

## Maradona's Ghosts and Co.: Narrating Maradona in Argentine Football Literature

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.6093/2532-6732/8970>

### Abstract

When Roberto Santoro wrote *Literatura de la pelota* (1971) little did he imagine that this book, written from the margins of Argentine literature, would open a new literary path for a considerable number of 'football writers' in Argentina and Latin America. In the five decades that followed this seminal work, this genre has continued to grow and diversify. However, one key thematic element that has been periodically revisited in the Argentine context is that of the mythical concept of the *pibe* as a central reservoir of Argentine footballing identity and the figure of Maradona as its most perfect incarnation. This essay will attempt to, on the one hand, describe and illustrate the *pibe-Maradona* connection in the context of Argentine Football Fiction and on the other, explain the pivotal role of Maradona and that of his phantasmatic presence as fundamental components to approach this literary subgenre in the Argentine context.

**Keywords:** Argentine Football Literature; The pibe Myth; Narrative Construction; Phantasmatic Maradona

### Introduction

Diego Armando Maradona played his last match as a professional on October 25<sup>th</sup>, 1997, wearing the colors of Boca Juniors, which, that day, defeated their archrivals River Plate by a score of 2-1. A slow, aging and overweight Maradona did not play well and was substituted at halftime by the (then) young and promising Juan Román Riquelme, a player later considered to be a sort of heir—one of many more to come—to Diego's crown as the national *pibe*. Only 5 days later, precisely on his 37th birthday (Christmas day in the Maradonian church's calendar), the *golden pibe* announced his retirement from professional football.

The void left by his absence was going to prove too big to fill: Maradona was not only the last Argentine (football) hero but also probably the most "real" and authentic of them all. He was not only an erratic individual, a unique and inimitable genius touched (by his own admission) by God's grace, but also the most potent incarnation and re-actualization of Argentine football's mythical narratives: he was not like mythical *pibes*, he was "the" mythical *pibe*. As Eduardo Archetti (1997) explains: "Maradona is the perfect product of a mythical tradition and is put historically into motion through the emotional contract with the worshippers. The cult of Maradona is the worship of a tradition" (p.49).

This is a tradition started from the margins of Argentine culture, from sport magazines like the immensely popular *El Gráfico* where writers such as Borocotó and Chantecler constructed a narrative that made sense of this British invention of football by capturing and reorganizing its significance around the figure of humble kids (*pibes*) playing in *potreros* (paddocks). The figure of the *pibe* is presented as that of a trickster who adds beauty, freedom, indocility and ingenuity to this sport by using dribble (or *gambeta*) as their main weapon, turning scarcity into excess. When we talk about scarcity, we refer to the humble origins of the participants of *potrero* football which, for instance, would play with a rag ball or anything resembling a ball, but also to the lack of space present in these types of informal settings where there could be up to twenty players per team. According to this narrative, the traditional dribbling style was born out of these circumstances, where the ball became a precious object that players needed to treasure and retain for as long as possible.

In these narrative constructions, *pibes* invariably spring out of the neglected and deprived suburbs—a liminal space in-between the city and the countryside— where buildings are scarce and vacant lots or *potreros* abound. *Potreros* function narratively in two ways: first, they are the inevitable breeding ground for the archetypical Argentine football player so much so that the advance of the city over these liminal spaces will be blamed (especially by the sports media) for the always imminent disappearance of creative players in the Argentine context; second, at the margins of the nationalist movement of *gauchismo/criollismo* but parallel to it, *potreros* work as the space where immigrants and their sons—with the exception of the British— will become Argentinian on a football field (this sport working as a powerful cultural machine capable of assimilating immigrants' threatening heterogeneity), creating a national style— referred to as “our way” or “la nuestra”— that's hybrid, open and, at the same time, exclusive (Archetti, 1999, p.71). On the other hand, the British (later simplified as the English), as Pablo Alabarces affirms, become a *significant other* (2008, p.46), the perfect opposite without which the construction of such a strong national footballing narrative could not have been possible.

Maradona's retirement from the football fields not only represented a crisis for Argentinians' ongoing construction of a national football identity but also coincided with the beginning of a social and economic decline that would reach its most dramatic point in the year 2001. By 1997, Argentina was two years into the second term of Carlos Menem's neoliberal government and the dream of belonging to the select group of nations enjoying the privileges of the so-called “First World” (thanks in part to a delirious peso-dollar peg) was starting to show its uglier face—a consistent trade deficit, the shutdown of factories, the growth of economy's informal sector— and slowly but surely turning into what was going to end up being 2001's full scale nightmare.

Moreover, the 1990s brought about a serious deterioration and, in some cases, almost the entire dissolution of some of the institutions in charge of producing a sense of “Argentineity”, specifically the State and along with it the public school system and the family. In this context, the media (especially the TV) took over the role of main producer of narratives and football became one of its most successful products and effective social binders. As Beatriz Sarlo (1998) affirms football is not the nation, but can become its easy, universal and pulsatile substitute (p.3).

It was from this decade on that Argentine society experienced a process of complete footballization fueled, in big part, by this sport's strong and constant media presence. Several sport channels (with football as its central product) were born: among them Cable Sport (VCC) and PSN, TyC Sports, ESPN Latinoamérica, America Sports, Fox Sports, etc. Argentine radio saw the launch of Radio La Red (also in the highly symbolic year of 1997), a TyC Sports' owned station entirely dedicated to sports. In addition, *Olé*, Argentina's first sport newspaper (with approximately 70 % of its pages reserved to football), appeared in 1996 and thanks to the use of an innovative visual design, journalistic informal style and street-like jargon revolutionized the way of doing sport journalism in Argentina.

Finally, the ties between sports (in general) and football (in particular) and politics became stronger than ever. President Menem may have not held the title of the country's "first sportsman" (that honor was reserved to Juan Perón) but was, in fact, the first and only head of state to fulfill his own "sueño del pibe" (boy's dream) and—on July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1989—play the whole 90 minutes of a football match for the national team. Needless to say, Maradona (a year later appointed by Menem as Argentina's sporting ambassador) was also there, as was the TV to carry the images of this game to the rest of the nation and the incredulous world. At this point, there was no way of denying the obvious profitability as well as the enormous visibility and relevance of football within Argentine society. The worst fears of intellectuals such as Carriego, Martínez Estrada or Sebrelí were realized: the much-anticipated football "invasion" had taken place leaving no corner of Argentine culture untouched or indifferent to it.

In this context of hiper-footballization, the proliferation of literary texts that revolved around this sport seemed almost logical. Even though there were writers such as Osvaldo Soriano and Roberto Fontanarrosa who regularly published stories about/with football as a central part of them, it was not going to be until the decade of 1990 that these football short stories would be given a special attention thanks mainly to the editing of compilations that gathered them in single volumes: this is the case of Soriano's *Cuentos de los años felices* (1993) and *Memorias del Míster Peregrino Fernández y otros relatos de fútbol* (1998) (followed by *Arqueros, ilusionistas y goleadores* in 2006) and Fontanarrosa's *Puro Fútbol* (2000). This decade will also see the return of two of the forerunners of football literature as are Eduardo Galeano and Juan José Sebrelí. The former with the best-seller *Fútbol a sol y a sombra* (1995) where he attempts to rescue the poetic, beautiful and ludic elements of the game in times of football's commodification and hyper-professionalism (in a romantic gesture that will be repeated by many of the post-1990s' Argentine football writers) and the latter with his essay *La era del fútbol* (1998) where he continues with his attack on a sport and cultural phenomenon that he sees as a reservoir of fanaticism, authoritarianism and racism among other evils.

When searching for an explanation for this renewed interest in football as a literary subject, it would be possible, but probably very naïve, to say that the attention and space given to football literature in Argentina from the mid-1990s onwards was the sole result of the democratization of the Argentine literary circles that were eager to hear the voices of a growing number of "popular" writers, among them many former/current sport journalists who were starting to produce texts centered on 'the beautiful game'. However, it would be equally shortsighted to reduce this phenomenon exclusively to cold market variables. It is

true, new “football” authors like Eduardo Sacheri have a numerous readership, but that could also be said of Fontanarrosa and Soriano in the seemingly distant 1980s. What is more, the publishing house Ediciones al Arco, responsible for editing many of the new football fiction writers, remains—after almost twenty years and more than one-hundred titles later—as small, humble, and peripheral as it was in its beginnings in the year 2003.

What could be affirmed though, is that the growth of football’s transversal presence and relevance in Argentine society opened the doors for new critical approaches to this phenomenon (especially from the social sciences) and established its legitimacy as an object of studies. Simultaneously, the increasing number of writers who started including football as part of their fictional universes helped dispel (in part) the antiquated notion that this was a thematic area not worth exploring by more “serious” literature. More than twenty years later, when reflecting about this football “explosion”, Pablo Alabarces (2014) concludes:

...la explosión futbolística de los años noventa, el crecimiento descomunal del peso del deporte como mercancía mediática (...) permitió otra configuración del campo. En lo académico, se dio una mayor visibilidad y legitimidad a los estudios sociales del deporte y el fútbol latinoamericanos (...). En lo literario, apareció una profusión de compilaciones de crónicas, memorias y biografías —deudoras de la práctica periodística, que se volcaba al libro como forma de colonizar un espacio de una supuesta legitimidad mayor a la del periódico—; pero también narraciones, ficcionales o semificcionales, deudoras de la serie que inaugurara el inglés Nick Hornby con *Fever Pitch*... (Alabarces, 2014, p. 205)

Without trying to diminish the impact that Hornby’s acclaimed *Fever Pitch* and the works of the group of ensuing British *socceratti* may have had in the Argentine football literary scene, it can be confidently said Argentina had its own models and precursors in writers such as Fontanarrosa and Soriano. Furthermore, Galeano’s *Fútbol a sol y a sombra* marked a significant milestone in the recent history of football literature in Latin America as it did in Argentina the publishing of *Cuentos de fútbol argentino*, a book compiled by Fontanarrosa and published by Editorial Alfaguara in the momentous year of 1997. With the exception of Galeano’s *Su majestad el fútbol* (1968), Roberto Santoro’s seminal, pioneering but obscure *Literatura de la pelota* (1971) and Jorge Valdano’s Hispano-American compilation *Cuentos de fútbol* (also published by Alfaguara in Spain in 1995), there were no other compilations that brought to light the presence of football fiction within the field of Argentine literature.

### **The Maradona Factor in Argentine Football Literature: narrating the definite *pibe***

Cuando Maradona, fue por fin, expulsado del Mundial del 94, las canchas de fútbol perdieron a su rebelde más clamoroso. Y también perdieron a un jugador fantástico. Maradona es incontrolable cuando habla, pero mucho más cuando juega (...) En el frígido fútbol de fin de siglo, que exige ganar y prohíbe gozar, este hombre es uno de los pocos que demuestra que la fantasía puede también ser eficaz. (Galeano, 2006, p. 236)

In these lines, Eduardo Galeano (2006) summarizes part of the appeal of the stocky Argentinian number 10, that is, basically what we presented as the main features of *pibes*: his rebelliousness and his magical creativity. What is more, Maradona—Galeano continues—was not only a rebel within the football field, standing for players’ rights and speaking to power. Despite Galeano’s known tendency towards romanticism and Maradona’s own contradictory tendencies (for instance, defying FIFA and supporting Menem’s neoliberal government in the same decade), the weight, relevance and fertility of this player’s figure (both metaphorically and literally) cannot be denied, and this is what transforms him into a potent star around which many football fiction writers will gravitate.

This is already evident in 1997’s anthology *Cuentos de fútbol argentino*, where José Pablo Feinmann (“Dieguito”), Guillermo Saccomanno (“Transito”) and Rodrigo Fresán (“Final”) arrange their stories around the Maradona persona/myth. While Fresán presents the magical feats of Diego in Mexico as both background noise and curative treatment for his recent divorce, Feinmann and Saccomanno focus on the off-the-field football star, as shown and consumed on TV (Feinmann) and on the street posters of an infamous anti-drug campaign (1996’s “Sol sin Droga”) during Menem’s government.

Maradona is presented in these stories as a phantasmatic and mediated individual, either as a via-satellite miracle-maker equally capable of mesmerizing an intellectual with no previous football interest or experience (in Fresán’s “Final”), an eight-year-old doll-loving “idiot” (in Feinmann’s “Dieguito”) or as a time-frozen and multiplied smiling face captured and reproduced in a million posters invading the streets of Buenos Aires (in Saccomanno’s “Transito”). Interestingly, the only material appearance of the flesh and bone Maradona occurs when he is already presumably dead, when Dieguito (the idiot in Feinmann’s story) finds his idol’s deteriorated body, moments after being crushed by a train when trying to cross the railways with his expensive car while the barriers were down (the ineffable *pibe* fulfilling his mythical destiny by dying while attempting to break the law). Feinmann’s metaphor is strong and it can serve to explain Diego’s centrality in the realm of Argentine football literature: now that the national hero is down, it is time for us (the football idiots?) to try to re-assemble his figure. This is exactly what young Dieguito struggles to do in a literal way by carrying Maradona’s body to his house’s attic and—using his doll-maker expertise—attempting to sew him back to life: in his own gerund-ridden speech “Dieguito armando Maradona” (Dieguito assembling Maradona).

Trying to define the figure of Diego Maradona can be a challenging task. He is pure excessiveness, the nodal point of most contemporary football narratives in Argentina, exactly at the center of it, but also escaping all categories with a creativeness that exceeds that of his bodily performances within a football field. Maradona is much more than an incredibly gifted left foot; he is also a voice: a very resounding one<sup>1</sup>. A voice in country full of voices

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<sup>1</sup> In his autobiography, *Yo soy el Diego de la gente*, Maradona acknowledges and embraces this characterization: “Yo soy la voz de los sin voz, la voz de mucha gente que se siente representada por mí, yo tengo un micrófono delante y ellos en su puta vida podrán tenerlo” (p.133).

where arguing and debating are national pastimes, and verbally dissecting Diego's chaotic and unique life became a habit. Written in 1995, read for the first time in Alejandro Apo's radio show "Todo con afecto" in 1996<sup>2</sup> and published in 2000's *Esperándolo a Tito* and 2013's anthology *La vida que pensamos*, Eduardo Sacheri's "Me van a tener que disculpar" is both a diatribe against the fanatical admirers as well as the implacable detractors of the legendary number ten, as well as an attempt to rationally articulate the narrator's own suspension of all critical judgment and ethical coherence when dealing with Maradona's figure.

The author's exceptional treatment of Maradona stems from a debt he feels he has with the emblematic football player. A debt that originated on June 22<sup>nd</sup> 1986, in a torrid Mexican midday, a day in which Maradona entered immortality and ultimately became Argentina's *pibe* for the rest of eternity by scoring 20<sup>th</sup> century's most beautiful and symbolically charged goal (or we should say, pair of goals) against the English team. As the narrator explains, the political resonance of this match was obvious: the Falklands/Malvinas war had taken place only four years earlier and the pain and the frustration were still fresh in the minds of most Argentinians. In this context, following Michael Billig's (1995) concept, something as banal as football becomes a much more emotionally charged territory, a potent communal channel of expression:

No es un partido. Mejor dicho: no es solo un partido. Hay algo más. Hay mucha rabia, y mucho dolor, y mucha frustración acumuladas en todos esos tipos que miran la tele. Son emociones que no nacieron por el fútbol. Nacieron en otro lado. En un sitio mucho más terrible, mucho más hostil, mucho más irrevocable. Pero a nosotros, a los de acá, no nos cabe otra que contestar en una cancha... (Sacheri, 2013, p.55)

It is precisely in the midst of this rarified scenario that "he" (Sacheri, the same as Hernán Casciari almost twenty years later, does not need to mention Maradona by name) humiliates the English "big Other", first by stealing from them, using his hand—or that of "God"—illegally (in the realm of professional football, but almost logically in the world of short,

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<sup>2</sup> From 1995, Apo's show took over Saturday's *siesta* hours and filled it with music, interviews, anecdotes and, crucially, football literature. The oral register dominating large part of football short stories as well as its reduced extension made them perfect for this medium. Apo not only used his show to revisit and promote the work of published writers such as Soriano, Sasurain or Fontanarrosa, but also provided an invaluable space for unpublished ones who could send their work for Alejandro to read in his program. The most remarkable of these previously unpublished authors was Eduardo Sacheri, a history teacher who in 1996 sent Apo three short stories ("Me van a tener que disculpar", "De chilena" and "Esperándolo a Tito") that earned him immediate recognition among listeners and in turn, helped fuel his career as a writer.

mischievous *pibes*<sup>3</sup>) to score the match's first goal, to later forever embarrass them by single-handedly dribbling past half the English team before sending the ball to the net. As he narrates Maradona's second goal, Sacheri does not shy away from employing the notion of football as a metaphor of war, in this case, a little, insignificant but unforgettable war won by an artist dancing to the idiosyncratic (thus hardly comprehensible for "the others") music of Argentine *gambetas*:

Arranca desde el medio, desde su campo (...) Y aunque va de azul, va con la bandera. La lleva en la mano, aunque nadie la vea. Empieza a desparramarlos para siempre. Y los va liquidando uno por uno, moviéndose al calor de una música que ellos, pobres giles, no entienden. (Sacheri, 213, p.56)

These same historic *gambetas* are referred by Hernán Casciari (in his short story "10.6 segundos") as something mystical while Maradona— simply mentioned in the story as "the player" or "the Argentine player"— is presented as a ball sorcerer, a privileged knower of the secret geometry of dribbling, someone capable of—through his intimate contact with the ball as a sacred sphere—seeing the infinite universe from his own leathered aleph, someone able to suspend time and belief for the duration of his fleeting miracle. A miracle that perfectly aligns with the Argentine football narrative tradition and serves to confirm the long-awaited arrival of the definite *pibe*.

As we observe, it can prove difficult for Argentine football writers to abstain from approaching the figure of Maradona from an emotional realm. This should come as no surprise, however, as it confirms and reinforces Eduardo Archetti's theory (1997) that bases and explains not just the popularity of the *pibe* from Villa Fiorito, but also the intensity and the extent of the devotion for this football player on his remarkable capacity of producing collective joy:

The fond remembrance of his achievements however does not explain his almost sacred status and cult in Argentina. (...) His possession of the human gift of producing and giving joy lies behind his incomparable cult. Being the cause of individual feelings of joy and enabling a collective expression is Maradona's precious secret, a very simple one indeed. (Archetti, Armstrong & Giulianotti, 1997, p. 44)

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<sup>3</sup> Argentine *pibes*' adoption of this alternative set of rules, codes and practices among which we find the favoring of joy, aesthetic pleasure and creativity over practicality and systematicity, and the use of tricks and simulation to escape the laws of the game can be read as, both, a subversive and a conservative element. Subversive in the way Josefina Ludmer (1988, p.210) understands it in Hernández's Martín Fierro—the central work of *gauchesca* literature— where an autonomous and organic oral code exists side by side with the written law of the land and sometimes supplants it; conservative when this alternative code becomes a nostalgic imposition, the only possible way of playing the game the "Argentine way". Football literature and sport journalism in Argentina will move back and forth, inhabiting the tension between these extremes.

## Diego Maradona and the Power of Dreams: A Star to Guide Us through Darkness

This unique joy inducing capacity is highlighted by another one of Casciari's stories "Vivir para contarlo (Carta a Diego)", a text originally published in 2004 as part of the blognovel *Más respeto que soy tu madre* at a critical time in Maradona's life when he was on the brink of death for the second time in four years. In this text Casciari employs the narrative voice of a housewife (Mirta Bertotti) to help explain Argentinians' adoration for Maradona by acknowledging Diego as the main source of happiness for her family and her sad, neglected and divided country in the past twenty years<sup>4</sup>: "Me dan ganas de explicarle al mundo qué país es este, qué pocas alegrías hemos tenido en los últimos veinte años, y que de esas pocas, casi todas vinieron con tu firma" (Casciari, pp. 204-205). The author touches on Diego's particular loquacity when the narrator confesses her dislike for him due to his arrogance and foul-mouthedness while at the same time proving that his excessiveness exceeds the realm of football, impacting the lives of those, like Mirta, who do not care about the sport.

Another important point this story makes is that of the role of football in general and Maradona in particular as a sentimental trigger for Argentine men. The narrator comments that Maradona helped her realize that her husband was able to let his emotions flow (and that he had any) as two of the three times she saw him cry were because of Diego. This is another recurring element in Argentine football literature, where we see (mostly male) characters use the sport as a safe channel for the expression and communication of intimate feelings. Mariano Siskind (2012) describes this as the "socio-affective significance" of football which he presents as a "proven global fact". Football, he continues, is much more than a sport as it is also "...one of the names of the sentimental mediations that make up our (masculine for the most part) subjective identities, and the relations we form with our fathers, our sons, our friends" (paras.4). In other words, football is not just a sport but a sentimentally and emotionally charged symbolic territory, a world where identities are shaped, one which accompanies subjects throughout their lives. A world that most Argentine football writers find imperative to capture and protect.

One of such crucial territories to be protected, that of adolescence, is at the center of "Bautismos", a short story exquisitely written by Walter Vargas where two idle and horny teenagers witness, by accident, the first squad "baptism" of an also pubescent Diego Maradona. This friendly match, which has been forgotten, eclipsed by Diego's official debut in October of that same year, took place in La Plata on September 5th, 1976. In "Un sueño de barrilete" (A kite's dream) a part chronicle, part interview that journalist Horacio Pagani

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<sup>4</sup> Nicolas Sorin's independent film "El camino de San Diego" (2006), set in 2004, also centers on this emotional debt and the religious fervor around Diego's figure.

published on November 17th, 1976 in the Argentine newspaper *Clarín*<sup>5</sup>, Maradona makes reference to the friendly match that Vargas rescued from oblivion: “Un día fuimos a La Plata a jugar un amistoso contra Estudiantes y cuando bajaba del micro el técnico me avisó que iba a estar en el banco de Primera. Jugué cinco minutos” (paras. 8). This type of narrative serves to represent another one of Argentine football literature’s distinctive characteristics, that is, its ability to go above and beyond the journalistic coverage of sports, turning its attention to “non-events”, capturing their human, social and intra-historical significance.

In the now highly collectible article, Pagani describes the state of Argentine football in that period as “anemic” and the 16-year-old Maradona is presented as an illusion, a dream, which feeds the collective imaginary of the entire “football nation”. A dream that, in those somber and dictatorial days, only a teenager could be brave enough to entertain. It is precisely that what the two protagonists in Vargas’ story do as they walk through the streets of La Plata: they dream of the beautiful spring to come, of the girls they fantasize having sex with, of summer and freedom. However, their daydreaming is abruptly interrupted by the presence of a police cordon typical under that dictatorship. After showing their IDs and receiving the obligatory admonition by the officer in charge, the boys realize they have just gone through their own kind of sordid baptism.

One of Vargas’s major accomplishments in this story is the vividness with which he depicts the everyday, routinely aspects of living under a dictatorship; a subtle and ominous presence working in the background of an otherwise sunny and peaceful Sunday afternoon. Another one is his ability to uncover the density and significance of even the most seemingly trivial actions, the characters’ dexterous inhabitation of the microscopic instances of power within society, the creation of almost imperceptible pockets of resistance. For this, he resorts to the intrepidity of *pibes*, neither afraid to verbalize their raging, imaginative (and up to that point mainly imaginary) sexuality in times of strict state censorship and imposed decorum, nor to express their simple yet powerful and insightful political views. However, as Pagani indicates, one must dream to regenerate the faith, and this is by far the most subversive of all actions these *pibes* (the story’s two protagonists and the young Maradona) perform.

After going through the police control, the teenagers decide to head to the stadium of Estudiantes de La Plata as they know a friendly match is being played there and assume the doors should be open as the game must be reaching its final stage. Their assumption turns out to be correct and they unimpededly join a small crowd of fans bored to death by a slow and uneventful match. Enter Maradona.

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<sup>5</sup> Coincidentally, Maradona’s first appearance in the national press was on September 28, 1971, also in *Clarín* where a reporter (who did not sign the article) was captivated by Diego’s juggling skills during the halftime of a match between Argentinos Juniors and Independiente. Although his last name got butchered (Caradona) the report did not miss Diego’s link to the *pibe* tradition as he is described as someone who has escaped from a *potrero* (Wilson, 2007, p. 209).

When spotting the stocky Diego getting ready to enter the field, the teenagers first recognize him due to his ephemeral participation as a ball juggler in a famous Argentine TV Show (“Sábados circulares”) to then acknowledge him as a fellow generational member, a *pibe* in a world of adults: “¡Pero es más pibito que nosotros! (...) Mirá la cara de pendejito que tiene. El técnico debe querer probarlo para ver si se la banca” (Vargas, p.108). As soon as he gets the ball, two experienced and tough defensive players of the opposing team (Miguel Angel Reguera and Carlos Pachamé) approach him with the unmistakable intention of intimidating young Diego, knocking him down while trying to strip him of the ball. In short, a traditional “welcome” to the rough world of adult football; Diego Maradona’s own baptism:

...a su encuentro iban Reguera y Pachamé ... como (...) dos leones hambrientos (...) entendidos de que no estaba en juego una pelota cualquiera (...) sino una pelota que definía claramente la línea que separaba el honor de la humillación. ¿O se iban a dejar ningunear por ese mocoso que a lo mejor todavía juntaba figuritas? (Vargas, p.109)

In this passage we find the notion of the duel and the ensuing menace to the participants’ personal honor as another element that reverberates throughout Argentine football narratives, along with the added ingredient of a generational showdown. More importantly, the rough and violent nature of Maradona’s adversaries in this story not only can be said to typify the state of Argentine football in the mid 1970’s but also the temperament of Argentine society as a whole. Naturally, Diego responds to this threat as only a *pibe* would: dribbling past his opponents, toying with them, making them look ridiculous thus reverting their age statuses: “Reguera cayó sentado como un bebé que juega con el balde y la palita en el charco de la playa. Pachamé quedo con una rodilla apoyada en el suelo, como Colón... con pantalones cortos...” (Vargas, 2004, p.109)

Maradona’s emergence represents more than just the arrival of another Argentinian dribbler, plentiful up until the 1950’s and always part of the (mythical) national footballing landscape. As previously stated, he incarnates the mythical construction of the figure of the *pibe* in the realm of Argentine football, but crucially, as a prototypical *pibe*, he also embodies the quintessential defiance to rules and authorities; a rebellious individual (a teenager who else?) who dares to dream and freely play in times of highly mechanized, well-oiled machines: those of 1970s tactical football and the dictatorial machines of death and repression.

Along similar lines, the power of dreams in dark times, the myth of Maradona and the idea of the return to football’s most basic and pure aspects are part of Sergio Olguín’s 2004 young-adults novel *El equipo de los sueños* (The Dream Team), a bildungsroman built around a teenage crusade consisting of the recovery of Diego’s first ball in the depths of Villa Fiorito. The author cleverly turns Maradona’s original, metaphorical and unstainable ball into a real and historical one: young Diego Maradona’s first ball, a sort of Holy Grail of Argentine football, which has been stolen to be sold to the highest bidder. Fourteen-year-old Ariel, the

story's protagonist, is the one - with the help of a group of friends: his "dream team" - in charge of recovering this highly symbolic item, and with it, salvaging what is left of football's - and metonymically - society's integrity in the aftermath of 2001's Argentinian collapse.

Insofar as Maradona's ball symbolizes the purest, most essential aspect of this hyper-commoditized sport, its retrieval, along with the deliberate effort to not turn it into saleable merchandise, represents not only an act of rebellion but also the reclamation of utopia in the midst of a corrupted and cynical social and political scenario<sup>6</sup>. Olguín offers a hopeful and encouraging vision that escapes from televised football and the panoptic experience of the stadiums to take his attention back to this sport at the grassroots level where community replaces commodity and people can afford the luxury of entertaining their own dreams. The author understands football - with its enormous transversal potentiality - as a site from which to rebuild a disintegrating community or, at the very least, offer a space of resistance to this gradual but seemingly inevitable process.

Similarly, many of this subgenre's works continually insist on the urgent need to re-humanize sport and by extension, life in general by recapturing the plasticity and freedom of play (exactly what *pibes* like Maradona and his literary ghosts do best). Following this sport's Argentine narrative tradition these texts create a territory where rules and regulations do not matter as much as the priceless and liberating opportunity to express oneself creatively. A territory where losers and antiheroes have the chance of founding their own epic of defeat, a defeat that is never completely so and always a partial victory against the monopolization of life's possible outcomes.

### **Football's monstrosity: Maradona's haunting ghost**

In the last section of this text, we will focus on the work of Horacio Convertini, a writer who focuses on the lives of anonymous and peripheral characters/players (a common feature of the subgenre) and, using elements from the noir genre, explores the sordidness and inhumanity of professional football. In his football-themed novels *El refuerzo* (2008) and *El último milagro* (2013) we find no traces of the idyllic and nostalgic patina that some other writers (Sacheri, Scher, Bracelli, Roncoli, etc.) cast over this central area of Argentine culture and their own sentimental education. For Convertini, football is not a space of freedom and resistance but one of blind and painful submission where footballers have lost ownership of their bodies and are bonded to a life of strenuous play (i.e., work) for the enjoyment and the benefit of others, a situation that connects them to other liminal subjects such as hitmen, slaves and prostitutes.

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<sup>6</sup> In the novel's closing paragraphs Ariel describes his encounter with this mythical ball in quasi-religious terms: "Bajé mis manos como ...los creyentes que meten las manos en el Ganges. Tomé la pelota ... ese cuero viejo y gastado pero limpio, eternamente limpio por los siglos de los siglos (...) Juro que esa pelota latía" (Olguín, 2004, pp.198-199).

This is the case of “El tanque Millán”, the protagonist of *El refuerzo*, an aging second-rate center-forward with a busted knee that wants to escape what he defines as the transient circus of professional football. Millán’s dream is not entirely different from that of the *gaucho* Martín Fierro in *La Vuelta*, that is to find a peaceful place where to rest his bones after a long and infamous life of errancy<sup>7</sup>. However, this is not an easy task as he sees the window of opportunity shrinking as he reaches the last years of his obscure career as a footballer. That is why, it does not come as a surprise to see him jumping at the possibility of earning some easy money (ten thousand dollars) by playing the final of a regional tournament for a team in the Argentine countryside. The town is called Villa Luppi and its exact location is never revealed, but the cardinal direction and the intertextuality are clear: Millán has to go south, to “El Sur” where he will face and be haunted by a contemporary cipher of the South— not Borges’s static *gaucho*—: number ten, Diego Maradona or the quintessential Argentine *pibe*.

Once in the small town, Millán is introduced as “Maravilla Millán” a nickname that is not his, and to make matters worse, he is handed Club Atlético Villa Luppi’s number ten jersey: “Antes de ponerse la camiseta, miró el número. Diez. La cifra mágica del fútbol. Pelé, Platini, Maradona. ¿Y si se habían confundido de jugador?... Millán sintió que las cosas no encajaban bien” (p.61). This number was surely the right fit for “Maravilla Millán” as they had called him, the problem was that there was nothing marvelous about his style of play. He was simply “El tanque” (the tank) a robust center-forward with a powerful right foot, an ailing knee, and little else. The familiar horror of *the double* reemerges as Millán feels himself vanishing under the pressing desire of Argentine football’s fabricated traditions. He is to become Argentine’s mythical number ten in order to succeed; a *pibe* in the middle of this country’s fertile *pampas*, the ultimate traditional narrative Frankenstein. Expectedly, the protagonist miserably fails to find his inner *pibe*<sup>8</sup>—according to the journalistic myth, present in every Argentine football player’s DNA— and becomes another victim of this narrative creation. Maradona’s number ten jersey—as that of Argentine *pibe*’s most perfect reincarnation—functions in this story (as it does in the realm of Argentine football) not only as an *empty signifier* but also as an oppressive symbol, haunting those who try to fill this void, invariably condemning them to the role of imposters.

By the end of the story, Millán, as a footballing Bartleby, prefers not to move anymore, to stop forcing his wrecked and abused body in the chase of an ever-elusive dream. A dream that on the Argentine context is based almost entirely on the *pibe*/Maradona myth, which promises fame, money, glory, and a quick way out of poverty to millions of hopeful individuals. Crucially—by focusing on this minimal and marginal football stories—Convertini as well as other football literature authors (Fontanarrosa, Vargas, Sacheri, Scher,

<sup>7</sup> Millán’s life as a second-rate professional footballer is described as infamous, marked by its fleetingness and emptiness, the life of a survivor and a mercenary, a football vagabond destined to be forgotten (Convertini, p.12).

<sup>8</sup> Unlike characters such as the protagonist of Sacheri’s short story “Ultimo hombre”, a dull and conservative defender who, magically and momentarily inhabited by the mythical *pibe*, dribbles his way towards freedom and indocility.

etc.) exposes what the sport media typically keeps hidden under the overwhelming spectacularization of 21st century's glamorous, commodified, and ultra-professional football; the *pibe* myth as an instance of the *unheimlich*: warm, familiar but also terrifying, a voracious monster feeding off millions of aspiring players' partially impaired, maimed or dead bodies. The road to professional success is paved with them and this literary subgenre does its small part to provide some visibility to this lesser explored side of the football phenomenon.

To conclude, football literature is much more than literature about football as this sport's transversality makes it an ideal vehicle to look at (in this case) Argentine society's history, intra-history, tensions, and internal contradictions. This subgenre's uncomfortable and very productive place (in-between journalism and literature, the traditional and the disruptive, the central and the eminently peripheral) allows for a much-needed reflection on this society from one of its focal cultural phenomena. Furthermore, we understand Maradona as the indisputable center, the nodal point or *point de capiton* following Laclau's (and Lacan's) term, around which the contemporary discourse of Argentine football is organized. He acts as an *empty signifier* but also a floating one (Laclau, 1996, p.36), providing the internal limits of discursivity and the possibility of producing new chains of equivalence<sup>9</sup>. As such, Maradona's relevance and area of influence naturally expands to reach that of Argentine football literature, whose authors take advantage of the flexibility of his figure and myth to elaborate on some of this subgenre's central themes. Without trying to be definite or comprehensive, this study has focused on one possible approach to the reading of this corpus through his figure.

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<sup>9</sup> For instance, Messi is obviously not Maradona (hence he is Messi) but in the Argentine context his actions on and off a football field are characterized and defined in relation to Diego's.

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