



American Poverty and Social Rejection in Craig Gillespie's *I, Tonya*

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Abstract

This paper examines the image of American poverty, rejection and social engagement in a recent sports biopic inspired by the story of American skater Tonya Harding, Craig Gillespie's *I, Tonya* (2017). It draws on data presented in recent poverty studies to determine the extent of deprivation and attend to its representation in American cinema. In the light of the above, I closely analyze the biopic, focusing on its depiction of professional figure skating, expectations of female athletes, and most importantly, the figure of Tonya Harding. I argue that the protagonist's social background dominates her portrayal, which also challenges the common conception of a sports biopic; Harding's narrative is defined by her mismatch with ice skating's normative expectations and, most importantly, by her social standing.

Keywords: sports movies, film, social rejection, poverty studies

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest analiza zobrazowania biedy i odrzucenia społecznego w filmie biograficznym na kanwie życia amerykańskiej łyżwiarki Tonyi Harding, *Jestem najlepsza. Ja, Tonya* (2017) w reżyserii Craiga Gillespiego. Bazę teoretyczną stanowią aktualne badania nad poziomem biedy w Stanach Zjednoczonych, które usystematyzują podstawowe pojęcia i określą skalę problemu. W świetle tych danych interpretuję wybrany film, skupiając się na przedstawieniu profesjonalnego łyżwiarstwa figurowego, wymaganiach stawianych zawodniczkom i, przede

wszystkim, na osobie Tonyi Harding. Dowodzę, że pochodzenie głównej bohaterki zdominowało jej filmowy portret, co także odbiega od powszechnego modelu sportowego kina biograficznego – narracja Harding została skonstruowana w oparciu o jej niedopasowanie do normatywnych oczekiwań zinstytucjonalizowanego sportu oraz, co ważniejsze, o jej pozycję społeczną.

Słowa kluczowe: film sportowy, Tonya Harding, bieda i odrzucenie społeczne

Introduction

Although vague and a tad oversimplified, the catchy, eye-opening statement that the world's richest 1% own half its wealth¹ has raised questions about the direction which global distribution of wealth has taken and how economic polarization is established. The United States, which still claims to be the world's military, political and economic superpower, has not escaped the issue of social inequality and rejection either, as reflected in portrayals of American life and the American experience in media, pop-cultural artefacts, and social discourses. One of the most widespread artistic tools to convey crucial messages on the financial and social situation of the country is film, and one of the most engaging activities with which social phenomena and challenges are portrayed is sport. This paper considers the representation of the specificity of American poverty in a recent sports drama film, Craig Gillespie's *I, Tonya* (2017), a mainstream movie that explores the issue extensively through the athletic experience. Though the film is set in the America of the 1990s, the time at which it was released invites discussion regarding the modern face of the relationship between poverty and professional sports.

The analysis draws on research data from current poverty studies to determine the scope of the issue and give attention to its cultural and social implications in the United States. I will closely analyze *I, Tonya* in the light of these notions. As cultural studies, especially as pioneered by the Birmingham Centre for Cultural for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the 1970s, would see it, culture and cultural artefacts (in this case cinematic art works) are not distinctly separate from politics, economics and society, but are reciprocally related to them,² and *I, Tonya* epitomizes this assumption.

1. A journey through a land of extreme poverty? American poverty and its cultural manifestations

A large and growing body of literature has investigated the issue of modern poverty in the United States, yet the findings seem inconsistent. In 2017, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UN Human Rights) issued a report by the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights in the US. According to the report, 40 million Americans live in poverty, 18.5 million live in extreme poverty, and 5.3 million live in Third World conditions of absolute poverty.

Extreme poverty has been defined as having an income lower than half the official poverty rate, which, for 2016, was about \$12,000 a year for a family of four.³ The report underlines that Americans' ethnicity does not influence whether they struggle financially or not.

In imagining the poor, racist stereotypes are usually not far beneath the surface. The poor are overwhelmingly assumed to be people of color, whether African Americans or Hispanic "immigrants." The reality is that there are 8 million more poor Whites than there are poor Blacks. The face of poverty in America is not only Black or Hispanic, but also White, Asian and many other backgrounds.⁴

Donald Trump's administration, on the other hand, argued that these findings were aimed at attacking his presidency and claimed that there appeared to be approximately 250,000 Americans living in extreme poverty.⁵ One way or the other, poverty seems to be a burning issue for Americans. From a global perspective, on the other hand, people are literally getting wealthier overnight. As presented in the Global Wealth Report by the Credit Suisse Research Institute, total global wealth has reached \$280 trillion and is 27 percent higher than it was a decade ago.

The reasons behind the alarming rates of American poverty and mechanisms governing this pervasive condition, defined as the inability to obtain or provide a standard level of food, water, or shelter, are not within the scope of the present article. What is crucial, though, is the presence of poverty as an element shaping lifestyles, political and social identities, and perceptions of the poor, especially in the eyes of those who govern them. It is an issue that impacts, and sometimes even defines, many measures taken by municipal governments as well as initiatives of local communities, and, finally, it constitutes a phenomenon which is portrayed in art works and popular culture. One of its most pervasive cultural manifestations is commonly known by the label 'white trash'.

As Annalee Newitz and Matt Wray observe, ‘Americans love to hate the poor.’⁶ In a country whose national identity has been profoundly shaped by the myth of ostensible class mobility, as well as a neoliberal ideology of self-reliance and hard work, it is easy to blame and stigmatize those who fail to attain the American Dream. Their experience of (self-)blame may be exacerbated if there are no ethnic-based obstacles that would prevent an individual from receiving decent education, attaining a good job, and amassing the kind of wealth that meets many people’s expectations of a white American household. (As has already been mentioned, it is falsely assumed that mostly racial and ethnic minorities experience financial difficulties in America.) These are the circumstances in which we are likely to encounter the term ‘white trash.’ Nancy Isenberg claims the term dates back as early as to the 1500s and ‘derives from British colonial policies dedicated to resettling the poor. [...] First known as “waste people” and then “white trash,” marginalized newcomers were stigmatized for their inability to be productive, to own property, or to produce healthy and upwardly mobile children – the sense of uplift on which the American dream is predicated.’⁷ In time, ‘waste people’ was replaced by ‘squatters’, ‘crackers’ and ‘red necks’, just to name a few other labels, which were used to describe people populating the western frontier of the US and some southern states. ‘White trash’ serves as a derogatory racial slur which is directed at low-income, rural white people. As Leah Donnella points out, for some reason ‘the term manages to come across as *less* offensive than most other racial slurs’⁸ and is successfully, yet not openly, used in political battles to prove that the downtrodden and less fortunate should find their representation in the world of big politics:

[C]ommentators who try to make sense of Trump’s mass appeal often fall back on “white trash” signifiers, even if the term itself never rises above the level of subtext. A recent *New York Times* article announced that counties most likely to contain Trump supporters were also likely to be populated by mobile home residents who had no high school diplomas, worked “old economy” jobs, and listed their ancestry as “American” on the U.S. census. [...] He is, in other words, the kind of leader who might well be called on by a population demographer William Frey described to the *Times* as “nonurban, blue-collar and now apparently quite angry.” Or, to put it in the kind of blunt terms we associate with the candidate: White trash.⁹

In the media and popular culture this group is usually portrayed as ‘angry, lazy, dirty, overweight, sunburned, stupid, racist, alcoholic, abusive, jobless, tacky, diseased, violent, backwards, Bible-thumping and uneducated.’¹⁰ One might argue, though, that

American TV and film present two versions of ‘white trash’, both of them being rather awkward and judgmental. On the one hand, the term (and the phenomenon behind it) appears in comedy, because shortcomings, unattractiveness, and apparent helplessness generally provide fertile ground for jokes.

On the other hand, American literature and film abound with examples from the Southern Gothic genre, where diabolism, decay, mystery, and alienation figure prominently in representations of Southern people and their struggles. A recent example that comes to mind in this context is the first season of the critically acclaimed HBO series *True Detectives*, which is set in the rural South and portrays its poverty, crime, and moral collapse. The series portrays Louisiana as a place of social degeneration, which is still haunted by a dream of great, Southern aristocracy. It is home to uneducated, orthodoxly religious, and intolerant white Americans. The series thus offers its viewers a peculiar ‘white trash’ ensemble fraught with incestuous relationships, nepotism, and corruption. Undoubtedly, the show reiterates pejorative stereotypes and vividly depicts poverty as a source of depravity and misery.

2. ‘Spit in the milk’ – *I, Tonya*’s question of fitting in

David J. Leonard and C. Richard King claim that, although ‘films about athletes or those set in sporting worlds may prove popular and even profitable [...] they do not rise to the level of critical significance.’¹¹ It could be argued, though, that this only applies with certain exceptions. In most lists of best movies of all time, *Rocky* (John G. Avildsen, 1976) and *Raging Bull* (Martin Scorsese, 1980) rank quite highly, both setting examples for the future proliferation of sports movies. These productions share a number of features: they are both boxing movies that depict flawed masculinity, hostile environments faced by their protagonists, and white (Italian) minorities struggling financially, to name just a few. Regardless of rankings, sports movies concerned with social issues played a vital role in American visual (cinematic) culture. The above-mentioned titles form part of post-war America’s film canon. The main social problems they explore, in terms of the sentiments, interrelations, patterns, and burning issues of the twenty-first century, include political and historical turbulence, global economics and capitalism. These phenomena pervade professional sport, lifestyle, and finally, the dilemmas of poverty, and social rejection. This selection draws, to a large extent, on findings by Bruce Babington,¹² Emma Poulton and Martin Roderick,¹³ as well as King and Leonard.¹⁴

Craig Gillespie’s biopic *I, Tonya* tells the story of famous, or infamous, 1990s figure skater, Tonya Harding. Public interest in the athlete mostly stems from an incident in

1994 that Harding was allegedly involved in. Her biggest opponent, Nancy Kerrigan, was attacked and physically harmed at the U.S. Figure Skating Championships in Detroit. The assault was to prevent Kerrigan from competing in both the tournament and the upcoming 1994 Lillehammer Olympic Games. Harding and her husband faced criminal charges for orchestrating the attack. The movie focuses not only on Tonya Harding as an athlete but also, and perhaps more so, on Harding as an American, wife, daughter, and public enemy. The core of the movie lies in telling the story from her point of view and presenting her background as a key factor in the story's development. Coming from a dysfunctional family, Tonya is presented as a young woman, struggling financially and emotionally while retaining her unquenchable enthusiasm for skating. As Richard Brody argues, 'Hollywood has two main ways of depicting working-class characters: as sullen, silent strugglers, or as loud, laughable vulgarians.'¹⁵ Gillespie's Harding undoubtedly falls into that second category and, at the same time, epitomizes the stereotype of a poor, uneducated, lower-class girl. Especially during the film's direct-address interview sequences, Margot Robbie (who was nominated for an Academy Award as Best Actress) embodies red-neck clichés in her portrayal of Tonya Harding. She smokes, curses, comes from a broken home, leaves school and gets married at a young age, potentially making it more difficult for the audience to identify with the protagonist. In this context, it is valuable to mention recent studies on female biopic theory. As Karen Hollinger observes,

[t]he critical consensus has been that the biopic is a deeply conservative cinematic form that represents a backward-looking glorification of the past, promotes the cult of the individual, and supports the idea of the self-made man. Yet a number of biopics of women challenge all of these characterizations. They show the genre to be much more complicated and challenging to regressive ideas than has been proposed. The films' multi-generic and multi-subgeneric nature makes them specifically open to different formats and thematic possibilities.¹⁶

Though viewers may sympathize with Tonya's struggle to overcome various obstacles, they might also want to distance themselves from her crudeness. As Virginia Newhall Rademacher notes, *I, Tonya* may, in fact, be read as an anti-biopic. Rademacher argues that anti-biopics offer a dual-temporal perspective: highlighting the subjective, they challenge a dominant narrative and underline 'not only the allure and popular consumption of the larger-than-life legend or, alternatively, crash-and-burn story, but also how these narratives become embodied in reductive images that reinforce social and cultural biases or collapse into caricature.'¹⁷ The scene in which

Tonya helps her boyfriend to fix his car and brags about an old fur coat, as if it were a manifestation of a better life that she, in fact, does not have, may arouse pity as well as a self-flattering sense of superiority over this poor, naïve, simple girl. As Brody argues, 'the movie perpetuates the very condescension that it purports to condemn: it treats Tonya's background, her tastes, her habits, her way of talking, as a joke.'¹⁸ The protagonist, however, does not succumb submissively to the ascribed image. Although, as she admits, 'trashy Tonya doesn't belong,' her attitude comes across as valiant, daring, and unshaken. Tonya's commitment and passion for sport function as a pass to a seemingly better life, but, as the film pointedly underlines, her background would always overshadow her talent and hard work.

These elements may distance the viewer from the protagonist, yet the audience is also given metafictional insight into her alienation by the media, and sees her self-awareness of her disparagement by the elite, which arouses compassion and sympathy. After all, *I, Tonya* begins with the message that it is 'based on irony-free, wildly contradictory, totally true interviews,' which immediately establishes the film's occasionally cartoonish, mockumentary tone and emphasizes the subjective character of the story. The red-neck clichés serve a similar purpose; they repeatedly construct and deconstruct the protagonist. It could be argued that, paradoxically, the anti-biopic elements bring the audience closer to the true face of Tonya, as they question and satirize the public version of her story shaped by the media and the many myths that have arisen over the years.

The movie guides the audience through Harding's childhood and familial affairs. She started skating at the age of four and instantly enjoyed considerable success. In 1991, she became the first American woman to complete a triple Axel jump, which placed her among national top skaters. Hardworking and determined, Harding notoriously dealt with, as the film character puts it, 'a question of fitting in.' Women's figure skating centralizes external appearance and presence; Harding could not afford elegant costumes (she made some of her costumes herself) and lacked desirable traits like grace, femininity, and sophistication. There is a powerful scene which depicts these apparent shortcomings. In solitude, Tonya puts on her garish and dark makeup in front of a mirror just before an important performance. She is stressed and vulnerable. For a moment, she gives vent to her fear and negative emotions by crying, yet quickly composes herself. She knows she cannot show any sign of weakness or misery, that she has no support from a hostile, unwelcoming skating community, which is rooting for her to fail.

However, Tonya is also shown as difficult and, at times, repulsive, which, as the film seems to underline, comes from her deprived social status. As mentioned above,

a number of behaviors attributed to her character seem to draw on stereotypes of the poor and uneducated. Firstly, she is emotionally and socially constrained by the pathological family she grew up in and, hence, blames her background for most of her failures. Although the overall message of the film is a feminist one that challenges restrictive gender roles in sports, the representation of Tonya deprives her of subjectivity and autonomy, due to the character's demanding attitude and her potentially alienating complacency. Secondly, the film pays significant attention to the presence of domestic violence (both physical and psychological) and gun use, putting Tonya in a twofold role as victim and abuser. The events are, obviously, loosely based on Harding's biography, but the film foregrounds roughness and violations of the law, ostentatiously placing their roots in provincialism and poverty.

Tonya may be portrayed as egocentric and unlikeable, but it is the skating community and American sport institutions that receive the most strident criticism. The movie sheds an extremely adverse light on the whole American skating scene. The U.S. Figure Skating Association (FSA), tournament judges, and the news media represent the ever mocking, critical, and prejudiced nature of professional sport. Even when Tonya delivers her best, they ask with incredulity: 'This is our champion?' It is, ironically, in those scenes in which Harding openly confronts the judges for not giving her the points she deserves that the audience perceives her passionate and genuine attitude towards the sport. 'Why can't it all be about skating?', she asks reasonably, yet naively. The film points out the judges' snobbery and provincialism, which are seen through the lens of Tonya's protests. Her enemies become the audience's enemies. As observed by Don Johnson,¹⁹ 'American sport tends to be democratic,' but the figure skating community in *I, Tonya* is not particularly inviting and socially inclusive. It not only demands athletic results, but also compliance with gender-coded rules and expectations regarding an athlete's social background, behavior, and physical appearance. The movie shows the FSA's insistence on promoting a female athlete who would be the showpiece of American women's sport: attractive, delicate, ethereal – all that Tonya is not. The organization requires 'a wholesome American family' (in the movie, this is shown as a reason for Harding's reconciliation with her aggressive husband) to fulfill the American ideal of the nuclear family. These days the explicit espousal of these ideals is more likely to be condemned and frowned upon, but the film depicts the sport scene of the 1990s as an openly hostile and patronizing environment for women, especially for those who air their grievances and refuse to hide their flaws. The movie also presents the American media as being unprofessional and unreliable. The journalist, who offers a direct-address commentary on Harding's career and her relationship with the media, comes across as shallow, and is shown to

uphold a specific ideal of female athleticism, one which the American press sought to maintain, and which Harding failed, or refused, to deliver.

This might explain why Harding has been denied a place in history as the talented athlete that she was, or her failure to immortalize herself through sport, as Raymond L. Schmitt and Wilbert M. Leonard II would see it. The scholars examined '[t]he processes through which Americans seek to leave their mark through achievements in sport' and conceptualized the notion of 'postself,' that is 'the concern of a person with the presentation of his or her self in history'.²⁰ It could be argued that the skater's postself as reiterated in Gillespie's film does, to some extent, encompass her athletic excellence, but it is dominated by her public image, the widely discussed Nancy Kerrigan scandal, and, substantially, by Harding's social background. The biofictional tools the director employs do not authenticate her narrative; the mockumentary style of the film accompanied by fake interviews with main characters (in which all their qualities are grotesquely highlighted) create a rather perverse sense of credibility, given how absurd and comedic these testimonies oftentimes are.

Although the figure of Tonya may arouse mixed feelings (in fact, the film conveys her subjective opinions and generally turns a blind eye to the fact that she was found guilty of a serious criminal offence), the audience could sympathize with her; there is a peculiar impression of unfairness, as her story will always be overshadowed by her background and place of origin. Gillespie creates an image of a victim of a heartless system, a loser in a game of appearances, and, finally, a wasted talent who was stigmatized by public opinion and her own sporting community. Harding's story clearly indicates that American sporting institutions and the American urge for athletic excellence failed to overbalance the power of prejudice, pretense, and stereotypes. As Taffy Brodesser-Akner concludes,

[h]er side of the story is not about guilt or innocence — the discussion over guilt and innocence ended right about the time she completed her community service, as far as she's concerned — but about the finer points of being Tonya Harding: respect, mitigating circumstances, how we treat people and what we expect from them in the first place.²¹

On the other hand, though, those critics who are skeptical of Harding's version of the Kerrigan incident disapprove of iconizing her as a fighter for social and sporting justice, as they perceive her narrative as unreliable and her attitude as exploitative of the realm of the poor and unprivileged. They even claim that her bearing contributes

to the post-truth discourse in which debate is framed neither by facts, nor by reasonable analysis, but by appeals to emotion.

This newfound obsession with Harding appears to reflect our truth-challenged times. [...] We live in a world where people line up for selfies with O.J. Simpson and heavyweight rapist Mike Tyson; where vaccines are said to be harmful for children and global warming is a hoax, and where the president tells whopper lies several times a day. Why shouldn't Tonya Harding be a new folk hero?²²

Conclusions

In its portrayal of a white working-class anti-heroine, *I, Tonya* moves well beyond individual biography to address American poverty and its problematic relation to sports and media culture. The present article has outlined the movie's engagement with social issues in the context of sport's relation to social background and financial means. The analysis of *I, Tonya* demonstrates that financial and social struggles (including biased language and cultural discourse stemming from these) are a significant element of the film.

I, Tonya epitomizes these aspects – by exposing an equivocal heroine, the film provides her sporting endeavors with a social and economic background. This background allows the audience to grasp the nature of the sporting and social realms in which Tonya exists. The figure of Tonya is portrayed as a reflection of her dysfunctional family, the malevolent skating community, and her controversial media image. The film focuses, most emphatically, on the athlete's identity and characteristics, attenuating these solely through reference to her family and social background and presenting her as vulgar, loud, demanding and boorish. The film constantly poses questions about fitting in – physically, economically, socially, and most importantly, in terms of keeping up appearances. Thus, in the case of Harding, what Schmitt and Leonard II's have described as a postself emanates from her private, financial and community-related struggles, rather than from the prism of her talent, athletic excellence and hard work. The film showed the experience of white poverty and its conflicted, ambivalent face – making Tonya both a sympathetic victim and mockable pariah. Moreover, it was a conscious, artistic choice by the filmmakers to follow Harding's version of the events, even though this decision leaves room for debate about whether her narrative, and by extension, the film, are just another manifestation of post-truth culture.

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Notes

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