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ZAHA HADID

PHILIPPE PARRENO AND
DOUGLAS GORDON'S "ZIDANE"



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This and opposite page:
Douglas Gordon and Philippe
Parreno, Zidane, a 21st Century
Portrait, 2006, stills from a
color video, 90 minutes.

ARTISTS HAVE LONG NAVIGATED THE VISUAL TERRITORY SHARED BY ART AND CINEMA, BUT FEW HAVE BROUGHT THESE SPHERES TOGETHER AS GRANDLY AS DOUGLAS GORDAN AND PHILIPPE PARENNO IN THEIR *ZIDANE, A 21ST CENTURY PORTRAIT*. HAVING DEBUTED AT CANNES LAST MAY BEFORE ITS PRESENTATION FOR ART AUDIENCES AT THE BASEL ART FAIR—NOTABLY, ON THE OPEN FIELD OF THE SWISS CITY'S HERZOG & DE MEURON—DESIGNED STADIUM—*ZIDANE* IS REMARKABLE NOT ONLY FOR ITS FORMAL INNOVATION BUT ALSO FOR ITS BOLD ENGAGEMENT OF THE GLOBAL MEDIA SPHERE. ART HISTORIAN MICHAEL FRIED AND *ARTFORUM* EDITOR TIM GRIFFIN OFFER TWO VIEWS OF A CINEMATIC ENDEAVOR REACHING BACK TO EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY PORTRAITURE AND FORWARD TO CONTEMPORARY SPECTACLE CULTURE.



Absorbed in the Action

MICHAEL FRIED

DOUGLAS GORDON AND PHILIPPE PARENNO'S FILM *Zidane, a 21st Century Portrait*, 2006, was made as follows: During the entirety of a ninety-minute soccer match between Real Madrid and Villarreal in the Estadio Santiago Bernabéu in Madrid on the evening of April 23, 2005, seventeen synchronized movie cameras, using different types of film and in various positions around the stadium, were trained on one player, the superb and legendary Real halfback Zinedine Zidane. (Zidane, born in Marseille to an Algerian family and now in his thirties, played spectacularly for France in the recent World Cup before being red-carded—expelled—from the final shortly before the end for head-butting an Italian defender. It was a stupefying act, and brought his glorious international career to a more memorable close than anything could have done except scoring the winning goal. Nevertheless, thousands of international journalists voted him the best player in the tournament, awarding him the "Golden Ball.") Gordon and Parreno sat in a trailer outside the stadium looking at real-time images fed to TV monitors in front of them; this allowed them to request individual camera operators to move in for a close-up, to pull back, to focus on Zidane's torso or head or feet or raised arm and hand, etc. Later the artists, together with noted editor Hervé Schneid, edited the raw takes, mounting sequences from each camera, as well as bits from the TV broadcast, to make a single temporally continuous, albeit visually extremely heterogeneous—at times disorienting—ninety-minute movie; the sound track, also heterogeneous, combines the Spanish commentators' televised account of the game (which runs intermittently throughout the film, giving it a narrative spine), crowd noise, sounds of contact from the field, music by the Scottish band Mogwai, and silence. At several points statements by Zidane appear in subtitles. The viewer follows not the match per se but number 5, Zidane, from beginning to (almost the) end, though at a few crucial junctures—when he is knocked down and later, after he defiantly dribbles past defenders and sends a fabulous left-footed cross that is then headed for a goal by his Brazilian teammate

Ronaldo—we are shown the action three times and from different points of view, to make sure that we grasp what has just taken place. (We are also given two views of a crucial penalty that leads to a goal—which we aren't actually shown—against Real, and two of a goal by David Beckham that puts Real ahead to stay.)

Zidane opened at the Cannes Film Festival, was projected in a stadium at the Basel art fair, and went into general release in Paris, where I caught it twice the first day it hit the theaters. This wasn't accidental. I had learned about the project some time before and had been looking forward to seeing the film. I had become deeply interested in Gordon's work, especially since seeing *Déjà vu*, 2000, a three-screen projection, at very slightly different speeds, of Rudolph Maté's noir film *D.O.A.*, in Gordon's retrospective exhibition at the Hirshhorn Museum in 2004. Even more to the point, the Zidane project intrigued me; in particular, I was curious to discover whether or not the designation of the film as a "portrait" could be taken seriously—whether it meant simply that the film was a biopic or whether it had some deeper resonance. I hoped the latter was the case, and when I saw the film my hopes were fulfilled.

In a short joint statement about their project, Gordon and Parreno refer to portraits by Velázquez and Goya in the Prado but identify Andy Warhol's real-time film portraits as the "direct source for the portrait that we hope to paint." This is doubtless true, but grasping the significance of *Zidane* requires a further consideration of the problem of the photographic portrait—which has come to mean both still- and moving-image portraits—in our time. For Thomas Struth, quoted by Ann Goldstein in an essay in the catalogue of Struth's 2002 traveling retrospective, "The portrait is the subject matter in photography where the problems of the media are the most visible." Basing her remarks on a conversation with the artist, Goldstein continues: "For him, those problems begin with the reality of putting a person in front of a camera, and the complex dynamics that take place between the sitter, the photographer, and the spectator." Between them, Struth and Goldstein make it sound as if the portrait presents



This page: Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno, *Zidane, a 21st Century Portrait*, 2006, stills from a color video, 90 minutes.
Opposite page: One of seventeen cameras used in the filming of *Zidane, a 21st Century Portrait*, 2006.



difficulties unique to photography, which may well be true, but it's important to recognize that something of the sort has been felt to hold for painting as well. In mid-eighteenth-century France, where modern painting began, the portrait was a questionable genre in the eyes of many art critics. As I remarked in my book *Absorption and Theatricality* (1980), one objection was that portraiture required the exercise of merely mechanical skills rather than of the pictorial imagination. "But there was," I suggest, "still another source of critical misgiving—the inherent theatricality of the genre. More nakedly and as it were categorically than the conventions of any other genre, those of the portrait call for exhibiting a subject, the sitter, to the public gaze; put another way, the basic action depicted in a portrait is the sitter's presentation of himself or herself to be beheld. It follows that the portrait as a genre was singularly ill equipped to comply with the demand that a painting negate or neutralize the presence of the beholder"—a demand, I went on to show in subsequent books, that lay at the heart of a major current or tradition of French painting, from Chardin and Greuze to Courbet and Manet. One strategy that painters adopted to overcome this limitation was to depict persons in a portrait as *absorbed* in thought or action; by the same token, Diderot in 1767 sharply criticized Louis-Michel Van Loo's portrait of him for its air of coquetry, which he explained in terms of the presence in the room of the engaging Madame Van Loo while he was being painted. What would have been best, Diderot writes, would have been to leave him alone "and abandoned to his reverie. Then his mouth would have come open, his distracted gaze would have been focused somewhere far away, the labors of his deeply preoccupied mind would have been depicted on his face, and Michel would have made a beautiful thing." Van Loo would have made a beautiful thing both because the result would have been more natural and because that superior naturalness would itself have been the product of a particular relation of the depicted sitter, and ultimately the painting, to the beholder: To the extent that the depicted sitter appeared entirely absorbed in his reverie, he also appeared *unaware of being beheld*, which is largely what Diderot meant when he insisted in *Conversations on the Natural Son* (1757) and *Discourse on Dramatic Poetry* (1758), his revolutionary early texts on the theater, on the need to treat the beholder as if he did not exist.

I need hardly add that naturalness so understood has also been a photographic ideal, based on the universal belief—the *doxa*—that a person who is captured unawares, who does not know he or she is being photographed, will reveal the "truth" about himself or herself, whereas one who is conscious of the camera will invariably alter, that is, theatricalize, his or her self-presentation. As Susan Sontag writes in *On Photography*, "There is something on people's faces when they don't know they are being observed that never appears when they do." In the course of the evolution of twentieth-century photography, attitudes toward that presumption have shifted back and forth, even within street photography, which lends itself more readily than any other photographic practice to ideas of capture and candor. But in recent decades, the practice of photographing subjects who are unaware of the camera has largely fallen out of favor, partly owing to a certain ethical unease, partly because, as Roland Barthes's comments in *Camera Lucida* suggest, capturing such subjects has too much the character of a bravura performance *on the part of the photographer*—which is to say that it, too, is tainted by theatricality. (There are, of course, exceptions, notably Philip-Lorca diCorcia's strobe-lit street photos ["Streetwork,"



1993–2000, and "Heads," 2001] and Beat Streuli's hidden-camera videos of urban crowds—but in both cases the photographer has found it necessary to take exceptional measures by way of legitimating his approach.) Accordingly, photographic portraiture has tended more and more to embrace the frontal encounter, with all the difficulties and potential embarrassments that that has been felt to involve; I am thinking, for example, of Thomas Ruff's deliberately inexpressive passport-style portraits, Struth's geographically diverse family portraits, Rineke Dijkstra's photos of young people on beaches and similar series, and Patrick Faigenbaum's portraits of Italian aristocratic families, to name four important recent achievements in the genre.

If we now try to situate *Zidane* in relation to these issues, what do we find? First and most obviously, Zidane himself is depicted as deeply absorbed throughout almost the entire film. What absorbs him, of course, is the match itself, which requires the fullest imaginable attention from start to finish and in addition calls forth the most intense and concentrated physical effort on his part, not continuously—we see him conserve his energy whenever possible—but in explosive bursts and sallies that are nearly impossible to follow as they unfold. Indeed, Zidane's dazzling and unerring footwork, his astonishing control of the ball, his instantaneous decision making all exemplify his seemingly unremitting focus on the game even as they combine to keep the viewer perceptually on edge, as does the sheer violence of his high-speed physical encounters with rival players as they try to strip him of the ball and vice versa. (The miking of the sound of those encounters adds greatly to their vividness.) Another factor in all this is Zidane's physiognomy, not just its leanness and toughness, emblemized by his balding, graying, closely cropped skull, but its basic impassiveness (his expression barely changes after his brilliant cross results in a goal), which adds to the impression of an inner ferocity that, not at all paradoxically—think of the great stars of classic Westerns—could scarcely be more photogenic. (To say that the seventeen cameras "love" Zidane is an understatement.) That impassiveness gives way only once, fairly late in the match, when he shares a joke with Ronaldo: The effect is marvelous, a sudden lightening, but according to Gordon (in conversation), that was the one moment Zidane didn't appreciate when he was shown the film. He seemed to himself to have lost his concentration, and that annoyed him.

In short I see *Zidane* as belonging to the absorptive current or tradition that I have elsewhere tried to show has played a central role in the evolution of modern art. *But*: Zidane's participation in the match is not depicted as involving a total unawareness of everything other than the focus of his absorption—in particular, an unawareness of being beheld that has been the hallmark of absorptive depiction from Chardin and Greuze in the eighteenth century to André Kertész's pictures of people reading and Walker Evans's subway photos in the twentieth. (In the last, the subway riders' states of apparent reverie or distraction go hand in hand

with their unawareness of being photographed with a hidden camera.) On the contrary, a major part of the conceptual brilliance of *Zidane* consists in the fact that its protagonist's sustained feat of absorption is depicted as taking place before an audience of eighty thousand spectators, with millions more watching via TV. Thus throughout the film there is the unmistakable implication that Zidane himself—as we see him—could not have been other than acutely aware that literally untold numbers of viewers had their eyes on him. (In fact, he knew too that seventeen movie cameras were following his

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every move.) And yet the viewer's conviction of the great athlete's total engagement in the match is not thereby undermined. Instead, the film lays bare a hitherto unthematized relationship between 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 that would have seemed unimaginable to Diderot. (Here we might think of Jeff Wall's posing of "absorbed" figures in works such as *Adrian Walker . . .*, 1992, and *Morning Cleaning, Mies van der Rohe Foundation, Barcelona*, 1999, and more broadly of the larger acknowledgment of the viewer in recent art photography that I have called "to-be-seeness.")

And not only does *Zidane* lay bare this new relationship, it goes on to explore it, in the first place, by the repeated foregrounding of the filmic and TV apparatus (mainly by shots of the game as mediated by television monitors, including at least one black-and-white monitor in the trailer outside the stadium) as well as by one brief "climb" to the upper reaches of the stadium, whence we zoom down to the field; in the second by sequences involving Zidane himself, as when the camera apparently follows his gaze up to the stadium lights or to the scoreboard before returning to the match, or when it draws us close to his face, then blurs his features as it brings the previously indistinct crowd behind him into sharp focus before zeroing in on him once more (the effect is to suggest Zidane's shifting consciousness of the "theatrical" aspects of his situation); and in the third, even more explicitly, by means of some of the handful of Zidane's remarks that are reported in the form of subtitles. "When you step onto the field," Zidane is quoted as saying at one point, "you hear the crowd, you feel its presence. There is sound, the sound of noise." Then: "When you are immersed in the match, you don't really hear the crowd. At the same time you can almost choose what you want to hear. You are never alone. I can hear someone shift around in his seat. I can hear someone cough. I can hear someone speak to the person next to him. I can imagine that I hear the ticking of a watch." And then: "When things go badly, you feel less concentrated and more inclined to hear the insults, the whistles. You begin to have negative thoughts, sometimes you want to forget . . ." All these remarks—which we read avidly, grateful for a glimpse of Zidane's "inner life"—are set off by the sound track, in particular by haunting stretches of music that at these moments consists mainly of a kind of repetitive, harmonic plucking, sometimes with crowd noise in the background. Above the subtitles or during the "silences" between statements we see Zidane, sometimes in action, sometimes walking or standing still, at moments in extreme close-up, hooded gaze focused offscreen, sweat dripping from him as he waits for the play to surge back in his direction. (From time to time he spits. He wipes his face with his arm or sleeve. He scratches his head behind his left ear. Now and then he barks "Hey" or "Aie" or raises one arm asking for the ball. We are also given repeated shots of his legs and feet, including close-ups that reveal him scuffing his toes against the turf as he walks along—why does he do that? His gait becomes intimately familiar by the end of the film. Somewhere in the context for *Zidane* is Bresson's magnificent *Au hasard Balthazar* [1966]). 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. (There are some things more important than the Trojan War, as a friend recently put it apropos the notorious head-butt.)

As for the subtitles themselves, I am, of course, greatly struck by the fact that Gordon and Parreno chose to make a point of Zidane's consciousness of the crowd, which suggests that the artists recognized, explicitly or otherwise, that this is *the* crucial issue, artistically and ontologically, raised by their film. And beyond that there is the (to me beautiful) question of how exactly to understand Zidane's account of his own double consciousness, if that is what it is: On the one hand, immersed in the game, he doesn't really hear the crowd; on the other, *at the same time*, he can almost choose what he wants to hear and indeed can go so far as to imagine—extraordinary thought—the ticking of a watch. What is clear is that this is not a matter of distraction, absorption's traditional nemesis; rather, it almost seems another form (another channel?) of absorption, a kind of psychic countermovement, reaching phantasmatic lengths (the ticking of that watch!), to his sense of exposure to the crowd's unpredictable, divided, at times hostile attentions. Not that such a countermovement is always available: When things go badly, Zidane's concentration flags, he hears insults and whistles, sometimes he wants to "forget." (Another extraordinary thought: Does he mean to forget what he is there to do? But "forgetting" is also a traditional way of describing an absorbed person's unawareness of his or her surroundings. Can he mean both? "You don't necessarily remember a match as an experience in 'real time,'" he says. "My memories of matches are fragmented." Like the film itself? Gordon and Parreno probably think so; they give us the last two quotations twice. And what is the relation of imagining the ticking of a watch to that fragmenting of time? It may be that something like a flagging of concentration begins to become visible toward the end of the match. At any rate, one can't help noticing what appear like signs of exasperation, culminating in . . . but I won't give away the climax. "*On n'est jamais seul*" ("You are never alone"): Whatever else *Zidane* may be, it is a marvelously compelling portrayal of that state in all its essential instability. (It also occurs to me that Zidane's remarks about the crowd are wholly in the register of *hearing*, as if even under the worst circumstances his visual attention remains on the game.)

For Gordon and Parreno, understandably, *Zidane* represents an attempt to make a film that belongs at once to the world of galleries and museums and to that of popular entertainment—of sports on TV, notably. But more might be said about the work's relation to certain issues of art. In his book *The World Viewed*, Stanley Cavell suggests that film by its very nature satisfies the "wish for the magical reproduction of the world by enabling us to view it unseen," a thought that has a close equivalent in Laura Mulvey's claim that mainstream narrative film portrays "a hermetically sealed world that unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience." Considerations such as these were why I was earlier led in "Art and Objecthood" to say that film escapes or bypasses the need to *overcome* theatricality that, I argued in that essay and others, lay at the heart of high-modernist painting and sculpture. Understood in this light, *Zidane's* inspired investigation of its protagonist's capacity for absorption under conditions of maximum exposure to being viewed, as well as of the modified and shifting meaning of absorption itself under such conditions, makes it, if not quite a modernist film, at the very least a film that is of the greatest interest to anyone engaged by these and related topics. □

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