

JACK JOHNSON’S CINEMATIC KO DEFERRED:
*A comparative-analysis between the star of early fight films and Hattie McDaniel,
the first black actor nominated for and to win an Academy Award*

While the boxing game tends to recycle its once-in-one-hundred-years matchups almost as frequently as it does its champions, the Fourth of July, 1910 “Fight of the Century” between Jack Johnson and Jim Jeffries truly was one of a kind. The combatants themselves were polar opposites—with the son of a former slave, and the first black boxer to fight for and win the heavyweight title in one corner; and in the other, a revered, undefeated champion, compelled out of retirement to defend the honor not only of his championship belt, but also of white America as a whole. More cameras covered the fight than had been present for any other event, as boxing footage was big business for movie producers in this era, and Johnson, the biggest attraction. Idolized and despised, he was—as Dan Streible argues in *Fight Pictures: A History of Boxing and Early Cinema*—the first black movie star.

In 1908, the championship belonged to a little-known Canadian boxer named Tommy Burns. Jack Johnson’s ring record and dominance in the process, combined with Burns’ modest reputation, set up a collision course for an interracial title bout—though Burns essentially had to be cornered in Australia, in the midst of a prolonged victory tour, to follow through on promises and threats to meet Johnson in the ring. Though the fight lasted fourteen rounds, Johnson won relatively easily, toying with Burns in the process.¹ One of the harshest and loudest critics of the new champion was Jack London, who covered the Australian bout as a reporter for the *New York Herald*. In an early indication of Johnson’s divisive star-quality and performance sensibility, London noted that he

seemed to play for the cameras throughout the fight. This behavior and the one-sided outcome lead London to dismiss the legitimacy of the matchup and opponent, writing simply that, “One thing remains. Jim Jeffries must now emerge from his alfalfa farm and remove that smile from Johnson’s face. Jeff, it’s up to you.”²

Footage of the film itself did not premiere for a number of months, with a reception that was, predictably, racially partisan. Nevertheless, the so-named *Burns-Johnson Championship Contest* performed well at the box office. This was due in part to persistent black audiences who took pride in the accomplishment, and in general did not mind having to venture out of their own neighborhoods to see the film—but the movie’s financial success also reflects a white viewership interested in seeing Johnson. This can be accounted for in the context of “cinema of attractions” (Tom Gunning’s term for the popularity of this era’s film-based revues—that are concerned less with narrative structures, and more with variety and spectacle), as well as a substantial white audience that watched the movie as game-film, imagining how the coveted Johnson-Jeffries battle might play out. It also helped that the image was censored. Surviving footage cuts off just before Johnson knocks Burns to the canvas for the final time en route to victory, indicating either that the cameras were ordered stopped at this point, or the film was edited after the fact. In either event, white audiences were spared the indignity of watching the outcome play out to its bitter end.³

A subsequent title defense against Stanley Ketchel, in 1909, was essentially about money in every conceivable manner, with the challenger clearly outclassed, allowing a built-in excuse (by white supremacists) when Johnson predictably won the match. The fight-as-money-grab was particularly evident in its cinematic incarnation, which

capitalized further on the racially motivated sensibilities that made the *Burns-Johnson Championship Contest* a box office hit. Adding to the intrigue of the *World Championship, Jack Johnson vs. Stanley Ketchell* picture, Ketchel had a moment of brilliance, luck, or stagecraft when he knocked Johnson down in the twelfth round, which also gave optimistic white audiences something to cheer about, and increased demand for Jeffries to unretire and restore order. As one black newspaper columnist observed:

If this Johnson-Ketchel fight wasn't a pre-arranged affair, there was some awful clever catering to the moving picture machine. Just imagine Johnson, the cleverest man in the ring today, allowing a little fellow like Ketchel to drop him with a wild swing back of the ear After the supposed blow Johnson went down on his hands and toes, rolled over backward on one hand, and facing the moving picture machine all the time; then, seeing that Ketchel was waiting for his cue, he jumped up and rushed at Ketchel like a wild man.... The referee stood squarely over Ketchel, counting him out, and all three were in full view of the moving picture machine.⁴

These thoughts were echoed by a white counterpart, who wrote that, "If the two men had been accomplished actors they couldn't have devised anything half so good for moving pictures as the show that was put up."

Regardless, the bout and especially its accompanying film perpetuated the public's interest in Johnson, and ensured a grand enough exhibition and payday to bring Jeffries out of retirement for a battle of the ages. The following Independence Day, in Reno, Nevada, everyone got their wish—at least for a little while. The multitude of cameras all captured the current champion systematically pummeling the former into bloody submission, and the fight was halted before Johnson knocked Jeffries down out (as with the Burns match). Nevertheless, news of the outcome resulted in reactionary

whites violently and fatally lashing out at celebratory (or simply present) blacks, with nearly twenty African Americans killed, in the end. As a result, and within hours, film of the fight was banned.⁵ This controversy increased demand to screen the footage, however, and in areas of the country tucked away from the film-ban legislation—or where crowds were considered easy enough to control (namely through measures of segregation)—the movie saw occasional screen time. Efforts continued to suppress fight films in general, however, as a federal ban disallowing their interstate transportation curtailed this driving force to Johnson’s popularity, and a dramatic boxing and film career was essentially over, almost as spectacularly as it had emerged.⁶

In this same period, Hattie McDaniel (the original certified black movie star, in her position as the first black actor nominated for and to win an Academy Award) had her initial taste of show business when she was only in elementary school. An older brother brought her to a carnival to sing and dance for the crowd, McDaniel’s act charmed the onlookers, and the change she collected as payment helped with the family’s finances. She continued to perform in various ways and venues from this point on, first gaining significant notice and acclaim as a teenaged entertainer with a specialty in mocking racial stereotypes of the day.⁷ In her study, *Hattie McDaniel: Black Ambition, White Hollywood*, Jill Watts notes that this performance background and subversive sensibility were the foundation for the next phase in McDaniel’s professional development—a transformation “from a satirical comedienne into an empowered and bold blues queen.” McDaniel was at home in a genre that transformed sorrow into artistic expression, but it was in humorous and shockingly sexual wordplay that she truly found her voice. The

1926 tune “I Wish I Had Somebody,” for example, begins with the lines, “Every time I think I’m set, With someone I just met, I’m bound to discover, another heavy lover, Getting what I ought to get”—and in her song “Any Kind of Man,” McDaniel informs the listener that “Any kind of man would be better than you. If he got one leg, that will be all right. Just so long that he brings that one leg home to Mama every night.” And at times a double entendre was one entendre too many, as the title “You Put It In, I’ll Take It Out” suggests. Most famous in this category is the 1929 duet “Dentist Chair Blues,” which includes the song’s practitioner informing the patient that he’s going to put his drill in her cavity, to which McDaniel replies, “you make me moan and groan,” before accepting some cocaine and liquor to ease his probing. When the procedure is over, she takes her leave, telling the dentist that he was rough, but she enjoyed his work.

It is in her subsequent Hollywood career that McDaniel garnered the greatest attention, however. Roles were generally small, and typecasting resulted in subservient characterizations, as was true for nearly all black actors of the time.⁸ For her part, McDaniel faced criticism in the black press for her unflattering “mammy” portrayals, though Donald Bogle allows that she perfected these roles in the 1930s with an air of militancy rather than submissiveness (as evidenced in her tart, rhetorical observation, “Why should I complain about making seven thousand dollars a week playing a maid? If I didn’t, I’d be making seven dollars a week actually being one!”). Bogle notes that McDaniel “emerged as the one servant of the era to speak her mind fully,” saying things “that no other maid in the movies would ever have dared.” This culminated, of course, with 1939’s *Gone with the Wind*—in which McDaniel’s “Mammy” shone in stark contrast to the usually innate inferiority of these characterizations. The performance and

reception was a mixed blessing, however—proving to be at once the highpoint as well as downturn of McDaniel’s career. In winning the Best Supporting Actress trophy, she was the first black actor even to be nominated for an Academy Award—beating out four (white) opponents, including *Gone with the Wind* costar Olivia de Havilland. Yet this came after Jim Crow legislation disallowed her from attending the film’s premiere, since it screened in Atlanta—and all Southern souvenir programs for *Gone with the Wind* removed McDaniel from the original promotional artwork.⁹ The triumphant performance was perhaps ahead of its time, representing of a form of black power that white audiences were not interested in seeing repeated. Roles shrunk in size and integrity, with no better example than her smiling and singing performance in 1946’s *Song of the South*.

This downturn in McDaniel’s career, following the height of her success, recalls the systematic resistance and dismantling of Johnson’s prospects as he attained his stardom and in the years that followed. The early twentieth century saw carry-over Reconstruction Era themed entertainment reach a wide audience with Thomas Dixon’s 1905 novel and play *The Clansman*, and in Edward Sheldon’s play entitled *The Nigger*. The latter was staged in 1911, a year after Johnson’s defeat of Jeffries, and then was adapted for the screen in 1915. This was the same year *The Clansman* morphed into D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation*—notoriously screened for President Wilson and his cabinet in the White House the week after its Los Angeles premiere, and the night before another special screening in Washington for Congressmen, Senators, and Supreme Court judges. *Birth of a Nation* went on to run for nearly a year at the Liberty Theater on

Broadway, and become the most seen film of its time. Streible contends that in this context, the Johnson fight films held particular weight for black audiences as counter-narratives to these widely popular, racist works of art—no less the case in absentia, when the *Johnson-Jeffries Fight* film was outlawed. And Gerald Early suggests an even greater degree of intertextuality, noting that Griffith changed scenes in *The Clansman* depicting black men raping white women to instead portray mere marriage proposals—an image that more closely analogized Johnson’s interracial taboo.

This element of his notoriety was more than just pop-culture fodder, however, as legislators targeted Johnson and his liaisons under the auspices of the Mann Act, designed to interrupt prostitution rings (it was commonly known as the “white slave traffic act”). Although clearly a trumped-up case, Johnson was found guilty, and fled the country in 1913 to avoid serving jail time.¹⁰ Mistaken in the belief that he could continue his successful boxing and/or film career in exile, Johnson found himself in a state of purgatory, as foreign nations generally held little interest in either deporting or employing him. A final match in the spotlight took place a couple of years later, in Cuba, against a formidable though inexperienced fighter named Jess Willard. As conditions for Johnson’s reentry to the United States hung in the balance, debate continues regarding whether he was out of shape, disinterested, too old, or took a dive (as he claimed); nevertheless, Willard knocked Johnson out, and with a prison sentence awaiting his return to America, this marked the end of his relevance inside the ring.¹¹

After serving his time, little remained for Johnson as a former boxer and felon except to live something of a sideshow existence, foreshadowing the fate of many a future boxing great. This unpleasant reality and unflattering depiction made its way onto

the stage once more, in the 1926 Broadway play *Black Boy*. Paul Robeson's portrayal of the Johnson-esque protagonist was well-received, but the play was not—perhaps indicating some audience fatigue with the figures and storyline. Some years later, the result of Johnson's own having alienated support in the black community is profoundly evident in a movie directed by an independent, black filmmaker, as Ron Green details in his work, *With a Crooked Stick: The Films of Oscar Micheaux*. 1940's *The Notorious Elinor Lee*, finds Johnson reimagined with the first name “Cracker”—a nod to his relationships with white women—and the character is cast as jealous antihero to the popular “Benny Blue,” a twist on Joe Louis' “Brown Bomber” nickname. The characters are clearly and specifically juxtaposed against one-another, with Benny seeking to redeem himself after losing to a German champion, whereas Cracker—with his bad behavior like carousing and womanizing—represents a sort of Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come influence that Benny must avoid so as to be successful and set a good example. This narrative continues in an exercise of pure exposition—including asides directed squarely at the camera—and while some plot twists and artistic flairs emerge along the way, Micheaux makes certain not to detract from the good (Joe Louis as Benny Blue) prevailing over the bad (Cracker Jack Johnson) story of uplift.

Finally, in the late 1960s, yet another play-and-then-movie emerged, this time putting a new spin on the old story: this was “Johnson as he wished to be remembered,” in the words of Randy Roberts—“heroic, honest passionate, intelligent, and a moral force for his generation.” *The Great White Hope* earned the 1968 Tony Award and Pulitzer Prize, and stars James Earl Jones and Jane Alexander's performances were Oscar-nominated for the 1970 film adaptation. Significantly, this timeframe overlapped with

Muhammad Ali's draft-evasion case, and he found solace in the familiar themes. Jones notes that when Ali came to see the play, "he said, 'That's my story. You take out the issue of the white women and replace that with the issue of religion. That's my story.' He kept coming back. He kept bringing people back to see the play." Once Ali was finally free to return to boxing, sidekick Bundini Brown would call out, "Ghost in the house. Ghost in the house. Jack Johnson's here. Ghost in the house," whenever his boxer promoted and fought in a match, or trained in front of reporters. One of the press corps, George Plimpton, explained of the practice that Johnson "sort of overrides boxing and the whole culture that surrounds it like some sort of a ghost."

By reframing the Jack Johnson phenomenon—beyond traditional evaluations in the sporting context—we cast his accomplishments and legacy in an altogether different light. The comparative analysis approach is useful in demonstrating this significance, especially when holding Johnson's case up against the example of Hattie McDaniel. This reassessment thus presents Johnson as more than a boxing champion and pioneer in race relations, but also as a transcendent and enduring popular culture icon. Ghost in the house, indeed.

1 Streible 170-171
2 Streible 173
3 Streible 174-175
4 Streible 215
5 Streible 181-183
6 Streible 188-192
7 Watts 41
8 Watts 82-83
9 Watts 168-170
10 Roberts 144, 181
11 Streible 192-193