

The Entertainment Leviathan *

“...long ago, ...we sold our vote to no man. [Now, we have] abdicated our duties; for the People who once upon a time handed out military command, high civil office, legions –everything, now restrains itself and anxiously hopes for just two things: bread and circuses.”⁰

Having thoroughly enjoyed watching some of the UEFA Euro 2024 soccer matches this summer, it started me thinking: What is it that makes me –and all other true football fans– enjoy watching these contests? No doubt, some of the teams are remarkably well organized; and surely some of their players are incredible athletes. However, some of the elements surrounding these games I find disturbing: the ferocious exuberance of the mass of fans, their horrendous vociferous cacophony, the ludicrous spectacles before, during and after each semi-final and final, the sometimes-riotous behavior of the crowds (this year occurring during the Copa América), the flashy ads on every available surface, smartphone and TV screen, and the billions of dollars spent on gambling and peripherals. I’ve already written about some of this in two previous essays, published on this same website.¹

But, why should it all bother me so much? After all, hasn’t entertainment always been a part of sports events? And again, what do I mean here by “always”? As the 2024 Paris Olympics are soon to start, would it be then fair to ask whether all of the above-mentioned irritating plethora of vulgar consumerist behavior can be traced back to the first Olympiad?

We only have clear information about the Olympic Games starting from 776 B.C. From that date on, we know that a number of cultural activities such as music, singing, poetry and theater, were organised at the Pythian or Delphic Games –parallel events to the ones held at Olympia– linking entertainment and sport to accompany the Games.²

We also know from history and many Hollywood movies that the Romans perfected the marriage of sports and entertainment, inherited from the Greeks, by staging their sports events in huge stadia attended by thousands of spectators. In ancient Rome, chariot racing was the most popular of many subsidised public entertainments. Winning drivers were well paid for their victories, regardless of social status; and the best could earn more than the wealthiest patricians. The drivers took to racing under team colours: Blue, Green, Red or White. Spectators generally chose to support and identify with a single team. Betting on chariot races raised large sums for the teams, drivers and their wealthy backers. Copious imperial subsidies kept the Roman fans fed, entertained and distracted. Violence between rival racing factions was not uncommon. Chariot-racing factions played a prominent role in mass entertainment and imperial politics for several centuries. Supporters of the *Blues* vied with supporters of the *Greens* for control of foreign and domestic policies, and for Imperial subsidies. Their displays of civil discontent and

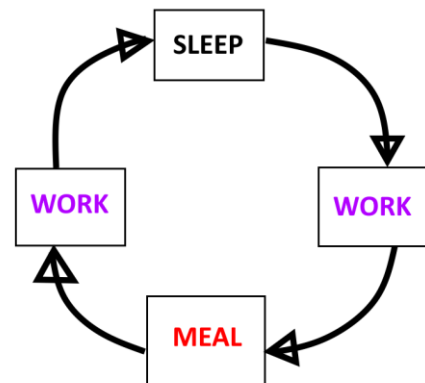
disobedience culminated in the Nika riots of 532 A.D., with nearly half of Constantinople being burned or destroyed, and tens of thousands of people killed. ³

The further we dig into the past, the more it becomes clear that entertainment has become so intertwined with athletics, culture, religion, business and politics, that it's almost impossible to ascertain and analyze its influence on all modern societies.

Perhaps it is preferable to start by defining our terms better. What does the word "entertainment" mean? The etymology of "entertain" can be traced to the 15th century French verb, *entretenir*, meaning "to keep up, maintain, to keep (someone) in a certain frame of mind," from Old French, *entre-* "among" (from Latin *inter*) + *tenir* "to hold" (from Latin *tenere*). ⁴ Right away, one can see the implied element of fascination in the conjugation of the word as a noun –an operation acting on the mind of another– foretelling the invention of the modern advertising industry.

As a Hispanic, I always tended to interpret the Spanish word *entretener* as indicating the action of keeping (*tener*) someone between (*entre*) two important and/or vital activities –such as work, meals or sleep. Therefore, any entertainment –welcome or not– would entail an interruption of, or being diverted away from, some important activity.

We may assume that in the Paleolithic there would not have existed any such entertainment. Every day would have entailed a back-braking routine of waking up at dawn, hard work, interrupted by a quick meal, some rest, then return to hard work until dusk and then sleep –a cycle to be repeated day after day, ad-nauseam, variations depending on the seasons. It must have taken maybe 80,000 years to arrive at a point when chanting, cave-painting and rituals would permit some respite from the cycle depicted in this illustration. →



As a good part of my life was spent as an entertainer –musician, broadcaster and poet– some readers might rightfully ask: What is your effing problem with entertainment? My answer has to do with the present gargantuan inflationary imbalance in the role played by the entertainment industries in all aspects of our lives, to the detriment of those categories in my illustration: Sleep, work and food.



Since the start of the last century, many of the activities that had once helped to alleviate the stress and anxiety of life in modern industrial life (e.g., art, music, theater, sports, festivals) have been so overdeveloped, exploited and commercialized that now the entertainment

colossus has become another source of mental and emotional angst and turmoil for millions of human beings. First, Madison Avenue, Hollywood, commercial radio and television, mass media propaganda wars, followed by contemporary global ICT-based social media, have so thoroughly invaded our lives that we can no longer tell what's real from what's "virtual."

I suppose now, after having thoroughly drawn and quartered the Entertainment Leviathan, I can cry out, laughing like Pagliacci's Canio: "La commedia è finita!!"

* Written by © Pascual Delgado, July 21st 2024.

⁰ Juvenal, *Satire* 10.77–81, 2nd century A.D. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bread_and_circuses

¹ *Of Churros and Bullfights*, March 4th 2016; and *On the Triumph of Artifice*, May 5th 2023.

² <https://olympics.com/en/news/the-history-of-the-olympic-games>

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chariot_racing

⁴ <https://www.etymonline.com/word/entertainment>