

Super Bowl Superness

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The Rev. Norman Vincent Peale once said that if Jesus were alive today he would be at the Super Bowl. No doubt the Reverend was on to something.

It is Super Bowl Week. It is Super Bowl L, or for those who have abandoned their ties to the Roman Empire, Super Bowl 50. I have been around for all of these games, the first several of which were rather bland affairs, poorly played and lacking much suspense. The one exception of course was Super Bowl III, the legendary game before which Joe Namath guaranteed a New York Jets victory, the first by the AFL against the NFL. The following year Kansas City pummeled the Minnesota Vikings establishing parity between the leagues by showing the Jets win had not been a fluke.

It is difficult to believe that there was a time when the outcome of the game was important. In point of fact the game is now lost in the midst of the extravagant deluge of excess. Few really care about winners and losers on the field, as the real contest involves the advertisers and their creations. Who will win the title, "most memorable commercial?"

Television commercials, one critic said, represent the new creative character of film in America. They tell dramatic stories in short time sequences with creative force that can be seen in few other artistic venues. Each Super Bowl is the equivalent of a film festival and it comes in the middle of festival season. There is Sundance, Cannes, Berlin, Toronto, and now the Super Bowl. The difference of course is that millions more will view the Super Bowl commercials than all the films at all the other festivals combined.

Then these same millions will offer their views on these commercials, rank them at websites, and pronounce their critiques on Facebook. Advertisers will measure the impact of these films in terms of sales, webpage hits, and general acclaim. Over the years there have been many commercials that have received high ratings on any number of forums and several stand out for their power.

The most memorable and the one with the greatest commercial impact was the parody of Orwell's "1984" which aired during Super Bowl XVIII in 1984. Directed by Ridley Scott and designed to introduce the Apple Macintosh this is still regarded as the [greatest commercial in Super Bowl History](#). Impressive from an artistic point of view, it was even more impressive in commercial results as some \$3.5M worth of computers were sold the next day, and within one hundred days sales eclipsed \$15M. Many remember this commercial and among those who remember only a few can tell you which teams played in Super Bowl XVIII.

There are other gauges of significance such as television ratings and the cost of advertising slots during the game. At the first Super Bowl thirty seconds of advertising cost \$37,500, within a decade it was \$800,000, it reached one million dollars in 1995, two million five years later, and three million in 2010. This year thirty seconds will cost the daring advertiser five million dollars.

Indeed in nearly every measure possible the Super Bowl has projected an upward curve. Television rights fees have soared, ticket prices have jumped, the TV ratings have gone through the roof with the Super Bowl now holding down nearly every position

in the top twenty-five rated television programs in U.S. television history.

As for the fans and the holiday atmosphere the economist Thorstein Veblen provided the most appropriate descriptive vocabulary with his notions of "conspicuous consumption," "display and emulation," and "conspicuous waste." It is in this dimension that the Super Bowl thrives and it is here that the game itself slips into the background.

The Super Bowl Party has become a national institution both at the upper levels of the society and at the grassroots. Starting at the top is the Commissioner's Party that early on established itself as a "must be seen at event." It was Commissioner Rozelle's showpiece of display with the chosen rich and famous invited to enjoy the extravagance. The venues for this party have been outsized and/or opulent, ranging from the floor of the Astrodome to the Miami International Airport just before it opened for business.

Over the years the exclusive parties have spread across the landscape of Super Bowl weekend to include the Player's Party, the ESPN Party, the CBS Party and a mass of other invitation only events. At the top of the list in recent years are the Skin Magazine Parties, the Playboy, Penthouse, and Maxim parties. Here display and emulation have their finest hour.

Moving down through the party chain there are the corporate parties which have been supplemented by the corporate tents for pre and postgame tax deductible schmoozing. The corporate boxes are stocked with fine wines, high end liquor, hors d'œuvres including the ubiquitous smoked salmon and caviar, and in some cases multi-course meals.

Many ordinary fans have their own version of "conspicuous consumption." In the 1990s an Ohio couple hosted an annual party featuring yard markers on the carpets, ice cubes shaped as footballs, TVs in every room, and large team helmets on the front lawn. There were unlimited snacks and drinks with the house decorated in the colors of the participating teams. Preparations started in November for this invitation only middle class suburban showpiece.

In homes and bars friends, co-workers, and acquaintances gather for the big day to eat, drink, and watch the commercials, with occasional glances at the game. It has become a mid-winter national holiday. On Super Sunday Americans consume food at a rate second only to Thanksgiving. 5,000 hot dogs are sold at the game, 49.2M cases of beer are sold on that day and 325M gallons are consumed. Along with the liquid refreshments 14,500 tons of chips and 8 million pounds of guacamole are devoured, and 1.23M chicken wings are eaten, enough wings to fill over one million football fields.

Who could possibly have time to watch the game with all this going on?

Another favorite are the excesses invented for the occasion. At Super Bowl XXII in San Diego a Super Salad was created across the border in Tijuana. The fourteen foot long, eight foot wide, and eighteen inch deep Caesar Salad was made from 840 heads of Romaine lettuce, 1,400 ounces of garlic oil, 175 lemons, 350 cups of croutons, 980 ounces of parmesan cheese, and 840 eggs. Why? Because celebrating the Super Bowl requires this level of excess.

In Downtown Minneapolis in January at the International Market Square, 25,000 tons of heated sand was dumped to create the setting for a beach party. This is the essence of conspicuous waste, as nature was reversed to no particular purpose except simply because it could be.

And what would all of this be without a dose of sex to add to the decadence quotient. Whether a traditional transaction or a "half-time quickie" is your preference, prostitutes aplenty flock to the Super Bowl. One member of the world's oldest profession once noted that "Pimps see the Super Bowl as a money-making opportunity sent by God."

And so it goes, on and on.

This week ESPN.com reported that new turf was being installed at Levi's Stadium for the big game. The cost, a paltry \$50,000, for grass carefully grown for the occasion on farmland east of San Francisco. Less expensive ordinary grass simply would not do.

So here we are at another Super Bowl inventing new ways to spend and waste at the highest cost possible. It's not easy, but apparently somebody has to do it.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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