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P. LOUISE JOHNSON, University of Sheffield, UK
p.l.johnson@sheffield.ac.uk

“Obra de arte yo too”: Eduardo Mendicutti on Soccer, Glamour and the “Beckham Effect”

In memory of Brian J. Dendle

La Susi en el vestuario blanco (2003) is a fictional chronicle of life in the Real Madrid locker room, a privileged insight into the sanctum sanctorum of *the world's* richest soccer team. The hiring of Susi as glamour coach ostensibly aims to boost the competitive advantage of the galácticos in foreign as well as local markets (reflecting the reality of the club at the time). In *Mendicutti's homoeroticizing gaze, it also serves to* uncover the homophobic substrate reportedly still common in male team sports, and teases at the anxieties of the players. This article explores the peculiar function of Susi as she sets the comic tone of the work and engages with the varied virilities before her. It *examines the notions of “glamour” and “identification”* both as tongue-in-cheek team objectives, and as phenomena with wider relevance for the way spectators relate to sport, and players to the world around them.

Key words: Eduardo Mendicutti, Susi, soccer, Real Madrid, humor, homophobia

Reflecting on the 2006 FIFA World Cup hosted by Germany, Yvette Sánchez laments the absence of a literary masterpiece on soccer in her panoramic essay “La literatura de fútbol, ¿metida en una camisa de once varas?” (2007). In so doing she echoes the concerns of

commentators from across the Arts and Humanities that sport, for a multitude of reasons, seems ill-adapted to both literary and scholarly discourses (and is ill-treated in turn by these), having to contend – particularly in the case of soccer and other ball games – with perceived cultural and academic neglect, lack of understanding, and resistance. Sánchez herself refers to the “prejuicios intelectualistas” which have contributed in the past to the stigmatizing of sport (134), and which contrast with the sheer volume of literary publications on soccer: “La gran cantidad [de narrativa breve y ensayos sobre el fútbol] nos lleva a la pregunta inexorable de si, en términos de calidad y atractivo, la literatura está a la altura del fútbol, de si puede hacerle frente. ¿O es que al intentar congraciarse con él, se acaba vistiendo con plumas ajenas?” (131).

In *La Susi en el vestuario blanco* (2003), Spanish novelist and journalist Eduardo Mendicutti offers an alternative mode of critiquing the not merely dominant, but apparently unshiftable discourse of hegemonic masculinity in soccer, through the dissolution of borderlines between player and spectator for the most crass commercial ends, and also, tongue-in-cheek, for a more seamless, mutual understanding. Here, soccer “tiene pluma”: in the arch femininity of narrator and protagonist Susi and her campaign to instil “glamour” into Real Madrid’s star players, the galácticos; and in her attempts to draw out the “lado femenino” of each of them in turn. Sánchez comments:

Y el machismo o el tabú de la homosexualidad en la cancha y en las gradas son el blanco de los ataques jocosos del escritor español Eduardo Mendicutti quien, en sus columnas semi-ficcionales, escribe contra la homofobia masiva y también contra el excesivo patriotismo (que puede degenerar en abierta violencia) o contra la pose de lifestyle engendrada por los medios de comunicación masiva. (135)

Sánchez overstates Mendicutti's attack on patriotism and violence (neither is obvious in *La Susi*), and the humour is more sophisticated than simply jocular, but for the rest, her observations are keen. In this article we argue that Mendicutti's striking, high-camp¹ treatment of soccer both behind closed doors and from the perspective of the spectator constitutes a singular reassessment of spectator-player identification, with implications for how we value sport aesthetically, as individuals, within the now inevitable frame of the global market. We contend, more importantly, that the critique through humor of heterosexism, machismo and ingrained homophobia goes further than other disciplines and genres in opening up the "space of exception" that soccer stubbornly occupies in the wider context of sexual politics, precisely because of Mendicutti's focus on the spectator, and on the comic application of the logic of identification. In this sense, Mendicutti's work acts as counterpoint to the more elitest endeavours of a scholar such as Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht whose own research over the last two decades into sport spectatorship, aesthetic experience and "beauty" (the "beautiful play" and bodily beauty) responds to a similar perception of neglect, or betrayal, this time in the academic sphere (see "Epiphany of Form" for a most engaging introduction). There are suggestive resonances between these so-called high- and low-cultural explorations of soccer which we will return to below.²

La Susi en el vestuario blanco is a collection of expanded and revised fictional columns from the 2003 summer supplements of Madrid-based daily newspaper *El Mundo*, which chronicle Real Madrid's tour in the same year of Hong Kong, China, Thailand and Japan. The columns' ostensible author and Mendicutti's alter ego, Susi,³ is concerned in a very self-interested way with ensuring that the galácticos achieve a radical glamour makeover. Gema Pérez-Sánchez has written that Mendicutti used these columns to comment "with a very queer sense of humor, on current events through the conceit of discussing his

cousin Susi's troubles," adding that "Susi is obviously an homage to Almodóvar's famous, transgender persona Patty Diphusa" (212 endnote 51). Mendicutti has insisted, after Flaubert, that "La Susi soy yo. Pura literatura" ("Buscando a la Susi" 46), and in his prologue to *La Susi* he identifies his protagonist as the expression of his own "lado femenino" (16).⁴

La Susi presents itself as a glamour manual-cum-crusade journal, illustrated with campily-captioned photographs of players during training and at rest, which help the reader "recordar y visualizar los hechos, a comprender de dónde saca la Susi sus ocurrencias, y a imaginar sus estupefacientes efectos" (19). The shots indicate in a tenuous manner the glamorous potential of the first-team players, where "glamorous" for the most part is understood as feminine (or not excessively masculine, androgynous) and sexually available. In a nod to the festive tone, the volume is prefaced with "Palabras para Susi" by Joaquín Sabina, the celebrated singer-songwriter from Úbeda, friend of the author but also a huge celebrity fan of Atlético Madrid (Real's local rivals). This somewhat perverse but affectionate gesture on Mendicutti's part, together with Susi's later allusions to Real's nemesis, Barça, point beyond mere banter to a sense of soccer inclusivity and mutual interdependence. The coplas also functionally rhetorically as a *captatio benevolentiae* for the Real Madrid players who are subjected to Mendicutti's barbs (thus "Que no se encrespe mi Guti / cuando mi don Mendicutti / abra la veda," 11). *La Susi en el vestuario blanco* is a rare, perhaps unique, queer engagement with soccer in the Hispanic sphere. The ephemeral press format ensured a broad initial readership, and the later publication as a single volume made possible a greater degree of narrative continuity (or coherence, perhaps, because the episodic nature resists plot), and extended that initial audience, offering a superficially frivolous, theatrical commentary on rampant commercialism in a populist mode.

Mendicutti, a Journalism graduate, explains that the short-column format was ideally suited to his caricatural purpose, and his artistic freedom in *El Mundo* had been guaranteed by

Manuel Hidalgo and Pedro J. Ramírez, two of the founders of the newspaper (it was Hidalgo who had invited him to become a contributor): “He descubierto que, escribiendo columnas, se puede y se debe ser audaz, alguna vez se es temerario, conviene ser listo o parecerlo, y muchas veces se echa mano de un desparpajo rayando en la desfachatez” (“Buscando a la Susi” 43).⁵ To this end, he says,

yo he utilizado como columnista, un truco muy práctico, y que es, además, un truco eminentemente literario: la creación de un personaje que me sirve de acicate, de interlocutor, de provocación, a veces de parapeto, a veces de conciencia crítica. Me refiero al personaje de mi amiga la Susi. (“Buscando a la Susi” 43)

Susi’s role in the *El Mundo* columns was sometimes major, often minor, and occasionally she all but supplanted Mendicutti: it is this autonomy that Susi displays in her tales from Real Madrid’s locker room. Thus “casi siempre en estos casos, se refiere a mí . . . de manera sarcástica: con este recurso, la Susi deja claro que ella es más atrevida, más radical, más brillante, más aguda e incisiva que yo . . . en muchas ocasiones, ella dice lo que yo no me atrevo a decir” (“Buscando a la Susi” 43). The use of a detached, satirical persona seems completely justified given the sensitivities of Mendicutti’s targets, here specifically world-class soccer players notoriously shy of proximity to anything that might be deemed (a marker of) non-heteromascularity. “La mirada frívola constituy[e] uno más de sus recursos literarios para poner en solfa asuntos, situaciones y vidas desgarradoras” (Jurado Morales 74), and although some might consider the association of “desgarrador” with soccer as trivializing in the context of widespread global criminalization of same-sex relationships, nevertheless it remains the case that in apparently civilized Western nations soccer is all too often a redoubt

for homophobic, and certainly heterosexist, views. The situation is changing, but slowly. That such reticence, even fear, has historically been sanctioned from the terraces and by pundits and the mass media more generally, underscores the magnitude of what Mendicutti, through Susi, attempts in *La Susi en el vestuario blanco*. This little-known work, through its camp aesthetic and focus on internationally-known sportsmen, exemplifies Mendicutti's "dechado existencial," characterized by "la oposición a los convencionalismos estancos, el cuestionamiento de las moralidades atávicas y la normalización de la diferencia como deber individual, colectivo o institucional para erigir entre todos un mundo más tolerante y más justo" (Jurado Morales 75).

Susi's voice can be strident, cajoling, maternal but most often it is that of a phallic-obsessed "mujer de cierta edad" who pops heart pills when the pressure becomes too much. The melodramatic, middle-aged if not menopausal effervescence of Susi does not merit a mention in Alberto Mira's *Para entendernos* but Mira's description of the narrative voice of those male characters "que han decidido ser mujeres" accords with Susi:

se expresan en su argot femenino pero no realmente "femenino": un estilo marcado por un tono levemente histérico, una continua afirmación del yo frente a lo que piense la gente, lleno de palabras recónditas que muestran un cuidado por la expresión. Por supuesto ninguna mujer habla así. La caracterización de la voz no es la de la parodia de la feminidad, sino la fidelidad a la oralidad de quienes parodian (o quizá homenajean) la feminidad. (Mira 509)

We might suggest in parallel that the “femininity” which Susi sees as the path to profit is no more “female” than she is, but constitutes, instead, a neovirility (“ese novedoso concepto de la virilidad” 15; “un concepto rompedor y muy atractivo de la virilidad” 18).

Susi’s narrative voice, her “libertinaje verbal” and “anarquía lingüística,” partly derive from Mendicutti’s emphatic opposition to journalistic style guides, and are manifest not only in the argot alluded to by Mira, but in “la transcripción fonética de las palabras de otros idiomas, sobre todo del inglés, reproducidas, escritas tal cual suenan cuando el inglés lo habla un español medio” (Mendicutti, “Buscando a la Susi” 46; e.g. “biutibox,” “epileidi”). There is no room for politically-correct posturing when faced with such linguistic (and other) stereotyping, accurate or not, as the supposed /r/ /l/ confusion popularly associated with the Far East is exploited to give “Leal Madrid,” “Laúl” (Raúl), and “Pol fin va a disflutal vacaciones malavillosas en islas Canarias [sic].” Susi switches into Catalan briefly on a number of occasions, a “guiño” in the direction of the independentist Joan Laporta,⁶ elected President of FC Barcelona in 2003, who would install Catalan as the official language of the club (and of the players) a few years later. And David Beckham’s valiant attempts to master Spanish are conveyed without pity: “Y a mí no importar nothing que mis children Brooklyn y Romeo cachondearse de su dady montaña” (La Susi 102). Verbal pastiche and loan words are juxtaposed in turn with Latin borrowings (“urbi et orbi”) in a richly chaotic discourse structured around relentless double-entendres that rejoice in the bosomly embrace of readerly complicity.

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David Beckham catalyses the glamour campaign in *La Susi en el vestuario blanco* when he signs for Real Madrid in 2003, shortly after what Mendicutti calls the “efecto Beckham” was

blossoming within United Kingdom soccer. As Gumbrecht allows and indeed celebrates in *In Praise of Athletic Beauty* (2006), many individuals and several teams have enjoyed, and themselves been aware of, their status as agents of aesthetic elegance; that is, as soccer divas (the term galáctico often embraces “diva” and “prima donna” in common usage). It is entirely logical, then, in an age of huge soccer presence in the visual media, that the sports industry should seek to capitalise on spectator receptiveness, and on the self-awareness of the beautiful, or here glamorous players themselves. Some reports (see Torres 2004) suggest that Real had Ronaldinho on their radar before Beckham signed, but the Brazilian,

según los hombres del presidente, no sirve para anunciar cosméticos. “¡Qué feo es Ronaldinho!” dijo uno de ellos hace dos meses, antes de la final de Copa. “No compensa ficharle. ¡Es que te coge una marca y te la hunde! Entre Ronaldinho y Beckham, me quedo cien veces con Beckham. No hay más que ver lo guapo que es Beckham, la clase que tiene, la imagen que transmite... ¡Toda Asia está enamorada del Real Madrid gracias a Beckham!” (Torres, “Ronaldinho visto por el enemigo”)⁷

When Susi manages to persuade Real Madrid to take her on as assistant to Jorge Valdano, at the time Director of Soccer, her brief is to instil glamour into the team, “incorporarlos a todos, siguiendo el modelo de David Beckham, a un concepto de club de fútbol en el que las habilidades con el balón son fundamentales, pero no más que una imagen individual y colectiva divina de la muerte y capaz de nutrir sin parar las arcas del equipo” (18). Mendicutti remarks in the Prologue that he had all but exhausted the possibilities for Susi in his *El Mundo* columns:

pensé que por fin la Susi iba a descansar en paz y que los del periódico me iban a permitir tomarme unas vacaciones com Dios manda. Iluso de mí. Yo no había contado con que el Real Madrid, del que soy forofo confeso, se convirtiese en muchísmio más que el mejor equipo del mundo y llegase a ser, tras un astuto proceso de rehabilitación y márketing, la institución española más rutilante y de mayor impacto mediático. Tras la contratación de David Beckham, el Real Madrid apareció de pronto como una reproducción posmoderna del Olimpo en que Zeus – Florentino Pérez, el presidente – maneja con omnipotencia empresarial una aglomeración de divinidades entre las que, de repente, destaca con luz cegadora un dios atrevido y distinto (Beckham), capaz de desatar, dentro y fuera del equipo, pasiones de todos los colores. Por fortuna para el Real Madrid, Beckham no es una versión más o menos masculina de la Kournikova, esa tenista impactante e inepta, sino un excelente futbolista, capaz de adaptarse con resultados sobresalientes a su nuevo, maravilloso y un poco descosido equipo, y de aportarle no sólo su profesionalidad, su brío y su enorme talento, sino un concepto rompedor y muy atractivo de la virilidad. Teniendo en cuenta que la virilidad en estado casi primitivo es uno de los mitos tradicionales, por no decir rancios, del fútbol, la figura de Beckham y su efecto en el atractivo publicitario y en la cuenta de resultados del club supone toda una revolución. (18; emphasis added)

Unsurprisingly, the summer tour of China and the Far East in 2003 had been specifically designed to capitalize on Beckham's signing from Manchester United, and on the English Premier League's popularity in European nations with a strong soccer tradition.

Mendicutti's use of the term "glamour" accords with what Carol S. Gould has called "false glamour," which "is created through such accoutrements as the Bugatti or surgical enhancements of the body; [and] relies on contrivances. False glamour, by means of these, holds out the promise of sexual pleasure and social privilege" (239). Gould considers that glamour has largely been maligned when not ignored within aesthetics, and argues that "the appreciation of glamour may add aesthetic interest to the human experience, both for those who observe it and the self that possesses it" (237). The distinction Gould makes between "false" and "true" glamour (the latter "requires no props or elaborate staging; [and] is the direct, but uncontrived, manifestation of a deeper part of the self") resonates with Beckham. For while the Englishman is "naturally" glamorous in Susi's superficial terms,⁸ the reality, as Ellis Cashmore (2004), Andrew Ross (2007) and others have demonstrated, is that Beckham cultivated a glamorous persona on a scale previously unknown in soccer. Gould's definition suggests that true glamour derives from "a crucial first person, subjective aspect" (237) which although it can be cultivated, is "more compelling and enduring" (239). In contrast, false glamour "does not wear well." While it is perhaps early to determine how the post-retirement Beckham qua commodity will wear, there is surely something to be said in Beckham's case for that pre-existing first-person element of glamour which, in the context of soccer, is so readily and inevitably construed as homosexual, as the taboo "other." Certainly this is how it played to the terraces, for Beckham was subjected to homophobic chants of "Beckham maricón" when playing for England in Sevilla in February 2009, and had become the first soccer player to pose on the front cover of UK gay magazine *Attitude* in June 2002 (see also *La Susi* 48). More in line with Gould's understanding of true glamour, and in the context of metrosexuality (a term that has dated badly), Parag Khanna writes, "[s]ubstance, Beckham shows, is nothing without style" (66).

Mendicutti's take on glamour, a camp reading of the aesthetic attraction necessary to maximise and consolidate commercial possibilities in the global game, foregrounds the hypermasculine and often homophobic culture of soccer that, with notable exceptions, has provided the dominant tradition in Western cultures. At its most basic, this manifests itself in the galácticos' use of the term "mariconadas" to describe the changes introduced by Susi, a vulgarism Susi condemns loudly and unequivocally as homophobic. More than a decade after its publication, *La Susi en el vestuario blanco* remains extraordinarily prescient of the gender-political concerns that seem not to be a priority in Western nations, Spain included,⁹ and are only recently beginning to be discussed by the Football Association (soccer's governing body in England).¹⁰ This situation of exception seems largely untouched by the wealth of scholarship within the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences that explores the persistence of different shades of prejudice within high-level professional sport,¹¹ yet seems detached from the tradition of the Gay Games, and LGBT sporting initiatives at a local level, such as Barcelona's Panteres Grogues, or FC Barcelona's LGBT penya.¹² This insularity is magnified by the commercial imperatives of the global market which must be careful not to offend cultural and moral sensibilities, and yet these same imperatives are, ironically, critical to Mendicutti's re-visioning of soccer spectatorship in extreme terms of intimacy and inclusivity.

Glamour, as fascination or seduction, is what draws the gaze (and gays) and invites identification. Susi advocates sexual display and cosmetic surgery as forms of communion with the team's admirers in Chueca, Madrid's gay district, and with fans across the world. Her brief involves making material changes in choice of clothing, for example, as she seeks to tone down the "macho ibérico" look while juggling the need to increase the players' gay appeal. Thus the players will wear chaps à la Helmut Lang (the designer was all the rage in summer 2003; see Paul Flynn's article), but in mitigation of (the Brazilian) Ronaldo's

excessively masculine display of butt and genitalia that results, he must wear a pink ribbon to restore a semblance of ambiguity (La Susi 97-8). In Susi's second evaluation of each individual player's progress towards their glamour and "femininity" objectives, Beckham tops the table, with a score of 9.9, having already flown to London to buy himself a pair of chaps. As always, the most recalcitrant, not to say aggressively hostile to Susi's initiatives is the coach, Carlos Queiroz: "El mister tiene que mejorar horrores" (98). Hairstyle, eye make-up, earrings, body hair and underwear are all policed by Susi in her oversight of gender identity at Real Madrid, and she goes further, ascertaining which cosmetic surgery procedures will best increase profit margins, pastiching ethnic tastes and stereotypes:

Mi Raúl, mi Pavón, mi Figo y mi Zidane serán intervenidos en los ojos hasta ponérselos al bies que les queden de lo más orientales. Ellos conseguirán el efecto identificación por parte del cliente en los mercados asiáticos.

Mi Casillas, mi Michel Salgado, mi Iván Helguera y mi Makelele, se pongan como se pongan, recibirán implantes faciales que les permitirán lucir pómulos eslavos, y gracias a ellos el efecto identificación cundirá en el apetitoso mercado de la Europa del Este . . .

Mi Ronaldo y mi Roberto Carlos serán operados del corte de cara hasta que queden clavados a Ben Affleck [sic]. . . con lo cual se conquistará el superprometedor mercado USA.

A mi Solari, mi Cambiasso, mi Morientes y mi Portillo les aplicaremos implantes de nalgas en busca de esos culitos respingones con los que tanto se identifica la demanda en los mercados africano y latinomericano. (La Susi 86; emphasis added)

Beckham and his jealous rival Guti (José María Gutiérrez Hernández) are the only players not destined for the scalpel. As far-fetched as these measures might appear (and Susi no more believes in them than the readers do), Franklin Foer alerts us to a reality of Japanese female fandom that while not extending to cosmetic surgery, confirms a significant degree of imitation/identification:

During the 2002 World Cup, the English midfielder David Beckham, famed bender of the ball, styled his hair in a mohawk. Almost instantly, Japanese adolescents appeared with tread marks on their shorn heads; professional women, according to the Japanese news magazine *Shukan Jitsuwa*, even trimmed their pubic hair in homage. (“Soccer vs. McWorld” 32)

The exaggeratedly epideictic nature of *La Susi en el vestuario blanco* gilds the pill of its criticism as it engages with modes of (voyeuristic) consumption and confronts one of the lingering taboos surrounding sport. Mendicutti’s homoeroticizing focus and Susi’s championing of glamour, reframe those characteristics of soccer players’ appearance and behaviour which in a different interpretative frame can be read as “gay” or “queer” signs. Along similar lines, as Oscar Guasch notes,

[m]uchos deportes de equipo protagonizados por varones constituyen otro espacio de complicidad entre ellos. La orgía emocional que se gesta en esos ámbitos suspende de forma transitoria algunas normas sociales, de manera que el auditorio comparte un sentimiento de pertinencia que permite eludir, por un breve período, la estructura social (incluyendo el género). Por eso los varones pueden besarse, abrazarse, revolcarse y frotarse entre sí. (35-36)

Mendicutti, through Susi, plays with the possibilities of this “suspension” of norms pertaining to a predefined social structure to reveal the unspoken homophobic subtext of the game, and underlines the fragility of that very suspension as societal norms reassert themselves. Thus the players may share celebratory kisses when they score – Cambiasso, according to Susi, “es de los más besucones del equipo, junto con mi Solari” (98) – but Susi’s requirement that the players kiss, because it will prove as lucrative as it had done for the Russian “lesbian” pop duo t.A.T.u., has Valdano exclaim “¡Aquí no queremos mariconadas!” (103): the shift of frame, or context, quickly reaffirms the entrenched belief system.

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La Susi is about more than a vacuous, camp exhibitionism. The exhibitionism is also rhetorical, contained in drooling innuendo, references to the size of male genitalia, and to the vulnerability of the anus to intrusion: “antes fuera de la Champions [League] que sodomizados” (La Susi 123). The players’ phobia, like much social conditioning, seems indissoluble. Gumbrecht, I think – at the risk of over simplifying – has something to say here. He suggests that sports spectators (specifically American football fans) are prevented from describing their experience of watching sports as “aesthetic” by the “accumulated effects of two hundred years of class condescension” (Gumbrecht, “Aesthetic Experience” 313), or by “social automatism” (Castro Rocha 110): “We can actually anticipate that some of the more enthusiastic fans would feel quite literally insulted by such an identification” (Gumbrecht, “Aesthetic Experience” 313). Might this phenomenon have its analogue in the aversion to glamour of Real Madrid’s players? For soccer (or US football) fans, according to Gumbrecht, the aesthetic experience “is a frame that establishes itself ‘behind their back’” (313), as a

difficult to access alternative or replacement frame of perception to the familiar, “inflexible” (314) cultural context that applies when watching sport. As we have seen, in *La Susi en el vestuario blanco* there is no “behind their back” for the galácticos, because their backs are firmly against the wall, and the possibility of being open to the new aesthetic frame of glamour is tightly closed off. The “virilidad en estado casi primitivo . . . uno de los mitos tradicionales, por no decir rancios, del fútbol” that we cited earlier (*La Susi* 18), and the “two hundred years of class condescension” seem to be of a kind: bulwarks of cultural and media conditioning in the form of institutionalised homophobia for Mendicutti, and an insistence on interpretative, hermeneutics-based approaches to sport for Gumbrecht.

In *La Susi*, Beckham plays the “naïf,” unaware of (although in reality unconcerned by) the apparent “significance” of the “gay” markers his team mates attribute to him, their joshing simply and successfully parried by phone calls to his wife Victoria, aka Posh, accompanied by joyous, innocent laughter. The portrayal recalls Gumbrecht’s illustration of “grace” (one of his seven “sport fascinations” and an object of aesthetic experience),¹³ for which he adapts Heinrich von Kleist’s suggestion that “[t]he gracefulness of puppets lies in their inability to become self-reflexive and thus either embarrassed by or proud of themselves” (*In Praise of Athletic Beauty* 168). At the time, the image of Beckham as marionette, or insouciant tailor’s dummy, would have fitted Mendicutti’s purposes surprisingly well. By 2010 the maturing former marionette seemed consciously to have adopted Mendicutti’s unspoken challenge to take his ground-breaking virility to the next level, with clearly ironic, self-reflexive and homoerotic television scenes in aid of UK charity “Sports Relief”: Beckham shares a romantic evening with comedian James Corden, including bathing with Corden, having his fingernails painted by Corden, hair coiffeured, arranging a bouquet of flowers (with particular emphasis on the “pinks”), and finally pictured in bed – with Corden.¹⁴ The fall from (Gumbrechtian) grace implied by the evolving self-awareness

and media savvy of Beckham, is all the more striking for the distance it implies from conventional tropes of masculinity which prove so persistent in soccer, in the behaviour and comments of the players themselves, and in the discourse of pundits.

Guti had occupied a similar position in the Spanish popular and sporting imaginary to Beckham in the UK: he was a gay icon. The Spanish media, notably the Catalan satirical sports sketch show *Crackòvia*, as well as blogs, message boards and the Real Madrid fans themselves, have frequently depicted Guti as effeminate or gay and obsessively preoccupied with his hairstyle and physical appearance (“Guti, Guti, maricón” was a popular chant). In part this is explained by Guti’s sometime relationship with transsexual singer and actor Bibi Andersen and his reported infinitely variable temperament.¹⁵ Beckham had been portrayed in the popular media as his companion pretty boy, before Cristiano Ronaldo took his place in front of the fairy-tale magic mirror.¹⁶ Was it Beckham’s greater international profile that made him, rather than Guti, a better “glamour” model for Mendicutti? Beckham would certainly have presented less risk within the immediate Spanish context. Cristiano Ronaldo, by contrast, seemed condemned to endure a negative focus on aspects of both his appearance and play that far surpassed Susi’s ostensibly well-meaning critique (although Ronaldo has also become a gay icon for many), as the global financial crisis highlighted the increasingly interconnectedness of big-borrowing soccer clubs and the banks. In this case, it was the news that Spanish savings bank Bankia had put up Ronaldo and Kaká as collateral with the European Central Bank (ECB): “It is not known whether the ECB imposed a haircut on the collateral, though it is thought unlikely the Portuguese winker¹⁷ would have consented without advice from a professional stylist . . . The board is hoping the shares don’t take a dive” (Aldrick). Susi anticipates Ronaldo’s perceived fondness for throwing himself to the ground theatrically in her lessons on “el arte del desmayo,” and Zidane and Salgado are

condemned to three hours in the opposition penalty area imitating Vivien Leigh in *Gone With The Wind* (124-25).

As we have seen, the very physical approximation to bridging cultural divides, to shortening the distance and blurring the difference between players and spectators, owes everything to Susi's business acumen, as she exploits untapped merchandising opportunities; a trading of ethnic characteristics for the good of the global brand. In a more Gumbrechtian sense, however, it is part of the movement towards undoing the distinction between stage and audience, and increasing the possibilities of identification in an outrageously narcissistic mode. For all the camping around and revelling in (homo)sexual anxiety, glamour and neovirility are not necessarily gay signposts. They might also be the beauty beyond or below the anxious sexuality of the sportsman that can only exist in those moments when the "traditional myth of masculinity" is suspended. Susi's outlandish attempts to tease feminine beauty or glamour from the galácticos are not, on the whole, successful, and she briefly, improbably, contemplates teaching glamour and femininity to the players of Al-Rayyan, Qatar. But this is of less significance than the underlying and entirely conventional admixture of homosocial and homophobic behaviour that marks their interactions, as an apparently "natural" adjunct of the belief that soccer is "un deporte de hombres-hombres" (124). This not only marginalizes more inclusive understandings of masculinity (including feminine masculinities), but calls up the question of women in sport, with its attendant prohibitions and fantasies. Although this is not Mendicutti's concern, it remains troublesome for the overall scheme of humour (see Dashper 2012). Susi's – or Mendicutti's – quest is for a Beckham-inspired, "feminine"-infused, distinctly "other" beauty, and if Luís Figo is to wear chaps, he must also, suggests Susi, wear a garland of orchids to counter the masculinizing effect of his butt hairs (La Susi 97). After all, "[w]hat is most beautiful in virile men is something feminine" (Sontag 279).

Gumbrecht seems to assimilate a Susi-like, stated imperative that beauty should exhibit itself to its fullest advantage. Thus he questions whether the ancient Greek athletic practice of oiling the body is in fact solely a competitive strategy (for example, in the pankration), and resolves that another motivation might be that “the oil made the naked bodies of athletes glisten with reflected sunlight, and this very palpable aura set them apart from ordinary men” (In Praise of Athletic Beauty 94). Mark Golden cites one classical scholar who denies that depictions of naked athletes on vases represent a Greek reality, the scholar proposing that “the late development of athletic nudity is a case of life imitating art, as the beauty of the male body modelled by sculpture and painting impelled athletes to conform” (Golden 68, emphasis added). Golden says “[p]erverse – except for the fact that oil must have transformed an athlete into something dark and gleaming, a bronze that breathed” (68). In both instances athletes are by implication aware of the advantage that might accrue to themselves if they perform this particular toilette: they are Beckham in the making. Susi’s Beckham has to be persuaded that Michelangelo’s “David” is not “una falsificación suya,” since “hay que andar con mucho eye contra las falsificaciones” (53). But, adds Beckham, “[o]bra de arte yo too” (54). His team mates have to be raised up, literally, to meet his standards: Susi responds with outrage to Valdano’s suggestion that Beckham’s crosses into the box are too high and, brooking no criticism of her glamour paradigm, she purchases eight-inch sequined platform boots to give the other forwards the extra height necessary to play the ball (La Susi 82, 84).

Can we say, in the end, that Mendicutti is effective in his critique of hysterical modes of consumption and of a monolithic, throw-back masculinity? If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, Real Madrid’s galácticos are well-marshalled by Susi. The players, through surgical intervention, imitate the spectators, but they do not identify with them psychically (although they may be identified with them). The spectators, on the other hand, and in line

with Susi's marketing strategy, identify with "doubles" who resemble themselves in some respects. The magic mirror of surgery gives the spectator / consumer the ultimate, narcissistic response. The collapsing of distance between spectator and (cosmetic-surgery altered) reflection is not death, as it was for Narcissus, but something akin to Baudrillard's hyperreal, metaphorically "the map that precedes the territory . . . the map that engenders the territory" (Baudrillard, *Simulations* 3).

As Susi fights to extend her contract with the merengues, she is forced to confront some back-sliding on the part of the players themselves: their goal celebrations no longer involve close embraces, spooning and effusive kisses, and have reverted to handshakes and slaps on the back. However, her impassioned remonstrations are rewarded as she discovers, via concealed microphones in the locker room, that even the most recalcitrant of the first-team players, one-by-one, explains what Susi has brought to them as a person (one chapter hinges on the pronoun "la" as it stands in various positions, euphemistically, for "la pene"). Susi counters Carlos Queiroz's resistance to her methods citing the success in the United States of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (later *Queer Eye*), or "Toque marica," "dispuestos a potenciar el lado femenino de cualquier heterosexual que se preste:" "Y de eso se trata, ¿no? De la celebridad mediática necesaria para que el Madrid sea el negocio del siglo" (La Susi 124). The maxim "lo que vende" persists at the heart of Susi's endeavour, and yet the approach is ultimately seen as incomplete, if not quite failing. Commercialism is double-edged: the "efecto identificación" brings people in and empties their wallets but the world outside is much more diverse than the majority of the locker room can handle, a microcosmic reflection of the reality of much sport even today. Through the improbable figure of Susi, Mendicutti does not present unassailable truths about soccer, gender and sexuality, or the media. But through caricature and camp exaggeration, he opens up a space to allow us to discuss (male) sport's resistance to athletes who do not conform to orthodox masculinity, and

overturns assumptions of mass (heterosexual male) sport spectatorship. However, as indicated earlier, locating women politically in this frame remains problematic. Although it is easy to accept the usefulness of La Susi in encouraging readers to see the constructedness of gendered behaviours, and therefore to question the persistence of heteromascline norms in soccer, perhaps with the hope of increasing tolerance in other ambits, women have no obvious place here. Posh, for example, appears but briefly: “‘Mujeres españolas no problem. Mujeres españolas gustar el cardado, los churros y el hombre-hombre’ – puso cara de asco” (106). Susi is a pantomime dame who manages to avoid much of the misogyny traditionally associated with the role but is nevertheless shaped by unedifying stereotypes. The anti-femininity Katherine Dashper identifies in sex unsegregated, gay-friendly equestrianism (which posits “an acceptable gay masculinity constructed in opposition to a devalued feminine Other” 1112) is happily absent, a situation unlikely to be replicated in many locker rooms.

But perhaps we are being too serious. For as Sontag says: “One is drawn to Camp when one realizes that sincerity is not enough” (288). There is no shortage of earnest sincerity in response to the problem of homophobia in sport, but in choosing a textually extravagant, visually suggestive celebration of something so mundane as his beloved soccer team (even if it does happen to be the richest club in the world), Mendicutti realizes camp humour’s transformative potential not just within Spain, but anywhere his protagonist might cause just enough offense, and no more.

Notes

¹ Mendicutti's work has often been situated within the "camp" aesthetic by critics (see, amongst others, Ingenschay on *Yo no tengo la culpa de haber nacido tan sexy*). I have chosen to take this as read in the case of *La Susi* rather than attempt a close analysis which would inevitably bring into play contrasting understandings of what "camp" might be. As Sontag says, "[t]o talk about Camp is . . . to betray it" (275).

² Gumbrecht is Albert Guérard Professor in Literature at Stanford. In his articles on team sports (1999, 2006), in *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (2004), and in his more populist "self-help book" *In Praise of Athletic Beauty* (2006), Gumbrecht is very consciously in dialogue with a range of cultural theorists whom he deems less than respectful of sport's singularity. Gumbrecht strives for a language, and a renewed understanding of the sporting phenomenon which is respectful of sport's fundamental materiality. In so doing he implicitly rejects, or at least seeks to balance, Jean Baudrillard's pessimistic conviction that sport can only now be consumed "rather than appreciated as play" (Global Game online), as well as Eco's similar and earlier views of sport as hyperreality (see, for example, "Sports Chatter" and "The World Cup and Its Poms" from Eco's *Travels in Hyperreality*). Alexander Regier refers to Gumbrecht's concern with "finding a vocabulary for aesthetic, affective experience" (30), and of Gumbrecht's *Production of Presence*, he notes that "[f]amiliar figures that are singled out for criticism include Roger Caillois, Norbert Elias and Pierre Bourdieu. They all attempt a detached analysis of sport as a phenomenon best described, respectively, as a form of the sacred, bodily subjugation, or as ways of social differentiation" (Regier 27-8). As an indication of the dearth of female voices talking and writing about sport in this area, all articles in the special journal number from which this quotation is taken are male-authored, and so too are the sport-related articles in Mendes and Rocha (eds). The latter volume examines Gumbrecht's importance in the Lusophone context.

³ *Susi* is an alter ego, but she does also demonstrate a certain autonomy, referring on occasion to Mendicutti the journalist e.g.: "Bueno, yo espero que al menos no lo echen de este periódico por mi culpa" (*La Susi* 139).

⁴ Mendicutti explains *Susi*'s genesis: "el personaje de la *Susi* está directamente inspirado en el personaje central y narrador de una de mis novelas. Esa novela es *Una mala noche la tiene cualquiera*

y el personaje ‘La Madelón,’ un travesti bastante dislocado, pero con un enorme y admirable sentido de la libertad, de la dignidad, de la rebeldía” (“Buscando a la Susi” 45).

⁵ “[Q]uiero resaltar que la primera condición que yo puse, antes de comprometerme a escribir de forma habitual en el periódico, era hacerlo con absoluta libertad. Y jamás he sufrido ninguna presión, ninguna regañina – incluso en las ocasiones en las que me he equivocado gravemente, que las ha habido –, ninguna consigna, nada que pueda parecerse ni lejanamente a una censura, por parte del periódico” (“Buscando a la Susi” 44).

⁶ As part of his election strategy, Laporta had promised to bring Beckham to Barcelona, but when Beckham went instead to Madrid, he signed Ronaldinho from Paris Saint-Germain.

⁷ Florentino Pérez’s men clearly had different priorities from those of the players; the subtitle of Torres’ article is unequivocal in this sense: “Los ejecutivos del Madrid, contra lo que opinan los jugadores, desprecian al ídolo que no ficharon.”

⁸ Susi refers to Beckham using the Valencian term “ninot indultat,” which is the life-sized (or bigger) papier-maché figure spared the bonfire on March 19 every year, the final day of the Valencian “Falles.” This allusion to the long history of constructing, and burning, three-dimensional caricatures underlines Mendicutti’s grounding of La Susi in “Spanish” popular traditions (traditions extant in Spain), while simultaneously treating issues of global significance. At the same time, the metaphor of “being burnt” – by unwanted media attention or as the result of professional ostracism – is underscored.

⁹ José Luis Pérez Triviño underlines this: “Hay pocos ámbitos sociales donde la imaginaria homosexual esté más manifiesta que en el deporte, y en especial, el fútbol. Sin embargo, es el territorio machista por excelencia” (2014).

¹⁰ The FA has an LGBT action plan within its equality brief, but its commitment to tackling homophobia in the game is much less high profile than, for example, the campaign against racism. Similarly, the FARE Network (Football Against Racism in Europe), which is backed by UEFA, acts as an umbrella organization to counter all forms of intolerance, but is largely unknown among soccer fans.

¹¹ Feminism was an initial point of entry for critical studies in this regard. See, for example, Michael Messner and Donald Sabo, *Sport, Men and the Gender Order: Critical Feminist Perspectives* (1990) and Patricia Griffin, *Strong Women, Deep Closets: Lesbians and Homophobia in Sport* (1998). More recent studies are legion, but see Ellis Cashmore, *Beckham* (2nd edn 2004), and the work of Jennifer Hargreaves, Daniel Burdsey, and Jayne Cauldwell.

¹² Cashmore, for example, has written that “English soccer manifests an aggressive, almost virulent conception of masculinity that, it seems, it just can’t shrug. Despite the global influences that have affected the way football is run and played since 1992, the essential manly character of the English game seems impervious” (144). This, paradoxically, is the tradition from which Mendicutti’s glamour catalyst, David Beckham, is drawn. See also Giles Tremlett’s article in the *Guardian* (online) for more on Beckham, and also on the “penya.”

¹³ The complete list is: sculpted bodies; suffering in the face of death; grace; tools that enhance the body’s potential; embodied forms; plays as epiphanies; good timing. These are “phenomena that lie somewhere between performance and the act of judging it” (Praise 151).

¹⁴ The sketch can be viewed on YouTube.

¹⁵ See, for example, Lowe’s blog in the *Guardian*.

¹⁶ See *Crackòvia*, various episodes, available via the TV3 website (www.tv3.cat). The magic mirror episode is available via YouTube.

¹⁷ “Winker” is word play on “winger” and an allusion to (what was perceived to be) Ronaldo’s wink in the direction of England’s Wayne Rooney as the latter was sent off against Portugal in the 2006 World Cup.

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