

CONTESTING THE SUPER BOWL

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INTRODUCTION

In January 1992 an American cultural spectacle took place in my hometown-the Super Bowl. I had nearly succeeded in ignoring the whirlwind upending Minneapolis-St. Paul. Then a moment of revelation convinced me that I was about to let an extraordinary opportunity slip by. Reconsidered from the vantage point of my interest in media studies, I could see that I had been presented with a chance to study the phenomenon behind the media event-the real Super Bowl, live and off-screen. Like many Americans, I had swallowed my dose of Super Bowl telecasts and I felt I had developed at least a rudimentary understanding of the image constructed in the course of the annual media fest. I assumed the media and the NFL intended otherwise, but nevertheless, I read the Super Bowl as a celebratory junction of corporate capitalism, masculinity and power that hegemonically affirms and perpetuates inequality. Certainly my outsider perspective was enhanced by my gender; I could find no compelling heroines among the token female sportscasters, the cheerleaders, or members of the Swedish Bikini Team.

My goal emerged in the midst of the media hype that escalated as the Super Bowl approached. A relentless stream of promotional reporting emanated from the local press and assertions regarding the benefits the Super Bowl would deliver abounded. A few maverick reporters challenged the prevailing sentiment, giving voice to doubts shared by many local residents. Which was the more accurate claim? Would the Super Bowl be a boon or a debacle? How would the benefits and the costs be distributed? As I began taking stock of the frenetic activity transforming my familiar environment I was convinced that I should seize the opportunity before me. As an ethnographer and as a documentary photographer I intended to construct a representation of the Super Bowl different from the image that would play in the commercial media, a portrayal that could serve a different didactic purpose. In short, I wanted first to discover and then to show, from a social scientist's perspective, what happens when a Super Bowl comes to town. I should make it clear that I did not enter the field a tabula rasa. I was armed with a theory about the role of the Super Bowl in American cultural life, and I was committed to putting my theory to the test as the fieldwork proceeded. The mainstream media defined the impending contest as a championship football game, while the engagement I envisioned was a contest for meaning.

Because I had primarily witnessed the Super Bowl as a televised media event—a football game—I had not fully appreciated the kind of activity it generates. The Super Bowl is the season's culmination, celebrating revenues accumulated by the NFL, team owners, advertisers, the media, and the many satellite industries that share profits generated by professional football. Perpetuating the commerce it venerates, CEOs use the Super Bowl as a vehicle to cement deals, entertain clients, reward productive employees with a free excursion, and simultaneously create tax deductions. The media take advantage of the event they helped craft, and the Super Bowl is placed among items at the top of the week's news agenda. Sportswriters, newscasters, talk show hosts, protesters, and celebrities of every ilk converge on the host city to produce and exploit the media spectacle which unfolds. On the local front, Minnesota's corporate elite joined forces to maximize the opportunity availed them by the Super Bowl. The Minnesota Super Bowl Task Force prepared ten days of festive events intended to draw in visitors and induce them to spend as much money as possible. While cheerfully tallying cash register receipts, they hoped simultaneously to showcase Minneapolis-St. Paul as a favorable site for business travel, year-round. Local leaders eagerly anticipated a future of Super Bowl-induced economic growth.

As the enormity of my endeavor became apparent I invited several local photographers to join the effort: David Rae Morris, Randall Johnson, Diane Bush, Donna Kelly, John Haselmann, Michael Branscom Amitava Kumar, and Steve Schneider. We affirmed our goals, divided the territory, and as the days passed we repeatedly rendezvoused to share information, ideas, and inferences. We told stories about our experiences and wrote them down in journals. As we became immersed in our task I found myself and others around me being swept up in the momentum of the events we came to observe. I confess that I began to enjoy playing the role of a media maker, with all its attendant perks—the abundant food and drink, the parties, the authority that comes with privilege. Acknowledging this seduction, we conscientiously worked to avoid reproducing the ideas, the attitudes, and the depictions made by our commercial counterparts, our version of "going native."

Ten days of fieldwork and photography revealed a dense thicket of interests and influences that resisted being easily untangled. There could be no simple, straightforward response crafted from this encounter with the Super Bowl. And I discovered another problem, even thornier than the daunting complexity of the social dynamics I had set out to understand. It had been my intention to fix attention on the events unfolding in front of our cameras, but the process of preparing for and shooting the Super Bowl ultimately forced an unanticipated confrontation with the goals I had

laid out at the start. It became increasingly clear that my fact-finding mission was compromised by our own communicative apparatus. I knew I would be unable to profess that we had uncovered the real Super Bowl. What we did discover, however, may have broader implications for our understanding of mass communication processes, and especially, the social construction of meaning through the vehicle of photography.

BEARING WITNESS

Despite the established tradition of photographers "bearing witness," the documentary process has been relentlessly buffeted by challenges that erode its privileged status.

¹ The simple notion that photographs offer a mirror of reality has been shelved by most scholars and replaced by a more complex view of photographic communication. Rather than residing in the image, photographic meaning emerges in the course of social interaction.² Photographs result from the social interaction between photographers and their subjects; each contributes to the image, and the circumstances surrounding the creation of the photograph helps to shape the outcome. Once the photograph has been created viewers engage in the activity of interpretation; the text offers a finite range of available meanings to which the spectator responds, negotiating an interpretation through the filter of his or her experience.

Other factors play a significant role in shaping photographic meaning. The institutional setting in which photographic activity occurs triggers a system of codes and conventions, and a set of expectations to which both photographers and viewers respond.³ Arenas of photographic production, either occupational or avocational, offer measures of success and failure internalized by photographers and viewers. Photojournalism, fine arts photography, and snapshot photography, for example, have all generated a distinctive set of practices and expectations governing the social production of meaning. We have come to expect certain kinds of images to emerge from specific institutional domains. Editors, curators, and family members may serve as the gatekeepers who inculcate photographic norms appropriate to the settings in which they act. In addition to these contextual influences, the photographic industry plays an important role in delimiting the range of possible photographic outcomes. Because the industry chooses to manufacture those products with the most potential profitability, mass market imperatives determine the kinds of equipment and materials most readily available to picture makers.⁴

Another dynamic became especially salient in the course of our fieldwork, a less scrutinized mechanism for the construction of photographic meaning. Politicians and

publicists both have become increasingly aware of the currency of appearances, and the potential benefits of managing the look of reality through the manipulation of the photographic image. The term "photo opportunity" has entered popular discourse, as events and pseudo-events are increasingly staged for consumption by the mass media, feeding its voracious appetite for sound and image bites.⁵ Recently, a new trend in image management has emerged-the "video news release"-a visual press release issued in a form that broadcasters can easily edit into news programs, saving the time and effort of shrinking news staffs. The demand for image management has led to the emergence of a cadre of professional consultants who advise clients on strategies to produce desirable appearances, and entrepreneurs who produce visual packages to sell to the media. The ability to control the appearance of reality is an additional resource distinguishing the power elite in the late twentieth century. Many frustrated photojournalists have begun to see themselves as submissive lap dogs, unable to live up to the obligations assumed by feistier watch dogs, because they are prevented from seeing anything that has not been staged and sanctioned appropriate for photographic consumption and mass distribution.

The photojournalist plays a pivotal role in this process, providing images to be published under the mantle of neutrality in the press, their messages reified as truth. When photojournalists portray people who harness neither the knowledge nor the resources necessary to govern access and appearance, they and their editors control the process of representation, and another collective version of "the truth" results. All photographers concerned with the factual integrity of their work must necessarily confront these questions: can we portray events unencumbered by the appearances fashioned by powerful interest groups? If so, what kind of alternative imagery can we offer? Will our good intentions yield images that more accurately represent the complexity of events? Can we find mechanisms and practices that allow us to address the power imbalance among subjects when we craft representations of the social world?

These issues moved from the theoretical to the concrete as we attempted to photograph the Super Bowl. We encountered and attempted to thwart mechanisms by which imagery is manipulated by those who set the stage. Not only do the efforts of event planners affect what appears in the viewfinder-we also witnessed the impact of these constructions on the behavior of event participants. The image of the Super Bowl created and promoted by power elites permeated every facet of the activity around us. Even protest was framed within the hegemony of the appearances crafted.⁶As our work proceeded we discovered several image management strategies designed to yield a positive representation of events, participants and locales.

ACCESS

Our attempt at producing an alternative portrayal of the Super Bowl required us to represent events open to the public, events restricted to and staged for the media, and private activities not intended for the public scrutiny photography might invite. Private parties or receptions might be photographed, but only for the use of the sponsoring agency or individuals involved. Given the array of activities and events, the most obvious control mechanism is selective access. Anyone can photograph an event open to the public, although the movements of a non-credentialled photographer may be restricted. Media credentials are required to join the ranks of professional photographers, and using my position as a member of the faculty at the University of Minnesota Journalism School, I was able to get NFL press pins for five photographers, in addition to two press passes to the Super Bowl game itself. Members of our photographic team without press pins could not enter the press lounge, nor attend press openings and parties. A dangling press pass and an attitude of entitlement open many doors closed to unaffiliated shooters.

With the legitimized status of professional photographer, comes a set of expectations with regard to photographic practice. Admission to the ranks offers the comfort of group membership which often inculcates a herd mentality. Press photographers have internalized the expectations of their editors, and they often share a conception of what should be photographed, from what angle, with what lens, and from what point of view. ⁷Diverging from the consensual wisdom of the pack earns the errant photographer the suspicion of colleagues and security guards. The constraining influence of conformity should not be underestimated; the response to a photographer who doesn't behave in a recognizably professional manner is more difficult to endure than the fellowship of congruity. Well-fed and entertained, press photographers are offered a variety of photo-opportunities, making reportage a matter of point-and-shoot. Few photographers sent to cover the Super Bowl would be likely to venture behind the scenes to see who is working in the kitchen or living in the alley behind the hotel.

While official credentials facilitated access to many events and activities, no credentials other than membership in the participating group would get a photographer into most private functions. Restricting access grants participants in some events a level of privacy others cannot expect. When seeking permission to attend and photograph several corporate sponsored parties, I was flatly refused by company public relations officials, who confided that someone might be misbehaving, or cavorting with "the wrong partner." In fact, many companies made it a policy to prohibit photographers at

parties. While some companies and groups denied me permission to photograph, others granted my request, and I encountered varying degrees of decorum, silliness, and drink-induced boorishness. At one party I was initially mistaken for the photographer hired by the group, and I was given instructions by the group's tour-guide. "Don't photograph people eating," she complained, "Show the revelry! The revelry!"

Activities planned by individuals such as business meetings, dinners, or sightseeing, are more inaccessible than organized events, and our representation cannot account for this arena of Super Bowl activity. By omission, our portrayal perpetuates the privilege of privacy. Regardless of the access granted, it is generally understood that a photographer will accomplish the task at hand and then leave. Photographers record events, popular wisdom teaches, and one picture is as good as another, so long as the deed is done. Permission to shoot may be granted with the understanding that a few shots will be all that is needed; photographers who stay longer are greeted with scant patience, while an extended presence earns hostility. Controlling who shoots and what can be accessed defines the terms of representation, limiting the possible range of meanings created.

SETTINGS

Anticipation of photography led to the transformation of the appearance of Minneapolis-St. Paul. Because the football stadium is located in Minneapolis, most effort was devoted to festooning its downtown with banners sporting local corporate logos. Spotlights shaped like Coca-Cola cans gyrated in parking lots, and giant inflatable Budweiser beer cans sprouted strategically from rooftops near the Metrodome, where they were sure to appear in photographs and television cutaways from the broadcast of the football game. Signs of the Super Bowl appeared throughout the city, and the official NFL Super Bowl logo adhered to storefronts and colorful displays of merchandise. Linking themselves to the Super Bowl, small businesses decorated exteriors and interiors to attract the tourist trade. Churches likewise hung banners welcoming Super Bowl fans. Billboards designed for display during the Super Bowl featured such novelties as bowls of soup with steam issuing forth. In tune with the "Great Minnesota Warm-up" theme proclaimed on banners hung throughout town, signs colored a toasty orange and red hung throughout the city's skyways, offering directions to tourists.

The Metrodome, nestled amidst the Budweiser and the Coca-Cola hospitality tents decorated with giant inflatable beverage cans, also received special treatment. Inside, play-off team banners hung alongside the corporate advertisements already in place. In

conjunction with the Super Bowl, Sony donated a giant state-of-the-art video screen, the "jumbotron," to residents of Minneapolis-St. Paul. In the evenings, lasers traced the Super Bowl logo on the outside of the dome, along with drawings of fans quaffing cocktails. Regardless of where photographers aimed their cameras, the shots they composed inevitably framed corporate logos and Super Bowl decorations, reminders of the sponsors responsible for the good times at hand. Corporations competed for prime space, places where photographers could be expected. The repetitive appearance of corporate logos in press photographs reaffirmed the presence, the power, and the privilege of corporate America. And inescapably, that presence was made manifest in our images.

EVENTS

The Super Bowl Task Force, in cooperation with the National Football League, scheduled a series of "official" events, published in brochures and distributed to residents and visitors. An aerobic workout featured fitness celebrities and local sports stars; kids attended a football clinic with professional players; football stars signed autographs for their fans; and throughout the skyways of downtown Minneapolis, entertainers performed for the "party under glass." The NFL hosted its own events, among them an awards dinner, and a celebrity variety show, broadcast live on television. There were daily press conferences with coaches and key players, and a "media day" at the dome, where all members of the competing football teams were available for interviews and photos. Corporations announced their own "events." Budweiser hosted the Budbowl, Campbell's Soup invited viewers to see the "world's largest bowl of soup," and promoters of the world's largest shopping mall, the Mall of America, bussed journalists to the site for a free tour and dinner, followed by NHL hockey and dessert at the nearby Met Center. Gala fund-raisers exploited the presence of celebrities and heightened media activity. Wheaties and the evangelical organization, Athletes in Action, sponsored a "prayer breakfast." And pseudo-events were staged when outsized Coca-Cola cans, the Pillsbury Doughboy, and Green Giant's Little Green Sprout strolled the airport and the skyways of Minneapolis. In a show of media savvy, MTV veejay, "Downtown Julie Brown," appeared at NFL media day at the Metrodome and became an event herself.

Events and pseudo-events were staged for media consumption, offering cameras a ready-made strategy for reportage. The promise of food, comfortable transportation, and entertainment enticed reporters and photographers to attend even the most banal and ridiculous happenings. Printed schedules distributed to members of the press upon

their arrival provided an agenda for the week's work, camera-worthy events certain to promote the conviviality offered by the Super Bowl and Minneapolis-St. Paul.

PERSONNEL

Personnel involved in Super Bowl activities were uniformed by organizers, offering a consistent, orderly look, and, sometimes, explicitly promoting a product. Waiters and waitresses at banquets, fund-raisers, and corporate luncheons and dinners were formally attired for the occasion in crisp white shirts with black bow-ties, black slacks or skirts. Elderly volunteer "ambassadors" were strategically stationed throughout the city to provide information to visitors; all wore tidy blue knit shirts, with "hot host" buttons pinned to their chests. Vendors selling souvenirs wore Super Bowl T-shirts, and models at the Budbowl were clad in BUD WEI SER T-shirts, commodifying them like the beer they promoted. At the site of every Super Bowl activity, uniformed security guards patrolled the perimeters, protecting participants, eyeing ogles, and expelling trespassers. Cheerleaders beautified themselves to live up to the expectations their eye-catching costumes encouraged. Their identities and roles defined by their uniforms, Super Bowl personnel adopted appropriate behaviors and attitudes.

Uniforms labeled Super Bowl workers, indicating the functions they were intended to perform. There would be no mistaking service personnel, their availability marked by their attire. In this way the population was neatly partitioned. The resultant appearance of order and efficiency paid tribute to the organizational skills of planners, and reified the status hierarchy, visually reaffirming the privilege of Super Bowl guests and the subjugation of the host community. participants

PARTICIPANTS

Visitors, like the personnel hired to serve their needs, wrapped themselves in the symbols issued by corporate elites. In some instances, enlisting the compliance of participants required nothing more than a give-away. All who attended the aerobic workout received a complimentary T-shirt, covered with the logos of local corporations. Kids attending the football clinic were given shirts designed by the manufacturer of a popular style of casual attire. Adopting their teams' symbols, football fans costumed themselves in Indian headdresses made from chicken feathers, masked their faces in hogs' snouts, or buffalo sunglasses. Symbols of wealth shared the scene as limousines clogged the streets, whisking their fur-coated passengers from site to site. At one lavish party I attended, guests who came unprepared could borrow or purchase a fur coat from the well-stocked racks made available by Alaskan Furs.

Protests mounted by the American Indian Movement took aim at racism in sports, opposing the use of "Redskins" as a team name and mascot. Rather than target poverty or homelessness, problems plaguing the Native American community in Minneapolis, protest organizers chose to exploit the presence of the media to raise consciousness about the offensive use of symbols. Patterned after the format of the NFL Super Bowl logo, the American Indian Movement created and sold "Stupid Bowl" T-shirts. In our photographs, unless closely scrutinized, they look like the NFL-licensed T-shirts sold internationally, and images of protest seem to offer an ironic twist. All who populated the site of the Super Bowl could be distinguished according to the symbolic markers they assumed, voluntarily or by decree. Protesters could be differentiated by their behavior, their placards and their attire, providing a disorderly counterpoint to the patina of sophistication and aura of celebration promoted by event organizers, and taken up by participants. Because they too had their place in the spectacle, accommodated by the system they accused of injustice, protest could be used to offer evidence of the privileges we all share as citizens.

TOWARD RESYMBOLIZATION

As photographers and ethnographers, our goal in chronicling the Super Bowl was to understand its inherent meaning and to share what we learned through the publication of pictures. Aware of the intense boosterism surrounding the Super Bowl, we hoped to take a more penetrating look at the unfolding spectacle and produce an independent interpretation of the events we witnessed. One of the points most clearly driven home by this experience regards the complicity and responsibility of the photographer assumed in the act of representation. There was no essential Super Bowl to be laid bare, hidden beneath the layers of hype and fabrication. No amount of careful visual investigation could present an image independent of the mediated reality so laboriously prepared. The anticipation of photography induced an atmosphere of readiness among planners, employees, and visitors. Photography was expected. Not only did professionals make pictures during Super Bowl week, but so did participants caught up in the whirlwind of privilege and celebrity. Only rarely did our persistence unearth situations that had not been carefully groomed. Unpleasant appearances had been expelled for the week, the city and its people briefly transformed for the camera. Like photojournalists, we too experienced the lure of the pack, the fun of press parties, the ease of hitching our carts to the paths so conveniently laid out for the media. The question that ultimately emerges is, did we make these pictures or were they made before we ever released the shutter?

Our representation has become an attempt to show the mediation process itself, to reflect upon the struggle over the production of meaning. What we are ultimately compelled to do is acknowledge and engage these manufactured symbols and repackage them in such a way as to visibly manifest their existence, exposing not the Super Bowl, but the appearances that stand for reality. By representing representation itself, we may permit the possibility of a broader range of meanings and alternative interpretations that build upon a critical awareness of the origins of the sights we encounter. Our responsibilities as photographers and ethnographers extend further, encompassing an assessment of our own omissions and an examination of the power we ourselves wield over the subjects we choose to depict.

NOTES

1. These arguments have most often been made with regard to documentary film and video, and television news. For examples of this recently reinvigorated literature see John Thornton Caldwell, *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television*, Rutgers University Press, 1995; John Corner, *Television Form and Public Address*, Edward Arnold, 1995; Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*, Indiana University Press, 1991; and Brian Winston, *Claiming the Real: the documentary film revisited*, British Film Institute, 1995. Comparatively little attention has been paid to the truth claims attending still photographs, either within the arenas of documentary or photojournalism. Examples of existing literature are: James Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth: FSA Photography Reconsidered*, Temple University Press, 1989; John Hartley, *The Politics of Pictures: The Creation of the Public in the Age of Popular Media*, Routledge, 1992; Catherine A. Lutz and Jane L. Collins, *Reading National Geographic*, University of Chicago Press, 1993; Paula Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary*, Verso, 1994; and Mark Roskill and David Carrier, *Truth and Falsehood in Visual Images*, University of Massachusetts Press, 1983.
2. Early articulations of this argument appear in Paul Byers, "Cameras Don't Take Pictures," *Columbia University Forum*, 9:27-31, 1966 and Allan Sekula "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning," *Artforum*, 13(5):36-45, 1975.
3. See for example, Christopher Musello, "Studying the Home Mode: An Exploration of Family Photography and Visual Communication," in *Studies in Visual Communication*, 6(1):23-42, 1980; Barbara Rosenblum, "Style as Social Process," in *American Sociological Review*, 43(June):422-438, 1978; Dona Schwartz, "Camera Clubs and Fine Art Photography: The Social Construction of an Elite Code," in *Urban Life*, 15(2):165-195,

1986; and Dona Schwartz, "To Tell the Truth: Codes of Objectivity in Photojournalism," *Communication*, 13(2):95-109, 1992.

4. These studies illuminate the typically unexamined relationship between material and aesthetics: Michael Griffin, "Between Art and Industry: Amateur Photography and Middle-brow Culture," in *On the Margins of Art Worlds*, Larry Gross, ed., Westview Press, 1995; Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy*, Oxford University Press, 1972.

5. See Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, Atheneum, 1961. Stuart Hall's discussion of the ideological process has been particularly influential within the field of media studies.

6. See especially, "The Rediscovery of Ideology: Return of the Repressed in Media Studies," in *Culture, Society and the Media*, Michael Gurevitch, Tony Bennett, James Curran and Janet Woollacott, eds. Methuen, 1982.

7. A number of valuable studies examine the professional routines and practices that shape the newsmaking process. See, for example, Gaye Tuchman, *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality*, The Free Press, 1978, Herbert Gans, *Deciding What's News*, Vintage Books, 1979, or Mark Fishman, *Manufacturing the News*, University of Texas Press, 1980. A study especially pertinent to an analysis of the professional practices associated with photojournalism is Dianne Hagaman's *How I Learned Not To Be A Photojournalist*, University Press of Kentucky, 1996.