

The Many Levels of Sports Narration

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Abstract: At its most a typical sports narrative records what happens in space and time. Alongside this traditional history of events there has emerged a research approach that might be called structural sports history. Its methods move in the world under the surface of facts, explored by researchers in ways that resemble archaeology. The aim is to uncover the changed human relationships and new forms of presence in sport-figurations of corporeality, space and time. Where the event-history approach recounts and recapitulates, the new approach works towards interpretation and understanding. These two are joined by yet a third element, the most intimate aspect of sports narratives: microhistory and the routes that it opens to the interfaces between the public and the private and the general and the particular, where the reader-oriented focus of the experiencing and narrating subject is necessarily foregrounded and at this point surface such elements of narrativity as the “confessional”, the “meditative” and the “fragmentary” (auto)biography. The article describes different levels of a sports narrative and their conventions in qualitative sports research.

1. Prologue

This article began its journey from the bookshelves at my home, from the books about sport I found there. It is a very personal journey; it is not a broad survey of the subject, a methodologically exhaustive discussion or a pedanti-

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cally instructive treatment. Some things will be left open, food for thought. I make the journey on resources drawn from the experience that I have accumulated, over the years, of sports research and of sports narration as mediated through social and cultural discourses. The meaning of my text is held together by two warps. The first one represents an attempt to grasp the sociohistorical essence of sport; is sport something that can be taken for granted or something relative and full of fissures? What twists the second thread around the first one is the fact that in sport, seeing is not enough; we must also narrate that what we see there, and if we look at it from another direction or in another way, what do we see then – and how shall we give an account of what we have seen?

2. Grand Narratives?

A huge 1,346-page book by a legendary Finnish sports journalist, Martti JUKOLA, published in 1945, was entitled *Urheilun pikku jättiläinen* [A Little Big Book About Sport]¹.

It was a reference work cherished in its time. I think that in the 1940s and 1950s the book could be found in nearly all homes in Finland; in big and modest bookcases, on top of the kitchen cupboard, by the stove or kitchen range. In my own childhood home it stood among *The Bible*, *Kalevala*, *Suomen maailmanmestarit* [Finnish World Champions] and *Seitsemän veljestä* [Seven Brothers].² The book had been leafed through until the pages were tattered, with the margins decorated by a small boy's pencil-scribbled comments on who was “a shit!”, who “a good one” – in other words, what was real sport, who were the real heroes?

The radio broadcasts from sports competitions that I heard with my father in the 1950s made the book a locus where knowledge and the mimetic came together. The book was *there!* It did not fade into the twilight like many of the aural impressions and memories generated by a radio commentary. It was where you could check *it* – after a quarrel in the yard – look up who *it* was, *where* and *when*. Its pages served as the source for the names of the winter- and summertime heroes that you took over for your own use and for use in the

¹ The complete name of JUKOLA's work (Porvoo, Finland: WSOY, 1945) is *Urheilun pikku jättiläinen. Ohjekirja nuorille katsojille, tietokirja kaikille urheilun harrastajille* [The Little Big Book of Sport. A Guidebook for Young Spectators, a Reference Work for Everyone Interested in Sport]. There was a third text printed in the title page in minute type, as if intended to represent writer's modesty: “Maailman kaikki urheilut esitetty sen 22:ssa luvussa. Kuvia yhteensä 1200 [All sports of the world described in its 22 chapters. A total of 1200 illustrations].”

² *Kalevala*, compiled by Elias LÖNNROT and illustrated by Akseli GALLEN-KALLELA (Porvoo, Finland: WSOY, 1943) and *Seitsemän Veljestä* (Seven Brothers), similarly illustrated by GALLEN-KALLELA (Porvoo, Finland: WSOY, 1934), are the two national epics of Finland.

drama, planned together with your friends, acted out in the yard; it was where you also found its events, planned in advance but also enlivened by many surprises. What was this if not role play of the time?

As a compilation the book was, apart from being a typical sports narrative, also a “moral story”, aimed chiefly at boys, about good youth and about an image of manhood to aspire to. The pages of JUKOLA’s thick volume recorded, in the manner of an event-historical document, the important basic messages of sport: *What, Where, When?* From the perspective of sports history, the book gave the “grand narratives” of sport exact coordinates and compass courses. Its immensely detailed approach represented an event history of sport at the same time as it nevertheless bore little resemblance to the dry-as-dust verbal and pictorial worlds of, for example, *Who’s Who*-type publications.

3. New Little Big Books?

There are also new documents on my bookshelves, today’s “little big books”: *Encyclopedia of World Sport I-III. From Ancient Times to the Present* (LEV-INSOIN & CHRISTENSEN 1996) and a work on Finnish athletes, *Kilpakenttien sankarit I-IV* [Heroes of the Sports Arena] (MÄKELÄ 1992-1994). Both documents try to X-ray sport and sports events also through a sociocultural gaze; the first one more superficially, the second one more richly and with a broader range of nuances. Both include vulgar and past aspects of sport, as if to remind us what even today’s sport has basically been all about.

Kilpakenttien sankarit is a factual sport book about the successes of Finnish men and women abroad. It is also a fascinating reading experience. The heroic tales are interspersed with texts that could be said to represent, like Walter BENJAMIN’s (1973, p.257) methodological gaze, the “small and trivial” of sport, texts that push their way into all that “junk” that lies hidden beneath the grandiose and pompous surface of sport. The contributors’ anecdotal approach gains in density particularly in the text boxes, where what strikes the reader most forcibly is the thought that sport is utterly useless. An excellent example might be a news item cited in the book about how in China in the Henan province, tobacco killed the teenage winner of a tobacco-smoking competition, Zhu, after three hours of puffing away – or the story about Toimi Silvonen who, in the 1960s, stayed awake for 32,5 days and nights without getting a wink of sleep. There were expressions of concern even in the Finnish Parliament, when the government was asked what it was going to do about such a record attempt (SIRONEN & KÄRKKÄINEN 1993, p.13).

Yes, these were record attempts, too, though without the blessing of the International Olympic Committee. That is why such eccentric performances never reach the pages of event-historical accounts of sport but are, instead, set down mainly in the Guinness Book of Records. Even so, this is sport, at least in

the sense of the Finnish word for “sport”³, and also “larking around”, for any serious-minded rationalist an activity without rhyme or reason. Both rhyme and reason are similarly absent from play and its age-old elements, named by Roger CAILLOIS (1961) competition (*agon*), vertigo (*ilinx*), chance (*alea*) and imitation (*mimicry*). These elements are variously emphasised and carry different overtones and meanings in different cultures. Where cockfight as it is practised in Bali uncovers, as an example of GEERTZ’s “deep play”, local cultural strata (GEERTZ 1993, see also SIRONEN 1992, p.12), in Spain bullfight serves as a similar mirror of identity. Such displays of daring have been described any number of times, particularly in poetry and drama, and often such texts have served to bring about a switch from the flat performance sites of modern sport towards the rhizomes of different body cultures and corporeal experiences.

4. Configuration – The Radical Turn of Sports History

In his classic *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners* (Vol. I) (German original 1939, English translation 1978) Norbert ELIAS, the German-born sociologist who emigrated to the UK and who won real recognition only in the 1970s, used the term “figuration” to describe the slow but inescapable changes that brought the instincts and emotions of the Europeans under increasingly strict control (ELIAS 1978).⁴ By assuming that there is a link between humans’ inner (“psychogenesis”) and outer (“sociogenesis”) world ELIAS sought to demonstrate, basing his views on books on etiquette and manners among other sources, historical changes and differences in modes of thinking and behaviour. Figurations referred, like mentalities, to a process, shaping everyday human behaviour, of self-regulation and self-control, largely unconscious but a necessary precondition of social development, where an increasingly powerful *superego* gradually reduced impulsive and aggressive behaviour (ELIAS 1978, pp.127, 141). This was a clear step towards historical sociology and psychohistory (LASCH 1985) – and simultaneously towards the genesis of modern sport.

German-Danish Henning EICHBERG (1987) was the first researcher to apply ELIAS’ idea of figuration to sport history or, rather, to its sociocultural base. He discussed change under the term “configuration”, using it as a means of starting to bring modern sport back to its old domain. “Where Elias, in his civilizing process, emphasised the imperceptible slowness of figurative changes, Eichberg emphasised their discontinuities and rupture” (translated from SIRONEN 1994, p.167). EICHBERG (2002) asks: “Where is the place of

³ The Finnish word “*urheilu*” has two meanings. Originally it meant risking oneself, doing something for a dare and flirting with obvious danger. A father might warn his sons from “*urheilu*” on thin ice, risking themselves on thin ice.

⁴ The second volume was *The Civilizing Process. State Formation and Civilization* (English translation 1982).

sport and where is the place of play?” How do the pull-and-tug games of many primitive peoples differ from the logic of modern sport? How to define “tug-of-the-mouth”, practised by the Inuit, the Arctic Eskimos? Are these sport in the same sense as power lifting, a modern sport that retains its rather rustic aspect? No, they are more: a festivaesque gathering, where the winner is neither universal nor a statistic, nor rewarded with medals or money. Naturally, such archaic and bizarre phenomena associated with different body cultures cannot be described in terms of a history of performance, time and place. It is true that tug-of-war for example became also an Olympic sport in the first three decades of the 20th century (EICHBERG 2002), but this was only a brief interlude. Given this, one cannot but ask why certain rustic and carnevalesque games of strength and stamina have disappeared from modern stadiums, why many of them were never given admission there? This despite the fact that the number of sports has grown enormously throughout the history of the modern Olympic movement.

EICHBERG (2002) assumes that, the national and international movement of modern sport sees both sport and itself as “evolution”, as something that is constantly developing, progressing. This modern “configuration” of sport presupposes the universally indisputable and uniform measurement and comparison of performances. This creates a need to have not only an acceptable performance but also sports equipment and sport sites correspond to fixed norms and standards. At the same time the system of sport must be rid of unpredictability and any special features linked with a particular body culture. As a result, despite its what can be quite old roots, modern sport has become an object, a commodity and a product. Like merchandise placed on supermarket shelves, modern sports and sport performances can be recognised and looked at as something familiar and pre-packaged. It is the narratives about such commodified events and experiences that generate also “sports talk”, a discourse that we can follow daily in the pages of newspapers and on television channels. To put it simply, sports talk is talk about a “machine” that either keeps running or breaks down – both metaphorically and concretely. The body management that characterises modern sport, externally evaluated, universally compared and, today, also financially rewarded, constructs a model of human physical activity that is based on a technical rationale and that may amount to clinical precision. EICHBERG (2002) considers that it is this requirement of “objectivity” that has eliminated “impurity” and “non-rationality” from sport and what is interesting is, its dialogical (I-You) aspect. Drawing on Martin BUBER, EICHBERG describes how there is an I-You relationship between Inuit tug-of-the-mouth contestants. Making the contest more sport like (“sportisation”), for example by keeping time, would transform it into a you-it relationship. Modern competitive and top sports are ultimately about the type of “it” (=result) that must be produced in the given sport. Modern sport, whose austere culture is dominated by the logic of capitalist accumulation and of an endless drive to-

wards greater and greater efficiency, has been purged of the force fields of rustic sport, such as laughter, change and the positive regression that takes place in play.⁵

Those who watched the elimination trials of the male 100-metre run at the 2003 Paris Athletics World Championship Games may have been perplexed by the one-man show staged by Jon Drummond, disqualified because of a false start. After the elimination the runner, who considered that he had been excluded on unjust grounds, spent a long time stretched out on the track, refusing to leave despite numerous requests by the race stewards. However, the spectators seemed to have sympathy for Drummond, lying there and finally plunging into the steeplechase water jump, even though the Finnish TV commentator went as far as to demand that the police be sent for. It may be that Drummond was just deeply disappointed and angry and nothing else. It may also be that media dramatics and overacting were a factor. But was all this at the same time a reflection of the only narrative that the media is interested in telling to its spectators and readers, a narrative where the disciplined body drilled as far as it can possibly go is forbidden to express its grotesque (“low”) aspects or act against a manuscript written in advance? As the indignant TV commentator put it, “What would happen if everyone began behaving similarly?” That’s right?

5. Through a Microscope?

An article by Giovanni LEVI (1992) “On Microhistory”, discusses the close link between microhistory and anthropology, particularly the perspective of GEERTZ’s “thick description”.

Rather than starting with a series of observations and attempting to impose one law-like theory on them, this perspective starts from a set of signifying signs and tries to fit them into an intelligible structure (...) Thick description therefore serves to record in written form a series of signifying events or facts which would otherwise be evanescent, but which can be interpreted by being inserted in a context, that is to say, in the flow of social discourse. This approach succeeds in using microscopic analysis of the most minute events as a means of arriving at the most far-reaching conclusions (...) The power of the interpreter thus becomes infinite, immeasurable, not susceptible of falsification. (LEVI 1992, p.98)

Among microhistorical approaches to sport is “memory work” (“*Erinnerungsarbeit*”), a method initiated in women’s studies (see HAUG 1987, 1990) that, in abandoning conventional “surface talk”, has focused on the history of recollected events and on what is under their surface; the aim is to pro-

⁵ As late as in the 1950s, during ski-jumping competitions in my own home town, Kuopio, thousands of spectators might have roared with laughter if a stray dog would have urinated in the landing pit of the ski-jumping hill or when a ski jumper took a pratfall after his jump.

vide an account of, for example, what has happened to one's own body and ego at different stages of one's life.⁶ Unlike traditional autobiographies, stories that represent memory work are not necessarily long, but they may be all the more dense. Where analytic methods look for objective knowledge and for truth about "it", experiential and phenomenological methods construct "the subjectivity of the ego".

As early as during the debate on positivism in the 1960s, the critique of empiricism put forward by Theodor W. Adorno was directed among other things at the inadequate empiricist outlook of empirical social studies. They abstract from and reduce the multiplicity of reality, diminishing the very experientiality in whose name they profess to operate (translated from SIRONEN 1994, p.178).

This means also that in memory work the investigating subject is contextualised, while in normal empiricism it is eliminated altogether. Esa SIRONEN (1994, p.179) writes:

Adorno described his standpoint as standing for 'the rebellion of experience against empiricism' and pointed to the example of Sigmund Freud, who had discovered the mechanisms of the psyche by examining dreams, jokes and slips, called by him 'the waste product of sense reality' (translated from the Finnish original).

The process that generates microhistorical narration and a microhistorical text can be triggered by a photo, a diary, something told by another person, anything "well remembered". The narrative may be propelled forward by event-historical facts and an autobiographical perspective. The narrator may look for connections in the terrains of the general, the private and the particular and along the boundaries that separate these. The narrator can also focus their gaze to locate thickenings where the recollected experiences are filtered through, for example, ethnicity, colonialism, nationalism, masculinity, femininity and subcultural discourses and rites.⁷

It is unlikely that such narration will produce harmonious and chronological facts of one kind or another, typical in the genre of memoirs for example. Instead, the work of recollecting experiences and narrating such memory work takes place somewhere "in between"; along boundaries and on interfaces. What we have here is a "configuration" of a kind between harmony and disharmony in the manner of Paul RICOEUR (1992, p.141).

⁶ In a strict sense and originally, "memory work" referred, in women's studies, to fairly long sessions and long-term interaction between discussion participants (HAUG 1987).

⁷ Soile VEIJOLA (1992) has drawn on her own experiences to describe the gendered modes of being built into sport – how "you must behave" – in *sähly*, a stick game where men and women played together, very popular among university students in Finland particularly in the early 1980s. When *sähly* was thrust through the "sports machine" (SCHMIDT 1982, p.11), it turned into salibandy ("floorball"), no longer played in mixed teams but with men and women in separate ones.

I am applying the term 'configuration' to this art of composition which mediates between concordance and discordance. (...) I propose to define discordant concordance, characteristic of all narrative compositions, by the notion of the synthesis of the heterogeneous (...) The essential difference distinguishing the narrative model from every other model of connectedness resides in the status of events, which we have repeatedly made the touchstone of the analysis of the self. Whereas in a causal-type model, event and occurrence are indiscernible, the narrative event is defined by its relation to the very operation of configuration; it participates in the unstable structure of discordant concordance characteristic of the plot itself.

6. The Local and the Private Side of the Autobiographical Approach

In the 1980s Finnish sport science saw the first beginnings of a shift (e.g. LAITINEN & TIIHONEN 1990) that might be called a "poetic sociology of sport", a quality that Richard H. BROWN (1978, pp.1-2) missed in sociology as early as in the 1970s – defining it as "an aesthetic view of sociological knowledge where the sociological understanding is yielded by interpretive procedures that focus on meanings that actors give to their own situations".

Female researchers, who were the first to smell the winds of change, sensed that the history even of sport must be something more than external interpretations and descriptions; it must also include the personally experienced and that which has been written down by those themselves engaged in sport. Male researchers joined in and began to write about themselves, their own experiences of childhood, sport and maleness. Later, when many of these texts were published in English, some non-Finnish researchers began to talk about "Scandinavian" and "Finnish research" (EICHBERG 1994), the "Finnish circle of sport scholars" (BALE 1995), a "group of Scandinavian scholars" (SPARKES 2002, p.76). According to EICHBERG (1994, p.1), the school of research that originated in memory work did not consider the traditional boundaries within the field of scholarship and research very important.

Here, the borderlines between sociology, history, anthropology / ethnology, geography and general cultural studies have become less and less significant. (...) The appearance of a young generation of scholars has caused more conflicts, has bred more psychological introspective inclinations and more vigorous breaking of conventions in disciplinary discourses.

At the core of many narratives stemming from memory work lay an introspective exploration of personal sport and corporeal experiences and their emotional nuances. The stories and texts could be "photographically exact" or they could proceed as if in a "dreamlike stream" of social discourse, as if between the lines, without emphases. Textual stylisation, sometimes even playfulness, must have irritated those researchers who were accustomed to the

conventions of “objective” scientific writing. Biographical texts offering new perspectives, new modes of narration and reading, began to appear not only in the social sciences in particular but also in sports research.⁸ Nevertheless, despite working towards a reader reception based on the principle of “reading with” rather than on that of “reading about” (see ELLIS & BOCHNER 2000), these texts are no more capable than any others of teaching people to narrate and write. Narration is difficult if not impossible to teach. One must simply find the courage to start narrating and writing. Philippe LEJEUNE’s (1989, pp.216-217) analysis of an American guide to writing a biography, *How to Write Your Personal History*, is harsh:

If I write my life story, I do so in order to construct my identity in a personal language or to pass on a particular experience. Well, from the opening pages the author of the manual seems to already know the context of my uniqueness, and the means that will allow me to communicate it (...) my uniqueness is (...) a standard production.

LEJEUNE (1989, p.ix) speaks also about a “generic pact” of autobiography, “*le pacte autobiographique*”.

In effect, the autobiographical pact is a form of contract between author and reader in which the autobiographer explicitly commits himself of herself not to some impossible historical exactitude but rather to the sincere effort to come to terms with and to understand his or her own life.

Acknowledging autobiography to be, historically speaking, a complex and unstable category, and eschewing any pretense to an essentialist or idealist objective, LEJEUNE proposed the following working definition of the genre: “We shall define autobiography as the retrospective prose narrative that someone writes concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality” (ibid. p.viii).

If autobiography is an especially clear example of “retrospective prose”, how seriously should we take the idea of accurate recollection? The issue has been pondered over in autoethnographical articles nearly without end. Pauli KARJALAINEN’s (1997, pp.235-236) discussion of the problem is rather apt. He writes:

remembering is not just thinking or the inner movement of pure consciousness; remembering is movement across the field of time and place as a whole, where external and internal elements enter into a continuous dialogue with each other (...) Remembering is a dynamic process, ceaselessly renewed as moment succeeds moment, where the past (that which was) is projected, as a horizon of expectations, into the future (that which does not yet exist) (translated from the Finnish original).

⁸ Among the most recent edited books to emerge in the field of sports research are *Talking Bodies. Men’s Narratives of the Body and Sport* (SPARKES & SILVENNOINEN 1999), *Moving Writing. Crafting Movement in Sport Research* (DENISON & MARKULA 2003), *Writing Lives in Sports. Biographies, Life-Histories and Methods* (BALE, CHRISTENSEN & PFISTER 2004).

It appears that the voluntary, “event-historical” memory selects from and searches our store of memories while PROUST’s “involuntary memory” (“*mémoire involontaire*”) thrusts us into situations abruptly, without warning (see BENJAMIN 1986, p.15) – and in such cases “it may even be possible to talk of images (al fresco) and of series of localised images where time makes room for places. Places become the primary element, relegating time to a secondary role” (translated from KARJALAINEN 1997, p.237). Such a collection of localised images, in phenomenological terms highly embodied, associated with sights, smells and tastes – whether it is pleurably relaxing or constricts the body – makes possible a type of narration where memory extinguishes time but constructs a place.⁹

7. The Meditative and the Fragmentary

Erkki VAINIKKALA (2003) considers Jean-Jacques ROUSSEAU’s *Confessions* the classical modern autobiography because it introduces a new conception of the subject, a conception of the human individual that incorporates all the contradictions that go with individual existence, with the result that the question concerning the coherence and continuity of the individual becomes an important aspect of autobiographical narration. By contrast, ROUSSEAU’s *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (*Les rêveries du promeneur solitaire*) no longer foreground narration itself but, rather, what may be called contemplation, meditation and reflection, resulting in a freely associating and essayistic text. Various incidents and events are narrated but narrative as a form does not dominate the whole. Narration is only one type among texts making up a mode of representation where reflections are at least equally important. VAINIKKALA (2003) sees meditative autobiography as a genre distinct from memoirs, where the perspective of a “witness” is invariably a strong element. Where memoirs strive towards a “picture of the times”, the narrator of an autobiography is concerned to make sense of own life, and the status of that which is recollected is different.

A storyteller can be a “speaking head” churning out his or her shallow self-confession, today a type of narrator not only fed but also produced by the media in particular. The narrating self is emptied of all social content, as can be

⁹ “Dad climbs down from his lorry and beats the snow off his trousers with his leather mittens. The lorry is parked next to the fence in the backyard, quite close to me, steam still rising from the bonnet. I stand on a mound of piled-up snow: I have skis on my feet, no sticks, a fur hat which covers my ears, and my legs are caked in icy snow. The afternoon winter light is turning blue. It always evokes a feeling of melancholy. The day is drawing to a close. I see far off behind a pond and the empty space of a field, where towering above the trees looms the silhouette of the tall tower of the famous Puijo ski-jump. There it is!” (SILVENNOINEN 2003, p.167)

read and heard, quite easily, from fragments of athletes' talk about themselves before and/or after a competition. However, from a broader perspective "I-talk" reflects the complex problems involved in individualisation and identity construction in a postmodern period: I *must* be myself and I must be *myself* (ZIEHE 1992). According to Thomas ZIEHE, the first demand, directed particularly at young people, is an institutional expectation about behaviour, about coping with today's world and about being aware of the styles and methods available for making oneself personally distinctive. The second demand is a more authentic manifestation of a need for autobiographical self-interpretation, involving a search for an answer to the question "Who am I?" "I-talk" and "self-projects" are an important element of today's culture. The simple idea put forward by Jerome K. BRUNER (1986) that apart from narrating our lives we also live out our narratives might be quite an apt way to sum up the age-old and socially cohesive tradition of narratives.

Both meditative and fragmentary – momentary, moving, caught up in the body – narration can scatter over various places and atmospheres or foreground a personally important location: belong somewhere. "Recollections, momentary glimpses and fragments chart time and place in ways that may be quite different from chronologically oriented historical representations. Pure chronological time is like endless duration and narration, pure chronological place like limitless continuity." (KARJALAINEN 1997, p.236).

A fragmentary text undermines the continuum, the chronological progression of time and events. In sports narration a fragmentary text can also mark resistance against a linear time that progresses too fast and represent, for an adult narrator, one possible way to return to the "child's voice" – a voice lived and experienced long ago even if, as LEJEUNE (1989, p.53) points out,

in the classical autobiographical narrative, it is the voice of the adult narrator that dominates and organizes the text; although he stages the perspective of the child, he hardly lets him speak (...) To reconstruct the spoken word of the child, and eventually delegate the function of narration to him, we must abandon the code of autobiographic verisimilitude (of the 'natural') and enter the space of fiction.

8. Epilogue

My relationship with the "sports Bible" of my childhood, JUKOLA's book, was something personally read and experienced but also something collectively shared. It was how things were seen from the perspective of the sporty masculinity and boys' cultures of Finland in 1950s – and it served as the start of one kind of narrative journey. "Dense descriptions" and "local knowledge" make it possible to account for similar well-remembered, powerful and often very momentary experiences by writing things that are different from and go beyond

bare recording. This is a matter of attributing meanings to “particular things in particular places” (GEERTZ 1993, p.9). Dense description is microscopic (ibid., p.21), and involves, as Norman K. DENZIN (1989, p.83) puts it, an art of description.

A thick description does more than record what a person is doing (...) It presents detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another. Thick description evokes emotionality and self-feelings. It inserts history into experience.

The subject of our research and writing may, on the quiet so to speak, drop us discursive hints about how things and events should be narrated, and this is true also in sport. It is not only cultural texts that are layered; such layers stratify also the experiences of athletes and those who write about sport. Because of this, deconstructions of the subject and “personal touches” give the writer and the reader more narrative space than does, for example, scholarly discursive prose. If we succeed in linking routine experiences, such as “sports talk”, also with the social world, this simultaneously inserts them into communication between human beings. Marjatta SAARNIVAARA (2002, p.141) quotes Della POLLOCK who observed that there has been an increased focus in research writing on literary representation which too has met with resistance.

In historical research for example, it has been argued, among other things, that conventional forms of writing are ‘more democratic’ and hence easier to teach everyone. In Pollock’s view the idea is odd to say the least because it means defining scholarship in terms of the least common denominator. (Translated from the Finnish original.)

I am strongly captivated by what Roland BARTHES writes about our two ways of observing ourselves and our environment.

If the established method of observation is ‘*studium*’, then it is counterbalanced by ‘*punctum*’; the prick of reality, a sudden revelation where even words fail us (...) We are scientific because we lack sensitivity (...) What we call science has been possible only when the moving gaze freezes into a stare, a perspective (see BARTHES 1993, p.81, VAINIKKALA 1993, pp.97-98; quotation translated from the Finnish text.)

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