The Spectacle of Accumulation

Essays in Culture, Media, & Politics

SUT JHALLY

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Cultural Studies and the Sports-Media Complex*

Men make their own history, but not in conditions of their own choosing.

—*Karl Marx*

The Critical Legacy: Circuses, Opiates, and Ideology

On September 26, 1987, *The Nation* magazine, one of the leading voices on the American Left, editorialized against the decisions by both the *New York Times* and CBS to give priority to sports coverage over the coverage of "real" (political, economic, and social) events. While recognizing that the coverage of politics by these organizations leaves a great deal to be desired, the editors nonetheless reflected what has been the Left's attitude toward sports in noting that sports have come to usurp the role that politics had occupied in American public life and in noting disapprovingly that "it's more important for a paper of record to report ball scores than to analyze the week's events." Sports spectating is a deflection, an activity that channels potentially critical political activity into a safe and neutral realm. Sports have taken over the function in advanced capitalist societies that Marx believed religion fulfilled in the nineteenth century—an opiate of the masses—providing the basis for spectacular shows and circuses that narcotize large segments of the population. An unimportant area of life obscures a more fundamental and important one.

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Gary Whannel (1983) notes, however, that, at the same time that socialists decry the importance that sports have achieved in social life, they are also attracted to the possibilities it opens up, of what could happen if that energy were directed to political activity instead. But that vision is a fantasy. The challenge for a cultural studies approach to sport is to use the fantasy creatively, to understand the context within which sports spectating, as a cultural activity, takes place, so that the domain of sport becomes not merely something to be deplored, but rather a site on which to fight for definitions of the social world. Such a project involves moving beyond the predominant circuses-and-opiates position. It also means moving beyond much of the work that has tended to characterize and define critical approaches to sport. Although simplifying an increasingly complex field, it is possible to identify two major themes in this literature: sports spectating as (a) ritual and ideology and (b) compensatory fulfillment.

Much of the tacit background to critical work on sport as ideology and ritual is based upon a search for those factors that have prevented the economic contradictions of capitalism from being expressed in revolutionary movements. The orthodox argument runs that the ideological sphere of capitalism has prevented workers from seeing the reality of their exploitation and has convinced them to identify with the system that dominates them. Sport is a key institution in this process. Sports function as a form of celebration of the dominant order. Other writers have extended the analysis beyond the notion of ideology to that of ritual. Noting that all societies require ritualistic celebration of their central value systems, these writers focus on the role of sports in these processes. Michael Real (1975) labels sport a form of mythic spectacle and argues that

> in the classical manner of mythical beliefs and ritual activities, the Super Bowl is a communal celebration of and indoctrination into specific socially dominant emotions, life styles, values . . . all functional to the larger society. . . . Rather than mere diversionary entertainment, it can be seen to function as a "propaganda" vehicle strengthening and developing the larger social structure. (pp. 36, 42)

Richard Lipsky (1981) argues that the ability of sports to function as a socializer of dominant values, as well as providing a form of refuge, is derived from its existence as a "dramatic life-world" in which the values of the larger society are highlighted and celebrated by being inserted into a different (human) context.

In a different vein, John Alt (1983) argues that, while, traditionally, Western sport has functioned as a ritual of liberal values, recent changes in the productive sphere of a corporate and bureaucratic society have led to a new role for spectator sports: that of compensatory fulfillment. Arguing that liberalism and its attendant ideologies of fair play and moral order have broken down in the face of the increasing bureaucratization of social life and its ends-oriented organization, Alt contends that sports now have to cater to the "new cultural-emotional needs of the masses." In short, as one part of the social world robs people of meaning and emotional gratification, another part offers it to them in the form of commodified spectacles. Sport offers excitement and emotional gratification denied to the citizens of a corporate society. We are back once again in the world of opiates.

This, then, is the legacy of a critical approach to sport. I do not want to deny the utility of such analyses or their many considerable insights into the role that sport plays in advanced capitalist societies. Indeed, later in this chapter, I hope to fill out in more detail the specifics of this ritualistic, escapist ideology. I do, however, want to insist that terms such as *ideology* are necessary but ultimately insufficient for a full understanding of the role that sports play in modern society and that the task now is to build on this base while, at the same time, overcoming the obstacles that it throws up.

The New Direction: Cultural Studies

One of the problems with the approaches outlined previously is that they have a tendency to treat the people involved in these ideological and ritualistic processes as largely passive, internalizing, and accepting the definitions of the situations presented to them. They also tend to be static and functionalist in their modes of explanation. While terms such as *power* (and even *manipulation*) are vital to a proper understanding of sport, we must treat them as dialectical notions, rather than as unidirectional and one-dimensional concepts.

The most ambitious attempt at this kind of reworking of the ideological and cultural sphere has been connected with British cultural studies, specifically with the writers associated with the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham in England (especially under the directorships of Stuart Hall and Richard Johnson). It is part of an attempt to shift the focus of debate from a concentration on ideology to one on *culture* and to focus on power from the viewpoint of contestation. Richard Johnson (1986–1987) stresses the following three premises as the minimum basis of critical cultural studies: (a) "Cultural processes are intimately connected with social relations, especially with class relations and class formations, with sexual divisions, with the racial structuring of social relations and with age oppressions as a form of dependency"; (b) "culture involves power and helps to produce asymmetries in the abilities of individuals and social groups to define and realise their needs"; (c) "culture is neither an autonomous nor an externally determined field, but a site of social differences and struggles" (p. 39).

Now, certainly, *culture* as a term cannot be used unproblematically in the sense that there is wide agreement as to what it means—there is not. Raymond Williams (1976) argues that it is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. Johnson recognizes this and suggests instead that cultural studies should focus on the terms *consciousness* and *subjectivity*, "with the

key problems now lying somewhere in the relation between the two, . . . cultural studies is about the historical forms of consciousness or subjectivity, or the subjective forms we live by, or, in a rather perilous compression, perhaps a reduction, the subjective side of social relations" (1986–1987, p. 43).

For the study of sport, these are highly pertinent and relevant organizing terms. First, *consciousness* refers to the way in which we cognitively make sense of the world, the knowledge that we have of it, of how it works, and of our place in it. It is largely a conscious, known process. *Subjectivity*, on the other hand, refers to the absences in consciousness, or to the possibility that some things that move us (such as aesthetic or emotional life) remain consciously unknown to us. For Johnson, subjectivity "focuses on the 'who I am' or, as important, the 'who we are' of culture, on individual and collective identities" (1986–1987, p. 44). Sports certainly offer a mapping of the world, a way of understanding the social relations within which we live our lives, but, unlike other media messages (e.g., the news), sports also involve us in other ways. There are passions involved, emotional entanglements with the events that we witness that cannot simply be explained under terms such as *consciousness* and *ideology*. They are a part (for many people, heretofore largely male) of how social identity is formed.

Raymond Williams has coined two key terms (*way of life* and *structure of feeling*) that can describe this tension between consciousness and subjectivity. Williams (1961) stresses that a simple description of cultural phenomena will not be sufficient to understand those forms:

> Cultural history must be more than the sum of the particular histories, for it is with the relations between them, the particular forms of the whole organization, that it is especially concerned. I would then define the theory of culture as the study of relationships between elements in a whole way of life. . . . A key word, in such analysis, is pattern: it is with the discovery of patterns of a characteristic kind that any useful cultural analysis begins, and it is with the relationships between these patterns, which sometimes reveal unexpected identities and correspondences in hitherto separately considered activities, sometimes again reveal discontinuities of an unexpected kind, that general cultural analysis is concerned. (pp. 46–47)

Connected with this *way of life* is a *structure of feeling* that refers to the

> felt sense of the quality of life at a particular place and time: a sense of the ways in which particular activities combined into a way of thinking and living. . . . It is as firm and definite as "structure" suggests, yet it operates in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity. (p. 48)

Sports, perhaps more than any other cultural phenomenon, lie at this tension between consciousness and subjectivity, between *way of life* and *structure of feeling*.

While Williams has made an immense contribution to the development cultural studies, I think it is fair to say that the very fierce critique of his wo by E. P. Thompson has yielded just as valid contributions. In his now clas review of Williams's *The Long Revolution*, Thompson (1961) stresses (at lea three things in opposition. The first is with a concern to break with the litera tradition when talking of culture and to include within a *whole way of life* the te rain of everyday, concrete, practical cultural processes that are cut through ar through with power. Second, while Williams coined the term *way of life*, Thom son insists on a corrective to a "whole way of conflict . . . a way of struggle Third, uniting the first two, Thompson wants to substitute for Williams's abstra historical forces the idea that it is people who make history, rather than vi versa. Quoting Marx, he argues, "History does nothing, it possesses no immen wealth, fights no battles. It is rather *man*, real living *man* who does everythin who possesses and fights." (p. 33)

However, while Thompson is undoubtedly a key figure in the development cultural studies, the inclusion of his concerns into an evolving theoretical fram work depended, in part, on the appropriation by critical scholars of the new translated work of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, whose key contributic to Western Marxism has clearly been the notion of *hegemony*. In many appropri tions, this has simply been taken as a slightly more complex form of ideologic domination. In contrast, Gramsci insisted that power and domination are alwa exercised in a combination of force and consent and that the two never ope ate in isolation. Hegemony consists, in part, of a class asserting intellectual ar moral leadership in a particular period. This is not done in a way that simp *imposes* ideology on a passive and accepting subordinate class; instead, the heg monic process is one of negotiation, compromise, and struggle in which the ru ing class, or, more precisely, the ruling bloc, gives concessions in one area so th it may receive them in another.

Similar to Thompson, Gramsci (1971) also insists that, if and when hege mony is won, it operates not solely at the level of coherent philosophies, but a the level of everyday consciousness or common sense. To the extent that hege mony operates at this level, it becomes far easier to *naturalize* a particular wa of defining things, because common sense is not coherent and does not hav to be. It has been "inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed" (p. 333 It is the "way things are." Raymond Williams (1977) notes that, for Gramsc hegemony

> is a lived system of meanings and values—constitutive and constituting—which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming. It thus constitutes a sense of reality for most people in society, a sense of absolute because experienced reality. (p. 110)

Similarly, John Hargreaves (1982b) argues the following:

> It is easy to see how, from this point of view, popular culture, and specifically sport, could be given their proper share of attention alongside other cultural constituents of civil society, like language usage, formal and informal education, the media, habits and customs, etc., as resources out of which a class fashions its hegemony. (p. 115)

It was undoubtedly Gramsci's discussion of these issues that led Louis Althusser to his seminal redefinitions of the field of Marxist ideology studies and his reworking of the base/superstructure metaphor. Although, for many different reasons, Althusser's work, in recent years, has been much criticized and sometimes simply ignored, there is much of value that can be drawn from his writings. For example, Stuart Hall (1985) paraphrases Althusser's formulation of ideology in *For Marx* in the following way: as "systems of representation—composed of concepts, ideas, myths or images—in which men and women . . . live their imaginary relations to the real conditions of existence" (p. 103). Althusser (1977) argues that all societies (even socialist ones) require ideology, because the understanding of real conditions does not occur in any simple or direct way—there is no one understanding or experience of social existence that imposes itself in our minds in a direct, unmediated way: "It [ideology] is a structure essential to the historical life of societies" (p. 232). Our understanding of our conditions is always socially constructed. This does not mean that social relations are not real, that they do not exist separate from our understanding of them. As Hall says,

> Social relations do exist. We are born into them. They exist independent of our will. They are real in their structure and tendency. . . . Social relations exist, independent of mind, independent of thought. And yet, they can only be conceptualized in thought, in the head. (1985, p. 105)

These real relations, however, do not declare their meanings directly and unambiguously. That is why Althusser calls ideology an *imaginary relation*. Ideology is *the* way that people live the relation between themselves and their conditions of existence. Moreover, this is not simply *false consciousness*, as in the traditional Marxist sense of ideology, because people have to *live* these imaginary relations; they have to survive and operate practically in the material world according to these imaginary relations. Ideology must then bear some relationship to real conditions, otherwise it could not work; it would fall apart as obviously false. This is the sense in which Althusser (1971) is able to talk about ideology not simply as abstract representations but as having a *material* existence in that ideas are lived out in practices:

> The "ideas" of a human subject exist in his actions. . . . I shall talk of actions inserted into *practices*. . . . And I shall point out that these practices are governed by the *rituals* in which these practices are inscribed, within the *material existence of an ideological apparatus*, be it only a small part of that apparatus: a small mass in a small church, a funeral, a minor match at a sports' club, a school day, a political party meeting, etc. (p. 158)

From this context, it becomes easier now to make sense of Althusser's central claim that "ideology interpellates individuals as subjects." It is through ideology defined in this way that we recognize ourselves as socially constituted individuals in our own particular culture. We are again back to our starting terms of *consciousness* and *subjectivity*. Althusser writes the following:

> In truth, ideology has very little to do with "consciousness," even supposing this term to have an unambiguous meaning. It is profoundly *unconscious*. . . . Ideology is indeed a system of representations, but in the majority of cases these representations have nothing to do with "consciousness": they are usually images and occasionally concepts, but it is above all as *structures* that they impose on the vast majority of men, not via their "consciousness": They are perceived-accepted-suffered cultural objects and they act functionally on men via a process that escapes them. (1977, p. 233)

This formulation again has a great deal of relevance for the study of sport, precisely because it is viewed as separate from the rest of social life, it is viewed as neutral when it comes to issues of power and politics, and it works at multiple levels of social existence in a very powerful and profound way.

While Althusser tends to collapse the distinction between ideology and culture, other writers who have been influenced by his work insist on the analytic separation. For example, Clarke et al. (1976) define culture as "that level at which social groups develop distinct patterns of life and give *expressive form* to their social and material life-experience" (p. 10), distinguishing among the dominant culture, the class culture, and the youth subculture. It is the *relation* among them that is important to investigate. There is no straightforward passage from culture to ideology in this perspective. Paul Willis (1977) argues that the cultural level is a mediation through which wider structural determinants (class, gender, race, and so on) need to pass to reproduce themselves in distinct social ways. Moreover, the cultural level is not determined but is open for contestation. In relation to the key terms I have been working with here, perhaps the best formulation of this relation is to say that *ideology* is the form that *culture* takes in conditions of *hegemony*.

I have spent a good deal of time and space elaborating on some of the main features of cultural studies, because I believe that critical scholars of sport *must* address these issues, which have redefined the field. It is a framework that insists upon the cultural level as a place where people actively seek to understand the conditions of their existence, where social groups battle and struggle over the definitions given to social life, and where unequal access to the resources to

accomplish this lead to the privileging of some groups' views over those of others. The production of culture (or cultural production) is an active process with no predetermined result that can be read from its relation to other levels of the social formation.

While insisting on the analytic necessity of terms such as *struggle* and *contestation*, we should take care not to privilege them in situations in which they are not to be found. Sports may be one of those arenas that is relatively free from real contestation. As Chas Critcher says,

> Sport is no longer, if it ever was, a major area of cultural contestation. . . . Change and tension are always evident but these are principally within rather than over sport. Understanding how and why this has happened remains an important question to those interested in understanding how capitalist culture works. (1986, p. 343)

The vital question then becomes, in what ways are some cultural forms taken out of the play of overt struggle?

Cultural Studies, the Media, and Cultural Commodities

These issues have specific reference to the study of sports. In the remainder of this chapter, I address the task of cultural studies in understanding sport, paying special attention to the role of the media.

I have not dealt specifically with the sports-media relation as yet, because I was concerned to establish the proper theoretical background that is necessary with regard to the broader field of cultural studies. However, as soon as we concentrate specifically on the subject of sports in capitalism, it becomes apparent that we can talk *only* about a *sports-media complex* (see Jhally, 1984). This can be (briefly) justified in two fundamental ways: (a) Most people do the vast majority of their sports spectating via the media (largely through television), so that the cultural experience of sports is hugely mediated, and (b) from a financial point of view, professional point of view, and, increasingly, collegiate point of view, sports are dependent upon media money for their very survival and their present organizational structure.

Within the tradition of cultural studies that I have been examining, there are a couple of models of media analysis that can be readily adapted for the study of mediated sport and that I will use in the following sections. Stuart Hall (1980) lays out what has become a very influential approach to media studies with his *encoding/decoding* model. Drawing upon Marx's model of the circuit of capital (production, circulation, distribution/consumption, and reproduction), and criticizing traditional mass communication sender/message/receiver models, Hall encourages us to think of the different moments of the communication process as

"a 'complex structure in dominance,' sustained through the articulation of connected practices, each of which, however, retains its distinctiveness and has its own specific modality, its own forms and conditions of existence" (p. 128).

Richard Johnson (1986–1987) also draws upon Marx's model of the circuit of capital to suggest his own *circuit of culture* model, which bears many resemblances to Hall's, as well as exhibiting important differences (such as being able to be applied to cultural products in general and not simply media forms). The model

> represent[s] a circuit of the production, circulation and consumption of cultural products. Each box represents a moment in this circuit. Each moment or aspect depends upon the others and is indispensable to the whole. Each, however, is distinct and involves characteristic changes of form. It follows that if we are placed at one point of the circuit, we do not necessarily see what is happening at others. The forms that have most significance for us at one point may be very different from those at another. Processes disappear in results. (p. 46)

There are four moments of the process: (a) a focus on the production of cultural products, (b) a focus on the texts that are produced, (c) a focus on how these texts are read by ordinary people, and (d) a focus on *lived cultures* and *social relations* that relate to the *uses* made of the readings of texts, as well as being materials that new forms of cultural production can draw upon. It is with these types of understanding about the nature of this circuit of culture and the relations among the different moments that I shall proceed with the specific discussion of mediated sports.

Production: The Commodity Context

The cultural and ideological role of sport in advanced capitalism (especially in the United States) is impossible to understand without locating the centrality of commodity relations to the framework of which it is a part. If we follow through the political economy of professional and college sports, we will see that each stage is dominated by a concern with commodities. The overall *logic* is provided by the processes concerned with the circulation of commodities in general.

Corporations directly sponsor teams and events in the hope of attaching their names to the meaning of the particular activities. The auctioning off of the Los Angeles Olympics was perhaps the most spectacular example to date of this linking of the spheres of commerce and sports. (Its blatancy led some commentators to describe them as the "hamburger Olympics.") Indeed, given the prevalence of brand names in the athletic events themselves and the use made of sporting themes in the advertisements that appeared between the events, the blurring of the line between the two realms was so complete that, at times, it was difficult to tell exactly what one was watching.

In addition to the direct sponsorship of events, corporations also buy advertising time on broadcast media during sports programming. This is connected to the very elusive and concentrated audience that sports programming is able to capture. Sports constitute a very important part of the schedule of the major television networks, which sell the time of particular audience segments to corporations that wish to reach those people with advertising messages. The material importance of this relationship between sports and the media will vary from society to society, depending in large part on the extent of private versus public control of the broadcasting sphere. Where there is private control (with revenues being drawn largely from advertising), it will be very difficult to separate media from sports. Where there is public control of broadcasting (through the state), the relationship will be less important, because the media are not governed by the same criterion of programming *having* to create audience segments that advertisers want. There is thus, at present, a major difference between the United States and Western Europe when it comes to defining this relationship, although, as broadcasting in the latter increasingly falls into private hands, we can expect that difference to decrease (see Seifart, 1984). In the United States, not only does sports programming generate a great deal of revenue for the media, but the media can also advertise their own upcoming programs during sports events and thus increase ratings and advertising revenues for nonsports programming. This is what ABC was able to accomplish through its coverage of the 1984 Olympics.

Following from this, there is an argument that, because media revenues are so important to their functioning, professional sports have been *transformed* and changed, that something pure has been lost in their commercialization (Altheide & Snow, 1978). Such an argument detracts from the fact that sports have *always* been based on commercial relations. Professional sports depend on two kinds of commodity sales, the relative importance of which has shifted historically. First, they sell tickets to fans who come to see the live event. For the first thirty years of this century, the role of the media was basically to act as publicity agents for sports, to get people into the stadiums. (This is still largely the role of newspapers today.) Second, professional sports sell the rights to broadcast events to the media. Historically, this has become far more important (contracts can now run into the billions of dollars) and is the basis of the claim that the broadcast media have transformed sports. While this is undoubtedly a valid observation, it seems to imply that, before the influence of the media, there was something that was pure sports. But sports have always been tied into a commodity sphere of one kind or another, their shape and organization always dependent upon their level of profitability. In the latter period, the major commodity that sports sell has changed; it is not that sports have suddenly been inserted into a commercial realm. The question is to what extent these historical transformations constitute a qualitatively new stage for the domain of professional sports. This is a fascinating question that we have not yet really begun to answer. The field awaits a detailed historical study of the political economy of professional sports, as well as data on the extent of cross-ownership among the spheres of sports, media, and commerce.

While the commodity structure is an indispensable way of understanding the interlocking of sports, media, and commerce, it is also a useful way of looking at the role of individual players within this framework. The advertising revenues that manufacturers provide to media, who in turn buy broadcasting rights, is at the root of the sizable increases in player salaries over the last thirty years. The players then are able, like other workers, to sell their specialized labor power to employers for its market value. In addition to this, however, players are also trying to create a commodity that they can, in turn, sell—celebrity. In this way, players can obtain revenues directly from manufacturers that are interested in having famous players endorse their products. For many players, this may be of even greater value than higher sports salaries, in that they can trade in their celebrity for many years after they have finished playing.

The last major actor that needs to be understood in this commodity structure is the state. Although the state itself, in the United States, is not involved in the production and sale of commodities, it performs a vital function for the whole structure—it defines the *conditions* within which the other activities take place. With specific regard to the media and sport, we can identify three important areas. First, the state provides an exemption from antitrust legislation for sports leagues in their negotiations with television networks. This leads to far higher prices that networks have to pay, although they are guaranteed a nonfractioned audience (see Horowitz, 1978). Second, advertising expenditures by manufacturers are tax deductible as business expenses. If they were not, the whole structure of the sports-media complex would be altered, as the proportion of advertising revenues directed toward broadcast media would be much smaller. Third, the state can impose (or lift) restrictions on the types of products that can be advertised and the media that they can be advertised on and thus again can affect the amount of advertising dollars that the sports-media complex can attract.

There has been a great deal written about the effect that this commodity structure has had on the organization and nature of professional sports. It has led to sports leagues changing the rules of the game to provide a better television package; clubs moving from one city to another based not upon stadium support, but upon the television audience; the flow and momentum of the game being interrupted as the game is stopped for time-outs that are called so that television can show commercials; the creation and destruction of entire sports leagues based upon whether or not television support could be found; and the ability (or inability) of teams to sign players, depending on the size of the television market a team controls.

A corresponding view treats the process of the increasing commercialization of sports (largely through the media) as leading to a *massification* of sports, as the search now is for new mass audiences for advertisers, rather than the appeal to

the so-called cultivated minority who really understand what sports are about. John Alt writes the following:

> The form of the spectacle—commodity rationalization—comes to envelop the structure of sports performances, shaping, changing, and altering the game to meet market and technical criteria. . . . Packaging the game, altering the rules and action, is undertaken to create special effects, usually in the form of visual-audial images. . . . In the extreme, the spectacle form reduces sport to its most banal and sensational elements as standards of excellence are repressed by commercial norms. (1983, p. 98)

Additionally, the increasing commercialization of professional sports has led to players' paying more and more attention to individual rather than team accomplishments and has changed the way that sports are played. Community and team loyalty are jettisoned in favor of self-identification in the building of celebrity.

Production: Encoding the Message

The last section looked at the wider constraints that are produced by the commodity-logic of the market selling on the way that sports appear to us in this society. In this section, I wish to focus on the more immediate and practical factors that affect the nature of the mediated sports message on television. The first point that needs to be made is simple but vital: Television does not present us with a sports event but with a sports event (already highly structured by the commodity-logic) that is *mediated* by television. A sports event is live and unscripted, and television is forced to provide its own structures and ideological viewpoints in a unique way. Directors, producers, camera operators, editors, and commentators are inserted between the live event and the home audience. As Stuart Hall notes,

> The production process is not without its "discursive" aspect: it, too, is framed throughout by meanings and ideas; knowledge-in-use concerning the routines of production, historically defined technical skills, professional ideologies, institutional knowledge, definitions and assumptions, assumptions about the audience frame the constitution of the programme through this production structure. (1980, p. 129)

Gary Whannel (1984) provides an illuminating example from the coverage of the 1980 Moscow Olympics of what happens when this hidden production process loses its internal unity. Soviet television provided the video pictures of the events, to which British television could add its own commentary. The agendas of these two institutions, however, were very different. While Soviet television wanted to present the games as being unaffected by the U.S.-led boycott, British television

wished to emphasize their abnormal character. This led to an "enthralling television battle—a struggle between Soviet television and the British channels to define the meaning of the Games" (p. 36). As this example illustrates, the mediating production process is not a closed system. "They draw topics, treatments, agendas, events, personnel, images of the audience, 'definitions of the situation' from other sources and other discursive formations within the wider socio-cultural and political structure of which they are a differentiated part" (Hall, 1980, p. 129). In this sense, the encoding process involves precisely what it says—using *codes* (technical, organizational, social, cultural, and political) to produce a *meaningful discourse*. Wren-Lewis and Clarke (1983) offer a reading of the television coverage of the 1982 soccer World Cup from the perspective of the surrounding political context (the Malvinas/Falklands War). From the perspective of the Johnson model mentioned previously, this wider context from which materials are drawn would constitute the moment of lived cultures and social relations.

The existing research on this production moment of the circuit of culture is very sparse. The few studies that do exist tend to work back from the encoded messages to a reading of motives and practice. Peters (1976), Buscombe (1974), and Williams (1977) have conducted these kinds of studies. Whannel also works backward from the message to come up with four important aspects of television sports production:

> First, hierarchization, the process of signalling that some things are more important than others. Second, personalization, the presentation of events from an individualized perspective. Third, narrative, the telling of events in the form of stories. Fourth, the placing of events in the context of frames of reference. (Cantelon & Gruneau, 1988, p. 183)

In Canada, Rick Gruneau and Hart Cantelon are attempting at the present time the most ambitious and thorough analysis of TV sports from the viewpoint of production of which I am aware. This involves, among other things, a focus on the organizational structures of the sports commentators' booth through both ethnographic and interview research methods (in addition to content analysis of the actual encoded messages). Such a project is urgently required for the American situation also. Todd Gitlin (1983) has shown how this can be accomplished for the understanding of prime-time television. The time is ripe for an *Inside Sports Time* companion to his work.

The Texts of Mediated Sport

Within critical analyses of sports, the reading of sports (through the media or directly) for their ideological meanings has been very prominent, and these readings are very important follow-ups to the focus on production and encoding—a

shift from process to product. As we have seen, there is no natural meaning of sport. The meaning of mediated sport is the outcome of a complex articulation of technical, organizational, economic, cultural, political, and social factors. There is nothing accidental about this process, and we should not forget, for all the stress on complexity, negotiation, and struggle, that this cultural production takes place within a *capitalist* context, where access to resources is differentially distributed. As Whannel notes,

> Sport offers a way of seeing the world. It is part of the system of ideas that supports, sustains and reproduces capitalism. It offers a way of seeing the world that makes our very specific form of social organization seem natural, correct and inevitable. (1983, p. 27)

Many writers have focused on this general ability that sports discourses have, because of the seeming separation of sport from other areas of life, to *naturalize* forms of organization that have a social and political basis. Despite increasing evidence to the contrary (boycotts, kidnappings, player strikes, and so on), the refrain to keep politics out of sport is still constantly heard. In the remainder of this section, I wish to highlight briefly some of the major tenets of this naturalized and ideological version of the world.

Militarism and Nationalism

Many major sports telecasts are saturated with militaristic values that start with the presentation of the colors or the flying overhead of fighter airplanes as "The Star-Spangled Banner" is sung. Again, I need to stress that this is simply not *showing* what is going on at the game: the television presentation of these events is normally *highly* technically mediated, with elaborate camera angles; overlapping pictures of players, flags, and weapons; and careful use of juxtaposition and dissolves. The Super Bowl especially seems to be inextricably tied up with this militaristic ideology. Writers have also noted the manner in which the very language of sports commentators embodies the vocabulary that one would actually expect of a society that houses the military and industrial complex at its heart. For example, in football, phrases such as "the bomb," "the aerial attack," "advancing into enemy territory," "the bullet pass," and "the offensive arsenal" are common ways of describing and interpreting the ostensibly sporting action (see Hoch, 1971).

A theme accompanying the militaristic one is, of course, the nationalistic one. This takes place in two related movements. First, "we" are separated from "them," the foreigners, through the use of stereotypical representations. "They" are different from us culturally and psychologically. Second, "we," who are separated from them, are drawn together under the mythical sign of the nation. This itself involves a two-step procedure. In the initial step, our real differences (of class, ethnicity, religion, and so on) are dissolved to create a false unity of nation (Americanness, Englishness, and so on). As Clarke and Clarke write of the English situation regarding this, the unity is not simply a sum of the different parts, but

> is structured in a particular direction. It draws its conceptions of Englishness from a specific set of social images and practices—those of the dominant social groups. Nationalism as an ideology works in two directions. One is to mark us off from the "others"—foreigners, strangers, aliens—it identifies and values what is unique to us. The other is to draw us together, to unite us in the celebration, maintenance and furtherance of "our" way of life. (1982, p. 80)

Competition and the Rules of the Game

At the heart of all sports is competition. The definition given to the form of the competition found in sports is thus an important dimension to their understanding. As for most factors involved in the analysis of cultural products, there is no single definition that holds cross-culturally. Joan Chandler (1983) argues that there are important differences between the United States and Britain in terms of the relationship between competition and social mobility and that these are reflected in the structures of competition found in their respective sports and the meanings given to them by the media.

In the United States, competition in sport is viewed essentially as competition between equals, without differential access to resources playing an important role. Moreover, the rules of the game are clear and neutral, so that the basis of the competition is unobscured. It is essentially *fair* competition, with the individual being the prime unit of action, so that failures become individual rather than social or class failures. The relationship of this kind of definition of competition to the way in which dominant groups would like to define competition in the wider economic, social, and cultural world is an important issue to discuss (see Jhally, 1988).

Labor, the Team, and Authority

One of the major themes in the critical analysis of sport is that sports reflect and celebrate the basic features of the capitalist labor process by presenting them in an idealized form. John Hargreaves summarizes this approach in the following terms:

> In their organization and functioning the major popular sports are seen as replicating all the fundamental features of modern nationalized industrial production: a high degree of specialization and standardization, bureaucratized and hierarchical administration, long-term planning, increased reliance on science and technology, a drive for maximum productivity, a quantification of

> performance and, above all, an alienation of both the producer and consumer. (1982a, p. 41)

The media, with the constant stress on quantification of specialized performance, and the focus on the coaches and managers as being the place where decisions are made, ritually celebrate the most alienating features of the capitalist labor process. This is accomplished by a stress on the sports world as, above all, a *human* realm rather than a technical one. The media transform authority structures that are hierarchical and exploitative into ones that become identified by the personal and the human (see Lipsky, 1981). An abstract alienated authority is personally mediated by very visible owners and coaches who are not an impersonal corporate elite but concerned leaders who *care* along with the ordinary fans.

Gender

All societies differentiate along lines of sex. It is a universal marker of human identity. These biological divisions, however, do not have the same meaning cross-culturally. The social understanding of biological difference is what many writers have termed the domain of *gender*. This refers to the specific cultural and social meanings surrounding what it means to be male or female in any society. This is obviously a huge subject, and I do not want to do more here than give the briefest indication of the role that mediated sports play in the complex processes that produce this meaning. There are, I think, three analytical dimensions to the issues: (a) How do mediated sports define notions of masculinity? (b) How do mediated sports deal with the relation between male and female athletic performance? (c) How do mediated sports define notions of femininity? (For discussions of these issues, see Hargreaves, 1986; Sabo & Runfola, 1980; Willis, 1982.) Much important work remains to be done in this area.

Race

Mediated sports present perhaps the most visible arena for racial minorities. While, in many other cultural forms, minorities have a token role, in contemporary sports they play an absolutely fundamental role. As such, black players act as powerful role models for black youngsters. However, just as for gender, race in sport is defined within a hugely ideological field. In 1987, a major controversy was created by the insensitive (although entirely reflective of the group of which they are a part) remarks by Al Campanis and Jimmy "the Greek" Snyder on blacks not having the intellectual capabilities needed for managerial positions in sports. The absence of blacks from managerial posts and even from playing positions that stress decision making and thinking provides powerful definitions of the kinds of activities that particular groups of people are capable of performing. Again, in the 1987 basketball season, the accurate (although perhaps ill-timed) remarks of Dennis Rodman and Isiah Thomas—that white players (such as Larry Bird) are given credit for working hard to achieve what they have done, while black players (such as Magic Johnson) are credited with natural ability that did not have to be cultivated or worked upon—showed how sensitive minority groups are to media definitions. Again, much work remains to be done in this area.

Sports Culture and the Culture of Consumption

While the stress in this section has been on the meaning of the mediated sports text, we should not forget that one very important part of these texts is that of messages that principally concern commodities, rather than sports—the advertisements. There needs to be a focus on the manner in which the world of consumption articulates with the ideology of sports that we have been discussing (see Jhally, 1987). Especially important in this regard is the manner in which the essentially naturalizing form of sports ideology is attached to other (equally) political domains so as to render them natural as well. Rick Gruneau, writing of the 1984 Olympic Games, notes that

> the combination of the location in Los Angeles, the organization of the Games by a private corporation, the advertising strategies employed by Olympic and other sponsors, the style of the Reagan Presidency, and the frequent speculation on Olympic programs about the future financial careers of victorious athletes, all became elements in a common discourse. Within this discourse, the themes of athletic success, healthy lifestyles, community, and Olympic ideals were continually circuited back to the success of corporate capitalism and the values prominent in American consumer culture. . . . Sport, like art itself, has become drawn into the discourses of modern publicity—a vehicle for expressing the common sense of modern consumer culture. (1988, pp. 22–23, 26)

Readers and Decoding

The study of texts is important, but only to a point. It is very useful to know what a formal analysis can tell us about the structure and content of the message, but we cannot simply infer *audience* readings from *our* readings. As Fred Fejes (1984) has pointed out, however, the field of critical media studies has been very reluctant to take this step toward audience research (for good historical reasons). I think this step is now imperative, especially as regards the cultural understanding of sport. An ethnography of sports viewing and the manner in which media messages are a *part* of the process through which meaning is constituted have to be included in the future of critical cultural studies. If we take seriously Althusser's formulations on ideology as an imaginary lived relation,

then we have to investigate the way in which sports discourses fit into the web of social practices of different groups. For instance, Althusser points out that the ruling classes do not propagate their ideology as a false myth but as the way in which they experience their real relations. They have to believe their own myths of freedom before they can convince others of them. Thus, in relation to sports, it is possible that, for example, images of competition are appropriated differently by groups in different social and class locations—the bourgeoisie see it as a reflection of existing relations, whereas others look to it as a realm of escape, where justice actually appears to prevail, unlike real life.

Moreover, there needs to be a recognition that sports is a realm of *popular pleasure*. People like sports. We need to focus on why some cultural forms become popular, become *principles of living*. Furthermore, "what are the *different* ways in which subjective forms are inhabited—playfully or in deep seriousness, in fantasy or by rational agreement, because it is the thing to do or the thing *not* to do" (Johnson, 1986–1987, p. 72)? There are real dangers associated with this move. A focus on the audience has the potential to elevate and to privilege the audience's own understanding of its situation in a way that divorces the analysis from the wider contextual conditions of power. Tania Modleski has warned of this recent trend in which, ostensibly, critical cultural studies come close to winding up as studies of "uses and gratifications" (1986).

To avoid these obvious temptations, we have to keep in mind two important analytical points. The first has to do with the nature of the texts that audiences decode. Although, in abstract theory, the meanings associated with these are open-ended, in concrete practice, social constraints act to close the range of possible meanings. Recognizing that texts are open to more than one interpretation, Stuart Hall warns that

> polysemy must not, however, be confused with pluralism. Connotative codes are *not* equal among themselves. Any society/culture tends, with varying degrees of closure, to impose its classifications of the social and cultural political world. These constitute a *dominant cultural order*, though it is neither univocal nor uncontested. This question of the "structure of discourses in dominance" is a crucial point. (1980, p. 135)

The second analytical point flows from the first: Audience readings take place in particular *conditions*, and the identification of these becomes vital. For instance, sports on television are a certain type of *watching*, where one's time is being sold to advertisers. What effect do the surrounding conditions have on the nature of our watching? Why are we watching rather than doing other activities? How have cultural patterns changed with the introduction of television? These questions (and many others that could be posed here) emphasize that *reading* takes place in certain social conditions that are connected to the way in which people live their everyday lives, and we cannot ask questions about audience

decoding divorced from these wider questions. In general, we need to remember Richard Lipsky's (1981) insight that sports can both provide an escape from particular social conditions and be a powerful form of socialization back into those same conditions.

Lived Cultures and Social Relations

> In a "determinate" moment the structure employs a code and yields a "message": at another determinate moment the "message" via its decodings, issues into the structure of social practices. We are now fully aware that this reentry into the practices of audience reception and "use" cannot be understood in simple behavioral terms. The typical processes identified in positivistic research on isolated elements—effects, uses, "gratifications"—are themselves framed by structures of understanding, as well as being produced by social and economic relations, which shape their "realization" at the reception end of the chain and which permit the meanings signified in the discourse to be transposed into practice or consciousness (to acquire social use value or political effectivity). (Hall, 1980, p. 130)

Stuart Hall here has given us the challenge that a critical cultural approach must meet. Ultimately, all the analyses of production, texts, and audiences must be integrated and contextualized within the broader frame of how people live their lives and the constraints and possibilities imposed by wider social, cultural, political, and economic movements. I wish here to mention briefly *some* of the factors that a critical approach to mediated sports must consider in attempting this wider framing (in addition to all the ones previously mentioned).

The first issues are historical ones. Nicholas Garnham (1983) has noted that there is a *class* basis to cultural consumption. These issues need to be analyzed and linked to the distribution of what Pierre Bourdieu has called *cultural capital*. Additionally, we need to analyze the manner in which the arena of cultural consumption has shifted and changed through this century, especially since the introduction of television. Obviously, this will be linked to the process that has been labeled *the industrialization of culture*, in which cultural products are increasingly provided directly by the market, rather than by nonmarket areas of social life. This again is related to the declining importance of cultural institutions such as the family, religion, and traditional working-class community. In the latter regard, Stanley Aronowitz (1988) has noted that, as the objective basis for working-class cultural life was eroded by economic movements in the 1950s, the locus of the new forms of community shifted to the emerging medium television, and that, although a coherent working-class no longer exists, the residual images of that culture are still present on TV in the guise of cop shows and the camaraderie associated with beer commercials. The relation of sports (especially its mediated, commercial form) to this disappearing cultural realm is a vital axis around which relevant research questions can be posed.

Questions need also to be posed in terms of the relations between the meanings of commercial sports and the shifting field of gender relations. Many writers have suggested that sports have become a refuge for men who are increasingly threatened by the appearance of new gender roles and relations. Whatever the merits of this kind of argument, we need answers to the question of why sports have become defined in the almost exclusively male manner in which they appear in our culture, as well as exploration of the historical shifts in the nature of this identity.

In more general terms, there needs to be an analysis of the relation between the predominant forms of mediated sports (the relative importance of baseball and football within popular culture in different historical periods) and the shifting nature of the surrounding social and economic relations. For instance, some writers, such as McLuhan, have argued that the emergence of football as the most popular sport in the past thirty years is connected to its being much more suited to television (*the medium is the message*) than other sports. Others have suggested that there is a close correlation between cultural forms and the wider economic system and that the emergence of football is strongly related to the shift from a competitive capitalism to its contemporary corporate and administered form. Again, we need to devote more thought to these issues.

There are also other, more contemporary issues. For example, why are sports so important as a form of nationalism, and what are their ideological and cultural links to the military-industrial complex? Also, in addition to the linking of sports discourses to the naturalizing of the commodity-form, the language of sports has also been used in other spheres, especially the political. Why has sports language become an important way to describe the activities of the state (see Balbus, 1975)? Similarly, issues connected to the arms race are often couched in sporting terms. In all these spheres, the key factor to be conceptualized is the nature of *competition* in these realms (which becomes increasingly more obscure) and the ability of sports to provide an illumination to the darkness (see Jhally, 1988). Again, the field awaits a close historical analysis of the changing nature of competition in many domains and the relation of this to the discourse of mediated sports competition.

Conclusion

Richard Johnson (1986–1987) has argued that cultural studies in general need to focus on two sets of questions. The first group has to do with the *use-values* of cultural forms and the issues of pleasure and popularity. The second group concerns the *outcomes* of these cultural forms. Do they lead to repression or freedom? How do they define social ambitions? Do they encourage a questioning of the existing social realm? Do they point to alternatives? Answers to these questions cannot be found by focusing on production or on texts or audiences alone: "They

can best be answered once we have traced a social form right through the circuit of its transformations and some attempt to place it within the whole context of relations of hegemony within the society" (Johnson, p. 72). Ultimately, of course, for our purposes here, what is called for is a thorough, nonreductive analysis of the articulation of mediated sports to social, cultural, political, sexual, racial, and economic factors—in short, a totalistic theory of sport and society and sport *in* society. The basic analytical research framework outlined in this chapter should enable us to get started on this important work.

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