

2.4

Illustrating Sports, or the Invention of the Magazine*

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In the late nineteenth century, the rise of amateur photography and the development of halftone printing allowed newspaper publishers to imagine new weeklies centering on photography, among them *The Illustrated American* (1891) and *Collier's Weekly* (1895), in the United States, and *La Vie Illustrée* (1898) and *La Vie au grand air* (1898) in France. These periodicals inherited the format and length of their predecessors, but were more generously illustrated. This emphasis on quantity, closely tied to the realization of the halftone process and the new possibilities it generated, created its own set of constraints. Art directors were added to editorial teams to oversee image flow and layout, bringing with them visual strategies that would transform the structure of illustrated periodicals. All of these weeklies carried sports news, but only *La Vie au grand air* published nothing else, from 1898 to 1922, and under “art director” Lucien Faure it pioneered a graphic style that ushered in the age of the modern magazine.

During the nineteenth century, sport played a steadily expanding role in France, and in the early years of the twentieth century it became synonymous with the advent of leisure. As an “enjoyable break” from work for some, and a “pleasure that does you good” for others, sport, for the Belle Époque, was one result of progress.¹ Writing of the first Tour de France in 1903 and its handling by the media, historian Georges Vigarello comments, “The newspaper recounted the race to the reader, the race the roadside spectator only glimpsed: it gave meaning and unity to a spectacle, recreated duration, linked the episodes together and provided a dramatic structure. Whence the curiosity and the attraction. Whence the sales.”² The association of the Tour de France with the magazine *L'Auto*, the Tour's initiator, testifies not only to reader interest in sporting events, but also to the inherent media-friendliness of sport for a press now more concerned with topical news than with informed, long-form articles.³ More recreational in content than traditional newspapers, the sporting press developed a less restricted mode of presenting the news, and with the spread of photography and the advent of halftone illustration, sports weeklies enjoyed increasing visibility and independence on the press scene.

1 April 1898 saw the first issue of *La Vie au grand air* (1898–1914; 1916–22), an “illustrated magazine of all sports”⁴ devised and published by Pierre Lafitte (1872–1938), a major figure on the press and publishing scene in the pre-war years.⁵ Under Lafitte's guidance, sports and “outdoor living” generally were addressed as social phenomena signifying progress and helping to shape a “young elite.”⁶ A surge of patriotism saw the editor-in-chief resolve to confront the Anglo-Saxon peoples and their reputation as

athletes with a France become “the land of muscle.” As a “guarantee of growth,”⁷ sports, offering a host of competitions and endlessly renewed feats, embodied the development of modern societies. France had its specialist press, but no “official, illustrated sports magazine” to make all of these activities accessible to the young, the “hope of our country.”⁸ *La Vie au grand air* was ready to take on the task, with news about cycling, cars, and athletics, and a program of the “popularization of sports,” which Lafitte proposed to carry out by complementing official accounts and articles by specialists with “vibrantly interesting photogravures and lively compositions by our illustrators.”

The amateur photography of the late nineteenth century showed a marked penchant for sports, and *La Vie au grand air* ensured amateur support from the time of its founding in 1898.⁹ During the 1880s discerning photographers such as Albert Londe and Gaston Tissandier channeled the energy of amateurs by forming associations, both to promote the medium and its practice and to get the most out of the challenging new form of the snapshot. The gelatin silver technique offered hitherto unknown sensitivity to light and, what was more, a dry medium that freed hobbyists from their laboratories.¹⁰ Their images not only embodied the medium’s new possibilities, but also constituted an aesthetic and a strictly photographic genre that “came to resemble a kind of sporting competition dedicated to an ongoing quest for visual exploits.”¹¹ It was hardly surprising, then, that “photography” should figure on Lafitte’s list of sports, and that the outings of the Société d’Excursion des Amateurs de Photographie (SEAP) should include venues like the Le Vésinet Skating Circle, the racetrack, and the Joinville-le-Pont Military College,¹² where the great sports spectacle could be captured “on the spot.” The fortuitous Belle Époque encounter of sports and photography generated a wealth of images which *La Vie au grand air* capitalized on and highlighted through sophisticated page design.

In its issue of 4 February 1899 the weekly carried sixty illustrations, all of them photographic.¹³ A quick evaluation of standard issues of the magazine shows that photographs covered 10.5 to 14 pages, that is, around 70 percent of each issue. From cover to cover there were few pages of solid print. Furthermore, text typically took the form of captions, with the images structuring the space on the page. The quantity and type of images meant *La Vie au grand air* had to find graphic solutions for each issue; for this it appointed an “art director” whose job was not only to choose the pictures, but also to lay them out such that they supported the editorial line. Lucien Faure was in charge of giving visual shape to the sporting news and each page, beginning with the cover, was an exercise in graphic construction in which text and image were blended to meet topical requirements. On the cover of the issue of 16 March 1905, for example,¹⁴ Hoffmann is shown on his motorcycle from a point of view that orients him towards the right-hand side of the page, eyes glued to the finishing line. The title of the magazine is laid out in four lines behind the motorcycle, whose front wheel is cropped by the bottom of a page insufficiently long to contain this vision of speed (Fig 2.4a).

This kind of presentation is aimed much more at a spectator than a reader: a spectator interested in things like the speed of motorcycles, and whose attention is likely to be drawn to the formal content of an image. Every possible technique has been utilized to produce an eye-catching cover: the snapshot freezes the movement, the frontality establishes the viewer’s position, and the placement of the text underscores the construction of the page. Thus consumers are drawn toward *La Vie au grand air* first by its enticing cover, then by the carefully laid-out pages that structure the issue, and finally by its arguable high point, the central double-page spread, a horizontal rectangular space where all of the layout strategies used for the cover and full pages were put to work.¹⁵

In the issue of 29 February 1908 the magazine devoted its double page spread to the diablo: “Is the diablo a game or a sport?” (Fig. 2.4b).¹⁶ The subject was addressed through a text-and-image layout



Figure 2.4a *La Vie au grand air*, 16 March 1905, no. 340, cover. Private collection.

that used the page to its fullest. A double border surrounds the composition, punctuated at several points by a diabolo or the arm of a player. A wide horizontal image unites the two pages, but is split down the middle by a player bent backwards in the act of throwing the diabolo. Arranged in a semi-circle around him are five other images: three silhouetted figures and two others set in circles. The text is not laid out with the same symmetrical exactness; rather, it fills out the remaining space, slipped in between

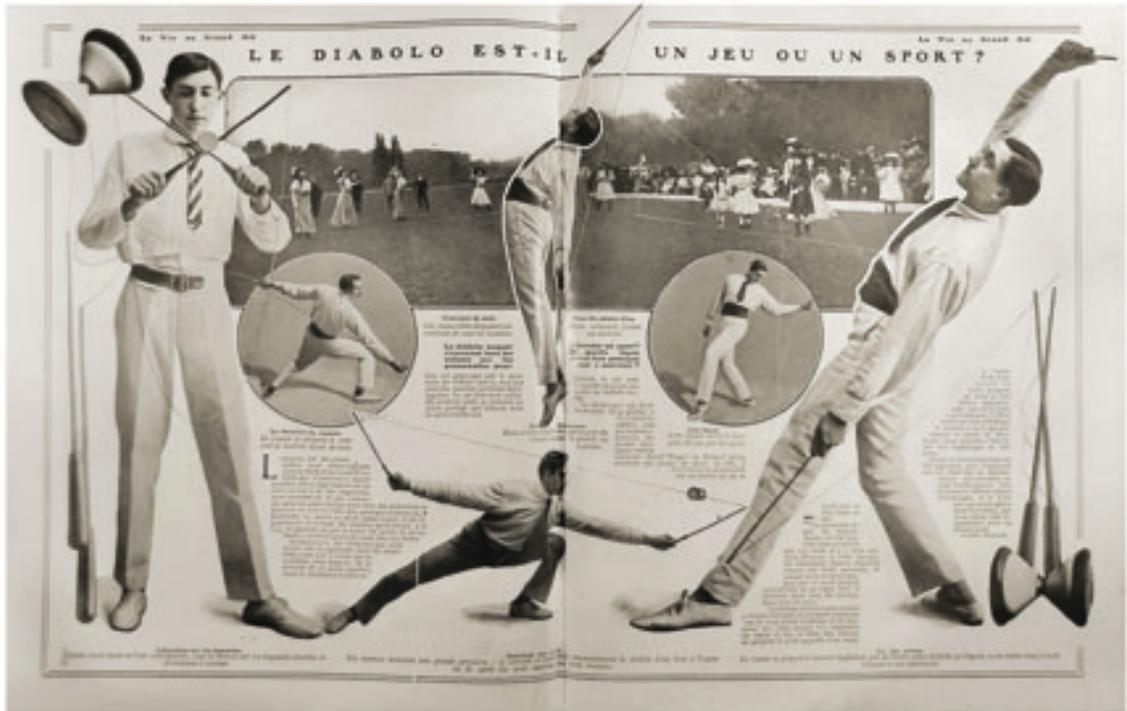


Figure 2.4b *La Vie au grand air*, 29 February 1908, no. 492, pp. 135–6. Private collection.

the images or the legs of one of the players. The author of the article struggles to convincingly present the game as a sport, but the layout certainly highlights the player's agility and dexterity. The figures are silhouetted in unusual but graceful poses; the circles echo the shape of the diabolo, accentuating its part in the general composition; and the scattering of the text mimics the speed of the movements demanded by the activity. The double page spread, then, presents its subject via a formal arrangement based on separate photographs. The layout employs a montage of distinct visual elements—text and images—aimed at an overall effect in which skill is conveyed through a formal display. The double-page spreads in *La Vie au grand air* systematically strove for this merging of form and content.

The spread in the issue of 1 August 1908 is further testimony to the narrative/display pairing (Fig. 2.4c).¹⁷ Here the topic is that year's London Olympics. A montage with the title at the top, the images in the middle, and four lines of captions at the bottom includes nine snapshots in varied formats of, among other subjects, the finish line of the 100- and 200-meter races, the winner of the 1,500-meter, and the end of the marathon. The images are numbered from left to right and from top to bottom, with each number corresponding to a caption, but the narrative sequence is disrupted by the superposition of an image: that of the American Francis C. Irons, who had just broken the world long jump record and been photographed head on during one of his attempts. Occupying the full height of the page and stripped of its context by tight silhouetting, Irons' body partially masks some of the other photographs as it hurtles towards the reader/spectator. The montage transcends any mere account of the Games through its arrangement of a representative selection of snapshots of the events. Irons astonishes



Figure 2.4c *La Vie au grand air*, 1 August 1908, no. 515, pp. 88–9. Private collection.

everyone by breaking the world record, but also by creating a spectacular visual effect. Number 2 in the sequence, the photograph of Irons, is the organizational linchpin for the spread. With this kind of montage, the *La Vie au grand air* double page became a magnet for readers in search of visual information modeled not on the academic dictates of the fine arts, but on modern forms. Incorporating photography and montage, the layouts of *La Vie* were, seductively, more suggestive of the newsreels being screened in Parisian cinemas than the teachings of the *académies*.

The modernity of those double pages in *La Vie au grand air* stemmed directly from the choice of photography as their mode of illustration, but also from a visual context marked by the advent of the cinema.¹⁸ Both posed potential problems. Two examples attest to the illustrative constraints the weekly had to deal with in opting for photography. First, in February 1903, the journalist André Foucault recounted the rugby final in Paris.¹⁹ Taking up four pages, his article was accompanied by nine illustrations: eight photographs and a drawing that covered the central double page. Derived by Tofani from a photograph, the drawing shows the Racing Club de France breaking through the Stade Français defense in a classical composition in which all lines of sight converge on the ball. The four-line caption gives equal emphasis to what is happening and to the reasons for using a drawing: “Our readers should not imagine that this is what old-style illustrated journalism called a ‘composition.’ This splendid plate is a faithful reproduction of a photograph. However, the snapshot’s instantaneity makes it more suited to capturing situations than to indicating movement. This is why we called on skilled draftsman Tofani to come to the aid of photography by imbuing this scene with the liveliness the camera had robbed it of . . .” The choice of

photography and a commitment to the dynamics of modern journalism would eventually mean abandoning the illustrative mode of which this example is symptomatic, in which drawing had always helped to compensate for the shortcomings of the medium. Second, the different forms of photography, and in particular those permitted by the snapshot, were taken on by a magazine whose compositions were now based not on the image itself, but on the page and its sequence of pictures. Justification for this approach appealed more to the cinema than the fine arts. *La Vie au grand air*'s issue of 21 June 1902 featured a six-photo double-page montage devoted to the Paris Grand Prix under the heading, "What our six photographers' cameras saw", together with captions declaring these snapshots of the race "a truly cinematic account of Kizil-Kourgan's victory."²⁰ This association of the cinema and the double-page format hinged on the use of silver gelatin images, the number and diversity of the shots and a montage forming a sequence from the race.

Even discounting the Lumière brothers' "topical subjects"²¹ and Meliès's famous reconstructions of current events,²² news continued to gain ground in the cinemas of Belle Époque Paris.²³ Pierre Lafitte was not unaware of the visual revolution taking place in media coverage of politics, society, and sports. It was probably too early for him to refer to the cinema when he wrote his 1899 article introducing *La Vie au grand air* in its new format, but in the inaugural issue of his daily, *Excelsior*, in 1910, he was adamant: "We are the first to take advantage, for the benefit and the pleasure of the public, of the enormous progress made over the last ten years in the industries of typography, photography and photogravure. The creation of *Excelsior* is the natural outcome of this progress . . . Thanks to these unparalleled developments *Excelsior* will be what it sets out to be: the cinema of the world's news."²⁴ In the words of René Jeanne and Charles Ford, "When the cinema became king, news was never the same again."²⁵ Here the historians are referring to content, but their observation could just as easily be applied to the forms the press was taking. Even so, it was not until the interwar period and the launch of such famous magazines as *VU* and *LIFE* that cinematic *mise en scène* and layout came face to face: "So the little paper cinema that is the magazine found itself . . . also involved in transforming its pages into *mise en scène*: something living, then something speaking, that is to say, something using a simple combination of photographic and typographic events to produce meanings sufficiently explosive for the reader to enjoy the magazine as a spectator: with no effort."²⁶

From the beginning of the Belle Époque, *La Vie au grand air* invested each page with a dynamic that encouraged the reader to "flip through" the magazine rather than read. It could be felt in the visual narrative generated by sequences of photographs, but also in spectacular overlay effects. Speaking of early cinema, Tom Gunning reminds us that with the filmic construction of news, the mode of narration often went hand in hand with "attraction", and that the close-up was resorted to as a stage effect, "an attraction in its own right."²⁷ This definition of early cinema also presupposes that the spectator can become engrossed in a "fictional world" and let himself be seduced by the curiousness of a given effect. Is this not the same duality that the reader of *La Vie au grand air* consents to when browsing? Does not the London Olympics spread provide a double dose of narrative, with its numbered images, and spectacle, with its frontal, outlined view of the American athlete Irons?

The invention of the magazine sprang from its near-exclusive use of photography and halftone which, applied to the sporting scene, gave rise to a new mode of illustration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The distinction between an illustrated weekly and a magazine hinged on new reading habits and the new way that readers encountered printed matter, owing to this use of photographs. In *La Vie au grand air* the draftsman and the engraver were replaced by the art director in a transmission of news no longer located in the image, but on the whole page. This shift was observable in many weeklies,

but it is in *La Vie au grand air* that it took on its most innovative form. Addressing a frankly frivolous subject—sports—with generous pictorial support, Lucien Faure selected, cropped, and organized his photographs to produce not only a visual narrative, but also spectacular effects. This graphic structuring of text and image enabled the pages and double pages to function independently of each other, freeing the reader/spectator from the hitherto mandatory first-to-last-page reading order. Each issue was designed to facilitate the random accumulation of information: the modern Belle Époque reader was no longer reading an illustrated newspaper. He was flipping through a magazine.

Notes

* This chapter translated from French by James Gussen.

- 1 Georges Vigarello, "Le temps du sport," in *L'Avènement des loisirs 1850–60*, ed. Alain Corbin (Paris: Flammarion, 1995): 193–221.
- 2 Georges Vigarello, "Le sport bouleversé par l'image," in Bernard Huchet and Emmanuèle Payen, eds., *Figures de l'événement. Médias et représentation du monde* (Paris: Centre Pompidou/BPI, 2000): 63.
- 3 Charles Giol, "La rubrique des sports," in Dominique Kalifa, Philippe Régnier, Marie-Ève Thérenty, and Alain Vaillant, eds., *La civilisation du journal. Une histoire de la presse française au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Nouveau Monde, 2011): 1077–86.
- 4 *La Vie au grand air. Revue illustrée de tous les sports*, 1, 1 April 1898.
- 5 In addition to *La Vie au grand air*, Lafitte was the man behind *Femina* (1901–39), *Musica* (1902–14), *Je sais tout* (1905–39) and *Fermes et Châteaux* (1905–14), all on coated paper and lavishly illustrated. Regarding his career, see Juliette Dugal, "Pierre Lafitte, 'Le César du papier couché,'" in *Le Rocambole*, spring 2000, 10: 12–38.
- 6 Pierre Lafitte, "La Vie au grand air," *La Vie au grand air*, 1, 1 April 1898: 4.
- 7 Georges Vigarello, "Le temps du sport," art. cit.: 208.
- 8 Pierre Lafitte, "La Vie au grand air," art. cit.
- 9 Regarding the amateur photographic output of this period, see André Gunthert, *La Conquête de l'instantané. Archéologie de l'imaginaire photographique en France (1841–95)* (Ph.D. dissertation, EHESS, Paris, 1999) and Clément Chéroux, *Une généalogie des formes récréatives en photographie (1890–1940)* (Ph.D. dissertation, Université Paris I, 2004).
- 10 Cf. Denis Bernard and André Gunthert, "Nouveaux mondes," in *L'Instant rêvé. Albert Londe* (Nîmes: Jacqueline Chambon, 1993).
- 11 André Gunthert, "Esthétique de l'occasion. Naissance de la photographie instantanée comme genre," *Études photographiques*, 9, May 2001: 82.
- 12 Concerning the links between sports and photography in the late nineteenth century, and notably between the SEAP and the *La Vie au grand air* photographers, see André Gunthert, "Un laboratoire de communication de masse. Le spectacle du sport et l'illustration photographique," in Laurent Véray and Pierre Simonet, eds., *Montrer le sport. Photographie, cinéma, télévision* (symposium proceedings) (Paris: Cahiers de l'Insep 2000): 29–35.
- 13 *La Vie au grand air*, 21, 4 February 1899: 243–254. In no. 59 of 29 October 1899, the directors estimated the number of "photogravures" in each issue at sixty. See "À nos lecteurs" ("To our Readers"): 74.
- 14 *La Vie au grand air*, 340, 16 March 1905.
- 15 Tom Gretton, "Difference and Competition: the Imitation and Reproduction of Fine Art in a Nineteenth-century Illustrated Weekly News Magazine," in *Oxford Art Journal* 23: 2 (2000): 143–62.
- 16 Jacques Mortank, "Le diabolos est-il un jeu ou un sport?" (Is the Diabolos a Game or a Sport?), *La Vie au grand air*, 492, 29 February 1908: 135–6.

- 17 “Les jeux Olympiques à Londres” (The Olympic Games in London), *La Vie au grand air*, 515, 1 August 1908: 88–9.
- 18 On the context in which these new forms of entertainment appeared and the interplay between different media during the Belle Époque, see Vanessa Schwartz, “Cinematic Spectatorship before the Apparatus: The Public Taste for Reality in *Fin-de-siècle* Paris,” in Leo Charney and Vanessa Schwartz, eds., *Cinema and the invention of Modern Life* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1995): 297–319, and Vanessa Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1998, 177–99.
- 19 André Foucault, “Le Racing champion de Paris” (Racing Club Parisian Champions), *La Vie au grand air*, 233, 28 February 1903: 135–8.
- 20 *La Vie au grand air*, 197, 21 June 1902: 408–9.
- 21 Marcel Huret, *Ciné Actualités: histoire de la presse filmée (1895–1980)* (Paris: Henri Veyrier, 1984).
- 22 Méliès, *magie et cinéma*, eds Jean Malthête and Laurent Manonni (Paris: Paris-Musées, 2002). See also Jean Mitry, “Le montage dans les films de Méliès,” in Madeleine Malthête-Méliès, ed., *Méliès et la naissance du spectacle cinématographique* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1984): 149–55.
- 23 For all matters relating to the history of cinemas in Paris before World War I, see Jean-Jacques Meusy, *Paris-Palaces ou le temps des cinémas (1894–1918)* (Paris, CNRS, 1995): 108–10.
- 24 Pierre Lafitte, “Notre programme,” *Excelsior. Journal illustré quotidien*, 1, 16 November 1910: 2.
- 25 René Jeanne, Charles Ford, *Le Cinéma et la Presse* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1961): 8.
- 26 Jean Selz, “Le cinéma et la mise en pages,” *Presse-Publicité*, 3, 28 March 1937: 8. My emphasis.
- 27 Tom Gunning, “Cinéma des attractions et modernité,” *Cinémathèque* (Spring 1994): 130–1.