Welcome Back!

From the Director: 
Great Sports

This fall, Baylor will host a conference on “The Spirit of Sports”, sponsored by the Institute for Faith and Learning. Few topics are more timely in our culture today, and Great Texts students are uniquely prepared for this conversation.

This fall, about 45,000 people will endure what remains of the Texas summer heat and gather on the banks of the Brazos River to watch a series of football games. Why would we endure such heat, not to mention cost, for the sake of watching sports (apart from the obvious importance of cheering for our champion Baylor Bears)?

Plato suggests that we are looking for revelation. How do athletics offer revelation?

In a few different ways, but Plato implies that what all sports offer is, in effect, recognition: the recognition of both similarities and differences (analogies) between the world inside the game and the world outside the game. In effect, sports reveal something to us about the character of reality. They can do this because, at some level, they resemble the world beyond their fictive rules—whether through the imitation of warrior training, the imitation of planetary motion, or the curious role of “luck” in final outcomes. In this sense, all sport is, to some extent, imitative, and, like drama, offers to reveal something to us through that imitative power, but how does that happen? In Plato’s Republic, Socrates suggests that “gymnastics” can help people internalize the cosmic harmony that math studies.

This point turns out to be more important than it first seems because, although math can, in some ways, measure reality, we would be mistaken to reduce any sport to its numbers. As long as we don’t confuse mathematics with the reality that it measures, math can reveal truth through its similarity to reality. (Similarly, a shadow can reveal some aspect of the thing of which it is an image, as long as we don’t mistake the shadow for the reality.) Ultimately, Plato’s dialogue implies that sports can reveal mathematical truth in the same way that math, in turn, reveals a reality beyond itself. Of course, if Socrates were in Texas, he would say “football” instead of “gymnastics,” but the same principles apply. This is why football is vulnerable to dissection by so-called “sports analytics.” Just as we would be mistaken to reduce
any reality to the numbers we use to measure it, we would be mistaken to reduce any sport to its numbers.

What, then, is the reality of sport, the reality of which mathematics can provide only a shadowy image? In a word, that reality is the “heart,” or what the Greeks called the thumos.

But don’t be misled: the term “heart” should not evoke primarily associations with romance: the thumos is what the Sam Houston character in the “Texas Spirit Theatre” (at the Bullock Museum) calls “the Texan part of the soul”—the place where courage grows. This point is worth noting because, for the ancients, the main purpose of athletics was not physical fitness. Of course, physical fitness could be a result of athletics, but they believed that the main purpose of athletics was for the soul rather than the body. Any sport involves trying to achieve certain purposes or goals within certain limitations that we call “rules.” The interest, the excitement, the core of an athletic game cannot be reduced to the physical actions that make it up. Rather, the essence of any game is the adventure, the drama, the surprisingly different ways of answering the question: how exactly can you achieve a particular goal, given a specific set of limitations (rules)? The particular experience of making the body co-operate in seeking the goals of any game is what led the ancients to imagine that athletics strengthened the place in us where courage grows. Of course, courage, as a virtue, cannot stand alone: in order for courage to be even itself, it must be practiced in conjunction with wisdom, justice, and self-control (as Aristotle most famously noted). Without these other virtues, what looks like courage becomes mere recklessness, folly, brutality, or willful self-destruction.

As a result, the danger of making athletic sport the only form of shared community life is that it makes courage, in effect, the master virtue, if not the only virtue.

In this sense, we should not be surprised to discover that professional and collegiate athletics are often dominated by the desire for the kind of honor that comes from victory: that is exactly what the ancient Greeks imagined the thumos (or heart) to desire above all: honor. If we act, however, with the understanding that victory is the highest good in sports, then our athletic competition projects a particular image of the world outside itself: it implies that reality consists ultimately of a contest, a competition, a fundamental strife. Here we come to some of the most basic questions raised by athletics: does sport reveal the competitive character of reality, or does it simply reveal character of competition? What if reality is not ultimately competitive? What if reality is revealed most fully, as Christians believe, in the action of someone giving a life for someone else, rather than defeating others?

Beyond these most basic questions there are more immediate questions that we can helpfully ask as we participate in and watch sports. What does this sport inspire us to seek or desire? What does it reveal about what we think will make us happy? What are we looking for when we watch this? What exactly does this sport imitate and draw us to imitate?

Above all, if we believe that reality is a gift, even self-giving, how does that shape the way that we approach competition? The answers to these questions will help us begin to understand what our sports reveal about ourselves, about where our culture locates happiness, and the vision of human flourishing that many people in our culture inhabit. Our athletic games both shape and reveal what we love.

- Phil Donnelly

***

**Marvel Rising: Understanding the Importance of Marvel’s Cinematic Universe**

In the last seven years, Marvel studios has put out twelve films that have grossed nearly $9 billion dollars worldwide, yielding an average gross of $744 million per film.

Recently, these films have been joined by a television arm, set in the same universe, comprising Marvel’s Agents of Shield, now entering its third season, Marvel’s Agent Carter, renewed for a second season, and the very successful Netflix series Marvel’s Daredevil, renewed for a second season and itself the forerunner of four other Netflix series. With the addition of the upcoming Spiderman movie, which we now know will be produced by Marvel Studios (and not by Sony with Marvel input), Marvel has announced ten more films in the next four years, and these films can conservatively be expected to double the company’s box office haul so far.

Why should we care? As a fan of Marvel’s intellectual properties (even though I am not a comic book reader, for the most part), it has been a golden age of nonstop joy. And joy, being perhaps the most precious and elusive of things in a broken world such as the one we’ve fashioned for ourselves, is never to be passed over lightly. But chances are at least some of you don’t share my enthusiasm for this universe. So perhaps I should rephrase the question to this: why does this matter, beyond extending Disney’s financial empire?

I will mention one more fact: the fictional world that has produced the most movies and television shows outside of Marvel is Star Trek, which has also given us twelve films, and can set five TV shows against Marvel’s seven (but five shows of much longer run to this point). The two franchises are basically in
permanent lead. Oh, and it has done so in one seventh the amount of time.

So is my point that Marvel is a cultural juggernaut and is important for that reason? Well, it certainly is a cultural juggernaut, and one that isn’t going away any time soon. But that’s not what I’m so interested in.

What I am interested in is precisely the amount of content that has been woven together with forethought and intentionality. If Marvel Studios head Kevin Feige is to be believed (and I have no reason to think he isn’t), the pillars of this plan were in place when they leveraged all their remaining character rights to get the money to make the first Iron Man movie. The secret to Marvel’s success, a multi-platform universe of interconnected content driving towards a single goal (a formula no one has yet figured out, but which is leveraging all of their remaining character rights to get the money to make the first Iron Man movie), is not something they stumbled onto, but was part of the movie division’s very DNA from the beginning.

And this is what I am so excited by. There’s a lot of talk about the stagnation of sequel culture and remakes, and I’m as excited as the next person about new intellectual properties in movies. But there’s also this part of me that was central to my childhood self and has never gone away that loves to spend time in places that I love. I love the Star Wars prequels, in large part because I love Star Wars, and I cannot separate the experience of watching those movies from the joy of being in the Star Wars universe.

I play games and read books that tie in to this universe because I want to spend as much time as possible in it, to explore its far reaches and think through its ethical and narrative issues.

But I only do these other things because there are only six movies, which is not nearly enough to sate my appetite for all things Star Wars.

And here’s what I find interesting, and why I’m telling you about this at all: this seems to me to be the same impulse that drives me back to great books over and over again. Homer is superior to Virgil at least in part because I have two epics to read, not just one.

Part of the joy of Statius is that I can foster the illusion that he combines with Homer and Virgil to make a single cinematic universe, if you will. Shakespeare’s histories are the same way. I must have read Narnia thirty times, because seven books is woefully few, and it seems to me one of the greatest literary tragedies of all time that Spenser never finished the Faerie Queene.

I long for continuous story, and I am zealous for new stories and adventures in the worlds I love. I can date my desire to be a writer to my outrage upon reading the following lines from Lewis for the first time: “And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever, in which every chapter is better than the one before” (The Last Battle, the last page of whatever edition you have). I ran to my parents in frustration, exclaiming: “I want to read that story!” Their response to me was probably the wisest and most important thing they ever said to me: “Why don’t you write it yourself?”

In some sense, I have been trying to do that ever since, whether writing fiction or theology or literary criticism. Sometimes I get something that is something like it; usually it’s disappointingly inadequate.

Always the hunger for more persists.

I don’t know how long the superhero golden age can last, and I don’t know how long Marvel can sustain what I consider to be Story-excellence; what I know is that I am foremost in cheering them on, in hoping that, against all the nay-sayers who seem to me to be too little in touch with their childlike selves, they are able to sustain it for many, many years to come.

- Junius Johnson

***

Interested in sharing news with former alumni, current students or faculty and staff? We’re eager to hear from you. Pitch us an article for the GTX newsletter or send us your favorite photos of Baylor adventures.

We’re also interested in hearing about announcements, from job placements to advanced degrees awarded and family news.

Write to Jill Joos@baylor.edu.

***

Future of Storytelling in NYC is looking for interns. Check out the opportunities on their website!

Have you considered interning with the United Nations? Bring your liberal arts expertise to bear on global issues and gain valuable experience.

Nexus Youth Summit in Washington, D.C. has numerous opportunities for summer and semester-long interns. Consider spending summer 2016 in the nation’s capital!

Check out these tips on landing your dream job coming from a liberal arts degree background in fastcompany.
Baylor in Turkey and Greece 2015

From the pages of dusty books to the Adriatic Sea: Over the summer, Great Texts students and others, led by Baylor Great Texts faculty members, travelled to Turkey and Greece to explore the roots of Western Civilization. Where has your Baylor Great Texts journey taken you?