Sport, Film, and Australian Cultural Identity: Reading *Hero to a Nation*

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Times have changed—drastically. Now major journals . . . devote sections to film. . . . Now the American Historical Association and the Organization of American Historians both give awards for the best historical film of the year. Now panels on film and screenings mark every major convention of historians. . . . Now institutions . . . sponsor major conferences on history and film.¹

Not all branches of history have recognized the importance of films. Sport, history, and film are rarely connected. Sport and history certainly are, but film is rarely added to complete the triumvirate. Sport history is a well-established subdiscipline of history that was founded in the early 1970s with national and international journals, regular conferences across the globe, and a multitude of monographs produced every year in several languages.² What is striking about sport history in all its academic forms is the minimal attention given to film. Sporting films are sporadically reviewed in the journals, and there is a handful of journal articles on specific films, as well as only a couple of manuscripts.³ In the Australian context, even fewer scholars have examined sport, history, and film.⁴ This lacuna has not resulted from a dearth of sport coverage in film. In fact, Toby Miller has identified six ways in which Australian sport is represented on film: documentaries, biopics, television mini-series, video collected highlights, semi-incidental references, and fictional film.⁵ Australian sport films, which began in 1896 with footage of the celebrated horse race the Melbourne Cup, have generated interest in cultural studies and sociology but have been eschewed by sport historians.⁶ Sport historians’ avoidance of film is probably seeded in epistemological and ontological issues about the centrality of “primary” sources to historical endeavors.⁷ While this paper does not seek to pursue these epistemological and ontological issues in any depth, it addresses the void of the intersection of sport, history, and film by investigating *Phar Lap: Hero to a Nation*, a feature film biopic about Australia’s famous horse, Phar Lap.

*Phar Lap* was a New Zealand–bred, Australian-raced and part-owned gelding. Purchased and trained by Sydney’s Harry Telford on behalf of Australian-resident American businessman David Davis, the horse had a modest beginning to his

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racing career in 1929, winning only one of his first ten races. After this inauspicious beginning, Phar Lap came to dominate Australian horse racing, winning 35 of his next 41 starts until his death in 1932. These races were over distances of between 1400 m to two-and-a-quarter miles and included a number of the nation’s most prestigious contests, such as the Cox Plate (twice), AJC Derby, Victoria Derby, Mackinnon Stakes (twice), and the 1930 Melbourne Cup, the “race that stops a nation.” In 1931 Phar Lap left Australia for North America. In his only race outside Australia, Phar Lap won the world’s richest thoroughbred race, the Agua Caliente Handicap, at the Agua Caliente Racecourse in Tijuana, Mexico. The fêted victory saw Phar Lap hailed by Australian newspapers and pamphlets as the world’s greatest racehorse. Sixteen days after this triumph Phar Lap died unexpectedly at a horse farm in Atherton, California.

Commonly referred to as “Australia’s Greatest Racehorse,” Phar Lap is widely remembered, celebrated, and represented in a number of cultural texts. The horse’s career is recalled in children’s and adult fiction, and in many nonfiction sport, sporting-icon, and horse racing books. Phar Lap is represented in statues at Flemington Racecourse, Melbourne, and Timaru, New Zealand, and is part of museum exhibitions in Canberra and Melbourne in Australia as well as in the Te Papa Tongerewa National Museum of New Zealand. Phar Lap’s stuffed hide in the Melbourne Museum remains the gallery’s most popular exhibit and the only one with its own full-time curator. Commemorative events, newspaper articles, magazine features, and Internet sites frequently recall and recirculate narratives about the horse’s life. As recently as November 2005, Phar Lap’s mantle as “Australia’s Greatest Racehorse” was under intense media discussion following the unprecedented triple Melbourne Cup victories of Makybe Diva. One important form that memory making of Phar Lap has taken, which has not attracted significant academic attention, is *Phar Lap: Hero to a Nation*.

Officially premiering on 7 August 1983, *Hero to a Nation*, at $7 million, was up until that time the most expensive Australian film ever made. These costs included not just the making of the film but also a lavish launch and unprecedented Australian marketing campaign marking the film’s premier. Although the film was privately financed, this investment was assisted by generous Federal government tax provisions. Aided by its extensive publicity campaign, the film finished the year as the most popular locally made film and second highest grossing film in Australia, behind the worldwide, box-office American success *The Return of the Jedi*. *Hero to a Nation* received mixed reviews, but its nomination for seven Australian Film Institute Awards, and its success in winning two, combined with its massive box office appeal, highlights its importance in Australian film history.

**Reading *Hero to a Nation***

*Hero to a Nation*, like any form of culture, is a polysemic text, as it simultaneously produces multiple meanings. Relations between image and viewer, industry and audience, narrative and culture, and form and identity create multiple meanings. While it is recognized that *Hero to a Nation* could be analyzed from many perspectives, including the themes of class, gender, race, and sexuality, as Baker has done with American sport films, this film will be read against the backdrop of national