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Jean Baudrillard and the loss of the referent. Imaginaries of "vacuum packed" sports.

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Jean Baudrillard and the loss of the referent. Imaginaries of "vacuum packed" sports. *This proposal further investigates the metaphor of "vacuum packed" sports outlined by Jean Baudrillard in reference to the closure of the stadium to the supporters when Real Madrid and Naples played the Champions league match on 16 September 1987. The gamewas heldbehind closed doors for safety reasons. Media broadcasting of that event inspired Baudrillard's reflections on the "hyperrealism of our world", inasmuch as it is nourished by symbolic simulacra linked to ubiquitous "advertising and media semiologization". This phenomenon also deals with the "disappearance of art" and the "transparence of evil" in the era of televised conflict.The disaster of the Heysel Stadium in Brussels (29 May 1985) appears even now as further proof of television's referential power triggered by the perception of risk and vulnerability. In line with McLuhan's mediology and Barthes' semiology, Baudrillard foresaw the imaginary of "vacuum packed" events that have lost their social and symbolic flair due to a shift in our media consumption.*

Keywords: communication, sports, pandemic, public sphere, audience.

Introduction

Almost thirty-five years after Baudrillard's analysis of the 1987 Real Madrid-Naples game, the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic has led to a new closure of stadiums in line with safety requirements that are no longer local and contingent but are perceived as permanent and globalized. In accordance with Baudrillard's sociological approach, it is possible to emphasize the ongoing disappearance of sports from the tangible public sphere, meaning that the pandemic has rid sports of their collective trait. Baudrillard's analysis probes the media shift imposed by the closure of stadiums in the era of Covid-19, with reference to TV imaginaries as they are produced by the ongoing "vacuum packed" sport events. Empty terraces and silent stands prove the topicality of Baudrillard's prophecy, who observed the "transparent shapes" of the public sphere shrunk through compliance with safety regulations: "but on the whole we are already collectively immunized against this loss of the referent and well accustomed with this remote and vacuum packed TV vision of the things of the world" (Baudrillard 2012, p. 42).

With his prophetic flair, Baudrillard foresaw some aspects of our complexity, so closely connected to the "mediatization" of daily life. The advent of the consumer society can be seen as the physiological development of technological innovation, inasmuch as consumption has to be framed within the sociological patterns provided by our mass democratization (Marchetti 2017). In other words, the diffusion of digital relationships has led to an experiential nihilism fueled by semiotic complexity and the end of great narrations once shared by journalists, writers, poets and politicians. Fashion and advertising are two of the most relevant hallmarks of a media civilization whose social impact resides in the almost instantaneous perishability of contents and meanings (Barthes 1967). Public entertainment is no exception, insofar as it ought to be conceived as a form of art. Benjamin and McLuhan's, Barthes and Derrida's legacy, lead Baudrillard to further investigate the impact of media consumerism and symbolic exchanges in accordance with the rhetoric of fear, risk and uncertainty. Baudrillard connects Benjamin's theory of technical reproducibility of the work of art to McLuhan's epistemology of media self-reference, without neglecting Barthes' reflection on contemporary mythologies. From *The Consumer Society* (1970) to *The Perfect Crime* (1994), through *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1972), *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976) and *The Transparency of Evil* (1990), Baudrillard constantly dealt with the transformation of reality stemming from the communicative and semiotic beams illuminating the public and private spheres. In this perspective, his sociological effort aims at deconstructing the shallow certainties of the electrified actors, as Latouche (2019) has recently explained in his *Remember Baudrillard*.

The theories of simulacra and hyper-reality insightfully concern our frenzied consumption, reproducible images and perishable contents. As Gane (2000, p. 11) assumes, "Baudrillard's thought is evidently not random or incoherent, but quite the contrary: it is rigorous with high degrees of conceptual consistency. It is not based on an appeal to mystical inner revelation, or to a pure personal experience". In compliance with this theoretical framework, the simulacrum becomes a reliable epistemological medium inasmuch as the reproducibility of daily life foreshadows the disappearance of reality and its

virtual replacement. The "perfect crime" also concerns the dynamic representation of reality and its progressive vanishing from the public sphere. Such a deceptive process entails emotional mystification and semantic sedimentation, as artists and writers effectively demonstrate: "The artist, too, is always close to committing the perfect crime: saying nothing. But he turns away from it, and his work is the trace of that criminal imperfection" (Baudrillard 1994, p. 1).

The distinction between cold and warm art seems to echo McLuhan's dichotomy of cold and warm media, in a time marked by the triumph of fascination and ephemeral seduction (Genosko 2002: 1999). The disappearance of art implies the replacement of visual experience from the ever-changing iconic stratifications that the artist strives to grasp. The "meta-language of an absent world" stems from this communicative circularity founded on some cryptic tautologies and blurred metaphors (Lombardinilo 2017a: 2017b). Hence follows the construction of the hyper-reality spawned by mainstream representations, since artists can reach originality through the conceptual representation of the consumer society in which they are engaged. Baudrillard queries the ratio between images and contents in a time overwhelmed by meanings and symbols. Furthermore, he observes that value nihilism can foster the vanishing point not only of art, but also of social relationships: "When we speak of communication, it is because there is no communication any more. The social body is no longer conductive, relations are no longer regulated by informal consensus, the communication of meaning is lost" (Baudrillard 2009, pp. 16-17).

In other words, communication may exclusively allude to the attempt to communicate, as the meta-discourses of mainstream media confirm. Conversely, the imaginary of pure art continues to be inspired by the myth of production, commercialization and reproducibility, as Andy Warhol surprisingly demonstrated through his popular creations. The metaphor of the conspiracy of art well expresses Baudrillard's diffidence to the intolerable simulation of the world fueled by the consumer society. As Lotringer underlines, "Baudrillard probably had his doubts about contemporary art even before he saw any of it, and he mostly managed to keep away from any serious involvement" (Lotringer 2005, p. 15). Baudrillard's diffidence towards pop art involves its simulated flair and

reproducibility gist, inasmuch as standardized images unavoidably lose their iconic seduction and rarefaction (Galbo 1991).

This is what he highlights in the two conferences delivered in New York in 1987, *Towards a vanishing point of art* and *Trans-aesthetics*, in which he anticipates some of the most meaningful insights previously uttered in *The Perfect Crime* in order to dwell on the social impact of "machinic snobbery". In the first conference Baudrillard wonders what it is going on "after the orgy", hinting at the images and tautologies featuring the communicative fall-out of post-modernity. This is a thoughtful anticipation of the inaugural essay of *The Transparency of Evil*, in which the metaphor of *After the Orgy* has a communicative meaning:

> Communication is more social than the social itself: it is the hyper-relational, sociality overactivated by social techniques. The social, in its essence, is not this. Rather, it was a dream, a myth, a utopia, a conflicted and contradictory form, a violent form – and, certainly, an occasional and exceptional occurrence" (Baudrillard 1990, p. 12).

The social utopia evoked by Baudrillard risks being broken by the advent of evil hovering over the public scene. The dialectics between good and evil is more than a value juxtaposition and it implies the analysis of media representations. The conspiracy of art and the transparency of evil are two witty metaphors depicting the consumer society in the era of mainstream events, whose globalized dimension needs omnipresent broadcasting. Art and sport are no exception, especially at a time ruled by the instantaneous reproducibility of images. Not only consumption but also sport is a communication system, as Barthes demonstrated in *Mythologies* (1957). In regard to this, some of Baudrillard's writings seem to be inspired by an epistemological effort shedding light on the relationship between society and sports, even though "sociologists of sports and leisure have made relatively limited usage of Baudrillard's *oeuvre*" and have underestimated the "assessment of the relations between sport spectators and authorities" (Giulianotti 2004, p. 226).

The game between Real Madrid and Naples showed that every public event can be consumed without the physical participation of supporters thanks to the visual hybridization of mainstream media. Two years earlier, TV showed the

dramatic events of the Heysel Stadium broadcasting the predictable disaster that occurred before the final of the Champions League match between Liverpool and Juventus. Baudrillard argues that in such a dramatic occasion "sport is no longer sport and becomes an out-of-control event, in which the spectators in Madrid are eliminated to ensure that we are dealing with nothing but a television show" (Baudrillard 1988, p. 42). The vacuum packed events that the pandemic has imposed are not only the direct consequence of social distancing measures but also the result of our hyper-connected condition enabling us to be ubiquitous and resident. This is why Baudrillard's metaphor of vacuum packed events may concern every aspect of daily life when incumbent risks hang over social actors. In this account, Beck's insight of the "metamorphosis of the world" revolves around the "politics of visibility" of risk society: "Now communication landscapes are emerging – fragmented, individualized and simultaneously spreading out into networks in which the power of the communication media is broken" (Beck 2016, p. 134).

Before the rise of the network society, mainstream media had already turned daily life into a broadcasted stream of contents also coping with the power of violence and the incumbent specter of public insecurity. From then on, the relationship between sport and spectators has never been the same insofar as the closure of stadiums (and cinema, theatres, arenas, squares as well) for safety reasons has unfortunately become a permanent contingency. Hence follows the imaginary of a vacuum packed society suspended between compulsory absences and long-awaited presences.

The vanishing point of art and sport

Mainstream hyper-reality is a hallmark of our connected complexity that the pandemic has profoundly changed. Social distancing has empowered hyper-connectivity and fueled new forms of remote interactions. The concept of "communicating impermanence" (Ball Cicchini 2020) makes us think of the relational resilience that social actors have coped with since the pandemic broke out, given that the higher the public exposure, the greater are the chances of being infected. Thus, the closure of stadiums can be interpreted as the only way to avoid

any gathering of fans, who are therefore compelled to support their teams remotely.

In other words, the pandemic has triggered a popular imaginary of distance and absence linked to the availability of digital devices, as Baudrillard realized in reference to TV broadcasting. His reflection on the disappearance of sport from the public scene is framed within the wider analysis of the vanishing point of art and, in particular, of Andy Warhol's aesthetic gist.

> There is, in short, no essence of the everyday, of the banal, and thus no art of the everyday: this is a mystical aporia. If Warhol (and the others) believe that there is, that is because they delude themselves about the very status of art and the artistic act, – something far from uncommon among artists (Baudrillard 1970, pp. 118-119).

The difference in repeatability appears to be an insightful aphorism capable of epitomizing Warhol's creative copyright. This is what Baudrillard critically emphasizes in *The Consumer Society* and *The Symbolic Exchange and Death* in line with the purpose of explaining the relationship between the message and its medium. McLuhan's legacy provides stimulating theoretical insights every time the mediatization of reality becomes a research field, even though, "in Baudrillard's terms, McLuhan, like Freud and Saussure, was blind to the most radical effects of his slogans" (Genosko 1997, p. 107).

Hybridization, repetition and symbolization are the most significant features of the mainstream semiotic flair that Benjamin, Barthes and McLuhan had all dealt with through the analysis of popular imaginaries and reproducible narrations. Andy Warhol's aesthetic gist reflects the systems of objects crowding daily experience in line with the permanent renewal of signs and symbols. In other words, immanence and transcendence "are equally impossible" when the desacralization of myths, creeds and values becomes overwhelming. The more popular sociality is, the emptier life appears from an ethical point of view. Shallowness is one of the most significant marks of the aesthetic revolution fed by the consumer processes that Warhol re-arranged in line with his imaginative shrewdness: "Now, there can be no worse arrogance for art than to pose as machine-like, no greater affectation on the part of the person who enjoys the

status of creator, whether he wishes it or not, than to devote himself to serial automatism" (Baudrillard 1970, p. 119).

Goffman's metaphor of everyday life as a representation provides a clever sociological perspective inasmuch as objects and symbols become exchangeable and intermingled (Hancock, Garner 2015). Contemporary myths are engendered by the removal of value dogmas and the spread of a mass-media culture triggered by advertising and information. Thus every aspect of daily life becomes perishable stuff whose "planned obsolescence" (Latouche 2012) is closely connected to the whirling nature of mainstream messages. In line with Benjamin's prophetic aura, repeatability generates aesthetic standardization and popular consensus, as Warhol realized through the resemantization of iconic myths. This is what Baudrillard supposes in reference to the Pop-art semiotic revolution,

> The properly serial form (Andy Warhol). Here the paradigmatic dimension is abolished along with the syntagmatic dimension, since there is no longer a flexion of forms, nor even an internal reflexion, only a contiguity of the same: zero degree flexion and reflexion (Baudrillard 1976, pp. 62-63).

Contiguity has finally replaced flexion and reflexion and determined the shift of the paradigmatic axis and the modeling of a new syntagmatic dimension pivoted on the symbolic transformation of the public sphere. Warhol's engagement is fundamental for an understanding of the social impact of communicative innovations leading to the construction of myths embedded in the televised civilization. Thanks to Barthes' legacy Baudrillard can dwell on the ephemeral myths already investigated by Debord (1967) within his society of the spectacle. Coulter underlined that "by looking more closely at Barthes and Baudrillard's writing on meaning, writing, language, truth, and the real, we can come to a better understanding of the emergence and implications of the poststructural challenge" (Coulter 2014, p. 194). The fluctuation between reality and imagination characterizes not only every work of art, but also the process of representation of human existence. The "machinic snobbery" depicted by Baudrillard in *The Perfect Crime* refers to the "metaphysical state of our modern

world, which is akin to that of the unconditional simulacrum" (Baudrillard 1994, p. 85).

Illusion is the cornerstone of this sociological engagement revolving around the way technology may reinvent humanity. The construction of simulacra entails the reproduction of illusory perceptions and implies permanent semiotic stimulations, as serial art products and TV narrations can show. Pleasure and fun legitimate the aesthetic entertainment made possible by the machinic snobbery permeating the televised era:

> A machine should be unhappy, because it is perfectly alienated. But Warhol is not: he has invented the joy of the machine, the joy of making the world even more illusory than it was before. For this is the fate of all our technologies: to render the world yet more illusory (Baudrillard 1994, p.85).

The collateral effect of this symbolic hypertrophy is the iconic pornography that deals with the total undress of reality and its immediate iconic glazing. The unveiling of daily life complies with the need to uncover the hidden fragments of the human gaze. This is the case of terrorism, which Baudrillard analyzes in terms of pornographic attraction: "Even the most seemingly unbelievable reality, the kind of reality that pushes its way through by means of the shocking photos so extensively disseminated by the media, takes the form of images populated by reflections and phantoms – but precisely on this account they are totally real" (Codeluppi 2017, p. 458).

Paradoxically, the Gulf War was a TV event and broadcasting made the Twin Towers attack a globalized media happening. Silverstone (1999, p. 33) dwelt on Baudrillard's reflection on the media narrative skills tethering information and spectacularity, "In what sense, as Jean Baudrillard asks, did the Gulf War *not* take place?". His provocation dealt with the TV power to shape reality in line with the discourse strategies imposed by the stereotyped functional skills of the televised actors. Serialization implies repeatability, whereas pornography entails obscenity. This is the iconic fetishism that the consumer society has to feed on in order to satisfy its iconic dependence. Thus every public event can be promoted without an audience thanks to broadcasting, and sporting

events are no exception, as we experience nowadays in the pandemic era. Visiting an exhibition on a web site or watching a football game from remote become ordinary actions when *in prasentia* relationships are replaced with *in absentia* interactions. The ongoing closure of stadiums, theatres, cinemas, gyms, museums and restaurants has led to the transfer of social life into the internet complying with a new way of coping with oral and written communication: "The transmission of knowledge through orality implies participation and personal involvement in the group, both weakened by the advent of writing and the subsequent tendency towards individualism" (Cristante 2017, p. 9).

Remote communications have generated new forms of individualism and solipsism that our hyper-connected society has the chance to pursue thus facing the lack of other reliable relational opportunities. Before the spread of digital devices, television was the perfect medium to suggest a different way to consume reality and shape a countless number of simulacra reflecting fragments of complexity: "If the poles of sender and receiver of messages have collapsed into each other because communication is abandoned in favour of fascination with the code, then Baudrillard's own writing cannot function as critique" (Bignell 2000, p. 33). This is what Baudrillard intends when he dwells on the football game played between Real Madrid and Naples in 1987 behind closed doors for safety reasons, when supporters were banned from the stadiums for the very reason of preventing clashes and violence. The imaginary of vacuum packed sports can be analyzed nowadays in line with the new communicative relations imposed by the pandemic in order to avoid the risks of infection. The public sphere has been transferred from open air spaces to digital environments, thus reformatting the concept of non places probed by Augè (1992) and re-shaping the "poetics of space" investigated by Bachelard (1957). We had better define our emptied-out environments as "meta-places".

That football match represents the prototype of the vacuum packed spectacles nowadays broadcast in order to prevent the risk of infection. Baudrillard dwells on that match in one of the two American conferences delivered in New York in 1987, entitled "Transaesthetics", and in one of the chapters of *The Transparency of Evil*, entitled "The Mirror of Terrorism". He

points out that violence is the expected collateral effect of our televised morbidity, as the Heysel events dramatically showed. In line with Barthes' semiotic analysis of sport, Baudrillard observes that "Sport itself … is no longer located in sport as such, but instead in business, in sex, in politics, in the general style of performance" (Baudrillard 1990, p. 8). Sport is a social product and a means of consumption perceived by the social actors as a seducing system of communication. Broadcasting highlighted the violence of Liverpool fans attacking the Italian fans in Brussels, where collective rage produced death, desperation and yelling:

> "How is such barbarity possible in the late twentieth century?" This is a false question. There is no atavistic resurgence of some archaic type of violence. The violence of old was both more enthusiastic and more sacrificial than ours. Today's violence, the violence produced by our hypermodernity, is terror. A simulacrum of violence, emerging less from passion than from the screen: a violence in the nature of the image (Baudrillard 1990, p. 75).

Dependence on TV images is itself a form of violence taking the sting out of the intolerable loneliness burdening human relationships, especially when they involve sharing public spaces. Seemingly, broadcast images may hamper the social entertainment nurtured by the consumption of mass events such as football games. This is a semiotic insight etched in the opening epigraph of "Transaesthetic": "Just as the world drives towards a delirious state of things, we must drive towards a delirious point of view" (Baudrillard 1988, p. 39). The pulverization of visual centrality has led to the fragmentation of subjective observation inasmuch as the multiplication of informative sources has finally accomplished the bewilderment of spectators' perceptive faculties. In a semiotic perspective, mainstream consumption fired the fading of meanings in favor of the signifiers whose dominion implies the shallowness of in-presence relations.

According to Baudrillard, every aspect of life has a political dimension and culture can be defined as "media and advertizing semiologization" (Baudrillard 1988, p. 40). The array of objects composing the social sphere stems from the radicalization of media simulacra surrounding every single media consumer and celebrating our religion of consumption, as Warhol knowingly demonstrated. His

aesthetic engagement helps us understand that the importance of stereotypes is closely related to media repeatability and its ideological background, since "simultaneously everything becomes aesthetical". Hyper-reality stems from such a machinic obsession, whose main effect concerns the political hybridization of the public sphere (Habermas 2008). In other words, repeatability and standardization are two different but complementary forms of media violence insofar as violence itself can be seen as a fascinating attraction for spectators:

> Violence is already there, even though somewhat in disguise, it is almost a natural choice when times get rough. And violence is also contradictorial. It is fascinating that Western culture professes to hate and despise it and yet it deals in it – is permeated by it – in everyday life as well as in international relations (D'Andrea 2017, p. 471).

The trans-political, the trans-sexual and the trans-aesthetic take form thanks to the post-modernization of the public sphere and the replacement of normality with the paradoxes, excesses and ambivalences so profoundly embedded in this meta-narrative framework. Confusion itself is the ritual hallmark of this collective media experience, as Baudrillard demonstrates by focusing on the "vacuum packed" game played behind closed doors in Madrid in 1987:

> A symbolic event. On September 16th 1987 in Madrid the football match of the European championship, a top match, Real Madrid vs. Naples, was played as an evening game in an empty stadium without supporters, as imposed by the disciplinary measures that FIFA took in order to punish the excesses of Real Madrid supporters in a previous match against a German team. Nevertheless the game was integrally broadcast on TV. Real Madrid defeated Naples 2-0. It is clear that a ban of this kind swill never do away with the fanatical passion for football. Nonetheless that event shows in a novel way the hyper-realism of our world, in which the "real" event, the real encounter, happens in a "vacuum packed" way. In other words, its human context has been cleaned out and it is visible from remote on TV (Baudrillard 1988, p. 41).

The removal of supporters from the stadium is the counter-effect of the overflowing of violence in sports contexts, as the public banishment of football hooligans in the Eighties demonstrates. Almost thirty-five years later, for the first time in history a pandemic imposed the absence of spectators from outdoor and

indoor stadiums, arenas, circuits. Baudrillard's imaginary of the vacuum packed sports has thus become reality due to the fact that the overcrowding of onlookers may facilitate the diffusion of infection. In such a social emergency TV and the internet have the power to transfer real life into every single home and cope with the individual frustration exacerbated by social distancing.

The match between Real Madrid and Naples can be considered the prototype of this mainstream imaginary in the same way as the closure of the Santiago Bernabeu stadium was set to prevent physical risks. The presence of football legends such as Maradona and Butragueño might have increased the mythical dimension of that match, thus fueling the illusory fascination of a game played in the silence of the "cathedral of Madrid". This is what Dukut underlines:

> When the soccer match between Real Madrid and Naples, who fought for the European championship, happened in 1987, it was done at night without any real supporters. Even though supporters were not allowed to enter the stadium because officials were afraid the Madrid supporters would make a dispute over the game, many television viewers were entertained to see the simulation match on television. This is clearly an example of how the postmodern society enjoys a simulacra as much as what may have been a reality" (Dukut 2006, p. 40).

As regards our pandemic emergency, the dichotomy between presence and absence well expresses the current condition of supporters compelled to watch games on TV due to the closure of stadiums. Furthermore, the fluctuation between illusion and reality can help us by probing the process of physical distancing from the public sphere. Postmodernism is founded not only on the deconstruction of reality already investigated by Derrida, but also on media hybridization and aesthetic nihilism, as Warhol and pop artists continued to demonstrate. The religion of consumption relies on a complex system of objects whose complexity entails a profound semiotic reconfiguration. And the closure of public structures may be considered the painless consequence of our digitalized prowess leading us to join public events with no distancing from the screen. This is what Baudrillard defines the trans-political factor that has emptied our life of passions, encounters and emotions. Broadcasting engendered a hyper-reality that rapidly replaced eye contact and conversation with transparency and absence. Unexpectedly, the

conspiracy of art and the transparency of evil stem from the saturation of daily life with its traditional relational patterns:

> This is the trans-political that deals with the transparent form of a public space from which events have been withdrawn. It is this pure form of an event from which passions have been removed. And in order to extrapolate from the aesthetic perspective, I would say that what happened in Madrid or Heysel (both trans-political events) shows that sport as a game disappeared. Likewise, the trans-aesthetic dimension is a fully exacerbated, transparent and mediatic condition, from which art has simply disappeared. When we talk about art, it is because it no longer exists (Baudrillard 1988, p. 43).

The relationship between arts and sports can be interpreted as the result of the "radical thought" described in *The Perfect Crime*, insofar as it is the result of "the incompatibility between thought and the real" (Baudrillard 1994, p. 97). Events may beboth intelligible and unintelligible inasmuch as thought appears contaminated or shaped by the countless simulacra haunting the public sphere. Ahead of Baudrillard, in the Fifties both McLuhan and Barthes realized that mediality aims at offering sports events as pure spectacle featuring sportsmen destined to become transparent, popular myths. Three decades later, what happened in the Heysel and Santiago Bernabeu stadiums triggered the start of vacuum packed sports suspended between symbolic simulation, aesthetic renewal and narrative hybridization.

McLuhan, Barthes and the social sign of sports

The transition from real events to "phantom" ones can be considered one of the most deceptive forms of violence bolstered by broadcasting, insofar as synchronicity and ubiquity are perceived as two epochal communicative achievements. In *Transparency of Evil* Baudrillard focuses on the game played in Madrid behind closed doors and argues that "No one will have directly experienced the actual course of such happenings, but everyone will have received an image of it. A pure event, in other words, devoid of any reference in nature, and readily susceptible to replacement by synthetic images" (Baudrillard 1990, p. 80). The transfer of social events from public arenas to mainstream ambients has produced new collective imaginaries whose symbolic tenets comply

with the resetting of any kind of socially shared experiences. The "radical thought" inspiring this technologic frenzy is embedded in the pervasiveness of remote relations and parallel realities, as Baudrillard remarks in *The Perfect Crime*:

> Why might there not be as many real worlds as imaginary ones? Why a single real world? Why such an exception? Truth to tell, the real world, among all the other possible ones, is unthinkable, except as dangerous superstition. We must break with it as critical thought once broke (in the name of the real!) with religious superstition. Thinkers, one more effort! (Baudrillard 1994, p. 98).

Consumption rituals and reality risks may have entangled creativity just as imagination may be stifled by our iconic hypertrophy. Of course, consumption is more than a social creed entailing superstition and dogmas. By denouncing the loss of its reference in nature, Baudrillard sheds light on the transformation of sports into vacuum packed events capable of stimulating new imaginary projections and illusory experiences. Hyper-reality is the result of this spatial evacuation that allows people neither to move from home nor to queue up outside a stadium to watch a football match. Baudrillard perfectly knows that "the medium is the message" since the closure of stadiums implies a new way to consume social events and to cope with "stasis and metastasis" (Baudrillard 1988, p. 45). Repeatability and editing make possible a more complex way to edit images and discourses so as to comply with the ritual habits of the globalized audience, as Andy Warhol cleverly realized when TV appeared. McLuhan called it the "timid giant" in line with his aphoristic and highly imaginative panache. Baudrillard quotes him in the American conference held in 1987 in New York, in reference to the cult of one's "look" afflicting public televised stars and sportsmen as well. Narcissism intertwines with self-reference and dandyism, as McLuhan emphasizes interpreting "narcissism as narcosis". Baudrillard deals with the look soon after having analyzed the ritual dimension of art and sports:

> The look is a sort of minimal image endowed with a minimal definition, as well as the video image. It is a kind of tactile image – as McLuhan would say – which does not provoke either gaze or admiration, as fashion still does, but stimulates a special effect as a special signification. The look is no longer fashionable, it is by now an

expression that fashion has overtaken. It is no longer inspired by a logic of distinction, it is not a play of differences, it plays with differences without believing in them. It is indifferent. Being ourselves becomes an ephemeral performance, without a future. It is neither dandyism nor snobbism nor chic nor distinction: it is a disembodied mannerism in a world without manners (Baudrillard 1988, p. 54).

The result of the fashionable construction of reality is nothingness and disillusion, inasmuch as the loss of reference in nature leads to the vanishing of the referential in signs, images, contents, discourses and narrations. Televised spectacles fuel the myth of fashion within the agonistic sphere as well, as Barthes highlighted in *Mythologies* in line with his semiotic approach to social consumption. Before him, McLuhan investigated the narcissistic dimension of look in relation to the athletic aspirations of social actors. Advertising stimulates fans' symbolic acknowledgment of everyday heroes like football players, as McLuhan highlighted in one of the last chapters of *The Mechanical Bride* (1953), "Murder the Umpire". The chapter is inspired by the image of a referee grasping the rugby ball and dodging the players who try to catch him as he runs away. This is the outlandish image chosen by The Electric Light and Power *Company for its* advertising campaign for "The American" journal. The photo warns the reader that nobody can trust a biased controller deprived of control, especially when economic interests are involved. The metaphoric reference is to the extravagant role played by the US government in regulating the electricity agencies while it is in competition with them. When the referee is not neutral, there is no point playing the game. This is why that "Murder the Umpire" appears as a social warning exploiting the communicative impact of sports metaphors. McLuhan wonders whether football matches can be set within a wider sociological frame, "Is football a ritual drama enacting the state of mind of a specialized commercial audience?" (McLuhan 1954, p. 135).

Sports events can be better explained through the metaphor of drama in line with the atavistic need of social actors to compete and have success. As in classic dramas, public representations comply with the expectations of the audience whose eagerness depends on the mimetic effectiveness of the show, as Bignell points out: "With television, McLuhan announces that the social subject has

become involved in a process of productive creation of sense which derives from the incompleteness of the image as object" (Bignell 2000, p. 37). McLuhan might have inspired Barthes' analysis of sports as social events and collective ordeals, inasmuch as physical competition tends to lead to semiotic dramas. Advertising and broadcasting turned sports competitions into pure entertainment driven by huge economic interests. As a result, the referee can be seen as the *deus ex machine* in charge of the regularity of the match that has to be pursued respecting the rules. In *The Craftsman*, Richard Sennett highlighted that playing allows children to learn to respect norms and rules in a playful way:

> Repetition of games in turn lays the groundwork for experiences of practice, going over a procedure again and again. In childhood play, though, children also learn how to modify the rules they make, and this too has adult consequences, as when in repeating a technical practice we can gradually modify, change, or improve it (Sennett 2008, p. 272).

The referee has the duty to remind the players that the game can be played only if the norms are respected. This is a real social issue, as McLuhan underlines:

> More obviously than most entertainment, competitive sport is a direct reflex of the various motives and inner dramas of a society. But private games like chess, bridge and poker are no less expressive. And for businessmen, golf is the recognized dramatization of the most immediate kind of personal competition. Thorstein Veblen's celebrated notion that sport is the degradation of the instinct of craftsmanship is useful as a pointer, but it fails to take into account the positive functions of sport as a kind of magical art in society. For sport is a magical institution, celebrating by a precise ritual the impulses that seem most necessary to social functioning and survival in any given group. (McLuhan 1953, p. 135).

Magic deals with illusion, fun and enchantment, whereas craftsmanship copes with reality and everyday life. Veblen's survey of the leisure class can still be fruitful to investigate the social impact of new forms of poverty. The globalized success of broadcasted sport resides in the intertwining of magic and reality without setting aside the craving-for competition that has been nurtured in human beings. Victory is more than a goal, especially when it is achieved at the end of a collective obsession and it is experienced as a social excitement. In this

perspective, rituality and competitiveness are two different sides of the same coin, taking into account that every sport has its own audience living the illusion of supremacy, as McLuhan proclaims remarking the composite social tissue of supporters:

> In England the same contrast may be seen between the rugger and the soccer crowd. The latter is a professional game played to vast crowds who are on the sidelines of life as well as of sports. The rugger crowd consists of relatively privileged people who are spectators of sport but participants in business and society (McLuhan 1953, p. 137).

Spectators are more than team supporters or sports enthusiasts, since they can be seen as fundamental social actors fully involved in a powerful cultural industry. In other words, sport is a social entertainment requiring the participation of crowds and supporters even from remote, as the debates on the creation of the Super League for economic factors emphasized. When fans vanish from the public sphere, entertainment loses its magical flair, despite the relevant economic interests fostering TV enterprises: "Sport, with its passion for victory, helps to stoke up the boiler that provides the steam for an activistic, extrovert way of life" (McLuhan 1953, p. 137). Therefore sport is the metaphor of the eternal human struggle for success and completion in a world where spectators have the illusion of rebuking biased umpires. Not only soccer, but also all-in wrestling can be seen as a magical activity staged for the spectators, in line with some representative tenets resembling parody. The referee knocked out or cursed by the "enraged" participants aims to provide a show capable of exciting the spectators:

> The intensity of coaching and training procedures in sport reflect not only the passion for victory but the extreme to which we are prepared to go to control the outcome. […] Excitement, not fun is the object or function of sport in a competitive industrial world. The passions which sport arouses systematically are much too intense to leave any scope for that element of detachment which provides fun in life and art. One has only to listen to the tense gunfire delivery of radio sports announcers to understand this. (McLuhan 1954, p. 137).

McLuhan intelligently realized that the close relationship between sports and media depends on the dependence of sports events on spectators. In the

meantime, the cult of victory and the mythologizing of sportsmen can be interpreted as the direct effect of a spectacularity pivoted on the domination of the signifier over the significant. As Gordon recapitulates, "McLuhan does not refer to the television image as tactile because of a metaphorical finger scanning the screen, but because the image requires of the eye a degree of involvement as tactile metaphorically" (Gordon 2010, p. 16). TV broadcasting implies a new form of visual tactility and shifting perceptive skills. In spite of the new communicative devices, such spectacles would not be possible without an audience, as McLuhan warned during a live audience Q&A session hosted by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation on June 27, 1977:

> Cricket is a very organized form of violence… Baseball or football, any kind of sport is a dramatization of the typical and accepted forms of violence in the business community […] All these games are huge ways of discovering and dramatizing what the society you're in is all about. By the way, without an audience, these games would have no meaning at all. They have to be played in front of a public, in order to acquire their meaning. A baseball game without an audience would be a rehearsal, only a practice. The game requires a public and public has to resemble a whole cross-section for the community (McLuhan 1977).

The presence of an audience has to be framed within the social patterns in which sports events take place and has to be connected to the construction of iconic myths haunting the public sphere. McLuhan prophetically foresaw the consequences of empty stadiums and arenas and warned TV spectators about the social transformations linked to the remote consumption of public events. In this account, McLuhan's mediology suggested to Silvertsone that "Our media, especially, have extended range and reach, granting us infinite power but also changing the environment in which the power is exercised" (Silverstone 1999, p. 20). On the one hand, mainstream media have revolutionized the public environment in line with the new broadcasting techniques; on the other, digital media have replaced physical presence with the connected condition of postmodern man compelled to cope with a pandemic that has deprived public events of the audience. In other words, McLuhan was convinced that the audience itself is a fundamental actor in public entertainment, and sport is no exception,

especially when worldwide mythologies are fueled by broadcasting (Lombardinilo 2018a).

Barthes dealt with this phenomenon in *Mythologies* (1957), in which he investigated society from a semiological point of view and shed light on the communicative complexity that both Debord and Baudrillard dealt with. Barthes' well-known analysis of wrestling ("In the ring") and bicycle racing ("The Tour de France as Epic") help us understand that the epic dimension of sport is triggered by accurate scenic flairs and dramaturgic patterns. Four years after the publication of *Mythologies*, Barthes joined the production of a documentary directed by Hubert Aquin, *Le sport et les homes* that was shown on June 1 1961 as part of the series *Temps present* on the television network of Radio Canada. Barthes wrote the text of the documentary, then published it under the title *What is sport?* (Barthes, 2004).

Their attention focused on five national sports, "as a social and poetic phenomenon", bullfighting in Spain, car racing in Italy, soccer in Hungary, hockey in Canada, and the Tour de France bicycle races. Barthes' commentary on images and photos depicts the social dynamics of great epic challenges, in which athletes confront issues of physical strength, technology, time and nature. The documentary is the proof that the audience is often attracted by the epic dimension of sport and can be overwhelmed by the atavistic power of living myths. This is why Dupuis (2004, p. xi) underlines that Barthes' work concerns "sports as, or beyond myths", insofar as myth can be considered as a "word" and a "communication system". Barthes emphasized the media imaginary of sports events since the reproducibility of images may foster the wider consumption of stadium events. To the fore is the magic aura generated by human competitions in the presence of an excited audience whose function is to share collective experiences emotionally and join the agonistic challenges taking place in crowded venues. Barthes' investigation of contemporary myths and sports spectacles is inspired by an epistemological effort aimed at probing the semiotic meaningfulness of daily experiences. Indeed, his texts "are credited with introducing students to structuralism and semiology in domains as varied as film

studies, the analysis of advertisement, modern rhetorics of the image, the semiology of fashion, and the structural analysis of narrative" (Rabaté 1997, p. 2).

Images and signs comply with the spectacular patterns required by globalized events, especially when games and matches attract the attention of a worldwide audience. In this perspective, Barthes insightfully realizes the popular dimension of soccer and proclaims the unveiled social imaginary connected to sports business. This is a relevant topic developed in Aquin's documentary, since "sport is a great modern institution cast in the ancestral forms of spectacle" (Barthes 2004, p. 59). Post-modernity entails a semiotic complexity embedded in the human sharing of theatrical experiences. Thus sport can be conceived as a perpetual struggle for victory:

> Why? Why love sport? First, it must be remembered that everything happening to the player also happens to the spectator. But whereas in the theater the spectator is only a voyeur, in sport he is a participant, an actor. And then, in sport, man does not confront man directly. There enters between them an intermediary, a stake, a machine, a puck, or a ball. And this thing is the very symbol of things: it is in order to possess it, to master it, that one is strong, adroit, courageous. To watch, here, is not only to live, to suffer, to hope, to understand but also, and especially, to say so – by voice, by gesture, by facial expression; it is to call the whole world to witness; in a word, it is to communicate (Barthes 2004, pp. 60-61).

Once again, communication deals with the sharing of emotions and perceptions, as long as fans are allowed to be part of collective competitions. More than sixty years after Barthes' analysis, we can assume that the intermediary between sportsmen and supporters has become the screen, enabling the spectators to watch vacuum packed matches. Witnesses disappeared from the public sphere, having been confined in closed rooms and solitary spaces. The imposition of social distancing caused the disappearance of collective excitement and the dematerialization of human interactions. The fruition of sports and arts underwent the same semiotic process pivoted on hybridization and digitalization. By highlighting the communicative dimension of sport, Barthes proclaims the social tenets inspiring popular and economic interests that still today explain the huge investments of TV companies:

> What need have these men to attack? Why are men disturbed by this spectacle? Why do they commit themselves to it so completely? Why this useless combat? What is sport? What is it then that men put into sport? Themselves, their human universe. Sport is made in order to speak the human contract" (Barthes 2004, pp. 64-65).

Did this human universe start to fade away when the pandemic broke the human contract? This is what Baudrillard denounced when the game between Real Madrid and Naples was played without audience and was broadcast all over the world. For the first time in history, fans were separated from their teams, thus experiencing compulsory distancing from the stadium. Risks and fears have replaced fun and social sharing, with the aim of preventing every possible danger. Does the closure of stadiums imply the cancellation of the human contract that both McLuhan and Barthes deal with? Not really, if we take into due account the power of broadcasting and digitalization in the era of the hyper-connected society.

Conclusion

According to Silverstone (1999, p. 37), both McLuhan and Barthes offered "an account of images as ideology, of the subtle, and not so subtle, ways in which meaning can be conveyed". Their analysis of the sports industry shed light on the social and psychological relationship between fans and sportsmen ahead of the closure of stadiums in the Covid-19 era. The new communicative chances supplied by broadcasting started to change the interaction between audiences and sports spectacles in line with a slow but progressive distancing of spectators from the public venues. This is what the match between Real Madrid and Naples set off, as Baudrillard remarks in The *Transparency of Evil* hinting at our televised hyper-reality:

> The phantom football match should obviously be seen in conjunction with the Heysel Stadium game, when the real event, football, was once again eclipsed - on this occasion by a much more dramatic form of violence. There is always the danger that this kind of transition may occur, that spectators may cease to be spectators and slip into the role of victims or murderers, that sport may cease to be sport and be transformed into terrorism: that is why the public must simply be eliminated, to ensure that the only event occurring is strictly televisual in nature.

> Every real referent must disappear so that the event may become acceptable on television's mental screen (Baudrillard 1990, p. 80).

The public can be eliminated from the public sphere in order to prevent risk and violence, as the Heysel events showed. The televised projection of sports events radically changed our media habits and revolutionized the way we habitually consume collective events (Lombardinilo 2018b). The pandemic imposed that sort of vacuum packed sociability that Baudrillard focused on so as to describe the social impact of violence and fear. Virtualization, hybridization and symbolization can be considered as some of the inevitable phenomena connected to our digital imaginary. The latter killed reality and replaced it with new experiential patterns, as in the case of terrorist attacks. Baudrillard's metaphor of "the perfect crime" is related to this symbolic shallowness, whereas Castoriadis points out that "the dereality of life is grasped in reference to an opposing reality, without which the metaphor would be meaningless" (Castoriadis 2007, p. 35).

Postmodern "dereality of life" might enable us to understand better Baudrillard's hyper-reality and simulacra, whose rapid transformation has to be related to the glittering iconicity of digital civilization. But McLuhan was undoubtedly right when he proclaimed that "without an audience, these games would have no meaning at all", as Barthes argued when assuring that "sport is made in order to speak the human contract". Their analysis helps us investigate the economic crisis afflicting some of the most important football teams in the world. Likewise, the protests of supporters against the creation of the so-called Super League reminded public opinion that the audience is indispensable and not optional to sports events. By paying attention to the closure of Bernabeu Stadium in 1987, Baudrillard skillfully dwelt on the social consequences of such a revolutionary decision. The imaginary of vacuum packed sport can be considered a result of our social uncertainty and communicative convergence with which Jenkins dealt in 2006: "As they undergo this transition, the media companies are not behaving in a monolithic fashion; often, different divisions of the same company are pursuing radically different strategies, reflecting their uncertainties about how to proceed" (Jenkins 2006, p. 19).

This tendency can be still tracked down in reference to the division of TV rights among the great TV companies anxious to broadcast the most important football matches in the world. Nonetheless, the show can hardly go on without the physical participation of fans, since their economic and emotional contribution is still necessary, despite the intolerable costs of the football industry. This is why Baudrillard criticized the value and symbolic nihilism produced by the "machinic snobbery" embodied in Warhol's art and fueled by technical reproducibility and synaesthetic hybridization. The imaginary of vacuum packed experiences is one of the collateral effects of our hyper-connected anxiety pivoted on the absence of real images and the loss of the referent: "Such is the objectless image, which lacks the imagination of the object" (Baudrillard 1994, p. 83).

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