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Fighters in the Shadow: The Stagnant Evolution of the Female Characters around Boxers in Contemporary Cinema

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RESUMEN:

Masculino por antonomasia, el género cinematográfico del boxeo ha contribuido a la consolidación de modelos de rol basados en una heterosexualidad idealizada. A pesar de que películas como *Girlfight* o *Million Dollar Baby* giran en torno a una boxeadora, la tendencia es respetar los rasgos asociados al ángel de la casa como única posibilidad para que una mujer no se considere una amenaza. Este artículo pretende demostrar que detrás de las expectativas puestas en *The Fighter* como retrato auténtico de la relación entre un boxeador y su novia, madre y hermanas, su discurso continúa en la misma línea de la saga *Rocky* incluso aunque en apariencia reivindique la herencia transgresiva desplegada en *Raging Bull*.

Palabras clave: crítica cinematográfica feminista, mujeres, boxeo, deseo homosocial, retromanía, teoría queer

ABSTRACT:

Quintessentially masculine, the boxing film genre has contributed to the consolidation of role models based on an idealized heterosexuality. Despite the fact that *Girlfight* or *Million Dollar Baby* revolve around a female boxer, the tendency is to respect the features associated to the angel in the house as the only possibility for a woman not to be considered a threat. This paper intends to prove that behind the expectations posed on *The Fighter* as a down-to-earth portrait of the relationship between a boxer and his girlfriend, mother, and sisters, its discourse continues in line with the *Rocky* saga even though it apparently claims the transgressive heritage displayed in *Raging Bull*.

Keywords: feminist film criticism, women, boxing, homosocial desire, retromania, queer theory

Nowadays there is a tendency in Hollywood to recur to validated formulas that provide zero risk in order to survive the digital era, whose simulated images colonize our everyday lives. Not only sequels, but also prequels abound in the box office.¹ This retromania has proved productive because people in their thirties and forties constitute a main target as consumers. Simon Reynolds defines this phenomenon as a "self-conscious fetish", but wonders whether the excitement for a theme-park version of what is gone stops creativity or the other way round, that is, maybe it is precisely in view of a cultural void that revivals become necessary to advance in one or another direction (2011: xii-xv).

This strategy implies the dependence on established models. Among genres, boxing films may function as the paradigmatically masculine one due to its emphasis on the power of the male body catalyzing frustration and rebirth. The scenario of two semi-naked men fighting on a ring with no extra help--just the strength and coordination of their muscles--is a perfect display of the animal instinct present in the exploitation of a man's primitive brutality in order to eliminate the other adversaries in the tribe. On the ring there are no social barriers or economic limitations, just two male bodies.

In *On Boxing* Joyce Carol Oates explores the theatrical rituals associated to the fighting ceremony and concludes that "it survives as the most primitive and terrifying of contests" (1994: 185). She alludes to self-destruction, for this is a true adolescent male fantasy in which the pitiless victory of a contender means the collapse of the other (1994: 186). Reminiscent of ancient gladiators that survived death in the arena, boxing constitutes the only spot where men can be legally treated as warriors. Incidentally, some boxing films are so widely known that certain clichés and situations have become part of collective memory. Indeed, they compose metanarratives whose cracks can be noticed in their reflection.

Despite the fact that films such as *Girlfight* (2000) or *Million Dollar Baby* (2005) employ a female lead, *The Fighter* (2010) returns to the classic plot of a quiet man surrounded by lousy women. This paper will attempt to demonstrate the homosocial desire and misogynistic nuances displayed in this film as the ultimate example of a questionably state-of-the-art perspective on boxing. For that reason, the two main referents for the female lead will be studied: Adrian throughout the *Rocky* saga (1976-2006)

and Vicky from *Raging Bull* (1980).² These motion pictures deploy popular visions of heterosexual couples, which stress the experience of powerful males over invisibilized women. I will trace feminist film criticism and queer theory to analyze not only the social models that these films present, but also the mechanisms that efface specific ideologies implanted deep down.

The most obvious referent for boxers' women in contemporary cinema is Adrian, whose physical and psychological features correspond to those of the angel in the house. When we first see her working in a pet store, she is wearing old-fashioned glasses and grey loose clothes. On top of that, she has short straight hair in a bobby pin. Clearly, she represents the stereotype of a spinster whose social skills are absent, in other words, she seems an outcast far away from her prime. Not only that, she looks down most of the time in a rigid virginal pose only interrupted by low key monosyllabic answers to Rocky: "Fine" (*Rocky* 1976: n.p.) is recurrent in her first conversations. She will remain mute most of the time and, therefore, powerless. Here language catalogs and even regulates her body inside a rigid definition of *gender* that denotes subordination.

Rocky plays the persuasive gentleman that rescues her from a miserable lifestyle. Even his intimidating job as a hitman is counteracted by his decent intentions despite several comparisons with beasts. Actually, it is her dependence on the man that Rocky finds alluring. The few words that she utters every now and then are carefully studied before being pronounced, for her objective is to contribute to the consecration of patriarchal values with her vocabulary and intonation. The idea of respect for the muscular man in front of her is recurrent. However, this humble language is not natural but naturalized, that is, she clearly chooses not to transgress the tradition assumed generation after generation. Thus, language is not neutral, but the final legacy of a certain ideology whose principles designate positive and negative values. Reality is not before but after words (Belsey and Moore 1997: 4). Finally, our perception of the universe responds to a particular guide that leads the way.

The relationship between Adrian and Paulie, her brother, does not transmit tenderness or any type of brotherly love. On the contrary, his attitude denotes psychological torture. Somehow, she tolerates his rude manners because they inhabit the same

private sphere, their parents' house. This is the only space where she feels safe. Furthermore, when Paulie tells her to go out with his friend, her reaction is to hide in the intimacy of the kitchen and then her bedroom since she feels incapable of controlling a public space. This fear of men becomes evident when she locks herself up so as to avoid a date with Rocky.

Once he invites her to his place she looks paralyzed. After all, this is the male space she has never dared to trespass. Her fear of sex makes her accept the invitation, though she will not even take her coat off. Like it or not, she is fascinated by Rocky's photos. This is the return of the supremacy of the phallus. Imelda Whelehan defines the area where male superiority is not even questioned as a form of retrosexism because it "reflects a popular nostalgia for a past untrammelled by the unpleasanties of sexual politics and results in an increasing public intolerance of feminist debates and challenges" (2004: 24). In other words, this tendency claims that life was more beautiful when women knew their place, inside the house.

As a couple, Adrian and Rocky are a caricature of beauty and the beast where she thinks and he acts. By confessing that she "fills gaps" (*Rocky* 1976: n.p.), he is actually stating that she is the Other for him. Paradoxically, Adrian is idolized and at the same time patronized, though never an individual. In this saga there is a clear phallogocentric perspective in which both the Self and the Other are defined from a masculine point of view, in other words, the patriarchal ideology behind Rocky and its sequels reveals that such binary cannot be natural, but an imposition whose goal is social control over women.

The next sequence shows Adrian's initial physical and mental transformation: no glasses and crossed legs. Now she even asks Rocky to kiss her goodbye. This is happening while he is experiencing his own metamorphosis through animal training, though his vocabulary will remain the same.³ She is suddenly capable of speaking her mind provided that she pleases her new owner. Otherwise, she will have to become invisible and return to the kitchen.

Even though she follows every aspect included in the guide for the perfect girlfriend, sometimes her dedication is not enough, for her submission is, after all, imposed. In fact, Judith Butler argues that bodies never assume their categorization completely because they are the effects of power dynamics (*Bodies* 1993: 18-

19). Rocky is even responsible for her sexual diet considering that, as his coach states sometime before the fight, "women weaken legs" (*Rocky* 1976: n.p.). This is a clear allusion to the patriarchal assumption that lust is inherent in women, that is why their sexual power aspires to be controlled. In short, she dares to become visible so as to get Rocky's validation. In any other sense, she will remain faithfully obedient. Following Monique Wittig's notion of *gender* as subject denier for women, Adrian does not even aspire to have a voice of her own but only excuses for her intrusions in her man's thoughts and acts (1985: 3-12).

The following sequels (*Rocky II* [1979], *Rocky III* [1982], *Rocky IV* [1985], *Rocky V* [1990] and *Rocky Balboa* [2006]) confirm her virginal status. Moreover, this is her method to achieve public acceptance, a persistent impersonation that passes for the real thing (Butler *Gender* 1990: viii). The key consists in learning and delivering innumerable performative acts up until they can be taken for the natural behavior associated to the female gender. Certainly, she believes the integrity of this man is superior to hers.⁴ On top of that, once she gets pregnant she personifies maternal love, whose portrait erases any attempt of verisimilitude in favor of Oedipal fantasies. This idea of motherhood is in connection with Dorothy Dinnerstein's analysis of the non-human natural and supernatural forces associated to the mother due to her reproductive quality (Kaplan 1983: 172). For instance, Adrian corresponds to a mythic oracle whenever Rocky hesitates. Therefore, she fulfills the role of the mother that relegates her identity to self-abnegation, spirituality, and chastity. Last but not least, Adrian works as Rocky's mother, too.

When their economic situation deteriorates, she offers to take back her previous job at the pet store, but her husband's response is rather revealing: "I'm the one that's supposed to support . . . Adrian, I won't ask you to stop being a woman. Please, don't ask me to stop being a man" (*Rocky II* 1979: n.p.). This is the result of Adrian's efforts performing certain social conventions mechanically, a ritual defying time based on "a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler *Gender* 1990: 140).

Rocky II is all about regaining his prestige when he becomes a family man. He has another chance to fight Apollo, but his wife will not let that happen because he might go blind. His frustration to provide a salary reaches a climax when Adrian is in hospital due to stress. These scenes show Adrian

lying down, though her face is visible. Even the camera is denying her a corporal status, from now on she will play the part of a saint. Evidently, this constitutes a clear allusion to the Virgin Mary, the figure that annuls the fears of female sexuality as the flesh is out of the equation. Spivak defines this oppressive strategy as the "repression of the clitoris" (1987: 153), a status that censors corporeality.

No sequel will involve any type of evolution regarding her behavior. In sum, she is the product of the male gaze, a perspective that includes not only sexual connotations, but also social, political, and economic ones. As a matter of fact, in *Rocky III* he goes wild when his opponent tries to tease her sexually, but only makes her look down as a true sign of masochism. Adrian aspires to meticulously reproduce the desires dictated by social norms, not by herself as an individual (Butler *Undoing* 2004: 2). But even that perfection can be questioned when a specific social structure is uncovered to the point that such norms can be resignified (Butler *Undoing* 2004: 27). Nevertheless, many of the scenes in this particular film prove a different art direction, in which Adrian and Rocky are placed separately in a medium shot reverse shot cutting. This is the result of the coach's death, now it is she that takes his feelings to the surface and makes him confess his anxieties.

Rocky IV is all about mourning and revenge. A soviet machine-like fighter kills Apollo, the perfect gentleman and Rocky's buddy. His grief is shown in a flashback sequence that collects the evolution of their connection, which is enhanced by the emotional soundtrack. It is this environment--surrounded by other men—that makes him feel fulfilled, a space where everyone speaks the same language like in any buddy film.

Cynthia Fuchs claims that in this type of films there is a homoerotic subtext that comes to the surface as "the exciting, troubling relation between two male bodies" (1993: 194). On the one hand, there is complicity and attraction. On the other hand, their heterosexuality must prevail for the spectator, which creates conflicts based on patriarchal views. This clearly alludes to the concept of homosocial desire, a clash between homoerotic details and homophobic speech. Generally speaking, this condition relegates women to a supporting role, whereas men can spend a tremendous amount of time together socializing on the screen with their virilities intact. In short, the female parts constitute

"signs or messages" (1993: 194) that cancel any type of sexual questioning, in other words, it transcends as a taboo.

Persuaded by the fact that the female counterparts become either objects of desire or patient wives at home, Fuchs defends the existence of a repressed homosexuality whose basis follows patriarchal conventions associated to the supremacy of men over women in terms of social power (Deleyto 2003: 192). In other words, Adrian turns out to be irrelevant for Rocky's motivation as she cannot understand his passion.

In this film Adrian meets Ludmilla, her opposite. In this case, her virginal pose is emphasized by empowering her defenseless character in the public sphere. For instance, she looks disoriented when the press assaults her. However, in the private sphere she clearly bothers Rocky by trying to stop him from fighting, as usual.

Ludmilla plays a dominatrix, a possible precedent to Catherine Trammell from *Basic Instinct* (1992) in the sense that they both play a *vagina dentata* that indecently intimidates and appeals. While working as her husband's spokesperson, this cold blonde enjoys Apollo's agony on the ring. The climax of this clash is shown right before and during the fight. Whereas Ludmilla controls everything in the background, haughty and smiley in a close-up, Adrian is shown looking down to the point that her face can hardly be seen. Next, Ludmilla stands up and stares at Adrian, who is still sitting and downcast. All in all, Adrian wins this fight by showing manners and discretion, the features associated to a lady. On the contrary, Nielsen impersonates an inhuman woman, in other words, a monster that reflects the male anxiety against women's potential (Moi 1991: 58).

Such significations turn out to be a matter of historical definitions socially normalized by means of linguistic influence. This is what Foucault calls "the cultural construction of the body" (Butler `Foucault' 1989: 603). Therefore, the body is violently malleated in order to control its multiple possibilities. Besides, the labels nature/culture prove ineffective for theorists like Julia Kristeva (McAfee 2004: 120). As the obvious opponent to the angel in the house, the monster expresses aggressive initiative, which is far away from ancient idealizations of submissive females.

Rocky V develops Adrian's control over Rocky's physical deterioration as he gets

older and none the wiser. She gets to speak in a press conference to defend her husband's honor, but only to announce his retirement. From now on, Rocky will behave like a teenager in bad company and, for that reason, Adrian will behave like a grandmother setting the limits. As a matter of fact, her make-up and stitched costumes remind the audience of a senior. This hurts his vulnerable ego assuming that she is finally taking control of the beast. Furthermore, Rocky's inner wilderness ends up being so tamed that it becomes the source of jokes for boxing businessmen.⁵

None of the characters actually evolves. On the one hand, Rocky still appreciates Adrian's culinary skills the most. On the other hand, she regrets intruding into her husband's role of head of the family so much that she apologizes for her dramatic speech when these men tempt Rocky back on the ring. Even the way she is raising their son is questioned as she decides that he must use his mind, not his muscles. Soon, the kid starts suffering bullying and the only possible solution is the one offered by her father's glorious past: the fists.

Another female character briefly appears to confront Adrian's virginal features, Rocky's former protégé's girlfriend. Merely a degrading stereotype, this woman impersonates the lusty *femme fatale* who takes advantage of a man's noble nature. Her red hair and fur coat complement this idea. Such a shocking shot totally contrasts with Adrian's old-fashioned wardrobe, including her unbecoming glasses. No trace of alluring appearance is left. That way, Adrian can play the unpolluted (grand)mother figure.

Rocky Balboa insists on this idea now that Adrian is conveniently dead. Hence, she becomes a soft memory with no power over Rocky's mind. The only allusions are due to a flashback sequence where she is remembered as a scared girl in a high-angle shot and a long shot with the name of Rocky's restaurant, Adrian's Restaurant. Over and over again, the cooking is present. Even her death, cancer, can be compared to that of a mortified martyr. He carries her photo as if it were Catholic religiosity: at home, in the car, and ultimately Las Vegas (also known as sin city). This is her sanctification, for it is Rocky's recent love interest that decides to bring her portrait so she can protect him. Oddly enough, this woman takes the initiative and kisses him holding the portrait, which indicates that in this scene

Adrian is almost the third character giving her blessings. Indeed, the photo frame is right at the center.

This is a way of replacing her as the suffering lady in the crowd, a modern Virgin Mary witnessing Christ's crucifixion. Instead of this new face, it is Adrian's image that Rocky perceives on the ring. In a kitsch celebration, this love interest turns out to be Little Marie, the adolescent he tried to patronize in *Rocky*. After all, she becomes a good candidate to inherit the part of the virgin in Rocky's mind. According to his education, this is the only possibility for a female. Either saint or sinner. In sum, the *Rocky* saga deploys culturally coherent genders who can only function as fantasies. Such role models belong in an imaginary territory because certain disruptive features are repeatedly though not efficiently censored (Butler *Gender* 1990: 28). For instance, it is always suggested that Adrian is a threat for Rocky's aspirations, and he feels safer in the gym obsessing about Apollo.

The most logical reason why Adrian strategically passed away is that Sylvester Stallone--producer, director, screenwriter and actor--needed a younger counterpart in order to retain his so-called status as sex symbol. Aware of his condition of national celebrity, Stallone attempts to maintain the social and ideological implications associated to his persona as noble hypersexualized man. Finally, he can liberate himself from the maternal figure and spread his wisdom on the women around him.

A much more realistic impression prevails in *Raging Bull* (1980), directed by Martin Scorsese. Unlike Stallone, this filmmaker simply saw a man who made a living beating up people and being hit back, then going home and behaving the same way with his wife and only brother. In short, violence everywhere: on the ring and in the kitchen.

The sense of the beast is increased when he meets Vicky, a fifteen-year-old beauty. She is introduced at a swimming pool as the personification of a mermaid with her loose curly blonde hair and white legs moving in zigzags in the water. On top of that, she remains silent in that scene in opposition to LaMotta's wife, who yells back at him as a parody of the stereotype of the Italian-American woman: dark, short, and loud. This refers directly to the dichotomy virgin/whore. Needless to say, it is his perspective that predominates all over the film.

Their relationship evolves immediately. For example, there is a scene that shows Vicky kneeling and LaMotta standing up in a high-angle low-angle shot located in a domestic setting again, so a direct connection is established between LaMotta's former marriage and this one. It turns out that the hypnotic effect was ephemeral, now Vicky will have to please him in both the kitchen and the bed. The taming phase finishes quickly for him by changing her status to that of a dutiful servant. Even though she still dresses like Lana Turner in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946), a *femme fatale*, LaMotta annuls her sexual allure assuming that she has already been conquered and considered a possession. Manners are not mandatory anymore.⁶ In this moment she becomes finally visible.

His sense of possession is so dramatic that once married he looks slovenly whereas she preserves her sophisticated image. The conflict becomes evident in a wide shot where she dresses in white, as usual, and he in black. Besides, each occupies an end of the table.

The classic scene where the boxer warns his girlfriend against sexual distractions is turned upside down. This time, it is the man that insists on having a sexual intercourse. But Vicky does not symbolize the flesh; she is just a victim of brutality that matures as she acquires a full personality. First, Vicky struggles to maintain her sexual identity. As a reaction, LaMotta blames his violence on her because it is the only way for him to retain her independence. In his case, there is a natural association between women and concupiscence that trespasses the sinful origin of it. LaMotta is always about to lose control when she is around, so he pursues to submit her in order to regain rationality. For instance, there is a close-up including both, which emphasizes their physical and psychological differences. On the one hand, LaMotta has a black eye and his facial features are obscurely rough. On the other hand, Vicky's delicate pale countenance is enhanced by the make-up. This is all he can see, and he will never suspect anything remotely dignified. Often associated to water, Vicky flows, that is why LaMotta cannot keep her engaged too long.

LaMotta's irrational behavior is complemented by his humiliating jealousy including every single word she says, interpreted as part of a seduction: contenders, ex-boyfriends, and even his only brother.⁷ Symbolically, Vicky starts wearing black clothes while his judgmental glance dominates in a slow-motion scene

where she greets her former partner. This anger is mostly expressed verbally with constant interrogations.⁸

At last, the audience is able to see Vicky in an unpolluted environment in which she can speak her mind surrounded by her former friends. Incidentally, she delivers a courageous speech on fear wearing black. The same vindications are repeated to LaMotta's brother. She reluctantly consents to his everyday brutality,⁹ a savage conduct that deteriorates her self-esteem. Vicky's definite transformation comes in a scene where she is wearing an appropriate black dress and conservative pearls. LaMotta spits in front of everyone at the hotel and cries like a baby because he has lost the fight, but the climax is reached by Vicky looking sideways and completely frightened in a high-angle shot. She orders the meal that her husband tells her to. Apparently, the submission has reached its climax. But we are wrong. Tired of interruptions while trying to respond to verbal attacks, she chooses silence instead of fruitless dialogs so as to meditate her possibilities and take further action. Her situation confirms that clichés like "the virgin bride, the happy housewife, the sexy secretary" (May 2005: 150) symbolize unreal options playing a masquerade. In short, preconceived notions of natural behavior result in artificial products.

Despite the fact that LaMotta now employs physical violence against Vicky, her reactions denote a strong determination to recover her independence. This is just another ring. In truth, Scorsese combines these two settings in order to consolidate one single effect: LaMotta is an animal who cannot control his irrationality. In his mind, Vicky has become an earthly whore, which explains why she is time and again shown in tight black dresses. Only her sad glances in the background in high-angle shots suggest another version. Such is the case in a scene in which LaMotta slaps her, for he is shown from the back in a wide view. He literally turns his back on her.

Scorsese's vision uncovers the unhappiness produced by the concept of the angel in the house. Far from reflecting women's instincts, *gender* is revealed as a compound "of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of view" (Butler *Gender* 1990: ix). Their interests construct a commodity that responds to phallogocentrism and compulsory heterosexuality. Once their restrictions are exposed, *gender* must include all its so-called inconsistencies as legitimate historical influences: race, class, sex,

ethnic and so on. They all contribute to found unique temporary identities that regenerate a cycle of performativity (Salih 2002: 45) in which gender is done and rectified once and again through linguistic practice.

The next argument connects with his first marriage like a vicious circle: he is standing up, pulling her hair, and slapping her face while she is kneeling. Though the pose is self-explanatory, the speech acts as a reversal of LaMotta's expectations:

VICKY. Get off me, you fat pig!
 LAMOTTA. Open the door!
 VICKY. Get away!
 LAMOTTA. Why did you do it?
 VICKY. I fucked all.
 LAMOTTA. What do you mean I fucked all?
 VICKY. . . . I sucked his cock.
 (*Raging Bull* 1980: n.p.)

At this point, Vicky is out of strength and surrenders to his ultimate paranoia: the suspicion that she is having an affair with his brother. Immediately, he slaps her and shows his fist. The fight continues on the street as she tries to hurt him punching him in the back, only to throw her on the floor and hit her.

Even though Vicky eventually frees herself from paternal law, its shadow permeates in every corner--her evolution can be defined as subversive only to a certain extent since she ends up using LaMotta's discourse. Subconsciously, she amplifies that same law that she consciously rejects. Hence, it is a partial condemnation inasmuch as she succeeds pushing the limits dictated by the rules of language assimilated once upon a time. Vicky's visibility is precisely achieved through the tools that stem from the social conventions that her position criticizes (Butler *Undoing* 2004: 4), but at least the instability of those same conventions is brought to light.

She can be defined as a linguistic subject in formation, a work in progress continuously questioning the validity of presumed origins and objectives as well as the mechanisms of power behind them. When the assigned features of the body are destroyed, the subject emerges improvising submissive and masterful actions for which she or he is not ultimately responsible, but only the effect of constraint (Butler *Undoing* 2004: 1). After all, the social circle imprints its seal far deeper than an individual's own possibilities because there is no essential entity, but only one construction and further reconstructions whose purpose

cannot be clearly aligned with either the establishment or provocation (Salih 2002: 11). In the aforementioned scene Vicky is wearing a white blouse and dark skirt while lying on the floor. This is no angel or prostitute, but an abused human being. To sum up, if the couple displays the failures and inconsistencies of an idealized heterosexuality, it cannot be mistaken for the natural origin, but only a performative construction as valid as any copy (Butler *Undoing* 2004: 209).

All in all, Vicky does not put an end to this story till his power as a celebrity is over when sentenced to prison. Significantly, she dresses in white again, though this time it is not associated to his delusional thinking, but to her decision to regain her identity. And so, she leaves him in jail. There are so many factors that LaMotta--the focalizer of the narrative--does not consider that for the audience she becomes unrepresentable, as Luce Irigaray put it (Butler *Gender* 1990: 9), an unexpected reality. Repeatedly, the brutalization of Vicky's physical features exemplifies Butler's analysis of the body as "a site where regimes of discourse and power inscribe themselves" ('Foucault' 1989: 601), a crossroad whose potential destinations have previously been fixed by outer agents.

The Fighter could be another genre film since it exploits several boxing leit-motives: the camaraderie of a gym, the working-class neighborhood, the underdog who is offered a unique opportunity, the training, the intrusive role of relatives and the extreme final battle. This film functions as a balanced mixture where most elements sound familiar from previous classics and box-office hits: *The Quiet Man* (1952), *On the Waterfront* (1954), *Somebody up There Likes me* (1956), *Rocky* (1976), *Raging Bull* (1980) and *Million Dollar Baby* (2004). The collage is certainly varied. Among these, the key factor is the story of the women literally and metaphorically fighting for him: mother, sisters, and girlfriend. The permanent hysteria of the female characters denotes comic relief on certain occasions and lack of control most of the times. This detail follows the primitive correspondence between women and madness as a way to repress their sexuality, an association that goes back to ancient Greece (Felman 1997: 117).

In the film, Lowell, Massachusetts is presented as a working-class town in which retired people live next to crack addicts. This implies a certain detachment between the context of the film and a major part of the audience, which gives

way to the desperate moods displayed by Micky's mother (Alice), Micky's girlfriend (Charlene), and Micky's seven sisters without the audience feeling responsible for their fights for survival. In spite of her education, the only difference between Charlene and Micky's sisters is the fact that she spent some time in college; they all use swear words as part of their everyday vocabulary, talk loud, express no manners, respond, intimidate and even attack other women verbally and physically. It appears that the analysis may be homogeneous, but these women of Lowell cannot feel tempted by the Universal Woman (Kristeva et al. 1981: 19), an abstract concept that globalizes and unifies female conflicts and even experiences.

The peculiarity of *The Fighter* is that every single female in the film turns out to be incapacitating, also known as the castrating woman or *vagina dentata*. These terms imply one of the deviations of the established order because she "threatens to devour, to castrate via incorporation" (Creed 1993: 157). At first, the protagonism of the women around Micky could be assumed as a celebration of female warriors that defy patriarchal conventions the same way that Hélène Cixous deconstructed this ancient dichotomy by inserting positive connotations on the feminine side.¹⁰ Even so, this exhibition of alternative femininity may be questioned by the simple fact that a male director was imposed. As a matter of fact, Catherine Hardwicke¹¹ publicly complained that she had been discriminated on the grounds of sex.¹² Paradoxically, that year Kathryn Bigelow received the Academy Award for Best Director thanks to a war film full of action.¹³ This veto implies the identification between *gender* and *genre* present in *woman's film*, mainly domestic melodrama (Curti 1998: 39). Ironically, the very definition of *genre* is based on repetition, which provokes variation in its codes and landmarks. Thus, even the indisputable essence is liable to mute.

The portrait of these female fighters who prefer to stand by themselves rather than support their men is somehow justified by their social status. All of the characters belong to the so-called American white trash. On that account, their behavior is not expected to be lady-like, in other words, they have a license to act and talk freely once their background comes to the surface.

In this sense, *The Fighter* clearly exemplifies one of the main principles of Third Wave Feminism, namely, the study of *women* rather than *woman*. In 'The Future

of Sexual Difference', Judith Butler and Drucilla Cornell discuss this idea by, first of all, alluding to Luce Irigaray and her denial of an essence for *woman*. Butler interprets this statement as the absence of an "established metaphysical place for the feminine" (Cheah 1998: 22). In opposition to the solidarity constructed by uniting certain features in the Universal Woman, Cornell claims that the concept of *women* implies that there is not a single way of approaching the feminine, but a plurality of situations (Cheah 1998: 23). It follows that this blank space is filled with meaning by absorbing questions of race and class, among others. However, in *The Fighter* these matters are not taken seriously most of the time.

Alice, Micky, and Charlene constitute the basic triangle around which the film revolves and evolves. However, Micky is the link that keeps his circle together. Micky—never Michael—symbolizes the crisis of identity that American men have suffered over the last few decades due to the social acceptance of women's professional success. Taking into account that both their physical features and careers were finally enhanced, this new generation of men needed to recover their protagonism by restoring the image of the noble savage, in other words, the engaged beast good at heart.

Surprisingly, the boxer's manners are in opposition to those of the many female characters revolving around him to the point that their presence becomes overwhelming. Such a negative effect is directly connected with the ontological fear of women, which stems from the destabilization of vital spaces, namely, the public and private spheres. Intimidated by these women's power over personal decisions, this is the best reason for the creation of a male community where they can support each other, like the gym. Even in such a dysfunctional family, father, son, and brother maintain harmony and integrity in their relationship. Anyhow, this is a conservative version of the homosocial desire explored in buddy pictures.

The creation and consolidation of the idea of *gender* is so necessary for the naturalization of a hierarchical order between men and women that, as Eve K. Sedgwick put it, "without a concept of gender there could be, quite simply, no concept of homo- or heterosexuality" (1992: 275). The mission of these signifiers is to select units of meaning and categorize them in a finite number of boxes, though no respect for equality

is guaranteed. As a result, there is no evolution in the definition of masculinity since it does not embrace any element outside tradition, but the other way round (Jeffords 1989: 119). In general terms, Micky can be described as a flat character whose main feature is his passivity, a quiet puppet surrounded by distortion. In other words, his manhood is questioned and even ridiculed, for his decisions are still dominated by the maternal.

The scene in which Micky introduces Charlene to his mother and sisters is revealing because it shows the Greek reminiscences of the film. Micky is facing down Alice as she questions Charlene's intentions. Obviously, the Oedipus complex emerges while he waits for her approval. She will never grant it, but even so he will not be confrontational. Either way, the potential factors behind the mother's authoritative behavior are never considered. Simone de Beauvoir discussed some of these hypotheses, such as a life full of professional frustrations due to limited choices (Deutscher 2008: 145). The portrait of this mother misses the chance to push discursive boundaries as her attitude can be anything but transgressive: no union between the protective nourisher and orgasmic entity—mother/other, as Julia Kristeva put it (Ainley 1990: 58).

Alice presides over this matriarchy. That is why she sits right at the center of her living room like a modern Clytemnestra. A true trashy harpy, Alice prefers to see her son's career sink rather than succeed on his own. In opposition to Adrian, Alice personifies "the myth of the neglectful, sadistic mother" (Kaplan 1983: 172), which means that the perspective on motherhood is not mature in view of the fact that the obvious efforts and decisions present in any mother are not even considered. Factors such as social status, birthplace, educational background or salary limit these women's freedom of choice to such an extent that other possibilities may not even be visible for them. All these classical references do not denote a revision of the discourse implicit in the Greek tragedies, but only a continuation of it.

As the evil castrating mother, Alice devours and destroys her son's phallus. Actually, any male member of the family is victimized. Neither Alice nor Adrian fulfills verisimilar roles, but phallogocentric fantasies that either sanctify or demonize the maternal body. Maternity is no Holy Grail, only the label that society adheres to the female body (Butler *Gender* 1990: 92). Alice is not alone, but assisted by her seven daughters. They function as her perfect

echo, a Greek chorus that adds a comic dimension to her words. First of all, their nicknames include Pork, Tar, and Beaver. Secondly, they fulfill the stereotype of fiercely protective Irish-American women who go together everywhere. In fact, the audience cannot distinguish one from the other. Thirdly, their looks and manners could be defined as picturesque (cigarette in hand, big hair, loud voice). Micky's sisters can have another function taken from Greek mythology: the Erinias. These were lunatic women who followed Orestes all enraged after his matricide. Orestes murdered his mother, Clytemnestra, but he was not punished for it. On the contrary, this made the Erinias be silenced. As a result, the image of the virgin goddess emerged, that is, the model of obedient beauty. For Luce Irigaray, the role of the execution of Erinias is to rebel against male authority by exploiting their emotional excess (1985: 35-36). Unfortunately, the audience does not perceive Micky's sisters as revolutionary, but as low and reprehensible.

Finally, they channel their aggressiveness like furies by punching Charlene, pulling her hair, and calling her names. Two of these need to be mentioned: skank and MTV girl. Both insults contempt her social status seeing that she is taken for an intruder trying to take advantage of their family business. Precisely, they only allude to sexist comments, that is why in this case the absence of a female tie carries such adverse connotations. There is no composite map, but only competition. This could refer to Donna Haraway's negation of a female community (1990: 197) in favor of a complex historical construct whose basis stems from patriarchy, colonialism, racism and capitalism. Susan Bordo goes even further and blames white, middle-class academics for creating bonds among women out of historical, racial, and class fragments (1990: 133). This idea is in connection with Gilles Deleuze's concept of changing identities based on renewing differences (May 2005: 114), which confirms the existence of internal divergences in any individual.

Charlene represents the new generation of women who were able to go to college. She is outside his circle and that provokes rejection, though Charlene never feels intimidated by any of his relatives. On the contrary, she confronts them in any way by using recurrent swear words, responding to physical attacks, and even leaving Micky when he reconnects with his mother and brother. Judith Butler distinguishes three terms regarding corporeality: "sex, gender identity, and gender performance"

(*Gender* 1990: 137). A few years later, she placed sexual difference somewhere between biology and culture. However, this relationship is rather uncertain or, at least, unfixed (*Undoing* 2004: 186). Even though her heritage delimits her behavior as a woman, Charlene is aware that the rules associated to *gender* are only an artifact. Subsequently, the dichotomy nature/culture vanishes considering that only culture persists.

This incoherent position—that dissolves other dichotomies such as universal/particular—remains inside the system as Charlene embodies a summary of both terms. Deep down, the identification with one stable sexuality is socially necessary and, at the same time, pragmatically impossible (Butler *Bodies* 1993: 152). In effect, sexuality is revealed as circumstantial due to multiple external factors inserted in the flesh, such as discourse and power. Consequently, if stability is only a result of a masquerade, then the term *gender* qualifies as a linguistic fabrication that pursues simplistic categorizations. In this case, self-named Truth is shaped.

Altogether, *gender* can be defined as the structures that name and normalize what is masculine and feminine, but it might also consist of the structures that denaturalize such terms (Butler *Undoing* 2004: 42). In order to maintain that illusion, Charlene must commit to a repetitive performativity whose variations will provide her authentic irregular identity. In fact, Charlene alludes to Butler's notion of *woman* as "a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end" (*Gender* 1990: 33). In this sense, Butler adds another dimension to Simone de Beauvoir's definition since she perceives no final results.

In conclusion, it appears that in this film there is hierarchy instead of mosaic since Micky's mother and sisters are excluded from any earnest formulation. These are the unregulated margins of society; on that ground, there is no circulation of meaning (Glenn 2004: 25). *The Fighter* has the ingredients of a buddy film where heterosexuality is assumed and regulated, but not the happy place for men since Micky as well as his father and brother all feel menaced by females.

This is the price of showing powerful women in a commercial film, in other words, reducing the complexity of the concept *women* to a classist vision of society where working-class people are illiterate and the remains of civilization feel ashamed.

The concept *women* denotes multiplicity and concreteness, though in this motion picture such diversity only brings cultural intelligibility, social failure, and, in the end, discursive exclusion.

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Rocky II (Stallone, 1979)
Rocky III (Stallone, 1982)
Rocky IV (Stallone, 1985)
Rocky V (Avildsen, 1990)
Rocky Balboa (Stallone, 2006)
Somebody up There Likes me (Wise, 1956)
The Fighter (O'Russell, 2010)
The Postman Always Rings Twice (Garnett, 1946)
The Quiet Man (Ford, 1952)

NOTES

1. *Prometheus* (2012) is a vague precedent for *Alien* (1977); *The Hobbit* (2012) is a distant prequel for *The Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003) trilogy just as it is bound to have its own trilogy; *The Amazing Spiderman* (2012) repeats the art direction from the film by Sam Raimi (2002).
2. Both *Rocky* and *Raging Bull* were produced by Irwin Winkler and Robert Chartoff.
3. "Yeah, I'll fight the big fight" (*Rocky* 1976: n.p.).
4. "I hate you never get tired of me" (*Rocky II* 1979: n.p.).
5. "Maybe we outta sign Mrs. Balboa to fight Cape, uh? Looks like she's the one with the *cojones* in the family!" (*Rocky V* 1990: n.p.).
6. LAMOTTA. Give me coffee, please! Coffee! VICKY. In a minute! LAMOTTA. Please, honey, hand me a coffee. Come on, I don't wanna wait! VICKY. Fuck! (*Raging Bull* 1980: n.p.)
7. Judith Butler wonders whether such rage comes from self-censored same-sex desire whose sacrifice is not seen reflected on his wife (*Undoing* 2004: 139).
8. "What were you talking to Sam before? . . . Shut up or I'm gonna smack you in the face . . . Do you think of anybody else when we're in bed?" (*Raging Bull* 1980: n.p.).
9. One of Vicky's acquaintances calls him "fucking gorilla" (*Raging Bull* 1980: n.p.).
10. Where is she?, Activity/Passivity, Sun/Moon, Culture/Nature, Day/Night, Father/Mother, Head/Heart, Intelligible/Palpable, Logos/Pathos, Form, convex, step, advance, semen, progress. Matter, concave, ground—where steps are taken, holding— and dumping— ground. Man Woman. (Cixous 1997: 97).

11. The director of *Thirteen* (2003) or *Twilight* (2008), among others.

12. "I was told it had to be directed by a man—am I crazy? It's about action, it's about boxing, so a man has to direct it ... But they'll let a man direct *Sex and the City* (2008) or any girly movie you've ever heard of" (Hardwicke 2011: n.p.).

13. The case of Bigelow—whose career is based on the genres of science-fiction and action—proves that the sex of the filmmaker does not condition the expected results from the industry.

Título: Luchadoras en la sombra: la evolución estancada de los personajes femeninos cercanos a boxeadores en el cine contemporáneo.

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