Boxing Lessons

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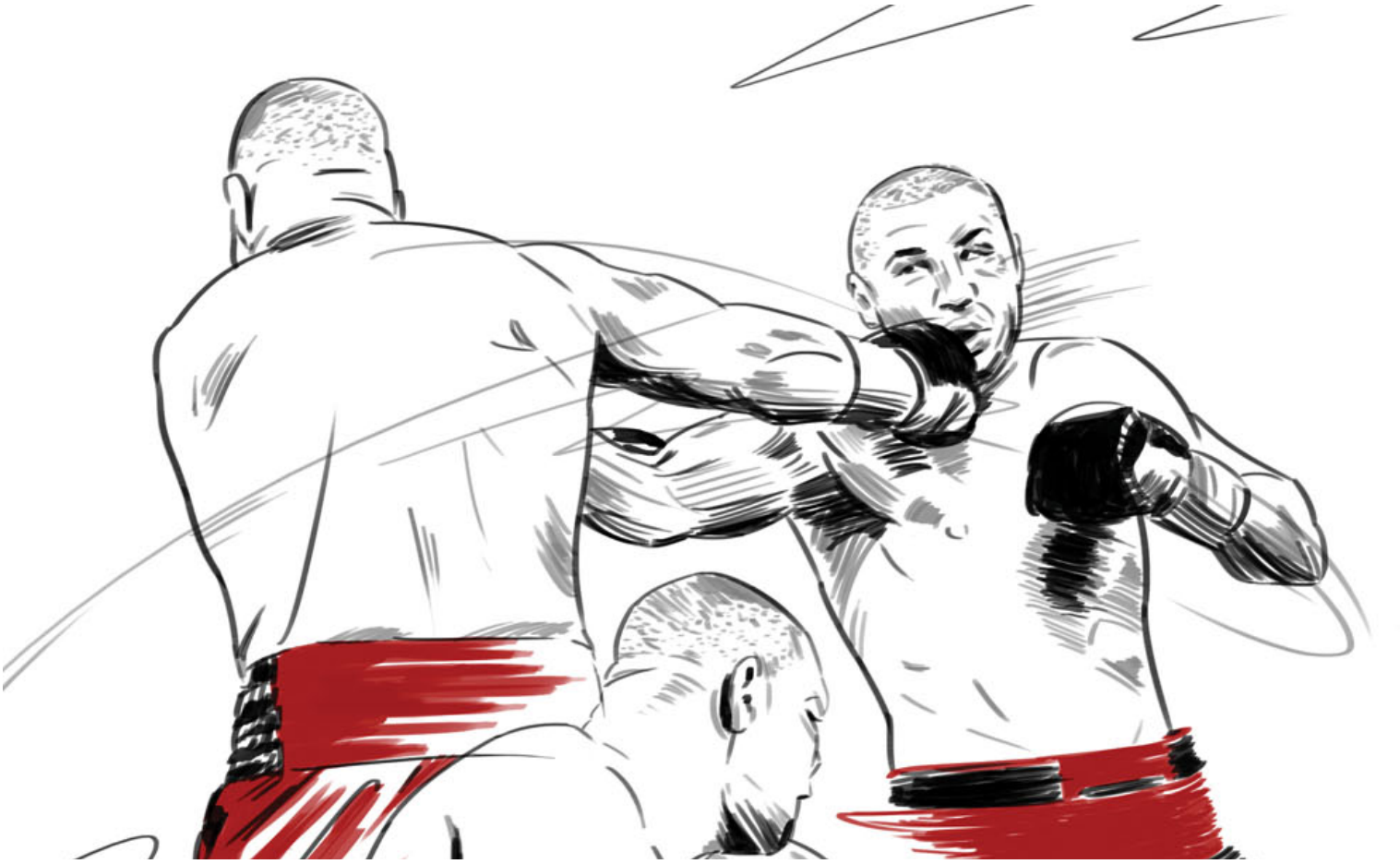
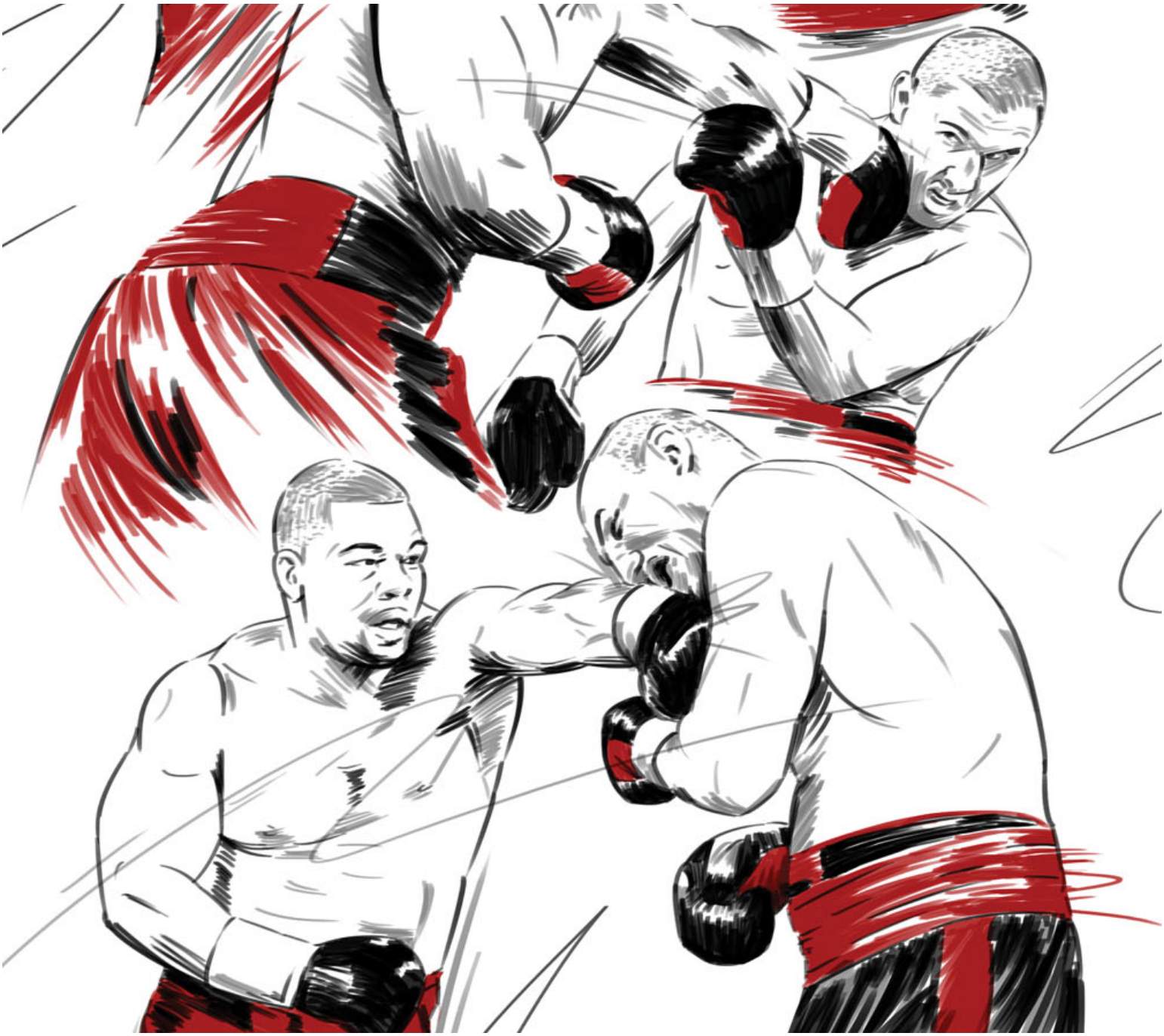
Hollywood's Infatuation with the Fights





I know a guy who knows a guy who tells a story about Joe Frazier and Jerry Quarry in retirement. The two former opponents were sitting, bored, through the speechifying at some kind of gala evening. They disappeared for a while, and when they returned they were mussed, grinning, looking like they had gotten up to some kind of mischief. The guy who tells the story leaned over and asked where they had been, and it turned out that they had gone to the bathroom to exchange crushing shots to the body, just for old times' sake, without even bothering to take off their suit jackets. What happened to Frazier and Quarry in the ring and in the gym and in their other adventures in the stern give-and-take of the fight world, the train of experience that turned them into the kind

of people who seek relief from after-dinner orations by taking turns delivering punches to the midsection that would burst the organs of non-fighters, belongs to them, not me. Fighters own their knowledge and their damage, which they have earned the hard way, and as a mere observer I don't have a right to any of it. I can learn lessons from it, and convey those lessons to others, but only as long as I bear in mind that it's fundamentally *not for me* and that I have to remain open to what is there in the fights, not what I wish to find.

This was on my mind when I accepted an offer from the director Ang Lee to help him make a movie about Frazier and Muhammad Ali. The project was still in the planning stages when I signed on. While a big-deal screenwriter known for his stylish male two-handers (a script featuring two main characters) worked on a first draft, Lee was thinking about his own take on Frazier and Ali as characters, the look and feel of the movie, how to handle the boxing, and so on. Every week or two I would take a predawn train down to New York from Boston and spend a day with Lee; Tim Squyres, who edits his films; Jean-Christophe Castelli, a writer and producer who had also worked with Lee for many years; and whoever else was in the office. My job was to open the fight world to Lee and company, guiding them through its deep course catalogue of lessons. This meant doing things like explaining elements of boxing style and history; bringing in fight people who could explain technical matters from the inside; finding a trainer to indulge Lee's desire for some hands-on pointers in the gym while making sure he didn't get hurt or messed with; offering thoughts on the larger cultural and social moment that framed the Ali-Frazier encounter; and explaining that Yank Durham, Frazier's trainer, would have called his fighter a motherfucker but not a cocksucker.

But I was aware at all times of a major obstacle in our path: Hollywood's ingrained refusal to learn anything from boxing but a single fairy-tale lesson about triumph against the odds. No matter what Lee might learn from the fights, no matter how much he might want those lessons to infuse his movie with originality and authenticity, potent forces would be pushing it into the same old rut: *Adrian! Adrian!* What bothers me most about boxing movies is that they presume that everything about the fights is *for them*, and yet they learn only what they want to learn.

Part of the curriculum was to take Lee to some live fights. Watching boxing on TV or YouTube or in other movies, even when augmented by hitting the bags in the scrupulously curated dinge of Gleason's Gym, doesn't prepare you at all for what it's like to be at the fights, especially up close. The feel of the crowd that prickles along your skin and booms inside your chest, the deep impact of body shots that cause your own innards to flinch in sympathy as you watch the struck fighter's torso flow around the intruding glove, the atavistic danger signal (*predator on the savannah!*) triggered in you by the appalling fitness and potency of the fighters in person—it all seems to happen to your whole body at once, not just your eyes and ears. A director who has no grasp of what this is like will produce boxing on a screen that refers not to the vivid flesh-and-

bone fact of the fights but to other fighting on a screen, a recursive process of abstraction that contributes to the leached-out, lifeless quality of most boxing in the movies. The hero is battered by one ox-killing blow after another before finally rising from the canvas to crown his comeback with his own even more impossibly ponderous swings from the heels; the music swells, the crowd roars; all the supporting characters go "Yes!" or look suitably chastened for having doubted the inevitable outcome or do that weeping-and-nodding-and-crinkle-smiling thing that indicates righteously earned joy in movies; and it all feels like an eleventh-generation Xerox copy of an out-of-focus photograph.

I took Lee up to Foxwoods to watch a middleweight bout between Curtis Stevens and Saul Roman. The staff in the casino steak house where we had dinner had been ordered to treat Lee like a big shot, though when he went off to the bathroom our waitress confessed to me that she didn't know who he was and figured he was just another Asian whale. No, he makes movies, I told her. Had she seen the one with the flying swordfights? Nope. The gay cowboys? Nope. The tiger? Yeah! The one with the tiger! The main event was a mismatch. Stevens knocked out Roman in the first round, starching him with a counter left hook on the button that left him supine on the canvas, legs extended with unnatural stiffness.

Three months later, Lee and I went to Madison Square Garden to watch Stevens step way up in class to fight Gennady Gennadyevich Golovkin, the unbeaten Kazakh middleweight champion known as Triple G. We visited Golovkin's dressing room before the fight. It was crowded in there, with cornermen, manager, a reporter or two, and some of Triple G's boys all jammed along the walls to leave room for the shirtless fighter to stalk back and forth, throwing punches in the air to warm up. They tell you not to go down to the paddock between races at the track because you're going to see a horse that looks like it could run through a brick wall and you'll get all excited and bet on it and forget that racehorses all tend to look like they could run through a brick wall, being racehorses and all—but, even so, Golovkin made an impression. His classical middleweight proportions managed to make him seem rangy and compact at the same time, and his capacity for pounding an opponent until no stone remained piled atop another was so neatly stowed in the package of his body, all that force pent up and ready to be released in a shrewdly directed gusher of purposeful capability, that we felt kind of bad for Stevens, even though we had seen him crush Roman without mercy.

The undercard of the Golovkin-Stevens bout featured a matchup between two rising undefeated southpaw heavyweights: Ismaikel "Mike" Perez, a Cuban who lived in Cork, Ireland; and Magomed Abdusalamov, a Dagestani based in Oxnard, California. Perez, like a lot of fighters trained in the Cuban system, had excellent technical skills and an easy, flowing style that had been refined over the course of a long amateur career. He'd slacked off in his training since leaving Cuba and turning pro, and he was probably older than his official birth date indicated, and he had no business weighing 235 pounds for a fight (he looked to be a natural cruiserweight, with a prime fighting weight just

under two hundred pounds), but he was a much better boxer than Abdusalamov or anybody Abdusalamov had ever fought. Perez took Abdusalamov's measure and then got to work on him, falling into a confident-but-careful rhythm like an expert disassembling a many-pistoned machine while it's still running. Jabs, crosses, body shots—pretty much everything he threw landed, and hurt. Abdusalamov, who had knocked out all eighteen of his previous opponents, showed great courage and kept after him, but Perez held him off and made him pay. Abdusalamov suffered a cheekbone fracture, probably in the first round and probably caused by a forearm shiver rather than a legal gloved blow, and his face grew lumpy and misshapen over the succeeding rounds until he resembled an ogre from a Caucasian Nart saga.

Late in the fight, with Abdusalamov taking a terrible sustained beating and now also bleeding from a nasty cut over his left eye, I spotted Boris Grinberg, his manager, hanging around in the aisle near my seat. Grinberg was drifting toward the ring—a step, a pause, two more steps, a pause—without seeming to realize it. We had met a few years before when I was writing about another one of his Dagestani heavyweights, Sultan Ibragimov. Fair-skinned Muslim Caucasian hardcases like Ibragimov and Abdusalamov tended to confuse Americans, who weren't sure whether to think of them as white guys.

I got up and went over to Grinberg and said something polite about how brave his fighter was. "Yah, too brave," he said, his thick accent adding extra portent to the words. He kept his heavy-lidded eyes on the ring, and there was a heightened alertness, a note of alarm, in his normally deadpan manner. The crowd was enjoying the high-action heavyweight fight, a rarity in a division in which sluggishness is far more common than slugfests, but Grinberg's concern fed my growing suspicion that maybe we were watching something else. Grinberg, who reminded me at times of Hesh Rabkin from *The Sopranos* and who by all accounts was deeply familiar with elements of post-Soviet society specializing in violence both in and out of the ring, had no doubt seen enough people beaten nearly—or all the way—to death to know what it looked like. You could see what was going on inside him. *My guy's getting killed in there, maybe somebody should stop this*: an unconscious step or two toward the ring. *But all this money and effort went into getting him to 18-0 and almost in line to contend for a title, and he's strong, and he could still get lucky and catch this fat Cuban sumbitch with a solid shot, and the fight's almost over anyway*: a pause.

Gradually, others in the arena began to notice that what looked like a rousing contest was really a massacre. Over the last couple of rounds, even the most bloodthirsty fans began to wince as Perez patiently battered Abdusalamov, sticking him with one clean shot after another. But he didn't have enough power to finish Abdusalamov, who, durable and willing but without the talent or know-how to change the course of the bout, kept coming, kept trying to land a fortune-turning blow, kept refusing to back up or go down no matter how many times Perez nailed him flush on the broken bone in his face. Everyone, including Perez, looked relieved when the final bell of the tenth round

put an end to it. The referee raised Perez's wrapped hand, and Abdusalamov looked as if he had an awful headache.

It turned out that he did have a headache so acute that it warranted a trip to the hospital, and also blood in his urine. The state boxing commission's officials were slow to respond to his distress, so his cornermen took matters into their own hands and tried to get him into a taxi, but he vomited and passed out on the sidewalk outside the Garden. When he finally did reach the hospital, doctors discovered a blood clot in his brain and removed part of his skull to relieve the pressure. Then came a coma, a stroke, long months in a hospital bed, permanent disfigurement, enduring paralysis on his right side, difficulty speaking, life in a wheelchair, an unending cascade of suffering brought on by severe brain trauma. Oddly, Perez would never be the same again, either. Wrecking Abdusalamov turned out to be the peak of his professional career. He had a record of 19-0 going into the fight but went just 5-3-1 afterward. He eventually dropped down from heavyweight to cruiserweight, but it didn't help. Somehow, undoing Abdusalamov appears to have undone Perez, too, in the sense that while he was willing to fight again, and to win the winnable ones, he seemed unwilling to let a fight reach the state of dire all-out-ness that characterized the Abdusalamov bout. Win or lose, he pulled back from the brink, apparently willing to settle for being an almost-contender and semi-celebrity in Ireland.

I couldn't guess all that was coming, of course, but it did seem clear that we had just watched one man give another a life-changing beating. A potential lesson moved in the atmosphere of the Garden like ghost smoke from long-extinguished cigars, though it seemed unlikely to me that Lee's movie would show much sign of having absorbed that lesson's import. Boxing movies have a hard time reckoning with damage, even when they earnestly set out to, and they usually end up settling for cosmetic indicators of the hero's ability to take it and take it before surging to victory: scar-tissue makeup, a certain manly stiffness of gait, the stylized hoarseness that actors seem to believe a sure sign of their character's having endured wisdom-inducing hardship. But sometimes boxing is just one guy fucking up the other guy, or two people mutually hurting each other, a naked fact that can prove impervious to the imposition of character arc, learning and growing, up-tending narrative momentum, and the rest of Hollywood's tried-and-true meaning-making apparatus. Hollywood telegraphs its big ol' roundhouse punches, and boxing slips them with ease.

Whatever the thematic attractions and rich historical resonance of the early chapters of the Frazier-Ali story, to my mind one test of Lee's willingness to do justice to his subject —and his studio's willingness to let him—would be whether his movie's third act would be allowed to consist of damage and not a whole lot else. Ali's declining ability to speak or move in his final decades resonated with the hurt inflicted on him by Frazier, Earnie Shavers, Ron Lyle, Ken Norton, George Foreman, and others. And Frazier, who spent weeks in the hospital after soldiering through Ali's punches in order to beat him, was never the same again. Having come into the first fight with Ali with a 26-0 record, he

went 5-4-1 after it. The four losses were to Ali and Foreman, the five wins over the likes of Ron Stander, Joe Bugner, and Jimmy Ellis. Frazier ate even more of Ali's shots on his way to defeat in their third bout, the Thrilla in Manila. In 2002, twenty-six years after that final fight in the trilogy, I found myself sitting next to the long-retired Frazier at ringside one night in Norfolk, Virginia. Well into the evening's proceedings, he leaned over to me and murmured, "Now, what town is this?"

In the main event at Madison Square Garden, after Perez had beaten Abdusalamov, Golovkin dropped Stevens in the second round with a left hook to the chin. Skidding on his butt and coming to rest half-sitting, half-lying on the canvas, Stevens, a heavily muscled fireplug known for his explosive power, had an *o*-mouthed, wide-eyed look on his face that plainly said, *Hoo boy, this feels like a lot more than I can handle*. He got up and bravely absorbed another six rounds of punishment, forting up in a defensive shell with his gloves on either side of his face and his arms protecting his middle. He threw just enough punches to prevent the referee from declaring him defenseless and stopping the fight, but mostly he just took his medicine. After the eighth round, which ended with Stevens penned in his own corner and Golovkin landing crisp blows to the head and basso body shots at will, the referee came over and said, "That's it?" Stevens's trainer nodded and said, "Yeah," all the while wiping his man's swollen face with a towel and not looking at the ref—like, *I can't really talk now because I'm concentrating on wiping this guy's face with this towel*. Thoroughly beaten but still on his feet, Stevens appeared grateful that his seconds had spared him the further damage and almost certain knockout he had coming in the four remaining scheduled rounds.

Lee gave me a look that said, *So, that's how it goes?* I didn't have to actually say anything in response, since the answer was obvious: *You weren't wrong to be wowed by Stevens's power and speed at Foxwoods; they were not a mirage. But Golovkin is to Stevens as Stevens is to Roman, even though they're all about the same size and they all could destroy any of the rest of us with one half-pulled punch. It's not fair, but that's how it goes. A fight can reach a point where it's mostly just a question of how badly the more capable fighter is going to fuck up the less capable one before they make him stop*.

Hollywood keeps on making boxing movies—or the same one over and over—at a rate that could fool an alien observer into believing that boxing remains as popular now as it was in 1936. It's not hard to see why: clear protagonists and antagonists, plenty of opportunities for character to express itself in action and for actors who work out four hours a day to take their shirts off, no excessive expense for setting and wardrobe and such. But I don't see much reason for them to exist at all.

I don't want to penalize anyone for creative curiosity, and I realize that when moviemakers draw from life they believe it's necessary to change things for storytelling purposes (*It's too complicated to have Jackie married to one guy and then to this other guy, so let's combine Kennedy and Onassis into one husband called Plato Sullivan*). But it still bothers me when, say, in *The Fighter* they unnecessarily turn Micky Ward's day at the office

against the ham-and-egger Shea Neary for the off-brand WBU belt into the epic climax of Ward's rise to the pinnacle of creation. Given the movie's interest in how the tank-town provinciality of Lowell, Massachusetts, shaped Ward, wouldn't it have been more thematically on point for the event to be presented as kind of tawdry and small? And it bothers me even more when in *Hurricane* they present as the greatest injustice in the history of mankind the judges' reasonable decision in favor of the veteran Joey Giardello after he outboxed the younger and harder-hitting Rubin Carter—as if we couldn't possibly hold in our heads simultaneously the notions that there is racism in America and that a thirty-four-year-old technician in his 126th professional fight had enough left to edge a twenty-seven-year-old bruiser in his twenty-fifth.

I find it most annoying of all when Hollywood celebrities talk in interviews about how a cursory dip in the fight world turned them into expert practitioners who speak from within that world. Mark Wahlberg, for instance, once told me in all self-seriousness, with Micky Ward sitting right there next to him, that while he, Wahlberg, of course wasn't a professional fighter, he was in better shape than some of the pros who had worked on *The Fighter* when it came to doing repeated takes of pretend boxing because he had so much more experience in that vital area of ring capability. Will Smith and his surrogates invoked with hushed mantric awe the "thirty pounds of muscle" he had supposedly added to play Ali, as if this was some kind of sacrifice rather than a paroxysm of self-love, and he insisted that he had taken his dedication so far as to monkishly abstain from sex while in training—both of which details suggest that nobody associated with the movie paid much attention to the example set by Ali, who wasn't particularly bulked up or cut and didn't do a whole lot of abstaining from sex even on the day of the fight. Smith also just happened to reveal in interviews, over and over, that taking an unimaginably terrible pounding in the course of training to play Ali and in filming the movie's fight scenes—exactly the kind of melodramatic, lovingly detailed soft-core sadomasochistic pounding that the steadfastly purposeful hero of an action movie typically takes on the way to achieving his steadfast purpose in the end—had led him to discover that he had a terrific chin.

Ang Lee didn't strike me as this kind of auto-starstruck person at all. He seemed like a nice guy, in fact, equipped with kind eyes and enough genuine modesty and curiosity to resist becoming too full of himself, no matter how much he was deferred to and made much of. I gave him credit for understanding that he didn't know much about boxing and that boxing movies tend to be pretty bad. He recognized that boxing cinema has so far never figured out how to surmount the obstacle presented by the fact that actors can't fight or even competently pretend to fight, not even a little, which makes the boxing scenes so flaccid and dull that even the best boxing movies—*Fat City*, *The Set-Up*, *The Fighter*—are better if you fast-forward through the boxing. You might think it doesn't matter if the boxing in these movies offends connoisseurs of the real thing, that it all looks the same to somebody who doesn't know a lot about boxing, but that's wrong. Anybody can see the difference between a lioness taking down a gazelle on the run and a house cat paw-bunting a squeaky rubber mouse, and boxing scenes are like

the musical numbers in a musical in the sense that if they're rote and inert, then the movie's rote and inert.

And no, trying to get around this obstacle by casting fighters to play fighters doesn't fully solve the problem. Some fighters can indeed act better than actors can fight—the superb boxer James Toney did a pretty good job as Frazier opposite Will Smith in *Ali*, for instance—and they at least move like fighters, but the boxing scenes are still flaccid because you can see that they have to substitute a pitty-pat going through the motions for their normal leonine lethality so as not to hurt whomever they're pretending to fight. Trying to compensate for the inherent half-assedness of the boxing scenes by broadening the movements into exchanges of gargantuan blows that look as if they could reduce buildings to rubble just makes it worse. It's as if you were making a biopic about Chopin and all the music had to be played on Schroeder's toy piano by a guy using just his index fingers, for which he tried to make up with melodramatically exaggerated strikes that began above his head.

Lee won me over with his willingness to spend money on inventive CGI effects to get around the actors-can't-fight problem, his eagerness to put Frazier rather than Ali at the center of the story, his insistence that everyone in the office on a given day sit down together for a family-style lunch, and, of course, because he was paying me—modestly, by Hollywood standards, but robustly by my academic and journalistic ones—for my time and expertise. That expertise amounted to little more than a precise recall of what could be found where in my boxing-book collection, a reliable set of sources in the fight world to whom I could put the many questions to which I didn't know the answer, and whatever knowledge I had gleaned from my own limited railbird's-eye experience of boxing. Sometimes I have deep command of the material I'm teaching, but sometimes I don't know that much more about it than the students do, and I'm no more than a step or two ahead of them. That's not an unworkable position; being the teacher is also always being the lead student, and when it comes to the fight world I'm eternally a student, since as a noncombatant observer I can't presume to speak from within its body of knowledge.

Working on the movie often felt like teaching freshmen. "Okay, Ali has the longer reach and he wants to circle and jab at a distance, and Frazier's a pressure fighter who wants to advance and cut off the ring. Now, cutting off the ring is a term of art, a specific skill. You don't just follow the other guy around, which would lead to endless futile circling while getting punched in the face, especially if the guy you're chasing is as quick and skilled as Ali. When you cut off the ring you move side to side with the other guy to keep him in front of you, so you have to be as fast as he is, but you also take every opportunity to advance as you do that, so that you're constantly working him back toward the ropes or, even better, into a corner, where you can fix him in place and settle in to break him down. Let's look at some footage of Ali-Frazier I, and we can see just how Frazier, one of the best of all time at cutting off the ring, does it against one of the most evasive heavyweights of all time…" It was easy work, and fun.

But, still, the basic question remained: Other than spreading a little Hollywood money around to subcontractors, what's the point of making a feature film about real boxers at all? Especially in the age of YouTube, when you have Frazier and Ali themselves right there at your fingertips in endless profusion: not only fighting with a virtuosity that no actor, even with the help of CGI, could ever come close to imitating but also talking with a force and eloquence and quality of surprise that no screenplay could ever hope to equal. After you watch a few minutes of their first fight on YouTube, watch a few minutes of their appearance together on *The Dick Cavett Show*, or even just the first minute, in which the two men come out in very fine '70s threads—Ali in dark-claret jacket, Frazier in black-and-white-checked suit over white turtleneck—and shake hands with Cavett and his other guest, the British journalist Michael Parkinson, and then negotiate the tricky business of how they will greet each other. Each in turn sort of offers the other a hand to shake which is sort of declined, an awkwardness they resolve with a period-pitch-perfect gimme-five routine that features Frazier turning with graceful suddenness on his heel to draw a reverse no-look hand slap from Ali. The grace of the sequence comes in great part from the way Frazier temporarily sheds the touchy reserve imparted by his being aggrieved in advance that Ali's going to talk and talk and make him look like a tongue-tied fool, but the grievance returns once he's seated and Ali starts hogging the limelight.

In a case like this, what can a work of art add to the vividness and drama of the amply archived stuff of life itself? A cleverly assembled plot to weave it all together in standard three-act form with thematic balance and closure to make it all feel like it comes out neatly? The meta-pleasure of watching actors you know from other roles pretend to be real people you've seen many times on film? Whatever minimal gain there might be in any of that, it's certainly not worth the steep comedown in quality that happens when you substitute the pale rote effigies fashioned by actors and screenwriters for the world-historically graceful, potent, and magnetic originals who not only fought with virtuosity but also supplied terrific natural-sounding dialogue for themselves.

I set aside these doubts about the usefulness of the enterprise and tried to be of use. Sometimes that meant heading off a bad idea. Lee had seen some chiseled young robot training at Gleason's and thought he could double in the boxing sequences for whatever actor ended up playing Ali, but that was a mistake. If you have access to the resources of CGI to solve the problem that actors pretending to box look foolish and boring, the body-beautiful physique of the guy doubling Ali in the fights is irrelevant. What matters is how he moves, how much he looks like he knows what he's doing. You can find a paunchy older fighter who does a fine Ali impression in the ring, as many heavies of a certain age do, and put a motion-capture suit on him à la Andy Serkis playing Gollum, which allows you to adjust the appearance of his body in postproduction at the same time as you paste onto that body the head of the actor you've chosen to play Ali in the nonboxing scenes. That's how you deal with the actors-can't-fight problem. I asked around and found exactly this kind of guy, a former fringe heavyweight contender who

in decline had become a professional opponent available to lose plausibly to your rising heavyweight. I had seen him fight in the flesh in the Garden, years before, and he had made it clear that he knew what he was doing. It turned out that he could indeed move like Ali, and of course the modest gut he had developed could be electronically erased. They sent him to New Zealand, where Peter Jackson's special-effects shop was handling the fight footage, a sweet gig for the over-the-hill fighter that gave him an adventure on the other side of the world during which he made good money without getting punched in the head in earnest even once. There was a brief holdup when New Zealand's immigration authorities learned about legal troubles stemming from a past incident in which our Gollum-suit Ali had tuned up some dude in a parking lot, but they let him in after it was explained to them that anybody who does a primo Ali impression in the ring is likely to have tuned up some dude in a parking lot at some point—and, anyway, the dude probably had it coming.

The special-effects technicians from New Zealand came to New York for a visit, during which they walked around looking up at tall buildings and exclaiming, the very picture of cheerful craftsmen from the provinces on holiday in the big city. The screenwriter, by contrast, projected an Important Artist persona when he came to town. He actually said, in my presence, "I write things that are true, whether they happened or not." This was over dinner in a restaurant with the last surviving fight guy I could find who had worked Frazier's corner back in the day, a trim, gentlemanly ass-kicker-in-retirement I'd arranged to bring from Las Vegas to New York to talk to Lee and the screenwriter. We were discussing a conveniently arc-extending scene the writer had invented, and I could see the thought balloon over the fight guy's head: *But that didn't happen and couldn't ever have happened in a million years, and pretending it could happen will look trifling and ignorant, and people who know what's what will laugh at me for having anything to do with this. Why bring me all the way here to tell you what it was like if you're just going to go ahead and make shit up that's just like the made-up shit in other movies*? The writer, accessorized with blocky glasses and an English accent, dismissed all such objections as artistically naive, but my sympathies were with the cornerman. If you're going to make shit up and still exploit the payload-of-truth effect you get from the audience's belief that real people really did these things, at least make shit up that fits the historical characters you've got to work with.

That I found the writing so disappointing was par for the course. There's no lack of talent in the business, but when I watch movies or TV I often end up feeling that although the makers spent a zillion dollars to make sixteenth-century London look like sixteenth-century London or monsters look monstrous, they didn't bother to attend to details of writing so obvious and rudimentary that any of a couple of dozen dissolute writers I know could have headed off the worst offenses for a hundred bucks while polishing off a six-pack. Like, for example, not having a post-Edwardian grandee say, "learning curve"; or not having a barbarian sorceress talk about her issues around closure; or not having everybody say, "No, fuck *you*" to everybody else because the writers can't think of anything even more trenchantly dope for them to say; or not

committing some other unforced error that kills stone dead the period or genre buzz worked up by editing, setting, lighting, costume, makeup, special effects, acting, and other stuff they actually care about.

The one person who had anything to do with the movie whose work startled me with its excellence was the editor, Tim Squyres. After Jean-Christophe Castelli drafted and I revised descriptions of Ali and Frazier's famous first and third bouts (in the second, less exciting and largely forgotten, the referee let Ali foul at will, so Ali spent much of the fight grabbing Frazier and pulling down his head in the clinches to tire out his shock-absorbing neck muscles), Squyres put together a visual synopsis of each that captured the essence of the encounter. I loved watching him slow down the action to frame-by-frame speed as he sought just the right moment of a turn of the ankle or shoulder feint on which to cut, matching that action to a similarly well-chosen one in the next snippet to effect a smooth and edifying transition.

The results weren't highlight reels of the kind that proliferate on YouTube; rather, they were essays on the way the two men moved, the interlock of their styles, the ebb and flow of the fights. In both, Frazier started slow but put in the work and, advancing under fire, took the shots he had to take in order to dictate the shape of the fight. Ali made him pay for it, but as each contest moved into the middle rounds Frazier imposed his will, his rhythm, his strength. Then, in the late rounds, Ali, who always seemed to be able to tap one more strategic reserve of potency, reasserted himself and tried to bookend Frazier's second-act arias by outscoring him in the decisive third act. In their first bout, the Fight of the Century in Madison Square Garden in 1971, Ali took one risk too many as he tried to close with a big flurry, and Frazier sealed the victory by dropping him in the fifteenth round with a counter left when Ali stepped in to throw a looping right uppercut. In the third bout, the Thrilla in Manila in 1975, the ringworn Frazier didn't have enough left, and Ali put such a beating on him down the stretch that Frazier's trainer, Eddie Futch (Yank Durham was dead by then), stepped in to save him. Boiling down each fight to a few minutes of expressive movement, Squyres caught the essence of the encounters: the way Ali resisted but eventually acquiesced to Frazier, setting himself with an air of resignation to receive the smaller man's urgent, feinting, shrugging rushes; the way Frazier seemed to fill with power and energy as he came on, then to erode as he weathered Ali's inevitable countersurge; the way the two men tacitly agreed to fight with an abandon that they would have to pay for in years to come, should they live long enough.

Squyres's working visual cutdowns of Ali-Frazier I and III were triumphs of nonfiction art, but they were intended to disappear into the feature film like sketches for a fresco. Once the cutdowns had been folded into the movie by putting fistic body doubles in motion-capture suits, having them mimic every move in the cutdowns, and grafting the actors' heads onto those body doubles, Lee and his crew could then do things to the resulting CGI copies of the cutdowns with the intent of finding hidden depths in the old footage. They could add shots of the imitated action from intimate angles that

weren't available in the films of the actual fights, add cornermen's conveniently explanatory advice as well as the fighters' famous in-ring crosstalk (Ali: "Don't you know I'm God?"; Frazier: "Well, God's gonna get his ass whupped tonight"), embed the boxing sequences in a well-wrought dramatic narrative and character arcs, and so on. There was no chance that the result would be anywhere as powerful as the original, let alone improve on it, so it would be many millions of dollars and a whole lot of creative effort down the toilet, but nobody other than me seemed to have a problem with that.

Moviemakers want to make boxing movies and moviegoers want to watch them (though I think the makers want to make them more than the watchers want to watch them). Fine. There are hundreds, thousands of hours of footage of Ali and Frazier being themselves: fighting, training, talking, walking, posing, performing, testifying, singing ("When you order a beer, do like Smokin' Joe/Order Lite beer from Miller and say no mo'"). The two men's Ali-and-Frazier-ness is the point of the exercise, so why attenuate it with simulations? Take a lesson from Squyres: Make a collage from this found footage, impose as much or as little narrative form and thematic consistency on it as you think necessary, call it a documentary, and call it a day.

I feel bad for Ang Lee that his Frazier-Ali movie never got made—so far, it's on permanent hold—but I'm also relieved. One of the big stumbling blocks was all the extra millions of dollars that the CGI effects would have required to get around the actors-can't-fight problem. Had the studio decided to commit those millions to the project, I would have made a lot more money, learned something more about moviemaking, and probably had several more amusing and possibly essay-worthy experiences if the movie had been made. But then my name would be somewhere on it, and I'd feel responsible in some tiny way for what would almost certainly amount to a high-end rendition of the usual pointlessness and error that are part of the DNA of boxing movies.

I'm tempted to say that, like Mike Perez after his encounter with Mago Abdusalamov, Lee has never been the same after his brush with Frazier and Ali. Since the project went into developmental limbo, he has made *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* and *Gemini Man*, generic efforts with the usual gunplay and stilted scripts that might have been directed by any Hollywood journeyman with a 16-11 record. It's as close to going 5-3-1 as a creative artist can get, though of course Lee could return to the top with a critical and/or commercial triumph at any time, since comebacks are a lot easier for artists than for fighters. The screenwriter, for his part, has shed the blocky glasses and gone on to great success. Lately he's been catching flak for making shit up about real people, some of whom aren't even dead yet, but he's still talking about "plausible emotional reality" and things that "might have happened" and such, and that seems to be going over just fine.

Word is that Abdusalamov's wife, Bakanay, who has selflessly cared for her husband since Perez fucked him up for good, is writing a motivational book about the family's

long struggle with Mago's injuries. A movie adaptation is also said to be in the works. They have three daughters, and they could certainly use the money. If that's the objective, I wish her wild success. But the movie, if it ever gets made, is going to be at best the same old thing, and if you want to learn a lesson from what happened to him and prefer your lessons in visual form, it's all there on YouTube already: Bakanay caring for Mago at home, the family's difficult but loving life, press conferences, interviews with Perez ("It's something that I have to clear it up in my mind"), and of course the fight itself—a syllabus of pain and sorrow, and the perhaps misguided courage to face them, on which art cannot improve.

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