

**And They're Off: A Critical Examination of the Horse Racing Film Subgenre**

by

Kayleigh Chance Murdock

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
Auburn University  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

Auburn, Alabama  
May 7, 2018

Approved by

Andrea Kelley, Chair, Assistant Professor of Media Studies  
Hollie Lavenstein, Associate Professor of Media Studies  
George Plasketes, Professor of Media Studies

## Abstract

Horse racing, the ‘Sport of Kings,’ has been a popular sport in American culture for centuries, and the sport has been depicted on film continuously since the medium’s emergence. Numerous feature films have focused on both fictional stories of racehorses and narratives that were “based on a true story.” The depictions of horses in these films have changed in dramatic ways since the genre’s advent in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries; horses have gone from insignificant background characters to titular characters. However, there are ideologically concerning elements of the representations of racehorses on screen. Namely, these films tend to brush over the harsh realities of horse racing as it exists today, which has the impact to influence audiences’ understandings of the sport to the ultimate detriment of the horses involved.

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	ii
An Introduction .....	1
A Brief History of the Horse Racing Film .....	15
The Ultimate Underdog (Or Underhorse): A Textual Analysis of the 2003 Film <i>Seabiscuit</i> ..	33
Conclusions and Reflections .....	53
References .....	60

## List of Illustrations

Illustration 1 .....	17
Illustration 2 .....	19
Illustration 3 .....	22
Illustration 4 .....	22
Illustration 5 .....	27
Illustration 6 .....	27
Illustration 7 .....	37
Illustration 8 .....	39
Illustration 9 .....	40
Illustration 10 .....	42
Illustration 11 .....	45
Illustration 12 .....	48

## **An Introduction**

In the Hollywood horse racing film *Seabiscuit* (2003), trainer Tom Smith, alluding to Seabiscuit's mistreatment at the hands of his former trainer, gives this advice to jockey Red Pollard before sending the pair out on a cross country gallop: "I just can't help feelin' they got him so screwed up runnin' in a circle, he's forgotten what he was born to do. He just needs to learn how to be a horse again" (Kennedy, Marshall, Ross, and Sindell, 2003). The camera follows Seabiscuit and Red as they gallop through fall forests and across stone bridges while the orchestral accompaniment soars. It is a moment of jubilation, of glee, of a horse's liberation from a life of whips and tiny stalls. *Seabiscuit* (2003) is one of several films that appear to challenge the commonplace ideological belief that animals are here for the use and abuse of humans. Seabiscuit's team, both in the fictionalized film and in the true story, went to great lengths to rehabilitate him after years of abuse and eventually transformed the emotionally scarred little horse into one of the greatest racehorses that ever lived. It is an inspiring tale, seemingly full of admiration and respect for a horse that just needed a little extra attention. However, despite its attempts to defy it, the film reproduces the dominant ideological belief that animals are here for our use; they are both celebrated and abused all at the same time. *Seabiscuit* condemns the mistreatment of the horse while maintaining the ideology that it is acceptable and right to use them for our own recreation and joy.

Contemporary conceptions of animals are complex and often contradictory; we uphold the merits of some animals, particularly dogs, while simultaneously remaining complicit in the widespread slaughter and abuse of others (chicken, pigs, cows, etc.). As Berger (1980) notes, “This – maybe the first existential dualism – was reflected in the treatment of animals. They were subjected *and* worshiped, bred *and* sacrificed...” (p. 7). Horses in particular occupy a bizarre and unique position because they have existed, and still do, on both sides of the spectrum; they have been conceived of as both utilitarian machines for the benefit of humankind and as beloved partners and friends. Horses were central to the development of the civilized world; they provided our forebears with mobility, speed, and power, and in doing so contributed to wars, exploration, and civilization in innumerable ways. With the exception of dogs, there is no other animal that has been so intertwined with the history of human life. However, due to the rise of the automobile and heavy machinery in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (including the train, the aptly named “Iron Horse”), the utility of horses declined, and the horse has instead developed into a sport animal for the wealthy and a complex cultural symbol.

Animal studies scholars strive to interrogate the connections between human and animal and what these may mean for us and for the animals with whom we share the world. Animal studies is an interdisciplinary field; the study of our relationships with animals spans fields of study as varied as anthropology, psychology, philosophy, biology, and media studies. As will be illustrated in this thesis, the field of media studies has an obvious relationship with animal studies. As Kellner (2003) writes:

The media are a profound and often misperceived source of cultural pedagogy: They contribute to educating us how to behave and what to think, feel, believe, fear, and desire – and what not to. (p. 9)

The ideologies perpetuated by film, television, and other forms of media have the potential to shape our worldviews, which includes our understandings of the animals with whom we share this planet. The relationship between human and equine has been replicated on screen since the earliest days of film; indeed, the first moving picture was Muybridge's iconic 1878 film *Sallie Gardner at a Gallop*, which was filmed to see if all four of a horse's legs come off the ground at the gallop (Stanford & Muybridge). It is telling that the very first filmic representation depicted both horse and human. Animals have played starring roles in film since its inception, but no animal has received more screen time than the horse due to their dual role as companion and utility. The noteworthy history of the horse on film is accompanied by a multitude of complex ideological understandings of horses, and interrogating filmic representations of horses allows for a better understanding of the ways in which society perceives and treats both the animals that we love and animals that we use (which are sometimes one and the same). This research project is equally informed by animal studies as a field and by the study of mediated representations and their real-life implications. While filmic dogs and Disney's animated animals have been studied extensively, there have been no extended critical analyses of the history and depictions of the filmic horse. In this thesis, I will examine the depiction of the horse in popular 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century narrative film using a cultural studies framework in order to analyze how filmic depictions construct ideological understandings of the horse.

## **Literature Review**

In the touchstone essay "Why Look at Animals?," Berger (1980) discusses the cultural marginalization of animals, concluding that, "That look between animal and man, which may have played a crucial role in the development of human society, and with which, in any case, all men had always lived until less than a century ago, has been extinguished" (p. 28). He argues

that with our increasingly urban and modern lives, we have become distanced from both nature and animal. Our cultural distance from animals has only grown since 1980, but their presence has been perpetuated in our lives and cultures through zoos, toys, pets, and the “widespread commercial diffusion of animal imagery” (Berger, 1980, p. 26). Among other things, this “animal imagery” includes the depiction of animals on film and in stories. Ray (1985) notes that the modern era “...has seen popular culture become, for most people, the *only* culture...” (p. 361). This animal imagery, where animals are seen in film, television, books, and other media, may be the only places in which contemporary people encounter animals. This is where this thesis begins.

Interest in the field of animal studies and the mediated representation of animals is rapidly growing. Scholars such as Baker (1993) have acknowledged for decades that “any understanding of the animal, and what the animal means to us, will be informed by and inseparable from our knowledge of its cultural representation” (p. 4). Even in modern American society, animals play significant roles in our lives as pets, sources of food, and cultural symbols, and mediated representations of them can have significant impacts on the ways in which we understand and treat these animals. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most commonly analyzed animal in early studies of film representation is the dog. McLean (2014) attests that:

The representation of dogs in narrative cinema has not only contributed to their steadily growing popularity across the past century but also created powerful assumptions about what dogs ‘are’ and, concomitantly, what sorts of relationships we ‘should’ have with them. (p. 9)

To this effect, one need only consider the plight of the Dalmatian after both versions of *101 Dalmatians* (1961, 1996), which led to an explosion in popularity of the breed and eventually an inordinate number of these dogs ending up abandoned in animal shelters (Navarro, 1997).



Dalmatians are high-strung and demanding animals not suited to the lives of most dog owners; however, one would never know that when watching *101 Dalmatians*, which depicts Pongo, Perdita, and their puppies as charming and easy-going dogs. Pongo, Perdita, and the puppies, as well as Pluto, Lassie, Beethoven, and countless other fictional dogs, would be classified as the ideal “Walt Disney dog:” “he is Very Intelligent, has morals, is capable of planning revenge, solves complex problems, and understands the value of the artifacts in Walt’s home” (Donaldson, 1996, p. 7). The unrealistic portrayal of dogs, the “Walt Disney dog,” has led to inordinate expectations of them, which often results in dogs being abandoned at shelters for failing to fulfill their imagined role as a perfect companion (Anderson & Henderson, 2005). However, mediated representations of animals can also positively influence human conceptions of animal populations in ways that lead to reconsiderations of the ethical implications of our interactions with them. A recent example is the 2013 documentary *Blackfish*, which stimulated new concern for the welfare of the captive orca and has led to SeaWorld’s sharp decline in popularity and reputation (Morgenson, 2017). Representations of animals can have substantial implications for their real-world counterparts, making these representations a vital site of inquiry for animal studies and media studies scholars.

## **Horses**

So why the horse? Baker (1993) notes that animals are often used to “symbolize human identity and human values” and gives the example of ‘national animals’ such as America’s bald eagle (p. 34). Horses have a variety of human meanings attached to them; they can represent a quintessential America, strength, power, beauty, freedom, sexuality, wealth, and more (Berger, 1989). Whitley (2008) notes that “...the horse is an apt and powerful figure for exploring ideas of freedom in terms of human relations with the natural world” (p. 92). In an analysis of the

depictions of horses in literature, Ortiz-Robles (2016) writes that horses are “perhaps most commonly associated with classical epics, novels of high adventure, and coming-of-age stories for girls” (p. 29). This representation of the horse – as an animal that expresses and complements something that is essentially human - is common in film. Horses are arguably the most well-represented animal in film history, but they are often depicted as merely incidental to the plot, as unnamed entities that serve only to deliver their masters at their destination. The common insignificance of the film horse is exemplified by the horses chosen to appear in early Westerns: “...solid-color horses were preferred by the movie directors...If the color was too striking, it was feared that the audience’s attention would be captured by the horse and that they would watch him instead of the actor” (Hintz, 1979, p. 69). Horses are common in war films, fantasy stories, and as paths to maturity for young boys and girls; in all of these contexts, they serve to fulfill the desires of humans.

However, there is another common and contrasting way of viewing and imagining horses. At times, horses have been granted names, stories, and personalities, and Berger (1989) notes that “throughout history, horses were granted divine status and became symbols of the gods” in Western mythology and art (p. 104). Films have, at times, reflected the conception of the horse as a divine being. Perhaps the best example is Tolkien’s Shadowfax. In the film adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (2003), Gandalf whistles for Shadowfax, and the horse comes galloping to him, sunlight reflecting off his pure white coat and orchestral accompaniment soaring. “Shadowfax,” says Gandalf, “the lord of all horses...and he’s been my friend through many dangers” (Osborne, Jackson, Walsh, and Sanders, 2003). It is worth noting that the white horse has been symbolic for victory, power, pride, and glory and has been utilized and depicted both on and off screen as the horse of heroes (Hintz, 1979). Additionally, in *The Lord of the*

*Rings*, the Rohirrim, or Riders of Rohan, and the kingdom of Rohan as a whole worships the horse, which rears in the center of their flag. A similar perception of horses is reflected in George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series and its television adaptation, *Game of Thrones* (2011 – present), in which the people known as the Dothraki live lives centered around their horse and worship an equine god known as the Great Stallion.

Perhaps the most prominent portrayals of horses, including the aforementioned *Seabiscuit*, are associated with horse racing. Horse racing, the so-called “Sport of Kings,” has played a prominent role in cultures dating back to early Greece and Rome’s chariot races (Berger, 1989). Horse racing played a significant role in American culture in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the sport continues at racetracks across the country where people gather to watch and to wager on these powerful Thoroughbreds. The most prominent of these races are, of course, the Kentucky Derby, Preakness Stakes, and Belmont Stakes, known as the Triple Crown. The Triple Crown is a renowned achievement in American culture; consider the hysteria that surrounded American Pharoah’s win in 2015. This sport, characterized by its adrenaline, high stakes, and beautiful horses, has been a popular topic for both fictional novels and films and those “based on a true story.” Smiley (2013) notes that “racing fiction has been filled with moral ambiguity” and that “American racing fiction...sees evil as pervasive, represented by cruelty towards horses, whether intended or unintended, that seems to be the very nature of horseracing” (p. 55). Smiley also notes that American writers of racing fiction have become focused on the horse itself, which is reflected in many recent horse racing films.

While the sport has had considerable cultural meaning, horse racing in the present day has become a downtrodden industry that stays afloat through a multitude of unsafe and cruel practices. A *New York Times* expose in 2012 revealed that “on average, 24 horses die each week

at racetracks across America” (Bogdanich, Drape, Miles, and Palmer, 2012, p. A1). Horses are run long before their bones are mature enough for the physical exertion of all-out galloping, drugged with a variety of chemicals (everything from Viagra to cobra venom) to mask pain, and often end up sold for a pittance to be slaughtered in foreign countries. The welfare concerns surrounding racing create a question of how we talk about this sport and these horses, which puts an impetus on the analysis of texts that depict them.

### **Anthropomorphism**

Among the earliest and most prominent of fictional horses is Black Beauty, the titular character from Sewell’s 1877 novel. *Black Beauty* has been translated to the screen on multiple occasions, including in 1921, 1946, 1971, 1978, 1987, and most faithfully in 1994. *Black Beauty* is the story of an English horse’s life in a time when horses were valued more for their utility than for their inherent worth. Blount (1974) notes that “the book had enormous influence for good in the treatment of horses and helped to abolish the bearing rein,” which was a strap used to keep horses’ heads unnaturally high when pulling a carriage for aesthetic purposes (p. 251). This influence was made possible by the narrative technique of telling the story from Black Beauty’s point of view; it would be difficult, as a reader, to experience the realities that Black Beauty does and still advocate for the abuse of the animal at the end (Pierson, 2000). *Black Beauty* is an example of a core tenet of the study of the representation of animals: anthropomorphism.

Anthropomorphism refers to the attribution of human traits to animals as well as to inanimate objects. The majority of published work that analyzes the animal on the page or the screen does so through this lens. While it is not a horse film, *The Lion King* (1994) is a textbook example of anthropomorphism; Simba cries after he finds his father dead in an expression of human grief, Scar stages a coup to murder his brother and take over leadership of the Pride Lands, and Simba

and Nala share a romantic evening in the forest. No animal, as Scar does, speaks, and much less uses the phrase “quid pro quo,” just as a pair of lions, who are not monogamous animals, would not categorize their partnership as ‘love.’ Heated debates have raged for years regarding the ethical and scientific implications of anthropomorphism.

While there are a variety of perspectives on this phenomenon, I find myself in agreement with Lockwood (1989), who writes that “it is a disservice to ourselves and to our fellow human and nonhuman creatures to regard any attempt to comprehend their experiences and feelings as merely irrational or sentimental” (p. 55). Of course, there are certainly scientific issues with anthropomorphism, and it can be used in manipulative ways. Lockwood (1989) cites the chimpanzee behavior of showing teeth, which humans tend to interpret as an exuberant smile when it is in truth an expression of anxiety, and politicized documentaries such as *Blackfish* (2013) have employed anthropomorphism to project emotions onto animals that may or may not be experiencing them. However, I agree with Lockwood (1989) in that without some degree of anthropomorphism and attempt to understand the lives of our animal cohabitants, there would be no interest in animal welfare:

Now there is great concern over assessing animals’ experience of pain and the response of animals to different conditions of care. This change...is a true reflection of many scientists’ realization that these questions, rooted in anthropomorphic projections, are timely, interesting, biologically valid, and morally significant. (pp. 54-55)

While anthropomorphism can be problematic and needs to be a primary concern in the study of animal representations, it is not inherently negative and, as Lockwood attests, has contributed to the understandings of animals and increased concern for their wellbeing. *Black Beauty* is an

excellent testament to the implications that anthropomorphism can have on humans' concern for animals, which may then lead to a better life for animals.

## **Production**

There is an additional factor involved in depicting animals on film that must be considered when analyzing the representation of animals: their production and use of animals. In live-action depictions of animals, there must, of course, be an animal that portrays the filmic animal, and there are often ethical questions that accompany these depictions. The American Humane Association (AHA) observes 70% of American film and television productions that involve live animals according to their website, and they attach their "No Animals Were Harmed" trademark to the films that satisfy their requirements (American Humane Association). However, the Hollywood Production Code did not acknowledge the wellbeing of animal actors until 1940, and the brutal abuse of filmed animals, particularly horses, in the years prior is well-documented (McLean, 2014; Mitchum & Pavia, 2014). Forced falls were the primary cause of injuries to horses; the filming of *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1936) resulted in 125 horses' deaths due to broken legs (Mitchum & Pavia, 2014).

Additionally, there has been a great deal of controversy in recent years regarding the AHA's handling of animal incidents and welfare on film sets, and there is growing concern that the organization is not the upstanding moral group that it claims to be (Baum, 2013; Victor, 2017). Despite the AHA's presence, there have still been incidences of severe abuse, particularly toward horses, in recent years. As recently as 2012, HBO's horse racing series *Luck* was cancelled after four horses were euthanized during production (Itzkoff, 2012; Baum, 2013). In a telling statement, HBO proclaimed that, "We maintained the highest safety standards throughout

production, higher in fact than any protocols existing in horse racing anywhere” (as cited in Itzkoff, 2012, p. C1). As McLean (2014) states:

It may be that dogs, like all animals, provoke a ‘crisis of representation’ because the representation of animals in commercial cinema not only affects real-world situations but cannot be understood, properly, *as* representation. A fictional motion picture involving a dog...is always ‘documentary’ in some sense, and the slippage between representational contexts, between dogs as fact and as fiction, can have profound consequences. (p. 20)

In essence, animal actors are still animals, and because they do not know the difference between a film representation and real life, anything they do on screen is real to them. In regard to the horses who acted in *Luck*, “You put a retired racehorse through a starting gate and run him down a track, it’s a race. He doesn’t know he’s acting” (Guillermo, as cited in Itzkoff, 2012, p. C1). The animals’ inability to understand the difference between acting and real life makes understanding representations – and the production of them - even more crucial. The amount of controversy and discussion that has centered around the treatment of animal actors indicates that it would be irresponsible to analyze the depictions of animals without also considering the wellbeing of the animal actors that lend their images to the screen.

The intricate web of ideas outlined above – the representations of animals, the cultural and ideological understandings of the horse, anthropomorphism, production concerns – will be woven together in this thesis in an effort to interrogate the relationships between these factors and what these may mean for real-life horses.

## **Thesis Structure**

As outlined, there is a considerable body of existing research on representations of animals. However, there has been little work on the depiction of horses in mainstream narrative film and

the ideologies that these reflect and shape, and the work that does exist is not written with a critical lens. Films that feature horses, which are significantly and fundamentally different from films that just *include* horses, often have at their core an argument regarding the treatment of these animals. In this thesis, I plan to deconstruct these filmic representations and arguments and their complex and contradictory natures.

I begin this process with an understanding that, due to the sheer number of horse films, this is a significant undertaking; there is a wealth of information to process and analyze within this topic. Due to the expanse of possible material and paths of investigation, my research will be guided by the following questions:

How have filmic depictions of horses in popular narrative film changed over time?

What are common filmic arguments about the treatment of horses, and how are these made?

How do popular modern horse films both challenge and perpetuate the dominant ideological understandings of horses and their uses?

At this point, it becomes necessary to justify my decision to use popular narrative film as the unit of analysis in this thesis. Kellner (2003), as cited earlier, refers to the media as a form of “cultural pedagogy;” popular media such as film have the ability to educate us on how we should understand and consider the depicted subjects. The popularity of a text is directly related to how many people will encounter it and how broadly its messages may be spread. Ray (1985) notes that “...ideology follows the route of the popular” (p. 20). To this effect, the films to be analyzed in this thesis are all films that have received some level of critical acclaim and popularity. This point also goes to explain why this thesis will be focused on narrative film instead of



documentary film. While documentary is rising in popularity, its audiences are dwarfed by the number of people who flock to popular narrative films. For example, the number of people who saw the documentary *Buck* (2011), which chronicles the life and techniques of a well-known horse trainer, would be dwarfed by the number of people who have seen the horse racing film *Secretariat* (2010), which generated almost 15 times the box office revenue (Box Office Mojo). Therefore, in the interest of examining the depictions which are most far-reaching, this thesis will focus on popular narrative films of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

I will utilize a cultural studies approach to this project, which brings with it a necessary politics and investigation of power. As Kellner (2003) posits, “Media images help shape our view of the world and our deepest values: what we consider good or bad, positive or negative, moral or evil...Media spectacles demonstrate who has power and who is powerless” (p. 9). As has been suggested by several scholars, the subordination of animals in contemporary culture shares similarities with issues of race, gender, and class (Spiegel, 1996). While I acknowledge that this is a controversial stance that is outside the limits of this study, the important aspect of this comparison is that a question of power is obvious in all of these relationships, and these power struggles have been illustrated and reflected in mediated representations of these subordinated groups. Through a cultural studies approach, which is ideal for this type of investigation, I will analyze the production and reception of these texts with special attention to the texts and the ideologies they set forth. Issues of production in horse films have already been acknowledged in the literature review, and these will be a primary focus of this thesis. I will also acknowledge additional aspects of production and distribution including the films’ marketing. In regard to reception, I will analyze critical reviews of the films as well as popular discourse, box office statistics, and award nominations. Understanding the discussions surrounding these films

as well as their popularity is crucial to developing an understanding of the impact of these equine depictions.

## **Conclusion**

Real-life horses serve the same purposes that filmic horses do. While most horse lovers claim to love the animals, there are inherent questions about what is done to force a horse to be the ideal companion. Even the common phrase of ‘breaking’ a horse comes with considerable rhetorical implications; the rider must *break* the horse’s spirit to ride it. Furthermore, despite the supposed love and care given to these animals, they often end up living and dying in horrifying ways. Consider the following passage from Pierson (2000):

Like the Web site for the equine sanctuary that warns visitors with weak stomachs to go no farther lest they see, by way of some video footage, what really goes on in a horse slaughterhouse, there is a warning here. Do not proceed if you prefer not to know what happened to your reining horse after he progressed through three owners, finally to come up lame as the possession of someone who really needed to recoup some money if this was going to be it; or what happened in September to the ponies adored all summer long by the girls at camp...; or where the Amish’s buggy horses find themselves when there is no more to be gotten out of them by those gentle, frugal people; or where all manner of damaged show horses, racehorses, backyard horses, wild horses, hack stable horses, urban carriage horses, Premarin horses, old horses, go when they go to their end. (p. 204)

This passage makes it clear that the horse world is fraught with issues, and it is the horses who pay the price. However, horses have been our on-screen partners since the very beginnings of film and have been our real-life partners for thousands of years. This thesis ultimately interrogates the ways in which we depict horses on screen and the ways in which these constructions shape our growing understandings of horses and our relationships with them.

## **A Brief History of the Horse Racing Film**

As the chestnut rounds the final turn onto the homestretch, the soaring musical accompaniment and the voice of the announcer fades away. For a brief moment, the viewer hears only Secretariat's hooves beating into the ground and his rapid, laboring breaths as he gallops forth to win the Belmont Stakes by a record 31 lengths, cementing his place in history as a Triple Crown winner and arguably the greatest racehorse that ever lived. Secretariat's victory was monumental when it occurred in 1973, and its replication on the film screen is no less powerful. *Secretariat* (2010) is a film that fits soundly within the genre of the horse racing film, which has been a popular subgenre in Western and Hollywood film since their earliest productions.

The common passion for horse racing in the United States and abroad, coupled with its inherently filmic qualities of competition and grandeur, has led to the sport's representation on film countless times. Horse racing films fit soundly within the sports film genre (Jones, 2010). Competition is a narrative device that gives the audience someone or something to root for, whether that be an underdog horse, an owner struggling financially and praying for a victory, or a jockey coming back from an injury. As Mitchum and Pavia (2014) write in their history of the horse racing film, "Common themes, the winning racehorse bailing out a desperate owner, a long

shot coming from behind, a former champion making a comeback after an injury, have all been worked and reworked over the decades” (p. 178).

In addition to high-stakes competition, the other core focus of the horse racing film is the group of people that surround the racehorse. Mitchum and Pavia (2014) note that “From the 1920s to the present, the colorful characters of the racetrack milieu – from wealthy owners, gifted trainers, weight-battling jockeys, unscrupulous competitors, and touts to low-heelers hoping to hit the jackpot – have provided inspiration for screenwriters” (p. 178). To the same effect, Queenan (2010) noted that “Very few movies have been built around horses, and even those that have been eventually cede centre stage to the bipeds in the production.” This anthropocentrism seems to be the central and founding principle of horse racing films; while the horses are beautiful and may be interesting, the film is primarily about the people who surround the animal and their relationships with the horse and the sport. In these films, the horse serves to aid the human in whatever (typically financial) goal they may be pursuing; the horses' own safety and well-being is a distant secondary concern.

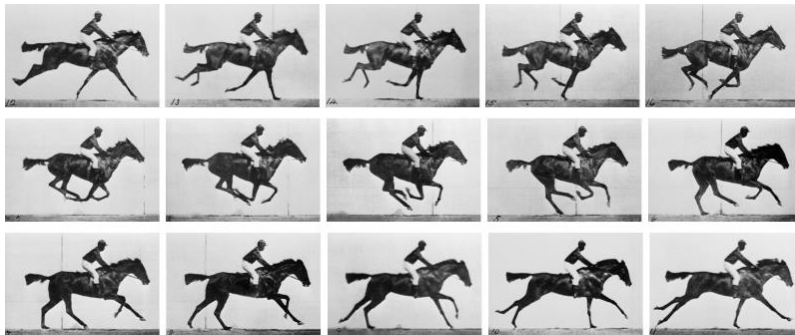
This chapter will trace the history of the popular horse racing film from the very first film, which featured a galloping racehorse, to the modern 2000’s-era horse racing film with particular attention to the ways in which these films depict their equine subjects. While this history will not include an in-depth analysis of each and every horse racing film ever made, it is instead intended to note significant trends and themes within the horse racing film. In so doing, the following pages will address significant time periods within the horse racing film, beginning with the earliest depictions of the sport, moving to the first appearances of primary horse racing clichés in the 1920s and 1930s, analyzing the emergence of the horse racing film that foregrounds the relationship between a horse and a child between the 1940s and 1970s, and ending with the

sudden resurgence of the subgenre in the 2000s. While a multitude of horse racing films will be mentioned, only films that have been noted for their historic popularity and cultural longevity will be analyzed at length in this chapter.

### **Early Horse Racing Films (1870s – 1900s)**

The history of the horse racing film is closely intertwined with the history of film as a medium. Jones (2010) notes that "One could argue that film-pioneer Edward Muybridge (1830 – 1904), in his quest to settle a bet by filming a galloping horse, directed the first film about horseracing in 1872" and points to this film as not only the first film but arguably the first film in the history of the sports film genre (p. 118). As referenced above, the film was created in order to settle a bet regarding whether all four of a horse's legs come off the ground at a gallop. (They do.) While it lasts only a few seconds, *Sallie Gardner at a Gallop* (1872) is an iconic image that is renowned in film history for setting the medium into motion. While the equine aspect of this film is not often recognized, there is a kind of poetry in the fact that the very first filmic image was of a racehorse. The inherent beauty and drama of a galloping racehorse made for an ideal subject, and this is a visual that film has replicated countless times since.

Illustration 1



Other iconic early films chose to utilize the beauty and drama of the horse. The Lumiere brothers' *Dragoons Crossing the Saone* (1896) depicts a group of young men riding horses as they swim across a wide river. In 1897, Thomas Edison filmed a harness race, in which horses pull light carriages instead of carrying jockeys (Mitchum and Pavia, 2014). This film lacks the cinematic and dramatic qualities of *Sallie Gardner at a Gallop*, but it is notable for its return to the already common subject of the racehorse.

### **The Horse as Commodity (1910s – 1930s)**

As Hollywood developed as a popular entertainment industry during the first decade of the 20th Century, representations of horses took narrative form. Unlike the early practice of filming horses in everyday life, more narrative and fictionalized representations of horses began to become popular. Mitchum and Pavia (2014) write that, "Director Reginald Barker established a soon-to-be-clichéd plotline in *The Thoroughbred* (1916), a comedic tale of a man struggling to get out of debt by entering his horse in a big race" (p. 178). This plotline is the first in a long line of films that utilize the theme of a horse being used to win a significant amount of money.

In discussing this theme, it is important to note that the history of these films, and indeed the history of horse racing itself, cannot be separated from the Great Depression of 1929 and the years and events that followed. In Hillenbrand's 2001 history *Seabiscuit: An American Legend*, she details the rebirth of American horse racing, which had been struggling in the US due to anti-gambling legislation. The sport was resurrected as "state governments searched desperately for revenue" in the wake of 1929's stock market crash and the resulting Depression (p. 16). Relegalizing gambling and therefore revitalizing the sport of horse racing was a primary way in which this was done. Additionally, Hillenbrand also discusses the 1935 origin of the Santa Anita Handicap, an iconic horse race that is still run today and is renowned for its purse: "\$100,000,

plus a few thousand dollars in entry revenue...It was the biggest purse in the world. Offered in a year in which the average per capita income in the United States was \$432, Strub's purse caused a national sensation" (p. 16).

It is not difficult to see why the filmic theme of utilizing a horse for money was popular in this time. If one could train a horse to be successful in a big race, they could overcome the Depression and access the motherlode. As the sport and the idea were popular, so was the horse racing film. The Marx Brothers film *A Day at the Races* (1937) is an ideal example of the replication of this theme in film. Promotional stills for this film depict the brothers with a swaybacked horse; notably, the audience's attention is meant to be focused on the Marx Brothers themselves, who stand in front of the horse. It is worth noting that the horse is outfitted in carriage gear, and as evidenced by its conformation and coloring, is very obviously not a racehorse at all, which raises questions of verisimilitude and the films' intended audiences (presumably not horse people).

Illustration 2



Of course, the horse itself matters to the story only in terms of whether he wins his race, and this film and cliché epitomize the mindset that the racehorse is not a sentient animal but a utility for making money and gaining success. Interestingly, the equine subject of *A Day at the Races*, Hi Hat, is entered into a particular type of race called a steeplechase, which, as will be discussed further in a later section, is a type of race that holds even more pronounced dangers than the average flat race.

Perhaps the most interesting and unique aspect of *A Day at the Races* is Hi Hat's hatred of the banker, Mr. Morgan. The horse is shown kicking, rearing, and panicking when he sees Morgan or hears his voice, presumably as a result of Morgan's abuse toward the horse. This hatred comes to a head when Hi Hat refuses a fence in the steeplechase, seemingly signaling to his jockey that he is not interested in participating in the race. However, the jockey shows Hi Hat a picture of Morgan that he has stored in his pocket, and the horse becomes so enraged that he turns around and not only jumps the fence but wins the race. This is played for comedic effect, but it is a troubling scene when one considers the mental anguish that the horse must have experienced to trigger a reaction; however, this idea is ignored in favor of the horse's use for financial gain.

It would be impossible to acknowledge the intertwined history of the Depression, horse racing, and horse racing's depiction on film without discussing the very real and beloved racehorse Seabiscuit, who has been immortalized repeatedly in film. The horse, who raced in the late 1930s, captured the hearts of a nation struggling through war and recovering from the Great Depression. By far the most critically successful of filmic adaptations about Seabiscuit was the 2003 film adapted from Laura Hillenbrand's well-received 2001 biography of the horse. However, a much earlier fictionalized version of the little racehorse's story was told in *The Story of Seabiscuit* (1949). This film was panned by critics; the *New York Times* review of the film



concludes with the following: “The ‘Biscuit,’ in short, does a lot of running but his ‘story’ is out of the money” (A.W., 1949, para. 3). The production of the film is detailed in Mitchum and Pavia (2014):

“Not only were the lives of the real people surrounding Seabiscuit altered to ill effect, but in this case the equine actors were also uncooperative. When the horse portraying War Admiral kept beating the movie’s Seabiscuit, director David Butler resorted to archival footage of the famous match between the two rivals.” (p. 183)

### **Of Horses and Children: A New Theme Emerges (1940s)**

Whereas earlier films tended to focus on the economic possibilities presented by racehorses, films in the 1940s begin to shift toward a different type of representation. Smiley notes that “most children’s books about horseracing – fictionalized accounts of important horses – use the device of a child’s attachment to the great horse” (p. 51). A thematic focus on the bond between horse and child begins to emerge in popular film representations at this time. The first of these is *Pride of the Blue Grass* (1939). In this film, an “outcast kid” develops a bond with a blind horse and trains him to be a champion steeplechaser. This film also involves the theme of the underdog horse, which will be discussed further at a later point in this chapter.

Perhaps the most iconic and beloved of the films in this section is *National Velvet* (1944), based on the popular 1935 novel by Enid Bagnold. *National Velvet* is one of a small handful of horse racing films that depict a race that takes place outside of the United States; the film focuses on a famous English steeplechase known as the Grand National. This film depicts an enchanting love story between Velvet Brown, played by a young Elizabeth Taylor, and a horse, named The Pie, that she wins in a raffle. As Velvet begins to ride The Pie across the English countryside, she

and family friend Mi Taylor discover the horse's talent for jumping and eventually decide, with the help of Velvet's mother, to run the horse in the iconic English steeplechase known as The Grand National. Velvet's love for The Pie and for horses in general is the central theme of the movie. Velvet is shown galloping about the village on foot, pretending to drive imaginary horses in bed, and collecting cut-out images of horses, all of whom have names and stories, in a small box. Velvet dreams of and has eyes for only horses, and her eventual ownership of The Pie is a culmination of all of these dreams. The film's poster and repeated shots of Velvet and The Pie make it obvious that the bond between horse and child is the central theme of *National Velvet*.

Illustration 3

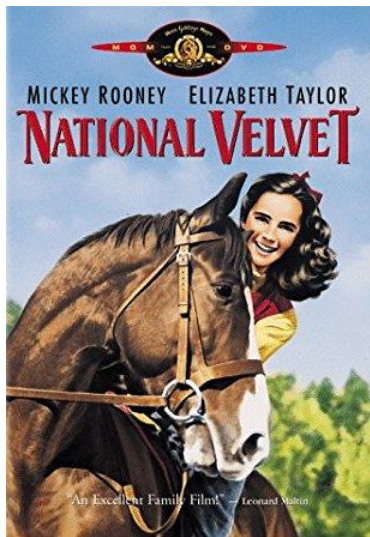


Illustration 4



Velvet's love for the horse, however, becomes complex when one considers the race that the film centers around. The Grand National has been continuously run at Aintree Racecourse in Liverpool since 1839 (Burns, 2013). It is among the most prominent and well-known of steeplechase races in the world; it is also one of the most infamous horse events in the world. Horses fall, resulting in broken bones and euthanasia, at regular rates in the Grand National;

Burns (2013) noted that the race has amassed “18 deaths in the past 20 years, including four in the past two races” (p. D1).

*National Velvet* (1944) does not shy away from depicting the dangers of the Grand National. As Velvet and The Pie race around the track at Aintree, several of the competing horses are shown falling. Similar scenes exist in the films *A Day at the Races* (1937) and *Pride of the Blue Grass* (1939). The very real and visceral falls depicted in these films force one to wonder how they were filmed; however, no production details exist on the filming of these scenes. *National Velvet* seems willing to acknowledge the risk of the race without criticism, and Velvet’s insistence that the Grand National is The Pie’s chance at greatness seems bizarre and at odds with her love for the horse. Why does greatness require running the horse in one of the most dangerous sporting events in history?

### **Dry Spells (1950s – 1960s)**

The 1950s and 1960s were something of a dry spell for the horse racing film. While a handful of racing-related films were released in the earlier part of this time period such as *Pride of the Blue Grass* (1954) and *Francis Goes to the Races* (1951), the films that were released in these years have had little cultural longevity. Notable horse racing films did not emerge again until the 1970s. There is no clear reason why the genre plummeted in popularity during this time, but it may be at least partially linked with a similar dry spell. The Triple Crown is and has been renowned among horse racing fans both casual and devoted; indeed, the Kentucky Derby, Preakness Stakes, and Belmont Stakes are the only horse races that receive widespread news coverage today. However, there was a considerable gap in Triple Crown winners during the 1950s and 1960s; after Citation won in 1948, there was not another Triple Crown winner until

Secretariat in 1973. The lack of Triple Crown victories was likely one of several factors in the genre's dry spell, along with a general interest shift toward television programming.

In Secretariat's *New York Times* obituary, his owner, Penny Chenery, was quoted as saying that when Secretariat won the Triple Crown,

Horse racing was in a down period. The country was in a blue mood. It was the time of Watergate and the Nixon scandals, and people wanted something to make them feel good. This red horse with the blue-and-white blinkers and silks seemed to epitomize an American hero. (Crist, 1989, p. A1)

Considering Secretariat's popularity and his status as the first Triple Crown winner in 25 years, it does not seem outlandish to suggest that horse racing – and the horse racing film – exploded back onto the scene as a result of Secretariat's remarkable victories at a turbulent time.

### **Of Horses and Children – Again (1970s)**

Despite this pause in the popularity of these films, when they did return to popularity in the 1970s, the theme of a horse and a child persisted. *Casey's Shadow* (1978) focuses on the bond between a child, Casey, and the Quarter Horse foal that he saves from euthanasia on two separate occasions; the horse eventually becomes a well-known racehorse (Mitchum and Pavia, 2014). This film, like most others in the genre, relies on the convention of “the big race,” but it, like *National Velvet*, does so while foregrounding the relationship between child and horse. Interestingly, the film emphasizes that “incredible stress is put on racehorses who as two-year-olds are pushed to perform before their leg bones have fully matured” (Mitchum and Pavia, 2014, p. 179). This film is, remarkably, the only film in the subgenre to acknowledge this aspect of horse racing.

*The Black Stallion* (1979) continues in the same tradition of a child and equine's bond. The film is notable for both its depiction of the relationship between the titular horse and a young boy and for its utter lack of realism. The classic story details the bond that forms between a boy, Alec, and a horse known as The Black after they are shipwrecked on an island together. After Alec and The Black are rescued from the island, Alec keeps the horse and trains him, with the help of a retired jockey, to become a champion racehorse. The largest outstanding issue with this narrative is that The Black is an Arabian horse; American horse racing is dominated by and constrained to Jockey Club Thoroughbreds.

An additional odd and complicated moment in *The Black Stallion* occurs when the horses are being loaded into the starting gate before the concluding race. The Black and another horse have an altercation, and The Black is left with blood pouring down his leg. However, the horse ignores his injury and gallops through the pain wins the race. The film seems to celebrate the horse's determination to win the race; however, it ignores the multitude of significant ethical questions regarding the running of an injured horse. The supposed innate toughness and determination of horses that this film and others hint at has echoes of a similar discourse regarding pit bull dogs. Popular discourse surrounding pit bulls has stated that these dogs do not feel pain, making them ideal fighting dogs (Dickey, 2016). This supposed (and false) quality has forced these dogs into a variety of compromising positions; because they do not feel pain, they allegedly enjoy fighting and become attack dogs. In this narrative, the animal – horse or dog - is willing to overcome pain in pursuit of its goals, which is celebrated as some sort of bravery and courage, when it is, in actuality, exploitation and animal cruelty.

The films listed above – *Pride of the Blue Grass*, *National Velvet*, *Casey's Shadow*, and *The Black Stallion* – share a common theme of celebrating the bond between children and their

horses. While this chapter is a history of the horse racing film, it is worth acknowledging that this theme is one that has remained extremely popular in more general horse films as well. While these films have considerable differences, their central thread focuses on celebrating the innate wonder and magic of the connection between a horse and a child, and this theme's increasing frequency in these time periods indicates a changing relationship toward horses – one that celebrates rather than exclusively exploits them.

### **Surge in the 2000s**

While the afore-mentioned films portray a rich, storied history of the horse racing film, the subgenre experienced an explosion in popularity and frequency in the 2000s. The sport itself has experienced some level of resurgence as well. News stories surrounding the Kentucky-Derby-winning Barbaro's injury and eventual euthanasia in 2006 and Eight Belles's injury and euthanasia in 2007 as well as American Pharoah's 2015 Triple Crown victory were front-page, top-of-the-hour reports. While the sport has faded from popularity since its heyday in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it certainly has not disappeared from the public eye.

Barbaro's 2006 leg fracture and Eight Belles's 2007 fracture, both of which occurred in Triple Crown races, brought scrutiny and criticism to American horse racing in a way that has not been seen before. As cited in the first chapter, a 2012 *New York Times* expose revealed that an average number of 24 American racehorses die on racetracks *every week*, totaling a rough estimate of approximately 1,248 horses a year (Bogdanich, Drape, Miles, and Palmer). Horse racing has been on the decline for many years, and this has created a racetrack culture that encourages the pursuit of purse money more than it cares for the wellbeing of the horses themselves (Bogdanich, Drape, Miles, and Palmer, 2012). The frequency of racehorse deaths can be attributed to a wide

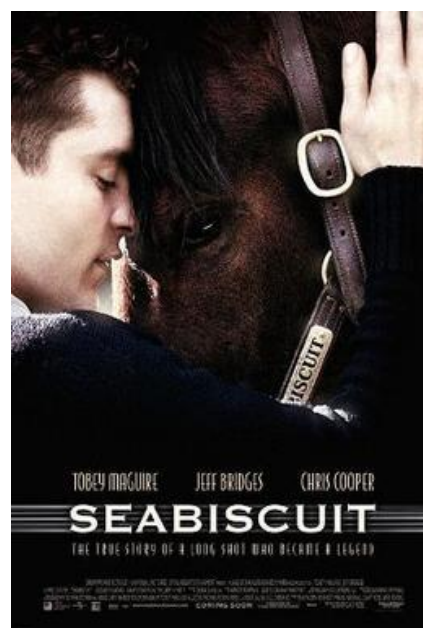
variety of causes, the most prominent of which is the practice of doping or using pain medication on injured animals who then run too hard and injure themselves.

Amidst several years of growing controversy within the sport, the horse racing film reached massive audiences in the 2000s. These films have changed somewhat since the popular racing films of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. As Smiley (2014) writes, “In the United States, writers have become more interested in equine personality...” (p. 55). An increased focus on the horse has become noticeable in these more recent racing films, but the attention given to the horse has not overcome the emphasis placed on the human and their experiences. It could be argued that the child/horse bond films of the 1940s through the 1970s were the predecessors to these films that share an increased emphasis on the horse. The increasingly amplified focus on the horse is indicated by recent film posters; two of the films discussed in this section (*Secretariat* and *Seabiscuit*) have posters that feature a horse and a human staring each other in the eye as if they were equals and friends.

Illustration 5



Illustration 6



This visual rhetoric of these posters seems to suggest a claim that would coincide with Smiley's; there is some increased concern for the horse - some cherished and symbiotic bond - that is being upheld in these films. However, the trappings of the racehorse that are also visible in these posters (the silhouette of Churchill Downs dwarfing Chinery and Secretariat as the horse is equipped with full racing tack, Seabiscuit being restrained with a leather halter) and suggest that while the horse is receiving more respect and celebration from these films, they are far more nuanced than a simple revelry and appreciation of the horse.

The afore-mentioned film *Seabiscuit* (2003) will be more thoroughly analyzed in the next chapter of this thesis, but it is worth acknowledging at this point as one of the most renowned and beloved of horse racing films; it is also arguably the most horse-centered of recent racing films. *Seabiscuit* tells the true story of the titular horse, who raced with great success in the 1930s and '40s despite a troubled history of abuse, overwork, and problematic conformation flaws including his crooked legs and diminutive stature. The real-life Seabiscuit was beloved and captured the nation during his day at the racetrack, and the film's retelling of his story received critical success and was even nominated for the Oscar for Best Picture. This film has complicated ideological implications, but it is still, at its core, a film that celebrates the little horse that could.

*Hidalgo* (2003) is something of a departure from most horse racing films of this period. While the film does depict a race, it is an endurance race set in Arabia instead of a flat dirt race or steeplechase. Endurance racing is different from American Thoroughbred racing in several ways - most notably in distance - but the sport holds the same dangers as its cousin. In fact, endurance racing is accompanied by some increasing risk for the horse; as the races take place over hundreds of miles (or thousands, in *Hidalgo*), the opportunity for a variety of injuries (fractures,



dehydration, exhaustion, the threat of stepping into a hole in the ground) is quite present in endurance racing. The film depicts these dangers in graphic detail, but despite the threats of endurance racing, *Hidalgo* has a happy ending as the mustang is released to the wild after winning the race. This film puts more emphasis on the horse itself than many of its forebears do, and the horse is, like *Seabiscuit*, an underdog; the film makes light of Hidalgo's status as a mustang racing against highly-bred Arabian horses.

In a similar vein, *Racing Stripes* (2005) is a film that deserves mention due to its unusual emphasis on the horses' (and zebra's) point of view. Stripes, the main character, is a zebra who pursues his goal of being a racehorse. This film conjures an image of an animal who *wants* to race, and while Stripes is a zebra and not a horse, he participates in the sport with other horses, who cheer him on in his racing career. We cannot suppose to know what a horse would do in any situation, but it does seem odd to picture a horse encouraging another animal to subject himself to the cruelties and injustices of horse racing. While the ideological implications of this film are odd, it is notable for its emphasis on the equine point of view. Additionally, this is another film that emphasizes the underdog; Stripes is mocked by some of the more elite Thoroughbreds due to his differences.

*Dreamer* (2005), released the same year as *Racing Stripes*, is a racing film that follows in the footsteps of films such as *National Velvet*, *Casey's Shadow*, and *The Black Stallion* in that its focus centers on the relationship between a child and an underdog horse. *Dreamer* concerns a horse that was injured on the racetrack; the horse is then rehabilitated by the child and experiences a triumphant return to racing. *Dreamer* and *Racing Stripes* highlight an interesting moment in the history of the horse racing film; two films released in the same year, both of

which focus primarily on an underdog horse and a child, sketch a shifting understanding of the horse and the sport.

The most recent popular filmic depiction of horse racing, *Secretariat* (2010), tells the story of the so-called “greatest racehorse that ever lived.” Big Red, as those who knew him best called him, was a spectacular, almost otherworldly horse whose legend has lived on American culture since his Triple Crown victory in 1973. However, the filmmakers of *Secretariat* made the odd move of focusing much more heavily on Secretariat’s owner, Penny Chenery, than it does on Secretariat. Queenan (2010) echoes this observation in his review of the film for *The Guardian*, referring to the film’s focus on Chenery as the film’s primary problem. In focusing on Chenery, the film betrays the recent trend in which horse racing stories have directed more attention to the horse; the film instead relies on the old cliché tactic of focusing on the people. The sections that do directly concern the horse, however, are indicative of the same ideological paradox that riddles *Seabiscuit*, *National Velvet*, *The Black Stallion*, and so many of the other films that have thus far been mentioned; we claim to love the horse, and yet we push him into an abusive and exploitative industry that endangers his health and wellbeing.

The film repeatedly references Secretariat as a horse whose love for racing trumps all else. In an exchange between Chenery and Secretariat’s eventual jockey, Turcotte, Chenery questions him about the death of a horse he had recently ridden. Turcotte responds,

“I risk my life every time I get on a horse. I’m not afraid. Neither are they. I wanna win just like they do. It’s true – the last horse I rode ran so hard his heart burst. But it’s who they are. And it’s who I am.”

This statement is an odd note; even without acknowledging the issues of anthropomorphism here, it seems outlandish to suggest that a horse would willingly 'burst his heart' in pursuit of a racing victory. Does it not seem more plausible that the horse would be just as content galloping

a few laps in a pasture and then settling in to graze on green grass in the sunlight with its herd, unfettered by the dangers of racing? *Secretariat* (2010) frames the horse as a competitive animal with an undeniable drive to race, which the audience is supposed to accept without question.

In another scene, Chenery and Secretariat's trainer, Lucien Laurin, discuss whether Secretariat should be trained and run in the three-week gap between the Preakness Stakes and the Belmont Stakes. Laurin advises Chenery that, "If we push him instead of rest him, it could be dangerous. No one knows how much he can take." Chenery replies, "He does." These two sections are problematic in their supposed understandings of horses. According to Chenery, Laurin, and Turcotte, racehorses are racing machines whose only desire is to run and defeat other horses. This echoes the afore-mentioned discourse surrounding pit bulls, their lack of ability to feel pain, and their love for fighting, and it is emphasized by a Bible verse from Job that is recited in the final moments of the film as Secretariat wins the Belmont Stakes and takes the Triple Crown:

Do you give the horse its strength or clothe its neck with a flowing mane? Do you make it leap like a locust, striking terror with its proud snorting? It paws fiercely, rejoicing in its strength, and charges into the fray. *It laughs at fear, afraid of nothing; it does not shy away from the sword. The quiver rattles against its side, along with the flashing spear and lance. In frenzied excitement it eats up the ground; it cannot stand still when the trumpet sounds.*

Again, this verse suggests that racing is inherent to a horse's disposition; "it cannot stand still when the trumpet sounds." The idea that horses want to race and want to be put in the kind of mortal danger that racing presents is outlandish. This claim is even more concerning when we consider that the vast majority of these films – *Secretariat*, *Seabiscuit*, *Dreamer*, *Hidalgo* – are

"based on a true story," leading the audience to believe that this is, in fact, the true nature of the horse.

## **Conclusion**

As is clearly detailed above, the history of the horse racing film would perhaps be best understood as a history of films about people who use horses as a means to achieve success, whether that success be emotional or financial. Cassidy (2014) writes that “representing racing is a fraught and complex endeavor. Death stalks the racecourse, along with joy and rapture...” (p. 1). However, the mortal danger that horse racing presents to the horses that keep it afloat is often ignored or minimized in favor of human gain. At times, the films do acknowledge the danger (*National Velvet*’s cascades of falling horses in the steeplechase, the injury that sets the plot of *Dreamer* into motion, the blood pouring down The Black’s leg in *The Black Stallion*). However, these injuries are always presented as something that can be overcome and conquered; the horse can go on to win another day. The ways in which these films depict humans, horse racing, and the very nature of the horses themselves have the potential to shape ideological understandings of both the sport and the animals. The shift in primary themes – from horse as commodity to horse as friend – suggest that our relationships with horses and with horse racing have shifted considerably since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, now reflecting a more charitable and celebratory attitude toward the horses. However, while we no longer depict the horse as a mere means to make money, there are certain ideological complexities that are still present in these stories. It is with this concept in mind that we move to an in-depth analysis of the renowned film *Seabiscuit* (2003).

**The Ultimate Underdog (or Underhorse):  
A Textual Analysis of the 2003 Film *Seabiscuit***

*“You know, everybody thinks we found this broken-down horse and fixed him, but we didn’t. He fixed us. Every one of us. And I guess in a way we kinda fixed each other too.”*

It is 5:00 AM, and the early-morning fog has obscured the racetrack and the horses on it. Aside from horses cantering by as they complete their workouts, it is quiet. In the distance, a horse and its handler emerge, but the horse is not cantering, galloping, or showing any spirit at all; instead he walks with his head down, looking almost dejected. It is the first time that Seabiscuit's eventual trainer, Tom Smith, encounters the horse that would make him famous. The narrator states, "Smith would say later that the horse looked right through him, as if to say, 'what the hell are you looking at? Who do you think you are?'" The narrator asserts that Smith did not notice any of Seabiscuit's obvious physical issues: "He was looking the horse in the eye." Smith sighs, "Damn," knowing that he has just met the horse that would change the course of his life.

Seabiscuit, a small and plain-looking bay Thoroughbred, is among the most famous and fondly-remembered of American racehorses. Seabiscuit's underdog past coupled with the heartbreaking stories of the people that surrounded him worked to make his story one that has been discussed and repeatedly represented on screen and page since the horse's rise to popularity

in the 1930s. In 2003, *Seabiscuit*'s story was featured in a major feature film that received a great deal of critical and popular attention. *Seabiscuit* (2003) is a profound film, which was noted and well-received for its themes of democracy, the American dream, and loss.. In light of the themes mentioned in the previous chapters of this thesis, such as the shift in depicting horses as friends instead of commodities and the sacred bond between horse and rider, this film will be analyzed for its depiction of the "little racehorse that could." It will be asserted that the film attempts to portray the horse racing industry as one made up of people who love and cherish the horses and are forced to mix with a few bad owners; however, this is a sugarcoated version of reality that may impact audiences' understandings of the 'Sport of Kings' to the ultimate detriment of the horses involved.

### ***Seabiscuit*'s Place in History**

*Seabiscuit* (2003) is a film worthy of especial analytic attention due to its wide reach. *Seabiscuit* made \$120 million at the box office, making it by far the most lucrative of films in the horse racing subgenre and, indeed, the most lucrative of any horse film made since 1980 (Box Office Mojo, "Horses at the Box Office," 2018). The second-highest ranking horse film is *War Horse* (2011), a film directed by box office darling Steven Spielberg, whose earnings were roughly half of *Seabiscuit*'s. It can be assumed that at least a portion of this film's popular success was due to the positive critical response to the film, which culminated in *Seabiscuit*'s nomination for the Academy Award for Best Picture in 2004.

This kind of popularity that *Seabiscuit* (2003) achieved is not typical for horse racing films. Films like *Dreamer* (2005), which made a mere \$32 million at the box office, or *Secretariat* (2010), which garnered \$59 million, tend to appeal to niche audiences, particularly equine enthusiasts and children. However, *Seabiscuit* (2003) is bolstered by its more mature and

complex themes, making it a film that is not merely for the child or the horse lover, but instead a film that has the kind of mass appeal that is typically reserved for sports films or critical darlings.

It is important to note that *Seabiscuit* (2003) was released two years after Hillenbrand's well-researched *Seabiscuit: An American Legend*. In the *New York Times* review of the film, Scott (2003) writes that "The current wave of Seabiscuit mania, which crests today with the nationwide release of Gary Ross's film adaptation of Ms. Hillenbrand's book, may reflect a similar hunger for optimism and inspiration" as *Seabiscuit* inspired during the Depression (para. 2). To this point, the film occupies an interesting position in the history of horse racing films and the history of America. In 2003, America was very much still struggling with the effects of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The War on Terror began in 2001, and the American invasion of Iraq occurred in 2003, the same year that *Seabiscuit* was released. In one of the most tumultuous times in American history, it is not surprising that a story like *Seabiscuit*'s did well; it was released at a point when Americans wanted to be reminded that we had weathered and overcome bad times before and that the little guy could come out on top. As noted, *Seabiscuit* was well-received, but the film was critiqued for its overly sentimental tone. As Scott (2003) writes, "the main problem with '*Seabiscuit*,' indeed, is a surfeit of reverence" (para. 4). While this reverence may have earned the film some criticism, it fit in well with the time period and the needs of American audiences.

The timing of *Seabiscuit*'s release is also remarkable when we consider the boom in horse racing films that occurred around the same time. Correlation, of course, does not imply causation, but it does not seem outlandish to suggest that the film's critical and financial success inspired others to create horse racing films such as *Dreamer* (2005), *Racing Stripes* (2005), and *Secretariat* (2010), all of which focus on similar underdog themes as *Seabiscuit* (2003).

## **Humble Beginnings**

*Seabiscuit* opens with an overview of the time period in which it is set, and 1930s America is an undeniably significant player in the story. The film employs a narrative strategy of using a narrator to set the scene as real-life black-and-white images give viewers a sense of the times. The filmmakers do this throughout the film, and the trials and tribulations of Seabiscuit seem to rise and fall with them.

The story begins as viewers learn the backgrounds of the three men that anchor Seabiscuit's tale, all of whom were affected in some way by the Great Depression. Throughout the film, the three men's stories are traced along with Seabiscuit's and along with the development of the Great Depression. We watch as Charles Howard gains business success in the 1920s only to have his business crippled and his family torn apart once the Depression hit. We see Tom Smith, the man who would eventually become Seabiscuit's trainer, live a secluded life as a former trainer and farrier, now without success and with only horses for company. Perhaps most affective is the story of Red Pollard, Seabiscuit's jockey, who was secretly blind in one eye; he was abandoned by his affluent parents after the Depression hit and forced to live with and work for an abusive low-level racehorse trainer as a teenager. Red's story shares several parallels with Seabiscuit's and positions him as the childlike figure that anchors many of the films discussed in the previous chapter.

While these stories, which are based in truth, are moving, it is curious that in the first forty-five minutes of *Seabiscuit*, horses are a mere afterthought. Viewers see Red ride in races at the bush track, Tom gallop across the West and lasso wild horses, and Charles poke fun at the frivolity of horses and horse racing; however, none of the horses pictured are named or acknowledged. Once we reach the forty-five-minute mark, however, viewers are finally



introduced to the titular horse. Upon his introduction, the film's narrator gives a rapid-fire synopsis of Seabiscuit's early life, beginning with his breeding:

He was the son of Hard Tack, sired by the mighty Man O' War. But the breeding did little to impress anyone at Claiborne Farms. At six months, he was shipped off to train with the legendary trainer Sunny Fitzsimmons, who, over time, developed a similar opinion of the colt.

Upon the introduction to the horse, the film immediately asserts that, despite his elite breeding, young Seabiscuit was an unimpressive specimen. His diminutive size and passive personality were significant contributors to this assessment:

The judgment wasn't helped by his gentle nature. Where his sire had been a fierce, almost violent competitor, Seabiscuit took to sleeping for huge chunks of the day and enjoyed lolling for hours under the boughs of the juniper trees. His other great talent was eating.

This scene is accompanied by scenes of a passive (and, frankly, adorable) horse lounging in the grass and gobbling up oats.

Illustration 7



Seabiscuit is characterized, both in narration and in his visual depiction, as a lazy, kindly soul who prefers relaxation to the speed and vigor of the racetrack. This description draws an

interesting parallel to the children's book *Ferdinand* (1936) and its 2017 film adaptation, which tells a similar story of a pacifistic bull who fails as a bullfighter.

Fitzsimmons is then pictured telling his jockey to hit Seabiscuit with a whip “as many times as you can over a quarter of a mile,” which the film then shows in vivid detail. The American Humane Association, the body that audits the use of animal actors in many American films, claims that the horse was not actually hit in this scene and that any whips used in the film were made of foam rubber (American Humane, 2017).

The brutal whipping does not change Seabiscuit’s nature. The film’s narrator states that, “When he didn’t improve, they decided the colt was incorrigible.”

By the time he was three years old, Seabiscuit was struggling in two cheap claiming races a week. Soon he grew as bitter and as angry as his sire, Hard Tack, had been.

It is worth noting that running in two races a week is an extremely heavy schedule for a young horse; at three years old, Seabiscuit would not have been fully developed mentally or physically. The above narration is the film’s way of telling Seabiscuit's life story up until his purchase by the Howards, and it is exemplary of the way in which the film tends to characterize and discuss the horse. Seabiscuit is framed as the underdog throughout the story, and his past is narrated in a way that highlights the horse’s personality and abusive treatment at the hands of his previous owner. This is primarily achieved using anthropomorphic language, which is illustrated by the narrator’s acknowledgment of Seabiscuit's “gentle nature,” which makes him different from more successful racehorses like Hard Tack; because Seabiscuit is not a "fierce, almost violent" competitor like his sire, he had no ability to succeed, and his breeders are dismayed at an inferior specimen. Fitzsimmons also claims that the horse is ‘incorrigible,’ claiming that the

horse has some personality flaw because he is not participatory in the racing scene, suggesting that the horse is 'incorrect' because all horses – especially Thoroughbreds - want to race.

Seabiscuit's atypical nature and his resulting lack of success on the racetrack is reinforced by the visual rhetoric of several shots in this section. The narrator states, "It all made sense. Champions were large; they were sleek; they were without imperfection." In this scene, Seabiscuit is pictured walking behind a chestnut horse that has presumably just defeated Seabiscuit on the track:

Illustration 8



This shot again reinforces Seabiscuit's difference from other racehorses. Seabiscuit is much smaller than the chestnut, and he looks dingy and plain next to the other horse's shining coat. Additionally, Seabiscuit carries his head low to the ground, which suggests a defeated nature when juxtaposed with the proudly-carried head of the chestnut victor. In another scene, Seabiscuit's small stature is emphasized again as Seabiscuit is defeated in a workout:

## Illustration 9



Although the film does not directly acknowledge it, there is a significant reason that it references Seabiscuit's diminutive size throughout the film. Successful racehorses are typically large; their size ensures that they are capable of longer strides, which carry them down the racetrack quicker. Seabiscuit, who was "barely fifteen hands," did have a significant handicap in size; his sire Man O' War, for example, stood at 16.2 hands. The film pokes fun at this size difference once Seabiscuit becomes successful, as Howard fondly refers to the horse as "the little guy," and states "Sometimes, when the little guy doesn't know he's a little guy, he can do great big things."

### **A History of Abuse**

Seabiscuit's introduction also emphasizes Seabiscuit's history of abusive treatment. Fitzsimmons requests that his exercise rider whip Seabiscuit repeatedly, runs him in multiple races a week as a three-year-old, and uses him as a training partner to boost the confidence of other horses. As a result of this mistreatment, viewers witness Seabiscuit's decline into a dangerous horse, one who can only be moved to his new home with hobbled legs, attacks jockeys when they come near him, and refuses offers of kindness like the half of an apple that Red attempts to feed him. By the time that the Howards buy Seabiscuit, he appears to be a tragic

figure, a broken-down and unsuccessful racehorse worth next to nothing. The horse is not seen when Howard evaluates him, but he is heard kicking the stable walls and neighing in obvious displeasure as Smith insists that the horse "has spirit."

This part of the film, it is worth noting, is more realistic in its description of horses and horse racing than many other films. While some horses do achieve success as Seabiscuit did in real life and does in the film, many horses languish at the bottom tiers of horse racing, racing multiple times per week for tiny purses. Fitzsimmon's treatment of the horse is framed as cruel, which it is; what the film ignores is that this is the reality of many racehorses. The characterization of Fitzsimmons and the breeders at Claiborne Farms is somewhat common fare for the horse racing film. Films in this subgenre often highlight a rival trainer or abusive owner as the enemy; Smiley (2013) notes that "American racing fiction...sees evil as pervasive" and "represented by cruelty towards horses" (p. 55).

*Seabiscuit* contributes to the ideological understanding of horse racing that permeates these films while attempting to contradict it; that is, the film suggests that as long as we treat animals well, they are made for our benefit and it is not unethical to treat them as such. This position is further illustrated by the film's scenes in Tijuana, as Charles and Marcella watch a bullfight, which provides another parallel with *Ferdinand*.

Illustration 10



They are both uncomfortable at the sight of the bull, who has been gored and is covered in blood; in fact, the two only meet because they both went out onto a patio to avoid having to watch. This scene seems to imply that the Howards are good people who are disturbed by the sight of animal abuse; however, this is a curious implication when one considers their complacency in horse racing, a notoriously dangerous sport. While this scene does not directly concern horses, it does reinforce the film's argument that animal abuse is condemnable, and it reinforces that the film's characters believe this as well, which becomes important in later moments.

This scene is also interesting in terms of its production. The American Humane Association notes for this film state the following about this scene: "During a bull fight scene, a bull is seen bloody and injured, with several banderillas (brightly adorned, barbed sticks) gored into the animal's shoulder. This sequence was stock footage and was not filmed for this production" (American Humane, 2017, para. 24). I acknowledge these production notes here because it seems hypocritical to include this scene; as evidenced by American Humane's involvement on set and by the film's argument against horse racing, the film seems to position itself against animal abuse. However, it does seem somewhat hypocritical to utilize this violent scene, which seems to

have been real and not staged; can the film really condemn animal abuse while benefitting from it?

### **Changes on the Horizon**

What makes the film's early characterization of Seabiscuit and his abusive treatment intriguing is the way in which *Seabiscuit* (2003) illustrates the horse's eventual comeback and juxtaposes it with these earlier scenes. Smith, Howard, and Red are represented as Seabiscuit's saviors due to their patience and devotion to the horse. Through careful and creative rehabilitation methods, they begin to uncover the speed and gentle personality hiding beneath Seabiscuit's exterior, eventually transforming him into a champion racehorse. This arc parallels the comeback of athletes in many other sports genre films.

In one of these scenes, which is referenced at the very beginning of this thesis, Smith sends Pollard out on a cross-country gallop aboard Seabiscuit. Smith states, "I just can't help feelin' they got him so screwed up runnin' in a circle, he's forgotten what he was born to do. He just needs to learn how to be a horse again." This is a moment that hints at the film's complicated ideological understandings of the horse. It is an oft-replicated theme in horse racing films to suggest that horses have some innate desire to race. Smith's quote seems to suggest that because Seabiscuit is a horse, he must love to race; however, what we know about Seabiscuit suggests otherwise. This moment is particularly complex due to Seabiscuit's status as a highly-bred racing Thoroughbred. Seabiscuit was *born* to race because he was *bred* to do it. This is a significant moment, and it hints at later depictions of Seabiscuit's supposed fervor for racing; everyone associated with Seabiscuit seems to suggest at some time or another that the horse loves racing, that he "fights for it." This scene is also significant in its dramatic contrast with the racetrack;

instead, the horse thrives when he is able to be out in nature instead of on an artificial dirt track and given free rein to just run.

As with the cross-country gallop, almost all of the efforts to rehabilitate Seabiscuit are pioneered by trainer Tom Smith. Smith is repeatedly portrayed in the film as a sort of 'horse whisperer;' his calm and kind manner with the horses is shown to give him an advantage with dangerous or rowdy animals and sets him apart from the rougher trainers of the track. Early on in the film, viewers see Smith convince an injured horse's owner to give the horse to him instead of shooting it; the film goes on to show Smith, always an outsider, caring for his horse at a campsite outside of a racetrack. Smith uses unconventional tactics to heal this horse; he wraps the horse's leg in hawthorn root, citing its positive effects on the horse's circulation, and he speaks to it in gentle tones much unlike the words used by other trainers at the track. Upon meeting him, Howard asks Smith why he is spending the time and effort to heal this horse of his injuries; after all, he will never race again, so what use is he? Smith replies, "You don't throw a whole life away just 'cause he's banged up a little." Notably, this quote is repeated later in the film when Howard is defending Red's failure to disclose his blindness, which draws further parallels between the struggles of Red and Seabiscuit.

Another tactic utilized by Smith is the introduction of Seabiscuit's companion horse, Pumpkin. Seabiscuit is neighing, kicking, and cribbing – an equine stress response in which they chew on wood and suck in air - in his stall. To alleviate Seabiscuit's anxiety, he begins to introduce animals to Seabiscuit in hopes of finding him a companion. He explains, "Smart ones hate being alone all the time, and sometimes another animal, it just – just soothes them a bit." Indeed, once Smith finds Seabiscuit's 'matches' in the palomino gelding Pumpkin and a canine friend, the horse is content, lying down in his stall in an image that draws parallels with



Seabiscuit's early days, suggesting that he is again content. The point of view, however, implies that Seabiscuit is still under control of humans and completely at their mercy:

Illustration 11



This scene is novel in terms of the horse racing film; these films rarely address stress behaviors in animals, and this is the only film reviewed in this thesis that includes cribbing, which is a common equine side-effect of stress and prolonged periods in a stall. In its recognition of this, this scene again suggests that Smith has a connection with nature and with the animals, which the film reveres. Through Tom's character, *Seabiscuit* contains an argument regarding the value and importance of connection and togetherness with horses and the earth; it is only through Smith's careful dedication to rehabilitating Seabiscuit in a natural way that he is able to recover and become a champion racehorse.

These moments are inspiring and moving, and they seem to champion a kinder and more humane treatment of horses. This is, in general, a positive argument; the film seems to advocate for Smith's treatment of Seabiscuit as the right way to handle him. The issue with this characterization is that the film seems to suggest that the sport is not inherently unethical and can be practiced with love and care. This is, of course, open to interpretation and argument, but in

present days, when one considers the number of racehorses that die in various, often painful ways every year, it is difficult to argue for the goodness of the sport. This paradox is one of the more concerning ideological implications of this film.

However, this reverence is, at times, quietly betrayed by the film. Despite the film's efforts to juxtapose Smith, Howard, and Red with the cruel Fitzsimmons, it is worth noting that several of these later racing scenes show Red using a whip on Seabiscuit, which he even remarks upon at one point when explaining to Woolf how to ride him: "When you do ask him, don't use the whip. Just flick it twice, show him it's there. He'll know it's time...and never on the left side. They hit him on the left side when he was a baby." This scene is odd because it seems as if Red is speaking of Seabiscuit in a protective way, but he is still advocating for Woolf to use the whip on him; but not like "when he was a baby." This is concerning because it suggests that, if done correctly, whipping is an acceptable measure to use to encourage a horse to win a race; however, many people, myself included, would argue that hitting a horse repeatedly with a thin whip, which causes pain, is cruel.

### **Successes and Defeats**

After Smith's interventions, explained above, Seabiscuit goes on to win a multitude of races, and the remainder of the film primarily consists of a positive comeback for all humans and equines involved. A soaring orchestral accompaniment plays over scenes of Seabiscuit outrunning other horses in competition, Red pumping his fist in the air/ Seabiscuit's underdog, long-shot status is heavily emphasized in these sections, as if to remind the audience that he was not always the championship racehorse he would become. In later scenes, the film positions Seabiscuit against War Admiral and the elitist blue-blood horses of the East Coast; however, this is a striking comment given Seabiscuit's breeding. Seabiscuit's grandsire was Man O' War, one of

the winningest racehorses of all time, and the horse was bred at Claiborne Farms, known in the horse world for standing and breeding some of the most elite Thoroughbred racehorses of all time including Secretariat, Bold Ruler, Mr. Prospector, Ruffian, Unbridled, and Nasrullah. In its desperate claims at underdog status, the film seems to trip over facts here, focusing instead on winning the audience over.

It is important to note that, in these later racing scenes, there are moments of danger in the film that hint at the true nature of horse racing and provide a sharp juxtaposition with Seabiscuit's championship days. Firstly, in a dramatic scene, Red is thrown from a horse when it spooks at the sound of a tractor backfiring; Red's foot is caught in the stirrup, and the horse drags him across the racetrack, injuring him to the degree that doctors predict he will not ride again. Seabiscuit soon encounters tragedy as well as he ruptures a tendon in the middle of a race. Once the track veterinarian comes to evaluate his injury, he suggests putting Seabiscuit down because his racing days are over. Seabiscuit's entourage are horrified at the suggestion, which suggests that the Howards, Smith, Red, and Seabiscuit's unnamed caretakers see the horse as a friend; to reiterate a foundational quote from the film, "You don't throw a whole life away just 'cause he's banged up a little."

As opposed to many, many other horse racing films, as detailed in the previous chapter, this film suggests that Seabiscuit is not a mere commodity designed to make his people money; he is, instead, a friend, a life worth something regardless of its monetary value. Even Red's affectionate nickname for the horse, "Pops," suggests that this horse is a beloved partner, just as scenes late in the film of the two recovering from their respective injuries do. Red's connection with the horse shares some common themes with earlier horse racing films and their focus on children. After a long and careful period of rehabilitation, which includes several of the film's most moving

scenes that establish the bond between the two, Red and Seabiscuit go on to win the Santa Anita Handicap, and all is well with the horse and his humans.

Illustration 12



In the final scene of the film, Red states, “You know, everybody thinks we found this broken-down horse and fixed him, but we didn’t. He fixed us. Every one of us. And I guess in a way we kinda fixed each other too.” The theme of cooperative rehabilitation of an underdog and overwhelming love for the horse is palpable in this scene and throughout the film, and in terms of its animal representation, this is *Seabiscuit*’s most endearing quality. While the film does focus heavily on the stories of both horse and human, *Seabiscuit* (2003) trends toward a more celebratory and reverent tone when it comes to its titular horse, as do many other horse racing films of the 2000s.

### **Horse Racing, *Seabiscuit*, and the Screen: Why Does It Matter?**

Horse racing is an incredibly dangerous and arguably cruel sport for both horse and rider. The commonplace practice of starting horses in full work while their fragile legs are still developing along with the industry’s heavy reliance on drugs (to mask horses’ pain so they can continue to

race through injury) are a leading cause of equine injury and death. Additionally, a significant portion of the horses that do not die on the racetrack (or never make it there in the first place) will end up dying in a foreign slaughterhouse - with the scents of blood and death hanging in the air - to be processed as meat for pet food. Horse slaughter is illegal in the United States, but these horses are often trucked to Mexico or Canada to make a quick buck. Eckhoff (2011) notes that 10,000 American Thoroughbreds are sent to slaughter every year.

These sad realities are a prominent and undeniable aspect of horse racing at its lowest levels, as suggested by *Seabiscuit's* synopsis of the horse's early life, but these atrocities occur at higher levels of the sport as well. 2007 saw the three-year-old filly Eight Belles break both ankles just a few strides after the finish line of the Kentucky Derby; she was euthanized on the track where she lay. This disturbing scene took place less than a year after Barbaro's injury in the 2006 Preakness Stakes, which eventually led to his death. Additionally, even successful horses end up slaughtered; 1986 Kentucky Derby winner Ferdinand was slaughtered in a Japanese slaughterhouse in 2002 (Finley, 2003).

Films within the horse racing subgenre often engage, at least on a surface level, with the dangers and harsh realities of the sport. This is presumably because these dangers raise the stakes of the film; however, these scenes also serve provide a brief glimpse into the reality of horse racing. *Seabiscuit's* emphasis and graphic detail of Seabiscuit and Red's injuries is the film's showiest example of this realism, but scenes from earlier in the film such as Seabiscuit's abuse at the hands of his first owner suggest the harsh realities of the racing industry as well. In doing so, *Seabiscuit* (2003) establishes itself as a film that appears to challenge the commonplace ideological belief that animals are here for the use and abuse of humans. The film's rhetoric and visual style suggest that Smith and Red's treatment of the horse is how a horse should be treated;

after all, Seabiscuit thrived under their care. This is the thesis of the film as suggested by its theatrical release poster. Red and Seabiscuit meet face to face, and their bond is almost palpable. It is difficult to deny or contest, when looking at this poster, that this film is about love and respect for horses and about how our unions can be beneficial for all involved.

However, while *Seabiscuit* does pay more tribute to horse racing realities than many horse racing films do, there is still a significant amount of positive spin and glossing over that is applied to the sport in the name of cinema. While realism is not necessarily a metric by which every film should be judged, it is important to remember that the way in which horse racing is represented on film is the sole way that some populations will ever experience or learn about horse racing. Most people will not experience the realities of the racetrack backside, and may take these films at their word, which suggest that racing can be an ethical practice. With racehorses dying in pursuit of the finish line, films like *Secretariat* (2010) that suggest that the horse racing industry is a loving and warm pursuit can become outright dangerous if they encourage the sport's popularity. *Seabiscuit* (2003) is notable for its acknowledgement of the dangers and abuse of horse racing; despite this, however, the film reproduces the dominant ideological belief that horses, and ultimately all animals, are here for our use as long as we treat them well.

## **Conclusion**

*Seabiscuit* (2003), like most other films in the horse racing subgenre, represents horse racing through rose-colored glasses and in a traditional underdog narrative. The film celebrates the effort put into Seabiscuit's rehabilitation and the kindness of the people who surrounded him while simultaneously condemning the abuse that is so commonplace on the racetrack. While these themes are respectable, it cannot be ignored that the film paints a positive picture of an

abusive industry. Even the horses that the filmmakers used in production were treated better than racehorses are:

The racing was simulated, with the animals running no further than 3 furlongs per take. Each horse rested between takes from 30 minutes up to several hours. Professional jockeys rode many of the horses chosen for the simulated races, using prop whips on their own legs as they rode; the whips were not used on the animals. (American Humane, 2017, para. 17)

In the real world, at racetracks across the United States, horses are whipped liberally as they gallop at full speed. Racehorses are not given the opportunity to recover between takes, and they are not limited in the distance they can run in a day. Reality, for racehorses, is far more bitter than what *Seabiscuit* (2003) paints the industry as: a mostly-good group of horse lovers who are mixed in with a few bad apples. The reality of horse racing is that it is a brutal sport that results in the death and injury of thousands of horses every year. It is, then, imperative that these films not sugarcoat the sport, which is far grislier than the films imply. It is a common theme in horse racing films to assert that these animals have an innate drive to race, and it is presented as if this excuses the cruelties of the racetrack. It is worth noting that the horse racing film fits soundly within the sports genre; it therefore makes sense for these horses to be framed in this way. What human athlete does not want to participate in their sport?

The other ideological implication that *Seabiscuit* (2003) presents is that it condemns the mistreatment of the horse while maintaining the ideology that it is acceptable and right for humans to use them for our own recreation, financial gain, and pleasure; this is partially achieved through the positive portrayal of the racetrack. While it cannot be denied that the film paints an image of people who very much loved Seabiscuit and fought for his success, this is not an entirely realistic depiction of the racetrack. The film is almost hypocritical in its denunciation of

Fitzsimmons and other trainers' abuse of the horses. If the film was truly and fully positioned against animal abuse, horse racing would not be presented in a positive light whatsoever.

The irony of all of this is that the sport of horse racing exists only for human gain, whether that be financial, occupational, or recreational. In the end, it is always the human's stories that dominate the narratives in horse racing and horse racing films. While *Seabiscuit* (2003) gives more focus to the horse than the vast majority of horse racing films do, the story is still centered on the lives of the three men that worked with Seabiscuit, and Seabiscuit's role is never fully separated from his status as a commodity and a means to a financial end. *Seabiscuit* (2003) is monumental in its acknowledgement of the dangers and cruelties of the racetrack; however, it represents a dominant ideology that has persisted throughout time: horses, and indeed all animals, are here for us to use.



## **Conclusion**

On March 7, 2015, I watched a horse die. I was at the Red Hills International Horse Trials, a well-known and established three-day event competition held annually in Tallahassee, Florida. As a lifelong rider and eventer, I was overjoyed to be at this event watching some of the sport's greats compete at the highest levels of three-day eventing. I was sitting at a combination obstacle, which required the horse and rider to quickly ascend a steep hill, jump a fence at the top of the hill, and then go down and up another hill with another fence. I watched horse after horse conquer this combination with ease; that was, until one did not. A horse named Conahy's Courage and his rider galloped up to the first fence, but the pair did not have quite enough speed built up at the top of the hill. Consequently, Courage could not snap his front legs up quickly enough. True to his name, the horse tried to get over the fence anyway, but with a lack of momentum, it was an impossible feat; his front legs caught on the fence, and they completed what is known in the eventing world as a "rotational fall." The horse flipped over the fence, landing on top of his rider as the two of them slid down the downside of the hill. Panicked, Courage scrambled to get back up on his feet, catching his front right leg in the drooping reins in the process. By the time the horse was standing, his forearm was at a right angle and his bone was protruding through the skin. He was euthanized within minutes.

This accident was a major turning point in my life. I began riding horses when I was four years old; in the years since, I evented, showed hunter jumpers, trained young horses, groomed, taught lessons, worked as a farm hand, and more. I thought that I had seen it all, but witnessing this accident terrified me and forced me to look at my sport in a new way. I began to dig up any information that I could find about equine safety in sporting events, and what I found was even more disturbing than the scene I had viewed at Red Hills. I found that countless horses die on a regular basis in pursuit of the upper echelons of competition and that, for many, the relationship was not the one that I had always known of respect and admiration for the horse; instead, the horse was a means to an end.

What I found most disturbing of all was the statistics that I found on horse racing. Horse racing, as has been established throughout this thesis, is dangerous at best and horrifyingly cruel at worst. Outside of the horse industry, few people know the realities of this sport, and most people's experience with the sport is relegated to one of two venues. Once a year on the first Saturday in May, Americans watch a crop of three-year-old Thoroughbred horses race in the Run for the Roses, better known as the Kentucky Derby, which is a widely publicized and covered event. The average citizen may also watch one of the many films mentioned in this thesis that depicts horse racing. Because so few people experience horse racing outside of these contexts, it becomes critical to analyze the themes and ideas communicated by these films.

As evidenced in this work, there are several prominent themes worthy of analysis in horse racing films. Perhaps the most prevalent of these is money. In the vast majority of the films referenced, the horse is seen and utilized as a commodity, as a method of acquiring capital or as a tool or vehicle. This theme has been prominent since at least *The Thoroughbred* (1916), and it continues up through the most recent horse racing film, *Secretariat* (2010). Horses in film, as in

real life, are conceived of as machines that are built to conquer the racetrack and win earnings for their owners.

However, some films complicate this notion. Another commonly-emphasized theme of the horse racing film is the concept of the horse as a companion, as a friend to the people surrounding him. Many beloved children's films emphasize this point of view as well; *National Velvet* (1944), *The Black Stallion* (1979), and *Dreamer* (2005) are all significant and popular examples. Over time, the horse racing subgenre has notably shifted to emphasize this concept of horses, but the two understandings of the horse (as commodity and companion) are still at odds in particular films. For example, this idea is prominent in *Seabiscuit* (2003), where it collides with the concept of horse as commodity in odd ways.

### **Depicting Racing**

In the process of depicting races, many of the films reviewed in this thesis reference the danger of the racetrack. In *National Velvet* (1944), viewers see horses and riders fall over fences in the Grand National. In *The Black Stallion* (1979), blood pours down The Black's leg as he fights his way to victory in the film's final race. In *Seabiscuit* (2003), the horse ruptures a tendon, which leads the track veterinarian to suggest his euthanasia. These films do not hide the outright dangers of horse racing. While this is a positive aspect of these films, which would be astounding misrepresentations of the sport without these acknowledgements, these films do not tell the full story. In all of these films, the horse, through love of the owners and riders, recovers to win another race; these injuries are not life-changing or career-ending but are instead just a brief hiccup on the road to success. This is among the most common tropes of horse racing films; *National Velvet* (1944), *Casey's Shadow* (1978), *Seabiscuit* (2003), *Hidalgo* (2003), *Dreamer*

(2005), and *Secretariat* (2010) include injuries ranging from broken legs to severe cases of colic. In every case, the horse is treated, rehabilitated, and returns to racing.

Unfortunately for thousands of horses in American horse racing, this kind of rehabilitation and recovery is often not the case. Rehabilitation costs money, which most trainers and owners are looking to earn, not spend. Only in rare and widely-publicized cases, such as Barbaro's, is the effort put forth to rehabilitate a horse, and these are often unsuccessful, as Barbaro's was. This is one of the ways in which these films tend to gloss over the harsh realities of this industry.

Films in the horse racing subgenre additionally appear to unanimously denounce animal abuse; trainers who are cruel to their horses are portrayed as evil and morally corrupt. *Seabiscuit* (2003) has an excellent example of this trope in Sonny Fitzsimmons, Seabiscuit's first trainer; the trope is also present in *National Velvet* (1944), *Hidalgo* (2003), *Racing Stripes* (2005), and *Dreamer* (2005). This trope becomes complicated when one considers the hypocritical nature of the representation. Abuse in the horse racing industry is commonplace; horses are drugged, beaten, raced despite injury, and overworked in the pursuit of a quick buck. However, this is not an individual problem; it is an institutional problem. It can be argued that starting a horse before it is fully developed in order to have it racing by the age of two years old is abuse. More broadly, it can also be argued that forcing an animal to gallop as quickly as possible, placing it in harm's way, is abuse whether the horse is treated well at home or not. In my own opinion and in the opinion of many researchers, horse racing is innately cruel. It is hypocritical to depict it as an industry that is made up of primarily good people with a few bad apples mixed in.

It is worth noting that many, if not most, of the films cited above would fall within the sports genre. The parallel nature of the horse racing film and the sports film is complex and worthy of exploration. Perhaps the most glaring complexity of this relation is that, due to the films'

structures, the horses are typically positioned as athletes in the same fashion as iconic film athletes such as Rocky Balboa. Their drive to compete and the gritty details of their losses and victories are shown in great detail, and the feeling of accomplishment is what drives these films whether their heroes are human or equine (or both, as in the case of *Seabiscuit*). The difference, however, is that horses are not given an option as to whether they would want to compete or not, and despite the films' claims to the contrary, they may not want to compete at all.

In light of the cruelty that takes place on racetracks across America, the positive spin that these films place on the horse racing industry is concerning. Many of these films are consumed by two primary audiences: children and horse lovers. Occasionally, such as in the case of *Seabiscuit* (2003), these films do reach a larger and more varied audience. The messages contained within gives these audiences – children and horse lovers primarily but the American public in general as well – an inaccurate understanding of horse racing. While, as acknowledged, real-life accuracy is not necessarily a metric by which we should judge films, in this case it seems apropos. To misrepresent horse racing as a pleasant and positive sport and to misrepresent racehorses as complicit athletes in search of victory is not only irresponsible of these filmmakers. If these depictions give children and horse lovers, in particular, reason to root for the sport, it could bring attention and praise to a real-world sport that is not positive and pleasant but instead is brutal, unforgiving, and punishing.

### **For Future Research**

While this thesis is a step forward in examining the depictions of horses on screen, there are still a myriad of ways in which this research could – and should – be expanded. This thesis was primarily focused on the positive spin placed on horse racing and equine welfare in these films, but there are many other questions presented by these films and by animal narratives as a whole.

In what ways do these films emphasize the connection between money and horses? How do films justify their use of animals for human gain? When, and in what contexts, are horses, or any other animal, recognized as sentient beings? What stereotypes are utilized in depictions of different animals?

An additional path of inquiry that is brought forth by this research is a question of how horses are depicted as tools and vehicles. Horses have been a prominent part of film since its earliest days, and many of these films are not as horse-centered as the ones referenced in this thesis. How do these films depict horses? Are they relegated to the background in the ways in which a car or bicycle may be? What is the rhetoric in these films around the use of horses; or is there any reference to them at all? These questions are film-specific, but the question could also be asked of video games, which often utilize horses as a means of transportation. Is the horse given any character? Is the horse even given a name? What does this say about our persisting belief that horses are for our use?

Another medium presents questions in this vein. How does news and sports coverage of horse races such as the Kentucky Derby depict this sport? Do they confront the realities of the sport, or is it sugarcoated, depicting the best and brightest and ignoring the cruelties that take place elsewhere? How are horses depicted and discussed? Because this is the other way in which Americans commonly experience horse racing, analysis of this venue is vital to understanding how media depictions of horse racing may impact the public's understandings of the sport.

Finally, this thesis highlights the need for increased research in the overlapping areas of Animal Studies and Media Studies. The way in which films depict animals can directly impact them, as is illustrated in the introduction with the example of dogs. Animals are continually depicted on screen; they are in children's and adult's films in the background or foreground.

They are everywhere. How may these depictions impact our understandings of these animals?  
Do they perpetuate or challenge any existing ideologies?

Humans and animals share this planet, and it is undeniable that our interactions have had significant effect on all entities involved. Animal Studies scholars are working to highlight these effects and examine why we understand and treat animals the way we do. It is vital – for people, for horses, and for all other animals – for us to further examine and critique the ways in which we communicate about animals. As evidenced by the above thesis, understanding and questioning our ideological concepts of animals, including examination of where these ideologies come from, may lead to a reevaluation of the ways in which we treat our furry, scaly, and feathered friends. Ultimately, this work could improve the lives of animals worldwide.

## References

- A.W. (1949, November 12). Seabiscuit center of Strand movie. *The New York Times*, p. 8.
- American Humane Association. (n.d.). *No animals were harmed*. Retrieved from <https://www.americanhumane.org/initiative/no-animals-were-harmed/>
- American Humane Association. (2017). *Seabiscuit*. Retrieved from <http://www.humanehollywood.org/index.php/movie-archive/item/seabiscuit>
- Anderson, M. V., & Henderson, A. Z. (2005). Pernicious portrayals: The impact of children's attachment to animals of fiction on animals of fact. *Society & Animals*, 13(4), 297-314.
- Baker, S. (1993). *Picturing the beast: Animals, identity, and representation*. New York, NY: Manchester University Press.
- Baum, G. (2013, November 25). Animals were harmed. *The Hollywood Reporter*. Retrieved from <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/feature/index.html>
- Berger, J. (1989). The horse: Noble steed or wild menace?. In R.J. Hoage (Ed.), *Perceptions of animals in American culture* (101-112). Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Berger, J. (1980). "Why look at animals?" In *About looking* (3-28). New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- Blount, M. (1974). *Animal land: The creatures of children's fiction*. London: Hutchinson & Co Ltd.
- Bogdanich, W., Drape, J., Miles, D.L., & Palmer, G. (2012, March 25). Mangled horses, maimed jockeys. *The New York Times*, p. A1.
- Box Office Mojo. (n.d.) Horses at the box office. Retrieved March 25, 2018 from <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/genres/chart/?id=horse.htm>
- Burns, J.F. (2013, April 6). Death again visits a tradition on trial. *The New York Times*, p. D1.
- Cassidy, R. (2013). Introduction. In R. Cassidy (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to horseracing* (pp. 1-12). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



- Crist, S. (1989, October 5). Secretariat, racing legend and fans' favorite, is dead. *The New York Times*, p. A1.
- Dickey, B. (2017). *Pit bull: The battle over an American icon*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Donaldson, J. (1996). *The culture clash: A new way of understanding the relationship between humans and domestic dogs*. Berkeley: James & Kenneth, Publishers.
- Eckhoff, B. (2011, November 29). Racing industry silent about slaughtered Thoroughbreds. *Forbes*. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/vickeryeckhoff/2011/11/29/racing-industry-silent-about-slaughtered-thoroughbreds/#41e396d71bd6>
- Finley, B. (2003, July 23). 1986 Derby winner was slaughtered, magazine reports. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/07/23/sports/horse-racing-1986-derby-winner-was-slaughtered-magazine-reports.html>
- Hillenbrand, L. (2001). *Seabiscuit: An American legend*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Hintz, H.F. (1979). *Horses in the movies*. South Brunswick, NJ: A.S. Barnes and Company.
- Izkoff, D. (2012, March 16). After 'Luck,' a post-mortem debate. *The New York Times*, p. C1.
- Jones, G. (2010). In praise of an 'invisible genre?' An ambivalent look at the fictional sports feature film. *Sport in Society*, 11(2-3), 117-129.
- Kellner, D. (2003). Cultural studies, multiculturalism and media culture. In G. Dines & J. M. Humez (Eds.), *Gender, race and class in the media: A text reader* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) (9-20). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Kennedy, K., Marshall, F., Ross, G., & Sindell, J. (Producers), & Ross, G. (Director). (2003). *Seabiscuit* [Motion picture]. USA: Universal Pictures.
- Lockwood, R. (1989). Anthropomorphism is not a four-letter word. In R.J. Hoage (Ed.), *Perceptions of animals in American culture* (41-56). Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- McLean, A. L. (2014). Introduction: Wonder dogs. In A. L. McLean (Ed.), *Cinematic canines: Dogs and their work in the fiction film* (1-30). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Mitchum, P.D., & Pavia, A. (2014). *Hollywood hoofbeats: The fascinating story of horses in movies and television*. Irvine, CA: I-5 Publishing.
- Morgenson, G. (2017, July 2). Chairman stays, stakeholders lose. *The New York Times*, p. BU1.
- Navarro, M. (1997, September 14). After movies, unwanted Dalmatians. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/1997/09/14/us/after-movies-unwanted-dalmatians.html>

- Osborne, B.M., Jackson, P., Walsh, F., & Sanders, T. (Producers), & Jackson, P. (Director). (2003). *The lord of the rings: The two towers* [Motion picture]. USA: New Line Home Entertainment.
- Pierson, M. H. (2000). *Dark horses and black beauties: Animals, women, a passion*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Queenan, J. (2010, December 2). Horses in film: Why the long face? *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2010/dec/02/secretariat-horses-in-film>
- Ray, R.B. (1985). *A certain tendency of the Hollywood cinema, 1930-1980*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Scott, A.O. (2003, July 25). Film review; Scrambling to victory. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/07/25/movies/film-review-scrambling-to-victory.html>.
- Smiley, J. (2013). The fiction of horseracing. In R. Cassidy (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to horseracing* (pp. 44-56). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Spiegel, M. (1996). *The dreaded comparison: Human and animal slavery*. New York, NY: Mirror Books.
- Stanford, L. (Producer), & Muybridge, E. (Director). (1878). *Sallie Gardner at a gallop* [Motion picture]. United States.
- Tobias, R. (2011). *Film and the American moral vision of nature: Theodore Roosevelt to Walt Disney*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press.
- Victor, D. (2017, January 25). 'A Dog's Purpose' filmmakers defend treatment of canine actor. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/25/arts/a-dogs-purpose-abuse-video-scandal.html>
- Whitley, D.S. (2008). *The idea of nature in Disney animation*. Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited.