

## RAGING BULL (1980)

### Credits:

director: Martin Scorsese  
screenplay: Paul Schrader and Mardik Martin; based on the  
autobiography of the same name by Jake La Motta  
cinematographer: Michael Chapman  
editor: Thelma Schoonmaker  
cast: Robert De Niro (Jake), Cathy Moriarty (Vickie), Joe  
Pesci (Joey)

### Background:

Named by *Premiere* magazine's select poll the greatest film of the 1980s, *Raging Bull* marks the fourth collaboration between the director and Robert DeNiro (following *Mean Streets* [1973], *Taxi Driver* [1976], and *New York, New York* [1977] and preceding *The King of Comedy* [1982] and *Goodfellas* [1990]). DeNiro won the Oscar for Best Actor for his performance, while Scorsese lost out to Robert Redford (*Ordinary People*) for Best Director. As in the first two roles, DeNiro plays an inarticulate, unprincipled, and violent denizen of New York's "mean streets." This time, however, Scorsese imbues his character with apparent religious significance if limited psychological development, problematically suggesting his tentative progress toward redemption. Carrying Method Acting to perhaps absurd limits, DeNiro rigorously trained for months to achieve the authenticity required for his appearances in the ring, then quickly gained 60 pounds to replicate the retired La Motta.

### Stylistic Qualities:

1. Black-and white cinematography provides the film with its formal quality by creating a level of abstraction in the images rather than striving for a look of documentary realism. Note the effect achieved by Jake's home movies, which are shot in color.
2. The stylized treatment of the various fights in the ring contrasts sharply with the realistic depiction of domestic and street violence. Many viewers (including myself) were initially confused by the sequences in the ring, probably because they were measured against the standards of previous boxing movies as well as televised fights.
3. The sound track similarly vacillates between the mimetic dialogue of the neighborhood and the asynchronous music and sound that produces much of the film's symbolic associations.

### Questions for Discussion:

1. Why would Scorsese want to make a film about such an unattractive, inarticulate, and unenlightened character as Jake La Motta? Is his tenuous progress toward self-understanding and grace more striking for its inadequacy and incompleteness than its humanism and religious significance? What, if anything, makes Jake fascinating and not simply appalling? Compare with Terry

Malloy in On the Waterfront.

2. How does the director employ the genre of the boxing movie? Compare with the Rocky cycle.

3. How does Scorsese, a practicing Roman Catholic, develop the film's religious themes? What is your response to the film's closing title, which makes this aspect explicit?

4. Consider the film's depiction of violence, which is directed against women as well as men. Does the film make meaningful distinctions among the various acts of violence-- between, say, the brutality inside the ring and that of the mean streets as opposed to the instances of domestic violence?

### Bibliography

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Kolker, Robert Phillip. A Cinema of Loneliness. New York: Oxford UP, 1988.