

# A life is more than the sum total of its details

## Ali, directed by Michael Mann

By David Walsh  
30 January 2002

*Ali*, directed by Michael Mann, screenplay by Stephen J. Rivele, Christopher Wilkinson, Eric Roth and Mann, based on a story by Gregory Allen Howard

Michael Mann's film treats ten years in the life of American heavyweight boxing champion, Muhammad Ali, from 1964, when he first won the crown against Sonny Liston, to his defeat of George Foreman and the recapture of the title in Kinshasa, Zaire in 1974.

Ali, loquacious, nervy, perceptive and an enormously gifted athlete, was one of the remarkable personalities of the time. His refusal to kowtow to the American establishment, reaching its high point in his refusal in 1967 to accept induction into the US army (which cost three and a half years of his boxing career), won him respect and admiration all over the world.

Mann (*The Insider*, *Heat*, *The Last of the Mohicans*) is an ambitious filmmaker. An ambitious filmmaker, but with only a quasi-serious approach to art and reality. One always feels that two processes are simultaneously at work: Mann's desire to do something socially and artistically out of the ordinary and his desire to make a film that has an unusual look and feel to it, i.e., to impress. The two projects are not necessarily identical and indeed generally war with one another, and since Mann as a rule doesn't work through the most difficult issues, it is more often than not the second desire that finds fulfillment in his work. Pleasurable as his films can sometimes be, it is difficult to recall a single insight arrived at in any one of them that seriously flies in the face of conventional wisdom. The great strength of *The Insider* (about the tobacco industry's criminality) was precisely that it summed up a sentiment that is widely felt and known but rarely articulated, that giant American corporations are ruthless and perfidious.

There are attractive and striking images in *Ali*, but the director has not managed to come up with an alternative to the Hollywood biographical film. While the film darts energetically and colorfully here and there, it never fully detaches itself from the comfortable formula: the Great Man's life in 10, 12 or 25 episodes. The tag line of the film is "Forget what you think you know," but the film tends to be a dramatizing of precisely that, with hints and insinuations of other hidden truths, which, unfortunately, thanks to the director's tendency to substitute enigmatic and oblique references for head-on confrontations with complex problems, remain largely hidden.

The film sets out to capture something of the unique contribution Ali made to American socio-cultural life. It identifies that

contribution largely in racial terms, the arrival onto the American scene of a new type of self-confident and self-assertive black personality. The film begins with Sam Cooke, the personification of sensuality, entrancing a night-club audience. Muhammad Ali (or Cassius Clay as he was then known) beats Liston, much to the surprise of the sports world, and proclaims, "I'm going to be the champ the way I want to be."

Ali becomes the friend and adherent of black nationalist leader Malcolm X. Government surveillance of the latter is stepped up. When Malcolm falls out with Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad (the political issues involved, including Malcolm's turn to the left, are never explained), Ali sticks with the Nation of Islam. The assassination of Malcolm, for which the Nation of Islam was principally responsible (probably with the assistance of state forces), affects him deeply. One presumes that this has taught him a lesson on the importance of true independence. He has also lost a first wife due to his allegiance to the reactionary moral strictures of the black Muslims.

The dramatization of Ali's opposition to the Vietnam War is unquestionably effective. His famous comment to a reporter, "No Vietcong ever called me nigger," struck a chord with millions. After the boxing commission strips him of his title, Ali strides down a corridor, hurling angry and incisive comments at the astonished news people. When he tells them he's not going "ten thousand miles to kill other poor people" the secret of his popularity with masses of people all over the globe is partially revealed.

As noted above, all sorts of things are hinted at. We see CIA and FBI agents trailing Malcolm X, a mysterious meeting between an FBI official and an undercover agent planted inside the Nation of Islam. But nothing much is made of all this. Nearly the last third of *Ali* is devoted to the weeks preceding the fight in Zaire and the fight itself. Episodes flash by: a run in the back streets of Kinshasa turns into a popular demonstration; Ali finds a new love; promoter Don King connives and manipulates; his current wife lectures him on the foulness of the Zairian regime, etc.

The film almost inadvertently hits on an important idea, that the radicalization of figures like Ali and wide layers of the black working class population in the 1960s did introduce, so to speak, a new and potentially explosive element into American political and social life. There is something to Ali's self-confidence and determination that speaks to important social truths. One feels it at several moments. But the idea is not developed and Mann is

willing to accommodate himself to the false notion that this was simply a racial or ethnic issue, the emergence of Black Pride or some such. The instant the director abandons the thornier social and class issues in favor of trite and thoroughly predictable considerations of race, one's attention wanders.

It would have been of great interest if Mann and his screenwriters had attempted—even had the attempt ended in failure—to explore the interplay of individual experience and social forces that creates an extraordinary personality like Ali's. (A single reference to the impact of the horrific Emmett Till murder on the young Cassius Clay is not adequate.) But the film takes for granted everything it should examine—the social circumstances, the personality, even the boxing skill (the art of it all)—and, starting at the point which might possibly have been the conclusion of the film's argument, merely sets about recreating in as much naturalistic detail as possible a series of already widely known incidents. That is, it doesn't seek the *truth* of those moments, which would have meant going beyond them, stepping back, so to speak, and making an independent assessment of a life and an era, it merely *reminds* us of them. One of the things that this suggests is that Mann, a left-liberal (who met Malcolm X in 1963), has no more understanding of the social processes at work in the 1960s today than he did when he was living through the decade.

The story of a life must mean and must be made to mean something beyond a recounting of the details of that life. Both Shakespeare's *Richard III* and Hollywood's *The Life of Emile Zola* (directed by William Dieterle, written by Norman Reilly Raine) leave something to be desired in the department of sticking to historical fact, but each in its own fashion is shaped by a coherent idea. One is not advocating a return to the complacent and conformist themes of studio biographies, much less historical falsification, but then a filmmaker has to advance resolutely toward something new. *Ali* is neither fish nor fowl. Mann has no desire to indulge in hagiography, but he hasn't produced a protest or a critique either. The film simply falls flat. One has the impression of a great deal of timidity on the part of the screenwriters; they were determined not to offend and accordingly tread lightly. Nothing extraordinary is produced on that basis.

*Ali* rarely goes beyond its own immediacy. There is the scene after the boxing commission hearing, there is the scene in the streets of Kinshasa, when Ali presumably realizes he is a hero to masses of very poor people. There are a few other moments. But Mann falls back, lazily, on the notion that a kind of matter of factness is the latest word in artistic representation. The film ends up largely being "one damned thing after another." One looks at one's watch. There is no argument being made here that truly and irrevocably transcends the details. What is the purpose of the film?

*Ali* is one of those films that seems less and less impressive the more one thinks about it and the more a viewing recedes in time. Mann has the ability to stimulate the nerve-endings and suggest visually that something provocative is going on. But the superficiality and lack of reflectiveness in the entire project come to dominate. It primarily catches at externals, like Will Smith's representation of Ali (one's regard for this central performance in particular drops off badly over time). Clever, brisk, always hinting at a deeper truth that only the director is privy to, finally, the film

subsides into the conventional. Fleeting glimpses of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. or the corruption of the Mobutu regime in Zaire are, one suspects, more mystifying than edifying to contemporary audiences.

One would have to have a more serious appreciation of the 1960s and 1970s. A serious appreciation includes making sense of those decades from the point of view of the present. What, after all, is one to make of the radicalism and the social opposition of the day? What does Mann make of it? Was it all an error? Or was it something necessary or possible at the time, but unnecessary or impossible today? Is there a continuity between the social conditions that helped produced Ali and conditions in the US today? The film ends on a note of personal triumph for Ali, his stunning victory over Foreman, but we know and the film seems to hint that the radical wave, which had helped carry Ali to such prominence, is about to break. The film simply ends, apparently because it has run out of fights, wives, outbursts, press conferences.

The argument that Mann represents the principle of style over substance misses the point. Style must also be substantive, it is not a disembodied element floating around in the ether. A development in form represents a response to new needs—in the final analysis, social needs—transmitted through the individual artistic consciousness. Mann is not an innovator, or his innovativeness lies primarily in the application of the visual pyrotechnics that have been developed in television, music videos, advertising and so on to certain kinds of dramas (historical and otherwise) where they have not generally been brought into play, thus producing a set of relatively unfamiliar sensations. But the filmmaker seems a figure far too deeply embedded in the current culture to stand above or against it.

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