Distinctiveness in combat sport aesthetics

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ABSTRACT

According to some philosophers, sports where athletes actively struggle against their opponents are aesthetically enhanced because of the increased potential for drama arising from dynamics of social interaction. I argue that combat sports further increase the potential of such dramatic aesthetic appeal. In contrast to the comparatively abstract struggles of team sports, suggesting a more detached Kantian aesthetic, combat sports involve competitive struggles that are less abstract and more primal, suggesting a more engaged Deweyan aesthetic. I also argue for a hierarchy of primal appeal within combat sports from the minimally constrained primal appeal of mixed martial arts to the more abstract, less primal appeal of fencing. Between these extremes, grappling sports (e.g., wrestling, judo, and jiu jitsu,) have a more primal (and intimate!) but less dramatic appeal than striking sports (e.g., boxing, kickboxing, and taekwondo). I conclude by raising and resolving an apparent paradox suggested by my account.

KEYWORDS

aesthetics; fighting; drama; grappling; striking

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INTRODUCTION

There is a tendency in sport and philosophy of sport to adopt monolithic approaches to questions of aesthetic value. For one example, in debates about what makes sport movement graceful, most theorists propose universal accounts applying to sports generally. Best proposes that a movement in sport will be aesthetically pleasing insofar as it appears economical and efficient, whereas one that involves wasted effort or motion will appear ungraceful (1978, p. 107). For Cordner, on the other hand, grace consists in the fluid integration of different movement elements (1984, p. 308). Others argue that graceful movement in sport has no underlying properties (Davis, 2001, p. 92), or that in every instance we can cite natural properties that help explain achieving or failing to achieve aesthetic value (Mumford, 2012, pp. 27–28). For another example,

in many sports there is a presumption of homogenized technique such that there is only one correct way to perform a given skill, both the most effective and the most beautiful technique, such that departures from the presumed ideal are assumed to be less effective and considered less aesthetically appealing, even ugly, irrespective of the athlete's unique physiology, for which the presumed ideal might be inappropriate (Holt & Holt, 2010, pp. 212–214). These are but two examples.

In contrast to such monolithic approaches to sport aesthetics, others have proposed more pluralistic approaches. For one thing, it is fairly obvious than different sports and different types of sports appeal to different tastes. People tend to find certain sports and often a favorite sport more aesthetically rewarding than others. In the debate about graceful movement, one proposal that resolves the entire debate employs Best's distinction between aesthetic sports, in which aesthetic judgment and the awarding of style points are involved in determining scores, and purposive sports, which do not involve either (1978, pp. 104–105). The proposal to resolve the debate is that the functional account of grace proposed by Best holds for aesthetic sports but not purposive sports, whereas the fluidity account proposed by Cordner holds for purposive sports but not aesthetic sports, which coheres both with the lack of a single reductive basis for grace in all sports and allows for case-by-case explanation of the presence or absence of grace in terms of natural properties (Holt, 2020, p. 25). As far as univocal approaches to technique go, especially in purposive sports, a more pluralistic approach that acknowledges physiological, technical, and creative differences among athletes, and celebrates technical diversity from both a functional and an aesthetic point of view, seems superior to monolithic approaches that tend to express aesthetic bias and injustice in unrealistically denying or problematically repressing such athletic diversity (Holt, 2020, pp. 69–70). These examples should suffice to show the further significance of my discussion of combat sport aesthetics below. It is such a pluralistic approach to the aesthetics of sport that frames and informs my analysis of combat sports here.

AESTHETICS AND DIFFERENT TYPES OF SPORT

From an aesthetic point of view, many people find sports, and combat sports in particular, to be either uninteresting or even ugly. However, for those who are naturally drawn to combat sports as viewers or participants, or who acquire such a taste, these contests provide a wealth of aesthetically rewarding experiences, as do sports generally. Here I briefly examine a significant part of the aesthetic appeal of combat sports as distinct from, though similar to, that of other sports, team sports in particular. By doing so I hope to kick off a fresh attack on the aesthetics of sport and movement.

Let us note, again, that the subcategory to which a sport belongs can affect both the nature and the importance of its aesthetic properties. Alongside Best's distinction between purposive and aesthetic sports (e.g., hockey and figure skating, respectively), consider Joseph Kupfer's (1988, pp. 392–394) threefold categorization of sport. First, quantitative (or linear) sports are those whose outcomes are determined by measurement. One wins by running fastest, jumping farthest, lifting greater weight, or whatnot. Second, qualitative (or formal) sports are those where the outcome is determined by who performs best, usually in terms of both how difficult the performance is and how well or beautifully it is executed. One wins by having the best gymnastics rou-

tine, the best series of dives, or the best figure skating program, for instance. Third are what Kupfer calls *competitive* sports – a somewhat misleading term, since all sports are competitive – in which competing sides actively struggle against each other. Examples here include team sports like soccer, baseball, and hockey, and combat sports like boxing, wrestling, kickboxing, taekwondo, judo, jiu jitsu, and mixed martial arts (MMA), among others. To avoid confusion, I will substitute 'adversarial' for 'competitive' in designating these sports. It is adversarial sports, in particular combat sports and team sports, that concern me here, although each of Kupfer's types of sport tends to have its own sort of aesthetic appeal. High-level linear sports, for instance, tend to impress us with a "factual" aesthetic, where sheer achievement may be seen as beautiful in itself (Holt, 2020, p. 47). By contrast, formal sports, otherwise known as aesthetic sports, have a more artistic aesthetic appeal. Indeed, many of these sports are dancelike (figure skating, artistic swimming, gymnastics floor routines, etc.), with judgment, as already mentioned, informing the determination of outcomes. My focus, however, is adversarial sports, and combat sports in particular and in contrast to other types of adversarial sports, team sports in particular.

There are, of course, other helpful ways to distinguish different types of sport. Consider, for another example, the proposed distinction between mono and duo sports (Parry & Giesbrecht, 2023, pp. 14–15). Mono sports are characterized by trying to achieve a single competitive goal, whereas duo sports involve trying to achieve a competitive goal *and* preventing one's opponent from doing the same. In cycling, for instance, time trials involve racing only against the clock whereas sprints require racing against others.[1] Thus time trials are mono sports and sprints are duo sports. The latter could be seen as coextensive with the adversarial category, or alternatively as a broader category cutting across the distinction between linear and adversarial sports. The fact that it is unclear whether cycling sprints should count as quantitative (as time-decided) or adversarial (as interactive) could be seen as a deficiency. However, whether adversarial and duo sports are coextensive, or the interactive struggles of adversarial sports, as in wrestling, are more demanding than simply jockeying for position in a race, my focus and preferred terminology here is adversarial sports in the possibly though not necessarily narrower sense, where some duo events such as cycling sprints may fail to count as adversarial because the interaction is minimal in comparison with the types of sport that concern me here: combat sports like MMA and team sports like soccer. Nor am I concerned with specifying the outer limits of this category, since standard team sports and combat sports will clearly qualify as paradigm cases. My concern is rather the relationship between these paradigms and corresponding differences among various examples of the latter kind.

Part of the aesthetic appeal of sport is as a source of drama depending on viewer interest in the unfolding of an event toward an uncertain outcome (Holt, 2020, pp. 52–53). In Kupfer's (1988, p. 396) view, adversarial sports are aesthetically enhanced compared with quantitative and qualitative sports because of the added dimension of social dynamics arising from competitors trying to execute their own skills while also actively trying to frustrate their opponents' attempts to execute theirs. Along these lines, Steffen Borge argues (2019) that at the heart of the dra-

[1] Thanks to Jon Pike for this example.

ma-rich aesthetic appeal of soccer is what he dubs an *agon* aesthetics – 'agon' meaning struggle – embodied in such on-pitch efforts of opposing sides against each other as loved by soccer fans: aggressive tackles, close marking, leaping saves, and so on. In his agon aesthetics of soccer Borge identifies various interrelated elements, including drama, competition, social interaction, the uncertainty of events, and possible unfairness (2019, pp. 199–214). This perspective on sport aesthetics as involving the appreciation of competitive struggles will inform my discussion.

AGON AESTHETICS

Given these perspectives, two questions arise: does the agon aesthetics Borge attributes to soccer generalize to other adversarial sports, or indeed to all sports, and to what extent might this appeal vary across such sports? At times, Borge's phrasing suggests a limited application: "It is here that we find the basis of an agon aesthetics of football [soccer] and similar sports" (p. 206). At other times, however, the phrasing suggests broader application to all sports: "The aesthetics of competitions – the agon aesthetics – lies in engaging in the conflict that a competition is ... " (p. 206). Either way, both the kind and degree of agon aesthetics seem to extend and vary across different sports, and this is because within the broad confines of struggling to win, the degree to which one may interfere with one's opponent varies significantly, even within adversarial sports. Contact sports permit more physical interference than non-contact sports, for instance, and some permit more interference than others. Combat sports are structured around mutual interference, around actively struggling against an opponent's efforts and not just, say, struggling to control a ball or some other contested object or state of affairs. Activities like wrestling are paradigms of rule-governed struggles against an opponent. I will argue that the drama-based aesthetic enhancement of adversarial sports is *further* enhanced, and even peaks, in the context of combat sports. In an earlier work (Holt, 2021, p. 79) this view was proposed as intuitive but not given supporting argument. I will remedy that here. I will also argue that notable differences in agonistic appeal are discernible among combat sports themselves.

As the nature of competitive struggles varies significantly across sports, from no or close to no physical interference with one's opponent's efforts, as in various races, to the robust, active struggling against one's opponent's efforts that we find in adversarial sports and combat sports in particular, there are important differences in agon aesthetics depending on the degree and kind of mutual interference permitted in various sports. There is, in other words, a continuum of athletic struggles ranging from pure *agonistic* efforts with zero or little interference between competitors to *antagonistic* efforts in which the activity itself is defined in terms of active physical struggles between antagonists. In a finer-grained analysis, then, we have an "agon-to-antagon" continuum of competitive struggles in sport. Adversarial sports, such as team (especially contact) sports and combat sports, have a more antagonistic element insofar as more physical interference with one's opponent's efforts is permitted. The competitive agon of such sports is realized not just through strategic opposition but also through substantial physical antagonism.

If we consider what it means to exert effort against someone whose purpose conflicts with our own, we should note another continuum ranging from basic physical

struggles for survival to the abstract, intellectual, nonphysical struggle of trying to win at a game like chess. This is my own proposal, that we examine the aesthetics of sports in terms of varying degrees of primality and abstractness, not only because it seems intuitive to do so, but because it captures something important about differences among types of activities involving conflicts between people, both inside and outside sport, as well as the aesthetic appeal of those activities. Toward the former extreme, that of basic vying for survival, we find struggles that are more *primal*, and toward the latter we find struggles that are more *abstract* and less primal. Because sports are physical games, those that require struggling against an opponent will be more primal and less abstract than the competition in a non-sport game like chess, but also more abstract and less primal than real life-or-death struggles, between predator and prey for instance, in a state of nature. In comparison with everyday civilized life, sport and specifically adversarial sport will be, and will have an aesthetic appeal, much more primal than abstract.

In adversarial sport, however, it seems clear that the agon aesthetic is more abstract in some cases and more primal in others. If one watches or participates in a paradigmatic team sport like soccer and compares it with a paradigmatic combat sport such as wrestling or MMA, these activities tend to engender different types of appreciative response in different audiences (though one could certainly enjoy both). In a team sport like soccer, for instance, the object is to put the ball in a net by prescribed means more often than your opponent, whose efforts to do the same you try to impede as they try to impede yours. The means are artificially constrained by game rules within the wider confines of natural law, as in other sports, but the end is also far removed, that is, abstracted from, the needs of everyday life or the primal urgency of desperate situations. When one watches soccer, the resemblance to natural conflicts unrestricted by rules is far thinner. There are certainly organized collective efforts in nature, but nothing resembling a soccer game in any real sense. In combat sports, however, despite the presence of artificial constraints, which are often motivated by safety concerns, the purpose of, say, submitting an opponent in wrestling is a far more primal, less abstract objective, where the means for doing so also has a more primal than abstract appeal. It will be hard to watch MMA and not be put in mind of primal, unrestricted fighting, since the sport is designed to be as close to such primal conflicts as minimally decent safety protocols will allow. In this way, the more primal side of aesthetic appeal comes to a peak in combat sports.

AESTHETICS AND COMBAT SPORTS

In general, the aesthetic appeal of struggles in team sports is more abstract and less primal, if still notably primal, in comparison with combat sports. The implication is that the agon aesthetics of combat sports will be further enhanced and more dramatic for those whose aesthetic sensibilities are geared more to the primal than to the abstract. Team sports tend to be more popular than combat sports,[2] true enough, though

[2] Team sports dominate lists of the world's most popular sports, whereas combat sports typically fail to make the list at all. To take one example, according to Veroutsos (2023), seven of the top ten most popular sports in the world are team sports (soccer, cricket, hockey, volleyball,

combat sports such as MMA have not only grown in popularity in recent years but also seem uniquely well-suited to addressing psychological needs for primal expression otherwise neglected in the world of sport (Holt, 2021, p. 83). To the extent that the agon aesthetics of combat sports is enhanced in this respect over and above that of team sports, it is owing to an appeal that is more primal and less abstract than that of team sports. Sport itself, again, may be seen as abstracted from more primal struggles (for survival, etc.) by the rules, although its physicality will be sufficient to qualify it as more primal and less abstracted from such basic conflicts than, for instance, board games. Adversarial sports likewise are more primal than other sports because they are less abstracted from natural conflicts such as unrestricted fighting than are sports allowing minimal interference with the competitive efforts of one's opponents. Furthermore, among adversarial sports, combat sports (e.g., MMA) are more primal than and less abstracted from actual fighting than team sports (e.g., soccer). In terms of abstracting from primal conflict, then, combat sports are more primal than team sports, adversarial sports more primal than other sports, sport generally more primal than other games. Although this points to combat sports having an enhanced dramatic appeal owing to struggles not just *with* but actively *against* one's opponent, the most appealing team sports are more popular than the most appealing combat sports, despite ranking lower on the scale of agon aesthetics, or so my argument suggests. Why this may be so is a subject for another time, though it seems evident that agon aesthetics alone is not the whole story in either case.

It is worth noting as an aside the contrast between competing accounts of aesthetic experience championed by Kant and Dewey, respectively. Kant's (2005, §2) account frames aesthetic experience in terms of psychological distance where one appreciates beauty for its own sake. Dewey's account (1980, pp. 36–37), by contrast, pictures aesthetic experience in terms of not disinterest but self-interest, only a more intense, more holistically coherent sort of pleasure than we usually encounter. I argue elsewhere (Holt, 2020, p. 34) that these differing views of aesthetic experience may be reinterpreted not as competing views but as describing different types of aesthetic experience pluralistically conceived. On such a view, the agonistic appeal of team sports elicits a more Kantian aesthetic response, whereas that of combat sports elicits a more engaged Deweyan aesthetic response.

Within the class of combat sports themselves there appears to be a hierarchy of primal appeal. The combat sport with the most primal appeal is probably MMA, since it is far more permissive than other combat sports in allowing techniques derived from a variety of martial arts and combat sports. At the other extreme, much more abstract and less primal, is probably fencing. (I assume an exclusion of such sports as archery and riflery, which though combat-related do not involve actively struggling against an opponent's efforts.) Although martial sword fighting is indeed primal, modern fencing is far removed from such extreme cases, first through the implementation of much safer first-blood dueling, then made safer and abstracted further through sport fencing's restrictions on equipment, target, and attack (Lawrence, 2010, pp. 203–204). In foil,

basketball, baseball, and rugby) with three individual (or pair/group) sports rounding out the top ten (tennis, table tennis, and golf). Even popular combat sports such as boxing and MMA invariably fail to make these lists.

for instance, one scores only with the point, only on the torso, and only with the right of way. Even in martial swordplay the presence of a weapon provides some measure of distance and abstraction.

Most combat sports, whether grappling or striking, fall somewhere in between the plausible extremes of MMA as the most primal and fencing as the most abstract. In this intermediate range we find grappling sports and arts like wrestling and jiu jitsu and striking sports and arts like boxing and taekwondo. In this middle ground we have a further division based on the distance between opponents in striking sports and arts, which lean toward the abstraction of fencing while remaining more primal, and the closeness, the intimacy of grappling, which inclines toward MMA in primal appeal though is less permissive and so more abstract. The primal appeal of grappling, however, often appears to be outweighed by the excitement of striking. Grappling has a more primal but less dramatic appeal, and striking has a less primal but more dramatic appeal. Thus, in MMA, although audiences appreciate the openness of rules allowing grappling as well as striking techniques, long grappling exchanges tend to be less fan-friendly than long striking or blended exchanges.

CONCLUSION

There may appear to be a paradox suggested by my analysis to the effect that combat sports represent such a wide spectrum of primal-to-abstract aesthetic appeal, since it was primal rather than abstract appeal that I argued distinguishes and enhances the drama of combat sports beyond the agon aesthetic of team sports. Overall, however, where quantitative and qualitative sports may be dramatic and aesthetically appealing, the drama and aesthetic appeal of adversarial sports on the whole will be comparatively enhanced because of the primal nature of their inherent struggles. Though fencing is hardly primal at all when compared with MMA, it ranks as more primal in dramatic appeal than soccer, and because of its derivation from martial sword fighting has a more primal objective (to hit the opponent with a weapon) than that of even the most primal team sport, probably rugby (to touch a ball inside a patch of pitch and kick it through the uprights). What this means, given the preeminent popularity of team sports, soccer in particular, is that most people's taste in sport would seem to prefer a blend of the primal appeal of physical struggles with the abstract appeal of struggles that fall short of being fights. Whether this ought to be the case is an open question. Another open question is just how pluralistic the aesthetics of sport, or anything else for that matter, should be. I will not presume to answer either question here.

Although my focus throughout has been distinguishing the aesthetic appeal of combat sports from that of other sports, and that of team sports in particular, the wider significance of this view is worth mentioning again. That is, the aesthetics of sport can benefit not only from looking at sport in general or at particular sports, but also from examining differences among different sport subcategories, whether combat sports and team sports, as I have here, purposive versus aesthetic sports, as has been addressed elsewhere, and so on. Along these lines, several possibilities for future research suggest themselves. It seems, for instance, that there are telling aesthetic implications that follow from Parry and Giesbrecht's distinction between mono sports and duo sports, as in the former there will be little if any chance for the social interaction

needed for agon aesthetics in Borge's sense, since mono sports, by definition, allow no such interaction during athletic performances. Consider, likewise, the differences in aesthetic appeal between the category of team sports and that of individual sports, or between ball sports, where things happen and change quickly, often unexpectedly, and sports lacking such dynamics. Such analyses would complement extant work in sport aesthetics, as well as enhancing the profile of this subdiscipline in a field that regrettably often neglects it. I hope that this article helps to nudge the field toward such further development and inclusion.[3]

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