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Body and Soul: The Structure of Meaning in the Boxing Film Genre

by Leger Grindon

This essay focuses on the master plots, characterizations, settings, and genre history of boxing in Hollywood fiction films since 1930.

The boxer and boxing are significant figures in the Hollywood cinema, with appearances in well over 150 feature-length fiction productions since 1930. During the decade 1975 to 1985 the screen boxer was prominent with, on the one hand, the enormous commercial success of the Rocky series and, on the other, the critical esteem garnered by Raging Bull (1980). As yet there has been no probing examination of this cultural phenomenon. My essay will initiate such a study by analyzing how the evolving conventions of the boxing film genre express conflicts pervasive in American culture.

In the cinema, contemporary genre analysis has focused on evolving narrative conventions as a dramatization of pervasive social conflicts. As Thomas Schatz explains, genre criticism treats familiar stories which “involve dramatic conflicts, which are themselves based upon ongoing cultural conflicts.” Guided by the practice of Schatz, among others, I will outline the conventions animating the boxing genre with a sketch of the typical plot, characters, and setting, followed by a consideration of the genre’s history and the typical emotional response. However, following Rick Altman’s principle that “the first step in understanding the functional role of Hollywood genre is to isolate the problems for which the genre provides a symbolic solution,” I will begin with the problems or conflicts which set the Hollywood boxing film in motion.

Conflicts. The fundamental problems or conflicts in the boxing film can be organized into four categories: body versus soul; opportunity versus difference; market values versus family values; and, finally, anger versus justice. These four related conflicts shape the more apparent conventions of plot, character, and setting.

A fundamental issue at work in the boxing film is the conflict of body and soul established by the tension between physical reality and psychic experience, the material and the spiritual. Whereas Western philosophers emphasize consciousness in their ruminations on the body/mind division, the boxing film foregrounds the body and particularly the male body. One may usefully study the boxing film as...
a masculine manifestation of the “body genres,” that is, films which Linda Williams describes as presenting “the spectacle of a body caught in the grip of intense sensation or emotion.” This issue is readily acknowledged in two boxing films from 1947 and 1981 that take Body and Soul as their title.

A conflict arises from the gratification the boxer gains from the physical power of his body that is opposed by his recognition of its deteriorating force. As Joyce Carol Oates has noted, boxing “is the most tragic of all sports because more than any human activity it consumes the very excellence it displays—its drama is this very consumption.” This confrontation with physical decline implies a grappling with death as well. The concluding line from Body and Soul makes this explicit. As the boxer Charlie Davis leaves the ring forever, he mocks the gangster’s threats, declaring, “What are ya gonna do, kill me? Everybody dies.” A dominant theme of the boxing genre is how the fighter deals with his waning physical powers: can he overcome the deterioration of the body by cultivating his soul? An additional question is frequently posed: what spiritual alternative does the culture offer to material rewards? The boxer’s problem evokes a long-standing division within the American tradition between an Enlightenment rationalism and its secular, pragmatic descendants versus the Puritan-evangelical aspiration to build a community in the service of God. In the ring the boxer represents the free individual exercising his skills in a pragmatic struggle against his onrushing opponent. However, upon facing the inevitable decline of his ability, he must transform his perspective or perish. The identification of the boxer with his body develops related problems which I have organized around the conflict between opportunity and difference.

America is a nation of immigrants, and the American ideal strives to embrace diversity and simultaneously to promote equal opportunity regardless of difference. Opportunity is central to the national community because the quest for self-improvement serves as a crosscultural value which promotes social unity. The American experience has labored fitfully under the demands of its promise, and the conflict between difference and opportunity continues to undermine this aspiration. In the boxing genre the ceremonial weigh-in, the impersonal referee, and the bare ring speak of equality, a rule-bound competition emblematic of the culture of opportunity. But these films constantly unmask the trappings of fairness and express the liability of difference. Everywhere the fix is on, the fighter is cornered, the game is rigged.

The boxer’s physical being and the social consequences of this condition define him as different, and that difference generates conflict as the boxer pursues opportunities in the fight game. Ethnicity accentuates the boxer’s body as the source of difference. Even during the classical studio period the pugilist was often a member of an ethnic minority; consider, for instance, the Italian-American Joe Bonaparte in Golden Boy (1939) or the Jew Charlie Davis and the Hispanic Johnny Monterez from Right Cross (1950). Ethnic identification intersected with class difference, characterizing the boxer as a poor worker selling physical labor in an industrialized economy which found little value in his skills. As a result, the boxer generally represents an oppressed underclass struggling to rise. Such a
tradition is long-standing and can be traced back at least as far as Jack London’s story “The Mexican” (1911). Though the body defines difference, economic marginalization is one of its consequences, so the questions arise: can the opportunity be seized? Will difference be overcome by money?

“The crisis of masculinity,” which Pam Cook and Robin Wood have explored in Raging Bull, is a manifestation of difference in terms of gender. For example, The Champ (1931, 1979) portrays the boxer as an immature father whose childish behavior estranges him from his wife and places him under the care of his young son. The boxer’s career unfolds in an exclusively male world which retards the fighter’s emotional development and intensifies his difference from women. In the romance the female protagonist is associated with mainstream culture and the family, whereas the society of the boxer is defined not simply as male but also as underdeveloped and apart. The romance provides the opportunity to overcome gender difference through marriage. Occasionally a comedy, such as The Main Event (1979), will move a woman into the boxing world using a gender reversal for humor. At the other extreme, the boxer may be an unmitigated brute who abuses defenseless women, such as Battling Burrows in Broken Blossoms (1919).

The conflict between opportunity and difference points to the third conflict: market values versus family values. The boxer, like Midge Kelly in Champion (1949), is typically motivated by poverty to turn professional, and he is driven not merely to become a champion but to become rich. As a result the boxer, in a close relationship to Robert Warshow’s gangster, embodies the success ethic and offers another critique of the Horatio Alger myth. His ambition stimulates a need for cash and a desire for integration into the dominant culture, which alienates him from his family, his fiancée, and his native community. In the boxing genre the struggle of the underclass acquires a vivid analogue for the physical, psychological, and moral toll of the drive for success. As in Golden Boy, material success generally fails to overcome loneliness and spiritual alienation. The boxing film asks, Is money the only standard by which self-improvement can be socially recognized? If not, what alternate values does the culture offer?

This conflict rehearses the long-standing tension in American culture between the individual and the community. The boxer, alone in the ring, embodies the individual stripped to his essential skills. He is posed in contest not simply with his opponent but against the collective values associated with the family and the ethnic community. This conflict also points back to the body-soul opposition as the boxer’s career is tied to the flesh, whereas the family is associated with the spirit.

Difference also generates the fourth conflict between anger and justice. The consequences of difference—social marginalization, sexual isolation, poverty—produce anger. “Boxing is fundamentally about anger,” explains Joyce Carol Oates. “Boxers fight one another because the legitimate objects of their anger are not accessible to them. There is no political system in which the spectacle of two men fighting each other is not a striking, if unintended, image of the political impotence of most men (and women).” The anger, frustrated in the face of injustice, generates violence, which becomes distilled, redirected, and displayed in the
spectacle of boxing. The anger experienced by the boxer is not simply a response to his malaise but also expresses his rage at being unable to expose its cause or, if revealed, to vanquish it. Whether it is the heartless vamp in *The Iron Man* (1931), the double-crossing manager of *The Set-Up* (1949), or the sleazy promoters who exploit Balboa in *Rocky* (1976), the boxer is consumed by anger but unable to strike at the antagonists who are tormenting him. The genre becomes a stage for the man of action to be disarmed by confusion and powerless in the face of domineering forces. These problems point back to the conflict between body and soul and a need for the integration of the sensual and the psychic. But they also express the condition of modernity, in which the complex forces of the metropolis disorient and overwhelm the individual. The boxer experiences the pain of victimization while being blocked from directly confronting his tormentors. The genre asks, Can rage finally address its cause, or will violence strike the innocent and destroy the boxer himself? Will the boxer come to understand the cause of his condition, or will the soul, blinded and disfigured by rage, be unable to receive grace?

The genre thereby expresses a thinly veiled critique of social conditions and the success ethic. The widespread experience of these conflicts attracts and maintains an audience for the boxing film. Equally important, the conflicts serve as the foundation upon which the conventions of plot, character, and setting are constructed. The conventions in turn elaborate the ideological framework through which the conflicts are understood.

**Master Plot.** As Pam Cook has noted, the plot of the boxing film is organized around the rise and fall of the fighter’s career. This rise-and-fall pattern can be broken into ten moves that establish what I call the master plot.

The master plot is a series of typical events linked into a causal progression which establishes the boundaries of the generic fiction. The master plot will be larger than most fictions in the genre, and individual texts will select from, vary, or add to the routine formula, but the master plot incorporates the general expectations of the spectator and often supplies implicit information assumed by any particular film. The master plot is similar to Schatz’s genre myth or the folklorist Vladimir Propp’s collection of “moves” which constitute a tale. Rick Altman offers a trio of plots—the fairy tale, the folktale, and the show musical—as the master patterns in *The American Film Musical*. Of course, the filmmakers themselves are well aware of the prevailing conventions, and, as a result, parodies provide valuable evidence of the master plot. In 1978 Stanley Donen’s *Movie, Movie* included a parody of the boxing film entitled “Dynamite Hands.” I will use it, along with other standard works, as points of reference in outlining the master plot of the boxing film.

Move 1: The Discovery. The protagonist is found to have a remarkable talent for fistfights. In “Dynamite Hands” Joey Popchik delivers sandwiches to the local gym. When a contender refuses to pay for his lunch, Joey lays him out with one blow and immediately comes to the attention of Gloves Malloy, the boxing manager. However, the protagonist is reluctant to enter the ring. He knows better than to take on such a dangerous and disreputable line of work. Joey intends to go to
law school and heads back to the deli. Chaney in *Hard Times* (1975) is discovered when he promptly knocks out the first “hitter” to the surprise and glee of Speed, the manager. But shortly after, the street fighter keeps his distance from Speed, who tempts him with a guarantee of lavish winnings.

**Move 2: The Crisis.** The values embodied in the protagonist’s family and his sanctioned ambition are placed in a crisis which drives the reluctant hero into the ring. In *Body and Soul* Charlie’s father, an innocent bystander, is killed in a gangland raid. Masculine pride provoked by poverty leads Charlie to forsake his education and accept the manager’s offer to become a professional fighter. In *City for Conquest* (1940) Danny Kenny resists a boxing career until his brother needs money to continue his studies and his sweetheart criticizes Kenny’s lack of ambition.

**Move 3: The Promise.** The boxer confirms his potential with his first victory in the ring. For example, in *Kid Galahad* Ward knocks out the champ’s brother and assures Donati, the manager, of his talent. In *Gentleman Jim* (1942) Corbett in his first regulation bout at the Olympic Club downs Burke, the former champion.

**Move 4: The Rise.** In the gym the manager develops the boxer’s craft followed by a series of victories in a provincial tour. The boxer returns to New York as a contender, ready for the big time. A classic instance is the tour montage of speeding locomotives, falling fighters, cheering crowds, and sports headlines chronicling Bonaparte’s rise in *Golden Boy*; for an earlier example, see *The Iron Man*.

**Move 5: The Deal.** The boxer, blocked by the brokers of the fight game, signs with a gangster promoter, against the advice of his manager, fiancée, brother, or other trusted confidant. The promoter, like Fuseli in *Golden Boy* or Harris in *Champion* or Sidney in *Hammer* (1972), guarantees the boxer a fight at the Garden, a title shot, in short, success.

**Move 6: Debauchery.** The boxer abandons his previous regimen of training for parties and the fast life. The girlfriend from the old neighborhood, disturbed by the transformation, is pushed aside by the vamp. True friends are replaced by sycophants, the trusted manager by the gangster. In “Dynamite Hands” Joey, now a contender, is seduced by the dancer, Troubles Moran, and in response his fiancée, Betsy, retreats to her lonely life as a librarian. In *The Spirit of Youth* (1937) Joe deserts Mary, his hometown sweetheart, for Flora, a cabaret singer, and soon the contender is spending his evenings at nightclubs.

**Move 7: Big Fight 1.** The protagonist gains the title or wins the fight that assures him big-time status. Midge Kelly defeats Johnny Dunne and gains the middleweight title in *Champion*. Jack Jefferson defeats Brady, the white former champ, in *The Great White Hope* (1970).

**Move 8: The Dive.** Rendered vulnerable by high living, isolated from his true friends, and in need of cash, the boxer yields to pressure from the gangster promoter and agrees to take a dive for some dubious reward. In *Body and Soul* Charlie, now the veteran champ, accepts Roberts’s proposition to throw his title
defense and retire with a big pay-off. In *Raging Bull* La Motta’s vulnerability grows from his jealous obsession, but in this variation he yields to Tommy, the Bronx ganglord, and takes the dive to gain a title shot.

**Move 9: Big Fight 2.** In an extended bout, the boxer suffers terrible punishment, but in a late round he regains his will and defeats his opponent; nevertheless, his career is over. Tommy McCoy in *The Crowd Roars* (1938) endures a beating because his beloved has been kidnapped by a gangster betting against him, but once he learns of her escape, McCoy rallies to win the title and then announces his retirement. In *Kid Galahad* the boxer follows the instructions of his double-crossing manager until Donati, softened by the pleas of his beloved, relents and engineers with the Kid a last-minute comeback.

**Move 10: Resolution/Epilogue.** The end of the boxing career signifies the decline of the body. Is there a resurrection or is the boxer finished? In the classic format the protagonist is saved by leaving the fight game and returning to his fiancée or his old neighborhood, as in Rocky’s closing embrace with Adrian after “going the distance” or Mountain’s return home to train youngsters at the end of the teleplay *Requiem for a Heavyweight* (1956).

“Though no single film can present the entire myth,” Rick Altman explains, “the system of generic variations creates a myth, a single coherent narrative mediating cultural conflicts.” So a work may portray only a part of this narrative pattern but still operate within the conventions of the genre. Films such as *The Champ* or *Requiem for a Heavyweight* (1956, 1962) dramatize the final move, while others such as *Raging Bull* skip the opening, leaving implicit the initial episodes of the conventional plot. Perhaps more remarkable are those like *Somebody Up There Likes Me* (1956) or *Rocky* that begin with the boxer as loser and reverse the common trajectory by ending with a victory. Works which seem tangential to the genre, such as *The Quiet Man* (1952) or *On the Waterfront* (1954), assume the conventional plot as a starting point for their fiction.

An understanding of the master plot of the boxing film needs to be supplemented by a description of the typical characters.

**Characterization.** The male protagonist is noteworthy as a multiple figure: the boxer, the manager, and the trainer. Though most boxing films foreground the fighter, some films, such as *Kid Galahad* or *The Harder They Fall* (1956), highlight the manager. In many films, such as *Hard Times*, the boxer and the manager receive comparable treatment. The division between these three figures serves to emphasize the mind/body split. The manager is the technician and strategist; a rationalist, he is frequently compromised because he represents business, a rival to the family. The trainer usually assumes a subsidiary role as the caretaker of the body, though he may, like Poe in *Hard Times*, also minister to the soul.

Two satellite figures circling near the protagonist are also common. The punch-drunk ex-fighter frequently appears as a harbinger of the boxer’s fate. In films such as *City for Conquest* or *The Crowd Roars* the protagonist acknowledges the mindless pug as he reluctantly embarks on a ring career. In later works,
characters such as Ben in *Body and Soul* or Bruiser in *Hammer* develop the figure. The sportswriter appears in films such as *Right Cross* and *The Harder They Fall* as a knowing man; he is related to the manager as an expression of intellect, but more detached. Occasionally he assumes the role of a first-person narrator, a confidant of the audience and cool observer of the boxer’s fate.

The boxer himself embodies the physical: a strong man deprived of power in a metropolis dominated by money, position, and cunning. Unlike the gangster, whose work is done in private, whose mode is conspiratorial, the boxer is a public figure, applauded or sometimes reviled. Emphasis on the male body, its power, beauty, and deterioration, ties the boxer to sexuality and the woman’s position in mainstream cinema. In this regard he becomes analogous to the prostitute, who also uses her body as a commodity and whose body, as a result, suffers abuse. Whereas the prostitute trades upon a false association with romantic love, the boxer redirects the emotion of anger to fulfill his market function. Like the prostitute or Robert Warshow’s gangster, the boxer is a tragic figure since the conventions separate body from soul and since time dictates the decline of the flesh. As a result, the boxer animates an implicit discourse on the conditions of oppression.

The Old Testament Samson offers a touchstone for the boxer. *City for Conquest* acknowledges the allusion by calling its protagonist, middleweight Danny Kenny, “Samson.” Samson, like the boxer, is physically overpowering. In the first demonstration of his might Samson “tore the lion asunder” with his bare hands; his bestial attributes cast doubt upon the spiritual aspects of his humanity. Central to the tale is the problem of difference, difference between Jew and Philistine, oppressed and oppressor, men and women. Samson, to the consternation of his parents, marries a Philistine, only to be betrayed by his wife and her people. Again and again Samson is set up by women (Delilah being the last and most successful) and, as a result, he must fight his way out of captivity. His story is a cautionary tale about assimilation.

Though a leader of the Hebrews, Samson’s dual nature is firmly anchored to his body: physical strength finds a counterpoint in sexual weakness. More important, his intense physicality suggests a spiritual flaw. In spite of his ties to the Lord, Samson is spiritually crippled, blind to the conspiracies of his enemies and, finally, blinded by them. Though the Lord allows Samson a final vengeance upon the Philistines, as a result of his weakness he perishes with his tormentors. The link between Samson and the boxer is grounded in the body, whose extraordinary strength carries with it a counterbalancing weakness. The dual nature of the physical is hidden from the hero by ignorance, a blindness to the spiritual, which carries the protagonist to his doom.

The antagonist mirrors the protagonist in comprising multiple figures, the gangster-promoter and the hero’s chief rival in the ring. For example, in *Champion* Harris the gangster-promoter replaces the manager, leading to Kelly’s fall, and his counterpart is Johnny Dunne, Kelly’s ring opponent. The gangster-promoter, an evil transformation of the manager, is associated with the corruption of money and the moral compromises necessary in order to prosper in business. In
the economic analogue underlying the genre the boxer represents physical labor, the manager, technical expertise, and the promoter, capital. As a gambler, the promoter is a shadow investor who uses capital to make money from the physical toil of others. For him value lies not in labor and craft, emblematic of the work ethic, but in money itself. As a result success is divorced from work and the Puritan connection between salvation and prosperity is corrupted. The promoter also violates the code of fair competition among men, for as a gangster he uses force outside the boundaries of the ring and employs others to execute his violence. A personification of the soul’s degradation, the promoter is solely interested in financial gain. Like market forces, he is impervious to human feeling.

The hero’s ring opponent physically portrays the moral assault undertaken by the gangster promoter. Whereas the gangster promoter portrays exterior social forces pressuring the boxer, the ring opponent often becomes a phantom antagonist representing an inner weakness or fear residing in the boxer himself. As Joyce Carol Oates explains, “The boxer faces an opponent who is a dream-distortion of himself.” For example, in Right Cross Hilden, the inconsequential opponent of champion Johnny Montez, recognizes that Montez drops his left hand as he throws a right punch. The champ’s weakness allows Hilden to score an upset. More to the point, the flaw in Johnny’s defense represents a character flaw, his exaggerated feeling of being victimized by prejudice. This motif invites, and frequently receives, a racial treatment, with African Americans assuming a symbolic function as the black phantom who personifies psychic turmoil. For example, in Golden Boy Joe kills Chocolate Drop in the ring and as a result comes to terms with the violence engendered in himself. Ben, the African American in Body and Soul, is the champion whom Charlie replaces, and later Ben becomes Charlie’s trainer and his conscience. Jimmy Reeves and Ray Robinson embody La Motta’s troubled psyche, inflicting defeat and retribution upon Jake in Raging Bull. So the antagonist in the boxing film assumes the body/soul division, splitting into the exterior social forces portrayed by the gangster promoter and the interior psychic turmoil embodied by the ring opponent.

The opposition between body and soul, as well as that between the market and the family, shapes the romance as the boxer’s affections move from the neighborhood girlfriend to the vamp. Whether the librarian of “Dynamite Hands,” the painter of Body and Soul, or the manager’s convent-educated younger sister in Kid Galahad, the girlfriend is associated with the uplift of the spirit under the rubric of family, religion, or the arts. On the other hand, the vamp, like Grace in Champion, offers the pleasures of the flesh; she preys upon the hero’s body just as she drains away his money.

Romance also raises the issue of difference. How can a man retain his masculinity and achieve a fruitful union with a woman? The heroine of the boxing film does not simply represent romantic fulfillment but challenges the exclusive male world of the ring. Marriage, domesticity, and family mean giving up the diversions of fighting and the male coterie of the gym. In order to cultivate his soul, the boxer must take on attributes associated with the female, otherwise he will perish with
his body. As noted above, The Champ portrays the fighter as an overgrown boy, and similar childlike qualities mark Kid Mason in The Iron Man, Joe Bonaparte, and Kid Galahad. Heroines such as Lorna Moon in Golden Boy, Fluff in Kid Galahad, and Omma in Fat City (1972) are sympathetic, knowing women who have been drawn into a male milieu, thereby compromising the spiritual advantage of their femininity. They become figures who are doomed unless they marry and re-establish their position in the family. Like the schoolmarm in the western, the heroine of the boxing film acts in opposition to a male ethos that the hero must reject in order to mature.

The opposition between the crowd and the family moves characterization toward collective figures which further amplify the conflicts between career and home, business and parenthood, individual and community. While the family represents a foundation for the spirit most vividly idealized in Golden Boy, the boxing film generally presents the family in crisis. Divorce in The Champ, the widowed parent in Body and Soul, the warring siblings of Champion, Rocky, and Raging Bull all present the family ruptured. The boxing racket is associated with the tumult of urban life, whereas the family harks back to rural and small-town values—Donati’s mother on the farm in Kid Galahad or the family shop in Golden Boy and Body and Soul. Even though the fighter frequently undertakes his career for the family, the drive for success strains or destroys kinship bonds. The opposition between business and family, widely recognized in the gangster film, is shared by the boxing genre and points to the broader conflict within American culture between the individual and the community.

The crowd, on the other hand, expresses the heartless detachment of the urban throng. The audience for the bout is made up of two types: particular characters from the fiction, but also figures constituting—individually or collectively—the crowd. Their chief spokesmen are the radio announcer, the press corps, and the referee. The crowd is forcefully sketched in Golden Boy and fully developed in The Set-Up. These spectators invest a raucous passion in the boxer’s struggle but remain apart from the humanity of the combatants. For the general public the fighter is a vehicle for entertainment, another commodity. They are a mass of consumers emblematic of the callousness of the market system. The crowd can take pleasure in an event which would be a crime outside of the ring and buy off their conscience for the price of a ticket. The kinship bonding of the family finds its opposite in the predatory character of the crowd.

Setting. The setting presents the third element of the generic profile. The boxing film establishes a meaningful division between those settings which are independent of the fight game and those which are specific to boxing, that is, the ring, the gym, and the training camp.

Among the settings apart from boxing, the hotel room poses a significant opposition with the home. The hotel—transient, public, and commercial—contrasts with the stability, intimacy, and warmth of the home. The touring boxer moves from room to room, but sometimes even the hometown fighter, like Tully in Fat
City, seems confined to hotels. The demands of the boxer’s vocation, unlike respectable professions, threaten domesticity. This division is amplified in the opposition between the metropolis and the rural or village setting. For example, in Kid Galahad the boxer’s goal is to earn enough money to buy a farm and leave the city. He falls in love with his manager’s sister, whom he meets at her home in the country. The hotel and the city come to represent the heartless forces of modernity, whereas the home and the country express the natural comforts of a preindustrial age.

Objects and locales also express a dichotomy between work and leisure. Prominent among the nonboxing settings are urban entertainment sites: the nightclub, the pool hall, the restaurant or bar. Here a contrast is offered between excess and balance, debauchery and the arts. Wild parties contrast with the regimen of training. Recreation represents not refreshment for a return to work but rather the boxer’s compensation for ascetic denial. In the frenzied metropolis a balanced, integrated life is abandoned for the swing between the rigorous discipline of work and diversion carried to excess. The pleasures of the flesh contrast with the solace of the arts: Joe Bonaparte gives up his violin for a fast car; in the middle of a drunken party, Charlie Davis is reminded of his decline by Peg’s portrait. Titillating his body rather than cultivating his spirit characterizes the boxer’s debauchery. In addition, a troubling reversal occurs when the boxer enters the ring and finds himself at work while the crowd takes pleasure from the assault on his body.

The locales distinctive to boxing stand apart from normal life; they constitute a professional realm that gradually confines the boxer until he faces his opponent alone. These sites move from conventionally socialized spaces, such as the manager’s office, to exclusively male enclaves, the gym, the training camp, and the dressing room, and finally reach the ring, where the boxer stands exposed, isolated, and in contest. The society of the manager’s office or the secrecy of the dressing room presents a space for scheming and deals, the site of the set-up. The progress from the periphery to the ring invokes a process of unveiling, a movement toward the fundamental. As a result, this passageway is frequently highlighted, particularly in the boxer’s walk to the ring for a crucial bout, as in Champion or Raging Bull. In the ring, however, the boxer stands alone and must come to terms with himself. On the one hand, the ring stands for the boundary of the self, and the bout represents an enclosed, internal struggle. On the other hand, the ring stages a commercial spectacle, and the public violence contrasts with the secret transgressions that characterize the gangster. The spectacle of the fight provides an iconography which links the private and the public conflicts driving the boxer. The boxing film is not simply about rise and fall but about exposing the body in order to reveal the fundamental struggles of the soul.

Within the ring two questions are posed. Can the boxer master his body? Can the soul of the boxer be acknowledged and embraced? The first is resolved when the protagonist gains the championship, when he wins what I have called “Big Fight #1.” At this point the fighter achieves an idealized command over his physical self. The culmination of the boxing film, however, comes with “Big Fight #2,”
in which the boxer must come to terms with the aging of his body and can only overcome this physical decline through an understanding of his spirit. Typically this moment comes with the realization that the boxer must not throw the fight after all, as in Body and Soul. The existence and nature of a spiritual alternative to physical being thus becomes a vital concern for these films.

The ring is the site of sanctioned violence and becomes the key setting for exploring the consequences of anger and the meaning of suffering; that is, can the aggression characterizing the boxer be understood and redirected? In Big Fight #2 the boxer endures a severe beating in the ring, and even if he emerges victorious, as in Golden Boy, he retires after the bout. How is his suffering to be understood? As a proof of self-worth (Rocky, for example)? As punishment (Champion)? As a source of purification in preparation for renewal (Body and Soul)? Or perhaps the boxer’s ordeal is rendered meaningless, as one could argue is the case in Fat City. The climactic bout explores the boxer’s inner self and asks whether violence bred by anger will destroy or liberate the spirit. The bouts present a struggle in which the boxer must finally learn from loss, that is, learn from the decline of his physical prowess or be trapped within his decaying body. The theme of resurrection commonly attributed to Raging Bull seems upon reflection to be endemic to the boxing genre as a whole.

Violence in the boxing film responds to broader trends outlined by John Cawelti in “The Myths of Violence in American Popular Culture.” The myth of equality through violence is dramatized in the boxer’s rise and debunked in his fall. The myth of the honorable code of violence which Cawelti associates with the westerner and the hard-boiled detective is reexamined. The honorable code depends upon ritual and discipline, so the exercise of violence serves justice. The boxing film emphasizes the rituals and discipline of ring violence but regularly shows that the rules attempting to contain violence are corrupted and that violence inevitably spills outside of the ring. In the boxing film the honorable code of violence is seldom tenable. The myth of regeneration through violence presents a more complex and provocative point of contact. Cawelti, referring to the work of Richard Slotkin, reviews the myth of the white captive who eventually turns on the Indians who have abducted him and destroys them:

The violence in this myth, Slotkin feels, was related to the settler’s imaginative tendency to project onto the Indians his own latent desires for freedom, sensuality, and escape from the spiritual rigors of the Christian community. Thus, in the myth of the captive, the ultimate rescue and destruction of the Indians are also symbolically a destruction of the captive’s own feared desires for lawlessness and the lascivious freedom of the wilderness.

In the boxing genre, the pugilist can be viewed as a captive of the dominant, urban culture. He must finally turn on the wealth and assimilation which it represents and destroy the gangster promoter and his alter ego, the ring opponent, in order to return, cleansed, to the traditions of the ethnic community from which he arose. But in the boxing genre the captive’s regeneration is seldom realized, be-
cause violence in the boxing genre mixes righteous anger and blind self-destruction, which, like Samson, bring down the Philistines and the strong man together.

**History.** This model is not a stable formula; rather, it has evolved in response to changing conditions within the film industry, boxing culture, and society at large. Three periods of intense activity mark its development: 1930 to 1942, 1946 to 1956, and 1975 to 1980.

Between 1930 and World War II over seventy fiction features were produced in the genre, and by the close of the period the classic mode of Hollywood studio production had established the core conventions apparent in films such as *Kid Galahad*, *Golden Boy*, and *City for Conquest*. By the early 1930s the boxer was closely aligned with the Depression crisis of the working man and exhibited the residue of literary naturalism. In addition, the censorship constraints on the gangster film intensified with the stricter enforcement of the Production Code in 1934, and the boxing fiction served to both mute and deliver key elements made popular by the urban crime film. Then the rise of Joe Louis in 1935 provided a stimulating political undercurrent. More than a world-famous athlete, Louis’s victories over the Italian Primo Carnera and the German Max Schmeling associated his prowess with the antifascist movement. Furthermore, he was carefully groomed to serve as a representative African American associated with the politics of racial equality. As such Louis became an emblem of the Popular Front in mass culture. Allusions to Louis mark the boxing film genre from the mid-1930s at least until *Requiem for a Heavyweight*. As a result, by the outbreak of World War II the boxing film carried pronounced associations with the New Deal and leftist values.

After a hiatus for the war, production resumed, but a sharper and more introspective disillusionment, associated with film noir, marked such films as *Body and Soul* and *The Set-Up*. The crisis of the Hollywood industry brought on by theHUAC investigation and subsequent blacklist, the Paramount decrees, and the decline in profits finds expression in the bleaker tone of the boxing film. Many craftsmen who worked on these films (Robert Rosen, Abraham Polonsky, Carl Foreman, Budd Schulberg—the list could go on) were stalwarts of the Popular Front in the film industry, and the boxing film offers an implicit testimony to politics in the movie capital after the war. The fading prowess of Joe Louis, exacerbated by the tax indebtedness, divorce, and death or imprisonment of members of his trusted entourage, presents a complementary influence. This trend culminated in three celebrated motion pictures which explored the problems of the boxer after he leaves the ring: *The Quiet Man*, *From Here to Eternity* (1953), and *On the Waterfront*. Upon reflection, these works can be understood in the context of the crisis undermining the Popular Front ethos during the cold war. This second period ends with the downbeat teleplay *Requiem for a Heavyweight* and the unusual optimism of *Somebody Up There Likes Me* in 1956, just as the last major white heavyweight champion, Rocky Marciano, moved into retirement. With the suppression of the Hollywood Left, the decline of the studio system, and a rising...
national optimism, the boxing genre appeared to have played out its meaningful address.

Only occasional production ensued until the presence of Muhammad Ali, the malaise of the 1970s, and a return to traditional genres sparked a revival. *The Great White Hope* and *Fat City* serve as relics of the old political sensibility, but by mid-decade the boxing film goes through a substantive transformation. Charles Bronson (*Hard Times*), Sylvester Stallone (*Rocky*), and Clint Eastwood (*Every Which Way But Loose*, 1978, *Any Which Way You Can*, 1980) assumed the role of the boxer as a white working-class hero no longer under allegiance to New Deal liberalism but as spokesman for the “silent majority.” The boxer becomes indicative of shifting class politics. Ali, like Joe Louis, influences the genre, but he inspires a threatening model as a representative of “black power” rather than an ideal of racial integration. The return to traditional generic forms typical of the “New Hollywood” invests these films with a nostalgic longing that is amplified by period settings and the primitive nature of boxing and the boxer himself. The genre, revised and invigorated, again attracted a large audience.

**Emotional Response.** Genres trade on the expectations of the viewer familiar with the conventions of plot, character, and setting. In addition, genres promise a particular emotional response, such as laughter in comedy or fear in the horror film. I would argue that the characteristic emotions elicited by the boxing film are nostalgia and pathos.

A bittersweet longing for the past finds expression in the boxing film in multiple ways. Boxing itself is a simple sport with minimal rules and trappings. The boxer, stripped bare in the face of his opponent, harks back to man’s primitive origins before even his skill as a tool maker distinguished him. As noted above, the boxer, enclosed by the metropolis, yearns for the farm or the village and expresses ambivalence divided between a desire for assimilation into the dominant culture and a return to his native, ethnic community. The flashback structures typical of film noir fit comfortably into boxing films such as *Body and Soul* or *Whiplash* (1948). Other films, such as *The Set-Up* or *Requiem for a Heavyweight*, portray the close of the fighter’s career and constantly allude to past success. At least as early as *Gentleman Jim* the genre embraces a period setting which becomes more prevalent in the 1970s with features such as *The Great White Hope*, *Hard Times*, and *Raging Bull*. Even Rocky’s evocation of Marciano, among other things, colors these films with nostalgia. By the 1970s the genre conventions themselves carry an antiquated simplicity which evokes the classical studio period. The use of nostalgia from the sentimental (*Rocky*) to the self-conscious (*Raging Bull*) varies widely, but the genre regularly elicits a distinctive feeling of time lost. And as John Cawelti notes, “A contemporary nostalgia film . . . must make us aware in some fashion of the relationship between the past and present.”

Nostalgia finds its etymological root in the Greek words for home and pain; pathos has a close relationship, as its Greek etymology is rooted in the word for suffering. Bearing witness to suffering is central to spectatorship in the boxing
genre. “Boxing is about being hit rather more than it is about hitting,” Oates explains, “just as it is about feeling pain, if not devastating psychological paralysis, more than it is about winning.” The literal and figurative imprisonment of the boxer in The Champ and Raging Bull crystallizes the wrenching agony cultivated by the genre. In The Champ Andy has been thrown into jail once again for brawling. Coming to his senses the next day, he realizes that his behavior harms his son, and he reluctantly decides to send his beloved Dink off to Linda, the mother and estranged wife. But when the boy visits Andy he pleads from the other side of the cell bars to remain with his father. Andy turns to insult and anger and finally strikes the boy to drive him away. In tears Dink departs, broken-hearted. Tormented at hitting the child and grieving at the loss of his son, the prisoner relentlessly pounds the cell wall with his fists until they are bloody and broken. In a similar fashion near the end of Raging Bull, Jake La Motta finds himself thrown into solitary confinement after resisting the police. Having alienated his family and friends, Jake is utterly alone, and he bemoans his bestial stupidity, finally pounding his head and his fists relentlessly against the unyielding concrete in despair. In both cases the boxer’s suffering is portrayed when he apparently inflicts blows, but the punishment is directed against himself. The agony of the boxer, in contrast to the gangster’s death, is a fundamental element. The reason for and purpose of suffering arise as central questions. Such feelings link the genre to what have been called the three pillars of the Hollywood tradition: D. W. Griffith, Charles Chaplin, and, in his more perverse tendencies, Erich Von Stroheim. Each of these filmmakers cultivates an intense feeling in his audience and strives to excite sympathy and awe at the suffering endured by the characters in the fiction. Ideally such emotions spark a recognition, linking the conflicts animating the work to the viewer’s experience. Furthermore, the narrative resolution may release the viewer from the trauma excited by the conflict. Such a release can prove enormously satisfying even if it does nothing to remedy these problems in the lives of the audience.

This sketch of the boxing genre can only fulfill its objectives by initiating more comprehensive study. I hope that this model can contribute to an understanding of particular texts, foster a study of the genre’s evolving forms, as well as illuminate the ideological predilections, some of which have been suggested here, embedded in the boxing film.

Notes

Thanks to Charles Ramirez Berg, William Rothman, Charles Maland, and my Middlebury College colleagues, Ted Perry, Don Mitchell, John Bertolini, Timothy Spears, Sharon Lloyd, and Molly Boyle, for their generous criticism and advice on this essay.

1. The most comprehensive available listing can be found in Sports Films: A Complete Reference, compiled by Harvey Marc Zucker and Lawrence J. Babich (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1987). Boxing is by far the most widely represented sport in fiction film.


7. The exclusively male society carries an implicit homoeroticism remarked upon by other critics, maybe most conspicuously Robin Wood in the essay noted above.


13. I am grateful to William Rothman for bringing this figure to my attention.


17. This instance replicates the famous case of Max Schmeling, who recognized a similar weakness in Joe Louis which allowed him to defeat Louis in their first meeting in 1936.

18. As Gerald Early has noted, this is “a very simple and very old idea here, namely, that the black male is metaphorically the white male’s unconscious personified.” Gerald Early, “‘I Only Like It Better When the Pain Comes’: More Notes toward a Cultural Definition of Prizefighting,” from *Reading the Fights*, ed. Joyce Carol Oates and Daniel Halpern (New York: Henry Holt, 1988), 50.

19. I am grateful to Charles Ramirez Berg for bringing this setting to my attention.


23. The Popular Front was a political alliance and rallying cry across a broad spectrum from moderate liberals to the Communist Party which was initiated in 1935 by among other things the Communist International’s decision to cooperate with liberals in France and Spain in resisting the rise of fascism. The alliance, which lasted until the Hitler-Stalin pact in 1939 and then was revived during World War II, focused on the rise of the labor movement and racial and ethnic equality as part of its antifascist program.

24. The widely repeated tale, probably apocryphal, that Louis first visited the boxing gym when he was supposed to be attending his violin lessons serves as a point of allusion in *Kid Galahad* and more obviously in *Golden Boy*, that is, boxers are associated with or play the violin. Even in *City for Conquest*, the link between boxing and classical music is played out in the relationship between the brothers. Rod Serling has acknowledged allusions to Louis in *Requiem*, most particularly in the offer to Mountain to become a
professional wrestler, a debasement of his lost skills as a boxer. Joe Louis himself both starred in films and had films made explicitly about him. For another instance, see note 17 above.


