

THE DAWN OF AN IMAGINED COMMUNITY: AUSTRALIAN SPORT ON FILM

Toby Miller
Murdoch University

This paper seeks to underscore the fragility and yet the value of a nation-based analysis of Australian sport on film. It argues that the construction of the nation has been a crucial element in many Australian films connected with sport, but that this construction has been unstable and always confused by other issues, particularly those of gender. It is comprised of four sections. Following a brief introductory passage on the nation as a concept, an attempt is made to trace the role of sport in early Australian film and its connexions with state, genre and gender. The paper concludes with an account of three readings of the film *Dawn!* that foregrounds the extra problematics of gender and interpretive practice.

The Nation

Benedict Anderson submits that a nation is, before all else, 'an imagined political community'. We never meet, see or even hear of most of our fellow nationals; nor do we know where they live or experience their daily routines. The introduction of the concept 'nation' over the last 250 to 300 years has been dependent on the introduction of the concept of 'meanwhile', the advent of a discourse of simultaneity.¹ It is a necessary precondition for imagining oneself to be part of a supra-local community to fantasise that, at the same moment as one's 'own' time, other 'like' people are doing other things somewhere else : to imagine that Australians everywhere are ending their Melbourne Cup lunch and drinks as the race is run, even though it's half past eleven in Western Australia. But what of the feelings that run with these imaginings?

Nationalism has been distinguished from chauvinism on the grounds that its basis rests on respect for the notion of particular identities.² Yet Michael Howard refers to the ‘purifying’ work of war as a virtual prerequisite to the generation of ‘national self-consciousness’.³ Terms such as this one and ‘cultural identity’ serve to ‘offer respectability and brand identification for a variety of contending politico-economic projects’.⁴

How do nation, sport and film relate to one another? Sabine Erika contrasts the antagonistic, racist, nationalistic operation of sport in Australia and the operation of films, because the latter allegedly ‘come out of our unique experiences and not out of the need to denigrate or ignore others’.⁵ In particular, she brings into question the misogynistic masculine style commonly associated with professional, televised sport and institutional expressions of nationalism.

The distinction she draws between sport and films is problematic. Of the 488 features which Pike and Cooper⁶ list as being made in Australia between 1900 and 1977, about 10% have significant sporting components. And Eric Reade’s survey of 450 films from 1896 to 1928 indicates a similar proportion.⁷ *Cinema Papers’* Australian Film Producers and Investors Guide lists 43 genres from which dynamic, innovative entrepreneurs can choose in their bid to give customers satisfaction. These ‘genres’ include, as discrete entities : boxing, kung-fu, skiing and surf.⁸ Fifty years earlier, the trade paper *Everyones* had run a series of articles as a ‘Helping Hand to the Australian Producer’, which listed six marketable genres. These included ‘racecourse drama’ and ‘surf story’.⁹

History

The 1896 Melbourne Cup was the subject of the first Australian film, something which the *Bulletin* found ‘beautifully appropriate’, and the race has been recorded every year since.¹⁰ That

first film ran in cinemas for three months and its sequel, the 1897 Cup, was the first Australian picture shown in New Zealand.¹¹ The retrospective documentary *The Pictures That Moved* (1968) suggested that the early popularity of the film was drawn from its ability to display events to people who could not attend them : how to create the imagining of Benedict Anderson. Eighty years later, calls for a greater appreciation of documentary film suggested that the ‘actuality footage of the 1896 Melbourne Cup’ was ‘more “real” than ‘the fragmentary melodramatics of the 1906 *Story of the Kelly Gang*’.^{1 2}

When the *Argus* suggested that the first Cup film would ‘carry’ images of Australia ‘to London, Paris and St Petersburg’, the images to which it referred were those not only of horses and riders, but of trains to and from the track, women’s hats and a Vice-Regal party.¹³ Significantly, these were all innovations from outside Australia which were re-deployed as tools towards an imagination of local community. By the time of the first screen subject in Western Australia, the 1905 Perth Cup, a standard format for filming races had been established, concentrating on crowds, preliminaries, settings etc. The film itself was advertised locally in terms of its likely impact elsewhere.¹⁴ Races were shot in Brisbane and Adelaide in 1910. *The Double Event* and *The Cup Winner*, narratives about ‘the cup’ which came out the next year, included actuality scenes of the race.¹⁵ The racing feature drew from other genres : rustic comedy, morality plays on the evils of betting and George Wallace vehicles.¹⁶ *Silks and Saddles* (1921) was pushed as ‘a thrilling tale of the Australian turf, with fast horses and pretty women’.¹⁷ But the film was re-released in the United States, where it masqueraded as a local picture.¹⁸ Such is the fixity of meaning in the nationality of a commodity.

Movietone’s film of the 1929 Melbourne Cup was one of the earliest in Australia to have sound; specifically, the sound of ‘God Save the King’.¹⁹ The first ever *Cinesound Review* newsreel showed the 1931 event.²⁰ Ken Hall’s *Thoroughbred* (1936) saw the first Australian use of rear-projection.²¹ So the first 40 years of Australian

cinema carry stories of technical and nation-building innovation that can be told through the racetrack (with a little judicious imagination).

The State

Latterly, it is significant that the interplay of neo-classical economics lobbying and industry lobbying has produced Australian government support for film based on ‘the “externalities” of employment, tourism, trade promotion and the sense of cultural legitimacy’ which features can confer.²² The position is similar in sport. The intersection of these ideologies in ‘sport’ and ‘film’ has definite and varied effects on their signification, particularly under the hand of an historically and vertically differentiated state. So in 1915, the Minister for Defence publicly endorsed the message of the recruiting drama *Will they Never Come?* which produced an opposition of ‘duty versus sport’.²³ But *Gallipoli* was hailed 67 years later for its melding of the two practices, in a film set in that very year which made a syntagm of masculinity in trenches and in starting lanes; and in 1920, John Monash said that ‘the instinct of sport and adventure’ was the Australian soldier’s ‘national heritage’.²⁴ After the First War, the Commonwealth Government commissioned the *Know Your Own County* series. It included *Australia's Winter Playground*, *Seaside Resort* and *Sydney's Sunny Beaches*.²⁵ Play was now officially sanctioned as a reward and a creator of jobs via a set of visual texts enabling a community to be imagined.

This sanctioning continues today. Malcolm Fraser’s launch of the America’s Cup challenge by Alan Bond in 1981 was a key element in the ‘Advance Australia’ business campaign, a state response to economic crisis.²⁶ Film Australia is selling a series of 24 case studies and a video on *Health & Fitness at Work - It Works!* The video shows how good health amongst employees leads to productivity gains and makes ‘an important contribution to the fiscal health of the organisation’.²⁷ The Film Commission currently lists about 20 films

on sport, mostly encouraging participation by the general public by concentrating on a mix of elite models and everyday stories.²⁸

Genre

There is, of course, an important difference between the actual coverage of specific sporting practices and an entire narrative feature woven around a sporting theme. Many sports, for example football and racing, have what amounts to a 'natural' mise-en-scene (the centre of the action and its attendant background textual features),²⁹ but they can be presented in non-realist ways, via replays, slow motion, inserts, commentary, wipes, split-screen and freeze-frames.³⁰ Within particular formations, these practices may combine at particular times to make a product which is distinctly different from non-sporting films; but this will not necessarily apply. A film which actually incorporates media commentary, as is the case with many racing narratives, may be employing these techniques as a film-within-a-film, but the dominant technical force shaping the visual presentation of sport will remain the fundamental protocols of the film presentation professions, not those of sporting commentary.³¹

One may go further and question whether sport can be treated as a film genre, eliding the appearance of different sporting practices in different textual spheres. It is probably more a complex of sub-genres operating within narrative documentary, state propaganda and independent and corporate capital films. Each of these sub-genres (for example, the racetrack as a site of luck, gangsters and goodness/the beach as a site of unbridled physical and scopophilic pleasure) may function intertextually as 'systems of orientations, expectations and conventions that circulate between industry, text and subject'.³² The sub-genres may interplay with each other, with their conditions of production, and with the circulation of knowledges about them. But 'sporting' features, for example, will also

owe large debts to the story conventions of romance, comedy, melodrama etc.

Gender

Mitzi Goldman and Trish Fitzsimons' 1987 film *Snakes and Ladders* illustrates the point that 'History is occupied territory' by photographs of James Cook, Henry Parkes and Don Bradman; signs of white patriarchy and (on an individual basis) sailing/invasion, politics and cricket. Surreal character-narrator Sophia Whist later uses a hockey stick to smash a picture to pieces in order to create a window through which new events, new history can be produced and seen. Here, a film which says that it is about women, history and education has used sporting icons - Bradman and the stick - severally. At one point, sport is a key element in male occupation of the past and its telling. At another, a sporting prop is revitalised and liberated from its conventions and rules to create a new space in which new histories can be written and read.

Susan Lambert has also taken slices of history about women's cricket (the 1930s-40s and the 1980s) to produce a television special for Film Australia,³³ but this is unusual. Most films using sporting images and narratives place women totally outside the public sphere.³⁴ An Australian film did appear in 1906 concentrating on women cyclists,³⁵ but more typical was T.J. West's *Sydney's Sirens of the Surf* (1911), a documentary on a beauty pageant emphasising the vamp element.³⁶ The novelty of sportswomen, when given any play at all, was generally subsumed, or at least co-opted, by other narrative devices such as 'the love triangle' in *Mated in the Wilds* (1921) and the search for passion in *Jasmine Freckel's Love Affair* (1921) or *Caught in the Act* (1928).³⁷ *Alvin Rides Again* (1974) presents women playing cricket as simply another site for Purple's irresistibility to express itself.³⁹ The dominant, hegemonic form obviously excludes women

(an exception being Bruce Beresford's quirky 1982 paean to junior feminism, *Puberty Blues*).

In many cases, sport on film becomes a setting for a concentration on male bodies.⁴⁰ It is the one forum in which heterosexual men can legitimately derive pleasure from gazing at other men. In *The Year My Voice Broke* (1987), the authenticity of John Duigan's rural setting is ensured by a variety of sporting activities. Trevor's standing as an intellectually slow but physically quick person is secured by his status as a star footballer, an ability frequently shown and spoken of admiringly by other males. He may break the law, but he abhors bullies and has a loyalty to the team (be it Freya and 'the boy' or the team on the field) and sport for him is a site of boundless pleasure. Indeed, his first serious interaction with Freya occurs in the Shoalhaven River, at a public swimming hole where bodies can be looked at and touched. Yet there is a duality here. Trevor enjoys fleeting fame but ultimate helplessness because of the problems inherent in a reliance on the sporting body, a quickly expendable commodity.

In *Betty Blokk-buster Follies* (1976), Reg Livermore explores the contradictory connotations of men disporting themselves together. His character Vaseline Amalnitrate is both football star and ballet dancer; fop and display are in each occupation, but their messages are differently despatched and received.

In *Coolangatta Gold* (1984), two brothers compete with each other and their father's memory for a combination of public glory and his paternal affection. Pulsating masculinity at work by the sea is not an unproblematic good. The 'Iron Man' is unstable. His outer persona stands for certainty, but the inner man is increasingly opened up to a prying gaze. *Coolangatta Gold* unpacks this heroic symbol of the male Australian nation by wrenching us into the private domain.

Conclusion

Such films raise difficult but worthwhile questions about Australian sporting masculinity and operate outside conventional knowledges about sport whilst still drawing on recognisable national icons. Whether sport is a *leit motif* or a casual segment in Australian film, it appears here as a powerful and polysemic vehicle because of its role in imagining the nation. The additional complications of gender and interpretive practice will now be amplified through a case study.

Dawn!

The South Australian Film Corporation's \$250,000 investment in *Dawn!* (1979) financed multiple locations: Balmain Townsville, Adelaide, Melbourne, Tokyo and Leichhardt; a grand tracery of Dawn Fraser's geopolitics. The screenplay, by Joy Cavill, won the Writers' Guild award as the best of the year. David Stratton's description of *Dawn!* in *The Last New Wave: The Australian Film Revival* concentrates on the authenticity and honesty which supposedly flow from the film's treatment of the protagonist's love life, whilst saying that it fails because of genre problems and the demands on one inexperienced performer playing the title role over a 25 year span. He stresses the efforts made to involve Dawn Fraser in the training of the person who acted as her and praises the direct treatment of an allegedly sexual relationship which Fraser had had with a woman. Stratton writes that she was 'delighted' with the film.⁴¹ This set of anecdotes and other information comes from a book designed to write up in serious but accessible and interesting ways the revival of Australian cinema. Conversely, Susan Mitchell and Ken Dyer's book *Winning Women: Challenging the Norms in Australian Sport* is a series of interviews with prominent Australian sportswomen. Fraser's chapter includes the following extract, which

is noteworthy for its relation to Stratton's version and for her ascription of responsibility for *Dawn!* outside the traditional functions of director or scriptwriter, as well as for her view of her own role. She says:

I wasn't happy with the final result ... It was full of innuendo. I was pretty disgusted with the South Australian Film Corporation when they cut the film without my knowledge ... The relationship with the woman journalist was one of the things I argued with them about. It was a very close relationship, but it wasn't sexual, which they implied in the film. I didn't give my permission to imply that, and it upset my family quite a lot.⁴²

Finally, Gary Whannel, writing in *Screen*, argues that the film is 'a rare attempt to explore the contradictions produced by an encounter between the two systems, sport and femininity'. He makes particular reference to Fraser's polymorphous sexuality.⁴³ Here, the publication is a journal produced in sometimes conflicting contexts of Althusserian Marxism, feminist psycho-analysis and discourse theory, a journal which holds a unique place in the development of international film theory.

These evaluations of the film clearly vary markedly. Where Stratton queries the possibility of the sporting biopic holding attention and doubts the competence of certain aspects of the film's production, he is nevertheless insistent in his privileging of personal experience as a guarantor of truth. Where Fraser attacks the financier, with a bitterness that seems to stem from its quasi-governmental status, this is because she is dissatisfied with the depiction of her sexuality. Where Whannel valorises the film for decentring conventional views of women and normalising homosexuality, he disregards everything bar the textual-ideological.

Hence, the text itself is rewritten by readers in its circulation; readers operating from contending discursive perspectives:

- (i) the celebratory jacuzzi history of films placed in a 'revival under the heading 'Australia' and concentrating on the abilities and failings of individuals to explain the relationship of films to a telos of *The Last New Wave*.
- (ii) the oral history of elite sportswomen, privileging experience, re-possessing authorship for the film's subject and finding a state financier responsible for sexual representations; and
- (iii) the left film journal seeking places where celebrations of difference and subversion can be read and written.

Only the *Screen* article denies a primacy to country/state/person of origin. Its field of critique is bounded and filled in by the general neglect of women in sport and sport on film, and/or their production within hegemonic discourses of femininity. The history and interpretation of *Dawn!* are thus inserted into wider debates that transcend national boundaries. Via the art of interpretation, the film's very Australianness can be rendered irrelevant. This leaves us with a discontinuous, varied and sometimes contradictory history; a history that, to repeat, subverts any attempt to impose a pattern of stability on the terms applied to *Dawn!* is of equal relevance to the more general comments made in this paper about 'Australia', 'gender' and 'sporting film' and their points of intersection.

NOTES

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