

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Movie Review

Zidane (2006)



Katapult Films

The subject of “Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait” in action.

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Portrait of the Artist as a Global Soccer Star

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You learn little by way of hard facts about the adored French soccer star and famous head-butter Zinédine Zidane in the formalist exercise that bears his name. But after 90 absorbing minutes watching him walking and running across a field in “Zidane,” dripping and pouring sweat, inscrutably staring into space and the breathing, cheering wall of humanity circling him, and leaping and twisting into the air to guide the ball toward

victory, he will seem more expressively human, less of an aesthetic conceit and more of a man, than he does at the start of this self-described “21st Century Portrait.”

The project was directed — conceived seems the better word given the process and results — by the Scottish-born artist Douglas Gordon and the Algerian-born artist Philippe Parreno. Inspired by Zidane and issues of modern portraiture, the two used a large crew and 17 synchronized film and video cameras to track him during an April 2005 match at a Madrid stadium between two Spanish teams, Villareal and Real Madrid. (Zidane, a midfielder, was then playing for Real Madrid. The notorious head-butting took place in 2006 during the World Cup finals, when he was back playing for France.) Over the course of the game the cameras captured what looks like Zidane’s every squint, scratch, sprint and hand gesture with claustrophobic intimacy, and in long shots so distant they might have been taken from an aerie.

On one level, “Zidane” is a celebration of the body in motion and an acknowledgment of our pleasure in watching bodies in motion, a pleasure the movies have been cultivating since Muybridge’s 19th-century locomotion studies. (The history of cinema is, in a sense, also a history of the modern body.) The movie’s close-ups demonstrate that Zidane’s body is more spectacular than most, though, notably, he spends much of his time waiting and walking. The game unfolds in fits and starts, with none of mainstream narrative’s orchestrated rhythms. For soccer fans, the game is probably inherently suspenseful; for the rest of us, suspense arises from our hope (expectation, anticipation) that this body will cease waiting (like us) and starting moving (like a star).

The tension is complicated by the fact that the point of view remains so fixed on Zidane’s body — his restless feet, sculptured calves and shaved head — you often don’t see what is happening elsewhere. This effectively makes him not just the subject of our attention but also a kind of mirror: we largely perceive the game through his expressions (his unmoving face, beaky nose and hooded eyes give him the aspect of a hawk) and his far more animated movements. It’s worth noting that the male filmmakers avoid the athlete’s groin and rear, which suggests that while Zidane is an object of

desire (including as an athlete and celebrity), this desire has been carefully circumscribed. Zidane might not have cooperated otherwise.

Though the filmmakers periodically fold in blurred images of the match taken from a television and a video monitor, as well as clips of serious and trivial world events, they rarely stray far from Zidane. He's a perversely opaque subject for a talking-picture portrait, in part because he doesn't say much beyond the occasional tactical observation.

Every so often, though, a subtitle provocatively cracks open a door to his consciousness. "The game, the event, is not necessarily experienced or remembered in 'real time,' " he is quoted as saying, sounding every inch the Frenchman. "My memories of games and events are fragmented." In other words, memory is montage, an observation that suggests there may be more to this specific man in motion than his cubistic portrait reveals.

ZIDANE

A 21st Century Portrait

Opens on Friday in New York.

Directed by Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno; director of photography, Darius Khondji; edited by Hervé Schneid; music by Mogwai; produced by Joni Sighvatsson, Anna-Lena Vaney and Victorien Vaney; released by Katapult Films. In French, with English subtitles. Running time: 1 hour 30 minutes. This film is not rated.