THE SOCIAL DRAMATURGY OF SPORT: TOWARDS AN INTEGRATIVE GOFFMANIAN MODEL

DIANA-LUIZA DUMITRIU

ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the social field of sports within the general frame of social dramaturgy, by using three metaphors that are grounded on Goffman’s conceptual field: sport as play, sport as game and sport as ritual. After discussing “what”, “how” and “to what extent” can Goffman’s concepts be re-contextualized in understanding the dynamics of the sport acts, I went further and integrated the three metaphors into a more comprehensive analytic model. The multidimensional model of sport dramaturgy that I have built around Goffman’s hard-core concepts covers: the dramaturgical dimension, the strategic dimension and the ritual dimension of sport acting as complementary elements that can provide an integrative perspective upon the sport dynamics. Every dimension of this interactional model implies a specific definition for the competitive situation, for the sport actor and for his dispositional orientation when faced with a competitive situation.

Keywords: social dramaturgy, impression management, strategic interaction, ritual, social role, sport.

1. INTRODUCTION

From ancient to modern times, the social imaginary of sport has been dominated by two master-frames: sport as “war” and sport as “show”. While the first approach of sport as “surrogate for war” (King, 2008) or “alternative for war” (Hilvoorde, Elling & Stokvis, 2010) lays stress on the relations of power within the competitive setting of sport acts, the sport-show analogy brings to the fore the dramaturgical resources of sport acts as entertainment constructs. From local
events to global mega-events, sport provides a constant source for spectacular performances and “a powerful vehicle for mediating meanings and feelings” (Kennedy & Hills, 2009, p. 1).

Even though the sport show concept is shared by most studies that discuss the media sport nexus or the marketization of the sport world, it is mainly related to the commercial nature of sport performances. Moreover, I would argue that, given the fact that we are speaking about a “show” analogy that people are very familiar with and tempted to use for a very wide set of social contexts, the dramaturgical framework has been subject to a trivialization process and ended up to be taken for granted. This is why I find that going beyond the entertaining dimension of the sport show concept can provide a more comprehensive approach of both the nature and significance of sport performances, as well as the sport actors’ condition and the sport-related social practices.

The dynamics of sport competitions, which are designed to be put on stage in front and, moreover, for the audiences, makes them a proper object for performance studies and, within this general framework, I argue that Goffman’s dramaturgical approach can be used as a resourceful conceptual model. Although studies on sport mega-events or sport audiences are very likely to make use of the analogy between sport acts and dramaturgical performances, Goffman’s influence has been rather implicit. Even when authors discuss the value of Goffman’s work for the sport studies (Birrell & Donnelly, 2004), they are mostly providing general directions for using the conceptual heritage of Goffman’s social theory.

The scarcity of in-depth approaches of sport studies using Goffman’s conceptual framework is quite surprising given the axiomatic value of social dramaturgy within sport as field of sociological enquiry. This lack of theoretical grounding, operationalization and problematization of Goffman’s model is the one that I want to address through this paper. In doing so I will focus on three aspects: laying stress on the Goffmanian hard-core concepts that can be used in defining sport acts, (re)contextualizing these concepts to the social field of sport and building up a multidimensional interactional model of sport acts within the social dramaturgy framework.

Based on Goffman’s conceptual framework, this paper tries to reconfigure the sport competition dynamics aiming to critically discuss to what extent can Goffman’s interaction order and social dramaturgy model provide a proper approach for sport dynamics and how can his concepts be re-contextualized for the sport social field. Does Goffman’s work provide us with more than the sport show metaphor? Can we build up a more comprehensive conceptual model of sport acts around this element?

Even though, throughout this paper, there is a clear focus on Goffman’s social dramaturgy approach, I will also bring into discussion other theoretical elements that are consonant with the Goffmanian approach. They will help me in adapting the conceptual field of the social dramaturgy to the sport ethos, as well as
in adapting the conceptual tools to the sport contents. All of these aspects are then connected and integrated in building up an *interactional model of sport dramaturgy*. This conceptual model aims to bring both a more extensive and intensive perspective of the sport dynamics, providing a multidimensional approach of the sport performances.

2. A GOFFMANIAN CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE SPORT ACTS

The “sport show” metaphor, although dominant within the sport social imagery, works as an oversimplification of the social dramaturgy model. This section is meant to lay stress on the potential of the Goffmanian model for understanding and analysing the sport acts. Trying to identify, connect and (re)contextualize Goffman’s concepts to the sport field, I will thus focus on the operationalization of the social dramaturgy model. Can it provide a proper framework for discussing the sport dynamics?

Sport competition works as a widespread metaphor from politics and economy, to education and entertainment; however, the social field of sport is in its own right a constant host for metaphorical representations. Based on this logic of exploring similarities, metaphors, as both cognitive and expressive constructs, provide a wide openness towards understanding sport dynamics, but, more important, towards understanding the social imagery attached to it.

Within the wider framework of social dramaturgy and performance studies, I argue that there are three main Goffmanian metaphors that can be conceptually resourceful if they were (re)contextualized in relation to the sport social field: sport as *play*, sport as *strategic game* and sport as *ritual*. Although they are all convergent with the social dramaturgy approach, each of them focuses on a particular aspects, providing different perspectives on *how* and *why* sport actors are engaged in the competitive process and *how* they are socially perceived.

Metaphors as conceptual models also have a structural effect upon the object they redefine, leading a transfer of significance between the two elements they symbolically put in connection. Nevertheless, when speaking about metaphors, we are bringing more than a framing effect upon the social field of sport, because metaphors “create «semantic maps» to the social world, which are best thought of as conceptual systems” (Manning, 1991, p. 78). Moreover, this *imaginative rationality* (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) of metaphors address both the descriptive and the explicative dimensions of social representations. This is why I have decided to address the sport dynamics in terms of Goffmanian metaphors.

Each metaphor attributes a distinct social value to the competitive act and to the sport dynamics in general. While *sport as play* is centred on the impression the

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1 By *play* I understand a theatrical act, show or performance.
management of sport performs, sport as strategic game moves the focus upon the reasons behind competitive acts and sport as ritual activates the symbolic heritage behind the sport events. Therefore, I will continue with an analysis of how these metaphors fit into the social imagery of the sport world and to what extent can they be adapted to sport dynamics. Based on this process of operationalization of the Goffmanian concepts within the social field of sport, the final part of the paper will then discuss if and how these metaphors can be used to build up a more integrative model for analysing the sport act.

2.1. THE METAPHOR OF SPORT AS PLAY

The sport performance act, which is the basic unit of the metaphor of sport arena as theatre, responds to Goffman’s criteria of permanent presence in front of a public and the existence of some kind of influence upon it (Goffman, [1959] 2003, p. 50). Moreover, if we were to simplify the logic behind sport performances, which are mainly oriented towards others (i.e. the audience), we would find ourselves a priori arguing that, beyond the actual content of any performance, sport is primary about performances’ effects.

The core element of sport acts is the mere interaction between sport actors as performers and their public. Although sport actors seem to play first fiddle, their performance make no sense in the absence of a public or, in other words, “meaning is a constitutive production in and through group performance” (Rawls, 1987, p. 141). While sport performance is usually approached in terms of directing the sport actors’ acts towards the public, the fact is that the public plays a crucial role in negotiating and co-constructing the overall meaning of the performance.

If we were to discuss sport performances in terms of Goffman’s typology of interactional units of action, they could be seen as a particular form of platform performances, defined, first of all, by the fact that they take place in front of an identifiable public (Goffman, 1983, p. 7). Moreover, when it comes to sport performance, especially in referring to what happens on the field, the abstract level of the dramaturgical metaphor is quite low, as there are various and consistent similarities between the design of sport competitions and the theatre ethos: the presence of the public, a team of (sport) actors, a specific setting of the performance (stage vs. sport field), a clear time-frame of the play/game, clear role scripts, a particular set of norms, etc.

Like theatrical performance, sport competition also involves two intercorrelated dimensions: one related to the act that is put on stage by the sport actors and the other one related to the act that is been watched by the audience. This performers-audience dyad is, in fact, the sine qua non condition of the sport show concept, as “both sets of roles are normative, organically linked, and necessary to the performance” (Cheska, 1979, p. 54). Hence, due to its recreational aim and its public nature, the dramaturgical analogy seems to be a rather natural frame of representation for sport competition.
Placing sport competition within the dramaturgy framework means bringing the actors into the spotlight. Every aspect of this field of representation involves sport actors as referents, whether as active or passive subjects of the overall performance act. However, the sport field is rather a stage for teams as collective actors than solely for individual performers, which adds another level of analysis to the dance of identification (Goffman, 1961, p. 127) that sport actors have to play in and outside the sport field’s boundaries. As performers on the sport stage and beyond it, due to their public figure status, sport actors need to adapt their “repertoire of proper gesture in accordance with the physical and the symbolical presence’ (Beciu, 2009, p. 44). Beyond goals and records, winners and losers, the most important part of a sport competition is the mere performance of its actors.

In his position as performer on the sport stage, the sport actor is subject to a “composite of multiple selves, each of which projects a set of claims’ (Manning, 1991, p. 77) attached to that particular role. Beyond the individual layer of self image, the sport actor has to cope also with a social role that is institutionally defined, whether he represents a private club or a national federation, making sport performance subject to both personal and institutional validation.

Although defined in terms of a “typical response of individuals in a particular position” (Goffman, 1961, p. 82), the role of the actor within a certain social situation is the key-element for any social dramaturgy approach. Athlete or coach, referee or spectator, they are all generic roles on the distribution list of a sport play. The actual performance of a sport role is a composite construct, reflecting normative elements, contextual aspects, as well as a personal impress upon the way a role should be performed. Despite the standardization enforced by the competitive situation (i.e. the rules of the game), instead of discussing sport roles in terms of specific set of expectations, they might be better described using Turner’s preparedness concept. Anchored in a continuous “self-others” role process of performances’ adjustment, using public’s or opponent’s reaction as guiding lines, sport actors find themselves in front of a range of potential responses and, thus, they are always prepared “for a loosely definable range of responses from alter on the basis of the latter’s role’ (Turner, 2009, p. 95).

In reaching a maximum level of embracement and authenticity of role staging (Goffman, [1959] 2003, p. 94–95), sport actors have to show attachment to their role, demonstrate their capacities in performing it and, moreover, be actively engaged in what that role requires. However, sport actors display different levels of commitment in different competitive situations, which might lead to a wide spectrum of performance acts attached to the same typical role. This can bring also distinct discursive positioning and definitions of the competitive dynamics. Hence, in the end, is the merge of context and role involvement that shapes the sport actors’ role, making competitive acts more than a redundant performance.

Performing in front of a public involves a permanent swing between “to be” and “to seem to be”, triggering the switch between self as performer and self as
performed. The dramaturgical metaphor provides the framework for Manning (1991) “two selves thesis”, reflecting this duality of in and outside the role script.

Performance in itself is defined by its impressive capital and evaluated in terms of the emotional and aesthetic impact that it exerted upon the audience. This is why the impression management (Goffman, [1959] 2003) is the main aspect of a performance, referring to the way an actor manages to succeed in controlling and directing the audience reactions towards accepting and validating a certain self image projected by him and, at the same time, a self image circumscribed to the social claims attached to the role he plays.

When it comes to the sport stage, the competition design and the confrontational dynamics amplify sport actors’ vulnerability, as the opponents’ reactions are not part of a rehearsed script and require both spontaneity and effectiveness in coping with the face threatening (Goffman 1967, 1971) potential of improvising.

The sport performance act has to provide expressive consistency and credibility, while remaining within the normative framework. All the aspects covered by a performance are thus “designed to enhance the audience’s sense of «realness»” (Fine & Manning, 2003, p. 46) and to assure sport actor’s control over the act of performance itself.

However, beyond dramaturgical “discipline’ and “vigilance’ (Goffman, [1959] 2003, p. 241–244), which are meant to minimize the unpredictable component of sport actors’ performances and maintain the expressive control, competitive setting require high flexibility in adapting performances to opponents’ reactions.

Sport actors find themselves, repeatedly, on the spectator position in relation to their opponents’ acts and, thus, in order to maintain the consistency of the overall competitive performance, they have to readjust their own part without stepping out of their role. Unlike many other social performances, on the sport competitive stage, the script of the performance is been written “on the go” and, therefore, the pressure of impression management is considerably high.

The impression management concern of sport actors during their public performance, in and outside the competitive act itself (i.e. other correlated situations of performing his professional role, such as press interviews, press-conferences, interactions with fans etc.), can be approached also in terms of face management (Goffman 1967, 1971; Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Defined as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact”² (Goffman, 1967, p. 5), the concept of “face” refers to a socially situated self-image that the sport actor wants to send to the public. Failing to do this means “losing face” and requires face management strategies directed towards “saving one’s public face. What should be highlighted is that “face” itself is defined by an interactional nature. It is something that is permanently subject to social negotiation and

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² By contact I refer to both the context and the interaction as communicative act.
(re)construction and sport actors”, as well as media discourses on competitive situations, contribute to this process of face management.

Moreover, sport performances are related to a set of spatial and temporal coordinates that define the limits and the nature of relationship between performers and their audience. “Spatiality is inherent to sport’ (Kennedy & Hills, 2009, p. 152), as boundaries can be found not only between sport and non-sport areas, but also inside the sport field itself, delimitating sport actors and audiences, performers and technical staff, competitive and training settings etc.

In discussing the organization of both physical and social space for sport actors’ performances, Goffman’s multilayered model of performance “regions” (Goffman [1959] 2003, p. 130–135) can be used as a conceptual framework for mapping sport activity. The aspect that I want to lay stress on is not the one-to-one matching of performance regions, but rather the continuous process of social negotiation and reconfiguration that the sport performance regions have been subject to. One of the main factors that have contributed to this situation is the “offensive” tendency of media to enter and conquer less public areas of the sport actors’ performances and to put them into the public eye, as part of an enriched sport experience.

It is all part of a wider proximity and spectacularity logic that media brought to the sport ethos, as the “logic of presence gradually takes over the one of representation” (Charaudeau & Ghiglione, 2005, p. 34). Since the audience is now present when sport actors’ enter the stadiums, when they come out from the stadium’s tunnels or even in their lockers, we can speak of a hybridisation process between front stage, back stage and transition zone or, in other words, of a redefinition of “back stage’ behaviours as a performance in itself.

In this context of a permanent reconfiguration of the boundaries of perception (Goffman, [1959] 2003, p. 131), I would argue that Goffman’s conceptual model of regions might be quite rigid in defining the psychical and social space of sport actors’ activity. The tendency of extending the “front stage” boundaries over areas that were supposed to be part of the transition, the backstage zone or the residual region comes with a high impression management pressure, as this face threatening act requires more dramaturgical resources from the sport actors’ part. Similar to other social areas, media played a central role in the hybridization process of the sport performances regions, making the line between these regions very blurry. This phenomenon is more and more complex, as the rise of social media and technological changes within and outside the sport world have redefined the entire sport experience, but this should be addressed properly in a distinct paper.

Is sport as play (spectacle) metaphor enough to address the social dynamics of sport competitive situations? Does the sport act mean more than actors and public, roles and performance regions, impression management and scripts?

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3 Front stage, back stage, zone of transition and residual region.
One of the main critical positions towards the dramaturgic approach is that it favours the impressive function over the other multiple functions of the interaction. I would hence argue that, focusing on the sport actors-audience dyad and its impressive dimension, the sport as play metaphor fails to cover all the aspects involved by a sport act. In other word, narrowing sport dynamics to the impact of sport actors’ performance upon the audience means minimizing the complexity of the sport dynamics. Another aspect is that, focusing on the impression which the sport actor is making on others (as frame of reference), the expressive and impressive functions of sport acts are rather separated (Messinger, Sampson & Towne, 2003, p. 209–211).

Moreover, this metaphor of sport dynamics is mainly descriptive, providing limited explicative tools and insights. What is the reason behind sport play/show? Why is the impression management so important? Why do sport actors engage in this play/show? The theatrical analogy fails to go beyond the surface level of sport actors’ performances on the competitive stage. Even though it manages to address the most palpable aspect of sport dynamics, the theatrical approach of sport performances is not enough to cover the complex analytical resources provided by the social dramaturgy.

2.2. THE METAPHOR OF SPORT AS STRATEGIC GAME

If the sport as play metaphor outlines the impressive dimension of competitive performances, the sport as strategic game metaphor defines sport dynamics in a different register, in which the main referent is the reason behind sport actors involvement in the competitive act, that is: winning the sport confrontation. While the sport as play metaphor responds to “with what effects” type of questions, the sport as game metaphor is concerned with sport actors’ strategic position or “why” questions.

Sport performance meets Goffman’s (1969, p. 100) conditions regarding the strategic nature of interaction: two or more parties placed in a well defined confrontational setting in which each of them has to make its move and in which every move has a decisive impact upon all parties involved in that particular setting. In fact, the condition of strategic interaction seems to be a precise description of sport competitive logic and corollary design.

On the sport field, every action of a party, whether it involves an individual or a team actor, has an instant impact upon the other party/parties action and, moreover, changes the dynamics of the competitive act itself. It is true that, in terms of sports’ design, this is more prominent for the purposive\(^4\) game sports, where we witness “changes during the match due to the permanent search for

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\(^4\) See the distinction between aesthetic (i.e. gymnastics, ice-skating, synchronized swimming, etc.) and purposive (i.e. football, tennis, basketball, rugby etc.) sports (Bell, 2009, p. 48).
successful behaviour, due to strategic considerations [...] or due to a reaction imposed by an action of the opponent” (Martin, 2006, p. 556). This high level of interdependency lays stress on the way sport actor plans and evaluates his own position in relation to the opponent’s one.

Each competition can be seen as a form of “chessboard”, on which sport actors pay attention to their opponents’ moves and react to them looking for the final checkmate. However, as Fine and Manning (2003, p. 47) point out, actors can play for others or for themselves, “can be pawns to be sacrificed for the sake of the game’ or can work as symbols for a certain position, status.

Within this framework of strategic interaction, the relation between sport actors can be redefined in terms of the interdependency between the “observational” and the “action” sphere. There is a permanent engagement in evaluating the opponent’s actions and in collecting information that could help sport actors in deciding to act in a way or another. Following Goffman’s logic behind strategic interactions, sport actors are interested in two complementary directions of action: gathering relevant information about their opponents and manipulating the information about themselves in order to control and deceive the opponent.

It is all about a maxi-min balance between finding as much as you can about the opponent, while revealing as less as you can about yourself – in terms of abilities, techniques, weaknesses, game strategy etc. “This model is particularly applicable to the study of sport, where competitors enhance their competitive advantages through deception and misdirection” (Birrell & Donnelly, 2004, p. 51) in order to be able to take the opponent by surprise and to take control over his actions. Beyond the sport competition itself, there is this more important deception competition between sport actors, as a strategic form of impression management that covers the “hiding”–“unhiding” cycle.

In analysing the dual orientation of sport actors towards revealing information about the opponent and holding back relevant information about themselves, there are two main dimensions: one regarding the preparation of the game/confrontation and one regarding the game/confrontation itself. If the first one is defined by sport actors’ involvement in trying to find out their opponents’ tactical approach, by watching their previous games and gathering information from both formal and informal sources, the second one is defined by a high level of exposure vulnerability. The feeling of control attached to the first dimension is replaced by sport actors’ simultaneous involvement in anticipating their opponent moves, while holding back as much as they can when it comes to their own directions of action.

During competitive acts, the sport actor is facing the dilemma of maintaining an efficient communication in-group, without exposing its intentions to the out-group. Choosing to keep the communication between team’s members to a minimum level during competitions as a precaution position can lead, as Goffman noted (1969, p. 77), to reducing the coordination level of the team’s actions. Sport
actors have to cope with this maxi-min dilemma and to find the perfect balance between working out their opponent deceiving intentions and their own efficiency in misleading the opponent.

All in all, this game metaphor outlines the interdependency between sport actors’ actions, as well as the strategic nature of their competitive positions. The permanent flow of information between sport actors mediates a sort of “mutual identification” (Rawls, 1987, p. 140) in which each actor is both producer and receiver of relevant information that the competitive act is dependent on.

Focusing on the reciprocity of information exchange, but, moreover, on the duality of sport actors orientation towards finding out relevant information about their opponents and manipulating those about themselves, the game metaphor brings forth this maxi-min dilemma behind sport actors’ actions. How to uncover as much as you can about your opponent, while revealing as less as you can about yourself?

Maintaining the “two selves thesis’ (Manning, 1991) is not only about covering and uncovering information about self and relevant others, but also about manipulating information about self as strategic tool of deception in order to gain a competitive advantage against the opponents. However, the limits of this metaphor relate to its tendency to overestimate the rationality and the ego orientation (Nicholls, 1989) involvement of sport actors (to prove their superiority towards the opponent by winning the confrontation), who are given a quite cynic profile of devious characters. Sport is as much, or more I would argue, about shared emotions (Hilvoorde, Elling & Stokvis, 2010), identity and identification (Dunning, 1999) or symbolic capital than it is about strategy. Thus, although strategy can win a competition, as it determinates the evolution of the sport confrontation in terms of goal achievement, it does not cover the resourceful expressive capital of sport acts.

2.3. THE METAPHOR OF SPORT AS RITUAL

What this last metaphor of sport as ritual brings to the fore is the latent heritage of the symbolic significances behind sport competitions. Sport as ritual can be approached from at least two perspectives, both of which are meant to reaffirm the social order: as a routinized social situation during which actors are oriented towards fulfilling the social expectations attached to their roles or as a social ceremony that works like an alternative to “those religious ceremonies, specifically by serving as an arena for the creation of symbolic leaders and the display of heroic action’ (Birell, 1981, p. 356). To some extent, the sport ritual metaphor takes sport performance to a deeper level of significance, maintaining the dramaturgical form, but focusing more on the meaning than on the effects of the sport act.

Beyond their competitive and entertaining dimensions, “actions that occur within the magic circle of sporting events are full of symbolic meaning” (Cheska, 1979, p. 64). Modern sport can be seen as the outcome of a desacralization process
of social practices originally associated with religious ceremonies. There is no wonder that sport arenas resemble “cathedrals where followers gather to worship their heroes and pray for their successes” (Wann, Melznick, Russell & Pease 2001, p. 200) and sport is perceived as a form of modern polytheism, redefined in marketing terms.

Even though today sport activities are not linked to the sacrum anymore, they continue to respond to Klapp (1956, p. 13) ritual anchors: repetition, regularity, emotionality, drama and symbolism. The first two components refer to the form of sport acts, stressing out the cyclicity of sport events, while the last three elements of Klapp’s model cover the affective dimension of rituals, focusing on the experience of sport acts and their social significance. All in all, the ritual dimension of sport reflects an oxymoronic connection between a rigid and standardized form and a fertile emotional content.

This section focuses on two dimensions of the sport as ritual metaphors: the “ceremonial rules” of sport competition (Goffman, 1956) and the expressive richness of sport performances and the “ludic rationality” (Loland & Sandberg, 1995) behind competitive acts.

For Goffman, ritual is not just the routinization of social contents and structures, but rather “the interaction order is sacred because it creates and maintains the social self” (Rawls, 1987, p. 139) and its presentational resources. Within the general framework, there are some “conventionalized means of communication by which the individual expresses his character or conveys his appreciation of the other participants in the situation” (Goffman, 1956, p. 476) that Goffman calls ceremonial rules.

Gestures or discourses that sport actors perform on the competitive platform are subject to a form of ceremonial rule that, despite the time and cultural mark of a particular sport event, preserve that everlasting sport competition ethos. Sport actors internalize these rules and take them for granted, without a corollary reflection upon their purpose or content, in a sort of social inertia. As rituals provide “a way in which the individual must guard and design the symbolic implications of his acts, while in the immediate presence of an object that has a special value for him” (Goffman, 1956, p. 478), sport ceremonial rules are both about behaviors as well as about their symbolic heritage. Thus, they cover not only the form of ritual manifestations, but also the content and the reason behind them, speaking about the reaffirmation of social values throughout every sport act.

Speaking about behaviors governed by ceremonial rules, Goffman (1956, p. 475) distinguishes between the individual as actor who has to comply with the rules and his position as recipient who turns to an expectation horizon regarding the way he should be treated in accordance with the rules that govern that particular setting. Obligations and expectations: these are the two elements that set up the social constraints for sport actors’ actions and provide the normative fuel for the ritual dimension of sport events.
It can be said that, to some extent, the ritual component of sport dynamics is a symbolic form of the normative pressure attached to a social field and to its corollary social roles. This actor-recipient relation should be addressed in a dynamic way, as there is a simultaneity of roles’ performances that sport actors are coping with as part of a competitive context. They find themselves anchored in a sort of overlapping roles’ process due to the complex network of referential points: their teammates, their coach/athletes, their fans, their family, themselves etc.

Inside this micro-universe of sport competitions, which is reconfigured around the ceremonial rules – starting with the competitive cycle/timeline and ending with specific elements of decorum, there are two main ceremonial components of sport actors’ performances: deference\(^5\) and demeanor\(^6\). Both of them contribute to sport actors’ attempt “to demonstrate through their selves the ideal role characteristics alluded by society” (Birell, 1981, p. 360), maintaining a moral order that people seek to find and recreate. Moreover, deference and demeanor act also as means of showing respect to others, whether public, opponent or teammate, as well as to oneself, thus underlining the dual dimension of ritual acts: transitive and reflexive symbolic manifestations.

Deference stresses out that sine qua non condition of the generalized respect that governs sport competition, as constitutive value that governs the sport world. It provides the relational platform that brings sport actors together and promotes universal values like “fair-play” or “equity”, which, in a way or another, speak about appreciation and respect. Along with the physical and symbolic distance that they put between themselves and the opponents or the public, the wide repertoire of taboos regarding how, when or to whom sport actors should/should not speak and behave – especially when they are exposed to public scrutiny – are part of the referential avoidance rituals that are performed within competitive contexts.

Moreover, forms of presentational deference can be found and discussed on different competitive levels, starting with salutations rituals that sport actors perform inside their own team, as well as towards opponents, referees or spectators and ending up with those standardized compliments that sport actors address to each others during press conferences. Thus, sport deference makes interaction between sport actors fall under a general sentiment of regard, setting the general grounds for how actors relate to each other and to the socially negotiated and accepted set of norms that governs sport dynamics.

In terms of demeanor, it is all about the projected self and the management of self image that sport actors have to cope with during their competitive performance, as they are expected to put on not just a sport act, but also a type of

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\(^5\) It refers to the “component of activity which functions as a symbolic means by which appreciation is regularly conveyed to a recipient” (Goffman, 1956, p. 478)

\(^6\) This is related to “that element of the individual’s ceremonial behavior typically conveyed through deportment, dress and bearing, which serves to express to those in his immediate presence that he is a person of certain desirable or undesirable qualities” (Goffman, 1956, p. 489)
character that society builds for this specific sport setting. Through demeanor, the sport actor creates an image of himself that is perceived by others in terms of desirable or undesirable attributes attached to his social role.

“Self-control” over his actions in the field, as well as over his emotions, “sportsmanship”, “modesty” and “honesty” are all attributes that properly demeaned individuals in general and well-demeaned sport actors in particular have in common. The standards of demeanor reflect a moral dimension of sport ceremonial rules that can be correlated with “the status of the athlete as exemplary role incumbent with power to mediate between the individuals who comprise the audience and the moral order of the community” (Birrell, 1981, p. 354). Sport actors are subject to a moral commitment imperative, their actions on the sport field, but also outside it, responding to a wide set of social constraints.

Crowned with a heroic aura, sport actors play their role in these ritualized spectacles hosted by the sport arena, providing a dialogic form of symbolic performance. “Sports heroes are a fundamental element of the sporting landscape” (Gammon, 2014, p. 246), adding both a mythical and an ethical dimension to the entertaining nature of the sport performance. Nevertheless, demeanor acts involve a voluntary submission of sport actors to social standards of appearance or conduct. If they fail to maintain what others see as proper, they become subject to moral judgment and corollary costs in terms of public face damages.

Both components of sport ceremonial rules, deference and demeanor, stress out a prosocial behaviour frame, with a significant moral dimension attached to this logic of desirable self image and role performance. Moreover, they address the relational nature of the ceremonial rules and act towards maintaining a proper framework of interaction between actors within the sport social ethos. This, in turn, constitutes a sine qua non condition for an efficient face management process.

The limits of using Goffman only for the ceremonial rules in addressing the sport as ritual metaphor are mainly related to their focus on the sport actors/characters in the detriment of all other elements that define the symbolic configuration of sport ethos. There is an unbalanced interest for sport actors, neglecting the competitive “scenography” that contributes to the overall ritual dimension of sport acts. Time or space coordinates and their symbolic contribution to sport ceremonial performance, the wide range of symbolic elements which provides the proper context for sport actors and acts should be addressed as integral parts of the overall ritual frame of sport competition. Therefore, although significant part of this ritual dimension, Goffmanian ceremonial rules do not cover the entire spectrum of the ritual metaphor of sport acts.

Beyond ceremonial rules, sport stands out for its expressive richness. The intensive experiences of sport competitions, the powerful affective involvement during these symbolic performances are connected with “an exhilarating festive feeling” (Ponomariev, 1980, p. 76). It is all about a perpetuum mobile of celebration acts, similar, yet always redefining and mediating a new form for the symbolic and normative heritage it activates.
Sport actors are modern reflections *sub specie ludi* who managed to professionalize and bring autonomy to competition as form of *play*. Beyond the media show, the whole infrastructure and money at stake, sport competitions can be understood as a complex form of *play*, providing us with a way of “stepping out of real life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own” (Huizinga, [1944] 2003, p. 42). Sport competitions create order and a sense of *temporary freezing* our ordinary course of life, becoming a globally shared playground that both sport actors and audiences are connected with. Although it builds on some constitutive elements of play, sport acts are more than a *play*, going beyond this “ludic rationality” (Loland & Sandberg, 1995).

Part of the wide repertoire of *community rites*, sport competitions mean “dramatization and theatricalization of social and institutional relations, acting, first of all, as a vast spectacle that society provides itself and about itself” (Lardellier, 2003, p. 171). Sport acts are not all about putting persons and things together in a competitive frame of action, but rather about putting together an entire *ethos*. A sport event activates a wider social imaginary that goes beyond the sport arena’s boundaries, as “symbolic activities represent performances and presentations expressing perceptions of social life” (Gusfield & Michalowicz, 1984, p. 427) as a whole.

The ritual dimension of sport competitions refers to the sport act as an unity of time, space and actors. Rules and actors lose their significance outside the *ritual context* (Lardellier, 2003) of competition, which brings *conformity*, but also makes its mark through its connotative nature, replacing the functional register by a *symbolic* one. Moreover, similar to the ludic rationality of *play*, the *ritual context* modifies the ordinary temporality, generating a sort of time *dilatation* or “slowness”.

Another part of the sport ritualized spectacles is the *symmetry of look* (Lardellier, 2003, p. 173) that sport competitions provide. We can thus speak about parallel performances: the performance on the field and the performance on the bleachers, sport actors and spectators acting both as performers and audience for one another. The relational nature of sport competition is the one that empowers this *expressive* “manipulation” of *symbols* in the arena and these symbols, in turn, “are triggers of social action and of personal action in the public arena” (Turner, 1975, p. 155).

Despite the new functional and symbolic value attached to it, sport competition cannot be denied its ritual dimension and, thus, it can be seen as a ritual act that takes the form of a laic ceremony performed on a modern platform. Sport competitions respond to the *communicative* and *integrative* functions of ritual acts, their highly standardized form adding a certain degree of *predictability* to their uncontested symbolic value (Mitchell, 2005).

The *expressive richness* of sport rituals comes from the way they end up staging these symbolic patterns, adapting them to the context and making all actors part of an intensive emotional experience. Every sport event can be hence seen as an “emotional symbiosis” (Ponomariev, 1980, p. 77), reaching all three levels of a
ritual construct: the *ethic* dimension of ceremonial rules, the *ludic* dimension of sport games, as well as the *expressiveness* of sport shows. All these elements make “our relationship to sport one of those remarkably naturalized social phenomena that seemingly seep into our pores of sensibility” (Wenner, 2010, p. 1571). This is why we get caught into the sport magnetism, why we care and why we emotionally engage in sport acts.

3. THE INTERACTIONAL MODEL OF SPORT DRAMATURGY

The three metaphors circumscribed to the social dramaturgy frame of sport competitions – *sport as play*, *sport as strategic game* and *sport as ritual* – should not be addressed as competitive approaches of sport dynamics, but rather as complementary components. Therefore, a multidimensional model of sport dramaturgy (*Figure 1*) could better cover the dynamics of sport competitive performance. Each dimension of this model provides a distinct manner of defining the sport competitive social setting and of sport actors’ corollary role. Moreover, based on these two aspects, there is a specific way of engaging into the sport acts and of their discursive reconfiguration, outlining one of its multiple functions.

*Figure 1*

The Interactional Model of Sport Dramaturgy
On the *dramaturgical dimension*, sport competition is defined as a play/spectacle, all actors acting towards putting the competition on stage in front of the public. The focus is on the performance act and on the way sport actors manage to respond to the social constraints and expectations attached to their role. The impression management and the resourceful performance “arsenal” that sport actors turn to in putting on the sport spectacle are the core elements of the overall dynamics of sport competitions. Engaging in this script of sport competitions involves, primary, an *impressive orientation*, stressing out the effects that sport actors’ performances have upon their audiences.

The *strategic dimension* is centred on the interdependency between sport actors, as one’s action influences the other party’s response and the general competitive flow. With the dynamic matrix of connected actions as a background, sport actors are faced with the double challenge of the *maxi-min dilemma*, trying to reach the optimal balance between finding out as much as they can about their opponents, while revealing as less as they can about themselves. It is all about manipulating the information transparency in order to gain *competitive advantage* over the opponent by controlling the information exchange between actors. Therefore, we can speak about a *pragmatic orientation* that reflects the goal-oriented nature of sport actors’ actions. In the end, sport competitions are mainly about winning over the other(s) and information management is a significant source of power to that end.

What the *ritual dimension* succeeds in bringing to the fore are the deeper significances beyond sport competitions as symbolic social acts. There is a social pattern of sport dynamics, a wide spectrum of symbolic elements and a set of values that sport actors’ reaffirm through their performance. Every sport event is, in the end, a form of actualisation and contextualization of this heritage, which requires conformation. Embracing the ritual path of sport dramaturgy means turning to a *symbolic orientation* towards sport dynamics and revealing the social mechanism of retaining, but also redefining the wide set of significances attached to sport acts.

An important aspect of the interactional model of sport dramaturgy refers to the relations between its dimensions, as this model is more than a static configuration of sport competitions. Its dimensions should not be understood in terms of equality and simultaneity of manifestation, but rather in terms of dominant and secondary components that change their active or passive position depending on the context and time-frame of the competitive dynamics or communicative situation. In other words, there are moments like opening/closing ceremonies of sport events when the ritual and the dramaturgical dimensions are more preeminent than the strategic one, as well as there are those decisive game related episodes that decide titles and hierarchies, when strategic orientation might take the lead.
4. CONCLUSION

Within the social dramaturgy framework, the sport show concept, which was mainly grounded on the metaphor of sport as play, has dominated the analysis of sport acts. However, as I have argued in this paper, the social dramaturgy of sport means more than that. An unidimensional approach of sport acts rises, with good reasons, critics regarding its inherent framing effect and its lack of addressing the complex nature of the sport ethos. Discussing how can Goffman’s work be used to build a conceptual framework for understanding sport performances, I have provided an operationalization of the sport show construct through three metaphors: sport as play, sport as strategic game and sport as ritual.

Even though, as each section has shown, Goffman’s conceptual field provides resourceful platform for defining the sport dynamics: from social roles to social settings, from social practices to social negotiation, from social values to social significances, the main problem was that all these elements are rather scattered. Therefore, I have argued that we should go beyond the inertial sport as play representation and enrich it by linking this dimension with both the strategic triggers and the ceremonial heritage of sport competitive acts. By doing this, we can actually make an important step to what Turner called the “reconciliation between studies of pragmatic action and studies of symbolic action” (Turner, 1975, p. 145).

Thus, by combining these complementary approaches of sport dynamics as play, as strategic game and as ritual, while maintaining a clear focus on the Goffmanian conceptual field, I have build up a multidimensional analytical model that succeeds in capitalizing on sport dramaturgical, strategic and symbolic potentialities. This interactional model of sport dramaturgy is grounded on the performance capital of sport competitions, outlining the impressive, the strategic and the expressive nature of sport acts.

Moreover, the model lays stress on the social representation of sport competition as a palimpsest construct, from its original ritual phase to its newer forms as commercial ritual performed on global scale. Going further with this analogy, sport social metamorphoses, in respect to both functionality and symbolism, are not defined by a denial relationship between their phases, but rather by an integrator process that led to this eclectic nature of sport acts. Sport is not (just) ritual, strategy or spectacle; sport is all of them and much more, always subject to social change and thus, enrichment in terms of social imaginary.

The main limit of this conceptual model is that it is rather focused on the field experience of the sport performance and needs to be further developed and adapted to the new challenges of the sport act as mediated sport experience. How does social dramaturgy work for the sport act as media construct? Does sport media show follow the same rules as the classic live-show in the sport arena? Future studies should address these aspects and discuss the social dramaturgy of the sport field within the Web 2.0. landscape.
Finally, what this analytical model provides is a resourceful approach on the content and, moreover, on the dynamics of the social imaginary of the sport ethos, capitalizing on the constitutive dramaturgical nature of sport performances. From normative role expectations to actual role performance, from strategic intentions to face management strategies, from the competitive uncertainty of a sport act to its ritualized form, the social dramaturgy framework brings to the fore the sport competition as social construct.

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