

## A portrait of the twenty-first century

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For spectators who allow themselves to be immersed in the enthralling audiovisual field created in Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno's film *Zidane*, the experience suggests that what they have seen is a key work of the new century. Indeed, the film may well be presented as the portrait of a star football player, but its impact and significance extend well beyond, and will outlive, that of a conventional documentary about a now retired athlete. *Zidane: un portrait du 21e siècle/Zidane: a 21st Century Portrait* (2006) offers itself simultaneously as a highly sensual and deeply reflexive work, combining the visceral and moving power of the audiovisual spectacle with an exploration of the status of filmic images as historical objects embedded in a culture of mass consumerism. As such, the film exemplifies one of the most stimulating developments in both contemporary film theory and the practice of feature filmmaking: the return of the corporeal and a concomitant reappraisal of film theory's abstract tendencies through a renewed focus on the material appearance and sensory impact of film and media images and sounds.

Since the 1970s, abstract models, often borrowed from established theoretical schools (linguistic, semiotic and psychoanalytic models in particular), and complemented over time by approaches informed by socioeconomic and cultural studies, have dominated film theory. In the past decade, however, approaches of a more phenomenological nature have reemerged in the work of both filmmakers and film theorists, focusing anew on the perception and materiality of the film medium as well as on its sensory and emotional impact.<sup>1</sup> Gordon and Parreno's film is an emblematic instance of the intersection of these apparently antithetical fields. With its fluctuations between macroscopic and

1 Martine Beugnet, *Cinema and Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press: 2007), pp. 8–10. See also Nicole Brenez, *De la figure en général et du corps en particulier: L'invention figurative au cinéma* (Paris: De Boeck and Larcier, 1998); Jérôme Game, 'Cinematic bodies: the blind spot in contemporary French theory on corporeal cinema', *Studies in French Cinema*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2001), pp. 47–53.

microscopic planes of perception, the film opens itself to a variety of spectatorial experiences and a multitude of readings. Neither straightforward documentary nor conventionally filmed portrait, *Zidane* is an audiovisual poem and a study of portraiture in movement and duration situated between the experimental (in its exploration of film form and time as duration) and the popular (in its presentation of a sporting hero playing in a high-profile football match). It also presents itself as a complex exploration of our experience of subjective and collective memory in an era of reified images and mass communication. The work's hybrid nature extends to its double vocation as feature film and gallery work, and its capacity to evoke and elicit a range of modes of spectatorship, from that of the football stadium to that of the cinema, museum or art gallery.

Known for their interdisciplinary work using a variety of materials, multimedia artists Gordon and Parreno found inspiration for the *Zidane* project in their respective experiences of growing up with football in a world increasingly shaped by television. Traces of the filmmakers' experience emerge through Zidane's own childhood account – provided via intertitles – of watching football on television and of the fascination and physical pull these images and sounds exercised on him: as a young boy, whenever he heard the distinctive voice of the main French football commentator of the time, Zidane would draw close to the television set. With its highly sensuous celebration of the collective and ubiquitous power of the media, *Zidane* combines a lyricism and technophilia reminiscent of Dziga Vertov with a characteristically contemporary melancholy tone, embracing cutting-edge technology to explore the present-day import of a genre – portraiture – that is rooted in the era of the 'auratic' work of art. The result is a deeply affecting evocation of the twenty-first century's media-saturated world.<sup>2</sup> In the way it alternately embraces and distances itself from the commodified sphere of global communications, Gordon and Parreno's film sounds a distant echo of the seminal reflections on cinema and new technologies led by the thinkers of the Frankfurt School, notably Walter Benjamin. While mourning the decline of the artistic aura's aesthetic of distance inherent in film's status as a mechanically reproduced commodity, Benjamin celebrated cinema's transformative capacity to 'shock' the masses into a visceral revolutionary consciousness, and acknowledged cinema's potential role in the reclamation and reenchancement of ordinary reality.<sup>3</sup>

In 1971, Hellmuth Costard completed *Fussball wie noch nie*, a portrait of George Best composed of a montage of sequences captured on 16 mm film by eight cameras pointed solely at one player throughout a single match. A comparison with *Zidane* is revealing. Costard's film, in its spare, unglamorous approach (the crowd as well as the other players are mostly excluded from the frame, and there is no play on the material appearance of the image) remains a fascinating exposition of the thinness of reality mediated through filmed images. In contrast, Gordon and Parreno's work is an experiment in the redemptive capacity of images to

2 Beugnet, *Cinema and Sensation*, pp. 170–76.

3 On Benjamin's notion of cinema as reenchancement and reclamation of 'experience' in a commodified world, see Bill Schwartz, 'Media times/historical times', *Screen*, vol. 45, no. 2 (2004), p. 95; Miriam Hansen, 'Benjamin, cinema and experience: "The blue flower in the land of technology"', *New German Critique*, no. 40 (1987), pp. 179–224.

4 As Cyril Neyrat writes, as exemplified in the artists' 'anti-spectacular ethic', the deployment of such an apparatus cannot be dismissed as mere technology fetishism. See 'The daydreaming of a loner', *Cahiers du cinéma*, English version, no. 638 (2008), [www.cahiersducinema.com/article804.html](http://www.cahiersducinema.com/article804.html) [accessed 20 September 2008].

5 *Ibid.*, p. 2. Gordon and Parreno took the technical team to the Prado to look at paintings by Velasquez and Goya.

6 Recalling Gilles Deleuze's use of the term, Laura Marks describes haptic visuality as 'a kind of seeing that uses the eye like an organ of touch'. Marks, 'Haptic visuality: touching with the eyes', *Framework: the Finnish Art Review*, no. 2 (2004), [http://www.framework.fi/2\\_2004/visitor/artikkelit/marks2.html](http://www.framework.fi/2_2004/visitor/artikkelit/marks2.html) [accessed 3 October 2008].

salvage fragments of a collective memory and infuse it with a renewed sense of density and meaning. To this end, they have relied on the resources of modern-day technology and the breadth of possibilities that such technology affords artists and film directors concerned with the development of poetic forms of modern audiovisual expression.<sup>4</sup>

The premiss of the project and the apparatus deployed by the two artists are well documented. Gordon and Parreno brought together a team of internationally renowned camera and sound professionals to operate the microphones and the seventeen cameras installed around the field – a combination of High Definition with 35 mm Scope format, and two prototype cameras with extremely powerful telelenses. The work's overall timeframe is that of a match: the raw footage was shot between kickoff and the closing whistle of a Spanish league game between Villarreal and Real Madrid on 23 April 2005; and the final, edited theatrical version accordingly lasts about ninety minutes. And yet the film has little to do with the usual football broadcast. *Zidane* incorporates a variety of audiovisual matter – images and sounds recorded directly on the football pitch and from television screens as well as satellite images and, at half-time, a series of extracts from broadcast news. Hence, the film effects sudden changes of scale and of medium, occasionally cutting from a close view of the action to a light-saturated, bird's-eye view of the pitch, or switching to conventional broadcast images of the match.

The bulk of the film, however, is composed of the footage shot on the pitch by the seventeen cameras focused solely on one figure, the great footballer Zinédine Zidane. The result is an elaborate series of striking closeup shots and fluid pans from varying angles that shift in and out of focus, edited together to create an entrancing, balletic composition of movements, colour fields and textures. The familiar linear narrative offered in traditional broadcasts is thus abandoned, the initial audiovisual rendition of the match's temporal frame redeployed, unfolded as it were, to form a kind of spatiotemporal sculpture – an ensemble of fluid blocks of duration brought together through intricate editing.

It is to painting that Cyril Neyrat compares the film's layers of images, describing them in terms of brushstrokes.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the overall effect of the film is that of a formidable exercise in haptic visuality.<sup>6</sup> Its visual field is in constant flux, shifting between long shots in clear-cut and detail-saturated photography to images caught by the telelenses, where forefront and background alternate between precision and shallowness, to extreme closeups that sometimes give way to complete abstraction. The soundtrack operates similar variations, overlapping or contrasting the elegiac, mournful tones of Glasgow-based band Mogwai, 'closeup' sounds of Zidane's actions, the drone of the crowd, and the voice of the Spanish television commentator. The film thus switches from one form of hapticity to another: from low resolution and grainy appearance to fine texture and photographic exactitude; from wistful musical tune to the precise enunciation of a television commentator to the pounding noise of the multitude. In the opening credit sequence, for instance, the camera

draws so close to the screen of a television showing a broadcast of the match that the image turns into an abstract composition, a shimmering surface of interwoven, colourful threads, before it abruptly cuts to a high-definition image of the pitch. From the very beginning, the film thus discourages an omniscient, masterly mode of viewing, calling instead for a ‘tactile’ relation to the image, an identification with the changing appearance of the audiovisual field as much as with its figurative content.

Although some images are superimposed with fragments of written texts – elusive observations originating, presumably, from the player – the film as a whole provides no factual information about Zidane. Yet Gordon and Parreno’s extensive use of the telelens in particular creates an uncanny sense of physical intimacy with the star player. The eye of the camera zooms repeatedly on the player’s face, hands and feet, capturing otherwise unnoticed details, odd gestures (such as the way he grazes the ground with the tip of his shoes) and facial expressions. Auditory details elicit a similar sense of closeness and poignancy, contrasting the overwhelming roar of the crowd with the sound of Zidane’s breathing, his occasional grunts and sighs. As the art historians Michael Fried and Tim Griffin put it in their analysis of the film in *ArtForum*, ‘The overall effect of subtitles, sound track, and images is intensely “subjective” and underscores the already powerful impression of Zidane’s capacity for stillness – one might almost say the impression of his psychic apartness, his faithfulness to his own Achilles-like singularity – at the heart of the general combat’.<sup>7</sup> Hence if the telelens erases spatial distance and absorbs the background into its shallow depth of field, the player’s portrait nonetheless yields the sense of unattainability characteristic of the auratic. With such a closed and exclusive focus on one individual, the viewing of the film should amount to a frustrating and claustrophobic experience. Yet, on the contrary, *Zidane* is a perception-expanding event where the outer field, though mostly *unseen*, is always *sensed*, and where identities, individual and collective, appear in a state of flux. Gordon and Parreno’s work is, fundamentally, about interconnectedness – with the world as well as with other subjects – and about cinema’s ability to recreate such a sense of interconnectedness. In Deleuzian terms *Zidane*, as a study of the fluidity of identity, is a film of multiple ‘becomings’. Equally, in its vivid evocation of how embodied subjectivities and the objective world are ‘passionately intertwined’,<sup>8</sup> it recalls the oceanic feeling described by Freud, or Merleau-Ponty’s description of the world as flesh: that is, as the unsettling and exhilarating experience of the lack of distinction between inside and outside, oneself and others.<sup>9</sup>

Many commentators have been struck by the player’s capacity for total concentration, or absorption in the task at hand, under the watchful gaze of the ecstatic stadium crowd and the multiple cameras – and in full knowledge that his performance is being observed by millions on the day via a live broadcast and then scrutinized by millions of viewers of the film, for which his full compliance was crucial. According to Fried and Griffin, ‘the film lays bare a hitherto unthematized relationship between

7 Michael Fried and Tim Griffin, ‘Absorbed in the action’, *ArtForum*, vol. 45, no. 1 (2006), pp. 333–5, p. 335.

8 Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: a Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 286.

9 Sigmund Freud, ‘Civilization and its discontents’ (1929), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works, Volume XXI*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1961), pp. 57–145; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 138.

10 Fried and Griffin, 'Absorbed in the action', p. 334. This apparent awareness of the act of looking, which Fried elsewhere calls 'theatricality', is characteristic of much postmodern art, with its often gimmicky self-reflexivity. Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980). See also Richard Rushton, 'Deleuzian spectatorship', in this issue.

11 Marks, 'Haptic visuality'.

12 *Ibid.*

13 Catherine Fowler, 'Room for experiment: gallery films and vertical time from Maya Deren to Eija Liisa Ahtila', *Screen*, vol. 45, no. 4 (2004), p. 343.

All images from *Zidane: un portrait du 21e siècle/Zidane: a 21st Century Portrait* (Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno, 2006), courtesy of Artificial Eye.

absorption and beholding – more precisely, between the persuasive representation of absorption and the apparent consciousness of being beheld – in the context of art, a relationship that is no longer simply one of opposition or complementarity but that allows a sliding and indeed an overlap'.<sup>10</sup> Paradoxically, however, this palpable sense of the player's unwavering concentration and focus, rather than creating a feeling of self-containment, contributes to make the presence of the outer field tangible: that which is partly or wholly excluded from the frame – the other players, the football pitch as a whole – is relayed by the soundtrack as well as by the player's intense awareness of the match around him. Moreover, the multisensorial response elicited by the tactile, synaesthetic quality of the images and sounds invites an embodied relation to the film where the sense of connection with the player and his surroundings is emphasized: we hear Zidane's breath and our own breath quickens; we see and hear Zidane's toe digging into the ground and we feel the grass beneath our feet; we see the sweat trickling down Zidane's face, and we wipe our brow. Even beyond these moments of sensory identification, there is the pervasive sense of being swept up in the film's *texture*, of merging with images we cannot yet, or can no longer, make out. Gordon and Parreno's use of haptic images 'invites a kind of identification in which there is a mutual dissolving of viewer and viewed, subject and object; where looking is not about power but about yielding'.<sup>11</sup> It is precisely the function of haptic images, Laura Marks argues, to 'help us feel the connectivity between ourselves, the image and its material support, and the world to which the image connects us'.<sup>12</sup>

According to Catherine Fowler, it is in the context of a gallery viewing that we are most likely to experience this sense of connectivity to the fullest. In gallery films, she writes, 'the moving image expands to fill space and time, inviting responses from its spectators that are very far from the passive, distanced stance of the auditorium. . . . [Gallery films also invoke] a connection to the space outside the frame that forces us to read in a more involved, embodied way.'<sup>13</sup> Fowler's characterization of





cinema spectatorship (in ‘the auditorium’) as strictly ‘passive’ and ‘distanced’ overlooks the sophistication of many modes of cinematic engagement; but more specifically, in the case of Gordon and Parreno’s film, the experience of watching a match is perhaps more successfully evoked through cinema’s continuous, collective screening than in the more fragmented and private mode of viewing of the gallery. The contrast is significant in that the spectator’s ‘involved, embodied’ relation to the film mirrors the film’s formal treatment of the relationship between player and crowd, figure and ground. The effect of the rack focus is key here, in terms not only of image but also of sound, in that it orchestrates the disappearance and reappearance of the figure caught in the flux of multiple ‘becomings’: as the focus shifts from one auditory or visual plane to another, the silhouette and sound of the player seem to dissolve and fuse with the background, with the teeming, collective body of the crowd, and with the texture of the audiovisual matter itself. Such fluctuations resonate with Zidane’s own description of his perception of his environment when on the pitch, given in a brief series of intertitles that quote him saying: ‘When you are deep into the match, you don’t really hear the crowd. At the same time, you can almost choose what you want to hear.’ In Deleuze and Guattari’s definition, ‘becoming’ offers a radical alternative to dual and fixed notions of the subjective body. It suggests that bodies and identities change through ‘contamination’, in an ongoing process of exchange that takes place at the level of the ‘molecular’: that is, at the micro level of perception – of visual and sound matter in movement and the way these interact and change – as opposed to the macro or ‘molar’ level of organization concerned with ideological, social and psychological frameworks.<sup>14</sup> It is the thrill of such an endless potential for ‘becoming’ – becoming-crowd, becoming-player, becoming-film – that is encapsulated in the film’s striking fluctuations in focus and sound mixing.

14 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (London: Athlone Press, 1984), p. 8.

There is, however, a deep ambivalence embedded in the inclusiveness and connectivity both depicted in, and elicited by, the film. On the one hand, the ‘macro’ level always resurfaces, inevitably bringing to mind the great paradox that underpins Gordon and Parreno’s film: in a contemporary Europe dominated by xenophobic fears, the most famous and admired man is a footballer of Algerian–Kabyle origins. On the other hand, in its treatment of the Zidane figure and of the event of the match in connection with imaging and media globalization, it raises the issue of technology’s impact on subjective perception, the relation of subjective experience to historical and mediated time, and, by extension, the commodification of the relation of the subject to the objective world.

This web of interrelationships is emblemized in a sequence that creates an unexpected tear in the fabric of the film. Midway through, at half-time, a montage of newsreels is inserted – images with intertitles, taken from television news broadcasts that form a kaleidoscopic evocation of events taking place on the same day as the match (from pictures of floods in Montenegro to images of Elian Gonzales on Cuban television; from the announcement of the sale of a *Star Wars* spaceship on eBay to the description of a terrorist attack in Najaf, Iraq, that includes a glimpse of a bystander wearing a Zidane T-shirt). It is as if the body of the film itself had become porous, a sensitive surface through which heterogeneous footage can emerge. The insertion of the sequence of newsclips certainly collapses geographical and temporal boundaries, appearing to connect the stadium to the outside world. And yet we might wonder if this *rapprochement* is in fact about connectivity; or if it is, rather, underscoring the disconnect, the impossibility of rendering mass information meaningful, the sense of helplessness in front of the endless, overwhelming flood of synchronous yet unrelated facts that, in Braudel’s words, ‘amounts to a horror of the event’<sup>15</sup> – and, beyond, the failure of cinema and television to offer a relevant vision of history.

15 Fernand Braudel, *On History*, trans. Sarah Matthews (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 28; cited in Paddy Scannell, ‘Broadcasting historiography and historicity’, *Screen*, vol. 45, no. 2 (2004), pp. 130–41.



Crucially, the newsclip sequence is not woven through the film, nor through the game, but confined to half-time, which on television is normally the break reserved for commercial sponsors to hawk their wares. Current events thus arguably acquire the status of advertisements – a transformation epitomized by the Zidane T-shirt worn by the bystander in the newsclip of Iraq. The onlooker may wear a Zidane shirt, but Zidane himself wears a Siemens Mobile shirt. The international makeup of both the filmmakers (Gordon is Scottish and Parreno is French–Algerian) and the football team, and the film’s eponymous emphasis on the French–Algerian–Kabyle star footballer’s playing for Real Madrid, mirror the global advertising slogans that traverse the pitch and the screen. Like the team itself, an *über-équipe*, the advertisements are transnational, attempting to transcend national boundaries whilst inevitably drawing attention to them (Siemens is German, Movistar and Fortuna are Spanish, Kellogg’s is American and BP is British–Dutch). The presence of the ‘outside’ world, a larger, becoming-globalized world, is further evoked in the babel of languages spoken by the players and commentators (Spanish, French and English) and by the advertising logos which constitute a kind of multinational hieroglyphics. All of these sign systems converge on the illuminated advertising panel that adorns the film like a frieze on which slogans appear in flat space, in contrast to the rounded depth of the playing field. The messages move across the panel to form a ‘graphic unconscious’,<sup>16</sup> the products advertised inevitably rubbing off on Zidane himself in a kind of sympathetic magic. The name ‘Movistar’ elicits the glamour of Zidane’s star turn, wryly commenting on the camera’s embrace of him and on the celestial explosions of flash bulbs and the swooning crowds; Siemens Mobile suggests the kinetic virility and choreographic intensity of Zidane’s movements as well as the international reach of his appeal and his status as a media icon; and ‘BP Ultimate Gasoline’ suggests the fuel that powers the seemingly unstoppable force of nature that is Zidane, an association underscored by ‘Fortuna Racing Machine’, a professional motorcycle team. All of these trademarks are applicable in one way or another to Zidane, who does not stop running yet cannot escape them.

But in this film, the frieze is also swallowed into the overall sensory space as a moving strip of abstract motifs and fields of colour, the viewer’s experience of the frieze thus shifting from an ‘optical’ reading position to a more haptic encounter. Here lies the great ambiguity of Gordon and Parreno’s project, hovering between an aesthetic of connectivity and an aestheticization of language that inevitably invokes the aestheticization of politics.<sup>17</sup> For, as well as the relegation of the newsclips to half-time, and the commercialization of player and sporting event, there is the fascinating anthropological spectacle of the chanting crowd, arguably an illustration of nationalist fervour and surrogate warfare. There is also the knowledge that the telelenses that make it possible to create such an engrossing sense of physical closeness with the

16 See Tom Conley, *The Graphic Unconscious in Early Modern French Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

17 In light of mass culture’s increasing adoption of haptic images for the purposes of advertising in the last decade or so, Laura Marks has added a cautionary note to her initial, somewhat euphoric, celebration of the haptic. See Marks, ‘Haptic visibility’.

- 18 As Paul Virilio has argued, cinema and war are irremediably coupled through the elaboration, testing and production of the optical technology that was key to the evolution of both. Virilio, 'A travelling shot over twenty years', *War and Cinema* (London: Verso, 1991).
- 19 Annette Kuhn, 'Heterotopia, heterochronia: place and time in cinema memory', *Screen*, vol. 45, no. 2 (2004), p. 109.
- 20 In 'The daydreaming of a loner', Neyrat points to the insertion of the news clip about the sale of a *Star Wars* vessel, as well as to the use of satellite images, connecting this to Parreno's habit of 'adopting the point of view of an extra-terrestrial' in his work.

player and with the image itself were used courtesy of the US Department of Defense, which developed the technology.<sup>18</sup>

As in Annette Kuhn's concept of *heterochronia*, or cinema time's quality of 'being at once open-ended and circumscribed . . . both outside of normal time and embedded in it',<sup>19</sup> in *Zidane* the convergence of various modes of perception results in a complex layering of moods and temporalities: the mournful evocation of the twentieth century through conventional television broadcasts, which are already beginning to look somewhat dated; the futuristic edge of global interconnections that extends, as Neyrat puts it, to an intersidereal sense of the scale of things;<sup>20</sup> the precise framework of the match captured in 'real time'; Zidane's subjective memory of the match as 'a walk in the park'; and, finally, the entrancing, fluctuating beat of the film as it unravels in front of us. The great achievement of the film – that which makes it such an enchanting and highly topical cinematic experience – is, ultimately, the captivating work of reappropriation that its treatment of audiovisual material represents: its refusal, precisely, to let media images be confined solely to the realm of the commodified culture and formatted entertainment that vampirizes not only political and artistic fields but also our experience of the world and others. There is an intricate process of rhythmic and graphic correspondences and variations at play, but no hierarchy of images, in Gordon and Parreno's cinematic dream. Televised images are woven into the film matter, while experience, subjective and collective, great or insignificant, is reclaimed and returned to its temporal and physical density in the event of the film itself.