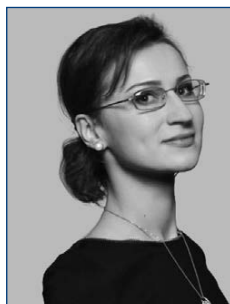




The role of sport in world cinema as a socio-political tool

UDC 32.019.5 316.4



PhD, Associate Professor **E.Yu. Kolobova**¹

Dr. Sc.Soc. **M.V. Rubtsova**²

PhD, Associate Professor **V.G. Pavenkov**³

¹St.Petersburg State University of Film and Television, Saint Petersburg

²Saint-Petersburg State University, Saint Petersburg

³Admiral Makarov State University of Maritime and Inland Shipping, Saint Petersburg

Corresponding author: jenechos@list.ru

Received by the editorial office on 07.06.2025

Abstract

Objective of the study is to determine the significance of sport at the international level, including its growing importance and influence on media societies as a political tool.

Methods and structure of the study. Based on an analysis of literary and statistical international databases, a comparative analysis was conducted, combining quantitative and qualitative methods to study the place of sport in European and Russian cinema and its connection with broader political and ideological messages. Media texts from national federal media served as the empirical basis.

Results and conclusions. The theme of sport in cinema emerged with the creation of documentary filmmaking and the development of scientific and technological progress, sport and culture. The sports genre has become a leading genre in world cinema, coexisting with other film genres. Sports films reflect social changes, public demands and the culture of individual nations.

In each country, a particular sport dominated at a certain period of time, and the Olympic Games were the apogee of the politicization of international sporting competitions, which left its mark on the content of films. Films on this subject are a tool for competition between countries, not only at the Olympic Games, but also in the cinema space, based on the number of films produced and their influence on European society, as confirmed by research into European and Russian sports cinema.

The film projects themselves are aimed at generating audience interest in leading a healthy lifestyle and participating in amateur sports. At the federal level, sports films play another important role in articulating and affirming existing power structures and ideological hegemony in Russian society, especially during a particularly difficult period of national and international instability and controversy.

Keywords: *sport and physical education, cinema, international level, socio-political role.*

Introduction. Culture and social norms are reflected in cinema. Cultural studies scholars note that cinema acts as a mediator in shaping public opinion and establishing hegemonic ideologies through the transmission of socio-cultural norms. The state, in turn, is interested in the development of the film industry, since film distribution in the international media environment shapes the image of the country and conveys its values.

The sports genre in cinema plays an important role in international competition at the economic, cultural, sporting and personal levels. In world cinema, there is a battle for box office takings between national films and Hollywood, which has played a central role in defining and popularizing the genre. Thus, the theme of sport became popular around the world, and in 2008,

in a special television broadcast on the American channel CBS, the American Film Institute recognized that the sports genre was the leading genre in American cinema.

Objective of the study is to determine the significance of sport at the international level, including its growing importance and influence on media societies as a political tool.

Methods and structure of the study. The article analyzed works related to the analysis of specific films about the history of sport (including basketball) in Europe and internationally [3, 4], as well as the portrayal of sport in cinema and other visual media [1, 7]. For example, a 1960s study by historian John B. Kuyper [6] on American films about the Civil War noted that films made during a particular decade or year can be

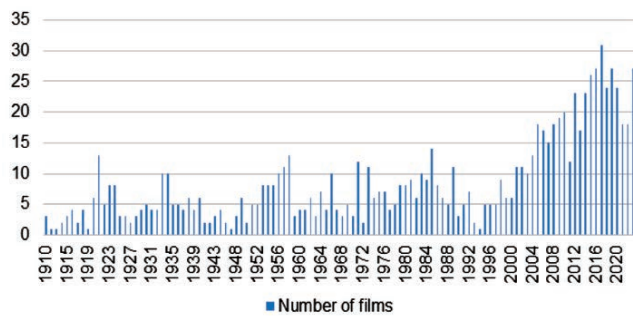


Fig. 1. Diagram showing European sports film production between 1910 and 2022.

an indicator of the opinions, attitudes, and concepts of both filmmakers and viewers of that period.

In-depth quantitative studies in the American context were conducted by a number of foreign scholars, who identified 590 American films from that period and examined various obvious trends, including the social and cultural significance of sport and its evolution.

In the process of analyzing sports in European films, difficulties arose with the statistical database. For example, existing databases at the European level, such as The European Film Directory and the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), include only feature-length films, while short films and documentaries about sports are absent. In addition, there are linguistic problems in classifying films as sports films, given the multi-genre nature of cinema. The sample includes films in which sport is the key theme of the plot.

Results of the study and discussion. The pinnacle of the politicization of international sporting competitions was reached with the Olympic Games, which more often than not serve as an arena for political struggle and a tool for propaganda and the promotion of ideologies. Over time, issues of physical culture and national achievements began to feature on the agenda of the media and cinema, and interest in sport began to emerge at the very beginning of the 20th century.

The popularization of artistic cinema and the development of scientific and technological progress contributed to the development of a variety of sports films. Thus, from documentary films during World War II for propaganda purposes (e.g., *Olympia* (1938)) to dramatic films based on real events (e.g., *Champion* (1949)), where sport served as a backdrop for the dramatic plot to the main sporting theme of the film. Later, sports-themed films began to receive Oscars. For example, the film *Rocky* showed that sports films can be not only entertaining, but also artistically significant.

According to the results of an analysis of films from

a sample of 37 European countries, where the main theme was sports, there has been an increase in the production of such films from 1910 to 2023 (Fig. 1). A distinctive feature of the study of the sports genre was the problem of selecting films, as there are many films with similar themes touching on sports, so the study is based on feature-length films that were shown in cinemas and whose main storyline is devoted to sports.

Each country has its own popular sports at a given time, which are reflected in feature films. Based on research, European films over the past 113 years reflect a number of characteristics. More than 25% of films are devoted to football as a key sport, followed by boxing, horse racing and athletics.

In addition, different sports were popular at different times and in different countries, reflecting social changes and public preferences. For example, in the UK, horse racing is preferred, so films about this sport accounted for only 9% of the total.

However, in the 1920s, about 50% of all films were dedicated to horse racing, as it was positioned as an important interwar sport in Britain [5]. The most active countries in terms of film production or co-production of sports films are: the United Kingdom, Germany, France, the Soviet Union (later the Russian Federation), Spain and Italy.

At the federal level, sport acts as a political tool in the strategy to promote nationalism, and Soviet references to sporting achievements serve as a model of heritage. The Russian Federation has its own sporting heroes who have been featured in films. For example, the 2013 film *Legend No. 17*, about the rise to fame of legendary Soviet ice hockey player Valery Kharlamov, was also a commercial success.

Thus, cinema contributes to raising the country's profile on the international stage, playing an important role in the cultural and economic life of the country.

Even a single film can reflect the political situation and public opinion at the national and international levels, highlighting the country's importance through its sporting history.

Conclusions. Sports films are not only entertainment, but also an important political tool for shaping national identity. Over time, sports films have transformed, reflecting not only changes in cinema itself, but also the evolution of society's perception of sport.

The authors summarized international and, in particular, European research in the field of sport as a film genre and journalistic agenda over a certain



period and found that cinema acts as a projection of a particular nation's perception of sport. Society's view of sport is expressed through cultural creativity – film production. In each country and in each period of time, one or another sport dominated, and sports games served as an instrument of cultural capital in the international arena, where the Olympic Games became the apogee of the politicization of international sports competitions.

Research into the evolution of sports cinema reflects the development of sport in Europe since the beginning of the 20th century, and the methods of presenting film material and the director's vision have shaped the norms, values and understanding of the sports themes presented. Football is the most popular sport represented in European sports cinema. At the same time, certain sports came to the fore in different eras, reflecting larger social changes. With the increase in the production of sports films since the 1970s, the types of sports represented on screen have expanded and there has been a transition to related genres – drama instead of comedy. In terms of national production volumes, the United Kingdom and the Russian Federation have been in the lead since the early 2000s.

Hollywood, in turn, played a central role in defining and popularizing the genre, and the popularity of Hollywood films influenced the perceptions and preferences of viewers who are oriented towards entertain-

ment content. The audience's familiarity with this type of film masterpiece shaped their standards for cinema in European countries.

References

1. Bauer T., de la Croix L, Gerville-Réache H (Eds.). Sport & cinema – la technique à l'épreuve du reel. Limoges: PULIM. 2023. 290 p.
2. Boyle E., Millington B., Vertinsky P. Representing the female pugilist: narratives of race, gender, and disability in million dollar baby. *Sociol Sport J.* 2006. No. 23(2). Pp. 99-116.
3. Graham T., Graham Cody R. Getting open: The unknown story of bill garrett and the integration of college basketball. New York: Atria Books. 2006. 260 p.
4. Hofmann A. (Ed.). Sport in Europe. London: Routledge. 2018. 420 p.
5. Huggins M. Horseracing and the British, 1919–39. Manchester: Manchester University Press. 2003. 210 p.
6. Kuiper J.B. Civil war films: a quantitative description of a genre. *J SocCinematologists.* 1964/1965. No. 4(5). Pp. 81-83.
7. Sudre D. La représentation des adolescentes-dans les films de sport. *Analysed'une image stéréotypéetrégressive des jeunessportives à l'écran. Agora Débats/Jeunesses.* 2022. No. 91. Pp. 37- 51.