





## The Art and Aesthetics of Boxing





*The Art and*  
Aesthetics  
*of Boxing*

David Scott

Foreword by Roger L. Conover

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Figure 1. Boxing Club, Trinity College Dublin.

From left to right: Alan Forde, David Scott, Conor Galvin, and Ruaidhrí Breathnach, 2004.

Courtesy Brendan J. Dempsey.



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To my formative sparring partners in 2003 and 2004, Alan, Conor, and Ruaidhrí, a token of my appreciation. 🍷



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To understand the world of boxing you have to explore it personally, to learn the ropes and to live the life of a boxer from the inside. Native understanding is here the necessary condition of an adequate knowledge of the object.

Loïc Wacquant, *Corps et âme*

Boxing tempts writers. It bids them to riff on the contained savagery of the prizefight. It entices them to explore the endeavor in terms of masculinity, race, and class.

James Ellroy, introduction to  
F. X. Toole's *Pound for Pound*



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## Foreword

All sports involve opposition, to a degree. And all games involve play. But in no sport is illusion as essential a feature of opposition and play as in boxing, where blood-smeared combatants insist on embrace, the wounded strut with cocky stances, and crafty prizefighters feign fatigue, luring adversaries into defenseless positions of prey. The fortunes of fighters turn quickly. A boxer who one second looks spent might rebound with a fatal combination the next. A veteran champion can at any moment walk into a jab and be dethroned by an unranked kid. Time and habits take their toll on all of us, but perhaps on boxers more than most.

Some armchair roughnecks go to fights to smell meat. But there was a time when the first whiff you got at a prizefight was of lipstick and smoke, mink and Cadillac. Madonna's bedroom is a boxing hall of fame, wallpapered with photographs of boxers. Muhammad Ali's is in the place of honor. It is signed, "Madonna—we're the greatest!"—a poignant reminder of what time can do to a famous act. Emily Dickinson is an unlikely bedfellow to put with Madonna and Ali, but in her peculiar way, she knew about this business, too. A century before Ali coined his famous slogan "dance like a butterfly, sting like a bee," Dickinson was writing boxers' and divas' fortunes:

Fame is a bee.  
It has a song—  
It has a sting—  
Ah, too, it has a wing.

A good boxer knows how to fake. He shadows, ducks, feints. Sets left; throws right. Clinches and breaks. Circles one way, then reverses. Switch-hits. His body language is plain to see but difficult to read. Some movements are calculated to forbid, others to lure. Let me embrace you that I might hurt you. Difficult lover. But if boxing is one of the most illusory and least verbal

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FOREWORD

of athletic endeavors, it is arguably the form of physical culture on which the most artistic talent has been spent, the most poetic expression has been generated, and the most theoretical discourse is still being produced, as you are about to learn. I would even claim that boxing has given literature as many great novels as baseball, cinema more classic films than football, and criticism more meaningful essays than tennis. But this has much more to do with boxing inspiring ringside artists and writers than with poets and painters actually going at it. OK, Georges Braque loosened up with a sandbag in the morning, and Picasso is said to have enjoyed boxing—but only until André Derain showed him that the game isn't just about hitting, but getting hit.

David Scott is not only a professor of literature trained in semiotics, he is a light middleweight who has fought on both sides of the Atlantic. You don't have to know this fact to find Scott's book interesting, but it is one of the things that gives the ideas ground and traction. He knows what it means to work with his back to the ropes and to work for six months to go six minutes. The last time we met was at the Dublin University Amateur Boxing Club on the campus of Trinity College, where he trains. It is a plainly honest space, equipped with just what it needs—no pretense or excess. You enter it, and you want to stay. You trust it, like the voice of this book—a book that will nevertheless startle readers who never imagined that an art history or aesthetic theory could be produced by looking at the material culture of boxing, and a book that conciliates between ring theory and ring mechanics, bringing something new to the marriage of cultural criticism, visual analysis, and empirical knowledge. I think it is because David Scott has not only done his scholarly research but he has, in Lord Byron's terms, done time at Jackson's, that this works.

The bedroom of Lord Byron, which probably did not otherwise resemble Madonna's, was also full of boxing images, including a portrait of the poet sparring with his trainer, "Gentleman" John Jackson, in Jackson's Bond Street sparring rooms. Like Scott, Byron knew the difference between men who boxed and those who only talked the talk.

Who shoot not flying rarely touch a gun  
Will he who swims not to the river run?  
And men unpracticed in exchanging knocks  
Must go to Jackson 'ere they dare to box.

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FOREWORD

Among writers, the glove and the pen have been worn on the same hand quite often, but again, not as commandingly as Ernest Hemingway and Norman Mailer would want us to believe. For this reason, I find it more interesting to consider boxing as a form of compensation for not writing than writing as a form of identification with boxing. When Barry McGuigan, the former world featherweight champion, was asked why he had become a boxer, he replied, "Because I can't be a poet. I can't tell stories." He took up the next best thing, as it were—boxing: the word made muscle.

All sports are narrative, to a degree. But the way time and space are delimited in boxing make the structure of its narrative particularly transparent. "Each round can be likened to a stanza or chapter, and the conclusion, as in the best narratives, is often in doubt until the closing moments . . . a great fight is a masterpiece of suspense." That's how the late poet and boxer Vernon Scannell once described boxing. "A poetry of physical action," he continued. Boxing is narrative, but it is also poetic; only language that is figurative can contain its contradictions. The first figure of boxing is the ring, "one of the most alluring and perturbing spaces in modern civilization," Scott tells us. But the boxing ring cannot be taken literally. In fact, as anyone who has watched a boxing match knows, the so-called ring is not a ring at all. Boxing takes place within a space whose name is paradoxical, belying a square that is parabolical. Tennis has its court, golf its green, baseball its diamond, hockey its rink, bowling its lane. These are all more or less literal equations for the zones within which these games are played; each of those names evokes an image of a precisely measured site. By that logic, it would seem that we could say that boxing has its site, its ring. But that ring is a simulacrum at best.

The ring of boxing is not only roped, it is troped. The name derives from an old practice, the memory of which conjures an image of fighters encircled by a string of men whooping it up and laying bets in prison yards or factory lots. A human rope of sympathetic spectators forming the approximate edge between boxing and the rest of the world, with a certain amount of awe and give. That is what a rope is. Something that holds, and something that gives, particularly the "elasticated" version which, as Scott explains, led to new tactical procedures of offense and defense in the ring.

But in the earlier, human form of enclosure, the rope of spectators offered

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a different kind of torque, shifting with the action as the fighters fell against them like cargo sliding into rails on a sea-tilted deck. There were no “corners” in the days when rings were human, only elbows, chests, and shoulders. If you were part of that line, you didn’t rigidly wall the fight, you went with it. Later, the human ring gave way to wooden rails, forming the first “squared circles” of London, until eventually, the rails gave way to the ropes and padded corners we have today. During that same history, the prison yard horn or factory whistle that we might imagine sometimes ended fights was replaced by a new sound: the mechanical bell that now signifies the end of a boxing round.

If the ring is the unit of boxing space, the round is the unit of boxing time, also named after circular gestures, in this case the paths that boxers trace as they stalk their quarry, round and round. And round: the word connotes the human lasso all over again. Indeed, the movements and gestures of boxers tend to be dominated by rounded segments and fragments of circles: uppercuts, swings, hooks, laps, bounces, embraces. And the gear of boxing—its apparel and hardware—also the subject of this book, is similarly comprised of curved forms and partial Os: gloves, posts, gumshields, bells, bags, stools, pads, clocks . . . not to mention the proudly proclaimed circumferences of heads, fists, and waists. As any trainer who has done the wraps knows, the taping of hands before a fight is not only a protective measure, but a hypnotic ritual that induces calm and focus in jittery combatants. As if being embalmed before a possible death, a warrior’s palms are encircled in gauze, ’round and ’round, before being sent off to war. So wrapped, boxers’ raw hands become padded cylinders, churning in space like enscribled prayer wheels.

Boxing’s essence is an essence derived from circling, from curving motions and rounded notions—from counts, weaves, skips, backpedals, comebacks, and KOs. Boxing always comes back to the ring. The ring that is somehow soft and elliptical even as it is defined by things straight, hard, and statistical. Take the contradictions of boxing away, take the paradox of the ring away, and this book would not exist.

*Roger L. Conover*

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All translations into English of texts originally in French are by David Scott.



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## Introduction

*Prizefighting was created in anticipation of mass industrialized society, where it has flourished as a sport and, even more startlingly, as an aesthetic.*

Gerald Early

*Even as boxing exploits it also liberates and, like most sports, it has an aesthetic quality which has intrinsic appeal to those who step into the ring.*

John Sugden

*The Fight World is the Outside World condensed and refracted.*

James Ellroy

Boxing is a sport that elicits strong reactions, whether from the point of view of spectators, commentators, or participants. The latter, who experience the challenge and exhilaration of the sport, as it were, at first hand, tend predictably to be the most enthusiastic partisans, but the sport also has a wide following among nonaficionados. There is also a smaller but nonetheless vocal group who question the moral basis of a sport in which the principal aim, at a professional level at least, is to render another human being unconscious, or who worry about the way the primarily sporting aspect of the game has been cynically perverted and commercialized by its professionalization and mediaticization. Two main current conceptions of boxing can be summarized as follows.

One view of boxing sees it as a larger-than-life phenomenon, an epic of potentially tragic dimensions in which professional fighters pit their strength

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