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Introduction

Luca Bifulco
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“Eracle. Journal of Sport and Social Sciences” has been in existence for several years now, and we are approaching its tenth anniversary. There has been a lot of hard work, but above all a lot of satisfaction for a journal that has sought to stimulate debate on the social sciences and sport among the Italian and international scientific communities.

Over the years, we have chosen to focus the articles in each issue on specific topics, based on the countless stimuli provided by current debates or historical circumstances.

However, we have often received proposals for articles outside the proposed themes, a sign of growing interest in the work of the journal, as well as in the social study of sporting phenomena. We therefore decided to collect some of the most promising proposals we have recently received in a special issue, one capable of capturing the effervescence of an international dialogue that has gathered around our editorial efforts.

The result is this rich and varied miscellany, which we hope will prove stimulating and insightful in its analysis.

The collection of articles explores the intersection between sport and the broader cultural, social, political and media phenomena of our time, crossing very different geographical, temporal and socio-cultural areas.

The first article in the issue – written by Marcelo Alves de Resende, Leda Maria da Costa, Ronaldo Helal and Fausto Amaro – examines the symbolic production associated with sport and its socio-political connotations. The authors analyse how the Brazilian right wing, especially Bolsonaroism, has appropriated the green-yellow jersey of the national football team as a political symbol, examining disputes over national identity and efforts to “de-sequester” the jersey ahead of the 2022 World Cup.

The focus then shifts to an analysis of the relationship between sport, personal experience, cultural dimension and identity formation.

Federico Czesli presents an ethnographic study of young footballers in Buenos Aires, investigating how sporting careers gradually reconfigure identity, economic and social capital rather than producing abrupt existential ruptures.

Nicola Strizzolo and Nico Bortoletto’s study analyses the parallels between extreme and lifestyles sports and shamanic practices, focusing on transcendence, ritual, ecstasy and ecological connection in the contemporary sporting experience.

Maria Frezza, in her sociological analysis of the autobiography of Stefano Borgonovo, a former Italian footballer who died of ALS, explores how the disease transformed his identity from celebrated athlete to public symbol of vulnerability, solidarity and resistance to illness, showing how narrative can repair biographical ruptures.

This article links to the latest articles in the issue, which focus more explicitly on the artistic, narrative and media spheres.

Emanuele Rinaldo Meschini investigates the “football turn” in contemporary art, showing how football, from a simple form of mass entertainment, can emerge as an artistic subject within a hybrid cultural ecosystem.

Sara Virnicchi examines the 1964 Tokyo Olympics as a crucial moment in the global mediatization of sport, marking the rise of global sports broadcasting and establishing sport as a global, spectacularized media ritual, while contributing to Japan’s postwar recovery.

Finally, Lorenzo Di Paola analyses Italian sports comics – specifically Carmelo Silva’s *disegnata* – and their role in myth-making, fandom, collective memory, cultural consumption, and digital transformation.

In the commentary section, Luca Bifulco discusses the Kings League, the new football format that seeks to fully exploit the commercial and spectacular potential of the contemporary sports industry in the digital age, while also seeking to reconfigure the canon of sport.

Dressing the nation: historical, political and media disputes around the Brazilian national team's jersey¹

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Abstract

This article explores the recent disputes related to the green-yellow jersey of the Brazilian men's national football team. We will therefore address the far right's rise in Brazil, represented by Bolsonarism, and its attempt to appropriate national symbols, including the Brazilian national team's jersey. Guedes and Almeida (2019) named this phenomenon the second sequestration of the national team's jersey and its context will be scrutinized here. We will emphasize the debate on the rejection of the Brazilian national team's uniform by part of the population. Finally, we will analyze some media narratives that, in the months leading up to the 2022 World Cup, sought to disentail the Brazilian national team's jersey from the far right, a phenomenon that we call "de-sequestration".

Keywords: Brazilian national team, Green-yellow jersey, Bolsonarism, Football, Far-right.

1. Introduction

In the 21st century, the world is experiencing what Dutch political scientist Cas Mudde (2022) calls the fourth wave of the far right, which came to power in several countries shaking liberal

¹ In this article, we will use the expression Brazilian national team's jersey referring to the men's national football team uniform.

democracy.² With a young democracy implemented after the last military dictatorship (1964-85), Brazil hosts a strong far-right that managed not only to win the presidency of the republic, by democratic means, but also to be present in the National Congress by electing deputies and senators³. The rise of the Brazilian far right, represented by Bolsonarism⁴, occurred during the last decade after a series of political events that allowed Jair Bolsonaro to be elected president in 2018. Among these events are the 2013 Brazilian protests, the 2014 presidential elections, the protests leading to Dilma Rousseff's impeachment in 2016, the Lava Jato scandal and the withdrawal of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva from the presidency race in 2018.

This article takes us on a journey through recent disputes regarding the green-yellow jersey of the men's national football team. We will address an important discussion about Bolsonarism and its attempt to appropriate national symbols, such as the Brazilian national football team's jersey, a moment understood by Guedes and Almeida (2019) as the second sequestration of the Canarinho jersey⁵. We will focus on the debate, notable during the 2018 and 2022 World Cups, about the rejection of the Brazilian national team's uniform shown by many left-wing Brazilians and those who disagreed with Bolsonaro's ideals. Finally, we will address the emergence of media narratives that, in the months leading up to the 2022 World Cup, sought to disentail the Canarinho jersey from Bolsonarism, a phenomenon that we call "de-sequestration"⁶.

2. Bolsonaro's rise: Brazilian democracy shaken

Jair Bolsonaro is a retired military man who built his political career in 1989, defending his class in the first direct elections after the fall of the last Brazilian military dictatorship. His first term was as a councilor in Rio de Janeiro, and, in 1991, he was elected federal deputy in Brasília, a position he held until becoming President in 2018. Bolsonaro, therefore, has always been part of the political system, contrary to his candidacy's discourse of a political outsider.

During the Confederations Cup in June 2013 – a test event held a year before the World Cup that would be hosted in Brazil –, we saw an escalation of demonstrations that called into question the classic models of political representation that had been structured since the democratic transition in the late 1970s. (Pinheiro-Machado and Freixo, 2019). From the 6th to the 13th of

² See Also Demuru (2024) and Teitelbaum (2020).

³ The most conservative Congress of the last forty years. *Le Monde Diplomatique*. (2018). Available at:

<https://diplomatique.org.br/o-congresso-mais-conservador-dos-ultimos-quarenta-anos/>. Accessed on: January 11, 2024.

⁴ Bolsonarism can be characterized as a political movement with a conservative, authoritarian, and right-wing populist orientation which emerged in Brazil in the late 2010s around Jair Bolsonaro's leadership. Driven by social resentments, anti-systemic rhetoric, and intensive polarization mechanisms, Bolsonarism mobilizes a broad, heterogeneous, and decentralized social base whose symbolic practices and political narratives show resilience even before the electoral weakening of its central figure. For examples see Souza (2024 and 2016), Pinheiro-Machado (2019), Rocha (2023 and 2021) and Ricci (2022).

⁵ Canarinho is another way to refer to the Brazilian team's jersey which started to be worn predominantly in yellow from the 1954 World Cup to erase from memory the white uniform used in the Maracanazo. *Museu do Futebol: A História da Camisa Canarinho: Como o amarelo-ouro passou a vestir o Brasil*. Available at:

<https://museudofutebol.org.br/exposicoes/a-historia-da-camisa-canarinho-como-o-amarelo-ouro-passou-a-vestir-o-brasil/>.

The first kidnapping attempt would have occurred in 1970, during and after the World Cup that year.

⁶ As the word "dessequestro" (de-sequestration) does not exist in Portuguese, we will understand it as a neologism and use between quotation marks along the essay.

that month, the demonstrations were confined to São Paulo, coordinated by the Free Fare Movement (MPL), against the 20-cent increase in public transportation fares. Around five thousand young adults and left-wing activists, including members of the Workers' Party (PT), attended these marches (Altman, 2023). On June 11th, police repression against demonstrators escalated, resulting in injuries and strong press repercussions. On June 13th, MPL called for new protests, even with threats from the then São Paulo governor and now vice president of Brazil, Geraldo Alckmin. Police abuse against protesters and journalists generated commotion and solidarity which broke the regional character of the acts. From June 17th to 20th, the protests amassed over two million demonstrators in more than 400 Brazilian municipalities, marked by several agendas and a retreat in the price increase of public transport fares by state and municipal administrations (Altman, 2023). Breno Altman (2023) states that the protesters' national profile consisted mostly of middle sectors that rose socially during the PT administrations. Initially, the demands were progressive in nature, criticizing the removal of homes caused by World Cup construction and the high investments made to hold the event, in addition to the rising public transportation fares. Just as FIFA had required from the Brazilian government the "FIFA standard"⁷ in the construction of World Cup venues, society took to the streets to demand the same for the various areas of public administration (Damo, 2020). As the protests became nationwide, MPL and other progressive movements lost representativeness while the right-wing gained space by adopting an aggressive conservative discourse against institutional politics – chanting slogans such as "no political party," "the giant has woken up," "thou shalt see that a son of thine fleeth not from battle"⁸ – and presenting a nationalist character, including the use of green and yellow (Reis, 2021).

Mobilization of the right-wing on the streets resumed in March 2015, gaining strength in the marches of August and December of that year and reaching its most expressive point in the massive protests of March 2016 (Rocha, 2021). The consecutive terms of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff as president enabled the automatic association of PT and the left with the establishment, placing the right as the opposition for the first time in the history of the Brazilian republic (Rocha, 2021). PT had remained in power for 14 consecutive years, from Lula's first election until Dilma Rousseff's impeachment in 2016 which, according to Rocha (2021), changed the country's political framework without the left having perceived this process.

Even in a scenario marked by the growing deterioration of the political system, PT managed to regain momentum and emerge victoriously at the polls in 2014, in the closest election since 1989 (Dilma Rousseff 51.64 % *versus* Aécio Neves 48.36%). However, PT was unable to govern, as a key point occurred in this election: the losing ticket questioned the result, asking for a recount of the votes and publicly raising concerns about electronic voting machines, a very clear target of Bolsonaroism in the following years: "not accepting the other's victory is the first step taken in coup adventures" (Rocha, 2021, p. 13). The National Congress, represented by Eduardo Cunha, obstructed the federal government's work and created so-called bombshell agendas⁹ to implode

⁷ "FIFA Standard" refers to the specifications and standards established by the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA) required for organizing events like World Cups. In Brazil, this expression is popularly used to denote something of great quality.

⁸ Excerpt from the Brazilian National Anthem.

⁹ The term designated projects with a strong fiscal impact and contrary to the interests of the Executive branch, whose approval increased public spending and made governability difficult. G1: Dilma faz apelo para que Senado barre 'pautas-

the Rousseff administration, who was trying to reduce public investment pressured by the market. At the end of 2015, Cunha launched the impeachment process against Dilma Rousseff, which ended in May 2016 with her definitive departure from the Presidency¹⁰. In the vote to continue the impeachment process, Jair Bolsonaro gained more notoriety by voting for Dilma's removal and saluting Colonel Carlos Alberto Brilhante Ustra, the first military man recognized by the courts as a torturer during the last military dictatorship¹¹.

Amid right-wing protests, the impeachment process that began in 2015 and the contestation of election results, Operation Lava Jato emerged in 2014 with the promise of saving Brazil from corruption. One of the themes of greatest political capital for right-wing extremists is the narrative created about corruption (Eco, 2018), imbued with an anti-systemic strategy to build the far right as saviors of the nation. Added to the economic crisis, political dissatisfaction and opposition from the country's main media outlets to the Rousseff administration (Pinheiro-Machado and Freixo, 2019), the issue of corruption appears more strongly, which generated large protests against the PT administration from 2015 onwards. Lava Jato, according to Marcos Nobre (2022, p. 19), "ended up showing itself, for a huge portion of the electorate, to be the last resort in politics, the only institutional path available for channeling their dissatisfaction." After the 2013 Brazilian protests, the political system failed to regain control of national politics. Nobre (2022) concludes that Lava Jato was one of those responsible for preventing such resumption. Federal judge Sergio Moro was the person responsible for the operation, a central figure in the national political events that created the instability that led Brazil into the arms of the far right. Essentially, Moro used judicial activism to close the siege on politicians, especially from the Workers' Party (PT), "with selectivity and Manichaeism marking the behavior of anti-corruption activists on social media, in the streets, in the media, and in the repressive state apparatus" (Miguel, 2022, p. 220). A selectivity confirmed by the tolerance of corruption by the governments of Michel Temer and Jair Bolsonaro, Dilma Rousseff's successors as president. Sergio Moro used the media as a judicial tactic to influence public opinion in his favor with selective leaks to the country's main media outlets when making decisions that were not supported by law – such as the leak of a conversation between Dilma Rousseff and Lula (Jinkings, 2016). Moro also acted in collusion with prosecutors – the best known being Deltan Dalagnol, elected federal deputy for Paraná in 2022 and impeached in 2023 by the Superior Electoral Court – to coordinate actions and impede defense mechanisms for those under investigation. This selective action was revealed by Vaza Jato, a leak of messages that exposed the joint action between Moro and prosecutors on Telegram (Vaza Jato, 2024). With an anti-corruption speech and in collusion with the media and prosecutors, acting in a corrupt manner, Moro removes Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (PT), Bolsonaro's main opponent and leader of voting intentions, from the presidential race by arresting him, a decision later annulled by the Supreme Federal Court. In such circumstances of

bomba' da Câmara. Available at: <https://g1.globo.com/politica/noticia/2015/08/dilma-faz-apelo-para-que-senado-barre-pautas-bomba-da-camara.html>. Accessed on: January 19, 2024.

¹⁰ In 2023, Dilma Rouseff was acquitted of the crime of fiscal backpedaling, a maneuver in which the government delays transfers to public banks, who pay for social programs with their own resources, creating a temporary debt and hiding issues in the public accounts, for which she was accused in the impeachment process.

¹¹ Gazeta do Povo. Available at: <https://www.gazetadopovo.com.br/ideias/quem-foi-brilhante-ustra-o-primeiro-militar-reconhecido-como-torturador-pela-justica-504br0rhl21rxfxsjkgjygv79/>. Accessed on: January 19, 2024.

the far-right advancement, Jair Bolsonaro grew in the polls of voting intentions from 2017 onwards and defeated Fernando Haddad, Lula's replacement, in the 2018 elections.

3. Sequestration and rejection of the Canarinho jersey

Attachment to tradition and the use of national symbols as political and ideological legitimacy are not specific to certain periods or political leanings but are more prevalent in dictatorial governments (Guedes & Almeida, 2019). The last Brazilian military dictatorship attempted to forge national unity by suppressing cultural and social particularities in the name of a so-called nation. Its government narratively constructed a positive discourse about certain events, like the country's economic growth, as a way to capture the population's support. Anything that deviated from the national ideal was seen as the communist enemy to be confronted, as in the government's strong campaigns entitled "Love it or Leave it" (Guedes & Almeida, 2019). The third world championship won in Mexico fits into the political use of the national team and football as an echo of the last military dictatorship's success. Guedes and Almeida (2019) argue that the 1970 World Cup was a milestone in the incorporation and appropriation of national symbols as national pride, with the emergence of improvised flags, painted streets, sales of green-yellow accessories, objects and clothing under strict control by the military dictatorship over this symbolism previously restricted to the elites and the armed forces. At that time, however, the state still controlled how, when, where and why to use national symbols, punishing non-compliance with dictatorial rules¹². Guedes and Almeida (2019) define this moment as the first sequestration of the green and yellow.

Once elected, Jair Bolsonaro modified the federal government structures by adopting two governance forms to guarantee the interests of the national elite: neoliberalism¹³ and the reduction of space and rights of minority populations. In addition to eliminating important ministries¹⁴, such as Labor and Culture, he placed names opposed to the agenda of minority individuals at the head of the Ministry of Women, Family and Human Rights (Damares Alves) and the Palmares Foundation (Sergio Camargo), an institution dedicated to promoting and preserving Black culture in Brazilian society. Similarly, in the sports field Bolsonaro sought to take advantage of football and tried to stay close to the country's most popular sport to promote far-right ideas, such as the adoption of hate speech (Williams, 2021) and cultural warfare (Rocha,

¹² We believe it is important to draw attention here to Robert Entman's work on framing, since for him (2009) framing consists of selecting and emphasizing certain aspects of reality in a message to promote a particular interpretation – defining problems, assigning causes, making moral judgments, and suggesting solutions, thereby shaping how audiences understand events and actors. Entman emphasizes framing as a strategic practice in media and political communication aimed at guiding interpretation. This notion fits well with our analysis.

¹³ JORNAL DA USP: Bolsonarismo é a nova racionalidade governamental do neoliberalismo. Available at: <https://jornal.usp.br/articulas/dennis-de-oliveira/bolsonarismo-e-a-nova-racionalidade-governamental-do-neoliberalismo/>. Accessed on: January 31, 2024.

¹⁴ AGÊNCIA SENADO: Com vetos, Bolsonaro sanciona lei que reorganiza ministérios. Available at: <https://www12.senado.leg.br/noticias/materias/2019/06/19/com-vetos-bolsonaro-sanciona-lei-que-reorganiza-ministerios>. Accessed on: July 14, 2023.

2021). In football, he intervened in several ways. He created the Home Club Law¹⁵, which established changes that exclusively guaranteed the home club the right to the arena¹⁶, that is, the right to negotiate the licenses to transmission and reproduction of matches. Before, the arena's right involved negotiations between the home and visiting team. He also reduced investments in Olympic sports in 2020, interrupting payments of the Athlete Scholarship¹⁷ which is fundamental in the Olympic cycle. Another attempt to popularize Bolsonaro through football came with the former president's initiative to wear jerseys from more than 80 Brazilian teams¹⁸ in recent years, dressing in the uniform of Brazilians' favorite clubs.

Leader of the Brazilian far-right, Bolsonaro seemed to have understood the importance of football in Brazil and that this sport is a stage for the dispute of narratives. Even wearing a non-official jersey¹⁹ has a meaning: it attributes a popular narrative to Jair Bolsonaro, bringing him closer to fans who cannot afford an official jersey. Bolsonaro knows it is an expensive item and uses that fact to his political advantage. But why do so? Because clothing goes beyond dressing the player or fans' consumerism of wanting to get the latest fashion from their favorite team. The jersey, therefore, ceases to be just an object and produces "ambiguities between strictly individualizing and/or sportingly collectivizing uses" (Toledo, 2019, p. 37). Football jerseys, according to Toledo (2019), create a double link between the social and the subjective as a symbolic material property of inducing relationships. Buying a jersey creates one's individuality as a fan while joining them to a club collective of other fans with similar taste. Fan culture creates interactive dualities of belonging between the individual and the social – my team and my rivals'. Amid the pandemic, Jair Bolsonaro agreed to host the 2021 Copa America, after Argentina and Colombia withdrew, a fact that generated much criticism of the administration due to the health crisis. In 2021, Brazil had already surpassed 460,000 deaths from COVID-19 which led to a manifesto by Brazilian national team players and Tite, the coach of the team at the time, against the tournament²⁰. Consequently, Jair Bolsonaro tried to intervene in the Brazilian Football Confederation (CBF) to replace Tite with Renato Gaúcho, a declared Bolsonaro supporter. With

¹⁵ FOLHA DE S.PAULO: Bolsonaro sanciona Lei do Mandante, que altera regras de transmissão de jogos. Available at: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/esporte/2021/09/bolsonaro-sanciona-lei-do-mandante-que-altera-regras-de-transmissao-de-jogos.shtml>. Accessed on: January 5, 2024.

¹⁶ Right to the arena is one that guarantees exclusivity in the negotiation, authorization, capture, fixation, broadcast, transmission, retransmission or reproduction of images of sporting events, regardless of the broadcasting means.

¹⁷ UOL: Governo faz manobra e, na prática, não pagará Bolsa Atleta por 2020. Available at: <https://www.uol.com.br/esporte/colunas/olhar-olimpico/2020/08/05/governo-anuncia-cancelamento-do-bolsa-atleta-de-2020.htm>. Accessed on: January 11, 2024.

¹⁸ UOL: Jogo de poder. Bolsonaro veste a camisa na 'autopromoção' com o futebol; presidente já usou mais de 80 uniformes de clubes. Available at: <https://www.uol.com.br/esporte/reportagens-especiais/bolsonaro-ja-exibiu-81-camisas-de-clubes-de-futebol-especialistas-apontam-uso-politico>. Accessed on: January 11, 2024.

¹⁹ UOL: Bolsonaro usa modelo pirata de nova camisa ainda não lançada pelo Flamengo. Available at: <https://www.uol.com.br/esporte/futebol/ultimas-noticias/2023/01/04/bolsonaro-vaza-nova-camisa-do-flamengo-em-dia-de-pizza-nos-estados-unidos.htm>. Accessed on: January 11, 2024.

²⁰ ESPN: Jogadores do Brasil divulgam manifesto: 'Somos contra a organização da Copa América, mas nunca diremos não à seleção'. Available at: https://www.espn.com.br/futebol/artigo/_/id/8755133/jogadores-do-brasil-divulgam-manifesto-somos-contra-a-organizacao-da-copa-america-mas-nunca-diremos-nao-a-selecao. Accessed on: January 11, 2024.

his popularity at a low point at the time²¹, Bolsonaro tried to use football and the Brazilian national team politically to promote himself.

Added to these attempts to appropriate football for self-promotion, there is the main one: the sequestration of national symbols as a way of legitimizing far-right ideals through the Brazilian flag and the national football team's jersey, a historical attribute of national identity, as did the last military dictatorship (Guedes & Almeida, 2019). In the right-wing protests of 2015 and 2016, with millions of people on the streets in several Brazilian cities, the use of green and yellow and the national team jersey was absolute (Reis, 2021). The protests received massive press coverage. Fantástico²², on March 13th, 2016, aired a report in which the Brazilian national team's jersey was shown 35 times in 13 minutes, an average of three cuts per minute as analyzed by Reis (2021). Combined, the scale of protests, the text and the excessive display of the jersey strengthened the association of the Brazilian national team's jersey with a political group, paving the way for its kidnapping. Bolsonaro adopted the anti-PT rhetoric, the anti-corruption topic and exacerbated patriotism, taking on national symbols and the yellow jersey against the red of PT and communism (Fortuna & Resende, 2024). At his inauguration as president on January 1, 2019, Jair Bolsonaro asserted that Brazil's flag would never be red²³.

Guedes and Almeida (2019) defined this association of Bolsonarism with national symbols, especially the Brazilian football team's jersey, as the second sequestration. Groups opposed to Bolsonarism no longer identified themselves with the green and yellow jersey, creating aversion and rejection of the attire, a topic that was addressed during news coverage of the 2018 World Cup in Russia. With headlines like "Part of the left rejects the yellow jersey for fear of 'turning' into pot bangers"²⁴, "The fans who don't care for the 'yellow jersey'"²⁵ and "The national team's jersey, the symbol contaminated by ideological feuds and the shady dealings of the bosses"²⁶, part of the national press already signaled the divide regarding the uniform. Notably, however, the rejection was restricted to the Canarinho jersey, not extending to football or the Brazilian national team since those who opposed Bolsonarism and feared being confused with Bolsonaro supporters found new ways of cheering like wearing the blue jersey, the second uniform of the Brazilian national team (Oliveira & Farias, 2021).

²¹ BRASIL DE FATO: Popularidade de Bolsonaro despenca e fica abaixo de 20% pela primeira vez desde janeiro de 2019. Available at: <https://www.brasildefato.com.br/2021/11/29/popularidade-de-bolsonaro-despenca-e-fica-abaixo-de-20-pela-primeira-vez-desde-janeiro-de-2019>. Accessed on: January 12, 2024.

²² Fantástico is a weekly program on Rede Globo, the largest Brazilian broadcaster, on air since 1973. A hybrid between variety show and journalism, the program presents on Sunday nights a combination of investigative reports, news, entertainment, culture and sports.

²³ VALOR ECONÔMICO: 'Nossa bandeira jamais será vermelha', afirma Bolsonaro na posse. Available at: <https://valor.globo.com/politica/noticia/2019/01/01/nossa-bandeira-jamais-sera-vermelha-afirma-bolsonaro-na-posse.ghtml>. Accessed on: January 14, 2024.

²⁴ FOLHA DE S. PAULO: Parte da esquerda rejeita camisa amarelinha com medo de 'virar' paneleira. Available at: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/esporte/2018/06/parte-da-esquerda-rejeita-camisa-amarelinha-com-medo-de-irar-paneleira.shtml>. Accessed on: January 14, 2024.

²⁵ PLACAR: Os torcedores que não querem saber da "amarelinha". Available at: <https://placar.com.br/placar/os-torcedores-que-nao-querem-saber-da-amarelinha/>. Accessed on: January 14, 2024.

²⁶ EL PAÍS BRASIL: Camisa da seleção, o símbolo contaminado por rixas ideológicas e as negociatas dos cartolas. Available at: https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2018/06/16/deportes/1529108134_704637.html. Accessed on: January 14, 2024.

4. Media narratives for “de-sequestration”

Throughout 2022, the year of presidential elections and the World Cup, celebrities, politicians, and brands built narratives for the “de-sequestration” of national symbols – especially the Brazilian national team’s jersey. Singers Anitta, Ludmilla and Djonga²⁷ are such examples. On social media and in their concerts, they introduced the debate about the sequestration of national symbols by Bolsonarism and positioned themselves in favor of reclaiming a symbol that belongs to Brazilians. In the case of Ludmilla and Djonga, to the *favela* people²⁸. During the campaign before the World Cup, Lula, Bolsonaro’s main opponent in the elections, stressed the importance of wearing green and yellow. In April, at an event held at the State University of Rio de Janeiro, Lula waved the national flag in front of a packed audience clad in red and stated that “this fascist does not own” the green-yellow jersey²⁹. In 2022, the left seemed to have understood how dangerous it was to leave a national symbol in the hands of only a certain group (Resende,2024). Seeing the adoption of the national team’s jersey by far-right groups and realizing the importance of taking a political stand, groups opposed to Bolsonarism reorganized themselves to act in the political debate, clashing against the far-right discourse in various fields of Brazilian society, including football. One moment directly related to the use of national symbols sequestered by the far-right was during the 2022 World Cup. Fans reframed the green and yellow jersey and the national flag in various ways to separate themselves from Bolsonaro supporters. Some preferred to wear the blue or black jersey, but others reframed the green and yellow uniform: stamped with the number 13 (the Worker’s Party number) on the back, in reference to Lula; with a red star on the chest or the Brazilian team’s red jersey in allusion to PT, Lula’s party; or the national flag with the words “For the World Cup.”

²⁷ Larissa de Macedo Machado, known as Anitta, is considered the Brazilian singer with the greatest international repercussion. Ludmilla is the stage name of Ludmila Oliveira da Silva, a funk singer and songwriter. She won the Latin Grammys in 2022. Gustavo Pereira Marques, known as Djonga, is a Brazilian rapper, songwriter and writer considered one of the most influential names in the Brazilian rap scene.

²⁸ BBC: ‘Resgatar o orgulho de ser brasileiro’: o movimento para ressignificar o verde e amarelo antes da eleição e da Copa. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-63069515>. Accessed on: January 31, 2024.

²⁹ UOL: Lula critica uso de verde e amarelo por Bolsonaro: ‘Não são desse fascista’. Available at: <https://www.uol.com.br/eleicoes/2022/03/31/lula-critica-uso-de-verde-e-amarelo-por-bolsonaro-nao-sao-desse-fascista.htm>. Accessed on: January 31, 2024.

Fig. 1. “It’s for the World Cup” written on the Brazilian flag



Source: Folha de S. Paulo, 2022

Fig. 2. National team’s jersey in red



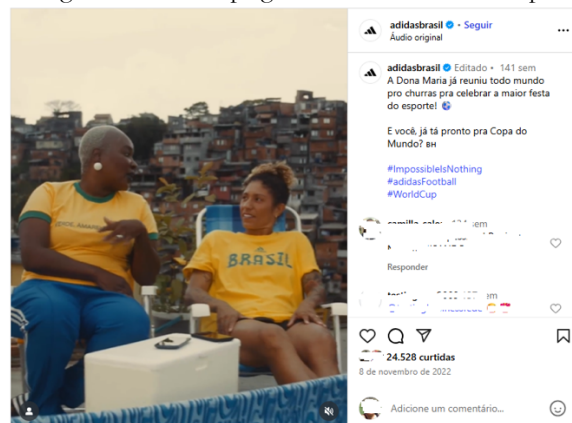
Source: Silva, 2022

Besides this ambience of civil society movements to redefine the Canarinho jersey, companies, CBF and media groups created the narrative of a national team belonging to all and, particularly,

of reclaiming the green and yellow jersey. Luiz Gonzaga Motta (2007) argues that narrative can interpret objective and subjective knowledge of the world (physical nature, human relations, beliefs, identities, values, myths, etc.) in accounts. This would allow us to put things in order and perspective, producing a discourse that creates and gives meaning to everything that involves human actions, from everyday to complex situations. Based on this conception, we will briefly analyze some examples of media productions that sought to create a narrative of unity about the national team and to disentail the Canarinho jersey from the far-right for the 2022 World Cup. Various brands and celebrities made declarations throughout 2022 to “de-sequester” the green-yellow jersey starting from the 2022 World Cup. Neither the presidential election, which ended in October before the Cup, nor the Carnaval; this was for the World Cup, a national mobilization event every four years (Guedes, 2023).

Adidas published on its social media an advertising piece of one minute and 35 seconds to promote a World Cup atmosphere weeks before the tournament. In the story created by the German multinational, fans from all tribes are gathered at “Dona Maria’s,” a common name in Brazil. Popular expressions like “get together with the guys” were used as synonymous for collective association and the names of former players Adriano and Cafu, player Cristiane, ex-player Formiga, influencer Luva de Pedreiro, among others, featured as characters who would be at Dona Maria’s to watch Brazil play. Using images of *favelas* and meanings produced by the national team’s players – Black individuals who rose from a difficult reality – , the narrative of the sports equipment brand provokes emotional effects (Motta, 2007) to emphasize a popular image for the national team, especially by plastering green and yellow throughout the piece. In other words, Adidas staged an advertising campaign to ‘return’ the yellow jersey to Brazilians, without any connection to the far right.

Fig. 3. Adidas campaign for the 2022 World Cup

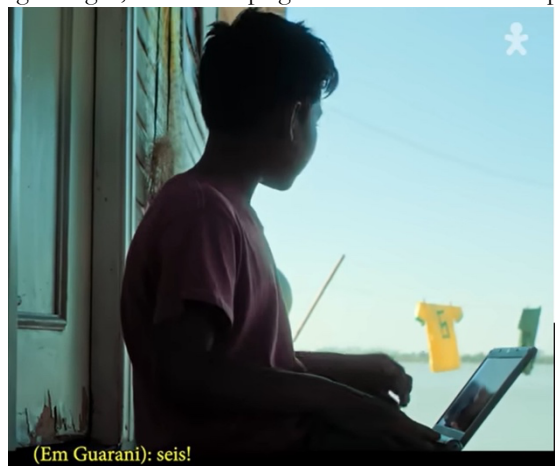


Source: Instagram – Adidas Brasil

Vivo, a telephone company and sponsor of the national team, associated the Canarinho team with winning its sixth championship, helping to reinforce the idea of a winning and respected jersey before the world. To convey its popular and national character, the brand created a one-minute story entitled “Signs”: at night, two children are on a farm, to connote the Brazilian countryside, counting six stars in the sky. Soon after, Vinicius Junior, one of the technical references of Tite’s team in that World Cup, wakes up with the alarm clock at 6 am on the day

he was to debut for Brazil in the World Cup. With the number six – in reference to the sixth title – used in several moments of the film, including in Indigenous villages and in the staged game’s overtime, Vivo “dresses” the population in green and yellow to support Vinicius Junior and the national team. He even scores a decisive goal, leading the Brazilian fans to celebrate effusively – whether inside the stadium or across Brazil – the victory in a difficult and important game. Choosing Vinicius Junior was not random: he is a black man born in São Gonçalo, metropolitan region of Rio de Janeiro, and has faced racist situations since he started at Real Madrid in 2018, bringing the Brazilian national team player closer to a less favored social stratum. By linking itself to a victim of racism from a poor background, Vivo works on the fan’s identification with the team, connecting the Canarinho jersey to all Brazilians and, most importantly, distancing it from the far right and its cultural war against minority populations.

Fig. 4. Signs, Vivo’s campaign for the 2022 World Cup



Source: Vivo, 2022

In a one-minute video, Nike uses the same approaches as Vivo, but with even greater emphasis on the national team’s jersey which is shown being pulled by other opponents at every moment – whether with the player Rodrygo on the field, the boy playing on a dirt field or the singer Djonga in the middle of a crowd. Its connotation and reading is clear: the yellow jersey is pulled by the nation’s rivals all the time, exemplified in the three contexts shown, but its symbolism resisted as something that belongs to everyone, seen in the three characters: Rodrygo, Djonga and the boy who plays on a simple dirt field, the latter representing the less privileged social stratum. We can interpret these opponents as those who try to steal the jersey for a specific group, like the far right. Entitled “*Veste a garra*,” meaning put on your fighting spirit, the video invokes the average Brazilian who faces a life full of mishaps and calls on fans to wear the jersey in unity with the national team, while a vibrant song in the background asks Brazilians to cheer together.

Fig. 5. Nike Football presents: Never-say-die attitude



Source: Nike, 2022

Nike invokes the same meaning Vivo attributed to Vini Jr. when exploring the images of Rodrygo and Djonga. Official supplier of the Brazilian team's uniforms, Nike used "Dynamic Yellow" in the jersey's design for the 2022 World Cup. It is a lighter and more vibrant shade of yellow that enhances the jaguar's spots, an emblematic species of Brazilian forests. By valuing the Brazilian fauna and flora and referencing nature and national biodiversity, the brand narratively constructs piece of symbology that the far right has vehemently attacked in recent years by denying the climate change caused by global warming.

Singers Anitta and Ludmilla also spoke up for the Canarinho jersey. In April, Anitta defended on social media that the green and yellow shirt belongs to all Brazilians which provoked a direct response from then-President Jair Bolsonaro. As to not generate content for the Bolsonaro base, Anitta blocked Bolsonaro.³⁰ A declared voter of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, Ludmilla performed at Rock in Rio 2022, in September, two months before the elections and three months before the World Cup, on a green and yellow stage and asked the audience to sign the "L" (for Lula) before singing "Baile de Favela," equating favela to people disconnected from the kidnappers. Soon after the show, Ludmilla went to social media and spoke about the popular character of the yellow jersey on a post about reclaiming the flag and the pride of being Brazilian with photos that translated everyone's involvement in the nation via the national symbols, seen on Brazil's green and yellow jerseys.

³⁰ G1: Anitta bloqueia Jair Bolsonaro no Twitter após mensagens sobre cores da bandeira do Brasil. Available at: <https://g1.globo.com/pop-arte/musica/noticia/2022/04/16/anitta-bloqueia-jair-bolsonaro-no-twitter-apos-mensagens-sobre-cores-da-bandeira-do-brasil.ghtml>. Accessed on: January 6, 2024.

Fig. 6. X, 09.11.2022



Source: Ludmilla, 2022

Another important statement for constructing a “World Cup climate” and for putting aside the dissent caused by the political dispute in a presidential election year was a call from Rede Globo, the largest Brazilian TV network and holder of the rights to broadcast the World Cup since 1970. In a one-minute campaign broadcast on open TV, the network uses Galvão Bueno, the “official voice” of the national team’s games on the channel, to narrate an emotionally appealing text for creating a narrative of Brazilians uniting for Brazil in the World Cup. In it, TV Globo uses elements of unity such as “family together” and values the encounter of differences to support the Brazilian team as one, creating a narrative of “Brazil against the world.” Despite no political references in the text or images, we can perceive references to the political climate that divided the country. Galvão Bueno’s narration reminds us that “Nothing unites us like football. Nothing brings us together like a World Cup”³¹. In the text’s illustration, the atmosphere of unity is reinforced by images of Brazilians clad in green and yellow united by football, by the World Cup, streets painted in the country’s colors, in an attempt to produce “Brazilianness” (Vieira, 2019), a national stereotype created during the World Cup. To legitimize the discourse about antagonistic people who come together through football, the campaign shows Vasco and Flamengo fans embracing, as if football could produce harmony between individuals with opposing views. In the message, the political rivalry between Lula supporters and Bolsonaro supporters are equated, through metaphor, to Vasco and Flamengo fans, one of the greatest classic matches in the

³¹ Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BoCQ8ZYXD5k>.

country and holder of one of the main rivalries in Brazilian football. If a Vasco and a Flamengo fan can put their differences aside, Lula supporters and Bolsonaro supporters can too.

Fig. 7. Globo's campaign for the 2022 World Cup



Source: Canal de chamadas, 2022

In September, a month before the elections and two months before the World Cup, Globo released details of its coverage of the World Cup in Qatar, announcing 300 hours of broadcasting on SporTV, the broadcaster's pay TV channel, and 160 hours on TV Globo. The channel's official slogan for the tournament broadcast followed that of the call: "We're together for the World Cup." Globo's sports director, Renato Ribeiro, mentioned that the 2022 World Cup would have a different meaning, because it would be a competition "after an election that promises to be the most polarized in Brazil's history" and that, according to him, "only a World Cup is capable of uniting the country in a single crowd."

Considering the far-right in power and the constant attacks on democracy by Bolsonarism, this is an action that takes advantage of football and the World Cup, especially in the case of brands and celebrities, to create democratic narratives, even if largely driven by commercial interests.

5. By way of conclusion: the Brazilian team's red jersey and the new chapters of the dispute for national symbols

New chapters about the dispute for national symbols started in 2024 and 2025, especially regarding the Brazilian flag and the Brazilian football team's green-yellow jersey, synonymous with Brazil's success worldwide. Recent discussion emerged from the disclosure, by the sports press, that the new Brazilian team's number 2 jersey for the 2026 World Cup would be red, generating great repercussions in the public – in the digital environment and beyond. Debate around the red jersey ranged from political to club issues, leading the Brazilian Football Confederation (CBF) to deny production of the red uniform and declare that the new jersey would follow the entity's statute, which defines that the colors must follow those of the country. Succinctly, CBF released a note reaffirming the "commitment to its statute (the standards in the traditional yellow and blue colors will be maintained) and informs that the new uniform collection for the World Cup will still be defined together with Nike."

According to a report published by the newspaper *O Globo* on April 29³², when the news came to light, the color choice would have no political undertones – in terms of a communication campaign, it would be strange to create a concept that generates political rift among Brazilians. It considered commercial and advertising requirements, following the launch of uniforms from Nike, sponsor of the CBF and Jordan brand, which would be stamped on the Brazilian uniform. Journalist Diogo Dantas, author of the Rio de Janeiro newspaper's web article, said that the red uniform would have been not unanimous within the confederation itself. Some defended a third uniform, without replacing the current green-yellow (main) and blue (reserve). However, Nike has not yet created a third kit for any national team because it could hurt sales of the other two. But the fact is: the shirt was approved, as initially published by the foreign website specializing in uniforms *Footy Headlines*. Nike's idea of making the third uniform prevailed, endorsed by CBF's president Ednaldo Rodrigues.

Consulting and research institute, Quaest conducted a survey on social media about the alleged red shirt, considering April 28 and 29, on platforms X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, Facebook, Reddit, Tumblr and YouTube, as well as news sites³³. The survey unveiled a strong rejection to the color change: 90% of the comments were negative and 10%, positive. Quaest identified 24 million mentions to the topic, with an average of 43 million views and 13 million mentions. Figures that confirm the stir around the subject among the population.

In an editorial entitled "It is not appropriate for the Brazilian team to wear a red jersey," the newspaper *O Globo* criticized the possibility of a red uniform for the Brazilian team stating that "respect for tradition is essential", recalling political discussions and drawing attention to the "polarization" around Brazil's uniform, captured by Bolsonaro supporters: "One could argue that brazilwood, with its reddish color, is at the origin of the country's name. But it didn't take much sophistication to predict the explosive effect of said change in a polarized country where the national team's yellow jersey was adopted as a uniform by Bolsonaro supporters, while red is the color traditionally associated with President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's PT," the outlet said. The alleged red shirt was even featured on the agenda of National Congress representatives. G1 (Rede Globo's online news portal) highlighted speeches by congresspeople on the subject.³⁴ Jair Bolsonaro's son, Senator Flávio Bolsonaro defended the green-yellow uniform against the red jersey: "it has always been green and yellow, the colors of our homeland. Changing this makes no sense. It is an insult to everything that has always represented the pride of our people!" Similar cries came from federal deputy Arthur Maia, from the right-wing party União Brasil: "The national team is one of the most expressive symbols of our country and obviously the colors must echo the national flag: green, yellow and sky blue, as our glorious canary team has always acted." G1 also highlighted the criticism by Randolfe Rodrigues, from the left-wing party PT: "The colors of our national team are not an 'ideological identity'; they represent what distinguishes us in the world. A national team's color is related to national identity. Any color other than green, yellow, white and blue is unjustified".

³² Available at: <https://oglobo.globo.com/blogs/diogo-dantas/coluna/2025/04/entenda-como-camisa-vermelha-da-selecao-foi-escolhida-e-por-que-ela-ja-nasceu-sem-ser-unanimidade-na-cbf.ghtml>. Accessed on: May 4, 2025.

³³ Available at: <https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/esportes/futebol/selecao-brasileira/camisa-vermelha-da-selecao-tem-forte-rejeicao-nas-redes-aponta-pesquisa/>. Accessed on: May 4, 2025.

³⁴ Available at: <https://g1.globo.com/politica/blog/andrea-sadi/post/2025/04/29/camisa-vermelha-da-selecao-brasileira-de-futebol-vira-briga-politica-nas-redes-sociais.ghtml>. Accessed on: May 4, 2025.

G1 highlighted the statements of three parliamentarians from different political spectrums: one from the far-right, another from the center-right and the other from the left – all three against the red jersey. Left-wing, Randolfe Rodrigues criticized possible ideologized national symbols. Marcelo Alves de Resende (2024) reminds us that instead of signifying it with popular discourses, linking it to the Brazilian people, removing all ideology leaves national symbols free to be re-kidnapped. Leaving them open without a unifying meaning opens doors to future social segregation, as happened with the sequestration by Bolsonaro supporters.

Despite new events, it is still too early to affirm a regaining of national symbols by the Brazilian population, disassociating them from the far right. In 2023, just over two months after Lula won the elections, Bolsonaro supporters invaded Brasília and vandalized the Praça dos Três Poderes [Three Branches Plaza]³⁵ dressed in national symbols. In March 2025, Jair Bolsonaro asked for amnesty for the vandals who destroyed Brasília two years earlier, in an act also held in Copacabana that was inundated with green-yellow jerseys. The dispute is still ongoing and 2026 promises important chapters with a presidential election year and the World Cup, in a different scenario from what happened in 2022 and 2018, mainly because (so far) Jair Bolsonaro is ineligible which is a blow to the far-right camp.

Fig. 8. Bolsonaro on Avenida Atlântica, in Copacabana, Rio



Photo: Alexandre Cassiano (O Globo)

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³⁵ A public square in Brasília, Brazil, where the headquarters of the country's three branches of government – the Executive, Legislative, and Judiciary – are located.

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“No son nadie”. Un abordaje de la posición liminal en el fútbol juvenil

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Abstract

Based on an ethnography conducted in a Buenos Aires football club (2019-2022), this article analyzes the stage of the youth footballer as a liminal period and asks whether, throughout this process, a transformation of their social position occurs. The data collected show that, unlike studies on other disciplines, the accounts of aspiring players do not display an explicit existential rupture in their biographies. Two complementary hypotheses are proposed: first, that aggregation does not emerge from the training process itself, but rather from gradual sporting success, which confers economic and social capital. Second, that the sporting career produces a transformation in the relationship with the practice and in the way players speak about it, grounded in the experience of bodily sacrifice; in this way, social networks expand and peer recognition grows, generating opportunities that were previously unavailable. The career thus enables a progressive transformation of identity associated with the development of networks and the demonstration of capital, making it possible to establish a differentiation from the uninitiated fan.

Keywords: Football, Liminality, Sacrifice, Young players, Career.

1. Introducción

Entre los años 2019 y 2022 se realizó un trabajo etnográfico en las categorías juveniles de un club de fútbol del ascenso de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires con miras a la realización de una tesis de doctorado sobre la formación de futbolistas juveniles en Argentina (Czesli, 2024). Dicho estudio tuvo como objetivo general el análisis del proceso de adopción del gusto por la práctica futbolística y de las relaciones y sentidos que circulan en los clubes formadores.

La metodología de investigación incluyó tres estrategias de construcción de datos: una observación participante en las categorías juveniles de un club de fútbol entre 2019 y 2022; 16 entrevistas en profundidad con juveniles de la categoría 2002 y cinco a padres de los jugadores; y finalmente una encuesta auto-administrada con 39 preguntas orientadas a indagar sobre las condiciones socioeconómicas con las que atraviesan sus carreras. A partir de ese trabajo, este artículo estará dedicado a presentar una lectura sobre la etapa juvenil en tanto período liminal y a analizar si la carrera de los futbolistas involucra un proceso de transformación de su posición social.

2. Del campo al concepto: pensar lo liminal

Una de las aristas del estudio realizado consistió en observar los sentidos que circulan en torno de la formación desde el punto de vista de los clubes, ya que si bien el paso por las categorías juveniles de un club de fútbol profesional involucra el aprendizaje de aspectos deportivos y técnicos, es recurrente que los entrenadores y coordinadores mencionen que parte de su tarea consiste en “enseñar valores” o “formar personas”.

De manera resumida, cuando en los clubes se hace referencia a los valores que procuran inculcar, se refieren a la adopción de la autodisciplina, que involucra una vida ascética donde todos los esfuerzos deben orientarse a alcanzar el objetivo del profesionalismo, y al respeto a la autoridad, que consiste en adoptar modos de conducirse no violentos y asumir una posición de subalternidad respecto de entrenadores y dirigentes del club. Mediante esos dos ejes se procura que los jugadores se distancien progresivamente de la imagen del varón y jugador barrial, que se asocia a aquel que pasa tiempo en “la esquina” con amigos, sin una vocación por el trabajo, con posibles consumos poco sanos y un potencial vínculo con la delincuencia.

Para promover esa formación en valores, dentro de los clubes se aplica un sistema de premios y castigos mediante el cual se procura comunicarle al jugador que su aspiración de alcanzar el profesionalismo se acerca o aleja en función de su conducta y de su rendimiento. Así, puede haber castigos ante faltas menores -como que pase un entrenamiento haciendo trabajos físicos mientras sus compañeros hacen fútbol- o puede suceder también que a un jugador se lo relegue a entrenar con los suplentes o con el tercer equipo o, incluso, que se lo expulse de un entrenamiento, se lo suspenda por días, semanas o de manera ilimitada si la falta fue grave.

En ese contexto, durante la etnografía se observó que recurrentemente los entrenadores les expresaban a sus jugadores, para marcarles faltas de conducta, que no podían comportarse así porque “todavía no llegaron”, porque “no son nadie”, y que como aún no eran nadie no podían darse ningún “lujo”: ni llegar tarde, ni faltar, ni entrenar a desgano, ni poner mala cara ante una indicación del entrenador, ni demorarse en acatar una instrucción. A modo de ejemplo, en un entrenamiento un preparador físico se dirigió de la siguiente manera a un grupo de jugadores, después de que él hubiera apartado a uno de ellos del entrenamiento y el jugador, de todos modos, siguiera entrenando:

Vos tenés [puesto] el anillo, te lo dije cuatro veces. Te lo sacaste ahora porque te lo dije yo. ¿Encima desafían? Arito, cadenita, pulsera... Son jugadores de fútbol. Si no quieren ser jugadores de fútbol no vengan más. Se los digo todos los días, parece que lo hacen a propósito. O no entienden o no lo quieren entender. Si no lo entienden, bueno, se los hago entender. Pero para desafiar a mí, quédense en sus casas. Porque yo les hago la vida imposible eh, les hago la vida imposible (...) Te digo que no entrenás y seguís entrenando. ¿Pero quien sos? No entrenés más, andate, andate a tu casa.

Nota de campo, 29 de julio de 2019

La investigadora Débora Majul (2017) sostiene que uno de los dispositivos que estructuran el vínculo entre clubes y jugadores es la excepcionalidad, es decir que los clubes les enfatizan que son excepcionales y que, por ese mismo motivo, deben “aguantar” maltratos, frustraciones o distancias afectivas. Sin embargo, observamos aquí también que al mismo tiempo se les expresa que son descartables, y que si no hacen lo que se les indica, detrás hay otro compañero que les va a sacar el puesto. La clave de este procedimiento consiste en escenificar la relación de poder desigual y la subalternidad del jugador, y manifestarles de manera clara que deben conducirse como aspirantes, incluso si su talento les permitiera sentirse en condiciones de competir en el primer equipo.

En el parque, Mariano me dijo que lo iba a “limpiar” a Tadeo, que es “subcapitán” y que no vino el lunes. Dice que ser subcapitán incrementa su responsabilidad, porque tiene que dar el ejemplo y que ellos “tienen que educarlo” porque son formadores y que no pueden dejarlo que falte. Dijo: “Se piensan que tienen privilegios y hay que mostrarle que no tiene el puesto asegurado, que no es más que nadie”.

Nota de campo, 22 de abril de 2019

A un arquero de Sexta categoría que había sido promovido a la categoría Reserva (tres por encima de su edad) se le escuchó decirle a un compañero que el club “era una mierda” y que “cuando él no estuviera lo iban a extrañar”. Eso generó que se lo bajara a su categoría y que fuera citado como suplente. Nuevas quejas del jugador generaron que no fuera citado al partido siguiente, ni siquiera como suplente (en la jerga nativa, que “lo limpiaran”) y eso derivó en su salida del club. Esta posición intermedia, ubicada entre la excepcionalidad (porque han logrado superar provisoriamente las selecciones, entrenan en un club que compite en el torneo oficial y se han diferenciado de la masa de aspirantes) y el hecho de que aún no son profesionales, llevaron a preguntarnos sobre la etapa del futbolista juvenil en términos de liminalidad.

Brevemente, el concepto nace a partir de la teoría de los ritos de pasaje de Arnold Van Gennep, quien se propuso observar cómo los grupos sociales integran a los jóvenes al mundo de los adultos y simbolizan los cambios de etapas. Desde su punto de vista, los ritos establecen una transición entre “estados” o situaciones relativamente estables en una sociedad. Y dichos estados son rangos, estatus, grados legales, profesiones reconocidas por el grupo al que un individuo determinado pertenece. En esta perspectiva el rito de paso implica tres fases: separación, margen y agregación. La primera fase, o fase de separación, supone una conducta simbólica que significa la separación del individuo de su anterior situación dentro de la estructura social; durante el período siguiente, o período liminar, el estado del sujeto del rito (o “pasajero”) es ambiguo, atravesando por un espacio en el que encuentra muy pocos o ningún atributo, tanto del estado pasado como del venidero; en la tercera fase, la agregación, el paso se ha consumado ya (Turner 1980, p. 104).

Turner, quien retomó el trabajo de Van Gennep, añade que el sujeto de los ritos de paso es “invisible” durante el período liminar, ya que no estaría ubicado en ninguna clasificación social estable, sino que se encuentra de paso: “Ya no están clasificados y, al mismo tiempo, todavía no están clasificados”. En consecuencia, cuando aquí nos preguntamos por la liminalidad en el fútbol juvenil estamos poniendo el foco en indagar si la carrera futbolística involucra un proceso de transformación y cuál es la posición de los juveniles en ese recorrido.

Esta pregunta cuenta con un antecedente, que amerita que recuperemos. En un artículo previo escrito en conjunto con Diego Murzi (Czesli y Murzi, 2018), habíamos trabajado sobre el relato identitario del fútbol argentino en Eduardo Archetti, donde hace foco sobre la construcción del futbolista argentino a partir de la figura del “pibe” como posición liminal, imagen que alcanzó su epítome en Maradona, el “pibe de oro”.

Para poder dialogar con su argumento es necesario hacer un breve recorrido histórico. Como recupera Julio Frydenberg (2011) el fútbol llegó a nuestras costas a través de las instituciones asociadas a las oleadas migratorias inglesas. En dichas instituciones -centralmente las escuelas y clubes- los dirigentes británicos apelaban al deporte como un programa modelador de la conducta de los jóvenes varones (Besnier, Brownell y Carter, 2018, p. 69). Sin embargo, con el surgimiento de las primeras ligas y el trazado de las líneas de ferrocarril se produjo un proceso de masificación y popularización que involucró el surgimiento de clubes que ya no pertenecían a la elite inglesa. Este proceso de apropiación por parte de los jóvenes criollos involucró dos significantes nodales, el “potrero” y la noción de “pibe”. La primera hacía referencia a aquellos espacios rurales que habían quedado por fuera de la agricultura y la ganadería que se pusieron en marcha a partir de la conquista de territorios. En el imaginario de la civilización y domesticación de las pampas, dice Archetti (2008) que los potreros quedaron como territorio libre: “La pampa salvaje vive metafóricamente en los potreros”, sostiene (p. 261). El potrero encarnaba, así, un territorio liminal porque era el espacio de los gauchos, figura reacia a quedar sujeta a la producción intensiva y que ya no podía cabalgar en libertad en el resto del territorio.

Este antropólogo, que analizó la construcción de lo nacional a partir de observar zonas aparentemente periféricas de la cultura como las prácticas deportivas, sostuvo que en la construcción identitaria del fútbol argentino se produjo un desplazamiento del potrero como espacio liminal hacia la imagen del “pibe”, “la figura mítica del fútbol argentino”. A este “pibe” lo observó investido de los mismos atributos que el potrero: poderes místicos, locura, igualdad, inversión de la autoridad, creatividad, solidaridad. El “pibe” era, entonces, una figura arquetípica, una

“realización mítica [...] de una cierta idea de fútbol basado en la naturalización de ciertas cualidades. Se transforma en el monumento vivo del pibe” [...] los pibes están obligados a conducirse de determinada manera para reproducir los estereotipos. Maradona, el pibe ideal, no es ni totalmente razonable ni responsable de su vida y no se espera que lo sea. Maradona con sus actos se crea de un modo casi tan potente como cuando es creado por los otros. El rito de institución, como un acto social, es un acto de comunicación (Archetti, 2008, p. 276).

En el artículo escrito con Diego Murzi proponíamos que esa figura irreverente asociada al “pibe” había perdido relevancia en la construcción contemporánea del futbolista, y que el héroe deportivo contemporáneo había devenido la del futbolista trabajador, que hace de su esfuerzo el camino hacia el desarrollo propio y el de su grupo.

Compartíamos que los juveniles se encuentran en una posición liminar, condensada en la categoría “promesa”, y que existen ritos de paso que enfatizan la separación respecto de sus pares no elegidos, como los viajes al exterior a competir en torneos internacionales. No obstante, considerábamos que no hay agregación debido a que un muy bajo porcentaje de jugadores pasa a ser futbolista consagrado y una cifra incluso menor que logra hacer una diferencia económica

o de status. Como consecuencia, estimábamos que la carrera futbolística no podía ser entendida como proceso de transformación en los términos de los ritos de pasaje de descriptos por Van Gennepe y Turner.

En aquel artículo nuestra hipótesis surgía del testimonio de un coordinador de entrenadores que habíamos relevado durante una experiencia etnográfica en Pumas de México (Czesli, 2016). Este coordinador se mostraba preocupado por la merma de rendimiento de un grupo de juveniles que habían firmado su primer contrato profesional, la atribuía a que haber firmado les había generado la sensación del “haber llegado” y, como consecuencia, generó que se hubieran relajado. Frente a esa situación, proponía demostrarles que aún no eran profesionales porque no habían alcanzado cincuenta partidos en Primera ni tenían el bolsillo lleno de dinero.

...Entonces ahí el chavo empieza a perderse, el chavo empieza a sentirse jugador de Primera División. [Pero] El chavo no es jugador de Primera, jugador de Primera es el que tiene cincuenta, cien partidos en Primera y tiene pinche bolsa ya con lanita [léase: y tiene el bolsillo abultado de dinero].

Nota de campo, 7 de agosto de 2015

Pasados los años, y con un mayor volumen de material etnográfico, encuentro diferencias respecto de esa posición, de modo que a continuación quisiera presentar nuevas reflexiones y datos contruidos para pensar los modos en los que el paso por las canteras afecta el devenir de los futbolistas juveniles.

3. Las redes vinculares como pasaje

Al menos tres trabajos analizaron la carrera deportiva a partir del modelo de Van Gennepe. La antropóloga Nemesia Hijós menciona que correr una maratón implica para los runners una transformación que establece un quiebre en sus biografías:

“Ya nada es como antes, ahora todo es distinto”, dicen algunos de mis interlocutores. “Cuando corrí una maratón me di cuenta de todo lo que era capaz”, alegan, tomando los 42 kilómetros como una experiencia vital: “Si corrí una maratón, puedo con esto” (...). Ahora son “mejores personas”, más fuertes y comprometidas; han demostrado (y se han demostrado) que son capaces, a través del esfuerzo, de levantarse temprano los días de fondos largos, entrenar bajo lluvia o con más de 35° C, ser responsables con su cuidado personal...” (Hijós, 2021, p. 177).

En paralelo, la investigación de Alejandro Rodríguez (2016) sobre las personas que entrenan en gimnasios el foco se ubica en el proceso de construcción de la subjetividad personal: “Las personas que llevan a cabo una carrera de entrenamiento de largo plazo en el gimnasio no parecen estar sólo capitalizando más salud, sino también moldeando su cuerpo y, a través suyo, también su persona. Se trata de un largo proceso de subjetivación que se realiza a partir de pero también en el cuerpo”, afirma (p. 19). Mediante este trabajo personal, el autor describe que “los entrenados” comienzan a ordenar todos los hábitos diarios, de modo de alinear toda la vida en torno de “una misma idea de persona”. Una posición equivalente podemos encontrar en el trabajo de Loïc Wacquant sobre los boxeadores del gueto de Chicago:

Un boxeador se hace un hombre más grande cuando renuncia a las cosas que el resto de los mortales no pueden dejar (...) Se ha purificado y santificado precisamente por separarse de las cosas bajas y triviales que antes gravaban su naturaleza. Sacrificándose ha engendrado un nuevo ser a partir del anterior (Wacquant, 2006, p.149).

Un tercer estudio que propone una lectura similar – aunque sin hacerlo de manera explícita desde la teoría de Van Gennep – es el de Norma Beatriz Rodríguez sobre runners (2018). Esta autora propone que mediante los esfuerzos físicos elevados y el poner el cuerpo a prueba estos deportistas se autorreconocen y son percibidos como corredores. En este contexto, sostiene que es el dolor corporal el signo que denota los esfuerzos realizado y aquello que permite la “conversión” que legitima la nueva posición ante los pares.

Otro conjunto de trabajos que abordaron procesos formativos son las investigaciones en torno de la construcción de los sujetos policiales o militares, como los de Galvani y Garriga Zucal (2015), Badaró (2009) o Sirimarco (2009). Estos textos poseen como denominador común que observan el pasaje desde el sujeto civil al colegiado y expresan que para que dicho proceso se produzca los sujetos llevan a cabo una relectura sobre sus propias vidas civiles.

Nuestra tesis es que en la representación de un yo, los policías desvalorizan el pasado y las relaciones no laborales para incluirse dentro de esta carrera laboral moral. El inicio de la formación habilita la representación de un yo, meritorio de estima, que empieza a diferenciarse de la otredad [el sujeto civil] y que ha superado los primeros pasos de la trayectoria laboral. (...) Se construye una imagen orientada hacia el futuro que moldea el pasado en relación con esa proyección. (...) Para ser policías deben dejar de ser lo que eran antes y es por ello que se presentan como nuevos sujetos. De allí que el tránsito por las escuelas de formación deba ser presentado como un quiebre existencial (Galvani y Garriga Zucal, 2015, p. 27 y 28).

De manera similar a la propuesta de Norma Rodríguez, Badaró (2009) pone el foco en el sacrificio, al que valora como categoría moral que “concibe al sufrimiento como una pedagogía, como un instrumento fundamental para crear y demostrar la identificación individual con el grupo” (p. 136). En la misma tónica, Galvani y Garriga Zucal añaden que

La carrera laboral moral se basa en el desarrollo de una reputación, concretada mediante la superación con éxito de una serie de pruebas. El sacrificio del aislamiento y de los sufrimientos asociados al ingreso en la Escuela es la primera de estas pruebas. Es el inicio de una trayectoria subjetiva que puede valorar desde estas primeras experiencias a los otros. El sacrificio es, al mismo tiempo, testimonio de una subjetividad y moneda de comparación para con la alteridad (Galvani y Garriga Zucal, 2015, p. 30).

Sobre la trayectoria de los cadetes de la Policía Federal Argentina, estos autores observan que las estrategias institucionales procuran cambiar la subjetividad para construir un homogéneo espíritu de cuerpo, incluso aunque los actores nunca sean reductibles a su ser profesional (ídem).

Estos análisis muestran recorridos donde los agentes experimentan una transformación que marca un antes y un después de sus vidas¹, y que ese quiebre se pone de manifiesto en una oposición respecto de una etapa previa de sí mismos: diferentes de antes de correr la maratón, de

¹ “El ser policía se revela, entonces, como una característica identitaria: es el *self* que estructura su vida completa. Es a partir de su *estado policial* que ellos elaboran su ser en el mundo” (Sirimarco, 2009, p. 31).

ordenar la vida en torno del cuerpo cultivado o de asumir una vida ordenada ligada a las instituciones policiales o militares. En algunos casos, además, esta transformación experimenta cambios en los modos en que son percibidos por su entorno: cambian las relaciones sociales, son respetados, incrementan sus responsabilidades.

¿Hasta qué punto es posible pensar el camino de los futbolistas desde esta perspectiva? A diferencia de las experiencias citadas, no resulta sencillo sostener que en los futbolistas se produce un quiebre en sus vidas, porque estos se dedican al fútbol desde la primera infancia y porque en sus relatos no dicen experimentar un cambio marcado a partir de la formación. Los jugadores no expresan su paso por el fútbol como un espacio transformador.

Es recurrente que aparezcan menciones ligadas a la autosuperación, tanto como necesidad de “enfocarse” cuando al jugador “no le salen la cosas”, cuando perciben que al ingresar al campo de juego no rinden como creen que pueden, si se sienten nerviosos y consideran que tienen que hacer cambios para poder mejorar; y cuando afirman que “ahora sí” están enfocados y están haciendo todo lo necesario para ser futbolistas. Pero no es lo mismo sostenerlo en una entrevista -donde intuyen que deben mostrarse profesionales- que haber incorporado los hábitos propios del deportista profesional. Tampoco significa, en caso de haberlos adoptado, que su entorno los observe transformados y los ubique en una posición distinta (porque la posición no depende sólo de la autopercepción sino de cómo se es percibido por los demás). En consecuencia, amerita preguntarse: si el proceso formativo no genera un cambio como lo veíamos en los corredores, los culturistas del gimnasio o los militares, ¿hay pasaje? Creo, de todos modos, que sí, a través de las dos hipótesis que se describen a continuación.

La primera consiste en que lo que genera la agregación no es el proceso formativo sino el éxito deportivo, una agregación que es escalonada en función de qué tan alto se llegue en la carrera. Si bien no se ha trabajado con ex jugadores profesionales para analizar cómo se transformó su modo de relacionarse, es dable pensar que si se alcanzó el profesionalismo en un equipo del ascenso pero no logró estabilizarse ni “hacer carrera” habrá un reconocimiento familiar y de otros varones del barrio con los que el futbolista juegue.

Será distinto, en tanto, el caso de un jugador que haya logrado ser profesional durante un tiempo más extendido (incluso si no logró hacer diferencia económica) porque a lo largo del recorrido tuvo más vínculos con otros profesionales. Así, podrá narrar anécdotas de vestuario o episodios compartidos con futbolistas reconocidos, tendrá mayor reconocimiento de sus pares y contará con acceso a contactos profesionales que le permitirán intentar una carrera como entrenador en juveniles o dentro del cuerpo técnico de un colega. Si el jugador lograra además hacer diferencia económica y un nombre público, entonces el reconocimiento será mayor, recibirá propuestas comerciales, lo invitarán a eventos de los clubes por los que pasó, dará testimonio de su experiencia y su propia carrera legitimará su conocimiento sobre el fútbol.

Estos éxitos deportivos son, en buena parte, efecto del proceso formativo. Sin embargo, no se puede decir lo mismo a la inversa, es decir que como no todo jugador formado logra el pasaje a un nuevo estado, no es posible sostener que la agregación depende de la formación. Lo que aquí se propone, entonces, es que la transformación no está dada por haberse formado de acuerdo con los preceptos de la institución sino por haber superado los múltiples procesos de selección que involucra la carrera del futbolista, más allá de los capitales que se hayan puesto en juego para alcanzarlo.

Cuando el éxito deportivo se produce el jugador adquiere capital económico y social, y los relatos sobre el modo en que construyó su carrera se sostienen sobre el discurso institucional –es decir, la adopción de la autodisciplina y los hábitos del deportista profesional, y el respeto a las autoridades de los clubes. A partir de ahí los aspirantes se encabalgan para construir su propio camino, pero hasta tanto no alcancen el éxito deportivo, los jugadores conservan su estado liminal y están imposibilitados de mostrarse “transformados”: aún “no son nadie” y, si se posicionaran en el lugar de los profesionales, rápidamente los bajarían de categoría y se los harían saber. La segunda hipótesis es complementaria a la primera y surge a partir de un error cometido durante el trabajo de campo. A lo largo de la Copa América que se disputó en junio de 2021 surgió un audio “viral” de un aficionado uruguayo enojado por el bajo rendimiento de su selección, y que lo atribuía a la estética y los cuidados de los jugadores actuales, por oposición a una estética menos cuidada de jugadores de décadas previas.

“...están cobrando MILLONES, nosotros íbamos con las medias agujereadas al Scorpion. MILLONES, con las vendas Nike procircuit, los zapatitos pro Adidas esteimielyen, el shortcito Puma clima estein, el calzoncillo Calvin Klein dual sim, la camiseta Puma dry fit y la camiseta antitranspiración clearclean, los champú new age y los perfumes de Avón, manga de muertos. (...) ¡FÚBOL! ¡ESTO ES FÚBOOOOOL! ¡PATEAR! ¡CONTRAGOLPEEEEE! YO tendría que estar ahí en el medio de la cancha. Pero YO, Torreira y Canobbio. CONTRAGOLPEEEEE, SEGUNDA PELOTAAAA, gritando SEGUNDA PELOTAAAA. Eso es lo que precisa Uruguay, no el cortecito con gel, el pelito... [Se necesita] MELENA, MELENA como Canobbio, MELENA como en los ochenta, shorcito y remera adentro, y DALE PATA NOMAAAA, URUGUAY NOMÁAA. MELENA BARBA, BARBA, MELENA, INTIMIDAR AL CONTRARIO!!

Social Media Group, 21 de junio de 2021

Por el modo exagerado de expresarse, porque consideré que no podía ser tomado en serio sino que podía resultar gracioso, les propuse a dos entrenadores compartírselo a los jugadores. Pero a ninguno de los dos les cayó bien la propuesta (y mucho menos, gracioso el audio). Uno de las respuestas fue la siguiente:

No lo pude escuchar, creo que llegué a menos del minuto. La verdad es que me parece una falta de respeto al jugador profesional. Te soy sincero. Por ahí al terminar dice otra cosa, pero estar planteando esas cosas y que él en el Escorpio o algo así hacía mejor las cosas, no me parece, no tiene ningún sentido. (...) Siempre lo que es una broma, en ese momento habla de la selección uruguaya, que no viene bien, y siempre esas chanzas están buenas. El tema es que cuando uno vive de esto y trabaja de esto ya lo mira de otra manera.

Luciano, DT, nota de campo, 2021

El testimonio marca una diferencia entre la posición del hincha, del fanático, el no iniciado, y la del jugador o entrenador que hace del fútbol un espacio de táctica y estrategia, de planificación, de desarrollo. La lectura que aquí se propone es que el proceso de transformación puede no generar un cambio en la capacidad económica, ni en la posición social que ocupan los jugadores ni una separación clara del varón barrial, pero sí en el vínculo que establecen con la práctica y desde la cual se posicionan para hablar de ella con su entorno, y que ese modo de hablar asociado a una posición de saber se legitima sobre el conocimiento que surge de haber hecho el recorrido por el fútbol.

En su estudio sobre la influencia del entorno ciudadano en la formación de basquetbolistas, Scott Brooks propone que

Las conexiones personales y las relaciones duraderas desarrolladas a través del básquet crean fuertes lazos que no se rompen fácilmente y que han sido útiles para viejos y jóvenes afroamericanos que navegan el mundo del básquet en Filadelfia y la ciudad en su conjunto. Al mismo tiempo, las redes, oportunidades y recursos desarrollados a través de generaciones a mediante las conexiones personales les han dado a estos hombres afroamericanos la posibilidad de una identidad alternativa -volverse basquetbolistas (Brooks, 2011, p. 534, traducción propia).

Las dos hipótesis previas se vinculan con lo que propone Brooks. El proceso formativo produce una transformación no tanto por un cambio en el status social que exprese una diferencia en los términos que planteaban Hijós o Rodríguez (la percepción propia de un antes y un después) sino en la ampliación de redes sociales y en el reconocimiento dentro del propio campo deportivo, por los pares que también son o fueron aspirantes, de los capitales que implica la formación. En este punto sí hay una similitud con lo que plantea Norma Beatriz Rodríguez o los estudios sobre formación militar citados: ellos observan que los sacrificios del deportista, o haberse alejado de los afectos, haber adoptado privaciones producto de la carrera militar y la disposición horaria total para con estas instituciones generan una distinción moral respecto de la sociedad civil.

Si bien no se encuentra entre los futbolistas la idea que habían propuesto Garriga Zucal y Galvani sobre la conformación de un cuerpo homogéneo, sí es posible observar -como propone Brooks- que los vínculos entre jugadores que se desarrollan en juveniles se asemejan a un espíritu corporativo. Se trata de una camaradería en la que los propios pares reconocen mutuamente sus capacidades deportivas, sus esfuerzos y sacrificios, fraternidad que posibilita la ampliación de redes sociales, una identidad asociada a haber demostrado corporalmente la adopción del esfuerzo cotidiano en pos de alcanzar un objetivo y, a partir de ahí, una apertura a oportunidades laborales a las que de otro modo no accederían. Por ejemplo, varios aspirantes, incluso menores de 18 años, entrenaban a niños en clubes de baby fútbol; otro comenzó una carrera como periodista deportivo enfocado en el fútbol; un tercero, guardameta, trabajaba como entrenador de arqueros. Todos esos trabajos surgieron indudablemente de las carreras deportivas que desarrollaron como juveniles y de los contactos que supieron poner en juego durante dicho período.

Esto muestra que aún si no logran conseguir el objetivo de llegar a Primera, el proceso posibilita una distinción progresiva que los distancia de los no futbolistas, y que esos sacrificios cotidianos son el sustento que permite continuar en carrera y ser respetados por sus pares. Por este motivo, en las arengas previas al partido, es frecuente que los capitanes de equipo motiven recordándoles a sus compañeros los esfuerzos realizados durante la semana, la centralidad de sus familias para que ellos pudieran jugar y la importancia de retornarles los esfuerzos realizados. Son esos sacrificios no sólo los que dan sentido al trabajo diario sino también los que posibilitan la construcción de una camaradería que se sostiene sobre el esfuerzo físico y las postergaciones que realizan en pos de un objetivo deseado.

4. Conclusiones

A lo largo de este artículo abordamos el camino de los futbolistas juveniles a través de la posición intermedia en la que se encuentran. Se trata de una pregunta que permite poner en escena cómo se produce el proceso de movilidad durante la carrera deportiva, las dinámicas de poder que se establecen al interior de los clubes y las relaciones de camaradería que se construyen entre los aspirantes.

En ese sentido, en este trabajo se propone una mirada distanciada de la que habíamos escrito con Diego Murzi en 2018. Si en ese momento considerábamos que no podía sostenerse que hubiera agregación porque la gran mayoría de los aspirantes no lograba una nueva posición una vez finalizadas sus carreras, aquí se propone que a lo largo del recorrido por el fútbol se produce una progresiva y escalonada transformación de la identidad asociada a las redes vinculares que se desarrollan y a partir de demostrar en el campo de juego dos capitales: el deportivo, asociado a la capacidad de rendir futbolísticamente, y el sacrificio, que se relaciona con la exposición del esfuerzo cotidiano y la autodisciplina.

Como consecuencia, no son únicamente los ingresos monetarios ni los ritos de iniciación (como pasar las pruebas de reclutamiento, entrenar con la Primera, conseguir un representante o viajar a competir en torneos juveniles en el exterior) los hitos que marcan los cambios de etapa. Es posible pensar un proceso de agregación a partir del desarrollo conjunto en el que los pares comprueban mutuamente sus capitales deportivos y corporales, y que es ese reconocimiento el que genera nuevas oportunidades tanto para dar continuidad a las carreras deportivas (ya que un juvenil que va a entrenar a otro club es una puerta de entrada para otros que hayan quedado libres) como para abrir nuevas carreras laborales en caso de que no lleguen.

Finalmente, no importa tanto lo que el jugador diga de sí mismo en términos de si está enfocado o no, sino que es en el cuerpo y con el cuerpo que se muestra el capital deportivo y la adopción del ascetismo. En consecuencia, en el diálogo con el trabajo de Eduardo Archetti es posible seguir sosteniendo, como planteamos con Diego Murzi (2018) que el héroe futbolístico contemporáneo es aquel que con su esfuerzo físico, su disciplina cotidiana y sin salir de una posición subordinada respecto de los clubes logra separarse de su posición de origen y adquirir una nueva identidad. Esta estará legitimada, por el rendimiento deportivo, por sus pares futbolistas y por su entorno - en ese orden jerárquico. Es así, también, que la carrera deportiva les permite diferenciarse del hincha común o del aficionado y adquirir un posicionamiento respecto del fútbol a partir de la experiencia física.

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Form of transcendence in sports. Suggestion from Hollywood

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Abstract

This paper examines how lifestyle sport practitioners experience forms of transcendence, altered perception, and connection with nature, and considers whether these experiences can be meaningfully interpreted through concepts associated with shamanic practice. Drawing on Roger Caillois' taxonomy, it explores how elements of ritual, ecstasy, and symbolic imagination appear within contemporary sporting contexts.

The first section reviews classical scholarship and journalistic sources to identify experiential and symbolic parallels between sport and shamanism, with particular attention to fandom, practices oriented toward the pursuit of vertigo, and the spiritualised imagery of some lifestyle and extreme sports.

The second part presents an exploratory quantitative study administered to participants of a master's program in shamanic studies. The survey investigates perceptions of overlap between shamanic experience and sporting activity, especially regarding transcendence, flow-like states, inner transformation, and embodied engagement with natural environments.

The aim of the paper is to contribute to lifestyle sport studies by proposing a new line of inquiry into how transcendence, ritualisation, and ecological attunement shape contemporary sports practices, particularly in extreme or highly symbolised disciplines.

Keywords: Social Transformation, Shamanism, Californian sports, *Ilinx*, Extreme sports.

1. Introduction

This paper examines whether the experiential intensity of extreme sports – including both the preparations that precede them and the formation of communities confronting high-stakes or potentially fatal challenges – can be meaningfully integrated into broader sociological discussions on contemporary sport.

The starting point is the observation that sport spectatorship and participation, from stadium crowds celebrating their idols to small communities revolving around local rituals of belonging, frequently mobilise symbolic structures resembling those found in ritualised and ecstatic

practices. Our initial hypothesis is that certain sporting experiences – whether embodied in the iconic figure of the exceptional athlete, or in the solitary confrontation with natural elements in solo sailing, freediving, mountaineering, or extreme trekking – may evoke experiential patterns similar to those that anthropology has historically linked to shamanism. These include states of intensified awareness, the pursuit of liminal thresholds, and attempts to attune oneself to forces perceived as greater than the individual.

A preliminary review of the literature revealed that explicit discussions linking sport to shamanic logics are scarce and usually tied to specific contexts such as therapeutic activities, ageing populations, or sport practices in natural settings. This scarcity of systematic treatment points to the value of examining more closely how transcendence, nature-connection, and altered states of perception – key topics in lifestyle sports research – intersect with anthropological interpretations of shamanism. In this perspective, shamanism is not approached as a descriptive or explanatory model to be directly applied to sport practices, but rather as an interpretative lens that allows recurrent experiential, symbolic, and relational dimensions to be analytically foregrounded.

To explore this initial intuition, we combined a qualitative review of existing scholarship and popular discourse with an exploratory quantitative test conducted among participants of two consecutive cohorts of a master's program on shamanic studies. The questionnaire aimed to assess whether individuals with sustained familiarity with shamanic concepts perceived experiential overlaps between shamanic practice and their sporting activities, particularly in terms of transcendence, flow-like states, and engagement with natural environments.

The different empirical and cultural references discussed in the article are therefore not treated as directly comparable cases, but as heterogeneous manifestations through which similar experiential logics and symbolic patterns can be observed.

The paper therefore develops along four axes: a contextual overview of sport and shamanism and their potential functional analogies; an examination of practices where altered perception and embodied knowledge play central roles; an exploration of fandom and communal identification as forms of contemporary tribalism; and an analysis of specific sporting disciplines with shamanic echoes. A brief case study of *Point Break*, a questionnaire-based quantitative section, and a concluding discussion complete the work. Through this structure, we investigate how lifestyle sports may enable experiences of transcendence and embodied transformation that can be meaningfully interpreted through concepts associated with shamanic traditions.

2. In society

2.1 *Le jeu et l'homme*

According to the French sociologist Roger Caillois (1991), who in 1958 published *Les jeux et les hommes*, play is conceived as the counterpoint to work – time lost versus time well spent. It is an activity that produces nothing (at most it displaces wealth, but does not create it) and is characterised by a relative suspension of constraints and consequences in everyday life. A game is defined by a set of rules that all participants must follow; it is not the cheater who annihilates the game, but rather the one who denies its rules altogether.

Play makes sense when players respect the rules while simultaneously testing their limits. It is not only the specific activity that defines play, but also a set of tools, symbols, and shared meanings that characterise it. The impulses underlying games are usually divided into two antagonistic poles; otherwise, their classification would be meaningless. *Paidia* refers to a principle of amusement that manifests itself through spontaneity and uncontrolled turbulence, whereas *ludus* designates the need to discipline *paidia* through precise rules and structures.

Caillois established a taxonomy of play forms. First, he identified *Agôn*, the principle of competition. Second, he described *Alea*, the principle of chance. Third, he outlined *Mimicry*, the principle of simulation and role-play. Finally, he defined *Ilinx* as the pursuit of vertigo and perceptual destabilisation.

Caillois' work is eclectic, and a comprehensive discussion of his framework would exceed the scope of this article. For the purposes of the present analysis, attention is therefore focused on the concept of *ilinx*. The pursuit of dizziness consists of «an attempt to destroy the stability of perception for a moment and to inflict a kind of sensual panic on an otherwise lucid mind» (ibid.: 23). Caillois here refers to individuals fascinated by physical and psychological disorientation. While in earlier historical contexts *ilinx* (from the Greek term for whirlpool) was associated with turbulent ritual involvements and even trance states, in modern societies it increasingly designates the controlled pursuit of vertigo, often linked to mechanised attractions and, more broadly, to sport practices seeking intense sensory experiences.

Within this framework, the relationships between society and sport (Dunning, 1999), as well as between shamanism and society (Eliade, 1964), can be read in parallel, without implying any direct equivalence. On the one hand, contemporary forms of communication frequently promote the transcendence of sporting activity (Murphy & White, 2011); on the other hand, such representations contribute to the construction of a mediated reality in which Baudrillard's concept of simulacrum becomes useful for describing the pursuit of transcendence through performative and highly mediated sport practices.

Our interest, then, lies in outlining possible intersections between these different domains. Around teams – and not only sports teams – many communities reinforce their sense of identity and belonging through forms of altered, albeit often minimal, states of consciousness associated with physical vertigo and emotional intensity (Catone, 2018). These elements help explain why transcendence, altered states of perception, and the pursuit of vertigo occupy a central position in lifestyle sports and are therefore relevant to the research question addressed in this article.

2.2 People like bridges

This search of increased emotional or perceptual intensity is not restricted to the best-performing teams. This covers a wide spectrum of contexts – from small-town football clubs, with supporters' collectives, local *palios* (e.g., Siena, which can be represented through animal effigies) and to large teams in which fans can be mobilised on an emotional level (Taylor & Acic, 2021). Caillois' work is useful here again when he alludes to the mask being an artefact which results in trance – a mood of a state of partial forgetting of the ordinary self that impacts both the mask-wearing individual and the collective that is doing the performing for itself. Through these meanings, the mask functions not only as a social bond, but as a medium of symbolic mediation;

sociologically, it is seen as a form of local social capital. These processes are based on classical group psychology and promote identitarian dynamics that create in-group/out-group divisions and help in the development of common meanings and collective dispositions (Tajfel & Turner, 2004; Cigliuti, 2018). Such patterns are ambivalent in their effects, as belonging mechanisms could simultaneously promote group bonding and generate exclusionary or boundary-drawing behaviors towards others. In terms of the passing down of values and norms, a variety of individual (goal-target oriented) and group practices are significant (Shields & Bredemeier, 2011). Discipline, consistency, acceptance of rules and opponents, loyalty and perceived fair play, are heavily held in common amongst these in the promotion of sport nowadays (Merico, Romeo & Tirino, 2022). This makes the message of ‘playing’ as a matter of rules and norms difficult to achieve. Sport has historically performed a role, not only as symbol but as case study of socialisation (Mead, 2009) and also, in various contexts, as a vehicle for social demands and claims for inclusion (Spaaij, 2009). Media visibility, at the same time, has rendered sport a privileged platform – the one sometimes deliberately cultivated, as in something commonly labelled as “sportswashing” – for illuminating injustices and abuse of power that propagate via socio-political and economic inequality (Boykoff, 2016; Hartmann, 2022). In this way, sport can act both as a vehicle for participation and integration to minoritarian or oppressed communities, and as a space in which exclusionary dynamics, struggles, and symbolic violence are replicable. This ambivalence ultimately complicates any objective reading of sport as an intrinsically inclusive practice, yet simultaneously reaffirms its crucial educational function in the socialisation of values and principles associated with equality, social justice and well-being, as underpinned by a number of the 2030 Agenda objectives¹. At this point, a reasonable reader might wonder how shamanism is a part of this debate. According to Singh (2017), shamanism includes practices of specialized spirit world specialists (shamans or samans) who communicate with the spirit world through altered mental states, including trance, for healing, divination, or guidance purposes. However, when viewed through its cultural context and unlike the more recent embedding of modern sport in institutional practice (Bausinger, 2009), shamanism has been analysed as having both individual and communal roles (Krippner, 2000; Eichberg, 2011), in society. References to shamanism in this article do not in and of themselves represent a direct identification between “shamanic” figures and modern athletes or fans. Instead, shamanism is instrumentalized as a comparative and interpretative approach to some aspect of transformation, identification and symbolic mediation. In different ethnographic settings, shamanic practices have provided ways for individuals to negotiate sociocultural problems and access socially acceptable identities. For example, in Siberut in the Mentawai Islands, individuals who become shamans later in life accept an altered status as healers or guardians of a group’s collective knowledge (Eichberg, 2011). Typically, such characters are not isolated from their respective communities but part of them and their activities are well socially accepted as significant gifts to the common life. Similar symbolic recognition dynamics are witnessed in sport but to a much greater extent. For instance, in sumo wrestling the athlete’s bodily attributes – that do not conform to prevailing aesthetic norms in Japanese society – are redefined in the competitive system and athletes are afforded a prestigious ceremonial status and social respect, sometimes described in para-religious ways

¹ <https://unric.org/it/agenda-2030/>

(ibid.). Similarly, it is through the emphasis on the connection between man and nature (common in shamanic traditions; Townsend, 1997; Harvey & Wallis, 2010) that the theme of environmental immersion and embodied attunement to a natural setting, notably in a lifestyle and outdoor sport culture, is reiterated in the practice of sports. Empirical accounts also provide evidence of the persistence of ritualised and symbolic imaginaries in organised sport. In 2002, the Confederation of African Football instituted regulations against witchcraft following accusations that teams had resorted to ritual specialists before the fixtures (Sadhu, 2022; Stan Chu Ilo, 2025). Analogous dynamics have been similarly described in some contexts – for example an association with a shaman (by the Peruvian club *Binacional*); group action of a group of Andean ritual specialists (Tayta Inti and Pachamama) before Peru is to compete in the World Cup against Australia (Sadhu, 2022). Although such events are often depicted in media texts as exotic or folkloric, the evidence suggests a continuing prevalence of ritual paradigms, which tie meaning, protection, or favors to sporting performance. These practices are in line with Nemeroff and Rozin’s (2000) notion of “sympathetic magic”, the idea that objects and people can imbue symbolic qualities or energies by means of being in contact, or through similarities or connections². This is an approach also seen in individual sports-specific cases such as tennis, where Novak Djokovic openly mentioned the presence of a spiritual leader-trainer (Pepe Imaz) through the guru of Spain and its self-described shaman as part of his larger search for himself.

In those diverse instances it is not the presence of these symbolical or ritualist resources that differs, it is the extent of cultural legitimacy associated with such resources and the manner in which these are openly recognised, mediated and commodified, given in the contemporary sporting context.

3. Embodied techniques, altered states, and ritual imaginaries

Following the concise discussion of play, vertigo, and symbolic mediation introduced through Caillois and developed in the supra paragraph, could be useful to foreground the collective dimension that emerges from these experiential dynamics. The pursuit of perceptual intensity and emotional arousal in sport does not remain confined to the individual body; rather, it is socially organised, culturally mediated, and collectively recognised. While the historical and cultural roots of modern sport as well as shamanism may differ, some partial and practical similarities of the two can be observed. Sport-related achievement often depends upon the discipline of practice over years and the systematic development of physical and technical skills (Stafford, 2011). Shamanic practices are also characterized by prolonged apprenticeship, where ritual learning and transformation, in conjunction with embodied training, are also highly common (Singh, 2017). Moreover, many sports require continuous internal effort on the part of athletes and sports performers to concentrate, meditate, and visualise (Orlick, 1986) in order to achieve the same level of performance (e.g., target shooting, fencing, martial arts, and combat sports). They require anticipatory mental scenarios along with a more present sensibility that directs the athlete at nuanced corporeal and situational clues. Fighting athletes often refer to this condition as an acute perception of the proper time, or spatial position that is necessary to

² Cited in Taylor&Acic, 2021, p. 575.

perform an effective movement. This kind of awareness is associated with being in tune with one's own body, sensations, emotions and fears, as well as those of the opponent. Athletes may experience an awareness of the optimal moment for positive movement, sensing subtle signals of bodily tension and breathing rhythm (O'Shaughnessy, 1995). By using focus, repetition, and routines of preparedness – often by superstitious and ritualised actions on the part of the individual (or in some cases the supporters) – sport performance can lead to altered states of experience. In sport psychology, they are most commonly defined as sensations of 'flow' or being 'in the zone,' with deep participation in the activity and the temporary abating of the distractions, physical, psychological, or otherwise (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Such events are not to be equated with religious trance, but it is the same reconfigured attention, perception, and perception of time and space. In shamanic settings, trance states, often realized in bodily practices, can be considered to be a means of attaining alternative forms of perception and knowledge, including communication (Eliade, 1964). Rather than considering these states as having to be one and the same, the focus of this analysis is to imagine them as structurally similar experiences, through the means of embodied technique of sensation, perception, and self-awareness in an unspoken form. Finally, sport and shamanic practices can be seen, not only in terms of the individual elements of transformation they provide – but equally as a means for transformation in different directions— but can be seen as a kind of transformative tool. Within sport, these transformations are typically prioritised for performance enhancement, competitive excellence, or individual and collective wellbeing (Merico et al., 2022). In shamanism, these concerns relate to more general forms of knowledge, balance and mediation between human and non-human aspects of perception (Larsen, 1998). These experiential dimensions – attention, embodiment, and trance-like concentration – represent domains with potential points of convergence of terms that are specific to shamanism with some form of lifestyle sport practice, but they do not imply a direct equivalent or continuity of causality.

4. From embodied experience to collective belonging

The experience of the modern fan is often understood as a reaction to the transition from community-based social structures to complex, differentiated societies — a phenomenon that has been thoroughly explored in classical sociology (Harris, 2001). This change has been considered a progression from mechanical integration to organic forms of social cohesion (Durkheim, 2007), along with the emergence of individualism (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2020), the erosion of normative ties that traditionally support communal life and the emergence of anomie (Durkheim, 1993). These dynamics are associated with the rational bureaucratisation of organisations (Weber, 1978) and the technologization of social existence (Ellul, 1964), as well as the gradual decay – and replacement – of magical-religious worldviews for scientific and technical rationalities, as well as the so-called “iron cage” of modernity (Weber, 2001) and the weakening of so-called “grand narratives” (Lyotard, 1979). In this respect, sports fandom has been read in

this context by some as contemporary tribalism³ (Maffesoli, 1996) and not as a return to pre-modern social structures, but as a metaphor for expressions of a new form of social life in which there is emotional intensity, collective symbols and group identification. From that perspective, some might interpret fandom as a modern belonging mode that can re-awaken affective connections and social engagement; such that it has also received attention in the media and communication literature (Dionísio, Leal, & Moutinho, 2008). The tribal experience of fans is often characterised by strong emotional involvement and a sense of solidarity that can temporarily suspend perceived social differences related to class, age, gender, or ethnicity (Taylor & Acic, 2021). At the same time, types of belonging are intrinsically ambivalent. In addition to unity and emotional togetherness, fandom also provides for exclusionary identities, conflict and symbolic and bodily violence, and the practices of discrimination and the formulation of boundaries (Serazio, 2013). These tensions emphasize not merely the necessity to tackle “tribalism” as a stable or normative status but as a dynamic and contested phenomenon. The same can be said for some extreme sports, which have been occasionally read through the dual interpretive framework of modern tribalism and shamanism (Thomassen & Balle, 2012). In ethnographic settings, shamanic practices included the ritualised and intense tests of endurance, courageousness, and bodily control (Eliade, 1964). Extreme sports can also be considered as ‘interstices’ through which participants expose themselves to potentially frightening and uncertain situations, heightening their sensory sensitivity and facilitating bonds within communities and between individuals (Van Gennep, 1981; Brymer & Schweitzer, 2013). While these practices should not be confused, they can be analysed as framing risk, stress, and cognitive changes as significant experiential resources (Lyng, 2004). Altered perception and acute experiential states have also been utilised in communication and branding strategies in modern sporting contexts. In this sense, the symbolic aspects of sport can be intentionally exaggerated and framed via marketing and PR practices to encourage identification with teams, events or brands. As a distinctive management function, public relations involve establishing and maintaining communication, understanding, and cooperation between organisations and their publics. This facilitates organisational adaptation to social changes through research-based, ethically oriented communication strategies (Heath & Vasquez, 2001). A common case within Italian context is Ducati’s communications restructuring of the late 1990s and early 2000s, which utilised Maffesoli’s concept of modern tribalism, explicitly. Within this narrative framework, customers, enthusiasts, and employees were figuratively reconfigured as belonging to a “tribe”, the brand was depicted as a totem, and marketing activities were ritualised through events, spaces, and shared practices. Although this model was intended to be understood as a communicative or symbolic formation rather than a sociological description, it resulted in significant organisational and commercial outcomes, including greater attendance at brand-related events, increased use of corporate spaces and substantial growth in sales and profitability (Vecchiato, 2008).

³ In Michel Maffesoli’s conception, tribalism (or neo-tribalism, *néo-tribalisme*) refers to a postmodern social phenomenon where the rigid, rationalized structures of modern society (class, nation, institution) are replaced by fluid, emotional, and small-group affiliations. He argues that while modernity was characterized by individualism and large-scale, rational organization, postmodernity is defined by a return to intense, localized, and affective (emotional) social bonds. Please note that in this work, the term *tribalism* is used exclusively in the sense represented by the French sociologist and borrowed by other scholars following the same line of interpretation.

5. From shamanism to sports

The Olympic Games are probably the most emblematic embodiment of Pierre de Coubertin's view of sport. They serve as a symbolic model that traces back to the ancient Greek Olympics, where athletic competitions were infused with ritual practices in honour of Zeus (Kyle, 2014). Similarly, many traditional sports in North America were developed in a ceremonial context and were often tied to dance, prayer and ritual performance (Culin, 1907). Other sport traditions have been temporally related with ritual and shamanic imaginaries as well. Mongolian wrestling, for example, has been tied to shamanic practices grounded within wider cosmological systems (Humphrey & Sneath, 1999). Aspects of martial arts have also been explored through the lens of the spiritual and ritual traditions in which they have been performed, but such connections should be understood within the cultural, historical, and philosophical framework from which they arose. Chinese *kung fu* and *tai chi* are closely related to Taoist philosophy (Krist, 2019); Japanese martial arts have appeared in the form of myths and imagery associated with mythological figures, including the *Tengu*. These legendary beings from Japanese folklore are believed to have symbolic links to the ritual and spiritual aspects of martial practice (Knutsen, 2011). Throughout these traditions, means of meditative, visualising and corporeal discipline and visualization techniques have been used to induce states of harmony and heightened awareness (Vertonghen & Theeboom, 2010). In recent generations, elements of shamanic iconography and intuitive practices have been applied to modern personal, professional and athletic coaching. Methods such as John Moore's "Shamanic Intuitive Coaching" draw from shamanic imagery in conjunction with strategies borrowed from hypnotherapy, adult learning, and performance coaching. Access to publicly available documentation and other materials related to such practices depict coaching as a journey toward transformation, overcoming personal and professional barriers through the activation of intuition and embodied awareness. Although these methodologies work almost entirely by means of market dominated and self-development discourse, they do demonstrate how shamanic vocabularies and ritualized metaphors are circulating beyond the cultural context in which shamanic voices and rituals are created, and they are re-imagined within contemporary performance cultures. Analyses of client accounts of comparable coach-based interventions such as Anne-Marie Southcombe's⁴ and Sandra Molendyk's⁵ focus on clients' perceived increases in productivity, psychophysical well-being, and

⁴ Comments from the practitioner's clients reflect extremely positive experiences with the coaching received, emphasizing how the process has had a significant and transformative impact on their lives. One client describes the experience by highlighting the holistic approach involving thinking, writing, physical and mental exercise. Another client, who worked with Anne-Marie as a life coach for over a year during a period of great pressure, praises the coaching for helping him realise that slowing down and connecting with himself was the key to unlocking greater productivity and success. A third piece of feedback, from a participant in a weekend retreat, emphasizes the value of connecting with others and the welcoming and comfortable environment created, despite his own introverted tendencies.

⁵ The website provided outlines the holistic approach of Sandra Molendyk, a Sport Shaman, who integrates sports psychology, positive psychology, neuroscience and shamanism to improve personal and athletic performance. Her method is highly customised, focusing on understanding the client's personal, professional, and athletic ambitions, and applying tailor-made methods for improvement. These methods aim to transcend ordinary experiences, creating joy, leadership and meaningful success. Molendyk emphasises the creation of a state of bliss for elevated awareness, facilitating deep personal insights and methods to overcome challenges and achieve goals. The approach also addresses healing on multiple levels: physical, energetic,

personal growth. Reoccurring terms – “healing,” “energy,” “spirit,” “success” – indicate a holistic commitment to a merging of symbolic, psychological and neuroscientific registers. At the same time, by far the least reference to traditional meditation practices suggests a more flexible and instrumentalized understanding of balance and awareness, which is inclined less toward spirituality per se than toward measurable performance outcomes. Collectively, the examples illustrate how, across and between historical and cultural contexts, symbolic and ritual elements are transmitted and appropriated to shape the contemporary sports practices and narratives that are characterized by risk, bodily engagement, nature and altered states of perception. Instead of suggesting continuity or equivalence as such migrations do, such migrations showcase the adaptable character of ritual imaginaries in contemporary sport cultures. These motifs – risk, altered perception, symbolic membership and the pursuit of vertigo – offer a way of framing lifestyle sports not as casual pastimes or games, but as opportunities for transformative experiences. The following section refines the Cailloisian categories used throughout the article by using a widely known cultural narrative that, in our view, has become emblematic of extreme sports and the contemporary search for transcendence.

6. A short case history: “Point Break”

(Bodhi) It was never about money for us it was about us against the system. That system that kills the human spirit. We stand for something to those dead souls inching along the freeways in their metal coffins. We show them that the human spirit is still alive. (Point Break, 1991, 01^h:32)

The selection of the film *Point Break* – originally released over thirty years ago – is inspired by its enduring capacity to illustrate the experiential dynamics addressed in this article. It does a greater job than most new movies of boiling down themes of risk, transcendence, group belonging, and confrontation with nature into a kind of story that has come to symbolize the culture of extreme sports. The plot is quite simple: Johnny Utah (Keanu Reeves) is a young FBI agent; as he infiltrates a group of surfers thought to commit bank robberies while wearing masks of former U.S. presidents. The film was directed by Kathryn Bigelow and released in 1991. The group is led by Bodhi (Patrick Swayze), a glamorous presence who is propelled by the desire for adrenaline, freedom, and existential intensity rather than for money. While Utah submerges himself in the surf society of Southern California, the relationship with Bodhi slowly erases the old lines between professional obligation and personal devotion. The story examines identity, friendships, and transformation from extreme experiences. Surfing, skydiving and other very high-risk activities are not just amazing settings; they are narrative devices by which embodied involvement, trust and collective identity are described. Ericson Core’s 2015 re-envisioned *Point Break* builds upon these facets in its exploration of extreme sports from wingsuit flying to snowboarding to rock climbing. In this version, criminal conduct is recast as a series of ritualised ordeals aimed at achieving harmony with Mother Nature. Though they are stylistically quite different, spiritually fictionalised visions of nature, risk and collective life become intertwined in

emotional, spiritual and mental, using techniques such as energy healing, spirit/soul retrieval and guided visualisation. This comprehensive method not only aims to improve athletic performance but also enriches personal life, offering tools for sustainable growth and well-being.

both films. What matters most for in this analysis are not the ‘reality’ in these representations but the symbolic weight of them. In the film, the group, mainly led by Bodhi, is portrayed as bonded by a system of balance of self, other, and nature. The very fact of the character’s name – Bodhi, derived from the Buddhist ideal of *enlightenment* – implies a narrative leaning toward transcendence, self-overcoming life (without inferring doctrine-related alignment). Sociologically the movie serves as a fine example group integration and identity formation. Like Johnny Utah, arriving in a sort of insular [close-off] community, could be a fundamental experience in which an external actor learns shared codes, practices and embodied dispositions. These dynamic echoes Caillois’ category of *mimicry*. Utah adopts the surfers’ behaviours in the beginning not as a natural response but as a deliberate strategic form of role play, distancing himself from institutional routines and normative expectations. But imitation ultimately becomes a transformative process whereby identity is renegotiated and reoriented through the group (Nardini, 2018). The film also stages experiences that can be linked with *ilinx* – defined as the pursuit of vertigo and perceptual destabilisation. Surfing high-flying waves or jumping off airplanes serve as cinematic figuration of managed loss of balance, in which characters contend with fear, danger, and the edge of man’s capacity to exert control. Such encounters symbolically represent a search with an embodied and situational aspect, one that is non-mythological and not metaphysical. In this way, Point Break provides a narrative discussion of lifestyle sports as potential countercultural sites in late-modern societies. Bodhi’s critique of “the system that kills the human spirit” mirrors sociological diagnoses of rationalisation, bureaucratisation, and alienation made by Weber, Durkheim, and Ellul.

Extreme sport practices are therefore conceived as modes of experiential resistance that suspend temporarily routinised identities and consider alternative modes of existence. And so, the mask, both as a literal and figurative motif, becomes a way to strengthen the movie’s interest in the performative and ritual. The masks give people a way to suspend common identities, increase group solidarity, and travel into the liminal that opens up alternative social and existential spaces they can occupy. In that sense, Point Break does not present shamanism as such, but rather engages ritualised imaginaries which make sense within larger anthropological debates about liminality, mimicry, and transformation of self-embodiment. Both of these elements combined render Point Break a useful piece of cultural narrative to assist the Cailloisian categories mobilised in this article with explication. It doesn’t offer empirical evidence so much as it does an allegorical and experiential apparatus that works as a mechanism to explain how lifestyle sports can be understood as places of risk, transcendence and an identity reshaping in modern culture.

Bodhi : They [the rival surfers] only live to get radical. They don’t have any real understanding of the sea, so they’ll never get the spiritual side of it.

Johnny : Hey, you’re not gonna start chanting or anything, are you ?

Bodhi : I might.... You still haven’t figured out what riding waves is all about, have you? It’s a state of mind. It’s that place where you lose yourself and you find yourself. You don’t know it yet, but you’ve got it. It’s right there (Point Break, 1991, 0^h:37)

7. A short quantitative approach

The narrative intensity of *Point Break* expresses in a stylized and symbolic register experiential dimensions that many lifestyle sport practices report on such as perceptual destabilisation, ritualized episodes of heightened states, and the creation of collective identities based off shared experiences with risk and nature. Building on this narrative background and offering a theoretical or heuristic basis for exploring how individuals with sustained engagement with shamanic frameworks may interpret similar dimensions within their own sporting experiences, the following quantitative section must thus be read as an exploratory counterpart to the qualitative and theoretical conversation we are presenting above. A questionnaire was given as part of the survey to 86 current and former students in the first Italian Master's programme with a focus on shamanism. The sample is not meant to be representative of the general population of sport practitioners but rather to encompass perspectives from individuals who already know the shamanic vocabularies, practices, and interpretative frameworks associated with sport. 79.1%, 18.6%, and 2.3%, respectively, identified as female, male, and 'other'. The average age was 50.5 years (median 51) with a minimum age of 27 and a maximum age of 77. In terms of educational background, 67.4 percent had a Master's or doctoral degree (including 18.6% who had a PhD), 4.7 percent held a Bachelor's degree, and 8.3 percent had completed compulsory schooling. Such high levels of education correlate with the admission and profile of the Master's programme itself, which presupposes at least a Bachelor's degree and is frequently pursued along with an advanced professional training pathway. In terms of occupational status, 51.2% of participants identified themselves as professionals, 29.3% as freelancers; 14.6% as executives or managers, and 4.9% as self-employed. Regarding the practice of sports, 37.2% of respondents indicated that they played mountain sports while 32.6% were involved in water sports, 4.7% in motor sports, and 34.9% in other sport activities; only 9.3% did not practice sports at all. Among respondents, about half (48.8%) performed the sport on a regular basis, while 51.2% did so at least sometimes. In comparison to ISTAT reference data on the Italian population, the percentage of the sample that involved sport practice is comparatively higher, especially with regard to outdoor sport. More than half (55.8%) of respondents mainly practiced outdoor sports, while 30.2% practised in sport centres and 4.7% at home. Although these numbers are above national averages, they are in line with the characteristics of the studied population. These perceived benefits of sport participation include improved mood (58.5 %), contact with nature (56.1 %), better psycho-motor coordination (56.1 %), increased resistance to effort (56.1 %), self-knowledge (46.3 %) and introspection (19.5 %) as mentioned by respondents. Course attendees were also asked to rate how far they agreed that sport facilitates feelings of transcendence from a scale of 1 to 10, with 84% rating it at 7 or better, with peaks at 8 (37.2%) and 7 (23%) rate. In the same vein, 48.8% rated sport as a tool for surpassing personal performance limits at ranges of 8 and 10, and 38.1% rated it as a source of inner transformation at level 8. A substantial number of respondents (95.2%) perceived a significant link between sport and nature; the highest frequency of responses occurred at levels 8 and 9. Thirty-nine percent of the sample reported awareness of the use of shamanic practices in organised sport contexts and perceived relevance was overall rated as high. Questions concerning flow and altered states of consciousness should be approached with caution. Although 81% of respondents described becoming "flowed" (or in a state of altered

consciousness) as being linked to shamanic activities, these responses are subjective self-assessments, according to the psychological literature of flow. The claimed influence of these experiences in relation to perceived individual and/or team performance should therefore be seen as indicative of participants' understanding of interpretation process as opposed to causality. The researchers likewise saw in extreme sports transcendental associations connecting risk and altered states of consciousness, which was perceived as high or above by 80% of the participants on a 10-point scale. Animal symbolism was found to be significant in sport situations with scores also clustering on the upper end of the scale. These interpretations are in line with symbolic and narrative elements described in the qualitative aspects of the paper. An open-ended question helped participants describe in their own words their experiences. For many, sport became an opportunity for introspection, heightened self-awareness, challenge and, sometimes, metaphorical parallels to shamanic journeys. Such expressions are subjectively mediated and culturally, but analytically interesting, they show how participants themselves negotiate their experiences through shamanic vocabularies. These narratives are not discussed as evidence of shamanic practices in sport but are read as evidence of interpretative convergence within this particular group. In conclusion, an exploratory factor analysis was performed to determine latent dimensions that influenced the response patterns (see Annex, Table 1). The results revealed associations between factors for transcendence in sport, animal symbolism and nature-connection. These factors are taken with a pinch of salt and construed as heuristics rather than stable constructs. More generally, the quantitative findings do not intend to establish generalisable relationships, rather they suggest early signs that those familiar with shamanic frameworks regard experiences of transcendence, flow-like states and nature-connection as interconnected for them to pursue in their sport.

8. Concluding discussion

In this article, we consider how certain sporting practices, especially those associated with lifestyles and extreme sports, can inspire experiences of transcendence, altered perception and connection with nature. These experiences align with the dimensions often discussed in shamanic contexts. Throughout the paper, we argue that sporting experience should not be solely focused on performance results, but should also encompass symbolic, affective and embodied processes, which are reflected in ritual structures, liminality and heightened states of awareness.

Drawing on existing literature, including ethnographic analyses of surf culture and lifestyle sports, this study suggests that contemporary sports practices engage with aesthetic, existential and libertarian dimensions within a framework where sports participation is viewed as a pursuit of intensity, meaning and self-transformation. In this interpretation, ideas related to shamanic knowledge – such as embodied knowledge, ecological attunement and experiential transformation – do not merely serve as explanatory tools; they also provide insight into how practitioners relate to themselves, others and the world around them. Symbolic associations and affective dispositions persist within these forms of practice, which involve the concept of “sympathetic magic” (Nemeroff & Rozin, 2000). The shamanic symbolism and ritualism inherent in sport are clearly evident in its portrayal in the media and advertising, and thus in the collective

imagination. This is made quite clear through the analysis of the case study examined in the article. In these contexts, references to shamanism may signal authenticity, spirituality or ecological sensitivity, thereby enhancing the communicative and symbolic significance of shamanism. At the same time, this visibility highlights the tension between the lived experience of transformation and the strategic appropriation of ritual and spiritual motifs in branding, marketing, and identity construction processes (Yun, 2006) The findings in research comprise a combination of theoretical reflection, cultural analysis and exploratory quantitative data. These quantitative results indicate that individuals with prior knowledge of shamanic frameworks are more likely to perceive the intersection of sporting practice and shamanic ideals. However, these findings should be interpreted with caution. They reflect beliefs prevalent within specific, culturally situated segments of the population and, as such, cannot be generalised to broader sporting audiences. However, they highlight key areas where more systematic sociological research would be valuable, such as the interplay between shamanic frameworks and sporting experiences.

Cumulatively, the analysis points to sport as a context where ancient symbolic repertoires and contemporary explorations of well-being, intensity, and self-transformation converge. Whether such experiences generate a new kind of collective involvement instead of being almost exclusively individualistic and market-based remains to be seen. However, it is clear that the combination of performance, embodied transcendence and ecological awareness in lifestyle sports highlights ongoing processes of cultural hybridisation in a global context.

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Appendix

1. Interpretive summary of factor structure

Survey item (short label)	Main factor (F) loading(s)	Dominant dimension (interpretation)	Key insight for the paper
Sport facilitates transcendence	High on F1 (.655); low-moderate on F3 (.294)	Symbolic-transcendent (F1) with a performance component	Transcendence is closely tied to symbolic/shamanic aspects, but it is also partly linked to performance and challenge.
Sport helps overcome personal limits	High on F3 (.772)	Performance-challenge (F3)	Overcoming limits is the clearest “purely sporting” dimension, distinct from symbolic or ecological concerns.
Sport supports inner transformation	Moderate on F3 (.482)	Performance-challenge (F3) with diffuse links	Inner transformation is mostly embedded in the performance-challenge space rather than in purely shamanic symbolism.
Sport promotes connection with nature	Very high on F2 (.862); moderate on F3 (.379)	Nature-ecology (F2) with some performance relevance	Connection with nature forms an autonomous ecological dimension, only partly overlapping with performance motives.
Sport promotes environmental sustainability values	High on F2 (.672)	Nature-ecology (F2)	Sustainability is clearly clustered with the nature dimension, reinforcing an “eco-spiritual” reading of sport.
Extreme sports offer risk-based transcendence	Moderate on all three (F1 .349; F2 .320; F3 .430)	Hybrid (shamanic, ecological, and performance)	Extreme sports sit at the intersection of transcendence, nature, and performance, illustrating the paper’s core thesis.

Survey item (short label)	Main factor (F) loading(s)	Dominant dimension (interpretation)	Key insight for the paper
Importance of animals and animal symbols in sport	Very high on F1 (.938)	Symbolic–shamanic (F1)	Animal symbolism is the strongest indicator of the shamanic-symbolic dimension in the data.

Attaccante fino alla fine: identità sportiva, celebrità, malattia e autobiografia nell'esperienza di Stefano Borgonovo

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Abstract

This study analyses, from a sociological perspective, the transformation of the identity of Stefano Borgonovo, a former professional footballer, following his diagnosis with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). Through a phenomenological-interpretative analysis of his posthumous autobiography, “Attaccante nato”, the research explores the conflict between the identity of the champion and the experience of the patient. The investigation focuses on three interconnected analytical dimensions that emerge from the text: status, representation of the body, and perception of time. The analysis reveals how autobiographical narration becomes a performative act to repair the biographical fracture caused by the disease. Borgonovo’s status evolves from a celebrity based on athletic performance to one based on public testimony of vulnerability, accumulating a capital of suffering. The body, from a performing and disciplined instrument, becomes a suffering and hyper-visible entity, yet catalysing rituals of collective solidarity. Consequently, the linear and progressive temporality of his sporting career is replaced by a present dominated by illness, radically redefining his existential horizon. The study concludes that, despite the loss of his performing ability, Borgonovo manages to preserve a strong social identity, reconfiguring his public role from athlete to symbol of the fight against ALS and maintaining a narrative continuity between his past and his present.

Keywords: Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, Athletic identity, Autobiography, Celebrity; Illness.

1. Introduzione

Chi ha seguito il calcio italiano tra gli anni '80 e '90, ricorda bene questo volto e la figura in campo di Stefano Borgonovo, scomparso il 27 giugno 2013. Un attaccante di talento, capace di accendere l'entusiasmo dei tifosi, un professionista che ha vestito maglie importanti come quelle di Como, Fiorentina, Milan, Pescara, Udinese. Un attaccante nato, come suggerisce il titolo della sua stessa autobiografia, un uomo la cui identità sembrava indissolubilmente legata al rettangolo di gioco, alla performance atletica, a quel ruolo specifico nel complesso sistema sociale che è lo sport professionistico. Come dichiara lui stesso, nonostante tutto: «Io se potessi scenderei in campo adesso, su un prato o all'oratorio. Perché io amo il calcio» (Borgonovo & Alciato, 2015).

Ma la traiettoria della vita di Stefano Borgonovo, come quella di altre figure pubbliche la cui identità sembra scolpita nella pietra del successo sportivo, ha conosciuto una deviazione tanto

improvvisa quanto drammatica. La diagnosi di Sclerosi Laterale Amiotrofica, la SLA, quella che lui stesso ha definito: «Lei, la grandissima Stronza, l'unica e inimitabile, protagonista timida e nascosta» (Borgonovo & Alciato, 2015, p. 487), ha segnato l'inizio di una nuova fase, una seconda vita profondamente diversa, caratterizzata dalla progressiva perdita del controllo sul proprio corpo, ma anche da una volontà di testimoniare. È proprio su questa complessa transizione che si concentra il mio intervento. L'obiettivo è analizzare l'esperienza del celebre calciatore non solo come dramma umano, ma come fenomeno sociologicamente rilevante. La mia riflessione prende le mosse da una domanda chiave che funge da filo conduttore per l'analisi:

Come viene esperito e rappresentato il conflitto tra l'esperienza del campione e quella del malato all'interno di una singola traiettoria esistenziale?

Nel percorso di analisi, l'oggetto di studio è stato l'autobiografia di Stefano Borgonovo, *Attaccante nato*, pubblicata postuma nel 2015. Letta attraverso una lente fenomenologica, essa ha permesso di esplorare come Borgonovo, nel suo vissuto, percepisse il mondo attraverso lo sguardo dell'attaccante. In fase esplorativa, dall'analisi del testo sono emerse alcune dimensioni concettuali – come status, corpo e tempo – che, pur non essendo esaustive, si sono rivelate tra le principali per comprendere l'esperienza del “morente” narrata nel testo (Elias, 1985, p. 34). È significativo sottolineare che l'autobiografia è stata dettata esclusivamente tramite il movimento oculare, utilizzando un computer oculare, rendendo ancora più potente il valore testimoniale della sua narrazione.

Il seguente paragrafo illustra nel dettaglio l'approccio metodologico, il disegno della ricerca e le tecniche di analisi impiegate per indagare questo caso esemplare.

2. Metodologia

Questo studio adotta un approccio di ricerca qualitativo, orientato da una prospettiva fenomenologica interpretativa. Tale paradigma si focalizza sulla comprensione profonda e soggettiva dell'esperienza vissuta, ponendo l'accento sui significati attribuiti dagli individui alla propria realtà. Il disegno di ricerca si configura prevalentemente come un caso di studio singolo e intensivo, incentrato sull'analisi approfondita dell'esperienza vissuta da Stefano Borgonovo a seguito della diagnosi di Sclerosi Laterale Amiotrofica. La scelta di focalizzarsi sull'esperienza di Stefano Borgonovo è motivata dalla sua particolare rilevanza, la sua figura pubblica di atleta di élite, radicalmente trasformata dalla diagnosi di SLA, offre un caso esemplare per esplorare la complessa interazione tra identità sportiva, vissuto corporeo alterato dalla malattia e narrazione del sé in un contesto pubblico. L'autobiografia *Borgonovo, S., Alciato, A. (2015). Attaccante nato*, rappresenta una fonte eccezionalmente ricca per accedere a questa specifica e significativa esperienza. La fonte primaria e oggetto esclusivo dell'indagine è, pertanto, la testimonianza autobiografica di Stefano Borgonovo, contenuta nel volume menzionato. Questo testo è stato trattato come il dataset primario dello studio, considerato nella sua interezza per cogliere le sfumature e la costruzione narrativa complessiva dell'autore. La sua natura di narrazione in prima persona consente di accedere direttamente alla costruzione di significato che l'autore attribuisce alla propria esperienza radicale.

L'analisi dei dati testuali è stata condotta attraverso una lettura fenomenologica e interpretativa, mirata a cogliere le dimensioni profonde dell'esperienza di Borgonovo, con particolare attenzione al vissuto corporeo alterato dalla malattia, alla percezione della perdita delle capacità fisiche e performative, e ai processi dinamici di ridefinizione del sé. Il processo analitico ha seguito le fasi tipiche dell'analisi tematica qualitativa. Questa frase descrive in modo corretto le prime fasi di un processo di analisi qualitativa dei dati, tipicamente l'analisi tematica. A seguito di una fase di familiarizzazione intensiva e reiterata con il testo, si è proceduto all'individuazione di segmenti significativi, i quali sono stati successivamente raggruppati e organizzati per identificare i temi emergenti. Questi ultimi sono stati poi raffinati e definiti come le tre dimensioni analitiche chiave: Status, Rappresentazione del Corpo e Percezione del Tempo. L'intero processo analitico è stato guidato dalla domanda di ricerca principale. L'esperienza individuale è stata contestualizzata all'interno di quadri interpretativi più ampi legati ai ruoli sociali, ai significati prevalenti che vengono attribuiti all'interno della pratica sportiva e al significato della malattia in un contesto pubblico. In questo quadro, si è cercato di comprendere come, anche nella condizione di malattia, l'identità dell'atleta d'élite continui a interagire con ruoli, simboli e valori collettivi.

Sulla base delle dimensioni analitiche emerse dalla precedente analisi qualitativa, si procede ora ad esplorare la complessa interazione tra identità sportiva e narrazione del sé nel contesto della malattia e della sua testimonianza pubblica.

3. Identità sportiva e narrazione del sé

Nel narrare la propria esperienza, Borgonovo si inserisce in quella che Arthur Frank definisce *wounded storyteller*, ovvero il narratore ferito che dà senso alla malattia attraverso il racconto (Frank, 1995).

In un Paese come l'Italia, dove il calcio è ben più di uno sport e si configura come un vero e proprio "fatto sociale totale" (Mauss, 2002), la storia di un calciatore professionista che affronta una malattia fatale assume un forte valore simbolico. Questa dimensione narrativa assume una rilevanza ancora maggiore nel caso delle figure pubbliche, la cui biografia si gioca costantemente tra il piano individuale e quello collettivo (Eaking, 2008). Per chi è esposto allo sguardo sociale, raccontare la propria esperienza non è solo un atto identitario, ma anche una forma di responsabilità nei confronti della collettività, come sottolinea l'autore. La narrazione del sé diventa così un tentativo di rendersi comprensibili all'interno di un orizzonte di significato condiviso (Eaking, 2008).

In quest'ottica, è fondamentale sottolineare il valore sociologico dell'autobiografia come pratica narrativa, in grado di costruire e rendere visibile il sé. L'autobiografia, infatti, non si limita a essere un semplice racconto retrospettivo, ma rappresenta un atto performativo che consente al soggetto di dare significato alla propria esperienza ed al proprio essere nel mondo (Bruner, 1997). Come affermato da Jerome Bruner, «noi diventiamo le storie che raccontiamo su noi stessi» (Bruner, 1997, p. 19). In questa prospettiva, la narrazione biografica si configura come un processo attivo di significazione, capace di integrare nella trama del sé eventi traumatici e non traumatici, momenti di crisi e trasformazioni profonde.

In questa stessa prospettiva, è utile considerare il concetto di «identità narrativa», secondo cui l'identità personale non è un dato immutabile, ma una costruzione dinamica che prende forma attraverso il racconto che l'individuo fa di sé (Ricoeur, 1993, p. 239).

L'autobiografia di Borgonovo si configura, quindi, come uno spazio simbolico in cui l'autore tenta di ricomporre la frattura tra il passato da atleta, segnato dalla forza fisica e dalla centralità della prestazione, e il presente da malato "morente" (Elias, 1985, p. 34).

Quando la malattia interrompe la linearità del percorso biografico e infrange le narrazioni dominanti legate alla salute, al controllo e alla prestazione — tipiche dell'esperienza dell'atleta — emerge la necessità di elaborare nuovi modelli narrativi. Nel caso di malattie neurodegenerative, quando la guarigione non è possibile, la narrazione prevalente della restituzione diventa inadeguata, creando un disallineamento tra la biografia desiderata e l'esperienza concreta (Frank, 1995).

In questo contesto, l'autobiografia diventa, dunque, uno strumento trasformativo, non tanto per restaurare l'identità precedente, quanto per costruirne una nuova, che includa la malattia come parte integrante del sé. L'autobiografia, quindi, rappresenta un dispositivo simbolico attraverso cui il soggetto elabora l'esperienza di frattura, rinegoziando la propria identità in modo dinamico e relazionale, aperto alla comprensione dell'altro (Bifulco, 2023).

Per analizzare la complessa trasformazione dell'identità sportiva di Stefano Borgonovo a seguito della diagnosi di Sclerosi Laterale Amiotrofica, propongo un framework analitico basato su tre dimensioni interconnesse, fondamentali per definire il senso di sé dell'atleta nel suo contesto socioculturale: status, la rappresentazione del corpo e la percezione del tempo. Questi assi non operano isolatamente, ma si influenzano reciprocamente, con le relazioni sociali che fungono da tessuto connettivo in cui l'identità viene costruita e riconosciuta. Il caso di Borgonovo risulta emblematico poiché dimostra come la destabilizzazione di uno o più di questi assi possa innescare una profonda crisi dell'intero orizzonte identitario. Per comprendere a fondo come questi elementi si intrecciano e determinano l'identità sportiva, è utile fare un breve affondo sulla teoria sociologica dell'identità, che pone le relazioni sociali al suo fondamento.

L'identità è un processo dinamico e continuo, una costruzione sociale che si sviluppa attraverso l'interazione con gli altri e con le istituzioni (Berger & Luckmann, 1973). Si configura come un fenomeno relazionale e dialogico, diventiamo ciò che siamo attraverso il riconoscimento, la differenziazione e la relazione con l'altro (Berger & Luckmann, 1973). In questa prospettiva, l'identità emerge come il risultato di una dialettica costante tra l'identificazione oggettiva – ossia il modo in cui la società ci definisce, ci etichetta e ci assegna aspettative – e la percezione soggettiva – ovvero il modo in cui interiorizziamo e viviamo tali etichette (Pecchinenda, 1999).

Nel mondo dello sport, questa dialettica si manifesta in modo potente. L'identità sportiva «è quella parte del concetto di sé che si riferisce alla percezione di sé come atleta e al valore che si attribuisce a questo ruolo all'interno della propria definizione personale e sociale» (Brewer, Van Raalte *et al.*, 1993, p. 237). Nell'identità sportiva di Borgonovo pre-diagnosi, questa congruenza iniziale era evidente, la sua identità di calciatore professionista si alimentava di un forte riconoscimento sociale e trovava una corrispondenza nella sua auto-percezione di sé intimamente ancorata alla pratica agonistica e al valore pubblico della sua immagine (Pecchinenda, 1999). La narrazione autobiografica lo conferma in modo esplicito: «Correvo, segnavo e mi divertivo, i miei

genitori avevano un banco al mercato e io il posto fisso sul campo. Abitavo lì» (Borgonovo & Alciato, 2015).

Accanto a questa prospettiva generale, per comprendere ulteriormente la tenuta dell'identità di Borgonovo nonostante la perdita della capacità performativa, può essere utile richiamare anche la *Social Identity Theory*. La SIT distingue tra "identità personale" e "identità sociale", intesa come definizione di sé attraverso l'appartenenza a categorie collettive (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 21). Secondo questa teoria, l'identificazione con un gruppo – ad esempio, la comunità dei calciatori professionisti o l'universo simbolico dello sport di alto livello – non richiede necessariamente un impegno attivo verso gli obiettivi del gruppo, ma può derivare dalla semplice percezione di condivisione del destino con il gruppo stesso e questa prospettiva sottolinea come l'identità sociale sia intrinsecamente legata alle relazioni di appartenenza e all'interazione (anche simbolica) con la comunità di riferimento (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

Nel caso di Borgonovo, l'identità sportiva può essere letta anche come una forma di identificazione sociale fortemente radicata. Egli non si percepiva solo come calciatore, ma con i calciatori, all'interno di un campo semantico e valoriale condiviso. È significativo, in questo senso, come la sua identificazione con il gruppo non venga meno nemmeno dopo la diagnosi e l'uscita forzata dalla scena competitiva. Anzi, l'argomento centrale che emerge è proprio la tenuta dell'identificazione sociale anche in condizioni di fallimento, perdita o sofferenza. Borgonovo continua a definirsi pubblicamente attraverso lo sport, e anzi riconfigura la propria identità da atleta a testimone, mantenendo così una continuità narrativa tra passato e presente (Tajfel, Brown *et al.*, 1979). Inoltre, il processo di riconoscimento da parte del pubblico – che continua a vederlo come uno di loro, nonostante la malattia – rafforza questa identificazione e consente a Borgonovo di conservare uno status simbolico, sebbene trasformato (Tajfel, Brown *et al.*, 1979). Un momento emblematico di questa continuità identitaria è rappresentato dalla partita del 2008, intitolata "Amici per sempre", organizzata in suo onore. Disputata il 13 ottobre allo stadio Artemio Franchi di Firenze, la partita vede in campo ex campioni della Fiorentina e del Milan – le due squadre più significative della carriera di Borgonovo – tra cui Roberto Baggio, Paolo Maldini, Franco Baresi, Dunga, Massaro e molti altri. La partecipazione è straordinaria: circa 30.000 spettatori gremiscono lo stadio, trasformando l'incontro in un evento carico di emotività e significato collettivo.

Il momento più toccante è l'ingresso in campo di Borgonovo, in sedia a rotelle e accompagnato dalla moglie, accolto da un lungo e commosso applauso. L'abbraccio simbolico dei suoi ex compagni e l'affetto del pubblico rendono l'evento un vero rito collettivo di reinclusione, in cui Borgonovo, pur debilitato dalla SLA e privo della parola, riafferma la propria appartenenza alla comunità calcistica. In questo contesto, la partita assume il valore di un rituale simbolico, che celebra non la performance sportiva, ma la memoria condivisa. L'evento è profondamente significativo dal punto di vista sociologico, il gruppo non respinge il soggetto ormai escluso dalla competizione, ma lo reintegra come testimone e simbolo. La sua identità sportiva non si spezza, ma si trasforma, trovando nuova forma attraverso il riconoscimento pubblico e mediatico. L'eco dell'incontro è vastissima, giornali, televisioni e siti web raccontano la serata; i tifosi inviano centinaia di messaggi; i social e i portali dedicati registrano un'ondata di partecipazione emotiva. In questo senso, Amici per sempre si configura come un momento di riaffermazione del legame comunitario, in cui la comunità calcistica ribadisce pubblicamente il proprio legame con l'atleta,

al di là della sua possibilità di performance. Si tratta di un “rituale simbolico” che contribuisce a rafforzare i confini identitari della comunità sportiva, intesi come confini simbolici costruiti attraverso significati condivisi (Cohen, 1985, p. 92).

Di questo momento e della vasta reazione che ne seguì, Borgonovo stesso testimonia l’impatto sulla sua percezione di sé e del suo nuovo ruolo: «Tutti i giornali l’hanno ripresa, alcuni siti Internet sono stati intasati dai commenti dei tifosi, mi sono arrivate centinaia di e-mail. Prima nessuno immaginava, dopo tutti sapevano. Ho scoperto che la gente mi voleva bene, che servivo ancora a qualcosa. Avevo uno scopo, fare uscire allo scoperto chi ancora si nascondeva. Chi si vergognava, come me fino a poco tempo prima» (Borgonovo & Alciato, 2015).

Tale dinamica mostra come, anche al di fuori della performance, l’identità sociale resti saliente e svolga una funzione cruciale nella preservazione dell’autostima, offrendo un punto di appoggio identitario anche in condizioni di forte discontinuità biografica (Tajfel, Brown *et al.*, 1979).

4. Status

Passando alla prima dimensione analitica, lo status, è cruciale notare fin da subito come esso sia profondamente radicato e continuamente negoziato attraverso le relazioni sociali.

Lo status può essere definito come la posizione sociale che un individuo occupa all’interno di un determinato campo o contesto sociale, riconosciuta dagli altri e fondata su criteri di valore condivisi, come il prestigio, la competenza o la moralità (Bourdieu, 1978). Nell’ambito sportivo, legato alla performance e al valore simbolico guadagnato in campo, la visibilità mediatica di Borgonovo non viene meno dopo la malattia, ma subisce una trasformazione profonda, assumendo connotati nuovi (Bourdieu, 1978). Inizialmente costruita come *achieved celebrity* – fondata su gol, vittorie e appartenenze a club prestigiosi – essa evolve in una forma di notorietà solidale e testimoniale, legata alla sua condizione di malato e alla sua capacità di rappresentare pubblicamente la fragilità e la resilienza (Rojek, 2001). La sua presenza nei media non scompare, ma si riconfigura, è sostenuta da eventi pubblici, dalla mobilitazione della comunità sportiva e da un vasto consenso emotivo e sociale, che rafforza la sua figura come simbolo e testimone.

Ellis Cashmore ha evidenziato come, nella società contemporanea, la celebrità possa fondarsi anche sulla narrazione della vulnerabilità (Cashmore, 2006). Borgonovo diventa un testimone, accumula quello che Luc Boltanski ha descritto come un capitale derivato dalla sofferenza esposta pubblicamente, talvolta riformulato come *health capital* (Boltanski, 2000). In questo nuovo ruolo, la sua identità non è più legata esclusivamente al calcio, ma si fonde con la sua missione di sensibilizzazione verso la SLA. Borgonovo non solo racconta la sua battaglia, ma la trasforma in un atto di lotta collettiva. A tal proposito, egli afferma: «Sentivamo forte il bisogno di renderci utili. Io e mia moglie non potevamo far finta di niente, avevamo già subito abbastanza gli eventi, spiando anche i peccati non commessi. Reagire alla Stronza era stato il primo passo, si doveva andare oltre. Farle sentire la nostra presenza poco discreta, darle fastidio. Innanzitutto, attraverso la promozione della ricerca scientifica, che è il primo scopo della nostra onlus» (Borgonovo & Alciato, 2015).

Questa nozione si inserisce nel quadro teorico più ampio del “capitale simbolico” delineato da Bourdieu, mettendo in luce come il riconoscimento sociale e l’accumulazione di valore simbolico

possano svilupparsi all'interno di campi differenti rispetto a quello d'origine (Boltanski, 2000; Bourdieu, 2022, p. 183). Se il campo sportivo premia la prestazione e il rendimento fisico, il campo della sofferenza pubblica e dell'impegno civico produce un'altra forma di valore, fondata sulla visibilità del dolore e sull'assunzione di responsabilità etica (Boltanski, 2000; Bourdieu, 1978). Il meccanismo decisivo che consente questo slittamento è il riconoscimento da parte degli altri, come evidenziano la fenomenologia sociale e la teoria della SIT, è l'interazione e la validazione da parte degli altri a conferire senso e valore a un'esperienza (Berger & Luckmann, 1973; Boltanski, 2000). È proprio questo riconoscimento a trasformare la sofferenza e l'impegno di Borgonovo in una risorsa simbolica condivisa, conferendogli uno status rinnovato, fondato non più sulla performance atletica, ma sulla resilienza personale, sull'etica della testimonianza e sulla capacità di attivare solidarietà (Boltanski, 2000).

L'evoluzione dello status di Borgonovo non è un processo passivo, ma il risultato di una co-produzione tra "agency" e struttura (Giddens, 1984, p. 43). Le sue azioni – come parlare pubblicamente della malattia, scrivere un libro, partecipare a eventi e fondare una ONLUS – non avvengono in isolamento, ma si sviluppano all'interno di un contesto sociale e mediatico che le rende possibili e ne amplifica la portata. Tali scelte individuali, pur condizionate dalle norme, dalle aspettative e dalle risorse offerte dal contesto, contribuiscono al tempo stesso a trasformarlo, inserendosi attivamente in esso e riorientandone i significati. «Questo libro l'ho scritto con lo sguardo», racconta, «dettandolo parola per parola a un computer comandato dalle mie pupille. Ero in grado di muovere solo quelle. Non per farmi compatire, ma perché la mia storia possa servire a qualcosa» (Borgonovo & Alciato, 2015). Queste azioni trovano risonanza perché si innestano su strutture culturali preesistenti, un panorama mediatico predisposto a narrare storie di vulnerabilità, una società sensibile alle tematiche della malattia e una cultura della celebrità che legittima nuove forme di riconoscimento (Cashmore, 2006; Rojek, 2001). In questo quadro, l'agency di Borgonovo non solo si adatta alle strutture sociali esistenti, ma le utilizza in modo strategico per rielaborare il proprio status, trasforma la vulnerabilità in risorsa simbolica attraverso la narrazione pubblica e l'azione collettiva (Giddens, 1984; Boltanski, 2000). Si configura così una vera e propria co-costruzione dello status, in cui l'individuo, pur segnato da una condizione estrema di fragilità, esercita un potere trasformativo sulla propria posizione sociale, modificando al contempo le coordinate simboliche e narrative entro cui tale trasformazione acquista senso.

Questa riconfigurazione dello status rappresenta una deviazione significativa rispetto alle dinamiche descritte da Sontag. L'autrice nota come, nella percezione sociale, il malato venga spesso relegato nel "lato notturno della vita" e costretto a una "cittadinanza più onerosa", dove la malattia misteriosa o incurabile diventa spesso sinonimo di sconfitta sociale o vergogna (Sontag, 2020, p. 7).

Nel caso di Borgonovo, invece, non avviene quella marginalizzazione che trasforma il malato in un "altro" da evitare. Al contrario, egli rifiuta lo status di vittima passiva o di sconfitto che spesso la società attribuisce a chi è colpito da mali incurabili. Attraverso l'esposizione mediatica, Borgonovo converte lo stigma della malattia in una nuova forma di capitale sociale, sfidando l'isolamento che Sontag individua come tipico delle malattie considerate "oscene" o "misteriose" (Sontag, 2020, p. 51).

5. Corpo

Questa radicale ridefinizione dello status è indissolubilmente legata alla trasformazione vissuta a livello corporeo. La rappresentazione del corpo, infatti, costituisce la seconda dimensione analitica per comprendere il conflitto identitario di Stefano Borgonovo e il modo in cui esso si ripercuote sullo status e sulla percezione del tempo. Lungi dall'essere un mero involucro biologico, il corpo è un'entità sensoriale, motoria ed emotiva con capacità generative, un veicolo di senso che partecipa attivamente alla costruzione dell'identità e plasma la vita sociale attraverso azioni, abitudini ed espressioni (Shilling, 2005). Nel contesto sportivo, e in particolare per un atleta di alto livello come Borgonovo, il corpo assume connotazioni specifiche; Chris Shilling lo descrive come una macchina altamente disciplinata, ottimizzata per la performance attraverso un rigoroso controllo medico e tecnico, e socialmente percepita come strumento di rendimento, in cui gli «atleti incorporano nelle loro capacità sportive [...] vere e proprie performance corporee» (Bifulco, 2019, p. 177). Per Borgonovo, l'identità sportiva pre-diagnosi era indissolubilmente legata alla funzionalità del suo corpo, gli allenamenti, le partite, i gol erano la manifestazione della sua abilità e gli garantivano visibilità e status. Tuttavia, questo corpo atletico, sebbene disciplinato, era anche fonte di piacere sensoriale e edonistico; lo stesso Borgonovo menziona la gioia di «correre, segnare, divertirsi» (Borgonovo & Alciato, 2015), confermando l'esperienza sportiva come piacere incarnato (Shilling, 2005). In questa fase, il corpo performante di Borgonovo, nella sua efficienza e assenza di ostacoli, tendeva a quella che Drew Leder definisce “assenza corporea”, una sorta di trasparenza che permette all'atleta di focalizzarsi sull'azione e sull'obiettivo, piuttosto che sulle sensazioni fisiche in sé (Leder, 1990, p. 55).

La progressione della malattia provoca in Borgonovo una profonda «destabilizzazione della sua conoscenza del corpo» (Shilling, 2005, p. 4). Quello che era un alleato fidato e prevedibile diventa un'entità estranea e imprevedibile. Questa esperienza non si traduce in una semplice dissoluzione del corpo, ma in una drammatica perdita della fiducia di base psicologica e della «sicurezza ontologica» (Giddens, 1991, p. 98). L'atleta, che fondava gran parte della sua esistenza sulla certezza del proprio corpo performante, si confronta con un'esistenza incarnata che non offre più garanzie, minando le fondamenta del suo posto nel mondo (Giddens, 1991).

Di fronte a tale radicale incertezza e alla progressiva compromissione fisica, già prima del 2008 – anno in cui Borgonovo rese pubblica la diagnosi – l'esperienza della malattia assume inizialmente una forma riconducibile alla «medicalizzazione della morte» (Elias, 1985, p. 36). In questa fase iniziale e silenziosa, il corpo malato e la sofferenza che ne deriva sono confinati quasi esclusivamente nella dimensione privata e clinica. L'esperienza del morire resta non ancora condivisa né elaborata socialmente, delegata principalmente alla gestione medica (Elias, 1985). Questo isolamento e questa solitudine – tratti che Elias individua come distintivi delle società contemporanee rispetto alla morte – si scontrano drammaticamente con l'identità pregressa di Borgonovo come atleta di alto livello, abituato alla visibilità pubblica e associato a un'immagine di forza, performance e salute (Elias, 1985). Per lui, questo passaggio segna l'inizio di una marginalizzazione tanto corporea quanto esistenziale, un ritirarsi dalla scena pubblica imposto dalla vulnerabilità del corpo malato (Elias, 1985). È proprio in questa scollatura tra il corpo sofferente vissuto nella sfera privata e l'immagine pubblica attesa o preesistente – un corpo che cede di fronte a un'identità pubblica che lo vorrebbe invincibile o, quantomeno, sano – che si

manifesta una profonda tensione, interpretabile attraverso il concetto durkheimiano di «*homo duplex*» (Alexander, 2002, p. 290).

In tale contesto di sofferenza privata e isolamento, la progressiva visibilità, o anche solo la consapevolezza del proprio corpo di atleta in declino fisico, si scontrava con ed era vulnerabile alle narrazioni sociali preesistenti nel mondo dello sport, in particolare quelle legate al dibattito sul doping. Come Borgonovo stesso testimonia: «Valutavano i sintomi, rimaneva il sussurro: Borgonovo è un drogato» (Borgonovo & Alciato, 2015). Il nascondimento iniziale della malattia può essere letto proprio come una reazione a questa complessa situazione, generata dalla scissione interiore che caratterizza tale condizione (Alexander, 2002). Da un lato, emergeva il bisogno egoistico di proteggere la propria salute e l'immagine pubblica; dall'altro, il potenziale desiderio sociale di testimonianza. Tale prospettiva esterna, il rischio di discredito legato a narrazioni come quella sul doping, non era una mera possibilità, ma una concreta minaccia all'integrità della sua immagine pubblica. Questa minaccia rafforzava potentemente il versante egoistico dell'*homo duplex* e, di conseguenza, il bisogno primario di proteggere sé stesso gestendo la malattia lontano dagli sguardi e dai giudizi potenzialmente errati del pubblico sportivo (Alexander, 2002).

L'irruzione conclamata della Sclerosi Laterale Amiotrofica segna una drammatica inversione della dinamica di "assenza corporea". Utilizzando il concetto di "dis-apparizione" (Leder, 1990, p. 99), possiamo comprendere come il corpo di Borgonovo, da strumento efficiente e quasi invisibile, riemerge bruscamente nella sua coscienza, imponendosi in modo prepotente. La malattia lo trasforma in un corpo sofferente, iper-visibile, che irrompe costantemente nell'esperienza a causa della progressiva perdita di controllo e delle limitazioni. Questa condizione estrema, che lo costrinse alla sedia a rotelle, impedisce l'azione, diventando il doloroso e ineludibile centro dell'attenzione (Leder, 1990).

Anche nella rappresentazione del corpo, l'esperienza di Borgonovo dialoga in modo contrastivo con le tesi di Sontag. Se la sociologa critica le metafore militari – che descrivono il corpo come "invaso" da presenze estranee o nemiche e rischiano di alienare il paziente dal proprio organismo – Borgonovo sembra invece adottarle, ma rovesciandone gli effetti (Sontag, 2020, p. 15). Accetta che il corpo sia il campo di battaglia contro "la Stronza", ma non vive questa invasione come vergogna. Mentre Sontag sottolinea che le malattie visibili portano spesso al nascondimento, egli rende il proprio corpo immobile e invasivo radicalmente pubblico (Sontag, 2020; Borgonovo & Alciato, 2015, p. 487). La sua immobilità non diventa segno di resa, ma un paradosso performativo: il corpo tradito dalla malattia è esibito non come fallimento biologico, ma come strumento di sensibilizzazione.

Questa modalità di raffigurare la malattia come antagonista intimo, profondamente inscritta nel vissuto corporeo dell'atleta, si colloca su un piano differente rispetto alla prospettiva teorica che guida questa analisi, orientata a considerare la vulnerabilità come tratto strutturale e condiviso dell'esperienza umana. È proprio nel confronto tra queste due modalità – la forte personalizzazione narrativa adottata da Borgonovo e la lettura più generale qui proposta – che emerge con particolare chiarezza la specificità della sua rappresentazione del corpo malato.

È in questo contesto di progressiva manifestazione della malattia e, infine, della sua rivelazione pubblica, che il corpo di Borgonovo, pur segnato, diviene un cruciale centro di mobilitazione emotiva. La sua figura pubblica, caricata di nuovi e drammatici significati, catalizza un'energia emozionale che unisce tifosi, ex compagni di squadra e media. Ogni apparizione, dalle conferenze

stampa alle partite di beneficenza, alimenta la solidarietà sociale e trasforma il corpo sofferente di Borgonovo in un potente simbolo di lotta e speranza, in linea con i “rituali collettivi” descritti da Durkheim. (Alexander, 2002, p. 112). L’esposizione del suo corpo, pur nella sua vulnerabilità, non solo alimenta un forte senso di appartenenza ma crea anche un legame profondo tra l’atleta e la collettività, rinforzando il concetto di “effervescenza collettiva”, in cui la condivisione emozionale contribuisce alla coesione sociale (Alexander, 2002, p. 70). Questo processo è strettamente legato all’ “energia emozionale” sviluppata da Collins, l’interazione faccia a faccia e la partecipazione a rituali sociali generano un’energia che si propaga tra gli individui, rafforzando la coesione del gruppo (Collins, 2004, p. 109). Il corpo malato di Borgonovo diventa il catalizzatore di questa energia, attivando un coinvolgimento che va oltre la semplice partecipazione fisica alla sua storia. Le emozioni di solidarietà, speranza e commozione si diffondono, creando un legame che travalica il semplice atto di guardare una partita. In questo modo, il corpo di Borgonovo diventa il punto di connessione tra il privato e il pubblico, tra la dimensione egoistica e quella collettiva, tra la protezione della propria integrità e la volontà di offrire la propria vulnerabilità come testimonianza di una lotta condivisa.

Questa radicale trasformazione corporea assume un significato ancora più profondo se letta alla luce del principio di prestazione che permea l’immaginario sportivo contemporaneo. Tale principio, alimentato dall’ideologia della massimizzazione continua, idealizza il corpo dell’atleta come macchina performativa potenzialmente illimitata, negando la sua intrinseca vulnerabilità (Shilling, 2003). Come osservato nel caso di Borgonovo, la malattia rappresenta una smentita radicale di questa promessa, il corpo, da strumento efficiente, si rivela nella sua finitezza biologica. La SLA, col suo impatto devastante, non solo interrompe la narrazione della prestazione, ma disvela con crudezza i limiti invalicabili della carne, ben oltre l’esperienza dell’infortunio sportivo. È in questa cesura che si manifesta la crisi della soggettività sportiva, l’illusione di una “colonizzazione della natura” da parte della tecnica e della medicina si infrange contro la realtà della morte e della sofferenza, richiamando l’attenzione sulla condizione umana come ontologicamente esposta al limite (Shilling, 2003, p. 120).

6. Tempo

La destabilizzazione dello status e la profonda alterazione dell’esperienza corporea si riflettono in modo cruciale nella percezione del tempo. È questa la terza e ultima dimensione analitica che esplorerò, comprendendo come essa sia intimamente legata alle due precedenti e costituisca un asse fondamentale per l’identità sportiva. La sociologia dello sport ci insegna che il tempo, nella sua versione moderna, è caratterizzato da temporalità “socialmente costruite” (Dunning, 1999, p. 183). Per Borgonovo, il tempo non era un mero scorrere di giorni, ma la struttura organizzata di campionati, stagioni, e la traiettoria biografica lineare della carriera, un percorso orientato al costante miglioramento fino al ritiro (Dunning, 1999). Questo orizzonte temporale, intrinsecamente performativo e legato al culmine fisiologico delle capacità, si sgretola (Dunning, 1999). I ritmi codificati dell’allenamento, della competizione, del recupero – quel calendario corporeo e sociale che aveva plasmato il suo “habitus” (Bourdieu, 1978, p. 838) di atleta e definito la sua quotidianità – vengono spazzati via. L’identità sportiva di Borgonovo, nutrita da questa

proiezione verso obiettivi futuri, si trova improvvisamente senza il suo carburante principale, il futuro performativo. Il suo tempo vissuto, prima intenso, concentrato sull'azione presente ma sempre proiettato alla prossima sfida, subisce una torsione radicale.

La diagnosi di SLA, nel post-carriera calciatore, diventa per l'ex attaccante l'incarnazione di quella «*biographical disruption*» (Bury, 1982, p. 169) di cui parla Michael Bury. È il punto di rottura che annulla la logica temporale su cui si fondava la sua identità di calciatore. La malattia, come evidenzia Bury, non è solo un evento clinico ma una frattura nella narrazione di sé che costringe a una ridefinizione al di fuori dei binari precedenti (Bury, 1982). Per Borgonovo, l'atleta il cui "sé" era indissolubilmente legato al corpo efficiente e al controllo del tempo in campo, la SLA significa uno sradicamento da quella linearità di carriera che fino a quel momento dava senso e coerenza alla propria esistenza (Bury, 1982, p. 177).

Si entra nel tempo della malattia, una dimensione che per Borgonovo si manifesta come eterogeneo, imprevedibile e spesso regressivo – in netto contrasto con la linearità e la proiettività dello sport. In questo senso, la sua vicenda può essere letta attraverso la lente di Anselm Straus, che parla di "illness trajectories" (Strauss *et al.*, 1985, p. 9). La malattia non è solo una sequenza clinica, ma una traiettoria sociale, temporale e pratica, che riorganizza profondamente la vita quotidiana (Strauss *et al.*, 1985). La traiettoria della SLA impone una nuova regia temporale fondata sull'imprevedibilità e sulla gestione progressiva della perdita, sostituendo la pianificazione sportiva con la logica dell'adattamento continuo (Strauss, *et al.*, 1985). Il tempo di Borgonovo non è più scandito dai calendari esterni della competizione, ma dal deterioramento progressivo e incontrollabile del corpo, che impone un tempo corporeo alterato e decadente (Elias, 1985). Si verifica una de-sincronizzazione radicale rispetto ai ritmi sociali e corporei precedentemente interiorizzati e condivisi con la comunità sportiva (Elias, 1985). È un tempo di forzata inattività e di attesa incerta, una perdita del controllo temporale che disallinea l'individuo non solo dal social clock tipico della sua professione, ma anche dalla sua stessa capacità di fare tempo attraverso il corpo e l'azione, minando la «sicurezza ontologica» (Giddens, 1991, p. 98) basata sulla prevedibilità temporale e corporea.

Secondo Kathy Charmaz, nelle malattie croniche si assiste a una frammentazione della temporalità vissuta, il futuro diventa incerto, il presente più denso e il passato un'ancora identitaria (Charmaz, 1991). L'atleta malato sperimenta una temporalità alterata, dove il tempo non è più uno strumento per il raggiungimento di obiettivi futuri, ma una dimensione spesso passiva, in cui la malattia impone la sua agenda (Charmaz, 1991). Il tempo vissuto diventa un tempo di passività e dipendenza, gli antipodi della padronanza temporale costruita attraverso il corpo sportivo e la sua progettualità (Charmaz, 1991). Le narrazioni autobiografiche come quella dell'ex calciatore si collocano tra le «*chaos narratives*», che esprimono l'impotenza, e le questioni narrative, dove la sofferenza diventa terreno di significato (Frank, 1995, p. 98). In questo contesto di frattura e de-sincronizzazione temporale, l'autobiografia diventa uno spazio cruciale di ricomposizione narrativa del tempo biografico fratturato (Frank, 1995). Il tempo della memoria non è una semplice fuga dal presente patologico, ma un campo di battaglia identitario dove si cerca attivamente di ri-ancorare il sé e dare continuità a una traiettoria spezzata (Frank, 1995).

Le citazioni di Borgonovo – «Vedo un pallone, tutti i giorni, tutte le ore. Voglio prendere la rincorsa e calciarlo, più forte che posso» – non sono mera nostalgia, ma l'espressione della persistenza di una temporalità corporea pregressa – quella della forza, della velocità, del gesto

tecnico – incorporata profondamente nell’habitus (Bourdieu, 1978, p. 838), che resiste alla debolezza del presente imposta dal tempo corporeo decadente della malattia. È un’identità radicata nel passato performativo che cerca disperatamente di riaffermare la sua validità nel tempo, anche contro l’evidenza fisica presente. Il dialogo «Forza, Ste, ce la farai. Sì, ce la farò» (Borgonovo & Alciato, 2015) sposta l’orientamento futuro, tipico del tempo sportivo proiettivo, la vittoria, la guarigione fisica attesa, su un piano esistenziale e simbolico, legando la speranza di “farcela” non solo alla guarigione fisica, ma alla persistenza dell’identità profonda «Perché sono un attaccante nato» (Borgonovo & Alciato, 2015).

Attraverso questa costruzione narrativa, Borgonovo crea un tempo narrativo che tenta di integrare la linearità spezzata del passato sportivo con la temporalità caotica e regressiva della malattia, proiettando un nuovo futuro basato sulla testimonianza e sul significato (Bruner, 1997). Questo processo dimostra come l’identità, anche di fronte alla destabilizzazione dei suoi ancoraggi temporali primari, ovvero il corpo performante, il calendario sociale, mobilita la memoria e la narrazione per riaffermare una forma di continuità e azione, superando la logica puramente performativa del tempo sportivo a favore di una temporalità più complessa e stratificata.

7. Conclusione

L’analisi dell’esperienza di Stefano Borgonovo, così come emerge dalla sua toccante autobiografia “Attaccante nato”, scritta con il solo ausilio del movimento oculare, offre un terreno fecondo per una riflessione sociologica approfondita sull’intersezione tra identità sportiva, celebrità, malattia e narrazione di sé. La domanda che ha guidato questa disamina – come viene esperito e rappresentato il conflitto tra l’identità del campione e quella del malato, attraverso le dimensioni cruciali dello status, del corpo e del tempo – trova risposta in un complesso processo di riconfigurazione identitaria, che trascende il dramma individuale per assurgere a fenomeno di rilevanza collettiva.

L’indagine ha messo in luce come l’identità dell’ex attaccante, originariamente forgiata sull’immagine dell’“attaccante nato” e su una carriera sportiva di successo, non si sia dissolta di fronte all’avanzare della Sclerosi Laterale Amiotrofica. Al contrario, assistiamo a una sua profonda e dinamica trasformazione. Lo status dell’ex calciatore, da *achieved celebrity* legata alle vittorie sul campo, si è evoluto verso una forma di riconoscimento fondata sulla vulnerabilità esposta pubblicamente e sull’impegno civile. Borgonovo ha saputo convertire la propria sofferenza in un capitale simbolico, diventando un testimone influente nella lotta contro la SLA e nella promozione della ricerca scientifica. Questo slittamento di status non è stato un processo passivo, ma il frutto di una co-costruzione che ha visto l’agency di Borgonovo interagire strategicamente con il contesto mediatico e sociale, che ha riconosciuto e amplificato la sua nuova missione. Parallelamente, la dimensione del corpo ha subito una metamorfosi radicale, con profonde implicazioni identitarie. Il corpo atletico, performante e disciplinato, fonte di piacere e strumento di affermazione, ha lasciato il posto a un corpo segnato dalla malattia, progressivamente immobile e fonte di sofferenza. Questa transizione ha significato la perdita di quella assenza corporea descritta da Leder, con il corpo che irrompe prepotentemente nella

coscienza, dis-apparizione, minando la sicurezza ontologica dell'individuo. Tuttavia, è proprio questo corpo vulnerato, esposto pubblicamente, a diventare un potente catalizzatore di energia emozionale ed effervescenza collettiva, trasformandosi in un simbolo di resilienza e di lotta condivisa. L'esperienza dell'atleta malato, in tal senso, decostruisce l'ideologia della prestazione illimitata che pervade l'immaginario sportivo contemporaneo, riportando al centro la finitezza e la vulnerabilità della condizione umana.

Infine, la dimensione del tempo è stata sconvolta dalla diagnosi, generando una *biographical disruption* che ha annullato la temporalità lineare e proiettiva della carriera sportiva. La malattia ha imposto una *illness trajectory* caratterizzata da imprevedibilità e dalla progressiva perdita di controllo, un tempo corporeo decadente che ha de-sincronizzato Borgonovo dai ritmi sociali precedentemente interiorizzati. In questo scenario di frattura temporale, l'atto autobiografico assume un ruolo cruciale. La narrazione diventa per Borgonovo uno spazio di ricomposizione del tempo biografico, un tentativo di tessere una continuità tra il passato da atleta, il presente della malattia e un futuro ridefinito dalla testimonianza e dalla persistenza di un'identità combattiva. Le sue parole, cariche di nostalgia ma anche di indomita volontà – «Perché sono un attaccante nato» – testimoniano la resistenza di un *habitus* che cerca di riaffermare la propria validità al di là delle contingenze fisiche.

In conclusione, la vicenda di Stefano Borgonovo, analizzata attraverso le categorie sociologiche dello status, del corpo e del tempo, si configura come un caso emblematico di come l'identità possa essere rinegoziata e ricostruita anche nelle condizioni più estreme di fragilità. La sua autobiografia non è solo il racconto di una battaglia personale contro una malattia devastante, ma rappresenta un potente atto performativo che ha permesso a Borgonovo di diventare la storia che raccontava di sé, trasformando la propria esperienza in un'eredità di significato per la collettività. Il suo percorso illumina il valore della narrazione come strumento di elaborazione del trauma e di costruzione di senso, e sottolinea la capacità dell'individuo, anche spogliato delle sue capacità fisiche, di mantenere un ruolo attivo nella società, ridefinendo i contorni della propria identità e lasciando un segno indelebile come attaccante, non più solo sul campo di calcio, ma nella vita e nella coscienza collettiva.

Questo studio, attualmente in una fase definita ma aperta a futuri sviluppi, intende mettere in luce il contributo che la vicenda di Stefano Borgonovo, e, più in generale, quello delle celebrità sportive affette da malattie neurodegenerative, può offrire alla comprensione del profondo legame tra sport, identità e malattia. L'analisi dei significati simbolici ancora inesplorati legati alla sua storia rappresenta un terreno di ricerca fertile per ampliare ulteriormente la riflessione sociologica sull'esperienza soggettiva della malattia. Tuttavia, i limiti di questo studio risiedono nell'approccio centrato su un singolo caso autobiografico, che pur nella sua eccezionalità, richiederebbe una comparazione con altre esperienze simili per corroborare le intuizioni interpretative e fenomenologiche emerse.

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The football turn in contemporary art: how the game became an artistic language

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Abstract

The article explores the “football turn” in contemporary art, analysing how football has progressively become a legitimate cultural object within the artistic field. Drawing on the model of cultural diamond developed by Wendy Griswold the study examines the intersections between football and contemporary art, focusing on the practices, institutions, and symbolic processes that have enabled their convergence. Through UK-based case studies ranging from the 1953 exhibition *Football and the Fine Arts* to recent initiatives such as OOF Gallery and *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait*, the article reconstructs the historical and sociological conditions that have transformed football from a site of mass alienation into a space for artistic dialogue and experimentation. By intersecting art and football, the analysis highlights how these two systems, once considered irreconcilable, overlap in the neoliberal order of images, generating a hybrid cultural ecosystem where symbolic logics are shared, reconfigured, reproduced and contested.¹

Keywords: Contemporary art, Football, Cultural diamond, Neoliberalism, Cultural production.

1. Introduction

On the occasion of the reunion of the historic Manchester band Oasis, Bohemian FC – the oldest football club in Ireland, owned by its supporters – produced a special jersey for the FAI Cup. In direct collaboration with the Gallagher brothers, who personally approved the project, the Dublin-based club designed a kit in which the sponsor’s logo, usually placed at the centre of the shirt, was replaced by the distinctive Oasis logo: white lettering on a black rectangular background, in Helvetica Black Oblique. This choice, which shifted attention from the economic to the cultural register, rapidly turned the Bohemian shirt into a viral object. It was not the first time, however. The previous year, the club had entered into an agreement with the band Fontaines DC, whose shirt was even worn by Greta Thunberg during her participation in the

¹ The term “turn” in the title – signalling contemporary art’s renewed attention to football-related themes and symbolisms – is inspired by Claire Bishop’s notion of the “social turn” articulated in her influential 2006 Artforum essay “The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents.” In that text, Bishop diagnoses a significant shift in contemporary art and criticism towards practices prioritising social engagement and collaboration while urging a critical balance between aesthetic and ethical criteria in assessing socially engaged work.

Flotilla². The idea of associating a football shirt with a musical group is not entirely unprecedented, particularly in England. During the 2020/2021 season, the post-hardcore band Enter Shikari sponsored the club of their hometown, St Albans, competing in the National League South. Even earlier, the pioneering heavy metal band Iron Maiden presented themselves as an actual football team in the booklet for their 1998 album *Virtual XI*: personalised shirts bearing the “Maiden” logo and the five band members arranged in a virtual line-up alongside Premier League stars such as Stuart Pearce, Faustino Asprilla, Paul Gascoigne, Ian Wright, Patrick Vieira, and Marc Overmars.

The Oasis episode was certainly extraordinary, but it illustrates a longer history of intersections between football and music. Despite the visibility generated by the Oasis-Bohemian collaboration, the relationship between music and football is, in many respects, already codified. In the same way, the dialogue between art and football is not entirely new. We may recall, for instance, the constructivists sport kit designed by Varvara Stepanova in 1928, or Umberto Boccioni’s *Dynamism of a Football Player* (1913), held at MoMA in New York. What is particularly interesting is the emergence, particularly since the 2000s, of a more systematic engagement of contemporary art with football, opening itself up to its languages, aesthetics and social dimensions. A striking example was offered by the 2025 Venice Architecture Biennale, where the Dutch Pavilion placed football at the centre of reflection with the project *SIDELINED: A Space to Rethink Togetherness*. The stated aim was to explore sport as both architectural and social device, capable of organising spaces, bodies and behaviours. Adopting a queer perspective, the project questioned conventional norms related to gender, identity and collective dynamics, seeking to redefine the ways in which we gather and interact in public space. Alongside the installations presented in the Pavilion – such as a one-goal table football reconfigured as a performative and relational space where the rules of the game become a terrain of symbolic experimentation – the project extended to Venice’s Pierluigi Penzo Stadium, involving the women’s team of Venezia F.C. To crown this collaboration, an interview with the artist Gabriel Fontana and curator Amanda Pinatih was published on the club’s official website: a tangible sign of how the boundaries between seemingly distant worlds – contemporary art and professional football – can indeed be traversed³. Following this line, the aim of this text is to examine the relations between football and contemporary art, reconstructing the points of convergence and the conditions that have made their encounter possible. The guiding question, deceptively simple, is how such an entanglement between two traditionally distant worlds has come to take shape. From this, two lines of inquiry emerge. First, how has the incorporation of football into contemporary art practices redefined the relationships between artists, artworks, and audiences within the artistic field? Second: how and why have art criticism and institutions come to recognise football not merely as a terrain of mass alienation – as denounced by a certain strand of leftist tradition (P. Kennedy & D. Kennedy, 2016) but also as a legitimate space for dialogue and cultural experimentation? To address these questions, the analysis draws on Wendy Griswold’s cultural diamond model, as the phenomenon under examination is configured through a still-emerging set of relationships. At this early stage, it is therefore more productive to foreground the existence

² For further details see: <https://oasis-bohemianfc.com> (last access 25th September 2025).

³ For the entire interview see: <https://www.veneziafc.it/en/news/sidelined-a-space-to-rethink-togetherness-the-dutch-pavilion-at-biennale-architettura-2025> (last access 25th September 2025).

of these relational dynamics and to make their key nodes explicit, rather than to articulate definitive causal linkages. The analysis seeks to delineate interpretive keys to the meanings generated by this convergence. The case studies were selected within the UK's contemporary art field on the basis of specific criteria. Each example is formally recognised for its artistic value within the institutional system of contemporary art. The exhibition *Football and the Fine Arts* (1953), for instance, was organised in collaboration with the Arts Council of Great Britain, a non-departmental public body dedicated to promoting the fine arts nationwide. OOF Gallery consistently works with artists who have received major international awards and distinctions such as Martin Parr and Jeremy Deller. Douglas Gordon, a Glasgow-born artist who won the Turner Prize in 1996 and later represented Great Britain at the Venice Biennale, co-produced the work *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait* with Philippe Parreno, a central piece of investigation for this text. A further criterion concerned the presence of direct collaboration with recognised football institutions. The 1953 exhibition was developed in partnership with the Football Association, while the video installation dedicated to Zidane was produced with the involvement of Real Madrid. OOF Gallery, moreover, emerged as part of the urban development project associated with the construction of Tottenham Hotspur's new stadium in North London. More broadly, the UK art system operates within a social context in which football – as illustrated by the musical examples discussed earlier – holds a widely acknowledged cultural significance. Moreover, F.C. United of Manchester represents a football-rooted example of how certain artistic practices can contribute to redefining a club's public image by aligning with, and reinforcing, an expected collective imaginary. In this specific case, although it is not a matter of contemporary art in the strictest sense, the use of cinema and music has played a decisive role in the reconfiguration of the club's symbolic horizon. Music and cinema – understood here also in the form of video installation – are likewise central to *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait* and can therefore be fully integrated within this shared cultural language.

This research builds upon fieldwork begun in 2016, when, together with the artist Luca Resta, I co-founded *Autopalo*, a project aimed at directly analysing the models and processes of participatory artistic practice in urban space through football. Within this trajectory, particular attention is devoted to the English context, with the case of OOF Gallery, in which I personally participated as a selected artist. This experience constitutes the empirical foundation of the reflection developed here⁴.

2. Theoretical framework: the cultural diamond

Methodologically, the article adopts a qualitative, relational approach, using case studies as analytical lenses to trace processes of cultural legitimation rather than to establish causal generalisations. The cultural diamond model, developed by Griswold (1986) as “an accounting device intended to encourage a fuller understanding of any cultural object's relationship to the social world”, (Griswold, 1994, pp. 15-16) is grounded in a specific definition of the cultural object and the role it plays in the human construction of meaning. Griswold defines a cultural

⁴ For an analysis of *Autopalo*'s work, see: Meschini E.R. (2025). *Autoetnografia di una ricerca. Come studiare la pratica artistica attraverso il calcio*, in: Mancini M.G. (ed.by), *Attraverso territorio e cultura*. Milan: Mimesis.

object as “a shared significance embodied in form” (Griswold, 1994, p.12) In other words, it is an expressive vehicle for meaning that is “audible, visible, or tangible, or that can be articulated” (Griswold, 1994, p.12). In this view, the cultural object is not simply a static artefact but “an interpretation, a set of meanings that fit into a context of ideas and institutions, that transform random happenings into events, and that suggest an appropriate set of attitudes and actions” (Griswold, 1994, p.134). This definition calls into question the creative dimension of the human being – both individual and collective – placing particular emphasis on the agency of those who produce and those who receive culture. In sociological terms, *agency* refers to the capacity of individuals or groups to act autonomously, to make decisions, and to influence the social context in which they are embedded (Paltrinieri & Spampinato, 2024; Gell, 2021). From this perspective, the cultural object appears as a dynamic node of relations between producers/creators, receivers, and the social world: not a fixed entity, but a process in constant transformation, capable of generating meanings while simultaneously being reshaped by them. Culture is thus not merely reflection but also practice, interpretation, and mediation: the cultural object becomes a symbolic device through which human beings make sense of the world they inhabit. The cultural diamond proves valuable precisely because it enables us to visualise and analyse these relations among four poles: creators, receivers, the cultural object itself, and the social world. Borrowing the metaphor of a baseball diamond, Griswold describes a geometrical figure in which each side represents a possible relation, for a total of six connections. As Griswold notes, the cultural diamond is neither a theory – “because it says nothing about the points relate” – nor a causal model, since “it does not indicate cause and effect” (Griswold, 1994, p. 15). Rather, it functions as a device of revelation: it makes connections visible, clarifies the dynamics of relationships, and highlights the internal movement of cultural objects. The vertical axis replays the logics of reflection theory: depending on the “direction chosen” it can show how culture reflects the material conditions of society (as in the Marxist conception of culture as superstructure resting upon economic forces of production), or, conversely, how social life reflects cultural visions, as in Weber’s analysis of the Protestant ethic and its influence on the development of capitalism (Weber, 1904). The horizontal axis, meanwhile, foregrounds the interaction between creators and receivers, emphasising that cultural production is never unilateral but always shaped by reception, interpretation, and what Jauss (1987) termed the “horizon of expectation” – the sediment of prior cultural and social experience carried by the audience. Research in the sociology of sport has demonstrated that football extends far beyond its symbolic or identity value (Martelli, Porro, 2013). Rather, it is embedded in a dense web of relations that both shift with the repositioning of the social world and actively reshape that world through the interaction of creators and receivers.

3. The cultural diamond in football

The cultural object “football” has itself been transformed over time through multiple relationships that the cultural diamond makes visible. The meanings football acquires in people’s lives are constructed through heterogeneous and layered practices. Among these, the most immediate and salient relation is that which links the cultural object to its receivers – essentially,

the fans. Yet this relation is never simplistic nor unidirectional. The axis that connects football to its supporters intersects with all the other dimensions of the diamond, producing meanings that must be situated in their social contexts. A particularly emblematic case is that of F.C. United of Manchester (FCUM). The club was founded in 2005, when a portion of Manchester United's supporters opposed the takeover by American businessman Malcolm Glazer, seen as yet another step towards the commodification of football. Escalating ticket prices, the subordination of fixtures to television schedules, and the transformation of stadiums into sanitised, corporate spaces had already fractured the bond between club and community (Brown, 1998; 2008). Against this backdrop, a group of supporters chose to abandon Old Trafford and create a new team based on values of community and association. Thus, FCUM was born, organised as a Community Benefit Society: democratic, non-profit, and collectively owned, with around 2,000 co-owners and a system of community shares that raised over £2 million. With the motto "Our Club, Our Rules," the supporters redefined themselves from receivers into creators, reshaping the very meaning of football belonging. This was not merely symbolic⁵. In 2015 the club inaugurated Broadhurst Park, a 4,400-seat stadium that reclaimed the tradition of terraces and functioned as a community infrastructure: shared spaces, social services, and initiatives during the pandemic. Culturally, FCUM has articulated an imaginary rooted in resistance and independence. This imagery has been reinforced through cinema and music: Ken Loach's film *Looking for Eric* (2009), featuring the iconic Manchester United captain Eric Cantona, tied football directly to narratives of working-class solidarity and resilience. The choice of Loach – long attentive to working-class experiences – was far from casual, and many of his films contain football references. Musically, the club's culture resonates with *I Wanna Be Adored* (1989) by The Stone Roses, a band from Manchester central to the "Madchester" scene, which fused football, music, and rave culture in the late 1980s. The anthem, played regularly at Broadhurst Park, encapsulates the ethos of FCUM: not selling one's soul, but seeking recognition on one's own terms. The case of FC United of Manchester can be approached from what may be defined as a football-based perspective and interpreted as a process of cultural legitimation grounded in grassroots agency. A key role in this process is played by cultural intermediaries (Heinich, 2012), understood not only as individual actors but as cultural infrastructures that enable mediation, circulation, and meaning-making. In the FCUM case, this intermediary function – albeit indirectly – can be attributed to the field of cinema, and in particular to the work of director Ken Loach. Through his film, Loach situates FCUM within a set of widely recognisable cultural frames, facilitating its intelligibility beyond the football domain and enhancing its symbolic visibility. His representation shifts FCUM away from a purely sporting reading and inscribes it within a narrative of struggle, a recurring theme in his work. Crucially, the focus of this narrative is not the team as a competitive unit, but its supporters. Fans are portrayed as active social actors whose collective practices, values, and forms of self-organisation constitute the core of the club's meaning. Through this representational shift, FCUM emerges less as a football club and more as a collectively produced social formation, embedded in broader histories of class, resistance, and community. Supporters are thus framed not as passive consumers of the football spectacle, but

⁵ Details on the management of the club are available on its official website: <https://fc-utd.co.uk/manifesto> (last access 28th September 2025).

as protagonists in the construction and circulation of cultural and political meanings. A comparable process of cultural mediation can be observed in the relationship between FCUM supporters and the legacy of The Stone Roses. In this case, the band functions as a symbolic resource appropriated by fans as a model for representing an underground, niche form of football culture that nonetheless claims a form of cultural primogeniture. This symbolic positioning gains particular significance in relation to the far more globally visible band Oasis, whose members have publicly declared both their support for Manchester City and the influence of The Stone Roses on their musical trajectory. By mobilising this lineage, FCUM supporters articulate a counter-hegemonic cultural identity that operates through selective appropriation, subcultural memory, and distinction, reinforcing the club's positioning within an alternative cultural economy of football.

4. The cultural diamond in the sociology of sport

The cultural diamond, which we have heuristically applied to the case of FCUM, can also be fruitfully employed within the sociology of sporting cultures. Its utility does not lie in defining football as a cultural object *per se*, but rather in tracing the ramifications and relational complexities that make it such. Used retrospectively, the diamond allows us to capture the multifaceted interactions that football has generated. Each axis of the model, in fact, points towards a distinct field of inquiry. Let us begin with the axis connecting the cultural object “football” to its consumers, namely supporters, whether with high or low levels of identification (Bifulco & Pirone, 2014). Studies on highly identified fans have often analysed the rituality of fandom as a form of “miniaturised battle” (Morris 1981; Dal Lago, 1990; Giulianotti 2002), highlighting the production of identity mechanisms, the incorporation of collective narratives, and the enactment of practices that, in some cases, assumed disruptive traits (Kennedy, 2016). These studies – alongside others that cannot be recalled here for reasons of space – have investigated not only the relationship between football and its fans, but also the dense web of relations that fans weave among themselves, giving rise to parallel systems of sociability and mutual aid. A telling example comes from research on amateur football in Argentina (Frydenberg, 2011; Daskal, 2017; Reyna, 2016), which demonstrates how, in a formative stage of state-building, clubs functioned as *enfrustradas ciudadanas* (Daskal, 2013), filling gaps in welfare provision and responding to cultural needs. Along the same axis of consumers, considerable scholarship has focused on organised fandom and, in particular, the ultras movement. Valerio Marchi (1994) investigated the differences between the ultras model and hooliganism, and later devoted a detailed analysis to a single match: the 2004 Rome–Lazio derby, marked by violent clashes following the false news of a child's death (Marchi, 2005). Research into ultras has shown the adaptability of the phenomenon to local contexts (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2009), disentangling it from reductive stereotypes and conceptualising it as a complex puzzle (Spaij & Viñas 2005), albeit not without its internal contradictions. Equally, lower levels of identification have been analysed, particularly in relation to the transformation of football into a mass spectacle and the correlative shift of supporters into consumers (Bromberger, 1999; Kuper & Szymanski, 2010). The nexus between football, its supporters, and the broader social world has also been examined through the lens of masculinity (Archetti, 1999; Alabarces, 2004; King, 1997) and gender more

broadly (Pitti, 2019). Turning to the axis of creators, understood here as players and clubs, scholarship has explored the reconstruction of post-career trajectories within the framework of celebrity studies (Tirino, Russo & Castellano, 2024), as well as the socio-historical formation of specific teams (Colozza, 2025). At this level, the link between history and the sociology of sport emerges clearly, as in studies retracing the sociopolitical genesis of mega-events such as the FIFA World Cup (Brizzi & Sbeti, 2018).

5. Football and art before the 2000s: the case of “Football and the Fine Arts”

The relationship between art and football has an important precedent dating back to the 1950s, when attempts were first made to bring the game into the sphere of national cultural dissemination. As reconstructed by Ray Physick (2013), this is the context in which the exhibition *Football and the Fine Arts* was inaugurated in London in 1953, marking the 90th anniversary of the Football Association (FA) and organised in collaboration with the Arts Council of Great Britain. The declared aim of the initiative was to bring together two apparently distant worlds, by inviting artists to represent matches or scenes connected with the game of football. As J. St John, one of the organisers, put it, “the worlds of art and football were not so far apart. The excitement of admiring paint skilfully applied to the canvas was not so far removed from artistry of by men like Mercer, Puskás and Matthews” (Liverpool Daily Post, 1954). Beyond fostering a new connection between two fields traditionally seen as separate, the exhibition also sought, on the one hand, to secure new sources of funding for the arts sector, and on the other, to confer cultural legitimacy upon football. Physick highlights how the FA had already begun to show an interest in visual language in the years leading up to the exhibition, experimenting with artistic commissions. The aim was not only to expand the representation of the game to a wider and more diverse audience, but also to construct a cultural image of football akin to that already associated with more “noble” sports such as cricket. As the exhibition catalogue put it: “Compared with cricket, there is no tradition in Britain of football painting.” (Physick, 2013, p. 46) A telling contrast is offered by Camille Pissarro, one of the leading figures of Impressionism, who, during his 1897 stay in England, painted *Cricket Match at Bedford Park, London*. While cricket was perceived between the wars as the quintessential national sport, it was football that drew mass audiences and, particularly in working-class districts, came to embody the *de facto* national sport. The exhibition featured 152 works, which Physick divides according to subject. Forty depicted stadiums, ranging from Stamford Bridge to The Valley, as well as lesser-known grounds such as Goldstone Ground (Brighton), Fratton Park (Portsmouth), Brunton Park (Carlisle) and Burnden Park (Bolton). The latter was captured in one of the most emblematic works linking art and football: Laurence Stephen Lowry’s *Going to the Match* (1928). A further twenty-seven paintings depicted football played in “community settings” – matches improvised on public fields, streets, or vacant lots. Around fifteen works focused instead on action within the game itself, often adopting a wide perspective that situated the stadium within its urban surroundings of working-class housing, power stations, and vestiges of a still-rural landscape. Between 1953 and 1954, in keeping with its aim of broadening audiences for this emerging subject, the exhibition toured several British cities, with uneven results. The greatest success came in Birkenhead, where the Williamson Art

Gallery drew over 21,000 visitors, aided by the display of trophies, medals, and memorabilia belonging to Ralph “Dixie” Dean, Everton’s legendary striker of the 1930s. Manchester (around 12,000 visitors) and Bootle (5,000) also recorded strong numbers, whereas in Bradford – despite being home to two professional clubs – the 5,773 attendees were deemed disappointing. Sheffield and Blackpool attracted modest crowds (7,000 and 2,000), while Wolverhampton stood out for its enthusiastic reception, hailed as “the most popular exhibition of the year” (Physick, 2013, p. 50). Some galleries – including Liverpool, Burnley, Stafford, Rochdale, and Birmingham – refused to host the show, citing either financial constraints or, more often, prejudice against football as an unsuitable theme for “serious” art institutions. For many years thereafter, *Football and the Fine Arts* remained an isolated case of collaboration between the worlds of football and art. As Physick suggests, only from the mid-1990s did this relationship begin to take more structured form. Once again, England played a pioneering role, with two notable exhibitions: *Offside*, hosted initially at Manchester Art Gallery before travelling to other venues, which explored complex social questions through football-related art; and *England’s Glory*, more commercially oriented and staged in a private London gallery, which displayed both contemporary works and pieces originally exhibited in 1953.

6. The intersection of football and contemporary art

The relationship between contemporary art and football began to consolidate in the 2000s, and particularly in 2006. This does not mean that artists had previously ignored the theme – examples in Italy include Enzo Umbaca, active from the mid-1990s, the match between curators and artists at the Bologna Art Fair, and the well-known 1993 work from Maurizio Cattelan’s *Rauss* (Bishop, 2012; Meschini 2021). These were pioneering experiments, anticipating a growing interest, but they emerged outside of a structured field of recognition and validation, with all the indeterminacy that such a context entailed. The year 2006 has since come to be treated as a watershed moment: a point of transition between an art world without football and one in which football became a legitimate cultural subject. Of course, this is an analytical rather than empirical date, constructed retrospectively through research choices and patterns of interpretation that were not visible with such clarity at the time. Two key episodes marked this turning point, both signalling a move toward greater formalisation of language and content. The first was the exhibition *One Love: The Football Art Prize*, hosted at the Lowry Galleries in Salford to coincide with the 2006 World Cup in Germany. Sponsored by the sports brand Umbro, the exhibition was staged in the same institution that houses one of the emblematic works from the 1953 show, thus seeking to create a sense of continuity over time (Melucci, 2000). The second was the release of the film-installation *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait*, directed by established contemporary artists Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno, and premiered – receiving critical acclaim – at the 2006 Cannes Film Festival. From the perspective of the cultural diamond, *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait* exemplifies several themes that would become recurring refrains over the following two decades, ultimately helping to articulate a degree of discursive autonomy. The work by Gordon and Parreno is a film-installation centred on a Spanish Liga match (Real Madrid vs. Villarreal, 23 April 2005), observed entirely through the perspective of Zinedine Zidane. Seventeen cameras

followed him for the full ninety minutes, while the soundtrack by Scottish post-rock band Mogwai provided the rhythm of play. There is no commentary, no sporting narrative, only an aesthetic and iconic portrait: gestures, silences, intervals of waiting, culminating in Zidane's final expulsion, which exposes the duality of the champion – poised between control and vulnerability. It is, in every sense, a portrait aligned with the artists own aesthetic. Gordon, for example, had already explored questions of time, duration, and hyper-representation in *24 Hour Psycho* (1993), where each frame of Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) was slowed down to stretch the original 109 minutes into a twenty-four-hour projection. Here, Zidane emerges as an icon of the present: a figure condensing cultural and political tensions – French of Algerian descent, national hero yet distanced from mainstream representations. In this sense, he functions as a perfect catalyst for aesthetic reflection, to the point of appearing on the cover of the Italian edition of Marc Auge's *Finzioni di fine secolo*, a collection of essays in which the anthropologist recounts, also, his own experience as a spectator at the 1998 World Cup in France. While remaining faithful to the artistic idiom of Gordon and Parreno, the work is also firmly embedded within the football system: it was produced in the context of a real match, with both club and league actively participating in its realisation. Art and football do not merely reinterpret one another; they converge. The artist and the player, the gallery and the stadium, art and football operate together as parts of the same creative dispositif. If Andy Warhol's 1978 pop portrait of Pelé isolated the player and transformed him into a consumer icon, Gordon and Parreno's work positions Zidane as a systemic figure, foreshadowing the deeper incorporation of football into the neoliberal circuits of image and spectacle.

7. The OOF gallery

As with the Oasis–Bohemian collaboration, *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait* marks another peak – this time a generative one. From this moment onward, the relationship between art and football began to acquire a systemic dimension. In England, in particular, a genuine cultural ecosystem has emerged (Allegrini, 2021), composed of museums, prizes, creative enterprises, and social initiatives, all capable of translating football into recognised aesthetic languages. Consider, for instance, the Football Art Prize, promoted by Arts Council England, or the role of the National Football Museum in Manchester as a hub for research, memory, and artistic production⁶. Parallel to these initiatives, companies such as *The Art of Football* and *Classic Football Shirts* have transformed football culture into fashion and design, even sponsoring professional clubs such as Burnley and Parma. This ecosystem reached public visibility through the major exhibition *Football: City, Art, United* (Manchester, 2025), curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist and former footballer Juan Mata. The exhibition staged dialogues between artists and players: Suzanne Lacy, pioneer of socially engaged practices, with Vivianne Miedema and Ali Riley on women's football; Ryan Gander with Eric Cantona in a reflection on time and memory; and Philippe Parreno, thereby

⁶ The most recent Football Art Prize edition, held in 2022 at the Millennium Gallery in Sheffield, included among the jury members David James, former goalkeeper of the English national team, confirming the dialogue between these two worlds.

symbolically closing the circle opened in 2006⁷. Within this landscape, the foundation of the OOF Gallery in London (2021) stands as an emblematic development – the first gallery entirely dedicated to the relationship between contemporary art and football. Emerging from the earlier experience of *OOF Magazine* (2017), founded by critic Eddy Frankel together with Jennie and Justin Hammond, the gallery was built on the premise that football constitutes a powerful collective emotional experience – beyond mere aesthetic representation. OOF Gallery invites artists to approach the game as a metaphor of shared sensibilities, identity tensions, and collective emotions, through exhibitions, events, and publications featuring figures such as Emile-Smory Fofana, Jeremy Deller, Martin Parr, and Corbin Shaw. Alongside its curatorial programme, Frankel and the Hammonds organised events such as a five-a-side football tournament, involving leading London institutions including the Lisson Gallery, Tate, and Christie’s. At the second edition in 2023, staged at the N17 Arena – part of the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium complex – the Tate emerged as the winner. The trophy, designed by artist Mark Wallinger, was awarded by former Spurs captain Ledley King. Through this interplay of institutions, practices, and languages, football has achieved a stable place within the geographies of contemporary art, consolidating its legitimacy as a field of cultural and symbolic production.

8. The establishment of the gallery and the urban regeneration plan

OOF Gallery is located within the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium, housed in the historic Warmington House. The gallery is accessed through the stadium’s retail store, and it is not insignificant that Justin Hammond himself has long been a season ticket holder at Tottenham, underscoring the biographical and affective entanglement with the club. From the perspective of its relation to the “social world”, OOF Gallery occupies a pivotal position within the intersection of the art and football, as it was an integral component of the urban regeneration programme that accompanied the construction of the new stadium and the redevelopment of its surrounding area. The new Tottenham Hotspur Stadium exemplifies a broader trend towards “integrated” stadiums, where, as Tosi argues, “the stadium becomes a part of the city and the city enters the stadium” (Tosi, 2018, p. 51). From the outset, the Tottenham project was conceived not simply as the replacement of the historic White Hart Lane, but as one of the most ambitious football-related regeneration schemes in Europe – capable of profoundly reshaping the social and economic fabric of the borough. Launched as the *Northumberland Development Project* in the late 2010s, the scheme responded to Tottenham Hotspur’s ambition to build a modern, competitive stadium, in line with developments already undertaken by other clubs such as Manchester City and their North London rivals Arsenal. However, the project extended far beyond the stadium itself, encompassing an extensive urban transformation of the surrounding area. From the beginning, the process encountered significant opposition: from businesses and residents affected by compulsory purchase orders, to concerns regarding the loss of historic buildings, rising gentrification, reductions in affordable housing, and the impact on traffic and

⁷ For the preparation of this article, I conducted an interview with Caterina Avataneo, Assistant Curator of the exhibition, who provided valuable insights into the genesis of the project, the criteria guiding the selection of artists, and the process through which relationships between artists and football players were established.

neighbourhood quality of life (see Report 2015). Multiple rounds of authorisation were required, with successive revisions to the masterplan. These changes included expanding the stadium's capacity to over 62,000 seats, creating new public spaces, and integrating cultural and commercial facilities. Like many regeneration plans affecting historically or culturally significant districts, the Tottenham project placed particular emphasis on art – both in terms of architectural heritage and as a core element of urban and social regeneration policy. In this respect, the 2015 *Strategic Planning Application Stage 1 Referral* of the Greater London Authority (GLA) provided the then-mayor Boris Johnson with a framework for evaluation. The report described the intervention area in detail. On the western side of the stadium, at the corner of High Road and Park Lane, stood the club shop, while further north, at 744 High Road, was Warmington House – a three-storey brick and stucco building dating from around 1828, listed as Grade II (of national historic and architectural interest). At the time, the building was vacant and shuttered. It was incorporated into a multi-use zone designated as the “Tottenham Experience (Sui Generis)”, which included “museum and learning facilities, including a Museum of Tottenham Heritage, and a Club Museum.” (Report, 2015, paragraph 27). The report repeatedly emphasised the significance of art and cultural heritage. Paragraph 49 explicitly situated the project within the *Upper Lee Valley Opportunity Area*, recognising art and culture, alongside sport and tourism, as strategic functions of regeneration. This framing reveals how the relationship between football and art was embedded within a holistic regeneration agenda. After years of appeals and negotiations, final approval was granted in 2015, paving the way for construction to begin the following year. The new stadium was inaugurated in 2019. Two years later, in 2021, OOF Gallery opened its doors in Warmington House.

9. The exhibition “The Art of the Football Scarf” and the solo show “It’s the Hope That Keeps Us Here”

In recent years OOF Gallery has developed a programme that operates fully as an “institution” of contemporary art. Alongside its exhibitions, the gallery runs a residency programme that provides artists with the possibility to live and conduct research on site. On the curatorial level, OOF’s programme is both rich and complex, offering several critical and artistic insights. An exemplary case in this regard – one that I discuss here also due to my direct involvement as a selected artist – is the exhibition *The Art of the Football Scarf*, held from 4 November 2022 to 25 February 2023. The collective exhibition brought together a group of mainly emerging artists, many of whom were not formally represented by galleries. It was the first OOF show to articulate itself on two levels internal to the contemporary art system: on the one hand, a collective exhibition; on the other, a solo show by an established artist, Mark Titchner, who in that same year had been shortlisted for the Turner Prize, the most prestigious award in British contemporary art. The lower floor of Warmington House hosted his solo exhibition *It’s the Hope That Keeps Us Here*, where Titchner reworked visual languages taken from football fandom and coaching manuals, transforming them into immersive installations composed of mirrors, video, and sound. In doing so, he explored the internal communication systems of football and how these are reflected – literally – into everyday life. Titchner’s project also included an intervention

that strikingly crossed the creator/audience axes of the cultural diamond. Working with the football scarf as concept, Titchner – an artist usually associated with large-scale installations – re-laborated the motto *We Believe in Us*, shifting it from the scale of a scarf to that of an environmental installation. During the Premier League match between Tottenham Hotspur and Leeds United (12 November 2022), the phrase was broadcast across the LED screens and digital structures of the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium, effectively turning the game into a collective art installation⁸. As reported in *The Art Newspaper*, this was the first time an artist had displayed work during a Premier League match⁹. The effect was to blur the conventional boundaries between art and football space, embedding the artwork directly into the live fabric of the event. The meanings generated here are multiple and intersect across different axes. In English football culture, unlike in Ultras traditions, banners are not an essential element of fan scenography. Many fanbases support their teams primarily through scarf displays, although “patches” – small banners – belonging to individuals or groups are also present. In several new English stadiums, such as Manchester City’s Etihad, horizontal LED screens have increasingly been used not only for commercial purposes but also to display virtual patches. While the appropriation of advertising formats by artists to subvert or reframe their messages is hardly new – Barbara Kruger and Group Material’s anti-AIDS campaigns in New York are notable examples – what was innovative here was the live remediation between football fandom and the commercialisation of football within a neoliberal framework (P. Kennedy & D. Kennedy, 2016) where the distinction between supporter and consumer becomes increasingly blurred. Between the collective and Titchner’s solo project, the intersections of the art/football become particularly visible. The football scarf, on the one hand, belongs to the world of fandom – not merely as a merchandising object but as a tool of collective agency. On the other hand, its artistic reworking relocates it within an authorial dimension closer to the creators. Indeed, the football scarf had already appeared in the work of artists such as Maurizio Cattelan and Aurore Le Duc, while Corbin Shaw has more recently focused on “patches.” The collective *The Art of the Football Scarf* therefore explored fandom’s collective dimension through an artistic, bottom-up perspective, working around a shared theme. Almost one hundred scarves, made by dozens of artists, were suspended from the ceiling and walls of the gallery, echoing the way scarves are displayed in pubs, fan group headquarters, or bedrooms. Among the participants were David Shrigley, the Guerrilla Girls, Babak Ganjei, Gray Wielebinski, Aurore Le Duc, and Bedwyr Williams. Some artists, such as Joe Richardson, expressed a genuine interest in football not only as a sport passionately followed but also as an established cultural language. His scarf *There’s always a next week* – also worn at Cheltenham Town matches – referred to the club’s run of eleven games without scoring, equalling records held by Coventry (1919–20) and Hartlepool United (1992–93). The phrase, as Richardson explained, came from the spontaneous shout of a supporter during a match: a fragment of football orality transformed into an artwork.

⁸ News of Titchner’s intervention is also reported on Tottenham’s official website, reinforcing the connection with the artistic initiatives promoted by OOF Gallery: <https://www.tottenhamhotspur.com/news/2022/november/mark-titchner-brings-celebration-of-football-fandom-through-art-to-n17-this-winter/> (last access 28th September 2025).

⁹ Full article at: <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2022/11/18/oof-turns-premier-league-football-match-into-a-mass-art-installation> (last access 28th September 2025).

10. The role of cultural intermediaries

Although the central focus of this contribution is to highlight the emergence of a new connection between football and art – one oriented towards a progressive process of systemic structuration – it is nevertheless necessary to pause on a figure that takes shape precisely within the spaces of intersection between these two realms: that of cultural intermediaries (Bourdieu, 1984; Negus, 2002; Heinich, 2012). In this respect, a particularly significant role is played by OOF Gallery, which operates as an actor positioned between the field of contemporary art and that of football. The language, positioning, and institutional credibility of OOF Gallery are grounded in an artistic foundation already fully legitimised within the contemporary art system. Drawing on Bourdieu's formulation, cultural intermediaries occupy a position in which 'jobs and careers have not yet acquired the rigidity of the older bureaucratic professions' (Bourdieu 1984, p.151). Access to such roles occurs predominantly through networks of relationships, shared values, and common life experiences, rather than through meritocratic mechanisms based on formal procedures of evaluation and recruitment. As shown above, the British art–football nexus is structured, on the one hand, by the cultural production of the contemporary art world and, on the other, by an emerging demand for cultural content within football itself. The actors revolving around OOF Gallery, as well as the artists involved in the Manchester exhibition curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist, belong to a shared artistic ecosystem capable of ensuring recognition, continuity, and symbolic stability. It is within this framework that the work of OOF Gallery assumes relevance as both a mediating function and a crucial node in processes of legitimation. In his work on cultural intermediaries, Keith Negus questions the extent to which these actors are creative, active, and reflexive, drawing on earlier studies of those occupying so-called *boundary-spanning roles* – a term introduced by Paul Hirsch (1972) in a series of works on the music, publishing, and film industries. Hirsch conceptualised the relationship between production and consumption through the metaphors of filters and flows, relying on the notion of the *gatekeeper*. As Negus observes, one of the most significant contributions of this strand of literature lies in demonstrating how the production of symbolic materials is often the outcome of established routines that require limited effort in terms of research and innovation: the updating of pre-existing content, the rewriting of familiar forms, and the reuse of tested formats and narrative schemes. Such routines render work more manageable by enabling actors to cope with temporal pressures and production constraints, while introducing a degree of predictability that encourages adherence to formulas that have already proven successful. Although this body of literature may initially appear distant from more recent debates on cultural intermediaries, it proves crucial for understanding the professional practices of this class fraction. It suggests that a substantial portion of work related to symbolic goods and services unfolds through adherence to genre conventions and standardised formulas, operating predominantly within – rather than across – organisational boundaries. It is precisely within this tension between habit and innovation that the activity of OOF Gallery can be located. Its work consists in transferring the modalities of artistic production into the football world, while simultaneously working on the legitimation of artworks through the legitimation of the field that hosts them. In this sense, the artwork gains recognition when it is inscribed within the symbolic space of the Premier League, and more specifically within a

London-based club that is central yet not part of the top-tier sporting elite, such as Tottenham, and that is undergoing a phase of identity reconstruction. It is precisely this condition of transition and openness that makes possible a renegotiation of the club's image, creating margins for artistic practices to intervene as devices of reinterpretation and re-signification. The examples analysed here explicitly operate through the transfer of competencies and dispositifs specific to contemporary art into the ordinary universe of football, with its rituals, symbolic figures, and sites of sociability. The exhibition devoted to scarves, the insertion of Titchner's slogan into the LED displays of Tottenham's stadium, and the very location of the gallery within the stadium complex all constitute elements of a broader process of re-signification and legitimation. Within this intertwining of art and football, it is the parameters of the artistic field – rather than those of the footballing world – that function as criteria of recognition. Consequently, legitimacy is not granted to the artist who has supported a club for the longest time or to one who has experienced a stadium ban (*DASPO*) – forms of symbolic capital internal to ultras culture – but rather to those who already possess consolidated recognition within the art system, a structured exhibition history, and insertion within an internationally articulated critical discourse¹⁰.

Conclusions

The convergence between football and contemporary art, examined through the analytical lens of Griswold's cultural diamond, reveals a dense and dynamic set of intersections. What emerges most clearly is that these two realms – once considered irreconcilable – have increasingly overlapped by virtue of their capacity to operate as cultural objects within systems of meaning that are simultaneously symbolic and relational. In this process, the axes of the diamond – creators, receivers, and the social world – are progressively redrawn. Clubs and players are no longer merely agents of sporting production but also figures embedded within a broader cultural economy; fans are no longer only supporters but also consumers and interpreters; and institutions – museums, galleries, media organisations, and brands – mediate these relations by conferring legitimacy, visibility, and value. Within this renewed relationship between art and football, at least two distinct interpretative trajectories can be identified. The first, which may be described as *football-based*, emerges paradigmatically in the case of F.C. United of Manchester. From this perspective, artistic practice and cultural production more broadly function as tools through which questions of identity and belonging can be re-signified and negotiated. Art enables actors within football cultures not merely to endure the processes of globalisation passively, but to adopt an active position, capable of producing, articulating, and controlling their own narratives. At the level of the imaginary, the encounter with artistic production also serves to construct a symbolic differentiation from a football system increasingly perceived as mechanised, hyper-spectacularised, and socially depleted. A second trajectory, which may be defined as *art-based*, instead interprets artistic practice as a product internal to the very neoliberal football system that

¹⁰ *DASPO* (*Divieto di Accedere alle manifestazioni SPORtive*) is an administrative preventive measure introduced in Italy in the late 1980s and subsequently reinforced through various legislative amendments. It allows public authorities to prohibit individuals identified as posing a risk to public order from attending sporting events, primarily football matches, for a specified period of time. Although formally framed as a security instrument, the *DASPO* has acquired a strong symbolic meaning within football cultures, particularly among organised supporters, where it functions as both a marker of repression and, in some contexts, a source of subcultural recognition and legitimacy.

a significant portion of contemporary fandom explicitly seeks to contest. In this configuration, new cultural intermediaries become possible precisely within a football world that is increasingly exclusive. The entry of contemporary art – coinciding with rising ticket prices, the construction of new stadiums, and the growing economic valuation of football as a cultural industry – appears to contribute to the maintenance of selective boundaries of access and inclusion. Rather than opening its symbolic and discursive horizon to new publics, this integration risks reproducing long-standing social divisions and hierarchies. It is true that the contemporary football audience is “new” when compared to that of thirty years ago, and even more so to that of the 1950s, which largely rejected the hybridisation of cultural languages and displayed a marked distance from artistic practices. Yet this audience cannot be considered genuinely new when viewed in relation to the art world. As football has been transformed into a fully-fledged spectacle – partially stripped of its twentieth-century identity matrices and its historical popular embeddedness – the language of contemporary art becomes intelligible and legitimate precisely because it is already familiar to more affluent social groups, who share its codes, symbolic repertoires, and modes of cultural consumption. At the same time, this intersection between art and football is far from dichotomous or crystallised. On the contrary, it remains in a phase of active development and ongoing redefinition. The cultural diamond proves particularly effective in capturing not stable positions, but shifting relations, allowing us to observe how football and contemporary art reconfigure each other across different axes of production, reception, and institutional mediation. The English case examined here demonstrates how the expansion of an economic system grounded in continuous symbolic consumption – and in the construction of identity as an increasingly individualised process – has brought together worlds once perceived as distant, as already anticipated by the 1953 *Football and the Fine Arts* exhibition. From the early 2000s onwards, artistic interest in football has taken on a more systematic and reflexive form. Players such as Zinedine Zidane have come to embody not merely sporting icons, but symbolic figures operating within a global field of meaning. In this sense, Gordon and Parreno’s *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait* exemplifies football’s transformation into a cultural symbol embedded within a relational system of creators, receivers, and the social world, each continually shaping and influencing the others. The encounter between art and football does not therefore entail the erasure of their differences, but rather rests on their shared capacity to function as symbolic dispositifs within a neoliberal economy of images. Art and football intersect insofar as both are able to condense meanings, circulate globally, and produce imaginaries that exceed their original contexts. The “football turn” in contemporary art can thus be understood as the outcome of this mutual contamination: a process in which the cultural diamonds of art and football overlap, generating a hybrid field in which the symbolic logics of both are rearticulated and brought into convergence, producing a cultural ecosystem in its own right. From this perspective, the joint study of art and football offers a privileged vantage point from which to observe broader dynamics of cultural production in late modernity: the circulation of objects across fields, the reconfiguration of meanings, and the ways in which practices once considered marginal or merely popular have become central to the symbolic economies of the present.

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Television, mediatization, and globalization of sport: the case of the first Olympic worldwide broadcast from Tokyo 1964

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Abstract

The 1964 Tokyo Olympics represent a turning point in the history of the mediatization of sport. Broadcast live globally via satellite, they marked the beginning of worldwide sports television and established a ritualistic model of collective media consumption. This article analyzes the television broadcast of the event as a “media event” (Dayan & Katz, 1992) and as the first example of globalized and spectacularized sport, analyzing together journalistic sources and vintage visual materials, through the framework of mediatization of sport (Frandsen 2020; Tirino 2019). The objective is to show how Tokyo 1964 sanctioned Japan’s rebirth in the post-war geopolitical context and laid the foundations for a new sports ritual on a planetary scale.

Keywords: Mediatization of sport, Worldwide broadcast, Tokyo 1964 Olympics, Media event.

1. Introduction

This paper intends to explore the role that the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games played in nation-building, in redefining Japanese national identity, and in the country’s representation on the international stage. In particular, the research questions guiding the analysis are three: how sport and political and cultural institutions contributed to the construction of a shared image of modern Japan, what role the media – especially television – played in disseminating this image, and to what extent these dynamics left a lasting legacy in global sports culture. To answer these questions, the paper adopts a sociological-culturalist approach based on two main directions. On one hand, the historical analysis of official sources (such as the Organizing Committee reports and media diffusion data) and historiographical reconstructions (Guttman, 1992; Guttman & Lee, 2001; Goryacheva, 2020). On the other hand, the application of (media) narrative analysis, useful for examining how the media discourses and narratives of the era contributed to shaping collective representations.

Into this framework fits the analysis of an article from *The New Yorker* and the documentary *Tokyo Olympiad*, two emblematic sources of the international and domestic narrative of the Games. The structure of the paper reflects these methodological choices. A first section addresses the theme of innovation, worldwide broadcast, and televised ritualism of the Olympics, showing how the diffusion – and partly the spectacularization – of the event was made possible by television, including colour television, and a rapidly expanding media system. This is followed by an analysis

section focused on the narratives of the era, which applies media narrative analysis to journalistic and audiovisual sources. The concluding part unfolds in two directions: on one hand, the examination of Tokyo 1964's legacy in global sports culture, and on the other, a broader concluding reflection, to understand how the dynamics triggered by the Games anticipated processes that still characterize major international sports events today.

2. Tokyo '64: historical and sociocultural context

The assignment of the Games of the XVIII Olympiad to Tokyo in 1964 was the result of a process that began in the early 1950s, when Japan, after being excluded from the 1948 London Games, sought to re-enter the Olympic community. The readmission of the National Olympic Committee in 1950 marked the start of a new phase, and the capital put forward its candidacy as early as 1952. Although the initial attempts were unsuccessful, they laid the groundwork for a more robust strategy. The decisive moment came at the end of the decade. In 1958, Tokyo hosted an IOC session in the presence of the Emperor, an occasion that strengthened the city's credibility as an Olympic host. The following year, with the election of Ryotaro Azuma as Governor, who combined a local political role with an international Olympic one, the bid was strongly relaunched. At the Munich session in 1959, Tokyo secured 34 votes out of 56, defeating Detroit, Vienna, and Brussels, and thus winning the Honour of hosting the XVIII Olympiad (Lechenperg, 1964).

The assignment triggered profound transformations. The Organizing Committee, established immediately after, created an articulated structure with commissions dedicated to logistics, facilities, transport, communications, and fundraising. The event became a driving force for urban and national modernization: numerous sports facilities were expanded or built from scratch, including the Nippon Budokan, a symbol of the link between tradition (Judo) and the modern Olympics. Urban infrastructure experienced unprecedented acceleration: the monorail to Haneda, new subway lines, large hotels, and especially the Shinkansen (bullet train), inaugurated just days before the Games, became the tangible signs of a nation in rapid transformation. As highlighted by Harald Lechenperg (1964, p. 10), the planning was designed not only to handle the logistical complexity but also to present the world with the image of a modern, peaceful, and technologically advanced Japan.

Alan Guttmann (1992, pp. 104-107) emphasizes how the Games represented the definitive transition from a post-war Japan, still marked by precariousness and social inequalities, to a nation projected towards industrial modernity. In this sense, Olympic Games were used as a "political language" to reassert national dignity and redefine the country's role on the international stage. At the same time, the interplay between tradition and innovation, which Guttmann and Lee (2001, pp. 223-227) identify as the hallmark of Japanese sport, clearly emerged: on the one hand, local cultural roots (Judo, ceremonies, imperial symbols), and on the other, the need to present itself as a modern and globalized power, in line with Western sporting and media standards.

The Japan of those years was a country undergoing rapid transformation. At the beginning of the 1960s, the city of Tokyo was still scarred by the devastating effects of the war and characterized by shantytowns (Whiting, 2020, p. 1) and precarious housing, which were giving way to what

would soon become a modern metropolis. Despite the apparent modernization, the city was divided between the urgency of progress and the persistence of rudimentary sanitary conditions. Skyscrapers, luxury hotels, new subway lines, a monorail between Haneda and the city center, and the Shinkansen – the high-speed train to Osaka – were all under construction.

The effort to redo Tokyo's urban infrastructure was undertaken in conjunction with a massive government plan to double GNP and per capita income by the end of the sixties through the manufacture and export of transistors, radios, television sets and automobiles. But it was made all the more urgent in 1959 when the city was awarded the 1964 Olympics, the first Asian country to be so honored (Whiting, 2020, p. 1).

Therefore, major public events – like the Olympics – play a decisive role in redefining national identity, especially during the period of historical transition in which Japan found itself. If nations do not exist in a concrete form but become visible and understandable through the symbols that represent them (Kertzer, 1988, p. 6), consequently, any transformation of a nation's collective image requires symbolic and visual occasions where these images can be presented, shared, and internalized (Wilson, 2012, p. 1). The event served as a form of strategic communication that staged a renewed image of the country, primarily for the benefit of the domestic audience: efficient, peaceful, technologically advanced, and open to cultural exchange. Although formally addressed to the international community, the Olympic Games' message was primarily received by the Japanese population (Wilson, 2012, p. 1). Television played a crucial role: while approximately 55% of Japanese households owned a television set in 1960, the percentage rose to over 90% by 1964, coinciding with the Olympics (Guttmann & Lee, 2001, p. 223). This was also facilitated by reduced prices: from about 175,000 yen in 1953 (more than ten times the average monthly salary) to 45,000-60,000 yen in 1962, made possible by increasing family incomes (Goryacheva, 2020, pp. 156-157).

A further role was played, more specifically, by colour television, introduced in 1960 and strictly linked to the 1964 Olympics: while initially there were only 1,200 sets in Japan, the event accelerated their spread, transforming them into a new status symbol for the middle class. By 1966, coverage reached 93% of the population (Goryacheva, 2020, p. 157). This innovation also had a cultural impact: seeing the Games 'in colour' meant participating in a common, shared national experience, reinforcing pride in a technological modernity capable of placing Japan on equal footing with Western powers (Goryacheva, 2020, pp. 156-157).

Television, now widespread in millions of homes, thus made collective and simultaneous participation possible (Whannel, 2009), reinforcing the emotional and symbolic effectiveness of the visual narrative offered. In this way, the Olympics were not just a sporting event, but an act of national self-representation, designed to symbolically unify a people around a shared image of Japan's future. Thanks to this widespread presence, the collective and simultaneous participation made the visual narrative of the Games extremely effective (Whannel, 2009). The Olympics thus became an act of national self-representation, designed to symbolically unify the people around a shared vision of the future.

The games also served to sanction Japan's redemption, and reinforced a sense of national purpose and collective Japan as modern and cutting edge, while also identity, while providing a stage for Emperor Hirohito's rehabilitation. In subtle ways, the Olympics created an

opportunity to rebrand symbolically embracing a history and set of traditions that had been implicated and discredited by wartime deprecations. (Tagsold, 2020, p. 1)

3. The mediatization of sport: theoretical framework

Mediatization, which permeates and transforms contemporary social, cultural, and communicative dynamics, represents one of the fundamental dimensions of the globalized society of the 21st century (Tirino, 2019, p. 151). As Krotz emphasizes: “Mediatization can be understood as a meta-process, comparable to globalization, individualization and commercialization. By meta-process I mean a long-term process which transforms society as a whole” (p. 256).

It is, therefore, a concept that does not describe a single effect of the media nor an immediate change, but a long-term series of phenomena within which media progressively reorganize social, cultural, and communicative practices (Krotz, 2007, pp. 257-258).

Mediatization impacts the way content is produced, distributed, consumed, and experienced in various social contexts – including sport. As Frandsen observes, “the audiovisual construction used in broadcasting coverage and the dedicated radio channel used for internal event communication” is central to ensuring the live transmission and public understanding of sports events (Frandsen, 2020, p. 51). Indeed, since the beginning of the twentieth century, the relationship between media and sport has developed parallel to the evolution of communication technologies: the press and radio helped build the popularity of disciplines and competitions, consolidating their symbolic relevance in the public sphere (Guttman, 1986; Bellamy, 2006).

Beginning in the post-war period, television assumed a decisive role in accelerating sport’s visibility and transforming it into a global phenomenon of collective entertainment (Whannel, 1998). Live broadcasts fostered a culture of shared enjoyment and emotional identification, creating a social ritual that turned sports events into moments of national and international aggregation.

Within the framework outlined by the theory of mediatization, two modalities assume particular importance. Firstly, there is informative mediatization, which impacts the sphere of news reporting and the transmission of sports events, where speed, immediacy, constant updates, and accessibility prevail. This logic is tied to the rapid and continuous consumption of sports content, fueled by the “liveness” of radio and television broadcasts and further accelerated by digital media. Secondly, there is narrative (Tirino, 2024) or fictional mediatization (Tirino, 2025), which intervenes in the construction of shared meanings through forms of sports storytelling, often emotional, epic, and heroic. This process is realized in a plurality of formats, ranging from cinema (sports biopics, films inspired by champions or historical events) to comics and manga (Japanese *shōnen* such as *Captain Tsubasa* or *Slam Dunk*), up to television series (such as *Ted Lasso*) and docu-series (such as *The Last Dance*).

In all these cases, sport is transfigured into a narrative, contributing to the reinforcement of myths, heroes, and shared values that transcend the competitive field to become cultural heritage. Sport, in this sense, is configured as a symbolic stage for social values, conflicts, and collective identities, where the media narrative helps to define roles, hierarchies, and modern mythologies.

In the 1960s, when the Tokyo Olympics took place, public participation was still mediated by one-way mass media, primarily television. At that time, speaking of participation did not yet mean interactivity in the digital sense, but rather the collective sharing of the media experience, lived as a social ritual. In 1964, Japanese television established itself as the central tool of symbolic mediation between the sporting event and society, allowing millions of citizens, for the first time, to watch the Olympic events live and in colour, contributing to the reinforcement of a sense of national identity and shared modernity. Although it was not yet interactive participation in the contemporary sense, the television broadcast of sporting events generated a strong emotional involvement, which was based on the simultaneity of viewing and the collective experience of the sports narrative. This first historical phase of mediatized culture is deeply rooted in the logic of television “liveness” (Dayan & Katz, 1992), that is, in the medium’s ability to create shared events in real-time, giving rise to temporary communities of spectators. Tokyo 1964 therefore represented a foundational moment for this type of mediatized sports consumption: the Japanese public first, and the global one later, though not yet digitally connected, began to build a shared experience.

4. Innovation, worldwide broadcast, and televised ritualism

The live broadcast of the opening ceremony in 40 countries created a sense of global synchronicity. Sakai Yoshinori, born in Hiroshima the day after the dropping of the atomic bomb on August 6, 1945, lit the Olympic cauldron: a highly symbolic gesture of collective rebirth. The global live broadcast of the 1964 Tokyo Olympics was made possible by the launch of Syncom III, the first geostationary orbit communication satellite. Thanks to its fixed position relative to Earth, Syncom III made the live television transmission of the Tokyo Games possible in other parts of the world, marking a historic moment: for the first time, a sporting event was shared on a planetary scale in worldwide broadcast.

Syncom III technically enabled what Dayan and Katz (1992, p. 1) would define as a “live broadcasting of history”, transforming the 1964 Tokyo Olympics into a global 'media event' and ushering in the era of the televised internationalization of sport. Dayan and Katz (1992) define *media events* as “high holidays of mass communication” (p. 1), events transmitted live that interrupt daily routines and gather a vast audience around “contests, coronations and conquests” (p. 5). They argue that such events are “integrative, narrating societies’ self-understanding and celebrating its values” (p. 9), functions that perfectly suit the role played by the Olympic Games in contemporary society.

The 1964 Tokyo Olympics perfectly embodied this paradigm, becoming famous as the “Television Olympics”. It is worth remembering, however, that the first Olympics broadcast on television were the Rome Games in 1960: an edition that paved the way for the televised visibility of sport, but which was not diffused globally. In Tokyo, however, television took on a decisive role in increasing the cultural visibility of the Games, thanks to its simplicity as a medium of transmission and its established place in domestic routines: “There is a strongly habitual nature of media uses (Silverstone, 1994), and levels of daily TV viewing indicate how the habit of

watching television (or, perhaps more accurately, having the television on) is difficult to shake, even with many competing media and activities (Rowe, 2011, p. 38)”.

The Olympic event was indeed broadcast live on television for ten hours a day, including the entire marathon, which was televised live for the first time in history for over two hours, thanks to the use of a helicopter flying over the transmission vehicle. The television audience witnessed a true real-time dramatization: an epic narrative that culminated in the victory of Ethiopia’s Abebe Bikila and the local favourite, Tsuburaya Kōkichi of Japan. Despite the dissatisfaction of many Japanese viewers – as the directing favoured Bikila, who was over a kilometre ahead of the local hero – NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation) justified the choice by the obligation of international coverage, marking an important transition toward the transnational logic of the sports audience (Guttman & Thompson 2001, p. 199).

The television audience figures are eloquent: 97.3% of Japanese households with a television set watched at least part of the Olympics, with peaks of 87.4% for the opening ceremony, 85% for the women’s volleyball final against the USSR, and 83.1% for the marathon (Guttman & Thompson, 2001, 199). The domestic reach was accompanied by global visibility made possible by the Syncom III satellite, which allowed for real-time intercontinental transmission. This innovation marked the advent of worldwide sports broadcasting and contributed to creating a global market for television rights – effectively saving the International Olympic Committee from its chronic financial crisis (Guttman & Thompson, 2001, p. 200).

Sport is particularly well-suited to television, especially live broadcast, as it captures attention on dramatic events unfolding in real-time within a defined space: this stimulates a strong emotional identification, particularly during international competitions; among the media connected to sport, only television allows for “such a potent mix of ‘liveness’ and [creates] common language” (Rowe, 2011, p. 38). The scholar further explains that to acquire global status, a sport must be played in many countries and followed by a vast audience. The choice to analyze the Olympic Games proves to be exemplary. Indeed, it is the first culturally shared sporting event transmitted live worldwide via satellite, and the first in colour in Japan, thus reaching millions of spectators and becoming a powerful “ritual of national reinvention”. Tokyo 1964 was “a stunning showcase for a rising economic superpower” and “the rebirth of Japan to the world” (Whiting, 2020).

The Olympics also facilitated the mass diffusion of broadcasting technologies and devices:

In the five years preceding the Olympics, the number of television owners paying reception fees to NHK zoomed from 2 million to 16 million. Many acquired their first sets to be able to watch the games. Many who had already become addicted to the black-and-white images bought their first colour sets to watch the broadcasts that were truly *tasai* (colourful). NHK had prepared very well for the Tokyo Olympics. In 1959, it had moved its sports division from the educational department to the news department. A huge staff of 2,548 covered the games, including 42 announcers, 195 directors and producers, 146 reporters and cameramen, and 598 broadcast technicians. They used an array of equipment to create the broadcasts: 74 black-and-white TV cameras, 6 colour TV cameras, 46 videotape recorders, 600 audiotape recorders, 18 black-and-white TV broadcast cars, 2 colour TV broadcast cars, 17 generator cars, and 8 videotape recording cars (Guttman & Thompson, 2001, p. 199).

The diffusion of colour televisions represents a further tangible sign of domestic modernization: “Colour televisions were another symbol of progress based on consumerism” (Tagsold, 2020, p. 4). Many families, after having purchased black-and-white sets to follow the Crown Prince’s wedding in 1958, replaced them precisely in view of the Games, the first to be broadcast live and in colour globally. This technical achievement was not only perceived as an engineering success but as a demonstration of Japan’s ability to successfully integrate into global modernity, so much so that Tagsold (2020, p. 5) defines it as “an outstanding feat that attested to Japanese ingenuity”. Simultaneously, the event also became an opportunity to redefine the concept of post-war patriotism. While in the past it had been rooted in military successes, it now found its foundation in civil progress: “Patriotism was no longer based on military success or imperialist adventures... it now drew largely from economic and technological progress” (Tagsold, 2020, p. 5). The new national pride was not limited to Tokyo but also extended to peripheral areas, thanks to the high-speed Shinkansen network and the Olympic torch relay, which symbolically connected the regions to the heart of the event.

The 1964 Tokyo Olympics were not only a moment of technological and urban modernization but also an occasion for collective belonging. The cheering and participation, both live and via television, generated shared emotions and a strong sense of national identity. Sports symbols and rituals reinforced this cohesion, transforming victories and defeats into common experiences (Bifulco, 2019, pp. 178-179), capable of influencing the country’s mood and collective self-esteem. This sense of belonging, thanks to the television broadcast, transcended national borders and entered into the logic of global culture. Within this framework, the East presented itself to the West through the “common language” of sport, thus offering the image of a shared culture. Events like the Olympics mark a discontinuity from the ordinary programming of all nations involved: “These telecasts share a large number of common attributes which we shall attempt to identify. Audiences recognize them as an invitation – even a command – to stop their daily routines and join in a holiday experience” (Dayan & Katz, 1992, p. 1). Every media event, understood as a “collective ritual of public communication”, helps strengthen the social fabric. The Olympics fall under “calendarized contests”, which assume a sacralized value in the media landscape. Tokyo 1964 became the symbol of the recovery of Japanese national pride, projected onto a global scale. This media turning point – which challenges the previous idea of a “culturally poor” television – also coincided with a theoretical shift: Dayan and Katz (1992, p. 2) observe that “until very recently, television was thought to be saying nothing worthy of humanistic analysis”, but sports mega-events prove the opposite, as they convey complex texts, genres, and public rituals. In particular, when television transitioned from being a luxury good to a daily household technology, sport became directly accessible in homes, bringing the energy of the stadiums into the living room (Rowe, 2011, p. 34). This change was not without controversy, as there were fears that televised sports would reduce the desire to attend live events in stadiums, damaging not only the sports economy but also the appeal of an event that depended on the atmosphere created by the present audience. However, the televised experience of Tokyo ‘64 marks not just the beginning of a culture of shared viewing, but above all offers the opportunity to follow competitions distant in time and space.

If the media amplify the symbolic reach of sport, making it “larger than life” (Wenner & Billings, 2017, p. 13) and transforming it into a spectacular commodity: “the commodified spectacle that

the sports mega-event has become would not be possible without media” (p. 17), the sports mega-event becomes the ideal setting for this process, uniting millions of spectators in real-time and promoting values such as peace, modernity, and fair competition. Tokyo 1964 presents itself as a media staging of Japanese modernity, orchestrated according to the ritual and narrative logic of the television medium. It is a prime example of how mediatization transforms sport into a cultural, political, and symbolic (media) experience on a global scale. “But global carried other connotations when discussing media and sport that went far beyond the idea of the merely international” (Rowe, 2011, p. 1).

5. Media narrative analysis between images and discourses

5.1 Methodology

To study the Olympic edition under examination, the analysis was carried out through media narrative analysis, a methodology that focuses on the narrative forms of media products by examining their content, structure, performative dimension, and target audiences (Mihas, 2023; Riessman, 2007). This approach also makes it possible to code elements such as story type, form, genre, tone, and the purpose of the narrative (Mihas, 2023). This method allowed us to identify content classes structured according to precise parameters. In particular, for this two direct and coeval sources were selected: the article entitled “II – The Olympics. Repercussions” published in “The New Yorker” magazine in 1964, and written by E.J. Kahn Jr. and the documentary *Tokyo Olympiad* (1965) directed by Kon Ichikawa. The selection is based on the desire to compare two complementary perspectives: on one hand, the external and international narrative of a Western periodical; on the other, the internal and official representation offered by Ichikawa’s film. This comparison allows us to observe how the Games were narrated and perceived, respectively, on the global and domestic stages. Applied to the two selected sources, this methodology allows us to highlight the different discursive strategies through which the 1964 Olympics were transformed into a collective representation and symbolic heritage.

5.2 Media content analysis

As for the Japanese, while they demonstrate anew every day what consummate organizers of games they are, they have proved to be something less than flawless contestants. As far back as 1960, they set their goal for 1964 at fifteen gold medals, and to date they are eleven short of fulfilling their ambition. The enthusiasm of the local fans for their native Olympic heroes nevertheless continues unabated. The Japanese are still coming out to all events in droves and raising the rafters (or the skies, if they’re outdoors) for anyone wearing their colours who manages so much ad not to come in last in a qualifying heat. [...] Of a total of two million one hundred and ten thousand tickets to twenty sports in a dozen venues that the Japanese Olympic officials made available to their countrymen, five hundred and seventy thousand were distributed to school-children through lotteries conducted by their schools, and the lucky winners are the envy of their age group. [...] The kids generally turn up at the various events in chartered buses and march to their seats behind banners; in many cases, they wear matching hats, so they can be readily identified by their chaperons (Kahn Jr., 1964, pp. 237-238).

The perception of the 1964 Tokyo Olympics overseas is telling. In the American weekly magazine “The New Yorker”, founded in New York in 1925 by Harold Ross and Jane Grant, dated October 24, 1964, the journalist E.J. Kahn Jr. wrote a long article dedicated to the recently concluded Olympics in Tokyo, entitled “II – The Olympics. Repercussions”, featured in Volume 40, Issue 36, across pages 236–248. Ranging from a direct analysis of the Games to a narration of Japanese culture in its entirety, the journalist observes Japan’s efficiency in organizing the Games with admiration from the very first pages. The Japanese are described as disciplined spectators and serious athletes, capable of maintaining composure even during long intervals or moments of misfortune. In particular, he highlights the composed silence of the Japanese spectators during a long pause in the stadium, where no one left their seat for hours, despite the lack of ongoing competitions (Kahn Jr., 1964, p. 241). Through the lens of media narrative analysis, it is possible to identify several thematic cores that structure the narrative and contribute to delineating the image of post-war Japan in the eyes of an international audience.

Thematic Core	Excerpt / Reference	Meaning
1. Japanese Organizational Efficiency	p. 237: “they demonstrate anew every day what consummate organizers of games they are”	Narrative of order and competence: Japan is presented as a model of modernity and discipline .
2. Sporting Ambitions and Results	p. 237: objective of 15 gold medals, they missed 11.	Contrast between aspirations and actual results: the effort is worth as much as the victory .
3. Publics and Collective Participation	p. 237-238: enthusiastic spectators, children with coordinated caps.	Sport becomes a civic and educational ritual , involving the entire nation.
4. Spectator Discipline and Composure	p. 241: 2.5-hour break, audience remains firmly in their seats.	Collective behaviour as a symbolic sign of national resilience and identity .
5. Curiosity towards “Exotic” Sports	p. 238: Iran–Mexico match with a Ghanaian referee.	The Japanese people’s ingenuity and openness towards unfamiliar sports mark the process of sports globalization.
6. Architecture and Urban Modernity	p. 238: National Gymnasium as an “architectural sensation”.	The structures become a visual narrative of Japanese modernity .
7. Narrative of Sporting Emotions	p. 242: the Ceylonese marathon runner Karunananda who keeps running even when lapped.	Defeat is transfigured into a spectacle of resistance : pathos and universality.

8. Symbolic Value of Children and Youth	p. 238: 570,000 tickets allocated to schools.	Youth as a symbol of the future: sport and education interwoven in the national narrative.
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Table 1: media content analysis of “II – The Olympics. Repercussions”

A first core theme concerns Japanese organizational efficiency, repeatedly highlighted as proof of the nation’s ability to manage a complex and imposing event. The article depicts the Japanese as impeccable organizers, capable of ensuring order, precision, and discipline: qualities that, beyond the mere reporting of facts, assume a symbolic value, testifying to the country’s rebirth and its modernization. In parallel, the text emphasizes the tension between sporting ambitions and concrete results. Kahn recalls that Japan had set the goal of winning fifteen gold medals, despite falling short of that target. This emphasis does not appear as criticism, but rather as recognition of the will to measure up against high standards: a sign of openness to international comparison, where the value of effort and determination prevails over the final outcome. Considerable space is dedicated to the audience and collective participation. Spectators are described as enthusiastic, orderly, and deeply involved. Particularly significant is the presence of children, brought to the stadiums through school lotteries and recognizable by their coordinated caps and flags: an image that portrays sport as a civic and educational ritual, capable of uniting different generations in a common national experience. The narrative also insists on the discipline and composure of the spectators, exemplified by the episode where tens of thousands of people remained firmly in their seats for hours, despite a long break between competitions. Such behaviour is interpreted as a sign of civilization and resilience, and it helps define Japan as a cohesive and patient society.

Alongside these traits of order and discipline, Kahn introduces episodes that show the audience’s curiosity towards unfamiliar sports, such as the football match between Iran and Mexico refereed by a Ghanaian. The amused and almost naive reaction of the spectators conveys the image of a country that is learning, open to sports globalization but still distant from some practices.

Another central core theme is that of architecture and urban modernity. The description of the National Gymnasium as “the architectural sensation of these Olympics” testifies to the attention paid to Olympic infrastructure, which became symbols of modernization and tools for national self-representation. Architecture, here, is narrated not only as a functional setting but as a visual language through which Japan declares its modernity. Kahn does not neglect the emotional and universal dimension of sport, giving space to episodes that go beyond mere triumph. This is the case of the Ceylonese marathon runner Karunananda, who continued running despite being lapped multiple times, applauded by the audience for his determination. Defeat is transfigured into a spectacle of resistance and sacrifice, signaling an interest in the human and narrative component of sport rather than the simple competitive result. Finally, the article highlights the symbolic role of children and youth, not just as spectators but as protagonists of a national educational project. The extensive distribution of tickets to students builds the image of a sport that becomes an integral part of civic education, a vehicle for socialization and identity construction. Overall, *The New Yorker* article performs a cultural mediation: through narrative

and descriptive choices, it transforms the 1964 Olympics into a story that presents a Japan that is disciplined, modern, and capable of projecting itself onto the international stage. Far from being simple sports reporting, the feature becomes an interpretive device which, with an admiring and sometimes ironic tone, contributes to shaping the collective image of Japan in the context of the Cold War and sports globalization.

This testimony, therefore, is useful for understanding how the internal narrative worked and thus influenced the global perception of what post-war Japan would be from then on. In this sense, the documentary *Tokyo Olympiad*¹ is an audiovisual source of exceptional relevance for the study of the 1964 Tokyo Olympics and the Japanese image they helped to shape. It is the Official Film of Tokyo 1964 – *Tokyo Olympic*, a 170-minute documentary produced in 1965 by the Organizing Committee for the Games of the XVIII Olympiad. It was restored in 2013 by the International Olympic Committee. Originally officially commissioned by the Games' organizing committee, but reinterpreted with great authorial freedom by Kon Ichikawa, the film constitutes one of the main examples of cinematic sports narration in the post-war period. Ichikawa (市川 崑, 1915–2008) was one of the most versatile and innovative Japanese directors of the post-war era. Active from the wartime period until the 2000s, he ranged across different genres, from social satire to historical drama, from noir to documentary. Despite being an “official” product, Ichikawa deconstructs the celebratory function of the event, offering a poetic, humanistic, and sometimes melancholic reinterpretation of the competitions and their protagonists. This very authorial choice, initially met with coolness by the Japanese authorities, makes the film particularly interesting as a subjective source rich in cultural and ideological implications.

There are many elements that make the documentary an interesting source to analyze. Kon Ichikawa, despite working on commission, produced a text that privileges the humanization of sport, the aesthetic dimension, and the construction of atmospheres over simple reporting of results, thus providing a plural and complex portrait of the Olympics as a cultural, political, and social phenomenon. In this sense, the film is particularly well suited for a narrative analysis, because it builds meaning through choices of editing, use of time, and attention to faces, gestures, and rituals, rather than through the narrator's voice or statistical data. The media narrative analysis methodology, therefore, appears the most appropriate: it allows the documentary to be broken down into its thematic cores, to investigate the compositional structures, and to interpret the performative aspect of the narrative, without losing sight of the role of the audiences, understood not only as recipients but also as actors represented within the text. This approach allows us to grasp the hybrid nature of the film, halfway between an official document and an author's work, and to highlight how it articulates the themes of modernity, tradition, the individual, and the collective in narrative form, revealing the Tokyo Olympics as a crossroads of national identities and global imaginaries.

¹ It is available on the official Olympic website, 'Olympic Channel,' and can be viewed at the link: https://www.olympics.com/it/serie-originali/episodio/tokyo-1964-il-film-ufficiale?entry_point_type=home_sign_in&entry_point_tag=BAU⁶

Thematic Core	Approximate Runtime	Technical and Stylistic Choices	Narrative and Cultural Significance
National Rebirth / Modernity	00:00–00:15	English title superimposed on demolitions, followed only after by Japanese title; use of scope and urban shots.	Cancellation of the old to build the new; projection of a modern Japan, open to the West.
Olympic Ritualism	00:10–00:25	Vigorously soundtrack, “rising sun” dawn, torch relay with voiceover, choreographic editing.	The Games as a universal founding ritual ; first journey of the flame to the East as an epoch-making event.
Humanism of the Gaze	00:25–00:40 (recurring)	Insistent close-ups, telephoto lenses, silences.	Centrality of the individual and emotions ; spectator empathy towards athletes and audience.
Aesthetics of the Athletic Gesture	00:35–01:05	Slow motion (<i>rallenty</i>), widescreen, aestheticizing composition.	Sporting gesture as a suspended dance ; aestheticization of sport as art.
Water and Lightness	01:05–01:20	Natural sounds (breathing, splashes), contemplative silences.	Sport as a sensory experience ; body as fluid writing in the water.
Grace and Control	01:20–01:35	Close-ups on micro-gestures and errors.	Narrative of precariousness ; valorization of vulnerability as part of the endeavour.
Tradition vs. Modernity	01:35–01:50	Sober shots, Judo ceremony, essential rhythm.	Judo as an identity bridge: Japanese discipline inscribed within Olympic modernity.

Collective Body / Nation	01:50–02:05	Alternating montage of team/audience, emphasis on group rhythm.	Japanese women’s volleyball victory as a metaphor for collective work and national pride .
Spectators as Protagonists	00:25–02:05 (recurring)	Alternating montage of events–audience; close-ups on fans, children, elderly people.	The spectator as a co-protagonist ; sport as a daily sociocultural phenomenon.
Endurance / Human Limit	02:20–02:45	Long shots, reduction of verbal commentary, focus on exhausted bodies.	Abebe Bikila’s marathon as a novel of fatigue ; sport as resilience and bodily time.
Melancholic Epilogue	02:45–02:50	Slowed rhythm, silence, stadium emptying.	Transitoriness of the event, memory as the only trace.
Internationalization and Media	00:10–00:25 (ceremony and report)	Insertion of journalistic data; images of the press room with 100 reporters; transmission via Syncom III satellite .	Tokyo Games as the first global sporting event , broadcast live worldwide on TV.
Global Narrative / Plurality of Modernities	00:10–00:30 (commentary on the flame arrival and opening)	Voiceover emphasizes ”games belonging to the entire world.”	Japan welcomed into the “family of nations”, but with its own modernity, both local and global.
Meta-narrative and Politics	Throughout the film; re-edits 1965 / restoration 2013	Divergence between Ichikawa’s poetic vision and the governmental desire for a triumphalist narrative.	The film as a field of tension between art, propaganda, and historical memory .

Table 2: media content analysis of “Tokyo Olympiad”

First and foremost, Ichikawa adopts an innovative cinematic language for the time, a sign both of a strong reading of contemporary society – which was constantly evolving technologically –

and of the desire to appear innovative and be innovators. In the first place, the use of the panoramic “scope” format and the recourse to telephoto lenses and slow motion (slow-motion) have the capacity to transform the competitions into choreographic visions suspended in time; the spectator is potentially led to immerse themselves in this compelling narrative, full of close-ups and interplay of silence. Secondly, the alternating montage (which intercuts sporting events and audience reactions) also helps construct this emotional, and thus non-chronological, narrative, focusing on pathos more than on the result. Consequently, the soundtrack privileges natural sounds – footsteps, breathing, roars – and often reduces or eliminates verbal commentary, underscoring a non-didactic, almost contemplative intention. The proposed table is not just a list of sequences, but an interpretive map showing how *Tokyo Olympiad* constructs meaning through the combination of narrative cores, technical choices, and cultural significance. Each block of images, in fact, does not merely record a sporting event but transforms it into a story, a symbolic representation of Japan and the world in the 1960s.

The film opens with an eloquent choice: the title credits first appear in English, “XVIII OLYMPIAD TOKYO 1964”, superimposed on images of urban demolitions, and only subsequently in Japanese. The effect is to visually signal the break with the past and the desire to present the country as modern, open to the West, and ready to welcome the world. This initial sequence immediately introduces the theme of national rebirth and modernity, which runs through the entire documentary. The monumentality of the city is juxtaposed with the dimension of Olympic ritualism. The dawn, a symbol of the “rising sun”, and the torch relay, accompanied by the narrator’s voice, travel the road alongside the runners. These first minutes are very evocative as they escort the spectator to the entrance of the Olympic Games; the commentator emphasizes the importance of the torch’s first journey to the East, not only for the Japanese people but also for the countries “from the Aegean Sea, across the scorching Syrian desert, the Iranian plateau, and passing through Southeast Asia”, which had the opportunity to witness the relay with their own eyes for the first time. The desire to emerge as part of a whole, part of the world, becomes apparent when listening to the commentary accompanying the Japanese athlete’s parade on the day of the Games’ opening, October 10, 1964, at 2:00 PM

Here are the Japanese athletes. Having overcome the hard training on the road to glory, the young Japanese athletes now march proudly. Tokyo had the chance to host the Games in 1940, but the dream was swept away by the war. Yet, ever since the announcement five years ago that the Olympics would be held in Tokyo, it seems as if every Japanese person has worked for this great day. It is the event of the century, the first time ever for Asia. The XVIII Olympic Games for peace and friendship. The journey to get here has been long and perilous.

This willingness to actively participate in the entertainment, but above all in the writing of the world’s (positive) history, is reinforced in the sense of community and national unity that this text conveys. Furthermore, the reference to the youth is a clear sign of the construction of a better future, guided by the sporting values declared on that occasion.

Another passage is certainly explanatory: “the Olympic Games have finally come to the East, demonstrating that they belong to the whole world”.

The choice of the last torchbearer is exemplary of the type of narrative Japan was weaving. Sakai Yoshinori was a Japanese sprinter, born in Hiroshima on August 6, 1945 – the day the atomic bomb was dropped on the city – and he was symbolically chosen by the Organizing Committee to represent the rebirth of post-war Japan, conveying a message of peace, hope, and national regeneration through sport. Not only the Olympic Games, but also the East, is a more active part of the world than ever before, a modern world that would, from then on, draw on this experience to narrate in a completely new way not only sport, but the very idea of internationality. There was, in part, an awareness of this: “The National Stadium press room hosted over 100 reporters from around the world who reported the results minute by minute. Using the Syncom III satellite, it was possible to broadcast live on TV for the first time”.

Alongside the ritual and celebration, however, another dimension emerges: the humanism of the gaze. Telephoto lenses, close-ups, and the interplay of silence isolate the faces of the athletes and spectators, conveying the most intimate side of sport, made of tension, emotion, and anticipation. In this way, the film does not only celebrate victories, but centers the human body as a place of vulnerability and expressiveness.

With the same logic, the aesthetics of the athletic gesture, rendered through slow motion and panoramic compositions, transforms running, jumping, or throwing into suspended choreographies, true visual artworks. The core theme dedicated to water and lightness insists on another register: swimming and diving, accompanied by natural sounds and silences, become almost contemplative experiences, where water becomes the body’s script. Artistic gymnastics, on the other hand, stages the fragile balance between grace and control, highlighting error and precariousness as an integral part of the sporting endeavour.

A special place is occupied by judo, a Japanese discipline making its Olympic debut. The sober shots, the ceremonial aspect, and the attention to mutual respect make this sequence a representation of the continuity between tradition and modernity. Conversely, the women’s volleyball victory by Japan recounts the strength of the collective: the alternating montage between the team and the public stages national pride through teamwork and gender participation. The constant focus on the public – children, families, the elderly – confirms another fundamental core theme: spectators as protagonists. Ichikawa devotes considerable attention to reactions and gazes, thereby transforming the publics into an active participant in the narrative. Sport is shown as a shared experience rooted in the daily life of Japan.

Abebe Bikila’s marathon becomes the culmination of the reflection on the human limit. Long, silent, and marked by fatigue and endurance, this sequence compels the spectator to share the duration and the suffering, transforming the race into a moral parable. The film concludes with the melancholic epilogue of the closing ceremony: the stadium emptying, the silence descending, the awareness that the event is already memory. Alongside these core themes, the table recalls two other crucial elements. On one hand, the role of the media and internationalization: for the first time, the Olympics were transmitted via satellite, and the Tokyo press room hosted over a hundred journalists from around the world. On the other, the political meta-narrative: the film was re-edited because it was considered too poetic and not triumphalist enough, but the full restoration by the IOC in 2013 restored Ichikawa’s original version, reasserting its artistic and

documentary value. In this intertwining of innovative techniques, aesthetic choices, and symbolic representations, *Tokyo Olympiad* does not merely document sport: it tells the story of a country's modernization, its desire for international legitimacy, and its identity suspended between tradition and innovation. The table, in this sense, shows how every sequence becomes chronicle, narrative, and cultural interpretation all at once. Within the broader framework of the narrative mediatization of sport, *Tokyo Olympiad* demonstrates how the symbolic, narrative, and technological potentials of the television medium are mobilized to transform the Games into a shared cultural event. In doing so, the film not only frames athletic performances but also structures the audience's (and publics') experience, turning viewers into active interpreters of collective meaning. At the same time, it endows the Olympic spectacle with a memorial function, preserving it as a cultural archive in which sport becomes a vehicle for negotiating identity, memory, and symbolic power. This perspective allows us to explore the ways in which sport is not merely represented but reconfigured through the very structures of media storytelling.

Tokyo Olympiad allows us to delve into various aspects. Among these are:

- The aestheticization of sport: The athlete's body is shown not as a winning machine, but as an instrument of human expression, encompassing effort and vulnerability.
- The spectator as the true protagonist of this documentary: Ichikawa dedicates ample space to the publics and their emotional participation; this is a clear sign of the event's sociocultural importance in the daily life of Japan at the time.
- International rehabilitation through sport: While not explicitly propagandistic, the film is part of the broader Japanese government project to restore the country's image on the international stage following the defeat in World War II and the American occupation.

These choices make the documentary a source that reflects not only what happened in Tokyo in 1964, but also how it was intended to be represented and internalized within the context of Japanese post-war reconstruction. It must be specified, however, that *Tokyo Olympiad* was subject to censorship and re-editing: the Japanese government disliked the film's poetic and reflective tone, preferring a triumphalist narrative in line with the image of the "modern Japan" reborn after the war. Nevertheless, the complete version of Ichikawa's film was restored in 2013 by the International Olympic Committee, which recognized its unique artistic and documentary value. The article published in *The New Yorker*, cited just above, offers a point of view that perfectly dialogues with Ichikawa's vision. Where the journalist observes the composed and curious reaction of the Japanese audience (Kahn Jr. 1964, p. 238), Ichikawa films them with the same contemplative gaze: not as passive spectators, but as bodies participating in the event, driven by emotion, silence, and respect. Another point of contact is the centrality of error and vulnerability. Ichikawa shows the effort, exhaustion, and falls, just as the reportage describes the clumsiness of a Japanese diver who botches a jump, hits his head, and resurfaces amid general confusion (Kahn Jr. 1964, p. 241): moments that reveal the human and fragile aspect of sport.

Although they share the thematic cores, and the global narrative appears linear, they diverge profoundly in the way they tell the story. Ichikawa translates sport into visual poetry and a reflection on the human condition, while the article offers a political, social, and journalistic

account. Together, the two sources allow us to grasp the dual nature of the 1964 Olympics: an aesthetic and spectacular event, but also a historical and geopolitical chronicle. On one hand, the film conveys the sensory and collective experience, centered on gesture, face, and memory; on the other, the article highlights the concrete implications of modernization and international politics. The intersection of these perspectives demonstrates how the Tokyo Games were not only a sporting stage but also a laboratory of cultural representations, capable of revealing the identity of a country in transformation and the role of the media in the construction of a global and plural modernity.

Thematic Core	<i>Tokyo Olympiad</i> (Ichikawa, 1965)	<i>The New Yorker</i> (1964)	Key Differences
National Rebirth / Modernity	Opening with demolitions, English title, modern Tokyo filmed in scope ; poetics of reconstruction.	Description of urban transformation and new infrastructure as a sign of progress.	Ichikawa aestheticizes and symbolizes; <i>The New Yorker</i> reports and provides socio-political analysis.
Olympic Ritualism	Dawn, “rising sun” torch relay, and ceremony as a universal ritual of peace .	Opening ceremony narrated as a political and mass spectacle .	Poetic and symbolic vs. analytic and political.
Humanism of the Gaze	Close-ups of athletes and spectators, pathos of gestures, slow motion.	Athletes viewed as disciplined national heroes, focus on records.	Ichikawa privileges emotions and vulnerability; <i>The New Yorker</i> focuses on results and discipline.
Endurance / Human Limit (Marathon)	Long, contemplative sequence of Bikila’s exhaustion, the body as a moral parable.	Account of Bikila’s victory and the Ethiopian record.	Aesthetic contemplation vs. sports reporting.
Internationalization and Media	Press room, Syncom III satellite, Games as a global event.	Detailed analysis of the role of media and satellite technology.	Convergence on the theme, but different registers: immersive film, informative article.

Table 3: parallel media content analysis between the article and the documentary

In particular, Kahn emphasizes how Japanese patriotism is present but also devoid of excesses. On several occasions, the absence of nationalistic ostentation is noted, such as during the medal ceremonies where, although the public warmly applauded the Japanese athletes, a respectful tone was maintained even toward their opponents (Kahn Jr., 1964, pp. 240-241). The journalist

highlights Japan's desire to be recognized as part of the international community, rather than as a hegemonic power. This willingness is also evident in Ichikawa's narrative, across various aspects. In conclusion, Kon Ichikawa, with *Tokyo Olympiad*, offers a complementary and critical visual source to "The New Yorker"'s journalistic account. Both materials convey the complexity of the 1964 Tokyo Olympics: not just a national celebration, but a space for global encounter, charged with cultural, human, and narrative tensions.

These representations and written accounts of the 1964 Tokyo Olympics reveal to us how the Japanese were readmitted to the family of nations. But as we have seen, many Japanese and foreigners left the Games knowing that the Japanese were somehow different, for the modernity which emerged was of their own making, one which successfully coupled both local and global worlds. We are coming to realize that there are many modernities in Asia, and that the world is not all the same. [...] Media representations of the Olympics provide a window to understanding how host nations portray themselves (Low, 2004, p. 48).

In conclusion, Tokyo 1964 is not just a successful sporting event, but a true cultural and media paradigm: a moment of transition between modern sport and postmodern sport, which inaugurated the global sport economy, transnational spectacularization, and mediatized diplomacy. The worldwide broadcast became a foundational element of a shared global ritual: the spectator is no longer just an audience, but part of a worldwide emotional and economic experience; it is here that the mediatization of sport consolidated itself as a cultural and geopolitical device, which still underpins major contemporary sporting events.

6. Conclusion. The legacy of Tokyo 1964 in global sports culture

Starting with the experience of Tokyo 1964, the mediatization of sport paved the way for a change: the progressive replacement of the unidirectional process of internationalization and Western cultural export (Rowe, 2011, p. 4). During this period, television became the central pillar of a global-scale sports-media cultural complex (Rowe, 1999, 2004). The entry of the television medium into the sporting field determined a relationship of mutual dependence between media and sports institutions (Tirino, 2025): television continually demanded events capable of ensuring spectacle and attractiveness for its schedules, while sport progressively found in television an unprecedented source of visibility and, above all, constantly increasing revenues (Boyle & Haynes, 2009). The 1964 Tokyo Olympics represent a decisive transition: they not only sanctioned Japan's return among the peaceful powers but also inaugurated a new paradigm where sport, politics, economics, and identity are intertwined in a complex manner. As Pound (2004, p. 28) observes, "the modern Olympic Games were fortunate to have developed during the emergence of mass communication... The media, and especially television, have provided the Olympic Movement with a global stage".

Tokyo 1964 is also one of the first fully modern examples of a Mega Sport Event, defined by Roche (2000, p. 1) as "large-scale cultural (including commercial and sporting) events, which have a dramatic character, mass popular appeal and international significance". Thanks to the transmission via the Syncom III satellite, the Games became the prototype of a planetary event capable of intertwining the sporting dimension with the geopolitical one. It is in contexts like the

one analyzed that what Martelli (2014) described as the SMS triangle (Sport–Media–Sponsor) would take shape in the future – that is, the mutual interdependence between sports organizations, media organizations, and sponsors in Western elite sports. The global spectacularization of events, which Whannel termed “international spectacle” (1992, p. 115), found its first prototype in Tokyo: sport became both the content and the container of political, cultural, and economic meanings. It is no coincidence that Whitson and Macintosh (1996) emphasize how mega-events dissolve the boundaries between sports and commercial promotion. The Japanese Olympics were, in fact, used to communicate to the world an image of a modern, peaceful, and technologically advanced nation, ready to re-enter the international community (Larson & Park, 1993).

This function is part of the second phase of sports globalization identified by Giulianotti and Robertson (2004, 2007), the “expansionist” phase (1949–1989), characterized by the integration of sport with fashion, tourism, and media. Japan, through a skilful use of soft power, succeeded in combining tradition and innovation: from the opening ceremony that showcased performance arts to the launch of the Shinkansen, a symbol of efficiency and the future. It is no coincidence that Pound (2004, p. 28) emphasized how the IOC is called upon to balance the enormous potential for visibility offered by the media with the safeguarding of Olympic values, a balance made increasingly delicate by the expansion of commercialization. On the infrastructural level, Bellamy (1989) notes how, already in the 1960s, sports leagues understood the strategic value of national television contracts, capable of transforming the local public into a transnational community of spectators. The live television broadcast of the Tokyo Games, supported by technological innovations and government investments, thus consolidated the collective ritualism that Dayan and Katz (1992) would describe as typical of media ceremonies. Finally, the political dimension cannot be overlooked. As Low (2009) recalls, the Olympic bid must be interpreted as part of a broader Japanese cultural policy, aimed at reasserting the country’s international legitimacy. Similarly, Aizawa *et al.* (2017, pp. 143-145) point out how the Games reinforced the image of a peaceful and modern Japan, also supported by the involvement of businesses and sponsors who integrated themselves into the national narratives.

The decade in which the 1964 Olympics took place thus ushered in a new era, in which sport ceased to be a phenomenon rooted exclusively in local or national contexts and established itself as a media construct of global scope (Roche, 2000). The *media logic* of television redefined the boundaries of sport as a cultural experience: competitions and events are narrated, packaged, and perceived through codes specific to the television language – from the editing of shots and replays, to the use of specific formats (live commentary, in-depth programmes, magazines), up to the combination of live broadcasts, technical analyses, sideline interviews, and studio discussions.

The 1964 Tokyo Olympics were not just a sporting event, but a cultural and political device that permanently defined the imaginary of contemporary mega-events. As Rowe (1999, 2004) observes, the codification of the forms of representation and consumption that we now associate with the Games – spectacular ceremonies, synchronized television direction, and the construction of global narratives – finds its origin in that edition.

According to Tagsold (2009, p. 1), the Tokyo Olympics should not be interpreted as a total break, but rather as a moment of “symbolic evolution”. The new infrastructures, erected in areas connected to the former empire or the military past, redefined the urban space as the stage for a regenerated nationalism. The infrastructural modernization – the Shinkansen, highways, monorails – did not erase tradition, but rather re-inscribed it within a new framework of legitimation: Japan could present itself to the world as modern without denying its roots.

In parallel, Aizawa *et al.* (2017) show how Tokyo 1964 acted on the social level through a set of public policies and structural interventions. With the Sport Promotion Act of 1961 and the founding of the Japan Junior Sport Clubs Association in 1962, the State used the Olympics to promote sports participation and transform it into an educational and civic tool (Aizawa *et al.*, 2017, p. 4). The success of the women’s national volleyball team, watched by millions of television viewers, generated a genuine “Olympic cohort effect”: entire generations were inspired to participate in sports thanks to the role models provided by the Olympic athletes. Thus, the event was not confined to the capital but became a national phenomenon, contributing to the birth of a new mass sports culture. A further crucial aspect of the legacy of Tokyo 1964 was the construction of its visual image, entrusted to the designer Yūsaku Kamekura. A leading figure in Japanese modernism, Kamekura (1915–1997) is considered one of the pioneers of post-war Japanese graphic design. Trained at the Institute of New Architecture and Industrial Arts in Tokyo, he helped introduce the language of international modernism to Japan, with an innovative use of typography, photography, and colour. His international fame is primarily linked to the official poster for the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, in which he combined the Olympic rings with the red disc of the Japanese flag for the first time, creating an icon destined to redefine the visual identity of the Games. His official poster for the Games immediately became an icon: for the first time, the interlaced Olympic rings were associated with a national symbol as strong as the red disc of the Japanese flag.

This operation was not a mere aesthetic exercise but a political and cultural gesture. Kamekura managed to condense the tension between the particular and the universal into a single image: on one hand, national identity, and on the other, belonging to the global Olympic movement. Furthermore, his graphic design broke with the illustrative style of previous posters, imposing the language of photography and industrial design as the new code for Olympic communication. The impact was immediate and long-lasting. Kamekura inaugurated a model that would be adopted and reinterpreted by subsequent organizing committees, demonstrating that an Olympics was not just a collection of competitions but a global cultural brand to be disseminated through logos, posters, mascots, and signage. In this sense, the Tokyo Olympics was not only the first Olympic event broadcast live and in colour via satellite, but also the first to construct a coherent and recognizable visual image, capable of functioning as an international language. Ultimately, the legacy of the 1964 Games lies in its ability to have integrated sport, politics, media, and design into a single narrative project. From that moment on, every Olympics would be called upon to measure itself not only by the sporting dimension but also by the aesthetic, communicative, and symbolic ones. Tokyo 1964 thus set a paradigm: the mega-event as a global

ritual, television spectacle, vehicle for cultural diplomacy, and, at the same time, a powerful device for marketing and national identity.

The analysis conducted shows how sport, through major events and the narrative forms that accompany them, has become one of the main symbolic languages of contemporary times. From urban and infrastructural transformations to social and cultural effects, and the construction of a recognizable visual grammar, the case studies highlight how sport is never neutral but acts as a device for collective representation. The 1964 Tokyo Olympics represented a turning point in the history of contemporary sport, demonstrating how it can function as a political, spectacular, and technological instrument. The worldwide broadcast marked by satellite transmissions inaugurated a new phase, in which sport transformed into a language of collective and diplomatic representation (Dayan & Katz, 1992; Rowe, 2011).

On that occasion, Japan staged its rebirth, integrating urban modernization, technical innovations, and a symbolic communication that spoke to both the national audience and the international community (Tagsold, 2009; Aizawa *et al.*, 2017). The strength of this event lay in its ability to connect diverse spheres – politics, economy, culture – within a single narrative framework. The construction of the image also played a decisive role: the work of Yūsaku Kamekura, with the famous poster that united the Olympic rings with the red disc of the Japanese flag, established an aesthetic destined to become a model for subsequent Games. The Tokyo Olympics were thus not only competition, but also identity representation and a global brand.

In summary, 1964 marked the birth of a new way of conceiving sport as a global phenomenon. Since then, every Olympics has measured itself against the legacy of Tokyo: not just competitions, but a media spectacle and a shared narrative, capable of both reflecting and constructing the transformations of global society.

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Calcio e fumetto: la disegnata dalla carta al digitale

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Abstract

This article examines the intersections between sports and comics, illustrating how both are products of modern society and the cultural industry system. The discussion primarily focuses on the Italian context, analyzing Carmelo Silva's so-called *disegnate*. It emphasizes the ways in which these visual representations have contributed to the construction of icons, myths, and collective memories, thereby fostering the emergence of fandom dynamics and patterns of cultural consumption. As digitalization advances, the *disegnate* undergo further transformation, evolving into NFTs and collectible items and raising questions about the nature of art and cultural value in the age of technical reproducibility. Adopting a historical, socio-cultural, and media-oriented approach, the article demonstrates how sports comics function as a narrative and identity laboratory, mirroring shifts in the media landscape from the print era to the current digital phase.

Keywords: Sport comics, Disegnata, Fandom, Digitalization, NFT.

1. Introduzione

Apparentemente sport e fumetto sono due mondi molto distanti tra loro. Eppure, attraverso un'analisi più approfondita possiamo scorgere tratti comuni che rimandano a una particolare doppia nascita. Sia sport che fumetto sono prodotti della società moderna legati indissolubilmente allo sviluppo dell'industrializzazione, dell'urbanizzazione e alle forme dell'economia moderna (ai suoi modelli di produzione e consumo e a tutte le relative pratiche sociali). Esiste, però, una forte continuità con esperienze che si perdono nella preistoria dell'umanità e che collegano sport e fumetto a pratiche educative, rituali e a una trasmissione di miti che contribuiscono a dargli quelle forme che poi hanno trovato regole e standard nella società di fine Ottocento. Per meglio comprendere come si è configurato lo sport moderno, è utile richiamare la prospettiva di Elias e Dunning (1989) i quali collegano il passaggio da giochi violenti e poco regolamentati a discipline istituzionalizzate e normate al più ampio processo di civilizzazione delle società moderne. Secondo questa visione, la graduale regolamentazione dello sport riflette il crescente controllo delle emozioni negli spazi pubblici, in linea con l'affermarsi di modelli sociali basati sulla disciplina, sull'autocontrollo e sulla pacificazione delle dinamiche collettive. Come osserva Bifulco (2020), la teoria figurazionale eliasiana evidenzia come il moderno sistema sportivo emerga in risposta alla necessità di canalizzare l'aggressività e il bisogno

di eccitazione all'interno di contesti regolamentati e privi di reali conseguenze distruttive. Lo sport moderno, quindi, si sviluppa come un campo sociale interdipendente, in cui i meccanismi di potere e il controllo sociale modellano le regole del gioco, la spettacolarizzazione e il ruolo stesso degli spettatori. Si tratta di un processo di standardizzazione che ha contribuito a codificare le pratiche sportive come strumenti educativi e di distinzione sociale contribuendo a diffondere modelli di autocontrollo e disciplina. Semplificando, possiamo affermare che lo sport moderno ha rimodulato diverse pratiche di gioco e attività fisico-motorie (attraverso un processo di selezione al servizio della nascente società industriale) in uno spazio sociale e culturale più unificato, regolamentato e mirato (Gruneau, 2017). Se consideriamo questi elementi in relazione al fumetto, possiamo osservare come anche quest'ultimo si sviluppi attraverso un processo di regolamentazione e standardizzazione della narrazione visiva. Il fumetto ha, infatti, rimediato antiche narrazioni figurali (a partire dalle raffigurazioni rupestri, passando per racconti attraverso immagini sequenziali come l'arazzo di Bayeux, fino ad arrivare al profumetto di artisti come Töpffer e Bush) fino a strutturarsi e a trovare degli standard produttivi e di consumo all'interno dei newspapers statunitensi (Di Paola, 2019).

Entrambi, insomma, sono frutto di un processo storico complesso che converge nell'emersione delle masse come protagoniste indiscusse dei processi storici e sociali. Non è un caso o una mera coincidenza storica, infatti, che il primo personaggio a fumetti (Yellow Kid) e le moderne Olimpiadi (rinate grazie agli sforzi di Pierre de Coubertin) facciano la loro comparsa a distanza di un anno, rispettivamente nel 1895 e nel 1896. Queste esperienze hanno contribuito a diffondere una cultura non alfabetica, che passa per le immagini, per la corporeità e per il gioco e che consente alle masse di partecipare attivamente e con maggiore consapevolezza alla vita sociale.

Sport e fumetto condividono, inoltre, una comune radice spettacolare, che costituisce la base della loro caratterizzazione merceologica. Entrambi si sviluppano all'interno delle logiche dell'industria culturale (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1947), non solo come prodotti funzionali al mercato, ma come strumenti di costruzione di mitologie collettive che rispondono ai desideri e ai bisogni delle società di massa. Come sottolinea Bausinger (2013, p. 62), "è innegabile che lo sport di massa rappresenta un segmento dell'industria culturale, del consumo industriale e del grande sistema del divertimento". Il fumetto si configura, dunque, come un linguaggio spettacolare, capace di sintetizzare contenuti mitologici e codici visivi in forme serializzate e standardizzate, perfettamente integrate nei circuiti della produzione culturale moderna.

Lo sport, grazie alla spettacolarizzazione delle sue pratiche dovuta anche al forte legame con il sistema mediale, è entrato a far parte della vita culturale delle società generando un sistema di simboli, valori e pratiche che non potevano non toccare un medium permeabile come il fumetto, da sempre inesauribile e vitale laboratorio in cui si sperimentano le possibilità del nuovo che emerge dal sistema dell'industria culturale (Frezza, 2017, 2018).

Come vedremo, il fumetto sportivo, e in particolare il nostro caso studio, la *disegnata*, rientra nelle dinamiche della narrazione mediata dello sport, poiché capace di trasformare le gesta calcistiche in racconti visivi iconici, contribuendo alla costruzione del mito sportivo e alla celebrazione delle figure atletiche. In questo senso, il concetto di mediatizzazione dello sport (Tirino, 2019) offre

una chiave di lettura fondamentale per comprendere il ruolo che il fumetto ha avuto nella transizione del calcio da disciplina agonistica a fenomeno culturale, commerciale e spettacolare. Secondo Tirino (2022), la mediatizzazione implica non solo la diffusione dello sport attraverso i media, ma una sua profonda trasformazione strutturale, in cui le pratiche sportive vengono adattate alle logiche della visibilità mediatica e del consumo culturale. La *disegnata* ha contribuito a questo processo anticipando modalità narrative successivamente sviluppate dalla televisione e, oggi, dai social media. Come evidenzia Tirino (2024), nella società digitale la fruizione dello sport avviene sempre più attraverso contenuti frammentati e ipermediati, come meme, video brevi e highlights, che amplificano e personalizzano l'esperienza calcistica. In modo analogo, la *disegnata* ha svolto una funzione simile in un'epoca mediale precedente, permettendo agli appassionati di rivivere e condividere momenti iconici del calcio. Questo dimostra che la mediatizzazione dello sport non è un fenomeno esclusivamente contemporaneo, ma un processo di lungo periodo, in cui ogni nuovo medium ridefinisce il modo in cui lo sport viene percepito, raccontato e consumato (Tirino, 2019).

2. Sport e fumetto, relazioni complesse e in divenire

Il rapporto tra sport e media è stato oggetto di numerosi studi interdisciplinari, che hanno analizzato il ruolo della rappresentazione sportiva nei mezzi di comunicazione e la costruzione delle celebrità sportive come fenomeno culturale, economico e sociale (Abbiezzi, 2006; Giulianotti, 2015; Rowe, 2012). La crescente mediatizzazione dello sport è stata interpretata come un processo che ha trasformato le pratiche sportive in spettacoli globalizzati, con un impatto significativo sulla percezione pubblica degli atleti e sulla costruzione dell'identità sportiva (Boyle & Haynes, 2009; Frandsen, 2020; Tirino, 2019). La cultura della celebrità sportiva, inoltre, è stata approfondita da studiosi che hanno evidenziato il modo in cui i media contribuiscano alla mitizzazione dell'atleta, creando figure iconiche attraverso la narrazione giornalistica, la televisione e i social media (Castellano, 2023; Smart, 2005). La spettacolarizzazione dello sport, facilitata dalle tecnologie audiovisive e digitali, ha portato alla trasformazione dell'evento sportivo in un prodotto di consumo, con dinamiche che vanno dalla drammatizzazione degli eventi fino alla creazione di veri e propri universi transmediali legati alle grandi competizioni e ai campioni sportivi (Tussey, 2018; Tirino, 2019, 2024). Le trasformazioni della comunicazione digitale hanno ulteriormente intensificato il ruolo dei media nella costruzione dell'immaginario sportivo, come dimostrano studi sulla mediatizzazione dello sport nell'era dei social media (Bifulco et al., 2019; Hutchins & Sanderson, 2017; Thorpe, 2017; Tirino, 2022; Tirino et al., 2024). Questa evoluzione ha reso gli atleti sempre più figure ibridate tra icone sportive e influencer digitali, con conseguenze significative sulle strategie di marketing, branding personale e coinvolgimento del pubblico (Castellano, 2023; Germano & Russo, 2021).

Tuttavia, la relazione tra sport e fumetto (Di Paola, 2023) è rimasta a lungo una tematica marginale, trattata solo in modo episodico nella letteratura accademica. Questa lacuna è dovuta anche a una difficoltà di collocazione disciplinare: il fumetto sportivo non rientra né

completamente nella storia dello sport né nella storia del fumetto, e per questo rischia di essere trascurato da entrambe le discipline. Nonostante questa apparente marginalità, il rapporto tra sport e fumetto è profondamente radicato in tradizioni culturali e mediali che si sviluppano a livello globale e transnazionale, con caratteristiche specifiche in diversi contesti storici e geografici. Un esempio di questa eterogeneità è rappresentato dal genere *shōkōn*, ovvero i manga sportivi giapponesi, che incarnano una particolare declinazione narrativa e ideologica della relazione tra sport, educazione e disciplina. Gli *shōkōn* non solo hanno influenzato la percezione dello sport in Giappone, ma si sono affermati come fenomeno transnazionale (Jiménez-Varea, 2005). Attraverso la loro enfasi sulla perseveranza, lo spirito di sacrificio e il superamento dei propri limiti, gli *shōkōn* dimostrano come il fumetto sportivo possa essere un veicolo per l'elaborazione di valori culturali e per la costruzione di modelli di comportamento in contesti sociali diversi.

In Italia, il fumetto sportivo si colloca all'incrocio tra cultura popolare, giornalismo sportivo e industria culturale, assumendo ruoli diversi a seconda delle epoche e delle dinamiche mediali in cui è stato prodotto e consumato. Data la complessità del tema e l'eterogeneità delle esperienze nazionali, sarebbe impossibile proporre un panorama completo delle intersezioni tra sport e fumetto in un unico saggio. Questo studio si propone quindi di esplorare un segmento specifico di questo fenomeno, focalizzandosi sul contesto italiano e in particolare sull'esperienza della *disegnata* e sulle dinamiche che hanno segnato l'evoluzione del fumetto sportivo. Per farlo, si adotta un approccio interdisciplinare, che integra diverse prospettive teoriche:

- un'analisi storica, che ricostruisce le origini del rapporto tra sport e fumetto, esaminando come questi due ambiti si siano influenzati reciprocamente nel corso del tempo, dalle prime illustrazioni sportive fino all'era digitale.
- un'analisi socioculturale, per comprendere il ruolo della *disegnata* nella costruzione dell'immaginario collettivo, nella narrazione dell'epica sportiva e nei processi di identificazione e fandom.
- un'analisi mediologica, che esplora come il rapporto tra sport e fumetto si sia adattato alle trasformazioni delle tecnologie della comunicazione, con particolare attenzione alla cultura della convergenza digitale (Jenkins, 2006) e ai nuovi modelli di produzione e fruizione dell'intrattenimento sportivo.

L'intreccio tra sport e fumetto diventa particolarmente evidente con la nascita del giornalismo moderno, quando entrambi iniziano a essere utilizzati per attrarre un pubblico sempre più ampio e si inseriscono nelle logiche della commercializzazione dell'informazione sportiva. L'evoluzione dell'editoria e delle pratiche di consumo culturale porta il fumetto a trovare spazi di visibilità nel giornalismo sportivo, contribuendo alla costruzione dell'immaginario sportivo in forme grafiche e narrative nuove. Fin dalle sue origini, questo tipo di giornalismo ha utilizzato sia fotografie sia illustrazioni per raccontare e valorizzare le imprese atletiche, contribuendo alla costruzione di un immaginario collettivo legato allo sport. Sebbene il fumetto sportivo si affermi pienamente solo più avanti, le prime tracce della sua ibridazione con l'informazione sportiva si riscontrano già alla fine del XIX secolo. Il primo esempio significativo è dato da "Lo Sport Illustrato", pubblicato

per la prima volta nel 1886 dall'editore Garbini di Milano, una delle prime riviste dedicate alla rappresentazione grafica dell'evento sportivo. Questa testata si inserisce in un più ampio fenomeno editoriale che lega l'illustrazione al giornalismo sportivo, anticipando molte delle funzioni che il fumetto assumerà nel corso del Novecento.

Il vero consolidamento del fumetto in Italia avviene però con la nascita del "Corriere dei Piccoli" nel 1908, una rivista concepita come prodotto destinato all'infanzia, che segna l'inizio dell'influenza dei fumetti sull'immaginario collettivo italiano. Nonostante il fumetto non abbia ancora un ruolo predominante nel giornalismo sportivo di questo periodo, l'illustrazione assume un'importanza crescente, come dimostra la presenza di rappresentazioni grafiche di eventi sportivi nel supplemento della "Gazzetta dello Sport", lanciato nel 1913 e pubblicato per oltre cinquant'anni.

La rivoluzione che servirà anche da laboratorio per pratiche che poi la televisione farà proprie, porta un nome e un cognome ben preciso, quello di Carmelo Silva, e ruota ovviamente intorno al calcio, lo sport che più ha ossessionato la nostra nazione. La parabola di Silva ha inizio negli anni Trenta, un periodo cruciale in cui il fascismo inizia a piegare l'industria sportiva sulle proprie logiche propagandistiche e politiche col fine di creare un consenso più ampio possibile. Non bisogna dimenticare che in questo periodo le masse sono irregimentate in attività ludico-sportive obbligatorie che in qualche modo avvicinano grandi fette di popolazione allo sport (Cannella & Giuntini, 2009). Allo stesso tempo la passione sportiva è alimentata dalle narrazioni di stampo epico della stampa e della radio che non perdono occasione per celebrare le glorie sportive nazionali. La spettacolarizzazione dello sport si mette a servizio della politica, con tutte le tensioni e le contraddizioni che potevano caratterizzare un regime che provava a schiacciare la nazione all'interno di un unico modello ideologico e culturale – ovviamente bisogna fare attenzione a semplificazioni eccessive in quanto la spettacolarizzazione sportiva risponde anche a logiche più ampie legate all'emergente industria culturale dello sport, che ne modernizza le forme di narrazione, ne internazionalizza le prospettive e ne favorisce l'integrazione nei circuiti del consumo e dell'intrattenimento di massa. In questo processo, il calcio diventa la vetrina principale per esporre le qualità dello sport fascista. Si tratta di un percorso iniziato già nel 1926 con la Carta di Viareggio, in cui viene riformato in profondità l'ordinamento calcistico italiano, e culminato con la vittoria del mondiale del 1934 in casa, descritta dai media di regime come una vera e propria conquista di un popolo che pretendeva un posto d'onore tra le grandi protagoniste della storia. Siamo di fronte a una narrazione di stampo epico che, per forza di cose, ha bisogno di eroi che incarnino credenze e valori in linea con gli ideali in cui le masse devono identificarsi. In ogni caso, questa dimensione epica-eroica non è un'invenzione politica, ma un elemento strutturale delle discipline sportive stesse. Ogni competizione sportiva è una forma di dramma ritualizzato, in cui si alternano momenti di tensione, sconfitta e riscatto (Bifulco & Tirino, 2018). Questi elementi narrativi permettono allo sport di generare eroi e miti, indipendentemente dal contesto politico in cui si sviluppano. La loro forza sta nella capacità di evocare simboli e archetipi universali, proiettando gli atleti in una dimensione mitica che trascende la loro realtà storica. Le sezioni sportive dei giornali con le loro illustrazioni e interviste accompagnano questo processo di trasformazione dello sportivo in celebrità creando una vera e propria drammaturgia che ha posto le basi per quella individualizzazione dello sport sostenuta in maniera più marcata dalla radio, prima e dalla televisione poi (Frandsen, 2020).

3. La disegnata di Silva

In questo senso il lavoro di Carmelo Silva ha influenzato notevolmente l'immaginazione sportiva



Fig. 1 1938 ITALIA-BRASILE 2-1 “Il Calcio Illustrato”

del pubblico, anticipando alcune dinamiche più propriamente televisive, ovvero quella riproduzione multisensoriale del corpo del calciatore in cui si estetizza il gesto sportivo e che ha portato il pubblico di massa ad avvicinarsi agli appassionati, contribuendo alla creazione della celebrità sportiva. In pratica, Silva traduce il linguaggio cinestetico e corporeo del calcio in un discorso visivo iconico, capace di immortalare l'azione sportiva e trasformarla in una narrazione mitica. La grande innovazione portata da questo vignettista italiano è la cosiddetta *disegnata* in cui si fissavano e si ricostruivano per le maggiori testate giornalistiche, in una sorta di moviola *ante litteram*, le azioni più emozionanti delle partite calcistiche. Alla fine degli anni Trenta la storia del calcio si lega indissolubilmente alla matita di Silva che inizia a illustrare gol per “Il Calcio Illustrato”, “La Gazzetta dello Sport”, il “Guerin Sportivo” e a curare l’“Almanacco illustrato del calcio” della Panini dalla prima edizione del 1939 fino al 1993. In tempi in cui le partite potevano essere seguite in radio o dal vivo –

e in cui al massimo si poteva rivedere qualche azione nei filmati sbiaditi e incerti dei Cinegiornali – le *disegnate* di Silva permettevano di visualizzare le gesta eroiche dei calciatori diffondendo tra le masse cultura sportiva e l'immagine celebrativa dei corpi e dei movimenti degli atleti. Questa operazione trasforma “Il calcio illustrato” (fondato nel 1931) in un vero e proprio vangelo del calcio: le fotografie, le interviste, le cronache e la *disegnata* contribuivano a creare quello stretto legame tra appassionati e mondo calcistico che col tempo ha disegnato modelli di consumo sempre più individualizzati e personalizzati. Silva non si limita a documentare le partite, ma trasforma il calcio in una narrazione epica, creando icone visive che rafforzano il senso di appartenenza e di identità collettiva. È importante sottolineare che la celebrità non dipende esclusivamente dal valore intrinseco delle imprese realizzate, ma deriva in larga misura dal modo in cui queste vengono rappresentate e amplificate dai media. Come osserva Smart (2005), sebbene il successo e le grandi imprese continuino a essere elementi centrali nella costruzione della fama, è innegabile che quest'ultima sia oggi profondamente modellata dalle dinamiche mediatiche, che

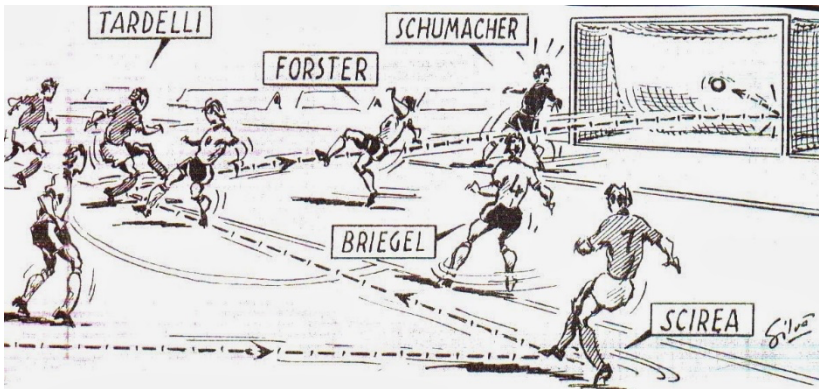


Fig. 2 1982 Italia-Germania Ovest 3 - 1 Rete di Tardelli

solo apparentemente statiche e silenziose, compongono racconti in cui la mente dei lettori/spettatori partecipa attivamente alla costruzione e all'animazione delle storie grazie agli indizi disegnati e disseminati sullo spazio cartaceo. I fumetti di Silva attivano modalità di conoscenza e divertimento che coinvolgono lo sguardo dello spettatore immergendolo in un'esperienza audiovisiva messa in moto da figure essenziali, delineate da pochi tratti che si animano grazie al dinamismo dell'azione, dalle linee tratteggiate delle corse, dei passaggi e dei tiri, dalle lettere che indicano la progressione del gioco. Come ha fatto ben notare Gino Cervi (2021), in poche righe Silva riusciva a dare anche una dimensione emotiva alle sue vignette: “ecco allora tre trattini sulla testa del portiere battuto a enfatizzarne la costernazione; il disorientamento del difensore superato in dribbling simboleggiato da un piccolo turbine intorno al capo; l'esultanza dei compagni ad accompagnare il pallone che entra in rete e via di questo passo”. La sostanza emotiva delle sue *disegnate* ben si agganciava alla necessità di vivere e rivivere le gesta dei propri beniamini, di dare corpo, voce e movimento a quei nomi che riempivano le animate discussioni domenicali dei bar di tutta d'Italia. Un segno, quello di Silva, capace di generare una immediata adesione da parte dei pubblici e di nutrire un immaginario alla ricerca di eroi sportivi. La macchina del mito messa in moto dalle industrie culturali sportive ha bisogno di nuovi cantori in grado di far vivere in prima persona l'epica del calcio e il lapis di Silva prende su di sé questo incarico per ben sessanta anni lasciando un segno indelebile nella storia di questo sport. Intere generazioni di tifosi hanno esercitato le proprie passioni e le proprie conoscenze calcistiche su queste vignette, tanto che Candido Cannavò per ricordare Silva il giorno dopo la sua scomparsa avvenuta nel 1996 scrisse sulla “Gazzetta dello Sport”:

I giovani cresciuti nell'era della televisione faranno fatica a capire. Ma chi, come noi, scoprì il calcio da balilla tra gli stordimenti della “guerra gloriosa” alla quale l'Italia si apprestava e le tragedie che lasciò addosso, sa bene che cosa abbia rappresentato Silva. Il campionato riprendeva la sua vita in un'Italia ancora divisa. Le gesta e gli eroi degli stadi - l'ultimo Meazza, il maturo Piola, il leggendario Valentino Mazzola, il sottile e bravissimo Maroso - erano per noi ragazzi una vecchia radio e la voce di Nicolò Carosio. Più che cronaca, immaginazione. Ecco Silva fu la nostra prima televisione. Aveva per antenna la sua magica matita. Il video erano le pagine del Calcio Illustrato che noi aspettavamo ogni settimana una sorta di trasposizione: la voce della radio si traduceva in immagini lungo una trama calcistica fedelmente riprodotta. E la matita di Silva penetrava dovunque, anche nello stile e nel carattere dei campioni. Come questa sorta di prodigio si realizzasse, non sappiamo: il nostro Silva andava allo stadio, seguiva le azioni, fissava i punti di riferimento sulle sue cartelline bianche e poi agiva di pura memoria.

La tecnologia dell'epoca risiedeva soltanto in questa sua vena d'artista che trovava nel calcio la sua ispirazione e il suo territorio. Lui captava, traduceva, dava un'anima alle sue scene.

La matita di Silva, insomma, porta il calcio nelle case, nelle vite private delle persone anticipando pratiche e modelli poi ampliati dalla televisione e dall'avvento del digitale. Molti degli eventi calcistici che hanno popolato l'immaginario nazionalpopolare hanno i contorni e il dinamismo dei disegni di questo fumettista quasi dimenticato e sconosciuto alle nuove generazioni, ma che ha un ruolo decisivo nella costruzione di una mitologia calcistica italiana. Un serio studio di media-archeologia del calcio italiano non può ignorare la funzione sociale e mediale delle *disegnate*, come queste hanno nutrito le pratiche che hanno dato vita al fenomeno della moviola e le miriadi di trasmissioni sportive dedite all'analisi e alla dissezione delle partite calcistiche. Le *disegnate*, infatti, non vanno considerate come forme espressive isolate, ma come parte integrante di un ecosistema mediale complesso, che interagisce continuamente con altri media come la radio e il giornalismo sportivo. Prima dell'avvento della televisione la *disegnata* calcistica dialogava intensamente con la radio, traducendo in immagini le parole dei cronisti radiofonici e offrendo così ai lettori-spettatori una visualizzazione concreta di azioni sportive altrimenti affidate esclusivamente all'immaginazione. Questo ruolo non si limitava alla semplice illustrazione: la *disegnata* contribuiva a definire codici visivi e strategie narrative che avrebbero successivamente trovato sviluppo e consolidamento nei linguaggi audiovisivi della televisione sportiva. In tal senso, è fondamentale comprendere come l'emergere e il successo della moviola, così come delle successive trasmissioni televisive dedicate all'analisi dettagliata delle partite, non nascano dal nulla, ma abbiano radici profonde proprio nelle pratiche e nelle modalità interpretative introdotte dalle *disegnate*. L'interazione tra *disegnate*, radio e giornalismo sportivo ha dunque creato un modello narrativo che ha plasmato il modo stesso di "vedere" e interpretare il calcio. La *disegnata* non è semplicemente una rappresentazione grafica, ma un fattore attivo nel processo di trasformazione del sistema sportivo, che ha contribuito a strutturare pratiche mediali, aspettative del pubblico e modalità di fruizione che tuttora caratterizzano l'industria culturale dello sport contemporaneo. Il successo di questa esperienza ha dato vita, poi, a numerosi epigoni che, su varie riviste sportive, hanno continuato a dare sostanza e forma alla passione calcistica. Ovvio che si tratta di un'esperienza destinata a perdere successo e adesione con l'avvento dell'era televisiva, anche se in qualche modo è riuscita a mantenere una certa vitalità anche in un panorama mediale profondamente mutato. Più precisamente, appare utile comprendere come e perché la *disegnata* sia riuscita a conservare la propria rilevanza, rinnovando pratiche e funzioni in un ecosistema mediale dominato da nuove logiche di spettacolo e consumo. Esperienze come quelle di Giuliano Giovetti (calciatore e fumettista), capace di realizzare dal 1978 migliaia di moviole *disegnate* per la "Gazzetta dello Sport" – oltre a quelle realizzate per il "Giornalino" e "Guerin Sportivo" – e di tanti altri fumettisti (come Paolo Samarelli o Simone Baruffi) in grado di dare corpo al desiderio sportivo rischiano di cadere nel dimenticatoio perché troppo legate al fumetto per gli studiosi di sport e troppo poco narrative o artistiche per gli studiosi di fumetto. Eppure, la loro importanza risiede proprio nella specificità dell'esperienza mediale che offrono allo spettatore: la *disegnata* non è semplicemente una rappresentazione visiva o una forma depotenziata di highlight, ma una modalità unica di rievocare e rivivere la memoria delle azioni calcistiche amate. A differenza del semplice *rewatch* televisivo, infatti, la *disegnata* attiva specifiche dinamiche emozionali e percettive, legate al rallentamento del tempo narrativo, alla focalizzazione su dettagli simbolici e al

coinvolgimento immaginativo dello spettatore. È precisamente in questa dimensione peculiare della memoria – che intreccia affetto, nostalgia, immaginazione e identificazione – che la *disegnata* rivela la sua forza. In altre parole, se gli highlights televisivi catturano l'istante, la *disegnata* permette di riscoprirlo, rallentarlo, approfondirlo, e soprattutto di trasformarlo in un evento carico di significato affettivo e simbolico. Questo ruolo mediale unico consente dunque alla *disegnata* di sopravvivere anche nella contemporaneità, confermandola come forma resistente e complementare, capace di offrire un'esperienza differente e unica. Le *disegnate* di Silva e dei suoi epigoni contribuiscono, infatti, in maniera decisiva alla costruzione di quei piccoli riti che cementificano le relazioni tra i fan, che amplificano passioni, amicizie e processi di identificazione creando una memoria comune e forti legami generazionali. I gol disegnati portano gli spettatori, grazie alla potenza mediale del fumetto e alla sua capacità di farci vivere una simulazione incarnata degli eventi rappresentati (Kukkonen, 2013), a immergersi nelle azioni più entusiasmanti dei match; e a condividere poi queste emozioni con la comunità di lettori e amici in una dimensione sociale che sarà rimediata e trasformata prima dalla televisione e poi dal digitale (Tirino, 2019).

4. La disegnata e il mondo digitale

Nell'attuale mediascape, allora, i gol disegnati cambiano la propria funzione mediale e sociale adattandosi alle dinamiche della digital society. L'evoluzione delle *disegnate* rappresenta un caso emblematico di adattamento alle trasformazioni del mediascape contemporaneo. Se in origine esse rispondevano al bisogno di fissare visivamente le gesta sportive, in un'epoca in cui la documentazione audiovisiva era limitata, oggi la loro funzione si ridefinisce all'interno di un ambiente mediale caratterizzato dall'abbondanza e dalla riproducibilità infinita del contenuto digitale. Secondo boyd (2008), i contenuti digitali sono caratterizzati da persistenza, ricercabilità, replicabilità e scalabilità, elementi che hanno trasformato il modo in cui lo sport viene vissuto e condiviso. Questo processo non è unidirezionale: se prima erano i media mainstream a definire la narrazione sportiva, oggi i fan stessi contribuiscono alla costruzione del discorso sportivo attraverso user-generated content, come meme, video editati e GIF animate.

Le *disegnate* sono state, dunque, rimediate trasformandosi da strumento di documentazione sportiva a oggetto di culto e merchandising per il fandom calcistico. L'eredità di Silva, oggi, è raccolta da un'azienda che mette a frutto la storia di questa pratica sulla rete cambiando di segno alle *disegnate* e trasformandole in un oggetto in grado di attraversare i social network (alla ricerca di audience) e di materializzarsi in vari prodotti di merchandising. Il sito "golddisegnati.com", infatti si aggancia a quel desiderio mai sopito legato all'immaginazione, alla memoria sportiva e alla nostalgia, così come dichiarato dall'ideatore dell'iniziativa:

Oggi è tutto così veloce, i video e le animazioni 3D catturano costantemente gli occhi. Eppure ogni tanto è bello guardare un gol solo per "immaginarlo". Da molte parti leggo che disegnare i gol è un'arte dimenticata, che TV e internet hanno ucciso questo mestiere. E chi lo dice? Il calcio non è morto, né tantomeno il disegno. Golddisegnati è frutto di una tradizione antica rivisitata in chiave moderna, dove ogni disegno rappresenta un'emozione incredibile che ognuno di noi ha vissuto guardando questa palla che rotola su un prato verde, si insacca nella rete e ... incanta tutto il mondo.

Questa affermazione evidenzia come la rimediazione digitale non elimini il valore delle *disegnate*, ma le trasformi in un nuovo oggetto culturale. Esse non servono più a soddisfare la fame di immagini calcistiche, come accadeva nell'epoca di Silva, ma diventano artefatti nostalgici che connettono il passato al presente, riattivando una memoria sportiva che va oltre la mera documentazione degli eventi. Attraverso il merchandising e la personalizzazione (magliette, tazze, poster), queste rappresentazioni visive si inseriscono in un'economia culturale in cui l'identità del tifoso si esprime anche attraverso l'acquisto e l'esposizione di oggetti iconici (Kozinets, 2001; Zagnoli & Radicchi, 2011). Tra le possibilità offerte dal sito, inoltre, c'è quella di acquistare gli NFT dei gol preferiti. L'introduzione degli NFT (Non-Fungible Tokens) nel mondo della cultura sportiva e artistica rappresenta un'innovazione significativa nel modo in cui i contenuti digitali vengono percepiti, distribuiti e monetizzati (Russo, 2024). In termini tecnici, gli NFT sono certificati digitali unici basati sulla blockchain, che garantiscono l'autenticità e la proprietà di un'opera digitale, trasformandola in un oggetto di valore collezionabile e scambiabile (Chalmers et al., 2022). Nel contesto sportivo, gli NFT stanno rivoluzionando la fruizione dell'iconografia sportiva, trasformando immagini, video, momenti salienti e illustrazioni (come le storiche *disegnate*) in beni digitali da collezione. Il valore degli NFT non deriva tanto dal loro contenuto estetico o artistico, ma dalla loro scarsità programmata e dalla possibilità di essere scambiati su piattaforme blockchain, introducendo una logica di mercato speculativo e di investimento (Scheiding, 2023).

Questo settore, dunque, riesce a offrire nuove occasioni di profitto anche a quegli artisti e professionisti del digitale (dei comparti dei videogiochi, del cinema, della grafica, ecc.) che possono ottenere enormi gratificazioni artistiche ed economiche, eliminando la mediazione di musei, gallerie, case d'asta e di tutti quegli attori che spesso formano un circuito economico e sociale chiuso o di difficile accesso (Centorrino & Di Paola 2022).

Nel caso delle *disegnate* calcistiche, la trasformazione in NFT apre un dibattito interessante: il valore di un'illustrazione sportiva è legato alla sua funzione narrativa e identitaria per i tifosi, o diventa semplicemente un asset digitale da collezione? Se nel XX secolo le *disegnate* di Silva erano un mezzo di fruizione del calcio e parte di un vero e proprio patrimonio culturale custodito da appassionati e collezionisti, oggi esse vengono trasformate in oggetti speculativi, con il rischio che il loro valore venga svuotato del suo significato storico e affettivo.

Gli NFT, inoltre, presentano due criticità principali. La prima riguarda la forte volatilità economica (Fuchs, 2022); la seconda riguarda il forte impatto ambientale della tecnologia blockchain utilizzata per gli NFT (Truby et al., 2022). Nonostante queste criticità, il mercato degli NFT continua ad attrarre collezionisti, investitori e appassionati di sport, dimostrando come la digitalizzazione abbia trasformato il concetto di possesso e autenticità. Se in passato il valore di un oggetto sportivo era legato alla sua materialità (magliette autografate, figurine, trofei), oggi il valore si sposta su un livello interamente digitale, in cui il possesso è garantito non dalla fisicità dell'oggetto, ma dal registro crittografico che ne attesta l'unicità. In ogni caso, sia gli NFT che il merchandise basato sulle *disegnate* possono essere interpretati come una forma di espansione transmediale della narrazione sportiva (Tussey, 2018; Tirino, 2019), attraverso cui frammenti di eventi e di memoria calcistica vengono "estratti" (Jenkins, 2006) dal loro contesto originale e trasformati in oggetti collezionabili e fruibili nel quotidiano. Il tifoso non si limita più a ricordare una partita, ma ne porta letteralmente un pezzo nella propria vita quotidiana, appropriandosi

simbolicamente di momenti che altrimenti resterebbero confinati nell'esperienza visiva o nella memoria personale.

Conclusioni

L'evoluzione delle *disegnate*, dal cartaceo a NFT da collezione, rappresenta un fenomeno emblematico della continua ridefinizione del rapporto tra sport, comunicazione e tecnologia. Questa trasformazione riflette un'ibridazione tra nostalgia e innovazione digitale, in cui il valore delle *disegnate* oscilla tra la loro funzione identitaria e narrativa e le dinamiche speculative del mercato digitale. Da un lato, le *disegnate* mantengono la loro capacità evocativa, testimoniando la centralità del fumetto e dell'illustrazione nella costruzione dell'epica sportiva e nella celebrazione dell'immaginario collettivo calcistico. Queste continuano a essere parte integrante della cultura dei tifosi, offrendo un legame tangibile con il passato e reinterpretando, attraverso nuovi media, il linguaggio visivo dello sport. Dall'altro lato, la loro conversione in NFT le proietta all'interno di un contesto in cui la cultura sportiva si incardina in oggetti di mercato, soggetti alle logiche di scarsità programmata, collezionismo digitale e speculazione finanziaria. Questo passaggio solleva interrogativi cruciali: il valore delle *disegnate* digitalizzate sarà determinato dalla loro capacità di tramandare la storia sportiva e visiva, o diventeranno semplicemente un altro asset volatile in un mercato altamente speculativo? L'esperienza delle *disegnate* si inserisce in un più ampio processo di mediatizzazione dello sport, attraverso il quale le forme di narrazione sportiva si adattano alle evoluzioni del sistema mediale, modificando le modalità di fruizione e di interazione tra pubblico e contenuti sportivi. Queste diventano modelli narrativi dinamici, capaci di connettere memoria storica, cultura del fandom e innovazione tecnologica. La lunga storia del gol disegnato testimonia le profonde trasformazioni del mediascape sportivo, mostrando come la spettacolarizzazione del calcio abbia sempre trovato nel fumetto e nell'illustrazione un potente alleato per costruire icone, miti e memorie collettive. Oggi, le *disegnate* non scompaiono, ma si trasformano, adattandosi alle logiche della società digitale e della collezionabilità. La loro persistenza non è legata a una mera esigenza tecnica, ma alla loro capacità di incarnare un desiderio collettivo di celebrare, ricordare e reinterpretare il mito sportivo. In questo senso, il futuro delle *disegnate* dipenderà dalla loro capacità di adattarsi alle logiche dell'attuale mediascape in cui i tifosi partecipano sempre più attivamente alla costruzione della narrazione sportiva. Questa tendenza riflette un cambiamento più profondo nella logica del fandom sportivo contemporaneo, sempre più connessa alla possibilità di personalizzare, possedere e condividere frammenti dell'esperienza sportiva. In questo scenario, le *disegnate* e gli NFT emergono come due facce dello stesso fenomeno: le prime rappresentano la persistenza di un modello narrativo storico, i secondi l'adattamento di questa tradizione alle dinamiche della digitalizzazione e del mercato sportivo. La loro storia, quindi, non è finita, ma sta vivendo una nuova metamorfosi, situata tra tradizione e innovazione, tra cultura sportiva e mercato digitale.

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The Kings League challenge. Glorification of commercialized and spectacularized sport

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Abstract

The Kings League represents a challenge within the global football industry, pushing the relationship between sport, spectacle and entertainment to its limits in the digital age. It does so through many elements: eccentric rules designed to maximize unpredictability and excitement; the combination and overlapping of different genres across matches and shows in a sort of pastiche; the tireless exploitation of the communication possibilities offered by digital technology; celebrities – mostly streamers and a few former footballers – who act as attractions; and the continuous involvement of fan-customers-prosumers, especially younger ones. All this unfolds in an atmosphere that is always halfway between competitive event and cheerful recreational show.

It is a rational strategy in economic terms, one that aims to exploit the principles of commercialization and spectacularization of sport as widely as possible, following a vigorous market logic, but also presenting itself as a cultural and commercial avant-garde for a recoding of the entire sporting canon.

Keywords: Kings League, Commercialization, Spectacularization, Digital entertainment, Market.

1. Introduction

The Kings League¹ is a competition created in Spain in 2022, although the first season took place at the beginning of 2023 (Kings League infojobs, 2024). It is a new sporting format, a football tournament played by seven players, which has now spread to several countries: to date, in addition to Spain, it is currently played in Italy, Mexico, Brazil, France and Germany. In a global yet centrally organized network, it operates through extravagant rules that change annually with a specific aim: to increase the spectacle of the game, maximize unpredictability and uncertainty of outcome so to make it appealing, entertaining, lively and exciting for a wide audience, especially younger generations.

Conceived specifically for the digital consumer, the Kings League represents a challenge to the global football industry, which seeks to maximize the commercialized and spectacularized logic of contemporary sport for economic purposes, systematically, methodically and openly

¹ There is also a female version, the Queens League, which does not seem to have achieved the same popularity at the moment.

exaggerating its fundamental characteristics while effectively merging sport and digital entertainment.

2. A theoretical framework: sport as commercialized and spectacularized entertainment

To fully understand the mechanism of this new competition, it is worth situating it within the dominant characteristics of the contemporary sports industry.

Nowadays, sport is primarily configured, especially in its elite dimension, as an industrial and market reality oriented towards producing performances whose primary purpose is to entertain spectators-consumers by virtue of a profit logic.

This industry fully embodies the distinctive features of a sporting context subject to advanced commercialization processes. This expression does not simply refer to the existence of economic transactions within the sporting system – which have been present since the earliest forms of structured competitions, especially those of greater importance – but rather emphasizes a specific cultural and organizational characteristic, and an attitude towards sport and its protagonists, that tends to interpret sporting practices, events and subjects mainly in terms of economic value, market and profit (Walsh & Giulianotti, 2001, 2007; Andrews & Silk, 2018; Andrews, 2006, 2019; Boykoff, 2014; Bifulco, 2024, Horne, 2006, Sage, 1998; Rinehart, 1998).

Thus, the pursuit of profit, the centrality of the financial dimension and the adoption of market logic guide, with rare exceptions, the planning of sporting events, their staging down to the smallest details, and the relationships among the actors involved. The generation of revenue and the accumulation of capital through the commercialization of goods and services related to sporting competition consequently emerge as the dominant criteria in shaping both the definition and perception of the sport as a social phenomenon, one that ends up being, over time, integrated into common sense (Whitson, 1984; Williams, 1977; Sage, 1998).

The social and communal dimension of passion does not disappear entirely; rather, it continues to exist in a relationship of coexistence and intersection with the market structure (Crawford, 2004). It remains, after all, an important component of fans' motivation to consume, even where it comes into tension with economic logic and seeks margins for autonomous expression. Yet this framework is unlikely to play an explicit role in guiding the strategic decisions of the sports industry, except to the extent that it can be translated into consumption potential.

The salient features of this configuration of sport can be traced back to several elements: the central role of large corporations operating directly within football or related sectors, led by managerial elites and oriented towards capital accumulation and profit maximization in both organizational and competitive choices; the systematic promotion of sporting and commercial brands; the increasing spectacularization of events, designed to attract large audiences and consumers of products and services; the use of celebrities as tools to build and strengthen identity and parasocial bonds with fans – bonds that are, in turn, subject to economic exploitation (Andrews, 2019). The commercialization of sport is therefore characterized by a constant focus on expanding the economic value of the entire sector and its potential, with a conspicuous interest in strategic markets such as merchandising, sponsorship, advertising, broadcasting rights,

season tickets and matchday admissions. The conduct of the actors involved is guided by explicit economic rationality in the planning of events and related commercial activities.

The key element through which the sports industry attempts to maximize its economic potential is spectacle. Sport is, in fact, a complex form of entertainment economy, geared towards channeling multiple forms of consumption: competitions, protagonists, venues and locations hosting competitions, side events, promotional messages, media discourse and even expressions of supporters are incorporated into a spectacular dimension whose aim is to imbue participation with emotionally engaging and seductive content capable of stimulating consumption. From athletic performances to ceremonial rituals, from entertainment shows to architectural spaces, from media narratives to the continuous flow of data and information, from the dynamics of celebrity to the aesthetics of uniforms, from advertising to fantasy sports, everything contributes to a spectacular totality aimed at entertaining, attracting and encouraging consumer behaviour (Andrews, 2019, pp. 41-42).

At the same time, the sports industry is becoming increasingly globalized. Companies interested in the commercial exploitation of sport – from sports governing bodies to multinationals and media agencies – aim to penetrate markets and capture audiences on a global scale, distributing resources according to market-driven criteria. Even the main players in contests operate within a globalized labour market, gravitating towards the most remunerative opportunities.

In this context, stadiums and sports arenas are themselves designed as consumer spaces, conceived to offer intense visual and entertainment experiences, but also diversified goods and services that extend well beyond the competition in the strict sense and may even incorporate dedicated areas for sales or consumption (Tosi, 2018).

The commercialized form of sport is based on the so-called sports-media complex or media-sport production complex (Lefever, 2012; Jhally, 1989; Tirino, 2025), i.e. on the structural interdependence among sports governance, media industries, and sponsoring companies. These are complex relationships, not without competitive and conflictual elements, yet characterized by systemic convergences of interest.

Sport is called upon to guarantee a continuous flow of events and content, set within predictable calendars cycles and established narrative patterns – rivalries and the drama of competition – which seek to attract and retain public attention. The constant production of competitions, results and news feeds attractive narratives within a universe familiar to fans and spectators, in which tradition, history and renewal coexist. This combination of novelty, outcome uncertainty and recognizable frameworks constitutes a significant source of commercial potential (Rowe, 2004, pp. 31-33).

The media, for their part, transform the attention of fans into economic value by building around sports content, in addition to broadcasting competitions, news or entertainment programming and leveraging the full narrative and communicative potential offered by digital platforms. In exchange for substantial economic investments, they aim to expand the audience they offer to the advertising market and strengthen their corporate legitimacy. The sale of advertising space generates significant resources for both media agencies and the sports sector, while advertisers benefit from privileged exposure to large consumer audiences.

Within this integrated system, the elite sports industry, in order to demonstrate its capacity to absorb huge financial flows, is deeply permeated by the logic and language of the market (Boyle

& Haynes, 2004). Broadcasting rights, sponsorships, advertising, the exploiting the digital engagement, and the development of productive relationships closely linked to the media ecosystem and the interests of major brands, all become instruments for maximizing profitability. In this context, the fan – the bearer of the passion that animates the system – is mainly considered as a spectator and consumer – and today also as a prosumer – whose attention represents the fundamental economic resource (Jhally, 1984). Although television remains a central player, the landscape is changing due to digitalization, the emergence of new platforms, processes such as disintermediation, and prosumerism as a new mode of engagement for fans, who are now not only consumers but also producers of content or digital traffic, and above all unwitting unpaid workers in the economic system (Andrews & Ritzer, 2018).

Sport itself, across its various disciplines, as well as the activation of community and identity dynamics, serves primarily an instrumental function insofar as it attracts spectators and customers to whom entertainment, goods and services can be sold, and brands promoted, benefiting from high visibility thanks to the widespread attention generated by tournaments, competitions and their protagonists.

The commercial and media exploitation of sport has thus progressively intensified the need to increase the spectacularization of events and refine the mechanisms for attracting increasingly segmented audiences. Within the sports and media entertainment complex, every element – from sporting performances to ceremonies, from biographical narratives to gossip, from the configuration of spaces to advertising – takes on a widespread spectacular dimension (Andrews, 2019).

A profit-oriented sports product therefore tends to operate across specific parameters in different ways and with different levels of integration depending on the case: favouring identification, amplifying drama, preserving outcome uncertainty, intensifying emotional peaks and enhancing aesthetic aspects, accentuating dynamism, keeping the duration of competitions limited – although not too short – and making use of – and/or amplifying – the relevance of events and the personalization of the protagonists (Clarke & Clarke, 2015).

This involves strategies aimed at maintaining constant audience engagement, leveraging identity, belonging, performance excellence, game aesthetics, the drama of competition and, in some cases, even economic incentives linked to betting.

It is not only the programming and staging of events, in addition to their narration, that are used to achieve this ideal of extended involvement of the fan-spectator-consumer. The continuous regulatory changes in the various disciplines are also directed towards the same aim (Sewart, 1987).

Contributing to this logic are changes to the rules of various sports, introduced over time to increase the appeal and telegenicity of competitions, the aesthetic and dynamic qualities of play, greater protection for the most talented athletes, as well as the reorganization of calendars to better meet the needs of global audiences. At the same time, the ways through which sport is covered – tv programmes and contents on digital platforms – are organized around a combination of images, sounds, comments and data that make the most of technological potential, including big data and analytics, to enrich both the interpretative and dramatic dimensions of competition (Bifulco & Bory, 2020).

Based on these processes, the aim is to convert the spectacular potential of sport into economic value through a circuit that risks being highly recursive: media visibility reinforces the commercial nature of the industry, commercialization requires increasingly spectacular competition, and spectacular entertainment tends to increase audiences and, consequently, the overall visibility of the system (Miller, Lawrence, McKay, & Rowe, 2001, p. 68).

3. Principles of economic rationalization: the Kings League, its rules and market logic

The Kings League is a football competition with teams of seven players, organized mainly – but not exclusively – around national tournaments². In most cases, there are twelve teams – in Brazil there are currently ten teams, in Germany eight, while in the case of the Kings World Cup Nations in 2026 there were twenty national teams, divided into four groups, where the European finals and the world club tournament clearly had a different schedule. The format of the tournaments and matches, as well as the rules of the game, are explicitly designed and periodically modified to try to improve and increase entertainment and spectator engagement, especially in the digital environment. The matches, events and related programming are mainly streamed and broadcast on social media, across which posts, reels and stories abound – although matches can also be broadcast on television channels.

The teams are created in imaginative and original ways and are directly linked to the presidents (team managers), who are streamers, influencers or former footballers or, occasionally, media celebrities or active footballers – with the specific aim of attracting a young audience. Although there is currently no direct reference to territorial identities in the teams, some more or less veiled references to football or territorial affiliations can sometimes be included, always with the intention of exploiting their engagement or promotion potential. This is the case in Italy with teams such as Zebras FC, which recalls the most widely supported club in Italian football, or Zeta Como, or some uniforms that can evoke the colours of established traditional clubs. On the other hand, in the broader commercial exploitation of the competition, the establishment of links with local cultures is not ruled out a priori, both in the definition of the teams and in the staging of spectacular support. At the same time, over time, it is likely to expect that teams will develop mechanisms of loyalty and attachment or identity-based affiliation, event if not territorial, a dynamic that already happens today, especially in relation to the presidents (Carrero Márquez, García Muñoz, & García Chamizo, 2024).

Of course, in the case of competition between nations, the reference to national identity is explicit.

The managerial logic that emerges is that of an actual cartel (Sage, 1998), which centrally controls the production, organization and marketing of competitions and all related services and goods, also regulating the relationships between the actors and operators involved. The management of economic and contractual dynamics, merchandising, competition preparation and media rights is concentrated in an organizational, industrial and professional network that firmly controls its decision-making and logistical power, establishing formats, rules of the game, how to allocate

² As we have already mentioned, tournaments are currently held in Spain, where the Kings League originated, as well as in Italy, France, Germany, Mexico, and Brazil.

resources, how to build teams, the exploitation of media revenues, market management and the identification of segmented audiences at national and international level.

This is, therefore, a distinctive case in which processes driven by economic rationalization and the bureaucratization of the system are fully realized in the planning and implementation of a sports and market project systematically from start to finish, from the conception of the sport and its mode of play, to the organization of matches, their impact on the media ecosystem, the relationships between the actors involved – from the players on the pitch to the fans, from celebrity presidents to the governing body of the sport, from sponsors to media operators – and the development of all the mechanisms and processes involved.

Commercial imperatives strongly influence the size and objectives of the Kings League, thoroughly embedded in commercial logic, since the structure of the competition is organized according to rational market logic (Sewart, 1987; Walsh & Giulianotti, 2007).

Among the most obvious aspects is the progressive reorganization of the rules of the game in these early years. The game has, in fact, become an industrial product designed for the audience, governed by economic motivations and centralized control of its staging.

If its internal logic, which combines rules, tactics and skill, is designed primarily to maximize profit and entertainment, and therefore to attract the attention and continuous involvement of audiences, this means that, on an organizational level, this amounts to a substantial subordination to the spectacular or aesthetic dimension, and above all to the market principles that govern the competitive aspect, sporting merit and athletic quality (Walsh & Giulianotti, 2007).

Thus, the rules and formats have changed continuously over time, not to improve the intrinsic quality of the game, but rather to generate marketable and appealing performances (Sewart, 1987), designed to increase spectacle, unpredictability and uncertainty of the results (Carrero Márquez, García Muñoz, & García Chamizo, 2024). We are in the logic of producing entertainment that is increasingly optimized and geared towards younger audiences, who may be less attracted to traditional forms of sport, despite attempts to modify the various classic disciplines over time.

Having been created explicitly with the clear objective of innovating sport to meet the needs of spectacular entertainment, fan engagement and commercial exploitation, the Kings League has no qualms about revolutionizing and experimenting with new game modes and rules over time. The underlying objective is to be increasingly exciting and engaging.

It suffices to list some of the main current rules³ to understand the underlying orientation.

The rules stipulate two halves, the first lasting twenty minutes and the second sixteen minutes, with two different mechanisms for resolving the match: if the score is tied, penalty shootouts⁴ will determine a winner; if one team is ahead, the match will continue with a gradual reduction in the number of players (scale-down) until there are two players per team, including the goalkeeper (matchball mode). At that point, if the leading team scores, it wins the match. The team that is behind is allowed, if it does not concede the final goal, to equalize the score – at which point the match will end in a draw. The match begins with two players per team – one outfield player and the goalkeeper – with one player per team being added progressively every minute until the match is played seven vs seven (scale-up). To start the match (the kick-off), the

³ https://cms-es.kingsleague.pro/uploads/kwcn_2026_regulations.pdf; <https://cms-es.kingsleague.pro/uploads/book-of-rules.pdf>; <https://pages.kingsleague.pro/rules>

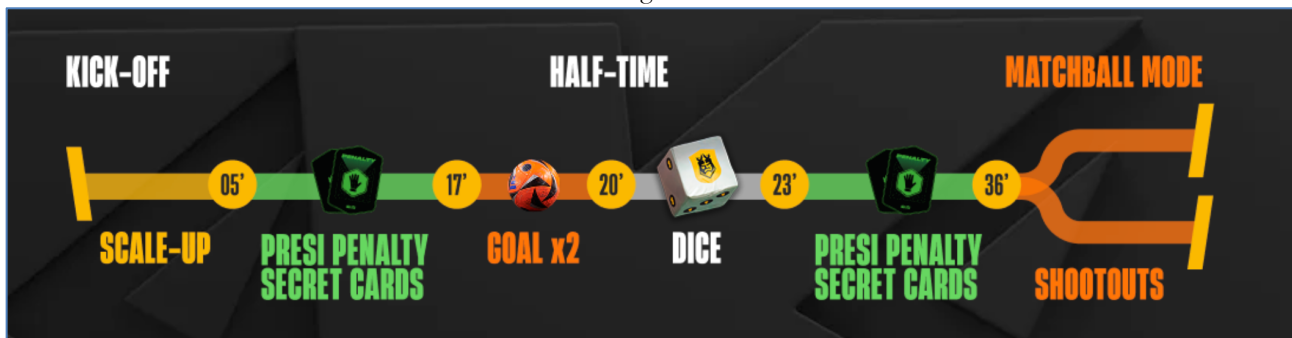
⁴ Shootouts are a traditional format based on a highly dynamic duel between a goalkeeper and a player, which makes the psychological pressure and strategic skill spectacular and exciting.

ball is thrown from above – as in water polo – specifically from a cage, and the two outfield players compete for control. Between the fifth and seventeenth minutes of play, and between the twentieth and thirty-sixth minutes, the teams can, using two different coloured buttons, take a presidential penalty kick – executed by the celebrity president – or play a secret card granting a specific advantage. The second half begins with the roll of a dice, which will determine the number of players per team on the field – 1 vs 1, 2 vs 2, 3 vs 3 (with the goalkeeper), with a subsequent scale-up. In the last three minutes of the first half, goals count double, and the ball has a different colour.

Shortly before the start of the match, the presidents each draw a secret card from a deck, which remains hidden from the public until played. Secret cards may include: goal counting double for four minutes; the temporary suspension of an opposing outfield player for four minutes; the possibility that the first goal scored by a specific player is worth double; the right to take a shootout; a reverse penalty to be taken by the opposing team: if scored, nothing happens, if missed, the team that played the card receives a point; a penalty; a joker card, which allows the holder to use one of the above options of your choice or to steal the opposing team’s card.

Yellow cards exclude a player for two minutes, except in matchball mode, where the sanction entitles the opposing team to a shootout. A sending-off leaves the team without a player and, during matchball mode, allows the opponents to take a penalty.

Fig.1



Source: <https://pages.kingsleague.pro/rules>

It is not difficult to understand how these rules are rationally designed to increase the marketability of the sports product in terms of attention span, entertainment, unpredictability, and outcome uncertainty, ideally remaining as balanced as possible. The element of chance is amplified, even in situations where meritocratic equality of opportunity can be waived – for example, secret cards, which are drawn at random, do not give the same advantage.

This configuration of the game, then, aims to make it fun, lively and exciting, adapting it as much as possible to the expectations of the target audience, with the possibility of continuously changing the rules over time, in a very agile and fast way and without bureaucratic delays, depending on the needs. The appeal lies in constantly provoking attention, maintaining constant excitement and stimulating engagement as much as possible. The immediate impact, the drama, the twists and turns, the aesthetics of the show, and even the possibility for fans to interact are not secondary elements compared to the quality of the game, the technical and tactical aspects, and even more so the competitive aspect.

4. The ritual and the pastiche

As we have seen, the Kings League is challenging the traditional sports industry, competing with it on the same terrain, that of spectacular commercialization and the market, with the advantage of having originated and been shaped directly within that domain and with that spirit.

The game is constantly being reimagined, in the name of innovation and experimentation driven by spectacular and business logic.

Overall, this proposal, together with the vehemence with which it is pursued, also for commercial ends, indicates an explicit attempt to recalibrate the sporting canon (Rinehart, 1998), i.e. the combination of forms, rules and meanings that define the characteristics considered essential for sport, which over time could become naturalized in the common sense.

With the aim of sustaining spectator attention, i.e. the economic asset par excellence of commercialized sport, the competition combines the logic of football (with seven players, at least in the central phase of matches) with that of “gaming”, with secret cards that can be used during the game, periods during which goals count double, the possibility of team presidents taking penalty kicks, a scale-up and scale-down of the number of players, a dice roll determining the number of players on the pitch at the start of the second half, extra time to score the winning goal or equalize. All this takes place in a persistent tension between sporting performance and light-hearted entertainment.

In this space of tension, the Kings League stands as a *avant-garde* practice (Rinehart, 1998), between innovation and tradition, where the sporting ritual maintains and exacerbates the most spectacular and exciting factors of the competition, maintaining a dramatic aspect, but also excessively increasing the elements that depart from the linear narrative of the match, through the enhancement of aesthetic performance, spectacular shock, irony, parodic variables, lived fan experience, and digital interaction.

Entertainment is structured as extended dramatization, oscillating between predictable storylines and sudden ruptures due to unpredictability, with a clamour that aims to be pervasive, in which the technical-sporting side coexists, not always as the dominant feature, with the scenic effect. At the same time, the atmosphere of the show aims to bring media fans towards an entertaining experience at once consumable and, thanks to online interaction, immersive.

The spectacle is not a secondary effect of the game, it is the game.

The structure of the matches takes the form of a *pastiche* (Dyer, 2007): a combination, neither original nor copy, of heterogeneous ingredients that preserves identifiable differences while recomposing them into a new unity that is effective, multivocal and rich in its own way, based on likenesses, on recognizable but distorted imitations, selecting essential features, perhaps in a marked way, even in the presence of apparently discrepant and incoherent elements.

This mixing and overlapping occur on several fronts. First, there is a mixture of genres: elements typical of sport, entertainment, performing arts, quiz shows, gaming, reality shows, and digital entertainment are combined, assembling sporting, theatrical, aesthetic, artistic and video game factors into a specific amalgam. At the same time, the simple sporting dimension itself takes on a strong combinatorial aspect, where in a recognizable football context, the draft for the purchase

of players borrowed from the NBA or the start of the match resembling water polo (to some extent basketball too) with the ball dropped from above and contested are combined.

The result can take on fictional, kitsch or pseudo-sporting “trash” forms, where aesthetic simulation aims to fascinate and excite the consumer.

Irony, parody and playfulness become central to the mood of the game, rather than secondary to the competitive aspect. For example, the commentary on the matches and the commentators’ remarks rarely focus on technical and tactical aspects, but are instead marked by cheerful, albeit excited, tones that often give the competition a light-hearted feel. Beyond the competitive part of the matches, moments such as presidential penalties, which give the chance to score but above all create excitement and fun, can include gags and playful situations, including costumed appearances by key figures. The use of secret cards further contributes to the overall theatricality. The player market, in turn, takes place within a show organized as online entertainment. Added to all this are other ritualized moments of a ceremonial character. This is in addition to the extensive supporting social media content – reels, trailers, online games – which follow the typical logic of digital communication and entertainment, where the consumer-audience may itself become, in some cases, an integral part of the spectacle.

All this is part of the consideration of sport as integral entertainment, which, responding to a need for recreation, incorporates element extraneous to athletic performance proper.

In this context, the famous personality – especially in the case of the president – is essential to the spectacle. They accompany and amplify the competition, but enrich it with ironic and parodic tones, sometimes distorting the purely competitive dimension of the game, ultimately breaking down the grey seriousness of sport (Lasch, 1979) and giving the crude and sensationalist component a not insignificant weight on a cultural and sporting level.

Thus, in the ritual of the Kings League match, the set of emotions, symbolic elements, and objects upon which attention is focused (Lukes, 1975) is constructed to encourage participation aimed, ultimately, at commercialization. In the internalized cognitive dimension and in the social relationships triggered by the spectacle, the entertainment, the passion, even the forms of identification with the players, the athletic effort, the technical aspect, and the playful character of the protagonists converge as driving force of digital exploitation and are accompanied by the ritualistic, veiled yet pervasive presence of sponsors, who follow the development of many moments of the show and its offshoots online and on social media.

5. Celebrity, the role of fans and digital communication

The Kings League focuses a significant portion of its appeal on the ability of certain celebrities – mostly streamers, often gaming specialists, influencers and a few retired footballers, but also some show business personalities – to draw attention to the competition and engage fans (Rojek, 2001; Smart, 2005; Cashmore, 2006; van Krieken, 2012; Bifulco, 2017). The ability of many of these personalities to navigate digital codes, to interact constantly, with great flexibility across communication registers – from irony to more reflective analysis, from impromptu to more structured content – and above all to embody an often colloquial and spontaneous communicative style, makes them particularly well-suited to younger audiences, which, among

other things, greatly appreciates online content creators, by virtue of an emotional bond that valorizes simplicity, frankness and communicative proximity (Carrero Márquez, García Muñoz, & García Chamizo, 2025).

The most important role is that of team president, but the celebrities involved can also be simple brand ambassadors, commentators or even, in limited cases, protagonists of the matches.

It is no coincidence that one of the rules of the competition is that a thirteenth player can be added to a particular match – teams have a total of twelve players – who may be a football legend, an elite professional player, a celebrity or public figure, or one of the presidents. This is in full accordance with the main characteristics of celebrity culture, with the possibility, in certain cases, to trigger a nostalgic effect.

The influence and appeal of these personalities represent a very important source of visibility (Driessens, 2013; Gunter, 2014) for attracting audiences to a spectacle where, as we have seen, entertainment is fundamental.

As mentioned, the role of the president is clearly central to the attraction mechanism. Presidents – entertaining, attractive figures who are a far cry from the grey representatives of industry and finance who have traditionally led the football industry – have a direct role in the game and in the entire ritual, being able to take a penalty at any point in the match chosen on the spur of the moment – a moment that interrupts the flow of the competition and fuels a pastiche-like combination in the contrast between actual players and characters who intervene, adding a spectacular connotation – but above all by providing live commentary on their teams' matches and participating in the media ecosystem through multiple interventions and online content. As we have said, they are celebrities of various kinds in theory – from the web, from sport, more sporadically from traditional entertainment industry – but for the most part they are streamers, taken from the range of characters potentially capable of appealing younger audiences, exploiting the popularity of digital platforms in those age groups, the ability to monetize online content and experiences by integrating new languages into the economic and spectacular enhancement of the entire project. By constructing communicative performances – beyond those related to football penalties – and shareable and engaging narratives about their personal involvement in the team, they work to jointly expand their personal brand and that of the competition.

The fan-viewer-consumer is, in its own way, central to the innovative Kings League project. It is no coincidence that this competition is an attempt to readapt football to youth culture and digital consumption, where an audience is rationally built with a promise of fun and participation. All forms of consumer motivation are involved in some way. Although territorial identity is largely absent, even if possible future links with more deeply rooted local cultures are not ruled out *a priori*, other forms of identification are at play, such as those with celebrities associated with a team. It is clear that, over time, forms of attachment to various teams, although the result of original creations and emotional choices, can consolidate and open up new scenarios of belonging. In the product's packaging and consumption, an important role is played by the aesthetic, exciting, uncertain and entertaining dimension of the experience of watching matches, as well as online interaction – with engagement that can offer gratification or material advantage, such as prizes.

Fan engagement is therefore part of a deliberate strategy to exploit the opportunities offered by platformization and the broader consumption of the sporting experience – matches are streamed

and, more recently, broadcast on pay-tv – through an intense social media presence, highlights and viral content, and multiple opportunities for interaction and resharing.

The audience is attracted and somehow involved, participating in the symbolic production of events interactively, both during matches and through various forms of intervention: commenting and debating online – perhaps on the use of secret cards, their effectiveness or the phase of the march in which they will be used –, voting on the performances or various tactics and strategies employed by coaches or players, creating personal content, suggesting possible measures and changes to the Kings League rules, predicting results, participating in fun moments and online experiences.

It is no coincidence that younger fans are attracted by this combination of sporting elements and pure entertainment, by the ease of interacting with other fans and the main characters in the game, the ability to access matches and content on digital platform quickly, personally and at their own pace, and not having to submit to the intercession of the media and traditional journalism, since the Kings League manages its own communication with a high level of skill in the stylistic and expressive mechanisms of digital media (Carrero Márquez, García Muñoz, & García Chamizo, 2024).

While audiences may not always feel central when physically present, online they take on a significant role, perceiving a degree of ritual centrality and feeling that they are “there”, through the consumption and circulation of online content, commentary and sharing. This participation, which makes such a football event a hybrid and complex practice, turns it into a cultural device that aims to strengthen emotional attachment and legitimize the entire sporting spectacle. In the digital environment, the audience perceives – more or less realistically – an active role in the production of the spectacle⁵, contributing to establishing its emotional, narrative, cultural, symbolic and media value.

However, this involvement channels participation within a framework defined by market logic, where the fan not only consumes, but also plays a productive role without enjoying the economic benefits. The mechanism takes full advantage of the rules of the attention economy and capitalizes on the logic of prosumerism, where the user is both consumer and producer, and where the need to express oneself, participate and belong becomes beneficial to the needs of the market (Andrews & Ritzer, 2018).

6. Conclusions

As we have seen, the Kings League is a new sport, but above all a spectacular event that feeds on processes of recombination and recoding (Rinehart, 1998) of sports designed to meet media exploitation – in this case created specifically for digital platforms – which favours visual innovation, speed, overall spectacularity, within the processes triggered by participation and digital communication, beyond the purely technical nature of the game, and where creative

⁵ In the contemporary sports industry, there is a strong link between the expressive desires of fans and the consumer culture that supports commercialization mechanisms (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998; Sandvoss, 2003; Crawford, 2004; Horne, 2006).

demands, economic interests, symbolic circuits, logics of visibility and media interaction are continuously intertwined.

Its explicit aim is to guide, revolutionize and represent the future of the sports and sports entertainment industry, characterized by the indistinguishable fusion of sport and entertainment within the industrial process.

Between avant-garde and kitsch, ritual and parody, seriousness and irony, sport and video games, this experience takes the form of a hybrid cultural and economic performance, deeply spectacularized and commercialized, where elements of theatricality and visibility are amplified, also by virtue of regulatory and format changes (Sewart, 1987), where the integration of electronic gaming experience takes on great importance, and where an incisive communication system – especially within digital environments – supports its consumption (Carrero Márquez, García Muñoz, & García Chamizo, 2024).

Thus, the industrial organization of sporting events completely assimilates the game into the entertainment industry, with organizational and regulatory criteria defined in terms of entertainment and profitability, and competition is primarily constructed as a product to be sold and consumed, tailored to the demands of a future audience.

We are faced with a clear case in which the definition of the sporting event, its aims, values and cultural meanings are explicitly guided by market rationality, based on economic calculation and media appeal, which considers the community dimension of sport primarily in the form of shared consumption.

It is no coincidence that the corporation that controls and organizes the Kings League is characterized by a transnational dimension and the alignment between a sporting technocracy, media capital and major brands (Maguire, 1999).

Within this scenario, we are witnessing a declared normalization of the absorption of spectacular, commercial and entertainment-based logics and relations into sport and recreational practices. Not only is the link between sport, commercialization and spectacle accepted, but it is also praised and incorporated into common sense, with a clear focus on profit, assimilating the dominant sporting culture into the social form of commodity (Whitson, 1984; Sage, 1998).

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Media e calcio in Italia dal Novecento a oggi.
Simonelli, G. (2024). *Quasi gol. Storia sentimentale del calcio in tv*, Manni

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È possibile una storia romantica del calcio raccontata dai media?
È questa la sfida che il bel libro *Quasi gol. Storia sentimentale del calcio in tv* di Giorgio Simonelli (2024), storico dei media e del giornalismo, affronta nell'arco di 160 pagine. Inevitabile punto di partenza di questa avventura è il periodo pionieristico del giornalismo su carta stampata. Un periodo, quello che ha inizio ai primordi del Novecento, ricco di iniziative, talvolta azzardate, imprese, racconti e autentiche innovazioni. Bisogna, infatti, inventarsi codici, formati, modalità del racconto, per lettori ai quali spesso era precluso l'accesso diretto alle competizioni sportive. È così, attraverso cronache spesso confezionate in un linguaggio aulico e letterario che i lettori dei primi fogli sportivi, a partire dalla "Gazzetta dello Sport"¹, hanno familiarizzato con squadre, partite, club, ammantati di leggenda e mito. È in questo contesto che si collocano, a partire dagli anni Venti, le prime aurorali radiocronache sportive. Il volume di Simonelli ricostruisce con ammirevole precisione le tappe fondamentali di questo percorso, in cui coraggiosi giornalisti si cimentavano, spesso coadiuvati soltanto da mezzi di fortuna, con il medium radiofonico. Il calore della voce di questi radiocronisti – il cui più noto esempio è Nicolò Carosio² – aggiungeva un tocco emozionale al racconto dei match calcistici nell'Italia che si preparava, sebbene dentro i limiti della propaganda fascista, al doppio clamoroso successo nei Mondiali di calcio del 1934 e del 1938. Siamo in anni ancora lontani dall'euforia del dopoguerra, quando anche il Totocalcio (nato nel 1946)³ sembrava offrire speranze a un paese ridotto in macerie dal devastante conflitto bellico.

¹ La "Gazzetta dello Sport" è un quotidiano sportivo italiano, con sede a Milano, fondato da Eugenio Camillo Costamagna e Eliso Rivera il 3 aprile 1896. È il terzo quotidiano italiano per diffusione, nonché il primo quotidiano sportivo del Paese e il più longevo d'Europa.

² Nicolò Carosio (Palermo, 15 marzo 1907 – Milano, 27 settembre 1984) è stato un giornalista e radio-telecronista sportivo italiano; curò per trentasette anni, precisamente dal 1933 al 1970, la cronaca degli incontri della nazionale italiana di calcio, unendo, così, imprescindibilmente, la sua voce alle forti emozioni ancora vivide nella memoria collettiva della nazione.

³ Il Totocalcio (acronimo di Totalizzatore calcistico) è un concorso a premi istituito nel 1946, inventato dal giornalista Massimo Della Pergola. Attualmente è gestito dalla SISAL, e si pone l'obiettivo di prevedere degli esiti di 13 (dal 2003 al 2021, 14) partite di calcio.

Nel 1954 la Rai inizia le prime regoli trasmissioni televisive, ma è ancora la radio, come giustamente rileva l'autore del volume, a ribadire il proprio primato nel racconto delle domeniche calcistiche grazie alla geniale invenzione di *Tutto il calcio minuto per minuto* (1960 – in corso)⁴. Si tratta di un autentico spartiacque nell'esperienza mediale del calcio per milioni di italiani: gli apparecchi radiofonici, che compaiono come funghi in circoli, bar sport e in poche abitazioni private, scandiscono il tempo e le emozioni calcistiche nell'arco dei novanta minuti domenicali. Assieme al rito della schedina, la trasmissione costituisce un appuntamento irrinunciabile per milioni di appassionati, attratti dalla girandola di voci dei radiocronisti, che si alternano tra i vari campi di gioco per segnalare gol o momenti cruciali delle partite. La successiva tappa della ricostruzione di Simonelli tocca un ulteriore caposaldo del calcio mediatizzato, ovvero *La domenica sportiva* (1953 – in produzione)⁵. Negli anni in cui le immagini in movimento del calcio sono una preziosa rarità, la possibilità di godere nella serata della domenica di sintesi filmate dei match principali appare a molti come il vero e proprio inizio dell'era televisiva del calcio italiano.

Con l'evoluzione del costume e della società, anche in relazione all'esplosione dei consumi, in pieno boom economico, aumenta la fame di calcio in tv da parte di tifosi e appassionati: è così che nasce *90° minuto* (1970 – in produzione)⁶. La ricostruzione del giornalista è attenta a ripercorrere i significati profondi che questo programma ha avuto, non solo per il mondo sportivo, ma per l'intera società italiana. Intervenendo dalle varie sedi regionali della Rai, giornalisti, come Luigi Necco da Napoli, Cesare Castellotti da Torino, Gianni Vasino da Milano, Marcello Giannini da Firenze, Tonino Carino da Ascoli, Franco Strippoli da Bari e molti altri, inventano modi di dire, slogan, stili di racconto che ne fanno altrettante celebrità del piccolo schermo. La ritualità dei tifosi è così scandita da precisi appuntamenti: la schedina; la diretta radiofonica live; le sintesi filmate, a poche ore dai match; gli approfondimenti della serata della domenica; la lettura dei quotidiani il lunedì (naturalmente un ruolo di primo piano per la "Gazzetta dello Sport", "Il Corriere dello Sport - Stadio" e "Tuttosport")⁷.

Nel diverso contesto degli anni Ottanta, il calcio si tramuta gradualmente in una merce spettacolare. L'abilità di Simonelli è tale da connettere in maniera assai precisa l'avvento del duopolio Fininvest-Rai (e le condizioni politico-sociali che ne hanno fondato le premesse) alla trasformazione del calcio televisivo.

⁴ *Tutto il calcio minuto per minuto* è una popolare trasmissione radiofonica di Radio Rai, dedicata alle radiocronache in diretta del campionato italiano di calcio, ideata nel gennaio 1960 da Guglielmo Moretti, insieme a Roberto Bortoluzzi, che ne divenne anche il primo conduttore, Sergio Zavoli e Giorgio Boriani.

⁵ *La Domenica Sportiva* è un programma televisivo italiano di genere rotocalco, il più longevo attualmente esistente; prodotto da Rai Sport, è nato nel 1953 e per oltre 40 anni è andato in onda su Rai 1. Si struttura come un vero e proprio programma con l'introduzione del conduttore, il primo dei quali è Enzo Tortora. Da quel momento oltre alle notizie sugli avvenimenti sportivi della giornata, si comincia a dare spazio ai commenti e agli approfondimenti con ospiti in studio.

⁶ *90° minuto* è un programma televisivo italiano di genere sportivo, in onda sulle reti Rai dal 27 settembre 1970. Condotto nel corso delle sue numerose edizioni da diversi presentatori, tra cui spiccano Paolo Valenti (20 edizioni) e Paola Ferrari (10 edizioni), trasmette brevi sintesi delle partite di calcio dei campionati italiani di Serie A e Serie B.

⁷ Tali abitudini sono state, per esempio, immortalate in film cult degli anni '80 come *Al bar dello sport* (di Francesco Massaro, 1983, con protagonisti Lino Banfi e Jerry Calà) e *L'allenatore del pallone* (di Sergio Martino, 1984, con protagonisti Lino Banfi, nel celebre ruolo di Oronzo Canà, Camillo Milli e il duo comico Gigi e Andrea). Interessante notare che, in questo periodo, la narrazione cinematografica italiana di argomento sportivo è quasi sempre inserita nel genere comico, con la presenza di figure di spicco della commedia italiana (Tirino, 2023).

Si va sempre più nella direzione della teatralizzazione del racconto, con format che, a partire dal *Processo del lunedì* (1980 – in produzione)⁸, prediligono la formula del talk, spesso a suon di polemiche e baruffe, non sempre spontanee. Negli anni Ottanta e Novanta, con la crescita del valore dei diritti televisivi, si aprono spazi per nuovi *player* dell'informazione sportiva: agli albori della pay-tv (con l'ascesa di Tele+), Rai e Mediaset (ex Fininvest) cercano nuovi linguaggi per accattivarsi il favore degli appassionati di calcio. La comicità e la satira, grazie al talento di un gruppo di autori, impreziosiscono le due più importanti trasmissioni di questo nuovo corso: *Quelli che il calcio* (1993-2021)⁹ e *Mai dire gol* (1990-2001)¹⁰.

Sebbene con meno dovizia di particolari, il volume *Quasi gol* ci immerge anche nella stagione del calcio digitale. L'avvento del digitale ha trasformato radicalmente il rapporto tra tifosi e racconto calcistico: secondo le teorie della cultura partecipativa di Henry Jenkins (2006), i pubblici non sono più semplici spettatori, ma produttori attivi di contenuti, significati e narrazioni. La disintermediazione dell'informazione sportiva – accelerata dai social media, dai podcast indipendenti e dalle community online – ha progressivamente eroso il monopolio dei grandi media tradizionali sul racconto del calcio (Tirino, 2019; Frandsen, 2020). Tifosi, blogger e creator amatoriali producono oggi highlights, analisi tattiche, meme e video virali in una logica *grassroots* che sfida e affianca quella delle piattaforme istituzionali. Questa produzione dal basso alimenta forme inedite di appartenenza e identità collettiva (Bifulco, 2019), ridefinendo la stessa esperienza emotiva del tifo nell'era della convergenza mediale. Il calcio diventa così non solo un prodotto da consumare, ma un testo culturale aperto, continuamente riscritto e reinterpretato dalle sue comunità di appassionati.

La mediatizzazione informazionale del calcio nell'era digitale (Tirino, 2025) rende anche la serie A un prodotto commercializzato, su cui dominano le strategie commerciali di conglomerati internazionali come Sky e DAZN, esempio concreto della potenza dell'intreccio tra mediatizzazione, commercializzazione e globalizzazione del calcio contemporaneo (Whannel, 2009; Wenner & Billings, 2017). Benché prevalgano, quindi, logiche di mercificazione e anche di omogenizzazione del racconto sportivo, non mancano anche in questo periodo esempi di narrazione del calcio improntati a valorizzarne le dimensioni epiche e sentimentali, a partire da *Buffa racconta* (2019, di Federico Buffa, prodotto da Sky Sport) e *Lo sciagurato Egidio* (1999-2009, di Giorgio Porrà, prodotto da Tele+ e a partire dal 2003 da Sky Sport).

⁸ *Il processo del lunedì* (oggi conosciuto come *Il processo al 90'*) è una trasmissione televisiva italiana andata in onda sulle reti Rai dal 1980 al 2026, con diverse stagioni di pausa, per poi tornare in seconda serata a partire alla stazione calcistica 2025-2026. È stata ideata e condotta da Enrico Ameri su Rai 3, ma dopo due stagioni il testimone passò ad Aldo Biscardi, che l'ha condotta fino al 1993, diventandone in qualche modo il testimonial più rilevante.

⁹ *Quelli che il calcio* era un programma televisivo italiano di genere varietà e sportivo, trasmesso su Rai 3 dal 1993 al 1998 e su Rai 2 dal 1998 al 2021. È stato condotto dal 1993 al 2001 da Fabio Fazio con Marino Bartoletti, dal 2001 al 2011 da Simona Ventura. Il programma consacrò al successo personaggi come Idris, Suor Paola, Peter Van Wood, Takahide Sano, Roberto Vacca.

¹⁰ *Mai dire Gol* è stato un programma televisivo della Gialappa's Band trasmesso su Italia 1 dal 18 novembre 1990 al 25 febbraio 2001. Il programma era, all'inizio, l'applicazione al calcio della telecronaca comica e surreale già sperimentata dalla Gialappa's a *Mai dire Banzai* (per i filmati dello show giapponese *Takeshi's Castle*, per certi versi simile a *Giochi senza frontiere*) ma anche nelle telecronache delle vecchie partite dei mondiali a *Mai dire Mundial* (in onda fra maggio e giugno del 1990). Successivamente il programma ospitò comici come, tra gli altri, il trio Aldo, Giovanni e Giacomo, Teo Teocoli, Gene Gnocchi, Antonio Albanese, Fabio De Luigi, Maurizio Crozza, Mago Forest.

In definitiva, la lettura di questo volumetto ricorda anche agli studiosi di comunicazione sportiva, come i media abbia svolto una funzione cruciale, non solo nelle forme di popolarizzazione del calcio, ma anche nella sua trasformazione in oggetto culturale, la cui essenza risuona profondamente nelle pratiche quotidiane, nei ricordi e nell'immaginario di milioni di tifosi, rinsaldandone anche la capacità di creare memorie intergenerazionali.

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