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Football is "the most important of the least important things": The Illusion of Sport and COVID-19

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Football is "the most important of the least important things": The Illusion of Sport and COVID-19

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Abstract
In his book, *On the Pleasure Principle in Culture* (2014), Robert Pfaller argued that our relationship to sport is one grounded in "illusion". Simply put, our interest in and enjoyment of sport occurs through a process of "knowing better". Here, one's knowledge of the unimportance of sport is achieved by associating the illusion of sport with a naïve observer – i.e. someone who does believe in sport's importance. In the wake of the global pandemic, COVID-19, it would seem that Pfaller's remarks have taken on an added significance. With major sporting events and domestic competitions being indefinitely postponed or canceled, Liverpool manager, Jurgen Klopp, commented that football was "the most important of the least important things". In light of these remarks, this paper will critically locate sport's sudden unimportance in relation to Pfaller's contention that sport reflects an "illusion without owner".

Keywords
COVID-19; illusion; mimetic activity; Pfaller; play; spectatorship

Introduction

It would seem that sport no longer matters. In view of the COVID-19 global pandemic, which has resulted in a number of domestic and international sporting competitions being indefinitely postponed or cancelled, Liverpool FC manager, Jürgen Klopp, referred to football "as 'the most important of the least important things'" (Wilson, 2020). Notably, Klopp's sentiments have been echoed by other sporting celebrities, such as Tiger Woods, who, in similar fashion, stated that "There are a lot more important things in life than a golf tournament" (Carroll, 2020).[1] But who are these remarks for? Surely, no one would disagree with Klopp or Woods's statements and suggest that sport *is* more important? In fact, amidst an increasing death toll and national "lockdowns" resulting in levels of unemployment unseen since the 2007

financial crash (Strauss, 2020; Tooze, 2020), do Klopp and Woods's remarks even need repeating?

In light of these questions, I wish to expand upon the nature of sport during the COVID-19 pandemic, paying specific attention to the inherent ambivalence that underscores both Klopp and Woods's remarks. This ambivalence will be explored through Robert Pfaller's contention that sport and play provide an "illusion without owner" (Pfaller, 2014). Drawing from Johan Huizinga's "sacred seriousness" (Huizinga, 1955), Pfaller (2014) details how the significance of sport relies upon an inherent illusion; an illusion which presupposes a "naïve observer".

In what follows, it will be argued that the importance of this "naïve observer" proves integral to the above remarks. For example, though no one would openly disagree with either Klopp or Woods's statements, the fact that they are stated, and subsequently reported, relies upon an Other who *does* believe in sport's importance (even in the face of a global pandemic). In the case of sport, leisure and play, the formal significance of this Other will be used to discern what COVID-19 avers: the inherent illusion that underscores our desire for "play"; an illusion that does not belong to any subject – an "illusion without owner".

Enjoy! Your leisure

Certainly, the commodification of leisure and the conflation of work and play is a widely recited theme in academic research (Jameson, 1991); culminating in the "gamification" of working practices (Wark, 2007). This infusion, however, belies a more significant tension. That is, under the neoliberal directive to "Enjoy!", we, paradoxically, have less time for enjoyment (McGowan, 2012; Žižek, 2008). As a result, we become participants in a relentless enjoyment that is never fulfilled, and which inevitably becomes work: an enjoyment that is decidedly unenjoyable. Such demands are evidenced in the extent to which our leisure practices become embroiled in a constant desire for affirmation, as Van Oenen (2018) highlights:

> because … affirmation can no longer be received from traditional sources such as God or nature, or any other self-evident and undisputed source of authority, it can only be procured from man-made social arrangements and be based on assessments by other human beings. It is thus to be expected that individuals

> will demand such continuous re-affirmation from other individuals, or collectives. (p.114).

For Pfaller (2014), this re-affirmation "holds on to the *illusion* of self-determination", with the subject "pursu[ing] his or her own heteronomy simply for the sake of 'proving' it to be autonomy" (p.215, italics added).[2]

Unfortunately, what becomes obscured in this desire for self-affirmation through leisure, is its attribution to a naïve Other (Boncardo, 2018). Such a naïve Other follows the Lacanian contention (elaborated by Žižek, 2001) that our subjective beliefs are enjoyed through an Other, constituting what Pfaller (2014) refers to as "objective illusions". While objective illusions ground their subscription in a variety of subjects, they are, nonetheless, claimed by no one: they are, in effect, disavowed. Both Pfaller and Žižek relate this unique process to a variety of examples, including when an individual uses their VCR to record films, that will never get watched; when an academic photocopies a book, they will never read; or, when the canned laughter on your favorite sitcom laughs for you. In each instance, the subject may never subjectively watch the films, read the book, or laugh, but instead, they can relax in the objective comfort that the VCR, photocopier and canned laughter has achieved this for them.

However, what remains unique about this transference is its disavowed status. Notably, in each transference – what Pfaller (2014, 2017) refers to as a form of interpassivity – "The illusion is not theirs" (Pfaller, 2014, p.23); that is, the illusion is *not claimed by the subject*. Consequently, "in full 'knowledge' of the alleged unsuitability of an interpassive process, the actors nonetheless carry it out, and then actually obtain successful results from it – yet once again conceal these results from themselves" (Pfaller, 2014, p.23). This is reflected in the case of sport, where the desire to "check the score", and thus stop whatever one may be currently doing, relies upon the subject's open acknowledgement that such "checking" is inherently "silly" ("I know this is silly, but I just have to know the score from yesterday's game").[3] This concealment bears witness to an important ambivalence in cultural practices involving sport, leisure and play. In part, it suggests that the enjoyment we seek through our leisure practices, including watching professional sport, is one in which the interpassive subject deliberately follows a path of self-forgetting.

In order to help explain this act of self-forgetting, we can consider what has been referred to as sport's "mimetic sphere" (Elias & Dunning, 2008; Maguire, 2011).

According to Maguire (2011), "'Mimetic' activities … provide a 'make-believe' setting which allows emotions to flow more easily, and which elicits excitement of some kind imitating that produced by 'real-life situations', yet without its dangers or risks" (p.920). Importantly, "'Mimetic' activities thus allow, within certain limits, for socially permitted self-centredness" (Maguire, 2011, p.920). In light of the above, we can offer a slight revision to Maguire's (2011) contentions, arguing instead that what these activities collectively provide is a form "self-decentrement", predicated on our own self-forgetfulness.

Sacred seriousness and knowing better

Following Huizinga (1955), Pfaller (2014) outlines how forms of play rely upon a level of secrecy which is shared by those involved in the practice. This is echoed in examples of politeness where, "The fact that niceties are 'not real' is thus a secret that is shared by all participants, and one that is kept secret from others who remain fully unspecified" (Pfaller, 2014, pp.89-90). In these instances, such "secrecy" relies upon an "illusion" that remains "ownerless" (Pfaller, 2014). What is more, it is in upholding this illusion that the enjoyment of play and sport relies upon the knowledge, and subsequent disavowal, that it is merely play. As Pfaller (2014) asserts:

> A player who does not know that the game is play cannot be captured by "sacred seriousness". He or she remains trapped in profane seriousness. This knowledge essential for play consists in "knowing better" about an illusion. Consequently, every game must contain an illusion. (p.91).

Therefore, if we follow Maguire's (2011) contention that the "make-believe" settings of our leisure practices serve as "the 'siblings' of those aroused in 'real-life' situations" (p.920), then it is clear that such forms of "make-believe" refer explicitly to play's inherent illusion. Importantly, the fact that such activities are known to be "make-believe", works to accentuate their seriousness. If anything, it underscores play's seriousness in the face of our everyday ("real-life") profanatory (Pfaller, 2014). Furthermore, this is not a confusion. One does not simply confuse the "play" as more seriousness than "everyday life"; instead, the sacred seriousness of play occurs when

"the players are *not* confused. Only by *knowing* that it is 'just' play is it possible to be more absorbed by it than by other areas of life" (Pfaller, 2014, p.92, italics added).

As noted, what remains key to such "knowing", is its disavowed status. Play, and its rationalization in a variety of sporting and leisure practices, works off a "suspended illusion"; or, in other words, a suspension of our better knowledge (Pfaller, 2014). For Pfaller (2014):

> Because this knowledge includes the fact that the game is "only a game", the game must contain a counter-illusion, so to speak – namely, that of being "more than just a game". This emerges as an important observation for understanding other, non-representative practices, too (such as abstract, repetitive forms in art, obsessional neurotic acts, and religious rituals that have seemingly lost their meaning): *wherever sacred seriousness reigns, there must be a denied illusion that is kept suspended*. Sacred seriousness is a sign indicating the presence of an illusion of the other. It is its symptom. (pp.99-100).

This affords further clarification on the apparent distinction between sport's inherent tensions and its similarity to other cultural art forms (Elias & Dunning, 2008). According to Maguire (2011), sport's "quest … for battles [is] enacted playfully in a *contrived* context which can produce enjoyable battle excitement with a minimum of injuries to the human participants" (p.922, italics added). As a result, "Compared with the arts, the scope for the exercise of the imagination involved appears to be of a rather restricted and heavily rule-bound kind" (Maguire, 2011, p.922). On the contrary, when considered in view of the "illusion without owner", we can begin to see how it is through sport's "contrived context" that our imaginations and our enjoyment in play is interpassively assured. Only a naïve observer would find the restriction of activity, through sport's rule-bound necessity, as in some way inhibiting the opportunity for play. Instead, play's sacred seriousness can occur precisely *because* there are accepted rules that restrict the full opportunity for enjoyment.

Take, for example, a game of football, and ask yourself: why do we bother restricting the game to the primary use of feet? Why do we add this "rule" which only restricts the opportunity to put the ball in the opposition's net? Certainly, no one who plays football ever questions this rule (in fact, if they did, they may prefer another sport, such as, Rugby Union/League); instead, it is part of the game's "secrecy" – an accepted

illusion that allows one to fully participate in the game. Moreover, rather than reflecting an unstable decontrolling of emotional constraint (Elias & Dunning, 2008), this reversal of our knowledge – the knowledge that play is merely play – is what can be identified when certain athletes break "the rules", resulting in suspension or outright castration from sport. Ultimately, such actions only confer play's sacred seriousness (its disavowed illusion): one *must* break the rules to win "the game".

It is in this way that our involvement in sport presents a form of "self-decentrement": indeed, a space *between* sport's objective adherence (i.e. following its rules) and our subjective divestment from the demands of its illusion (an illusion of the Other). In doing so, both sport and leisure can help to confer a form of self-forgetfulness, one that stands apart from the unending and inevitably impossible "self-realization" that the leisure industry so hopefully promotes (Rojek, 1993).

Sport's inherent ambivalence and COVID-19

We can now begin to see the ambivalence which sits at the heart of sport; an ambivalence which is brought to light in the aforementioned comments from Klopp. Indeed, while Klopp's remarks serve as a denouncement of sport in the face of COVID-19, at the same time, he bears witness to the "sacred seriousness" it relies upon (Huizinga, 1955). When Klopp asserts that football remains "the most important of the least important things" (Wilson, 2020), it is clear that football holds *some* importance. Yet, what underscores Klopp's assertions is an inherent ambivalence regarding the "importance" of football; one that remains indebted to a naïve observer who wholeheartedly believes in football's importance. Consequently, such remarks ambivalently herald both positive and negative assumptions: football *is* the *most* important of the *least* important things. In effect, it is precisely because football is "unimportant" (or the least important) that it remains important. Ultimately, Klopp's remarks help reveal the suspended illusion which underlies football's (un)importance.

Furthermore, it is the contention of this essay, that such ambivalence can reveal the significance of play's self-decentrement. Indeed, if we follow Pfaller's (2014) contentions, then it is in the context of play that the illusions we uphold, but disavow, can be deferred to an Other who underpins the illusion's social efficacy. It is in delegating the illusion to a naïve observer that we regain a sense of enjoyment from the

process of delegation itself. This is further substantiated by Pfaller (2014) and Žižek's (1998) claims that the delegation of enjoyment can result in a surplus enjoyment.

In the case of sport, such outsourcing of enjoyment functions even when the literal postponement of sport occurs. What the cancellation of sport seems to highlight, therefore, is how "the strongest emotional ties to something can develop precisely when the matter – through real or imagined better knowledge – is declared to be 'foolish' fun or 'mere' play" (Pfaller, 2014, p.93). Here, the postponement of sport during COVID-19 has resulted in a number of daft examples.

During the first postponement of English Premiership League games, Watford and Leicester City played their fixture via the managerial simulator, *Football Manager* (Sega, 2019) (BBC Sport, 2020). Echoing this, Leyton Orient asked fans to select the team for their game at Bradford City, which included pre-match advice from their manager, Ross Embleton. In addition, Southampton took part in a game of *noughts and crosses* with Manchester City (BBC Sport, 2020). What remains unique to these examples, is that they were followed with match reports from the BBC. In fact, despite sport's "official" postponement, Bull (2020) highlighted that "sport [… could] be found in the most unlikely places". He commented upon:

> the viral clips of the two men playing paddle tennis between their neighbouring windows on the fourth floor of their apartment block (their rally lasted 28 shots) and the pair playing ping pong with frying pans and a net made out of pasta boxes. Or Ian Bell lacing a bog roll down the corridor for four ("Don't bowl there, son," he tells his kid) or Lionel Messi doing keepie-uppies with one (which brought to mind Michel Platini's line: "What Zidane does with a ball, Maradona could do with an orange."). (Bull, 2020).

In each example, sport's illusion for the Other proves particularly captivating, resulting in a host of "silly" activities (including the strange proliferation of "online" quiz events),[4] that, in light of play's sacred seriousness, seems only to compel individuals to think up different ways of doing "sport". Accordingly, while governments have undoubtedly struggled with the aim of increasing physical participation amongst its population, the cancelation of sport, and the subsequent "lockdown", has only resulted in a number of people deliberately taking the opportunity to complete their leisure allocation (Cabinet Office, 2020).

Final Comments

To conclude, we can reflect upon the ambivalent satisfaction which these examples seem to infer. As Poulard (2013) asserts, "The displacement of enjoyment can be viewed in two different lights: either as an ineluctable symptom of alienation inherent to mass entertainment or as the opening of a space of relative freedom where (for a change) nothing is expected of me" (p.306). Set against our pre-COVID-19 reality, where one was expected to join a gym, check the scores and "find time" with the family, it is our present reality – one that goes no further than the basics required for living – which suddenly denotes a "nothing expected" (Poulard, 2013). It is, instead, the unexpectedness of a future that helps to confer a level of self-forgetfulness that is brought to light in our relations with play, leisure and sport. In doing so play's naïve observer reveals a self-decentrement that remains decidedly collective. Indeed, when sport inevitably returns, when leisure becomes what we do "at the weekend", we can perhaps take greater stock of the interpassivity which underscores our most cherished and self-affirming practices. Practices that are "less encumbered by aggressive demands for recognition and more attuned to truly public questions – questions of distribution, of shared history, and of justice" (Boncardo, 2018, p.307). It is in this regard that our leisure can offer a more liberating, non-alienated significance.

Endnotes

[1] Woods was referring to the 2020 Masters Tournament.

[2] According to Pfaller (2017), this process has heralded a decline in "public space".

[3] See Pfaller (2014, p.1).

[4] See Brennan (2020).

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