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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

FALL PREVIEW

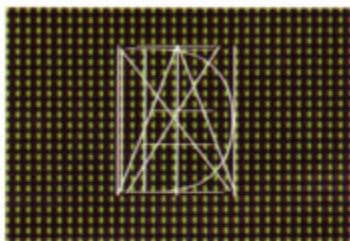
ZAHA HADID

PHILIPPE PARRENO AND
DOUGLAS GORDON'S "ZIDANE"



\$10.00





The Job Changes You

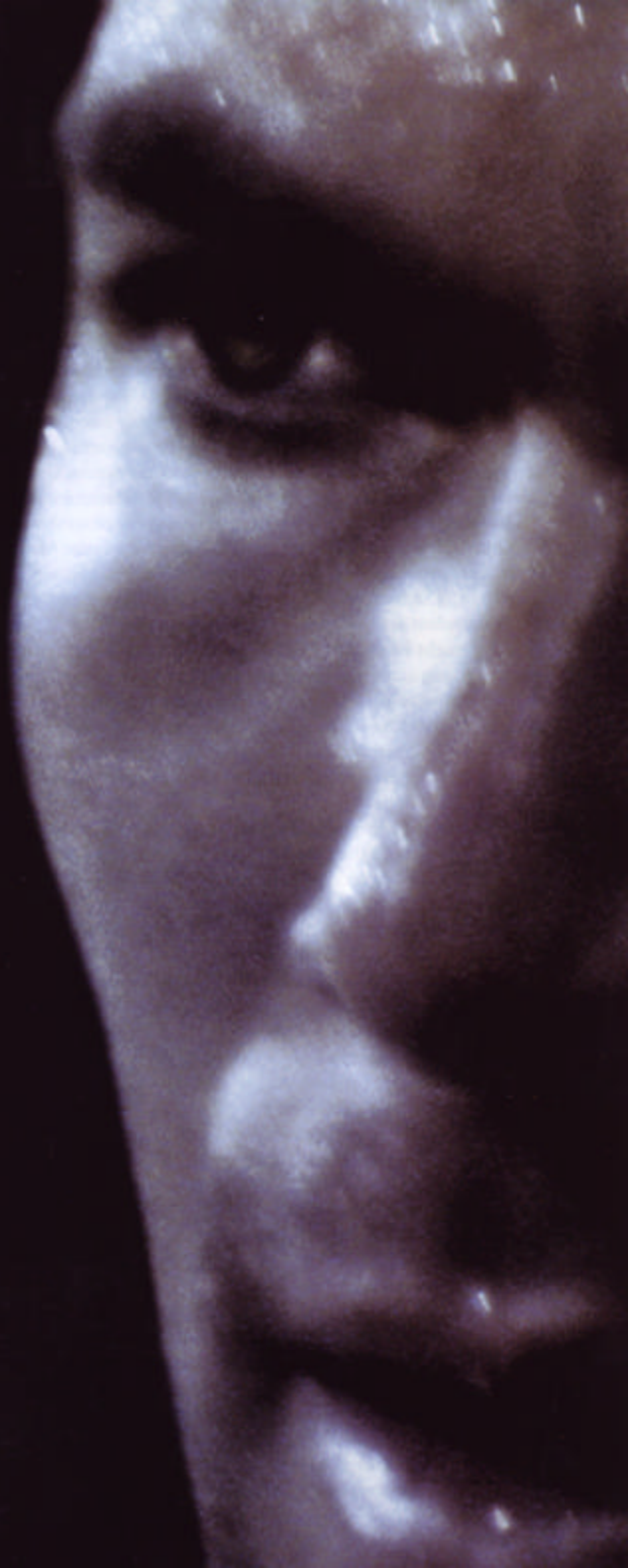
TIM GRIFFIN

A TEMPLATE FOR *Zidane, a 21st Century Portrait* may be found in the film's very first moments, when the opening kick of a championship football match in Madrid, Spain, appears on the grainy screen of a television monitor. Slowly the film's frame closes in on this broadcast image to focus on a single player, his figure increasingly vulnerable to televisual distortion until, finally, he dissolves into the very mechanism of his reproduction and dispersion—a grid of pixels. Paired in turn with an ambient sound track and the hushed tones of what seem to be French talk radio and the animated dispatches of Spanish play-by-play, this abstraction is the Zinedine Zidane of artists Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno: the individual immersed in his own mediation, never viewed apart from all his representations and attendant commentaries. Indeed, set for the duration of a single game at the intersection of seventeen cameras encircling the pitch, Zidane is, as a subject of portraiture, an evocation and accumulation of all these different topographies of the self. And if, as Pasolini once observed, "Cinema is the written language of reality," then the artists' treatment of their star might be perfectly encapsulated in the final graphic of the film's opening credits, courtesy of the design firm M/M Paris: Each letter of the player's name is superimposed, one atop the other, creating a figure that is at once totally present and also entirely obscure.

While keeping their man perpetually in the viewfinder, Gordon and Parreno nevertheless continually change channels throughout *Zidane*, shuttling among vantages and depths, cutting from television broadcasts of the match to footage recorded on their 35-mm and high-definition cameras. The vividness of the latter tool announces itself in the freezing clarity of the athlete's perspiration on-screen, which, matched by the deafening roar of the crowd, seems to proclaim that one could not possibly get any closer to this player or scrutinize him, or the conditions around him, more intently. (Such image quality may be increasingly common today, but its manifestation here in a sports-related work of art recalls the old formalist anecdote about Frank Stella, who considered the baseball player Ted Williams a genius because he could see the seams on a ninety-mile-an-hour fastball.) This is, in other words, as real as it gets. Or, more accurately, this is *more* real than it gets. The systemic rendering, where the artists navigate various perspectives on a single individual, seems an exercise after Pasolini's "Observations on the Sequence Shot." There the director imagines a film of the Kennedy assassination, in which the famous Zapruder footage would be complemented by cameras shooting from every possible angle: By coordinating a "series of sequence shots which would reproduce the real things and motions of that hour," Pasolini writes, "the existential subjectivity would give way to objectivity," which, as Pierre Huyghe has elaborated, would produce "a hologram image of a situation."

In the context of such total mediation, and at the prospect of such intrusiveness of reproduction in our encounters with the real, it is worthwhile to consider that Gordon—introducing his film this past summer during the Basel art fair—referred to *Zidane* as a portrait of "a man just doing his job." Here one gets a whiff of the twenty-first century. After all, Pasolini's dream has in a sense come to pass in today's sports arena. Whereas Barthes in the '50s called wrestlers epic players in a realm characterized by "the drenching and vertical quality of the flood of light," a football player such as Zidane now operates in the densest microcosm of contemporary post-Fordist society—a spectacularized workplace designed almost exclusively for sight; a landscape premised on immanent reproducibility, the likes of which entices, say, a communications giant like Rupert Murdoch to purchase Manchester United. Zidane's extraordinary physical and analytical ability places him in the center position, but it is the disseminated image of his play—the object of a billion people's trancelike gaze—that earns him a contract with Real Madrid to the tune of sixty-six million euros over four years. The game on the field, in other words, is also always a contest for mass attention. So it is impossible when looking at *Zidane*, its stadium setting glinting at you with advertising, not to become aware of the implications for portraiture in an age of design, when life is the stuff of style (unless, of course, the phenomenon is so familiar by now that you fail to see it). What should a portrait be when, as Hal Foster has succinctly observed, "Design seems to advance a new kind of narcissism, one that is all image and no interiority—an apotheosis of the subject that is also its potential disappearance"? The stadium seems a matchless *mise-en-scène*. Nowhere else is the intensely corporeal in such intimate proximity with the abstract, immaterial flows of commerce. Zidane's body is literally enmeshed within and against a backdrop of advertising: He passes a ball effortlessly as an M3 Power Razor by Gillette floats across a screen in the distance behind him; as exhaustion begins to register in his awkward gait, the sweat on his chest is soaked up by a jersey advertising Siemens mobile services.

It is a world radically evolved from the one that appears in the last film to have followed a single football player for an entire game, Hellmuth Costard's 1971 *Fussball wie noch nie* (Football Like Never Before), starring "George Best in the role of his life"—a tagline that contrasts markedly with Gordon and Parreno's suggestion that their portrait is emblematic of an entire century. Nevertheless, a brief comparison of the films is instructive. Although Costard may have pioneered the premise (using six cameras), today's hypertrophied mediasphere and technical means have merged to result in an altogether different kind of portraiture. Unlike the taut beginning of *Zidane*, for example, Costard's project opens casually with Best "offstage," during warm-ups before his Manchester United team's match against Coventry. But more significant for our relatively unmediated view of Best is the fact that he appears to be filmed from just three principal



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

perspectives: two at spectator level and one higher in the stands (where most television broadcasts of such events are shot today)—the last one privileged since a camera more readily covers the field from that vantage. The main consequence of this arrangement is that while Costard, like Gordon and Parreno, carves and dismantles the athlete before his camera—filling the screen with the image of a single arm held up against the sky or of those magical cleated feet, which all three filmmakers fetishize, lending their respective stars the aura of a bull pacing a ring—he is most often forced to display Best from head to toe. This perspective establishes a different relationship between the master and the overall game, as he clearly drifts with the tides, swirls, and eddies of activity on the field just visible at the periphery of the frame. And when Best runs to his mark, the camera sometimes has difficulty keeping up with him; whereas, for Zidane, there is no escape. There is always another camera, another angle. Best is, in other words, the center of our attention, but he is merely one part of the action. The same may be true of Zidane, but Gordon and Parreno are able to stay with him in extreme close-up, placing him at a remove from the action. Or more to the point, Zidane is the only action, his face filling the giant screen for long stretches.

Theorizations of the cinematic close-up date back to the very inception of film studies, but especially pertinent to *Zidane* is scholar Mary Anne Doane's recent distinction between the English/American and French/Russian schools of thought. The former dwells on the incredible proximity of the actor's face and its attendant sense of interiority, prompting the audience to wonder what a character might be thinking or feeling. (Recall Marlon Brando's recommendation to a young actor that he move his face as little as possible in close-ups, letting the audience do all the emotive work.) The latter school, on the other hand, reads the close-up less in terms of proximity than actual scale: the massive image on-screen and "the very possibility cinema has of representing disproportion, of interrogating and displacing realism," in Doane's words. (It is this quality that appealed to Eisenstein, for example, who saw in it a politically consequential space for critical distance.) In *Zidane*, Gordon and Parreno seem to brilliantly execute the French/Russian model, fragmenting action by using different perspectives and coexistent variances of mediation, capturing different tempos in single moments, expanding and contracting time, as when Zidane's feet fly across the ground beneath the slow arc of the ball aloft in the air. As if to confirm this sense of defamiliarization, Zidane himself—someone who is no doubt quite familiar with his on-screen image—recently observed that his close-up visage was odd to encounter, saying, "I think I am looking at my brother."

Yet the duo's filmic mastery makes it all the more confusing when they induce us to seek, or project, shadows of depth in the face on-screen. As the game wears on, single tones of sound are held at length to create an impression of melancholy or isolation about the man on film. (Though here the technique of adding ambient compositions is at once beautiful and obviously distinct from the game and player, thereby evidencing its own theatricality.) Elsewhere, texts inserted at the bottom of the frame feature Zidane's observation that time is fragmented during the game, suggesting to viewers that their experience of the film is his experience on the field, and so a form of empathetic realism. It must be said that the film seriously falters at halftime, when images and subtitles with the hokey globalist ring of a telecommunications commercial announce other events that occurred on the same day as the match in Madrid, ranging from a Bob Marley marionette performing in Ipanema to escalating violence in Iraq.



Perhaps the weakest moments in the film arise when subtitles feature anecdotes verging on cliché, as when the player recalls listening to broadcasts of football as a child. Zidane is recast, from figure on the field to psychological figment—an identity existing, it seems, to be identified with.

Perhaps the artists are aware of this oscillation, or are even toying with the notion of such insight (and of Zidane's consumability). Consider, for example, that Parreno has previously produced a number of works that, while never presented as portraiture per se, problematize the genre and its putative ability to provide some essential knowledge of a subject. In *Anna Sanders, l'histoire d'un sentiment*, 1997, Parreno and his sometime collaborator Pierre Huyghe abandon the literal individual and instead create a magazine comprising articles, advertisements, and design elements that denote a fictional woman's taste, in effect positioning identity as commercial demographic. And in his contribution to the Annlee project (another collaboration with Huyghe), titled *Anywhere Out of the World*, 2000, Parreno presents a digitally animated character's face in close-up: Purchased from the catalogue of a Japanese manga company, the virtual being is scripted by the artist to deconstruct itself before the viewer, declaring its own status as a product and short-circuiting notions of projection and identification while adding that its voice is actually that of a model who is most often employed to sell other products ("subject-less subject," indeed). Such forays into fiction offer an obvious critical foil for reading *Zidane* as a portrait executed in reality (or as a portrait of the fictions in our reality), signaling Parreno's long-standing interest in entertainment, as well as his post-Situationist desire (shared by Huyghe and others) to operate in the sphere of the mass media and branding. Ample opportunity for that crossover certainly abounds in the stadium of *Zidane*, where leisure's commodification is perhaps most resolved, where the very dynamic of play (or, conversely, doing a "job") has been marketed to the extreme. In this regard, the technical virtuosity of *Zidane* cannot be ignored, with sound engineered by the mixer for the remakes of *King Kong* and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*; a camera crew including two National Football League specialists under the direction of Darius Khondji, who is currently working with Wong Kar-wai; graphic design by the aforementioned M/M Paris; and a sound track performed by Mogwai.

Finally, how should one describe the nature of this fragile relationship, or inter-view, between image and viewer in *Zidane*? To what extent is the viewer absorbed into or invested in the subject? A second, editioned version for "art" audiences will soon be released, each copy pairing a DVD of the film with

For Zidane, there is no escape. There is always another camera, another angle.

"rush" footage from one of the seven-teen cameras trained on the player that night. The shifting between these two perspectives, as well as the smaller-scale format, would certainly offer viewers a kind of reflexive distance from the action on-screen. (If this is a critical space, however, it is also an exclusive luxury that borrows from the proven marketing strategy—and potential oxymoron—of the "unique edition.")

But perhaps such measures are ultimately beside the point, since the artists come upon a stroke of luck carrying with it a certain truth: The match, and film, ends—as would this year's World Cup championship—with an inscrutable act by Zidane (the kind of stuff that makes sports writers scramble for quotes from Camus). And so audiences leave even the theater with the inevitable realization that Zidane, whether image, symbol, or hero—all real aspects of his being—is also a man we can't pretend to know at all. Of course, that is his appeal. □

TIM GRIFFIN IS EDITOR OF ARTFORUM.

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

