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## Sport, life, *This Sporting Life*, and the hypertopia

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### ABSTRACT

Sport has classically been regarded as an ‘elsewhere’, a leisure activity set apart from the serious business of life. Sociological critiques of sport, however, emphasise its importance in transmitting ideology, and its responsiveness to historical change. The question, then, is how does this ‘elsewhere’ connect to the everyday? The article proposes that the spaces of sport generally function as a hypertopia, which involves a *going beyond* of the normative, rather than the Foucauldian idea of the heterotopia or utopia, which foreground difference. By analysing Lindsay Anderson’s *This Sporting Life* in terms of the hypertopia, it is possible to rethink sport’s connection to hegemonic social orders, and consider the way filmic representations of sport constantly engage with this sense of ‘going beyond’.

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### Sport as hypertopia

The title of Lindsay Anderson’s 1963 film *This Sporting Life*, adapted by David Storey from his 1960 novel, implicitly questions the relationship between sport and life. Is a ‘Sporting Life’ a thing set apart, or, as the adjective hints, is life intrinsically connected to sport? Anderson appears to sit firmly in the first camp, stating categorically: ‘*This Sporting Life* is not a film about sport’.<sup>1</sup> The great social historian of rugby league, Tony Collins, agrees, arguing: ‘it is not really about sport, or rugby league, at all. It is all about sex’.<sup>2</sup> Anderson was perhaps worried that his subject would not be taken seriously (the sports genre has often been regarded as ‘below’ other forms, such as the western or musical), faced with the common belief, exemplified by American sportswriter Jimmy Cannon, that ‘sports is the toy department of human life’.<sup>3</sup> Both Anderson and Collins, however, feed the idea that sport is an ‘elsewhere’, just as Johan Huizinga, whose *Homo Ludens* (1938) was one

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of the earliest attempts to theorise the play/sport/life nexus, claimed: 'Play is not "ordinary" or "real" life. It is rather a stepping out of "real" life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own'.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Roger Caillois argued 'play is essentially a separate occupation, carefully isolated from the rest of life, and generally is engaged in with precise limits of time and place [...] a restricted, closed, protected universe: a pure space'.<sup>5</sup>

Few would argue this is part of the appeal of playing, or even watching, sport, where 'each athlete finds – uniquely, through the experience of sports – an "alternative reality" into which the problems and anxieties of the everyday world no longer intrude'.<sup>6</sup> And yet this 'alternative reality' is not that alternative: the universalising tendency of Caillois and Huizinga has largely given way to sociological studies that insist on sport being enmeshed in socio-historical change. Marxist critiques, crystallizing in the same decade as *This Sporting Life*, make clear links between capitalism and the development of competitive, hierarchical games. In Henning Eichberg's neat phrase, 'Sport was no longer regarded as "innocent"'.<sup>7</sup> Ironically Anderson's film, and Collins' work, also emphasise the *connection*, rather than the *separation*, of sport and life.

Writing on sport in recent decades takes this connection as a starting point, and yet there is still a lack of theory on how this connection can be formulated, often falling back on the idea of sport as an 'alternative' space. Even a critic as influential as Eichberg points out that one of the defining characteristics of contemporary sport is that: 'The *space* for the game now becomes more and more specialised and standardised, and in the process isolated from the environment of everyday life'.<sup>8</sup> Geographers such as John Bale have insisted on the way sports spaces are *produced*, and I suggest that considering them as an 'elsewhere' is unhelpful. I want to start by looking at how space and time are reordered in sport, and then move on to a reading of *This Sporting Life* – often touted as a candidate for 'best sports film' and even 'best British film' – to show how sport and life are intrinsically linked. In the process, I want to propose a new term for thinking about sports space, the hypertopia, which is useful for the way it contrasts Michel Foucault's formulation of alternative spaces, the utopia and the heterotopia.<sup>9</sup>

Foucault observes that there are two types of space, the utopia and the heterotopia, which are markedly different 'elsewheres' that call normative life into question. For Foucault, utopias have no connection with the real, but 'are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down'.<sup>10</sup> It is commonplace for sport to be regarded as an unreal space; you only have to think of Manchester United's rebranding of Old Trafford into 'The Theatre of Dreams', and Séan Crosson claims: 'Sport maps a utopian space beyond the challenges of everyday life'.<sup>11</sup> The most common modern form of heterotopia, by comparison, works by deviation: like a prison or a graveyard, it stands apart from the normative, and its

strangeness creates a profoundly jarring juxtaposition. My argument is that elite sports, rather than promising alterity, create spaces that are different in degree, rather than essential quality. They are locked into a relation with what could be called the normative (it is a strange utopia, or heterotopia, that can be attained by a punch, or a kick, or a run).<sup>12</sup> Sport instead inscribes a *going beyond* of the everyday, insisting on similarity, rather than difference. The Olympic motto, ‘*Citius, Altius, Fortius*’ insists that sport is relational, taking something fairly normal (fast, high, strong) and moving it to a new level (faster, higher, stronger). In elite sport, you don’t pay to watch someone do something you could do, but it is also something you *could* conceivably have done. This reframing has consequences for the politics of sport: Foucault’s heterotopias are usually associated with a destabilising of the structured spaces around them, offering radical possibilities where the quotidian is ‘simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted’.<sup>13</sup> Yet sport is usually viewed as an affirmation of dominant ideologies, particularly in the way it complements traits associated with modernity and capitalism. Alan Sillitoe, whose *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1959) rivals *This Sporting Life* as one of the great social critiques of sport in this period, states: ‘Society was built on “competition” and “sport” is a preliminary to this society and an accompaniment to it. It is a sort of training ground for entering the war of life’.<sup>14</sup> To reformulate sport as a ‘hyper’ space, which takes the normative, and extends it, helps to focalise its relations to power and its connection, rather than separation, from ‘life’.

Choosing the Greek prefix *hyper* (ὑπέρ) to describe sport has a genealogy that goes back to Homer. In Book VIII of *The Odyssey*, which includes the Phaeacian Games, Laodamas observes that Odysseus is ‘no mean man’ and has ‘great might’, describing him in *hyper* (ὑπέρ) terms.<sup>15</sup> The prefix, in its *OED* definition, signifies ‘over, beyond, over much, beyond measure’, with the sense of ‘to step over, overstep, to throw over, or beyond’, including to ‘cross the threshold’. While the prefix ‘hetero’ (‘other, different’) emphasises alterity, a break with previous forms, ‘hyper’ implies ‘that the thing or quality is present over or beyond the ordinary degree’. *Hyper* insists on a difference predicated on an extension of what already exists, which is fundamental to how sport, and sports space, functions. Most people can run; they just do not run as fast as Usain Bolt. Even ordinary people find sport allows an ability to ‘over’ perform. Storey, who played rugby league well enough to be part of the paid ranks at Leeds, was not a great fan, but still admitted: ‘The pleasure to me is in the pitch of endeavour, sustaining it, *going beyond it*. In many ways I hated rugby, but it allowed people to do marvellous things’.<sup>16</sup>

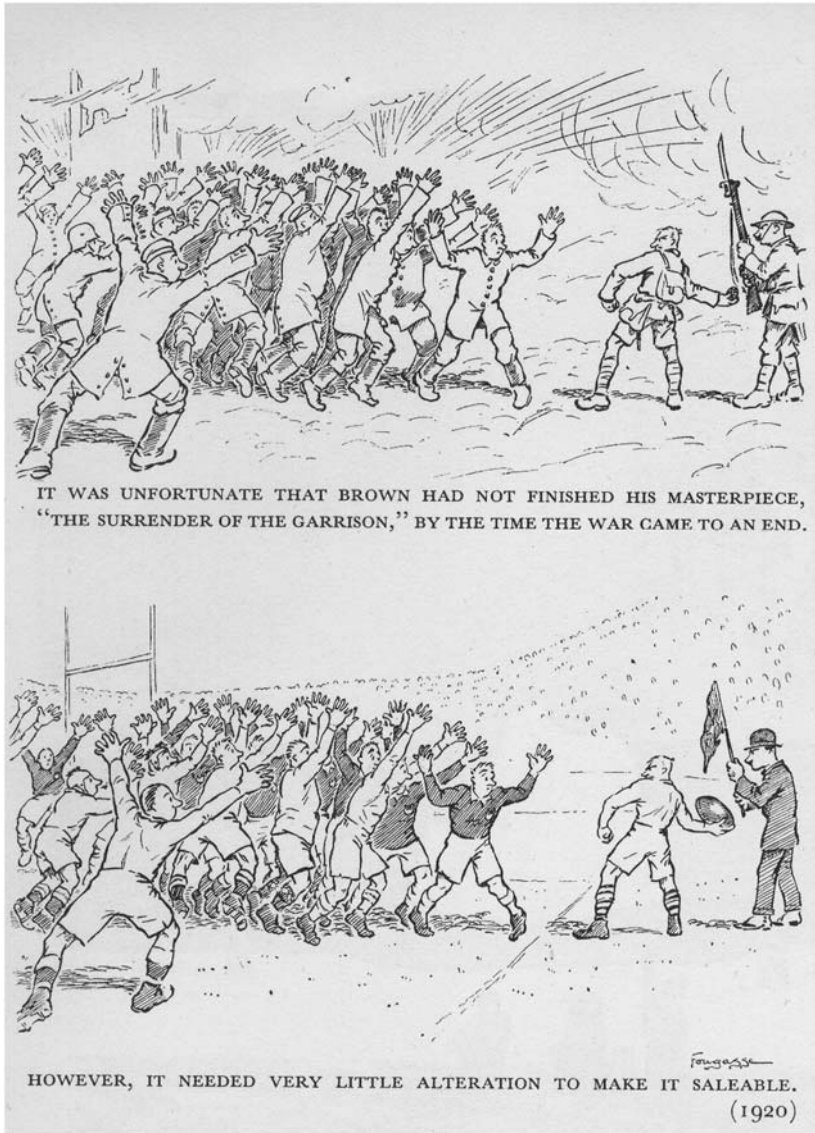
Thinking in terms of hypertopia helps to explain why the hegemonic order is more likely to be ratified, rather than subverted, by sport. The hypertopia of sport may call the normative into question, but only by an extension, amplification, and condensation of what is already there. It should be added

that, if sport rarely produces a space that is innately troubling, this is not to say it is inherently conservative. It can, for instance, provide a remarkably powerful platform for change. The way in which David Beckham has been able to disturb some of the masculinist binaries around football (as the title of the film *Bend It Like Beckham* suggests), indicates the way sport can subvert expectations of ‘normalcy’. On a less obvious level, the hypertopic space can also lead to its own inversion by going *too far*. Modern usage emphasises this: to be ‘hyper’ is to be excitable, highly strung, and extraordinarily energetic, with the sense that this state can become so extreme it is disturbing. Similarly, to be guilty of ‘hype’ is to present something that is so over-praised it fails to ring true, opening itself up to critique. The hyper masculinity of some sports, such as the bulging biceps of Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Pumping Iron* (1977), is as likely to challenge heteronormativity as to uphold it. The hypertopia can lead to a *queering* of ideas of normalcy.

### The ‘going beyond’ of sports space

To consider in more detail how the hypertopia works, I’d like to look at a cartoon by Cyril Kenneth Bird, under his pen name Fougasse, which appeared in the magazine *Punch* just after the end of World War I (Figure 1). There are two initial points to make; the first is that war is not, thankfully, a normative situation (indicating again how problematic any notion of the ‘normal’ is); the second is that the two images are almost identical. Throwing a grenade is obviously very different to throwing a ball at a lineout (although I have watched many rugby matches that have tried to replicate life on the Western Front), but apart from that the placing of the figures is unchanged. The clothes are different, with the sombre uniforms exchanged for parti-coloured rugby kit, but the expressions are the same. This is odd because war is a matter of life and death, while sport is just a pastime: as the caption indicates, ‘The Surrender of the Garrison’ was to be Brown’s masterpiece, but as a sports scene, it is nothing more than ‘saleable’. War is a heightened experience that goes far beyond the everyday, yet the rugby scene generates *the same emotions* as the war scene. In fact the type of space produced by sport is, if anything, *more* intense.

This is partly because the sports scene is so highly focalised. The action is, for a start, much clearer. While the distant explosions of the battlefield indicate a wider sphere of action, the sports scene provides only one thing to look at, and only one story, bounded by a white line (a sign of ‘planned, controlled and regulated activity’).<sup>17</sup> The addition of a crowd, placed as if in banked seating, trains all eyes on the pitch. Mike Schäfer and Jochen Roose observe that the design of the sports stadium creates ‘a particularly advantageous setting for the arousal of emotions’, thanks to the atmosphere of collective interest (the crowd is faceless, amorphous).<sup>18</sup> The ball – classically the



**Figure 1.** 'Brown's masterpiece'. Reprinted from *A Century of Punch*.

focal point of most sports – is far bigger than the grenade. The lines on the pitch and the addition of a goalpost orient the action, giving it a depth absent in the planar war scene. Every spatial position of each competitor, and every movement as they adjust to the movement of the ball becomes, in Brian Massumi's formulation, 'supercharged'. Massumi argues: 'The goals polarize the space between them. The field of play is an in-between of charged movement. [...] The polarity of the goals defines every point in the field and every

movement on the field in terms of force'.<sup>19</sup> This electrified atmosphere is transferred to the bodies of the players, which are framed in what Massumi describes as 'a state of intensive readiness for reflex response'.<sup>20</sup> The war scene shows a moment that has happened, while sport focuses on what is about to happen. One is static, the other is primed for movement: the outstretched hands of each of the players are alive in readiness to catch the ball. In the war image, agency resides in the soldier poised to throw the grenade; on the sports field, the agency is distributed to every player.

Space, so often separated from time for reasons of analysis, can never really be decoupled from temporality. Jean-Marie Brohm calls sport a 'prison of measured time', suggesting the way it is set apart in terms of time as well as space.<sup>21</sup> Modern sports (with the notable exception of baseball) always have a set duration, organising time in ways that make them unique. There is one constant with sports, however; they tend to accentuate the importance of 'now'. Brown's 'The Surrender of the Garrison', represents a specific historical moment, while the sport scene is strangely ahistorical. It is deliberately distanced from any narrative frame; there is no scoreboard, no sense of which teams are playing, and it is not given a title. It is presented as a moment of action without any thread of the story. The game offers access to a sense of time as becoming, allowing an appreciation of the moment (Eichberg speaks of Danish sports commentator Gunnar 'Nu' Hansen, who gains national fame, and his nickname, 'thanks to his excited cries of "nu": "Now ... now ... now it happens!")'.<sup>22</sup>

The job of most sports media is to provide a unique selling point; to reshape the story in order to tell something new. To some extent, the sports event – which aims for a realm of immanence, of happening – acts in opposition to its media. The mantra of sports journalists is to 'move a story forward'. It is a rare event that allows the moment to sustain itself after the final whistle, yet it can happen. Take the England football team's traumatic World Cup semi-final penalty shootout defeat on 4 July 1990, with Joe Moran observing that the usual post-game rush to put the kettle on for tea was delayed by the drama of the final kick:

When Chris Waddle hoofed the ball high over the bar to give West Germany their victory, the Electricity Board braced itself for a soar in demand [...] Instead, viewers were shocked into paralysis, and it was not until eight minutes after Waddle's penalty that the demand for electricity surged to 2,800 megawatts, beating the previous record set in 1984 by *The Thorn Birds*.<sup>23</sup>

It is true that sport has its seasons, its eras, its longer-term rhythms, but these are often constructed in a post-emergent realm. Sport (along with sex) is seemingly the event that restores immanence like no other. The kick of a ball can produce a 'moment' that lasts eight minutes.

Foucault argues that ‘the heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time’.<sup>24</sup> While I would not wish to underplay the importance of temporality, which is often sport’s most radical contribution to reconfiguring the quotidian, it is worth considering exactly how this functions. Sport can offer a profoundly alternative experience of temporality, but how close is this to Foucault’s concept of heterochrony, of time as heterotopia? Time is always deeply structured in sport; the game unfolds in a series of rhythms, all of which define themselves against a quotidian pace of life. This is often about speed – most modern sports require bodies to go into hyper-drive (so many football games are described as being played at 100mph). Eichberg sees modern sports engendering an experience of time as an arrow; one-dimensional, absolute, directed forwards like progress, quantifiable, and rapid.<sup>25</sup> Modern rule changes in football – the banning of the back-pass, outlawing the tackle from behind – are perhaps less about fairness and more about the desire to accelerate the flow of the game. What is produced, however, is far from Eichberg’s ‘one-dimensional time’.<sup>26</sup> Tennis, for instance, deliberately fashions moments of crisis as the less important opening points of a game turn into key moments of game point, break point, or set point (while golf, so resistant to the temporal, creates instead a spatial point of crisis, ranging from ‘drive for show’ to ‘putt for dough’ as the wide fairway narrows to the tiny tin cup). All of these rhythms are intrinsic to most elite sports, where any period of action is regularly interrupted by ‘moments of formal structure’.<sup>27</sup> Massumi argues that usually in sport ‘nothing happens’, and instead ‘things are typically about to happen or have already happened’ (it is only later that ‘becoming becomes reviewable and writable: becoming becomes history’).<sup>28</sup> In Bird’s cartoon, the game has been halted in preparation for the lineout, creating a moment of tension. For the watcher, or the player, sport requires a re-synchronisation to a different set of rhythms, often remarkably complex and subtle in comparison to the rhythms of the everyday. Yet the deadlines of the office, and the deadline of the buzzer, are different in degree, not quality. Freud argued that ‘protection against stimuli is an almost more important function for the living organism than reception of stimuli’, and sport stages emotion and excitement within a protected frame.<sup>29</sup> It offers a series of exquisitely balanced moments of crisis *and* a final whistle that promises a return to the quotidian, continually producing hypertopic relations even within a game.

If sport continually reorders clock time, it also plays with other normative structures. Huizinga argues in *Homo Ludens* that play always ‘proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner’.<sup>30</sup> Yet most sports create structure only to dramatise disorder, moving beyond the normative hierarchies of bodies and space. Melee sports, such as rugby, allow extreme moments of flux



until a rule infraction leads to play being reset into a position of order and clarity. Each American Football play starts with the teams placed in exact strategic positions, and ends with the inevitable pile-up of bodies, helmets and flags. The opening shot of *This Sporting Life* focuses on a neatly ordered line on the pitch, followed almost instantly by a man failing to gather the ball as it is kicked out of his hands and an ensuing collision of bodies. Sport takes the everyday contrast between structure and flow and intensifies it to an extraordinary degree.

Similarly, sport offers a narrative clarity that is not found in everyday life; the parameters of win, lose, and draw are utterly clear-cut. The film producer David Puttnam, talking about his decision to make *Chariots of Fire*, stated: 'What I like about the sport is the cleanliness of the decision-making process. In life most of our choices are muddled and we never cease to wonder'.<sup>31</sup> The level playing field of sport helps to create this clarity. Caillois observed that in sport the *agon* is intensified because an 'equality of chances is artificially created'.<sup>32</sup> Events are there to be shaped by any or all of the contestants. This sense of sport as 'becoming', a narrative left open and ostensibly unscripted, raises the possibility that something as synthetic as a game has a reality that eludes the everyday. In a world of simulacra, sport can seem to possess a hyper-reality that goes beyond 'the real'. The German soldiers raise their arms in a semaphore of defeat; the hands of the rugby players are alive with possibility.

One final point to make about the cartoon is that the artist chooses to turn a war painting into a rugby scene. Why not a street scene? Or another sport? To rephrase the question: why is it that the war scene is already depicted in such a way that it is interchangeable with rugby? The WWI black comedy *Blackadder Goes Forth* includes a joke that the main aim of the Allied military strategy was to move Field Marshal Haig's drinks cabinet one yard closer to Berlin, but that is also a pretty accurate description of how England played rugby union well into the 1970s, moving the ball forward a yard at a time. Unlike football or hockey, which range from end to end, rugby is a game of territory. Both sets of players are divided, they line up against each other as if in trenches, and there is usually a No-Man's Land separating the teams. Much of the match is based on attrition, and it is also a sport that celebrates collective battling, rather than the more individual genius of football. As Frank Machin, the protagonist of *This Sporting Life*, tells Mrs Weaver: 'We don't have stars in this game. That's soccer'.

Each sport creates its own genre, prioritising certain skills and attributes over others. The hyper-aggression of rugby league would be out of place in crown green bowls (one would hope). Each game orders time, space, and narrative differently. Rugby league, for instance, is a deeply combative sport, continually asking players to break through barriers, or to tackle those trying to get beyond them. Its rules, modified from rugby union,

both simplify and speed up the game to foreground running and tackling. With the possible exception of American Football, it foregrounds continual, percussive collisions more than any other sport. This is accentuated by Anderson's rugby sequences at the beginning of *This Sporting Life*, which stay close to the bodies and the action, rather than any distanced view. The need to compete and gain territory, so central to rugby league, folds into every aspect of Machin's life, but an even greater driving force is his desire to excel. One of his first 'moves', mimicking his rugby skills, is to elude the doormen at a nightclub, where he had been made to wait outside with the general public while the City rugby team are waved through. His 'life' and his 'sport' are deeply connected by a desire to sidestep the normative and go beyond its barriers.

The spaces of sport are obviously polysemic, at times approaching the utopic, at others distinctly dystopian, so that any attempt to define them by one term is necessarily reductive. With that caveat, they are still fundamentally hypertopic; sport functions by taking the ordinary to a new pitch. Machin gains entry into the nightclub because he is just a bit quicker, and just a bit more daring, than those around him. Similarly, in Storey's novel, he only wants to try out for the local team after noticing that work colleague Maurice Braithwaite 'kept his head above the general level of crap' by playing rugby league.<sup>33</sup> Sport is not an elsewhere, but a way of rising above the general level. In the case of Brown's masterpiece, it takes just a few brush-strokes to turn 'real' life into sport.

### **This Sporting Life**

The concept of the hypertopia is particularly useful for thinking about *This Sporting Life*, not just in showing that the film *is* about sport, but to suggest it is structured around spaces that either encourage, or discourage, a 'going beyond' of the normative. In the deeply gendered industrial north of the 1960s, this split divides the two main characters; while Machin exists in hypertopia, the widowed landlady he has an affair with, Mrs Hammond, is constantly denied access to such a space. Supriya Chaudhuri argues that 'the emergence, or re-invention, of the sporting disciplines of modernity takes place in an almost exclusively male world. Even today, of all social activities, sports is the most sharply segregated and regulated by gender'.<sup>34</sup> The 'now' of sport, its excitement, unpredictability, its staccato narratives, and its extension of identity, are possible only for men in this society, creating intolerable tensions between the two main characters.

This is embedded in the pacing of the film. There are two basic realms of action; scenes linked to the sports club, and those focusing on the domestic setting. The film starts with a series of rapid cuts and flashbacks as Machin injures his teeth while playing rugby league (one of the fastest of all sports,

designed to minimise set-pieces and stoppages), and the dentist's anaesthetic opens up his 'subconscious what-nots'. In the first 10 minutes, there are 15 different scenes of action, mirroring the accelerated movement of the rugby. At first the sports scenes dominate, only for the domestic to exert a growing power. At one point, the film is like being at a tennis match, with heads moving to see one shot after another, although in this case the contest is between two modes of experience. The sports scenes deal in compression, excitement and variety. In comparison, the domestic is static, often shot from a stationary camera angle. As Machin's relationship with Mrs Hammond becomes the main focus, the rapid cuts at the start are replaced by longer and longer takes. At the end an excruciatingly slow deathbed scene and Machin's return to Mrs Hammond's now empty house reverse the opening hurry by remaining in two locales for 10 excruciating minutes. Machin's final appearance on the sports field is then shot in slow motion. Pierre Bourdieu argues that elite sports often treat the body 'as an end in itself, while working-class sports often involve 'a *gambling with the body*'.<sup>35</sup> It is as if the film, having started at full speed, has gradually unspooled, just as the physical energy needed to maintain Machin's ability to excel has become consumed, 'the human motor' worn down.<sup>36</sup> The last words of the film, as Machin's legs betray him and he fails to keep up with the action, is a jibe from the crowd: 'C'mon Machin, get a bloody move on'. It signifies his exit from hypertopic space; unable to maintain the pace, he is now reduced to being a mere mortal.

This raises a third way of looking at the title; that a 'Sporting Life' is a biologically determined period when the body is able to do 'wonderful things'. One of the ways sport alters experience is as a physical stimulant. Pulse rates and breathing are usually heightened from their baseline levels, and the physiological mood of athletes is altered; raised levels of endorphins, dopamine, and adrenaline are all triggered by sports. In Storey's novel, Machin uses performance-enhancing drugs, stating in the first game we see: 'I've time for one burst. The effect of the benzedrine's already worn off'.<sup>37</sup> In the film, alcohol often fuels his larger-than-life persona. 'You've been drinking', chides a disapproving Mrs Hammond. It is no accident that he only starts to reflect on his actions after being given sleeping gas at the dentist, a sedative that brings a rare moment of calm, and leaves him strangely muted (or even normal) when he later attends Mr Weaver's party.

While Machin has elevated spirits, Mrs Hammond is depicted as depressive. Research into cognition and the apprehension of time suggests the importance of novelty, rather than repeatability, in making life appear full (or dull). It takes longer for the brain to process the new, and hence at these moments, time has a sense of plenitude. Machin continually tries to get Mrs Hammond to leave the house, or to bring the novelty of 'sport' into the domestic sphere. When he returns late one evening, he taunts

Mrs Hammond, saying: ‘I’ve been out with the lads, living’. He buys expensive presents, a flashy car, a TV set, and does all he can to introduce what he considers to be excitement into the household.<sup>38</sup> The moment when he hits his fist on the table while she sews (Figure 2) is just one of many meetings between ideas of life as fast, violent, a blur of energy, and life as restricted, repeatable, dull.

‘You get far too excited, lad’, he is told by ‘Dad’, one of the typically unprepossessing father figures of sports narratives. Machin continually tries to alter the temporality of the domestic space, to bring it into line with the heterotopic ‘time as crisis’, which is so central to the ordering of sport. By contrast, Mrs Hammond tells him: ‘You’ve got to give me time, Frank.’ The fact he fails to do this is one of the many factors leading to their separation and her final breakdown, which is described by a neighbour in sporting/militaristic terms: ‘It’s an attack. Some kind of attack.’

Machin’s aggression, and the alternation between domestic and sports club settings, foregrounds this sense that we are watching an ‘attack’. B.F. Taylor makes the insightful comment that the key to understanding the film is its ‘organisation of space and its deployment of characters within this space’.<sup>39</sup> One of the flashbacks shows Machin before his meteoric rise as a rugby player working in the mines. It is as if the rest of the film documents his attempt to escape (or be reborn) from this claustrophobic nightmare. While work encroaches on Mrs Hammond’s leisure time, Machin’s switch to professional sport means that his work is a form of leisure, and distinguishes him from the miners and factory workers. At no point is Machin ever one of the crowd, suggesting the way his expanded sporting identity permeates his every action. Jeffrey Hill observes that “‘Acting big” while, in actuality, being “small” becomes a motif for the life of the sportsman hero’.<sup>40</sup> Yet Machin is also encouraged to excel by those around him. He is sent fan mail, kids line



**Figure 2.** Publicity still, *This Sporting Life*. 1963. © Continental Distributing, Inc.

up for his autograph, he is lauded by the club's directors who compete for his favour, and he receives glowing write-ups in the newspaper, even though the sports journalist is well aware of Machin's faults. When he visits a night-club, he is cajoled onto stage to sing. People want him to go beyond the normal. In contrast, Mrs Hammond is continually being confined. Her crowd – the eyes of her neighbours – disapprove of anything that is different. One of the derivations of hyper, 'to move beyond the threshold', suggests she is subjected to very different pressures and expectations, barely able to move past her front door for fear of criticism. People are predisposed to applaud Machin, while she is policed, forced to stay within strict parameters of the normal. The amorphous crowds at the matches, like the club owners Mr Weaver and Mr Slomer, appear to live vicariously through Machin's exploits. He provides spectacle, while all that Mrs Hammond does is rendered invisible.

In the domestic sphere, the extended self-image which helps Machin stand out on the rugby field is felt as overbearing, as is his excessive physical presence. 'You are so big', says Mrs Hammond (this is a long way from *Carry On Britain*), and the way he swings on beams, like a caged animal (he is variously referred to as 'tiger', 'Tarzan', 'great ape', and 'big cat'), indicates that the house is too small for him. As Machin increasingly trespasses on her territory, Mrs Hammond complains: 'I don't need you pushing in', a line which is surely meant to allude to the rugby scrum. While some sports with working-class foundations, such as football, foreground skill, Machin's value as a forward is almost entirely down to power and the ability to make (or defend) ground. Beverly Geesin and Simon Mollan state: 'Machin understands that, as a forward, he is the "ape" of the game, valued for his size and brute force as opposed to intellect'.<sup>41</sup> Rugby league, though, is less about strength and more about speed and dynamism, with Eichberg arguing this streamlining of the physique is part of a specifically modern interest in *energy*.<sup>42</sup> Machin is always a *charged* figure, just like a body on a sports field; he tends to either inhabit the edge of the frame (the actor Richard Harris employs a fine line in Brandoesque brooding), or takes centre stage. In both cases he dominates the screen. The owner's wife, Mrs Weaver, tells Machin: 'You're always moving. I've never seen anyone so restless'. Taylor makes this connection between the boundaries of the pitch and the edges of the film's frame:

This is evident when we see players jostling for position on the pitch. Or when they find themselves crowded out, trapped by other bodies and are unable to move. [...] the positions adopted by characters within the frame, as well as the movement between these positions, are governed by a logic that is compellingly similar to the one on the pitch.<sup>43</sup>

The power dynamics of the relationship at the heart of the film are treated unwaveringly by Anderson, who places Machin in a series of unnatural,



**Figure 3.** *This Sporting Life* film poster. 1963. Dir. Lindsay Anderson. Author's own collection. Carlton International Media.

overpowering positions compared to Mrs Hammond. When they first have sex, there is a remarkable clumsiness in the way the two are manoeuvred in the small bedroom space (again, with Machin introducing a moment of crisis as she goes about the daily chore of making the bed). This is highlighted by one of the film posters distributed by Rank (Figure 3), where Machin is holding Mrs Hammond as if he is about to pass a rugby ball:

This asymmetric set of power relations, especially in the way his body is celebrated, while her physicality is policed and diminished, creates a barrier between them. The hyper masculinity that underpins the sporting landscape continually thwarts his attempts to get close to her. Collins, having said the film is about sex, not sport, admits that the two are, in fact, deeply interconnected:

Sport is a masculine, aggressively heterosexual world, in which might is right and weakness punished. This is a world that Frank Machin understands. But his mastery of that world puts him at a disadvantage in the real and complicated world of sex and personal relationships.<sup>44</sup>

In Storey's novel, Machin at first appears to rape Mrs Hammond, but in the film their sexual relations are represented in a liminal realm where the unpleasantly forceful advances of Machin meet a seemingly consensual, if not exactly welcoming, response.

Hill's comment that the sports star tends to 'act big' also suggests the performativity involved in hypertopia; to go beyond can also lead to a gap between the self-image and the reality. After his trial game, Machin eagerly reads a newspaper report, suggesting he is mostly interested in

making a name for himself. The desire to go beyond can easily be conflated with the creation of a dubious sense of aura. He is endlessly trying to impress those around him, with the constant need to prove himself indicating that the 'hyper' expectations of the sports pitch are imbricated in every element of his life. Taylor argues that 'the sadness felt while watching *This Sporting Life* comes from watching Frank finally understand that the rules he adheres to on the pitch make no sense when he tries to apply them to other areas of his life'.<sup>45</sup> Machin's drive to compete, to be a dominant male, and to regard the domestic as dull, taints everything. At one point, while mimicking a boxing hero, he aims a punch at a mirror in his bedroom, a neat symbol of the self-destructive nature of his own 'sporting' self-image.

*This Sporting Life* certainly presents an unremittingly bleak portrait of working-class life, with Taylor arguing that 'the cramped sequences that take place in the house are framed by the film as the tragedy of a relationship that will never have the space it needs to develop properly'.<sup>46</sup> Jane Mansfield points to the importance of the 'occupation of alien space' for working-class protagonists in a period of unprecedented social and geographic mobility, but when Machin is invited by the sexually predatory Mrs Weaver to her affluent home, he looks around as if he is weighing up this new space for what kind of life it affords, rather than as a conquest. Machin seems less interested in gaining territory, than in finding spaces that he can thrive in.<sup>47</sup> It is perhaps more accurate to say that the film depicts the tragedy of a relationship fractured by the meeting of two, almost opposite, types of space. In one space the male is encouraged to act big; in the other, the female is constantly being restricted. Machin appears to possess more freedom, but he is just as much a prisoner as Mrs Hammond. Sport plots often trace Greek forms; the quest narrative, the desire for glory (*kleos* – in particular the 'beautiful death' of the young warrior in battle), and even the homecoming (*nostos*). Machin signally fails on all three fronts, returning to an empty house, reduced in the eyes of society, and fighting on long after his body has lost any tinge of heroism.

The film does, however, present an alternative, and significantly this is bound to a reconfiguring of ideas of sport and sports space. As part of a brochure produced by the BFI to celebrate a festival of the best British films of 1963 in Paris, the designers opted for a triptych; rather than focusing on the 'male' sports space and the 'female' domestic sphere, they included a third image, that of the trip to Bolton Abbey (Figure 4). One of my students, in discussing this, described it as a 'neutral space', and it is clearly freighted with significance.

The journey to the Abbey is ostensibly to give Machin the chance to show off his most extravagant purchase, an expensive motor-car. It also allows the chance to escape, giving Mrs Hammond and her children an extended sense



**Figure 4.** Screen grab, *This Sporting Life*. 1963. Dir. Lindsay Anderson. Carlton International Media.

of space, and injecting excitement into the domestic. There is a sense of synthesis throughout the scene. Travelling in the car, for instance, is described as ‘like riding around in your own front room’, combining speed and novelty with the ‘domestic’. Compared to the rapid cross-cutting at the start, or the slow-motion finale, it seems to operate at a natural, or ‘real-life’ pace, with no jarring juxtapositions or longeurs. The scene is oddly framed, with Mrs Hammond placed in an uncomfortably formal position, alone, flanked by the abbey and the car, while Machin has a kickabout with her two children. Taylor sees the abbey (death, a respectable past, a ruin) and the car (flashy consumption, the fear of being perceived as ‘fast’, social climbing) as symbolising ‘a choice of directions that she might allow her life to take’.<sup>48</sup> As the scene develops, it seems another possibility starts to open up. Machin plays ball with the children, and hierarchies and divisions start to break down. In this game, there is no scoring, no competition, no direction of play. What starts as basketball morphs into football and then rugby. The sports field is so fluid that the ball gets kicked into a lake, and the play continues as Machin wades out to retrieve it, a laughing girl on his shoulders. The sense of freedom, space, and openness is palpable. According to Marxist critiques, sport is ‘the capitalistically distorted form of play’, and it is hard not to compare this moment with the joylessness of the rugby league scenes.<sup>49</sup> Gender distinctions are also redundant as the girl plays as much as the



boy. 'Let's go play soccer, Linda', says Machin, and the play is devoid of rules; it just happens. This is also a rare moment when the four function as a family unit.<sup>50</sup> The crux is when Machin surprises Mrs Hammond by passing the ball to her, shouting 'Margaret, catch it'. She fumbles it and laughs, then catches the next pass. This is the 47th minute of the film, and it is the first time she has shown any spontaneous, unalloyed joy. Later, when she recalls working in an 'All women' munitions factory making bombs during the war, she fondly remembers that 'we had some good times together' (before, of course, the men returned). The film interrogates the way that male dominance of sport and work excludes and oppresses women; it also offers a brief glimpse into an alternative ordering of space and play that would lead to a very different connection between life and 'This Sporting Life'.

## Conclusion

Thinking about the spaces of sport and 'life' raises the question of politics and change. Eichberg asks, 'what is constructing what in society?'<sup>51</sup> Does sport purely mirror society, stand outside it, or is there a more complex inter-relationship? It would certainly be a mistake to think social structures come first. The scene at Bolton Abbey is a reminder that rules and codes are applied *after* the initial impulse to play. In this case, is there any reason that sport has to be shaped as 'the capitalist form of play' (if, indeed, that is an accurate description of the multiplicity of sport and its functions)? J.M. Coetzee points to this ambivalence:

Rugby dreams of itself as a celebration of speed, agility, strength, comradeship. Every now and again one sees evidence, flashes of beauty amid all the milling and toiling, that the dream is not unfounded. But the flashes are intermittent. [...] There is a mistake in the most basic conception of the game. Therefore, the question to ask is: Why does this crippled game flourish?<sup>52</sup>

This is not to say that 'play' is intrinsically superior to codified games (kick-about in parks are not inherently innocent, or necessarily fun), but it is to insist that sport can always be shaped – and reshaped.

The concept of the hypertopia inevitably leads to questions about how sport might function in a fairer society. Can the sports space ever be neutral, or does its fundamental desire *to go beyond* always vindicate hierarchy? Does it necessarily celebrate the elite and the exceptional, the hyper-muscular, the hyper-male, the hyper-talented, and the hyper-committed? Is the 'hyper' complicit in discourses of exceptionalism, mastery, and a repudiation of democratic ideals? Does it tend to create gendered, sexualised, racialized spaces, as Cathy van Ingen has posited?<sup>53</sup>

This is why literary and filmic representations of sport are so important. There is an enduring tendency to regard sport as an elsewhere, a thing set

apart with its own rules. Artistic representations of sport tend instead to focus time and again on its hypertopic nature, seeing sport as an extension of the normative and its ideologies. They work in the liminal realm between the hyper and the normative, interrogating its connections. It is easy to criticise sport as a distorted and conservative realm, but one could also read *This Sporting Life* from Mrs Hammond's point of view as a cautionary warning about what happens to a social space that does not allow the hypertopic.<sup>54</sup> Van Ingen has rightly called for sports geographies to be 'strategically and dialectically reworked in order to recognise the complexity of our multiple spatial and social belongings'.<sup>55</sup> I would argue that progressive films, books and plays about sport have been doing this for a long time. The hybrid genre of Anderson's film points to these complexities. The title sequence joins the roar of fans with an orchestral score, just as Anderson blends the tradition of working-class realism with French New Wave filmmaking, creating a strange mix of the brutal with extreme moments of poetry. Storey's script brilliantly takes ordinary speech and suggests layers of significance beyond it. If sport is hypertopic, so too is Anderson's filmic representation, with its crosscuts between the ordinary and the exceptional, its spatial juxtapositions, its merging of high and low, and its raising of the everyday to a greater importance. To paraphrase Lindsay Anderson; *This Sporting Life* is not a film about sport, but about how sport – and film – connects to 'life', and how both might be changed for the better.

## Notes

1. Lindsay Anderson, *Never Apologise: The Collected Writings*, ed. Paul Ryan (London: Plexus: 2004), p. 92.
2. Tony Collins, 'This Sporting Life', posted online 5 September 2012. <http://www.tony-collins.org/rugbyreloaded/2012/9/5/this-sporting-life>
3. Sports journalist and broadcaster Howard Cosell, often thought to have originated the line, credits it to Cannon. See Howard Cosell, with Peter Bonventre, *I Never Played the Game* (New York: Morrow, 1985), p. 16. The title of a 1969 *Sports Illustrated* article, 'Sport Was Box-office Poison', says it all. See Séan Crosson, *Sport and Film* (Abingdon, Routledge, 2013), p. 52.
4. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Beacon Press, 1992), p. 8.
5. Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, (*Les Jeux et les Hommes* 1958), trans. Meyer Barash (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), pp. 6–7.
6. William Hutchings, 'The Work of Play: Anger and the Expropriated Athletes of Alan Sillitoe and David Storey', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 33.1 (Spring 1987), pp. 35–47, 37.
7. Henning Eichberg, 'New Spatial Configurations of Sport? Experiences from Danish alternative planning', in John Bale and Chris Philo (eds.), *Body Cultures: Essays on Sport, Space, and Identity* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 68–83, 72.

8. Eichberg, 'A Revolution of Body Culture? Traditional Games on the Way from Modernisation to "Postmodernity"', *Body Cultures*, p. 143.
9. Hypertopia is a neologism, first used in film studies by Francesco Casetti in *The Lumière Galaxy: Seven Key Words for the Cinema to Come* (Columbia University Press, 2015), taking the key sense of 'hyper' as 'lying over the frontier [...] the lintel of a door'. Casetti uses hypertopia to rethink the way film changes once it moves beyond the cinema space to the home or the tablet. He uses 'hyper' to think of how a medium can move beyond its initial limits to make some fascinating arguments about changing filmic reception.
10. Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', translated by Jay Miskowicz, *Diacritics* 16.1 (Spring 1986), p. 24.
11. Séan Crosson, *Sport and Film* (Abingdon, Routledge, 2013), p. 6.
12. Sport obviously does have its utopic moments, but these are rare, and often idealised. When sport attains mythic status it is often by a process of mediation, and an 'after-the-fact' elevation of the gap between the norm and the event, rather than something intrinsic within the sports space itself. Geoff Hurst's hat-trick goal in the 1966 World Cup final has been replicated, in relative silence, in a thousand Sunday morning football matches. The 'aura' of sport and its players is closer to Jean Baudrillard's ideas of simulacra and the hyper-real than it is to heterotopia and utopia.
13. Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', pp. 22–7, 24.
14. Alan Sillitoe, 'Sport and Nationalism', in *Mountains and Caverns*, selected essays by Alan Sillitoe, (London, W.H. Allen, 1977), p. 84. Cited by John Hughson, 'Why He Must Run: Anger, and Resistance in *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*', in Ron Briley, Michael K. Schoenecke, and Deborah A. Carmichael (eds.), *All-Stars and Movie Stars: Sports in Film and History* (UP of Kentucky, 2008), p. 269.
15. See the parallel Greek/English texts available at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper>
16. Martha Duffy, 'An Ethic of Work and Play', *Sports Illustrated*, 5 March 1973: pp. 66–9, 69. Cited in Hutchings, p. 44. My italics.
17. Eichberg, 'New Spatial Configurations of Sport?', p. 68.
18. Mike Schäfer and Jochen Roose, 'Emotions in Sports Stadia', in S. Frank and S. Steets (eds.), *Stadium Worlds: Football Space and the Built Environment* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 234.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
21. Jean-Marie Brohm, *Sport: A Prison of Measured Time*, trans. Ian Fraser (Pluto Press, 1987).
22. Henning Eichberg, 'Efficiency, Play, Games, Competitions, Production – How to Analyze the Configurations of Sport', *Physical Culture and Sport: Studies and Research*, 72 (2016), pp. 5–16, 10.
23. Joe Moran, 'You Have Been Watching', *The Guardian*, 17 August 2003.
24. Foucault, p. 26.
25. Henning Eichberg, 'The Societal Construction of Time and Space as Sociology's Way Home to Philosophy', in *Body Cultures*, pp. 149–64, 149–51.
26. Eichberg, 'The Societal Construction of Time and Space', p. 151.
27. Gavin J. Andrews, 'From Post-Game to Play-by-Play: Animating Sports Movement-Space', *Progress in Human Geography*, 41.6 (2017), pp. 766–94, 775.

28. Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 80; 77.
29. Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle'. *The International Psycho-analytical Library*, 4. Translated C.J. M. Hubback. Part IV, n.p.
30. *Homo Ludens*, p. 32.
31. David Puttnam, Special Materials, Bill Douglas Cinema Museum.
32. Caillois, p. 14.
33. David Storey, *This Sporting Life* (London, Vintage, 2018), p. 17. First published 1960.
34. Supriya Chaudhuri, 'In the Ring: Gender, Spectatorship, and the Body', in Alexis Tadié, J.A. Mangan and Supriya Chaudhuri (eds.), *Sport, Literature, Society* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), p. 117.
35. Pierre Bourdieu, 'Sport and Social Class', *Social Science Information*, 17.6 (1978), pp. 819–40, 838.
36. Beverly Geesin and Simon Mollan, 'This Sporting Life: The Antithetical Novel's Revelation of the Organisation and Work of Sport', *Culture and Organization*, 25.5 (2019), pp. 368–82, 373. There is a sense that Machin is using up his young adult energy; sport in working-class culture of the Sixties was often considered the thing you did before you become an adult (and got married). See Bourdieu, p. xx.
37. David Storey, *This Sporting Life*, p. 4.
38. The TV set is a reminder that, by 1963, Storey's north would increasingly be felt as anachronistic in a Britain changing rapidly from Fifties austerity. TV also altered the dynamic of sport and the domestic; the BBC's flagship sports programme *Grandstand* started in 1958, with live rugby league a key ingredient, allowing the spectacle to infiltrate the domestic. This is central to Cassetti's view of hypertopic space, where the realm of laptops, TVs, and tablets, ensure that an 'other' world 'is made available to us, responds to our summons, and comes to us – [...] it fills our "here" with all possible "elsewheres"', p. 131.
39. B.F. Taylor, *The British New Wave* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), p. 143.
40. Jeffrey Hill, 'Sport Stripped Bare: Deconstructing Working-Class Masculinity in *This Sporting Life*', *Men and Masculinities*, 7.4 (April 2005), pp. 405–23, 409.
41. Beverly Geesin and Simon Mollan, pp. 368–82, 375.
42. Eichberg, 'A Revolution of Body Culture?', p. 143.
43. B.F. Taylor, p. 144.
44. Collins, n.p.
45. Taylor, p. 153.
46. Taylor, p. 148.
47. Jane Mansfield, 'The Brute-Hero: The 1950s and the Echoes of the North', *Literature and History* 19.1, pp. 34–49, 37. It is worth adding that this speaks to D.H. Lawrence's ideas about fractured gender relations, especially in the battle between Paul Morel's parents in *Sons and Lovers* (1913), with the interesting parallel between the pursuits that create the tension at the turn of the century (fairs, dancing clubs, holiday rambles), and the 1960s milieu where institutionalised sport has become the focus for finding an alternative to the everyday.
48. Taylor, p. 152.

49. Ulrike Prokop, *Soziologie der Olympischen Spiele* (Munich: Hanser Verlag, p. 21). Cited in Allen Guttman, *From Ritual to Record* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), p. 69.
50. The moment after the death of Mrs Hammond when Machin sees the children, but walks away, seems to me the lowest point of the film, ensuring the cycle of abandonment will continue.
51. Eichberg, 'The Societal Construction of Time and Space', p. 162.
52. J.M. Coetzee, 'Four Notes on Rugby (1978)', in David Attwell (ed.), *Doubling the Point* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1992), pp. 121–2. He is discussing rugby union.
53. Cathy van Ingen, 'Geographies of Gender, Sexuality and Race: Reframing the Focus on Space in Sport Sociology', *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 38.2 (2003), p. 207.
54. Similarly, it is hinted that her husband had committed suicide, in response to the lifelessness of factory work.
55. Van Ingen, p. 212.

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