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## Ageism in Sports as a Cinematic Motif Based on Films by Charles Stone III

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### Abstract

The issue of old age in sports is rarely tackled by film directors, as one would be hard-pressed to see this juxtaposition as culturally justified. However, two films directed by Charles Stone III – *Mr. 3000* (2004) and *Uncle Drew* (2018) – both clearly focus on these issues, addressing the issue of ageism in sports, where an old person has to be excluded from participating in a competitions, as shown by the main message of both of the analysed films. The study was conducted on the basis of qualitative analysis of films as media messages, focusing on three levels of problems – historical and social, semiotic, as well as ethical. The author sought answers to a set of questions, including the historical and social context of the phenomenon of ageism in sports as depicted in the analysed films directed by Charles Stone III? In what manner is the issue of ageism framed in a symbolic way that reveals the myths and ideologies regarding perceptions of youth and sports, which prevail in the American society? In the course of the study, the author managed to challenge the cultural convention of the opposition of youth and old age by pointing to the psychological, rather than just physical, basis for discovering one's identity as a senior citizen.

**Keywords:** ageism, analysis of films as media messages, American sports feature film, sports ethics, Charles Stone III

### 1. Introduction

Physical activity and competition are the two foundations of sports, which gave rise to a common and widespread association with physical and mental effort, the desire to perform better, achieve increasingly better results and surpassing one's own weakness by competing with others. Due to the above, sports is widely seen as the domain of young people, as well as a form of self-growth, a way to improve one's own character by means of physical exertion. Various sports-themed audio-visual materials reveal our desire to achieve physical perfection, to be visually attractive, to have a well-looking body. While athletic lifestyles are becoming increasingly popular as a way to live among young people, which can be seen particularly well due to the growing popularity of fitness trends, in the case of the elderly population, we might be dealing with discrimination (Jenkin et al., 2017; Jenkin et al., 2018; Jin, Harvey, 2020).

One may wonder about the place of middle-aged populace, as well as the elderly in contemporary sports. Following the conclusion of their careers as competitive athletes, many decide to pursue training and coaching as their next professions, becoming mentors and sharing their own experience with young apprentices of a particular sport. However, one group remains, namely those who decide to continue competing, as well as those who due to various setbacks in their lives start their careers a little later than most athletes. They face a variety of issues – not only the lack of respect due to individuals, but sometimes they have to deal with openly manifested

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social exclusion. In subject literature, this issue is referred to as ageism (Chang et al., 2020), and in this paper, it will be considered in relation to sports (Cousins, 2005).

In contemporary cinematography, in particular in motion pictures released in the United States, there are numerous examples of productions addressing the issue of ageing athletes or athletes starting their careers at an older age, including *The Natural* (1984), directed by Barry Levinson, *The Rookie* (2002) by John Lee Hancock, *Rocky Balboa* (2006) by Sylvester Stallone (Schnieder, 2014), as well as *The Wrestler* (2008) by Darren Aronofsky (Carlin, Cole, 2011). One could also mention motion pictures concerning the functioning of older people in sports organisations, such as *Trouble with the Curve* (2012) by Robert Lorenz. Indirectly, they reveal the stereotypes concerning the functioning of older people, which are still pertinent in the American society, focusing on the prevailing cult of youth and success. However, the author was primarily interested in films that directly address the issue of ageism in sports.

## 2. Materials and methods

The works by Charles Stone III, American film director and advertising producer, author of the famous *Whassup?* campaign advertising Budweiser beer (Watts, Orbe, 2002) is unique in this regard. The subject of the media analysis undertaken in this paper will be two of his sports comedies: *Mr. 3000* (2004) and *Uncle Drew* (2018) which constitute the body of source material for the study.

The author used the methodology of analysing films as media messages, developed by Grzegorz Łęcicki (Łęcicki, 2017), which takes into account three key research areas – historical, semiotic, and ethical. The following study questions were formulated: 1) What is the historical and social context of the phenomenon of ageism in sports as depicted in the analysed films directed by Charles Stone III? 2) In what manner is the issue of ageism framed in a symbolic way that reveals the myths and ideologies regarding perceptions of youth and sports, which prevail in the American society? 3) What is the outcome of the ethical evaluation of ageism in sports and in what way is it expressed in the analysed motion pictures – *Mr. 3000* and *Uncle Drew*?

## 3. Discussion

In the research on contemporary ageism we can point to both scientific projects on the occurrence of this phenomenon in sports, and the analysis of film representations of the problem of age discrimination. As for the first category, these include research on perceptions of ageing and manifestations of ageism as factors limiting physical activity for individuals in later stages of life. People who have been discriminated against emphasise in the qualitative interviews that this type of exclusion has a clear negative impact on them and makes it difficult to stay mentally and physically fit. However, such individuals often feel more motivated to engage in sports, contrary to prevailing stereotypes (Massie, Meisner, 2019). Another qualitative study identified the main motives for older men's participation in sports, both connected to well-being, as well as physical health. However, experienced difficulties resulting from declining body function and the social realities of ageing have also been distinguished (Hurd Clarke et al., 2020). Research also points to the need for the dissemination of more gender- and age-open categories of sports, which would promote greater social inclusion and eliminate discriminatory phenomena (Martínková, 2020). Analyses are also undertaken on the discourse of elderly athletes. Narratives about ageing are often negative, but the growing number of older adults participating in sports challenge these assumptions. Research shows how older athletes transcend their own physical limitations and challenge dominant discourses about ageing and managing the risk of pain and injury by actively participating in sports (Bowness, 2020).

The second category in the academic discourse on ageism concerns its cinematic representations. The analyses concern the image and social role of women in later life as presented in selected feature films and television series. An example of this is the study of the four-episode drama series *Olive Kitteridge*, directed by Lisa Cholodnyko in 2014, starring Frances McDormand as an ageing high school teacher. The study included not only film studies analysis, but also the social context of film production and reception (Bernárdez-Rodal, Menéndez-Menéndez, 2021). Other analyses deal with the problem of sexual violence against the elderly portrayed in films, exemplified by the South Korean picture *An Old Lady*, directed by Lim Sun-ae (2020), based on the story of a 69-year-old woman raped by her physical therapist. The study highlighted the educational dimension of the film, especially for social workers caring for the elderly and the

possible pathological phenomena associated with this (Park, 2021). Contemporary research on ageism in audio-visual culture also highlights the need to develop a new methodology that broadly covers the problem of depicting masculinity and femininity at different stages of life. It points to the application of the feminist studies tradition in this area, the need to develop a new way of analysing texts, images, discourses, and communicative experiences (Gutierrez et al., 2021). Other times, the importance of queer theory is pointed out as a research tool for ageist assumptions about the life course, primarily enabling the analysis of non-heteronormative representations of ageing (Hess, 2021). One could also point to research on the depiction of elderly sexuality in contemporary comedies using the method of critical discourse analysis. Researchers point out that cinema has ignored the topic of sexual needs of the elderly until recently, avoiding audio-visual representations of intimate contacts, especially non-heteronormative ones (Gatling et al., 2017). Finally, one can go to the analyses of the ways in which the elderly are represented in animated films, targeted, by definition, at the youngest viewers. The negative connotations of old age in Disney productions continue to prevail, with even a slight increase in the representation of older adults portrayed as villains (Zurcher, Robinson, 2018). Children are particularly sensitive to the images conveyed by the media, and animated films represent privileged content for this group, which means that they can have a strong impact on the way they understand the world. Hence, it seems necessary both to develop adequate methods of film studies analysis (Nunes, Antunes, 2019) and social control of manifestations of discrimination in audio-visual productions, as well as educational and film activities in this regard.

#### 4. Results

##### *The historical and social context of the films Mr. 3000 and Uncle Drew*

By analysing selected films by Charles Stone III, one can notice the presence of real historical figures, actual sports events, television personalities, as well as learn indirectly about American society, its ideologies and social stereotypes. The viewer is also dealing with the history of sports and its prevalence in American culture and media.

The very title of the first of the analysed films – *Mr. 3000* – points to the cult of the player, a major trend in American baseball. The batter who scores 3,000 hits in his Major League Baseball (MLB) career deserves a place in the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum, in Cooperstown, New York. The main protagonist – Stan Ross (a fictional character, played by Bernie Mac), playing for the real-life Milwaukee Brewers club, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin seems to meet these conditions. He has achieved the success he dreamed of and is now able to focus on business. He runs a 3000-themed mall, offering Chinese food, pagers – the use of the technology itself carries some ageist overtones – hairstyles, etc. However, a mistake in the sport's almanacs results in the former athlete having to return to the pitch at the age of 47, due to scoring only 2997 hits. His negative character traits, selfishness, lack of teamwork skills, as well as poor attitude towards women and friends are additional obstacles to his goal. Most notably, his former relationship with Maureen "Mo" Simmons (played by Angela Bassett), a sports commentator for ESPN – an actual and well-established American sports television station, and his friendship with Anthony (played by Michael Rispoli), whom he calls "Boca" – after the actual Boca Raton resort in the state of Florida, popular among retirees and pensioners. Stan Ross learns of the error after his official reception at the stadium, during which his number as a player (here 21) was reserved, also an acknowledgement of the historical traditions of American baseball. The gala features – despite being fictional and held solely for the purposes of the comedy narrative – real-life players who used to play in American MLB, including Robin Yount, Cecil Cooper, and Paul Molitor. Sports TV show hosts, including *The Best Damn Sports Show Period* (Tom Arnold) and popular satirical shows like *The Tonight Show* (Jay Leno) also exist in real life. In the plot of *Mr. 3000*, comedy and drama of a former athlete clashes with the real American media-marketing context, with the guiding principle that after a sports career comes time for business, there is no room for failure, and certainly not for a return to active sports.

A very similar historical and social context, as well as the media and marketing contexts, can be seen in *Uncle Drew*. The main character is played by Kyrie Irving, an Australian National Basketball Association (NBA) player, who was characterised as older for the film. However, the context for the making of this film, namely the Pepsi Max advertising campaign launched in 2012, directed by Charles Stone III, is also important. The campaign featured the same athlete in a similar costume. Right from the beginning of the film, the viewers are introduced to historical

figures, prominent players of the American NBA. They tell the story of the legendary Uncle Drew, an athlete who made dunks while holding a ham and cheese sandwich in his other hand. We see Pee Wee Kirkland, Rick Barry, Jamal Murray, Dikembe Mutombo and Steve Nash, among others. Uncle Drew's co-stars, the old men hidden under make-up, are established NBA players, in order of appearance: Chris Webber as "Preacher", leading The Calm Before the Storm Christian community with his wife Betty Lou (Lisa Leslie, a former American basketball player), Reggie Miller as diagnosed blind Wilbur "Lights" Wallace, Nate Robinson as the catatonic schizophrenic patient nicknamed "Boots," taken from a retirement home with the consent of his granddaughter (Maya, played by Erica Ash), and finally Shaquille O'Neal as "Big Fella," martial arts school leader who has a love affair with Drew from years ago. The historical event of the film – and the main plot point – is the basketball tournament held at Rucker Park, in Manhattan, New York, played since the 1950s. This is where Uncle Drew started out – however, this time it is also about \$100,000, not just sports and friendship values. By analysing these historical and social references, however, the author aims to establish the symbolic framing of dramatic situations in Charles Stone III's films, including those concerning ageism and his ethical interpretations as a director.

*The symbolism of sports ageism in the analysed films by Charles Stone III*

An important research problem is to determine in what way is the athletes' old age is portrayed in *Mr. 3000* and *Uncle Drew*, primarily what are the cultural semiotics of these representations. One could point to several episodes, issues and visual presentations of the issue at hand. First of all, it is worth looking for signs of discrimination due to age in the film analysis.

*Mr. 3000* – Stan Ross – when he learns of an error in the almanacs, makes the decision to return to the pitch. He begins an internal dialogue with himself and realizes that it may be too much effort for him, as evidenced by his first attempts to work out at the gym, as well as bets about his fitness. At every step, he hears things such as: “take it easy, grandpa, or you'll have a heart attack.” What is particularly painful is not the bickering of younger players – most notably of "T-Rex" Pennebake (played by Brian J. White) – but the statement by Jay Leno: “his baseball card has Latin writing on the back, it's an old print.” When he returns to the team in the locker room he finds a walker for seniors, so he can prop up and keep his balance. It becomes the symbolic topic of the film, used by the end by the athletes rejoicing over the result. At the bar, he hears that he does not have the focus and physical strength any more. Laughing at him, a regular at the bar drops a bottle of beer. “You won't catch it before it falls to the ground, it takes as long to hit the ball. 0.4 seconds.” Ross managed to complete the challenge, but was not fully successful. The viewers see a close-up of a bottle with a slightly damaged bottom. It did not shatter, however, beer was dripping from it through the crack. Symbolic elements in the film also include references to products and television commercials for seniors, most notably Viagra – Stan Ross is to be the face of the campaign, though he expected to star in Adidas advertisement. We watch the transformation of the main protagonist, but we do not see his physical struggle to prove to himself and others that he is the best, but his efforts to come to terms with his own weaknesses – his “self-absorption”, as his friend Boca puts it, and the chance lost years ago for a relationship with Mo. Coming to terms with his own shortcomings, he tries to give advice to T-Rex, consequently puts the common good before his personal one, appreciates the members of the team – with a particularly amazing Gus Panas played by the excellent Paul Sorvino, silently judging him, and pursues the love of the woman he loves more than his own aspirations to prove that he is Mr. 3000. Eventually, he becomes Mr. 2999, accepting his weaknesses and quietly tending to his ice cream food truck – a business that reminds him of the meaning of baseball, the tune that accompanied his childhood games.

*Uncle Drew* is – in semiotic and genological terms - a film fairy tale. The viewer realises that the elderly people depicted in it are actual athletes hidden behind make-up and costume, in particular Shaquille O'Neal, the NBA star. It would be hard to believe that the blind Lights can hit the basket and Boots, who is unable to get out of his wheelchair, can make dunks efficiently. The subversion of expectations and the perception of old age and youth is symbolic and constitutes a part of a semiotic cultural discussion about puer-senex, a boy who has the consciousness of a mature man. Here we are dealing with an additional symbolic aspect – old people who have young bodies, and their consciousness is shaped not by physical fitness but by mental conditioning, and the characters wear the masks. There are also symbolic objects in the film, with the aforementioned walker and a comment: “go ahead girls!” However, it is important to point out Drew's gifts to friends. The glasses that make Lights see and hit the basket, boots for Boots, who never changed them, that make him stand up. There is also a gift for Big Fella, a figurine – a prize from a

basketball tournament, trampled by the recipient. They loved the same woman, the night before the finals years ago Drew slept with Big Fella's girlfriend, they pulled out of the competition after the event. Nevertheless, Big Fella married his girl – after many years, she died due to illness. The two reconciled only by visiting the gravestone of their mutual sweetheart. “I need you for assists,” Big Fella tells Drew. They reconcile – their love of basketball is a shared passion.

Semiotically analysing the two films – *Mr. 3000* and *Uncle Drew*, one can see common rules concerning old age and ageism. The American culture indeed seems to be geared towards success, something that is available to the young and fit. However, it is Dax Winslow (Lil Rel Howery), the coach of the senior team depicted in *Uncle Drew* who contradicts this attitude. He is still living with complexes stemming from a lost match with his rival Mookie Bass (played by Nick Kroll), who took everything from him – his team and girlfriend. T-Rex from *Mr. 3000*, on the other hand, repeats Stan Ross' mistakes. Dealing with his own shortcomings, Stan can only give him a wise message – that it is not worth it, because it is the team that counts. but he has a nice ride. Through the aforementioned symbolic depictions of the problem of old age and ageism, Charles Stone III makes his own interpretation of these themes, focusing on ethics.

#### *A director's ethical assessment of ageism in sports*

In seeking this ethical evaluation of the director, we will focus on two important statements. It is important to note that there is no blunt condemnation of ageism in these films, but criticism of discrimination against ageing athletes is clearly expressed. The author will focus on two such statements that contain important ethical messages.

At the end of his story about being *Mr. 3000*, Stan Ross says: “It is about coming to terms with yourself. We are getting old and we should get over it. It worked for me, I stopped being an athlete, but I did not disappear (here we see an ice cream truck with Mr. 2999 on it and with the protagonist's favourite tune) – you've probably seen my commercial (a picture of a sofa with Mo lying on it in lingerie, followed by a slogan: Viagra, the best is yet to come.” Stan Ross is trying to become an athlete once again. He is trying to come to terms with everything, he wants to fix his errors of selfishness – he even took the 3000th ball from a child in the audience in the last game of his career. He was already creating his legend before he was recognised in the hall of fame. As it turns out, he is not who he says he is and what he was building his personal brand on. This touches upon an important ethical issue – the public image of a person and the facts that are supposed to underpin that image. It is ethically telling that a difference of only three points (rather than 50 or 100) makes all the difference in the character's story. One could build an image of a marketable athlete, create an almost perfect business project on a baseless story, where details are everything that matters. Charles Stone III's ethical evaluation also leads us toward the notion of internal agreement, the pursuit of proper relationships with oneself and others. In this pursuit, the others, the community and values become crucial. Stan Ross feels sadness watching critical coverage of himself in the TV. He feels the desire to be included in the community. Mo and Boca are close, but he needs to stop thinking in terms of self and start seeing the needs of others to be able to focus on the common good. It could be said that – as Charles Stone III intended – at the end, Ross not only accepts the one missing point, but he also receives added value. The things that were so much criticised about his age, what he denied in conversations with himself, becomes an asset. By coming to terms, he also gains back his intimacy and physical aspect.

In the story of *Uncle Drew*, the viewers see the following ethical belief, voiced by Boots, who was unable to get up from his wheelchair. When Big Fella ends up in the hospital after a heart attack – another semiotic reference to old age discovered, he says: “you don't stop playing because you're old; you're old because you stop playing.” It is worthwhile to reflect on this quote, which is an important statement regarding ageism in sports. It challenges different audiences and confronts the viewers with questions about age. Ethically, one may have doubts about the onset of old age, as it is difficult to determine when this period starts. Boots hints that this is when values (including sports) no longer matter. “What matters is the love of the game”, – this is mentioned in another conversation between Drew and Dax, when they acknowledge the sanctity of basketball, rather than focusing on winning money in the competition. This is because Uncle did not know about the expected prize, he participated only because of sports and camaraderie. The ethical sports teaching that follows these two implications boils down to the notion of competition. They are competing about their own sense of time, and the game is the internal struggle for values. The problem of ageism begins with one's own tacit acceptance of becoming infirm. Meanwhile, old age is an opportunity to share one's philosophy of life or sport with



younger people, to pass on one's own cultural experience as well – this is well-illustrated by the dispute over music between Drew and Dax in the van, in particular the playback technology (an eight-track cassette player) and remix culture (“rap-hip-hops”). Even in this dispute, the characters eventually find a common cultural denominator.

## 5. Conclusion

The above analysis of Charles Stone III's films – *Mr. 3000* and *Uncle Drew* reveals the stereotypes present in American culture regarding the perception of youth, especially in relation to sports.

In examining the above fictional film depictions, the author carried out a historical analysis, pointing to real-life athletes, television shows, as well as sporting events. The socio-historical context of Stone's films reveals the essential marketing and media principles guiding the world of contemporary sports, most notably undermining its axiological character, one's own pursuit of values and remaining faithful to one's ideals.

Semiotic analysis revealed this phenomenon in relation to ageism, the manifestation of discrimination against people based on old age. It is difficult to find a place for the elderly or seniors in today's marketing and media-oriented sports world. Stone III performs a semiotic transposition by turning young athletes into ailing old men, who are looking forward to a retirement in a retirement home or watching TV in their armchairs. At the same time, they are formulating an important message for a younger audiences. Everybody faces the time, where they have to make peace with physical ailments in favour of developing other skills, like mentorship.

Finally, the author tried to find ethical messages about sport and old age in the analysed films. Selected statements by the characters lead us towards the notion of coming to terms with one's age, health, and fitness. However, the answers to these questions depend on individual effort, a personal struggle with one's own character. Above all, Stone III highlights the essence of competition based on one's love of the game and teamwork, while opposing individualism. He also points out that ageism stems out of young people's fear of losing their vitality – he sees the fear of time in their aggressive statements. By contrasting their discriminatory behaviour with the attitude of mature athletes, he encourages a rediscovery of the essence of sport based on timeless foundations.

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