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What Is Sport?

Roland Barthes

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What Is Sport? Roland Barthes
A little-known gem, the text of Barthes's *What Is Sport?* was never reprinted in the Seuil editions of his *Complete Works*—neither the three-volume version nor the later five-volume edition. It is published here in a graceful and faithful English translation by Pulitzer Prize winner Richard Howard. Originally commissioned by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation as the text for a documentary film directed by Hubert Aquin, *What Is Sport?* was written three years after the publication of Barthes's *Mythologies* (1957) and bears considerable resemblance to that work. Some of Barthes's best writing seems to have been inspired by popular culture.

Once again blurring the distinction between high and low, the great French literary theorist muses philosophically on the question: What is sport? In investigating the phenomenon of sport, Barthes considers five national sports: bullfighting (Spain), car racing (America), cycling (France), hockey (Canada), and soccer (England). For Barthes, sport is spectacle and serves the primary social function that theater once did in antiquity, collecting a city or nation within a shared experience. The real pleasure of this book, however, lies less in its generalities than in its fleeting, strangely haunting moments of insight. It makes an appropriate gift for any sport enthusiast as well as those interested in the writing of Roland Barthes.

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