

## Review Section

GARRY ROSS, Director. *Seabiscuit*. 2003.

I watched *Seabiscuit* a few hours after England had won the rugby union World Cup with a drop goal in the last 40 seconds of extra time to beat Australia by 20-17. This victory came at the end of a week in which bombs had exploded in Istanbul aimed at British targets and coincided with a controversial state visit to London by President Bush.

For a moment all this was forgotten when, on Sunday morning, England's victory was splashed across the front pages of the national press. It appeared as if a "nation" had been brought together and the gravity of world problems was, if not forgotten, then momentarily relegated in importance. The question arises, though: What does it mean for a nation to be brought together in terms like these, the fairy tale moments of sporting heroism, which are so bound up with transience? What part of a nation's identity does this concern?

*Seabiscuit* was a horse who carried the expectations and fulfilled the dreams of millions of people as well as offering a distraction from the economic hardships of the 1930s. Yet, in the film *Seabiscuit* the horse never quite comes into focus. The cultural significance that *Seabiscuit* carried as a mass icon, his place in relation both to the politics of the time and the lives of those involved with him erases something of him as the horse that he was.

I am not making a point here about the failure of the film to capture the animal's alterity or purely nonhuman aspects but rather that *Seabiscuit*, paradoxically, is not given center stage in his own story. Nor does the film provide any space where we might meditate on, or in some ways see for ourselves, what made *Seabiscuit* such an extraordinary horse—though, on the voiceover commentary, we frequently are told that he is.

Of course, he does win some extraordinary races. Yet, despite this, there is a principle of interchangeability at work in which the humans are, in fact, the real heroes and *Seabiscuit* becomes a model for specifically human hopes, giving rise to an optimism that any ordinary person can rise above the crowd. Whereas, on deeper consideration, what we really might learn from the example of *Seabiscuit* is that the horse

was so unusual and rare—and the circumstances of his success so particular—that the chances of rising above the crowd are, in fact, millions to one. In that sense, *Seabiscuit* raises interesting questions and paradoxes about the manner in which human relationships, memory, and national interest revolve round the figure of a horse who, in himself, somehow is not quite so important.

*Seabiscuit* is a film marketed as a story about a horse who brought a nation together in the late 1930s, a restorative during a period of depression and economic hardship. Based on Hillenbrand's book, first published in 2001, it tells of an oddball creature whom Hillenbrand describes as "a smallish, mud-colored animal with forelegs that didn't straighten all the way. "[He] spent nearly two seasons floundering in the lowest ranks of racing, misunderstood and mishandled" (2003, p. 12).<sup>1</sup>

The three men of the story, Charles Howard the owner, Tom Smith the trainer, and Red Pollard the jockey, are also men who, like *Seabiscuit*, are in some sense damaged. Charles Howard loses his son in a truck accident and then is left by his wife. Tom Smith is a quiet cowboy who prefers to sleep outdoors and has something of the horse whisperer talent about him. He is portrayed as out of place in the modern world. Red Pollard is a jockey whose family suffers in the depression. He is abandoned by them to survive as best he can by boxing and riding. The boxing causes him to lose his sight in one eye. As the composed shots of this group that are frequent throughout the film indicate, joined also by Howard's second wife Marcela, they form an alternative family. Brought together by *Seabiscuit* who, in turn, overcomes all sorts of obstacles to become a great champion, they are, as one of the final lines of the films suggests, "fixed" by the horse and made whole.

The other important theme that runs through the film and has a key bearing on the status of *Seabiscuit* as a horse is technology; specifically the motor car and the radio. The sale of motor cars is the key to Howard's self-made wealth. Old photographs of the Ford assembly line and the car industry, so important to the downfall of the economic importance of the horse at the beginning of the twentieth century, mark the beginning of the film. In addition, it is the increasing availability and growing cheapness of radio in the 1930s that turns the popularity of *Seabiscuit* into a mass phenomenon. These themes are brought together in a wry detail in the film when *Seabiscuit* wins his classic head to head race against War Admiral in November 1938. Red Pollard, who—because of a broken leg—could not ride that race, listens to it on the radio. At the end of the race broadcast, there is an advert for the sponsors: National Oil.

Throughout the film during Howard's bravura displays of showmanship in his promotion of *Seabiscuit*, he refers to a better future. He speaks the language of optimism for the underdog. But what that future really holds as represented by Howard him-

self is increasing industrialization, the extension of the mass media, and electrification. All this means a different role for the horse. The future for horses is the world of entertainment: films, horseracing, hunting, and riding. However, to use the horse as the symbol who bears the hopes of this very future provides an element of anachronism. Rather like the Flash Gordon book and game that belonged to Howard's dead son, which he looks at on occasions during the film to remind him of the boy, it is like the mythology rather than the science of space travel. Hillenbrand has remarked that the story is about the people and not the horse.

Lots of my readers say, "I've never been to a horse race" or "I don't like horses," but they say they liked the story. I think that's because of the people in it—and that was always my focus, these three men. That's why the cover of the book doesn't have the horse's head on it. I've made a very deliberate decision to focus on the faces of the people so that you know that this is a human story.

Somehow this displacement is further reflected in the way in which the film was made. The production, as is usual in animal films, needed a variety of horses to play Seabiscuit, including horses who could race and horses who could do other things like rearing angrily or biting. Ten horses were used as well as a specially designed vehicle, known on set as the S.S. Seabiscuit, on which were mounted two eqicizers with realistic horse heads for close shots of jockeys in action.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the production purchased more than 50 thoroughbreds to film the racing sequences. This was necessary, given that there could be only a few takes for any race and the animals could race only every other day.<sup>3</sup> Certainly it would be difficult to make this kind of film in any other way, given the physical and legal constraints of working with animals.

That so many horses are needed to portray one horse, however, contributes to a sense of disarticulation to the point that this filming method actually comes through onto the screen. As the British film critic Newman (2003) perceptively notes in his review of the film: "[T]he character most neglected here is the title star, who is never invested with the personality the script insists the champion had." What the audience is presented with is an amalgam of moments (kicking the stable walls, lying down with a horse and a dog) to indicate the different sides of Seabiscuit's character, which the film considers enough to portray an animal—a composite of clichéd character effects.

I began this review with some remarks about the relation of sport and nationhood. In *Seabiscuit*, the kind of nation that Howard promoted the horse as appealing to was composed of the no-hopers, the man who starts with nothing and makes good. At the time, however, the kind of nation bonded by horseracing was of a very particular kind.

One of the most important shifts in racing, coinciding also incidentally with the rise of the motor car, was the disappearance of the black jockeys who had been a key component in American racing history, especially toward the end of the nineteenth century. These slave jockeys managed to get round the limitations of slavery if they became successful riders and some became very famous (Thomas, 1999).

From the early 1900s, black jockeys began to disappear due to racism, opposition and resentment at their fame and potential economic success, and also the migration of blacks from southern farms to northern cities. Thus in the year 2000, Marlon St. Julien was the first black jockey to ride in the Kentucky Derby since 1921. Prior to that, however, in the years between the first Kentucky Derby in 1875 until 1903, 15 of the Derbys were won by black jockeys.<sup>4</sup> This obviously is a much more radical exclusion from history—there are only two black jockeys in the Horse Racing Hall of Fame—than the partial decentering of Seabiscuit that one finds in this particular film. It does, however, occupy a similar conceptual space. In the case of Seabiscuit, on film the therapeutic role he seems to play for individuals and masses alike makes him merely a servant, almost a slave. In that sense, his role in his own achievement comes to be effaced.

\* Jonathan Burt<sup>5</sup>

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> On the randomness of the relationship between breeding and racing success see Cassidy (2002), especially pp. 100ff.
- <sup>2</sup> An equicizer is a type of mechanical horse with springs, a wooden head, and a carpet body. It imitates the experience of riding a horse and can be used for training and exercise.
- <sup>3</sup> This information and the Hillenbrand quotation comes from the production notes section of the film's website, <http://www.seabiscuitmovie.com>.
- <sup>4</sup> This much under-researched history has recently been the subject of a number of studies. See Hotaling (1999), and Saunders and Saunders (2002).
- <sup>5</sup> Correspondence should be sent to Jonathan Burt, Ferry House, Bottisham Lock, Waterbeach, Cambs, CB5 9LN, U.K. E-mail: [pcfav@aol.com](mailto:pcfav@aol.com).

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CAROL ADAMS: *Pornography of Meat*. New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group. 2003.

Carol Adams knows how to name a book! From her *Sexual Politics of Meat* a decade ago to this book, I'm sure she's dashed the hopes of more than one pervert who has mistakenly fallen prey to the provocative titles. She bases her latest book on her popular "Sexual Politics of Meat" slide show, where Adams (1990) is more academic and lays out a broad case for a feminist-vegetarian critical theory. The later book bolsters her basic argument with hundreds of examples and is written in a more conversational and accessible style.

This book focuses solely on media and pop-cultural imagery of the objectification of women and nonhuman animals. If you leave this book on the coffee table—with all its many provocative and disturbing images—it will engage even the most casual reader thumbing through its pages. However, the academic audiences who will gain the most insight from the book are those who study topics such as gender, race, sexuality, sociology, psychology, linguistics, cultural studies, ethics, visual rhetoric, animal representation, advertising, and media studies.

Although Adams' slideshow may be Jean Kilbourne-esque in its feminist critique of the media, *The Pornography of Meat* deals more with the intersection of both female and animal objectification in the media—although it transgresses sometimes more into just one or the other. Despite the implication of the title, the book is not simply a feminist criticism of strictly pornographic images. It is a broader accusation that the dominant perspective of our culture is the "pleasurable consumption of consumable beings," where Adams (2003) seeks to explain "how someone becomes a piece of meat" (p. 13).

Adams (2003) feels that the examination of advertising texts offers us a "window into the myths by which our world is structured" (p. 15). She notes that the nature of

advertising promotes hierarchy and subordination by “advancing someone over something,” which ends up reinforcing the patriarchal “great chain of being” of man over women and animals (p. 39).

Through advertising and media images, Adams (2003) exposes the hegemonic nature of patriarchy as an insidious force so built into our cultural structure that inequalities become so natural they go unnoticed (p. 47). She claims inequality virtually “disappears as a privilege and is experienced as ‘desire,’ as ‘appetite,’ as ‘pleasure’” (p. 171).

What seems transparent, she makes it her job to illuminate in this book. Her analysis of the media images shows how animals are feminized and women are animalized . . . and both are often sexualized, to their ultimate detriment. The “anthropornography” and *Playboar* S&M ads are disturbing examples of this.

In Adams’ stringent analysis, however, many may proclaim her a conspiracy theorist (or, at best, a pessimist) who is reading “too much” into the images. As a fellow feminist and vegan, where I may be willing simply to overlook weaker accusations I feel are a stretch, I am afraid that more readers new to, or skeptical of, feminist-vegetarian theory will use it only as an excuse to discredit Adams as an “extremist” and dismiss her entire argument altogether. I feel many of the images are egregious enough to stand on their own without so much dissection and conjecture by the author.

I envision also that social-scientific researchers who expect all samples to be rigorously selected will not be impressed by the sporadic and highly anecdotal nature of her chosen texts (from chain e-mails to t-shirts to menus). Some of the facts and stories are not properly sourced and therefore lose some credibility. However, I feel the greatest weakness of the book is the lack of organization and stream-of-consciousness flow. The readers could use more direction, more context, and more indications of how these series of individual examples logically fit in with the point of the chapter . . . and with each other. Many of the transitions between anecdotes are non-existent or quite weak. One might wonder how the following topics on page 152 fit together logically: an over-sexualized dairy ad, lactose intolerance in people-of-color, mad cow disease, and the fact that heavy women are called “cows.”

However sporadic, the wealth of media images in the book do make it a useful reference for academic writers, who should find much heuristic value in this book. The many provocative images and stories likely will conjure up a myriad of possible research questions for the inquisitive academic. I think Adams is to be commended for collecting these images into one source and encouraging readers to view them

from a critical perspective—in case you did not already recognize the harm in Hooter’s billboards, the Chik-Fil-A cow campaign, or anything by *Hustler*).

In conclusion, if readers come prepared for this book, which is structured more like a slide-show script than a research paper, they may be able to appreciate Adams’ hundreds of anecdotes and read them as part of an interesting and important, yet depressingly sobering conversation that foregrounds the hegemonic nature of gender and species inequality in our society.

\* Carrie Packwood Freeman,<sup>1</sup> University of Georgia

### **Note**

<sup>1</sup> Correspondence should be sent to Carrie Packwood Freeman at 1554 S. Lumpkin St. #11, Athens, GA. E-mail: [carriepfreeman@charter.net](mailto:carriepfreeman@charter.net).

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