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Rocky v The Wrestler: sport as genre, shifting ideology, and the doubleness of the sports film

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ABSTRACT

Each sport acts as its own genre (like horror, or the western), has its own rules, its own narratives, and can be understood only in terms of a constellation of other sports (rugby union makes sense because we can compare it to football, just as the musical is partly defined by film noir). Just as genre shifts, so too do sports as a result of rule changes, altered demographics, innovations in strategy, and other socio-cultural developments. This helps foreground the way each sport transmits its own forms of ideology; in *Rocky*, for instance, the genre determinants of boxing help create a very different version of the American Dream to *The Wrestler*. Representations of star athletes, which interrogate the way sport acts as an extension of the normative, also highlight how ideology functions ‘from below’. They often appear to promote conservative myths, yet typically dramatise a coming to terms with this ideology, or a modification of it. Sports films have an essential doubleness; they constantly make visible both ‘the Real’ and its fantasy construction, making even a classic sporting triumph film like *Rocky* both celebratory – and deeply unsettling – at the same time.

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Introduction

In September 1955, *Sports Illustrated* ran a short vox pop by Jimmy Jemal, which asked who would win a ‘free-for-all’ contest between Rocky Marciano, the undefeated world boxing champion, and Lou Thesz, the unsurpassed pro wrestler of his day. The answers fell into two opposing camps; boxing supporters argued Marciano’s ‘power-laden fists’ would knock out Thesz while wrestling fans insisted that Thesz would simply out-grapple his opponent. Oyama Kato, a judo expert, declared that ‘any top wrestler or

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judo artist can beat Marciano’, while Alfred Y. Morgan, the owner of White Rock Beverage Corporation, countered: ‘Wrestlers have no defense against the killing blows of a skillful boxer’.¹ Although Jemail posited a ‘free-for-all’, it is not seen as a contest between two men, but a contest between two sports.² This suggests that each sport has its own identity, with its own characteristics, effectively acting as a genre. The rules and dynamics of each sport organise time and space in unique ways, shape identities and bodies, and engineer narratives, functioning in the same way as the ‘rules’ of genre. Like all genres, each sport is also defined by what it is not. Jemail effectively stages a contest between boxing v wrestling, and the polarised responses suggest that sports, just like other genres (musicals and westerns), are in competition with each other.

It is an obvious point, yet the consequences of considering sport as genre have been consistently under-theorised. Pierre Bourdieu long ago observed that the meaning of each sport is dependent on the other sports that surround it.³ Rugby union is not the same as rugby league, or sevens rugby, or mixed tag rugby, just as American Football ‘speaks’ to baseball. These sports all define themselves against each other (we could do with a Linnaeus to trace the various connections between the genus and species of the sports kingdom). What I would like to suggest is that foregrounding sport as genre enables us to re-think how sports function. This has a significance far beyond sport, because genre is a mechanism that plays a central role in transmitting (and shaping) ideology. The combat between wrestling v boxing is also a battle between differently ranged ideologies: the mix of sports in any given society is a constantly changing nexus that can have profound cultural effects. This is all the more effective because sport does this ‘from below’, where the individual becomes personally invested in a sport. In a previous life I worked as a sports sub-editor, and when I started out, and needed help with a story, one of my senior colleagues, Dave Hutchins, would say: ‘It’s about dreams. Get dreams in the headline’. Take Jemail’s debate about boxing and wrestling; not only the owner of a soft drinks company, but a representative for the American Bureau of Shipping, and the President of Firestone Plastics, defend their chosen sport aggressively. It is as if the standing of their sport is central to their core sense of identity. In the futuristic and dystopian *Rollerball* (1975), where sport is used as a form of social engineering, John Houseman’s sinister corporate chief Mr Bartholomew tells the players that while executives may have their ‘hands on all the controls’, yet still ‘you know what those executives dream about out there, behind their desks, they dream they are great rollerballers’.⁴ This acknowledgement that *all* the executives would give up their power to be a sports hero suggests not only that we are in the realm of fantasy, but that these fantasies are collective (rather than purely subjective). That, in effect, as Slavoj Žižek has argued, our ‘dreams’ are not our own but are dependent on genre and

ideology: 'The first step to freedom is not just to change reality to fit your dreams. It's to change the way you dream. And again, this hurts'.⁵ The 'way you dream' in modern, sports-obsessed societies, is deeply connected to how sports function as genre.

If we consider that each sport acts as a genre, and also accept that genres are machines that transmit fantasy and ideology, then this leads to a very different way of thinking about the politics of sport. In this reading, something as simple as a rule change, or an altered mode of play, can have a profound impact on how a sport functions ideologically. Rugby union, so often reduced to an attritional and territorial contest, has been reinvented by the style of play of some teams (French 'champagne rugby') or reframed by a raft of law changes intended to make it a quicker and more mobile game. Similarly, shifts in the constellation of sports (more mixed tag rugby, less contact rugby; less cricket in the West Indies, more basketball) can act as a driver for change. Consider Ken Loach's *Kes* (1969), which contrasts one of the earliest of sports, falconry, with football. The film shows a marginalised boy co-opting the elite feudal sport, with a corresponding elevation of spirit and a heightened awareness of his possibilities. This is contrasted to the depressing masculine hegemony and star worship of working-class football played out in the Sixties, where Brian Glover's bullying sports teacher turns the playing field into his own skewed fantasy of being Bobby Charlton (Loach points to this imaginary construct by ironically flashing up a Match of the Day scoreline each time a goal is scored).⁶ While I am not suggesting everyone should take up falconry, the film shows how each sport creates its own lines of force, its own ideological charge, and its own 'dreams'.

To test this theory, I want to look at the boxing v wrestling contest in detail, analysing two contenders for the crown of best boxing film and best wrestling film: *Rocky* (1976), and *The Wrestler* (2008). *Rocky*, which cost \$1m to make, netted \$100m on its first run, and won 'Best Picture' and 'Best Director' for John G. Avildsen at the 1976 Academy Awards. The American Film Institute rated it among the 100 greatest American movies, while Darren Aronofsky's *The Wrestler* was nominated for two Academy Awards and won the Golden Lion award for best film at Venice.⁷ In these films, the differing genres of boxing and wrestling help create ideological determinants that work on the main characters and their 'fantasies' of a good life. They also lead to a very different engagement with that most amorphous and yet pervasive of ideologies, the American Dream. In the process, the essential doubleness of the sports star (one who is normative, yet also hyper, going beyond the ordinary), unveils the connection between ideology and the fantasy constructions of the subject. It also helps explain the paradox of why sport, so often regarded as marginal and unimportant, is so central to modern society.

Genre and sports films

The relationship between sport and genre has been noted before, while the connection between sport and ideology has long been a given of Marxist cultural critique. Séan Crosson, in an excellent overview, names Dan Striebel, Thomas Schatz, David Rowe and Aaron Baker as key commentators who think of sport in terms of genre. Crosson also notes the importance of Rick Altman's work on genre and the connections he makes, where 'the rise of spectator sports takes place virtually simultaneously with the development of film genres', and both carry a similar ludic charge, where 'genres are not the real world, but a game that we play with moves and players'.⁸ Louis Althusser's classic essay 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' argues that while certain state powers enforce ideology in a top-down, repressive way (the army, the police, factory regulations), ideology is also transmitted culturally via the arts and 'sports', including even the rituals enshrined in 'a minor match at a sports' club'.⁹ The full ramifications of considering sport *as* genre, its connection to ideology, and the way that altered modes of competition can have a profound effect on the way a social polity 'thinks', have not, however, been fully pursued. This is partly because the nature of a given sport has been strangely elided in discussions of genre. The boxing film sub-genre, for instance, is either seen to respond 'internally' to other boxing films (*Raging Bull* speaks to and modifies *Rocky*), or 'externally' to socio-historical forces (the post-war boxing film briefly connects to social conscience concerns before the McCarthy backlash).¹⁰ What is almost always ignored is the shifts within a sport itself, how its rules are modified, its social demographic alters, or how it is transformed by changing modes of play. Crosson suggests that 'sport performs principally an allegoric role in the sports film genre'.¹¹ Allegory, however, requires a fixed set of terms, while sport is constantly changing in terms of rules, strategies, and socio-political determinations, leading to subtle shifts in ideological import. A change in the chronotope of a sport (Mikhail Bakhtin's term to discuss the space-time characteristics of a literary form) will affect a genre and the way it organises narrative.¹² Banning the backpass in football, and outlawing the tackle from behind, instantly altered the way the game was played, its strategies, its narratives, the fan experience, and the types of player who would prosper. Sport, like genre, is not monolithic, but a continually emerging set of practices, tropes and topoi. What is left out in seeing sport as allegoric is its individual agency; not sport and genre, but sport *as* genre.

The problem with assigning sport a fixed, allegoric meaning is at the heart of Tony Williams' observation (in a wide-ranging and fascinating article) that the boxing film is 'a sporadic genre [...] compared to such enduring genres as the western, gangster, horror, and science fiction film'.¹³ One of the arguments Williams makes is that the boxing genre is unstable because

it has wildly differing views about 'an American Dream of Success', mixing happy and unhappy endings.¹⁴ Williams, pointing to the issues of class, race, gender and aggression that are enmeshed in the fight film, adds: 'The boxing movie genre's very semantics involves the presence of disturbing elements generally repressed from the American cultural consciousness which makes ideologically viable syntactic associations extremely difficult'.¹⁵ Yet the fact that the boxing genre is intrinsically disturbing is connected to the troubling nature of boxing itself, where a fight is deemed a 'sport'. As I will go on to argue, most sports films are innately troubling because they have a doubleness at their heart, where fantasy constructions of the self are made visible. The fact Williams uses the language of psychoanalysis (repression and consciousness) suggests how sports distort the American Dream, and this is foregrounded in both *Rocky* and *The Wrestler*.

It should be added that there are differing views about what constitutes the American Dream.¹⁶ It is a critical commonplace to read *Rocky* as a celebration of this national myth but the American Dream is a fluid series of competing and overlapping discourses, offering a suite of fantasies.¹⁷ Sport, it is true, fits neatly into one of the classic American myths; that you can become a success if you want it enough. 'This is the land of opportunity', says Apollo Creed, as he chooses no-hoper Rocky as his next opponent. Rocky takes up the challenge to prove he is not 'just another bum from the neighbourhood', with the politics of the Bicentenary setting, and the poster tagline that proclaims, 'His whole life was a million-to-one shot', speaking to this fantasy of self-realisation through discipline, effort, and work. The first *Rocky*, however, is a more subtle film than this. Rocky's triumph is not the classic victory against the odds (Creed wins), and the unflinching realism of the dilapidated, post-industrial Philadelphia setting just highlights that while Rocky takes his one-in-a-million shot, there are 999,999 Paulies who can only dream of escape.

Although I have used the word 'dreams', this should really be termed 'fantasy'. Žižek argues that 'in the opposition between dream and reality, fantasy is at the side of reality, and it is in dreams that we encounter the traumatic Real'.¹⁸ Dreams bring truth, but the daytime fantasy element acts as a barrier to 'the Real'. According to Žižek, fantasy structures the way we see 'the Real' (admittedly a problematic concept) and shields us from it. Sport perhaps foregrounds this more than any other activity. The extraordinary amount of cognitive space given to sport is completely out of kilter with what is, at bottom, an activity rooted in the ordinary. Sport is not a dream world or a utopia. Sport is a hypertopic realm, where the ordinary can be raised to an extraordinary pitch but is always seen in relative terms to the normative. In fact, what is perhaps most notable about sport is the way the ordinariness of what can be called the Real is separated from the fantasy element.¹⁹ A punch in itself is nothing to admire; a punch by

Muhammad Ali can attain mythic status. Althusser defines ideology as ‘not the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relations in which they live’, and sport continually shuttles between fantasy and the Real. This ambivalence of sport and the sports star is exactly what had interested Stallone when he wrote his screenplay, providing the germ of his narrative:

I thought why not do a story about people who can't fulfil their desires? [...] Then, as fate would have it, I saw the fight between Ali and Chuck Wepner. And the fight was really undistinguished until the man who was considered an absolute pushover knocked the unbeatable champion down. I saw how the crowd reacted, and I said to myself, “This is what it's all about”. Everybody wants a slice of immortality, whether it's for fifteen rounds in a fight or two minutes in their own life. They want that sensation that they have a shot at the impossible dream, and that solidified the whole thing for me.²⁰

In *Rocky*, Avildsen constantly frames the ‘undistinguished’ hard slog of the fight alongside its fantasy construction, this ‘impossible dream’, with the giant posters of the boxers like icons looming over the exhausted, bloodied, men (Figure 1).

This image is paradigmatic of how the doubling of the sports identity is central to representations of sport. The protagonist of *The Wrestler* answers both to Robin Ramzinski and Randy the Ram, while Sylvester Stallone's character starts off as a dual character, half himself (*Rocky Balboa*), and half the greatest boxer of all time (*Rocky Marciano*). It is sadly ironic that the bloated film cycle that follows leads to the fictional Rocky being inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame in June 2011 alongside the real Rocky Marciano, considering Avildsen's film treats the fantasy so



Figure 1. Screen grab, *Rocky*. 1976. Dir. John G. Avildsen. United Artists.

warily. The setting of *The Wrestler* in a wintry, desolate New Jersey has a similar effect. The film starts with a ‘dream’, the camera moving over the cuttings and memorabilia of Randy’s career pasted on the wall above his sleeping head, a series of sports commentaries detailing a set of triumphs that are at odds with his trailer-park existence. In both films, the fantasy constructions of sporting success are placed alongside their antithesis, the Real, creating a split subject. These divisions are also partly determined by the genre characteristics of their respective sports. *Rocky* hinges on two competing constructions of boxing in the mid-Seventies, while *The Wrestler* is patterned by three specific, and very particular, types of wrestling bout. Not only do boxing and wrestling pattern the ideological framing of Rocky and Randy, but these genre shifts suggest that sport can also reframe these fantasies.

Boxing v wrestling

Boxing and wrestling should, on the surface, be very similar. They are part of the combat sport family, use a ring, and usually feature timed rounds. In practice, they are utterly different, especially the world of professional wrestling depicted in Aronofsky’s film, which most would agree is not a real sport at all, but a simulacra of competition. Even the form of wrestling contested at the Olympics is equally alien to boxing. While the pugilist has to work at a distance, and is limited to punching (the boxer is quickly told to ‘break’), wrestling is defined by a series of holds, as well as a range of eye-catching moves including forearm smashes, drop-kicks, throws, body checks, and splashes from the top of the ropes. In wrestling, for much of a bout, one of the combatants is characteristically in a position of dominance thanks to the hold they have on their opponent. In boxing, this relationship is more equal; it is a maxim that to land a punch, you must be prepared to take a punch. One-sided fights are quickly stopped by referees, yet in wrestling, one-sidedness is constantly engineered. Wrestling foregrounds unequal power relations, leading to displays of injustice becoming central to the story of a fight. Joyce Carol Oates neatly observes that in boxing, ‘the finely calibrated divisions were created to prevent mismatches’.²¹ Wrestling instead dramatises unfairness; huge stars (in every sense of the word) such as the American Andre the Giant, or Britain’s Big Daddy and Giant Haystacks, enshrine a David v Goliath element by their physique alone. In terms of ideology, boxing is meant to suggest a democratic, fair contest. In wrestling, fans are instead immersed in a world of injustice.

In boxing, the underdog always has a chance, as one punch can change the outcome of a bout (just as Wepner nearly shocked Ali). Obviously, boxing as a real contest has a degree of contingency that is absent in the scripted wrestling match. This is, however, also inscribed in the sense of boxing as process,

and wrestling as a meeting of essences (of types of fighter, of body shapes, of ring personas). The great critical work on wrestling – and perhaps boxing too – is Roland Barthes' essay 'The World of Wrestling' in *Mythologies* (1957), where he argues:

A boxing match is a story which is constructed before the eyes of the spectator; in wrestling, on the contrary, it is each moment which is intelligible, not the passage of time. The spectator is not interested in the rise and fall of certain fortunes; he expects the transient image of certain passions. Wrestling therefore demands an immediate reading of the juxtaposed meanings, so that there is no need to connect them.²²

Fans and commentators continually try to read how a boxing fight is going, while wrestling is a 'spectacle', which defies cause and effect.²³ Boxers, for instance, usually conceal that they have been hurt, but the wrestler will exaggerate pain and suffering, whether this is fake or real. If boxing (in principle at least) promotes a level playing field, two of the three bouts in *The Wrestler* follow a classic pattern that works by piling on injustice, only to then allow the 'good' fighter, often described as 'the face', to win following a dramatic turnaround. An even greater audience reaction is generated when the 'bad' fighter, 'the heel', wins, usually by breaking the rules when it suits him, and hiding behind them when it does not. Barthes is chiefly discussing this style of wrestling, which reaches its culmination in the WWF franchise in the Eighties. Randy, a child of the Eighties (big hair, spandex gloves, heavy metal), is also the product of a wrestling era which started to dispense with the fiction that the bout was a contest, the kayfabe style which dominated in the time of Thesz, who in an interview in 2000 would call modern wrestlers 'tumbler'.²⁴ In these heel-and-face contests, the fans are powerfully mobilised into rooting for the rule of law to be upheld. This law is on the side of Randy the Ram, the all-American hero, with bleach-blond hair, rather than his punk opponent Tommy Rotten or the Ayatollah. Randy's classic heel-face fight pattern is something of a throwback; modern WWE wrestling favours much more involved storylines, suggesting Randy is caught within a very specific moment within wrestling's genre shifts (Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson has fashioned a career as a nuanced comic actor, a progression that would seem impossible for Randy the Ram, just as it was for Hulk Hogan).

Rocky, by contrast, is not involved in a heel-face contest. Barthes notes that boxing is 'based on a demonstration of excellence', and this gives the combatants a chance to move beyond type, to write their own scripts. Oates argues that 'boxers are there to establish an absolute experience, a public accounting of the outermost limits of their beings; they will know, as few of us can know of ourselves, what physical and psychic power they possess'.²⁵ It is far from the binary heel-face narrative, though it should be

added that Apollo Creed's great sin is in trying to turn boxing into wrestling: he expects to win in three rounds (the traditional duration of a wrestling bout), chooses Rocky as a walkover opponent, and bills the fight like a wrestling match: 'Apollo Creed v the Italian Stallion. Sounds like a monster movie'. Of course, instead of a monster movie, the fight makes both contestants more human. This is partly because boxing, as a genre, is diametrically opposed to monster movie narratives; it is based on a very different notion of identity, centred on ideas of personal development, rather than the meeting of types (which is one of the lessons Creed has to learn).

The two sports also transmit different notions of identity. Boxing has a mantra of self-development, foregrounded by the twinned running montages that finish with the ascent to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where 'the Rocky steps' symbolise the stage-by-stage raising of the self. Randy, by contrast, trains very differently; he puts highlights in his hair, uses steroids to pump his muscles, and visits a tanning salon, in keeping with wrestling's emphasis on external simulacra. *The Wrestler* has a circular narrative, starting with a dream that recalls the highpoint of Randy's career, his match with the Ayatollah, and ending with a 20th anniversary re-hash of the same fight in a Ring of Honor style contest. Rocky has a clear linear path, starting off as unsuccessful, unknown, unloved, alone, and unfulfilled, to a complete reversal by the end. Grant Wiedefeld points out the unrelentingly progressive nature of the film, and how it centres on a growing network of respect as in turn we see the 'relationships he builds with Adrian, Mick, and Paulie, then the community, nation, and globe'.²⁶ In *The Wrestler*, there is never any sense that Randy will gain anything more than *personal* redemption, with just the smallest of social changes on offer compared to the outward extension of *Rocky*. Key genre characteristics – the circularity of Eighties wrestling and the linearity of boxing – create competing ideological lines of force.

Take, as another example, the question of masculinities and gender relations. Leger Grindon observes that 'the boxer stands alongside the cowboy, the gangster, and the detective as a figure that has shaped America's idea of manhood'.²⁷ This fashioning of masculinities is very different from that of wrestling, particularly in terms of male violence. Joyce Carol Oates argues that 'Boxing is fundamentally about anger', while Grindon discusses the characteristic 'displaced rage' of the boxer, and Williams believes the sport provides 'a circumscribed scopic arena' for 'the safe expression of repressed violent tendencies'.²⁸ Yet a comparison with wrestling suggests a different interpretation. In *Rocky*, top-level boxing is rarely about anger, but about *controlling* aggression. Rocky never demonises or hates Creed; in fact, he does not even want to beat him, but to stay with him by 'going the distance'. Instead of a fight for dominance, this is a battle for respect. Konrad Lorenz, in *On Aggression* (1963), observed that 'few lapses of self-

control are punished as immediately and severely as loss of temper during a boxing bout'.²⁹ The real anger in the film belongs to Paulie, the working-class man with no prospects, with nowhere to go. Boxing extols condition, work-rate, ringcraft and strategy; a master trope of the sport is that brute force is rarely enough; hyper-muscularity and aggression are as likely to be disadvantages as advantages. In wrestling, one classic fight narrative is choreographed around a turning point where the righteous indignation of the 'face' brings an adrenaline-fuelled burst of power, ending a period of sustained punishment from the 'heel'. This comic book representation of masculinity and violence is, worryingly, often targeted at children. Randy gives Pam's son a hulking-up figurine of himself; an over-extended sign of muscular capital and strength to look up to. Predictably, the boy plays with the toy and weaponises it. In *Rocky*, violence is controlled and caged; in *The Wrestler*, Randy is at times enraged outside of the ring, scaring off male customers at a strip joint, or rampaging through the store where he works, as if wrestling promotes an idea that rage is an acceptable part of manhood.

Thinking in terms of sport as genre also helps to see the gender relations in *Rocky* in a more balanced way. Victoria A. Elmwood observes that 'the film's main female character is safely ensconced within a heteronormative relationship in which she fulfills the traditional, domestic (and implied) reproductive roles of the wife'.³⁰ The criticism of the gendered norms of Adrian and Rocky's relationship is clearly valid, but misses the fact that for a woman to be so included in the fight milieu is a remarkable counter to the chauvinism of Seventies boxing. Loic Waqant observed at first-hand that 'women are not welcome in the gym', and Mickey's edict that 'women weaken legs', or the view of Oates that 'Boxing is for men, and is about men, and *is* men' were the views of the majority.³¹ *Rocky* subverts this, showing Adrian providing a strengthening influence, foregrounding her agency in making decisive changes to her life, and pointing to a strength and bravery that allies her to Rocky. In the changing room before the final bout, Rocky says 'How about I wait here, and you fight?' It is a joke, but like most jokes, contains a truth. In comparison, Randy and Pam (stage name Cassidy) perform hyper versions of gender stereotypes as muscleman and lap dancer. Randy has a one-night stand with a woman who asks if he can 'Party like a Fireman' (a troupe of male strippers). The walls of her room are covered with Fireman posters; she does not see *him*, just an image of masculinity (the appropriately named Ram). While Rocky assembles a family of sorts, Randy's hyper-masculinity costs him any chance of a rapprochement with his daughter and contributes to his failure to connect with Pam. He turns away from her at the end and chooses the ring and the fans (who he calls his real family). Randy may succeed as a figurine role model or a video game avatar, but outside this persona he consistently fails those around him. Rarely can 'the Real' have been so clearly abandoned in favour of a fantasy. 'What else is fantasy

but the imagining of what one desires?’ asks Audrey Jaffe, but for Randy, the sports fantasy is so enmeshed with his sense of identity that he is unable to separate this from his real relations, with terrible consequences for himself and those closest to him.³²

Sport emphasises this doubleness of identity, enshrined in the idea of sporting ‘stardom’, making this real/fantasy disjunct much more obvious than in ordinary life.³³ In *Crazy* (2021), a book which takes as a key theme how the ideology of literature can affect the individual, Jane Feather writes: ‘On finding no proper object, grief rebounds, folds over, subsumes you, until all you can be is the sum of your failure to have been what you ever imagined yourself to be’.³⁴ In quotidian life, attainment is impossible; desire is always over the horizon. Joan Copjec develops this further, claiming:

Psychoanalysis denies the preposterous proposition that society is founded on desire [...] it argues, it is the *repression* of this desire which is crucial. The law does not construct a subject who simply and unequivocally has a desire, but one who *rejects* its desire, one who wants not to desire it. The subject is thus split from its desire, and desire itself is conceived as something – precisely – unrealized.³⁵

The unbridgeable gap between self and desire (of always wanting more) is characteristic of societies based on growth. As Jaffe says succinctly, ‘desire requires a structure of exclusion’.³⁶

In sport, however, it is possible to find the ‘proper object’, if only for a moment, because sport allows a realisation of desire that is demonstrable. Sport creates a quantifiable fantasy which alters the subject’s usual relationship to their desire, with Barthes stating: ‘What is portrayed by wrestling is therefore an ideal understanding of things; it is the euphoria of men raised for a while above the constitutive ambiguity of everyday situations’.³⁷ Randy the Ram, in the ring, always wins. Rocky’s fight ends in triumph, the final shot a freeze-frame, suggesting that beyond this, there is nothing more. Althusser claims there is always a split self, where the individual is in thrall to a higher power. According to Althusser, this is one of the key functions of ideology, which insists on ‘the interpellation of “individuals” as subjects’ and ‘their subjection to the Subject’.³⁸ In sport, this is conflated in moments when the subject becomes *the* Subject; Robin Ramzinski becomes Randy the Ram, and Rocky Balboa becomes Rocky the Hall of Famer. When Rocky finds his locker has been given to another fighter, pasted on the inside of the door is a series of Afro-American pin-ups, rather than the Italian-American heroes plastered on the walls of his home. This could be read as subliminal racism within the film, or a nod to cultural shifts, but it is also a nadir for Rocky, who is left with the possibility of being *only* a subject, of having his ‘shot’ at fulfilling his fantasy removed for ever.

In sports films the gap between subject and Subject becomes something the individual must constantly negotiate, making the workings of ideology highly visible. Sports films are rarely intended to be ‘innately troubling’, and yet sport is also not a dream space, working rather as an extension rather than an alternative to the normative.³⁹ Representations of sport cannot help but interrogate this gap between the ordinary and the hyper, foregrounding the split self of the sports star (how often in these films we see the protagonist look in the mirror). As the titles of *The Wrestler* and *Rocky* suggest, Randy is wrestling with more than just his opponents, while the ambivalence of ‘rocky’ suggests both granite-jawed solidity and one who is no longer on solid ground. In both films, the protagonists are placed in a liminal realm, where they are continually on the edge of seeing through the ‘imaginary relations’ that determine their sport and their lives. In *The Wrestler*, the two classic bouts (Randy’s ‘heroic’ wins over the dangerous Other of Tommy Rotten and the Ayatollah) are sandwiched by a more disturbing contest, based on the ‘sub-genre’ of deathmatch wrestling, which deals in ultra-violence. In this match, Randy is hit with ladders, chairs, and other everyday implements, as well as having dollars stapled to his forehead. The hardware-store props make it impossible to separate the ring from the spaces outside of it, and act as reminder of the working environment where Randy is habitually humiliated by his boss (a puny man, but with all the power). Unlike the heel-face bouts, the hero/villain division collapses, as does the masking that the violence is somehow justified because it is being used to right injustice. Here, the tawdry blood-letting is masochistic, disturbingly voyeuristic, and is one of the factors contributing to Randy’s heart attack; a nausea that results from a new perception of what he is really providing for the fans. In the final fight the Ayatollah tells Randy: ‘Pin me – we gave them enough’. The Ayatollah, now a used-car salesman, understands that this is a transaction, something Randy never allows himself to admit. Rocky’s opponent Apollo Creed is also less of the Other than Tommy Rotten, or the Ayatollah. Oates brilliantly observes: ‘The boxer meets an opponent who is a dream distortion of himself in the sense that his weaknesses, his capacity to fail and to be seriously hurt, his intellectual miscalculations – all can be interpreted as strengths belonging to the Other’.⁴⁰ Rocky does not quite know what he is made of until he meets Creed, a different type of fighter whose attributes are based on speed, movement, and fast hands. Creed also stands for a different approach to boxing, focusing on showbiz, self-promotion, and business acumen. Rocky’s fear about the physical threat he is facing is also a fear about the change in the mental landscape that could be inflicted by all that Creed stands for, ‘if this guy opens my head’.

In *Rocky*, the ‘dream distortion’ that Creed offers largely consists in his understanding of the sport and its ideology. If Rocky is on the edge of

understanding the real relations of his sport, his opponent is *too* knowing. Apollo Creed (whose name speaks of belief as well as a godview) places himself above ideology, and sees himself as its master. He markets the fight as ‘caveman against cavalier’, and dresses up as Uncle Sam and George Washington in both a celebration, and a subversion, of the bicentenary celebrations and the American Dream. Loosely based on Muhammad Ali, Creed is a showman, operating in Lacanian terms on a Symbolic level. Creed’s pre-fight build-up is garish, with spotlights, a palette of primary colours, and we even see a ring girl dressed as a golden Statue of Liberty. In comparison, the fight itself accords with the sub-genre’s characteristic ‘principle of intensified realism’.⁴¹ Clay Motley observes (through the lens of masculinity studies) that *Rocky* ‘is an example of Americans seeking what was “genuine” at a historical moment when society felt it was losing its “authenticity”’.⁴² Rocky, who like Randy is presented in sub-literal terms (a caveman), starts to understand this fantasy construction, stating: ‘He looks like a big flag’. Compared to the dark and grey of midwinter Philadelphia, the Stars and Stripes red, white and blue creates a hyper-real arena, a type of symbolic America which jars with the realist presentation of the fight (in the clinches, the words spoken between the fighters are barely audible). As Creed in Uncle Sam costume shouts across the ring ‘I want you’, Rocky responds ironically: ‘Is he talking to me?’ Creed at this moment *isn’t* talking to Rocky, but to the character he has named, his fantasy opponent. By the end of the fight, however, Creed learns that you cannot purely inhabit the ideological level as Rocky’s resistance reacquaints him with ‘the Real’, (and the two men will be left in each other’s arms, all distance collapsed, the two elements combined).

The finale of the films revolve around the degree to which the protagonists are subsumed by ideology, and the degree to which they gain what Althusser describes as ‘*knowledge of the mechanism*’ by which ideology functions.⁴³ Althusser argues ideology masks itself as ‘obviousnesses, which we cannot *fail to recognize*’, making it harder to see through.⁴⁴ The protagonists are on the edge of unveiling or understanding these mechanisms, but the process is different in *The Wrestler*, where Randy actively resists this knowledge because, as Žižek suggests, ‘it hurts’. His nostalgia for the Reaganite era, and his love for larger-than-life hard rock acts such as Guns N’ Roses, is specifically ranged against his dislike of the rise of Grunge, which had pointed out the grimmer realities of the Eighties. When Randy has to serve the public at a deli counter, he is no longer able to keep his star identity separate from his working life (at a time when there was still a requirement that pro wrestlers should stay in character outside the ring). Grindon neatly observes that in boxing, ‘The progress from the periphery to the ring is a process of unveiling, a movement toward a fundamental truth’; here the walk happens in ‘real life’ as Randy’s progress to the counter mimics the usual walk from back stage to perform.⁴⁵ Randy uses a series of defence mechanisms (turning the job into a

sport), but the dissonance between his star persona and the lowness of the role leads to a breakdown when he is recognised as ‘the Ram’ by a customer, creating what Žižek calls the Event, ‘a disruption of the continuity of the perception of reality’.⁴⁶ Randy deliberately cuts his finger on a meat slicer, and then rampages through the store (his best bit of wrestling). It is no accident that this is demarcated by the cut to the hand, since ‘the psychoanalytic name for this Event/Cut is, of course, *trauma*’.⁴⁷ In Rocky’s climactic fight, he suffers a swelling to his eye, and tells the cornerman to cut the lid so the swelling can subside. Randy responds to trauma by redoubling his wrestling persona and concealing what is revealed; for Rocky, the cut helps him to see properly. Interestingly, in the penultimate round, when even Rocky’s corner tells him to stay down, Adrian enters the auditorium for the first time and closes her eyes as if willing him on, allying herself with the audience’s desire for wish fulfilment, a collective prayer for the comeback which enacts ‘the impossible dream’. Even in the fight’s most brutal moments, the fantasy construction is never far away.⁴⁸

In *The Wrestler*, the final shot sees Randy, surely now self-aware, still choosing to jump from the top rope, to throw himself back into a fantasy of being the ‘people’s champion’, which will lead to his death. Žižek has observed how hard it is to reject fantasies because ideology is enmeshed ‘from below’, shaping the subject’s desire. Pam has told Randy ‘I’m here’, but it is the imaginary that he chooses, rather than the proximate and human. His is a rare case of death-by-signature-move, as it his ‘finisher’, his iconic Ram Jam flying headbutt, that will lead to his death.⁴⁹ The fans around him chant ‘USA, USA’, a show of patriotism deeply at odds with the post-industrial, impoverished America that the film exposes (much like the Old Glory of the *Rocky* arena), but Randy still finds it impossible to live without his fantasy life. For Randy, ‘there is something more real in the illusion than in the reality behind it’.⁵⁰ Sports films promise redemption; Randy has a Christ tattoo on his back, with Pam calling him ‘the sacrificial Ram’, while Rocky’s first fight is at the Resurrection Athletic Club. It is easy to see this as a classic nod to the American Dream; work hard, live right, and you will be rewarded. In fact, the redemption (or failure to be redeemed) arrives as a result of whether you have been able to unmask ideology, and whether you have managed to come to an accommodation with it (in a real sense, to live with it). The stakes are high; Rocky gains life and new vistas, Randy finds only death and a closing of the possibilities that have been glimpsed. One sacrifices himself to the fantasy image, the other sees through it.

At a fundamental level, this is the product of sport as genre. Rocky’s relentless progress narrative, which is so endemic to boxing, bleeds into the lives of those around him. Even more importantly, Rocky modifies the usual narrative of the individual sports hero by moving beyond ideas of individual success, offering second chances to those around him; Adrian, Mickey, Paulie, and finally the people on the streets of Philadelphia, the ‘city of brotherly love’ who take him

to their heart. This collectivity even extends to the rival camp. Elmwood, who teases out the ambivalent racial positioning of the movie in sensitive ways, neatly observes that ‘Implicit in Rocky’s near-victory is the rebirth of Creed’s passion for boxing and athletic excellence’.⁵¹ Even Jergens, so worldly at first, moves beyond the usual cliché of the cynical boxing promoter. Before the fight he tells Rocky, ‘I am sure you are going to give us a great show’, but in the post-match announcement, he is rejuvenated and tells the crowd they have ‘witnessed one of the greatest shows of guts and stamina in the history of the ring’. The change from an exterior ‘great show’ to an internalised show of ‘guts’ indicates that Rocky’s approach to the sport is transformative. Similarly, Rocky’s disinterest in the judges’ decision – an exterior degree of subjecthood – and his cry for Adrian reasserts his own agency (and rejects the usual men-only boxing expectations). Rocky never falls for the illusion. While Randy and Pam ‘sell their bodies’ and turn them into ‘signs’, Rocky only allows himself to be turned into a ‘billboard’ as a favour to Paulie.⁵² Stallone’s brilliant performance is also a case study of a person on the edge of understanding, whose success signifies something new, a more collective, fraternal idea of giving people second chances, rather than the bankrupt ideology of Creed’s American Dream and its ‘one-in-a-million’ fantasy of success.

Conclusion

Each sport creates its own genre. The lines of force created by these genre characteristics shape narratives, bodies, identities, and transmit great ideological force. Sports films, which place a protagonist in the gap between their ‘real relations’ and the fantasy constructions of selfhood and stardom, make visible the workings of ideology in unique ways, creating an essential doubleness. ‘An ideology is really only “holding us” when we do not feel any opposition between it and reality’, claims Žižek, and the sports film is also constantly in danger of letting this hold slip.⁵³ Why one society favours boxing or wrestling says much about the transmission of ideology within different groups at different moments. Similarly, shifts in the constellations of sports, such as a move away from hyper-competitive elite male sports to ‘postmodern sports’ such as skateboarding, facilitate different forms of ideology.⁵⁴ Considering sport’s mutating genres, its representations in film and writing, and its construction of desire and fantasy, may be one of the most germane fields we possess for understanding ideology. Boxing v wrestling, in a very real sense, may help us see how sports stage a combat for our ‘dreams’ and our political choices.

What this thesis of sport as genre also does is bridge that strange gap where sport takes up so much of the mental life of a modern society, and yet is seen as so peripheral. For Althusser and a Marxist reading of sport, what is meant to be invisible is the way ideology helps reproduce the

relations of production; sport, positioned as a 'leisure' activity and an escape from work, is perfectly placed to mask its function of shaping a polity for economic production. The marginalisation of an industry estimated to be worth \$500bn a year and growing faster than the oil or the automotive sectors may well be one of the greatest tricks of ideology. The fact that sports films are so often regarded as celebrations of the 'dream' should also not hide their essential doubleness; they may deal in fantasy but can only do so in an unsettling way by showing us 'the Real'. Like Rocky, or Randy the Ram, the cinema audience must negotiate this doubleness. Like Adrian, they may close their eyes, praying for what they want to come true, but this is also an admission of defeat, that the fantasy is exactly that – an imaginary construct. It should be added that Adrian is surely wishing for something very different to most of the crowd, suggesting the agency of rethinking sport, as if she is taking Žižek's advice that the first step to freedom 'is not just to change reality to fit your dreams' but 'to change the way you dream'.

Notes

1. Jimmy Jemail, 'The Question', *Sports Illustrated*, September 19, 1955. <https://vault.si.com/vault/1955/09/19/the-question-in-a-freeforall-between-rocky-marciano-heavyweight-boxing-champion-and-lou-thesz-wrestling-champion-who-would-win>.
2. Thesz had a more mobile conception of his capabilities, mentioning that pankration, the ancient Greek mixture of wrestling and boxing, 'sounds like something I would have enjoyed'. See *Hooker*, Lou Thesz, J. Michael Kenyon, and Kit Bauman (Gallatin, Tennessee: Crowbar Press, 2011).
3. Pierre Bourdieu asks 'according to what principles do agents choose between the different sports activities or entertainments which, at a given moment in time, are offered to them as being possible?' See 'Sport and Social Class', *Social Science Information*, 17.6 (1978), pp. 819–40, p. 820.
4. *Rollerball* (1975), dir. Norman Jewison (USA: United Artists).
5. Slavoj Žižek, *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology* (2013), dir. Sophie Fiennes (P Guide Productions/Zeitgeist Films), (2:31.51). <https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/ondemand/index.php/prog/06FA432F?bcast=110364265> (Date accessed: 9 September 2021).
6. *Kes* (1969), dir. Ken Loach (UK: Woodfall Films).
7. The AFI list puts *Rocky* at 57. *Rocky* (1976), dir. John G. Avildsen (USA: United Artists); *The Wrestler* (2008), dir. Darren Aronofsky (USA: Fox Searchlight Pictures).
8. See Séan Crosson's discussion in chapter 3 of *Sport and Film* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).
9. Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an investigation)', *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (NY: Monthly Review Press, 2001, first published 1971), p. 96; p. 114.
10. See Leger Grindon's opening chapter in *Knockout: The Boxer and Boxing in American Society* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), pp. 3–31.

11. Crosson, *Sport and Film*, p. 60.
12. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), pp. 84–5; pp. 245–6.
13. Tony Williams, “‘I Could’ve Been a Contender’: The Boxing Movie’s Generic Instability”, *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 18.3 (July 2001), pp. 305–19; p. 35.
14. Williams, p. 305; p. 306.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 306.
16. Most studies on the myth, such as Lawrence R. Samuel’s *The American Dream: A Cultural History* (Syracuse University Press, 2012) conclude it is a nebulous and changing term.
17. See Daniel J. Leab’s analysis of how Stallone’s script speaks to a specific moment in American history: ‘Reaffirming Traditional Values: The Blue Collar Ethnic in Bicentennial America: Rocky’, in Steven Mintz and Randy Roberts (eds), *Hollywood’s America: Twentieth-Century America Through Film*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), pp. 264–71.
18. Slavoj Žižek, ‘Psychoanalysis and the Lacanian Real’, in Matthew Beaumont (ed.), *Adventures in Realism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), p. 222. See also Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London, NY: Verso, 2008), pp. 44–7.
19. Consider the film *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait* (2006), which is perhaps the most focused attempt to capture a sport in all its ‘reality’. The directors train 17 cameras on Zidane, and we see the frustration of fragmented plays, missed passes, heavy challenges, and the dullness of each de-narrativized moment. And yet we also see the mediated elements of sport; the commentaries with the raised inflection of excitement whenever Zidane gets the ball, the accompanying crowd roar, or the extra-diegetic quotes overlaid on the screen, such as the repeated line ‘my youth dreams follow me on to the pitch’, which provide a startling contrast to a game shorn of its usual fantasy constructions.
20. Althusser, p. 111; Thomas Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 1991), pp. 300–1, cited in Grindon, *Knockout*, p. 217.
21. Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing* (NY: HarperCollins, 2006), p. 6.
22. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Vintage, 2009), p. 4.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
24. See Dan Lovranksi, ‘Interview with Lou Thesz’, *Live Audio Wrestling*, March 13, 2001. See also Eero Laine, ‘Professional Wrestling Scholarship: Legitimacy and Kayfabe’, *The Popular Culture Studies Journal*, 6.1 (2018), pp. 82–99; Matt Foy, ‘The Ballad of the Real American: A Call for Cultural Critique of Pro-Wrestling Storylines’, *The Popular Culture Studies Journal*, 6.1 (2018), pp. 173–88.
25. Barthes, p. 4; Oates, p. 8.
26. Grant Wiedendorf, ‘The Conservative Backlash Argument Controverted: Carnavalesque, Comedy, and Respect in *Rocky*’, *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 33.2 (2016), pp. 168–80, p. 178.
27. Grindon, p. 3.
28. Oates, p. 63; Grindon, p. 193; Williams, p. 310.
29. *On Aggression* (NY: Harcourt, 1966), p. 281. Cited in Loic Waqant, *Body & Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer* (Oxford: OUP, 2006), p. 91. It is true, however, that the turning point in Rocky’s first fight is a surge of righteous anger that follows the injustice of a headbutt, perhaps suggesting a boxing discourse shifting towards wrestling (and in need of correction).

30. Victoria A. Elmwood, “‘Just Some Bum from the Neighborhood’: The Resolution of Post-Civil Rights Tension and Heavyweight Public Sphere Discourse in *Rocky* (1976)”, *Film and History*, 32.5 (Spring 2005), pp. 49–9; p. 53.
31. Waqant, p. 50; Oates, p. 72.
32. Audrey Jaffe, *The Victorian Novel Dreams of the Real* (Oxford: OUP, 2016), pp. 18–19.
33. Althusser, p. 111.
34. Jane Feather, *Crazy* (London: Corsair, 2021), p. 246.
35. Joan Copjec, ‘The Orthopsychic Subject: Film Theory and the Reception of Lacan’, *October*, 49 (Summer 1989), pp. 53–71, p. 61.
36. Jaffe, p. 18.
37. Barthes, p. 14.
38. Althusser, p. 122.
39. See Chris Ewers, ‘Sport, life, *This Sporting Life* and the hypertopia’, *Textual Practice*, 36.8 (2022).
40. Oates, p. 12.
41. Grindon, p. 23.
42. Clay Motley, ‘Fighting for Manhood: Rocky and Turn-of-the-Century Anti-modernism’, *Film & History*, 35.2 (Spring 2005): pp. 60–6; 60.
43. Althusser, p. 117.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 116.
45. Grindon, p. 21.
46. Michael Frazer, ‘Closer to Consciousness: Waking as the Žižekian Event in Finnegans Wake’, *James Joyce Quarterly*, 53.1–2 (Fall 2015–Winter 2016): pp. 95–110; p. 98.
47. Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute, or, Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (NY: Verso, 2000), pp. 95–6, cited in Michael Frazer, p. 101.
48. Like so many romances, from *Cinderella* to *Pride and Prejudice*, Rocky’s fantasy ending almost bends to the will of the audience.
49. The Ram Jam is a diving headbutt finisher from the top rope, a move synonymous with Chris Benoit, and his tragic death in 2007. See Chris Toplack, ‘The Diving Headbutt: A Cautionary Tale’, *The Signature Spot*, June 19, 2021.
50. Stephen Holden, ‘Sometimes Groucho’s Cigar is Not Just a Cigar’, *New York Times*, 16 Jan. 2009.
51. Elmwood, p. 57.
52. Nathan Carlin and Thomas R. Cole, ‘The Aging Bodies of Mickey Rourke and Marisa Tomei in *The Wrestler*’, *American Studies*, 56.1 (2011): pp. 85–101; p. 96.
53. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 49.
54. See Henning Eichberg’s brilliant ‘New Spatial Configurations of Sport? Experiences from Danish Alternative Planning’, in John Bale and Chris Philo (eds), *Body Cultures: Essays on Sport, Space, and Identity* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 68–83.

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