

European cinema and the football film

‘Play for the people who’ve accepted you’

Seán Crosson

On the day that the UK officially left the EU (31 January 2020), the Leigh Film Society organised a special screening of *The Keeper* (2018) – the biopic of legendary Manchester City goalkeeper Bert Trautmann – to mark the occasion. As noted by Owen Evans and Graeme Harper:

It wasn’t just the footballer’s symbolism as a figure of international reconciliation that affected the audience in Leigh that night ... That an Anglo-German production should be screened on the very day Britain was leaving the European Union also seemed deeply symbolic.

(2020, pp. 1–2)

The Keeper, in common with a considerable number of contemporary depictions of football on film, is a co-production between several European countries and in its content and thematic concerns, it reflects and responds to broader European anxieties within the period in which the film was made and released. The film also provides an intriguing link to the earliest footage of football on film. While ostensibly set in Lancashire and Manchester, most of *The Keeper*’s filming was actually done in Northern Ireland and Germany. The scenes depicting Manchester City’s home games were shot at The Oval, Belfast club Glentoran’s ground. Recent research suggests that it is at this site in 1897 that the story of football on film began, when footage was shot of an encounter between Glentoran and fellow Belfast-based team Cliftonville, most likely by French cameraman Alexandre Promio, then working for film pioneers Auguste and Louis Lumière.¹ While some 120 years may separate the production of these two films, they are connected by the international genesis of their creation and the interconnected nature of the European experience of football on film, the central focus of this chapter, which has emerged from ongoing research examining the phenomenon of sport cinema in the European context. Sport cinema has been among the most enduring, popular, and critically acclaimed of genres within American cinema; however, limited research has been undertaken as yet of the European experience.

As evident in an ongoing quantitative survey being undertaken as part of this research, football is by far the most commonly featured sport. Indeed, a single

chapter could not possibly account appropriately for the very large number of relevant productions. In the British context alone, Stephen Glynn's comprehensive 2018 study *The British Football Film* identifies over 90 relevant films pointing 'to the importance of football not only in the quotidian rhythms of national life but also, and especially, its immutable place in Britain's social and cultural *imaginary* landscape' (2018, p. 10, emphasis original). Therefore, a brief overview of the historical development of the sub-genre is provided in this chapter in light of the initial findings of the quantitative survey, with particular attention paid to the impact of a number of representative films in a variety of European contexts. This is preceded by a short survey of considerations of European cinema and the sports film genre.

European cinema and the sports film

On 17 June 2008, the American Film Institute (AFI) presented as part of a CBS television special the 'AFIs 10 Top 10', a listing of the ten greatest American films in ten classic film genres (Anonymous 2011). Among the genres chosen was the sports genre, which the AFI defined as involving 'films with protagonists who play athletics or other games of competition' (Anonymous 2008). The inclusion of this genre as among the most important in American film history was recognition of the enduring popularity and considerable critical acclaim accorded to films featuring sport. While the genre is well established in the American context – including such seminal works as *Rocky* (1976), *Raging Bull* (1980), and more recent Academy Award winners *The Blind Side* (2009), *The Fighter* (2010), and *Ford v Ferrari* (2019) – less research has been undertaken of the place of sport within European cinema.

Since the mid-1990s and through the 21st century, there has been an increasing engagement with the concept of European cinema, evident in film studies in a range of publications from Petrie (1992) to the work of Konstantarakos (2000), Wayne (2002), Mazierska and Rascaroli (2003), Forbes and Fowler (2002), Elsaesser (2005), Everett (2005), Galt (2006), Loshitzky (2010), and Harrod, Liz, and Timoshkina (2014) as well as the many academic articles published on the topic (see, for example, Eleftheriotis 2000 or Halle 2006). The concept of a popular European cinema has also attracted increasing research, particularly following the publication of Richard Dyer's and Ginette Vincendeau's influential collection *Popular European Cinema* (1992), which as Tim Bergfelder notes, 'triggered a thriving academic interest in the topic in the 1990s and early 2000s, at least in the Anglophone context' (2014, p. 34), apparent in subsequent studies including Dimitris Eleftheriotis's *Popular Cinemas of Europe: Studies of Texts, Contexts and Frameworks* (2001) and Tytti Soilas's collection *Stellar Encounters: Stardom in Popular European Cinema* (2009). A recurring issue across all of these works is the challenge in defining European cinema given the diverse and distinct cultures (and cinemas) that Europe encompasses, evident in the title of one of Wendy Everett's interventions: 'Dinosaur, Shipwreck or Museum Piece? The Unstable Identity of European Cinema' (2007). Nonetheless, the European

context constitutes an important dimension of film production and reception across the continent, if only in terms of the transnational funding models that now predominate in European film production and the peripatetic and transnational character of the European film festival circuit. In addition, as Everett (2005) remarks in a further study of the topic, the discourse concerning European cinema is vital:

not only because cinema provides us with a vivid illustration of the vulnerability of the national and regional to the relentless dynamic of globalisation specifically, in this case, to the dominant discourse of Hollywood in a way that raises wider issues of European identity, but also because it exploits the fundamental relationship between seeing and understanding, and recognises the centrality of visual images to the formation of identity, whether personal, regional, national or European.

(Everett 2005, p. 8)

As one of the most distinctive and popular features of European culture, sport may offer a further means of defining European cinema today. Europe was a crucial location for the development of modern sport, both in the spirit of the Olympics but also in the first codifications of various sports – including football, cricket, rugby, and tennis – in nineteenth-century Britain and France. Furthermore, sport constitutes a crucial aspect of many European citizens' everyday identities. No matter what aspect of sport citizens may be involved with, it brings an important sense of belonging, a sense of pride, a sense of being more than just an individual lost in daily routines (Bairner and Shirlow 1999, p. 152). Therefore, when depicted in cinema, sport offers a further significant feature in defining a distinctive European film culture.

While underdeveloped, important analyses have been undertaken of individual European sports films as part of this broader engagement with European cinema (see, for example, Boyle and Haynes 2000; King and Leonard 2006; Briley, Schoenecke, and Carmichael 2008; Poulton and Roderick 2009; Ingle and Suter 2013a, 2013b), though there are specific challenges in researching the area on a large scale, including the linguistic variations involved. As is evident in relevant studies to date, most research on European sports films has focused on individual case studies of exemplary films – e.g. *Olympia* (Germany 1938); *Chariots of Fire* (UK 1981); *Les Triplettes de Belleville* (The Triplets of Belleville, France 2003) – or the development of sport cinema within specific national contexts – e.g. Jones's (2005) work on the British sports film; Romaguera and Ramió (2003), Rodríguez Díaz (2010), and Ashton (2013) on the Spanish sports film; Cunningham (2004) and Fodor (2017) on Hungarian football films; and McDougall (2017) on East German football films. Though more narrowly focused, these studies have nonetheless revealed the distinctiveness of sport cinema as it has emerged in the European context. European sport cinema provides a unique historical moving image record of the development of a range of distinctive sporting practices across the continent, from traditional sports like

Basque pelota in Spain, to the evolution of the continent's most popular team sport, association football.

This chapter is an initial attempt to identify some distinctive aspects of the sports film genre as manifested in the European context, with a particular focus on how football has featured. By football, I am of course referring to association football rather than the American (or indeed, Irish or Australian) variety. This distinction is important to make at the outset, as in cinematic terms, American football has featured much more prominently, including in some of the most commercially successful films in the sports cinema genre – e.g. *Any Given Sunday* (1999), *Remember the Titans* (2000), *The Blind Side* (2009). Hollywood's considerable power and influence has been an important factor here, though the nature of association football itself has presented particular challenges to directors despite the fact that this sport may seem on one level to offer an obvious parallel with the feature film; the average length of the feature film and a football match, at 90 minutes, is about the same. However, football is also characterised by often long periods in which very little happens, something conventional narrative film seeks to avoid. As Ian Nathan has noted, 'choreographed soccer looks preposterous and totally unbelievable on screen. It is a sport too sustained and random to hold up to artificiality' (Nathan 2000). Directors have responded to these challenges in a number of ways, including incorporating actual players into their films and basing their productions on actual events or individuals (as is the case with *The Keeper*). These responses have met with limited success and presented further challenges, as discussed later. As a consequence, fiction films featuring football, in common with the sports film genre as a whole, have tended to focus as much on issues off the field as on it.

Sport and film

Modern sport and the cinema both emerged contemporaneously towards the end of the nineteenth century. The first modern Olympic Games were held in Athens in April 1896, only four months after the Lumière brothers gave the first public screening to a paying Paris audience of their new invention, the 'cinématographe'. It is significant that these two pivotal events in modern cultural history occurred in the space of less than half a year. The beginnings of the art form that would eventually become popularly known as 'film', 'the movies', or 'the cinema' is inextricably linked with sport. Indeed, sport, as a widespread cultural practice with a considerable following internationally, had a vital role in popularising the new medium of film, including in the European context (McKernan 1996, p. 109). Among the first programme of Lumière films screened in December 1895 were several that had sporting associations. Furthermore, the website catalogue-lumiere.com includes 62 films featuring sporting activities, including boxing, cycling, horseracing, gymnastics, various martial arts, tennis, wrestling, athletics, skiing, and football, including the early film referred to at the opening of this chapter.

As I have noted previously of the earliest film footage of hurling (Crosson 2019, pp. 31–35), early football footage also indicates the challenges of capturing a team sport such as association football in the early years of cinema, particularly with the rudimentary film camera available to early pioneers, limited with regard to movement and lens possibilities at the time.² The rather unsatisfactory footage speaks to what would be an ongoing challenge for filmmakers wishing to include football in their work (and the often poor reception of these films): the difficulty of credibly and convincingly depicting this sport. As Andrew Sarris has noted, ‘Sports are now. Movies are then. Sports are news. Movies are fables’ (Sarris 1980, p. 50). British director Ken Loach has also commented on this aspect, noting that ‘the real enjoyment of football is to be there’ while for the screenwriter of Loach’s football-themed film *Looking for Eric* (2009), Paul Laverty, ‘A film can never match the excitement of football. Unfortunately we can normally guess in 95% of cases how a film is going to end but the beauty of football is that you just never quite know’.³ If people seek a representation of football (apart from attending a match itself), film cannot hope to match the immediacy and versatility of live television, or the various related live streaming possibilities that the internet age has facilitated. As a consequence, as Glen Jones has noted, the more accomplished films that have featured football have been those that have analysed and looked ‘at issues surrounding soccer’ (Jones 2005, p. 33) rather than being focused primarily on the sport itself or on sporting sequences.

In one of the most persuasive studies of sport cinema, David Rowe (1998) recognised the changing and evolving nature of the genre and argued that ‘to claim that sports films may constitute a genre (perhaps with a range of subgenres) it would be necessary to establish the existence of some shifting yet patterned relationships within or between subject matter, presentation, narrative, and affect’. Taking this as his starting point, Rowe suggests a

common basis to nondocumentary or instruction-based sports films as a genre (or, more cautiously, as a ‘complex of sub genres’), underpinning a panoply of formal, substantive, and stylistic variations: that all films that deal centrally with sports are at some level allegorical, that they address the question of the dual existence of the social and sporting worlds as problematic, and that they are preoccupied with the extent to which (idealized) sports can transcend or are bound by existing (and corrupting) social relations.

(Rowe 1998, pp. 351–352)

My own approach to sport cinema, including depictions of football in fiction film, is indebted to Rowe’s analysis. While we may define a sports film as works in which a sport, sporting event, athlete (and their sport), or follower of sport (and the sport they follow) are prominently featured, and which depend on sport to a significant degree for their plot motivation or resolution, sport is ultimately rarely the central concern of such films. Rather, sport (as well as providing a seductive and popular point of engagement for audiences) performs primarily an

allegorical role in the sports film genre, including within the sub-genre dedicated to depictions of football.

The football film in European cinema: a quantitative survey

In compiling my own database of sport cinema in Europe, the first challenge I encountered was the lack of an entirely comprehensive database of European cinema; those databases that do exist – including the European film directory⁴ – don't currently provide the facility to search by sport or sport genre. While recognising the importance of non-fiction sports films in Europe (both as influential film texts and important historical records of specific sports), due to the sheer number of relevant films involved, I have focused for the purposes of this initial survey on fictional and theatrically released works produced or co-produced by or with a European company that feature sport, sports people, or followers of sport prominently and in which sport is an important aspect of the plot development or motivation. However, the challenge in this exercise was not just deciding what films qualify as sports films (and how we define that term) but equally the linguistic challenges we encounter in attempting to undertake a pan-European study of a popular cinema genre. For the purposes of this initial enquiry, I have begun with perhaps the most well-known and comprehensive database of international cinema, the Internet Movie Database or IMDb.⁵ In deciding to start here, I am entirely conscious of the limitations of this resource, including the gaps that exist regarding international cinema but also the issues with how films are classified there, with not all relevant films categorised with regard to sport. What IMDb does offer, however, is the possibility to identify sport, feature film, and country as categories, allowing us to examine what is classified in this way and then to extrapolate from there. In total I found relevant sports films listed in 32 European countries (including no longer existing states the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and West Germany). While this is an imperfect measure and one that needs to be interrogated at each point, it does nonetheless provide a useful initial resource to undertake a quantitative survey of European sport cinema. As well as giving us an initial understanding of the extent of films that could be classified in this manner within the European context, IMDb can elucidate a number of further useful aspects, including: how many of these films are co-productions between several European (and non-European) countries; and what the trend has been in terms of the increase (or decrease) of the production of sports films over more than 100 years, and the specific sports featured, including the prevalence of depictions of football.

The first striking feature to emerge from the survey is the sheer number of relevant films, even focusing only on theatrically released fiction work – approximately 692 between 1911 and 2018. A further pattern evident from my analysis is the increasing number of sports featured in film from the 1970s onwards, more than doubling from 25 sports up to the 1960s to 58 sports represented by 2018. A further feature evident is the very significant increase in

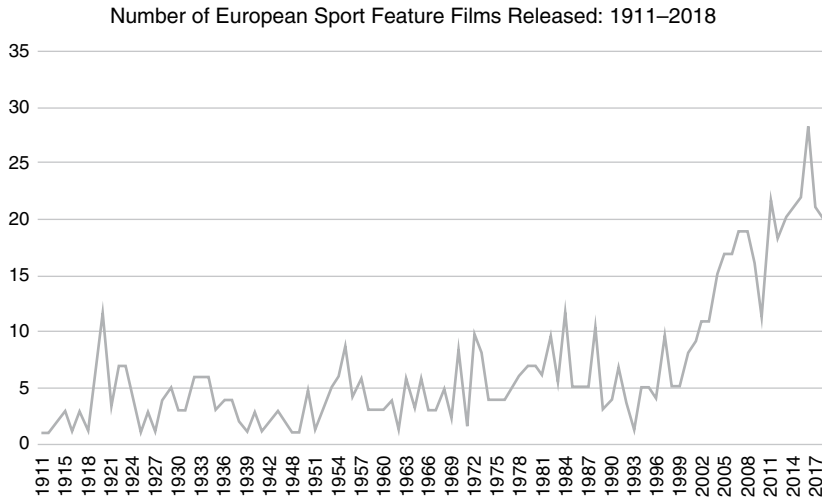


Figure 6.1 Number of European Sport Feature Films Released 1911–2018 Source: IMDb.

production of sports films in Europe over the past 20 years, with over 45% of all films produced in that period (Figure 6.1).

As Figure 6.2 indicates, by far the most prolific country to produce or co-produce sport cinema is the UK, followed by Germany, France, the Soviet Union, Spain, Italy, and Russia. The high number of British produced or co-produced sports films (224) reflects on one level the prominence of sport in the UK (particularly football, evident in the high number of football films produced there). However, the fact that the UK also shares a language and strong cultural ties

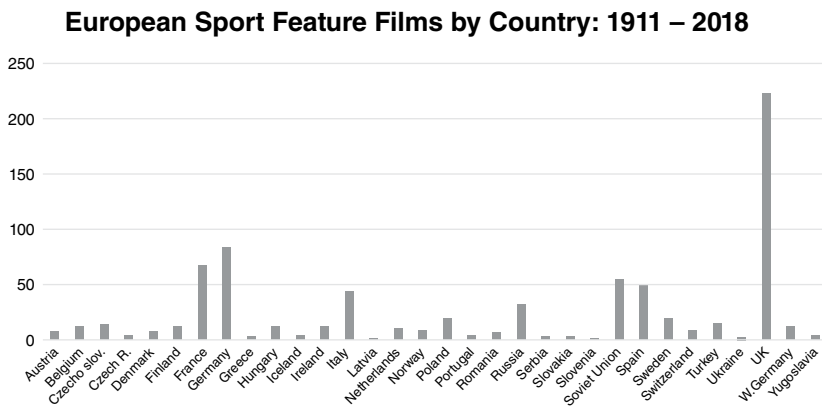


Figure 6.2 European Sport Feature Films by Country: 1911–2018 Source: IMDb.

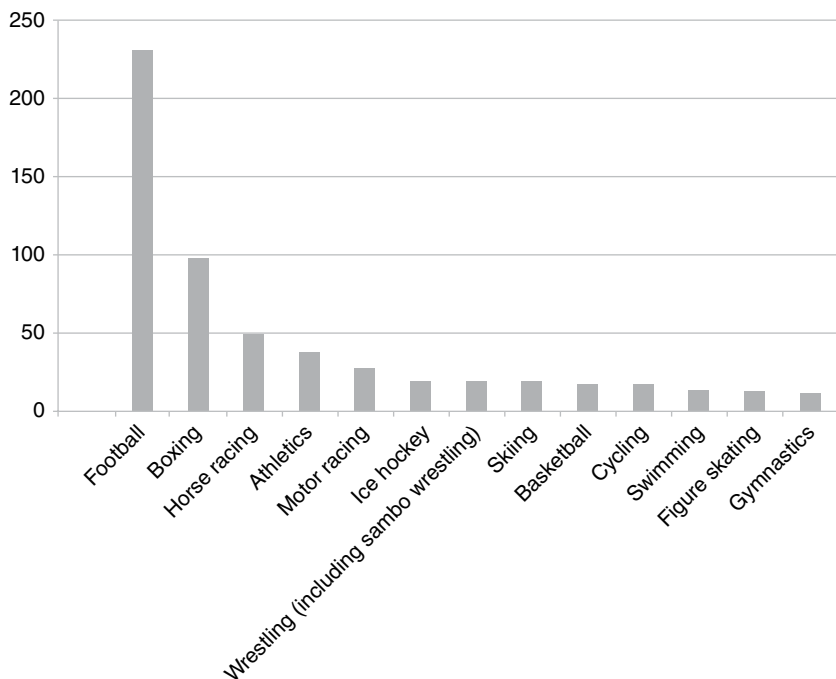


Figure 6.3 Prevalence of Specific Sports Featured in European Cinema Source: IMDb.

with the United States (the producer of most sports films) has also contributed to the large number of sports films produced by the UK. This is evident in the high number of US/UK co-produced sports films, with 13% of UK produced sports films having an American co-producer.

With regard to sports featured, perhaps unsurprisingly, football is by far the most popular sport featured in European sport cinema, featuring in almost one third (228) of all films produced followed by boxing, horseracing, and athletics (Figure 6.3).

The first football films

Indeed, the first European sports fiction release was a football-themed production, *Harry the Footballer*, directed in 1911 by Lewin Fitzhamon, one of the most popular directors of the early silent film era in Britain. The film concerns the kidnapping of super-striker Harry by the opposition team, the Bestham Vampires, and his subsequent rescue by his girlfriend and race to the match, making it just in time for the kick-off. The plot was repeated three years later when Maurice Elvey directed *The Cup Final Mystery* (1914), though this time it was the goal-keeper, rather than the striker, that was kidnapped just before the Cup Final at Crystal Palace. Fitzhamon directed a further football-themed film in 1914,

A Footballer's Honour, a work considered to be the first commercially successful film devoted to football (Seddon 1999, p. 365). Two years previous, the first animated film featuring football appeared, *The Cat's Cup Final*, directed by one of the pioneers of this art form, Arthur Melbourne Cooper. Indeed, the first film directed by Britain's first female director, Ethyle Batley, was a football-themed work, *The Rival Captains* (1916), a film in which a dog rescues a football captain following his kidnapping (Glynn 2018, p. 24). In common with the practice more generally in the industry in this period, all these early films were less than 20 minutes in length; the first feature-length (that is, of approximately 90 minutes or more in length) British football film to enjoy considerable commercial success was Hugh Croise's *The Ball of Fortune* (1926), based on a novel by Sydney Horler. Contributing to the film's success no doubt was its featuring the legendary Welsh striker Billy Meredith, star of cup-winning teams for Manchester City and Manchester United, with whom he also won the League championship in the 1907–1908 and 1910–1911 seasons. Meredith played himself in the film in the lead role as a football coach, and the football sequences of the film were played at Leeds United's Elland Road ground (Seddon 1999, p. 635).

While football would continue to feature in fiction film throughout the interwar period, the most frequent encounter with professional football on film in this period was via highlights of major games featured in cinema newsreels. Films of football were generally uncontroversial, and their short and exciting nature made them very suitable for cinema showings, and thus football featured prominently. Indeed, football was one of the most popular newsreel items in Britain and across Europe in the 1920s and 1930s, with sales of individual newsreels increasing where football was included (Huggins 2007, p. 84).

The importance of newsreels was evident in Thorold Dickinson's 1939 football-themed feature *The Arsenal Stadium Mystery*, a murder mystery film concerning the investigation of the murder of a football player, John Doyce, during a charity match. The film begins with a Gaumont British newsreel detailing the upcoming game between professional side Arsenal and the fictional touring amateur club Trojans. Indeed, the game featured in the film is itself commented on by legendary Gaumont commentator E.V.H. Emmett, ably assisted by the Arsenal manager at the time George Allison, also a former journalist. The foregrounding of the media here would anticipate what is now a staple of the sports film: the focus on the media and their role in relaying the action on screen. This is also a feature of *The Keeper*, which uses contemporaneous newsreel coverage of its subject to add additional realism and authenticity to the production.

Furthermore, in common with *The Ball of Fortune*, *The Arsenal Stadium Mystery* relies heavily on featuring leading players, and personnel, as well as media figures associated with football in the period. This includes many of the then Arsenal team – one of the most successful teams in English football in the 1930s – as well as members of fellow London team Brentford, which was also a Division 1 side at the time.⁶ However, the film enjoyed limited audience or critical success on release, with Charles Barr remarking, conscious of earlier films featuring professional players, that 'Even in 1939, the centring of *The Arsenal Stadium*

Mystery on a match between professional and amateur sides seemed tame and anachronistic', while for Barr the acting of the 'authentic footballers ... is stilted, and the action into which the film incorporates them is ... unconvincing' (Barr 2003, p. 630). This includes the remarkable reserve exhibited by players from both sides when they discover that one of the players has just died during a game. However, the film was responding to the challenges that faced filmmakers trying to combine depictions of football with a fictional scenario when people's engagement with this sport was primarily through attendance at games, or via newspaper reports, radio broadcast, or newsreels. *The Arsenal Stadium Mystery*, as many subsequent films would do (including, as discussed later, *Escape to Victory* (1981)), falls awkwardly between two stools where the need to instil realism in the work involves including non-actors whose performances leave much to be desired while the actual sporting sequences are less than compelling themselves, combining close shots of unconvincing staged runs past peculiarly immobile defenders with more convincing long shot sequences taken from the actual Arsenal-Brentford game.

However, while football takes up a small percentage of *The Arsenal Stadium Mystery*, it does serve a larger allegorical role, a role bound up with affirming aspects of British (and particularly English) culture in the period. As noted by Huggins of newsreels (featured prominently within the film) in the period concerned:

The regular projection of screen soccer helped move it from being publicly perceived as largely a working-class sport (although there were always middle-class supporters too) to being a widely accepted part of popular culture. Newsreels further embedded the sport within the fabric of the British way of life as an apparently unproblematic, innocently pleasurable experience which perhaps helped audiences face the social and economic difficulties of the period more cheerfully.

(2007, p. 97)

Huggins's remarks are also relevant to the depiction of football on film across Europe as the twentieth century developed, particularly with regard to its role in affirming prevailing structures and values within the broader society concerned.

Football on film beyond the UK

While the first depictions of football in fiction film emerged in the British context, other European countries followed soon after. Peter Dahlén has identified Per-Axel Branner's football-themed *Hans livs match* (*The Match of His Life*) (1932) as the 'final breakthrough for a broad, popular and 'completely Swedish' sports film'. As Dahlén continues:

Here, the storyline is based entirely on football and the fate of the football hero, Gunnar 'Nicken' Gawell (Björn Berglund) – the nickname 'Nicken'

alludes to 'nick the ball' ... the film showcases the great and increasing popularity of football and sports heroes in the early 1930s.

(2021, p. 136)

Dahlén also notes the important ideological role of this film, as with other European depictions of football in the period and subsequently, particularly evident in the 'symbolic reconciliation between the social classes that takes place at the end of the film' (2021, p. 136).

The use of football films to bolster hegemonic culture and shore up prevailing conceptions of national identity was evident across European cinema, particularly in the years during and in the immediate aftermath of World War II. In Germany, the filming of the Berlin Olympics in 1936 (in which football features prominently) by Leni Riefenstahl in her aesthetically groundbreaking (if politically controversial) documentary *Olympia* (1938) was also connected with the wider national cultural and ongoing state project, in particular concerned with celebrating the achievements of Nazi Germany and affirming the German nation (Downing 1992). Football also featured in German cinema in the war years, including within Robert Adolf Stemmle's innovative 1942 release *Das große Spiel* (*The Big Game*). Focused on a fictitious German team, Gloria 03, the film follows the tensions and competition between the team's star forward, Werner Fehling, and fan favourite, goalkeeper Jupp Jäger, with each player seeking the affections of the leading lady, Grete. Though not explicitly employing Nazi rhetoric, Rebecca Dawson has contended that Stemmle's production nonetheless employs football 'to circumvent the obvious, direct self-glorification' evident in Nazi propaganda of the period while simultaneously and more subtly 'replaying and illuminating the everyday expectations of Nazi citizens', including German moral strength and character, 'as well as the glorious splendour of The German Reich, its government, and its people' (2021, pp. 160–161).

In some European contexts football films have been sufficiently popular – both in terms of numbers produced and audience engagement – to constitute a distinctive national sub-genre; a case in point being the phenomenon of the Spanish 'kick-flicks'. These works were an important part of the larger popular context (of which sport was a key component) that affirmed and popularised government control in the challenging post-World War II period of Franco's initially largely isolated fascist regime. As noted by Marañón:

The abundance of films like *The Pelegrin System* (1951), *The Aces Search for Peace* (1954), *Eleven Pairs of Boots* (1954), *Blond Dart* (1956), *The Phenomenon* (1956), *The Fan* (1957), *The Angel is on the Summit* (1959), *The Soccer Pool* (1959), *The Economically Weak* (1960), *The Red Cross Three* (1961) and *Sunday's Battle* (1963) couldn't be the fruit of mere coincidence. And so soccer converted itself into one of the country's cinematographic genres. Films in which the popular side of soccer served to divert into

comedies of local customs and manners, to indoctrinate into sporting dramas, or even to expose the best essences of the country.

(Quoted and translated in Ashton 2013, p. 173)

These Spanish ‘Kick-Flicks’ enjoyed immense popularity as their production coincided with a period in which major international football stars began to emerge at Spanish clubs, including Real Madrid’s legendary Argentine striker Alfredo Di Stéfano who featured prominently in several films in this period, including *Blond Dart* (*Saeta rubia*) (1956) and *Sunday’s Battle* (*La batalla del domingo*) (1963). These films focused above all on defending morals, defining masculinity, and asserting values in line with the ruling Franco regime (Ashton, 2013, pp. 173–174). A relevant example is the 1954 production *The Aces Search for Peace* (*Los ases buscan la paz*) – a film described by Ashton as ‘designed to draw the soccer fans to the box office and at the same time glorify the Franco regime’ (2013, p. 172). Focused on the life story (and hardships) of FC Barcelona’s Hungarian striker Ladislao Kubala (who also starred) in escaping his socialist homeland (and contrasting that with the opportunities Franco’s Spain provided), the film has been described by Marañón as ‘an enormous propagandist triumph for the Franco regime’ (Quoted and translated in Ashton 2013, p. 173).

In Kubala’s home country, Peter Fodor has also identified a similar pattern in Hungarian football-themed films from the 1950s, noting how the legendary ‘Golden Team’ of footballers from that period (that featured such acclaimed players as Ferenc Puskás, Sándor Kocsis, Nándor Hidegkuti, Zoltán Czibor, József Bozsik, and Gyula Grosics) ‘was at least in part an instrument of [the communist dictatorial] Rákosi regime, which sought to profit from the team’s victories and prowess on the field in order to legitimise the regime’s hold on political power’ (2017, p. 329). Hungarian football films produced in that era attempted to build on this popular sporting success while simultaneously supporting the ruling regime. Indeed for Fodor, ‘Like the daily press, the schematic film productions of the era were also characterised by the ideological utilization of sports’ (Fodor 2017, p. 328). A relevant example of this approach is the 1951 production *Civil a Pályán* (*Try and Win*) directed by Márton Keleti, which employs classical comedy elements to combine the factory life with the world of football. As Fodor continues, ‘Keleti’s film was intended to popularize a centralized mass sports movement of Soviet origins called “Ready to work and fight” and to communicate the party’s message to professional sportsmen who were considering emigration’ (2017, p. 328).

European co-productions

Football has continued to feature in European fiction work since the 1950s, though productions have met with very mixed responses from both audiences and critics. Perhaps one of the most famous examples is Irish-American director John Huston’s British/US/Italian co-production *Escape to Victory* (1981) (very loosely based on an actual football game played between PoWs and their German

captors during World War II) described by Ellis Cashmore as 'Soccer's filmic nadir' (Cashmore 2000, p. 134). Glen Jones has also criticised this film for the 'poor sporting skills of Sylvester Stallone, Michael Caine and the poor acting skills of Pelé, Bobby Moore et al' not to mention the unconvincing scenario which is as insulting to war veterans as it is to the general public's naivety (Jones 2005, p. 33). Apart from *Escape to Victory*, football fanatic and novelist Nick Hornby has described the football-themed film *Yesterday's Hero* (1979), a UK/Australian co-production written by popular fiction writer Jackie Collins, as 'probably the worst British film since the war', including its 'breathhtakingly daft' attempt to combine real footage of football celebrities with the film's narrative (Hornby, quoted in Jones 2005, p. 33). However, critical lambasting does not necessarily mean that football films have not had significant impacts on audiences. Since its first release, *Escape to Victory* in particular (perhaps due to its inclusion of legendary figures in the game) has had an enduring popularity with football fans and film audiences evident in several dedicated websites to the film and its repeated selection in audience polls as among the best football films ever.⁷ *Escape to Victory* and *Yesterday's Hero* also share a feature increasingly found in European football films: a co-production genesis involving partners in differing European and international contexts. Indeed, as Figure 6.4 indicates, almost 20% of football-themed films produced in Europe, since the first football-themed co-production – the Spanish/Italian co-production *Volver a vivir* – was released in 1968, now involve multiple international producers. The advent of the European Economic Community in 1957 (incorporated as the European Community into the European Union (EU) in 1993) and the establishment of a range of European international co-production and film funding initiatives – including Eurimages (established 1989) and MEDIA (1991) – has encouraged this development. As Figure 6.4 also indicates, depictions of football in European cinema has also increased considerably since the early 1990s, a period of huge growth more generally in the media coverage of football in Europe.

Some of the most acclaimed football-themed films produced in that period have been the product of international co-productions, including the Iceland/Finland/UK co-production *Strákarnir okkar* (*Eleven Men Out*) (2005), the France/UK co-production *Sixty Six* (2006), Ken Loach's *Looking for Eric* (2009) (a co-production between five European countries), and Gurinder Chadha's UK/German/USA co-production *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002), the most commercially successful football film released to date.⁸ While more research is needed of these productions and the phenomenon more generally of European co-productions, it is evident that in contrast to the more nationalistic sentiments apparent in earlier football-themed productions noted previously, these European co-productions challenge prejudice and foreground themes of international and intercultural understanding in which sport plays a prominent role. *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002) is focused on the attempts of Jesminder 'Jess' Bhamra, the 18-year-old daughter of Punjabi Sikh immigrants living in London, to play for a girls' soccer team, against the wishes of her conservative parents. At the centre of the film is a conflict between the traditional values of Jess's parents and the

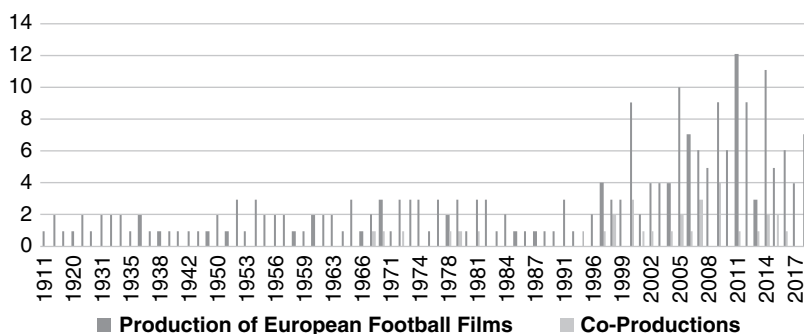


Figure 6.4 Production of European Football Films (1911–1918) Source: IMDb.

more progressive impulses of Jess, more interested in embracing aspects of English popular culture – in particular football – than with submitting to the traditions of her parents. While the film depicts aspects of Punjabi Sikh culture, including the wedding of Jess's sister, football functions within the narrative as the means through which Jess finds her own independence separate to her family, who eventually agree to her wish to play football, allow her to accept a scholarship to the US and, indeed, as the last scene of the film suggests, to develop a relationship with her football coach, an Irish 'gora',⁹ outside of the arranged marriage traditions of her family and culture. While the overall narrative resolution may not be entirely convincing (and follows the transcending pattern described by Rowe earlier), the film nonetheless suggests in football a forum where differing cultures and ethnicities can interact and find understanding. A further relevant (if less commercially successful) co-production is the film referred to at the outset of this chapter, the UK/German co-production *The Keeper*, to which we now return to conclude.

Conclusion

While dating from the earliest days of European cinema, depictions of football on film have grown considerably to constitute an increasingly important part of Europe's film heritage deserving of increasing academic attention. As these films have responded to larger developments within specific European countries and the continent more broadly, they have served as a barometer of changing cultural values and concerns since the early twentieth century. To return to the film referred to at the beginning of this chapter, *The Keeper* provides a relevant recent exemplar which manifests features found across the European football film sub-genre. Given the challenges of depicting football in fiction film, it is significant that football, as in passages in which the sport is depicted, actually has a very limited presence within the film. Over *The Keeper's* entire 119 minutes, less than 10 minutes consist of football sequences. Indeed, its British producer Chris

Curling resisted its designation as a sports film, remarking prior to the film's release that,

For me, it's much more a personal story about a young guy who got caught up in the Nazi movement and was then fighting on the eastern front. He saw terrible things in the war and was eventually captured by the British. When he entered the PoW camp, he was still following Nazi ideology. But he learned to see a different version of the world. He decided to stay in the UK, fell in love and was very successful on the football field. That interests me as much as the football.

(Alberge 2017)

However, though football may only feature briefly in *The Keeper*, its presence nonetheless carries a significance that far outweighs its screen time and draws upon the symbolic resonances of this sport in the European context. The basis of the film on actual events and individuals (or the involvement of familiar and well-known footballers) is also found across many football-themed films, again as a means of responding to the challenge of depicting the sport convincingly in fiction film. These strategies have also responded to distinctive developments within specific European contexts and the recurring practice of moving the focus from the playing field to the challenges faced by protagonists in their everyday life. In some contexts, as in Nazi Germany or Franco's Spain, this has involved the employment of football on film to affirm and promote hegemonic constructions of national identity. However, as European cinema has increasingly relied on international co-production models, a change of emphasis is evident in more recent productions. While *Bend It Like Beckham* stresses intercultural understanding and tolerance, a similar concern is also evident in the extraordinary story of Bert Trautmann, a former German soldier who following his imprisonment in England as a PoW, decided to stay on and play football professionally with Manchester City. As depicted in the film, Manchester City encounter considerable opposition to their decision to sign Trautmann, but he ultimately gains the respect of the club's supporters, including those among the large Jewish community in the city, due to his performances on the field of play. A key aspect of the film is the transformation of central characters – including Trautmann's eventual wife Margaret and the head of his PoW camp Sergeant Smythe – from being initially prejudiced towards and distrusting of Trautmann to being among his strongest supporters. As Smythe remarks when he encounters Trautmann in a graveyard following his son's tragic death, 'Go out there and play, Bert. Play for the people who've accepted you. For those of us ... who've lost someone in the wartime. Play for your son. Go out there and give something back'. As the final credits indicate, Trautmann would eventually be awarded both an honorary Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) and the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany for his contributions to Anglo-German relations and understanding through football. Football in the film therefore (in line with the tendency of sport cinema generally to transcend challenging circumstances)

provides a central forum to facilitate understanding and overcome prejudice. However, as is often the case in sport cinema, while the setting may be historical, the concerns are contemporary. As Curling also remarked at the time of the film's production,

It's a story about reconciliation between people. There was a big campaign against him at Manchester City. So, in the film, we watch a man coming to terms with his past and starting anew ... overcoming hostility towards him. These days, that seems particularly relevant as well – how we as British people treat outsiders.

(Alberge 2017)

The period of *The Keeper's* production and release was marked by huge division in the United Kingdom following the Brexit referendum in June 2016, when those in favour of leaving the EU won a small majority. In the run-up to the referendum and in its aftermath, a prominent concern particularly among those in favour of Brexit was the high levels of immigration to Britain. Indeed, concerns regarding immigration have been described as a 'key driver' among those who voted in favour of leaving the union (see, for example, Goodwin and Milazzo 2017). In this context, *The Keeper* uses the engaging topic of British football and the life story of a legendary player to articulate an appeal to tolerance, reconciliation, and understanding in Britain's relationship with other European countries and nationalities at a time when Britain politically is moving away from the European Union, a feature remarked upon by several reviews at the time of the film's release (see, for example, Alaba 2018; Clarke 2019; Gamble 2019; Hattenstone 2019; GOTP Editorial Team 2019; Solomons 2019; Tyers 2019). In this manner, *The Keeper* suggests the important role depictions of football on film can have in the European context in articulating larger social concerns and contributing to the discourse of how we define European cinema and society today.

Notes

- 1 This information is further to recent research by Glentoran supporter Sam Robinson (published in his 2016 book *There's a Green Sward Called the Oval – the Life and Times of a Football Stadium*) who identified the teams, particularly from the distinctive white shamrock design evident on the Cliftonville players' shirts, as well as coverage of the game – played on 23 October 1897 – in the Irish press of the time and further coverage of the screening of the film two days later in Belfast. Further information on this discovery is available here: *Who's Who of Victorian Cinema*, June 2016, <https://www.victorian-cinema.net/news> and in Glynn 2018, p. 15.
- 2 This footage (though wrongly identified as being shot in London in light of the research referred to earlier) is accessible on YouTube at the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qRI56TOinKk>.
- 3 Both Loach and Lavery made these comments in Toby Reiz's documentary *United We Stand* (Feasible Films Production, 2009), included on the DVD edition of *Looking for Eric* (2009).

- 4 Further information on this directory is available here: <http://lumierevod.obs.coe.int/>. The directory is also restricted to 'European films available on on-demand services in Europe'.
- 5 The International Movie Database (IMDb) is accessible at the following link: <https://www.imdb.com/>.
- 6 The football footage was shot during the final game of the Division 1 season on 6 May 1939 before World War II broke out. A further poignancy is added to the film today when one considers that nine Arsenal players – some of them featured in the film – died on active service with the British army during the war.
- 7 See for example the IMDb online poll of best football films, where *Escape to Victory* is listed second: https://www.imdb.com/poll/ETf7js45cDI/results?answer=1&ref_=po_nr.
- 8 *Bend It Like Beckham* took almost \$77 million at the international box office when first released. Box office figures for this film are available at <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/release/tl3074721281/>.
- 9 A Gora is a Hindi and Indo-Aryan racial epithet for Europeans or a light-skinned person. The word is used in this respect within the film.

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