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MATCH WITHOUT THE AUDIENCE - COMPETITION WITHOUT PERFORMANCE

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Abstract The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically affects all aspects of organizing sporting events. The question raises whether sports competition can be possible without the audience, and what is the value of sports results if spectators do not attend and witness them? The aim of this paper is to analyze the observed problem within the theoretical framework of the performance studies, namely the theory of Erika Fischer-Lichte. Also, the aim of this paper is to introduce theoretical postulates of theatre and performance studies to sports researchers because they have great potential for application in the analysis of sport and its social role and characteristics. It was concluded that by abolishing the bodily co-presence of the audience and athletes autopoietic feedback loop is broken and the competition loses its performance properties, which is why sports results achieved without the presence of the audience cannot be valued in the same way as those achieved in front of the audience. The analysis lays the foundation for future empirical research as well as event organising and broadcasting practise improvement.

Key words: Bodily co-presence, autopoietic feedback loop, performance studies, COVID-19, event organisation

INTRODUCTION

Current outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic is undeniably affecting all aspects of events organizing [7] including sporting events and performances. Whilst a number of crowd gathering is focused on the virtual space and advantage of online communication, sports competitions are mostly organized without the presence of the audience. Even though sports fans all over the world have embraced the ending of the pandemic restrictions, their enthusiasm has quickly perished. In the hearts and minds of the countless sports fans, there has been a sense of emptiness and void as if the season 20/21 didn't bring anything to the table. This impression was deeply seeded in the subjectivity of the former audience member and, sometimes, not in sync with an actual matter of things. For instance, FC Liverpool won Premier Lige after over 30 years. Amongst the army of Liverpool supporters (including the author of this paper), there was a number of those who have seen this result followed by lack of excitement and joy. What was the actual problem?

To put it plainly, it is not the same to follow a sporting event from the chair or to partake from sports arena. Although in the digital media and the global communications era, there is a lot more hours of everyday life spent in a virtual world [11] and the high resolution screens are just another part of home appliances [13] the feeling and the thrill still are not nearly the same. Even more, watching live broadcast of event with or without audience also can't be compare.

The question is: can sport exist without the audience, and what would be the value of sports competitions if there are no viewers present? Strictly speaking, even without the audience there is a scoreboard, results are achieved, teams and individual players are beating defeat, winning titles and competitions. These results are noted and imported into sports yearbooks and statistics with equal value as those that have been achieved with audience members. However, if one would search deeper into the topic and understanding of the noted problem, the analysis would have to be spread to the field outside sports law and took into consideration in a broad social context, i.e. social aspect of sports and sporting events as

one of the basic ontological principles in their existence. An example of that is the approach to the sports and somatic that was dominant in Ancient Greece, most relevant in inherited Olympic games. Democratic uplifting of the individual was in regards to the physical state of the person, therefore sporting and physical exercise have been presented in continuity to spiritual, intellectual and philosophical work on self. There is one other thing connecting organized sporting events and their thought counterpart – the audience. For that reason, the applied theory for this type of analysis will be Erika Fischer-Lichte's [2,3,4,5] theory of performance, one of the most influential theories in field of theatre, culture, and art, with deep roots in anthropology.

The main goal of this paper is to apply theoretical assumptions of performance studies onto the analysis of the noted problem of sports performance without the audience. Likewise, the purpose of this paper is to present the Fischer-Lichte's [2,3,4,5] performance theory to the sport theoretical, scientific, and broad public and to point out its potential use in sports analysis theory, social character and role. This would provide room for the interdisciplinary research of sports as collective creative praxis [15], long over due for [17] and not properly implemented until this day [12,15]. For its theoretical nature, this study will not provide results of the empirical research but it will set basics for the future empirical studies.

PERFORMANCE STUDIES

Performance studies have been introduced as a specific scientific discipline, its development, and spread of the field of study was maintained by the expansion of definitions far from only the theatre. Fischer-Lichte [2,5] had an insight that it was necessary to precise the subject of performance studies so it could stand as an independent discipline.

"If everything is theatre, and theatre can be approached from a wide variety of disciplines with a variety of research questions and methods, it raises the question why we need a separate discipline to study theatre at all" [2, pp. 10].

It should be mentioned that the other scientific and theoretical disciplines are confronted with similar issues of their own development, distancing and defining research subject as it is in sport science, research in human locomotion, kinesiology, physical education, etc. Fischer-Lichte set an example in her own niche.

An attempt to put together theater and performance studies as an autonomous field of research Fischer-Lichte [2,3,4] as a research subject takes term performance and furthermore gives a close specification to define it accurately. She is building on the definition given by Max Herrmann [8] that the performance is a game in which the audience and performers partake.

This phrasing of the terminology doesn't complete performance in full, it doesn't define what game is it or what is the nature of it, but it allows it to develop from the aspects of who is participating by bringing into focus the audience as constitutive member of the performance – contrary to the perception of the spectator as a passive recipient. Similarly, Jerzy Grotowski [6] said the theater is what happens between the audience and the actors.

Therefore Fischer-Lichte puts performance as a subject of research of theater and performance studies as "the event in which all the participants find themselves in the same place at the same time, partaking in a circumscribed set of activities" [2, pp. 18]. As a *differentia specifica* it can be extracted bodily co-presence of the performer and the spectator (they are witnessing the same thing at the same place at the same time). From there, Fischer-Lichte [2,3] points out key characteristics of the performance: it is created from the interactions from the participants. She calls this process an autopoietic feedback loop.

BODILY CO-PRESENCE AND AUTOPOIETIC FEEDBACK LOOP

Performance studies developed their own theoretical framework from significant overlapping with anthropology [19], creating the specific field of cultural performance by expanding the field of performance beyond the boundaries of theater and art "giving equal status to rituals, sports, dance, political events" [16, pp. 86-87] as a subject of research. Thus, various cultural phenomena have gained an instance by which they can be analyzed within the framework of performance studies, just like theaters. The gathering of the audience, their focused view of the staging and performance as well as their reaction to what is seen become the object of analysis. Primarily, it is possible to analyze their distance from the artistic plan and its realizations, since "cultural performances are specific because, as a rule, they are not implemented by artists but by citizens organized in different associations (religious communities, political parties, sports clubs, court system...)" [10, pp. 237]. In this sense, cultural performance are "social events (political gatherings, religious rituals, trials, sports matches)" [10, pp. 237] which are characterized by mutual energy exchanges. This shared experience defines each individual performance.

Bodily co-presence, as a characteristic of performance in terms of its materiality, distinguishes performance from other arts that have intermediaries in communication with the audience; that being the material artifacts from whose text meanings can be read [5]. Unlike the materiality of a film, book, or painting

(where the presence of the author is irrelevant for consumption and which can be accessed at any time) the basic characteristic of performance is its transience. A performance conceived in this way is not a unique feature of the theater. Music, opera, dance are performing arts too.

Postulating bodily co-presence as the main feature of the performance, furthermore performance as a social event [3] is in line with Marvin Carlson [1] and Richard Schechner [18] agreement on Restoration of Behavior as the criteria for determining performance. In this way, performance receives a social component as behavior that is shown to others and thus becomes different from other "ordinary" types of behavior that is "only" done [9].

The process of creating a performance in the bodily co-presence of the audience and the performer could be illustrated in the following way. The performer's body does something (moves or produces sounds etc) and the audience directly perceives, interprets, and reacts to it (coughs, laughs, applauds, etc). Reactions of the audience can be manifested in more or less obvious ways, but they certainly have an effect on what the performers are doing. Performers perceive them and based on that feedback, consciously or unconsciously change their own behavior. For example, if the audience laughs, the performer will repeat whatever he thinks that the audience laughed at. If the audience does not react as expected, the performer will try to change something in his own act. This process is actually what Fischer-Lichte [2,3,4] calls autopoietic feedback loop.

The bodily co-presence of the audience and the performer from which autopoietic feedback loop is derived as the main process of performance emerging, have further implications in specifying the definition of performance as a subject of theater and performance studies research [2,3,4,5]. Namely, the performance is defined as immaterial, more precisely as transiently material, before the beginning and after the end it does not exist as a material artifact and can exist only in traces. Material traces of the performance, such as a costume or scenography, can only indicate its existence, but its essence cannot be found in them. Performance is also a unique, random, contingent event that cannot be controlled. The performance is built-in real-time by all present participants in the performance event and everyone is responsible for it. The course of the performance and its content cannot be predicted in advance, nor can it be fully understood if it is not directly participated in. Even if we watch a recording of a play in front of an audience or its live broadcast, we are deprived of our part of participation in its creation and thus kept outside from the autopoietic feedback loop. In that way we cannot perceive and completely find out the performance itself. Unlike other arts where the artistic product in terms of the material carrier of meaning (film, book, paintings) is relatively immutable, each performance is specific and constantly changing through interaction between the author and the audience.

DISCUSSION

As it was previously explained adopting cultural performance as the subject of research of performance studies is strongly supported by the performance theory of Fisher-Lichte [2,3,4,5]. As a cultural performance, sporting events are organized by a group of people, they involve certain action presented by performers in front of the audience and they have their own specific rituals surrounding them. In that way sports competitions, matches and events become an equal subject of interest and research of performance studies together with theatrical performances or political gatherings. By making comparative studies of sport and art or political events both sports sciences and performance studies can benefit from.

A key part of cultural performance analysis is the relationship between performers and audiences. Namely, the difference between the audience and the performer comes down to the difference in the action, i.e. the difference between the broadcaster and the recipient of the message. The performer does something, sends messages (performs) and the audience observes and receives messages. However, the autopoietic feedback loop implies that the audience is also doing something - reacting. The audience also sends messages, not always necessary to the performer, nor is the performer necessarily the initiator. On the other hand, performers observe all the time, receive messages - perceive the reactions of the audience, if they would not do so they would not be able to react to them and the autopoietic feedback loop would be interrupted.

The division into audiences and performers in the theory of Fischer-Lichte [2,3,4,5] could be viewed exclusively as quantitative and not as qualitative and in praxis this division may vary. For example, it is difficult to say who is the performer and who is the audience i.e. who quantitatively sends and who perceives more messages in a situation where a group of people enters the stands of a football stadium two hours before the match, standing with their backs to the field, singing chants, expressing their political views, spreading political slogans, fighting with each other and with the law enforcement representatives, or burning and breaking the performance space while twenty people are running around the pitch in fear.

Performance in the traditional notion of institutional realization implies the division of performers and audience determined by buildings' architecture, their accessibility, and openness to the viewer. Spatial orientation in theatrical circumstances is reduced to a plane that separates them from each other and sets the conditions for the performance (turning to actors, discovering relevant elements of the performance, *mise-en-scène*), unlike a football stadium (and similar sports arenas) which conditions a centralized view

surrounded by an audience. Thus, the question of performance as a specific experience that cannot be replicated is determined not only by the unique moment but also by the position in which the viewer finds himself. Although an example of such an approach can be found in a theater that does not belong to the dominant Western interpretation, the space of a football stadium in this sense is quite specific due to the lighting orientation towards the field and the audience as a whole. For this very reason, the trend of separating the pitch and the audience with wire fences has replaced the trend of tearing down fences.

Bearing in mind that the reactions of traditional theater audiences in institutionalized theater practices are largely nonverbal (the verbal commentary is only a rare exception), and nonverbal communication of people rely heavily on facial expressions, posture and gestures, it is clear that most of these messages can be perceived only visually. This does not mean that the performer cannot perceive the reactions of the audience at all (other communication channels besides the visual remain open), but the extremely important visual part is excluded from that exchange of information. The visual form of communication on the observer-performer line is obstructed by the light setting, so the mentioned reactions of the audience remain largely outside the autopoietic feedback loop, as information lost in the transmission. In such a light setting, autopoietic feedback loop also exists, but it can be justified to assume that it would be stronger if more information from the audience could reach the performer. Perhaps this is one of the answers to the question of why football matches manage to animate their audience so intensely, even though they offer simpler content compared to the theater. Because of this, the football spectator rightly feels like an equal participant in the match, similar in importance to the players and coaches, in the belief that he can personally influence the result, activity or morale of the players and referees.

Fischer-Lichte [2] grades the presence of performers in three levels: weak, strong and radical. This could be further transferred to the very presence of the audience in three similar levels. For example, from the weak presence of an audience that just sits silently in their chairs, through its active involvement in the performance with the turbulent emotional expression to the extreme level, in which the audience provoked by the performance event leaves the position of the observer and takes an active role (or actively refuses to do so). Such are performances of the Performance group or Marina Abramović [4]. Football match shows that the intensity of the audience's presence does not necessarily depend on the intensity of the performers' presence. If we take Serbian football as an example, the strong and radical presence of the audience, as a rule has nothing to do with the quality of football that the performers show. Coming to the stands and performing often become autonomous motive that overcomes the urge to only follow sports and matches. However, such cases are sporadic and in minority, they could even be called exceptions that confirms the rule, the rule being that top performance requires a strong presence of all sides: domestic athlete or team, domestic fans, opponent and opponents (absent) fans.

By defining performance as an event that is constituted through the bodily co-presence of the audience and the performer in the process of the autopoietic feedback loop, specifying the beginning and end of the performance becomes problematic. Fischer-Lichte [2] as the end of the performance marks the break of the autopoietic feedback loop. Then the moment of its establishment should be marked as the beginning of the performance. It is not entirely clear how exactly to determine these moments, Fischer-Lichte [4] suggests approaching liminality and transitivity of performance and performance practices that have developed rituals for the beginning and end of the performance for that reason. However, except in such practices in which a clear ritual of the beginning and end of the performance is present, it is difficult to determine the exact moment of the beginning and end of the performance based on the criteria of establishing and breaking the autopoietic feedback loop. For example, does the performance begins when the actors take the stage, or when they prepare to go out watching the audience behind the curtain, or in the moment the audience enters the hall, or at the moment the audience enters the theaters foyer? Things are similar to a football match and similar sporting events where autopoietic feedback is formed long before the referee's first whistle.

As physical co-presence is a necessary precondition for the very existence of performance, the question arises as to how the performance is realized and whether it is possible in the pandemic situation that is in absence of the audience. Modern technological solutions for the realization of the online events which allow the establishment of an autopoietic feedback loop with simulated co-presents have not proved effective enough when it comes to sports competitions. Attempts of simulation of audience presence with a computer-integrated image subsequently added to a television broadcast, reduces the role of the audience to the level of scenography, which is far from the truth. The inclusion of sound effects in transmission but not on the scene has the same limitations. The somewhat more efficient way in an attempt to establish an autopoietic feedback loop or performance without direct bodily co-presence represents the inclusion of an audience reaction recording on the pitch. However, the sound replicates old or artificial reactions that do not correspond naturally to what is happening on the field, but that is edited according to the beliefs of the performers, in this case the organizers. In this way, the audience remains deprived of participation in the performance, while the perception of the audience's presence with the performer is of low intensity, insufficient to exceed the performance threshold. That's why, although the described techniques increase

the impression on the television and internet viewers of the broadcast, they are not enough for such events to be considered as a performance. Rare exceptions of sport events in the presence of the audience such as Eden Park Stadium in Auckland, New Zealand, where the stadium was home to over 46.000 spectators at a time of global pandemic, clearly illustrating the described differences in the experience of both the media and let alone the present audience. This specificity of the rare realization of a sports performance is fully reflected in the specificity of the audience's reaction. In addition to basic cheering, localized and reactions to the movement of the ball, there is also the emotion of co-presence with other people and participation in creating a performance when such sharing is propagated around the world as unscrupulous, and even legally prohibited and regulated by epidemiological measures of movement restriction, distancing and quarantine.

CONCLUSIONS

Sporting events have performative value and as such can be analyzed within contemporary performance studies. The main characteristic of sports performance is the presence of the audience which has been brought to the attention in current epidemiological worldwide restrictions. Even though sport event is accepted to be broadcast and televised, overruling aspect is that the performance can't be placed in the case where there are no public members in front of who the game is taking place. Therefore, audio recordings following the game without the fans are merely the simulation of the audience participation and as such are part of staging. Actual reactions and implications of beings witnessing the performance of any kind are the key assets in performance existence. This is one of the many aspects that are introducing theoretical guidelines to the attention of the sport's theoretical representatives. The underlining truth is that sport is part of social activities, defined by its followers throughout history, shaped and influenced by people that are in this moment kept far behind from performance/audience line.

Keeping all said in mind, as the direct answer to research question it could be concluded that sports results achieved without the presence of the audience cannot be valued in the same way as those achieved in front of the audience.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The analyzes performed and conclusions drawn lays the foundation for stronger integration of sports sciences and performance studies as well as for future empirical research. Theoretical assumptions and conclusions can and should be validated through series on empirical studies. Also, guidelines were pointed out on how treating the audience as an active or passive participant in an event can increase social influence, which is especially important for institutional theater practices. This should be beneficial insights that can be used for event organising and broadcasting practise improvement.

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