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## Fighting for Subjectivity: Articulations of Physicality in *Girlfight*

By Katharina Lindner<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

The analysis of *Girlfight* (Karyn Kusama, 2000) in this paper is framed by critical discourses surrounding physically active female characters in the action genre, the conventions of the boxing film 'genre', the relationship between bodily spectacle and narrative structure, as well as the more general significance of the female boxer's challenge to normative and binary notions of bodily existence and subjectivity. With a particular focus on the interrelationship between narrative structure and boxing sequences ('numbers'), this paper explores notions of the (gendered) subjectivity constructed around the film's female boxing character, Diana (Michelle Rodriguez). I will argue that the boxing 'numbers' largely function as a (bodily) articulation of Diana's struggle for a unified sense of identity and the embodiment of subjectivity. However, the emphasis on the materiality of the body in earlier 'numbers' is replaced in the final boxing sequence by a sense of abstraction and generic integration. The significance of the physicality of the body in relation to the embodiment of subjectivity is therefore strangely disavowed and the (bodily) agency of Diana's character undermined.

*Keywords:* gender, body, subjectivity

### Introduction

'The body' and visual representations of 'the body' are issues that have attracted the attention of (feminist) film critics, cultural studies scholars and media researchers for some time. Questions surrounding representations of 'the body' frequently arise in the context of questions surrounding articulations of 'subjectivity'. However, 'the materiality of bodies and bodily movement can sometimes become paradoxically submerged' within these debates as 'the body' remains a strangely abstract concept (Desmond 2). In response to this tendency, a number of contemporary scholars in various fields have started to take an increased interest in the 'inescapable fleshiness of the human subject' (Taylor 344). This shift towards a more corporeal worldview and a consideration of the materiality of the 'lived body' has its origins in the work of phenomenologists such as Marcel Merleau-Ponty and is also heavily influenced by Foucault's work on sexuality and institutions. The emphasis on the 'lived body' is linked to a rejection of the Cartesian mind/body dualism as the significance of the *relationship* between body and mind is emphasised; in this context, conceptualisations of subjectivity as 'embodied' become central (see Taylor 2007).

The following analysis of *Girlfight* (Karyn Kusama 2000), an independent American film about a female boxer, is situated in the context of this proposed shift. My reading of the film draws on debates concerned with the ambiguously empowering nature of women's pursuit of a quintessentially 'masculine' sport such as boxing. Additionally, it is situated in relation to debates surrounding cinematic representations of female

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physicality, particularly within the action genre. Lastly, my conceptual approach borrows from work on the 'musical', in particular the sustained academic interest in the relationship between narrative and 'number', as well as from conceptualisations of the boxing film as a (sub)genre in its own right. I will first outline the conceptual framework for this analysis in some more detail, before moving on to a discussion of *Girlfight* itself, where I will argue that the boxing 'numbers' function as an articulation of the protagonist's (bodily) struggle for a unified and embodied sense of self.

### **The Female Boxing Character: Action Heroine?**

The relatively recent phenomenon of the boxing film with a female protagonist has been discussed primarily in the context of the increased presence of central female characters in the action genre – an issue that has received much critical attention within feminist film and media studies over the last two decades (Tasker 1993 and 1998; Holmund 2001). This work is primarily concerned with the ideological implications of the depictions of physically active and powerful female characters, as well as with the broader socio-cultural contexts in which these images are produced and consumed.

The discourses surrounding *Girlfight* in particular are an apt illustration of the tendency to situate the recent emergence of the female boxing film in the context of the action genre (see Beltran). In the case of *Girlfight*, the association between the female boxing film and the female action flick has been facilitated, perhaps, by Michelle Rodriguez's career as a female 'action star'. Her first major role as Diana Guzman in *Girlfight* has led to subsequent starring roles as Letty in *The Fast and The Furious* (Rob Cohen, 2001), Rain Ocampo in *Resident Evil* (Paul W.S. Anderson, 2002), and Chris Sanchez in *S.W.A.T* (Clark Johnson, 2003). Rodriguez's performance in *Girlfight* is often read in the context of these other roles, in which she tends to be depicted as a 'natural fighter who demonstrates almost no traditionally feminine qualities or romantic interest in the opposite sex' (Beltrán 195). She has therefore come to be associated with notions of female masculinity and an untamed and tomboyish physicality. Public and media discourses about her supposed lesbianism and violent behaviour in her private life arguably feed into the construction of this particular star image. The significance of such extra- and inter-textual factors is usefully acknowledged for the following exploration of the inscription of sex/gender and sexuality on the female boxing body.

Much of the recent critical engagement with the female action heroine ultimately centres on the perceived tensions between depictions of the action heroine as an active subject and sexualised object in films such as *Charlie's Angels* (McG, 2000). In addition to narrative as well as visual containment, highly feminised and (hetero-) sexualised star images of actresses such as Cameron Diaz or Jessica Alba are considered to feed into this ambiguity. Mark O'Day appropriately terms the emergence of films that feature physically active but highly sexualised female protagonists the 'action babe cinema' (201). Largely, these films appear to be characterised by a non-realist representational framework, particularly with regard to depictions of the materiality and physicality of the body. As Lisa Purse suggests, the tendency for the physicality of the action heroine *not* to be authenticated, *not* to follow the laws of physiology, *not* to be 'convincing', is part of a larger tendency for both visual and narrative containment of the action heroine as active subject. Special effects allow the female body to do things of which it is not necessarily capable. While this is a characteristic of the action genre more generally, there appears to

be a tendency for the physicality of the bodies of female action heroines to be less ‘convincingly’ depicted than those of male action heroes. Purse also proposes, however, that some recent films such as *Hard Candy* (David Slade, 2005) or *Kill Bill: Vol.1* (Quentin Tarantino, 2003) and *Kill Bill: Vol.2* (Quentin Tarrantino, 2004) depict the active female body in an arguably more realist fashion and link the heroine’s ‘action’ more directly to the physicality and materiality of her body.

The emergence of these two different ‘types’ of action heroine (‘action babe’ vs. action heroine whose physicality is articulated within a realist representational frame) is a tendency that is largely reflected in contemporary female boxing films. Films such as *Honeybee* (Melvin James, 2001) and *The Opponent* (Eugene Jarecki, 2000) are overtly characterised by the tensions associated with the depiction of a physically active female protagonist in a highly sexualised and objectifying fashion. Both films formulate boxing as a way for the central female characters to gain independence from (abusive) male characters as they acquire the necessary physical strength and skill to protect themselves from violence. The boxing sequences articulate the change in the female protagonists’ self-esteem that comes with their improving boxing skills and athletic success. The visual aesthetics and framing of the female boxing bodies in particular, however, seriously undermine these notions and firmly position the representations of the female boxer within more traditional and acceptable (generic) contexts of representations of the female body. The prolonged sequence of female dancers in a strip club in *Honeybee*, for example, serves no obvious narrative function. Importantly, however, the diegetic rap/dance music to which the strippers take off their clothes in the club is the same music that accompanies the boxing action in one of the following fight sequences, reinforcing associations of female physicality with sexuality, passivity, and to-be-looked-at-ness. Similarly, in addition to the overly stylised framing of the female boxing body (such as the use of excessive lighting and smoke effects during training sequences), one of the training/fight montages in *The Opponent* is intercut with images of a similarly stylised sex scene involving the female boxing protagonist and her male trainer. Again, female athleticism and physicality are directly linked to excessive displays of female sexuality, realigning the female image with established and restrictive notions of femininity. What should also be mentioned here is that the female boxing protagonist in *The Opponent* is played by Erika Eleniak who is perhaps better know for her role as Shauni McClain in *Baywatch*. Arguably, extra-textual factors such as Eleniak’s star image and the sexualised athleticism associated with her appearance in *Baywatch* play a part in linking her performance as a female boxer in *The Opponent* to notions of a hyper-sexualised femininity.

*Girlfight*, on the other hand, lacks an overt sexualisation and objectification of the female boxing body and can therefore be usefully examined in the context of the proposed shift towards a more realist representation of the active female body and its materiality and physicality.

### **The Boxing Film as ‘Genre’**

The boxing film ‘genre’ provides another, and to my knowledge largely ignored, context for an examination of the female boxing film. It is only in recent years that the boxing film – generally assumed to be about a male boxer – has been considered more frequently as the object of critical analysis within film studies. It is surprising, perhaps,

that the substantial body of boxing films has not received more critical attention, considering both the centrality of boxing to the very beginnings of cinema, and the large number of boxing films produced since.<sup>2</sup> Leger Grindon, in particular, has argued for a conceptualisation of the boxing film as a (sub)genre in its own right. In an 1996 article Grindon begins to explore the generic conventions of the boxing film, including plot structure, characterisation and setting.

To summarise Grindon's argument briefly, there is a tendency in the boxing film genre for the boxer's disadvantaged social circumstances, which are associated with his working-class and/or ethnic identity, to fuel anger. '[This] anger, frustrated in the face of injustice, generates violence, which becomes distilled, redirected, and displayed in the spectacle of boxing' (1996 56f). For the boxer who is a member of an 'oppressed underclass struggling to rise', boxing, with its lure of fame and money, represents an opportunity for integration into mainstream consumer culture (55). The boxer's 'success', in turn, threatens to alienate the boxer from his (disadvantaged) family and community. The spectacular display of the boxer's body not only serves as a manifestation of these conflicts but also articulates the tension between the gratifying experiences of bodily power, strength and control, and the simultaneous recognition of the body's deterioration and vanishing of strength. This recognition proves tragic for the male boxer as his identity is defined by/through his body; it evokes notions of a masculinity in 'crisis'.

In a more recent discussion of *Raging Bull* (Martin Scorsese, 1980), Grindon also hints at the structural parallels between the boxing film and the musical. He suggests that:

The boxing film generally uses the boxing sequences as important spectacles of physical action that punctuate the plot at key intervals, like the song and dance numbers in a musical. Most Hollywood boxing films display a well-established pattern of three or four boxing episodes that culminate in an extended bout at the climax of the fiction. (2005:22)

Like Linda Williams in her analysis of pornography, Grindon acknowledges the usefulness of examining the relationship between narrative and 'numbers', as well as between 'numbers' themselves. This conceptual and analytical approach is associated with Rick Altman (1987) and his exploration of the socio-cultural significance and function of the Hollywood musical. Here, Altman proposes that the structural relationship between narrative and 'numbers' is central to the existing socio-cultural conflicts that are addressed and, potentially, resolved within the musical.

A closer consideration of the argument for the functional nature of genre is useful in the context of the long and persistent history of the boxing film genre, and, specifically, the relatively recent emergence of the female boxing film as a 'variation' and 'evolution' of the boxing film (Neale 1980; Altman 1987). If genres are said to address and attempt to resolve existing socio-cultural conflicts, this implies, of course,

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<sup>2</sup> McKernan suggests that in the early days of cinema, no other subject proved to be more suitable for the camera than boxing. He sees in the early (fiction and non-fiction) American boxing film 'the very birth of American cinema – realism, drama, newsfilm, fakery, commercialism, populism, professionalism, two protagonists battling within the perfect staging, the ring' (111). The longitudinal overview study by Pearson et al reveals that more films have been made about boxing than about any other sport. See Pearson et al (152).

that particular genres can only exist if the particular socio-cultural conflicts they address continue to exist.<sup>3</sup> It also implies that genres and generic conventions change, or that new genres emerge, as socio-cultural problems change and/or arise. One of the aims of this paper, then, is to explore the socio-cultural conflicts that are addressed and/or resolved in *Girlfight* through a consideration of the relationship between narrative and boxing 'numbers'.

### **Boxing, Gender, and the Embodiment of Subjectivity**

Significantly, with reference to *Raging Bull*, Grindon also suggests that the boxing sequences in the film function as a disturbing but powerful articulation of the boxing character's subjectivity, an articulation that is centred on the representation of the boxer's subjective bodily experience in the ring (23f). In the context of this argument, as well as the proposed significance of the articulation of physicality in representations of the action heroine, I want to argue for the productiveness of an exploration of the boxing character's subjectivity through a consideration of the representation of physicality and the subjective, bodily experience of this physicality.

A central reference point of debates that link athleticism and physicality to the notion of 'embodied subjectivity' is a 1980 article by Iris Young. The author draws heavily on the work of Merleau-Ponty, suggesting that the boundaries for acceptable bodily existence are strongly gendered. Feminine bodily existence, she writes, is an 'inhibited intentionality' (145), as women tend not to make use of their bodies' physical potentialities. It is associated with an alienated relationship to the body and a lack of subjectivity. In a sense, the body is experienced not as the initiator or subject, but as the object, of movement. 'Masculine' bodily existence, on the other hand, is associated with an active embodiment of 'masculine' bodily form, movement, comportment, and, ultimately, subjectivity

There is an understanding, then, that women's engagement in athletic activity is potentially 'empowering'. Most sports allow for an active acquisition of embodied subjectivity, a subjectivity created through the experience of being 'in touch' with one's body, and the experience of the body as capable and competent in moving through and relating to people and objects in the space surrounding it. Athletic activity can, as Catharine MacKinnon suggests, 'give us a sense of an actuality of our bodies as our own rather than primarily as an instrument to communicate sexual availability' (122). Boxing appears to offer this possibility in what is, perhaps, an extreme form. However, while being potentially 'empowering', the engagement in a quintessentially 'masculine' sport such as boxing, which is associated with 'masculine' bodily existence, also effectively leads to an exclusion from the realm of acceptable and desirable femininity. The female boxer appears to challenge the binary conceptions of gender that are based on the body. She represents both a symbolic and a very real, physical and 'lived' transgression of normative notions of gender and bodily existence. A consideration of the ambiguity that surrounds the female boxer's embodiment of gender and, ultimately, subjectivity, provides an appropriate context for an analysis of the female boxer's (gendered) embodiment of subjectivity as it is articulated in the boxing film, and the boxing 'number' in particular.

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<sup>3</sup> The 'problem' of sexual difference and heterosexual desire, for example, that is said to be the central conflict addressed within the musical genre continues to be 'unresolved'.

The following exploration of *Girlfight* is framed by discourses relating to four key areas: physically active female characters in the action genre; the conventions of the boxing film 'genre'; the relationship between bodily spectacle and narrative structure; and the more general significance of the female boxer's challenge to normative and binary notions of bodily existence and subjectivity. With a particular focus on the relationship between narrative structure and boxing sequences ('numbers'), this paper examines the notions of (gendered) subjectivity that are constructed in *Girlfight*. I will first outline how the boxing protagonist, Diana (Michelle Rodriguez), lacks a unified identity and a coherent (embodied) subjectivity as her character is introduced in the beginning of the film. I will then move on to a discussion of the boxing 'numbers' as a (bodily) articulation of Diana's struggle for a unified sense of identity and the embodiment of subjectivity.

### **'I didn't make the Cheerleading Team': Boxing and Gender (Deviance)**

Following established generic patterns for the 'boxing film', *Girlfight* situates its protagonist within a disadvantaged social context (Grindon 1996). Diana's working-class and ethnic-minority background is made explicit through depictions of poverty, alcoholism, violence, and a failing education system in the opening part of the film. Diana's marginalised existence is then very overtly linked to her violent behaviour and her subsequent involvement in boxing. The film's signature score, consisting of rhythmic, 'temperamental' Latin-American music, is central to the opening sequence in which Diana is introduced, foregrounding her Hispanic ethnicity as a central aspect of her identity. However, while the music works primarily to position Diana as part of the Hispanic immigrant community throughout the majority of the film, imagery and framing simultaneously work to position her as isolated within, and alienated from, this community. Diana's marginalisation, in turn, is intrinsically linked to her ambivalent expression of gender. In a sense, Diana's existence is established as one of manifold exclusion from the white, middle-class ideal of desirable femininity.

The film's opening scene is a powerful articulation of the protagonist's 'difference' from this normative ideal. Importantly, ambiguities surrounding both her 'bodily existence' and the nature of her gaze are depicted as central to her 'difference'. The film opens with a shot of an anonymous student crowd walking along a high-school hallway and across the frame. Through the gaps between moving bodies, a person's torso, leaning against a locker in the hallway becomes visible. The face remains invisible as it extends beyond the frame. It is an androgynous body, covered in baggy trousers and an army jacket; the feet are positioned firmly on the ground, about shoulder width apart, in an assertive and unapologetic stance; the hands are stuffed in the trouser pockets in a confident, self-enclosing, and arguably 'masculine' pose. This body has a powerful presence in the frame and confidently takes up space in the public sphere. It is steady and unmoving in what is depicted as the fluid and somewhat chaotic space of the hallway as students continue to cross the frame.

This is the very first shot of the film and the viewer is kept guessing as to whom this body belongs to. The lack of visible sex/gender difference heightens this suspense, as the viewer is confronted with this faceless body that literally stands out in the crowd. As bodies continue to move across the frame the camera cuts to a closer shot of the leaning body's torso. The uncertainty about the (gender) identity of the unidentified person lasts

until about thirty seconds into the film, when the camera cuts to a medium close-up of who we can now identify as Diana, revealing her face and upper body as she stares down on the floor. Her hair is pulled back and her mouth is firmly closed, revealing a facial expression that is a combination of anger, aggression, arrogance, and disinterest. A cut to a lengthy extreme close-up of Diana's face follows as the disruption of the image by other students stops and Diana, without moving her head, slowly moves her eyes to stare directly into the camera. She returns the camera's gaze and acknowledges its presence with no sign of self-consciousness. She continues to gaze directly into the camera even as the rhythmic Latin-American music that plays in the soundtrack throughout this first scene suddenly stops. Her look can only be interrupted when the camera cuts away to a shot of Diana entering the female bathroom. It is the camera, and as such the viewer, that 'gives in' in this staring contest.

What is established in this opening scene is Diana's ethnically specific identity, as well as her unapologetically non-specific and ambiguous gender identity, both of which are central to the powerful presence of her character. When the camera cuts to Diana entering the bathroom, the sign 'GIRLS' on the door is clearly visible in the centre of the frame. In arguably ironic fashion Diana is firmly positioned on the 'female' side of the sex/gender binary. However, the bathroom scene also functions to contrast Diana's female masculinity with the excessive femininity and exotic, temperamental heterosexuality that is embodied by the other Latina characters in the film. Diana's lack of concern with appearance, as well as her overly aggressive and violent reactions in everyday situations of conflict, are emphasised in particular.

The sequence depicting Diana's first entry into the gym is of additional significance to the establishment of her character in the opening part of the film. It not only underlines the unconventionality of her character in relation to normative notions of gender embodiment, but also in relation to established and gender-specific cinematic patterns regarding the construction of the gaze and framing of the body. As Diana enters the gym, the viewer enters with her, surveying the space, taking in the busy atmosphere, and catching a glimpse of Adrian (Santiago Douglas), Diana's future love interest, through the ropes of one of the boxing rings. Shots of different boxers working out and sparring in the gym alternate with close-ups of Diana's face. In a reversal of traditionally established gendered looking patterns, Diana, fully clothed, enters a space of semi-naked male bodies. Importantly, Diana looks, and she does so without inhibition. One particular series of shots focuses on the exposed upper body of a male boxer. From a close-up of Diana's face, the camera cuts to a point-of view shot of the boxer's naked upper body as his shoulders and back muscles are massaged by another boxer. His eyes are closed as he shadowboxes in slow-motion. The camera then cuts from a high-angle close up of his softly-lit face, to an extreme close-up of his back as it is massaged by the hands of the other boxer. The camera lingers on his oiled muscles, then proceeds to move down his muscular and shiny left arm, muscles flexed as he continues to shadow-box in slow movements. Then the camera cuts back to Diana's face, looking on.

The lingering close-ups and soft lighting, in addition to the patterns of the gaze, are reminiscent of established (mainstream) cinematic conventions for framing the *female* body, constituting a reversal of these gendered norms, and positioning Diana as subject, as the owner of the gaze. Additionally, the image of two male boxers in sensual physical contact addresses the lingering homoeroticism of boxing rather explicitly. Diana's



curious and arguably desiring gaze could be read as a disavowal of notions of male homoeroticism. However, her 'masculinity' also complicates this notion, implying that her gaze is one of identification; this, ultimately, draws attention to the restrictiveness of binary conceptions of sex and gender. Is the gaze of Diana, a 'masculine' female, a heterosexually desiring gaze? A homosexually desiring gaze? Or one of identification? Or both? The boxing context is thus introduced as a space in which possibilities for non-normative expressions of sex/gender, desire and identification exist. Importantly, the sequence of Diana's first entrance into the boxing world establishes the gym not only as a male-dominated and homosocial space, but also as a microcosm of the wider working-class Hispanic community. Diana's working-class Latina identity is thus asserted through both the broader social context as well as the boxing context depicted in the film.

To summarise, the opening part of the film that leads up to the first training sequence functions to establish Diana's character not only as a disillusioned member of a disenfranchised ethnic-minority, working-class group, but also as an individual who is alienated from, and marginalised within, this group and her family. She is characterised as somehow 'naturally' physical and aggressive, as fundamentally different from the other Hispanic, but explicitly feminine, female characters. Diana communicates with and relates to her environment through her physical presence, lets her (violent) actions speak for themselves; this is the kind of behaviour, combined with her physical appearance, that gets her into (gender) trouble.

### **The Female Body 'In Action': Narrative and Boxing 'Numbers' in *Girlfight***

Diana gains entrance into the boxing world after her character is firmly situated within a specific socio-cultural (working-class, ethnic-minority) context. Narrative conflicts and tensions, most of which are directly related to Diana's unconventional gender expression, are addressed, and at times resolved, within the boxing sequences, imbuing Diana's character with a sense of physical agency. The aesthetics of the boxing sequences change throughout the film, paralleling Diana's changing relationship to her body and her developing sense of self as a sexed, gendered, raced, and classed subject. While the early boxing sequences demonstrate Diana's alienation from the physicality of her ambiguously gendered body, later boxing sequences convey a sense of Diana's subjective bodily experience during training and in the ring. Diana's struggle for bodily agency and subjectivity is ultimately contained, however, as the emphasis on the physicality of the body is replaced by a sense of abstraction and generic integration.

The first training sequence in the gym opens with a close-up of Diana's mirror image as she looks at herself. The mirror is broken and her mirror image is distorted. What the viewer sees, and what Diana sees of herself, is a split image, which is arguably reflective of her fragmented sense of self, as it has been established in the scenes leading up to this first training sequence. The camera zooms out from a close-up of the mirror image of Diana's distorted face to reveal her body. Her baggy and worn-out clothes largely conceal her physique and the shape of her body, underlining her androgyny. Diana's contemplation of herself in the mirror thus represents her own growing awareness of her struggle for a unified (gender) identity that is centred on the body.

This first boxing 'number' also depicts Diana's raw physical talent and prowess. Her movements are unrefined, uncontrolled, and appear awkward, especially in contrast to the smooth, fluid motions of the male boxers who are visible in the back of the frame.

Diana's lack of rhythm and skill is also underlined as it contrasts with the now familiar rhythmic Latin-American music that plays in the soundtrack during this sequence. The music functions to reassert the centrality of ethnicity, while the diegetic noises in the run-down gym add to the realist and unglamorous tone of the sequence, reinforcing already established notions of the working class. Diana's unfamiliarity with the intensity of a boxing training session also draws her attention to the limits of her own physicality. At the end of the sequence Diana is exhausted and soaked in sweat. She is not 'in tune' with or in control of her body. In a sense, her body is not the subject but the object of movement (Young 148). What this first training sequence provides, then, is a statement of Diana's alienation from the physicality of her body and thus an embodied sense of self. It is a potent manifestation of the physical strain of her struggle for a unified gender identity.

The mirror image in a training sequence much later in the film (directly following Diana's sparring match with Adrian) recalls and contrasts the distorted mirror image of the very first training sequence. The sequence opens with an extreme close up of Diana's softly lit face as the rhythmic Latin-American music begins to play in the soundtrack, accompanied by the voice of Diana's trainer Hector (Jaime Tirelli). He reads out a letter from the boxing association that announces the introduction of 'gender-blind' amateur boxing, meaning that male and female boxers are officially accepted as 'equal'. The framing of Diana's body and face in this sequence contrasts heavily with the previous emphasis on the angularity of her face, shoulders, and body frame as a whole. The highlighting of the softness and roundness of her face recalls more traditional cinematic conventions for framing the female body and face. As female boxing is integrated into the boxing mainstream (as indicated by Hector's voice-over), Diana is integrated into mainstream cinematic conventions.

As Diana begins to shadowbox to the rhythmic clapping of the music the camera zooms out slowly from the close-up of her face. The environment is revealed as Diana's bedroom – the walls painted in a 'girly' pink – that is illuminated by soft, hazy lighting. Her face and upper body in the centre of the frame are revealed as her mirror image. As Diana starts to shadow-box while looking at herself in her bedroom mirror, the speed and precision, as well as the graceful and aesthetically pleasing nature of her boxing movements, are emphasised. The sequence can be read as a visual expression of Diana's more holistic and less fragmented sense of self. Her movements are as powerful and energetic as they are in the early training sequences, but they are simultaneously smooth and fluid, a notion that is foregrounded by the film's Latin-American score. Diana now seems more in control of her body and more confident in her physicality.

The scene accentuates and idealises the aesthetic, graceful, and, perhaps, more feminine, nature of boxing, assuaging the tension evoked by Diana's defiance of normative notions of gender. In contrast to the previous boxing sequences, in which Diana trains in the public space of the boxing gym, the bedroom is a contained and intimate space. It is telling, perhaps, that this depiction of Diana's refined athleticism takes place in the traditionally female sphere of the private and the domestic. In the immediately following shot of Diana training in the gym, she is now dressed not in worn-out and loosely fitting clothes, but in tight tracksuit bottoms and a sports bra top that reveal her toned physique. Ultimately, Diana's refined athleticism, as well as her refined sense of self, are represented through a more revealing depiction of her bodily form,

which necessarily accentuates the explicitly ‘female’ aspects of her otherwise muscular, and as such masculine, body.

The training montage before Diana’s fight against a well known female boxer later in the film further reasserts that depictions of Diana’s progress as a boxer, in particular the emphasis on her refined physicality, coincide with a shift in framing that recalls more traditional cinematic conventions for framing the female body. The first shot depicts the now-familiar distorted mirror image of Diana, this time in a red sports bra, shadow boxing in front of the broken mirror in the gym. Her movements are quick but controlled. The camera then cuts to a long shot of Diana hitting the speed bag in the only illuminated corner of the otherwise dark and empty gym. The soft light from above in the following medium close-up of Diana’s back and shoulders emphasises the outline of her broad and muscular frame against the dark wall, imbuing the scene with a consciously ‘artistic’ dimension. The fast, rhythmic music underlines the speed and smoothness of her movements. In contrast to the previous emphasis on the physicality of the body, as it relates to the acquisition of an embodied subjectivity, the viewer is, in a sense, invited to contemplate the aesthetic beauty of Diana’s muscular body in motion. Hector’s voice-over, which plays in the soundtrack during the first part of the montage sequence, announces ‘I will train you so hard, you will be wired like a machine’. The voice-over, in addition to the music, provides a sense of continuation between the various shots of Diana engaged in different forms of training. It also, however, creates a sense of distance from the image of Diana in training. The notion of Diana *being trained* by Hector undermines the sense of physical (and narrative) agency previously constructed around Diana’s engagement in boxing.

As I have shown, a consideration of the training sequences in *Girlfight* provides an illustration of the ways in which Diana’s increasingly refined physicality as a boxer, and as such her increasingly unified sense of self, coincide with a change in framing which suggests a generic integration that undermines her character’s (bodily) agency. These sequences usefully complicate the film’s suggestion that boxing provides an opportunity for the individual to develop a coherent sense of embodied selfhood.

The sparring/fight (as opposed to training) ‘numbers’ of the film are more directly associated with specific narrative conflicts, all of which are somehow related to Diana’s defiance of normative notions of gender. The sparring/fight sequences are, I want to suggest, physical articulations of these conflicts – most dramatically so when the boxing and social worlds overlap. Diana’s first sparring match – meaning the first time she is in the ring with an opponent, ‘allowed’ to hit and also running the risk of being hit – is against Ray (Victor Sierra), one of the male boxers in the gym. The tension surrounding this ‘battle of the sexes’ can be read as an expression of the perceived threat to the dominant gender order that is based partly on the assumption of men’s physical superiority over women. The match is set within the narrative context of a general resistance (by the male coaches and some of the male boxers, including Ray) against the admission of a female boxer into the gym. For the majority of this sequence, the camera either stays outside the ring or frames the boxers through a static low-angle shot from the corner of the ring. The lengthy takes emphasise the enclosed and restrictive space of the ring, as well as the awkward and unrefined nature of the two boxers’ movements. It also underlines Ray’s unwillingness to fight a ‘girl’ and the fears associated with a possible defeat. The lack of subjective (boxing) experience conveyed here is also reinforced when,

in the beginning of the sequence, the camera cuts away from the boxing action for prolonged periods of time, focusing instead on the conversation between Ray's and Diana's trainers. Their conversation continues to run in the soundtrack even when the camera cuts back to the boxers, stressing the outsider perspective occupied by the camera and the viewer. Overall, the sequence is an articulation of the resistance Diana experiences against her pursuit of boxing, due predominantly to the 'inappropriateness' of her gender.

The sparring match between Diana and her boyfriend Adrian is one of the film's most explicit attempts to resolve a narrative conflict within the boxing 'number'. The fight is imbued with tension because Diana and Adrian are, at this point, romantically involved. The competition for physical superiority threatens (should Diana win) the very core of dominant conceptions of heterosexuality. The fight takes on additional narrative significance because Diana sees Adrian in the company of another woman in the sequence immediately preceding the fight. While the camera is in the ring with the boxers, the lengthy static takes parallel the lack of action in the ring. Adrian is passive and tries to get out of Diana's way without attempting to hit her himself. The tension expressed by the two boxers circling each other, recalling the personal tension between them, and anticipating the intensity of the fight, is emphasised by repeated cuts to close-ups of the boxers' feet dancing across the canvas. Reaction shots of both boxers' trainers also underline the lack of action in the ring, where Diana grows frustrated and angry as Adrian refuses to hit her. The sequence ends with an image of both boxers holding on to each other in what could be referred to, outside the boxing ring, as an embrace. This is the point at which Diana leans over and whispers in Adrian's ear, 'I love you, I really do'. Then, as the bell rings to indicate the end of the round, Diana delivers a heavy punch to the side of Adrian's head.

The overlap between the social and boxing worlds, and the significance of boxing in the context of established narrative conflicts, is further reinforced in the sequence immediately succeeding Diana's first official fight. Here, the 'number', a physically violent confrontation between Diana and her father, takes place in the domestic space of the home. During this 'fight scene' the film's signature Latin-American score begins to play in the soundtrack again, drawing parallels to earlier boxing sequences. The fight takes place in the narrative context of Diana's cold, distanced, and adverse relationship to her father, who holds very traditional views regarding gender roles in particular. Fundamentally, he is strictly opposed to Diana's pursuit of boxing, while he pressures her overly effeminate brother into taking boxing lessons; Diana also blames her mother's suicide on his alcoholism and abusive behaviour. The confrontation is a violent display of Diana's physical prowess as she beats her father unconscious. The image of Diana's father lying on the kitchen floor is also his last appearance in the film. Arguably, this scene can be read as a violent reaction against the restrictively patriarchal nature of traditional gender relations within the Hispanic/Latin community, which Diana's father symbolises.

With the exception of Diana's physically violent confrontation with her father, the final climactic bout is the film's most dramatic and intense overlap between the boxing and private/personal worlds. The fight is climactic in a number of ways. It is of athletic significance as Diana fights for the New York Amateur Championships. More importantly, however, Adrian will be Diana's opponent and the fight takes on additional

meaning in the context of the romantic relationship between the two characters. This physical confrontation between a man and a woman engaged in a heterosexual relationship draws very explicit attention to the restrictiveness of normative notions of gender and desire. As normative heterosexuality is based on very particular and binary conceptions of gender and gender relations, the fight threatens the very basis of Diana and Adrian's relationship. What is addressed through Adrian's initial refusal to fight Diana is the contradictory experience of boxing as simultaneously 'empowering' (in relation to the acquisition of a subjective and embodied sense of self) and debilitating for the female boxer, as it ultimately situates her outside normative notions of gender and heterosexuality. Adrian appears confused about his attraction to a woman who exhibits distinctly 'masculine' attributes. His reluctance to publicly commit to Diana recalls Laurie Schulze's argument that the anxiety around a male's attraction to a 'masculine' female is rooted in the association between masculinity and maleness, essentially evoking notions of homosexual desire.

*Girlfight* attempts to overcome the symbolic conflicts and tensions addressed through this final fight in a number of ways. The overall very different 'tone' of this final and climactic fight distinguishes this scene from earlier boxing sequences. It is overlaid with a slow, emotional, and almost spiritual score that contrasts with the ethnically and culturally specific music of previous boxing scenes. Along with the music, the slow-motion of the sequence aestheticises the violence and brutality of the fight. Annette Davison, referring to Claudia Gorbman's examination of narrative film music, argues that highly emotional cues, such as the score in this final 'number', are representations of the epic and the sublime. The music assists in '[elevating] the individuality of the represented character to universal significance' (81). Gorbman suggests further that emotional scoring 'invites the spectator to contemplate; it is helping to *make a spectacle* of the images it accompanies' [emphasis in original] (68). Therefore, 'the musical representation of the "epic" frequently occurs at moments in which the narrative is temporarily halted' (Davison 30). This is underlined by the brightly lit canvas that contrasts with the darkness surrounding the ring. The ring becomes an intimately separate space, a stage. It seems that Adrian and Diana, together, occupy a time and space separate from the time and space occupied by the diegetic audience. This notion is further reinforced by the close-up of Diana's face at the beginning of the second round, which then fades to a completely white screen before fading to a close-up of Adrian's face.

The emphasis on the materiality of the body in earlier sequences is replaced by a sense of abstraction. The significance of the materiality of the body, foregrounded earlier in the film, is strangely disavowed. The image of the boxers circling and holding onto each other in intimate embrace also implies a connection between boxing and dance (Oates 11), and is perhaps more suggestive of a love scene than a fight sequence. The imagery of both Adrian and Diana giving themselves up, transcending themselves in physical exhaustion, is reminiscent of traditional cinematic manifestations of the physicality of (hetero)sexual relations.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, the universalising tone of this final boxing sequence, together with the film's happy ending, which reunites the sexes, can be read as an articulation of a generic acceptance and integration into heteronormative and mainstream cinematic structures.

The ultimate goal for the female boxer does not necessarily appear to be athletic success in the 'utopian zone of epic individual achievement' (Brownrigg n.p.). For the female athlete, then, boxing does not necessarily represent the potential for transcendence into the timeless and mythic realm of Olympic universality. Rather, the universalising tone of the final boxing sequence in *Girlfight* is an attempt to overcome the tensions evoked by the protagonist's non-normative expression of gender. The notion of the body as central to the protagonist's selfhood is displaced by a sense of transcendence that disavows earlier, established conflicts surrounding the protagonist's struggle for an embodied subjectivity. The significance of the materiality of the body and the experience of this materiality are therefore renounced and replaced by a sense of generic acceptance and integration.

It is useful here to recall Richard Dyer's argument about the functional nature of genre as an articulation of 'utopia', as providing solutions to existing socio-cultural conflicts. Rather than providing representations of a concrete reality, he suggests, genres are an articulation of what utopia would 'feel like' (20). The climactic fight sequence in *Girlfight*, with its emotional, spiritual and universalising tone, provides a 'solution' to the 'problem' of the non-normative expression of gender that is somewhat removed from the reality of the (ambiguously gendered) body. Drawing further parallels between the boxing film and the musical, Rick Altman suggests that the music track during the song and dance 'number' in the musical lifts the image into a 'realm above the world of flesh and blood' (63). The same appears to be the case for the climactic boxing sequence in *Girlfight* – despite the film's attempt to construct a sense of the protagonist's struggle for a unified gender identity as *centred on the body* in the boxing/training scenes leading up to this final sequence. Arguably, the most intense articulation of the protagonist's subjectivity occurs in the final fight sequence. This sequence is also, however, abstract; the depiction of the boxers is removed from the articulation of a 'specific' identity – from the representation of the materiality of the sexed, gendered, raced, and classed body. In a sense, the 'solution' provided in *Girlfight* disavows the significance of the body in the context of the socio-cultural problems and conflicts addressed through the interaction between narrative and boxing numbers in the film.

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