

*Because so little depends on us  
life has neither end nor beginning  
and after every grand love  
empty waiting rooms  
remain behind*

Serhiy Zhadan

The feeling of having ended up in an empty waiting room became certainly bitter after ninety plus five minutes. The proverbial metaphysical emptiness took root – arrived at nothingness, or rather, in the lower half of the symbolic nothingness which is a calculated table. But then, due to self-ascribed miserable conditions, the last train had already left anyway. So, the waiting room it is. Merely assuming that this sudden emptiness corresponds with an abrupt sense of indifference, that love will yet outlast impending death: though this is surely the kind of passion that means suffering. British director Ken Loach once said in an interview that fans are born pessimists: “You always expect your team to lose. You expect next Saturday to be a disaster, and that’s precisely how it turns out. After that, you have a whole week to wail and mourn. Being a soccer fan is indeed a kind of masochism.” Love and suffering, Saturday ritual versus Sunday depression, absolute devotion and obsessive intoxication, both spiritual and material.

The green tracksuit with the large print on the back that my grandfather once brought over was the object of initiation for me. As opposed to Nick Hornby’s assertion that the club picks its fans, and thus summons their love, and not the other way around,

it was a banal item of clothing that led me to the club I would later choose as mine. Socialized in a petty bourgeois-conservative rural milieu, Sunday and the weekend were reserved for family and Catholic ritual. Thanks to the strict educational renunciation of television, *ballesterisch*<sup>1</sup> support and experience were first and foremost of an auditory nature. Their narration and dramatic arc played out in the imagination. This was the era when the soccer scene was not yet as riddled with monetary madness and Gianna Nannini’s smoky vocals of the anthem *Notti Magiche* boomed from rustic stereo systems in provincial pizzerias. The World Cup in Italy created absurd scenarios: Renzo Pianops new flying-saucer-style stadium architecture and the oversized polyester jerseys were the stylistic cutting-edge of the time – long before Vetements began sampling proletariat chic, the allegedly profane sport was unfolding its sacred effect.

In retrospect, the 1990s were an extraordinary moment in every respect: gold rush vibes and amateurism went hand in hand, all had fallen victim to a grand intoxication. Marketing was the order of the day: there was club-look bed linen; some players were given their own lines in shampoo; world champion Mario Kempes<sup>2</sup> played in the vineyards of Krems; Giuseppe Giannini<sup>3</sup> moved from Rome to Graz after the local stadium (known as the *Gruabn*<sup>4</sup>), on account of its pitiful condition, had bizarrely been presented to him as their training ground.

The Austrian soccer magazine *Ballesterer* (i.e. soccer player) writes in its current issue that during

- 1 *Ballesterisch*: Austrian slang for “soccer related” (<https://www.duden.de/rechtschreibung/ballestern>)
- 2 Mario Kempes (born 1954) became World Champion on home turf with Argentina in 1978. The striker played for numerous clubs, including FC Valencia in Spain (1976-1981 and 1982-1984). In 1996 he came from Alicante to Austria to join First Vienna FC, which had made him a lucrative offer, but whence he soon moved to VSE St. Pölten for a further three years. He ended his career at Kremser SC (1992). Helmut Slezak, then an upcoming Vienna player, remembers: “As a team player, he was especially nice to us kids ... but if something went against the grain for him, he could turn awkward. When coach Ernst Dokupil benched him for a game against Eisenstadt, Kempes sat there and lit a cigarette (!) ... Before games, he had a special ritual: he always drank a “coffee with vitamins” – a black coffee with a shot of cognac. He’d slip the waiter his recipe beforehand so the coach wouldn’t notice.”
- 3 Giuseppe Giannini (born 1964) is a former midfielder and current coach from Italy. He played for AS Roma (1981-1996), with whom he won the Coppa Italia three times, and also briefly for Sturm Graz (1996-1997), finally ending his career in 1999 at US Lecce. Rumor has it he was homesick for Italy, which is why his engagement in Graz was short and rather unsuccessful.
- 4 The “Gruabn” (pit), also known as Sturmplatz (literally: Storm Field), is a sports center in the Jakomini district of Graz. This extremely narrow facility in the middle of a built-up area, where the atmosphere was boiling, opened in 1919 and was home to Sturm Graz until 1997. Today Grazer SC plays there and the “Gruabn” celebrates its 100th anniversary this year.

those days “...soccer underwent what was probably its most spectacular change since the beginning of the Second Republic. One club after the other dreamed big and plummeted all the deeper. The new masters of the modern soccer world threw around concepts, the streets seemed paved with money and rules were no more than irritating obstacles. It was much as we imagine the Wild West.”<sup>5</sup> As an adolescent supporter of the green and white workers’ club from the far west of Vienna, it was something like the Wild West for me, too. Having barely escaped financial ruin, and one unsuccessful public offering later, my club of choice rose all the way to the European Cup Final only to then end up in a state of cultivated mediocrity that continues to this day while continually flirting with borderline delusions of grandeur.<sup>6</sup>

If one lends credence to the thesis of art historian and self-confessed fan Horst Bredekamp, soccer amounts to a kind of social sculpture in ecstatic format. He defines it as the perfect unity of life and art that can even resist an ever-increasing commercialization. Supported by the fleeting performativity of

their sworn communities, the victory of (underdog) David over (top dog) Goliath is still possible. Hence, to this day, such bonds are nourished by an admixture of nostalgia and hope, which, famously, dies last.

Ninety minutes of collective tragedy, euphoria and madness reflect the break with the atomized world and the everyday realities of life. Taking time out from yourself, finding beneficence at the dreariness of a local derby, in the acid rain of Charleroi, amidst the run-down charm of the *Stade du Pays*. A post-industrial scenography straight out of Blade Runner: the simultaneous demise of faith and hope forms a bleak symbiosis with the taste of canned beer while tennis balls and flares descend from the stands. Dystopian romanticism versus romantic dystopia, yet always grand theater: the performativity, whose choreography unfolds during its enactment, is at every instant permanently and *per se* threatened by insecurity and failure:



Love, it's as trivial as it is irrational,  
a fleeting obsession with three variables.  
1 2 X  
And the stadiums, they're our waiting rooms –  
as ever, they remain empty after each grand love.

- 5 In: Ballesterer, soccer journal, #141/p. 3 (Editorial)
- 6 SK Rapid Wien, based in Hütteldorf, West Vienna, was founded in 1899 and is, after First Vienna FC, the oldest surviving club in Austrian professional soccer (and the strongest in terms of membership, among other things). It's still my club today. In 1991, SK Rapid Wien was close to bankruptcy, having dared to go public and failed. In 1994, Bank Austria drew a line, suspended trading in its shares and saved the club. After many tough years, the club qualified for a European Cup final again in 1996, which it lost 0:1 to Paris Saint-Germain in Brussels. Since 2008 (last championship), we're cautiously waiting for silverware...

The Sitcom Show Episode 2