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Diamantino

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Diamantino

Abstract

This is a film review of *Diamantino* (2018), directed by Gabriel Abrantes and Daniel Schmidt.



***Diamantino* (2018), directed by Gabriel Abrantes and Daniel Schmidt**

I remember, as an undergraduate, having the realization that sports and religion might be the same thing. It was probably when I was reading something like Durkheim for a method and theory class. At the time, this idea seemed revolutionary to me, potentially changing the way I thought about all human behavior and interaction. I soon found that many others had made this same discovery before me, so on its own it wasn't a particularly profound observation. Still, it could be an interesting starting point for work in the humanities.

Diamantino uses parallels between sports and religion as its literal starting point. The film opens with voiceover narration from the title character (played by Carloto Cotta), the world's most accomplished and recognizable soccer superstar, talking about his father's love of cathedrals. As we see increasingly closer shots of a sold-out soccer stadium, and eventually super-slow-motion shots of Diamantino himself in action, we hear his father's opinion that soccer now inspires faith in a way that artists and holy figures no longer can. Diamantino agrees with his father, describing his own experience on the soccer pitch as transcendent, which we can see through his visions of

giant fluffy puppies that give him the calmness and contentment he needs to perform at an elite level.

The film quickly introduces a number of bizarre and sometimes surreal elements to complicate this simple picture of transcendence. The day before he is to represent Portugal in the World Cup final, Diamantino sees a refugee family risking death to cross the Mediterranean Sea. Their suffering breaks Diamantino's feeling of transcendence, and his poor performance the following day directly causes Portugal to lose the final. Now a national disgrace, Diamantino announces that he will adopt a refugee child. Upon hearing this announcement, a Portuguese government agency investigating Diamantino for tax evasion sends one of its employees, a woman named Aisha, to pose as a teenage African boy and become Diamantino's "son." Meanwhile, Diamantino's twin sisters are upset about potential lost income if their brother's soccer career is ruined, so they accept an offer to subject Diamantino to genetic testing by a mysterious laboratory with vague connections to a Portuguese ultra-nationalist party. These might sound like spoilers, but this all happens within the first 20 minutes of the film. Oh, and Diamantino's father dies watching the World Cup final, when his son misses a penalty kick in the closing minutes.

This setup suggests a zany and unpredictable unravelling of the story, but the film turns out to be slower and more intimately focused than might be expected. In some ways, this could be disappointing to many viewers, as not every element that is introduced leads to a satisfying payoff. Personally, I had high hopes for the more explicitly political storylines, which never took any particularly interesting turns. Viewers hoping for outrageous spectacle or sharp satire may find the experience of the film to be rather dull, and frankly, that was my feeling as I left the theatre. Reflecting on the film afterwards, though, I have come to appreciate it more in retrospect, particularly as I consider how it deals with those parallels between sports and religion that the film

raised so directly, so early. While it might seem obvious to talk about sports and religion as communal experiences, this film does not show us any sort of community. We never see Diamantino's fans, how he interacts with them or how they react to his disappointing performances. We never even see Diamantino with any of his teammates. Instead, we see his image on billboards, on commercials, and all over his own house. One of the film's main questions seems to be: what happens to a person when they become more an icon than a human being?

The character of Diamantino is obviously supposed to look like real life Portuguese soccer superstar Cristiano Ronaldo; he's got the same build, the same hairstyle, the same diamond earrings. His personality, though, is about as far from the public image of Ronaldo as one can imagine. While Ronaldo is one of the most brand-conscious athletes of all time, constantly projecting a persona of hyper-masculine bravado, Diamantino is almost cartoonishly childlike and naïve. While this naïveté is at times humorous or pathetic, Diamantino's lack of guile is also refreshing. His emotions are simple, but genuine, and his concern for refugees is heartfelt even if he has no idea how to help them. Because of his iconic status, though, the people around Diamantino do not take his emotions seriously; instead, everyone looks for ways to exploit him. On one level, the premise of Diamantino's story is just like the story of the Buddha: a privileged but sheltered young man discovers real suffering in the world, and looks to completely change his lifestyle in response. In Diamantino's case, though, his status as an icon undermines his ability to change. Few people know what kind of person he really is or what he wants. Those who do know who he is work to keep him isolated, ignorant, and powerless, so that they can use his status to their own benefit. The only affectionate relationship Diamantino had was with his father, who is no longer around when Diamantino needs him most. Perhaps this is why the film does not develop

its more obvious social and political storylines: Diamantino himself does not have the resources to understand these aspects of the world.

And yet, the movie does open with the statement that icons such as Diamantino can inspire faith. Despite Diamantino's completely superficial appearance from the outside, and his feelings of complete powerlessness from the inside, his situation unfolds in a way that could give him some reason for hope. While the film may not always work as entertainment, it does provide plenty of resources for thinking about the humanity of iconic figures and their impact on the people around them.