

Film, Media, and Museum Reviews

Ali (2001). Directed by Michael Mann. Produced by Jon Peters, James Lassiter, Paul Ardaji, Michael Mann and A. Kitman Ho. Written by Eric Roth and Michael Mann, based on the story by Gregory Allen Howard, Stephen J. Rivele and Christopher Wilkinson.

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What Hollywood has proven conclusively with *Ali*, its latest attempt to dramatize the life of boxing champion Muhammad Ali, is that either it is incapable of making a first-rate film about the fighter or that such a film cannot be made by anyone while Ali is alive. Ali may be such a larger-than-life figure that film, usually a compelling mythologizing medium, actually diminishes him. Moreover, since he is still alive, and especially since so many people who know and love him are still living, a filmmaker's ability to do something particularly innovative is compromised by the strong desire not to be unflattering in any way that the public would find unacceptable.

In 1977, capitalizing on Ali's extraordinary popularity at the time and the recent publication of his autobiography, Hollywood gave us *The Greatest* with Ali playing himself. There was no lack of talent associated with the production with a script by Ring Lardner, Jr., and a cast that included Ernest Borgnine, Robert Duvall, and James Earl Jones. Nonetheless, it was a major flop, both commercially and critically, (although it yielded the melodramatic pop hit, "The Greatest Love of All," sung by guitarist George Benson whose lyrics were so blatantly narcissistic as to border on both the infantile and the comic, but

Ali's narcissism always had elements of both the infantile and the comic). It is curious that Ali was so inept at playing himself, a great deal more so than Jackie Robinson was in *The Jackie Robinson Story* (1950) made at the height of his professional baseball career. (Robinson certainly did not exhibit any talent such that anyone encouraged him to give up his day job, yet he was touchingly inspirational playing himself.) In part, Ali's failure to play himself well was not simply that he had little talent as an actor, despite the fact that many would say his entire public life has been one huge act, or that he may have received poor direction from director Tom Gries (the film seemed hastily put together) but rather that Ali's myth or persona was so all-consuming and so profoundly far-reaching in the public's mind that there was hardly a person one could play. It is difficult merely to embody a legend without some sort of dramatic tension and Ali's life, despite his athletic success, does not lend itself well to the usual Hollywood formula film about the life of the star athlete overcoming adversity to triumph in the end. Ali's story is the far more complex tale of someone who wanted establishment success while dissenting from the establishment's view, indeed, even openly accusing the establishment of dishonesty and hypocrisy. The fact that he became both an establishment star and a major dissident and is honored for both is a remarkable feat.

But the question remains: what is there behind the legend, the guise of black warrior-prince? Ali skeptics like Mark Kram and Garry Wills have suggested that beneath Ali's dazzling surface, there was nothing, that he was nothing more than a vacant contrivance who achieved significance because he became clumsily enmeshed in the important issues of his day—race and the Vietnam War. Ali, cleverly, cultivated writers and it was writers and intellectuals, taken with the romance of boxing and Ali's unusual personality (for a professional prizefighter), who cultivated Ali's myth. There is probably some truth to this view, and Ali seemed equal parts Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley. The very thing that made Ali so extraordinarily popular—his outsized heroism and daring in and out of the ring and his star-lit youthfulness, his willingness to throw away a career for his religious beliefs, something most people have neither the courage nor sheer egotism to do—was what made him also unreal as person, perhaps even to himself, at this stage of his career. Whether there was something beneath the fame that could be reached or nothing at all, a very gifted actor would be required to make such a person interesting in a dramatic rendition of the life.

The Greatest was made during the second phase of Ali's professional career, when he returned to boxing in 1970, after a three-and-a-half-year exile, a punishment engineered by the boxing establishment and those with political influence who loathed Ali's views of the Vietnam War and his stance against the draft, using his 1967 conviction on charges of draft evasion as a pretext to break him. Between 1964, when he won the heavyweight champion from Sonny Liston at the age of twenty-two and announced publicly that he was a member of the Nation of Islam, until his return to boxing in 1970 he was probably one of the most hated professional athletes in American history. (Heavyweight boxing champion Jack Johnson was his closest rival in this regard, a black man who challenged the white social conventions of his day.) When he returned, there were still segments of the public, especially portions of the white public, that strongly disliked him, but, on the whole, he was warmly greeted and his popularity rose geometrically. This change had

much to do with the public's growing disenchantment with the Vietnam War—a stunning cultural sea-change when one considers how many veterans of both World War II and the Korean War were middle-aged adults, many at the height of their influence in American public and professional life—and with the public's growing respect for Ali's willingness to go to prison for his beliefs. The public may not have understood or liked his beliefs, but it understood sincerity, a highly regarded personality trait for celebrities. And Ali was, after all, not only handsome and a stylish boxer, but a tremendously personable and charming man. In the outer-directed America of David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*, personality (coupled with looks) makes all the difference. After he re-gained the title in 1974 by beating heavily-favored George Foreman in Zaire, he was lionized in a way that few athletes, black or white, have ever been in America. He exploited his popularity by putting out an obviously ghost-written, and not entirely trustworthy, autobiography, *The Greatest: My Own Story* (1975, edited by Toni Morrison), which sounded a great deal more like his Marxist-leaning co-author, Richard Durham, an editor for *Muhammad Speaks*, than like Ali himself. He even did some television commercials. He was, without question, the most famous athlete in the world, probably the most famous in the history of the world. It is understandable why Hollywood (and Ali and the Nation of Islam) would want to further exploit this intense adulation by making a biopic. It is also understandable why such a film, done while Ali was still an active athlete, still coursing through his career, would have been unsuccessful largely because it lacks perspective.

In this regard, it is understandable why, twenty years after his last fight, Hollywood would want to try it again despite the fact that for many of today's young people, Ali is little more than a name (as Joe Louis was for me during the 1960s). After all, perspective can now be gained on his career; it is possible to look back at Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam, the Vietnam War and the issue of black loyalty, black assertion and the white backlash in the 1960s with greater clarity and objectivity. Or, at least, so one would hope. Moreover, Ali remains a beloved figure in American life, even more so today because of his Parkinson-like illness that makes it difficult for him to speak and write. There is now admiration for Ali mixed with pity and even collective guilt. Too, in this age of multiculturalism, Ali is the most famous Muslim in America, a man who publicly changed his faith and his name, much to the chagrin of society. In short, Ali was an instrumental figure in making the United States a more multicultural place by insisting that he was something more or something other than what a largely white, Christian society thought a black person should be or ought to be. All of this portends a promising subject whose time has arrived, and one would think that a new Ali film could be as great as Martin Scorsese's prizefight masterpiece, *Raging Bull* (1981), a biopic of middleweight champ, Jake LaMotta. This time out, Hollywood hired an experienced actor, Will Smith, to play Ali, beefing him up to look a bit more like a heavyweight fighter.

Unfortunately, *Ali* is a highly flawed film. This turgid, overly long movie is strangely without any dramatic punch or even narrative coherence. It covers Ali's life from 1964, when he wins the title from Liston, to 1974, when he regains it in Zaire by beating Foreman. Once again, we have Hollywood trying to fit Ali's life into the star athlete's biopic mold. It is as poorly served as it was twenty-five years ago in *The Greatest*. *Ali* takes us from fight to fight, from event to event in Ali's life without ever explaining why these events are taking place or, even more basically, who this man is. The film never succeeds in

doing what any film must do in order to pull in the viewer: make us care about the fate of its hero. Will Smith, despite his skills and good intentions, is not given a character to portray but rather two moods to personify: petulance (when Ali is being "political" and serious) and humor (when Ali is being fun-loving and theatrical). In fact, Smith comes perilously close (as does Jon Voight as Howard Cosell) to giving the viewer nearly parodic impersonations like one might find on a "Saturday Night Live" skit. This is not the fault of the actors but of the script and the director, Michael Mann, whose previous films include *Heat* (1995) and *The Insider* (1999). Ali, a man surrounded by people all his life, seems curiously isolated here, as we see him running alone on the streets of Miami right before the Liston fight.* (What fighter, preparing for a championship fight, would be permitted to run alone?) There is a curious sense of isolation in the parallel scene near the end of the film when Ali is running alone the impoverished streets of Kinshasa and although he is surrounded by people, adoring Africans, his moment of epiphany, where one supposes he understands the true meaning of his martyrdom and his heroism to the pan-African World, seems unmoving and unconvincing. This sense of isolation might have been intriguing and dramatically enriching if Mann had done something with it by actually developing the other people in Ali's life. But aside from Jaime Foxx's affecting Bundini Brown, Ali is not shown connecting in any sort of way with any of the people around him, not his brother (who, along with Howard Bingham, was his constant companion throughout his career), not Angelo Dundee, not Herbert Muhammad (who is unflatteringly and inaccurately depicted in the film). There is some attempt to portray a relationship between Ali and two of his wives and principally between Ali and Malcolm X, which opens the film. Yet, we know from biographical fact that Malcolm X was not that important to Ali's conversion to Islam nor to his complex relationship with the Nation of Islam. When Ali broke with Malcolm X, he quite sincerely meant it and expressed no particular sorrow over his death. (I knew very well several people in the NOI when I was a teenager during the 1960s, and they had little good to say about Malcolm after his death, saying that he got what he deserved.) The depiction of the Nation of Islam is shockingly inadequate and distorted. The entire film would have been better served dramatically if Ali's life had been told from the perspective of the people who knew him, like Thomas Hauser's biography.

The film assumes that the viewer not only knows the Ali story but a good deal of 1960s American social history: urban race riots, government surveillance of black dissidents and civil rights leaders, the rise and fall of Malcolm X, the growth of the American sports audience, the rise of the New Left, and the tragedy of the Vietnam War. Without this background, the film must feel like a coded telegram, paradoxically, despite its tedious length. It is remarkable to say, yet this film achieves the uncanny, doing too much while also doing too little. The fight scenes, while competently done (in the Hollywood mode, which means that more murderous punches are thrown in one fight than most fighters encounter in a career), are much too long and tend to be of little interest of non-fight fans.

*The opening scene, with the Sam Cooke performance serving almost as a dramatic aria, is certainly effective, and the filmmaker is to be commended for creating a symbolic triad between Ali, Malcolm X, and Cooke, tying together the worlds of black popular culture and black politics. Nonetheless, the scene, like many in the film, is too long.

Besides, no re-enactment can come close to showing an audience the special beauty and pulse-racing excitement of Ali as a fighter.

Football great Jim Brown once said, "When Ali came back from exile, he became the darling of America, which was good for America because it brought black and white together. But the Ali that America ended up loving was not the Ali I loved most. I didn't feel the same about him anymore, because the warrior I loved was gone." And perhaps most tellingly, *Ali* fails to show change and growth in Ali over the ten years of his life that it covers: what had he lost and what had he gained in the grind of being alive and at the center of his culture. Not only, in the end, is Ali in this film isolated from everyone in his life, he seems hermetically sealed from the experience of his life. This is why he fails to become a dramatic persona in the film. If the filmmaker could simply have dramatized Brown's sentiments, he would have had one hell of a film instead of the inert pulp/pop mythology with which we wound up.

