

One Day in September: Grass Roots Enthusiasm, invented Traditions and Con temporary Commercial Spectacle and the Australian Football League Finals

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In the northern winter of 1983 the Italian-born American composer, Gian Carlo Menotti was visiting the warmer climes of Melbourne to consider the prospect of creating a third Spoleto Festival. Already established in Spoleto in Italy and in Charleston in South Carolina, a third cultural festival in Australia would allow Spoleto to girdle the globe in its three manifestations.¹ In the southern spring of September 1986, postponed from a year earlier, Spoleto Melbourne began.

Unfortunately, Menotti made two miscalculations. The first, which he later acknowledged, concerned the size of Melbourne. Could a festival really work, could it capture the streets, the people and the imagination, in a metropolis of nearly three and a half million people as it did in the smaller towns of Spoleto and Charleston? Could a city of such size ever really embrace the festival spirit? Perhaps yes, perhaps no.

The second problem was outside Menotti's cognisance and went even beyond the vagaries of Melbourne's frequently cold and windy spring weather.² What Menotti had not taken into account (how could he?) was that Melbourne in spring made its own music. In September, it already hosted the greatest event on the Australian festival calendar, the Australian Football League (AFL) final³. More popular even than the autumn local and city festivals, including Moomba and the Spring Racing Carnival centred around the Melbourne Cup, the AFL finals grip Melbourne in September, a month of football frenzy leading up to the Grand Final.

Spring in Melbourne means finals fever, the climax of more than six months of football fervour that engenders even warmer temperatures among the city's inhabitants. For it is football that captures Melbourne's imagination during the winter months until that 'One Day in September', the Grand Final. The red, white and blue of the AFL Grand Final is the highlight of the Australian sporting calendar, or, as it is now packaged, the red and white as well of the

sponsor, Coca-Cola. It is also television's biggest rating day in four of Australia's six states, and the most watched winter sporting event in the country

In 1994, when the arts festival had been the Spoleto-less Melbourne International Festival of the Arts (or MIFA) for four years, it finally recognised the reality beyond the vision of Menotti and moved the opening to October, between the football finals and the Spring Racing Carnival. The following year the *Age* reported that after a decade 'most people now realise that MIFA doesn't stand for "Melbourne Is Football Addicted" but for the Melbourne International Festival of the Arts'.⁴ Soon MIFA would become simply the 'Melbourne Festival'.

Festive Traditions in a New World Society

If Menotti failed to invent a tradition, how much has finals fever grown out of an authentic, popular spirit? Expanding celebrations around the culmination of the football season, especially the Grand Final, raise several questions which are the concerns of this study. Those questions go beyond the power of national communications and television which in recent years have made the world's most exciting form of football also the nation's leading sport.⁵ Important subjects include the spectacle, symbols and rituals accreting around the finals and particularly the Grand Final. Have today's moments of off-the-field performance and excitement also been invented, or orchestrated, by the AFL, Channel Seven and the marketers? Are the spirit and forms of the celebrations and the symbolic moments indigenous, that is home-grown, and appealing to grass roots enthusiasm? Or are they derivative, imported in the era of the spectacle and the commodification of mass spectator sport, from the Olympics to most major football codes? Does the September excitement culminate in moments of national, or even just sporting, transcendence felt by an imagined community? Or are these moments simply Faustian bargains struck with the commodified Devil of American, or American-style, product marketing? In 1981, Leonie Sandercock and Ian Turner feared the latter, suggesting that 'each year the Grand Final week gets bigger and more corny'. Perhaps the Collingwood cheer squad banner was right to challenge the Carlton Bluebirds, those cheerleading dancing girls of the early 1980s, as 'Cheap Trashy Americana'.⁶

In one way the sensory and emotional appeal of the finals begins with the spectacle of Australian Football, the most dramatic, and arguably the most aesthetic, of field team sports. Once described as a 'fast, high-scoring, exhilarating sport...distinctly Australian...[and] demanding greater individual skill' than any 'other game in the world',⁷ for many spectators and players it is the dance of the tribe, and the finals are its most important occasion.

In another sense the excitement of the finals begins with spring itself. As the essayist Charmian Clift wrote in 1965:

Spring is a fairly feverish time anyway for anybody with at least a drop of wild blood. An ardent time, restless, dizzy, beguiling.. the old earth all miraculous with nubs and buds and leaves and new spears of life pushing up through the crust. Renewal and regeneration. ... Everywhere in the world since time began people have gathered together in the spring of the year to witness, affirm and praise, and to help the miracle along with ceremony, ritual and sacrifice.⁸

In Victoria, and the other southern states, the football finals are the supreme spring festival. Their energy and excitement contrasts with the suburban and less carnivalesque character of more traditional Australian festivals such as Sydney's Waratah Festival, which Charmian Clift had lamented was not 'joyful', 'festive', 'gay' or 'feverish'.⁹

Such reflections also raise the question of where festivals and celebrations stand in Australian traditions? In the most modern of societies, a primarily urban, immigrant and deracinated new world society, older seasonal and religious rituals are rare or somewhat shallow. Perhaps settler Australians had been afflicted by an Anglo-Saxon sobriety. Yet, the decorations and illuminations surrounding the imperial and Federation festivities at the turn of the nineteenth century suggest that Australians had a talent for display - from parades to temporary triumphal arches. An early capacity for sporting innovation was demonstrated by the first night football match, which was played with a white ball, under the new Melbourne electric light in 1879.¹⁰ Australians tended to express themselves through sporting events and public display, rather than in the folk traditions, dances and crafts of older societies. In an historically colonial or dependent settler society, sport was one expression of national spirit.¹¹

The late twentieth century has seen a revitalisation of festive life at all levels in Australia, from local and ethnic community festivals to larger city-wide celebrations. In an era of economic globalisation and the decline of state sovereignty, politicians still seek to build up their party's vote through identification with sporting festivals, heroes and major events. It is in these multiple contexts that the festival of Australian football has grown, in Melbourne and beyond.¹²

Footy Spring Fever

This analysis first explores the grass roots expressions of finals fever and then considers the pattern of innovation and orchestration, the borrowed and invented traditions, associated with the game in general and the finals in particular. It takes cognisance of those 'events', 'symbolic moments' and performances which have been accepted, and those which have either failed

or have been equivocally embraced. In each case there have been patterns of evolution, both natural and artificial. And often, in the invention and transmission of cultural institutions and practices, the answer is in the detail.¹³

Everyday dimensions of football excitement continue. This begins with the identification with the supported team, whether you live locally, near its ground, or not. Today the festival of footy is still deeply rooted, taking hold of a people. Its imagined communities take them, through their shared excitement, away from the everyday and individual towards larger transcendent unities. In a large city and in much of the country, the football finals are a festive event. Even with their implicit team divisions, they unite many people in a joyful experience. The abstracted communal identity of the footy team, which may wear a Melbourne suburban name, but draws players and supporters from all over the country as well as automotive sponsors from Seoul or Detroit, leads to a festive spirit which affects, if not engulfs, most of the society. In Melbourne, few can ignore it, even though some try.¹⁴ Is there any similarity between the larger patterns of identification and the local feeling - in 1996 and 1999 in the shops at Kensington, 3-4 vestigial drop-kicks from Arden St. where premiers North Melbourne, aka the Kangaroos, are still based? Traditional identifications have endured so far, despite the recent nomenclature of the nomadic Hewlett-Packard-cum-Mazda Kangaroos and the possible millennial call of Homebush Stadium.¹⁵

In the modern world of mass media and travel can the mind's country of the football finals link many people to an idealised past in which time, place and tribe come together in a traditional festive event? As football has become the opiate of the people, the secular god of today, does it, like religion and nationality, transcend place, class, gender and ethnicity in its imagined community? It must be asked whether this shared experience persists in Melbourne today even in the era of Friday night to Sunday finals and of interstate finals seen only on television, even though the sacrosanct one day, the Grand Final, is still held at the MCG, the Melbourne Cricket Ground.¹⁶

The festive dimension expresses the football spirit in everyday life during September: boys and girls playing footy on the confines of a suburban grassed median strip; white-collared office-workers having a kick in the park; and road workers taking high marks over the bitumen, interrupted by cars, rather than commercial breaks. Workplaces celebrate the season by having a party or a lunch for the presentation of the end of season prizes in the tipping competition, whereby the normal pecking orders are often reversed due to skill or luck.¹⁷ Football club scarves are draped over PC monitors, offices are adorned in team colours, conversations abound about the weekend's prospects, and post-mortems follow defeat while other luxuriate in the joy of victory. The season's rhythm of the footy-to-working week can involve gloating from 'Monday's

experts' (as Weddings Parties Anything termed them), mid-week angst about reports and video evidence, and Friday's predictions. All are replayed at a higher level as tension gathers during the finals.

The rites and forms of symbolic expression of support for a club, the second part of this story, have evolved over time. These have traditionally included club colours on scarves, beanies, badges, duffel coats, and long banners around the stands, streamers and placards.¹⁸ Now, club colours and logos abound on licensed merchandise clothing and on car window stickers. Except for the loss of the banners, displaced by the advertising and sponsorship hoardings, the display has grown in size. The few streamers and occasional balloons at the end of the players' race onto the ground, from the 1920s to the early 1950s, have given way to enormous run-throughs several metres wide and high. Their images and slogans, and the small trucks which bring them to the ground, are of a different order to the older, simpler expressions of support.¹⁹ Hollywood and pop music have also influenced the cross-cultural reference of the messages on the run-through banners. The cheer-squads haven't changed, however, even if some banners carry advertisers' logos and long floggers are banned. And, except for Sydney, which had the Swanettes, dancing girls have generally been dismissed as 'culturally inappropriate'.²⁰

Other traditions, only noted here, mainly revolve around the lead-up to the finals matches, particularly the Grand Final. Thousands attend training, just to see the boys go through their paces, say hello to fellow supporters and have a sizzling sausage. After the match, and especially a premiership, even more attend the victory receptions, held in the team's suburb or town, in the main street and at the ground; and the 'family fun days' at the ground on the Sunday after the match, regardless of whether the team won or lost.²¹ In recent years, with the advent of a national competition, the old Australian tradition of welcoming home the conquering heroes, once reserved for troops or triumphant sports stars returning from overseas, has taken on a new dimension.²² Street parades, and, often pre-election, civic and state receptions in Adelaide for the Crows, the 'pride of South Australia... admiration of the nation', followed earlier welcomes in Perth for the West Coast Eagles, who had also defeated 'the wise men from the East'.²³

Grand Final Week Rituals: From the Brownlow Medal Count to the One Day in September

The major focus of this discussion is on the symbolic rituals which have emerged around the Grand Final. To what extent have the traditions, performances and spectacles surrounding the Grand Final either evolved from grass roots sentiment or at least found a popular response? To what extent have the AFL and the football media invented traditions as a means of increasing the profile

- and therefore the commercial potential - of the event? This story of the presentation of the Grand Final, the orchestration of the event, is most commonly seen as beginning in the last two decades, especially from 1977.

In that year, the new VFL principals, including President Allen Aylett, returned from an American sporting safari with new ideas about how to market the game. But its origins go even further back, arguably even to the early 1860s, when the first matches were held for the Challenge Cups and Silver Cup of 1861-66, and to the tradition that the winner in Australian Football is not the minor premier, the team on top of the ladder at season's end, but the victor in the Grand Final.²⁴ More recently the story goes back to former VFL President, Sir Kenneth Luke, otherwise K. G. Luke, trophy manufacturer, who brought in an Olympic-style presentation of the Brownlow Medal before the first semi-final in 1956 and followed this in 1959 with the Premiership Cup, which he modelled on the FA Cup.²⁵

That late 1970s aspiration Grand Final Week has now been successfully realised. Media, public and football 'events' of earlier in the week leading up to the Friday, the Friday night and the Saturday morning before the big game constitute a week of excitement (as well as 'hype'). These Grand Final week off-field events include the Brownlow Medal count Channel Seven's second most popular TV sporting program in 1996.²⁶ The Brownlow, now held on the Monday before the Grand Final, is an occasion which celebrates an individual rather than a team, a distinctive award in a sport in which the individual 'heroes' always express the belief that the team and the winning of a premiership are more important than their own personal achievements. The medal count has traditionally been a night of compulsory and compulsive viewing in Melbourne despite being generally regarded as comparable to watching paint dry. The drone-like reading out of the votes by the AFL chief commissioner, whoever he happens to be, always attracts comment. One 1999 correspondent to the *Herald-Sun* wondered if it was not 'too early to rid ourselves of Mr "Excitement Machine" Wayne Jackson reading out the Brownlow votes'.²⁷ The Brownlow count has become more and less dramatic in recent years. While it has lost its fateful randomness, the counting of the 3, 2 and 1 votes separately, this has been exchanged for a narrative with a sense of historical denouement. It is now conducted in a round-by-round approach to the season, spliced with more active footage, TV film highlights of each round. In either form, the occasion is, as the television commentator Bruce McAvaney might say, 'special'.

The night's highlights have similarities to glittering award nights, such as TV's Logies and even Hollywood's Oscars. Glamour is added by the seeming preponderance of ubiquitously blonde women partnering several of the footballers. For those seeking a modelling career or celebrity status their small screen cameo in slinkier than slinky outfits can't hurt. Many other players, of

course, take their wives, and on one occasion Carlton player Peter Dean was accompanied by his mother. Accounts from the gossip pages and the nightclub scene suggest that the player is as much a trophy as the partner. One newspaper feature profiled the 'Sirens: The women who will do anything for a footballer', and reported on their stratagems for picking up a consort to get to the Count.²⁸ The sartorial efforts of the footballers themselves range from the understated to the over-the-top with an all-time favourite being the brown velvet suit and bow tie which adorned Graham Teasdale, the 1977 Medallist. The Brownlow, like other award nights, is enhanced by video clips. The umpires' votes are, however, resolutely traditional, and except for a period in the mid-1980s²⁹, are usually given to the 'Fairest and Best' player. Unlike the AFL Players Association, which hands out a Most Valuable Player (or MVP) award, the Brownlow has not been seduced by American models or terms. In 1999, that new award added an event to the calendar. It was presented on the first Monday night of the finals, in tandem with naming the All-Australian team to play International Rules against Ireland in October,³⁰ at a gala night televised from the Sofitel ballroom in Collins Street. Television shapes these performances and both 'nights' would be followed by the Monday night TV staple, *Talking Footy*, Channel Seven's most analytical football program.³¹

Except for Tribunal reports, Tuesday is the only football free weeknight on television as it has been since the season started. Tension gathers early on as supporters wait for the verdicts from on high, the decision of the AFL Tribunal about players charged with various offences (always 'good news' when they 'get off' unless they are playing against your team) and updates from the medical rooms; both hang like a sword of Damocles over star players. In recent years the Channel Nine *Footy Show* has had a last extravaganza of the year, a mid-week sell-out show at the National Tennis Centre or Crown Casino's Palladium (with tickets available from scalpers), adding another event to the week's festivities. The Friday Grand Final Parade of the teams through the city streets is followed by the Channel Seven all-night footy marathon which starts nineteen hours before the first bounce. The political and business event of the week is the North Melbourne Grand Final Breakfast, held on the Saturday morning of the Grand Final, part of which is televised. City and television events then give way to the myriad activities on and around the MCG, including, at last, several football matches, on the one day in September.

Dreams and Dreamings

Several major invented traditions clustered around the presentation of the Grand Final itself, and of football in general, have been derived from the USA. As Dave Nadel comments, from the mid-1970s VFL principals travelled regularly to the US, where they were NFL (National Football League) guests

at the Superbowl. They were also guests of Channel Seven at another major sporting spectacle, the Olympics, in both Barcelona and Atlanta.³²

In 1977, the VFL first sought to build up 'Grand Final Week'.³³ In that year it held the first VFL Grand Final Parade and brought Barry Cracker, the former Geelong boy and quasi-national hero (as Bazza McKenzie) back from London to sing the 'Impossible Dream' at the Grand Final. In traditional cultural cringe deference to Australians who had made it overseas, one version of the worship-of-the-Tall Poppy-syndrome, Keith Michell returned from London to perform in 1978.³⁴ On the ground a podium was used for the presentation of the Premiership Cup as ceremony proceeded on its own imperious way. By 1979, the VFL looked to post-war immigrant rather than expatriate talent, and Johnny Farnham gave his rendition of 'Waltzing Matilda' while Mike Brady sang 'Up There, Cazaly'.³⁵ Future returning expatriates would include Rolf Harris (1982), and, from the US, Peter Allen, who sang 'I Still Call Australia Home' in 1980, Diana Trask (1985), and Olivia Newton-John (1986). Amongst those who re-gathered at a 1996 Centenary Grand Final (at which the Premiers won a gold Premiership Cup) were Slim Dusty, John Farnham and Aboriginal singer, Maroochy Barambah.

Even more significantly, 1976 had seen the establishment of the VFL Properties Division modelled on its American NFL counterpart. It would, in later years, return large dividends to the VFL and then AFL, including profits from the sale of Grand Final logo merchandise.³⁶ This has raised a number of debates about American influence on Australian Football, including the player draft, the use of American words like 'rookie', and the character of the pre-match entertainment.³⁷ The almost half-hour of pre-match pageantry and music, the *son, couleur et danse* (if not *lumiere* - not until a night grand final) has been accused of detracting from rather than enhancing the spectacle, its 'sportainment' package trivialising the drama. Was this spectacle meant for occasional watchers rather than for the loyal and devoted telespectators out there?³⁸ To traditionalists, there may be a place for meaningful ceremonial: the teams lining up and the national anthem being played, and then drowned out by the roar of the crowd, the honouring of retiring players and legends of the game, and the presentation of the cup and the premiership medals. However, performance for its own sake diminishes the drama of the match itself. In the early 1990s the AFL had another, sporting, problem: the drama of a close contest on the field and on the scoreboard was often lacking.

Grand Final Day has several festive expressions, the central one being the game itself. Others include the excitement of the crowd around the MCG leading up to the match; the pre-match entertainment spectacular; and, out in the suburbs, thousands of private groups, made up of both devotees and people

with a sense of occasion. But before all this even starts, business is up and chasing a dollar at a great sporting and networking event - a Grand Final breakfast. The fact that Grand Final day starts with this 'commercial' invented tradition mirrors a change in the context and culture of football clubs. Local business support, once predominant, has now been complemented by the sponsorship of state, national and international companies. Originating in 1965, the North Melbourne Grand Final Breakfast, although emulated by other clubs, remains supreme in its status as a Grand Final Day institution. There are two reasons for this. First, the links between North Melbourne and Channel Seven, personified by Ron Casey North president and Seven sports and later station director, led to television coverage of its highlights. Second, it now attracts Prime Ministers and Opposition leaders as well as state premiers, captains of industry and media celebrities. It is, like politics, business and the media (and football), still very much a boys' own club up at the head table. Although there are some women, like former Premier Joan Kirner, the 'girls', like most 'boys', are not part of this business and politics stratosphere.³⁹

The traditional gathering of the crowd at the MCG has been enhanced by new developments. Wearing club colours - despite the non-partisan majority - they cluster in excited groups. Except now the warring teams colours are also expressed in face paint, either home-made or done for a few dollars outside the ground. This innovation most likely derives from the Swedish fans at the Australian Open tennis during the 1980s.⁴⁰ Many older symbols, such as the 1956 Olympics oak trees along Brunton Ave which celebrated British-Australian links, are ignored.

Other new traditions include the broadcasting tents for 3AW (where, in 1999, Rex Hunt adapted or aborted the language depending on your point of view, and Sam Newman's often precise enunciation of three syllable words was seen as a measure of intelligence) and music station 3MMM. Meanwhile fast food outlets sell Portuguese chicken and exotic sausages, along with pies, chips and hot dogs. Footy memorabilia booths selling to devotees, passing followers and tourists are comparable to the stalls which line the paths to temples everywhere, from Borobodur to the Vatican; and a graffiti board has been installed for messages of good or bad luck to favoured and unfavoured teams. After the match, the WEG poster cartoon, which declares the name of the Premiers, and raises money for the Royal Children's Hospital survives even though the evening newspaper the *Herald* in which it first appeared, does not. Aiding gestures of suburban triumphalism, the poster is destined to be put up in lounge room windows facing the street. Today, in the era of marketing, it has been joined by Grand Final and Premiers T-shirts, windcheaters and caps.⁴¹ Like the brides in the Fitzroy and Treasury Gardens, and the drama of suburban house auctions, both less common phenomena on this day, the gathering at the

MCG is Melbourne *en fete* and Melbourne at play On this day the Queen City of the South lets her hair down.⁴²

Meanwhile, at home in living rooms and lounge rooms or around large TV screens at pubs and clubs, the game is simulated in indoor and outdoor play, of the mind and of the body. The demographic, as well as the ethnographic or anecdotal, evidence is also dramatic. Even after the heady days of the 1996 centenary, the AFL remained at the pinnacle of the TV ratings ladder in Melbourne. In 1998 the Grand Final was the highest ranking show (1,108,000 viewers), two night finals were in the top twenty shows; the Brownlow Medal count rated 8th with 688,000 viewers; and the Grand Final edition of Channel Nine's *Footy Show* came ninth. The Street Ryan study for the AFL, entitled 'Australian Rules Football: The Number One Sporting Entertainment?' (1998), reported that television ratings placed the Grand Final as Australia's third highest rating sports event in its years of study (1993, 1996 and 1997), after the Wimbledon and Australian Open Tennis finals.⁴³ In technical and financial terms, the match is a television extravaganza. It uses twenty to twenty-seven cameras, in contrast to ten cameras at home and away matches and fourteen at other finals; they include 'Blimpcam', 'Goalpostcam' and 'Light-towercam' while Channel Seven even occasionally discovers the drama of ground shots as used so effectively in the 1960s films of the game.⁴⁴

Imperfect Dreams?

In 1999 the pre-match extravaganza followed the presentation of the Reserves Premiership Cup. This display of banners, guernseys and large groups of children clad in club colours⁴⁵ is designed both for those watching it on television at home or high in the Great Southern or Northern stands. For many the parade of past players is the day's highlight. In contrast, for the fans of 'sportainment', the fusion of sport and entertainment, the spectacle coupled with the panoply of songs of dreaming, ('The Impossible Dream', 'The Power of the Dream'), 'Rock 'n' Footy', 'Waltzing Matilda' and the national anthem is a highlight of the day? The dramatised pageantry begins, as it did in 1998, with the stentorian tones of the announcer doing the lead-ins, with its echoes of Moses, Cecil B. De Mille, 1950s newsreel authoritative voices and Superbowl. Consider the 1998 introduction to Mark Seymour singing (a great song) 'The Holy Grail', which came after the opening graphics, the Channel Seven promotional song 'Rock the G', triumphal flourishes, aerial shots of the stadium, armed services trumpet fanfares, and sports announcer Bruce McAvaney's enthusiastic introduction of the spectacle - 'it's a celebration of football'. So, to the narrator:

Just as life is a journey so it is with our great game - a game of the people for the people.

It is a journey that ends here at the MCG on this last Saturday in September.

Today, we cheer, applaud and marvel at the character of the chosen two, their long search for football immortality almost complete.

At today's end only one will have its name etched indelibly in the pages of premiership history.

Most of this is said with a raised hush in the voice, betokening the weighty significance of these words from the mountain. He then concludes:

The Australian Football League, Coca Cola and your Seven network welcome you to share with Mark Seymour this journey in search of the Holy Grail.

The strength of the Kerrie Hayes Productions spectacular is in its visual presentation. Deploying thousands of unpaid children and many choristers, the former working with banners and oblong and triangular club colours and players' guernseys, the show recognises history, particularly the 'inductees' (an American word) of the still unconstructed 'Hall of Fame'. Retiring players and the Brownlow Medallist go around the ground in open top sports cars. Again, perhaps for good and for bad, the sonorous voice of the announcer speaks lines which are only half-rooted in truth:

Amazing, is it not, how the future of our great game depends so enchantingly on the past? In this sporting cathedral you do not have to close your eyes to dream. There is a magic about the place and its people - the champions to whom our dreams belong. Today we honour this year's Hall of Fame inductees with the handing down of the guernseys. Gordon Coventry, this year elevated to Legend status, Jack Clarke...Fred Flanagan..

This invented tradition, as the crowd also honours the Brownlow Medallist and the players bowing out, is effective. So is the impressive device of banners moving down over the crowd as first used at the 1980 Moscow Olympics.⁴⁷ It recognises the players, both those of an earlier generation and those who have just hung up their boots; having brought a sense of transcendence to so many, they are, in some respects, 'sacred'. Unlike most of the glitzy entertainment this pageantry is grounded in sporting history, even with the imported artifice of the 'Hall of Fame' idea. These new rituals contrast with much of the rest of the pre-match entertainment, which, admittedly, appeals to many viewers and spectators, except for those purists at home who find it a good time for a kick to kick on the back lawn or time for a nibble or a drink. During this period the TV coverage now cuts several times to the change rooms as the teams, nervously,

prepare for the match. The footballing symbolism based on memory and the colour, and even Australian innocence, of the children against a green 'stage' were impressive. Powerful in a different way was the heart-pounding experience of the F18 Hornet flying over the ground in 1998, as those in the AFL members can attest.

The musical aspect is variable. Critics have often suggested that being a star for the over-40s or over-50s was a prerequisite for getting a guernsey. Sometimes, operatic versions of popular songs don't work in the open, especially when the crowd are encouraged or expected to join in. This is also true of the national anthem, even when the crowd is aided by having the words on the two big screens.⁴⁸ Some musical performances are disappointing. In 1998, as the announcer called it, 'two of Australia's leading stars' Jane Scali and Michael Cormick came together 'to share with us more than a song - a tradition - called 'Waltzing Matilda'. Unfortunately their cutesy-pie little dance around each other - a lovers' duet, as they sang that great romantic song about a relationship between a grazier, several troopers and a swaggie, didn't quite fit. While her red dress and blonde hair looked good, to traditionalists they had come together not to enhance, but to murder, the national song.⁴⁹ Their version contrasted dramatically with the one sung by the crowd in support of the Australian team in the August 1999 rugby union international against New Zealand at Stadium Australia.

However, aided by technology, the AFL has made one grass roots musical gain. It has successfully invented a musical tradition that challenges the Australian unwillingness to sing in public. The playing of club songs as teams run out onto the field and the winner's song after the final siren, in all matches, is an innovation which has not only struck a chord, but also helped those devoid of any memory for musical lines.

Cultural Cringe and Americanisation?

The NFL origins of aspects of the Grand Final entertainment demand critical reflection. The American writer Thomas Boswell raised several matters in the US context. In his *99 Reasons Why Baseball Is Better Than [grid iron] Football*, Reason 6 is 'Up With People singing "The Impossible Dream" during a Blue Angels flyover at halftime with bands', while reason 87 is that 'Football has two weeks of hype before the Super Bowl. Baseball takes about two days off before the World Series'.⁵⁰ A slower Australian society and the fast-moving action of Australian Football are both different from America and from the Super Bowl's stop-start marathon, with specialist players and privately-owned clubs, and the AFL entertainment occurs before the match rather than at half-time. However, the songs of dreaming aspiration, like an early 1990s Michael Jackson tribute, the Grand Final Parade and Grand Final Week, and the short-

lived, financially unprofitable, AFL Sensation for kids are all taken from the NFL model.⁵¹

This analysis of imitation also refers to a more general critique of the colonial cultural cringe values which pervade the television media, marketing and even Australian culture in general. The cringe view is that every TV program has to be based on a successful 'international' model, that overseas is best. It was even felt that this principle was necessary to market one of the world's best games to those remaining infidels north of the Murrumbidgee. The AFL's brilliant 'I'd like to see that' commercials featured, undoubtedly at considerable expense, overseas sporting and other luminaries celebrating the speed, power and beauty of the game. They included John McEnroe, Heather Lochlear, the centenarian George Burns ('A game older than me. I'd like to see that!' - unfortunately, he couldn't stay around for the centenary grand final in 1997), Bishop Desmond Tutu and, recently, looking beyond the mere globe, a Russian cosmonaut.

Australian commercial television executives have an annual ritual which expresses their own institutional cringe. They head off for their summer holidays in Los Angeles and beyond, looking to buy American 'product' for their new season. This pilgrimage had its paradoxical reflection in the late 1980s. An Australian Broadcasting Tribunal hearing on Australian content at the World Trade Centre in Melbourne heard from Actors Equity representatives and TV executives on a nastily hot February day. Significant was a cooler conversation between several television executives as the hearings broke for lunch. Looking after millions of dollars of potential profits, they came from the then Lowy's 10, Skases's 7 and Bond's 9. Men in their achieving forties, dark-suited and accoutred with gold pens and occasional gold chains and nicely placed handkerchiefs, they looked back on their holidays - of a kind. Skiing in Utah was 'so elegant, so upmarket...just fabulous', 'much better than Lake Louise near Banff in Canada'. During the usual 'break' in the non-ratings period, they had combined sitting in a glitzy hotel room, watching American television, and meeting the sellers with a summer holiday in the snow.

This colonial combination was as old as apple pie, even if flying to 'the States' had supplanted going to London for the Season, or Robert Menzies journeying to a Prime Ministers' conference that had been timed to coincide with an Ashes Test match. Where once the entrepreneurial organisation JC Williamson's brought out the latest 'big-in-Birmingham' star or the just-over-the-hill Broadway talent for the Australian commercial stage, now Hollywood called. Perhaps a modified version of that cringe was expressed when the VFL first beckoned expatriate performers who would call Australia home on Grand Final day. Its organisational mirror was the VFL and AFL principals' journey to be NFL guests at the Superbowl.

The Spectacle and the *Agon*

By definition the pre-match entertainment sits in a curious relationship to the game itself. The *agon*, the theatre, the drama, of the match contrasts with the visual tableau and the *son et (some) lumiere* of the pre-match spectacle. Despite the often hour-long period between the reserves grand final and the match itself, which seriously lessens the tension, the making of grand final day into a national event, a patriotic occasion, where the only enemy is the other team, is a form of public symbolic activity that is more positive than negative. Similarly, the pageantry, performance and ceremonial of two non-sporting spectacles, the opening and closing ceremonies of the Olympics, are the most watched and most popular events of the Games.⁵²

The leading theatre historian Peter Fitzpatrick has reflected on the difference between the formal pageantry as an expression of social harmony, a mirror or expression of shared unity, and the *agon*, the dramatic contest of the match itself. In the tradition of theatre, a 'dispute' or contest breaks out in the match and is resolved through the action of the play.⁵³ In a related sense it is also a transition from innocence to experience, which in a Western tradition also leads to two states: one the idyllic Heaven of the premiership, the other the purgatory-cum-Hell of defeat. In this polarisation, the innocent pre-match harmony gives way either to post-match euphoria or to devastation.⁵⁴

The Premiership Cup presentation has itself become a theatrical event with a thematic stage, a podium backed by the Coca-Cola AFL Logo, and a distinguished former player making the presentation of the Cup and the individual medals. At the same time the clubs' sponsors get their pound of sporting flesh, their minute of fame, as the players (most if not all) don the sponsor's cap for the presentation. That newly invented commercial tradition was first put into practice in the AFL by the West Coast Eagles in 1994.⁵⁵

Faustian Bargain or Economic Necessity?

The Australian Football League has been a pioneer of the commodification of sport, even allowing the football to bear the logo of Challenge Bank and later the 'Big M' of McDonalds. The goalposts carry advertising, while for the Grand Final Channel Seven has logoified the centre circle in which the umpires bounce the ball and a soft drink company has Coca-Colonised much of the ground. The 50 metres long Grand Final logo painted on the ground in 1998-99 was dominated by the advertising sign for Coca Cola which dwarfed the AFL's red, white and blue and football shield. Such a repertoire of commercial symbolism suggests that a similar study to this analysis could also be pursued in other terms including: the 'science and art of celebration', special events; as a research project in cultural consumerism and marketing; or, as an anthropological study in symbolism and ethnography.⁵⁶

The commercial aspect makes it reasonable to ask whether the AFL has struck a Faustian bargain with the Devils of television, marketing and sponsorship. However, if it has, it is not alone. The trend is international, although paradoxically weakest in the USA.⁵⁷ Compare the Ansett and CUB stumps in Test and One Day cricket and those great rugby league battles fought out between 'Canberra Milk' and 'Smiths Crisps' at the Sydney Stadium and, in English soccer, by 'JVC' versus 'Sharp' at Wembley. The cost of running professional sport, and the fact that Australian Football is particularly expensive due to the number of players, has given the AFL a reasonable defence for embracing commerce. At least the game has been generally free of other ugly imports (UMBRO logos and 'Oi Oi Oi!' chants), while private ownership and leggy dancers have been consigned to the basketball courts of the NBL (National Basketball League) and the Murdoch-shaped NRL (National Rugby League).⁵⁸

The AFL has had many progressive social policies, which have been reflected in attendant Grand Final ceremonial. In 1993 it recognised the Year of Indigenous People: Aboriginal art provided the cover illustration of the Grand Final *Football Record*, Maroochy Barambah sang the national anthem and Yothu Yindi performed. During the 1990s the AFL led Australian sport (and Australian politicians) in policies to eliminate racial vilification. The tangible, and footballing, evidence of such social progress occurred by chance in 1993. As if in sympathetic harmony with the public and ceremonial events, Aboriginal players dominated. Gavin Wanganeen won the Brownlow Medal, Michael Long won the Norm Smith Medal for the best player in the Grand Final and, earlier in the year, Nicky Winmar pulled up his guernsey to bare his skin against racism at Collingwood's Victoria Park ground.

At the end of the twentieth century, the organisers of a major sporting competition found it difficult to remain as pure as the driven amateur. The AFL, like Adam and Eve, succumbed. Nor is the monetary side of sport new as the careers of those commercially oriented cricketers, Dr W. G. Grace and Sir Donald Bradman demonstrated. As George Bernard Shaw is said to have remarked, when a woman initially rejected going to bed with him ('What sort of woman do you think I am?') but then eventually expressed her willingness to reconsider for a large sum of money they were not debating morals but simply haggling over the price. In the era of the dollar, the AFL has sold its less-than-innocent self, but for a good price and on good terms. The 'One Day in September' is a celebration of indigenous Australian traditions in an international world of mass entertainment. Even the inventions and orchestrations of popular feeling have been sifted through and have settled down. As a result the Australian Football League finals reflect the popular rather than the contrived, and the natural enthusiasms of an Australian spring rather than the concoctions of Hollywood or the Super Bowl. Perhaps, as

Menotti might have dreamed, they represent a European and Australian festival of art in the new world.

Notes

* I would like to thank the participants in the 1999 ASSH conference. at which this work was first presented, and the August 1999 VUT Football Fest seminar for their feedback and Jane Yule for her editing.

- 1 *Age*, 21 October 1995.
- 2 For example, the October Phillip Island 500 cc bike races.
- 3 Since 1990 the Australia Football League (AFL) has replaced the Victorian Football League (VFL). However interstate teams (Sydney Swans, 1982, Brisbane Bears, 1987 and West Coast Eagles, 1987) were already participating in the competition.
- 4 *Age*, 21 October 1995, p.27.
- 5 'Australian rules a long punt ahead of the rest', *Age*, 21 December 1999. The Australian Bureau of Statistics April 1999 survey found that 16.8% of the population had gone to an Australian football match in the last 12 months, in contrast to 10.1% for rugby league, 10.6% for motor-racing, 6.3% for cricket, 4.2% for soccer, 3.5% for basketball, 3% for rugby union, and 1.7% for netball.
- 6 Leonie Sandercock & Ian Turner, *Up Where Cazaly? :The Great Australian Game*, Granada, St Albans, Herts, 1981, p.167.; Dave Nadel, 'Colour, Corporations and Commissioners', in Rob Hess and Bob Stewart, eds, *More than a Game: An Unauthorised History of Australian Rules Football*, MUP, Melbourne, 1998 p.209.
- 7 *Aussie Rules, OK*, SBS documentary, 1987.
- 8 Charmian Clift, 'Festival fever' in *Trouble in Lotus Land*, Imprint-A&R, N Ryde, 1990, pp. 60-63.
- 9 Charmian Clift might have drawn similar conclusions about Melbourne's Moomba festival and parade.
- 10 Sandercock & Turner, p. 41.
- 11 Arguably, it is better in its simulations than the usual 'patriotic' habit of loss of life in 'other people's wars'. That is not to deny the use of sporting metaphor in war recruiting (for example John Wren's Sportsmen's Thousand and Norman Lindsay posters in the Great War) or in reports of war experience including the battle cry 'Up There Cazaly!'.
- 12 Prime ministerial attendance at the Grand Final has become de rigeur, as has attendance at the lesser event in a larger population centre, the ARL or later NRL final on the following day in Sydney. Two major practitioners have been the 'great national sportsman', Bob Hawke and John Howard, the 'cricket tragic', (as described by Australian captain Mark Taylor).
- 13 It is also influenced by time, by change, for example the beginnings of a national finals system rather than finals which are totally, or as now still predominantly, held in Melbourne.
- 14 For example, in the early 1980s a non-, even anti-sporting, Sydneysider believed she could. Then she found herself in a traffic jam in Johnston St Collingwood on a weekday before 4.00. Cause? The Magpies were training at Victoria Park!
- 15 Similar local feeling is aroused in the Victorian country towns, for example in the coastal town of Anglesea when their own seaside Roos are in the finals. A football focus is mirrored in contemporary Victorian TV soap operas such as *Something in*

- the Air and Seachange*. Even the characters of the latter's coastal community, Pearl Bay, remembered the date of a dramatic event, a shipwreck, as it had occurred on the day of their Grand Final.
- 16 A related question, not fully pursued here, concerns television. The game might be experienced differently by either the devotees at large by their TV sets in the southern capitals and country towns and in the suburbs of Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane, or by the novices, the once unbelievers beginning to discover the sport. Similarly, the feelings of the supporters of the participating clubs and of devoted followers at the ground may differ from the experience of those attracted by the mystique of the big event, whether they are at the ground or watching on television.
 - 17 Like the weaker team getting up in a final, this involves an inversion of the normal state of affairs and can lead to a quiet carnivalesque pleasure at the 'challenge' to the ruling order.
 - 18 In the auto era, victory scarves waving in the breeze from the car window after a match, sometimes supported by a ghettoblaster pumping out the club song, offer a contemporary modification.
 - 19 Rob Hess, 'Fanfare: Australian Rules Football and the Development of Spectator Culture 1880-1971'; and Matthew Nicholson, 'Disputed Terrain: Spectator Culture and the Commercialisation of Australian Rules Football, 1972-2000'. Teams and Fans conference papers, University of Queensland, July 1999.
 - 20 Nadel, p. 209. Both rugby league and basketball have maintained this sexist tradition. The National Rugby League program also has 'Page 3 girls', who usually appear on the inside back cover.
 - 21 John Lack et al *Unleashed*, Aus-Sport, Footscray, Vic., 1996, 'The victory celebrations: an unfortunate anti-climax', pp. 187-194. The large Town Hall crowds excitement was slightly lessened by the fact the sound system wasn't working.
 - 22 This has occurred, it might be noted, in an era of the excessive proliferation of street parades for sporting heroes, as each Commonwealth Games team returns, again victorious over Zimbabwe and Wales.
 - 23 The incumbent Liberal government sneaked back in at the South Australian elections held just after the Crows 1997 premiership. After winning several premierships, the regional plaint has been deleted from the lines of the West Coast Eagles club song.
 - 24 *More than a Game*, pp. 23-25.
 - 25 Jeffrey Hill, 'Cocks, Cats, Caps and Cups: A Semiotic Approach to Sport and National Identity', (*Culture, Sport Society*, vol 2, no 2, Summer 1999, pp. 1-21) explores the rituals which have accreted around the FA Cup over the last century, including the pre-match ceremonial.
 - 26 Peter Blair, *History of the Brownlow Medal*, Sabey & Associates, Hawthorn, Vic, 1997, Preface, .p.6.
 - 27 *Herald-Sun*, letters, 12 January 1999, p.20. Populist resentment and class tension can also be expressed at the ground. The other occasion in which the VFL-AFL supremo, once the President and later the CEO, took centre-stage used to be the presentation at the Grand Final. Allen Aylett was booed in 1983, it was alleged, by 100,000 people, but perhaps some of the MCC members deigned to participate in this chorus as they also refused to join the arm dance of the Mexican wave.
 - 28 'Playing the field', *Age Sunday Life* magazine, 14 September 1997, pp. 8-13. See

- also Linda Pearce, 'Running of the blondes', *AFL Record*, 17-18 September 1999. In 1998, it was remarked that the hairdressers had either a declining role or played a different part, as the bloneness ratio was smaller than usual.
- 29 Some critics believed that Robert DiPierdomenico, Greg Williams and Tony Lockett were not the fairest, as well as the best, players in the league.
 - 30 This fusion of Australian Football and Gaelic Football has eventually become successful for occasional international matches after slow development since 1967.
 - 31 See Amanda Smith's analysis, 'Talking Footy on a Monday Night', in Stephen Alomes & Bob Stewart, eds *High Mark: Australian Football and Australian Culture*, Maribymong Press, Hawthorn, Vic., 1998.
 - 32 'Out of Context: North American ideas in Australian football: What the late Alan Schwab did in his summer holidays' in B Stewart & R Pascoe, (eds), *Oval Logic*, VUT, Footscray, 1994, pp. 18-21.
 - 33 See: Nadel, 1998, pp. 200- 205; G Dowling, *The North Story*, Playright Publishing, rev. edition, Caringbah, NSW, 1997, pp. 203-4.
 - 34 In life and in sport, except in Australian Football, success was measured by making it overseas, first in Britain and later the USA. See: Stephen Alomes, *When London Calls: The Expatriation of Australian Creative Artists to Britain*, Cambridge University Press, Oakleigh, Vic, 1999.
 - 35 Sandercock & Turner, p.167.
 - 36 Allen Aylett, *My Game*, Sun, Melbourne, 1986, pp. 115, 123, Sandercock & Turner, pp. 174-6.
 - 37 Other sporting, rather than cultural, debates concern the player draft system, taken from the NFL, and the salary cap, which was taken from the NBA.
 - 38 That was the strongly held view of the members of the Footy Fest seminar, football traditionalists and researchers. Several declared that, when gathered to watch the match on television, the kitchen, the fridge and/or the backyard called during the pre-match entertainment. (Football Fest, Victoria University, 27 August 1999).
 - 39 As typified by the football which decorates John Howard's office, politicians aim to establish their populist football-loving credentials. In this case it was as convincing as comedian Gerry Connolly's 'Monica' character when 'she' came up to John Howard in 1998 and declared 'the tie, the tie...'. Performance and comedy has allowed this orchestrated event to go beyond football in another way. Gerry Connolly was a hit in the shortened 1998 telecast, with rather more memorable moments such as when approaching Malcolm Fraser with a look of recognition and the remark, 'Memphis!'
 - 40 These were the great days of Swedish tennis. Face-painting is now internationally popular, including at the NFL Superbowl.
 - 41 Some things change. In 1999 WEG also did a charity poster featuring the new Melbourne Storm rugby league team after it won the NRL premiership.
 - 42 Some come just to watch and to soak up the atmosphere around Jolimont. (I am grateful to one enthusiast for the occasion but not necessarily the sport, Dianne Reilly, for information on this ritual.)
 - 43 *Age*, 10 December 1999; 'Australian Rules Football: The Number One Sporting Entertainment?', Street Ryan & Associates/ Australian Football League, Melbourne, November, 1998, p.14.
 - 44 'The grand plan: Channel Seven's AFL Grand Final coverage is a triumph in TV

- sports production', and 'Making the big day work', Grand Final edition, *Football Record*, 26 September, 1998, pp. 49-50, 52. The production involved a staff of 300, including 60 technicians, cameramen and tape operators, the 3-D Frost computer graphics system and a super slo-mo camera used at the soccer World Cup in Paris.
- 45 Challenging the old order of rule by the Melbourne Cricket Club (MCC) the pre-match performers and post-match ceremonies face the AFL members, their posteriors pointing to the MCC Members stand. This is one expression of the continuing political wars over ground control, revenue and advertising rights are fought out at the ground, supporting the work of lawyers and lobbyists. In the fight for public support regarding this contested space the MCC propaganda machine includes the once (briefly) funny vox pop interviewer, the Voice of the 'G', and the pre-match tune 'Nothing beats the footy at the MCG' and signage on the big screens. Stig Wemyss has been the Voice of the G for over five years and also appears at cricket matches. *Herald-Sun*, 21.4.1999.
- 46 The entertainment timetable, the running sheet, for 1998 comprised:
 Percussion Fanfare
 'Holy Grail' - Mark Seymour
 'Handing down of the guernseys' of the Hall of Fame inductees - Hall of Fame Salute
 'Go the Distance' - Adoration of the Gospel Train
 'Waltzing Matilda' - Jane Scali and Michael Cormick
 'One Day in September' and Grand Final club songs - AFL Choir
 'Rock'n'Footy' - Donna Fisk and Michael Christian
 'When We Were Kings' and 'This is the Moment' - Rob Guest
 'Good Times', 'That's The Thing About Football' and 'Up There Cazaly' - entire cast.
 'Singing up a storm: It's the show before the big show, when the hits are not painful and the goals are to entertain and enjoy', Grand Final edition, *Football Record*, 26 September, 1998, pp. 46-47.
- 47 This device may have originated in an Eisenstein film.
- 48 My impression from attending finals in recent years is that the singing participants in the crowd are primarily drawn from the ranks of two categories, women and older males.
- 49 Only in 1992, when Angry Anderson was driven onto Waverley in a Batmobile, and in a few other musical moments, bad taste similarly flawed a Grand Final, as the extravaganza was designed for a different public than the normal sporting audience.
- 50 Thomas Boswell, *The Heart of the Order*, Penguin, New York, 1990, pp. 29-37. I would like to thank Dave Nadel for directing me to this material.
- 51 One account which, controversially, differentiates between Americanisation and 'American influence' and, accurately, demonstrates long historical patterns of influence is P. Bell & R. Bell, eds, *Americanization and Australia*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 1998. At the other pole is the article 'From Old Boys to Men and Women of the Corporation: The Americanization and Commodification of Australian Sport' by J McKay and T Miller, *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 1991, 8, pp. 86-94.
- 52 This is so whether the measure is demand for tickets or size of television audiences. See: John J MacAloon, 'Olympic Games and the Theory of Spectacle in Modern Societies' in John J. MacAloon, ed., *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle:*

- Rehearsals Toward a Theory of Cultural Performance*, ISHI, Philadelphia, 1984; G. Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, Black and Red, Detroit, 1977.
- 53 See Peter Fitzpatrick, 'Football and Theatre', *High Mark*, pp. 29-37 ; telephone conversation, 28.1.1999.
- 54 In an Australian culture which places winning a premiership above all, the experiment of giving runners-up medals was abandoned when the defeated Collingwood player, Peter Moore, flung his away in disgust.
- 55 Sponsors caps may have been used earlier in South Australian league football.
- 56 The last ever AFL match played by Collingwood at Victoria Park, its home ground since 1892, on Saturday 28 August 1999 was a study in the fusion of ceremonial and pageantry, entertainment and novelty, ritual and popular ethnographic expressions not in the formal script. Like all performances it came at great cost, including not only a stage and performers but a large temporary screen. Abreast a pole like a Venetian mast, with Emirates airline advertising across the bottom and top, it was held aloft by a crane and powered by several generators. The day's festivities began with the 're-play' of great moments in Collingwood on-field history as former players - all ageing and some balding and paunching - re-enacted those great moments including Ray Gabelich's 1964 run along the MCG, while the original tapes ran on the screen. Other performances included songs sung by Colleen Hewitt and the Collingwood greats going around the ground in cars, waving to their friends amongst their fans, while the 14 Premiership pennants flew from the historic stands. At half-time entertainment and novelty took over. First there was a wedding ceremony, with the bride wearing a touch of black on the bodice of her white dress. However, the crowd responded to 'Do you take this woman...?' with a loud 'No!'; the players in this performance were, like the re-enacting players earlier, not getting any younger. The other entertainment novelty event was when a spectator had the chance, following the example of Peter Daicos, to kick three goals from around 40 metres; if he kicked two out of three, he won \$10,000. After a stumbling first kick he did and wandered around for some time holding the monster cheque and hugging family and friends. After the game other great historical moments were replayed on the screen to the recorded accompaniment of popular operatic performers. Unfortunately, for the Collingwood faithful the match itself saw their team thrashed, from the first quarter on, by the Johnny-come-latelies, the Brisbane Lions, the final score being 13.16.94 to 8.4.52. The second ethnographic example of other agendas concerned the response of a 9-year-old boy to the question of what was the highlight of the afternoon for him. It was neither the match nor the performances, but the handball as we made our way along the footpaths back to his home in nearby Clifton Hill.
- 57 NBA Baseball uniforms are advertising free.
- 58 However, in 1999 above the entrance to the traditional Melbourne sports store, MSD (or Melbourne Sports Depot) in Swanston St, the glass front has large sports product logos including Umbro and Converse.