‘Im Sport ist der Nerv der Zeit selber zu spüren’: Sport and Cultural Debate in the Weimar Republic

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This article presents, in its social and historical context, an account of the relationship between cultural-political discourse and the conceptualization and practice of sports in the Weimar era, a period in which sport underwent extraordinary expansion and development. It attempts to elucidate the manner in which the cultural debates prompted by sport, and the popularity of sport, can be said to reflect cultural faultlines. Drawing on a broad range of journalistic and literary responses to sport, the article considers rival conceptions and definitions of sport, perceptions of the connections between sport and national identity, criticism of the emphasis upon performance and records, and of the commercialization of professional sport at the expense of amateur *Volkssport*, and the ambivalent relationship between art and sport. It includes a detailed case-study examination of responses to a particular sporting phenomenon of the era, the hugely popular *Sechstagerennen* (six-day bicycle races) in Berlin. Authors considered include significant names such as Bertolt Brecht, Erich Maria Remarque, Egon Erwin Kisch, Joseph Roth, and Alfred Polgar, as well as significant contemporary sports theorists such as Willy Meisl and Carl Diem.

In the turbulent decade that followed the First World War, sport (or the ‘sports movement’, as it was sometimes known) underwent a period of extraordinary expansion and development, both as a mass-participation, amateur activity, and as a professional and thus commercial enterprise. This was true of many countries, including those most frequently associated with the development of modern sport, Britain and the United States, but was particularly true of Germany, which experienced, in the words of Willy Meisl, a sports writer and reporter for the liberal *Vossische Zeitung*, a ‘springflutartige Ausbreitung der Sportbewegung’ (Meisl 1928: 20). In the young Weimar Republic a native tradition of rather militaristic *Turnen*, dating back over a century to the establishment of the gymnastics movement in Germany by Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, began to lose ground to a range of imported, competitive sporting activities, and to forms of expressive *Gymnastik* and an idealized notion of *Körperkultur* (see Jacob 1994: 17-18; Wesp 1998: 9-11). These new forms of sporting activity were perceived by many as international, intensely modern, as the embodiment of ‘der Nerv der Zeit selber’ (Kasack 1983: 260), or even as the ‘Weltreligion des 20. Jahrhunderts’ (Seiffert 1932). Germany was highly receptive to global trends and currents, and Meisl was not alone is speculating that the enthusiasm with which sport was embraced by all levels of German society meant that it should be seen as a ‘Produkt seiner Zeit’ (Meisl 1928: 20). It is certainly possible also to argue that there was something specifically German to the way in which sport was

seen in the Weimar Republic. In a highly perceptive 1928 essay, in which he defends the ethos of amateur and community sport against the encroaching dangers of over-commercialization and specialized professionalism, Meisl suggests that sport might be a means by which a damaged generation was seeking to 'heal' itself from the lasting trauma inflicted by a static, destructive war, that as a largely urban phenomenon it should further be understood as a form of physical compensation for the loss of nature in modern, industrialized cities, and even as a spiritual reaction to years of enforced 'Bildung, die sich Kultur dünkte', and of '[d]ie Negierung des Leibes' in the German education system (Meisl 1928: 21). These provocative thoughts are representative of the unusual degree of critical reflection, in this period, on an activity that, for the first time, had come to be understood as a significant example of national (or transnational) culture, or else as a potential threat to such a culture.[1] As was the case for other highly visible cultural innovations, notably film, the extent of its popularity prompted serious cultural, political and sociological discourse and critical commentary, conducted not only in the 'sports' section of newspapers and in specialist magazines such as the popular *Sport im Bild*, but in the *Feuilleton* section of newspapers and in journals such as *Der Querschnitt*, *Die Weltbühne*, *Das Tagebuch*, and *Die Neue Rundschau*.[2]

This article presents, in its social and historical context, a survey of this discourse, which has still to be fully explored in research, and attempts to elucidate the manner in which it can be said to reflect many of the cultural faultlines of interwar society in Germany.[3] Opinions were polarized, and by no means all commentators felt the growth in the popularity of sport was to be welcomed; then as now, a degree of cultural elitism determined some responses to sport, and there was resistance, perhaps justified, to the status granted to prominent athletes, which was perceived by some in terms of a dangerous privileging of the physical over the intellectual (see Gamper 1999: 139-43). Writing in 1930, the journalist Joseph Roth mocks media fascination with 'star' sportsmen: 'Ich habe einen unheimlichen Respekt vor Boxern. Aber ich sehe viel lieber ihren Faustschlägen zu, als daß ich ihren Unterhaltungen lausche. Denn das Reden soll

[1] The sociological and political implications of rival conceptions of sport were the subject of a significant German study as early as 1921 (Heinz Risse (1979)). More recent contributions to this field include work by John Hoberman (1984), Frank Becker (1993) and Christiane Eisenberg (1999).
[2] Worthy of particular note is the June 1932 issue of the liberal arts and culture journal *Der Querschnitt* devoted to sport ('Fug und Unfug des Sports').
[3] The relationship between cultural-political discourse and the conceptualization and practice of sports has received only limited attention in German-studies scholarship. Notable recent examples of work in this field include the work of Michael Gamper (1999; 2001) and Mario Leis (1998).

nicht ihre Stärke sein' (Roth 1989-91: III, 236). Even Bertolt Brecht, who in the 1920s approved of exercise as a non-instrumental end in itself, and of the emotional authenticity of sport (and in particular boxing) as a popular spectacle, was uncomfortable with the way in which polite society and the media had embraced sport: 'Ich bin für den Sport, weil und solange er riskant (ungesund), unkultiviert (nicht gesellschaftsfähig) und Selbstzweck ist' (Meisl 1928: 146).

Despite resistance and reservations from commentators of all political hues and tastes, it is symptomatic of the degree to which sport had begun to play a role in the lives of millions that we find so many significant literary and journalistic figures had something to say about it. It is perhaps true that it was seldom given serious 'literary' treatment in the Weimar era, as has often been noted (see Rothe 1981: 136-8).[4] The existence of 'Sportliteratur' primarily as a sub-genre within popular *Trivialliteratur* is explained by Gamper (1999: 149-51) with reference to a perceived discrepancy between the immediacy and sensuality of sport as an experience and phenomenon and the reflective, critical distance demanded of literature. The fact that it is the subject of a period of consistent intellectual exchange and observational reportage is, nevertheless, worthy of continued exploration in a broader research context. My concern in this article, then, is not with literature as a 'high' cultural phenomenon but with the interface between, and problematization of, parallel and competing discourses of a practical, sociological, ethical and aesthetic nature.[5] The sudden popularity of sport was often described as a challenge or 'problem', and even those strongly in favour of sports, such as Willy Meisl, felt that the way in which it was received, promoted and practised would help determine the direction in which society was to head. In what follows I shall examine some of the ways in which sport and culture became the focus for debate in the Weimar Republic. Focal points include the perceptions of the connections between sport and national identity, criticism of the emphasis upon performance and records, and of the commercialization of professional sport at the expense of amateur *Volkssport*, and the challenge to traditional arts posed by sport. I shall briefly examine each of these areas, before suggesting a broader context in which they should all be seen. I shall also comment on a number of

[4] See also the near-definitive bibliography of prose fiction and poetry concerned with sport in Leis (1998).
[5] Rothe (1981: 147) suggests that *Trivialliteratur* 'ist oft ein zuverlässigerer Spiegel der mentalen Verfassung einer Gesellschaft als die Hochliteratur'. This is perhaps true (though his exhaustive analysis of a single example is not sufficient evidence), but the same can surely also be said of consciously reflective published evidence, if surveyed comparatively and with an awareness of context.

responses to a particular sporting phenomenon of the era, the hugely popular *Sechstagerennen* (six-day bicycle races) in Berlin.

Stefan Jacob has rightly observed that, regardless of whether there was an actual causal relationship, many responses to the adoption and subsequent popularity of 'new' sports sought to find a 'Zusammenhang zwischen der in den Manufakturen des Merkantilismus praktizierten Arbeitsteilung und der Zerlegung sportlicher Übungen in ihre motorischen Einzelelemente' (Jacob 1994: 22). The conception of work described here, which was to be massively influential in the Weimar Republic, was modelled on the rationalization promoted by Frederick Taylor and the functionalism of Henry Ford's factory lines. Thus to make a comparison between the methods of modern sports and those of modern industry, noting in particular their shared focus on the end-product (the time, the score, the *Leistung*), is by association to identify them as culturally specific, as American (or Anglo-Saxon) rather than German, for Fordism and Taylorism were perceived not just as the epitome of twentieth-century *Sachlichkeit*, but, rightly or wrongly, as typically American. This view of the United States, and by extension of sport, was widespread. Writing in 1930, Carl Diem, general secretary of the *Deutscher Reichsausschuss für Leibesübungen*, the mainstream organization encompassing the majority of middle-class sporting groups, including the conservative *Deutsche Turnerschaft* as well as many more modern German sports associations, sees the impulse to quantify and compare as a founding principle of the American education system, and thus of the Americans it produces:

> Die amerikanische Erziehung ist […] erfüllt von Leistungswillen und Leistungsprüfung. Es ist, als ob der agonistische Sinn der Griechen hier seine Wiedergeburt feiere. Was bedeutet es denn anderes als Freude an Leistung und Leistungsvergleich, wenn das gesamte Studium […] mit Punkten gewertet wird. Nichts liegt mir ferner, als dies Punktsystem in Deutschland empfehlen zu wollen. Es widersteht uns, gewisse geistige Dinge wie Sinn für Ordnung und Sauberkeit äußerlich messen und in Punkten werten zu wollen; aber wir können doch nicht leugnen, daß da, wo es gechieht ein höchst eiserner Wille vorhanden ist. (Diem 1930: 9)

The ambivalence in these comments is clear, but also, I think, the admiration. This is consistent with the role of mediator between tradition and modernity that Diem saw himself as occupying, promoting German *Körperkultur* as a negotiation between the 'nature'-orientated *Turnvereine* and the industrialized 'Leistungsstreben' of modern sport (Diem 1928: 160).

The assumption of a fundamental contrast between European 'Geist' and American practicality and performance is a revealingly common cliché; it is similarly reflected in many of the popular literary representations of sport. We find it, for example, in *Station im Horizont* (1928), an early novel by Erich Maria Remarque, who, before he achieved global fame as the author of *Im Westen nichts Neues*, was a regular contributor to, and briefly editor of, the populist magazine *Sport im Bild*, in which *Station im Horizont* was serialized. It portrays a cosmopolitan world of elite sports, and the simple dynamics of its story depend upon a central masculine rivalry between two racing car drivers, one German, Kai, and one American. At one point, tellingly, the American driver, Murphy, states:

> Ich weiß, wir Amerikaner haben in diesen Dingen nicht die psychologische Geschmeidigkeit der Europäer. Wir sehen nur die Leistung, und ich halte sie für ausschlaggebend. Lassen wir die Leistung sprechen. Gewinne ich das Rennen, so gewinne ich ein für alle mal über Kai. (Remarque 1998: 53)

Kai, the European protagonist, represents a combination, on the one hand, of practical intelligence and camaraderie with, on the other, a restless sentimentality and vague 'spirit'. He embodies an ideal that reflects an ambivalence towards the technophilia of the 1920s, and a desire to temper *sachlich* urban narratives of speed and surface with more permanent values.[6] In a period of perceived 'Americanization' of Europe – a related topic – opinion about sport serves as a barometer of opinion about cultural and political issues. It is noticeable, for example, that many of the hostile responses to sports that had been developed or standardized in other countries were framed in nationalistic terms. This even applied to football, which had been rejected by some involved in Jahn's influential, explicitly nationalistic *Turnbewegung* as an 'englische Krankheit' (Kisch 1928: 8).

By the late Wilhelmine era this attitude had even fed into the choice of vocabulary, at least for nationalists, with the term 'Sport' being reserved for competitive Anglo-Saxon disciplines, including boxing, athletics, and team games such as football, all of which tend to emphasize individual performance, and quantifiable results (the number of goals, the fastest time etc). This was understood in opposition to what were often known as *Leibesübungen*, a term that encompassed *Turnen*, expressive gymnastics (*Gymnastik*)

[6] One might compare here the impossible 'morality' of the eponymous protagonist of Kästner's *Fabian* or the desire, repeatedly articulated by the narrator of *Im Westen nichts Neues*, to maintain the intangibly 'human' in the face of dehumanizing processes of the military and combat.

and dance (*Ausdruckstanz*) (see Jacob 1994: 18; Wesp 1998: 10). German *Turnen* in the tradition of the *Turnbewegung* tended to define itself in terms of its 'national' qualities and emphasize many of the militaristic qualities that in the course of the nineteenth century had come to be associated with what it meant to be German: discipline (*Zucht*), training, and the fostering of a sense of communal and even national spirit. Ute Frevert (1996) has noted that the association of Germanness with these qualities can be historically linked to the introduction of conscription for men in Prussia as a condition of citizenship, and Jahn conceived his movement and the type of *Leibesübungen* it encouraged as a means of developing soldierly qualities, such as 'Wehrbarkeit', 'Waffenfähigkeit', 'Streitbarkeit' (Jahn 1991: 217) and so on. There is an interesting association between the development of the German 'national' character as 'manly' or 'soldierly', and the simultaneous development of a specifically German sports movement.

This exclusively and aggressively masculine tradition was, of course, highly visible in the supposed 'ideological muscularity' (Boscagli 1996: 83) of the Third Reich, in which theorists such as Alfred Bäumler viewed the body as 'ein Politikum' and sport as 'Leibesertüchtigung'. The ideological encoding of sport and exercise after 1933 was able to build on pre-existing traditions and assumptions that had been maintained in the diversity of the Weimar era. In the monthly journal of the nationalistic 'Verband für Leibesübungen', *Eichenkreuz*, for example, we find lengthy articles promoting 'Kriegsspiele', mock war-games, as an appropriate activity for young boys, not, they claim, in order to promote violence or war, but as 'ein Eingehen auf die jugendliche Seele, die es immer wieder zum Messen der Kräfte in ehrlichem Kampfe treibt, aus ureigenem Lebensgefühl heraus' (Voggenreiter 1931: 84). Needless to say, the definition here of what is 'natural' for boys is ideologically coloured, and competitive instincts can of course be directed in other ways. The *Turnbewegung* in fact found itself increasingly under pressure to adapt to the conventions of sports that had, in the meantime, become international, a process that was certainly accelerated by the pressure to do well in international competition, by the establishment of sports in the school curriculum, and by national competitions such as the *Reichsjugendwettkämpfe*. These were established in 1920 by Carl Diem, who also co-founded, in 1921, the *Deutsche Hochschule für Leibesübungen* in an attempt both to modernize and to grant academic credibility to a movement rooted in tradition. Diem, who exercised considerable influence as head of the

aforementioned *Reichsausschuss*, was, as the quotation above from his 1930 report on American sport suggests, far more open than many involved in the *Turnbewegung* to international influence, and in particular to American innovations in the integration of sport into education as a character-forming 'Erziehungsmittel' (Diem 1930: 19).

Thus, gradually, and partly through the efforts of figures such as Diem, a principle that had been anathema to Jahn – measurable or quantifiable *Leistung* – became the norm even in sports and disciplines not previously judged in this way. However, the spirit that had prompted critics of football to suggest, rather comically, that a 'national' alternative to scoring by goals would be to grant additional points for optimum 'Körperhaltung' (Kisch 1928: 8), remained influential.[7] It is not only evident in the emphasis upon body form promoted within the *Turnbewegung*, but also visible in the aesthetics of some mainstream sports photography, such as the work of the Austrian sports photographer Lothar Rübelt, and of course, in the Nazi period, in that of Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympia* films, in which the documentation of the quantifiable success of German athletes is accompanied by a stylized aestheticization of bodies – and in particular of 'Aryan' bodies – that implies, perhaps, that the true 'spirit' of sport is not to be found in measurable performance alone. This parallels tendencies within the *Gymnastikbewegung*, a movement which, primarily as a form of organized sporting activity for women, experienced an extraordinary growth in the Weimar Republic. It was, Gabriela Wesp has noted, 'von irrationalen, metaphysischen und gegenaufklärerischen Tendenzen gekennzeichnet' (Wesp 1998: 74). It too promoted 'eine Ästhetisierung und Stilisierung des Körpers' (Wesp 1994: 76), but with the noticeable difference that it tended to emphasize not the 'Körperstählung' characteristic of *Turnen*, but rather 'das Weiche, Runde, Elegante, Naturhafte, Seelische' (Wesp 1994: 76). These stereotypically 'feminine' qualities on the one hand contrast with the 'masculinity' of the *Turnbewegung*, but they also reflect a shared, and deeply conservative, assumption of innate, gender-determined characteristics worthy of preservation.

The idea that performance could and should be an end in itself did, however, find resonance in Germany, and is invested with a sort of philosophical glamour in the aforementioned novel by Remarque. The novel's protagonist embodies the restlessness

[7] There are parallels to this: see for example the promotion in Ireland of Gaelic football as a 'national' alternative to 'English' sports such as soccer and rugby, or the abortive attempts by the Italian fascists, in the 1920s, to create a 'national' ball game (known as Volata). The use in Italian of the term *calcio*, the name

and identity crisis typical of the 'lost generation' of war veterans on which so much of Remarque's work is focused, and seeks refuge from spiritual, cultural and political doubts in the abstract certainties of performance:

> Das Wesen des Rekords lag in seiner menschlichen Belanglosigkeit; gerade deshalb presste er härter und sachlicher das Bewusstsein der Leistung zur Spannung zusammen und destillierte daraus das Fieber so großer Erwartung, als ob es um weltweiteste Probleme ging (Remarque 1998: 53).

Jacob has argued that the turn towards recordable results and measurable performance was essential in ensuring the growth of internationally standardized sports as a mass phenomenon in Germany:

> Das entsprach dem zeitgemäßen Denken in Quantitäten, wie es sich im Rahmen der deskriptiven Statistik äußerte, die allgemein im ausgehenden Absolutismus die gesamte staatliche Planung und das ökonomische Leben kennzeichnete und zunehmend auch das Individuum erfaßte. (Jacob 1994: 20)

With this in mind, then, it is no surprise to find, in the years of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* in German culture, an often naïve enthusiasm for all things factual that encompassed not only the facts and figures of records, but an increasingly mechanistic, scientific approach to training and technique. Peter Borscheid summarizes common attitudes neatly, if rather uncritically: 'Am Fließband, am Steuer und auf der Rennbahn hat die Körper-Maschine automatisch zu funktionieren' (Borscheid 2004: 191). The series of self-improvement exercise manuals written by the Dane J. P. Muller, following on from similar 'systems' popularized by such figures as the German bodybuilder and strongman Eugen Sandow, found a receptive market in Germany. Other popular science manuals, in keeping with a broadly positive reception of Taylorism and Behaviourism in Germany, promoted the training of the body as if it actually were a machine. Maurizia Boscagli, in analyzing the development of masculine body image, detects an irony in the promotion of what she sees as an 'ornamental' body ideal through the application of rationalized, functional techniques: 'The body's physical strength […] was now increasingly anachronistic whether in the office, in modern mechanized warfare, or in the factory that used Taylorist work principles' (Boscagli 1996: 95). This is certainly true of the 'excessive' physique of bodybuilders such as Sandow, but in the self-conscious modernity of the Weimar Republic aesthetic-ornamental values such as body strength and form tended to be taken less seriously than instrumental values such as play, fitness, performance and results. The

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of an ancient Italian ball game, for modern soccer derives from the same impulse. See: Bonini 1999: 92-4;

achievement of strength, speed and fitness was not seen as a gesture of redundant competition with the mechanical world but as a necessary human extension of that world. Within the *Gymnastikbewegung*, for example, alongside the rather other-worldly traditionalism of some, there were those in favour of the development of a more *sachlich* body culture appropriate for the machine age. In his 1925 study of contemporary images of femininity Fritz Giese, for example, writes in praise of the modern woman (or 'Girl') as a 'Jünglingstyp' (Giese 1925: 120), embracing a vision of body culture that he consciously defines in terms of a simplistic idea of 'American' pragmatism and rationality: 'Die Girls sind der Ausdruck jenes echten Sportgeistes der Frau, die in elegantem Sprunge auf die Straßenbahn, vom Automobil herunter, in schneller Reaktion zum Telephon eilt: wie es die rasche Zeit dauernd erfordert' (Giese 1925: 97). A comparable application of what one might term an aestheticization of function is to be found in a description of his own body, published in *Der Querschnitt*, written by the swimmer Johnny Weissmüller, whose 'schlangenartig' (Weissmüller 1932: 417) body form, in his Hollywood performances as Tarzan, became familiar to millions.

However, it was by no means only conservatives and nationalists who were sceptical about this rather superficial enthusiasm for mechanical methods, functionality and the valorization of measurable performance as the ultimate purpose of sport, and about what was often perceived as a mania for setting records: 'Rekordwahnsinn' (Kisch 1928: 13; see also Borscheid 2004: 190). Meisl makes explicit his scepticism regarding this trend by repeatedly emphasizing his conviction that the essence of sport is to be found in play, in enjoyment, and in the sense of liberation it can bring: 'Der Rekord soll nicht um seiner selbst willen vollbracht werden, und ein Rekordversuch ist fast schon Verletzung, eine Blasphemie gegen den Sportgedanken' (Meisl 1928: 75). Egon Erwin Kisch agrees, arguing that any sport pursued as a means to an end – whether this end is a record or the achievement of size or strength – misses the essence of sport, to be found, he suggests, in 'jene Freude am Kampf […], die sich selbst genügt' (Kisch 1928: 18). This type of argumentation, in which Gamper discerns a parallel with arguments against the instrumentalization of art in German idealism (Gamper 1999: 146-7), seems to derive from a desire to defend both the human body and human activities from excessive functionalization and from teleological definitions, and are entirely compatible, for

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Szymanski and Zimbalist 2005: 69.

example, with liberal responses to other urban phenomena, and to the increased pace of life in the 1920s.

A related area of heated debate concerned the question of amateurism, with the Olympic movement and large numbers of sports and disciplines excluding professionals almost as a matter of moral principle. Meisl notes that such strict attitudes often disguise a sort of indirect professionalism – many supposedly 'amateur' sportsmen and women were in fact wealthy enough to spend whole winters skiing in the Alps, with other well-known athletes earning significant sums of money from ghostwritten books and articles, and from endorsements, at the same time as working-class footballers were prevented from accepting financial reimbursement for time spent away from their jobs while representing their country at the Amsterdam Olympics in 1928. Despite such legitimate objections to this strict interpretation of the so-called 'Amateurparagraph', the emergence of professional sport, promoted and exploited for profit as a form of entertainment, prompted a series of concerned proponents of the sports movement to talk of an emerging 'crisis' in sports at the end of the 1920s. This 'crisis' was often presented in terms that are transparently political, and echo comparable objections, voiced by many of the same commentators, to the cultural effects of capitalism. Frank Thieß, for example, writes of the danger of sport losing its cultural and educational value for the sake of 'eine Art großindustrielles Unternehmen, das vorzüglich mit zwei Attraktionen arbeitet, mit Rekordsucht und Starsystem. […] Der Sport gehört kaum noch denen, die ihn groß gemacht haben, sondern denen, die an ihm verdienen' (Thieß 1928: 132). This political hostility to a loss of spontaneous, 'human' qualities echoes Siegfried Kracauer's critique, in the same period, of highly choreographed forms of *Körperkultur*, including chorus lines as well as organized sports, which like Thieß he likens to '[die] römischen Zirkusspiele, die von den Machthabern gestiftet worden sind' (Kracauer 1977: 62). A related criticism, implied in Thieß's argument, is that increased professionalism might result in the amateur masses, who are naturally unable to compete with specialists, being less inclined to practise sport themselves, and more inclined to function simply as spectators, or consumers of sport as a spectacle or 'Sensation'.

Meisl presents a case against 'Berufssport' for less explicitly political, but related reasons: he argues that overspecialization, the devoting of one's life to the pursuit of a single sport, to the exclusion not just of other sports, but of all other content, is not compatible with the 'spirit' of sport as he understands it. This argument should be understood in the context of

a broader intellectual hostility to, in Kasack's words, 'die Versachlichung der Vitalität' (Kasack 1983: 260) in the name of progress. The rationalization of the workplace had, of course, led to a degree of specialization previously unimaginable; though efficiency was improved the individual consequences – satirized in literary texts such as Georg Kaiser's Expressionist drama *Gas* – were frequently perceived as a diminishment or reduction of the integrated, 'whole' human being. It is in this context that we should read Meisl's criticism of professional sport:

> Und wie der Taylorismus dem Arbeiter die Freude am Schaffen nehmen und ihn zur Maschine degradieren muß, so muß sich solches Spezialistentum für den Übenden eintönig ausnehmen, muß solche Beschränktheit auf eine einförmige Tätigkeit sich im Athletentypus ausprägen. (Meisl 1928: 38)

Many of the negative commentaries on the *Sechstagerennen* derive from these two related criticisms of professional sport: the extraordinarily repetitive, specialized nature of the sport itself, and its exploitation as commercial entertainment.

The concept of a six-day cycling event had been imported from America, where the first had taken place at Madison Square Gardens in 1896 and where it continued to be a popular spectator event until the 1940s; the first in Europe took place in Berlin in 1909, where it was to become, the War years excepted, an annual institution, held from 1911 in the Sportpalast on Potsdamer Strasse (see Borscheid 2004: 188-9; Fiedler 1997). By attracting many thousands of spectators, day and night, and entertaining them not just with the ongoing race but with a mixture of music and cabaret, food and drink, the *Sechstagerennen* was amongst the best-known and most commented-upon sports events of the Weimar Republic.[8] Borscheid (2004: 188-9) relates its popularity to the 'acceleration' in the *Tempo* of life in the 1920s, which he sees as characterized by a culture of speed: 'Das Publikum soll die schnellen Fahrer nicht wie auf der Straße nur einmal kurz vorbeihuschen sehen, es soll sie inmitten des Rennovals andauernd im Blick haben, es soll die Geschwindigkeit permanent inhalieren, es soll süchtig werden auf Tempo'. Many contemporary published responses to the sport view its popularity rather more sceptically, and provide us with a cross-section of opinion on sport in general. Broadly speaking, these texts tend to focus on one of three distinct areas: the competing athlete(s); the nature of the sport itself; the commercialization of the event and the

[8] Its popularity, needless to say, is to be distinguished from the boom in cycling as a recreational activity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (see Leis 1999: 16-19), which if anything was somewhat less popular amongst the urban masses during the 1920s.

behaviour of the spectators. The choice of focus is revealing in itself, for it is debatable whether an enthusiast for sport in general or cycling in particular would ignore events on the track in favour of an account of crowd behaviour.

Perhaps the most simplistically approving – and consciously naïve – response to the *Sechstagerennen* is to be found in Hannes Küpper's poetic tribute to the well-known Australian-born rider, Reggie 'Iron Man' McNamara, selected and published by Brecht as the winner of a poetry competition in *Die Literarische Welt* in 1927 (see Gamper 1999: 153-4; Midgley 2000: 43-4).[9] This was a provocative decision, not least because Küpper had not in fact entered the competition. Employing a folkloric, balladesque form that, at least in Brecht's eyes, is appropriate both to the popular subject matter and the dynamic subject of the poem, 'He, He! The Iron Man!' imagines McNamara as ruthless man-machine, 'dieser künstliche Mensch': 'Eine Spiralfeder aus Stahl sei das Herz, / frei von Gefühlen und menschlichem Schmerz' (in Brecht 1992: XXI, 669). The subject is thus deliberately dehumanized, his mechanical efficiency imagined in terms of artifice and construction. It is interesting that this literal interpretation of his nickname almost certainly does not reflect its actual origin – namely an admiration for the 'iron' will of a sportsman who was able to succeed in an unimaginably draining discipline, and whose will to compete allowed him to return from various serious injuries. Yet although McNamara was, in reality, anything but invulnerable, the extremities of repetition and exertion that the six-day race involved do indeed invite speculation about the sort of mentality and physique required to succeed. Despite this, few journalistic commentators present the athletes in anything like these terms. The *Feuilletonist* Alfred Polgar (1930) approaches the event with the sceptical irony for which he is known, focusing upon the bizarre psychology he supposes is required to compete in such an event. Echoing both Meisl's critique of overspecializing and Küpper's description of the racer's brain as 'eine einzige Schalterwand' (Gamper 1999: 153), Polgar interprets the intensity of the riders as a form of obsessive madness. The 'senselessness' of the sport is frequently commented upon, particularly by those who view sport straightforwardly in opposition to 'Geist'; writing in 1933, Paul Kornfeld, for example, dismisses the *Sechstagerennen* as 'etwas

[9] McNamara (1887-1970; spelt by Küpper and other Germans Mac Namara) was a naturalized American citizen and remains a legend in cycling history. With his partner Harry Horan he won the Berlin six-day race in January 1926. According to his entry on the website of the United States Bicycling Hall of Fame: '[McNamara] won five 6-day races at the Chicago Coliseum and won 6-day races in France, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany and England. He was called the "Iron Man of Cycling". With 55 victories in 125 starts, Reggie further proved his durability by taking the 1932 Madison Square Garden 6-day at the age of 45.' See: http://www.usbhof.com/inductees/2004.cfm [accessed 11 July 2006].

vollkommen Blödes' (quoted by Gamper 1999: 142). And even for Kisch, reporting on the tenth event in 1923, both the sheer monotony and the extreme physical demands of 144 hours of unbroken cycling were comparable to dehumanizing torture: 'Ein Inquisitor, der solche Tortur, etwa "elliptische Tretmühle" benamst, ausgeheckt hätte, wäre im finsteren Mittelalter selbst aufs Rad geflochten worden' (Kisch 1972: 265-6). Writing five years later, he is even more explicit: 'Was hat es mit Sport zu tun, wenn man sechs Tage lang Schlaf und Muße und Gedanken opfert, um sinnlos im Oval zu fahren, ununterbrochen, ununterbrochen' (Kisch 1928: 16).

Yet he and many of the other commentators are ultimately less concerned with the demands of the cycling itself than with the watching crowd, and with the nature of the event as a form of commercial entertainment. This of course is a focus of what is probably the best-known literary representation of the *Sechstagerennen*, in Georg Kaiser's Expressionist drama *Von morgens bis mitternachts* (written 1912), in which both the vanity of the riders and the manipulability and greed of the frenzied spectators are satirized, and the endless circularity of the event utilized as a metaphor for the *Zirkelschluss* of capitalism (this metaphor is also evident in Kisch's texts; see Bienert 1992: 88-90). The naïve protagonist of Kaiser's play initially assumes, idealistically, that the apparent passion inspired by the sport has the effect of overcoming the social divisions that were particularly prevalent in the late Wilhelmine era. This assumption proves to be wrong, but it is noticeable that later commentators almost always make reference to the social mix of a crowd in which the wealthy and famous were to be seen alongside the working classes – albeit in more expensive seats. This potentially positive quality, however, is customarily presented as a form of carnival – a form of temporary masquerade. This produces comic reversions of the customary order, but it is seldom seen as an event of any significance in a society in which class divisions remained pervasive. Victor Aubertin, for example, writing in the *Berliner Tageblatt* in 1923, notes: 'In den Logen sitzt die Crème und trinkt Bier. Eine der Damen hat, täuscht mich nicht alles, die nackten Beine auf den Tisch gelegt. Beim Nähertreten bemerke ich, daß es nicht die Beine sind, sondern die Arme; aber wer soll das alles auseinanderhalten' (quoted by Fiedler 1997: 20). Joseph Roth's 1922 report excludes almost all mention of the race itself, focusing instead on the grotesque antics of the crowd, who are consistently dehumanized and depersonalized by Roth's use of metaphor and simile: 'Den vielen Sitzreihen entsprießen auf einmal viele tausend Zuschauerköpfe wie Nadeln auf

Steckkissen' (Roth 1989-91: I, 753). The implication throughout is that sport is artifice, a crude and superficial form of theatre, fuelled by money and the desire for money. Willy Meisl also singles out the Sechstagerennen as a form of 'Volksvarieté' and 'Sensation' rather than 'Sport' (Meisl 1928: 92, 93).

These references to sport as entertainment, and thus as a form of spectacle occupying the same province as art, and in particular theatre, suggest a final significant area: the relationship between sport and the arts. The assumption that the two are polar opposites was a common one, but the reality, as should already be clear, was that the interaction between the two fields was more complex, and more ambivalent. Many conservative politicians and religious figures were critical of a perceived undermining of *Geisteskultur* by *Körperkultur*, and this 'Skepsis gegen die Massenkultur und ihre Erscheinungen' was echoed, as Gamper has noted, 'bis weit ins linksbürgerliche Lager hinein' (Gamper 1999: 135). The objections of many liberal and left-wing artists and writers to sport did not necessarily relate to physical exercise in itself, or to their understanding of the nature of art, but were political: they were critical of the elitism of many sports, or else understood sport, anticipating Adorno, as a form of distraction, of culture imposed by the ruling classes. These two objections could be countered: for example by references to the healthy state of 'Arbeitersport-Vereine' which, as Kisch argues, 'ebenso ihren Klassencharakter wahren wie die vornehmen Automobil-, Tennis-, Golf- oder Poloklubs den ihren' (Kisch 1928: 11). More interesting from the point of view of our central focus, the cultural discourse prompted by the sports movement, are those intellectuals and artists who saw in sport not simply another potential topic – largely ignored by 'serious' writers – but a practice from which art could and should learn. As is well documented, the 1920s saw numerous artists and writers develop a cultish enthusiasm for sport: we might note Brecht's poetic tributes to boxing, and to the iconic pilot Charles Lindbergh, the short-lived existence in 1926 and 1927 of an avant-garde sports magazine, *Die Arena*, designed by John Heartfield, Erwin Piscator's miniature gymnasium in his Bauhaus-designed apartment, and numerous tributes and references in the visual arts, including a reverent painted portrait of the boxer Max Schmeling by George Grosz (1926; see Willett 1978: 102-3). For the viewer familiar with Grosz's satirical oeuvre, Schmeling's toned body forms a striking contrast with Grosz's vicious caricatures of capitalists, who are always depicted as overweight: Schmeling's body, and his sport, are by implication republican and democratic. Dilettantish and ephemeral as much of this

enthusiasm was, its theoretical motivation is nevertheless of some interest. For many of these artists, it was precisely the apparent incompatibility of body culture and sport with the solemn 'Geist' of high German culture that appealed. One might legitimately associate the enthusiasm of Thieß, Kasack, Brecht and others with the impulse in the same late-Expressionist era towards a utopian reconfiguration of the human in the form of 'der neue Mensch', and it is certainly noticeable that, though it is tempting simply to label the enthusiasm for sport as an element of *Neue Sachlichkeit*, much of the writing on it draws not on its mechanical nature but on its potentially liberating 'naturalness'. This is implicit in conservative-nationalistic discourse, with its emphasis upon intangibly ethical, aesthetic or organic elements. The parallel with Expressionism is most explicit, perhaps, in Diem's writing, for whom *Körperkultur* was the 'Lebenskultur des neuen Menschen' (Diem 1928: 157). A comparable impulse is discernible in the aestheticization of the performative, ritual nature of sport as 'Selbstzweck' in left-wing and avant-garde discourse. The most prominent example of the latter line of argument is in the work of Bertolt Brecht during the 1920s, when he advocated a form of theatre 'als sportliche Anstalt' with a more interactive, informal relationship between 'Ereignis' and 'Publikum' (see Gamper 1999: 154-61).[10] As John Willett has observed, for Brecht and his aide Elisabeth Hauptmann 'sport was a form of entertainment whose principles ought to be taken over by the theatre, with the stage as a brightly lit ring devoid of all mystique, demanding a critical, irreverent attitude on the part of the audience' (Willett 1978: 102-3). Brecht also, as is evident in his endorsement of Küpper, drew inspiration from sport in his verse, not simply as a subject matter, but in the attempt to achieve a comparable 'narrative' simplicity and intensity to that which he perceived, classically, in boxing. The spontaneity and instinct typical of both participation in and spectatorship of sport are important here. The playwright Arnolt Bronnen also embraced sport, and like Brecht he sees it not as something 'healthy', 'safe' or practical, but as something inherently dangerous, potentially discomforting and strange. He invokes the common origins of sport and theatre as forms of ritual, as forms of 'Ersatz für den Tod', and argues that both art and sport should involve risk: 'Kunst und Sport gehen hier ganz denselben Weg: und ein Kunstwerk wie ein Sportspiel befriedigen uns um so mehr, je mehr als absichtlich erkennbare Hindernisse den Beginn vom Ende trennen' (Bronnen 1928: 140). Bronnen's

[10] Rothe (1981: 135) and Gamper (1999: 160-1) both observe a slight shift in Brecht's position in the 1930s, with the representation of *Arbeitersport* in the film *Kuhle Wampe* (1932) demonstrating a more instrumental understanding of the function of sport: not as a 'Selbstzweck' but as training for class war.

arguments here suggest his movement towards fascism in the unusual linkage of sport not with nature and health, but with ritual and death. At the same time they can be said to derive from the same impulse as the views of Brecht and other avant-garde artists, for whom sport served as a form of philosophical inspiration to reconnect with elements that remained unusual in the arts: physicality, randomness and chance, and – here the enthusiasm for boxing becomes explicable – as a means of reconnecting with human mortality.

It is interesting, then, that the Weimar-era 'cult' of sport is so often referred to as a manifestation of *Neue Sachlichkeit*, when the spirit that informs so many of the liberal and avant-garde responses to sport seems to have more in common with late Expressionism, and in particular its enthusiasm for 'der neue Mensch'. The competing discourses analyzed in this article reveal a shared desire to debate and define what is fundamentally human. Although it is true that its popularity is not reflected in 'high' literary treatments by canonical authors, the same is true of many of the other defining phenomena of the 1920s, including the cinema, jazz and radio. By drawing so clearly on aesthetic, nationalistic, political, social and philosophical models, the debates and polarized opinion prompted by sport, the 'Weltreligion des 20. Jahrhunderts', are of unique importance to historians of German culture, society and literature.

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Biodata

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