

Mediated Ethnicity

New Italian-American Cinema

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"Ain't Nothing Over 'til it's Over": The Boxing Film, Race, and the *Rocky* Series

Jacqueline Reich

SUNY STONY BROOK

From its opening credits, Sylvester Stallone's 2006 film *Rocky Balboa* intends, to paraphrase the title song, to "take you back" to the series' original 1976 film. The familiar trumpet fanfare of Bill Conti's score, the titles in large block letters that pass across the screen from left to right, and the montage sequence featuring images of contemporary Philadelphia evoke nostalgia on several levels: nostalgia for the character of Rocky who had been absent from the screen for sixteen years; for the *Rocky* films as a subgenre of the ever-enduring boxing film, and for the glory days of Stallone's own faded film career. Inspired by the 1994 George Foreman fight with Michael Moorer, when the former regained the heavyweight title at the age of forty-five, the film's intention, according to Stallone, was to repeat the success of the first film and to prove that, in Stallone's words, "the last thing to age is the heart."¹ According to Leger Grindon, nostalgia and pathos are the constant characteristic emotions associated with the boxing film, which as a film form gives expression to multiple conflicts in American culture.² One of the issues boxing films often tackle, both directly and indirectly, is the racialization of American society, in particular the tension between white ethnic America and African Americans. Boxing films, in drawing on the extra-cinematic context of boxing's own history as a sport, have often featured Italian Americans as what Peter Bondanella has termed the *Palooka*: the loveable brutish fighter, who achieves success in the ring more with his sheer physical power rather than his artful style.³ This emphasis on the strength of the white ethnic body and

¹ From the documentary, "Skill vs. Will: The Making of Rocky Balboa," Rocky Balboa DVD (Sony Pictures, 2007).

² Leger Grindon, "Body and Soul: The Structure of Meaning in the Boxing Film Genre," *Cinema Journal* 35.4 (Summer, 1996): 54-69.

³ Peter Bondanella, *Hollywood Italians: Dagos, Palookas, Romeos, Wise Guys, and Sopranos* (New York:

its prominence in the boxing film has important implications for the representation of Italian American-ness in American cinema. Cinematic displays of muscled male bodies engage issues of race, gender and nationality, and the boxing films that feature Italian Americans are especially complicit in the articulation of a white racial identity at the expense of the African-American other. By focusing primarily on the first and the last films in the series, *Rocky* (John Avildsen, 1976) and *Rocky Balboa* (Sylvester Stallone, 2006), I show how the *Rocky* series rewrites racial tensions in order to create sympathy (Grindon's pathos) for the white ethnic, and how little has changed in this cinematic representation over the past thirty years. Moreover, I aim to answer this question: if, as many critics rightly contend, the first *Rocky* film created a narrative of masculine and ethnic redemption for post-Vietnam, post-Watergate, and post-affirmative action Bicentennial American, what does *Rocky Balboa* say about race, gender, and class in urban American in the 21st century?

From cinema's earliest days in the late nineteenth century, boxing proved an attraction for both filmmakers and spectators, despite the sport's marginal legal status in the United States. These early films consisted of filmed sporting events and helped increase the growing sport's popularity.⁴ In American cinema, while there were many silent feature films about boxing, the genre flourished, according to Grindon, after the 1930s, when, up until 1942, over seventy boxing films were produced and released.⁵ Films such as *The Champ* (King Vidor, 1931) and *Kid Galahad* (Michael Curtiz, 1937) mythologized the populist fighter as New Deal hero, in Aaron Baker's words, and, despite being primarily set in urban spaces, advocated a rural utopian vision of American society.⁶ Other periods in which boxing films flourished were from 1946 to 1956, which revealed the darker side of the sport in such films as *Body and Soul* (Robert Rossen, 1947), *The Set-up* (Robert Wise, 1949), and *The Harder They Fall* (Mark Robson, 1956). During both these periods (especially the latter), films featured Italian American boxers as sympathetic protagonists who were often caught between the tensions of the old and new world,

Continuum, 2004) 92-131.

⁴ Luke McKernan, "Lo sport nel cinema muto/Sport and the Silent Screen," *Griffithiana* 64 (October 1998): 80-141, here 84-97. See also Dan Streible, "A History of the Boxing Film, 1894-1915: Social Control and Social Reform in the Progressive Era," *Film History* 3.3 (1989): 235-357.

⁵ Grindon, 65.

⁶ Aaron Baker, *Contesting Identities: Sports in American Film* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003) 100-40.

such as in *Golden Boy* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1939). Much of the Italian American presence in boxing films is due to the history of boxing itself, which sported champions in different weight classes. The stories of Rocky Graziano, Jake La Motta, and Rocky Marciano have been told in countless films, including *Somebody Up There Likes Me* (Robert Wise, 1958), *Raging Bull* (Martin Scorsese, 1980), and *Rocky Marciano* (John Favreau, 1999).

Just as in these biographical films, many other boxing films take their cues from the history of boxing as a sport and address, either explicitly or implicitly, issues of race, class, gender, and national identity. Sociologist Kath Woodward notes how the history of boxing "is marked by social exclusion and processes of 'othering' especially through racialization, ethnicization and gender differentiation."⁷ The fights of Jack Johnson, Joe Lewis and Primo Carnera, among others, played on racial stereotypes, racist fears, and national eugenic supremacy.⁸ These racial tensions found cinematic correspondence in early silent cinema, which, according to Dan Streible, in turn revealed anxieties about race, class, and gender: approximately one third of all filmed prizefights before 1915 featured an African-American versus a white boxer.⁹ Although much of post-code Hollywood cinema tried to bury these tensions, independent films such as *Body and Soul* openly problematized the powerlessness of the black boxer in light of the sport's endemic corruption and its ties to organized crime, and later films such as *The Great White Hope* (Martin Ritt, 1970), based on the story of Jack Johnson, made the racial tensions explicit.

In terms of the representation of race, gender and boxing, the *Rocky* series of six films is simultaneously progressive and regressive. As is widely known, the backstory of the *Rocky* film is, like its narrative, a Cinderella story. Sylvester Stallone, inspired by the Muhammed Ali/Chuck Wepner fight, wrote the film's script in a little over three days. The film's backers didn't want Stallone to star as the title character, and the film went on to capture the Academy Award® for Best Picture in 1976, beating the more pessimistic competition *Network* (Sydney Lumet), *All the President's Men* (Alan J. Pakula), and *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese).¹⁰

⁷ Kath Woodward, *Boxing, Masculinity and Identity: the "I" of the Tiger* (London: Routledge, 2007): 5.

⁸ Jeffrey T. Simmons, *Beyond the Ring: The Role of Boxing in American Society* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

⁹ Dan Streible, "On the Canvas: Boxing, Art, and Cinema," *Moving Pictures: American Art and Early Film, 1880-1910*, eds. Nancy Mowll Matthews with Charles Musser (Manchester, VT: Hudson Hills Press, 2005) 111-116.

¹⁰ Daniel J. Leab, "The Blue Collar Ethnic in Bicentennial America: *Rocky* (1976)," *American History/*

This optimistic vision of Bicentennial America, with its feel-good story of the working-class and the American dream, has inspired a variety of critical interpretations. Lynn Garafola integrates the film within the genre of the working class films of the 1970s, with their message of nostalgia for traditional values that Italian Americans have come to represent in film: honor, chivalry, respect, and patriarchal domination. Others, such as Clay Motley, see masculinity in *Rocky* as a metaphor for the search for meaning and authenticity in the post-Vietnam era, in which Rocky's "going the distance" symbolizes the "recapturing" of the traditional values of virility and strength. Victoria Elmwood, on the other hand, observes how the white man shows the Black man the lessons of material exploitation and leads him back to the true roots of boxing, and how the black masculinity is in service to white remasculinization.¹¹

What is somewhat astounding is that all of these points of view can easily be applied to what one can only presume to be the last installment in the series, *Rocky Balboa* (2006). The film begins not with the traditional montage of Rocky's previous victory but rather with a fight featuring Rocky's future nemesis, Mason "The Line" Dixon, who is played by the reigning light heavyweight champion Antonio Tarver. At this point, the sixty-year old Rocky has lost his beloved wife Adrian and has a one-sided relationship with his son Robert Jr, (Milo Ventimiglia), now trying to make it in the financial world away from his father's looming shadow. Rocky lives squarely in the past, a fact metonymically represented in the Italian restaurant he now owns, Adrian's, where he entertains diners with stories of his fights. With him, as always, is his brother-in-law Paulie (Burt Young), who, during a tour of their old haunts marking the third anniversary of Adrian's death (the pet shop, Mickey's old boxing gym, his apartment, and the empty lot where the ice rink once stood), tells Rocky that he is "living backwards" and that it's "time to change the channel." A final stop at the Lucky Seven tavern reunites him with Marie, the girl whom he tried to save in the first film and responded with "Screw you, creepo." Dixon, on the other hand, is tired of fighting boxers who pose little chal-

American Film: Interpreting the Hollywood Image, eds. John E. O'Connor and Martin A. Jackson (New York: Ungar, 1979) 257-72.

¹¹ Lynn Garafola, "Hollywood and the Myth of the Working Class," *Radical America* 14.1 (Jan-Feb 1980): 7-15; Clay Motley, "Fighting for Manhood: *Rocky* and Turn-of-the-Century Antimodernism," *Film & History* 35.2 (2005): 60-66; Victoria Elmwood, "'Just Some Bum from the Neighborhood': The Resolution of Post-Civil Rights Tension and Heavyweight Public Sphere Discourse in *Rocky* (1976)," *Film & History* 35.2 (2005): 49-59.

lenge to him but make him an extremely wealthy man. One day, a fictional ESPN series "Then vs. Now" features a computer-simulated fight between Rocky Balboa and Dixon, with the panel of judges calling Rocky the more experienced fighter and predicting his hypothetical victory over Dixon. The computerized Rocky emerges victorious, much as Rocky Marciano did in a simulated fight against Muhammed Ali in 1970. The media picks up the story, and Rocky begins to contemplate a return to the ring. Dixon's manager, L.C. Luco, convinces him to pursue a fight with Rocky to rebuild his tattered image. Billed as "Skill vs. Will," the fight occasions a reconciliation between father and son, the continued rehabilitation of Marie's biracial son, Steps, and the developing friendship between Marie and Rocky. It also provides a forum for the classic training montage sequence, complete with beef carcass punching. During the Las Vegas fight, Rocky gives Dixon a run for his money, and although Dixon ultimately emerges victorious in a split decision, Rocky goes the distance, as he did in the first film. The film ends with Rocky bringing roses to Adrian's grave, telling her, "Yo, Adrian, we did it."

Rocky Balboa came on the heels of a twentieth-century mini-revival of the boxing film, not only in terms of quantity, but also quality: *Ali* (Michael Mann, 2001), *Million Dollar Baby* (Clint Eastwood, 2004) and *Cinderella Man* (Ron Howard, 2005) are among the critically if not financially successful boxing films of the past five years. Perhaps not coincidentally, boxing as a sport has declined in terms of its popularity, mostly due to the absence of a charismatic figure at the top, such as George Foreman, for instance, or Mike Tyson, who makes a cameo appearance in the Stallone film. The casting of key players in the sport, including Tarver and fight promoter Lou DiBella, the fight's Las Vegas setting (with audience footage from the December 2005 Bernard Hopkins/Jermain Taylor fight), the press conference featuring today's preeminent sportswriters, and the use of Jim Lampley and the HBO team to call the fight all add to the veracity of the film's criticism, and perhaps attempt to diminish the potential ridiculousness of the sixty-year old Rocky/Stallone returning to the ring. It also sparked a revival of Stallone's sagging career. Stallone's desire to return to a proven formula and to the character with which he was so closely identified is not surprising, given the traditional trajectory of actors primarily known for their muscular bodies, whose extracine-matic identities are tightly fused to their fictional characters. In interwar Italy, Bartolomeo Pagano's individuality was inseparable from Maciste; in

the 21st century United States, Arnold Schwarzenegger (aka the Governor) relied on the cooptation of lines from his films to sell his political message.

Despite its contemporary setting, the film's tone is decidedly nostalgic: Rocky's longing for the past (Adrian, his boxing career, his family), the series' nostalgia, the innocence and success of the first film, and Stallone's melancholic recollection of the glory days of his career. In evoking that nostalgia, however, the film treads into the same problematic racial territory as the original: the Italian American ethnic becomes the stand-in for white America, as he teaches the uppity African-American man how to be both a true American and a real man. The film foregrounds Rocky's Italian American-ness from the beginning, shooting a scene at Philadelphia's famous Italian market as he buys the supplies for his restaurant. Shot in a montage-like fashion, the sequence juxtaposes shots of Rocky comfortably interacting with the merchants and the fresh produce, cheese, meat and fish with photographic stills of the multi-racial clients, merchants and bystanders. In this poly-ethnic melting pot, Rocky's sheer physical dominance, enhanced by low-angle shots and strategic key lighting, foregrounds his whiteness.

Like his forerunner *Apollo Creed*, Mason Dixon is a fighter corrupted by material culture, although here he is more a pawn in the system. Managed by the greedy white promoters DiBella and L.C. Lucco (A.J. Benza), he is cut off from his grimy gym and former trainer, the humble Martin (Henry G. Sanders), who tells him: "You've got everything money can buy, except what it can't: pride." The colors black and white dominate the scenes in which Dixon appears on screen: his magnificently large white house, the white baseball cap he wears, and the antiseptic whiteness of his new training facility (as opposed to his origins in Mark's grimy studio) contrast with dark shadowy lighting which infuses Dixon's body. The two venues in which the audience sees the ESPN television show speak to the divide that exists between affluent white and Black society in contemporary Philadelphia, as envisioned in the film: the brightly-lit, predominantly white Irish pub where Robert Jr. sits with his analyst friends, and Dixon's house, which, despite its enormous windows, remains predominantly dark and shaded. Clearly, the darkness is an allusion to Dixon's moral dilemma, but still remains racially coded.

The fight sequence—the traditional third act of the *Rocky* series—completes the lesson Rocky has to teach Dixon: that what matters is heart,

pride, and respect, not material gain. Despite being filmed in high definition tape and employing more special effects (black and white footage, slow motion, color tinting), the ten-round bout incorporates many of the standard cinematic devices of previous Rocky films (the early knockouts, the comebacks, the Bill Conti score) and proves, again nostalgically, that computer simulations can never substitute for the real thing. The fact that Stallone and Tarver did not carefully choreograph the fight but actually sparred, often brutally, in the ring, adds to the reality effect.

In addition, the character of Marie harks back to the nostalgic, if not reactionary, representation of women in the first film. Just as Rocky, through his love, transformed Adrian from a mousy, asocial spinster into beautiful, adoring future wife, so does Marie blossom under Rocky's patronage: he rescues her from the now decrepit Lucky Tavern and gives her a job hostessing in his restaurant and mentors her troubled son. Her metamorphosis is physical as well as financial: she begins to dress more fashionably, wears make-up, and straightens her wild hair which she fashions into a stylish ponytail. During the fight sequence, she is not included in Rocky's support team, as is her son, Paulie and Robert Jr., but rather remains, as Adrian did, in the audience, a spectator rather than participant in the drama.

Philadelphia remains an essential presence, even character in the film. Although the film features traditional shots of the city's skyline and other famous landmarks, including the Philadelphia Museum of Art, most of it takes place in Rocky's old neighborhood, which is clearly marked as urban, crime-ridden slum. Its population, however, is decidedly white, a noticeable contrast to contemporary Philadelphia, whose poor population remains predominantly African-American. According to the US Census Bureau 2000 estimates, of the 20% of Philadelphians living in poverty, 42% were African American. In 2004, out of a total of 2004 homicides, more than 80% of the victims were African American.¹²

Hence, the return to the question posed at the beginning of this essay: what does *Rocky Balboa* have to say about race, class, and gender in twenty-first-century America? In an attempt to resuscitate a drowning career, Stallone has opted to hark back to the roots of the series, with the erasure of thirty years of women's efforts towards equality with men, a

¹² Rogelio Saenz, "Beyond New Orleans: The Social and Economic Isolation of Urban African Americans," Population Reference Bureau, www.prb.org; The Philadelphia Inquirer 2006 special section on Violence: <http://www.philly.com/inquirer/special/violence>.

stereotypical portrayal of the African American male, and the exaltation of the sympathetic Italian American boxer as sacred vessel of the American Dream. Although clearly attempting to infuse his film with a sense of authenticity and realism, he has literally whitewashed the texture of contemporary Philadelphia, creating a serviceable melting pot united by its love for a local, albeit fictional, hero, and erasing the economic and social reality of one of the United States' most racially polarized cities. In this nostalgic evocation of the past, the character of Rocky, and, I would argue, Italian Americans in general, represent traditional American (read white) "family" values. In resuscitating a character who embodies the solid, moral principles of honor, pride, loyalty and family, *Rocky Balboa* harks back to an ethos which, from *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972) on, Italian Americans have literally embodied on the big and small screen. In the pendulum of representations from progressive to conservative, the emphasis on the usual values of family, honor and sacrifice *all'americana* is more conservative today than it was in the 1970s. Italian American cinema has made great leaps forward, and with *Rocky Balboa*, Stallone has taken several steps back. One can only ponder what he will do with his next project as actor/writer/director: *John Rambo*, slated for release in 2008.