

## Market Mythology and the Cult of El Diego

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Whilst the existence of a Church of Maradona seems bizarre, the cult of retired Argentine footballer, Diego Maradona, continues to grow. Maradona has profited from the marketing opportunities; producing such material relics as a t-shirt which has a picture of a football (described as the bible), a stadium (the church), the fans (the congregation) and finally himself – the God! Another shows Maradona rising majestically for his iconic 'Hand of God' goal with the inscription; 'The Hand of God is the single piece of indisputable evidence proving the existence of God'. In advertisements for his popular TV talk-show, Maradona is shown leaping over the England goalkeeper lifted by angelic wings (see [here](#)). The goal has been immortalized by the song La Mano de Dios, ([the Hand of God](#)) which, apart from being his show's theme song, is a major hit throughout Latin America. Beyond celebrity status, Maradona is a living case of total iconicity (an Oxford University Union declared him to be the Master Inspirer of Dreams in 1995) and an attraction of adulation ranging from the ironic to the profound. Considering this adulation allows for a demonstration of how football as mass consumer spectacle can be an extraordinary site for mass God-like myth-making and how these mythologies are reproduced through material culture.

Observing the Cult of El Diego provides an example of religious iconicity and mythology intersecting with material culture and an extreme case of iconic branding (see Holt, 2004). Whilst divine intervention in a soccer game might seem dubious, the association of divinity with Maradona is sustained by numerous phenomena. For football lovers, it takes only a small leap of faith to imagine Maradona as blessed with transcendent and sublime skills. The story of his life as perpetuated through the textile merchandise that his business endorses, his autobiography, his TV show, and the forthcoming feature film of his life, all present Diego using mythical themes resonating with the life of Jesus and other cult figures. Just as Belk & Tambuat (2005) demonstrated how the story of Apple parallels cultic themes (as advanced by Campbell, 1991), the story of Diego presents themes such as humble beginnings, call to adventure, trials, apotheosis and even resurrection.

Significantly, much is made of Maradona's impoverished upbringing. Just as Jesus of Nazareth had impressed elders at an early age, camera crews sought out the young Maradona for his immense football skills. In true fashion, his call to adventure was to join Argentina Juniors and by 15, he played for the senior team. From then on Diego was engaged in a wondrous journey which saw him lift the World Youth Championship in Japan and leave his homeland in the style of cultic figures. His arrival in Napoli seemed miraculous as he quickly transformed the provincial club to European champions. In 1986 he seemed to single handedly win the World Cup for Argentina. His

quarter final performance against England, who had recently been at war with Argentina, was his apotheosis; the game where he scored one goal that transcended the rules of football by punching the ball over the goalkeeper and a second which transcended the skill of football by dribbling the ball around several players and finishing with a goal conventionally held to be the greatest of all time. In response to the huge controversy generated by the first goal, he gave the world his iconic quotation; "the goal was scored by the head of Maradona and by the hand of God".

Maradona's life was not without trials: alleged Mafioso connections, viciously brawling whilst playing for Barcelona, cocaine addiction and firing an air gun at paparazzi. His trials peaked in USA World Cup in 1994 when he failed a drugs test and was consequentially banned from football for three years; 'they broke my wings' he protested. Maradona's tendency toward self-mythologising spurred him to characterise himself as victim of conspiracy. In his autobiography (Maradona, 1995) he strongly implies that, threatened by his calls for increased player power, FIFA – the World football governing body - maliciously branded him a cheat. Indeed Diego portrays his life as irreverently challenging corrupt powers, whether FIFA or more recently through his association with Venezuelan President Chavez. Hence Diego encourages his story to be understood as a battle against the notional anti-Christ, with occasional divine intervention allowing him to transcend his trials but ultimately he is sacrificed. As the (fake) priest in the film *Hijo de la Novia* proclaims about Diego "they idolized him and then crucified him". This leads to the crowning aspect of the Cult of Maradona - his resurrection.

Following retirement, Diego descended into an Elvis-esque spiral. Concerned viewers saw Diego arrested for drug possession and becoming dangerously obese. In 2004, Maradona's life was left in balance after a major heart attack, inspiring global concern and an emotional vigil outside his hospital. Maradona's spectacular recovery seems miraculous and his reappearance as the politically outspoken, all-singing, all-dancing TV star resembles Diego's second coming. I have witnessed the emotions inspired by Maradona - a man who sat in the stadium watching Maradona on his mazy run in 86 broke down in tears as he told me the story of the greatest goal of all time. In Argentina members of the Iglesia Maradoniana refer to the current year as AD 44 - that is 44 years After Diego's birth. For his part, Maradona is regularly at the centre of idolatry, encouraging worship and mythical discourse through his TV show and his lines of merchandise. As he says: "I tried to be happy playing football and make all of you happy. I ask you a favour. I want this love to last forever. I love you very much!"

God-like, he has come to spread love and he expects it back in return and has, along the way, produced the profitable Cult of Diego.

### References

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