The British Boxing Film

Stephen Glynn

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'Stephen Glynn is *the* authority on sport in British cinema, and *The British Boxing Film* is a very welcome addition to his previous surveys of the people's game and the sport of kings. Glynn makes a highly persuasive case for the boxing picture as a site of significant cultural interest, especially through its engagement with class and gender politics. As relevant for social historians of sport as for film studies, *The British Boxing Film* is an undisputed knock-out winner.'

—James Chapman, Professor of Film Studies at the *University of Leicester* and editor of the *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: The Rules of Boxing on Film

A five-minute scene early in Twentieth Century Productions' *The Young Mr. Pitt* (Carol Reed, 1942) sees Britain's youngest-ever Prime Minister (Robert Donat), without a workable mandate or parliamentary respect, ambushed at night by henchmen of his political enemies. Two observers come to Pitt's aid and with deft comic teamwork swiftly rebuff the assailants. They are revealed as 'followers of the Fancy': Daniel Mendoza (Roy Emerton), 16th bare-knuckle boxing champion of all England, and 'Gentleman' John Jackson (Leslie Bradley), successor to the title. On repairing to Jackson's adjacent Pugilistic Academy, the boxers tend to the despondent Pitt's injuries and, over a restorative glass of wine, reassure him that he holds high favour with 'the common people' despite being only 24 years old. 'Same as in the Fancy, sir,' Mendoza asserts, 'a game young'un is always better than a game old'un'—and with Jackson encouraging him to 'peel off the mufflers and take the fight to them', Pitt calls a general election and gains a working majority.

Almost 50 years later, an early scene in Parkfield Entertainment's *The Krays* (Peter Medak, 1990) follows 18-year-old twins Ronnie and Reggie Kray to a travelling fairground's boxing booth. After their grandfather, ex-streetfighter Jimmy 'Cannonball' Lee (Jimmy Jewel), is summarily dispatched by the booth's 'Cockney Devil'—a cameo from 1975–1976 WBC welterweight champion John H. Stracey (45-5-1)[1]—Ronnie (Gary Kemp) enters the ring and enacts a swift revenge. Reggie (Martin Kemp) then puts on the gloves and brotherly union disappears as the ensuing slugfest,

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complete with slow-motion head-blows and blood-spitting, exposes a deep-seated search for sibling domination, only ending when their fearsome mother Violet (Billie Whitelaw) steps in and pleads with them to stop. Back at their Bethnal Green terraced home with a restorative pot of tea, Violet kneels between her boys and makes them vow never to fight each other, 'not for fun, not for money, not for no reason'. The contrite twins comply with her entreaty to 'stick together: that's how we're strong' and to fight instead the world beyond, 'them out there'. It is a bond that will lead to their notorious reign of terror as crime-lords in London's 1960s underworld.

These two scenes illustrate the range and reach of boxing in British film history. From urbane Georgian politicians to psychotic 'Swinging Sixties' gangsters, the sport of boxing allows the exploration of an encompassing British social, historical, psychological and physical topography. In truth, both biopics offer less period accuracy than a contemporary reading underpinned by what Katharina Bonzel terms the 'emotional authenticity' required whenever films employ sport 'in the service of a particular vision of national identity' (2020, p. 15). Peter Evans curtly dismisses Reed's film as 'wildly inaccurate' as it brazenly skews the Napoleonic Wars to fit an allegory on Britain's current war against Nazi Germany, with Pitt explicitly modelled as a Winston Churchill figure (2005, p. 53). The pugilism scene is entirely fictional, but it succeeds in showing how British boxing enjoyed a broad appeal across both ethnic and class divides. Mendoza was a Sephardic Jew whose 'scientific style' with guard up and sidestepping defence revolutionised boxing technique and popularity; reputedly the guest of King George III, his standing improved the reputation of London's Jewish community at a time of distinct anti-Semitism. Middle-class Jackson was a key player in furthering the sport's social acceptance, founding in 1803 a boxing academy for aristocrats including the Prince Regent and Lord Byron (who termed Jackson the 'Emperor of Pugilism'), and co-founding 1814's Pugilistic Club, a forerunner of the modern Boxing Commission that worked to keep the sport clean and respectable (Colls, 2020, pp. 87–94). *The Krays* similarly offers an allegory for its time as, with war-survivor Violet 'mothering' a ruthless spirit of free enterprise, the film reveals the '"homosocial economy" of the male gangster society as a "doppelgänger" of the ordered society of Thatcher's Britain' (Desjardins, 2006, p. 119). It certainly plays fast and loose with chronology: the brothers were briefly professional boxers (not shown in the film), debuting in 1951 as lightweights at the Mile End Arena and

concluding together a year later—Ronnie (4-2-0), Reggie (7-0-0)—on a Royal Albert Hall undercard. Their fairground punch-up is deemed apocryphal: if it happened they were 12 at the time, and proudly took their 7s6d winnings aka 'nobbins' home to their beloved mother (Smith, 2012, pp. 135–138).

These two scenes, manifesting first a nostalgic index for the nation's imperial greatness then a critical metaphor for contemporary capitalist practices, will prove indicative of common themes at different times in British boxing films. *The Krays* is, perhaps, more recognisably 'generic' as it situates boxing in an internationally recognisable social milieu: a pathway for working-class self-realisation but entwined with organised crime where fights are regularly fixed to secure gambling success. *The Young Mr. Pitt*, by contrast, exemplifies a uniquely indigenous slant with its patrician curatorship of a sport that Britain long considered its own. Boxing had held an important place in the games of ancient Greece and the Ludi Romani, only to fade with the Roman Empire (Boddy, 2008, pp. 9–25): it re-emerged in eighteenth-century London, quickly overtaking combative sports such as backsword and quarterstaff when the wealthy and powerful patronised bare-knuckle fighters and spectators wagered heavily on the outcome. This 'English Golden Age' saw boxing's first heavyweight champion (1719?–1730) in James Figg (reputedly 269-1-0). The next noteworthy champion John 'Jack' Broughton (1738? –1750), looking to remove the sport's image as an undisciplined brawl, introduced practice gloves ('mufflers') and in 1743 standardised a set of seven rules, codifications modified by the London Prize Ring Rules of 1838 (and 1853), and definitively moulded by the (still extant) Queensbury Rules, published in 1867. Redressing the balance between boxing skill and brute strength, these 12 rules limited fight lengths, insisted on a roped-in square ideally 24ft square and prohibited all wrestling or bare-fisted fighting.

Ironically, as this codification was globally accepted, Britain's status as the epicentre of boxing diminished. Nonetheless, as Richard Holt notes, in twentieth-century Britain, 'despite the dominance of the United States, especially in the heavier weights, boxing remained an extremely popular professional sport' (1989, p. 301). The same holds true for the British boxing film, the focus of this study. While there may appear to be no viable 'heavyweight' contender to challenge America with the aesthetic reputation of *Raging Bull* (Martin Scorsese, 1980), or the commercial longevity of *Rocky* (John G. Avildsen, 1976) and its reiterations, *The British Boxing Film* will show that home-grown works operating at lesser weights have

frequently entered the ring to entertain audiences and, while at times beating a hegemonic retreat to a past 'Golden Age' as shown with Pitt's brave rescuers, repeatedly re-present prevailing social attitudes.

Boxing and cinema are adjudged as developing hand-in-glove. Dan Streible contends that cinema was central in the move to 'modernize, popularize and legitimize professional boxing' (2008, p. 13), while Luke McKernan boldly claims 'that it was boxing that created cinema' (1996, p. 107). The latter may be open to the accusation of 'hyperbole's irresponsible attractions' (Babington, 2014, p. 41), but supportive evidence bears weight, beginning with the early experiments to capture human motion from English-born photographer Eadweard Muybridge. Alongside studies of adults running, jumping and throwing, his shadowy serial photographs of *Athletes Boxing* (1879) were considered especially successful—when Muybridge gave the first London presentation of his work three years later, the Prince of Wales reportedly greeted him with a specific request: 'I should like to see your boxing pictures' (*Photographic News*, 13 March 1882). Muybridge's later, clearer images such as *Two Men Boxing*, published in his *Animal Locomotion* of 1887, proved hugely influential on Thomas Edison and his New Jersey engineering team. Thereafter, existing research on boxing and early cinema focuses almost exclusively on America, tracing Edison's and others' documentary-style fight 'topicals' through to the 17 March 1897 full filming of the 14-round world championship bout between 'Gentleman' Jim Corbett and Bob Fitzsimmons—Veriscope's *Corbett-Fitzsimmons Fight* (Enoch Rector, 1897) is considered the world's first edited, widescreen and feature-length film release (Streible, 2008, pp. 52–95). While a financial success, Rector's recording also increased the moral momentum to ban boxing from America and Canada: thus, alongside technological and stylistic developments appeared the medium's constant corollary, film censorship. Both practical and legal restrictions led thereafter to the filming of numerous restaged (i.e. 'fake') contests, arguably occasioning the first employment of actors and 'the beginnings of the popular narrative film that would dominate cinema from the second decade of the twentieth century' (Crosson, 2013, p. 40). These ongoing tensions between a commercially successful genre repeatedly stigmatised by 'violent content, interracial provocations, and gender politics' (Abel, 2005, p. 80) were alleviated by a parallel recourse to comedic fictions foregrounding knockabout/knockout action, with boxing-based shorts such as *Comedy Set-To* (William Heise, 1898) and *A Scrap in Black and White* (Alfred C. Abadie, 1903) rehearsing the exaggerated

in-ring moves subsequently perfected by London-born Charlie Chaplin in his self-directed *The Champion* (1915) and later *City Lights* (1931).

What, though, of Britain's pairings of boxing and film? A similar early symbiosis is evident and understandable: hitching the new medium to existing popular practices such as sport was commercially expedient, but for boxing three particular advantages present themselves. At the practical technological level, both practices were dependant on short, segmented periods of performance—boxing rounds and film reels; also, unlike sports such as football, athletics or horseracing where the action and points of development cover a wide and lengthy area, a boxing match was confined within the square ring, making it—especially if the ring was reduced in size—entirely filmable by a single fixed camera. Secondly, the renowned film theorist André Bazin would later assert that 'the cinema is movement' (1971, p. 141) and, aesthetically, single hand-to-hand combat encapsulates the focused movement of the human body, a prime initial attraction of the medium. Finally, as Streible notes, the interlinked development of cinema and boxing had important 'sociological' roots: 'In the 1890s, prizefighting and filmmaking shared a milieu: an urban, male community known to its contemporaries as the "sporting and theatrical" world' (2008, p. 23). All of these factors will be seen to develop in Britain as in America: technological advances enable a more immersive capture of ring action; as narrative advances, the boxer becomes a prime site for both social conflict and existential challenge—the pairing of 'body' and 'soul'; simultaneously, boxing's performative nature grows into settings interlaced with other branches of the entertainment industry—and with criminality, cementing its status as 'show business with blood'. To this day, the boxer's essential, elemental drive—to stand and fight or take the fall—remains a crowd-pleaser: reviewing the British film *Jawbone* (2017), Olly Richards summarises how 'Boxing as metaphor for internal battle is hardly new cinematic ground, but there are good reasons why it's perennial. The damaged person inside the fighter offers endless character possibilities and there are few action sequences more brutally exciting than a good boxing match' (*Empire*, May 2017). Thus, the boxing film genre endures.

The terms 'boxing' and 'genre' are performing some heavy lifting here and need elucidation. This study, as evidenced with William Pitt and the Kray twins, treats both professional and amateur boxing, bare-knuckle and gloved (plus late excursions into Muay Thai and UFC codes). Within the sport an aesthetic distinction is often made between a 'boxer' who, respecting rules and protocols, looks to win with skill and strategy (e.g. Mendoza),

while a 'fighter' relies on brute force and expediency of technique (e.g. the Krays): in general parlance, though, the terms are synonymous and, if only for stylistic variety, the use of both terms—plus 'pugilist'—will be made hereafter without intended differentiation of 'artistry'. Whatever noun is applied, the using of fists is a physical reality, eminently provable on the pulses: by contrast, as Jane Feuer notes, 'genre is ultimately an abstract conception rather than something that exists empirically in the world' (1992, p. 144). A troublesome and multi-layered term in film studies, Christine Gledhill sees genre functioning as a 'conceptual space' where 'issues of texts and aesthetics—the traditional concerns of film theory—intersect with those of industry and institution, history and society, culture and audiences—the central concerns of political economy, sociology and cultural studies' (2000, p. 201). The boxing film, with its myriad manifestations, ranging across socio-cultural spheres from Regency gyms to contemporary fairgrounds, offers just such a conceptual space for exploration.

Nonetheless, even if, like goodness, 'genre is easier to recognise than to define' (Bordwell and Thompson 2010, p. 91), empirical parameters must be applied and this study examines the screen treatment of British boxing and boxers, both within and outside the ring: it will reference the influence of early actuality and later television works, but predominantly treat fiction films made for theatrical release. The frequency of such treatments—this book features over 100 investigations of the 'Sweet Science'—not only throws up a recurrent narrative progression and secure/familiar iconography, but also indicates the importance of boxing as both a material and cultural entity in British national life.

This still begs the question of how much boxing content is needed to 'make the weight' as a boxing film, and any answer exposes long-standing tensions in employing genre as 'a tool for mapping out a taxonomy of popular film' (Grant, 2007, p. 2). Denis Gifford, pioneer of British cinema's encyclopaedic classification, divided the nation's film content into 23 categories and defined the sports film as 'a dramatic film, usually involving crime, in which the central theme is a sport such as boxing, football, horseracing etc.' (1973, p. 12). While roughly a quarter of these inclusions are centred on boxing, Gifford's generic apportioning results overall in relatively small numbers for sport (a highest annual total of 3%). However, as Stephen Shafer points out, an examination of Gifford's film synopses reveals how 'a large number of films in other categories (such as comedy, crime, musicals and adventures) also deal with various sports … or at least with aspects of sports such as gambling. If such films were

included, this category would have been substantially higher' (1997, pp. 28–29). This genre study purposefully includes many such films. For instance, Gifford categorises the big-budget *A Gipsy Cavalier* (1922) as an adventure, but it is equally a costume drama—and a boxing film; he labels the independent *Run with the Wind* (1966) a drama, but it is also a pop musical—and a boxing film. The applied 'rule' for generic inclusion in this study evaluates films where boxing constitutes a *significant* narrative momentum—though even this approximate prescription must function at a qualitative before quantitative level. In his 'preliminary definitions' of the sports film, Bruce Babington cogently argues for flexible entry requirements in 'a genre of considerable plasticity': 'Because of sport's place in so many lives, its carrying so many meanings both utopian and dystopian, many films that cannot be called sports films feature sequences where a sport is invoked in ways more developed than mere passing allusions' (2014, p. 6). The same 'generosity' will be employed for this study. For instance, a boxing bout features only briefly in the Norman Wisdom vehicle *One Good Turn* (1955), but it encapsulates the sacrifices Norman will make to fund a gift for a young orphan. The boxing fits Wisdom into an established tradition of comics taking to the ring and, not least, the scene's slapstick cannot conceal that Wisdom knows how to box, a skill denied many actors whose fighting limitations, despite every trick of editing and direction, reduce if not K.O. the credibility of their action sequences. David Thomson argues that without the requisite 'mise-en-scene that employs spatial relationships', every sports fan can 'smell the fake' on film (1996, p. 13). Wisdom was no fake and therefore makes the weight.

This actor/boxer dichotomy is a contributory factor in many boxing films wittingly prioritising out-of-ring events, thereby offering a deeper sporting and wider social focus—and potential audience appeal. This feeds into a further problematisation—again shown with the Pitt and Kray biopics—since all mass media genres are commonly interpreted as 'reflecting' or 're-presenting' values dominant at the time of their production and exhibition (Turner, 1993, p. 131). More specifically, David Rowe advocates that 'all films that deal centrally with sports are at some level allegorical; that they address the dual existence of the social and sporting worlds as problematic, and that they are preoccupied with the extent to which (idealised) sports can transcend or are bound by existing (and corrupting) social relations' (1998, p. 352). Thus, *The British Boxing Film*, through its close examination of genre, functions equally as a work of social history, not only mapping changes in the depiction of boxing in British film but

simultaneously exploring how evolving attitudes to and within the sport can be interpreted as a broader social barometer of the values expected of the cinema-going public, offering commentary on issues of class, race and gender, with particular emphasis on British codes of masculine identity.

This notion of identity extends beyond a local or regional compass and, in referencing the 'British' boxing film, this study follows up on 'genre' with the equally heavyweight concept of 'nation', a contentious issue both within the sport and cinema. For example, the first modern-era British-born world heavyweight champion (1897–1899) was the Rector-filmed Bob Fitzsimmons (89-12-14): he was raised, however, in New Zealand and Australia and won as an American citizen. There would not be another undisputed British-born world heavyweight champion until 2002 with Lennox Lewis (41-2-1): he was, however, raised in Canada and won his 1986 Olympic gold-medal in Canadian colours, only returning to the UK fight-scene on turning professional.[2] Can they therefore count as 'British' champions? Similarly, what ultimately makes a film 'British'? Raymond Durgnat began his pioneering study of post-war cinema *A Mirror for England* (sic) by stating that, in choosing films for discussion, 'our criterion has had to be rather arbitrary and subjective: is it about Britain, about British attitudes, or, if not, does it feel British?' (1970, p. 5). A firmer prescription will here be applied, with an avowed focus on films that textually/aesthetically possess British-based boxing content, and that contextually/industrially present British film-defining contribution levels to both cast-and-crew and production finances. Durgnat cannot be totally dismissed, however: much as the judges' decision in a boxing contest can, at times, breed controversy, there are herein occasional anomalies, as with Jim Sheridan's top-ranking *The Boxer* (1997), its narrative set in Northern Ireland, but financed from the Republic of Ireland and America, or with Denis Kavanagh's bottom-of-the-bill *Fighting Mad* (1957), UK-financed but narratively decamping to the Canadian outback. Overall, though, this volume's body of boxing films, regular or 'ringers', will show, after a largely conformist and even reactionary ideology, a late-flowering resistance to the 'conceptual space' also known as 'Britain', reinforcing Seán Crosson's contention that 'sport has on occasion provided a means for filmmakers to contest hegemonic constructions of the nation' (2013, p. 131).

This dual perspective of social history and genre study is reflected at a structural level, as *The British Boxing Film* follows a broadly chronological progression while teasing out the overarching development of a generic

'life cycle'. Theories of genre development often promote a three-part process, codified by Thomas Schatz as 'experimental', before the genre has a discernible self-identity, 'classical' when its conventions are stable and most coherent, and 'mannerist' when its original purpose has been outlived and its conventions are openly cited, even subverted (1981, pp. 36–41); Richard Dyer, labelling film genres as successively 'primitive', 'mature' and 'decadent', offers an equivalent if more biologically-inflected (and potentially boxing-apposite) trajectory (1992, p. 61). While aware of the dangers inherent in any rigid delineation of development—excluding films that realise a precocious self-identity or remain unstable when the genre has cohered, the paradigm retains a relevance to the boxing film and will be employed here, with the study divided into three chronological sections, each containing two chapters. Part I, 'The Silent Treatment', explores the representation of boxing from its earliest motion-picture footage to the late-1920s, analysing in particular how this new medium moved beyond the basic film grammar of newsreel 'topicals' to enhance the dynamism of boxing contests and situate them within an expanding narrative dimension. Part II, 'The Sound Treatment', surveys the 1930s–1950s, showing how an essentially visual action-based sport worked to find its place within a newly auditory medium, dovetailing initially with comic set-pieces by performers from the music-hall tradition and then with boxing literature's advance of a critical social realism. Part III, 'The Colour Treatment', first shows how the sport's late-century decline from the national imagination led to increasingly innovative representations of ethnicity, gender and sexuality that work to expose the instability of the very concept of 'the boxer' and 'being British'. It then examines how the late-1990s onwards (in keeping with the recurrent narrative template) brings a sporting resurgence—but also a boxing genre that (replicating the dynamic of a century earlier) becomes increasingly reactive to the dominant American paradigm, adding aesthetic self-consciousness and rampant intertextuality. Across these temporal divisions, each chapter headlines a film deemed its decade's 'Boxing Film Champion', a fuller case-study exploring an innovative and/or influential contributor to the genre through another tripartite structure used across the book, its production history, the film 'text' itself (including a plot summary since many films have been dislodged from Britain's cinematic memory), and its consumption, both critical and commercial.

And this is where this writer, like the boxer, must finally strike out alone. While the films featuring in this study have their production and

reception contexts predominantly researched from written records, the same approach must hold for the textual reading of most British boxing films released up to 1939. The historical disregard for moving-image media has, at conservative estimates, led to the loss of over three-quarters of silent films and over half of the cheap support features churned out under the 1927 Cinematograph Films Act. Such percentages are, perforce, replicated in this study, rendering most aesthetic assessments a piecemeal procedure (cautiously) composed from local and national press reviews and interviews, company catalogues, publicity material and participant memoirs. Alongside this 'new film history' approach, supportive academic exegesis is even scarcer than extant early exempla and *The British Boxing Film* has little precedent to inform its aesthetic judgements. As noted from its early history, the importance of the partnership between film and boxing is treated as quasi-synonymous with Hollywood. The (partial) exception is Dan Streible's meticulously researched *Fight Pictures* which, exploring how boxing 'came to silent-era screens and became part of American popular culture' (2008: cover), nonetheless acknowledges that fighting pictures up to 1915, factual and fictional, also featured in Europe. Leger Grindon's boxing monograph *Knockout* (2011), sub-headed 'The Boxer and Boxing in American Cinema', duly treats the Hollywood boxing film from the coming of sound. Travis Vogan's *The Boxing Film* (2021), however, assumes total synonymity as, though dispensing with geographical descriptors, it again focuses exclusively on the US, now mostly on African American representation.[3] Changing weight from full-length boxing-film studies, Ronald Bergan's pioneering *Sports in the Movies* opens with 'Boxing: Pugs, Mugs, Thugs and Floozies', but the chapter is again US-centric, offering a single paragraph (plus image) on Alfred Hitchcock's *The Ring* (1928) (1982, p. 18). Seán Crosson's *Sport and Film* includes sizeable sections on both 'The boxing film' and 'The British sports film' but only (elsewhere) name-checks UK-based pioneers Birt Acres and Robert W. Paul (2013, p. 36). Bruce Babington's *The Sports Film* offers a more international treatment of the sport, including 'some Asian boxing films', but only mentions Basil Dearden's *The Square Ring* (1953) (2014, pp. 19, 41). Moving broader still, Kasia Boddy's comprehensive *Boxing: A Cultural History* contains a 77-title-strong filmography, but only lists (without analysis) Sheridan's *The Boxer* and Alex De Rakoff's distinctly lightweight *The Calcium Kid* (2004) (2008, p. 468).

Studies of British boxing films thus constitute a distinctly thin undercard. Against this, the genre's UK ubiquity means that single films, their

directors and studios are referenced (and occasionally explored) in disparate academic studies: none, though, place their exegesis within the informative diachronic context of 'the boxing genre', which thus offers an alternative and, I trust, informative perspective on specific films. For example, *The Ring* (when not ignored) is invariably viewed as a minor effort in a leading auteur study, while *The Square Ring* is habitually placed as a lesser entry in Ealing Studios' filmography: this recontextualisation reappraises these films as major works for both British film studies and the social history of sport. Thus, in this particular academic division *The British Boxing Film* presents itself as the first full-length study devoted to the representation of a seminal British sporting practice in British cinema, and a study that proposes a detailed and nuanced counter-argument to existing reductive (when not dismissive) views on the UK's contribution to the genre.

One last (and important) counsel before this fight-back begins. This volume completes a trilogy on British sporting film and, like its Palgrave predecessors on football (Glynn, 2018) and horseracing (Glynn, 2019), is written by a Janus-faced exponent, here a film historian *and* boxing follower. The historian aims, through precisely referenced contextual and (where possible) textual analysis, to establish a viable British subset of the sports film; the follower, while begging indulgence if occasionally aping film reviewers' penchant for boxing metaphors, seeks to convey the enthusiasm, the ambivalence, the disappointment or indeed the occasional embarrassment experienced in viewing these films, always remembering that the vast majority's foremost function was, and will remain, affective fun and entertainment.

Let's box.

Notes

1. Where known, the professional career records of boxers are shown, in order of wins, losses and draws.
2. *Lennox: The Untold Story* (Rick Lazes, Seth Koch, November 2020), narrated by Dr Dre, provides a reverential if not, despite its title, particularly revelatory documentary portrait of Lewis' life and achievements.
3. Danny Leigh's British-made television documentary *Boxing at the Movies: Kings of the Ring* (BBC4, tx. 3 March 2013) again assumes US synonymity, making no mention of British contributions.

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PART I

The Silent Treatment

CHAPTER 2

Opening Rounds: 1895–1918

2.1 Celebrities and Comics

Boxing may not have monopolised pioneer status in early British cinema as in America—being superseded, I argue elsewhere, by the more socially respectable 'sport of kings', that is, horseracing (Glynn, 2019, pp. 17–25)—but it remained a seminal player in the nation's development of this new medium. Denis Gifford's landmark *British Film Catalogue*, a record of 'every British film produced for public entertainment since the invention of cinematography' (1973, p. 7), places two boxing titles amongst the first five-ever British productions. Gifford records these films as being exhibited in January 1896, but his listing needs nuancing. The originally partnered *Boxing Match* and *The Boxing Kangaroo* both actually date from February–June 1895 and were not technically works of cinema, being made by Birt Acres, US-born of English parents, for exhibition on his London-born business partner Robert W. Paul's replica Kinetoscopes, cash-activated individual viewing boxes set out in an American-style 'kinetoscope parlour', and exhibited at Imre Kiralfy's Empire of India Exhibition in London's Earls Court from May to October 1895. Paul-Acres' original *Boxing Match*, a bout wherein each competitor is simultaneously floored, is lost, and Gifford (amongst others) conflates this film with Acres' later (recently rediscovered) solo film, shot with several other shorts on his own invention, the (unreliable) Kinetic Camera, at a Military Tournament near Cardiff in June/July 1896.[1] Alongside titles such as

S. Glynn, *The British Boxing Film*,
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Sword v. Bayonet and *Cleaving the Turk's Head*, Acres filmed two army boxing bouts (*Photographic News*, 7 August 1896, p. 503). Again, one of these is lost, but the surviving *Boxing Match* aka *Glove Contest* features a staged contest between Sergeant-Instructor F. Barrett and Sergeant Pope and includes (as Gifford summarises) a first round of fighting, interval and climactic second-round knockout (Fig. 2.1). The thoroughly unconvincing nature of this final punch means that, with impeccable generic prescience, the first extant competitive boxing scene in British film history also captures the first 'thrown' fight on celluloid.

Gifford's second listing is more accurately labelled: *The Boxing Kangaroo* (similarly rediscovered) is a 25-second recording on the Paul-Acres camera of a young boy boxing with a small kangaroo on stage while a ringmaster/referee looks on. Again, though, the piece has an involved exhibition history and one that supports Luke McKernan's theory that sport especially 'represented the changeover from film as a medium of scientific study to a medium of entertainment' (1996, p. 109). While initially deployed in the Kinetoscope peep show, Acres' boxing film was, with other titles, exhibited by Paul to demonstrate his new screen-projecting 'Theatrograph' to London's Royal Institution on 28 February 1896. The Albemarle Street venue indicates that the rapidly advancing medium's potentialities were still adjudged, even by the financially astute Paul, as

Fig. 2.1 *Boxing Match* (1896)—boxing film beginnings

more relevant to scientific employment than mass entertainment. An extensive press article the next day began with 'A Chat with the Inventor', then described 'The Theatrograph at Work'—'At one end of the library a long screen was suspended and at the other end of the room was an optical lantern fitted with an electric arc lamp'. Its final content-reviewing section, sub-headed 'The Well-Known Boxing Kangaroo', related how 'As soon as the machine was set in motion the kangaroo and his opponent began to box in a vigorous manner. The whole scene was remarkably life-like, and elicited much applause from the audience' (*The Morning*, 29 February 1896).[2] Amongst that enthusiastic audience was Lady Florence Harris whose husband, Sir Augustus Harris, was general manager of West Kensington's Olympia, a six-acre exhibition centre regarded as 'London's greatest pleasure resort'. The impresario met with Paul and persuaded him to allow the commercial exploitation of his Theatrograph 'novelty', at sixpence a time with profits shared (Christie, 2019, pp. 52–53). Shown in the centre's Palmarium annexe it proved hugely popular, to the extent that Frederick Talbot, an early commentator on British cinematography, would later, somewhat partially, contend that 'it was the first picture palace in the world, that is to say, the first establishment devoted exclusively to the projection of moving pictures as a complete entertainment. From it the whole modern development of cinematography may be said to have sprung' (1912, p. 40). As evidenced in the accompanying advertising—'Animated Pictures. Most startling scientific marvel. Life-like series of Trilby, Boxing Contest, Skirt Dancer, Comic Singer, &c.' (*Daily Chronicle*, 23 March 1896)—a central constituent in the show's commercial appeal and thereby the burgeoning popularity of cinema was its filmed record of the practice of boxing.

Following their first steps into amateur and animal contests, Acres and Paul—who worked separately towards projected film after an acrimonious split in July 1895—both belatedly copied American practice by marketing well-known professional fighters on film. Acres' *A Prize Fight by Jem Mace and Burke* (December 1896)[3] featured an important figure in boxing's transition from bare-knuckle to its more reputable post-Queensbury status—James 'Jem' Mace, variously England's welterweight, middleweight and heavyweight champion (1860–1866), who decamped to America where he won the world heavyweight title (1870–1871) and, as a trainer, discovered the famously-filmed Bob Fitzsimmons. Timing, though, is important in cinema as in sport, and while today adjudged 'the father of boxing' and 'the first worldwide sports star' (Gordon, 2007), by the

mid-1890s Mace was very much 'yesterday's man', an impoverished 65-year-old eking out a living through exhibition fights in Victorian travelling circuses when Acres filmed his London bout against Dick Burge (sic) on 14 October 1895. The piece, shorn of pugilistic prowess, would at best have offered a nostalgic prurience. (Nor did it presage an upturn in fortunes since Mace returned to the screen 13 years later—2 years before his penniless death—as an old boxer on the comeback trail in London Cinematograph Company's optimistically titled *There's Life in the Old Dog Yet* (S. Wormold, October 1908).) Robert Paul, by contrast, filmed the distinctly less superannuated *Boxing Match Between Toff Wall and Dido Plum* (July 1897), a record of one of 19 London-based three-round exhibition fights featuring Charles 'Toff' Wall (10-0-0) against Dido Plumb (sic) (28-5-2) held between 1893 and 1901, when both men were still competitive and sequentially recognised as England middleweight champions. With Paul's film a far more relevant contest to contemporary aficionados, the estranged filmmakers' respective fight choice is indicative of how Acres' solo career would soon hit the deck, lacking the commercial instincts of his increasingly successful former partner.

Again aping American practice, these 'celebrity' pieces were quickly followed into the ring by the popular film mode of comedy. British Mutoscope and Biograph Company's (extant) *Has He Hit Me?* (William Dickson, October 1898) offers a 38-second travesty of boxing technique from brothers Tom and Fred McNaughton, a popular (and well-connected) music hall duo (Tom was brother-in-law to stage legend Marie Lloyd). The Brothers, well-built 'straight-man' Fred looking the part in old-time boxing attire with black tights and a silk bandeau around his waist, Tom gurning and paunchy in an ill-suited striped bathing costume, spar frantically but barely lay a glove on one another: Fred gives an unsporting kick up the rear and seconds later is floored with a blow to the face—the punch seems (inadvertently?) genuine—and Tom the 'underdog' wins. The work is a reconstruction of the duo's burlesque stage act, its capture by Dickson on his 68mm camera offering an improved image quality if not boxing technique or narrative progression. In similar slapstick vein, Warwick Trading Company's three-scene *Comic Boxing Match* (Anon, April 1899) has 6ft 3in 'Whirlwind Charlie' boxing the 3ft 6in 'Carisbrooke Kid'—with the fight taking place on board the Africa-bound ship 'Carisbrooke Castle' for added turbulence. The company's catalogue details the final reel's knockout of Whirlwind Charlie and avers that 'The contest is most amusing, and takes well with any audience' (*WTC Cat.* 1899, no. 5205–5207).