R ROUTLEDGE

SEÁN CROSSON
SPORT
AND FILM

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Seán Crosson

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FIGURES

INTRODUCTION

Why sport and film?

> Its drama, its personalities and its worldwide appeal means sport is the new Hollywood.
>
> Bell and Campbell (1999, p. 22)

Sport has developed over the twentieth century and into the twenty-first to become one of the most important and influential of contemporary cultural practices. While sport may appear to many as a trivial distraction, it has grown to have huge economic, cultural and on occasion political importance in people's lives. Indeed, sport has evolved into a popular metaphor for life itself. There are few other cultural practices that have provided as many idioms now used widely in everyday life and outside the sporting contexts in which they first emerged, particularly in the English language. These idioms have come from a variety of sports including horse-racing ('down to the wire', 'home stretch'), baseball, rugby, or American football ('drop the ball'), cricket ('hat-trick'), and association football ('move the goalposts'). Many have emerged from boxing, including 'come out fighting', 'down and out', 'out for the count', 'the gloves are off', 'go the distance', 'have someone in your corner', 'heavy hitter', 'heavyweight', 'hit below the belt', 'infighting', 'K.O.', 'lightweight', 'on the ropes' and 'saved by the bell'.

While boxing has arguably provided more idioms than any other sport to the English language, it is also the sport that has featured most commonly in film. Filmmakers have commented on the allegorical role of boxing with Martin Scorsese describing boxing as basically

> just an allegory for the theatre of life ... you get in the ring and you try to survive or you're on the attack, you're on the defensive, you're on

> the offensive, to many people in life … life is that struggle, and there's a struggle everyday in one way or another.
>
> (2004)

This theme of struggle, and the perceived role of sport as a means of overcoming, has been one of the most popular subjects of the sports film.

Despite the emergence of later audio-visual forms such as television and the internet and their popularisation during the late twentieth century, the cinema, in common with sport, also occupies a prominent role in people's lives today. While other audio-visual platforms may have contributed to the decrease in the numbers that attend the cinema regularly in the West, elsewhere cinema attendances continue to grow with audiences in excess of 65 million people attending the cinema weekly in India (Wright, 2006, p. 1). There are also signs in the West that cinema attendances are increasing. Indeed, given the fragmentation of audiences through the emergence of cable and satellite television and the exponential growth of television channels, cinema provides one of the few contemporary forms that still attracts huge audiences to a single cultural product. The success in 2010 of the film *Avatar*, the most commercially successful film of all time, indicates both the continuing popularity of the cinematic experience and its engagement of a mass, undifferentiated audience in a manner unusual in today's fragmented cultural milieu.

In some ways there are obvious attractions to sport that would seem at face value to make it the ideal subject for film. Sport attracts huge attention and is one of the most popular cultural practices internationally providing a crucial source of personal, communal, national and occasionally international identification. In its myriad forms, it offers both participative and viewing possibilities for billions daily. It crosses from the recreational to the political and has a unique ability to effect individual and collective actions. Indeed, as will be considered in Chapter 6, sport can have a powerful role in affirming national identities and furthermore can have nationalistic and political reverberations beyond the sporting events themselves as evidenced most famously in the four-day war – often referred to as the 'Football War' – that broke out between Honduras and El Salvador in July 1969, the catalyst for which was the qualifying games for the 1970 FIFA World Cup the previous month between these two countries, and their representation in each country's media (Kapuscinki, 1990). The extent of the sponsorship by leading sporting, food and drink, and clothing companies of major sporting events is indicative of its importance commercially not to mention the huge role that sport plays in the media internationally such that, as Boyle and Haynes contend, '[s]port and the media are now integral components of what we often called the entertainment or cultural industries' (2000, p. xi). There are also aesthetic and structural parallels, as Chapter 1 outlines, between sport and film including the ability of both to evoke intense emotional responses and to possess dramatic possibilities realised in film through the manipulation of its various fundamentals including cinematography, sound and editing.

Modern sport and the cinema both emerged contemporaneously towards the end of the nineteenth century. The first modern Olympic Games were held in Athens in April 1896, only four months after the Lumière brothers gave the first public screening to a paying Paris audience of their new invention, the 'cinématographe'. It is significant that these two pivotal events in modern cultural history occurred in the space of less than half a year. The beginnings of the art form that would eventually become popularly known as 'film', 'the movies' or 'the cinema' is inextricably linked with sport. Indeed, sport, as a widespread cultural practice with a well-established following internationally, had a vital role in popularising the new medium of film, a topic explored further in Chapter 2.

The development of both sport and film also reflected the substantial changes that the Western World in particular was undergoing in the late nineteenth century. As the industrialisation and modernisation process developed apace and Western countries became increasingly urbanised, the need to provide structured leisure for such rapidly changing societies became evermore pressing. As noted by Johnny Waterson and Lindie Naughton,

> Sport as we know it is a Victorian invention, a by-product of the move off the land. Town life, by its very nature, created rules and couldn't afford to be governed solely by the weather and the seasons. There was also less space and in the cramped towns of the nineteenth century, sporting activities became restricted to strictly confined areas. Later, as the working hours became shorter, Victorians began looking for something to do in their time off. The result was a dramatic growth in all kinds of activities and 'hobbies' from the Salvation Army and brass bands, to music halls and horse racing.
>
> (1992, p. 3)

For many people, sport in its various forms particularly as it became codified and commercialised, provided a crucial source of both participative and entertainment possibilities.

Understandings of sport also changed significantly during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As Ikuo Abe has observed, the description of 'sport' in English and American dictionaries was confined principally to the predominantly upper-class 'skills in the field, like riding and hunting' until the 1880s and 1890s when this term began to be applied more generally to athletic 'or physically competitive activities' (1988, pp. 3, 24). The changing application of the term reflected what Norbert Elias has described as a process of 'sportization' (Elias, 1986, p.151) involving the codification of sports during the mid- to late-nineteenth century as institutionalisation and bureaucratic organisation along with 'rational calculation in the pursuit of goals, emphasis on task performance, and seriousness' would come to 'distinguish sport from other types of physical activities such as play, recreation, and games' (Nixon, 1984, p. 13).

The institutionalisation of sport, including the formalisation of rules, and the establishment of national and regional sporting associations and authorities

was also part of an attempt to control and ameliorate concerns and suspicions regarding sporting activities themselves. Sport was viewed with considerable suspicion in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, particularly among the Establishment of Europe and the United States who often regarded it as a valueless distraction associated with a range of vices including drinking, gambling and violence and 'at worst a manifestation of cultural decline and barbarism' (Gruneau, 1993, p. 86). However, the very development of modernity and capitalism, and the attendant problems they gave rise to, including the fragmentation and attenuation of traditional communities and beliefs, contributed to a re-evaluation of sport and the role that it might play in society. In this context, issues of personal and social advancement became increasingly important and sport was deemed to have an important role to play in their development. Sport's role in these respects has been traced through the influence of British public schools and imperialism, and French romanticism in the nineteenth century (Holt, 1990, pp. 74–85).

In the United States, the growing realisation of the importance of sport has been linked to fears around national weakness and a belief in the ability of sport to produce men of action (Streible, 2008, p. 11). Particularly from the 1850s onwards, with the advent of intercollegiate competitions in boat racing and subsequently baseball, athletics and American football, sport came to play an increasingly prominent role in American society and culture. For those in positions of authority, sports became much more than diversions from study; as in the development of sport in the British public school system, they were promoted as a means of instilling discipline and imparting leadership and an appreciation of the value of teamwork in students while affirming the social barriers that distinguished these students from working-class men (Corn and Goldstein, 1993, pp. 147–148). Sport was also viewed by influential figures such as president Theodore Roosevelt in the 1890s as a means of sustaining the dominance of White Anglo-Saxon men at a time when immigrants, African Americans and women played more prominent and influential roles in American life (Umphlett, 1984, p. 34).

However, there were further impulses at work that were related to the very nature of capitalism itself and the discontinuities and disruptions it gave rise to. For Marxists in particular, sport has often been viewed warily as a crucial part of the ideological state apparatus through which ideology[1] interpellates individuals as subjects within the social system (Althusser, 1972, p. 173). For Louis Althusser, sport was one of the ideological state apparatuses or 'number of realities which present themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialized institutions' (1972, p. 143). These apparatuses are particularly effective because they do not function primarily by force but rather through ideology creating individuals as 'self-recognized cultural subjects' (Tudor, 1997, p. xvii).

One of the most influential political thinkers for Marxist readings of sport and society, including the work of Louis Althusser, is the Italian political

philosopher Antonio Gramsci. Arguably Gramsci's greatest contribution to the evolution and nuancing of Marxist thought was his analysis of the role ideology plays in society. Rather than seeing the functioning of power in society as being principally the result of force and coercion, Gramsci saw power functioning in much more subtle ways through ideological control that maintained and prolonged the prevailing structures of domination and subjugation. Power, Gramsci contended, was maintained by two forces in society, direct domination through coercive forces such as the army and police, or the more subtle, though equally, if not more effective, processes of ideological control that saw people give their consent to systems that ultimately contributed to their repression. For Gramsci the second element was crucial to the maintenance of control in any society as coercion was rarely sufficient to such a task (Gramsci, 1971).

For Gramsci a fundamental aim of a State is 'to raise the great mass of the population to a particular cultural and moral level, a level (or type) which corresponds to the needs of the productive forces for development, and hence to the interests of the ruling class' (1971, p. 258). A crucial concept in this respect for Gramsci was cultural hegemony which referred to the maintenance of control of one social class over others through the diffusion of a complete system of beliefs, ethics, values and ways of thinking throughout particular societies that ultimately becomes the 'organising principle' that supports the existing power structures. These ideas on all aspects of life ultimately work to support the ruling elite and become accepted as the prevailing 'common sense' (Boggs, 1976, p. 39) or, as Geoffrey Nowell-Smith contends, 'the way a subordinate class lives its subordination' (cited in Alvarado and Boyd-Barrett, 1992, p. 51).

What Gramsci described as 'common sense', Roland Barthes referred to as 'bourgeois norms' (1957, p. 140) while for Althusser it was 'obviousness' (1972, p. 171), a crucial tool in the maintenance of hegemonic power. However, as Gramsci observed, 'common sense is not something rigid and immobile, but is continually transforming itself' (Gramsci, cited in Hall, 1982, p. 73). Drawing on Gramsci's ideas, John Fiske summarises that

> Consent must be constantly won and rewon, for people's material social experience constantly reminds them of the disadvantages of subordination and thus poses a threat to the dominant class ... Hegemony ... posits a constant contradiction between ideology and the social experience of the subordinate that makes this interface into an inevitable site of ideological struggle.
>
> (1992, p. 291)

It is in this context that sport, film and the media more generally play a central role both as a means of maintaining hegemonic power but also as sites revealing the tensions inherent in its maintenance. The codification and development of sport in the late nineteenth century reflected the functioning of hegemonic forces in society at that time concerned with affirming and promoting particular

values more generally but 'in ways that privileged the material resources, cultural competencies, and preferred beliefs of European and North American males from a particular class' (Gruneau, 1993, p. 97). As such, the codification of sport could be viewed as part of a desire to control and provide continuity for societies in a period marked by considerable discontinuity. While the old certainties of place, identity and religion were increasingly problematised with the rapid escalation of modernisation, sport contributed to their reconstruction. As new communities emerged in the rapidly growing urban centres, sport provided people with a sense of identity through their identification with particular athletes and teams and a sense of belonging and community through sharing their sporting experiences with others. Sport, in a manner comparable to religion historically, over time became 'loaded with symbolism, imagery, myths, rituals; in short, the meaning-making apparatus that we associate with any other area of cultural life' (Cashmore, 2000, p. ix).

Film too would come to hold a crucial role in people's lives. Indeed, Andrew Sarris has described most Hollywood films by the 1930s as 'semi-religious light shows built around the rituals of family and courtship' (1998, p. 15). This focus on the ritual function of film has preoccupied one major strand of critical discourse concerning the emergence of genres in cinema (discussed further in Chapter 3) with Rick Altman contending that

> By choosing the films it would patronize, the audience revealed its preferences and its beliefs, thus inducing Hollywood studios to produce films reflecting its desires. Participation in the genre film experience thus reinforces spectator expectations and desires. Far from being limited to mere entertainment, filmgoing offers a satisfaction more akin to that associated with established religion.
>
> (1984, p. 9)

The satisfaction found by audiences in film has been described by Richard Dyer (1977) as a 'utopian sensibility', a sensibility that is shared by followers of sport. Sport maps a utopian space beyond the challenges of everyday life. While sport evolved in form and practice during the nineteenth century, it maintained and developed a central powerful appeal. Sport provides utopian possibilities that can transcend the sometimes tarnished and challenging present, and past, circumstances of those who engage in sporting activities or follow those who are. Indeed, the origins of one of the largest global sporting events, the Olympic Games, lay precisely in a belief in the utopian potential of sport. For the founder of the modern Olympics, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, 'sports were offered as a peaceable lingua franca, a means by which the people of different nations could communicate and cooperate in a manner that would lessen the likelihood of war between "alien" entities' (Rowe, 1998, p. 352).

Drawing on the definition offered by Dyer in his influential essay on 'Entertainment and Utopia', this study suggests that it is the utopian sensibility

that both sport and film offer, as popular forms of entertainment, that are their most seductive qualities. As Dyer observes,

> Entertainment offers the image of 'something better' to escape into, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don't provide … Entertainment does not, however, present models of utopian worlds … Rather the utopianism is contained in the feelings it embodies. It presents, head-on as it were, what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organized. It thus works at the level of sensibility, by which I mean an effective code that is characteristic of, and largely specific to, a given mode of cultural production.
>
> (1977, p. 373)

In commentary on sport by those long engaged – and possibly obsessed – by it, one encounters descriptions that repeatedly affirm the powerful utopian feelings sport evokes. As Nick Hornby writes in his book *Fever Pitch* as a fan of English association football club Arsenal:

> please, be tolerant of those who describe a sporting moment as their best ever. We do not lack imagination, nor have we had sad and barren lives; it is just that real life is paler, duller, and contains less potential for unexpected delirium.
>
> (1992, p. 6)

Similarly, for Chief Sports Writer of *The Times*, Simon Barnes,

> Sport is such stuff as daydreams are made of, for sure; but it's also the stuff of real dreams … Like dreams, sport can bring us the most ecstatic and profoundly felt pleasures, and can also bring us matters so complex and confusing that we don't know how to react to them. Sport can deliver those moments we thought only possible in fiction or daydream, but with a visceral intensity that no amount of private musing can rival.
>
> (2006, p. 166)

For followers of individual athletes or teams, competition and the possibility of victory – and its enjoyment – allows them to step outside what may be challenging, or possibly unsatisfactory lives, to experience intense emotions rarely found elsewhere. This experience can be brief, and may only last for the duration of a single competitive event, but nonetheless for millions of people engaged with sport, it is very real. It is, as Dyer describes, a feeling, but one, as Barnes continues, of 'visceral intensity', and few cultural forms have the emotional impact on people's lives of sport, a factor exploited readily by directors of sports films. This is particularly evident in the frequent, and often highly emotionally manipulative, final fight, game, or race scene found at the climax of so many sports films.

Indeed, film has a powerful ability, inherited and developed by other audio-visual forms such as television and the internet, to preserve, elevate and slow down the utopian moment in sport; not just to capture it for perpetuity, but to transform that moment. As André Bazin noted, the photographic image 'embalms time' and film adds to this property 'the image of their duration, change mummified as it were' (1960, p. 8). As a seductive and powerfully influential form, film's fundamentals – including as discussed in Chapter 1, narrative, mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing and sound – provide powerful tools for exploiting sport's utopian sensibilities.

Hollywood sports films in particular, which have been most influential for the form internationally and constitute the largest number of such films produced, are characterised by this utopian sensibility. As David Rowe has summarised in Hollywood sports films customarily 'all manner of social, structural, and cultural conflicts and divisions are resolved through the fantastic agency of sports' (1998, p. 355). What these films frequently offer is an idealised view of sport providing an overly simplistic solution to real social problems. However, this trajectory also includes a commitment to the social structures that have ultimately perpetuated social inequality. As Aaron Baker has argued in his study of the American sports film, drawing on the work of Richard Dyer,

> the conservatism of utopian entertainment comes from the way it offers representations of a better life if we just follow the rules and try harder. In other words, not only does such utopian entertainment avoid suggesting specific ways to change the current social reality, it promises us happiness by adhering to the status quo … this utopian response only works if one ignores – as entertainment almost always does – how social identities such as race, class, gender, and sexuality complicate self-definition. On the contrary, the acknowledgement of social forces in the constitution of identity makes evident that the opportunity, abundance, and happiness in utopian narratives are not there for everyone to the same degree. Even when sports movies acknowledge the disadvantage of racism, sexism, or class difference (homophobia is still widely ignored), individual performance is generally held up as the best way to overcome this influence.
>
> (2003, p. 13)

Despite this predominant 'utopian narrative', mainstream sports films nonetheless reveal recurring tensions and contradictions. While many of these films may ultimately affirm the American Dream of opportunity, upward social mobility and material success (discussed further in Chapter 4), they also contain elements that have the potential to unsettle or destabilise this trajectory. This is a feature of populist entertainment more generally whereby its polysemy or strategic ambiguity provides multiple points of identification only to ultimately attempt to contain these in the interests of affirming hegemonic values and order. As noted by Slavoj Žižek,

To work, the ruling ideology has to incorporate a series of features in which the exploited majority will be able to recognize its authentic longings. In other words, each hegemonic universality has to incorporate at least two particular contents, the authentic popular content as well as its distortion by the relations of domination and exploitation ... How did Christianity become the ruling ideology? By incorporating a series of crucial motifs and aspirations of the oppressed – truth is on the side of the suffering and humiliated, power corrupts, and so on – and rearticulating them in such a way that they became compatible with the existing relations of domination.

(1997, pp. 29–30)

Hence, mainstream sports cinema may depict racial, social class or gender issues, as part of its appeal to a mass audience, but these issues are rarely engaged with critically or provided with a social or historical context. Rather, they are used to appeal to the 'authentic longings' of the marginalised, as a means to ultimately affirm the structures that perpetuate their marginalisation. This tendency is found particularly in the most commercially successful sports films, a theme explored in more detail in Chapters 4 and 5.

The following six chapters and conclusion will provide an overview of the historical development and ideological importance of the sports film. While the focus will principally be on mainstream fiction films that have emerged from the United States, and Hollywood in particular, given the influence and popularity of work emerging from that source, consideration will also be given to sports films that have arisen from other national contexts in Chapter 6. As an introduction to the subject, this book is far from comprehensive with regard to either sports films or the examination of pertinent themes therein. It is unlikely that any single volume could accomplish this task. Indeed, there is at least material for a single monograph (and possibly several) dedicated to each of the themes considered, and others not, in this book. The Internet Movie Database (IMDb) lists over 1,000 sports feature films produced in the United States alone with almost 750 more produced internationally. These figures relate to fiction films only; details of in excess of 2,800 sport-themed documentaries are available on IMDb though this is likely to be a considerable underestimate of the total given the popularity of sports-themed documentaries on television internationally.

Therefore, this book examines but a small fraction of the total. The themes examined in this book are also by no means exhaustive. Other themes that deserve consideration include sexuality, religion and disability to name but three; while aspects of each are touched upon in this study, their prominence and complexity merit more substantial and in-depth consideration. Furthermore, a dedicated study of the sports documentary film – touched on in Chapter 3 – is well overdue. However, from the hundreds of sports films viewed during the research towards the completion of this book, this study attempts to chart some of the recurring features and themes found across these works. The

films chosen to examine, particularly in Chapters 4–6, are among the most commercially and/or critically successful sports films produced; their popularity challenges scholars to consider not just the reason for their appeal but also what function these films may play in popular culture. As scholars of both media and cultural studies have contended, film is a significant mediator of social relations through the naturalisation of cultural norms including those concerning race, social class and gender (Croteau and Hoynes, 2003; Schirato and Webb, 2004; Boyle, Millington, and Vertinsky, 2006, p. 110). Sport has also been recognised as playing a crucial and comparable role in each of these areas (Jones, 1992; Gruneau, 1999; Scraton and Flintoff, 2002; Smith, 2009). A central argument returned to repeatedly in this book – whether in terms of its analysis of race and social class (Chapter 4), or gender (Chapter 5) – is the important role the sports film plays in the affirmation of the American Dream ideology and the maintenance of patriarchal hegemony. This dream is by no means confined to the United States; as Chapter 6 contends, such has been the popularity and influence of Hollywood cinema that sports films that have emerged in other national contexts frequently share characteristics with American films, including the utopian trajectory found therein. However, Chapter 6 will also consider instances that challenge both the utopian trajectory and hegemonic national structures. The phenomenon of the post-9/11 Hollywood sports film will be considered in the concluding chapter; the films examined here provide a useful case study to summarise the continuing appeal and importance of the mainstream sports film in popular culture today.

1

READING THE SPORTS FILM

To raise the issue of how to 'read film', may appear to some superfluous. Film seems so accessible and immediate a form that the notion that people require guidance in understanding its message, or 'language', may appear both patronising and peculiar. Indeed, the seeming simplicity of film and its apparent lack of ambiguity when compared with other art forms have contributed considerably to its popularity. Allied to this has been the driving force within commercial film-making practice since its first appearance: greater verisimilitude, or the ability to represent the world as we know it as closely as possible to its actual appearance in reality. As James Monaco has noted, the placing of film among the recording arts reflects its ability to 'provide a more direct path between subject and observer' (2000, p. 27). However, film's popularity is not just because of its ability to render reality as we know it; films have been carefully designed to evoke responses from viewers, a process that has developed substantially since the first moving picture images flickered across screens in the mid-1890s. These designs are dependant on decisions regarding the form and style of a particular film, decisions that encompass stylistic techniques crucial to the realisation of film including narrative, mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing and sound. Decisions on each of these techniques are themselves influenced by financial, social, cultural and sometimes political considerations. Furthermore, due to its powerful potential to affect viewers by dynamically engaging their expectations and emotions, film can itself have an impact in some or all of these areas. Indeed, given all of this, commercial cinema in general, and Hollywood cinema in particular, might be more correctly described in Rick Altman's terms as 'a deceptively obvious cinema' (1999, p. 135).