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This is the author's version of "Truth and reality in screening sports' pasts: sports films, public history and truthfulness" in *Journal of Sport History* 41(1), pp47-54, 2014. It appears here in its prepublication format in lieu of the publisher's version of record. Author: Malcolm MacLean

**Truth and reality in screening sports' pasts:
sports films, public history and truthfulness**

Malcolm MacLean

Keywords: sports film; film grammar; public history; narrative analysis; audience analysis

Truthfulness in details may very well not constitute the truthfulness of the whole, however. The elements of dress and the jewels, viewed separately, are factual, but their arrangement on the model fails to produce an impression of veracity. The accumulation of all of these accessories upon a single individual creates a saturated effect that is detrimental to verisimilitude. It looks as if the photographer had at his disposal a large and varied stock of jewellery and apparel and could not stop himself from having the model wear it all at once.¹

Malek Alloula's distinction between forms of truthfulness in colonial era photographs of the harem points to the challenge of distinguishing verity in texts and sources of historical analysis, cultural meaning and political depiction. His position provides a useful counterpoint to the identification in these three discussions of filmic sports history and some of the key tensions, contradictions and debates we must continue to grapple with and work through if we are to make effective use of film of any form or genre in academic work in sports history. Rather than venture into any close evaluation of the papers, this contribution explores some related issues that practitioners of social or cultural history, including sports history need to grapple with in making effective use of these media.

It is often hard to ignore the debates that dominate the film-and-History discourses, especially those seen in repeated outrage at inaccuracies. Consider, for instance, the 2000 movie *U-571*² (directed by Jonathon Mostow) starring Matthew McConaughey, Bill Paxton, Harvey Keitel and Jon Bon Jovi as members of a team of US service men who capture the eponymous U-Boat in an effort to steal its Enigma machine.

Outraged military historians fumed – it wasn't U-571, but U-570 they pointed out;

they weren't US troops but British – an even greater source of trans-Atlantic anger. What is more, the German crew destroyed most of the secret material and it played little role in the eventual breaking of the Enigma code. The most notable thing about U-570 is that it was, as far as I know, the only submarine to see service during WW2 as both a German and British vessel. The issue here is one of verisimilitude and therefore claims to truthfulness. The problem of *U-571* and films like it, according to these critics, is not that they are bad movies (this kind of cinematic assessment is seldom made) but that they misrepresent the past. As an aside, there is a small set of movies that actively engage with this 'misrepresentation' – consider Peter Richardson's 2004 *Churchill: the Hollywood Years*³ starring Christian Slater as Winston Churchill and Neve Campbell as Princess Elizabeth.

Our debates, claims and views as historians have a disturbing tendency to conflate verisimilitude and realism, when the conflation should be verisimilitude and claims to reality as something quite different from anything that resembles a realist film discourse and grammar. A strong case can be made that commercially successful cinema relies on a conflation of verisimilitude and cinematic realism, but only because commercial success tends to rely on believability (although the success of science fiction as a genre tells us that this is not necessarily believable-in-the-current-world). Looking to mainstream, commercial cinema, in both *Girlfight*⁴ and *Blue Crush*⁵ the actor Michelle Rodriguez highlights cinematic grammatical complexity. She is neither a boxer nor a surfer but she is clearly much more at home in the ring than on the wave. Through these contrasts Rodriguez problematises much of the praxis of filmed sporting performance in contemporary feature films, often seen as a tension between actors who are athletes and athletes who can act. An alternative dramaturgy does not necessarily present this problem because audiences are not asked to believe in the same way that the actor-on-screen is *really* a boxer or a surfer. Such approaches do not lend themselves to significant commercial success or straightforward audience engagement – although Lars von Trier's 2003 *Dogville*⁶ shows that this is not always a commercial impediment. The (usually) commercially necessary reliance on a realist grammar shapes the tensions and paradoxes in most sports films, yet to abandon this grammar would cast those films adrift in the

rarefied world of film festivals and art cinema that would have replaced realism as narrative coherence with reality as verisimilitude in *mise-en-scène*.

These three papers point towards two principal tensions in historical sports films. The first is a phenomenological tension between, as Susan Birrell notes, the cyclical/seasonal character of sports time and the linear character of post-enlightenment historical and narrative time; the second is the already anticipated narrative tension between two paired features: veracity and reality as one pair and verisimilitude and realism as the other.

Phenomenological tensions

In the phenomenological tension, filmic time challenges sporting time: in *The Loneliness of a Long Distance Runner* Colin Smith continually runs back to where he started from (Ruxton Towers), except the last time where he refuses to complete the circuit and becomes trapped in a closed narrative by running back to the limited opportunity working class life he came from. In rejecting the myth of sports' transformative potential he, and the film, undermine the dominant ideal, make the film strange to audiences imbued with sports cultures (not just the American Dream Birrell notes) and suggest a profound tension in the parallel with *Learning To Labour*⁷: Colin Smith seems to knowingly choose his limited world in a rational and informed manner; *Learning To Labour*'s 'lads' do not obviously knowingly choose. It seems their cultural codes offer them no alternative modes of action than the, at least by the liberal bourgeois codes of Hammertown High, self-destructive enclosure of opportunity. This tension, based in an epistemological antagonism, suggests an ontological contradiction that we need to explore through a closer focus on anti-sport cultural artefacts.

The consequences of this temporal contradiction may be seen in the films Jaime Schultz explores. Sporting seasonal/cyclical time provides an accessible starting and ending point for the linear narrative of the story at hand, stories in these cases of triumph over social adversity and the constraints of taken for granted thinking about

the hegemonic racial order and stories in which one season stand in for longer, more complex and less clear social change and political struggle. Each of the films Schultz explores may be seen as having the classic form of the first two stages of a *rite de passage* as analysed by Arnold van Gennep⁸: a social order is disrupted by a liminal character – a coach who takes sports orthodoxies as literal, who plays the best team regardless of the social racial codes and rules – and in doing so forces on the team, the school, the town, the wider society an altered state of being; the team, in each case, is taken out of the ordinary world of social relations to a voyage of exploration and transformation, and on its return transforms the society it remains a part of as well as bringing a new consciousness to many of its members; at this point it diverges from van Gennep’s model in that the actors are not reincorporated into the extant society but transform it. Despite this transformation, the sporting season of cyclical time continues with its enclosed narratives of success or failure yet the season the film centres on is depicted as having a direct transformative effect on the now – because as Schultz notes, these films are about the now, they celebrate the enlightenment of the present and condemn the backwardness of the past.

This contrast in temporal forms further suggests/implies/points to a disjuncture at the level of the filmic form and sport experience – that is, there is a phenomenological as well as a temporal rupture. Returning to the problem of seeing actors as realist athletes (cf., the case of Michelle Rodriguez), as Birrell suggests, what a ‘real’ runner in Colin’s position might do is open to question when we consider the contradiction in phenomenological sports studies between the runner for pleasure and the runner for performance success; in sporting terms Colin’s pleasure in running is perverse, because it is not about him but about humiliating the governor. This is then an instrumentalist deployment of sport.

A closer look at these films also allows us to see, in their form, a structure that adds to this undermining of the politics of pleasure through a politics of audienceship. For instance, *The Loneliness of a Long Distance Runner* constructs an audience alliance with the governor that undermines the political subversion of the novel and engineers a divergence of truths by isolating Colin from all possible comrades (within

the film's text and in the film's being read) leading to a conservative reading of a politically subversive tactical moment. This appears to be more than a clash of realities between University of Iowa sport studies students with their classed and national sports cultures that isolate them from working class northern England of the 1950s and 1960s. This conservatism seems to be inherent in the film's construction, and for explanation demands attention to narrative, and the politics of struggle.

Narrative Tension

This second tension, the continua marked by veracity and reality and verisimilitude and realism, suggests a different set of issues related to reading and interpreting films as texts, as source and as public history.

In her readings, Schultz has provided a textual exegesis that explores the ways, the textual forms and codes, by which realism expunges verisimilitude – noting again that realism is a textual trope that should not be taken as another form of reality; it is not verisimilitude but believability. In the cases she explores realism negates verisimilitude by re-mythologizing liberal politics and giving us Great Men and heroic forms of history writing; this is cinema that lends itself to a Frankfurt School reading of mass disempowerment, while being romances in Hayden White's meaning of the term⁹. This kind of productionist perspective does not sit well with a cultural studies tendency to accentuate the audience, but the film politics shown by Schultz's readings suggest a deeply conservative if not reactionary message in each of the films considered. Cinema is replete with these simple narrative forms that suggest Malek's problematic of truth as a continual tension between the detail and whole is one we should pay more attention to in exploring historical sports film. This is a cinematic form that is not distinct to sports movies and at odds with another film tradition of the *bildungskino* that rely on veracity to place their protagonists within an explicable social context; 2010's *Incendies*¹⁰ (in which sport, or rather physical activity, plays a tiny but crucial role) is a superb example of that tradition.

Schultz's cases are a contrast to *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, which must be seen within that strand of post-WW2 British films that accentuate the 'ordinary', the outsider, and proclaim and normalise while concurrently marginalising the Northern working class as, in Rob Shield's evocative label, a place on the margin¹¹, comparable to the Canadian North as the exotic heartland defining the nation. Birrell's case requires that we consider the strengths and weakness of specific theoretical approaches. Willis's approach in *Learning to Labour* helped define the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies' approach to working class masculinity as a sub-culture, as a less meaningful and inadequate component of a quasi-romanticised masculine working class. Willis's book, for all its excellence, not only points to the failure of the lads to find a path to a better life, but devalues their way of being working class as somehow inauthentic – but he was not alone in this in the BCCS tradition in the 1970s: this mythification and masculinisation of working class lives has been soundly and roundly criticised in discussions of and within the BCCS, while also leading to a critique that sees the invention of a specific and legitimised form of youth.¹²

More importantly, *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* maintains a contradictory relationship to both veracity and reality. Its *mise-en-scène* has a potent realism: its crisp black and white cinematography gives it a high end documentary feel while the frequent use of close-up on the faces of authority figures accentuates their power, both social and cinematic, so that although it is Colin's story, the validated narrative is that of the warden and the PT instructor. In this setting, both *Learning to Labour* and *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* allow us also to explore the BCCS emphasis on politics and wars of position, to invoke Gramsci's notion, that found its expression in the British model of *New Times* as radical politics for the bad times that mitigated the promise of socialism.¹³ Wars of position are limited because they must happen at the interstices of power and they serve only to make the bad times bearable. Colin's protest, his politics of struggle, is therefore undermined because both texts expose the problem of liberation for a group rather than liberation by a group where both Colin Smith and 'the lads' represent only a class-in-itself, neither are members, yet, of a class-for-itself; they are therefore not

able to liberate themselves through a war of position – ‘the lads’ because of their tactical limitations acting within the confines of the school’s structures and Colin because of his individualism. *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner’s* filmic form, its documentary feel, enhances the sense of reality it invokes to legitimate the inevitability and correctness of the borstal’s power régime.

The documentary world Russell Field explores is one that challenges many historians working with film; it is one where the central figure, the narrative hero, maintains a silence on political issues to the extent that Maurice Richard seems to be a malleable palimpsest on whom meaning could be continually over-written. The complexities of these politics open up a further aspect of the antagonism between verisimilitude and the believable, between realism and reality, which confronts the mythologizing effects of popular history that is also claimed by a subaltern group that maintains a problematic relation with the dominant nation by also claiming Richard to the extent that they claim a form of nationhood themselves. In this aspect of the tension, Maurice Richard may be seen as the nexus of contradictory and antagonistic cultural flows around nation, ethnicity, gender and forms of knowledge production and reproduction that are politically deeply constrained both by their Old Media formation and by the circumstances where their claims to veracity are challenged by private knowledge that cannot engage in meaningful public debate with those media.

Equally, the genre Field explores, mainly documentary, confound conventional reading practices. As with the crispness of *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner’s mise-en-scène*, many documentary techniques undermine our ability to read them as constructed, yet the problem of ‘symbolic truth’ Schultz raises is essential to grasp when the distinctions between veracity/verisimilitude and reality/realism is not clear. In these documentary texts the problem is partly textual(ised), that is, to do with the medium and partly knowledge of historical context. This tension may be seen in Field’s discussions of the ‘Richard Riot’, which can be taken as a sign of tension between veracity and verisimilitude in *Peut-être Maurice Richard* where it may be seen and arguably is depicted as a symbolic truth

of hockey's banal meaning and passions. In Field's representation of the events, *Peut-être Maurice Richard's* depiction of the 'Riot' also suggests a tension between team and nation that is glossed in the film. The documentary-as-genre, in being understood as 'non-fiction', blurs the distinction between veracity and verisimilitude and reality and realism; when considered alongside Field's discussion of *The Rocket*, this issue of veracity/verisimilitude can be seen as confused by documentary's claim to *vérité* suggesting the need for historians to have a better grasp of cinematic tools and textual conventions. As with Schultz's productionist aspects we are reminded of the significance of authorial intention and of the rule of source analysis that demands that we explore both the provenance of the source and the conditions of authorship.

This need for a better grasp of cinematic tools and therefore of codes of visual reading suggests a need also to distinguish between textual veracity and textual effect. This distinction may be seen in Schultz's point that sports film histories seem to celebrate the present and aggrandise sports heroes and great men, tropes that many of us would recognise as conservative, often deeply conservative, historical forms. This means that even when these films are celebrating the underdog – a sports culture trait – this is seldom 'history from below'. Sports films' imbrication with sports culture, noted explicitly by both Schultz and Birrell, in the context of Schultz's invocation of Thomas Doherty's argument that "the grim truth that Americans absorb more history from the multiplex than from middle school demands the Hollywood's treatment of the past be carefully considered rather than simply avoided"¹⁴ means that scholars need to be more aware of the ways film texts work. Concern with source provenance is not sufficient because these are not just sources but public history with powerful ideological effects that many of us would deplore in academic history in that they are often simplistic narratives celebrating conservative readings of change and the present. These narratives seem, from these analyses, to be conservative in two key ways. In the first form, historical myth making celebrates the Great Man and denigrates popular struggle to become a reactionary form of politics seen in the coach-as-source-of-inspirational-individual-change motif, in Colin Smith's individualist politics while we as audiences are

encouraged to build a cinematic alliance with borstal authorities and, less convincingly, in documentary *verité* as an affective assertion of truth. In the second, as seen especially in *Glory Road* and in *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, the narrative of change and struggle is isolated from broader social change isolating the athlete-as-intellectual (college students) from their non-student peers and comrades and in individualist responses to oppressive power.

All of this leaves unresolved two major questions that we need to explore not only in analyses and exploration of sports films in sports history, but more generally in the film-and-history debates. The first is whether the claim that a film is 'based on a true story' (when only the facts have been changed) demands that attention be paid to reality/veracity as the dominant factor in the two binaries in the dialectics of narrative. We need to consider how much this is a factor of the medium or genre 'sports film', if such a genre can be said to exist. The second is whether there is a danger that 'factual nit-picking' can be ideologically reactionary in that it can fail to acknowledge or identify the politics of 'error', that is, there is an issue whether historical or textual error can be progressive.

The challenge therefore for historians is that in discussing film and similar articulations of commercially framed public history we are dealing with the past in several different ways – as the subject of those texts, as the media and grammars in which those texts are constructed and as the audiences hailed into existence by those texts. The media form means that these texts are not able to talk back to us and neither can we easily construct derivative texts in comparable media (although the presence of *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* derivative and fan media show that this limitation can be overcome¹⁵). The challenge we face, principally, is that these media do not allow their audiences to speak back or leave traces or texts that we can easily access because for the most part we are dealing with subaltern and subordinate knowledge to which our methods of inquiry do not readily grant us access (this suggests a need to pay much closer attention to the dialogues and discourses emerging in new and more interactive media platforms with more potential for user generated content). This then is praise for these textual readings, but is also a

reminder that we need to go further and find ways to explore the meaning making by these film's contemporary audiences as they read, make sense of and deploy the tensions between the detail and the whole.

¹ Malek Alloula *The Colonial Harem* (Minnesota UP: Minneapolis, 1986), 54.

² *U-571* (Universal Pictures, 2000)

³ *Churchill: The Hollywood Years* (Pathé Pictures International, 2004)

⁴ *Girlfight* (Independent Film Channel, 2000)

⁵ *Blue Crush* (Universal Pictures, 2002)

⁶ *Dogville* (Zentropa Entertainments, 2003)

⁷ Paul Willis, *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get working Class Jobs* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

⁸ Arnold van Gennep, *Rites of Passage* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1961/1908).

⁹ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

¹⁰ *Incendies* (micro_scope, 2010)

¹¹ Rob Shields, *Places on the Margin: Alternative Geographies of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1991).

¹² The critical literature here is extensive and present from the early days of British cultural studies. Early and significant texts include Women's Study Group, *Women Take Issue: Aspects of Women's Subordination* (London: Hutchinson, 1978); Sarah Franklin, Celia Lury and Jackie Stacey, *Off-Centre: Feminism and Cultural Studies* (London: Harper Collins, 1991) and Steve Redhead, *The end-of-the-century party: Youth and pop towards 2000* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990).

¹³ Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques (eds) *New Times: The Changing Face of Politics in the 1990s* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1989) and David Harris, *From Class Struggle to the Politics of Pleasure: The Effects of Gramscianism on Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1992)

¹⁴ Thomas Doherty, "Film History, Foxes and Hedgehogs" *OAH Magazine of History* (2002): 13, cited by Jaime Schultz "The Truth About Historical Sport Films".

¹⁵ John Tulloch and Henry Jenkins, *Science Fiction Audiences: Watching Doctor Who and Star Trek* (London: Routledge, 1995), Henry Jenkins, "Quentin Tarantino's *Star Wars*? Grassroots Creativity Meets the Media Industry" in *The Social Media Reader*, ed. Michael Mandiberg (New York: New York University Press, 2012).