

Re-Staging the Great Depression: Genre as Social Memory in Darren Aronofsky's *The Wrestler*

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From NPR's series on the Federal Writers' Project to a spate of biographies on FDR to the invocation of *The Grapes of Wrath* in a recent *Washington Post* editorial, it seems the Great Depression is everywhere in public discourse.¹ For students of 1930s culture, the sudden public reconsideration of Steinbeck and the Federal Writers' Project is both a source of surprise and a cause for speculation. After all, the Great Depression has long been politically and culturally a forgotten decade: Keynesianism was long announced dead, labor unions dying, social realism held as a bad joke in English departments. The welfare state that emerged with the New Deal is in tatters, and what fragments of 1930s left culture remain in cultural memory, like Woody Guthrie's "This Land is Your Land," survive often at the level of cultural cliché.

And yet it became increasingly clear that as all previously solid derivatives melted into air, the "forgotten decade" was suddenly remembered everywhere: *Time Magazine* issued a cover story entitled "Hard Times" with a 1931 black and white photo of a Chicago bread-line.² The same week, *Time* ran "Remembering the Depression" on its website, comprised of a series of Walker Evans photographs and first-person testimony of survivors, now in their 80s and 90s.³ Not to be outdone, *Newsweek* ran its February

¹ According to the Center for Economic Policy Research, nearly a third of working class homes in the United States cannot meet basic needs and live in a state of constant economic insecurity, and the effects of poverty also include increased levels of failed marriages and even domestic violence, Shawn Fremstad, Rebecca Ray, Hye Jin Rho, "Working Families and Economic Insecurity in the States: the Role of Job Quality and Supports," (Center for Economic Policy Research), <<http://www.cepr.net/>>, April 15, 2009.

² "In the final decades of the twentieth century, industrial labor lost its hegemony and in its stead emerged 'immaterial labor,' that is labor that creates immaterial products, such as knowledge, information, or an emotional response. . . . Affective labor . . . is the labor that produces or manipulates affects such as a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion. One can recognize affective labor in, for example, in the work of legal assistants, flight attendants, and fast food workers (service with a smile)," Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York, The Penguin Press, 2004), 107-8.

³ "A New Federal Writers Project," *Day to Day*, National Public Radio, December 11 2008, <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=98134230>>; "State by State," *Talk of the Nation*, November 27, 2008, <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=97574231>>; Scott Simon,

2009 cover story “Road to Recession” with Dorothea Lange’s 1938 “The Road West.”⁴ Even Pete Seeger had his moment in the rain during Presidential inauguration.

If *Time* got the genre right – the Federal Writers’ Project *First Person America* did change the way history was recorded – the stories underneath the Evans photos were mostly Reagan-era homilies of pluck and resilience. And like *Time*, Newsweek’s embrace of Keynesianism lite – “running deficits and printing money” – is a far cry from the government intervention and wholesale creation of new federal programs to create jobs that seemed to many in the 1930s a taste of what might be a socialist future to come. Few if any of these stories – from the *Washington Post* to *Time Magazine* – seemed to think we are in a new Depression. From neo-conservative Niall Ferguson to liberal Robert Samuelson, the system, they argue, is sound; all that may be necessary to shore up what is presented as a temporary glitch is a little tinkering at the edge. While there have been deeper concerns, including a *Newsweek* cover titled “Guide to Populist Rage” featuring pitchforks and torches, only one of the six commentators suggested anything about social movements. The Getty Archive photographs in *Time*’s memory piece – including images of farm workers, bread lines and hitch hikers by Evans and Dorothy Lange – stand in stark disjuncture to the stories of thrift and diligence they accompany.

One has to then ask what this frequent – almost obsessive – citation of the Great Depression should mean for those who write and work on the terrain of cultural production, and on the 1930s in particular. As critic Marita Sturken points out, cultural memory is “co-constitutive” with the process of forgetting: to “remember” the Depression offers a new national narrative and potentially suppresses others.⁵ And as Walter Benjamin writes in his seminal essay, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, such

“Unchained Memories,” National Public Radio, February 8, 2009, <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=986158>>; Thomas Sugrue, “The Hundred Days War,” review of *Traitor to his Class: the Privileged Life and Radical Presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt* by H.W. Brands and “Nothing to Fear: FDR’s Inner Circle and the Hundred Days that Created Modern America” by Adam Cohen, *The Nation*, April 27, 2009, 25-8; Rachel Dry “A Recession only Steinbeck Could Love,” *The Washington Post*, magazine, Sunday, March 22, 2009.

⁴ “Hard Times,” *Time Magazine*, cover, October 13, 2008.

⁵ “Remembering the Great Depression,” *Time Magazine*, February 27, 2009, <<http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/0,28757,1851306,00.html>>.

moments of crisis are precisely when the construction of new movements must "retain the image of the past" in order to "fan the spark of hope" for social change.⁶ Yet the essay also carries with it a warning. Memory contains a "threat" precisely because it is subject to and potentially agent of the same forces of power and hegemony as those that rule the present. There is always a "conformism that will overpower [memory]," denude its strangeness and power, and render history into merely a positive affirmation of the status quo. To remember Depression-era social movements, even to remember them as sources of positive change, is not necessarily the same as "fanning the spark of hope." Historical memory is double edged, and recollection is not the same as recovery.

As the mainstream media has engaged on its own memory project, it may seem appropriate to ask what cultural memory means in this new context, and what it should mean to "remember the Depression" as we are heading into what looks like a new one – especially as the news media seems to recall that Depression only in order to insist that we are not in one. Looking at two recent Hollywood films that reference the Depression may help to shed light on what memory can – and should – mean for those invested in the project of recovering (and re-activating) progressive and historically grounded culture. Likewise, as film may be the medium that best captures immediate social change, offering a rich textual and visual discourse, these films provide a more contradictory – and productive – forum for exploring this problematic. Produced between the needs of its investors and the demands of its creators for artistic content, film can show a more nuanced view of the present than the news, which is often more ideologically circumscribed.

Ron Howard's 2005 *Cinderella Man* and more recently Darren Aronofsky's 2008 *The Wrestler* are both films that are deeply invested in the memory of the Great Depression, and that can tell us much about the way in which that historical memory is constructed today. Of the two, *Cinderella Man* appears the most obvious fit for a "thirties film." Based on the real-life 1930s boxer James J. Braddock, it includes a host of Depression-era tropes that attempt to add gritty historical context to what some critics derided as an overly sentimental film. We see shots of Hoovervilles, hear references to

⁶ "The Road to Recession," *Newsweek*, cover, February 4, 2009.

political organizing, see pre-union waterfront hiring lines, relief offices, and the gray and ochre color scheme often associated with social realist art. More importantly, the film evokes what critic Chris Vials, in his recent book, *Realism for the Masses*, argues was one of the central mediums through which Popular Front politics were communicated: the boxing narrative.⁷ Films like *Kid Galahad*, *The Champ*, *The Killers*, *They Made Me a Criminal*, *Body and Soul* and *Golden Boy* (very closely modeled after the Clifford Odets play by the same name) portrayed the boxer as often ethnically marked and working class, exploited by a world of gangsters, consumerism, greedy promoters, and literally cut-throat competition that threaten his morality and, often, his life. While Frank Capra's work presented a cinematic portrait of the New Deal as a benevolent paternalism modeled on a small-town, the boxing narrative was, in fact, more emblematic of the movement culture of the Popular Front: it featured an urban, multi-ethnic, anti-fascist, and frequently anti-capitalist "structure of feeling" that fused pulp mass culture with a hard-edged working-class politics.

Unlike *Golden Boy*, which was produced as a play by Group Theater before it was a Warner Brothers film, 1937 *Kid Galahad* was emblematic precisely because of its relative insulation from left political movements. Nonetheless, the film represents what Michael Denning refers to as "the laboring of American culture" that began in the 1930s, articulating a working-class sensibility not necessarily associated with the Communist Party nor "political" in the narrow sense of party politics, but belonging to a generational re-alignment of culture that integrated a working-class constituency, thematic content, and sensibility.⁸ Ward Guisenberry, bellhop turned prize fighter, is re-christened "Kid Galahad" by his promoter to a roomful of photo-snapping reporters. Repeatedly, Guisenberry/Galahad's promoter, Nicky Donati, refers to the boxer as a "machine, not a violin player" and to his strong round-house punch as "money in the bank." In doing so, Guisenberry/Galahad becomes a kind of gilded proletarian whose body is merely an extension of the businessman's capital. The film proceeds with a number of formal

⁷ Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997), 2.

⁸ Walter Benjamin, "Theses of the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York, Schocken Books, 1968), 255.

contrasts between the commodified world of boxing and the anti- or pre-capitalist forms of labor. Guisenberry's dream to "own his own farm" is contrasted to Donati's urban and bourgeois schemes to make money from the labor of others; mobster Turkey Morgan's profit from gambling and other forms of crude speculation are contrasted with the generosity of the farm family and the frank honesty of Guisenberry.

In these films boxing is the *performance* of capitalism. In the broadest sense, the emphasis on boxing as a metaphor for capitalism has its roots in what Warren Susman notes as the importance of games and sportsmanship during the Depression.⁹ Not only was there a "dramatic increase" in games of all kinds, board games, sports leagues, the democratization of golf and tennis, the expansion of mass media in radio and film made sports and sports heroes national figures in ways they hadn't been before. As Susman points out, the game was also a metaphor for rules and mores that needed to be reinforced or, in the cases where the game wasn't played fair, for a social order that seemed to violate all of known boundaries. Even the New Deal borrowed its name from the language of the poker game. "Yet the striking fact remains," Susman writes, "that the increase in the particular kind of games that did dominate . . . in the 1930s . . . marked a return to an almost folk-style pattern of large-scale participation and engagement."¹⁰ Boxing by its very staging lends itself to a representation of anti-social competition: it is a game that unlike dance contests or baseball does not rely on a visible social cooperation. In Robert Siodmak's 1946 *The Killers* we see the body of a soon-to-be washed-up fighter in exhausted agony, as we do also in *Golden Boy*. Boxing in these films is presented as individualized, alienated labor. In the 1930s lexicon of games, it is the anti-game as it were.

⁹ Chris Vials, "Taking Down the Great White Hope," *Realism for the Masses: Aesthetics, Popular Front Pluralism, and U.S. Culture, 1935-1947* (Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 4.

¹⁰ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front*, (New York, Verso, 1998), xvi-xvii. Denning outlines several interrelated arguments about the changing U.S. culture of the 1930s: the growth of the labor movement, increased influence and participation of working class Americans in the arts, and the dramatic expansion of mass culture and education for working class adolescents and adults. While the Popular Front was a political movement, dominated by the Communist Party and left-lead unions of the CIO, and much of the culture produced by and around the movement was broadly working class, anti-fascist, and anti-racist in outlook, to suggest that it carried a CP or CIO "line" would drastically simplify the way culture works.

While *Kid Galahad* remains distinctly apolitical and conservative in its solution to the values of capitalism – one can either fall in love with a farm-girl or return to the countryside as a peasant producer – the binary between the commodified and capitalistic world of boxing and the social world of human values is a constant in boxing films, and often is deployed in more politically radical ways. In Clifford Odets' *Golden Boy*, for instance, boxer Joe Bonaparte's desire to "be better than you are" is contrasted with his father's wish that he fulfill his promise as a violinist or his brother's role as a organizer for the CIO who fights "for what he believes in."¹¹ In *The Killers*, a used-up fighter with a broken hand turns down the offer to be a neighborhood cop for "six times the money" as a small-time gangster. And while love is offered as a substitute for class competition, it is often the women involved in the world of boxing – cutting news-clippings of the boxer's prize-fights as in *Kid Galahad* or seducing the boxer to keep him in the game as in *Golden Boy* – that threaten to further ensnare the boxer within the world of commodities and consumerism. Ultimately, the boxing narratives of the 1930s portray the sport as a kind of unregulated, brutal competition that preys on the dreams of second generation immigrants to improve their lot and enter the mainstream of society.

Given the context of the 1930s in which it is just those second-generation children of immigrants who made the "backbone of the CIO," boxing films' implied rejection of self-serving competition and their implicit if not always explicit endorsement of an alternate value system based on intrinsic worth and mutuality undoubtedly resonated. As Lizabeth Cohen writes in *Making a New Deal*, by 1940, one in three factory workers in Chicago belonged to unions, compared with nearly none a decade earlier.¹² Mostly second-generation immigrants and blacks from the South, these new proletarians, while diverse and divided in many ways, shared English as a common language and often shared common mass cultural references to films and music. Together, Cohen argues, these new institutions like the CIO, federal programs delivered through the Democratic Party, and common cultural references fostered what she refers to as a "culture of unity,"

¹¹ Warren Susman, "The Culture of the Thirties," *Culture as History: Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York, Pantheon Books, 1984), 162.

¹² *Ibid.*, 162.

a political and cultural common sense based in mutuality and solidarity.¹³ This generational mood is dramatized by Clifford Odets in *Golden Boy*, in which Joe's father's wish that his sons live "the good life" by playing classical music is translated by Joe's brother Frankie into becoming a labor organizer for the CIO.

Viewed against the field, *Cinderella Man* violates nearly every premise of the 1930s boxing film narrative. The washed up boxer James J. Braddock returns to the ring from the relief rolls to win the heavy-weight championship from Max Baer. Considered an "underdog," Braddock is depicted as an "everyman" who represents the struggles of ordinary people against the well-heeled Baer. Despite the populism implicit in the depiction of Braddock's poverty, the film never problematizes the sport itself. Indeed, the match seems to pit the "good" boxer, James J. Braddock, who fights "for my family," against the "bad" boxer, Baer, who is seen as an arrogant playboy. Indeed, Braddock is not only shown to be a family man, but a constant dispenser of cracker-jack moral wisdom: he lectures his kids on the evils of stealing, explains to his wife the virtues of keeping his word, and returns his relief money to the welfare agency after he is self-sufficient again. Rather than represent the boxing ring as a microcosm of working-class capitalist competition, Braddock frames it as the only legitimate avenue to assert one's independence and manhood against those who would look down on working men. In the ring he tells his wife, "at least I know who's hitting me."

Braddock as a muscle-bound Horatio Alger is dramatically underscored by Braddock's co-worker, Wilson, who advocates for unionization at the docks. Shown as an alcoholic who flees after hitting his wife, he is eventually trampled by police horses after trying to organize members of a Hooverville in the city. Advocating that "working people have to fight," Wilson is also portrayed as emotionally unbalanced, appearing drunk during a community birthday party before assaulting his wife and insulting Braddock only to flee running down the street. While it's clear that Braddock pities his co-worker, it's also clear that Wilson's radicalism is tied to his emotional instability. As Baer is Braddock's foil in the ring, so Wilson becomes Braddock's foil in the public and

¹³ Clifford Odets, *Golden Boy, Six Plays of Clifford Odets* (New York, Grove Press, 1979), Act 3, Scene 1, p. 2; Act 3, Scene 3, p. 3.

domestic spheres. Braddock's loyalty to his family is tied thus to his work ethic and professionalism; his "goodness" at home becomes a sign that he knows to limit his "fighting" to the ring. Structurally, Wilson's death is contrasted to the deadly power of Baer's punches. While Wilson abandons his family to organize, Braddock fights only "to buy milk" for his kids. Indeed, it is continually suggested that Braddock's need to put food on the table is what makes him nearly invincible in the ring; the sanctity of the nuclear family gives him what appears to be superhuman power. Compared to *Golden Boy* in which union organizing is seen as an antidote for the competition of the ring, *Cinderella Man* suggests boxing as a safer and more certain alternative to political advocacy, with self-reliance as its core virtue and the capitalist family structure as its constituency.

There is a telling moment when Braddock's wife attempts to convince her husband's fight promoter to cancel Braddock's fight with Baer. The promoter, who has sold his own furniture to promote the fight, reveals that he believes in Braddock "as a cause" rather than just a fighter, let alone a mere business investment. Pitted against blacks, rural hicks, Jews and a very swarthy half-Jewish Max Baer in a series of dramatic wins, one has to wonder what "cause" the crowds at Madison Square Garden and those praying for Braddock in Catholic churches are cheering for. Along with Braddock's feelings of shame around receiving welfare (and his much publicized return of his relief money), his humiliation at unemployment is resolved less through an ultimate rejection of capitalism than through a symbolic victory over ethnic outsiders who are perceived to be its beneficiaries. In contrast to the coalition of minority organizations and union members formed the political backbone of the Popular Front, the image of a lone white hero battling Jewish and black boxers against the shame of federal relief transforms the New Deal "cultures of unity," into a story of racial backlash. As his identification with the Catholic Church may suggest, Braddock's status as a "common man" thus may have more to do with the racial populism of Father Coughlin than with anti-racist social democracy of the Popular Front. Transforming the "culture of unity" to a populism of *white* unity, so the film also completes the transformation of the Popular Front from a movement that challenged racial capitalism in the U.S. and imperialism abroad to a movement that prefigures a white post-war middle class.

As Vials argues, boxing narratives of the 1930s often provided opportunities to link class consciousness to a critique of whiteness.¹⁴ For Richard Wright, the boxing ring was a mass-cultural arena in which black Americans could feel racial pride. Joe Louis' victory over Max Baer was written about enthusiastically by Wright in the *New Masses*' piece "Joe Louis Uncovers Dynamite" that "Joe Louis was a consciously felt symbol. Joe was the concentrated essence of black over white."¹⁵ Max Baer himself took to wearing a Star of David on his boxing shorts after he defeated Germany's Max Schmelling, as a conscious repudiation of Nazi racial ideology. In Clifford Odets' *Golden Boy*, his ultimate self-destruction comes after he kills the black boxer the Baltimore Chocolate Drop in the ring. Even *Kid Galahad* suggests that the price of boxing is the adoption a deracinated "white" identity, as we follow Guisenberry from his idyllic Scandinavian farm village to an urban consumerscape in which his name provokes laughter from crowds of partiers and is seen as merely one more hardship to conquer. In contrast, the film seems to celebrate the ethnic background of fight promoter Nicky Donati, by showing an extended scene of untranslated dialogue between him and his Italian-born mother at her rural farm in upstate New York. As a negligent son who rarely visits his home, it's implied that Nicky's downfall and ultimate death is related to his rejection of his cultural and ethnic roots. Perhaps the most telling anti-racist moment in 1930s boxing comes from an anecdote related in Cohen's history of working class Chicago: during a CIO organizing drive, she reports how both white and black boxers in the union supported Louis and even listened to the Baer-Louis fight during a membership meeting.¹⁶ Cohen suggests that for the multi-ethnic CIO, working-class support for Louis helped bridge racial divides facing industrial workers in Chicago.

¹⁴ Chris Vials, "Taking Down the Great White Hope," *Realism for the Masses: Aesthetics, Popular Front Pluralism, and U.S. Culture, 1935-1947* (Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 4.

¹⁵ Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990), 2. 333.

¹⁶ Vials, *Realism for the Masses*, 21-31. Chris Vials gives an excellent reading of Clifford Odets' *Golden Boy* and Nelson Algren's *Never Come Morning* as Popular Front works in which white-ethnic boxers embrace the promise of white upward mobility offered by the sport, at the expense of boxers of color. As both Odets and Algren were committed anti-racists, the boxers' failure can persuasively be read as a warning against the culture of whiteness.

As Vials argues in *Realism for the Masses*, films like *Rocky*, *Cinderella Man* and *Million Dollar Baby* “bear witness to the decline” of the Popular Front incarnation of the boxing narrative.¹⁷ I would argue however, that what is happening is more complicated. Popular Front era politics have not merely “declined;” rather the working class iconography has been subsumed within an implicitly racialized – often racist – populism. As a restaging of the Great Depression, *Cinderella Man* fits uncomfortably well with post-60s formations of a white working class pitted against minorities who depend on welfare from the state and political largesse from well-heeled liberals. Like Allan Bakke, the medical school applicant who famously sued the University of California to overturn affirmative action, a working-class white person is framed in contrast to ethnic outsiders who use their connections to get ahead. Hillary Clinton’s appeals to “hard-working Americans, white Americans” who supposedly preferred her to Barack Obama in the Democratic primary are little different from Braddock’s insistence that he fights for the “common man” by knocking down uppity Jews and blacks in the ring. Given the racial politics of the boxing narrative, Braddock’s whiteness stands in sharp contrast to his opponents’ ethnic and racial otherness. In this sense, films like *Cinderella Man* or even Walker Evans’ photos in *Time Magazine* should be considered less as reconstructions of the Depression than as arguments about its historical legacy. Far from the actual social movements in the 1930s that challenged racism and demanded a more democratic economy, these narratives reproduce a narrative of whiteness, in which social welfare was a temporary, unfortunate necessity that white people were able to overcome (unlike certain implied “others”) through hard work and resilience. Thus the contradictions of the news media depictions of the 1930s bear with them implicit arguments about the Depression that go beyond their mere citation. Remembering the Depression through hard-working white boxers or as a moment when white, working-class Americans struggled to maintain their racialized and individualized identity suggests a response to today’s financial crisis that may include temporary relief but cannot challenge any of the systemic inequalities of the system.

¹⁷ Richard Wright, “Joe Louis Uncovers Dynamite,” *New Masses: An Anthology of the Rebel Territories* ed. by Wright and Joseph Norton (New York, International Publishers, 1969), 66-8.

“Remembering” a social movement is different from citing it. Indeed, as *Cinderella Man* suggests, citing a social movement can be a way of forgetting it. The film *The Wrestler*, I argue, recalls the classic 1930s Depression-era boxing films, and yet does so through modalities of the present. What it shares with the boxing films is less the focus on a particular sport but rather a genre of filmmaking in which class, consumerism, ethnic identity, alienation, and sexism form crucial intersections in the representation of late capitalism. In a sense, one could say the boxing films of the 1930s are precise examples of what Georg Lukacs refers to as “historical fiction,” fiction that does not simply “reproduce” a historical time period, but rather attempts to understand the class formations of a given point in history.¹⁸ Thus the Popular Front boxing films hinge almost obsessively on the choice of the boxer to accept his class identity and renounce his own commodification. That these concerns are also intersected with questions of ethnic identity and cross-racial alliances forms a structural homology to the worker’s choice to join the swelling labor movement. Boxing films became allegories of commitment during a time when joining such a movement presented a real choice for the urban, ethnic workers these films portray. As Joe Bonaparte’s death on the Long Island Expressway while speeding in his brand new car suggests, they are also warnings against the failure to commit to something other than individual success.

The Wrestler inherits these categories of concern – the body as commodity, solidarity in the face of racial difference, the lure of consumerism, Americanization versus ethnic belonging – and moves them into post-modern and post-industrial New Jersey. In one sense, Robin/Randy “The Ram” Randzinski/Robinson seems the obvious inheritor of Ward Guisenberry or Joe Bonaparte’s legacy. A white-ethnic with working-class roots, his role as a wrestler is inextricably tied to his new “American” identity, apart from ethnic identification. In the same way Joe Bonaparte leaves his Italian-American roots, Ward Guisenberry’s “funny name” becomes “Kid Galahad” or Nelson Algren’s Bruno Bicek is rechristened “Lefty Biceps,” so Robin Randzinski becomes Randy “The Ram” Robinson, with bottle-blond hair and an oversized American flag. Literally, the name is an inversion of his identity: Randzinski is transformed into “Randy” and the

¹⁸ Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 330.

gender-ambiguous “Robin” becomes the Anglicized “Robinson,” thus transforming the Slavic ethnic-American into an American icon. Cast as the White Hero against politically and racially identified enemies inside the ring – a flag-waving black man in Palestinian national colors named “the Ayatollah” and an anarchist with a red and black mohican – Randzinski/Robinson outside of the ring leads a life of working-class economic and social hardship. Frequently late on the rent, without medical insurance or a pension, his family an apparent victim to the requirements of his employment, Randzinski/Robinson leads a life not so different from the lives of many working-class Americans.¹⁹

What is absent from the film, of course, is the social movement politics of the 1930s. While it’s clear that Randzinski/Robinson is exploited, with the exception of a reference to “guys with Cadillacs” and his disappointment over low pay, the 1930s obsession with boxing “management” is absent. Likewise, the choice that Ward Guisenberry makes to return to farming or the choice Joe Bonaparte’s brother makes to organize for the CIO are not available to Randzinski/Robinson. Rather, his alternative is to work in the deli counter of the local supermarket, which as Randzinski/Robinson shows, is merely another form of performance. The distinction between two forms of what Hardt and Negri refer to as “affective labor,” one that is potentially highly paid but unsteady and other which is low-paid and humiliating must suffice for choices in Randzinski/Robinson’s blue-collar stretch of New Jersey.²⁰ Lacking an external movement alternative to which to turn, the immediate struggle for Randzinski/Robinson is to form connections with other “affective” workers, whether strippers or other former wrestlers, to recognize their conditions within a class framework.

The radical potential in the film, like *Golden Boy*’s recognition of the work as organizer Frankie does, is to see the class nature of non-productive labor and performance. The recognition Randzinski/Robinson and Pam/Cassidy have for one other is romantic, but it is also a fundamental recognition of a particular kind of class solidarity. As Hardt and Negri write in *Multitude*, the era of post-modern production is as much about the extension of capitalist relations around the globe as it is about its

¹⁹ Vials, *Realism*, 36.

²⁰ Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. by Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (London, Merlin Press), 1962.

incursion into modes of existence previous imagined sealed off or immune. Whereas *Kid Galahad* imagines love as an antidote to exploitation, romantic and familial love in *The Wrestler* is very much within and part of capitalist biopolitics. Rather than attempt to construct binaries of performance and reality – or productive as against “performative” labor as *Golden Boy* does – the film de-fetishizes the labor process of “affective” work. When Robsinson/Randzinski interrupts a verbally abusive lap dance Pam/Cassidy is soliciting from four young men, charging that “they don’t know how to treat a lady,” Pam/Cassidy angrily complains that his chivalry cost her two-hundred dollars, suggesting that gender humiliation is precisely part of the “emotional” labor she performs. Likewise, we see many scenes that feature Robsinson/Randzinski negotiating with other wrestlers about routines pre-match (“I hope staples are OK”), and that introduce viewers to wrestling stagecraft (a small razor used to draw one’s own blood, for instance). Furthermore, shots of wrestling are juxtaposed with shots of stripping, and for a moment, Robsinson/Randzinski imagines himself entering the ring to the sound of 80s music when he enters the deli-counter, encouraging viewers to see the connections between these apparently disparate sites of performative labor. The deli counter itself appears as a kind of performance, as Robsinson/Randzinski’s skills as a showman makes him initially popular with the customers. Indeed, it’s suggested that it is because Robsinson/Randzinski sees the value in performative or “emotive” labor, that he doesn’t see anything strange about Pam/Cassidy’s “other” life as a mother. *The Wrestler* does not retreat from post-modern capitalism into a nostalgia for the past so much as it dialectically goes through the contradictions of Randzinski/Robsinson’s love for Pam/Cassidy and attempts to come through the other side. Indeed, the closest to a “pastoral” contrast or fantasy of “escape” we get here is merely an image on Pam’s cell-phone, an image of a condo that has yet to be constructed.

This is not to suggest that *The Wrestler* offers no critique of class. In addition to the poverty Randzinski/Robsinson faces, it is made obvious that his body is a commodity. He refers to it as a “broken down piece of meat” and, as such, his body – injected with steroids, colored, tanned, and shaved – is likened visually to the shaped and dyed packages pieces of meat that he sells as a deli counter clerk in the Acme Supermarket. And giving a twist to the usual boxing tale, in which women are generally presented as

either temptresses or saviors, Randzinski/Robinson is attracted to and courts Pam/Cassidy, a stripper whose body, like his, is an aging commodity (mis)used by her profession.

Randzinski/Robinson's tragedy is not Joe Bonaparte's or "Lefty" Bicek's – that the world of cut-throat competition prevents his return to a life of pre-capitalist idyll – but rather that he cannot differentiate the commodified image of himself as a "wrestler" from his material condition. He is angry that he has to wear a name-tag with "Robin" instead of his stage name "Randy" on it, and he seems to be equally mystified by Pam/Cassidy's insistence upon the distinction between real relationships and the client/stripper relations he has with her as a paying customer to her club. While in some ways this tragic misrecognition is also his saving grace (Pam/Cassidy eventually falls for Randzinski/Robinson), the structure of alienation is quite different from earlier boxing narratives. Rather than suggest he join a social movement and reconstruct class as a marker of liberation, Randzinski/Robinson's struggle is to differentiate the relations between commodities from the relations between people.

As much as Randzinski/Robinson insists on the value of affective labor – unlike Ward Guisenberry, who understands his role as a "machine," and unlike Joe Bonaparte, who rails against the managers that "own" him and "use him like a gun" – Randzinski/Robinson identifies with the consumer image of himself as a "hero" and "face."²¹ In the opening scenes of *The Wrestler* we follow the back of Robin/Randy "The Ram" Randzinski/Robinson for what seems like an uncomfortable amount of time. We see him coughing and exhausted after the fight; we see his back as he questions his promoter about "the gate" money; we see him autograph a fan's program; and we see him locked out of his trailer for late rent. The first time we are granted a long view at Randzinski/Robinson's face he is gazing at the inside of his van, at an impressive collage of his own commercialized images: newspaper clippings, promotions, posters, even an action figure of himself on the dashboard, all taking place of course, inside "the Ram's" Dodge Ram. The "face" among villains, the wrestler's face only emerges when gazing at his consumer identity.

²¹ Odets, *Golden Boy*, Act 2, Scene 1, pg. 291; Act 3, Scene 1, p. 309.

This split between what the audience sees and what Randzinski/Robinson sees suggests the alienation faced by the wrestler is as much a question of identity as it is of exploitation. Unlike *Golden Boy* in which Bonapart's role as a performer in the ring is contrasted to the "real" labor of artistic production, or Guisenberry, who dreams of the productive labor of farm work as opposite to the performative labor of boxing, there is no such opposition in *The Wrestler*. In *Kid Galahad*, the phoniness of the boxing spectacle and its performative aspect is seen as degrading, and it is a sign of Guisenberry's integrity that he refuses to "bicycle" or "play" an opponent, rather than knock him out directly. In distinction, Randzinski/Robinson both produces and consumes the commodity of himself, surrounding himself with reminders of his status as a consumer object, from wrestling video games in which he is the hero, to oversized American flags that serve as necessary props for his part. When he panics inside the deli at the meat cutting station, it is because a customer recognizes him as the wrestler he used to be, thus highlighting the gap between Randzinski/Robinson as a "piece of meat" and "the Ram" as a hero. As Slavoj Zizek writes in *The Parallax View*, there is no opposition between the role of worker and consumer here, since it is only as a consumer that the commodity is realized as value.²² Value created by labor is "performatively enacted" not at the site of production, but rather at the site of consumption, where the worker-consumer completes the cycle of exploitation by realizing the value of the commodity that labor has produced. If the wrestler is both the producer and consumer of his own commodity, then in many ways his situation is not all that different from the U.S. working class. He "closes the gap" as Zizek would say only by staging and consuming wrestling matches as much to keep the self-referential system going as to accomplish anything per se.

If there is a resistance to this confounding capitalist gaze, it has its source in the body. Bodies are everywhere in this film – breaking down, sweating, wearing hearing aids, exposing their flesh, being punctured and pierced. Thus it's not incidental that the material limits of the wrestler's commodity status – the split between Randzinski, working class failed father/husband, and "The Ram" Robinson hero – are most starkly confronted after his heart attack. The body is what links him not only to his daughter, but

²² Slavoj Zizek, "The Parallax View," *The New Left Review*, 25(2) January-February 2004, 121-34.

also to his common condition with Pam/Cassidy. Like Pam/Cassidy, his fans “don’t like to hear about a family” and, yet, unlike her, he abandons them entirely. The commodity, according to Marx, appears free of its past, as if it came from nowhere. And thus it is at the level of irony that what he gives to Pam/Cassidy is a representation of exactly that life: an individually packaged action figure. Framed by his hearing aid, Randzinski/Robinson’s confession that he’s a “broken down piece of meat” occurs in front of his daughter reinforces not only his own awareness of his status, but the film’s awareness that above all it is the suffering flesh and blood that, in breaking down, can force the recognition of the social cost of the circuit of production and consumption.

If the film stages the body as a site of resistance to the commodity fetishism of identity, this resistance is certainly precarious. Randzinski/Robinson’s pick-up of a wrestling fan suggests the consumer fetish offers seductive pleasures, even as it produces alienation within acts of intimacy, as an extension to the realm of the spectacle. While Randzinski/Robinson lies about his status as a wrestler to the woman, it’s clear that her invitation to “party like a fireman” is part of an active fetish supported by posters, action figures, and even fireman boots she has him wear while having sex. As she tells him at the bar when they first meet: “I know who you are.” Within the ring, audience participation is equally totemistic. There is a disturbing scene in which Randzinski/Robinson is handed an artificial leg with which to hit his opponent during a “hardcore match.” The request that Randzinski/Robinson perform an act of violence with a disabled man’s prosthesis suggests something of a faith healing: the association with the spectacle of ableism will produce all it touches with the perfect life of the commodity. Even the most fleeting contact with the commodity spectacle is thus pregnant with the promise of “immortality.”

And again, unlike earlier boxing narratives, the non-commodified relationships with either a woman or with family do not (and cannot) serve as a refuge or escape for Randzinski/Robinson. His relationship with his daughter is broken past healing, and by the time Pam/Cassidy accepts him, he’s already found the gap between production and consumption, identity and image to be too painful to bear. Randzinski/Robinson announces in his last fight that the crowds at the wrestling match “are my family,” suggesting that the circuit of capital can produce a close-knit discursive unit: like the man

with the artificial leg, within its bounds, the fiction can be real. Similarly, that he gives his speech to his daughter at the closed-down site of a beach-side amusement seems significant. It suggests an older form of consumer culture in which human and collective interaction was still the center of events. Randzinski/Robinson remembers his daughter “clinging to his leg” as they descended on a ride, and they finish the day dancing in an abandoned ballroom. Where consumer culture was once a collective focal point of working class life and even facilitated organizing, *The Wrestler* suggests that contemporary mass culture is based on a spectacle in which one is a passive observer, radically limiting its progressive potential.²³ Indeed, as critic Joseph Ramsey has recently noted: “Once upon a time, indulging in consumer culture meant giving oneself a ‘scare’ – Stephanie’s favorite ride, as Randy recalls, was the ‘Hall of Monsters’ – that would make you hold tight to the living leg of an actual family member beside you; nowadays, the film suggests, it means seeking an artificial ‘family’ member who will hold your prosthetic leg in the spectacular lights, wielding the symbol of your debility on stage as if it were as a weapon.”²⁴

Yet within the ring, wrestlers show a very material understanding of the codes of sport – who is the “face” and who is the “heel,” e.g., the “white hero” as against a kitchified Arab nationalism. Likewise, the class-conscious coaching Randy gives to “Tommy Rotten” before the match, that “guys with Cadillacs do the promoting . . . it’s not about ability” obviously contradicts with the triumph of Americanism over anarchism that their fight narrative in the ring suggests. More importantly, they also find ways to support each other during the match. Randzinski/Robinson tells “The Ayatollah” to “go easy,” and when he sees that Randzinski/Robinson is gasping for breath, “The Ayatollah” invites Randzinski/Robinson to “pin me” and end the fight. Replacing the racism of fascism or the Ku Klux Klan of the 1930s that were central features of boxing stories like *Golden Boy* and Wright’s reportage of Joe Louis, *The Wrestler* references the global racial politics of the post-Cold War era through the characterization of “The Ayatollah.” Waving a red, green, and black flag, and attempting to sneak up on “the Ram” “the

²³ See Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, and Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1986).

²⁴ Joseph Ramsey, from email correspondence, May 2009.

Ayatollah,” in a parody of guerrilla warfare, suggests that the present moment has resurrected Cold War racial politics of a previous era. Yet as much as Randzinski/Robinson identifies with post-September 11th patriotism, his gestures of workplace solidarity with “Ayatollah” in the ring suggest a radical view of class based on material condition. Unlike *Rocky IV* in which the Soviet boxer Ivan Drago and Rocky Balboa inhabit their Cold War symbols totally, the film suggests wrestlers are “affective” workers, whose alienation from their own symbolic logic allows for moments of solidarity at their worksite.

Randzinski/Robinson’s whiteness, unlike Joe Bonaparte’s, does not rely on the presence of people of color. Indeed, Randzinski/Ronbinson seems openly supportive of the few black wrestlers in the sport. Rather it’s about the inheritance of an individualism that in the film’s post-modern appreciation of class identity imagines itself outside of a system of exploitation and state sanction that is reserved for “heels” and “ayatollahs.” And likewise, Randzinski/Robinson’s recognition of the class dynamics of the mat, unlike the class dynamics of his own life, suggests that any form of commodification cannot be total. In some ways, the film supports a traditional Marxist view of class politics: that it is precisely the form of labor the proletariat engages in that creates the potential for solidarity. That is, despite the wrestler’s alienation from his identity, he feels solidarity for other affective laborers, wrestlers and strippers, in their place of work. These multiple layers of solidarity and commodification are, I would argue, potentially the grounds on which any new U.S. labor movement will be built.

Thus *The Wrestler* reproduces the class dynamics of 1930s boxing pictures not by recreating the past “as it really was” to quote Benjamin, but by reinscribing a 1930s genre within the material conditions of late capitalism.²⁵ What makes films like *Cinderella Man* and the slew of “New Hard Times” reproductions of 1930s iconography in the *New York Times* and *Time Magazine* websites conservative is precisely their aura of “past-ness,” their inability or refusal to meet capitalism and the state of working-class America in its new conditions of production. This is not to say that *The Wrestler* is entirely new. Indeed, in many ways it is a return to classic realism: the attention to the gritty details of work,

²⁵ Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 255.

the machinery engaged in the labor process, the techniques of wrestling, the bare lighting, the linear narrative construction. Yet it returns not as an archivist revealing the original, but rather as reconstruction of a genre for a contemporary historical moment.²⁶ In many ways, I would argue, its lack of reference to the 1930s is its precise act of memorialization. One cannot see the film without on some level appreciating its deep referencing to social realism, yet it is not in the form of nostalgia or pastiche. One may be hopeful for a new breed of more militant filmmaking, or a militant movement that may inspire filmmakers to produce films in response. But if the first requirement of an artist is “to tell the truth,” then I would offer that *The Wrestler* is perhaps one of the best Hollywood films documenting working-class life in the U.S. in decades.

²⁶ The recent David O. Russell film *The Fighter* proves this point in a moment of revealing and un-ironic genre citation. A formulaic and conservative narrative much like *Cinderella Man* (if better made), *The Fighter*'s plot hinges on a diagetic documentary made about a drug-addicted former boxing champion from a down-and-out post-industrial New England town. Watching the documentary, the former boxer breaks his addiction to cocaine. In addition, his younger brother's estranged girlfriend returns and helps convince him to become a boxer, who eventually outshines his washed-up older brother. As the role of the documentary was originally to “show reality” and perform moral uplift, *The Fighter*'s genre citation reveals its 19th/early 20th century debt to the equally 19th century idea of individual agency and self-help. While the setting and social class of *The Fighter* and *The Wrestler* are highly similar, *The Fighter*'s political conservatism runs far deeper than its Horatio Alger politics. Its thrust is basically nostalgic – not only can one return as if by magic to an earlier time, so also can one return to a simpler idea of ocular truth. The power of the film lay in the way it suggests that these are ultimately one and the same.