

FEELING THEM RIDE: CORPOREAL EXCHANGE IN CROSS-COUNTRY MOUNTAIN BIKE RACING

Kath Bicknell

When people in sporting establishments buy their tickets they know exactly what is going to take place; and that is exactly what does take place once they are in their seats: viz. highly trained persons developing their peculiar powers in the way most suited to them, with the greatest sense of responsibility yet in such a way as to make one feel that they are doing it primarily for their own fun. (Brecht 1978, 6)

Brecht's observations on sport, originally published in Berlin in 1926 (Willett 1978, 8), were aimed at better understanding audiences of the theatre, a theatre in which audience and actors were opposed across the traditional proscenium arch. In both theatre and sport, however, the distinction between actor and audience is sometimes far from clear.

Imagine now, that for many of the audience at such a sporting event, the fun they are witnessing athletes display is something they too have felt as participants (amateur or professional) in the sport as well. Not only do they understand the 'narrative' of the event about to take place, but they also have an experiential appreciation of the fitness and dexterity required to make that narrative. Placing itself within recent work applying performance studies theory to sport (such as Downey 2008, Kennedy 2001, Lewis 1995, Maxwell 2006), this paper investigates the complex phenomenological feedback process happening between performers and spectators in such circumstances. A case study from a cross-country (XC) mountain biking event in Australia will be used to bring these arguments to life.

A PERFORMANCE STUDY OF SPORT

Like many accounts of theatre, much writing on sports performance – both theoretical and in sports media – favours the performance that is watched or executed over the experience of viewing, and the relationship between the performer and the spectator in the co-creation of the event. While such works produce a varied and detailed knowledge of the demands of the performance and the myriad of approaches which produce this, it can also have the effect of isolating the process of sporting performance from the greater context in which it takes place – one in which an athlete's approach, focus and learning curve may

also be impacted upon by the presence and observations of (and interactions with) other competitors and spectators.

A recent shift in the treatment of such phenomena, again both theoretically and within popular culture, is blurring the lines between athlete and spectator, creator and observer. In particular, phenomenological approaches to such investigations or reports, due to their fascination toward lived experience in its immediacy, are simply and effectively drawing attention to the crossover between the roles of actor and spectator and the consequences of this on performance practice. Some such studies of sport (including Downey 2008, Sutton 2007 and Hockey 2006 for example) are revealing new ways of thinking about the cultural experience of sport as well as new applications and limitations of theoretical concepts pertinent in performance studies.

Greg Downey notes the tendency of performance studies to treat sport as spectacle, “emphasizing the division between spectator and athlete” (Downey 2008, 1). He investigates the ways that a performance study of sport might take shape away from this paradigm, demonstrating the broad scope for both immediate and longitudinal studies of athletic performance and events concluding, as an anthropologist would, that to study sport we must eventually head onto the field to find out what it is that athletes are actually doing.

Downey urges us to consider sports coaches as phenomenological allies in our analytical task. Using phenomenology and analytical description as his tools, he investigates the instance of a capoeira master helping him to learn a handstand manoeuvre, which he reveals, happens through a three step process: bringing attention to the learner’s own bodily inaccuracies in their execution of the skill, generating a “corrective experience” for the student (by demonstrating a hyper-correct version of the correct execution of the technique), and subsequently guiding the learner’s own creation of the successful performance of the movement. These steps are communicated, and responded to, through movement rather than speech – demonstrating that skill development, and refinement, can be successfully transmitted through observation and emulation.

Downey also touches on what I believe is an important point about the nature of spectatorship in sport, which he does not develop given the short format of his paper.

Beyond the most popular spectator sports, however, we find that the division between audience and performer is not so great; many spectators are themselves amateur participants. (Downey 2008, 1)

In the Australian mountain biking subculture, the blurred distinction between audience and performer is evident in magazine and online events coverage, which is almost always written by someone with a first hand experiential knowledge

of the sport. Coverage often describes races using a commentary style narrative or uses an explicitly experiential editorial position. In fact, some reports (such as Bicknell 2009a, 2009b, Partridge 2009 and Williamson 2009), move back and forth between the author's own experience of the event as a rider and descriptions and reflections of the event as an observer. These works sit alongside a growing number of online forums, weblogs and cycling e-zines that also privilege 'being there' over commentary style reports of race results. The demand for events coverage from this experiential vantage point suggests a valuing of participants as both 'keen rider' and 'objective spectator' and hints at the difficulty in making a clear distinction between the two roles. I am interested in exploring what this relationship can tell us about the experience of sports events from the viewpoint that this participant-observer engagement allows.

The ability of an audience to maintain a level of objectivity toward the event in front of them was also critical for Brecht's theatrical work, and it is interesting to note that he drew again from sporting spectatorship as a way of expressing this:

Brecht was insisting on the need for what he called a 'smokers' theatre,' where the audience would puff away at its cigars as if watching a boxing match, and would develop a more detached and critical outlook than was possible in the ordinary German theatre, where smoking was not allowed. (Willett 1978, 8)

I am by no means advocating that we stand under a cloud of cigar smoke to get the most out of sporting spectatorship. Rather, I'm interested in developing this idea of detached criticism (which, upon reflection, is not an uncommon trait of many sporting crowds), alongside that of a corporeal knowledge of what is taking place once the whistle goes, and the race is on. So where to begin?

In a mountain biking context, intimate engagements with, and senses of, place, performance and the atmosphere of an event are an integral part of both the racers' and spectators' experiences of the event. This again signals to the experiential vantage point of phenomenological observation as a useful starting point for a performance analysis of this sport. This allows us to think afresh about the relations between athletes, performers and spectators, and to look at the experience of sport on a personal and cultural level, rather than keeping the focus on aesthetics or results, as is often the case.

The case study I have selected for this paper examines the learning and skill development processes that can take place as an informed spectator watches a sporting event and provides evidence as to how the corrective experiences Downey explains can also take place in the absence of a phenomenologically gifted coach. Data has come from my own fieldwork, as a rider and spectator, and will be analysed within an ethnographic framework.

TAKING THIS STUDY OFF-ROAD

Mountain biking, or off-road riding, is a form of cycling that takes place on tracks composed of varying terrain and technical difficulty. The sport began in the 1980s and has since developed into several, distinct disciplines. XC races (which are the focus of this study) incorporate terrain in a loop formation which heads up, down and across the event's landscape. Depending on the geological make up of any riding location, XC trails feature differing amounts of dirt, rock, gravel, tree roots, logs, sand, creek crossings, and other natural or specifically sculpted features of the land.

Race tracks are normally marked by thin tape called bunting. In higher profile events, such as World Cups, bunting will line the entire course. In lower profile events, such as club, state and even some national rounds, the bunting will be used to signal where to go when it is not obvious, or to prevent people shortcutting the course. While this requires less infrastructure and time to mark a track by event organisers and volunteers, it relies on riders and spectators respecting the rules and objectives of the event.¹



Figure 1: A thin piece of bunting separates fans from the technical single track as Burry Stander races and win the U23 World Championship title at Canberra's Stromlo Forest Park, September 2009

¹ Lower profile events of this type in Australia typically attract a couple of hundred spectators at best. The 2007-9 Australian National Championships saw an estimated 2500-3000 people attend the race venue throughout the event, and the Australian round of the UCI Mountain Bike World Cup in September 2008 attracted 28,600 spectators spread over four different mountain biking disciplines, alongside the ACT School Champs and an eight hour endurance race which were held as supporting events during the week of the World Cup to enable a greater number of local riders to be part of the event and race sections of the course (Baker 2009). Note, if one person attended these events across multiple days, they would count multiple times toward these total figures. The National Championship and World Cup events mentioned above were all held at Stromlo Forest Park in Canberra.

Spectators may stand as close to the track as they choose, as long as they do not interfere with anyone riding past and stay outside of the bunting if it is there. During lower-profile events, there is often very little control over where spectators travel during the race and it is not uncommon to see people riding sections of the race track (for practice, or for enjoyment) while another race is taking place. The majority of the spectators at these events are riders as well and will probably race in various categories throughout the event, or they have brought their bikes with them to the event to go for a ride on the track and/or nearby terrain at a different time just to see what it is like.

STARING AT STAIRS: AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL XC ROUND 2, THREDBO, DECEMBER 2006

To begin a critical breakdown of the riding-spectating experience, I will start with a short description of a few moments of a XC race written from an informed spectator's point of view. I wrote this after my own experience at an Australian national XC round, which was held in Thredbo in December 2006.

Another rider and I are watching the Elite Men's race. I have just finished racing in the women's event. We have our bikes with us, so we can easily get to different sections of the track to watch. Sometimes this means riding on the race track itself (and hoping we don't get caught by any marshals) and sometimes it means taking alternate routes to interesting sections of the course as they are more direct, or avoid the hills.

After the race began, we headed to the area where the racers have to ride over a bridge and turn right to head down a staircase before taking a sharp left turn onto the next part of the track. The track was damp and muddy, making this section pretty difficult to ride. A lot of riders find this section difficult in the dry, and many women chose to run it, carrying their bikes during the race. We got there in time to see the end of the men's field tackling this section and waited until the guys at the front came through for their next lap.

Some of the men jumped off their bikes and ran down the stairs the way the women had. They were generally faster than most of the guys who rode it. Of the guys who rode it, some of them pulled hard on the front brake to force their bikes into a nose pivot so they could line themselves up with a wooden plank that had been put on the staircase. Others slowed down so much their bikes almost became still, but kept just enough momentum to steer the bike down the very edge of the stairs. This sneaky line was faster than the more obvious line down the plank.

We knew the names of most of the riders and had been cheering loudly as they came past: "Yeh! You nailed it!" or "Don't worry, it's faster to walk it anyway!" Sometimes they would smile, sometimes they just had the 'I'm in a world of hurt' expression on their faces.

Dylan Cooper, who is well known for his incredible bike handling skills rode

this section of the course quicker than anyone. He just seemed to glide over it all. It was exciting viewing, but I still have no idea how he did it. We turned the cheering up a notch: “Yeh!! Go Dylan, you great big spunk!!! Show us those skills!! They’re some great legs!!!! Keep it up, you’re doing awesome!!”



Figure 2: Murray Spink runs down the stairs at Thredbo



Figure 3: James Williamson rides the ‘sneaky line.’

I jumped on my bike after the men had passed and had a quick couple of goes at riding the staircase myself. I tried twice and succeeded both times! I didn’t think about how to do it, I just took the same line the boys had, thinking that if other riders could do it, then I could too. As I was riding down the side of the stairs I knew I had gotten it right not simply because I could see and feel that I had reached the next section, but because my body felt like it was moving in the same way as the bodies I had watched. If you asked me right away to describe how I had done this, I wouldn’t be able to tell you exactly what I had done differently this time compared to when I had tried it during my own race and scooted down the stairs with one foot off the bike. I would probably have said what other riders had told me: “You’ve just gotta commit.” If only I had this faith in myself during my own race.

There are several aspects of the spectating experience, and the rider/spectator relationship that come to attention in this account. The most obvious of these relates to the direct embodied experience spectators can have of the course the racers are competing on. The section of the race at the staircase was particularly exciting because it posed such a challenge for most of the riders who passed it. We got to see first hand the different approaches each rider took to the same section and learned that, in many cases, walking it was actually quicker than riding it. Trying to ride it ourselves was exciting and confidence-boosting because we had seen so many of the riders we admire struggle with it. It gave us a chance to assess our own abilities against the terrain and gain perspective on our own skills in comparison to those who we had cheered for in the race. The performances we had seen moved from the realm of the aestheticised into the realm of the achievable –

with the exception of whatever it was that Cooper did to get down the stairs. Our own attempt at the same skill, and inability to grasp what it was that he had done so differently, had functioned to increase our admiration of Cooper's superior technique.

This experience of watching racers at this set of stairs also presents some more generalised ways to think about skill development in relation to live performance.

MAKING MENTAL LEAPS

Skill development is often talked about as a process that comes about through practice, repetition and paying attention to a complex set of rules. The process then becomes naturalised, or reaches a state of automaticity, allowing us to focus our attention on other things while performing the newly acquired skill without conscious effort or concentration. Drew Leder provides a paradigmatic example of this way of thinking:

The initial stages of mastering a new skill usually involve a complex series of thematizations... I pay explicit attention to certain rules of performance...I attend to the examples provided by others...The problematic nature of these novel gestures tends to provoke explicit body awareness...Yet the successful acquisition of a new ability coincides with a phenomenological effacement of all this...This now comes without conscious effort, allowing my focus to be directed elsewhere... A skill has been incorporated into my bodily "I can."
(Leder 1990, 30-31)

This is a useful way of thinking about how, through practice, we can perform new skills without explicitly thinking about each moment of their execution. Reflecting upon this process phenomenologically, my own experience of watching the men ride the staircase and then being able to do it myself has also revealed that the developmental process underpinning skilled performance does not just come from 'doing' but can be developed through cognitive experiences as well. In fact, for any rider who learns to ride a small set of stairs for example, Leder's "I can" moment develops more through a process of emulation and belief rather than practice, error correction and repetition. Like jumping off a diving board for the first time, you cannot half ride a staircase, learning little components of the skill along the way. You need speed, momentum, body position and commitment to the manoeuvre at the beginning of the action, to relax during it, and to know what shape you want to feel yourself in as you finish it off. You cannot realistically rehearse how to land in the water once you have left the top of the diving board, but on the way down you can remind yourself to keep your legs straight and your toes pointed so you enter the water safely and avoid getting hurt. Likewise with riding some stairs, reminding yourself to keep your body weight behind the seat of the bike will mean, even for the novice rider, the bike stays stable as it hits the

flat ground at the exit – meaning the rider’s body will not flip over the front wheel causing a nasty crash.

The stairs at Thredbo were a little more complex than riding stairs alone, but the process of recognising the ‘I can’ moment *before* performing the new manoeuvre still applies. What I learned from watching other people ride this section was firstly, this action was indeed possible, and secondly, that the line around the plank would enable me to keep just enough momentum to turn the bike and roll down the stairs. Using Downey’s terms, which I discussed earlier, the observation of the line around the plank was the ‘corrective experience’ in this scenario. When I had tried the stairs previously, I had slowed so much while turning that I had not believed that it was possible to complete the turn before falling off the bike, and I had put my foot out to scoot down the staircase instead. This moment relates to Downey’s first stage of observation: bringing attention to performance imprecision. By breaking the conscious direction of the movement into aiming toward the edge of the stairs, followed by looking toward the exit, I was able to successfully negotiate the turn and finish the rest of the complex manoeuvre. It is in this way that I guided my own reinvention of the correct technique – Downey’s third phase of re-development.

Thinking about skilled performance in this way reveals the tantalising statement, “You’ve just gotta commit” to be simply a colloquial shortcut for the phenomenological process I have just discussed. In the mountain biking community it is an often-used phrase which encourages riders to ‘let go’ of the fear holding them back from relaxing during a manoeuvre, and trusting that they can do something at speed which cannot be rehearsed completely in smaller parts. The phrase represents an assumption that the rider being encouraged will be able to embody the technique necessary to perform the skill once they have committed corporeally to the action. The faith behind the encouragement also promotes a relaxed body position during skilled performance. When a rider has not committed to such a move, often due to doubt, fear, or distraction, their body position will alter due to muscle tension, or looking in the wrong direction (which often affects shoulder movement, which in turn affects steering) and the movement’s outcome will alter.²

This breakdown of the spectating experience has nonetheless revealed a process of developing movement that demonstrates a relation to, and experience of, place

2 Ideally speaking, this type of encouragement happens between riders when an observer is confident that the hesitant learner has the ability to embody the complexity of the manoeuvre in question. It would be silly to encourage someone to ‘commit’ to riding the complex line down and around the stairs at Thredbo if a rider was inexperienced in riding a simpler set of stairs, in the dry, without a crowd watching. Clearly there is an element of sensibility and progressive development involved in skill acquisition as well. If not, more people would progress from jumping off a diving board to doing three somersaults in the pike position over the space of a day.

and performance – learned through an embodied feedback process – which has echoed from one person's actions to another's. It also allows for conclusions to be made about skilled spectators taking away a more expert knowledge of the constituents of performance than their non-skilled counterparts.

Hubert Dreyfus (1996) argues that as skilled performance moves from novice to expert level, the performer (actor, sportsperson, or in the case of Dreyfus's paper, chess player or car driver) has a greater capacity to choose a course of action in response to a novel stimulus. This is due to a greater repertoire of possibilities for action, developed through experience. This case study demonstrates that skillful spectators also have a better capacity to pick out important information from what they are seeing. It follows that someone more skilled at mountain biking than myself would have an increased likelihood of pulling performance information out of Cooper's swift staircase manoeuvre (and more success at breaking down the differences between Cooper's movements and those of the other riders in the race).³

LEARNING THROUGH THE LIVED EVENT

Watching different approaches to the one obstacle generates new ways of thinking about it, which can be extended to thinking about other challenges on the track, within the context of a race, and riding in general. The descriptive analysis above has demonstrated the ways that spectators, who are also informed participants, gain perspective about their own skilled performance and those of other people due to a direct bodily appreciation of the activity and the environment within which it takes place.

The case study in this paper describes a short section of track that makes up approximately five seconds of a race that goes for about two hours. Detailed, analytical description has revealed a phenomenological approach to spectating at sporting events that offers some interesting ways of thinking about how we know and learn about place and skillful performance through the dynamic relations between participation and observation.

Spectating can allow fans of the sport to rethink their own abilities in relation to the demands of the event (or similar demands at in another time and place). In doing so, improvements can be made in the performance of techniques they are finding difficult – or they can use their own knowledge of the track to provide this clarity and motivation for those who are in competition. In the Australian mountain biking scene, this relationship between racers and knowledgeable spectators is

³ As my own skill set has improved since the time of this case study, I would suggest that Cooper used a more sophisticated technique for turning the corners prior to, and after the staircase, allowing him to carry more speed down the stairs. This enables the possibility of taking a narrower line – no longer needing to head to the dirt on the side of the stairs to maintain momentum. Cooper later confirmed this theory (Cooper 2009).

therefore mutually beneficial, influential and, at times, indistinguishable. The lack of a rigid boundary between those trackside and those racing, and the shared familiarity with the demands of the sport is important to recognise in order to understand the meanings live events carry for participants in this sport, and indeed alternative forms of performance as well. To further these findings, the obvious next step is to investigate, through similar methods, the impact knowledgeable spectators have on those for whom they are cheering. This would further illustrate the degrees to which the cultural, performative and experiential outcomes of these events are created and influenced through complex interactions between those on the track, and those beside it.

Considering sport as performance generates new ways of thinking and producing knowledge about sport and its relation to greater cultural processes. Perhaps, it is useful to bring to attention once more the opening quotation, which points out that not only do sporting audiences know what is going to take place when they attend an event, but they are watching “trained persons *developing* peculiar powers... in such a way as to make one feel that they are doing it primarily for their own fun” (Brecht 1978, 6, my italics). My work seeks to demonstrate that it is a joint development, between those watching and those being watched, which is in a constant process of negotiation – but so highly valued within this sporting world – that underpins much of the motivation, joy and meaning taken away from live events. It is a far more active process than paying money to sit back and marvel at the spectacle of it all.

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