

Football as world-view and as ritual

CHRISTIAN BROMBERGER*

What is the point of taking an interest in the apparently futile game of football? Philippe Soupault, the French Surrealist writer, in one of his prose texts, with the detachment of a traveller who has strayed into unknown territory, underlined the meaninglessness of football for whoever looks at it from a distance:

Le ballon est placé au centre du terrain. Un coup de sifflet, un joueur donne un coup de pied. Le match est commencé... Le ballon vole, rebondit. Un joueur le suit et le poursuit, le pousse du pied, se le fait voler par un adversaire qui à son tour le conduit vers les buts... Quand l'occasion est bonne, il fonce et d'un grand coup de pied lance le ballon dans les buts. Alerté le gardien se jette sur le ballon, l'attrape et le renvoie vers un de ses équipiers. L'attaque reprend... Avec une habileté et une rapidité qui ressemblent à de l'acrobatie, avec une force qui dégénère en brutalité et qui se mêle à la ruse, les équipes des deux camps feignent, trompent et finissent par faire entrer le ballon entre les poteaux. L'arbitre siffle. Le résultat déchaîne l'enthousiasme des joueurs et des partisans.

It is, however, precisely the discrepancy between the futility of a game and the intensity of the passions it arouses which is at the origin of the long and exacting anthropological research done in Marseilles, Naples and Turin, and of which I would like to give a rough outline of some of the main conclusions in this article. There is no need to emphasize the infatuation of our contemporaries for this type of sporting entertainment. Indeed, in just over a century – the codification of its rules goes back to 1863 – football has become a 'planetary passion', a kind of universal referent, one of the very few if not the only element of a masculine world culture, which is obvious

* I am grateful to Jean-Luc Alberti and Brian Rigby who played a crucial part in the translation of this text from French. Address for correspondence: Laboratoire d'Ethnologie Méditerranéenne et Comparative, Université de Provence, 29 Avenue Robert Schuman, 13621, Aix-en-Provence CEDEX 1, France.

to everyone, regardless of the diversity of region, nation and generation to which they belong. Only a few scattered countries, including the U.S.A., still escape this massive ascendancy – but for how long?

As a proof of this popularity, one can cite the fact that the World Cup which took place in Italy in 1990 was then the most popular event ever watched since the beginning of time, with an audience of sixteen billion television viewers in all. So, what is the meaning of this craze? How is one to interpret the forms, the functions, the meanings of mass gatherings in football stadiums? For example, does the analogy, which is sometimes put forward, between sporting events and rituals, enlighten or rather get in the way of understanding these phenomena?

Football as deep play

Is it possible to advance the hypothesis that if we today – the men amongst us at least – love these events, it is not just because we want to know the final score or what sort of game it was, but because a profoundly significant game is being played out on the field, which intensifies and enacts the fundamental values of contemporary life? Can we deal with a football match as Geertz does with cockfighting in Bali, considering it as ‘deep play’, a sort of meta-social comment, a philosophical dramatic tale, producing emotions with cognitive purpose?¹

These are quite iconoclastic premises and contradict the more generally accepted view of sporting events. A well-established tradition in philosophy and sociology, from Blaise Pascal to Umberto Eco, summons us to treat these mass gatherings with great caution, and to define their primary function as something which deflects attention away from essential matters, rather than expressing them. We are told that we are dealing with the opium of the people, popular entertainment which helps blur people’s perception of their place in society and of their everyday problems, both as individuals and as a group, a fleeting and illusory sense of unanimity which masks the tensions and conflicts of everyday life, manipulation of the masses, compensatory fantasies, etc. . .

This critical and disenchanting view is not devoid of arguments in its favour: in Italy under the Fascists, as in Argentina under the military junta, the national team’s successes were exploited as propaganda. There are any number of provincial moguls or captains of industry (Achille Lauro in Naples, the Agnelli family in Turin, the Peugeotts in Sochaux, Bernard Tapie in Marseilles, etc.) who have been able to use their role at the head of a club either directly or indirectly to promote their own public image or consolidate their power base. Moreover, in support of this view, one might

¹ C. Geertz, ‘Deep play: notes on the Balinese cockfight’, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

also note that it is often those towns – Liverpool, Marseilles, Naples – which have fallen on bad times, that in their nostalgic yearning for past glories, are most passionate about the clubs that represent them, as if the team's exploits will dress and heal their current wounds.

However, pursuing the argument that the mobilization of football for social and political purposes is the exclusive preserve of powerful individuals and of states, soon brings us full circle to its contradiction – that is, situations where clubs, stadia, competitions, have acted as powerful catalysts for protest, by awakening rather than anaesthetizing political consciousness: 1958 saw the team of the Algerian Front de Libération Nationale, made up of famous players who had walked out of the French league, take part in a worldwide tour – a harbinger of the birth of a nation. On another level, the magazine *Napulissimo*, which is published by young fans of the Naples team, is concerned as much with the latest exploits of the stars as with social problems in the city. Beyond these individual cases one hardly need emphasize how football once formed the cultural and symbolic cement which held the working classes of Northern Europe together in the first half of this century. Quite simply, when one attempts to trace football's latent functions one finds multivalent, fluid and contradictory processes which defy any single or reductive interpretation.

But, one might ask, what is one to say about the crowds? These are certainly anonymous hordes for whom communal fervour and the joy of being united together against the opposition at least temporarily anaesthetize any awareness of individual differences. Here again this observation needs to be refined. By their very form as compartmentalized circles or squares, where hierarchies are established and flaunted (from the terraces to the stands), stadia can be understood as one of those rare spaces in modern times where society holds up to itself a definite image, not only of unity but also of the contrasts which mould it. The spectators themselves are not unaware of the way they are sectioned off from each other. Those on the terraces, aware that they are where they belong, sometimes jeer other supporters of the same team seated in the stands, whom they consider over formal and much too unenthusiastic. This is just one of the observations among many which one could make about the heterogeneous nature of supporters and the rivalries between groups of fans at the same club, and which allow one to counterbalance the arguments of those who emphasize the mystificatory function of sporting events and the unifying influence exerted by crowds on human behaviour.

Football fans are no different from anyone else, in that they are not ignorant fools, nor are they deluded by their passions to the point of being incapable of maintaining a critical distance *vis-à-vis* the world around them. If the match is neither a seductive fiction nor a pernicious mirage, what then is the meaning of the sudden surges of passion to which it gives rise? It seems to me, on the basis of supporters' comments, that if football fascinates

people, it is due first and foremost to its capacity to embody the cardinal values that shape modern societies. It is like a caricatural melodrama, laying bare the major symbolic axes of our world. Its deep structure (the laws of the genre rather than the rules of the game) represents the uncertain fate of man in the world today.

What exactly does it tell us? As with other sports, it celebrates merit, performance and competition among equals; in stark and brutal fashion, it points up the uncertainty and changing nature of individual and collective status. This is symbolized by the emblematic figures of players on the substitutes' bench, the recurrent rise and fall of the stars, the promotion and relegation of teams, the creation of a set ranking system – that golden rule of all modern societies founded on the evaluation of ability. The popularity of sport lies in its ability to embody the ideals of democratic societies by showing us, through its heroes, that anyone – like Pelé, for instance – can become someone, that status is not conferred at birth, but is won in the course of a lifetime. So football, like other sports, metaphorically magnifies achievement against what one started with; it measures conquered status as against acquired status. In the light of this, it is significant that competitive sport took form in those societies built on the ideal of democracy (ancient Greece, nineteenth-century England) and where social competition and a change in hierarchical structures were conceivable. There could be nothing more different from football, on the other hand, than *tlatchtli*, the ball game played by Aztecs which has several formal similarities with today's sport.² In a society where a man's fate was fixed from birth and no room was left for chance, success and defeat were endowed with an equal symbolic value. It was inconceivable – even in a game – to have a change of position.

Nonetheless, can one reduce the fictionalizing process of the imaginary at work in football to the simple celebration of merit, where success would be directly proportional to each individual's qualities? This sport – and undoubtedly this is one of its special attractions – presents a more complex and contradictory picture of life.

As well as individual performance, it need not be stressed that football values team work, solidarity, division of labour and collective planning – very much in the image of the industrial world which originally produced it. The mottoes of many clubs (from Benfica's *E pluribus unum* to Liverpool's *You'll never walk alone*) underline this necessary co-operative effort on the road to success. On the pitch each position requires the implementation of specific skills: the power of the *libero* (who demands respect); the stamina of the midfield (the lungs of the team); the subtle skill of the wingers (who can dribble on a pocket handkerchief); the tactical nous of the leading players etc... In the same way, the different sorts of fans can choose from a broad

² See C. Duverger, *L'Esprit du jeu chez les Aztèques* (Paris, The Hague: Mouton, 1978).

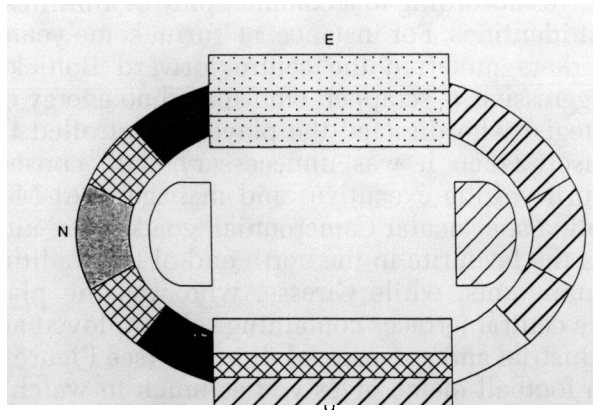
spectrum of contrasting players with whom to identify. Actually, allegiance to certain stars changes according to a complex play of affinities which more or less reflect social identities. For instance, at Turin, some years ago, a lot of the youth and workers preferred the centre forward Boniek – the ‘mad horse’, direct and aggressive, a ‘scrapper’ who spared no energy on the pitch – to Platini, the strategist who directed the players, controlled the game and did not exert himself when it was unnecessary, and, consequently, was primarily the favourite of the executives and managers. At Marseilles, too, some years ago, Bell, a spectacular Cameroonian goalkeeper, nicknamed ‘the black panther’, was the favourite in the north end of the stadium, composed of many young immigrants, while Giresse, who was the playmaker, was more popular in the central terraces containing self-employed artisans, small businessmen or industrial and commercial directors (see Figure 1).

But, of course, a football match gives you as much to watch as it does to think about, and this is because of the special place occupied by uncertainty and chance, due to the complicated techniques required by a game based on an unusual use of the foot, head and upper body, and to the wide range of variables which need to be mastered in order to secure victory; one must also not forget the devastatingly powerful role of the referee, who must immediately penalize offences which are often difficult for the spectators to see clearly.

The spectre of chance, which is rarely conceptualized as probability, and from which emerges a sense of destiny, hangs over these sporting encounters, reminding us with brutal honesty that merit alone is not always enough to get ahead. Just as it might change the course of life, chance can change the trajectory of the ball against the run of play. It is these chance variables that players and supporters try to ward off by means of a plethora of micro-rituals which aim to propitiate the course of fate. Football can, therefore, be understood as an infinite variation on the drama of fortune in this world. If the road to success depends on a mixture of merit and luck, then you also have to help yourself along with a little cheating: pretence and deception when employed opportunely, in football more than in other sports, can prove advantageous. The black figure of the referee counteracts the many forms of trickery with the strictures of the law. Yet since most rules only punish deliberate infringements (intentionality is extremely difficult to establish: was the hand-ball deliberate, the tackle a foul or not?), a match opens itself up to a debate of theatrical proportions on the validity and arbitrariness of a flawed system of justice.

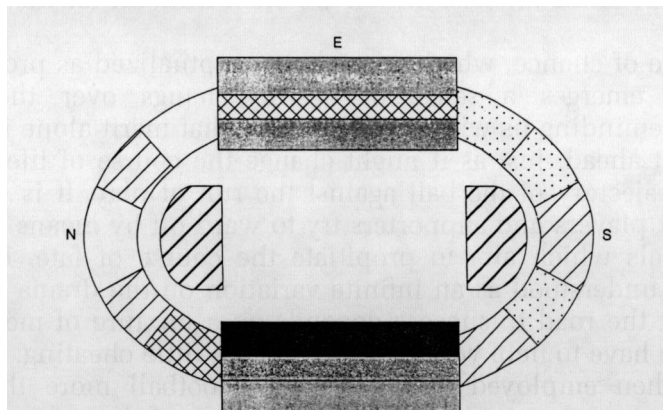
Football, therefore, embodies an image of today’s world which is both consistent and contradictory. It celebrates individual and collective merit in the form of a competition which aims to reward the best, but it also underlines the role of luck and cheating in the achievement of success, both of which, in their own way, laugh in the face of merit. By these elements and the particular form taken on by justice, football shows a world which is

LES JOUEURS



b) Où appréciait-on Bell ?

D'après l'enquête effectuée le 22 mai 1987 à l'occasion du match OM-Lens. Bell jouit d'une aura maximum dans le virage nord ; son panache est aussi apprécié par le public huppé de la première série (au centre) de la tribune ouest (Jean Bouin). Taux de préférence minimal : 15 % ; maximal : 34,1 %.



c) Où appréciait-on Giresse ?

La carte de popularité d'Alain Giresse est, pour ainsi dire, le négatif de celle de Joseph-Antoine Bell. « Gigi » est particulièrement prisé dans les tribunes, où se regroupent les spectateurs adultes.

Taux de préférence minimal : 16,7 % ; maximal : 46,4 %.

Figures réalisées avec le concours d'A. Chatelain et J.-D. Gronoff (EHESS Marseille). L'intensité des symboles traduit le gradient d'intensité du phénomène.

Fig. 1. The popularity of the players

understandable in human terms, even when success eludes you. It can embody a culture of Promethean success, as much as a Sisyphean philosophy of misfortune. For societies where everyone is urged on towards success, both individually and collectively, failure and misfortune are only psychologically acceptable if they can be explained away in terms of a third party's action, be it injustice, fate or victimization. Within football's unimpeachable order, based on pure merit, there is always a tension created by the ever present elements of suspicion and uncertainty. What would be the point of a completely transparent society or world where everyone could have the guaranteed certainty of occupying the position they deserved, a society where one could not say 'If only!'

If football uncovers the meanderings of our made-to-measure fate, it equally brings us face to face with other essential truths, which everyday life conceals or renders imperceptible. It tells us loud and clear that in a world where material and symbolic goods are in finite supply, one person's happiness is conditional on another's misfortune (*mors tua, vita mea*). The Gahuku-Gama of New Guinea grasped this cast-iron law of football, and of Western society, so well that they quickly got round it in order to make the game correspond more closely with their *Weltanschauung*: 'They play as many games on consecutive days as are necessary for each team's victories to cancel out their losses'³ But our own notion of happiness does not only consist of our neighbours' set-backs, or the defeat of today's opponents. So that we can ultimately gain success, as is accurately illustrated by the mathematics of league systems, close or distant rivals, be they weak or strong, must win or lose other matches. Football competitions, therefore, display another law of modern life: the complex interdependence of individual and collective destinies on the road to happiness.

These are – very roughly sketched out – the general values that football competition celebrates. But besides these general values, what do supporters who assemble week after week in the circular or square-shaped stadia try to express? Which concrete mechanisms are at work that may explain this addiction to performance? How, and according to what processes and modalities, is this unique and repetitive event intertwined with the lives of individuals, groups and social networks?

Fieldwork in the stadia: methodological aspects

First, let us evoke briefly the methods used in the fieldwork practice. At first sight, in its rather strange arrangement, deriving from a huge crowd of individuals shaped into a temporary unit, the stadium seems like a disturbing phenomenon for the anthropologist, used to scrutinizing small communities or limited social networks. Indeed, such an approach is still

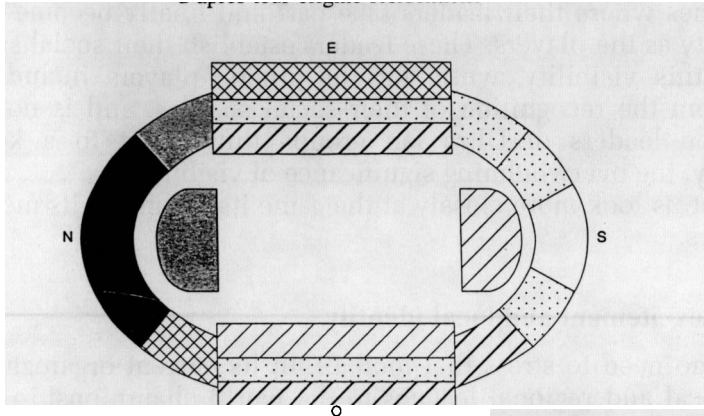
³ See C. Lévi-Strauss, *La Pensée sauvage* (Paris: Plon, 1962).

essential when one starts an analysis of a stadium. Actually, a part of the inquiry consisted in studying networks or groups, either preformed in urban space or occurring in the stadium, match after match. These groups and networks stand next to each other and form a complex structure, and not a shapeless and homogeneous crowd or mass, as is suggested by popular images or by Le Bon's crude psychology. In pursuing this approach, ethnological study finds itself located in the stadium and consequently in the city – in the public bars where spectators become groups, or in the supporters' club premises. But by working in this small-scale way, one may be in danger of seeing the tree and not the woods, and thereby fail to see the special quality of the stadium as a whole, that is, not only as the site of a spectacle (the match), but also as a spectacle itself (the behaviour of the crowd). It is this dual character which makes the football stadium one of the few spaces where a modern urban society can offer itself a material image of its unity and its differences. So, the 'micro' must be combined with the 'macro': on the one hand, a close scrutiny of behaviour, comments, slogans, emblematic accessories, stand by stand, public bar by public bar and, on the other hand, systematic large-scale surveys of the composition and distribution of the public, according to its social, professional, residential and ethnic origins. For instance, one could say that, as a whole, at Marseilles the structure of the city projects itself onto that of the stadium. There is a sharp contrast between the north and south ends. The north end brings together a young public, with a majority from the city's poor northern districts and suburbs; the south end brings together teenagers mostly from the central and southern districts of the city (see Figure 2). One can see that these territories are heavily symbolic: the main supporters' group on the north end is named the Yankees; the anthem of the south end is the Battle Hymn of the Republic.

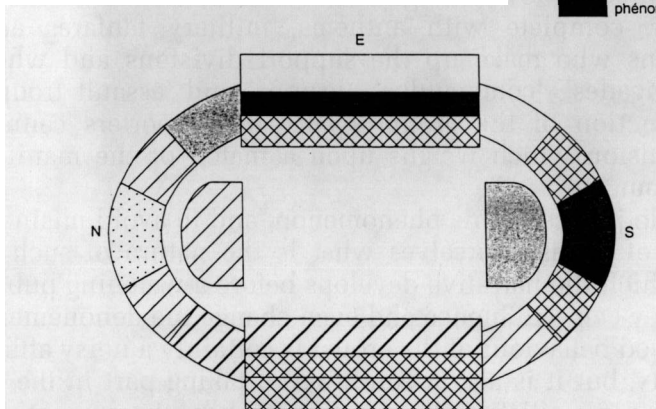
With reference to the methods used in this multi-scale analysis, I would like to stress the special importance of long private talks, and especially of the analysis of the life stories of spectators and supporters. By according such importance to these methods, this created a new type of anthropological relationship – an interactive one – which produced rich results in terms of my field-work and the subsequent analysis. When I sought to interview the most ardent fans (they call themselves the Ultras), I was struck by their eagerness to give interviews on subjects with which they were deeply involved. The interviewer, who usually looks around desperately for people willing to be interviewed, finds himself being sought out by the fans, who see in him a potential intermediary who might satisfy their personal and collective desire to be recognized. Many interviews ended up in a request to 'Mention us!' In their desire to be acknowledged, the fans develop strategies for attracting attention, one of their chosen techniques being to show off and act violently, and thereby transform themselves from anonymous individuals into public stars. In the case of the Ultras, evidence

LA RÉPARTITION DES SPECTATEURS

8. Répartition des spectateurs dans le stade d'après leur origine résidentielle



Présence massive des habitants des quartiers nord de la ville dans le virage nord du stade. Au fil des âges de la vie les spectateurs migrent plutôt vers l'est (tribune Ganay). Taux minimal : 4,6 % ; maximal : 35,7 %.



Présence plus diffuse des habitants des quartiers sud, fortement représentés dans le virage sud et les tribunes centrales. Taux minimal : 7,1 % ; maximal : 33,5 %.

D'après l'enquête réalisée le 22 mai 1987

Fig. 2. The distribution of the spectators

of this quest for visibility can clearly be found in the way that they yell the name of their own group as much as that of the team they support. They collect press cuttings and photographs of themselves, as eagerly as they collect anything to do with the club. In Italy, fans organize television programmes where their leaders take part and finally become as famous in the locality as the players. These leaders establish their social success on the basis of this visibility, while for the others, players included, visibility comes from the recognition of their social success, and is not the starting point. The leaders of Ultra fan groups thus point to a key aspect of modernity: the overwhelming significance of visibility.

Now let us look more closely at the game itself, and at its meaning for the performers.

Football, excitement and local identity

There is no need to stress that football, in its current organizational format – from local and regional leagues to the world championship – provides a forum for the expression of collective identities and local or regional antagonisms. It is certainly in this ability to mobilize and display loyalties that one must seek an explanation for the remarkable popularity of this team sport which relies on physical contact and genuine competitiveness. Every match between rival towns, regions and countries takes the form of a ritualized war, complete with anthems, military fanfares and banners wielded by fans who make up the support divisions and who even call themselves ‘brigades’, ‘commandos’, ‘legions’ and ‘assault troops’. But the celebratory function of the group loyalty of supporters cannot in itself explain the tension which weighs upon a match or the manifestations of violent behaviour.

In order to do justice to this phenomenon, and to avoid misinterpretation, we must first of all ask ourselves what is the nature of such a dramatic spectacle in which the narrative develops before a watching public who can – or believe they can – influence and even change the denouement. During a match, the biased behaviour of the crowd is certainly a noisy affirmation of a specific identity, but it is also a condition of taking part in the excitement. There is nothing less satisfying than a match where there is nothing at stake, at which one cannot feel involved as an actor in the scene, and at which the transition from ‘them’ to ‘us’ is not made. The explosion of verbal and gestural expression, the emblems wielded and the insults that are hurled, are all part of the confrontational nature of the spectacle, and it would be wrong to overinterpret them. Is this to say, however, that these phenomena lack any meaning? Definitely not. A football stadium is one of those rare spaces where collective emotions are unleashed (in the words of Norbert Elias: ‘controlled decontrolling of emotions’), where socially taboo values are allowed to be expressed (the crude affirmation of one’s dislike of the Other etc.).

In other words, the rhetoric of the fans is to be sought both within and outside the logic of the game. When the *tifosi* (supporters) chant 'Devi morire' ('You must die') at an opposition player who has gone down injured, they do not actually want him to die, but the tone of their curse is not devoid of meaning. When Milan supporters call the Neapolitans 'Africans', or when they welcome them with a banner on which is written 'Benvenuti in Italia' ('Welcome to Italy'), these are not harmless insults, but the impact of them is less when one recalls that the same Milan fans got behind Cameroon in the 1990 World Cup against an Argentinian team which included a... Naples player: Diego Maradona. It would, therefore, be equally imprudent to claim the arbitrary nature of fans' language as it would be to attribute to it excessive depths of motivation.

In order to understand some of the ways in which loyalty, support and identification are built up, let us focus, for instance, on the supporters' identification with his city, district or nation through his team. If the supporters identify so intensely with their city's, their factory's or their nation's teams, it is because these teams are perceived, through their playing styles, as symbols of a specific mode of collective existence, and not as a simple sign (arbitrary) of a common identity. The style of the team does not always correspond to the way the players really play, but rather to a stereotyped image, rooted in tradition, that the collectivity holds up to itself and wishes to present to others. Thus, style is part of a collective imaginary, not so much in the way in which the men live and the players play, but in the manner in which it pleases them to recount their way of life and the playing style of the team. For instance, according to de Matta⁴ the Brazilian style of play, which sets a high value on the art of the feint, offers an illustration of the golden rule of a society where it is important to know how to work your way out of trouble with stylish dissimulation.

In the same vein, the styles of Olympique of Marseilles, Juventus of Turin and the Naples teams are strongly opposed, each reflecting a particular vision of the world, of mankind and of the city. Olympique of Marseilles and, therefore Marseilles itself, are known for their taste for panache, for the fantastic, for the spectacular; the motto of the club, from the beginning, has been 'Droit au but!'. In the popular memory it is the explosive or quick-turning strikers who have left the deepest traces, whilst talented players – for example, holders of the most caps for France – are today almost forgotten. In the same way, in Naples they particularly value the imaginative game, full of tricks and skills, the eye-catching move, the spectacular feat. One of SSC Napoli's most symbolic figures, who combined spectacle and football in all senses of these words, was Attila Sallustro, the star of the team from 1925 to 1935. Skilful and entertaining, nicknamed 'the greyhound of

⁴ R. de Matta, 'Notes sur le futebol brésilien', *Le Débat*, 19, 1982.

football', Sallustro divided his passions between football and Lucy D'Albert, a diva from the New Theatre, whom he married at the end of his career.

The style of Juventus of Turin is, so to speak, the opposite of that of Naples and Marseilles. It is the style of an aristocratic 'old lady' ('vecchia signora'), combining the rules of etiquette and the rigorous discipline of the industrial world. Since 1923 the club has been in the hands of the Agnelli dynasty, the Fiat ruling family, which has held power either directly or indirectly throughout this period. The 'Juventus style', a model invented by E. Agnelli, president of the club from 1923 to 1935, is symbolized by the three S's: 'Semplicità, Serietà, Sobrietà' ('Simplicity, Seriousness, Sobriety'), which brings to mind one of the company mottoes. This motto is completed by an adage which Agnelli liked to repeat: 'Una cosa fatta bene puo essere ancora fatta meglio' ('Something done well can be done better'). The functioning of the club and its style of play largely reflect this rigorous model. On the pitch, it is essential for the players to look like lords, in the image of the Agnelli family and firm: fair play, correctness and respect for the referee's decisions are the key words here. A symbol of fidelity to that culture – a culture founded on the high-mindedness that created a bond between Agnelli and Togliatti, the former communist leader who supported Juventus – was the Welsh star of the 1950s, John Charles, whose chivalrous gesture during a famous derby in 1957 has remained engraved on people's memories. After a fullback of local rivals Torino hurt his head, Charles helped his injured opponent up and remained with him until the arrival of the physio, although the referee had not stopped the game.

Thus football links the universal to local values of identity. This process can also be seen in the make-up of the local team, which is often perceived and conceived as an ideal reflection of the population for which it is the standard-bearer. This paradox must be stressed. On the evidence of recruiting processes, one would assume that the richest clubs simply buy the best players, whom they choose exclusively according to sporting criteria. This is, of course, largely true. Nevertheless, recruiting processes are also deeply rooted in cultural considerations, and it appears that, although, on the surface, the search for new players is driven solely by the desire to produce a better and more efficient team, in reality the decisions are affected by profound notions of local identity and citizenship. The O.M. team accurately reflects the cosmopolitan ideal of the city. From its start in 1899, but mainly from the beginnings of professionalism in 1932, O.M. carried out a policy based on the recruitment of foreign stars, bringing together footballers from central Europe to North Africa to form a single spectacular team. Later on, after the Second World War, Swedish, Yugoslav, Brazilian, West African and, more recently, English stars took over and made a deep impression on the image and memory of the club.

Statistics show that there was, indeed, a partiality for foreign players: during the 1945–1974 period, foreigners represented eighteen per cent of all

players at Marseilles, twelve per cent at Saint-Étienne and seven per cent at Reims, these latter two towns being rooted in 'la France profonde'. Let us not forget that Saint-Étienne and Reims played in the European Cup Final. How can this fascination for foreign stars at Marseilles be explained? In fact, the trajectory of foreign football stars offers a striking and idealized symbol of the fusion of different communities into the city, just as the presence of immigrants in the stadium can be seen as a rite of passage towards integration. Furthermore, we may perhaps say that this cult of the adopted foreign player symbolically stresses the *jus soli* (citizenship acquired by residence) as a major way of achieving local citizenship in this part of Europe. One can become a true Marseillais or a genuine Provençal without having a long lineage. Finally, the Marseilles team can be viewed as the epitome of an inventive form of melting-pot which it would be interesting to compare with other cases – either regional (the Basque country, for instance) or national (German countries among others), where more rigid conceptions of the sense of belonging prevail.

At Turin, the choice of stars must yield to other requirements, besides strictly sporting criteria. Firstly, they must be prestigious international stars, generally from northern Europe (Charles, Platini, Rush, Platt, for instance), able to stand as symbols of the club and the Fiat company. Secondly, beyond these general aims, the composition of the team reflects the particular history of the company. Actually, Juventus has regularly included players from southern Italy (for instance, in the last few years, Anastasi, Causio, Brio, Caricola, Mauro), as has the Fiat company itself, which takes on numerous immigrants from Mezzogiorno. Thus, the make-up of the team is not only dependent on pure economic rationality, but also, in Godelier's words,⁵ on 'a global social rationality', deriving, to a large extent, from the local conception of citizenship and the perceptions of the Other.

Football as ritual

Football gives concrete form to people's deepest feelings about the world; it is a complex mesh of people's different senses of their identity. It is also possible to suggest that a football match is akin to a sacred ceremony. In general, definitions of ritual postulate the necessary combination of a certain number of substantive properties which distinguish ritual activity from more trivial regulated behaviour: first, a break with everyday routine; second, a specific spatio-temporal framework; third, a carefully programmed schedule of ceremonies recurring in a regular cycle, and consisting of words uttered, gestures made, objects handled, with a view to achieving some transcendent

⁵ M. Godelier, *Rationalité et irrationalité en économie* (Paris: Maspero, 1973), Vol. II.

ends, not explicable in terms of practical efficiency or as a mechanical sequence of cause and effect; fourth, a symbolic configuration which lays the ground for the ritual practice and, at the same time, ensures its observance; fifth, the establishment, in Turner's words,⁶ of an 'anti-structure', freed from ordinary hierarchies regulating social life and which, in that moment out of time, assigns to each person a different rank, according to his relative proximity to the object of the rite and to the officiants in charge of it; finally, the moral obligation to participate, since attending a ritual is a question of duty and not just a matter of free choice. In the proceedings of a ceremony, actions and words derive their meaning and justification from tradition and exegesis, from texts which constitute its founding background. Hence, V.-W. Turner characterizes ritual in the following way: a powerful moment that gives meaning to existence through the necessary intermixing of operative and exegetical aspects pertaining to other dimensions.

If rituals can be defined by their structural properties (what they are about), they can also be viewed from the angle of their general function (the use they have). According to Durkheim, the main object of ceremonies is 'to secure the continuity of collective consciousness', 'to assert for oneself and for others that we belong to the same group',⁷ to acknowledge and to recall periodically the primacy of the group over the individual. On the occasion of these 'joint deeds', the group gains self-knowledge and takes a stand, or to use Marc Augé's terms, 'individual destinies are ordered according to collective rules.'⁸ Within these liminal conditions, freed from daily constraints and hierarchies, a sense of *communitas* prevails, an essential and generic human bond, without which no social group could ever exist. From this perspective, ritual depends on operations rather than words, reuniting from time to time the various parts of a fragmented social body.

Once the medals have been awarded, are we going to grant or deny the ritual nature of a major football match by comparing its properties to the accepted ideal that has just been defined? What is interesting in a model is not so much its use as a principle of inclusion or exclusion. It is not so much a question of picking out similarities and likenesses as of focusing on meaningful variations and discrepancies that tell us something about the specific nature of the phenomenon with which we are concerned.

Before examining these specific modalities, one should look at the formal characteristics, the types of behaviour, the symbolic figures, etc., which lead one to compare a big football match to a religious ritual, because these are not merely incidental and haphazard features but are essential and permanent elements of the game. Firstly, *a particular spatial configuration*.

⁶ V.-W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977).

⁷ E. Durkheim, *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (Paris: P.U.F., 1990, rééd.).

⁸ M. Augé, 'D'un rite à l'autre', *Terrain*, 8, 1987.

The great urban stadium has often been presented as 'the shrine of the industrial world'. This parallel is not simply metaphorical, if we consider the feelings and attitudes the monument arouses, as well as the rules which define its internal delimitations and uses. For instance, in Italy, the players never train on the pitch where the Sunday game will be played, and since it is exclusively devoted to the main event, there is no 'curtain-raiser' between two teams of lower rank; the players do not warm up on the pitch, they come to inspect it, in their suits, an hour before the kick off, then they go to get ready in a gym located under the stands or beneath the pitch. For the most ardent of supporters, this pitch has all the qualities of sacred ground: they even keep a lump of earth taken from it in their bedrooms.

Secondly, the distribution of spectators within the precincts of the stadium recalls, in many respects, the rigorous ordering of the different social groups attending important religious ceremonies. In both cases, three main concurrent principles determine how the space will be occupied: the usual social hierarchy (with the V.I.P.'s who flaunt themselves in the best seats and boxes); the hierarchy of the football world itself (directors, representatives of the leagues and federations, etc., are accommodated in reserved seats), then a hierarchy based on the fervour and the strength of support (which is the principle governing the distribution of supporters' clubs from the middle to the outer edges of each end). Another analogy, which stresses the parallel even further, is the obligatory and ostentatious presence of the holders of political power in the official stand used for major events.

Thirdly, spatial similarities go together with *temporal and rhythmic affinities*. Competitions are scheduled according to a regular and cyclical calendar of events, which reaches its peak at certain stages of the football year (in spring, when cup finals and matches deciding the championship are played). This regularity is most striking in Italy, where, significantly, the match is always played on a *Sunday* afternoon.

Fourthly, the *distribution of roles* during the spectacle, as well as the behaviour of the crowd itself, radiate a ceremonial quality. The 'faithful', of whom the most devoted belong to brotherhoods based on districts, age groups, etc., 'commune' with officiants in charge of carrying out the 'sacrifice'. The 'faithful' express their excitement, punctuating the actions on the pitch with words, chants and gestures, all of them codified. Their particular way of dressing, and the accessories they exhibit and make use of (outfits, scarves, drums, rattles, banners etc.) contribute to this metamorphosis of appearances and behaviour, characteristic of ritual time.

Fifthly, *the organization and the working principles* of the world of football also share some common ground with the world of religion. After the fashion of church bodies, the world of football has its own laws and strict hierarchy, ranging from FIFA to local clubs, run exclusively by men imposing the same rules everywhere (the XVII Laws of the Game – one

always uses capital letters to refer to them), and with the International Board at the head overseeing it all.

Sixthly, *the sequential framework of the match*, which, whether one is looking at the play or the overall spectacle, recalls that of a religious ritual. For instance, before important matches, either at home or away, the players go into retreat – the term itself is revealing – and split up into couples to share a room; they are coupled in this way for the whole season. This is how a society is constructed, based on pseudo-kinship reminiscent of ritual brotherhoods. For the supporters, the pre-match, the match and the post-match, also divide up into a fixed rhythmic pattern, depending on the importance and progress of each match. For instance, the night or morning before are taken up with the preparation of all the regalia; the meeting-up is at a fixed point, always the same, from where they go down to the stadium. For the most fervent of fans, this pre-match stage is marked by tension and contemplation; they eat nothing, or very little, before the match (this fast recalls another: that imposed before communion). In the stadium, the demonstrations of support are conducted according to a relatively invariable scenario (this tendency is much clearer in Italy than in France): the pre-match exhibition of the regalia and the singing of chants, according to an order fixed by the fans' leaders; codified gestures when the team comes out of the tunnel and onto the pitch, followed by stereotypical attitudes of outrage and exultation during the match. After the game the groups of supporters meet at a fixed spot on the square in front of the stadium, where they begin discussions which stretch out endlessly over several hours in bars and restaurants. For the most passionate fans, the night will be a restless one, punctuated by dreams and nightmares, depending on the outcome of the drama.

Seventhly, during the match a 'communion of minds' is created, and ordinary hierarchies are, at the least, weakened, if not actually abolished altogether. The football match produces that sense of *communitas* which seems to have been lost or undermined in everyday life. Gestures, words, behaviour express this fleeting transformation of social relations: embracing unknown fellow-supporters, hearty chats with the first person one meets – who briskly reverts to being a stranger hardly worthy of a goodbye as soon as the final whistle is blown – and, in Italian supporters' clubs, communal meals with strangers which, as on ritual occasions, give one a sense of cohesion and solidarity.

Such a coming-together of structural affinities (break with the everyday, specific spatio-temporal framework, repetitive and codified modes of behaviour, metamorphosis of appearances and hierarchies, emotional agitation expressed through conventional means, symbolic richness of values brought into play, sacrificial drama) lead one to take seriously the parallel one can draw between a big football match and a religious ceremony. One could argue that there is an element missing which is

essential to validate such a comparison, namely the belief in the active presence of supernatural creatures or forces, which constitute the backbone of religious rituals.

In fact, football can be seen as a ritual in which magico-religious practices play a significant role, but in a specific way. Madame du Deffand did not believe in ghosts, but was afraid of them; conversely, Benedetto Croce, like some Neapolitan seller of charms, was convinced that the evil eye did not exist, but nevertheless believed in it. A fan once told me that he prayed before matches, although he was an atheist. All of these are contradictory forms of behaviour, 'semi-propositional beliefs', to use Sperber's words.⁹ In the same vein, both football supporters and players believe in their propitiatory rites, just as the ancient Greeks believed in their gods, that is in the minor key; but, like the Romans, they are *religiosi*, that is to say formalist and scrupulous in their attempts to win over Dame Fortune. In short, one would be wrong, here as in other cases, to take rituals at face value, to imagine them as deeply rooted in an unshakeable faith: transcendence is only dimly perceived; practice is more common than true belief; detachment from rituals is also a part of rituals.

But apart from religious gestures and appeals to religion, one wonders what the true framework for these propitiatory rites might be. It is certainly not a system of beliefs be it either eclectic or doctrinaire – but is more akin to a growing search for stable relations – for example, for the connection between a number on a shirt and victory – which, in the eyes of the person concerned, have already proved themselves to exist. Thus, to use Frazer's terminology, it is the law of similarities which is at the basis of most of these practices. Among players, it is goalkeepers and strikers who are the most eager to propitiate the gods: they have to make instant decisions and their fortune hangs by a thread. For them, the line is a narrow one between making a name for themselves, or being considered a nobody. In order to tame fate and master the aleatory, the keenest supporters pay enormous attention to their choice of clothes, and even to their choice of underwear. Some of them never go anywhere without a club emblem (scarf, pen, medallion...); in some cases, they transform their private universe into a sort of domestic shrine where they keep, not only the precious relics of their attendance (match tickets, especially), but also the concrete evidence that they have stood next to their idols (autographs, photos, etc.).

Football appears, therefore, to be on the dividing line between various beliefs which come from all directions. It is a sort of 'rite-gatherer' where, in the manner of a kind of syncretic 'bricolage', all those customs which might help to avert misfortune are called upon. This fragmented religiosity is living

⁹ On this problem, see F. Lenclud, 'Vues de l'esprit, art de l'autre. L'ethnologie des croyances en pays de savoir', *Terrain*, 14, 1990.

proof that, for those who become its devotees, there is some realm beyond human agency where meaning is to be found, and where issues of cause and effect are settled. Yet, there is no need to emphasize how weak these beliefs are. On the one hand, they are not shared by everyone, and those who respect them are often sceptical about their efficacy. Like Jules Renard, they seem to say: 'Je ne comprends rien à la vie mais il n'est pas impossible que Dieu y comprenne quelque chose.' On the other hand, one must not forget that football does not constitute a specific or autonomous world, with its own set of established transcendental beliefs: it is only a particularly fertile field for the proliferation of magico-religious practices borrowed from a whole range of other rituals.

Finally, football mania and religious devotion share common ritualistic properties, but in a very particular way. Important ceremonies are most often characterized by solemnity, but in football the solemn runs alongside the ridiculous; the tragic alternates with the comic, drama with parody, belief with scepticism, commitment with aloofness, ritual with show, collective moral obligation to support one's side with the individual desire to have a good time, the social order of everyday life with the hierarchy particular to the day of the match, etc. Transcendence appears only hazily, and on the fringes; the sacred and its figures are only called upon in a metonymic or hyperbolic way, often in inverted commas, just as if they were not in their real place there. Besides these extraordinary modulations, many other features relate to an ambiguity in the classification, an ambivalent 'in-between' status of this type of ritual event. Contrary to a religious system, football matches and the fervour they arouse do not form an autonomous and coherent body of representations, beliefs and practices. Ritual behaviour constitutes here a sparkling patchwork of miscellaneous borrowings from the most varied magico-religious universes, of syncretic interpretations which draw on a variety of forms (sacramental rhythms, cups, gestures), in order to endow them with new meanings, often in a ludicrous mode. The correspondence between the functional and exegetical aspects which, according to V.-W. Turner, provide the basis for the ritual configuration, is just as blurred. If a football match can be broken down, like a ceremony, into a series of codified operations, carried out by officiants and assistants, no body of mythical or symbolic explanations can give an exhaustive account of the meaning of each of these acts and of the emotions they arouse. It is, then, a ritual with no 'exegesis', one that 'does rather than says',¹⁰ and one that speaks about itself, that is 'thought within men, without their knowing' – but for what purpose?

We usually expect a ritual to remind us of the ultimate meaning of existence, to tell us about the next world, to assure us of our salvation, to

¹⁰ C. Lévi-Strauss, *Le Cru et le cuit* (Paris: Plon, 1964).

bring us good fortune. This transcendent representation of the world, of prime causes and final ends, or even the quest for a thorough transformation of our life, fails to materialize in football. Contrary to secular religions – such as political messianism – which herald our salvation on earth in a remote time to come, football holds out no promise of a radiant future. Instead, it embodies a vision of everyday life which is deep enough for us to adorn it with every attribute of a great ritual. If it does not tell us the slightest thing about where we come from and where we are going, it shows us who we are, by sanctifying the fundamental values that shape our societies: the identities we share or dream of, competition, performance, the part played by fortune, injustice and trickery in the progress of individual and collective life. In the spirit of modernity, two main features distinguish this ritual from most traditional ceremonies and cults: firstly, it is never repeated in exactly the same way; secondly, it changes its idols so rapidly that a player who is, at one moment, adulated, can be totally forgotten only a short time later. This fickleness, engraved in the ritual, perfectly symbolizes two main aspects of our contemporary world: the uncertainty and frailty of values and destinies.

After all, if a great football match, more than other similar events which bring people together, periodically makes manifest the enduring reality of a collective consciousness, it is because it combines four underlying features which are seldom brought together in those other events to which it is apparently akin. Firstly, it epitomizes, as we have said, the values which model the most salient aspects of our world; secondly, by opposing 'us' to 'them', it polarizes the particular and the universal; thirdly, it gives the group the opportunity to celebrate itself by performing and displaying itself, both in the stands and on the pitch; fourthly, due to its multifaceted character, it lends itself to many and varied readings. In the light of football's complex and contradictory properties, one is perhaps justified in seeing this sport, which is neither pure spectacle, nor an established ritual, as symbolic of an epoch in which the classificatory landmarks of collective life have become confused. One may also be led to reconsider other 'traditional' rituals which we have come to think of as fixed and immutable, but whose own complexity we may have too rapidly overlooked.