

This is an Open Access document downloaded from ORCA, Cardiff University's institutional repository:<https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/88461/>

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted to / accepted for publication.

Citation for final published version:

Edgar, Andrew Robert 2015. Football and the poetics of space. *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy* 9 (2) , pp. 153-165. 10.1080/17511321.2015.1030439

Publishers page: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17511321.2015.1030439>

Please note:

Changes made as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing, formatting and page numbers may not be reflected in this version. For the definitive version of this publication, please refer to the published source. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite this paper.

This version is being made available in accordance with publisher policies. See <http://orca.cf.ac.uk/policies.html> for usage policies. Copyright and moral rights for publications made available in ORCA are retained by the copyright holders.



## Football and the Poetics of Space

### Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore a possible source of the aesthetic pleasure yielded by the various codes of football, and particularly association football. At the root of the exploration lies an argument that draws upon Kant's distinction, in his 'Analytic of the Beautiful', between the agreeable [*Angenehmen*] and the pleasurable [*Lust*] (Kant 1952 §3). The experience of beauty, and by implication of the experience of a beautiful art work, Kant argues, is not a matter of agreeable entertainment. Beauty does not pander to fundamentally sensory desires and appetites. Rather, a deeper pleasure is invoked that engages the intellect as well as the senses. It will be argued that sport, similarly, is not merely an entertainment that exists to provide an immediate excitement. Sport too is pleasurable in the Kantian sense, not least in that it is open to a depth of appreciation that draws upon a subtle and complex knowledge of the game, its rules, tactics and even history. Sport invites a form of connoisseurship. This paper will argue that, in the case of football, pleasure is yielded insofar as players and spectators alike strive to appreciate the ways in which the movements of players about the pitch articulate a complex experience of space. This spatial experience will be analysed with reference to the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty. While Merleau-Ponty offers a description of the spatial experience of football, it will be suggested that a genuine aesthetics must go beyond this to a 'poetics' that embraces the possibility of the metaphorical understanding of this space. The possibility of metaphor takes the experience of the footballing space beyond a literal articulation of the movement of ball and players in order to express something of the deeper meaning that the sport might suggest – a meaning that touches upon an understanding of the potentials and insecurities of human performance. In this context it will be argued, drawing on Bachelard, that pleasure in football exemplifies 'topophilia'. Such 'love of space' is manifest in the embodied experience of playing and watching football, but further in the invitation that this experience makes to talk about the play, more or less metaphorically or poetically. It will be argued that the topophilia of football is manifest, ultimately, in a 'poetics' that strives to grasp and express the spatial experience of play in terms of an understanding of the manner in which the flow

of play allows or inhibits the player's exercise of sporting competence. In effect, competition in football is appreciated, aesthetically, not merely as the tactical struggle to secure a spatial advantage over one's opponent, but rather to secure a space in which one is 'at home', confident in one's competence as a player (and conversely, to unsettle the spaces occupied by one's opponents, such that they are not at home, not confident in their skills). It is through appeal to Bachelard that we can begin to understand something of the aesthetics of football and sport in general, through the subtlety and nuance that comes from applying the metaphors, such as that of the home, to the experience of football. Given the complexity of the articulation and experience of space in association football, the paper will proceed, after initially exploring the nature of aesthetic pleasure, by looking firstly at the relatively simple space of the chess board. The chess board allows for a mere 64 spaces, each of which is clearly distinguished from the others. The football pitch allows for an infinite differential of space, and thus complex articulations. American football, with its more interrupted play and moments of stasis, offers an intermediary stage between the space of the chess board and that of the soccer pitch.

## Pleasure

It may be suggested that an aesthetics of sport is premised on the assumption that sport yields an experience that is more complex than mere entertainment or sensory enjoyment (see Edgar 2014, 84-7). One of the joys of the FA Cup final used to be the fact that it was played on the pristine Wembley pitch. After a British winter, in which pitches became gradually more muddy and barren, the simple green of the turf elicited a certain delight. Wembley looked good (and especially so if the sun was shining). Advances in the technology available to groundsmen have lessened this pleasure somewhat in recent decades. Premiership pitches, at least, tend now to remain grassy throughout the season. While there may be a degree of aesthetic pleasure in such experiences it is not clear that it is a pleasure of a particularly sophisticated kind (and indeed is probably what Kant would dismiss as merely charming (Kant 1952, §13)). Perhaps more importantly, it is not clear that it is a pleasure that is distinctive to football or sport. A similar pleasure could be derived from a well-tended lawn or park. This suggests two preconditions for a genuine aesthetics of sport. Firstly, that the aesthetic experience be a complex one. It is not sufficient for aesthetic response to be elicited by an isolated or

unmediated experience. Secondly, the aesthetic experience must be made possible by the distinctive characteristics of the sport itself. Any event or object can be evaluated aesthetically, and sport is no exception (Best 1974, 197). An aesthetics of sport must identify the aesthetic experience that is characteristic of (and possibly unique to) sport *as* sport. It cannot, for example, be an aesthetic experience that proceeds by ignoring the competitive element that characterises sport.<sup>1</sup>

These claims may be briefly defended by considering the nature of an exciting game.<sup>2</sup> In American football, a long forward pass, if caught, is exciting. It is a display of skill that can generally be appreciated by anyone, regardless of their knowledge of, or interest in, the sport. There will be a certain elegance in the flight of the ball and the dexterity of the receiver, as well as something breathtaking in the skill exercised. This elegance and skill can be appreciated regardless of the context within which it is exercised, be this the general rules of the game, or more specifically, the significance of the pass in the context of the play. In terms of excitement, it may matter little if the physical actions of passing and catching were the frustrated gestures of a couple of rugby players, flagrantly breaking the rule prohibiting forward passes, or if, within an American football match, this was the crucial pass that would set up, in the final seconds of the game, a winning field goal attempt, or simply 'consolation' for an already defeated and outplayed team.

One recipe for an exciting game of American football is to include as many successful long passes as possible (and in this lies something of the popularity of a quarterback such as Dan Marino). Similarly, an exciting game of soccer should include as many goals as possible (and preferably cleanly struck goals, and not goal-line scrambles). If one wants excitement from sport, then a low scoring game might be something of a let-down.<sup>3</sup> However, if the appreciation of moments of excitement exist in isolation from the context of the game, it is not clear that an exciting game is necessarily aesthetically pleasurable. Aesthetic pleasure, as here conceived, presupposes a more subtle and nuanced appreciation of the game.

A high scoring game may simply be the result of poor defensive play (such as Yugoslavia's 9-0 win over Zaire in the 1974 World Cup). A low scoring game may be aesthetically more satisfying, precisely because it may have demanded more from both defence and offence, and thus, potentially, the more complex, inventive and subtle exercise of skill and tactics. The very contest that lies at the heart of the game is thus worked out with more intensity. This does not, of course, rule out the possibility that the goalless draw is not also exciting, thanks for example to spectacular saves or

audacious defensive tackles. However, it is being suggested that the experience of pleasure in such a game can come only from understanding what it is to play well, and thus from a depth of understanding of tactics and strategy, and an ability to be able to perceive and appreciate often subtle movements of players. It is, after all, easy to see a player scoring a goal or touchdown; it is often much more difficult to see the work of the defence in preventing a goal, not least if this is achieved by marking an offensive player out of the game. To appreciate a game, one must be able to perceive what does not happen, as much as what does.<sup>4</sup>

This is, of course, not to argue that 0-0 draws are always preferable to 5-0 victories. It is, rather, to recognise that there is a difference between a pleasurable and non-pleasurable 0-0 draw, just as there is a difference between a pleasurable and non-pleasure 5-0 win. If the 0-0 draw is a result of incompetence – poor passing, the inability of the team to hold its tactical shape, and the inability to create and exploit scoring chances – then the game will be neither exciting nor pleasurable. However, if the 0-0 is the result of skilled, creative and determined defence by both teams, while the game may lack excitement, it will yield pleasure to the informed spectator (and a suitably rewarding challenge to the players).

In summary, it is suggested that, in order for a game to yield pleasure, it must appeal to an informed spectator who is prepared to make the effort necessary to follow the development of the contest as a whole, and to assess individual events within the context of that whole. While it does not follow that such appreciation may unproblematically be labelled ‘aesthetic’ (and it certainly does not entail that football is one of the arts), it does suggest that the appreciation of sport presupposes something closely akin to the connoisseurship that is typically associated with the arts. In the remainder of this paper, it will be argued that the appreciation of football as a spatially articulated game is foundational to the pleasure that the sport may yield, and further that an appreciation of spatial articulation makes possible aesthetics, in the form of a poetics of football.

## Chess

The space of a football pitch is constituted by more than its being an oblong with a width of between 90 and 45 meters and a length between 120 and 90 meters. Further, it is more than the subdivisions marked by the centre line and circle, the penalty box, or indeed the goals. In contrast to such fixed points of reference, space is articulated in football through the shifting interplay of players and ball.

More precisely, it may be argued that the rules of football constitute opportunities to play with, and to play within, space, articulating a tension between the abstract space of the unoccupied pitch, and the significance of any given place on that pitch during play. The importance of any given point on the pitch will vary, from utter insignificance to the focus of the whole game, as players and the ball move, thereby creating new patterns, structures and actual or potential interactions. The subtlety of this entwinement of space and place can be unfolded, initially, by turning away from football to the superficially simpler topography of chess.

A chess board consists of 64 squares. There is something extremely abstract about this space. It has no maximum or minimum dimensions, and indeed need not exist in physical space at all. Yet these 64 squares are never mere spaces. That is to say that they can never be considered as abstract, empty space. Each square is, rather, a place. That is to say, it has a certain meaning as to what can, and cannot, happen in it, and by implication the relationship that it then bears to the other 63 squares.

At the beginning of the game, only a limited number of moves are available (involving pawns moving to the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> ranks, and knights to the third rank). As soon as White moves, the meaning of the squares changes in subtle ways. To move, for example, a pawn to e4 is considered an aggressive opening, contesting the centre of the board and immediately bringing into play the queen and the bishop on f1 (and thus making certain diagonal sequences of squares potentially threatening to Black). Squares have an importance insofar as they can become open to occupation by certain pieces, but also, even if not occupied, as representing strategically significant places, worth contesting. Other squares, necessarily, fade into insignificance. The game will not be contested on them. If Black responds to White's e4 by moving a pawn to c5 a Sicilian defence is initiated. White, if a relatively expert player, is now posed with a limited number of responses, reflecting an understanding of the relative significance of squares, not just terms of the next move, but in terms of the potential overall development of the game. Crucially, the Sicilian defence is understood in terms of the occupation of certain squares by certain pieces (and by implication, the potential subsequent moves that are thereby facilitated). The space of the chess board is not an abstract grid but, from the first, an array of pieces, all with specific powers and intentions, that occupy and thereby constitute a structure of places. The 64 squares of the chess board thus represent the most minimal condition of possibility for the playing of chess.<sup>5</sup> The rules that govern the movements of pieces, alongside the

strategic history of the game, entails that, as each piece occupies a square, it constitutes the specific meaning of that square, as a place, in the unfolding of the game as a whole. Significantly, and reflecting the above comments on connoisseurship, the expert chess player understands the game, not in terms of an abstract set of rules (governing the moves of each piece), but rather in terms of sets of strategies, and indeed a history of games that embody and play with different strategies. The spatial deployment of pieces on the chess board is thus seen and appreciated through the mediation of that history, and this in turn entails an appreciation of the game as a whole (and not merely in terms of the series of excitements that a novice player might experience in successively taking an opponent's pieces).

The squares as places may most fundamentally be understood in terms of the opportunities that they present for the player to exercise their competence as a chess player. The objective of chess, quite explicitly, is to force one's opponent into a position in which they cannot go on. Put otherwise, the game ends when one player, unable to play on, is rendered incompetent. The coup de grâce of actually taking the king is not performed. Its inevitability, however many moves away it may be, is sufficient for the game to be lost. It may be suggested that the strategy of chess thus focuses upon striving to constrain one's opponent's opportunities to play, and thus the range of moves they can make, as much as possible. The opponent must be forced into positions – and the spatial image in intended literally – that inhibit the possibility of the exercising their competence. Such strategy is necessarily complemented by striving to ensure that one's own opportunities to display competence remain as open as possible. Precisely insofar as competence is manifest in the free and creative movement of pieces from one square to another, squares, understood as places, are either available for the exercise of that competence (i.e. they can be freely occupied), or not (e.g. to move to them would risk the loss of a piece). To follow a chess game is to follow a flow of security and insecurity, as competence is exercised and thwarted. Metaphorically, it is to follow the experience of players feeling more or less 'at home' on the board, where one's sense of being at home rests upon one's capacity to act competently.

### American Football

The space of chess is not yet that of soccer. American football offers an intermediary step in the analysis. The articulation of space in American football is less fluid than that found in soccer. The

pitch is more precisely defined (being 360 feet in length and 160 feet in width) and is delineated in a grid of 10 yard strips. The grid serves to suggest the abstract space of the 64 squares of the chess board. It is, in practice, of limited significance, being primarily an orientation for officials, players and above all spectators. The game could be played equally well without it. The line of scrimmage is more important. This line moves, marking as it does the point to which the ball was advanced on the previous down. It is an imaginary line, in the sense that it is not drawn upon the pitch (although it is marked by officials at the touch line). Yet, even if imaginary, it is shared in the imaginations of players, officials and spectators.<sup>6</sup> The spatial properties of the pitch, during play, are initially constituted through the relationship between the line of scrimmage and the fixed position of the goal line. The line of scrimmage defines the immediate objective for the offensive team, defining to where exactly the ball must be moved if 10 yards are to be secured in four downs. It defines further where offside is for both teams, and thereby serves to constitute that strange space into which one can quite easily move physically (as a mere human being), but into which one is not allowed to move as a football player. Crucially, the offside space is thereby constituted by the rules of the game, not fixed physical markers or boundaries. Physical markers of the offside space, such as a defensive player, acquire their status as such only through the rules of the game, and not through any intrinsic or invariable properties they may possess.

As suggested in the introduction above, and in parallel with chess, a deep appreciation of American football comes, not from the excitements of isolated moments, but from understanding the flow of the game, as a whole, in terms of its tactics and strategies. The momentary fixed point of the down invites this contemplation, and indeed analysis, by players and spectators alike. The down, like a move in chess, entails a certain deployment of players in space, and thus certain expectations as to what those players intend to do (primarily, but not exclusively, by the defence of the offense). Again, the football pitch, like the chess board, is not to be seen as an empty and abstract space, but rather as a complex array of places. The formation of the offence will suggest certain tactics that it might employ (just as the initial occupation of e4 on the chessboard is suggestive of White's strategic intentions). Such tactics in turn indicate certain places on the pitch that will be of significance. A formation that, for example, is indicative of a running play, makes places around the line of scrimmage more significant than places closer to the goal line. The very presence of a certain player in the line-up, with a known history of expediting certain types of play, will be suggestive of places

that may be contested and others that will not be. So, as with chess, it may be suggested that the immediate objective of the teams is to create and secure places in which they can exercise their competence, and their opponents cannot. The quarterback will, not infrequently, pass the ball in to what, at the moment of the ball's release, is empty space. If successful, the pass is in fact to a place that will be occupied by a receiver, and crucially a place to which the defence has failed to give value or importance. It becomes a place in which the quarterback and wide receiver display their competence. The defence is exposed as incompetent. If unsuccessful, and the receiver is marked out of the game or the defence occupies the place first, intercepting the ball, competences are reversed.

The image of being at home, suggested for the chessboard, is, it may be suggested, equally valid for football. It is exemplified, in American football, in the 'pocket' occupied by the quarterback. Ideally in a passing play the quarterback's linemen will form a cordon, protecting the quarterback and given them time to choose a pass receiver. More precisely, insofar as the immediate goal of the offence is to retain possession of the ball – to protect it as their ball – then the ball carrier and the players around them, blocking opponents, form a protective shell, or carapace. As such, the pocket may be understood as a momentary place of safety for the ball. The collapse of the pocket makes the quarterback and the ball they protect acutely vulnerable to the encroaching defence linemen. To be sacked is a humbling inhabitation of any possibility of further exercising competence as a quarterback. To be sacked and further to lose the ball is the ultimate loss of competence.

A sense of being at home will also be had by the receiver who can move unmarked, securing anew the possession and safety of the ball, or the running back who can carry the ball through gaps opened in the defence by the offensive linebackers. In each case, it is being suggested, the exercise of competence, the sense of being at home on the pitch, of being the nestling shell within which the ball is held secure, is realised within specific and dynamic spatial configurations of players. Such configurations turn mere abstract space into places that have meaning for players (and meaning not least in making possible the exercise of their athletic competence).

These brief analyses of chess and American football have sought to suggest that there is a pleasure to be gained in appreciating certain tactical games and sports as more or less fluid articulations of space – as arrays of places. The rules of different sports will allow for different articulations. Rugby league and rugby union begin to relax the rigidity of the line of scrimmage, albeit that the ruck and maul serve similar functions in constituting the pitch as a momentarily fixed

array of meaningful places. Further, the lack of anything akin to blocking means that, in rugby league, the individual player is the protector of the ball. Union begins to abandon this possessiveness. The ball is manipulated more tactically, and is readily given away, in long kicks, in attempts to gain a tactical advantage or to relieve pressure on the places near to the touchline. Union further offers new spatial experiences, as the ball is passed more frequently, and more or less fluid and dynamic chains of players take shape, allowing the ball to trace, akin to the nib of a pen across paper, complex twisting lines over the pitch. Australian Rules football introduces a different spatial experience, not simply due to the relative immensity of the pitch (up to 185 meters in length and 155 meters in width) but more particularly due to the absence of any off-side rule (even at kick-off) and to the size of the teams. Here the 'mark', in which a player cleanly catches a kicked ball, and thereby halts the game, giving them an uncontested 'free kick' – and thus an opportunity to exercise their competence and, it is being suggested, a moment securely at home on the pitch. This serves most obviously, but by no means exclusively, to orientate the pitch as a structure of significant places.

## Soccer

The very simplicity of the core rules of association football, and thus the poverty of methods and skills available to the (outfield) player to move the ball (primarily kicking or heading), leads to an extraordinary nuancing of outcomes in play. Even though players will have specialist skills and responsibilities (traditionally designated in spatial terms, such as 'left back' and 'centre forward') the lack of the rigid specialisation found in American football or even rugby offers players a greater freedom to move about the pitch, adopting different roles and responsibility. (This culminates in Dutch 'total football'.) There is thus a distinctive fluidity of play, with only various forms of free kick (resulting from rule infringements) and the restarting of play after goals, offering fixed points. The articulation of space is thus more subtle, and it may be suggested that the foundation of the aesthetic appeal of soccer lies precisely in this subtlety.

The relationship of the player to the ball also changes in soccer. It was suggested above that, in American football, the offensive players become the protective shell of 'their' ball. The outfield soccer player is not allowed to protect or nurture the ball so effectively. They can never be a shell or carapace, and the ball is continually vulnerable to interception by the opposition. The player's contact with the ball is also more fleeting. Typically contact may be nothing more than the split-

second of a kick or header. Even in dribbling, the ball may not be particularly close to the player most of the time. A certain elasticity connects player and ball. It may thus be suggested that the ball in soccer (and more so than in rugby union) is not something possessed by players, but rather a further actor on the pitch, tracing its own trajectory – a trajectory with which players strive to interact and thus to influence.

For Merleau-Ponty the experience of the game is further, emphatically, an embodied experience (1963, 168-9). At one level this entails that the pitch ideally becomes an extension of the player's body, and indeed the understanding of what is possible, and thus what modes of action are called for, will be mediated by the player's physical strength, skill and training.<sup>7</sup> It may further be suggested that such embodiment applies not merely to the player but also to the spectator. The spectator experiences play through their bodies, and most profoundly through remembrance of their own attempts to realise such play. At another level, the places constituted in play are places occupied, or potentially occupied, by players (and crucially, not just players in the abstract, but particular players with particular qualities). Just as the square in chess takes on meaning in terms of the moves that the piece that occupies it can perform, and the piece stands proxy for the presence of the chess player him or herself, so the physical space of the football pitch becomes an array of places through the presence of players.

Merleau-Ponty has offered the following analysis of the spatial properties of the football field:

For the player in action the football field is not an "object," that is, the ideal term which can give rise to an indefinite multiplicity of perspectival views and remain equivalent under its apparent transformations. It is pervaded with lines of force (the "yard lines"; those which demarcate the "penalty area") and articulated in sectors (for example, the "openings" between the adversaries) which call for a certain mode of action and which initiate and guide the action as if the player were unaware of it. The field itself is not given to him, but present as the immanent term of his practical intentions; the player becomes one with it and feels the direction of the "goal," for example, just as immediately as the vertical and the horizontal planes of his own body (1963, 168-9).

Merleau-Ponty argues that the space of the football game is not the abstract space of the empty pitch. He notes the 'lines of force' offered by the fixed lines drawn on the pitch and, more importantly, the 'openings' created in the free movement of play. It is these movements of

players and ball that, it has been argued above, constitute the game's shifting array of places. As Merleau-Ponty continues: 'Each maneuver undertaken by the player modifies the character of the field and establishes in it new lines of force in which the action in turn unfolds and is accomplished, again altering the phenomenal field' (1963, 169). Such constitution of place by movement is thereby revealed as entailing a dialectical interplay, as the players' movements change the pitch as a meaningful environment, but thereby demand from the players new practical responses, new 'modes of action'. This dialectic is more dynamic, more fluid, in soccer than any of the other codes for the reasons just noted. The array becomes a kaleidoscope of continually recombining elements, as places crystallise and dissolve. The players and ball are points of gravity or force, trajectories that come into fleeting contact. The pleasure of football for the player thus lies, in part, in realising the continual unfolding of this dialectical interplay – and for the spectator in following it.

It might thus be concluded that the aesthetic pleasure of soccer lies precisely in the creativity with which space is articulated on the pitch, and thus in the creativity with which players occupy spaces, constituting spaces as place. To argue such would be argue that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the space of the football pitch may be read as an aesthetics of football. However, while the above analysis of chess and American football has sought to lead up to, and indeed culminate in, Merleau-Ponty's argument, it has also striven to go further, precisely insofar as it has been suggested that the places of the football pitch are contested places, and that this contest may most fundamentally be understood in terms of the player being 'at home'. Places are contested in order to win the game, for one will win insofar as one's own team manifests its footballing competence and one's opponents are prevented from so doing. The point of such an argument is to pick up on the observation, noted above, that there may be an aesthetics of anything, but that what is being sought is an aesthetics of football *as* football. While the movement of football players, as analysed by Merleau-Ponty, may be aesthetically pleasurable, it is not immediately clear why that aesthetic appeal something distinctively and uniquely yielded by football. As such it is not clear why this spatial articulation is the concern of an aesthetics of sport, and not akin to the aesthetics of ballet, or indeed the appreciation of a skilled shopper negotiating a crowded supermarket. Put otherwise, if Merleau-Ponty's analysis is read aesthetically, there is a danger that this reading excludes the

contest that is constitutive of football. To recognise football as a contest, and to characterise that contest in terms of the exhibition of competence, opens up, it is being suggested, a genuine aesthetics of football. This may be supported by turning, in conclusion, to Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*.

#### A Poetics of Football

The *Poetics of Space* is a 'topoanalysis', which is to say 'the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives' (1964, 8). Topoanalysis is complementary to psychoanalysis, not least that in while psychoanalysis is concerned with our dreams, topoanalysis is concerned with our daydreams and reveries, which is to say, the conscious, not the unconscious, play of the imagination. In practice, much of Bachelard's study thus is concerned with the use of spatial imagery in poetry, and the associations held by particular spaces, such as the house (primarily), drawers, chests, and wardrobes, nests and shells, nooks and corners (see 1964, xxxv-xxxix). These spaces are taken as sites of intimacy. They are spaces in which we can daydream. They are 'felicitous spaces' and as such the objects of a love of space or 'topophilia' (1964, xxxv). Bachelard admits that he is not interested in the 'space of hatred or combat' for it 'can only be studied in the context of impassioned subject matter and apocalyptic images' (1964, xxxvi).

Topoanalysis is grounded in a recognition of the fundamental importance of space to human self-understanding, and as Casey observes, a challenge is thereby offered to Kantian transcendental psychology (1997, 358). For Kant, time is the precondition of our sense of ourselves. For Kant, we remember and anticipate ourselves as beings existing in a flow of one dimensional time (2003, A37). In contrast, Bachelard suggests that space is the precondition of this 'inner sense'. Memories are associated with spaces. 'Memories are motionless, and the more securely they are fixed in space, the sounder they are' (1964, 9). This suggestion opens up an understanding of the space of football. The story of the game may not be simply or primarily experienced as a temporal series of events, one occurring after another, but rather as something fundamentally spatial. At its simplest, the game may be the trajectory of the player, creating, through their movement, a pattern or trace on the pitch. It has been suggested above that the story of a soccer match is also the trajectory of the ball. As a spatial trace, the ball appears to manifest its own inner life, and the story of the game is thus the interaction of the spatial patterns of players and ball. But further, on a perhaps deeper level, the story

of a game is a continual returning to the same few places. It is a concatenation of places, rather than a series of events. For the individual player, a game is a story of places that have been successfully or unsuccessfully contested. Two opposing linebackers face each other at scrimmage after scrimmage. The right back confronts the inside left in play after play. Players thus repeatedly face a similar challenge (to retain possession of the ball, to create an effective pass, to tackle and neutralise an opponent) and thus return to the same place – be this a space defined in terms of the fixed boundaries of the pitch, or more significantly a place constituted purely by the challenge faced. The player's self-understanding – their sense of having played well or badly, and thus the degree to which they have been at home on the pitch – is thus itself spatial. Recalled, in reverie or daydream, it is not the sequence of events that matter, but the replaying of a particular tackle, pass or confrontation with an opponent.

The inner space, in which the game and the player are understood, has a yet deeper, and fundamentally imaginative and poetic quality. Bachelard observes that '[s]pace calls for action, and before action, the imagination is at work' (1964, 12). The actor, and thus the player, exists in a space that is always already imaginatively construed, and thus not in an empty or abstract space onto which meaning is subsequently imposed by the action. This imagination is the beginning of Merleau-Ponty's dialectic noted above. The movement of the player occurs in a milieu with which they have already creatively engaged, and which their actions further transform, in the continual flux of crystallisation and dissolution. Each player may imagine the game differently. It is precisely in the creative of the individual imagination, recognising possibilities of action that do not exist for others, that the poetic appeal of the sport lies.

In sport, the imagination is, as Merleau-Ponty's analysis suggests, embodied rather than overtly mental. The imagination is manifest in a physical awareness of the possibilities of play. The poetics of football can then lie, in large part, in the explication of these imaginings in the work of the poet, the one who writes and daydreams about the game. Above, it has been implied that the sporting imagination can be articulated by certain kinds of spatial image – the shell or the carapace, the line of force or centre of gravity, the trajectory and the kaleidoscope. This poetic work does not retrospectively impose metaphors on the football's action, but rather seeks a metaphor that explicates what is the player's imagination and movement already embodies. Space has become place for the player precisely in that it has been embodied as a shell or channel, as opening or

trajectory.

Bachelard, as noted above, is concerned with 'felicitous spaces', and as such intimate spaces. To return, finally, to the specificity of an aesthetics of football – and thus to argue that the aesthetics of football is not merely an exemplification of the fact that anything can be contemplated aesthetically – it may be suggested that football, and sport in general, offers only infelicitous spaces. The various codes of football constitute opportunities to experience space, and each code offers different opportunities. All, nonetheless, rest on the agonistic nature of sport. The space that is experienced is a contested space. Bachelard, in his pursuit of felicity and intimacy, makes much of the image of the home as a place of intimacy. While it has been implied above that being 'at home' is an appropriate metaphor for the player's freedom to exercise their competence as a player, it has also been suggested that such freedom is hard won and always vulnerable. From this it may be concluded that the poetics of football focuses as much, if not more, on infelicity than on felicity. The poetics of football is as much about the piecing of the protective shell and the disruption of the harmonious trajectory of player and ball. That is again to argue that the aesthetic appreciation of football lies in the recognition of the space of football, and thus its continually shifting array of places, not merely as Merleau-Ponty implies, in the movement of players within a phenomenal field, but further and fundamentally as being constituted by rules that encourage an imaginative contesting of place. For Bachelard, at least the 'space of combat' may be found in sporting images, not apocalyptic ones.

## Conclusion

Football is something of which we daydream. We anticipate a match, be it as player or spectator, in reveries of what might happen, and relive it in reveries of what did happen, or what might have happened. The history of the game is perhaps built from such reveries. Here lies something of the depth of our appreciation of football, and thus of its aesthetics. It has been argued that the football is not simply a source of excitement or entertainment. It is required to be pleasurable, and our pleasure, in play or reverie, is disciplined by our knowledge of the rules, the strategies and the history of the game. It has been suggested that one source of our pleasure is the fact that the rules of football constitute the game as a contest over space, and as such require players (and indeed spectators) to imagine, creatively, the football field as an array of places, within which they strive to be at home in the exercise of their skills. Such imagination, embodied in the player's awareness of the of the space

around them, is the beginnings of a poetics through which the visceral pleasure of participation may be expressed.

## REFERENCES

- BACHELARD, G. 1964. *The Poetics of Space*. Boston, MA.: Beacon Press.
- BEST, D. 1974. The Aesthetic in Sport. *British Journal of Aesthetics* 14: 197-213.
- CASEY, E. S. 1997. *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History*. Berkeley CA.: University of California Press.
- EDGAR, A. 2014. *Sport and Art: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Sport*. London: Routledge.
- EDMUNDS, D. 2011. Out of Thin Air. *Prospect* <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/features/out-of-thin-air-doping-technology-sport> [ACCESSED 22<sup>ND</sup> Demcember 2014]
- KANT, I. 2004 [1781/7]. *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by Norman Kemp-Smith and Howard Caygill, London: Palgrave-Macmillan.
- KANT, I. 1952 [1790]. Critique of Aesthetic Judgement. In his *Critique of Judgement*, translated by J. C. Meredith. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- MERLEAU-PONTY, M. 1963. *The Structure of Behaviour*, translated by Alden L. Fisher. Boston: Beacon Press.
- VIVAS, , E. 1959. Contextualism Reconsidered . *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 1(2): 222-240.

---

<sup>1</sup> An example is provided by Vivas, who finds aesthetic pleasure in an ice hockey game only by watching a slow motion replay and crucially only when he ‘was not interested in which team won the game’ (Vivas 1959, 228).

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed consideration of these issues, see Edgar (2014).

<sup>3</sup> At the end of a televised game in the 2014 World Cup, Adrian Chiles, the anchorman for the British

---

broadcaster ITV, commented with relief at the single late goal in the game: on ITV 'we don't do nil all draws'. He thereby expressed the notion that a game without goals is somehow a failure as entertainment (and by implication, as failure as such).

<sup>4</sup> The distinction between pleasure and excitement, and thus by implication between the experience of the knowledgeable 'connoisseur' of the game and the naïve viewer is something of an ideal type. In practice there will be a continuum between these two extremes, thus admitting of degrees of pleasure.

<sup>5</sup> It may not be too fanciful to suggest an analogy between the 64 squares of the chess board and Kant's pure intuitions of space and time – in effect, an abstract grid or framework within which more substantial experiences are organised (see Kant 2004). The rules that govern the movements of pieces would thus correspond to the Kantian categories (or more properly the schemata that govern the application of the categories, with the pieces themselves standing in for the categories).

<sup>6</sup> A further Kantian analogy suggests itself, insofar as the line of scrimmage is subjective yet universal.

<sup>7</sup> Jim Parry has noted how the strength and stamina of modern professional player threatens to burst out of the pitch. In effect, the soccer pitch as experienced has become 'smaller' as the players' bodies have developed under modern training techniques (see Edmunds 2011).