

# ON CINDERELLA MEN AND PEACEFUL WARRIORS: “SPORTAINMENT” IN AMERICAN MAINSTREAM CINEMA

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## ABSTRACT:

Being one of the portmanteau words related to media entertainment, “sportainment” is a term that refers to the processes of merging sports and entertainment within the media sphere, predominantly for commercial purposes. Even though the concept is mostly discussed in terms of various forms of reality TV, live broadcasting of sports or globally successful spectacular sporting events such as the Olympic Games, there are many other forms of sportainment to consider. The author reflects on sportainment and its use in the present-day American mainstream film production. The aim of the article is to offer a set of theoretical outlines which are related to sport and its social, cultural and media frameworks, as well as knowledge on sports feature films produced in Hollywood and their thematic aspects. That is why the second part of the text addresses the ways various sports and athletes are portrayed in American mainstream films. The author works with the basic assumption that the current forms and variations of so-called sports dramas made in Hollywood apply multiple practices of genre hybridisation, and they thus tend to involve a wide variety of topics, ideas and heroes which may or may not be primarily focused on sport.

## KEY WORDS:

commercialised sports, global movie industry, mainstream, media entertainment, Hollywood, sports dramas, sportainment

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## Introduction: Media Sport in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Looking at the available body of scholarly literature and knowledge on American mainstream cinema and its influence on the global movie audiences, we may say that there are numerous monographs, textbooks, studies and other sources of information that thoroughly reflect on the ways today’s globalised American cinema disseminates its ideas, values, stories and preferred types of lead characters. On the other hand, the specific type of mainstream film drama, which portrays various life stories of real (or fictitious) athletes and sportsmen or offers an insight into the background of the highly commercialised world of sports, is discussed less frequently. This is quite surprising, given the fact that movies involving such themes are, generally speaking, very popular and thus economically valuable. Deepening the popularity of mediated sports in late



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modern Western society, sports feature films function as attractive, visually rich spectacles that present (or rather represent) and disseminate the cultural values today's society fosters and prefers.

Whether we like to watch our sport 'heroes' and admire their talents, extraordinary physique and perseverance on television screens, or whether we tend to further explore their life stories and 'rise to fame' through the silver screen, commercial sport of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is closely associated with media culture and media technologies. Of course, our timeless tendency to attend sporting events and watch potential sensations and sport legends, as they happen and are born, is still as strong as ever. However, few people are able to visit all sporting events they are interested in, anywhere in the world – it would be quite time-consuming and financially demanding. And this is where media come into question – we might say that today's media technologies are able to offer the people watching television or Internet live streams spectacular experiences which are no less appealing and exciting than 'being really there'. Niemi says that *"commercial sports events are everywhere in the media and popular culture – proof that vicarious experiences of physical grace, achievement, and victory serve an important compensatory function in the era of postmodern capitalism, when large segments of the populace are relegated to underpaid, stultifying work and experience a depressing lack of meaningful community and political power."*<sup>1</sup> We therefore assume that the sphere of media production, which specialises in sporting events, stories they tell and heroes they present, is an immensely important part of the media industry as a whole. Media products related to sports have overstepped their former boundaries and local or regional contexts; most of them, at least those commercially interesting, have become remarkably powerful forms of global communication.

Reflecting on this topic, many scholars note that watching sports via television broadcasting or the Internet has led to substantial changes in all processes of organising and promoting any types of sporting events. For example, Děkanovský explains that many sports and specific disciplines have lost their popularity because the media are no longer interested in them. On the other hand, a sports discipline the media recognise and favour automatically attracts the audiences and their generally volatile attention; such a discipline may not only become universally popular but also financially lucrative.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the media determine, at least to a certain extent, social and cultural changes related to perceiving and understanding sports. One does not even have to possess scholarly awareness of the given issues or any kind of theoretical knowledge to notice that mediated sporting events have changed significantly. The media audiences currently prefer action-packed, dynamic struggles and long-time rivalries between two (or more) champions and rising stars. All matches and races are now quicker, shorter – one of the most efficient ways of making a sports discipline more visually attractive is to adjust its rules or reduce the number of participating athletes. Team events and mixed relays can be seen much more often, too; not only they are commercially interesting and sometimes quite fascinating, they also let their fans enjoy the possibility of directly comparing female and male performances and confrontations.

The late modern society is strongly marked by impatience. Nowadays, attracting the media audiences' attention is becoming increasingly difficult. These capricious, choosy and easy-to-offend media recipients thus unwittingly put a lot of pressure onto all media companies which are determined to gain, keep or strengthen their interest and loyalty. Being under this kind of pressure, the media, quite understandably, relieve some of the tension by trying to influence the ways sporting events are organised and planned. As noted by Bellamy, the seriousness of merging sports and media products has reached its critical point. There is no need to discuss the mutual relationships between the media and sports anymore, as these phenomena are no longer distinguishable. "Media sport" or "media sports" are terms that refer to the media-transformed shapes and forms of sports within the contemporary social and cultural framework.<sup>3</sup> In other words, all mediated sporting events and sportsmen have created a specific communication space based on complex socio-cultural communication acts and wider societal transformations.

1 NIEMI, R. J.: *Inspired by True Events: An Illustrated Guide to More than 500 History-Based Films*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2013, p. 233.

2 DĚKANOVSKÝ, J.: *Sport, média a mýty: Zlatí hoši, královna bílé stopy a další moderní hrdinové*. Praha: Dokořán, 2008, p. 157.

3 BELLAMY, R. V.: Sports Media: A Modern Institution. In RANEY, A. A., BRYANT, J. (eds.): *Handbook of Sports and Media*. USA: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006, p. 63-64.

As we have stated above, mediated sports are an important part of globalised media culture. They correspond with the cultural continuity, reflecting the wider, historically determined human interests and the admiration we express towards mentally or physically superior individuals, in our case sportsmen. Influenced by media culture of the new Millennium, the media audiences seek extraordinary sports performances, wait eagerly to see world records being broken and new personal maxima being established, and watch closely to experience the emotions these events tend to elicit. Television and other mass and digital media, as Sekot remarks, *"circle around gold medals"*; events happening elsewhere, e.g. on less important sports fields, are marginalised. The media do not tend to perceive sports performances through the eyes of athletes, but rather through the eyes of producers offering entertainment saturated by action and thrills. The suspense, the uncertainty is very important to attract sponsors and build commercial partnerships. The action elements of sporting performances are presented so naturally that the spectacle we are watching at the moment is 'the sport itself' to us.<sup>4</sup> This kind of sensation is so exciting that the audiences may experience the feelings action movies often provide – or should provide if they want to fulfil their purpose and the overall expectations related to the genre.

However, the undeniable socio-cultural importance of mediated sports is associated with much more than their ability to entertain the audiences; sports also offer attractive and engaging personifications of healthy life, recreation and moral values. According to Dyer, the most prominent difference between sports and other forms of mediated entertainment lies in their very essence: *"Unlike true entertainment, sport is true: for all its performative elements, with their aesthetic and affective dimensions, it is not a representational performance, it is itself; and while the quality and authenticity of all entertainment can be discussed, winning in sport is absolute (even disputing a win is founded on the assumption that there is an absolute win that can be determined)."* The author also remarks that sports have been *"invaded by entertainment values"*. This is evident when we take into consideration incorporation of sports into entertainment modes of television presentation, in the *"apparatus of stardom"* and secondary material as well as in the re-categorisation of sports as activities where winning depends on formal judgments (such as gymnastics, figure skating, ballroom dancing, formation swimming, acrobatic skiing) or which are widely known to be performances in the first place (e.g. professional wrestling).<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, this unique social and cultural determination of sports no other forms of entertainment possess does not mean that sports cannot be merged with media entertainment; they can be and "sportainment", the result of this blending, is entertaining and true at the same time, and thus hard to overlook or ignore.

The main objective of the study is to discuss "sportainment" and its forms used in the contemporary American mainstream cinema. We believe, however, that sports feature films cannot be categorised as a stand-alone genre; that is why we offer a short analysis of various American sports dramas and their different thematic outlines and formal aspects. Our aim here is to point out that these movies tend to include a wide variety of themes, motives, stories and narrative elements to present visually compelling and inspirational messages or extraordinary lives of past or present sports 'heroes'. It seems that the commercial potential of this segment of the media production places sports film dramas next to other forms of sportainment, i.e. live broadcasts of sporting events on television, reality TV based on sports performances or soft news related to sports that are typically published by tabloid media.

## Sportainment, or Sport As a Form of Media Entertainment

"Sportainment" is a portmanteau word which reacts to the need to reflect on the commercial establishment of sports within the sphere of media entertainment. The term underlines that it is necessary

4 SEKOT, A.: *Sport a společnost*. Brno: Paido, 2003, p. 143.

5 DYER, R.: *Only Entertainment*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 177.

to better understand the ways sporting events and sports celebrities are mediated and publicly presented to entertain the media audiences.<sup>6</sup> The processes of turning sporting events into spectacular media shows filled with action, emotions and dynamic turnarounds are very complex. We may encounter their results while watching television news, using specific digital communication services or interacting via online social networks. Besides understanding the ways television news programmes inform about sports and processes of selling and acquiring rights to broadcast globally important sporting events, we also need to pay attention to the integration of a huge sporting event with a wide spectrum of cultural and entertaining experiences (e.g. Super Bowl, the annual championship game of the National Football League in USA, that has lately become quite popular in Europe and all over the world). It is worth noting that Super Bowl involves a lot of accompanying show business events (such as performances of the most popular musicians) and offers a prominent advertising schedule – this advertising space is perceived as the most lucrative commercial session and tends to present upcoming Hollywood blockbusters with the highest possible financial aspirations.

The previous example may serve as a suitable explanation of how complex the relationship between sportainment and cultural economy truly is. Building enormously expensive sporting complexes and stadiums, investing in sports, buying stocks and bonds of globally successful and popular sports teams, sponsoring an athlete (or a team) or constantly increasing incomes of the most prominent athletes and sports managers, those are only a few of many related issues we have to acknowledge. Sekot states that the relationship between sports and politics implies various emotional associations, especially the feelings of national self-esteem, pride and shared identity. Moreover, many countries use accomplishments of their sportswomen and sportsmen to establish international relationships (or at least they try to do so). And last but not least, the contexts of education and inspiration are very important, too.<sup>7</sup> In most cases, sportswomen and sportsmen can become – at least potentially – much better role models than, for example, musicians who have built their careers on basis of personal scandals, extravagant behaviour or controversial public statements.

Moreover, while reflecting on sportainment, we cannot forget the technological aspects, i.e. the hi-tech essentials of media culture; among other things, they bring new possibilities of portraying sportswomen and sportsmen during their trainings and initial preparations or at the moments they focus their energy on the upcoming performance. These apparent ‘details’ may increase a sporting event’s attractiveness significantly; the oversaturated media audiences are always highly interested in the ‘hidden background’, in the special moments they have never seen before and may never see again.

Today’s media culture favours elite sports over amateur or recreational sporting activities – even though many unprofessional forms of sport are commercially interesting as well. Elite sportsmen are presented as prototypes of successful people, as celebrities who indirectly influence and inspire their supporters and fans all over the world. Moreover, according to Pravdová, the popularity of sportainment deepens the late modern cult of the body.<sup>8</sup> Inspired by sportswomen or sportsmen and their strength, endurance, dexterity or physical appearance, we buy various products they endorse and/or visit gyms to shape our bodies. Although it may not be so obvious, even these aspects are closely associated with sportainment and its many consequences.

As we have remarked, the notion of “sportainment” is often reflected on when we discuss television culture. Hudíková sees sports news programmes and live broadcasting of sports as very specific television genres; not only they allow the viewers to freely express their feelings, these expressions might even be required. Not expressing them is often seen as a violation of the established ‘rules’. This also applies to sports commentators and news presenters who ‘personalise’ such television programmes. Fans – or other stable percipients – experience a broad spectrum of emotions; along with their favourite teams or sportswomen/sportsmen. Most typical are “*the feelings of stress and nervousness during matches and races, feelings of enthusiasm, joy or even euphoric happiness when winning*”. The feelings of anger and hatred are also very frequent (towards rivals, referees, but also the favourite teams or players when they lose unexpectedly), as well

6 BOSSHART, L., HELLMUELLER, L.: Pervasive Entertainment, Ubiquitous Entertainment. In *Communication Research Trends*, 2009, Vol. 28, No. 2, p. 7.

7 SEKOT, A.: *Sport a společnost*. Brno: Paido, 2003, p. 12.

8 For more information, see: PRAVDOVÁ, H.: Kult tela – Univerzum kultúry homo digitalis. In GÁLIK, S. (ed.) et al.: *Premeny identity človeka v kyberpriestore digitálnych médií*. Lódž: KSIEŻY MLYN Dom Wydawniczy Michał Koliński, 2016, p. 48-75.

as the feelings of empathy following the loss.<sup>9</sup> Nowadays perceived as the late-modern-day heroes, sportswomen and sportsmen fill the media space with their accomplishments and compelling, often complicated or peculiar personal histories. As noted by Macková and Trunečka, it is more than understandable that the term “sports hero” appears very frequently in the media language, especially in the sports reporting. It is, after all, an emotional kind of communication.<sup>10</sup> As it seems, late modern society sees no difference between prominent actors, musicians, artists and star athletes. All of them are potential celebrities, and not just because they excel in what they do for a living. Even sportswomen and sportsmen who do not win, and never will, are sometimes able to achieve (typically short-term) popularity, especially if they are eccentric or otherwise remarkable – and not always in a positive way.

Sekot states that today, live broadcasting of sports reminds us of the world of action films. Anything, which stays hidden from the attending spectators, is available to other audience members, i.e. to those who watch the event on television or via the Internet. Television and Internet audiences are able to experience all the emotions, all the details related to sportswomen/sportsmen and their tears, smiles, despair or pain.<sup>11</sup> We may even say that the contemporary media audiences are offered a wider spectrum of footage, information and dramatic moments than the spectators who paid for their tickets, travelled and waited to see the event. What they still lack, however, is the unique atmosphere of the place, the collectively experienced set of emotions related to ‘being there’ in order to witness something outstanding.

Since sportainment is a very important aspect of globalised media culture, the complex relationships between sports, media and culture need to be reconsidered constantly. It is, in fact, quite logical that commercialised sports cannot avoid the globalisation trends and tendencies. According to Jarvie, some scholars perceive globalisation of sports as a natural way of reducing the influence of national states (and their political representatives) on sports, other see globalisation as a transnational flow of money and resources that exploits local talents and uses sportswomen and sportsmen to generate a staggering amount of profit.<sup>12</sup> Both of these perspectives are relevant, of course; however, criticising globalisation and its consequences is nothing new. That is why we have to seek new or revised ways of understanding global cultural phenomena and their media representations.<sup>13</sup>

Any theoretical reflection on sportainment has to take into account various theoretical frameworks of media studies and cultural studies, especially the sociological or socio-economic categories of class, lifestyle, gender, ethnicity, social roles, etc. As such a complex analysis would highly exceed the scope and purpose of this study, we would like to mention at least the category of gender, more precisely the presumed male dominance in professional sports and its media portrayals. Sekot reminds that in the Anglo-American world, this topic is very important. Influenced by mainstream ideas and worldviews, people tend to assume that all physically demanding sports are performed by men and watched by men.<sup>14</sup> This phenomenon is still quite obvious, even though, as Baker admits, there are many sportswomen who have made their mark in the process of seeing women as equal sports professionals and top athletes that are capable of extraordinary performances. However, as the author points out, sports feature films still tend to focus on male heroes; women mostly appear in various supporting roles, e.g. as mothers, lovers or supporters of the lead male characters.<sup>15</sup> We may definitely observe that women’s sport (e.g. women’s tennis, women’s ice hockey) is gaining its social, cultural and economic importance. Nevertheless, there is still a lot to reconsider. Professional sports, traditionally seen as predominantly patriarchal “*celebrations of manhood*”, may be changing their original gender determination,<sup>16</sup> but we still have to discuss a wide range

9 HUDÍKOVÁ, Z.: Emotional Factors in Creating Media Contents. In *European Journal of Science and Theology*, 2015, Vol. 11, No. 6, p. 159.

10 MACKOVÁ, V., TRUNEČKA, O.: You Don’t Have a Leg? Don’t Worry, You Can Still Be a Star! Media Image of Cyclist Jiří Ježek. In *Communication Today*, 2015, Vol. 6, No. 2, p. 80.

11 SEKOT, A.: *Sociologické problémy sportu*. Praha: Grada Publishing, 2008, p. 153.

12 JARVIE, G.: *Sport, Culture and Society: An Introduction*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2006, p. 95.

13 See, for example: SOLÍK, M., VIŠŇOVSKÝ, J.: The Issue of Media Reflection on Socio-cultural Recognition and Global Change. In *European Journal of Science and Theology*, 2017, Vol. 13, No. 6, p. 249-260.

14 SEKOT, A.: *Sport a společnost*. Brno: Paido, 2003, p. 11.

15 BAKER, A.: Sports Films, History, and Identity. In *Journal of Sport History*, 1998, Vol. 25, No. 2, p. 217-221.

16 DUNCAN, M. C.: Gender Warriors in Sport: Women and the Media. In RANEY, A. A., BRYANT, J. (eds.): *Handbook of Sports and Media*. USA: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006, p. 231.

of related topics – from the obvious misbalances between prize money obtained by female and male athletes competing in the same disciplines to the ways the media audiences and spectators accept (or do not accept) women competing in ‘traditionally’ masculine disciplines.

This line of thinking is, quite understandably, closely associated with the issue of gender stereotypes and their position in the mediated reality.<sup>17</sup> According to Lieberman, with an abundance of male-driven sports stories, Hollywood does its part in reinforcing our tendency to associate athleticism with men: “*Storylines that feature female athletes practicing and working in traditionally male sports are focused on the perpetuation of hegemonic masculinity as the standard.*” As a result, these domains exploit an ideology that encourages domination and brute force.<sup>18</sup> Even though only a few movies actually react to the given problem, there are some. We would like to mention the film portrayal of the true story about the 1973 tennis match between the female tennis superstar Billie Jean King and the former male tennis champion Bobby Riggs. *Battle of the Sexes* was released in 2017 – the movie was directed by Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris. Given that its main plot is based on one of the most watched and famous sporting events of the 1970s, it necessarily refers to the 1970s and their cultural reality, i.e. to various feminist movements and social movements trying to do their part in promoting gender equality. Moreover, the film story does not omit the highly sensitive topic of human sexuality, more specifically the real fact that Billie Jean King, then married, shared an intimate relationship with her female friend and was not afraid to admit it. This aspect alone is worth noting and thinking about. As Madleňák, Švec and Schuszteková observe, the consumption lifestyle of today, boosted by advertisements and the media, has evoked an increased interest in otherwise marginal topics, and not only amongst the LGBT communities.<sup>19</sup> It seems like the mentioned motion picture reacts to this emerging trend, along with many other mainstream movies; however, generally speaking, sportainment is included in very few of them.

## Sports Themes and Their Various Functions in Hollywood Movies

All mainstream media products are (typically, but not always) rather entertaining than reflexive or contemplative, even though they are, according to Solík, Višňovský and Lалуhová, able to communicate and foster all kinds of human values: cognitive (epistemological), semantic, heuristic, diagnostic, inspirational, motivational, etc.<sup>20</sup> Hollywood blockbusters and audiovisual media products aimed at the global audiences are no exception; the artefacts of media culture that are produced in the US are – on the global scale – the most successful sources of universal human values. Olson points out that the global success of North American film industry and television production is partly a result of the ‘universal’ narrative structure that gives the recipients living in other parts of the world an opportunity to ‘project’ their own values and needs into ‘transparent’ media contents. These products easily cross the boundaries of their original cultural space.<sup>21</sup> This also suggests that American popular culture is pervasive and ubiquitous, able to reflect specific myths, narratives and cultural values of other nations and cultures. The given ability contributes to its universal attractiveness and comprehensiveness. It also means that Hollywood movies, as we presume, are an important source of sportainment, i.e. of entertaining, as well as inspirational portrayals of popular sports and real or fictitious sportswomen and sportsmen presented as film heroes.

17 See, for example: BUČKOVÁ, Z.: Genderové stereotypy v tvorbe mediálnej reality. In *Media Literacy Student Magazine*, 2015, Vol. 2, No. 2, p. 35-40.

18 LIEBERMAN, V.: *Sports Heroines on Film: A Critical Study of Cinematic Women Athletes, Coaches and Owners*. Jefferson: MacFarland & Company, 2015, p. 3-4.

19 MADLEŇÁK, A., ŠVEC, M., SCHUSZTEKOVÁ, S.: Marketing Communication and Consumer Diversity. In JURISOVÁ, V., KLEMENTIS, M., RADOŠINSKÁ, J. (eds.): *Marketing Identity 2016: Značky, ktoré milujeme. Conference Proceedings*. Trnava: FMK UCM, 2016, p. 102.

20 SOLÍK, M., VIŠŇOVSKÝ, J., LALUHOVÁ, J.: Media as a Tool for Fostering Values in the Contemporary Society. In *European Journal of Science and Theology*, 2013, Vol. 9, No. 6, p. 74.

21 OLSON, S. R.: *Hollywood Planet: Global Media and the Competitive Advantage of Narrative Transparency*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1999, p. 4.

Obviously, Hollywood sports cinema has walked side by side with the increasing popularity of major spectator sports. The variations of sportainment present in Hollywood movies thoroughly use all the available technological advancements (e.g. computer-generated imagery and most progressive post-production procedures and visual effects) to appeal to the international or even global audiences. As we have mentioned above, Hollywood production tends to work with the most universal and easily comprehensible themes, motives and values, and sport has been one of them for decades. In Noverr’s words, in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Hollywood producers learned that sports films, previously seen as commercially unviable products, could offer compelling stories, heroes and narrative formulas such as the underdog or unlikely winner, the big comeback after failure, decline or adversity, the relationships of coaches and players or teams, the fast rising stars, the inside stories of how a sport is run by those who control it and make it profitable, and so on. Most of those films reinforced the hegemonic order and its values – fame, fortune, wealth, social visibility, admiration and ‘immortality’.<sup>22</sup>

As Babington points out, Hollywood’s historical and economic prevalence means that the sports film has been dominated not just by American film but by American film about ‘American’ sports. While acknowledging Hollywood’s centrality in terms of sports feature films is definitely relevant, we should also challenge the over-identification of the sports film with American cinema, bring into view sports neglected in American films, dramatize the meanings of different sports in different cultures and expand our sense of the sports drama’s possibilities.<sup>23</sup> It is necessary to add that Babington sees sports feature films as a stand-alone genre and therefore reflects on them accordingly.

Many American sports dramas, i.e. mainstream films that offer rather conventional all-human stories, which are based on genre schemes established decades ago, are able to cross any boundaries of national states, ethnic differences or cultural disparities. Their multi-layered narratives filled with popular topics reflecting the current reality turn them into global cultural phenomena. Sportainment is related to both form and content – the audiences typically see sports heroes fighting against all odds, stepping out to help their families or trying to become superstars. These stories are intertwined with spectacular action scenes and emotional music sequences. However, sports dramas still remarkably reflect the everyday lives of their audiences. As Solík and Klementis observe, media products that aspire to gain the status of popularity must reflect everyday lives of their users; media culture is “*a source of inspiration, an impulse leading to certain transformations of one’s own social situation*”.<sup>24</sup> In other words, even though it is commercial, profit-oriented and sometimes just one-dimensionally amusing, Hollywood sportainment inspires, touches one’s feelings and, in many cases, evokes pride and hope.

Given the aforementioned facts, mainstream films that work with the notion of sportainment tend to be both emotional and visually spectacular. However, at least some of them are aimed at niche audiences or tend to appeal to more specific audience segments – logically, their economic potential is considerably smaller. These kinds of motion pictures often portray various subcultures, extreme sports or communities associated with hypermodern sports (for example, *Lords of Dogtown*, 2005, an American biographical drama directed by Catherine Hardwicke which follows a group of young skateboarders). Moreover, although we mostly perceive sports feature films as pure entertainment, some of them have become cults for being exceptionally written and/or visually superior (e.g. *Raging Bull*, 1980, directed by Martin Scorsese and starring Robert de Niro). Such cult, timeless variations of sportainment function as a source of inspiration even now, decades later. After all, the idea of a sportsman with an emotionally self-destructive personality and aggressive behaviour who is able to win, but unable to lead a normal life, so thoroughly explored in *Raging Bull*, continues to inspire many film producers and directors even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Films always reflect our dreams and desires, exposing us to our own fears and anxieties. According to Magál, they may be artistic, purely entertaining (aimed at the mass audiences) or, most often, hard

22 NOVERR, D.: Foreword. In BRILEY, R., SCHOENECKE, M. K., CARMICHAEL, D. A. (eds.): *All Stars & Movie Stars: Sports in Films & History*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2008, p. VII-VIII.

23 BABINGTON, B.: *The Sports Film: Games People Play*. New York, Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2014, p. 5.

24 SOLÍK, M., KLEMENTIS, M.: Mimicry of Cultural Production for the Majority: Development Tendencies of Mainstream Culture. In *European Journal of Science and Theology*, 2015, Vol. 11, No. 6, p. 103-104.

to aesthetically evaluate and criticise.<sup>25</sup> Rusňáková claims that the production mechanisms of American mainstream film are quite complex and very diverse.<sup>26</sup> This applies to Hollywood sportainment as well. American sports feature films have become quite popular; some of them have obtained multiple awards and are critically acclaimed (for instance, *The Fighter*, 2010, directed by Darren Aronofsky). Many of them display real events of significant historical importance (e.g. *The Battle of the Sexes* mentioned above). As noted by Baker, professional sport has been used as a topic of Hollywood movies since the 'birth' of the movie industry in the United States. Hundreds of sports dramas have been produced, and for the same reasons as films presenting other cultural forms, i.e. theatre, art, literature, fashion.<sup>27</sup>

While reflecting on this kind of audiovisual production, most media theorists tend to use the expressions "sports film", "sports drama" or "sports feature film". As we have already mentioned that seeing "sports drama" as a stand-alone genre is rather problematic, we should also explain why – some of the motion pictures, which might be seen as sportainment, are predominantly action movies, other can be categorised as war films or even social dramas claiming that succeeding in a sport is one of the most honourable ways of supporting one's family (these films mostly appeal to adults and middle-aged people), gaining respect amongst one's schoolmates (movies reaching to teenaged audiences and young adults) or just becoming famous and rich (this variation is universally popular). However, Hollywood sportainment of the new Millennium, as we believe, uses the established narrative schemes to focus on deeper (or seemingly deeper) problems a portrayed sportswoman or sportsman has to face. The action sequences and sporting spectacles are still present and quite dominant, but these kinds of films increasingly involve serious social problems, specific consequences of the bad economic conditions, in many cases also an opportunity to 'look inside', i.e. to find out more about the background of the sports industry and the ways particular disciplines are organised, popularised or commercially exploited by a small group of well-situated, influential individuals. "Sports drama" is therefore a very special type of film drama that often offers formal aspects and thematic elements of multiple genres.

One of the most popular types of sports movies presents boxers or men competing in various kinds of martial arts; its gender determination is therefore quite obvious. However, it would be inadequate and false to presume that no women are interested in this theme. *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), Clint Eastwood's<sup>28</sup> highly acclaimed tragic sports drama starring Oscar-winning Hillary Swank, disrupts many of these gender stereotypes, offering a story of a determined young woman, a former waitress, who is even willing to work with an annoying, life-hardened boxing trainer to succeed. There are several popular and globally successful movies portraying real or fictitious boxers, wrestlers or fighters. Following the ideas set by *Raging Bull*, *Chariots of Fire* (athletics and the Olympics, 1981, directed by Hugh Hudson) or *The Natural* (baseball, 1984, director Barry Levinson, starring Robert Redford and Robert Duvall), the hypermodern forms of sportainment associated with boxing and wrestling are very popular and some of them also critically acclaimed. We would like to mention *Cinderella Man* (boxing, 2005, directed by Ron Howard), *Rocky Balboa* (boxing, one of the most popular sequels to *Rocky*, 2006, starring and directed by Sylvester Stallone), *The Wrestler* (wrestling, 2008, director Darren Aronofsky), *The Fighter* (boxing, 2010, directed by David O. Russell), *Warrior* (mixed martial arts, 2011, Gavin O'Connor), *Foxcatcher* (Greco-Roman wrestling, 2014, Bennett Miller), *Southpaw* (boxing, 2015, Antoine Fuqua) and *Creed* (boxing, 2015, Ryan Coogler).

Reacting to real historical events and including biographical facts about the famous boxer James Braddock, *Cinderella Man* (2005) is a rare portrayal of social problems following the Great Depression in the 1930s. At first, Braddock, a family man facing serious economic problems, is a rather mediocre boxer with no accomplishments worthy of public attention. However, his unexpected comeback is highly successful – the nickname 'Cinderella', quite obviously, refers to one of the most popular Disney fairy tales based on the 'from rags to riches' premise. Of course, Braddock's almost miraculous success made him an inspiration

25 MAGÁL, S.: *Filmový a mediálny manažment: Filmová produkcia I*. Trnava: FMK UCM, 2011, p. 133.

26 See: RUSŇÁKOVÁ, L.: Produkčné mechanizmy amerického mainstreamového filmu a ich vplyv na recipienta. In ČÁBYOVÁ, E., VELICKÝ, P. (eds.): *Quo vadis massmedia, Quo vadis marketing 2017. Conference Proceedings*. Trnava: FMK UCM, 2017, p. 131-142.

27 BAKER, A.: Sports Films, History, and Identity. In *Journal of Sport History*, 1998, Vol. 25, No. 2, p. 217.

28 Clint Eastwood has also received a lot of praise for his 2009 sports drama *Invictus* that focuses on Nelson Mandela, the South African President, and his struggle to unite the apartheid-torn country by enlisting the national rugby team to the 1995 Rugby World Cup (remark by the author).

for the depressive, economically collapsing America of the 1930s. Ron Howard's work received three Oscar nominations in 2006. *Cinderella Man* is built around the Australian actor Russell Crowe, best known as the revenge-seeking, heroic *Gladiator* (2000, directed by Ridley Scott).

The films about Rocky Balboa might be one of the most popular series of sports movies. Even though the actor portraying the fictitious boxing champion Rocky, Sylvester Stallone, is not young or even middle-aged anymore, his latest 'Rocky films' (*Rocky Balboa*, 2006 and *Creed*, 2015) revisit the character through new perspectives. In *Rocky Balboa* (2006, director Sylvester Stallone), thirty years after he became famous, the lead character of Rocky comes out of retirement to prove that he is still able to compete (and win) against Mason 'The Line' Dixon, the current heavyweight boxing champion. The movie's set-up is quite surprising, however; Dixon, humiliated by media for losing a virtual boxing match against Balboa, challenges Rocky to a 10-round exhibition match broadcast on national television. *Rocky Balboa* is therefore an action spectacle based on 'the battle of different generations' between a retired, much older, but very experienced former champion and a much stronger, faster, younger boxing star of today. It is reasonable to presume that the movie is aimed at middle-aged and older male audiences, the fans of the original *Rocky* from 1976. However, it also popularises virtual (online) boxing simulations and various digital games offering this kind of virtual experience.

Showing what will happen if – even the most successful – sportsmen do not prepare for the future and rely purely on their momentary fame and success, *The Wrestler* (2008, directed by Darren Aronofsky) offers a surprisingly deep social drama about an aging wrestler, his fading career and non-existing family life. Played by the former Hollywood star Mickey Rourke, Randy 'The Ram' Robinson, once a famous and highly successful professional wrestler, now looks like an old, sickly shadow of himself. Robinson still tries to wrestle and loses permanently, and that is why he has to make a living as a part-time grocery store employee. His personal life consists of two struggles – to 'reconnect' with his grown-up daughter, whom he abandoned years ago, and to form a closer bond with his only female friend, a somewhat younger pole dancer. Ignoring the fact that he feels terrible and suffers from constant pain in his chest, the hero accepts a sudden offer of a well-paid re-match with his most dangerous opponent from 'the best days'. The film functions as a social drama and also as an analogy to Rourke's once successful career in acting and its decades-long decline. Just like Randy Robinson in the movie, Mickey Rourke was given a second chance (and an Oscar nomination).

The thematic framework of the contemporary sports dramas often refers to serious social problems or young people and their struggles. Following this premise and offering an interesting background story of two brothers and their problematic family life, *The Fighter* (2010, director David O. Russell) is a highly acclaimed sports drama about Micky 'Irish' Ward, later a successful professional boxer, and his older step-brother and trainer in one person, Dicky Eklund. Ward's story is based on real events in the 1980s – given the fact that the lead character is portrayed by Mark Wahlberg, one of the world's highest-paid actors, and the A-class Hollywood star Christian Bale (here Oscar-awarded) plays his brother/trainer Dicky, it is no surprise that the movie was so successful. Dicky is immensely talented, but he is a drug addict, and therefore he is neither physically nor mentally able to compete. His younger half-brother Micky is, however, determined to become a boxing star. The story of two troubled brothers draws a colourful picture of a split, problematic family – their mother Alice, seeing herself as Micky's 'manager', does not even think about finding a proper job. While watching motivational video tapes and instruction films about becoming a millionaire by selling houses and other properties, Alice Ward just criticises her children and hopes that Micky will get rich and provide for her. Unlike in the case of *Cinderella Man*, this family is not worth fighting for; the lead character has to leave and start his own family life to succeed.

A similarly emotionally engaging depiction of social problems and brotherly relationship is also offered by the movie *Warrior* (2011, directed by Gavin O'Connor). However, in this case the narrative is set in today's globalised society that is marked by pathological social phenomena such as low incomes earned by highly educated people, alcoholism, domestic violence and post-traumatic stress disorders many former soldiers suffer from. On the other hand, it is also a quite archetypal story about two brothers and their complicated fate. The older one, Brendan Conlon played by Joel Edgerton, works as a science teacher at a local high school and leads a happy, yet humble family life. However, unexpected financial issues (most of all, hard-to-handle mortgage payments

the Conlons have to cope with) make him secretly return to his former profession that is less respectable, but far more profitable – mixed martial arts and (at first illegal) cage fighting. Facing AWOL<sup>29</sup> charges, the younger brother, Tommy Riordan portrayed by Tom Hardy, returns to the US with horrid memories of what he has experienced in Iraq. The brothers are very different, in terms of both looks and manners, which is evident not only during their interactions but also in all aspects of the complicated relationship they have with their abusive, authoritative father Paddy, a former trainer and long-time alcoholic (exquisitely depicted by Oscar-nominated Nick Nolte). Nevertheless, the interesting backstory of the family ties prevailing over the need to win a lot of money yields to the spectacular portrayals of cage fighting and currently popular mixed martial arts, as Brendan, determined and well-trained but still much physically weaker, does his best to face Tommy, the natural-born champion, and his raw physical power and (almost) unstoppable fervour. Framing the story about two brothers fighting each other inside a cage, some of the current social problems of Western societies are present – most of all, the thin line between being a war hero and being a criminal facing court-martial (hence Tommy's unfortunate life), the flaws of the school system (those who teach socially deprived young people who are to graduate high school have to work extremely hard to provide them with at least some of the required knowledge, as Brendan's day job clearly shows), the fact that many young parents must have multiple occupations to make ends meet (Brendan and his wife) or the struggles of broken elderly men unable to cope with their own mistakes and addictions (Paddy, living alone, hated by both sons, not allowed to even talk to his grandchildren).

Cinematic sportainment made in Hollywood also provides a closer look at young sportsmen living in the countryside, far away from big cities and real career opportunities. As it seems, these promising athletes are given only one chance – to obtain scholarships and leave their hometown in order to attend college and later turn pro. The reality of adolescent sportsmen from lower middle classes is also reflected in *Friday Night Lights* (2004, director Peter Berg). The film is based on true events and focuses on a rather successful high school football team in Odessa, a small, economically depressed town in Texas. Although the individual players are very diverse, they share one dream – to leave their hometown and enter the 'big world' of money and fame. The film is loosely followed by a similarly set episodic television drama of the same name. It is centred on a young tailback, who suffers a career-ending injury, and his teammate, a shy quarterback from a socially weaker family. Life in this small town in Texas is literally driven by football – football matches are the only weekend activity the residents see as meaningful (hence the film's title). Another film story involving young footballers is told by *We Are Marshall* (2006, directed by McG), which depicts the aftermath of the 1970 tragic plane crash that killed most football players on the Marshall University football team, along with some of their coaches and trainers. Even the actor Matthew McConaughey's lead performance is remarkable, the film itself is visually kitschy, especially in relation to the ways the remaining players and coaches try to keep their team 'alive'.

Since American football – along with the prestigious National Football League – is reflected on in sports dramas quite frequently, other important works of this kind should be mentioned as well. Most of them are (rather loosely) based on true events, e.g. *The Blind Side* (2009, directed by John Lee Hancock) about a homeless, uneducated teenage African-American, Michael Oher, who is taken in by a young couple and their children. The Tuohys give the young man every opportunity to succeed, helping him improve his grades, qualify for a prestigious athletic scholarship and become a football superstar; to do so, Leigh Anne Tuohy (portrayed by Oscar-winning Sandra Bullock) dedicates all her free time to attend Michael's trainings and argue with his coaches.

Furthermore, films such as *Moneyball* (2011, directed by Bennett Miller, six Oscar nominations), *Foxcatcher* (2014, also directed by Bennett Miller, nominated for five Oscars) or *Creed* (2015, director Ryan Coogler), the first two being 'based on true stories', underline the importance of coaches and their right, even though often unconventional attitudes towards the young people they train. The audiences are confronted with engaging and dramatic portrayals of training processes, analyses the coaches and managers conduct before and after every match and turbulent relationships between sportsmen and people who train them, often former champions. *Moneyball* shows an unconventional way of analysing sporting performances

on basis of advanced digital technologies, which results in extraordinary success, while *Foxcatcher* offers a rarely spectacular depiction of Greco-Roman wrestling and gives Channing Tatum, the film's lead actor, an opportunity to partly improve his reputation of an actor known for starring in teenage comedies and dance movies. As we have mentioned above, *Creed* follows the immense popularity of movies about Rocky Balboa; even though Sylvester Stallone (here even Oscar-nominated) does not play the lead character, he is still 'the face' of the movie. Rocky has moved on from being a highly successful boxer to being an inspiring coach who trains young Adonis Johnson, the son of his toughest enemy, Apollo Creed.

Hollywood sports dramas are typically based on the action sequences and spectacles linked together by the personal controversies and exceptional successes. Even films portraying aesthetically rich sports (and thus involving artistic performances) are focused not only on true (or partly true) events, but also on scandals and emotionally exhausting moments. *I, Tonya* (2017, directed by Craig Gillespie, won one Oscar, gained two more Oscar nominations) about the talented and physically capable, but graceless and ill-mannered American ice skater Tonya Harding is far less about her outstanding skills and accomplishments and much more about her nasty behaviour, abusive, psychotic husband, cynical mother and the infamous plan to attack and seriously hurt Nancy Kerrigan, her biggest rival. The film portrayal of Tonya Harding's life and career is rough, controversial – it is not clear whether she should be seen as a true antihero or just a victim of her spouse's psychotic ideas and her mother's own unfulfilled ambitions.

In terms of sports dramas, ice skating has been popular lately. Another true story, this time aimed at teenage audiences, is offered by the media company *Netflix*. *Kiss and Cry* (2017, director Sean Cisterna), a story about a young, promising ice skater Carley Allison who suffers from a very rare type of cancer and expresses her thoughts and worries via singing and placing videos on *YouTube*, features various aspects strengthening the film's authentic aspirations. For example, the producers claim that Sarah Fisher, the actress who depicts the female lead, was the best friend of real Carley Allison. The final scene also includes a voice-over by Toronto radio announcer Adam Wylde, taken the day Carley Allison passed away. As is clear from the comments placed below Carley Allison's *YouTube* videos, seeing the film has inspired many people to find out more about her life. The movie also includes real reactions of various music celebrities watching Carley Allison's *YouTube* profile and wishing her luck and good health. The expression 'Kiss and Cry', of course, refers to the zone where professional ice skaters emotionally experience their own accomplishments or failures while waiting for scores.

Movie depictions of spectacular racing cars and motorsports are a very specific type of sportainment. It can be said that there are not many racing movies which would be comparable to Lee H. Katzin's *Le Mans* (1971, starring the Hollywood legend Steve McQueen, aimed at the world's hardest endurance race at the Le Mans circuit in France) or Tony Scott's action drama *Days of Thunder* from 1990 featuring Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman. In the late 1990s, movies about illegal street racing began to gain popularity, namely the immensely profitable 'Fast and Furious' action series starring Vin Diesel and Paul Walker. It is questionable whether these films (the series now includes eight movies and two more are in development) are indeed sports dramas; their target audiences may or may not perceive illegal street races as a 'sport'. As we believe, these are rather action movies which use the fast cars, outstanding driving skills and exotic exteriors to offer attractive, dynamic sequences that have nothing to do with sport. However, the theme of car racing has been successful in terms of animated feature films (e.g. *Cars*, 2006, directed by John Lasseter, and all sequels to the movie).

As the 2010 emotional documentary on the three-time Formula One champion Ayrton Senna, so far the last casualty of Formula One races, was quite successful, a few years later, in 2013, one of the most aesthetically valuable sports dramas of all time was introduced under the title *Rush* (directed by Ron Howard). Being set in the dangerous 'golden' era of motorsports, the 1970s, the film nostalgically returns to one of the greatest rivalries in Formula One history, the rivalry between the easy-going, charming British playboy James Hunt and the perfectionist, outstanding, yet physically unattractive Austrian Niki Lauda. Driven by Hans Zimmer's remarkable soundtrack, the story explores not only the racers' exceptional achievements, critical career moments and character differences, but also the things they have in common – their self-confidence, hunger for victories and unwillingness to fulfil the expectations of their wealthy and influential families.

29 Note: AWOL is the acronym for "absent without official leave". The term is used in the US Military to describe a soldier or other member of military personnel who has left her or his post without being permitted to do so (remark by the author).

Many of the contemporary Hollywood sports dramas work with the concept of ‘mentor’, which is, as we assume, quite different from the traditional portrayals of trainers, coaches and other types of characters helping sportsmen achieve their goals. Some of these movies are aimed specifically at teenage audiences and focus on stories built around adolescents trying to find their place in life. This concept works well in *Peaceful Warrior* (2006, directed by Victor Salva). The story of a young, highly skilled college gymnast Dan, who is not only talented but also physically attractive and therefore popular with girls, changes its original setting in the moment when Dan first encounters an older gas station attendant calling himself Socrates. Shortly after that, a serious car accident ends Dan’s sports career, leaving his body broken and his mind deeply depressed. Socrates, Dan’s newly found mentor, helps him ‘heal’ his soul and shows him what really matters in life. Besides other things, the film refers to wisdom older and seemingly ‘ordinary’ people are able to provide after decades of gaining life experience. The same principle is used in *Never Back Down* (2008, director Jeff Wadlow). Being amongst the first feature films to widely popularise mixed martial arts, the motion picture depicts a frustrated, conflicted teenager named Jake Tyler who is bullied by his classmate and therefore joins an underground fight club in order to retaliate. However, he eventually meets Jean Roqua, a mixed martial arts trainer, who becomes his mentor and changes his negative attitude towards life, own family and sport.

On the other hand, today’s late modern film production also tends to challenge or openly mock the ways young people are trained by former star athletes, claiming some of them are too narcissist to help someone else succeed. This is quite obvious in Bryan Buckley’s comedy *Bronze* (2015), a movie about a vulgar former gymnastics bronze medallist Hope Ann Gregory who still enjoys her status of a local ‘celebrity’ despite being unemployed and financially unstable. Embracing a chance of becoming rich and popular again, she starts to train Maggie Townsend, a promising young gymnast, but without any true effort to help her improve. Gregory’s inappropriate behaviour is a satiric portrayal of the late modern narcissist personality which lives in the past and cannot see that everything has changed to her disadvantage.

Another untraditional trainer is presented in *Eddie the Eagle* (2016, directed by Dexter Fletcher). The movie offers a partly dramatic, partly purely entertaining narrative based on true events – the story of the British athlete Michael ‘Eddie’ Edwards who, despite lacking all the talents required, decides to become a ski jumper in order to go to the Winter Olympics. He is trained by Bronson Peary, a former American ski jumping star, now an alcohol addict and an occasional snowplough driver. Even though he is hopelessly untalented, Eddie eventually goes to the Olympics as the Great Britain has no other ski jumper that would compete against him. The story is equally inspirational and absurd; the audiences never know what to think about Eddie’s passion for ski jumping, his terrible style of jumping or the strange way he celebrates all happy landings despite being hopelessly last.

Sportainment has also been used in so-called mockumentaries or fictional documentaries. In this context, the comedy *7 Days in Hell* (2015, director Jake Szymanski) has to be mentioned. The fictional movie absurdly portrays the rivalry between ‘two of the greatest tennis players of all time’ during a fictional 2001 match that lasted seven days. Its documentarist elements react to the most frequently used clichés present in sports documentaries, mocking sportsmen, their lack of education, overly ambitious parents and the ways they publicly share hyperbolised details related to their ‘unhappy childhood’ in order to attract the attention of fans and increase their own commercial value. However, the film is equally absurd and offensive (e.g. it openly insults multiple nations, the Queen of the United Kingdom and other members of British royal family, and also explicitly depicts various types of sexual intercourse).

## Conclusion

‘The right to be entertained’ is now proclaimed not only across all highly developed liberal democratic countries, but also in post-colonial and developing countries, anywhere in the world. As Zillman states, it is quite easy to let someone or something else entertain us and feel good about it: *“Entertaining happenings that used to be difficult to attend, if they were not out of reach altogether, now are, literally, at the consumer’s fingertips. Convenience is altogether a salient component of media use. Each and every viewer now has the*

*front seat that used to be reserved for nobility and a few illustrious citizens. And viewers get to see and hear not backyard stagings but performances by the world’s greatest actors, singers, athletes, magicians, scholars, cooks, and assorted others.”*<sup>30</sup> The same is true in case of sporting events – witnessing the world’s best sportsmen win and their competitors struggle has never been so simple. Hollywood sportainment allows us to watch emotional life stories of real (or fictitious) athletes and sportsmen, giving us a chance to see, although indirectly, the highly commercialised world of sports most ordinary people would otherwise never experience. Even though we tend to think that the sporting events and their media portrayals are all about comparing performances and winning, many Hollywood sports dramas offer much more than that – moreover, it is reasonable to presume that at least some audience members watch these films ‘just for the show’ or because they like specific disciplines and admire certain female and male athletes, their talent, public appearances or show business activities.

Various researches on gender differences in terms of watching sports may have confirmed the fact that women and men generally prefer different kinds of sporting events, but they typically cannot offer any complex explanations why. According to Cooper-Chen, women tend to prefer aesthetically rich and ‘artistic’ sports such as gymnastics and ice skating, while most men favour action, physical confrontations.<sup>31</sup> However, we have to note that this statement and similar opinions are often based on data obtained via quantitative research methods and approaches, which rarely try to clarify or even acknowledge the individual preferences of the media recipients that do not correspond with the given generalisations (related to females and males alike).

Today, mediated sports are presented at least as spectacularly as other forms of media culture. The media depictions of sporting events and sports celebrities may also be appealing to the media audiences that are not generally interested in sport. This trend is especially evident if we consider the ways star athletes are sexualised and objectified by the media, i.e. the rich visual forms of underlining their physical attractiveness. Hollywood sportainment is no exception – it focuses on the strong dramatization and sexualisation of sports celebrities and heroes in order to stimulate the attention and desires of the mainstream movie audiences. Considering this fact, audiovisual sportainment is one of the most commercially interesting and popular entertainment hybrids. We dare presume that its economic significance will only increase, and in all contexts. Hollywood producers nowadays expand the existing portfolio of topics and narrative elements related to sports. The dynamic action scenes are still in the centre of the mainstream audiences’ attention, but film stories involving sport as an attractive background for social dramas and more serious topics are popular as well. Another fact worth pointing out is that various once unknown or marginal sports have gained popularity quite rapidly thanks to their spectacular film portrayals. This is the case of mixed martial arts, which have been popularised amongst both teenaged film audiences (*Never Back Down*) and adult moviegoers (*Warrior*).

Many contemporary American sports feature films try to convince the audiences that nothing is impossible and that talented athletes are always able to win against all odds. The ‘from rags to riches’ premise is quite prominent here – the recipients are therefore encouraged to hope for a better life, for a better tomorrow. This is very important in terms of fulfilling sportainment’s key purpose – to provide escapist spectacles and highly emotional experience. Crosson mentions the most important driving force of sports dramas (or rather their narratives) – the Objective. Heroes of these movies always want to achieve something; they typically want to retaliate, prevail over their archenemies or solve their otherwise unsolvable financial and family problems. These goals are deeply rooted within the stories<sup>32</sup> and very diverse – for example, in *Eddie the Eagle*, the hopelessly non-talented hero dreams of qualifying for the Olympics in any discipline, in *Friday Night Lights*, the young football players do whatever it takes to have a chance to leave their insignificant, boring hometown, in *Rush*, both portrayed Formula One drivers are willing to risk anything to win the championship, and so on.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Hollywood sports dramas merge with other film genres to constantly renew their own entertainment potential. Although these films are typically rather mainstream movies than blockbusters

30 ZILLMANN, D.: The Coming of Media Entertainment. In ZILLMANN, D., VORDERER, P. (eds.): *Media Entertainment: The Psychology of Its Appeal*. Mahwah, London: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2000, p. 7.

31 COOPER-CHEN, A.: The World of Television. In COOPER-CHEN, A. (ed.): *Global Entertainment Media: Content, Audiences, Issues*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2005, p. 4.

32 CROSSON, S.: *Sport and Film*. New York: Routledge, 2013, p. 14.

(in terms of the common economic categorisation of American film production),<sup>33</sup> some of them are both commercially successful and critically acclaimed. In fact, lately a lot of Oscar-winning or Oscar- and Golden Globe-nominated movies have been based on the dramatic stories involving star athletes or greatly significant sporting events (*The Fighter*, *Wrestler*, *The Blind Side*, *Million Dollar Baby*; etc.). The ‘based on a true story/real events’ formula seems to be absolutely crucial.

However, various new or rather untypical and innovative topics have emerged as well – we can see these tendencies in many American sports dramas, namely *Creed* (a former boxing star looking after his toughest opponent’s talented son), *Seven Days in Hell* (a fictional tennis documentary mocking real film documentaries on star athletes) or *Peaceful Warrior* (a story about a young, promising gymnast recovering from a horrible injury). A lot of binary oppositions are applied – the mainstream media audiences seem to favour the conflicts between women and men (*Million Dollar Baby*, *Battle of the Sexes*), two brothers (*The Fighter*, *Warrior*) or young talents and their much older mentors (*Million Dollar Baby*, *Creed*). Moreover, the role of mentorship, trainers and coaches seems to be essential, too, as we can see in *Million Dollar Baby*, *Never Back Down* or *The Blind Side*. Some of the most popular Hollywood sports dramas focus on the portrayals of aging former stars and their last chance to ‘shine’ (Sylvester Stallone’s *Rocky Balboa*) or their utter social and physical decline (Mickey Rourke’s *Wrestler*). Some sports feature films are also aimed at teenagers and young adults, offering the inspirational stories about young athletes suffering from terminal diseases (*Kissy and Cry*), teenagers struggling to get a chance to lead a better life (*Friday Night Lights*), troubled individuals bullied by their schoolmates (*Never Back Down*) or young adults, once sportsmen, trying to cope with a serious physical disability after an accident (*Peaceful Warrior*).

As late modern media culture is full of contrasts and contradicting ideas, Hollywood sportainment also provides cynical comments on the narcissist, intellectually worthless former athletes (*Bronze*), satirises the clichés present in film documentaries on sportsmen (*7 Days in Hell*), offers the dramatized versions of scandalous true stories associated with the ‘dark side’ of sport and competitive struggles (*I, Tonya*) or works with the idea of ‘macho nostalgia’ (*Rush*). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Hollywood movies that would portray ‘European’ football (in the US called ‘soccer’) are notably absent, as well as films about ice hockey and some other highly popular team sports (e.g. basketball, baseball).<sup>34</sup> Soccer has mostly been depicted via romantic comedies such as *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002, directed by Gurinder Chandha) or *She’s the Man* (2006, director Andy Fickman). Although these motion pictures are comedies, both of them point out the gender inequality in soccer. The former movie shows a teenaged daughter of orthodox Indian parents who rebels against her family’s values by joining a soccer team, the latter film features a young woman disguised as her twin brother in order to be able to continue playing high school soccer after the girls’ team gets cut. Mainstream movies associated with mountaineering are also quite untypical (with the exception of stories based on real events such as *127 Hours*, 2010, directed by Danny Boyle, or *Everest*, 2015, director Balthasar Kormákur).

The absence of films about basketball is especially surprising, as in the 1990s, a lot of them were produced. According to Baker, the narrative conventions of racial representation dominating American popular culture framed those films as “athletic contests with winners and losers”. These movies include *White Men Can’t Jump* (1992, director Ron Shelton), *Above the Rim* (1994, director Jeff Pollack), *The Air Up There* (1994, directed by Paul M. Glaser), *Space Jam* (1996, directed by Joe Pytka), *Eddie* (1996, director Steve Rash) or *He Got Game* (1998, directed by Spike Lee).<sup>35</sup> It seems that sports dramas which focus on extraordinary individuals and sports based on the Agon principle (i.e. boxing, mixed martial arts, wrestling, Formula One racing or tennis) are the most successful and critically acclaimed.

Hollywood sportainment still has a lot of narrative possibilities to explore. As we have mentioned above, its key idea of winning against all odds is associated not only with the media myths and role models they produce, but also with our understanding what quality and ‘authentic’ success really are (deepened by the

fact that sportsmen depicted in Hollywood movies rarely lose). The scholarly discourse on American sports drama claims that “it is increasingly significant precisely because of the ways it reflects and reinforces dominant modes of production, means of representation, and conventions of reception. Indeed, whether suffused with nostalgia or realism, concerned with identity or difference, preoccupied with race, class, or gender, or rendering American dream or global nightmares, films focused around sporting worlds more and more constitute vehicles for the expression and inscription of dominant symbols, preferred sentiments, and hegemonic structures.”<sup>36</sup> The recent prominence of sports dramas in terms of the most renowned movie awards, quite naturally, attracts skilled actresses and actors, as well as world-famous directors. Given the fact that commercialised sports are increasingly important (not only as social and cultural phenomena but, first of all, economically), there is hardly anything left to doubt when we say that Hollywood sportainment will maintain or even increase its current success on the global media market.

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<sup>33</sup> For more information, see: PLENCNER, A.: Filmový hrdina s mesianistickými črtami. In *Communication Today*, 2013, Vol. 3, No. 2, p. 35.

<sup>34</sup> There is, however, one particularly important sports drama about baseball to mention. It is Robert Lorenz’s movie *Trouble with the Curve* from 2012 starring Clint Eastwood and Amy Adams (remark by the author).

<sup>35</sup> BAKER, A.: *Contesting Identities: Sports in American Film*. Chicago : The University of Illinois Press, 2003, p. 44.

<sup>36</sup> KING, C. R., LEONARD, D. J.: Why Sports Films Matter; Or, Refusing a Happy Ending. In KING, C. R., LEONARD, D. J. (eds.): *Visual Economies of/in Motion: Sport and Film*. New York : Peter Lang Publishing, 2006, p. 227.



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