

Mascots: Performance and Fetishism in Sport Culture

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Sport culture is something of great interest to citizens ranging from sociology scholars¹ to sports fans. The performance rituals that accompany sport include victory dances, school songs, cheers, and mascots. As Rick Minter, a mascot historian writes, “We all care about the symbols, nicknames, and legends of our club – mascots make them real again. They are a bit of our club that we can reach out and touch” (7). If we accept Minter’s conceptualization, what is the theoretical foundation that supports these representations? They make us laugh, we enjoy their athleticism, and kids love them; however, their lineage and purpose runs far deeper than their presence in the arena.

This paper argues that mascot performances represent fetishized aspects of sport culture, and specifically, that such rituals embody the ability to relate to and influence the providence of a chosen athletic team. Arguably, the success of college and professional sport teams rests on their ability to claim triumph, and mascot performances are an integral part of that process to those who believe in their power. While sports fans enjoy mascots for their physicality as furry caricatures that dance along the sidelines, their significance is founded on a supernatural power relationship. The performance of mascots perpetuates their fetishized status in sports ranging from high school soccer to professional football.

In the discussion of fetishization, one must be forgiving of possible oversimplifications present in the summarizing of various theorists, as the paper’s

¹ James Frey and Günter Lüschen outline both collegiate and professional athletics, exploring competition, reception, and cultural significance. See Frey’s “Sport and Society” and Gunther’s “Sociology of Sport: Development, Present State, and Prospects.”

purpose is to connect mascots to several ideas and support those connections using theory rather than conducting a thorough theoretical analysis using a single set of ideas. Since not all mascots cultivate significance in the same way, a range of theorists is most useful in examining the substance of their performance.

The word “mascot” comes from the French “masco” or “mascotte,” translated to mean “witch.” According to historian Richard Traubner, the word came into being in 1880 when Edmond Audrain’s operetta “La Mascotte” gained popularity (91). Audrain’s opera was the story of a young woman who brought luck to those around her. The translated title of this operetta became *The Mascot* and the idea of a mascot as something that brings good fortune was thus established. Yale University adopted the first sport mascot in 1889 and they now perform at all levels of athletic competition.

Fetishism is a term that came into existence through the work of Charles de Brosses, and is the act of ascribing supernatural powers to material objects for the purpose of worship (Sofer 212). The word “fetishism” was first referred to in English around 1800, after popularization through French and German texts. In the mid-nineteenth century, Auguste Comte wrote a definitive history of fetishism that provided a source for both concurrence and discord, beginning the lively debates about the use of fetishism in academic discourse (Pietz 125). Karl Marx soon followed with his groundbreaking work on fetishism, commodities, and materialism.² While there are endless concepts and theories about the topic, this paper will focus on cultural fetishism by examining mascot performance through a fetishistic lens. As defined by Louise Kaplan in 2006:

² On Marx’s appreciation of materialism and the fetish, see Peitz, “Fetishism and Materialism: The Limits of Theory in Marx,” in *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, 133-43. See also Stallybrass, “Marx’s Coat” in *Border Fetishism: Material Objects in Unstable Spaces*, 183-207.

Fetishism is a mental strategy of defense that enables a human being to transform something or someone with its own enigmatic energy and immaterial essence into something or someone that is material and tangibly real, a form of being that makes something or someone controllable. (5)

Kaplan's description is especially useful as a modern definition of fetishism for an argument about sports mascots. The "something or someone" is the mascot performance and the "something or someone" that becomes controllable is luck and fortune. The driving belief behind mascots is that their performative existence brings providence to those whom they represent, be it fans or sports franchises, and that belief is at the center of this paper's argument.

One such providential performer is Baldwin, the mascot for the Boston College Eagles. This large, stuffed bird graces the sidelines of various Boston College events, even traveling with certain teams for games across the country. The mascot's name is an amalgamation of "bald," for Bald Eagle and "win" for the desire to win games. The Reverend Edward McLaughlin fashioned Baldwin in 1920, saying:

It is important that we adopt a mascot to preside at our pow-wows and triumphant feats, and why not the Eagle, symbolic of majesty, power, and freedom? ... Proud would the B.C. man feel to see the B.C. Eagle snatching the trophy of victory from old opponents, their tattered banner clutched in his talons as he flies aloft. ("Eagle' Nickname & Mascot," par. 1)

Baldwin is a representation of nature believed to bring luck to those who worship his presence; thus, a totem owing to the mascot's endowed powers stemming from its association with a bird of prey. The most widely known presentation of totems is totem poles; however, the use of totems is also evident in such traditions as medieval heraldry, where images emblazoned on crests represented entire family clans. Baldwin is a bald eagle, the same symbol chosen by Thomas Jefferson to represent the strength and pride of an entire nation, which remains America's symbol even today (Kempthorne par. 7).



Fig. 1. Baldwin the Eagle. Photograph courtesy Media Relations Department, Athletic Association, Boston College.

On totem poles, the carvings (totems) include multiple representations of man, nature, and the spiritual world. Once theorized by Eurocentric perspectives, totem poles and their nature-based carvings gained a sense of mystique that is often associated with fetishized objects. Each carving is a relevant and meaningful totem, symbolizing something greater than the wood from which it is fashioned. The totems tell a story from which the owners draw strength and spiritual guidance.

Mascots perform as totems adopted for the purposes of good fortune. They stand in for culturally powerful or relevant representations in order to disseminate their fortuitous power. The idea behind Baldwin is that this large bald eagle will bring strength to the athletes at Boston College and they will find fortitude through the worship of the Baldwin totem. It just so happens that this particular totem is a six-foot-tall performing eagle costume inhabited by various human beings at multiple sporting events. Baldwin moves betwixt and between the rows of Boston College fans, shaking their hands, hugging children, and non-verbally mocking the opposing team, using these routines to win the affections of his audience. Through delighting in Baldwin's performance, fans of

Boston College athletics become active participants who worship their team's totemic identity. Although the actors who perform Baldwin often change, the eagle totem remains, highlighting the key difference between the essence of a totem pole and the essence of mascot as totem: totem poles have a life cycle and mascots do not. Totem poles are meant to return to the earth as their wood decomposes (Myers par. 7). Totemic mascots are imagined in such a way that their presence perpetuates without life cycles. When this interminable lifespan becomes linked to mascot representations, their performance becomes effigial.

Joseph Roach has done tremendous work on the role of effigy in performance, claiming that through performance, effigies “fill, by means of surrogation, a vacancy created by the absence of an original” (36). This is a relevant definition when considering that as one mascot performer passes, another assumes the role through surrogation, instilling the fetish object (mascot) with the “original motive powers” (124), deepening the object's value.

One particular mascot performance stands out with striking potency as an effigy. Roach describes effigies as “provid[ing] communities with a method of perpetuating themselves through specially nominated mediums or surrogates: among them... by virtue of an intense but unsurprising paradox, corpses” (36). One school uses an actual corpse as its source of mascot power in the belief that the corpse's presence endows supernatural luck to the other mascot representations, all of which are mere facsimiles of the original. This powerful effigy is Yale University's original Handsome Dan, a bulldog who died and was stuffed over one hundred years ago, currently residing in Yale's Payne-Whitney

Gymnasium.³ Since Handsome Dan's death, there have been fifteen other live bulldogs performing the role, but there is no attempt to pass these dogs as the original. There are various performance rituals surrounding Handsome Dan, especially when Yale plays their interscholastic rival, Harvard University, in their yearly football match.⁴ According to Yale University's Athletic Department, any Handsome Dan's favorite trick is to "speak to Harvard," whereby the dog "bark[s] ferociously and work[s] himself into physical contortions of rage never before dreamed of by a dog."⁵



Fig. 2. The taxidermied Handsome Dan, photo courtesy of James McGirk.

Handsome Dan's role as an effigy connects closely to Roach's description of mummification as "the sacred purification of a secular relic, a venerated effigy fit for a king" (92). Handsome Dan is fetishized in death because of the belief that he, as Yale's original mascot, brought fortune to their sports teams. For believers in the power of Handsome Dan, the death of the original marked the passing of a great symbol of providence, and thus the flesh of the animal became an effigy, immortalizing the power of this homely canine mascot. Moreover, the tradition must be performed through a live

³ The entire history of Handsome Dan, as published by the Yale University Athletic Department, can be found at <http://yalebulldogs.cstv.com/trads/mascot.html>.

⁴ In addition to Harvard/Yale, many other schools perform mascot rivalries. See George Washington University's *Hatchet*, Oct. 5, Oct. 19 1948 and *Cherry Tree*, 1949 for description of 1949 kidnapping of and subsequent ransom demands for the University of Maryland's mascot.

⁵ See Yale University Athletic Department

bulldog in order for modern believers to connect with their mascot and continue their tradition of competitive athletic success.

Although Handsome Dan is an effigy made of flesh, the mere fact that all mascots are ageless and everlasting representations of primary ideas makes them effigies. The original is absent but the facsimiles remain in order to keep the spirit within our cultural consciousness.

While some mascots are easily identifiable, not all mascots are caricatures or interpretations of imagined beings. A fine way of categorizing the performance of non-human/animal/monster mascots in our academic discourse and cultural collective is to connect them with props. According to Andrew Sofer, “A fetishized prop is one endowed by the actor, character, or playwright with a special power and/or significance that thereafter seems to emanate from the object itself... [that] then serves the same function for the audience” (27). In the case of mascots, the players and fans endow the power upon the mascot in return for luck gained through superstitious belief rituals. Sofer goes on to describe the projected anxiety associated with the fetishized prop, illustrated beautifully by a recent debate surrounding the mascot for the Atlanta Braves.

Chief Noc-A-Homa⁶ (to be understood as knock-a-homer, as in hitting a home run) and his trusty tomahawk presided over the Braves organization for many years (Wallace pars. 4-6). When the Braves phased out Chief Noc-A-Homa in favor of Homer, a figure with a baseball head, and Rally, a large, red character of no discernable origin, the fans were enraged. To make matters worse, the team went on a losing streak shortly after the Chief’s teepee was dismantled in order to make room for additional stadium

⁶ For additional discussion about the fetishisation of Native American signs and symbols, see Jason Edward Black’s “The ‘Mascotting’ of Native America: Construction, Commodity, and Assimilation” and King and Springwood’s *Team Spirits: The Native American Mascot Controversy*.

seating. Fans demanded the reinstatement of the man with a teepee who resided in left field. They missed his victory dance, his battle cry, and his convincing performance as the powerful leader of their tribe. More than that, they missed winning. Bob Watson, a former player and now Major League Baseball's Vice President of On-Field Operations explains:

The Braves lost all those games when they took the teepee down in left field, and [people] attributed that losing streak to the teepee having been taken down to put in [extra] seats. When we put the teepee back up, we ended up winning the last five out of seven games and ended up winning the National League West. (Cooper par. 6)



Fig. 3. Chief Noc-a-Homa performing the ritual victory dance at his teepee in the left field of Atlanta's Fulton County Stadium, courtesy of The Carl Vinson Institute of Government (Georgia University).

The politically correct compromise was the restoration of the teepee and tomahawk without the Chief. The Atlanta Braves tomahawk and teepee remain the ultimate props for Major League Baseball as they represent an entire franchise. The fans today perform a ritual chopping movement (the "Tomahawk Chop") with their arms to simulate the tomahawk's slicing motion whenever they are praying for luck during the game, furthering the fetishized performance of their mascot. Without their tomahawk, Braves fans become anxious about their ability to control the game's outcome.



Fig. 4. The Atlanta Braves logo, illustrating the tomahawk prop, courtesy of Major League Baseball.

The tomahawk is particularly relevant as a prop because, as Sofer states, props “bring dead images back to life again – but with a twist” (3). Tomahawks are antiquated implements of battle that we no longer see in use. They are “haunted mediums... possessed by the voices of the past” (27). The tomahawk, unlike a gun or cannon, is a weapon that relies upon the force of the user in order to be effective, reminiscent of the great warriors who employed these weapons. The Braves’ tomahawk is a supernatural representation of Native American power, a fetishized prop that symbolizes the ability of the Atlanta Braves to kill their competition with great force and violence. Another prop that serves as a mascot and calls to mind brawny men of battle is the recent adoption of the skull and baseball bat/crossbones used for the Pittsburgh Pirates (reminiscent of the Jolly Roger). These props perform as magical possessions for those who believe in their power, connecting them to fetishized and supernaturally evocative props that are traditionally associated with stage performance.

Props usually remain on stage, effigies exude power from their respective alters, and totems began as immovable carvings; however, the sports mascot’s power is believed to pour forth into commercial reproductions created in representational likeness, thus inserting mascot performance into capitalist discourse.

Karl Marx used the term “fetishism” to characterize the whole of the capitalist social process. According to William Pietz, “Marx appealed to the language of magic and theology in general, and fetishism in particular, as a way of evoking the materialist imaginary proper to... a mode of apprehending capitalist reality” (130). Marx focused his work on materialism and social theory, producing philosophies of modern capitalist society. In particular, his work on commodities is of noteworthy relevance to the

conceptualization of mascots as fetishized; however, in order to understand mascots as commodities, we must first examine the social entities at work in his theory and then relate them to the discussion of mascots and their performance in sport culture.

Marx, in his magnum opus, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, stated that “All our inventions and progress seem to result in endowing material forces with intellectual life and stultifying human life with a material force” (qtd. in Fernbach 300), and thus the concept of “commodity fetishism” was born.⁷ The social relations between the actor as mascot and the audience commoditize the performance and reception of these symbols. William Pietz conceptualizes fetishized commodities as “universals that incorporate (i.e., that become the practical substance – the unity – of) the particular social processes that produce them and which they thereby alter” (147). Fans gather in support of their chosen sports franchise, thereby creating the social processes that produce mascots and their subsequent worship. The perceived alteration is the luck that the followers believe comes from the existence of their mascots as part of their sport ritual. The commoditization in this relationship happens on two different levels: that of the human being that performs the role and then the mascot itself.

According to Marx, the key to this idea is the surplus that exists between the worker (proletariat) and the capitalist (bourgeoisie), which is something that applies to today’s mascots. The actors hired to perform as mascots are athletic and entertaining; however, it is impossible to reveal their personal identities since they vow secrecy so as

⁷ Marx repeated this idea verbatim in a speech that he gave at the anniversary of *The People’s Paper* in London on 14 April 1856. See <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1856/04/14.htm> for additional background information and complete text.

not to spoil the “magic.”⁸ The actors are dispensable and interchangeable, turning them into faceless commodities. For professional sports mascots, salaries start around £12,500 per year (Sahadi 4) and include health benefits, which is of critical importance. Dr. Edward J. McFarland of Johns Hopkins University surveyed mascots of professional American sports teams and learned that “40 percent of the respondents had suffered from heat exhaustion, brought on by costumes that averaged 21 pounds in heat averaging 85 degrees inside the uniform” (Vecsey pars. 12-13). These actors are commodities to the sports organizations that they represent because they provide both a use value and a sign-exchange value. Their presence is the use value and the status of the sports organization recognized by the symbolic mascot is the sign-exchange value. If the actors cannot perform their roles (which often happens due to injury), they are quickly replaced so that the benefits of the mascot remain. In addition to use and sign-exchange, a pure Marxist exchange value is also relevant to the discussion. The actors perform the mascot ritual but are compensated mere fractions of what the capitalist franchises gain.

The visual representations of mascots serve as revenue generators, allowing fans to bring supernatural mascot powers into their own homes. The people performing the roles are not the beneficiaries of these monetary gains, often (especially for college mascots) compensated just in the joy and honor that acting such a role bestows. Boston College’s bookstore and online merchandising site offers countless products adorned by Baldwin the Eagle, ranging from sweatshirts and hats to golf tees and the “Eagle Express” train set for the holidays. The list is inexhaustible and illustrates the exchange

⁸ In December 2007, the author spoke with various actors who play mascots in the Boston, MA area including Baldwin the BC Eagle, Wally the Green Monster of the Boston Red Sox, and Paws the Northeastern University Husky. All asked to remain anonymous and cited that revealing their identity compromised the “mascot magic.”

value of mascot representations.⁹ The Marxist connection lies between not only the actual retail products but also the commodification of human beings associated with the performance of mascots.

The question remains: what broader lessons about sport culture can be learned through mascots? These fetishized characters signify a link between the various sports teams and the communities that they represent. The mascots stand for luck and good fortune, which gives the fans and athletes a belief that they can influence a game's outcome by worshipping the mascots. By trusting in the power of mascots, the believer receives agency in an otherwise uncontrollable situation. As sports fans worship the performances of mascots, they situate themselves as participants in creating luck for their chosen sport team, which signifies the action that they cannot take on the field. Whether revealed as fetishized totem, effigy, prop or commodity, the power is of equal importance in relieving the anxiety associated with sporting competitions. As long as players and fans believe that they can somehow manipulate a game's outcome through veneration of a symbolic entity, such entities will remain. By understanding mascots as fetishized performances of sport culture, we can better comprehend their perpetual existence.

Although this paper discussed the power of mascots, uncultivated knowledge remains. What about scopic fixations in relation to mascot performance? Gazes, whether conceptualized by Foucault, Lacan, or Mulvey must certainly play a role in the fetishized status of mascots since our very act of looking is what signifies our awareness of their presence. There would be no mascots if spectators were not fixated on their physical being, an awareness that requires optical confirmation and energy. By delving into gaze

⁹ For additional discussion of possessions as related to beliefs, see Russell W. Belk's "Possessions and the Extended Self".

theory, one could better understand the tri-directional power structure that exists between fans, athletes, and mascots. Moreover, since mascots cannot speak, their directional gaze is the only way that they can communicate their intentions and presence. Therefore, multidirectional scopophilia is a strong (and likely lengthy) source of additional research on this topic.

In addition, one could look at mascots that are outside of sport culture in order to further this discussion. The Walt Disney Company's foundation rests on mascot performance and could be explored using a close reading of Marxist theory. Symbolic representations and corporate mascots such as the McDonald's "M" or the Microsoft Window, as well as the icons of Mr. Clean and the Energizer Bunny are equally endowed with magical performative powers. Some of these (such as the "golden arches") are linguistic representations, engaging the role of semantics in the representation of mascots. Semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce's founding work, Umberto Eco's research on iconism, and Baudrillard's discussion of simulacra could help advance mascot discourse by approaching the relevance of these cultural performances from new academic dimensions.

Mascots are an integral part of our collective conscience and I would argue that they are influential in ways that we have yet to discover. This paper serves as an invitation to further explore the fetishized status of mascots so that we can ultimately unpack the complexity of the imagistic world in which we live.

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