Chapter 8

Argentina 1978

Military Nationalism, Football Essentialism, and Moral Ambivalence

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INTRODUCTION

In the novel by Antonio dal Masetto, *Hay unos tipos abajo* (1998), Pablo, during the weekend of the final of the World Cup played by Argentina against Holland, sees a suspicious car with two people inside parked at the corner of his house, located in a central neighborhood of Buenos Aires. He is not engaged in politics, but as a journalist he knows that he could be defined as an enemy of the military Junta. He and his fiancée undergo two extremely paranoid days. Dal Masetto recreates an odd atmosphere in which Pablo’s fear of being kidnapped by a police or military squad is contrasted to the excitement and enthusiasm of the Argentines anticipating their World Cup triumph. We are in the middle of a sporting competition that covers over political repression, torture, and death. What goes through Pablo’s head as a frightening possibiltiy takes on tragic dimensions in the novel by Martín Kohan, *Dos veces junio* (2002). The narrator is a soldier serving as a driver to a military doctor during the period of the World Cup. While the masses follow the matches by radio or television, the soldier waits outside River Plate stadium for the doctor, who is urgently needed: a tortured political prisoner is dying, and the experience and competence of Dr. Mesiano is required. Dr. Mesiano is more interested in football and the fate of Argentina’s team in a crucial match than in saving a life—after all, terrorists do not deserve to be treated as human beings. The dying person could have been Pablo. In *La crítica de las armas* (2003) José Pablo Feinman has dramatically portrayed the contradictions of Argentine society that claimed order and peace while kidnapping and killing reigned. The main character, Epstein, a philosopher who has written revolutionary texts in the past, is obsessed by the idea of being kidnapped, and night after night he waits for the
noise of the lift stopping on the floor of his flat, announcing the arrival of the military squad. Feinman writes:

If he did not die, if he was not assassinated, Pablo Epstein knew that he would live in a country of cowards and accomplices. But he knew something more, even worse: he, necessarily, would participate in one of these two conditions, or in both, because he knew that he would behave as a coward, and he was unable to imagine how, in the terrible coming country, he could not be an accomplice. (2003, 21)

Argentine fiction has forcefully elaborated the moral dilemmas of the 1970s and reflected on the dark side of the World Cup. These recent novels show that the military period is still an open wound that produces both emotional consternation and controversial meanings. Nobody will deny that a mere thousand meters from the River Plate stadium, where the Argentine team played the first round and the final, was the ESMA (Navy Mechanical School). This was the largest torture and detention center of the military dictatorship. The horror was such that the prisoners could hear the celebration and joy coming from the stadium mingled with the screaming of the tortured inmates. Was it legitimate to be obsessed with the World Cup, pretending to ignore what was going on? Was it acceptable to support the national team under those circumstances? Was it justifiable to desire victory, knowing that this victory was the main explicit political aim of the military in power? Was it defensible to go onto the streets, singing and waving the national flag after Argentina's victory?

Twenty-five years after the World Cup, the journalist, de Vedia, summarizes the contradictory situation of Argentina in 1978:

The core of the Argentine tragedy was the existence of a country divided in the middle, a nation cut by a dichotomy in which football and death competed in the most absurd contests. . . . In 1978 there was pain and death but also football and contentment. Life always flows in this way, with light and shadow . . . countries write their histories, with the soul full of joyfulness, and at the same time, full of pain. . . . We will play football without the shadow of death invading the stadiums, and we will cry for the lost lives. (La Nación Deportiva, June 25, 2003, p. 2)

In this chapter I shall attempt to reach a better understanding of the complex relationship between the Argentine passion and love of football and the nationalist ideology of the military junta. In the final section I shall elaborate on the moral ambivalence over the victory of the national team, a victory that has stimulated continuous discussions on what was right and wrong in Argentina.
MILITARY NATIONALISM AND THE WORLD CUP

The beginning of 1976 was extremely chaotic due to the extreme, gross political violence used by the paramilitary and military forces to combat opposing left-wing guerrilla groups, to the institutional crisis that began after the death of President Peron, and to the economic decline and crisis that, among other things, provoked an annual rate of inflation of 566.3 percent. In March of that year the inflation reached a historical peak: 56 percent. This was accompanied by a political assassination every five hours and a bomb explosion every three hours. From December 1975, the killings were aggravated by the uncontrolled activity of the paramilitary groups supported by the state and the rightist wing of the Peronist party in power. On March 24, the military overthrew President Isabel Martínez de Perón and installed a regime euphemistically called Proceso de Reorganización Nacional ("Process of National Reorganization"). Its proclaimed objectives were the reestablishment of the lost social order, the reorganization of the institutions, and the creation of better conditions for the return to an authentic democracy (Novaro and Palermo 2003, 20). In their own words, they intended to stay in power until the true values of Christian morality, the national tradition, and the dignity of being Argentine had been reinstated. The most important means were the eradication of the subversive leftist groups and the promotion of harmony between the state, the capital, and the workers. The insertion of Argentina in the western bloc of Christian nations fighting communism and opposing the socialist countries was defined as crucial (La Nación, March 25, 1976). The diagnosis of an intense moral, political, and social crisis was not far from reality, but of course the military forces were also an important part of the syndrome. They decided to act with the idea that they represented the only guarantee of order and that, in the process of governing, the required social consensus would be obtained. General Videla, who had been appointed president by the junta, declared that once its values and goals were accepted by civil society and political groups, a gradual transference of power could be made (Novaro and Palermo 2003, 27). The military forces, though, decided to hold power for a long period of time, and this time perspective was different from the other military regimes that had been in power in the recent past. The use of repression, torture, kidnapping, and assassination became normal. The results were dramatic: 30,000 people were murdered between 1976 and the end of the dictatorship in 1983. A country accustomed to military intervention and violence had never experienced cruelty and madness on this scale.

This was the context in which the World Cup was organized and carried out in an exemplary way. One could ask in retrospect: how could FIFA allow the World Cup to be played under such circumstances? How was it possible for fifteen other countries, many of them old democracies governed by progressive governments, to participate? The answer is simple: the dominant ideology prescribe
that football and sport belong to civil society, thus independent of partisan state policies. It is assumed that football is not politics and never will be. The ideologist Polakovic clearly expressed this conceptual framework:

The World Cup is not politics, it is the manifestation of the national . . . of the community of belonging . . . each person is part of a nation, independently of the State . . . nationality accompanies the individual and marks his personality . . . and from the point of view of sport, the national team is like the folkloric ballets that represent the best of a nation . . . thus the national ties are the most powerful . . . the nation gives protection and pride . . . and the World Cup engenders deep national emotions . . . and football is a factor of national reunion . . . the Argentine football present in the River Plate stadium activated the ethnic forces and helped in the reinforcement of the Argentine soul . . . we knew of the national value of tango, and now we discover the national value of football. (La Nación–Suplemento Cultura y Nación, June 22, 1978, p. 6)

Moreover, FIFA, as a transnational organization, depends on the independent national football associations and sponsorship of multinational firms, both interested in the global impact of championships and the consolidation of sport’s worldwide profile. Neither FIFA nor Coca-Cola engage in politics or take moral standpoints, putting the qualities of hosting countries at the core of their concerns. The junta knew very well that FIFA was not prepared to cancel the World Cup on ethical grounds. The military rightly understood that the periodical evaluations carried out by the FIFA were based on an assessment of the organizational capacity of the national committee (Ente Autártico del Mundial—EAM) that was in charge of rebuilding stadiums, transforming airports, and providing a new television and communication structure. The junta inherited a World Cup finals given to Argentina in 1968, a competition for which it had not asked. One can imagine how influential generals might have considered it a gift to a society that loved football so much. But it was a poisoned chalice: if the country was not pacified, their time was running out. The total annihilation of guerrilla groups was crucial. A World Cup with bombs, protests, and demonstrations was unthinkable. A few weeks after the military coup, the EAM was taken over, and the World Cup was defined as a national priority.

Alfredo Cantilo, the president of the Argentine Football Association, recognized that the preparations initiated in 1968 were not sufficient. The military in 1976 was confronted with a chaotic situation. The main obstacle was the lack of time. However, the presence of the military in the EAM finally made possible all of the delayed building work. The military, Cantilo says proudly, demonstrated to the world the possibilities of a new nation and confirmed the importance of planning and discipline (La Nación, June 1, 1978, p. 8). General Antonio Merlo,
who was in charge of the EAM, had declared some months before the opening ceremony that “in spite of the World Cup being a modest event compared with the Olympics, the main objective is to show the world our organizational talent. Two years ago nobody believed in us, and now the world is convinced that the Argentines are capable of doing important things. For us the moment of truth has come” (Somos, April 28, 1978, p. 14). There were expectations when it came to the sporting competition itself. At his last meeting with the national team, General Videla proclaimed that the footballers were obliged to show that they were the best of the nation and the best Argentina could present to the universe... and they were obliged to demonstrate the quality of the Argentine man. This man that at the individual level or working in a team is able to carry out great enterprises when guided by common goals... I claim from you the victory, the winners of the World Cup, winners because you will show courage in the games... and will be the right expression of the human quality of the Argentines. (Suplemento Clarín Mundial, May 27, 1978, pp. 6–7)

The World Cup turned out to be a success in a “pacified” society. The wave of popular nationalism was extreme. The demonstrations of joy in the stadiums and the streets after the Argentine victories that culminated in the triumph against Holland in the final were interpreted by the junta as the success of a national project. General Videla said that the cry of “Argentina, Argentina” and the millions of flags all around the country were signs of a recovered nation celebrating its dignity. General Saint Jean, governor of the province of Buenos Aires, proclaimed that Argentine history divided into a time before and a time after the World Cup. The World Cup was seen as the beginning of a new epoch in which the unity of the people was finally formed and sealed. The junta declared with pride that the competition showed that the matches were played not by the eleven players on the field but by 25 million Argentines. Argentina won peacefully against subversion. A new country was born (see Página 12, June 26, 1988, pp. 10–11). The media, without exception, showed no critical distance in the explosion of joy, optimism, and chauvinism (see Ulanovsky 1997; Gilbert and Vitagliano 1998; Blaustein and Zubieta 1998). Even a critical intellectual of the stature of Ernesto Sabato observed that “the World Cup was a proof of maturity, nobleness, a popular mobilization marked by generosity and altruism” (La Razón, June 13, 1978, p. 4). Defined as La fiesta de todos (the feast for all), the title of the official World Cup film, the junta enjoyed its best days that June. Without any doubt or hesitation, the regime believed that it had achieved some of the most important symbolic and real goals through football: the image of a victorious nation projected to the entire world (Novaro and Palermo 2003, 166). In the next section we shall see how this was also
made possible by the values and ideologies of Argentine football that created a particularly favorable environment.

FOOTBALL ESSENTIALISM

Football in Argentina is an old national passion, an obsession, a locus of pride and disenchantment, of joy and sadness, an important arena for obtaining victory and global recognition (see Archetti 1999, 2001; Alabarces 2002). A country that had exported thousands of players to the world, and especially to Europe, and had gained many international titles with its clubs and national teams had never been crowned “World Champions.” Their last involvement in the World Cup of 1974 had not been successful, with the 0–4 defeat in the second round against Holland proving rather traumatic. The defeat was put down to the erratic systems of play chosen by the coaches. The leading sports weekly magazine reported that Argentina played without conviction and, even worse, without a philosophy that reflected a vision or an expressed historical continuity (El Gráfico, July 9, 1974, p. 1). In the same issue, Perfumo and Babington, two of the most talented players who played in the World Cup of 1974 in Germany, confessed that they did not know how to play because they were more preoccupied with how their opponents played than with their own tactics. Babington said that it was necessary “to have clear ideas about our style, we need a plan reflecting our idiosyncrasy, our ability and technique, combined with more dynamics and rhythm” (El Gráfico, June 9, 1974, p. 3). In the long article there was a consensus between players and journalists on the right strategy: an imperious need to return to the sources of Argentine style based on dribbling and virtuosity. It was emphasized that Argentina, a world power in exporting players, should now concentrate on its own possibilities, creating a process that would culminate in winning the title in 1978.

In October 1974, César Luis Menotti was appointed national coach. He had been a talented inside left: languid, tall, elegant, and very technical, a scorer with great vision. He started his career with Rosario Central, a traditional team from the city of Rosario, with great success. Later he moved to Buenos Aires and played on two important teams: the Racing Club in 1964 and the Boca Juniors in 1965. His time at Boca was very problematic. His style, based on a slow tempo and elegant touches, did not fit very well with the kick-and-run tactics that has always characterized the Boca Juniors. Like many Argentine players, he too had an international career. In 1967, as a true pioneer, he joined the Generals of New York and in 1969, he joined the famous Santos of Brazil, the mythical team of Pelé (Gasparini and Ponsico 1983).

Menotti coached Huracán in 1973, when the club won its first national title playing what Argentine football lovers perceived as the typical national
style. He understood that a clear philosophy was needed. Menotti was educated, having spent two years as a university student. He was politically engaged, a member of the Communist Party, and, above all, very articulate. He was able to create a discourse about the relationship between the historical roots of football and national identity. Moreover, to accept the post of national coach was in accordance with the political strategy of the Communist Party, which was more opposed to the guerrilla groups than to the junta. After so many failures, the public expected a kind of messiah, and he was prepared to perform this role. In a long interview in *El Gráfico*, Menotti summarized his football philosophy in a few principles:

1. Talent and technical ability should predominate over physicality and power.
2. A dialectical articulation between bodily and mental speed was needed: he did not want players running without thinking or thinking without running.
3. A flexible system of zonal and man-to-man marking was the best defensive strategy.
4. Attacking with two wings and one center-forward was the best response to the system 4–4–2 imposed by the Brazilians and followed by so many teams.
5. Continuity, as exemplified by the Dutch in the 1970s, was crucial: possession should be regained as soon as possible after the ball is lost.
6. A sense of belonging to a football tradition with great heroes was important for the players. (August 1, 1975, p. 2)

He decided to select the best established players and also to give opportunities to a lot of talents playing in the provincial leagues. His project was defined as a “national enterprise” and he deliberately constructed a national squad, including players from the interior. He also began systematic work with the youth national team that culminated in victory in the prestigious Toulon Cup in France in 1975. In this tournament Tarantini, Gallego, Passarella, and Valencia, who were to join the national team in 1978, were outstanding figures. He insisted that football was only a sport, and that his work was carried out in order to defend the prestige of Argentine football traditions. He said that “playing we do not defend our borders, the Motherland, the flag. With the national team nothing essentially patriotic dies or is saved” (*El Gráfico*, April 19, 1977, p. 65). The systematic preparation of the national team lasted almost four years. Menotti was even successful in persuading the Argentine Football Association in October 1976 to ban the selling of Argentine players to foreign clubs. Menotti experimented with many players, and he was confident of reaching 1978 with the majority of them playing in Argentina. This was achieved, and the only one selected from outside the country for 1978 was
Kempes, who at that moment was playing for Valencia in Spain. In four years he was able to form a dedicated group of young players with the mission of becoming world champions.

For Argentine football supporters and the media, winning the World Cup was seen, paradoxically, given the political context, as an act of redemption and justice. In El Gráfico, Onesime wrote that on the day of the finals “justice was achieved with great transparency . . . Argentina was World Champion for the first time” (June 27, 1978, p. 23). In a special issue of the magazine, the importance of a dream transformed into reality was emphasized; the national side played in the style people liked (la nuestra) against Holland, which represented modern and functional European football. Once more, the technique and ability of the Creole players (jugadores criollos) were hailed as being superior to the robotic Dutch way of playing (El Gráfico, June 30, 1978, p. 58). The attempt by Menotti to create a national discourse based on tradition, cultural continuity, and a return to the sources was undoubtedly successful. Menotti repeated time and time again throughout 1978 and 1979 that the best way of understanding the triumph was to see it as a tribute to “our old and loved football” (El Gráfico, June 26, 1979, p. 63). He constantly denied that he created a Menotti style. He was just recapturing the memory of the people and their love for “the inner nature of the Argentine football player: his creativity” (Viva, May 19, 1988, p. 54). He recreates a history of purity through an explicit ancestral cult, that of the great Argentine players who pursued success with fantasy, imagination, and a sense of duty.

Menotti, in spite of his exaggerated modesty, was declared the “master of the victory,” because he initiated and brought to conclusion a long process based on continuity and a profound respect for the qualities of his selected players. The daily Clarín, in an editorial note the day after the final, wrote that the plan of Menotti’s was seen as unachievable madness. To believe that it was possible to build a competitive side taking as the premise the qualities of the Argentine player. To play well and to win . . . during this process of searching for a distinct style was a hard struggle. . . . For four years the team played well and not so well. Won and lost. But the religion of ability and touch was accepted by all the players. . . . Now the victory covers all the moments of darkness. Argentine football is the best in the World . . . but the achievement of Menotti is great. His style won. His convictions won. It is possible to be World Champions with technical and attacking players. Argentine football will always be remembered for this triumph. (June 26, 1978, p. 15)

Years later, it was clear that Menotti, a progressive figure, desperately tried to rationalize the success, searching in the history of football and not in current
political history for categories and concepts to interpret the joyful events. He developed a clear ideological standpoint: politics is based on hypocrisy and tricks; his "philosophy of football" tried to demonstrate the importance of playing with generosity, creativity, and honesty, and without tricks. Football, then, in a difficult period of Argentine history, could be perceived as a performative field crossed by "permanent" values of decency. Menotti observed the following eight years later:

Many people would say that I have coached teams during times of dictatorship, in an epoch when Argentina had governments with which I had nothing in common and, moreover, which contradicted my way of life. And I ask myself, should I have done that, should I have coached teams that played badly, that based everything on tricks that betrayed the feeling of the people? No, of course not.... We were conscious, and we knew all the time that we were playing for the people. A people, that in this moment in Argentina, needed a new point of departure to do something different together.... We tried to play in the best way possible, because we understood that we were obliged to give back to the people the spectacle of football. To give it back through victory, if this was possible, but, after all, through the pleasure of playing honest football. Each of us had an order when we went on the field on the day of the final: to look at the people in the stand. We are not going to look up to the authorities in the VIP box, I said to the players, we are going to look into the stands, to all the people, where each of our fathers perhaps is sitting, because there we will find the metal workers, the butchers, the bakers, and the taxi drivers. (Menotti 1986, 27)

For the junta it was clear: the victory articulated the excellence of the nation and the importance of staying together, like the national team, against all kinds of enemy. Football was defined as a privileged arena as far as patriotism was concerned. Videla proclaimed four days after the final that the “triumph was obtained with capacity, courage, and discipline” and not, as Menotti stated, with “technical ability.” Furthermore, it was even more important to observe the joy and enthusiasm of the people, and this “could be seen as a profound wish for national unity felt by all Argentines.” The World Cup expressed the “purist sentiments because they are the best proof of our identity and our will to win. The entire nation has triumphed” (Clarin, June 29, 1978, p. 15). Menotti used the category “people” instead of “nation.” Nation relates to traditional Argentine nationalism, while people relates to a left-populist discourse. In a note published on the day of the final in Clarín, Menotti wrote that he dreamed of a victory that belonged to one alone: the Argentine people (not the nation) (June 25, 1978, p. 6).
However, despite this difference, the patriotic tales of the junta joined the essentialist narrative of Menotti in a symphony of victory. It was accepted that the Argentines, governed by the rules of fear and repression, also participated in the feast. Claudio Tamburrini, an imprisoned political activist, student of philosophy, and professional football player who escaped from a house of detention in March 1978 (see Tamburrini 2002), wrote the following twenty years later:

What is the fascination of sport that makes it possible for torturers and tortured to embrace each other after the goals scored by the national team? During the 1978 World Cup, the Argentines—including myself—replaced the critical political judgement of the situation of the country with sporting euphoria. Sports, in particular, football, produce passions. Passions don't always help when decisions are made. To support the national side of a country that is subjected to a dictatorship is an example of a costly irrationality, but perhaps salutary for a people. Given the imperfectability of life and history, it is perhaps rational to celebrate football triumphs alongside a society’s concrete political context. Argentines should commemorate the title again... Luque, Fillol, Kempes, and Bertoni, together with the other heroes of 1978, should return to the River Plate stadium. Now they will be the undisputable champions. This time, Videla is in prison. (Perfil, June 12, 1998, p. 14)

Tamburrini indicates the paradoxes, contradictions, and moral ambivalences that the World Cup brought about in Argentina. In the next section I shall show that football in Argentina is a crucial field for gaining a better understanding of some of the dilemmas experienced by the main actors engaged in the drama of 1978.

**EPILLOGUE: TWENTY-FIVE YEARS ON AND MORAL AMBIVALENCE**

On June 19, 2003, I was present at a commemorative act organized by the University of Belgrano in Buenos Aires, at which the key invited participants were two of the best Argentine players from the 1978 final: Bertoni and Larroza. The idea was to discuss with the students the importance of the country’s first World Cup victory. There was not a large audience, which initially surprised both of the players, who had expected a packed and admiring crowd. Their reactions as the event proceeded, however, were different. Bertoni said that he was not surprised, because what characterized Argentina was “a lack of mem-
ory, or, better, the fact that we have a short memory." Larrosa agreed with him but speculated that the students were reticent perhaps because they “had a great deal of memory.” I asked him to develop this statement. Larrosa explained that the victory was obtained in a difficult political context, that there were allegations that the military junta paid some of the Peruvian players in the quarter final match that Argentina won 6–0, and that Maradona, the superb player who dominated world football in the 1980s, was not chosen by Menotti at the last minute. In other words, the victory was a locus of polemics and moral ambivalence. Later in the debate, both players were asked to comment on their reactions to the indiscriminate and unjust repression launched by the junta. They emphatically denied any knowledge of it, maintaining that football was not politics, and that they played and represented the people and not the military—an argument reminiscent of Menotti.

Democracy returned to Argentina in 1983. All of the members of the junta and many prominent military figures were arrested and brought to justice. The atrocities were open to public scrutiny. It was obvious that Menotti and the players could no longer remain silent. The majority chose Menotti’s explanation: they represented the people, and they played for the people. Moreover, they also said that, like the majority of Argentines, they did not know the scale and brutality of the military and paramilitary forces. In 2000, Ricardo Villa, another important player from the 1978 squad, who later had success in England playing for Tottenham Hotspur, agreed to discuss the World Cup with Tati Almeida, a mother from the Plaza de Mayo, who had lost her son Alejandro on July 17, 1975. Villa said that he agreed to the meeting because he did not feel that he was an accomplice of the military. He was a footballer who unfortunately lived in a terrible epoch of Argentine history. “Now,” he says, “I feel that I would have liked to fight for a better country.” Even he admits that if he had known what was going on, he would have declined to join the Argentina team, like the captain, Carrascosa, who refused to play in the World Cup finals but never presented clear arguments why he made that decision. Almeida admitted that she wanted Argentina to win. She also wished that her son, Alejandro, had been alive to be together with so many young people in the public feast that followed the final. Villa concluded the dialogue, saying,

we are talking about a horrific period. Today I realize that we were used to [giving] joy to the people. But I don’t like the fact that we, the players, are represented as sons of the military Junta, because I assure you that I did not know what was going on then. As the years went by, I became aware that I had been deceived, but this had not been difficult: I was a player who just wanted to be a world champion. (Clarín Deportivo, June 26, 2000, pp. 12-13)
With the arrival of democracy in the 1980s, Villa decided to become active in local politics. He joined the social-democratic Radical Party. In 1990, he was elected and presided for many years in the municipal council of his town, Roque Pérez.

Villa’s later political commitment is exceptional, but he is not the only player to exercise self-criticism. Oscar Ortiz, one of the most regular players during the championship and a dedicated socialist, declared, “I would have swapped the title we won to stop what happened during the military dictatorship. But it must be clear that it was not our fault, we were not the cause of the tyranny,” adding that even civil society and the political leaders had been more responsible by passively accepting the coup d’état. He feels that too much blame has been put on the players because, as many argue, the match against Peru was fixed by the junta, and the team played to “wash the face of the military.” But this is wrong: Ortiz insists, “We were not the champions of the dictatorship, we just happened to be champions during it, and we played good football” (Veintitrés, June 26, 2003, pp. 78–79). Menotti supported Ortiz’s reasoning when he asked rhetorically, “Why is there so much criticism of the team and not of the entrepreneurs, the media, or the politicians” (La Nación Deportiva, June 25, 2003, p. 3). In the interview, he insisted that on the day of the final he ordered all of the players to ignore the junta. He emphasized that they belonged to a football tradition with a certain style, and that their main purpose should be to defend Argentine football history (La Nación Deportiva, June 25, 2003, p. 3). He pleaded for a better understanding of what happened in 1978: “Without minimizing the dictatorship, it is important to keep the World Cup in its real context” (Página 12, June 15, 2003, p. 20).

The players and Menotti are not exceptional in their arguments. This appeal to Argentine ignorance has been described as dialectical, “the show of horror and the myth of innocence” (see González Bombal 1988; Novaro and Palermo 2003). From the second half of 1982 onward, the revelation of the scope of torture and murder was such that after a few months of incredulity there followed a general indignation and repulsion about what the military had done since 1976. The complex mechanism of denial built up by the repressors, the lack of witnesses, and indeed the extreme nature of the cruelty conditioned the skepticism of public opinion. This was slowly undone by hard evidence, and a feeling of guilt came over the nation. How had it been possible to ignore what was being done by the military and other repressive forces? The fear and terror were, together with the supporting role of the media, important factors in creating passivity and a lack of interest. Villa, Ortiz, and the rest of the players were part of a people that preferred to adhere to the logic of innocence. It is clear now that the military years provoked in Argentina an extreme situation of social alienation (see Vezzetti 2002).
I have shown in this chapter that the genuine passion for football in Argentina was articulated in a double discourse: the narrative of tradition and style of play and the ideology of a nation fighting a just war against communism and subversion. Julio Marini writes that the main dilemma twenty-five years on is how to understand a popular love for a sport in the midst of a “cruel time.” He describes the engagement of the supporters inside and outside the stadium, of those without knowledge of what was going on and of the others who ignored it. He even points out the most blatant of the paradoxes: the prisoners listened to the radio and showed sincere joy on the day of the final (Clarín Deportivo, June 25, 2003, p. 7). The story of Captain “Tiger” Acosta, one of the most violent torturers of the navy, has entered Argentine mythology. He is said to have entered a room after the final because the prisoners were shouting, “We won, we won,” and then participated himself in this authentic and spontaneous display of euphoria. As an example of his cruelty, it is said that he took a group of prisoners out in a car so that they could see with their own eyes that the people did not care about them or human rights. They just cared about the World Cup. One of the victims told journalist Fernández Moore that she asked Acosta to open the roof of the car to have a better view of the masses in the streets. And when he had done this, she thought about screaming that she was one of “the disappeared,” held in a secret place. But she realized that this was pointless, because the people would just think that she was a crazy woman in the middle of the national carnival (Fernández Moore, 2003, 11).

Writer Alfredo Leuco provocatively acknowledged that in full knowledge of the junta’s atrocities—he had friends who had disappeared—he participated in the celebrations in the streets. He writes:

The dictatorship tarnished the history of Argentina with blood. But neither the ball was stained, nor the supporters. . . . Football is not the opium of the masses. . . . I would even argue the contrary. Football mobilizes a collective creativity, harvests multitudes that unify interests and goals, democratizes class relations. . . . It is the expression of what we are and what we have. . . . Twenty years have passed since one of the most cruel paradoxes was lived out in this country. The happiness of being world champions combined with the painful tears of thousands of Argentines who died in the prisons. The passion and the horror together. . . . Football and death playing the same match on a field called Argentina. (Página 12, June 25, 2003, p. 21)

It is clear that the 1978 victory will always be perceived as being morally difficult, generating the ambiguities and ambivalences that I have been able to present. Larrosa was one of the organizers of the commemorative event twenty-five
years after the success. The day chosen was July 9, 2003, the day of the national independence, the location River Plate stadium. At the University of Belgrano he emphasized the generous attitude of the committee: “The celebration was not only for the triumph of 1978 but also a tribute to Argentine football.” In this way, it had operated within the ideological framework developed many years before by Menotti. The testimonial match, he said, would be played by old and young players who had represented Argentina in different World Cups and international competitions. He told us that the Argentine Football Association had even commissioned the delivery of medals to such charismatic players as Batistuta and Simeone. Maradona had also been invited, and he had promised to come from Cuba. Sixty thousand were expected, but only 9,000 found their way to the stands. It was a sad day for the heroes of 1978. The people they represented did not bother. Maradona did not leave La Havana, and even Kempes, the greatest player of the tournament, did not come. Everyone just ignored them. They were part of history; they were, in many ways, the players of a match between football and death. They symbolized a traumatic epoch that will never be forgotten and in the middle of which they are like a dark diamond, the names and bodies of the first great victory of Argentine football.

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