
The Visual Culture of Football Supporters: The Borderland of Urban Activism and Art

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Abstract

This article scrutinizes the use of visual and performative practices in football supporter culture. It examines how supporters -- by means of graffiti, stickers, tifos (the collective visual manifestations of the supporters in the stands), and performative protests -- claim space in the public space of the urban fabric and on football terraces. Supporters are understood as a public contending and interacting to form society. The specific cultures of supporters and especially the ultras are understood as a subculture and act as such. I discuss the conflict between international commercial football and the autonomous supporter movement. I debate territorial claims, conflicts with society, and means to bring unity in the public sphere of a city by the activities of the supporters.

Keywords

visual culture, urban activism, supporter culture, ultras, sticker art, performance.

Introduction

On 16 March 2014, a demonstration of nearly 10,000 people gathered at Möllevångstorget in Malmö, Sweden.¹ One section of the procession held a large banner that read "Against Nazism." In a photo from the demonstration's start, one can see behind the banner a man holding a two-pin banner in yellow and red with an image depicting a young man fit into the number 03 and "Supras" written below it. In this scene, a protest against neo-Nazi-related violence and xenophobia, one could by the visual language decipher formations that were not usually present at political manifestations. The colors of the main banner, light blue and white, are the colors of the local football team Malmö FF. The colors of yellow and red in the two-pin banner would also have been well known at the local football stadium, understood as the local supporter movement's flirtation with the separatist or provisional movements in Scandia of southern Sweden. The two-pin also marked the presence of one of the major Malmö FF ultras group, Supras, in the demonstration. Through these small visual codes, one could depict a network containing the Malmö FF football team, supporter groups, and the demonstrators. It was also evident how visual signs had moved from the terrace into the streets of Malmö and at the same time actively claimed to be part of the reshaping and control of society and public space.

In the photo, one could also see the visual language of supporter cultures and its subcultural codes: in the dress of the young men standing at the front of the demonstration and the flares that later were lit (Thornton, 2003). This was in a way both an act of solidarity and a show of strength from the ultras movement — the subcultural hard-core groupings within the supporter movement — which was making its presence known. It was not just the colors of the team, it was a subcultural manifestation. Being there in the demonstration, as mentioned however was at the same time a merging of the subculture of supporters and the public protests against violence and racism. It was an active

choice to participate in the public sphere. However, through visual codes and performance they stayed true to the idea of the authenticity of the subcultural identities of Ultras, and especially to the authenticity of the Malmö Ultras. The Malmö Ultras and other supporter groups were one of many publics, to use the term of Habermas who attended the protest (Habermas, 1989). Its presence was articulated and preformed through the group's visual marking, just as the different supporter groups did on the terraces and in the streets with graffiti, stickers, banners, tifos, and sometimes performance protests.



Fig. 1 - Demonstration against Nazism, Malmö, Photo: Susanne Hultman.

Public Spaces and Subcultures

Urban society, and consequently the materiality of public space, is in this article understood as a conglomerate of different, sometimes competing publics that form and shape the urban fabric. Public space is thus formed relationally in the interaction between different contenders or publics (Massey, 1994: 146-156, 2002). This formation of society and public place is both material and visual as well as social. Visual practices and enacted identities play a major part in the construction of public space. If we focus on urban place, the city, football supporters in most cases as a group connect to the city of their team. To support Malmö FF, one is probably also a keen advocate of the city Malmö.²

However, supporters are seldom claiming the right to the city as a political manifestation (Harvey, 2012; Mitchell, 2003). They claim and inscribe themselves in the urban fabric through marches to their home ground and at worst through hooliganism in the streets. Mostly, though it is not a bodily presence. Instead, their visual tactics in stickers, tags, and graffiti writing, referring to their supporter group or their football team, mark their presence in the urban fabric. Still it

is not in the urban fabric predominantly that the defining of the culture of football supporters take place. It is on the stands of the home ground. It is there that flares, clothes, banners, and chants form their identity. It is a formation that verges on what Dick Hebdige writes in his seminal book *Subculture the Meaning of Style*: “It stands apart – a visible construction, a loaded choice. It directs attention to itself; It gives itself to be read” (Hebdige, 1979). In the football stands, it is expressed in opposition to the opposing teams and through the unity of the supporters. What happened in Malmö in March 2014 was that the identity of the football stands was merged with political activists, political parties, and common inhabitants of Malmö, etc. Interconnectivity formed a new urban place of openness and respect (Massey, 1994: 121). Was it a one-time event or should supporter cultures be understood as forming in a dialogue between the stands and urban place?

Aims

This article discusses the public participation of supporters in the public sphere of football games and the public space of urban areas. It discusses the use and impact of visual and performative practices in the supporter cultures of modern day football. I use the term public sphere as a social nexus where different publics and institutions meet and critically discuss and enact society. However, the public sphere is also understood as something reliant on the materiality of public space and place, if it is a football terrace, a street corner or the internet. When being materialized in its concrete meaning of appearing as a material body, society is possible to contest or defended through visual nodes as art or other visual practices. Even though supporter culture could act as art, I must underline that I am not claiming that the expressions of football supporter cultures are the result of artistic creativity or artistic performances. That is, of course, a possibility, but to properly examine that it demands a deeper discussion of similarities and differences, intentions and belongings. To reach my scope, to understand and discuss the supporter cultures’ visual and performative expressions, I confine myself to calling them visual practices. The cultures of supporters are an individual or collective act with the double intention of supporting your team and stating identity as well as being an instrument in the construction of a modern urban society.

Modern-day football is part of a commodified market of merchandise and entertainment (King, 2003; Morrow, 2003). Enormous amounts of money go into an industry that has become one of the largest entertainment sectors in Europe. Many football clubs across Europe have become corporate companies with large international shareholders. Players are commodities and supporters are consumers of events. This challenges the basic assumption of many supporter groups: that of representing an authentic football culture where local identity, belonging to a long tradition, and being a genuine alternative in a world where everything is made up of commodities and where a love of a team or even the team in itself can be bought. It is an autonomous subcultural position taken by the supporter groups. In his book *The G-word*, Jacob Kimvall uses to explain graffiti culture as subcultural a lexical definition as “a smaller cultural group with beliefs, norms, practices and rituals that are different from and sometimes at odds with the larger culture” (Kimvall 2014). The definition is also well suited to understand part of the supporter cultures discussed here. It is slightly vague and open, and as such has the benefit of allowing the differences in the supporter movement still to appear as one movement. As seldom is the case, there are no clear limits between the larger culture of modern football and the subculture of supporter culture.

Rex Scania and the Commodified World of New York FC

To exemplify the difference between the position of the ultras and the commodified, branded market of modern football, let me compare the Malmö ultras group, Rex Scania’s visual tactics, and the marketing of a new soccer team in New York.

The team New York FC's owners are an overseas football consortium deeply rooted in globalized international capital. The team lacks a traditional history and its life span stretches one year back before their inauguration into U.S. Major League Soccer. The Ultras group "Rex Scania" has used graffiti as a tactic in the manner of de Certeau to claim the geography of Malmö, to strengthen their identity and to support the team Malmö FF (de Certeau, 1988). This graffiti is to be found on trains and walls, and is frequent on ultras forums and on social media. It has a circulation of its visual production similar to many urban art forms (Bengtson, 2014). In its expression and cultural belonging, it interconnects to urban subcultures as well as ultras movements around the globe. As such, it relies on the experience of an authentic culture in opposition to mainstream commercial society. When New York City FC announced its first season in New York, it visualized its presence in the city through the signifier of graffiti. The visual language signified urban cultures, youthfulness, and an alternative sport. To a certain extent, Rex Scania's and New York City FC's territorial tactics and usage of graffiti were similar. They both claimed the local city as theirs; they both used a visual language, recognizable as urban, active, and modern to emphasize their identity. Nevertheless, we can be sure of that Rex Scania's members actively engage in graffiti writings and that they are both part of the graffiti and supporter scene — they belong to the urban subcultures. As a direct counterpart, there's New York City FC. To find its subcultural language, it hired an advertising company, and used the large-scale advertising channels to promote it. However, the most fundamental difference is that Rex Scania graffiti is part of an illegal claiming of territory and thus actively engaged in the contesting of public space. New York City FC, on the other hand, has bought advertising space in Times Square and thus commodified football and public space. The subcultural visual tactics of the ultras has rendered them a place on the margins of society and the commercial strategy of NYC FC has further developed the brand and value of a commercial company.



Fig. 2 - Advertisement NYCF, New York, Photo: Henrik Widmark.

Supporter Culture and the Concept of Authenticity

It can thus be concluded that there is a difference between modern-day football clubs and supporter groups being supportive of an alternative to modern football. However, it is not so clear. Football supporters come in many forms and the manifestations of the supporters are also willingly or unwillingly part of the commodified market of modern football. The tifos and the atmosphere created at the games, the reproduction of the team colors in stickers and graffiti are part of an autonomous movement relying on the idea of authenticity. At the same time, willingly or not they are also promoting the team-commodity, football as merchandise and large-scale commercial contracts, brands of football wear, and players as brands. Following the idea of authenticity supporter life is non-profit, idealistic, and based on “true love to your team.” It is an ambiguous stand as the teams they support rely on a commercial market. It could be compared to the classical subcultural phenomena of, for instance, the rapid commodification of punk or hip hop styles and identities (Williams, 2011). Authenticity among ultras is stressed by the objects of their culture. Still, it is important to bear in mind that the idea of authenticity is evident among the supporters and prevails through actions of autonomy toward the commercial event-based culture of their teams.³ Moreover, even the clubs seems ambivalent between the nonprofit ideal and the commercial.

In the case of Malmö, supporter groups, and their team, it is important to remember that Swedish football clubs are regulated non-profit organizations, where one as a member can make one’s voice heard at the annual meeting (Kennedy and Kennedy, 2016: 68). This is of colossal importance in the supporter movement. It is possible to hold onto authenticity and belonging in a commodified world. At the same time, to be able to compete on an international level, the clubs also act as commercial companies and are competing on an event market (Kennedy and Kennedy, 2016: 66–70). The football world works differently throughout Europe. Some clubs are organized on the Swedish model and others are multinational companies. At the core of a large part of the supporter movement, what makes the idea of a passionate relation to a football club is “the myth of the club” or the supporter-narration of the club. Their own club could in other words be both part of the larger culture that supporters oppose as well as part of “the myth.” The complexity of the identity-construction thus allows both belonging to a commercial field and at the same time opposition towards it. Thus, supporter campaigns can oppose the national football federation, which all clubs belong to, as for instance in the protests against the Swedish football association SVFF after they had imposed harder regulation on flares on the terraces in 2009. At another level are the protests against UEFA, the European football association. In the supporter-protests, UEFA represents an autocratic institution in European football that is also the main promoter of football as a commodity. Still, UEFA is essential to the supporters and the clubs as it is the only transnational association in Europe and the means to compete on an international level. In the Malmö stands in 2015, the protest against UEFA concentrated on corruption and earlier fines for chanting “UEFA mafia” at the referee at an UEFA-organized game. The protest used a caricature of the UEFA logo and the supporters wore the transformed logo on t-shirts in a silent protest. Another example is the tifo from the Polish team Legia Warszawa’s terrace. They protested against a UEFA-ruling that the year before had expelled their team from the Champions League for using a non-registered player. These are both locally staged protests against institutions within football but they reach an international scope through the earlier mentioned circulation of images in internet forums, and through social media (Numerato, 2016; McLean and Wainwright, 2009). Thus the local geography of the football stadiums is turned into the public space of international football. A possible conclusion from the protests is the positioning in opposition of the supporter movement. Another is that the clubs, the supporters, the market, the national, and international associations all belong to an entangled network that is contemporary football culture.

The Right to Enact Your Culture

National and local regulations, and codes of conduct, set the possibility of action in the stands. Security companies and police enforce these regulations. This order will inevitably lead to confrontations with some of the supporters: breaking regulations with the burning of flares is an important part of supporter culture. There is also disorderly behavior, closely linked to the violent cultures surrounding football known as football hooliganism. Violence is seldom a feature at football games, and is not an essential part of the main supporter cultures. At the same time, it has through media, and the male and macho-dominated expression in supporter groups, been inscribed into the narrative both from the outside and the inside (Spaij, 2006: 38–46). Accordingly, the illegal acts, as many other subcultural movements' actions, has attracted interest from the police and has often led to open confrontations. The police has become the main enemy to a large part of the supporter movement, both through bad experiences and ill treatment by the police and as a symbol of the oppression from society against their way of life (Spaij, 2006: 17–49).

During early spring 2016, a pre-season game in Malmö against the Danish team Brøndby created disturbances outside the stadium where small groups from both supporter teams tried to fight. The police eventually stopped the disturbances; in the aftermath, the police, a few months later, searched, and took in custody nine members of the Malmö ultras.⁴ At the first game after the action of the police, Ultras from Malmö staged a protest similar to a performance, where a man wearing a police security vest and a pig mask lit a flare during the opening of the game. It eventually led to arrests after the match.⁵ The performative protest alluded to the police as pigs and the flare both highlighting that fact, as well as being the far strongest symbol of a resistant culture shaping their own public space. The protest should be understood both as a claiming of territory and a defense of their culture (Kärrholm, 2004). The protest also stressed the importance of the larger ongoing battle against the police, in which the performance on the terrace was one node in a network of visual representations of stickers and banners with the well-known acronyms ACAB and 1312.⁶ When calling upon 1312 and ACAB the ultras were joining ranks with, or being part of a heterogeneous network of, hooligans and ultras around Europe, left-wing activists and convicts—to name a few in opposition to the police. In consequence, with the interpretation of the pig-police performance the stickers and banners are all part of the ongoing public critique of the police. At the same time, they mark a material and visual claiming of their territory.



Fig. 3 - Pig mask happening, Malmö
Photo: Supras Malmö.

Bringing the Urban Fabric Together

Not all actions and visualizations are protests. As we have seen in the case of Rex Scania, they are part of a subcultural geography of urban areas or tactics of claiming public space or part of the interconnectivity of urban publics. The interconnectivity and the ongoing visual presence also owns the possibility to unite places and the people inhabiting them. The locality of the city, or the city districts where the clubs are situated are important aspects of what I have called “the myth of the club.” Ideally, the football club and its audience represents the whole city and its inhabitants, thus becoming one with the city. In larger cities having two or more major teams, the claiming of the right to the city often lead to conflicts and battles over place, often fought through stickers, graffiti, and tagging. However, not all visual campaigns lead to confrontation.

Going back to Malmö, it is a city dominated by one team, Malmö FF, but it is also a spatially segregated city. On one side you have the thriving areas of the inner city and Västra hamnen, that could be described as ideal parts in what Richard Florida has called the “creative city” inhabited by the “creative class” (Florida, 2002). Their urban counterparts are areas such as Rosengård and Lindängen where unemployment rates are high and where immigrants live. Malmö has a history as one of the most important industrial towns of Sweden, but has during the last decades gone through enormous changes and is today best described as both a young and rich creative city and as an economically and socially weak city, where national media coverage is dominated by violence, unemployment, and a challenging



Fig. 4 - Tifo "All of Malmö's Team, Malmö Photo: MT96.

situation among immigrants.

The identification and the historical narrative of the football club Malmö FF has traditionally been a part of the Swedish working class. Since the 1990s, supporter groups have challenged the homogenous image and today there is probably few publics in Malmö that can compete with the supporters of the football stadium to fully represent a major part of the city: its districts, social classes, and ethnic groups. In 2015, the Tifo Group MT96 arranged a tifo that concealed the northern terrace completely. The tifo was accomplished as a group performance by the spectators of the northern stands at the new Malmö stadium, one by one, raising signs with the names of different parts of Malmö eventually forming a landscape representing the city with all its different areas as one. They all came together under the banner, all of Malmö's team. It was a tifo hard to misinterpret. The urban fabric with its districts was claimed as part of the Malmö FF territory. At the same time, it pointed out that all of Malmö's inhabitants belong on the terrace. It held local pride but was still welcoming. This time the visual practices and arrangements of the supporters were described as something positive in the media; today local bus companies use images of the tifo on their busses and thus through their routes claim the city space and project the city as being and standing as one with the help of the local team. It does not, of course, change unemployment or hinder social clashes and violence, but it shows the possibility to understand Malmö as one consisting of many.

1.8 The Right to the City – Istanbul

Let us move to Istanbul and the intersection of the streets Sakalar Yokuşu and Mumhane Caddesi in in the district of Fener in late spring 2014 (Widmark, 2016: 173–180). The area consists of mainly multi-storey apartment houses from two to four floors high. Looking down into Mumhane Caddesi, you can see worn-down façades with remains of the traditional wooden paneling. At the intersection, there are two corner shops and at least two restaurants or cafés. It is a lived place of social relations. On the walls of all the houses, there are satellite dishes that could be understood as both signs and material mediators of information that enable communicative meetings all over the world, and they are also thus forming the locus. At this spot Istanbul connects to a global economy, global communication systems, and a global cultural field. In the center of the intersection, on the lampposts, on the cobblestones, on the walls, and even on the street cabinets, yellow and blue colors are present as a sign of the identification of its inhabitants. Just a week before my visit, the football club Fenerbahçe had won the Turkish league and, as a celebration and identification of this historical occurrence, the supporters had remodeled the intersection. The identification of some of its inhabitants with Fenerbahçe had changed the fabric of place. The notion of the action of repainting the intersections appears with a further dimension by using Google maps 'street view'. By using Google maps, it is possible to step back a year in history to 2013, a time when the rival Istanbul team of Galatasaray were reigning champions. The intersection was at the time painted in their colors of yellow and red, and the identification was completely different. Without going deeper into the long-time rivalry between the clubs and their supporters, it is not an exaggeration to depict it as long and often violent. Seeing how supporters depending on who reigns as champions change a place allows us to note existing different identifications within that singular place. The colors of the teams hold the imagining of future victories, and the imagining of a change of colors, and they become part of the constitution of place at that very moment. They do not aspire to be the place of the 'Totenbaum' to use a contested term of Heidegger, where our ancestors' bones are buried, but the place of identification and imagination and the possibility of a different identification the next year (Heidegger, 1971: 156). Regarding the history of the team, we can be sure that the painting of the street corners also are signs of conflicts, of physically contesting publics. As an example of the conflicts, note that some of the Galatasaray paintings of 2013 have scribblings of F.B on them. F.B are the initials of Fenerbahçe, and these scribblings contest the Galatasaray colors in the hope of what is to come.

Coming back to the satellite dishes on the walls, it is also worth remembering that football on a large scale such as that of the Istanbul clubs is a global affair. Spatially, Istanbul football encompasses the whole world. Supporters of Turkish teams have been scattered all over the world through emigration, and new generations grow up with roots that can be traced back to Istanbul. Connectivity through internet and satellite television has made it possible to experience wins and losses in an instant regardless of whether you are in Istanbul or Berlin. Thus, it is also possible to see the satellite dishes as connections to the experience of football with relatives in Berlin or Toronto. Some of them are certainly happy to know that the cobblestones in 2014 are yellow and blue, and some are hoping for change.

The intersection of Sakalar Yokuşu and Mumhane Caddesi is a place of different supporter identifications, but it is also a place under the pressure of gentrification. The intersection is a place that defies a singular identity. The formation of a lived place is full of conflicts. The colored cobblestones of the supporters defy that just for a moment, and perhaps make living there easier. The right to the intersection belonged in 2014 to both Fenerbahçe and Galatasaray—in the imagination of Galatasaray and materiality of Fenerbahçe, and in such it was also a hope for small changes controlled by its inhabitants.



Fig. 5 - Street Graffiti Fener Bahce, Istanbul, Photo: Henrik Widmark.

End: Supporters and Political Activism in the City

Let us conclude back in Malmö, at the rally. It was held because a supporter, Showan Shattak, had been brutally attacked by neo-Nazis a week earlier leaving a feminist midnight rally called “Take back the night”. Showan is a well-known left wing activist and a supporter with a background among the ultras in Malmö. On the night after the attack, the first graffiti appeared a few blocks away from where Showan had been attacked, on a roundabout known for its graffiti. In the colors of Malmö FF it held the message in Swedish “Kämpa Showan,” translated “Fight Showan” but could also mean “Survive Showan”. The graffiti and the stickers that followed soon became viral and spread in ultras and supporter forums around the world. It had gone global and the message was on banners and stickers and on terraces all over the world. In Malmö, the graffiti was as Showan got better changed into Kämpa Malmö alluding the fight against racism, homophobia, and neo-Nazism. The project had thus changed from personal to political. However, Kämpa Malmö also alluded to common chants at the Malmö stands and thus it connected to the support of the local team. Kämpa Malmö became an important slogan that held hope in a city exposed to violence and xenophobia. Thus the chants from the terraces had through graffiti and stickers become political. Doing the reversed travel and going back from the streets into the arena, was though not such an easy move. A banner that had the message: “The MFF-

family stands united against Nazism,” was banned from the stands a few days later by the club out of fear of it being too political. In a sense, it was a threat to the non-political values of modern commercial football. Eventually, after an intensive dispute between the supporters and the club board, the banner was allowed. The dispute goes to show that modern football and the politics of the public sphere is not always an easy match even though they are inseparable.

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Notes

1 - The demonstration was extensively reported in Swedish press. See: <http://www.sydsvenskan.se/2014-03-16/tusentals-demonstrerade-mot-nazism>; <http://www.aftonbladet.se/senastenytt/ttnyheter/inrikes/article18550631.ab>.

2 - In global football of today, this is though not always the case (Gushwan, 2016).

3 - This view has been contested. Instead, it is understood as the supporters invest in their team in admission expenditure and so on and thus demand their commodity in return. See: Free Hughson, 2006, 88.

4 - <http://24malmo.se/2016/05/11/nio-mff-supportrar-gripna-av-polis-i-samordnad-insats/> Retrieved 2017-02-01.

5 - <http://www.aftonbladet.se/sportbladet/fotboll/sverige/allsvenskan/malmoff/article22879057.ab> Retrived 2017-02-01.

6 - The acronyms 1312 and ACAB stands for “All cops are bastards.”