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Spectacular sports as desire engine

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It is an "acephalic," non-subjectivized knowledge. Although (or, rather, for the very reason that) it is a kind of "Thou art that!" which articulates the very kernel of the subject's being, its assumption desubjectivizes me, i.e., I can only assume my fundamental fantasy insofar as I undergo what Lacan calls "subjective destitution." (Slavoj Žižek, "Desire : drive = truth : knowledge")

In the debate over structuralism, Slavoj Žižek has taken a decidedly critical view to certain post-structuralist positions. For instance, Jacques Derrida held that signifiers always refer to other signifiers in a free play of signification, and that their meaning cannot be finally anchored in a field of signifieds.ⁱ Against this Žižek claims that there must always be a point outside language – beyond the level of signifiers – that isn't itself ideological in order for ideological critique to take place.ⁱⁱ This paper examines the kind of knowledge Žižek calls acephalic as a possible point from which to launch ideological critique. Acephalic knowledge is situated in a body that is without head and without heart, i.e. it is a kind of knowledge that is prior to reason and emotion. As Žižek states in the epigraph to this paper, acephalic knowledge provides a «thou art

that», or a kind of recognition that the subject cannot but accept since it articulates the very kernel of the subject's being. When we are stripped of our emotional and intellectual defenses – when we are placed in a state of subjective destitution –we are in a position to recognize this kind of knowledge. Here we ask if mass mediated sports can provide an experience of such subjective destitution. Spectacular sports make appeals to the body as a depository of understanding and communication, but these appeals are entangled in ideological structures that gloss over the ways in which desire is managed through elite sports events. How do spectacular sports events narrate our fantasies both through the gaze of the spectator and as pre-packaged allegories that provide epic frames around individuals, nations and international organizations?

As engines of desire, peak sporting events trigger and regulate desire in spectators, by producing a particular kind of knowledge of the body, and by establishing boundaries that distinguishes legitimate from illegitimate objects of desire. Finally, we ask how an experience of subjective destitution through spectacular sports may lead to an experience of desire as mediatized and be productive of utterances in which subjective truth reverberates. Do we reach a point when we shed the ideological frames around the body and make contact with a knowledge that is prior to reason and emotion – the very kernel of our being?

Producing fantasies through elite sports

It is to a large extent the body which is the location and vehicle for understanding and communication in sports, and it may have been this aspect of popular games that made them suitable for codification and autonomization by the socio-economic élite at the end of the 19th century (Bourdieu 1988, 160, 161; 1993, 342). When sports return to the people in the form of mass dispersed spectacles, they are enmeshed in structures that serve to frame their meaning and constitution as objects of desire (1993, 346). In this sense, religious and social investments to popular games in pre-capitalist societies find their analogies in the way elite sports events are invested with desire, and the manner in which desire is regulated and managed through visual

narratives.

Elite sports events produced for the masses may be approached as machines or engines that mediate desire, in the sense that they serve to exhibit the Lacanian object a. Desire in Lacan is "metonymical, it shifts from one object to another" (Žižek 2005), while the object a endows desire with a certain formal frame of consistency. Object a, then, is not what we desire, but the cause of desire, or the image or representation that inducts desire in the subject. Since desire is metonymical, it makes little sense to declare some absolute or singular representation as the cause or object of desire. Rather, spectacular sports serve particularly well as desire engine precisely because of the endless shifts in mediations that on the surface appear strikingly standardized. On the other hand, the gaze of the couched spectator, "bereft of all practical competency and who care more about the extrinsic aspects of practice, such as the result, the victory" (Bourdieu 1988, 160), elucidates the lack which is contained by the image, since the spectator must always remain on the hither side of the screen onto which the image is transmitted.

The analogy with the child's trauma of experiencing its own reflection in a mirror, the effect of the so-called "mirror stage," is striking. Only on realizing that it can never be as whole or sutured as its appearance in the mirror can the child experience the kind of paranoid alienation or imaginary servitude that is characteristic of the formation of a social I (Lacan 1977, 4-7). Through an experience of the mediated image as a misapprehension of his desire the spectator of elite sports events may recognize the ways in which his gaze and the mediated image serve to manage and regulate his fantasies. As the mirror stage inaugurates a fictional agency of the ego, so does the gaze enable the kind of trauma by which I may realize that I can never fully be myself, and the fantasies on which I rely for the constitution of my desire are structured misapprehensions. The supplement, as it were, to the visual destitution of elite sports events may be that they narrate our fundamental fantasies – these little pieces of imagination by which we can gain access to reality (Žižek 1999, 104-124).

Since these fantasies are produced both through the gaze of the spectator and the images that are mediated to him, the metonymical shifts in objects onto which the spectator's desire is transferred occurs both on the retina and on the television

screen. These fundamental fantasies are manufactured by the way we observe, and through investments of desire in the objects that appear on the screen. The minute shifts in images that are invested with desire are structured both in the moment of production, – by nation states, sports organizations, television producers, manufacturers of sporting equipment, and so on –, and in the moment of reception, i.e. in and through the gaze. What object a, the cause of desire, confers to the subject is a formal frame of consistency, and this frame is further reinforced through the way visual narratives are structured and ordered in generic formats or frames. What is at stake is to identify the specific techniques and modalities by which desire becomes habituated and productive of subjects with embodied beliefs in an identity between the cause and object of their desire.

Representations of peak events in mass mediated sports are consistently framed as allegories of the excessive body, and of a state in which there is no lack or scarcity. Analogously to hard core pornography, elite sports mediate visual signs of desire. The innumerable repetitions of the same record breaking event, spectacular goal or nationalist feast share characteristics with the "repeatedly inflated, 'spending' penis" of hard core pornography's "money shot" (Williams 1989, 108). These images take the shape of a Lacanian object a, endowing desire with a certain formal consistency. Peak events in mass mediated sports are produced in a structured way, and organized through a whole set of technologies to ensure their reproduction in slightly shifting representations while maintaining their formal or generic coherence.

The epic frame of desire: Individuals, nations, international organisations

The training machine to which all elite athletes submit is organized as a disciplinary regime. It is this form of discipline that "makes individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise" (Foucault 1977, 170). Its instruments of dominance – hierarchical observation, normalizing judgement, and their combination in the examination – serve at every moment to place "individuals in a field of surveillance" in order to homogenize, "capture and fix them" (1977, 189). This disciplinary regime and its meticulous attention to detail in each performer produces modern subjects as individuals, inaugurating "the

man of modern humanism" (1977, 141). This notion of the individual posits a moral, or knowing, agent "as an autonomous sovereign subject" (Schildrick 2004, 152) whose acts are detached from any particular context and from other actors (2004, 150). Sports are encapsulated in by an atomistic disciplinary regime that manufactures athletes as individual specimens.

Hence, while on the surface it may appear as if each record breaking event or spectacular goal stands out in its own singularity, these moments are carefully manufactured by submitting athletes to a Fordist training machine engineered to satisfy the demands of an individualizing desire engine. A Fordist mode of production, with its characteristic assembly line model, is designed to mass produce standardized and pre-defined products, and its application to athletes serves to engineer performers that can fulfil and embody de Coubertin's Olympic ideals, "higher, stronger, faster." Far from coincidental, the peak moments of elite sporting events are carefully planned and meticulously organized to ensure the reproduction of visual spectacles that may generate and order desire in spectators.

Nationalism may be perceived as a form or genre onto which mass disseminated sports events, such as the Olympic Games or the Soccer World Cup, are grafted. Nations are imagined as communities that "loom out of an immemorial past, and [...] glide into a limitless future" (Anderson 1991, 11-12), and it is perhaps their "philosophical poverty" (1991, 5) that urges them to seek justification in an epic world of originary myths and founding fathers. "The world of the epic is the national heroic past: it is a world of 'beginnings' and 'peak times' in the national history, a world of fathers and of founders of families, a world of 'firsts' and 'bests'" (Bakhtin 1981, 13). Mass disseminated sports events are dominantly framed by the epic genre which provides a coherence mechanism for meaning and signification (Barthes 1967, 74). The way peak moments of elite sports events are narratively framed serves to recycle the notion of founding national moments and construct performers as national subjects.ⁱⁱⁱ Performers are manufactured to produce new records and championships in order to fortify the notion of national founders, firsts and bests. The Fordist training machine, then, serves to satisfy the demands of nationalist narratives under state custodianship, providing images that can reflect a sutured national past of peak moments (Bakhtin 1981, 30). The epic genre formally frames the minute metonymical

shifts in images spectators invest with desire.

Sports organizations such as FIFA, the international soccer body, and IOC, the International Olympic Committee, followed nation states in their foundational history and provide stories that have generic relations to nationalism. The IOC narrative constructs Pierre de Coubertin as its founding father and restorer of the ancient Olympic Games (Simonovic 2004, 3), which, in effect, locates the ancient games in an absolutely valorized past (Bakhtin 1981, 15) and provides a mould for apprehension of each Olympic feat and record breaking event. The current versions of the Olympic Games are seen as reflections of the ancient games, and the originary myth of the games constructs it as rooted in European soil. Analogous to nationalist narratives and their supposedly European forebears (Kamenka 1976, 3; Alter 1994, 19), international sports organizations and their foundational stories belong "to a whole system of 'phantasms,' to a certain representation of nature, life, history, religion, law," constituting them as a kind of "'delivery of arms' [...] of European exportation" (Derrida 1985, 295). These international organizations serve as custodians of the code, political philosophy, history of records, and other paraphernalia that define sports as fields of cultural production relatively autonomous to the field of class relations (Bourdieu 1993, 341-343).

Consuming peak events

The diffusion of elite sports through television entails that its production is regulated by demands of the mass media and their consumers, advertisers and owners. The increasing competition between the established organization and major corporate interests over sports has generated conflicts concerning the ways in which peak moments can be produced most efficiently, which, in one case, resulted in the formation of an Inter-European Champions' League in soccer within the bounds of the Union of European Football Associations, UEFA.^{iv} Furthermore, media interests continue to push for changes in the codes of sports to make them more attractive to television advertisers.^v Manufacturers of sports equipment and the media complex have found different avenues of challenging the current dominance of FIFA. In commercials repeatedly aired during the 2002 Soccer World Cup, a multinational

corporation gathered a host of players with individual sponsorship contracts to play a "friendly" game – as two teams both playing for the same company. In such a way, corporation suggested ownership of the game itself, dissolving the opposition between the two teams on a corporate level. It is "commercial imperatives" that "drive the production" of televised images. "'Watching' sports is one of the few transgenerational experiences that men and boys, fathers and sons, still share in the post-Fordian economy. [...] The images of manly character that boys and men consume in sports media become embodied by star athletes who reflect and reinforce men's collective power over women" (Sabo and Jansen 1998, 207; 205). Since the demand that the commercial media makes of sports is that they deliver viewers or consumers to advertisers, athletes represent "the peak performance of manly youth," transcending "the ordinary constraints of embodiment and mortality" (1998, 203). It is in the form of spectacular goals, record breaking events and other peak moments that sports are coded as "responsive" to a "target market" (1998, 207).

In this system of mediated consumption the couched spectator represents a potential consumer. The work of sports in reproducing the structures of dominance in the field of class relations is to provide images that can deliver consumers to advertisers. Since the market for spectacular sports is constructed as demanding events that can reproduce patterns of masculine domination, the mass media strives to provide recurring instances of peak performances of manly youth transcending the body and the constraints of mortality. These spectacular moments are framed within the epic genre, representing a world of "peaks," "firsts" and "bests," and it is this narrative form which provides coherence to the foundational stories of nations and sports organizations, or the system of "European 'phantasms'" that are invested with desire through their mediation in elite sports events. Performers are carefully manufactured by an individualizing training machine to produce the record breaking events, spectacular goals and nationalist feasts required to feed a desire engine with innumerable minutely shifting repetitions that can substitute or stand in for a Lacanian object a, conferring a formal frame of consistency to desire in spectators. It is in this sense that spectacular sports narrate the fundamental, or deep-seated, fantasies that must remain a screen's width beyond the grasp of the viewer.

Desire and knowledge of the elite sporting body

This desire engine constructs performance as a drive for knowledge, manufacturing performers that can "push the envelope," and their performances are equipped with measures that are constructed as objective. The scientific training machine producing these performers submits to this drive for knowledge "heedless of cost – satisfaction is here provided by knowledge itself –," thus reinscribing "this inexorable drive-progress of science which knows of no inherent limitation" (Žižek 2005). Perhaps the desire engine of spectacular sports and its system of phantasms is produced by and productive of a "European upbringing and perception of society" that transforms "young people – regardless of their social position – either to dolls wrapped in cotton or to withered, chronically morose machines for industry or 'business'" (Reich 1973, 149).^{vi} Hence, the peak events of elite sports serve both to trigger and contain desire in audiences, working at every moment as a technology to manage spectators of mass mediated sports.

The desire engine of spectacular sports establishes boundaries for desire through procedures of containment and discourses of contamination. Sports participate in a "symbolic conquest of youth," with the "aim of ensuring complete and continuous containment of the working population" (Bourdieu 1993, 348), and, as part of an officializing "law and order" ideology, serve as a guard and bulwark against social outsiders, hooligans, criminals, drug addicts, and so on (Bennett 1982, 295-303). Sports operate a typology which demarcates the healthy and orderly inside from that which belongs on the outside. For instance, the gentlemanly code of "fair play," inherited from the political philosophy developed during sports' phase of appropriation by the social élite in the late 19th century and autonomization from the field of class relations, operates an interdiction against doping, which, in effect, excludes the rank of those who are willing to take their profession seriously enough to consider "gambling with the body itself" while privileging the "macrobiotic cult of health" associated with the new bourgeoisie (Bourdieu 1993, 354; Tamburrini 2000, 202-204). The ban on doping, establishing a typology of legal and prohibited drugs, declares that "one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impunity, anomaly or monstrosity" (Derrida 1992, 224-225).

Class, family, nation and the narrative exterior of elite sports

Spectacular sports serve both to trigger and guard the boundaries of desire by narrating those fundamental fantasies that reproduce the structure of the field of class relations. To Lacan, the mirror stage comes to its conclusion with the rise of primordial jealousy, when "the whole of human knowledge tips into mediatization through the desire of the other" (Lacan 1977, 5). Objects of desire, as well as the object a, which is the trigger or cause of desire, are far from innate or natural moments, but, rather socially or culturally constructed. It may be that the process of guarding these cultural "phantasms" can explain the "collective violence restricted to a smaller group" (Girard 1987, 101). A community in stress tend to identify an outside group or character "as a potential saviour, especially someone totally unknown and thus easily endowed with a certain exotic prestige. If things do not rapidly improve, however, the new man's instant popularity is likely to turn into its opposite, and yesterday's idol becomes today's scapegoat" (1987, 82). Such a scapegoat is elected by a process of mimetic suggestion, indicating the mediated character of desire, and it may be applied to a single person or an entire community. The containment of desire through spectacular sports proceeds by a discourse of contamination by which outside groups and artefacts are constituted as threats to the representational or narrative order.

The epic form of spectacular sports and its world of fathers and founders of families undergird the pattern of domination in the field of class relations. Since nationalist narratives under state custodianship emphasizes the "emotional identity between *family*, *nation* and *state*, human family structure could easily be brought into the structure of the fascist state" (1973, 178).^{vii} It is such "models of idealized family structure" that define modern politics. "The very notion of the founding fathers uses a metaphor of the nation as family, not as something we think actively about, but as a way of structuring our understanding of the enormously hard-to-conceptualize social group, the nation, in terms of something closer to home, the family" (Lakoff 2004). As these communities conceptualize themselves in terms of that which is outside, whether it may be other nations, social outsiders or artefacts that are perceived as threatening contamination, scapegoating processes may be particularly close at hand

in times of stress. "Fear triggers the strict father model; it tends to make the model active in one's brain" (2004). When communities with an "irrepressible desire for freedom" are in economic crisis they tend to "submit to an authoritarian father figure" (Reich 1973, 175).^{viii} It is this fear, hidden behind a thin veneer of "self-control, forced civility, and feigned sociality," that puts the cultured person of "human history's patriarchal-authoritarian era" at the point of bursting with "irrational rage" (1973, 171).^{ix}

Truth and desire in spectacular sports

Images of record breaking events, spectacular goals and nationalist feasts provided by elite sports trigger desire in spectators while always failing to provide the precise object of desire, even if viewers construct these visual narratives as embodying that which they want. The obsessional neurotic's coating of factual truth, then, dissimulates the truth of his desire. If my enemy is caught doping I ensure everyone that I had nothing to do with his violation of the sports code, and that I was not in any sense responsible for the event. "While this is true, this 'truth' is propagated by me to conceal" the fact that the incident "realized my desire" (Žižek 2005). The neurotic acknowledges the Law "in order to occasionally take enjoyment in its transgressions (masturbation, theft, etc.), and thus obtains satisfaction by snatching back from the Other part of the stolen *jouissance*," or the freedom of which the neurotic has been deprived (Žižek 1999, 117). By contrast, the hysteric articulates the truth of his desire by uttering factual lies, such as when the coach opens the training session with the declaration "Let us stop running now." The hysteresis of habitus is an effect of moments when embodied propensities or dispositions for action in social actors are "too distant" from the environment in which they operate (Bourdieu 1977, 78), so that a sports coach may be unable to adapt his actions to circumstance. The hysteresis effect accounts for "the structural lag between opportunities and the dispositions to grasp them which is the cause of missed opportunities and, in particular, of the frequently observed incapacity to think historical crises in categories of perception and thought other than those of the past" (1977, 83).

The desire engine of spectacular sports feeds images and visual narratives to those fundamental fantasies that constitute and reproduce the pattern of domination in the field of class relations, and it is productive of fantasies that are embodied in subjects as structured propensities of the gaze. Spectacular sports contribute to the production of subjects that rely on these minutely shifting mediations of peak events for their constitution and who identify with them to the extent that they mistake the cause for the object of desire. However, the gaze may enable an experience of the lack contained in the image, which may give access to the kind of non-subjectivized, or acephalic, knowledge located at the "kernel of human structure" (Reich 1973, 171).^x This knowledge is prior to reason and its coating of civilized behaviour, and before those fundamental fantasies that are constitutive of subjects. The kind of trauma or "subjective destitution" brought about by the loss of a fundamental fantasy, or by the apprehension of these visual narratives as mistaken objects of desire, may facilitate the experience of desire as always mediatized, and give rise to the truth effects of "full speech," or "speech in which subjective truth reverberates" (Žižek 2005). Through such an experience we may "break the constraints of fantasy and enter the terrifying, violent domain of pre-synthetic imagination, the domain in which *disjecta membra* float around, not yet unified and 'domesticated' by the intervention of a homogenizing fantasmatic frame" (Žižek 1999, 122). On our approach to a desubjectivized experience, the acephalic body answers in the form of a sign that requires interpretation to make meaning in a dialectical movement of call and response.

ⁱ With the absence of a transcendental center or origin of signification, Derrida argues that we find ourselves in a world where “the domain and the play of signification [extends] infinitely” (1966, 280).

ⁱⁱ Unlike the “false consciousness”-school, Žižek doesn’t claim it necessary that anyone actually holds this position. After we have decomposed some object into its ingredients – that is to say, after we have subjected some phenomenon to ideological analysis – “we look in vain in them for some specific feature which holds together this multitude and makes of it a unique, self-identical thing,” and we must conclude that a thing is only wholly itself in its external conditions. Žižek remarks that “this tautological ‘return of the thing to itself’ which renders forth the concrete structure of self-identity is what Lacan designates as the *point the caption*, the ‘quilting point’ at which the signifier ‘falls into’ the signified” (1999 [1993], 234).

ⁱⁱⁱ Even if nationalism has tended to hegemonize the meaning of elite sports, such subjectivities may interfere with sports performance. To Bruce Lee, a “martial artist is firstly a man, which is ourselves: nationalities has [sic] nothing to do in martial art” (2004, 5).

^{iv} Per Ravn Omdahl, then-President of UEFA, notes that in the late 1990s, when “powerful media interests joined some of the major teams and wanted to break away” from UEFA and establish their own league, the club teams were persuaded to stay by UEFA’s proposal of a new Inter-European league. The following year another group made an attempt to sever ties with UEFA. This time the group consisted of a “mix of Spanish Pay-per-view, Berlusconi, German Kirch, Murdoch,” and others. Omdahl estimates that such break away attempts constitute a “threat which football will have to confront for many years ahead. We are particularly concerned with the linkage between the media, ownership of football clubs, and control of TV distribution” (2000, 34).

^v Before the 1994 Soccer World Cup, a proposal to cut each half of the game in two was tabled, which would have the effect of dividing the game into four periods of 20 minutes, “so that there would be more time for commercials” in televised versions of soccer events (Pedersen 2000, 49).

^{vi} “Men vår europeiske samfunnsforestilling og –oppdragelse har forvandlet de unge – uavhengig av deres samfunnsmessige stilling – enten til dukker intullet i vatt eller til uttørrede, kronisk gretne maskiner for industrien eller ‘næringslivet’” (my translation).

^{vii} “Ved å betone den følelsesmessige identitet mellom *familien*, *nasjonen* og *staten*, kunne menneskets familiestruktur lett videreføres i den fascistisk-statlige struktur” (my translation).

^{viii} “Økonomisk krise pluss en ubendig frihetsvilje resulterer i en fascistisk mentalitet, dvs. en beredvillighet til å underkaste seg en autoritær farsskikkelse” (my translation).

^{ix} “På overflaten bærer [...] den menneskelige histories patriarkalsk-autoritære eras [...] kulturmenneske [...] selvbeherskelsens kunstige maske, den uekte tvangshøflighet og den påtatte sosialitet,” og “kan bare råke i irrasjonelt raseri når den ønsker å gjenopprette sin biologiske grunnfunksjon og samtidig er redd for å gjøre det” (my translation).

^x “Dette tredje og siste laget – som utgjør den menneskelige strukturs *biologiske kjerne* – er ubevisst og fryktet” (my translation).

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