Non-visibility and the politics of everyday presence: A spatial analysis of contemporary urban Iran

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5. SPORTS

The Unrelenting Visibility of Wayward Bodies

The world of sport has provided the setting for the carnivalesque occupation of streets by the masses on a number of occasions in recent Iranian history. Most notably, following the decisive victories of the Iranian national football team in international tournaments, the streets of major Iranian cities were taken over in celebration by a jubilant crowd, whose genuine emotions and support for their national team proved to be far too strong to be contained in the privacy of their homes, in front of their television screens. This is significant, because to be outside in public in large numbers has been a rarity in the history of urbanity in Iran, an ambition that many social and political groups have cherished for a long time. Notwithstanding the bustle and chaos of the crowd of pedestrians and vehicles pouring in and out of streets in big cities – the swarming mobility of a hurried people on their daily business – it is rather uncommon in Iranian cities to see the formation in public of a solid mass of people with a particular identity, demeanour, message or demand. Although, in the first instance, the spontaneous and innocent outburst of ecstatic reactions to sporting events in such cases could be seen as sheer triviality – unsophisticated passionate reactions of devoted football fans – the public and social analysts share the view that, in the absence of non-governmental means of collective public expression in Iranian society, such a genuine way of collectively occupying the streets has a particular social and political significance (Chehabi, 2006; Gerhardt, 2002).

In the introduction to her study of the features of modernity in late twentieth century Iran, Fariba Adelkhah (2000) draws an analogy between the exuberance and the atmosphere of carnival experienced during the May 1997 presidential elections, and the expressen of excitement and joy that were seen on the streets of major Iranian cities a few months later, on 29 November, in celebration of the national football team’s qualification to the 1998 World Cup. Adelkhah believes that both events, although dissimilar in their causes, produced quite similar effects that were without precedence in post-revolution Iran. The world was shocked with the elections, she suggests, not only because of its unexpected result (a huge victory for a reformist mandate from within the ruling Iranian political elite for the first time after the revolution of 1979), but also for the images of the passionate and cheerful supporters of the newly elected president – mostly women and youths – who had previously been
thought to be completely absent from the public scene in Iran. The overwhelming presence of the enthusiastic public on the streets and the unbridled way in which they let their emotions out is, Adelkhah believes, what connects the elections to the football celebrations. The two events were similar not only in that both presented an image of a different Iran that was dynamic, vibrant, public and full of hope, but also because they were heralding a new way of corporeal presence and emotional expression in public.

In addition, and more importantly perhaps, Adelkhah believes that such euphoric “mass reactions” – and the fun-to-watch images that were distributed of them – carried weight because of the “disturbing” and unsettling effects they left behind (2000, pp. 1-2). They were disturbing for the Iranian authorities, which were afraid of any system of “popular mobilisation” that would potentially undermine their authority and breach the governmental systems of control (Adelkhah, 2000, p. 1). They were also disturbing for the social and political commentators, who saw a disjuncture between such public events and the vision they had in their minds of a tightly regulated and grim everyday life under a totalitarian regime. They were therefore unable, or unwilling, to let their critique of the regime come to terms with the idea that “the Islamic Republic of Iran had more to it than a simple system of control and repression” (Adelkhah, 2000, p. 1). The shock of the new visibility that these events brought forward could therefore be said to have had two contradictory effects: the emphatic visibility of the previously unseen scenes of cheerful people in public generated a sense of determination, an evidence of the existence and vigour of a forgotten and silenced public; and at the same time the scale of bodily presence and the intensity of emotional release during such celebrations unsettled the commonly held notions of a grim and dull life, and showed more than anything the ambivalence and unpredictability of public life in Iran.

Such public celebrations have not faded away over the years, but grown to form a pattern of reclaiming streets. In the summer of 2013, Iranians experienced an almost identical set of events to those of 1997, discussed by Adelkhah. The celebrations on the streets after the Iranian national football team’s qualification to the 2014 World Cup took place just a few days after the enthusiastic supporters of the 2013 presidential elect, the reformist Hassan Rouhani, took to the streets in large numbers. Similar in spirit to the events of 1997, the public outburst of emotions on the
streets in both 2013 cases shows unstoppable jubilance and vigour for reclaiming the public space (see Figures 5.1-2). Two years later, in 2015, similar performative patterns were once again passionately practiced in large numbers on the streets of Tehran, in celebration of the pivotal nuclear agreement reached between Iran and the world powers (see Figure 5.3).

Figure 5.1. Celebrations following qualification to the World Cup, 4 July 2013.

Figure 5.2. Cheerful supporters of president elect Hassan Rouhani, 16 June 2013. Photos credits: Atta Kenare/AFP/Getty Images (left) and Yalda Moayeri/Reuters (right)

Figure 5.3. Celebrations following nuclear agreements between Iran and the world powers, 2 April 2015 (left), and 15 July 2015 (right). Photo credits: Ebrahim Noroozi/AP Photo

The socio-political valence of such events, regardless of their specific cause, is contained precisely in the multiple social and political implications of a moment of
(mass) eruption. It is the discharge of social and political energy contained in such events that is rare, and therefore valuable for critical examination. Marcus Gerhardt (2002) suggests that the subversive energy contained in such eruptions of euphoria is reminiscent of the events during and following the Islamic revolution of 1979. The allusion to revolutionary sentiments suggests that the public eruptions related to sporting events have more to them than mere absentminded jubilance. They are occasions for the discharge and release of a whole range of complicated and interrelated emotions – aspirations, disappointments and frustrations – which transcend the common social and political means of expression and communication.

In his comprehensive study of the politics of football in Iran, Houchang Chehabi (2006) recounts a complex case in which, unlike the examples explained so far, the outbursts of emotions in reaction to sporting events were expressed in anger and bitterness, and had more complicated political implications:

In the autumn of 2001 the Iranian national team fared badly in the qualifying matches for the 2002 World Cup. Again people poured into the streets, this time to vent their frustrations. Disappointment over the team’s loss mingled with disappointment over the stalled reform in Iran, and, fuelled by Persian-language radio broadcasts from Los Angeles, rumors circulated that the government had deliberately instructed the national team to lose so as to prevent a repetition of the celebrations of 1998. (Chehabi, 2006, p. 251)

What I am suggesting is that such eruptions of public sentiment create genuine occasions for uninhibited public presence and the realization of a diverse range of embodied performativities in public. What is most disturbing for the apparatuses of control in these events is the displacement or extension of the bounded space of sports – the stadium – and the individualized space of sports spectatorship through television – private space of the home – to the open of the street. The dislocated bodies carry with them the emotions and behavioural patterns of their allocated settings and form a corporeal collective whose assertive performativities disrupt the public orders of the visible.

My analysis in this chapter is therefore concerned with the ways in which sports provide possibilities for alternative ways of bodily presence that are not
bounded to the sporting fields, but expand to diverse geographies of everyday life. By the end of this chapter I wish to be able to substantiate the claim that the significance of sports to Iranian society lies not only in the possibilities that it offers for public participation and engagement in the formation of a collective discourse, but also in the various ways in which it produces conditions for social and cultural critique, by instigating what I call moments of wayward visibility – instances in which deviant appearances and ways of conduct become visible and encroach upon the public orders of visibility, although momentarily and inadvertently. Such moments of waywardness occur within a wider language of hypervisibility that media sports are globally concerned with – a distinct aesthetics whose objective is to make visible every detail of sporting practice and magnify its visual effects. Key to the creation of this language of hypervisibility is the interdependence of actual sport and its mediated forms in modern society – the cultural complex of media sport. I will argue that, similar in their effects to the event-like celebrations discussed above, the politics of everyday presence and visibility that the structures of media sport instantiate generate in everyday lives a plethora of moments of outburst of emotions and embodied performativities, with disturbing and subversive effects.

To make my point clear concerning (media) sport’s paradoxical effects of hypervisibility, I want to briefly recount a different case of public gathering that, even though it occurred on a much smaller scale and was generally experienced in calm rather than with loud emotional release, created comparable effects of eruption in the domain of public visibility. On 25 August 2015, groups of people gathered in specific spots in Tehran to commemorate and mourn the death of the Iranian and world champion bodybuilder Baitollah Abbaspour. His death from a rare disease at the age of 36, not long after his championship on the world stage, was especially touching since the image of his perfect body had not yet disappeared from the collective memory of bodybuilding fans in Iran. It is not the idea of mass occupation of space that is my point here, as neither the scale of occupation nor the intensity of emotions expressed in this case are comparable with the celebrations that I have mentioned above. However, what interests me is the way in which such an occasion provided a rare but sound condition for the aesthetized image of Abbaspour’s naked body, perfectly posed and displayed with the Iranian flag over his shoulders, to find its way into the public space, hoisted on the shoulders of the mourning fans (see Figure 5.4).
To begin with, this image of Abbaspour on the world championship stage far exceeds the limits of nudity, bodily exhibitionism and sexual appeal that public orders of the visible in Iran permit, and therefore attracts extra attention and gains extra visibility. The effects of hypervisibility are even more emphasized in this scene through the narrative of the scene – the event of paying respect to the deceased, whose image asks to be looked at and stands for the way he is to be remembered – and its mise en scène – the contrast between Abbaspour’s naked body held above the shoulders to be seen and the darkly dressed mass of supporters on the ground. The unabashed way in which such an image is displayed in public, and even has risen to stardom, poses a certain type of critique and carries a subversive undertone. In this chapter I wish to discuss and analyse the nature of such a subversive potential, contained in sport’s trigerring of moments of hypervisibility. Such a wayward visibility would have not entered the realm of the public in Iran – would have not been seen, experienced, and lived with – had it not been related to sport, had it not been constituted within the discourse of sport.

The question remains, then, that if such an image is incompatible with the public orders of the visible in Iran – as my claim for the creation of a paradoxical moment of wayward visibility in the public suggests – how is it that it does fit within the image politics of sports? Is it not true that, after all, this image is an evidence of the fact that Abbaspour did pose his barely clad body in sporting events, and that sports cannot be dissociated from bodily display altogether? Do the disturbing effects of this image then emanate from the conditions of its production or consumption? Are
there certain exclusive geographies of sport that allow and naturalize the naked body in action? Or, are there any specific geographies of spectatorship, for the images of bodies in action to be looked at? In that case, how is the relation between doing sport and being a spectator sustained in the expanded field of sports in the media-saturated everyday lives today? It seems to me that there exists a disparity and contradiction between the orders of the visible in sports and in the public, and between the geographies of doing sport and watching it.

Responding to these questions, my argument is that in sports bodies and subjects find settings for asserting their presence in recalcitrant ways. Instances of critique are caused by the enhanced visibility of bodies doing and watching sports, provided with the magnifying lens of televised sports. In the first instance, such a wayward visibility stands in contrast to the general conditions of non-visibility that I have argued for in previous chapters: the transient, embodied and mobile assemblage of the car-driver; the dark, silent and leftover aesthetics of the rooftop practices; and the unrepresentable, uncertain and contradictory scopic regime of the stroller in the shopping mall. However, my argument is that the conditions of hypervisibility are only realizable because of the normalizing effects of the discourse of sport, which constructs a specific visual language that normalizes aberrancies – the (partial) nakedness of bodies for instance – so that the viewer would not normally notice and see the disparities of the field of the visible, so long as they reside in the field of (media) sports. It is in this way that the hypervisibility of media sports is embedded in a language of non-visibility. However, the implications of non-visibility that the familiarization of sporting bodies and the reduction of the shocking effects of their disclosure instigate are highly unstable, since the geographical and visual constituents of sport’s normalization processes are highly ambiguous and contested in modern societies. Moments of eruption, disturbance, and critique take place exactly in these liminal moments of uncertainty.

**Sports and Everyday Life in Iran: A Short History**

In modern societies, David Rowe observes, “sport has insinuated itself into the wrap and weft of everyday life” (2004, p. 2). Even though modern sport is largely developed as a set of strict rules of the game that only apply as long as it is played in demarcated sports fields (centres, courts, stadiums, etc.), Rowe (2004) explains that,
in modern societies, the threshold separating such a closed universe and the society at large is broken in multiple ways. “Once out over the threshold, public space is suffused with signs of sport – much to the chagrin of dedicated sports haters and to the mild irritation of the merely indifferent” (Rowe, 2004, p. 2). Not only is the everyday suffused with ‘data’ about sports, but also “the sights, sounds and ‘feel’ of sport are everywhere – shrilly piping out of television and radios, absorbing acres of newsprint, and decorating bodies” (Rowe, 2004, p. 4). As a result of this ubiquity, sport in modern societies is increasingly indistinguishable from ‘sports media’ or ‘sports culture’, building an interrelated web of “the media sports cultural complex” (Rowe, 2004, p. 4).

What increases the cultural effects of sports in society is the expanded reach of the media that pertain to its production and dissemination. In modern societies, sport extends over a variety of specialized and non-specialized media – such as newspapers, magazines, radio, TV, and internet – and takes up different formats. For example, the live broadcasting of a particular type of sporting event (such as a football league) constitutes only a portion of the whole package of weekly sports programmes on any media (radio, television, and the Internet). Sporting event coverage (of a football match, for example) extends far beyond the actual time of the match on television and occupies such extra, but by no means secondary, sections as pre-event introductions and interviews, mid-game analysis, and post-game highlights and extras (Goldsmith, 2009). Even more extensive than live coverage are diverse ranges of entertaining programmes that feed on sport in indirect ways, such as sports news, journals, roundtables, and quiz shows.

Like in many societies around the world, the media sports cultural complex is hugely influential in Iranian society. Sports programmes occupy a major section of the airtime of the Iranian national television. In 1993, Iranian national television introduced a third Channel, Shabakeh Se (Channel 3), that was dedicated completely to sports. Since then, sport has increasingly taken up TV programming in various forms, on Shabake Se and beyond. The number of print media on sports is also strikingly large in Iran. Gerhardt (2002) observes that, when the first reformist government after the revolution was formed in the late 1990s, sport took advantage of the slight liberalization of the press, as the number of publications devoted to sports increased dramatically, far bigger in proportion than any other type of publication. He
believes that such large numbers of publications and programmes devoted to sports on audio-visual media, with their vast network of supporting practices and cultural associations, are per se “signs of a strengthening civil society”, “a precursor to a more mature and outspoken media (and society)” (Gerhardt, 2002, p. 45). From a slightly different point of analysis, Adelkhah believes that the overwhelming craze for sport in Iranian media accounts for “the creation of a real public space, if not a civil society”, and therefore plays a constitutive role in Iranian society’s move to modernity (2000, p. 1).

Sport in Iran has indeed created a discourse within which multiple social, cultural and political issues are brought into discussion and disputed in public. The weekly, live, late-night TV football programme Navad (Ninety), probably the most popular show in the history of Iranian national television, is a good example: heated debates take place where not only such details of a football match as the play strategies of the teams, the performance of the players, the decisions of the referee, and the pre- and post-match facts and figures are closely examined, but also many different sorts of social, cultural and political associations that accompany football are brought to light and deliberated on. The discussions and interviews on Navad most often acquire a political edge, dissimilar in scope and intensity to any other programme on the Iranian national television. The quest for understanding football transforms into an interrogation of particular top-down appointments, managerial decisions, financial interactions and all sorts of power relations that suffuse the world of football. Far from a cool moment of being on air, to be interviewed live on Navad (whether in the studio or via phone) is a challenging moment for the interviewees, who range from top politicians and managers who get asked to respond to accusations of wrong-doings and mismanagement – a very rare form of exchange of information on Iranian TV, because of its high risk of exposure – to players who are asked to justify tiny bits of their behaviours on and off the field.

In addition, and particularly significant for a society that is usually considered to be lacking effective and strong democratic means and institutions for participation in civil society, in Navad, the public are frequently asked to join in the discussions by voicing their opinions via text message. The immediate way in which the results of people’s votes are exposed live on TV, with occasionally controversial outcomes in defiance of the visions and decisions of authorities, accounts for probably the most
direct and effective way of public expression in Iranian society. Furthermore, under the cover of football, social and cultural taboos are frequently checked and enquired into in the discussion forum of Navad. For instance, serious public discussions over issues of identity, ethnicity, and race were brought up in Navad, in response to the very real and tangible issues raised by the decision of the Iranian national team’s Portuguese manager, Carlos Queiroz, to invite to the national football squad (and later use in key positions in the team) a number of young talented players of double nationality, raised outside Iran by Iranian parent(s), who looked different, spoke Farsi poorly, and did not live (and some of them had never lived) in Iran. The huge popularity of Queiroz and those players stood in contrast to the unspoken racism, conservatism and nationalism of many sports fans and commentators. The tangible effects of such an internal paradox to many sports fans in Iran had the consequence of stirring heated discussions over the implications of racism in Iranian society – in ways that the decades-long racism against Afghan immigrants had not, for instance.

However, this firmly established and in some ways unique position of sports media in Iran has had a bumpy and vulnerable history of development. Chehabi (2006) explains that in the first decade after the revolution of 1979, at the time when the new regime was either scornful of spectator sports (as a form of depoliticization of the masses) or at best indifferent to it (because of it’s worldly and non-spiritual bearings), what led to the expansion of sports was a huge public demand that showed itself in urban space, as people increasingly transformed street corners and alleys into tiny replicas of the football field and played Gol Kuchik – literally translating as ‘little goal’ – on the streets. In the grim decade of the 1980s, writes Chehabi, when city life was to a large extent devoid of entertainment due to the harsh realities of life after the revolution and during times of war with Iraq, the spread of street football was a sign that “young men wanted to play”, and that sport was “one of the few remaining leisure activities for men” (2006, pp. 245-246).

In Chehabi’s account, there was a hidden message in such a craze and thirst for sports that said “playing football was more fun than listening to preachers” (2006, pp. 245-246). He writes, “the popularity of these games in neighbourhoods inhabited by people who formed the social bases of the new regime worried the new men in power, who would have preferred to see youngsters in the mosques rather than on the playing fields” (2006, pp. 245-246). However, for fear of antagonizing this new
revolutionary populace, the regime finally gave in to the public demand for sports (as entertainment) and decided to not only expand and promote sports, but also take control over it, patronage it and finally generate revenues from it. Chehabi (2006) believes that from the first years after the revolution until today, sport in Iran has contained this political edge that concerns the authorities’ fear of the excitement generated by sport, and their subsequent attempt to hold the excitement.

Such a history of the spread of *Gol Kuchik* on the streets in Iranian cities, and the regime’s endorsement of it, points to sport’s potential for laying claims over the public space and offering a powerful leverage against authorities. In the recent period that sport has suffused the physical and virtual public space in Iran, issues of women’s claim on public presence has been enacted collectively through sport. Asef Bayt believes that, in addition to public realms such as work, education and arts, sport has been one of the realms of “mundane daily practices in public domains” through which women have been able to assert their presence in Iranian society against all odds, “imposing themselves as public players” and therefore shifting, even if a little, the gender prejudices imposed on them (2010, p. 97). More specifically, the issue of women’s access to sports events and venues has become one such occasion of the creation of public demands and agendas for social transformation. The world of sports in Iran remains strictly gender segregated, with opposite sexes being banned from attending the sporting events of one another. Although the creation of gendered spaces could be said to have had encouraging effects for women to do sports in Iran, the issue of female live spectatorship of male sporting events remains unresolved. Even though in globally standardized structures of professional sport, men and women almost never compete with or against one another (except for rare categories such as mixed double tennis), such a gender divide does not apply to spectators in most parts of the world.

In Iran, however, women are barred from entering stadiums to watch football matches, on the basis of the improperness of the vulgar feel of the stadium for women spectators. As a result, sporting venues such as football stadiums have turned into exclusively male spaces. This has become a matter of public attention and social mobilization, generating several civil campaigns to grant rights of live spectatorship for female fans, especially to be able to support their country in international competitions (Hoodfar & Sadeghi, 2009, pp. 218-210). It is specially in light of such
matters of gender segregation and the inaccessibility of the stadium to women spectators, that the celebrations after the historic victories of the Iranian national team are significant, since in those occasions women, barred from entering the actual stadium, were able to assert their bodily presence in the subsequent celebrations on the streets, shoulder to shoulder with the male supporters.

The issue of women’s access to do and watch sports in Iran highlights the complex intertwinement of the gender and geography of sport with matters of visibility. Such a complex relation is symbolized in the placards that female fans hold in protest outside the doors to Azadi stadium in Tehran, which cry out “We refuse to remain off-side” (Fozooni, 2008). Off-side here is simultaneously indicative of spatial and visual boundaries – being off-limits and out of sight. The interrelatedness of the spatial and the visible, the border and the frame, the conditions of being in place and seeing the place – and their ambiguities – are the focus of the next section.

Geographies and Visualities of Sport

In her Zourkhaneh/Bodyless (2004) series of photographs, the female photographer Mehraneh Atashi depicts the exclusively masculine space of the traditional sport of Zourkhaneh, by self-consciously highlighting the spatial and visual boundaries that are crossed by her body’s presence and her act of looking (see Figure 5.5). Zourkhaneh, literally translating as ‘the house of strength’, could be said to be the traditional equivalent of the modern day gym, with the distinction that the physical workout and bodily perfection in Zourkhaneh are in place to uphold, in a ritualistic choreography of moves, the spiritual development of masculine ideals of virility and chivalry. Zourkhaneh therefore exudes a sense of sacredness, a sanctuary whose spiritual integrity is to be kept safe from degrading intrusions from the outside world. The presence of a female photographer in this exclusively male space is therefore a crossing of borders in itself. Rather than striving to portray a real, first-hand, feminine view of the inside of Zourkhaneh, Atashi decides to make the incongruity and shock of the sheer presence of her own photographing body the focus of her project.
In the introduction to her project presented in the publication *Iranian Photography Now*, Atashi explains her artistic strategy succinctly:

The first day I entered a Zourkhaneh, I suddenly found myself in front of some big, strong, and religious men. It was hard to gain their trust and consent to pose half-naked in front of me. I made sure to be present in each photo as a subject among the heroes, even though tradition forbids ‘the breath of women’ in the *zourkhaneh*. I played with mirrors in order to transform the gaze of my lens and create a specially designed choreography. (Issa, 2008, p. 30)
In this way, Atashi’s pictures highlight a number of oppositions between the bodies of the sportsmen and her own in terms of gender (male and female), body coverage (half-naked and fully covered), dress code (colourful and dark), movement (in action and static), type of activity (doing sport and observing/photographing), and the direction of gaze (being looked at and looking). The virile integrity of space is broken not only because of the intrusion of a female body, but also since her position as an observer stands in contrast to the spirit of pure sports for the development of body and mind, rather than a spectacle to be nonchalantly looked at, that Zourkhaneh stands for.

In other words, by including the spectator in the scene, Atashi’s photographs take a stance that is more in tandem with the development of modern sports. Indeed, modern sport has developed on the basis of an economy of spectatorship. Sport today is not only a physical exercise, a training to do, but also an activity to follow (check the news) and a spectacle to watch (on TV or in the stadium). Spectators are also integral to the pleasures of media sports, as the coverage of a football match on television, for instance, would not have the same effect without the presence of the crowd in the stadium, without hearing the hum of the crowd and seeing the occasional close-ups of the faces of the spectators on television. By insinuating her own dislocated position of female spectatorship, Atashi positions the spectator as an element of the scene of sport to be looked at.

In this set of photographs, Atashi highlights the specificities of the medium itself by stressing the composition of the frame, the presence of the camera, and the persona of the photographer caught in the act of taking photographs. Coalesced in the female figure depicted in these photographs is the passive spectator, whose gaze is frozen onto the scene she observes, and the active photographer, whose mobile gaze produces material to be looked at. Similar to the mirrors that reflect the image of the photographer, the camera reflects the gaze of the general public watching the photographs. The feel of spectatorship is insinuated into the image by the connections that the viewer makes between his own act of observing the image, the artist in the scene and the lens of her camera. As we see through the lens of the camera the photographer seeing the scene, we feel ourselves being part of the scene.

In fact, what is missing in these photographs is Atashi’s spectator self. The figure of the photographer and the disembodied gaze of her camera supplant the passionate eyes of a spectator. Rather than the vigour and avidity of the sports
spectator, the disembodied public eye of the camera stresses the problems facing the depiction of the spectators’ bodies and their emotional release. Unlike the bodies of sportsmen that have become visible in their bold gestures, the spectator gains a ghostly position as her presence is felt, but the whole range of her bodily capabilities are downplayed and substituted by the solemn performance of a photographer. And yet, it cannot with certainty be said that the subject matter of these images, the object on which the look of the audience rests and seeks to connect emotionally, is the sportsmen rather than the spectator/photographer. It is a correct representation of womanhood in the proximity of such a conspicuous masculinity that is contested in these images.

To indicate the complexity of the issue of the representation of the female body in the expanded field of sport in Iran, Gertrud Pfister (2010) recounts the controversy that was raised in Iranian media over the opening ceremony of the 2008 Olympic Games in China, during which the Iranian flag was carried by a female member of the Iranian rowing team, Homa Hosseini. By granting a woman athlete the highly symbolic position of representing the nation during the opening march, the Iranian Olympics committee had aspired to show to the world, against all doubts and criticisms from international organizations, its appreciation of the special significance of women in sports in Iran. In spite of its politically correct message, the Iranian Olympic committee’s decision sparked contradictory reactions within Iran. Pfister writes that, while many interpreted Hosseini’s role “as a symbol of Muslim womanhood and proof of the high social status of women in Iran”, strict Islamists believed that the sheer gesture of the march of a woman in front of the global audience, however correct her dress and attire, was in opposition to religious values of modesty that the nation appreciated and sought to represent (2010, p. 2938).

To understand the geographies and visualities of women’s sport in Iran, one should take into account multiple ways of relating to sport. Sports federations in Iran have been successful in recent decades in promoting women’s sports, and Iranian women sports teams have triumphed in international women’s events. In the 2014 Inchoen Asian Games, for instance, 16 out of 57 of the total medals acquired by Iranians were in women’s sports, which show a high percentage for an Islamic country. To make space for the participation of Muslim women in international sports, Iranian sports authorities set up the ambitious Women’s Islamic Games, an
exclusively female international competition, held in Tehran in 1993, 1997, 2001, and 2005. Discontinued today, these games received contradictory reactions, writes Pfister, as some expressed their appreciation of the possibility that the games provided for Iranian women to be able to compete with women of other nations in a safe environment; while others, among them many top athletes, “pointed out that events of this kind would confirm and legitimize the exclusion of women from the ‘real’ world of sports”, and stopped participating in them (2010, p. 2950).

The most compelling point of criticism of the event, however, concerned its media coverage. Pfister explains that, as no male spectators were allowed to the event’s venue and no media coverage was broadcast of the event, ostensibly to protect the feel of physical and visual safety for female participants, a further problem for many women athletes competing in Games was precisely “the lack of an audience and media coverage” (2010, p. 2950) – i.e. the aura of sport. What is being disavowed in such circumstances is the full range of spectatorship. It is not the right to do sports that is being limited here, but the right to watch sports and to be watched doing sport. The Iranian sports media cultural complex has somehow resolved the problem of male spectatorship of women’s sports by prohibiting physical or visual contact between the two, promoting exclusively female sporting spaces with no media coverage. However, women’s spectatorship of men’s sports is an unresolved issue and a site of contestation over the right to space and visibility.

Chehabi (2006) gives an account of the challenges that the issue of female spectatorship imposed on the development of sports in Iran after the revolution. He explains that, although in late 1980s the Iranian government began to promote sport as a legitimate form of entertainment, the expansion of television brought forward new concerns over the appropriateness and suitability of televised sport programmes for the general public. He writes: “Iranian television was hard pressed to produce programmes that people actually liked, and sporting events seemed innocuous enough, except that neither football players nor wrestlers cover their legs between the navel and the knee.” (Chehabi, 2006, p. 247) A conflict was provoked between the conservatives and more moderate fractions regarding national television’s coverage of men’s sports, which bore similarities to the heated debate that was raised at the time over the suitability for Iranian viewers of non-Iranian films and TV programmes in which women were not dressed properly according to Islamic conventions. This
conflict was only solved by a fatwa in 1987 issued by Ayatollah Khomeini, the
supreme leader, which authorized television “not only to broadcast films featuring not
totally covered women, but also sports events, provided viewers watched without
lust” (Chehabi, 2006, p. 247).

Indeed, there exists an element of erotic desire in the “kaleidoscopic
pleasures” of televised sports, suggests Margaret Morse, which is concerned with the
“eroticization of the male body” (1983, p. 58). “If athletic bodies are the commodity
of sport”, writes Morse, “the look at the image of male bodies in motion is what
television has to offer the viewer” (1983, p. 59). In fact, televised sports is one of the
very few global cultural domains in which male bodies are customarily presented as
“object of scopophilia” for male and female audience to take erotic pleasure in gazing
at them (Morse, 1983, p. 45). It is as if the discourse of sports “can license such a gaze
and render it harmless”, by conflating issues of statistics, performance, display, and
play (Morse, 1983, p. 59). However, such innocuousness does not completely remove
the emasculating effects of an objectifying gaze posed upon the male body. It is the
power contained in the position to own the gaze, Morse believes, that explains “the
strong cultural inhibition against the look at the male body” (1983, p. 59). In public
discourse in Iran, the debilitating effects of the uninhibited gaze on the male body are
overwritten by the harmful and contaminating effects that such a gaze is thought to
have on the beholder of the gaze – the female spectator.

Ayatollah Khomeini’s fatwa certainly served to validate the televised sports,
but did not fully resolve the difficulty of female spectatorship. In fact, it endorsed a
notion of dis-eroticized sports spectatorship, which is untenable as suggested by
Morse. As a result, confusion and uncertainty remains in Iran over the intensity of
lustfulness being evoked by the images of sport. Today popular sports such as football
and volleyball are not generally considered improper for female spectators to watch
on TV, even if the bare legs of sportsmen would be considered improper, and even
punishable, in other public contexts, such as the street. However, the issue is more
complicated in the case of equally popular sports, such as swimming and wrestling, in
which the level of nudity, the shape of the sportswear, and the choreography and
performance of bodies in motion are far too clearly suggestive of erotic overtones to
be disregarded. Even though wrestling is key to the identity of sport in Iran – it is
considered ‘the national sport’ where Iranian wrestlers have historically triumphed on
international podiums – and carries an aura of virtuosity that is quite exemplary in the age of professional sport – wrestling champions have historically been looked up to as heroes in Iran – conservative voices occasionally express their discontent over its broadcasting on television, stating that the content of such programmes are not appropriate for women spectators. However, to find a solution for the problem, such discontent voices usually cannot decree anything other than putting the burden of responsibility on the shoulders of the women audience at home, asking them not to renounce their support and appreciation of wrestling altogether, but to turn their eyes away from the television screen and avoid watching wrestling competitions – in short, to see the competition without looking at improperly dressed male bodies (Entekhab, 2011).

Regarding issues of nudity, an interesting case is the state of the sport of bodybuilding in Iran. The level of nudity and bodily exhibitionism in bodybuilding is clearly in violation of the public orders of the visible and Islamic virtues of modesty, as a result of which the activities of the Iranian federation of bodybuilding remain mostly hidden (some would be shocked to know that such a federation actually exists in Iran). The Iranian federation of bodybuilding has made a choice not to televise its events on national television, but remains undecided about the circulation of images of its public events in other media.

The self-contradictory visual strategies of the federation of bodybuilding could be seen in its photographic report, which is published on the federations’ official website, of the Iranian national league championships, held on 18 February 2015 in Rasht (see Figure 5.6). Images of the event are added to the reportage in order to make it visually available for the public to see; however, to comply with the public orders of the visible, the federation has had no other choice than censoring its own images. However, one might argue that, not much is concealed after all in these images, since the clumsily added black squares on the groins and nipples of the athletes do not exactly reduce the effects of their revealing posture. In fact, such an ostensible modification is only self-revealing in that it draws extra attention to the excluded body parts (what is wrong with seeing nipples, one might ask), and keeps reminding the viewers of the profound effects the censored body parts might have had, or in fact should have had, on their psyche.
Seen in these images is also an audience, seated in close proximity to the podium, which constitutes a different kind of public that not only has unmediated access to the scene, but also enjoys the possibility of creating and circulating its own visual material through personal digital cameras. The pictures taken by the mobile phones of present public (seen in Figure 5.6) would not only lack the black squares, but would also be distributed among a diverse set of intimate publics, quite distinct in its scale and structure from the public to which Figure 5.6 speaks. It is neither a general inhibition of visuality in sports nor the specific non-visibility of the bodybuilders’ bodies that I am trying to suggest, but rather that sport in Iran remains a highly visual domain, in which its conditions of visibility vary considerably according to a particular category of sport, and the entwined relationship between the media and geographies of its practice and spectatorship. Although sporting events are held in demarcated spaces and follow the orders of the visible particular to their own discursive construct, the geographies and visualities of spectatorship are quite diverse and complicated. Most importantly, it is the position, ethos and identity of the real or imagined female spectator that accounts for the challenges that this multiplicity of positions is capable of posing in the discourse of sports in Iran.

It could be said that the politics of female spectatorship in Iranian sport is ruled by an idea of distanciation. Women spectators are not allowed the geographical proximity of the spectators’ seats in stadiums (during male sporting events) and are presented a second- or third-hand view of the game through the intermediary of the narrative and visual media. They are also asked to further distance themselves from the images and videos of sports they watch at home, in order not to get deeply excited by them. Such measures of distanciation are reminiscent of a particular scene in
Offside (2006), Jafar Panahi’s real-time story of a group of cross-dressed girls’ failed attempt at entering the Azadi stadium in Tehran to watch the decisive play-off between Iran and the Republic of Ireland, in which the girls are kept in custody in a small enclosure outside of the walls of the stadium. Having been barred access to the event both spatially and visually, the girls are nevertheless able to follow the match through the passionate report one of the guards makes for them from the adjacent barred gate to the stadium (see Figure 5.7). A football fanatic himself, the shouts of joy or despair and the body language that accompany the guard’s idiosyncratic blend of commentary and analysis communicates the event to the girls while keeping it distant. Despite the constant warnings of the head officer to the girls to keep their posture and not to show immodest gestures of emotional release, the girls in effect find ways to follow the match passionately, join in its excitement, and feel its pressure without seeing it.

Figure 5.7. Offside (2006)

Referring to this scene in Offside, Kim Toffoletti uses the metaphor of “long distance love” to explain the “manifestation and performance” of Iranian women’s fan identity, which is not per se inferior in intensity or authenticity to the fan identity of their male counterparts (2014, p. 83). Such culturally maintained forms of distancing do not decrease the women sports fanatics’ passion, Toffoletti indicates, as the reactions of the girls in the film show. Rather than the fan identity of the girls, it is their spatial and visual connections to sport that get disturbed. What happens in the film is that the group of girls neither get to the stadium, nor do they – or the audience of the film – ever get to see the match. It is frequently alluded to throughout the film that such distancing is for the sake of the preservation of the virtues of womanhood, to keep femininity safe from contamination by the excitement of the crowd. Or, conversely, it can also mean that the distancing serves as a strategy of control, to
reduce the disruptive effects that female spectatorship could have on the public structures of space and orders of the visible.

The spread of television sports programming has been instrumental in modern times in achieving the spatial, visual and emotional measures of distanciation. While keeping the spectatorial momentum alive, television sport relegates the emotional release of the spectators to the disconnectedness and invisibility of their private homes. However, far from keeping the disruptive features of sport under control by keeping the unpleasant spectators at bay, television creates its own modes of emotional engagement with sport. As Garry Whannel, a leading scholar in media sports, writes, “By bringing live pictures to the home, television brought immediacy and uncertainty from the public domain to the domestic space” (2009, p. 206). As I will argue in the following section, the aesthetic and narrative constituents of television sports paradoxically highlight the visual and intensify the emotional engagement of the viewer with it. Television sport creates hypervisibilities and intensities, and trains the eyes of the spectators to take pleasure in closely looking and interrogatively detecting the visual beauty of the game and the athletic bodies in motion.

**The Hyper Visibility of Television Sports**

“For most of us, for most of the time, sport is television sport”.

*(Whannel, 1992, p. 3)*

Television has shaped the mode of everyday engagement with sports around the globe, as Garry Whannel already noted in 1992. Not only the imaginaries of sport are shaped by, and carry with them the elements of, the visual and narrative structures of televised sport, but also “the political economies of sport and television are now so closely intertwined that it is difficult to imagine life otherwise” (Miller, 2010, p. 105). On the one hand, television itself has benefited enormously from sports to produce a wide range of sport programmes that not only constitute a major part of its airtime but also absorb a distinctively large number of audiences – in effect, rendering the growth of television unimaginable without the impact sport has had on it. It is noteworthy that the most popular and widely watched programmes on TV today are mega sporting events such as football World Cup and Olympic Games, which attract millions of
viewers worldwide even in the unpopular airtime slots. On the other hand, television has had a major influence on the development, expansion, and popularity of sports globally, and has affected the format and arrangement of particular sporting events according to its own economic concerns – for example, in the way a football league is scheduled to suit the needs of the broadcasters (Whannel, 2009, p. 215).

By “stage-managing” the spectacle of sports to its own audience, television could be said to have transformed sports by way of fostering a culture of “television sports spectatorship” (Whannel, 2009, p. 216). If, before television sports, the experience of live spectatorship in stadiums had an “aura of uniqueness, of authenticity”, writes Whannel (2009, p. 216), that air of originality is eroded to a large extent today, not only because sporting events are covered fully by television, but also because television sports itself has come to create an authentic sense of television sports spectatorship. The visual and narrative innovations particular to television programming – such as replays, relays, close-ups, live commentaries and studio discussions – have provided its audience unique material, inaccessible to the spectators in stadiums. Paradoxically, in today’s culture of sport spectatorship, “live spectatorship, with a distanced view and lacking replay, could seem to be missing an element” (Whannel, 2009, p. 216).

The experiences of live and televised sports spectatorship, Whannel (1992) suggests, differ from one another in their commitment to satisfaction and certainty. To count as a successful TV programme, television sports need to be entertaining in the first place, and to leave in its audience a sense of pleasure and satisfaction in watching the TV programme itself, regardless of the dissatisfaction a section of its audience might get from the result of the game or the performance of the players in the field. A major task of a television sports programme is therefore to avoid succumbing to the possible tediousness of the sporting event by adding charm and glamour to it. Therefore, Whannel believes that there exists in television sports a “contradictory interface” between its “commitment to realist conventions” of a practice of journalism, which is concerned with a transparent and truthful portrayal of the sporting action to the viewer, and “the conventions of entertainment” that shape “the structure of its programmes, its modes of representation and modes of addressing its audiences” (1992, pp. 81-97).
The quest for maximum transparency and the aspiration for highlighting pleasure in television sports conjoin in fostering a visual language of hypervisibility. The charm of a sporting event is retained in television through highlighting, repeating and dramatizing those moments, movements and incidents whose disclosure is crucial for a candid and comprehensive documentation of the event. Television sport’s infatuation with the use of such techniques of over-exposure as close-ups, replays, and slow-motions, respond to an urge for full coverage of the event – alluded to in this typical announcement of the presenters, “stay with us, you won’t miss a second of the action…” (Whannel, 1992, p. 98) – but has the corollary effect of fetishization of the action and the image. By making use of such techniques as keeping up the pace of cutting, cutting between mid-shots and close-ups, using multiple viewpoints (that are available to the multiple cameras placed around the field) with possibilities for rapid and instant changing of perspectives and zooming-ins on the event and players, television sport’s goal is to obtain an effect of “maximum action in minimum space” (Whannel, 2009, p. 89).

It is such hypervisibility that feeds the voyeuristic desires of viewers to obtain erotic pleasure from television sports, as it effects “the visual maximization of the ideal body-in-motion” (Morse, 1983, p. 64). As I have described previously, this aspect has been the cause of disapproval and uncertainties in Iran regarding the suitability of television sports for female spectatorship. However, a slightly different consequence of the over-exposure of the field of action and the maximization of time and space in television sports is the dramatization of actions and the intensification of emotions – that which leads to establishing “engaging viewing experiences” (Whannel, 2009, p. 210). “Rather than emphasizing a voyeuristic and objectifying gaze”, Rose and Friedman suggest that “television sports seems to invite the viewer to engage in a distracted, identificatory, and dialogic spectatorship” with the drama of the game, in ways similar to the experience of watching a soap opera (Rose & Friedman, 1997, p. 4). Television sports’ techniques of hypervisibility, in conjunction with the discursive exchange of commentaries that speak to an ideal spectator, engage the sports fan “in the participatory reception characteristic of sport viewing: inviting him to call the plays, argue with the referees, and coach ‘his’ players from the simulated sidelines” (Rose & Friedman, 1997, p. 6). This leads to the television sports
spectators’ emotional engagement with the image – their participation in reading the emotions of sportsmen and reacting to them empathetically.

Beyond gaining voyeuristic pleasure from the spectacle and partaking emotionally in the drama of the scene, television sport’s techniques of hypervisibility invite viewers to scrutinize the image, look for evidences for truth in the image, and to objectively evaluate the actions of sportsmen (Morse, 1983; Stauff, 2011). Morse suggests that the effect of all the “spatial compression and temporal elongation and repetition” is to point to the “action and body contact”, not only to be appreciated, but also to be closely analysed by the viewers in a quasi-scientific manner (1983, pp. 48-50). By being given the possibility of seeing the scene from different angles and in different scales and speeds, the viewer is propelled to see how things unfolded in a single scene and to outguess the referee and find out (see) what “really happened” (Morse, 1983, pp. 48-50). Embedded in “a hermeneutic process of scientific discovery”, the audience is constantly presented with numbers, graphics, data, and statistics that aid them in their inquiry into the action on the screen (Morse, 1983, pp. 48-50). Television sport’s quest for the “analysis of controversial decisions and dramatic incidents”, its ability to “dissect and analyse sporting moments”, is fundamental to the culture of spectatorship that it adheres to (Whannel, 2009, p. 210).

The scrutinizing gaze of the viewer gains social and political potency in the way in which, in order to understand what really goes on on the pitch, it seeks to read, interpret and evaluate behaviours and emotions. Markus Stauff (2009; 2011) suggests that viewers understand a foul, for example, not only by seeing the clash between the players, but also from reading the expressions of confidence, surprise, anger, or vulnerability on the faces of the players, their teammates, the support team, and the referee. Such emotions and bodily gestures neither lend themselves to interpretation easily, as one cannot with certainty assert the honesty of the players from the expressions they show in the moment of a foul, nor always fit their actions into normative categorizations of right and wrong behaviours. In the constant interpretation and assessment of actions and reactions that television sports encourage, Stauff (2011) finds grounds for the close assessment of socially held norms and values. By highlighting in close-ups facial gestures and emotional reactions of sportsmen, players, managers, referees, and spectators, television offers to its audience the otherwise socially awkward (publicly disavowed) emotions, such
as crying and anger, and renders them simultaneously innocuous and challenging for the scrutinizing eyes of viewers (Stauff, 2009).

Television sports spectatorship in Iran similarly faces the challenges posed by the “augmented visibility” (Stauff, 2009) of unruly bodies, erratic behaviours, and volatile emotions that cannot be easily forgotten or disavowed once introduced to the scrutinizing eyes of the viewers. The point that I want to make regarding sports in Iran is that genuine possibilities for cultural and social critique reside in Iranian television’s unwitting endorsement of the production, and reproduction, of knowledge and sentiments that are socially, politically, and culturally disturbing. Therefore, rather than the often-cited fear of erotic temptations aroused in male observers, what inhibits women’s sports from being broadcast on Iranian television is the interrogation and re-evaluation of a whole range of cultural norms and values regarding the shape, content, and place of women’s emotions and body movements that the hypervisibility of television sports affords the interrogative eyes of the public. While the range of women athletes’ bodily exposure and expressivity are hugely curtailed in Iran due to their head-to-toe covering, loose, and unrevealing outfits, their facial and verbal expressions could be open to exposure and intensification within the diegesis of television sports.

It is noteworthy that, despite inhibitions on live coverage of women’s sporting events on television, images of Iranian women athletes (especially in competition in international podiums) do get reproduced in other forms of visual media (see Figure 5.8). These pictures usually tend to decrease the possibilities for channelling the excitement of the game by closing the frame on medium-long shots, depicting the collective sporting action rather than single bodies, avoiding close-ups of faces and cutting off the sight of the crowd. In addition, by controlling their format, quality and size, strategies for media reproduction of these images strive to control the viewers’ possibilities for close engagement with the image. Shunning television’s techniques of maximization of movement, space and time, these images strive for a pure representation of women’s sports to be seen but not enjoyed, engaged with, or scrutinized. It is particularly the hypervisibility afforded by the format of television sports that renders women’s sports harmful to watch as a cultural product in Iran.

Unlike women’s sports, men’s sports do not face similar restrictions for broadcasting on Iranian national television, and is therefore impervious to the
subversive consequences of its moments of hypervisibility. Notwithstanding concerns
over the sexual charge of the male exhibitionism for a female spectatorship, it is the
exposure and hypervisibility of expressions of emotions, such as anger or ecstatic
jubilation – sometimes in conjunction with quite inappropriate levels of nudity – that
renders men’s television sports disturbing for the collectively held values and orders
of the visible in Iran. For instance, even though punishable with a yellow card
according to FIFA regulations and strongly discouraged in the Iranian football
federation’s guidelines for ethics in football, it is not uncommon to see a player take
off his shirt in ecstasy after scoring a goal (see Figure 5.9). In such instances, not only
television sport’s mandate for transparency dictates a full coverage of the scene from
a good angle, but its quest for entertainment also asks for the highlighting of such
moments of eccentricity in repetition and close-ups. For their potential in arousing
excitement in the audience and keeping up the momentum of the game, scenes of
celebration on the pitch are too invaluable for television sports to ignore.

To offset the culturally inappropriate effects of such behaviours, the television
programme is left with no other option than announcing to its audience the
distastefulness and incorrectness of the actions that are visually presented to them.
The commentator and analysts of the television programme repeatedly denounce the
actions as not only contrary to the spirit of sports, but also non-ethical and distasteful
according to accepted codes of behaviour in Iranian society. A contrast is therefore
sustained in such instances between the verbal denunciation of the action and the
accentuated visual presentation of it, which poses questions about the social and
cultural pretexts that present such incongruity as innocuous. Such erratic
performances and expressions of emotions are usually treated with additional
equivocality when performed by the members of Iranian national teams in
international competitions, since their assumed incorrectness stands in contrast to the
cherished feelings of patriotism and national pride that they simultaneously evoke
(see Figure 5.10). Therefore, any attempt for visual censoring or verbal correction of
the actions would not only run the risk of losing the momentum and excitability of the
game, but also undermining or hurting the spectators’ collective feelings of national
pride.
Figure 5.8. Iranian women’s Kabaddi team in Asian Games 2014, Inchoen, South Korea. Source: ISNA

Figure 5.9. Omid Aalishah taking off his shirt after scoring a goal for Persepolis, Iranian Football league 23 Nov 2014.

Figure 5.10. Iranian squad’s celebrations following their decisive victory over South Korea in Seoul, World Cup 2014 qualifiers.
Iranian television sport is not different from sport programmes in other nations in bringing to public attention and deliberation erratic behaviours and foul language being expressed on and off the pitch. However, in the tightly controlled and regulated structures of public discourse in Iran, where such possibilities for direct visibility are rare, television sports’ potential in raising cultural, social, and political issues based on such visibility is quite unique. I need to make it clear that such moments of exposure and unchecked visibility do not, therefore, always lead to productive critique of cultural normativities and their re-evaluation, but can also result in the reiteration and even consolidation of existing cultural norms. Most importantly, the exposure to an uncritical reproduction of cultural norms could have devastating consequences for the players whose incorrect behaviours get heightened visibility on the screen.

An example is the incident during the match between Persepolis and Esteghlal in the 2010-11 Iranian football league, where the footage of the excitement of footballers after scoring goals, captured twice after the goals and repeated several times during the live coverage of the match, showed from a clear angle actions that could be interpreted as one footballer (jokingly) ‘fingering’ his fellow jubilant teammate from behind. The result of repeated categorical denunciation of the action by commentators on the media – as being utterly distasteful, shameful and alien to the ethics of sports and Iranian society – and the hateful remarks and jokes that were distributed in social media on the incident, was the public shame put on the shoulders of the two players involved in the action and the severe penalties and prohibitions they received subsequently from the football federation. It would be naïve to assume that the homophobic public discourse changed overnight by this incident.

However, the sheer energy contained in such moments of hypervisibility, in dire contrast to the general politics of invisibility, has transformative effects on the sphere of the public in Iran. It is sport’s potential for sustaining that contrast, and therefore creating liminal conditions for vulnerable yet assertive visibility, that has to be acknowledged. However unwanted or unproductive, the hypervisibility of such erratic gestures within the seemingly innocuous discourse of sport interrupts the public orders of the visible. There exists in such interruptions an enduring force for subversiveness and criticality in everyday life, that feeds on the liminal condition of uncertainty in the simultaneous assertiveness and vulnerability, assuredness, and insecurity of the wayward instances of visibility.
To control the unfavourable consequences of constant exposure of sportsmen to television cameras, the Iranian football federation has introduced specific guidelines for the general conduct, behaviour, and bodily bearings of Iranian footballers on and off the pitch. According to the guidelines, Iranian footballers should self-discipline their behaviours, social conduct, and bodies – the style of their haircut, beard, and body attachments such as rings, earrings, and tattoos – to comply with a certain level of decency particular to Iranian society, and avoid being exposed to the media if not in conformity with such guidelines (Fars News Agency, 2008). But the feasibility of such measures of control are matters of uncertainty. Indeterminacy in action against the misconduct is seen, for instance, in the treatment of tattoos, argued by authorities to be alien to the ethics and body politics of Iranian society, yet increasingly spreading over the bodies of Iranian footballers (probably under the cultural influence of the tattooed bodies of prominent world football players). The problem arises since tattoos, unlike haircut or earrings, cannot be easily removed or modified. Once inscribed on the athlete’s body, tattoos become magnified in television sports’ augmented visibility and present themselves to the viewers assertively, even if unwittingly. To control that visibility, authorities have announced that tattoos would be tolerated as long as they are covered and not seen. Covering tattoos under sportswear is feasible for most of the Iranian footballers, whose tattoos are already placed in less exposed body parts so as to keep them hidden from exposure in public under their everyday clothes. However, unwanted moments of brief disclosure occur in football matches, on and off the pitch, which then give rise to speculations over the exact shape of the tattoos and discussions over the meaning and appropriateness of them in public forums and social media (see Figure 5.11).

Figure 5.11. Arash Borhani’s tattoo, normally covered under his socks, disclosed unwittingly.
CHAPTER 5

In recent years, the issue of tattoos has become foregrounded as a complex problem that is more difficult to settle than by simple covering. Some of the key members of the Iranian national football team – such as Reza Ghoochannejhad, Ashkan Dejagah, and Sardar Azmoon – have tattooed bodies that do not necessarily stand in contrast to the body politics of their respective countries of residence – Belgium, Germany, and Russia – but cause problems in Iran, as their adorned body parts are not easily coverable (see Figures 5.12-13). While Ghoochannejhad has devised creative ways to cover his right arm’s tattoo, Dejagah’s fully covered arms have remained difficult to cover, unless under a second layer of sleeved shirt that does not really work for the footballer during a heated match of football. In effect, Dejagah has given up trying to cover his tattoos – and Iranian authorities have reluctantly accepted that as an unspoken exception – and Ghoochannejhad’s attempts for concealment have at times been proven futile in the heat of the game.

Figure 5.12. Ashkan Dejagah (left) and Reza Ghoochannejhad (right), covering their tattooed arms during training for the national team in Iran.

Figure 5.13. Reza Ghoochannejhad’s futile attempt to cover his right arm’s tattoo during a 2014 World Cup match with Nigeria.
Just like erratic and aberrant actions, nonconformist bodies highlight the conflation of Iranian national television sports’ imperative for transparency and augmented visibility, with their capacity to preserve public ethics and nationally held values. The issue of an Iranian identity and the need for the preservation of its values and visibilities, as disparate from the values and visibilities attached to bodies of other identities, come into play in television sports in Iran. It is particularly the visibility of the aberrant ‘Iranian’ bodies that is deemed inappropriate, and therefore in need of visual minimalization and verbal denunciation on Iranian television. Similarly disagreeable bodily features of non-Iranian footballers receive rather favourable comments by the commentators of Iranian television as they describe, sometimes in shocking detail, the features of a new tattoo, earring, or hairstyle of a particular player. As a result, the uncurtailed visibility of the bodies of non-Iranian footballers has had immense cultural effects on Iranian television viewers. Chehabi explains that even in the 1980s and 1990s, during the times that Iranian society was more strictly controlled than today, in terms of adherence to Islamic codes of conduct, and Western symbols were strictly banned from the public space, the cultural influence of sports was noticeable in cities in Iran in the way in which “Maradona’s earrings, Chris Waddle’s haircut and the German national team’s uniforms were all imitated, much to the chagrin of regime hardliners” (2006, p. 247). While Iranian authorities strive to impose certain levels of control on the aberrant visibilities of Iranian players, the hypervisibility of world sports on television and its cultural effects remain uncontrollable.

A further challenge of hypervisibility concerns the uncontrollability of the crowd, the live spectators in stadiums, an incoherent mass of bodies whose actions, behaviours, and appearance are much less tightly regulated than those of the athletes and sportsmen. This is significant because spectators play a key role in the creation of the feel of the game in television sports. A typical televised sporting event consists of numerous moments of zooming in and close-ups of the faces of the crowd, granting high visibility to their emotions and bodily gestures. “The most realistic aspect in the ‘look’ of the game is the crowd with its motley colors and with its faces in close-up and reaction shots” (Morse, 1983, p. 50). “I maintain that the crowd is part of the diegetic world of televised football. The look of the crowd in reaction shots is seldom well matched with the shot of the field. It seems more importantly to function as a
visual identity for the phantom crowd invoked by the soundtrack.” (Morse, 1983, p. 65)

Here again, a dividing line is drawn between the Iranian and non-Iranian spectators, who adhere to different orders of public conduct. While the restrictions on women spectators’ presence in stadiums in Iran could be seen as a move to control such possible moments of exposure on television, a typical crowd in countries other than Iran includes women whose clothing might not match the orders of the visible in Iran. Live broadcast of international games are usually delayed with a few seconds on Iranian TV in order to give time to the censors to edit out the improper crowd and to replace them with stock footage of an appropriate one. But this process does not always work out smoothly and moments of incongruity occur frequently, as a result of which the act of censoring itself becomes visible. For instance, Gerhardt explains that during the live broadcast of the 1998 World Cup on Iranian television, “the cheering summer crowds in the French stadiums were replaced by prefilmed coverage of spectators in winter jackets and coats (spectator coverage from a winter game had been used) so that the Iranian public would not see the scantly clad (by Iranian standards) female spectators” (2002, p. 45). And there always lurks the danger of moments of inappropriateness skipping the eyes of censors. Controversy was raised during the broadcast of the 2014 World Cup when a very brief glimpse of an inappropriately dressed woman was detected on Shabake 3 by vigilant spectators and identified as Shakira, a figure of Western cultural corruption according to the official jargon of the Islamic Republic of Iran (see Figure 5.14). The incident was subsequently reproduced on social media, its news was spread like a popular joke among Iranians, and the head of Iranian national television, Ezzatollah Zarghami, was summoned to provide an explanation for it (Kamali Dehghan, 2013).

Such moments of wayward visibility of an indecent crowd are more seriously disturbing for Iranian television in the occasion of the live televised coverage of the Iranian national teams’ competitions abroad. Highly unsettling and disruptive of the official codes of visibility are the Iranian team’s fans, mostly consisting of immigrant or second generation Iranians, residents of the country where the match is being held, who use this public occasion to present to the cameras their nonconformist selves – as unhindered by the public dress codes of the Islamic Republic of Iran and undisturbed by the political identity that is represented of them in the official public discourse in
Iran. Iranian fans around the world use such sporting events to show their defiance and unruly conduct and to send a political message to the world by living and performing an otherwise ordinary act of sports spectatorship – rather than acting particularly politically. The interaction between the cheerful Iranian fans, physically present in the stadium, and the national television’s programmers is therefore a game of catch and mouse. The spectators fill the stadiums in their support for the Iranian team, and willingly present themselves to the cameras to grant their erratic performances of sports fandom visibility. In this way, not only the images of unveiled Iranian women standing joyfully next to their (most probably unmarried) male companions, captured on the camera and magnified to a large scale on the stadium’s score board, stands in contrast to the orders of the visible in Iran, but also their otherwise customary act of kissing on the lips subsequent to being spotted on the camera stands as an embodied act of defiance and disobedience (see Figure 5.15).

Figure 5.14. Shakira as spotted on Iranian television’s live broadcast of Spain-Italy football match in 2014 World Cup, Brazil.

Figure 5.15. Iranian Fans spotted on camera during the 2014 World Cup, 16 June. Photo: Behrouz Mehri/Getty Images/AP.
Yet the fact remains that the televised coverage of such events cannot fully do away with the images of the Iranian fans, because to convey the feel of the cheering crowd and to boost the sentiments of national pride it needs precisely to make use of the emotional energy emanating from the Iranian supporters in the crowd. Here, a reverse mechanism usually occurs in which the footage gets censored in the televised coverage of the event on the national TV, while the commentator explains verbally to the audience the passion and energy that Iranian fans exert in the stadium (based on the footage that is available to him, but not to the viewers). The more television cuts out images of the crowd and renders their presence invisible, the more viewers notice those interruptions, feel their absences and get vexed for being deprived of the footage, and the more they get assured that a collective act of political and cultural defiance is taking place that connect their own anger and unrest to the disruptive acts of the physically present nonconformist spectators in the stadium. There is a close relation between the physically present bodies and a virtual collective that the reception of their images creates.

The Spectral Community of Television Sports Spectators

“In a future in which people compose their own viewing schedules from a large range of instantly downloadable sources, major live sport may just be the last bastion of the experience of simultaneous communal viewing”. (Whannel, 2009, p. 216)

Television not only creates an entertaining spectacle of sports for its viewers to watch and engage with, but also constructs its own specific audience, a virtual community of television sports spectators. Through its blend of a narrative of “visual and verbal communication” (Barnfield, 2003, p. 326), television sport orientates the viewers’ emotional reactions and modes of engagement with the programme, and frames their grasp of and stance on the event. In addition to its visual techniques, the verbal commentary is instrumental to television sports’ production of knowledge and stirring of emotions (Barnfield, 2003, pp. 331-335). The commentator not only guides viewers’ eyes to particular actions or events to follow, but also informs viewers of what they might have missed on or off screen (Barnfield, 2003, pp. 331-335). Furthermore, the commentator speculates on the final score of the game – produces
“in-game hype” – by making connections between the event that is being broadcast and other concurrent events, happenings in the field and off the field, and the past and present incidents (Barnfield, 2003, pp. 331-335). The viewer of the television sport programme absorbs the information provided by the commentary and is further entertained by actively participating in the making of such connections, associations, and speculations.

Whannel suggests that a key part of the discourse of television sports, and its pleasure, is constituted through the mechanism of “direct address” – whereby sports presenters directly address the viewers as a ‘you’ (1992, pp. 100-106). At first it seems that the ‘you’ (the audience) is positioned firmly as the recipient of the programme that a ‘we’ of the production team offers. However, continues Whannel, this one way relationship gets confused as the ‘we’ of the ‘production team’ joins the ‘you’ of the audience to construct a collective of sport fans, enacted in such expressions like “we’re going to see one or two of the highlights now”, or “we’ve already seen …” (1992, p. 103). The implication is that “just as the home audience get comfortable to watch their sets, so the presenter is doing the same thing in the studio. In a sense, the presenter becomes a personification of the audience as a whole – just as pleased to be a recipient as the rest of us should be – we enjoy along with the presenter” (Whannel, 1992, p. 103).

This shift in the relation between ‘we’ and ‘you’ occurs when reference is made to ‘our’ shared experiences of watching sports on television. A collective ‘we’ is constructed rhetorically, which adheres to shared ways in which sentiments and emotions are aroused and satiated amongst viewers, the production team, and the sports fans at large. This ‘we’ builds a feeling of togetherness of a discursively constructed sports crowd, within which distinctions of gender or age usually do not hold (unlike in live crowds in stadiums in Iran), and which usually rests on specific ideological assumptions, such as that of the nation. To sum up, “the rhetoric of presentation” is to construct a discursively bound and ideologically committed collective of the viewers, the production team, and the world of sport at large.

One of the reasons why television sports have remained central to the experience of media sports spectatorship, despite the growth of more flexible new digital media, is its ability to not only ‘spark the attention’ of an extraordinarily large number of people globally, but also to make that mass “feel part of a collective (a
national community)” (Stauff, 2011). With “the mobilisation of patriotism” in national sports, writes Whannel, television sports do not simply make reference to an identity, but rather “in framing the event, in summing it up and in providing closure, presenters are also offering a position to inhabit” (1992, p. 104). The collective national ‘we’ is therefore constituted in television sports in the way in which “in the nicest possible way, we’ve been told how we should feel, how we should behave and where we should be on Saturday” (Whannel, 1992, p. 104).

By highlighting the communal nature of the experience, the rhetoric of presentation raises awareness in viewers that their experience is shared by a large number of viewers of the same sports programme around the world. Contrary to Margaret Morse’s suggestion that “television sport is one of those solitary pleasures like novel reading, cut to the measure of the individual and not the mass” (Morse, 1983, p. 48), the television sports spectator is propelled to feel part of a community of spectators – a virtual crowd – that the rhetoric of the presentation establishes. In being contingent upon the discursive construction of a specific television programme, this community does not adhere to certain geographies or modes of reception, but traverses the boundaries of such constructs in establishing a virtual unity, which could be said to be symbolized by what Morse calls “the evocation of phantom crowd on the soundtrack” (Morse, 1983, p. 48). The ‘spectrality’ of this community of spectators, whose presence is felt throughout a televised sporting event but not necessarily seen, therefore evokes links to the cultural and social construction of visibility and vision, “to that which is both looked at (as fascinating spectacle) and looking (in the sense of examining)” (del Pilar Blanco & Peeren, 2013, p. 2).

Because of the constitutive role of the commentary in fostering this collective feeling, TV channels, specifically national broadcasters, gain in significance in constructing a distinct set of collective sentiments and identities. While, to transmit a live sporting event, different broadcasters make use of the identical set of original visual material in its complete format that is provided to them by the official local organizers – with close-ups, cuts, and replays already in place – they do produce their own exclusive commentaries and analyses of the event, and therefore speak to distinct sets of audiences. From a number of different choices for watching a televised sporting event, television sports spectators always turn to the specific broadcaster in whose rhetoric of presentation they feel addressed. This explains the otherwise
unreasonable choice of many Iranian viewers to keep watching censored sporting events on Iranian national television, while other full versions of the same event are available to them through satellite transmission of non-Iranian channels (some of them already in Farsi, such as BBC Persian).

The wayward moments of hypervisibility therefore carry disruptive and critical force so long as they perform within the discursive construct of the collective address of Iranian national television. The interesting point is that the conjunction of such moments of visual interruption accompanied by the (sometimes funny) explanatory remarks of the live commentators shape a repetitive pattern that over time has become engrained in the rhetorical construction of that particular collective. In other words, a part of the pleasure of television spectatorship, and constitutive of the collective feeling of the virtual crowd for Iranian audiences, lies in looking for such moments of interruption during a live televised broadcast of a sporting event, anticipating the commentator’s reactions, getting simultaneously angry for the censorship and excited by being able to detect it, quickly checking other television channels or the Internet to see the original version of those moments, and subsequently comparing the two versions in detail. The potential for cultural and social critique is engrained in Iranian television sports precisely for the embeddedness of such disturbing instances of exposure – which national television paradoxically disavows – in the collective experience of sports spectatorship in Iran.

That is why the emerging new media – with multiple possibilities for producing information about and generating modes of engagement with sport – do not play down the significance of television sport for creating and sustaining spectral communities of sport spectators, but feed off it and add new dimensions of embodiment and performativity to the otherwise disembodied and spectral character of its spectators. The relation between new media and television can be explained by what Whannel calls television sport’s “vortexual” character (2014, p. 773).

In an age of electronic and digital communication in which various media “feed off each other” in a rapid fashion, Whannel suggests that mega sports events perform as a vortex that “suck in media attention”, a centre of gravity that “dominate[s] the headlines to such an extent that it becomes temporarily difficult for columnists and commentators to discuss anything else” (2014, p. 773). Such a process of being “drawn in, as if by a vortex”, he continues,
is greatly enhanced by the rise of texting, smartphones, sport-based websites, and the social media generally… Now, the first reports of news events and incidents will often come via mobile phones. People around the world can discuss events as they happen by texting. Social media such as Twitter have enabled instant response to events as they unfold. (Whannel, 2014, p. 773)

The new media not only provide multiple possibilities for emotional engagement with sport, but also help the dissemination of knowledge produced by the scrutinizing eyes of the television viewers – in effect, enhancing the hypervisibility of television sports. Whannel recounts an incident during a football match in the English Premier League, in which racially abusive words that were uttered by one of the players but were not heard by anyone, and therefore did not get any reaction during the game from the referee or the recipient of the malediction, were finally detected online “only when a lip-reading viewer posted the words”, which were subsequently read by the friends and family of the ‘victim’, disseminated widely and instantly on social media, and raised as a highly controversial issue in public media (2014, p. 773). This incident in Whannel’s view points to

the strange characteristic of modern media audiences – in which there are those physically present and those who are virtually present. In addition, being physically present does not preclude virtual and interactive involvement – crowd anger at incorrect decisions by referees can be seen to escalate as crowd members receive tweets from television viewers who have seen the slow-motion replays. (Whannel, 2014, p. 773)

Viewers therefore participate in the construction of the collective experience of the sporting event by supplementing – rather than replacing – the television’s commentary, and in doing so they ‘perform’ their collective practice of spectatorship, rather than only ‘be’ subjected to the constructed experience of television spectatorship. Apart from the multiple possibilities for production of knowledge and sentiments, the interactive involvement of spectators in social media shifts the character of the collective community of the spectators from a formless mass of
spectral crowd, whose presence is understood collectively by the rhetorical address of television’s commentary, to an interactive network of embodied practitioners, whose distinct presence is felt and understood as they leave the marks of their presence in the mundane spheres of communication transcending television’s professional structures of production.

In addition to text messages and tweets, selfies have become a central form in which the performance of sports fandom is disseminated, shared and communicated among the community of spectators, and has become a constitutive element of the experience of sports globally. Just like all athletes and celebrities around the world, members of the Iranian national sporting teams are increasingly caught in selfies of their fans, taken right after a competition in the sporting venue, during the training, or just on the street. While such images of athletes amongst their fans taken inside Iran (see Figure 5.16) are tolerated and even celebrated as exuding a feeling of the strong bond between athletes and the public – a sign of the humbleness of professional sportsmen who see virtue in connecting with people – selfies of fans accompanied by Iranian sportsmen taken outside of the country, during international competitions, have sparked controversy in Iranian public discourse (see Figure 5.17).

Utterly disturbed by the immense number of uncontrolled and uncontrollable selfies produced and disseminated once Iranian athletes put their feet outside the national borders, Iranian authorities have strived to demoralize the act on the basis of its triviality, and have decreed that Iranian athletes avoid selfies abroad. Clear in its message, the demand remains impractical and unrealistic for professional sports. Although at first glance the officials’ bitter resentment could be said to be harboured
by the intrusion of non-conformist bodies of spectators in such images – similar to the moments of wayward visibility of spectators’ non-conformist bodies on television – it is the selfies’ aesthetics of embodied intimacy, incorporated in its processes of production and dissemination, that is most discomforting for authorities.

Such selfies not only depict intimacy, as bodies rub shoulders and touch one another to a degree that crosses the limits of appropriate distance between male and female figures in the public orders of the visible in Iran, they also transmit a feeling of intimacy and closeness in the practice of taking selfies itself. The images embrace
tactility in their production, as people usually get very close to one another for a second to fit in the frame of the image that is being taken from such a short distance, and phones even change hands between the photographer and the photographed to find the best possible frame. This in turn excites the tactile participation of the viewer, enacted by the extended hand of the photographer towards the camera/viewer that is usually visible in selfies. The image transmits a feeling of tactile intimacy, as the distance between the camera and the subjects remain literally at an arm’s length. Unlike the zoomed in, telescopic, and flat images captured of spectators in stadiums, selfies usually embrace a depth of the field of vision in which the prime subjects, even if slightly out of focus, are positioned right in front of the camera.

The affective force of such selfies, and the subversive power contained in them, also arises from their being embedded in ordinary practices of everyday life. Taking a selfie is usually unplanned and spontaneous, and could be said to be an embodied everyday act, as its production and dissemination are not dependant on extra care or gadgets other than common smartphones, which constitute not an embellishment but a somewhat necessary component of our daily lives and an extension of contemporary bodies (Larsen & Sandbye, 2014, p. xxv). It could be said that in its everydayness and intimacy, the fans’ taking selfies with favourite sports personalities stands as the contemporary version of asking for an autograph. However, unlike the autograph that only contains the personal mark of the star for the fan to embrace, in a selfie there also exists an element of self-celebration and self-assertion on the side of the sports fan. In all its modesty of production and dissemination: selfies could be seen as quite an indecorous, self-absorbed and immodest way of presenting oneself. The political valence of the selfies of Iranian sports fans partly resides in such narcissism, since, as Khosravi suggests, in contemporary Iran “‘self-assertion’ has been seen by the authorities as a sign of defiance and insubordination” (2008, p. 162).

Such selfies serve not only as a direct and assertive indication and evidence of presence – an authentication and manifestation of presence that decry “Hey, I am here right now” (Villi, 2015) – but also as an embodied form of engagement in the production and dissemination of the collective experience of spectators. Their agency does not only reside in their provocative representation of wayward bodies and conduct, but also in the waywardness of the practice of taking selfies itself. Stressing
the centrality of the idea of practice, Larsen and Sandbye write that in digital photography “technology cannot be separated from issues associated with performative practices of taking, editing, distributing, uploading and exhibiting photographs” (2014, p. xxv). This is crucial for understanding the performative role of such selfies in the construction of sports spectatorship. As Shanks and Svabo suggest, “mobile media photography marks a shift in orientation from the image towards photography as a mode of engagement” (2014, p. 229; emphasis in original). Selfies invite embodied and interactive forms of engagement, rather than purely visual ones. The “inscription of bodily gesture into a still image” summons the viewer to do more than look, it invites viewers “to make conspicuously communicative, gestural responses” – to ‘like’, ‘retweet’ or ‘comment’ on it, for example (Frosh, 2015, p. 1612). Bodily gestures of the photographer/photographed selves in selfies, writes Frosh,

invite the viewer to infer and adopt a physical position in relation to the photographer. Manifested in the suggestion of bodily contact, the gestures propose a particular kind of sociable interaction: the act of accompanying and the subject position of companionship. (Frosh, 2015, p. 1617)

The representational aspects of the mediality of the photograph in digital and smartphone photography recede into the performative nature of the networks of practice that sustain them. Selfies therefore demand a practice based approach to understanding their mediality that suggests that “media are not ‘media’ per se – coming between, mediating units that are given, a posteriori, primacy – but are intimate aspects of the fabrication of the social and cultural” (Shanks & Svabo, 2014, p. 237). Talking about selfies in particular, Paul Frosh suggests that “the selfie as an index is less the trace of a reality imprinted on the photograph than of an action enacted by a photographer”, and in that way it “exploits indexicality in favor of connective performance rather than semantic reference” (2015, p. 1609).

Over and above what one might read and interpret from seeing non-conformist bodies and conduct depicted in selfies of Iranian fans and sportsmen, it is the participation of the spectator and the sportsman in the act of making selfies that is of significance. Selfies foreground the relationship between the image and its producer,
because their “producer and referent are identical” (Frosh, 2015, p. 1610). In that way, selfies enhance performativity by enacting “a field of embodied inhabitation” in which spaces of production and depiction are unified (Frosh, 2015, p. 1612). A selfie, Frosh suggests, “says not only ‘see this, here, now,’ but also ‘see me showing you me.’ It points to the performance of a communicative action rather than to an object, and is a trace of that performance” (2015, p. 1610).

In short, selfies capture modes of bodily engagement and relational enactment in its production and consumption that transcend conventional systems of visual production and reproduction of sports in media. The selfies of Iranian fans with their heroes not only subvert the tightly held structures of public visibility in Iran, but also interrupt the spectators’ conventional modes of engagement with sports and produce traces of embodiment of the otherwise spectral community of spectators. These images are particularly disturbing for Iranian authorities because of the empowering effects that the marking of the presence of wayward bodies on selfies has on pushing the otherwise spectral community of spectators to active participation, performative action, and embodied engagement in the making of a vibrant and genuine form of everyday sports spectatorship. The embodied spectatorial position of this networked population transcends the limitations of geography and scopic regimes of the established modes of sports media, such as television, to create an interactive system that paradoxically stresses the vortexuality of the established television sports. It not only stresses television’s moments of hypervisibility and produces additional moments of exposure based on them, but, by adding an embodied performative dimension, also makes the bodily presence of the greater public felt in the discursive construction of sports spectators.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have argued that sport provides popular grounds for the emotional release of a large community of spectators and their active engagement in the creation of public sentiments and knowledge, in ways that transcend the norms of public presence and visibility in Iranian society, while paradoxically performing within it. In my analysis, I have focused on media sports as establishing a “structure of feeling” (Williams, 1977) that shapes the lived experience of sport for a greater public. In doing so, I have followed Rowe’s suggestion that institutions of sport and media have
become “mutually indispensable” in contemporary societies, as “it is almost impossible now to ‘imagine’ sport without the mind’s eye conjuring up replay, slow motion and multi-perspectival images, accompanied by the inner voice of phantom sports commentators” (2004, p. 13).

I have spent a large section of this chapter on the unique role of television in constituting the everyday experience of sports. I have argued that, by paradoxically making its viewers see what might remain invisible to the live spectators, television sports create a culture of hypervisibility and exposure. In discussing this aspect, I have explained that television sport’s techniques of “augmented visibility” (Stauff, 2009) ask for the scrutinizing eyes of the viewers to look at the image intently and to uncover moments of truth from it. I have argued that, in the controversial moments in which aberrancies are unwittingly exposed on the screen during televised sport, the scrutinizing gaze of the viewer propels the re-evaluation and critique of the commonly held values and norms of social conduct. I regard the “unashamed gazing” that television sports promotes (even if with voyeuristic implications) as radically disjunctive “in a culture where gaze-aversion is sanctioned in moralistic terms” (Fozooni, 2008, p. 119).

In the final section of the chapter, I have turned my attention to the study of the culture of spectatorship that television sports foster. I have argued that spectators tune in to the augmented visibility of television’s sport programmes and partake in the discursive construct of a spectral community of sports spectators that television commentary actively creates. Television sport commentary, I have explained, constructs a collective identity in which, on the one hand, hegemonic notions such as stereotypes of national identity, race, and ethnicity, as well as historically developed notions of beauty or morality get reproduced, reconstructed, and re-confirmed; while, on the other hand, the conjunction of such hegemonic notions with aberrancies of moments of wayward visibility on television provide conditions for counter-discourses to emerge. I have subsequently argued that, with the development of new media, spectators find ways to participate actively in the creation of the collective feeling of spectatorship and to develop strong counter-discourses that supplant, and disrupt, television’s often hegemonic construct.