

# The Ninety-Minute Anxiety Dream

Simon Critchley



Matthias Hangst/Getty Images

*England's Wayne Rooney during England's World Cup match against Uruguay, June 19, 2014*

Soccer is an oddly amnesiac activity, in the sense that spectators tend to look toward the next game rather than remember the last one or the lost one. In Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, the chorus interrogates the chained Titan as to what gifts he gave human beings. In addition to fire and thus technology and civilization, Prometheus says he sowed in human beings blind hope, as a way of forestalling doom. There is something of this in the soccer fan.

I'm teaching ancient tragedy at Cornell for the summer, for which I am truly grateful, as it has left me with far too much time to watch the World Cup. I'm writing on day ten of the competition, which is important to point out, as what has been unfolding in Brazil is particularly exciting and wonderfully open-scoring, but also evolving very fast, hour by hour, day by day. So far, it positively glimmers in comparison with the 2010 World Cup in South Africa, defined by those irritating vuvuzelas. Aside from some dramatic high points (Algeria vs. the USA and Ghana vs. Uruguay stick sharply in the memory), 2010 was an oddly plodding, slightly melancholic affair. By contrast, I feel rather enlivened by much of what I have seen this time, with the exception of Spain and England, and maybe Cameroon.

The day after England's sorry capitulation to Uruguay, who are far from being the best team in this tournament, despite the prodigious, indeed Promethean, gifts of Luis Suarez, fans were already fixated on the question of whether England might survive if Italy beat Costa Rica. They didn't.

In soccer, it's not the disappointment that kills you; it is the ever-renewed sense of hope. On May 30, I went with my twenty-two-year-old son to see England play Peru at London's Wembley Stadium with pretty much the same lineup that started both World Cup games. Peru played like a pub team with hangovers and England won 3-0, but the writing was already on the wall for England: the lumbering style, the tactical cluelessness, the headless-chicken panic that sets in whenever the opposition gets the ball and dares to cross it into the penalty box, the porous, fragile defense, and the attempt to do the same thing in a kind of slow motion, over and over again and failing (Glen Johnson has two faults as a defender: one is that he can't defend. His other fault is that he can't attack either). But still, when I took the subway to watch the game with my pal Liam against Italy on June 14, my heart was full of hope. It didn't last long.

Whole books have been written on why England loses at major tournaments (see the excellent and compendious *Soccernomics* by Simon Kuper and Stefan Szymanski). But the phenomenology of defeat is pretty interesting and I could give a whole litany of such experiences, as could millions of others. The art critic Hal Foster sent me an email from Paul Myerscough, an *LRB* editor in London, where he talks about the England defeat as "a recurring nightmare, and the sort that becomes so habitual one is aware, even inside the dream, that it is happening again." This is exactly right. Watching England is like being stuck inside an ever-repeating anxiety dream. You are trapped and powerless and you know exactly what is going to happen and it does. It is like being stuck in quicksand, the more that England try to escape the unfurling disaster, the more tightly bound they are to their doom.

Of course, for many England fans, this is a merciful relief and we have long learned to stop worrying and start loving the World Cup without England and without the stupid, bloody-minded white tribalism that surrounds the England team, even when most of the best players are black.

Which brings me to more interesting matters. The positive lesson to be learned from the negative dialectic of England's failure can be summarized in two words: Costa Rica. *Los Ticos* have shown tactically how soccer should be played. They maintain a high defensive line, they are incredibly well-organized by their passionate and very shrewd coach, Jorge Luis Pinto, they are physically fit, young, and strong, they relentlessly close down the opposition in midfield, they have great passing accuracy and are fast on the break into attack. Costa Rica didn't just win against Italy, they completely dominated the Italians in every part of the game.

Take one moment among many. In the Italy vs. England game, Italy's first goal was created by an Andrea Pirlo step-over or dummy from a corner where he drew across Daniel Sturridge, the England player, and opened a space for Claudio Marchisio to exploit. England were momentarily caught on the wrong foot, Marchisio wasn't closed down, took a moment to look up and then scored with an elegant, measured shot into the corner of Joe Hart's goal. Easy. Against Costa Rica, however, Pirlo was given no time on the ball, was consistently closed down or tackled. There was one moment in the second half when Pirlo was tackled and left on his bum in the middle of the pitch, looking lost and suddenly rather old (although he is a handsome devil).

Allow me to state the bleeding obvious: this is a tactical game. It is not about passion and individual genius, notwithstanding the relentless commodification of stars like Messi, Ronaldo, and Neymar. No, soccer is about the use of reason and intelligence in order to construct a collective team formation that will contain and defeat the opposition. It requires discipline and relentless training, particularly in order to maintain the shape of the team and the way it occupies and controls space. This is the job of the coach, who tends to get reduced to some kind of either bizarrely animated comic character or casually disaffected bystander when games are televised. But he is the one who sets the team up to play a certain, clearly determined way, the prime mover although sometimes moved rather than unmoved.

Otherwise said, soccer is not about individual players. You can have great individual players in the wrong shape and the results can be tragi-comical, as with veteran English midfielder Steven Gerrard's performances at this World Cup, where he ran around breathless, pink-faced, and making mistakes, like the one that led to Uruguay's winning goal. This doesn't happen (so much) when he plays for Liverpool because he is part of a rational system that he

understands, which has a number of interconnected moving parts and which is defined by the ability to relax and rely on your teammates. Soccer is a collective game, a team game, and everyone has to play the part which has been assigned to them, which means they have to understand it spatially, positionally, and intelligently and make it effective. This is what Costa Rica has shown to great effect, without any star players. They know exactly what they are doing and play with admirable pride and trust in their coach.

Don't get me wrong, I don't think that Costa Rica will take home the World Cup. But the right organization can go a long way, as South Korea showed when they reached the semi-finals of the World Cup in 2002 under the benevolent hedonism of their Dutch coach, Guus Hiddink.

What is true of Costa Rica is also true of the US team, meticulously prepared by Jürgen Klinsmann. Some have talked about a German invasion, and it is true that Klinsmann has shown a preference for players based in Germany and had the courage to leave out his "star" player, Landon Donovan (which was undoubtedly the right thing to do). But Klinsmann, with pretty meager resources in terms of world-class players, has built a formidable team formation around a midfield diamond, using the reliable abilities of Michael Bradley. I hope they go far, but wonder how they will cope without Jozy Altidore, a strong center-forward who can both hold the ball up well and score goals—and has been benched with a strained left hamstring. Their performance against Ghana was impressive and the one time so far I have jumped out of my chair and punched the air was when the unlikely John Brooks scored the winner. But this wasn't luck. He cleverly found space in a sloppy defense and headed the ball down to beat the keeper.

What is true of Costa Rica and the US, is also true of Bosnia-Herzegovina and even lowly Iran (though both lost close games on Saturday, with no help from the refs). Talk of national tactics, national behaviors, and national pathologies in relation to soccer is tempting and a lot of reassuring fun as it allows us to find our cultural stereotypes confirmed, but it is overblown and misplaced in my view. Spanish *tiki-taka* was an adaptation and improvement of the Dutch style of total football that was introduced to Barcelona by Johan Cruyff. When Bayern Munich obliterated Barcelona 7-0 in the Champions League semi-final in spring 2013, it resulted not from an anti-*tiki-taka*, but from an improved version of it, with added physical strength and the attacking speed of Franck Ribery and Arjen Robben, who also know how to defend. And Germany will either win or come close with these tactics.

There is one way to play soccer and that is well. My team, Liverpool, enjoyed enormous success in the 1970s and 1980s by adapting a form of soccer that the legendary coach Bill Shankly and, later, Bob Paisley had seen when they played against teams on the European Continent, especially from Italy. Shankly said, "Above all, the main aim is that everyone can control a ball and do the basic things in soccer. It's control and pass...control and pass...all the time." If control and passing is combined with movement and speed, where after each pass there are two or three options up ahead, eventually the team will score. And whoever scores most goals will win. It's as simple as that.

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