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THE AESTHETICS IN FOOTBALL

The beautiful game?

Stephen Mumford

Why the beautiful game?

Football is frequently called the beautiful game. It presents itself as the most aesthetic of all sports. But how much truth is there in the old cliché, the credit for which is claimed by former-BBC commentator Stuart Hall? In this chapter, broad support will be offered for it. Football is indeed the most beautiful of sports. But we need to rely on more than just the received opinion. Is there a compelling reason to give football an aesthetic status above most if not all other sports? An argument will be offered to that effect. The case will be made that football exhibits a complex and multilayered aesthetic that at least in part accounts for its supreme popularity. There are many aesthetic dimensions we should note within football and an account of the basis of one of the most abstract of these – real sporting drama – will be offered in terms of a so-called tendential theory of sporting prowess.

There is already a large literature on aesthetics within sport generally (for instance Aspin, 1974; Fisher, 1974; Cooper, 1978; Cordner, 1988; Gumbrecht, 2006; Lacerda and Mumford, 2010; Mumford, 2012a). The only conclusion I take from those discussions is that sport indeed exhibits legitimate aesthetic values. My main concern will be what those are in the case of football.

The aesthetic hypothesis

Football enthusiasts see that, at its best, football is capable of the sublime. There are beautiful goals, beautiful games and moments of the highest athletic beauty. Much depends on one’s perspective, of course. Manchester United’s 1999 injury time Champions League win against Bayern Munich may have been sublime for some but probably not for the Bayern fans. Many fans seem able to enjoy the beauty only when it is their own team producing it (Mumford, 2012b), but this is not to deny that the beauty exists. For opposition fans, it’s more a case of declining to take aesthetic pleasure in it even though there may be a grudging acknowledgement that it’s there. Occasionally there are moments that unite all, such as when Brazil scored their fourth goal in the 1970 World Cup Final. Even Italian fans could appreciate that, and perhaps with the passage of time they can appreciate it more as the hurt of defeat fades.
This aesthetic element of the sport, I will claim, is more than merely incidental. There is, however, a view that sport is, and should be, all about the quest for victory (Elliott, 1974). Arguably, in competition the athlete has no business trying to produce beauty. After all, an ugly goal counts as much as a beautiful one. Artists aim for the sublime, not footballers, and any aesthetic values they do produce is surely inessential to their endeavour. Contrary to this view, however, I argue in favour of the aesthetic hypothesis that aesthetic considerations have shaped the development of the sport, continue to do so, and explain its continuing survival and success. Football is the most popular spectator sport in the world and it is no coincidence that the most popular sport is also the most aesthetic because – according to the aesthetic hypothesis – the latter explains the former. We watch football because we find it beautiful in many different ways and on many levels.

The aesthetic hypothesis applies not only to football. What it suggests in practical terms is that rules of sports are developed and evolve on the basis of making a more enjoyable experience for the spectator: a more aesthetically enjoyable one. We might consider the abolition of the back-pass rule in football. A few decades ago, defenders would frequently pass the ball back to their goalkeeper who, at that time, was able to safely pick it up. But this slowed the game down, making it boring and frustrating. Spectacle and excitement would make football a global phenomenon and the back-pass rule detracted from it so had to go. Similarly, goal nets – first used in a game in Nottingham in 1891 (Mumford, 2009: 6) – were developed and retained not just to aid the correct judgement of the scoring of a goal, but also because they made the goal look good. Seeing the ball bulge in the net and spring back out is one of the most beautiful sights for the fan. And the different shirt colours that were originally used merely to distinguish the two sides were soon found to make an attractive visual contrast, especially set against the green of the playing area. We have reached a point where the kits are now very deliberately and artistically designed for maximum aesthetic appeal. Few of these innovations are for the benefit of the participants, except insofar as they are ever in a position to enjoy their own game aesthetically. The back-pass rule made the game more athletically demanding by preventing a way of slowing it down. But the spectators liked the change and thus it stayed. Arguably they did not appreciate the ‘golden goal’ rule in knock-out competitions and that rule subsequently did not survive. The abrupt end to the game did not give a sense of proper closure without the opposition having a chance to level the score until the referee called time.

The aesthetic hypothesis sets sports in an almost Darwinian struggle for our attentions and the benefits that follow. Not all sport is in the business of wanting spectators, of course. Squash, rock-climbing and jogging on the whole serve different purposes, such as maintenance of fitness. But in the context of commercial exploitation, competing spectator sports have indeed evolved and continue to do so. Now while other sports similarly grow and develop, football arguably is the one that has found the best, if not yet entirely perfect, aesthetic combination. It’s current health on many financial measures is a key indicator of its popularity, a popularity I argue is down to aesthetic considerations. I will now go on to outline some of those complex aesthetic values but I will then end with a note of caution. Football may flourish now but the evolutionary ‘arms race’ is never a static matter. Other sports could yet improve to a point where they outstrip football. And football itself could face an aesthetic decline, caused by its financial arrangements, which would almost inevitably see its popularity overtaken.

The aesthetic of the concrete and particular

We may start at perhaps the most apparent and obvious of aesthetic categories within sport, which I will call the concrete particular. By this I mean the aesthetic values that are found in
the bodies and movements of the individual players during a game. We might consider, for instance, the grace of Garrincha as he dances round an opponent or the awe-inspiring sight of Wayne Rooney scoring with an acrobatic overhead kick in a feat that looked almost superhuman. Many professional-level footballers have beautiful bodies and sport is a context in which it is permissible to admire them. It is permissible precisely because it is an aesthetic gaze rather than, for example, a sexual one (Mumford, 2011: 137). And one notable aesthetic advantage that football has over other sports is the sheer range of beautiful actions and movements that it is necessary to perform in order to gain competitive advantage.

The latter point is a key one. Elliott is right that the athlete aims for victory but the rules of football are such that the instantiation of aesthetic value is an inevitable accompaniment of it. One must be able to stretch highest to win the header, run fastest to get the ball, stretch fully to make the save, turn quickly to deceive the opponent, and so on. And all of these involve bodily shapes, figures and motions that are considered appealing aesthetically. Consider the goalkeeper’s dive, stretch and save, for instance. A fully extended body is one that we can enjoy aesthetically. We do so in gymnastics, for instance. Such a body appeals more than one that is loose, inefficient, bent, out of control, uncoordinated. And this aesthetically appealing bodily shape is just one in football, among so many. There is thus a richer aesthetic resource in football than in golf, for instance, where the range of bodily actions performed in a game is far narrower.

Particulars can stand in part–whole relations. An individual player is situated within a larger whole, which encompasses a whole field of play, a whole game, and a setting. This larger particular too is an aesthetic object for the spectator. Some abstraction is required on the part of the viewer to get the most out of this experience, as I shall go on to show, but for the moment I am considering the view of the game and its context. Football seems to have found the right balance among a number of factors that facilitate an aesthetic view.

There are two very different kinds of view that it is worth discussing apart. First, there are the spectators who watch at the stadium, in person. An appeal of doing so is that the whole field of play is within view. Even the events on the far side of the pitch can be watched without much loss of relevant detail. In some sports, the area of play is much larger: in polo and cricket, for instance. If one attends motor racing or horse racing, one is often able to perceive only a part of the track and only a fraction of the event with one’s own eyes. For football, one has a view on the whole rectangle of play. Every player is before the viewer such that the whole is perceivable and the sum of parts. This is not an insignificant point, as I shall argue later. Hence, one can see the brightly coloured shirt of one player but also the setting within which it is located, matching with the shirts of teammates, contrasting with those of the opposition, and contrasting against the grass pitch. And attending in person allows one also to perceive the context, namely the stadium within which the game is played and that forms the spectacular backdrop. Stadiums too are now subject to high standards of architectural design. They can be works of art and stadium design too has displayed a remarkable evolution over the past century from the early days in which stadiums grew in a barely planned and haphazard way with little unity and integrity. The stadium is now something in itself to see. And the fan experience is completed with the view of fellow spectators filling those stadiums, with colours, noise, singing and choreographed exhibitions of banners and flares making for an intense sense experience. There are, of course, sports with a much smaller field of play than that of football. But this comes, I suggest, with a loss of spectacle or with fewer things that can fit within it and around it. A badminton court has only two or at most four players, for instance. Basketball is popular in the US but is restricted in what it can do within that confined space. The bigger the field, the more spectacular the view: until the point where it is too big to be comfortably apprehended within a single view. The football pitch, it is suggested, is of the optimum size for the live sporting experience.
A second kind of viewer is the one watching on TV. This is worth mentioning as a distinct class because of the effect the intervention of TV has had upon the aesthetic of the game, both in the way it is presented and the way it is viewed. Television coverage has done much to promote the game and exploit as well as develop its aesthetic. The slow-motion replay, and now the super-slowmo, have evolved from merely allowing the viewer at home a second look at a goal to now depicting players in athletic/aesthetic poses and movements. Such sequences are interspersed within the coverage often when the play depicted was relatively insignificant but where it had aesthetic and spectacular value. This innovation is of course part of a bigger picture in which the director chooses which shots to take of the game: the camera angles, the camera selection, wide angle or close in, and what to replay and how. For a top-level game, there are now scores of angles available on each goal scored, with the director choosing the best from an aesthetic point of view and not merely factually depicting that the ball crossed the line. TV tells the viewer a story, very obviously aided by the commentator whose job it is to do explicitly that. It takes control of what is seen and heard. Much is usually out of shot, in contrast to the spectator within the stadium who may choose where to look and not necessarily just to follow the ball. This may give the live spectator an advantage when it comes to a view of tactics and patterns of play. This is a more abstract view of the game, to which I now turn.

The abstract view: patterns and tactics

An aesthetic view that is less immediate and requires more learning than the concrete is an aesthetic appreciation of the patterns of play to be found in football and the tactical nuances that lead to success. The novice cannot see much of these tactical patterns and the TV viewer is often disempowered from doing so due to the tight camera angles: hence the need for analysts accompanying the commentator in order to explain the tactical aspects. At the stadium, however, especially with a high view, one may see the pattern of play in the whole, where the game is often won and lost not with the ball but, rather, in what occurs some distance away from it.

Viewing the whole, one can see the field positions of all the players. One can see, for instance, that a run is made off the ball, dragging a defender out of position, creating space for a more effective play to develop. One can see the team fall deep, or push up, one can see the possibility of a goal sometime before it becomes real – and usually before a TV audience would. One is able to judge space and movement and patterns within that movement. The effective team behaves as a single, holistic entity, moving on the field as if with a single but collective mind.

One’s perception must be educated in order to grasp this. One must see not just the individual players and their movements but see them as part of the whole and part of the pattern. This pattern is grasped by abstraction from many individual runs and changes of direction occurring in the game. It has to be perceived over an extended period of time and many incidents. This might not be quite the whole game because there is a possibility of a team changing tactics and formations within a game. And to grasp the beauty within the tactics, the spectator must also be able to understand why these actions are being performed: as part of a problem-solving exercise.

Again there need be no conflict between the aim for victory and the accompanying aesthetic qualities. Although the team is not trying to create a beautiful pattern by running around in some particular coordinated fashion, them doing so in order to solve their problems within the game can nevertheless be seen as beautiful by us. Similarly, it is arguable that in art the aim is not directly to create beauty. The novelist wants to tell a good story, the sculpture wants to create a three-dimensional form using certain materials, the painter wants to create a pattern of colours, possibly as a depiction, and beauty occurs in some of the cases in which artists solve these problems.
There is another aesthetic aspect that we can now see in football. Part of the aesthetic appeal is the interplay between the concrete and the abstract. The problem of achieving victory over an opponent with the same aim as you is solved at the level of the particular and whole working in parallel. Certainly, individual players must win their individual battles, being stronger and faster than their immediate opponent, but this produces victory only if it is effective within the functioning of the whole that is the team. There is no point winning an individual battle that serves no subfunction within the functioning of the whole team. The parts must be coordinated within the strategy of the whole, rather than undirected. And yet the whole could not function without the parts playing their assigned role.

Not every sport has this dimension of part and whole working in harmony. In golf, again, the lusory (game) goal is simple (on lusory goals, see Suits, 2005: 49). An individual player merely attempts to get the ball into the hole in as few strokes as possible (which is not to deny that there can be some tactics in how best to secure that by earlier shots setting up the best approach play). In football, there is a combination of individual, one-on-one battles, which themselves can be apprehended aesthetically, and the full battle at the level of the whole, which is team on team. The successful coach is one who sees the part and whole as problems to be solved in parallel, finding players who can best play a role that is required for the success of the whole. One good example of this was Sir Alf Ramsey’s use of Bobby Charlton in the 1966 World Cup Final to neutralise Franz Beckenbauer.

**Drama: the high aesthetic**

At an even higher level of abstraction, a huge part of the aesthetic of football comes from the drama it provides. Drama can be thought of as a higher aesthetic category in that it concerns more than an aesthetic gaze applied to an event or series of events but also requires higher cognitive abilities of understanding, engagement with narrative structures, contextualising and so on. In respect of the latter, for instance, it may be highly dramatic if a lower-ranked team is able to defeat a much higher-ranked one. There may be nothing in the perceptible event – the match – that indicates this relative standing. A casual visitor may know nothing of the rankings nor history of the two teams competing. But the addition of that contextual knowledge may change the whole perception into a dramatic and aesthetic one. Similarly, drama occurs within a perceived narrative. A player may return from injury or other difficulties to score the goal and, within that context, it matters more than if some other player had scored a goal that looked exactly the same. Similarly, there is a narrative comprehended within the game itself: thus a goal scored in the final minute is far more dramatic than an indistinguishable one scored in the thirtieth.

There is nevertheless an attack on the idea that sport contains real drama. David Best (1974) pointed out a number of dissimilarities between the true drama of the theatre and the case of sport. On the stage actors adopt a role. They play someone else. In sport, it is the players themselves that we go to see, not some character that they are playing. Hence, Brutus kills Caesar on the stage. The actor playing Caesar does not die and the actor playing Brutus is not put on trial. In a game of football, however, a broken leg can be suffered by an individual. Victories and defeats are really suffered rather than merely depicted as they are on the stage. The actor is not sad who suffers a merely depicted defeat: indeed, they may be quite pleased if they portrayed it well. To think of football as unscripted theatre is thus misleading, thinks Best. Football is not just theatre without a script. There are other differences between sports and the genuinely dramatic.

It is arguable, however, that these dissimilarities are apparent only (Mumford 2011: ch. 6). Given one’s place within the whole – the team performance that aims at victory – then an
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An individual player can very much be understood as adopting a role (as Bobby Charlton did in that 1966 Final) within and for that performance. And they are also adopting a role within the game: an adversarial role towards opponents who sometimes are personal friends. Often a player plays at international level against a teammate from club level, switching between cooperative and adversarial roles. And in that case, the harm of a hard tackle is indeed done to the player qua opponent rather than qua friend or individual human being, which thus produces no personal animosity. Occasionally, however, opponents may overstep a significant boundary and deliver a harm that is not required for performance of the game. If one player deliberately ‘tackles over the ball’ in order to break an opponent’s leg, then this is a personal harm inflicted and suffered that is not necessary in playing the game. Similarly, a personal insult may be delivered to an individual rather than merely an attempt to undermine their confidence in their play. This indeed was Zinedine Zidane’s defence for headbutting Marco Materazzi in the 2006 World Cup Final. And in the theatre, there is an analogous boundary. Suppose the actor playing Brutus personally detests the actor playing Caesar and when he has to use the prop knife to stab Caesar digs it in unnecessarily hard, whispering in his ear as he falls that he wishes he was dying for real. These actions are not required in order for that actor to fulfil his Brutus role. His counterpart would therefore be perfectly entitled to think of those actions as not being part of the play’s performance. This is how we should understand a variety of activities in football, such as spitting, biting, racist abuse, and so on, which are contrasted with other physical challenges that are part of the game, even if they result in harm being suffered accidentally.

The foregoing argument is aimed at showing how the drama to be found in football can be an authentic and genuine drama, answering an objection to the contrary. But there is yet more that we can say because there is another element of sport that is vital to that drama and concerning which football fares especially well.

The tendential theory of sporting prowess

One vital precondition of sporting drama concerns its balance between the advantages of skills, abilities and other attributes and the element of chance. If the outcome of sport were a matter of pure chance, it would have little interest as a spectacle. Coin-tosses would make for relatively poor entertainment, for instance. This is not to say that there can be no interest in seeing games of pure chance. Roulette may be interesting for a while, though it’s hard to imagine anyone watching purely for an interest in numbers.

However, it seems that we want at least some chance, or what looks to be chance. If the outcome of a sporting contest was entirely predictable, then it again would be of little interest to the spectator. Suppose for instance that just by looking at the league table, one knew the result of a match in advance because the stronger team always beat the weaker. That too would eventually make very dull watching, even if there was artistic play in securing the results. One might appreciate the general play but if the goals and wins were inevitable then it is hard to imagine how we could get too excited watching them.

Some sports are rather too predictable. Suppose we go to watch tug-of-war. The two sides have had a weigh-in and we know that one side is much heavier than the other. The result may feel inevitable and when it comes to pass there is hardly any excitement. There is nothing dramatic in sport when the inevitable is played out; and here there may be a real contrast with the theatre where a script is followed closely.

It seems, then, that we need to strike an optimum balance between the outcomes being a result of skills and attributes and being a matter of chance. Too far in either direction and we lose interest. An entirely predictable outcome, if the strongest always won, or an entirely
unpredictable outcome where it’s all down to chance, and there is no sporting spectacle and no possibility of drama.

How can we explain the way in which sport strikes the right balance, and football in particular? One explanation would be that the stronger team does indeed always win. Perhaps it is just that we start from a position of ignorance as to which team will be stronger on the day. One team may be higher in the league but perhaps they have a vital player out injured or another weakened by a virus. The dramatic spectacle might then consist only in having it revealed to us which team is indeed the stronger at the time of the contest. But there is a problem with such an account. It seems to trivialise the notions of stronger and weaker in sport. Winning the contest becomes definitive of being the strongest during it and thus the notions of stronger and weaker lose their explanatory power. We can explain the victory of a side in terms of them being the stronger team only if being the stronger is not defined in terms of being the winner. That would then be like saying that an uncle is an unmarried man, which is true by definition. Being an unmarried man cannot cause one to be an uncle and similarly, on this interpretation, being the stronger side could not cause one to win the game.

Instead, therefore, I offer what can be called a tendential theory of sporting prowess, which explains how being the all-round strongest can lead to victory but in a way that explains too how sport finds a balanced level of predictability and thereby the possibility of dramatic moments.

The basic idea is that the athletic virtues of the sport – attributes such as speed, strength, agility, and so on – are those that tend towards success. They do not guarantee it but they are able to bring success about and indeed tend to do so. In contrast, athletic liabilities are those that tend towards defeat: liabilities such as lack of stamina or a susceptibility to uncontrolled anger. The outcome of a game of football is down to a vast complex of factors that are beyond anyone’s total control, no matter how much a good side prepares. Each individual player contributes to the outcome and in various complex ways. But we can also add to that the tactics, which if right can make the whole more than the sum of its parts. And there are other factors in play. Some may be environmental, such as the weather: the swirling wind making the ball move unpredictably. The referee and players might be subconsciously influenced by the crowd, and so on. Outcomes cannot be controlled, therefore, because they are produced by too many causal factors.

But a team can do many things that will tend towards success. They can be fit and tactically prepared. A sports psychologist may have the task of making the team mentally strong, and they may have studied the strengths and weaknesses of their opponents. The better prepared they are, the more they will tend to win. But in a game like football, in which there is direct competition between opponents, the outcome will be a result of the relative balance of preparedness between the two sides. A crucial feature of this view, however, is that we cannot say simply that the winning team must have been better than the losing, simply in virtue of the fact that they won. One team might indeed be stronger than another but still lose. The better team will tend to win more often, but in any one sporting contest anything could happen. Similarly, a loaded coin may tend to land heads more than tails – more than half of the time – but tails can still appear.

What goes for the complex aetiology of sporting outcomes, goes for causation generally. It exhibits what Mumford and Anjum (2011: ch. 8) call the dispositional modality. Sporting prowess disposes towards victory but this disposition is irreducibly tendential in nature. And this is the same with causation in any other sphere. Causes dispose towards their effects where such a disposition is less than the necessitating of an outcome but more than complete chance. Hitting a golf ball exactly towards a hole disposes it towards falling in but without guaranteeing it, as every golfer knows. There might be a big gust of wind or a twig that knocks the ball off
course. And the causation of football, as already noted, is massively complex. Hence, a strong team might just get that bad bit of luck. A ball might hit the post and spin out, when an opposite spin could have brought a goal. A goalkeeper might block a shot with closed eyes, little knowing for sure that the save will be made. But the goalkeeper probably understands the dispositional modality all too well. The keeper knows to take up a certain position relative to the shot and to make a certain body shape in full knowledge that there is little that can be done against a perfect shot but that this kind of stance tends to produce more saves than any other.

Sporting prowess can thus be understood in this tendential sort of way. A full league campaign is a very good way of measuring those tendencies. Over a full season, the best team will indeed tend to win because these dispositions – the attributes of the sport – will tend to manifest themselves as the number of sporting encounters grows. Kretchmar (2005) notes this, though without the theoretical framework of the tendential theory. In any one game, the weaker team can beat this stronger but over the full season, it is reasonable to expect the better teams to finish above the weaker.

There is the possibility of real drama in sport because of the tendencies that produce its results. We know that the better team will tend to win, and this is how we want it. There would be less interest in watching if the better team was guaranteed to win but also if the result was random. But we still like to know that either side could win, even if it is a mismatch on paper. And this is where I insist that football does particularly well. In tug-of-war, but even in a game like Rugby Union, the better team tends to win far more often, and by a bigger score. Because football is relatively low scoring, there is a greater possibility of upsets, where the weaker team produces the dramatic unexpected win. Similarly, in one game, a team holding a 3–0 lead will have a strong tendency to win but high drama can be created where this tendency is defeated, such as when Liverpool won the Champions League in 2005 from that adverse position.

There is also dramatic content to be found in the competition overall. As noted, in a year-long league competition, the strongest team should win. But it might not always. A tight contest might come down to the final match, with the top teams neck and neck. And in that final round of games, anything could happen. And the tendential nature of footballing prowess is very evident in knock-out Cup competitions in which there is a series of one-off encounters. Weaker teams have a greater chance here, as tendencies manifest themselves more the greater the number of tests. Thus a team such as fourth-level Bradford City could reach a major Cup Final. Third-level Hødd even won the Norwegian Cup in 2012, defeating top-tier Tromsø in the Final. Football is full of such upsets, which all become part of the dramatic narrative and an essential aesthetic component of the sport.

Aesthetic decline

There is nevertheless a caution concerning football’s future. The aesthetic hypothesis has been ventured in which a substantial part of the popular success of football is down to its aesthetic appeal to its audience. Much attention continues to be devoted to its aesthetic development. However, one area that might unintentionally fall into decline through short-term financial gain overcoming its longer-term interests is the dramatic potential of football. In some countries in the world this is already very apparent.

The dramatic appeal has been created by this optimum balance between necessity and chance. There must be adequate amounts of both. But if we reach a situation in which some teams become so much better resourced and consequently so much stronger than the others, then their tendency to win may be so much stronger than all others that it becomes too difficult to resist. There are some domestic leagues around Europe, for instance, that have the same
champion virtually every season (Belarus has had the same champion since 2006). This is not
good for the also-rans but it is also not really good in the longer term for the winner. The value
of their own league is badly diminished and attendances will fall, along with domestic revenue.
The reason this seems to happen is that the title brings with it Champions League entry the next
year and even if elimination follows at the first hurdle, the revenue is greater than any domestic
opponent can hope to gain.

If football continues down this track, it could become the sport that eats itself. Dramatic
potential is reduced and, as noted earlier, other sports might catch up and overtake football in
this aesthetic arms race. If they do, football’s popularity will fade. The beautiful game might be
a relative accolade. It is not inconceivable that, without constant attention to its aesthetic
dimension, football might be surpassed by a sport that is able to become more beautiful. The
authorities should take note if they are capable of legislating for football’s long-term interest.

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