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Sports heroines on film: a critical study of cinematic women
athletes, coaches and owners, by Viridiana Lieberman,
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This is the author's version a review of Viridiana Lieberman, *Sports Heroines on Film: A Critical Study of Cinematic Women Athletes, Coaches and Owners in Sport in History* (forthcoming). It appears here in its pre-publication format in lieu of the publisher's version of record. Author: Malcolm MacLean

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Viridiana Lieberman, *Sports Heroines on Film: A Critical Study of Cinematic Women Athletes, Coaches and Owners* (Jefferson, NC, McFarland & Company, Inc, 2015) 189pp. £36.95 pb. ISBN 9780786476619.

Recent years have seen the publication of a number of monographs, collections and scholarly exploring sports films, some grounded in film studies, others in more conventional disciplinary approaches including history. Film themed papers are becoming more common at conferences, the *Journal of Sport History* for instance has a film review section and has published themed sections dealing with sport film, and there are more classes in sports film and several sports film festivals. There is clearly something happening in the cinematic realm, yet this 'happening' is to a very large degree constrained by discourses of realism and reality, and accordingly by the gender dynamics of sport as a powerfully masculine space. As is the case in much of the sporting world, sports films' women are marginalised, sexualised, trivialised, objectified and shown as interlopers in a world that continues to highlight forms of masculine homosociality.

This context makes Viridiana Lieberman's exploration of women in sports films an important, if sacrificial, contribution to this small but growing field – sacrificial in that the first monograph in a field of study becomes the one that subsequent analysts work off and against as a reference point, foundation and foil for arguments. The volume is a usefully teacherly text with descriptive and analytical assessments of several films at the core of each chapter: given that the earliest films considered are from the 1940s and early 1950s there is a reasonable chance that many students will not have seen them, making the description alongside the analysis particularly valuable. Similarly, Lieberman provides a useful typology of women-in-sports films, with seven categories: female athletes in individual sports; female athletes in team sports; women athletes in men's teams; sports where women do not seem out of place – tennis, basketball and the like; films where men and women appear in drag; films dealing with women coaches and finally those dealing with women owners. Typologies can be help us think better analyses, and for her purposes in this volume and possibly more generally this one seems to work, capturing key areas of tension and core dynamics in sport films and their social contexts.

The typology is useful also in that it should allow further discussion of sports films tropes grounded in realism, and in conjunction with that the relationship between these fictional films and reality. Some attention to these filmic frames might have enhanced and strengthened the argument. Lieberman's case, through all of the work, is that sports films are not fictional enough, in that makers do not use their fictional form to imagine alternative ways of being in and doing sport. This may be a limitation imposed by her focus on mainstream, Hollywood or Hollywood-like cinema where it may be the case that the realism-reality tension is as much a product of commercial demands to sell tickets as much as anything else; a constraint limited by the implicit coding of sports films as films for men. In fiction forms such as may sports films where realism is conflated with reality, plausibility

becomes the same as feasibility, meaning that sports films are often unable to imagine alternative ways of being in sport because the need for a situation to be feasible means that the cinematic trope of realism becomes conflated with truthfulness. Yet Lieberman seems to accept as they are the cinematic tropes of the films she is exploring meaning that she does not open up possibilities for ways that sports films might reimagine sports as differently or non-gendered. This is a significant weakness in her otherwise laudable call for more gender-blindness in sports cinema, of the kind she sees in *Girlfight*, which she presents as the best of the films explored.

These questions of cinema's grammatical tropes are not obvious and are a challenge to explore in cinematic analyses, in part because they rely on a particular and in some ways quite advanced form of reading of the cinematic texts. Much more obvious, and more surprising, is the uneven theorisation of the argument Lieberman presents. The first four elements of the typology are read primarily through a feminist psychoanalytic lens, which despite its limitations works for the films considered and in the predominantly masculine space that is sport. This framework disappears from the final three elements however – cross dressing, women coaches and women owners. Whereas the dominant theoretical approach in the first four chapters centres on the place and role of the father figure in psychoanalytic analyses, in these latter three the approach could have allowed exploration of notions of lack and absence or of phallogentrism, both significant tropes in feminist psychoanalytic film theory that could have enriched the reading in the latter portion of the book. From a teacherly approach, however, this absence might also be a strength in allowing exploration of both this and other theoretical approaches.

For sports historians, the usefulness of the book lies in its typology, and the argument that fictional films allow us to imagine other ways of being. The grounding of the analysis in film studies is, however, a problem for historians in that the films-as-texts are allowed to stand relatively independently and there is little done to situate them socially or culturally, so that for instance in Chapter 1 (focussing on women in individual sports) *National Velvet* (1944), *Pat & Mike* (1952), *Million Dollar Baby* (2004) and *Girlfight* (2000) are analysed without significant attention to the social-cultural or historical context of their production: this is not to say there is no reference to context but the film studies approach, highlighting text, does in some places come problematically close to anachronistic readings. This is, in part, related to the realism-reality problem. It does not negate its usefulness in teaching settings, but it is an issue to be careful with.

Finally, reading in a sense against the grain of the book reminds us of a significant gap, probably the major gap, in analysis of sports films – the absence of affect. Audiences, and especially audience responses, are absent from the analysis. This is not a gap limited to Lieberman's analysis, but in the field as a whole and that is highlighted by her film studies based approach, prioritising text over audience. It is a gap we need to find ways to begin to fill.

The book is generally well presented, although the absence of images, presumably for cost reasons, weakens the effectiveness of the text in places. The index, at one page predominantly made up of sport names and film titles, is very poor. It is, however, an important and useful contribution, exploring an area poorly addressed in the existing literature, and that deserves both wide use in sport studies and film studies programmes, and that also deserves respectful deployment and critique. It provides with a useful way into discussions of women in sports films, develops a useful

frame through which to begin to make sense of the area and suggests through both its presences and silences important ways to further develop this area of scholarship and analysis.