Paranoia in the Ring: Fighting Films and *Film Noir*

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"He never had a chance to do anything to us.
He never even seen us".
"And he's only going to see us once".
-Ernest Hemingway, "The Killers"

"Give the public a chance to see what they
are entitled to".
-Former Heavyweight Champion of the
World, Jack Dempsey, to the Senate
Subcommittee on Legalizing Transportation
of Prize-Fight Films,
May 25, 1939

I. Introduction

American culture and, by extension, American film repeatedly return to paranoia as both a discursive mode and topic. In this paper, I'd like first to align the short-lived American film genre known collectively as *film noir* with the long history of boxing films (which begin with the advent of the film medium in the 1890s). This connection is more than a passing interest; beginning with the "darker" gangster and crime films of the 1930s and the *noir* films of the 1940s and '50s, boxing continues to appear in film entirely transformed by the aesthetics and thematic concerns of these films.[1] In addition, I would like to consider the possibility that as *film noir* aesthetics

have been transmitted to other national cinemas (notably, French, British, Japanese and Chinese cinemas), so too has a close relationship to the portrayal of professional fighting. While a discussion of all such manifestations is far beyond the scope of this paper, I would like at least to suggest the possible ways in which this cultural transmission appears.

I will use Robert Siodmak's 1946 film *The Killers* as my starting point. Not only does this film combine the conventions of the nascent boxing film genre with those of *film noir*, but it also continues to have a lasting place in cultural history (having been remade both in the US and abroad). The film follows the *film noir* trope of using a series of flashbacks told through multiple characters to recount the events leading to its protagonist's, ex-boxer Ole Anderson's, death. In most of the flashbacks, the person telling the investigator Jim Reardon his or her version of events simultaneously paints Ole "The Swede" Anderson as a tragic victim, makes Kitty Collins appear to be Ole's fatal flaw, and, most importantly, exculpates his or herself in the process (not necessarily from *the* crime, so much as *a* crime). As with nearly all *films noirs*, one's sense of plot coherence only appears over the long process of assembling these stories, with the consequence that Ole—conveniently dead early in the film—becomes the sacrificial lamb for everyone else's transgressions. This sacrificial structure is the single-most salient feature of fighting films throughout the world; moreover, with its use of death as the starting point of narrative, *film noir*, too, depends almost wholly on sacrificial violence as its most fundamental motivation.

Fig. 1. The image of Ole Anderson's prone body in the ring is echoed repeatedly throughout the film.[2]

And this should be little surprise. In *Violence and the Sacred*, Rene Girard tells us that through the organized spectacle of violence

> where only shortly before a thousand individual conflicts had raged unchecked between a thousand enemy brothers, there now reappears a true community, united in its hatred for one alone of its number. All the rancors scattered at random among the divergent individuals, all the differing antagonisms, now converge on an isolated and unique figure, the *surrogate victim*.[3]

Ole had been a boxer, the profession *par excellence*, of the surrogate victim. And this would seem emphasized in the fact that in the only scene in which the film's viewers see any actual boxing Ole gets a sound beating. His subsequent death grounds the

majority of the film, generating both the investigation and the film's thematics. The film closes with Kitty Collin's arrest, which would paint her as the ostensible perpetrator (of any and all transgressions in the film). The ultimate buck-stopper and *noir* staple, the *femme fatale* should also function as something like the film's expiating surrogate victim. She is the only one punished by the law, every other (male) criminal in the film dies. Girard, too, sees women in general often functioning as the surrogate victim for male violence (not necessarily as the recipient so much as its ritualized source).[4]

If this is the case, then what do we make of all the dead, dying, and beaten men in *noir* films generally and in this film particularly, and how do we explain the seeming resolution through assignation of guilt to the *femme fatale*? *The Killers* is systematic in its sloughing-off of the men involved in the Prentiss Hat Factory heist; one after another dies until the only living person involved in the crime is the only woman involved in the crime. In order to better answer this question, I'd like to digress and examine more closely the organized way by which men suffer bodily harm in this and other *noir* films, paying particular attention to the only substantially self-conscious presence of ritual violence in these films: boxing.

II. A Brief History of Boxing and Boxing Films

Boxing films have existed as long as the film medium itself has existed. Many who have written on the boxing film genre claim strong correlations exist between the development of modern organized sport boxing (ca. 1892) and the development of the film

medium itself (ca. 1894).[5] As a testament to this strong affinity, the first heavyweight champion, John L. Sullivan, also has the distinction of being the only heavyweight champion never filmed.[6] Regardless of the strength of the bond between film and boxing, at the very least boxing (and boxing films) shares with film a common history of regulation by internal, private organizations and external, public organizations. Rules enforcing weight classes, number of rounds, and use of gloves appeared in 1892 through the sport's self-regulation, and state laws criminalizing prize fighting proliferated throughout the 1890s and on into the 20th century.[7] Though boxing matches were staged, documented, and fictionalized for the camera, exhibiting these films has not always been as easy as showing a pay-per-view broadcast or distributing the Rocky films. The later rise of Jack Johnson, the son of a former slave, to the heavyweight title in 1908 added further fuel to the fire, ultimately leading to a ban on distribution and interstate transportation of fight films throughout the United States in 1912 and the express prohibition of their exhibition within many individual states.

In one of the more remarkable attempts to circumvent federal laws, one distributor, L. Lawrence Weber, set up an elaborate scheme to get the filmed version of the 1915 Jack Johnson-Jess Willard fight into the United States. Lee Grieveson, in his account of these events, claims that the film's distributor wrongly assumed that since Jack Johnson lost the fight the film would be tacitly permitted to be brought from Cuba (where the fight took place and was filmed) into the states since it appeared to settle the ongoing racial conflict between black and white. Since Jack Johnson

had finally lost to a white man, Weber brought the film into Newark, New Jersey, where, to the distributor's surprise, the port authorities seized the copies of the film. He took his case through federal district court and into the Supreme Court, defeated the whole way up the judicial ladder. His next tactic in response to this defeat was a challenge to the legal embodiment of film itself: he decided that since interstate transportation of the film was illegal, he would invite the law (in the form of a US customs official) to stand witness as he projected the film negative across the Canadian border and converted it to useable (and distributable within New York state) film stock in the United States. Though commendable for its cleverness, the trick didn't hold up in court and the film was again seized. As Grieveson comments, "the policing of the national border could extend to a disciplining of the movement of rays of light."[8] Yet by 1917, all-white matches were being openly distributed within the United States.

Much has been made of the significance of Jack Johnson's public presence and his depiction on film in the realm of racialized discourse; however, more in line with my paper's concerns, the prevalence of early fight films and the subsequent "disciplining of the movement of rays of light" gives the boxing spectacle a revealing twist in its relationship to the later advent of *noir* films. *Noir* films find in boxing a camaraderie based on a common legal marginality, and hence a close relationship built upon a shared paranoid worldview.[9] The eternal possibility that the fighters are acting and that the fight is fixed, the all-powerful role of gambling statistics, the criminal element, the seedy venues, the pervasive presence of the spectators' gaze,

and so on, all fit nicely into the *noir*-ized film vision. As Jonathan Buchsbaum notes in his discussion of paranoia and *film noir*, "the paranoid scrutinizes the environment for confirmation of his suspicions . . . The paranoid begins with a bias, and, through often brilliant manipulation can twist the data to conform to the preconceptions."[10] Boxing asks to be investigated in this way and is tailor-made to *noir*'s paranoid specifications. Moreover, Weber expected Jack Johnson's defeat at the hands of a white boxer to make his film "safe" for viewers. The perceived taint of the film reveals the way in which this match, too, isn't over when it's over. Watching the match would only show that Jack Johnson's defeat was perpetually open-ended. He was defeated in the ring, but something persists outside the ring: a racial paranoia voiced as opposition to "barbarity". This racial paranoia was quickly transmuted into a sexual paranoia in the discourse surrounding Jack Johnson's rise and fall in the boxing limelight, leading ultimately to his exile from the United States following an indictment for "white slavery" (transporting white women across state lines for immoral purposes).

In a Senate Subcommittee hearing in 1939 on legalizing transportation of prize-fight films, supporters of a bill to repeal the 1912 law (prohibiting interstate transportation of "prize-fight films") continually point out that the law is outdated, specifically because of the law's response to contemporaneous racial tensions that no longer apply. Abe Green, commissioner of the State Athletic Commission of New Jersey, says that "the measure came into being in the midst of a boxing contest which involved racial feuds: it was conceived at the time that

the showing of such films might fan the flames of race hatred. There is now, and for a long time there has been, no such condition."[11] The Executive Secretary of the State of Kansas Athletic Commission claims that "the present law barring transportation of all films showing boxing exhibitions was passed in order to minimize the possibility of racial trouble after a colored boxer [Jack Johnson] had won the heavyweight championship from a white boxer . . . Times and conditions have changed."[12] Former Heavyweight Champion Jack Dempsey states that "that old bill served its purpose, but now we are living in a different age and a different era."[13] The 1912 law (the Sims Act) is repealed in 1940; a new version of *The Maltese Falcon* is released the following year, signaling the advent of *film noir*.

III. Boxing and *Film Noir*

But when boxing explicitly appears in *noir* films, it doesn't look like the boxing of the early fight films or of the contemporaneous fictionalized boxing films. A handful of films in the '40s have been identified with either *film noir* or boxing films or both, notably *Body and Soul* (1947), *The Set-up* (1949), and, more recently, *Raging Bull* (1980). However, little seems *noir*-like about these films. *Body and Soul* might look *noir*, but it doesn't act much like it. It plays out more like a commentary on the American success story. In his study of the boxing film genre, Leger Grindon identifies American ideals of democratic, egalitarian opportunity as central structural and stylistic components of the boxing genre. Whereas boxing films trace some kind of rise and/or fall in success, *films*

noirs promulgate the always already fallen world ad nauseam. And I agree with Borde and Chaumeton's assessment of *The Set-up*: it only transforms into *noir* in the final minutes (in terms of both its style and its substance). *Raging Bull* has some interesting *noir* resonances (a loosely defined *femme fatale*, a narrative organized by flashback, a decidedly fallen worldview), but it ultimately finds a closer affiliation with the boxing film proper in its concern with the rise and fall of a sport icon. Of course, to talk in such definitive ways about genre is always vague at best, but between these films and a film like *The Killers* lay some key differences in modes of spectatorship, and hence in their respective methodologies of blame and punishment.

Most obvious is that in the boxing film proper, the boxing match becomes the center of the audience's attention (the diegetic audience present at the match and the film audience watching both the boxing audience and the match). In *The Set-up*, everyone watches the series of matches excitedly and takes obvious pleasure in each one. A blind man complains before the matches begin about his seat back in the eighth row and shouts boxing strategy to the boxer-hero, Bill "Stoker" Thompson. A middle-aged married woman claims that she kept her eyes closed the whole time at the previous match, but we see her yelling viciously during the final match to no one in particular to "make 'em fight". Stoker's girlfriend Julie tries in vain to avoid thinking about his match. She doesn't go to the fight; instead, she wanders the city streets looking for distraction. She comes upon a penny arcade and walks in, but there, too, she sees the match (in the form of two toy boxers duking it out). The

match is everywhere and demands that it be watched.

In contrast to the fixed, obsessive voyeurism of *The Set-up*, *The Killers*, like most *noir* films, looses the spectatorial gaze into the convoluted narrative and urban space. The boxing match in *noir* always threatens to escape the ring and permeate the environment. In the Swede's final boxing match, the spectators at the match only appear as the blurry, out-of-focus backdrop for the fight. We enter the fight as Sam does: at the beginning of the last round of a fight already being lost. The only individual close-ups of the spectators at the fight are of Lilly and Sam, the two ostensibly telling the flashback to Reardon. Neither shouts at the fighters (as in *The Set*-up), and both have furrowed, worried brows (a sure sign of their simultaneous watching and reluctance to watch). The only thing like a direct shot of the audience comes at the end of the bout as the audience stands up and walks out of their seats en masse, leaving Lilly alone still visibly watching the ring. Importantly, spectatorship has here carried over beyond the match itself into the rest of the plot; Lilly is watching Ole's defeated body, not the match that led to it. This shot becomes even more confused when approached from within generic conventions; the shot presents the isolated, stunning entrance of the film's *femme fatale*, which is soon superceded by a shot of a replacement *femme fatale*: Kitty Collins singing at the piano. Lilly stands witness to what comes immediately *after* the fight; in the *noir* context, this gaze-in-excess of the boxing match sends us off into what becomes a large-scale commingling of sexual and material desire, experienced as a narrative in search of closure (hence the investigation). Of course, much up to this point in

the film has already worked to send us there, the opening scene in particular.[14] Remember, too, that the boxing match is a combination of the accounts of both Sam Lubinsky and Lilly herself; exactly whose perspective most informs this sequence never becomes clear. Regardless, what remains fully clear is that Ole lost (and lost emphatically). In fact, the confusion surrounding perspective and spectatorship only emphasizes the singularity and surety of this single event.[15] When we witness Kitty's final failure to summon a flashback from Colefax that will successfully exonerate her, her singularity (as witness, perpetrator, victim, and spectator) is just as much at fault in her implication as is the unity of the preceding flashbacks/stories.

As argued above, the succession of flashback accounts in the film confounds the coherence of the narrative and it is through a scapegoat (whether this is Ole or Kitty remains unclear) that the narrative gains the illusion of coherence. When Reardon listens to Sam's version of things, Sam begins with an ambiguously joking comment that it might seem bad that he arrested his childhood friend and married his girl, but Lilly admonishes him for being so flippant about blame, shifting the onus to a combination of circumstance and Ole's interest in Kitty. As a result, all that remains of the boxing match is a sequence of shots showing Ole getting the crap beat out of him. Was the hand that doomed him already broken, or did he break it in this fight? The flashback doesn't show enough of the fight for us to know. In terms of the sequence of events as they are presented to us, the hand was already wounded; and not only was it wounded, we saw it die as a synechdoche for Ole

himself. Next we see the scarred hand again when Reardon goes to the morgue to look at Ole's dead body. But in the match, his hand is completely covered by Ole's boxing glove. Even after the fight when his gloves come off it's difficult to tell anything is wrong with his hand until the bindings come off; and even then, the recognizable scar we've already seen in its two prior appearances isn't there.

Consistently, then, the boxing match deflects the gaze of the film's viewers and of the characters in the film. It is something that can't be clearly or wholly seen. It comes at us in too many different directions and speeds away again in yet even more directions. It is loss; it is lack; it is a spectacular failure. And this makes sense if what these flashbacks do is sacrifice Ole for the sake of their respective tellers. Sam didn't arrest his childhood friend and steal his girl; Ole took the fall for Kitty and left Lilly for the seductive second woman. Nick Adams didn't run away in fear from the two killers; instead, he ran to Ole to warn him, but Ole felt too self-destructive to heed Nick's warning. The maid in Atlantic City didn't know why Ole would leave her $2500; she wasn't being kept silent by Kitty, who conveniently isn't there in the maid's flashback, because Ole was obviously already suicidal. Charleston wasn't in on the heist; it was Ole's obsession with Kitty that drew him to the crime. Blinky wasn't in on a double-cross against Ole; a boss who doesn't cheat his partners at cards doesn't cheat them in crime. Even the newspaper's memory of events points to nothing blameworthy but the silk kerchief given to Ole by Kitty (not unlike the ruse of confused spectatorship focusing on the singularity and coherence of Ole's losing the boxing match, embodied in his scarred and

dying hand). The final flashback from Kitty's perspective maintains this pattern, and in doing so implicates her in Ole's downfall in order to mask her marriage to Colefax and his responsibility for the double-double-cross.

But what does any of this have to do with Ole's boxing match? Perhaps the best way to return to the discussion of boxing lies in Jim Reardon's smug response to Colefax's death: "Married people can't testify against each other. Otherwise I would have tried playing you off one against the other instead of making myself a target for those gunmen of yours". As he sees it, he had two options: either set the couple against one another or fool them into revealing their plot by taking a deliberate fall. In either case, the fight would, according to Reardon, unveil who had the money and draw the investigation to a certain close. But Reardon speaks safely and comfortably after-the-fact. He would always not have been able to set them against one another; it was wishful thinking on his part.

IV. Boxing and Paranoia

Reardon, in a sense, was already doomed. A fight with a clear winner and loser (and hence a clear ending) is the wish-fulfillment of the paranoid mind, a fantasy in which cause and effect—even if not immediately obvious—play out in a discernible pattern. In a slight alteration of Girard's claims about the cultural function of ritual scapegoating, the fight is itself a sort of scapegoat. In it, the "thousand individual conflicts . . . now converge on an isolated and unique" pair. The problem with this type of

resolution is that, as we have seen above, a match in the *noir* world (and apparently in the post-Jack Johnson world, as well) is highly unstable and looses an unmanageable narrative. It only seems to work when it can find a single object of calumny. So, then, Reardon doesn't get the fight he wanted because the two were prevented by law from fighting in court. Instead, the two turn on him because he forced their hand when he futilely attempted to persuade Kitty to give him a "fall guy for the law". By using himself as a target, Reardon brings a semblance of closure to the otherwise free-floating violent desire. He draws out the couple, but just as Sam had arrived at Ole's fight too late, Reardon arrives after all the shooting has already happened. This time, rather than just one man defeated, two are killed (Dum Dum and Colefax). But just like the boxing match, the gaze of the woman remains after the match is over.

The film, too, finds closure—similarly only a semblance of it—in the movement from the close-up of Ole's scarred, dead hand, through the green handkerchief, to the close-up of Kitty sitting over Colefax's dead body begging him to liberate her. Blaming the *femme fatale* in *film noir* for any and all crimes committed, if this particular film is any reliable model, is troubling. Not necessarily because of its overt sexism, but because blaming Kitty for Ole's defeat in the ring only registers thematically; Kitty and Ole hadn't met yet. Strangely, it seems that in *The Killers* the uncertainty generated by a paired match correlates with the two women's gazes and with the way in which this excess desire is held accountable for the fallen state of the *noir umwelt*. But before I can take this argument much further, I must first look at

how a similar "boxing-match logic" works in a sampling of other *noir* contexts.

In Dashiell Hammett's novel *Red Harvest*, the Continental Op's first move in cleaning up Personville is fixing a boxing match. Actually, he *re*-fixes it. The better boxer was threatened into taking a dive, so the Op spreads this news around town. Then the Op threatens the boxer into not taking the dive. The boxer gets killed after winning the fight. The explanation the Op gives for his elaborate double-fix is that "plans are all right sometimes . . . and sometimes just stirring things up is all right—if you're tough enough to survive, and keep your eyes open so you'll see what you want when it comes to the top."[16] The first thing to surface after the boxing match in *Red Harvest* is Dinah Brand's greed, a more literal version of what I've identified in the boxing match in *The Killers*. She makes money out of the fight, and over the course of the novel, proves to have a vested monetary interest in every important man in town. She dies well before the resolution of the plot, making her a problematic model for the *femmes fatales* found in *film noir*, but, nevertheless, her insatiable appetite appears at this moment in all its innumerable directions.[17]

This same methodology underlies the boxing match in *The Killers*, not in the sense that it was orchestrated for the sake of catching anyone out, but in that it is the beginning of things and instigates the circulating, rampant, competing perspectives (most clearly represented in the mosaic of flashbacks) that won't end until Kitty is left the only survivor in the group of criminals. Reardon's final ploy to find the money, however, *does* fix the fight so that what he wants will "come to the top". He would've preferred to have had

Kitty and Colefax duke it out, but he puts himself up against them instead. In either case, the ruse works and the money surfaces.[18]

My final example from American cinema comes is a short film with a fairly simple plot (simple for a *noir* plot, at least), Stanley Kubrick's *Killer's Kiss*. A has-been boxer falls for a dancing girl; her boss and sometime-lover gets jealous and tries to kill the boxer. The boss's men mistake the boxer's manager for the boxer and kill the wrong man. In a final fight, the boxer kills the boss. Boxer and dancing girl go away together. As with my prior examples, the boxing match takes place early in the film (and the boxer loses, of course). This match has no visible audience.[19] The match is shot all from very low angles with a bright light over the ring, washing the surrounding environment in total blackness. As far as we're aware, the fight is on the level and Davy has no prior injury to doom him; however, the television announcer explains that he "has been plagued by a weak chin" and usually chokes during important fights, and when Rapallo (the dance hall owner) first sees Davy, he tells Gloria (the dancing girl) that he "used to be a pretty good fighter".

During the fight, Gloria works at a dance hall.[20] While dancing with a uniformed soldier, Rapallo butts in (almost starting a fight of his own) and takes Gloria up to his office to watch Davy's fight on TV.[21] They're the only audience of the fight that the film shows us. At the critical moment in the fight when Davy gets knocked out, Rapallo and Gloria are in the midst of a passionate kiss (eyes closed). Gloria glances at the TV briefly when she hears the announcer say that Davy has lost. Rapallo looks, too, but quickly pulls Gloria back into a kiss, turning her head away from the

television, his closed eyes staring straight at the television. Here, we're back to something like Lilly's intent gaze after Ole's final loss, but this time there's a man there to turn her head away. Rapallo visibly does not look at the fight and Gloria has been turned away into a kiss. In terms of the model of the "gaze-in-excess" I have attempted to outline in this paper, there would seem to be its precise opposite: a gaze present as an over-abundant absence.[22] While this film seems only to concern itself with a system of desire built upon a specifically sexual desire (unlike most *films noirs*, which explicitly include money in the equation), this point marks the same sort of opening in the narrative. This time, what had seemed simple jealousy on Rapallo's part is sent off into a diffuse and oppressive *noir* erotics by way of the triangular relationship between Gloria, Rapallo, and Davy. Again, the fight serves as an organizing lack for desire run amok through the urban landscape (begging for investigation). Rapallo's first comment to Gloria just before telling her that Davy "used to be a pretty good fighter" was that she seemed to be "doing pretty well" for herself. His comment reveals both his admiration and jealousy, as well as the less visible monetary undercurrent through the film (the main characters of the film are two employees and their two bosses, after all).

If what I'm tracing in all of these films is the transition from a failed scapegoat for narrative closure (ritualized in the boxing match) to a more manageable perspective (the *femme fatale*, the supposed source of the excess gaze), this film traces the same transition but finds greater success in scapegoating a different type of person, but for similar reasons. According to

Killer's Kiss, the onus of excess falls on Rapallo for many possible reasons: he's too hispanic, he's too effeminate, he's too old (Gloria even tells him that he's "old" and "smells bad"), and so on. The point is, Rapallo's own "shortcomings" mark him as already having "lost" some larger, vaguer match; like the *femme fatale*, Rapallo's *a priori* lack provides a strong enough narrative closure to ultimately end the film (which, as with most *noir* films, was already over before it began, as seen in the abundance of flashback-based narrative structures throughout the genre).

The initial boxing match is revisited in the final confrontation between Rapallo and Davy in a mannequin factory. Again, no audience. Except for the hundreds and hundreds of female mannequins (something like Phyllis's expression while Neff and Mr. Dietrichson fight). The mannequins look in many different directions; some seem to be looking at the men; some seem to have fixed their eyes on one man or the other; some seem to parallel the sight-line of one man or the other; many seem to look at no one or nothing; dislocated hands and fingers seem to point at Davy while others point nowhere in particular. Female spectatorship is implicated, but only as a necessary means to enacting the scapegoating ritual. As spectatorship is performed, rather than turning on the *femme fatale*, the film amplifies her presence (albeit, as a surfeit of dead, inert objects) in order to force the killing ritual to work properly. The hypermasculine weapons the two men use, a spear and an axe, and the multitudinous, ambiguously attentive "female" spectators overdetermine the stakes. When Davy finally *spears* Rapallo, one can't help but groan at the drippingly obvious symbolism of the accomplishment.

Kubrick's film explores the route of the later action film genre: if the fight doesn't work the first time, fight harder the next time. The paranoid mind succumbs to its paranoia. Unlike *The Killers*, Kubrick's film enacts a completed and satisfying ritual after which nothing remains but the inevitable reunion of Davy and Gloria. The framing story all takes place in a train station with Davy waiting to see whether or not Gloria will meet him there. She comes, sans blame or guilt (even though she had been willing to go back to Rapallo when she realized he might kill her). The law determines that Davy killed Rapallo in self-defense; his paranoia was justified, and Davy and Gloria live happily ever after.

V. *Film Noir* and Fighting Films in Hong Kong and Chinese Cinema

I'd like to conclude with a short discussion of the appearance of this thematic and generic alignment in another cinematic context. In pre-handover Hong Kong, hardboiled detectives, gothic storylines, and American film styles flourished in a handful of filmmakers and actors (among them, such figures as John Woo and Chow Yun Fat). Both in its martial arts films and urban crime films, Hong Kong cinema drew heavily from the look and thematic impact of American *film noir*. *Noir* has appeared throughout the world at various points in the evolution of national cinemas (e.g., in France in the '50s and '60s, in Japan in the '60s, again in the US in the '70s, in Britain in the '90s, etc.). Important to this study, however, is the relevance of the portrayal of one-on-one fighting in the commingling of *noir* style with the Hong Kong martial arts film. I'd also like to consider and briefly examine

the function and appearance of paranoia in these films.

John Woo's 1989 film *The Killer* utilizes nearly all the standard tropes and conventions of 1940's-era American *film noir*. The convoluted investigation plot, the doomed hero, the *femme fatale*, and so on. However, what has been heightened here (and in many of Woo's subsequent films) is the doubling of the hero. Assassin Jeffrey Chow is paired with police inspector Danny Lee in a manner closely resembling the image of the pair in the boxing ring seen in earlier examples such as the similarly titled *The Killers*. Importantly, however, bodily contact has given way almost wholly to the more distanced use of guns and gun battles. Like 1940's *noir* in the US, the use of guns often suggests and moves toward bodily contact without ever consummating that contact. In the more visually striking gun fights in Woo's film, the guns are often held close, nearly to the point of intertwining arms, hands, and guns. Much has been written on the less-than-latent homoeroticism charging such moments,[23] and these sequences have, in turn, been incorporated into more recent send-ups of the *noir* genre such as Quentin Tarantino's 1994 film *Pulp Fiction*. More relevant to this discussion, however, is the paranoia embodied in these stand-offs expressed as an ambivalent attitude toward men touching. In the boxing ring, touching is accomplished and disavowed through violent contact, but in Woo's film, guns accomplish the simultaneous desire to touch and disavow touching (visualized in the constant nearing and distancing of pointed guns). The spectacle most desired and most feared is men embracing.

In other recent and suggestive examples, we see

film noir-informed paranoia appear in other contexts. For example, the paranoia of the possibility of political rebellion is acknowledged and suppressed in Zhang Yimou's recent film *Hero*. Here the Western influence in the action film style of Hong Kong meets the historical epic of mainland Chinese film tradition. Again, as with Siodmak's 1946 film *The Killers*, *Hero* is structured by flashbacks, and just as with that earlier film, these flashbacks pass blame from one person to another until we are left with two possible objects of violent retribution: the emperor or the nameless hero. Ultimately, the nameless hero suffers for the transgressions of all the other characters, including the emperor. The hero/victim stands in for the film's own cultural transgressions and thematics. That is, where the film departs from traditional Chinese epic and politics (i.e., its most *noir* moments), the hero steps in as the surrogate victim for all of those departures, dying at the hands of the (reluctant) emperor. The heavily choreographed fight sequences adopt a decidedly *noir* aspect; while color is itself antithetical to the *noir* landscape, each flashback and fight set-piece uses a monochromatic color palette as a stand-in for the stark contrasts generated by the black-white film stock so strongly associated with *film noir*. Despite the use of color, therefore, the visual presence of doom and foreboding still obtains. The unity generated by surrogating the nameless hero generates the unity absent from the otherwise fractured narrative. The paranoia of (political and cultural) disunity is overcome through the unifying sacrifice of the film's tragic victim. Interestingly, Zhang's succeeding film *The House of Flying Daggers* follows a similar pattern of violent surrogation, but in contrast

to *Hero*, this film uses a series of radical plot twists as its narrative fragments instead of flashbacks. However, taking into account each film's method of victimization and each film's aesthetic approach to portraying fights, the final tragic death is not enough to contain its own political position within the global marketplace. As much as these films would like to seem to unify a political "folk," their place in the international market belies their political ambivalence and ultimate instability, much like the enormously cynical American *films noirs* from which these films take their cue.

VI. The Match as a Ritual of Unification

The lesson learned from all of this is that in the *noir* imagination, the fight ritual isn't enough to contain what it presumes to contain. But the paranoid would like nothing better than to see a fight in the open and in plain sight brought to a clear resolution. These films map the way in which the paranoid mind moves to implicate someone (or a group of someones) for letting paranoia escape the ring. Spectatorship itself, then, is held accountable, which brings me back to the early regulation of boxing films and their distribution. It should be of little wonder that despite the fact that a black man lost in the Jack Johnson-Jess Willard fight, the film's distribution was still banned. Desire is a dangerous thing in boxing rituals, and spectatorship is a powerful force. Nor should it be surprising that race and class (and, more recently, gender) so often figure so powerfully in boxing movies and portrayals of boxers (as in *films noirs*); desire extends far beyond the ring, and it has no regard for

the outcome of the match. The boxer in boxing films and *films noirs* is typically a safe medium between black and white (Italian, Mexican, Jewish, Swedish), often of the working class (with an ensuing success story), and when he's not, he arbitrates between any number of other poles for desire (greed, sexuality, politics, etc.).

What the *noir* film brings to this is a useful means for regulating fears of multiplicity and indeterminacy. Girard's understanding of the ritualized surrogate victim leaves under-explored the way in which the ritual itself functions to regulate desire and how spectatorship manages both to implicate itself and free itself from the contamination of the omnipresent and undefined desires subject to regulation (experienced as paranoia). *Noir* assumes failure, and this shift in ritual excision is no different. Instead, it attempts to circumvent the problem of an always already failed purgation often by sexualizing what it identifies as the locus of its failure, attaching desire to desire. Where and how *noir* films identify this locus (begun in the boxing match) plays out in different ways in each of the three films exampled above.

In each film, however, the implication of spectatorship in the failed ritual of expurgation obtains in each of the boxing matches (precisely at the moment when they should be over and completed). Each of the films targets a different embodiment of the taint of having witnessed this failure ("failure" in contrast to "losing," which all of the boxing matches seem to show clearly and explicitly). Losing is reified, but only as a necessary aspect of the fallen *noir* worldview; the many fractured and disparate flashbacks, stories, evidence, etc., don't of themselves

unite the narrative and resolve the desires supposedly embodied in the match. They require a witness. That is, each time a boxing match is lost, that loss must be accounted for. Narrative unity is not possible or necessary to these films' resolutions, a unity which would also resolve the violent conflict at the heart of the films first brought to light in the opening boxing match, but it is always looked for.[24] Locating spectatorship proves slippery at best, however. Instead of actively seeking it out (as it would seem a detective would want to do), like the Continental Op, these films wait to see what "comes to the top". Only at the expense of its witnesses does *film noir* find something like narrative closure.

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Endnotes

1. As evidenced by the most recent contribution to the genre, Eastwood's *Million Dollar Baby*, boxing films and *film noir* have developed an inextricable bond. Perhaps most recognizable for displaying this alignment, Scorsese's *Raging Bull* goes so far as to appear in the stark black and white contrasts of classical *noir*.

2. Frame capture from *Ernest Hemingway's the Killers*. 1946. Directed by Robert Siodmak. Home Vision Entertainment/Criterion, 2003. ISBN# 1559409312

3. Girard, p. 79

4. Girard attributes a "loss of sexual differentiation" to the function of women in ritualized violence. As he says:

   > If the lost sexual difference makes it easier to shunt the responsibility for violence onto the women, it still cannot explain away the necessity for violence. Like the animal and the infant, but to a lesser degree, the woman qualifies for sacrificial status by reason of her weakness and relatively marginal social status. That is why she can be viewed as a quasi-sacral figure, both desired and disdained, alternately elevated and abused. (pp. 141–142)

   Though I'm possibly being unfair to Girard in citing a passage in isolation that seems so overtly sexist in its argumentation, I think it worthy of note in this passage that Girard alludes to a larger categorical function in ritual violence which "women" often serve (in the remaining and unexplained "necessity for violence").

5. Dan Streible and Lee Grieveson, cited elsewhere in this paper, each rely upon such parallels.

6. Streible, p. 236.

7. *Ibidem.*

8. Grieveson, p. 41.

9. This connection has yet to be very well developed by critics. I couldn't begin to make a full and coherent

argument here, but suffice it to say that crime and paranoia share a long history, particularly in the post-Freudian world (diagnosis of criminal behavior, identifying criminal subjectivity, symptoms of social "ills," etc.). Foucault's use of the panopticon as a metaphor explaining the "enforced" self-disciplining of a given citizenry is only one of the latest manifestations of this common critical/theoretical history.

[10] Buchsbaum, p. 89.

[11] "Legalizing Transportation of Prize-Fight Films." p. 3.

[12] *Ibidem*, p. 4.

[13] *Ibidem*, p. 6.

[14] I couldn't begin to parse fully the opening diner sequence within the confines of this paper, but the tension created by the immanent violence of the two "killers" in the diner spreads (at the very least) into the conflicted economies of race, urban "style," and crime.

[15] This claim echoes Michel Foucault's claim that in the pre-modern system of public torture, "the tortured body is first inscribed in the legal ceremonial that must produce, open for all to see, the truth of the crime" (*Discipline and Punish* 35).

Of course, the problems with using this claim in direct reference to *film noir* are numerous: Foucault repeatedly uses the English (and by inference American) penal/legal system as his history's exception; he's also speaking of pre-modern Western Europe (not the U.S. in the 1940s); and Foucault is referring specifically to a legally sanctioned public practice executed for the sake of adherence to Law (at best, boxing can only work here metaphorically). What is useful in his study, however, is the explication of a system of public, ritualized violence which performs a "surrogation" akin to that which Girard describes at length (the important difference being that Girard sees perpetual "crisis" where Foucault sees a systematic cultural adaptation to changing attitudes toward crime and legal transgression).

[16] Hammett, p. 85.

[17] As in *The Killers*, *Red Harvest* reveals that the woman most implicated turns out to have been only the initial manifestation of a later, much more sinister woman orchestrating bad things. In Hammett's novel, a relatively minor character's sister (described by the Continental Op

as totally insane) turns out to be even more conniving and dangerous than Dinah.

[18] The gradual way in which Reardon inserts himself into the narrative he investigates is continually undermined, not only by his ineptitude with a gun but also in the *noir* fantasy he creates for himself (why else would he go so far for a 1/10 of a percent share increase?). Putting himself in harm's way is only one more manifestation of Reardon's own *noir* fantasy. It might be interesting to consider the way in which Reardon represents an attempt by the classical "arm-chair" detective to save face in the *noir* environment, i.e. the film is a representation of Reardon's own elaborate desire for a paranoid experience.

[19] *Fight Club* (1999) explores the possibility of an audience regained and re-implicated in the fight and in the investigation. The men of these clubs attempt to overcome the paranoia inherent to boxing matches through a predetermined masochistic drive to lose, which would bring closure to an artificial and isolated narrative of masculinity. When a woman learns too much about their organization, they try to kill her. When the narrator tries to tell the authorities about the organization, the club members try to "get his balls," literally castrating him as a means of closely monitoring the gaze. The film, however, turns this project on its head and returns to the *noir* model of spectatorship, leaving these men where they began: in indeterminacy.

[20] The film allies Gloria's and Davy's respective professions via visual and thematic parallels throughout the film. Not only does this give additional play to the notion of boxing as explicitly sexualized, but it also further confuses the role between the losing fighter and the spectator.

[21] At the hearing on legalizing transportation of prize-fight films, Jack Dempsey says that "with television coming in and the different new inventions, it is only the fair thing to do [repealing the 1912 law], so the public may see what they wish to"(5). According to this line of reasoning, television was there already, so film doesn't do anything that wasn't already being done by the new (soon to be mass) technology. *Killer's Kiss* presents television as an autonomous technology with an invisible and imagined spectator. Television, in this context, precedes *and* supercedes film.

[22] Carol Clover's discussion of the molecular enactment or performance of Freudian *Verneinung* seems appropriate

to mention here. Nor would I be reaching too far in claiming that at least part of the reason that each of these boxing matches appears at the beginning of these films is to deny (*verneinen*) visibly the violent spectacle of the boxing match. However, if this is the case, some unaccountable desire always slips from these key moments of *Verneinung* into the narrative as a whole (most clearly represented through the confused position of the spectator/s).

[23] See for example: Michael Koven's "My Brother, My Lover, My Self: Traditional Masculinity in the Hong Kong Action Cinema of John Woo" *Canadian Folklore Canadien,* v. 19, no. 1, 1997, pp. 55–68; and Jillian Sandell's "Reinventing Masculinity: The Spectacle of Male Intimacy in the Films of John Woo" *Film Quarterly*, v. 49, no. 4, Summer 1996, pp. 23–34.

[24] The obvious narrative disunity in films like David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* implicates and confuses spectatorship yet another way. The horror at its "conclusion" is the misrecognition of one character (and the audience) for their environment, themselves, and other characters: a sort of perpetual amnesia or dream-state. This is a narrative disunity similar to what is threatened in *The House of Flying Daggers*, but in contrast to Lynch's film, death is certain.