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**Huggins, Mike (2015) The visual in sport history: approaches, methodologies and sources.**

**International Journal of the History of Sport, 32 (15). pp. 1813-1830.**

Historians of sport now increasingly accept that visual inquiry offers another dimension to social and cultural research into sport and its history. It is complex and its boundaries are rapidly evolving. This overview offers a justification for placing more emphasis on visual approaches and an introduction to the study and interpretation of visual culture in relation to the history of sport. It stresses the importance of adopting a critical approach and the need to be reflective about that critique. An ever-widening range of visual data are now being explored; so, this paper begins with a brief survey of sources that potentially offer rich returns, from film and photographs to posters and paintings or standards and statues. It next provides a critical assessment at an introductory level of some of the more important methodologies now emerging to help interpret these. This can be no more than a personal choice, given their sheer variety and interdisciplinary nature, and the reality that many historians of sport adopt a mixture of methods and approaches. Approaches covered include content analysis, iconography and iconology, semiology, psychoanalysis, discourse analysis, and reception and audience studies. Examples of recent studies of visual studies are used to illustrate the discussion.

Sport is a spectacle. So for most people, their experience of sport is largely visual. Some play, some watch live games from bank, bench, terrace, or grandstand. Others pick up media representations on television, computer, tablet, or iPhone. Sport permeates public consciousness in further ways too. In the USSR alone, sport was represented 'in a whole host of cultural activities, including literature, film, theatre, music, painting and sculpture' and public exhibitions of various sorts.<sup>1</sup> So sport enjoys a symbiotic relationship with visual culture. For some, direct presence at an event, most especially a mega-event, can be as much about seeing more broadly and being seen as about actually watching a contest. For fans, the visual has contributed strongly to the creation of fan culture. Fans' flags, for example, a multi-modal visual form nearly always containing text, colour, images, and varying in size, materials, and placement, as well as having different effects, might show their current immediate hopes, feelings, and concerns, celebrate their support and identification with the club, commemorate their history, attack the manager or owners, or antagonize rival supporters. Other flags communicate the sponsors and corporate owners.<sup>2</sup>

And sport's multiple representations constantly proliferate. The extent and nature of specific visual experience historically and geographically has yet to be fully explored, but there is a general agreement that from the eighteenth century onwards, social life has been ever-increasingly constructed, deployed, and received through the visual.<sup>3</sup> By the nineteenth century, images, technologies, and visual experiences from photographs to engravings and advertising were becoming central to sporting 'modernity'.<sup>4</sup>

Visual material filters, organizes, and edits past and present, and creates collective memories and cultural ideals. Recent decades have seen a huge increase not only in the number of images but also in the nature of images produced and consumed, and these speak to us in different ways to verbal and text languages. This visually saturated world is now central to our cultural fabric. We have become ever more surrounded by visual images and visual technologies, including satellite TV and

the modern fan park, and an ever-increasingly hyper-visual world. Changes in technology meant that spectators can now draw on television broadcasts enhanced by new photographic techniques, better film, moving cameras, instant replays using 'Hawkeye' analysis, and split-screen effects.

Until recently, historians of sport interested in the visual have concentrated on more 'stable' cultural objects such as paintings, films, or statues. Visual data can now be retrieved from web cameras and the Internet. Distributed, networked, mobile, widely available, and constantly consumed digital technologies and network platforms are capable of easily reproducing, overlapping, and transforming visual images, genres, and media. Digital technology makes it easy to create, store, and disseminate visual material. But, this now-arriving 'digital turn', with its potential for reshaping lifestyle, behaviour, and perceptions of sport, its new forms of attention and 'reading', and the epistemological, archival, methodological, ontological, and philosophical questions it raises, is currently under-theorized, and will place further demands on researchers, as Osmond and Phillips have pointed out.<sup>5</sup>

## Why Study the Visual?

Though visual representations are always embedded in wider culture, it is 'seeing', or rather 'perceiving', those specific visual representations upon which particular social groups rely, that for many has now become intertwined with 'knowing', 'understanding', and emotionally 'feeling' sport.

It has become ever more important for historians of sport to understand how visual culture and its multiple voices and perspectives have come to construct our perceptions, engender ideologies, and subjectivities, and even shape narratives, stereotypes, behaviours, and cultural understanding. A deeper appreciation of the social and cultural qualities of human vision ('visuality') has now slowly emerged to help this process. But for almost all of us, learning this more critical visual literacy is like learning to read text. It is a slow, painstaking process, hindered by our lack of skill, understanding, and critical vocabulary. It will take time.

In the academic world, more broadly, from the 1990s, if not before, scholars have had growing interest in what was termed 'visual culture', and accepted that 'seeing' was a social and cultural process. The role of visual depiction, the practices of visual production and reproduction, and the socialization, history, and conventions of visual perception quickly became emergent themes, with interdisciplinary research projects, conferences, and publications.<sup>6</sup> As Stuart Hall pointed out in 1997, such meaning was 'a slippery customer'. Meanings could variously be 'plausible', 'competing', or 'contested' as they were interpreted. He emphasized that there was no single or 'correct' answer to the question, 'what does this image mean?'<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, the adoption of visual methods and the analysis of visual culture can enhance our understanding of the history of sport, by nuancing or challenging existing histories. The process of 'seeing', and interpreting what can be seen, is tightly tied to culture now and in the past. Images could help to visualize social power and difference, and this has in turn shaped social behaviour. So the social and cultural outlook of those who produce sporting images is both shaped by society and helps to shape it.

Historians of sport were initially slow to pick up on this 'visual turn', which placed visual sources as the centre of analysis. As Brian Goldfarb has pointed out, in the social sciences, a long-standing historical

construction meant that writing and speech were higher in status and in pedagogical use.<sup>8</sup> This long-standing logocentric emphasis meant that most scholars of sport's history merely 'skimmed' visual materials, used them largely as illustrations, and marginalized them as less important sources for content. While 'text' materials and modes of expression were dominant, there was a lack of engagement with visual and material culture. As late as 2010 the Danish historian Hans Bonde, in his careful analyses of movement, masculinity, gymnastics and sport in Denmark, could still argue that 'source material in the form of photography, film, video, painting and instructions for movement is a crucial but neglected source group'.<sup>9</sup> A higher degree of critical visual literacy was slow to emerge, but there was a growing recognition that 'to exclude the visual is to reject a key area of human [sporting] experience', and that there was therefore a need for a more effective exploitation of visual material by historians of sport.<sup>10</sup> There is now widespread acceptance that visual research can produce new and different types of knowledge; that the world that is seen and represented visually is different to the world that is represented through words and numbers, and that it connects to different realities. Visual studies offer a different and valuable way of knowing about sport history, with new forms of data, and evoking different kinds of response.<sup>11</sup>

It was research into media, especially television and film, which first began to generate wider sustained interest in this aspect of the history of sport. Cultural theorist, Garry Whannel's studies of sporting media and audiences, for example, began in the 1990s, and explored the ways the media brought sport into people's lives in new forms. The ways in which television images were constructed by their producers to convey what they perceived as nationalist values and ideals was one early focus of interest.<sup>12</sup> More recently, Jack Williams has unpacked the ways in which televisual images have changed over time and the extent to which they have reproduced and shaped perceptions of the sport.<sup>13</sup> Sport in fictional films was also an early area of study. Headon studied how Australian sport was presented in silent movies as early as 1999,<sup>14</sup> and certainly film has attracted attention in the last decades in a growing number of studies.<sup>15</sup> In 2013, Seán Crosson, an expert on sport and film, not just in Ireland but more broadly, published carefully contextualized work on film which drew impressively upon a wide range of critical and interdisciplinary conceptual frameworks to analyze how various Hollywood and other international film forms and styles have had a major impact on sporting representations from the 1890s to the present. It was also helpful in showing students how to 'read' a film.<sup>16</sup> Currently, however, little attention has been paid to sports films from outside Hollywood. Gender issues in sports film have been less well addressed, though the recent publication of Nicholas Chare's book, *Sportswomen in Cinema*, has provided a powerful critique of film's gendered coverage of sport.<sup>17</sup> Until recently, sport in animated films has been almost completely ignored, but Goofy, Mickey Mouse, and even Wallace and Gromit now figure in Paul Wells' important analysis of the ways in which animation addresses motion and produces visually spectacular outcomes. He shows that both sport and animation are embodied languages that have aesthetic, political, and technologically constructed meanings and effects.<sup>18</sup> Mike Huggins and others have begun to explore the potentialities of newsreel and documentary film.<sup>19</sup> Mike O'Mahony has tracked film's documentary images of the Olympics, and their changing conventions, including Riefenstahl's *Olympia* (already well covered in the existing literature) which merged authoritarian and classical past references in its apparent documentation of the 1936 Berlin Games. O'Mahony contrasts it with Ichikawa's *Tokyo Olympiad* of 1964, which included pictures of a bombed Hiroshima, and discusses their joint impact on Olympic film production.<sup>20</sup> Emphasis generally is still on filmic content and images rather than audiences and reception, or on the film's impact on ways sport is imagined and remembered.

More generally, the last two decades have seen an increased intensification of and sophisticated work on the use of visual sources, the exploration of visual culture, and exploitation and visual research methods by historians of sport. Visual studies have become an increasingly important and versatile area, generating increased scholarly interest and excitement in the process. The focus has shifted from an empirical understanding of past images as sources, with image content as fundamental, to the recognition that they were powerful historical agents in their own right. They shaped meanings, communications, and cultural memory and heritage as well as formed part of a broader social culture of 'visuality', a term used to suggest that vision is always culturally constructed. Booth's book *The Field* was an important reminder that all interpretations were reliant on personal subjectivities, and that a critical, more reflexive approach to such material was important.<sup>21</sup> Researchers see their data through the lens of their own lives, experiences, and subjectivity in interpreting images and justifying their interpretations. As Carly Adams pointed out, in summing up Booth's work, a researcher needed 'to be reflexively aware of one's positionality as researcher and embrace the historical process' in engaging with 'the complex and messy', yet 'exciting and insightful' complexities of historical research.<sup>22</sup>

There was also a wider acceptance that all images should be regarded as 'polysemic' or 'polysemantic' (having many possible meanings and interpreted differently according to the cultural position of those viewing them) and given a 'close reading', which scrutinized them carefully and treated them as problematic. However, experiences are rarely, if ever purely, visual. In terms of sport, scholars are often dealing with combinations of visual and written texts, and both sensory and embodied experience and knowledge, so research needs to combine images and words.<sup>23</sup>

This overview offers a justification for placing more emphasis on visual approaches and an introduction to the study and interpretation of visual culture in relation to the history of sport. It stresses the importance of adopting a critical approach and the need to be reflective about that critique. The paper begins with a brief survey of sources that potentially offer rich returns. It next provides a critical assessment at an introductory level of some of the more important methodologies now emerging to help interpret these. This can be no more than a personal choice, given their sheer variety and interdisciplinary nature, and the reality that many historians of sport adopt a mixture of methods and approaches. Approaches covered include content analysis, iconography and iconology, semiology, psychoanalysis, discourse analysis, and reception and audience studies. Examples of recent studies of visual studies are used to illustrate the discussion.

## Potential Sources

Visual inquiry has now become a complex, rapidly evolving area of social and cultural sporting research. It is simultaneously expanding the boundaries of visual data used, and invigorating the sub-field by creating a body of literature and a growing community of practitioners. In an important 2011 overview of this expanding volume of work, Huggins and O'Mahony noted some of the disparate, but key earlier studies and the many potentially rich and diverse sources which were ripe for exploitation.<sup>24</sup> The references to the many key earlier *studies* footnoted there, and in their earlier work, will not in the main be repeated here for reasons of space, and where possible, more recent works have been deliberately cited. Amongst the important source materials Huggins and O'Mahony reviewed were paintings, film, sculpture, advertisements and illustrated books, engravings and prints,

stamps, stadia, cigarette cards, sporting paraphernalia (including trophies, medals, and the numerous examples of popular consumer goods and souvenirs), badges, coins, emblems, armbands, flags, standards, and pennants.<sup>25</sup> Each of these visual forms relies on specific technological and production modalities and historians need to understand how these impact.

The many contributors to their collection utilized sources as diverse as animations, banners, cartoons, fine art and associated visual cultures, physical treatises, photographs, stamps, posters, and stadia. Another recent collection of papers, edited by Baller, Miescher, and Rassool, which was centred round the visual culture of African football, explored similar material, including stamps, cartoons, posters, and advertisements.<sup>26</sup> In general, however, advertisements in the past remain a relatively neglected source,<sup>27</sup> as do the visual aspects of comics, though a number of cultural researchers have concentrated on individual comic characters such as the working-class athlete Alf Tupper or footballer Roy of the Rovers.<sup>28</sup>

Many visual sources form part of the material culture of sport, which includes playing equipment, venues, training equipment and sports medicine technology, sportswear, prizes, symbolic artefacts, performance measurement technology, ephemera/detritus, and memorabilia. Study of these can provide further understanding of the relationship between people and their material world. Hardy, Loy, and Booth have provided a useful typology here.<sup>29</sup>

Materiality was the theme of a recent collection of papers by Linda Borish and Murray Phillips, and sports kit is now also becoming an area of interest.<sup>30</sup> Until recently, as Kevin Moore has argued, 'historians of sport have tended not to value museum collections in their research ... museum exhibitions have been regarded by academics as a less valid form of history than written academic history ... an academic view [is] that sports museums present an uncritical, celebratory history'.<sup>31</sup> Two recent edited collections produced, respectively, by Hill, Moore, and Wood and by Murray Phillips reflect the still small but growing 'new museology' and the serious scholarly attention and critical gaze applied to stadia, museums, and halls of fame which provide representations of sporting heritage through material objects.<sup>32</sup> Museums and halls of fame shape people's experience and understandings of the visual material they display. So such studies provide useful insights into the institutionalization of the material cultures of the sporting past, heritage, promotion, and production. Many leading football club museums, for example, can be read in marketing terms as 'branding platforms' by the clubs themselves.<sup>33</sup> Institutions' multi-layered meanings are then further shaped by their audiences.

Increasingly, the boundaries of visual data are being redefined to include an ever-wider range of artefacts, visual media, and digital technologies. Whilst two-dimensional images have been regularly drawn on in research, formerly neglected three-dimensional types of visual representation such as statues, memorials, cemeteries, and public spaces have attracted interest, and so affected visual inquiry. Specific recent studies have included Mike Huggins's study of heritage and graveyard commemoration, Gary Osmond and Claire Parker's linkage of memory, sport, and materiality in their reading of the Arthur Baynes Memorial Obelisk, Mike O'Mahony's assessment of the impact of the Ancient Greek sculptor Myron on the representations of sportive movement and symbolism of the visual cultures of the modern Olympic Games, and an exploration of Britain's sporting history through sculptures by Ian Hewitt and Sampson Lloyd.<sup>34</sup>

Changes in attitude to cultural heritage have meant that as of 2012, there were figurative subject-specific statues of association football players, managers, chairmen, owners, or founding fathers sited

at stadia or city centres within the UK, with all but three of these erected in the last 20 years. Chris Stride and his associates have done important work in developing the theorization of this type of sporting statuary in Britain and America in a number of publications, most recently studying statues of sport fans at baseball stadia.<sup>35</sup> The growingly acute visual and spatial awareness has opened up the places and spaces of play and memorial too. This has allowed the recent *Played in Britain* (English Heritage) series edited by Simon Inglis to explore architecture, art works, and archaeology related to the ways in which sport has been written into the landscape, and the many places with sporting associations such as cockpits, billiard halls, sports fields, ice rinks, or swimming baths related to Britain's sporting heritage.<sup>36</sup> Relationships of class, gender, and race have been reflected in sport's multiple venues.

Despite the volume and variety of such material, it suffers from the same drawbacks as all archival material. It is partial, collected, and preserved for a variety of reasons, selected in a context of power and current cultural, financial, and political constraints. Its potentiality is determined by how it is used.

## Methodologies

The term 'visual methods' can refer to any research design which uses visual material, and many of the current approaches to sport's visual history draw on the current trend to interdisciplinarity within academic discourse. Knowles and Sweetman have suggested that there are three key theoretical approaches to visual images within social research: images as evidence in empirical studies, images as constructions of reality, and images as texts, and it is the latter two which are more focused on here.<sup>37</sup>

The increasing body of work concerned to interpret the meaning of particular types of visual image shows that the sets of procedures, working, and analysis that characterize visual research are showing rapid development. The effectiveness of research, however, is linked to our ability to identify, understand, and defend the chosen method, and engage with its theoretical arguments. This is critical for its effectiveness. Visual methodologies cannot be simply reduced to one practice or set of tools, so this short overview of methodology can be no more than an introduction to the range of methods available, and further background reading and investigation would be required before embarking on a research project. If sports history scholars are to stretch the boundaries of their sub-field, then as Phillips, O'Neill, and Osmond have pointed out, 'a range of literacies, not typically familiar to sport historians, have to be engaged to enable critical analyses of visual and material representations of the past'.<sup>38</sup>

## Interdisciplinary Approaches to Methodology

As Allen Guttman pointed out in 2008, 'the field of sports studies is and ought to be multi-disciplinary', and visual approaches are an important section of this field.<sup>39</sup> Guides to visual methodologies were already becoming available in the 1990s,<sup>40</sup> and 'the visual' has since become a significant growth area, used widely in anthropology, cultural studies, film and media studies, sociology and visual communication, as well as history and the history of art. Articles, monographs,

and visual essays have proliferated, with more coming out each year. A growing body of work examines the key elements of working with visual sources as a set of methodologies, although as they often approach this from a different subject perspective, they therefore stress different approaches.

Some idea of the approaches available to historians of sport can therefore be gained by a brief overview of some key methodology texts, many written as introductions to the subject for readers or as textbooks for students.<sup>41</sup> Many historians still largely adopt a 'positivist' approach, using visual sources as empirical evidence. The cultural historian Peter Burke, for example, stresses 'the use of images as historical evidence', their 'testimony' (though warning against the 'temptations of realism'), and draws on approaches such as iconography and iconology, emphasizing social context while warning of the dangers of over-interpretation, and the need for documentary evidence of reception.<sup>42</sup> By contrast, visual sociology increasingly adopts a more 'structuralist' and/or interdisciplinary approach to images. John Prosser's 1988 edited book covered visual anthropology, visual sociology and psychology, and interdisciplinary approaches. In 2001, Marcus Banks provided a guide to empirical qualitative research, explaining how to 'read' pictures, their portrayals, and narratives alongside many examples from visual anthropology.<sup>43</sup> Van Leewen and Jewitt provided an important in-depth survey of visual analysis methods, including content analysis, historical analysis, structuralist analysis, iconography, psychoanalysis, social semiotic analysis, and ethnomethodology.<sup>44</sup> Emmison, Smith, and Mayall's student guide, revised in 2012, covered traditions as diverse as semiotics, ethnomethodology, symbolic interactionism, and material culture studies,<sup>45</sup> while Douglas Harper, a key figure in visual sociology, emphasized ethnographic, symbolic interactionist sociological approaches, and the links to cultural studies work, though stressing the determinist underpinnings of semiotics.<sup>46</sup> By contrast, art historians have exploited methods such as formalism, connoisseurship, technical analysis, iconographical analysis, anthropology, psychoanalysis, structuralist and post-structuralist approaches, contextual analysis, and semiotics.<sup>47</sup> Visual cultural analysis has become an established method in media studies and cultural studies, which both explore the complex relationship between visual culture and 'reality'.<sup>48</sup> Sports study courses have also picked up the theme.<sup>49</sup> Visual ethnography likewise possesses a series of techniques, methodologies, and archives that use the image to represent a concrete social reality.<sup>50</sup> For the wider research community wishing to explore visual culture and work with visual materials, the visual studies scholar Gillian Rose has provided a very useful classroom text covering a critical assessment of key methods, their key issues and perspectives, and how to use and interpret them. First published in 2001, it has been regularly revised.<sup>51</sup>

This sheer variety and the theoretical complexity of approaches now being used mean that the scope of the paper does not permit a fully developed discussion of any single methodology. Further significant differences between them are produced by the broader theoretical context in which they are located. The following sections merely provide a brief critical introduction to some selected leading forms, together with references to current work being carried out in terms of the history of sport.

## **Art History Approaches**



Standard art history approaches largely rely on formal analysis, often of 'high art', using the composition of the visual image itself to seek its answers, looking to see what its creator was trying to achieve. So scholars rely on methods such as iconography (the decoding of images through the analysis of detail and signification), and iconology (the study of their meaning through the analysis of subject matter, symbolism and imagery, style, and medium) in art historical debates. The iconography of football shown in African postage stamps, for example, was analyzed by Agbenyega Adedze in 2012.<sup>52</sup> The purpose of the work, its visual form, and its pictorial tradition are usually explored. Formal approaches are usually accompanied by contextual analysis, which might, for example, explore patrons, artist, viewers; the work, its location and use; or the larger social context and issues it represents and its ideological relevance.

Historians of sport are now increasingly using paintings. Allen Guttman, in his recent study of American sport and art (predominantly paintings) produced over the past two or three centuries, sees sport and art as having a 'sibling relationship within the extended family of culture'. He argues that understanding the history of sports enhances and intensifies the appreciation of sports-themed art, just as understanding the history of sports-themed art offers new perspectives and insights into sports.<sup>53</sup> So, for example, he uses art history techniques to analyze the stylistic modes and conventions employed by artists like Benjamin West, Frederic Remington, George Bellows, Thomas Eakins, or James Henry Daugherty while setting them firmly in their context. John Hughson adopts a cultural history perspective in his work on a 1930 painting by the fine artist and social commentator C.R.W. Nevinson, which treated football in derisory fashion. Hughson sets it in both its broader social context and in terms of the artist.<sup>54</sup> Huggins has used contemporary paintings of a 1750 carriage match at Newmarket as a starting point for a culturalist exploration of the debates about the early modern period and proto-modernity.<sup>55</sup> In 2013, Ray Physic took what he called a 'social art history' approach to the representations of football in British fine art, placing it in its social and economic contexts, alongside use of techniques such as iconology. He probed related social issues, such as social class, gender, race, identity, and celebrity culture. His main focus, however, was on the significance on football art in relation to what it reveals about the cultural phenomenon of football and cultural issues associated with football.<sup>56</sup>

Art historians, beyond a small sub-group working on the genre of 'sporting' paintings of hunting, horse racing etc., have been less interested in sport more generally but are now entering the field. American art historian Daniel Haxall has begun to open up the neglected field of contemporary fine art and its coverage of sport, most especially football, in relation to issues of gender, class, politics, nationalism, and social norms.<sup>57</sup> British art historian Mike O'Mahony's books on the USSR physical and visual culture and on images of the Olympic games (such as Soviet realist paintings) use a range of historical approaches, and reveal how paintings' deeper meanings are not only embedded within the painting but are also generated by them.<sup>58</sup> Another art historian, Bernard Vere, has recently reviewed the new approaches to sport and art.<sup>59</sup>

## Content Analysis

Content analysis applied to written texts appeared regularly in NASSH presentations and in some sports history papers in the 1980s and 1990s, though it has fallen from favour, and recent content analysis has been less rigorously quantified.<sup>60</sup> Morrow and Waters provided details of its methodology

as early as 1982, stressing the need for methodology to be explicit.<sup>61</sup> Content analysis of visual material is still rare, though content analysis research carried out by the Institut für Sportpublizistik in Cologne, which compared German 'quality press' photographs of the Olympics and Paralympics at Sydney and Salt Lake City, was able to note a range of significant differences in number, types of representation, and techniques of distracting or concealing the disability of the world-class athletes involved.<sup>62</sup> Content analysis is a more structured and systematic approach to analyze images. It is potentially useful in dealing with large numbers of sporting images, but there are challenges of meeting the complexities of coding, and then producing a quantitative estimation of the coding's relative significance. It also fails to deal with context well. Analysis might well offer one way of examining the dominant visual codes used in a particular image form such as sporting cigarette card collections. Though it looks carefully at images, it does not study the social practices of production and lacks reflexivity.

## Semiology

Deconstructionists, drawing on ideas formulated in the writings of Jacques Derrida, have challenged the idea that paintings and other high art are logical and comprehensible. They emphasize their resistance to interpretation, and focus on indeterminacy and the open play of signs. Many art historians have turned to cultural studies approaches such as semiology as a more interdisciplinary and 'quasi-scientific' form of iconography and iconology, offering a specialized but precise and rich vocabulary. Semiology explores not just what visual material might mean but emphasises how the creator, viewer, and wider society go about making these meanings. It lays bare the prejudices and ideologies beneath the surface. Its focus is on the 'signs' within images, their 'codes', 'mythologies', 'ideologies', or wider systems of meaning for specific groups, and their interrelationships. The image itself, its structure and compositional features, and the ways it constructs and shapes effects such as social difference is at the centre of the analysis. For example, Naofumi Masumoto's 1998 analysis of the multiple interpretations of Olympism in sports films drew heavily on semiological readings of texts, contexts, and meta-texts.<sup>63</sup> The image itself can be read in terms of the forms particular elements take; their placing and special organisation; what they denote; or how they link and associate within and beyond the visual form. Often, there are elements of intertextuality since a visual source might be connected consciously (or unconsciously) by its creator to other visual forms.

The strength (and potential weakness) of semiology is its precise, rich, and specialist vocabulary which can exclude some readers. The semiologist approach sees such 'signs' as being complex and falling into a number of types or categories, too detailed to explore here. Connotative signs, for example, carry a number of higher level meanings. So a picture of Australian Rules player Nicky Winmar responding to on-field racist abuse by lifting his jersey and pointing to his chest has been analyzed by Klugman and Osmond in terms of its racial connotations and symbolic significance to debates about its purpose and meaning.<sup>64</sup>

Semiology links to cultural readings of a sporting image, for example, which might concentrate on features within it such as age, gender, race, appearance, embodiment and size, or manner, activities, props, and settings. These can all be read in terms of their cultural significance and social relationships, at a variety of levels of meanings. Because semiology stresses both the multiple meanings of signs and the existence of dominant codes and preferred readings, it permits reflexivity,

though it does not demand it. A major weakness is its lack of interest in wider reception. The 'expert' semiologist offers a privileged reading, but often shows little interest in how others might interpret it differently.

## Discourse Analysis

This is an umbrella term, drawing heavily on post-modern and Foucauldian approaches to discourse to critically explore context, text, intertextuality, and ways of seeing. It uses the construction of knowledge to explore past sporting culture through the visual. It emphasizes form over content and representations over reality. It tends to be most focused on the image itself, its composition, and its effects on society, often in terms of social class and difference, and the relationship between image and the broader context of power relations and social interactions. It mainly addresses questions of how, rather than of why. Within sport history, scholars including Susan Birrell, Doug Brown, Murray Phillips, and Richard Pringle have regularly applied such approaches to text. Key questions about the objects, subjects, and discursive practices of texts, and their claims to truth, can also be applied to visual material. Susan Birrell's analysis of Mount Everest as a cultural symbol, for example, used an interdisciplinary approach largely using discourse analysis, which drew predominantly on written text discourse, but also used films and photographs.<sup>65</sup> Visual discourses offer sets of meanings, metaphors, stories, and representations that construct together a particular interpretation, and provide frameworks through which people interpret their lives. Commonalities, visual patterns, and themes amongst sources can be drawn out. Dominant discourses exist in a context of power and knowledge, and have some form of institutional support.

Some forms of discourse analysis focus more on the image, its complexities and contradictions, and its social modalities, seeing it as almost socially produced and exploring how it constructs the social world and social differences. In his recent detailed study of the Victorian painter William Powell Frith's painting 'Derby Day', for example, Mike Huggins drew on the way it was informed by ideas of physiognomy and phrenology and 'social types' as well as notions of respectability and disreputability.<sup>66</sup> Other forms of discourse analysis focus more on sites of production, dissemination, and spectator/visitor experience, and the way dominant institutions, drawing on notions of power and the 'expert' knowledge of curators, have used images. Many of the contributors to recent work on museums and halls of fame have interrogated museum technologies of display and interpretation in such ways.<sup>67</sup> Further work is needed on the processes through which sporting art has been marginalized, with rare exceptions such as the work of Stubbs, and dismissed as not 'high art'.

While the visual image remains a focal point in discourse analysis and other approaches, it should be understood as just one component of the larger field. Rose emphasises that meanings of all images are made not just by the image itself but also in terms of the way in which it was produced, on the ways in which different audiences saw it, and finally in the various routes of its dissemination and circulation, ones which were structured by what she called 'power geometries'.<sup>68</sup>

Studies of how sport circulates in fans' memories, experiences, and imaginations would be a fascinating oral history topic, though even the ways images themselves circulate are yet to be really explored. Mike Huggins's *Derby Day* analysis explored reasons why Frith decided on the topic, the way the picture was created, its social context, compositional issues, the ways in which the painting

itself created meaning, the artist's and characters' gazes, the multiple ways it was deconstructed and interpreted by the various audiences, including critics.<sup>69</sup> It did not, however, explore the painting's subsequent physical tours overseas to Europe, the USA, and Australia in the 1860s, which helped to circulate it and foster its popularity, though its wildly enthusiastic reception as it travelled round Australia in 1864–1865 has been analysed by Andrew Montana.<sup>70</sup> Racing was so popular there that by 1886, the Austrian painter Karl Kahler was reportedly able to charge *la crème de la crème* of Melbourne society five guineas apiece to include them in his imitative work *The Derby Day at Flemington*, and it likewise had a hugely popular reception at its exhibition at the Melbourne Athenaeum.<sup>71</sup>

In general, it has been these last two sites of meaning (reception) and later dissemination and circulation that have been more neglected in current writing. The different ways in which images circulate are important. They can be transformed during travel, and the speed, nature and directions of travel all help to determine the effects they have on viewers. For example, as yet, there does not seem to be any significant interest by historians in what Clough and Halley have called 'the affective turn', and the ways that visual material might gain 'affective' value as it circulates, and collective emotions are created.<sup>72</sup>

## Psychoanalysis

The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan has built on ideas of scopophilia (pleasure in looking) and visual disruption to argue that certain ways of seeing and visualities are of vital importance. They address the self very powerfully. So these approaches grapple with subjectivity and the unconscious, the image *and* its psychic, emotional and social effects on the audience, whether conscious or unconscious, including visual pleasure, fantasy, and desire. It has been particularly prominent in film studies and in studies of gender and sexualities. Laura Mulvey's important work on the 'male gaze', 'voyeurism', 'castration complexes', and 'fetishist scopophilia' has shown how 'the fascination of film is reinforced by pre-existing patterns of fascination already at work in the individual male subject and the social formations' that moulded him.<sup>73</sup> Patriarchal power operations and the exercise of desire are invested in the gaze. She demonstrates how framing, lighting and camera position, movement, and points of view aid such production. Gazes are orchestrated between characters on screen, and between the positioned audience and screen. Unlike Mulvey, Lacan has focused in more detail on the gaze and its cultural constructions in terms of how the subject is seen.<sup>74</sup> O'Mahony addressed issues such as voyeurism and gaze direction in pictorial space in terms of his discussion of the Russian painter Alexander Deineka's 'Dinamo: Sevastopol' (1934).<sup>75</sup> Mike Huggins explored some aspects of the 'sporting gaze' and gaze theory in an early paper on visual methodology. There is currently little work on this theme, despite the approach offering potential.<sup>76</sup> For example, given Mulvey's emphasis on the male gaze, how might one theorize and investigate a female sporting gaze?

## Audience and Reception Studies

Audience studies and the reception of the visual are still largely neglected in current work, especially in more theoretical approaches such as discourse analysis or semiotics. This is surprising since as

early as 1972, John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* made the point that the relationship between the image and the spectator is always critical, so creative intent and reception do not always coincide.<sup>77</sup> Likewise, Stuart Hall drew on semiotic coding and decoding approaches in parallel to focus on the extent of the symmetrical fit between image producers and viewers.<sup>78</sup> Empirical work is currently more influential and informative, despite the major challenges and ambiguous complexities of establishing the interpretation and reception of images by contemporaries, and the hearts and minds of fans can be explored through oral history. The relationship between image and actual viewers, the differences between groups of viewers, the different ways they 'read' the image, the conventions they follow, and their behaviour while viewing are all potential topics. But audiences (spectators, viewers, or 'beholders' [Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's term of choice]) are difficult to categorize in terms of social position or interpretative practices.<sup>79</sup> And each term has different meanings and associations. Audiences may be conceptualized as 'active', 'resistant' to hegemonic attempts, 'subversive', or even 'marginalized'. Katia Boddy makes the point that sport's uses, interest, pleasures, and gratifications are heterogeneous and variable, 'depending on class, race, nation, gender or sexuality'.<sup>80</sup> The ways in which spectators and views respond to the aesthetics of sport are beginning to be opened up. A 2006 symposium on Gumbrecht's book *In Praise of Athletic Beauty* attracted scholars of sport from a variety of interdisciplinary perspectives, exploring it from phenomenological, philosophical, historical, epistemological, and cultural positions.<sup>81</sup> Yet, despite the complexity of the theoretical frameworks offered in discussion, actual spectators and their responses remained shadowy. In part, this is because of the difficulty of gathering data. For historians of sport who examine the past beyond living memory, data gathering approaches such as interviews or ethnographic work are not possible. So, currently reception has been covered relatively unsystematically by most sports history studies, while sports sociology has paid more attention to hooligans than fans.

## Mixed Approaches

In reality, however, historians of sport have not usually adopted a single approach uncritically. Many use a mix of approaches depending on the subject studied. Paul Wells, for example, who had previously used a theoretical analysis based on Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's theory of 'fascinations' in sport for one of his studies, now describes his more recent methodology in studying sport animations as poly-vocal and multi-register, combining a sense of historical context with secondary literature, and theories of practice and practices of theory articulated by scholars, practitioners, and lay participants. He then attempts to combine these various positions, knowledge, and skill sets through case study-led textual analysis and an overarching 'super-objective' argument.<sup>82</sup>

In their study of Australian sports stamps, Osmonds and Phillips draw on Alun Munslow's concept of historical 'story space', context, semiotic theory, and the new museology.<sup>83</sup> The sociologist John Hughson takes a different approach to Olympic poster design, drawing on cultural aesthetics, and analyzing the posters' designs, classical references, and their association with political controversies and ideological and nationalistic functions.<sup>84</sup> There has always been a politics of visibility about what is and what not is represented, and we need to be aware of the latter.

## Photographs in Visual Research: An Exemplar Case Study

Despite such variety of approach and method, photographs are still the most used visual medium. Photographs have plasticity, an ephemeral material nature, and technical and physical choices about their production help to create meaning. They 'are enmeshed with subjective, sensuous and embodied interactions', and involve 'processes of intention, making, distributed, consuming, using, discarding and recycling', all of which impact the way they are understood.<sup>85</sup> Visual sociologists have often had a particular emphasis on photographs, arguing that while they do not provide us with unbiased objective documentation of the material world, they 'can show characteristic attributes of people, objects and events that often elude even the most skilled wordsmiths'.<sup>86</sup>

Historians, skilled at source evaluation, often have the clearest sense of some of photography's limitations. A photograph or a film is visual information that has been framed by the producer. The process of choosing what to include or what to exclude from view is made by the person who stands behind the camera. The photograph or film is a representation of, not an exact replication, a social situation. Photographs are often undated and unlabelled. Gary Osmond's socio-political interpretation of the iconic media pictures of the black power salute given by black Americans Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the Mexico Olympics in 1968 is focused on the white Australian athlete, Peter Norman, who was also on the podium. Osmond points out that the captioning, positioning, and accompanying text all have an explanatory and/or interpretive role, and that careful cropping of the photograph sometimes allowed the white runner to be literally cut out of the picture.<sup>87</sup>

Identities, especially those of race and gender, have been prominent themes. The art historian Gillian Poulter has explored the relationship between visual culture and national identity in Canada, using a variety of images, especially photographs such as the 1867 Notman shots of Beers' Montreal Lacrosse and the Caugnawaga (Indian) Lacrosse Clubs and of sports hunting, and demonstrates that they displayed a powerful visual vocabulary of Canadian identity.<sup>88</sup> They were mediated in a variety of ways, not just by the actors and photographers, but by the viewers and audiences too. Another art historian, Alex Leese, discussing the form and composition of engraver William Ralston's contemporary depiction of the 1872 international football match between England and Scotland, reveals how issues of class, national identity, and social satire are there tied together.<sup>89</sup> By contrast, Dylan Miner, for example, draws explicitly on the work of Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag to inform his analysis of Cuban sports posters and photographs.<sup>90</sup>

Lynda Mannik and Karen McGarry apply discourse analysis and cultural studies to explore the ways in which photographic and other media representations of the bodies of different groups, including sports stars, are constructed and performed within the context of visual- and discursive-mediated content. They point up the ways in which images of individuals destabilize national mainstream visual tropes, which in turn have the potential to destabilize nationalist messages.<sup>91</sup> Gary Osmond points to the ways that photographs address race and can destabilize the past.<sup>92</sup> Two studies of the photographs from the 1912 Stockholm Olympic Games and the 1926 Women's Games at Gothenburg have shown how they related to gender norms and to ways of framing athletic women's identity.<sup>93</sup> Joyce Woolridge argues that in representing the working-class masculinity of leading English football professionals, magazine photographs change their appearance and format in relation to social and cultural changes.<sup>94</sup> Even photo-finish snaps have been analyzed.<sup>95</sup>

## Conclusion

This essay can do more than briefly scratch the surface of a rapidly growing and extremely complex subject, of which the methodologies sketched here form only a small part. We currently need more theoretical contributions to widen our appreciation of the idea of the visual, and better come to grips with the ways in which representations and interpretations of sport in visual culture resonate with values specific in place and time. We need more detailed critiques regarding the premises, assumptions, and practices of studies of the visual in sport, including those in this present paper. We need to look at images more carefully, and take into account their production and its technological aspects, as well as their compositional elements. We need to consider the social conditioning of images and especially questions of access and power such as class, race, gender, or sexuality and their effects. We need to be reflexive in our looking. We need to know far more than we do currently about the audiences for and the reception of such material. Currently, gender issues have received only limited analysis. Likewise, the subtleties and complexities of embodiment and its representation in visual culture in terms of body and gender politics, Western identity, eroticism and performativity, or sports fashion are yet to be fully brought out.

## Keywords

visuality,  
methodologies,  
art history,  
semiology,  
culture

## Notes

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