

Film Next Section »

BODY AND SOUL

Frederick Wiseman's *Boxing Gym*

by Caroline Koebel

Frederick Wiseman's *Boxing Gym* focuses the director's trademark observational eye on Lord's Gym in Austin, Texas. The gym, managed and co-owned by Richard Lord (with his wife Lori), bespeaks American Pluralism in the ideal, with its own organs, causality, language, and belief structure. Lord's stands in stark relief from the ordinary life beyond its doors, though it nevertheless scrapes against outside circumstances and events at key uncanny intervals in the film, moments that Wiseman captures with an engrossing authorial voice and a sense of the gym's inescapable rhythm.

Only in the film's final minutes do we see the staging of an actual match: two guys boxing in the ring and the faces surrounding it. Looking relations are more prescribed here than elsewhere—just as the fight's spectators occupy set positions, so do we as the film's viewers. Information is ordered and there is less involvement on the part of the audience to assemble the fragments. As a result, this culmination or "climax" of training is less absorbing than the complex processes leading up to it.

Wiseman has stated that he kept less than two percent of the footage, so the prioritizing of training over fighting could be as indicative of his own ethos as it is an accurate representation. An athlete's time competing is but a fraction of that spent training, and Lord's functions less as a site of competition than one that fosters community among individuals with disparate lives. The mutual respect shared between all those within its sphere is palpable, and this impression could have been obscured by more screen time devoted to direct competition between individuals.

In comparison to mainstream gyms (including mine only a couple miles away), Lord's is a warm, cozy cave. The film's *mise-en-scène* is dark and cluttered, conveying more a feel of expansiveness than of claustrophobia—there's space for all who enter its realm. Jesus Chavez (a legendary Lord's alumnus) is omnipresent amongst the many fight posters that line the gym's walls alongside other visual provocations such as a minimalist black on yellow graphic of two sparring Greeks and a Bruce



Frederick Wiseman, *Boxing Gym*, 2010. Image courtesy of Zipporah Films

Nauman-esque flashing neon “boxing” sign. At the center is the ring, its blue color suggesting the gym holds a patch of sky under artificial light. A mirror on the wall segues into plywood on the floor, creating a mini-stage on which boxers skip rope or fine-tune their form. The abundance of sensuous shapes, including modified punching bags and homemade medicine balls, almost invoke Louise Bourgeois, as does the general mood of the gym as a well-used hiding place.

“The speed and endurance will come. It’s just all about getting the rhythm.” These sage words spoken by a Lord’s veteran to a novice in one of the film’s various conversations could be Wiseman’s own manifesto. The spatiotemporal medium of cinema aptly conveys the myriad visual and aural rhythms that Lord’s Gym comprises. Gym members afford much visual pleasure, in their actions and movements—a choreography both repetitive and singular—as well as in the dynamic colors and patterns of their attire. Absent are music, radio, Web, TV (no screens!—their exclusion marks Lord’s as a vital refuge from the clutches of corporate pop culture), and instead an acoustic panoply encompasses gloves thumping, nonlinguistic utterances of bodies in exertion, whirring of skipping rope, Richard Lord coaching, “1-2, 1-2,” and the constant pierce of an electronic timer signaling shifts between “work” and “rest.”

The “rhythm” men also discuss the misunderstood place of violence in the sport, a paradigm thrown into question by *Boxing Gym* as a whole. In Wiseman’s film, training for the ring is presented as the pursuit of self-fulfillment within a collectivist enterprise—following the ethos of Richard Lord, the point is to become fiercer not as a means to an end but rather as a process by which to strengthen one’s ability to touch others. This point is underscored by a juxtaposition that concludes the film’s opening montage: in the shot’s foreground, a brawny man beats a punching bag, and in the background an infant shakes its feet and mouths a chew toy. Such signifying transposition of three-dimensional pro-filmic space into flat screen space that, through a single pan, generates a wealth of associations and understandings is indicative of the inspired camerawork and editing throughout. At the sound of “beep beep beep,” the boxer goes into “rest time,” and in the next instance with his gargantuan gloved hands play-punches his happy baby.

In cinéma vérité—a term applied often to Wiseman but one that he himself disavows—subjects speak for themselves, without commentary in the form of voice-over narration or other devices by which filmmakers build context in conventional documentary. Viewers do not “hear” the director’s “voice” so much as they experience direct immersion in a reality independent of any filmic vehicle intended to transport that reality to their purview. While it is clear the making of the film furthers Lord’s electric atmosphere, Wiseman’s perspective becomes especially felt in *Boxing Gym*’s encoded analysis of violence and the American psyche. No matter how seemingly antithetical to boxing itself, Lord’s acts as a peaceful respite from greater reality. But the world outside inevitably invades, and these instances expose Wiseman as a critical mind with provocations to make.

Midway into *Boxing Gym* two men on elliptical machines chat about the younger’s ambition to become a Texas Ranger following military service. The scene is not so hypnotic and riveting as others, the action relatively subdued (with little sweating and no grunting), and so the viewer

anticipates the next. The cut does come, but not until the young man—facing postponed deployment to the Middle East—confides his disappointment, “I joined the Army to go to combat.” Words barely out, Wiseman shifts to a shot of a gym regular sitting atop red stairs beside the ring, elbows on widely spaced knees, hands joined by thumbs and forefingers, shaven head slightly forward, eyes focused pensively off-screen. Next, a young boy in a Spiderman T-shirt stands in the ring against a red column looking off-screen, from where a baby’s cry emanates, and in the following shot a woman pauses from wrapping her hands to tend her fussy newborn, tucked beneath a pink blanket on the blue ring. Richard Lord enters the scene and helps the mother comfort her child. Wiseman—ever the virtuoso—commands relations between space and time to articulate in a mere minute the dialectic of masculinist adolescent death fantasy and the wonder of new life.

The shooting of the film coincided with the Virginia Tech Massacre on April 16, 2007, and mention of the incident gives more palpability to Wiseman’s point. Three-quarters into *Boxing Gym*, a tech industry Lord’s member shares privy information received from a partner space aviation company in Moscow with Richard, as the latter wraps the former’s hands. A live call comes in with updated victim numbers. While both men are stoic, their seemingly relative ease of mind is belied by the viewer’s general familiarity with feelings of passivity and inertia in the face of spectacular American tragedy. When yet another act of irrational violence happens, sharing bits of knowledge and exchanging stories person-to-person maintains the image of—and hope for—a sane society. In this section of *Boxing Gym*, content is afforded primacy, and film form becomes ancillary. The weighing here of content over form, then, leads consequently to greater cognizance of Wiseman’s intentionality in compiling fragments into the whole that is *Boxing Gym*.

Let’s imagine that not only is Wiseman positing Lord’s as a utopic alternative to the horrors of the U.S. zeitgeist. He is also mapping Austin, the city anchoring this boxing gym peace-ship marvel, as a site of trauma. Prior to Virginia Tech, the University of Texas at Austin had the ignominy of being home to the deadliest campus shooting in U.S. history. On August 1, 1966, Charles Whitman ascended to the 28th floor observation deck of the school’s 307-foot tower and opened fire. Wiseman’s ventures outside Lord’s are almost nonexistent, so his inclusion of the U.T. campus (and to lesser extent the downtown skyline) is noteworthy. The monumental buildings stand in sharp contrast to the den of protection back at the gym. One scene in particular clashes the harsh architecture with human rhythms: as Lord leads a dawn workout through the U.T. stadium stairwell, the boxers in motion could not be more at odds with the concrete environs. *Boxing Gym* closes with the silhouetted campus tower before a fading sun—Wiseman’s choice to end his movie about a gym that Richard Lord explains as a place where “most people avoid fights.”

This review follows a screening of *Boxing Gym* at the Austin Film Society in November 2010, with Frederick Wiseman and Richard Lord in attendance. *Boxing Gym* premieres on PBS on June 16 and will be available on DVD later in 2011.

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