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**Football, fandom, and violence:
Jean-Pierre Mocky's *À mort l'arbitre !* (1984)**

Abstract

Jean-Pierre Mocky's *À mort l'arbitre !* (1984) is an interesting example of French sports fiction. It takes us back into French post-Giscardian society, where people lived under the threat of structural unemployment and in fear of a precarious personal and family life. This context allows us to better understand how exacerbated militancy developed among the supporters of a sport as popular as football. *À mort l'arbitre !* tells the story of a referee who was chased by a group of supporters, intoxicated with frustration and rage after he awarded a penalty to the other team. Waylaid outside the locker room, stalked in a supermarket, and attacked at his home, the referee had no alternative but to go through this nightmarish odyssey to the end. The aim of this article is to analyze the political, cultural, and social meaning of supporter violence towards football referees during the 1980s.

Introduction

Sports films are being increasingly considered as original material for new avenues of sociological, historiographical, and even anthropological reflection, in the same way as other fictional sources such as sports literature¹. They not only enable us to enrich our knowledge of sports representations throughout time², but also to deconstruct the stereotypes of the mind through these representations. While some sports films contribute to such “awareness”³, is cinema not an agent of history, whose symbolic gestures should be decrypted? Through his books *Sport and Film* (2013)⁴ and *Sport, Film and National Culture* (2021)⁵, Seán Crosson offers a fresh look at the corpus of sports films and its related analytical tools, thus extending the link between pioneering works⁶ and future exploration. Other specialists have also initiated additional lines of thought concerning, among others, the topics of national identity⁷, narrative credibility of sporting gestures⁸ and portrayal of female athletes⁹, as well as the representation of Native American athletes¹⁰ and social confrontation within the American youth¹¹.

Jean-Pierre Mocky's *À mort l'arbitre!* (*The Death Penalty*) is an interesting example of French sports fiction, belonging to a long tradition of fictional discourse on criminality¹² that shares stereotypes, conventions of representation and narrative or visual structures¹³. It takes us back into French post-Giscardian society, where people lived in fear of structural unemployment¹⁴ and a precarious personal and family life, all of which led to individuals' dissatisfaction, anxiety, and disappointment¹⁵. Tinged as it was with economic and political crisis, this context allows us to better understand how exacerbated fanaticism developed among the supporters of a sport as popular as football. As indicated by Seán Crosson, “to understand the functional role of sports films, it is first necessary to examine the role of sport itself in society”¹⁶. That said, alongside the role of sport as a phenomenon of identity and outlet for violence, lay the seeds of a revolution in which - three years after the abolition of

the death penalty in France, part of the Penal Code since 1791 – the footballing pleb turned on “its King”. *À mort l’arbitre !* tells the banal and sordid story of a referee (Maurice Bruno, played by Eddy Mitchell) who was chased by a group of supporters, led by Rico (played by Michel Serrault) and intoxicated with frustration and rage after he awarded a penalty to the other team. Waylaid outside the locker room, stalked in a supermarket, and attacked at his home, the referee, accompanied by his partner Martine Vannier (played by Carole Laure), had no alternative but to go through this nightmarish odyssey to the end. Based on the emplotment of a sports-related news item, the aim of this article was to analyze the political, cultural, and social meaning of supporter violence towards football referees¹⁷ during the 1980s. Behind the irony and sometimes humor of this “social caricature”¹⁸ can be seen the reflection of a modern society in which sport played (or not) a key role in collective pacification¹⁹.

To this end, the study of both the film and the choices made by Jean-Pierre Mocky combines several forms of analysis, including cinematic genre intertwining sport and criminality, cinematic narrative²⁰, which is deconstructed here, and the history of football refereeing during the 1980s²¹. In this regard, accounts from elite referees of the time, coupled with the institutional archives of the French Football Federation (FFF), allow us to pry into this particular period. Furthermore, several information sources were explored, including the origins of inspiration, critics’ comments concerning the film’s release in the mainstream and specialized press²², and the testimonies of the director and actors, given here and there during the film’s promotion.

1/ *À mort l'arbitre !*: a success story

A cult film in France that has just seen the 40th anniversary of its release²³, *À mort l'arbitre !* was made in 1983 by Jean-Pierre Mocky, based on a screenplay cowritten with Jacques Dreux. Although it failed to draw many people during its cinema showing – barely 360,000 tickets were sold – it went on to earn its stripes over time thanks to high viewership during its multiple reruns on television²⁴. The latter started in 1989 when the film featured on French TV show *Les Dossiers de l'écran*²⁵, giving it fresh impetus. Four years after the Heysel Stadium disaster that shook the world of football, the editorial team of the TV program chose Jean-Pierre Mocky's film as the introduction to a debate on violence in football. Beyond its relevance regarding the events of the time, the film's success was linked to the great acting quality of French actor Michel Serrault²⁶, who portrayed a furious and disturbing supporter, willing to do anything to get his hands on the referee who had given a penalty to his team's opponents. The rest of the cast was equally impressive with athletic French crooner Eddy Mitchell and Québécoise actress Carole Laure, as well as French actors well-known for their supporting roles, such as Laurent Malet and Claude Brosset. That said, more than just a film about sport, it offered a reflection on cretinism, credulity, the fanaticism of crowds, and, as a backdrop, the regulatory role of the legal system in a democracy, not forgetting the topics of racism and sexism. As stated by Inspector Granowski (played by Jean-Pierre Mocky himself) at the end of the film, "Isn't it stupid, huh, how a crowd always follows the craziest one. And there's always one that's crazy!".



Figure 1 –Film poster for *À mort l'arbitre !*
by Jean-Pierre Mocky (1984)

The French press was mostly enthusiastic following the film's release, mentioning the mechanisms, abuses, and excesses of mob justice when it escapes from the stands. *France Soir*, for example, underlined the “pamphleteering”²⁷ aspect of the story. *Le Matin* spoke about a “vitriolic portrayal”²⁸ of football fans by the director. As for the newspaper *Le Monde*, it highlighted the “sarcastic vision”²⁹ of the film's production. While many media outlets celebrated the usual clichés regarding violence within the sporting world, a rare number of negative critics denounced the director's bias, in particular Gilles Le Morvan of *L'Humanité* who wrote, “At no point does the film rise above a minor news story, as tragic as it may be. The violence is completely gratuitous. It offers no insight whatsoever”³⁰. He regretted the lack of a true character study for a better understanding of supporters' motives, in other words where they come from and who they really are.

The fact remains that the film was a great success as a (sporting) crime fiction with remarkable directing and a script that played with the tropes of the genre and strayed from them when necessary. As written by Richard de Lesperda, the film's plot, unfolding in a "constant atmosphere of unhealthy anxiety"³¹, seeks to merge two stories, one of a manhunt ending with a murder and one of supporters involved in a police chase. For this purpose, the filmmaker plunges the viewer into an urban universe dominated by insecurity (shopping malls, car parks, underground tunnels, depopulated buildings, gypsum quarries) and in which vulnerable characters (the referee and his partner) are confronted with a mob of angry fans fuelled by "blind rage"³². Influenced during his youth by Hollywood films such as those of Michael Curtiz, Raoul Walsh, and Alfred Hitchcock, Jean-Pierre Mocky used football as a pretext to harbor his fascination and "taste for films noirs"³³. Let us not forget that this iconoclastic, prolific, and popular film director made a habit of resorting to exaggeration to render his films excessive and extravagant³⁴. The film's poster, showing Rico halfway between the Grim Reaper and Jack Torrance in Stanley Kubrick's *Shining* (1980) seeks to bring terror to the fore. As Jean Mambrino wrote, "He is a popular director, popular for his successes and the subjects he tackles. Yet, he never panders to his audience, rather he rubs them up the wrong way"³⁵. Having always criticized the corruption of the elites (*Y a-t-il un Français dans la salle ?*, 1982), the deviations of religious institutions (*Un drôle de paroissien*, 1963), and intellectual freedom (*La Grande Lessive*, 1968), he remained consistent with his prior filmography by bringing to the screen a social satire on fandom in the footballing world.

It was while reading Alfred Draper's British thriller³⁶, *The Death Penalty*, that Jean-Pierre Mocky decided to adapt the novel to the silver screen. Published in 1972, *The Death Penalty* was translated into French by Rosine Fitzgerald the following year for French publisher Gallimard, and more specifically for the longstanding hit collection "série noire" (series noir),

created in 1945 and headed by Marcel Duhamel. The novel depicts the hunting of a football referee by a gang of young hooligans holding him responsible for their team's defeat as the result of a penalty, unwarranted in their eyes. Alfred Draper not only condemned the supporters' violence but also the ambient racism of British society, since the only person convicted was a young West Indian; hence the title's double entendre between "the penalty of death" and "the death penalty".

Naturally, as an adaptation, many of the novel's features were transposed to Jean-Pierre Mocky's film, including fast narrative pacing until the penalty in the match's electric atmosphere, the injustice felt by a gang of football thugs, and the description of the referee as a rather serious man committed to enforcing the rules, as well as the presence of a black participant in the night's events, the characterization of the fans' leader as an aggressive, misogynistic, racist and manipulative man, and the referee's murder. However, there were many differences between the two mediums, and not only in the details. While the film focuses on the "manhunt" through the city's streets until its tragic end, two thirds of the novel are dedicated to the police's efforts to find the perpetrators³⁷ and their trial.

On the other hand, Alfred Draper's novel is itself based on true events taking place during a match between Manchester and Glasgow, which resulted in the mutilation of the referee³⁸ at the hands of a group of "sportsmen" exasperated by his verdict. This true event³⁹ was one of the dramatic episodes spreading the violence around football matches in England.

2/ Football: a motive for murder

Jean-Pierre Mocky's interest in Alfred Draper's novel and his choice of football as a motive for murder was not without meaning. Even if Mocky himself had never been a great athlete, he had always liked the sport that he discovered as "goalkeeper"⁴⁰ in high school at the end of the 1940s. Eddy Mitchell himself was not "into football", or "into any sport" for that matter,

as he admitted to a journalist in the influential French sports daily *L'Équipe*⁴¹. According to him, it was his physical “appearance” (at over 6ft) that inspired Jean-Pierre Mocky. In an interview given to *L'Équipe* in 2015, the latter explained that he had offered the role to Eddy Mitchell although he was not his first choice: ‘A referee is an ordinary guy, and Daniel Auteuil⁴² seemed like an average little Frenchman, but he refused the role out of fear that the film would be a flop. Alain Delon was too handsome, “Bebel”⁴³ (Jean-Paul Belmondo) wasn’t free, I almost took on the role myself ... In the end, instead of portraying the referee as a skinny guy, I opted for a huge one. When I saw an American football game refereed by a stocky redhead, it made me think of Eddy Mitchell’⁴⁴. Consequently, in preparation for his role as sportsman and referee, Eddy Mitchell asked his friend Daniel Hechter - President of Paris-Saint-Germain’s (PSG) between 1974 and 1978 - to accompany him to several matches to observe the attitude of the man in black. It should be remembered that, at the time, every referee wore the official black outfit representing sobriety, authority, and neutrality⁴⁵. As Eddy Mitchell said, ‘It was interesting because usually no one looks at the referee. Yet, he was the only person I watched. I noticed that when referees blew their whistle, at the time anyway, they would practically stand to attention. So, I tried to do the same in the film’⁴⁶. In other words, the dramaturgy of footballing fiction was put to the test of reality⁴⁷.

Although football was the linchpin of the story, its cinematic presence is rather minimalist or, at least, on the periphery. A sole three-minute sequence is fully devoted to the notorious football match⁴⁸, starting with the arrival of the fans and prolonged by their anger at the end of the game. The match is virtualized through parsimonious flashing images (ball, field, players, goal, goalkeeper, referee, stands, sponsors, etc.), without spilling over into the non-fictional media coverage of sport. Most of the match takes place off-camera, unfolding in the audience’s imagination. Admittedly, Eddy Mitchell’s performance in the film is poor, whether through the signs he makes⁴⁹, his positioning or movements on the pitch, and even the way he

gives a yellow or red card⁵⁰ (showing it to the crowd instead of the player concerned), yet he clearly embodies the man to be slaughtered with his black Adidas shirt, identical to those worn by referees at the time.

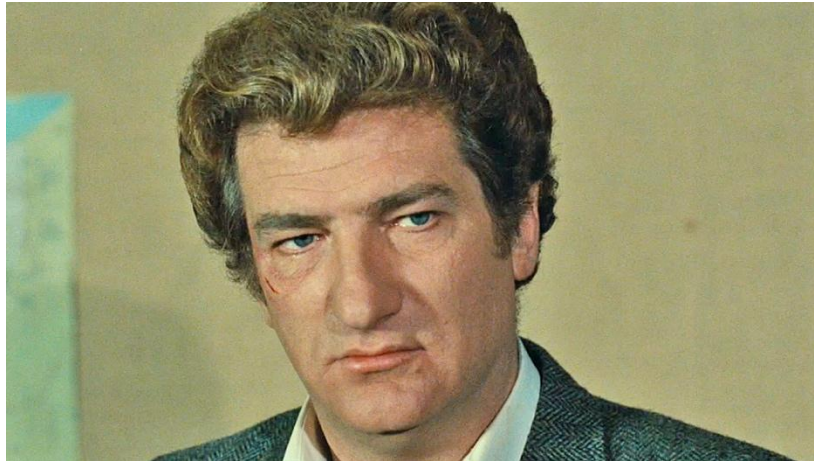


Figure 2 – Referee Maurice Bruno (Eddy Mitchell)
In the film *À mort l'arbitre !* by Jean-Pierre Mocky (1984)

This brief moment of sport on screen is sufficient to convey the frenzy washing over some groups of supporters. Seeking to provoke a reaction within the collective imaginary, Jean-Pierre Mocky cleverly plays with the camera angles, often tilting up from the ground and exacerbating the perspective of objectivity between the viewpoints of the pitch and the stands. While the fans did not perceive the subtlety of what was happening on the field, the player in a black and yellow jersey did, in fact, touch the ball with his hand while trying to control it with his knee, thus legitimizing the referee's call for a penalty. Even if he had made the wrong decision, there was no video assistant referee (VAR) to help him at a time when the footballing world was reluctant to use it. Although video was already used in referee training, it was firmly kept outside the stadium⁵¹. Furthermore, the competition between television channels, which tended gradually to increase the economic stakes of football, inevitably placed the still amateur referees at the core of a sticky financial situation⁵². Such discrepancy was illustrated perfectly by Maurice Bruno's interview on the post-game newscast:

- Journalist: “So, the referee doesn’t do it for money?”
- Referee : "No. Definitely not."
- Journalist: “And you don’t receive any perks either?”
- Referee: “Erm, yes, we do! Sometimes we receive tomatoes. But they’re sent to us in such a nice way!”

All the early warning signs were present, notably the madness of those who rose as one, embraced each other vigorously, and shouted in unison their insults to the referee. Blinded by their thirst for victory, they were uncontrollable, displaying latent aggression with “increasing emotional intensity”⁵³. The viewers could hear a whole range of sounds, from kicks to cheers, chants to trumpets, and rumblings to thunderous complaints, to help them witness the dramatization of the sporting scene⁵⁴. Moreover, Michel Chion clearly describes the impact of sound in fiction films, which he says can be either “empathic”, participating directly in the characters’ emotions, encasing, prolonging and amplifying them, or “anempathic” when it shows indifference towards the situation which, far from preventing emotion, can actually reinforce it⁵⁵. As Swiss poet Georges Haldas wrote, “it is obvious that one of the most dramatic elements - within football of course - is and always will be the penalty⁵⁶, having a success rate of 90% in a generally low scoring sport⁵⁷. Consequently, the sound atmosphere here is well and truly “empathetic”, as the fans’ destiny intertwines with their proletarian inclusion in the filmic space.

This on-screen supporter sequence was shot at halftime during a real French First Division match between Rouen and Strasbourg (2-2 final score) on September 17th, 1983. It should be noted here that Jean-Pierre Mocky was only allowed to film the stands⁵⁸. The sporting scene, on the other hand, was shot in the days following the match, with fake players and

unidentifiable colour jerseys. By zooming in on the scene, the zone marked out for the actors in the Red Devils' area (nickname of FC Rouen's fans) becomes clearly recognizable. As the angle widens slightly, the stands of the Robert-Diochon stadium in Petit-Quevilly (a town near Rouen) are revealed, with the 12,000 viewers who really attended the match. The main objective was to maintain the impression that the actors blended in with the setting and the crowd, especially since some shots showed real supporters in the stands. With the safety of his actors in mind, the director surrounded them with two hundred extras, indirectly acting as "bodyguards"⁵⁹. It should be said that Jean-Pierre Mocky shot the film in the lair of Football Club de Rouen (FCR) which boasted, among its ranks, center forward Jean-François Beltramini and midfielder Djamel Tlemçani, two indisputable stars of French football at the time.

3/ The story of a manhunt

While the film's eponymous title is a reminder of Alfred Draper's novel, director Jean-Pierre Mocky had once considered naming it "All against one"⁶⁰. In either case, it was clear that he wished to immerse his film in the spirit of a true manhunt. From this perspective, the urban environment became a character in itself⁶¹. Viewers had the feeling that the gang of supporters could not be stopped, especially their leader Rico, thus accentuating the mounting suspense of the botched police tailing operations (Inspector Granowski and his trainee always arrive late to the scene), their movements (in a van, on foot, in a car) or the frequent changes in location (stadium, television studio, shopping mall, residential building, etc.). Almost as a reference to Stanley Kubrick's *Clockwork Orange* (1971), the tune composed by musician Alain Chamfort added to the process of transforming this relentless pursuit into an increasingly frightening and macabre party.

While the quality of the film relies on the effectiveness of the dialogues, Michel Serrault's magnificent verve, and Jean-Pierre Mocky's technical prowess, it is also the result of the dramatized manhunt at the tragic heart of the film. In the same way as a play inspired by ancient tragedy, the plot is divided into three acts: *protasis* (exposition), *epitasis* (confrontation) and *catastasis* (resolution). The first act reveals the arrival of the supporters and their clash with the referee, rapidly considered as solely responsible for their misfortune. The second act begins as they leave the locker room and shows the car chase through the city's streets, from the television set to the gypsum quarry, via the shopping mall⁶² and the residential building. The third act focuses on Rico's killing frenzy as he follows through on his criminal act, incapable of backing down. This duel between the supporters and the referee, or rather the perpetrators and their victim, was intended to establish a clear and indisputable link with theatre, the whole of the film dramaturgy developing within this delimited perimeter. That said, for this modern play to unfold, Jean-Pierre Mocky juggles several scenographic elements regarding space, time, and music. The film was indeed designed to be nerve-wracking, and, as stated by Annie Coppermann, cinephiles would enjoy "the against-type performances, the sets, the vibrant editing, the unbridled violence"⁶³. By sometimes using static shots, as in the final sequence where time seems to stand still around the referee's car, the director brings to life the words of sports sociology pioneer Georges Magnan concerning filmic morality, "As the long clamor rises and gradually becomes a song of joy, as wide as a rolling sea, swirling and bubbling, it is impossible not to feel, there under the sky, better than in the largest playhouse of the world, the *catharsis* that the Greeks expected from their theatre"⁶⁴. This desire to stage a Freudian *catharsis* was customary for those directors contributing to the history of the genre, the aim being to revive 'the traumatic event for abreaction to take effect, for complexes to unravel and illness to heal'⁶⁵.

The manhunt is orchestrated by Rico, a dangerous, manipulative, coarse, misogynistic, wicked, and racist leader of men. Actor Michel Serrault, always “unbeatable in the role of a psychopath” according to Jacques Siclier⁶⁶, is hyperrealistic in showing the culminating excessiveness. For, in the film, Rico is quite simply “crazy”⁶⁷. Armed with a small trumpet symbolizing his weapon, he leads the small gang of supporters to crime with exemplary relentlessness. Above and beyond his deviant behaviour and sexist remarks, he becomes a murderer by mistakenly killing one of his own. Spotting the referee in the shadows of a corridor, or so he thought, he accidentally kills his friend Beru (played by Vincent Solignac) with an iron rod. Blaming the referee for the murder, Rico reverses the situation and, as the supporters pay their respects before Beru’s remains, he urges them to take revenge. Once again, the referee is the perfect scapegoat for the supporters’ misfortunes. A tracking shot over the different faces of the supporters, completely shocked by this death, heralds the group’s descent into barbarity. An enraged Albert seconds Rico and takes matters into his own hands. Adding insult to injury, Rico is also a rapist in the making. As the supporters find themselves in the block where the referee and his partner are hiding, Rico sexually assaults female supporter Malou (Nathalie Colas), leading Dominique Jamet to describe the character as “prodigious, exuding fierce, cowardly, and perverse malice, swaying between madness and sadism”⁶⁸.



Figure 3 – The supporters look for the referee's address

In true “gunfight at the O.K. Corral” fashion, the manhunt comes to an end in an underground quarry, adding real aesthetic value to the tragedy. In addition to the pursuit between a car driven by the referee’s partner, as his arm is injured, and the bus driven by Rico, the slalom between the bulldozers gave the scene a “nighttime photogenicity”⁶⁹, reminiscent of nocturnal meandering. While the dust settles temporarily as the partner stops the car on the edge of a precipice, with both protagonists believing they have lost their aggressor, Rico pushes them to their death by violently ramming their car. The element of surprise is achieved for the viewers who do not see it coming. This unexpected ending corresponds perfectly to the “criminal” categorization of the narrative for, as Dominique Kalifa wrote, crime rhymed in the collective imaginary with ‘a brutal, violent and major transgression, a vile and cowardly act that harms an individual’s physical integrity’⁷⁰. As for the police inspector arriving on the scene after the accident, he can only deplore this tragic outcome, adopting the position of a man who is completely disillusioned with the human race.

4/ Fandom madness in the (post) Giscardian years

The context of French society was a determining factor that should be taken into account in order to understand and explain the release of *À mort l'arbitre !* in 1984. The mid-seventies, with the oil crises of 1973 and 1974, marked the end of the prosperous “thirty glorious years”⁷¹ for developed countries such as France. These crises shook the international monetary system and caused not only an important increase in inflation to over 15%, but also a massive rise in the number of unemployed⁷². While French President at the time, Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, decided to adopt liberal and austere policies aimed at containing this conjunctural crisis, he was unable to do so⁷³. The state’s lasting inability to curb unemployment and stimulate employment was behind the growing anger in a French society where social inequality was rising at an alarming rate. Such anger followed in the footsteps of the May 1968 events, during which violence prevailed over all forms of authority (police, military, judges, teachers)⁷⁴. Jean-Pierre Mocky also surfed on a pivotal moment in sports history, both in France and internationally, by seeking not to make a fiction about football, which he feared would be yet another flop, but rather a fiction about sport⁷⁵. On the one hand, several French laws (the Mazeaud and Avice laws on sport in 1975 and 1984, and the decentralization laws of 1982) sought to establish a true sports “public service”⁷⁶ by renewing the link between sport and the community. It was true that councillors preferred stadiums drawing large crowds to local youth centers (“MJC - Maisons de la Jeunesse et de la Culture” in French), which were considered more dangerous from an ideological standpoint⁷⁷. On the other hand, the boycott of the 1980 Moscow Games opened a breach in the political imaginary of sport, hitherto indistinguishable from Olympism⁷⁸ that was, in theory, characterized by fair play, as well as being moral and apolitical, except for the mishap of the 1936 Games, featuring in French cineast Gérard Oury’s film *L’As des as* (Super Ace) in 1982. The rise of critical authors such as Jean-Marie Brohm, who published *Sociologie politique du sport* (Political sociology of sport) in 1976, marked the beginning of the deconstruction of this

“category of government intervention”⁷⁹. In the words of Thomas Pavel, “we should treat fiction as a dynamic, historically and culturally conditioned phenomenon, in contrast and interaction with actuality and myth”⁸⁰.

Football did not escape this climate of mistrust⁸¹ and disillusionment, even if the physical and direct violence would gradually give way to more indirect and symbolic aggressiveness⁸². As a *mise en abyme*, it was not spared from the challenging of power and hierarchical systems⁸³. It must be said that the referee is easily likened to an authority figure since he is tasked with regulating negative emotions on the pitch and pacifying the players. He must ensure order, enforcing a number of sporting rules, seventeen in the case of football. Just like a policeman⁸⁴, a referee has a uniform and a whistle⁸⁵, uses codified body language, directs players’ actions within the collective space, and sanctions them if necessary. While the Law of July 13th, 1983, focused on the rights and obligations of public servants (protecting the latter from any form of aggression), no piece of legislation was intended to protect football referees. No doubt, public powers considered the latter as being under the jurisdiction of sports federations. Yet do assaults of these actors in the game not disrupt public order? As sociologist François Borel-Hänni explains, challenging a football referee ‘is a gateway, at a given time and on an enclosed field, to indiscipline concerning state powers’⁸⁶. In the early 1980s, as denounced rightly by Jean-Pierre Mocky in his film, the men in black were subjected to numerous assaults, in both the amateur and professional worlds of football. By way of example, when François Gillet was paralyzed for life after being hit during a match at district level in the Lorraine League, one of his colleagues, Jean Garcia, lost an eye when a player from Bastia got out of control during a fourth division match. These two cases were highly publicized at the time and attested not only to the rise of violence on the football pitch, but also to the lack of confidence in referees. The latter were quick to react and make their voices heard”⁸⁷. The *Union Nationale des Arbitres de Football* (National Union of Football

Referees) (UNAF), created in 1967 to defend referees' rights and working conditions, tackled the problem head on, announcing that the championship matches of February 25th and 26th, 1981, would be played without any referees⁸⁸.



Figure 4 –Leader of the supporters, Rico (Michel Serrault) chases the referee with a fire axe

Such malicious acts against referees were not limited to amateur matches given that several elite referees were also mobbed, as evidenced by testimonies from that time. For example, Michel Dailly⁸⁹ recounted the painful memory of an event that happened after a second division match between Arles and Paris Football Club during the 1976-1977 season, ‘At the end of the match, the city’s chief of police came to my locker room to tell me that “we have about a hundred people waiting behind that door and they are not happy”’. He then said, ‘we have two solutions, either we try to make it [...] to your car or we can call the riot police from Marseille, but that will take three hours’. ‘Are they really that furious?’, I asked, to which he replied, “No, they’re angry and they’re shouting, but if we go out, they should move out of the way’. And so, we left the locker room, and the crowd parted like a wedding procession, all the while yelling behind us. The chief of police held my arm, and I held my bag with my other hand. At that moment, a young man ran through the crowd, came right up to me and punched me in the face, breaking my nose⁹⁰. A scene in *À mort l’arbitre!* (TC: 12’30”) explicitly echoes this account as the referee makes his way back to his changing

room: ‘We’re gonna make that bastard pay for his penalty!’ a supporter exclaims as Maurice Bruno tells his journalist partner ‘There you go, you have your article about football: violence, noise, and blood!’. The police inspector that arrives on the scene, on the other hand, advises the referee against going out immediately. Maurice Bruno, however, having a scheduled interview on television, precisely to talk about refereeing, decides to take the lead and leave, surrounded by policemen.

In conjunction with the release of Jean-Pierre Mocky’s film, a journalist interviewed Henri Didier⁹¹, a federation referee officiating during the 1970s, whose testimony confirmed the frequent fate of referees, ‘In France, we haven’t had any gunshots or stabbings yet, like they have in South America. There haven’t been any deaths either, no referees have been hit with darts, like in England (that is terrifying), but we have seen kicks, punches, lit cigarettes, stones, pieces of concrete, empty bottles, and tins’⁹². During this interview, he also explained how he had once been exfiltrated by the police before receiving death threats, in the same way as the character depicted by Jean-Pierre Mocky and played by Eddy Mitchell. These recurrent exfiltrations featuring in *À mort l’arbitre!* takes us back to the dawn of the First Republic, when King Louis XVI was decapitated by the people incriminating him. Although bloody and barbaric, the manhunt in the film represented an opportunity to raise further debate on the death penalty. The latter had already been at the heart of François Mitterrand’s presidential campaign a few years earlier, in the late 1970s. While this societal issue divided the right wing, the various left wing political parties displayed a genuine consensus⁹³. *À mort l’arbitre!* was thus released amid debate about a society where state murder should be suppressed when the trumpet of revenge was being blown. Jean-Pierre Mocky, however, constructed his plot around the escalation of violence, from a broken tile to the irreversible act of a sacrificial shedding of blood that “soils” and “cleanses”, “defiles” and “purifies”, and “leads men to rage, madness and death”, while also “soothing” and “reviving”⁹⁴.

Thus, while the film *À mort l'arbitre !* remains a caricature of football, taking the referee's manhunt to extremes, several testimonies of the time convey the porosity between some of the sequences in the film and French football during the (post) Giscardian years. The rise of violence within the footballing world reached its climax in 1985 during the Heysel Stadium disaster⁹⁵. Let us not forget that before the final of the European Cup between Liverpool and Juventus Turin at the Heysel Stadium in Brussels, clashes between supporters led to the death of thirty-nine people. On that day, football as 'a moment of purity and redeeming joy' became, according to Madjid Allali and Jean Nicolai, 'an instrument of torture and a sad reflection of our society'⁹⁶. Clearly visible with the *hooligans* in England⁹⁷ or the *tifosi* in Italy **depuis les années 1960**, this phenomenon could also be seen in France **à partir de la fin des années 1970**⁹⁸. **Alors qu'avant cette date, les stades français ne sont pas très remplis et affichent des ambiances éteintes, l'arrivée du supportérisme dynamise les tribunes en même temps qu'elle introduit de la violence physique et verbale de la part de certains groupes partisans qui veulent imposer leur supériorité sur les autres clubs.** But as explained by sociologist Patrick Mignon, 'Who was involved in this violence? Precisely those who are struggling to find a job and exist socially. French society during the 1980s was indeed a society marked by the increase in youth unemployment, rising inequality, and new urban issues. Delinquency thus appears inseparable from greater poverty and exclusion. It develops because of weakened social and penal control, which goes hand in hand with the loss of control of the major socializing institutions'⁹⁹. **Les pratiques supportéristes violentes de cette "jeunesse dangereuse" traduit ainsi les souffrances d'une partie de la population, qui souhaite montrer son mécontentement. Ces entités supportéristes, qui regroupent majoritairement des jeunes hommes, se positionnent alors contre les normes dominantes et développent un sentiment d'appartenance, si important dans un contexte de fracture sociale.**

Conclusion

By taking this “tragic tale”¹⁰⁰ to its climax, Jean-Pierre Mocky gives football a peculiar flavor, which is all the stronger since the initial plan was for the referee to kill the supporter. The scenes were moreover shot with this in mind. However, actor Michel Serrault requested that the ending be changed as it did not suit him. The switch gave the film its tragic dimension since, as underlined by Natacha Levet, the scenography specific to a “film noir” narrative about sport can only be imagined through its “deviations”, insofar as sport is viewed and portrayed as a “highly criminogenic environment”¹⁰¹. Aiming to show how far a motley crowd can let itself go when it commits the unspeakable, the director develops his plea against supporter violence in three sections: cinematic ridiculing of the sports supporter figure, mise-en-scène of the symptomatic harassment in football as a spectacle sport, and moral violence beyond the control of the French police. Far from positioning himself as a supreme judge, Jean-Pierre Mocky points a finger at the group effect which, in his eyes, has always been one of the ingredients driving supporters to act in a frenzied way as a release of emotion, somewhere between passion and frustration. As explained by Francis Martens, ‘having no access to others and the world other than through the way in which one represents them exposes an individual to imputing their own representations to these others and the world. Relationships with others are thus necessarily paranoid, the substance of one’s psychic life inevitably animistic, and the murdered identity easily able to murder (Cain and Abel, Romulus and Remus)’¹⁰². *À mort l’arbitre !* sheds additional light on other comedies, dramas and biopics focusing on the *hooligan* as ‘a quality archetype for fiction’¹⁰³, including Karel Smyczek’s *Why?* (Czechoslovakia, 1987), Willard Jansen’s *De Harde Kern* (Netherlands, 1988), Alan Clarke’s *The Firm* (England, 1989), Ricky Tognazzi’s *Ultra* (Italy, 1991), Philip Davis’ *I.D.* (England, 1995), Bruno Garbuglia and Roberto Ivan Orano’s *Forza Roma* (Italy, 1996), Lexi Alexander’s *Hooligans* (2005), John S. Baird’s *Cass* (2008), Jan-Christoph Glaser and Carsten Ludwig’s *Baston pour le football* (Germany, 2009), Stevan Filipovic’s

Skinning (Serbia, 2010), and Anton Bormatov's *Kicking off* (Russia, 2013). This study should lead to awareness of the importance of being vigilant with regard to violence in football, **qui progresse fortement dans les tribunes à cette période avec l'arrivée du supportérisme**. Above all, of paying particular attention to the investigation and justice in this type of case.

Notes

- ¹Harvey, 'Team Work? Using Sporting Fiction as an Historical Archive and Source of Developing Theoretical Approches to Sport History'.
- ²Camy and Camy, *Sport et cinéma*.
- ³Ferro, *Cinéma et Histoire*, 13.
- ⁴Crosson, *Sport and Film*.
- ⁵Crosson, *Sport, Film and National Culture*.
- ⁶See, for example, Crawford, 'The sport film—Its cultural significance'; Umphlett, 'The Dynamics of Fiction on the Aesthetics of the Sport Film'; Mosher, 'The white dreams of God: the mythology of sport films'; Mosher, 'Sport movies grow up'.
- ⁷Bruveris, 'Sport, cinema and the national imaginary in Dream Team: 1935'.
- ⁸Byrne, 'Actors who can't play in the sports film: exploring the cinematic construction of sports performance'.
- ⁹Caudwell, 'Girlfight and Bend it Like Beckham: Screening Women, Sport, and Sexuality'.
- ¹⁰Bauer, Delsahut and P. Leconte, 'Sporting Indianness: challenging the cinematic representation of Native American athletes'.
- ¹¹Bauer and P. Leconte, 'In the Shoes of Dave Blasé: Cycling, Cinema, and Social Class in Peter Yates' Breaking Away'.
- ¹²Kalifa, *L'Encre et le sang*.
- ¹³Carou and Letourneux, 'Le cinéma des premiers temps et le "discours médiatique" du crime', 31.
- ¹⁴In 1984, the number of unemployed passed the two million mark.
- ¹⁵Rioux and Sirinelli, *Histoire culturelle de la France. Tome 4 : le temps des masses : le vingtième siècle*, 345.
- ¹⁶Crosson, *Sport and Film*, 66.
- ¹⁷Chovaux, "Siffler n'est pas jouer ?". *Une histoire des arbitres de football* ; Joly Alexandre, *Les arbitres dans le football professionnel français : de l'amateurisme au semi-professionnalisme (1955-1995)*. Doctoral thesis in STAPS, under the supervision of Olivier Chovaux and Jean-Nicolas Renaud, University of Artois, 2021; Joly, Chovaux and Renaud, 'Referees in French professional football: from amateurs towards semi-professionals (1955-1995)'.
- ¹⁸Jacques Siclier, 'Les supporters de la colère', *Le Monde*, 25 February 1984.
- ¹⁹Elias and Dunning, *Sport et civilisation : la violence maîtrisée*.
- ²⁰Jost, *Le Récit cinématographique*; Vanoye, *Récit écrit récit filmique*; Vanoye and Goliot-Lété, *Précis d'analyse filmique*.
- ²¹Joly, 'Michel Vautrot : la construction d'une figure populaire de l'arbitrage (1959-1991)'.
- ²²For example, the work of Camy and Camy, *Le Foot à l'écran*.
- ²³Official release in France on February 22nd, 1984.
- ²⁴In an interview given to *La Tribune* on August 9th, 1995, Jean-Pierre Mocky said, 'À mort l'arbitre ! had 200,000 tickets sold in Paris and 17 million television viewers'.
- ²⁵*Les Dossiers de l'écran* is a French television program created by Armand Jammot and broadcast from April 6th, 1967, on the second channel of ORTF, then Antenne 2, until August 6th, 1991. A debate program on social issues, it includes a thematic film followed by a debate.
- ²⁶One of the most popular actors of his generation, Michel Serrault (1928-2007) made a total of 140 feature films, playing very different and original roles: from theatre play (*La Cage aux folles*), and absurd and crazy comedy (*Buffet froid*, *Le Miraculé*, *Rien ne va plus*) to darker cinema (*Garde à vue*, *Les Fantômes du chapelier*, *Mortelle randonnée*, *Docteur Petiot*), via a whole range of nuanced and dramatic renditions (*Nelly et Monsieur Arnaud*, *Le Monde de Marty*).
- ²⁷Robert Chazal, 'À mort l'arbitre !', *France- Soir*, February 23rd, 1984.
- ²⁸Florence Raillard, 'Jean-Pierre Mocky : "les supporters, c'est l'extrême droite"', *Le Matin*, February 22nd, 1984.
- ²⁹Jacques Siclier, "Les supporters de la colère", *Le Monde*, February 25th, 1984.
- ³⁰Gilles Le Morvan, 'Carton rouge : l'humour au vestiaire', *L'Humanité*, February 25th, 1984.
- ³¹Richard de Lesparde, *Minute*, February 25th, 1984.
- ³²Jean Mambrino, 'À mort l'arbitre ! de Jean-Pierre Mocky', *Études*, May 1984.
- ³³To use an expression coined by Gilles Menegaldo and Maryse Petit. Voir *Le Goût du noir dans la fiction policière contemporaine. Littérature et art de l'image*.
- ³⁴Benyayer and Sichler, *Jean-Pierre Mocky. Une vie de cinéma*.
- ³⁵Jean Mambrino, 'À mort l'arbitre ! de Jean-Pierre Mocky', *Études*, May 1984.
- ³⁶Alfred Ernest Draper, born on October 24th, 1924, in London, is a British author who specialized in crime novels after a career as a journalist at *Daily Herald*, *Daily Express* and *Daily Mail* as crime reporter, then at the BBC.

- ³⁷ In the novel, the press called it: “The case of the murdered referee”.
- ³⁸ On the subject, see Jean-Pierre Mocky’s account in an interview dated 2004: <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x7fjzsg>. According to Jean-Pierre Mocky, present at the match, the referee’s partner is also thought to have been raped.
- ³⁹ On the subject, see Dominique Rabourdin, ‘La troisième mi-temps’, *Les Nouvelles*, March 1st, 1984.
- ⁴⁰ Alexandre Borde, ‘Jean-Pierre Mocky : ‘J’ai déjà joué au foot avec Pasqua !’’, *Le Point*, May 27th, 2013.
- ⁴¹ François-Guillaume Lemouton, ‘Eddy Mitchell : ‘une question d’allure’’, *L’Équipe*, January 22nd, 2023.
- ⁴² Daniel Auteuil, born in 1950, is a famous French actor, nominated fourteen times for a César.
- ⁴³ ‘Bebel’ is the nickname of Jean-Paul Belmondo (1933-2021) who is a famous French actor.
- ⁴⁴ Comments reported by François-Guillaume Lemouton, ‘Eddy Mitchell : ‘une question d’allure’’, *L’Équipe*, January 22nd, 2023.
- ⁴⁵ Pastoureau, *Noir : histoire d’une couleur*.
- ⁴⁶ Comments reported by François-Guillaume Lemouton, ‘Eddy Mitchell : ‘une question d’allure’’, *L’Équipe*, January 22nd, 2023.
- ⁴⁷ On the subject, see Bauer, De la Croix and Gerville-Réache, *Sport et cinéma : la technique à l’épreuve du réel*.
- ⁴⁸ Passage between the start of the game (TC: 09’33”) and the final whistle (TC: 12’35”).
- ⁴⁹ Despite the fact that he awarded several penalties during the match, Eddy Mitchell never indicates the penalty mark.
- ⁵⁰ English referee Ken Aston was greatly affected when he refereed a harsh match between Italy and Chile during the 1966 World Cup – known as the “battle of Santiago” – and proposed yellow cards for warnings and red cards for exclusions. They were used for the first time in 1968, during the final of the Olympic Football Tournament in Mexico.
- ⁵¹ Joly and Desfontaine, ‘La technologisation des arbitres de l’élite dans le football français : entre arbitrage humain et rationalité numérique (1980–2021)’.
- ⁵² Nys, ‘Les relations économiques entre le sport et les médias : entre complémentarité et ambiguïté’.
- ⁵³ Magnane, *Sociologie du sport*, 97.
- ⁵⁴ Bromberger, *Football : la bagatelle la plus sérieuse du monde*.
- ⁵⁵ Chion, *Le Son au cinéma*, 122-123.
- ⁵⁶ Haldas, *La Légende du football*, 85.
- ⁵⁷ During a World Cup playoff match between France and Bulgaria in 1976, French sports commentator Thierry Roland was a strong indicator of the importance of this situation that inflames passions. At the end of the match, when the score was 2-2, Mr. Ian Foote, Scottish referee at the match, gave Bulgaria a penalty. Thierry Roland was quick to insult the match referee in front of millions of viewers: “Mr Foote, you’re an asshole [...] his place is in prison, not on a football pitch”.
- ⁵⁸ Monique Pantel, ‘Jean-Pierre Mocky fait de Carole Laure la femme de l’arbitre’, *France Soir*, September 15th, 1983.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁶¹ As Jacques Lévy explains, the 1970s and 1980s saw the appearance of “a number of significant film producers who made the urban environment a character in their films”. See ‘De l’espace au cinéma’, 700.
- ⁶² The various manhunt sequences through the shopping arcade were shot in three different locations: the shopping malls of “Rouen-Saint-Sever”, “Arcades de Noisy-le-Grand” and “Créteil-Soleil”.
- ⁶³ Annie Coppermann, “À mort l’arbitre !” *Les Échos*, February 22nd, 1984.
- ⁶⁴ Magnane, *Sociologie du sport*, 93.
- ⁶⁵ Renneville, ‘Quand la folie meurtrière fait son cinéma : de Nosferatu au tueur sans visage’.
- ⁶⁶ Jacques Siclier, ‘Les supporters de la colère’, *Le Monde*, February 25th, 1984.
- ⁶⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁸ Dominique Jamet, ‘Foot furieux’, *La Quotidien de Paris*, February 25th, 1984.
- ⁶⁹ Robert Chazal, ‘À mort l’arbitre !’, *France- Soir*, February 23rd, 1984.
- ⁷⁰ Kalifa, ‘Crime’, 100.
- ⁷¹ Expression coined by French economist Jean Fourastié and used in 1979. See his book *Les Trente Glorieuses ou la révolution invisible de 1946 à 1975*.
- ⁷² For example, in France in 1974, there were 500,000 unemployed people registered with France’s job center, *Agence Nationale pour l’Emploi (ANPE)*, then in 1977, over a million. On the subject, see Becker and Ory, *Crises et alternances : 1974-1995*.
- ⁷³ Rioux and Sirinelli, *Histoire culturelle de la France. Tome 4*, 345.
- ⁷⁴ Le Goff, *Mai 68 : l’héritage impossible*.
- ⁷⁵ See the interview of Jean-Pierre Mocky, mentioned above.

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- ⁷⁶ Barreau, 'Le modèle français du sport'.
- ⁷⁷ Chateaufreynaud, 'Le sport : nouvel enjeu de pouvoir au niveau local', 8.
- ⁷⁸ Bachelet, 'Maurice Herzog, architecte d'une politique du sport comme grande cause nationale'.
- ⁷⁹ Dussault, 'Vers une typologie des objets et des formes de l'intervention culturelle étatique'.
- ⁸⁰ Pavel, 'The Borders of Fiction', 88.
- ⁸¹ Lévy Kuentz, *Sur le football : lecture d'un phénomène de société*, 51.
- ⁸² Elias and Dunning, *Sport et civilisation : la violence maîtrisée*.
- ⁸³ Wahl, 'Le mai 68 des footballeurs français'.
- ⁸⁴ On the subject, see Milliot, Blanchard, Denis and Houte, *Histoire des polices en France : des guerres de Religion à nos jours*.
- ⁸⁵ Blanchet and Lesay, *Le Dico du parler sport*.
- ⁸⁶ François Borel-Hänni, *Étude de la responsabilité sociale des journalistes de sport : le cas de l'arbitre de football dans les médias français*. Thesis in Sociology, University of Lille, 2014, 43.
- ⁸⁷ France Football no. 1.815, January 20th, 1981.
- ⁸⁸ France Football no. 1.806, February 18th, 1981.
- ⁸⁹ Born on February 21st, 1943, in Lyon, Michel Dailly began refereeing in 1967 and became a referee for the Federation in 1974, the second division in 1976, then the first division from 1979 to 1984. In this latter year, following his retirement from sport, he became President of UNAF until 1999.
- ⁹⁰ Interview with Michel Dailly on April 23rd, 2019, at his home in Pont-Évêque.
- ⁹¹ Born on December 21st, 1934, in Paris, Henri Didier began refereeing in 1960, following his return from war in Algeria. He was consecutively appointed referee for the Federation in 1967, for the second division in 1971, then first division in 1972. He ended his career in 1981.
- ⁹² Dominique Rabourdin, 'La troisième mi-temps', Les Nouvelles, March 1st, 1984.
- ⁹³ Le Quang Sang, 'L'abrogation de la peine de mort en France : une étude de sociologie législative (1976-1981)', 286.
- ⁹⁴ Girard, *La Violence et le sacré*, 60.
- ⁹⁵ On the subject, see Leclaire, *Le Heysel : une tragédie européenne*.
- ⁹⁶ Allali and Nicolaï, *Le Football et la violence*, 54.
- ⁹⁷ Bodin, Robène and Héas, 'Le hooliganisme entre genèse et modernité'.
- ⁹⁸ Mathieu Monoky, *Ultras et hooligans en France : socio-histoire des supporters radicaux de football au tournant des XX^e et XXI^e siècles*. Thesis in Contemporary History, University of Lille 3, 2019.
- ⁹⁹ Mignon, 'Les désordres des stades : 1945-2005'.
- ¹⁰⁰ Camy and Camy, *Le Foot à l'écran*, 92.
- ¹⁰¹ Levet, 'Le sport dans le roman noir contemporain : de la fascination à la démystification', 216.
- ¹⁰² Martens, 'Pour en finir avec la castration : Maillage mytho-symbolique et détournement idéologique', 126.
- ¹⁰³ Etienne Sorin, 'Dans le petit filet du cinéma', Le Figaro, March 21st, 2020.

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