

Canned Reactions and FIFA Noise: The Specter of the Audience During a Pandemic

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Abstract

Synthetic crowd noise has been used in a variety of professional sports presentations since the onset of the pandemic. Sex dolls were used as seat-fillers during a professional soccer match in Korea in May of 2020. Technical compensations for the removal of crowds from stadiums indicate a dependency on the consistency of our media presentations. They also indicate a dependency on the kind of reproducibility that broadcast and presentation technology affords. This paper investigates—along McLuhanite and Baudrillardian lines—the significance of this inclusion of synthetic representations of an audience in order to legitimize the significance of these presentations and to pacify anticipated anxieties experienced by the television audience.

Keywords

technology, television, media theory, visual communication, mass media effects

On 17 May, 2020 K League club FC Seoul used what appeared to be sex dolls to fill out empty seats in their stadium during a match against Gwangju. The team's Instagram feed was subsequently filled with messages from fans who were, "outraged to that the club had failed to notice that the mannequins were 'so obviously' sex dolls" (Sang-Hun). The team was fined

100 million won, and there was some speculation that they might be barred from their own stadium over the incident (Diaz). In the abstract, it seems like an overreaction on the part of the league. Granted, professional sports—barring some exceptions—are presented as family entertainment and many leagues put a lot of effort into projecting a wholesome image. Sponsors and fans all assume that the discourse connected to the game will remain within the typical parameters: score, standing, statistics, and so forth. The question that this paper will address is why the sight of the dolls caused the kind of outcry that it did and, more importantly from the perspective of media theorists, what this might mean about our relationship with live-ness, authenticity, and the contemporary production of spectacle.

At a basic level, this is a story about an attempt to produce duplicates. Putting a substitute for a living person in those seats was a matter of finding the best available stand-in. The capabilities of technology and media seem to be limitless, but the ability to produce a credible replica of a breathing human being is no small task; nor is it possible without including a significant amount of contextual baggage. In responding to a question about clones, Jean Baudrillard argued that, “[t]his desire for cloning is just another way of disappearing, and a shameful one. It is a technological disappearance into artificial survival, corresponding to the elimination of the human as human” (*The Agony of Power* 123). The extent to which we want to disappear into spectacles is significant. Guy Debord knew that. So did Marshall McLuhan, though he would have argued that spectacles drag us toward them rather than the other way around. The need for a duplication remains however, and in the case of FC Seoul, desperation eclipsed context.

Baudrillard argues that “[w]hat we see now behind the eclipse of the ‘objective’ real, is the rise of Integrity Reality, of a Virtual Reality that rests on the deregulation of the very

reality principle” (*The Intelligence of Evil* 17). In this environment, anything that mimics the real is acceptable. In fact, driven to its limit, the idea of Integral Reality demands that the interpretation of something avoid designations like ‘real’ or ‘authentic.’ It is the position of the thing that matters—the placement in the precession of simulacra. The sticking point is that the context of something is carried with it like a shadow and the logic of an object in a system of representation does not eliminate its ontology.

The dolls were positioned in the stands in various poses mimicking enthusiastic sports spectatorship. They were all dressed in casual clothing and medical masks. There were 28 female and 2 male dolls, and their seating followed social distancing guidelines for people in public places during the COVID-19 pandemic. It emerged after the game that the dolls had been photographed holding advertisements for a variety of pornographic websites before the match, but that those signs had been removed before the start of play. In any case, the purpose was to position synthetic bodies in a way that might make up for the absence of real ones. Obviously, it didn’t work.

For the majority of people who pay attention to sports, the focus on something that has no lifeworld consequences is legitimized by the enthusiasm of other people who are also paying attention. In other words, the crowd that voluntarily attends the spectacle and those who follow the team or the sport from a distance provide a reciprocal justification for each other. That enthusiasm transfers to the people who are personally taking part in the competition on display. There is an opportunity to identify with some of the participants in one way or another whether that is through the arbitrary selection of favorites or the recognition of a geographical connection shared between observer and participant. The result is that a relationship forms that encourages an emotional investment in the conduct and the result.

The league's condemnation of the use of the dolls appears to have been rooted in the fact that they were not 'mannequins.' It was understood that mannequins would be used to fill out the empty seats in the stands and, hopefully, mimic a familiar visual presence in a live soccer broadcast. The COVID-19 pandemic has prevented the attendance of fans, and the oddity of the image of a pair of professional teams playing soccer in an empty stadium was something that an image conscious team and league would want to avoid. In fact, I can only think of a handful of matches prior to the pandemic that were played in empty stadiums and, in each of those cases, the crowds were barred from the stadiums due to violence between supporters. In the interest of providing a presentation that was as normal as possible, the league and the teams opted for fake humans. And those fake humans were supposed to be manufactured specifically as substitutes for the visual presence of human beings. This, of course, is not the primary reason for the production of sex dolls and that distinction is where the controversy was supposedly located.

They were *illegitimate* false observers. The obvious explanation is that this is due to the fact that the passivity implicit in a sex doll has more specific implications than those of a mannequin. It is the ability to use a body for sexual gratification independent of the consent of the object, effectively a rape endorsement. Veronica Cassidy has pointed out that "[r]ather than a gesture toward a post gender world, [sex dolls] are the worst of masculinity technologies employed to use, and abuse, women's bodies, reducing the feminine to a source of pleasure for man" (213). For makers of sex dolls, the attempt, as much as possible, is to create a substitute for a human body. It is arguable as to whether the increased interest and marketability in sex dolls indicates a cultural shift, but an expanding market is not an indication of increased social acceptance. In a basic sense, the doll exists as something that is to be acted upon rather than

observed. The type of action that is encouraged is one that is intrinsically connected to, at best, physical intimacy and, at worst, subjugation and violence.

It is important to point to Rebecca Gibson's work here and note her concerns that "[d]ue to scientific progress, we may be moving away from a feeling of uncanniness, when boundaries are confused, in regards to android/genomic beings, and toward a feeling of comfort and stability based on entire non-human reliability and durability, when we realize that these boundaries are something we created, and which we can uncreate" (241). Granted, Gibson's work is focused on the use of realistic sex dolls as companions and substitutes for human intimacy, but these uses for the objects combined with the realization that the companies that produce these dolls are, "doing a booming business" (241). It is notable that the dolls are marketed and apparently consumed as primarily private objects, so the movement, "away from a feeling of uncanniness" (Gibson 241) appears to be limited to private consumption rather than the public perception of the objects. Veronica Cassidy points out that, "loving a [sex] doll is widely stigmatized" (205). Her research into online forums for doll owners reveals that many are reluctant to admit their enthusiasm or ownership publicly. Many of the complaints from soccer supporters after the game were focused on a kind of lewdness related to the objects themselves. In the end, the reaction was rooted in the public display of something that is interpreted as personal.

As nonhumans, sex dolls function as an absence in practice. Sex dolls are generally marketed as 'almost as good as the real thing.' RealDoll.com, for instance, uses slogans like, "Dream. Your wildest fantasies into reality," and "We Spell Love R-E-A-L". The notion of substitution is present, as it is in mannequins, but the purpose of the object is that it might be a substitute—permanent or temporary—for another person. This incorporates an admission of

inferiority while allowing for a justified substitution for that real thing in its absence. The intrinsic passivity of the object is the reason it works as a solution for the absence of an actual partner. The key here is that the doll must be, at a basic functional level, substitutable for another person.

The idea was that the doll or mannequin would function as a prop that would allow the television viewer to maintain the sense of participation that would normally coincide with watching a broadcast match. In seeing themselves reflected in the bodies of the fans in the seats, the distance between the viewer and the physical event collapses a little. McLuhan described the encounter with electronic media as simultaneously an autoamputation—in that we ignore the parts of the body that are not directly involved in our interaction with the technical object—and an extension of the central nervous system—in that we come to experience what is transmitted to us as vibrant, immediate and urgent. This response depends on a comprehension, however, that the image and the sounds that are transmitted to us are comprehensible. This might explain why so much of television programming appears to be interchangeable—and no format is more predictable in its contours than sports broadcasting.

Veronica Cassidy, building off of Donna Haraway's work, points out that "the boundary between organisms and machine is part of an exploitative Western tradition" (211). The act of substituting real people for synthetic ones probably made a kind of sense when organizers were discussing what to do about the absence of real-life fans. Assuming that the objects used were indeed supposed to be mannequins, the problem being solved would have been the alienating absence of bodies in seats. Allowing television audiences to retain the sense of something significant happening—even though the outcome of professional sporting events is largely trivial to anyone other than the players, the supporters, and those with a financial interest in the

respective franchises—is crucial to the perpetuation of the impression that sport does, in some objective way, matter. The overture, then, might be interpreted as a kind of gesture towards the significance of the fans in the presentation of the match. These false bodies are here, they might have said, because the game is nothing without fans and this is the best we can do under the circumstances. The problem is that in proposing mannequins and finally substituting sex dolls the substitute appears to diminish the significance of the presence of supporters rather than highlight it.

This makes sense given that the simulation is something that is supposed to stand in for the real. Jean Baudrillard argued in *The Intelligence of Evil* (2005), that “*the simulacrum is not that which hides the truth, but that which hides the absence of truth*” (32). The fiction of participation in professional sports keeps the audience’s interest and helps perpetuate the illusion of a relationship between fans and athletes. Multiple athletes have spoken fondly about the encouragement offered by supporters as they were plying their trade but so have rock stars and virtually no one would argue that someone who buys a ticket to a concert is automatically a member of the band. Those who invest a significant amount of their self-worth in following and supporting a particular sports team take ownership of the successes and failures of a group of people they presumably do not know and who do not know them. That said, the participation of the spectacle through witnessing is the basis behind sports fandom. The televising of matches allows for that tribal loyalty to be expanded beyond the limits of immediate physical proximity. In order for that to happen, the transmission of the match, the movement of the spectacle from the physical plane to the electronic one, must be endorsed not only by the teams participating and the fans in the stands but also by the supporters witnessing through media.

This connection is more or less by design, of course. McLuhan pointed out that “[i]n the electric age we wear all mankind as our skin” (52), and to a significant extent he was right. Our relationship with technology forces a kind of indulgence for impulses and information that are delivered to us synthetically. The body comes to be a kind of shell of authenticity that covers up layer upon layer of internalized electronic impulses and relationships. The delivery of the spectacle becomes the mechanism we use to interact with the outside world and, before long, the idea of participating by simply witnessing through a televised image doesn’t seem so irrational. This would not have surprised Baudrillard:

Against this obsession with the real we have created a gigantic apparatus of simulation which allows us to pass to the act ‘in vitro’ (this is true even of procreation). We prefer the exile of the virtual, of which television is the universal mirror, to the catastrophe of the real (*The Gulf War* 28)

The simulation is usually created because the real is inaccessible (either temporarily or as a matter of course). Video games make up for our horrifyingly typical physical abilities; films and novels make up for the unpleasant predictability or unpredictability of our lives; news broadcasts and websites make up for our inability to be in multiple places at the same time, and all of these augmentations normalize the presumption that simulations and digitally enhanced realities are correct substitutes for anything that is not achievable through the use of our bodies alone. Sport fills this gap in what is often a more personal sense; many of a team’s supporters will have played the sport in question as children and, in some cases, as adults. The enthusiasm for watching someone perform at a level that we know we are incapable of performing satisfies the same desire to see the banal performed in an exceptional way. In this instance, however, the event is witnessable in real time and according to a set schedule. The extraordinary

happens on a defined schedule and it is possible to plan to witness it. In light of the fact, however, that there are a limited number of seats in any venue and that there are some matches and leagues that are prohibitively expensive, the production of a contemporaneous spectacle allows for greater access while preserving the sensation of witnessing directly.

Crucially, the contemporaneous presentation must still *resemble* our memory or impression of the real (as much as we're still cognizant of it) and the synthetic stands in service to the real in its absence (and when the digital cannot provide an alternative). Greater resolution in television images, higher quality sound from digital platforms, increased speeds of transmission all seek to service the impression that we are directly connected to whatever is being transmitted. So much so that people are often disheartened to discover that almost everything that is broadcast live is done so with an intentional delay built into it.

For example, a few years ago a beer company named Molson began distributing Wi-Fi-enabled lights that resembled the light behind the goal in professional ice hockey. The light would automatically sync with National Hockey League games that are broadcast on television and, when a goal was scored, the light lit up. The problem is that there was no delay built into the light's response to the action at the actual game but there was a 15-second difference between what was showing up on the television screen and the actual gameplay between the two teams. The lights are very popular in Canadian sports bars and there is a slightly surreal quality to seeing the light go off and then knowing that, within fifteen seconds, a goal will be scored. At one level, it increases the anticipation, but at another it tips the crowd off to who is going to score and seems to leech some of the mystery out of the contest. There is a desire for some sort of simultaneity on the part of those who pay attention to sporting events and any

violation of that illusion diminishes the audience's ability to pretend that they are directly involved.

It is worth noting that, a few months after FC Seoul's misstep, the soccer leagues in England resumed competitive play without fans in attendance. The solution to uncomfortable optics related to the absence of flesh and blood supporters in the stands has been to cover the seats with tarps that either display team logos and slogans or massive collections of selfies and webcam shots taken by supporters. Interestingly, the broadcasts now include optional audio of a simulated crowd reacting to the action on the pitch. The artificial intelligence required to make this happen is supported by Electronic Arts, the video game behemoth that puts out major multiplatform sports titles like those offered by the National Football League, the National Basketball Association, the National Hockey League and, of course, FIFA. The crowd noise is integrated into the televised presentation and, in some cases, optional for viewers. Bundesliga in Germany, having gone back to a playing schedule before their English counterpart, tested the technology out in May and found that it allowed viewers to more easily concentrate on the action on the field (DeCourcy). The absence of familiar sounds coming from the fans, apparently, caused those watching the games to be distracted. The familiar sense stimuli of aural reactions was making it harder to focus on the—supposedly—primary input of the presentation; the visual. The amount of detail EA went into to produce the effect is impressive:

EA Sports sampled 92 different crowd sounds and cheers to create these effects. And it will be authentic, not generic. The sound in each game will be taken from past matchups involving those particular teams at that particular stadium. (DeCourcy)

The audio provides a validatory signal to the visual information that is being transmitted. There is a comfort element to this as well. In the self-conscious context of crowd dynamics, those watching the action remotely want to have their reactions to the play on the pitch validated. The soundtrack delivers this kind of validation in the same way that a fitness tracker validates the fact that the person wearing it is exercising.

This level of involvement in an aspect of the contest that effectively does not have any impact on the result—the teams are not able to hear the soundtrack—indicates something significant about the relationship between professional sports and technology. The tools they use to communicate to their audience are, like other aspects of electronic media production, chosen because they help the audience immerse themselves in the events they are witnessing. The less intrusive or obvious these tools are, however, the more effective they are likely to be. What is interesting about the use of the crowd noise, however, is that even though it is obviously not phenomenologically connected to the action on screen, the rationale for using it is that it makes it easier for the television and streaming audience to immerse themselves in the game.

What we have here, then, is the use of two different tools to obfuscate the fact that soccer is continuing under a pandemic. The respective reactions indicate that one approach is working while the other clearly did not. Both tactics were used to accompany the same type of event over the same form of mass media. One of the adjustments involved sight and the other involved sound. From a McLuhanite perspective, the sense that is encouraged to touch the inauthentic part of the text will process the information differently than the secondary sense that illustrates rather than informs. In the case of the dolls, the visual element of evaluating other people is built into an immense matrix of social relations. Fundamental interpretations

based on preconceptions like racism, ageism and so forth, factor into this. So too do situational interpretive impulses like trying to read the behavior of the crowd to see how they are interpreting the progress of the game. The knowledge that we are looking at something that is literally marketed as a substitute for actual humanity underlines the distance we are now required to keep between ourselves and the event.

Most sex doll marketing emphasizes the extent to which the dolls are exchangeable with the idea of a living sexual partner. The emphasis on parity with the real as exchangeable with the synthetic fits comfortably with Baudrillard's assessment of integral reality. Indeed, it seems that the indignation related to the use of the dolls during a broadcast has to do with the underlying nature of their existence rather than an overt call to sexuality implicit in how they were presented in the stands. It is the obvious fakeness of the dolls that makes the image of them sitting in the stands cheering the play on the pitch that makes it unbearable. The synthesis of what is happening is impossible given the extent to which the dolls do not achieve the kind of chaotic animated humanity that links to large crowds. The possibility of everything being mistaken for the 'real' is dependent on the real being duplicable. Much in the same way that it strains credulity to watch old Hanna Barbera cartoons where characters walking down a hallway pass the same picture or end table over and over again because the studio reused background cells for simplicity and economy, the image of the lifeless dolls frozen in waving or reclining positions at once seems comical and insulting. The real is not able to get anywhere near this scene. What the audience is presented with is a collage of half-realized imitations of an idealized crowd's behavior. The inevitable conclusion is that, since we no longer have actual access to the real because of the precession of simulacra, the idea of an authentic real is a fallacy.

Examples from the ‘Black Sox’ scandal around the 1919 Major League Baseball World Series to the 2018 banning of Yu Delu and Cao Yupeng from professional snooker due to evidence of match fixing indicate that the enthusiasm we have for contests is rooted in a sense of legitimacy. This faith in legitimacy is tied as much to the expectations regarding the presentation of the event as it is to the expectations regarding the result. In the same way that many Western courts require public access to their court systems—faith in the efficacy of the system being rooted in the public’s ability to witness the processes in action—the enthusiasm for something like professional sports is rooted in the witnessing of what is believed to be an honest contest between opponents. The witnessing here is crucial: the event is constructed for the benefit of an audience and the continued support teams get from their fan base is rooted in the belief that their support of the organization is tantamount to a kind of active participation. The use of the dolls in order to fill out the traditional presence of supporters acknowledged the need for witnesses to the event, but provided an alternative that negated the necessity or even the significance of the supporters.

The crowd noise modification has been applied to a number of different televised sport presentations at present and it appears to be working. The introduction of a ghost crowd helps maintain the sense of credibility in the proceedings. This should tell us something: in the same way that muzak was introduced into elevators in the twentieth century to calm the people who were inside when the doors closed, the introduction of recorded fan noise into the body of a televised sports presentation lulls the viewer into a sense of normalcy even though the visual elements underline the fact that things are, at present, not at all normal. The aural field augments what is happening in the visual field. It is different from one sport to the next, of course. The chatter coming from commentators during Major League baseball games is nearly

constant whereas the disembodied voices used to illustrate play in professional soccer leagues drift in and out of the presentation with the sound of the crowd used to fill in the blanks. In either case, however, the aural sets the mood for the presentation.

The widespread animosity to the use of vuvuzelas during the 2010 World Cup in South Africa would be a good case in point here. The BBC received enough complaints about the use of the horns during matches that it contemplated introducing an optional broadcast version the matches that would have edited the sound out of subsequent games (BBC). The expectations that we have about the presentation of live events—in this case, the sounds of cheering and singing that British crowds are accustomed to—made it difficult to enjoy the action on the pitch. The aural element of the broadcast is where audiences appear to find their comfort. Predictable nuances to the sound of a match validate the sense of involvement that a television viewer might feel towards the presentation. The absence of the possibility of this part of the presentation being included in the COVID-19 era of soccer matches made the viewing of the initial games even more alienating. It wasn't even that the crowd noise didn't conform to the expectations that went along with the normal nuances of the game; it was that the circumstances of professional sports had changed in such a way that prevented the possibility of crowd noise in the first place.

The reemergence of sport has told us a lot about our relationship with mass media and the expectations we have for it. In trying to explain the visceral and personal reactions we have to electronic media presentations, McLuhan argued that the connection was immediate enough to be personal. When Baudrillard was evaluating the prevalence of duplication and distribution in 20th century Western media environments, he determined that our relationship with the precession of images and duplications was enough to bury the reality beyond our reach. Our

relationship with televised sports is one that is both personal and political. The way in which we interact with these presentations is rooted in historical norms and contemporary relationships with our social landscape and political environment.

What was shocking about the use of sex dolls during a K League match was not, in spite of social media comments to the contrary, rooted in a prudish rejection of the objects and their manufactured purpose. The sexuality was an excuse, a justification for a visceral reaction to the sight of manufactured corpses doing the traditional work of human beings. The fear produced by COVID-19 was somehow embodied in a necro-performance signaling the replicability of human actors. The knowledge that it was impossible for fans to attend in person was the opening of the frustration, but that frustration still provided room for a sense of loss - that the spectacle would remain incomplete without the presence of a living crowd. The fear that the pandemic might alter our reality was suddenly overshadowed by the suggestion that reality didn't require us to continue functioning.

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