A Film Analysis: *Seabiscuit: An American Legend*

“If your dream was big enough and you had the guts to follow it, there was truly a fortune to be made.”

- David McCullough

Through literal and symbolic representation, the film *Seabiscuit* portrays an ongoing theme of hope in times of struggle. The movie is time-specific to the Great Depression and is a story of a few broken-down people and an equally broken-down horse who join forces in order to overcome the odds with hope. On a wider scope, such hope is symbolic of a hope that Americans searched for in order to survive during a pivotal time of devastation. The film uniquely represents the events of the era through a documentary style which consistently is in direct correlation with the main storyline throughout the movie.

Specific examples of devastation on a smaller scope in the film include Charles Howard’s (played by Jeff Bridges) loss of family through the death of his son; Red Pollard’s (played by Tobey Maguire) suggested abandonment by his family and, later, his injury while riding; Seabiscuit’s injury while racing, all of which are representations of overcoming the odds through hope as each of these situations are resolved.

Throughout each situation, the existence of hope is suggested through the unlikely relationships between each of these characters. Specifically, the character of Tom Smith (played by Chris Cooper) is suggested to be the ‘glue’ which holds each of these relationships together, as he is, in a way, the person to form each relationship. In a more specific sense, each character separately is a symbol of hope because of the strength they carry through the trials they face.
The movie takes place during a time when Americans were looking for heroes and in such a time, the individuals who formed around Seabiscuit were easy to relate to on a personal level for those surviving the Depression, bringing many Americans hope, or, at the very least, something to distract them from the devastation surrounding them.

The movie also consistently emphasizes the pursuance of the ‘American Dream’, that success is something that should be sought after, no matter how rough the journey. It conveys clearly the idea that anything is possible if you work hard enough at it, but that there will definitely be struggles along the way. If the film could suggest only one thing, it would be that it is through these struggles that people grow individually, but that, ultimately it’s the relationships between people that will carry them through any struggle.

This idea is supported in the film’s feature commentary with Director Gary Ross and Filmmaker Steven Soderbergh as they discuss this theme: “It’s suggested that there is a humanistic solution, that nothing can hold a person down, but it doesn’t always work; you have to reach out to others. It’s about people being able to reach out and help each other, about people braking down those barriers and allowing themselves to accept that help, which is the more difficult thing...” (1)

Throughout the beginning of the film, when compared with Smith and Howard, it is Pollard who struggles the most with such barriers. His negative experiences cause him to be on the verge of bitterness and cynicism. After Pollard loses a boxing match, he refuses the help of his jockey friend, George Woolf. While on a train ride with the Howards, Pollard also refuses an offer from Marcela (Zabala) Howard (played by Elizabeth Banks) to come out of the cold; despite his agonizing hunger, he at first refuses the food the Howards offer him. Pollard is quick to anger (revealed through a scene in which he’s racing and is pushed into the rail, or fouled) and
it isn’t until Howard asks him “What are you so mad at?” that Pollard begins to change and such barriers are eliminated. It is through the changes and evolvement of each character that such themes are most clearly conveyed.

“There weren’t no suicides on Wall Street that day’ – it was a myth that would grow over time.”

- David McCullough

*Seabiscuit* was released just two years after the September 11th bombings, at a time when American morale was still at an all-time low and U.S. patriotism was waning. What better way to combat that than with a film of American history portraying some of the greatest heroes of all-time? Especially when presented in such a way as to be entertaining and relatable to most Americans on any level and with such key phrases as: “We may be down, but we’re not out”, “Just ‘cause we’re littler, doesn’t mean we’re scared”, “You want something that’s not going to run from a fight”. (2) When mirrored with the following year’s election and America again facing war, the underlying message suggests “You want someone who’s not going to run from a fight.”

When related to an event as devastating to our country as 9/11, such phrases take on a whole new meaning. It becomes clear that there is a hidden agenda and level of manipulation in this film; some viewers have no choice but to come away from a film such as this without getting a little greater sense of America’s struggles, successes and the ‘realities’ of the “American Dream”, and an overall feeling of patriotism.

Maybe John Ulmer was just one of the few who sensed that manipulation and decided to lash out with the following negative review: “I expected something really epic going into ‘Seabiscuit,’ something strong and powerful. ‘...Seabiscuit’ is neither. It is a very, very corny
movie, and very, very cheesy. I don't care if it's based on a true story or not – 'Seabiscuit’ should be chopped into brisket....” (3)

This film was also produced before the current recession, but at a time when the economy was still struggling – again as quoted from the film’s commentary, “When I bought the rights, obviously unemployment hadn’t reached an 11-year high like it is right now and people didn’t feel the sense of instability that they do now but unfortunately these things are cyclical and it’s something that people are feeling a lot more acutely now.” (1) And that was in 2003. Perhaps the movie was made just a few years before its time when compared with the tragedies we’re facing with the economy currently in a recession in 2008.

In some ways the film may have been meant as a means of describing a way to survive the current smaller-scaled personal struggles that occur in our lives. Hope, in this story, serves as a great parallel for any struggle of life. The emphasis on the Howard’s divorce mirrors many families’ circumstances today, yet Howard finding happiness with Marcela shortly after gives relevance to hope for people today. The rise of technology back then – replacing horses with the new-aged automobile – mirrors technology in today’s world, with the rise of computers, the internet, and more recently cell-phones as a means of replacing home phones, text messaging replacing verbal conversation, i-Pods replacing computers, and how all of that effects relationships with people in today’s world.

The filmmaker’s intentions of emphasizing technology in the film are described perfectly in the commentary: “…Technology and all that has to offer can provide you a rich future, which is not always true, that technology and emerging technology sustain the belief that there will be a technological solution – that we'll invent a way out of whatever depression we're in.” (1)
“At a time when the world really needed a drink, you couldn’t get one in the United States of America. The virgins were scarce and there was only so much a human being could do without. The border-town was born…the chance to turn bad luck into good.”
- David McCullough

Other secondary themes in the film include sport as a means of entertainment and escape during times of hardship, with horse racing being one of the most popular of that era, next to baseball. Made illegal in the U.S., American’s went out of their way (and out of the country) to specifically set up a place to practice it.

There is also a theme of spokesman-ship, with Howard always telling the press and the public exactly what they want to hear and what they can relate to, becoming a revered spokesperson for the country. “The reporters ate from his hand. Here was the dream subject: daring, dashing, photogenic, articulate, a man who was always doing something stunning and always saying something quotable afterward…Howard gave the press a banner headline; the press gave him the public...(4) It became a little unclear who was stalking whom.”(5)

A theme of relationships is most obviously evident with the interactions between Howard, Marcela, Smith, and Pollard, but is also represented by the relationship between Pollard and Woolf; Tick Tock McGlaughlin (played by William H. Macy) and the group; and something as seemingly insignificant as the relationship between Seabiscuit and Pumpkin, Pocatell the dog, and JoJo (a spider monkey of unspecific origin and not in the movie) (6) who were placed together to keep Seabiscuit calm and relaxed when not racing; in essence, to keep Seabiscuit ‘together’, just as the group kept Pollard ‘together’ emotionally.

A theme of community is also significant on both a small scale – represented through the Tijuana crowds; the jockeys who are portrayed to have a community of their own – and on a wider scale as the public – reaching crowds upwards of 40 million people – came together, even in times of tragedy, to watch the greatest horse races ever ridden.
“You know, you don’t throw a whole life away just ‘cause he’s banged up a little.”
- Tom Smith

The film is riddled with symbolism which is portrayed in multiple ways, one of the most significant being the correlations between what’s going on in the storyline vs. what’s being narrated in the documentary. Specifically: Howard explaining to his house guests about the rise of automobiles, toasting the future, only to be interrupted by the phone ringing – a ring they don’t hear (symbolic of their determination for success, having no time for news of defeat) – with the film cutting to documentary, narrating the moment of the stock market crash; Howard losing his wife after the death of their son (who, ironically, was killed in a car crash, the very thing Howard was building for ‘the future’) and after describing Tijuana, the film cutting to documentary style with this opening quote, “…It was more invisible than that, men who were broken only a year before, suddenly felt restored, men who had been shattered suddenly found their voice…”; Pollard being offered soup from the Howards and the film immediately after cutting to documentary style describing the soup lines during the depression.

Perhaps the most potent symbolism occurs in the pivotal, juxtaposed scene of Smith observing Pollard holding a chair, angrily and passionately fighting a group of guys, and Smith turns around to see Seabiscuit, fighting the men holding his reigns, who are trying desperately to calm him. In that scene it is revealed the correlation between Biscuit and Pollard, symbolic of each other, both broken, rundown, and all around angry, willing to fight anyone daring enough to
cross their path. And Smith realizes the understanding and respect the two would hold for each other because of their circumstances and that Pollard is the jockey for Biscuit. The injuries they would go on to sustain during racing would be a direct symbol of the injury of the country during the era.

“That’s the poetry right there.  
- Pollard’s father, watching him ride the horse he ‘earned’

The film generally follows a chronological order with intermediate flashbacks of documentary footage in between. Overall the plot structure stays true to that of the book, introducing the characters one by one at the beginning, as they appear in the book. This gives the viewer a feel of who is most important; their importance being relevant to the combination of events bringing the characters together. The film introduces the key character, Howard, followed by Marcela, followed by Woolf, followed by Smith, followed by Seabiscuit, followed by Pollard. Without one character, it is suggested that there would not be the others and, obviously, the events would not have taken place as they had in history. Overall, the story is a build up of understanding and relating to the characters, so that when things go bad – Howard’s son dying, Pollard losing the race because he can’t see, his injury, Seabiscuit’s injury – we care about them.

Because the movie is based on real-life experiences, there are multiple cycles of inciting incidences, major complications, crises and climaxes that are then resolved individually. The director describes this, in reference to Pollard, perfectly in the commentary: “There is kind of a little piece that is the most moving which is transcendent, like he was crushed, he comes back, he was crushed, he comes back, it’s like at a certain point being crushed and coming back are a part of the normal process of living and you either engage it or you don’t...the courage comes
from an acceptance of that…it’s just a part of living and he’s become accustomed to that…it’s about engaging and reengaging a process…” (1)

Other examples include the introduction of Howard, his involvement with cars, the introduction of his wife and son, him talking to his son about how he should be playing outside—all building up to the conflict: his son getting into the truck, driving it around the corner, the other car headed towards it, with the climax being birds flying out of a tree, implying a crash. We see the toy truck in a puddle of water which is really underneath the truck the boy was driving (a shot of complete peace in a moment of chaos); the scene is gradually resolved as Howard’s holding his son, crying, then a few more scenes, with the final ‘resolution’ being Howard in Tijuana. In a way, each race is part of that cycle, especially the bigger races, along with the injuries of Pollard and Seabiscuit, and their inability to race at different times.

However, taking a look at the movie as a whole, the buildup would begin with the introduction of characters, Howard’s involvement with automobiles, Smith’s involvement with horses, Pollard’s involvement in boxing, the depression occurring, several races leading up to the match race between Seabiscuit and War Admiral, which is as climactic as Pollard’s sudden injury just before his second shot at the Santa Anita race.

Things start to arch back downwards after Seabiscuit’s injury and we’re brought to an ultimate resolution with him and Pollard racing and winning the ‘unbeatable race’ – Santa Anita. (Ironically, Howard was one of the high rollers who, along with his close friend, Bing Crosby, helped fund the Santa Anita track, yet it was the one race that continually escaped him.) (10) This cycles the audience back to the idea of hope, which becomes understood as being greater than what anyone was suffering from during the Depression. Each of the characters are reacting to the circumstances of the depression and availability of opportunity, or lack of opportunity.
Their main motivations are a drive for success and to fulfill their passions, seemingly regardless of their results.

“The books were the closest things he had to furniture, and he lived in them the other way men live in easy chairs.”

- A description of Pollard used in Seabiscuit: An American Legend by Laura Hillenbrand

All of the sets, locations, costumes and other physical elements of production design support the era in which the story takes place. Tanforan, Santa Anita, and other tracks at which races take place are all places in which the races took place in real life. Specifically, the costumes of the characters were in correlation with the social status of the characters. For example, Howard is first introduced wearing a blue collar outfit during his job at an assembly line position. As his social status improves he is portrayed in more established attire in front of his bike shop. However, this ultimately becomes upgraded to a suit when he becomes the owner of a Buick store.

Pollard is often seen in a wife beater and ragged pants until he meets up with the Howards and they make a Jockey’s outfit, with the letter H representing the Howards. Smith’s outfit stays true to what is described in the book: gray suits, dark vests, rip chord trousers, wing tips, and on race days, a restrained Republican tie. “Topping off the ensemble was, of course, the utterly unremarkable gray felt fedora. . .given that Smith was not a man of particularly noteworthy appearance, it was probably the hat and not the face that people recognized.” (7) The movie stays true to this profile.

In the film’s commentary, costume designer Julianna Makovsky describes the work put into the costume design: “This is one of the largest films I’ve ever done, with the amount of
extras we had to dress everyday. We did go to costume houses all over America, England, and Italy. I would say we have almost thirty-eight rental houses from across the world.” (8)

Pollard’s books are props specifically emphasized throughout the film. His books symbolize his method of escaping his harsh reality and share a specific correlation to Howard’s son, who also enjoyed reading. This is portrayed in the scene where we see him reading Flash Gordon and he says, “C’mon Dad, it’s about the future.” (2) This scene is relevant as it shows a son’s desire to connect on a personal level with his father during a conversation in which the father is trying to persuade the son.

The production design, as well, matches the time period: from the slums of the depression, to the extravagant manors of the wealthy, to the brothel houses, and to the race tracks and events. Every single environment design is done with meticulous attention to detail. The set design portrayed in the scenes which take place in Tijuana also stay true to the book with everything down to the Molino Rojo (the “red mill”) which we see on the hill behind the track and which also symbolizes a key place of escape for jockeys.

“It was the beginning and the end of imagination all at the same time.”
- David McCullough

The visual style portrayed in Seabiscuit holds a pattern unique to the film with shots such as Pollard tossing up the yellow daisies after winning a race. The daisies turn from color to black and white and the film cuts to documentary style with a narration to follow. Creative montage is used for the passage of time, specifically when showing the growth in relationship between Howard and Marcela, beginning with their courtship and ending somewhere around their marriage.
Much of the film’s strength comes from showing a character’s emotion; this is best done through close-up shots of the characters. This is specifically done when Pollard freaks out over being fouled in a race, as his anger builds the camera moves closer to his profile in correlation with his emotion, giving the audience a true sense of how he is feeling. Frequent close-ups of Smith’s face gives the audience an acute sense of his emotions in an otherwise difficult to read character; the same is true of Howard and with such close-ups the audience is able to relate to the character in a deeply personal manner.

Different forms of lighting create accurateness to the scenes on which they are used. For example, oftentimes in the film when a shot is filmed in a barn, the focused lighting is portrayed as natural light streaming in through the barn doors, giving the area inside the barn a feeling of convincing dimness. In the scene in which Pollard is first welcomed into the Howard’s spacious home it is nighttime and the main lighting is from the fireplace which is placed in the center of the shot. Other lights coming from either side of the screen suggesting house lamps, giving the scene a feeling of comfort and a sense of welcome.

Perhaps one of the most challenging shots involving lighting is when Pollard is asked by Smith to ride Seabiscuit at night in complete darkness. At first the screen is completely dark, yet as Pollard circles the track there is a light glinting onto the track’s rail. This light is produced by another light focused on a reflective surface, adding a very soft hint of light to what the camera is able to film, producing a very realistic sense of moonlight.

In order to capture the speed of a race a wide angle lens worked best in bringing the audience into the action. The shots were designed with the intention of making the viewer feel like they were right there between the horses as they battled for the finish line. This is further described in the commentary as follows: “...And then, to drop you into the middle of the race
where you are literally on the back of the horse with Woolf and he’s trying to rate the horse, the juxtaposition of those two things is what gives the race its power.” (1)

The point of view is predominately subjective in the sense that it puts its own twist on the storyline in order to enhance its cultural importance. For example, focusing on parts of the depression, on both Howard’s and Pollard’s family life. It’s obvious that the director of the film shares biasness with Hillendbrand’s passion for the story of Seabiscuit, leaning towards only the most positive aspects of the characters’ journeys to success. Information like Pollard’s struggle with alcoholism are conveniently left out of the movie even though such information is shared in the book.

Because of this biasness, the audience may feel that the characters are more personally relatable to them and seem much more noble, and potentially flawless. This also portrays a much keener sense of the relationships between characters and helps the overall flow of the movie despite the incredible amounts of information shared in the book.

“‘Who hit you in the butt with a saddle and told you you could ride?’ a starter hissed [to Pollard] before a race. ‘The same S.O.B. that hit you in the butt and told you you could start!’”

- *Seabiscuit: An American Legend* by Laura Hillenbrand

The pounding of hooves on the racetrack is a frequent sound. Similarly, many minor sounds are employed in order to portray a very realistic quality within the film, sounds such as the brushing of fabric against the saddle, wind rushing during a race, etc. Most of the music takes significant effort to be noticed, it all kind of blends in with the film, except in a few places, like when Pollard loses one specific race, the music follows a descending scale, matching up perfectly with a mood of great loss combined with a feeling of falling. Scenes which take place
in Tijuana have a Mexican style fitting of the setting, which could roughly qualify as a leit motif, but imprecisely.

All of the music is very epic, in major key to emphasize a positive message of hope, matching up with the film’s theme of hope. It also emphasizes the importance of the era and often carries an underlying patriotic tone. The music’s tone differs between storyline and the documentary style. As in any film, the music is relevant to the moods of the characters and what the different scenes are trying to portray. Tick Tock McGlaughlin carries his own musical score. The music during a race is significantly more upbeat than any other time in the film. Before both Pollard’s and Seabiscuit’s injuries, there is an eeriness to the music, foreshadowing that something bad is going to happen. Likewise, there is a horrific cracking sound following Pollard’s injury, at the moment he hits the wall and the horse runs off all other sounds seem to stop momentarily and all you hear is the crack.

“Sometimes all anybody needs is a second chance.”
- Charles Howard

The values behind the message of the film are numerous, values such as loyalty (all of the characters are loyal to each other, despite the hardships they all go through), honesty (Pollard admitting his blindness), acceptance of the truth (Howard telling him it’s okay), respect (all of the characters value each other’s viewpoints of the situations they find themselves in – Pollard suggesting Woolf to ride for him, shows Pollards respect for Woolf; Smith and Howard agreeing shows their respect for Pollard), courage (being a jockey was one of the most horrifically dangerous sports of that era, yet Pollard and Woolf both rode despite their fears of it). Countless
other values were vitally combined in order to portray the themes so successfully carried out throughout the film.

If another foreign culture were trying to figure out what Americans were like by watching this film, they might think that Americans are persistent, determined, courageous, but they might also possibly think they are a frivolous people, putting so much energy into a sport that is so dangerous and even possibly inhumane, as it inflicts potential dangers to people and animals in something as dangerous as horseracing.

Overall, *Seabiscuit* is a real-life achievement of the American Dream. It’s a story about a man who moved out west with only 21 cents in his pocket and from that was able to build and sustain his fortune. His was a fortune not only of financial wealth, but of personal abundance as well. It was a story of a frontiersman who watched his land gradually disappear, yet instead of turning bitter, he joined forces with one of the very people responsible for its disappearance and chose to ignore the things beyond his control and instead to control the things he could, becoming key in building a legend.

Most of all it’s a story of an essentially orphaned, broken-down boy and an equally orphaned, broken-down horse who mirror each other throughout their lives. They learn to trust together, master courage together, are injured together, and together overcome their injuries to complete the tasks they set out to complete – to win an otherwise unbeatable race, the Santa Anita, but even more so, a race to survive during one of the most harsh, most tragic eras of America. As the tragedies of that era cycle into the era of today, it will be these values which Americans will need to mirror in order to find our own sense of hope, a hope which will ultimately carry us through the hardships of our time.
A Film Analysis: Seabiscuit by Suzanne Gehring - 16 -

Bibliography


