

Fighting and Victory (A Film Essay on Flawed Duality)

(By Toshio U.-P.)

While films involving fighting and pugilistic behaviour rely heavily on the presence of ‘the other’ as an enemy or a rival, we will attempt to study confrontation in film genres such as the ravages of war epic, the boxing underdog story and the modern gangster showdown. Through the study of four unique films from different eras, we will show that fighting ideology relies heavily on the justification of violent acts, the failure to find and resort to redeeming dialogue and the impulsive desire to triumph and surpass adversaries through acts bordering on violence in a more peaceable and law-abiding world. We will also talk about the build-up of rivals and rivalry which develops to drive such fighting film narratives forward.

In John Frankenheimer’s black and white war epic The Train (1), we are transported to Paris and rural France at the end of World War II’s Nazi occupation. As the Nazis start to retreat from French cities with the help of the Allied Forces, French railway worker Labiche and his Resistance allies plan and carry out terrorist acts in order to disrupt the flow of Nazi railway initiatives in their native country. When Labiche is informed that Berlin wants ‘degenerate art’ belonging to France’s cultural heritage in the hands of the Third Reich, he embarks on a mission to save the precious rail cargo considered to be ‘the pride of France’ from being destroyed in air raids, while causing covert acts of sabotage to prevent it from crossing the border into Nazi Germany.

In Costa-Gavras’ controversial historical drama Missing (2) set during the Nixon era, aging father Ed travels to Chile in the weeks after the September 1973 coup to try to locate his son Charlie who has been reported missing. With the help of Charlie’s wife Beth, Ed reaches out to his son’s friends and to American diplomats in the war-torn region to try to bring Charlie back home alive. Unfortunately, as they begin to expose evidence of severe brutality and bloodshed led by the Chilean Junta in the days after September 11th, Charlie’s left-leaning tendencies and aspirations to document the on-going conflict as a writer further imperil his chance of survival.

In Ryan Coogler’s breakthrough boxing film Creed (3), we are introduced to young Adonis Johnson, a juvenile delinquent with an often troublesome fighter’s spirit. When Adonis is freed from institutional detention as a teenager, he is adopted by Mary Anne Creed, the widow of the late boxing great Apollo Creed. While being given opportunities to move up in the more conventional world of business, aspiring boxer Adonis—who learns soon after from his stepmother that he is in fact Apollo Creed’s biological son from an extra-marital affair—turns down an office promotion to take on the perilous and risky path of professional boxing. While struggling to find the right trainer in his hometown of Los Angeles, Adonis moves to Philadelphia to follow his dad’s legacy and to train under the tutelage of the city’s famed retired boxer Rocky, who had a close relationship with Apollo at the end of his life. After the aging Rocky reluctantly accepts to train the fiery and petulant young boxer, Adonis attempts his

ascent into the top ranks of commercialized prize-fighting, a brash and confrontational world fraught with severe injury, damaged pride and strained relationships.

In Hong Kong gangster film Election (4), we are given a behind-the-scenes view into the underworld of the Wo Sing Society as a transfer of power occurs to elect its new Chairman. Amid attempts by police forces to disrupt 'Triad Activities' through mass arrests and the use of covert police informants, a rivalry between crime bosses Lok and Big D —along with their many violent underlings—carries over into a larger regional gang war as bloody battles rage to pass a coveted 'baton' to the new Chairman according to age-old cultish gang tradition.

While fighting narratives showcase an often violent way of settling differences between characters, a pseudo-Darwinian model often comes into play in which the strongest and fittest ascend to the ranks of victory and power, regardless of a failure to comply with a basic moral code. While 'the other' can be deemed lowlier through their tactics of fighting and even atrocity, a knowledge and an understanding the inner-workings of the opposing side may be only found through acts of compromise and non-violent verbal debate. While targeting or challenging an opponent or enemy on a battlefield, a fighting ring or a streetscape setting involves a process of vilification, denigration and differentiation, film narratives driven by antithesis more often reveal hidden flaws from both the loser and the triumphing victor.

Sources:

1. The Train (1964). Dir. John Frankenheimer. United Artists. USA and France. 133 min.
2. Missing (1982). Dir. Costa-Gavras. Universal Pictures. USA. 122 min.
3. Creed (2015). Dir. Ryan Coogler. Warner Bros. Pictures. USA. 133 min.
4. Election (2005). Dir. Johnnie To. China Star Entertainment Group. Hong Kong. 101 min.