

OF FROGS AND PRINCES

There was once a frog whose best friend worked as a kitchen maid. The maid dreamt of going to a ball and dancing with a handsome prince. Sometimes after dark, dressed in rags, she would dance in the parlour, never expecting that her dream would ever come true. One night a fairy godmother appeared, waved a magic wand and transformed the maid into a Lady, complete with exquisite ball gown. But, who would accompany her to the ball? Once more, the fairy godmother motioned her wand and the frog became a prince. Not the prince of the kitchen maid's dreams: far more handsome and dressed in clothes so fine that they put even hers to shame. And, when they arrived at the ball, he danced so divinely, that the others withdrew from the floor in awe and simply looked on in admiration – and in envy.

He basked in the admiration so much that he forgot to get home by midnight to break the spell and so ended up trapped in a human body. But what a body! Adorned with resplendent stains, perforated with elegant jewellery, his supple, creamy flesh was enchanting. The maid fell in love with him; so too did countless others. In fact, they not only loved him, they adored, idolized and worshipped him. They devoted large parts of their life to him, copied his clothes, his hair, his tattoos, the rings in his ears. How they wished they could be like him, or a part of him, or even be him. So enchanted by the image of the handsome prince were they that they forgot completely that he was once only a humble frog. It really didn't matter, anyway. Folks came from far and wide to stare at the prince, bestowing

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on him great praise and gifts. Some folks sneered; most gazed in wonderment. How could it be possible that one so comely, so gifted, so rich could have all these qualities in such abundance and be able to dance like no other? One person held the answer, of course – the fairy godmother. What was the source of her wand's power?

Fairy stories, folk tales and myths are fantasies. David Beckham's life, his experience, his very being is a fantasy of sorts. A working class boy with generous athletic skills who, after a modest start to his sports career, became the most celebrated athlete of his time, perhaps ever, Beckham seems to live in a fantastical landscape, in a world that resembles our own, but in which the rules are different. In the Beckham landscape, our hero scores vital goals that compare with any dragon-slaying feat achieved by St George. He marries a pop star, an event that could have been stolen from *Sleeping Beauty*. His hairstyles, clothes and body ornamentation are emulated with the kind of obedience commanded by the Pied Piper.

The evidence is, quite literally, all around, from huge billboards bearing his image, to the fact that every newspaper and radio station carries at least one story about him. He appears on television, on chat shows, on commercials and, of course, playing football, whether for his club or country. Beckham is near-ubiquitous. News that he has acquired a new tattoo or body pierce is instantly relayed around the world, reported, interpreted and discussed. A new haircut sparks an occasion for deep thought: what does it mean, is it appropriate, should we follow his example? He holds hands with his wife: the *Guardian* runs a story on the significance of hand-holding. Every move is closely monitored and minutely dissected by the media. Every gesture, mannerism, haircut, body pierce, tattoo becomes a subject of scrutiny and analysis. His clothes are taken apart, label-by-label, invested with the kind of significance typically reserved for rock or movie stars.

Beckham's life is closely monitored by a voracious media prepared to report the most seemingly minute and insignificant detail and expand it into a full-blown adventure. The presentation of a speeding ticket is changed into a life-and-death chase,

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with Beckham attempting to flee the predatory paparazzi who track him everywhere. A mohican hairdo becomes a moral and psychological discourse, with discussions centring on the propriety of the do and the motivations behind it. A sense of national catastrophe follows a fractured metatarsal in his left foot, x-rays of the little bone appearing on newspapers' front pages and reports circling the globe. Every feature of his life is spun into a tale. We devour every one of them.

Fairy stories tend to refract our own experiences. Some would say that they secrete a kind of eternal human truth. A world in which frogs turn into princes, cross-dressing wolves masquerade as sick grandmothers, and ducks transmute into swans engages the listener with a message of change. Things are not always what they appear: they have hidden qualities which, under certain conditions, will surface. In the process, they will change and, during the metamorphosis, something different will emerge. Beckham turned from an ordinary kid, his father a manual worker, his mother a hairdresser, into a celebrity. We all wish to change, if only because of a residual dissatisfaction with our own bodies. Some of us want to take off a few pounds, or maybe put on a few. Nobody thinks their body is toned enough – certainly not those with taut muscles who work out at the gym and stare at their reflections endlessly. Maybe we'd like to be taller, or shorter, or have bigger breasts, fuller lips, narrower thighs, smaller noses or whiter teeth. Cosmetic surgery can fix all these, of course. Unsurprisingly, we would all like to be richer. In fact, money can buy all the cosmetic surgery needed to effect a complete transformation.

Desire reflects the contemporary world. Princes have always had an edge over frogs, but slimness has only recently surpassed fatness as a valued property; and, while it's possible that some form of self-dissatisfaction always existed, contemporary culture dictates clear priorities. Wealth, fame and glamour are valued; poverty, obscurity and ordinariness are not. Some aspirant singers or actors toil away in pursuit of the break that will give them access to the world of wealth, fame and glamour; others try for a few years, then resign themselves to a more

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mundane life; still others fantasize about it. A few others actually get into the parallel world, if only for a few years. That is, the world of fame, glamour and celebrity.

Manchester United fans often chant (to the tune of José Fernández Díaz's *Guantanamera*): "One David Beckham. There's only one David Beckham." Actually, there are two: the flesh-and-blood father with a fondness for cars, decorously pale looks and fine soccer skills; and the icon, the celebrity, the commodity, the Beckham that exists independently of time and space and resides in the imaginations of countless acolytes. For women, he's *le beau idéal*, a figure on whom fantasies are spun; for men, he's a colossus standing astride all dominions of sport, commanding their admiration, affection and devotion. He's become a global phenomenon, a towering presence, not only in football but in all of popular culture. The Beckham phenomenon is so perfectly congruent with our times, it could have been created. Actually, it was. This book is about how.

Clichés that would normally seem crass feel oddly appropriate: A-list celeb, gay icon, rich-and-famous. Somehow, they all fit. But, of course, Beckham is not just a footballer. He is the sports celebrity *par excellence*. Whichever way you hold him to the light, Beckham is an extraordinary being, a rare thing, a total one-off. He's everywhere, in newspapers, television, the internet, on countless posters that decorate young people's bedroom walls.

He attracts accolades like a magnet attracts iron filings. He's Britain's best-dressed male, according to *GQ* magazine, and was only edged out of the number one position as "sexiest man" by Robbie Williams in *Heat's* poll. In the 2002 "Young rich" lists of two national newspapers, he came fifth. BBC Sports Personality of 2001, World Footballer of the Year runner-up. His fans are from all over the world, and they include the kind of passionate gay following that most athletes might find awkward. Some reckon he and his wife have wandered into the emotional territory once occupied so serenely by Princess Diana. They have certainly commanded the attention of the paparazzi in much the way Diana did.

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Yet, when you think about it, what does he do? Lead armies into battle, discover cures for diseases, perform miracles? He plays football, primarily. Auxiliary activities include buying lots of extravagantly expensive cars and clothes, being a doting father, accompanying his wife to glittery premières, appearing in ads and, well, that's about it. Yet Beckham has given the sports pages, the tabloids, the internet websites and the television networks more stories than they can ever wish for. Has he disclosed his political views, his stance on any great global cause, his personal habits even? Of course not. So, why is he exalted to the point where you can almost imagine his being beatified? The answer is *not* because he is a good footballer. The answer is *not* because he is a good footballer. (I repeat this in case his fans mistake it for a typo.) It's because he's a product that we all consume. We're part of a generation of emotionally expressive, self-aware, brand-conscious, label-observant, New-Man attentive, gossip-hungry, celebrity worshippers. We, the fans, the television viewers, the writers, the audience, make Beckham *Beckham*. We've become an unpaid backing choir for his aria, and one that can stop singing any time we like. The moment we do, Beckham turns back into a footballer.

This book is a departure from the usual sports biography. It's neither an extravaganza, celebrating the wonderful and unique gifts of its subject, nor a piercing insight into the subject's personal life. It certainly isn't a muck-raking exercise, dishing the dirt on private secrets that have previously escaped the public's attention. But, it *is* about Beckham. It starts from the premiss that there is more than one way to understand somebody. Looking inside them, trying to disclose their inner core, their intimate character, their true personality, is only one means of discovery. Another is to look outside them. This is my approach. To understand Beckham in this way requires looking not so much at him or his unique talent, but at the culture of which he has become an important part.

Making sense of Beckham by looking outside him to the influences that have made possible and assisted his creation takes me

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into unusual territory. I am not, of course, neglecting his starting talents on the field of play. Yet, the clues to understanding his status lie elsewhere: in his club, his culture, his environment. So, this is how I proceed, mapping out the circumstances in which Beckham came into being, not as a human being or even an athlete, but as a sports celebrity.

The tribulations of Beckham are pretty well documented. The hell-and-back-and-beyond drama in which he was turned from a dashing young knight to an accursed soul before discovering deliverance is a tale in its own right. Chapter two describes how this experience changed not only Beckham but, more vitally, the media's and public's perceptions of him. Together, they created a singular position for Beckham. Yes, there have been other athletes who have become world famous through either their great accomplishments or their scandalous private lives. And there have been other sports stars who have been idolized by women. And, I suppose, there have been sportsmen who have at least approached, and maybe reached, the same levels of fame as showbusiness celebrities. But, all of these? In this respect, Beckham is out on his own.

I then sketch the "good life" that Beckham and his wife symbolize. Of course, everyone knows they are one of the most glamorous, designer-clad couples around, and sport-showbiz liaisons are always newsworthy. In chapter three, I show how the Beckhams have become living advertisements, commodities in their own right, and a demonstration that there is a grand life for those daring enough to shoot for it, or even for those timid enough to fantasize about it. In other words, Posh and Becks present a vision of the good life to which others aspire.

Football lies at the core of Beckham's celebrity status, though it has become a small part of his overall repertoire of activities. Still, the fact remains: if he hadn't been a good athlete, we'd never have heard of him. This raises a question: if he'd been a good footballer, yet signed for, say, Tottenham Hotspur, near his birthplace, or perhaps a less fashionable club like Everton, or even Preston North End, a club to which he was loaned for a while, would he still have become a global celebrity? No.

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Beckham's inauguration in football was through a club which was in the process of building one of the world's leading sports brands: Manchester United is not only the world's richest club; it vies with Dallas Cowboys as the world's most valuable sports franchise. Almost by default, Beckham became part of a brand. He acquired the cachet associated with United. Playing for a global brand was vital for Beckham: it drew him media attention in a way that would have been impossible if he had played for a lesser club. Imagine if Matthew Le Tissier, a player of uncommon technical ability, had moved from Southampton to, say, Arsenal or Leeds United in 1992. Would football history have been different? He might have challenged Gascoigne as the country's leading player and perhaps even its favourite celebrity footballer. He might have helped one of those teams supplant Manchester United as the dominant club of the decade. His club might then have provided Beckham with the kind of showcase that United later gave him.

My interest is in what happened, rather than what might have happened (though I am tempted into this kind of speculation throughout the book). This was that Manchester United allowed Beckham, first, to exhibit his skills in front of the world, and second, to lend his name and image to a range of merchandise that would sell around the world. Both were integral to the Beckham phenomenon. In chapter four, I highlight how Manchester United changed from an ordinary and, at the start of the 1980s, lacklustre club, into the powerful brand it is now. I pay particular attention to the key role played by Martin Edwards in this transition. Edwards is an interesting man, loved and loathed, though not in anything like equal proportions. While he's demonized, particularly by Manchester United fans, he's also responsible for many of the plans, perhaps even visions, that worked to establish ManU as the power it now is. You might be misled into thinking the mains of that power are on the field of play. Prepare to be disabused of this notion.

There is a bigger presence in David Beckham's professional life. While you rarely see him, Rupert Murdoch is everywhere in football. His influence has been total. His television company

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BSkyB, or Sky as it started life, changed football the moment it pitched for the rights to show Premier League soccer "live". At the time Beckham emerged in 1992, satellite television had barely begun to ring its changes. But, by the time he established himself as a Manchester United regular, the revolution was in full swing. Football, the working class game of yore, was not so much modified as converted wholesale into a tv-friendly competition thriving with well paid players from all four corners and a queue of commercial sponsors, all eager to associate their brands with the now fashionable pursuit of the affluent.

This was Beckham's world, of course: bursting with tv and sponsors' money, mixing with film, fashion and rock music as partners in showbusiness. World stars, like Jürgen Klinsmann and Ruud Gullit, were among the first overseas sojourners to base themselves in the newly glamorized English league. Soon, the whole sport was cosmopolitan.

Football's place in popular culture had been under threat throughout the 1980s. Its image as a drab and soggy sport afflicted by recurrent violence and racism had not been helped by the sequence of disasters culminating in Hillsborough. Had Beckham developed in this environment, he would never have snared the lucrative endorsements, the television documentaries and the many other deals that brought him his riches and status. The fact is that he rose to prominence when football was more than just a game. In chapter five, I trace the changes that turned football into a showbusiness-like spectacle. To do so, I examine the career of Rupert Murdoch, perhaps the most powerful person in sport today.

As football was turned on its head, so other cultural changes were afoot. Girl Power, for all its vagueness, was a term on many people's lips: it chimed with the times. Victoria Adams, as she then was, personified Girl Power. As a member of the Spice Girls, she was known as much for her bubbly audacity as her gender. When she met Beckham, her band was, as she remembers, "on fire", selling millions of records all over the world and lending its name to enough merchandise to fill an Argos catalogue. She was well versed in demands of celeb-

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rity-dom. This, we can safely assume, included the business side.

While Beckham had shown potential and was being touted as a future star, he was by no means a celebrity athlete. News of his relationship with Posh changed all that: he soon became part of a paradoxical world of separateness and intimacy. Progressively, he was separated from other footballers, identified as a special case deserving special treatment. He was, after all, the beau of one the world's most famous women. Intimacy was no longer his: he quickly had to get to grips with the fact that personal life for a celeb is not, strictly speaking, all that personal. The media wanted to know more about him; they wanted to share his secrets. His relationship with Victoria was in the public domain from the moment it became known that they were an item.

Victoria played a central role in Beckham's career. Her status was transferred to him as if by osmosis. Chapter six looks at the ways in which the Posh and Becks relationship became bigger than the sum of its parts, in the process, elevating Beckham to his peerless position.

Of course, Beckham wasn't the first British footballer to be granted celebrity status. According to some writers, Stanley Matthews was a celebrity of sorts, though in an age when the media were much, much less invasive and were interested primarily in his sporting prowess rather than his personal habits. Even George Best, who sprang out of a Beatlemaniacal Sixties culture and became the first athlete to be given the same kind of attention as a pop star, wasn't subject to the elaborate scrutiny and saturation coverage afforded subsequent sports celebrities. Paul Gascoigne, on the other hand, was.

Gascoigne was the first genuine celebrity athlete to contend with a media ready to feast on any morsel: truths, half-truths, hearsay, tittle-tattle, gossip and downright lies were all staples of the media in the 1990s. Tabloid war had broken out, celeb magazines were being launched, satellite and cable television were pitching in. Gascoigne stood at what some writers call a junction, where football changed direction and headed towards becoming the product we now consume, rather than just watch.

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Gascoigne was like a bottle of Budweiser: shake him up, and he spurted over everyone within range. Even when not shaken, he was prone to spontaneous discharges, usually playful, but occasionally violent. Every foible – and there were many – of Gascoigne was recorded and, often, relayed around the world. And, for a while, he appeared to love the attention. In fact, one suspects that he played up to his part as the idiot savant, as Germaine Greer once described him (she also recognized his centrality to popular culture). Eventually, Gascoigne buckled under the weight of the media and turned against them. By this time, it was probably of little consequence: they'd found new prey. Chapter seven is devoted to a study of Gascoigne and his importance. I compare Gascoigne with Beckham, not as footballers, but as celebrities.

Many of the feats for which Gascoigne is famous concern manliness. His treatment of people, including his wife and members of the media, said something about being a man. Beckham's conduct and bearing also said something about being a man. The contrast between the two is illuminating. Like Gascoigne before him, Beckham offers a version of what it is to be a man. Not for him the boozing, farting, and no-holds-barred debauchery that characterized Gascoigne's odyssey through the 1990s. And certainly not the wife beating that disclosed an unheeding cruelty in Gascoigne.

Beckham offered a quite different palette of masculinity: sweet-natured, caring, nurturing, doting, full of soft, humanizing touches. It's a type of manliness that has earned him admiration from unexpected quarters. A devoted following of gay fans would be enough to guarantee most footballers a punishment course. Football fans are traditionally not known for their tolerance in this department. Yet, somehow, Beckham got away with it, even to the point of appearing on national television and endorsing his gay following. How is he able to do it? This is the subject of chapter eight.

Appearing in advertising is not simply an added bonus for being famous. It's integral to the process of remaining famous, or becoming even more famous. There are a few celebrities who would never stoop to lending their name or image to commercial

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products. Not many though: even A-listers such as Madonna, Liz Taylor and Britney Spears have all done endorsements. Perhaps they were once regarded as vulgar. Now, their benefits are well recognized. Not only are they hugely remunerative, they can also help position a celeb in the public consciousness.

Football's entry into the entertainment industry has had many consequences, one of which is that its leading lights enjoy a similar kind of status to pop and movie stars. One of the first things a footballer does after securing a first team place is sign an endorsement deal, even if it's with the local timber merchants. The more the player is seen and recognized, the greater the potential rewards.

Beckham's image is everywhere: on tv, in magazines, in advertising and countless other media. His extensive presence isn't a matter of chance, but the product of a controlled enterprise. There's a virtual industry charged with the responsibility of managing a diverse portfolio of lucrative endorsement contracts, ensuring that the kind of publicity generated is exactly appropriate and extracting the right rewards for merchandise bearing Beckham's name and image. This is the focus of chapter nine, which also includes details of how Michael Jordan was manoeuvred by, among others, Nike and his agent, to his position as a global sport icon. Comparisons with Beckham are, of course, inescapable.

In chapter ten, I explore how fans contribute directly to Beckham's status. When you think about it, he actually doesn't possess any special qualities, apart from being able to play football, of course. Yet, you wouldn't think so, judging by the worshipful following he commands. One fan claimed she heard him issuing personal commands to her. No doubt there are many, many more who experience similar visitations.

I offer the view that Beckham is like a book, a piece of text, something we can read and comprehend. How do fans make sense of Beckham in an age when most of the strategies, tactics and tricks used to keep celebrities in the public eye are well known? It's as if a fairy tale was postscripted with the equivalent of one of those "The making of..." documentaries that explain how all the special fx of movies were achieved. You imagine a

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Brothers Grimm tale would lose its magic if it contained details of how the story was concocted and scribed. Many aspects of Beckham's story are fairy tale-like. How do fans come to terms with a fairy tale that includes an account of its own production?

Beckham's extraordinary status is due less to him and what he does, more to what people attribute to him and believe he does. The special "gifts" he's thought to own haven't been granted him through divine intervention, as Mozart's were thought to be. The fans who read him and read about him are the ones who credit him. His playing abilities are beyond question, and his accomplishments are undeniable. Attempting to strip away his mystery doesn't involve denying that Beckham has masterly technique and fearless resolve on the football pitch. It merely means that, to understand him, we need to understand what fans make of him.

There's an answer to the big question that lies beneath this and, for that matter, any other book that tries to tap the sources of a celebrity's spell. Why are we enchanted by Them, Them being the fabulous creatures with wealth, glamour, fame and the kind of lifestyle that qualifies as the good life? We never used to be. This is a relatively recent development, brought about principally by the medium that's ambushed contemporary culture – television. The proliferation of celebrity magazines devoted to the lives of the rich and famous has both reflected and promoted interest.

There have always been famous people. It's just that, in recent years, there have been more of them. Lots more. And they seem to multiply. What's more, many of them haven't distinguished themselves for anything more than the capacity for being known. Beckham doesn't fall into this category: he has athletic skills, and these were the original reason he came to the fore. Coming to the fore isn't the same as being a demigod. Why has there been a sudden hunger for beings who appear to live on the fringes of fantasy? Chapter eleven explores the reasons why today we have all been caught up with the cult of celebrity.

Exactly who wants to be rich and famous? The answer is, of course, we all do. While this may not strike readers as surpris-

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ing, we are talking serious fantasy here. There is a generation out there that clings to celebrities, not in a physical way, but in a way that takes a lot of perseverance, devotion and time. Many fans index their own lives to those of the celebrities they respect, honour and perhaps even idolize, like Jess in Gurinder Chadha's *Bend it like Beckham*. They are part of a new type of culture, one in which celebrities, whether from sport or other branches of entertainment, wield unprecedented influence. Beckham has emerged from precisely this culture.

The final chapter examines Beckham against the background of a culture that places an exorbitant value on celebrities. There have been other celebrity footballers, including George Best and Kevin Keegan, but never one that surfaced at the moment in history when he was regarded as something much more than an athlete, even a great athlete. The evidence of our senses tells us that Beckham surely is. If he had come to the fore fifteen – no, ten – years ago, he would have been recognized as a good – perhaps even a great – sportsman. The honours that have become commonplace might still have poured in. But he wouldn't have been the unique phenomenon he is. He wouldn't have had a fan base that encircles the globe; nor would he have attracted a fringe of zealots who endow him with spiritual significance. Gay men might have found him appealing, but they wouldn't have granted him iconic status. Beckham himself would probably not have had the nerve to pose in the kind of fashion shots that would earn him that kind of status. Advertisers might have offered him a few endorsements (remember Keegan's homoerotically risqué shower room commercials with Henry Cooper?), though he wouldn't have had a bulging portfolio valued in millions, as he does today. No, Beckham is a product of this time, this place.

This is actually the argument of the book and, running the risk of being repetitious, I'll restate my point: Beckham would simply not have happened in another era. He's perfect for today. In fact, I'll argue, he's as much part of the twenty-first century cultural landscape as Bob the Builder or Tony Soprano. None of them would have happened any time else but the present.

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Beckham is the most adored, most copied athlete and, probably, most persuasive, should he ever care to propound his opinions on anything. He's very much a product of his time, his culture, yet transcends his time and culture in a way that no other athlete has. He's accessible but not exactly open and deflects the very attention other, perhaps less talented, celebrities pursue. As athletes go, he appears among the least egocentric, the most psychologically transparent, the simplest yet most artful. We know practically everything there is to know about one Beckham; virtually nothing about the other. He doesn't say much, or do much apart from playing football and accompanying his wife. In these respects he seems so ordinary. Perhaps that's the key: everyone knows there's a public face of Beckham; they assume the private face is much the same. What more can there be?

Even if there are hidden depths, I'm concerned less with the physical Beckham, so to speak, more with the global celebrity. Beckham the celebrity embodies cultural changes that have transpired over the past two decades. These changes have affected us, rendering us all celebrity idolaters. Not content to watch athletes compete or actors act or politicians govern, we've demanded to know them. Their character, their private life, their tastes: we demand that these be displayed for our delectation. The media collude and, as we'll see later in the book, connive in this. So do we.

We haven't started getting interested in these things spontaneously. Our changing interests reflect other kinds of changes all around us. Many of them will come into view throughout the book. For example, there have been shifts in the status and operations of sport in contemporary culture, changes in perceptions and understandings of masculinity and family life; changes in the way we formulate our plans, our ambitions and our relationships with others. The engine behind all these changes is known as commodification – the seemingly irresistible process in which everything is subject to being turned into an article of trade that can be bought and sold in any marketplace in the world. Over the past few decades, we've all become consumers. We don't buy because we need things; we buy

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because we desire them. A whole industry has grown up around trying to access our desires and shape them and convert them into spending habits. In other words, potentially anything can be made into a commodity. This includes people. Footballers. Beckham is evidence of this process and of the culture that has advanced it. This is, after all, a culture capable of turning frogs into princes.