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## **A Perfect Script? Manchester United's *Class of '92***

### **Abstract**

*The Class of '92* is a documentary film which features six Manchester United F.C. players who recount their time during a pivotal period for the club, English football and English society. The documentary claims to offer a commentary of Britain in the 1990s, but appears, without acknowledging the fact, to be a promotional vehicle to establish the six men as a brand labelled the Class of '92. Creating this brand necessarily involved presenting a selective account of their time and place with the film being little more than an advertisement, masquerading as an observational documentary. The film draws freely upon the symbolic capital held by the club and the city of Manchester and uses the Busby Babes/Munich chapter and the more recent 'Madchester scene' to forge a *Class of '92* brand by editing out those elements that did not accord with this project. The paper argues that a more complete representation of '90s Britain, whilst disrupting the intended narrative, would acknowledge the significant structural and commercial changes experienced by the club, the sport and the city in the last decade of the twentieth century. We suggest that the *Class of '92* invites the viewer to consider how the documentary film genre can contribute to brand development and promotion.

## Introduction

In this paper we focus on *The Class of '92*, a British documentary released in 2013, which features six Manchester United F.C. players during the mid-1990s. We discuss specific themes within, and missing from, the film and locate it in a broader sociocultural context and identify those factors which are inextricably linked to the club, English football and the city of Manchester. Notwithstanding the antipathy of much of the United States populace and media to soccer (Szymanski and Zimbalist, 2006), Manchester United F.C. is one of sport's most recognisable clubs, a global and highly valued brand and subject to extensive academic attention by those researching the consequences of English football's economic neoliberalisation (Andrews, 2004; Millward and Poulton, 2014; Porter, 2015; Rofe, 2014; Szymanski, 1998).

*The Class of '92* (hereafter *CO92*) documentary is built around key moments, a tactic common to the sport documentary genre. It begins in 1992 and closes in 1999 when Manchester United F.C. (hereafter MUFC) won 'the treble' comprising the FA Cup, the Premier League title and UEFA's European Champions League. The documentary purports to offer a sociocultural commentary on Britain in the 1990s orientated around six individuals: David Beckham, Nicky Butt, Ryan Giggs, Gary Neville, Phil Neville and Paul Scholes. This paper examines the representation of these six players and film's links with the iconic 'Busby Babes'. We contend that the film exploits the Busby Babes/Munich tragedy and the more recent 'Madchester scene' in an attempt to forge a Class of '92 brand by editing out those elements in the history of the club and city that did not accord with *CO92* project. We consider the aesthetic style found in specific segments, identify what was left out from the documentary and suggest reasons for these significant omissions. The film appeared, without acknowledging the fact, to be promotional – specifically to establish these six men as a brand labelled the Class of '92. This process involved constructing a highly selective account of their time and place with the film acting as little more than an advertisement, masquerading as observational documentary. The paper closes with a discussion of the legacy of the *CO92* documentary and considers 'what happened next'. In doing so, we explore the cinematic representation of re/constructed memory and question how the documentary uses a series of events in an attempt to construct a 'narrative of truth' for the viewer.

The film is read as an attempt to develop a *CO92* brand, based around the six featured players, which draws upon the symbolic capital held by MUFC, football and the city of Manchester, with this brand acting as a springboard for other *CO92*-themed activities and business ventures. We will argue that greater focus and accuracy needs to be given to the sociocultural context when using nonfiction media documentary techniques to (re)tell the past for contemporary and future consumption. We suggest that a more accurate representation of '90s Britain, whilst disrupting the intended narrative, would acknowledge the significant structural and commercial changes experienced by the club, the sport and the city in the last decade of the twentieth century.

### **Not another documentary about football!**

The sports documentary genre is one with a great deal of variety in terms of topic and presentational style. McDonald (2007:222) views the sports documentary as a form that can both 'represent reality and actively contribute to recreating that sporting reality' with Whannel (2008) suggesting they can seek to create alternative versions of events; thus while *CO92* adopts the format of an observational documentary and conforms to the established, conventional model of documentary film-making, there is clear evidence of mythologising the individuals, events and places depicted.

Recent soccer documentaries have often focused on individuals or teams; the '*CO92*' focuses on both. The film's directors, Ben and Gabe Turner, previously directed a documentary about black footballer Laurie Cunningham ('*First Among Equals*') which examined football and race relations in 1970s Britain, and a road-trip documentary, '*In the Hands of God*,' which followed five young British freestyle footballers on their journey through the Americas in an attempt to meet their football hero, Diego Maradona. In the bonus features section of the DVD release (*The Class of '92, The Making of*), Ben Turner suggests that "...you could tell the story of '90s Britain, and what happened there, through the story of these boys".

Substantial symbolic capital has been accumulated by MUFC over many years in the top flight of English football. In the 1980s and continuing into the 1990s, the club generated a commercial momentum that saw them become a global sports brand, claim a global following of 659 million adults and become the first football club to generate an annual revenue over £500m (McGovern, 2015). Whilst many individuals have good ideas for potential sports documentaries, securing the necessary funds is essential. The *CO92* directors were able to draw upon symbolic capital possessed by the club and a potential audience of millions, both of which made their documentary proposal an attractive proposition for the film funders, Universal (Bouchet, Hillairet and Bodet, 2013; Hill and Vincent, 2006). Upon its general release the film did generate a number of complimentary reviews (Horan, 2013; Parker, 2013; Richman, 2013; Wallace, 2013).

During the 1970s and 1980s football was described a 'slum sport played in slum stadiums increasingly watched by slum people' (*The Sunday Times*, 1985, cited in King 2002:93). Stadium disasters at Sheffield's Hillsborough ground, Bradford's Valley Parade, and the Heysel Stadium in Brussels, and on-going hooligan activity culminated in English teams being banned from European competitions (Taylor, 2008). The 1990s is the backdrop of *CO92*, with the changes that took place during this decade proving to be a watershed with the creation of a 'whole new ball game' (Conn, 2002; 2005). The introduction of all-seater stadia, the launch by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation of pay-per-view satellite television (Sky) in the UK, and individual football club owners seeking greater profits, all contributed to the creation of the English Premier League in 1992 (Bower, 2007). The first deal to televise English

Premier League (EPL) matches was for a five year period and cost BSkyB (the precursor to Sky) £305 million. This contrasts with the UK live broadcasting rights for the three seasons 2016/17 through 2018/19 which saw the broadcasters pay over £5 billion (EPL, 2015).<sup>1</sup>

### **Overview of the film's structure**

CO92 adopts a conventional structure, with a linear narrative and content typical of the sport documentary genre (match footage, reconstructions, stills, interviews, but lacking a characteristic 'voice of god' narration). The film opens in 1999 at Barcelona's Nou Camp stadium where MUFC are playing in the Champions League final against Bayern Munich. A montage of images from the 1980s is used to 'set the scene' without explanatory captions, which limits understanding, but which is sufficient to convey that this was a period of significant domestic social unrest, even for Queen Elizabeth II, who is shown describing her own 'annus horribilis'. This montage is intercut with footage of six young players and the implicit suggestion that sport and politics do not mix: the world seems to be bypassing these six youths who remain focused on their football. These short introductory vignettes establish a hagiographic narrative of the six players whose profiles are revisited and developed throughout the film.

In terms of the film's *mise en scène*, a cohort of another six individuals (namely: film director and MUFC supporter Danny Boyle; Gary Mountford, bass-player for the band The Stone Roses and MUFC fan; former teammate Eric Cantona, former footballer Zinedine Zidane; former MUFC youth coach Eric Harrison; and former Prime Minister Tony Blair) provide 'talking heads' comments and the links between match footage, along with the six players reminiscing around a meal table. Some of these six individuals have a clear connection to the club and/or city, but the absence of significant others, for example, Alex Ferguson, who lived through the whole period addressed in the film, is important and is addressed later in the paper. The film follows a chronological order and structured around six matches:

- 1992 FA Youth Cup Final vs Crystal Palace (*'where it all started'*)
- 1999 FA Cup 4th round vs Liverpool
- 1999 FA Cup semi-final replay vs Arsenal
- 1999 English Premier League (EPL) decider vs Tottenham Hotspur
- 1999 FA Cup Final vs Newcastle United
- 1999 Champions League Final vs FC Bayern Munich (*'where it all ended'*).

The players are seen revisit significant sites including the Cliff training ground which is presented as the formative place for the CO92 and which features more extensively in the film than MUFC's home stadium at Old Trafford.

The film is punctuated by clips of 'in game' match footage with each player profiled in short sequences in which they demonstrate their footballing skills and poise on a simple unidentified playing field. The film closes with six unnamed young boys who gather in a local park and begin to kick a ball around. As the sun shines, the six central characters in the film reflect on the uniqueness of their situation, when a group of

young local players were able to progress from an academy side and enter the first team and achieve sustained sporting success. However, in the same way these sequences have been carefully constructed, the viewer is presented with one version of the events that transpired, a version told with embellishments and significant omissions. By drawing upon carefully chosen, and omitting, aspects of the club and city's history, and their respective symbolic capital, we argue that the use of a nonfiction medium to (re)tell the story of '90s Britain' has resulted in a selective and misleading representation.

### **The Busby Babes and Fergie's Fledglings**

The theme of the 'Busby Babes' and the events of 1958 form a central narrative in the documentary. Any consideration of MUFC would be incomplete without reference to what Mellor (2004) views as the fundamental turning point in the development of one of the world's most famous clubs and what Wagg (2004) has suggested is perhaps sport's most remembered catastrophe: the Munich air crash in 1958 in which 23 people, including eight first team players, died. Under the management of Matt Busby the team was christened the 'Busby Babes' in 1951 by the Manchester press corps (Morris, 2007), due to his selection of players in their early twenties (Rofe, 2014). Frank (2013) concludes it is the combination of youth, death and unrealised potential which continues to inform the legend of the 'Busby Babes' and as Wagg (2004) notes, the post-Munich disaster discourse has seen the deceased footballer's rooted in notions of class and community and presented as sporting heroes rather than celebrities.

CO92 makes repeated references to the Busby Babes/Munich period whilst editing out those elements that do not accord with the film's intended narrative. This period continues to resonate at the club in the various physical representations found in and around the stadium (Dee, 2014). In the documentary the players visit many of the physical memorials of the Busby era which for Huggins (2012) serve simultaneously as a form of remembrance, sacred space and tourist attraction. In the CO92 the directors present a similar, albeit less tragic, group of players who share the working class origins of the club and its locality. In recalling the historical events of the 1958 crash within the context of the CO92 we see how the sports documentary obliges us to think of these events in line with the dominant narrative. The story of the how Busby rebuilt the team to win the 1968 European Cup has become part of the club's most celebrated stories, and David Beckham, one of the six players profiled, recounts this in the film. He speaks of a link between that which was built by Busby in the aftermath of the crash and the success of the club under the management of (Sir) Alex Ferguson. This use of athlete's recollections of events contributes to what Oates (2014) refers to as a reconstitution of the sporting past and in this respect perpetuates what Mellor (2004: 278) calls the 'discourse of loss and recovery,' based on the theme of success in the face of adversity. The success of MUFC as a modern soccer club is arguably more a product of structural and financial factors rather than with invocations of teams of the past, irrespective of the esteem in which they are held. Nonetheless, in the

competitive marketplace that is elite sport, the power of heritage is an advantageous selling point (Friedman and Silk, 2005).

CO92 draws upon the mythology that surrounds the 'Busby Babes' which is a unique marketing opportunity rooted in an era when football was steeped in tradition, locality and working class loyalty (Frank, 2014). The film's inclusion of many of the physical representations and the CO92 players' reverential recollections of Matt Busby and his 'Babes' attempts to create a sense of proximity between two teams from vastly different eras. The utilisation of the symbolic capital held by the 'Busby Babes' and Manchester United F.C. and the film's presentation of these historical period does not encourage the viewer to think beyond an unbroken connection between the two periods, teams and individuals. This tale of 'tragedy and rebirth' which is inherent in the club's sense of self, and reproduced in the film, is firmly rooted in a sense of place, the city of Manchester.

### **'Madchester'**

In this section we contend that the film overly identifies the CO92 players and MUFC with the city and the 'Madchester scene' and downplays the fact that many leading Madchester figures identified with Manchester City rather than United.<sup>2</sup> This is evident in the players' reflections, in the remarks of the 'talking heads' and in the film's soundtrack which make repeated reference to popular culture in general and pop music in particular. In the documentary, the film director Danny Boyle (one of the 'talking head' contributors) identifies how the 1980s were dominated by Thatcherism, a neoliberal ideology that sought to emasculate the collective working class identity of northern industrial cities (O'Connor and Wynne, 1996). Successive right-wing Conservative governments became concerned with what they saw as increasingly ungovernable northern cities and towns, and thus supported the establishment of development/regeneration corporations (Roberts and Sykes, 2004). The Central Manchester Development Corporation, established in 1988, took advantage of the damage caused by an IRA bomb (in 1996) to regenerate large parts of the city centre and transform previously industrial areas into spaces designed for the production and consumption of 'culture', including Manchester's Northern Quarter, its Gay Village and the Salford Quays. Part of this regeneration saw the city bid to host the summer Olympic Games in 1990 (for the 1996 Olympiad), and again in 1993 (for the 2000 Games). Although neither bid was successful they did lay the foundations for the city hosting the Commonwealth Games in 2002.

The postmodern reimagining and rebranding of Manchester was partially created through culture and musical activity as evidenced by examples sprinkled throughout the film. The term 'Madchester' is identified by the six players and the 'talking heads' as emblematic of the '90s; however, there is a misrepresentation when they appear to conflate 'Madchester' (late 1980s/early 1990s) with 'Britpop' and 'Cool Britannia' (mid-1990s). The late 1980s/early 1990s was the high point for the 'Madchester scene' and its indie-rave bands such as New Order, Stone Roses, Happy Mondays and Inspiral

Carpets (Haslam, 2000; Robb, 2009). The indie-rave scene is a direct ancestor of the 'Britpop' movement with the link between 'Madchester' and 'Britpop' / 'Cool Britannia' provided by the Manchester band, Oasis (Harris, 2010). In seeking to equate MUFC with Manchester/Madchester, the film makes little mention of Manchester City F.C. as the significant 'other' and how it was traditionally regarded as 'more Mancunian' (Conn, 2013; James, 2012; Shindler, 1998). Manchester City F.C. was also the club of choice of Ian Curtis (Joy Division), Mike Joyce and Johnny Marr (The Smiths) and Mark E. Smith (The Fall). Leading Manchester figures, including the Noel and Liam Gallagher (Oasis), made known their dislike for United, seeing City as the true representatives of city's working class and who embodied opposition to the increasing commercialisation of the game - before their club was bought by the Abu Dhabi United Group in 2008.

Although the city of Manchester took a postmodern turn and sought to reimagine itself through sport, music and popular culture, its reputation for violent gang and drug culture continued throughout the 1990s as did its high levels of unemployment, underemployment, poverty and homelessness (Fitzgerald, 2015). These social problems, while not unique to Manchester, continue to be found in many of the UK's northern, deindustrialised cities (Pidd, 2016). Had the film noted these issues it would certainly have disrupted the narrative, but made for a more accurate representation of the story of '90s Britain. The omissions and confusion over the timeline by those providing the film's commentary is possibly due to the film-maker's desire to create a coherent, albeit incomplete, narrative. Similar to the tactic used when referencing the Busby/Munich chapter, the film draws selectively upon the 'Madchester' period and omits those elements that did not fit the film's narrative or purpose.

### **'You'll Never Win Anything with Kids'**

After MUFC lost to Aston Villa F.C. in the opening game of 1995/96 season, respected TV pundit Alan Hansen offered what has since become a famously incorrect judgment on the team's performance claiming that "*You'll never win anything with kids*". However, Alex Ferguson's Busby-like selection of a largely youthful team ultimately proved to be a successful formula and regularly included the main protagonists featured in the documentary. The phrase 'Class of 92' has become synonymous with the six individuals at the heart of this story; David Beckham, Nicky Butt, Ryan Giggs, Gary Neville, Phil Neville and Paul Scholes and has all but replaced another term in football fan lexicon that has seldom been heard since the film's release. 'Fergie's Fledglings' with its echoes of 'Busby Babes' was used frequently in the press to describe a broader collection of players that progressed from the academy system at MUFC to the first team between 1988 and 1995 (Tyrrell and Meek, 1994). However CO92 mistakenly associates the six players featured with the victorious 1992 FA Youth Cup winning team since Phil Neville and Paul Scholes did not feature that year.

The academy system at MUFC is repeatedly credited in the documentary with the emergence of the featured players with each relating tales from their journey to

professional football. Each of the six players is represented as a variation on the white, working class male archetype: Giggs is the prodigiously talented older brother; Butt is the tough local lad; Scholes, the quiet, model professional and the two Neville brothers as focussed hardworking, sporting all-rounders. In the film David Beckham is presented as somewhat of an outsider, being the only 'southerner' and, although working class, lacking the 'northern working class' authenticity the other five players draw upon (Vincent, Kian and Pedersen, 2011). Gill's (2003) description of the 'New Lad' was a dominant cultural narrative of masculinity in '90s Britain and underpins the film's depiction of all six players. However, despite the fact that they are all heterosexual there is almost no mention of interactions with females.

English professional football is an almost exclusively male preserve with the academy system a prime site for the demonstration and reinforcement of traditional working class values (Parker, 2001). In the journey from boys to men, the six players recount their exposure to a series of experiences that clearly bear many of the hallmarks of hazing (Waldron, Lynn and Krane, 2011; Clayton, 2012). This assimilation through humiliation is framed by the film's directors as a positive one which produced resilient young professionals who are both humble and deferent to the norms and rules, both written and unwritten, of the club. This approach supports McDonald's (2007) claim that sports documentaries 'post-Michael Moore' (e.g. *Bowling for Columbine*, *Fahrenheit 9/11*) are often complicit in reinforcing dominant ideologies, here when the young players are faced with accepting of traditional working class, masculine values, behaviours and roles.

A recurrent motif throughout the documentary is that of the playing field with match footage complemented by several specially staged outdoor sequences. As the documentary unfolds, the transition from the youth academy and Cliff training ground to the first team is shown via a visit to Old Trafford's 'theatre of dreams'. As Gary Neville, David Beckham and Paul Scholes emerge from the darkness of the players' tunnel and approach the pitch, Neville is heard to invoke the spirit, integrity and fight inherent in the people of Manchester. Towards the end of the documentary the six players are filmed arriving at The Cliff, the club's former training ground, where they are reunited with eight former academy players who have enjoyed much more modest footballing success. All arrive in the car park and proceed to line out in retro-replica MUFC shirts and shorts with all their attendant nostalgic charm (Stride, Williams and Catley, 2015). They then play an informal game of football with the soundtrack provided by Manchester band The Stone Roses and finish the game as the sun begins to set. Special attention is given to Raphael Burke who is identified as one of the most talented academy players of that period. The cautionary tale of Burke's 'wasted talent' is juxtaposed with the industriousness of the CO92 players, especially Gary Neville whose willingness to 'graft' whilst lacking some of the skills of those around him, reinforces the idea of sport as a meritocracy. There were other players, such as Keith Gillespie (who lost over £7 million and was declared bankrupt in 2010, see McBride, 2014) and Ben Thornley (who was badly injured in a reserve game in 1994), who did



make the transition from academy and featured in the 1992 FA Youth Cup-winning side alongside the CO92 players, but who were notably absent from this staged reunion (Greeves, 2013). That no reference is made to them, or explanation offered for their absence, is more evidence that the documentary has edited out those elements which do not accord with the creation and valorisation of the CO92.

### **Significant Omissions**

We view the CO92 documentary as a text worthy of analysis and in this section discuss what was left out in order to create a very particular narrative. The documentary opens with the UEFA Champions League Final and shows Teddy Sheringham and Ole Gunnar Solskjaer scoring the late goals which secured the victory, although neither player features beyond this isolated, highly emotive footage. The achievements of this treble winning team, often considered among the greatest of any English club, was the collective effort of a squad comprising 31 players recruited from several countries - England (17); Norway (4); Holland (3); Republic of Ireland (2); Denmark (1); Northern Ireland (1); Trinidad & Tobago (1); Scotland (1); Sweden (1); and Wales (1). The film limits its focus to the six featured players despite Paul Scholes having been suspended for the Champions League final and Phil Neville having only watched from the substitutes' bench. One of the players central to the team throughout the 1990s, but wholly absent from the film, was the captain Roy Keane who, in his biography, criticised the creation of the 'CO92' brand suggesting that 'It's as if they were a team away from a team and they are not shy of plugging in to it' (Keane, 2015:30) and illustrates the film's overplaying the contribution made by the six players. Also wholly absent, apart from some short archival footage, is the team's manager (Sir) Alex Ferguson whose absence was justified by the directors who felt his presence would have dominated / overshadowed 'the boys' (Wallace, 2013). With the global fame of David Beckham, it is notable that no comparisons are made with one of Busby's most gifted players, and arguably MUFC's first superstar, George Best. However Best's 'wild man' image, alcoholism and eventual death from multiple organ failure in 2005 would not have been in keeping with the story woven around the CO92.

Not only did the film's directors omit many of the key players in the MUFC team, they also neglected to mention any number of significant off-field events and legacies. In their attempt to construct a particular narrative of the past, the film's directors made no mention of the boardroom struggles at the club during the 1990s. No mention is made of the club's flotation on the stock market in 1991, nor the abortive attempt by Rupert Murdoch to buy the club in 1998. While the players are shown reminiscing about how, when they were young, they went to watch football, the discussion makes no mention of the rampant commercialisation which has seen the cost of admission to EPL games prohibitive for most working class youngsters. Omitted likewise no mention was made of the formation (in 1995) of the Independent Manchester United Supporters Association in response to the direction the club and English football was taking (Brown, 2007; 2008). This omission is discussed below in relation to the player's purchase of Salford United over FC United of Manchester.

What these collective omissions show is that, far from telling the story of 90's Britain, what is presented is an extended advertisement featuring the six players and selected elements from the club and city's history. All documentaries are selective, but the CO92's omissions are significant because it re/constructs and presents an incomplete 'narrative of truth' and will inform memory for future generations. We argue that greater accuracy should have been accorded to the sociocultural contexts and recognise that, whilst this would have disrupted the film's intended objective of building a CO92 brand, it is misleading not to acknowledge the significant structural and commercial changes experienced by the club, the sport and the city in the last decade of the twentieth century.

### **What happened next?**

The film ends with 'the perfect season' with European Champions League success adding to domestic league and cup wins. Although the CO92 and MUFC team did not immediately fragment, it would have become harder to maintain the narrative sought by the film's directors had the film extended beyond 1999. The six featured players continued to play for MUFC over the next few seasons with Beckham the first to leave (for Real Madrid) in 2003 after a high profile fall out with Alex Ferguson. Of the remaining five, Phil Neville left to play for Everton in 2005 and retired in 2013, whilst Nicky Butt left for Newcastle in 2004 before finishing his playing career in China in 2011; he returned in 2016 to head Manchester United's youth academy. Paul Scholes retired as a player in 2011 to take on a coaching role with the club, but returned to play for one season before finally retiring in 2013, and like many ex-players now offers his services as a sport pundit. Giggs remained at MUFC before retiring in 2014 to become Manchester United's assistant manager despite having no managerial experience. Gary Neville also remained at the club until his retirement in 2011. He also entered 'sports punditry' with the Sky Sports Television network before moving into football management with the English national team and, briefly, at the Spanish club Valencia CF, owned by Singaporean billionaire and business partner Peter Lim (Conn, 2015).

In an attempt to develop the Class of '92 brand, five of the six players (plus Peter Lim) purchased Salford City FC, a small non-league football club and produced a popular 'reality' television show titled '*Class of '92: Out of their league*'.<sup>3</sup> First broadcast by the BBC in 2015, it showed the players taking charge of the club where attendances rarely exceeded 100 and, perhaps unintentionally, showed the poor state of local, grassroots football. In an attempt to portray the players as 'ordinary folk' and 'football fans' - despite their obvious ascendance out of this (working) class, the programmes create drama and focus on personalities within the club (including the tea-lady and chairman). It is instructive and reflective of the initial CO92 documentary that the players chose to purchase the Salford club as opposed to F.C. United of Manchester (FCUM). FCUM was formed in 2005 by local MUFC fans disenchanted with what they saw as the excessive commercialisation of football and the material theft of a Manchester institution by US-based Glazier Family (Brown, 2007; 2008; Kiernan, 2015).<sup>4</sup>

## Conclusion

Documentary films typically draw upon fact and fiction, combining entertainment and knowledge. The presentation of *CO92* as non-fiction acts to embed notions of truth and reality with the decision to prioritise art and 'telling a good story' over historical accuracy leads the audience to believe that what is presented is accurate; what really happened, in terms of '90s Britain and the creation of the English Premier League as one of sport's most global, valuable and recognised leagues, never comes under discussion.

The directors' story of '90s Britain was filmed through a very soft focus, narrow lens and offers an imagined version of history based around six footballers whose individual traits have made them very wealthy. In this paper we have identified a more complete frame through which *CO92* should be viewed and offered a critique of the attempt to use a nonfiction media to (re)tell the past for contemporary and future consumption. The film is guilty of Hobsbawm and Ranger's (1983) 'invention of tradition' by making comparisons with the 'Busby Babes' and neglecting to mention the other players involved in the team's successes. The *CO92* invites us to think again about the documentary film genre as a contributor to brand development and promotion. Whether it be the development of the brand of a network like ESPN through the *30 for 30* series (Vogan, 2012) or a sports apparel company like Nike via the Steve Prefontaine inspired *Fire on the Track* (Walton, 2004), this form of representation of sports provides various brands a platform to grow. Whilst it is accepted that all documentary filmmakers face the difficult question of what to include/exclude; it is argued that the omissions from *CO92* serve in the main to create a coherent narrative which celebrates and endorses the emergence of the Class of '92 as a brand.

Accommodating the cliché that soccer is the world's game, MUFC are unquestionably one of its most significant clubs. This film covered a watershed decade in which the club were on the cusp of becoming a truly global brand, albeit with local supporters, a British manager and a majority of 'home-grown' player.<sup>5</sup> Football in the 1990s offers a stark contrast with the present-day with MUFC owned by an American family and international financial institutions (Tempany, 2016). Locally born players find it increasingly difficult to secure a regular team place in a squad rotation system with young players either loaned out to gain experience or transferred, with clubs preferring to field the 'finished article'. This situation makes it highly unlikely that a core of players from a youth academy will again breakthrough into the first team and create a comparable cohort to the Class of '92 (Langley, 2016). An alternative version - that is, one that is more accurate - of '90s Britain might be less neat and tidy, but would acknowledge the wider societal changes experienced by this once powerful industrial city; after viewing *CO92* one is left with little sense of the structural and commercial changes experienced by the club, football and the city in the last decade of the twentieth century. The hagiography of the players by each other and the film's 'talking heads' and the attempt to mythologise the city and its popular culture should not be

seen as an attempt to showcase reality but rather to construct a specific version of events based around the six featured individuals and their sporting success. Towards the film's close Eric Cantona suggests the Class of '92 is a 'perfect script' but we prefer Terry Christian's (2012) comment from a documentary about *'Madchester: The Sound of the North'* (1990)<sup>6</sup> in which he cited a line from John Ford's film *'The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance'*

Ransom Stoddard: You're not going to use the story, Mr. Scott?

Maxwell Scott: No, sir. This is the West, sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend.

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<sup>1</sup> The EPL is the second most lucrative league in the world behind the NFL (EPL, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Unlike Manchester City FC, MUFC is not actually within the city of Manchester. It is located in Salford which is one of ten metropolitan boroughs which constitute the metropolitan county of Greater Manchester. It is home to several other football clubs including Bolton Wanderers F.C., Bury F.C., Oldham Athletic A.F.C., Rochdale A.F.C. and Wigan Athletic F.C.

<sup>3</sup> The 'Salford City' mediated adventure did not include David Beckham who was developing his MLS franchise in Miami.

<sup>4</sup> By contrast, former MUFC 'legend' Steve Coppell became a co-owner of FCUM in 2016 (FCUM, 2016)

<sup>5</sup> MUFC fielded a team of non-English players for the first time in 2009 (Stafford, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Christian's comment was used as the tagline for the feature film, *24 Hour Party People* (2002), about Manchester's Factory Records.