

PhD Thesis Abstract

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Embodying Biking: Sport as Live(d) Events

Performance Studies as a discipline lays claim, amidst the 'broad spectrum' of phenomena it might potentially address, to sport (Schechner 2006). Studies taking up this claim, however, are rare. In particular, there is a dearth of in-depth studies of sporting experiences themselves. In response, this thesis asks what the application of performance studies theory to mountain biking can reveal about the relations between sport, performance and lived experience. Through the consideration of the training and performance processes made explicit in mountain bike racing, I examine how bikers are able to guide conscious and embodied experiences that enable high-speed execution of highly developed skill sets on, across and through variable physical terrains. This facilitates a sophisticated reflection on expert level experiences of embodied states: states that are regularly discussed in relation to 'thinner', less complex circumstances. Such analyses reveal that riders are actively maintaining modes of awareness that are shifting and multiple during extreme states of embodied performance, and that participants (viewed as both performers and spectators) are able to draw on information from their senses of self, alongside stimuli from the broader performance environment, to make tactical and reflective decisions during races. I have drawn upon a phenomenological anthropological method for this study. The emphasis such a method places on a systematic engagement with a particular lifeworld allows for sustained, grounded and, critically, embodied explications of otherwise complex theoretical arguments.

In order to appreciate fully how bikers understand biking events, this thesis begins by processes of skill development before opening out to reflect upon the interanimation of one's own performance within the broader context of performance events. In Chapter 3 biking is therefore described in relation to the execution of basic riding manoeuvres such as cornering or riding over 'drops'. I then extend these ideas to reflect on how such skills can be guided, monitored and enhanced to maximise performance in a racing context. This leads toward the phenomenological exploration of ideal, or 'flow-type', states in Chapter 4. I argue that in order to maintain the sensation of being 'in the zone', thinking is active, reflective and lines up multiple states of awareness. In the following Chapter, 5, I discuss some of the performance strategies riders use that allow space in the working memory to deal with risky or plan-changing scenarios while continuing to race over difficult terrains. I step back from riders' experience of racing in Chapter 6 to examine the impact of their continued involvement in the sport on their senses of self and place. A close examination of the ways riders develop personal strategies and skills through involvement in sport allows for consideration of the

relations between performing and spectating in Chapter 7, revealing these roles to be mutually beneficial and influential.

Through considering embodied practice as a dynamic series of live(d) events, this work interrogates simple distinctions between watching and performing, thinking and doing. The detailed analyses of embodying biking in this thesis reveal not just how we can better understand a range of phenomena as performance, but how the application of performance studies theory can provide unique insights on what it is to live.