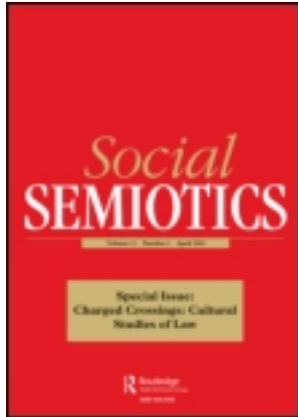


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Stealing the Signs: A Semiotic Analysis of the Changing Nature of Professional Sports Logos

RON BISHOP

This paper explores the changing nature of professional sports logos, using semiotics and the work of postmodern writers like Baudrillard, Debord, and Jameson as its theoretical framework. Brandishing a professional sports team's logo was once a sign of allegiance; it signified the person's love for his/her favorite team. A number of forces, including television and the aggressive marketing of sports-related collectibles, have indelibly changed the relationship between fan and team. On one level, logos 'imply social rapport and social power' (Baudrillard 1983: 88). Wearing culturally endorsed logos of culturally endorsed teams guarantees status to the wearer. But, on another level, logos reveal the diminution of the fan's role. Fans have been reduced to buying an endless stream of team-related products, our actions 'channeled into the global construction of the spectacle', as Debord would argue. The uniqueness of the logo, and its original reference to connection with a team, has been erased. Where in the past fans used the logo to trumpet their 'contact' with a team and its players, 'contact' today is achieved by purchasing the goods manufactured and licensed by the team. Teams have successfully constructed an anti-player, pro-sport discourse that binds fans to them and to their products. As Coombe suggests, teams have interpellated a fan 'with a more visual orientation and with more corporeal desires—desires met both by material consumption and by visual consumption of embodied others made available through the mass media' (Coombe 1998: 171).

Introduction

Brandishing a professional sports team's logo on a hat or a jacket was once a sign of allegiance; it signified the person's love for his/her favorite team—and, perhaps, to a city, or to a region. The person wearing that hat or jacket probably had a favorite player or two whose exploits they followed closely through the course of a season.

In this paper, I contend that a number of forces, including changes in the nature of the professional sports themselves, aggressive marketing of sports collectibles, and the relationship between professional sports, television, and the fans have changed the nature of the professional sports logo as sign. Where fans once initiated the creation of meaning through the consumption of the logo, the teams and their licensees today have the more active meaning-making role; in part, because fans have become so disenchanted with the arrogance and greed they see in today's

professional athlete. Thus, the team logo carries with it an odd kind of status for many of us. Wearing the ‘right’ pro logo is as important today as wearing the ‘right’ brand of jeans or athletic footwear with their attendant logos. Professional sports logos have become brands for their teams; they signify the success of capitalism in overtaking sports. Success in professional sports has just as much to do with clever marketing as it does with winning and on-field performance.

Jean Baudrillard would argue that logos ‘imply social rapport and social power’ (1983: 88). By cultural agreement, certain pro logos have more interactional value than others. Wearing the logo of the six-time National Basketball Association (NBA) champion Chicago Bulls carries more weight than with peers than wearing the logo of a less successful team like the Cleveland Cavaliers or the Miami Heat. Thus, the logo has come to signify our love of success and, to a lesser extent, our love of our own consumption and its fleeting nature, its planned obsolescence. We consume the success; this makes us doubly successful. Fan discourse about sports now revolves to an alarming degree around acts of consumption, about the desire to consume team-related items. We are true fans only if we successfully keep up with the items that teams and professional leagues churn out.

The theoretical foundation for our journey comes from Baudrillard’s orders of the sign. Baudrillard argues that we live in a state of hyperreality, awash in a universe of images. He describes the ‘disappearance of social life in the form of lived experience and possibility of the textual representation of that experience’ (Carey 1991: 30). For Baudrillard, meaning is built on ‘self-referencing signifiers that make sense only because they define some difference with other signifiers’ (Gottdiener 1994: 168). Signs, in short, are defined by other signs.

In the first order, ‘signs are limited in number, and are not widely diffused’ (Baudrillard 1983: 84). First-order signs are not arbitrary. The movement toward arbitrariness, Baudrillard argues, ‘begins when, instead of linking two persons in an unbreakable reciprocity, the signifier starts referring back to the disenchanted universe of the signified’ (84–85). We pass from a ‘limited order of signs, which prohibits “free production”, to a proliferation of signs on demand’ (85). At one time, sports teams limited the number of logo-related souvenirs they sold; there was not an enormous market for them. As teams began to realize the importance of more aggressive marketing, the logo as a sign began losing its resemblance to ‘the obliged sign of limited diffusion’, as Baudrillard explains (85). Universally available, the logo loses its clarity.

In the second order, ‘being and appearance are melted into a common substance of production and work’ (Baudrillard 1983: 94). There is no difference between appearance and reality. It liquidates the real. Finally, in the third order, the copy completely overtakes the real: ‘Only the obliteration of the original reference allows for the generalized law of equivalence’, Baudrillard notes (97). Production is no longer ‘an original process’; instead, ‘it becomes a process of absorption of all original being and of introduction to a series of identical beings’ (97). As discussed in the next section, now content to consume variations on a team’s logo and colors, fans have been to some degree reconstituted as a ‘series of identical beings’.

Rather than base my entire argument on the free play of signifiers suggested by

Baudrillard, I also contend that the logo changes discussed here are, as Foucault might argue, 'engineered for effect'. Here, signification is controlled by the leagues and the teams—the forces of power in professional sports. Logos in part 'represent the condensation of past knowledge and ideologies that have materialized technique, modes of desire, and knowledge for social control' (Gottdiener 1994: 177). It could be argued that their main function is to sustain attendance. But it is simplistic to limit an exploration of the logo to its deployment by a professional franchise. I recognize, as Rosemary Coombe explains, that it is important to study 'multiple moments' (1998: 17) in the life of a logo. Coombe notes:

These would include places in people's daily lives, in the realm of public representations, the contexts and conditions of interpretive reception, the influence and contestations of those readings in private lives and social lifeworlds, the authorization, legitimation, denial, or injunction of those interpretations in institutional forums, and the potential transformation of such readings in new cultural practices. (1998: 17)

With this in mind, I will focus on the 'public representation' of professional sports franchises in the United States through their logos and the 'interpretive reception' of these logos by the fan. I will then explore how the changing nature of being a 'fan' of a team has been 'redeployed and romanticized' (Coombe 1998: 192) by professional sports franchises and television networks to turn the fan's attention away from the player and toward the endless supply of team merchandise. First, I turn to a discussion of what it means to be a 'fan'.

What it Means to be a Fan

A 'fan' is an individual who follows the exploits of a team or a player by attending games, by watching games on television or listening to them on the radio, and/or by monitoring team and player performance via the mass media. In the modern era of sports, one marked by aggressive marketing of teams and their players, being a fan also means actively buying a range of goods emblazoned with a seemingly inexhaustible skein of variations on a team's logo. For our purposes, a logo is 'an identifying symbol' (*Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* 1979) deployed to represent a company or, in this case, a professional sports franchise. Teams introduce a wider array of goods in order to maintain the allegiance of the diehard fan, and to attract casual fans. The points made in the paper could apply to fans from all demographic groups, but my focus will be on young male fans.

Today, being 'a fan' no longer means that someone who wears an item featuring a logo necessarily roots for his/her hometown team, or even for his/her favorite team. Alliances to teams are now built on team colors or on a distant team's reputation and performance instead of on any kind of personally forged link to the team or its players. The most successful teams usually sell the most products. Furthermore, the connection that fans of past generations may have felt with their favorite players is gone, washed away in a tide of cynicism. What's left? Perfecting our ability to buy

products featuring team logos and products the players use off the field. We have become the real ‘player’ in the biggest game of all. Corruption of professional sports logos goes hand in hand with the immense popularity of logos for clothing manufacturers. Nike’s swoosh stripe is the most recognizable product logo in the world. In addition to signifying the quality of the product, the ‘swoosh’ also signifies that the wearer is a knowledgeable consumer. The rise in popularity of the ‘swoosh’ and logos like it (for companies like FuBu, Mossimo, and Adidas) may in part reflect cynicism on the part of fans and casual sports watchers toward the perceived arrogance of professional athletes. Instead of building connections to the athletes, a frustrating task, we collect the trappings of being an athlete—what the athlete wears, what the athlete consumes. We are encouraged to be like an athlete, but also to be like no particular athlete. Without a true link to team, we are more susceptible to ‘becoming’ our collections, as Baudrillard might contend.

Until recently, there was not a wide selection of team-related items from which fans could choose. The author, a lifelong New York Mets fan, recalls what today would be considered a paltry list of ‘souvenirs’ almost hidden in the back of team yearbooks from the late 1960s and the 1970s. Ordering the items was a chore; mail was the only option. Even the word ‘souvenir’ had a sanguine sound—it was a remembrance of the fan’s innocent interaction with the team and favorite players. Today, fans can select from an endless, ever-changing stream of items and variations on the logo, marketed directly by leagues and teams, and by approved licensees like Logo Athletic and ProLine. One catalog calls these items ‘the stuff that fans are made of’ (Genesis Direct, Inc. 1998: 1). One can order by mail, by phone, and online. Brochures for these items come out a number of times per year; once on a mailing list, the recipient feels as if he/she has a magazine subscription. Perhaps the most vivid example of this aggressive marketing are the hats worn (in plain view of television cameras) during games by professional football players as part of the National Football League’s contract with the hat manufacturers. Introduction of the hats created for the winners of the Super Bowl has become an important element in the post-game hoopla.

This is not to say that professional sports franchises have been anything but commercial endeavors. With few exceptions, mainly in smaller markets, owning a franchise, like running a radio or television station, is a license to print money. But in order to keep money flowing into their coffers from increasingly disillusioned fans, owners have had to license the soul of their sports to marketing executives and to the companies that advertise during their games and in every unoccupied foot of stadiums and arenas. In doing so, they have created a new system of signs. But, to borrow a term from football, this is a classic misdirection play. Fans vent their anger louder than ever before, but spend more money than ever before on products that feature the ‘hippest’ logos. There is less allegiance to team, and more to commodified sport; we pride ourselves about being informed, and at the same time cynical, yet we also line up to by the latest iteration of a team’s logo. Being a consumer is easier, it would seem, than trying to come to terms with the legal problems of a favorite player or the imminent move of one’s favorite team to another city. As consumers, we all compete on a level playing field.

Threatened by the focus on merchandise is the link to the player. In some cases, of course, players are the direct cause of our disenchantment. The day-to-day business of sports is played out in newspapers, on local sports broadcasts, and six times a day on ESPN's SportsCenter. More players, it seems, are entangled by legal problems. We hold them to a much higher degree of scrutiny than members of other visible professions. With fewer untainted individuals left to root for, we have to turn somewhere to sustain our tie to the sport. It is at this point that team owners step in, endeavoring to turn our attention from the player to the packaging, from the performance on the field to the overall 'game' experience. In the process, they transform the player into what Coombe might call an 'other'. Frustrated by the perceived arrogance of players, owners are working to create a strong sense of 'social difference' within the sport. Players are to be looked upon with suspicion because of their arrogance. Thus, the logo signifies the 'embodied otherness' of the player (Coombe 1998: 167); the player serves as little more than a model for the latest apparel. For us, the logo signifies our ability to select the 'right' teams to root for—those teams that combine the best performance and coolest colors. These are the teams with the strongest marketing savvy. On a broader level, the logo signifies our allegiance to the experience of sport writ large. We have successfully been weaned off player loyalty.

Thus, professional teams and clothing manufacturers have devalued the logo. Every new logo, every new uniform style, brings the fan experience closer to the 'hyperreal' discussed by Baudrillard. New logos and new uniforms are designed primarily to sell goods to fans in many markets, not to strengthen the ties with fans in a team's own market. Thus, if a connection is made with a distant fan through these devices, this connection is 'without origin or reality', as Baudrillard might argue. The logo as a sign, then, helps to nurture long-distance relationships. It signifies a team's efforts to break geographic barriers and find fans in other markets. Buying hats and jackets allows an individual to 'simulate' being a fan of that team (Baudrillard 1983: 5). Despite the fact that an individual might not have followed the trials and tribulations of the team, he/she can become a fan simply by buying an article of clothing.

But is an Atlanta Braves fan from Houston any less real? Is a native Atlantan's connection to the Braves stronger than the fan from Houston's? At one time, the logo for most fans reflected a reality—their love of team and its players. As professional sports grew, fueled in large measure by television, these relationships were attenuated. The logo as a sign has been changed to the point that it 'mask[s] the absence of a basic reality', as Baudrillard points out (1983: 11). Today, the logo only tenuously signifies older notions of allegiance and connection. As will be discussed later, logos are moving toward becoming 'pure simulacrum'. Adopting a team's logo may give individuals, particularly young people, a means to communicate a lack of connection or a sense of transience. It is ironic that this sign has come to signify the transience of fan loyalty, and of the teams themselves. Adding so many logos and uniform styles has inadvertently given us an outlet for the anger we feel for our hometown team and toward the sports we used to love without condition. Now, a fan in Philadelphia, for example, can end his/her connection with the Eagles

and go on to root for another team. Thus, like so many other things in our culture, team loyalty is now disposable.

We now turn to an examination of the economic factors that led to the change in the nature of logo as a sign, and then return to a discussion of what pro sports logos now signify for sports fans.

The Economic Climate

Whitson (1998: 59) notes that, when spectator sports first emerged, 'teams were largely composed of local men, and operated under the auspices of "clubs" that acted as organizers of ethnic, class or town affiliations'. This framework, Whitson contends, 'contributed to the popular sense that teams were community institutions'. Games 'served as occasions for public rehearsals of the class, ethnic, and religious identities that structured life' in these communities. When it became clear, however, that professionalizing sport might be a lucrative endeavor, this link to the community 'would be abraded and transformed by the logic of the marketplace' (59). Professionalization of sport, Pierre Bourdieu (1978) claims, commodified activities that communities had once used to entertain themselves. Today, only the language of sport's connection to community is left, deployed by leagues and owners 'when it suits their commercial purposes' (Whitson 1998: 60). To partake of sport, fans must actively participate in 'the discourse of consumer choice' (60). They must be able to talk about what it means to be a fan, rather than actually experiencing a fan's connection to a team.

In the first half of the twentieth century, newspapers played a key role in drumming up interest in nascent professional leagues. 'With the development of the sports sections and sportscasts that became regular features of the daily news, sport would stay "in the news" all week, even when there was no action on the field', Whitson writes (61). Like fans of soap operas, sports fans were now part of communities of 'continuous gossip' (Wernick 1991: 105). Each game 'promote[d] interest in its successors and adds to the overall presence of the master narrative and its characters in popular culture' (105). Audience interest is heightened, Whitson argues, 'as identifications are developed with teams and players, and as the serial dramas of playoff races and individual competitions for scoring or batting titles move toward their annual climaxes' (1998: 61). In effect, Wernick (1991) writes, sports came to depend on fans to 'amplify the promotional effect'. The 'ties of loyalty' that develop 'are only a more excited version of those which tie regular customers to any commodity brand' (105).

With success came expansion. Leagues granted new franchises at a rapid pace, especially during the 1960s and 1970s. As Whitson (1998) notes, such an arrangement leads to 'greater market penetration by national brand names, and the erosion of independent alternatives and regional differences'. Next for the owners was television. The magic of television was its ability to 'augment ... core audiences of already committed fans, both by taking "live" sport into new geographic regions and by presenting sports in ways designed to make them entertaining to new viewers'

(63). In short, television allowed for the complete transformation of sport into a product.

Ironically, television was once seen as a threat to home attendance; it is now the primary source of income for the owners of professional sports teams. Broadcasting and cable executives lavish billions of dollars on leagues for the right to air their games. Monumental increases in the rights fees paid by broadcasters have in turn driven player salaries to incomprehensibly high levels. The Fox Network, owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, changed the dynamics of sports broadcasting by outbidding CBS for the rights to National Football League (NFL) games in 1993, and by paying what some considered an outrageous sum for the rights to broadcast National Hockey League (NHL) games—the league's first true national television contract since the late 1970s. In 1997, CBS pushed its way back into professional football by outbidding rival NBC for American Football Conference (AFC) games.

Superstations like WTBS, owned by Ted Turner, and WGN, owned by Tribune Entertainment, have given their teams (Turner's Atlanta Braves and Tribune's Chicago Cubs) national exposure; they also eat into the audiences for the teams in the markets they invade. Baseball executives have long feared erosion of their fan base at the hands of the superstations, and have tried for years to halt their growth (Helyar 1994). Superstations and national television contracts in all four major sports have done significant damage to the sports logo as a sign of allegiance. A sports fan armed with cable television or a direct broadcast satellite dish can choose from scores of games on any given night. Fans still check in on the progress of their favorite teams, but they are also exposed to the players, and the marketing schemes, of other teams. Furthermore, as more teams have seen the value of national marketing, the reach of their logos has increased. Thus, it is not surprising to see pockets of Chicago Bulls fans in Washington, Atlanta Braves fans in Maine, or Dallas Cowboys fans in California. This is not to say that these teams did not enjoy farflung support in the past. It is argued, however, that colors and a flashy logo are as powerful a lure today as a dominant team or dynamic player was 15 or 20 years ago.

As the owners' profits grew, so to did the desire of players to share in the wealth. Players unions were established, and soon salaries began to increase. To pay the players, owners sought more for the broadcast rights to their games. When television networks, with rare exception, proved willing to pay exorbitant sums, owners took that money and moved into 'regions where ... sports were not historically major' and into 'underrepresented television markets' (Whitson 1998: 63). Such rapid growth of professional sport soon led to the 'gradual "delocalization" of sporting tastes and loyalties' (65). Franchises soon began moving almost as often as players did. Moreover, national television exposure 'would encourage, and gradually normalize, the practice of fans identifying with teams based elsewhere' (65). Today, teams and players are completely detached 'from loyalties and meanings based in place' (66). Marketing has all but destroyed the regionalism of professional sports. Anyone, anywhere, can become a fan of a particular team—usually by watching its games on television and by building a connection through merchandise. Filling the void left by

shattered allegiances is a 'normalization of the discourses of personal and consumer choice' (66). In place of real links with teams are 'circuits of promotion' built on merchandising and cross-marketing. Fans do not so much begin and end relationships with teams as they do become part of 'recursive and mutually reinforcing public texts that generate more visibility and more business for all concerned' (Wernick 1991: 105). Teams are now properties, cross-promoted with intertextual zeal, as in the case of the NHL's Mighty Ducks of Anaheim, owned by the Disney Corporation. Teams have become brands—for years, the NFL's Dallas Cowboys have been marketed as 'America's Team', a title they now share with baseball's Atlanta Braves. Loyalty to team now seems to have little to do with the players, except to the extent it drives awareness of the brand. Players are clearly secondary to the packaging created to market professional franchises. In fact, 'the fan' has become a brand—cynical, knowledgeable, avid, ranting, raving. One recent commercial for the NFL shows a son recalling his father's instruction on how to paint his body correctly before game time and how to engage in the 'right' level of raucous behavior during the game. Attending or watching a game is not enough; to be accepted, to be branded, you must become a ravenous, nail-spitting, player-hating, hypercritical fan.

A typical professional sports telecast is little more than a lengthy commercial for the manufacturers of the footwear and jerseys worn by players. Nike, Reebok, Wilson, and Champion have paid a great deal of money to parade their logos to legions of fans. It seems that we are so busy being cynical about the players and complaining about their salaries that we leave ourselves wide open to a non-stop sales pitch. We become so wrapped up in our tirades on all-sports radio stations that we do not see companies like Logo Athletic slipping hats to NFL players to wear while they sit on the bench. We should be cynical about the commercialization that produced the high salaries that we so readily carp about; instead, we chide the players while marketing executives for the professional sports teams and for companies like Nike and Champion produce an endless supply of clothes for us to buy.

But no single economic force has done more to change professional sports than free agency. Owners of professional sports teams have gone to great, sometimes illegal, lengths to control the spiraling salaries caused by the free movement of players. In one celebrated instance, baseball owners resorted to collusion to limit the movement of free agents (Helyar 1994). Free agency allows an athlete to move to another team once his contract with his current team has expired. But this freedom of movement depends, it seems, on the owners in the sport; baseball players move more often than players in the other so-called 'major' sports—basketball, football, and hockey. The NBA and NFL have kept their players in place by implementing salary caps that limit the amount of money a team can spend on its players. During the past five seasons, owners have reexerted some power by releasing high-priced veteran players and then resigning them at much lower salaries.

For the fan, free agency means endless roster changes. The make-up of many teams changes annually as owners sign the free agents whom they believe will bring the team more success. As a result, it is difficult for fans to maintain loyalty to a

particular team. Furthermore, it is rare to find a player who has played his entire career with the same team, like Cal Ripken Jr. of the Baltimore Orioles. It is just as rare to find fans who spend their entire lives rooting for a single team. Thanks to aggressive marketing and the availability of games on television, fans change alliances to teams like they change brands of soap. But, as Major League Baseball found in the aftermath of the 1994 players strike, this new kind of brand loyalty is fragile. Moreover, a quick listen to any sports talk radio station tells us that the American sports fan has grown disenchanted with professional sports athletes, because they make so much money and because they lack any kind of allegiance to the fans or the region from which teams draw their fans. Professional sports leagues have had varying degrees of success getting around this problem. A strike by National Hockey League players in 1994 did little damage, thanks in part to the success of new franchises in California and Florida, and the league's new television contract with the Fox Network, but Major League Baseball suffered a significant drop in attendance after its players returned to the field after the 1994 strike. The drop-off continued as negotiations toward a new agreement dragged on. Only the assault on Roger Maris' single season home run record by Mark McGwire of the St. Louis Cardinals and Sammy Sosa of the Chicago Cubs would stem falling fan support.

Ongoing loyalty to teams is also tested by the growing number of owners who have used the threat of moving their teams in order to extract better lease terms from cities and to get new stadiums. Ironically, we do not get angry at the teams and their owners; we tend to see the teams as their business, i.e. until the team that moves is our own. Then we tend to rally behind plans to keep a team from moving. But we seem to have a consistent disenchantment with the players. They are the antagonists in this narrative, not the owners who plead poverty after raking in billions of dollars each year.

Despite our disenchantment, merchandising of professional sports goods has exploded into a multibillion-dollar business. Teams change logos, colors, and uniforms almost as often as they change coaches or managers. League officials encourage these changes. Many teams, across the major sports, have introduced 'auxiliary' or 'secondary' uniforms, a throwback to the Sunday white home uniforms created in the early 1970s by then Oakland Athletics owner Charles O. Finley. In fact, the introduction of new uniform styles is now almost an annual event for some teams. The New York Mets, for example, introduced new white Sunday uniforms before the 1997 Major League Baseball season, then introduced new blue and black home and away uniforms in 1998. The Buffalo Sabres of the National Hockey League changed its logo and colors at the end of the 1995–1996 NHL season during festivities held before the last home game played by the Sabres at Buffalo's Memorial Auditorium. Blue and gold, the team's colors since it entered the NHL in 1971, were replaced by black, silver, and red. The Sabres' old logo, a charging buffalo above crossed swords, has been replaced by the twisting head of a ferocious buffalo, complete with piercing red eyes. The timing of the Sabres' logo introduction was not coincidental; for many teams, introducing a new logo or color scheme generates a great deal of media coverage; it is what Boorstin might call a 'pseudo-event'. In

addition, the size of many new logos is more suitable for hats and clothing than for viewing by the fans in the stands.

By changing logos, teams hope to draw more fans to their games and to keep the fans they already have. More important, they use merchandise sales as a means to increase revenue in the face of increasing fan disenchantment with the players. In the case of the Sabres and the NHL's Boston Bruins, who in 1995 introduced a new uniform that incorporated the team's old logo, teams also want to draw fans into a new arena. After decades at the old Boston Garden, the Bruins moved into the new Fleet Center for the 1995–1996 season. Buffalo moved into the Marine Midland Arena in time for the 1996–1997 season. But even more important for our discussion, teams change logos, uniforms, and colors to create a theoretically endless market for team merchandise. They recognize that a growing number of professional sports fans are fascinated with sports collectibles. Every new logo and uniform change means a new line of collectible items. Instead of showing loyalty to team by supporting the players, fans show loyalty by buying the latest shirts and hats. A more recent development is the licensing by sports leagues of multicolored renditions of team uniforms and hats. Thus, one can buy red, orange, and yellow versions of the New York Yankees famous pinstriped navy and white uniform. New teams, and teams that change cities, still bring geographical or regional considerations into play when selecting a team name, logo, and color scheme, but many of them do so with a flair for the aggressive. When the NHL's Winnipeg Jets moved to Phoenix for the 1996–1997 season, they adopted the name 'Coyotes', purportedly because the animal is found in large numbers in that region of the country. In 1998, the NHL welcomed the Nashville Predators; the team's logo is best described as an angry feline creature with huge, sharp teeth. These teams sport hip, aggressive nicknames, nicknames that produce marketable logos. A link to community or region is fine, so long as it translates into increased visibility and stellar merchandise sales.

Sports Logo as a Sign

Applying Rosemary Coombe's discussion of trademarks to logos, it is clear that logos 'mark and galvanize bodies in public rituals of homosocial bonding' (1998: 194). Coombe argues that a logo conveys a sense of fidelity by operating as a 'signature of authenticity'—i.e. a true and accurate copy—and that it 'registers a real contact, a making, a moment of imprinting' for the fan. The fan actively looks for the logo, 'domesticates it, and provides it with protective shelter; he or she makes a form of bodily contact with it' (169). But with the commercialization of sport has come a fundamental change in the nature of the 'contact' Coombe describes. The logo now signifies rejection of the athlete. Owners, frustrated in their efforts to keep a lid on rising salaries, now nurture a sense of discontentment about players. The logo, made available in endless permutations, now signifies the 'embodied otherness' of the athlete, as Coombe might argue. Fans claim to feel alienated from wealthy players. Unfulfilled, they latch on to the trappings of being an athlete. But in an odd way, buying a shirt or hat with a logo on it may be a show of support for team owners. We have had enough of high-priced players, these purchases seem to say; so

what if billions of dollars flow into the coffers of the teams through merchandising? This is music to the ears of team owners. Marketing through merchandise is far more efficient than marketing with players, players who stay with a team only for a short time, players whose behavior may be questionable. Where in the past fans used the logo to trumpet their 'contact' with a team and its players, 'contact' today is achieved by purchasing the goods manufactured and licensed by the team. Teams have successfully constructed an anti-player, pro-sport discourse that binds fans to them and to their products. As Coombe suggests, teams have interpellated a fan 'with a more visual orientation and with more corporeal desires—desires met both by material consumption and by visual consumption of embodied others made available through the mass media (1998: 171).

As mentioned earlier, the players are 'embodied others' in this discourse. Ironically, so are the fans. Within the 'infinite realm of consumer choice' (Coombe 1998: 172) created by teams and leagues is the image of the intense, rabid fan mentioned earlier in the article. The range of products 'purports to create conditions for a variety of identifications and a seemingly inexhaustible supply of bodily images offered for consumption, seizure, and occupation' (172). In actuality, however, only one definition of a fan is promoted. Differences between fans are downplayed. All fans must be allied against the financial gain achieved by players. Owners have found a way to give exchange value to our dislike of the players. Teams promote their leagues first, and themselves second—all to create a 'sense of belonging to an imagined community' (173) of fans. To be part of the experience, fans must root for the sport as a whole, not just for a team or a player. The result, I contend, is a further standardization of the sports experience. In short, the owners needed a larger fan base to fuel the growth of their leagues. They needed to 'conjure a particularly American consumer on which to focus their marketing efforts' (173), one positioned to be impervious to player transgressions. This explains why so many teams build their promotional efforts on a sense of nostalgia, a yearning for a simpler (more peaceful) time in sport, when tickets were inexpensive, and players were not so demanding. These strategies thus revolve around 'cultural and corporeal distinctions' we readily recognize, distinctions that include less emphasis on admiration for players. Thus, both players and fans are symbolically subjugated by the commodification of the logo. I do not equate this with the blatant and ongoing subjugation felt by ethnic and racial minorities, but some interesting themes from the literature on the blatant racism shown by many professional and collegiate sports teams can be applied here. Churchill (1994) notes that despite intense protest from Native Americans, many professional and collegiate teams continue to misuse Native American images as logos and as the basis for team mascots. The Washington Redskins of the NFL, for example, have come under intense criticism for failing to change their logo, the head of a Native American adorned with war paint. Several colleges, including Stanford University and Miami University of Ohio, have abandoned racist nicknames and mascots, Churchill reports. He rejects the argument, supported by some in the media, that racist logos and mascots honor, rather than insult, Native Americans. Churchill notes that the outrage felt by Native Americans is seen by some as a barrier 'to the sort of intergroup communication so necessary

in a multicultural society such as ours' (Churchill 1994: 67). Certainly, there is little malice seen in the reconstitution of the fan by professional sports franchises, and in no way is the pain felt by Native Americans comparable with the change in fan imagery. Nevertheless, with the shift in focus from player to packaging, the fan and the player have become the embodied others. They are almost in danger of being 'metaphorically erased' (Coombe 1998: 194). Both groups, I argue, now experience sport solely from a commodified vantage point. Owners have become adept at deploying older notions of being a fan to support the commodification of their sports. In the same vein, teams and leagues now readily deploy the image of the rowdy, zealous fan, an image that disparages the fan at the same time it tries to sustain his/her interest in the sport. At the same time, owners routinely disparage players for their greed and their errant behavior, to the point that their disparagement has become a dominant strand of the discourse about sports. But unlike Native Americans, who have admirably worked to persuade professional and collegiate teams to drop racist logos, the sports fan as 'other' does not react—in fact, the fan does not see the need for a reaction. There is no sign of the 'counterpublicity' discussed by Coombe (1998: 184), an effort by the fan to 'deploy consumer imagery and the bodily impact' of the logo and its permutations to achieve a position of true power within the world of sports. The zeal with which so many of us attend to sport leaves us unable to see the commodification nurtured by team owners. Ironically, the emphasis on merchandise occurs as many teams are raising ticket prices to the point that the 'average fan' cannot attend games with any regularity. But as Coombe notes, 'what is socially peripheral is so frequently symbolically central' (1998: 195). As already mentioned, the lot of the 'symbolically central' fan is homogeneous. Gone are 'the mixtures, blends, and hybridities' in the history of a fan's relationship with a team. They are stripped of their meaning, transformed, and used to sell the new sports experience back to us.

In this new 'economy of signs' (Lash & Urry 1994), individuals no longer base their decisions to buy apparel featuring professional sports logos on the personal elements that create team allegiance. Instead, fans base their decision to buy a garment on flat, peripheral dimensions of connection with team—color, style, and national reputation. The professional sports logo no longer signifies allegiance to a particular team, especially for fans of out of town teams and for the casual sports fan. They provide a kind of 'life-line' for fans who cannot, or choose not to, keep track of the latest players on their favorite teams. This 'construction of symbolic meanings' is crucial, Whitson notes, 'to adding value to many kinds of branded products, whether these are experiential products like NBA Basketball or the Olympics, or material products like sneakers and sweaters and colas' (1998: 68). To survive, professional sports leagues must use these symbolic associations to attract a never-ending stream of new consumers. They must 'promote new ways of satisfying old needs, and associate the consumption of branded products with imaged identities and pleasures' (Barber 1995: 68–69). The periodic revision of team logos and colors is indeed a new way of satisfying an old need—the need to feel connected to one's favorite team. In short, teams and leagues have successfully commodified allegiance.

The logos discussed in this paper clearly are examples of what Baudrillard calls

the 'second order of the simulacrum'. The reproduction of the logos, along with the proliferation of team uniforms, now organizes the fan's experience with teams. Players have become little more than models for the latest uniform color scheme. The mode of signification in place when professional sports was just starting to grow was the representational sign (Poster 1990: 61). Logos had a stable referent: the team. Team owners would eventually look for ways to capitalize on the growing popularity of their sports. They began putting team logos on a variety of items. Today, logos as signs are moving quite rapidly through Baudrillard's second order and toward the third order of simulacra. The logo now holds a more abstract relationship to the signified. By purchasing an item featuring a team logo, fans show their love of team, a concept that often has a rich history of its own. Older team logos and colors come from Baudrillard's second order, but yet share some characteristics with first-order signs. For example, professional sports teams limited the amount of licensing—of 'free production' (Baudrillard 1983: 85)—until the 1980s, when they began to realize how much money could be made from more aggressive merchandising. In addition, until the 1970s, professional leagues had relatively stable numbers of teams. Professional sports leagues enjoyed uninterrupted periods of financial success. But free agency, discussed earlier, a period of fairly rapid expansion, and the movement of teams to new cities have led team owners to focus on marketing the team, and the experience of attending a sporting event, rather than on identification with the players. Major League Baseball added two teams for the 1998 season, its first expansion since 1976. The National Hockey League added two teams in the 1998–1999 season, and will add two more next season. With expansion comes more aggressive, some would say too aggressive, marketing.

National media coverage of professional sports did not flower until the 1980s, with the continued growth of cable television, preventing, at least for a time, the 'wide diffusion' of signs Baudrillard describes in his first order. For fans, the logo carried with it the 'reciprocal obligation' Baudrillard describes. This relationship was 'anything but arbitrary' (Baudrillard 1983: 84). For fans, 'the social world was constituted in the figure as "realism" through signs whose referents were material objects' (Poster 1990: 61). We knew that the items we were buying from the teams were just reproductions of the items worn by players. Our status vis-à-vis the teams was clear. We were not players—we simply watched the games. Later, as a growing number of teams tried to attract fans and television allowed these teams to reach more fans, and then a more diverse range of fans in different parts of the country, the logo became counterfeit, 'unburdened of all restraint, universally available' (Baudrillard 1983: 85). But for many, however, owning an item with a team's logo—the product of the second order—still meant love for the team. More of us create relationships with teams via the media. The beginning of this relationship was a copy of reality, the television broadcast of a game. We soon came to accept watching a game on television as the equivalent of being there. A team's appearance, including its logo, then, was a 'reality, image, echo, appearance' (95). As the number of goods with logos on them proliferated, we were able to more accurately approximate what it was like to be a professional athlete. We can buy 'game worn' jerseys, official batting practice jerseys, practice jerseys, hats like those worn by coaches,

jackets like those worn by players and managers. The copy is marketed as being more important than the original. 'Our ability to access resources allowed us to interview and consult with NFL coaches, players, and equipment managers to ensure you're getting the same stuff you see on the field, on the sidelines, and at practice' (Sports Illustrated and the National Football League 1998: 2), a recent catalog for the Pro Shop, a joint venture between the NFL and Sports Illustrated, proudly states. A tag on clothing sold through the catalog tells fans that they are buying 'the identical item that the players and coaches wear' (2).

Television put these athletes into our living rooms, so we could see and hear them. We went inside the locker rooms, saw the dugout, went inside the huddle—experiences 'radically opposed to the principle of theatrical illusion' (Baudrillard 1983: 88). Through all of this, however, the logo still had a relatively stable connection for fans to their favorite teams and players. Today, what it means to be a 'fan' of a team is itself a second-order simulacrum, based as it is for so many on connections made through endless copies of products and the logos on those products. Furthermore, because of the anger felt by some fans toward players because of their salaries, we feel we are entitled to be a bigger part of the playing experience. We want our money's worth out of them. Thus, our connections to team are closer than ever before, but in a more aggressive, some would say warped, fashion. Companies that sell team-related products simply sell our alienation to the players back to us. They make a great deal of money from our disenchantment. Furthermore, the act of being a fan has been commodified. It is not enough to be connected to a team; a fan, so the logic goes, must be overzealous. Debord (1994) might argue that 'being' a fan has been 'downgraded' into 'having'—having the items that make one a true fan, a commodified fan. In truth, we 'appear' to be loyal to a team and its players; our true loyalty is to the appearances created by the companies that market professional sports items. To Debord, these items may be 'imaginary compensation for a poverty of real social activity' (1994: 20). With no real connection to the teams or their players, we are left with the items that bear team logos. The role of the fan, reduced to buying an endless stream of team-related products, has been 'channeled into the global construction of the spectacle', Debord might argue (1994: 22). Our dissatisfaction with professional athletes is also put into play 'for the simple reason that dissatisfaction itself becomes a commodity as soon as the economics of affluence finds a way of applying its production methods to this particular raw material' (38).

Yet we want to belong, to have a more vocal role in the economic progress enjoyed by the players (at our expense), so we attend the games, buy the items, and excoriate the players on sports talk radio. At one time, we reveled in whatever connection we could make to a team or to its players; today, we bark about our entitlement to that connection, which may explain the increase in boorish fan behavior. We have become isolated—colorful and boorish packages of zeal. Attending a game is more about making sure one expresses one's opinions about sport than about enjoying the company of others. The experience is largely about us, rather than the game or its players. Poster notes that 'increasingly meaning is sustained through mechanisms of self-referentiality ...' (1990: 13). Discourse about sport

largely revolves around how we feel about the sport and its athletes, about how the sport affects us. To some degree, the team logo has come to signify our self-absorption. We have objectified ourselves in relation to teams and players; we can only talk about ourselves as an object, as a ‘fan’. The sport itself ‘fades into obscurity’ (13) and plays a diminished role in the creation of meaning.

For the most part, we go through this alone. As Debord notes, ‘spectators are linked only by a one-way relationship to the very center that maintains their isolation from one another’ (1994: 22). We buy products and contemplate our role as sports fans; we do not simply live that role. It becomes a performance. The importance of the logo ‘is demonstrated by the fact that the individual’s own gestures are no longer his own, but rather those of someone else who represents them to him’, Debord argues (1994: 23). This only heightens the alienation we feel as fans toward players, and eliminates the chance that it will end—and it is largely our own doing. ‘The closer his life comes to being his own creation’, Debord contends, ‘the more drastically is he cut off from that life’ (1994: 24). Where once loyalty had been built on the hope of being connected to our favorite players, it is now built on a false, commodity-driven sense of connection. We know that we can never get close to players. We build the connections, and constitute ourselves as fans, on the mediated, largely self-referential information made available to us by teams, players, and journalists—information that purports to bring us closer to our heroes. Indeed, the language of being a fan, a language experienced through the media, invites us ‘to play with the process of self-constitution, continuously to remake the self in “conversation” with differing modes of discourse’ (Poster 1990: 46). New logos invite us to remake ourselves as fans, to ratchet up our loyalty by buying—and talking about—the latest products. There is also the opportunity to move on to another team, and remake ourselves there, through discourse about that team’s products. Also, since franchises have forsaken any real link with communities, focusing instead on a product-driven relationship with fans, there is no ‘clearly determinate referential world’ (Poster 1990: 46) for fans to use to make sense of the meanings offered by the teams and their players. Fans now scramble for a sense of identity.

But buying items and embracing logo changes seems to allow us to create and shape our own definition of loyalty—to being a fan on our own terms, without having to be loyal to the players. In the bargain, however, the uniqueness of the logo, and its ‘original reference’ to connection with a team, has been erased. Fans find themselves in the midst of what Lefebvre called ‘the decline of the referentials’ (quoted in Poster 1990: 62). Endless logo and color changes, the introduction of more licensed team products moves sports closer to ‘indefinite reproducibility’ (Baudrillard 1983: 98). The origin of new sports logos truly is technique—what the logo looks like, how the colors blend. Creating a brand appears to mean more to sports marketing executives than any real connection the fans have to their teams. It ‘no longer has any sense; its social finality is lost in the series. The simulacra win out over history’ (100)—or, as Debord might argue, the ‘perceptible world’, stemming from the fan’s link to team, has been ‘replaced by a set of images that are superior to that world’ (1994: 26), images sold to fans in inexhaustible varieties.

Ironically, teams now wear items that are ultimately sold to fans, as if they were employed only to test market these products.

Evolution to the third order of simulacrum described by Baudrillard, where we journey into the 'informational mode of signification' (Poster 1990: 62), comes in the form of individuals who break away from the reference to team (and to the marketing of the team), and use the signs to create their own reality. The factors discussed earlier have made logos available to individuals who, 20 or 30 years ago, might not have had any interest in professional teams from distant cities. These individuals wear a particular logo because it is fashionable or because it has been accepted by their peer group as a sign of status. The status conferred by the logo clearly means more to the individual than the team. In a sense, these individuals are showing as much pride in their ability to consume the products created by a team as they could in the team itself. The sign's value, for Poster (1990: 67), lies in its emotional interaction with the consumer. Individuals who wear a particular team's logo to make a statement about themselves are deeply involved in Baudrillard's third order. As Poster points out in his discussion of Baudrillard and television advertising, only the receiver of a message—in this case, the purchaser of an item with a logo on it—can guarantee that the message 'works' and that it has meaning (67). The proliferation of sports-related items speeds this evolution. Individuals buy the item in order to create a message about themselves, expressed through consumerism. Poster argues that receivers play two roles: the object of discourse, and the 'judge, validator, referent subject of the discourse' (1990: 67). Our purchases of these products are acts made in a world of purportedly free choices. To find meaning in these products, we must accept the pitch to buy them and move on to create meaning, Poster claims, by attaching the floating signifier—in this case, allegiance to team through consumerism—to the products (67). In a sense, then, owning items with logos is the 'hyperreal' part of being a fan. Once you enter an arena and take your seat, you move from being a consumer to being a user. Here, 'the subject constituted by the communication becomes a subject constituted in the everyday-relation to the commodity-object' (63). It is little wonder, then, that today's players and teams can never measure up to the world of fantasy created through the purchase of products. Instead, it seems that we are trying to create a sense of identity as 'the fans'. The team logo, in all of its variations, signifies this identity. It bespeaks expertise in consumerism, but at the same time is a product of growing distance from professional athletes. A new form of consumer fetishism is built on the stockpiling of these repetitious signs. It becomes more important (for the true fan) to have all of the versions of an item rather than to nurture feelings of support for the team. Being a fan becomes a transaction in the truest sense of the word. As we buy more, we feel more entitled to a top-flight performance. This relationship exemplifies the contradiction that Poster argues is at the heart of Baudrillard's third order: 'it promises a new level of self-constitution, one beyond the rigidities and restraints of fixed identities, but also makes the possible the subordination of the individual to manipulative communication practices' (Potter 1990: 65). At first glance, it is the true fans of a team that engage in logo-driven self-constitution; the casual fan is at the mercy of the sports marketing executives. In actuality, however,

the true fan may be missing the manipulation, or perhaps accepting the manipulation—the endless stream of new items—as the price for self-constitution. By introducing new colors and logos, teams create a discourse whose main theme is a new, consumerism-based definition of ‘fan’. To show true loyalty, one must buy all of the latest items. The casual fan and the nonfan are able to be more selective. They buy items to signify something about themselves, apart from the team and from the sport.

Conclusions

For all fans, one thing is clear: the ability of the logo to signify has become ‘the subject and the structure’ of the communicative act. What it means to be a fan is changed in the arena of consumption. In promoting new logos and colors, teams create a discourse that convinces fans to see themselves as consuming subjects, Althusser might argue. Fans new to a team or a sport now make their connections using the language of consumption. We find our way to teams through the products they make, not through the players they hire. It is ironic, then, that team owners often talk about ‘putting the best product on the field’, since it is the products sold off the field that drive the fan–team relationship. Nevertheless, this comment shows how professional sports have reconstituted themselves. The on-field product is still important, since success drives sales of yearbooks, pennants, and jackets, but it is the ability to market those same yearbooks, pennants, and jackets to individuals all over the country that is a truer barometer of success. New logos and team colors, Poster might argue, ‘generate desire by merging fantasies with banalities’ (1990: 57). Teams promote these items by urging individuals to become ‘part of the team’; the cost, ironically, is in addition to the exorbitant prices many teams charge for tickets. Each new group of items is composed of ‘strong, clear, durable signs’, Barthes (1977) would argue, that the fan puts aside in time for next season—and the new items. Teams encourage this planned obsolescence, taking great care to introduce only a few new items each year. Such a practice leads to fragmentation of the fan, as Jameson (1984) might argue. Overwhelmed by the endless permutations of team logos and colors, the fan—the individual subject—has disappeared. Personal connection to the team is gone, replaced by a shallow, mediated, self-reflexive discourse about being a fan, about sport. The fan, and the player, have become ‘disembodied others’, as Coombe might argue. Lost in all of this, much like the identity of an ethnic or racial minority, is the opportunity to nurture a relationship with a team based on allegiance to the team or region or love for the sport. Instead, we engage in a kind of self-reinforcing collective mimesis that, according to Bourdieu, ‘sustains the possibility of collective regeneration’ (quoted in Coombe 1998: 194). Team owners will probably continue to encourage our skepticism of players, their behaviors and motives. This is not to say that fans never question the actions of owners or the leagues in which their favorite teams play. But owners, it seems, are quite adept at deflecting the same kind of skepticism of their own actions.

Logos signify a drastic change in the conditions one must meet for being a sports fan. As Meyrowitz argues, ‘media are types of social settings that include and

exclude, unite or divide people in particular ways' (1985: 70). The media promote the endless string of logo and uniform changes developed and marketed by teams; they unite fans under a banner of consumption. This is not without cost. The emphasis on marketing has changed the nature of the fan-team relationship. Consumption is more important than allegiance. Applying Barthes, one might argue that supporting a team was once the province of the true fan; now, thanks to the mass production of goods featuring team logos, that province is open to everyone, regardless of their connection to the team or sport. Thus, true fans and casual fans watch from the same televised vantage point, one that creates meaning in the games by manipulating context and that does not require our active involvement. The sale of team logos to individuals with only tepid interest in a team further blurs the line between the earnest and casual fan. Until the 1960s, when teams began moving out of the cities and into suburban stadiums, fans built relationships with teams from the same degree of connection they felt to their neighborhoods. Granted, this is an overly romantic view; nevertheless, more of today's fans build their allegiances from television and by consuming the products created by the teams. Applying Debord, it is not just that our relationship to these commodities 'is plain to see'; these commodities, the endless logo and color changes, are 'all that there is to see' (1994: 29). The playing field is ostensibly even but, in actuality, marketing executives for professional sports franchises have stolen the signs. We are left with our self-reflexive relationship with teams and their players.

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