Quiet Contradictions of Celebrity: Zinedine Zidane, Image, Sound, Silence and Fury

Abstract

The French soccer-player Zinedine Zidane is an emblematic sport star whose celebrity persona nevertheless remains opaque and open to debate. As a French citizen of Algerian origin, Zidane has come to embody many current French concerns over the integration of ethnic minorities and has, particularly since the World Cup Finals of 1998 and 2006, been subjected to intense scrutiny and interpretation. Despite such attention, however, he remains quietly inscrutable, the contradicting claims on his identity and celebrity persona compounding his own lack of self-reflection in a complex negotiation of significance. Assessing Zidane through the interlinkages of his hybrid identity, ethnicity, masculinity, morality and nationality reveals how he and his celebrity persona struggle to establish coherent or consistent meaning, and an analysis of his high-cultural representation in two recent French art-works throws light on how his sometimes violent behaviour in soccer and emblematic celebrity ultimately interrogate causality and agency, as well as the sociocultural significance of sport stars.

Keywords

Zinedine Zidane, sporting celebrity, agency, masculinity, World Cup, Jean-Philippe Toussaint, Douglas Gordon, Philippe Parreno
Within France, Europe, and throughout the world, the soccer-player Zinedine Zidane is the most famous of all French sport personalities. The soccer World Cup Final is the sporting event watched by the greatest audiences worldwide, and twice in ten years Zidane has been the focus of their enthralled attention. In 1998, when France won the World Cup in Paris, he scored two goals; in 2006, when France lost to Italy in Berlin, he scored a penalty but was spectacularly dismissed for violent behaviour, in the planned final match of his career. Zidane played for the highest-profile of European clubs: Juventus of Turin, and Real Madrid, where he was a star even in the club’s array of ‘galácticos’. In France, he is the subject of awe and veneration, and has always retained public sympathy, even in the face of occasional issues - doping suspicions at Juventus, premature retirement from the national team in 2004 or his red card in Berlin in 2006 - which would have spoiled the reputation of lesser celebrities. He was until retirement France’s most highly paid sport star, and has continued to enjoy lucrative sponsorship. Zidane is a pre-eminent example of what has been described as an ‘emblematic individual’ (Braudy 1997: 601). Braudy has elegantly described how celebrities cannot avoid implication in the image-creating systems that define them: ‘To be talked about is to be part of a story, and to be part of a story is to be at the mercy of storytellers - the media and their audience. The famous person is thus not so much a person as a story about a person’ (Braudy, 1997: 592). Zidane’s fame is unwilling, problematic, and sometimes contradictory, and ultimately, although they can tell us much about him, it seems that the collective configurations of race, ethnicity, nationality, morality and masculinity offer only partial insights in trying to understand Zidane. Conflicting meanings are
constantly projected onto Zidane as cipher, and he struggles to negotiate his own reluctant construction of celebrity and the projections made onto his every essence, action and statement.

A popular biography has been devoted to Zidane, which reveals little of substance (Fort and Philippe 2006), as do another much-criticised biography (Franck 1999), and a children’s comic-book portrait stressing his iconic success-story (Nolent, Pierret and Venanzi 2005). He has also become the focus of French art-works which may provide greater insights: Zidane has recently figured in a cinema documentary film which follows him - until he is red-carded at the very end of the game - during a match between Real Madrid and Villareal. Zidane, un portrait du XXIe siècle (Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait, directed by Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno) was premiered in France in May 2006, just weeks before the World Cup Final where its protagonist’s career so spectacularly concluded. The second part of this article analyses how this innovative and unusual portrait of a sporting hero - read in conjunction with another, literary, representation - interrogates and reveals the inherent receptive opacity of Zidane’s celebrity persona. Initially, we briefly sketch just Zidane's upbringing and career, and then suggest some of the issues coalescing around Zidane as soccer-superstar, which have found themselves reflected, artistically, in film and literature.

A fundamental dimension of Zidane’s ‘identity’ in France is his race and ethnicity: as a French citizen of North African ‘origin’ now generally known in France as ‘beur’ (back-slang for ‘arabe’ and referring to France’s ethnic minorities from the Maghreb) he negotiates long-standing French fears about threatening ‘Arab’ males and more contemporary hopes for the successful integration of ‘immigrants’ into French society. Zidane was born in 1972 to working-class immigrant parents from Algeria. Zidane’s construction-worker father came to France in the early 1950s, and remains of Algerian nationality. Zidane was brought up in an underprivileged
area of Marseille - the council housing estate of La Castellane - but his soccer skills were soon nurtured by the French clubs Cannes and Bordeaux. He made a high-profile move to Juventus in 1996, but became a true world sport star in 1998, in France’s home victory in the World Cup. During 1998-2006 he played for France and Real Madrid - he transferred from Juventus to Real in 2001 for a record €77 million - prematurely announcing his retirement from international competition in 2004. He played his last match for Real Madrid at the end of the 2005/06 season and finished his career – returning surprisingly to playing for France - in the 2006 World Cup Finals. He helped France to defeat Brazil again in the semi-Final, then scored his third World Cup Final goal against Italy before being dismissed for violent conduct. Italy won 5-3 on penalties, depriving Zidane of a second World Cup title, and threatening to make him responsible for France's defeat. Amongst many sporting awards, he was nominated the world's best player by FIFA on three occasions (1998, 2000 and 2003) and best player in the World Cup Finals (2006). In 1998 the French state awarded him the Légion d'Honneur, and in 2006 received the highest distinction of Algeria, the Athir Medal. The six-monthly opinion poll conducted for the popular newspaper Journal du dimanche has regularly - since 1998 - named him France’s favourite person. He is apparently happily married - although occasional rumours surface – has four children, and strongly defends family values and his family’s privacy.

Zidane as cipher: race, ethnicity, nationality

For all his visibility on the soccer pitch and in the celebrity-based popular culture of ‘people-magazines’ and chat-show programmes of the French press and television, Zidane has often appeared as an inscrutable cipher. His celebrity is particularly one in which everyone, apparently, reads his identity in individual ways. For all that France has adored Zidane, there is a sense that
people neither know what he thinks, nor can define his celebrity persona. Zidane himself is notoriously uncommunicative, resisting attempts to pigeon-hole him in French debates on politics, culture and society, and in a country where laws on reporting private life afford more protection to celebrities than elsewhere, he has actively defended himself from intrusive attention. It has been suggested that ‘One doesn't listen to Zidane; one watches him, and that’s all’, and, indeed, that unlike French soccer-players such as Thuram and Henry who in 2005 protested against social deprivation, when he does express himself, Zidane ‘only talks about football’ (Dely 2006). One sensitive attempt to deconstruct Zidane’s behaviour and his celebrity persona concluded that his silences and reluctance to take position are a means of self-preservation, but also hint at inner contradictions (Le Vaillant 1999). The complicated and indeed, sometimes contradictory celebrity figure of Zidane engages complexes of issues in French politics, culture and society during the 1990s and 2000s, where questions of race, ethnicity, identity, culture, nationality intersect with masculinity and fame in a confusing and ambiguous maelstrom of representations and meanings.

When Zidane was most recently elected ‘France’s most popular person’ he explained his own understanding of his fame in an interview with a young child: one element to his popularity was France’s victory in 1998 – ‘an event of great importance to everyone’ - but the second element to his celebrity was his determination to remain true to himself: ‘the most important thing is to follow the path that I have always taken’. Using the term ‘récupérer’ (meaning to be appropriated or hijacked), Zidane stated that he will never be used by any political party or lobby, unless he agrees to it (‘Je ne serai jamais récupéré si je ne le veux pas’), adding that everything he does has the sole aim either of pleasing himself or helping people, and always in sport or for children’s causes (Ifop/JDD 2007). The blandness of Zidane’s objectives in life,
combined with the simplicity of his self-awareness and reluctance to take stands which could facilitate his being ‘récupéré’, foster a sphinx-like inscrutability. The choice of a child to quiz him on his self-image seems significant: above and beyond his commitment to family and children’s issues, Zidane is naively un-reflective and un-cooperative in producing a rationally-elaborated celebrity persona, thereby offering little for promoters or fans to process.

The film *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait* considered later in this article investigates Zidane’s agency, ultimately leading to an interrogation of causality, and one fruitful way of trying to understand him is to consider how the sport star seems to be a prisoner of his own identity as a French celebrity of Algerian origin caught in French society’s ongoing psychodrama about multiculturalism. Since 1998, Zidane has become the – unwilling - symbol of the integration of ethnic minorities in France and in many ways embodies France’s neuroses about race, ethnicity and nationality. In addition, masculinity and morality seem to be issues which help – partially - in an understanding both of his moment of greatest fame - the dismissal in the World Cup Final of 2006 - and of his celebrity persona. Ultimately, however, the conflicting ‘meanings’ of Zidane result from contradictory public projections onto his body, his silence, his declarations, and every aspect of his existence.

Whannel has underlined that the image of a male sporting celebrity condenses discourses of masculinity and morality, and that analysis of representations of sport stars can tell us much about ideas of morality and how men should behave (Whannel 2002: 1). Zidane’s celebrity identity is very much a ‘negotiated terrain of significance’ (Marshall 1997: 47) in which masculinity and morality work out their meanings within the framework of the collective configurations through which he defines his own existence, and through which those who consume his representative subjectivity try to make sense of his identity. But it is not entirely
clear that masculinity and morality are foremost in the representations of Zidane. Although we shall discuss ‘morality’ below, of the central collective configurations of age, class, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity and nationality, it is more the latter three which seem most strongly to drive his celebrity persona, even if in his case in particular, ethnicity and morality seem closely linked.

In France, Zidane goes by a variety of names: ‘ZZ’ is an obvious abbreviation (leading to references to ‘Zorro’); ‘Zinedine’ is familiarly formal, used by President Chirac in welcoming the team home in 2006; ‘Zizou’ is popularly affectionate and used by the general public (often seen as an ‘appropriation’ by white France of Zidane as ‘beur’); ‘Yazid’, abbreviated to ‘Yaz’, is a given-name used by family and close friends, and often employed by French youths of North African origin as a claim on Zidane as ‘one of us’. Such a range of names suggests the possibility of a fractured identity: Zidane seems to be a complex example of what Whannel - in discussion of various analyses of race and its intersections with identity, nationality and masculinity - summarises as ‘hybridity’ (Whannel 2002: 175). Whannel quotes Stuart Hall’s description of the experience of being black and British as a ‘hyphenated sense of belonging’, and Zidane’s identity can fruitfully be considered as a kind of double-hybridity and double-hyphenation. Not only is Zidane a French citizen of Algerian descent, and therefore a member of an ‘ethnic minority’ in France, but additionally, his Berber origins make him a minority even within the sub-set of his ‘beur’ (as French citizens of Maghreb descent are called) identity within France. Zidane’s ethnic identity is constantly open to both well-meaning and hostile interpretation, and the ethnic faultlines of his hybrid nationality/identity are further complicated by the politics of France’s painful decolonisation of Algeria in the 1950s and 1960s. During France’s attempts to defeat the Algerian military uprising, a minority of Muslim Algerians - known as the Harkis -
fought for the French against the nationalist insurrection, gaining the gratitude of France but the
enmity of Algeria. Periodically, Zidane’s fractured identity has shaken by claims that his
Algerian father was a Harki. He has actively refuted these accusations, thus defending his
father’s integrity as a ‘true’ Algerian but underscoring his own status as the son not of a Harki
loyal to France, but of an Algerian ‘nationalist’: defending his father’s honour necessarily
‘undermines’ his own ‘French’ identity.

France’s tradition of right-wing extremism and racism began to focus on the national
soccer team in the mid-1990s, as the Front national questioned the right of various non-white
players of *les Bleus* legitimately to represent France. Centering on simplistic interpretations of
nationality and seizing on the apparent lack of enthusiasm of some players such to sing the words
to the *Marseillaise* before matches, the extreme right exploited latent racism in French society.
Such discourses of mono-cultural, mono-ethnic national identity culminated during the 1996
European Championships, and simmered throughout the build-up to the 1998 World Cup. But
during the Finals themselves, the success of the French team was accompanied by growing new
discourses of national identity which - in tension both with the clumsy racism of the Front
national and with strict ‘Republican’ interpretations of a single French people undivided by
ethnically or culturally-defined sub-communities - celebrated the multi-ethnic squad as a positive
reflection of France’s de facto ethnic and cultural diversity. Most media representations of
France’s World Cup victory represented it as the fruit of ‘black, blanc, beur’ teamwork, using the
metaphor of collaborative sporting endeavour to suggest potential resolution of racial tensions.
The French team was predominantly composed of ethnic-minority players, but it was around
Zidane that representations crystallised most strongly. Often wrongly portrayed as the team’s
captain in reflection of the talismanic significance he had assumed, Zidane became the emblem
of a France which hoped to have reconciled its ethnic divisions. France’s euphoric experience of the 1998 World Cup has been discussed by various studies (Dauncey and Hare 1999; Hare 2003) and other analyses have described how the ‘black, blanc, beur’ dream has faded in the decade following ‘France ’98’.

One example of the fading of this dream which involved Zidane was the infamous match between France and Algeria held in the Stade de France in October 2001, when the crowd whistled the French players and eventually invaded the pitch. The ways in which this was seen as a litmus test of identity and national allegiance have been discussed by analysts of French football (Hare 2003: 137-139). For Zidane, commentators saw the match as a stage for his multiple identities as Berber, Algerian, and as French citizen, and before kick-off and the match’s degeneration into scandal, suggested that ‘Algeria’ could not fail to win, either through Zidane, beur/Berber/Algerian, best player in the world and captain of the French side or through their national team: ‘The Algerians have two chances of winning this evening: either with their team; or with Zidane’ (Helvig 2001).

When Zidane visited Algeria in December 2006 he was given what amounted to a state reception by President Bouteflika, and the award of the Athir medal - usually reserved for heads of state and icons of Algeria’s fight for independence - consecrated his image as an Algerian national hero. Despite Zidane’s claims that he is never ‘récupéré’, this seemed a prime instance where his innocent actions contradict his preferred image: his previous visit to Algeria was in 1986, and although he has stated pride in his Algerian origins he has never overtly supported the Algerian regime.

Morality and masculinity; silence and sanctity
Zidane’s persona is one in which ethnicity and nationality overlap with morality and masculinity. One cultural commentator’s reaction to Zidane’s head-butt in Berlin was to interpret it as a blow struck by an ethnic minority against the hegemony of white-dominated professional sport accustomed to rewarding black and beur players for unquestioning collaboration: ‘Long live Zidane, you who have put the dignity of a whole people, or even of a single man, before a cup awarded by the white world to those who keep quiet’ (Lasne 2006). This interpretation of Zidane’s retaliation to Materazzi’s racist sledging encapsulates the view of Zidane as a honorable sportsman - a belief not wholly confirmed by his playing career - and by reference to the term ‘people’, locates his identity as beur/Berber/Algerian rather than uncomplicatedly French. Materazzi’s provocation is still unclear, but original explanations suggested it involved Zidane’s ethnicity, the reputation of his mother and sisters, and slurs of involvement with Islamic terrorism. Zidane’s discursive reaction was typically reserved, and although he apologised for being sent off in a crucial game, he stated – in interviews with the private television channel Canal + which specialises in football coverage and elsewhere - that he cannot regret his response to the insults. Zidane’s justification is thus his own honour, and defence of his mother and sisters: ‘I can't regret what I did because that would mean that he was right to say what he did, and that I can never do. He wasn’t right to say what he did, no way. No way’: soccer is a ‘man’s game’ where one must stand up for one’s self, but it is also –especially for Zidane – a question of ethnic- and family-honour.

Zidane’s career has been marked both by genius and bad-temper and violence, so his integrity as someone who plays the game by the rules is questionable. Admittedly, his unpredictable style and ethnic origins have exposed him to both clumsy physical challenges and racist abuse, but his interpretation of ‘honour’ refers less to the rules of soccer than to a private
masculine code. Lilian Thuram, a black former French national player who now works for the government’s *Haut Conseil à l’Intégration* and thus defends more ‘Republican’ and ‘public’ codes of honour than those of Zidane, reminded the nation that Zizou had previously acted violently on the pitch, and that he had made a 'mistake' (Normand 2006).

Another dimension of ‘morality’ was raised by the ironic description ‘Saint Zidane’ coined in the immediate aftermath of the red-card head-butt by media commentator Daniel Schneidermann, who discerned in the frenzied reaction to this sporting drama a wider questioning of France’s relationship with its sporting idol: ‘Saint Zidane has hit out, and everything is a shock in this head-butt [...] A shock between the raw and brutal photo of this action and the long-term carefully-constructed media image of Zidane as the wise, kind man involved in helping sick children; the shock of the abyss opening up beneath the secular sanctification of Zidane in the Pantheon of France’s great men [...] Everything is a shock, and the initial reactions of a traumatised France reveal a country obsessed by its worship of Zidane’ (Schneidermann 2006). Schneidermann identified in ‘Zizou-mania’ (as it was called) a suspension of normal conditions of rational ethics, and an apparent readiness of France to ignore or forgive the visible, televised gulf between Zidane’s violence and the sanitised image he felt had been created for him by French television. ‘Zizou-mania’ version 2006 – and no reproof for the head-butt - was strongly evident in President Chirac’s message for Zidane as the team returned to Paris: ‘Dear Zinedine, in such a difficult and intense moment for you, I would like to express the affection and admiration of the whole nation. You are a virtuoso, a genius of football and an exceptional human being. That is why France admires you’.

Zidane’s silence has been cited as proof of his true star quality: the quiet tranquility of his public persona and his placid inscrutability are both the means and the sign of his stardom.
(Greilsamer 2006). In this perspective, it is the essential muteness of Zidane - his discursive reserve, his physicality rather than communication - which provide the space for all to read his celebrity persona differently. A final example of Zidane’s inscrutability is his bizarre reversal of his retirement from international football. The apparent ‘mysticism’ of this episode reinforces suspicions that his celebrity persona may always remain inexplicable. The ‘revelation’ brought about by an unidentified ‘force’ elicited much ironic media discussion, but we can interpret it as proof of Zidane’s struggle to manage his own identity, drowning in a flood of media signs:

“One night, I suddenly woke up and I spoke with someone […] It was someone you’ll probably never meet […] It’s an enigma, don’t try to understand […] even I can’t explain it to myself […] The person exists, but comes from such a long way away. There, in the hours that followed, I was on my own with this person, and there in my home I took the decision to play again for les Bleus […] I was paralysed by this force which was telling me what to do, and I had a kind of revelation: suddenly I had a wish to go back to my roots, to my beginnings in professional soccer when no-one knew me and when no-one bothered me, and when I was able to learn my trade and grow up. It was an irresistible force which took hold of me and I had to obey the voice which was advising me. (Schneider 2005)

The possibility that Zidane is a sport star who is a very public man lost between his own quasi-mystical belief in an over-arching plan, and questions of his own agency and causality is something which emerges from consideration of his representation in two recent art-works. The rest of this article examines how film and literature can help us try to understand Zidane.

Zidane: Close-up

Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait is a film portrait of the celebrated French footballer directed by the contemporary artists Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno. Described by the filmmakers as ‘a document about a live event, rather than a documentary’ (Gordon and Parreno 2006), the film was recorded during a league match between Zidane’s team Real Madrid and Villarreal during
April 2005. The crew worked with seventeen cameras set up around the stadium – equipped, as the publicity delighted in revealing, with some of the most powerful zoom lenses in the world, on loan from the US military –, each trained on Zidane. The premiss of this singular film experience, then, is that it follows Zidane and Zidane alone for the full ninety-minute duration of the match, regardless of what is happening elsewhere on the pitch. As such, the film has something of an uncertain status, situated somewhere between a feature-length documentary, a contemporary art exhibit and an experimental broadcast of a football match. Nonetheless, Gordon and Parreno, conscious of the persisting class associations around galleries and museums, were keen, from the beginning, that their film should be distributed and consumed as a film, such that it might prove accessible to fans of Zidane who might not otherwise give time to a contemporary art exhibit (Gordon and Parreno 2006).

*Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait* opens with Spanish television footage of the match’s kickoff, before zooming in so close to this television image that the picture as such disappears leaving only individual coloured pixels. Prior to the title proper, onscreen text had stated the filmmakers’ intentions to remain as close to the action as possible, for as long as necessary (‘*au plus près, autant que nécessaire*’). These words are taken from an interview with Zidane which will be transcribed through onscreen titles later in the film, and in which the footballer describes his boyhood habit of watching televised football matches as close to the screen as possible. But if this dramatic zoom in to the TV footage is an impossibly exaggerated representation of a hypothetical viewer’s perspective, it also announces the film’s project: for, if this portrait looks closer than ever before at Zidane, it ultimately has no secret, no truth to reveal about the player: as a critic for *Le Monde* commented, the more we blow up the image, the more its secret seems to escape us (Douin 2006). This idea, tied to the persistent sense of inscrutability attached to
Zidane’s celebrity persona, is further evinced by the presentation of the film’s title: each letter of Zidane’s name appears one at a time, each accompanied by a chimed note played by Mogwai on the soundtrack, before all six letters are printed over each other. The resultant hieroglyph appears as some sort of a mystical pentagram, seeming to contain forms like an X and an O, or a five-pointed star, all of them contained within a box. The title typography thus implies that Zidane himself, as a celebrity and public figure, is a sort of written-over text or palimpsest of competing discourses that threatens ultimately to render him illegible. Gordon and Parreno have stated that they chose Zidane as the focus for their film precisely for his indecipherable quality, and that, despite the sense of proximity to the player during the film, the spectator is left essentially knowing nothing more about him (Gordon and Parreno 2006). As Richard Kelly has remarked, the film ‘polishes [Zidane’s] enigma rather than penetrates it’ (Kelly 2006: 43).

As the film continues, Gordon and Parreno’s original 35mm footage of Zidane is frequently edited together with the television footage, most commonly when Zidane is actually in possession of the ball. Thus, as Zidane receives the football, the film cuts to show the television broadcast of the action, but, when Zidane passes, and the action moves upfield, the film cuts back to the 35mm image of Zidane left alone. In this way, a distinction is set up between television and film: where the television image follows the ball, the film follows Zidane. As Charles Tesson has commented, in televised football, the ball legitimises editing: it is the movement of the ball that motivates changes in angle and focal length as well as camera movement (Tesson 1986: 45). Liberated from this constraint by its exclusive focus on Zidane, Gordon and Parreno’s film is thus in a better position to offer privileged access to a more intimate knowledge of the player.
Gordon and Parreno have stated their desire to adopt Zidane’s point of view in the film, to make their portrait less a factual record of a match than a subjective experience of the event’s protagonist (Gordon and Parreno 2006). Indeed, the French DVD release of the film promises the spectator ‘the impression of being Zidane on the pitch’. In truth, though, as Jean-Luc Douin points out, we do not really see what Zidane sees: for the most part, the camera sticks so close to him, that we can only see what immediately surrounds him, rather than sharing his global view of the entire pitch, the whole game. More than appreciating Zidane’s tactical intelligence, then, the film invites us to imagine his thoughts and feelings (Douin 2006). This sense of a subjective portrait of Zidane is created particularly by a section of the film that occurs after around twenty minutes, following the hesitant, uncertain opening to the match. After a free kick aimed towards goal sails high and wide, the camera tilts slowly up to frame the stadium floodlights. A cut back to a close-up of Zidane shows him glancing upwards before another tilt, this one quicker and rougher, scans up and down again to the lights. This kind of eyeline match is a standard device used in narrative cinema to convey the point of view of a character, and thereby encourage spectator identification through adoption of that point of view by the camera. At this point, too, the music of Mogwai begins to play on the soundtrack for the first time since the opening titles, and this kind of non-diegetic music is itself frequently used in film to suggest character interiority by reflecting thoughts and feelings (Reay 2004: 32-3). The melancholy tone of Mogwai’s music here – a slowly gathering drone, gradually punctuated by infrequent bass notes before a guitar begins to tease out a melody – is matched to the onscreen subtitles which relate Zidane’s thoughts and feelings about the experience of football matches, as he recalls his own childish fascination for television broadcasts. Throughout this section of the film, which lasts for some eight minutes of the first half, Zidane is mainly filmed in close-up or medium close-up,
with the film usually only cutting to long shot (and thereby espousing the point of view, or the visual register, of television coverage) when Zidane actually receives the ball or is chasing or tackling an opponent with the ball. In many shots, Zidane is framed in a slightly low angle, from the chest up, against the darkness of the night sky. As Charles Tesson has remarked, in most television coverage, footballers are framed against the green background of the pitch; much of *Zidane* is closer to the aesthetic principles of sports photography, which tends rather to frame players against the sky or the blurred mass of the crowd, thereby isolating and deifying the individual (Tesson 1986: 44). There are frequent close-ups, too, of Zidane’s feet and lower legs, the recurrent gesture of knocking his toe against the ground beginning to function as a kind of regular punctuation throughout the film. The work with sound is also crucial to suggesting Zidane’s interiority: for most of this section, the noise of the crowd is muted, the focus instead on the music and the sounds of the game: feet treading the turf, impacts on the ball, shouts and grunts of the players. Meanwhile, Zidane’s subtitled commentary addresses the sonic experience of the stadium: he states how, when he is absorbed in a match, he doesn’t really hear the crowd, yet can always choose to hear it, is never alone. As though to illustrate this, at this point, another matched gaze – a cut and whip pan across the floodlights – is accompanied by a swelling cheer from the crowd that stands out, louder than before, from the background murmur. As the crowd noise is gradually restored to full volume, Zidane goes on to explain how, if he chooses, he can focus on the sound of an individual supporter shifting in his seat or the ticking of a watch. The crowd noise then cuts out again to be replaced by the amplified sound of Zidane’s breathing as, in close-up, he pulls up his socks.

Real-time and replay
If the film’s formal organisation thus essentially consists of Zidane’s real-time evolution on the pitch, this aesthetic policy is not necessarily legitimised by Zidane’s own comments on his experience. At the end of the section discussed above, in which Zidane’s thoughts are projected on the screen, we read his assertion that ‘One doesn’t necessarily remember a match as an experience in “real time”. My memories of matches are often fragmented’. This is doubtless also the experience of the average spectator, but for most of us, our reception and understanding of football matches is shaped – and thereby fragmented – by the aesthetics of television broadcasting, and in particular by the use of the slow-motion replay. As Jean-François Diana has shown, in support of Charles Tesson’s observations, the slow-motion replay does not so much prolong the time of a match as organise that time hierarchically, or ideologically (Diana 2000: 258-9). The slow-motion replay arguably has an instrumentalising effect on the very gestures of the footballer, since it is only those actions having a measurable impact on the game (fouls resulting in free kicks; shots that do or don’t hit their target) that tend to be replayed. At the same time, of course, the replay implies a call for judgement, given its use in relation to contentious decisions. As such, the image in slow-motion appears decontextualised and sufficient unto itself, inviting the spectator to participate in the imagined democratic community of viewers by judging for her- or himself (Diana 2000: 262). In this way, too, the use of the slow-motion replay becomes what Tesson has called ‘a live selection of images for the future’ (in Diana 2000: 258): a hierarchical ordering of that which is considered important in the match.

Despite its experimentation with an alternative visual organisation, Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait does not escape from this structuring of the real time of the match through the use of the instant replay. And, despite the insistence of Gordon and Parreno that they wanted to avoid the classical sporting portrait with its emphasis on the athlete’s prowess and triumphant
focus on the most successful action (Gordon and Parreno 2006), the film nonetheless, through its editing of the raw footage of the match, arguably tends to favour a fairly traditional, heroic presentation of Zidane’s exploits. For, if Gordon and Parreno do not offer, with their own 35mm footage, replays of the same action from a different angle, they do frequently include replays from the Spanish television footage, and it can be revealing to consider which actions are replayed. Thus, for instance, when Zidane fouls an opponent, the action is filmed from behind, in long shot, such that the offending gesture is largely blocked from the spectator’s view, and no reverse-angle replay is offered. A couple of minutes later, when Zidane himself is fouled, the action is replayed twice from different angles. Admittedly, this is a more serious foul, and a yellow card is shown, but much later, when, at the very end of the match, Zidane is sent off for throwing a punch, the action is again largely concealed within a long-shot mêlée, and no replay is forthcoming. At the other end of the behavioural spectrum, we have the goals. Real’s first goal is set up by Zidane, who dribbles the ball down the wing past several defenders and crosses to Ronaldo to score. As Cyril Neyrat comments, at this point in the film, the directors are faced with a dilemma: whether to stick to the rules of the portrait and focus only on Zidane, or to switch to the ‘objective’ television view of the goal. The film chooses to compromise, doing both (Neyrat 2006: 30): this is the most complex piece of editing in the whole film, counting some nineteen shots between Zidane’s first reception of the ball and the eventual resumption of play following the goal. Zidane’s run up the wing is filmed from several angles, cutting between medium close-ups on his upper body and close-ups on his legs and feet, to reverse-angle long-shots demonstrating his position in relation to the defenders. Off-screen space is judiciously used to dramatise the action as Zidane chases the ball upfield. Zidane’s cross to Ronaldo is initially filmed from the end of the pitch beside the goal and, when the film cuts to a reverse
angle of him releasing the ball, various figures crowding the frame, including the goalkeeper, block our view of the goal itself. It is, rather, a cut to a long-shot of supporters and players raising their arms in triumph that confirms the score, before Zidane is met by several team mates to celebrate. Only at this point do we cut to a television replay of the goal, with a different angle enabling a more global perspective. If the filming of this goal is clearly motivated by Zidane’s role in it, then Real’s second, and winning, goal, to which Zidane does not contribute, but which is nonetheless shown in Spanish television footage, signals more of a concession to the traditional hierarchical visual organisation of the sporting event. On the other hand, the first goal of the match, a penalty scored by Villareal, is not directly filmed at all: we see a replay of the foul that led to the penalty, and watch the Villareal player place the ball on the spot, but otherwise the camera stays with Zidane, watching from the edge of the penalty box, and the goal is signalled instead by sound (the rattle of the ball hitting the back of the net) and by Zidane’s reaction.

Competing scripts: Zidane and agency

Within the temporal organisation of the film, this penalty arrives shortly after Zidane’s reflections upon the ‘fragmented’ time of the match as it appears to memory. Another of Zidane’s subtitled thoughts reads: ‘Sometimes, when you arrive on the pitch, you have the impression that everything has been decided in advance and there is nothing you can do: the script has already been written’. At this point, on the soundtrack, the music fades out to be replaced by a surge of crowd noise, Zidane, in close-up, gives a little grin as the whistle blows and the penalty is awarded; a cut to the Spanish TV footage shows a replay of the foul. This is, then, a significant juxtaposition: just as Zidane muses on the apparently scripted or pre-ordained
nature of a football match, we arrive at a turning point in the game: from a contentious penalty (the replay shows that the Madrid defender clearly played the ball which, anyway, was on the edge of the penalty area: the Spanish commentators call the referee’s decision ‘incredible’), Villareal will score, leaving Real Madrid trailing and thereby changing the character of the game. Of course, in a very prosaic sense, football is often scripted in advance: teams will typically have a game plan based upon their analysis of their opponents’ strengths and weaknesses. As Charles Tesson has argued, football is at its most boring when the advance script matches perfectly to the game that is played. On the other hand, a match becomes truly interesting when this advance script is disrupted by another, unexpected narrative, constructed upon the ruins of the first (Tesson 1986: 42). Zidane’s comment, however, would seem to imply something more radical, a more metaphysical sense of pre-destination: and the editing together of this comment with the Villareal penalty suggests that this too, although clearly not part of Real Madrid’s game plan, may somehow have been decided in advance. What, though, does this imply about agency? Andrews and Jackson (2001: 8) have argued that it is precisely the unpredictability of sport, ‘the seeming visceral, dramatic immediacy of the sport practice’ that accounts for much of the appeal of sports celebrities, their ‘important veneer of authenticity’ when compared to other, more ‘manufactured’ cultural spheres. What becomes of Zidane’s unpredictable individual agency if he is, by his own admission and within the narrative logic of Gordon and Parreno’s film, subject to some mysterious, over-arching plan? We might relate this to the different methods of filming football that we have already touched on above. The televisual aesthetic, by offering a global view of the match and following the ball rather than individual players, certainly gives a sense of how the players work as a team, but it also tends to highlight the distinctive contributions of individuals by demonstrating the consequences of actions to the overall evolution of the game:
thus, for instance, Zidane’s dramatic run up the wing is shown to be decisive in the scoring of Real Madrid’s equalising goal. On the other hand, the aesthetic regime of Gordon and Parreno’s portrait, by focusing on just one player, paradoxically seems to detract from the sense of that individual’s agency, since Zidane’s actions are largely divorced from their consequences, existing in a kind of vacuum, sufficient unto themselves. As Bérénice Bailly has pointed out, there is an undeniable suspense to the match unfolding, but Gordon and Parreno’s film deliberately distances itself from that suspense by withholding from the viewer the traditional markers of the game’s evolution (Bailly 2006).  

The sense that Zidane is less the author of his own actions and rather trapped within some mysteriously unfolding stratagem is further developed by Gordon and Parreno’s filming of the second half of the match. We quoted above Gordon and Parreno’s description of their film as ‘a document about a live event’ rather than a documentary. But this status of the film, as a retrospective organisation of a live event, places the work in an ambiguous position with respect to the structuring of narrative: for, in a live broadcast, the outcome of an encounter is necessarily uncertain, whereas, in a retroactively edited film, whether documentary or fiction, the end of the story is known in advance and will frequently determine the shape of the overall narrative structure. Thus, Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait, while seeking to maintain some of the suspense of a live football match, also contains elements of narrative prolepsis, knowing gestures toward what will be the outcome of the game. As mentioned above, Zidane is sent off at the end of this match for his involvement in a minor brawl between the two teams (it remains difficult to decide whether this is a theatrical gesture on the part of Zidane, made in full cognizance of the cameras trained upon him, or simply a chance event that provides the directors with an unexpectedly lurid

1 We have already suggested, above, that this withholding of signposts is far from total, but in comparison to the standard televisual representation of football matches, the point clearly stands.
selling point for their film). Much of the second half of the film seems to work to prepare this act of violence by gradually developing a sense of tension and the idea of an unfocused anger building within Zidane. This is largely achieved through the use of music. The original music for *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait* was recorded by the Glaswegian post-rock group Mogwai, specifically chosen by Gordon and Parreno for their atmospheric quality: Parreno has commented that Mogwai’s music contains many ‘promises of narrative’, but that these promises are constantly withheld (Gordon and Parreno 2006). What Mogwai’s music promises in particular, is violence: on earlier albums, such as 1999’s *Come On Die Young*, their melodic tracks would frequently build – or sometimes erupt unexpectedly – into passages of intense, layered, but largely formless noise. In the group’s more recent work, these brutal assaults of noise have become more infrequent, but retain their threat as a latent possibility within the music, largely because of Mogwai’s recurrent use of feedback and distortion.

In the second half of *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait*, these musical qualities are used judiciously in order to build an atmosphere of tension and menace that will ultimately feed into Zidane’s final expulsion for violence. At the beginning of the second half, grinding feedback and echoing drones accompany a series of extreme close-ups on Zidane’s face which tend to give a tense, hunted quality to his appearance, exacerbated by a series of matched whip-pans around the advertising hoardings at the edge of the pitch which, when tied to Zidane’s point of view, convey a sense of entrapment. Jean-Luc Douin has described Zidane in the film as resembling an animal lying in wait for its prey (Douin 2006), and indeed the rhythm of this second half, with short bursts of activity as Zidane chases the ball, followed by slow-motion close-ups of his legs and feet walking away from the camera, sometimes resembles a wildlife documentary, a sense contained in the title of another French review of the film: ‘Beau comme un safari’ (Duponchelle
Later in the half, gathering swells of increasingly piercing feedback from Mogwai fade in and out as the action on the pitch grows more fractious with tackles getting more vicious. A more melodic track (entitled ‘Time and a Half’ on the soundtrack album) slowly builds to a crescendo over a series of shots of Zidane that grow from medium- to close-up to extreme close-up, then cuts out entirely with a cut to an extreme high-angle long-shot from the far corner of the stadium. The camera then spends a moment prowling the deserted areas below the stands, with the sound of Mogwai still playing, but tinny and distant, before emerging at the top of the stands and zooming very quickly back to the pitch and cutting to a medium shot of Zidane. The muting of the music during this brief passage below the stands gives the sense that its real home (where it is heard at full volume) is on the pitch and, since the shots on the pitch remain resolutely with Zidane, the music comes across as a subjective representation of his thoughts and feelings. Thus, following Real Madrid’s two goals in quick succession, just as the match appears wrapped up, another atmospheric Mogwai track\(^2\) begins to build: the dull electronic hum of a drone, topped by the low scraping of feedback heavily treated with reverb. This track, though cutting in and out, will continue to build, the feedback gradually growing more sharp and insistent, throughout the final fifteen minutes of the game/film, apparently signalling, despite the favourable outcome for Zidane’s team, the spectre of a final act of attrition that will mark the close of the match.

Zidane’s paradox: Masculinity and melancholy

Another recent depiction of Zidane by a French art work raises similar questions about the star’s agency while building its narrative around an act of violence. Jean-Philippe Toussaint’s *La

\(^2\) On the soundtrack album, this piece of music appears as a ‘hidden’ track that plays around three minutes after the end of the last listed track and lasts for some twenty-five minutes in total, gradually gaining in volume and texture without ever taking on a recognisable form.
Mélancolie de Zidane is a short, literary text written in response to Zidane’s expulsion from the 2006 World Cup Final following his head butting of Marco Materazzi. Toussaint uses a somewhat grandiose, and in places archaic language to describe Zidane, imagining his emotions in terms of humours (bile, melancholy and saturnine influences), while his description of Italian goalkeeper Buffon’s placating gesture of ‘anointing’ Zidane’s head is pseudo-Biblical (Toussaint 2006: 15-16). Most of all, though, Toussaint describes Zidane in what might be seen as ‘existential’ terms: ‘he experienced, with a poignant intensity, the feeling of being there’, writes Toussaint (2006: 7), and Zidane’s violent gesture is ascribed to a kind of existential weariness: ‘he has had enough of the world and of himself’ (‘il n’en peut plus du monde et de soi-même’, Toussaint 2006: 11-12). This willingness, within France, to cast Zidane as a kind of existential hero can also be seen in the publicity surrounding Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait: Gordon and Parreno, citing the interest in football of the existentialist writer Albert Camus, say of Zidane: ‘He exists only within this arena [i.e. the football stadium] during these ninety minutes. It is as though everything else disappeared’ (Gordon and Parreno 2006). This casting of Zidane into an existential arena, alone with his destiny, face to face with his actions and their consequences, makes of the football match something like one of Jean-Paul Sartre’s situations limites in which characters are brought up sharp against the possibility and attendant responsibility of their freedom – a sense contained within the title of another review: ‘To be or not to be Zidane’ (Duponchelle 2006a).

For Toussaint, the 2006 World Cup Final may be summarised in two words: form and melancholy (Toussaint 2006: 8). But, as with Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait, if the first of these categories implies an external, objective viewpoint, it is nonetheless under this heading that Zidane’s agency as an athlete and sporting celebrity is preserved: for by form, Toussaint refers to
Zidane’s conversion of a penalty in the seventh minute with a chip-shot that, hitting the crossbar and rebounding just past the goal line, appeared as a ‘citation’ of Geoff Hurst’s 1966 World Cup Final goal against Germany (Toussaint 2006: 8). *Melancholy*, on the other hand, while seeming to imply a more internal, subjective view of Zidane, ultimately suggests that the player is simply the unwitting puppet of forces beyond his control: Zidane was ‘caught by the hostile divinities of melancholy’ (Toussaint 2006: 15). Zidane’s melancholy, in Toussaint’s interpretation, is linked to the impending end of his career: it is marked by a mixture of reluctant sadness at this foretold finish, and a desire to get it over with as quickly as possible (‘*l’envie d’en finir au plus vite*’, Toussaint 2006: 11). Toussaint goes as far as to cite theorists of melancholy – Sigmund Freud and Jean Starobinski – in describing Zidane’s violent gesture as an act of deliverance (Toussaint 2006: 12). The elements surrounding Zidane in the stadium seem to reflect his internal torment: his captain’s armband repeatedly slipping down is taken as an unconscious sign of his weariness and resignation, while, as night falls over Berlin, Zidane feels the sky darken around his shoulders (Toussaint 2006: 13-14). This transforming of Zidane’s petulant headbutt into a totemic gesture somewhere between an act of existential revolt and a divinely-ordained inevitability arguably serves both to excuse the violence and to remove it from the reality of its sociological context: as Garry Whannel has commented, although violence on the part of male sports stars is routinely condemned in the media, this coverage offers little in the way of contextual insight. Issues to do with the construction of masculinity as powerful and invulnerable, the structure of patriarchal power, the concept of women as objects and as property, and the translation of human relations into commodity relations [do] not surface in popular discourse. (Whannel 2002: 172)

Such considerations would appear to be irrelevant to Toussaint’s account which eschews the question of any immediate justification for Zidane’s act, instead presenting it as the result of ‘a long process of maturation, an invisible and secret genesis’ (Toussaint 2006: 6). The gesture,
continues Toussaint, is situated beyond the aesthetic categories of the beautiful and the sublime, and beyond the moral categories of good and evil. This citation of Nietzsche implies that the real stake of Toussaint’s account is a philosophical interest in causation: for Nietzsche, if actions are beyond good and evil, it is (in large part) because they come about as the result of a long series of preceding actions and reactions that it is absolutely not within any individual’s realistic power to control (Nietzsche 1990 [1886]). Having asserted that Zidane’s headbutt was invisible (because supposedly no one in the stadium – neither officials nor spectators – saw it happen), Toussaint ends his short text, seemingly rather lazily and unsatisfactorily, with a reference to Zeno’s paradox: Zidane could never have head butted Materazzi because, once his head had travelled half the distance to Materazzi’s chest, it would still have had half the distance to travel, and that distance may be halved ad infinitum such that Zidane’s head would never reach its target. If this rather glib conclusion (Toussaint speaks of ‘Zidane’s paradox’) smacks slightly of desperation, it nonetheless rejoins once again the preoccupations of Gordon’s and Parreno’s film. For, as Mary Ann Doane has shown, Zeno’s Paradox has frequently been cited within film theory as a way of describing the mysterious process whereby the cinema produces the illusion of continuous movement out of a series of discontinuous still images (Doane 2002: 172-205). As a result of breaking down movement in this way into its component parts, the moving image – from the motion studies of Marey and Muybridge, through narrative and experimental cinema, and up to the slow-motion replays of contemporary media commentary – has been seen as a particularly valuable tool for reconstructing the precise causal logic of an event or action. It is a significant measure of the receptive opacity of Zinedine Zidane’s celebrity persona that both Gordon’s and Parreno’s film and Toussaint’s text take an act of violence by Zidane as the starting point for interrogating the resistant opacity of causality itself. Behind the interminable
discussion of what Marco Materazzi really said to Zidane lie more ancient and troubling questions: how do we pass unexpectedly from one situation to another? To what extent are we responsible for our moods and our actions?

Conclusion

As this study has shown, Zidane has served, especially within France but to some extent also around the world, as a kind of cipher or hieroglyph. All things to all men, Zidane has become a blank canvas on which the French media has played out the nation’s preoccupations with race and national identity, crystallising around key moments like the France-Algeria match of 2001. At the same time, Zidane’s not infrequent acts of violence on the pitch, in being presented as somehow ‘invisible’, inscrutable or incomprehensible, have allowed for the projection of spurious discourses of class hatred and racial revenge as well as the revival of dated codes of honour that serve to glorify masculinist violence. Zidane’s own enigmatic public comments have only confused matters further, posing problems for a celebrity industry based on a heroic conception of individual agency by at times implying a more modest, self-effacing belief in destiny or divine ordination. This has led to somewhat patronising discussions of Zidane’s ‘saintly’ innocence, or childlike naivety (a line which is never too far away from the paternalism of colonial discourse), while, in fact, Zidane’s careful refusal to take up ideological positions or explain his actions may represent a canny negotiation of a global media arena in which the slightest utterance is subject to fine scrutiny. The question of how conscious Zidane is of his actions, how in control of his own destiny, has thus become the unspoken stake of much commentary: are his dramatic sendings off in high-profile matches the sign of an untameable impulsiveness that is heedless of Zidane’s privileged media platform, or on the contrary
cynically engineered to achieve maximum publicity? This kind of soul-searching has subsequently formed the basis of cultural representations of the soccer star in a very French tradition of high-cultural appropriation of popular-cultural phenomena. But, if these art works have used Zidane as a catalyst for the rekindling of fundamental questions of artistic form and of philosophical interrogation, they ultimately offer little insight into the pernicious mixture of social influences and economic pressures that cause one highly-paid footballer to lash out at another.

References


Schneider, G. (2005), ‘Zidane a eu “comme une révélation”’, Libération, 10 August.


