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Invictus As Coronation: Creating And Exporting A King

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Roundtable on *Invictus*

Sharrona Pearl,

INVICTUS AS CORONATION: CREATING AND EXPORTING A KING

Sharrona Pearl

If there are no villains, how do we know who the real heroes are? *Invictus* solves this problem by simply telling us, over and over and in a multitude of ways: there is only one true hero, and it is through him that the future is saved; there is only one true leader, and all others follow his lead. There is only one man who deserves gratitude, and all others thank him. There is one master of fate, and he is the captain not just of his soul, but of the soul of the country. All other captains are in his thrall. In the film *Invictus*, Nelson Mandela is the hero, and the only real villain is the demon of memory. According to the narrative of the film, the Mandela character must battle for the future of the country. But the largely American viewers for whom the film is primarily structured are not able—at least not with any real excitement or enthusiasm—to view the past as a major antagonist, for the simple reason that, in the case of South Africa, it has already been condemned and it has already lost. This is the major failing of this film: it has a hero with no villain, stock characters with no development, a story with no narrative, and a cumulating conquest that is no real event. As a result, the outcomes of the sports battles, which stand as a proxy for the outcome of the battle between Mandela and history, are never in doubt. Rather than an epic victory against overwhelming odds, the film's representation of the Springboks and Mandela simply achieve the inevitable.

Part of the project of the film is to enroll the trust of (American) audiences in Freeman's character through their identification with the story's fans undergoing the same process. Royals, unlike elected political officers, represent continuity over time; the trust that American audiences place in the film's regal portrayal of a President from 1995 bridges that sporting event with the 2010 World Cup. As Bok success is, essentially, a given from the outset, the narrative of sporting contest and conquest by the underdog is necessarily subsumed by the true story of the film: the coronation of the character of Nelson Mandela.

Mandela, as depicted in the film, is a minutely flawed but still all-knowing deity in whom we have absolute trust. The tension of the film—if there is any—arises when those less generous, those who lack foresight and political acumen, those who fail to see the reconciliatory potential of rugby, disagree with Madiba about the importance of the Springboks, hitherto, for the majority, a hated symbol of the apartheid regime. We know that the naysayers are wrong, but the tension, slight as it is, arises from the possibility that they may override Mandela and succeed in changing the team name and colors; this, in the logic of the film, would irreconcilably alienate Afrikaners (assumed by the film to be Springbok supporters, one and all). The tension is only slight because the Mandela character will of course prevail, such is his power and sway over an adoring public. The naysayers are depicted as either vengeful or guilty of a lack of understanding of what is at stake in a sports contest. While the depth of their anger against the Boks and all they represented is hinted at, it is rarely taken as seriously as the film Mandela's message of reconciliation, which is always presented as both just and politically astute. Freeman's Mandela is thus not only a hero and a saint, but a shrewd political operator, and necessarily so—for to win against the past, nothing short of an omniscient and charismatic leader will do.

In their seminal work *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History*, Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz offer three major categories of live television events that are highly-coordinated and carefully choreographed to highlight social organization and continuity, even at moments of dramatic change: contests, which are rule-governed battles between two equal sides; conquests, in which the stakes are high (nothing less than the organization of society) and which are overwhelmingly unequal battles in which rules are inevitably broken; and, finally, coronations, in which a leader is ceremonially anointed.³⁹ Dayan and Katz offer a number of compelling examples for each category, which they analyze in depth. They point to conquests as the typology that most drew them to their model, highlighting the visit of

Egyptian President Anwar El Sadat to Israel to negotiate with Prime Minister Menachem Begin in 1978, or the equally courageous visit of Pope John Paul II to Warsaw in 1979. The American Presidential debates are an archetypal contest that sets evenly matched competitors against one another in a highly structured, rule-governed setting. Their examples of coronations (in which they expand the definition of royalty to include any significant societal leader, often in moments when his or her flaws are ignored or elided) include state funerals such as those of Mountbatten, Kennedy, or, indeed, Princess Diana.⁴⁰ Coronations, they explain, are also highly rule-governed, but the rules derive from tradition rather than collective agreement. They focus on societal rites of passage, and are particularly important in moments of crisis or change. In the case of funerals, the coronation marks the defiance of society against the possibility of falling apart following the death of a leader. The success of the coronation event hinges on the witnessing function of the audience, who perform the magic necessary for the ritual. There is tension; the magic may not work, and may be undermined by a variety of factors. When it does work, society and social order triumph by failing to disintegrate.⁴¹

While Katz and Dayan are primarily interested in the construction, production, and representation of highly newsworthy events after they have occurred, their analysis can be successfully extended to genres like the bio-pic or historical film, which may also borrow the organizational and storytelling structures they bring into play. Though *Invictus* is not presented as news per se, its repeated use of quasi-documentary clips (as in the election scenes, the analysis of All-Blacks games, and the final rugby match) and its gestures towards historical events enable the application of the broad categories Dayan and Katz provide. On the face of it, *Invictus* seems organized around two simultaneous and related conquests: the Springboks' road to the conquest of the World Cup, culminating in their final match against the New Zealand All-Blacks, and Nelson Mandela's conquest of the hearts and minds of his countrymen: the road he travels to reconciliation between black and white South Africans. Both are brave attempts at victory against the odds; both break the established social rules; and both would have (at least so the film and the book on which it is based would have it) significant consequences for the structure of society. The Boks, in truth, stood little chance against the all-mighty All-Blacks and the film makes it clear that their chances are improbable at best; in the tutorial given to Mandela by his minister of sports, the President is told that, "according to the experts, we will make the quarter finals and no further." The Mandela character sagely and pithily indicates that all manner of unlikely events have recently come to pass in South Africa. Improbability is no barrier to achievement: "According to the experts, you and I should still be in jail." (53:52-53:56).

The Springboks, and Mandela, win, of course. The beast of history is vanquished—but not in the final scenes of the film. Rather, it is in the opening moments that the conquest occurs: when the contrast between the lush rugby pitch of the white schoolboys and the depleted soccer fields of the black schoolboys are highlighted against the backdrop of Freeman's release from prison. The rest of the story functions, really, as the Mandela character's coronation. The essential victory is in Freeman's release, creating the bridge between the two pitches by bringing the rugby football to the soccer field was inevitable. Once the conquest is made, the remaining two hours and thirteen minutes of the film are details.

The Boks, historically a rugby powerhouse, suffered significantly from the boycott against South Africa. For many years they were unable to compete at the international level, with the resultant decline in their own skill. In Mandela's South Africa, the Boks were again exposed to international play, and, in the matches shown in the early part of Eastwood's film, often came out the worse for it. The conquest event is set up neatly by clearly establishing the Boks as underdogs facing powerful (but, in a nod to historical veracity, not overwhelming) odds: even in the best-case scenario, the Boks would only make it to the quarter-finals. Mandela (or Freeman's) request that the team should win the World Cup (which, in an important scene, he subtly but effectively communicates to Captain Francois Pienaar), is presented as courageous, even audacious, challenging the predictions of the experts and possibly the abilities of the team itself. The stakes are presented as high: loss for the Boks could mean the country's loss of the delicate and precarious balance of growing forgiveness and acceptance that directly mirrors the Boks' march through their matches.

The ostensible payoff of the film comes with the final battle between the Boks and the All-Blacks, which represents the culmination of both the team's and the character of Mandela's long journey(s) to victory. This event is not just a contest (as defined by Katz and Dayan as a battle between equals governed by well-established rules), but, following their formulation, a conquest. Contests, as they point out, tend to have fewer long-term implications and less emotional resonance than conquests, which are sites of drama, daring, and, in this case, deliverance. The tension surrounding the conquest and its outcome is where the interest and emotional heart of the film lies. However, through its hagiographic treatment of Mandela, the film sets up the Boks and Mandela's victory as inevitable, the only possible outcome in a battle between a divine ruler and mere humans. The sport scenes, lacking the usual excitement of a simple contest, fall flat. So strong is our trust in the film's Mandela, so convinced are we of his omniscience, so potent is his prophetic power, that his inability to bring about victory through force of will is simply inconceivable. If anything, an All-Black victory would itself have hints of conquest, so imbalanced, ultimately, is the game. While they may have had arguably one of the best rugby players of all time in Jonah Lomu, the Boks had something even more important: the Boks had a king on their side. As Grant Jarvie has argued, the inherent conservatism of sporting events and experiences create moments of collective identity; in the narrative of the film, Freeman's Mandela mobilized that identity to an experience of common (and inevitable) destiny.⁴²

The athletic contest-that-is-really-conquest is layered upon a conquest-that-is-really-a-coronation: the Mandela character's courting of the whites in the name of reconciliation. Rather than chronicling the difficulties of the struggle and the transition (which even John Carlin's book on which the film is based attempts to do, and which would be a rich source of narrative and tension), the film relies on the tropes of Dayan and Katz's coronation category. Already a king for some, in the course of *Invictus*, Mandela is, with a Springbok cap, crowned the king for all. The white rugby supporters, the film tells us, needed—and got—a king, who is crowned during the World Cup opening ceremonies by his green Boks cap, a gift from a player whose heart he won over earlier. Like a king, Mandela's leadership in this moment transcended political divisions; his crowning cap, as Jacqueline Maingard has argued, identifies Mandela the leader of a unified South African nation.⁴³ Once again, the odds of victory, in terms of the film's visual and narrative logic, actually fall in the film Mandela's favor. While on the surface of it, Mandela is pitted against the powerful forces of hatred, and anger, and racism, and repression, and poverty, and the results therein, his own personal charm renders these challenges minor.

It takes only one meeting between Freeman's Mandela and the Afrikaner captain Francois Pienaar for Pienaar to fall totally under his spell. As the captain of the Boks, the symbol (we are repeatedly told) of apartheid and discrimination, Pienaar, and especially his family, act as a proxy for the past; if Pienaar, an archetypal Afrikaner, can come to experience reverence for Mandela, so too can (and will) the nation. The Pienaar family home is a bastion of apartheid attitudes of the past and fears for the future unashamedly expressed by Pienaar's father in full hearing of the black maid. The physical and rhetorical space of Pienaar's home is placed in sharp juxtaposition with other spaces of the past, including Mandela's jail cell on Robben Island, and the spaces of the rainbow nation future, namely Mandela's Presidential office. The rest of the courtship process underscores the security of the film Mandela's position rather than chronicling how it is established. For Freeman's Mandela, the victory of the Boks is not the victorious culmination of his conquest; it is his coronation.

There are many moments in the film in which the Mandela character has power conferred upon him—by his people, by the institutions of (fledgling) democracy, by his workers and subordinates, and, finally, by the newly amalgamated rainbow nation as a whole. There is a great deal of slippage between the quasi-documentary scenes depicting Mandela's (which is to say, Freeman's) release from prison and his inauguration; the intervening election is treated in one brief clip whose outcome is never in doubt. The Mandela character's statements upon release and his inaugural swearing-in are presented, in the rapid montage of these quasi-documentary clips, as almost contiguous. Both moments are brief scenes filled with cheering (black) crowds; both moments contain short excerpts of Mandela's forward-looking speeches calling for reconciliation and forgiveness; both showcase his leadership, dignity, and absolute comfort in his position. The continuity between these two moments depicting the conferral of power underscores the extent to which Mandela's election, or (what was in actual fact quite fraught and tense)

the holding and timing of the election, is never in doubt. More than that: the film's Mandela is able to escape the usual rituals of campaigning and wooing a nation; as a divinely appointed ruler, he is exempt from the base requirements—the content, if you will—of the campaign trail.

Carolyn Marvin has argued that political campaigns involve an extended fertility ritual in which the candidate woos the voters with the goal of consummating the relationship through the marriage of election and inauguration.⁴⁴ (This narrative also provides some of the generic rules of romantic comedy.) In *Invictus*, the Mandela character's divine ordinance exempts him from this process; his leadership is already guaranteed and his supported is a given. The burden of dealing with dissention lies with the dissenters rather than the leader. The democratic nature of Mandela's election was of overwhelming historical significance, but in the context of the film, the narrative of election is sidelined in favour of the narrative of coronation as represented by the spectacle at the end of the championship match. Mandela's achievement of regal, or, (as embodied in Morgan Freeman,) of celebrity status on the rugby field is also marked by cheering crowds; these crowds are mostly white, and their cheers represent the final stages in the consensus around Mandela's authority. Unlike elected officials, kings and queens do not need to seduce the people on whose support they rely. The honour of the office in many ways rests on its distinctions from transient and fickle political machinations, a distance that Freeman's Mandela labors to achieve throughout the course of the film.

The regal bearing of Morgan Freeman's Mandela reflects the very deliberate way in which his public persona was constructed to reflect a notion of inherited right to rule. The oft-repeated claim that Mandela was the scion of a 'tribal' royal family can be traced to Anthony Sampson's *Mandela: The Authorized Biography*.⁴⁵ Mandela did indeed descend from Thembu royalty, albeit from a lesser house. The film exploits this rhetoric by framing Mandela's leadership as regal rather than political, culminating in his coronation and rendering his inauguration narratively unremarkable.

The Rugby World Cup, according to J.M. Coetzee, was used "to promote the idea that a nation and a national consciousness are to all intents and purposes the same thing, and therefore that sounds and images, if numerous and powerful enough, can create a nation."⁴⁶ In Coetzee's analysis, the images and sounds of the World Cup— those that were used to constitute the nation, were clichéd caricatures, stereotypical tokenism, and naïve historical snippets far more contiguous with the colonial visions of South Africa than any true embodiment of the Rainbow concept. The group identity promulgated by the opening and closing ceremonies of the Cup had more in common, he argues, with Victorian imperial and ethnic ideas, in which rugby played a huge part, than post-apartheid possibilities. The image-makers behind the construction of the new South African "nation" were bowing to the expectations of outsiders to create and market a vacation destination.⁴⁷ Mandela's coronation in the film shows the deftness of Coetzee's description of the World Cup Ceremonies: it is a spectacle of what we might call, to borrow from and modify Jean and John Comaroff, a climactic moment in the project of image-construction or nation-imagination.⁴⁸ Unlike political office, whose occupants are ever changing and whose fulfillment is often fracturing, royalty represent national continuity and unity. In this sense, we might say that Mandela's coronation keeps the rainbow nation from falling apart. Eastwood's film is, then, a curiously anti-democratic celebration of democracy, right at the moment when the US was celebrating Barack Obama's electoral victory—which is clearly one of the subtexts at stake in its appeal to an American and international audience.

Like the event itself, Eastwood's cinematic rendering of the 1995 Rugby World Cup is a project in outsider nation-imagination. A largely American product, *Invictus*, though many years in the making, was released strategically in the run-up to the 2010 Soccer World Cup, held for the first time on African soil. Designed in part to make South Africa legible to American World Cup tourists (by far the biggest group of international visitors for the event in 2010), the film borrows heavily on American sports film tropes, rhetoric of colourblindness, and notions of the sacredness of the Presidency.

As Mandela conducts his battle with history (in the guise of those who will not support the Boks, and will only grudgingly support Mandela's support of the Boks), he is aided on his quest by the growing success of the team, which, we are to believe, is due to his inspirational leadership. Rugby comes to displace even Mandela himself as a symbol, thereby allowing the film to avoid any real interrogation of

Mandela as a person and Mandela as a politician, leaving us with Mandela as king. Rugby and its apparatus – including field, players, opposition, and violence – replace Mandela and the nation as the sight of debate, battle, and victory. What we are left with is rainbow-painted by outsiders for outsiders to see when they watch the sights and sounds of the 1995 (or 2010) World Cup. The only villain (and then, only sort of) is the team of the New Zealand All-Blacks (with their own complicated and utterly obscured history of reconciliation) who come to stand in for history.⁴⁹ The only real nation is the one whose construction lies in the future.⁵⁰ The Mandela character's coronation is a key moment in the project of image-construction or nation-imagination, designed in the film to export an American-friendly idea of a safe and redemptive sporting nation. Unlike political office, whose occupants are ever changing and whose fulfillment is often fracturing, royalty represent national continuity and unity. Though the Mandela presidency lies far in the past, the film presents a logic of royalty to reassure potential soccer World Cup visitors that the unity of the rugby moment transcends time and politics; royalty, the royalty of Morgan Freeman's Nelson Mandela, is forever. Or at least through the summer of 2010.

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Note:

39 Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz, *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History*.

40 *Ibid.*, 33.

41 *Ibid.*, 36.

42 Grant Jarvie, "Sport, Nationalism, and Cultural Identity," *The Changing Politics of Sport*.

43 Jacqueline Maingrad, "Imag(in)ing the South African Nation: Representations of Identity in the Rugby World Cup 1995."

44 Carolyn Marvin, "Fresh Blood, Public Meat: Rituals of Totem Regeneration in the 1992 Presidential Race." *Communication Research* 21.3.

45 Anthony Sampson, *Mandela: The Authorized Biography* (New York: Vintage) 2000.

46 J.M. Coetzee, "Retrospect: the World Cup of Rugby."

47 Coetzee, 352.

48 Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, "Naturing the Nation: Aliens, Apocalypse and the Postcolonial State."

49 The rugby relationship of New Zealand and South Africa made this final match especially resonant; South Africa's first post-apartheid test match in 1992 was against the then-utterly dominant All Blacks. The ANC situated this first match as an explicit (if highly controversial) gesture towards gaining the trust of white South Africans. Black protesters were killed at Boipatong a few weeks prior to the event, leading for numerous calls to cancel the game. The ANC decided to go ahead with the match with the proviso that the white South African flag was not flown and the white anthem not sung. The anthem was indeed sung, leading to further divisions within the ANC and throughout the South African sporting community. J. Nauright, "A Besieged Tribe?" 50 The ANC framed sport broadly, and rugby specifically, as an "emotional unifier," explicitly acknowledged by Mandela in the opening of the World Cup, during which he referred to the event as an important "nationbuilding effort." L. Steenveld and L. Strelitz., "The 1995 World Cup and the Political of Nation-Building in South Africa." The role of sport in creating national identity across political, economic, and social divides has been examined in depth by Grant Jarvie (1993), though as Eric Hobsbawm has pointed out, sport in general and rugby in particular can also be used to delineate and exacerbate class divisions. E. J. Hobsbawm and T. O. Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*.

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