
Sensory Ethnographies of Sport

Three Methodological Considerations

Hans Erik Næss

Faculty of Management
Westerdals Oslo School of Arts, Communication and Technology, Norway
Authors contact: <hans.erik.ness@westerdals.no>

Abstract

The sensory character of fieldwork has been increasingly used as part of ethnographic investigations. Sport, however, seems to be lagging behind when it comes to exploiting this element. For that reason, this article seeks to illustrate the potential of making sensory diversity a premise, rather than an afterthought, for ethnographies of sport. Based upon trans-local fieldwork at six FIA World Rally Championship events, as well as other examples from sensory studies of sport, it is argued that by exploring the sense-based experience of fans and how it shapes their view on sport, we get a broader picture of their affiliation with it. By discussing the uses of the senses as ethnographic ‘instrument’, the role of the researcher and issues related to qualitative analysis, this article offers practical advice on how to use this approach in the field.

Key words: rally, cars, senses, fieldwork, collective effervescence, nostalgia

Introduction

‘The senses’ has evolved to become a field of its own in qualitative social science research (Buckland 1999, Howe 2004, Smith, 2007, Pink 2009, Sparkes 2009, 2015, 2016). Howe (2004, p. 1) argues their importance on the grounds that, although the senses are shaped by personal history, they are also ‘collectively patterned by cultural ideology and practice’. Given the emotional and competitive nature of *sport*, and the many opportunities it offers for a certain kind of collective behaviour and for social interaction rituals (Ferguson 1981, Mann 2009), one would assume that the sensory capabilities of the qualitative social scientist would find a ready-made home in research on this field, theoretically as well as methodologically.

However, while the inclusion of the senses in qualitative social science research has become increasingly common, for instance through the *Senses and Society* journal founded in 2006, the presence of sensual elements seems to be the exception, rather than the norm, in qualitative sport studies and it is on this aspect of the topic that the present article focuses. Since sensory ethnography in sport is ‘a relatively new form of inquiry’ (Atkinson 2015, p. 14), new explorations of what this means for qualitative investigations are needed. Sarah Pink (2009, p. 72), for example, writes that ‘learning to sense and make meanings as others do thus involves us not simply observing what they do, but learning how to use all our senses and to participate in *their* worlds, on the terms of their embodied understandings.’

This article draws upon trans-local ethnography at six FIA World Rally Championship (WRC) events (Finland, Argentina, Monte Carlo, Wales, France and Italy in the period 2010–13) to explore the following root research question: how to solve the paradox of commercialism, or ‘the challenge of extracting commercial value from their brands without compromising the intrinsic “integrity” and spirit of the game’ (Smith & Stewart 2013, p. 534). Like other sports, the WRC has been forced to streamline in order to reach a global market on the one hand, while, on the other, keeping the quirky qualities that made it popular in the first place. Its quiriness is what makes it potentially attractive to a global audience; yet, in order to reach that global audience, some of that quiriness needs to be jettisoned. An early discovery I made was that the promotional treatment of nostalgia could be key to weaken the force of this paradox (Næss 2014). In order to develop an understanding of the

content, contours and contexts of that contemporary experience which nostalgia refers to, we need to track down the sources of mnemonic experience in group life (Davis 1979, p. 7. Motorsport historian Derick Allsop (1999) provided me with a clue: ‘true greatness [in the WRC] is measured not only in medals but also by the impact on the senses’ (p. 36).

With emphasis on fans’ nostalgia for certain WRC cars, fieldwork experiences are used in this article to give a systematised account of three important elements of sensory awareness in sport ethnography in general: the uses of the senses in the field, the role of the researcher, and how the approach affects analysis. The result is a refined approach to how senses can be instruments for the researcher in qualitative research.

Methodological context

Ethnography can be described in general as ‘a qualitative social science practice that seeks to understand human groups (or societies, or cultures, or institutions) by having the researcher in the same social space as the participants in the study’ (Madden 2010, p. 16), and utilising the techniques of participant observation. In studies of sport, this method – regardless of whether it is single- or multi-sited (Melhuus, Mitchell & Wulff 2012) – has become an instrument with particular qualities. Apart from explaining the meaning of rituals and behaviours within these cultures, organisations or communities, participant observation of this kind makes it possible to connect the various aspects of sport with social processes and to examine their reciprocal nature. Sands (2002, p. 150) writes that: ‘For a culture, a world to go crazy over a ball game, a camel race, a lacrosse match, a run, speaks volumes about human behavior’.

Moreover, ‘unique to sport ethnography’, writes Joseph (2013, p. 7), ‘is the methodological requirement that the researcher comes to understand the subculture through reflecting on their embodied experiences using what has been referred to as experiential, kinaesthetic, corporeal or performative ethnography’. Some notable works in the study of sports underpinning this approach, which also include autoethnography, include Downey’s (2002) research on capoeira; Sands’ (2002) work on collegiate basketball players, footballers and sprinters; Wacquant’s efforts as an apprentice boxer (2007); Purdy, Potrac and Jones’ exploration of rowing (2008); Laviolette’s (2009) inquiry into cliff-jumping; Sparkes’ (2009) scenes relating to cricket, football and the gym; Woermann’s

ethnographic inquiry into freeskiers (2012); Parry's work on football (2012); Spencer's work on Mixed Martial Arts (2013); Allen-Collinson and Hockey's exploration of running (2015); and Loh's (2016) examination of martial arts.

Despite the growing acknowledgements of the senses in ethnography, the combination of participatory observation and the use of the senses as methodological instrument have yet to be fully assimilated into the methodological toolbox of sociology and anthropology, not least within sport studies (Sparkes 2015). One reason for this, perhaps, is that the examples mentioned above mainly concentrate on the participants of sports, rather than on fans, managers or others less directly involved. As mentioned above, the senses are a natural part of 'collective effervescence' sometimes associated with spectator cultures (Molnar & Kelly 2013, p. 45). A second reason is that ethnographies where the authors made a point of using sensuous cultural practices (see Willis 2007) have either been overlooked or other sections of their work have been given more attention. A third reason is the need for an organised account of the more general elements of sensorial ethnography. In response to this need, the following exploration of rally fans' canonisation of certain cars in the history of the World Rally Championship (WRC) will provide an example of how the use of ethnography in sports studies might be improved.

Established in 1973, the WRC has grown from a niche sport to a global entertainment product. Yet, it has stuck with its basic formula. Unlike the special vehicles you will find in Formula 1, and although technical regulations have undergone major changes six times by 2017, WRC cars are still derived from the road-going cousins both in terms of looks and of technology. Along the way, some cars have become icons, that is, objects that are repositories of a significant piece of motorsport history and, in the view of many fans, are symbolic representations of the sport, as it ought to be. To understand the emergence of nostalgia, which could ease the tension between commerce and tradition, it was relevant to pursue what my informants found important in cherishing certain cars as well as a cue for me to conduct participant observation in the field based on shared experiences which affected the senses. While there is no room for a complete review of the nuts and bolts of that discussion here, the rest of this article will discuss the practice of sense-based ethnography, the role of the researcher and the challenges this poses to qualitative analysis.

Using the senses as ethnographic instrument

Work in the field can be seen as a balancing act between the desire to obtain information and frame it theoretically on the one hand, and to become ‘one of them’ in a way that is reflected in the writing-up of the fieldwork on the other (Thiele 2003). Hence, the role of the researcher ‘requires critical self-reflection of the ways in which researchers’ social background, assumptions, positioning and behaviour impact on the research process.’ (Finlay & Gough 2003, p. ix). Prior to fieldwork, and partly because I knew a lot about the WRC beforehand, I relied on the idea contained in W F Whyte’s seminal ethnography *Street Corner Society*, where he writes that he was advised by Doc, his key informant, to ‘go easy on that “who”, “what”, “why”, “when”, “where” stuff’. If you ask questions like that, ‘people will clam up on you. If people accept you, you can just hang around, and you’ll learn the answers in the long run without even having to ask the questions’ (Whyte 1993, p. 316).

It became apparent to me as early as my first field trip to Finland in 2010, however, that to make this ‘hanging around’ effective, I had to include my own and other people’s uses of the senses as an analytic element. The reason was that, as in other sports, a great deal of the WRC fans’ communication is embodied in gestures – cheers, grins, expressions of anger or physical reactions in general – and is difficult to put into words, at least there and then in the field. Furthermore, what ignites these sense-based reactions, and the reactions themselves, must be grasped by the ethnographer through a multi-sensory gaze as no one sense is more important than the other – being a football fan at a stadium, for example, creates an experience that includes smell, touch, sound and sight (Back 2003, Sparkes 2009). However, if senses are included as research instruments, there are potentially issues to do with the way the researcher and the participants are represented (Coffey 1999, Krane & Baird 2005). Failure to comply with the unwritten codes of conduct in the environment in question may turn these multi-sensory opportunities into an experience of alienation. In my case, this potential pitfall was lessened by my previous interest in the sport – as Woermann (2012, p. 622-24) in his study of freeskiers, capitalised on his experience as a former ski instructor in order to understand ‘the phenomenology of looking cool’.

As Woermann did, I was able to use my knowledge of the WRC as a shortcut into informants’ life-world as rally spectators and to connect more directly with the rationale for their sensorial impressions. At this

early stage, lessons from other ethnographies underline the importance of coupling the temporal and spatial dimensions of the field site with how the senses are stimulated by the structuring activities in it (Spencer 2013, Allen-Collinson & Hockey 2015, Sparkes 2015). As the organisation of the gym and the fighter cage is paramount to understanding the senses that are awakened by mixed martial arts (Spencer 2013), the understanding of rally culture necessitates an engagement with a plethora of sense-evoking elements: nature, cars, people and food. Mostly, this is due to the organisation of rally events. The locations of speed tests at the one event of Rally Finland, for instance, make a pattern of geographical dots criss-crossing the region of Jyväskylä. Spectators can pick and mix viewing points anywhere along the approximately 400 kilometres of rally roads (which are normally public roads, but closed during the competition).

Along the way, and because spectatorship in the WRC involves outdoor activities like hiking, making bonfires and camping, there are many experiences which bring together the senses and which allow the researcher to join in with fans. Let me introduce a page from my field notes at Rally Finland 2010.

GRR-ANG-JKK-BROOOM-POP-KOPOP-III-PIIU-BRROOM! I can hear him! He's coming! People exchange looks; this is it! Deep inside the intensely hot, mosquito-infested Finnish forests we have no visual on the first car on the road, which is Sebastien Loeb in his C4, but we can definitely hear the car from a distance; engine growls, rocket bangs from the exhaust and the machine-gun-like effects from gravel being shot into the forest from tyres spinning all mix as a symphony of speed, where the attention to the sounds transform the faces of the spectators from relaxed campers to light bulbs electrified by expectations – it is always something special about the first car on a WRC rally, similar to the song which opens the concert with your favourite artist. I can see it in their eyes – this is gonna be awesome! Loeb comes closer, and by the amplifying of sounds we can feel that he is approaching the chicane where we are placed. It is the first real stage of Rally Finland 2010. Soon, the entire mood among the spectators changes even more, and people pull forward their pocket cameras and lean over the tapes to get the best view possible. Everybody looks at each other and gives thumbs up and broad smiles. And when Loeb finally races into the corner and passes us at maximum speed we are up close and dirty, sprayed with gravel and covered in fumes, happy as hell.

This quote is an attempt to show the relevance of connecting the ‘spatio-temporal’ dimensions of the field with the senses as a knowledge-generating instrument about the spectator culture of the WRC. On several occasions, and in various sites, I showed these notes to my informants and asked whether they concurred with the description, as a form of narrative ethnography where the critical point was to find out why *this* version of the story (i.e. the development of the WRC) was chosen in preference to *that* version (Gubrium & Holstein 2008). As we debated the precision of my impressions, the status of the information was transformed into a co-production of knowledge. For instance, in their study of running, Allen-Collinson and Hockey (2015, p. 78) emphasise that the route has both functional purposes and symbolic salience: ‘The ways in which we “see” sections of the route, and the route in toto are structured by our runners’ vision, socialized into us as members of the distance running subculture, but also arising from our own unique biographical and lived-body experiences as runners.’

In addition to discussing field notes on narrative selection at the end of the day, I shot small clips of film from various viewpoints to explore the ‘spatio-temporal’ dimensions of the field from a different point of view. According to Pink (2006, 2009), who in her work combines visual and sensorial ethnography, this means videotaping and taking photographs of ethnographic encounters. Visual data are not simply images, she argues, but ‘material objects with sensory qualities’ (Pink 2009, p. 93). As I went to spectate more stages, I tried to combine the gaze of the ethnographer with the possibilities for the cameraman. Although nowhere near technically perfect, these clips nevertheless provided me with a lot of sensory material (e.g. spectators covered in dust after the car has raced past) which I could share with my informants and, after a discussion on what I should include and what I could leave out, translate the impressions into text later the same day.

In return, informants at such diverse sites as Argentina, Monte Carlo and Wales all led me to videos on YouTube called ‘Group B – Pure Sound’ along with explanations of ‘what rallying was all about’. In those videos, the howling sound of the five-cylindered Audi WRC car has become to some people what musicologists call a ‘sound souvenir’, a concept originally used to describe endangered sounds, like those of pre-industrial life, that needed to be recorded for posterity (Schaefer 1994, p. 240). Another frequently taped car in these videos is the Subaru Impreza, as the distinct sound from its ‘boxer’ engine helped its impact grow fast after its

entry to the WRC in 1994 (Robson 2006, p. 19). I will come back to the role of sound in the WRC fan experience, but suffice to say here that I saw it as a chance to intervene in the situation (by introducing myself as a writer working on a book on the WRC) and – if successful – get people to talk about their favourite cars. What I did not realise at the beginning was that these conversations and observations pointed to something cultural as well as personal.

The role of the researcher

The use of the senses led me to reflect on my own role. Approaches to fieldwork like the one outlined in this paper are demanding of the researcher because they require some knowledge of the subject and of the way people interact within the community. To an extent, this was resolved by my previous interest in the sport, which made parts of the project slightly ‘autoethnographic’, that is, ‘a form of writing that make[s] the researcher’s own experience a topic of investigation in its own right rather than seeming as if they’re written from nowhere by nobody’ (Ellis & Bochner 2004, pp. 733-34). Related to this method is the perspective that psychologists call ‘subjective personal introspection’ (SPI), which is a helpful methodological device in explorations of nostalgia. The researcher’s narrative recollection of memories and experiences as a sports consumer, for example through photos, aids her towards an impressionistic interpretation of their relation with the present (Holbrook 2005).

The upside of this prior knowledge and childhood memories of the WRC was a quickly established trust with the informants as we shared an understanding of the sensory elements that constituted the sport’s identity and access to explanations as to why cars like the Ford Escort, Audi S1 and Subaru Impreza were considered ‘classics’ by many fans. On the other hand, my knowledge could also be a hindrance, as it could lead both me and the informants to taking things for granted and, above all, cause me to ask unintentionally leading questions, guiding informants into answers that were projections of my own assumptions (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle 2009). Especially at the beginning, my insider status generated only superficial information. The informants did not explain the choice of their favourite cars, rallies, or drivers, or views on the WRC as a whole, because they assumed I would understand just by saying things like ‘the Impreza’. In order not to let my insider role get between infor-

mants' description and explanation (see Coffey 1999), it became necessary to make some adjustments.

Eventually, I figured out that by weaving the sense-based approach into what I had found in additional sources such as news articles, magazines and literature on the WRC and motorsport, I could steer the conversations on to what I wanted to talk about. Usually, the conversation began with something else – the bus trip, food, the stage condition, or the latest rumours from a team – before it was led into a conversation about rally cars, current issues or past debates. An increasing number of associations between spectators' own experience and certain cars became a useful portfolio of 'entry points' to the subject I was interested in. After a car had passed through the spectator area, for instance, I could hear people talking about the time they watched that car or this driver some years ago.

In this way, by stimulating people to make conversation without asking direct questions, I was able to address a common theme in sensory ethnography: the lack of acknowledgement of the diversity of how people sense things – for instance, food (Stoller 1997) – and the meanings attributed to them. Across localities, I gradually identified certain characteristics of how people in the WRC community spoke of certain cars and drivers and at which point I could 'enter appropriately' into the conversations (Sanjek 2014, p. 96) and even get in contact with them after fieldwork was finished. Macphail (2004) reveals a similar experience. Following an ethical dilemma, she was forced to reflect on her role as researcher in her study of the Forest Athletic Club:

I rarely questioned that the behaviour of the athletes and the conversations I was party to were contrived (...) However, as time passed, and I observed more sessions and got to know individuals better, patterns of behaviour and discussions began to emerge from the data, verifying the quality of data in the first few months of the ethnography (Macphail 2004, p. 232).

In my recollection, it was, however, not primarily my prior interest that allowed me to understand the sensory character of cars and enter other people's conversations, but the ability to search for a 'handle' for the concrete situation by letting a word, phrase or an image emerge from the felt sense, a technique in which, as Stelter notes (2010, p. 864), 'the informant is encouraged to use language that directly refers to bodily experiences' (see also Humberstone 2011, Sparkes 2016). This link between

communication and experience led me to a particular discovery: when I reviewed my field notes after the third WRC event, as well as doing additional research on online forums and interviewing senior personnel at FIA along the way, a pattern began to crystallise as to why some WRC cars were classified as iconic. Regardless of event locality, time and country, there were commonalities in people's sense-related experiences. At first, as mentioned above, I was under the impression that sound was the primary sense that led some WRC cars to become classics. I spent much time talking to people about this and considering the specific reasons why the sound of one car was preferred to another.

Yet, as I was to discover when I analysed the field notes, video snippets and conversations, the reasons why certain cars achieved iconic status was more complex, although people tended to begin with sound as the reason why, for example, the Audi S1 was their favourite WRC car. Eventually, as fieldwork progressed, the affective variables among WRC fans were found to be particular *combinations of senses* where some cars stood out above the rest in terms of sensory entertainment. Sound alone rarely generated the great experience, nor was the audio-visual experience necessarily similar even if two drivers used the same type of car. Rather, there seemed to be some kind of agreement among fans that the connection between personal memories, scenery, car movements and sounds, created memorable experiences. Brian, one of my US informants, put it like this:

I think the Group B cars [those who competed in the WRC 1982-86] were better from a personal preference standpoint. These were *sheer monsters, cut loose from their cages*, and allowed to have their way with the stage roads on the shortest of leashes. When a driver got sloppy and gave too much slack, these beasts bit back, often hard. Conan would be proud. The new WRC cars [those which have competed in the WRC from 2010 onwards], on the other hand, are still cool from the technological standpoint. However *this technological wizardry sort of mutes the ultimate demonstration of skill* in vehicle control that makes rally so appealing (italics added).

Similarly, my Estonian informant Markko said:

Modern WRC cars and also drivers have no personality, *they all look the same. And almost sound the same*. Few years ago we had the Mini WRC, that car sounded differently. But now the average rally fan can't tell the difference. Hope that new rules coming in 2017 can bring the difference in sound and also driving style (italics added).

Chris, a German informant, put it like this:

I think there is something in the driver *taming a fire-spitting monster*. It is the spectacle that draws the people to the show; after all they are called spectators. I think we need to look at modern electronics, suspension and transmission technology. For a start the extremely expensive sequential quick shift gearboxes seem counter-productive, *if hearing a driver struggling for traction on engine notes – pops and bangs and fire spitting exhausts – is one of the sensations* (italics added).

What Brian, Markko and Chris are getting at here, as italicised in their quotes, is that the more spectacular the experience, for instance, when cars are airborne, put sideways or made to use the entire road to get through by some of the WRC's most spectacular drivers, the more awesome (i.e. adrenaline-generating) is the impression.

Opportunities and challenges to qualitative analysis

To be analytically relevant, this understanding of the sensory appeal of certain cars in the WRC needs to be put into a theoretical context. 'Pure' impressions are like raw data – they contain a lot of information, but they make much more sense when they are organised as support for an argument or as an empirical reply to a research question (see Smith 2007, Sparkes & Smith 2012, for discussions). My research thus resembled the process of 'analytic ethnography' as outlined by Snow, Morrill and Anderson (2003). Rather than adhering to traditional interpretative ethnography or seeking post-modern conceptualisations of people's experiences, this trio of researchers emphasises a desire to 'to produce systematic and generic propositions about social processes and organisation through attention to a number of overlapping research principles' (2003, p. 182). One of these principles is the 'theoretical extension'. This means that findings are neither theory-free nor do they generate new theoretical frameworks, but focus 'on broadening the relevance of a particular concept or theoretical system to a range of empirical contexts other than those in which they were first developed or intended to be used' (Snow, Morrill & Anderson 2003, p. 187).

In a number of sports, the WRC included, nostalgia offers us an example of a theoretical extension. It is often associated with yearning for former times (Davis, 1979), but in sport, a more relevant understanding

of the concept can be to view it as ‘motive, as socialisation tool, [which] forms an integral part of the norms and rituals of various social worlds’ (Fairley & Gammon 2005, p. 183). In this process of creating nostalgic sentiments through interaction, my informants often pointed to how WRC cars affected the senses in various ways and how they shaped their perception of the sport’s past and present. ‘I really miss that Audi sound,’ my Argentinian informant Alejandro once said dreamily – and he was 39 at the time. But then he explained why it was nostalgic in the first place. ‘It was more exciting (back when Audi participated in the WRC, in the first half of the 1980s), plenty of adrenaline. I remember the night stages, waiting with my friends around a big fire to keep us *warm*’ (italics added). This connects with the claim that ‘recollection is a *sense act*: a memory is actively brought to bear in idealized sentiments that are created and interpreted in terms of relations of time by which people, places and things are actively assigned their place’ (Waskul, Vannini & Wilson 2009, p. 15).

By acknowledging recollection as a sense act, the rationale for using nostalgia as a theoretical concept to grasp the sensory impression discovered through fieldwork becomes twofold. First, as the WRC fans reveal, people, almost regardless of gender, age, nationality or cultural background, do not have to have experienced something to be nostalgic about it. With the proliferation of social media, so-called ‘vicarious nostalgia’ has become a performative aspect of sport consumption (Greene, 2009, p. 75), amplified by the notion that this process is consequently not time-bound. In contrast to the belief that the amount of time elapsed influences one’s aptitude to be nostalgic, Davis (1979) suggested that ‘lived-time’ – an individual’s current circumstances that contrast with events from the past – is far more important. Bruno, one of my Norwegian informants, put it like this:

My favourite era has to be the 1980s. Unfortunately, I could not witness it ‘live’, as I had just been born. But after *seeing* and *hearing* videos of *roaring* Audis and *flame-throwing* 205s on narrow mountain roads one gets the idea of what it was all about. Cars were monsters and men were men. I have seen and experienced a lot of entertainment with modern rally cars as I have gotten older, but harbour a strong feeling of having missed the real fun (italics added).

What Bruno’s remarks exemplify is the ability to cherish experiences you were not part of. According to two researchers on sport and nostalgia,

the explanation is that memories can be *lived memories*, that is, ‘reflections that people have of their personally experienced past’, but they can also be *learned memories*, that is, ‘based on external sources such as books, media or stories’ (Sierra & McQuitty 2007, p. 100). The reason why this breeds nostalgia, according to Paul Connerton, is that ‘we experience our present world in a context which is causally connected with past events and objects, and hence with reference to events and objects *which we are not experiencing* when we are experiencing the present’ (Connerton 1989, p. 2, italics added).

Second, unlike its corresponding individualised state, melancholia, nostalgia has a relational quality, according to Svetlana Boym: ‘nostalgia is about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory’ (Boym 2007, pp. 8-9). Market researchers have pointed to a number of affective variables – memories, sounds, smells – that might explain different elements of the nostalgia among sports fans (Summers, Johnson, & McColl-Kennedy 2001) and, in a similar way, WRC cars in the hands of certain drivers seem to offer audio-visual experiences that are just as important as the rally results. Memories like these are, consequently, not just individual interpretations. Because they are storied on the basis of a certain script, an otherwise loosely connected set of groups and individuals are shaped into a narrative community. One way to interpret this is that it is the relative diversity of appearance that evokes the senses the most strongly, not that WRC cars should have a certain sound or look, or be driven in a certain way. In other words, as my informant Markko also pointed out earlier in this article, the real issue may not be the absence of a certain car, but the lack of diversity.

While my analytical attention in early fieldwork was given to what fans had to say about any aspect of the sport, the comparative context in which examples of highs or lows were used to make an opinion gradually created a far more interesting subject: patterns of meaning. These patterns of meaning, formed by the way people in the WRC community spoke of and reacted to cars, events and drivers as symbols of the championship’s sporting identity, were interpreted as empirical substance of how the senses affected their view of the sport as a whole. One precondition for this approach, however, is that the researcher must be informed, not ruled, by theory in her quest for identifying the most central webs of connections and becoming part of the social relationships that enable data on the WRC as experience. Matthew Desmond (2014) writes that

certain relationships can be accentuated and others minimized depending on the relevance to a specific research question. This means that before fully entering the field the relational ethnographer should spend a considerable amount of time articulating a set of research questions and constructing a scientific object moulded around them (p. 559).

The benefit of using a similar approach to Desmond's was an instant impression of what mattered to fans in various localities. Embodied reactions, spontaneous social gatherings and holistic perspectives on the sport – its cars, events and drivers in particular – came together as explanations for their interest in almost any conversation. However, while emphasis on the senses and the literary transformation of sensory interplay create new opportunities for data gathering and analysis, they simultaneously create difficulties when it comes to combining analytical prose with sense impressions. Yet, according to Stoller (1989, p. 8), stylistic changes in the writing of ethnographies to include elements such as rich sensory description and vivid metaphors can open up the world to a multi-sensory exploration. It does not have to be either/or, but, as my field notes above demonstrate, sensory description and metaphor can enrich the analysis by providing the reader with a more complex portrait of the phenomenon in question. Gathering this kind of material along with field notes based on participatory observations allowed me to represent better the phenomenon of the 'there and then' while simultaneously conveying its general qualities as they related to other aspects of the WRC (see Sparkes & Smith 2012, pp. 178-186, for a discussion).

Conclusion

In this article, the binary use of the senses in ethnography, as data gathering instrument on the one hand and analytical lens on the other, has been explored through rally fans' view of what constitute iconic cars in the FIA World Rally Championship (WRC). Drawing on my own fieldwork and the research of others to identify some possibilities and pitfalls in systematising the senses as part of ethnographic work, my suggestion is that, used with caution, such an approach may expand the ethnographic experience and provide new insights into others' experiences of sporting phenomena. In the case of WRC, these sense-based discoveries can contribute to solving the paradox of commercialism, as they indicate the

need to reconsider what there is to promote in the first place – the WRC's sporting identity, which is very much a nostalgic affair.

My conclusion is that the combination of sense-based impressions and context enabled me to analyse the identification of iconic cars in a different way from judging by conventional participant observation alone. The admiration for certain rally cars was relationally defined through a combination of how they were driven and their appearance, rather than through a ranking on the basis of sound, sight or livery. Even though the social parts of this experience (e.g. after a night in the open round a fire with friends) are not accessible to those who suffer from non-experienced nostalgia, the two sets of sense-based impressions still contain valuable data in terms of reconciling traditions and commercial considerations in the WRC.

As the value of being a WRC spectator derives from certain cars and the nostalgia associated with them, I suggest that the general connection between the senses and nostalgia – which I would argue plays a major role in most sports – invites other researchers to explore sport experiences through the same framework. Like any cultural experience where linguistic communication only covers part of the impression (Willis, 2007), the senses are responsible for a large part of the meaning people attach to being a sports fan. To avoid getting stuck in the paradox of commercialism, a broader incorporation of sport consumer experiences is needed, and is a natural field for further research.

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