

## The Nietzschean Wisdom of Luis Enrique

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*The Blizzard*

In his first year as Barcelona manager, Pep Guardiola won the treble. In his second and third years, he oversaw what is canonically taken to be the greatest team in football history – the closest approximation of perfection the sport has ever seen. Since then, Guardiola has widely been thought the best manager in the world. But more importantly, he has also represented an enlightened brand of expansive football to counter the suffocating, defensive, and counterattack-based football of the likes of Jose Mourinho.

Luis Enrique's achievements in his first year at the Barcelona helm put in question this reassuringly agreeable narrative, however. For large tracts of this past season, his side relied heavily on light-speed counterattacking, as well as a tight defense that allowed only 21 La Liga goals – as few as in Guardiola's best defensive season (despite controlling the ball much less). More surprisingly, since January Barcelona's football has been aesthetically compelling in its own way, a very different way though it is.

Meanwhile, Guardiola's time away from Barcelona has been less than compelling. Having taken over a treble-winning side, his Bayern Munich has regressed, in its first year, to a mere double (with a humiliating UCL semifinal exit), and in its second year, to a solitary Bundesliga trophy (suffering another educational moment at the UCL semifinals and a somewhat comical German-cup semifinal exit).

This has people asking: is Guardiola really an extraordinary mastermind, or was he simply lucky enough to manage Leo Messi? Having awakened this year from a two-year slumber, the latter is once again accustoming us to routine magic, and Enrique's Barcelona consequently looks no less devastating, and no less compelling, than during the Guardiola era. Yet Enrique is not taken to be a Guardiola-like genius; rather, he's thought to have landed at the right place at the right time. The same might be true – so goes the newly emerging narrative – for the 2008 Guardiola.

In reality, both sides of this new narrative are baseless. Guardiola really did do something special with his Barcelona side – but Luis Enrique is not the charmed fool he is often represented as.

To fully understand Guardiola's genius, we must take a brief detour through German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's aesthetic theory, as expounded in his book *The Birth of Tragedy*. Nietzsche, only 27 at the time, argued that aesthetic

perfection arises from the right balance between two opposing forces, which he labeled Apollonian and Dionysian. Apollo, dreamy and poetic, represents order, composition, harmony, symmetry, and calm control. Dionysus, drunk and disorderly indeed, represents the uninhibited life-forces, ecstatically bursting through structure and form with irrepressible, uncontrolled, white-hot energy. Each is compelling in its own way, but it is only in their careful equilibrium that we get a glimpse at the sublime. We can enjoy Wordsworth in an Apollonian mood, or Walt Whitman in a more Dionysian mindset, but it's in reading Shakespeare that we witness the glorious synthesis that defines artistic perfection.

Guardiola's Barça between 2009 and 2011 effectively implemented the Nietzschean model in the realm of football. The superstructure of Guardiola's system was an Apollonian framework in which 8-9 field players had finely calibrated roles. The axis of this Apollonian framework was Xavi, conducting the symphony with measure and intelligence and controlling movement backwards, forwards, and sideways. Busquets crucially provided further support for this control, releasing tensions in the back by finding the open man under pressure, moving into "negative space," and sometimes even luring teammates into that space with suggestive passes. The Xavi-Busquets duo served as the foundation of the framework, surrounded by two mobile backs in Dani Alves and Abidal and two wingers in Pedro and David Villa, each pair moving on invisible but very precisely delineated parallel tracks.

In that Guardiola side, Messi is often described as a false 9, but the truth is that *he had no role*. He was the joker, the Dionysian force of chaos, freely roaming within the Apollonian framework and sowing the seeds of unpredictable, miraculous occurrences – the kind of stuff for which no opposition can prepare. Somewhere between Messi and Xavi, symbolically even more than spatially, was Andrés Iniesta, typically executing his role in the Apollonian edifice but occasionally contributing his spark to the Dionysian proceedings.

There is no question that putting together this superstructure was a work of genius on Guardiola's part, and it is true that football perfection has been approached more than ever with Guardiola's creation. At the same time, it would be impossible to put this together without the right individual talents – without Messi in the role of Dionysus and Xavi as the embodiment of Apollo.

Until Luis Enrique's arrival, the managers who succeeded Guardiola – Tito Vilanova and Tata Martino – had a simple plan: keep on cranking the Guardiola machine, with new pieces replacing ageing ones. Unfortunately, around the time Guardiola left Barcelona, Xavi started to fade as well – and Cesc Fabregas seemed unable to fill his shoes. Relatedly or unrelatedly, Messi too lost some of his luster during those unstable years.

When Luis Enrique took over last summer, his great idea was to stop trying to operate the same old machine and embrace a much more overtly Dionysian style of football. There were several good reasons for this. First, and as already noted,

nobody has succeeded in doing what Xavi did within the Guardiola system. Second, Enrique found by Messi's side what Guardiola never had – Luis Suarez, the third-best player in the world over the past two years and a considerable Dionysian force in his own right; it would have been a shame not to let loose this extra quantity of brilliant energy alongside Messi's. Talented as Villa and Pedro were at their peak, they never matched Suarez and Neymar. Third, however, Neymar does hold the ball for too long and loses it too often to integrate smoothly into a tiki-taka architecture; so his talent as well would be underexploited in a Guardiola-style system.

Enrique's change of direction was thus strongly called for. The result of sacrificing the midfield axis on which Barcelona football has rested for over half a decade, and unleashing in its stead the torrent of Messi, Suarez, and Neymar, was that the trio contributed a record 122 goals and 56 assists this season – in a hail of trophies through dominant high-profile performances. Consider that the first-leg victories against Manchester City, PSG, and Bayern Munich essentially wrapped up all Barça's ties on the way to the UCL final! The final itself Barcelona dominated completely as well, aside for a heady 20 minutes at the beginning of the second half. The two La Liga games against outgoing champions Atlético Madrid and the Copa del Rey final against Athletic Bilbao were also totally one-sided.

It would be easy to underestimate the courage it took for a Luis Enrique to push the requisite brand of football in Guardiola's house. Much of his image as an irrelevant stooge derives from the early impression that he brought a primitive and unrefined football into the Camp Nou.

Also contributing is the notion, fancifully inferred from innocent remarks by Suarez in April, that it was Messi and Suarez who decided on their respective positions within Barça's current set-up. The notion that Enrique had no input for the crucial tactical switch of the season is belied by the fact that the system Enrique had originally put in place, while Suarez was still serving his bitegate ban, was precisely the system Barcelona is playing now, but with Munir warming Suarez's spot. A much more plausible reconstruction of what later transpired is that Messi was displeased with his role away from the center once Suarez arrived, overruled Enrique for a time, but eventually came to see the wisdom of Enrique's plan, and ultimately gave it the green light.

There is a final twist to all this. Over the final two months of the season, Barcelona has proven capable of controlling games through midfield possession as well as through counterattacking acumen, enjoying 62% of possession at the UCL final and 73% at the Copa del Rey final. Might have Enrique's early Barcelona played the way it did simply to overwhelm old habits? Just as a hard-drinking fellow who wants to quit must go tee-total for a while, before he can enjoy the occasional pint again, Barcelona had play exclusively counterattacking football for a time before it could integrate this newfound weapon with its standing arsenal of control-based passing game.

It was often objected to Guardiola that his Barça had no Plan B. If Enrique's Barça can perfect both modes of football, future generations may look back at Guardiola's side as simplistically one-dimensional – and see Enrique's as the truer approximation of total football.

It is not clear that this is Enrique's real plan – we may know within six months. But if it is, and if it works, then his wisdom may actually be far greater than anyone has suspected: he may have re-imagined the optimum point of balance between the Apollonian and the Dionysian.