Aesthetic Investigations{Fresh}
Published on behalf of the Dutch Association of Aesthetics

I shall feint: Arts of deception in sport

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Abstract: The potential influence of deception on the aesthetic value of sport often depends on its ethical profile. Immoral deception (e.g., cheating) diminishes the aesthetic value of sport. Questionable forms (e.g., gamesmanship) undermine aesthetic value in some ways but heighten it in others. By contrast, morally permissible deceptions such as feints enhance sport's aesthetic value. This is especially true for effective deceptions that are particularly difficult or noticeably creative. Cases of individual style shining through in sport proffer plausible examples of artistic self-expression. As with art, I argue, this result owes less to the content than the form of the expression.

I SHALL FEINT

Analogies between sport and art have been explored in several notable respects. For instance, both domains involve skilled activities that provide for aesthetic experience and are governed by institutions. This paper explores one important analogy between sport and art that has yet to be explored, namely that successful efforts in both domains often involve the skilful use of effective deception. Just as an effective artwork can engage us in an aesthetically rewarding fiction, an effective play may engage opponents in an aesthetically rewarding fake out. Whether readers suspend disbelief with fiction or hockey players are tricked by a deke, both are examples of aesthetically rewarding deception. We thus see an overlap between two distinct senses of 'art'; art as aesthetic creation and art as a domain of skilled activity, respectively. Forms of skilled activity surpass the status of mere craft when they are systematic and exhibit the artfulness or light touch of legerdemain. In this way a novelist, a magician, and an athlete may be seen as creating, albeit in different ways, effective illusions aesthetically appreciable as such.

This is not to say that deception has not been addressed by philosophers of sport. It has, but almost exclusively from an ethical point of view, though it has also been analysed from the perspective of phenomenology.[1] One noticeable gap in the sport philosophy literature, however, is a dearth of discussion of the aesthetics of deception, which proves a complex and interesting phenomenon from an aesthetic point of view. Here I will fill this gap.

Consider first Kathleen Pearson's distinction between definitional and strategic deception in sport. As Pearson defines these terms, definitional deception is best exemplified by cheating, which is not part of the game, whereas strategic deception is part of the game.[2] Consider the difference between taking a prohibited performance enhancer, such as steroids, versus faking out one's opponent on the field. In both cases we would be deceiving opponents, and perhaps officials as well, but there is an obvious moral difference in that cheating violates the rules, whereas feinting complies. The cheat does something wrong, yet the feinter does something permissible and even praiseworthy. The distinction between definitional and strategic deception amounts to far more than a moral difference, however. It also constitutes an aesthetic difference.

To grasp this aesthetic difference, consider both Stephen Mumford's aesthetic hypothesis, which places aesthetic considerations at the heart of sport's design, and his 'interactivist thesis', wherein sport's moral and aesthetic value often influence one another.[3] Such principles help explain the intuition that cheating manifests the ugly side of sport—a term with moral and aesthetic valence—whereas skilful play is partially responsible for making sport beautiful.

Having already addressed Mumford's account in greater detail elsewhere,[4] I propose a theoretical approach to the aesthetics of deception in sport that blends both Pearson's and Mumford's perspectives. While definitional deception detracts from the aesthetic value of sport, strategic deception adds to the aesthetic value of sport. The former is most evident in the case of cheating, which we could

define as deliberate covert rule-violation. We may also consider cheating along the lines of 'trying to win one game by playing another', which is how Leslie Howe and others describe gamesmanship (discussed below),[5] although unlike cheating gamesmanship does not involve rule-breaking. Cheats might be understood as playing a different—if immoral—game than the one they have nominally agreed to play, in the that they either follow fewer rules than their opponents or aim at a different goal, that is, they try to get away with covert rule violation. As such, cheating may count as a sort of meta-game or game-within-a-game. I now turn to the aesthetic dimensions of cheating.

According to Mumford, '[f]actors that are ethically bad can detract from sport's aesthetic value, and factors that are ethically good can enhance sport's aesthetic value'.[6] For Mumford, the paradigm ethically bad factor that diminishes the aesthetic value of sport is cheating. If we initially find an athletic performance beautiful, for instance, but then discover (after a failed drug test, for example) that the athlete had cheated, 'we no longer see it as having aesthetic value',[7] or at least take its aesthetic value to have been compromised to some extent. By contrast, we tend to find those athletic performances that are honourable, sporting, or courageous aesthetically enhanced for precisely that reason. Although this account of aesthetic-moral interaction in sport is broadly plausible, we should note with respect to cheating that in contrast to a more conventional take as Mumford describes, we also find a subversive 'con artist' aesthetic in which athletes may take a perverse pride in the skilfulness of getting away with illicit acts. This is especially true in some sport subcultures which have traditions of such questionable practices: flopping in soccer, throwing spitballs in baseball, and so on. Beyond more common forms of cheating, rare or unique cases—such as the Astros' sign stealing scandal or deflategate—may be conventionally ugly but also perversely appealing to subversive con artist sensibilities. Such outlier tastes, emphasizing the 'artist' in 'con artist', should be acknowledged if not accepted. Such appeal lacks transpersonal objectivity and constitutes, at best, a kind of skewed partisan preference. In general, revelations of cheating compromise the aesthetic appeal of sport performances. In the case where we see an athlete cheating, such aesthetic appeal is compromised in advance.

Whereas cheating involves rule-breaking and typically undermines the aesthetic value of sport, gamesmanship does not involve rule-breaking—though it may involve bending the rules (e.g., at the borderline between good aggression and dirty play)—and is a more complex, morally ambiguous phenomenon, According to Howe, gamesmanship is 'the attempt to gain competitive advantage either by an artful manipulation of the rules that does not actually violate them or by the psychological manipulation or unsettling of the opponent (or sometimes the officials)'.[8] Such manipulation is often deceptive, pushing the limits of acceptable behaviour (over and above rule-following) without necessarily flouting them. Such practices may but need not involve bending the rules. Either way, gamesmanship in a broad sense is not just morally but also aesthetically ambiguous. From a moral standpoint, Howe distinguishes two types of gamesmanship:

strong gamesmanship (e.g., grossly intimidating trash talk), which is morally impermissible, and weak gamesmanship (e.g. a fast break or inside pitch), which is not only morally permissible but often also required for skilful play.[9] Although certain forms of gamesmanship are undesirable and do not belong in sport, others are not only desirable but essential for sport.

For my purposes here, there are three points worth noting. First, Howe's distinction could be usefully supplemented with the concept of moderate gamesmanship, uncertain cases between impermissible and permissible gamesmanship. Since some forms of intimidation are beyond the pale (e.g., threatening an opponent's family) and others are clearly permissible (e.g., a confident posture), some forms lie in an uncertain middle ground (e.g., edging into an opponent's personal space in some sports). Second, perhaps more important, as already suggested, Howe's distinction constitutes not just a moral difference but also an aesthetic difference. Gross intimidation is part of the ugly side of sport, whereas skilful execution of game-appropriate gamesmanship is again part of what makes sport beautiful. The distinctions are not coextensive, however. In a variety of sports, for instance, excessive trash talk often diminishes the aesthetic value of the event in one sense yet enhances it in another. As much as such gross behaviour offends the sensibilities of fans who prize sportsmanship, it invariably also serves to hype events, creating drama for spectators. Third, I find it curious that Howe does not discuss, either because the definition was not meant to include it—although it clearly does—or for some other reason, the phenomenon of feinting. This form of opponent manipulation counts as weak gamesmanship and invariably increases aesthetic appeal, and so we turn to that next.

Unlike cheating, permissible deceptions in sport (e.g., trick plays, feints, no look passes, etc.) invariably enhance sport's aesthetic value. These skills are not merely morally permissible but often essential to successful play, especially in adversarial team and individual sports. Terms used for such strategic deceptions vary across sports: in hockey we have *dekes*, in American football *jukes*, in combat sports *feints*. Trick plays are likewise employed in team sports. As viewers, we often appreciate the beauty of effective illusions employed strategically in sport. Such moves, indeed, often figure prominently in highlight reels. If we are partisan supporters of a particular side, that will incline us toward attribution bias evinced in overrating the aesthetic value of our own side's performances and underrating the aesthetic value of the other side's. However, we can alternatively be purists in our sport spectatorship, appreciating the aesthetic appeal of a sport performance irrespective of which team affiliations. I argue that it is possible not just as a spectator but also as an athlete to be a purist in aesthetically appreciating an athletic performance no matter whose it is. Being such a purist practitioner, I argue, is not only possible but also highly desirable, even a necessary part of the athletic ideal of sportsmanship. Part of being a good sport is acknowledging the quality, aesthetic value included, of one's opponent's efforts in addition to one's own.

As observers of effective forms of misdirection in sport, we tend to appreciate

not just the competitive result of such manoeuvres, but also the illusions themselves as such. It is as if we are in on a magic trick that fools the audience. We appreciate the misdirection of effective illusion almost as an exemplification, a representation, of art itself (i.e., art as effective illusion). Perhaps as viewers we ourselves are taken in along with the opponent. Either way, we can appreciate the skill, the rightness, the artistry of the effective employment of such illusion.[10] The feinter creates a little fiction—'I'm going left instead of right', 'I'm kicking now instead of a split second later', etc.—and the fiction, for its efficacy, is aesthetically appreciable as such. The illusion of the deke is art in the form of competitive fiction. If microfiction is a legitimate form of artistic writing, I see no reason to deny its legitimacy as a form of artistic playing.

Whether speaking this way indicates that feinting may sometimes be regarding as art, or instead constitutes a mere *façon de parler*, may be resolved quickly if we endorse one or another particular approach to art theory. According to aesthetic theories, for instance, art consists in any expression or arrangement of conditions that provides for aesthetic experience.[11] Although such views may seem to yield a too-generous scope of what counts as art, note that most things in the world aren't artifacts, and most artifacts don't provide for aesthetic experience. On such a view, many cases of misdirection in sport would count as artful. On the other hand, we might endorse the argument from David Best insisting that sport lacks the potential to express 'a conception of life situations' requisite for art.[12] Either way, it would seem that the question turns on whether sport, and particularly deception in sport, can be understood as expressive in the right way.[13] In such a vein, I focus on sport as a possible form of self-expression.

In feints and trick plays we often find appreciable not only the efficacy of such skills but also such aesthetic properties as grace or elegance. This is especially so for particularly difficult or notably creative manoeuvres, even more so when such moves form part of an athlete's style of play. Why would this be so? Taking a cue from the analogy between sport and art, cases in sport where individual style shines through evidently qualify as self-expression and also plausibly as art. In both art and sport, it is less what someone expresses that matters so much as how they do, not the content but the form that makes the result self-expressive and aesthetically appreciable as such. Even choosing to play, or refraining from playing, a certain sport might itself count as self-expression with moral and aesthetic significance. Consider the courage and poignancy of athletes playing sports that violate gender norms: women in masculine sports like rugby, men in feminine sports like figure skating. Flouting such expectations takes grit, and playing against stereotype is often a beautiful thing.

One possible objection is that there seems to be clear discrepancies between art and sport as venues for self-expression. If we compare a paradigmatic self-expressive art-form like poetry, for instance, with a typical sport, say hockey, one might well see poetry, with all the complexity and sophistication of natural language, as an expressive medium to contrast sharply with hockey in which such mental states find expression are comparatively simple: an intention to score, a

desire to retrieve the puck or deke an opponent, screen the net, and so forth. By this contrast, so painted, sports hardly seem to offer an outlet for self-expression at all. Granted, there are sports with very narrow skill sets—weightlifting, track and field events, etc.—in which the opportunity for self-expression, if extant, seems remarkably thin.

However, not all art-forms or sport-forms are created equal. Aesthetic sports such as figure skating provide opportunities for self-expression no less than we find in artistic dance. As I have argued elsewhere, many figure-skating performances count as both sport and art, as competitive dance performances count as both art and sport.[14] Many visual and plastic arts, such as sculpture, seem to offer comparatively limited opportunity for self-expression when compared with literary art. But no one would deny that such arts provide outlets for self-expression, so why not also for sports with similar performative profiles and significant aesthetic appeal? Maybe sport is a kind of kinetic sculpture. Even in the case of literary art, what matters is the manner of expression, not the matter of expression, again, the form, not the content. It is *how* an artist expresses themselves that matters rather than *what*—thematically or specifically—they happen to express. Such a view may be somewhat controversial, but I propose that it is worthy of serious consideration.

Whether the specific form of expression in art does or does not affect artistic meaning, the same considerations apply to performance and style in sport as to performance and style in art.[15] Thus, whether effective and appealing illusion in sport ultimately counts as art matters less than noting the provocative parallels between such disparate domains when considered from an aesthetic point of view.[16]

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NOTES

1. See Aggerholm, Jespersen and Ronglan, 'Falling for the Feint – An Existential Investigation of a Creative Performance in High-Level Football'.

2. Pearson, 'Deception, Sportsmanship, and Ethics', 81–82.

3. Mumford, 'The Aesthetics of Sport', 183; and Mumford, *Watching Sport*, 68.

4. Holt, 'Mumford on Aesthetic-Moral Interaction in Sport'; and Holt, *Kinetic Beauty*, 53–55, 57–61.

5. Howe, 'Gamesmanship', 212.

6. Mumford, *Watching Sport*, 68.

7. Mumford, *Watching Sport*, 74.

8. Howe, 'Gamesmanship', 213.

9. Howe, 'Gamesmanship', 220.

10. See Gombrich, *Meditations on a Hobby Horse*, 99: 'What moves the trompe-l'oeil into the vicinity of art is precisely the connoisseur's vicarious participation in the artist's skill'.

11. Holt, *Meanings of Art*, 59.

12. Best, *Philosophy and Human Movement*, 115.

13. Wertz, 'Representation and Expression in Sport and Art', 15–16.

14. Holt, *Kinetic Beauty*, 99–108.

15. Compare my view here with Collingwood, *The Principles of Art*, 109–110.

16. This paper was first presented at the

2025 conference of the Canadian Society for Aesthetics. For engaging discussion, I thank Andriy Bilenkyy, David Collins, James Dow, Tor Haines, Iris Jovanović, Suma Rajiva, and Roger Seamon. Thanks also to the Editors.

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