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From a body to a story

Transformative narratives in Swedish football

Katarzyna Herd

Introduction

The pitch. This is the core of the process, 90 minutes of a game, creating history ad hoc, constantly, quickly, and sometimes painfully. 22 players run and fight over the ball, for their careers, respect, and fame. Supporters often see themselves as the most important participants in the football experience, but one needs players. The emphasis in the media has often been on the football superstars, described as modern heroes with a cult surrounding them (see, e.g., Digance and Toohey 2011). At the same time, critical voices have pointed out how football is increasingly detached from its fans and focused on financial advantages and imported stars. Yet football fans demonstrate different techniques of reclaiming the power over football and players. The focus of this article is the appropriation of the physicality of players. Their bodies are not only physical. If spectators are to make a meaningful emotional connection with players, a kind of transformation needs to happen that makes flesh and blood into a mythical object that can be used later. Such processes are most visible when a healthy organism undergoes a change and is not able to perform as required.

There are many different angles of investigation when it comes to physicality and athletic performance in sports with numerous publications in the fields of medicine and sport science.¹ The perspectives chosen here focus on the body as an object of cultural meaning and a tool for creating

1 A journal entitled *Science and Medicine in Football* (Taylor & Francis Online) is dedicated exclusively to these issues: <http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/rsmf20/current>.

narratives. The questions, then, are: how are bodies used? What kinds of transformation take place? What kinds of narrative are created there?

Methods and material

The core of this article is based on three stories where players' bodies failed and they were not able to perform physically, yet they were useful for supporters in terms of producing narratives that would strengthen their positions. The cases come from the highest Swedish football league called Allsvenskan and are based on players called Guillermo Molins, Erik Israelsson, and Ivan Turina. The three cases presented here oscillate around the issues of cultural meanings attached to bodily abilities. In all these examples, physicality, stamina, and fragility of bodies are crucial elements of specific narratives. All three players were active in and employed by two clubs from Stockholm—AIK and Hammarby IF—and one club from southern Sweden—Malmö FF (MFF).

The material includes interviews, observations, newspaper articles, and internet ethnography (netnography). The material from interviews and observations was transcribed, translated to English, and coded through searches on themes and connections. Ethnographic interviews constitute one of the most popular and established methods in quantitative studies, including ethnology (Davies 2008, 107). The same can be said about participant observations, the »archetypal form of research employed by ethnographers« (Davies 2008, 77). Those two methods tend to be intertwined, especially in the ethnologic research concerning regular participants within the cultural sphere close to the researcher. Interviews were contextualized as they were also instances of observations, and the knowledge was produced in a specific time and space within the realm of conversation between an interviewer and an interviewee (Malinowski 1935, 37–52; Geertz 1983, 58; Davies 2008, 108).

The data was collected by the researcher between 2012 and 2018. The interviews were semi-structured and conducted in person except for one internet chat with an informant referred to as Oskar, who spontaneously

volunteered to share his thoughts about one player.² The plethora of sources contribute to the methodological bricolage, which is a strong tradition in conducting ethnographic research and characteristic of ethnology as an academic discipline (Ehn and Löfgren 2001, 147).

Norwegian sociologist Axel Tjora pointed out that methodological and analytical approaches in ethnography-driven disciplines are connected throughout research projects and could be presented as a »gradual-deductive inductive method« (2017, 18–19). The model explains that going from material toward a theory (inductive) and from a theoretical standpoint to approaching the material (deductive) push the analysis simultaneously as the researcher reevaluates the theoretical approach with the growing material while at the same time, a new theoretical take pushes for new approaches to obtaining the material (Tjora 2017, 18). Swedish ethnologists Billy Ehn and Orvar Löfgren stressed the importance of surprises in the field and unexpected encounters that drive the analysis forward (1996, 134).

Theoretical perspectives

The main theoretical perspectives that help to unpack how physicality is transformed into narratives include sense-making and textuality/intertextuality. Intertextuality is a term used in linguistic studies and folkloristics. It refers to fluidity and influences that the different sources have on each other. Instead of texts being closed and self-sufficient wholes, they emerge as an assemblage of previous texts, creating a mosaic of meanings (Asplund Ingemark 2004, 32; Worton and Still 1990, 1–2). Understanding a text means awareness of different influences on it, different texts merging into one. This means that symbols and elements from various sources create a bricolage of meanings. The transformation from physicality to narratives could be viewed through a concept of posthumanist performativity as discussed by feminist and theoretical physicist Karen Barad (2003). It

2 The names of the informants were changed for ethical reasons. Numerous issues with respect to ethics, access, gender, or class relations could be discussed from a methodological perspective. Charlotte Aull Davies (2008) provides a comprehensive discussion of ethnographic methods in her book *Reflexive Ethnography*.

does not give all the power to words and instead stresses the importance of materiality and physical bodies. Bodies are active through discourses (Barad 2003).

Football is a game, and it does represent a different set of logic. It is heterotopic, which means that one must understand and accept its specific rules (Herd 2017). The French anthropologist and ethnologist Christian Bromberger, while conducting fieldwork among French clubs and groups of supporters, analyzed his material in terms of rituals and pointed out the ritualistic character a football match had without being a kind of religion (1995). He further pointed out that one element is missing that would classify matches as religious rituals, »namely the belief in the active presence of supernatural creatures or forces, which constitute the backbone of religious rituals« (1995, 309). I would further suggest that the utilitarian character, belief in one's abilities, established rites and rituals, and a specific set of rules that governs football would allow one to classify it as an example of a magical context (see Mauss 1972; Herd 2017). This claim, based on my previous work on football, serves as a background for approaching the position players have.

There is specific sense-making in football as participants must be able to understand its textualities and engage in the play. Producing sense is an analytical approach anchored in Susan Stewart's book *Nonsense*. Stewart states that social events can be »textual« because they depend on recognition and interpretation, and because they have a content that needs to be situated in a specific social context (Stewart 1989, 13). In other words, events can be read. Some socially constructed spaces such as football depend heavily on the interpretation and acceptance of sense and nonsense that appears there. Stewart's analysis of nonsense points to the complex ways of agreeing what makes sense. Some behavior during matches seems strange to onlookers not familiar with the context, yet once the participants agree on the rules and understand the context, the behavior starts to make sense.

Narratives help to understand the world and to construct it. Running players are not just agile bodies. Their abilities help to construct meaningful emotional connections that result in producing a social context with a

specific logic. And in turn, their stories become immortal narratives connected to clubs and supporters.³

War heroes, gods, mortals—Shape-shifting on the pitch

For more than 100 years men (and women)⁴ have run on green pitches all over the world. Because of the complicated labor market, selling and buying footballers contributed to attitudes toward them. One of my interviewees said that players are »only tools« used to bring titles to their employers (interview with Jan, Malmö, September 2012).⁵ Such evaluations are common, with supporters repetitively saying that one cannot trust players. Yet the meaning of this exercise in skill, stamina, and teamwork has gone beyond the physical abilities of human bodies. Players mean more than their muscles that work for the glory of the clubs. It is possible for fans to establish emotional connections with players who stay in clubs for just half a year, or those who would hardly be described as major stars.

Supporters express a very pragmatic approach toward players. They consider them ready-to-use footballers in all possible ways, including transforming them into stories and symbols. Goals and victory celebrations provide desirable material, but so do dramatic instances of pain and suffering. Footballers take risks with their bodies, and they are often

3 It should be noted that narratives are gendered and that a certain idea of masculinity is transmitted through them (see, for example, Hourihan 1997, 15). This perspective is explored in my ongoing PhD project.

4 The focus of my research is on men's football and men's clubs, and although the discussion of both masculinity and femininity in this context is valid, the broader gender perspective is not examined here as the main point of the article is story-making as a process. Academic publications about women's football in Sweden include Mattias Melkersson's PhD thesis (2017) about organizational aspects of women's football clubs and a study of migration patterns of female players moving to Scandinavia conducted by Botelho and Agergaard (2011).

5 The exact date of the interview was unfortunately not recorded. The names of informants were changed for ethical reasons.

injured and thus not able to participate in games *per se*. Yet narratives arise from this fact that transform wounded bodies into meaningful stories. As Donna Haraway put it, one could see bodies »as maps of power and identity« (Haraway 1990, 222). Physicality goes beyond its organic functions and marks not only people, but also spaces occupied by bodies. And when a body stops functioning, when it becomes useless in one way, it offers itself as a different sort of platform. A wounded body lends itself to interpretations, as its owner cannot use it to perform.

A footballer is located in a specific sociocultural space that interacts with him. Several scholars have called for more grounded research on sports that would include the geographical, political, and historical context as well (Bale and Philo 1998; Eichberg 1998; Brabazon 2006). Players' agility and stamina translate not only into goals and match statistics, but also into emotional involvement between different actors.

Modern football is a result of industrialization (Eichberg 1998, 48) and commodification (Giulianotti 2002, 2005; Tapp and Clowes 2002). Special places were produced in order to exercise bodies. Stadia and arenas facilitate their own social microclimates. Because these places are separated by design from everyday life, they become heterotopic and allow their participants to engage in behavior that could not be exercised anywhere else. This applies to players who are paid heavily for being good at materializing the physical ideal. Bodies of players became exercised, disciplined, and separated from the rest of the society as amateur activity attracted more money and became more serious, paving the way for professionalization (Eichberg 1998, 13). As the game became more professionalized, it also became more clinical, based on stamina only, and cleansed of social relevance that would go beyond individual physical capacities. Before professionalization,⁶ players were more visible in their communities; they worked, studied, had contact with different strata of

6 Professionalization of football took place later than in other European leagues. The rule that football was an amateur sport was abolished in Sweden in 1967, and Swedish players had gone abroad to play professionally decades before that (Sund 2008, 52–61).

society. Former players mourn the development that has placed modern footballers, in their opinion, outside of so-called normal working life (interviews with Sune, Malmö, November 12, 2014, and Jesper, Malmö, November 25, 2014).

The commodification of football could characterize the very businesslike relationship between clubs and supporters and turn them into passive consumers. However, it has been pointed out that »football is »more than a business,« and this implies that the usual rules of producer-consumer relations do not apply so strictly« (Kennedy and Kennedy 2010, 186). One of the key reasons why the normal business pattern does not work is the realization that »supporters continue to »consume« football even when the »commodity« proves to be an »unsatisfactory« or unsuccessful one« (Kennedy and Kennedy 2010, 186). Further, supporters engage in producing the experience they consume simultaneously. What one gets for money might be a victory or a trophy, but it can also be, for instance, emotional engagement and different cultural capitals (Skeggs 2004). Bodies carry a certain sort of capital as well, and they can be used to construct a cultural framework or lend themselves to exemplify ideas (Bourdieu 1984; Skeggs 2004, 16). Bodies can acquire that function, especially when clubs strip supporters of influence, limiting the possibilities of their involvement.

Jean Baudrillard painted a bleak picture of the development of modern sports, isolated and clinical, without spectators, with television providing such detailed viewing that it could be described as pornographic (Baudrillard 1990). As a result, sports would become an exercise based on power, without any real social meaning. German sports historian Henning Eichberg argued that the kind of physical control and »the subjecting of the body to rigid temporal and spatial disciplines« would result in stripping away »ambiguity, play, willfulness, humor from the sporting body culture« (Eichberg 1998, 13). Fans are creative in finding ways to connect to seasonal players and fuel social processes that allow supporters to create meaningful narratives. The following stories include three footballers who actively played in the highest Swedish league—Allsvenskan—in different clubs, with various degrees of success. Because

of singular events connected to their physicality, these three players became more visible, remembered, and talked about. The materiality of their bodies was non-discursive, but activated discourses visible in narratives (Barad 2003, 809).

Guillermo Molins—»I was a hero. Now I am nothing.«

Guillermo Molins is a player from southern Sweden with Uruguayan roots. After playing for some years for Malmö FF,⁷ he moved to Belgium. He injured his knee when he was playing there, and spent a long time recovering. Then he moved back to Malmö. He was welcomed as a returning hero, and was doing very well in the season of 2014, when he injured his other knee. During an interview, he said:

Molins: And when I was 16, Malmö called me and said »we would like to bring you here for a trial.« And I came and I was very nervous, you know all the stars that I saw on TV and they were standing one meter from me. And yeah, they liked me and I came here. Since then I've played here except for two years when I played in Belgium.

Interviewer: How was it in Belgium?

Molins: Very bad. The first game I broke my knee, and now I broke my other knee. So it's something you feel. Now if I go back in time, if I can jump a little bit, three months ago, I was the biggest hero in Malmö, now I feel like a nobody, because I cannot perform, you understand? It's six to nine months. Next season April I will be good again (Malmö, October 30, 2014).

The interview was recorded in late October 2014. In late April 2015, I witnessed Molins enter the pitch for the first time after the accident. Fans were cheering; he was their captain, coming back for glory.⁸ He

7 Malmö FF (MFF) is the most successful Swedish club; it secured its 20th national league title in 2017: <https://www.allsvenskan.se/tabell/>.

8 Match observations, MFF-Djurgårdens IF, Malmö, June 7, 2015.

was referred to as »king« or »captain.«⁹ A group of supporters made special t-shirts with his name on and he received one, too. When Molins came back from Belgium, it was the story of a returning hero, and such narratives are abundant throughout the history of Western Europe (Berger 2013). This would have been a simple enough story of a returning son who would bring hail and glory to his mother club and to the fans.

Captain Molins never really recovered, and in 2016, when his contract expired, MFF decided to let him go. Some fans hoped he would be offered a new contract, but he was just not considered to be in sufficiently good shape, and there was not enough empathy capital. Malmö FF became a club for tough winners, with two runs in the Champions League. They had enough financial resources to buy good quality, scoring players. They did not need an injured, struggling star. However, supporters were attracted to the symbolic value that he represented. In 2017 I encountered an individual in a pub wearing a shirt featuring Molins. When I asked if I could take a photo, we had a brief chat. The person wearing the shirt mentioned that the former captain was still important for the club.

9 During the match I refer to a group of supporters had a banner saying »Now Allsvenskan [the highest Swedish league, KH] begins to shake/Captain Molins is coming back«. There was a small sign saying »Kung Molins«—King Molins, which was visible during several matches. The shirts were designed by a group of supporters and resembled the design of Captain America's shield with text »Guillermo Molins—Captain Malmö.« I witnessed them being distributed during a match between MFF and Helsingborgs IF Malmö on Sep. 21, 2014.

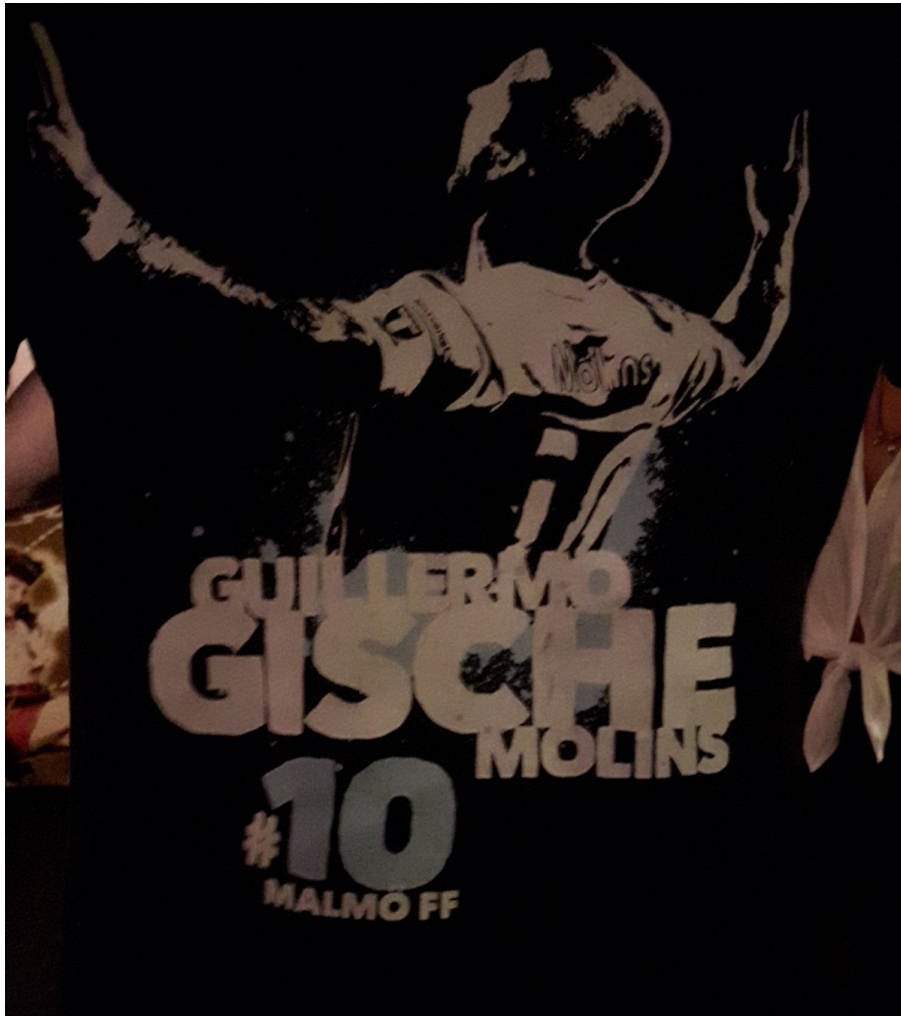


Fig. 1: Photo taken by Katarzyna Herd in a pub in Malmö in July 2017.

Molins had a special connection with the fans. In the interview he told this story:

But in the beginning I didn't like them (fans) because they did not like me. Because after one game, when I was young, we went to the fans, and they started booing us, and as I said I'm a bit of South American, so I reacted by doing this (shows his middle finger). It became a very big thing for 2 years, every time I got the ball there

was (whistles) and then it changed, and now I can say, without being cocky, that I'm the favorite player for most fans. So the fans are incredible and I'm enjoying playing for them. (Malmö, October 30, 2014)

The MFF striker was aware of the connection he had forged, and the difficulties in the beginning contributed into forging an emotional link that then developed. Molins was strong and responsive, and allowed the fans to come close, both with negative and positive feelings, as he recounted in the interview. When his knee was injured, his supporters stayed true and hopeful.¹⁰ But his contract was not extended and the injured hero left the club. Molins left behind a rich story and a great deal of affection that contributed to retaining his image. His journey and pain fit into a mold of a heroic myth. A hero, broadly speaking, encounters difficulties on his path and overcomes his weaknesses when becoming a hero, as the protagonists in folktales teach us (Hourihan 1997). Fans used Molins's story to compose a narrative that connected him to them through continuing to wear the shirts and sing the chants. At the same time, Molins's body was constructed *through the discourse* applied, making a relational connection between a material body and a narrative (Barad 2003, 814).

The story is about physical suffering and noble defeat. Molins is now gone, but supporters still consider his image important. His story is based on his bodily abilities that are applied in a broader discourse; hence, it is a material-discursive practice that is used in producing power, in this case granting power to fans using it (Barad 2003, 810). When Molins returned to MFF, he was a warrior hungry for success, and a figure of a prodigal son returning to his home club.¹¹ When he was recovering, fans stayed true to him, pronouncing him their captain although other players

10 The chant about him was sung on numerous occasions.

11 Two articles in a local newspaper *Sydsvenskan* discussed his return and his difficult time in the Belgian club Anderlecht: Niklas Wihlborg, »Molins tillbaka i MFF,« Aug. 11, 2013, <https://www.sydsvenskan.se/2013-08-11/molins-tillbaka-i-mff>; Marie Carlsson, »Molins tillbaka i MFF,« Aug. 14, 2013, <https://www.sydsvenskan.se/2013-08-14/molins-tillbaka-i-mff>.

took the role. When he returned to the pitch, he was declared a returning hero who battled his weaknesses, and a strong message about his return was written on a banner by fans.¹² This is a mark of a hero who needs to go through a *rite of passage* to be named one (van Gennep 1960 (1909)). Heroes need to have a journey (Hourihan 1997). When he was in danger of not getting a new contract, some repeatedly called for keeping him in the club. When he left, supporters continued to stress how important he was for the club.¹³

Yet something has been lost. The group of supporters that in 2017 called for his importance was not big, the voices demanding a new contract for him were not convincing to the club's management. He went through hell (a severe knee injury) and survived. Should one be tempted to draw a parallel, it would be the figure of a mythical hero journeying to hell and back that bears some resemblance.¹⁴ Molins's accident caused him months of painful waiting and rehabilitation. He became a motif of a hurt, suffering captain. Yet, somehow unfortunately, he got better. He could not be fixed in time and space. Molins left the club, although unwillingly. His grand return almost happened. Just not quite. His recovery disturbed the narrative and forced fans to establish him as an important figure, albeit gone and slipping from the popular imagination, fading slowly, banners and shirts being less and less visible.¹⁵

12 Match observations, MFF-Djurgårdens IF, June 7, 2015.

13 The person whose shirt I photographed in a pub in Malmö engaged in a brief discussion about Molins. He said that explicitly that Molins »is still very important for the club« although he no longer played there.

14 This is a well-documented motif in different world mythologies, appearing for example in Greek, Nordic, and Japanese mythologies.

15 After Molins left Malmö, he started playing in China. He was contacted by a Swedish newspaper *Expressen* and in an emotional interview spoke about his respect for Malmö FF and the strong feelings that surrounded his transfer: Martin Hardenberger, »Molins talar ut: »Hade sålt bilen för att stanna i MFF,« Dec. 29, 2016, <https://www.expressen.se/kvallsposten/sport/molins-talar-ut-hade-salt-bilen-for-att-stanna-i-mff/>. Another newspaper, *Aftonbladet*, presented a rather emotional review of Molins's

Physical suffering contributed to transforming and making sense of Molins's story. As Stewart puts it, »manufacture of common sense and the transformations by which nonsense is made out of common sense belong to the same social universe« (1989, 7). People recognize a myth pattern when they see it happening; that is why we understand a fairy tale when we see one (Hourihan 1997, Berger 2013). Since fans take a pragmatic approach, they made Molins into a reusable figure. And although gone, he is still featured as a marker for connection between the fans and the club. Molins is still active and is in July 2018, after two years of playing in Greece, he came back to MFF, but he has not appeared in the main squad as yet (October 2018). His body though became a narrative that exists for MFF fans.

Erik Israelsson—»Let him die!!!«¹⁶

Another story connected to the performance of material bodies comes from Stockholm. During the 2015 season, there was a tense derby in the Swedish capital. Two clubs from Stockholm, *Almänna Idrottsklubben* (AIK) and *Hammarby IF*,¹⁷ played a derby match. A Hammarby player, Erik Israelsson, scored a leading goal for his team, and shortly afterward collided with an AIK player. The encounter left him unconscious, lying

negotiations for renewing the contract with Malmö FF, calling him »the supporters' darling« Johan Flinck, »Molins på väg att lämna MFF,« June 3, 2016, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/sportbladet/fotboll/a/22939576@abse/molins-pa-vag-att-lamna-mff>.

- 16 The chant was reported by several newspapers, also online: Simon Bank, »Bank: Tusentals skrek: »Låt han dö; Fy fan,« *Aftonbladet*, Sep. 27 2015, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/sportbladet/kronikorer/bank/article21484102.ab>; Martin Petersson, »AIK fördömer ramsorna mot Israelsson: »Hål i huvudet,« *Fotbollskanalen*, Sep. 29, 2015, <https://www.fotbollskanalen.se/allsvenskan/aik-fordomer-ramsorna-mot-israelsson-hal-i-huvudet/>.
- 17 Both clubs are currently in the highest league, both have long histories (AIK was established in 1891, Hammarby in 1915) and a long history of rivalry on many levels, including the popularity and class factor. Hammarby won the league only once in 2001; AIK has won several titles, most recently in 2009.

on the pitch. The match was halted, and an ambulance was called. Amid general fear for the player's health and even life, a chant came, clearly audible, from AIK fans: »Låt han dö!«—Let him die! As Israelsson was taken away from the pitch, still unconscious, anger grew among Hammarby fans, and from the media, other clubs, and AIK's management as well.¹⁸

Such behavior—angry chants with violent or racist content—does occur in the football world. What some sport journalists considered outrageous in this case was not a small group of individuals that would scream such words, a wish of death, but thousands that joined in and appeared blind and deaf to the generally established social rhetoric of compassion, sportsmanship and fair play.¹⁹ What happened here?

Football allows for creating a heterotopia, a contemporary reality with its own logic and set of rules (Foucault 1967). A heterotopia means constructing a specific space that allows for reinterpretations of the acknowledged social structures that exist in the broader context. This contributes to behavior that would be highly questionable outside a stadium, yet is accepted during a match (Bromberger 1995). It can be offensive chants, but even showing emotions like grief openly. Some pointed out the general image of Stockholm clubs. AIK and Hammarby have a long history of contests and conflicts, with hooligan firms involved. On top of that, AIK as a club is sometimes referred to as anarchistic, outrageous, and provocative.²⁰ And with the clock ticking, fans did not want the game to be stopped. One can often see players falling and »filming,« simulating an injury to win some time.

18 Various Swedish newspapers picked up the story, including *Aftonbladet* (»Bank: Tusentals skrek«). The same newspaper published an official response from AIK's chairman Johan Segui, who condemned the chant: Andreas Käck, Per Bohman, and Kristoffer Bergström, »Det handlar om medmänsklighet,« Sep. 27, 2015, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/sportbladet/fotboll/sverige/allsvenskan/aik/article21484032.ab>.

19 Simon Bank, in a column published Sunday, Sep. 27, 2015 (»Bank: Tusentals skrek«).

20 Ibid.

The collapse of the wounded player somehow damaged the boundary between the acceptable and the taboo. Abusive chants are nothing new. In the stands, fans can scream that they hate players, referees, coaches, the police, other teams, the other team's supporters, other cities etc.²¹ It is unusual to wish death to the wounded opponent. Swedish football has had painful encounters with players passing away because of diseases, and two supporters were killed in football-related accidents.²² Even the highly emotional state of watching a team lose would not easily justify such behavior.

Israelsson's injury, his collapsing body, interacted with established discourses and triggered an action. The closed, heterotopic reality of a football match can accommodate various sets of logic and common sense. Susan Stewart writes about rules of a game:

Once the boundary of the game is established, it is kept intact until closure. Breaking the boundary of the game by running off, by throwing down one's bat or racket, or by not paying attention, is poor sportsmanship, just as any return to the »madness« of the real world was a traitorous gesture among the dadaists. (Stewart 1989, 91–92)

Being on the stands means participating in a game. That game has its specific rules and boundaries. By testing, contesting, and repeating certain behavior patterns, fans establish their own special logic, but it needs to be read, understood, and accepted by all parties. The chant »Let him die!« is known among Swedish supporters of different clubs and employed

21 Such incidents were observed during every match attended and cited in this article.

22 One was a supporter of IFK Göteborg who died in 2002 after a hooligan-related fight in Stockholm; Susanna Vidlund and Marcus Noterius, »Misshandlade fotbolls-supportern avled,« *Aftonbladet*, Aug. 2, 2002, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/EoaeVa/misshandlade-fotbolls-supportern-avled>. The other supporter died (in what has been seen as an accident) in 2014 in Helsingborg; Marie Larsson, »Supporter död efter bråk i Helsingborg,« *Dagens Nyheter*, Mar. 30, 2014, <https://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/supporter-dod-efter-brak-i-helsingborg/>.

sporadically. Serious injuries do not happen often and the chant appears to mock simulating players rather than actually wish them death.

In the case of Israelsson, one could point out two ways in which the boundary was trespassed. First, the fans delivered a harsher statement than anticipated. They did not go with the flow of the match. A serious physical accident brought reality back to the stadium, a reality filled with institutionalized society in need of common empathy. AIK fans did not agree with that, they stayed on the other platform of sense-making, the heterotopic football reality. One can say that the rest of the stadium, and the media, failed to play along with the chanting fans, as they demanded a return to the world of the common sense while the game was still on, which manifested itself in the wide condemnation in the public sphere and in various media.²³ A material body activated a discourse of power (as fans clashed using symbolic violence) and Israelsson's immobile body became a discursive marker branding AIK supporters (Barad 2003).

The sense of common empathy in our society is in sharp contrast with a chant that would proclaim no value to Israelsson's life. His accident stopped the game and potentially hindered AIK from scoring. The hierarchy of values, of importance, became reversed. The effect could be described as irony, because it emphasizes the *common sense* present in everyday life. As Stewarts puts it:

Irony emphasizes the textual, the interpreted, and the cultural, rather than the natural, status of social interaction. Thus it may be seen as linked to other parodies, satires, and burlesques of the everyday world; the specific taking in and taking over of one text by another. [...] Realism and myth stand in a contiguous relation to everyday life. With irony that contiguity is split, made reflexive. (Stewart 1989, 20)

Such behavior as presented during a match in Stockholm provides a strong insight into both the common sense inside and outside the stadium,

23 See, for example, »Bank: Tusentals skrek,« *Aftonbladet*; »AIK fördömer ramsorna mot Israelsson,« *Fotbollskanalen*.

and the stark contrast that can exist between them. The same people can participate in both; most can read, interpret, and play by the rules. A very material, visible, serious physical injury brought the *real world* into the restricted, special football reality. Israelsson's story became an example of the interaction of the two, immortalized by the media and social media that provide a footprint for collective memory. It fixed Israelsson in the situation and in the collective memory (Assmann 1988; Halbwachs 1992).

Ivan Turina—»Ivaaaaan!!! Turinaaaa!!!«²⁴

Erik Israelsson's accident was serious, and many fans held their breath waiting for news about his health. He was able to continue his sports career and moved to a club in Holland in 2017.²⁵ His dramatic story became a freeze frame, lasting for a moment. Another player, Ivan Turina, suffered from heart failure and died in May 2013 while he employed by a team from Stockholm—AIK. Turina, a goalkeeper from Croatia, played in various clubs before coming to Sweden in 2010. After three years in AIK, he suddenly died in his sleep. The shock touched fans in many Swedish clubs.

There were spontaneous commemorations, flowers, and condolences. Supporters from other Stockholm clubs came to pay their respects. He enjoyed a modest international career, and he was moving toward the end of his time as a footballer, as he was already over 30. He was a popular figure, and supporters liked him and could relate to him, a theme that came up in many interviews (interview with Maria, Stockholm, March 5, 2015; telephone interview with Kristian, April 28, 2016). He was a foreign player who did not play for the club for a long time. He managed to show character and some heart. He seemed not only to understand supporters; he seemed to understand the character of the

24 This is the chant that supporters perform every match during the 27th minute.

25 Erik Karlsson, »Erik Israelsson klar för Zwolle,« *Aftonbladet*, Jan. 14, 2017, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/sportbladet/fotboll/a/kg6AX/erik-israelsson-klar-for-zwolle>.

club, which one supporter mentioned in a Facebook conversation (chat with Oskar, June 21, 2017). Exaggerated commemorations in the football context occurred in other countries, for example in a case of »usable soccer martyrs« in Egypt. Football-related riots that occurred there were connected to the Islamic view of martyrdom (Mielczarek 2016, 95–110). In that instance, religion played a strong role in producing an identity within a sport. In the Swedish case, the commemorative rituals were devoid of religious connotations as such, although performed within an established cultural frame of grieving. Moore and Myerhoff (1977, 24) demonstrated that »secular rituals« are used as »unquestionable« means of communication.

After Turina died, rites of different sorts appeared. Up to 2018, supporters have stopped their chants in the 27th minute of a match and shouted Turina's name together.²⁶ There have been banners and flags with his pictures, and t-shirts as well.²⁷ A small group of AIK fans go to his grave in Croatia every year.²⁸ The late goalkeeper disappeared physically from the club, but he has been reworked into a symbol that seems to be attaining a strong position among supporters. One of them, Oskar, gave this answer to a question about the importance of chanting Turina's name:

It is the supporters' way of showing that a hero is not forgotten. The chant contributes to the community, everyone was affected [by his death; KH] and still wants to show this. (Facebook chat with Oskar, June 21, 2017)

Oskar's words reflect that fans are aware of their own, somehow egoistic reasons for continuing to commemorate Turina. One could reflect here

26 Match observations AIK-MFF, Stockholm, May 29, 2017; match observations MFF-AIK, Malmö, Apr. 9, 2018.

27 Match observations AIK-MFF, Stockholm, May 29, 2017; match observations AIK-MFF, Malmö, Apr. 9, 2015; match observations AIK-Djurgårdens IF, Stockholm, Aug. 10, 2015

28 I explore the theme of the transnational character of his death in a different article which is currently under consideration for an anthology about transnational death.

on the process of grieving after a death in the community. Ethnographer and folklorist Arnold van Gennep stated that although at first glance, mourners would be preoccupied with rites of separation, it was the rites of transition that were particularly elaborated (van Gennep [1909] 1960, 146). Van Gennep concluded that the importance lay in reshaping the dead and his or her connection to the group, as well as the group itself. A transformation needed to happen. Arnold van Gennep wrote about the mourning group:

During mourning, the living mourners and the deceased constitute a special group, situated between the world of the living and the world of the dead, and how soon living individuals leave that group depends on the closeness of their relationship with the dead person. (van Gennep [1909] 1960, 147)

How would such a statement compare to the devotion fans show to Ivan Turina? Arnold van Gennep's quote was written in the early twentieth century, and his work considered what he himself called *semicivilized* societies. Fans have spent a lot of time and energy transforming Turina into a useful narrative. They are reluctant to end the mourning period. Their persistence in keeping the memory of Turina alive is striking. In the reality of the high speed of change, of players coming and going, it would be natural to let his memory fade. Being in charge of commemorating the late goalkeeper puts supporters closer to him as well.

The death occurred in a certain temporal context. Just a year before, AIK had lost its old stadium, which was hard for supporters to swallow.²⁹ This Stockholm club has not been successful either, finishing seasons without winning them. It is not unusual for clubs to be in trouble or to see footballers come and go. Then they play for other clubs, in different

29 Jens Lindqvist, »Här rivs Råsunda av en grävmaskin,« Nyheter24, Feb. 8, 2013, <https://nyheter24.se/sport/fotboll/allsvenskan/738327-har-rivs-rasunda-av-en-gravmaskin>. In one interview with two people working for AIK they were very bitter about the decision to close the arena (interview with Carl and David, Stockholm, Mar. 5, 2015). All the AIK supporters interviewed complained about it.

countries, say to the cameras that it is an honor and joy, and that the new club is the best thing that has happened to him. As one of my informants said, echoing several others, »You cannot trust players, they will disappoint you« (interview with Björn, Malmö, September 2012).³⁰ For devoted fans, players bought on a free market are not easy to relate to. One needs to remember that they are often loyal only to their careers. The death of a popular character, in a context of a club, does not happen often. Turina passed away as the goalkeeper, the spirit of AIK, the strong man protecting it, the favorite of the crowd. Had he moved to another club, he might have been respected but simply put aside in importance for his previous club.

Four years after the event, AIK supporters still shout Turina's name and still go to Croatia to pay their respects.³¹ They do not wish to let go. The narrative is kept alive from match to match, and a big Turina banner still travels with fans to away matches.³² He needed to disappear physically, his body needed to literally stop functioning, to make his position in the club permanent. And with staggering speed, Turina seems to be undergoing the process of transformation from communicative to cultural memory (Jan Assmann 1988; Aleida Assmann 2011), meaning that it is no longer about personal contact and communication, but involves official, institutionalized means to keep the memory alive. Although it has not been a long time since his death, he has already been raised to the ranks of a legend (match observations, 2015–16). Supporters, and the club, continue the commemoration.

His definitive and complete absence made it possible for him to fill the void with the much sought-after symbol of a dead hero. The failure of the body opened doors to creating narratives, and in the end immortality. The phenomenon described here was produced through various human and non-human elements that take effect together and trigger action

30 The exact date of the interview is unfortunately not recorded.

31 Pictures from pilgrimages to Turina's grave in Croatia appear on AIK's Facebook page.

32 Match observations MFF-AIK, Malmö, Oct. 23, 2017.

(Barad 2003, 817). This is, in the end, a story from long ago. A dead hero would be worshipped as a demigod after his departure from the mortal world (see Hourihan 1997; Berger 2013). Once dead, the absence would feed the myth, without the need to fear that the hero in question would do something stupid or inappropriate. Turina became the most productive symbol for AIK when he was no longer there.

Concluding remarks

In this context of football games, participants are granted agency to influence history writing of clubs and individual stories through matches. It is based on the common, contextual understanding of what is allowed and what is not, what makes sense and what does not, and potential meanings take form (Seitel 2012, 77). It depends on the audience's *reading skills* to comprehend events and processes, which then undergo an interpretation and transformation, resulting in various cultural exchanges. Christian Bromberger (1995, 295) remarked on a football crowd as being pragmatic in its approach, and not a seemingly irrational crowd:

Football fans are no different from anyone else, in that they are not ignorant fools, nor are they deluded by their passions to the point of being incapable of maintaining a critical distance vis-à-vis the world around them.

I interpret Bromberger's commentary as another emphasis of the specific logical arrangement that is possible in football. As a space somewhat outside of the everyday, football can facilitate behavior that might appear strange or erratic, yet does follow the rules that are acceptable within that context. As already mentioned, Bromberger noticed a difference between football rituals and religious rituals, but he did not classify football as an example of magic, which I claim is the case (see Herd 2017). The pragmatic use of players, as exemplified in this article, is one of the elements that point toward a magical interpretation of this context.

Many players are considered divas today, overpaid but not exactly overworked. Former players seem critical of professionalism; they question the approach as players have difficulties in connecting with broader

society.³³ All one needs from them, at first glance, is run, pass well, and score. The examples presented in this article show that a physical inability becomes rich cultural material within seconds, bringing forth both positive and negative connotations. The dynamics in football provide an account of how narratives constitute/contrast/contradict the common sense that structures society through active bodies that act even though immobile (Barad 2003). The reading skills of the participants are connected both to the contextuality of heterotopia of football, and to an intertextual meaning of different kinds of narratives and myth. The use of bodies in narration makes sense if both intertextuality and contextuality are in place.

In an essay about the functions of ritual killings, Walter Burkert ([1983] 1996, 67) made a comment about the function war could have:

It almost seems as though the aim of war is to gather dead warriors, just as the Aztecs waged war in order to take prisoners to use as sacrificial victims.

The analysis of the three examples presented suggests that Burkert's statement applies to the symbolic conflicts in the context of sports. Players are important when running on the pitch, but they can be even more important when unable to perform. Their physical actions are halted, but they lend their abilities to narratives that continue to linger around stadiums. The mechanism of creating connection is traced from bodily abilities, and more importantly disabilities, to story-building. Because supporters look for different ways to engage with their beloved clubs, they are quick to use any references available. Still, there is a power structure (Skeggs 2004, 2) that is maintained by the use of narratives and allows supporters to build a strong position that can influence the character of a club.

One does not have to be a star, one has to become meaningful and that is not just up to a player. That is why it is such a difficult thing to achieve. The negotiations, probing, and different applicability result in stories and narratives that are woven by all the parties involved. In football, a spectator

33 Interviews with Sune, Malmö, Nov. 12, 2014, and Jesper, Malmö, Nov. 25, 2014.

can become an actor, and fans claim emotional ownership of their clubs and consider themselves as important as the players. But they project their own passions onto the bodies of footballers. Jean Baudrillard remarked that the »naked body is an expressionless mask hiding each of the true natures. [...] the body only has meaning when it is marked, covered in inscriptions« (Baudrillard 1993, 105). Although the marking of players' bodies is only symbolic in the cases described, they do serve as blank canvases that can be used for different kinds of stories. Footballers are paid to play for a limited period of time. Supporters can play with the traces they leave behind for as long as they please. Once transformed into narratives, players can become immortal.

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