Ball Games and Language Games

On Wittgenstein, Football Fan Culture and Pop Culture

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> Doesn't the analogy between language and games throw light here? We can easily imagine people amusing themselves in a field by playing with a ball so as to start various existing games, but playing many without finishing them and in between throwing the ball aimlessly into the air, chasing one another with the ball and bombarding one another for a joke and so on. And now someone says: The whole time they are playing a ball-game and following definite rules at every throw.
>
> And is there not also the case where we play and—make up the rules as we go along? And there is even one where we alter them—as we go along.
>
> (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* 1958, No. 83)

It is probably no coincidence that it was in Great Britain in the late 1920s that Wittgenstein found his model of the "language game" – according to an occasional legend, inspired by a 'wild' football game in a park.[1]

1 This is almost certainly just an anecdote. What is certain is that the metaphor "game" appears for the first time in a very abstract form, when Wittgenstein moves from a view of language as a mechanical "calculus" (metaphor chess) to a view of language

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Wittgenstein used his metaphor to refer to the rules by which people played on the grass: how exact or blurred they were, how children learn such games, namely by doing and imitating rather than studying the set of rules, and to what extent such rules become apparent to the observer while they watch the seemingly chaotic processes. The parallel game played by the fans in the stands, which has become increasingly dense and complex (in its semiotics) over the course of now more than hundred years of football, can be viewed in much the same way.

The wider game, which is not limited to the 22 players, consists of at least four levels: the clear demarcation lines (sections of the pitch, hand play, clear foul play), the blurred demarcation lines (offside, unclear fouls), the patterns effective in the game (the characteristic play of individual teams and players), the patterns projected from outside (e.g. fight and discipline as "German virtues", self-sacrificing British "kick and rush", Brazilian "samba", etc.) … and finally the semiotic games of the fans in the stands, which are necessarily related to the football game as a reference, but largely develop their own internal logic and dynamics.

This fan culture is no atavism, even if it is reminiscent of old village rivalries. Evidently, there is some kind of border that divides a homogeneous space into two parts and subsequently is charged with meaning. This usually happens not because there is a particular conflict, but because of a basic drive in people or the socio-cultural system to create meaning where there was none before.[2] In

as a "game" with fuzzy rules (metaphor ball game; cf. *The Big Typescript*, section 47, published in 1933). For this purpose, "ball games" are then actually used in the philosophical investigations and compared with the game of chess (paragraphs 66 and 83). There is a – of course British – Wittgenstein sweatshirt, which adapts the famous text of paragraph 83 specifically to the world of football: "Imagine people playing football, kicking the ball in the air, chasing, fouling each other … "

2 The rival clubs West Ham United and Tottenham Hotspur are based in two close quarters in traditionally proletarian North-East and East London. The Munich clubs FC Bayern München and 1860 München share one of the most semiotically fertile 'enmities', and they even originate from the same neighborhood: Giesing was a so-called "shattered glass quarter" [a socially deprived area] of Munich. In this sense, according to a favorite saying by Franz Beckenbauer, "Obergiesing vs. Untergiesing" was actually played here. In the process, an opposition was formed between the proletarian 1860 ("Untergiesing", so to speak), and the rising FC Bayern (quasi "Obergiesing") personified by the 'football Kaiser' Beckenbauer himself, who came from the most modest of Giesing backgrounds. Interesting from a semiotic perspective, by the way, is that 'proletarian' 1860 seems to have been far more susceptible to National Social-

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20th century Europe, this old game of demarcation is particularly associated with football, the new game of the working class and urban mass culture. The elaborate fan culture itself, with its associated semiotic games, probably did not emerge until after Wittgenstein's death: parallel to the triumphant advance of the new medium of television over the course of the 1960s.

The semiotic games that now proliferate around the game of football have a thoroughly contradictory relationship to media. In a certain sense, they are the exact opposite, because they insist on the almost caricature-like 'tangible' reference, something that is more and more lost in the age of media: it is all about a round ball, a game that lasts 90 minutes, and the tangible, sweaty bodies of the players, who have to deliver "honest work". Even if the true fans are not primarily concerned about winning, as the motto of *www.topspurs.com*, the fansite of Tottenham Hotspur F.C., states[3], competition still remains a necessary condition for the semiotic games of the fans. The fans present themselves in opposite ends of the stadium as a uniformly dressed "block", singing and waving flags. In the peculiar, self-contained space of the football stadium, their actions function as unmediated physical acts in a way that is otherwise hardly possible in contemporary culture. No one actually needs radio or television on site. Their place is taken by the stadium, as it were, the "medium" of urban "mass" culture. (This has changed with the technical innovation of the digital scoreboard that shows slow motion and, not least, the audience itself.)

Nevertheless, the semiotic games of the football fans are no longer comparable to medieval spectacles such as the *Paglio* in Siena, where participants wear the colors of their respective neighborhoods. Especially in football, the game of the modern urban "masses", they are determined to a considerable extent by the media. And not only because the fans perceive and reflect their own chants and visual patterns on the radio and television as a work of art. The new British fan culture did not emerge until the new media culture brought about the disintegration of the old social milieus and with them the neighborhood cultures which, up to that point, had provided quasi "organic" semiotic material. Thus, the need for new boundaries arose. And at the same time, the free-floating semiotic game ma-

ism and anti-Semitism than FC Bayern, which has always been considered 'snotty'. (cf. Fischer/Lindner/Marschik 2000)

3 The TOPSPURS philosophy: "The great fallacy is that the game is first and last about winning. It's nothing of the kind. The game is about glory. It's about doing things in style, with a flourish, about going out and beating the other lot, not waiting for them to die of boredom." Danny Blanchflower (TopSpurs Website, 2003/2020).

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terial that was available to fans hungry for signs and meaning grew exponentially through the media.

Football fan culture developed parallel to pop culture, which is also a media-affiliated disintegration product of the old urban milieus. Nick Hornby in his popular novel *Fever Pitch* (1992) was not the first to draw attention to the striking closeness that connects the two subcultures. Both are expressions of an uninhibited semiotic game that serves to generate new vital energies out of nothing, semanticizing and involving the body, the traditional bearer of the most primary reference, in a complex way.

Indeed, the pop-oriented youth subcultures, which in turn emerged for the first time in Great Britain in the 1950s, knew not only the tension between performers and audiences, but also that between competing groups with their own sign systems: around 1964, the legendary street battles between "Mods" (soulfans in suits) and "Rockers" (rock'n'roll fans) took place, which were later repeated by Teds vs. Punks and then Punks vs. Skinheads. Also in the mid-1960s, new British TV comedy was born. Without inhibitions, respect or good taste, it ripped every sign out of its context and subjected it to grotesque games.[4] At the very beginning, there was the now legendary series *Till Death Us Do Part* with Warren Mitchell as the fascistically inclined East-End tory "Alf Garnett". It was first aired between 1966 and 1969 to great success, and also played an important role in connection with the "Yids" from Tottenham[5].

At the end of the 1960s, Great Britain was the experimental semiotic laboratory of European media culture, where the game of language and signs intensified considerably. It included traditional "heavy signs" (Baudrillard): On the one hand, the violent subculture of skinheads emerged, which, against the media trend of devaluing all signs, brought the "proletarian" body into play as a pseudo-primary reference and thus an anti-sign. While that group incorporated the British Union Jack into its newly constructed pop-chauvinism, the heavy signs of National Socialism appeared elsewhere in strange contexts: The British glam-

4 These include the "German/Nazi" jokes of Harry Enfield and ex-Monty Python John Cleese (*Fawlty Towers*) or, more recently, the politically extremely incorrect jokes of Sacha Baron Cohen (alias "Ali G.").

5 The word "yid" and its related term "yiddo" refer to the supporters and players of Tottenham Hotspur. Originally, they were used in a derogatory manner by rival fans, but the Tottenham fans started using them as a self-designation in a non-pejorative sense.

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rock proles[6] of The Sweet, who had numerous singles in the charts between 1971 and 1977, combined camp make-up and high heels with swastika bandages. One of the alter egos of David Bowie (besides Ziggy Stardust and many others) was the "Blond Fuehrer" around the same time. And the demonstratively 'degenerate' and 'sick' Sex Pistols, who also integrated the swastika into their deliberately chaotic mix of signs, recorded a punk song in 1976 entitled "Belsen Was A Gas" – a song that referenced the Nazi concentration camp Bergen-Belsen but refused to convey any particular message.[7] For the glam rockers and punks, the reference to Nazis and anti-Semitism worked as a provocative game with seemingly empty signs. Nevertheless, it was and is dependent on the remnants of the old heavy connotations and references that still stick to it. It is only because there were bodies, millions of dead bodies, that these extreme signs still work in a totally mediatized media culture in which there can no longer exist a foreign body.

Since the end of the punk cultural revolution, i.e. since 1978 at the latest, the postmodern findings of Bowie and Baudrillard have become everyday experience. The semiotic game that commercial pop stars such as Madonna continue, has become the domain of advertising. The profusely circulating signs no longer refer to anything 'real', but through them alone, no taboo can be broken or bourgeois parents shocked. There is no longer any policy that is not media policy, and there is now in Europe, too, no clear social order that is impressed upon the individual. Since then, young TV generations have been zapping from sign to sign. Their members are basically able to deal with signs just as freely and ironically/cynically as advertising is now doing more and more radically – something that was previously the prerogative of the artistic avant-gardes (Dada, Surrealists, Situationists).

One could interpret this as meaning that we are now finally freed from the shackles of reference to enter a more humane, postmodern age under the sign of

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6 Characteristic of the British delight in playing with signs, strange conversions were apparently possible without any problems. Slade, another very popular teenybopper-glam-rock band, around 1970 had still appeared as first-generation skinheads. On the cover of their first record, re-released in 1976 under the title „Whatever Happened To Slade", they pose in full-on glam outfits and smile at photos in the background showing them as skinheads.

7 "Belsen was a gas I heard the other day
In the open graves where the jews all lay
Life is fun and I wish you were here
They wrote on postcards to those held dear
oh dear oh dear oh dear." (Sex Pistols 1976)

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play. This is what the German buzzword of "Spaßkultur" ("the culture of fun") ultimately meant: an eternal children's birthday party that dissolves the boundaries between entertainment, advertising, consumption and 'real life'. But in contrast to Baudrillard's use of words, there are no "empty signs". Postmodern media culture does not escape the basic law that every sign must have two sides so that semiotic and social energy can flow between these poles. Not only does the empty body always seek out new signs and meanings – the apparently empty signs of media culture also soak up physical-material reality time and time again.

In media culture especially, the specter of reference cannot be banished, as pop theorist Diedrich Diederichsen states using the example of the disintegrating punk subculture, which was finally dragged down by the burden of the originally anarchically empty signs that "became increasingly laden with meaning and interpretation" over the course of their use. The end result was the undead caricature of "punk", the sincere and rebellious beer punk with the leather jacket and the spiky hair, who shows "the system" their middle finger (Diederichsen 1983: 174). It was the very experience of the semiotic catastrophe brought about by the media and marked by punk in 1976/77 that led to a reactionary return to the body, to the "roots", to authenticity. But these primary experiences, in turn, had to be conjured up through secondary games of signs and symbols. Consequently, people from punk circles revived the proletarian cult style of the skinhead, which had been extinct since about 1974: "Just like the exis [Existentialist youth movement in 1950s Hamburg], the skins need the heavy signs: The fascistic [...] is almost only a coincidence of this discourse [...]. The skin is the hard nut, and it does not matter with what content he fills the sign." (Diederichsen 1983: 173) A casual remark by Dick Hebdige fits in very well here: he reminds us that the skinheads of the first generation already imitated the tone of "Alf Garnett", the contemporary TV caricature of the narrow-minded working class chauvinist from the East End (Hebdige 1983: 93).

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