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Running with Butkus: Animals and Animality in *Rocky*

Rocky (1976), directed by John G. Avildsen and starring Sylvester Stallone, is often viewed as the inspirational story of an underdog who achieves success through “going the distance” in the boxing ring with the champion. The film is inspiring for the way in which the title character, down on his luck, rejected by his trainer, and living in poverty rises to the challenge by taking the standing champion, Apollo Creed, the full fifteen rounds. While he ultimately loses the fight, this serves as a minor detail, since his goal was to prove his worth to himself, to prove that he is not just a “bum.” His determination and work ethic in training are inspiring as he comes close to the pinnacle of his sport with little financial and, at least at first, little emotional or moral support, considering his lack of friends and family at the beginning of the film. The rather innocent, well-intentioned title character secures the film’s success and importance in American film as Rocky figures as a working class hero, one who refuses to let a life of poverty diminish his character or render him as just another parasite on or victim of his community. That is, the film celebrates the working class character as having value, and his story of moving from poverty and isolation to accomplishment speaks largely to American myths about the successes of poor immigrants and other poor folks who come from nothing to achieve something meaningful in their lives.

Rocky is an inspirational film in light of the character’s determination and drive for success — the film and its music are continuously cited in popular culture and by exercise enthusiasts. As its portrayal of Rocky’s ethic of hard work translates easily to any challenge that viewers may face in their own lives, perhaps this is another reason for its initial and continued popularity. While many viewers note the film’s underdog story of believing in oneself and striving for a goal in the face of great adversity and doubters, I’m interested here in *Rocky*’s animals and animality, which have not received much treatment by critics: the film series’ portrayal of the title character’s animality, its animal themes, and animal actors. As Steve Baker’s work on animals as symbols show, Rocky’s close relationship and associations with animals are likely another reason why people relate to and like him. For example, Baker notes that the English bulldog is often historically associated with the positive attributes of “courage and determination” (*Picturing the Beast* 50-52). The way Rocky lives with pets and takes on an animal nickname provides a way to convey to the audience his courage, nobility, and innocence.¹ Animals and animal themes reappear throughout the Rocky series: Rocky’s

pet turtles, Adrian's job at a pet store, Rocky's "Italian Stallion" nickname, his being a "southpaw" and an "underdog," his having a "beast" inside him in Rocky Balboa, the song "Eye of the Tiger" from *Rocky III*, Rocky's dogs: Butkus and Punchy, etc. Rocky's association with these mostly strong and virile animals provides a clear example of how animals are used for their symbolism in human narratives. While I'll discuss animals as symbols at a few points, I'm more interested in the scenes in the films where animals are approached literally and on their own terms. In this essay, I'll focus on the first and last films of the series, *Rocky* (1976) and *Rocky Balboa* (2006), because animals and Rocky's animality receive the most attention there. As I'll discuss later, the last film, appearing thirty years after the first, complements the original nicely as it picks up many of the same motifs and achieves some critical moves which were not possible or were not achieved in the first under-budgeted film, including Stallone's decision to actually box in the last fight scene.



Rocky and his pet turtles, Cuff and Link.

Rocky portrays the life of its eponymous poor young boxer as he struggles to live a meaningful life in an underprivileged urban setting of Philadelphia. The film begins with a boxing match where he receives a brutal head butt and, after deductions for showering, doctor fees, and other items, he receives almost no pay for winning his fight. The film portrays the local Philadelphians and match attendees as rude, offensive, and

poor, with one patron yelling at the wounded Rocky that he is a “bum.” Rocky attempts to live differently and tries to avoid the abuses, both verbal and physical, from those he lives with, including his friend Paulie (a meat plant worker), his trainer Mick, who kicks him out of his gym, the loan shark Tony Gazzo, for whom he briefly works, boxing organizers, fans, and the press. He is portrayed as caring for animals, looking after pet turtles in his dirty apartment, and later running with his bullmastiff Butkus. Adrian, a pet store employee and sister to Paulie, purchased Butkus for Rocky as a running companion and as she later becomes his love interest, she is perhaps the one character, in addition to the animals and perhaps Apollo Creed, his opponent, who does not treat him poorly.

Where most of the characters seem self-interested and prey on or abuse others, Rocky and Adrian are portrayed as benevolent and hurt or wounded by the abuse they receive from those they live with. Rather luckily, he gets chosen as an opponent for the current boxing champion, Creed. The organizers select him in order to promote the fight as a clash of cultures, thinking it will increase sales to sell the story of the champion fighting an underdog, a “nobody,” while also playing on the jingoism of the bicentennial of the birth of America. In other words, the fight isn’t taken seriously as an athletic competition by the promoters and Creed’s camp, but more as an easy way to sell tickets to the fight. Rocky takes the fight seriously, however, as a chance to prove his mettle. He doesn’t win, but still secures a sense of achievement, proving that he isn’t a bum or “worthless,” but that he belongs in the company of champions. The story is often viewed as inspirational for its portrayal of his finding a kind of success as a “million to one shot.”

The second film under analysis titled *Rocky Balboa* (2012) begins, after a few brief clips of current champion Mason Dixon’s boxing matches, with a scene of Rocky, now much older (at least in his 60s), feeding his turtles, putting food on the windowsill apparently for birds, and then doing pull-ups in the meager backyard of his lower class house. The film revisits many of the scenes from the original *Rocky* and portrays in the title character someone struggling to deal with the death of his wife Adrian, to move on from the past. Upon stopping at a bar he once frequented in the old neighborhood, Balboa happens upon Marie, who appeared in *Rocky* as a young teen hanging out in the streets and whom Rocky attempted to guide away from being used sexually by boys. Their relationship takes on an important role in the film as he invites her and her son, who live in a rather poverty-stricken looking part of town, to eat and later work at his

restaurant called Adrian's. The two encourage and help Rocky in his training for his last fight. Rocky also has a somewhat strained relationship with his son who works in the business world, and who often neglects to visit his mother's grave or meet with his father.

After a sports program on television runs a computer-animated simulation of a fight between Rocky in his prime and the current champion Mason-Dixon, Rocky decides he wants to return to fighting, even in his old age. Much like Apollo Creed of *Rocky*, Dixon is portrayed as extravagantly wealthy; yet he is dissatisfied with how fans and commentators fail to respect him and speak poorly of him. Rocky desires to fight a few small, local fights, but after the attention that the simulation garnered from the sports world, Dixon's promoters organize a fight between Rocky and Dixon, convincing Rocky to participate. Along the path of preparing for the fight, Rocky offers several poignant speeches about his desire to fight and to do what will make him happy. He delivers these speeches to his son, who attempts to dissuade him, as well as to the judges who at first refuse to grant him a boxing license because of his age. Balboa's training for the fight against Dixon that concludes the film brings his friends new and old closer to him, including his newly adopted dog Punchy and his son as they help him train for the final fight of his life.



Rocky exercising in his backyard with Punchy (bottom left).

Reading Animals On their Own Terms. To be certain, in the *Rocky* series animals are not the focus of the story, as the films obviously center around the life of the human boxer. And yet animals and animal themes play a significant part in Rocky's life. Leger Grindon² highlights the fact that after Rocky's first win, he has no one but his pets to tell of his good news (*Knockout* 215). While perhaps many have not taken notice of the animals in the film, a quick search on the internet reveals a Butkus fan-page, Butkus Stallone being listed as an actor playing the part of Butkus on the Internet Movie Database (imdb.com), and at least one fan saying that he likes *Rocky* because he likes boxing and loves animals. In addition, the visual that plays during the scrolling of the credits at the end of *Rocky Balboa*, which portrays candid video of average people running up the stairs of the Philadelphia Museum of Art in imitation of Rocky — something people apparently do there every day —, portrays at least two people running up the stairs with their dogs before celebrating like *Rocky*. When animals appear in fiction or in film, a common practice is to read them as symbols, metaphors, or as propping up or developing human characters. In *Picturing the Beast*, Steve Baker calls this the “cultural denial of the animal,” which for him “is maintained by means of a rather effective two-pronged attack: it comes from common sense ... on the one hand, and from theory (psychoanalysis, historical sociology, and a good deal more besides) on the other ... The possibility of addressing the issue of animals has been closed off” (216). Baker is thinking about instances where people have read stories with animals in them, like those produced by Disney, to be not about animals at all, but as stories where the animals stand in for something else, usually a human issue or concern. To be sure, the films under question here use animals and animal themes in this way, as is evident in the name “Italian Stallion,” for example, which is Stallone's use of an animal name that provides a positive symbol of animality, an association of toughness and nobility for his character. It is a way to develop character, and as no horses appear in the film it is clear that *Rocky* isn't concerned with a real stallion.

Stallone himself, in his director commentary on *Rocky Balboa*, suggests that some of the animals should or can be read as symbols or as developments of Rocky's character. For example, he notes that the dogs in the films are like his alter-egos: Butkus is strong and youthful like the title character in *Rocky*, and Rocky sees his older self in Punchy. In *Balboa* he also personifies his sadness and anger as a “beast” that he has to get rid of by boxing Mason Dixon. Such uses and readings of animals make them mere props in developing human narratives: sacrificing the animal as a symbol or metaphor to tell a human story. In these uses of the animal, the animal's life or presence is never

approached on its own terms or acknowledged as having its own bodily experience; rather, the animal is denied, as Baker argues, and turned into something that makes sense in a cultural narrative. I'm interested, however, in taking the animal actors and animal bodies in the *Rocky* series seriously and on their own terms. What happens when we read Rocky's dogs and the beef carcasses he punches not as a way to show that Rocky is fierce or innocent or friendly (and they certainly can be and perhaps are intended to be read this way for the most part) but as animal bodies? Included in this reading is Rocky's own animality and how we might read him as a material body rather than as a symbol for cultural success or as a figure for white masculinity or nationalism, for example. While much of the films' use of animals is symbolic in nature, a few important scenes in each suggest the possibility of approaching animals and animality on their own terms.³ In this sense, the final fight scene of *Rocky Balboa*, in which Stallone decided to actually box a seasoned fighter in Antonio Tarver instead of choreographing a boxing match with another actor, as he did in *Rocky* with Carl Weathers, suggests a move away from the construction of a cultural narrative to a portrayal of real bodies being beaten and injured: a decisive move to treat bodies as bodies.

As an example of a critic who reads bodies in *Rocky* in cultural or social terms, Victoria A. Elmwood argues that

Rocky offers masculine status and national citizenship to a previously rejected group [African Americans] in exchange for their allegiance in a quest for the remasculization of white men (and, by extension, the nation) as well as offering a bond of solidarity in rolling back the advances made by feminism. In particular, this rolling back focused on reinforcing the primacy of reproduction as women's social (and civic) duty. (49)

Elmwood offers an important critique of the way Adrian's fate is made to depend on the success of Rocky's fight and how her interests are sacrificed to the story of male bonding. Also, Elmwood highlights a reading of the racialized body of the African American character. While Elmwood reads the characters as symbols for masculinity and race relations — how their bodies can be read in a social sense — I'm interested in reading them as material bodies, acknowledging at the same time that much of the violence done to bodies results from racism and patriarchy when bodies are read culturally or perceived to be defined by race or gender.

The horrible way that people treat others continues in the scenes of *Rocky Balboa* in which Rocky struggles to deal with Adrian's death, emotionally breaking down at

times. Accompanied by Paulie, he revisits places important to his and Adrian's relationship. Paulie continuously complains, trying to rush Rocky, explaining that he does not want to relive the past: "You treated her good ... I treated her bad." Paulie's words confirm his violent and poor treatment of his sister — early in the first film, he told Rocky that she frustrates him so much that he could split her head with a razor —, showing his remorse at having treated her poorly. Obviously, readings of race and gender relations are important for critiquing modes of oppression. However, when we view bodies as defined by or representative of these social categories or constructions, we often neglect a consideration of their singularity and materiality. That is, we might view Adrian as a figure for the plight of women or representative of white women, viewing her body abstractly as a fact, and in the process neglect her as a real presence. This is not to undermine the importance of identifying racism and patriarchy in fiction and film. Instead, the point is to appreciate more deeply the suffering of bodies, to stay a bit longer with the trouble and horror of the violence they experience, which is often neglected when bodies are viewed as representatives, facts, or statistics.

Film Scholar Leger Grindon argues that "[t]hrough an entertainment, the boxing film portrays suffering as central to experience" (*Knockout* 187). In addition to the violence that emanates from patriarchal and racist discourses, suffering in *Rocky* also often results from the conditions of poverty characters experience, as well as their failure to recognize the vulnerability of others. This suffering comes into focus as animals are used as symbols to develop character or to describe human suffering. Many of the characters treat each other terribly in the first film, often, it seems, as a way to derive pleasure or profit from their abuse of others. Apart from Rocky, Adrian, and the animals, many of the characters' interactions with each other are relations of consumption. They often view others as a means to produce a profit for themselves, or as objects to be consumed for their personal enjoyment. For example, the crowds that attend the boxing matches are portrayed as grotesque in their consumption of the visual spectacle of the beating of the boxers' bodies. In another example, there is a great deal of tension between Rocky and his trainer Mick, since Mick had earlier thrown him out of his gym and returns to say he wants to train Rocky only after Rocky is selected for the big (and more lucrative) fight against the champion, indicating that Mick views Rocky as a means for his own profit. Just as bodies can be read as symbols in terms of human narratives, capitalism can influence humans to read bodies as commodities to be consumed or profited from, often closing off the view that the body is a vulnerable life. Where most of the characters in *Rocky* adopt this mode of individualism and

accumulation, Rocky and Adrian are portrayed as nurturing and doing for others by trying to bring them pleasure. Of course, the animals in the film have not adopted consumption as their only mode of relating to others either, and this may be one of the reasons that Rocky has only them to share his good news with. Since everyone else treats him poorly — puts him down and treats him like “meat” — he chooses to keep company with his pets.

Rocky, of course, is not a perfect character without flaw or immunity from the ills of his community. In his poor state, he comes close to working within the norms of his community in order to survive and yet he strives to view and treat others as people, as bodies, and not as a means to secure money or pleasure for himself. In an early scene in *Rocky*, while working for a gangster figure named Tony Gazzo, Rocky struggles with trying to view someone as a means of profit and ignoring their bodily life. Down by the docks, Rocky approaches a man who owes Gazzo money with significant interest in a physically threatening manner at first. He grabs the man by the collar, demanding the money. Fist raised, he looks about to strike and finds he cannot do it: he cannot beat the man for his money. In this sense, he is not the best muscle or “goon” for a loan shark as he can’t bring himself to beat someone for their money, to ignore the vulnerability of a body. While he does get some money from the man, it seems he recognizes his behavior as a mistake and he is no longer shown collecting money for Gazzo in the film. Stallone says as much about Rocky in his director’s comments on *Rocky Balboa*, when he suggests that Rocky is a nurturer and “doesn’t require beating people to elevate himself.” In contrast, Paulie’s desire to work for Gazzo and his verbal abuse and physical violence towards Rocky and Adrian as when, for example, he swings a bat at them at his house, suggest his failure to respect the vulnerability of others’ bodies. Paulie also arranges for the Shamrock Meat Company endorsement from the meat-plant where he works to be sewn into Rocky’s boxing robe, with Paulie solely profiting from the deal. In this sense, Paulie uses Rocky and capitalizes off of Rocky’s risking of his body to injury and death, confirming that Paulie relates to others, even his friend Rocky, in terms of self-accumulation.

Rocky’s desire to have relationships with others that revolve around giving them pleasure or nurturing them extends to his relationships with animals as he lives with them, brings them food, and talks to them, sometimes awkwardly telling them jokes. Most of the other characters in the film relate to animals only through consumption: Paulie eats meat and works at the meat plant, for example. Rocky challenges the normative practice of eating turkey on Thanksgiving in the United States, as he doesn’t eat it, commenting that it is just another Thursday for him. He is also never shown

eating meat in the film, never consuming animals, with the exception of his drinking raw eggs as part of his diet for training.

Like Paulie, Mick, the trainer, relates to humans and animals via consumption. Upon entering Rocky's apartment to congratulate Rocky on getting the chance to fight against the champ and to secure employment as Rocky's trainer for what will surely be the most profitable of Rocky's career up to this point, Mick notices Rocky's pet turtles and remarks that the turtles would make good soup. In response, Rocky looks at him in horror and perhaps with an impulse of violence towards Mick should he need to protect the turtles. In her analysis of late capitalism, Rosi Braidotti explains that all bodies, human and nonhuman animals, can become disposable: "no animal is more equal than any other, because they are all equally inscribed in a logic of exchange that makes them disposable and hence negotiable" (99-100). Mick's attempts to profit from Rocky and his remarks about eating the turtles are consistent with a capitalist relation to others, where any animal, humans included, can be rendered as merely disposable and a means for profit.

As the scene at Rocky's apartment continues, Mick relates the great suffering he experienced in his boxing career through an animal simile. He remarks, "Pugs like us were treated like dogs. For ten bucks you gotta rip somebody's throat out." His history describes the situation for poor boxers under capitalism and its violence. To be sure, humans and animals are and have been abused for reasons other than the influence of capitalist logic throughout history; however, this film set in the late 1970s in the United States often emphasizes the financial motives behind characters' abuse of others. As the Rocky series often portrays in brutal detail the blood, sweat, and beating of bodies and the dirty conditions in which its characters live, these films portray what is often elided by capitalism. While discussing dogs as commodities and as consumers of commodities, Donna Haraway recalls Marx's words that describe this fact of capitalism:

Marx always understood that use and exchange value were names for relationships; that was precisely the insight that led beneath the layer of appearances of market equivalences into the messy domain of extraction, accumulation, and human exploitation. Turning all the world into commodities for exchange is central to the process ... In Marx's own colorful, precise language that still gives capitalism's apologists apoplexy,

capital comes into the world "dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt." (Haraway 45-46)

Indeed, the boxing scenes throughout the series make a spectacle of this often neglected facet of capitalism as everyone makes money or derives pleasure from the wounding of the boxers' bodies. Adrian is perhaps the only character, aside from the boxers themselves, who doesn't derive pleasure or profit from the beating of the boxer's bodies, and in contrast with the crowds who are enjoying the spectacle she is portrayed throughout the series as often highly anxious and traumatized from viewing the abuses Rocky takes in the ring.



Wounded Rocky with Adrian (Talia Shire). Rocky. MGM, 1976.

Particularly interesting in Mick's description of the pain and trauma he endured as a boxer, is that the pathos he feels for himself fails to extend to the dogs of his simile. That is, the dogs here, which seem to refer to the abuse of dogs in the practice of dog fighting, are not approached literally but used as a figure for human suffering. At times,

Mick seems to view others, including animals, in terms of his profit and pleasure, which is perhaps one reason why he fails to extend consideration to the dogs of his description. Another reason he fails to take notice of the dogs' own suffering might stem from one of the "difficulties of reality" that Cora Diamond explains. Writing about J.M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* and the failure of its critics to acknowledge its protagonist's, Elizabeth Costello's, wounded nature and her animality, Diamond argues that philosophers tend to move too quickly from a "difficulty of reality," something so horrible or so beautiful that we cannot fathom it, to the norms of philosophical or moral debate. Such a move, for Diamond, too easily assimilates an incomprehensibly complex thing into simple terms and therefore loses the opportunity afforded by it to think differently or respond differently. In relation to Mick's analogy, Diamond points to a difficulty of reality that might further explain his failure to consider the dogs' suffering. After discussing Costello's comparisons of our treatment of animals to the Holocaust, Diamond writes: "So there is a part of the difficulty of reality here that is not seen by Costello: so far as we keep one sort of difficulty in view we seem blocked from seeing another" (Diamond 55). As Mick, and much of the film, is focused on describing human suffering — the horrible way people treat each other — it is near impossible for him to acknowledge animal suffering at the same time. Where in Costello's lectures "her understanding of our relation to animals seems to throw into shadow the full horror of what we do to each other" (Diamond 55), for Mick human violence is in the spotlight, and animals remain in the dark corners of his understanding. That is, the horrors of human suffering exhaust the limits of his attention, and to consider animal suffering alongside his own seems beyond the scope of most humans' abilities.

In the Meat Locker. *Rocky* invites comparisons between the consumption of the boxer as spectacle and the consumption of animals as meat. The scenes of Rocky boxing in the ring are strikingly similar to his boxing the sides of "beef" in the meat locker, as in both scenes vulnerable flesh is cut, bodies are beaten, bruised, and swollen, and, after the volley of punches, blood is transferred to the fists or gloves of the boxer as evidence of the death or injury of the opponent. While most viewers fail to take note of the animals and the suffering of the animals in the film, due in part to the difficulty of bringing two "difficulties of reality" into focus at the same time as mentioned above, and because, as Diamond notes, not everyone notices the lives of animals or recognizes the animals that we are (47), the scene in the meat locker offers a potential for appreciating the difficulty of reality that is the lived experience of cattle in the factory farming industry. Again, the

animal is not a central focus, and the meat in the locker can also be read in part for symbolic purposes to portray the suffering or virility of humans.⁴

Rocky not only shows the dirty and bloody side of capitalism for the humans who suffer through poverty, but the meat locker scenes also show the aftermath of the turning of animals into meat. To be sure, Rocky does not portray an actual slaughterhouse — Paulie remarks that they are slaughtered across the street. While the scene does have the effect of displaying Rocky's strength, it also offers an opportunity, albeit only a brief one, for the appreciation of the animals' suffering that we share with them. The repeated theme of cutting in the film also highlights the materiality and shared vulnerability of bodies. Paulie slices meat in the packing plant while the sound of a cutting machine, perhaps a buzz saw, fills as background noise. Mickey introduces Rocky to the "cut man" who will slice Rocky's wounded eye-lid during the fight against Apollo Creed. In the case of Rocky, the cutting occurs during the suffering he experiences in the ring, and it is done to relieve the swelling so that his eye does not swell shut; nonetheless, the cutting is still related to a woundedness and a vulnerability that is shared by both human and animal bodies.

If *Rocky* "is not about boxing" (qtd. in Michaels 39) as Stallone claims, then what is it about? As mentioned, the story of determination might be abstractly applied to any challenge someone faces, especially for those living in poverty. I. Lloyd Michaels offers Stallone's narrative of the creation of the screenplay for *Rocky*: "Stallone has said that the idea for Rocky came from his observation of journeymen actors much like himself longing for a chance to escape the obscurity of bit parts in minor films" (Michaels 39). In light of Stallone's comments, we might read the boxer as a metaphor for the poor actor struggling to survive and therefore as an almost biographical portrayal of Stallone's own struggles as an actor before achieving success in the writing and acting of this screenplay. By the time of *Rocky Balboa*, as I'll argue later, Stallone no longer treats boxers as symbols to be used in other narratives, but begins to approach them literally in a flattening of metaphor and symbolism, as at times is also the case with the animals in *Rocky*. Deleuze and Guattari's discussion of the flattening of metaphor in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* is a model for this kind of reading and writing. They write that "Kafka deliberately kills all metaphor, all symbolism, all signification" (22), and mention earlier that he at times makes language "take flight on a line of non-sense" (21). As Steve Baker reminds us, common sense is one of the kinds of thinking responsible for the cultural denial of the animal. Such uses of language outside of common sense offer a way of thinking about the animal and the human animal on its own terms, outside of cultural narratives which usually turn it into a prop for human meaning. In

addition, as Leger Grindon argues in “Body and Soul,” in boxing films “the boxer animates an implicit discourse on the conditions of oppression” (60). The directorial move of bringing the camera inside a meat processing plant in my view, intentionally or not, offers a potential recognition that actual animal bodies suffer greatly as do human animals.

Walking into the meat locker after making “moo-ing” noises in addressing some of the cut up bodies of beef cattle on the hooks, Rocky remarks, “It stinks in here. It’s like an animal morgue;” “Who killed all these things?” Here Rocky attempts an appreciation of a difficulty of reality: the suffering and the slaughter of animals in factory farming. His description of the meat locker as a morgue for animals suggests that he is attempting to imagine their deaths as best he can from a human frame of reference, as human bodies usually end up at the morgue after death. His “moo” in addressing the animal meat that hangs from the hooks acknowledges the lived experiences of these animals: a recognition that they were not just meat or commodities, but once lived and experienced the world. The answer to his question — who killed them? — of humans or factory farm workers and the owners of these farms is another of the horrors of human behavior, another difficulty of reality. This questioning of the abuse of animal bodies is consistent with his challenging the verbal and physical abuse of others in the film, obviously except for in the ring. Michèle Pickover draws a distinction between hunting and sport that also highlights an important difference between the slaughter of livestock and the sport of boxing. Pickover argues “A fair sport involves two equally matched individuals who mutually agree to engage in an activity, which is usually overseen by independent judges. It is hard to argue that an animal lured to a location by bait ... is anywhere near on equal footing” (24). Although Rocky and the other fighters are brutally beaten, consumed as spectacle, and profited off of by event organizers and promoters, they choose to risk their bodies, where the farm animals have no choice in the matter, suggesting perhaps the limits of the metaphor of boxers as meat. Nonetheless, however briefly, in this scene Rocky ponders the suffering and deaths of these animals in a way that points to this shared aspect of bodily life as the deaths of his friends and family throughout the *Rocky* series confirm: Adrian’s death from cancer, Apollo Creed’s death from boxing against Ivan Drago in *Rocky IV*, and Mick’s heart-attack during a match in another of the *Rocky* films.

Unfortunately, Rocky’s time to stay with that moment of wonder at the deaths of these animals is cut short as Paulie begins asking Rocky if he’s having sex with Adrian in

vulgar terms. Rocky reacts out of frustration after Paulie talks badly about her and tells Rocky “you stink.” While slicing a piece of meat, Paulie asks Rocky “You screwin’ my sister?” to which Rocky replies with a somewhat mild punch, saying that he should not “talk dirty” about his sister. Here we see Paulie treating Adrian as somewhat less than human, or at least lower in a hierarchy than man, referring to her only as a body that can be used for reproduction and sexual gratification. In contrast to the dirt and smell of the meat packing plant, Rocky argues that Paulie shouldn’t talk “dirty” about her. In this sense, he is concerned for her body and challenges Paulie’s patriarchal views of women. Donna Haraway’s commentary on “species” suggests the relation between gender, race, and animals that Rocky highlights:

The discursive tie between the colonized, the enslaved, the noncitizen, and the animal — all reduced to type, all Others to rational man, and all essential to his bright constitution — is at the heart of racism and flourishes, lethally, in the entrails of humanism. Woven into that tie in all the categories is ‘woman’s’ putative self-defining responsibility to ‘the species,’ as this singular and typological female is reduced to her reproductive function. Fecund, she lies outside the bright territory of man even as she is his conduit. (Haraway 18)

Rocky challenges Paulie’s verbal abuse towards his sister⁵ and after lightly punching Paulie, he punches the already dead meat violently and repeatedly, displacing his violence from Paulie to the lifeless meat.⁶ At this point, the meat is no longer regarded as a former animal, but returns to the realm of human meaning, as it stands in for Paulie. Steve Baker comments in *The Postmodern Animal* that “The animal reduced to meat is in an important sense no longer an animal — it is mere material, virtually interchangeable with human meat — and it therefore explains rather little about postmodern art’s fascination with the animal. For that fascination to operate, the distinct form of the animal has still to be recognizable” (95). Rocky attempts to think about the meat in a way that acknowledges the lives and deaths of the animals, an exceedingly difficult task it seems, but ultimately his thinking about the lives of animals and taking animals on their own terms is cut short as the light shines back onto the human violence of what humans do to each other.



Paulie (Burt Young) cutting meat at the plant.

Rocky does not regularly train with the meat; in fact, he comments that doing so interrupts his training. Obviously, Rocky is not hurting the already slaughtered animals or advocating violence towards them as he asks Paulie who slaughtered them. Paulie's comment following Rocky's volley of punches — "you know, you do that to Apollo Creed, they'll put us in jail for murder" — confirms that the lives of these animals are no longer thought of as the violence inflicted on their dead bodies becomes translated to human terms and the animals' bodies are now read as stand-ins for the bodies of Rocky's human opponents in the ring. Grindon writes of the disavowal of violence in boxing under capitalism in a way which contradicts, but remains in the spirit of Paulie's comment: "For the general public the fighter is a vehicle for entertainment, another commodity. They are a mass of consumers emblematic of the callousness of the market system. The crowd can take pleasure in an event which would be a crime outside of the ring and buy off their conscience for the price of a ticket. The kinship bonding of the family finds its opposite in the predatory character of the crowd" ("Body and Soul" 62). In the ring, it is culturally acceptable to beat a man and sometimes to death as the commodified nature of the boxers' bodies distances the audience from appreciating them as real presences.

In the next meat locker scene, Paulie, true to his character, sets up the news report of Rocky punching the meat in the hopes of creating some publicity so that he might profit from Rocky's chance at the title. The news reporter frames Rocky's boxing the meat as a

peculiar form of training. Here, the carcass he hits isn't regarded as a body, but is treated merely as a practice bag, or what boxers call a heavy bag: while this is usually a cloth or canvas bag filled with sand or other materials, the meat becomes the bag that Rocky hits for practice. Importantly, in an earlier scene, Rocky himself is called a "meat bag" by the loan shark Tony Gazzo's right-hand man, suggesting he is an object used by others to practice punching on. At this insult, Rocky retaliates, yelling something inaudible in response, suggesting his refusal to be viewed merely as meat, as a body whose sole purpose is to be beaten and consumed by others. In addition, as the news report comes to a close, the film cuts away to portray Apollo Creed's trainer watching the TV report as Rocky holds up his hands covered in blood. He positions his hands as if to say to other boxers "this could be your blood" or "you're dead meat." Blood courses through the bodies of animals and humans and its loss often indicates injury (as Rocky and his fellow opponents bleed during boxing matches) or death. Cary Wolfe describes the importance of this vulnerability for Cora Diamond's thinking: "what generates our moral response to animals and their treatment, Diamond argues, is our sense of the mortality and vulnerability that we share with them, of which the brute subjection of the body ... is perhaps the most poignant testament" ("Exposures" 11). The fluidity of the animal's blood and its transfer to Rocky's hands offers a trace of the animal's body that further emphasizes its vulnerability and its death. The scenes in the meat locker then, have the effect of highlighting embodiment and the potential for suffering and death that we share with animals. During the final fight against Dixon in *Rocky Balboa*, the blood flying off the meat in response to Rocky's punches in the meat locker is further juxtaposed to the blood in the ring that explodes out of the beaten human bodies via flashbacks to the meat locker scenes of the first film.



Rocky “punching meat” in the meat locker.

In his discussion of animal imagery in *Animals in Film*, Jonathan Burt mentions the uncertainty of meaning associated with animals on the screen. For example, after discussing the taboo and regulation of violence done to animals in films, Burt suggests,

The violent animal image, therefore, has a significance that extends beyond simply representing the uncivilized (both in the sense of “natural” and the “barbarous”), and, like a form of propaganda, is assumed to have the power to cause the repetition of such action. Again we see that the power of the animal image stems from the fact that, because it is more prone to collapse the boundary of representation and reality than other forms of imagery, it threatens to reveal not just the isolated fact of coercion or cruelty but the whole system by which coercion and cruelty are reproduced. (140-141)

While we don’t actually see the slaughtering of animals or violence done to them in *Rocky*, perhaps because of film regulations — we only see the end product of this process — the scenes of beef hanging from hooks in the meat plant have the potential to

have a similar effect in causing viewers to question larger institutions like factory farming that cause these animals extraordinary suffering and death.

Running (and Writing) with Butkus. In addition to the meat locker scenes, the circumstances surrounding the creation of the screenplay and the appearance of animal actors in the films offer the opportunity to approach animals in a literal manner. Interestingly, Stallone calls his dog Butkus his co-writer for the screenplay of *Rocky* and describes an encounter somewhat similar to Derrida and his cat as described in “The Animal that Therefore I am (More to Follow).” He explains that he would write for a while with Butkus next to him, and then read the lines for Butkus’s approval. Stallone relates this scene to some extent jokingly in an interview, commenting that Butkus didn’t say much, but just looked back at him, so the feedback was always good (“Commentary”). While I’m playfully comparing here Stallone’s experience with his dog to that of Derrida and his cat and the essay that followed, it is worth noting that Stallone’s retelling of the encounter with his dog and acknowledgement of Butkus as his co-writer suggests his recognition of the dog’s ability to respond and offers an indication of his own ability to respond as it perhaps informs his writing *Rocky* as a character who values animals differently than most people in his culture.

Stallone’s viewing of Butkus as co-writer of the screenplay and as co-actor in the film troubles a reading of the dog in *Rocky* as just a way to demonstrate the human character’s sensitivity or strength. With the knowledge that the two are real life “companion species” in Haraway’s terms, their running together and interactions in the film seem more genuine relating than just as a symbolic or psychological development of character alone. Jonathan Burt quotes Rob Block’s remarks about the treatment of animal actors as mere props in the 1920s and 30s in a way that contrasts largely with the treatment of Butkus: “people would kill an animal just to get a shot. Animals were just stock or props” (153). Burt cites the “1925 version of *Ben Hur* [in which] some 150 horses were killed during the filming of the chariot race” (153). Similarly, in her writing about blind white male detectives and their service dogs in several American television series, Susan McHugh relates the ways in which dogs are mostly used as props for human narratives: “If ... some recent examples suggest that the dog is simply a prop for the wounded white American serviceman’s reclamation of his rights, then they do so only by abandoning the goal of structuring a story in such a way that a man and dog together can become the agent of justice” (McHugh 32). Certainly Stallone filming his own dog Butkus, with whom he had a significant relationship, influenced how he viewed Butkus as an actor. In addition, Burt, noting how the animal in film resists our cultural projections, argues that “The animal body is caught up ... in a complicated

system of reactions and effects which is registered as a play between the surfaces of bodies" (31). For Burt, the interiority of the animal is closed off, and as film operates via the showing of surfaces the animal has the potential to be read at the surface level, at times to insist on being read as just being an animal. Given Stallone's own poverty prior to the success of *Rocky* and his actual relationship with Butkus, their lives mirror the film in a way that, with this knowledge, encourages viewers to read Butkus, in addition to any symbolic connotations, as an actual dog, an actual running partner.



Rocky and Butkus (Butkus)

Regarding the reading of bodies, Mia Zamora in her analysis of Asian American literature and nationalism queries: "Is the body, in any final sense, 'natural' or 'raw' (i.e. non- or pre-social)? On the other hand, can the body itself be regarded as purely a social and signifying effect lacking in its own weighty materiality?" (7). Zamora's questions

get to the heart of how we interpret the bodies we encounter in fiction and film. Following Haraway's troubling of the terms "nature" and "culture," bodies are always inscribed in a variety of overlapping registers. The human tendency and philosophical norm that Diamond draws our attention to, however, is more often to treat bodies only in a social sense, or to regard them as "facts" via "deflection" instead of as real material "presences" (Diamond 59). Butkus's real presence in Stallone's life, his particularly large and bulky presence as a bullmastiff, challenges a reading of him as a mere symbolic animal. Zamora concludes that "[t]he material body often suffers under the sway of the figurative regime" (Zamora 8), and although this is certainly the fate of many animal actors in film, especially in the early 20th century, Butkus invites a reading of his body as a real presence, one who was consulted and took part in the creation of the fictional screenplay of *Rocky*, instead of as an animal who is sacrificed for its completion, or put to use as a metaphor by its human author.

In his commentary on the 2001 DVD of *Rocky*, Stallone remarks that Butkus was supposed to feature more prominently in important scenes of the film, as when Rocky runs up the stairs of the Philadelphia Museum of Art; however, the dog was too tired and too heavy for Stallone the actor to carry, so the desired scenes were dropped ("Commentary"). What is shown and not shown in the film therefore reveals the materiality of bodies: their limits, that the flesh gets tired. Stallone also comments at times about the stress he put his own body through in making the films and describes actual injuries he suffered in filming the training and fighting scenes. Due to the continued success of the series, the desired scene is finally achieved in the final film of the series when Rocky and Punchy, a much smaller dog than Butkus, run up the stairs together in *Rocky Balboa*. Rocky and Marie's son Steps pick up Punchy from a dog pound and as they choose him, Rocky remarks, "You learn a lot talking to dogs." However casually we may take it, the remark suggests that dogs have a different knowledge of the world than humans, a knowledge and experience beyond our grasp, another of the difficulties that Diamond mentions. The iconic scene from *Rocky* of Stallone raising both arms high in a sign of the success of his training, is corrected here in *Balboa*, or at least repeated with an important difference, as he raises only one hand while the other holds Punchy. This image of Rocky and Punchy running up the stairs together, which Stallone desired with Butkus in the first film as well, suggests the importance of his nonhuman animal training partner to his success. The scene of a half hug between the training partners with one arm raised also mirrors the posture Rocky takes when celebrating the end of a run on the beach with Apollo Creed in *Rocky III*. The repetition of this scene suggests that Punchy is regarded as a significant training partner. Punchy's appearance in *Rocky Balboa* as Butkus's replacement also exposes the

fact of Butkus's death, another way in which what is not shown reveals the reality and materiality of the animal's body. Stallone's personal relationship with Butkus and his desire to give him a more central role in important scenes in *Rocky* highlights the way in which the films attempt to offer a more complex portrayal of animals, open to reading them flatly as animals.



Rocky and Punchy running up the stairs of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. *Rocky Balboa*.

The Final Fight. In addition to the opportunities these films in the Rocky series provide for taking animals seriously, they also offer the potential to consider our own animality in a serious way. The boxing scenes that portray brutally beaten bodies of the boxers are perhaps the best attempt at acknowledging the vulnerability that we share with animals. Indeed, Leger Grindon says of boxing films, "The boxer's rise highlights our animal nature, grounded in the body, and prepares the drama for the champion's demise and the inevitability of death. As Charlie Davis acknowledges in the closing line of *Body and Soul* (1947), 'Everybody dies'" (Grindon, "Body and Soul" 189). The limits of the body are clearly brought to the fore as the title character describes the material effects of boxing on his body in *Rocky*: "Morning after a fight, you're nothing but a large wound." As an often wounded animal, wounded by the way other people treat him, by both verbal jabs and the physical jabs in the ring, *Rocky* prompts viewers to regard his body in all of its animality.



Rocky bleeding during the last fight in *Rocky Balboa*.

In *Creaturely Poetics*, Anat Pick suggests a pivotal moment in the reading of animals in film by way of a quote from Jonathan Burt: “Questions about the cinematic animal arise at the point at which ‘fiction and reality collapse into one another’ (161)” (Pick 109). While Burt seems to have in mind a more traditional view of “animals” as those other than human throughout *Animals in Film*, Pick’s claim that film is not concerned with species divides, but portrays all bodies as creatures (106) seems decidedly more accurate, given the current reading of bodies in these *Rocky* films. That is, not only does the animal image trouble a border between fiction/reality, but so does our own animality, when taken seriously. As *Rocky Balboa*, the last film of the series, is so focused on looking at the past, at characters who have passed away (as have in some cases also the actors who played them, like Burgess Meredith, who played Mick), the film draws attention to the material conditions of bodies, namely that they are vulnerable, they decay, and die.

The length of the *Rocky* series, appearing over a thirty year period, while sometimes mocked for its rather elderly and unlikely boxer protagonist,⁷ has the great advantage of portraying bodies experiencing time in a way that brings attention to the materiality of the actors’ bodies. Discussing André Bazin’s interest in realism in film, Pick suggests that “the actor’s proper role is as a temporal avatar because, rather than acting classically (expressing an inner meaning), the performer in realist cinema is an aging

being” (Pick 115). Pick goes on to challenge Bazin’s emphasis on “human” existence, arguing that realist film doesn’t construct species differences. The way in which actors and characters, both human and animal, have passed throughout the filming of the series attests to this condition of real bodies, and the theme of death is also brought out in the fiction of the film: a complex blending of reality and fiction that animality brings about.

Stallone remarks in his Director’s Commentary on *Rocky Balboa* that he wanted to make Rocky’s final boxing scene against Mason Dixon as real as possible. He describes how he, the other actors, and film crew came out to shoot the scene in the ring before an audience attending a real boxing match in Las Vegas without their prior knowledge and before the match they had come to see. Stallone expresses his satisfaction with having actual boxing announcers, callers, sponsorship, fans, etc. in the shooting of Rocky’s final bout. Such a commitment to the real is consistent with Pick’s “creaturely poetics.” Discussing Simone Weil’s thinking on vulnerability and her interest in the material finitude of bodies, Pick writes, “Attitudes and actions may be judged according to their orientation toward reality: the extent to which they seek to avoid (deflect) or else perceive and receive the real” (Pick 11). In *Rocky* of 1976 Stallone had described the film as not about boxing, and as a way to express the struggles of actors. As I’ve suggested, despite this intention, the film also can be read flatly where the boxer is not a metaphor for something else, but as a study of the brutal beating of bodies that takes place in the ring. In *Balboa*, Stallone’s decision to actually fight the boxing scenes against a real boxer instead of choreographing them further demonstrates a commitment to the real. He notes that he and Antonio Tarver were actually injured in the fight, with Stallone breaking part of his foot. Stallone recalls that the sounds of the fight — the hitting of flesh, gasps, and grunts — are real as well, without overdubbed studio sounds. At one point Tarver hit him rather hard and Stallone relates that he thought he was merely dazed, but actually struggled to get to his feet for several seconds. Real blood and bruises, real injuries to the body trouble viewers who might wish to take the film as being about something besides wounded bodies, wounded animals.



Rocky (Sylvester Stallone) and Mason Dixon (Antonio Tarver) in the ring.

In his closing comments, Stallone remarks that as Rocky makes his exit from the match against Dixon, Rocky is recognizing this time as the end of his career and soon the end of his life: Rocky is thinking of his death. Stallone's body also shows the signs of his aging, of going the route that all material bodies go. Like the fight at the end of the first film, Rocky emphasizes to his opponent that the violence of the fight may cause them bodily harm. Where Apollo Creed in *Rocky* approaches the fight with the attitude that it is just a show to make money, he fails to recognize, and this is what Rocky reminds him of, that fighting puts their bodies at risk to injury, suffering, and death. Similarly, when the over-confident Dixon comments that he is unafraid of getting in the ring, Rocky remarks that he is always scared before a fight. In his parting comments, Stallone conflates himself and the character, mentioning that he's also thinking of the end of the *Rocky* series and of his own death, in all the difficulty of thinking such a thing, as he exits the boxing arena. The conflation of fiction and reality that results from the character's animality frustrates readings of him, even for Stallone the director, actor (and in this scene real boxer), as other than, at least in part, a material body.

When we read human and nonhuman animals as material bodies, instead of as mere symbols in a social or cultural narrative, we can approach a greater appreciation for the suffering that we share with them. Where the materiality of our bodies and the bodies of animals is often elided in discussions of humans and animals in fiction and film as many critics note, these scenes in the *Rocky* series prompt us to read bodies in an asignifying fashion, a reading of bodies as bodies, or what the narrator of J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* might describe as a place of reading where "bodies are their own signs" (157). This

approach to reading the bodies of human and nonhuman animals in film offers the opportunity to stay with the “difficulty of reality” in considering the horror of how humans treat each other and treat animals. While cultural readings of bodies might “deflect” us from this reality to turn our attentions to philosophical discourse, being “exposed,” in Diamond’s sense, to these images of bodies suffering and being wounded prompts us to recognize the vulnerability of others and our own vulnerability, thereby challenging us to respond in more ethical ways to the bodies of others. As Diamond notes, it is exceedingly difficult to consider or appreciate the horror of the suffering experienced by humans and animals simultaneously, and yet, while it focuses more on revealing the reality of the suffering of humans, the Rocky series attempts to acknowledge and appreciate this other reality at the same time: the suffering and vulnerability of the animals with whom we live.

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Notes

1. Leger Grindon argues “The animal motif, widespread in the ‘comeback’ cycle, amplifies Rocky’s innocence when the fighter falls in love with the clerk at the pet store. The animal motif cultivates in Rocky a Franciscan sanctity” (220).
2. Thanks to Michael Green for querying Aaron Baker about my project, as they pointed me to Grindon’s work on the boxing film as a genre.
3. In *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, Carol Adams describes how Upton Sinclair’s use of meat and the processing of meat as a metaphor in *The Jungle* fails: “As Upton Sinclair bemoaned, ‘I aimed at the public’s heart and by accident hit it in the stomach.’ Butchering failed as a metaphor for the fate of the worker in *The Jungle* because the novel carried too much information on how the animal was violently killed. To make the absent referent present — that is, describing exactly how an animal dies, kicking, screaming, and is fragmented — disables consumption and disables the power of metaphor” (78-79). Although animals aren’t shown being abused in the *Rocky* series as they are in *The Jungle*, in a few important points the film offers opportunities outside of reading animals on the symbolic register, where animals and their suffering (including human animals) are approached in a literal sense instead of as metaphors.

4. Although Carol Adams mentions *Rocky* briefly in her project, she offers only a passing comment in her important section on animals and race: "Put Rocky in a meat locker and you have the icon of the determined male fighter, of man over nature. But put an African American man in that same meat locker and the icon is not so undilutedly celebratory. It reinforces the idea of the black man as animal-like and violent" ("Pornography of Meat" 53). I'm interested in reading Rocky's body and those of the slaughtered animals as other than representatives of different species, in a way similar to Anat Pick's approach of reading all bodies in films as "creaturely." To be sure, Adams's reading of race and meat importantly critiques racist views of black males as inherently dangerous and violent, and points to the historically racist tradition of the animalization and dehumanization of the Other. I'd also submit that Rocky is sympathetic with animal suffering and not a proponent of it, and as a wounded body, he is not a master over nature or materiality but highly aware of being embedded in it.

5. Paulie's views about his sister confirm that he views women solely as means of reproduction in the way described by Haraway: "If my sister don't start living, her body's gonna dry up." He also offers disparaging and racist remarks to other characters throughout the film series, as when in *Rocky Balboa* he assumes that Marie's son Steps, an African American teen, is a criminal based on the way he's dressed and looks. Rocky here as well attempts to correct Paulie's violent words, as he says of Steps that "he's a nice kid" and he critiques Paulie's attire: "coming from a human hamper, that's quite a compliment." Paulie's racist and patriarchal views lead to the violence, verbal and physical, against bodies. Rocky's challenging of these views and response with a verbal jab at Paulie's own character suggest his distance from this kind of thinking. Indeed, Paulie's role in the films often seems to be a foil to the nurturing Rocky; Paulie serves as an example of human violence.

6. Rocky's hitting the already slaughtered animal bodies contrasts largely with the behavior of the boxer whose fight against Muhammad Ali inspired Stallone to write the screenplay for *Rocky*: the "Bayonne Bleeder," Chuck Wepner. A documentary that aired on ESPN in October 2011 entitled "The Real Rocky," directed by Jeff Feuerzeig and Mike Tollin, focuses on Wepner's boxing career and shows brief footage of Wepner fighting a live bear in the ring towards the end of his career. Wepner's decision to fight a live bear, it seems, was a publicity stunt to sell some tickets, whereas Rocky's hitting the already dead animals causes their bodies no harm and instead draws attention to our poor treatment of them.

7. This may not be the final fight or final film since as of July 25 2013 there is news of the beginnings of a new project in the works for Stallone: another *Rocky* film, a spinoff to be titled "Creed."

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