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## BOXING: Aesthetics, Semiology and Visual Culture

### Abstract

This paper investigates the dynamics of fist and the space of boxing ring as aesthetic paradigms in the modern period, focusing on early C20 art, especially the Futurist theorization of absolute and relative motion: two types of dynamism. Here the boxing ring is viewed as dynamic theatre of action, the gym as quasi-mythical space; both constitute an aspect of the mythologization inherent to modern boxing aesthetics. The metaphorical transformation of the fist in visual culture is also studied as part of this process. The paper concludes with suggestions of ways in which an aesthetic approach to boxing (or other martial arts) can be used as a viable research tool, deepening understanding of the moral, cultural and physiologico-dynamic implications of a sport that, in its various guises, remains central to western civilization.

**Keywords:** Aesthetics, Art, Boxing, Futurist, Semiology, Symbol

### Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel untersucht die Dynamik der Faust und den Raum des Boxrings als ästhetische Paradigmen in der Moderne und konzentriert sich auf die Kunst des frühen 20. Jahrhunderts, insbesondere die futuristische Theoretisierung der absoluten und relativen Bewegung: zwei Arten von Dynamik. Hier gilt der Boxring als dynamisches Aktionstheater, die Turnhalle als quasi-mythischer Raum; beide stellen Aspekte der Mythologisierung dar, die der modernen Boxästhetik innewohnt. Dabei wird auch die metaphorische Transformation der Faust in der visuellen Kultur untersucht. Das Papier schließt mit Vorschlägen, wie ein ästhetischer Ansatz für das Boxen (oder andere Kampfkünste) als ein brauchbares Forschungsinstrument genutzt werden kann, um das Verständnis der moralischen, kulturellen und physiologisch-dynamischen Implikationen eines Sports Sports, der in seinen verschiedenen Erscheinungsformen zentral für die westliche Zivilisation bleibt, zu vertiefen.

**Schlagwörter:** Ästhetik, Kunst, Boxen, Futuristik, Semilogie, Symbol

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## Aesthetics as Semiology & Boxing as Aesthetics

Whether in an anthropological or cultural context, there is a profound link between aesthetic foregrounding and the apprehension of signs (Scott, 2009). In this sense, 'Beauty' is a function of semiotic highlighting: the sensual aspect of signs is foregrounded in the interests of underlining their social or mythical significance. There is an aesthetic principle integral to ritual. I will explore in what follows the function and importance of the aesthetic aspect of boxing. In doing so, I combine the insights of an amateur with a participatory interest in boxing, with those of a critic specializing in the field of signs and images (semiotics) as applied to various cultural fields. Such an approach will, hopefully, allow certain issues implicit to but not normally explored within more conventional approaches to the world of boxing, to be brought out into the open.

Like most sports, boxing is a highly formalized and stylized activity. Its particular quality in its modern form is to reconfigure the potentially lethal and anarchic elements that constitute fighting into an organized and legible form of combat. Stance, movement, clothing, rules or codes of conduct, division into fixed-length rounds and, above all, the boxing ring itself, all contribute to a process in which each element, through a system of aestheticization, contributes to the overall visual coherence of the sport. This process is fundamental from the point of view both of the spectator and of the boxer: for the viewer, it provides focus for the gaze and ensures maximum visibility; for the boxer, it provides a stable environment for action. In exploring further, the aesthetics of boxing, I stress in particular aesthetics' contribution to the functional efficiency of the sport and to the clarification of some of the deeper issues at stake in its rigorously organized form. This is because in any human culture, a high degree of formalization or aestheticization invariably signals an important semiotic function: that of drawing attention to an object or action and suggesting a deeper symbolic dimension to it. In other words, aesthetics constitutes a form of marking or highlighting.

How though, in boxing, does this aesthetic highlighting takes place? First it is necessary to take a brief historical glance at the development and evolution of boxing practices in relation to site (the ring), apparel (standardization, and use of gloves) and the make-up and motivation of the audience—betting as well as appreciation of the 'Sweet Science of Bruising' was originally an intrinsic part of the boxing scene and undoubtedly affected the evolution of some of its conventions and practices. Next it is important to stress the stylized stance and movement, and the progressive glamorization of the combatant's body, both in its legible muscularity and in its minimal but spectacular adornment. A third angle of focus is on the development of the boxing ring itself and how it reflects the dynamics inherent in it from the point of view both of combatant and spectator. The role of the ropes, for example, is central—in both containing the action and in providing the combatants with a means of defence and counter-attack. And of course, the ropes also express the tensions of the

boxing encounter in both physical and mental terms. In this way, the boxing ring both contains and expresses action within what is in effect a 3-dimensional picture frame.

Violence is an intrinsic potentiality of most forms of human and animal life. What *civilizes* violence in human societies is not so much its elimination as its regulation and control through communally agreed conventions. Thus, actions such as killing, unthinkable in peacetime, become tolerable within the conventions of war, while fighting between individuals, frowned upon in regular society, becomes acceptable, is indeed promoted, if it takes the form of boxing or other recognized martial arts. Indeed, it has been argued that the elaboration of forms of regulated and codified violence such as boxing are closely related to the development of civilization. Such controlled forms of violence are optimally *public* because it is important that they should be viewed by a representative section of the community and thus serve their purpose as a controlled enactment of the violence that might otherwise erupt in other, uncontrolled ways. It is for this reason that today as much as at any time in the past, sports and games perform a necessary function in civil society by providing an outlet for violent impulses as well as entertainment and amusement.

The evolution of boxing as more or less recorded in history over the last three thousand years reflects the gradual civilization or formalization of the lethal and chaotic potentiality of fighting (Grombach, 1977). First and foremost, boxing became, with the Greeks, a general spectacle, viewed in a public arena, within a defined space. The performance of the combatants became thus open to public approbation and judgment within a certain ethos. Ethical principles such as fairness and the reduction of unnecessary brutality were natural corollaries and although differences of weight (and therefore power) between boxers only began to be regularized at the beginning of the modern period (from the late eighteenth century), the sense of the match being even was always an important part of the spectator's pleasure. As boxing over the last two centuries became more refined, the instruments gauging evenness of match (in particular weight divisions) have become more finely calibrated. Likewise, an increasing move, once again initiated by the Greeks, towards protecting the boxer from lethal damage, is reflected in the now standardized use of gloves of agreed weight, gum-shields (first used in 1913 by the British boxer Ted 'Kid' Lewis), hand-wraps, and abdominal guards (the Taylor Foul-proof Cup, was introduced in 1930), with head-guards now widely worn in amateur boxing. The regulation of the period of combat—division into rounds of fixed length with one-minute intervals (a nineteenth-century development codified in the Queensberry Rules of 1865, officially adopted in 1892) and the gradual reduction of the number of rounds fought—fulfils, in theory at any rate, a similar function. These civilizing refinements also enhance the visual clarity of boxing as performance and the audience's ability to judge the match.

Despite this gradual evolution towards a more controlled and civilized form of combat, boxing of course still retains some of its primeval lethal potential. In Roman and Etruscan times the use of lead-weighted or spiked boxing gloves -

respectively, the *caestus* (figure 1) and the *myrmex*—and the heavy, chopping blows associated with them (figures 2 & 3), the use of slaves as combatants in the amphitheatre and the convention that matches might be fought to the death, or the death of the loser prescribed, brought to the forefront the inherent brutality of the sport.

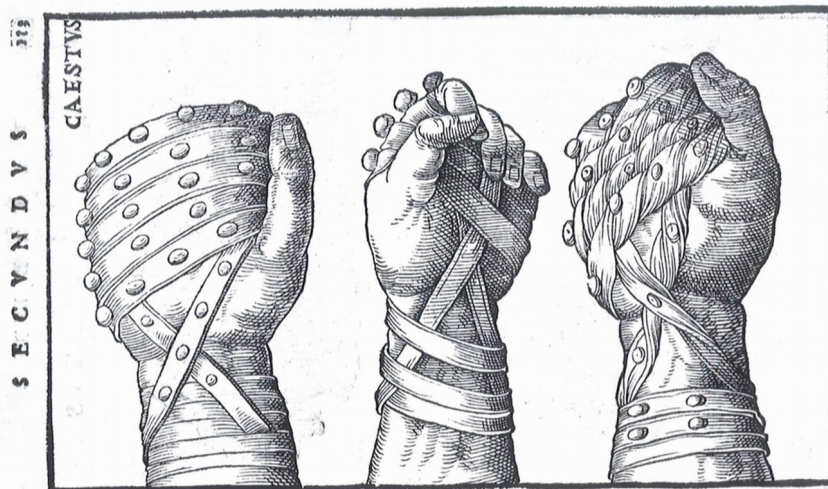


Fig. 1: Hieronymus Mercurialis, *Caesti* from *De arte gymnastica*, 1573 (Trinity College Dublin Library)

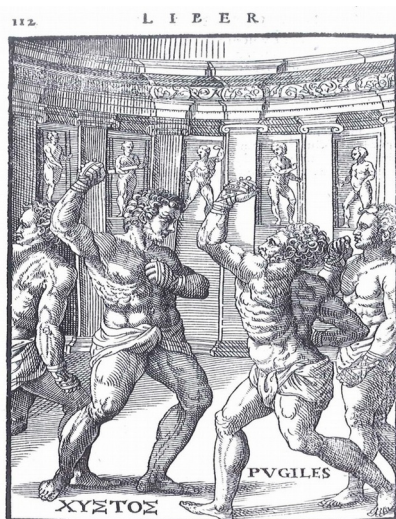


Fig. 2: Hieronymus Mercurialis, *Roman Boxers* from *De arte gymnastica*, 1573 (Trinity College Dublin Library)

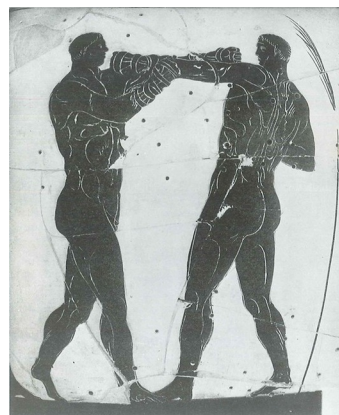


Fig. 3: Greek Vase, 336 BC, originally reproduced in John V. Grombach *The Saga of the Fist*, 1949 (reprinted London: Thomas Yoseloff, 1977)

Similarly, although since the late nineteenth century boxing gloves have become compulsory (figure 4)—the last bare-knuckle fight for the heavyweight championship of the world, between John L. Sullivan and Jake Kilrain, over 75 rounds, took place in 1889 —, as Bernard Shaw and others have argued, their use in no way softened the violence of the sport, indeed perhaps the contrary.

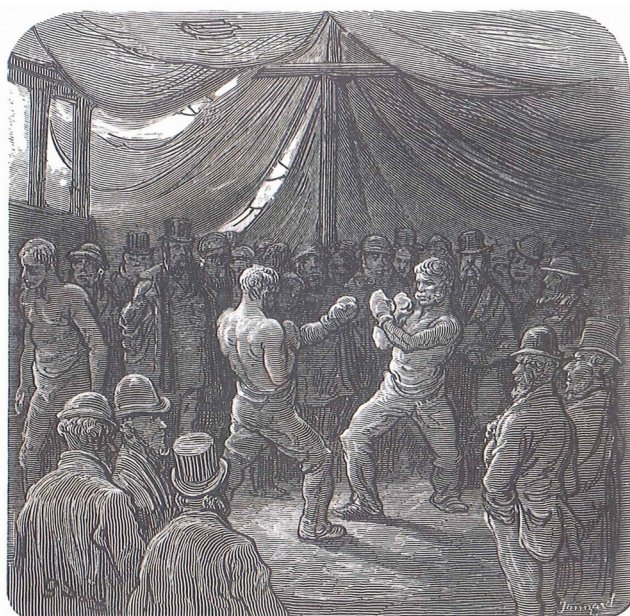


Fig. 4: Gustave Doré, *The Prize Fight*, engraving from *London: A Pilgrimage*, 1872

This is because gloves protect the boxer's fist more than the body of his opponent, and the fist is the most fragile component in the boxing encounter. With the fist protected and strengthened by bandaging and gloves, especially if wielded by a super-fit heavyweight, the damage it can inflict is far greater than that of the unprotected hand of the bare-knuckle fighters of the previous era. Today's heavyweight professional boxing is therefore still a highly dangerous sport and one capable, as many have witnessed, of inflicting devastating damage.

In a similar way, from the boxer's point of view, as Bernard Shaw (Shaw, 1979) was also among the first to argue, limiting the round-lengths to three or four (now two or three) minutes, with ten seconds to recover from a knock-down (the ten second rule was introduced in London in 1873), was a mixed blessing. Quite apart from the fact three minutes can seem like an eternity if one is up against it, in the old prize ring in which the round had no fixed duration, the fall of either combatant immediately gave the respite of thirty seconds, and could thus be reckoned on in moments of difficulty. What some more recent and apparently humanizing refinements of boxing in fact reflect then is the greater measurability and visibility of the sport, enhancing the audience's appreciation and the adjudicators' judgment of the boxers' performance. The tell-tale white tops of modern amateur boxing gloves are a case in point; they facilitate the judges' ability to assess the number of punches that actually make contact and thus to award points in a level of the sport at which speed and accuracy as much as knock-out power is of the essence. With TV and the demands of network scheduling this demarcation of performance in temporal and visual terms becomes even more important.

Another important factor in the codification of the visibility of boxing as a sport was a function of its role—like cockfighting or horse-racing—as a focus (if often illegal) for gambling and betting. Prize-fights in eighteenth- and

early-nineteenth-century England were usually organized by rich, often aristocratic patrons, for the benefit of themselves and others of the boxing and gambling fraternity—the ‘Fancy’ as they used to be called (forerunner of today’s ‘fans’) (Pierce, 1971). Bets very often changed as the matches developed (in those days, rounds were unregulated in length and number) and it was obviously important for the Fancy to have a clear view of the match’s progression (figure 5).



Fig. 5: Thomas Rowlandson, *The Prize Fight, 1787* (Yale Centre for British Arts, Paul Mellon Collection)

One result of this requirement was the gradual regularization and reduction of the size of the boxing ring. The latter was a ‘ring’ because initially viewers were grouped in a circle (figure 6).

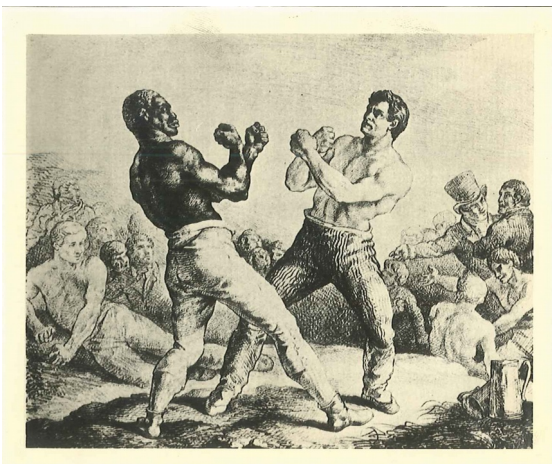
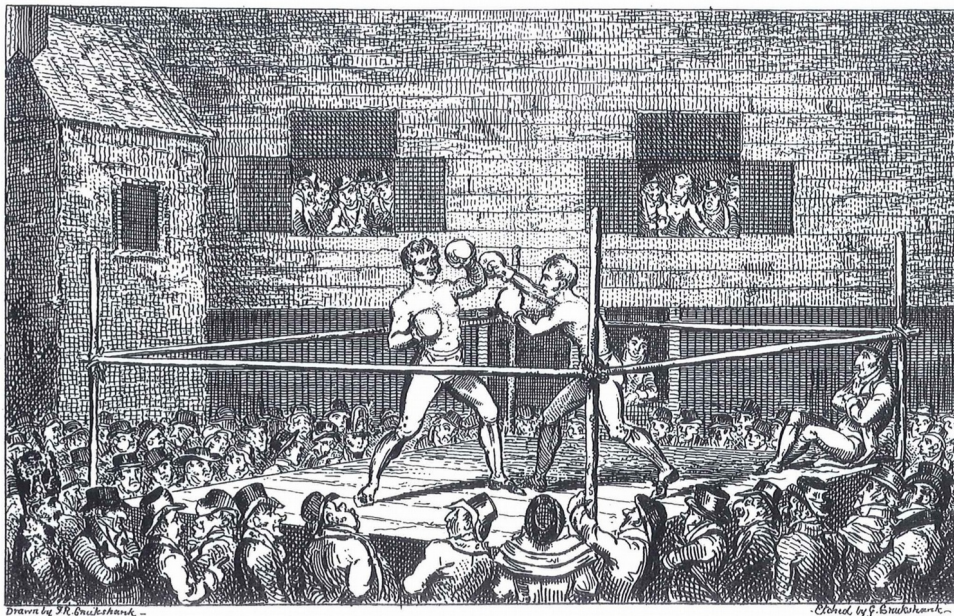


Fig. 6: Théodore Géricault, *Boxing Match (Tom Molyneaux vs Tom Cribb) c.1818*

The circle became squared when the fight ground became roped off or fenced-in, using posts linked with taught ropes (figure 7).



A SPARRING MATCH AT THE FIVES COURT.

Published April 14<sup>th</sup> 1813, by George Smeeton, 230, St. Martin's Lane.

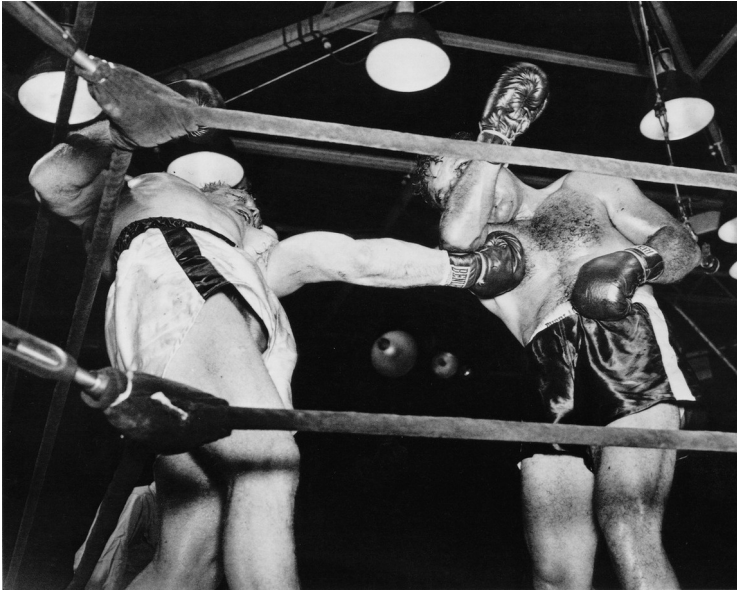
Fig. 7: George Cruikshank (after Isaac Cruikshank), *A Sparring Match at the Fives Court*, 1813 (Courtesy Trinity College Dublin Library)

Circular rings have occasionally been reintroduced—as late as the twentieth century—in England in 1912 and in America in 1944. Sometimes there were outer and inner rings, the former a kind of no-man’s-land that ensured visibility for the often huge crowd beyond, the inner marking out the space of combat itself. In John Broughton’s *Rules*, drawn up in 1743, there was in addition a square yard or ‘scratch’ chalked in the centre of the combat area or ‘stage’ at which both fighters presented themselves at the beginning or resumption of the set-to.

In the earlier days of prize-fighting, seconds and the time-keeper were allowed in the combat ring itself. They were relegated to the outside with the ring’s reduction in size (to a maximally 24-foot square) in the nineteenth century, after which only the boxers remained in the ring during the rounds of fighting. Part of the referee’s skill—since his re-admittance in the early twentieth-century to the ring—is to become a semi-invisible presence, moving with agility to avoid the combatants while regulating the progression of the combat.

The modern ring, with its elasticated ropes, padded corners and pillar-less construction, dates from the late nineteenth century, and is of a design so elegant and functional that it has scarcely been altered since. First introduced in 1892 (for the Sammy Kelly versus Bob Cunningham fight at Coney Island, New York), padding was made mandatory in 1948. While the London prize Ring Rules specified two guard ropes, this went up to three later in the century with the Queensberry Rules, with four becoming the norm after 1963 when the featherweight boxer Davey Moore died as a result of a snapping ring rope.

The elastication of the ropes of course had important repercussions for the boxer's ring-craft, enhancing the range of options open to him and also the visual interest of the sport from the spectators' point of view (figure 8).



*Fig. 8: Charles Hoff, Robert Villemain vs Jake LaMotta, 1949*

In this way, the violence of the boxing combat has become limited and contained while at the same time the visibility of the combatants and their actions has been maximized. The boxers are fully aware of the limits of their field of action and, for the audience, the theatre of action becomes one of almost hallucinatory clarity and fascination. For some this excessive visibility becomes a kind of obscenity in which the danger or suffering of the boxers is vicariously enjoyed.

To summarize, the aim of this progressive refinement and codification of boxing has been to enhance the clarity of boxing as a spectacle and to maximize the viewer's judgment and enjoyment of the action. The emphasis on symmetry—boxers of more or less equal weight, fighting from opposite corners in contrasting colours—facilitates the viewer's appreciation of the action which itself, though closely regulated, is prone to all kinds of chaotic and unanticipated configurations (figure 9).



*Fig. 9: Charles Hoff, Unidentified Boxers, c1950*



Shadow-boxing fighters are commonly described as ‘making shapes’ and this is indeed what they do also within the ring, though following an order and with a degree of surprise and violence that it is impossible always to anticipate. Fighting itself is chaotic, as will be confirmed by anyone who has witnessed an impromptu set-to or who has had the misfortune to be involved in military confrontation. The organization of boxing becomes therefore a reflection of its *symbolic* as well as its real significance: the aim of boxing is not just to stage a fight (though this is a vital part of the sport) but also to set in train an action that will have symbolic importance: one fighter may represent a certain colour, race, nationality or religious belief (figure 10); one fighter may be the underdog attempting to fight his way out of poverty or obscurity; both fighters may be wishing to bolster the fragile identity of the modern male by a display of manly courage and endurance that no other social outlet allows them to assert. Whatever the issues at stake, boxing provides an elegant and symmetrical format within which tensions and conflicting aspirations may be more or less consciously worked out, combining entertainment with a display of courage and pain.

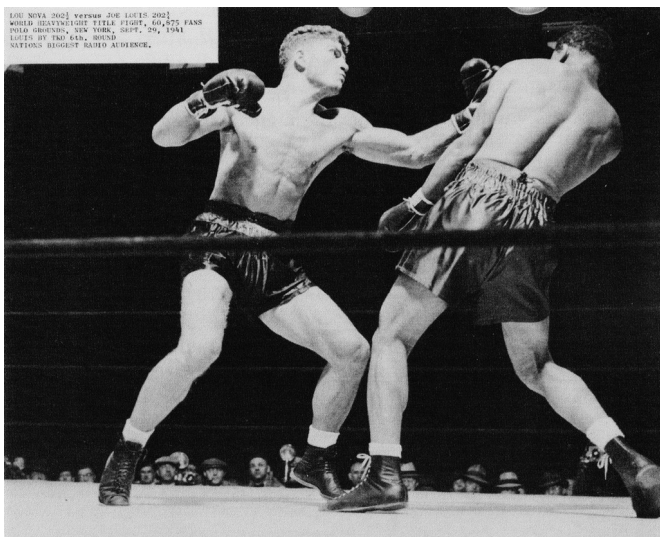


Fig. 10: Lou Nova vs Joe Louis, Polo Grounds, New York, 1941 (originally printed in *The Ring* magazine)

## Dynamics of the Fist and the Space of the Boxing Ring as aesthetic paradigms in early twentieth-century Art

The rise of sport as a mass entertainment seems roughly to have coincided with the development of cinema and other forms of cultural production towards the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. This development was fuelled by the emergence of new, machine-based sports such as cycling and motor racing (the *Tour de France* was initiated in 1903) but also by the revival of the Olympic Games in 1896, in which boxing was one of the traditional sports. The growth in interest in sport, and in boxing in particular, was the function in the early modern period of the support of a new urban industrial male working class whose wages were sufficient to allow a small balance for entertainment. At the same time that boxing, especially in its amateur 'small hall' form became popular among the working classes (Shipley, 1969, pp. 78-115), it also became, in its professional form, promoted in the larger and especially the capital cities, a form of entertainment to which a certain prestige was attached, a continuation of that aristocratic interest that had done so much to promote prize-fighting in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In addition, by the beginning of professional boxing's golden age (the 1920s to the 1940s), a (masculine) form of the (feminine) glamour associated with Hollywood cinema seems to have become firmly attached to boxing (figure 11).



Fig. 11: Mickey Walker vs Young Corbett III, 1934 (originally printed in *The Ring* magazine)

The exemplary status and enduring popularity of boxing as a sport seems to be a function of various factors. Associated with the Greeks, it has (unlike the equally ancient sport of wrestling) always incorporated an aura of authentic heroism; at the same time, its appeal is essentially democratic: while widely supported among the urban working class, it was also a sport promoted in English public (upper-class) schools and colleges as a noble and character-building discipline (Hughes, 1857). The particular compactness of the boxing ring lent itself well not only to live viewing but also to film and radio commentary, and later to television. The 'black and white' nature of the sport—

a winner and a loser, combatants in a mirror relationship with each-other, the possibility of the knock-out, black corner and white corner, black shorts and white shorts, intense white over-head lighting with the audience wreathed in obscurity—further added to its fascination. The intense visual stimulus the sport offered to the viewer along with its acute visceral impact also seems to have attracted twentieth-century artists, in particular those interested in new—more dynamic and challenging—forms of visual representation. In this context, the interest of Futurist and Cubist artists in boxing is understandable, particularly insofar as these movements were concerned to analyse the deeper, often dynamic structures underpinning objects and visual experience in the modern world.

The Futurist conception of internal dynamics offers an illuminating insight into such preoccupations. For the leading Futurist painter and sculptor, Umberto Boccioni (1882-1916), for example, artistic representation, to be effective, had to include the dynamic as well as the static aspect of the object. Developing his theory of ‘plastic dynamism’, Boccioni stresses the importance of not separating the object from its environment. This is because for him plastic dynamism involved the combination of the absolute motion of the object with its relative motion, the transformation it undergoes in relation to its mobile or immobile environment. Boccioni’s theory reflects the Futurist understanding of the need to introduce *movement* into the representation of objects in art, reflecting the new dynamism of twentieth-century life. So, a set of new equations—object plus environment, body plus movement, speed and simultaneity—became the formulae governing Futurist artistic representation in which a ‘force-form’ derived from real form, produced a new form defining objects and their driving force. Such new forms would express both the intrinsic dynamism of the object and the actual dynamism of its interaction with mobile or immobile environment.

Boccioni’s sculpture *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* of 1913 (figure 12) provides a classic example both of the theory just outlined and of Futurist expression of the latent energies of the boxer. This can be seen if Boccioni’s figure is compared with the unidentified black boxer in Charles Hoff’s photograph (figure 13) of the 1940s.



Fig. 12: Umberto Boccioni, *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, bronze, 1913 (Gianni Mattioli Collection, Milan)

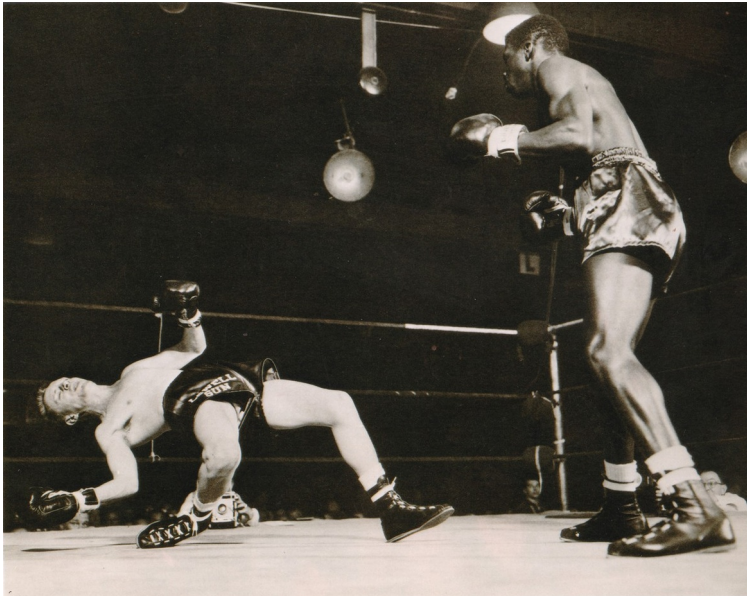


Fig. 13: Charles Hoff, *Unidentified Boxers*, c1950

In the latter, the black boxer has just floored his white opponent; he is waiting, fists cocked, to continue the onslaught, depending on whether his opponent manages (which in this case seems unlikely) to rise from the canvas. The readiness of his body is indicated by the tautness of the muscles that run up his leg and back, and his raised fists. The bright overhead lights illuminating the boxing ring are reflected in the boxer's gloves, boots, dark shorts and glistening dark skin, creating a bronze-like patina. His body is a picture of animal alertness and latent energy. The effect created by Boccioni's sculpture is remarkably similar.

Here the impression of dynamic advance in the figure is enhanced by the way the potential forward movement of the legs and shoulders is indicated by the trailing flanges. In this way, the flesh and sinew of the body is displayed to enhance the viewer's understanding of its structural and dynamic qualities. The many-faceted undulations of the sculpture and the smooth finish of its surface reflect light in a way that further intensifies the life and energy the work exudes: glistening with perspiration, it seems, like the boxer in Hoff's photo, to be in a state of dynamic readiness.

The concern with the dynamic potential of the static object is taken further by Futurists in their focus on moving objects: cars, trains, animals, human forms, and, above all, the fist. Once again, sports such as boxing provide a perfect analogy to this conception, offering the example of a human body in constant motion within a controlled/framed environment. Boxing is about interaction of forces implicit in the human body. Boxing activates, dynamizes the potential of human movement within a relatively circumscribed and therefore visible theatre or frame, that of the boxing ring. The punch is the perfect dynamic expression of the fist; it involves a movement that draws on the dynamics of the boxer's body in its totality, the whole of the body weight being ideally transmitted through the arm and the fist to land on the opponent. Furthermore, the act of punching is performed in circumscribed theatre of boxing ring in which action is viewed from all four sides, in other words, in an integral

environment. Action is contained by the ropes which add an extra dynamic to it while at the same time maximizing its visibility. Aspects of this dynamic are also illustrated by the Futurist painter, Giacomo Balla (1871-1958), with reference both to the theory and practice of Boccioni as artist, and to the dynamics of the picture frame.

The preoccupation of Balla with Boccioni's fist, or more properly with *Force-lines of Boccioni's Fist* (c. 1915) can be traced through a number of pencil and colour crayon sketches, gouaches (figure 14) and even a sculpture made of red-painted cardboard.



Fig. 14: Giacomo Balla, *Force Lines of Boccioni's Fist*, tempera on paper, c.1915 (Private Collection, Milan) [1]

1: Source: [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/4/44/Balla\\_Lines\\_-\\_Force\\_of\\_Boccioni%27s\\_Fist.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/4/44/Balla_Lines_-_Force_of_Boccioni%27s_Fist.jpg), Jan 9, 2018.

As with other Futurist works, Balla's aim was to explore the dynamic potential of the object, analysing in the process the lines of force intrinsic to it while at the same time attempting to express them in visual terms. A mixture of abstract and representational design in which the indexical vigour of the former outmaneuvers the iconic verisimilitude of the latter, Balla's fist drawings and sculpture aim to present the object in its dynamic potential. The fist emerges as the straight right of a boxer moving dynamically forward, all the energy of the body, as in boxing, being directed into and through it as it punches its target. In some versions of the drawing, a red triangular form indicates the direction of the fist's force, representing in abstract form the tangible movement of the body. Like boxing as a sport, the fist is a symbol of both violence and control, combining propensities towards beauty and danger, tendencies that the Futurists saw increasingly as interacting in dynamic tension in modern life.

In another work by Balla, *Futurist Frame* of 1927 (figure 15), the energies implicit in the rectangle of the paper or canvas are expressed in the surrounding frame, a three-dimensional construct in which painted panels and batons of wood present in tangible form the dynamics inherent in the pictorial project.

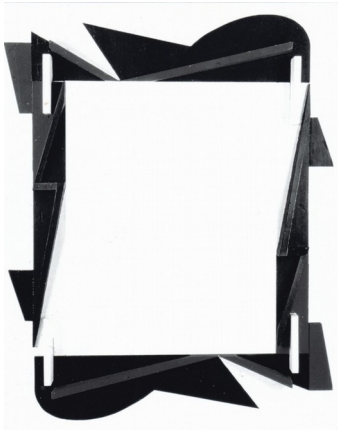


Fig. 15: Giacomo Balla, *Futurist Frame*, painted wood c.1927 (Private Collection, Rome)

This frame was originally conceived to enclose a self-portrait of the artist himself, but is in many ways a far more powerful construction when exhibited void of picture. This is because it allows the multiple potentialities of the picture plane to be imagined or fantasized by the viewer, the coloristic and sculptural qualities of the frame itself suggesting rhythms and dynamisms that have no need of further specific representation. The top left and bottom right corners of the frame incorporate triangles of white and, in this way, already activate dynamic movement in the frame itself as the enclosed square also becomes stretched into a trapezoid, thus problematizing the exact whereabouts of the edge of the picture frame and introducing a kind of kinetic movement into the overall structure. Perhaps Boccioni's fist rather than Balla's self-portrait might have formed a more fitting subject for this frame since it seems to operate exactly like a boxing ring, that is, as a simultaneously stable but flexible 3-D device for enclosing, promoting and expanding action within its bounds.

Indeed, the disposition of the batons, painted as is often the case with the ropes of the boxing ring, in three different colours (red, white and blue) seem like a schematic representation of the guard ropes as they bend and stretch under the impact of the boxers' bodies, the rounded and geometrical forms extending beyond them perhaps representing further vectors of bodily movement or of the trajectory of punches. In any case, it is remarkable to observe how cubist, constructivist or art deco presentations of the boxing ring, almost exactly contemporary to Balla's frame, exploit the same trapezoidal dynamic and the same concern with the periphery as much as with the (often blank) centre of the work.

Within a cubist conception of art, boxing as a sport takes on a status similarly exemplary to that suggested in some Futurist works. This is because it facilitates real perception of movement and simultaneity of action. First, movement: the relative codification and stylization of boxing moves—basic stance; six main styles of punch (left jab; straight right; left hook; right hook; left uppercut; right uppercut); frequent repetition of similar moves; symmetrical interaction of boxers, striking and parrying; boxers operating in mirror-image-like

relationship with each-other. Second, simultaneity: the close proximity of two boxers in a schematic cube of space in which two or more angles are simultaneously perceptible. The boxers in the ring, or more properly cube, are viewable from all angles simultaneously as they activate various circling and interacting movements within the ring/cube. The strobe-like effect created by ropes as seen by the viewer at the ring-side further activates the dynamic aspect of the boxing encounter.

The painting *Boxing Match* of around 1930 (figure 16) by the Paris-based art deco painter Milivoj Uzelac (1897-1977) exemplifies, in slightly diluted form, many characteristics of representation in cubist art.



Fig. 16: Milivoj Uzelac, *Boxing Match*, gouache, c.1930 (David Scott Collection, Dublin)

Uzelac takes boxing ring, boxers, referee, corner-men, audience (including a couple of swells in full evening dress), journalists, announcer and film cameraman and creates a cubist interaction of their various responses. The image is cubist in the way separate components overlap with each other and in the way, some of the various components are arranged in expressive juxtaposition rather than conventionally verisimilar coordination. Thus, we see, as in cubist painting, static objects, or fragments of objects, disposed in an array that is decorative and expressive rather than strictly realistic, just as, at such a real encounter, the occasionally distracted eye of the viewer notices details of the scene in no particular logical or functional order. So, loudspeaker, stool, bowl and sponge; typewriter; film camera; round marker notice, are disposed around the object of central attention, the ring. Similarly, the mixture, as in cubism, of styles of representation, expresses the differing levels of attention the observer devotes to the various visual, aural or tactile impressions offered by the scene: so for dimly perceived objects, such as the film camera and cameraman, we get a mere outline; for other members of the audience, mere silhouettes; areas of pure colour express our varying degree of awareness of

light and shadow; schematically represented figures (the boxers, the referee) command our full attention; while fully represented figures (the glamorous couple of swells) become rivals for our attention to the main event.

As befits a cubist (or even a Futurist) painting, the composition of Uzelac's gouache is essentially dynamic: angled panels surrounding a central ring placed not square-on but dynamically, as an asymmetrical diamond shape (as in Balla's *Picture Frame*). Movement is directed into and out of the picture frame. The body of the kayoed boxer, spread-eagled, and that of the referee (who is simultaneously indicating with one arm to the winning boxer to stay in his corner and with the other counting out the floored opponent) act as indexes of the dynamics implicit both in the match and in the composition. The loudspeakers top left blare the weights of the boxers (both are heavyweights at 89 kilos) into the arena. The effect of the spotlights' light and shade is reproduced by pure splurges of colour (pure white and powder blue) that descend into the ring at angles, the maximum intensity of light being reflected by the white-clad figure of the referee in a position of asymmetrical centrality in the ring. The treatment of the only straight lines in the composition—those that mark the ropes of the ring—is also telling: they are tautly traced in, being most fully articulated on the side nearest the picture's viewer, appearing more sketchy on the far side. The way the ring is stretched into an asymmetrical trapezoid at the corner in which the upright boxer awaits the final countdown is wonderfully expressive of the pressure his body exerts against the ropes on which he is leaning. It also suggests the dynamic, catapulting action the ropes will have if the boxer is instructed to leap forward to finish off his opponent if the latter survives the count-out. The obscurity and weight of that corner of the ring is enhanced by the angle of shadow that frames the waiting boxer, the tension of the moment being enhanced by the sketchy but clearly agog stance of the viewers seated behind the upright boxer, craning their necks to see the final outcome of the match. In the opposite corner of the picture, in the press-rows of the stadium, several pairs of disembodied arms clack relentlessly at the rows of typewriters, expressing in their fragmentary feverishness, the excitement of recording what appears to be a knock-out victory. Meanwhile, in the same corner, the sponge, water-bottle, bucket and towel that will be needed to revive the fallen boxer, are positioned at the ready in the bottom left corner, next to the waiting cornermen.

A more schematic but nonetheless effective expression of the analogy between modernist art and boxing is provided by the constructivist posters of the Stenberg brothers – Vladimir (1899-1982) and Georgii (1900-1933) – produced, like the other work discussed here, in the 1920s. In *The Punch* of 1926 (figure 17), created to advertise an American boxing film of 1921, also released under the title *Scrap Iron*, the frame of the boxing ring is itself ambiguously presented: is it the red wedge—reminiscent of the political posters of El Lissitzky (1890-1941), such as *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* of 1919—that descends from the top of the poster image, or the black



trapezoid below it, against which the floored boxer sprawls and into which climbs what seems to be an impresario or spectator?



Fig. 17: Stenberg Brothers, *The Punch*, 1926 (Batsu Gallery, Ruki Matsumoto Collection, Tokyo)

If the ring is the red wedge, site of passion and violence, then the black surround, traversed by the guard ropes, is the apron over which the hapless boxer appears to have been projected into the black chaos of the audience and unconsciousness. Whatever the case may be, this ambivalence enhances the dynamic potential of the scene as the frames slip bringing differing interpretations to bear and enhancing the sense of movement. The important role of the viewer, both of the poster and of the film it advertises, is fore-grounded by the massive face of a man who looks diagonally into the picture along the line of the wedge that partly frames him, with evident concern for the floored boxer in his unconscious state. The illusion of 3-D is cleverly created by the figure of the third man climbing through the ropes into the boxing ring. The contrast between intense light and deep shadow is reproduced both in this latter figure and in the central face, the nose and mouth of which appear in a warm golden glow, while the rest of the face is swathed in red shadow. Many of the structural dispositions visible in this poster echo or anticipate those in Uzelac's painting, the diamond-shaped trapezoid forming in both compositions an absolutely essential component of the pictorial dynamic, the ambiguity of both reflecting also the dynamic options opened up in Balla's concept of the Futurist picture frame.

The intrinsic dynamism of the boxing ring as aesthetic space is also shown by artists when there is no action going on in the space. So, for example, Mario Correa's *Hawktime* (figure 18) of 2003 explores the potential of movement within the empty space of the ring as it is created by its own internal structure.

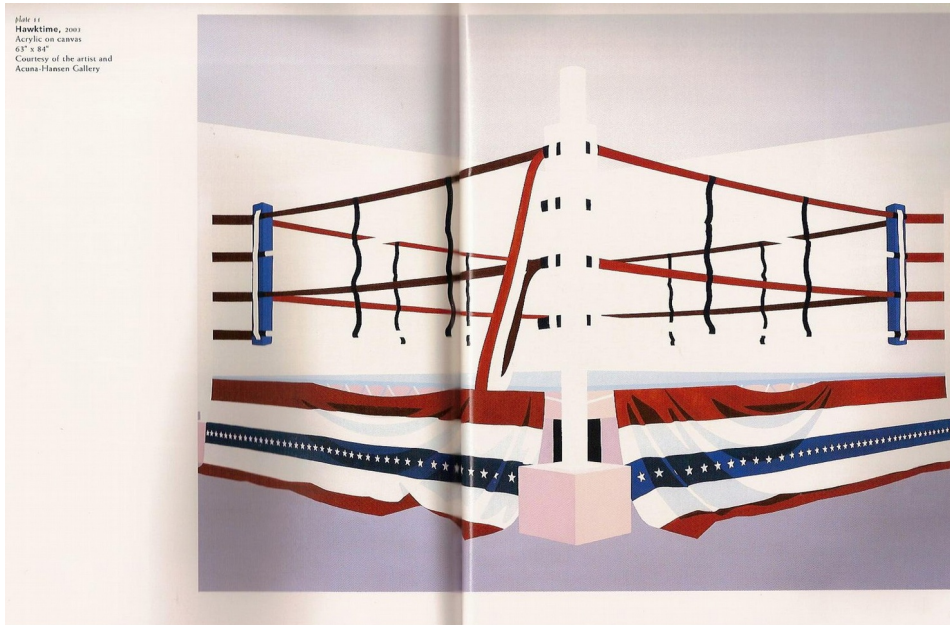


Fig. 18: Mario Correa, *Hawktime*, acrylic on canvas, 2003

Set in a neutral, empty room, the dynamic inherent in Correa's ring is a function of the rippling effect of the guard-ropes divider strings whose undulating movement implies the vibration activated by contact with the bodies of the absent boxers. The wavy movement of the apron of the ring, as if lifted by a gust of wind, is similarly evocative of action, the whole composition becoming charged with an energy that foretells the boxing event. It is almost as if the ring itself were magically activated, reproducing in the pure terms of its elastic structure, the dynamics of the pugilistic encounter. As this painting's title and date suggest, the use of the American colours and the battlefield status of the boxing ring take on added intensity of significance in that the work was produced at the time of the Second Gulf War.

An even more economical presentation of the dynamics of the pugilistic encounter is provided by the Italian graphic artist Luigi Castiglioni (1936-2006) whose poster (figure 19) advertising the Monzon versus Tonna middle-weight championship of 1975 presents simply the three ropes of the ring, a few drops of the boxers' sweat against the setting sun (or some other cosmic event) which expresses the heat of the encounter.

## Boxing and Visual Culture

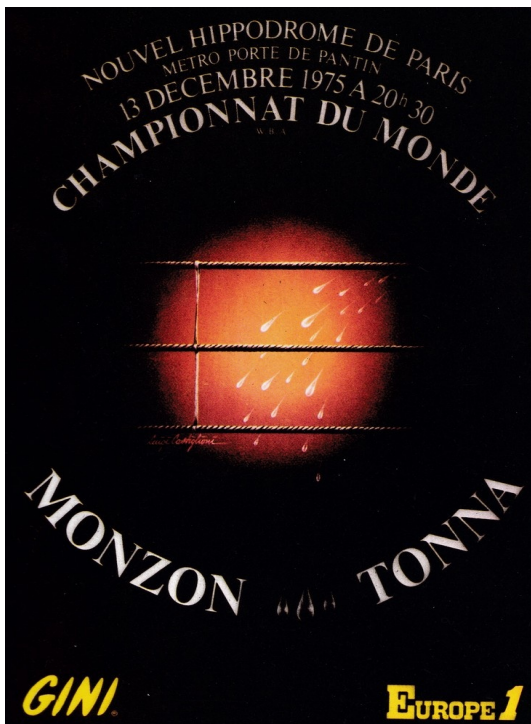


Fig. 19: Luigi Castiglioni, *Monzon vs Tonna*, poster, 1975

Whereas Cubist, Futurist and Constructivist artists were, as we have just seen, primarily concerned to explore the object and its (albeit internal) dynamism from the outside, clarifying in the process the way it is perceived or experienced by the viewer, some artists focus as much on the inner, psychological dimension of the boxing experience. This poses a particular challenge for a number of reasons.

Firstly, because it already takes a lot of concentration on the part of the viewer simply to follow the rapid succession of movements compressed into the three minutes of a round. It has been calculated, for example, that British bantam-weight boxer, Naseem Hamed, could throw thirty-eight combination punches in eight seconds with eight different foot and ten different hand movements or up to fifty-four combination punches in 12 seconds. Secondly, the intense visual excitement of boxing tends fully to absorb the viewer's attention, drastically reducing his or her time to reflect on the competing boxers' mental processes. And, thirdly, from the point of view of the boxer, since boxing is a sport in which reflection and action are of necessity so closely and intensely coordinated, it is extremely difficult to separate visceral experience (energy, pain, shock) from psychological reaction. In the light of this, the procedure adopted by the artists examined here—Philippe Perrin (b. 1964) and Miguel Rio Branco (b. 1946)—is essentially that of exploring the various means of slowing down and projecting key moments of the action and the various peripheral or preparatory rituals associated with the boxing match. In doing so they are able to give valuable insight into the 'psyching up' process as well as the psychological experience of the boxing encounter in both its real and its mythical dimensions.

The Grenoble-based French installation artist Philippe Perrin explored between 1983 and 1990 what was to him at stake in the champion boxer by elaborating an imaginary or mythical identity. Naturally, he first started to construct this persona from the outside, using, like any actor, the props and costumes that would help shape the role. He then, in an installation of 1990, *My Last Fight*, produced a series of life-size head and shoulders black and white portrait photographs in which the boxer persona is shown in the ritual and delicate act of binding his hands before leaving the dressing room to enter the ring. Most significant of all in *My Last Fight*, however, is the way the theatre of the boxing encounter—the ring—is transformed by the artist into an expression of what is at stake in both aesthetic and psychological terms (figure 20).



Fig. 20: Philippe Perrin, *My Last Fight*, acrylic on canvas, 1990

So, the *canvas* that traditionally covers the surface of the boxing ring becomes the support of a giant self-portrait of the artist. It is painted in black and white, not only because it is adapted from one of the hand-bandaging photo images mentioned above, but also because this restricted palette perhaps expresses a certain objectivity on the part of the artist—the painting is ostensibly the work of ‘an official Soviet political painter’, executed in the ‘socialist realist’ style. The frame provided by the boxing ring, scene in the fight itself of an unarticulated psychological though physically fully apparent drama, is thus finally put to specifically artistic use as it frames the artist’s portrait. The very size of the latter emphasizes the vulnerability of both boxer and artist as they literally and metaphorically lay themselves open to the scrutiny of the viewer. The ropes enclosing the ring express not only the tensions implicit in the boxing encounter, but also the imprisoning of the portrait in its frame, the trapping of the combatant in his encounter with his opponent and the obligation of boxer and artist to perform within bounds that ensure the maximum

visibility and scrutiny of their actions by the viewer. In this way, the metaphor of the boxing ring as site of heroic self-confrontation in a very public sphere, a potentiality hinted at implicitly in some earlier artistic representations of it, is here made explicit.

Perrin uses the fully panoply of current artistic techniques to realize his boxing project—photography, paint, canvas, graphics, installation, as well as real objects. Miguel Rio Branco here uses photography, his main medium of expression in the 1990s. His use of a slow shutter speed in *Blue and Red* of 1993 (figure 21) of course implies movement: the blurring of the exercising boxers' bodies expresses both the external (speed) aspect and also the internal (half-conscious absorption) aspect of their experience.



Fig. 21: Miguel Rio Branco, *Blue and Red*, (Santa Rosa series), 1993

This latter constitutes a vital but little discussed aspect of boxing: the aim of training is to so exercise and prepare the body for split-second movement and automatic reaction that the mind itself scarcely keeps pace with the movement of events, the body's reflexes and the brain's instincts being trained to operate virtually independent of conscious decision. Boxing is the art of the perfect movement, the lightning blow, the instantaneous evasion, skills and reflexes that pose a formidable challenge also to boxing art as it tries in its turn to re-present them in graphic terms. The challenge implies achieving success both in expressing certain boxing or training actions as really experienced by practitioner and in re-producing this experience in such a way that it can be shared, in an analogous form, by the viewer.

A clue as to how Rio Branco tackles the experience of the practitioner is given by the title of his photo of three boxers doing sit-ups in the ring, namely *Blue and Red*. What the boxers in this situation no doubt experience is a rush of sensations—colour, texture, smell, movement—inextricably mixed in a kind of visceral or physiological matrix that partly numbs the conscious mind both to

the pain and to the specific, analysable detail of their actions. They do not consciously look at their own bodies but focus rather on their body's movement. So, it is not figurative representation but simple sensations—red, blue; hot, cold; painful, calming—that constitute the essence of the experience and the artist correspondingly invites the viewer to interpret them in similar terms. The red and blue also define for both boxers and viewer the two-dimensional planes that make up the cube or 3-D theatre of the boxers' action. The ropes of the ring are bound in blood-red tape, some of which is already coming adrift from the rope and bleeding down towards the canvas. The canvas is blue, a calm sea or sky, the horizon of the boxers' action whether, as here, training, or at the next stage in their sparring or fighting encounters. The unravelling of the ropes' tape may express in visual terms the strain on and depredation of the boxers' muscles and sinews as they complete their exhausting circuits and prepare themselves for the even greater stresses of the fight situation. The unravelling tape is also of course a function precisely of the tussles against the ropes that constitute an essential part of the boxing action, and signal the difficulty the ropes often have in containing the potentially anarchic movement of the struggling bodies. The fragments of red material also foretell the blood that is likely to be spilt in boxing encounters. In this way, the viewer is given a heightened awareness of what is at stake in the boxing/training experience.

I finish by briefly recapitulating my understanding of aesthetics and showing how, as discipline, it offers insights into boxing both as physical practice and as symbolic action. What is aesthetics as a discipline? It is the study of a practice in which formalization (visual or textual) acts in the interests of enhanced symbolization. Works of visual art are representations in which a high degree of formalization (point, line, plane, colour—to use Wassily Kandinsky's basic terms) enhance the viewer's attention to the object or action in question; this in turn and maximizes the object or action's potential to *symbolize*, that is to speak or represent relations beyond those that are immediately apparent. Enhanced form suggests deeper meaning. So, a highly symmetrical setting (the ring and ropes) plus the boxers' efficient movements facilitate boxing's visualization and, through this, its symbolic potential (ethical, social, racial). In this way, the paradigm of pure relationships manifested in twentieth-century abstract art (whether Futurist, Constructivist or geometrical) provides a template on which can be superimposed the lines of force and space of dynamic action of the boxing encounter. This is what I have tried to show in this article.

Additionally, modern visual art (especially Surrealism) has experimented widely with the interacting of *figurative* elements in the interests of creating symbols or visual metaphors that open up new and surprising meanings. Poster artists concerned to show in a visual representation of boxing the complex symbolic or metaphorical issues at stake in the sport often adapt or adopt visual metaphors from painting to suggest the symbolic potential of boxing. So, for example, as a poster artist, Luigi Castiglioni is keen to show how some physical components of the boxer (eye, arm, fist) work in a combina-

tion so rapid and symbiotic that, in a sense, they obliterate focus on any other part of the body. He therefore creates an image of disembodied physical components united in a form that maximizes their significance in terms of efficient action. In doing this, Castiglioni often takes his cue from innovative artists in the modernist tradition. For example, whereas Hans Bellmer (figure 22), in his



Fig. 22: Hans Bellmer, *La Poupée*, 1935 (photo. Editions Filipacci, Paris) [2]

2: From [http://jcdn.wabisabiinvest-me.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/bellmer\\_hans\\_211\\_1987\\_414011\\_display-size.jpg](http://jcdn.wabisabiinvest-me.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/bellmer_hans_211_1987_414011_display-size.jpg), May 23, 2018.

famous surrealist objects, articulates the limbs of dismantled dolls in improbable new combinations to a heightened erotic effect, Castiglioni reconfigures the dynamic elements of the boxer's body to create a metaphorical form that best expresses concerted boxing action: the eye becomes the controlling centre of a mechanism that sends flurries of punches accurately to their target in a few fractions of a second (figure 23).

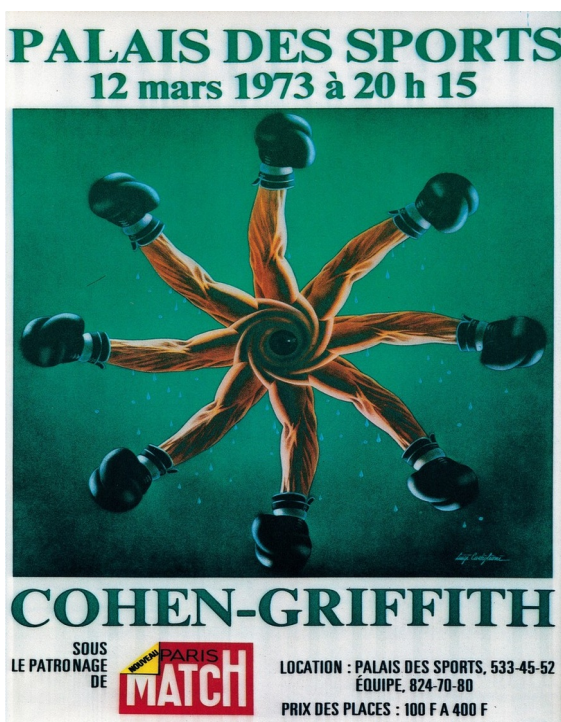


Fig. 23: Luigi Castiglioni, *Cohen-Griffith*, poster, 1973

A similar procedure is employed by Castiglioni in another poster (figure 24), based on a painting by Magritte (figure 25), in which the power of the punch seems to multiply as it passes through the fading trace of the boxing glove.

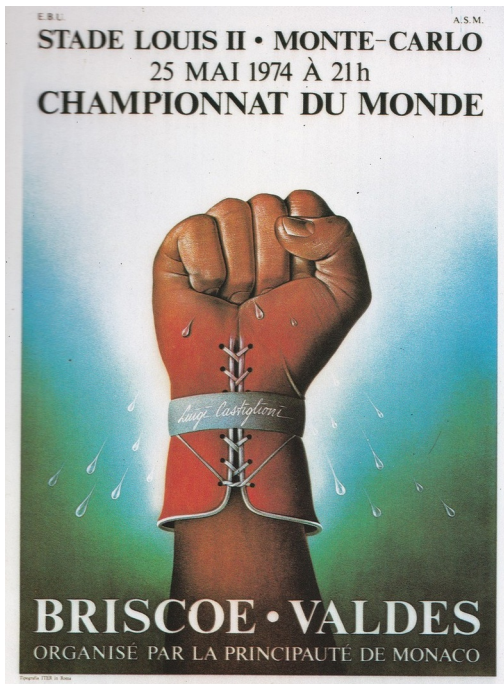


Fig. 24: Luigi Castiglioni, *Briscoe-Valdès*, poster, 1974



Fig. 25: René Magritte, *Le Modèle rouge*, oil on canvas, ca. 1937 (Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam) [3]

3: From <https://artblart.files.wordpress.com/2016/08/renc3a9-magritte-le-modc3a8le-rouge-iii-1937-web.jpg>, Jan 9, 2018.



The ability of metaphor not only to express but also to transform symbolic meanings is shown in the following two posters, one by Castiglioni (figure 26), the other by the Swiss poster artist Claude Kuhn (b. 1948) (figures 27).

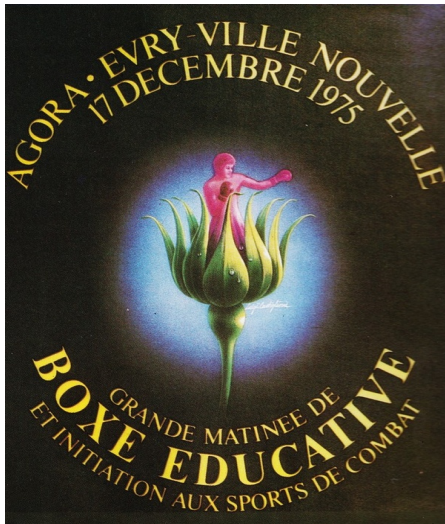


Fig. 26: Luigi Castiglioni, *Boxe éducative*, poster, 1975

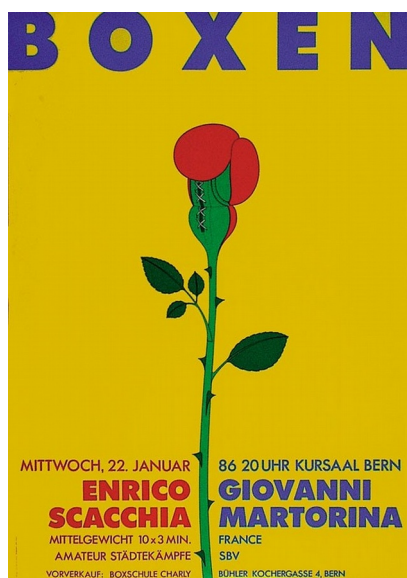


Fig. 27: Claude Kuhn, *Boxen*, poster, 1986 [4]

Both posters are promoting amateur boxing among young beginners, centering their image on the idea of love. What is the standard metaphor for love? – the rose. So here both artists use the image of the rosebud to represent either the boxing glove or the young boxer. At the same time, both artists exploit the potential of the image to express pleasure and pain since whereas the bud gratifies the nose with its fragrance, the glove gives the nose a stinging blow.

In a sense then, to adapt an aesthetic approach to boxing is similar to what one might do as an ethnologist, one who examines the rituals and sign systems of a target culture in the interests of revealing the deeper symbolic meanings at stake. In both cases, the trans-disciplinary perspective is likely to provide – as boxing does itself – surprising and yet mutually illuminating meanings.

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