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Michael Mann's *Ali* (2001)

Introduction

Written, produced, and directed by American filmmaker Michael Mann, the 2001 biographical sports film *Ali* covers Muhammad Ali's life from the year 1964 to 1974. Played by Will Smith, Ali is shown as he captures multiple heavyweight titles, joins the Nation of Islam, criticizes the Vietnam War and navigates a complicated love life. Through his film, Mann shows his viewers how one of the South's most influential icons navigated a life pressured by politics, religion, and fame.

I. The Life of Muhammad Ali

Cassius Marcellus Clay Jr., as Muhammad Ali was known before his conversion to Islam, was born on January 17, 1942 in Louisville, Kentucky. Named after his father, who himself was named for a nineteenth century politician and abolitionist, Clay's early years in the segregated southern United States would prove to be formative (Doeden 10). During this time, Louisville was "noted for the Kentucky Derby, mint juleps, and other reminders of southern aristocracy" (Hauser 3). Viewed as the "servant class in Louisville," African Americans in the city typically occupied positions low on the socio-economic ladder (3). African Americans raking manure and cleaning people's homes were common sights (3). As a child, the mistreatment of African

Americans hurt Clay deeply. One story that Clay's mother, Odessa Grady Clay, once recalled describes a very young Clay crying after a store refused to serve him water due to the color of his skin (3). As Clay grew older, his father made sure that Ali was aware of the "foibles of white people" (Ezra 9). In his book *Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon*, author Michael Ezra explains, "[Clay Sr.] frequently lectur[ed] young Cassius and his little brother Rudy about the pitfalls of growing up black in America" (9). In these early years, Clay was already beginning to develop the racial pride he would become known for.

In 1954, at the young age of twelve, Clay would fall into the sport that would one day claim him as its greatest. Clay's family had little money at the time; unable to afford the bus fair, Clay often ran to school (Doeden 10). Despite struggling financially, Clay's father, a billboard and sign painter, and mother, a household domestic worker, invested in their son and tried to give him the best upbringing possible. Clay's father soon gifted him a brand-new Schwinn bicycle, so that Clay would no longer have to run to school (10). Not long after, however, Clay's bicycle was stolen while Clay played in downtown Louisville where young boys often asked white businessmen for treats (Lemert 15). Enraged, Clay told police officer Joe Martin that he intended to whip the thief" (15). Martin, who trained young boxers at the Columbia gym located in the basement of the Louisville Service Club, questioned if Clay knew how to fight (15). Before long, Martin began training Clay and eventually raved about his determination: "He stood out because, I guess, he had more determination than most boys, and he had the speed to get him someplace. He was a kid willing to make sacrifices.... It was almost impossible to discourage him. I mean he was easily the hardest working kid I ever taught" (qtd in Lemert 15). Clay's goal was to be nothing short of the greatest. His training would begin as early as four thirty in the morning (Doeden 11). On school days, he would make a journey of nearly three miles in each

direction from Central High to Columbia gym. In winters, this meant riding back in the dark. In summer, when Clay was home from school, his journey nearly doubled and was against blistering heat (Lemert 18). Clay's work ethic during these years led him to an overall amateur record of 100-5 and several amateur boxing titles. Having quickly risen the ranks, Clay was now one of boxing's rising stars (Doeden 11). By the time he was eighteen years of age, many of Louisville's citizens were becoming aware of Clay and his talents (Ezra 10).

As a young adult in 1960, Clay's talents would take him out of Louisville after winning a spot on the US Olympic boxing team. In Rome, he became a gold medalist in the light-heavyweight division after winning all four of his fights (Doeden 12). This milestone brought Clay one step closer to the global icon he'd eventually become. At the event, Clay made one of his earliest political statements; he would eventually become known for his politically charged comments. After being pestered by a Soviet reporter about race relations in the United States, Clay responded, "To me the U.S.A. is the best country in the world, including yours" (qtd. in Ezra 11). The comment and gold medal in Rome brought Clay enormous reception in Louisville. Upon his arrival back in Kentucky, he was met by a crowd of over two-hundred fans. Soon after, Clay was interviewed alongside Louisville's mayor Bruce Hoblitzell before traveling alongside a fifty-car motorcade to Central High School for a celebration ceremony (Ezra 11). The world was beginning to finally see his charm and outgoing personality.

Shortly after returning from Rome, an eighteen-year old Cassius Clay made his professional boxing debut. A six-round bout was organized by Mayor Hoblitzell and boxing promotor Bill King to take place on October 29, 1960. Cassius Clay versus Tunney Hunsaker was won by Clay in a unanimous decision (Ezra 13). Over the next three years, now under the training of Miami-based Angelo Dundee, Clay accumulated a 19-0 record. While Clay's record

suggested perfection, his fights frustrated many boxing enthusiasts (Hauser 13). Author Thomas Hauser explains, “Cassius Clay held his hands too low. He backed away from punches, rather than bobbing and weaving out of danger, and lacked true knockout power. Purists cringed when he predicted the round in which he intended to knock out his opponent, and grimaced when he did so and bragged about each new conquest” (13). By this point in his career, Clay was proudly proclaiming his greatness. He was skilled at promoting himself. In 1963, for example, Clay released a music album titled, *I Am the Greatest!* (Doeden 14). Within the work, Clay taunted the reigning heavyweight champ Sonny Liston (14). By the end of 1963, a majority of Clay’s fame stemmed from his personality rather than his accomplishments in the boxing ring.

The following year, 1964, marked a major turning point in Cassius Clay’s career; a twenty-two-year-old Clay had challenged Sonny Liston for the world heavyweight crown (Hauser 13). At the time, Liston was regarded by many as “the most intimidating ferocious powerful fighter of his era” (13). Clay entered the fight as a massive underdog. Even some within his own camp suggested that Clay avoid taking on an experienced, highly accomplished fighter such as Liston (Doeden 14). In the days leading up to the fight, he continued his tradition of taunting his opponents. Clay “dubbed Liston the big, ugly bear” and during the seventh round of their bout, defeated Liston by technical knockout (14). Clay shouted, “I am the greatest! I shook up the world!” (qtd. in Doeden 14). Clay was now the world heavyweight champion; no longer could he be accused of being all talk. Clay backed up his statements on the highest stage, and with it sprung himself into global stardom.

It was during this time in Clay’s life when he began affiliating himself with the Nation of Islam. During the civil rights era, the Nation of Islam, which operated under very different principals than orthodox Islam, “took a militant stance on social reform” (Doeden 16). While

leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. preached the importance of peaceful demonstration, the Nation of Islam believed that forceful resistance was the only way to bring about change. The movement endorsed violence when necessary and strongly encouraged African Americans to feel pride in their racial identity (16). Clay, who was still “deeply resentful of racism and America’s legacy of slavery,” was gravitated towards the Nation of Islam’s teachings (15). “The first time I truly felt special in my life was when I walked into the Muslim temple in Miami. I liked what I heard, and wanted to learn more,” Clay said (qtd. in Doeden 16). First becoming aware of the Nation of Islam around 1962, Clay would officially convert shortly after his fight against Liston (Lemert 21). By this time, he was being personally mentored by Malcolm X, who was one of the movement’s most significant figures. Shortly after converting, the Nation of Islam gave Cassius Clay the Muslim name Muhammad Ali (Doeden 17). “Cassius Clay is a slave name. I didn’t choose it and I don’t want it. I am Muhammad Ali, a free name. It means beloved of God, and I insist people use it when people speak to me,” Ali said shortly after his conversion (qtd in Doeden 17). Ali’s affiliation with the Nation of Islam was a decision mired in controversy. Ali’s popularity declined among many who now viewed him as radical. Within the group, there was also disarray. After having a fallout with its leader Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, who had decided to convert to orthodox Islam, was gunned down in 1965 (Doeden 18). In his later years, Ali would cite a broken relationship with Malcolm X at the time of his death as a major source of sorrow. “Turning my back on Malcolm was one of the mistakes that I regret most in my life,” Ali says in his 2004 autobiography *The Soul of a Butterfly* (qtd. in Lusher). For the next year, Ali tried to return much of his focus to the boxing ring. Over a couple years, he defeated the likes of Sonny Liston (in a famous rematch), Floyd Patterson, and Ernie Terrell (Doeden 19).

Soon after, however, Ali's success in the ring was cut short. On April 28, 1967, at the height of the Vietnam War, Ali refused induction into the United States Army (Hauser 5). Citing religious beliefs, Ali explained that he would only go to war if Allah ordered it (Doeden 21). Ali's refusal came after a 1966 statement where he famously said, "I ain't got no quarrel with them Vietcong" (qtd. in Hauser 5). Ali was met with extreme backlash as much of black and white America saw him as unpatriotic and cowardly. On June 20, 1967, Ali was convicted for refusing his induction and sentenced to five years in prison (Hauser 5). Around the same time, Ali was stripped from his title and barred from boxing. In what should have been the prime of his career, Ali had to step away from boxing for around three-and-a-half years while fighting his conviction (5). Ali refused to leave country, citing America as his home and birthplace, and instead dedicated his time towards his legal battle and other pursuits such as serving as a guest lecturer on college campuses (Doeden 23). According to his wife at the time, Belinda Ali, Ali "believed that he would never fight again" (qtd. in Hauser 5). Fortunately, in 1971, the Supreme Court unanimously overturned his conviction. By that time, Ali's impact had grown "among black Americans, among those who opposed the war in Vietnam, among all people with grievances against The System" (Hauser 5). Ali took on not only America, but Armies all over the world by proposing that, "Unless you have a very good reason to kill, war is wrong" (Noble qtd. in Hauser 9).

Ali's return to boxing was made shortly before his Supreme Court ruling. By 1970, much of the public opinion had shifted against the war and Ali was viewed by many in a new, much more favorable, light. Ali's boxing ban was subsequently lifted. At the age of twenty-nine, no longer as agile as he once was, Ali made his return against Jerry Quarry in Atlanta, Georgia. Set against the ongoing civil rights movement, the bout featuring Ali verses a white fighter came

with an understanding of its social importance. Ali dominated, winning the fight in the third round via knock out (Doeden 24). Shortly after, however, Ali's comeback would become derailed in his first fight against Joe Fraizer. The bout, which took place in Madison Square Garden on March 8, 1971, went all fifteen rounds. Despite this, Frazier was a clear winner and handed Ali the first loss of his professional career (25). Over the next two years, Ali's determination fueled a comeback that led to an 11-1 record. With his eyes set on the heavyweight title, Ali's attention turned to George Foreman, who had taken the title from Joe Frazier (28). After a rematch with Frazier, in which Ali emerged victorious, the stage was set for Ali versus Foreman.

Dubbed the Rumble in the Jungle, the 1974 bout between Ali and Foreman would take place in the central African nation of Zaire. Zaire's dictator, Mobutu Sese Seko, agreed to fund the fight as he believed that the publicity would be good for his country. Foreman, who was seven years younger than Ali at the time entered the fight as heavily favored to win. Foreman had taken the boxing world by storm due to his size and strength (Doeden 28). Charles Lemert explains, "He had already destroyed both Frazier and Ken Norton, while Ali had lost to each and was unable to knock out either in winning the return matches" (24). For Ali, however, the trip to Zaire was about more than his bout against Foreman. Ali embraced the country's people and in return, they embraced him. Through the streets of Africa, the home of Ali's ancestors, people would be heard chanting his name (Doeden 28). Like the scenes leading up to it, the fight itself was an image to behold. Under a moonlit sky, tens of thousands watched as Ali again shook the world. A master strategist, Ali surprised his trainers and fans by relaxing himself against the ropes and allowing Foreman to tire himself. The rope-a-dope, as it would be known, paid off as

Ali knocked out a weary Foreman with a series of punches in the eighth round (Lemert 24). At thirty-three years of age, Ali was once again the greatest.

After completing his comeback, Ali would fight for about seven more years before retiring from the sport. During this time, nearly every fight proved to be physically demanding. Ali would fight Joe Frazier for a third time during 1975's famous bout *The Thrilla in Manila* (Doeden 30). Following his victory, Ali later said, "We went to Manila as Champions, Joe and me, and we came back as old men" (Ali qtd. in Doeden 31). Despite the toll boxing was beginning to take on him, Ali fought on before ultimately announcing his retirement in June 1979. Retired life, however, did not satisfy Ali and in October 1980 Ali returned to the Ring to fight Larry Holmes. At thirty-nine years of age, Ali was cautioned by many, including his mother, to stay out of the ring. Medical tests noted that Ali was beginning to lack coordination and struggle with speech (Doeden 33). Ali's comeback bout was a disaster and Holmes, who was later in tears after seeing his hero in such bad shape, easily defeated Ali. Not ready to give up, Ali participated in one final bout. After producing a similar result, Ali knew it was time to hang up his gloves (34). In December of 1981, Ali retired from the sport he dominated at a professional level for nearly two decades.

Ali entered a new chapter of his life. Nearly a decade prior to his retirement, Ali had left the Nation of Islam and converted to orthodox Sunni Islam. After a 1972 pilgrimage to Mecca, Ali had gained a new perspective: "I have never before seen sincere and true brotherhood practiced by all colors together..." (Ali qtd. in Doeden 34). With this new outlook, Ali's post-retirement life was characterized by a focus on spirituality and giving back to a world that had showered him with love. Having previously struggled with infidelity through multiple marriages, Ali's family became a focal point in his life. In 1986, Ali married Lonnie Williams, who would

remain by his side until his death. Unfortunately, the long-term negative effects of Ali's boxing career would test both Ali's faith and family. In 1984, doctors diagnosed Ali with Parkinson's Disease (Doeden 35). Ali's speech was becoming slower and slurred and his movements were no longer fluid. Despite his condition, Ali embraced life and was noted for especially enjoying time with children. Ali continued to be outspoken despite struggling with his speech. In the early 1990s, as a diplomat for the United States, Ali helped free fourteen US hostages who were being held in Iraq (36). Following the attacks on September 11, 2001, Ali appeared on national television to defend Islam: "I wouldn't be here representing Islam if it was really like the terrorists made it look" (qtd. in Doeden 37). For many of his late years, Ali was also heavily focused on the campaign for seeking a cure to Parkinson's disease. Often teaming up with *Back to the Future* actor Michael J. Fox, Ali helped bring the disease to the global conscious (37). Through his retirement, Ali remained a global icon loved by many. One Ali often comes to mind when thinking of his prominence: a slow-moving Ali lighting the Olympic torch at the opening of ceremonies of the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta. Ali, while no longer the Athletic talent he was for most of his life, was met with thunderous applause (36).

On June 3, 2016, Muhammad Ali, whose health had been declining for quite some time, passed away of a respiratory illness at the age of seventy-four. The champ's death became a trending topic around the world as people mourned and remembered his impact on both "popular" and "political" culture (38). Under his own wishes, Ali underwent a traditional Muslim burial ceremony and over fifteen thousand people from all over the world attended his funeral. In both life and death, Ali was an icon who brought the world together. In his life, Ali transcended his sport, and, in his death, Ali achieved a sort of immortality as someone who will be remembered lifetimes from now. In more ways than one, Ali was truly the greatest.

II. *Ali* (2001) and the Cinema of Michael Mann

Born on February 5, 1973 in Chicago, Illinois, director Michael Mann grew up interested in “various storytelling forms” (Rybin 21). After graduating from the University of Wisconsin at Madison with a bachelor’s degree in English literature in 1965, Mann would go on to earn a master’s degree in film from the London Film School in 1967. Following his formal education, which saw him as a member of the same London Film School graduating class as important filmmakers such as Ridley Scott, Mann directed short films such as *Insurrection* (1968), *Jaunpuri* (1971), and *17 Days Down the Line* (1972). Through these early works, one could begin to see Mann’s interests as a filmmaker: “liberal and at times radical politics” and “a commitment to cause-and-effect narrative forms [in] familiar Hollywood genres” (Rybin 23). As Mann’s career progressed, more of his fascinations became clear. Mann’s films each contain a protagonist who is committed to their personal beliefs. This commitment often drives the narrative as Mann shows how his protagonists’ decisions affect the world around them. In simpler terms, Mann’s films are concerned with the relationship between “social engagement” and “existentialism” (Gaine 2).

Given Michael Mann’s interests, it comes as no surprise that Muhammad Ali, played by Will Smith, was chosen to be the protagonist of the director’s first biographical film. *Ali* (2001) focuses on the boxing great’s life from 1964 to 1974, a decade during which Ali both held and lost the heavyweight title, joined the Nation of Islam, criticized the Vietnam War, and was romantically involved with multiple women. These events serve as a perfect vessel for Mann to express his fascination with existential struggle and political mindedness. Through them, the film chooses to focus on “the relationship between Ali’s career and his religious transformation and

the social context in which they occurred” (Rivele qtd. in Rybin 152). Mann establishes this focus early in a film through a montage that depicts a young Clay walking to the back of a segregated bus, an older Clay listening to a lecture given by Malcolm X, Clay jogging in the street, and Clay training for his fight against Sony Liston (*Ali*). In a single montage, viewers are exposed to the social context that influences Ali, his unwavering dedication to his career, and his larger-than-life personality. At first viewing the sequence may feel like several disconnected scenes; however, while abstract, the montage as a whole allows Mann to give his take on what it may have felt like to be Ali during this time. As the film progresses, Mann shows his audience how Ali’s career, religion, political values, and social interactions are in constant discourse rather than being separate entities. An example of this discourse is seen through Ali’s interactions with his wives. Throughout the film, Ali’s wife at the given time is always concerned with “both the boxer’s well-being in the ring” and outside of it (Rybin 153). This often leads to conflict. For example, the film shows Ali’s first wife Sonji excited to see him after his victory against Sonny Liston. Throughout the fight, Sonji appears genuinely concerned for Ali’s well-being. Despite her care for him, Ali gets frustrated at her for dressing in a way that he disapproves of due to his religious beliefs (*Ali*). In this scene, Ali’s career, religion, and love-life all come together to create a complex tension that results in Ali’s first divorce.

Mann also creates discourse between the different aspects of Ali’s life by blurring the boundaries between Ali as an individual and Ali as a member of a larger community. The world, including its people and conflicts, is inseparable from the film’s protagonist; in *Ali*, this fact is more significant than in any of Mann’s other films (Gaine 199). This can be seen through scenes such as the ones in which Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. are murdered. While Muhammad Ali is not physically present in either case, Mann inserts Ali’s presence into the

scene. In the case of the Malcolm X scene, Mann shows Ali mourning immediately after. Similarly, in the case of the Martin Luther King Jr. scene, Ali's voice can be heard through a phone call (*Ali*). Scenes such as these not only provide context for the choices Ali makes through the film, but also "dramatise the world which Ali perceives" (Gaine 200). Mann's investment in the world around Ali exemplifies his commitment to the connection between the "fundamental self" and "social engagement" (201). As the film progresses, this is seen repeatedly. When refusing to serve in the United States Army during the Vietnam War, for example, Ali must internally debate whether or not there is value in losing prime years of his career in order to adhere to his sociopolitical beliefs. His decision ultimately leads to widespread social outrage as the NAACP, Illinois boxing committee, and many fans turn their back on Ali (*Ali*).

By the time it reaches its conclusion, in which Muhammad Ali is shown defeating George Foreman at the famous Rumble in the Jungle, *Ali* makes itself at home alongside Mann's other filmography. The story of Muhammad Ali from 1964 to 1974 provides Mann with a narrative well-suited for his interests. As a complex, incredibly important historical icon, Muhammad Ali, is a difficult character to adapt for any filmmaker (Rybin 151). By exploring Ali's personal beliefs and the impact that they have on the world around him, however, Mann provides an interesting lens through which to view the icon. Mann's portrayal ultimately informs viewers that Ali was even more complex than many think, with his beliefs being informed by his religion, social context, relationships, and position as an athlete.

III. The Reception of *Ali* (2001)

Michael Mann's *Ali* (2001) opened on December 25, 2001 with critics viewing the film

with mixed to positive reviews. On the review-aggregation website, Rotten Tomatoes, *Ali* holds a 67% critic rating indicating that the film was viewed in a positive light by around 67% of notable film critics (“*Ali*”). Among the chief complaints of the film, was the criticism that Mann removed too much of Muhammad Ali’s story by only focusing on one decade. In a review by *Variety*, Todd McCarthy explains, “just about everything Mann has chosen to present is valid, substantial, and convincing, but by the end, the feeling persists that while certain essences have been grasped, only part of the story has been told” (McCarthy qtd. in Rybin 151). In a harsher review, *Film Quarterly* states that “Instead of adding depth to [Ali’s] image, Mann’s *Ali* takes an Exacto knife to it” (Thompson qtd. in Rybin 152). Famed critic Roger Ebert agrees with this sentiment with the opinion that Mann’s *Ali* “lacked much of the flash, fire, and humor of Muhammad Ali” (Ebert).

Interestingly, some critics feel that Mann accomplished exactly what Ebert claims the film lacked. In a positive review, *The New York Times*’s Elvis Mitchell claims that the film has “overwhelming love for its subject” (Mitchell). Much of this “love” is attributed to Will Smith’s portrayal of Ali, which most critics praised. In a television documentary, *The Making of Ali*, Smith admitted that for years he rejected the role because he believed that no one could properly portray Ali. After meeting Ali and being told that he was pretty enough to play him, Smith was convinced to take the role. Smith was determined to put on a good performance, claiming that his sacrifices would be nothing in comparison to the one’s that Ali made (*The Making of Ali*). Smith underwent professional training in Miami where the humidity was like that of Africa. Every day, he ran three miles, practiced boxing, ate a high protein diet, and watched fight films before working out. During actual film shoots, Smith and his fellow actors actually boxed rather than

resorting to shadow punches (Robinson). Smith's hard work was certainly recognized as he would receive an Academy Award nomination in 2001 for "Best Actor."

Ali would proceed to gain approximately \$58,203,105 at the box office in the United States and \$87,817,729 worldwide. With a budget of approximately \$107,000,000, Michael Mann's *Ali* was a box office failure ("Ali (2001)"). Despite this, *Ali* continues to be in film conversation with many of its political themes still relevant and subsequent releases of modified director's cuts.

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