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CHAPTER

55   Sport, Film, and the Cultural Imaginary 🔓

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Abstract

Codified sport and the cinema emerged contemporaneously in the second half of the 19th century, and from the earliest film productions, sport was prominently featured and contributed significantly to the new art form's growing popularity. Sport would subsequently become one of commercial cinema's most enduring and popular topics, though scholarship of the area (and identification of a specific genre) was slower to develop. While identifying salient aspects of depictions of sport's fiction on film, this chapter examines the development of the relevant critical discourse and the major foci therein, including sport cinema's role in articulating and influencing understandings of broader sociocultural themes such as race, social class, gender, and nationalism.

THE nomination of the motor racing–themed production *Ford v Ferrari* (2019) for the Best Film Oscar at the 2019 Academy Awards marked a recent and high-profile reminder of the prominence of sport cinema in contemporary film and popular culture. Though the film did not win the award (one of four nominations it received), it did receive Academy Awards for Best Film Editing and Best Sound Editing, speaking to the dynamic and sophisticated use of both sound and visual editing that has become synonymous today with mainstream sports films. However, while the film enjoyed both critical and commercial success (taking in U.S.$225.5 million at the international box office alone before its release on DVD and via streaming platforms),[1] its critical reception also revealed salient features regarding sport cinema. First, the film was not always described as a sports film, despite the fact that its lead protagonists are motor racing drivers and its most dynamic sequences feature motor racing. On IMDb (the Internet Movie Database, the largest online database of film releases), the film is initially categorized on the landing page as "Action, Biography,

Drama"[2]—but not in terms of sport. Indeed, the film's original title de-emphasizes its sporting connection —though this was highlighted more clearly in some European territories where the film was released under the alternative title *Le Mans '66*, referring to the celebrated French motor race featured prominently in the film. Furthermore, where sport was acknowledged, the film was frequently categorized as a "racing film" (Debruge, 2019; Hammond, 2019; Mithaiwala, 2019) rather than in terms of sport cinema, indicating the variability with which films featuring sport are described. In addition, a considerable portion of commentary inspired by the film focused not so much on the particulars of the film itself or its depiction of sport, but rather the complex and contested events that it drew inspiration from: the combative and competitive relationship between the Ford and Ferrari motor companies in the 1960s. As noted by *Forbes.com* contributor Chuck Tannert (2019, para. 3) following the film's release:

> The story begins in the early 1960s. U.S. purchasing habits changed as the Baby Boomer generation came of age. For the first time in history, youth were more important to American business' bottom line than their parents. Boomers had lots of disposable income to spend on items such as cars, clothes and homes, and unlike their "a penny saved is a penny earned" ↳ parents, who had lived through the Great Depression and World War II, they were looking for something unique from a new vehicle. They wanted cars that were sportier and sexier, valuing speed and performance over comfort and reliability. They wanted sports cars, a fact that was not lost on the executives at Ford Motor Co.

Tannert's discussion and that of other commentators who responded to the film (e.g., Brody, 2019; CBS News, 2019) reveals a further recurring feature of the discourse surrounding sport cinema: these films are in many cases not primarily about sport. Sport provides a seductive and engaging cultural form to draw viewers to works telling other stories, stories that may be revealing with regard to larger and more complex societal issues, including questions of race, class, gender, or the changing economic or social structures of the society concerned. As such, sports films can be highly influential texts shaping audience understandings and appreciations of their social and cultural imaginary (Ardolino, 1988; Crawford, 1988; Dickerson, 1991; Mosher, 1983). It is this potential of sport cinema that has been a recurring concern of scholarship engaged with the topic, and this chapter will chart some of major issues, approaches, and debates that have featured in research of the area.

Issues

Sport Cinema: "Box Office Poison" or Cinema's Most Enduring Topic?

Throughout the history of the cinema, sport has been one of the most popular subjects featured. Zucker and Babich (1987) list over 2,000 relevant films in their index of sports cinema. With the advent of the internet and online indexing tools, IMDb categorizes in a recent search (July 31, 2020) 4,238 feature films under the "sport" category—and this does not include television productions (fiction, nonfiction, and serial) produced internationally that have featured sport.[3] Sports films have also enjoyed considerable box office success and critical acclaim, including such seminal productions as *Rocky* (1976), *Raging Bull* (1980), and more recent Academy Award winners *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), *The Blind Side* (2009), *The Fighter* (2010), and *Ford v Ferrari* (2019).

However, despite the popularity of sports fiction on film (the principal focus of this chapter),[4] research regarding the area has been slow to develop (Dickerson, 1991, p. 5; Poulton & Roderick, 2008, p. 107). The limited critical engagement with the topic until recent decades can be partly attributed to the low standing that sport cinema has had historically. Sports films have often been perceived as "box office poison" (Carlson, 1998, p. 361; Jones, 2005, p. 30) or less critically significant, with King and Leonard (2006, p. 1)

arguing that even where films "about athletes or those set in sporting worlds may prove popular and even profitable … they do not rise to the level of critical significance, much less art."

Contributing to the poor reception critically of sport in film has been the heavy reliance of sports films on clichés. In his analysis of baseball films, Good (1996, p. 22) provided details on some of the most prominent of these, including the mythical status of the ballpark; the fatherly team manager; the presence of dual contrasting female leads, one pure, one tempting; and "raw rookies and worn-out veterans." Many, if not

all, of these ↳ clichés recur across sport cinema, regardless of which sport is featured. Furthermore, films featuring sport have been criticized for frequently suffering from overly familiar scenarios and "nauseating sentimentality" (Sarris, 1980, p. 50). An obvious example of such a "familiar scenario" is the big game, race, or fight finish found at the climax of a considerable number of sports films.

Sport Cinema Beginnings

Despite this uncertain history, sport is nonetheless one of the oldest and most enduring topics found in the cinema. As a widespread cultural practice with a considerable following internationally, sport had a vital role in popularizing the new medium in its earliest years. Included in the program at the first public screening to a paying audience (sometimes referred to as "the birth of cinema" [Austin, 1996, p. 1; Jarvis, 2006, p. 49]) of short films by French film pioneers the Lumière brothers on December 28 1895 at Salon Indien du Grand Café in Paris were several that had sporting associations. Furthermore, the Catalogue-lumiere.com lists 62 productions in the "sport" genre, including actuality films featuring boxing, cycling, horseracing, gymnastics, various martial arts, tennis, boules, swimming, wrestling, rugby, rowing, athletics, skiing, and football.

As well as providing a recognizable popular cultural practice, sport also exhibited a defining feature of cinema: movement. It is these traits that contributed to sport being one of the most popular subjects in this new art form from its very earliest days. While the new moving-image technology may have attracted audiences for its novelty at the first screenings, it was sport, and particularly boxing in the United States (as evident in the large number of boxing-themed films produced by American film pioneer Thomas Edison's company), that ensured the continuing popularity of cinema in its first decade of production (Betts, 1974, p. 243). McKernan (1996, p. 110) identifies in the early boxing films "the very birth of American cinema realism and drama, newsfilm and fakery, commercialism, populism, professionalism, two protagonists battling within the perfect staging, the ring." The first feature-length films, the first use of actors, and the first commercial cinema exhibitions in the United States were all of boxing films (Streible, 2008). Furthermore, these early films were influential texts, particularly as vehicles for the inculcation and affirmation of American values to immigrants (Irish Americans and Italian Americans in particular prominently represented), facilitating their assimilation into American society (Jowett, 1976; Sklar, 1976).

Sport provided many of the ingredients that would be key to the sustainability of cinema: a captive audience, drama in a confined space (hence the popularity of boxing films in the early years), and strong characters to identify with and dislike. Indeed, one could argue that the rudiments of mainstream fiction film practice were all evident within the earliest sports film productions. However, as cinema developed and coalesced into specific forms and genres, the requirements and expectations of each brought both possibilities and challenges for filmmakers wishing to include sport in their work. These filmmakers (and above all those focused on producing fiction film) were challenged in re-creating or communicating what has long been a crucial factor in the appeal of spectator sport: unpredictability, or what Whannel (2000, p. 295) refers to as sport's "uncertainty." As American film critic Andrew Sarris (1980, p. 50) has observed, "Sports are now.

Movies ↳ are then. Sports are news. Movies are fables." This shortcoming of sport cinema became all the more apparent as popular media forms such as the radio and later television provided live coverage of sporting events.

The Evolving Focus of Sport Cinema

While cinema has evolved technically to allow for more dynamic depictions of sport—often informed by live television coverage—the focus of sport cinema has moved from the field of play to the lives of sporting protagonists. As a consequence, what we may describe as sport cinema may actually feature limited minutes of sport action; this is not to diminish the importance of these sequences, however, and they are often crucial to character and plot determination and resolution. As noted by Cummins (2006, p. 186) (describing fiction productions by ESPN):

> [T]he network has learned what novelists, playwrights, and Hollywood film and television producers have known for years, that sport serves as an ideal backdrop for telling other stories…. Racism, sexism, social inequality, the splintering of the American family—all of these issues have been addressed in countless fictional narratives that revolve around sports.

We will return to some of these themes identified by Cummins later in this chapter. However, television is also hugely indebted to cinema with regard to the narrative and aesthetic presentation of sport. Sport cinema defined the contours of subsequent depictions of sport, particularly through its popularization of "confrontainment" (Holly, 1994, cited in Hess-Lüttich, 2007, p. 1365)—that is, providing entertainment on the basis of confrontation—but also in the manner in which broadcast media "strives to place sports events within a dramatic framework for audience interpretation" (Sullivan, 2006, p. 137). The key ingredients in ensuring the appeal of televised sport are defining features of mainstream drama. As Wood and Benigni (2006, p. 154) observe, "the enjoyment of sports is contingent upon several factors, including *drama … interesting characters … conflict …* and *satisfying resolutions,*" and the ability of sport to provide all these elements has contributed to the endurance and popularity of sporting subjects since the earliest days of the cinema.

Approaches

There is a growing body of research engaged with sport cinema across a range of disciplines and informed by a variety of critical approaches and concerns. While some quantitative analysis of the area has been undertaken (Pearson, Curtis, Haney, & Zhang, 2003), qualitative studies have predominated. Research of sport cinema has evolved considerably over the past 40 years, from a point at which the topic was largely ignored (particularly within film studies) to its current status as the subject of increasing attention. Despite sport being one of the earliest subjects of film, in both nonfiction and fiction forms, academic engagement with these representations was slow to develop, partly due to the path that critical and theoretical

p. 1069 approaches to film took from early in the 20th century. Indeed, because of ↳ film's initial consideration as a "lower" form of entertainment, in part because of its association with perceived "lesser" sports such as boxing, much of the early writings on film were concerned with advocating for a degree of respectability for this new cultural form and identifying its distinguishing features. Proponents argued for film's particularity as a form with a separate aesthetic of its own, rather than a format primarily used for adapting more established arts such as literature and theater, or representing popular cultural forms such as sport (cf. Monaco, 2000, pp. 391–394; also Lindsay, 1915; Münsterberg, 1916).

Researching Sport Cinema: From History to Genre

The second half of the 20th century was a particularly productive period for the development of critical and theoretical approaches to film. Facilitated by the popularization of film festivals and societies and the increasing acceptance of film internationally as an academic discipline, a broad and varied range of approaches to film developed, drawing inspiration from developments more generally in academia in diverse areas such as historical studies, psychoanalytic analysis, linguistics, cognitive psychology, social anthropology, Marxism, and feminism. Under the influence of both poststructuralism and ideological criticism, a movement is evident in scholarship of sport cinema from initial historical studies of the area to examinations of the role of sport cinema in articulating and influencing the social imaginary (cf. Crosson, 2013, pp. 23–29; also Altman, 1999; Barthes, 1977; Monaco, 2000). Early engagements with the area in the work of film historians Manchel (1980) and Bergan (1982) mapped its historical development, identifying key texts and some of the recurring themes. Bergan in particular stressed the role sport cinema can play in affirming societal beliefs and values, a focus that was further developed by Mosher (1983, pp. 15–16), who identified "the narrative of the quest" motif in particular as central to films featuring sport and the manner in which relevant texts serve "universal human needs." Bergan's and Mosher's respective approaches anticipated a broader turn in theoretical approaches to film, influenced by developments in media studies and cultural studies, as scholars increasingly examined the function and meanings of sport cinema texts (Miller, 1990; Tudor, 1997).

Sport Cinema Studies: A Growing Field of Scholarship

Whannel's (2000, p. 293) remark that "while there has been much discussion of individual films, there is no scholarly overview of sport in the cinema" preceded two decades of increased scholarship, including monograph studies by Baker (2003), Crosson (2013), Babington (2014), Lieberman (2014), Sheppard (2020), Bonzel (2020), and Friedman (2020); dedicated journal issues (*Sport in Society* 2008, *11*[2–3]; *Studies in Eastern European Cinema* 2017, *8*[1]); and collections (Briley, Schoenecke, & Carmichael, 2008; Crosson, 2020; King & Leonard, 2006; Poulton & Roderick, 2009); as well as non-English-language overviews of the area by Romaguera i Ramió (2003), Camy and Camy (2016), and Garioni (2017).

The increased engagement with sports films reflects the larger evolution of critical engagements with sport media, and similar critical tools and concerns are evident within the discourse specific to sport cinema. Poulton and Roderick's (2008, p. 108) contention (referring to work by Boyle, Millington, & Vertinsky, 2006; Miller, 1990, 1994; Poulton, ↳ 2006; Redhead, 2007; Rowe, 1998, 2004; Tomlinson, 1996, 1999) that "scholars from the sociology of sport appear to have given sport in film more critical attention than their film studies counterparts" responds to the predominant focus of scholarship to date (including in film studies) on how sport cinema engages with and impacts discourses long of interest to sociologists, including questions of race, gender, and social class. Sport cinema has also attracted the interest of scholars in the fields of sports management (Pearson & Lam, 2015), nursing (DiBartolo & Seldomridge, 2009; Wilson, Blake, Taylor, & Hannings, 2013), medicine (Alexander, Lenahan, & Pavlov, 1999), and psychology (Butler, Zaromb, Lyle, & Roediger, 2009; Núñez & Garcia, 2014), though principally in studies examining the potential use of relevant sport film texts in educational contexts. However, these studies are also revealing in their analysis of the employment of sports films in classes considering themes such as gender and diversity (Núñez & Garcia, 2014), a theme that has also been the subject of critical attention in studies of sport cinema.

Scholars have also sought to delineate the distinctive features of a sports fiction genre (whether in film or literature), though these attempts have encountered considerable challenges. Cummins (2006, p. 187) observes—drawing on work by Burns (1987), Dickerson (1991), Oriard (1982), and Zucker and Babich (1987):

> Virtually every scholar who has attempted to define sports fiction has been faced with a myriad of highly problematic questions. For example, is the mere presence of sports in a narrative enough to justify inclusion as sports fiction, or must sports be central to the storyline? To that end, how large a role must sports play in a narrative before it is considered a central element? In addition, should all forms of athletic competition be included, or only organized sports?

While Cummins lists several potential avenues toward defining what sports fiction might refer to, he ultimately declines the challenge, admitting that his intervention will do "little to clarify whether sports films exist as a distinct genre" (p. 188). In common with Cummins, for much of the 20th century, this question was either sidestepped or largely ignored in critical literature. This is evident in the omission entirely of sport from Gehring's *Handbook of American Film Genres* published in 1988. Subsequent studies have somewhat addressed this omission, including Lopez's (1993) *Film by Genre,* and focused overviews of sport cinema, including those by Wallenfeldt (1989), Williams (2006), Didinger and Macnow (2009), Camy and Camy (2016), and Friedman (2020), as well as recognition by the American Film Institute in 2008 of "Sports" as one of the 10 classic film genres. However, doubts still persist as to how we might define the area, with Whannel (2008, pp. 196–197) denying that a sport cinema genre exists at all, positing instead that sport is "simply a topic, which links a set of otherwise diverse texts."

A crucial determinant of genre recognizability is critical commentary regarding individual films; as Altman (1999, pp. 124, 127) observes, "Our terms and our concepts derive not so much from cinema itself, but from those who represent cinema to us.... In short, critics and not studios lie at the origin of most generic language." However, Babington (2014) attributes sport cinema's seeming absence in critical discourse for decades to its hybridity and the inclusion by critics of films featuring sport often in other genres, ranging from the romantic comedy to the musical, the history film, the art film, and many more besides. Indeed, he lists in total 27 subcategories within which sports films have been found ↳ (pp. 12–14), a list that is by no means exhaustive and does not include the subgenres associated with individual sports, very evident in many critical engagements with sport on film. Hence we have to date focused critical studies of popular sports in the cinema, including American football (Oriard, 2001; Vogan, 2014), baseball (Briley, 2011; Dickerson, 1991; Good, 1996), cycling (Bennett, 2019), boxing (Grindon, 2011; Streible, 2008; Vogan, 2020), association football (Glynn, 2018), cricket (Glynn, 2020), Gaelic games (Crosson, 2019), ice hockey (Cermak, 2017), and surfing (Engle, 2015).

Scholars have attempted to bring some order to this very broad range of areas by finding dominant categories within sport cinema. Mosher (1983, pp. 15–19) identified four principal archetypal patterns—comedy, tragedy, romance, and satire—in the sports film, each of which responds to quite different audience expectations. Cashmore (2000, pp. 132–139) adopted an approach similar to Mosher's when he described three prominent subgenres to sport cinema, namely the dramatic/biographical, the comedy/fantasy, and the documentary. Most recently Friedman (2020, pp. 15–16) defined sport cinema in terms of eight "master narratives that help to define the genre": "Individual salvation/redemption/renewal," "Team unity," "Generational mentorship," "Pathway out of poverty," "Small-town heroes," "Moral victories," "Miracle wins," and "Beleaguered everyman quest."

While the differing approaches to the categorization of sport cinema may suggest uncertainty regarding the genre, this uncertainty is not unique to films featuring sport (Bordwell & Thompson, 2010, pp. 328–329). Furthermore, the development of the classification of genres in cinema history has often been characterized by considerable change and variation (Crosson, 2013, pp. 55–60; Neale, 2000, pp. 231–257). This has led commentators to move beyond attempting to define genre according to a limited number of prerequisites, with Jim Collins (1993, pp. 242–263) proposing "genericity" as more appropriate to the reflexivity and textual awareness apparent in recent genre films. Rick Altman (1999, pp. 62–65) has suggested the term "genrification" to reflect the continuing construction and reconstruction of genre in film whereby "the

constitution of *film* cycles and genres is a never-ceasing process, closely tied to the capitalist need for product differentiation." David Rowe (1998, p. 351) recognizes the changing and evolving nature of the sports genre in particular, arguing that "to claim that sports films may constitute a genre (perhaps with a range of subgenres) it would be necessary to establish the existence of some shifting yet patterned relationships within or between subject matter, presentation, narrative, and affect." Taking this as his starting point, Rowe suggests a

> common basis to nondocumentary or instruction-based sports films as a genre (or, more cautiously, as a "complex of sub genres"), underpinning a panoply of formal, substantive, and stylistic variations: that all films that deal centrally with sports are at some level allegorical, that they address the question of the dual existence of the social and sporting worlds as problematic, and that they are preoccupied with the extent to which (idealized) sports can transcend or are bound by existing (and corrupting) social relations. (pp. 351–352)

Rowe's analysis here points to a recurring concern of critical engagements with sport cinema: how films connect with and inform broader social relations and understandings. This concern has been at the center of ongoing debates regarding the area and individual sports film texts.

Debates

Sport Cinema: More Than Films about Sport

As summarized above, scholars of sport cinema have identified and examined the manner in which representative films have connected with wider questions and concerns in the time of their production and release. While Dickerson (1991, p. 153) contends that Hollywood sports films mirror "the changes of the culture that gives birth to the films," for Baker (2003, p. 2) these films also "contribute to the contested process of defining social identities." Informed by influential work in the broader cultural studies and communication studies fields (including Hall, 1973/1980; Morley, 1980) studies of sport cinema have engaged with the role relevant texts have had in either affirming and influencing dominant values and their acceptance or (occasionally) the potential of individual texts for progressive, alternative, or oppositional readings, what Mathia Diawara (2004) described (in relation to African American audiences) as "resisting spectatorship." Relevant work has considered a broad range of topics in relation to sport cinema, including nostalgia (Kibby, 1998; Nilsson, 2000; Paino, 2001; Springwood, 1996), religion (Ardolino, 2003; Crosson, 2017; Roubach, 2007), and youth and aging (Cummins, 2006; Good, 1996; Tudor, 1997). However, the most prominent and recurring debates have concerned questions of race (Denzin, 2002; Free, 2012; Giardina & McCarthy, 2005; Regester, 2003; Sheppard, 2020), gender (Kibby, 1998; Lieberman, 2014; Lindner, 2011; Nilsson, 2000), social class (Bowden, 1994; Crosson, 2013; Grindon, 1996, 2011; Hill, 2005), and nationalism (Bonzel, 2020; Crosson, 2020; Miller, 1990; Sobchack, 1997).

Race and the Sports Film

Reflecting the dominance of American sport cinema, the majority of critical work on the topic of race has been focused on the depiction of African American athletes, though some research has also been undertaken examining the depiction of Native American characters and other ethnic identities (cf. Crosson, 2013, pp. 125–156; also King, 2006; Ransom, 2014). The critical discourse regarding race and sport cinema is part of a wider engagement with the depiction of race in *MediaSport* (Wenner, 1998) as "a key site of contemporary corporeal display and consequently of racial signification" (Grainger, Newman, & Andrews, 2006, p. 447).

A recurring concern across analyses of sport cinema is the often problematic depictions of minorities. Good (1996, p. 140), referring to the depiction of minorities in baseball films, contends that these productions "often mistreat the player by giving him certain childish or uncivilised traits." He offers the example of *The Bingo Long Traveling All Stars & Motor Kings* (1976) to illustrate this practice, evident in this production in the manner in which African American characters are depicted in a comical manner. While depictions of African Americans have undoubtedly evolved, particularly after the civil rights movement in the 1960s and the legislative changes that followed, a wide range of scholars have nonetheless observed a lack of real progress in representations of African Americans athletes, ↳ who continue to be depicted in subservient or stereotypical positions. Baker (2003), Good (1996), and Crosson (2013) have all highlighted how, even in films that depict minorities in leading or prominent roles—including *Cool Runnings* (1993), *The Air Up There* (1994), *Jerry Maguire* (1996), *Hardball* (2001), *Radio* (2003), *Bring It On: All or Nothing* (2006), *The Love Guru* (2008)—these roles continue to support and "reinforce White superiority" (Cummins, 2006, p. 193). Crosson (2013. p. 83) identifies, for example, the continuing depiction of African Americans in one of the most commercially successful of all sports films, *The Blind Side* (2009), "as untrustworthy, violent and sexually aggressive … neglectful of their own social responsibilities in contrast to members of the dominant White community." In one of the most recent studies of the subject, Sheppard (2020, p. 10) is critical of the way sport cinema "subsumes the significance of race" even in texts where race is clearly a prominent issue. She adopts an innovative "black body genre" approach to the subject, contending that "sports films centralize Black athletes' corporeal performance as a spectacle, such that blackness is realized, mitigated, succumbed to, and disavowed via cinema's regimes of representation" (p. 8).

While the majority of critical engagements with the question of race in sport cinema have raised concerns regarding the problematic positioning of minority characters, Babington (2014, p. 70) sees relevant films as the result of compromises "imposed by their historical moment" that "need to be understood as the condition of their existence." There has also been a recognition of the possibility of oppositional readings given the polysemic nature of mainstream cinema. Baker (2003), for example, describes how two early boxing-themed films featuring African American boxers, *Spirit of Youth* (1938) and *Keep Punching* (1939) (works which ostensibly conform to "dominant discourses of self-formation and segregation"), "reverse the race film convention of casting dark-skinned blacks as the criminal heavies" by placing characters suggesting "whiteness" in these roles, thereby invoking "the racial barriers that were a historical reality" for African Americans. As a result, these films allow for alternative and potentially progressive readings within narratives that nonetheless did not contradict "the bourgeois values endorsed by the Hollywood pictures" screened at the time (pp. 111–112). The potential for such contrary readings of conventional texts has also been identified with regard to representations of women in sport cinema.

Gender and the Sports Film

One of the most prominent debates returned to repeatedly in academic studies of sport cinema—and indeed sports fiction more generally—concerns the depiction of gender. Baker (2003, p. 3) argues that "to some degree every sports film is about gender," and Crosson (2013, p. 104) contends that "film has had an important role to play in affirming the prominence of men in sport, with male physicality a prominent feature in many films." This focus is evident in the popularity (in terms of both numbers produced and commercial appeal) of the sports biopic, evident from as early as 1940 with the release of *Knute Rockne, All American*, the biopic of the legendary American football coach. Dickerson (1991), Good (1996), and Briley (2011) have each highlighted the 1940s and 1950s as a particularly prolific period for this subgenre; popular successes include *The Pride of the Yankees* (1942), *The Stratton Story* (1949), and *Jim Thorpe—All-American* (1951), all of which feature male ↳ protagonists and their heroic efforts to overcome considerable obstacles to achieve sporting (and personal) success.

Dickerson (1991, p. 43) has connected the popularity of these productions with ideological needs in the post–World War II period. An important development in these years was the increasing empowerment of women and their greater involvement in roles previously the preserve of men, a pattern accelerated during the war. A relevant cinematic response to this change was the MGM production *National Velvet*, released in 1944, prior to the end of the war. In its depiction of a female jockey winning the Aintree Grand National against the odds (and the rules), *National Velvet* reflected a paradigm shift more broadly in American society (Crosson, 2013, pp. 110–114).

Partly as a response to the growing women's movement and to women's increasingly active roles more generally in society, from the 1950s onward women began to feature more frequently in prominent roles in sport films; relevant productions include *Hard, Fast and Beautiful!* (1951), *Pat and Mike* (1952), *Ice Castles* (1978), and *The Main Event* (1979). Indeed, women now began to appear in roles and to possess qualities perceived historically as masculine, such as authority, strength, aggression, force, and intellect. While these films continued to be in the minority, the representations of women found therein often suggest the tensions inherent in placing strong females in contexts that have historically been predominantly the preserve of men and the need to manage the threat these women presented to patriarchy (Crosson, 2013, pp. 103–124; Tudor, 1997, pp. 80–81).

The increasing empowerment of women in the 1970s and 1980s has also contributed to what Dickerson (1991, p. 119) describes as a "return of mythbuilding," evident in the popularity of sports biopics focused on male athletes, including *Eight Men Out* (1988), *The Babe* (1992), and *Rudy* (1993)—all films concerning legendary figures in American sports history and sharing a nostalgia to varying degrees for a time prior to the women's liberation movement of the late 1960s. Further relevant examples include *Raging Bull* (1980), a work Pam Cook (1982) views as suffused with a nostalgia for a strong robust masculinity and traditional patriarchal culture, and *Cinderella Man* (2005). The theme of recuperating American masculinity is central to many of the most prominent sports films of recent decades: *The Rookie* (2002), *Invincible* (2006), *The Fighter* (2010), *Rush* (2013), and recent Oscar winner *Ford v Ferrari* (2019). While there are notable recent exceptions that feature women prominently—including *I, Tonya* (2017) and *Battle of the Sexes* (2017)—the vast majority of sports films continue to focus primarily on male athletes.

In most of these films, Tudor (1997, p. 79) contends, women's roles are "relative to the male athlete-hero," occupying principally supporting parts. Tudor summarizes these traditional roles as "mother, spectator, cheerleader, booster" (p. 94), findings supported by Good (1996) in his analysis of baseball-themed films, from *Pride of the Yankees* (1942) to *The Natural* (1986) and *Field of Dreams* (1989). Representations of women in sport cinema have clearly evolved, as women's roles more generally in society have evolved over the 20th and into the 21st century. However, scholars have contended that what may ostensibly appear to be progressive representations of female athletes in sports films (including prominent productions *A League of Their Own* [1992], *Bend It Like Beckham* [2002], and *Million Dollar Baby* [2004]) may actually disguise a conservative ideology concerned ultimately with the maintenance of patriarchy (Boyle et al., 2006; Lieberman, 2014). Crosson (2013, pp. 103–124) argues that the threat such strong women may pose to patriarchy is contained in three principle means in the sports film: in the often negative, or comic, portrayal

p. 1075   of ↳ women in positions of authority; by positioning leading sporting females clearly under the guidance (and authority) of men; or by the sexual objectification of women for principally male gratification.

There is some recognition among scholars of the progressive potential of strong female characters in sport cinema. Lindner (2011, p. 337) has contended, referring in particular to boxing films featuring female lead protagonists (a subgenre that includes *The Opponent* [2000], *Million Dollar Baby* [2004], and *Die Boxerin* [2004]), that while mainstream sport cinema affirms the "generally hetero-normative representational context of cinematic fiction," it can also occasionally point "to ways in which filmic depictions of female athleticism might destabilise normative understandings of gender and the gendered body," a position also evident in Caudwell's (2008) analysis of *Girlfight* (2000). However, while Lieberman (2014, p. 168) also notes

the potential of sport cinema to "challenge, create and celebrate women's accomplishments and imagine new possibilities," she laments that this feature has "yet to become common."

Social Class

Scholarship has engaged with the depiction of social class in sport cinema emerging from a variety of national contexts, though the American experience has attracted most sustained attention. The American sports film has been viewed as playing a central role in the promotion of a particular version of ideal masculinity, indelibly associated with the American Dream, and defined by Baker (2003, p. 49) as the "heroic individual" who "overcomes obstacles and achieves success through determination, self-reliance, and hard work" (see also Crosson, 2013, pp. 103–124). This feature is informed by a central aspect of sport in the United States; as noted by Tudor (1997, p. xx), "the notion of individualism heavily marks the discourse of North-American athletics." Scholars have observed the importance of this theme across American sport cinema (Englert, 2018; Lichtenfeld, 2014; Whannel, 2008) where individual responsibility is invoked regardless of the challenges characters may encounter, including with regard to race, gender, or social class. Repeatedly in sport cinema we witness working-class characters overcome considerable obstacles through sport to realize at least a part of the American Dream, particularly in those films depicting boxing.

Boxing has been one of the most popular sports featured in sport cinema; Leger Grindon (1996, p. 54) could count "well over 150 feature-length fiction productions since 1930" in his essay on the topic, and this number has increased substantially since then. These films have provided an ambiguous yet revelatory insight into sport and social class in the United States, often focusing on the dark and corrupt aspects of this sport, but also seeing in it an opportunity for those marginalized and less fortunate to realize the American Dream. However, as Bergan (1982, p. 35) observes, boxing films "hardly ever question the social conditions that help to produce this phenomenon." Rather, individual responsibility and achievement are foregrounded repeatedly. Frequently in the boxing film the decline of the boxer is related primarily to a personal weakness rather than social factors; this can sometimes be the boxer's pride or insecurity (as in *Champion* [1949] and *Raging Bull* [1980]) or a boxer's fondness for the good life and all that it brings, including alcohol (as evident in *The Champ* [1931] and *The Great John L* [1945]) (Baker, 1997, 2003; Crosson, 2013; Grindon, 2011).

p. 1076 Boxing films have enjoyed considerable commercial and critical success, including, in the 21st century, David O. Russell's Oscar-winning *The Fighter* (2010) and the relaunch of the *Rocky* franchise in the related sequel productions, the Oscar-nominated *Creed* (2015) and *Creed II* (2018). That relaunch reflected the influence and popularity of *Rocky* (1976), a film that, more than any other, defined and popularized the contours of sport cinema since its release in 1976, popularizing the figure of the working-class sporting hero in its eponymous lead character and the American Dream trajectory at the heart of the film (Crosson, 2013, pp. 93–98). However, critics have accused the film of implicit (if not explicit) racism in its contrasting of a sympathetic underdog working-class white character with a wealthy and excessive African American, the heavyweight champion Apollo Creed (Leab, 1979; Tomasulo, 2007; Wilkinson, 1984), in a work that elevates white ethnic immigrant identity (Italian American) as an acceptable cipher for WASP identity, while disavowing (and legitimating) white privilege (Jacobson, 2006). The film has also been viewed as a neoconservative backlash against the various social and civil rights movements that marked the 1960s (Elmwood, 2008; Jordan, 2003; Nystrom, 2009). Grant Wiedenfeld (2016) challenges these readings of *Rocky*, viewing the film more positively. Drawing on Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque and Northrop Frye's classification of literature, Wiedenfeld regards *Rocky* as a carnivalesque low mimetic comedy that embodies "progressive ideals for race and class under the general theme of respect" (p. 168).

Sport Cinema beyond Hollywood

The focus of sport cinema scholarship to date has been predominantly on the American experience, the source of most relevant texts. However, increasing attention has been given to the place of sport cinema in other contexts and its role in the articulation and representation of national identities. This research has built upon the extensive research considering the place of sport more broadly with regard to national culture (e.g., Bairner, 2001; Bale, 1986; Dolan & Connolly, 2017; Holt, 1990; Porter & Smith, 2004), while scholars have also noted the important influence the mass media (including the cinema) has had in the popularization of sport and affirming its political significance (Billig, 1995, pp. 120–126; O'Boyle & Free, 2020). The increasing (if still underdeveloped) focus of research on specific national contexts responds to the role sport cinema may play in affirming (and occasionally contesting) central tenets underpinning conceptions of national identity while also revealing the much more extensive experience and practice of sport cinema beyond the American and Anglophone context.

Indeed, in some countries Indigenous sports films have been among the most popular at the local box office: in Norway, *Flåklypa Grand Prix* (*Pinchcliffe Grand Prix*, 1975); Russia, Движение вверх (*Going Vertical*, AKA *Three Seconds,* 2017); Spain, *Campeones* (*Champions*, 2018); and India, *Dangal* (2016). These films often reflect the influence of the predominant trajectory found in American sport cinema, summarized by Rowe (1998, p. 355) as one in which "all manner of social, structural, and cultural conflicts and divisions are resolved through the fantastic agency of sports." However, they can also reveal cynicism and pessimism regarding that trajectory, as evident in films as various *as The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (United Kingdom, 1962), *Boxer a smrt* (*The Boxer and Death*) (Czechoslovakia, 1962), and *Offside* (Iran, 2006). Studies

of sport cinema have to date focused ↳ on a wide array of national contexts, including Spain (Ashton, 2013; Rodríguez Díaz, 2010; Romaguera i Ramió, 2003), Germany (Bonzel, 2006; McDougall, 2017), Australia (Crosson, 2013, pp. 143–150; Miller, 1990, 1994), Belgium (Biltereyst & Vande Winkel, 2020), Britain (Jones, 2005), France (Jouan-Westlund, 2006; Place-Verghnes, 2007), Italy (Buscemi, 2020; Garioni, 2017), Taiwan (Lin, 2020), Ethiopia (Thomas, 2020), Latvia (Brūveris, 2016), Brazil (Capraro & Vargas, 2020), New Zealand (Henley, 2020), Ireland (Crosson, 2019), Sweden (Dahlén, 2020), Hungary (Cunningham, 2004; Fodor, 2017), and India (Crosson, 2013, pp. 150–156). While responding to the salient features apparent in each context considered (or exemplary text analyzed), these studies individually and collectively reveal the ongoing significance of the relationship between sport cinema and national identity.

Conclusion

Much as sport has developed as a key and highly influential aspect of popular culture, so too sport cinema has responded and magnified central aspects of sport's appeal. Indeed, sport is one of the oldest, most enduring and popular topics featured in film, such that identifying and defining the parameters of a distinctive sports film genre has presented considerable challenges. However, due both to the low regard with which sports films were held for much of the 20th century and the focus of scholars on identifying distinctive traits of film itself as an art form, scholarship of sport cinema was slow to develop. The emergence of this critical discourse over the past 40 years has involved a broad range of disciplines and areas, with the influence of cultural studies particularly evident in relevant scholarship. As scholars of cultural studies have argued, film plays a critical role as a mediator of social relations through the naturalization of cultural and societal norms (Boyle et al., 2006, p, 110; Croteau & Hoynes, 2003; Schirato & Webb, 2004). This contention has informed the focus of research on the role and influence of sport cinema texts in articulating and informing broader discourses, including with regard to race, gender, social class, and national identity.

While there has been considerable recent scholarship of the genre—including four relevant monographs in 2020—there remains much potential for further research. The American experience has understandably attracted most attention as the source of the majority of sports films. However, research of sport cinema is underdeveloped with regard to other contexts, despite the popularity of sport on film internationally and the distinctive nature of its portrayal in specific national and regional contexts, both in terms of sports depicted (for example, association football in Europe) and singular narrative and aesthetic elements that may feature.

Furthermore, the impact on sports films of the changing nature of cinema itself, due to declining audiences, new technologies (a process accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic), and the contemporary convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006), requires further study. Sports dramas are now an increasing and popular component of television programming, including for dedicated sports channels more familiarly engaged with live sporting events (Brown & Bryant, 2006, pp. 78–80, 97–98). The success of such fiction-based content eventually led to the establishment of ESPN Films (previously known as ESPN Original Entertainment) in March 2008, dedicated to the production and distribution of sport films (ESPN Press Room, 2008). ESPN Films lists over 100 productions, including TV series ↳ as well as fiction and nonfiction works. While these have had limited box office success, they have attracted huge audiences on television and streaming platforms, including the Academy Award–winning documentary mini-series (which also had a limited theatrical release) *O.J.: Made in America*, which had an audience in excess of 35 million in the United States alone (The Futon Critic, 2016).

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ESPN is a subsidiary of the Walt Disney Company, one of the most prominent producers of sports-themed films, with over 60 produced to date (Disney Movies List, n.d.). Another Disney subsidiary is 20th Century Studios, coproducer and distributor of the film with which we began this chapter, *Ford v Ferrari*. Sport cinema is now part of the contemporary convergence culture in which major film studios are but one component of giant conglomerates with businesses that expand well beyond film productions, and may include publishing, television, merchandising, internet concerns, and in some prominent instances (as with Disney) sporting interests. The long-term impact of these developments on the content and reception of sport cinema is still to be determined; what is clear, however, is that sports drama will continue to occupy a prominent and influential place in popular culture for many years to come.

Notes

1. Further information on the box office returns of the film is available here: https://web.archive.org/web/20191118055744/https://www.boxofficemojo.com/release/rl990348801/.

2. The film's listing is available here: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1950186/.

3. This search is possible on IMDb at the following link: https://www.imdb.com/search/title/?title_type=feature&genres=sport (search undertaken on July 31, 2020).

4. While this chapter focuses primarily on sports fiction, it is also important to acknowledge the significance and popularity of documentary depictions of sport. Sport has been a frequent subject of documentary from the emergence of the form in the 1920s. Some of the most influential and innovative documentaries ever produced have featured sport prominently, including Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), Jean Vigo's *Taris, roi de l'eau* (*Jean Taris, Swimming Champion*, 1931), Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympia* (1938), and Kon Ichikawa's *Tokyo Olympia* (1965). This continues to be the case today, and the popular and critical success of recent productions such as *Senna* (2010) and the television series *Sunderland 'til I Die* (2018–2020) and *The Last Dance* (2020) indicates the continuing relevance of the documentary approach—in both theatrically released productions and the televisual/online experience. Sports documentaries have enjoyed not just significant commercial success and popularity with audiences but also considerable critical acclaim, with sports-themed productions winning the Best Documentary feature Academy Award in 2017 (*O.J.: Made in America* [2016]), 2018 (*Icarus* [2017]), and 2019 (*Free Solo* [2018]) (Sheppard & Vogan, 2020, p. 1).

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