The culture of boxing: sensation and affect

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The Culture of Boxing: Sensation and Affect
Kath Woodward
Joyce Carol Oates has argued that watching boxing on television is drama, whereas being at the fight is real. Staking a claim to reality is a strategy that is used in order to explain the lasting power of boxing to excite people and as part of the sport’s historical endurance and the cultural investment in boxing that crosses a range of fields. This article uses Oates’s distinction between drama and what is real to explore the culture of boxing and its continuing, if contradictory, appeal through different cultural forms. Boxing poses a cultural dilemma and raises questions about how something so apparently brutal retains its hold on contemporary culture. The material properties of boxing invoke the senses and prioritize corporeal, enfleshed engagement. Oates also applies the notion of authenticity to men’s boxing. Thus the focus of this article is upon the capacities of boxing and its affects and the particularities of the event of boxing which make its dramas real, wherever they are enacted, as well as the forces in play which create particular versions of masculinity which are enmeshed with the affects of boxing.

Introduction
The writer and boxing fan Joyce Carol Oates argues that boxing is not drama, it is real.1 Implicit in this argument is that what is authentic about boxing is flesh and the embodied material practices of the sport in the ring, which are real in a way that cinematic versions or, in the case of Oates’s argument, television cannot be. It also suggests an immediacy which contradicts the endurance of memory in boxing in the make-up of the legends and myths which permeate the sport. The culture and reality of boxing is only accessible by ‘being there’, in the flesh; corporeal
presence is crucial to spectatorship as well as sporting participation in boxing’s embodied practices; being in the ring or in the gym and running the risk of being hurt. Boxing offers particular relationships between people and things, words and flesh, images and practices, which are caught up in the dynamics of an event. The event may be the public spectacle of a big fight at a prestigious site embedded in the annals of the sport, like Madison Square Garden, or the routine of everyday practices in the local gym, and the art forms that represent boxing such as those of literature, film, theatre or photography.

The ‘Rumble in the Jungle’, the name given to Muhammad Ali’s and Joe Frazier’s heavyweight title fight in Kinshasa, Zaire, in 1974 has inspired creative as well as social commentary in the golden age of heavyweights, popularly described as ‘When We were Kings’, which is also the title of Leon Gast’s 1996 film of the fight. The film, When We were Kings, also demonstrates a strand of the relationship between different components of what is authentic or real. For example, the real is constituted as documentary in the Rumble in the Jungle film and in journalists’ accounts at the time. What is perceived as authentic is then re-produced in the creative narratives of writers such as Norman Mailer in his account, The Fight. In this book, Mailer engages with the intensities of being there somewhat unusually by describing himself in the third person, firstly, as Norman, then Norm and occasionally, as Norman Mailer. Great moments such as the ‘Rumble’ in Zaire, which become classified as legendary, are made in the spaces between the real and the representational, here evidenced in the interface between documentary and drama, reportage and creative reconstruction.

This article addresses some of the questions about boxing culture which are embedded in this distinction between drama, which includes representations of boxing, and what is real. Boxing is a sport which has the distinction of being premised upon the aim of one protagonist to knock the other unconscious. It is one-on-one combat with particularly strong connections to conflict, bellicosity and pugilism; boxing is pugilism, albeit regulated and disciplined pugilism. Boxing has powerful links to transgressions of legality and to exploitation. It is the dark continent
in a number of ways. Yet boxing also inspires some of the most interesting and the best artistic and cultural projects, in film, art and literature. Is this because what is real about boxing is separate and distinct from its representations or is it because they are inseparable? In this article, I argue that the enfleshed practices of boxing and its regulatory mechanisms are inextricable from its cultural representations, its myths and its legends. This claim is based upon the relationship between the capacities which boxing has to generate affects and the way in which the enfleshed practices of the sport are themselves re-produced by its cultural manifestations. The culture of boxing occupies the spaces in between and the to and fro of affect.

Boxing is both ordinary and spectacular; it is a back-and-forth dialectic of naturalism of affect and of iconography, which Kasia Boddy conceptualizes within the Le´vi-Strauss structuralist paradigm of the raw and the cooked: ‘Boxing is an artificial creation that culture cannot resolve.’ Boxing is, however, cultural and constitutive of culture and one beset by contradictions and ambivalences, which is also why boxing inspires imaging through art, cinema and photography. Boxing may always be raw because it necessarily involves a one-on-one combat with one person trying to knock the other unconscious, but there are other ways of interrogating boxing, through the arrangement of people, things and places that make up boxing culture, which I consider in this article. Boxing has endurances and persistences, but it is not a linear narrative; although boxing does draw heavily upon myths and legends and memories of the great events which make up the sport. For example, many boxing films tell a story, especially one configured around the heroic legend, most crudely in the Rocky series.

Boxing’s great iconic moments are never entirely absent from the experiences of the sport’s routine practices. These stories are part of the delivery systems which make up boxing and intersect with the sport’s enfleshed practices and the ways in which flesh is implicated at different sites; in the gym, in the ring, on film and in sentient spectatorship. This
article explores the drama of boxing working through the ways in which the relationship between the sport’s routine and spectacular affects play out within the cultural practices focusing upon the genre of film, including the example of a film that sought to embrace documentary coverage of the everyday experiences of boxing and of art, *A Bloody Canvas*. I include this film because I was part of the team that made it as an adviser and participant and the film was an eclectic mix of disparate strands, although underpinned by some of the enduring boxing relationships and connections, notably those forged through the discursive regimes of hegemonic masculinity. This was disrupted by my presence, although I am both inside, as a boxing fan, and outside as a white, educated, middle-class woman who has never boxed; most male researchers, for example do engage in active participant observation with maximum participation. There were also questions raised by the *disconnections* as well as the synergies in putting together a film that included the materialities of histories, social, spatial and temporal axes of power, art forms and enfleshed practices. The processes through which *A Bloody Canvas* was made present a particularly good example of how the affects of boxing as a cultural event and set of practices are generative of and are themselves generated by the diverse strands which encompass the disparate elements of enfleshed routine practice, spectacle and social and cultural inequalities, which themselves make up the world of boxing. The mix of the film recreates some of the spaces in between by highlighting some of the elements of boxing which affect and are affected by the sport and its perceptions.

**Ordinary Affects**

After his defence of his WBA heavyweight title on 3 April 2010 the usually (at least in his media interviews if not in the run-up to fights) charming, engaging David Haye was interviewed on BBC Radio 4. He responded to the interviewer’s comment about looking good the day after a fight that went the full 12 rounds against an opponent who has been described as more fighter than boxer. Almost inaudibly he slipped in that Ruiz had
come off worse with a broken jaw, broken nose and broken rib. It’s par for
the course in boxing. Such injuries are not dramatic; you pick yourself
up unless you are actually unconscious and most of them come back.9
Although boxing is a sport associated with violence, it is not however,
the sport which tops the league table of injuries,10 according to an
AQ1 Australian survey in 1998 reported by AIBA.11 Nonetheless violence is one
of the ordinary affects of boxing. Boxers routinely damage their hands in
135 training. Perhaps surprisingly, the most likely injury in boxing is damage
to the hands. There are of course more dramatic injuries and even deaths
in the ring. Becky Zerlantes was the first woman to die in the ring in
modern times in 2005 and it is estimated that over a thousand boxers
have died in the ring in the last 120 years. The horrors of the spectacle are
140 manifest in the fact that some of the more recent tragedies can even be
viewed on YouTube.12
The everyday damage to the hands and injuries like the broken jaw, rib
or nose that might result from a competitive bout are ordinary affects of
boxing; as Kathleen Stewart describes the everyday, material intensities
145 of life,13 which, in the case of boxing involves routine practice in the
downtown gyms as well as by the hopeful, aspiring boxers on the support
card at public venues. Boxing has all sorts of capacities that are swept up
into the new consistency of the event: the aspirations of the dispossessed
490 K. Woodward
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in the traditional route out of poverty and social exclusion; the forces of
150 heroic narratives of hegemonic masculinity; the spectacle of competition
and the enfleshed materiality of a sport, the main purpose of which is to
render the opponent unconscious for the entertainment of those who
watch and the profit of those who organize fights.14
Affects and Sensations
155 The concept of affect presents alternatives to narrative and mediation
and presents a route into understanding the relational processes which
have affects and are affected. It also offers a particular perspective on the
agency of people, living things and objects that moves away from notions
of intention to a consideration of the relational force of things, the
unconscious and the capacity of events to intervene in social processes.
Agency is in the event: an affect gathers diverse materials and sweeps them
up into a new consistency, a transformation for the duration of the affect.
Events such as a fight, a film, a photograph or a painting encompass
a wide range of materials, and how they are arranged is central to the
discussion of affect. People, places and things and the affects they generate
are understood through sensation, which is central to explanations of
affect. Flesh and emotion are implicated in sensation, as material having
its own affects and being affected, but also as having specific capacities
and properties which contribute to sensory processes. Different senses are
evoked and, for example, some are more present in different situations
and, even at a distance, spectators are caught up in the maelstrom of the
event and movement develops its own consistencies and intensities and
thus sensation.
Affects include the past, which generates consistencies and dura-
tion and raises questions about representation and memory. Flesh is
implicated in sensation, as material having its own affects and being
affected, but also as having specific capacities and properties which
contribute to sensory processes, none more so than in boxing for
spectators and viewers as well as for boxers. Movement takes place within
sensation which includes the embodiment and enactment of thought
through sensory media.
Boxing affects include the past, which generates consistencies in the
making of heroic masculinities in particular in the sport. Sensation is
implicated in these intensities in that the boxing event is drama,
representation and enfleshed. What is spectacular, for example through
boxing legends and the display of boxing in public arenas, whether live or
in film or on television or in other cultural forms, mixes up with what is
Sport in History 491
ordinary and routine. Boxers in the gym routinely attribute their interest
in the sport to some heroic figure, whether a family member or more
public legend,15 which then becomes swept up in the event of the fight.16
Boxers even claim to be thinking about their heroes when competing, and
these events are conventionally re-told as stories. For example, Naseem Hamed before his bantamweight title fight with Vincent Belcastro in 1993 informed Donald McRae: ‘I’m gonna be a legend’ and after the fight justified his own excesses as the result of his not really being there, because his imagination had transported him to Las Vegas in 1983 and he thought he was Sugar Ray Robinson defeating ‘Marvellous’ Marvin Hagler at Caesars Palace in 1983. The hero, however, is also created through the relationship with the different elements that make up the event, including how the hero is perceived, and films play a key role in the making and re-making of these events.

Boxing Affects: Fights and Films

Boxing lends itself well to the insights of the affective turn, which brings the relationship between all the elements of people and things: subjects and objects. In boxing and in boxing films, the relationship between objects, the equipment, the ropes, the gloves, the gum shields, the boots, satin shorts and paraphernalia of the spectacle, perception in the to-and-fro between subjects, boxers, trainers, cut men, promoters, commentators and spectators are all implicated in the mix that makes the event.

Different materials include their pasts, which generate consistencies and duration through the memories that are such important components of sports legends. Although some aspects of the event may seem static, framed in film or photograph, they incorporate movement; even objects within the image can be arranged so that they develop their own consistencies and intensities and thus sensation, for example in Neil Leifer’s photographs of Muhammad Ali, one of which appears to portray Ali boxing under water. In the Rocky series of films the actor Sylvester Stallone merges with the hero of the films: Stallone is Rocky. Sensation applies to spectatorship too and to the reception of texts such as films as well as to physical presence at a fight. Flesh and sentience are also implicated in the processes of constructing and regulating authenticity in the reality of being there. The whole event of the film, as of the fight, is sensory through the organization of light, movement and matter as in art and expressive systems, which boxing is as drama, as an enfleshed event. This is evident in the performance in the drama of theatre too, as
in Bryony Lavery’s play Beautiful Burnout about the three seconds when
K. Woodward
a boxer’s guard drops and the hammer blow that is a knockout is
delivered. The play uses different planes of movement and movement
image and the mobilities of light to capture the impact of the punch and
the drama of the ring. More frequent, however, are attempts to recapture
the intensities of boxing in film.

Boxing Films
The sport of boxing has a very special place in film history and boxing
films represent a long tradition. Boxing has arguably produced more
high-class films than any other sport. There have been some 150 films
made, starting with some very early recordings of fights, including eight
minutes of ‘Gentleman Jim’ Corbett against Peter Courtney in East
Orange, New Jersey, in 1894. Early films were records of fights rather
than creative reconstructions but it is a fine line and boundaries are
blurred between what is real and what is drama, notably, in film, through
the technologies of reconstruction and the techniques through which a
film is made, whether with actors or actual boxers in real time. Boxing
was seen as early as the late nineteenth century to have enormous potential
as a spectator sport, which transforming technologies could make
more widely available and which could benefit the development of
those very technologies. Performance and display are integral to boxing.
A ‘Gentleman Jim’ Corbett fight, the 1897 Fitzsimmons-Corbett fight, in
the Nevada desert in the US, the site of technological experiment in a
wooden amphitheatre, with peepholes for cameras, was crucial in shaping
future links between film, spectacle and fighting. ‘Filming of the fight’,
as McKenna has claimed, ‘was always integral to its planning.’
One of the most significant points at which boxing has the capacity to
make its own stories and embed memories in its culture is through the
spectacle of film. Although boxing films have a long history, the cinematic
depiction of combat in the ring generates a set of aesthetic and ethical
relationships which might be antithetical to commercial movie-making.
Films are part of the wider social and cultural terrain in which these
tensions are played out through the points of connection and disconnection between the axes of power of social, cultural and economic factors.

260 Boxing has capacities to engage with the social, economic and cultural AQ3 forces through which the construction of heroic figures occurs, usually coded masculine, and the hero is central to boxing culture. However, this requires further explanation. There are more alternatives than the economic determinism which compels the boxer to fight and take up the noble art as a route out of the ghetto or economic deprivation,

265 Sport in History 493

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265 Sport in History 493

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265 Sport in History 493

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265 Sport in History 493

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violence that are resonant of the experience of witnessing a fight and of ‘being there’. Scorsese’s hallmark themes of violent men in crisis and his ‘signature directorial style with flashy, imaginative visual flourishes, long and complex takes and pervasive pop music in the background’ lend themselves well to a powerfully intense portrayal of boxing and the elision of anger, enfleshed contact and aggression which are in the material of boxing, its spectatorship and its films. The intensity of the spectacle also invokes anxieties about voyeuristic spectatorship which are integral to the culture of boxing, which is so often inflected by ethical concerns and moral dilemmas sometimes elided with medical discourses of risk.

Boxing films range from those which explicitly tell a boxing story, for example in the 1940s, such as Robert Rosen’s Body and Soul, Robert Wise’s The Set-up and Mark Robson’s Champion to films such as David Fincher’s Fight Club which are less centrally concerned with the sport of boxing. Other films such as Quentin Tarantino’s Pulp Fiction have a fight element, but could not be said to be ‘about boxing’, even bareknuckle fighting, although boxing films are never just about boxing.

K. Woodward

The internal conflicts of Fight Club, like the Palahniuk novel upon which it is based, is concerned with dislocation and disconnection enacted in scenes of violent pugilism. Fight Club assembles psychic conflict and brings together the discursive regimes of pugilism, especially those which take place outside the law and those of the internal, psychic drama of the film’s main protagonist. The films that might be more narrowly categorized as ‘boxing films’ have often been bio-pics, which bring together the real hero and the actualities of fights and the cinematic hero into one figure. Some of the most notable are the Ali movies. Boxing biographies re-generate heroes, largely through chronological life stories, like Michael Mann’s Ali and Robert Wise’s Somebody Up There Likes Me about Rocky Graciano. They also focus on pivotal moments in boxing history, such as the documentary Rumble in the Jungle and its reincarnation in 1996 in Leon Gast’s, When We Were Kings and, in 2000,
One Nation Divisible, on the Frazier-Ali rivalry, again arising from key boxing events.

Boxing occupies the relational space between flesh, conflict and social forces of economic deprivation, racism and the insecurities of migration and mobility that become concentrated on a particular version of masculinity. Thus boxing and boxing films provide a relevant context in which to explore and question the ubiquity and hegemony of existential angst, especially in relation to masculinity, at a time of change as both ‘true’ and authentic, but which it has been difficult to regain especially since the 1940s and 1950s, in what has been called the heyday of boxing films. Boxing heroes in the twenty-first century are more often tainted by the contradictions of the sport, although they still present satisfying accounts of an heroic, usually linear narrative of triumph over tragedy.

Boxing films may also appear to represent hyperbole and excess. Mitchell, following the claims of the boxing writer Richard Hoffer about the properties of melodrama and hyperbole of boxing, argues that such films are not required to exaggerate; characters such as Don King, Mike Tyson and Jake La Motta are already personalities writ large. Hyperbole occupies the in-between relational spaces. This raises further questions about the relationship between what is real and what is artifice and between the actual pugilist and the actor who plays him, or more rarely her. Boxing films and boxing as a sport always exaggerate and it is boxing which aspires to magnification. Actors are expected to become caricatures of themselves, just as some actual boxers enact an excessive version of masculinity. Boxing and boxing films especially affect and are affected by the manifestations of excess and the complex relationship between authenticity and deception and between fantasy, aspirations and reality. Hyperbole also serves to re-instate gender binaries implicated in the reinstatement of the heterosexual matrix. The overstatement of masculinity reconstitutes the exclusion of femininity and the necessary avowal that boxing is for ‘real men’, who are made through the capacities
of the sport to re-produce these corporeal practices and enfleshed
dimensions as well as implicated in the heroic narratives of boxing films.

355 One of the major affects of boxing is its capacity to generate a version of
corporeal, aggressive, hegemonic masculinity. Women can and do engage
in the iterative practices of masculinity which mark boxing culture.
Women boxers such as Ann Wolfe have engaged in what Judith Butler
calls the performativity of doing masculinity, in a masquerade of macho
posturing which includes the adoption of the comportment and dress of
machismo in press photographs where, for example, she has posed arms
akimbo, chin jutting forward, surrounded by a posse of aggressive-looking
young men. The anatomical body also underpins the performance of
masculinity, for example in the embodied practices of boxing and the
measurement of the enfleshed selves who take part in them. Boxing is one
of the relatively few sports which is measured and classified by body size,
thus giving primacy to the anatomical body. Boxing masculinity is also
constituted in relation to femininity through the inclusion of actual
women in the narrative or of recognizably feminine traits and attributes
and the status of femininity within the fight film genre. This raises
questions about the spaces occupied by femininity in these stories of
heroic masculinity. Boxing does have the capacity to create alternatives;
for example Leila Ali occupied a heroic public space through the
associations with her heroic father, the legendary Muhammad Ali, as
well as through her sporting success; kinship ties are widely enmeshed in
the generation of consistencies and endurances of boxing. Leila Ali is
imbricated in the kinship and family group, caught up in the legend that
is her father, but she is also part of a sport in which she has demonstrated
a high degree of competence. It is troubling in some ways, but also
celebratory of a strong black woman who has been part of the endurance
of boxing’s power and is part of its transformations. The acceptance of
women’s boxing as an amateur sport in the Olympics in 2012, the first
time there has been any display of women’s boxing in the games since
1904, means that there are more young hopefuls across the world, even in
the powerfully patriarchal Afghanistan, where boxing might be a site of
some cultural change. These are largely private spaces, however, and the
public arena of film offers more possibilities for change.

496 K. Woodward

Boxers become part of the popular imagination through their place in the movies, whether they are actual fighters or fictional ones like Rocky Balboa, the film character reputedly based on the actual boxer Chuck Wepner. Some boxers might have passed into cultural oblivion, apart from the memories of the boxing cognoscenti, if it had not been for cinematic representation. If it had not been for Robert de Niro’s Academy Award-winning performance and Martin Scorsese’s direction of Raging Bull, Jake LaMotta might not be still remembered.48 Cinema plays an important role in the re-configuration of heroes and boxing heroes and villains are always implicated in the social and cultural processes through which they are constituted. It is difficult to disentangle the affects of the mechanisms of cinematic reproduction from the materials and objects here which make up boxing, which are reproduced. What is real is implicated in both.

A Bloody Canvas

A Bloody Canvas, directed by Alan Gilsenan and produced by Martin Mahon presents an idiosyncratic journey into the world of the ring by the internationally renowned abstract painter Sean Scully, who has been fascinated by boxing and boxers since his childhood in post-war east London and has himself practised both boxing and martial arts. The discussion which inspired and shaped this film embraced the division of art and action, which has always held a particular fascination for artists, and the brief for the film sought to explore a reconciliation of the world of the imaginary and transcendent and that of the physical, enfleshed engagement. Although it may seem impossible to reconcile these opposites within a binary logic that divides the cerebral from the corporeal, boxing, which is, in a very tangible way, legalized brutality, in spite of this, or perhaps because of it, has been bestowed the status of an art-form by a number of artists.

Sean Scully is a world-famous visual artist, who presents himself as the embodiment of an ageing boxer. This maverick image is matched by
what he describes as a pugilistic personality which is embodied in his
description of himself as a warrior poet. The film combines elements of a
personal pilgrimage into the dark and theatrical world of boxing in search
of what makes up the noble art. Each scene frames particular aspects of
Scully’s quest to unravel the nature of the warrior poet, ranging from the
highly personal to explorations of broader social and cultural matters,
from the confrontational to the romantic, from the poignant to the
Sport in History 497

Although the film is primarily concerned with the points of connection
between art and boxing, it aims to capture the specificities of boxing, its
particular capacities and its enduring appeal. This is effected through
conversations, often reinstating the conventional patriarchal networks of
older men who reconstruct memories of boxing histories, but these forces
are disrupted by different interventions, for example through abstract art,
less predictable voices and even eccentric practices. The most notable of
these eccentricities is embodied in the Irish trainer Brendan Ingle’s
Chaplin-like dance at the end of the film, which merges into a parody of
the British comic duo Eric Morecambe and Ernie Wise. Morecambe and
Wise always concluded their television comedy show by turning their
backs to camera and moving away, each kicking his legs sideways in an
absurd parodic dance; a parody of a parody.
The film uses the iconography of the ring as a framed space. As David
Chandler argues, each ‘boxing match is story but it is also a picture’, with
the ring as frame. This frame, however, carries the movement of the
picture image. The frame of the ring is a relatively closed composition,
like the frame of the film, which demonstrates movement image and not a
series of separate still shots. Even a film can produce the new in that
reception and sensation cannot be determined or even mediated and the
event of the fight is always uncertain (the practice of throwing a fight for
money notwithstanding). The ring is acknowledged as the frame of the
event as an iconic frame embodying the endurance of boxing legends and
there are strong links between the frame of the painting and the frame of the ring throughout the film. Art offers the transcendental possibilities of going beyond discourse and art plays an important part in the film, at some points with direct links to boxing. Scully is also filmed at the internationally renowned Petronelli Gym in South Boston, where he talks to Kevin McBride, the Irishman who beat Mike Tyson in the last fight of his career. Debates about representational art underpin another conversation, this time in New York, where Scully talks to LeRoy Neiman, a boxing painter who achieved considerable acclaim through the second half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century. Scully is filmed in his own studio in Ireland in a context which presents another spatial frame, that of the bounded physical space of the studio.

Scully is also filmed in Rome where he explores some of the implications of the work of Caravaggio. Caravaggio, himself a pugilist and street fighter, is used in the film more for his use of planes of light and dark, although Caravaggio’s life story of street fighting lends another strand to the mix of fine art and the art of boxing the noble art which are imbricated in the film. Scully draws analogies between the artist and the fighter and argues that the fighter, like the warrior, is always ready to fight, for example in his paintings of David and Goliath. Caravaggio’s own violence on the street is used to situate some of the different materialities that intersect to assemble boxing culture; the regulatory mechanisms of boxing and the brutalities inside and outside that framework. Caravaggio’s work resonates with the stark contrasts of boxing; the black background, visceral simplicity and flat sculptural moments where miraculous moments are made permanent. This resonates with Deleuze’s argument about Francis Bacon’s paintings, in which he suggests that the essence of painting is experienced as rhythm. ‘Rhythms and rhythms alone become characters, become objects. Rhythms are the only characters, the only Figures.’ Thus Bacon’s accomplishment, according to Deleuze, is in showing that painting offers
a virtual surface for the expression of a logic of sensation that may be the
most conducive surface for doing so, at least at the time Bacon was
painting. Rhythm is also affect, in that affect needs a virtual surface for the
expression of a logic of sensation.

The crew also visited the Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition in the UK
and images of Mapplethorpe’s work are presented in contrast to other
material but also as unmediated sensation which generates instabilities in
much the same ways as boxing can. The film moves to and fro between
boxing myths and iconography through a visit to the grave of Gene
Tunney, the heavyweight legend and world champion from 1926 to 1928,
who twice defeated Jack Dempsey. The direct engagements with artistic
practices are interspersed with frames which include conversations with
boxers and trainers, such as with the legendary Irish boxing trainer
Brendan Ingle in Sheffield, who provides a discursive mix of the
practicalities of the gym and training and claims to the spiritual
transcendent qualities of boxing in a surreal display of enthusiasm.

Conversations often focus on reflection and the ways in which memory
affects and is affected by boxing. In the final scene, Scully is filmed in his
apartment and studio in Barcelona, where former world champion Barry
McGuigan joins him to ‘look back at the mutual fascination between art
and boxing, between what they call the men of art and the men of
action’. The moments of reconstituting memory and the conversations
between older men are resonant of the strong boxing tradition of making
heroes through the framework of the dialogue between the present and
the past which so powerfully generates the endurances of hegemonic
masculinity. Even when a boxing film is overtly about a woman it is
hegemonic masculinity that is largely what dominates the discursive field.

One example is Million Dollar Baby, directly the story of a white woman
who attempts to follow the more traditionally masculine path of
achieving a route out of the trailer park into financial success through
the boxing ring and thus take care of her wayward and dependent family.
Clint Eastwood, the film’s director, also stars in the film alongside Hilary
Swank as Maggie the boxer and Morgan Freeman as Eastwood’s trainer. Maggie is the vehicle through which the film explores Eastwood’s character, Frankie’s problems and the dilemmas of contemporary masculinity.57

The invisibility of women is also part of their absence from the histories and legends that are the delivery systems of boxing culture. Spectacle and iconography are part of the gym. The real of boxing is not entirely separate from its dramas, but part of the assemblage and boxing traditions are made through the capacities of boxing to re-create ordinary affects of masculinity in kinship ties and routine practices as well as through its cultural representations. Drama in the ring and on film, in the following case inseparably, is also central to boxing.

Conclusion
Boxing, in all its myriad cultural forms, has the capacities to generate affects which range from the spectacular to the routine and has a powerful presence in the field of artistic representation. Boxing demonstrates the flows of visceral forces that go beyond discourse and even beyond emotion and beyond conscious knowing.

Pain, flesh and nerves mixed up with agency and vulnerability are central to boxing; it is as much about defeat as success and damage as well as the dignity of the noble art. Indeed destruction is as much an ordinary affect of what happens in the ring as the routine damage to the hands in the gym.

Whatever binaries may still have some purchase in regimes of truth in boxing such as sex gender differences, winning and losing, the real versus drama is neither useful nor sustainable. Boxing is both and this is why it has the capacity to generate such affects. These capacities operate through assemblages of power, economic, social, enfleshed, embodied practices and psychic investment to draw in and to exclude and to invoke sensations that are sensate and not always sensational, although boxing can certainly be spectacular and always offers that possibility.

K. Woodward

One of the major affects of boxing is its capacity to generate a
particular version of hegemonic masculinity which has considerable purchase among networks of men, in particular those who are implicated in its peripheries as well as its core enfleshed engagements and whose participation also affects boxing. Enfleshed presence — being there — is bound up with the sensate person who can locate their own presence, an experience which may be described as transcendent and so more real than it might be beyond discourse. Sensation is most powerfully expressed in the distinction between the reality of the enfleshed presence of boxing and the occupancy of virtual space of viewing at a distance which Oates characterized as drama. Boxing however has the capacities to generate affects and sensation which operate in diverse spaces through display and through representation, for example cinematically and in different art forms. Experiences are constituted through the event in which they take place through the processes and intensities in which people are implicated. That intentionality, too, is constituted through these processes rather than agency being the starting point of action. In boxing, events include the routine enactments and the mega-events and spectacles that create sensation in those caught up in the event and are themselves sensational in the mixture of materialities. A Bloody Canvas was implicated in these processes and reflected and refracted those materialities and offers a good example of some of the disparate capacities of boxing in a set of systems and processes that are more complex and multi-directional than conventional narratives of existential heroes or of economic determinism in explaining the endurance of boxing.

Notes


9. Wacquant, Body and Soul.

10. Woodward, Boxing, Masculinity and Identity.

Sport in History 501


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18. Woodward, Boxing, Masculinity and Identity.


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{RSIH}articles/RSIH650371/RSIH_A_650371_O.3d[x] Friday, 6th January 
38. Somebody up There Likes Me, directed by Robert Wise 1956).
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52. The Bloody Canvas.
54. Deleuze, Francis Bacon.
55. The Bloody Canvas.
57. Woodward, Boxing, Masculinity and Identity.
Sport in History 503