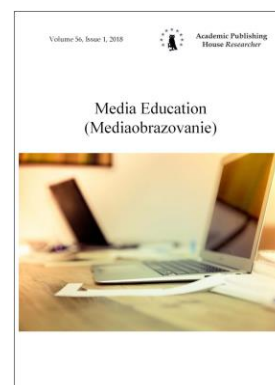




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The Image of the Sportsman in Polish Sports Feature Films of the Second Decade of the 21st Century

Piotr Drzewiecki ^{a,*}

^a Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, Poland

Abstract

The contemporary image of the sportsman can be studied not only in marketing terms, but also in film and media studies, indicating the protagonist's struggle with fate, his own weaknesses and limitations, as presented in the audiovisual message. The analysis focused on contemporary Polish feature films from 2011–2020, containing the story of athletes who experience both universal and national history and their own existential and moral dilemmas. The method used was the study of films and TV series as media messages and the theoretical perspective of an intimate approach to the analysis of the athlete's image. We may pose the following problematic questions: 1) what is the significance of universal and national history in the film and media presentation of the experiences of a given athlete? 2) in what way are his existential struggles symbolically captured in individual cinematic images? 3) what moral dilemmas does the athlete experience and how are they portrayed in a given audiovisual message? The analysed sports feature films portray sports rivalry less and focus the audience's attention more on the existential and moral choices of the protagonists. We have also noticed the significant importance of the historical context of the presented images of athletes.

Keywords: Polish sports film, media studies, feature films, TV series, media, sportsman's image, film analysis.

1. Introduction

The image of the sportsman in media messages can be studied in two aspects. The first one relates to the issues of media marketing and advertising, and the basic research objective is to determine the attractiveness of the brand of a given athlete (Kancik, 2013; Lasek, 2017), to indicate possible ways of its creation and to improve sports marketing communication aiming at achieving the highest possible commercial profits. The second aspect – more related to the tradition of media–film studies – consists in the scenic, semiotic and narrative analysis of the images of sports heroes portrayed in films and television series. Researchers are interested in the portrait of a given athlete portrayed by a film or television director, the existential and moral dilemmas he or she experiences, and references to biographies of historical figures (Barczyk, 2013; Łęcicki, 2013; Papuczys, 2017).

We will refer to the latter research tradition in the media and film studies analysis presented below. The perspective of the intimist approach to the analysis of the athlete's image proposed by Dominik Wierski, a cultural studies scholar and cultural animator, is adopted, implemented here for the study of feature films. The essence of this approach is an attempt to establish the meaning of the sports heroes portrayed, the director's intended way of portraying them providing a starting point for a personal and intimate reflection on human struggles with the surrounding reality, one's

* Corresponding author

E-mail addresses: p.drzewiecki@uksw.edu.pl (P. Drzewiecki)

own weaknesses, difficult past, social limitations or problems in interpersonal, family and professional relationships (Wierski, 2017).

2. Materials and methods

Five Polish sports feature films of the second decade of the 21st century were selected for analysis. In 2012, two biographical TVN productions from the series *Prawdziwe historie: Bokser* (True Stories: Boxer) directed by Tomasz Blachnicki, based on the life story of Polish kickboxer Przemysław Saleta and *Nad życie* (More than Life) dir. by Anna Plutecka–Mesjasz, about the life and fight against illness of Polish volleyball player Agata Mróz–Olszewska, were presented. 2017 saw the premiere of two sports biographical productions: the picture *Najlepszy* (The Best), dir. by Łukasz Palkowski – inspired by the life of Jerzy Górski, the 1990 world champion in the Double Ironman triathlon competition in the United States, previously struggling with a drug addiction problem – and the film *Gwiazdy* (Stars) dir. by Jan Kidawa–Błoński, about the story of Jan Banaś, a football player of Polonia Bytom and Górnik Zabrze, a multiple representative of Poland. The analysis also included a Polish sports drama from 2019 titled *Underdog*, dir. by Maciej Kawulski – incidentally co-founder of the Polish martial arts federation Konfrontacja Sztuk Walki – featuring Mamed Khalidov.

It is worth mentioning other feature productions sometimes included in the category of sports films, i.e.: a comedy of manners *Być jak Kazimierz Deyna* dir. by Anna Wieczur–Bluszcz from 2012 – referring to the figure of the legendary footballer of Legia Warszawa, representative of Poland and gold medallist of the 1972 Summer Olympic Games in Munich; film drama *Płynące wieżowce* (Flowing skyscrapers), dir. by Tomasz Wasilewski from 2013 – a film tackling the issue of gender identity, whose main character is an amateur swimmer – and the thriller *Bad Boy*, dir. by Patryk Vega, showing irregularities in Polish football clubs, with a guest appearance by Polish football representatives: Kamil Grosicki and Sławomir Peszka. However, it is difficult to consider these titles as exhaustively fulfilling the criterion of a sports film as a media genre whose main theme should be a specific sport discipline or the main character should be the person of a given athlete (Siwicki, Galanciak, 2015: 88).

The study used a methodology for analysing feature films and television series as media messages, proposed by Grzegorz Łęcicki, an apologist, cultural theologian, media scholar and audiovisual media researcher (Łęcicki, 2017a, 2017b). The method goes beyond mise en scène, semiotic and narrative analysis alone (Taylor, Willis, 2006: 13–29, 71–85), focusing us more on exploring the historical context, paying attention to the details of the film or television image, highlighting the meanings and symbolism of individual scenes, referring to existential and moral issues, which is supposed – through repeated viewing – to lead to grasping the meaning and fundamental message of the film. Combining the above presented research method with the adopted perspective of an intimate approach to the analysis of the athlete's image, we may pose the following problematic questions. First: what is the significance of universal and national history in the film and media presentation of the experiences of a given athlete? Second: in what way are his existential struggles symbolically captured in individual cinematic images? Third: what moral dilemmas does the athlete experience and how are they portrayed in a given audiovisual message?

3. Discussion

The analysis of Polish sports feature films of the second decade of the 21st century undertaken in this article needs to take into account the contemporary discussion on the possibilities of studying the film image of athletes. The motif of national identity of athletes portrayed in feature films can be found in the interests of media and film scholars after 2017. Among other things, research has been undertaken on the image of African–American basketball players in Hollywood productions – primarily Disney – looking for mythological and ideological connotations (Descamps, Vivier, 2020). Another example is the analysis of Indian national identity and the promotion of patriotism in Bollywood sports films, mainly in terms of contemporary political economy (Rasul, Proffitt, 2017). Similar research on the national image of athletes in feature films is also undertaken in studies of Italian (Landrini, 2020) and Latvian (Brūveris, 2017) cinema.

Cultural–media and media–educational aspects can also be pointed out in analyses of film images of athletes. These include analyses of the phenomenon of the excessive tendency to combine sport with elements of entertainment – sportainment – in contemporary American cinema (Radošinská, 2018), studies on the reception of sports films by children's audiences, taking into account negative themes e.g. athletes' addictions and positive themes e.g. relationship with the

coach (Wakefield et al., 2017), critical analysis of representations of physical education in contemporary cinema (Walton–Fisette et al., 2017) as well as issues of sports health in films e.g. injuries sustained and the need for rehabilitation (Olympia et al., 2018).

One can also point to analyses of the ways in which representatives of specific sports are portrayed in cinematography. Examples of this are studies of narrative construction in films depicting car racing (Howell, 2017), the presentation of positive sporting behaviours such as overcoming physical and mental limitations in films about modern runners (Nelson et al., 2019), or contemporary forms of depicting UEFA Champions League matches in 21st century football films (Archer, 2020).

4. Results

The story from the perspective of the individual athlete's experience

The cinematic images analysed refer to different historical periods of Poland after World War II. We go back to the times of the Nazi occupation in the film *Gwiazdy* (Stars), based on the biography of footballer Jan Banaś. The protagonist is born as the illegitimate son of a German and a Polish woman in Berlin in 1943. His mother Anna names him Heinz–Dieter Banas after his father. After the war she marries another man and they live in Upper Silesia. It was the time of the People's Republic of Poland, the domination of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in Central and Eastern Europe. Despite difficulties with his background, he achieved his first sporting successes in Polonia Bytom. He also made his debut in the Polish junior football team. Heinz does not know his father and falls unhappily in love with his step–sister Marlena, his stepfather's daughter. He finally makes contact with his father, who urges him to emigrate to the Federal Republic of Germany and play for 1. FC Köln. However, he was disappointed and was disqualified for two years because his father did not reveal all the details of his contract. He returned to Poland, changed his name to Jan Banaś and joined Górnik Zabrze, with whom he qualified for the 1970 Cup Winners' Cup final. He was called up to the Polish national team but, for political reasons, was unable to play in the tournament during the 1972 Summer Olympics in Munich and the 1974 World Cup in the Federal Republic of Germany.

The People's Republic of Poland also forms the historical backdrop of *Najlepszy* (The Best), a picture inspired by the biography of Polish triathlete Jerzy Górski. We are transported to the late 1970s and 1980s, to Legnica, the place where the protagonist was born and grew up, and also the headquarters and barracks of the Northern Group of the Soviet Army. Young people looking for freedom find it in music and drugs. He soon comes to pay a high price for the loss of his loved ones, his health and his life. His girlfriend Grażyna, daughter of a local officer of the Citizen's Militia, with whom he participates in drug meetings, leaves him despite the fact that they are expecting a child. Neither his stay in prison, nor his suicide attempts, nor his arguments with his father lead to a decision to quit. Only the sight of Andrzej's dead friend in hospital, who has overdosed on heroin, brings about a change in him. Persuaded by a nurse, Ewa, the protagonist meets Marek Kotański, a psychologist, therapist and founder of the addiction therapy centre Monar. He undertakes a difficult healing process, sometimes experiencing failure. However, an awareness of his early sporting interests returns, with success in gymnastics. He begins training – running, swimming and cycling. His health improves. He starts dating Eve, and on one of their first dates they go on a tango lesson. He works with therapists and coaches, who recognise his sporting potential. He is successful in the then fledgling Polish triathlon. Eventually, he competes in the "death run" in Huntsville, Alabama, USA. He received the title of champion and set a world record on the Double Ironman distance. 7.6 km swim, 360 km bike and 84 km run with a time of 24 h 47 min. 46 sec.

The historical background of the remaining sports films is contemporary Poland, the period of the first and second decades of this century. There are far fewer references to events of general and national history, but due to the biographical nature of the films *Bokser* and *Nad życie* we can try to point to them, especially the socio–cultural transformations taking place in democratic Poland. The Boxer is based on the biography of kickboxer and boxer Przemysław Saleta. The filmed Przemek chooses a career in the United States, aware of the professional difficulties in his home country. There are no chances for lucrative fights in Poland, and the training conditions also leave a lot to be desired. He emigrates at the insistence of his new sports manager of Polish origin, Gary Michalsky, leaving behind his family, his wife Ewa and their daughter Nicole. Przemek neglects contact with his relatives, becomes a media star, parties, has fleeting affairs and abuses alcohol. Meanwhile, Nicole's health suddenly deteriorates, she suffers from kidney disease, needs regular dialysis, and preferably a transplant. The turning point in the life of a sportsman is the decision to donate his own organ to his daughter. Indeed, Przemysław Saleta undergoes such an operation in

December 2007. Unfortunately, it ends with respiratory failure and internal bleeding of the patient. Doctors manage to restore his health and before Christmas he is discharged home.

Nad życie – is a memory of Agata Mróz–Olszewska. The young and attractive volleyball player is more and more successful. In 2005 she is the gold medallist of the European Championships. With BKS Stal Bielsko–Biała he holds the Polish championship in 2004 and the Polish cup twice, in 2004 and 2006. With Gruppo Murcia 2002 she achieves the Spanish championship and cup in 2007. In 2005 she takes part in a photo shoot in the illustrated men's magazine "CKM". She enjoys life, her femininity, her sporting successes, but she is aware of a progressive disease, myelodysplasia of the bone marrow. She abandons her career in 2007. She falls happily in love with Jack and they marry in June 2007. In April 2008 their daughter Liliana is born, although doctors strongly advised against pregnancy. In May 2008 she undergoes a bone marrow transplant. Unfortunately the operation was unsuccessful. Agata dies in June 2008 leaving behind a husband and daughter.

Unlike the above–mentioned films, *Underdog* is not based on a biography of an athlete, although the makers point to inspiration from real events. Borys "Kosa" Kosinski is a mixed martial arts – MMA fighter. He wins a duel with Deni Takaev, but a doping control reveals irregularities. He is disqualified and loses the title. He struggles with loneliness and, above all, with the chronic effects of his previous injuries. He abuses painkillers and alcohol. He works in a welding workshop in a small town. After hours, he works as a security guard at a club. He adopts a stray dog that needs medical attention. This brings him into contact with his classmate Nina, a vet. A feeling develops between them. What he doesn't know is that Sonia, who supplies him with painkillers stolen from the clinic, is her daughter. Meanwhile, Deni, the old rival, wants to start fighting again and Boris begins gruelling training. Preparations for the duel are complicated by the kidnapping of Sonya by the Russian mafia, her behaviour and trade in anaesthetics upsetting the balance of the local underworld. Pushkin, mafia boss, sets a condition for her release, Boris must submit to a fight in the octagon, otherwise Pushkin would lose a bookmaker's bet. The film is an attempt to show the sports reality of MMA fighters in Poland. The presence of Mamed Khalidov (Deni Takaev), the current – since 2020 – Chechen–origin Polish middleweight champion of Confrontation of Martial Arts, as well as the person of the director himself, Maciej Kawulski, who – as it has already been mentioned – is one of the creators of KSW, the Polish MMA organisation established in 2004, is telling.

Symbolism of existential struggles of athletes

We can also point to the symbolic dimension of the analysed sports films. The existential struggles of athletes are expressed in the language of universal cultural codes, often through the screen presence of specific objects that have a specific meaning. An important role in *Gwiazdy* is played by the knife with which the protagonist wounds his old friend during a football match. Both were unable to attend, remaining in the stands at the Waldstadion in Frankfurt am Main on 3 July 1974, when Poland succumbed to the Federal Republic of Germany – in the so–called match on the water – losing 0:1 in the World Cup. Both were in love with the same woman, which was the root of their conflict. A distinctive knife also appears when the protagonist meets his father after emigrating to Germany. They use it to cut lobster on a camping trip together. A particularly symbolic scene is one from childhood. A functionary of the people's government pierces the hero's ball with this very knife. There is an eagle with a swastika on it, and a red star on the knife. The knife refers to many universal cultural meanings, it indicates male principles of competition, but also faithlessness and betrayal. Here, it is further strengthened by historical symbolism.

Najlepszy also deals with a specific object with its own symbolic dimension. A mirror plays an important role there. The protagonist sees his alter ego in it. This internal double accompanies him during his drug–induced ecstasy. It is he who persuades him to commit suicide twice. There are moments when they look at each other calmly in the addiction treatment centre. However, there is a battle with the mirror image here too. The alter ego presses the protagonist's head against the mirror pane, finally he reaches for a stool and symbolically smashes his fears. However, the nightmare returns. During a terribly gruelling triathlon race, the double emerges from a mirror, both of them are in a surreal space. He angrily kicks the protagonist lying just before the finish line. The final blow and awakening to reality ends this unequal fight. *Child in Time*, a Deep Purple song, echoes throughout the film. Eloquent in it are the words: Sweet child in time, You'll see the line, The line that's drawn between, Good and bad. The mirror seems to represent this very symbolic line between good and bad.

We can point to two important symbolic objects in *Nad życie*: the partition wall in the house and the wedding ring. When the heroine moves in with her husband, she tries to redecorate their common flat. She begins intensive treatment, sports training is out of the question, she tries to

occupy her thoughts with something and manage her time. This wall is pointless, can we knock it down? – asks his husband. The house was built by my great-grandfather," replies the husband, reluctant to her plans. They are expecting a child and the therapy continues. When it becomes clear that the final may come, the husband smashes with a pickaxe the aforementioned wall in their house that is over a hundred years old. Despite this symbolic attempt to overcome difficulties beyond measure, he fails to save his beloved's life. The wedding ring is also a telling symbol. The heroine watches her hands in the sunlight. She hopes that love, marriage and the expectation of a child will make it possible to overcome the deadly disease. In moments of suffering in the hospital room, she touches the ring, searches in it for the power of a marriage vow, a promise to live together in every joy and every suffering.

It is difficult to point to a specific symbolic object in *Bokser*. However, the Christmas Eve scene, already in exile in the United States, is telling. The wife arrives with her daughter at her husband's place. She prepares a traditional dinner, the father and his daughter choose decorations for the Christmas tree. But the tree does not look like a green tree, it is white and pink. His manager comes to see him. Despite his Polish origin, he does not know why the family starts Christmas one day earlier. Christmas, after all, is only tomorrow,' he says. He tries to hum a carol, but he cannot remember the melody of *Silent Night*. He sits down at the table, nonchalantly takes the wafer and dips it in another of the dishes. They discuss a new fight, joke about the last party, about the women they picked up that day. Christmas Eve turns into a professional and social gathering. This irritates the hero's wife. In a symbolic dimension, the scene is an expression of the protagonist's confusion, his family life is on the brink, only profits and sporting successes count. One could also say that this is also a crisis of his Polish identity.

Also in *Underdog* we have difficulty in defining the symbolic object. There is, however, the story of a dog taken in on the street. The mongrel has a broken paw. My friend, what is wrong with you? Wolves, not humans – he says to himself. The protagonist takes him to the veterinary surgery and wants to leave him at the door of the garage-like clinic. He is constantly bothered by a terrible pain in his back. Either you take him in or you give him to a shelter," the doctor replies to his laconic question: what then? The protagonist takes care of him and starts a romance with the vet. When the date of the fight approaches and problems with the mafia begin, he finds his dog hanging from a tree. The symbolic play on words seems important. Underdog in English slang means a potential loser in betting. A player on whom nobody is betting, who cannot hope to win. The dog, however, is a symbol of loyalty, faithfulness and readiness to fight. The protagonist's suffering overwhelms him to the extent that he does not want the proximity of another human being, or even an animal. But then a transformation takes place in him, even the final surrender of the fight in the octagon turns out to be a victory. He symbolically ceases to be an underdog.

Moral dilemmas of sportsmen

The heroes of the analysed sports films experience many difficulties in life. They struggle with their own weaknesses, addiction, illness. They have to make many choices, including moral ones. Jan faces a dilemma of love and national identity in *Gwiazdy*. He cannot accept that his closest friend is taking the woman of his life away from him. However, she is his new sister. The feeling never dies, but love between the lovers is impossible, unacceptable in the social reality of those times, although there is no biological kinship between them. The main dilemma concerns the athlete's origin. He considers himself Polish, but repeatedly experiences humiliation because of his father's German nationality. His emigration to Germany and attempt to continue his football career in a new land ends in failure. In turn, his return to Poland is associated with the stigmatisation of the sporting environment and political power. Although he changes his name and surname to Polish, he is still accused of belonging to the nation of the former occupant. Only the police officer questioning him at the German police station seems to understand his dilemma. He also has Polish origins, but has chosen to live and serve in exile.

Jerzy experiences the moral hell of drug addiction in *Najlepszy*. He loses his girlfriend and the possibility of contact with their child, his friend dies of an overdose, he destroys his relationship with his parents and his own health. Only difficult therapy and the love of a new woman restores his faith that he can still achieve something, that the sport he once practiced can be a form of returning to humanity. Jerzy seems to have overcome his problem and made the right choice, so it is difficult to speak of a moral dilemma. But his decision turns out to be insufficient; his addiction problem has profoundly changed his psyche and his physical condition. During one of his nightly cycling training sessions, he has a car accident and ends up in hospital. Due to a doctor's

mistake he is given strong painkillers which, as an addict, he should never have received. His body and mind go into shock and his addiction kicks in. He resumes his sporting struggle until he manages to free himself from his fear in the final scene of a gruelling run. He is consistent in his choice, which allows him to achieve a moral victory.

We are faced with another moral dilemma in *Nad życie*. Agata realises the seriousness of her condition. She gives up sport and undergoes treatment. When she becomes pregnant with Jacek, the doctors strongly advise against supporting her. She wants to give birth to the child, despite the risk to her own health. She is ready for complicated and painful therapy. Her marital love and her desire for the birth of her daughter gives her strength in her struggle. There is no doubt that she is doing the right thing. She makes a dramatic choice by sacrificing her own life, against medical logic and at first even against the will of her husband. Her moral choice has a heroic dimension, even though it is not directly connected to the sporting struggles, it shows in a special way the values which guide Agata's life. Love above all else.

Przemek in *Bokser* faces a choice: a career abroad or family life in Poland? It seems that he will manage to reconcile the separation from his loved ones, thanks to training and fights in exile he will be able to earn a decent living, maintain the house, provide adequate conditions for the family. However, he quickly succumbs to the moral freedom of the Western sports environment. Family values are not particularly respected here, professional success comes first – at any price. Przemek succumbs to the influence of his manager, moves around the world of television celebrities, and changes partners. However, he cannot fully come to terms with his own decision, with his sense of guilt. When Nicole needs a kidney, she undergoes a transplant operation. Although in this way she wants to pay for her moral mistake.

Boris' moral dilemma in *Underdog* is particularly related to sport. After allegations of doping and undermining a fight he won, he quits MMA. He is a manual worker, a security guard, abuses painkillers and alcohol, leads a lonely life, incapable of loving another person or even caring for a dog. The new love of a woman and the support of his disabled brother lead him to decide to resume training. He is also persuaded to do so by a former rival who sees in him a special sporting talent. Boris overcomes his physical and mental limitations and seems to come to terms with his sense of life's loss. However, there comes a new moral dilemma. Fight the fight honestly or give it up to save the daughter of his beloved who has been kidnapped by the mafia? He decides to do the latter, although it is not sporting behaviour, but a sense of higher necessity proves stronger. His choice is not understood by his rival in the octagon. The fighters decide to fight once more, this time without the presence of cameras and the public, in the training room. Boris is a double moral victor. He wins the return of his passion for sport and the love of those close to him. He earns the respect of his opponents, even the mafia.

5. Conclusion

The analysed sports feature films portray sports rivalry less and focus the audience's attention more on the existential and moral choices of the protagonists. Athletes are portrayed as struggling with family problems, addictions, illness or national origin, thus becoming closer to us as an audience. The use of the intimist perspective in film and media analysis proved to be a correct methodological assumption and allowed us to notice this way of constructing the film image of heroes in contemporary Polish sports cinematography.

We have also noticed the significant importance of the historical context of the presented images of athletes. The films indirectly point to the various political and social conditions of Polish sport, both in the period of the People's Republic of Poland and the contemporary Republic of Poland. However, we notice not only important geopolitical motifs (Germany, Russia), but, above all, connections between personal history and national and universal history. In the images relating to contemporary Poland, socio-economic problems concerning work, health care, social status are presented above all.

In accordance with the methodological assumption, we may also point to the symbolic layer of the analysed film images of athletes. Their struggles are presented through the use of specific symbolic objects, such as a knife, a mirror, or references to the cultural symbolism of animals – a dog. This allows for highlighting the universality of the athletes' existential and moral experience, thus deepening the intimacy of the characters and the commonality of experience with the viewer.

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