

## Soccer, Media and Culture:

### An Ethnography of the 2006 World Cup in Brazilian Cities

Édison Gastaldo<sup>1</sup>

---

This paper analyzes the social situation and the public reception of the 2006 FIFA World Cup Soccer matches as they transpired in several Brazilian cities. During this event, there is widespread availability of TV screens in public places such as bars or shopping malls, along with massive concentrations of people in large public places watching together on giant screens as the Brazilian team plays. Ethnographic video data from different places in Brazil was collected in these contexts to allow some reflections concerning order and interaction in the social context of this media environment.

---

#### Introduction

**I**N this paper, I wish to discuss some salient aspects of the relation between soccer, media and social interaction in Brazil from an ethnographic perspective. Examining the video taped behavior of Brazilian fans watching broadcast games in public places, I intend to describe and analyze male social interaction during the 2006 World Cup of Soccer. After presenting a brief overview of the role of soccer in contemporary Brazilian culture and its relevance as a major theme for male sociability, I will proceed to describe and analyze some ethnographic video data concerning the collective reception of soccer matches in public places. The project, called *Rites of a Nation*, employed four different teams of ethnographers, each covering a different region of Brazil. There were video recordings made in eight different cities in five states. In such settings, some remarks can be made about the on-going interaction of the fans there (supposedly, the “audience”) and the media, the different alignments of the participants reacting to the definitions of the situation proposed by the TV sports commentator, and the sound and images presented. This paper also wishes to challenge the stereotyped views of soccer as a domain ruled by violence and come to a closer and more sophisticated—due to its ethnographic approach—theoretical grasp of this specific situation.

#### On Soccer in Contemporary Brazilian Culture

**A**LTHOUGH the myth of Brazil as “the football country” is the result of a social and historical process that has little more than 50 years, this sport has become one of the major icons of what may be called, along with samba and trance religions, a “Brazilian identity.” There are interpretations of Brazilian soccer that connect it to peculiar attributes of

---

<sup>1</sup> Édison Gastaldo is part of the Post Graduate Program in Social Sciences at Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil.

‘Brazilian-ness’, such as the so-called ‘*malandragem*’ (trickery). The golden age of ‘*malandragem*’ is generally situated at the beginning of industrialization in Brazil, between 1930 and 1940. This time is a sort of ‘mythic past’ for Brazilian contemporary culture, and the ‘*malandro*’ is a kind of ‘popular hero’ in Brazil, much like the ‘cowboy’ for North Americans or the ‘samurai’ for the Japanese. Ruben Oliven (1986) considers the ‘*malandragem*’ as a “strategy for survival and a conception of the world” (p. 34) through its refusal to bend to the discipline—and the exploitation—of regular employment. Although the contemporary historical and social contexts have left the ‘*malandro*’ in the past (along with his razor fights, white suits and silk scarves around the neck), his emblematic figure is still present in Brazilian culture. One of the fields in which ‘*malandragem*’ is still seen as a value in Brazil is the soccer field, a stage where many elements of Brazilian culture are ritualised.

The homogeneity promoted by a single and unified definition of ‘Brazilian-ness’ hides conflicts underlying social, ethnic and regional differences. According to Ortiz (1994), the “official” choice of symbols of “Brazilian culture’ during the Vargas period (1930-1945) elevated elements of black culture—such as samba and African trance religions—to the status of “Brazilian culture.” Of soccer, it is worth noting the now classic work of Mario Rodrigues Filho, *Black Men in Brazilian Soccer* (1964/first published in 1947) which proposes an ‘heroic’ interpretation of the participation of the black soccer players as competing against their ‘enemies’, the white racist elite of Brazilian soccer. The thesis is that once the doors for black participation in soccer matches were opened, the soccer played in Brazil had become a new entity, “Brazilian soccer,” reflecting a Brazilian style, that, several years later would be called ‘art-soccer’—a derivation of Gilberto Freyre’s (1973) “racial democracy.” The work of Mario Filho and Gilberto Freyre eventually became a dominant discourse about soccer in Brazil, although recently it has been questioned (see, in this sense, the debate between A. J. Soares, 1999a, Gordon and Helal, 1999 and the response by Soares, 1999b).

Roberto Da Matta (1982) argues that the same activity can be appropriated differently by different societies so that the football in Brazil and in England, for example, reflects different kinds of social interaction. In Brazil, soccer is always called ‘*jogo*’, a term that defines both gambling and sports, while in England the two words define completely different activities. In general, Brazilian people’s interest for soccer is related to their support for local teams—often called ‘clubs’. These soccer teams demand a life-long loyalty. Many times, sports commentators refer to the supporters of a club as a ‘nation’, defined by its colors (‘black and red nation’, for example, for Flamengo in Rio). The term that describes the support for a team is also different: ‘*torcer*’ (literally ‘to twist’), refers to the anxious contortions of fans during the matches. Being a part of a ‘*torcida*’ (a “twisted”) involves deeply emotional attachments, very often mediated in childhood by familial relations (Damo, 2002).

This emotional charge is transformed into a national dimension when the Brazilian team enters the pitch. This special soccer team represents a sort of ‘national unity’ that surpasses the fan’s affection for regular teams with an overriding common wish: the success of Brazil against all other countries. I emphasise the metonymic sense that usually relates the ‘national team’ and the ‘nation’ itself—Brazil or its opponents. Thus, frequently sports press use the Brazilian team to ‘represent’—on the metonymic sense—the Brazilian people. In this sense, a World Cup in Brazil is much more than a soccer tournament: it is a chance to compare Brazil with the rest of the world. This is probably why in Brazil the World Cup is taken as the summit of the sports universe—much more than Olympic Games. The one who wins the World Cup is undoubtedly the ‘best of the world’.

**Media and World Cup in Brazil**

**T**HE World Cup is a social fact of gigantic dimensions in contemporary Brazilian culture which is intimately linked to its character as a mediated event. Since the beginning of regular international transmissions of soccer matches on the radio in the early 1950s, the coverage of matches of the Brazilian team in the World Cup have produced huge audiences. The massive interest of Brazilians for soccer, boosted by its participation in the World Cup finals has even resulted in the creation of curious—and artful—devices designed to ‘capture the audience’ and thus add value to each second of advertising time. During the World Cup of 1962 in Chile, for example, the videotapes of the matches could be transmitted in Brazil only two days afterwards. Attempting to circumvent this delay, a radio station in São Paulo installed in a huge panel in a large park in the city centre. Painted as a soccer pitch covered with lamps, a public address system transmitted the position of the ball on the pitch, so that an operator in Brazil kept turning the lamps on and off according to the position of the ball in Chile. According to Edileuza Soares (1994), this ingenious device attracted crowds to ‘watch the matches live’ and conquered the audience for their station in that World Cup, anticipating by decades the phenomenon analyzed in this paper.

Nowadays, every edition of the World Cup becomes a massive public event all over Brazil. When the Brazilian team plays, ordinary life gets placed on hold, in a most literal actualisation of the term “finite province of meaning” (Schutz, 1962). The direction of motor vehicle traffic is changed to avoid jams that always happen; banks change their hours of operation; many stores close early or open late; newspapers publish lists of essential and emergency services that will remain open. In short, a match of the Brazilian team in a World Cup creates a liminal moment, a deep alteration in the order of everyday life, in an increasingly institutionalised way. If in past World Cups there was not a consensus toward this alteration in work routines, this sort of “semi-holiday” is becoming a tradition with each new edition of the tournament.

I believe that the World Cup represents for Brazilians an authentic opportunity to celebrate national values. The traditional day for the display of patriotic fervor in Brazil is the 7<sup>th</sup> of September, 7<sup>th</sup> but that celebration, with its emphasis on military parades and the circus of military hardware, recalls too vividly the dark days of military dictatorship (1964-1984) than the more popular zeal of the World Cup. During a World Cup, people celebrate the idealization of a triumphant nationality, in an international competition in which Brazil is always the favorite, “the best of the world”, even when it loses. As with some other ritualised periods (Christmas, for example), people decorate their houses to publicly communicate the feelings of the owners who inhabit the house. The facades of buildings and houses are covered with the national colors of yellow and green, city halls, shopping malls and commercial associations provide “public” decorations, street vendors color the corners with hats, banners, t-shirts, horns and a variety of goods in the ritual colors for celebrating nationality: yellow and green. Supermarket shelves are covered with all sort of regular products dressed up in a “new package” or “special edition,” always yellow and green. Shop windows as well are covered with Brazilian flags, footballs, and multiple other displays, always with yellow-green inscriptions. As happens at Christmas, in a marriage or for any other ritual, a Brazilian World Cup game requires substantial preparation, specific items of consumption and, most important, a group celebration. To watch the match alone is definitely not usual.

In keeping with this collective imperative, TV screens of all sizes are made available to the public in shopping malls, bars, street shops and, most impressively, in major public places, such

as parks and markets. In such social settings, usually sponsored by the city hall, thousands of people gather to watch the match in giant screens. In this highly ritualised organization of public space, the ethnographic fieldwork was carried.

### Methodology

**T**HE ethnographic study outlined here consists of two integrated components:

- 1) a video recording of the 2006 World Cup of Soccer as it was experienced by fans in eight different Brazilian cities;
- 2) an ethnographic description and analysis of the video data and the different venues where fans joined together to watch the World Cup on television.

It must be noted that the World Cup, an event that mesmerizes the totality of Brazilian society and much of the rest of the world, occurs only once every four years. Moreover, there is no certainty that the national team of any particular country will qualify for inclusion and that, even it advances through the qualification rounds, there is no guarantee that the team will not be eliminated within the first round. Argentina, for example, always a powerful team to be contended with, was eliminated from the World Cup in 2002 during the very first round after only three matches. Most nations, in fact, seldom if ever qualify for participation in the Cup and, those that do, always mark this rite of passage with great celebration.

In a country as large as Brazil, the distances between one region and another make it difficult to grasp the phenomenon as experienced in different places. In order to deal with this difficulty, it was decided to contact video makers living in different cities and regions of Brazil, and ask them to go to a public environment and document the World Cup matches with their cameras. Each video maker was given an orientation to the study and a set of instructions of how to proceed. Four teams of ethnographers and video makers answered the call and produced more than 20 hours of raw footage. A mailing list was created to put the video makers in contact and images were taken in five states: Rio Grande do Sul, São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Minas Gerais and Goiás. Each team was instructed to record audio as well as video and to use natural lighting as much as possible. Most of the images were taken during the first three matches of the Brazilian team, respectively, against Croatia, Australia and Japan. Additional images were taken after the defeat against France in the quarter finals. Each individual video maker was asked to keep an ethnographic diary describing his or her experience. The audio/visual that was collected, plus the diaries, were then sent to the coordinator, who analyzed the images and texts. Along with editing the video, the coordinator organized the material into a set of analytical categories and assembled the images and texts in a coherent way.

### Some preliminary results

**T**HROUGH the collected data in the video, it was possible to draw out some inferences about the so-called “Football Country.” Analyzing the situation as a giant media environment—the images on the screen completely dominating the context—it is interesting to make some observations about the relationship of the participants with the media, and after, some reflections on the social uses of nationality within the setting.

**a) Participation in the setting:**

The situation under scrutiny could be described in the terms of Goffman (1961) as a “focused interaction”:

Focused interaction occurs when people effectively agree to sustain for a time a single focus of cognitive and visual attention, as in a conversation, a board game, or a joint task sustained by a close face-to-face circle of contributors. (p. 7)

In the researched settings, the focus of interaction is on the screens. They determine the spatial dispersion of the people throughout the setting, producing, if there is a single screen, a sort of “triangle” or “cone” of attention, focused on the screen. However, in larger places, such as public markets or parks, it is usual to offer more than one screen, turned in various directions. The resulting effect is to enlarge the angle of the “cone” and, as it is made of people, of blurring its limits. The situation is such that, at any given time, a participant may watch the match on several different screens. Although the eyes of participants may stare in different directions, the images that form the central focus are always the same.

Usually, apart from the World Cup period, soccer supporters in Brazil are men, with an unchanging passion for one particular club (see Gastaldo, 2005). Thus, regular soccer fans face local rivalry in the setting as a constant pattern. Whoever a team plays against, there will always be the “others”, the fans of a traditional rival. In World Cups, however, there are key differences. Beside the fact that there is only one side supported in the situation (in this case, the Brazilian team of course), the number of supporters involved highly outnumbers regular sports fans. There are a lot of people that usually don’t care about soccer but, at the same time, don’t miss a match of the Brazilian team. So, the quality of the understanding of the match among the public is highly variable.

If something can be taken as a “total social fact” (Mauss, 2001) in Brazilian society, it is the celebration of a goal scored by the Brazilian team in a World Cup. Everyone stands up, with raised arms, shouting, jumping, and hugging each other: the sound of the crowd can be heard from a long distance. Apart from this special moment within the match, the degree of focus of such a number of people—hundreds or thousands in each situation—is highly dependant on the quality of the match. It is always expected by the fans that the Brazilian team will play wonderfully, score several times and finish as the World Champion every time. However, as in every game, one can never predict what is going to happen. So, the unlimited attachment to the Brazilian team depends a good deal upon the performance of the Brazilian team itself. If people perceive that the players are not playing up to their expectations, such attachment can diminish and even reverse itself. In the match against Japan, for example, Brazil played a bad first half. In a counter-attack, Japan scored first. In several places we videotaped in Brazil, people actually applauded the Japanese goal, as an ironic homage to the opponents, understood as the weakest team in Brazil’s group.

The pattern of behavior analyzed in the different situations was relatively consistent. However, we noted a sort of what Goffman (1998) called “determinism of the situation,” that is, the same formal situation in different places results in some different attitudes of participants. In bars, the facility of consumption of alcoholic beverages (just asking the waiter) makes this situation rather noisy and emotionally more intense than in others, such as the auditoriums of

universities where no alcohol is permitted or even in public parks, where beer is made available by sporadic street vendors salesmen but there are no chairs, tables, waiters or pressure at all to consume alcohol.

The situation exists only for the duration of the match, as in the most strict adherence to the idea of a “finite province of meaning”. Places start to get crowded a few minutes before the match, reaching full occupancy about 15 minutes after the start, and emptying almost immediately after the end: in no more than five minutes, the crowd is gone.

### **b) soccer and symbols of nationality**

As it was said, the situation of public reception of World Cup matches is a highly ritualised one. Thus it demands appropriate dressing. The Brazilian team’s t-shirt is an obvious element, although most of the participants do not wear the “official” t-shirt, as it is quite expensive by Brazilian standards. On the streets close to any concentration of supporters, street vendors are easily found that offer “alternative” Brazilian t-shirts hanging on strings, much cheaper, along with Brazilian flags, hats, horns, whistles, all in yellow and green. These colors seem to be the ultimate symbol of nationality: almost everybody in the researched settings showed up with a yellow-green element, be it a hat, a scarf or a simple band around the head or arm.

The attitude towards the national anthem, played before the matches, was in fact a surprise. It could be expected that the crowds would sing it out loud as a musical expression of national values. The pattern presented, however, was of almost absolute indifference. It is intriguing to note that both the flag and the anthem, prime symbols of the national state, were simply ignored, whilst the yellow t-shirt and the Brazilian soccer—national symbols unrelated to the State—seemed to captivate much more attention from the supporters. It would seem, therefore, that the once strong link between sports, national identity and the government, synthesised in the expression “political use of sports,” is becoming weak.<sup>2</sup> Affiliation to national values, in this sense, could seem now more a matter of private/individual leisure than one of political/collective engagement.<sup>3</sup> The myth of “political use of sports”, a sort of taken-for-granted interpretation of soccer in Brazil during the military dictatorship seems each day a weaker explanation for the social appropriation of sports.

One final word about the most enthusiastic supporters of the Brazilian team: advertisement gimmicks.<sup>4</sup> They are all over, in posters, outdoors and TV commercials and show the “regular” gimmicks dressed up as Brazilian team’s players, making tricks with the ball, and always scoring and winning. If one is to believe in national mythologies, the “football country” is much more real in the world of advertisements than in the world of politics and government.

### **Conclusion**

**T**HIS paper has tried to discuss some of the aspects related to a special media event, highly ritualised within Brazilian society: the Brazilian team’s matches during a World Cup, taken from an ethnographic perspective. This collective video-ethnography reveals both

---

<sup>2</sup> According to this explanation, soccer would be an “ideological device” under the command of the State. A Brazilian victory in a World Cup would serve as an antidote against revolutionary feelings, “the opium of the people.”

<sup>3</sup> This opinion was anticipated by Helal and Soares, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> For an analysis of national themes in advertisements see Gastaldo, 2002.

promising paths and methodological challenges. The rich data collected on such a rare occasion—and as of yet only partially analyzed—points to further reflections on the reception of the media under special conditions, as well as on the social dimension of soccer and national identity in Brazil. I believe that by deepening the interpretation of these phenomena, we could reach a fuller understanding of a national culture through an everyday life perspective. Through this other approach, we may begin to see more clearly a national culture in the making.

### References

- Da Matta, R. (Ed.) (1982). *Universo do futebol*. Rio de Janeiro: Pinakotheke.
- Damo, A. S. (2002). *Futebol e identidade social: Uma leitura antropológica das rivalidades entre torcedores e clubes*. Porto Alegre: UFRGS.
- Freyre, G. (1973). *Casa grande & senzala: Formação da família brasileira sob o regime da economia patriarcal*. Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio.
- Gastaldo, É. (2002). *Pátria, chuteiras e propaganda: O brasileiro na publicidade da Copa do Mundo*. São Paulo: AnnaBlume/São Leopoldo: Unisinos.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2005). O complô da torcida: Futebol e performance masculina em bares” in: *Horizontes Antropológicos*, 24. Porto Alegre: PPGAS/UFRGS.
- Goffman, E. (1961). *Encounters: Two studies in the sociology of interaction*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merril..
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1998). *A representação do eu na vida cotidiana*. Petrópolis: Vozes.
- Gordon, C.& Helal, R. (1999). Sociologia, história e romance na construção da identidade nacional através do futebol in: *Estudos Históricos* (13/23) Rio de Janeiro: FGV.
- Helal, R. & Soares, A. J. (2004). O declínio da pátria de chuteiras: imprensa, futebol e identidade nacional na Copa do Mundo de 2002. In: M. Pereira, R.E. Gomex, & V. Figueirido. (Eds.), *Comunicação, representação e práticas sociais*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora PUC-Rio.
- Mauss, M. (2001). *Sociologia e antropologia*. São Paulo: Cosac Naify.
- Oliven, R. G. (1986). A malandragem na música popular brasileira. In: *Violência e cultura no Brasil*. Petrópolis: Vozes.
- Ortiz, R. (1994). *Cultura brasileira & identidade nacional*. São Paulo: Brasiliense.
- Rodrigues Filho, M. (1964). *O negro no futebol brasileiro*. São Paulo: Civilização Brasileira.

Schutz, A. (1962). *Collected papers*. Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff.

Soares, A. J. (1999a). História e invenção de tradições no futebol. In: *Estudos Históricos* (13/23) Rio de Janeiro: FGV.

\_\_\_\_\_ (1999b). A modo de resposta. In: *Estudos Históricos* (13/23), Rio de Janeiro: FGV.

Soares, E. (1994). *A Bola no ar: O rádio esportivo em São Paulo*. São Paulo: Summus.