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Contesting Identities: Sports in American Film [Book Review]

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Contesting Identities: Sports in American Film

Baker, Aaron. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003. 162 pages, \$32.50, hardcover. ISBN: [0252028163](#)

Aaron Baker's *Contesting Identities: Sports in American Film* is an indictment of the key American myth that anyone can succeed through self-reliance. Baker finds that sports films, in general, comprise a site in which the myth is represented and reproduced. Baker's focus, though presented from multiple analytical perspectives, is singular in its purpose. That said, Baker does concentrate on what he considers the four core American sports: football, baseball, basketball and boxing. Approximately ninety movies, from the silent era to the present day, provide the content of the analysis, but several are exemplary and are cited repeatedly in the book's introduction, four chapters and conclusion. Each chapter comprises one category of analysis: history and identity, Hollywood and the black athlete, gender and class (in boxing).

Contesting Identities relentlessly examines the American myth that hard work and self-reliance will be rewarded. Rather than being separate issues, class, race and gender then become entry points for further analysis of the ways the culture maintains and reproduces (one of) its central ideologies. This leads to some repetitions -- several films figure in every chapter -- and the seeming inevitability of the conclusions. For example, *Knute Rockne: All American* falls into the history and race categories of analysis, *The Jackie Robinson Story* falls into three and *The Harder They Fall* fits all four. Regardless, the multiple approaches only confirm the (frequent) complicity of film makers in providing fables of self-determination and individuality, even when it is a misrepresentation of historical fact. Nowhere is this more evident than in Hollywood's many manipulations of both the real and the film versions of Jackie Robinson. In contrast, Baker shows, are films such as *Eight Men Out* which depict unrewarded prowess and the sinister side of individuality and the pursuit of personal rather than communal gain.

The effect, Baker concludes, is that most films function to deny social identity -- that is, a predominantly working class identity -- by focusing on the individual. Mediated productions of actual sporting events, with their emphasis on stars over teams, only serve to reinforce their cinematic counterparts. The overlapping topics should not surprise readers. First, the analytical categories are imbricated with each other and with social identity. Second, as Baker observes, "to some degree every sports film is about gender, whatever it has to say about other aspects of social identity" (3). Thus, the section on gender forms the largest chapter. As well, the discussion of the narrative of self-determination as a particularly masculine concept underlies every other chapter.

The potential for a class-based social identity that crosses the boundaries of gender and race leads the argument to two important but controversial points. First, based on Stuart Hall's notion of "a difference that doesn't make a difference of any kind," Baker boldly claims that while "African-Americans have clearly been the primary victims of the justification of racial discrimination that I'll analyze, this biased thinking can affect whites as well, and so it is in the interests of whites to recognize how it functions in media texts like [sports] films" (31). Although Baker intends to show that whites (especially those from the working classes or from ethnic minorities) might be marginalized or excluded from sports by the current regime, he ends up placing the notion that sports and entertainment are the only access points to upward mobility for African-Americans -- viewed from both within and without -- alongside the notion that whites have "inherent physical limitations" (31). Baker shows how this is played out in films such as *White Men Can't Jump* and *The Great White Hype*, but it just cannot ring true given whites' greater access to power, in general, and the hegemonic windfall -- seen or unseen -- that whites receive, especially in terms of ownership, management and coaching, all of which result from a merely adventitious birth.

The second point, however, is equally bold but holds greater promise. In comparing the heroes and heroines of sports films, particularly *Girl Fight* and *Love and Basketball*, Baker cites scholars Judith Halberstam and Leslie Heywood and with them advocates that women in sports and sports films "appropriate aspects of masculinity -- such as physical strength and self-confidence -- not to replicate the controlling behaviors that characterize dominant masculinity, nor to accept the idea [...] that competitive success precludes lesbian sexuality, but rather to protect themselves from being victims of patriarchy" (89). In other words, Baker suggests that women should essentially use the master's tools against him. This runs counter to many criticisms of masculinized females such as Xena: Warrior Princess and the comic book heroine, Tank Girl. For example, Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins warn that "much of what gets read as female empowerment within popular culture represents feminist appropriation of violent images for their own ends" (29). Baker's point regarding the stability of gender runs counter to essentialist views which hold that the practices of patriarchy are antithetical to women and, more specifically, to feminism. It may not be a successful strategy of empowerment for all women, but it is for some. Moreover, although not discussed at length, such a strategy might also be employed by homosexuals, who are arguably more frequently excluded from the hypermasculine realms of sport and sports films.

Contesting Identities has its limitations. It does not examine the full range of cinematic sports, nor does it claim to do so. This is not a problem given the breadth of the genre. Rather its strength -- the determined and thorough critique of America's meritocracy -- can lead to moments of analytic rigidity. Thus, the melodramatic positionings that occur in the stereotypical locker room scenes do not figure at all. For example, the love triangle in *Bull Durham*, which the book suggests displaces the eroticized male body in favour of more masculine concerns, is less stable when one considers that Crash Davis (Kevin Costner) and not Annie Savoy (Susan Sarandon) teaches Nuke Laloosh (Tim Robbins) all of the domestic concerns of baseball -- from care of the pitching arm to care of the shower sandals -- and that the locker room then becomes the domestic sphere. Similarly, an analysis of *Raging Bull* needs to consider the kitchen qua boxing ring, and vice-versa. As well, the issue of sexuality -- especially homophobia and homosexuality, in what are traditionally male-dominated, hypermasculine realms -- is underrepresented.

Although it concentrates on American film and sport, *Contesting Identities* sets itself up within the realm of British Cultural Studies. However, this should not deter the non-academic reader. In situating his analysis, the author invokes definitions of popular culture from Stuart Hall, definitions of "whiteness" from Richard Dyer and definitions of community from Raymond Williams. This leads to the rather tidy statement on the jacket that the book claims to consider the "ways in which cinematic representations of sports and athletes have evolved over time [...] and what they say about the ways identities have been constructed and transcended in American society." Sports

films quite clearly occupy a site of contestation and present competing discourses on class, race, gender and sexuality as the dominant culture attempts to maintain its position. Thus, the analysis should not be unfamiliar to scholars in either Cultural Studies or the Sociology of Sport, for it occupies a largely unmapped interstitial space between the two. Scholars especially will find the bibliography and filmography to be quite useful resources. Indeed, given the lack of scholarly -- as opposed to critical or popular -- analyses of cinematic sports, *Contesting Identities* is a most welcome study [[1](#)].

Note

[1] At the time of writing the MLA database, for example, lists only seventeen entries for sports films. One is the *Sports Film Database* (Ed. Harvey M. Zucker and Lawrence J. Babich, McFarland, 1987), which contains titles and credits up to the end of 1984, and one is an unpublished dissertation. Two others were papers presented at conventions of the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport. It was through correspondence with several of these authors that I was directed to *Contesting Identities* and another book for which my review is in progress. [[^](#)]

Marc Ouellette

Work Cited

Cassell, Justine and Henry Jenkins. *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender in Video Games*. Boston: MIT Press, 1998.