

I Have Often Compared Cyclists to Jazz Musicians

Jørgen Leth in conversation with Giovanni Giaretta

I know you played table-tennis and you were a professional cyclist. Is this the beginning of your interest in sport?

Yes, I played table-tennis in Marselisgaard Bordtennis Klub in Aarhus in the 1950's; my best individual result was winning the singles championship of Aarhus, once. In cycling, I was a member of an amateur road-racing club, but never became a professional. My childhood experiences with cycling came from the fact that my uncle Erik Linde, a former sprint champion, was director of the famous Aarhus Cyklebane track. He invited me to all the races, and I saw the great names of track sprint racing of the late 40s and early 50s, among which Joseph Scherens, Arie van Vliet, Jan Derksen, Reginald Harris, Louis Gérardin, Georges Senteben, Oscar Plattner, Antonio Maspes... They were my heroes – flamboyant eccentric characters. I could come close to them, and I had them write their autographs in my little green book. That's where it all started for me. Then, for some years I didn't follow sports – sports was seen as a lower trivial culture – and I came back to my childhood fascination only when I wrote my third collection of poetry, *Sports Poems*, in 1967.

“My intention is to produce not a history of sport but rather, let us say, its phenomenology and its poetics...”

This is the beginning of a letter between Hubert Aquin and Roland Barthes. Somehow sport is not considered an intellectual subject even if it has so much weight in our society. Did you try to create a phenomenology and a poetics of sport in your films?

I have read Roland Barthes' essay about Fausto Coppi, who was a big hero for me. Among my *Sports Poems* there is a poem called 'Fausto Coppi' that has been much quoted, and which I still read when performing with musicians. I am not familiar with the correspondence between Aquin and Barthes, but it is true – and very much so in Scandinavia – that sport was not considered an intellectual subject. I felt my poems were a rebellion against the arrogance of the intellectuals against sport. My poems were the first literary work on sport. We were a group of artists – painters, writers, filmmakers – who had a fresh look at some aspects of the so-called trivial culture. For instance, we were fans of the “spaghetti-westerns”: Sergio Corbucci's *Django* and then, of course, all Sergio Leone's films. And we liked sports. My ambition was to lift the fascination of sports up into a higher level of appreciation. And yes, I wanted to create a poetics of it, to portrait sports heroes as representing old-fashioned virtues, such as courage, sacrifice, extreme loyalty etc.

In your films on tennis and table-tennis, such as *Monument* (1969), *Motion Picture* (1970) and *Chinese Table-tennis* (1972), you seem to focus on the choreographic aspects of gestures – on movement itself. There is a quote by Robert Bresson from his book *Notes on cinematography* that came to my mind when I first saw your films: “Be The First To See What You See As You See It”. Could you expand on that?

I have an aesthetic approach to sports. I like the images of great performances. I want to study effort in detail. You can see that very clearly in the films you mention. Of course, the most programmatic one is *Motion Picture*, which I see as one of my most important films – experimental, quite rough. But also in my cycling films, for instance in the time trial sequence in *Stars And Watercarriers*, you can see this tendency to study the athlete like an artist at work.

You have worked a lot on cycling, in films such as *Stars and Watercarriers* (1974), *The Impossible Hour* (1975) and *A Sunday in Hell* (1976), as well as in your work as a TV commentator. What has always impressed me in cycling is the



possibility to create epic stories. Cyclists become something more, as the protagonists of an adventure novel. Can you talk about that?

Cycle races have a great epic value. They are stories that move in time and space. They happen in geography and climate, they have characters with extreme courage. Riders create adventures as they move on. I love this quality of great sport. Definitely, cyclists become more than just cyclists. They are heroes because they represent emotions and imagination.

Roland Barthes said that the Tour de France is the challenge of man against the landscape, that bullfighting is the challenge of man against animals and that Formula One is the challenge of man against time – a way to become immortal. Do you agree with this idea? In your film *The Impossible Hour*, I encountered a strong feeling of being against time, an anxiety to fight against the laws of nature...

I agree with Roland Barthes. I have studied anthropology myself for some years, and was very inspired by an anthropologist of an older generation, Bronislaw Malinowski, who has been an influence on much of my filmmaking, an inspiration for what I call my pseudo-anthropological films – such as *The Perfect Human*, *Life in Denmark*, *Good and Evil*, *Notes on Love*, *Erotic Man* and even my two America films. I agree with Barthes' view about the challenge of man against nature. What always moves me in the Tour de France is the fact that the riders transcend all limits and all suffering to step into mythological material – thereby, sometimes, becoming immortal. As Coppi in certain years, in certain races, or Bahamontes, Gaul, Koblet, Pantani.

In your film *Pelota* (1983), about the “Basque pelota” sport, it seems as if the entire soul of a people can be reflected in one sport. Can you talk about it? Is it possible to portray a place starting from its most popular game or sport? In particular, I am thinking of the images of playing fields as they appear in *Pelota*.

For what regards *Pelota*, our intention was to seek the ‘soul’ of this archaic sport. I wanted to caress the melancholic beauty of the Basque landscape that frames those tough men playing with a hard ball, and to get into the history and mythology of this sport by looking at dynasties and generations of players.

In your film *Moments of Play* (1986) you gather a sort of collection of different games and ways to play them around the world. How did you come up with the idea for the film? Have you been inspired by Roger Caillois' book *Man, play and games*? Did you have an anthropological intent?

I don't know the book by Roger Caillois. Neither was the film inspired by Huizinga's famous book *Homo ludens*. From the start of the project we decided that we would not connect to the rich literature about play and games; it would have been boring to follow ideas from these works. We only let ourselves be inspired by the simple view of playing in different cultures – what we saw when travelling. We simply wanted to tell stories in different settings about how people play.

Several times, it has been said that the 90-minute duration of a football match is exactly that of a feature-length movie. Can you talk about the relationships between sport and cinema?

I suppose you mean fiction films? I think it is surprising that there are so few great sports films. I like some of the American movies about baseball; *The Natural* (1984) with Robert Redford, for instance – not a great film, but a decent one. I like the mystique and romanticism around this purely American sport. I also like several boxing films. Not least, Scorsese's *Raging Bull*, which in my opinion is a masterpiece. If we talk about documentaries, I think there are some good ones but, again, surprisingly few. One of the best is, of course, *When We Were Kings* about the Ali-Foreman match in Zaïre 1974. I was once involved in a big Hollywood project; I was hired by the great producer-screenwriter Carl Foreman (*High Noon*, *The Guns of Navarone*, *The Bridge on the River Kwai*) to do the 'second unit' footage for a Tour de France movie, based on an English novel, *The Yellow Jersey*. In 1985 I guided Dustin Hoffman and Al Pacino on the Tour – they were drawn into the project. And in 1986 I was directing a crew of 15 French technicians to shoot documentary material for the second unit. The project was not very appreciated in Hollywood, and finally it stranded. I have seen the film about Zidane. It is too technical to my taste. Alex Gibney's *The Armstrong Lie* offers some interesting insights in the Tour de France, especially in the behind-the-scenes footage from the 2009 race, which we already know from the 'official' race footage. But I don't like the omniscient narrator in the film; it is too conventional. I do not like to be told what to think.

Somehow, *The Five Obstructions* (2003), the film you made with Lars Von Trier, has some elements of a sport challenge. Was it experienced like that?

The *Five Obstructions* was, of course, a film about challenge; it was putting somebody up against real difficulties. It is an art film, not a sports film. But it is about game rules, like in sports; it is about being up against terrible obstacles. I have always been working with game rules for my films and my writing. Deciding what I can do and what I cannot do. I have been teaching that concept at the National Film School in Copenhagen to students like Thomas Vinterberg, Per Fly, Ole Christian Madsen. Lars von Trier credits me for inspiring the Dogme films. In *The Five Obstructions* I have to find out what to do. Solutions can be painful and almost impossible. That is what gives that film its unique quality of real struggle and suspense.

Italian painter Sandro Chia once made a controversial statement about doping in sport. He said that, in a way, it's beautiful to see an athlete who wants to get his heart break, who wants to offer himself completely to the audience. It is like an actor who wants to act in the best possible way. In a way, the stadium is like a theatre.

And why is this controversial? I will tell you why: because there is so much hypocrisy about doping. I have to be careful with what I say, since I am a public person in Denmark; I have been a commentator of the Tour de France and other great races for more than thirty years. I have often compared cyclists to jazz musicians, who willingly sacrifice their own health for the benefit of innovative music. Cyclists are experimenting with their health to enhance their performances. I absolutely think that there must be doping control, because we need to have the illusion of equal conditions. But extreme sport is an experimental area and athletes are like test pilots. I do not think it is fair to demonize them for always going to the limits of what is permissible.

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Jørgen Leth, *Pelota*. Photo: Georg Oddner.

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Jai alai hall, Havana, Cuba, circa 1904. Detroit Publishing Company.

