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Introduction

Prizefighting was created in anticipation of mass industrialized society, where it has flourished as a sport and, even more startlingly, as an aesthetic.

Gerald Early

Even as boxing exploits it also liberates and, like most sports, it has an aesthetic quality which has intrinsic appeal to those who step into the ring.

John Sugden

The Fight World is the Outside World condensed and refracted.

James Ellroy

Boxing is a sport that elicits strong reactions, whether from the point of view of spectators, commentators, or participants. The latter, who experience the challenge and exhilaration of the sport, as it were, at first hand, tend predictably to be the most enthusiastic partisans, but the sport also has a wide following among nonaficionados. There is also a smaller but nonetheless vocal group who question the moral basis of a sport in which the principal aim, at a professional level at least, is to render another human being unconscious, or who worry about the way the primarily sporting aspect of the game has been cynically perverted and commercialized by its professionalization and mediatization. Two main current conceptions of boxing can be summarized as follows.

One view of boxing sees it as a larger-than-life phenomenon, an epic of potentially tragic dimensions in which professional fighters pit their strength

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against each other in a struggle almost to the death. The combatants, often denizens of black, colored, or Hispanic ghettos, find in this rough trade one of the few avenues out of poverty and obscurity and devote their whole energies to perfecting their power to knock out or otherwise seriously incapacitate their opponent and thus achieve victory and celebrity. The involvement of most viewers—it is generally a mass audience—is vicarious, being mediated by television or video, whose voyeuristic lens adds both a distancing and intensifying effect. A devastating demolition of one boxer by the other is the primary aim of a match, the buildup to which is carefully orchestrated by the media in the runup. Large sums of money are generated by the fight, both in terms of the “purses” of the competing boxers and the box office and television rights, most of whose takings go to the small number of promoters who monopolize what is conceived as a kind of industry. This view of boxing as a mediatised fight game of spectacular dimensions dominated by professional heavyweights managed by rapacious impresarios is broadly an American one and has to date been most fully stated (or overstated) by Joyce Carol Oates (1987).

A second view of boxing sees it more as a sport or game, a notable part of whose interest can be found at an amateur level. So while Oates finds it difficult to conceive of boxing as a sport, let alone as a game, other writers, who hold a different conception of boxing, have no problem with either term. It is the skill of the individual as a boxer as much as a fighter that is a center of interest, and the proceedings in a backstreet or college gym (figure 1) can be absorbing as any megastar boxing event broadcast worldwide. The interest is in the interaction of the two opponents, in the resilience, flair, and elegance of their boxing style. This is more a British/Irish or general European view that perhaps sees in boxing one of the seminal sports tracing its European history back at least as far as the Greeks and the Olympic Games. This conception of boxing implies a greater openness to general participation, even if only at a fitness level, with the most enthusiastic viewers of the sport often having some firsthand experience of what is at stake in it. It is a conception that has been articulated across a range of both journalistic and fictional writing on boxing, and most convincingly by Vernon Scannell (1963).

These two views of boxing are not of course exclusive; indeed they complement each other. Boxing, like other sports, is about pushing human capabilities

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to their limits, and with such human interest at stake, it is inevitable, especially in a media age like that of today, that the more extreme tendencies of the game should be explored. The alternative view is necessary however as a counter to this, for boxing, despite all the symbolism or neuroses invested in it (to be discussed further in chapter 9), is after all only another sport, one which, though very grueling, is no more so than, say, running or cycling. Boxing is not, as George Foreman claimed, to the approval of Oates (1987, 39), the sport to which all other sports aspire. Sports by definition aspire to fulfill the maximum potential of their own intrinsic possibilities and, in the process, to test the capabilities of their participants to the limits enshrined in the rules of the game, while providing enthralling entertainment for their viewers. In this way each sport has its particular fascination, eliciting a combination of qualities (speed, stamina, dexterity, strength, agility) and offering a unique range of pleasure and interest to viewer and participant. In the case of boxing, the two differing though complementary views of the sport imply a different aesthetic as well as moral conception. Whereas the former more absolutist view implies tragic drama with attendant blood and possibly death, in any case some devastating climax, the latter implies a less bombastic, though still serious, kind of entertainment in which, as in dance, process as much as finale is of primary interest.

For the participant, especially one competing at the amateur level, boxing offers nevertheless an experience of physical and psychological intensity that is perhaps unlike that of any other sport. This intensity is a function of various factors. The first is that it brings the boxer up against the real, the gritty resistance of matter—here encountered in the form of the fist or body of the other boxer—a real that is more devastating not least in that it comes proactively forward to meet you. Concomitantly, you yourself go forward to encounter the real in an aggressive and determined fashion, seeking out the resistance or resilience of the opponent in an equally concerted way. The second factor, one that triggers the complex psychological reverberations inherent to boxing, is that the opponent one faces may be construed to be a version of oneself, someone closely matched in size and weight, a kind of mirror image in which one comes up against oneself in terms not only of psychology or imagination but also of the three-dimensional real. In this way it is possible to probe and to explore, to feel and to fend off of the other, and in the

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process, oneself, before finally accepting and embracing it. The concentration of each opponent on the other's eyes is an essential element of this process whereby the will or spirit of the other becomes the key to the physical action. The way that the physical appearance of the sparring partner, often a friend, becomes subtly transformed by the insertion of the gum-shield and the addition of the protective helmet is not the least strange of the metamorphoses that the boxing encounter brings about.¹

The “high” or adrenaline rush that invariably accompanies the boxing experience (even one of defeat or humiliation) is a function of the confrontation and engagement with the challenge of the real transmogrified in this mysterious fashion. So the glow of acquiescence felt at the end of the encounter in part results from the recognition of the real as other in particular insofar as it is experienced through the agency of another version of oneself. The feeling of fraternal affection at the end of the match or sparring, even for the opponent who has been one's undoing, also follows from this situation of identification with and resistance to the other. In this way, as Scannell says—rubbishing “the commanding officer or headmaster belief that boxing ‘makes a man of you’” and arguing that “as a moral therapy . . . boxing is a dead loss”—boxing permits “a man to behave in a way that is beyond and above his normal capacity” (1963, 43). Boxing also permits him to delve into that capacity and to experience it as pure life and energy.

From the spectator's point of view, the dynamics inherent in boxing as outlined above are experienced in more aesthetic terms, the visceral interaction of the two opponents being translated in part into a kind of visual pleasure in the form of dance or choreography. The boxing ring, as three-dimensional picture frame, offers in this way an alluring theater for action in which the two participants, mediated by the flitting white presence of the referee, perform their various, and more or less predictable or ritualistic, actions. Boxing thus becomes from the viewer's perspective a play of matching or near-matching forces which, personified as human beings, through formalized but nonetheless very real confrontation, explore human potential in physical and psychological terms. Although boxing is like theater in the aesthetic pleasure it offers and in its aim to reenact ritual movement, it is closer to the real, and therefore to a more intense level, of excitement. This is because there is real risk in it, both physical and psychological. The blows exchanged

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hurt, and ultimately the aim is to knock out or temporarily incapacitate one participant—in other words subdue them to forces of a real that is greater than themselves. The drawing of blood, as in any ancient or primitive sacrificial rite, undoubtedly intensifies the experience for audience and boxers, the inevitability of pain both confirming and ennobling the confrontation with the violence that is inherent in both matter and in human and animal life. Similarly, the audience usually experiences the same feeling of relief and acquiescence at the end of the match as the participants—though the level of intensity of these feelings is variable—as order and civilization are restored after the alluring but dangerous detour through the primitive and the primeval that the boxing match represents or enacts.

My book explores further the function and importance of the aesthetic aspect of boxing. In doing so, it combines the insights of an amateur who has a participatory interest in boxing with those of a critic specializing in the field of signs and images (semiotics) as applied to literature, the visual arts, and to cultural studies in general. Such an approach will, it is hoped, allow certain issues implicit to, but not normally explored within, more conventional approaches to the world of boxing to be drawn more to the forefront.

Like most sports, boxing is a highly formalized and stylized activity. Its particular quality in its modern form is to reconfigure the potentially lethal and anarchic elements that constitute fighting into an organized and legible form of combat. Stance, movement, clothing, rules or codes of conduct, division into fixed-length rounds, and, above all, the boxing ring itself all contribute to a process in which each element, through a system of aestheticization, contributes to the overall visual coherence of the sport. This process is fundamental from the point of view both of the spectator and of the boxer: for the former it provides focus for the gaze and ensures maximum visibility; for the latter it provides a stable environment for action. In exploring further the aesthetics of boxing, this book looks in particular at the contribution of aesthetics to the functional efficiency of the sport and to the clarification of some of the deeper issues at stake in its rigorously organized form. In any human culture, a high degree of formalization or aestheticization invariably signals an important semiotic function: that of drawing attention to an object or action and suggesting a deeper symbolic dimension to it. In other words, aestheticization constitutes a form of marking or

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highlighting. It is the aim in the first part of this book to identify and analyze the intrinsic aesthetic dimensions of boxing as a sport, and, in the second and third parts, to explore the degree to which aesthetic responses to boxing, whether from the point of view of artists, writers, or graphic designers, provide special insight into the complexities that enable this sport to exert its continuing fascination.

The first part of the book thus investigates how, in boxing, aesthetic highlighting takes place. The first chapter takes a brief historical glance at the development and evolution of boxing practices in relation to site (the ring), apparel (standardization and use of gloves), and the makeup and motivation of the audience—betting as well as appreciation of the “Sweet Science of Bruising” (Egan 1824) was originally an intrinsic part of the boxing scene and undoubtedly affected the evolution of some of its conventions and practices. A second chapter is devoted to analyzing the stylized stance and movement and the progressive glamorization of the combatant’s body, both in its legible muscularity and in its minimal but spectacular adornment. A third chapter focuses on the development of the boxing ring itself and reflects on the dynamics inherent in it from the point of view both of combatant and spectator. The role of the ropes, for example, is central—in both containing the action and in providing the combatants with a means of defense and counterattack. And of course the ropes also express the tensions of the boxing encounter in both physical and psychological terms—to the extent that the symbolism of boxing has become part of general parlance (being “up against the ropes,” “boxed into a corner,” etc.). In this way the boxing ring both contains and expresses action within what is in effect a three-dimensional picture frame.

The second part of the book shows how various forms of artistic representation of boxing help to highlight its aesthetic and symbolic importance. Boxing is appreciated by large audiences not only as an enthralling sport but also as a metaphor, a focus of profound identification, whether in terms of a situation—a mythical struggle, a binary opposition—or a combatant—a potential hero, a symbol of personal, communal, or racial investment (see Sammons 1990, 31; Piper 1996, 71). The golden age of modern boxing (the first decades of the twentieth century) coincided with an upsurge in representations of the sport in avant-garde painting and literature, to the extent

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that it becomes the “ultimate modernist spectacle” (Chandler 1996, 17). One chapter of the book thus investigates the link between boxing and modernist and futurist action, while a second explores the expressive relation between the canvas and ropes of the ring and the canvas and frame of painting. A third chapter shows how boxing-related installations by contemporary artists such as James Coleman and Philippe Perrin throw light on the way even the minutiae of ring-craft or fight preparation can be deeply invested with symbolic importance. Graphic representations by poster artists such as Luigi Castiglioni and Claude Kuhn offer, on the other hand, an insight into public psychological investment in boxing, suggesting some of the unstated but nonetheless authentic expectations the audience brings to the sport and the meanings it attaches to it.

The final part of the book looks at some of the ways writers on boxing enable us better to appreciate its aesthetic and symbolic potential. The focus here is not so much on boxing fiction, of which there is a considerable and interesting corpus (a selection of which is listed in the bibliography), but rather on approaches to the sport that attempt to rationalize or interpret its visceral reality. This implies perspectives committed to penetrating the deeper social, personal, and psychological aspects of the sport, viewed both from the point of view of the boxer and his audience. Of course some boxing fiction is able to do this, particularly that by such writers as F. X. Toole (*Rope Burns*, 2000) and Leonard Gardner (*Fat City*, 1969) who have had a real professional involvement with the sport. The fiction of writers such as George Bernard Shaw (*Cashel Byron's Profession*, 1886) and Jack London (*The Game*, 1905, and *The Abysmal Brute*, 1913), on the other hand, while offering valuable perspectives on boxing and the boxing scene, is often complicated by romantic or other themes. Similarly, although books by P. G. Wodehouse such as *The Pothunters* (1924) give an invaluable insight into early-twentieth-century British schoolboy boxing, the boxing interest is usually only an episode in a larger fictional project. My book, in contrast, focuses on equally important but somewhat less noticed modernist poets and writers who integrate boxing themes into a fictional, autobiographical, or metaphorical framework. So, chapter 8 looks in general at boxing's richness as a source of metaphor and more particularly at how modern poets such as Arthur Cravan, Paul Eluard, and Tristan Tzara pinpoint some of the paradoxes at the heart of

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boxing. Meanwhile, chapter 9 investigates, through reference to key modernists such as Maurice Maeterlinck, Robert Musil, and Vladimir Nabokov and boxing writers as talented as Gerald Early, Carlo Rotella, and Vernon Scannell, boxing's ability to provide solutions to some of the issues confronting man in the modern world, in particular in the wake of the collapse of traditional values after the First World War, a moment coinciding with the onset of the golden age of boxing from the 1920s.

Overall then, the aim of this book, in presenting boxing in its semiotic and aesthetic as well as its more general sporting and sociological aspects, is not only to present a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the sport in its own right but also to show how a deeper analysis of it in artistic and symbolic terms reflects the profound cultural investment in boxing and the space in which it is played out. So, for example, the focus on boxing apparel is not only an attempt to point up some of paradoxes and contradictions inherent in the sport but also to show how these features are signs reflecting conflicting cultural conceptions in relation to violence, glamour, and masculinity. So the wearing by fine specimens of male athleticism of shorts (standard masculine attire) made out of satin (conventionally a feminine fabric) worn inside out and back to front, becomes a trigger to reflection on the contradictory impulses in modern society relating to gender, undressing, nudity, and display of physical and psychological energies. Similarly, the focus on the boxing ring as an aesthetic space, a forum within which harmonious and discordant energies interrelate, seeking a resolution that is both anticipated and yet surprising, offers a fruitful analogy to the ambitions of modern art in which tensions between order and chaos, stasis and dynamism, seek harmonious resolution. In its very public reenactment and in its highly stylized and ceremonialized forms, boxing is like a primitive ritual in which the darker or more ambiguous energies of a society are acted out, with their full implications being only partly or unconsciously grasped by the viewers. In this sense boxing reveals that it is, like other sports, itself a popular form of theater or art in which the symbolic aspect of the game is as important as the excitement it offers as a real event having a real impact on the participants in it.

In the context of symbolic action and sign display, boxing is particularly privileged as a sport. This is because boxing is both highly concentrated and

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focused in its action—two men in a visible yet confined space acting out a performance of extreme violence—and uniquely paradoxical in its glamorous trappings and its display of nudity. Like many primitive rituals, it is highly eroticized and engages the viewer on a number of levels, not all of which are in the heat of the action consciously apprehended. In this respect it offers a fascinating object for cultural analysis and a source of reverie that, as this book is perhaps the first comprehensively to show, has had a deep impact on many important artists, writers, and filmmakers throughout the twentieth century.

The theoretical approach of this book attempts to be consonant with the rich cultural nexus on which it draws. Each of the book's three main parts reflects the layered approach taken in respect to boxing as a cultural, artistic, and literary phenomenon. The first part, in exploring the inherent aesthetics of boxing, follows a broadly ethnographic model of cultural analysis. Unlike Loïc Wacquant, however, in his pioneering socioethnographic approach to boxing in *Corps et âme: Carnets ethnographiques d'un apprenti boxeur* (2000), my study does not focus exclusively on the sociological and ethnological issues at stake in modern boxing, in particular as they relate to issues of race and color in contemporary Chicago. Rather, the fundamental anthropological issues relating to masculinity, violence, and physical prowess are explored in their historical and aesthetic dimension, that is, in the ways that they have over time been stylistically transformed in the interests of maximizing their symbolic or mythological status. In the book's second part, a second layer of analysis is mediated by the representation of boxing in specific artworks, that is, objects or images that are themselves aesthetic, and through which some of the otherwise hidden or obscure dimensions of the aesthetic transformation of violence through boxing become more readily apparent. Finally, in the third part, devoted to the analysis and representation of boxing in modern writing—poetic, fictional, and critical—the aesthetic dimension of boxing is further illuminated by the multiple cultural, ethnographic, and theoretical insights that recent (mostly twentieth-century) writing has drawn from its observations and reflections on the sport. Of course none of these layers is watertight: the aesthetic, by emphasizing the semiotic importance of phenomena, is ineluctably connected with the ethnographic or sociological, while writing reflects and articulates both ethnographic-sociological

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and aesthetic thinking. However, the separate but linked consideration given to these different perspectives should permit a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the complexities of boxing and provide a model of analysis that answers more fully to the multiple disciplinary possibilities opened by the sport as a cultural phenomenon. A particular strategy that this book employs is the use of illustrations in such a way that in themselves they constitute a kind of visual argument complementing and enhancing that of the written text.