



The Iron Tulip

The Mediated Persona of Manchester United Manager Louis van Gaal:

A Different Kind of Dutchman

Name: J.M.A. de Groot
Student number: 4009533
Course: Bachelor Thesis English Language & Culture
International Journalism & Anglophone Media Studies
Supervisor: drs. S.J. Cook
Second reader: S.C. Chambers
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1. Introduction

Seven Dutch managers coached a Premier League football club, of whom three are active today: Dick Advocaat currently coaches Sunderland; Ronald Koeman is in charge of Southampton; and Louis van Gaal is manager of Manchester United. Van Gaal has an excellent CV as a football club manager, but also is a controversial personality who has never become the best of friends with the media. Being manager of England's most successful football club in history and having spent more than a hundred million pounds on players already, Van Gaal's reputation is at stake, as the English press is vicious. *The Sun* welcomed Van Gaal to England with the headline: "'Tryant' Louis van Gaal takes over at Man Utd" (Philips), accompanied by a picture of the manager portrayed as the devil. In a big piece about the 63 years-old Dutchman *The Guardian* closed: "It promises to be anything but dull" (Ronay). And, indeed, it has not been a dull season on the media front. Whereas Dutch footballers and coaches are known – and often praised for their artistry and elegant style of football, Van Gaal is portrayed as a brilliant, yet strict dictator who rules with an iron hand and has no sense of finesse. The question is how the mediated persona of Van Gaal as manager of Manchester United has been developed and whether it accords with or differs from the British media representation of the Dutch.

To investigate how a mediated persona is created, a media discourse analysis, as developed by Ferdinand de Saussure and Michel Foucault, will be conducted. It is particularly interesting to research the mediation of Van Gaal's personality, since Van Gaal, as manager of one of the biggest football clubs in the world, is responsible for the results of a commercial company in an incredibly mediated environment. Van Gaal's history – and relationship with the media will be scrutinised in the light of several controversial or much discussed events during his earlier managerial career and during his time as manager of Manchester United. To put Van Gaal's mediated persona into context, it will be contrasted with how Dutch national

identity is represented through football, since Van Gaal has adapted instead of adopted the *total football* system with which Dutch football and thus Dutch national identity have been associated since the 1960s. Van Gaal's football philosophy, his interpretation and modification of total football; his complex personality; and his occasionally abrasive attitude contribute to a fascinating mediated persona that has continued to cause controversy.

2. Global Football

2.1 The Biggest Club in the World

During a training camp of the Dutch national team in Hoenderloo in 2014, when the rumour concerning Van Gaal to be the next Manchester United reached its peak, a BBC-journalist asked Van Gaal what he knew about Manchester United, to which Van Gaal famously responded: “That’s a stupid question” (RedDevilsZone). Not only did Van Gaal during his first encounter with the British press whilst in the running to become Manchester United manager show his occasionally controversial way of coping with journalists; he also made an important remark about his future employer: “The biggest club of the world, ‘*what do you know about Manchester United?*’” It might not be beyond dispute whether Van Gaal is right in claiming Manchester United is the biggest club in the world; however, it is the most successful football club in the history of English football and, indeed, has a leading role in football worldwide, both sportively and commercially.

2.1.2 Understanding Modern Football

Raymond Boyle and Richard Haynes describe the immense power of contemporary sports as a result of a 1990s outbreak in the mediatisation and, consequently, commercialisation of sports in the United Kingdom: “As broadcasting markets opened up, increased competition for viewers and subscribers has seen sport become the key element of ‘media content/product’ being used to build new audiences and income streams for media organisations” (102), of which the football industry has profited the most. As a result of the mediatisation of sports, clubs have become global brands and, therefore, integral units of media business strategies (Boyle 103):

A football club is a brand because many supporters enduringly identify with the ‘product’ (the team) and continue their consumer spending habit on it (e.g., match

tickets, television subscriptions, club merchandise), even if they are often unhappy with the quality of product's outcome (such as match results) (Millward 26).

However logical the commercialisation of sports might appear, the global interest in the brands has massively influenced and complicated the sports rights market. Media coverage of sports is no longer limited to live match broadcasts, but also comprises pre and post-match studio talks; match highlights; interviews; press conferences and so on, which, nowadays, are distributable and both easily and instantly accessible via new media.

Ever since the introduction of the major English football competition as it is known today, the English Premier League (EPL), in 1992, British Sky Broadcasting (BSkyB) has been the most important player in the sports broadcast rights market, as it is screening the most matches and paying the most money to the EPL per game. However, with new media having become increasingly important in the mediatised football world, the original rulers of the broadcast rights market have had to adapt to – and embrace the new opportunities the internet provides: “Throughout the cultural industries the battle is on to forge alliances between content providers and new delivery platforms and distribution systems” (Boyle 104). BSkyB's sports broadcast channel, Sky Sports, would no longer meet its audience's demands by merely televising live football matches, since, as Miguel Sicart points out: “Sports spectatorship has shifted from being essentially an affair in the present tense to a multi-layered perspective in time and space, where actions take place now but are seen in the contexts of their past and their future” (94). Moreover, Sky Sports is a pay channel and not everyone chooses to pay a monthly fee to watch sports. Many would rather interact with the free or low-cost and easily accessible sports coverage the internet has to offer, which establishes good reason for Sky Sports to provide online content: “As TV audiences become more sophisticated and ever more ‘plugged in’ to their tablets, phones and other devices, there has been a marked increase in ‘dual screen’ television watching over the last two years, and

broadcasters now have new opportunities to reach viewers simultaneously across a myriad of platforms (“TV goes social”), which Sky affirms on its official website: “We [...] leverage the ever-increasing power of the digital environment as a channel for engagement” (“Stakeholders”). In addition to its multiple television channels, Sky Sports now has a website, a Facebook page, a Twitter and an Instagram account and its own YouTube channel: new media that “allow for the automation of many operations involved in media creation, manipulation, and access” (Manovich 32). The online communication services Sky Sports has established to meet its audience’s needs suggests the idea of immediacy, which, as Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin point out, is based on the desire for complete media-immersion, as “the user is no longer aware of confronting a medium, but instead stands in an immediate relationship to the contents of that medium” (24). This suggests that the endless possibilities of media distribution the internet allows should not be considered additional to live television, but rather an inevitable part of today’s sports culture, to which Miguel Sicart agrees: “For those of us who love sports, the data immediacy that modern broadcasting offers has fundamentally changed the experience of watching any sport on television” (94). Next to user friendliness and instant user accessibility, and thus enhanced audience engagement, online media also provide the broadcaster with low-cost tools to publish edited content on the web, which “offers an enhanced, networked understanding of sports that contextualises, explains, and even predicts actions while we are watching a game” (Sicart 94).

2.1.3 Manchester United’s Mediatisation

Manchester United has been a key player in the development of the contemporary commercial football industry, as, in 2000, it became “the first sporting club in the world to be valued at over £1 billion on the stock exchange” (Boyle 103). However, to prevent Manchester United’s value from being dependent on the London Stock Exchange, Malcolm Glazer and his family

delisted the club from it when they seized financial control over the club in 2005 (Millward 113). Manchester United continued growing and was the first sports club with a 3 billion pounds valuation in 2013 (Ozanian). In its *Money League*, Deloitte keeps a record of the richest football clubs in the world, in which Manchester United held the second position in 2014, despite having had their worst season since the introduction of the EPL (“Deloitte Money League: Manchester United Second”)¹. This can be considered the result of Manchester United having developed its own media infrastructure over the years, with its own television channel, *MUTV*, being the most important element: “MUTV [...] is viewed as a vehicle to drive the sale of the Manchester United brand around the world. [...] The key to MUTV’s success is the control of broadcast rights, currently shared among the entire Premier League rather than with individual clubs” (Boyle, 106). Additionally, Manchester United extends its global reach via its website, manutd.com, which “reportedly receives more than 8 million hits per month, the vast majority of which are from overseas” (Boyle 107).

Van Gaal currently manages a club which has continued to set the example for modern football enterprises, as most contemporary European football clubs maintain their respective television channels, websites and social media accounts to increase their global brand awareness. It sums up how modern football should be perceived: extraordinarily commercialised as a result of mediatisation, which, according to Boyle and Haynes, should be considered positive: “We would argue that broadly speaking the relationship between football and the media (television, radio and the press) has been good for both institutions; it has opened up new audiences and brought the game to a large global audience” (Boyle 112).

¹ The final of a pre-season friendly football tournament in the United States of America in the 2014 summer illustrates the current state of football in terms of financial power and international popularity, as the match-up was between Manchester United and Real Madrid, two absolute football giants: “[...] a packed 109,318 fans in Michigan Stadium [...] in an encounter worth up to \$20m (£11.9m) to the local economy [...] was broadcast live to over 40 nations. The attendance was a record for a ‘soccer’ game stateside, beating the 101,799 who saw the 1984 Olympic gold medal decider at Pasadena’s Rose Bowl” (Jackson).

3. The Iron Tulip

3.1 Ferguson's Heritage

Manchester United was founded in 1878 under the name of Newton Heath Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway, “little suspecting the impact they were about to have on the national, even global game” (ManUtd.com). Since 1910, the club has played its home games at Old Trafford, the *Theatre of Dreams*², which is one of the most famous football stadiums in the world. The most vital bit of history to take into account in establishing an interpretation of Manchester United as a football club with regard to Van Gaal's appointment as manager of the club, is the club's managerial history from 1986 to 2013, also known as the *Ferguson Era*. For 26 years, Sir Alex Ferguson managed Manchester United, winning 37 major trophies, including two European Cups (Graham). Consequently, having been the longest serving – and the most successful Manchester United manager ever, Ferguson is considered a club legend. When Ferguson retired at the age of 71, he personally chose David Moyes, who then managed Everton, as his successor (Jackson). Moyes, who had quite some boots to fill, was sacked in less than ten months: “The Scot's succession to Sir Alex Ferguson's trophy-laden years was an overwhelming disappointment as poor results blighted his short spell at Old Trafford, resulting in a seventh-place finish which was United's worst of the Premier League era” (“David Moyes: Manchester United failed [...]”). Ryan Giggs³ temporarily managed Manchester United for the remaining part of the 2013-2014 season, providing the club time to find a suitable successor, who would be able to cope with Ferguson's immense heritage and who could rebuild the squad to bring back glory to Old Trafford. On Monday 19 May, Van

² Sir Bobby Charlton, who made 758 appearances for Manchester United and, therefore is considered a club legend, was the first to nickname Old Trafford the Theatre of Dreams in John Riley's book *Soccer* in 1987 (Froggatt).

³ Having made 963 appearances for Manchester United, Ryan Giggs has the longest record as a Manchester United player. He is assistant manager to Van Gaal and his intended successor (manutd.com).

Gaal, a man with a strong personality who had already earned his stripes as a football club manager, was appointed as new manager of Manchester United (Jackson).

3.2 Identifying Van Gaal: The Manager

“I have a pet theory: slow footballers make the best managers,” says *New Statesman* journalist John Bew, “Alex Ferguson, Arsène Wenger and José Mourinho [...] all fit the bill. So, too, does Manchester United’s manager Louis van Gaal, who as a defensive midfielder for Sparta Rotterdam in the late 1970s was said to resemble ‘a slug on sandpaper.’”⁴ By comparing two different biographies of Van Gaal, written by Dutch journalists Hugo Borst and Maarten Meijer, Bew endeavours to construct a profile of the controversial 63-year old Dutchman.

Van Gaal started his managerial career in 1991 at Ajax Amsterdam, after which he coached FC Barcelona and the Dutch national team, followed by second terms at both FC Barcelona and Ajax; AZ Alkmaar, FC Bayern Munich and, before becoming coach of Manchester United, another – more successful – time the Dutch national team, leading it to the World Cup semi-finals. Van Gaal won every team he coached several championships and trophies, the 1995 Champions League victory with Ajax being his greatest achievement as of yet. This is where Bew draws up a parallel between Van Gaal and Ferguson, as they both have excelled at training younger players: “[Van Gaal’s] Ajax team which beat Milan in the 1995 UEFA Champions League final was celebrated for eight out of the 13 players who made it on to the pitch for that match having come through the club’s academy.” However, unlike Ferguson, not all of Van Gaal’s managerial endeavours turned out successfully, as, for instance, Van Gaal failed to qualify for the World Cup during his first term as coach of the Dutch national team, which he himself described as the biggest disappointment in his coaching career (Chadband). In the *Irish Independent*, Max Lui deducts from Meijer’s Van

⁴ Quoted from Hugo Borst’s Louis van Gaal biography *O, Louis*.

Gaal biography why Van Gaal was not always considered the best candidate to – indirectly – follow in Ferguson’s footsteps at Manchester United: “His career has been characterised by fluctuating fortunes, with remarkable triumphs earning him respect as one of the world’s greatest coaches and miserable failures leading commentators to write him off as stubborn and abrasive.”

3.2.2 Identifying Van Gaal: The Man

“If David Moyes was the shrinking violet who was sacked because he was too awed by the club to take it forward, United would be hiring the antithesis in a Dutchman whose confidence levels have earned him the nickname ‘Iron Tulip’” (Jackson), a title Van Gaal has not been able to dispose himself of as manager of Manchester United. Van Gaal is not only known for his achievements and failures as a football coach, but also for his complex personality, occasional controversial managing methods and way of communicating with journalists, which makes him “the subject of endless fascination and scrutiny” (Hytner). In addition to Van Gaal’s record as manager, an insight in his managing methods and controversies of the past have contributed to his mediated persona.

The answer to the question how exactly Van Gaal earned his nickname of Iron Tulip, lies in the man’s personality, which shines through in his training methods and his treatment of both players and journalists. Van Gaal describes himself as a “relationships coach” (Hytner), something he is convinced he is only able to maintain by knowing every detail about both his players’ professional and personal lives: “He asks about family matters, such as the names of wives, partners and children, and also demands to know about whether their down-time includes trips to pubs and nightclubs or to the cinema and theatre” (Mullock). In addition to that, Van Gaal’s players need to adhere to a manifesto of strict rules “about

behaviour and discipline, limits on media and promotional work, and lunch and dinner rules in hostels and at training camps” (Mullock).

Whereas Van Gaal has proven himself an expert at coaching and developing younger players⁵, it has often been argued that his personality and training methods do not meet the approval of older, more experienced footballers, as has been the assumed reason for Van Gaal’s massive failure during his first term as coach of the Dutch national team, since the squad featured many star footballers who played for big clubs: “Years on and with reputations established, the relationship was not so productive. Egos collided” (Ronay). Exactly that collision between Van Gaal’s regime and unconvinced players’ – and journalists’ responses to it has marked and distorted Van Gaal’s relationship with the press:

Control is fundamental to Van Gaal and there are invariably problems when he feels that his authority over technical matters has been questioned. They flare regularly with the press. He once told a journalist: “Am I so smart or are you so stupid?” which has proved to be one of his most famous quotes, although disagreements with club colleagues have pockmarked his career (Ronay).

With appointing Moyes as manager in 2013, Manchester United intended to prolong the Ferguson Era with a young Scotsman who had not yet established a significant managerial record, which turned out as a mistake: “United had not needed to look for a new manager for more than a quarter of a century, and had grown so far and so fast in that time that it was not straightforward from the inside to identify the type of manager to take over” (Wilson). In appointing Van Gaal as manager, Manchester United has contracted a man of whom ex-Bayern Munich president Uli Hoeness once said: “Van Gaal’s problem is not that he’s God, but he’s God’s very own father” (Jackson), which, although exaggeratedly, covers and explains the foundation of Van Gaal’s mediated persona. It suffices to say that Van Gaal is

⁵ “[...] and older ones who have remained open-minded and hungry” (Ronay).

convinced of himself, his record and his managerial achievements and methods, and that Manchester United has chosen to break with its Ferguson tradition by contracting a manager in a different mould to Moyes.

3.3 Mediated Persona

In terms of media influence, this study has, as of yet, been restricted to sports' reach and financial power. To, eventually, understand how Van Gaal's mediated persona differs from the British media representation of the Dutch, it is important to consider how media assign meaning and can control opinions and views. Media, both old and new, are part of media discourse. According to Michel Foucault, discourse determines meaning: it controls how a subject is treated. The views and ways of thinking most apparent in the media control how people receive the subject at hand and influence, whether consciously or not, how it is assigned meaning (Hall 29). Foucault's theory is based on a constructionist approach, of which linguist Ferdinand de Saussure is considered the founding father: "For our purposes, his importance lies not in his detailed work in linguistics, but in his general view of representation and the way his model of language shaped the *semiotic* approach to the problem of representation in a wide variety of cultural fields" (Hall 16). Saussure regards language as a system of signs which communicate meaning in context with each other (Hall 10-11). According to Saussure, a sign consists of two elements: the signifier, the actual sound, image or word one hears or sees; and the signified, the mental concept with which the signifier is associated: "Both are required to produce meaning but it is the relation between them, fixed by our cultural and linguistic codes, which sustains representation" (Hall 16). Foucault's Saussure-based definition of discourse does not include a set subject, but is applicable to many fields of study, as it excludes Saussure's linguistic focus, but "includes many other elements of practice and institutional regulation" (Hall 36) and "is concerned with

the ways in which broader beliefs, world views and social structures are embedded in and reinforced in the use of verbal or written communication (Hodkinson 73). Furthermore, Paul Hodkinson argues: “Focussing on various elements of vocabulary, grammar and syntax analysts ask questions about how the particular formulations used position the speaker and the audience, what they include and exclude and how they invite us to understand events, individuals, groups and identities” (73), which is what this study endeavours to give an account of. By applying Saussure’s theory on Van Gaal’s mediated persona, Van Gaal becomes the signifier; and all concepts and sentiments revolving the man, the signified, of which Stuart Hall says:

If the relationship between a signifier and its signified is the result of a system of social conventions specific to each society and to specific historical moments, then all meanings are produced within history and culture. They can never be finally fixed but are always subject to change, both from one cultural context and from one period to another. There is thus no single, unchanging, universal ‘true meaning’ (17).

Moreover, Hall argues that, considering the shifting character of meanings, “‘taking the meaning’ must involve an active process of *interpretation*. Meaning has to be actively ‘read’ or ‘interpreted’” (17). This means that Van Gaal’s mediated persona is an interpretation of the signified, which excludes the possibility of Van Gaal’s mediated persona being fixed and supports the idea that it is a product of media representation.

It could be argued that media have the power to control – or at least influence – public opinion and, therefore, play a role in how media users interpret a public figure and his or her behaviour as a result of his or her representation in the media. It is, however, important to keep in mind that a persona is never established entirely as a result of its media representation, which John Corner illustrates in the light of political persona: “Any analysis of political persona must recognise that performance, involving various degrees of self-consciousness and

calculated deceit, is a constituent factor of social life, including the realm of ‘private life’ (68), which means that, next to its media representation, the self-presentation of a public figure determines a big part of how one is perceived as well. However, most – if not all – public figures’ statements and actions reach us via some sort of medium, as, assumingly, we do not know these people personally. Jessica Evans addresses public figures as celebrities, since “if celebrities are the few, known by the many, then people can only become celebrities through the transmission of their image: *celebrity by definition* requires mediation” (19). Evans thus argues that a mediated persona is not necessarily fixed, since: “Rather than being simply a meaning contained within one individual text, such as one film, persona involves the *circulation* of meanings across different media, different genres and different formats. It may involve aspects of typical roles they play, the image they present in interviews and on chat-shows, celebrity ‘inside gossip’ and so on” (19). Accordingly, Van Gaal, in his role as a public figure, is subject to media representation and, next to his public behaviour and managerial choices, his persona is created and disseminated by the media.

3.3.2 The Dutch Dictator

An analysis of what Van Gaal was asked during his first official press conference as manager of Manchester United will help to illustrate what Van Gaal’s mediated persona comprises. Additionally, to uncover how Van Gaal’s mediated persona has been developed by the British media, the responses to – and the coverage of Van Gaal’s controversial response to West Ham United manager Sam Allardyce, who called Manchester United “long ball United”, will be scrutinised.

On 17 July 2014, Van Gaal had his first press conference as Manchester United manager, at which *BBC News* correspondent Andy Swiss asked him: “You have a reputation for having a very strong character, a strong personality. For the fans and for the players, can

you give us an idea of how you would describe your style of management?” (Sky Sports 11:21-35). Van Gaal responded by describing himself as a democratic and empathetic human being. He agreed that he had a strong personality, but claimed his other traits were more important and the key to his personality. A bit later during the press conference, *The Times* correspondent James Ducker claimed Van Gaal had a reputation of being autocratic, of which Van Gaal immediately said it was unfair. When asked by Ducker why this reputation was unfair, Van Gaal responded: “Because the media want to show that part of my personality, but that part is like this [he gestures ‘small’]. But when you always repeat that, then everybody thinks like that” (Sky Sports 14:25-15:06). Not only did Van Gaal concisely explain how media representation works; he also rejected the mediated persona he has been ascribed. Yet, Van Gaal has been portrayed as an autocrat ever since he started managing at the age of 39, which, as Van Gaal explained, is the result of a misunderstanding: “‘Autocratic’ and ‘strong personality’ are not the same words; [...] a lot of people think it’s the same word” (Sky Sports 15:07-16:01). The journalists’ questions implicate the assumption of Van Gaal being an autocrat to be true, as they start with statement. This supports the idea that a mediated persona is a product of both the self-presentation of the public figure as well as his media representation, however Van Gaal may see himself. It is clear that the ultimate control and strict rules Van Gaal maintains and considers part of his philosophy are regarded as symptomatic of an autocratic personality by the media and, therefore, by media users.

Another aspect of Van Gaal’s mediated persona to take into account is his conviction that he constantly has to prove that he is right, approaching every question or statement regarding his managerial choices as an assault on his authority. The aftermath of the EPL confrontation between West Ham United and Manchester United on 8 February 2015, which ended in a 1-1 draw after a last minute equaliser by Manchester United, illustrates this. After 70 minutes, Van Gaal had changed his team’s playing style, which secured them the draw in

the end. During a post-match interview, West Ham United manager Sam Allardyce said “in the end, we couldn’t cope with *long-ball United*” (Sky Sports 0:00-18), referring to Van Gaal’s changed tactics. However, during the post-match press conference, Van Gaal explained he did not agree with his colleague’s interpretation of the match: “Because I expected this question [i.e. what Van Gaal thought about Allardyce’s comments], I have made an interpretation of the data of this game and I have to say it’s not a good interpretation of Big Sam. [...] West Ham United have played 71 percent of the long balls to the forwards, and we 49” (Sky Sports 0:19-2:54). Not only did Van Gaal tell this to the press; moreover, he visualised Allardyce’s wrong by showing and handing out a four-page dossier of statistics to the attendant journalists, which, subsequently, caused controversy: “What Louis van Gaal needs to learn quickly about English football is that Manchester United managers are supposed to wind everyone else up, not get suckered so easily into making fools of themselves by other managers’ comments” (Wilson). Manchester United legend Paul Scholes called Van Gaal’s action “bizarre”, claiming a Manchester United manager should not take the remarks of a West Ham United manager that seriously (Flanagan). Even the facial expression of Manchester United’s media manager Karen Shotbolt when Van Gaal made her distribute the dossier to the journalists showed disapproval of Van Gaal’s action, indicating the manager acted without having had or having accepted any advice from club people. Hence, Paul Wilson draws the conclusion that Van Gaal’s self-confidence and his constant endeavours to prove his right and expertise can and will work against him: “Anyone who has followed the Dutchman’s career for any length of time will know that no one in the world could possibly be as smart as the Manchester United manager thinks he is”, which warns Van Gaal to be careful with similar actions in the future, as he will be criticised for them; but also implicates that such behaviour will only stimulate his mediated autocratic persona.

4. Identification through Football

4.1 National Identity

The last bit of information to take into account in understanding how Van Gaal's mediated persona relates to the British media representation of the Dutch, comprises how media define and maintain a national identity; how this identity shines through in football; and, lastly, what the British consider Dutchness to represent.

According to Foucault, media produce meaning through discourse; "it governs the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about" (Hall 29). Like any other concept, the construction of a national identity is subject to media discourse, since, as Hodgkinson points out, communities are constructed through "formulations of language and the positioning of speaker and audience in relation to these" (73). This does not mean that solely the way of talking about and making sense of a national identity is determined by discourse; moreover, "by definition, it [discourse] 'rules out', limits and restricts other ways of talking, of conducting ourselves in relation to the topic or constructing knowledge about it" (Hall 29). W. Russell Neuman considers national identity in the light of the recent decline in usage of traditional media aimed at a mass audience, as communities have become increasingly divided, whereas common cultural and political national identities used to be reinforced by the mass media. According to Neuman, a national identity is based on the principles of both community and pluralism: "A national identity is not the sum of a series of rational calculation of individual self-interest. A sense of community and belonging meets fundamental human needs that transcend self-interest calculations" (367). It is important that Neuman bases his definition of national identity on the decline of traditional mass media usage, since, by doing so, he recognises the pluralism of most modern, new media-orientated societies; however, he also shows that a national identity is strongly mediated, since "when

the hubbub of conflicting voices gets to be extreme, people retreat and seek solace in the common norms of national identity” (371).

4.1.2 National Identity in Sports

Sport and media are undeniably intertwined, but to gain a greater understanding of how sport manifests itself in society and reflects its norms and values, the representation of sport with regard to national identities must be elaborated. If not physically attending a sports match, every television or radio report, or online image, clip, soundbite or whatnot of a sport event that reaches us, is a mediated representation of the actual events on the sporting ground, which Hans-Jörg Stiehler and Mirko Marr explain: “On the one hand sport is a social system of its own: for those who are active in it as well as for those who are only watching it, sport includes many varieties of social behaviour. On the other hand sport is a specific area of sense-making. There is a need for a broad public to receive explanations that make rules and results understandable” (139). In *The Language of Sport*, Adrian Beard says: “One way in which sport is represented is through ideas surrounding national identity” (33). However, national identities are also represented through sports, which causes the risk of lapsing into stereotyping. Beard illustrates this in the light of the common portrayal of Swedish sportsmen and women, who are generally considered cool, calm and psychologically strong, which, for instance, earned Swedish tennis player Björn Borg the nickname of *Ice Borg*: “The origin of this stereotype may in part reflect a view of the Swedish climate and landscape, rather than any scientifically proven psychological facts, but the stereotype is strong enough to be seen in sports coverage throughout Europe” (33). Likewise, the stereotype of German sport teams often involves “discipline, reliability, teamwork and efficiency – many of the qualities said to belong to German manufacturing” (Beard 34), or “metaphors suggesting military character” (Bernstein 15). Sander Gilman defines stereotypes as “a crude set of mental representations of

the world. They are palimpsests on which the initial bipolar representations are still vaguely legible. They perpetuate a needed sense of difference between the ‘self’ and the ‘object’” (278), suggesting stereotypes merely consist of attitudes towards foreigners. However, when considering sports coverage, one might argue that stereotypes may also appear in media coverage of the own nation, as long as “there are positive features to be found, features which can give a sense of national identity and well-being” (Beard 34).

4.2. Total Football

Having covered how a national identity manifests itself through media and, therefore, through sports coverage, the question remains how the British mediated representation of the Dutch has been established and maintained until today. By considering how Dutch football is regarded as a metaphor for Dutch identity, the representation of Dutch identity should become clear. Frank J. Lechner argues that “because Dutch identity is in flux, it would be premature to declare what ‘it’ really is”; however, he adds: “The Dutch attitude towards football provides a clue” (24). In addition, Lechner argues that “Dutch football discourse helps to define what the nation is” (5), which supports the idea of approaching Dutch national identity through football.

In *Brilliant Orange*, David Winner explores how the Dutch style of football reflects and embodies the Netherlands’ culture and history; he connects the cultural revolutions the Netherlands has experienced since the Second World War with the development of Dutch football: “As it was with society, so it was with football. At the beginning of the sixties, Dutch football – which within a decade would be considered the most innovative and sophisticated in the world – was startlingly unrefined, amateurish and tactically crude” (6). The foundation for what is known as Dutch football today was, as Winner mentions, laid in

the 1960s, with Rinus Michels⁶ and Johan Cruyff⁷ as its founding fathers. *Total football* is the term for the dynamic style of play with which Dutch football is still associated: possession play, characterised by players continually switching positions, enabling them to play offensive football from every angle. However, with regard to Dutch national identity, the offensive nature of total football is not the most important aspect of the system to consider; it is its beauty:

When in the late sixties intellectuals, artists, writers and students flooded to De Meer [the then Ajax stadium] for the first time to watch the nascent Total Footballers in action, the idea began to take hold that what Cruyff and the others were doing was something more than football. It was no longer men kicking a ball around a muddy field. It was something refined and intriguing. It was Art (Winner 131).

The unparalleled refinement of Dutch football as established in the 1960s is what continues to be associated with the mediated Dutch national identity as of today. An underlying principle to take into account is the Dutch longing for appealing football, which tends to subordinate the desire to win: “they presumably take pride in going down with honour” (Lechner 4). The style of play that still is considered Dutch football is essentially meant to entertain and show off: to win is not the most important aspect of the game; it is how to play: “Other nations and football cultures may have produced greater goalscorers, more dazzling individual ball-artists and more dependable and efficient tournament-winning teams. But no one has ever imagined or structured their play as abstractly, as architecturally, in such a measured fashion as the Dutch” (Winner 44). However, when considering the contemporary style of football of the

⁶ Rinus Michels (1928-2005) is a legendary Dutch football coach and is considered the inventor of total football. With it, he guided the Dutch national team to the 1974 World Cup final and, most notably, to the 1988 European Championship final, which resulted in the first and only Dutch national football triumph ever. Michels was voted coach of the century in 1999 (Lawton).

⁷ “It always struck me that Cruyff is not simply the best-known Dutch person alive – he’s probably the most important. How many Dutch politicians can you name? Not many, I’ll bet. But Dutch footballers are known and adored around the world – Cruyff most of all (Winner 26).

Dutch national team, introduced at the 2010 World Cup in South Africa, one could argue that total football has made place for something else: “Although the Netherlands reached the final of the [2010] World Cup, there were those who saw only disgrace in their performance: They weren’t Dutch enough” (Wilson). In *The Telegraph*, David Winner says that “*Oranje* has struck a Faustian bargain with pragmatism and this has triggered an anguished debate in Holland”, which he explains as follows: “One point of view is a version of the Biblical rhetorical question: ‘For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole World Cup, and lose his own soul?’ Another insists that after 40 years of beautiful losing, Holland now has the moral right to win ugly.” The total football playstyle of the 1960s is the signified that has continued to be associated with Dutch football, the signifier, which Winner marks as the cause for the ongoing debate: “Holland’s path to the prize is blocked by their blood brothers, by the more authentic version of their better selves.”

4.2.2 Van Gaal’s Philosophy

The specific considered Dutch kind of football influences how Van Gaal, as a consequence of his self-presentation and his team’s playing style, is represented and assessed. Van Gaal has used Rinus Michels’ idea of total football as his starting point in coaching, which he has continued to carry out. However, Van Gaal has shaped total football “to the different circumstances he found as a manager in Spain and Germany” (Bew), and now does the same in England, since, according to Van Gaal himself, “it [is] a philosophy, rather than a system” (Robson), which Winner enforces: “To solve the problems of congested pitches and massed, mobile, modern defences, Van Gaal, working on the principles of Cruyff and Michels, developed a flexible, integrated system based on speed of thought, movement and passing” (227).

Sport is represented through national identity, which does not restrict itself to national teams, but also concerns individual athletes and coaches. Although Van Gaal had already evidently reshaped Michels' total football in 2009, when he managed AZ and led them to their second ever national championship⁸, Dutch football, and therefore a team managed by a Dutch coach, is still expected to represent Dutch national identity as instituted in the 1960s, to which, according to Ronay, people should start to reconcile: "It is, of course, a very English thing to worry overly about positional certainties. Van Gaal, in his role as post-Total Football innovator, will tell you this is simply what elite-level modern football is now, a game of fluidity and shifting roles."

⁸ "AZ's organically grown new method appears to be the mortal enemy of the Dutch football school because of its reluctant style" (Schaerlaeckens).

5. Conclusion

Louis van Gaal describes himself as an empathetic human being, yet not a single medium or journalist recognises him as such. Van Gaal is approached and represented as an autocratic manager; whereas he claims himself to always act democratically. Van Gaal lives in disagreement with his mediated persona, which, however developed by the media, consists for a significant part of one's self-presentation. The sobriquet of *The Iron Tulip* covers his mediated persona: he is convinced of himself; peremptory; and he is Dutch.

As a result of the mediated representation of Dutch identity, Van Gaal's Manchester United is expected to show the elegance with which Dutch football has been associated since the 1960s, but he does not; he strives for it, but Van Gaal has come to realise that, definitely when one is responsible for a club valued over 3 billion pounds, the result is at least as important as the team's style of play. Although based on the considered Dutch principles of Michels and Cruyff, Van Gaal's football philosophy does not fit the representation of Dutch identity, which Winner explains: "Louis van Gaal is generally considered the creator of a football system or machine. It might be more accurate to describe him as the originator of a new *process* for playing the game" (230). In a *Manchester Evening News* article on Van Gaal's work at Manchester United, James Robsen offers a solution to the continuous misunderstanding: "Louis van Gaal arrived with a reputation as the champion of Total Football. Yet it is the Dutchman's ability to roll up his sleeves and win ugly that is proving most effective at Manchester United." Thus, Van Gaal's mediated persona differs from the common representation of Dutch national identity to the extent that, although he is Dutch, Van Gaal no longer adheres to the core principles of what is considered Dutch football, as he has chosen to focus on results, rather than on artistry.

Since it is restricted to just Van Gaal's time as manager of Manchester United, not wholly scrutinising every media-related controversy of which Van Gaal has been the subject

during his managerial career, this conclusion leaves room for further research. By taking into account and thoroughly studying Van Gaal's mediated persona from the beginning of his managerial career until present, a more complete account of how a mediated persona is established could be given. Moreover, to demonstrate to what extent Van Gaal's mediated persona differs from the British media representation of Dutch identity, one could consider to study not only the representation of Dutch identity through football, but, for instance, also through history, art and architecture. Extending further research with all of Van Gaal's controversies and characteristics, and adding a more complete account of the elements of the representation of Dutch identity, will give a full account of the core issue discussed in this study.

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