

A History of Show-Business Football

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Is people's passion for football as we know it today a recent development? Marion Fontaine retraces the history of supporters and show-business football, showing how the game gradually became a form of major entertainment.

In 1978, the first part of the UEFA Cup final was played in Corsica, pitting SC Bastia against PSV Eindhoven. Jacques Tati was there to capture images of a show that overflowed from the confines of the stadium and took over the island (*Forza Bastia 78. L'Île en fête*: see <http://video.google.com>). His camera followed the fans' preparations, the shouting, the firecrackers and the comings and goings that fed the growing turmoil in a city decked out in white and blue, which then died down once the match was over. These sequences, unearthed and edited by the filmmaker's daughter, Sophie Tatischeff, show the theatre of football in its contemporary form, which appears normal to our eyes. By observing the enthusiasm that infected everyone from black-clad old women to local children, and which enlivened the stands inside the Furiani stadium and the city's streets and squares, Tati's film also highlights the way in which the show can feed and embody a community envisaged on a territorial level – in this case Corsica. That capacity and, more generally, the immediate power of the show, explain the interest shown by sociologists, ethnologists and historians, who apply to it a wide variety of metaphors and explanatory models: ritual, opium, epic poem, amusing war, theatre of democracy or even total social fact.

Tati's indulgent, amused yet distant observations nevertheless prompt us to put all these metaphors to one side, at least temporarily, in order to focus on the details that form the framework of the show and the intensity of the moment, but also its fleetingness and, in some ways, its incongruity. Even with football as his subject, Tati urges us to seize on all that is

strange and new about the show that is unfolding in Bastia, and elsewhere on the same day. In other words, his film helps us to understand the change that is taking place, hidden by a certain illusion of persistence or a tendency to project images of the present onto past eras. That risk of anachronism is particularly acute in the area of sport because the contemporary representations it suggests are visible everywhere. All too often, there is a prevailing idea that, from the beginnings of football at the end of the 19th century, the meaning behind the show and the way in which people take part in it have always been the same: their enthusiasm is eternal, their identifying role is essential, and the passion they feel is timeless. The aim of this analysis is, to some extent, to qualify that impression of eternity, by putting forward a number of keys to understanding the novelty of what Jacques Tati seized in his day, a novelty that is both familiar to us yet shifted in time: the show of 2010 is no longer that of 1978.

An Orderly, Contained Show

To begin with, we should be suspicious – at least in the case of France – of the magnifying effect created by the 1998 World Cup. The crowning victory of the 12th July, its ensuing national self-celebration and the endless analysis that followed were a model of a particular kind of sporting enthusiasm and approach to the theatre of football. The effects of that model are still being felt. We saw it again, even though it came to a swift conclusion, during the semi-final of the 2007 rugby World Cup, when we found the same tricolour flags bedecking the streets, the same scenes of jubilation and car horn concertos. However, that model can also have a distorting effect by making people see the history of football as a show in France through such a prism and, after the event, by attributing too much importance to the game. Even after its democratisation in the interwar years, people's passion for football remained intermittent for a long time¹ and was rivalled by other sporting events. It was the Tour de France that was described as mythical in 1957², and not its younger sister the Coupe de France. Certainly, the event drew a crowd of almost 40,000 to the stadium in Colombes in 1936, but that figure paled in comparison with the 250,000 spectators spilling out of the 127,000 official Wembley seats during the mythical 1923 Cup Final.

That sporting show from the years between 1930 and 1960 had two important features, which were probably common to the majority of European football events during the same period. The first, and perhaps the most surprising for a modern sport, lay in the value attached

¹ Patrick Mignon, *La passion du football*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 1998, p. 183-209.

² Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Paris, Seuil, 2007 (1957 for the original edition), p. 120-133.

to the spectator, to the detriment of the fan or the supporter. The person who involved himself in a controlled manner was the norm, rather than the person who got carried away by his passion; the group who stood up, but not the groups or individuals who went wild. These standards show the effects of a certain agoraphobia – that fear of the new sporting crowds that football managers and the media had been expressing for a long time. Far from letting off steam or expressing flamboyant support for a team, the public is expected to “behave properly”, as seen in video footage from the period showing the final of the Coupe de France³ (<http://www.ina.fr/sport/football/video/AFE85001997/finale-de-la-coupe-de-france-de-football-lille-lens.fr.html>). The footage shows an orderly, civilised group that was less expressive and showed less obvious enthusiasm than our contemporary eye is accustomed to seeing. Admittedly, that standard was applied to varying degrees, and often did not alter people’s behaviour at football matches, particularly at local level, which could sometimes be marked by considerable violence, particularly towards the referee and the opposite team. In spite of this, if we look at the example of England⁴, after the marked disturbances that took place before 1914, we see that respectable working class standards applied. A football match was a time of relaxation, an outing for which people – sometimes the whole family – wore their Sunday best, watched over by the older men who accompanied, initiated but also supervised the younger ones. Although the show was already an opportunity for self-expression, that expression was not what it is today, and people’s participation in the match was in keeping with the rules of general civil culture.

Generally speaking, stadiums submitted to the structures, sociality and affiliations that were expressed in the surrounding environment. Even though studies have not fully confirmed it, this would seem to be as much the case for French stadiums as for British ones⁵. Admittedly, no French stadium can claim to embody the notion of working-class or popular belonging with the same force and clarity as the stadiums in the north of England, which were dubbed ‘Labour at prayer’. There is no doubt that football does not have the same class connotation in France – an interweaving that was present in the values attached to the sport, in people’s attachment to the ‘local boys’ who become players on the team, and in a territory

³ Annick Bonnet, Marion Fontaine, “Les spectateurs dans l’œil de la caméra : représentations du spectacle sportif en France, des actualités cinématographiques aux journaux télévisés (années 40-70)”, in Laurent Daniel (ed.), *L’art et le sport. Tome 1*, Paris/Biarritz, Musée National du Sport/ Atlantica, 2009, p. 85-97.

⁴ Eric Dunning, Patrick Murphy, John Williams, *The Roots of Football Hooliganism. A Historical and Sociological Study*, London, Routledge and Kegan, 1986, p. 91-131.

⁵ Marion Fontaine, *Le Racing Club de Lens et les Gueules Noires. Essai d’histoire sociale*, Paris, Les Indes Savantes, 2010.

that makes the stadium a familiar, ordinary place – somewhere between the street and the pub⁶. However, even in France it is clear that the stadium layout and the format of the show were adapted to the local environment, reflecting it exactly. In Lens, northern France, the minors who supported the city's team (the Racing Club de Lens, or RCL) gathered at the stadium with their workmates and neighbours, where they made their presence known by recreating the gestures and objects that were characteristic of mining sociality, such as copying the flags of trade union branches in order to display them in the front rows of the stands.

We should perhaps also look at this interweaving and these stadiums – which people saw as familiar cocoons – in order to explain the less ostentatious display of support for the team and people's less visibly passionate celebration of belonging to a particular territory. One explanation is the absence of the mirror that is colour television but it is not the only answer. At a time when it was still uncommon to travel except between neighbouring towns, the stadiums were mostly filled with local spectators. Clashes between rival supporters were far less frequent, and people did not need to give such visible support to their team in order to confront or impress rival fans. Moreover, the feeling of territorial and social belonging that was conveyed through people's support for the home team began to express itself in other places (neighbourhoods or, in the case of workers, the factory) and by other means (denominational, professional, political). The stadium was then redundant – or of less absolute importance – when it came to publicly displaying a particular affiliation, which was still somewhat prohibited in the republican context, especially when based on a game as “trivial” as football.

From One Model to Another

This overall framework came undone in the 1960s. The dominance of show-business football did not develop from a linear, inevitably triumphant progression, despite what the footballing world's often rather short memory might have us believe. Football first had to face a protean crisis, at both French and European level, which signalled a transition. The traditional model of the show was crumbling away. It was based on people's weekly attendance at the local team's matches, and relied on a public who was loyal yet trapped by the distraction of football, on account of the limited leisure activities on offer. The spread of

⁶ Cf. for example Richard Hoggart, *La culture du pauvre*, Paris, Minuit, 1970 (1957 for the original edition), p. 154-155.

the family car and the proliferation of leisure alternatives – particularly television – gradually rendered the traditional way obsolete. At the same time, the erosion of the working class world, coupled with the industrial crisis, undermined the foundations of a number of clubs. The paternalistic style of management that characterised them, particularly in France (British clubs were more forward-thinking, functioning as separate entities), subsided. That did not, of course, signal the end of all links between sport and the business world, but rather their reconfiguration (from paternalism to sport as a management tool) and, above all, the end of the identity shared by players, spectators and company employees.

Another model began to emerge and triumph from the 1970s and 1980s. The new show given during football matches increased football clubs' profits, based on sponsorship and television broadcasting rights. It transformed clubs into commercial enterprises on a whole new scale in comparison with previous decades. It increased players' mobility, some of whom quickly reached stardom. That considerable transformation, seen early on in England – at Manchester United, for example⁷ – eventually spread to France. No doubt the managers of Saint-Etienne were among the first to fully understand it and to turn their club into show-business company. In 1976, they launched ASSE (*Association Sportive de Saint-Etienne*) Promotions, a company responsible for commercialising the club's brand image. In particular, the company promoted club merchandise and the sale of shirts, gadgets, scarves, etc., which helped spread 'green fever' right across France.

The 'saga' of *les Verts* ('the Greens'), which culminated at the Glasgow European Cup final against Bayern Munich in 1976 (<http://www.ina.fr/economie-et-societe/vie-sociale/video/CAA7600524501/glasgow-la-folle-nuit.fr.html>), also revealed another change, this time on the part of the spectators. Television played a paradoxical role by weakening the ties between the public and the local club and partly emptying the stadiums, and later by giving them colour – literally speaking – and excitement. The stands became the focal point of the show, just as much as the match itself. The more television showed people's support for a team, the more the spectators – who were also the television audience – were aware that they were being seen and so the more they competed, both in terms of imagination and display, to appear both in the stadium and on television. At the same time, the spectators' standards were being erased, making way for those of the supporters, who were valued for

⁷ Claude Boli, *Manchester United: l'invention d'un club : deux siècles de métamorphose*, Paris, Éditions de la Martinière, 2004.

and identified by the passionate, exuberant attachment they showed to their team. At European level, this definition of the role of the supporter⁸ was drawn from two sources: in Britain, it was based on a hooliganism that was far from remaining confined to outbursts of violence inside the stadiums; in Italy, on the ‘ultra’ movement, characterised in particular by the increasingly spectacular displays organised in the stands. The spread of these two styles of football support was based on people’s growing tendency to travel. Faster transport and a higher number of European tournaments (the European Champion Clubs’ Cup from 1955, the European Nations Championship from 1968, UEFA Cup from 1971) gave rise to comparisons, rivalries and imitations between groups of supporters. All of this helped to give stadiums a new image and create a new relationship with shows. That is precisely what Jacques Tati observed with amusement in 1978, when others saw it if not with concern (hooliganism was becoming a social problem in the 1970s) then at least with a certain degree of perplexity: in 1968, while commentating for a match between *les Verts* and Glasgow’s Celtic, Léon Zitronne was outraged by the Scottish ‘maniacs’ and showed his surprised at their expressive displays (shouts, smoke, scarves) by comparing them with the French public’s good behaviour and restraint (<http://www.ina.fr/sport/football/video/CPF04006461/saint-etienne-champion.fr.html>).

Stadiums and Territories

This transformation, which continued to grow in the coming decades, was closely linked with territory. On the one hand, it signalled the end of a deeply localised version of the shows. European and world competitions were becoming global media events whose aim was to unite the community of television viewers rather than to physically bring spectators together. At the same time, the clubs continued to shift in dimension, with teams that were no longer built up from a national, *a fortiori* local, base. At European level⁹, new forms of solidarity and competition emerged between major clubs (Manchester United, Real Madrid and, in France, Olympique de Marseille, Paris Saint-Germain and Olympique Lyonnais), which were shifting further away from their original foundations and aspiring to play their own matches, as shown by the establishment of the Champions League from 1992-1993. Of course, this form of extra-territoriality was worthwhile for the players and, in a way, for the

⁸ Patrick Mignon, *La passion du football, op. cit.*, p. 111-137.

⁹ Anthony King, *The European Ritual. Football in the New Europe*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2003.

supporters as well¹⁰. Supporting a team was no longer just a function of a specific territorial belonging, but rather part of an adherence to the representations associated with certain clubs in the media world. Today one can support Olympique de Marseille yet live far from Marseille, without having any tangible links with the city, simply on account of what the club evokes in the collective imagination.

Was it, then, an uprooted, deterritorialised show? Not exactly. At the time when this process was underway, the reference to territory had never been so significant. This was also true of the stadium itself. The birth of new forms of football support was accompanied by the definition of exclusive territories within the stadium, an exclusivity that was one of the main reasons for the conflicts that come under the general umbrella term ‘hooliganism’. Supporters existed as a group gathered together in a particular area of the stadium, and they defended that area. This was clearly seen during the rise of Paris Saint-Germain¹¹. The delimitation of certain physical locations (in the case of the stands at Boulogne and Auteuil), based on multiple factors relating to the wider social geography (the relationship between the centre of Paris and the suburbs), gave rise to a desire to establish places where like-minded fans could gather (such as the Kop of Boulogne) – territories facing other territories within the same sporting arena. Further afield, it was the reference to a territory or territories that was supposed to embody a team now glorified more than ever. The definition of a ‘good’ supporter, a ‘true’ supporter, as the ‘ultras’ repeated so often, was based on their claim of an original site and often summarised by their slogan “Proud to be...”. This claim explained the games of rivalry between fans, whose banners displayed the social/moral/cultural qualities of a particular place for some supporters, while stigmatising that same place for others (the Saint-Etienne ‘plebs’ as seen by Lyon fans, or the ‘backwards’ Naples supporters as presented by those from Milan or Turin). The team’s victory constituted that of a territory praised to the skies during major events: when the Racing Club de Lens won the *Championnat de France* in 1998, the event was presented by supporters and the media as a symbol of the revenge and pride of a region that had been stigmatised for too long.

In that sense, show-business football showed the ambiguous effects of a globalisation process which, far from suppressing the notion of territory, instead altered and complicated its

¹⁰ Ludovic Lestrelin, *L'autre public des matches de football. Sociologie des supporters à distance. Le cas de l'Olympique de Marseille*, Doctoral thesis in sports sciences (STAPS), Université de Rouen, 2006.

¹¹ Patrick Mignon, *La passion du football*, *op. cit.*, p. 225-259.

meaning. Through that ambiguity, we can also see the fundamental discontinuity, which characterised people's contemporary relationship with shows, taking shape more clearly. Until the 1960s, it was the surrounding material territory and the local society that made their mark on these shows and made it, in every aspect (from players' selection to spectators' behaviour), an extension of them. Today, the opposite is true. The stadium and the show, in both their material and immaterial dimensions, have become their own reference points; they have become independent and produce different forms of behaviour and belonging, and can potentially have an effect on the surrounding society. Nowadays, the supporters do not divide themselves up so much according to their origins as their relationship with the club (for example, the very clear separation between those who see the show as a distraction and those who wish to be its main actors). Those supporters create their own rules and sometimes their own rituals, which are structured around what happens after the match and the rivalry fostered by the stadium. Generally speaking, the show gives rise to forms of behaviour which are now valued precisely for their capacity to liberate people from the standards of ordinary civil behaviour (shouting, face-painting, fighting, etc.). Again, it is the show that produces and reinvents a longed-for sense of belonging, which, all too often, has no relation to the feeling that was expressed in the past. In the 1950s, the miners who supported the Racing Club de Lens saw the club as the representation of a feeling of local belonging (the city and housing estates) and social belonging (the working class group), which was immediately tangible outside the city. Through the club, the supporters of RCL today celebrate and have developed a sense of belonging that has much broader limits (from the narrow coalfields in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region to the 'Ch'ti' workers' group), and which is created in and by the act of participating in the show.

A 'Sportification' of the Public Sphere?

A total social fact, then? A ritual? A catharsis? Today, certainly so, and in the knowledge that these concepts help to establish the phenomenon they are analysing. While show-business football, from an early stage, was connected with the way in which the collective group was established and perceived, that construction and testing are no longer the same; they have acquired new intensity and significance. The sporting spectacle has long been interconnected with the construction of collective identities; however, while in the past it represented identities and imaginations that were imposed upon it from the outside, now that spectacle is what creates them in the mould of the stadiums, or at least helps to create them.

Although this show has been and continues to be exploited, the vital difference is that it is now a creator – and the two situations are not mutually exclusive. Much has been said about the affinities that exist between modern sport and the values of liberal democracy, and about the way in which the ‘sportification’ of Western societies has been the playful counterpart of their democratisation¹². It is not impossible to think that this link now operates in both directions. By dominating the public sphere to an ever greater extent, the sporting spectacle could well be in a position to influence the form and content of the democratic process (in the political and social meaning of the term). In fact, it would appear to be a catalyst, at times creating figures, practices (those of the supporters), metaphors (the team, the match), and represented values that are debated at city-level and then reinvested. The last presidential elections in 2007 were not devoid of that kind of reinvestment, whether it be campaigners-turned-supporters or the second-round dual that was defined and described, by the actors themselves, as a match. A rupture has indeed taken place. It is more easily perceived in France where, unlike other countries such as Great Britain, the sporting spectacle as an activity has never really been accepted – used, certainly, but always seen as an accessory, particularly in terms of the public sphere and political links. That rupture shows the growing social importance attached to that show, particularly on account of its capacity to embody processes and feelings of belonging that are less and less seen or understood in other spheres.

That power can be perceived in different ways. We can celebrate the show’s capacity both to create and remain abstract. That capacity means that everyone is able to appropriate it as a new feature of the democratic process, since it enables people both to reconsolidate certain affinities and to express a certain shared lifestyle. Marc Augé commented on this as early as 1982: “Show-business football has become something for everyone, and can no longer be seen as being aimed at a particular group which, according to one’s point of view, would find in it the image of its own cohesion or even a mirror reflecting its alienation”¹³. On the contrary, we can also envisage that power as the symptom of a democratic crisis, as the sign of the practical difficulties of establishing identities and rules for a common lifestyle, or as the expression of the modern masses’ emotional search for identity. We can see that the ‘communities of emotion’ that the show creates do not actually form any concrete links, but

¹² Based in particular on the analysis made by Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning, *Sport et civilisation. La violence maîtrisée*, Paris, Fayard, 1994 (1986 for the original edition).

¹³ Marc Augé, “Football. De l’histoire sociale à l’anthropologie religieuse”, n°19, *Le Débat*, February 1982, p. 65.

merely a fleeting union with no future commitment¹⁴. We may remember that the imagined identity of a France that was “black, white, Arab” (*black-blanc-beur*) was scornfully rejected in the media-related riots of 2005.

In any case, the contemporary sporting spectacle displays some unusual traits: those of a society that has, in theory, turned to production, and which are reflected in the game, caught between extreme forms of democratisation and new forms of exclusion, and which reinvent other modes of affiliation and representation without really knowing how or for what. Whatever judgment we might make as regards this situation, it would be unfair to resent the sporting spectacle or to glorify it, but it is certainly interesting to contemplate.

Further reading

- Christian Bromberger, *Football, la bagatelle la plus sérieuse du monde*, Paris, Bayard, 1998.
- Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning, *Sport et civilisation. La violence maîtrisée*, Paris, Fayard, 1994 (1986 for the original edition).
- Marion Fontaine, *Le Racing Club de Lens et les Gueules Noires. Essai d'histoire sociale*, Paris, Les Indes Savantes, September 2010.
- Anthony King, *The European Ritual. Football in the New Europe*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2003.
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- Patrick Mignon, *La passion du football*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 1998.

Links:

<http://lestrelin.canalblog.com> (blog by Ludovic Lestrelin “Invitation à la sociologie du sport”).
<http://www.wearefootball.org> (**We are football association** tries to explore the complex links between footballing culture, history and memory).

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¹⁴ Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le peuple introuvable. Histoire de la représentation démocratique en France*, Paris, Gallimard, 1998, p. 447.