BEAUTIFUL PAIRING OR DOOMED EXPERIMENT? A DREAMER AND A CYNIC TAKE SIDES.

THE

NOTHING

THAT IS NOT THERE

by ROWAN RICARDO PHILLIPS
Do we really learn more about others from our deeply ingrained compulsion to compare, which has been innate in us from the time God portioned the flailing chaos of the void into manageable ideas of darkness and light, day and night, sky and sea, fish, fowl, flora, firmament, and mankind? Do we actually understand ourselves better because of that trick of the mind that we call weeks, or have we simply learned to shape our lives within the weeks that we have created—this week better than last, always having next week, another rejuvenating Monday to look forward to? Does night seem to haunt us because we live in the light of day? Do we know peace better because we say we abhor war?

Compare, compare, compare, compare. Why would soccer be any different? With its cyclical calendar and outsized passions, something about the game constantly edges its followers toward the most feral and least logical comparisons. Maradona and Pelé not only played in different eras, they played under differing sets of tactical atmospheres: the 1958 and 1986 World Cups, watched one after the other, seem paintings of the same landscape composed by artists centuries apart. The threat of a footballing void, an emptiness felt for not being able to bring something of ourselves into the ongoing debates of this great game, encourages us to go all in with what we have. And therein lies the greatest damage that comparisons inflict upon our impressions of the game: They subordinate beauty to self-reference.

But this, I have read time and again, is the attraction of the game. That its observations transcend eras and knit for pensive spectators a flag for them to wave. Comparison becomes the easiest way to mark your territory in the world of soccer—the easiest, yes, but also perhaps the least earnest. Hence, year after year a little spark of life would leak out of me as I withdrew argument after argument about Maradona vs. Platini, Gullit vs. Matteus, Romario vs. Baggio, Rivaldo vs. Zidane. I have always been more interested in tactics and first touches than in bloated questions like whoever the best player in the world may be. For those who love these games of head vs. wall, the Leo Messi/Cristiano Ronaldo debate has been a veritable gold mine: two players who exist in their own stratosphere, play in the same league, and possess such different styles that one must be a fundamentalist of the final outcome—the goal—to appreciate equally in both players the processes they use to get there. For those in love with these comparisons, the satisfaction of having found a perfect one extends beyond this moment. I cannot help but feel that there is a joy in having found a stance for the rest of one’s life, an identity—as though no matter what happens in the succeeding years, no pairing of players will be as great as these two. These fans have found the Pelé vs. Maradona of their time, and they will hold on to them for all they’re worth, having by then forgotten all of the failed courtships before: Messi and Robinho, Messi and Robben, Messi and Sneijder, Messi and Rooney. Like men and women who have settled down to marry, “No, no,” they will claim, “those others meant nothing to me… This is what I’m all about, this is what I have been looking for all along.”

And then along came Neymar. You’ve no doubt noticed Messi’s ubiquity on that list of jilted lovers. Messi, you see, is a hard habit to break. And even Ronaldo’s run of form in the twilight of 2013 and the subsequent likelihood that he will win this year’s Ballon d’Or is accompanied by an inescapable feeling that he has not surpassed Messi so much as profited from Messi’s injury-caused absences and dips of form. All is fair in love and soccer, so good for him. But is Ronaldo doing anything other than what he has done in seasons past, only now out of Messi’s eclipsing shadow? Is he the better player now, or is he the better player playing? Messi, you see, is a hard habit to break. But Neymar, that wisp of a player, all hair, feints, and technique, presents challenges to Messi that not even Ronaldo can equal. Neymar is a challenge from within. Thus, if our love for comparison wins out, one will inevitably become the virus of the other.

**NEYMAR AND MESSI SHARE A LOCKER ROOM AND A PITCH, AND THERE’S ONLY ONE BALL.**

For some reason, this is supposed to be a disaster. Two players enter our mind: only one comes out. Either due to armchair psychology or the corrupting influence of endorsements and fame, the wrong loved one whispering the wrong things in the ear, something should go wrong. For soccer, if we are brave and admit it, is for the impotent fan a game of error and imprecision, our love of our teams and favorite players only equal to our fear and loathing of their rivals. So much do we thirst for comparison that we let it rob us of the great game’s true glamour, the unequaled splendor of everyone playing well, the spectators with no preexisting point to have proven, no bitter score to settle. But let’s face it. The idea of Messi “vs.” Neymar as opposed to Messi “and” Neymar is rooted in something out of either player’s control: the countries in which they were born. “Argentina vs. Brazil” rolls far more easily off the tongue when talking about soccer than “Brazil and Argentina.” In this sense, both players are pawns of our bad habit of living for conflict instead of the game. Maradona and Pelé, Beckenbauer and Cruyff, eternal rivals, gracefully swiping at each other in the press, long ago became the standard modus operandi for how we encounter canceling greatness. For soccer, embroidered in these taxing comparisons, is a game of agon and collapsing force instead of a game of empathy and angles. Neymar and Messi share a locker room and a pitch, and there’s only one ball. This must somehow be a formula for disaster. They are doomed. How can they overcome such obstacles? Players capable of beating multiple defenders while dribbling at full speed, who are just as adept at delivering final passes, are destined to have difficulty playing with each other. And, of course, great players typically hope against hope to play with lesser players so that they alone may shine.

These arguments would have us forget that Neymar and Messi do not play the same position; that for their respective national teams they have similar responsibilities and symbolic weight, but they do not play the same position. Neymar’s responsibility is to combine with the left interior, almost always Iniesta, and the left back (Alba or Adriano). Messi, meanwhile, combines on the right with Xavi and Alves, often dropping deep to triangulate with Busquets and Xavi and leave the center forward space vacant for runs from the wide attackers, including Neymar. This ceding of space and subsequent occupying of it is soccer’s true language of comparison: some spaces are better than others, some runs more dangerous, some passes more devastating. We the people sit in the din far from the pitch, merely watching, hypothesizing out of habit, and living off the scraps of a language we understand less than we think. Soccer players compare phases of space. Space equals time, and time equals opportunity. These fractions of centimeters and seconds are beyond our narrative scope but read like stanzas to the right players. Fans compare the residue of the outcome: who scored, who won, therefore X, the end. But Neymar and Messi, like most exceptional players, see the game earlier than we do. They see portions of space and time that quickly become ideas. Technique is a gift, but anticipation is the gild to that gift. The speed of the one-tos, the reaction to a defender’s movement seemingly before the defender has even moved, the slight turn of the torso in order to open up the best angle for the best pass.