

Soccer and Culture: Aesthetics for the Masses

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Abstract:

In this brief account, I argue that the ubiquity of soccer should not be taken lightly. In fact, there may be a strong connection between soccer and aesthetics and by extension the “high” culture of art itself. I develop this argument based on a formalist account and then also make the claim that soccer is well appointed as a mechanism that is also instrumental in other social-cultural dimensions: politics; religion, philosophical thought and in envisaging a new world, marked by its innocence and creativity.

Keywords: culture, soccer, art, aesthetics, utopia

INTRODUCTION

The impact of soccer as a world sport is unparalleled. In this essay, I will outline how soccer inspires countless by its sheer formal beauty. Then I will analyze how that also has a dramatic effect culturally in terms of its extra aesthetic implications and meanings. I will ask the question whether this impact contains vestiges of art and philosophy or at least prepares the great mass of supporters towards such an awareness. I conclude that indeed soccer has the potential for world bettering.

The position of the researcher is a reflective one. The researcher stands back as it were in order to analyze and understand a particular area of focus. The problem arises when one considers that the manner and protocols of such research are itself part of a game, itself caught within the web of culture and institutions of power, and therefore no more than the product of a larger cultural sphere, rather than objective and factual. The researcher him/herself is also determined by the system and therefore does not operate at an intellectual distance enabling assessment of culture as such. Notwithstanding, the premise of this argument is that analysis and research can understand and quantify aspects of culture even as it is embroiled within it and thus can indicate or produce valuable insights about what is taking place currently. In such terms, I believe art and philosophy as applied to sports culture, in particular the game of soccer, can deliver a useful interpretation of the massive impact such a game has on a global scale.

SOCCER AS BEAUTIFUL

Gumbrecht’s book *In Praise of Athletic Beauty* (2006) sets the benchmark for the idea that sport is an aesthetic phenomenon and that it may be beautiful. I would extend the argument and claim that it is eminently artistic. Unlike previous writers (Cordiner, Best et al.), I do not make the distinction between various kinds of sport, some of which are artistic and others not or even that sport as a whole is not artistic; rather I claim that sport is a form of art, and soccer certainly one such example.

This argument can be made on the basis that like art, sport is formally attractive; expressive; Institutional; an ideal; a kind of mimesis and accords with the flavor of the postmodern. I will not

focus on all such aspects, but draw the reader to the first, namely the formal beauty of soccer as that is most closely aligned with an aesthetic appraisal of sport and thence its artistic merit.

Drawing from Kant and later Greenberg, artistic formalism took root as a basis for the beauty of art. Art could be assessed and appreciated for purely artistic meanings, the elements of art working in harmony and producing a heightened aesthetic experience, a certain “disinterestedness” on the part of the viewer. The same can be said of soccer, often conceived as low culture compared to the sacrosanct arts.

Such an argument can be based on the following observations: 1. The coordination of a “move”; the perfect geometric bisection of a pass; the deft touch – these are all instances of beauty. 2. The order of play: the festival atmosphere; the regalia; the pageantry; the ritual dimension – these too are instances of aesthetic delight. 3. The superlative play, totally unimagined and providing a vision of excellence; indeed, a certain beauty and finally 4. Tactical excellence: skillful maneuvers and the often-unpredictable unfolding of the game towards its coda are commensurate with creating an artwork and the reception thereof wherein the viewer is complicit in the continuous dynamic effect that the artwork as an instance of beauty, may express.

It is common to hear soccer being described as the beautiful game and this should not be taken lightly. It provides an island in space and time, where the sheer joy of skillful athleticism is on show, communicating an embodied experience of health and vitality and youth in a culture saturated with the digital and superficial. One may retort that soccer is itself superficial and contrived, yet consider the dynamic influence of the game at the highest level and how the game itself has resonance and influence over so many, in which case such an aesthetic dynamic is alive, even an act that may initiate a change in consciousness as it impacts culture, whereas art and philosophy pales into obscurity by comparison. This need not be problematic, for the argument here is that by equating soccer to aesthetic potency, those without access to “deep” or higher culture are yet attuned to an aesthetic dimension within an ideal world – a game – and this may be described as both an artistic creation and philosophy in action. The Ancient Greeks intuited this, aligning reason and aesthetic prowess, a harmonious state of body and mind.

SOCCER AS POLITICAL

Change can come from below. A simple kick by a soccer player may be a statement, a political act. Consider the case of Maradona, whose seeming socialist leanings were concretized in his skillful play on the football pitch. His brilliance in the Mexico World Cup of 1986 was considered an act of aggression in trouncing England and thereby taking revenge for the Falklands war of around that time.

There are countless examples where political leaders make it their business to use sports as instruments of propaganda and power-mongering, joining the mass gathering to strengthen their hold on the public.

Soccer can be seen as a battle between the richer Europeans over the poorer South Americans; as the potential for Africa to develop; as the rising power of Asia and of course while the States have not fared that well in this sport (as opposed to being a leader in the Olympic medal tally) have been hosts as have the Middle East in the most recent installment of the World Cup.

Considered formally, one might think one can simply revel in the beauty and joy of the game itself where time-and-space are experienced differently and the flow is purely of another world, nevertheless as part of culture and as exerting influence over a great throng of people, soccer becomes a symbol of nationalist sentiment, perhaps even more so than as a world game or as an expression of a common human set of actions and feelings. Rather such actions and feelings are often mobilized to support political sentiment. Its apparent freedom from the claims of "this world" succumbs to the various "...isms" that have constructed and conditioned human lives for good or for ill.

SOCCER AS RELIGIOUS

Whereas art galleries and museums have been described as the new temple or church, one may claim the same for stadiums, cathedrals of intoxicating fervor, cathedrals that began with the onset of modern industry and empire and that also recall the chivalrous games of the past and the ancient colosseums of entertainment, though now rather less dangerous and ludicrous.

The masses desire salvation: they hanker after hero-worshipping; the god incarnate in the flesh, and they may find that on the soccer pitch and especially in connection with the star of the team. Maradona was a case in point and now, while probably not eclipsed by Messi, there is a new star, one that carries the dreams of Argentinians and football lovers the world over. His uncanny skill cannot be denied. This leads people to think he is beyond politics and rather represents a religious sentiment: a sort of miracle, a perfect example, a dynamic player whose destiny is from above. People believe in such notions; children follow and world culture especially through the medium of digital platforms, create a god out of the player. He is adored for giving pleasure and entertainment; he arouses ecstatic worship and soccer itself becomes more than just 22 players running after the ball, but a ritual act of sublime beauty, mystical intrigue and some are heroes, their fame cutting across all boundaries in what might be called a world culture, a religion transcending traditional worship, practice, and divide.

SOCCER AS PHILOSOPHICAL

Having argued thus far that soccer is a cultural phenomenon akin to art and motivating a certain religious dimension, how can it be philosophical, considering it is clearly not intellectual or about anything as such - the game is just a game, one which is fundamentally physical and perhaps just entertainment? Soccer is only philosophical if it is reflected upon, otherwise it is just mindless patterns and athletic excellence. Hence the significance of Gumbrecht's book mentioned earlier, namely the worthy academic study of mass cultural phenomenon such as sport.

Reflecting then on soccer, what might we find? The medium is the message: in the formal harmony and beauty of a particular move or of the game as a whole, concepts, while not intellectually derived or "thought about" are nevertheless shown and instantiated. So, for example, the ideas of "speed"; "accuracy"; "joy"; "despair"; "perfection"; "vision"; "health"; "cooperation" and "strength" is exhibited, much in the same way an artist may allude to such notion through artistic form, and similarly, without discursive understanding or in line-by-line logical deduction. One might say the soccer game at the highest level is philosophy in action. One has an image of the Brazilian player Socrates, at once a skillful athlete and pensive philosopher, creating the unexpected on the field, a creative act that a philosopher may search for in developing say a new theory (in that field).

THE GAME AS UTOPIA: A NEW WORLD

Following Suits (2004) definition of games as the overcoming obstacles in an inefficient manner and that such games offer a certain utopia, one will note that soccer is clearly contrived kind of play within certain rules. It transports one (as player or participant) into an ideal world, a sabbath from ordinary life, if you will, that nevertheless influences and improves the experience of life itself. Troubles are forgotten and only the game at hand assumes importance. It is naturally unpredictable, offering emotional excitement (at least sometimes) and has a historical and social discourse that spans well over a century. It sanctifies time and space. It is an arena where dreams may be made or broken. It leaves a memory at the highest level or simply helps a kid deal with exuberant energy.

Soccer is a simple game. A round ball will do, some kind of surface, imaginary goals, and a few friends. It is the world game whose embrace includes rich and poor. It thus knows no boundaries or class distinctions. Every so often a star is born, and the world follows. His impact may be more widespread than a political leader or billionaire. The utopia that soccer offers then is inclusive, joyous, and creative. On the other hand, the sheer volume of competitions, its obvious commercial interest or the possibility that sport (as with artistic culture) will simply be manipulated as a pawn of other power structures always remains a threat to the simple innocence of passing a ball to a friend who gratefully controls it and passes back in kind.

The fact that soccer is so incredibly popular and ubiquitous means that in many respects it does the work of art and philosophy to an even greater extent, offering mass consumers a beautiful arena, a respite from troubles both personal and of more collective import – offering in its stead a hero; a beautiful image and something exasperatingly mystical that may transcend cultural and political boundaries and interest. On the other hand, as a function of culture as a whole, it is not “pure” or immune to other insidious aspects of “the game”.

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