphony or a painting), there are two possibilities:

- (a) We can perceive it as if it was an ordinary object of use, but this kind of perception doesn’t do justice to the work of art.
- (b) We can perceive it *aesthetically* and only in this case we do justice to the work of art by giving it a *special treatment*, as when *we are inside the symphony*. ‘The work of art is what is left of the aesthetic object when it is not perceived’ (PhAE, 14).

And that’s another important distinction: unlike other objects (e.g. the cognitive object) that does not need to be present to be part of the correlation with a subject that perceives it, the aesthetic object needs *to be attested by a perception*. I can describe a historical fact, a mathematical concept or a philosophical question without its physical presence, but I can’t replace the opera’s aesthetic experience by its narrative. Therefore the *reciprocal possession* between the aesthetic object (work of art + aesthetic perception) and the recipient shows that the aesthetic object needs the recipient (spectator or audience).

There are many forms of art. In this case, I will only talk about the performative arts (music, theatre or dance), because it’s easier to compare the role players in those activities with sports such as football, rugby or tennis. If we consider theatre, dance or music, the audience’s presence and even the audience’s collaboration is undeniable. Dufrenne claims that in a concert ‘it is at least left for the audience to collaborate in the performance by forming a backdrop of pure silence, a human silence charged with attention’ (PhAE, 49).

Dufrenne recalls that we say that a concert at an empty theatre is a sort of sad concert. And can we imagine an exhibition at a museum with no visitors or a book with no readers? Can we say the same about a competition that takes place in an empty stadium?

However, it seems obvious that in some contemporary art experiences the audience’s participation is definitely more important. Dufrenne says that

these new works of art demand a stronger audience commitment on the aesthetic experience; instead of keeping the distance ... and requiring a passive and ceremonial audience contemplation, they ask ... for the audience’s participation. ... Dionysus defeats Apollo and the party begins, the spectators become players, the reception becomes a co-creation. (Dufrenne 1976, 285)

Is it the same for a sport event? Let’s compare an orchestra with a rugby team. We can say that rugby players work as an ensemble like the members of an orchestra do. We can say that, in a rugby match, neither team needs the audience for doing its job. We can say that they’re playing only for themselves. They receive support or even hostility from the audience, but they can play in an empty stadium. Can’t they? What about those Olympic competitors who rouse up the audiences before their run-up in high jump, the long jump or triple jump? Surely, this behaviour is to get spectators to add something to their performance.

In tennis competitions the audience must watch the players in silence during the match: when a match is disrupted or interfered with by the action of a spectator who is

part of the player's entourage, the official first warns the player, including advising that any further interference may result in his own disqualification. Therefore, we can say, using Dufrenne's words, that in tennis *it is at least left for the audience to collaborate in the performance by forming a backdrop of pure silence*. But in other sports, what's the audience's role in the competition?

3. What is Competitive Perception?

As I said before, *competitive perception* and watching sports are different concepts. We can watch a sports event without a competitive perception of it. For instance, some politicians go to stadiums mainly to be seen rather than to watch the sport event and consequently with no ulterior purpose or *disinterestedly* (Stolnitz 1961). Those politicians are acting out of self-interest. However, it must be said that, sometimes, other politicians behave as genuine fans. For instance, the Italian president, Alessandro Pertini, celebrated the *Squadra Azzurra* goals against Germany during the 1982 World Cup Final as a genuine *tifoso*. He jumped and howled like a child, but he was 86 years old. There's no doubt that he was living a competitive perception and he didn't act to be seen by others. I believe he was watching *disinterestedly* a football match.

Silvio Lima, a Portuguese sports philosopher, wrote in 1938, these words: 'The game or the sport competition has his own aims. It's autoteleological. The player doesn't have an external aim' (Lima 2002, 967). In other terms, the player plays because he wants to and that will doesn't surpass the game itself. The sports player doesn't seek an audience. But if these arguments are good, we must ask again: what's the audience's role in a sport competition?

There's another dimension in sport competition besides the so-called autoteleological dimension. Before a game starts, nobody knows the final score. There's uncertainty and that's essential to sport watching and even to sport competition. If, for any reason, I can't watch the game live on TV and if I want to watch it later, I would prefer not to know the final score. If I already know the final score, I can watch a game from a purely aesthetic standpoint (see Viva's example), but in that case I would not be able to have a competitive perception. That's why we can enjoy watching the Borg vs McEnroe Wimbledon tennis final, the Manchester United vs Bayern München Champions League final in 1999 or the 1973 Barbarians try against the All Blacks rugby team. Yet in those experiences we don't feel the uncertainty. Before watching we know in advance how the story ends. In those experiences, we don't do justice to the sport competition. Therefore, we don't have a competitive perception.

Very often the sport spectator wants to be a part of the competition. That's the reason why he wears his team clothes. Usually, we say the audience is the 12th player of a football team. And sometimes the audience interferes in a competition decision. As we said before, there are sports (like tennis) that don't allow this kind of interference for ethical reasons. On the other hand, several contemporary art experiences demand audience participation. In those cases, one expects the audience to become one of the players. According to Dufrenne, *the reception becomes a co-creation*.

In a sense, we could argue that the competitive perception in tennis is more closely related to the aesthetic perception of the classical works of art (*a passive and ceremonial audience contemplation*). But even in tennis, things keep changing. For instance, in the Davis Cup (a competition that is similar to the football or rugby World Cup) it's very hard to avoid *the audience's participation*. And this participation isn't necessarily absurd. Or at least isn't

less absurd than the football fan who shut his eyes before a penalty kick. Although he can't see anything there's no doubt he's experiencing a competitive perception. He *plays* as if he was a team member. In a similar way, the team coach acts as an orchestra conductor and directs the players from the bench. Both the fan and the coach have a competitive perception, but they can also applaud a goal scored by the opposite team from an aesthetic standpoint. In some countries this kind of behaviour can be very dangerous, but still it isn't impossible. This happens when aesthetic perception takes over competitive perception.

4. Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to discuss the implications of the Dufrenne's philosophy beyond the aesthetic experience, especially in his analysis of the spectator's experience. I have started with Dufrenne's definition of aesthetic experience and then I have tried to make an analogy between the sport spectator's experience and the art spectator's experience. It is my belief that sports competition offers two main features:

- (a) the autoteleological dimension;
- (b) the uncertainty.

This paper also claims that aesthetic perception and competitive perception aren't the same, even if there are similarities in them. In either case, the sports philosopher can certainly find here some of the most curious human behaviour.

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