Camus and Zidane Offer Views on How Things End - New York Times

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BERLIN In "The Stranger," the existentialist novel by Albert Camus, an alienated French-Algerian man, Meursault, kills an Arab on the beach in the glare of the sunlight. It is a senseless act, as senseless as the way he fires one deadly shot, and then four more into the prone body.

Zinédine Zidane, a Frenchman born to Algerian parents in Marseille, did not kill anyone in the glare of the floodlights of Berlin’s Olympic Stadium. His senseless act, beneath the gaze of a billion people, merely knocked an Italian off his feet. All that Zidane killed was a certain narrative of his life.

As he awaits his execution, Meursault reflects on his deed: "As if that blind rage had washed me clean, rid me of hope, for the first time, in that night alive with signs and stars, I opened myself to the gentle indifference of the world. Finding it so like myself - so like a brother, really - I felt that I had been happy and was happy again."

A man about to be executed should not be happy. Or so we believe. A footballer, the greatest of his generation, captaining in reality, and not merely in virtual reality - knocked Materazzi off his feet. Provoked, somehow, he acted with what looked like blind rage.

Camus, writing during World War II, the son of a man killed in World War I, captured a 20th-century senselessness in his story of a man driven to an irrational act for which he feels no remorse, for which in fact he feels nothing. The story of Zidane in the World Cup final is also a story of his age.

Of all the planetary audience for the final, the only ones who did not know what had happened were those in the stadium. Because the defining act of the match, and perhaps the tournament, took place far from the ball, only those with access to television replays could see Zidane down Marco Materazzi.

As a result, tens of thousands of spectators, those actually watching the game in real life, had to resort to calling or texting friends, often in faraway places like the United States or Japan, to find out what was happening in Berlin. Why was Zidane, the resurgent French hero, walking with a bowed head from the field?

Because the fourth official had, according to FIFA, seen Zidane do what he did. Not on video, FIFA insists, but in real life. It is then a fact that in the 110th minute, Zidane - in reality, and not merely in virtual reality - knocked Materazzi off his feet. Provoked, somehow, he acted with what looked like blind rage.
Zidane chose his fate. We all do, or so Camus believed. Zidane chose his moment, 10 minutes before the end of his career. What he could not determine was what would happen afterward in the age of the global conversation.

Already, theories are swirling, a planetary fog of electronic opinion arising from an act virtually nobody who was there saw. Lip-readers and others claim to know what Materazzi said. Zidane's agent is promising a revelation.

Some defend Zidane, or even perceive a certain elegance in his head butt. Others recoil in horror or anger. One or two hail Zidane's cosmic joke. Jacques Chirac, the French president, thanks Zidane for what he has done for France and for showing "the greatest human qualities." Zizou wins the Golden Ball award for best player.

On my World Cup blog (blogs.iht.com/worldcupcohen), I have been deluged with mail about the incident. Jessica Torres wrote from Dallas, Texas: "Two minutes before his fall from grace I was sure he was going to go down in history as a man full of honor, grace and control and take his place with the greats. And then he re-wrote his own destiny. But his actions also made me love him more. Before he was a god. But then he showed us all that he was just a man. A man with weakness and hate."

She concluded: "I am much more affected by him than I would have been had things gone as I hoped. But, my Lord, was that head butt sexy."

Another correspondent, writing from Oakland, California, said: "I think Zidane's performance has always been about controlling rage and focusing it, in one way or another. It was, most of the time, a beautiful thing to behold."

The comment continued: "The zone out of which Zidane's football brilliance came was likely some kind of deeply personal state that he indulged and called upon. Zidane believed that he could do impossible things, or that impossible things could flow out of him if he gave himself over to this state."

Certainly, Zidane was in a place denied most mortals during the French victory over Brazil. His smile was that of a man seeing things others could not. And it is true that he could give the impression that the ball was propelled not precisely by him, but by some force emanating from him.

Camus was averse to judgment. Acts themselves, explicable or not, were all that we could know existed. Meursault felt nothing at his mother's funeral and he killed the Arab in the stunning sunlight. We may wish that the story had been otherwise - as we may wish that love not be close to hate - but the story was what it was.

Zidane, it seems, lost his head. Or perhaps he kept his head and chose to write a coda to his story that would have all the complexity of a great novel. Perhaps he sought an almost unseen act of anger that would prompt a global, virtual argument about the merits or demerits of a gesture without sense.

I do not know. Nor do I believe we will ever know. Whatever comes out will remain inconsequential beside the act itself, this violence in a 21st-century glare, this strange and stimulating ending.

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Tomorrow: Jane Perlez on a second chance for East Timor.
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