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Off the pitch: semiotics of liminality between space and play

Abstract: Playing fields are "spaces where the communitas suspends its everyday life and structures" and "The internal logic of sporting games is connected to values from the social context" (Parlebas, Pierre. 2013. Motor praxeology: A new scientific paradigm. In Mariann Vaczi (ed.), *Playing fields: Power, practice, and passion in sport*, 127–144. Reno: University of Nevada Press). But what about the space in between? What kind of semiotics organisation can be detected in the membrane between player and liminal space where spectators are not allowed yet specific characters needed to carry out an event? We can therefore identify a liminality that can be connected either to the controlled or the wild playing field and depending on which of the two is the case can be analysed according to the degree of regulated system of signs which they produce. This implies different pathways and rituals: as matches are played, a variety of bodily activities may be taking place concurrently. Furthermore, it is inevitable that these activities attract the attention of the audience or alternately lead a player to interact with a non-player.

In this article, I will first try to identify certain semiotics features, especially connected to Eco's Peircian concept of Encyclopedia, that characterize the status of liminal space around the playing field. Then I will focus on liminality in soccer, investigating what kinds of interaction exist outside the playing area.

Keywords: football; liminality; play; semiotics; space

1 Let's play (and game) it again

Within academic debate, the English-speaking terms *play* and *game* have shared for some time an apparently deep-rooted and fateful distinction. Avedon and Sutton-Smith (1971: 5) were among the first to use the term *play* to indicate "a type of behavior." Contrary to the action, a "game is sufficiently systematic that it may be repeated by others in other places" (1971: 7). The game-play is unique,

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individual, and ephemeral, while the game-game is systematic, repeatable, finalized, and has predictable results, even if it produces unbalanced results such as identification of winners and losers, or rankings (1971: 7). Within linguistics, this definition seems to hypothesize a pre-semiotic dimension in which free play without rules (for example that of children) is not codified: an abnormal dimension that differs from the rules of the game. Roberts et al. (1959) consider the game therefore as a liminal passage that determines the symbolization of some rituals within the society and the community that practices it. Precisely because it is liminal, the threshold between the real world and the sporting or recreational world will always remain fragile and traversable. According to Turner, game "is done by formal rules and by such morivational means as, for example, competitiveness. A game's rules dismiss as irrelevant most of the 'noise' which makes up social reality, the multiform stimuli which impinge on our consciousness" (Turner 1974: 87)

In their famous *Theory of games and economic behavior*, von Neumann and Morgenstern had already warned of the difference/distinction between the system of rules and their practical implementation: First, one must distinguish between the abstract concept of a game, and the individual plays of that game. The game is simply the totality of the rules that describe it. Every particular instance at which the game is played in a particular way from beginning to end, is a play (Neumann and Morgenstern 1944).

In a way that resembles the dynamic between Langue and Parole by Saussure (and therefore a linguistic dimension), the game is always the virtual set of rules, and the play is its realization. Now it is a question of observing to what extent the structural dynamics that "All games are defined by a set of rules which in practice allow the playing of any number of matches" (Levi-Strauss 1966: 30). This is prevalent in the open course of a game: that is, a set of actions that are not fully regulated and lack a necessary symmetry.

Compared to a rigid structural vision there seems to be a more pragmatic way that sees a *flow* (Csikszentmihalyi 1981), rather, an uninterrupted flow in the subjective conditions of experience. From a semiotic point of view, the subjective semiosis process requires an awareness of playing beyond the action that is being undertaken; that is, we don't play (only) when "we know we are playing, and we choose to do it" (Hinthorne and Schneider 2012), rather, when we are aware that the objectives, rules, and actions that we are following are freely chosen from a large range of possibilities: it is not a certainty that a professional in the world of football is *playing* any more than an orchestra conductor or a painter.

The game, in actual fact, gives meaning to human interactions, where they do not exist, or at least, do not yet exist. The presence of an actual phenomenon makes the underlying idea of a structure or, at least, that of an abstract model possible. At

this point it is easy to see that the event itself becomes secondary to the shared rules, which are the very origin of communication possibilities. However, what seems to underlie the idea of a game is the remaining presence of a code: "Le facteur-clef présent en toute situation est la notion d'incertitude" ('The key factor present in any situation is the notion of uncertainty'; Parlebas 1998: 65). Whether language can play a central role, semiotic practice must be thought of as rule-guided practices. They are not chance actions nor randomly proffered words, but actions that owe their legitimacy, relevance, and even existence to a set of rules determining their use. The certainty of the presence of rules guarantees the definition of sport that ultimately concerns "toute situation motrice d'affrontements codifiés, dénommée jeu ou sport par les istances sociales" ('any motor situation of codified confrontations, called game or sport by social istances'; Parlebas 1998: 196). In this sense, the basic differentiation between game and play, which we will talk about shortly, seems clear cut and unmatchable.

1.1 Game and sport

A small and necessary clarification: Is there consequently, an absolute relativity and interchangeability between the concept of *game* and *sport*? On the contrary, this overlap must be avoided. Of course, they have much in common: they are all based on motor action, which is subject to a system of competition rules that determine their internal logic. However, there is a significant difference between them: some of these motor situations have been selected and heavily promoted by international institutions that have modelled them on the image of their socio-economic universe.

   Some of these ludic motor situations (Parlebas 2003) have been chosen and intensely promoted by international institutions that have shaped them in the image of their socio-economic universe. In fact, only those motor games best adapted to the demands of a certain kind of mass spectacle, favoring competition and the consecration of an elite set of winners, have been retained. This is what is called sport, which is based on the simultaneous presence of four necessary and sufficient distinctive features: motricity, rules, competition, and institution. Sport is the set of motor situations codified in the form of competition and institutionalized. The nomenclature problem is not neutral. We thus fundamentally differentiate sport from traditional games, although we will use the expressions motor games or sporting games when these two sectors are to be considered together (Parlebas 2020). It is precisely for this reason that in this work we are dealing with the internal and external spaces of the official and institutionalized football pitch. Sport, therefore, is opposed to non-sport. The main consequence of

this rift emphasizes that those activities which, "do not subscribe to the criteria of the sports spectacle – that is to say hundreds of traditional games – will be excluded from the field of valued practices, and from the field of research as an insidious consequence!" (Parlebas 2020: 2). In this sense, one cannot disagree with Parlebas – the founder of semiotricity – when he asks.

> Sport is a world of signs: of signs, not of stimuli. Is it possible to carry on treating players in action as they were stimulus response mechanisms? Is it possible to be content with analysing their acts from the Pavlovian model of conditioning? Sporting game is a place riddled with immediate, literally embodied meanings: each motor behaviour carries a meaning that the other participants must interpret to act appropriately. Sitting ball players, like basketball players, try to extract tactical meanings from the acts that interweave before them. (Parlebas 2017: 277)

In this way, the very concept of *Semiotricity* is intended as "field and nature of motor situations considered from the angle of the use of sign systems directly related to the participants' motor conducts" (Parlebas 1998: 43). It should also be remembered that within these conducts and in the very depths of the structural mechanisms underlying the game, mechanisms of the individual players involved coexist, that is, they belong to their own personal semiotic mechanisms. Only in sport, and understood in the sense mentioned above can we identify the complex network of relationships, inferences, and signs that determine a sporting event.

2 Programs and encyclopedias

As Betti et al. (2010) remind us, in this sense the Peircian lesson can actually be a good starting point for a semiotic approach to motor situations and sport in general, as long as the implications are fully understood. Peircian pragmatics is fundamental for understanding the semioticity of motor action, which is the result of a complex process in which the *Ground* of a sign is interpreted through what Eco (1976) would call a package of instructions falling through space and time.[1] The semiosis mechanism of Peircian inspiration tells of a fluidity of the elements involved, which are always potentially interchangeable in their positions. This implies the fact that we are never faced with a finished product, but rather, that the ability to produce signs from a sign extends to any phenomenon with meaning/meaning, and in the understanding of the sign production process (language) as root of knowledge production, semiotics would allow to read and interpret the signs involved (even in psychomotricity action). In this sense, it is difficult to

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1 The ground connecting the phenomenon/object and the sign produces the dynamical interpretant or translation into other signs (interpretants).

establish clear lines of distinction, so cultural and social constructs that are gradually constituted precisely due to the game nature of sport, can always be broken.

On the other hand, it seems, just as with a discriminating and defining element, one cannot escape a structuring of the sporting event, that is, a constant reference to those codified rules that in fact govern the game and consequently the sporting action. A sport is in fact also a set of narrative programs (Greimas 1987; Greimas and Courtés 1982) in which the inserted players are not only *abstract actants*, but also historical subjects: that is, they possess a specific semantic competence due to their previous sports and ludomotor experiences.

This mismatched correlation between structure and pragmatic dimension can be deepened and put into focus by recalling the concept of Eco's encyclopedia which consists of "a sort of polidimensional network, equipped with topological properties, in which the distances covered are abbreviated or elongated and each term acquires proximity with others by means of shortcuts and immediate contacts, meanwhile remaining linked with all the others according to continually changing relationships" (Eco 1976: 124). The empirical reality actually tells us in fact, that semiotic material is in continuous movement and that consequently the concept of structure (and therefore of code) risks losing most of the pragmatic implications by not allowing us to understand the phenomenon. Except for a static, synchronic moment to analyze ("locally," in the sense of the Catastrophe theory) virtual portions of the Global Semantic Space that inevitably move according to local codes, the observation of the sign in terms must be deepened in the provisional correlations established by the different codes. The result is a broad, unlimited but not infinite field, which is the recorded set of all interpretations, an archive of all verbal and nonverbal information: the encyclopedia. As with a rhizome, where any point can be connected with any other point; broken at any point to then resume its course; with a center that is always mobile and fleeting, in fact never fixed.

It is obvious that when put into these terms the encyclopedia can only be a semiotic postulate, in the sense that it cannot be described in its entirety. It therefore requires a concrete realization that detaches itself from the idea of Globalization and is able to become operational. It should be a given that communicating subjects share:

> Quite large portions of the Global Encyclopedia… being part of a certain community means (also) sharing the knowledge of one or more local Encyclopedias, which, during communi cative exchanges can remain unspoken as it is taken for granted that they are shared by the community. Local Encyclopedias (which act as cultural glue within a community) can be to varying extents, both in the sense that they can concern vast semantic fields, and in the sense that they can be shared by expansive groups of people. (Pisanty and Zijno 2009: 171)

We will therefore have, as Violi (1992) suggests, four descriptive levels. (1) That of the Global Encyclopedia which we have already talked about. (2) Average knowledge: it is the knowledge that characterizes a given culture and differentiates it from all the others. A relatively coherent and determined sub-universe as such that we can, for example, establish "which knowledge and beliefs were part of the universe of a peasant from the 1300s and those of a French nobleman on the eve of the revolution." (3) Encyclopedic competence, on the other hand, is the average competence that an individual must have in order to belong to a given culture. It differs from the previous one as it is still linked to a concept of general and shared culture, and because in this case we speak of the competence of the individual subject, so as to allow him to understand certain given situations. The fourth point (4) instead concerns semantic competence and is what we could say concerns linguistic (but also cultural) codes and their lexicalization.

3 Encyclopedias and sports

Starting with these assumptions, I would like to focus on the possible theoretical consequences that reasoning stemming from the Eco (1976) concept of encyclopedia could have in the context of the analysis of the sporting event.[2]

1. The basic element of the Global Encyclopedia, that is, the most general and decisive one is the concept of motor action, rather, a primary action that takes place in space and in time. In short, the recognition of the very possibility of a sport through some of the rules and basic signs that characterize it.
2. The encyclopedia as average knowledge is the first operationalization of level (1). It tells us what kind of action is taking place, in that it leads us to recognize a certain game or sport which is culturally and socially differentiated when compared to others.
3. The individual's specific knowledge of the codes that determine a particular sport may make the individual more or less capable within a specific sport.
4. The knowledge of the semantic rules underlying the sport will be fundamental in order to linguistically define a specific sport, discuss its rules and actors, and define a connotative universe.

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2 In Umberto Eco's semiotics, the encyclopedia is a sort of multidimensional space of semiosis. Eco describes it as the recorded sum of all interpretations, conceivable as well as "the library of all libraries" (Eco 1984: 109), which can be succinctly defined as the overarching horizon of knowledge to which we all refer in order to make sense of and to interpret any kind of text.

As we can see, we find ourselves at different levels of knowledge and reaction. Underlying everything is what Parlebas calls the praxem: a battle of signs "through which individuals and teams try to outwit their adversaries in a costant game of guesses, deceptions, and make-beliefs" (Martínez-Santos 2020: 26). The semiosic process is therefore based on the initial production of a set of signs, which can be observed as bearers of an overall project. You may not know the rules of ancient Florentine football or of other primitive games, but they are recognized as sports, that is, with rules, different from those of other sports and institutionalized within society. The second moment is general and concerns the knowledge set of a particular sport. It is obvious that here we could have different levels based on the space-time situation in which the game of football is known and how. As Martinez-Santos rightly says, when making his own football example:

> Se ha señalado una falta a diez metros del borde del área grande. El árbitro marca las distancias, se forma la barrera y el jugador con el número diez a la espalda avanza en carrera hacia el balón. Es evidente que cualquier observador, ya sea compañero, adversario, arbitro, entrenador o espectador, puede disfrutar de esta misma situación praxémica, y que a todos se les puede plantear la misma duda: ¿va a tirar a puerta? En todos los casos, los observadores son afecta dos por el mismo signo comportamental complejo (la postura, la aceleración, la acción de brazos…) del número diez, por lo que las múltiples interpretaciones que cada cual pueda hacer ("sí, va a tirar"; "no, va a centrar"; "no, va a pasar lateralmente," etc.) son en todos los casos una conexión con el objeto, que es en realidad el sujeto de la acción inten cionada: un agente ludomotor que actúa, a su vez, a partir de sus propias interpretaciones.

> ['A foul has been whistled ten meters outiside the penalty area. The referee counts the distances, the wall is set and the player with the number ten on his back runs towards the ball. It is evident that any observer, whether a teammate, opponent, referee, coach or spectator, can enjoy the same praxemic situation, and that everyone can be asked the same question: is he going to shoot? In all cases, the observers are affected by the same complex behavioral sign (posture, acceleration, arm action…) of the number ten, so the multiple interpretations that each one can make ("yes, he goes to shoot"; "no, he is going to pass forward"; "no, he is going to make a sideways passing," etc.) are in all cases a connection to the object, which is actually the subject of the intentional action: a ludomotor agent that act, in turn, from their own interpretations.'] (Martínez Santos 2020: 8)

We can define this open system of differences in a more articulated way: the internal starting situation in the global encyclopedia guarantees not only the recognition of a shared game (precisely "it's a game"), but also the minimum rules, football traditions, and media elements (average knowledge). For example, the presence of a famous footballer, the jersey of a particularly recognizable team, or a hated or loved referee are all contextual elements that go beyond even the very knowledge of individual football rules and build a multifaceted semantic model in which different positions contribute to the definition of the action. Obviously, each of the individual active or passive participants, as Martinez-Santos notes,

will instead have a personal encyclopedic competence that will allow them to understand the smallest portions of the sport in question (coach, fan, player) and to activate determined chain of intepretants. There will obviously be the fan or the amateur capable of recognizing the technical gesture and also of lexicalizing it, or the one who is simply intrigued by the event. At the same time there will be players who are more, or less capable of certain playful gestures within the play space.

It is important to note that the last observed competence, the semantic linguistic one, seems more like a reinterpretation (obviously in a pragmatic key) of Barthes' lexicalization, exposed in perhaps the most complete way in *The Fashion System* (Barthes 1990); that *lasting* process through which a language tries to build and reiterate the fixed coded system (the structure). In this sense, the ability to express linguistic signs in a given sport is the starting point from which one is able to set rules and is able to share and possibly change them. Again, in this sense, semantic competence, which obviously becomes a distinctive element in the diverse knowledge and interpretative possibilities, is a fundamental step in the process of opening and closing a sports "scene."

The sports movement, like the language of the athlete, has a particular lexical system of its own. The meaning of the words of this system lexicon is determined by its relationships, by the place each one occupies of them within the system, after having studied the structure, functions and principles of the system itself. In sports it is not yet known a study of their words (lexicography), as elements of a system lexicon. These words must be in lexical awareness and opposite each other. to the others to obtain their true meaning and mutually coordinated, forming a system that can be studied and analyzed to the extent of the progress of your research (Mirallas 2007: 293).

Beyond the semantic linguistic dimension that guarantees the memory of the event and therefore the *historical stratification* that differentiates the actors of a narration from those of a sports competition, it must be emphasized that the division into different encyclopedic levels corresponding to the different semiotic moments is central to defining a sport as the result of an interpretative process that takes place in a double temporal dimension. This is because the discursive and pragmatic implementation of the sporting event develops in two directions: the narrative one, determined by the rules of the game (discourse), and the historical-cultural one that relates to the individual choices of the players on the pitch (pragmatic). As Goffman recalls, in "every social situation we can find a sense in which one participant will be an observer with omething to gain from assessing expressions, and another will be a subject with something to gain from something to gain from manipulating this process. A single structure of contingencies can be found in this regard which renders agents a little like us all and all of us a little like agents" (Goffman 1967: 81). Without delving into the complex concept of agency, it

appears clear to us at this point that the single subjectivity does not present itself as detached – it interacts with the other elements – but even more so, it covers different positions both in the act and phase of the narrative and pragmatic realisation.

4 From space to time and back

The motor praxeology project is a semiotic act that seems more like the terminal phase of a broader and established process than as a process that tends to stabilize a linguistic structure that somehow makes it *verbalizable* and therefore comprehensible and interpretable (also because without this the same agents involved could not define themselves and therefore, in fact, act).

For Peirce, the human mind is a *sign* in the developmental stages, which is completed not by trying to set itself limits ('I finite') but through its ability to reflect itself on others: the logical inferential reasoning is the constant motor of his own identity. This mixture between the ego and the others is fundamental for Peirce because here the ego continuously divides itself between the interpretant and the interpreted. It defines itsself as a sign for others and at the same time as the one who interprets the signs. This is a fundamental step because it takes on the idea of continuous temporality that we saw in the re-reading of the Eco's encyclopedia.

In short, the ego is always developing along a continuous timeline (illimited semiosis) that allows it to change and adapt to different roles and contexts. Thus, the Ego that interprets not only constitutes itself, but also lays the foundations for future interpretants, which in some way are already foreseen in its previous choices. Precisely, the competitive logic of sport forces us to take them as motor decisions to be evaluated in terms of strategic and tactical effectiveness. Parlebas speaks of "indirect practical communication" (Parlebas 1998: 65) i.e., a battle of "praxems" (1998: 26), through which individuals and teams try to outwit their opponents in a constant game of conjecture and deception. Event, ability to interpret and self interpret, self-definition of the self and of the contested, and logical prediction of the future. All three aspects of temporality, future, past and present, somehow coincide in the semiosic process. So, every sporting act, for example, will be a standoff of a complex network of interpretants and interpretations, but also of a temporal movement that will somehow define the past and lay the foundations for future choices. Understanding is interpreting, and interpretation is the outcome that translates into "motor behaviors" with regard to a single agent, and into "motor action" (Martínez-Santos 2007) with regard to the whole situation.

The presence of minimal elements, such as a rudimentary goal post or a ball, already allows us to understand what kind of shared semantic universe is going to be activated. *Football is being played.* However, if we had to grasp the primal element that allows this recognition of sport-football, we would say, as with all or almost all sports: the space of the playing field. It is the space in this sense that allows the institutionalization of the event. Marked or unmarked is the first distinction that allows the sign process. I recognize from a series of signs that there is an area designated for play and an area that is not (we will return to that shortly). It is the starting point for understanding the very presence of a game. The defined playing field defines sociomotor practices that are otherwise inconceivable or incomprehensible outside of this. The space, therefore, is the anchorage needed in order to build the field of semiosis; the first step for activating specific skills, determining a frame and consequently the inferential game. In practice, it guarantees the last step, after from play to game, therefore the one from game to sport. As Parlebas still remembers:

> Le sport est d'abord une organisation de l'espace, un quadrillage des territoires. La maîtrise sportive passe par la métrisation des lieux: sont soigneusement définis les dimensions, les distances, les couloirs, les zones et les frontières.
> La transition qui permit le passage des jeux aux sports, la "sportification," a provoqué une standardisation de plus en plus poussée de l'espace dont furent supprimées peu à peu les sources d'imprévu.
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> ['Sport, first, is an organization of space, a grid of territories. Sporting mastery goes through the metrology of places: the dimensions, the distances, the corridors, the zones and the borders are carefully defined.
> The transition which allowed the passage from games to sports, "sportification," caused an increasingly advanced standardization of space from which sources of unforeseen events were gradually removed.'] (Parlebas 1995: 43)

Thus, the space of the football field delimited by the outer lines is the rectangle within which the event takes place. It is an obviously semantically dense rectangle, where a previous semantization has inserted boundaries and the possibilities of action.

5 Between the pitch and the world

Football belongs to the partner-opponent "domain of motor action" (Parlebas 1998: 74) because within it, as in other team games, there is opposition and collaboration. But it a) takes place within a delimited space b) it is the spatial organization that allows its recognition. Therefore, the sport of football is

constructed mentally and above all, a series of increasingly restricted portions of the encyclopedia that are activated along a timeline.

If this is true, it follows that the boundary between the internal space of the football and the external one is never rigid. Not even in the complete realization of the sporting event. Realization that is complete as we have said only in theory, precisely because the game is actually the complex negotiation of different encyclopedias, of different skills and of different psycho-motor interactions. Consequently, even if configured as a fixed boundary, outlined by a continuous line (the white line that goes around the entire playing field), the space between the inside and outside of the game is always porous, crossable.

If in its complete realization, that is in its virtual rules, there is a border in its *langue*, it is instead a border in the complex interaction between the actors. Moreover, the difference between border and frontier is known and is central in geographical studies: the linear border found in maps, marks the division between two or more communities that find their identity precisely by staying within established limits; the border relates to a natural, physical or cultural limit, without both sides establishing fixed and antagonistic identities. On the one hand, it is a space with rules and hierarchies of movement (walls, gate, customs), on the other, a place with weak markings and a nuanced codification (myths, stones, inscriptions, natural elements). In this sense, sport is configured as a disrupted element of this geographical distinction. Boundaries and frontiers in sport are regulated, but at the same time formalized. Existence on both sides of the lines is constantly challenged: the border becomes a frontier and vice versa.

Parlebas emphasizes that in addition to the presence or absence of opponents and in the absence of partners, the third element that characterises the definition of a sport is precisely the *milieu* that marks the distance between the sporting element and the *domestic* element. But this *milieu* is always mobile, precisely because it is symbolic and therefore in some way constructed to represent the possibility of its infringement. Mobile but not free: it is in fact regulated around the hierarchical space of the pitch and the edge of the pitch, which are based on rigid control mechanisms. The invasion of the pitch by the crowd or by individual streakers is a clear sign of the porosity and friability of the *false* sporting boundary. The supporters of a team enter the field joyfully to celebrate the victory of a cup or a championship, actually obscuring the very presence of the sporting event. The playing field is covered by hundreds of celebrating supporters, and any semiotic delimitation that establishes the limits between the outside and the inside is dismantled. The field remains a 'historical' reminder of what the sporting event was, the memory of the semiotic process.

There may also be infringements on the other side. The players inside the rectangle break the boundaries by exiting the field for various reasons. The most

classic case is the goal. Once a goal has been scored, the player decides to go and make his celebration in front of the stand, temporarily interrupting the game. It is an action, often accompanied by a jump over the advertisement board or slalom jumps between teammates. While quite typical in football, it is much less present in many other team sports: it manages to create, through the crossing of the demarcation line, a break which is not only spatial but also temporal (lost time is also often penalized by the referee when it goes too far). Conversely, the exit off the pitch can be imposed by the referee, and therefore is a regulated internal punishment, and is a case of expulsion. It can also be imposed by the coach, when a player is to be substituted. The possibility of entering and exiting the delimited, apparently confined space, underlines the function of *mediation* between the spectators, and therefore in some way, the real world and the space of the game of the sideline as it is a heterotopic place to the (narrative) action, yet central to the pragmatics of the event. This area is often the scene of situations that can undermine or, at least, pause the discursive linearity of the football narrative. As already mentioned, these steps can be partially adjusted. In official matches for example, in addition to the presence of two or more referees (linesmen) who are in charge of regulating ball positioning with respect to the white line, there is the fourth man who regulates the entrance and exit of the substituted players and monitors the movements of coaches and players on the bench and determines the length of recovery time. Significantly, this actor, unique in being able to move freely along the edge of the field, controls the spatial accessibility and the temporal duration of the game simultaneously.

In fact, the 1993 FIFA regulations began a process of continuous segmentation of the air surrounding the pitch. What was generically the sideline has developed in recent years into an articulated set of places. Two relevant technical areas were established for each team where the *benches* are located and within which the coaches are free to move and give directions to their players. The technical area is marked by a white line and is of variable size but always at least "one meter from both sides of the designated seating area and with a distance of at least one meter from the line of play." The space around the pitch which was once open to the stands and devoid of demarcations, has gradually created figures not directly involved in the game by motor skills but still connected to it: liminal figures of the border/frontier are constituted (the coaches who must have a view of the game) yet, are forbidden from passing through the field, and potential figures who temporarily behave as spectators but who can actively enter the playing area (the substituting players, the medical staff who enter in the event of an injury).

A hierarchy of the functions of play and non-play has therefore been established within the sporting event, which over the years has become more rigid but not too much. Interestingly, since 1999, FIFA has instructed the fourth referee to

check that any players about to come on for a substitution always warm up inside the technical area. In common practice, however, the latter are allowed to move along the entire length of the sideline, but not on the short sides where the goals are located. It can truly be said that the sideline, in some way, is constituted as a controversial area between sporting and therefore institutionalized recreational players, and a wide range of roles, linked to the space-time dimension, whose liminal identity remains fluid. A place of secondary narratives and use that is intertwined with the main narrative program.

There are those who can hardly ever access the area, and the public cannot access it at all, except at the cost of interrupting the event. Here too, however, there may be exceptions: ball boy children, disabled people with privileged access are all actors who in some way represent a specific part of the public positioned within the sideline: they are however, symbolic and special roles that once again mark the space of the border/frontier of a state of exception, never entirely reducible to fixed roles and functions. There are also figures or those professionally linked to the world of football such as photographers, cameramen, law enforcement officers, stewards. They are *control* and *mediation* actors who regulate flows and positions. Discursive metapositions that should minimize the possibility of pragmatic and semantic proliferation in the realization of the narrative program (police and stewards are real guardians of the threshold) or focus and textualize the sporting event by limiting it within visual frames (cameramen and photographers).

I would now like to return to the technical area and to the coaches and players on the bench. The latter, if called for a possible replacement, will begin a rather typical series of warm-up exercises that include stretching, jogging and muscle relaxation. It is, and this is interesting, a series of actions that we can define playful but not playful, which in this case are also quite typical of the football pitch. The liminal space thus becomes a place for the practice of play-type actions, that is, free workouts without regulations, if not those linked to the choices of individual trainers and team doctors. The sideline often reminds us of the presence of other sporting practices not directly related to football. Until a few years ago, in most football stadiums, there was athletics track that surrounded the field: a memory of other possible recreational activities and even of alternative sporting events. It was often used for the so-called *victory lap*: the lap of the whole team to show the crowd the trophy that has been won (cup, championship) and receive the appraisal of the spectators.

Sometimes even the operators responsible for regulating access are wrong. At the last European Football Championships in 2020, after the goal scored in the Italy – Spain semi-final, the Italian defender Bonucci, who went to cheer with his teammates in the stands, was then stopped by a steward who had mistaken him for a fan who wanted to invade the field. Also, supporters increasingly tend to

"imitate" their favorite players by wearing original team shirts and other items and so the public also partially participates in this mixing of identity and functions.

On the other hand, by giving directions to the players on his team, the coach will be the actor of a whole series of gestures more typical of the *real* world, codified in civil society: he will be able to wave, scream, point out, get angry. His actions, which are also linked to the trend of the game, are so similar to those of everyday life that, recently, FIFA banned some excesses (smoking and swearing) typical of domestic life (the spectator smokes, drinks, and swears while watching the match). This has even given rise to different types of narrative actions and programs and has become either a personal style (the style of being on the sidelines of the most famous coaches, Guardiola, Ancelotti, Mourinho) or true parallel narratives (interactions with the crowd, disagreements with the referee, instructions to the players on the field and on the bench). In short, the border/frontier space establishes mixed identities halfway between the internal player and the external spectator, creating a narrative that is realized based on the individual skills (and infringements) of the players on the pitch.

In some way, the football sideline marks a semiotic moment, a threshold crossing in which those who pass through it either, in one sense or another change their status, or are recognized and interpreted differently. We could define it as a space of *catastrophe*, when extra-semiotic reality intrudes and transforms the bounded space (Lotman 2004: 115), in the sense of its possibility of determining an intermediate and balanced moment and at the same time constructing lateral and secondary semiotic narratives, which continually reopen and close the semiotic frontier between what is a sporting event and what is not. The semantic linguistic competence and media lexicalization of the event then contributes to creating legendary tales.

6 Conclusion

In a perfect semiosic circularity, the sideline defines the end and the beginning of sporting careers or their salient moments, defining and implementing specific cultural parts and consequently the cultural and individual encyclopedias. The immediate surroundings of the football pitch are, for example, the site of the first commentaries on the football event (comments, interviews), the final movements (invasion of the pitch, victory lap, expulsion from the pitch). That is, it emerges as a place of semantic density, where action on the pitch becomes a paratextual semantic space for redefining the sport itself, for a new chain of interpretants.

In the famous Italy-France 2006 world cup final, the image that has remained iconic is that of Zidane who, in his last match with the French national team, and

after being sent off for headbutting Materazzi, walks right past the World Cup trophy to get to the changing rooms. The semantic dimension of defeat and punishment focuses on this passage and suddenly becomes thymic/passionate: the impossibility of remaining not only on the pitch, but also in the operational space of sport.

Less iconic and symbolic, but equally significant was when Eric Cantona famously kicked a spectator who mocked him after being sent off at Manchester United against Crystal Palace on January 25, 1995. In that case, the player, having left the pitch, decides to mark the intermediate place, transforming it into a fighting arena and hitting the supporter of the opposing team who insulted him: the kung fu style football remains a marked moment in the player's career, it creates an open and continuously reiterated discourse: was it a justifiable act as it was provoked or was it a shameful act especially because it was aimed at someone not taking part in the sporting event? Here the incredible fragility of the border between what is on and what is off the pitch is revealed. In short, it reveals the obvious counter – evidence of how the spatial milieu redefines the relationships between the individual players involved and their skills and knowledge (what can the player do? To what extent is he separated from the crowd?).

It is worth remembering that the semiotics of architecture has also dealt with the various recasting of temporary play areas such as football fields that can sometimes host musical artistic events (concerts), and others, more dramatically, to be used as prisons and concentration camps (sadly, the case of the Estadio Nacional of Santiago of Chile during the coup of 1973).

This shares similarities with another moment of infringement of the border, famously well known in Italy. The volatile Carlo Mazzone, coach of Roman origin, at the helm of the lombardian team, Brescia, in the 2001/02 season. After his team made a comeback against the hated Atalanta from Bergamo, Mazzone runs at breakneck speed under the rival's stand to take revenge for the insults received during the match, proudly holding up three fingers (they had made a comeback from 3–1 to 3–3). As we can see, the sidelines mark both the beginning and the end of recreational coding, allowing the sporting event to preserve the porosity of the border. Above all, however, it guarantees the possibility of *infringement* not of the regulation, but of the system of rules itself that allows sport to define itself as such. A pragmatic dimension that becomes metadiscursive by defining and revealing the symbolic sporting event. According to Sahlins (1981), event is not simply a representation of the system, but a site of emergence out of which novel articulations of practiced reality arise. So, the marked space off the pitch becomes either a regulated boundary between the soccer game system and external world or a frontier, between a regulated area and a hybrid one, still to be characterized. This liminal place is then able to organize itself in a *quasi* microsystem always

potentially open. The place beyond the border, standing between spectators and players, in short, organizes itself in complex structures and prepares itself to *welcome* the event. Consequentially, all participating actors need to adapt themselves to this hybrid situation, intepreting the new events through the signs. The game itself, as a set of institutionalized rules, exists thanks to this place of mediation, where the actors can exchange roles, and the skills and rules become less rigid. The metasemiotic dimension, which guarantees a simulated and not real level, typical of play, takes place through the distribution and exchange of skills, roles, the textualization and mythization of secondary narrative events, and the constantly shifting interpretation of signs.

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