

# The Spectacle Explodes

## A True Tiger Fan

1984

All right, I admit it. I started the World Series riot in Detroit on October 14, 1984. I tore up the outfield turf, ripped down the entrance signs and tore off other bits of Tiger Stadium to take home with me as souvenirs. Yes, I set fire to that police squad car, then trashed several others while the cops were distracted. Later in the evening, I stood side-by-side with other diehard celebrants at the corner of Michigan and Trumbull, throwing rocks and bottles at the riot police on horseback as they made their way down the street. And, yes, that was me emerging from a looted store on Woodward Avenue with the upper half of a mannequin in my arms, waving the surreal trophy over my head in triumph.

News reporters, sports commentators, and city officials tried to say that the tens of thousands of us partying outside Tiger Stadium weren't "real" Tiger fans. Supposedly, while the real fans were peacefully cheering on the home team, "suburban rowdies" who had no business being there were assembling outside Tiger Stadium to cause mayhem and "ruin Detroit's image." Lost in the barrage of accusations and condemnations was an understanding of what actually occurred.

## Fall of the Rate of Fascination

The spectacle resembles a radioactive element in chronic decay, but with a half-life much shorter than that of uranium. More and more powerful doses of excitement must be injected in the spectacular ensemble to ensure its continued functioning. Finally, the spectators themselves must be injected into the process to counteract the tendency for the rate of fascination to fall and for boredom and disillusionment to set in. Hence, the encouragement of "participation" in every domain, from the workplace to politics to sports. People must be encouraged to manage their own misery and alienation. But with such a strategy, the stakes are raised: people who are encouraged to act, to participate, sometimes take this encouragement to its limits and begin to transgress the spectacle's repressive boundaries, raising "excessive" demands and experiencing "forbidden" desires.

In sports, the spectators are encouraged in many subtle and not-so-subtle ways to become part of the action. "Tiger fever," the most recent and blatant such instance, is a case in point. The media positively reveled in the "Wave" and other similar manifestations of crowd enthusiasm. Sports commentators waxed eloquent at the fans' ingenuity as they competed to create the most effective Waves and the most innovative ones, like the super-slo-mo Wave and the fast-forward Wave. They enthusiastically reported the antics of Detroit's "bleacher creatures," whose innovative cheers and spontaneous theater shifted the focus of attention from the game to the fans.

It would be an oversimplification to suggest that the media somehow consciously "desire" the incorporation of the spectator into the spectacle. The Wave, for instance, wasn't created by the media, but by fans who hoped to distract opposing players and influence the outcome of the game with their efforts. The fans, in some sense, obviously desire their own incorporation. But whence is the source of this desire? As the following quotes perhaps illustrate, media-messages are an important element, in engendering this new level of "participation." The news

media do not simply report events—they shape them to their own form. Events are reduced to packaged “moments” that can be transmitted over the airwaves and reported in print media. Reality, in all its complexity and opacity, is supplanted. As with events, so with people.

“The people of Detroit gave the Tigers unquestioned loyalty, unwavering support, fanatical devotion because they were winners, and by association, the people were able to envision themselves as winners. It made them feel good. And it made them forget the grinding realities.” (Bill Lyon, in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*)

“How could they lose with fans like Dan Novack of Detroit, who declared: ‘I love the Tigers more than my wife?’” (The *Detroit Free Press*)

“Baseball fever—catch it!” (national television advertisement)

“He’s an animal—a Tiger!” (caption accompanying photo of Kirk Gibson out of control)

“I was delirious, out of control, a basket case.” (Tiger owner Tom Monaghan after the pennant victory)

“Gr-r-eat! Fans go wild over Tigers” (*Free Press* headline)

“Bless you boys! Be a part of it.” (Canadian Club whiskey ad)

“How ‘bout them Tigers! Way to go, boys—Thanks for all the excitement...From all your fans at Pontiac—the road car company. We (also) build excitement.” (Pontiac ad)

“Every time the Channel 4 helicopter flew over, people would start screaming and waving as if to say, ‘I’m on TV!’” (eyewitness account of the post-series celebration at Tiger Stadium)

“Everyone will be a star for fifteen minutes.” (Andy Warhol)

## Sports a Linchpin of Alienated Life

The spectacle labors tirelessly to preserve sports as a linchpin of alienated life. Previously, sports (like the cinema) was the site of an “irresponsible” passivity: the manifold frustrations of daily existence could be abandoned at the turnstiles, and the spectator could experience himself as “alive,” or as a “winner” through vicarious immersion in manufactured events. Today, however, one must work actively to achieve these sensations. One can sense in today’s fan a palpable sensation of despair, an enormous letdown, an overwhelming feeling of being cheated, if his or her team should have the effrontery to lose on a given day. One’s psychic being has become more dependent than ever on the success of the favored team. Sports figures have become larger-than-life celebrities with the power to induce either ecstasy or crushing disappointment in their fans.

Yet the spectacle increasingly fails to deliver its promised catharsis. Disappointment easily turns to outrage at the perceived source of one’s misery, as numerous sports figures who have been the targets of fan hatred can attest. Extreme emotions are channeled into “manageable” forms of expression: outrage at alienated life is transformed into (fan)aticism—hatred of the opponent, hatred of one’s “own” team when they lose, hatred of the umpire, hatred of the other team’s fans. This rage is momentarily placated in the euphoria of a championship baseball season. But then comes the letdown, the post-series hangover—and reality painfully seeps into the void left by baseball’s departure. (But soon comes football season, with its unabashed violence, its military and rapine metaphors—“crushed,” “blitzed,” “good penetration,” etc. A cathartic gladiatorial contest.)

Again, it would be wrong to imply that the media simply manipulate a passive audience. Spectacle has given way to symbiosis, an era of self-managed alienation. The poles of manipulator and manipulated have merged. A masochistic era. (“I want to be hit, I want to be hit,” I saw a delirious Tiger fan scream as he rushed the cops, who obligingly honored his request.)

## Euphoria and Anger

When the volatile admixture of euphoria and anger that was “Tiger fever” exploded into violence, the media covered its tracks in an outpouring of hypocrisy over “fan excess.” News reporters and sports columnists called the celebrants “trash,” “bums,” and “criminals” who had damaged Detroit’s image (as if Detroit did not already have a bad “image”). Typical of this hypocrisy was the widespread condemnation of Bubba Helms, the 17-year-old fan

whose picture (holding a Tiger pennant in front of a burning police car, beer gut hanging out and a bemused look on his face) appeared in newspapers all over the country. The same media which had collaborated with Helms' exhibitionism to make him a star, then turned around and denounced him as a "symbol" of fan violence and representative of wayward youth.

This hypocrisy should surprise no one. All summer long the local television stations and newspapers self-servingly promoted "Tiger fever." The night of the series celebration, one could see reporters and cameramen on rooftops or hovering over the streets in helicopters, presiding over the events like vultures over a carcass.

But of course they weren't "promoting" anything, they were "just doing their job." But what exactly is their job, anyway?

All right, I admit it. I was there; I saw the police beat people indiscriminately while driving them into the crush of fans on the sidewalks with nowhere to go. (I remarked to a police officer, "It looked like some of your friends were really enjoying themselves clubbing people over the head." "Well, we have to protect you people from yourselves," the cop matter-of-factly replied. A sadistic era.)

I saw people fight back in anger, screaming at the cops to "leave us alone—we're not doing anything wrong!" and "let us have our party!" I was there as the Tigers' 1984 season ended in celebration, violence, torched police cars, broken windows, shattered bottles, looted stores, numerous people injured, and finally, anxious silence.

And I was there all season long, drawn to the sports spectacle like a firefly to candlelight, hoping for a little excitement amidst the flames. Recently, Detroit's Chief of Police vowed that there will never be another night like World Series riot night. Never again will the police lose control of the streets, he promised. An empty promise, in my estimation. Next time—I promise—we'll be ready for them. Our turn to play.

# fifth Estate

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