

Diego Maradona and the Psychodynamics of Football Fandom in International Cinema

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Abstract

Taking a psychoanalytic approach, the article examines and compares how three films explore the psychodynamic processes of fan investment in Argentine former football star Diego Maradona. These films illustrate how his meaning as an international cultural icon is refracted by specific fan experiences and fantasies, and are variously informed by, and critically explore, the myths of virtual death, resurrection, redemption and geopolitical opposition to global capitalism associated with him.

In the 2007 British documentary *In the Hands of the Gods*, five ‘freestyle’ footballers from the UK embark on a pilgrimage to his home. Their geographical movement through North and South America is presented as an opportunity for psychological rebirth and self-realisation through their affinity with him as a supremely gifted individual, rather than a representative of the disciplined world of team sport and its international rivalries. The 2006 Argentine road movie *El Camino de San Diego* ironically depicts its fan protagonist’s obsession with Maradona as a misguided narcissistic distraction from a geographically fractured and enduringly economically weak post-crisis Argentina. Finally, Emir Kusturica’s 2008 movie *Maradona by Kusturica* reflexively explores how Maradona’s enigma and contradictions as an object of fan investment and political figure of redemption confound his attempts to explain him. Kusturica’s fantasies return inevitably to himself, raising the possibility that ‘Maradona’ may be a ‘neutrosemic’, or inherently meaningless, fan text.

Introduction

This article concerns three films variously concerned with former Argentine soccer player Diego Maradona as an object of intense psychodynamic investment for his fans worldwide. The term ‘psychodynamic’ refers to how ‘unconscious mental activity’ and ‘conscious thoughts, feelings and behavior’ are dynamically interrelated (Cabaniss et al. 2011: 4), but in ways that are only partially or inconsistently consciously accessible. Drawing on concepts derived from Freudian and object relations psychoanalysis, the article focuses firstly on how Maradona is a varied and often contradictory object of psychodynamic investment for his fans, then on how his status as such is represented and explored in these films.

Methodologically, using varied sources, from Burns’ (2010) biography to various commentaries by Argentine and international authors, together with ethnographic and journalistic studies of Maradona’s fans, the article examines how Maradona has acquired a symbolic status as a celebrity whose fame transcends the sphere of football. It identifies the contradictoriness and inconsistency of Maradona’s highly publicised behaviour and pronouncements, and so highlights the difficulties of offering a plausible interpretation of either his psychology or his symbolic meanings for his fans. Utilising psychoanalytic perspectives on sport in relation to ethnographic and journalistic accounts of his Argentine fans (Archetti 1997; 2001; Franklin 2008), it is argued that Maradona’s untrained and visibly unique achievements as a player lie at the core of his appeal to a nostalgia for idealised boyhood. Yet his repeated career transgressions and punishments are equally suggestive of unconscious masochism at work, while his apparently intense personal investment in his exalted status as celebrity – explored in such texts as the ‘biopic’ *Maradona, la Mano de Dio* (2007) – suggest a pathological narcissism as the root of his periodic crises.

The article then examines how the films illustrate the refraction and geographical specificity of his symbolism for his fans. In each case, the focus on affective – over and above intellectual – investment, and the often visually suggestive, rather than verbally articulated,

form of the text lends itself to interpretations variously inspired by Freudian and object relations psychoanalysis. The discussion of *In the Hands of the Gods* (Turner and Turner 2007), a documentary chronicling the journey of five male practitioners of freestyle football (that is, the art of expressing yourself with a football, performing tricks with any part of the body) from the UK to meet Maradona in Buenos Aires, acknowledges the documentary's constructive role in its participants' forging their onscreen identities through its progressive record of their journey, and the ways in which its camera operates as a confessor to which they confide their experiences and desires. Nonetheless, the focus of their discursive interactions on themselves and their individual life trajectories, rather than on Maradona, is read as indicative of how Maradona as a celebrity is an object of affective investment that validates the protagonists' corporealisation of their self-identities through performances as freestyle footballers that are clearly distinct from the world of organised team football and (seen from a psychoanalytic perspective) its post-Oedipal code of submission to its rules. National origins, identities and narratives, too, are marginal to the shared theme of individual renewal through their affinity with Maradona (who only appears briefly). Maradona becomes a vehicle for the rather neoliberal, de-territorialised theme of individual empowerment.

El Camino de San Diego [The Road to Saint Diego] (Sorín 2006) follows a fictional fan who journeys to Buenos Aires when Maradona falls gravely ill, carrying as a gift a tree root that supposedly resembles Maradona. The emphasis here is on how the film's visual iconography is suggestive of fandom as narcissistic identification with the object of fandom. The methodology focuses on the tensions between the appearance of romantic endorsement and Sorín's problematising of this outwardly simplistic representation through sometimes complex use of *mise en scène* and juxtaposition. The analysis reads these tensions as a critical commentary on the contradictions and harsh reality of Argentina's recovery from the 2001 economic crisis, which is periodically directly referenced. The context is problematic of 'national' cinema: celebrity fandom as a prism through which to explore the contradictions of post-crisis Argentina.

The analysis of *Maradona by Kusturica* (Kusturica 2008), an explicitly authored cultural and political documentary portrait of Maradona by Bosnian-born Emir Kusturica, focuses on the film's foregrounding of psychoanalytic concepts through Kusturica's own voice-over narrative of his efforts to make sense of Maradona's personal and political symbolism. It offers an interpretation of the repetitive structure of this non-narrative film and Kusturica's expressions of frustration with his project as evidence of a reflexive acknowledgement of fan investment as a form of narcissism leading back to himself. It seeks to identify how this is rhetorically presented through the visual and discursive focus on Kusturica as narrator, interviewer and observer, and on the use of marked fantasy sequences. Each film illustrates the varied psychodynamic investments of fans, but only *Maradona by Kusturica* explicitly offers a metacommentary on celebrity fandom.

A Mess of Contradictions

Generally considered the most talented footballer of his generation, Maradona captained Argentina to World Cup victory in 1986, en route against England scoring two of soccer's most notorious goals, the second the outcome of a breathtaking dribble past half the England team, the first from an illegal handball unseen by the officials. This combination of supreme achievement and controversy characterised his career. In 1991 he was banned from football for 15 months after testing positive for cocaine while a player at Napoli, and in his 1994 World Cup comeback he was expelled for using the banned drug ephedrine.

Despite his transgressions, Maradona was considered to be essential to the marketing of international soccer by FIFA. Yet he outspokenly criticised FIFA in 1986 for its inappropriate scheduling of games in extreme heat in order to maximise television and commercial revenue, so fuelling his status as an icon of resistance to the game's power hierarchy, an image that was further enhanced by his career at Napoli in the 1980s. Napoli was both a poor relation of the wealthier northern Italian clubs and a geographical representative of Italy's poorer south. Maradona's success there was thus both geographically and economically symbolic, and it became intertwined with a romantic narrative, in Argentina, of his rise from the impoverished suburb Villa Fiorito, on the margins of Buenos Aires, to the status of national hero. Following his retirement, he became politically associated with Cuba's Fidel Castro and Venezuela's Hugo Chávez. He criticised the US boycotting of Cuba, and joined Chávez for his 'People's Summit' rally to protest at the holding of the Fourth Summit of the Americas at Mar del Plata in 2005, 'an occasion for ALCA (Free Trade Area for the Americas) to deliberate on the expansion of a free-trade zone regulated by the United States' (Salazar-Sutil 2008: 450).

Maradona's political statements and beliefs are notoriously inconsistent and often incoherent. Critics such as biographer Jimmy Burns (2010: 6) have stressed his political inconsistencies. He did not protest when, having been central to Argentina's 1979 Youth World Cup victory, this achievement was used to symbolise the military junta's legitimacy. He supported President Carlos Menem and Domingo Cavallo, Menem's neoliberal economic minister, widely blamed for the 2001 economic collapse. When Menem's policies massively increased unemployment and poverty (Cooney 2007: 23–24), Maradona did not support a socialist alternative. However, for Tobin (2002), Maradona's appeal lies in the perception of his being against power in a non-specific sense, however incoherent his position may be: hence his widely reported reference to US President George W. Bush as 'human garbage'. Such gestures make him a compelling, populist symbol of resistance to American geopolitical hegemony.

Nicolás Salazar-Sutil (2008: 448) argues that "Maradona" is a "neutrosemic fan text" (citing Sandvoss 2005), a 'mirror on which anyone can project an image or signification' with the "potential to be a pair of opposites or whatever else the audience projects onto his empty bodily screen" (Salazar-Sutil 2008: 455–456). However, while Maradona is a persistently contradictory figure, it is surely too much to say that he is an infinitely variable text with no relationship to the materiality of his actions as a person. But is it possible to find some consistency to his contradictions and to how he is imagined by his fans, or is that an entirely contradictory endeavour?

The popular reception in Argentina of Maradona's World Cup goals against England help explain his enormous national popularity. Maradona attributed the first to divine intervention, the 'hand of God', playfully fuelling discourses on his God-like status for his fans. Though transgressing the ethical code of sportsmanship, this was widely celebrated in Argentina as legitimately crafty play, entirely consistent with the second goal. Maradona also later crossed the supposed boundary between politics and sport, claiming his goals as vengeance for the 1982 Malvinas/Falklands War (Tobin 2002: 68). The longer historical context for this dates to introduction of football by British sailors and émigrés in the late nineteenth century, following which Argentine football has been popularly imagined as bifurcated into a quintessentially British, "industrial" style and a more imaginative "*criollo*" (creole) style described by Archetti (2001: 155) as 'restless, individualistic, undisciplined ... agile and skilful'. The archetypal *criollo* player, exemplified by Maradona, is known as *el pibe* ("the young boy"), whose abilities are learned on the *potrero*, a patch of "irregular ground in the

city or in the countryside which has not been cemented over” (Archetti 2001: 156). *El pibe* is forgiven personal or public transgressions because of the “joy” he brings (Archetti 2001: 159). Scoring first by cheating England, then scoring again with the “goal of the century,” Maradona demonstrated his craftiness, his disrespect for rules and orthodoxies and his “exuberance of skill” and “artistic feeling” (Archetti 2001: 159).

In Archetti’s fieldwork, Maradona’s Argentine fans repeatedly stressed his “liminal,” in-between quality (Archetti 1997: 38) as a *pibe* who has never submitted to the demands of adult masculinity. Hence one typical remark that “he is like our son and we as fathers place our dreams on them (sic)” (quoted in Archetti 2001: 161). In order to make sense of Maradona’s appeal in this way, and of the depiction of his devotees in film, I suggest that psychoanalytic perspectives on sport are pertinent.

A key reference point in this respect is Lili Peller’s (1954) situating of formal games and sport as the most advanced phase of play in childhood development. Positing that play “alleviates anxiety” (Peller 1954: 179) deriving from internal or external dangers, Peller sees pre-Oedipal play as attempted emulation of maternal control by manipulating objects that the child begins to identify as separate. Oedipal play involves more structured, representational, game-like activities, which enable working through family attachments and fantasies, easing the disappointment of loss (Peller 1954: 187–190). Formally organised games and sports are post-Oedipal, reality-adapted play fostering mutual identification, channelling homosexual urges into teams and observing rules as more significant than victory. These “latency games” represent “independence from external superego figures” (Peller 1954: 191–192). Extending this logic Barry Richards (1994: 33) argues that soccer’s handling taboo, which forces the cultivation of the foot, psychologically and socio-historically contributed to more disciplined social behaviour. By making the foot a means of expression rather than violence or forward propulsion, soccer constitutes a sublimated fusion of Freud’s libidinal and aggressive drives, “an image of society ... with its rituals, its agonistic encounters and above all its taboos and rules” (Richards 1994: 40).

However, as therapeutic observations and analyses of sport and fan biographies have highlighted (Free 2008), involvement in professional sport may facilitate the perpetuation of pre-Oedipal and Oedipal fantasies, especially given sport’s systematic reproduction of capitalism’s contradiction between promised opportunity and personal development, and alienation and expendability (Ingham et al. 1999: 249). The celebration of Maradona’s handball goal in Argentina enmeshed both personal and collective Oedipal pleasure in his rule-breaking: the ‘liminal’, man-child *pibe* versus the game’s originators, Argentina’s former military foe. As for the second goal, he played as though unaware that it is wiser to pass for fear of losing the ball, combining a breathtaking image of pre-Oedipal exuberance with brilliant adherence to football’s foundational handling taboo as the ball seemed almost attached to his left foot.

Indeed, Maradona’s affinity with the ball is reminiscent of Donald Winnicott’s (1971: 1–34) psychoanalytic concept of the “transitional object,” the blanket or toy to which many pre-Oedipal infants attach themselves, and which facilitates transition from maternal dependence to independence as an ‘in-between’, magical object imagined as neither ‘me’ nor ‘not-me’, neither found nor created. The football belongs to the game of football, but at the feet of unique talents like Maradona it is like an imaginative extension of the individual body rather than a neutral, inanimate object. Compilations of moments of brilliance by such players are made, circulated and celebrated via such electronic means as YouTube because they seem to transcend the spatio-temporal boundaries of individual games, and the game of football itself.

Archetti (2001: 159) highlights another feature of the myth of Maradona as quintessential *pibe*: his “capacity to ‘die’, metaphorically,” through imprisonment or drug addiction, “and be resurrected,” to return (through irrepressible creativity rather than his expressing guilt and serving his punishment), and so to be forgiven for any moral and social transgressions. Calls for Maradona’s return in 1994 were informed by belief in this capacity following his 1991 ban. Yet so strange was the mix of Maradona’s exuberance at the tournament, his wild scream at the camera following a goal against Greece, and his visibly emaciated features following rapid pre-tournament weight loss, that his tragic downfall suggests something else at work in his psyche. He claimed that his trainer Daniel Cerrini gave him an over-the-counter, legal diet formula at the 1994 World Cup (USA’94) that (unknown to Maradona) contained ephedrine, whose detection in a post-match drug test precipitated his immediate expulsion and 15-month ban from football. However, Maradona’s acceptance of Cerrini’s “weight reduction and energy-giving drugs” (Burns 2010: 222) seems to have been extraordinarily naïve. He later remarked that he had “risked so much this time round” to be there and that what FIFA “did to me is to make money from blood” (Maradona et al. 2000: 222). This suggests a combination of unconscious and conscious motivation, as well as an intimation of the dire consequences that he would melodramatically depict at the ensuing press conference as his martyrdom: “they’ve cut my legs off.” As explored in *Maradona by Kusturica* (see below), there is a possibility that there was unconscious masochism at work here, or at least that we can speculate as to its presence as a motivating force.

It is possible, of course, to read this romantically from a nationalist perspective. Established in Argentina in 1998, the ‘Church of Maradona’ merges this symbolism in its profanation of the Christian narrative, venerating Maradona’s Christ-like suffering for Argentine football with a football crowned with thorns. It initiates its members through re-enactment of the ‘hand’ goal. Members chant, “He was crucified, killed and tortured. ... They cut his legs but he returned and his magic spell was reborn” (Franklin 2008). This profanation of Christian belief is congruent with the “cultures of devotion” in Argentina to such “folk saint” martyrs as Antonio Mamerto Gil Núñez (“Gaucho Gil”), a nineteenth-century outlaw brutally executed without trial. These figures’ reported suffering and miraculous interventions following death elevate them to “saint” status in Latin America, despite Church disapproval (Graziano 2007: 113), and they are the popular cultural context in Argentina for the creation of the Church of Maradona.

Key to the Christian narrative is Christ’s masochistic suffering for the sins of humanity. Freud (1985/1913: 216) famously read the Crucifixion narrative as symbolic atonement for the guilt of replacing a father-worshipping religion with Christianity and its worship of the son. Through death and resurrection, Christ both replaces and is identified with God. The Church of Maradona’s popular narrative of his serial falls and resurrections promotes the Christ-like imagery of his suffering for the transcendent ‘truth’ of Argentine football and the romance of his unique skills: he suffered for his questioning of the unfair exercise of power in football, his highlighting, through his supreme skill, its cynical culture of foul play, and by relentlessly pushing himself, with or without drugs, knowingly or with denial.

Arguably, though, Maradona’s suffering also helped affirm the legitimacy of the nation as a natural political unit, such that each citizen is first and foremost Argentine despite internal material differences. If his was a patriotism driven from below, it served whoever was in power – even the military junta when he led Argentina to the Youth World Cup in 1979. Moreover, for all his supposed radicalism, like Jesus’ ultimate identification with God the Father, Maradona’s elevation through suffering affirms the post-Oedipal power of football’s rules: in his farewell speech to supporters of Boca Juniors at the Bombonera Stadium (10

November 2001) he said, ‘If someone makes a mistake, football shouldn’t pay for it. I made a mistake and I paid, but the ball doesn’t get dirty.’ Yet, like the folk saints, where there is a logical connection between Christ-like human suffering, redemption and a sense of divine justice that exceeds the temporality and brutality of political power, for his fans Maradona’s suffering is romantically associated with a truth that transcends both the motives of corrupt political manipulation and the game’s governance. If he was punished for pushing himself too hard to play in 1994, through divine intervention (the ‘hand of God’) he was assisted and spared punishment for the handball goal in 1986.

Such is Maradona’s ambiguity that a further possible reading is that he succumbed to a misguided, destructively narcissistic and bogus ‘self’-belief. The Italian/Argentine co-produced ‘biopic’ Maradona, *la Mano di Dio/la Mano de Dios* (Risi 2007) explores this interpretation, offering a variation on the ‘celebration, punishment, redemption’ narrative of many sporting heroes (Whannel 2002: 145–158), but with a cyclical, repetitive structure. Maradona is shown here to identify with his mediated myth, but to his detriment, as the film chronicles the impact of his drug excess and latterly his chronic weight gain. In a key scene, based on a childhood event (Burns 2010: 10), there is a dissolve from a flashback, in which young Diego searches for a ball in a cesspit (the flashbacks recur, with Diego ultimately retrieving the ball), to his snorting cocaine from a silver plate while a player at Barcelona. The ball as transitional object is replaced by the cocaine as a form of what Joyce McDougall (1985: 87) called a ‘pathological transitional object’. The pathological transitional object is typically a drug imagined as a source of apparent succour, but that is actually poisonous. Reflected in the silver plate we see his drug dealer’s reflection, not Maradona’s, a suggestion that he has lost his true identity through the bogus narcissism of celebrity. The romantic image of the *pibe*’s magical attachment to the ball as a quasi-Winnicottian transitional object is connected to a scatological image of immersion in, and emergence from, the shit of poverty that is contrasted with later alienation from the inner child. Maradona’s cocaine perpetuates a dangerously bogus narcissism in which he identifies either with the image of himself as a combination of exalted star and tradable commodity, or a false self in the faces of drug dealers, the Camorra (while at Napoli), or agent and fellow cocaine user Guillermo Coppola, whom he kisses on the lips at his wedding. This tragedy of the pathological transitional object replacing the real transitional object, bogus versus healthy narcissistic self-belief, is introduced at the film’s outset when, gesturing towards Pablo Neruda’s (1974) ‘Where is the child I was?’, the bloated Maradona collapses, unable to sustain a keepy-uppy routine with an orange.

This lament can be read as a fan fantasy concerning the tragedy of the commodification of sport’s finest talents. Fuelled by cocaine, Maradona’s progressive identification with his commodified image impedes his maturation. When his wife Claudia leaves him following her discovery of his brothel visits, he declares “I am Maradona!” and breaks his family picture frames, echoing an earlier scene where, standing on his sports car in Barcelona, he invites Claudia to join him in a chant of “Marado.” Narcissistic identification with his commodified image as a celebrity is depicted as alienation from his increasingly unknowable true self. It remains a fetish that, ironically, he cannot de-fetishise: he is the magical object, rather than a fully human subject.

Paul Willis (2000: 55) argues that cultural commodities have a specific quality of usefulness pertaining to their ‘actual or potential cultural meaningfulness’. They invite usage, seek communication by reminding us of the ‘embedded expressive labour’ in them (Willis 2000: 55). Therefore they are doubly half-formed (Willis 2000: 47–66), each side vying with the other: commodity fetishism, the need to be sold as an object disconnected from production

history and circulate widely, versus the need to be usable in acts of consumption that personalise or collectivise ascribed meanings in specific contexts (Willis 2000: 58). However, athletes whose labour power is commodified, and who are constantly subjected to scrutiny by employers, officials and fans alike may – seemingly paradoxically – be in thrall to their commodified image. *La Mano de Dios* suggests that Maradona could not transform his exchange value as a commodity into use value as a man. The point is wryly conveyed when, hugely overweight and physically restrained in a sanatorium following his 2004 collapse, he remarks that while fellow patients’ delusional fantasies are mutually reinforced, “I say I am Maradona, and nobody believes me.”

Yet the film’s conclusion with young Diego’s retrieval of the ball from the cesspit reiterates the theme of healthy individuation through play with the real transitional object. While he can re-emerge from the undifferentiated shit of impoverished Villa Fiorito, Maradona sinks through the bogus narcissistic self-regard and reliance on pathological transitional objects served on the silver-plated but shitty world of elite celebrity. (The slang terms ‘shit’ for drugs and ‘coke shit’, signifying the laxative effects of cocaine, come to mind.) Maradona’s self-destructiveness has nothing to do with Christ-like suffering at the hands of FIFA and so on, and the film has no interest in his political affiliations or manipulation. The ball that ‘doesn’t get dirty’ here is the one that the enduring Diego within has made an extension of himself.

La Mano de Dios is thus a form of fan text that reiterates, even while highlighting its tragedy, the myth of Maradona. Along with the films discussed below, it illustrates how ‘Maradona’ is a vehicle for externalising and playing with a core psychodynamic fantasy concerning the tension between submission to football’s post-Oedipal discipline and the indulgence of pre-Oedipal nostalgia and Oedipal resistance to it.

Following Matt Hills’s (2002) reading of Winnicott (1971), I take the ‘object relations’ psychoanalytic position that cultural fandom opens a ‘potential space’ of playful psychic engagement with objects of fandom that are themselves imagined as anomalous, neither ‘me’ nor ‘not-me’, intermediate, transitional objects on to which idealising, denigrating or ambivalent fantasies can be projected. Because sport as commodity is ‘produced’ while in progress, and because sport contests unfold unpredictably and are influenced to unquantifiable degrees by vocally and corporeally expressed emotional support, there is a sense that it somehow contains part of the self as a supporter. This also explains such phenomena as one of Archetti’s (2001: 160) informants fantasising about asking Maradona for ‘mercy’ for his unreasonable expectations of him, and his (consequently?) disastrous return to football in 1994. However, sport can never be materially owned. By both enabling and frustrating fans’ fantasies, it is an object of ambivalence on to which idealising and destructive fantasies may be safely projected and in which they may be held. Fandom often involves symbolic investments in particular sporting heroes and teams involving complex relationships with the fan’s biographical background, and indeed may be a central element in the retrospective tracing of a logical biographical narrative.

Maradona may be a particular object of fan investment, fascination and frustration because of his combination of untrained, supreme skill, a self-destructiveness that may be inexplicably innate (or masochistic, or a symptom of an exalted social status simultaneously empowering and alienating) and an ability to ‘resurrect’ himself through (as *La Mano de Dios* implies) the endurance of the child within, the arrested development and arresting image of the liminal *pibe*.

In the Hands of the Gods? Or the world at their feet?

The British documentary *In the Hands of the Gods* chronicles the journey to Buenos Aires of five British fans to meet Maradona, funding their trip from London via the United States, then Central and South America, by blagging flights and raising money for accommodation and transport through freestyle football street performances. Varying the reality-TV format of an assembled group faced with the challenge of cooperation and bonding, but with the inevitability of personal differences, the documentary focuses on their self-validation through individual and collective investment in Maradona as a symbolic figure.¹ The three who succeed in meeting Maradona, albeit very briefly, dominate the film: Woody, a failed apprentice professional footballer turned freestyler; Sami, a Somali Civil War refugee living homeless and estranged from his mother following a record of juvenile crime; and Mikey, whose two closest friends have died in accidents, the emotional impact of which, he explains, was that he considered quitting freestyle football altogether. For all, the ‘search for Maradona’ becomes a symbolic vehicle for self-renewal as they move geographically and psychically towards him.

Given the geographical, cultural and personal differences of its protagonists, the film illustrates how Maradona’s meaning as a celebrity articulates with local – and, in Sami’s case, complex – biographical vicissitudes. Yet contextual details pertaining to their biographies, or Maradona’s nationality or footballing career, are largely absent. The political history is registered only through a shot of a sign in Buenos Aires reading ‘Los Malvinas son Argentinos’. Thus, while the title refers obliquely to the handball goal, and to Maradona’s God-like status as their inspiration, it is perhaps best situated within the context of a series of British films dating from the 1990s which offered ‘a certain utopianism about the possibilities of collective action ... in the face of economic adversity and social decay’ (Hill 2000: 183). Most famously, in *The Full Monty* (1997), corporeal performance is key to the recovery of masculine identity, and so to coping with industrial decay and unemployment. Here, however, the freestylers embody a distinctly twenty-first-century neoliberal logic of individual self-empowerment as the antidote to unemployment and welfare dependence (Cruikshank 1999). Freestyle football’s elaborate ball manoeuvres, individualistic non-contact nature and focus on the imagery and aesthetics of body movement distinguish it from team football’s emphasis on physical strength, collective endeavour and domination of opponents. It was popularised by Nike advertising campaigns and subsequent competitions in the 2000s (www.freestylefootball.org).

Significantly, though, their varied identity projects do not involve movement towards an older paternal ideal. Through their idealising of Maradona without reference to his international football career, the film individualises, depoliticises and rejuvenates him, but Maradona becomes both a tacit symbol of separation from the patriarchal discipline of team football and of asocial individuation through the ball as a kind of transitional object to which, like Maradona, each is inextricably attached. Indeed, Woody describes watching an old video every night ‘without fail’, of Maradona performing tricks with pieces of fruit, a feat he emulates at a Guatemalan market, suggesting that it is with Maradona’s perpetual boyishness that he identifies. The tape is like a secondary transitional object comparable to the football itself, while dispensability of the football (the object) signifies the dispensability of football (the game) as the organised team sport that failed him.

The film chronicles their arrival in New York and migration southwards, splitting into two groups in Mexico, and splitting again when Mikey decides to perform solo and fund his own

¹ The film was screened in more UK cinemas, on initial theatrical release, than any British documentary film in UK cinema history. See: www.fulwell73.co.uk/film/hands-of-the-gods.

journey, so highlighting the tensions between collective solidarity and the freestyler's individualistic, somewhat narcissistic, motivation. Describing himself as 'the best freestyler' through his 'flair, confidence, personality and performance', and the prime exemplar of the film's neoliberal theme of self-empowerment in his use of the camera as diary, Mikey justifies his decision rather self-righteously:

[W]hy do I keep saying 'on my own'? Because I want it to be on my own. ... You make big decisions in life and this is how I'm gonna mature, this is the biggest decision I'm gonna have to ever make and I've decided.

As Mikey illustrates, such documentaries provide a frame within which, responding to the camera's presence, their participants perform and refine their individual and collective identities. Both the documentary and its protagonists' fantasies are informed by existing, heavily mediated narratives so that, although only appearing briefly for photographs, Maradona confirms the fantasies informing their expectations. Their thoughts, as expressed to each other and to the camera, exemplified by Mikey and Sami (below), are increasingly self-monitoring, indicating the framing, constructive role of its presence as symbolic Other. As Bruzzi (2006: 10) argues, the "collision between [camera] apparatus and subject are what constitutes" documentaries as "performative acts whose truth comes into being only at the moment of filming."

Sami's reflexive commentary on his biographical experiences is the most intriguing of these performative acts. Phoning home, he learns that his parole officer has informed his mother of the journey, intimating, "[M]y Mum knows who Maradona is" and "I want her to think I'm trying ... but it's hard when I'm trying to talk to her through a letter-box. I know what I've got to do now." This performative self-reinvention leads to what, in Kleinian psychoanalytic terms, is depressive anxiety concerning the damage he has caused his mother, and the desire for symbolic reparation. Melanie Klein's psychoanalysis derived from the study of the pre-Oedipal infant's ambivalent relationship with the mother or primary carer, and the individuation of identity and capacity for empathy and sociality via the working through of this ambivalence. The 'depressive position' was her term for the progression from psychic splitting of the mother into 'good' and 'bad' 'part-objects' towards the experience of guilt and desire for 'reparation' (Klein 1975/1935: 262–89). Describing his mother's heroic efforts to protect him in the war, Sami remorsefully reflects, "I make out like she's the baddie, but I'm realising it's me." Movingly, when generously accommodated by a visibly poor Guatemalan family, he recalls his own family's comparable poverty and maternal protection: "I remember the day the Civil War broke out ... [B]ullets ricocheting off the walls and Mum dragging me, and everything after that's just blacked out ... I'll always love [her because] she risked herself, her life for me to be here."

Sami's pilgrimage thus results in imagined reparation of this maternal bond through his capacity to recall their shared trauma. His individualistic blaming of himself without reference to his criminality as a possible legacy of this trauma, and his seeking to impress his mother by proving his independence connects with the others' individualistic performative investment in Maradona as a symbolic figure. However, his theme of maternal recovery illustrates the absence, from the documentary, of older male 'authority' figures. Having told the others, 'I haven't got an idol, I haven't got a father figure. Hell, I haven't even got a mother', for him the pilgrimage opens up a Winnicottian 'potential space' (Winnicott 1971: 135) of playful possibility, of imagined reunion with his mother – not the discovery of Maradona as a father figure.

The varied fantasies of self-discovery depend on some shared sense of Maradona's validation of retreat from the post-Oedipal world of football and refusal of sport's inculcation of 'conditional self-worth' (Messner 1992) and expendability among players, like Woody, discarded by it. The eventual encounter with Maradona is secured following Woody's emotional plea via Argentine national television as their journey makes the news there. However, the reason for Woody's identification with Maradona remains obscurely psychological rather than social: "[W]hen I was a kid I was inspired by your skill and talent. My education was as hard as yours was and that's why I identify with you. Watching videos of you gave me hope in my football." 'Education' here presumably refers principally to acquiring technical skills, but possibly also the premature end of his professional football career. Meeting Maradona would presumably validate the fantasied Maradona and Woody's post-football-career identity as a freestyler. Indeed, Woody is clearly emotionally overwhelmed when they meet, but the brief encounter seems merely a bonus to an already achieved self-validation through the extraordinary journey. Geographical and psychical progression seems to entail the validation of their creative regression, through freestyling, to the moment before life 'went wrong', to the recovery of a lost boyhood represented by identification with Maradona as an individual abstracted from national identities.

Road to Nowhere?

Somewhat surprisingly, Carlos Sorín's *El Camino de San Diego* offers a far more ambivalent representation of its fictional Argentine fan's devotion to Maradona. Although the film is ostensibly a post-crisis feel-good movie, Sorín depicts his fan protagonist's obsession as rooted in a hollow promise of narcissistic self-fulfilment rather than as source of individual and collective redemption.

Despite Argentina's economic crisis since the mid-1990s, the Argentine film industry has had both commercial and critical success. 'New Argentine' film-makers have been classified either as 'industrial auteurs' (Fabien Bielinsky, Juan José Campanella and Marcelo Pineyro) whose work has received transnational funding and been feted through film festivals and awards; or as 'independents' (Lucrecia Martel, Pablo Trapero, Adrian Caetano, Martin Rejtman, Lisandro Alonso, and so on) (Falicov 2007: 142), restricted more to the art-house circuits. All have variously engaged with the impact of the economic crisis which, as Page (2009: 211) remarks, 'shatter[ed] the illusion of "Argentine exceptionality"' in Latin America, the notion that poverty was merely transitory. Despite thematic, formal and stylistic variation, their work shares an Italian neo-realist aesthetic in their use of actual locations, non-professional actors and simple shooting techniques (Page, 2009: 34).

Belonging to neither grouping, Carlos Sorín is largely ignored by critics despite his international successes, *Historias mínimas* (2002) and *Bombón, el perro* (2004). Aguilar (2008: 16) dismisses his continuation of earlier Argentine cinematic tendencies towards 'political imperative (what to do)' and 'identitarian imperative (what we are like)' eschewed by the newer emphasis on spectator 'interpretive responsibility'. However, in *El Camino*, Sorín uses its subject's symbolism to highlight the contradictions of post-crisis Argentina, continuing his earlier films' deconstruction of the countryside as "an ambivalent space, criss-crossed by contesting paradigms of nationalism and modernization ... where the contradictions of Argentine modernization and the inequalities of global capital are most clearly seen" (Page 2009: 120).

Set initially in the tropical northern province of Misiones, adjacent to Corrientes – from where Maradona's family originated (Burns 2010) – it opens as a pseudo-retrospective

documentary. Over flashbacks, fellow villagers recall tree feller Tati Benitez, obsessed with Maradona to the extent of permanently wearing his replica shirt, having a number 10 tattooed on his back and training two pet parrots to say 'Marado'. The opening interview montage also features humour at Tati's expense, when it emerges that his autographed Maradona photograph is only a copy. After losing his job, Tati sees a tree root that, in a case of pareidolia (the imagining of a pattern or meaning that does not objectively exist), he believes resembles Maradona with outstretched arms. Hearing that Maradona is ill, he decides to bring the root to Buenos Aires as a gift.

El Camino repeatedly and deliberately foregrounds its religious symbolism. The title is a pun on Spain's 'El Camino de Santiago de Compostela', signifying the quasi-religious status of Tati's pilgrimage. The tree root resembles both a Maradona goal celebration and Christ's cruciform shape, suggesting – symbolically – Maradona's martyrdom. En route, Tati visits the shrine of Gaucho Gil, whose religious intertextuality is further extended when Brazilian truck driver, Waguinho (who gives Tati a lift), reveals a miniature Virgin of Itatí, a reputedly miraculous wooden statue in Corrientes.

Like Winnicott's transitional object, the root's status for the childlike Tati is ambiguous: did he find it or somehow make it by wishing it to appear? As he journeys, he changes his story, variously describing it to others as a root, a statue he is sculpting and a statue commissioned by Boca Juniors, so in fantasy elevating his status as worker and artist.

This inconsistency suggests a subtext contrary to the outwardly simplistic narrative. Tati finds in Maradona a mirror of his own narcissistic identification with his image, only ever seeing the real Maradona on television, thus as indirectly as the copied autograph, and it is visually suggested that this narcissism and misrecognition are shared. In a shot of a bus driver's rear-mirror reflection as he talks to Tati, beside it is a Maradona picture featuring the word 'dios' spelt with the number 10 ('D10S'), and a miniature Virgin of Itatí. Reflection, photograph and Virgin image ("Itatí" resembles Tati) combine to highlight Tati's narcissistic misrecognition. Just as Maradona has apparently learned nothing (a television news bulletin shows him discharging himself from hospital to play golf), Tati's pilgrimage is hardly enlightening. Indeed, unlike the Greek mythological figure Narcissus, who is captivated by his own image, Tati perhaps resembles more directly his pet parrots in their refrain of 'Marado, Marado'. If Maradona is a misguided Narcissus, withering through his enthrallment by his own celebrity image and his mythical powers of recovery, Tati is closer to Echo, cursed to repeat the words of others and to suffer unrequited love for Narcissus. When Tati finally presents the statue at Maradona's country club, it is uncertain that Maradona will ever see it.

Sorín's film thus seems torn between a celebration of national integration and uplift through Maradona as symbolic of resurrection and a more pessimistic vision. The Maradona root proves economically valuable only to Waguinho. Swaying a group of redundancy-threatened tannery workers to allow him through their roadblock with his truckload of chicks by lying that it is a Boca Juniors commission, he saves the chicks that will fuel one economy as another dies. Their Brazilian origin is a reminder of the South American (Mercosur) Free Trade Agreement, while the roadblock typifies this method of popular resistance to the "violence of neo-liberal stability" (Dinerstein 2001: 1) in the 2000s.

Ironically, then, the only Argentine film depicts the psychodynamics of fandom rather pessimistically. Meta-filmically, Sorín's irony is symptomatic of his characteristic attempts "to 'resolve' a historical divide" between Argentine independent and commercial cinema'

(Page 2009: 124), acknowledging Maradona's 'neo-religiosity' (Salazar-Sutil 2008: 445) while simultaneously deconstructing the mythical promise of quasi-Christian redemption, using the road-movie genre to highlight the non-integration of national space. If *In the Hands* suggests that the freestylers are discovering the truth of their abilities and identities (and the neoliberal promise of freedom through heightened individuation) on their journey, *El Camino's* is a fractured, contradictory road to fantasied national recovery.

Fandom as Reflexive Mirroring

Maradona by Kusturica (2008) more optimistically explores Maradona's notionally Christ-like symbolism as a potentially redemptive, revolutionary figure for the geopolitical South. But in doing so, Bosnian-born film director Emir Kusturica reflexively explores his own narcissistic identification with Maradona, so extending his filmic themes of extremely marginal figures as anti-heroes (Gocic 2001: 53) and of harmony in dissonance (Iordanova 2002).

Following his major breakthrough film, *When Father was Away on Business* (1985), Kusturica has pursued a more flamboyantly visual style, exemplified by *Underground* (1995), a richly metaphorical epic chronicling of Yugoslavia from WWII through to the 1990s Balkan wars, and *Time of the Gypsies* (1989), which first established his baroque style of visual and aural excess and his recourse to magical realism (Iordanova 2002: 98). Iordanova (2002: 97) describes him as a "post-modern" artist who "plays with the beautiful and the ugly, the sublime and the despicable, the comic and the tragic ... in a constantly changing interplay of mutual recreation."

Maradona by Kusturica was more of an authored cinematic portrait exploring Kusturica's fascination with Maradona than a conventional documentary, stylistically exhibiting his trademark characteristics of carnival excess and dense texture. He establishes Maradona as an enigmatic figure eluding description, interpretation and prediction, embodying both irrepressible vitality in his play and seemingly unconscious self-destructiveness in his cocaine abuse. For Kusturica, Maradona is a postmodern both/and, rather than either/or, an intriguing contradiction. But as with the other films, it is in Maradona's representation of pre-Oedipal immaturity that Kusturica is most invested as a fan, echoing his depiction of the permanently migrant and ahistorical gypsies of *Time of the Gypsies* (1988) and *Black cat, White cat* (1998).

He introduces the search for Maradona's elusive meaning by quoting Baudelaire's *Fusées* (1867): 'God is the only being who, in order to reign, doesn't even need to exist.' Like God, the magical object of fan fantasies exists in the worshipper's imagination. As the quote appears, Kusturica introduces his own fantasied version of Maradona with his electric-guitar rendition of Ennio Morricone's theme from Sergio Leone's spaghetti western *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, performed in Buenos Aires with the band Zabranjeno Pusenje (No Smoking) (Iordanova 2002: 6). The juxtaposition additionally signals the profound profanity of Maradona's deity, reminding us of the gaucho, and of the film's Mexican-border setting. Leone subverted Western-movie convention in brutally depicting the American Civil War's North-South conflict, highlighting how "the true history of the United States was constructed on a violence which neither literature nor the cinema had ever properly shown" (quoted in Frayling 2000: 205).

This invoking of a North-South geopolitical divide connects with a mapping of a geopolitical fantasy of resistance on to Maradona's body. As his second goal against England is shown in replays from various angles, Kusturica comments that "even God himself got involved" here,

as “a country heavily in debt to the IMF triumphed over one of the rulers of the world.” Verbally referring to the first goal as we see the second suggests artistic equivalence. Neither hand nor foot acts as designated or expected by the post-Oedipal, paternal, authoritative codification of football. Kusturica’s fantasy of pre-Oedipal recovery and Oedipal resistance combined undergoes numerous repetitions, with minor variations, in the periodic animated sequences where Maradona, his photographed face transposed on to a cartoon body bamboozles various elite Westerners (including Margaret Thatcher and George W. Bush) while the Sex Pistols’ “God Save the Queen” is played. This is a distinctly corporeal fantasy of refusal of the post-Oedipal rules of global football and global politics alike.

However, for all that he is clearly enthralled by his own fantasy, the film constantly reiterates Maradona’s enigma and the frustration of Kusturica’s project. It shares the repetitive structure of music, and of football itself in its multiple cycles of restart, defence and attack, stressing Maradona’s transcendence of hierarchical distinctions through his corporeal irreducibility to discursive explanation or translation. Thus, on discovery that Maradona is again seriously ill and cannot be seen, he witnesses a street performance of Argentina’s other famous export, the tango, and verbally indulges a favourite theme of his, finding harmony in dissonance (Jordanova 2002: 104). He connects Maradona’s vibrant football, revolutionary political alignments, self-destructiveness and miraculous survival with the dance “most obviously suggest[ing] the union between thanatos and eros,” Freud’s (2001[1920]) death and life instincts.

Although mixing images of Maradona with Castro and Chavez with interview segments where Maradona elaborates his populist critique of the hegemony of Western neoliberal economics, Kusturica is fascinated most by the seeming paradox of the great beauty of Maradona’s play and his history of turning against himself the righteous anger elsewhere directed at the geopolitical elite. Kusturica thus suggests that Maradona may be unconsciously masochistic, echoing Freud’s (1984/1924) theory of masochism as the eroticisation of the death instinct. He repeatedly shows Church of Maradona processions and ceremonies. Their equation of Maradona’s punishment by FIFA with the Crucifixion is evident as a member holds a football that “represents Diego’s sacrifice,” followed later by a ‘barbed-wire crown’ representing ‘the pitch, the field, the grounds’ where he suffered. Like Jesus’ death, Maradona’s disastrous return to football in 1994 was voluntary. Combined with his near death due to chronic obesity and his cocaine addiction, Maradona’s actions are clearly open to the interpretation of unconscious masochism.

There is a distinct echo here of Christian masochism’s implicitly homoerotic dimension, conforming as it does to Freud’s pattern of ‘erotogenic’, ‘moral’ and ‘feminine masochism’, whereby love of the father is forcibly renounced through introjection of the paternal superego, but the ego regresses to the anal stage so that the masochistic fantasy of being beaten by the father maintains the homoerotic dimension (Freud 1984/1924: 424), the ‘negative’ Oedipus complex (Freud 1984/1923: 372). The masochist, like Christ, is submissively ‘feminine’, introjecting the morally punitive strictures of the paternal superego. Maradona both submitted to and transgressed the disciplinary codes of football, on and off the field, paying the devastating consequences as spelt out in his own castration metaphor: they ‘cut my legs off’. Maradona indicates this more directly when admitting to identifying with Robert de Niro’s sadomasochistic boxer Jake La Motta in *Raging Bull* (1980): “He wants to break everything. I want to score goals.” Although Maradona equates goals with outwardly directed violence, *Raging Bull* contains many scenes of homoerotic masochism (Grist 2007): to unconsciously seek punishment is to invite the wrath of the symbolic father.

Yet this masochism, whether real or Kusturica's fantasy, co-exists with nostalgia for the pre-Oedipal exuberance of *el pibe*, exemplified by the goals against England. Pursuing this theme in interview, Kusturica unearths a further contradiction. He juxtaposes archive footage showing the brutal outcome of the Malvinas/Falklands War, including wounded soldiers, with the handball goal. Maradona's verbal likening of the goal to stealing "an Englishman's wallet" invokes both pre-Oedipal exuberance and Oedipal resistance. However, as a national representative, by honouring the dead "sent to die by their own country," he both indicts the military junta who dispatched them and invokes the legitimacy of the state, its national boundaries and territorial claims, so reflecting his vulnerability to political manipulation – just as his support of Menem and remark that Fidel Castro is a "true patriarch with balls on" (Burns 2010: 6) signify a confused populism more than coherent socialist beliefs.

However, Kusturica's romanticisation of Maradona's resistance is foremost, connecting with his recurring theme of the superiority of perpetual immaturity. Hence his inclusion of a favourite trope, the bride, whose marriage typically curtails her youthful vitality and innocence, as in *Underground*'s wedding scene. Here, though, he shows an already married couple's induction into the Church of Maradona, but their mock wedding ceremony signifies an escape back to immaturity as the bride kicks the ball to the groom, who on scoring screams at the camera, emulating Maradona's charging of the television camera during the 1994 World Cup:

Maradona thus has a Christ-like quality in Kusturica's imagination as fan as he, rather like Kusturica's film characters who comically fail to hang themselves, cheats death in cycles of recovery and repeated crisis. Maradona represents a narcissistic, pre-Oedipal, immature part of himself for which he yearns, a fantasy as a way of staging desire for the narcissistic pre-Oedipal, pre-linguistic, corporeal, imaginary 'I'. Hence his introduction on stage by a No Smoking band member as "Diego Armando Maradona from the world of cinema"; dancing with Maradona on stage; and turning away from a mock lesbian tango at a nightclub to watch television replays of Maradona's goals, an acknowledgement of the homoerotic attraction in football, perhaps, made legitimate through narcissistic 'doubling' with an imaginary mirror image.

Conclusion

While the three films variously address Maradona's symbolism, only *Maradona by Kusturica* engages critically and reflexively with his contradictions as an Argentine cultural icon, and with his place or places in the imagination of his fans. The depoliticised romanticisation of Maradona in *In the Hands of the Gods* offers a fan fantasy of individual renewal in its imagery of freestylers journeying geographically towards him, but equally, or more importantly, towards a fantasied biographical recovery of a lost boyhood. Sorín uses Maradona's neo-religious iconography as a national hero rhetorically to highlight its opiate distraction from a deeply fractured society in his ostensibly linear road movie. Kusturica's is a decidedly postmodern documentary, as befits Maradona's contradictions: "he was at once the imaginary and the symbolic, he was marginal and he was central, he was strong and he was weak, he was popular and he was the elite" (Bilbija 1995: 205). Unable to establish exactly who Maradona is and what he 'means', Kusturica expresses and lives his ambivalent relationship to those contradictions.

However, despite the variations exhibited here, Maradona is not 'neutrosemic' because all of the films are linked by the themes, in football, and as relentlessly reiterated in Maradona's already textualised biography, of cyclical symbolic death and renewal. They also reiterate the

romantic notion, however fanciful, of an inspirational corporeal 'truth' in his sporting achievements, irrespective of his failings outside of football. And they evince a nostalgia for a pre-Oedipal exuberance that is contradictorily related to the post-Oedipal, hierarchically governed discipline of football.

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