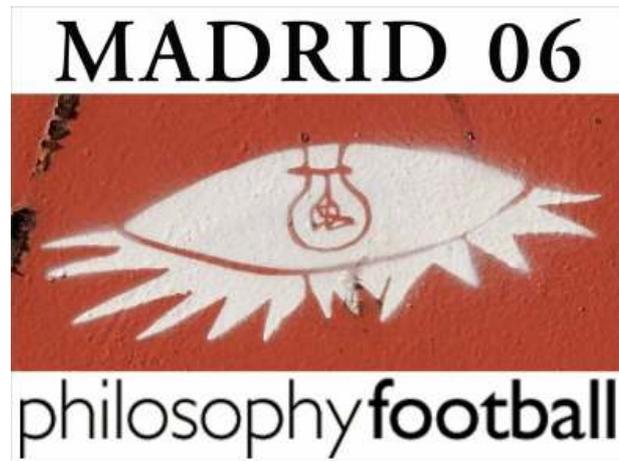


Madrid, no pasarán



Well, David, listen, I said – Filippo said – this coming Saturday a bunch of English lads will come to Madrid, playing a friendly at Real’s training pitch. They play their home games, in London, at Hackney Marshes – you know, Filippo explained to us, I thought I catch his attention with some reference to his origin in Leytonstone – and, David, they would be mightily chuffed if you would turn up. So what do you think? Playing against a Spanish team? Beckham asked – Filippo said. They will have their work, ahem, cut, ahem, underneath their, ahem, legs? Beckham said and smiled. He always smiles, you know, he is such a nice guy – Filippo said – no, really, such a nice, pleasant guy, but as he smiles to every question it doesn’t mean much, so I gave it another try and phoned his agent, and said to him, listen, this morning I spoke with David, at the training ground, explaining him this visit of some English lads, you know, and so on and so forth, and the agent said: And what did he say? Well, he smiled, I said – Filippo said. Well, there you have it, the agent answered, and then, sadly, I knew it, he wouldn’t come, Filippo finished.

And lo and behold, he didn’t come on Saturday; but who needs Beckham, if one looks forward to playing on Real Madrid’s training ground, against the brother of Sergio Ramos who, as I, in my ignorance, only realised later, plays as well with Real – Sergio, that is, not his brother, who – the brother, not Sergio – turned out to be quite a different character, in more than one respect.

The date for this international football summit in November 2006 was known long in advance but R. and I – as Geoff rightly said: with untypical Swiss spontaneity – only decided to join

the party on Wednesday before the Friday, booking a flight with Swiss, our battered airline in German hands which has improved a little bit as of late, because the dreadful sandwiches have been replaced by a lukewarm piece of pizza. Madrid didn't receive us very friendly: like provincial people coming to town – what we are, in effect – we were fleeced by the taxi driver from the airport to the hotel, who muttered something about the money he had lost because of blocked streets and terrible traffic and about half a dozen hungry children at home. On the other hand, the hotel was a pleasant surprise, with its central location, near to the Royal Palace; recently modernised with a design which combines moderate avant-garde with some fretsaw work to astonishingly pleasant effect – only the freestanding washbasin did get its balance between aesthetics and functionality not quite right – and the breakfast buffet was really a treat.



25 people had arrived in the colours of Philosophy Football FC, which came in two shapes, one young, hungry and lean, the other one mature and, well, ..., Cornish Al effortlessly bridging the gap between the two groups and cultures; a couple of players would later fly in from Rome. Al, recently married, whom I still can't visualise as a barrister in robe and wig in front of judge and jury, had decided to come on short notice as well, sneaking away in the middle of a process for which he still needed to prepare his speech over the weekend, a process concerning the eviction of a tenant from a flat in the Docklands as he told us with somewhat bad conscience. Geoff, obviously, was waiting in the wings of the hotel, circumspect as always, but under some strain, because once again involved in one of his innumerable moves between Wales, England and Italy. The rest of the team was already established at the *tapas bar* which served beer as well, so for the younger members of the team somewhat absorbing a possible culture shock.

From the *Legends*, I recognised Joe from Cardiff, in the meantime father of two, and he gave me useful tips how to follow the forthcoming *ashes* via internet, and realistic odds on the English team, i.e. very high ones; Paul was here, our former imperturbable skipper, and, conspicuously, Brian, towering over friend and foe in many a battle. At the diner, the tables

groaned under the weight of the food, meat in all shapes and forms and tastes, *Jamon, Jamon*, which overpowered even me as a renowned carnivore. Filippo, living in Madrid for just nine months, lively and eloquent as always, reported about his protracted negotiations with Becks and the relevant authorities of Real Madrid. Was there a hint to be detected that the game against the Spanish journalists was not yet fully secured and in the bag? No, of course nothing of the kind was to be detected. On the other hand, well, the promised tickets to Real's game on Sunday, well, they were somewhere in the pipeline, but it needed some further negotiations and persuasions, but, *don't worry, chaps*. In the meantime Neil, my legendary partner upfront who in one season scored 40 goals in 13 games, arrived, and he wanted to propose a toast to the *young fellas*, and another one, and another one, because his cunning plan involved drinking his younger opponents under the table or into oblivion in the night before the game.

On Friday, the rain hadn't bothered us too much, but on Saturday we looked somewhat concerned towards Spain's clouded sky. Nevertheless, early in the morning, in drizzling rain, we began the forward march to our cultural programme, at the *Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia*, only, when passing an equestrian statue, to get an erudite lecture by one of the *Current Stars* about how the number of legs a horse keeps on the grounds will indicate

how it died, say: reared died heroically in ground and one meant: died during deed, and four legs meant it died peacefully out to grass – which probable for the times statues were erected, that I, in the now quite didn't quite catch the the number of legs



up on two legs meant: battle; three legs on the delicate in the air another honourable plump on the ground in the stables, being put seemed to me not very in which equestrian but it was quite possible strongly falling drizzle, drift of the story, and symbolised the way the

rider of the horse had died; as all this knowledge had been gleaned during the recent World Cup in Germany I marvelled about the things one can learn on a football tour. By the way, the same *Star* identified, during a side trip to Zurich, this town as one of the most beautiful in Europe, especially when driving a *pedalo boat* on the lake, and I can confirm that praising the

lake of Zurich, indeed, is an esteemed cultural tradition, whereas the fun of riding a pedalo boat might have to be resurrected from its slightly musty image.

Anyway, whereas one part of the team marched, happily chatting, towards its goal, another group seemed slightly at a loss, and a third part of the party was completely lost, as it had been *very* late the evening before. Neil, indeed, had succeeded in staying with three Current Stars till the bitter end, but there was some *collateral damage* which he covered with a heroic silence.



At the *Museo Nacional* we entered the glass lifts, mandatory for all modish buildings, which brought us to the floor which hosted Picasso's *Guernica*.



776 to 349 centimetres, it hung in a huge room on its own, with a red cord to keep the public at some distance. Reverently we looked the reared-up horse into its dying eyes, took in the dismembered, screaming corpses, tried to follow the fading light of hope in the painfully crooked fist *into the open*. How can one describe a painting which has been described many times before, for instance in another masterpiece of the century, as a symbol of horror and inferno: «steeply the arms stuck out of flaming prongs, the overlong neck, the upwardly stretched chin, the features twisted in horror, the body shrunk to a pin, charred, hurled into the air by the heat of the furnace», and at the same time, «ambiguous, like the components of

poetry» offering another reading, «to see in the bull the durability of the Spanish people, and in the one-eyed, rigidly hatched stallion the hated war, forced upon by Fascism.»

Nevertheless, I felt more reverential, conditioned by cultural and historical knowledge, than really stunned; the painting seemed rather well-worn, mummified, enshrined, as classic works of art tend to become.* More lively, and more forceful, were the drafts, in which Picasso probed some of his figures, motives and parts, in immediate grasp, not yet finished, cut short or exaggerated into grotesque forms. Forceful as well, in another room, a tour through Spanish surrealism, from playful Joan Miró to some more realistic painters whose names, sadly, didn't mean anything to me and which I would have to reconstruct via *google*.



Culturally satisfied, we solved the question of our stomachs with some sandwiches with lots of meat, *Jamon, Jamon*, and despite all the shenanigans of the night, everybody was on time to embark on our very own team coach. Captain Ally led from the front, Big Brian secured the flank, and somewhere at the rear an unmistakably greyish head is, just, visible. Real Madrid's training ground lays to the North of the capital, in the Never-Neverland of a lunar landscape, connected via a main road leading out of town, on which some persistent fans undertook their pilgrimage in the abating drizzle. From

the canteen, functional, austere, we detected the pitch on which we would, in short, give our entrance. Finally, we were allowed to enter the dressing rooms. They were functional, austere. What did we expect at a training camp? The glory and the pomp of the Bernabeu? No. Yes.





Having barely warmed up, with undue haste the first game was started, and it was the inner-philosophical tug of war between *Legends* and *Current Stars*. Neil performed in front of a highly bemused referee a stirring rendition of a *haka*, but then some of his strength seemed to somewhat desert him after his adventures just hours before kick-off. The *Current Stars*, which we had been able to contain some months ago in a clash in London, surprised us with their speed and snappy attacks and deservedly took the lead. But with time the *Legends* held their ground, equalising when Luigi delivered a corner into the box where I desperately threw myself towards the ball and redirected it with the faintest of touches into the far corner, and only losing in the dying minutes of the game and the embers of our strength. The following game between Philosophy Football's *Legends* and a team of Spanish journalists with some mercenaries from the *Guardian* and the *Sun* pitched, once again, two different attitudes against each other, the slick continental passing game and some robust English challenges and deft tackles. Filippo had warned us that every physical contact would be deemed as a foul, but even so, after we had fallen behind because of a well-crafted goal by the Spaniards, even I was surprised when the referee blew his whistle after an innocuous challenge in our penalty area with following dive and awarded a penalty. The *Legends* put one back after another free-kick by Luigi found its way through all the incoming traffic in the box into the goal. Some minutes later we were again two goals in arrear. Game over, so it seemed, but then the *kulturkampf*, somewhat surprisingly, erupted in earnest. Sergio Ramos's brother, massive, but not very talented, as it seemed to my eye, but all the time moaning about real and imagined

fouls, all of a sudden tried a head-butt on Big Brian, only to meet his shoulder, which resulted in some pushing and huffing, and one or two of the following tackles by Philosophers, more agricultural than philosophical, didn't help in pacifying our hosts. In this somewhat heated atmosphere it was nearly lost that someone, somehow, managed to pull one back for the *Legends*; some minutes later Brian advances for a corner, called for the ball as he rose and equalised with a point-blank header. Later still, Joe rushed unstoppably over half the pitch but dragged his shot marginally wide; only for a late fourth goal to crudely crush us.



Anyhow, the victory had sapped the energy from the Spanish team, so the *Current Stars* of Philosophy Football, thanks to goals by Eric and our evergreen Cornish AI, secured a deserved 3:1-victory against them and the coveted win of the first philosophical tournament on Iberian soil.** Finally, the powerful vocal – mainly female – support, who endured all the slings and arrows of the rain in Spain on the terraces, could return

to the warmer climes of the canteen, whereas Brian could look after his hand which had doubled its size. Incredible what the skin is capable of absorbing before it cracks. The head-butt to his shoulder he found as outrageous as ridiculous, but that an opponent stepped onto his hand he declared magnanimously to be an accident. The *Current Stars* celebrated their victory, whereas I pondered how to unite footballers of all countries might be not much less difficult than another Internationale.





In the evening, Alan and Little Bryan paraded their kilts with only the smallest hint of irony through Madrid where it still rained. In the restaurant, lots of meat was joined by lots of fish. The following events can best be documented with one picture but no more words.



On Sunday, under a still cloudy but dry Spanish sky, R. and I went strolling through Rastro. Jumble sales will tell you quite a lot about cultures and social situations, but we didn't quite escape football because one of the biggest attractions was the place where football pictures were bartered by kids accompanied by their even more excitable parents.



Most of the other philosophers, however, assembled in the lobby of the hotel to work out a strategy to get hold of the disappeared tickets to the Real-game in the afternoon, and opened a war chest with a not inconsiderable amount in it. I decided, after some deliberation and hesitation, to quit this game. Once upon a time, in my bygone youth, I had been interested in Madrid's Royal club, but with time one learns and begins to support Barcelona, the real People's club, because Real went to bed with Fascism, and in the last year has disintegrated into a dysfunctional ensemble of stars (think of another royal family), although, Ronaldo, if he plays, still has my support, as a sort of honorary baby-boomer, and even R. would have asked Beckham for an autograph if he would have turned up at our game.*** But now, in Madrid, to wait for half a day, or to help Filippo in his tireless quest to secure the tickets, or to be fleeced on the black market (remember the taxi driver), and then to watch a game, in the drizzle and cold, from the threehundredandseventh row, a game in which I would not be able to invest any personal emotion and which would consist of two halves of static football, and then to go to a restaurant and to buzz around a footballer

who might or might not be coming to the same restaurant, surely crowded by male and female groupies – frankly, I felt too old for this kind of exercise, so we choose a tranquil stroll through one of the Royal parks and some further culture. Only to learn later, that the delayed tickets were purchased at normal price, with seats in the seventh row,



and furthermore to see our star defender talking shop with another defender, who,



just a few days later, was voted European Footballer of the Year, controversially, but nevertheless**** – surely, I had to throw a somewhat melancholy glance onto my absence at the Bernabeu.

We left Madrid as we had entered it, because I forgot my purse in the taxi which brought us to the airport; but after a phone call to the hotel the taxi driver was tracked down and brought the purse back to the hotel, from where it returned to me via London. Sometimes this our world staggers reluctantly into its proper orbit again.

* A few weeks after our return from Madrid, the BBC, in its series *The Power of Art* by Simon Schama, was broadcasting a programme about Picasso's *Guernica*, in which Schama celebrated his usual mixture of enthusiastic knowledge and psychological populism. A week before his programme on Picasso, he had spoken about Jacques Louis David's *The Death of Marat*, condemning the politicising of art, but in the first instance, once again, demonstrating the slightly neurotic attitude of English intellectuals towards the French revolution. Now, he proclaimed *Guernica*, a politicised work of art if ever there has been one, to be a masterpiece of modernity, because it penetrates in his view the whole century and exceeds the political. As is his forte Schama described eloquently some elements of the painting and its domestic background in Picasso's real and emotional household. During his lecture something strange happened to me. The painting on TV, in front of a completely blackened background, totally on its own, without the distraction of the room, the visitors, the security cord, took on a new urgency which I hadn't been able to detect in the original, real painting. Might the aura of art been transformed into its technically reproduced and concentrated form, I considered? Or then again, I might only have stumbled onto the limits of looking at art in community with a lot of other people.

** There exists a picture of the victorious *Current Stars* but it is suppressed as a protest against the complete absence of pictures showing the *Legends*.

*** Good luck, David, in the USA, where Posh, at least, obviously belongs.

**** What can one say about Italian football, with its scandals and corruption and right-wing violence? It is a conundrum which even Filippo has not been able to explain to us.