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FOOTBALL IS FOOTBALL AND IS INTERESTING, VERY INTERESTING<sup>i</sup>

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**Paul Davis**

‘Everything is what it is, and not another thing.’ (Butler 1726, Preface 39)

‘Football is not a rival poetry. It is not the poor man’s ballet. It is not an enlightened erotica. It is not samba dancing.’ (Davis 1992, 27)

*Abstract*

There are robust consequences of the fact that football is football and not something else. The aesthetic personality of football does not submit to a template inappropriately borrowed from elsewhere. One consequence is that beauty should not be awarded privileged status. Any just aesthetics of the game must be properly hospitable to the game's less hygienic and agonistic features, such as stolid defence, scuffling and scavenging, heroic goalkeeping, visible toil and strain, the intrinsic possibility of failure, the visibly strenuous working with materials (most obviously the body), one’s exposed vulnerability to conditions, luck, loss of form and the injured or ageing body, and the visible realisation of a plurality of life-values in a self-enclosed domain. This gives football a deep affinity with a Modernist aesthetics. However, ‘traditional’ aesthetics might also have a substantive and precious input into the aesthetics of football. Indeed, it might be that beauty is a legitimate aesthetic category and that it figures in true statements about football. Furthermore, the agonistic and traditionally aesthetic can fuse in rich and dramatic ways, within campaigns, performances and individual plays.

Football fandom therefore fails to normatively submit to any privileged desideratum of the contest. Fans legitimately enjoy the spread of both agonistic and traditionally aesthetic qualities. This is illustrated in the individual contest, but more powerfully through a campaign, where conditions, contests and performances of radically different flavours are properly enjoyed and sometimes not fully assessed in their meanings until the conclusion.

## **Introduction**

Butler provided his famous epigram in the eighteenth century, and its principle was echoed in a late twentieth-century Scottish football fanzine essay of my own. The latter is an attempted interrogation of the then dominant discourse of Scottish football, which was taken – as ever – to be in a state of crisis. (Scottish football is precious about its perennial crisis. When the fanzine essay was published, Scotland were about to play in the European Championship finals after five successive World Cup qualifications, and Scottish clubs had been in two European finals in the preceding decade, winning one.)<sup>ii</sup> I suggested that this discourse betrayed a loss of confidence in football's character as football, an affliction which might be diagnosed in terms of a Scottish pathology - itself a toxic variant of a British and even Northern European pathology.<sup>iii</sup> Shortly after the 2002 World Cup, the same organ published my flippant, faintly humorous critique of the British 'Brazilophilia' (Davis 2002), an essay which implicitly argued that this affliction requires, again, an ideological forgetfulness that football is football and not another thing. (Any illusion that Brazilophilia is passe is dispelled by the BBC's sombre reaction to Brazil's trouncing in the 2014 World Cup.)<sup>iv</sup> I had, more broadly, already challenged (Davis 1999) Jan

Boxill's argument that competitors in the purposive sports are ultimately concerned with the production of beauty, upholding in the process the successes of sport's existentially disparaged champions or victors, such as the prolific England rugby union side of the early 1990s. I consolidated this theme in a discussion (Davis 2007) of the normative status and the narrative configurations of skill in the purposive sports, championing (among others) the (West) German football team and one of their victories and goals in particular. A slightly earlier response (Davis 2006), finally, to Kretchmar's (2005) argument that time-regulated games have flaws absent from event-regulated games also upholds football in particular and the rich range of narratives it grounds – just as it is and as they are.<sup>v</sup>

Palpable from the preceding thread of intellectual autobiography is affinity with the integrity and value of sport as sport, and more specifically, football as football. I believe that Cordner (1995, 435) speaks wisely in asserting that sport is not art and that it has different allegiances, and that it is none the worse for that. I believe too that we must avoid impoverished conceptions of art, which would have the perverse consequence of impoverishing our conception of sport should the latter be admitted as art, a suggestion whose significance will become clearer as this essay proceeds. It was therefore with enormous enthusiasm that I read Edgar's (2013) *tour de force*, 'Sport and Art: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Sport'. Edgar rejects a classical aesthetic framing of sport or art in terms of beauty and proposes that sport requires a Modernist aesthetic, which must finally shade into a hermeneutics of sport. This hermeneutics will offer up accounts appropriate to sport as it is in its distinctive richness. In the remainder of this essay I will adumbrate Edgar's treatment with special focus on his contrast between traditional aesthetic qualities and agonistic violence, note points of convergence and comparison with the preceding pieces of

my own, provide further elaboration and illustration of my own perspective and in the process express some apparent divergence from Edgar. Football is, naturally, prioritised as a site of the theoretical discussion. I will finally give brief consideration to some ramifications for the recent philosophical discussion of sports fandom, again with particular application to football.

### **Edgar, Football and I**

Edgar's treatment is much too rich for just exegesis here. Therefore, I select points, motifs and passages which I regard salient in his approach and illuminative of my treatment of football, trusting all the while that I don't bastardise his monumental essay. His treatment is (arguably) summarised in the following passage:

An aesthetics of sport will be shown to be either trivial – for there may be an aesthetics of anything, and as such it says nothing distinctive about sport – or remains in danger of being a narrowly restricted concern, if it fails to develop a vocabulary of aesthetic concepts that are properly relevant to sport. It will be argued that ... aesthetics ultimately yields to a hermeneutics of sport. That is to argue that aesthetic qualities – and particularly qualities synonymous with beauty – are only superficially applicable to sport, and discussion of sport in terms of its beauty tends to conceal more profound and disturbing questions as to sport's meaning. (Edgar 2013, 80).

Despite my hospitality towards Edgar's treatment, I first note two qualms I have, the first of which is, in the context, insignificant. The first is that the 'aesthetic' sports cannot brook the suggestion that aesthetic qualities are only superficially

applicable.<sup>vi</sup> Second, this suggestion is – as it stands – quite dubiously applied to the ‘purposive’ sports – which include football - too. I return to this and go so far as to argue that beauty might sometimes robustly and substantively characterise football. But I am in keen sympathy with the view that an aesthetics of sport must respond to sport as sport, and (therefore) discussion of sport confined to or privileging of beauty is fundamentally impoverishing.<sup>vii</sup> These sympathies are evident in the second epigraph to this essay and, with a little unevenness, in each of my preceding essays. For instance, in my critique (Davis 1999) of Boxill (writing fifteen years earlier), I argue that it is, *pace* Boxill, contextually inappropriate for the performer in the purposive sports to aim at beauty; such a performer misunderstands the logic of the activity. I now concede, however, that I too easily accepted Boxill’s collapse of the aesthetic in sport into beauty in sport. All the same, I affirm my concluding comments (Davis 1999, 93-94) that ‘aesthetic quality is only one of the values that we prize for our sports. It must exist alongside other sources of sporting value – for example, persistence, stamina, tactical-nous and determination ... The competitive interests of the effortless and silken should not dictate that we change rules to disfavour the sweaty and determined.’ These sentiments are echoed and superseded eight years later (Davis 2007, 29) in my rhetorical question, ‘In the conspicuously organic world that sport now is, might it be democratically required to grant ideological equality to those who work, sweat, run, pound, organise, scramble, scuffle and even pray their way to success over more skilful opponents?’ Moreover, I try in this case to diagnose what I cast as misplaced ideological framings of specific sport competitors – the German and Brazilian football teams, for instance – in terms of perpetual and unwarranted hang-ups about the aesthetic status of the purposive sports and underlying hang-ups about ourselves (Davis 2007, 29-31) (and see Endnote 3). In

my reply to Kretchmar, again, I invoke Cordner's suggestion (1995, 429-31) that sport, like art, allows the 'realisation of life-values in a self-enclosed domain', and cite doggedness, tenacity, resourcefulness, faith, command, plenitude, repose, urgency, patience and dignity (Davis 2006, 60-61). By no contortion can such realisation of life-values be collapsed into the triumph of beauty or, again, any set of aesthetic qualities. This reflection finds echo in Edgar's (2013, 117) affirmation, in football, of 'a dedication to rigorous defence and a begrudging midfield', giving the slip to that eighteenth-century classical aesthetics of beauty, which is, Edgar notes, in danger of disenfranchising sport.

Indeed, before detailing Edgar's argument a little more, I strengthen the flavour of the preceding through two further football examples, each involving Celtic in the European Champions' League. On November 21, 2006, Celtic defeated Manchester United 1-0 at home, and on November 6, 2012, they defeated Barcelona 2-1, also at home. On each occasion, Celtic were palpably inferior in terms of the range of football skills. Their opponents had far more possession and clearly superior players, and looked more likely to score throughout. On each occasion, Celtic toughed it out, showing persistence, stamina, strong goalkeeping (including a penalty save against Manchester United) and spirit, encouraged by a large, loud and passionate support. They also, naturally, rode their luck. They, again, showed flashes of quality themselves, most obviously in the extraordinary (though erroneously awarded) free-kick which secured victory against Manchester United. In neither case did the outcome of the match mean that football failed to flourish as the kind of thing it is. Quite the contrary. Football is just the kind of thing where qualities such as determination, spirit, stamina and luck occasionally best superior skill. It is the kind of thing where teams sometimes win drastically against the run of play. Nothing

essentially goes wrong with the practice in such cases. There is no cause for hand-wringing or teeth-gnashing. We do not suffer a dysfunctional result. Football is football in such cases, just as much as it is when the team of superior skill coasts, as a result of that skill, to a 4-0 win.

### *Beauty, Sport and Modernist Aesthetics*

The sixth chapter of Edgar's treatment is 'The Beauty of Sport'. The title is, given Edgar's preceding scepticism about the normativity of beauty in the aesthetics of sport, explicitly ironic. Indeed, Edgar (2013, 100) is none too enthusiastic about beauty as an aesthetic category, asserting in his opening paragraph that it is a 'hangover of eighteenth-century aesthetics and art criticism, that now serves only to conceal the true nature of aesthetic judgement.'<sup>viii</sup> He suggests (2013, 103) too, slightly later, that it is only when beauty cashes out as more substantive concepts, such as 'graceful', 'delicate', 'dainty', 'handsome', 'comely', 'elegant', 'balanced', 'warm' or 'passionate' that we get any grounds for accepting or rejecting judgements of beauty. Though I will, again, offer something of a challenge to Edgar's dismissiveness of the category of beauty and its application to sport (and football specifically), there is no need to adjudicate on these broader judgements in order to sympathise with his sceptical perspective upon the normativity of beauty in sport aesthetics.

The immediately preceding differentiae of beauty offer an index to Edgar's discomfort with the primacy of beauty in the aesthetics of art and sport, and also as to why this discomfort is well-grounded. They enthrone the appearance of ease, the illusion of effortlessness.<sup>ix</sup> (I would suggest, though, that 'passionate' is in this

respect discontinuous with the others.) Edgar rightly argues that this prospectus is pallid in its vision of both art and sport. First, it seems conservative and polite insofar as it has scarce room for the extrinsic significance of art and sport, i.e. the capacity of art and sport to carry meaning beyond itself (a capacity which might work in very different ways).<sup>x</sup> Second and relatedly, it is unreceptive to the disruptive potential of art and sport. Third, it fails to reckon with Modernist aesthetics and artworks, which are characterised by the demystifying abandonment of the appearance of ease and consequent luminosity of the artist's brute materials and painstaking effort. (Sontag (1966, 8) goes so far as to say that the characteristic aim of modern art is to be *unacceptable* to its audience [emphasis in text].) Finally, it can only damn with faint praise some defining qualities of (the world of) sport, e.g. visible toil and strain; the intrinsic possibility of failure; the visibly strenuous working with materials (most obviously the body); one's exposed vulnerability to conditions, luck, loss of form and the injured or ageing body; and, again, the visible realisation of life-values (only one at most of which is beauty) in a self-enclosed domain. One sentence in Edgar (2013, 114) gives us a fair handle on this constellation of qualities and the failure of the orthodox aesthetics of sport (and see Endnote 7) to give them their due: 'The aesthetics of sport is then not about beauty, as traditionally understood, but about the struggle to make sense of the agonistic violence.'

Again, however, it might be that Edgar's treatment presents us here with a false choice or doubtful platonism for the aesthetics of sport. Need we choose between beauty as traditionally understood and the struggle to make sense of the agonistic violence, or say that the whole enterprise is *really* about the latter? Or if we are uncomfortable with beauty, can't the struggle to make sense of the agonistic violence co-exist with substantively applicable aesthetic qualities which resist reduction to

beauty? (Again, Edgar's conception of traditional aesthetics seems to vacillate slightly between one which is finally about beauty or has beauty as its highest value and one which contains beauty on an equivalent footing with other qualities.) Why can't sport aesthetics have this dual character? Might sport have this dual character? Might some individual contests, individual performances and individual episodes of excellence have this dual character? Edgar is right to demand a place at the top table of sport aesthetics for sport's agonistic qualities, but it doesn't follow that beauty as traditionally understood or 'traditional' aesthetic qualities which might not be co-extensive with or acolytes of beauty need be denied a place. I will try to defend my divergence from Edgar through, largely, a discussion of Cambiasso's famous goal in the 2006 World Cup, and more briefly, through discussion of another two goals.

### *Football Aesthetics: Maintaining the Balance?*

Anyone who seriously likes football can remember the goal scored in the 2006 World Cup by Cambiasso for Argentina against Serbia Montenegro – the twenty-five passes, the sudden increase in tempo, the increasingly tight passing, the back-heel and the marvellously improvised finish. The long, glorious exercise had - like the accomplished exercise of many skills in sport and elsewhere - the appearance of ease, the illusion of effortlessness. At a certain, vital level, it was anything but easy: it was possible only through the painstaking acquisition of very finely honed and calibrated individual and collective skills. Even the best and most experienced footballers among the readership of this journal could not approach it. But the elite players of Argentina made it look easy. The goal displayed harmony, fluency,

balance, rhythm, purity, integrity, whole-ness and even a metaphorical narrative, complete with supremely satisfying closure. It suffices for the nub of my divergence from Edgar to say that (i) these qualities are causes of the pleasure many got and get from watching the goal, (ii) the same qualities are among those which subserve aesthetic response as traditionally conceived, (iii) the pleasure in the qualities cannot be subsumed without remainder under the umbrella of pleasure in the struggle to make sense of agonistic violence, and (iv) there is therefore good reason to configure the pleasure of watching the goal as, *pace* Edgar (2013, 80), pleasure in (non-superficial) aesthetic qualities and not pleasure in the struggle to make sense of agonistic violence.

Although the immediately preceding brief argument suffices as a case that the aesthetics of football needs a traditional as well as an agonistic component, I merely sketch an argument, the case again refracted through Cambiasso's goal, that beauty, no less, might be implicated in the former. We might, again, have 'traditional' aesthetic qualities such as grace, elegance, harmony or the sublime, yet reject or remain noncommittal on the category of beauty, which is an extra step. How might it be made?

### *And Might it be Beautiful?*

The case Mothersill (1984) makes in her landmark book for the reinstatement of beauty is compelling and not unpersuasive. Again, her brilliant treatment is much too rich for a just exegesis. I give brief mileage to three at least partially overlapping elements. The shorthand of *apprehensio ipsa* can serve for the first. This is the Aquinas formula, 'Let us call that beautiful of which the apprehension in itself

pleases.' The *ipsa* ('in itself') element presages one of Kant's conditions of the judgement of taste, i.e. that it is free of the taint of personal interest, charm or emotion, etc. Much fan enjoyment of the Cambiasso goal was no doubt as free as possible of the taint of personal interest, emotion or charm, even if complete disinterestedness is, as Kant knows (see Mothersill 1984, 326), an ideal limit which is never reached (e.g. that Argentina are one of my own favourite international teams no doubt contributed to my response).<sup>xi</sup> The *apprehensio* part of Aquinas' formula denotes a knowledge of a particular by acquaintance and not mere description, and is, like any knowing, a species of cognitive success. Someone who had no idea whatsoever about the game of football, e.g. what Argentina were trying to ultimately do, the role of their opponents in trying to stop them, and the teams' respective permissions and prohibitions, could not enjoy the *goal* and therefore could not have any experience of it which could conceivably be called aesthetic. Indeed, it is hard to see that they could even recognise it as a goal or configure any of the prior passes or movement as having the gestalt required for aesthetic experience. The goings-on would be meaningless movements of men and a ball. Again, though, as Mothersill (1984, 363) puts it, 'Acquaintance can range from a minimal noticing of O to a full and detailed understanding.' Acquaintance with a slice of football admits of degrees: some people know more than others about football (as some know more than others about opera), and therefore have a finer-grained understanding of the constituent parts of the Cambiasso goal when they see it.<sup>xii</sup> The deeper acquaintance permits a richer aesthetic response; here, instead of letting daylight in on magic, it is daylight deepening the magic.

The second element is Mothersill's conception of an aesthetic property (borrowed from Sue Larson's privately circulated lecture notes) and which, swiftly, reinforces

the (Kantian) particularity of aesthetic experience (see Edgar, 105-06). As Mothersill (1984, 344) puts it, Larson's formula entails that no two distinguishable items can have the same aesthetic properties. If that is correct, no goal which can be distinguished from Cambiasso's has the same aesthetic properties as Cambiasso's goal. Aesthetically, the goal is non-interchangeable with any other. This uniqueness sponsors a precise excitation of response, a 'notable pleasure' distinct from the merely exciting or agreeable.

The final element I sketch is the normativity of the judgement of beauty. As Mothersill (1984, 377) again puts it, 'Someone who takes an item to be *beautiful* ... believes, truly or falsely, that it has extraordinary qualities and that it will be a cause of pleasure to anyone who attends to them. If he voices his belief, it will be in the mode of assertion; he is making a claim ... He thinks that properly qualified and suitably situated people *ought* to find it beautiful because he thinks it *is* beautiful [all emphases in-text].' Again, this is viably applied to the Cambiasso goal. A football fan could reasonably be shocked if another, comparably knowledgeable fan could not see the goal's extraordinary qualities and therefore feel the same ('notable') pleasure as she does. She might then try to change the comparative coolness, much as one might try the equivalent with regard to a painting, by meticulously pointing out what she thinks makes the goal extraordinary and properly a source of notable pleasure.

If the preceding, brief consideration of the Cambiasso goal carries conviction, then it might be that aesthetic qualities as traditionally understood are a robust and precious part of the aesthetics of football. And indeed, it might be that we should go the whole hog and say that beauty is at least among those aesthetic qualities which inscribe the game. Football is what is it and not another thing, and that thing that football is

might be - as I celebrate in this essay and elsewhere - agonistic, and also beautiful, with no reason to grant existential priority to either.

### *Glorious Fusion*

Again, there is no reason why the agonistic and 'traditionally' aesthetic cannot be fused in the same football episode, and the two indeed intimately connected. I suggest two matches in particular. The first is the 1986 World Cup semi-final of which I have already written (Davis 2007, 30-1). I have already extolled the balance, control, assuredness, strategy, execution and symmetry of the West German performance. While none of these qualities is intrinsically aesthetic (unlike, say, beauty or elegance), the presence of any set can be (i) the ground on which *apprehensio ipsa* pleases, (ii) the ground of ostensive non-interchangeability, and (iii) the ground of aesthetic normativity. Furthermore, the closure and tension-release of the decisive, very late second German goal was a resolution of the teeming struggle of the previous ninety minutes or so. And it is this quality that betrays the *agon* of the match, and perhaps the final dependence of the aesthetic completeness of the match, and of the German performance in particular, upon the agonistic struggle. The irresistibly clean, crisp and triumphant second German goal followed approximately eighty minutes of, not only rigorous German defending and begrudging midfield, but heroic tackles, dogged closing-down and marking of opponents, spectacular diving headers out of the penalty area, etc., and maybe a bit of luck. Without this gestalt, the goal would not have had its precise, consummate texture.

The second example is the 2007 FA Cup final between Chelsea and Manchester United. Some words of Kupfer (1988, 463) capture the match: 'Some games are tense, stingy encounters in which defence dominates and scores are hard earned, as if squeezed from a resistant world. Our attention is tight in such contests, screwed to each moment since any play can be decisive. Ideally, their conclusion is a clean, incisive play, snapping the taut mood with its clarity.' Approximately 116 minutes of an extraordinarily taut contest was 'snapped' by a memorably incisive one-two and winning goal, complete with deftly finessed finish. Again, the goal – with its balance, control, strategy, execution and geometry – heavily owed its precise aesthetic meaning to the lengthy and titanic agonistic struggle which preceded it.

### *Football's Olympian Gods*

The propriety of a traditional aesthetics of football is reinforced by recognition of the kind of player who is, as Giulianotti (2005: 99) affirms in discussion of sporting masculinities, the 'most lionized' in the game's history:

They are the artists who (like Maradona) are often small and seemingly vulnerable in stature ... Maradona is joined by other technical talents like Zico (Brazil), Baggio (Italy), Platini (France) and Best (Northern Ireland)<sup>xiii</sup> ...

Through sporting dramas, these brilliant players outwit and deceive tougher opponents; physical power and aggression are disarmed, becoming handicaps rather than pre-conditions of successful masculinity in play.

(Giulianotti 2005: 99)

I briefly sharpen Giulianotti's observation with reflection upon the specific culture of Scottish football. (It is slightly surprising that Giulianotti, a Scot and football aficionado, does not include a Scottish footballer in the preceding set.) The self-loathing self-narrative of Scottish football casts the country's game as a sordid celebration of the ugliest of ugly masculinities – gratuitously aggressive, philistine and ultimately futile in the face of the superior skills and smoother masculinities of more refined countries. (And see Endnote 3.) And unavoidably so, the story goes, since this footballing ethos is what Scottish fans demand. This narrative might well have traction outside of Scotland too, and it would be foolish to deny the truth in it. However, there is a spectacular counter-narrative of Scottish football, continuous with Giulianotti's observations of the game at large. The most celebrated of Scottish footballers are, again, exemplars of skill, craft and artistry, and heavily celebrated precisely because of their ability to best tougher, brawnier opponents. The four most celebrated of Scottish footballers are Denis Law, Jimmy Johnstone, Jim Baxter and Kenny Dalglish. None is or was (two are deceased) particularly big, with one 5'4" tall and (unlike Maradona) slightly built. None was known as a tenacious ball-winner, crunching tackler or enforcer. They are, again, celebrated for their virtuosity.<sup>xiv</sup> Indeed, if the set is slightly extended, the story is consolidated in revered figures such as Davie Cooper, Gordon Strachan (5'5") and Paul McStay. And finally, if the set is extended to include foreign imports, then it can be observed that the two most celebrated imports to Scottish football are the moderately built and lavishly skilled Henrik Larsson and Brian Laudrup. The eminence of this narrative within such a putatively unhygienic football culture is strong reinforcement of the need for a Modernist aesthetics of football to be accompanied by a more traditional aesthetics.

## *The Pseudo-Aesthetics of Kitsch*

In no domain can kitsch exemplify beauty or - in case they are not co-extensive with beauty – other qualities of traditional aesthetics (elegance, grace, purity, etc.). Edgar (2013, 115-7) illustrates the point with his example of the spectacular-looking but easy-to-perform and substantively empty gymnastics move, which might impress an impressionable layperson – who in this instance fails the cognitive requirement of *apprehensio* - but will not impress the judges, who pass the *apprehensio* test expertly.

Despite the aesthetic fertility for which I have tried to argue, football too can suffer the doubtful blandishments of kitsch. We should not be aesthetically impressed by, for instance, an affectation of languor,<sup>xv</sup> gratuitous back-heels or acrobatics, self-conscious and uneconomical possession,<sup>xvi</sup> ‘keepie-uppie’<sup>xvii</sup> or decorous ‘dancing’ with the ball at one’s feet.<sup>xviii</sup>

## **The Aesthetics of Football Fandom**

If my treatment so far is sound, then football cannot submit to an ideal of aesthetic qualities traditionally conceived (whether they collapse into beauty or not) nor to an ideal of agonistic struggle. Both facets are preciously defining qualities of the game, co-existing and intermingling, as I have tried to illustrate, in rich and sometimes profound ways. Football’s aesthetic pluralism cannot but have fundamental consequences for normativity within football fandom. I conclude with brief discussion of some of those consequences.

Dixon's (2007) engaging and seminal essay has spawned a veritable philosophical discourse on normative questions of support for sports teams. While I find much to admire in Dixon's essay (and in some of the rest of the discourse),<sup>xix</sup> the approach I take here impels me to quibble with one aspect of his treatment. Dixon (2007, 441) distinguishes the purist and the partisan, the former defined by (flexible) support for the team that he thinks display the highest level of sporting excellence and the latter by loyal support of 'a team to which she may have a personal connection or which she may have grown to support by dint of mere familiarity.' Dixon concludes that the ideal fan, whom he calls the 'moderate partisan', combines the most admirable elements of each, i.e. the loyalty of the partisan and the purist's insistence that the game be played 'fairly, skilfully and with style' (Dixon 2007, 449). Russell (2012) has offered a compelling critique of both the concept of the ideal fan and the presence of loyalty in Dixon's conception. I wish to focus instead on the normativity of the desideratum that 'the game' be played 'skilfully and with style'. (There is tactical reason, which I hope is soon clear, for the scare quotes around 'the game'.)

I have no quibble with Dixon's fairness desideratum. However, if my perspective here (and that of Edgar) is sound, it is misplaced to accompany that with the (ideal fan's) desiderata of skill and style. To do so is, again, to privilege only one set of defining facets of team sport and to privilege, in turn, only one thread of experience and narrative within team sport fandom. I suspect the point is well illustrated by unpacking the dread scare quotes I have placed around 'the game' in Dixon's account. Dixon's intentional object seems to be the singular contest and the normativity of fan wishes for it. But this is anaemic, as illustrated through the sport which is the subject of this essay. Football has different competitions of different durations, formats and aesthetic personalities. In Britain, for instance, the league

begins and ends in sunshine, which helps facilitate certain approaches. Between is a range of weathers, pitches and atmospheres, alongside accumulating injuries and suspensions. Again, a range of contest-types across the campaign is not only expected by all fans, but probably relished by all.<sup>xx</sup> Fans of title winners are liable to relish the memory of the away November slugfest won by the sixty-third minute deflection just as they relish the memory of the opulent 4-0 home win in the sunshine of early September or early May. The comparative lack of skill or style in the former match does not faze them, and they might indeed appreciate the spirit and tenacity of the opposition, if not their aesthetic quality. It is all part of the rich narrative of winning the title. The intentional object here is not a match, but a *campaign*, the goods of which are properly different from those of a singular contest. A cup campaign, again, is shorter and snappier, and might involve unusual trips on single-lane roads under misty skies to tight and feisty grounds which allow television and radio microphones to pick-up individual fan shouts. Skill and style are again liable to be limited, something again likely to be enjoyed by fans who might hope, conversely, for plenty of skill and style should they be in the May sunshine of Wembley. The equivalent point applies to two-legged European ties. The comparative opulence of the 3-1 home win might give way to a scuffled and scavenged goalless draw in the away leg. Fans of the victors are liable to take as much pride in the latter as the former, albeit the pride might be differently inflected in the respective cases. And the latter could assume a precious meaning as the tournament proceeds.

It is open to Dixon or anyone else to say that the fan perspectives just sketched are mistaken, i.e. a fan ought to want each contest played with skill and style, therefore relish for taut, dour or scuffled contests and scavenged 1-0 wins or goalless draws, even as part of an unfolding narrative, is misplaced. Again, however, this rejoinder

illegitimately enthrones one facet of the purposive sports and team fandom within them, and in turn illegitimately subjugates the agonistic element which is a defining motif of the purposive sports.

## **Conclusion**

I have tried to unpack some key ramifications of the fact that football is football and not another thing. Football cannot submit to an aesthetics which privileges beauty or any set of 'traditional' aesthetic qualities. The agonistic struggle is an essential part of football. Rigorous defence, begrudging midfield, heroic goalkeeping, visible toil and strain, the intrinsic possibility of failure, the visibly strenuous working with materials (most obviously the body), one's exposed vulnerability to conditions, luck, loss of form and the injured or ageing body, and the visible realisation of a plurality of life-values in a self-enclosed domain are all legitimately precious threads in the rich tapestry of football. At the same time, 'traditional' aesthetics might well have a substantive and legitimately precious input into the aesthetics of football. Indeed, it might be that beauty is finally a legitimate aesthetic category and that it figures in true statements about football. Moreover, the most lionized footballers, even those within putatively hypermasculine football cultures, seem to appeal to a more traditional aesthetic sensibility within their audiences. Furthermore, the agonistic and traditionally aesthetic can fuse in football in compelling and dramatic ways, within campaigns, performances and individual plays.

The preceding entails that football fandom fails to normatively submit to any privileged desideratum of the contest. Fans legitimately enjoy both the smorgasbord of agonistic elements and the spread of traditionally aesthetic qualities, respectively

illustrated in the individual contest and in revered players, but perhaps more powerfully through the thickets of a campaign, where conditions, contests and performances of radically different flavours are properly enjoyed and sometimes not fully assessed in their meanings until the end of the campaign. This is one of many rich qualities which make football interesting, very interesting ...

## **Epilogue**

Look at his face, just look at his face ...<sup>xxi</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> This is an allusion to a legendary piece of commentary. In a match between Manchester City and Derby County in 1974, County's Francis Lee's promising position elicited a measured 'interesting' from BBC commentator Barry Davies. Lee's subsequent rocket into the top corner of the net provoked a louder and much more excited 'very interesting!' As Lee celebrated, Davies screeched the words of this essay's Epilogue, his voice cracking near the end. [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NS8eH1g3u9I>]

<sup>ii</sup> The following season (1992-93) Scottish champions Rangers failed only on goal difference to reach the final of the European Champions' League, remaining unbeaten against the winners.

<sup>iii</sup> Of the stereotype of 'an uncouth northern Europe in perpetual admiration of a cultured south', Neil MacGregor (2012, 151-2) writes: 'It is a stereotype that goes back more than 2500 years, and it still shapes the way Mediterranean Europe thinks about the north – and even the way the north thinks about itself. Over the centuries this myth has, I think, done a great deal of damage.' The stereotype and its perverse consequences seamlessly extend to the North's conception of Latin America, with Brazilian football perhaps the site of its most pungent expression.

<sup>iv</sup> For instance, pundit Alan Hansen pronounced himself 'distracted' at half-time, and anchorman Gary Lineker wore a funereal countenance both then and at the end of the match. The half-time inquest, with Germany already five goals ahead, proceeded for a conspicuously long time before Alan Shearer proffered the first praise of Germany. And general reportage in Britain was heavily slanted towards the calamity suffered by Brazil. (See the BBC online report of July 8, 2014 [<http://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/0/football/28102403>]). This echoed the coverage of the final of France '98: the BBC half-time inquest, with Brazil two goals behind and Hansen again centre-stage, was urgent, angry and almost entirely Brazil-centred, whilst on ITV Brian Moore (and see Endnote 18) and Kevin Keegan conducted a funereal second-half commentary.

<sup>v</sup> Kretchmar (2008) has written a powerful counter-reply. And see Ryall (2015) in this volume for further contribution to the discussion.

<sup>vi</sup> Best (1978, 103-5) distinguishes the 'aesthetic' and 'purposive' sports. The definition of the former is that there is no end specifiable independently of the means, with the latter defined by the presence of an independently specifiable end.

<sup>vii</sup> Edgar (2013, 100) notes ruefully that 'The beauty of sport has long been a largely unchallenged presupposition of much aesthetics of sport.'

<sup>viii</sup> Sontag (1966, 31) has similarly characterised beauty as 'an essentially vacant concept' and lamented that modern aesthetics is 'crippled' by its dependence upon it.

<sup>ix</sup> For argument that graceful movement in sport is essentially the appearance of ease, see Cordner (1984, 2003).

<sup>x</sup> Sontag (1961, 23) observes that 'we never have a purely aesthetic response to works of art – neither to a play or a novel, with its depicting of human beings choosing and acting, nor ... to a painting by Jackson Pollock or a Greek vase.' This betrays the typically intimate dependence of an artwork's extrinsic (e.g. moral, political or ideological) significance upon its intrinsic properties. Such intimacy does not apply in the case of sport. For instance, sport's well-documented capacity to reinforce or challenge power relations radically depends upon contingent particularities of sociocultural contextualisation; for discussion of different lengths and granularities, see, for instance, Armstrong and Giulianotti (1999), Giulianotti (2005), Kuper (1994), Goldblatt (2006) Morgan (1999), Messner (1988) and Molnar and Kelly (2013).

<sup>xi</sup> Sontag's observation (see Endnote 10) about response to art transfers to response to sport.

<sup>xii</sup> A recurring motif, again, of Edgar's (2013) treatment is that sport, like art, speaks as a world.

<sup>xiii</sup> A decade on, we would add, for starters, Messi and Ronaldo.

<sup>xiv</sup> Warner (1994, 24-6) elevates the mythological exemplars of a wily masculinity.

<sup>xv</sup> Alongside considerable ability, Liverpool, Sampdoria, Rangers and Scotland player Graeme Souness was liable to this and therefore helped convince some that he was better than he was.

<sup>xvi</sup> This vice arguably characterised the Colombian World Cup teams of 1990 and 1994. During the former tournament, one broadsheet journalist commented that if asked to do a penalty shoot-out, they might have tried back-flips.

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<sup>xvii</sup> In 1967, Scotland defeated reigning world champions England 3-2 at Wembley. In the dying minutes, Scotland's Jim Baxter played some keepie-uppie in the England half. The symbolic potency of taunting England at Wembley means that Baxter's antics are what most Scots who saw the game remember most fondly and what younger Scots are most likely to internalise. Yet they were, as Crampsey (1978, page unknown) observed, tactically inept.

<sup>xviii</sup> Keen willingness to be impressed here was memorably illustrated in Brian Moore's ITV commentary of the France '98 final. About half-way through the second half, with France leading 2-0, Brazil's Denilson faced up at the corner of the France penalty-area to his opposite number. He performed an extended and gratuitous 'dance' in front of the ball and a singularly unperturbed opponent. Despite its clear futility, Moore intoned excitedly, 'Wow! Look at that twisting and turning!' Denilson was easily dispossessed before clumsily falling.

<sup>xix</sup> See especially Russell (2012)

<sup>xx</sup> For percipient and piquant affirmation, especially in relation to Scottish football, see McCarra (1995).

<sup>xxi</sup> See Endnote 1

Paul Davis' "Football is Football and is interesting, very interesting" shares with Borge and Kreft a concern with football's distinctiveness qua a certain kind of sport and competition, counselling in turn that an aesthetics of football reflect this. Having argued for the distinctiveness of football, Davis explores how a distinct aesthetics of football and a more mainstream aesthetics can fruitfully fuse.