

Football Documentaries: Creativity v Actuality/Liveness

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Making sports documentaries was once looked upon as the cinematic equivalent of scoring own goals. They were traditionally the preserve of television or, more recently, the straight-to-DVD market. They had titles like The 100 Best Goals of the Season or David Beckham: Life of an Icon. They were films, aimed at sports fans, with no pretence of any cinematic value.
Kaleem Aftab, *Independent*, 6 June 2008

Approximately 641 million viewers in total, and nearly 22 million at its peak. And that's only in England. Worldwide an estimated total of 26 billion watched the recent FIFA World Cup, making it arguably the most-watched television event in history. While the BBC refuses to disclose the sum they invested to cover half the World Cup games, we know that Sky paid £1,31 billion to show 24,2 percent of all Premier league fixtures.¹

If football, as these figures suggest, is the mass media's prodigal child, then why is it that the mass media's critical twin, the documentary, is so utterly uninterested in football? Why do documentaries not like football, and sport in general, as their subject?² In order to answer these questions I will first define some of the central genre specifics of the documentary in general. Thereafter, I want to show why sport and the documentary have such difficulties coming together, trying to reveal which elementary qualities of football in particular make it such a difficult subject for documentaries. Finally, I will chart those documentaries on football that succeed against the odds.

1. Mass Media's other: the Documentary³

The most enduring definition of the documentary, coined by the pioneering Scottish documentary maker John Grierson, describes it as a "creative treatment of actuality". This reveals a central paradox the documentary form entails: it is not like fiction *and* it is like fiction. On the one hand, unlike fiction, which deals with the virtual, that which might be, documentaries deal with the actual, that which is (here and now). On the other hand, like fiction, documentaries are a product of creative work, of selecting and arranging material in

new ways in order to create new insights. Documentary films aim at cinematic value *and* try to be true to actual reality.

Early non-fiction films were mainly interested in visually attractive material (cf. Gunning 1997). One of the topics, amongst many others, these short films portrayed, was sport: *Blackburn Rovers v West Bromwich* (UK, 1898) is probably “the oldest extant footage of the game” (Lee-Wright 2006: 1270), while the *English Cup Final: Barnsley v Newcastle United* (UK, 1910) established a longstanding broadcasting tradition (cf. McKernan 1998: 107). Football, as much as other team sports, however, did not catch on: “Football and baseball in the USA, and soccer and cricket in Britain were national sports of huge appeal, but largely beyond the descriptive capabilities of the emergent cinema.” (*ibid.*: 97) More important than football, boxing seems to have been the sport that offered the most spectacular images to the limited perspective of the cinematic apparatus (cf. Lee-Wright 2006: 1270-1271). Boxing, as well as horse racing in Britain, Luke McKernan argues, indeed played a vital role in the birth of cinema: “The first commercial film projection was of a boxing match.” (1998: 89)

Although concerned with actuality, these films were not considered ‘documentaries’. The first filmmaker to categorize his film as a documentary was probably Edward S. Curtis. Originally a photographer of Native Americans, he filmed *In the Land of the Headhunters* in 1914.⁴ Probably the most famous of the early documentaries is Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North*, released in 1922. The film presents life, work and play of Nanook, played (!) by the Inuit Allariallak, and his fictional family. It is a highly dramatized, and somewhat romanticized view of a life that had already disappeared when Flaherty was filming. It was in relation to these films that John Grierson developed his theory of the documentary. Grierson distinguishes the documentary not only from the dominant mode of Hollywood *fiction*, but also from other forms of *factual* films: newsreels, scientific and educational films, etc. For him, the documentary filmmaker “would photograph the living scene and the living story” (like the producer of a factual film) and then (like the producer of a fictional film) apply “arrangements, rearrangements, and creative shapings of it.” (Grierson 1998 (1932): 83) Sport was decidedly on the side of facts: “the newsreels loved sport – provided it was brief” (McKernan 1998: 117).

Grierson became the cornerstone of the so-called ‘Documentary Film Movement’ – a loose collective of British filmmakers in the 1930s and 1940s (cf. Aitken 1998). Many of their productions set out to show another ‘other’ than those in earlier documentaries: this time, the subjects of the films were not the exotic borderlands of civilization (the Wild West, the Poles,

the Aran Islands), but the unknown territories within, that is, the world of the working classes. Although the filmmakers tried to go where the hegemonic media would not go, cinematographic equipment was posing significant restrictions; consequently, re-enactments of key scenes were often used to bolster ‘authenticity.’ Sport, it seems, was not on the producers’ agenda: if it appeared at all, it served as a release from the hardships of working class life and not in its own right. The aim of such depictions was to give a deeper meaning to sport, to include sport in (the filmmakers’ idea of) society.

By the end of the fifties, filmmakers were beginning to employ new camera equipment that made it possible to record synchronised sound and image at the place of filming: it became possible, now, to actually record the ‘living scene’ that Grierson was looking for. New equipment made it possible to produce films privately funded, or by semi-independent film boards; also, the increase of TV channels created better market opportunities – and a new opponent: the TV reportage. More importantly, the new equipment made it possible to come closer to the (new) ideal of capturing reality in real time. This new documentary camera was able to go where no other (hegemonic) camera would dare (TV) or want (Hollywood) to go.

The central form of documentary that evolved from these developments was the so-called Direct Cinema. Filmmakers used the new equipment to create documentaries that bore as little traces of the filmmaker’s involvement as possible; life was to be presented as unmediated as possible and the filmmaker should be nothing more than a ‘fly on the wall.’ Richard Leacock and Joyce Chapra’s *A Happy Mother’s Day* (US, 1963), for example, follows a mother of quintuplets in her attempt to deal with the five babies *and* the media attraction they create. The film contrasts the ‘public’ image produced by mainstream media with the ‘real’ people as they reveal themselves to the documentary camera (cf. Barnouw 1983: 231-253). Such new wave documentaries also turned to sport, promising to provide a new view on a phenomenon that began to dominate the airwaves. Kon Ichikawa’s *Tokyo Olympiad* (JAP, 1965), for example, gives meaning to one of the first worldwide media events by aesthetically reframing it. *Goal! The World Cup* (UK, 1966) tries the same for the 1966 FIFA World Cup; *Six Days to Saturday* (UK, 1963) attempts to give a look behind the scenes of a professional football club.

Finally, the development of video in the 1970s opened new opportunities to make (relatively) cheap movies with small crews, opening the documentary form to various sections of society. By the beginning of the 1980s, however, the dominant form of a purely observational documentary had become questionable – not least because this form had

become a regular feature of mainstream television. Consequently, documentaries started to question the representational powers of the documentary and instead developed a performative relation to truth: the only form of sincerity came to be seen in acknowledging the media's contribution to the production of truth. Like the observational documentary, the performative documentary takes an increasing mediatisation of society as its premise. However, whereas the unobtrusive observational documentary believes that there is another, more real, 'backstage' self to the public performer, the performative documentary has lost such belief. Where early (expository) documentaries proclaimed to reveal a deeper truth of an event, and where Direct Cinema tried to show what the mass media wouldn't or couldn't show, the performative documentary concentrated on deconstructing the power of the mass media.⁵

2. Sport v The Documentary

Peter Lee-Wright, one of the few academics who ventured to have a closer look at documentaries about 'Sports', saw fertile ground for the sport documentary emerging in the 1960s: "The narcissistic in sport and its filmic expression [...] reappeared with a bang [...], as sport joined music in offering the main two trajectories through which the aspiring young could find their 'fifteen minutes of fame'" (2006: 1271). Sport and pop/rock music came to dominate popular culture – at least in the 'West' – and its preeminent mass medium, television, alike. However, whereas documentaries on rock and pop stars and events became a successful and respectable subgenre (cf. Huck 2008b), sport documentaries were only rarely a success with the audience, and even more rarely with critics.

Lee-Wright suggests that sport documentaries have little chances to succeed as they stand against a corporate world of

gigantic multinational business returns. In this world, the documentarian, normally a poorly resourced individual or small company attempting a novel insight to this world, fares no better than a dinghy in the path of an ocean-going tanker. The television stations that pay millions for sports rights and the companies that own them face a conflict of interest, with investigations that may undermine the celebrities and take the shine off the contests that pull their punters and ensure their profits. (2006: 1270; cf. Lee-Wright 2010: 265)

Even if Lee-Wright's analysis is adequate, this, then, would be true for pop music as well: the broadcasting rights to matches as much as to gigs and records are corporately owned. Martin Scorsese, however, is not being criticised for the fact that he indeed 'fails' to 'undermine' The Band in his *The Last Waltz* (US, 1978); rather, he is applauded for revealing something about the music of the band that a record could not tell. Consequently, the relative lack of success of the sport documentary must have reasons that go beyond the institutional and the contextual.

2.1 Behind Sports

There are, I think, inherent differences between the popular culture of sport and the popular culture of music that favour the latter over the former as a subject for documentaries. Both employ the distinction between an on-stage show (the match, the concert) and an off-stage reality (the dressing room, the backstage area); both promise the viewer to go beyond what the mass media present and reveal mass media's manipulations (cf. Huck 2008b: 157-159). However, while in the case of music this wins a respectable audience, in the case of sport this appeals only to the hard-core aficionado.

Pop singers are constitutively double. It is difficult to talk about the performer without acknowledging the possibility to distinguish the on-stage persona from an assumed 'real' person 'behind' the performance (Auslander 2004: 6; cf. Huck, Kiefer & Schinko 2010). Within pop music, consequently, a look behind the scenes at least promises a deeper understanding of the performance we know from records, TV shows and live concerts: if we understand the songwriter's life, the reasoning goes, we can understand his/her performance persona. Regardless of the fact that academics like to uphold a strict distinction between author and narrator, the audience of pop music loves nothing more than to conflate the two in the star: if we know the person, we understand the work. Rock is expressive; sport, however, is performative.

We normally know the sportsman/-woman from her/his performance on TV or in the stadium only, too. Many of the most successful sport documentaries – and (semi-)fictional biopics – consequently attempt to explain the sporting performance with revelations about the 'real' person behind the performer; films about the lives of cricketers, baseball players and athletes were indeed among the first documentaries (cf. McKernan 1998: 125-126). Films about boxing especially, whether factual or fictional, provide a rare breed of successful sport films: from Hollywood blockbusters like the *Rocky* franchise (US, 1976-2006) and Scorsese's *Raging Bull* (US, 1980) to award winning documentaries like *When We Were Kings* (US,

1996) visual (and violent) spectacle is combined with the derivation of a specific performance in the ring from the lives and loves of the fighter. Most typically, the hardships outside the ring provide the grounds for endurance and aggression within. The only team-sport where this structure has been successfully applied seems to be basketball. The award winning *Hoop Dreams* (US, 1994) and the similar *Soul in the Hole* (US, 1997) follow the lives of young basketball hopefuls struggling for a place in the sun, i. e. a contract as a professional. “What made *Hoop Dreams* so watchable,” Aftab tellingly applauds, “was that it wasn’t really about basketball at all. It was the story of two African-American working-class kids, William Gates and Arthur Agee, who saw basketball as a way out of poverty and social housing.” (2008: n.p.)

Looking at those few documentaries that actually deal with mainstream sport, i. e. with those forms of sport that dominate the mass media, we find that most concentrate on individuals coming from marginalized sections of society. What this reveals is that most documentaries that deal with sport are either about forms of sport usually neglected by the mass media, e. g. skateboarding, athletes with quadriplegia who play wheelchair rugby, extreme mountaineering, or about things that stand in the way of sport, like racism, sexism, classism, discrimination against disabled people, politics or personal problems.

McDonald, in his analysis of the sport documentary, concludes that such contextualisations are indeed the central purpose of the genre:

At their best, in placing the sporting event or subject matter in context, the viewer gains a greater insight, understanding, and appreciation of the sporting event itself. Thus, occasionally sport documentaries emerge in which the sport and the social context dialectically fuse to produce a documentary that not only illuminates the social context but also heightens an appreciation of the sporting event. (2007: 222)

I guess the word to highlight here is ‘occasionally’: most of the time the sporting event itself recedes into the background, and the films become more about everything that stop sportsmen and -women from achieving their best, about all the things that stop sport from being a pure event. (Hollywood films about sport regularly end with the beginning of the final match, when all social, political, personal etc. obstacles are overcome so that the sport can begin.)

2.2 Sport as Event

Of course, sport, like every other aspect of society, is determined by those factors that shape modern cultures: race, gender, class, nationality, ability, age, religion, economy, etc. Therefore, if we look at sport, we surely find out something about these topics. Richard Holt emphasizes such symbolic role of sport in society: “As the anthropologist Clifford Geertz remarked, sports are a kind of ‘deep play’ in which the innermost values of a culture may be expressed [...]; they are, in a sense, ‘a story we tell ourselves about ourselves’” (Holt 1989: 3; cf. Huck 2008a). Consequently, many documentaries reveal the representational politics involved in sport, and as a creative semiotic endeavour they are well equipped to unearth this ‘story we tell ourselves about ourselves.’ However, if representational politics are what sport have in common with other aspects of modern life – pop music, art, literature etc. – it cannot be what makes sport ‘sport.’ There must be something specific to sport.

Ellis Cashmore’s paradigmatic attempt at *Making Sense of Sports* claims that sport is “autotelic” and does not “represent anything” (2000: 10). This means that while sport is involved in the representational politics of our time, there is something that goes beyond *representation*: sport, as we will see, is about *presence*. And to represent presence, to creatively rework liveness is what sport documentaries find difficult.

One of central reasons for our fascination with (watching) sport Cashmore suggests (with reference to Max Weber) is the ongoing bureaucratization of modern society, its aim to produce order, stability and security through increasing calculability (*ibid.*: 3). Life, consequently, becomes too predictable, and the indeterminacy of sport provides compensation for this predictability: “It is not to know what will happen that makes sport attractive.” (*ibid.*: 5) What Cashmore describes as a somewhat romantic theory of compensation, however, is a much more dialectic process. Bureaucratization is itself only a reaction to the rise of the fear-inducing experience of contingency in the modern world (cf. Luhmann 1998): as a consequence of the increase in communication, functional differentiation and the decrease of hierarchical orders, society becomes polycentric. There are no longer any privileged points from where to evaluate society as a whole in order to base one’s decisions on such (objective) representations. Instead, observations can only ever be made from the inside and have to compete with other representations. Organisations (and their bureaucracy) are a means to deal with such structural contingency by providing decision-making operations to follow. Sport, it seems, is that part of society which allows contingency back to the fore. But why do we love something in sport that we fear otherwise?

Of course, as Cashmore (2000: 255) admits, sport does not exist outside society, but is itself subject to bureaucratization: without rule books, without the stop watch, without

minutely organized tournaments, without scientifically informed training regimes and equipment, modern sport would be unthinkable. Sport, consequently, is not simply about the experience of contingency (or indeterminacy) – and the bureaucratization of sport does not endanger its function. Instead, sport provides a controlled experience of uncontrollability: during a football match, at least during a *good* football match, we never know what happens next; we can guess what might happen, or hope what should happen – but we can never be sure. However, we know, we can indeed safely predict that after 90 minutes, or sometimes 120 minutes, unpredictability will come to an end. This contingency is rule governed, it is just a game – it becomes entertainment (cf. Luhmann 2000: 51-62). Until the next match, factors of predictability rule: economic power, tactical acumen, physical fitness, cultural resources, historical weight etc. are discussed in newspapers, on TV news programmes and in the internet in order to make the outcome of the next match more predictable. During the week we can discuss endlessly who should, according to all relevant factors, win; *when Saturday comes*, this predictability is suspended for another ninety minutes.

The contingency that comes to the fore, and that we experience with pleasure, is anchored in the human body. The uncontrollability and unpredictability of the body, of pure materiality, becomes, other than in real life, the source of pleasurable entertainment. The viewer can “participate voyeuristically using a body-to-body analogy” when watching sport: “boundary situations of bodily control [are] being presented [...] in sport” and through these “boundary cases the problem of the sudden change from control to lack of control becomes visible” (*ibid.*: 59). However meticulously you plan a football match, however much you practice, the bodies of the players never fully follow this plan: there is always something unplanned going to happen – and that, other than in real life, is experienced as a good thing: we expect the unexpected. At these moments, often short moments only within a dreary match, pure physicality, pure corporeality comes to the fore – for a moment everything is possible, no controlling power from off the pitch can determine what will happen. “This experience makes it clear in retrospect how difficult, if not impossible, it would be to narrate the course of sporting events [...]. One has to go there oneself or watch it on television.” (*ibid.*)

On television! Because live tele-vision enables the bridging, or even the negation of spatial distance, it enables a simultaneity that other mass media, such as print or cinema, cannot deliver. Television and sport are indeed inseparable, “a match made in heaven,” as Cashmore has it (2000: 273). The function of television is “to report rather than interpret sports” (*ibid.*: 249). While popular music can be played over and over again, and sometimes

only reveals its charms after repeated listening and the pleasure of recognition, sport is to be perceived live: the “importance of ‘liveness’ to sport,” as David Rowe (2007: 33) emphasizes, cannot be overestimated. While pop music is ambivalent and overdetermined, and consequently invites the recipient to interpret it, sport, and especially football, is, at least for decisive moments, completely underdetermined. Documentaries about sport, however, instead of simply showing what happens, creatively interpret what happens. While such interpretive investment seems to be invited by deliberately ambivalent popular music (cf. Huck, Kiefer & Schinko 2010), sport is unambiguously clear – if only for the moment. The ‘truth,’ as a German saying has it, ‘is on the pitch.’

Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht, a scholar famous for bringing the experience of presence in line against the interpretive deferrals of hermeneutics, chose sport, and especially team sports, as the prime site for what he calls ‘form as event.’ For him, such forms move beyond the traditional oppositions of ‘being’ (substance) and ‘show’ (representation). A ‘form as event’ exists, and can be immediately experienced (even if mediated), as that moment when contingency, for once, is transformed into clarity by bodies that, for once, are in full control of themselves:

[P]erhaps I can bring my reflections to a close by showing how the contemporary fascination with sports (especially – or exclusively? – with team-sports) resides in a fascination with form as event. What we enjoy in a ‘great play’ – in a touchdown-pass from Joe Montana (rather than from Steve Young) to Jerry Rice, in a slapshot by Mario Lemieux and a save by Patrick Roy, and in a double-pass [sic] between Bebeto and Romario entering the penalty box – is the emergence of a form, of a form *in actu*; a form, however, which has disappeared by the time the play comes to its end. There is no duration and no possible snapshot of the great play. Today, thanks to media technology, we can replay and even analyze, over and again, the great play as the emergence of a form. But the emergence of each great play can only once be form-as-event. For eventness not only implies the aspect of processuality but also those of contingency and of unpredictability. Before a play happens, we cannot know whether negentropy as form will prevail over the constant threat of entropy (mainly) embodied by the opposing team. But we know that, despite its immediate vanishing, despite its ephemeral presence, the form of the play could not happen without the participation of real bodies. (1996: 591-592)

4. Football Documentaries

There are, relative to the overall production, relatively few films about sport, and these have had relatively little success – other than sport video games, for example, which dominate the market (cf. Crawford 2007). Documentaries about sport seem even more neglected, a marginalized subgenre of a marginalized form. McDonald (2007: 222-224) lists seventeen sport documentaries that he finds worth mentioning, one of them is about football. The three-volume *Encyclopedia of the Documentary Film* (Aitken 2006) has, as far as I can see, enlisted seven documentaries concerned with sport – none of them about football.

With their aim of providing a ‘creative treatment of actuality,’ documentaries, as I tried to explain, cannot deliver the live-experience that is so central to sport and which marries it to TV; instead, they deliver explanations and interpretations that only mar the experience of sport as event. Football – soccer, that is – seems even less suited to documentaries than other, individual sports. Boxing, for example, appears to be the favourite subject of sport films (Pearson et al. 2003: 150), but also athletics – *Olympic Diaries* (UK, 1996) and *Gold Fever* (UK, 2000) – extreme mountaineering – *Touching the Void* (UK, 2003) – and skateboarding – *Dogtown and the Z-Boys* (US, 2001) – have produced successful documentaries. The complex internal relationships between the twenty-two players on the pitch seem to make it even less credible, and helpful, to attribute specific achievements on the pitch to lives off the pitch. While off-the-pitch problems and behaviour might be able to stop players from achieving their full potential (George Best, Paul Gascoigne, Wayne Rooney, etc.), there are only few instances where the off-stage-life is seen to positively determine the performance on the pitch. Football, it seems, finds its specific fascination in being as far removed from the cultural determinations of class, ethnicity and gender as possible: during the ninety minutes the match lasts, football achieves an autonomy that seems to go beyond that of other sports.

Despite the various pitfalls for sport documentaries in general and football documentaries specifically, there is a small number of documentaries concerned with football. Not included are videotape/DVD collections of highlights, like *Gary Lineker's Striker* (UK, ca. 1992) or *Soccer's Hard Men* (UK, 2000);⁶ these films do explicitly not aim at a ‘creative treatment,’ but rather please nostalgic or fetishistic desires. Similarly, TV productions that either present live or simulated-live events, or that present news surrounding these events are not considered. According to the distinctions developed above, documentaries on football either try to contextualise a sporting event or personality (‘Behind the Media’), or show what

the mass media fail to present ('Away from the Media'), or deconstruct usual ways of representing the game ('Beyond the Medium'). In the remainder of this essay, I want to analyse a few representative films for each category, rather than to produce an extensive filmography.

Behind the Media

The Saturday Men (UK, 1962) is the third instalment of a 'Look at Britain'-series produced by the Ford Motor Company. The DVD-cover of the 2009 release praises the film as a true documentary: "This is one of the earliest examples of the 'fly-on-the-wall' documentary style which is such a firm favourite of filmmakers today, the non-intrusive observational method allowing unrivalled access to the real lives of the subjects." The film opens with the image of football fans squeezing their heads through a fence in order to catch a glimpse of their favourite players. The following, then, offers to show what these people strain to see: it presents a week in the life of West Bromwich Albion FC. The viewer can observe the players training, refreshing after exercising and taking a shower. Also, the film reveals something about the players' personal lives, their plans for when their career is over, their lives with kids and wives, their hobbies and interests, but also their growing alienation from their working class backgrounds. Furthermore, the film shows those off the pitch that nonetheless belong to the club: the board members, the manager, the punters, the ordinary fans, the team doctor, the ground staff, etc. When it comes to the match, the film highlights the preparations that are normally hidden from the general audience's view: how the players undress, take off watches, rings and false teeth, how they put on their kit and how, finally, the manager prepares them with a team talk. The film closes with what would normally be considered the main act, i. e. the match: however, the camera concentrates on the terraces instead of the pitch – as the mainstream media would. All in all, the film can be considered a representative of Direct Cinema, a distant relative of D. Alan Pennebaker's *Dont Look Back* (US, 1967), which portrays live behind the scenes of Bob Dylan's 1965 tour through Britain (cf. Huck 2008b), but also a late follower of the 'British Documentary Movement' with its concern for working class morals.

Six Days to Saturday (UK, 1963), produced by BBC's Documentary Unity, follows the blueprint laid out by *The Saturday Men*. This time, the documentary camera presents the lives of those involved in Swindon Town Football Club between two matches; what the camera captures is contrasted right from the beginning with reports in the media. Again, we see players training, the manager delivering his team talk and so on. The audience can see all

those things that it cannot see in the stadium or watching Grandstand, BBC's sports programme that was launched in 1958, or Sports Personality of the Year, which was launched in 1954 and apparently attracted 12 million viewers in that year alone.

The formula that was set out by these films, and which is standard procedure in the realm of rock and pop, is still applied today. *Manchester United: Beyond the Promised Land* (UK, 2000), to name only one example of many club portraits, promises (on the DVD cover) to provide a "sensational behind the scenes film," a film that "reveals the antics on the pitch and in the boardroom, the club at work and at play and the fans from near and afar." Similarly, *The Real David Beckham* (UK, 2000) promises to do the same: show what happens when the cameras of the journalists are gone and, as the VHS cover has it, deliver an "intimate and revealing portrait of a born performer," which "chronicles the daily life of the most high profile player in Britain today." (cf. Schwab 2006: 783-785) However, in a media savvy age it is naïve to think that Alex Ferguson or David Beckham would let down their guard when in front of the documentary camera instead of those of the mass media – or that the final product would not have been cleared by the management. Rather, the films present a suitable backstage persona to complement an on-stage persona – and not the 'real' person behind the mask worn for the media. These films, then, present themselves as documentaries but offer little insight beyond the expected – although, of course, it can also be revealing to observe what the management thinks should be known of their clients.

While personalities and teams are difficult to come close to these days, events still offer themselves to the documentary, following a long tradition of films about the Olympics. A series of films that have been commissioned by FIFA to document the World Cup finals since 1954 turn a TV-event into a documentary. *Goal! The World Cup* (US, 1967), capturing the 1966 home win for England, manages to emancipate itself, at least to a certain degree, from the task of reporting. The film opens with a sophisticated stop-and-go editing on the beat of a jazz track, turning scenes from a match into a ballet of bodies. After this intro, a goal kick is cut against the take-off of a jet. Football, as the following introduction explains, has become a global event in a globalised world: "In 1930, when it all began, the European teams took weeks to sail to Uruguay. Now, as they fly into London airport, it's a matter of jets and hours." (03:33-03:41) London itself is portrayed as a cosmopolitan and multicultural metropolis, although with a distinct British tradition, that is indifferent to the World Cup at the beginning, but slowly warms to it. The film shows summaries of the matches also, of course, but it manages to reveal aspects that the audience of a live-broadcast would remain oblivious to. There is little voice-over commentary; instead, the images, supported by the

music, are allowed to speak for themselves. A good example is the moment when Pele goes down after another scathing attack by the Portuguese (25:40): when Pele lies on the ground injured, the sounds from the crowd are slowly faded out (25:55); music sets in (26:35) when Pele is carried off the pitch; when the referee finally restarts the match, the camera does not follow the match anymore, but stays with Pele until he re-enters the pitch and the noise reappears. Here, the ‘creative shaping’ and the ‘rearrangement’ of actuality succeed in revealing a significance that remains invisible to most in the stadium and in front of the TV. Towards the end of the film, the narrator claims: “World Cup Crowds – crowds of the *what* happens, not for *how* it happens” (52:37). The documentary audience cannot be interested in the *what*, as the *what* is obvious/gone by the time they watch: instead, they become second-order observers looking for the *how* – and the documentary has the cinematic means to reveal *how* it happened.

Away from the Media

The look behind the scenes of a famous club, player or event is certainly the most successful form of the sport documentary. However, as such revelations become as futile as the attempt to uphold the sociological distinction between social role and real person, the world beyond the big clubs and beyond the big money comes increasingly into focus. Ken Loach’s *Another City: A Week in the Life of Bath’s Football Club* (UK, 1998), for example, portrays a semi-professional club that tries hard to re-enter league football. While the film offers the usual behind the scenes material, e. g. dressing room, team talk, players' dreams, board, ground staff etc., the focus is on football’s role in working class communities. It portrays the ties between a community football club that will never make it onto Sky and the local citizens that support the club. This documentary camera shows a world that exists even though the mainstream media do not report about it. *The Game of Their Lives* (UK, 2002), in a similar vein, revisits the long forgotten North Korean players who beat Italy at the 1966 World Cup to reach the quarterfinals (cf. Schwab 2006: 418-423).

While Loach shows those that the mass media are not interested in, other films concentrate on the neglected contexts of professional football. Films about hooliganism are flourishing (cf. Poulton 2007), but often indulge in nothing more than ‘hoolporn’ – inviting an apparently nauseated, but nonetheless voyeuristic gaze at violence. *Trouble on the Terraces* (UK, 1994) interviews fans, police, psychologists, anthropologists and other academics commenting on the topic and contrasts these comments with TV images from news programmes. Added to these voices are various forms of archival footage, often recorded

privately or by the police, showing hooliganism in action (cf. Schwab 2006: 914-916). However, there is little cinematic intent involved: images are used to illustrate, rather than creatively arranged to reveal a filmic truth. *Undercover Britain: Football Touts* (UK, 1996) is another example of a film interested in context: the TV-documentary investigates the illegal re-selling of tickets. *Kill the Referee* (BEL, 2010), a brilliant documentary with the English referee Howard Webb at its heart, provides insight into the work of those for whom the biggest compliment normally is that they weren't noticed. In this film, everything is shown from their perspective; we are even allowed to eavesdrop on the communication between linesmen and referee during a match. Here, really, the documentary manages to reveal something about football that the mainstream media have shown little interest in.

Beyond the Medium

The third subgenre of the football documentary neither tries to go behind nor away from the cameras of the mass media. Instead, they try to reveal a new perspective on the apparently known. *Fußball wie noch nie* (GER, 1970), Hellmuth Costard's portrait of George Best, leaves out everything that is not football itself. During the course of a match eight cameras are permanently focused on every move of Best; even during the break the camera shows a close-up of Best's face. Apart from the score and the time of play we learn nothing about the development of the game; there is no voice-over to explain to the audience what happens, no slow motion to reveal what the naked eye cannot see, no totals to provide an overview of the action: no attempt is made to penetrate the surface of performance. Instead the audience has to follow Best, whether he is involved in the game or not, whether he runs, stands or lies on the ground; we don't learn about his partner in a one-two, or who scores the goal he apparently sets up.

Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait (FRA, 2006) is a similarly radical endeavour, co-directed by Turner Prize-winning artist Douglas Gordon and French artist Philippe Parreno. For this film, seventeen cameras were focused on Zinedine Zidane during a match between his Real Madrid team and Villarreal. Part film, part art-installation, the whole match is shown only from the perspective of Zidane. *Zidane* can be understood to deconstruct the live-modus of TV (cf. Rowe 2007: 37) which it quotes at the beginning: instead of an apparently objective perception of the match as the TV cameras construct it, the film presents an utterly subjective experience of the match, using Zidane as a focalizer: here, the speed of the match rises and falls according to the level of Zidane's participation. A score produced by the Scottish experimental rock group Mogwai as well as digital effects highlight this subjectivity.

For most of the time, the contingency of the game is blatantly obvious – nothing much happens; at one single moment, however, a touch and a shimmy are enough to create a form as event from this contingency: Zidane uses his unrivalled skill to triumph over the entropy of the match. It is one of the few moments, however, that make the film enjoyable.

5. Finally: Looking for Eric

The question asked at the beginning – why is it that mass media's critical twin, the documentary, is so utterly uninterested in football, mass media's prodigal child? – might be answered rather predictably:

Sport films are not about the art of film. [...] [This] combination – though undeniably beautiful – is ultimately irrelevant. We want to know who won. [...] The other failing of [...] sports film [...] is in that past tense. Film comes after the event. [...] But sport is all about being live, uncertain and tense anticipation. Only television has been able to give us the experience of being there live [...]. (McKernan 1998: 137)

While this seems to be a simple, sweeping truth, it is interesting to see how different forms of sport lend themselves to different forms of films, some more, some less successfully. Football, more than other forms of sport (e. g. boxing), can neither be explained through personal characteristics of its proponents, nor are its proceedings determined by other heteronomous forces, nor is its execution completely distorted by the mass media. Documentaries' most central modes, direct cinema and performative documentary, consequently, are ill suited to come to terms with football.

There are, however, other ways of approaching football. Ken Loach, in his recent feature film *Looking for Eric* (UK, 2009), changes perspectives. Instead of trying to answer what football really is through either documentary or fictional modes, he asks what (actual) football means to those who have to live their lives once the fleeting form of the event is gone. Through the fictional story of postman Eric, Loach tries to reveal how football (personified by ex-Manchester United star Eric Cantona) plays a part in a life that has to be lived in-between the negentropies of football matches, that has to be wrung from the powers of entropy. It is here, in the contact zone of fact and fiction, that the future of the sports film might lie: such films are less interested in the *actuality* that is represented in media products than in the reality that is *created* by them.⁷

Notes

¹ Viewing figures are according to the Broadcasters' Audience Research Board.

² I cannot share Ian McDonald's judgement that "sport documentaries form a significant part of the documentary tradition" and that only "the nascent discipline of documentary studies" (2007: 208) has neglected their critical appraisal.

³ Parts of the following overview of the history of the documentary is based on an earlier engagement with the documentary; cf. Huck & Kiefer (2007).

⁴ Most of the historiographic information is taken from the excellent *Encyclopedia of the Documentary Film* (Aitken 2006), the invaluable databases of the British Film Institute (www.bfi.org.uk) and the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com).

⁵ For the distinction between expository, observational and performative documentary, as well as the less central poetic, participatory and reflexive mode, cf. Nichols (1991) and Bruzzi (2006).

⁶ The website *Football Heaven* lists an endless array of such productions in its video section; cf. www.footballheaven.net.

⁷ I like to thank the editor of this issue and the anonymous reviewer for bringing important further material to my attention.

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