

SPORT, FILM, AND CULTURE

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I Could Have Been a Contender: Images of American Insecurity in the Boxing Films of the Post World War II Era

Following the Second World War, the victory culture of the United States was severely tested with the insecurities of the atomic bomb and Cold War. To deal with these travails, America formulated an ideology that scholars have labelled the post-war liberal consensus, characterized by the twin pillars of anticommunism and capitalist economic expansion that would address the inequalities of race, gender, and class. In reality, post-war America was best described by ambiguity and paradox. For in the midst of affluence was poverty; the independence of owning one's home in suburbia was limited by community conformity; women were discouraged from pursuing professions, but had to work outside the home to support the consumerism of the affluent society; and the consensus ideology was challenged by teen rebels, the image of James Dean, the beat culture, and the civil rights movement.

In cinema, post-war themes of individual alienation and institutional corruption were most apparent in the film noir genre. While films focusing upon crime and mystery dominated this genre, Hollywood also examined such American traditions as sport in a similar dark and questioning manner. This was especially true in cinematic depiction of boxing, a sport that has attracted intellectual and artistic interest within the American intelligentsia and artistic communities. Themes of corruption are prominent in such films as *The Killers* (1946), *Body and Soul* (1947), *Champion* (1949), *The Set Up* (1949), *Night and the City* (1950), *On the Waterfront* (1954), and *Requiem for A Heavyweight* (1956). While less dark, *From Here to Eternity* (1953) and *The Quiet Man* (1954) indicate some confusion and ambivalence in the patriarchy as the protagonists question the "manly" qualities of boxing.

This examination into the boxing cinema of post-war America in the late 1940s and 1950s is a companion piece to a paper on baseball films of the same period presented at the

NASSH 1997 meeting. Analysis of the baseball films identified themes of insecurity for the American consensus in which supernatural forces or a strong female figure were needed to rescue a confused male protagonist. These ideas will continue to be explored in this paper on the cinema of pugilism. The paper will be based upon an in-depth reading of each film in historical and cultural context, along with analysis of popular and critical commentaries on the film texts.
