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Animating Sporting Morals, Ethics and Politics

Thinking and Hitting at the Same Time: Yogi Berra or Yogi Bear?

Mihalich has suggested:

The existential athlete does not think about space and time in the world – the athlete lives space and time in the world in his or her uniquely acute expression of consciousness-in-the-world-with-a-body. A good example is the anecdote about Yogi Berra… When Yogi contended that ‘he couldn’t think and hit at the same time – it’s got to be one or the other’ he epitomized the distinction between conceptual analysis and existential action in specific human situations.

(Mihalich 1982:80)

Throughout my discussion, thus far, I have tried to establish that there are clear connections between animation and sport, both in its execution and in the ways that it liberates particular approaches to understanding the historical evolution of both forms, the national and international contexts both forms exist within, and how the specific aesthetics of animation serve as the most revelatory interpreter of sport, and vice versa, offering a different site for rethinking and reimagining the world. Implicit in all my analyses has been the idea that all animation and sporting practice is inevitably underpinned by ideological imperatives – this was especially clear in my address of the Olympics and animation, for example – but in this chapter I wish to develop these points further. Indeed, part of this desire is to speak to an often encountered and underlying scepticism in both academic and professional circles that both sport and animation are in some ways immune to the world, or simply not in some way ‘serious’. I remain uncertain why this attitude persists, but it is clear that by in some way remaining within the realm of popular culture, and in both cases by being deemed as ‘only entertainment’, sport and animation are not seen as socially valid in the ways
that they articulate philosophical or political principles. This seems patently absurd in the light of the global reach of the Olympics, the football World Cup, the Super Bowl, or for that matter the work of Pixar, Studio Ghibli or Aardman, and the political economies worldwide that invest so heavily in sport and animation, at the very least, for their ‘Trojan Horse’ soft power in a myriad of contexts. It is clearly a danger to forget that ‘Sport has legitimized regimes from Imperial Rome to Soviet Russia’ (Allinson 1993:4), and that animation has informed every single successful approach to wartime propaganda, public information project and utility film, almost since the beginning of its production (see Hediger & Vonderau (eds) 2009).

One of the key reasons why sport and animation don’t seem ready vehicles for complex ideas is that both are informed by the view Mihalich notes above; namely that in their very execution there is seemingly an absence, or more specifically an invisibility of conscious thought or conceptual analysis. Almost in order to conduct sporting and animation practice at its most pure is to seemingly render it with a Zen-like transcendence. While this might be so, ‘in the moment’ neither sport or animation can be conducted at its highest level of achievement without extensive knowledge, practice and conceptual abstraction. ‘Existential action’, for all its apparent intuitiveness and instinctive responses is actually a post-conscious product; a transference of physical, imaginative and intellectual intelligence into specific kinds of motion choreography. While Yogi Berra might be an ‘acute expression of consciousness-in-the-world-with-a-body’, this is also the case with Yogi Bear, ‘a smarter than average’ incarnation of the symbolic body, and one model of evidence that sport and animation are examples of thinking and hitting at the same time. *Laff-Olympics* (_DIRS: William Hanna & Joseph Barbera, USA, 1977–1979) was a spoof of Olympic sport, with Hanna Barbera’s popular roster of cartoon characters mobilised into teams called ‘Yogi’s Yahooeys’, ‘the Scooby Doobies’ and ‘the Really Rottens’ competing for gold, silver and bronze medals. Echoing models of sports broadcasting, and indeed the competitive dynamics of *Wacky Races* (_DIRS: William Hanna & Joseph Barbera, USA, 1968–1969) (see Wells 1998b), the currency of the narratives is always concerned with the moral and ethical premises that legitimise winning. ‘Yogi’s Yahooeys’ echo some of the characters in the animal-based Olympics discussed in Chapter 3, and unlike the other teams, who feature human characters, only feature anthropomorphised animals. Further, the team, featuring Yogi Bear, Boo-Boo, Huckleberry Hound, Pixie and Dixie, Mr Jinx, Quick Draw McGraw and Augie Doggie, is largely made up of characters created during the formative Hanna Barbera years of the 1950s and 1960s, and carry with them the ideological and cultural attitudes of those eras. The simple point to be made here is that Yogi and his fellow characters are ‘existential athletes’ in that they exist as archetypes that are deeply influential in the moral and ethical engagement with sporting representation, especially for a children’s audience, who are not merely being entertained but informally educated. It is no accident then that the Adult Swim ‘Robot