What Does Girls' Cheerleading Communicate?

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In spite of feminist "consciousness raising" and contrary to much apparent good sense, cheerleading as an institution continues to flourish. More girls, it often seems, would rather be cheerleaders than be athletes or scholars; cheerleaders rather than in the counterculture or gainfully employed. And many boys and parents and grandparents would support this preference. Nation-wide, schoolgirls vie ardently and arduously for positions on cheerleading squads. Competition at colleges is even keener than in highschools. Cheerleading summer camps and clinics prosper. National and regional cheerleading organizations proliferate. Squads increase in number and variety at many schools. Why?

Before an answer to this question is attempted, a number of reservations are in order. First, the present essay is intended as a preliminary study. Thus, it avoids the complications introduced by co-educational cheerleading: this study concentrates exclusively on all-girl squads. Likewise, the present essay is synchronic in the sense that, with a few exceptions, it does not—in the interest of simplicity—address the historical dimension.

Nevertheless, it is the sure and rapid evolution of cheerleading in the last sixty years that suggests that the pop-cultural counterpart of an empty ecological niche existed and was in due course occupied by the practice in question. Cheerleading represents an elegant solution to the problem of communicating a bundle of messages that define an important sector of our United States' popular culture. As a subtext to crowd gathering and athletic competition, cheerleading makes sense and communicates in a variety of ways.

On the conventional, surface level, three justifications are frequently advanced by schools and organizations sponsoring cheerleaders. Like many institutional rationales, these explanations are superficial. Nevertheless, they are clearly ways in which cheerleading communicates.
1. **Discipline**—Cheerleaders typically are asked to display "willingness to obey commands by a faculty adviser and/or Captain without complaint." They must "Do everything as a unit, a squad... All 'bench' behavior should be done as a group... Stand, sit, move together." Cheerleaders train, wear uniforms, and perform exacting, synchronized routines. Cheerleading teaches discipline and teamwork while suggesting that submitting to uniformity and control can be fun and a source of prestige. This clearly furthers the institutional purposes of the school.

2. **School spirit**—Cheerleaders display—and exhort to—loyalty. Partisanship is further expressed by their wearing the school colors, giving the school yell, etc. The audience responds at games with enthusiasm and the players are heartened. School morale is thus raised.

3. **Participation in mass culture**—Cheerleaders reflect current fashions in their hemlines, dance styles, yells, etc. Popular music and television programs furnish a context for many routines. The existence of an alternative repertoire of "soul cheers" reflects an abiding division in American popular music and culture. Mass education perforce encourages extracurricular participation in mass culture, and cheerleading is a way to be "with it," up-to-date, current.

Nevertheless, such rationales for the existence and meaning of cheerleading hardly account for its persistence, force, and continued popularity. Discipline, school spirit, and mass culture, after all, must contend with considerable and varied counterattractions; for example, from the realms of individual expression and high culture. More sophisticated observers, therefore, acknowledge that cheerleading communicates in ways beyond those traditionally suggested by the sponsoring school. Clearly, cheerleading also means:

4. **Sex and sexism**—The cheerleader is a disturbing erotic icon, both in real life and in fantasy and fiction. In this capacity she reminds us of the persistent convention that any female who struts her stuff in public desires sexual contact, presumably with "the" beholder. She incarnates, in a word, a basic male-voyeuristic fantasy.

In addition, cheerleaders, on the one hand, represent endogamy: they can be viewed as the symbolic brides of the players. Yet, on the other hand, they are also the "stake" of the game. They are the potential spoils of a victorious opponent and communicate the possibility of exogamy, even as the opposing, visiting cheerleaders do to the home audience via the home team. Female cheerleaders thus further incarnate the ultimate meaning of the males' contest.

Moreover, cheerleaders are loyal. After a conventional introductory gesture, a cheer for the other team is unthinkable. Cheerleaders reinforce the notion that the double standard is just
and good, that males are the primary gender. Yet females can *imitate* them. Indeed females' greatest happiness, as this view would have it, lies in such imitation and subordination. Cheerleaders, after all, mimic all-male athletic teams with their tryouts, uniforms, hierarchy of sports and squads, elections of captains, practices, varsity letters, and the like. (Meanwhile, any male group's wholesale mimicry of a female group would result in parody, if not in the arrest of the males.) What is more, cheerleaders (female) swing into action only when the players (male) are resting or plotting strategy. Any cheerleaders' attempt to dominate the scene when the males are active would not be tolerated by the audience for long.

Finally, however superior physically the playing males may be to the males in the audience, or even if the visiting team wins, the male (paying) audience is guaranteed, in the person of the cheerleader, a subordinate being who entertains for free. In other words, there is an atrocious double standard of sporting excellence that results in the most agile of the (female) cheerleaders tumbling before even the most decrepit (male) ticketholder.

5. *Sympathetic magic*—This seems to take place on an archaic level. Once the female cheerleaders' mimicry of the male players is established, the success of the cheerleaders' routine is felt to be somehow connected to the resultant success of the players' efforts. This is one reason why cheerleaders undertake demanding athletic stunts, the success of which, it is hoped, will carry over to the athletic contest. Indeed some cheerleading routines clearly mimic the sport (basketball, football) played. Likewise, by their show of loyalty, optimism, loud and smiling resolution, etc., cheerleaders attempt to *evoke* (sympathetically) a like mood in the audience. This in turn is projected to the players, becoming a second channel along which the "sympathetic magic" functions.

6. *Survival of the fittest* is communicated by cheerleading in four basic ways. (1) Eugenics: let the strongest, swiftest males consort with the females who best embody agility, attractiveness, and docility. (2) Natural selection: should the neighboring "tribe's" males prove swifter and stronger, let them carry off the girls. (3) Group solidarity: co-operation, co-ordination, mutual support, shared danger and triumph, and the like—among the audience, players, and cheerleaders—are all acted out. Clearly, for such a ritual to assume meaning for a group, representative females, here in the person of cheerleaders, are needed to take their assigned roles. (4) Patriotism: passing from the small group or community to a national perspective, one is not surprised to see patriotic tokens (rifles, flags) as props in varieties of cheerleading.
Cheerleading thus communicates on an official, institutional level (paragraphs 1-3 above) as well as in sexist and sexual (4), magical (5), and Darwinistic ways (6). Yet why would large numbers of girls want to participate in an institutionalized-biological ritual when they already go to school for many hours each day and could presumably realize, in their private lives and much more conveniently, whatever magic and biology they wished? In other words, why is cheerleading flourishing contrary to what might be seen as common sense? The answer appears to lie in two additional ways in which cheerleading communicates—ways that could be termed Lamarckian in so far as they serve the persistence of acquired, cultural traits and practices across generations. That is to say, cheerleading bears still other messages. Indeed in their arcane multiplicity, the representations of cheerleading can be compared to religious symbols, which have been described as polysemous, affective, and prescriptive signs, deriving their power from their multireferential or multivocal nature and their ability to encode a special model of reality. Access to a community's image of the world should then be available through decipherment of these symbols. But their multiple signifieds are not easily revealed.5

7. Circus substitute—Cheerleading is part of a spectacle, comparable in many surprising ways to that compound spectacle, the circus. Cheerleading is like the circus which, according to Paul Bouissac, "presents, in a ritualistic manner, spectacular events that are remarkably patterned and highly meaningful for large audiences."6 And like the circus, cheerleading presents "animal acts," acrobatics, and clowning. Cheerleaders put the audience through its paces much like trainers in circus animal acts. In addition, cheerleaders are often supplemented by solo cheerleaders dressed as team mascot animals.

Along with the obvious acrobatic presence in both the circus and in cheerleading, cheerleaders share with circus clowns a perpetual aura of mirth, vitality, and performance. Cheerleaders also typically perform mute, clown-like skits and gags. Finally, by appearing mainly during time-outs, cheerleaders are comparable to "the 'reprise' clowns, who fill the gaps between the acts by performing parodies of the acts."7

What is more, like circus acts, cheerleading routines are entirely pre-planned and rehearsed, although both attempt to offer the illusion of spontaneity and extemporariness. Just as all circus acts have a beginning, middle, and end, cheers exhibit, for example, attention-getting claps—for starters—and freeze endings. Other parallels to the
circus could be cited. The point is that cheerleading communicates to an audience receptive to spectacle in many circus-like ways.

8. *Amour courtois*—The term (courtly love) comprehends a last major bundle of meanings conveyed by cheerleading, and not surprisingly still another reference to our past civilization. Every man jack in the audience is a lover; the cheerleader is his lady fair. And like courtly lovers, the two communicate through each other's eyes. She always keeps her eyes on the audience. His eyes are on her. He obeys her every whim and complies with her directions. "Look at them, smile at them, and you will charm them into watching and following you."  

Like the courtly lady, the cheerleader may be symbolically "married" (see also paragraphs 4 and 6 above) to the knight-athlete, but now she performs for us, the audience. Meanwhile, the players, like the noble husbands of medieval ladies fair, essentially ignore her in favor of more manly concerns.

Like her courtly prototype, the cheerleader is courteous to opposing cheerleaders. Before the game she greets her visiting colleagues, later defers to them when cheering, and afterwards socializes with them. She is also gracious to the opposing players. At the contest's start she greets the rival team with a cheer—the so-called welcome or "Hello Yell." She never insults or derides the opposition; on the contrary, she solicitously cheers injured opponents. "If you teach cheers which bring out primitive instincts, you can turn your organized cheering section into a disorderly mob." In a word, the cheerleaders civilize the tournament, much as women at court in the thirteenth century were said to civilize otherwise unruly noblemen. Cheerleaders are instructed to "maintain... composure and set a good example to be followed by the fans." "A crowd must be handled as a great monster, able to crush you... It must be commanded by a superior intellect and 'humored' into doing the cheerleaders' biddings."

Finally, she cheers to conquer. However the team may fare, she never loses. The cheerleader is almost always in control, in spite of her apparent regimentation and submissiveness. "Do not let the students run the show," she is taught early on. Any girl who has led the cheers of hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of spectators can testify to the power of the position. As a former senior United States foreign policy advisor is reported to have said, power is the ultimate aphrodisiac. This is why well-meaning feminists, or parents ambitious in other ways for their daughters, or allegedly more sophisticated peers often will not be heeded when downgrading cheerleading to cheerleaders. And for better or for worse this lesson—
not officially in the highschool curriculum or in cheerleaders' manuals—will be learned for life: in a male-dominated, sexist society, female avenues to power are specialized.

The circus-like allure of cheerleading and the cheerleader's higher function of civilizing dominatrix, commanding the audience's gaze and controlling its collective behavior, thus round out the multiple meanings communicated by the institution of cheerleading. Instead of being merely a rather meaningless, rag-tag set of youthfully exuberant antics, cheerleading can be seen as a remarkably economical bundle of simultaneous and polyvalent messages which are responded to by a culture-competent audience.

Two points remain to be made in conclusion. First, television presentation of cheerleaders radically modifies the above while serving, at least in part, to confirm it. Television alters beyond recognition the proxemics of the audience-cheerleader dyad. On television, all but the voyeuristic features of cheerleading are virtually eliminated by the combination of (video camera) shot and duration. Thus cheerleaders are employed by television producers as erotic filler or, alternately, in so-called cut-away (i.e., reaction) shots to underscore the joy of victory or the agony of defeat, tension or bliss, etc. TV's voyeuristic function, moreover, is usually carried out in close-up (or sometimes from low angles), whereas the cheerleader before a live audience necessarily tailors her behavior to be readable from a considerable distance.

Second, the communication of cheerleading can be regarded in terms of the following triadic model:

where: (1) the cheerleaders address the audience and the latter responds; (2) the audience responds to play and the team to the audience; but (3) the players, although implicated in much of what the cheerleaders...
do, in effect ignore the latter while cheerleaders likewise refer play to the audience, not to the team. Perhaps still another way in which girls' cheerleading communicates, then, is to underscore the separation of the sexes in schools. Indeed the audience can then be viewed as a mediator between the school-age sexes, just as society at large is in a sense implicated in each and every highschool courtship.

In any case, cheerleading is hardly a superficial, disposable ornament to school sports. Rather, it helps mediate, interpret, and direct the experience of the audience at such events, while reiterating a number of cultural realities on the background of which the school-life-sport-spectator situation functions.

Notes

1Though reliable and comprehensive statistics on the subject appear to be lacking, it seems likely that the all-girl cheerleaders’ squad is more frequent than either the co-ed or all-boy squad. The present study can be regarded as a contribution to a semiotic approach to the composite spectacle of the American school basketball or football game: such spectacles surely are today’s participatory and popular *Gesammtkunstwerken*, featuring a mix of sport, music, costume, emotion, cuisine, socializing, wagering, and more.


3Ibid., pp. 8-9.

4Or to put it another way, the comedy of a home-team victory ends in symbolic group marriage; the tragedy of a defeat in symbolic group death.


7Ibid., p. 70.

8For instance, both circus acts and cheerleading rely overwhelmingly on sight over sound for effect because of the distance of the audience. And both the three-ring circus (see Bouissac, p. 11) and cheerleading seem to derive their recognizably modern versions from the America of around the 1890s (see Newt Loken and Otis Dypwick, *Cheerleading and Marching Bands*, The Ronald Press Co., 1945, p. xi). Then, both cheerleading and circuses are at once complex and arcane, but accessible even to the naive. Finally both can be said to share an intertextuality with legitimate competitive athletics. (For the tripartite, Aristotelian form of circus acts, see Bouissac, p. 182.)


11Ibid., p. 88.

12Loken, p. 15.


14Humphrey, p. 49.
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