

Maradona and Utopia: social dreaming and the left (foot)

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Abstract

This article discusses the representation of Diego Armando Maradona in popular culture from the perspective of utopian studies. Analysing the Netflix documentary series *Maradona in Mexico* (2019) and the film *Maradona by Kusturica* (dir. Emir Kusturica, 2008), in addition to selected examples from Latin American cultural production such as songs and TV programmes, the article maps the utopian tropes that are often associated with the figure of Maradona, generally represented as a saviour of working and popular sectors of society, and as an emancipatory political figure aligned with left-wing regimes in Latin America.

Keywords: Utopianism; Maradona; Emir Kusturica; Dorados de Sinaloa; Latin American 'Pink Tide'

Maradona and the utopian impulse

The film *Adiós querida luna* (Goodbye Dear Moon, 2004, dir. Fernando Spinner) is a science-fiction parody about an Argentinean space mission into outer space. In the year 2068, three astronauts are sent on a mission that, if successful, would destroy the Moon so as to alter the rotation axis of the planet. This, in turn, would revert climate change – according to a theory formulated by an Argentinean scientist. Only the government of Argentina believes in this scientific theory: the world's developed nations have categorically rejected its conclusions. However, the government decides to go ahead in secret, believing that if it managed to solve the catastrophic effects of climate change it would be hailed as a global hero and placed at the forefront of the international order. Ultimately, the enterprise is a failure: the spaceship loses its power and is left stranded, floating around in space.

With nothing to do except await instructions from the mission control base in the suburbs of Buenos Aires, the astronauts amble around the ship. At one moment, one of them decides to play a videogame. It is not a traditional game in which a screen acts as an interface: it brings up a holographic 3D image of footballer Diego Maradona, controlled by a joystick on a console, that shoots penalties against an equally holographic goalkeeper. The hologram, about 50cm tall, depicts a young Maradona (played by an actor), with unruly hair, who resembles the Maradona captured in early news footage when he was in his early teens. In this game, however, the player is wearing an Argentina kit with the number 10 on his back – thus combining the imagery of an innocent,

youthful Maradona with that of the symbol of the Argentina national team. This is reinforced by the sound: excerpts from the famous Víctor Hugo Morales commentary of Maradona's second goal against England in the Mexico 1986 World Cup.

This is a minor element in the film, but late into the story the holographic Maradona acquires a more relevant role. At this stage, an alien creature has boarded the ship. Although it adopts a human form, it is a monstrous being who at some point attacks one of the astronauts. The alien is powerful, but the man finds an ingenious form of defence: he activates the videogame and shoots the holographic balls not at the goalkeeper but at the alien, hitting him repeatedly until he falls to the floor, defeated. I have discussed the dynamics of this film and the symbolism of Maradona within its narrative elsewhere (Paz, 2014), but here I want to highlight the utopian resonances of these scene. Within a space mission that is intended to raise the international profile of Argentina from the periphery to the centre of the world-system, almost turning the country in the saviour of humanity, the proudly nationalistic astronauts' resort to a figure also considered a saviour across the globe, not only for entertainment but also for saving their own lives when faced with a threatening, powerful enemy. This is only one example among a extended list of similar representations.

The objective of this article is to discuss the figure of Maradona as a narrative trope in audio-visual texts from the perspective of utopian studies. By discussing a gamut of cultural texts such as popular songs, the film *Maradona by Kusturica* (Serbia/France/Spain, dir. Emir Kusturica, 2008), and the Netflix TV series *Maradona in Mexico* [*Maradona en Sinaloa*] (Angus Macqueen, 2019), I will trace the utopian resonances behind carefully constructed versions of Maradona that portray him as a key actor in different processes of social change and the search for a better, more equal society. It is important to clarify that the term utopian is being used here in its scholarly sense, as developed by a number of thinkers working in the field of utopian studies over the past decades. Utopia understood in this sense is not, as in common usage, a perfect but inexistent society, but the expression of a desire for a better way of being or living (Levitas, 2013, p. 3).

As proposed by Lyman Tower Sargent, there are three dimensions of utopianism, understood as an impulse towards social dreaming (that is, imagining and constructing better ways of social life): utopia as a narrative genre, utopia as social theory and praxis, and utopia as commune, or lived communal experiences. Maradona as an image, myth, and signifier operates along all these three spheres. Narratively, he has been represented in a number of literary and audio-visual texts, both fictional and documentary, that portray him as a saviour or as somebody engaged in an emancipatory struggle for a better society. In terms of political practice, Maradona chose to actively endorse specific political leaders and movements which favoured, at least in theory, those same views. Regarding the sphere of utopian communities, it can be seen in rituals and followers of the Church of Maradona. In this article I am concerned with the first form of utopian expression, which Fredric Jameson has defined as «an obscure yet omnipresent Utopian impulse finding its way to the surface in a variety of cover expressions and practices» (2007, p. 3).

As Lucy Sargisson (2014, p.8) puts it, «by asking ‘what’s wrong with our world?’ utopias perform a diagnostic function. They identify core problems with the world around them and these are often the cornerstones that prop up the entire society». The above does not deny the importance of utopia as a narrative genre (Vieira, 2010), and in fact in this chapter I discuss the utopian connotations in specific texts that offer narratives involving Maradona. Neither of these productions (documentaries, films, songs) could be defined solely as utopian, but they do present a strong affiliation with a utopian impulse that, according to Sargisson, contains «challenges to the roots of contemporary socio-economic and political systems» (2014, p. 8). Following Ernest Bloch, Tower Sargent (2010, p. 11) has called utopianism the “philosophy of hope”, and Levitas adds that «read in this way, utopia does not require the imaginative construction of whole other worlds. It occurs as an embedded element in a wide range of human practice and culture» (2013, p. 5).

Maradona’s exploits can be, and have been, read as a social and political metaphors along these lines. The most obvious examples are his performance in the Mexico 1986, particularly in the quarter-final match against England, and his career for SSC Napoli in Italy. The Argentina-England game became the scenario for the two most renowned goals that Maradona ever scored: the “Hand of God” goal and the “goal of the century”, in which he dribbled past five opposition players and the goalkeeper. As everybody familiar with Maradona knows, this victory was read as a vindication, as a symbolical revenge following Argentina’s defeat in the Falklands/Malvinas War in 1982 (cf. Alabarces, 2008; Sacheri, 2013; Galeano, 2017). Maradona himself would also favour this interpretation in his autobiography (Maradona, 2006). The second example of Maradona as utopian signifier is his career in Italy, helping Napoli to win the Serie A title for the first time in history, and standing for the underprivileged Italian south against the wealthier, industrialised north (Bifulco, 2014).

Maradonian Utopics On Screen

The Netflix documentary *Maradona in Mexico* draws on the same utopian connotations behind the two moments mentioned above (both acknowledged in the series’ opening credits), now mapped onto Maradona’s experience as the head coach of the team Dorados de Sinaloa. The club, based in the city of Culiacán and playing in the second division of Mexican football, hired Maradona as manager in September 2018, and the series charts how this experience played out for the fans, the club’s president, local journalists, and Maradona himself. The first scene of the first episode, which takes place before the credits, already casts Maradona in a utopian role. Alone in a dressing-room office, Maradona speaks before the camera that is recording him: «I want to improve football, for the good of the people»¹. That is to say, Maradona presents himself as the leader of a utopian mission: changing the lives of the people through football. Later on, in Episode 3, Maradona extends his utopian aspirations towards a socioeconomic sphere, albeit vaguely, with an appeal for the redistribution of wealth. The scene takes place at a

¹ All translations from the series are mine.

fundraising dinner in which he is asked to give a short speech. He states: «all of us, in our own homes, we have too much stuff. And we need to share some of this wealth».

Such phrases, as used by Maradona, could be read as examples of Bloch's notion of utopianism being «driven by wishful thinking» (Sargisson, 2014, p. 15), a stance that is directed towards imagining better social alternatives, although it is essential to note this does not mean that Maradona is a utopian thinker or activist (although many do see him in this light). The point is that utopianism permeates the series as a discourse conveyed through the aesthetic tools of audio-visual productions: camerawork, editing, and scoring. One should also acknowledge that documentaries, despite being non-fiction works, are not by any means representations of an objective truth. They are, indeed, carefully constructed audio-visual texts that convey specific ideas and views (Sounders, 2010; O'Rawe, 2016).

Maradona's statements could be taken as simple talk from a person who was particularly prone to making self-aggrandizing comments and eager to embrace the role of hero. But the connections between utopianism and Maradona go well beyond his own public declarations, and utopian tropes run through the entire series (seven episodes in total). A key one is related to the way Maradona's arrival in Culiacán is told. The shock produced within the world of Latin American football when the appointment of Maradona as the manager of Dorados was announced is well documented in the series. Not only fans but local football journalists and even the Dorados players were unsure whether these reports were serious and if Maradona was going to show up in Mexico. All of them, however, are shown eagerly expecting his arrival. But it should be remembered here that Maradona's career as a coach had been erratic and unsuccessful, mostly limited to short stints in clubs in Argentina in the mid-1990s and the UAE in the 2010s. His single high-profile appointment had been as manager of the Argentina national team in 2008-2010, with his contract being terminated at the end of the World Cup in South Africa. Argentina reached the quarterfinals in that tournament, which meant that Maradona either equalled or exceeded the World Cup performances of all national coaches since 1990, when Maradona himself was playing.² However, the team was thrashed 4-0 by Germany, a defeat made more resounding given the quantity of footballing stars that were playing for Argentina at the time (including Lionel Messi, Angel Di María, Gonzalo Higuaín, Javier Mascherano, Carlos Tévez, all of them at the peak of their careers).

That is to say, when he eventually arrived in the city of Culiacán to take charge of Dorados, Maradona did so with a poor track record as a manager. Moreover, he was taking charge of a team sitting at the bottom of the second division table. Despite this, he was regarded as a saviour by the team's fans, staff, and even the players, in scenes similar to those that took place when Maradona joined Napoli in 1984, also received as a form of messiah (Dini, 2014, p. 15). It is true that this time Maradona was coming to Dorados as

² Argentina lost in the Last-16 stage in USA 1994, managed by Alfio Basile, reached the quarterfinals managed by Daniel Passarella in France 1998, did not go past the group stage under Marcelo Bielsa in Korea-Japan 2002, and reached the quarterfinals in Germany 2006 coached by José Pekerman.

an established legend and one of the most iconic football players of all time. But this is a status Maradona had achieved through his extraordinary skills as a player, not a manager.

There are multiple ways in which Maradona's arrival as messiah is portrayed in the series. The opening-credits sequence is one of them. Visually, this short clip uses a combination of animated visuals and photographs to revisit the highlights of Maradona's career, among which the two that stand out the most are his World Cup victory in 1986 (emphasising a Mexican connection with Maradona) and his spell at Napoli: that is to say, the two defining moments in Maradona's career, those most connected to the utopian tropes that have defined the majority of the narrative and political discourses on the player, and the two that have contributed the most to turn him into a sporting myth.

It is also essential to consider the track that scores the credits. The song, by the Sinaloan band Evolución Quattro and titled "Diego Maradona llegó", combines rhythms from popular musical genres from Argentina (cuarteto) and Mexico (corrido). It is a celebration of Maradona's decision to coach Dorados. The chorus reads:

Y Diego, llegó
Llegó, Diego
Llegó para alegrar al fútbol
Y Diego, llegó
Llegó, Diego
Llegó para cambiar el fútbol
Y Diego Maradona llegó.³

Maradona is arriving (the repetition leaves no doubt) and he is doing it with a purpose: to bring joy to football, to change it for good. Maradona is not just returning to coaching, but also, as the song points out, "ha regresado donde alcanzó la gloria" [he has come back to the place where he reached glory], Mexico. The animated sequence shows Maradona parachuting off a plane to land softly amid the pitch of the Dorados's stadium, as if he was somebody engaged in a rescue mission.

Moreover, in the first episode, the first image following the credit sequence, right after the final two words of the song's chorus ('Maradona arrived'), is a 360-degree drone shot of a giant statue of Christ which sits atop the Sanctuary of Divine Mercy in Culiacán. The shot shows Christ, arms widely stretched, looking at the sprawling streets and buildings of the city, with the sun sitting low on the horizon in the background (it is unclear whether it is sunrise or sunset, but the audience has to conclude that this is the dawn of a new era). The association of Maradona with the symbols of Christianity should not be surprising. As Tower Sargent states, the Judeo-Christian tradition is «permeated with utopian imagery» (2010, p.86). Discussing the New Testament, he adds that «the message of equality, forgiveness, and loving strangers as well as neighbours provided the basis of much Western utopianism and many literary utopias» (2010). Indeed, the links between

³ "And Diego, he arrived/he arrived, Diego/He arrived to bring joy to football/ And Diego, he arrived/he arrived, Diego/He arrived to change football/And Diego Maradona llegó".

utopianism and Christianity continue to inform utopian ideas and practices, such as the Liberation Theology in Latin America (Moylan, 2020).

The song “Diego Maradona Llegó” is not, however, an isolated example. Although understudied by academics, there are clear and extended links between Maradona and music, particular regarding the player as the focus of songs across a wide range of musical genres. While many of these songs simply celebrate the footballing skills of Maradona, a good number of them are informed by utopianism in lyrics which, supported by positive and upbeat melodies, cast Maradona as a redeemer, as an agent for social change, and even as a saviour. Music, writes Levitas (2010), has the capacity to transport the listener into a better world. This capacity, she adds, «renders music utopian, for it is this better world and the attempt at and experience of its prefiguration that is the defining character of utopianism» (*ivi*, p. 216).

A well-known example of the utopian impulses in the Maradonian song is analysed by Eduardo Archetti when discussing “Dale alegría a mi corazón” [Bring Joy to my Heart], by Argentinean pop star Fito Páez. The lyrics state: «Y ya verás/Como se transforma el aire del lugar» [and you will see, how the air in this place is transformed]. Less poetic, and more overt, is the song “Maradó”, by Argentinean rock band Los Piojos, which includes the following lines: «Caen las tropas de su majestad, y cae el norte de la Italia rica/y el Papa dando vueltas no se explica, muerde la lengua de Joao Havelange» [Her Majesty’s troops fall down, the rich Italian North falls down/and the Pope cannot explain how, he bites the tongue of Joao Havelange]. Here, we encounter Maradona’s key enemies: England and Northern Italy (as the sites of football teams Maradona played against and defeated), and discursive targets such as the Pope and FIFA president Havelange – both powerful figures who were publicly attacked by Maradona on several occasions. Both songs (although Fito Paéz does not mention Maradona by name) present the footballer as a popular hero, with “Maradó” also portraying him as the weaker David facing powerful Goliaths, like the Queen of England and the Pope.

The Los Piojos song adds: «Cuando se caigan a pedazos las paredes de esta gran ciudad/cuando no queden en el aire más cenizas de lo que será, que será/Maradó, Maradó» [When the walls of this big city fall into pieces, when nothing remains in the air but the ashes of what will be, will be/Maradó, Maradó]. Maradona, the song hints, is thus the spearhead of a social revolution: even if this will come about through collective action amid rising poverty and hunger⁴, Maradona has shown the way, by demonstrating it is possible to stand up before powerful opponents, and indeed beat them.

Utopia between the individual and the collective

Dorados is a small team which, according to the Netflix documentary, was only founded in 2003. For most of its short history it has played in the Mexican second division (it also played three seasons in the first division, having obtained promotion on two occasions). When Maradona arrived, he found the team at the bottom of the table

⁴ The song was released in 1996, the beginning of a period of sharp economic decline in Argentina that would lead to a major socio-political crisis in December 2001.

and a group of players who lacked conviction and motivation. His presence generated a boost of interest in the club from international and national media (the shots of Maradona in a densely packed Culiacán airport, with dozens of photographers and cameramen confirm this), reinvigorated the small but hardened Dorados' fan base, and most importantly inspired the players, who managed to stage a sporting comeback and go on to mount a serious challenge for promotion.

Interestingly, the same cycle is repeated for the second part of tournament (the season is divided in two different competitions, Apertura and Clausura), after Maradona's health problems provide an added layer of drama. Having returned to Buenos Aires on holidays during the Christmas break, the footballer was admitted to hospital, and it was not clear whether he would be able to return to Culiacán to manage the team in the Clausura tournament. Eventually, Maradona recovers and makes it back to Culiacán a few games into the season. Once again, he finds the team at the bottom of the table, and once again the performance of the players improves, so that Dorados climbs all the way up to the play-off positions. The team reaches the final once again and loses by a small one-goal margin.

Although the ultimate happy ending (winning the final and getting promoted) is not attained, it is important to put things into perspective and recognising the significance of Maradona's achievements at Dorados. In two occasions he finds a team that is struggling in form and lacking in confidence, in a league in which he has never played or managed before, and on both occasions he is able to revert the situation, inspire the team, and lose promotion by narrow margins after having reached the final. Ultimately, not being able to get promoted by the smallest of differences (a goal suffered in extra time in the second leg of the final, playing away) should not be considered a failure.

An additional curiosity is that, if Maradona's presence revitalises the team of Dorados and their fans – those portrayed are all working class people who clearly struggle in an impoverished Mexican city, as the scenes that take place in the homes of some of these fans show – the series also shows that the utopian impulse can go both ways, and that the experience also has a positive effect on Maradona. It is evident that, when he arrives to take charge of the team, Maradona (57 years old at the time) is struggling with a variety of health problems, the most obvious of which is excess weight and what he describes as arthritis of the knees. He genuinely struggles to make even light physical movements such as climbing stairs or getting out of a car. He walks slowly, with his knees bent outwards.

On the one hand, this look contributes to emphasise the figure of Maradona as a martyr, placing the benefit of the team, the fans, and football in general before his own personal health, given that he still attends training sessions, delivers dressing room talks, and stands by the touchline during matches, shouting orders at the players and, more often than not, vocally confronting fourth officials and rival coaches. He is even portrayed, on more than one occasion, dancing in the dressing room celebrating victories, fostering a positive atmosphere amid the group. He does all of this despite the pain he has to endure, echoing important moments of this playing career, such as the Italy 1990 World Cup, which he played with a severely injured left ankle. But it is also evident, during the Clausura tournament in the second half of the year, that Maradona is feeling

better, physically and mentally. He seems happier, there are less confrontations with match officials and rival coaches during the games. While still struggling with his knees he seems to walk more smoothly, perhaps standing upwards more.

Maradona's improvement on a personal level is not, of course, a utopian signifier. As Moylan states, «settling for utopia in one person results in nothing but a tantalizing indulgence that is all too easily available for the capitalist disciplinary imagination». Utopias «must necessarily be collective» (Moylan, 2020, p. 5). However, it could be argued that the utopian praxis aimed at improving the conditions of a group of individuals in the city of Culiacán (not only the players but, as mentioned, the club backroom staff and fans) seems to take place in a dialectical manner, looping back and improving Maradona himself. The team, its confidence improved, stages a renewed challenge for promotion until kept alive until the very last minutes of the final game. The fans, lower-class people for whom following the team regularly, particularly for away matches, is clearly a struggle, have regained a sense of purpose and happiness. Local sports journalists and commentators based in Culiacán have found in Maradona an object for perpetual analysis and discussion.

Football and politics: the utopianism of the Patria Grande

One could argue, at this stage, that the utopian overtones outlined above are far too vague to be considered properly political. To an extent this is true, although the series contains several scenes in which the filmmakers venture into Culiacán and its suburbs, showing the impoverished surroundings of the city and hinting at the sharp inequalities that characterise Mexican society. It is also clear that for some people, such as the club president and the local journalists, Maradona's contribution goes beyond the realm of football, helping to improve the image of Culiacán, a city most often associated, in Mexico and globally, with drug cartels. Through his presence, and the attention it generates among the international press, the city's dark fame might be at least mitigated. But ultimately Maradona can only improve the conditions of Culiacán residents and Dorados' fans only symbolically, through the joy of watching their team play better football and challenge for promotion. None of this will change the socio-economic structures in which these people live.

At this stage, additional audio-visual cultural texts can be examined for a more political vision of Maradona as a force for social change. Two will be mentioned here: the opening sequence of the TV programme *De Zurda* (2014), and a scene from the documentary *Maradona by Kusturica* (2008), directed by the renowned filmmaker Emir Kusturica. The first case study refers to a TV programme broadcast daily during the 2014 World Cup in Brazil. It was hosted by Maradona and Victor Hugo Morales, and it consisted of football comments and analyses, mixed with interviews to assorted players and managers. It was broadcast by Telesur, the Venezuelan TV network founded by President Hugo Chávez in 2005, conceived as a Latin American media outlet that would voice the interests of Venezuela and its left-wing allies in the region. Maradona had been a committed supporter of Chávez and, following his death, the incoming president Nicolás Maduro

also cultivated close relations with the footballer. The programme's title, *De Zurda*, can be loosely translated into English as «with the left» (BBC, 2014)⁵.

The opening sequence of *De Zurda* is, like that of *Maradona in Mexico*, a montage that shows the connections between Maradona, music, and utopianism. It is essentially a video clip of a song specially composed for the show, under the same title. It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of the singers who perform it: Gustavo Santaolalla, the song's composer, an Argentinean musician who works with a variety of musical genres (winner of two Academy Awards in the category of Best Original Score⁶); Julieta Venegas, an extremely popular Mexican singer; the Colombian hip-hop group ChocQuib Town, and Gustavo Cordera, founder of the Argentinean rock band Bersuit Vergarabat. The song, a lively mix of cumbia and pop, can be considered a hymn to the idea of *patria grande* [Great Fatherland], a notion that refers to the united community of Latin American nations, closely connected on the basis of their common colonial past and the set of social problems that they presently share. The term tends to be used across the wide spectrum of leftists and socialist parties and movements in the region.

The sequence consists of an edited clip that shows the performers singing before a microphone, groups of mostly young lads playing football on streets or beaches, footage from football games (including of course the ubiquitous goal of Maradona against England) and some additional images of Maradona. The opening shot, which shows a strip of beach, the sea, and the sky, already contains some utopian hints, through the association of the seaside with nature and freedom. Two titles attempt to locate the image in space and time, telling the audience that the date is June 2014, and the place is "Latin America." The date is the month in which the World Cup would begin in Brazil. But with thousands of miles of coast, the inscription does little in terms of geographically locating the place. This, however, is precisely the point: it is Latin America, one single region. The presence of musicians of European and African descent, and their different national accents, connote the ethnical variety that characterises Latin America.

At first the lyrics celebrate the new tournament, and the fact that it is held in Latin America. The sense of importance grows bigger with the lines: «¡Estamos haciendo historia en América Latina! Cuando el mundo está al revés, mejor pegarle de zurda» [We are making history in Latin America! When the world is upside down, it's best to strike it with the left]. This is an evident reference to the "pink tide" – the wave of left-wing governments that spread throughout Latin America in the early 21st century, including those of Chávez and Maduro in Venezuela, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, Evo Morales in Argentina, Inácio 'Lula' Da Silva in Brazil, and Néstor and Cristina Kirchner in Argentina among others (cf. Lievesley and Ludlam, 2009; Ellner, 2019). Analysing the specificities and complexities of this aggregate of political movements exceeds the scope of this article. The relevant point for the present discussion is the utopian ideal that informed

⁵ «With the left» would work in the sense of doing something, like kicking a ball, with the left foot. Being *zurdo* o *zurda* would mean somebody who is left-handed, but also, colloquially, somebody who sympathises with the left as a political ideology.

⁶ Santaolalla won the prize on consecutive occasions for his scores for the films *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005) and *Babel* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2006).

this united front of administrations that defined themselves as the enemies of a postcolonial order of globalised capital, and whose aim was improving the socioeconomic realities of a region characterised by sharp inequality and widespread poverty. From this perspective, the ‘pink tide’ governments would spearhead a series of reforms that would lead to a fully independent, interconnected, and prosperous Latin America. The neoliberal world order, led by the US, is precisely what is “upside down” and has to be hit from the left, the song implies.

The final verses read: «El mundial hoy mira al sur, a la izquierda del planeta/todos con un ideal, con caño, toque y gambeta/sueños en forma de gol y el pueblo como bandera/¡Hoy celebramos la copa, con la Patria Grande entera!» [Today the World Cup looks south at the left of the planet/all of us with an ideal of nutmegs, passes, and dribbles/dreams in the forms of goals and the people as symbol/Today we celebrate the cup, among the entire Great Fatherland]. The global south, firmly situated in the left, presents a united front that will lead to beauty and skills on the pitch, but that is also supported by the people, joined together under the ideal of the *Patria Grande*.

This ideal, advocated by Maradona, features prominently in another cultural product involving the footballer: the documentary *Maradona by Kusturica*. The film, as Marcus Free (2014, p. 208) indicates, «explores Maradona’s notionally Christlike symbolism as a potentially redemptive, revolutionary figure for the geopolitical South». Shot over a two-year period in which Kusturica meets Maradona, interviews him, and follows him around with a camera on several occasions, the film is organised around certain structuring moments: they include trips to Naples and the director’s own country, Serbia; footage from Maradona’s playing career; a long interview between player and filmmaker; and the rituals performed by the Church of Maradona. Arguably the most colourful part of the film is devoted to the protests against President George W. Bush and the US agenda during the IV Summit of the Americas.

The summit was hosted in Argentina in November 2005, in the coastal city of Mar del Plata (about 400km south of Buenos Aires). It was attended by the heads of state of all nations in South and North America, and many from Central America and the Caribbean. The summit turned out to be a chaotic event since the leaders participating had sharp disagreements regarding the agenda to be discussed, particularly in relation to the FTAA (Free Trade Area of the Americas - ALCA in Spanish), a free trade agreement proposed by the US and favoured by other countries, such as Canada and Mexico, which had strong opposition from most countries in South America (Marridoriaga, 2005; New York Times, 2005).

Against this background, a “counter-summit” that would denounce the US agenda and the presence of Bush was planned for the same time and place. One of the main organisers was Miguel Bonasso, a left-wing journalist and politician, but he secured the support of regional leaders such as Chávez and Bolivian President Evo Morales, and also of Maradona. The organisers travelled from Buenos Aires to Mar del Plata by train, in a trip that became known as *Tren del Alba* [Dawn Train]⁷ (Russo, 2005; Guardian, 2005).

⁷ Alba, literally ‘dawn’ in Spanish, acts both as pun and allusion to ALCA (the acronym that stands for Free Trade Area of the Americas).

Travelling in the train, among hundreds of protesters, were a number of renowned figures from the world of culture (actors, singers), Bonasso, Morales, and, most notably, Maradona (followed by Kusturica and his crew). For them, the FTAA was simply an excuse to extend neoliberal policies across the region, to the benefit of the US and detriment of South American nations. Once in Mar del Plata, thousands of people gathered at the city stadium, where the regional leaders delivered speeches. Maradona here does not take centre stage, but upon Chávez's invitation, he approaches the main stand, wearing a T-shirt with photo of George W. Bush and the caption "War Criminal", and offers a few words advocating peaceful but firm protests aimed at «restoring our dignity» and calling to defend «what is ours» in the face of the US pressures for the FTTA treaty to be signed.

In the film, the train scenes are shot with a hand-held camera, offering shaky and fluid takes (understandable amid the train movement and the huge crowds) that convey a sense of realism and urgency to the images. As usual, Maradona is surrounded by masses of fans, photographers, and police escorts. In the voice-over narration, Kusturica, a true utopian, reflects that the train is not just headed for Mar del Plata, but towards better times in Latin America. He had already included footage of Maradona meeting Fidel Castro, and expressing his admiration for the Cuban leader. Interviewed by one of the many journalists covering the event, Kusturica explains that people need somebody to lead them because the leaders of the world today, they are not good enough. Naturally, he thinks that Maradona could be that leader. In this case, then, Maradona would not just be improving football, but the lives of millions through an emancipatory project that would counter the inequalities produced under by the current global order.

Conclusion

None of the texts discussed above explore the potential contradictions that can be found in Maradona. It is clear that readings that problematise, if not directly refute, many of the assumptions offered in these works would be possible. Maradona's behaviour often contradicted his own stances and positions, or those that are conveyed in cultural texts about him. His role in defence of the powerless and marginalised is perhaps at odds with his endorsement of Middle-East regimes and with his treatment of women. In fact, recent controversies in the media about his relationships with women show an aspect of his life that is highly questionable from a moral perspective (if not directly unlawful). Moreover, the films and texts mentioned above erase any inconsistencies that may exist in Maradona or in the positions that are being advocated. One example would be the controversy surrounding the high salary that Maradona was supposedly paid for the TV show *De Zurda*, exacerbated by, at the time, increasing economic problems that affected Venezuela and other countries that financed Telesur (*Cronista*, 2014, BBC, 2017). Others could be that his anti-globalisation position has not prevented him from making extremely lucrative deals across the world, or that he has endorsed and supported regimes with questionable human rights records, from Cuba to Belarus.

The images and meanings surrounding the figure of Maradona, however, cannot be easily controlled or directed, even if many have tried to manipulate them. Despite the biographical details of Maradona the man, and the moral questions that his actions raise, Maradona the myth can still continue to be a signifier imbued with utopian tropes. In the texts discussed in this article, the utopian impulse associated with Maradona do not go beyond a very early stage, the one Bloch would define as wishful thinking (or abstract utopia), which simply refers to an unfinished, vague set of ideals imagining a better world. The legacy of the “pink tide” governments, which ultimately failed to alleviate the conditions in which millions of Latin Americans live in the long term, is an example of the complexities of progressing into a more advanced utopian stage of building a concrete, improved society. As the fictional astronauts in *Adiós Querida Luna* show, Maradona (and its representations), can be a lot more than innocent entertainment. When the Maradona hologram can defeat a powerful alien, we enter a diffuse territory that blurs the boundaries between representation and praxis, and between spectacle and the real. According to Alabarces, Maradona has become an empty signifier, one that can be filled by whoever is trying to produce meaning through his figure (2008, p. 134). Perhaps, then, it is a question of the right utopian project coming along to provide an anchor to the Maradona signifier, one that could mobilise the people towards a genuine and truly inclusive utopia.

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