The Day The Earth Screamed, “FOOTBALL!”

The coin is tossed. Hester, eyeing his pursuers on the “Jumbo-Tron,” bails down the field and Dolphin Stadium is alight with thousands of camera flashes that twinkle in the stands like twilight fireflies. We are fourteen seconds in and the Chicago Bears score a touchdown. The crowd goes wild. Welcome to Super Bowl XLI.

I am not an aficionado of football. My favorite pals, however, are serious purveyors of sport. Football, hockey, soccer, baseball, NASCAR, you name it. They are there. Nearly everyday my friends congregate at Bob's house because he has the two TV sets, the TiVo, the satellite broadcast, and, of course, the videogame of the sport that they are going to watch which they start to play hours before kick off (et al.) in their amped-up states of anticipation. But as each “season” comes and goes, not one game among them is able to generate as much excitement, build-up, or planning as the Super Bowl. When I called Bob, the night before his most sacred of Sunday’s, to ask what time he would like me to show up for the festivities, he told that I should come over as soon as I woke up. "Really," I asked, “I thought that it starts at 3:00?” Bill laughed and replied, “You can’t drink all day if you don’t start in the morning."

There is no doubt that the Super Bowl is America’s premier extravaganza; it is the spectacle event to trump all others. The players are revered as gladiators. The stadium is, in look and feel, a simulated Roman arena. These games are our bread and circus. I think Ritzer would agree that, just like its Roman precursor, the game is not, in and of itself, an end. It is, rather, a means for compelling millions of people to participate in a mass consumption feeding frenzy. If, as Ritzer points out, spectacles are created to, “bring in large numbers of people to buy more goods and services,” (Ritzer 95) then the Super Bowl is batting with the best of them. It was pointed out in class that the Super Bowl generates fully two hundred million dollars more in revenue than any other sporting event in the world. This is perhaps the savviest example of “entertainment retailing” out there. With thirty-second commercial spots selling for over 2.5 million dollars, on Super Bowl Sunday Joe Public is not only watching the commercials, but in many cases, watching for the commercials and, for the first time, compelled by corporate America to actually create the commercials we see. These marketing campaigns are only the beginning. When Super Bowl parties are being planned an average of 45 days in advance, the amount of fanfare and preparation that goes into these game day get-togethers comes as no surprise. In the week before the Super Bowl, supermarkets start building their tributes to this massive day of consumption: giant towers of Bud Light are erected, banners go up, pizzas go on sale, and Doritos are stocked like there is no tomorrow. Like countless other American households, the party pad I spent my Super Bowl Sunday at rose to the occasion with a vengeance.
I showed up at Bill’s house close to 1:00 PM, two hours to kick-off. Ten people were already there. The Herculean spread put my mild lunch to shame. I was met at the door by Hamburger nacho cheese-dip, little smokies, homemade BBQ sauce, Bob’s own impressive monument to the god of Doritos, meat and cheese platters, sizzling chicken kabobs, spicy chicken wings, cupcakes decorated to look like footballs, and more alcohol than I thought reasonable what with the keg, the two gallons of whiskey, and the three coolers of beer in reserve. The “big” TV was tuned into the pre-game. Jim and Bill were on the second string television set playing Madden. They were both screaming at each other and jumping up and down. One man played the Bears and the other the Colts as they duked it out on game day in virtual reality. As we got closer to kick off, people started logging on to the internet to place their Super Bowl bets. They put money on who would score first, the final spread, the final score, and numerous other outcomes of the game. Bill had put up a giant white board and asked everyone to write down their final score predictions. The winner, I heard, got a special prize at the end of the game. By 3:00 there were nearly twenty people crammed into Bill’s tiny apartment. Fourteen seconds into the game and everyone was screaming yes or no. People were clenching their fists and waving their arms. A bowl of chips sailed through the air as Marisa flung her arms wildly and hollered instructions to the Colts’ offensive line. Mary heralds her position in our social circle as “just another one of the guys”. Her passionate knowledge and appreciation of sport has garnered her a special place on Bill’s couch. She is the mythical goddess of sport who can spin stats and criticize referees with the best of the men. At that moment Mary was intoxicated by the game, and rightly so. Peyton Manning had been her “football boyfriend” for six years so she had a vested interest in a win by the Colts.

The “football boyfriend” phenomenon in Moscow is an interesting one. It started with Mary’s overwhelming crush on up-and-comer Peyton Manning and slowly, but steadfastly, spread to every one of her female friends and family members. The amount of thought that goes into the selection of a football boyfriend has varied for each of us (for me, it was Troy Polamalu’s Slayer-hair which made me swoon last year during the playoffs), but I think Whannel would agree that these artificial and, for the most part, arbitrary acquisitions have served to personalize a game that, at the sake of sounding stereotypical, most of the gals in my circle of friends could have cared less about. In his analysis of hero identification in sport, Whannel writes, “while there are clearly aesthetic pleasures in merely watching a sport performance, the real intensity comes from identifying with individuals or teams as they strive to win.” I do not like football. I do not understand the game or think that it is an exciting way to spend an afternoon. However, last year when my “football boyfriend” was playing in the Super Bowl, I watched the game with an attentiveness that surprised me. I was rooting for a team. I was excited: I clapped and cheered and groaned with the rest of the fan-bots in Bill’s living room. For the first time, I actually followed what was going on and did not have a hard time understanding the game. In fact, my experience last year was so fun that I was looking forward a similar Super Bowl Sunday this year. However, consistent with Whannel’s identification theory, the
game was dull. I had a hard time following it. I was easily distracted. Before long, I was restless and bored. It was like any other year. After reading Whannel’s argument on sport and pleasure, I should not have been surprised. It is no coincidence that the one time in my life that I was sucked into the “carnivalesque” of sports culture coincided with the one time that I could identify, personally, with an aspect of the game. If my make-believe “football boyfriend” was able to so pique my interest in the game, I can only imagine the effect of the years of personal investment, the wearing of jerseys, and the rapt attention to heart-felt pre-game narratives on a true fan’s commitment and identification to sport and its heroes. It is no wonder that these gladiators are larger than life. It is no surprise that the pleasure fans experience is as exultant and overwhelming as it is.

Whannel’s review of Barthes discussion on plaisir and jouissance seem especially applicable to the game day passions that were played out in my group of friends. The ecstasy and fervor began days before and increased in intensity as we neared Super Bowl Sunday. The pre-game, the kick-off, and the half-time show all delivered to the group the pleasure that they were promised. All the while, the tension inherent in Barthes jouissance was rearing its agitated head. Die-hard Bears and Colts fans were both in attendance and the commotion mounted as the game wore on. This small group of spectators was so animated that they were hugging and giving high-fives as well as screaming expletives at the TV and each other. As the Colts maintained their dominance of the game, Bears fans started becoming more and more upset. The tension was so tangible that, at one point during the second half, two friends almost got into a fist fight. What is it about this game that can incite a handful of mild-mannered people into behaving as they did? Whannel’s explanation of the carnivalesque as, “a symbolic dissolution of barriers between performer and audience,” goes a long way in elucidating the maniacal behavior of my friends.

Whannel points out that, “Sport, like other aspects of popular culture, is the site of a struggle”. This unique avenue of pleasure, then, has something to tell us about the nature of American society. One does not have to dig deep to unearth artifacts of our hegemonic reality from a spectacle like the Super Bowl. This game, in particular, highlighted various ideologies and realities surrounding the issue of race in America. Our simultaneous diminution and exaltation of the two black coaches speaks volumes of America’s values when it comes to the roles deemed suitable/marketable for African Americans. The coaches were, in many ways, invisible throughout the game, but their race was regularly tokenized to highlight how far we had come in creating a “color-blind” society. The role of women throughout the game was even more tenuous. A scant number of female reporters were employed throughout the pre-game to tell us touching stories about the players we so admire. This lack of representation comes as no surprise when we consider the marginalization of women in sport and the perception of their incompetence in grasping the nature of the game. There is a reason that my friend Mary garners the attention that she does when she displays how knowledgeable and excited she is by sports games. Her enthusiasm flies in the face of common stereotypes of women and their “place” in the world of sport.
By the final play, the mystery was gone. The Colts were the champions and as the clock ticked down the celebration had already begun. The water coolers were ceremoniously over-turned on Tony Dungy and the red, white, and blue confetti began to rain down from the heavens. The players were able to rub the lucky trophy as it made its way to the team manager who waited on his dais. Coach Dungy was prompted to comment on the "social significance" of his win for African American coaches everywhere. Peyton Manning, the uncontested hero of the day, was awarded the title of MVP as Mary’s heart melted and her prayers were finally answered.