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## Sport in Paolo Sorrentino's Movies

### Le sport dans les films de Paolo Sorrentino

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**Abstract:** While sport is a popular theme for film directors, it is all too rarely studied by social science researchers. This is all the more true when it is considered as just one of the many narrative or decorative elements of the film and is not at the heart of the story. Such is the case for academic studies related to Italian director Paolo Sorrentino's work, in which the easily identifiable theme of sport is surprisingly nowhere to be found. Indeed, while reference to the body periodically occurs, most of the work conducted on his feature films focuses on the recurrent themes of politics and the quest for power, loneliness and isolation, the flâneur in post-industrial society, sexism, irony, and of course the mafia. The sporting occurrences (including footballer Antonio Pisapia in *L'Uomo in più*, Cheyenne's ping-pong match in *This Must Be the Place*, as well as Fred Ballinger and Mick Boyle's alpine treks in *Youth*, etc.) cannot be missed. Why then does Sorrentino choose to refer to sport: for societal, narrative or nostalgic reasons? These questions and more invite us to identify the "constants" and "variables" of this theme, so as to highlight a strong element of his style.

**Keywords:** cinema, sport, filmmaker, soccer, Maradona

**Mots clés :** cinéma, sport, cinéaste, football, Maradona

## Introduction

While sport is a popular theme for film directors, it is all too rarely studied by social science researchers.<sup>1</sup> This is all the more true when it is considered as just one of the many narrative or decorative elements of the film and is not at the heart of the story. Such is the case for academic studies related to Italian director Paolo Sorrentino's work, in which the easily identifiable theme of sport is surprisingly nowhere to be found. Indeed, while reference to the body periodically occurs (sexuality, dancing and even physical decline linked to ageing or illness), most of the work conducted on his feature films focuses on the recurrent themes of politics and the quest for power, loneliness and isolation, the flâneur in post-industrial society, sexism, irony, and of course the mafia. Studies likewise exist on his style and artistic choices concerning camera movement, color reconstruction and musical eclecticism. Yet, numerous references to sportspeople and physical activities can be found in his films, including footballer Antonio Pisapia (*L'Uomo in più*), the surf instructor (*Le Conseguenze dell'amore*), Cheyenne's ping-pong match (*This Must Be the Place*) and the football jugglery of Ramona's lover (*La Grande Bellezza*), as well as ball-throwing between female volleyball players (*L'Amico di famiglia*), Giulio Andreotti's fitness training (*Il Divo*), Fred Ballinger and Mick Boyle's alpine treks (*Youth*), and the workout of Pope Pius XIII (*The Young Pope*), etc. These sporting occurrences cannot be missed. Why then does Sorrentino choose to refer to sport: for societal, narrative or nostalgic reasons? Moreover, why does he attach more importance to certain sports, such as football, than others? Could it be that he sees it as a metaphor for life? These questions and more encourage identification of the theme's "constants" and "variables", with the aim of circumscribing, somewhere between film analysis and psychocritique,<sup>2</sup> the film director's symptoms of possible *acute sportsmania*. The corpus chosen for this study includes his first novel *Hanno Tutti Ragione* published in 2010, seven feature films screened between 2001 and 2015<sup>3</sup> and the television series *The Young Pope* broadcast as from 2016.

### 1/ A dedicated sports oeuvre

Acting as a true source of inspiration, sport irradiates all of Sorrentino's cinematic work. From one storyline to another or one film to the next, the director signs his scripts with narrative elements arising from his experience and knowledge of physical activity. He plays with the viewers by discreetly, even secretly, interspersing a number of sometimes unusual references. By using allusions in this way, in the etymological sense of the word, does he not then consider sport as a signature from deep down, the significant trace of a path of meaning? Answering this question implies entering his inner geography by identifying the scenes and references to sport that mark his work. In a process bordering on "taxonomic

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<sup>1</sup> A number of academics have explored the relationship between sport and cinema from different perspectives, including national identities (Klara Bruveris, 2017), technical representation of sport (Sebastian Byrne, 2017), portrayal of female athletes (Katharina Lindner, 2011), wrestling in early cinema (Luke Stadel, 2013), understanding sports coaching (Nicholas Chare, 2016) and, of course, Seán Crosson's remarkable and comprehensive book *Sport and Film* (2013).

<sup>2</sup> Psychocritique is a method of analysis which consists in studying an oeuvre to identify facts and relationships arising from the film director or character's unconscious personality. Credit for developing this psychological approach from literary texts goes to Charles Mauron (1899-1966).

<sup>3</sup> *L'Uomo in più* (2001), *Le Conseguenze dell'amore* (2004), *L'Amico di famiglia* (2007), *Il Divo* (2008), *This Must Be the Place* (2011), *La Grande Bellezza* (2013), *Youth* (2015).

fury” (Barthes 1985, 156), occurrences were identified and organized, paying particular attention to the film decors, dialogues and characters’ postures. And so, a host of sporting activities accompany and reflect the director’s thoughts. Whether anecdotic or recurrent, they confront Sorrentino with his own sporting experiences and possibly even with the unchanging pillars of time. Here lies perhaps one of the challenges of his cinematic writing, producing *self-encoded* or *self-encrypted scripts* through which he strives to transform his seemingly perishable sporting memories into an inalterable form linked to melancholy and adolescence. While appearing to film football, swimming or dancing, he is in reality acknowledging the passing time. Through the examples he shows, he is providing partial pieces of an autobiographical jigsaw.

There is no doubt that sport is a key element of Paolo Sorrentino’s narration. *A priori* insignificant in how the plot unfolds, the sporting allusions in his films (a singular metaphor, a suggestive decorative object, a character built like an athlete, an action scene, etc.) nonetheless constitute a place for personal expression into which the discerning viewer may delve. Admittedly, Sorrentino’s main preoccupations concern Republican Italy and the grey areas of its history. Oscillating “between Sergio Leone style westerns and pure pulp gangster movies (Vacaro 2009, 183), his films show how tension operates between manipulators and the manipulated with, beneath the surface, the implication of politicians and financial leaders, football managers, mafia godfathers and even men of the Vatican. He also likes to give his stories a singular tonality by playing on both musical rhythm – hence the alternation between classical music and rock or electronic music – and energies, hence the sizeable place occupied by sport. From decors to ripostes, the art of Sorrentino lies in coinciding the narrative spine with a more personal message and may be modeled according to three techniques. The first involves the use of image as *a reference to the sporting sphere*. The director regularly “pitches” the camera following a tracking shot or in between two scenes so as to orient the viewer’s gaze towards a sporting action. Such is the case in a sequence of *This Must Be the Place*, where he films an appropriately dressed man rollerblading down a path in Central Park just before he has a memorable fall. The main character Cheyenne impassively watches the scene. The variety of film shots used by the director, from the sportsman on the ground to the rock star sitting peacefully on a bench, emphasize the situation and heighten its evocative power. As Alain Masson explains, “gesture is not limited to an immediate and simple meaning or value or function” (2007, 87). The second technique consists in making the sporting object *a condensed representation of the physical activity*. With a fixed or moving camera, Sorrentino periodically films the presence of sports-related equipment or work of art in the corner of a room, as with the skiing photograph on the hotel manager’s wall in *Le Conseguenze dell’amore* for example. The photograph symbolizes a window to the outside world, life and freedom within a story unfolding inside a closed space, confined and almost dehumanizing. Condensing in this way has its role to play in the construction of the viewer’s imaginary. Sorrentino acknowledged as much during one of his interviews in which he referred to the description of the location by saying “Malaise and mystery, that is the atmosphere the film aimed to create in the first part. But the decor of the hotel, frozen in time with its numerous mirrors and large windows, further reinforced its “aquarium” aspect and oneiric dimension”.<sup>4</sup> Finally, in honor of his passion for football

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<sup>4</sup> Sorrentino, Paolo. *Le Conseguenze dell’amore/The Consequences of Love*. 2004. Behind the Scenes/Interview with the Director – DVD TF1 video, Ocean Films Distribution.

and according to the principle of *mise en abyme*, he regularly inserts a *mention of its sporting events*. He cannot help but show viewers the exceptional victories of the Naples football club and the vital role of Argentine Diego Maradona.

## 2/ Diego Maradona

Football occupies a special, not to say omnipresent, place in Sorrentino's work. He did not randomly choose the dramatic life of a footballer as the subject of his first film *L'Uomo in più*. Indeed, the story introduces two men who carry the name Antonio Pisabia. One is the pop singer "Tony", the other a young professional soccer player. For the two men, the 80s promise wealth and success, but their fortunes take a turn for the worse. After seducing a young girl, Tony is accused of rape, while Antonio tears his ligaments and can no longer play. Antonio becomes a coach, but finds he no longer has a place in the world of sport. One day, destiny brings the two men together, and the one's defeat means the other's redemption.

Sorrentino moreover gives a prominent place to the emblematic figure of Diego Maradona and contributes, indirectly, to the dissemination of the icon in media culture (Free 2014). The director explained during an interview, "I thought of Maradona because he belongs to the world of show business. When a sportsman is so astounding and astonishing, he is no longer merely an athlete, but an artist".<sup>5</sup> In *La Grande Bellezza* for example, Sorrentino shows a sequence in which a naked young man gives a display of football acrobatics in his room. The sequence serves to illustrate a conversation between the mondain Jep Gambardella (Toni Servillo) and the attractive Ramona (Sabrina Ferilli), in which she tells him about her relationship with the football player. The director uses this passage to give an indisputable wink to Maradona, known for his famous moves. Moreover, when he won his Oscar in Hollywood, Sorrentino thanked Maradona as one of the three personages inspiring the film, along with Federico Fellini and Martin Scorsese. It is however without a doubt in *Youth* that he pays the greatest tribute to the Argentine star, with the latter's figure haunting the luxury hotel resembling a sanatorium. The footballer is of course only a shadow of his former self and –the exact opposite of Pope Pius XIII – is presented by Sorrentino as a worn out, overweight man needing to use an oxygen mask. At the same time, he aptly describes his virtually unaltered power to fascinate others. Hotel guests and fans lining up along the hotel railings for an autograph all show genuine respect towards him. And as further allusion to his genius, Sorrentino inserts a scene where the character of Maradona (Roly Serrano) performs acrobatics with a tennis ball on a clay court. In the middle of this oasis of calm, only the swish of the ball and the heavy breathing of the former footballer can be heard. The succession of shots shows the yellow ball rising and falling in the same way as the spirit of places where free time is enjoyed and time is taken to reflect, however painful it may prove to be. The character of Maradona adds a distinctive flavor to the film which, when all is said and done, questions men's destiny and future prospects.

Why *does* Sorrentino show so much interest in Maradona and the Società Sportiva Calcio Napoli? Several complementary hypotheses can be formulated. A first probable one is *societal* in nature. From the moment the director uses Italian society to contextualize his stories, he cannot ignore football as one

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<sup>5</sup> Sorrentino, Paolo. *La giovinezza/Youth*. 2015. Behind The Scenes/Interview with the director – DVD Pathé.

of the pillars of its identity. The sport is an integral part of political life and Italian culture, more especially since the *Calcio* served as a battleground for communists and Christian democrats (Archambault 2012); Italy's victory in the 1982 World Cup only strengthened its role in national identity (Foot 2016). Sorrentino no doubt drew his inspiration for a number of his scenes from both the character of Don Camillo and his own interest in football.<sup>6</sup> A second likely hypothesis is *narrative*. Born in 1970, Sorrentino was deeply marked by the 80s when he changed from a boy into a man. At the time, Italy was in the midst of political, cultural and sporting tumult. While part of Italy's youth, immortalized by Toty Ruggieri, sought refuge in drug use and artistic revolution, the political scene experienced a turning point with the "Operation Clean Hands"; on this occasion, traditional politicians seemed to make way for the judges and academics who suddenly appeared (Rayner 2005). As for football, in the hands of a number of mafioso, it underwent a troubled period following the *totonero* scandals and conflicts of interest in 1980 and 1986. Mirroring a country in search of stability and as a sign of the times, this football culture is a source of fertile inspiration which has allowed the director to color the majority of his feature films. A third and the most likely hypothesis pertains to *nostalgia*. Not unlike all the adolescents of his time who dreamed of becoming footballers, Sorrentino was influenced deep down by the sporting life of SSC Napoli and that of Diego Maradona. This exceptional player who brought the 1986 World Cup to Argentina thanks to the "hand of God" (Britto, Ventura de Moraes and Barreto 2014) quickly became the icon of the club. Idolized by the *tifosi* of the San Paolo Stadium, he led the Naples team to the most significant titles of its history, making it one of the greatest in Europe. His influence was such that, in the 1980s, "thousands of Neapolitan newborns brought to the baptismal fonts were called Diego" (Dinia 1994, 75). And so, during the club's heyday between 1984 and 1992, Maradona left his mark on the imagination of young Sorrentino. Indeed, the latter was only 14 when he discovered him for the first time. Although the footballer's image was tarnished by the time he was transferred to Sevilla through being caught in the act of using cocaine, he remained nonetheless an exemplary team player in the director's mind, as well as an incredible playmaker and a veritable virtuoso. The fairly marked assonance in the dialect between Maradona and Madonna (Madonna being the name of the Virgin Mary) explains not only the fascination he feels for him but also, in line with the principle of *mise en abyme*, that felt by Cardinal Voeillo in *The Young Pope*.

### **3/ Sport and religion: the example of *The Young Pope***

Sport and religion are two themes permeating Sorrentino's work. As rightly pointed out by Eszter Simor and David Sorfa, "Magical characters in the films are often spiritual or religious figures" (2017, 12). Moreover, his characters may at times have supernatural powers. Lenny Bellardo (Jude Law) for example, described as a "saint" by Sister Mary (Diane Keaton), is able to accomplish miracles: he heals a dying woman, tames a wild kangaroo, enables an infertile woman to become pregnant, etc. In addition, Sorrentino shows that sport in a monastic context may be considered as a path to spiritual elevation. From this point of view, he is in line with the words of Richard Hutch for whom "lives are empowered

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<sup>6</sup> Don Camillo is the name of a fictional character created in 1948 by Italian humorist, writer, journalist and illustrator Giovannino Guareschi. His adventures were published in the form of short stories in the weekly *Candido*, before being immortalized by Fernandel at the cinema in 1952. He is characterized by his sometimes tough verbal sparring with Peppone, the communist mayor.

not by brute strength and tenacity alone, but also by sustaining personal coherence within the lived experience of one's sporting activities" (2012, 131). It should be remembered that since the advent of the sports movement in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, religious institutions and youth movements had gradually taken over physical activities with the aim of promoting their ideologies (Watson and Parker 2014; Schultz and Sheffer 2016). As for others such as Baron Pierre de Coubertin, they wasted no time in comparing the International Olympic Committee to "a sort of Vatican for athletics" (Pouillart and Willems 1953, 16). This undoubtedly explains why, in *The Young Pope* series, Sorrentino shows not only the spiritual dimension of sport – the Coubertinian concept of *religio athletae* (Jirásek 2015) – but also what sporting life within the Vatican could be like. With ten episodes, the series was previewed at the Venice International Film Festival on September 3, 2016, before being progressively screened in Europe and the United States. It describes the daily life of a young 47-year-old American Pope, Lenny Belardo (Pius XIII), who is basically unknown to the cardinals. The Pope proves to be unstable, ultraconservative and calculating. He is conspicuous since he "smokes like a chimney", drinks Coca-Cola zero cherry and stands like a rock star; in short, an absolute psychopath fueling a mystical delusion existing around him. Abandoned as a child at an orphanage and permanently troubled, he develops an extremely turbulent relationship with his faith and God.<sup>7</sup>

The relationships between sport and religion are however mocked. Sorrentino cannot help but develop the offbeat humor found in all of his films. He moreover openly admitted it during an interview: "When I start to write a movie, my first priority is that I want it to be funny... I want to make people laugh. On my way to doing that, I often wind up creating something that is also sad" (Simor and Sorfa 2017, 1). For the moment, according to Mathilde Cesbron, he seems to have transformed the Vatican into "pure entertainment" (2016). Which is why he does not hesitate to portray Pope Pius XIII as a modern, athletic man, concerned about staying in shape and careful in his choice of clothes – far from the traditional image of an ageing and sometimes sick pope. When shaping his silhouette to appropriate pop rock music with bodybuilding equipment or yoga, he is always looking towards the light. The director therefore makes explicit, through image and sound, the strong bond uniting physical and spiritual lives. That said, Sorrentino also develops the character of a surprising supporter throughout the series, the very powerful Cardinal and Secretary of State Voiello (Silvio Orlando). A true *tifoso* (fan), the latter devotes his leisure time to the Naples football team. He carefully collects all club posters, has mobile phone cases with photographs of the players and uses supporter song ringtones. He also reads all the latest sports news in *Corriere dello Sport*, listens to live match commentaries on the radio and sometimes watches YouTube playbacks of Maradona from the time when the footballer was playing for the club. Two scenes are particularly interesting in this respect. The first occurs near the beginning of the series. In the first episode, Voiello can be seen placing his three cell phones on the Pope's desk before exclaiming "And here you have the trident!" A tracking shot followed by a close-up then shows the three great footballers of the 2015-2016 Season. Referring to Poseidon's attribute is a way to show just how far these players represent the ultimate weapon. One of them is Gonzalo Higuain, aka "Pipita", the team's center forward. To extend the metaphor, the player is again referred to in the second episode of the series. A worried

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<sup>7</sup> This theme can also be found in *La Grande Bellezza*. It should be remembered that Sorrentino lost his two parents in a gas explosion when he was 17 (Moscati 2017).

Voiello is talking to the Vatican's Marketing Officer Sofia Dubois (Cécile de France) when he refers to "Pipita" by saying "Help us, Pipita!" In answer to Sofia's question "Who is Saint Pipita?", Voiello retorts "He's not a saint. He's Naples' center forward!" With the hint of a smile, Sofia concludes he is losing his optimism. The second scene in the fifth episode shows the moment when a police captain is questioning him over the mysterious disappearance of impostor Tonino Pettola (Franco Pinelli), a quack healer claiming to have been touched by divine grace. Failing to obtain any response whatsoever from the clever Voiello, the captain cunningly gets his own back by affirming that Diego Maradona is still taking drugs. He claims that one of his friends, a secret agent in Dubai, has told him. Somewhat upset by this, Voiello replies immediately, "Why do you want to hurt me? Why?" The ensuing punchline hits home as the police captain cynically responds "Because I'm an Inter supporter, Eminence". The humor is easy to perceive and indisputably accentuated with brio by the actors' performance. It enables Sorrentino to add a little levity to a subject that is sensitive to say the least. Somewhere between fascination and detachment, curiosity and indifference, respect and irreverence, he gradually leads viewers into the private life of the Holy See and desacralizes God's servants to a certain degree.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout his productions, Paolo Sorrentino has developed a recognizable style that consists in "corporifying" his characters and giving them a degree of vitality, such as Jude Law as a bodybuilding pope or Roly Serrano as an adept Maradona. Moreover, and despite the apparent plurality of polymorphic elements, he has likewise developed what could legitimately be called a comparatively "sporting" oeuvre, by systematically inserting scenes or allusions to physical exercise into a coherent whole and within the complex mechanism of cinematographic "fabrication". Indeed, in order to include as many references to sport, the Italian director has performed a skillfully orchestrated sleight of hand by carefully managing his camerapeople, directors of photography and other film editors. This energy directed towards sport, however, reveals deeper motives that drive a quest for identity linked indisputably to his Neapolitan adolescence. As explained by Francis Vanoye, "the mask also serves to dissimulate the subject so he can make his moves on the quiet" (2011, 20). In the same way as the flashbacks he inserts into his films, Sorrentino discreetly provides elements of his life including, for example, the painful loss of his parents with the theme of abandon tormenting Lenny Belardo played by Jude Law, and his passion for the Naples football club with the implicit omnipresence of Maradona. These tangible clues of self-portraiting consequently show the scope of his "athletic" vision of life.

## **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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