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MARADONA inc: PERFORMANCE POLITICS OFF THE PITCH

Nicolas Salazar Sutil

ABSTRACT

This article addresses the blurring boundaries between celebrity, media sports, cultural identity and politics. I explore the case of media sport star Diego Maradona, whose strategies of public representation highlight the way in which politics and popular culture can overlap. Firstly, the article offers a general overview of the theorisation of football in Latin America. Central to my discussion is the problematic use of concepts like identity and belonging to define football politics. I insist on a theoretical reformulation of political culture in global contexts, and point to an understanding of media personalities such as Maradona as currency within global markets of cultural and political production. Maradona is understood as a corporative and performative phenomenon, where 'Maradona' becomes whatever audiences project onto this vacant public signifier (e.g. neo-religious icon, political spokesperson, or global brand).

Key words: Diego Maradona, football, media sports, celebrity, cultural identity, performative, politics.

Player, pundit, politician... prophet?

‘When the ball turns, the world turns’, the words of Uruguayan journalist Eduardo Galeano. In his book *Soccer in Sun and Shadow* (1998) the world of football is described as a series of tragic and joyful events dictated by forces of an astrological nature. Galeano’s visual metaphor reminds the reader that football’s effect on society is comparable to global religion or lunacy. Inasmuch as football stars provide an affirming quality to the fan’s life, sports stars elide critical thinking in order to produce a sense of religious joy (Novak 1993). Thus the language of football becomes a language of concrete incantations. Like an Artaudian code, it is transmitted through song, shouts, onomatopoeia. Eduardo P. Archetti (1997) points out that football is an emotional contract: ‘pure passion and pure heart’ (50). The game resembles religion insofar as it tells believers from non-believers, which is why the faithless intellectual has been disinclined, until recently, to deconstruct the sport. Argentinean fans, for one, would agree that the ball and the world never turned the same way again since their God Diego Armando Maradona stepped on the pitch. But whilst many fans may recognise ‘Santa Maradona’ as a postmodern divinity, it would be too hasty to conclude that Maradona is culturally significant only as a pseudo-religious or cultic phenomenon derived from the world of football.

My aim in the following article is to theorise the proliferation of discourses surrounding Diego Maradona off the pitch. This polysemic reading of Maradona allows us to raise a fundamental question of cultural theory: how does a football star develop metonymic layers of interpretations that are so far removed from the sports itself? As Gary

Whannel (2001) observes, sport star images involve complex condensations of discourses by the self-referential and intertextual constructions of celebrityhood. Like other post-modern mediated sport heroes such as Andre Agassi ('Image is Everything') and Michael Jordan, Maradona is an identitary pastiche that problematises the modernist conceptualisation of the sports hero. Footballers like Johan Cruyff or Franz Beckenbauer did not outreach the sphere of sports in the same way as the postmodernist sports celebrities intimated above. Indeed, the concept of a postmodern footballer was unheard of in Latin America at the time Maradona emerged on the field.

Alabarces and Rodríguez point out (2000) that each new drama involving Maradona has established a tension between how the events are to be encoded and how their meaning is to be interpreted. As such, Maradona is an ongoing, ever-changing narrative that is publicly performed and read by a diffused, global audience. The difficulty in reading Maradona has not precluded the production of more texts, readerships and visualisations of the star. On the contrary: at the height of a Maradona media-craze in October 2005 the idol appeared regularly in every major section of most Argentinean daily newspapers, thus diversifying his performance way beyond the football pitch (Zanoni 2007: 14). My discussion of Maradona as corporate phenomenon thus hinges on the situatedness and multiplicity of his performances.

John Fiske (1986) has famously underlined the polysemic nature of popular texts, that is to say the ability of popular texts to incorporate a variety of different meanings. According to this reading, what makes Maradona a text open to interpretation is not his talent on the football pitch but the conversion of these football skills into symbols that can be invested outside the sphere of football, beyond a single and closed interpretation. Taking his cue from Fiske, Cornel Sandvoss suggests that popular texts allow for so many different readings that they cannot be meaningfully described as polysemic, but rather neutrosemic- in other words, they carry no inherent meaning (2005: 126). According to this interpretation, Maradona could be best understood as a blank page, a 'mirror of consumption' (2005). This is a thought-provoking development in fan theory that problematises the widely accepted notion that cultural signification is open-ended. Instead, cultural

meaning is conveyed as an empty shell that can only be contained by contingent processes of consumption.

This said, my chief concern here is not with meaning or interpretation. The following is not a semiological study of the textuality of Maradona. Rather, I am interested in uncovering what Bourdieu would call a 'language market', that is, the context of value formation from which the symbol derives its objective relations or usages. From this perspective, Maradona is both a neutral meaning and a multiplicity; indeed, he is whatever the public projects onto the public screen of his celebrityhood. Maradona is thus a situated performance shaped by contingent systems of cultural production. In order to analyse Maradona in all his complexity it is necessary to conceptualise his phenomenon as a performative strategy, a situated, ongoing process of celebrity formation. Moreover, it is necessary to read Maradona as a limited set of ongoing identitary formations that are fabricated to suit changes within his audienceship. In order to be a comprehensible text, Maradona must diversify according to the fluctuating logic of a cultural market. There are, no doubt, other important markets where Maradona is recognised as a valuable symbolic currency. Maradona is an internet avatar, a football manager, a writer. Nonetheless, I have decided to focus primarily on three of Maradona's most famous public performances (as neo-religious, political and corporate figure), because I believe these are the fields of symbolic exchange that make his name and his number 10 shirt intelligible metonyms of popular culture.

According to Zanoni, Maradona (or 'Maradollar') represents one of the most lucrative corporate images in Argentina, and one whose extraordinary revenues are comparable to the biggest names in global business (2007:16). But there is no image to this corporation: there is no single logo that makes Maradona inc. as readily recognisable as Coca-Cola or McDonald's. Maradona's ubiquity rests not on the industrial repetition of a unique corporate image. His star quality depends on the diversification and adaptation to changes in those markets where his symbolic capital is exchanged. Thus the poster image of Javier Vásquez' documentary film *Amando a Maradona* (2005) depicts the Argentine A-team with eleven Maradonas at different stages of the idol's life. What these eleven mutations illustrate

is the versatile reinvention of Maradona's public image in order to elicit support from various generations of fans, and across various cultural landscapes.

This is not a question of condemning the star for the fabrication of shifting identities, 'self-deceiving magic' or 'pseudo-events', as Boorstin (1992) would have it. Instead of reproaching celebrity culture as a moral defect of our age, is it not more productive to ask why so many modern commentators have undermined celebrity culture for its duplicity? Or perhaps, as Lyotard suggests, we should do away with the whys altogether (2006: 63). *Why* we need celebrities is not the point in contention, but *how* we need them. As I will explain below, the inflections of celebrityhood do not necessarily point to a morally reprehensible lie, or a disreputable theatricalisation, but to a contradiction that is inherent to power relations.

In the same way that I have decided not to pursue a semiological approach that confines meaning to something singular, multiple, or non-existent, I will not concern myself with the question of reality (or lack of it), or whether mediated identities are true or fake. As I will explain below, such binary conceptualisations of celebrity can be problematic. The same applies to the notion of Maradona as a concrete, physical individual. Where is the TV or newspaper public that avows and disavows the role of Maradona as global icon? Where is Maradona himself, in the replay or in the flesh? Or is the notion of corporality in this context quite obsolete? In becoming a media sports phenomenon Maradona colonises publics without places (Thompson 1995). He becomes a performer for non-existent audiences (Hartley 1996). And if an audience does not exist, by the same token neither does Maradona. Maradona and his audiences are not necessarily people communally assembled in sight of one another to audit a concrete performance. In Hartley's view, mediated identities are more like Martians or communists in 1950s paranoia movies (1996: 64). As Hartley explains, readerships will sometimes be called into being as physical audiences, sometimes not. From that perspective, it is not the physical reality or spatiality of Maradona and his audience that must concern us here, but the ways in which they manifest themselves.

Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) would suggest that Maradona creates different types of audiences simultaneously by virtue of a situated performance. In Abercrombie and Longhurst's view, performance is crucial in order to accentuate identity in a way that gives certain tension to the performer's reception by fluctuating forms of audienceship (40). In mediated society, performance has become necessarily elongated and fragmented, travelling greater distances in space and in time (1998: 62). This allows performance to cover a continuum of audience experience from consumer to petty producer and back, creating a performative feedback that loops identity-based expulsion and incorporation. Does this not ultimately problematise the definition of identity and self-formation as a fixed position? As part of Maradona's shifting audienceship there is a simple audience at a football convention, a mass audience in La Bombonera Stadium, and perhaps most importantly, a diffused audience where everyone becomes a spectator of Maradona's performance all the time, whether through TV replays, internet images, Maradona merchandise or impersonations. Diffused audiences allow Maradona to pervade society as a local and global, private and public network of related performances. Maradona thus adapts his discourse to fit these audiences like a chameleon adapts to his greenery. And this is not a morally reprehensible act of political camouflage or a form of 'bad politics', but rather the natural effects of political immersion.

By presenting us with the dilemma of how the media public differs from the Classical public sphere, the debate on the construction of public selfhood dislocates the notion of 'public-ity' within a more complex sphere that does not function as an exclusive, Habermasian production of knowledge, but as a two-way process of influence and borrowing between the popular and the political (Hartley 1992; 2005). In the end, it does not matter whether football is real, or whether, as Umberto Eco posits, it is an 'everyday unreality' (quoted in Tobin 2002: 52). The question is how football stars are publicly legitimised as celebrities in a way that outreaches their sport, triggering a production of meaning that is perceived as real in wider cultural circuits.

The difficulty with the perception of the celebrity/fetish is compounded by the contradictory nature of celebrityhood itself, and the consumption

of an image of power that is at the same time distant and proximate, public and private, apprehensible and reprehensible, physical and virtual, local and translocal. Reality as hyperlink has made identity an act of transit, which is why self-formation implies not only a physical space, a concrete truth, but a series of shifting and negotiable situations and in-between spaces. This would suggest that Maradona's popular myth resides in a capacity to hyperlink beyond a singular foundation. Maradona is hyperlinked beyond football-related sites, and onto markets where other cultural and subcultural currencies are exchanged. If that is the case, can the aura of the celebrity footballer impose itself as a substitute currency for the symbolism of a religious or political guru?

Santa Maradona contains elements of a neo-religiosity characteristic of Latin America's saint-worshipping cultures. For a start, Maradona is not only worshiped in religious sectors but also in highly secularised divisions of society. In a mediaworld fuelled by criticism, cynicism and scandal-mongering, Maradona is sublimated as cult figure on account of a different type of neo-spiritual power. The football-saint can feed audiences with extraordinary miracles on the pitch, as well as tabloidesque narratives about heroism, scandals and unlikely comebacks. Furthermore, as Rodman points out in his study of Elvis, the affective investment shared by the members of the community is intensified by the fact that it can be constituted around a physical space that, once imbued in mythology and ritual, becomes de-spatialised and spiritual. In other words, Maradona can constitute a new form of church-like, global spatiality. Rodman points out that celebrities are not fixed to spatial locations, and that sports celebrities provide only a partial exception to the 'no-fixed space rule' of fan communities (1996: 125). In my opinion, Rodman has overlooked the affective power of football and the neo-religious spatiality that can be found in Latin American stadia; I am referring here to legendary sites like the Maracana Stadium in Rio, the Centenario in Montevideo, or La Bombonera in Buenos Aires. And although the Bombonera Stadium pre-exists Maradona's emergence as the ground's main football star, Maradona has radically changed the nature of this stage. La Bombonera Stadium and the slums of Villa Fiorito are now integral sites of the

Maradona myth. They are places of pilgrimage that help to organise the postmodern religion of Maradona around both concrete and virtual spaces. In point of fact, a Maradonean Church was founded in the city of Rosario in 1998 to help bring together fans from around the world in a syncretistic space that blends Catholicism with the worship of the Argentinean idol. Maradoneans often refer to their God as D10S, a portmanteau word that fuses Maradona's shirt number with the Spanish word for God (Dios).

Before I resume this analysis of Maradona's complex and often contradictory diversification as cult figure, political leader and corporate image, I must pause for a moment in order to consider the relationship between football and Latin American critical theory. In the section that follows, I will discuss how football theory has developed in the subcontinent, in order to interrogate some of the existing literature concerning the figure of Maradona.

Latin American football and critical theory

South American football is known as the 'People's Passion' (*pasión de multitudes*). This definition indexes a level of popular fervour that has undermined critical theory and has shied local intellectuals away from football as an academic field (Mason 1995). Given the popularity of the game in the subcontinent, however, it is surprising that the subject has not been critically examined at length. Until recent years there have been few historical accounts of Latin American football, with a growing literature on the subject only just beginning to emerge (Scher and Palomino 1988; Mason 1995; Taylor 1998; Sebreli 1998).

According to Pablo Alabarces (2000), despite being an object of study in the US and Europe (particularly amongst followers of Norbert Elias' Figurationist school), the transference of technologies of knowledge did not affect the theorisation of football in Latin America. Due to the appropriation of football by populist and military governments, the analysis of the game was confined to state-controlled journalistic accounts. It was not until the early eighties that a period of transition to democracy finally opened up a tenuous dialogue between pioneering

scholars such as Sebreli (1981), Da Matta (1982), and Lever (1983).

It could be argued that one of the first methodical studies of football in the subcontinent is Juan José Sebreli's book *Fútbol y Masas* (1981), a materialist critique of the game's effect on the social scaffolding of Argentinean society. In Sebreli's view, football either distracts the people from what ails them or trains them for submission to capitalist decline. As such, Sebreli's work focuses on the effects of class in shaping the choices of individuals and crowds. Following a Marxist approach to the study of popular culture Sebreli defines Argentine football as a terrain on which dominant and subordinate groups reproduce power relations and play out the dynamics of capitalist production. The notion of the popular ensconced in football is not something to be glorified by populist politicians; indeed, according to Sebreli the fan has a need alienated from what the academic refers to as 'culture' or 'knowledge'. Sebreli's view of the popular is that of an instrumentalised and fundamentally superfluous mass that cannot be understood as culture so much as capitalist labour force.

At around the same time Sebreli was publishing his work on football and the masses, social anthropologist Roberto Da Matta was editing a book that was to take a completely different approach to the same phenomenon. In *Universo do Futebol* (1982), Da Matta compiles the works of various authors who argue that the sources for social identity-formation in Brazil are not the state's constitutional laws but manifestations of popular culture such as football, religion and carnival. Following a somewhat Geertzian approach, Da Matta's theory of football *qua* ritual focuses on the game as a 'social drama'. In other words, football dramatizations are a national idiom through which society allows itself to be perceived. For Da Matta (2003) football is also a democratization ritual that affords Brazilian society a sense of social justice, equality and liberation. But unlike the materialist and functionalist approach of Sebreli and Lever, in whose works football and society are separated by strict boundaries, Da Matta depicts football as the ritual dramatisation of society itself. In other words, football is a ritualised performance of social reality, theatricalised and framed in such a self-reflexive way as to speak about the people, from the people, to the people.

Janet Lever (1983) would agree that a democratic drama is at stake in the practice of Brazilian football, although she does not conceive the game as a microcosm of society. Instead, she understands football as a mechanism of sublimation of and escape from Latin American society. In *Soccer Madness* (1983), her well-known study of Brazilian pitch-fever in the 70s, Lever takes a functionalist approach to Latin American football in order to interrogate the way in which the sport strengthens social relations necessary for people to work together in constructive ways. According to Lever (1983), sport is one mechanism that builds people's consciousness of togetherness, as it contains the paradoxical ability to reinforce societal cleavages whilst transcending them, thus making soccer the perfect means of balancing out multiple groups.

As far as Maradona is concerned, there is of course plenty of biographical literature on the subject (Levinsky 1996; Burns 2001; Zanoni 2007), including an autobiography of the ex-footballer entitled *El Diego* (Maradona et al. 2004). The reading of Maradona amongst intellectual circles, on the other hand, offers an incomplete (if not lopsided) picture of the idol. The Maradona phenomenon is seldom approached in a way that articulates his role as global brand, neo-religious icon or political spokesperson. Analysts often tag onto a method of cultural theory that insists on an interpretation of Maradona as a local sports hero (Dini 1994; Archetti 1997; 2001; 2003; Tobin 2002). A critical reading of Maradona seems to founder on the difficulty faced by the theorist in the unravelling of Maradona's multifaceted and transnational identity. In other words, it remains to be seen what Santa Maradona represents not as an individual voice but as mediated heteroglossia.

One theorist who has given plenty of attention to the subject is cultural anthropologist Eduardo P. Archetti. Archetti focuses on Maradona in order to tease out the wide-ranging effects football has on Argentinean masculine identity (1997; 1998; 2001; 2003). In one of his earliest works, Archetti (1997) deconstructs Maradona's emotional effects on male Argentineans following his doping scandal at the USA World Cup. According to Archetti, the fall of the hero stimulates a profound emotional state that reaffirms the affective bond between player and public. What makes Maradona's cultic status decisive is his unique

capacity to emerge from the pain of everyday life and produce joy in the public. An emotional contract is thus established between Maradona and his supporters that enable them not only to agree on the meaning of joy, but to share it (1997: 45). Archetti otherwise argues that the Argentinean public frames Maradona in an abstract, idealised and emotionally- charged way, integrating the lived and imagined past with what is perceived to be a national tradition. In this sense Maradona is both the product and producer of national ideology.

The key to the formation and perpetuation of a loyal public is the emotional power of the original event (i.e. the Hand of God, the lifting of a World Cup). This powerful sentiment reproduced in the media has elevated Maradona to a mythological status that transcends the local life-worlds of Argentineans. For Archetti (2001), the qualities of Maradona transcend the limits of nationality and, in this sense, can direct attention to a variety of ideas concerning how one should, or could, be. Unfortunately, this idea is not explored at length, which is why Maradona remains a site-specific phenomenon for Archetti. Archetti's Maradona is based on two essentially problematic paradigms: masculinity and national identity. What Archetti fails to theorise is the way Maradona builds on an emotional reservoir triggered not only by a single performative event or a privileged male participation, but by an endless iteration of TV, internet, and other mediated replays of a performativity that is non- specific. Likewise, Archetti does not explicate how Maradona's identity remains fixed to national and gender paradigms whilst acceding to performative networks where subjectivity and belonging are blurred. In other words, how can the public accept the affective bond that warrants cultic status if the hero's sense of belonging is shifting from his small neighbourhood, to a national, to an international space of representation? Whannel (1992) argues that there is an inherent tension in the star system of mediated sport caused by the increased commercialisation of the individual that eclipses any attempt to place sports stars in the national ideologies of representative sports. Given his continuous passage from political figure, to global brand, to local divinity, the essential identity of this ex-footballer is a fundamentally contested and perhaps empty proposition: a mirror on which anyone

can project an image or signification.

Football, politics, and other contradictions

Galeano (1998) notes that Maradona is uncontrollable not only when he plays, but also when he speaks. According to this reading, the star's popularity rests on his capacity to translate his uncontrollability on the pitch into controversial soundbites and visualisations relayed shorthand by the media. Doubtless, Maradona's most important media gestures are his goals, the most memorable of which occurred during a quarter-final match in Mexico '86. Maradona scored both goals in Argentina's famous 2-1 victory over their main rivals England. It is truly remarkable that two of the most famous goals in football history were scored in the same game, in a space of 5 minutes, by the same footballer. In the second goal, Maradona weaved his way through the entire England defence in an outstanding solo move that became known as the 'cosmic kite' (*el barrilete cósmico*), or as England manager Bobby Robson put it: 'a bloody miracle'. The first goal, on the other hand, was a Maradona trademark that indexes the polarised nature of his character. Maradona described his (in)famous handball as 'something that came from deep inside, having done it in the waste ground (*potrero*), having done it in Fiorito' (Quoted in *La Noche del 10*, my translation). Furthermore, Maradona fed the international press with a timeless soundbite: 'the Hand of God', which was to magnify the message of England's humiliation way beyond the football pitch. 'This was revenge' explained Maradona, 'it was like recovering a little bit of the Malvinas [Falklands]' (2004: 127-128). Media gestures were to follow at the 1990 World Cup, when Maradona mouthed the words *hijos de puta* (sons of bitches) twice in front of the cameras as the Italian public repudiated the Argentinean anthem, and later, in the 1994 version of the competition, when Maradona screamed down a camera after scoring a goal against Greece.

As Leandro Zanoni points out (2007), the medial circus surrounding Maradona has inflated these performative gestures to such an extent that they have transformed them into an affair of State. And whilst Maradona's media gestures on the pitch are often transmitted in the cultic language of football, the same cannot be said about his reactions

off the pitch. During the 1986 World Cup finals, for example, Maradona raised several complaints against the commercialisation of the football industry and FIFA's exploitative interests, insofar as it forced players to sweat it out at midday in Mexico in order to guarantee lucrative prime time TV contracts in Europe.

As early as 1978, the Argentine military engaged in a curious relationship with teenager Diego Armando Maradona. General Videla's military government had prevented the player's move to Barcelona FC in order to secure his stay in the country. By holding such prodigious young player at home the Videla regime hoped to deflect political issues to the football ground in a 'bread and circus' policy. Football was being used as a political sedative, much in the same way as during Perón's dictatorship, when state intervention in football reached its peak (Duke & Crolley 1996; Alabarces 2003). Those in support of Maradona's transfer to Europe were labelled communists and anti-Argentinean. Given the level of state-sponsored support, Maradona dedicated the national team's victory at the 1978 Youth World Cup to President Videla, the man responsible for appalling human right violations and thousands of disappearances during the so called 'Dirty War' (1976-1983). In his autobiography, Maradona argues that his political views are not modelled by the powers-that-be. In retrospect, however, this seems like a hard statement to prove.

During the 1990s, following a regionwide transition to democracy and neo-liberalism, Maradona became an open supporter of right-wing and *neo-peronista* politician Carlos Saúl Menem. Although hard-line economic policies fuelled widespread political unrest Maradona did not back a socialist alternative at the time. Instead, Maradona came out in support of disgraced finance minister Domingo Felipe Cavallo, who in 1996 was ousted from government following staggering unemployment and inflation rates. Although Cavallo is credited with radical economic reforms that triggered the so-called 'December 2001 riots', Maradona claimed 'Mingo' was an honest man, and that the Argentine people were hypocrites for blaming their politicians for what after all was a crisis of their own making (Levinsky 1996: 350).

With most Latin American countries currently under socialist

administration Maradona is now associated with Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez's project of pan- American socialism. In addition to criticising the US boycott of Cuba and carrying a tattoo of Che Guevara on his left arm, Maradona has spoken out against the Vatican, the discrimination against Neapolitans in Italy, and the commercial exploitation of footballers by bureaucrats and corporate organisations. According to Jeffrey Tobin (2002), such declarations empower many of the arguments in Argentine Cultural Studies about resistance, class, and neo-colonial relations, which can and are routinely applied to Maradona. The reason why Maradona's activities can be readily subscribed to the articulation of an Argentine Cultural Studies is precisely the refusal to speak intelligibly and thus to enter a dominant ideological discourse (2002: 60). This encapsulates the complex, hybrid cultures that according to Nestor García-Canclini (1995) are characteristic of Latin America.

In order to prove his commitment to the socialist cause Maradona joined anti- globalisation protests surrounding a meeting of the Fourth Summit of the Americas in 2005. Gathered in the seaside town of Mar del Plata to discuss enterprise development and Latin America's fight against poverty, the 2005 presidential summit became an instance for ALCA (Free Trade Area for the Americas) to deliberate on the expansion of a free-trade zone regulated by the United States. Thousands of anti-globalisation and anti-American protesters gathered to oppose George W. Bush's visit to Argentina in what was believed to be Washington's covert plan to control Latin American trade.

Having been excluded from the official meeting, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez summoned a counter-event known as the 'People's Summit', sponsored by his Pan- American and counter-hegemonic organisation (the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas or ALBA). Numerous figures of Latin American politics and culture travelled from Buenos Aires to Mar del Plata in a special train, dubbed the 'ALBA Express'. Maradona attended the 'People's Summit' wearing a white top with a red swastika bearing the message: 'Stop Bush!' The same political message was evinced on a second day of protests with a T-shirt reading: *War Criminal*, which showed Bush's face splattered with blood. Maradona made the headlines by claiming that he was proud to

repudiate ‘human garbage’ - yet another controversial media gesture against the American President.

But right-wing media organisations hit back. In 2006 rumour had it that the Argentine football star had come out in support of Ollanta Humala, the ethno- nationalist and pro-Chávez candidate for the Peruvian presidential elections. The Peruvian daily *La Primera* appeared to confirm this by showing a front-page photograph of Chávez and Maradona in which the latter wore a T-shirt with a picture of Humala. The photograph caused a media furore, although it was later revealed that the image had been modified and that the photograph had been taken at the Estadio Mundialista during the ‘People’s Summit’. The T-shirt in question was the one used by Maradona on the second day of protests, which depicted Bush as a war criminal. Ollanta Humala had to disclaim any links with Hugo Chávez or Diego Armando Maradona for fear of losing support from an increasingly anti-chavista electorate. And although Maradona visited Peru to play an exhibition football match during the presidential campaign, he had to keep his political allegiances well hidden from the press.

On the basis of the foregoing, it is possible to conclude that Maradona’s ideas are articulated in sophisticated strategies of political communication. As many critics have been quick to point out, Maradona’s socialist tendencies are hardly compatible with his friendship with Peronist President Carlos Menem or his support for free- market economist Domingo Felipe Cavallo. What is more, Maradona’s role as anti- neoliberal and anti-globalisation activist in Hugo Chávez’ ‘People’s Summit’ is hardly compatible with his appearances on chat shows and highly lucrative exhibition football. His programme *La Noche del Diez*, which was aired for a period of 13 consecutive Mondays towards the end of 2005, comprised 260 members of production, 14 cameras, luxury sets, giant video-wall screens, 30 dancers, as well as global celebrities such as Pelé, Mike Tyson, and Robbie Williams. To make his contradictory political persona all the more graphic, Maradona appeared in April 2006 in a soft drinks advert wearing the *verde-amarella* shirt of archenemy Brazil. By creating a visual paradox that is agreeable and disagreeable both to Argentines and Brazilians, the media gesture enhanced

Maradona's capacity to outreach any fixed, definite, and predictable notion of selfhood, thus creating a political persona that is appealing to wide sectors of the public. In a brief apology for his political incongruity, Maradona explains:

People complain about me, they say I'm contradictory, but what about Argentina? In our country there are still people who defend Videla but far fewer who defend Che Guevara. (2004: 27) Toward the end of a somewhat contrived confession Maradona makes one final attempt to provide a definitive explanation of who this fabricated Diego is, and how his myth should be read by global audiences. Maradona explains:

I am the voice of the voiceless, the representative of the people. I am one of them, no different. It's just that I get microphones shoved in my face and I get the chance to speak for them. No one's given those people a chance in their whole fucking lives. Let's see if we can get this point across once and for all: I am El Diego. (Maradona et al. 2004: 253)

El Diego implies that Maradona is reducible to a single, definitive identity. But as I have argued thus far, Maradona is often described as a composite self, a fusion of complex typologies. In the following pages I will discuss why Maradona is often read by critical theorists as a dual persona. Dualism not only favours the utilisation of Maradona as an analytical, Marxian case-study in the field of Cultural Studies, but also enhances his pseudo-religious, transcendentalist image. In the following section, I will problematise this binary reading of Maradona's political performance in order to posit a hyperlinked and fragmented vision of Maradona inc.

Duos and Duels

At the height of his career in 1984 Maradona chose not to play his football for Barcelona FC in order to join SSC Napoli, an unprepossessing *Serie A* team struggling to stay up. It was Naples, not the affluent Barcelona, which gave Maradona the freedom to reproduce the social phenomenon that had made him a hero back in Argentina. The stigmatisation of the southerner presented an ideal opportunity for the staging of Maradona's exclusionary/inclusionary politics. In

Naples, Maradona could use the football pitch as a stage for the cultivation of a highly politicised audience (Dini, 1994). As Maradona was well aware, Italy's geographic fracture fuels football with a series of collateral emotions, feuds and duels, which is why a sporting hero in Naples is not only awarded economic, but also political capital. The transferral of regional struggles onto a football pitch reifies the political as a dramatised friend/foe contest where territory, identity, physical belonging and violence are represented along clear ideological lines (Dal Lago 2001). The objective bipartition of both field and stadium into contending political parties sets up the vision of the political as a Classical agon. However, this binary set-up is highly questionable. As I have intimated above, binarism transforms notions such as consumer/consumed, friend/foe or right/left into very rigid and artificial categorisations that fail to explain the fluctuations and overlaps of postmodern culture. The friend/foe antithesis is problematised by the fact that in the case of most successful teams, players and managers are imported from abroad, which means identity and territory have become more unstable sites.

John Hartley (1992) argues that binarism forgets its own condition as concept. Binarism is only an analytical process, which is why binary-thinking should be understood as a sense-making operation rather than a social reality (Hartley 1992: 31). The kind of analytical structure Hartley has in mind is porous and unstable. Thus, what informs the categories of public and private are the fluctuating conditions of consumption and citizenship (2005). The desire of the consumer is comfort, whilst that of the citizen is freedom. The endless tradeoffs between these energies represent an important trajectory of identity-formation that define whether individuals are perceived as consumer or consumed identities on the one hand; or whether they are rightful citizens or right-less city-dwellers. It follows that the porosity of this binary must also call into question the very substance of the notions of consumerism and citizenship. As Hills points out, cultural identities are performed not simply through a singular binary opposition, but rather through a raft of overlapping and interlocking versions of 'us' and 'them', to the extent that power and resistance are at times extremely difficult to locate (2000: 27). In the following pages, I will critique the

binaristic analysis of one of the most notable cultural theorist to deal with the Maradona phenomenon: Eduardo Archetti.

The *pibe/potrero* dualism resolves in black and white the Maradona paradox, but in the rigidity of this reading the multilayered, nuanced and ever-changing image of Maradona is lost. According to Archetti's thinking, Maradona is synonymous first and foremost with success, not least because he materialises a feeling of victory, joy, and childhood freedom. On the other hand, Maradona is a peculiar narrative that leads the reader to a confrontation with themes of marginality, poverty and the urban wasteland. The critical reading of Maradona often emphasises Maradona's birthplace in the slums of Villa Fiorito, in Buenos Aires. Archetti (1997) points out that Maradona is pure *potrero* (wasteland), even when he is not playing football. In other words, Maradona has difficulties accepting boundaries and hierarchies. Owing to Maradona's global celebrityhood, however, the narrative of the *potrero* no longer indicates a real space, but an imagined one, in the traditional sense of the 'no-fixed space rule' of fan communities described by Rodman (1996: 125). It is an itinerary of wastelands that links Buenos Aires with Naples, with Havana, with any other urban wasteland in the globe. In J.B. Thompson's words, Maradona becomes a paradigm of 'non-local knowledge', fixed in a material substratum, reproduced technically, and transmitted via the media (1995: 211).

In my opinion, such a mangled and overlapping series of phenomena as Maradona inc. does not sit comfortably with the *pibe/potero* duo. Localities such as the *potrero* function not as fixed spaces of political identity-formation but as slippages where ongoing transnational identities collide and merge into each other. As Sandvoss explains, just as popular culture has an ability to accommodate different, sometimes diametrically oppositional readings, so landscapes of fandom are under pressure to provide a place corresponding to all such divergent readings (2005: 58). The collapse of dualism results in identities constructed within a continuum where place and placelessness can overlap.

Another facet of the Maradonean binary that must be called into question is the notion of child-like play. The Golden Boy or *pibe de oro* is a powerful image insofar as it helps to portray football as a game for

children, to be fully enjoyed when total freedom is granted and achieved (Dini 1994; Archetti 1997, 2001, 2003). Archetti (1997) observes that Maradona places a unique emphasis on the infantile nature of football whilst stressing the importance of freshness, spontaneity and freedom. According to this reading, the responsibilities of mature life cancel out people's sense of play. If the *pibe* represents an escape route and a return to childhood for the adult football fan, Maradona's actions epitomise an ideal state where the negative aspects of the individual are always discarded (1997: 35). As such, Maradona is an ideal *pibe* that is not expected to be reasonable or responsible in real life. If there is such a thing as carnivalesque inversion, football could mark out a time in which it is possible to escape the rigidity imposed by strictly hierarchical, grown-up societies. As the childish trickster weaves his way past better fed, better schooled opponents, the crowds feel that order has been turned upside down. In sum, Maradona is a playful kid who is continually testing the authority to see what he can get away with (Whannel 2002: 164). But unlike Archetti's dualistic reading, for Whannel Maradona is the 'Artful Dodger' whose morality is contingent upon power relations and upon positionalities of multiple mediated identities. In the same way that he dodged his way past England defenders in Mexico '86, Maradona can weave his way through systems of electronic and digital information-exchange creating traces of selfhood that make up an incompatible, dizzying and yet irresistible textuality, or 'vortextuality', in Whannel's words (2001). That childish or adolescent carefreeness that is associated with Maradona is not consistent with a dualistic persona, or a binary analytical program, but with changing ideas and visions the public projects onto the empty canvas that is Maradona. A fixed sense of selfhood is lost given the public nature of this performative phenomenon. In the final analysis, it is the theorist who seeks to impose an ideological program on Maradona, rather than the other way round.

Conclusion

To the extent that there are no clear boundaries within the public sphere, corporate identities such as that performed by Maradona are collective narratives or readerships and not intrinsic properties of their own subjectivity. In other words, Maradona can be read as a

communicative net, a system of readerships where a projected sense of Maradona-hood creates fleeting places and times of identity-formation and social bondage. The Maradona phenomenon exists beyond a single cultural market, in the virtual apparitions of TV replays, internet avatars, religious icons, books, films, newspapers, banners, the collective consciousness. Maradona is the catalyst for endless visualisations, a discursive narrative furiously colonising places of public-hood that are no longer found in the ground but, as Hartley puts it, are 'places in the schedules' (1992: 5). Maradona thus takes football from the street to the stadium and from the stadium to the abstract, relocating the game in a public sphere that vanishes in its own footsteps. The meta-narrative that is put in place creates a body of symbols that is not only relevant to a single circle of fans, but to a series of overlapping and interlocked groups of supporters. In Neil Blain's words, the symbolic functioning of sports often usurps the directly connected network of meaning attached to the original activity (2003: 233). Maradona's performance exceeds Fiorito and Boca, in the same way that each embodied political construction, according to Judith Butler (2006), is precisely that which is never fully constructed. The subject remains that which is as yet to be finalised, an indefinite future of construction that eludes every moment of instantiation. In the case of Maradona, political power furnishes the meaninglessness of his performance with an almost Derridean supplementarity, a superabundance of celebrityhood that postpones the finalization of post-theological signification: is Maradona a player, a pundit, a prophet? This unbounded diversification and symbolic dispersion broadens and deepens Maradona inc. beyond what is defined concretely as corporate football. Given the speed of change and exchange in mediated communication the concrete is not necessarily the real, in terms of what constitutes a social narrative.

Not surprisingly, Maradona begins his autobiography by confessing he sometimes thinks his whole life is on film, or in print (2004: 1). Although Maradona refuses to see himself as a fictional character, the kind of rags to riches story told by Maradona is by no means an unfamiliar motif in the narratives society tells itself about sport (Boyle and Haynes, 2000). Summing up, football has an increasingly broad

and influential cultural role insofar as it can substitute experiences that would have been attributed traditionally to religious, economic or political practices. The power-relations available to football culture can and are routinely transferred to a number of critical discourses. Performance politics thus arises in the context of a power shift, in order to normalise new spaces of cultural production.

The conversion of public anxiety into affect and fandom is the result of a performance that fluctuates from right-wing to left-wing, from intimate to distant, from neo-religious to secular, from private to public, from commodity to gift, from location to translocation, from person to corporation. Furthermore, the itinerary can be reverted, and the performance can return to its previous state in an endless feedback loop. Maradona is never one thing or the other, but the potential to be a pair of opposites or whatever else the audience projects onto his empty bodily screen. Consequently, if I were to start this analysis again but from a semiological point of view, perhaps I would agree with Sandvoss after all in claiming that the popular text is neutral. This said, if performance is only this momentary subjectivity, this changing screen projection, how can we predict what Maradona's next political self will look like? Only God knows, for He will no doubt continue to reclaim the empowering desire that controls majorities.

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