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Writing the Essay  
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## When the Screen's a Mirror: And You Don't Like What You See

Fighting is one of the coolest things to watch that you never want to partake in. I being the not-lanky, not-weak, not-lamer looking version of David Schwimmer individual that I am, come from firsthand fighting experience having partaken-...partook?

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I have partookened in such an activity, in my own school. Granted; it was the fourth grade, both Aiden Kureeni and I were crying, and not a single punch landed, but you'd struggle to differentiate between the Great White Pudgy Schoolboy Battle of 2008 and Rocky.

Ok Rocky III.

Fine Rocky IV but I ain't stooping to Rocky V, because at least we were trying.

But fighting isn't always so rad, tubular, and other gnarly examples of 90's slang, like Sly Stallone knocking Mr. T's teeth out. Real fighting doesn't get a Hollywood treatment that guys in Rocky, Cinderella Man and the Fighter have shown us, because in the movies we always know who the good guy is and who the bad guy is because the good guy is good and the bad guy is a jerk. But, most people aren't wholly good or bad. They're just people. Fighting. Not always fighting for moral reasons.



Not because they're fighting for something. Sometimes it just happens, and we're just a Raging Bull in a china shop full of our loved ones. It's ugly, disturbing, and at times unwatchable and we can't just be ok with the violence like we normally because the guy isn't a saint or fighting for his family. Today in the "no-good millennial hipster generation teenager who lives his life through his phone" era, experiencing a film like Martin Scorsese's Raging Bull today in 2015 vs. back at the end of the indie-auteur era of the 1970's (1980), can we understand a man who does things that make individuals in 2015 instantly unsympathizable? (It's not a word, but you get the picture) Raging Bull follows the life of real-life boxer Jake LaMotta, and his life of insecurity and dangerous violence that while helping him become a legend in the ring ends up ruining his life. But this film was made back in 1980, and today when we see a man fight who isn't the hero of a journey, a subconscious switch goes off in our mind, and if we don't know what we think about said individual, the violence he's performing instantly becomes disgusting, grotesque and the human being in or out of the ring is instantly contorted into a monster. Beyond sympathy. Beyond relatability. Beyond understanding. But Robert De Niro's portrayal of the violently insecure boxer Jake LaMotta isn't asking for you to root for him, whether he's beating Sugar Ray Robinson or beating the ones he loves. He's not asking you to cheer for the abuse. He's asking you to understand the abuse. And applying that ugly rage to a world today where any slip of the tongue, thought misunderstood, or piece of text offends any group, can this film still be digested as a human portrait of people like you and me, and not as the cliché rise, fall, and redemption of a bad man. Because although there is a rise and fall in the character's story, there is no redemption. At least no clear-cut "Hey I'm a good guy now" and there shouldn't be. But it's a sort of personal redemption in that he is finally realized with his purpose, he understands what he's done and he's learned. Maybe not entirely and maybe not a whole lot, but enough that he is now content as that constantly crunching rage is now no longer suppressed, but absent. But can an audience look past this abusive, sexist man and see the soul behind it, or will they turn away in disgust, unable to change their initial judgments or understand this

man because he is a bad man. Because with Raging Bull you find that you can understand why a messed up man does messed up things.

The home life depicted in the film is filled with abuse, suspicion, jealousy, and distrust with Jake hitting his wife, controlling her every move, and pounding men who don't deserve their beating into oblivion off a hunch. Living as a young adult today, many people even ones I'd call my friends would instantly scoff at his character labeling him as a villain, which would be ludicrously wrong. Or even an anti-hero, which although more fitting, still does not feel just. Because the film is the portrait of a person. A man. Not a character. A character is an emotion represented by a person, a cartoon that you know is fake, over-dramatized, artificial, and is only experienced through the screen. A man is a person you see every day, neither wholly good nor wholly bad, but with problems, triumphs, mood swings, emotions, and an ability to change, perhaps not drastically, but make an effort none the less. LaMotta is a man filled with violent insecurity, doubt in his masculinity, and a bottled up rage that doesn't have as tight a cap as the rest of us. For many viewers of my age I feel it would be hard for them to ever see themselves sympathizing with Jake, but that's not what the film is asking from the audience. That's not what Robert De Niro is asking, that's not what Jake LaMotta was asking, and that's not what Scorsese was asking. All the film does is try to make you understand him.



It's one of the few films ever made where although everyone will disagree with what this man does, over the course of the film through De Niro's subtle nuances, the story's circumstances, and Scorsese's framing of those circumstances, I do understand why this character does the things he does. Why he abuses the way he does, why fights the way he does, why he is the way he is. Through glances filled with fear, suspicion, and anger, and slight nervous pauses that last an unsettling amount of time before De Niro responds with his line, he makes you feel as though you can see the gears of suspicion turning in Jake's head as he's processing whether or not his brother had sex with his

wife, not only making Joe Pesci visibly uncomfortable in the scene, but us as an audience as well. De Niro develops these slight changes in demeanor and nervous ticks expertly placing them before an explosion of rage allowing you to witness the warning signs of a meltdown, and the slow-mo shots of his wife Vickie conversing with and kissing goodbye other men linger tensely showing Jake's perspective of what he thinks he knows for a fact is going on.<sup>1</sup> And moments of violence like when Jake and his wife are screaming at one another as he beats his brother to a pulp off a suspicion of infidelity, moments like these are layered with audio tracks of ear-piercing screeching factory metal to evoke the insane animalistic nature that the characters are feeling and acting out.<sup>2</sup> Seeming as if almost nothing the characters say can be overheard over the sound of the chaos present in the scene. Scorsese pulls at the strings of our subconscious to get us in the mindset of the kind of barbaric rage and hate these people have been conditioned by their constant experiences to Jake's rage to feel. And this tragic effect on the ones he loves, perhaps mirrored the state of Scorsese at the time, whose life was in shambles after a near drug overdose, and originally didn't wish to do the film because he was never a boxing fan.<sup>3</sup> But he soon connected with LaMotta's story of self-destructiveness and personal redemption as he attempted to avoid M. Night Shyamalaning his career, and Scorsese became enamored with this idea that he could see himself in LaMotta, and perhaps the idea that you as an audience member are surprised to find that you can relate to this man, and that through all the hard-to-watch scenes of pure dangerous rage, he, as well as the audience, could relate to such a seemingly awful man.<sup>4</sup>

That Relatability is probably the reason so many people applauded it back in 1980, but why so many people today may not today. LaMotta at first glance is, for most of us in 2015, an awful kind of man we've never seen before and may never see. But when you strip away the social rules, checks, and

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<sup>1</sup> Snider, Eric D. "15 Punchy Facts About 'Raging Bull'" *Wwww.mentalfloss.com*. N.p., 3 Aug. 2015. Web. 9 Dec. 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Snider, Eric D. "15 Punchy Facts About 'Raging Bull'" *Wwww.mentalfloss.com*. N.p., 3 Aug. 2015. Web. 9 Dec. 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Thompson, David and Christie, Ian, *Scorsese on Scorsese*, pp. 76/77.

<sup>4</sup> Biskind, Peter *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls* 1998, p.378.

Kelly Jane Torrance. "Martin Scorsese: Telling stories through film", *The Washington Times* (Washington, D.C.), November 30, 2007, page E1.  
Phil Villarreal. "Scorsese's 'Raging Bull' is still a knockout", *The Arizona Daily Star* (Tucson, AZ), February 11, 2005, page E1.

balances that constrain our feelings and behavior in everyday life, Jake kind of represents us. The lashing out for answers to paranoia, the constant inkling of infidelity involving your significant other, proving you're man enough, these are all common experiences that most of us go through but keep bottled up, Jake signifies us without the cap. And especially today, where social conduct and etiquette has become everything, we don't want to see ourselves in a character like this, and when we find that we may we label him as "NOT ME" and "BAD" and the conversation ends there. And while some like in *The New Yorker's* Rebecca's Mead's "The Scourge of Relatability" find that, "Relatability- a logism so neo, that it's... has become widely and unthinkingly accepted as a criterion of value, even by people who might be expected to have more sophisticated critical tools at their disposal" (Mead 1).<sup>5</sup> Mead believes that Relatability has become a recent, unwanted piece of critique that isn't part of the movie but more so part of your specific experience with it. But in *The Atlantic's* Derek Thompson's response to Mead titled "The Power of Relatability," he talks of how "many of the best plays...relate explicitly and purposefully to their contemporary audiences... It wasn't coincidence that Shakespeare, writing for an audience that often featured sitting English monarchs, wrote 10 plays about former English monarchs."<sup>6</sup> Thompson explains how art was made for contemporary audiences to relate to, and in Raging Bull's case, that's the cynical 70's indie auteur era audience. Mead expresses how relatability has become a very popular form of critique as of late, explaining why people today look for relatability in LaMotta. And Thompson provides perhaps the reason, suggesting that Bull was made for an audience who had experienced psychologically intense and draining film such as Deer Hunter and Taxi Driver, not for the bubbly-Instagram-snapping audience of today. Although these two writers differ in opinions on the importance of relatability, they both in their descriptions of how they feel, provide a possible answer as to why it has become so much harder to understand and see oneself in the human being Jake LaMotta.

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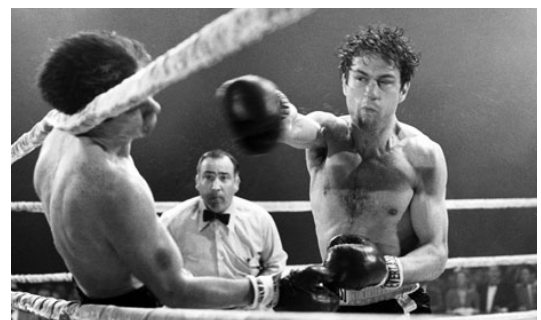
<sup>5</sup> Mead, Rebecca. "Scourge of "Relatability"" *Www.newyorker.com*. N.p., 1 Aug. 2014. Web. 10 Dec. 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Thompson, Derek. "The Power of Relatability." *Www.theatlantic.com*. N.p., 1 Aug. 2014. Web. 11 Dec. 2015. <<http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/08/the-power-of-relatability/375468/>>.

And one of those things that people today may miss because of all these points of violence and brutality in the film, is the evolution of a moment that Scorsese shows over the course of the film, that reflects Jake's state each time. It's a scene towards the end of the movie long after Jake's boxing career has ended when he has let himself go both physically and mentally and his wife has just left him for good where he's thrown into solitary confinement of a jail for introducing a couple of 14-year-olds posing as 21-year-olds to some men at his nightclub. Here is where we finally see Jake let his insecurity consume him as before he would back them down through violence or assumptions that he made himself believe were true, here we see Jake make one last effort to control his sorrow with violence as he's breaking down in tears, he pounds both his fists at his sides against the concrete walls of his prison wailing, "WHY?! WHY?! WHY?!" This scene is so poignant because this break down of him not as character but as a person is earned, he's gone his whole life literally fighting away what he fears in life and now he has no one left to fight but a concrete wall, and like so many situations that we've been through as well, no one is left to blame but himself.



The pattern I noticed while watching the film is that you see him use these same vicious lower side punches in two other instances, but each time the emotion and reasoning behind the vicious speed and power is completely different. The other time we see this is in his fight with a young, skilled "*good-lookin*" fighter Tony Janiro. That last adjective is of the utmost important because it's stated by his wife, which then sets in motion an even more destructive Jake LaMotta as he fears both the idea of a cheating wife, which he deals with using violence, and the idea that he could lose to this guy after hearing how hot his wife thinks he is. Here we see LaMotta use these same punches to back Janiro up against the rope, as



that then allows Jake to basically tee up Janiro for not just a fight, and not just a beating, but what seems like attempted murder.

So the first time we see Jake use these rib-breaking punches are out of jealous anger and fear of insecurity as he beats Janiro to a pulp. The second time is when he's alone in his cell when these punches are out of frustration and an all-encompassing sorrow. But the third time we see it is when at the end of the movie, as Jake, 20 years from the beginning of the film, is preparing himself to host a variety show and looking in a mirror reciting the ending of *On The Waterfront*. He gets up and says to the mirror "Go get'em champ." And he does these same low side punches, with the same power and velocity that he used in the ring but out of happiness, saying, "I'm da boss, I'm da boss, I'm da boss" all while punching. As that's the last time we see Jake, we see that he ends the movie the way he started it.



Fighting. But not out of insecurity, fear, or rage as we saw throughout the film. But these right and left hooks

are now coming from a new place of self-confidence, a sense of security and faith in himself. A sense of long awaited content for both Jake, and us as an audience as we understand how he truly feels by the end because we've gone through all of it with him.

This is hard to catch for a generation of people who base their Best Actor or Actress choice sometimes solely on physical transformation without even seeing their performance, yes it's still a marvel of commitment, but it is not the focal point of their performance. But the thing that I feel millennials perhaps can do to look past surface-level internet click-bait information and opinions, is by comparing something like *Raging Bull* to it's larger genre that it supposedly fits into]. The typical, inspirational American boxing drama they've become accustomed to watch. As far as sports movies go, the most prolific and heart-wrenching stories, performances, and experiences we have in a theater is due from the emotional left and right hooks thrown at us in a boxing movie. The character in the ring

although behaving wildly different is the same character we see out of the ring, and that character's personality, relationships, and personal struggle are all played out and affect their fighting. In a film like *Rocky*, we see a kind of skewed reality of Brando from *On the Waterfront*, as in the story of a nobody who could've been a somebody, but now finally gets his shot to be that somebody. And that same movie is reflected in *Raging Bull*, in its final scene of the story of a violently insecure man and his rise, fall, and up-to-interpretation redemption. But in that final scene in Jake's dressing room before he's about to go on as a host of a variety show, the words take on a twisted new meaning when put into the vocabulary Jake LaMotta. It shows the tragic downfall of a man who became a contender only to lose it all, which strikes an all more tragic note at the end of the film, showing how he had it all, but because of what he did, and the choices he made, and his irresponsibility he lost everything. Not quite the same as knocking out a 7ft Russian to win the Cold War.

The funny thing these films is that they're both technically sports movies but end in completely different ways. In *Rocky* we see a man lose an insignificant, external, literal battle, but win an emotionally personal and far more important war of showing to the world and himself that he's not as Rocky says, "just another bum from the neighborhood," by going the distance with the heavyweight champion of the world.<sup>7</sup> And in *Raging Bull*, interestingly enough in a sports movie, we don't end with a fight, an end-all-be-all battle. We end with a much more internal fight, a fight that has raged in De Niro's Jake LaMotta for the 20 year span of the film as he finally comes to peace with who he is, and what he wants to do with his life, finding a sense of clear purpose and secure humanity.

What I've learned from watching more from this genre is how truly revolutionary *Raging Bull* was on flipping the script, burning it, and then throwing the ashes out the window. This is unlike any other American boxing movie, whether it is the inspirational classics like a *Rocky* or a *Cinderella Man*, or the more gritty and tortured paths to redemption like the recent *South Paw* and *The Fighter*, *Raging Bull* does not end with a bang, it does not end with a mean finishing blow to the bad guy's head, and it

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<sup>7</sup> "Rocky Quotes." [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com). N.p., n.d. Web.



does not end with a whimper or silence. It ends with a man by himself, but the self he's fought to be. Not a character, but a man that has a purpose again, that may not have learned from all his mistakes, but has understood what he's done wrong and is trying as best he can to not just do better or be better as a person. But to be better being himself. Jake LaMotta. After horrific fights, and unlike the other boxing films, his fights are like mini-horror movies according to Roger Ebert, made to look like newspaper front



pages, shot in black and white with smoke, flashing lights, and blood everywhere, this is not a man fighting another man, this is a man fighting his emotions, his insecurities, his fears. With each punch and jab and hook he suppresses these fears further and further until he can't anymore and the only

thing he can do is just stand there and take a beating, because that beating may be better than the mental one he gives himself in his everyday paranoia-inflicted unstable life. In many ways Jake LaMotta is the antithesis of Rocky Balboa, one man fighting for moral reasons, just wanting to know that he means something, and has a girl that he'd do everything for. And one man is a man fighting out of insecurity of his manhood, which leads to fear, which leads to anger, which leads to pure unadulterated rage, and has a girl that he'd do anything to. But Rocky is very much the reason why Bull got made, with the same producing team behind it, it feels as if they wanted to take something inspirational that they created, and show a cruel reality, that only a real-life story could create.<sup>8</sup> The parallels are most interesting though; in the way the female protagonist is treated. Both men change their wives, but while Rocky gives Adrian the confidence to come out of her shell and stand up for herself, Jake instills a terror and constant paranoia in Vikki as she her fears turn into the same rage that is reflected in her husband. Both men scream their wives' names, but the reasons couldn't be further apart.

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<sup>8</sup> "Raging Bull." *Www.imdb.com*. N.p., n.d. Web.  
Biskind, Peter *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls* 1998, p.378.

But the audience of 1980 was different from that of 2015, it was a culture that had been conditioned and prepped with a decade of brutal, more real than comfortable indies that had dominated the industry. Today...Iron Man dominates the Industry. And while these types of films are found, they are still so few in comparison and have been distilled down to an Oscar Season that lasts only a couple months. But after recently seeing Creed, the forty-seventh movie (not actually) in the Rocky franchise, it only makes the staying power of Raging Bull that much more effective of what a director can handle, and how an audience can handle certain material. While other films attempt to make you root, or at the very least sympathize with the fighter you follow, Scorsese does not participate in such handholding. And while although some like Rebecca Mead find relatability unimportant and Derek Thompson believing that it's integral, the relatability of LaMotta isn't what makes it a good film. It's what makes us look past the awful surface of Jake LaMotta and understand him the way Scorsese and the audience did back in 1980. From the first scene in which he destroys the kitchen over an overcooked steak, it's as if he's saying, "this is Jake LaMotta. You may not like him. You may even hate him. But you will understand him." And through this dialogue millennials may truly be able to sift through this PC, surface-level world we've become accustomed to, and truly be able to face and have real conversations about things such as racism, homophobia, and as with this, domestic abuse. And through this, my generation might be able to acknowledge but still look past the issues present to see the real human on display in Raging Bull. Not a monster. A human (as much as people hate to use that word) that has grudges, makes mistakes, isn't always right, and wants to be happy. A person.



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