**Football: Spectacularly Insignificant or Unspectacularly Significant?**

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Football supporters are often projected as being obsessed, emotionally saturated and intensely involved with their club. This may be true for some but much of the time the consumption of football is mundanely incorporated with other routine behaviours and actions. Drawing on previous research on football and everyday life this paper explores how it is both significant and insignificant through the relationship between spectacular and unspectacular consumption. The ‘everyday’ is used both descriptively and conceptually. The former is illustrated through examples of the ordinary ways in which football becomes entwined with other elements of everyday life. The latter, rooted in the works of everyday life theorists, provides the philosophical tools for contextualising the meaning of the ‘everyday’. This is then put into perspective with contemporary understandings of living in a fragmented and fluid world which raise further questions about the ordinariness of football culture as part of people’s everyday lives.

**Introduction**

The tautological title to this paper draws attention to the possible ways in which football is mundanely experienced by the majority of people most of the time. Drawing on previous research on football and everyday life, mostly conducted in the city of Sheffield, but infused by a biography of more than 30 years of being an Arsenal supporter growing up in suburban London, the paper explores how football is both significant and insignificant through the relationship between spectacular and unspectacular consumption.

Adopting a hermeneutic sociology[[1]](#endnote-1), the main content of this paper provides an interpretive reading of ‘everyday’ football consumption. With limited space it is only possible to provide a few examples, but in doing so, I hope to have responded to Gibbons & Dixon’s[[2]](#endnote-2) observation that despite previously calling for a wider focus for football fan research,[[3]](#endnote-3) my own work has not provided anything in the way of empirical evidence.

To begin with, I will briefly present my perspective on the relationship between common understandings of football consumption, classic theories of everyday life and contemporary sociology of living under the condition of liquid modernity[[4]](#endnote-4). This is followed by a discussion of ordinary and spectacular consumption. Drawing on the approach of Goffman[[5]](#endnote-5), the main content of the paper provides a presentation of football’s infusion with everyday life. Day-to-day living is not necessarily a smooth, easily readable and transcribable series of events and as such the academic presentation of football as part of the everyday must reflect this. Similarly, the management of everyday life involves sense-making processes that give the impression of a more linear and manageable world. Adopting the hermeneutic role of *flâneur* as sociologist[[6]](#endnote-6) provides a parallel to these processes in contextualising the ‘reality’ of daily life through the production of a scholarly text such as this. This leads to the construction of a narrative that whilst rooted in the ‘reality’ of everyday life is presented through a series of scenes that recreate the author’s experiences, replicating the fluidity and complexity of life in liquid modernity. Accounts are related as close as possible to what has been observed and utilise a ‘gonzo’-like style[[7]](#endnote-7) that is intended to be ‘aesthetically appealing’ as well as being ‘made to the measure’ of liquid modernity[[8]](#endnote-8).

In so doing, I hope to provide a corrective to the projected image of football supporters in film, television advertising, popular and academic literature as that of solely being overwhelmingly obsessed, emotionally saturated and intensely involved with their football club. This may be true of a minority, but for most, football offers fleeting ‘moments’ of intense emotion or the illusion of obsessive involvement. During a match, these moments may become prolonged, but for the remainder of the time, the consumption of football (and for many, the match itself) is mundanely incorporated with other routine behaviours and actions. It is this integration within daily life that sustains the (self)image of football supporters in this way and by extension involves many others in even more unspectacular, almost unnoticed, engagement with football culture. This is not to deny the ‘altruism’ and ‘seriousness’ attached to football fandom as the likes of Best[[9]](#endnote-9) continue to argue but to suggest that like skinning a rabbit, there are many ways to engage with football culture, particularly away from the stadium itself.

The ‘everyday’ can be used both descriptively and conceptually. In this paper, the former will be illustrated through examples of the ordinary ways in which football becomes entwined with other elements of our daily lives. The latter, rooted in the works of everyday life theorists, provides the philosophical tools for contextualising the meaning of the ‘everyday’. This can then be put into perspective through the use of contemporary understandings of living in a fragmented and fluid world which raise further questions about the ordinariness and significance of football culture as part of people’s everyday lives.

**Foregrounding the background**

Chaney[[10]](#endnote-10) suggests that, instead of overlooking everyday life as a collection of norms that create the possibility for more worthwhile social actions to take place, sociologies of the everyday are likely to ask the question of how it is that the everyday is made possible. They have a particular interest in the effects that increased rationalisation has on the creativity inherent within everyday life. My suggestion is that football culture seeps into the practices of everyday life to such an extent that it could be seen for some people as an essential part of making the everyday possible and provides a particularly creative resource within daily life. To paraphrase Lefebvre[[11]](#endnote-11), football extends itself all the way to the slightest details of everyday life.

Lefebvre’s ideas build upon Marxist concepts of alienation and the ideal of the ‘total person’ and, not unlike the work of the Frankfurt School[[12]](#endnote-12) expose the relationship between the processes of modernity and cultural experiences. He extends the economic focus to confront what he feels is the complete penetration of capitalism throughout the ‘details of daily life’ and demands action in order to transform the social conditions under which we conduct our daily lives. Unlike the despairing voices of the Frankfurt School, and more in tune with the surrealists who also actively sought to transform the quotidian, Lefebvre is convinced that everyday life possesses ‘moments’ that provide an ‘immanent critique’ of life in modernity. It is for us to capitalize on such moments in order to change the direction of everyday life and overcome what he sees as its alienated character.

In an extension of this critique, de Certeau[[13]](#endnote-13) offers insights into practical instances within the everyday that already exist to successfully resist the regulatory dominance of instrumental reason. Resistance for de Certeau is not about great communal displays of defiance but more about little victories and the persistence of less than heroic habits that avoid and circumscribe, that escape and evade, the expectations of authority and together combine to thwart totalising regimes. These ‘ways of operating’ are hidden within the ‘praxis’ of daily life. What was of interest for him is how people use practical knowledge of how things work, employ cunning tricks and discover short cuts and personal preferences within everyday practices such as talking, reading, moving about, shopping and cooking and how these practices are used to reaffirm the sense of self through action and conveyance to others.

Also influenced by the writings of Lefebvre was the politico-cultural organisation of the Situationist International (SI). Their central idea was the construction of ‘situations’ that would challenge the dominance of consumer capitalism and promote an ‘authentic existence’ ungoverned by the abstractions of the prevailing power structure as they envisioned it. Key to this movement was Debord’s concept of the ‘spectacle’[[14]](#endnote-14), whereby “[everyday] lived experience is increasingly replaced by the media and advertising image, and active participation is supplanted by the passive gaze.”[[15]](#endnote-15)

These ideas are the precursor for Baudrillard to claim that rather than a replacement for it the image in fact precedes the real[[16]](#endnote-16). Lived experience is that of the *simulacrum* of reality. Active or passive engagement is not the issue. Both are possible, but only of the simulated reality through which our everyday lives in postmodernity are ordered. The ‘hyperreality’ of the world Buadrillard presents is in many ways similarly dystopian as that of the Frankfurt School before him. More in common with Lefebvre and de Certeau in offering some sense of possibility within the confusion of contemporary culture is Bauman’s notion of ‘liquid modernity’ in which, according to Blackshaw, “Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle* does not so much give way to Baudrillard’s *Third Order of the Simulacrum* – that is the ‘hyperreal’ does not supersede the distorted ‘real’ – rather the *Society of the Spectacle* is succeeded by one of celebrity…”[[17]](#endnote-17)

This can be understood as part of the ‘demotic turn’ that has seen “the opportunity of celebrity spreading beyond elites of one kind or another and into the expectations of the population in general”.[[18]](#endnote-18) The mass media’s fascination with ‘ordinariness’ has led to a ‘new process of identity formation’ that plays out on the surface of everyday life. It is one rooted in the desire for recognition and renown, the most apparent model for which is celebrity culture.

Rojek claims that, “The increasing importance of the public face in everyday life is a consequence of the rise of public society, a society that cultivates personal style as the antidote to formal democratic equality”.[[19]](#endnote-19) Drawing on the work of Giddens[[20]](#endnote-20) he goes on to suggest that, “In the age of life politics, individuals possess an accentuated awareness of the construction of the public face and appropriate material from public life to ensure that the right kind of match between self and society is achieved.”[[21]](#endnote-21) This is a result of ‘reflexive restructuring’ that is according to Giddens now a routine feature of ordinary social interaction and can be seen to be embodied by the ‘celebrification process’[[22]](#endnote-22).

In his interpretation of this process, Rojek argues that as consumers compelled by capitalism to develop abstract desire for commodities, individuals in turn become objects of desire for the abstracted mass. Celebrity culture represents the embodiment of this compulsion. As a result there is a “general tendency to frame social encounters in mediagenic filters [meaning] elements and styles that are compatible with the conventions of self-projection and interaction, fashioned and refined by the mass media”.[[23]](#endnote-23) Interaction is thus based upon seeing ourselves and others as commodities the currency for which is ‘abstract desire’.

If for Bauman desire is replaced in liquid modernity by wish-fulfilment, the waiting is taken out of wanting through the performativity of celebrity that helps define everyday interaction and further blurs the public/private boundary. What football does is provide public performances for private consumption (in the form of the broadcast of live events), a legitimising element of which is more personal performances for public consumption (within everyday life).

The main features of liquid modernity, as Bauman defines it, are that the human condition has slipped from certainty to uncertainty, conformity to self‑expression, from unmoving, assuredly solid referents to ever shifting, consciously acknowledged, liquid moments. It is not that individuals are completely free to act however they choose as choice itself is subject to the circulation of discursive ideas some of which remain rooted within the structures of modernity.

Whether we are actually free to achieve whatever we want or be whoever we want is fairly irrelevant because in Bauman’s consumerist world we are constantly required to present ourselves anew. In contrast to solid modernity's aspirational but ultimately unreachable transcendence of the repetitivity of everyday life, liquid moderns are in a position where they must take responsibility for the creation of their own lives on a daily basis, whether they like it or not. With such responsibility comes less certainty; with more 'freedom', less 'security’.

So, where Lefebvre defines the quotidian as that which is 'humble and solid' in comparison with the greater project of modernity as 'daring and transitory'[[24]](#endnote-24), Bauman claims that solid is no longer a consideration, and even the quotidian is infused with possibility and uncertainty. The previously pre-reflexive acts of day to day living that unquestionably routinised and reinforced our life worlds are much more open to disruptions through the increased flows of stimuli from different sources.

Football, both as the experience of a collective allegiance and as the symbolic representation of individuality, forms part of the expression of a 'liquid' self as its presence emerges in some situations and diminishes at other times. It is how the consumption of football as part of everyday life can be so unnoticeable yet also, if common understandings of its extraordinary nature are to be believed, potentially so detached from other routines of day to day living that forms the main discussion of this paper.

**Spectacularly Ordinary**

Sport has long been recognized as being associated with the spectacular[[25]](#endnote-25) in terms of the events themselves but as Abercrombie & Longhurst argue, supporters are becoming increasingly part of a ‘diffused audience’[[26]](#endnote-26) in which their performances are significant to the sporting spectacle “not only at the ‘live’ venue or via the mass media, but also in their everyday lives away from these”.[[27]](#endnote-27) In a precursor to Blackshaw’s prediction of a ‘society of celebrity’, their suggestion is that in an increasingly narcissistic world the key to contemporary living is to ‘see and be seen’. This raises questions of how the spectacle of sport is performed and consumed within less spectacular locations than those of the ‘live’ events and how spectacular those ordinary forms of support need to be to remain significant within life-worlds infused by the spectacular.

How the spectacle of sport is actually defined has been called into question[[28]](#endnote-28). Tomlinson, for example, suggests that the concept has been used as ‘interpretive shorthand’ without much in the way of useful theorising[[29]](#endnote-29). His critique centres upon the uncritical adoption of Debord’s work for determining and defining the spectacle[[30]](#endnote-30). In going ‘beyond Debord’, Tomlinson attempts to highlight the multi-faceted nature of sports spectacles as more than a pessimistic analysis of contemporary consumer culture. Following a similar tract, Manzenreiter notes the lack of distinction between spectacles, events and rituals in the study of sports mega-events. He goes as far as to suggest that due to this lack of clarity it is possible to, “identify spectacles as being unspectacular…”[[31]](#endnote-31)

For understanding the usefulness of the ‘spectacle’ in everyday life in contemporary consumer culture it is necessary to work with Debord whilst avoiding the determinism and ignorance of human agency for which he has been criticised. We must also take into account the period in which Debord was writing and the critical-Marxian perspective on which his work is based. In doing so, we need to allow for Blackshaw’s suggestion that the society of the spectacle is succeeded by one of celebrity. Most pertinent to this is perhaps Tomlinson’s etymological discussion of the ‘spectacle of oneself’ which refers back to the historical role of the court jester as a figure whose job it was to play the fool for the entertainment of others; a person exhibited to the public gaze. In liquid modernity we all must turn ourselves into exhibits for the gaze of the ‘abstracted mass’.

Using examples from individuals’ experiences of sports mega-events Tomlinson goes on to make valid points in his critique of Debord. But the study of mega-events is to isolate the concept of the spectacular. The point of Debord’s theorisation of the spectacle was to do the very opposite and highlight the total penetration of the commodity form, represented by the spectacle, throughout our everyday lives and its promulgation through an alienating system of control. Whilst I agree with Tomlinson that, “there is little sense in Debord of any cultural sensitivity to … the range of responses generated by human subjects in their experiences of the spectacle”,[[32]](#endnote-32) if we move away from the spectacle as event and towards spectacle as pre-reflexive part of everyday life, by definition those responses become indiscernible from routine behaviours which were the very subject of what ‘everyday life’ theorists were critiquing. Going beyond Debord is to acknowledge the human agency and reflexivity involved in the ‘celebrification process’ and that the dominant everyday experiences of sport are through diffused forms of narcissistic consumption that due to their infusion into daily life seem to be ordinary and unspectacular.

In Ilmonen’s discussion about ordinary consumption and the part it plays in the routinisation of everyday life he makes the point that contingency within contemporary society has lead to growing insecurity regarding consumption choice. He identifies a number of trends that have contributed to this situation that leaves us, as consumers, in a very unpleasant situation. He suggests that, “The growing variety of commodities not only increases the choices available to us (providing that we have sufficient economic resources), but it also makes it more difficult for us to know whether we are making the right choices”. [[33]](#endnote-33) Whilst not referring directly to the work of Bauman, Ilmonen mimics his liquid modern perspective in stating that whatever our situation, “we are condemned to choose”. His conclusion is that one way of minimising uncertainty, which is an inherent part of liquid modern living, is by way of routine consumption expressed through brand loyalty.

Football offers consumers brands that loyalty to which is one of the fundamental aspects on which football culture has been constituted and sustained. Football clubs have presented themselves as symbolic totems of locality and provided opportunities for the expression of collective identity. There is no reason to shop around because to do so undermines the product that one is buying into – loyalty, community, history, the delayed gratification of success. This is recognised in the work of Robson, Giulianotti, King and Armstrong[[34]](#endnote-34). It is also acknowledged by Robson and by Giulianotti, though, that the *habitus* on which these loyalties are founded is no longer as secure as it may once have been.

For some, the routine consumption of football offers a continuing illusion of security. Through the unacknowledged but ever present physical and mental reminders adorning the mantels of their daily lives or securely stored in the bottom drawers of the mind and in boxes under the spare bed football provides a regular reminder of a consistent, linear narrative. Football merchandise provides reassurance for the wearers and bearers that their individual significance within the crowded streets and shopping malls is there for all to see, a tacitly textile reminder of ‘being into’ football, of being part of something else, something bigger than the individual, but uniquely locatable by those in the know.

Routine consumption is however subject to increasingly spectacular renditions as the spectacle becomes the predominant mode of consumption in postmodern market places from film to theatre, theme parks to shopping malls, advertising to cyberspace[[35]](#endnote-35). Likewise, football is routinely spectacular. It is consumed through multiple platforms, sold to us as ‘super’ and as ‘fantasy’, it is dominated by ‘the big four’ and ‘six-pointers’, a media battleground for ‘exclusive’ stories about signings, sackings and allegations of misconduct. Opinions are expressed, comments are made; they are consumed, re-tweeted and repackaged. The daily, weekly, seasonal routines are far less linear than they once were and the geographies of support increasingly wide spread. The routine ways in which individuals engage with these spectacular consumerist forms are nonetheless at the centre of their proliferation throughout everyday life. Everyone has a view and that view can be broadcast far and wide. For those who prefer to keep their own counsel rather than blogging and tweeting, there are plenty of other opportunities for public display within the ordinary practices of daily life. Replica football shirts are worn to go to the shops or the cinema, ostentatiously announcing what their living mannequins are into. Private phone calls are carried out in public leaving the rest of us in no doubt about what the caller thinks of their team’s manager or a rival striker’s attitude.

Ordinary consumption of football is informed by spectacle. Even for those supporters still clinging to solidly modern forms of engagement with the sport, the ubiquity of the football/marketing/mass media triumvirate that has turned footballers (and their followers) into celebrities and become a defining feature of football culture cannot be avoided. The ‘everyday’ is both purveyor of this and its critique. The ‘celebrification process’ of identity construction may be more mediated but also contains a level of, admittedly narcissistic, human agency. It is not about being a celebrity but about the self-determining style above substance that dominates everyday interactions.

What I hope to demonstrate in this paper is that spectacular consumption and consumption of the spectacle within everyday life is a dominant part of football culture to the extent that it is ordinary enough to be seen as unworthy of study but vitally significant to the daily management of individual identities, social interactions and the perpetuation of football cultures.

**Exploring the (in)significance of football in everyday life**

Having parked in the pink zone of Meadowhall car park, the most direct exit route from the mall is through House of Fraser. And so it is that I find myself wandering through the department store early one Sunday afternoon. Progressing through the depths of the store, the sweetly mixed scents of the perfume counters have faded and the visual stimulus of the lingerie department is still fresh in my mind. Walking trance-like through the shop, my gaze may have been scanning the variety of household goods in my eye line but the images in my head are still those of the lacy underwear from which I had been trying to avert my view. I am however increasingly aware of another stimulus almost beyond the senses. If the near imperceptible buzzing of audio and visual goods was not doing enough to interfere with my more sensuous daydreaming, a sudden shout from somewhere close by certainly brought me back to the here and now: a sort of mix between "Wahey!" and "Oh-yeah!"

"We have nae won at Ibrox for ages..." is the gruff follow up which is directed at no-one in particular by way of explanation for the sudden outburst. The television behind the wild-eyed young man is showing 'Rangers 1–3 Celtic'. He walks away beaming with contentment, joyously repeating the score-line to anyone he passes and occasionally doing a little twirl and punching the air as he disappears out of the shop.

As he walks off, the other customers in the store are left in no doubt that this man is Scottish, he is Glaswegian and he supports Celtic. At least that is the performative identity that emerges at that particular instant to be acknowledged by those with the appropriate cultural capital to interpret the possibly odd-seeming behaviour. Some shoppers will have simply witnessed a wild Scotsman.

The scene illustrates a fundamental point about football and everyday life. For some its presence passes without notice. For others, they will recognise this behaviour. For the man himself it is always present but not significantly so until something triggers a reaction. Likewise for those, such as myself, within earshot.

This is not an everyday result (in terms of it happening regularly) but it is being incorporated into this man’s everyday life (in terms of his ordinary, mundane mode of being in the world). The consequence is the sudden transference in time and space of the spectacle that is the Glasgow derby to the less spectacular location of a Sheffield department store (Benjamin’s views of such places notwithstanding[[36]](#endnote-36)). What is produced in this moment is more spectacular than other forms of consumption taking place in the store. It provides a seemingly authentic reaction that may or may not be carefully staged as well as being rather ‘jesterly’ in presentation. But for the man himself, it may just be an ordinary and regular rendition of his performative self as a football supporter. It is unspectacularly significant to the presentation of his self in everyday life but spectacularly insignificant to other members of the audience that witnessed it.

It is difficult to comment upon the type of person this man is or his general disposition towards football other than at this point in time. It does, however, replicate, in a more dramatic manner, similar displays of allegiance or immersion within football culture by others in their everyday lives. A barely audible curse from somebody checking the scores on their iPhone whilst waiting for the bus or smirking as they send a text message deriding a friend’s favourite player as our remote social connections are carried with us in digital form. A disgusted sneer from a supporter as they catch a glimpse of a rival team’s jersey beneath the coat of a passer-by whilst going to get their morning paper. A more welcoming exchange with a shop assistant who realises they are serving a fellow football fan and consequently acts in a more friendly manner. Not as a friend though, more like a chat show host. An almost instinctive conversation starter between work colleagues whose main non-profession based way of interacting with one another is through their relative positions in the office fantasy football league; desperate as they are to find some way of forming a connection beyond that of work as the post-productive society of liquid modernity requires. These are all unspectacular forms of the football spectacle the significance of which is contingent to the specific situations in question. Some are personally significant but completely irrelevant to the rest of us at the individual level. Other seemingly insignificant encounters are perhaps extremely relevant to the sociality that exists in contemporary urban living.

It is the interaction of strangers (and the strangeness of interaction) that has been highlighted by the likes of Baudelaire, Simmel, Garfinkel and Goffman as the key to understanding how modern everyday life in the city is made possible[[37]](#endnote-37). For Simmel, the over stimulation of living in the modern urban world leads to people taking refuge in impersonal exchanges and indifference toward others. Sennett observes that, "The negative of this Simmelian notion of the mask of rationality is that information is exchanged in this way but communication is lowered, particularly communication that transcends self-interest as well as communication of an emotional sort."[[38]](#endnote-38) This 'mask of rationality' is operational through football, in that communication is easily achieved but only at a superficial level, and also undermined by football, as interaction is achieved that would otherwise not take place, often with the consequence that more emotional and deeper connections take place, either positive or negative.

The public realm has become one of uncertainty and negotiation that in true post-modern style draws on nostalgic claims to authenticity whilst self-consciously hiding behind the aesthetics of consumer culture and hyperreal relations. The strength of football (including fans, players, directors and the media) to maintain the pretence of tradition and to self-consciously evolve within the parameters of and with constant reference to its own history provides an opportunity for individuals involved to conserve something solid in the face of uncertainty – even if it is performatively constructed and, paradoxically, more reflexively consumed. It provides a perfect source for the presentation of authentic identities and feelings of deep connections with likeminded souls at the most mundane level of day-to-day encounters.

Bauman notes that, "In the meeting of strangers there is no picking up at the point where the last encounter stopped, no filling in on the interim trials and tribulations or joys and delights, no shared recollections: nothing to fall back on and to go by in the course of the present encounter".[[39]](#endnote-39) However, in a liquid modern world, the likelihood is that a common cultural language can be found amongst the banality of mass consumption. We are all strangers with so much in common in a globalised world that no longer is the human condition governed by the intimacies of experiences too personal or too complicated to be discussed with strangers: love, desire, loss, pain. There is a commonality, in western society at least, that is given shape by the consumption of global brands, the mass media and other products of popular culture – including football. 'Civility' has a more individual nature that craves attention rather than what Goffman refers to as the 'civil inattention' of urban existence.

The everyday battle, though, is the attachment of meaning to that which is consumed so that the connections that are made feel authentic and of value, at least for their duration if not for any prolonged period beyond that. What football offers the liquid modern individual is a package of discourses from which to unpack an appropriate identity for any occasion. The performative qualities of any given identity are constantly open to critique and modification as the contingency of situations require but connections between strangers are rooted in the familiar. Judgements are based upon shared histories and cultural experiences, whether defined by the features associated with solid modernity of class struggle, upbringing, family values, education and geographical proximity or the media dominated worlds of liquid modern consumerism.

The sparsity of staff in my local supermarket has left long queues at the few cash tills that are open.

“Not much of a pre-match meal, that!”

The voice behind me belongs to a neighbour who regularly sees me watching televised football matches in the local pub.

“You'll need more than that to beat Chelsea... I love watching Arsenal and I hope you do beat them but they're too strong...”

As the cashier scans my pepperoni pizza and the bar code reader beeps its way through the rest of my groceries, we discuss the relative merits of the two teams and the possible outcome of the upcoming match between Arsenal and Chelsea.

“The midfield trio work so hard to close down space… And the Arsenal defence are leaking goals at the moment… Is Walcott fit? He’s started to look like more of a threat recently. He wants to play down the middle though doesn’t he? He won’t get much change from Ashley Cole out wide will he…”

My response at the mention of the Chelsea full back’s name is one of abusive indignation followed by a less than objective consideration of the match. The partisan nature of my opinions is overlooked by my shopping companion as he repeats much of the popular discourse around my team's strengths and weaknesses obtained from a variety of media sources and our discussion routinely culminates in the question: "You not there then today?" which seems as much an accusation as it is an enquiry (my own reflexively monitored football sensibilities notwithstanding).

Although we live in the same neighbourhood and bump into one another at various times during the course of our daily lives, our life-worlds are very different and we have little in common except a mutual interest in football. Even that interest, however, divides us to an extent as our perceptions of one another's attitude towards football are rooted in different forms of expression. However, our relative identities are to some extent fixed by the performative qualities of our relationship which has been centred upon football. As fluid as our individual discursive selves are required to be in liquid modernity, we rely on the familiarity of an imagined solid identity whenever we meet. But, it is necessary that these identities are performed repeatedly in order for the illusion to remain. Moreover, in order for interaction to be successful our relationship to one another is a constant product of reflexive negotiation as we find common ground within the complexities of competing football discourses.

We are not friends. We are not strangers. We are acquaintances – a condition that predominates as connections with increasing numbers of people are formed in various ways through the nature of contemporary living. Our individualised 'habitats'[[40]](#endnote-40) influence our relationship with football but we seek common ground upon which to build temporary bonds. My disposition towards the live experience may devalue any opinion he has that, from my perspective, seems to emanate from media led discourses that misunderstand 'my' team. Meanwhile, his wide consumption of football through the media provides an alternative set of understandings that seemingly diminish my own prejudiced views. Furthermore, our conversation takes on the format of pre-match punditry that might be expected to take place between ex-professionals sitting in a pitch-side studio as we adopt our respective ‘mediagenic’ positions and provide expert opinion. The performativity of our relationship, though, imperceptibly leads us to find a position of ‘attentive civility’ when encountering one another. In these circumstances, football is significantly unspectacular as it forms part of our everyday interaction but is reproductive of the society of the spectacle, as Debord would see it, as our exchange is based upon a commodified form and is therefore less authentic as a result. That we are communicating at all is significant in the more privatised world of urban living. Where once our interaction may have been centred upon (extra-)local rivalries or our mutual support for one of the Sheffield based clubs, in this case we are rivals in football knowledge and the authenticity in *how* we present that knowledge seems just as important as the actual content.

There are also more familiar relationships that football may help to manage. Familial and romantic connections mould themselves around and adapt to football affiliations as part of everyday expressions of togetherness. With family members living increasingly segregated lives football provides a common point of interest. A moderate interest as a child becomes a binding between parents and offspring as football becomes a more conscious part of life in the struggle to maintain a connection with (physically) distant family members.

Beyond football’s blood ties, it is also implicated in the processes of negotiation between individuals whose connections are more romantically motivated. Allan & Crow point out that as intimate relationships develop, "the high emotionality of 'falling in love' [is] replaced by a more 'mature' commitment based on a fuller understanding of each other's needs, as well as a shared biography".[[41]](#endnote-41) The extent to which football becomes a part of a shared biography is not necessarily displayed through attendance at matches or a mutual enjoyment of the game (though this may be part of it). It is manifest through the performativity of relationships and the accommodation of various positions that football occupies within daily life more generally.

In other words, the perceived securities inherent in football identity are absorbed along with many other discourses of belonging attached to family, home, love and commitment to allow people to convince themselves that they are part of a secure unit but still free to express their individuality (and that that individuality is in itself strong enough to cope with the insecurities of liquid modernity). Thus patterns of behaviour evolve that acknowledge and accommodate football identities within domestic arrangements in negotiation with the expression of other individualised identities. Relationships are constituted by the repetitive acts that are alleged to be their result.

It is a warm and sunny afternoon, more than reasonable for the beginning of May. It is the first opportunity that Mike and Laura have had to properly meet up with their friends all together and celebrate the recent birth of their first child, George. The conversation is dominated by the joys and concerns attached with parenthood, respectively framed for mother and father by gendered discourses and their relative positions within the friendship group.

“We saw the cutest little booties in town didn’t we Mike…”

Mike interrupts his discussion with Dan about Sheffield United’s current managerial situation:

“…they were pretty cool. They looked like these tiny little versions of Adidas Gazelles...”

“So expensive though…!” Laura takes over.

Her conversation continues with her disbelief about how much it costs to have a baby: carry cots and car seats, nappies and other necessities. Mike returns to his debate about United’s current predicament, at the same time insisting on showing everyone the image of his son that acts as screen saver on his mobile phone.

Laura offers him an unnoticed, mid-conversation smile in conjunction with the subtlest shake of the head. Her exhausted demeanour seems incongruous with her enjoyment at being the centre of attention amongst the women in the group as she cradles George in her arms. The baby, however, seems less impressed by all the attention, grizzles of discontent causing a couple of Laura’s friends to involuntarily recoil ever so slightly. Mike breaks away from the group of lads that have segregated themselves from the women and enquires into his wife and son’s welfare.

“He can’t be hungry… and he doesn’t need changing,” she responds forlornly as she checks his nappy.

“What’s wrong with you now, then?” Mike softly questions his unknowing son.

“Need a bit of boy-time…?”

He dutifully relieves his wife of their son and wanders off jiggling him over his shoulder, informing him instead of his mates all about his views on the situation at United. They in turn seem content not to be included in Mike and George’s male bonding session.

Mike’s relationship with his burgeoning family is an extension of his pre-existing relationship with football. In the mundane world of daily living, one is not more important than the other. Football dominates at certain times but fades away when other duties need to take priority only to re-emerge as appropriate. He is always keen to show-off the photo of his new born on his mobile phone. It is of course appropriate in a ‘society of the spectacle’ that it is an image of his son, as he wants him to be seen by others, rather than the baby himself that is being presented. The fact that he is dressed in a Sheffield United babygrow begs the question of whether he is presenting his son for comment or his football allegiance (or possibly just the phone itself). Both are of course intertwined as the pride he has in his son is displayed through the more tangible means of Mike's relationship with his football club and others' understanding of that connection. Judging by Laura's reactions, the significance of it being their son that he is showing off and not just some image of the United insignia which was there previously has not been missed.

Relationships are of course dynamic in their construction from one moment to the next. During a field interview with Laura, for example, she vehemently explains that, "Sometimes I just want to smash this to pieces!" She is referring to her husband’s Sheffield United mug that she has just picked up from the windowsill and which occasionally imparts a sadistic longing in her whenever they have had a falling out. Although it has never come to the point of physically destroying the mug, Laura does admit to having hidden it on occasion, "I just tell him he must have left it somewhere stupid again – 'cause he does tend to just leave it lying around, you know, wherever is convenient once he finishes his coffee or whatever." The paradox here is that although it is a precious item for Mike, the mundanity of such an object means that it is not something of which to be over protective even if, "he sometimes get's a right mood when he has to use a different mug..." For Laura then, football sometimes occupies a negative realm within the home which on a personal level can be used positively as a means of releasing pent up tension by attacking a representation of Mike's persona rather than the man himself. It is a ‘little victory’ that ‘evades’ the hegemonic ‘expectations of authority’ within the domestic setting, to put it in de Certeau’s terms.

Football is a significant part of Laura’s life but is consumed in a far less spectacular and indirect way than it is for her husband. Nonetheless, her understanding of football’s role in their everyday patterns of interaction is through her perception of Mike’s football identity. This is in part through Mike’s use of and attachment to the football commodities that represent what he would consider to be a more authentic self – a self that is constructed around the attendance of football matches home and away during his formative years. That is not to say that there are not other elements to his identity but the performative strength of football and the ease through which it becomes incorporated with other aspects of everyday identity formation means that his football identity seems more solid and thus more meaningful to both him and his wife.

It is, though, an identity that has undergone revisions (and will continue to do so) as, “…[in] the patterning of intimate relationships … certain behavioural sequences [are] selected and conserved and others ruled out”,[[42]](#endnote-42) temporarily at least. Like other fathers, Mike, reveals that he, “can’t wait until [he] can take [his child] to [the stadium] and chat about the match.” This of course raises the question of financial family planning. In a world dominated by wish fulfilment, what is the monetary cost of the demotic turn? With modes of display subject to increased commodification and football in competition with numerous other forms of self-presentation, there are increasing demands on the household budget. There is not the space here to discuss the ins and outs of any cultural contraception employed within the domestic setting other than to acknowledge the unspectacular significance of the rhythm methods utilised in balancing the books.

**Significantly Insignificant**

Following the precedent of much sociological research, football literature has tended to focus on the exceptional, the subcultures attached to hooliganism or football fanzines, or the impact that structurally imposed factors such as race, gender or class has on one’s relationship with the sport and the culture that surrounds it. The mundane, unspectacular and everyday ordinariness of how the majority of supporters relate to football is often overlooked by academia as being too obvious and unworthy of study. It is there for all to see so what therefore can be revealed that we do not already understand?

Football, and its attached cultural products and codes, is present both everywhere and nowhere within everyday life. It is through interaction that meanings are produced, reproduced or challenged. For different people at different times, football emerges to reinforce their sense of self, to aid connectivity amongst friends, family, colleagues and strangers. It helps regulate viewing or listening habits, interactive routines and consumption practices. Football can provide spaces within the ordinariness of daily life for the portrayal of different versions of the self, of multiple versions of the self.

Everyday life is awash with representations of football culture (a fraction of which I have been able to illustrate in this paper), whether idiomatic speech, advertising, clothing, celebrity gossip or idle ‘chit-chat’, but for the majority of people for most of the time they go unnoticed. Other duties, preferences and tasks take centre stage. Football is nowhere to be seen. The representations of football that you may notice whilst sitting on the bus, a shaving advertisement by the side of the road or a headline in the newspaper, a sticker in the window of a passing car or a pedestrian wearing a club shirt may mean nothing to other passengers.

From nowhere, however, football’s presence emerges. It becomes significant. It is the realisation on turning the page on the calendar by the fridge that the school parents’ evening clashes with a rearranged cup tie. It is the point of common interest that allows two work colleagues to ease into a familiar pattern of communication. It is the ‘Match of the Day’ ring tone that reminds those in earshot of Saturday nights at home in front of the television. It is a high profile football personality’s image appearing on screen in the corner of the pub causing uncontrollable psychological nausea or a desperate urge to hear his words of wisdom at the expense of the current conversation. It is any number of mundane sights or sounds, tastes or smells, that spark memories, individual and cumulative, of travelling to matches, standing on the terraces or sitting in the stands, arguments with the ex-, meeting up with friends, idolising favourite players, becoming embroiled in irrational rivalries and enduring tedious conversations.

It is always significant, until that significance is hidden behind insignificance. This is the difficulty of trying to reveal the relevance of what happens in our everyday worlds. Furthermore, in the *longue durée* of one’s relationship with a football club its significance is in constant negotiation with other aspects of life, whether related to work or family, physical or financial access, social or psychological need. Much of the time the consumption of football is mundanely incorporated with other routine behaviours and actions. It is this integration within daily life that sustains the (self)image of football supporters. And whilst as noted already that football offers fleeting ‘moments’ of intense emotion, there are periods of unspectacular significance as well as spectacularly insignificant moments.

Daily life in liquid modernity is of course saturated with such moments. The mundane and carnivalesque are intertwined. The fluidity of daily life means that liquid moderns have become accustomed to impromptu street performances or are readily prepared to stage their own shows. Not necessarily some great theatrical production. It is more likely to be akin to a fringe festival piece, performed to an intimately small audience or perhaps no one at all. In this sense, football provides opportunities for the ‘controlled de-control’[[43]](#endnote-43) of our desires that is the experience of everyday life. What this entails is both distanciation in the Kantian sense of aesthetic judgement and 'de-distanciation', or 'instantiation', through the investment of desire and immersion in the experience, no matter how momentary.

The ubiquity of football within contemporary culture provides numerous opportunities for contextually defined presentations of ‘controlled de-control’ within daily life. Some locations allow for individuals with all sorts of relationship with football culture to be immersed in the instantiation of football fandom - fleetingly at least. Though that is all that liquid moderns may expect, a quick shot of gratification as wish fulfilment has, according to Bauman, replaced desire and its associated investments of time and energy. Similarly, emotional outbursts, in response to someone else’s opinion or newly acquired piece of information about a match or a player, are not unusual whether in public or private. Emotional responses are no longer repressed in a world so familiar with the public confessional. They are there for all to consume and comment upon.

The way in which life is structured in liquid modernity is such that the formerly secure anchors that were seen, positively or negatively, to uphold our way of life no longer have the same strength to keep things in place. We still have to drag them around but we are aware that any attempt to moor ourselves involves lashing ropes to various points of contact, themselves constantly moving, and continuously monitoring the bindings. More importantly, the anchors lie below the surface, resting on shifting sands; the jetties float on the surface, offering a more visible sense of security and a less cumbersome feeling of permanence.

One such mooring point, namely football, provides for many people a seemingly secure anchorage by being able to adapt to individuals’ own needs and desires for security and freedom, belonging and individuality, at a level that is reflexively undemanding enough to succeed in achieving this on a daily basis.

The way football does this is through a combination of a history rooted in solidly modern tradition that is also celebrated and promulgated through liquid modern forms of ‘the spectacle’. It may by definition still remain routine but everyday life is infused with more spectacular forms of the ordinary as individuals vie for exposure as part of a fluid existence in which the self is presented through mediagenic filters that in Baudrillard’s terms are the precession to the simulacrum of subjectivity.

Football's position as a global brand, a consumer's playground and beloved media spectacle, has ideally placed it as a major player within the fluidity of contemporary culture; it is able to morph itself to fit into new market places whilst retaining an illusion of lost ideals, traditional values and communal togetherness. It variously offers a sense of belonging and security increasingly absent in the world, an opportunity to connect with others in the face of increasingly fragmented lives, or a way of consumptively 'reclaiming' a sense of locality for disparate and geographically dispersed individuals. If, as Bauman suggests, consumerism is the liquid modern way of life then the everyday routines that sustain football culture are both spectacularly insignificant and unspectacularly significant.[[44]](#endnote-44)

1. **Notes**

   Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity*; Blackshaw, *Zygmunt Bauman*; Stone, ‘A Methodological Orientation for registering the everyday experience of football in Liquid Modernity.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Gibbons & Dixon, ‘‘Surf’s up!’: A call to take English soccer fan interactions on the Internet more seriously’ [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Stone, ‘The Role of Football in Everyday Life.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Frisby, 'The *flâneur* in Social Theory'; Stone, ‘A Methodological Orientation for registering the everyday experience of football in Liquid Modernity.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Sugden & Tomlinson, ‘Digging the Dirt and Staying Clean’; Blackshaw & Crabbe, *New Perspectives on Sport and 'Deviance': Consumption, Performativity and Social Control*; Stone, ‘A Methodological Orientation for registering the everyday experience of football in Liquid Modernity.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Blackshaw, *Zygmunt Bauman* [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Best, ‘Liquid fandom: neo-tribes and fandom in the context of liquid modernity’ [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Chaney, *Cultural Change and Everyday Life* [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Lefebvre, ‘Toward a Leftist Cultural Politics: Remarks Occasioned by the Centenary of Marx’s Death’ [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Adorno & Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*; Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Gardiner, *Critiques of Everyday* Life, 107 [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Blackshaw, *Zygmunt Bauman*, 128 [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Turner, *Understanding Celebrity*, 83 [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Rojek, *Celebrity*, 9 [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Rojek, *Celebrity*, 192 [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. ibid. 186 [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, 24 [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Mazer, *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle*; Kellner, ‘The sports spectacle, Michael Jordan and Nike: unholy alliance?’; Tomlinson, ‘Theorising spectacle: Beyond Debord’; Crawford, *Consuming Sport: Fans, Sport and Culture*; Oriard, *King Football: Sport and Spectacle in the Golden Age of Radio and Newsreels, Movies and Magazine, the Weekly and the Daily Press*; Manzenreiter, ‘Sport spectacles, uniformities and the search for identity in late modern Japan’ [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Abercrombie & Longhurst, *Audiences: A sociological theory of performance and imagination* [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Crawford, *Consuming Sport: Fans, Sport and Culture,* 87 [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Tomlinson, ‘Theorising spectacle: Beyond Debord’; Manzenreiter, ‘Sport spectacles, uniformities and the search for identity in late modern Japan’ [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Tomlinson, ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Manzenreiter, ‘Sport spectacles, uniformities and the search for identity in late modern Japan’, 148 [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Tomlinson, ‘Theorising spectacle: Beyond Debord’, 56 [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Ilmonen, *Ordinary Consumption*, 18 [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Robson, *No One Likes Us, We Don't Care: The Myth and Reality of Millwall Fandom*; Giulianotti, 'Supporters, Followers, Fans and *Flaneurs*'; King, *The End of the Terraces*; Armstrong, *Football Hooligans: Knowing the Score* [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*; Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*; Ewen, *All Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture*; Denzin, *The Cinematic Society: The Voyeur’s Gaze*; Abercrombie & Longhurst, *Audiences: A sociological theory of performance and imagination*; Penaloza, ‘Just Doing It: A Visual Ethnographic Study of Spectacular Consumption Behaviour at Nike Town’ [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen*; Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life'; Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology*; Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Sennett, 'Reflections on the Public Realm', 381 [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Bauman, *Liquid* Modernity, 95 [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Varcoe, ‘Zygmunt Bauman’ [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Allan & Crow, *Families, Households and Society*, 62 [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Barnes, 'Systems Theory and Family Therapy', 226 [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
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