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Introduction

The Heritage and Legacy of *Raging Bull*

Martin Scorsese's *Raging Bull* (1980) represents American filmmaking at its best. Since its initial release, the film has garnered a significant critical reputation. It has been called the greatest film of the 1980s, the greatest boxing film ever made, the greatest sports film ever made, and, indeed, one of the greatest films of all time. Superlatives abound whenever people talk about *Raging Bull*. Not only is it an exemplary cinematic work, it is also a cultural icon representing a rich cross section of themes, issues, and characters that reflect American culture in ways that typical Hollywood films do not. Furthermore, *Raging Bull* is a highly personal film. It reflects Scorsese's unique personal vision, captures the personality of the brutal but all-too-human Jake La Motta, and perpetuates the intimate working relationship between Scorsese and his star Robert De Niro.

Around the time Scorsese was making *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974), De Niro gave him a copy of *Raging Bull*, the autobiography of Jake La Motta, which La Motta co-wrote with Joseph Carter, a miscellaneous writer, and Peter Savage, a longtime friend who figures prominently in the book as Pete, a partner in Jake's early criminal activities and in his subsequent success in boxing. Later becoming acquainted with Savage, Scorsese found him to be "an amazing character." Scorsese generally enjoyed reading La Motta's autobiography, but it seemed to him that Savage was most responsible for its content. Discussing Savage's influence on the book, Scorsese observed, "He put a dramatic structure on Jake's chaotic existence. It wasn't so

much Jake speaking about himself as Pete explaining Jake to Jake!" (*MSI*, 85).

De Niro, of course, presented the book hoping that Scorsese would adapt it for the cinema and that he would cast him in the lead. The work appealed to De Niro because it contained what he called "some good scenes," meaning scenes with "dramatic possibilities, and irony, and humor, and something that people can relate to" (Kelly, 122–123). In the book, Jake is a despicable character, but De Niro did not see Jake's despicability as a barrier to bringing his story to the cinema. Early in the book, Jake apparently beats a man to death, commits several robberies, and rapes a young woman. None of these episodes deterred De Niro's enthusiasm for the project.

La Motta's autobiography does possess cinematic sensibilities. In the book, motion pictures give Jake a means of interpreting his personal past. Throughout the narrative, Jake uses film analogies to explain his actions. He compares the act of remembering his past to "looking at an old black-and-white movie . . . a string of poorly lit sequences, some of them with no beginning and some with no end." Recalling a robbery he and Pete attempted, he compares their physical movements to those of "movie soldiers walking very carefully over some terrain, afraid of stepping on land mines." To stop Jake from brazenly challenging some local hoods at one point in the story, Pete yells, "Now listen, you're not in some goddam gangster movie, so don't act stupid." Taking Pete to the hospital after he has been shot, Jake finds that the emergency ward "was fast and efficient the way it is in the movies."[1]

Whereas Scorsese would end Jake's story with him practicing his stage routine in the dressing room of the Barbizon Plaza, the autobiography continues the story beyond this point in Jake's life. Around the time of his performance at the Barbizon, Jake was starting to get some dramatic roles on stage, on television, and in films. Pete, amazingly enough, had become a filmmaker himself. Directing and producing a film entitled *A House in Naples* (1970), Pete cast Jake in a leading part. In his closing pages, Jake mentions some additional dramatic roles he played, without mentioning a small part he had in a major film: Jake plays the bartender who dispenses drinks to Paul Newman and Piper Laurie in *The Hustler* (1961).

Shortly before describing his budding career as a stage performer and movie actor in the autobiography, Jake relates a low point in his life. After leaving Miami and returning to New York, he eventually became so broke that he was forced to work on a maintenance crew in Central Park. Being between wives, he was living in a crummy hotel room and, with little else to do, he amused himself by reading all the paperbacks he could find. The volumes on this urban pugilist's bookshelf apparently included Robert Ardrey's *The Territorial Imperative*, one of the few books Jake specifically mentions by title.[2] It is hard to say whether Jake really read *The Territorial Imperative* at this point in his life. He could have. The book was widely available in cheap paperback editions, and it was translated into many languages. Film enthusiasts may recognize it as the book Jean Yanne reads to Mireille Darc in Jean-Luc Godard's *Week-end* (1967).

The reference to *The Territorial Imperative* within La Motta's autobiography seems so appropriate that it may reflect Peter Savage's shaping hand more than Jake's actual reading tastes. One of those pseudoscientific works that occasionally capture the popular imagination, *The Territorial Imperative* emphasizes the instinctual basis of human behavior and offers numerous parallels between man and animal. Man, like his animal ancestors, requires the possession of territory to fulfill his most basic needs. In the passage Godard quoted in *Week-end*, for example, the hippopotamus marks its territory with fecal matter, which it disperses with its tail. Performing a private activity within the collective space of a pond, the hippo reveals its acceptance of collective behavior. Despite the popularity of *The Territorial Imperative*, serious readers scoffed at Ardrey's ideas when it appeared, and the book has been all but forgotten now. Situated within the life story of a boxer known as a raging bull, however, Ardrey's ideas about man's instinctual animal-like nature retain a strange relevance.

De Niro's presentation copy of *Raging Bull* did not immediately convince Scorsese to undertake a film adaptation of La Motta's story. At first, Scorsese was unconvinced that a film version of the book was feasible or, for that matter, desirable. Besides, he and De Niro had two other films already planned for the coming years, *Taxi Driver* (1976) and *New York, New York* (1977). Still, Scorsese did not reject the idea

outright. Perhaps the clearest indication that the *Raging Bull* project remained a possibility is the repeated appearance of Peter Savage on Scorsese's set. Savage even finagled himself into the cast of two films. In *Taxi Driver*, he plays The John, and in *New York, New York*, he plays Horace Morris's assistant.

The disappointing reception of *New York, New York*, a film Scorsese poured his heart into, put him into a blue funk. As an homage to the Hollywood musical, *New York, New York* pleased genuine cinema aficionados, but it disappointed many of the fans Scorsese had gained with such works as *Mean Streets* (1973) and *Taxi Driver*, viewers who had no nostalgia for the New York of decades past and preferred a grittier image of the city, complete with, in Travis Bickle's words, whores, skunk pussies, buggers, queens, fairies, dopers, and junkies. *Raging Bull*, Scorsese came to realize, would allow him to return to the world he had created in *Mean Streets* and *Taxi Driver*. Eventually, he came to see *Raging Bull* as completing a cycle he had started with *Mean Streets*.[3]

Shrewdly, De Niro also presented a copy of *Raging Bull* to Mardik Martin, an old friend of Scorsese's since their film school days at NYU with whom he had collaborated on *Mean Streets*. Despite Scorsese's hesitance, Martin began turning La Motta's autobiography into a screenplay. Martin spent two years researching and writing different versions of the story, but not he, De Niro, Scorsese, or producer Irwin Winkler were satisfied with the results. "When Mardik came in with *Raging Bull*," Scorsese recalled, "it was like *Rashomon*. He got twenty-five versions of the story because all the characters were alive."[4]

Martin was quietly relieved when Winkler took him off the project. He handed all of his various drafts and research materials to Paul Schrader, who reshaped Martin's disparate materials into something close to a final version of the screenplay. Most importantly, Schrader was responsible for the film's basic structure: he was the one who, in Scorsese's words, "had the idea of opening with the speech on the stage and linking that with Jake's first defeat, in Cleveland" (*MSI*, 88).

Even after Schrader completed his script there were still parts of it that the others, especially Winkler, found dissatisfying. Schrader had written what he called "one of the best soliloquies I ever wrote, a two- or three-page masturbation monologue, which happens when

1. "I am not an animal."

Jake is in his jail cell. It was to be the climax of the film. La Motta is trying to masturbate and talking to himself, conjuring up images of the women he's known. He manages to get an erection and then he remembers how terribly he treated people and can't manage to masturbate. Finally, he blames his hand, and smashes his hand against the cell wall" (Kelly, 124). Speaking of this scene, Scorsese said, "On paper it was beautiful, but how do you shoot it?"[5] (Figure 1) Scorsese and De Niro decided to rework the script themselves. To that end, they traveled to St. Martin, where they spent three weeks hammering out a final working script. De Niro recalled, "Marty and I liked parts of Schrader's script but not others. We still had to make it our own. So we revised the script, and went over each scene, sometimes adding dialogue" (Kelly, 126).

Once Scorsese was committed to the project, De Niro began his rigorous physical training for the role. Scorsese filmed a few of his training sessions in 8 mm and, as he tells the story, happened to show them to Michael Powell. The director of *The Red Shoes* (1948) found the appearance of De Niro's red boxing gloves distracting. Powell helped Scorsese realize that, for most adults, memories of boxing were black-and-white memories (*MSI*, 84). Scorsese's decision to film *Raging Bull* in black and white partly stems from his desire to re-create such boxing memories. His growing dissatisfaction with color film stock also helped persuade him to make the film black and white.

Scorsese named these two reasons as the ones that convinced him to shoot *Raging Bull* in black and white.[6] There are others. Few can deny the influence of cinematographer Michael Chapman. La Motta's comparison between the memories of his personal past and a black-and-white movie in the autobiography offers another precedent, though Scorsese has denied La Motta's influence in this regard (*MSI*, 84). The photography of *Life* magazine also influenced *Raging Bull*, as Eleanor Ringel noticed. She called Cathy Moriarty "a Lana Turnerish blonde with the sultry, sun-baked appeal of the '40s *Life* magazine cover."[7] Furthermore, black-and-white allowed Scorsese to distinguish his boxing film from the numerous others that were appearing in the wake of *Rocky* (1976). In an era when color films were the norm, the choice of black and white was a conscious aesthetic choice, which gave a film an artistic aura. Recall some of the black-and-white films that had appeared during the preceding decade – *The Last Picture Show* (1971), *Lenny* (1974), and *Manhattan* (1979).

Production on *Raging Bull* began as De Niro's conditioning reached its peak. Once the early parts of the film were shot and the fight scenes completed, production shut down so that its star could travel to Italy and load up on pasta to prepare himself for the later parts of the film. De Niro returned from his eating binge to shoot the Pelham Parkway sequences, but then he went back to Italy for more linguine.

De Niro's excessive weight gain became the most publicized fact about the film's production. Upon its release, nearly all the contemporary reviewers mentioned it. The remarks of British reviewers were especially apt. Commenting on De Niro's weight gain, Peter Ackroyd observed, "The man without a soul has nowhere to go but outward. This quick change obesity adds a further note of authenticity to a film which already has that quality in excess."[8] Reviewing the film for *The New Statesman*, John Coleman went on about De Niro's weight gain at some length:

> To impersonate this unprepossessing oaf, Scorsese's favourite actor Robert De Niro became literally a glutton for punishment, putting on some 60 lb. of flab. Watching his La Motta physically deteriorate between the years 1941 and 1964 is an awe-inspiring experience, and likely to be a one-off in cinema history. (A mean voice whispers

> we may yet witness the first Academy Award for Forced Feeding.) But De Niro is, of course, more than the sum of his swelling, bloated parts and what he gives here is certainly a performance as well, in its awful, dumb stillnesses before unbridled violence, in the painful precision of its self-pity, in the boozy crumminess of the later years, when the champ's occupation's gone and he tells cheap jokes into a mike.[9]

Coleman, of course, was wrong about De Niro's weight gain being a one-off in cinema history. Since *Raging Bull*, the willingness to gain weight for a part has become a mark of an actor's dedication to the role. Recently, Charlize Theron put on considerable weight to portray serial killer Aileen Wuornos in *Monster* (2003). Speaking of Theron's Oscar-winning performance, one reviewer commented that not since *Raging Bull* "has there been a transformation this powerful and effective."[10]

Not all of the contemporary reviewers appreciated *Raging Bull*, but almost all of them recognized it as a work of great power. Reviewing the film for *Maclean's*, the Toronto weekly, Lawrence O'Toole observed, "Scorsese has captured what Norman Mailer described in *The Fight* as 'the carnality of boxing,' the 'meat against meat,' and has flayed the genre at the same time. The movies that de-romanticized boxing in the past – *The Harder They Fall, Requiem for a Heavyweight* – always gave the audience something to hold onto: the fighter's humanity. Scorsese doesn't." Like many viewers, O'Toole was hypnotized by its imagery despite the repulsiveness of its protagonist. He concluded, "It's unpleasant, he's unpleasant, and we can't stop watching."[11]

Boxing has captured the American imagination and served as a fit subject for creative treatment since the time before motion pictures. A number of different literary works depict boxing matches but perhaps no work does so with more verve than "The Fight" – not the book by Norman Mailer but the short story by Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, which Edgar Allan Poe called "a sketch unsurpassed in dramatic vigor."[12] A classic of American literature, "The Fight" depicts a contest that adumbrates the Jake La Motta–Tony Janiro fight in *Raging Bull*. In the film, Joey (Joe Pesci) says that Jake knocked

Janiro's nose "from one side of his face to the other." And Tommy Como (Nicholas Colasanto), describing Janiro's appearance at the end of the fight, uttered the film's most memorable line: "He ain't pretty no more." Describing Billy Stallions, one of Longstreet's contestants, one spectator observes, "He hit the ground so hard, it jarred his nose off. Now ain't he a pretty man as he stands! He shall have my sister Sall just for his pretty looks. I want to get in the breed of them sort o' men, to drive ugly out of my kin folks."[13]

Though the verbal parallels between "The Fight" and *Raging Bull* suggest a continuity between the two works, Scorsese's debt to the literary tradition is relatively slight compared to his debt to the history of cinema. True, *Mean Streets* does make multiple allusions to Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, but Scorsese's obsession with the cinema has meant that he has been likelier to get his literary references through the intermediary of film. But like the finest literary works, *Raging Bull* presents an elaborate tissue of references and allusions that significantly enhance its complexity.

Consider the final shot of the last fight between Jake La Motta and Sugar Ray Robinson in *Raging Bull*, which displays a close-up of one of the ring ropes dripping with blood. Describing the inspiration for this shot to an interviewer, Scorsese traced it to the recent boxing matches he had attended as part of his research for the film: "The first evening, even though I was far away from the ring, I saw the sponge red with blood, and the film started to take form. The next time, I was much closer, and I saw the blood dripping from the ropes. I said to myself that this sure didn't have anything to do with sport!" (*MSI*, 95). Scorsese has related this anecdote multiple times to different interviewers, but it has not appreciably changed in the retelling. What he has withheld from his interviewers is that there was another, and perhaps more important, influence on this image, which he modeled on a shot from *Toby Dammit* (1968). Federico Fellini's adaptation of Poe's short story, "Never Bet the Devil Your Head," *Toby Dammit* also influenced *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), as Scorsese has freely admitted (*SS*, 143).

At the end of *Toby Dammit*, Terence Stamp, in his role as Fellini's title character, attempts to drive a new Ferrari over a chasm. Unknown to him, a taut wire extends across the roadway. As he reaches the wire, it decapitates him. Fellini does not show the decapitation, but after

the fact he shows a close-up of a section of the wire dripping with blood.

Wildly departing from the Poe tale on which it is based, *Toby Dammit* tells the story of a popular British actor who comes to Italy to star in what he is told will be the first Catholic Western. The priest who tells him this is also the film's producer. Once the two meet at the airport, the priest explains the concept of the film to Toby. It will have what his friend Roland Barthes might call a syntagmatic structure: it will be "something between Dreyer and Pasolini with a soupçon of John Ford." The priest's words are not inappropriate to *Raging Bull*. The combination of classic Hollywood filmmaking and elements of European art cinema has appealed to Scorsese since the start of his career. A rich mosaic of film references, *Raging Bull* itself draws on the history of cinema to tell its story.

During its production, Scorsese feared that *Raging Bull* would be his last feature film. Consequently, he decided to put into it everything he could, everything that he knew and felt (*SS*, 77). He explicitly admitted this inclusiveness after the completion of *Raging Bull*, but the film itself, which contains recognizable references to numerous films, implies as much. The image of De Niro shadowboxing in his hooded robe during the opening credit sequence, as Amy Taubin has recognized, recalls one of Rossellini's monks in *The Flowers of St. Francis* (1950).[14] Up-ending a dinner table early in the film, De Niro performs a gesture reminiscent of an action performed by Paul Scofield in Peter Brook's *King Lear* (1971). The appearance of Cathy Moriarty adorned in a snood echoes the image of Ginger Rogers in her snood toward the end of *The Major and the Minor* (1942). The shot of the organist at the end of one fight in *Raging Bull* is framed similarly to shots of the organist at the hockey arena in *Slap Shot* (1977). Scorsese's use of still photography, point-of-view shots, slow motion, and intermittent flash bulbs during the fight sequences in *Raging Bull* recalls the opening fight sequence in *Requiem for a Heavyweight* (1962).

A reference to another film functions effectively as Scorsese's admission that he was putting everything into *Raging Bull* he could. Depicting the aging, overweight Jake La Motta in his dressing room prior to a stage performance, Robert De Niro ends a verse recitation with a traditional saying: "That's entertainment!" Though a proverbial expression common to the realm of show business, these words also

happened to form the title of an unexpectedly popular film released a half dozen years earlier, *That's Entertainment* (1974), a retrospective documenting the classical Hollywood musical. Presented as a pastiche of clips from famous MGM musicals, *That's Entertainment* effectively eulogized the genre.[15] The allusion to this film suggests that *Raging Bull*, too, can be seen as a pastiche of references to earlier films.

Naturally, *Raging Bull* owes an important debt to the heritage of the boxing film genre. Take Buster Keaton's *Battling Butler* (1926), for example. Scorsese has called Keaton "the only person who had the right attitude about boxing in the movies for me" (*SS*, 80). It is not hard to see what lured Scorsese to *Battling Butler*. Much that can be said about Keaton's boxing film applies to Scorsese's. As the opening credits end, *Battling Butler* depicts a close-up of a bell, which clangs to start a round of boxing. After this shot, however, the film does not cut to a boxing match; rather, it cuts to a stately mansion where the film's story begins. As Scorsese would more than a half century later, Keaton deliberately paralleled the cinema with the boxing arena.

Attending a boxing match as a spectator, Keaton, in his dandified role as Alfred Butler, happens to sit next to the manager of a boxer named Alfred "Battling" Butler. The manager cannot watch the fight without mimicking the punches of the boxers he sees. The kind of behavior the manager exemplifies would become a commonplace of the boxing film. Consider the numerous shots of the crowd Robert Wise included in *The Set-Up* (1949). Depicting such violence among the spectators, Keaton anticipated the violence among the spectators in the first fight sequence of *Raging Bull*. Both Keaton and Scorsese recognized the boxing ring as a microcosm revealing the violence endemic to modern society.

As part of this violent world, Keaton also depicted violence against women. When "Battling" Butler sees his wife enter a hotel room with Keaton, he charges into the room to confront them. Keaton manages to sneak away, but as he listens to what is happening after his escape, he hears a light bulb shatter, a sound symbolizing the violence occurring behind the hotel room's closed door. When the wife appears the next morning, she has a big black eye. Keaton refrained from showing the intervening violence. Scorsese, on the other hand, would depict what Keaton had ellipted, the domestic scenes where so much disturbing violence occurs.