

The quick answer is: because of my daughter, because of my wife, because my family is from Catalonia. But if I had to answer with honesty why I'm still here, in Barcelona, in these awful and boring times, it would be: because I'm forty minutes in train away from the best football in history. I mean, if my wife and daughter decided to go to live to Argentina right now, I would divorce and stay here, at least until the Champions League final. Because the world has never seen something like this inside a football pitch, in no era, ever, and its very likely that it will never happen again. It's true, I'm writing this at a special time. I'm writing this in the same week that Messi scored three goals for Argentina, five for Barcelona in the Champions League and two for his club in La Liga. Ten goals in three games of three different competitions. The Catalan press doesn't talk about anything else. For a little while, the economic crisis isn't the subject in the front-page of news. Internet explodes. And in the middle of this, a theory just passed through my head, a very strange, hard to explain theory. That's why I'll try to write it, to see if I can finally grasp it fully. It all started this morning: I'm looking non-stop at Messi goals in YouTube. I'm doing it with guilt because I'm in the middle of the editing of the magazine number six. I shouldn't be doing this. Casually, I click in a compilation of clips I've never seen before. I think it's another video like other thousands of thousands, but I soon realize it's not. The clips are not Messi goals, his best runs, nor his assists. It's a strange compilation: the video shows hundreds of clips, two or three seconds long each, in which Messi receives strong fouls and doesn't fall to the ground. He doesn't dive or whine. He doesn't intentionally look to gain a free kick or a penalty. In each frame, he keeps his eyes in the ball while he struggles to find balance. He makes inhuman efforts for the play to not be stopped, nor the opposite player to get a yellow card. They are a lot of little clips of fierce kicks, obstructions, stamps and cheating, reckless tackles and shirt grabbing; I've never seen them altogether. He goes with the ball and receives a kick in the tibia, but keeps going. He gets hit in the ankles: stumbles and keeps going. He gets his shirt grabbed and pulled by a defender: he frees himself and keeps going. Suddenly, I was stunned, because something was familiar for me in those images. I replayed each frame in slow motion and understood that Messi eyes are always concentrated in the ball, but not in the sport, nor in the context. Football, today, has very clear regulations by which, a lot of times, going to the ground could mean securing a penalty, or getting an opposition player booked, because it could be useful in later counter-attacks. In these clips, Messi seems to not understand anything about football or about opportunities. It seems like he's in a trance, hypnotized; he only wants the ball inside the goal. He doesn't care about the sport nor the result nor the laws. You have to look carefully in his eyes to understand it: he squeezes them, like if he was struggling to read a subtitle, he focuses on the ball and doesn't lose sight of it not even if he would get stabbed. Where did I see that look before? It looked familiar to me, that gesture of unmeasured introspection. I paused the video, zoomed into his eyes and then I remembered: the eyes of Totin when he lost his mind for the sponge. When I was a child I had a dog called Totin. Nothing moved him. He wasn't an intelligent dog. When thieves broke into the house, he just looked at them while they carried the TV away. The doorbell sounded and he didn't seem to have heard it. I puked and he didn't come to lick it. But when somebody (my mother, my sister, myself) grabbed a sponge -a yellow sponge to wash the dishes- Totin went mad. He wanted the sponge more than anything in the world, he died for taking that yellow rectangle and carry it to his dog bed. I showed him the sponge with my right hand and he focused on it. I moved it side to side and he never stopped looking at it; he couldn't stop looking at it. It didn't matter the speed at which I moved the sponge; Totin's neck would move at identical speed through the air. He's eyes turned into attentive, intellectual eyes. Like Messi's eyes, which stop being the eyes of a scatterbrained teenager and, for a few seconds, turns into the attentive sight of Sherlock Holmes. I discovered today, watching that video, that Messi is a dog. Or a dog-man. That's my theory, I'm sorry that you made it this long with better expectations. Messi is the first dog that plays football. It has a lot of sense that he doesn't care about the rules, maybe he doesn't even understand them. Dogs don't fake and dive when they see a car coming in their direction, they don't complain to the referee when a cat escapes them, they don't want the garbage truck to be booked. In the beginning of football the humans were like this too. They went for the ball and nothing else: coloured cards didn't exist, nor the offside rule, nor the away goals were more important than the home ones. In the beginnings, people played football like Messi and Totin. Afterwards, everything got very strange. Right now, everybody seems to care more about the bureaucracy of the sport, its laws. After an important game, people take a week long to talk about the legislation. Did Juan get booked purposefully so he could miss the next game and play El Clasico? Did Pedro really fake the foul inside the penalty box? Will they allow Pancho to play as stated by the clause number 208 that says that Ernesto is playing for the U-17. Did the coach order to over-water the pitch so the opponents would slip and break their cranium? Did the ballboys disappear when the game was 2-1 and appear again when it was 2-2? Will the club appeal Paco's double yellow card in the tribunal? Did the referee correctly add the minutes that Ricardo lost by protesting the sanction that Ignacio received because of Luis time wasting before the throw in? No, sir. Dogs don't listen to the radio, don't read the news, don't understand if a game is an unimportant friendly or the final of the championship. Dogs want to take the sponge to their dog bed even if they are tired to death or if the mites are killing them in pain. Messi is a dog. He breaks records of other times because only until the 50's the dog-men played football. Afterwards, the FIFA invited us to talk about laws and articles, and we forgot how important the sponge is. And one day a sick boy appears. Like the day a sick monkey stood upright and Mankind history started. This time, it was a kid from Rosario with, apparently, some disabilities. Unable to say one phrase after another, visibly awkward, unable to almost anything related to human guile. But with an impressive talent to keep and control something round and inflated and take it to the net at the end of a green prairie. If people let him, he wouldn't do anything else. Take that white sphere and put it in between the three posts all the time, like Sisyphus. Over and over again. Guardiola said, after the game in which he scored five goals in a single game: "The day he wants, he will score six" It wasn't a compliment, it was the objective expression of the symptoms. Lionel Messi is a sick man. It's an illness that moves me, because I loved Totin and now Messi is the last dog-man. And to watch attentively that illness, to see it evolve every Saturday, that's why I'm still in Barcelona even though I'd prefer to be living somewhere else. Every time I climb the Camp Nou stairs and I suddenly see the brightness of the lightened pitch, that moment that always remind us of our childhood, I say the same thing to myself: you have to be really lucky, Jorge, for liking so much a sport and be contemporaneous of its best version and, on top of that, that the pitch where it happens is so close to you. I enjoy my double luck. It's my treasure, I'm nostalgic of the present moment every time Messi plays. I'm fanatic of this place in the world and this historic time. Because, I think, on Doomsday all the men that have ever lived will be congregated to talk about football, and one will say: I studied in Amsterdam in 1979, other will say: I was an architect in Sao Paulo in '62, and other one: I was a teenager in Napoli in '87, and my father will say: I travelled to Montevideo in '67, and other one behind him: I listened to the silenced Maracana in 1950. Everybody will tell their battles with pride until the night is old. And when nobody is left, I will stand and say slowly: I lived in Barcelona in the times of the Dog-Man. And there will be silence. Everybody else will lower their head. And God will appear, dressed for the occasion, and pointing at me will say: "you, the little fat one; you are saved. Everybody else, to the showers.