Sports and Shows: Spectators in Contemporary Culture

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The spectatorial relationship between sporting events and theatrical performance, based on recent sociological studies, reveals much about the nature of any audience position, and raises issues of class, economic status, and gender. Despite the heavy commodification and internationalization of professional sport, fans retain a remarkable sense of psychological investment in home teams, centred around notions of civic pride and communal ownership. They ardently follow the fortunes of their sides in a manner rarely associated with any other form of entertainment, a devotion that can lead to notable violence. Sporting events also constitute one of the few remaining examples of live television broadcasts. Television extends the implications of the sports spectator enormously, and is the foundation of the globalization of sports, but it also affects live audiences through the mediatization of some events.

‘This isn’t the century of theatre, it’s the century of football.’ (Bertolt Brecht)

Theatre spectators are not free beings: we give up part of our own agency when we agree to assist at the spectacle. The approbative and disapprobative audience gestures conventionally available in theatre are limited - applause, laughter, shouting encore, booing, weeping - and they confine spectators to predetermined and relatively compliant roles. The physical and vocal passivity of the spectator, frequently condemned in the avant-garde tradition of the twentieth century, is partly necessary if the performance is to proceed: audience participation is workable on a continuing basis only when it occurs inside the producer’s plan. Even the disruption of the event sought by the Living Theatre in works such as Paradise Now, for example, was premeditated.

One of the most consistent features of theatrical modernism was a desire to control perception, conditioning or requiring the spectator to assume a set of gestural, postural, visual, and perceptual attitudes: sitting upright, attentive, and quiet in the dark, trapped between armrests and the knees of other spectators, freeing the mind of preconceptions, open to the command of the work, staring at the light. In the nineteenth-century playhouse in the West the habits of response were anarchic, with spectators assuming the right to disrupt the occasion, talk, move about, eat and drink, and they forced the audience into the event. But gradually these were eliminated in the modernist movement, which found them both anti-naturalistic and antagonistic to the mood of the performance. As early as 1904 Granville Barker in London was trying to break the custom of interruptive applause by
noting in some printed programmes at the Court Theatre that curtain calls would not be taken after each act but only at the end of the play. The volatile and vocal responses in lower-class theatres were seen as counter-progressive to modern reform. In the new century it would be the producers who would lead the consumers, not the other way round.

This audience movement was reinforced by the invention of cinema, which absconded with most of the popular audience for theatre fairly quickly and permanently. Spectator habits in the first years of cinema remained boisterous, the result of the brevity of the films themselves and their exhibition as part of a live variety show. Once full-length narrative films were the norm, the darkened auditorium and the bright screen image made the audience substantially more quiescent. The introduction of spoken dialogue in 1927 ensured that audiences for film were at least as compliant as for live performance. Meanwhile the embourgeoisement of theatre in the West had become almost complete, and the rowdy mode of reception associated with the male working class transferred to music halls, vaudevilles, burlesques, and strip shows.

It transferred even more notably to sport. The rise of professional spectator sports in the second half of the nineteenth century, beginning in England and spreading throughout the world, brought one of the most significant changes in history to the manners and entitlement of the spectator. In obvious distinction to the restrained behaviour at films and bourgeois theatres, sports fans from the start were encouraged to display emotions, approbation, and partisanship in an open and free-playing manner. Normally it is beneficial for athletes to have highly vocal assistance, and of course this behaviour is not disruptive as it is in most dramatic ventures in the modernist tradition, whether live or recorded; the sports contest would seem deadened without the noise of communal support. While endorsing the team, sports spectators are also invited to connect their own fantasies to the ordeal on the pitch. Their vociferous and occasionally violent responses indicate the degree of investment fans can assume with the match, and further suggest the liberating and recreative spirit available for live witnesses.

Compared to a theatre spectator the sports spectator assumes a playful freedom. I have three suggestions about what that means. First, it is the freedom to negotiate a relationship to other unknown spectators, something that rarely occurs in theatre or film. In the stadium fans assume wide options about their fellow spectators, ranging from ignoring them to creating a bond over mutual regard to vilifying or striking them for rooting for the opposing side. In a 1926 newspaper article, Brecht claimed that fans know exactly why they attend a sporting match and what will take place there; they thus relate to the event and each other in a straightforward way – we might say in a Brechtian way. In drama, on the other hand, ‘the demoralization of our theatre audiences’, he wrote, ‘springs from the fact that neither theatre nor audience has any idea what is supposed to go on there’.1

Much of this particular spirit derives from the sports spectator’s range of investment in the team, from the casual TV viewer, to the season-ticket holder, to the gambler with a lot of money on a football match. Sporting events, of course, are overt contests and are teleological or outcome-oriented; they easily lend themselves to an engaged spectatorship of fanatics intimately interested in both the details of athletic performance and the final result of the game. Around the world sports teams are identified most frequently with a specific city or region or, in the case of the Olympics and World Cup, an entire nation. Despite the fact that
players and their coaches infrequently come from the sponsoring city or even the same

country, and in some sports are bought and sold with a regularity distressing to ardent fans,
spectators often look to the team as a representative of the *polis* and take civic or national
pride in their 'ownership' of it.\(^2\) In the psychological sense, sports spectators seek, through a
process of identification, a refuge from urban anonymity: an imagined return to an
imagined small community. When the team wins, the city or the country wins, and thus the
invested spectator shares the lustre, becomes ritually distinguished from non-invested
persons and especially from the losers.

The relationship of one fan to another is quite extraordinary in sport, especially for
males, and follows from this engagement. Openly emotional behaviour is sanctioned as the
level of excitement gathers force. 'It is not uncommon, in any sport, to see spectators
behaving in a way that would be uncharacteristic of them in any other context: embracing,
shouting, swearing, kissing, dancing in jubilation.'\(^3\) Even male weeping is accepted.
Emotional behaviour is particularly notable in that most male and most working class of all
British sports, Association Football. The infamous British soccer terraces, where groups
consisting almost entirely of men gather in extreme proximity, concentrate the experience
of communal excitement through unavoidable and constant physical contact. 'Physical
contact to this extent is unusual in any culture', Bill Buford notes about the terraces. 'In
England, where touch is not a social custom and where even a handshake can be regarded as
intrusive, contact of this kind is exceptional . . .'\(^4\)

The second free-play characteristic for sports spectators is the freedom to condemn the
performance's outcome and reject the manner of play. Fans can know better than the coach,
demand more of the team, see more than the referee. If the result displeases them, they may
well express their dissatisfaction publicly. It is true that any theatre spectator can also do
this, but since the investment of theatre-goers is substantially less ardent their disappoint-
ment is also less and they rarely express it openly, except by staying away in the future.
Further, sports fans can indicate dissatisfaction on a continuing basis, communally, and
with statistically supported knowledge. In dramaturgical terms a sporting season or tourna-
ment is like a serial TV show, with the same players meeting challenges each day or each
week that are both new and not new. The character identification that some TV viewers
assume with actors in soap operas or sitcoms is parallel to the heroicizing of sports stars,
and little like it is possible in the theatre.

Third, sport spectators have freedom to vary or alter the purpose of their presence.
Theatre-goers technically participate in this condition and in the past often attended a play
as a pretext for other public behaviour, from flirting to conducting business. In the
twentieth century, however, most of this ancillary activity was abandoned for both theatre
and film. Under the rigours of theatre architecture and the modernist revisions to the actor-
audience association, theatre spectators have been deprived of much of the privilege to write
themselves into the performance event. The sports spectator, meanwhile, has elaborated the
Victorian working-class patterns of public behaviour as a method of owning the experience.

In addition to class issues, I have been implying that fan deportment is significantly
connected to gender. Sport has become a male preserve because it is one of the few areas of
life where aggressive male behaviour is sanctioned. This is more complicated than first
appears, since many women enjoy watching sport and more and more women engage in
both solo and team sports. On the whole, however, it is reasonable to say that men still dominate sport and sports culture. As Allen Guttmann summarizes, the modernization and industrialization of traditional societies has left games like soccer, rugby, and boxing as legitimate enclaves of violence for the fans as well as the players.\textsuperscript{5} Sport may not be the most important factor in ‘the production and reproduction of masculine identity’ but it plays a crucial role in reinforcing macho aggressiveness ‘in a society where only a few occupational roles, such as those in the military and the police, offer regular opportunities for fighting, and where the whole direction of technological development has been for a long time to reduce the need for physical strength’.\textsuperscript{6}

In the post-industrial world male strength has been transformed in purpose, away from work and war, and into symbolic power and sexual allure. This is a movement away from use value to exchange value, or away from the need for the masculine to the performance of the masculine. Male strength, in other words, becomes male display.\textsuperscript{7} Clearly sports are crucial to this development, since they require both strength and its display. In this light spectator violence is an extension of the same traffic: finding few legitimate outlets and almost no social need for ferocity and destructiveness, some spectators in some sports environments have channelled male strength into a public display of fighting. Spectator violence is a form of audience involvement that indicates a most serious commitment to the show. Riots in the theatre and riots outside it caused by theatrical events were probably never as common as the laws attempting to control them imply; it was usually the extreme fear of riotous conduct, rather than numerous actual incidents, that led to state constraints. But, however frequently they occurred in the past in the theatre, we almost never hear of them now.

In sports, however, the curve of spectator violence, to all appearances, has increased, as the British media never tire of proclaiming. During Margaret Thatcher’s term as Prime Minister (1979–90) the tabloid press found regular material for overblown stories in what was dubbed at an early stage ‘hooliganism’. The conventional view has been that perpetrators of soccer violence off the pitch are examples of the feared other inside British culture. In the 1970s and 1980s the press and government policy treated them as sociopathic ruffians born out of a recent economic and cultural change; it is true that for a while hooliganism seemed an extension of the punk movement with right-wing allegiances. This popular view has been challenged by a number of sociologists and psychologists, who attack one another’s theories with a vigour worthy of the hooligans themselves.

The dominant sociological position has been led by Eric Dunning and his colleagues at the Sir Norman Chester Football Research Centre at Leicester University. Heavily influenced by his one-time colleague Norbert Elias, whose well-known work on the civilizing process\textsuperscript{8} proposes an evolutionary model of human behaviour, Dunning has attempted to show that far from being a new development violence at football is ancient, having arisen at the very foundation of the folk game in the Middle Ages. Even the destruction of property by non-players outside the pitch that became common in the 1980s has its parallels in the folk game. In \textit{Quest for Excitement} (1986) Elias and Dunning argue that civilized societies more and more look down upon highly excitable behaviour in public: ‘Great fear and great joy, great hatred and great love have to be whittled away in outward appearance.’ Spectator sports provide a carnivalesque outlet for emotional conduct otherwise unavailable. ‘In advanced
industrial societies’, they write, ‘leisure activities form an enclave for the socially approved arousal of moderate excitement behaviour in public’. From this angle violent fan behaviour results from the mixing of macho working-class culture with alcohol and the emotional condition authorized by sporting matches.

There has been serious criticism of the Leicester approach, even accusations that it has enabled repressive police action and the policy of spectator containment that led to the Hillsborough disaster of 15 April 1989. On that sad day Liverpool and Nottingham Forest played an FA Cup semi-final at the Hillsborough stadium in Sheffield. The authorities followed the common policy of separating rival fans by penning them in the terraces. Worried that fans excluded from entry would create a violent protest outside, the police allowed far too many of them onto the terrace. Once inside there was no way out, as the cages were locked. In a surging movement of the crowd, ninety-five Liverpool fans were crushed to death. As one commentator puts it, the horrific deaths were the direct result of a false interpretation by South Yorkshire police that the problem was ‘a violent crowd pitch invasion, rather than a problem of safety and over-crowding, itself created by allowing thousands of Liverpool fans to mill around outside the Leppings Lane end of the ground’.

While there is no need to enter the debate about the Leicester approach here, it is clear that hooliganism is a complex issue. Yet despite World Cup trouble in France in June 1998, British soccer violence declined significantly in the 1990s. The lessons of the previous decade took a while to sink in, but more enlightened stadium construction, better seating arrangements, fairer apportionment of tickets, arrangements for travel and visitors’ accommodation, and preventive policing have had positive effects.

Sociologists concerned with British soccer violence often wonder why a similar problem does not exist in the United States, one of the most violent societies in the world. Distance is one reason: the great distances between rival professional teams have worked to keep down fan violence, whereas English hooliganism increased in the late 1950s when fans could travel more readily and cheaply to rival cities. (Of course this factor does not apply to local rivalries in America, especially in high school football and basketball – some clashes there have been so extreme, and so implicated in racial turmoil, that spectators have been barred from games entirely.) But on the professional level there really is no equivalent in the USA to British soccer hooliganism. The price of tickets is important here; British supporters can easily travel by train, admission to the terraces is cheap, and the crowded terraces breed violent behaviour. At an American football game, every spectator has an assigned seat.

Most importantly, violence-prone young men, like those in street gangs, have not found sport an appropriate locale for confrontation in North America, whereas in Britain expressing violent opposition to the rival team is part of sporting culture. Young men involved in serious violence in Britain tend to think of fighting and encounters with rival fans ‘as an integral part of attending a football match’. The songs and chants of inter-fan rivalry support this: ‘during a match the rival groups direct their attention as much and sometimes more to one another as they do to the match itself, singing, chanting, and gesticulating en masse and in what one might call spontaneously orchestrated uniformity as expressions of their opposition’. We might note how in the USA a similar opposition tends to be ‘civilized’ and ritualized through cheerleaders, bands, and manipulative media displays in the stadium.
The hooligan problem returns us to the main theme through the issue of live witnessing. Both violent and peaceable fans will go to extraordinary lengths to be physically present for an important match, even when they have no hope of entering the stadium. I take this as a sign of how powerful witnessing has become in an age of electronic simulations. We are all mediatized spectators now; surrounded daily by televisual enactments and luminant fantasies, we have achieved a new relationship to the live event. The cost of theatre and its high art associations have made it a rarity in most peoples' lives, but it thereby has assumed a value it could not have prior to the twentieth century. Just as the living witness in a court of law is a throwback to a time when travel and communication were difficult, so the spectator at a live performance has a status that is technologically unjustified.

In theatre, where the mechanical unreproduceability of the experience is the point, the spectator is assumed to desire the archaic status of witness – it is a choice, made to achieve a condition of observation and audition unattainable in film or TV. The case with sport is more complicated in that sporting events are one of the very few remaining examples of live television transmission, and thus fans who attend in person underline even more their status as specialists in witnessing, while at the same time authenticating the 'aliveness' of the contest for those at home. Like tourists photographed in front of famous monuments, live sports spectators wish to claim a trace of originary authenticity in a world of manufactured experience.

From this angle hooliganism is a form of being there, and despite its destructive and anti-social results, is a method of taking ownership. Furthermore, the soccer riot, which we associate with the decadent capitalist world, 'was always part of the Soviet sports scene' as well. Dmitri Shostakovich, 'a rabid and knowledgeable soccer fan', wrote a letter to a national sports daily in 1946 complaining of rowdy and ill-behaved crowds in stadiums, where he felt his young son was threatened and intimidated.\(^{13}\) The official Soviet view was that violence did not occur in sport but as late as the 1980s 'visitors to Moscow and Leningrad', Guttman writes, 'are warned by their Intourist guides not to attend soccer matches, where high spirits are often sent higher by vodka'.\(^{14}\) Robert Edelman argues that Soviet spectators, who never took to the rather dreary Olympic sports promoted by the USSR for international propaganda reasons, were adapting state-produced events to another end: dissenters, if you will, from the official view of sport.

But today, whether in Russia or England or the USA or Japan, the tribal cohesion provided by inter-civic and international sporting contests, which appears to be so forceful, may be just another illusion of the postmodern condition. In many cases in professional sports the community of spectators, whether in the stadium or watching the box, is a thoroughly commodified cohesion, packaged and sold with great marketing skill, sometimes with the borrowed power of the state adding to its presumed communality. In fact the state or commercial sponsors managing the major sporting events, and the complicit media broadcasting them, frequently and cynically prey upon the very lack of cohesion or lack of community that spectators otherwise feel in their everyday lives. Soccer hooligans are rather sad in this regard, little Englanders fighting in the streets for a national identity that no longer exists.

We can see this operating in TV's alteration of the nature of big-time sport,\(^{15}\) and in
the reliance upon fans-in-presence to create the necessary atmosphere for TV fans-in-absence. In 1989 the executive producer of ‘The Match’ in Britain said that it is no good broadcasting even First Division matches of the lesser-supported clubs because they will not draw a full stadium, and without the atmosphere of a full house the game does not look right on TV.\textsuperscript{16} When Silvio Berlusconi bought the Dutch trio of players Gullit, Van Basten, and Rijkaard in the late 1980s for Milan, he said that ‘spectator interest in national teams would diminish in the face of the “international” qualities and strength of Milan’ and he insisted that Milan’s game must become one of exciting attack rather than reliable and old-fashioned defence because attack and scoring show better on TV.\textsuperscript{17}

Yet the spectator in the stadium is also subject to mediatized manipulation. Especially in North America the show surrounding and incorporating the game has become reliant on mediated experience: giant TV screens with instant video replay, which often reveal that referees’ decisions are wrong, projected player statistics and biographies, scores from other games, cues telling fans when to clap, when to sing or chant, giving the words as well. In Major League Baseball and the National Football League these conditions are not optional and some fans, offended by the vivid spectacularization of professional sports, have turned to the minor leagues for relief. But the force of the show is great and is affecting college games, and even has seeped into Europe.

Like most large-scale businesses, professional sports are now global enterprises, and it is routine to dislocate them physically from their indigenous contexts. Soccer, American football, baseball, Australian rules, all tour to capital-rich venues such as Saudi Arabia or Japan, more or less at the command of international sponsors and the requirements of globalized TV. A few years ago I watched the Pittsburgh Steelers beat the Chicago Bears in an exhibition game of American football in Dublin, an enormously dislocating experience for me since I had lived in Pittsburgh for twelve years. This was at Croke Park, the Dublin stadium of the Gaelic Athletic Association which normally will not allow foreign games to be played on its pitches. Just as the theatre audience has become mediatized and the theatre event invaded by high technology, so the sports spectator has become a subject in the reign of global media and commercial sponsorship, to which even the rules of wholly domestic sports (such as GAA) linked to the agendas of nationalism are subject.

Nonetheless, sports contests are difficult to control even though the state has continued interest in appropriating them; they may support the dominant but ‘in a less than fully efficient manner’.\textsuperscript{18} The significance of sport, it seems, is not tied to ideology so much as to carnival. Raymond Williams noted that TV sports, despite control and commodification by government or commerce, normally escape complete appropriation, maintaining a strong sense of their independence and even purity.\textsuperscript{19} In the stadium this is even more the case. It may be that the chief distinction of sports is the freedom fans assume to create, in a public forum and communally, a new text out of their spectation, separate from the text of the game or the meanings assigned to it by the media or official agencies.

\textbf{Notes}\\
1 John Willett, ed. and trans., \textit{Brecht on Theatre} (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), p. 6.\\
9 Elias and Dunning, *Quest for Excitement*, pp. 64, 65.
12 Elias and Dunning, *Quest for Excitement*, p. 249.