

MARTIN SCORSESE'S CHARACTER DRIVEN FILMS: THE STUDY OF MAIN PROTAGONISTS IN *TAXI DRIVER* (1976) AND *RAGING BULL* (1980)



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Rajko Petković

University of Zadar, Zadar, Croatia

Gordana Jurleta

Varaždin, Croatia

Abstract

Martin Scorsese is a crucial figure in American cinema, and one of the few filmmakers who has possessed the gift to skillfully adapt genres and themes throughout the decades by making them thoroughly contemporary. Since his first appearance on the American film scene, this director's corpus of films has been remarkable as he has successfully merged the commercial and the exploitative. This paper explores how the themes of violence, ethnicity, masculinity, and Catholicism have influenced Scorsese as a filmmaker, as well as the construction of his lead protagonists in *Taxi Driver* (1976) and *Raging Bull* (1980). Scorsese's characters are conflicted, constantly seeking redemption, and are central to the plots of his film, which makes these aforementioned films essentially character-driven.

1. Introduction

Martin Scorsese is one of the most important American film directors of his generation. Over the course of a decade's long career as a filmmaker, he has incorporated a wide range of themes in his work, from portraying spiritual leaders, famous figures, gangsters, to making music documentaries and directing music videos. Thus, Scorsese's films are distinct, and, although dealing with subjects or characters already known to the audience, they appear fresh and different.

Most of his films are imbued with notions of a Catholic sense of redemption, in which a person overcomes the temptation of sin, thus achieving salvation. However, in his works, redemption transcends the religious context and achieves universality, often without bearing any connection to a set religiosity. Scorsese's ethnic background and upbringing have also left an indelible mark on him as a person and a filmmaker. The violence displayed in his films originates primarily from his observations of the men in the Sicilian community in which he grew up, thus leaving an indelible mark on the aesthetics of his entire opus. He has made films both for modest sums and modest returns, which has earned him the critical and authorial position he enjoys today. Nevertheless, he has recently moved closer to Hollywood, probably for greater earnings, but also in search of larger audiences, so his work has become less experimental.

The first part of the paper investigates the bases of this filmmaker's work on the tenets of New Hollywood Cinema and Italian neo-realism, which has placed him in the *auteur* milieu. The next section of this paper focuses on the recurrent motifs in his work, such as ethnicity, violence, sexuality, and religion, which largely influence the portrayal of characters in the aforementioned films. However, the main focus of this paper is on the character study of the main protagonists in two titular films: *Taxi Driver* (1976) and *Raging Bull* (1980). The primary aim of this paper is to

explore the way in which Scorsese's experiences have shaped his personal vision. It primarily refers to the mirroring of such influences in the portrayal of the lead protagonists in his films, attempting to grasp what exactly makes them a driving force in his character-driven films.

2. New Hollywood Cinema and Neo-realist Influence on Scorsese's Work

In order to better understand Scorsese's approach to filmmaking, it is necessary to situate his work within the conventions of New Hollywood Cinema. American cinema was taken by storm with radical changes after the collapse of the big studios in the 1960s, the social unrests generated by the Vietnam War, a sense of uncertainty, and the postmodern influence of the European film industry (Graham, 2002, p.13; Lubin, 2005, p.1). These all led to the rise of New Hollywood Cinema, which led to the view that cinema was not only a source of light entertainment, but also a medium which should tackle contemporary problems. Furthermore, adult and educated audiences were in need of a more mature cinema, which would explore the contemporary social issues in aesthetically coherent ways. The objective of New Hollywood Cinema was to revitalize American cinema and end the domination of mainstream cinema, the majors and their preferred way of filmmaking. The directors of New Hollywood can be seen as the embodiment of such a new current of filmmaking. Among others,¹ Scorsese was a part of this new generation, who were not only educated in acknowledged film schools, but also grew up with film, finding more in them than just a pastime. They could now exploit the transitional state of studios, and use their talents in an exploratory and self-conscious way. This new wave of American cinema provided filmmakers with the opportunities to question the assumptions of commercial narrative cinema, introduce new production methods, experiment with cinematic form, content, and genre, and reflect on the history of the film medium from which they would learn and "borrow" elements in order to build narrative and style (Kolker, 2011, p.6).

The majority of New Hollywood postulates came from Europe, mostly from the work of Italian neo-realists. According to Ruberto (2015, p. 55) and Grist (1996, p.16), the neo-realist influence on Scorsese is visible in various ways: from his formal style and approach to characters to his choice of themes and storylines. Such films possess certain common characteristics, such as on-location shooting, contemporary settings, non-professional actors, authentic language, long takes, and diegetic sound. Concerning plot, happy endings are rare, approaching a heightened realism achieved by the characteristics mentioned above (a polar opposite to Hollywood production). This is one of the reasons why, besides ideological subtexts and political unrest, neo-realism had more repercussions in independent production than in Hollywood (Ruberto, 2015, p.57). Therefore, neo-realist principles provided filmmakers with the opportunity to connect to audiences and encourage them to critically reflect on the world outside the film screen.

¹ Coppola, De Palma, Penn, Kubrick, Altman, Bogdanovich, Spielberg, Lucas (Greven, 2013, p.13; Larke-Walsh, 2011, p.349; Lubin, 2005, p.2).

3. Recurring Motifs in Scorsese's Opus

3.1. Ethnicity

There are many concepts we can identify as the driving forces of Scorsese's films. One of the fundamental traits of his filmmaking is undoubtedly drawn from his Italian heritage and ethnicity. Scorsese belongs to the third generation of an Italian-American family, and although born in New York, his home was the Sicilian community of Elizabeth Street, Manhattan, which had its own prevalent cultural norms (Blake, 2005, p.153). At one point in his documentary *My Voyage to Italy* (1999), Scorsese himself says that Elizabeth Street was actually Sicily, where every building could be considered a different village. Casillo (2006, p.60), however, suggests that Scorsese was never perfectly assimilated into this society, nor did he desire complete assimilation, but rather made the most of the social surrounding which provided him his earliest experiences. By taking a middle ground, Scorsese gained a valuable perspective on his ethnicity, later confronting and exploring its problems of race, gender, and limited opportunities rather than denying them.

Scorsese makes an effort for more tolerance, progressiveness, and freedom, by critically portraying the culture in his films imbued with issues of ethnicity. Blake (2005, p.176) and Casillo (2006, xi) agree that both his overtly Italian American films such as *Mean Streets* (1973), and his later films, such as *Taxi Driver* (1976), deal with characters who struggle to acquire personal identities, regardless of ethnicity. His films show that ethnicity is not something superficial, but deeper, and is not viewed as exclusively ethnic. It has to do with the way characters see the world, the structures which govern relationship dynamics, their communication and behavior (Cavallero, 2011, p.2).

3.2. Violence

Critics have consistently described Scorsese's characters as hyper masculine men torn between victimhood and redemption. Lopes (2019, p.188) states that "Scorsese touches a particular aspect of the male gender imagination that prefers to avoid sympathizing or understanding the pain others feel in the expression of hyper masculine violence, but feels compelled to sympathize with the male characters trapped in their self-destructing masculinity". According to Graham (2002, p.2), there are two reasons why American films are so saturated with violence, the first being that they draw on the viewers' most visceral instincts and thus making a film more successful at the box-office. The second reason violence might be so appealing to the viewer is that it is thought-provoking and imitates the reality of life. Scorsese, thus, uses violence in his films as an artistic element, to comment on the world around us. In this way, violence serves as an event that enters the viewer's mind by interrupting the process of narration, which is necessary in order to separate the aesthetic form from everyday experiences. Violence in Scorsese's films, then, should not be taken as a separate entity, because it always seems to be connected to a certain representation of the character's state of mind.

It could be argued that violence has a central position in Scorsese's cinema, often controversial, as his depictions of violent episodes are quite explicit, excessive, brutal, and unembellished. At times viewers may be uncritical towards it and accept the violence as a norm,² based on their perception of the character as either positive or negative. However, Scorsese provides distance and irony in these depictions, and leaves it to the viewer to judge the characters, with violence being an aesthetic accomplice in this judgment, and not a provider of "sadistic pleasure in pain common to many action-adventure films in the age of computer-generated graphics" (Blake, 2005, p.159).

3.3. *Catholicism*

Beside ethnicity and violence, it is necessary to touch upon Scorsese's Catholicism when discussing the recurring motifs in his work. Scorsese's early life was very much marked by experiences regarding the Church and the sacred. The two elements mentioned earlier - ethnicity and violence- are actually intertwined with Catholicism. Scorsese's use of ethnicity in his films can also be related to his recurrent topic of the outsider, which is, in turn, connected to a religious sensibility as Scorsese's main characters often search for ways to redeem themselves. In this way, Scorsese is able to reveal the sacred element in otherwise ordinary things and events in this world (Casillo, 2006, xii). Duncan (2004, p.15) asserts that the two worlds, one being Little Italy, and the other the Church, are not so different. Although the two have conflicting codes, the Mafia and the Church display power in a similar way. On the one hand, young delinquents and Mafiosi found their rules and order with the mob, and Scorsese, on the other hand, fell under the influence of honor, ethics, and the spiritual order of the Catholic Church, where priests commanded loyalty.

Also, the Church and the street have much in common, chiefly through the display of often bloody violence. Thus, Scorsese re-lives Catholicism through cinema, and his films can be regarded as stories of salvation and damnation, where the use of sacramental images or metaphors implies a character's behavioral and psychological state (Casillo, 2006, p.100). Catholic sacramentalism, ritualism, and liturgy have shaped his sensibility toward film, because film and the Church are similar mediums; both are theatrical and display epic tales with ceremony. Through a Catholic prism, Scorsese explores wider themes in his films, such as pride, conflict, narcissism, envy, complacency, retaliation, and violent behavior. San Juan states that in his work, Scorsese cannot escape his Catholic faith, and although perceived by some as a cliché, it has always been a crucial part of the auteur's worldview. "The concepts of faith and sinfulness, prayer and contrition, and Catholicism and guilt are intertwined. Why else would his protagonists so often be surrounded by religious iconography, despite being people of sin?" (2020, p.38).

² Such as the shootout scene in the brothel near the end of *Taxi Driver* (1976), where Travis is perceived as a hero by many.

4. Characteristics and Portrayal of Scorsesean Anti-Heroes

All the aforementioned motifs, such as Catholicism, violence, and ethnicity have not only influenced Scorsese as a filmmaker, but are interwoven in his portrayal of the main characters in the majority of his films. If we view Scorsese's opus over the span of the last 50 years, i.e. the length of his career as a filmmaker, his films are primarily character studies. We can claim that he has taken a distinct interest in characters who are troubled, who struggle with their everyday lives, but are trying to redeem themselves in one way or another. These characters are chiefly men who are the main initiators of the plot. Almost all of Scorsese's films display a predominant male-centered position typical of Hollywood films, also with a privileged male point of view, typically focusing on the study of masculine identity where plot is often subordinate to the character. We may assert on the basis of this that this makes the two films by Scorsese mentioned earlier character-driven films.

When it comes to defining the type of characters in which Scorsese is mostly interested, we can conclude that his heroes are actually the exact opposite, i.e., anti-heroes. This stems from the tenets of New Hollywood Cinema, which have undoubtedly influenced the development of Scorsese's main protagonists, as his filmmaking can be viewed as an aesthetic mixture of European and American cinema. As mentioned earlier, Scorsese likes to challenge the conventions of strictly defined genres, resulting in the characterization of protagonists as well, where he tries to dissect complex portraits of male characters as anti-heroes. This kind of aesthetic profile is not only artistic but also anthropological, as its aim is to present a form of masculinity which tries to position the male characters between those typical of Hollywood and masculinity as presented in European film: in European film masculinity is portrayed as problematic and tortured,³ which has inspired Scorsese to portray his characters in a similar way. They are trapped, struggle intensely with their personal integrity and survival, with implications of the redemption and restoration of their masculinity, but this is not always a given. Thus, rather than the final resolution so crucial to the narrative structure of a genre films, they generally end on an ambiguous note, often after intense violence or bloodshed, leaving the notion of redemption in question (Bertellini and Reich, 2015, p.44). This is precisely why viewers identify the main male character as difficult, problematic, and enigmatic. However, Lopes (2019, p.75) proposes that Scorsese's characters should also be analyzed through an "anthropological" lens, as their placement in historical settings strongly connects the individual with the social.

Furthermore, Scorsese is a master of juggling the viewer's perception when it comes to presenting reality and imagination in his films, by always arousing an audience's suspicions of what is real and what may only be in a character's mind. According to Larke-Walsh, Scorsese sees the main protagonist as the mover of the plot, and the film itself becomes a "self-conscious exploration of the inner conflicts of his main characters" (2011, p.352).

³ Mostly influenced by an existentialist, post-war state of mind, and a shift from optimism to pessimism (Grist, 1996, p.159).

3.4. *Travis Bickle as an Alienated War Veteran in Taxi Driver (1976)*

Taxi Driver took the world of film by storm upon its release. Although the wider public objected to its extremely explicit portrayal of violence, drugs, prostitution, and urban decay, it was Scorsese's first critical success. It won the Cannes film festival that same year, and was also nominated for an Oscar in four categories. The film later made its way into American cultural history, popular culture, the ranks of the 100 films of all time, numerous re-releases, and the selection for preservation by United States National Film Preservation Board (High, 2015, p.380). Tait states that the film can be defined as a social critique of its time, as it "came to embody everything that was going wrong with America but also what was paradoxically going right in American film" (2015, p.302).

This was a common story concerning a lead character estranged from his environment, but told from a different perspective in an unusual, fresh way. This is mostly due to a positioning between dream and reality, subjectivity and objectivity, and a combination of expressionism and realism. The expressionism in this film lies in its aesthetics; claustrophobic, expressionist lighting, voice-over, neon-lighted and rain-washed streets, the musical score and so on. This mixture of realism and expressionism is due mostly to the conventions and reworking of classic noir stylistics, representing emotions of despair, alienation, isolation, pessimism, and a world of futility. However, although *Taxi Driver* (1976) borrows some elements from noir, we can also say that it departs from its conventions, because in classic noir, the source of anxiety is usually external, but for Travis it is something that comes from within (Connelly, 1991, p.63). Furthermore, the anti-heroes of modernist neo-noirs such as this one appear as a product of the forces of a destabilized American society and convey disillusionment with this society and a disbelief in any public system or authority.

This being said, it is necessary to shed some light on the social circumstances of the time the film was made. The early '60s were somewhat optimistic years, as Americans saw hope in public heroes such as J. F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King and Muhammad Ali, who all tried to confront society's problems and emphasize social justice. However, prompted by the atrocities of the Vietnam War, the later part of that decade saw mass, and sometimes fatal, riots, bringing chaos into American society. The American white male was especially the target of this disillusionment (LoBrutto, 2007, p.190). The '70s only intensified this urban nightmare with people having little or nothing to believe in, which resulted in confused, restless, lonely civilians. The nation lost faith in its institutions and law enforcement. According to social circumstances, *Taxi Driver* (1976) was an allegory of the American experience of the Vietnam War, and an early attempt to portray the immense psychological scars experienced by soldiers, but also the side-effects felt by the American nation, such as the disintegration of the moral and physical state of the nation. Travis Bickle was a character with whom people could relate, as he conveyed feelings of frustration, rage, fear, disillusionment, and disgust most people felt at that time.

Let us present a short plot summary before proceeding with a character study of Travis Bickle. Travis is a Vietnam War veteran, a loner living in New York City, who, unable to sleep at night, becomes a taxi driver. He has strong opinions about what is wrong with humanity, as he watches the world deteriorate every night through his cab window. After meeting Betsy, a worker for senator Palantine's presidential campaign, he tries to woo her but fails after an unsuccessful date. Then, Travis becomes interested in a child prostitute, Iris, wanting to become her savior, also assuming she wants to return to her parents and continue her education. Maddened by a sense of powerlessness, he thinks of ways to escape his depressing life, arming himself in preparation for a bloody aftermath. The assassination attempt on Palantine goes wrong, which causes Travis to seek another target: Iris's pimp.

3.4.1 Alien in New York City

Travis Bickle is an alien; he is a stranger, not only to the city, but to the very society in which he lives. Firstly, we do not know neither his true past nor where he comes from, thus, he is alien to us. He is a person without place, permitted to be anywhere in the city, but essentially belonging nowhere. Travis is alienated from the world, but this alienation is a result of inadequate social bonds. He lives alone, and is unable to connect to anybody: women, fellow cabbies, customers. The use of the phrase "I'm God's lonely man" is, in his case, entirely true, as is the very frequent mention of any variation of the word "loneliness". Every interaction he tries to establish is awkward and relatively unsuccessful. His inability to connect and communicate with other people is dominant throughout the film. He comes into contact with many people, but doesn't form any lasting bonds and has little or no communication with them.

Instances clearly showing this are the scenes where all the cabbies sit together in Belmore Cafeteria, discussing and retelling stories from their shifts. In every such scene, Travis is estranged from them either physically (sitting far from them or at another table), or mentally, when he doesn't hear their questions or conversation. Travis is always somewhere at the edge of the frame, or alone in the frame, whereas the other cabbies are always portrayed in a group. Another notable moment in the film is the one which metaphorically emphasizes the immense emptiness and futility of Travis's life. In this scene, Travis phones Betsy after their disastrous date at the porno theater, and begs her to meet him again, which she heartlessly rejects. The camera's focus on the empty hallways is a perfect metaphor for the character's disconnection, both from others and himself.

Travis constantly struggles to convey his feelings, as in the scene where he approaches Wizard and does not know how to express what is really bothering him. This can be attributed to the silence and passivity that are the result of a lack of dialogue in Travis's life. As a cab driver, he overhears the passengers but does not talk to them. He mostly spends his time in quiet observation of the city, and the ideas in his head make sense, while he struggles to get them out into the open. Travis's behavior also displays a lack of knowledge about social norms, especially when it comes to dating, which is perfectly illustrated by the scene where he takes Betsy on a date to a porno

theater. However, he genuinely doesn't know what he has done wrong, but her reaction lets him know that this is no place to take a woman on a date. Shown by his diary entries, he longs to conform and accept cultural norms. He wants to be a part of normal society and find a sense of purpose in his life, but finds it extremely difficult. Nevertheless, in the final scene, Travis achieves an apparent assimilation into society, and whether it is reality or just a fantasy playing out in Travis's head, he is seen in an enjoyable conversation with his fellow cabbies, being a rightful member of their group, possibly because he was hailed as a hero by the media.⁴

As there are virtually no scenes in the film in which he is not present, Bickle can be considered an omnipresent character. This lures the audience into developing a certain liking to him, as he displays a kind of real-life presence with which viewers can identify, or at least understand. We start to see things his way, and many of his actions do not seem as monstrous or evil as they objectively are. However, by employing the objective viewpoint, the audience sees that the film expresses the obsessive, often completely unaccountable, visions of a madman. As proposed by Kolker (2011, p.230), only when the character tries to become a hero by escaping the prison in which he has entrapped himself, the audience loses sympathy.

In this way, Bickle becomes a man of the dark noir world, a neo-noir anti-hero of sorts, closed, dark, paranoid, obsessed, and violent. His internal life remains an enigma for viewers, as it is exposed, but not explained.

3.4.2 Perception of Women

In order to interpret Travis's attitude towards women and his perception of them, it is important to dedicate a few words to the voyeuristic gaze of the film. The opening credits already set the mood, as we see Travis's eyes in the rearview mirror of his cab, and his point of view is almost everything we are aware of in the film. He is, however, restricted to passively observing the streets and people from the windshield, but everything he notices is filth, madness, scum. Kolker (2011, p.238) assumes that there is a reason why the only streets he sees are the stews of the city, and the café he frequents is attended by pimps or drug addicts, the passengers he drives are repellent and sick. It is because these are the only people and only places of which Travis is actually aware. The duality of his nature makes him look both in fascination and disbelief at the prostitutes, "spooks" and porno films, and he may not be aware of it, but he is addicted to sex and violence.

The pornographic gaze is also of concern while trying to probe into Travis's mind. There are numerous scenes in the film where Travis stops to stare at romantic exchanges between couples on the streets, or couples dancing on TV, fighting in a soap opera, or in the café, when he looks and listens in fascination as Wizard tells a story about his sexual encounter with a customer. It is as if he longs for that kind of connection with someone, and this is probably the reason he spends so much time in porno theaters. However, when he is on the spot, watching a dirty film, his

⁴ Also proposed by several authors, e.g. Duncan (2004, p.40) and High (2015, p.390).

face looks equally fascinated and disgusted, while he himself emphasizes his loneliness and long, endless days in voice-over. His interactions with the two prominent female characters in the film begin similarly, as voyeuristic stalking. This is Travis's dominant interaction with others, and while voyeurism emphasizes the lack of connection between people, for him it is a reflective, intimate, and completely one-sided view of a desired object, in this case a woman (High, 2015, p.385).

Travis has a very nihilistic attitude towards the world surrounding him until he sees her appearing "out of the filthy mass like an angel". Betsy is a campaign worker for Senator Palantine who is running for President. She is the most beautiful woman he has ever seen. Her appearance is as a fifties film star- blonde, voluptuous and unattainable. When he first sees her, walking in slow-motion, and after this, when he stalks her from his taxi parked in front of her workplace, she becomes the object of his visual desire, which combines the concept of the voyeuristic gaze with the absence of social connection. He gathers courage to approach her, and once he does, he is slightly awkward, but charming, and unrelenting until she accepts to go on a date with him.

It seems that Travis knows how to behave toward women, he even buys Betsya Kris Kristofferson record, but immediately after this he takes her to a porno film which proves to be a recipe for a disaster: Travis's decision may be interpreted as an act of unconscious self-sabotage, which is mirrored in his own self-hatred and a general anger toward women. After the date, she does not answer his calls, and for him she becomes "like the others: cold and distant. Many people are like that. Women for sure. They're like a union". Thus, having initially constructed Betsy as an "angel", Travis's next interaction with her at the Palantine headquarters positions her 'in hell, like the rest'.

Several authors⁵ call attention to the Scorsesean Madonna-whore dichotomy which he uses to present women in his films. This ambivalent attitude is projected by men who are fascinated with women but at the same time do not really know how to relate to them on a human level. This is why they are subconsciously attracted to those who are unattainable. Previously a Madonna figure, Betsy becomes a whore, while Travis projects his frustrations on trying to save an actual 'whore-figure', Iris, a 12-year-old child prostitute. She becomes an inspiration for his quest, and he wants to save her from the life she leads. Iris represents not only a social critique of runaway youth, child prostitution, and drug use, but also Travis's fixation in his search for meaning. He wants to transform her impurity into something virginal, but it seems she does not want to be saved. He subjectively thinks he is right, but maybe it's all in his mind, and after Iris is returned safe home to her parents, the end note is bittersweet: he becomes a hero, while she is entrapped once again.⁶ Pauw assumes that all of this is crucial for the following climax of the film, as Travis's successive involvement with the two women in the film, after he has been rejected by both of them, triggers him to become a killing machine (2006, p.45).

3.4.3 Violent Vigilantism

⁵Most notably Ebert (2008, p.44); Grist (1996, p.177); High (2015, p.386); and Rausch (2010, p.44).

⁶As her father writes in a letter to Travis: "we have taken steps to see she has never caused to run away again".

One of the very important underlying concepts in the film is the crisis of American male identity which arose in the 1970s. Travis's behavior in the film may be interpreted as symbolic of this masculinity crisis, where men are uncertain of what is expected of them, how to behave and what their role in modern society should be.⁷ Travis feels angry, dissatisfied, and alienated from the world at the beginning of the film, yet, except verbally, he does not display aggression in any other way. However, the anger accumulated within only needs the right impulse in order to be triggered. In the film we can see that the moment came in the form of Betsy's rejection, and the impulse is probably the passenger talking about his intention to kill his cheating wife with a .44 Magnum pistol.

This is the cue for Travis to start getting "organized", so he starts living healthily and working out, and decides to buy a gun.⁸ He finally has a sense of purpose in his life and has now embraced violence in order to achieve a meaningful identity. The re-sculpting of his body is what we see on a superficial level, but it is the mind's transformation which will count in the end. The act of buying guns from Easy Andy is an omen of violent bloodshed bound to happen. It could be argued that Travis sees guns as something that will help him purify society, something that will solve his problems. The first time he actually uses it is when he witnesses a robbery at a convenience store, where he calmly shoots the robber in the head. At that moment, by taking matters into his own hands, Travis ceases being only a passive observer. The previous scene, which is the famous mirror rehearsal scene, shows Travis practicing with guns, fantasizing about becoming a hero. By actually attaching the gun to his body and making it a part of himself, Travis feels intimacy between himself and the weapon. This scene may be symbolic, as for him the gun becomes a portent of masculinity and a substitute for the sexuality absent from his life. From that moment on, he begins his transformation into a delusional vigilante.⁹

In the voice-over at the beginning of the film, when he just began working as a cabbie, Travis says: "Thank God for the rain, which has helped wash away garbage and the trash from the sidewalks. Someday a real rain will come and wash all the scum off the streets". The only hope Travis has for redemption of this society is apocalyptic. The moment has come, and he considers himself an executioner of this purification, an avenging angel of sorts. He is a "man who would not take it anymore", and if society will not accept him, then he plans to impose his will on society itself. The illusion that the audience had is abruptly broken when Palantine says "We have reached a turning point", and the viewers can finally see things objectively when Travis appears as a shocking Mohawk-wearing lunatic. Before killing Sport and every other man in the brothel, Travis is shown as a walking arsenal. He appears in front of Sport as a fiercer, tougher, more masculine version of his original self. Scorsese's long camera take over the massacre leaves us

⁷The origins of this crisis may have been the decline in men's power as they no longer attained it through a physically strong appearance or independence; the increasingly blurred boundaries between male and female roles; strengthening of the feminist movement; technology and television representing unattainable ideals of masculinity in the real world (Pauw, 2006, p.20).

⁸ Although previously in the film he swiftly rejected the idea of possessing a gun when Wizard asked him if he needed one for protection. However, the zoom-in on the tablet sparkling in the water immediately after signifies that something is boiling in Travis and needs to get out.

⁹ Vigilantism is very often justified as heroic violent behavior, an obvious defining characteristic of mainstream American film heroes and their masculinity.

wondering if Travis sees this bloodbath as an act of purification. However, seeing Travis's expressionless eyes in the aftermath, the audience bears witness of the lowest point of degradation in human life, all the result of violence.

The question remains: is Travis Bickle a hero? We do not know the answer, because it is unclear if the final scenes of the film are fantasy or reality. Whether they are real or not, his act of slaughter, perceived as an act of liberation and purification, is accepted by everyone else, and he is certainly portrayed as a hero by the media, by Iris's parents, even by Betsy. This follows the normal conventions of a heroic film. He has finally purified himself, and is reintegrated into society as part of the group of cabbies. Also, he sparks interest in Betsy once more, but the flash of his red eyes in the rearview mirror leaves an ambiguous note. Travis may still be in hell, unredeemed.

3.5. Hyper-masculine Jake La Motta in *Raging Bull* (1980)

Raging Bull (1980) is a black-and-white boxing drama, based on Jake LaMotta's 1970 memoir named *Raging Bull: My Story*. From the beginning, Scorsese was reluctant to shoot it,¹⁰ despite De Niro's insistence, who had read the memoir and became taken with the story and portrayal of Jake LaMotta's character. Had Scorsese turned down the project, this film wouldn't have been one of his most prominent, critically acclaimed masterpieces, winning Oscars for De Niro and editor Schoonmaker, along with five other Oscar nominations (Ebert, 2008, p.278; Rausch, 2010, p.71). In preparation for the role, De Niro took method acting to the next level. He not only thoroughly investigated LaMotta's life, but also went into extensive training with LaMotta himself in order to achieve the genuine impression of the boxer in the film, even entering three real boxing matches in Brooklyn. Moreover, De Niro gained 60 pounds for his portrayal of the older LaMotta in the final scenes of the film (Duncan, 2004, p.83).

In many instances, the film resembles a documentary, chiefly due to its black-and-white cinematography. By the 1980s, the process of filming in black-and-white was already quite unconventional, which was probably the reason Scorsese used it both to create distance and stylization, and to put more emphasis on the film's narrative structure and its fighting sequences (Casillo, 2006, p.228; Kolker, 2011, p.189). Another reason is Scorsese's work in the field of film preservation.¹¹ Furthermore, Scorsese and his associates considered the red color of blood and boxing gloves distracting from the images. Moreover, black and white was used to emphasize the realism of the setting, to make the film more authentic, not only to reflect the times when LaMotta was young, but also the memories of boxing matches on TV in black and white. The final reason

¹⁰ He had no interest in boxing, even hated the sport, and criticized the style of writing in the memoir (Rausch, 2010, p.70). However, after a near-death experience, caused by an overdose, the story served Scorsese as rehabilitation, as it allowed him to put his thoughts, feelings, and emotions under the microscope (LoBrutto, 2007, p.222).

¹¹ In the fall of 1980, Scorsese launched a campaign against Kodak over the issue of color preservation, issuing a petition on color fading in American film heritage, as he considered that Kodak's printing stocks were fading at an alarming rate. "Why should he shoot *Raging Bull* in color only to see those colors badly faded only a few years later?" (Rausch, 2010, p.76).

for Scorsese's choice was his desire to artistically distinguish his film from numerous similar works appearing at that time¹² which were shot in color.

Although ranking among the greatest boxing films of all times, *Raging Bull* (1980) is primarily not about boxing at all. It is a film about a man who struggles with his sexual insecurity and jealousy in order to attain functional relationships in his life. When he fails to do this, he punishes himself in the ring which serves as a metaphor for life and the struggle for redemption, confession, and atonement. Although the film is undoubtedly influenced by American cinema's boxing classics, it resists the generic clichés of the boxing film. For example, most films in this genre combine brutality and sentimentality, and ultimately portray an emotionally likeable main protagonist, by giving the audience something to hold on to: the boxer's humanity.

However, this film makes it difficult to account for Jake's actions or produce sympathy after witnessing his actions. By subverting generic characteristics, Scorsese moves the film away from a conventional pattern, and makes his character and narrative non-conforming to type, just as it was the case with *Taxi Driver* (1976). Scorsese followed the conventions of European 'art' cinema to emphasize social realism, the psychological delineation of the protagonist, and an ambiguous ending. Although the film portrays the rise and fall of a boxing champion as a generic convention, it stops there. For example, instead of following his road to success, we know nothing about LaMotta's boxing history but we are thrown directly into the plot where he already is an established fighter. Some other generic departures are also visible in the function of boxing, the treatment of romance, and an ambiguous conclusion where there is no boxing involved.

Before proceeding to an analysis of Jake LaMotta's character, a few words about the plot of the film should be stated. The film begins with a scene from 1964, where we hear an older and bloated LaMotta practicing his stand-up comedy act on a boxing theme. The film moves back to 1941, tracing the events that transpired in Jake's boxing and personal life. We are introduced to Jake's younger brother Joey, his sparring partner and manager, and a young girl named Vickie, whom he seduces and later marries. During the course of the film, the episodes from his personal life are interrupted by fighting bouts. After a period of time trying to make it on his own, Jake becomes connected to the mob. He throws his first fight, which leads to his suspension, but this does little harm to his career, as he soon wins the middleweight championship title. Three years pass and Jake's jealousy and paranoia only grow, as he suspects Vickie is cheating on him. With no evidence at all, Jake cruelly beats up Joey, and physically attacks Vickie. Several years later, we see a retired LaMotta in Miami, who ends up in jail after a series of events. Returning to New York after serving his sentence, he runs into Joey, finally apologizing for everything he had done. The last scene of the film is actually the first scene, where Jake rehearses an act he is about to perform in front of a crowded auditorium at the Barbizon Plaza.

¹² Such as *Rocky* (1976), *Rocky II* (1979), *The Main Event* (1979), a remake of *The Champ* (1979), and *Matilda* (1978) (LoBrutto, 2007, p.223).

3.5.1. *Attestation of Masculinity*

Many authors agree that Jake's issues and violent escapades, supported by his hyper-inflated ego, are actually the result of his distorted conception of masculinity.¹³ In this specific case, many of these misconceptions possibly stem from ethnicity. By isolating themselves within their ethnic enclaves and the bounds of their neighborhood, Scorsese's Italian American characters often accept very regressive views on gender and race. In such surroundings, men like gangsters, criminals, and in this case, boxers think they have more right to be respected because of the preexisting rules and their reputation, so if their personal integrity or honor is disrespected, they often resort to violence. Thus, the characters can never really escape their own cultural norms, as their background defines who they are. However, Scorsese's films dealing with Italian Americans do not embrace such behavior, but rather critically question such cultural demands.

Casillo (2006, p.74-76) states that the Mediterranean cult of masculine behavior can't be understood without the values of honor and shame. In such a cultural surrounding, the moral and behavioral code is determined by the approval or disapproval of the community, and a man who follows this social code obtains status and honor. Thus, masculine behavior is the extension of such values, as it helps in their maintenance, frequently followed by violence. The ideal of masculinity is for a man to present a god-like superiority over others. Thus, Jake tends to perform the masculine "ideals" within the boxing ring and outside it. But even though he is professionally successful, the daily life which requires socially adapted behavior becomes a problem for him. It can be seen both in the type of language he uses, as well as in his loud and argumentative verbal outbursts which are threatening and full of profanity.

On the other hand, Jake also has insecurities which he tends to discard by haunting other people. For example, in the scenes where he complains to Joey about his "little girl's hands", he discloses his fears not only of femininity, but about the attestation of his own masculinity as well, as he will never be able to "fight the best there is". Although Joey tries to reason with him, it is clear that in this scene, Jake questions his own performance of masculinity, which he immediately tries to disprove by bullying Joey into hitting him the hardest he can, who eventually utters the question "What are you trying to prove?". Several authors¹⁴ point out another scene, where for Jake, compromising his own integrity means falling short of his masculinity. He denies all the connections to the mob from the beginning, fantasizes doing it his way, on his own. But even though his boxing abilities are never in question, he is long denied a title shot.¹⁵ Ultimately, he gives in, and agrees to throw a fight against Fox, thus wounding his integrity, pride and vanity. The dishonor he has to endure makes him break, as he bursts into tears in the locker-room.

When we look at Jake, his masculinity is also proven in an impulsive, instinctive way, the way that animals behave to display their dominance. We can say that LaMotta is an "animal" whose territory is every aspect of his life, he has to dominate everyone and everything because of

¹³ Proposed by Blake, 2005, p.196; Casillo, 2006, p.53-71; Cavallero, 2011, 47-62.

¹⁴ Casillo, 2006, p.245; Duncan, 2004, p.81; LoBrutto, 2007, p.239; Rausch, 2010, p.90.

¹⁵ The mob had the power to determine a boxer's career, through their assigning and fixing of matches.

his insecurities. The film is full of allusions to animality, the most obvious being the title itself, derived from Jake's nickname: the Bronx Bull. Very often, comparisons with animals or calling someone an animal can be heard in the film, such as in the scene where Jake argues with his first wife, when the neighbor yells "What's the matter with you, animals?", followed by Joey's later remark to Jake's living habits "You can't fucking eat and drink like an animal". Furthermore, Salvy's comment from Copacabana Club identifies Jake as a "gorilla", and during Jake's domestic fight with Vickie, she calls him a "fat pig", and a "sick animal".

The animality allusion is also juxtaposed with the concept of boxing itself. Jake wears a leopard print robe before and after his every match. His fighting and movements in the ring resemble an animal attacking, similar to that of a predator stalking its prey, while animal cries are audible in the underlying soundtrack. Peterson (2005, p.84) concludes that Jake's acts, like an animal's, are not consciously self-produced, but instinctive, impulsive, and inconsiderate. And although denying it in the jail scene, with the line "I'm not an animal", all of his actions and inhumanity which extend beyond the ring suggest something different.

3.5.2. *Sacrifice in the Ring*

While most typical Hollywood boxing films show what it is like to have a ringside experience, *Raging Bull* (1980) takes the viewer into the ring, to gain a subjective experience of the events and see them through Jake's point of view. Thus, everything that happens in the ring becomes quite similar to Jake's mind and feelings. There are nine boxing sequences in the film,¹⁶ which subjectively portray Jake's inner feelings. Each of the bouts is designed as an allusion to an episode from his personal life and they are closely tied to the narrative progression.

Everything happening during Jake's fights isn't actually controlled by sport tactics, but by his internal drives. For example, the first two matches with Robinson express Jake's passion as he wins Vickie over, and in this way, his dominance in the ring is comparable with the dominance in his love life. The Janiro fight accounts for his jealousy, the Fox dive corresponds to his feelings of shame and loss of integrity, winning the title from Cerdan his melancholic joy, and the final fight with Robinson is penance for the acts he committed against his wife and brother. The splattering of blood and sweat, the unidentified sounds, the fragmentary, slow-motion shots reflect LaMotta's interior landscape (Grindon, 2015, pp.405-417; Kolker, 2011, p.26). The boxing ring is a place where Jake achieves both transcendence and penance. By beating his rivals, he proves himself professionally, but when he lets them beat him, he tries to repent for his wrongdoings by absorbing endless physical punishment in the ring. By masochistically punishing himself, LaMotta wants to manipulate suffering in order to achieve redemption.

Sacrificial imagery is most prominent in the last Sugar Ray Robinson fight. By employing a masochistic gesture- allowing himself to be beaten by his rival, as in the violent escapade when he beat Joey and Vicki- he redeems himself. This scene is iconographically imbued with the

¹⁶ A practice different from typical Hollywood films of this genre, as they move towards a climactic match. This film is different as there are many more bouts, but the ending itself is devoid of any boxing matches.

religious imagery of sacrifice, notably the ropes, which are seen dripping with blood. Furthermore, in the process of watching this fight we are given the impression that Jake is in hell, as heat is visible in the image, with steam rising around the ring. However, his pride never wanes, and he does not allow himself to fall to the floor. It may be argued that in this instance, LaMotta is not a martyr, but a man who intentionally and publicly allows his own self-destruction, and in his futile attempt to redeem himself, almost becomes a caricature of himself.

3.5.3. *Vickie as the Object of Jake's Sexual Paranoia*

Another aspect of Jake's demonstration of masculinity is his attitude toward women, notably his wife Vickie. Women must be studied in relation to Jake's perspective, because we only see them in the film as constructs of his own subjectivity (Grindon, 2005, p.25; McCormack, 2005, p.29). The relationship Jake has with women is based on the projection of the patriarchal order, where the male must be dominant. The sexist and overpoweringly violent stance toward women in general is emphasized in the film on many occasions.¹⁷ The women in the film have little to do with the action, all we see them do is receive abuse, but we never find out why they were attracted to such a man as LaMotta in the first place and why they stayed with him for so long. In this way, Jake displays his masculinity and demands respect from his wife, but he cannot have it as he does not treat anyone with respect. For him, a woman is like an object without freedom of action, speech, or any kind of independent existence.

This brings us once more to the concept of Madonna-whore dichotomy. At the start, Vickie is simply a sexual fantasy to Jake. The moment he first sees her, she is shown by the pool, her legs in the water, a sign of something clean. He is mesmerized by her appearance, her blonde hair, well-built body and her maturity of conduct, but is deliberately shot by Scorsese in an objectified manner, as the goddess from the Hollywood Golden Age. The illusion of their happily married life is provided in the home film sequences, showing Joey's wedding, children's birthdays, family gatherings, where it appears that Vickie has made a transition from Jake's sexual trophy to his life companion and partner. However, these home films are shot in color and followed by classical music, which suggests their marked contrast to the objective narration. It may be argued that these scenes represent Jake's romanticized version of his relationship with his wife.

However, due to his insecure sense of manhood, she becomes an object of his jealous obsessions, and turns from a "Madonna" into a "whore". After marrying her, he becomes convinced that she is cheating on him, and this is why his paranoid obsessions are shown in slow-motion while Vickie greets other men. He fears that she will dishonor him with her behavior toward other men, such as Salvy, Tommy, or his brother Joey.¹⁸ As he cannot completely control her sexuality, his jealousy and violence become the only form of expression of his feelings for her.

¹⁷For example, Jake beats his wives, and both Jake and Joey insult and threaten their wives. In the Copacabana club scenes, women are targets of abuse and mocking. They are always condescendingly told to do something: "Bring over the steak", "Kiss my boobies", "Sit a little closer", "Don't you ever disrespect me like that" etc.

¹⁸ As Casillo (2006, p.77) explains, one of the greatest fears of the Italian American male is being cuckolded, also known as *cornuto*, or the horned one, meaning castration or defeat by a sexual rival.

His mistrust and misogynistic attitude are perfectly embodied in what he says when he commands Joey to spy on her: “Any woman given the right time, the right place, the right circumstances, they’ll do anything”.

3.5.4. “*I Could’ve Been Somebody...*”

In the final scene, awaiting a public performance as a comedian at the Barbizon Plaza, Jake looks at himself in the mirror and rehearses Marlon Brando’s “I could’ve been a contender” speech, from Kazan’s boxing film *On the Waterfront* (1954). This ambiguous ending scene can be explained in several different ways. On the one hand, it could mean that LaMotta has changed and finally realizes his mistakes in life. Although Malloy believes that Charlie is guilty of Jake’s ultimate defeat, Jake is aware that in reality it was he who brutalized the people who loved him. He knows he was a contender, he also was a champion, but he actually wasn’t anybody, and ended up like a bum. However, through this recital, Jake probably gains some kind of introspection, and reaches the self-realization that he has managed to alienate everyone who was ever close to him. Jake no longer exhibits rage, but can now look upon his former life with detachment and regret. On the other hand, the ending leaves us wondering if Jake is an entirely other person now. Without excluding the possibility of his spiritual growth, several authors¹⁹ mention some factors which suggest that Jake hasn’t achieved enlightenment through his experience. Firstly, he tries to regain his audience as a comedian by mimicking his previous experience as a boxer, and he still considers himself the boss, as he says to himself while shadowboxing before his performance at the very end of the film. He still does everything his own way, because it is the only way he knows. Furthermore, although he apologized to his brother in the public garage, it remains unclear whether Jake did this because he really wanted to regain his brother’s affection, or only to be at peace with himself. In the end, Scorsese leaves us wondering once again- has Jake really succeeded to find peace of mind?

4. Conclusion

Until recent years, Scorsese had not been the most commercially successful among his generation of filmmakers, which came at a cost as he had a need to express a personal vision. His earlier work, especially the two films studied in this paper, were not mainstream at the time. On the contrary, they were controversial, publicly condemned, or ill-received by the audience. Today, however, they are considered to be the director’s masterpieces and of unavoidable significance for cultural and film heritage. Scorsese is primarily a director in search of redemption, which is visible in the manner of the representation of his main characters on screen. His filmmaking style, especially the *misé-en-scène*, frequently used slow-motion photography, and distortions of perspective, do not grant us the favor of a deeper understanding of the characters. However, what we do see is their fragmented psyche, and this is enough to experience the character on our own,

¹⁹ Bordwell and Thompson, 2008, p.430; Nicholls, 2005, p.131; Raymond, 2009, p.131.

without the director's imposition. Thus, the protagonists' inner monologues place them within particular social contexts which are crucial for pinpointing their struggles, stories, and narratives.

The two protagonists, Travis Bickle and Jake LaMotta, are oddly similar, although it doesn't seem so at first. Primarily, *Taxi Driver* (1976) is not about the life of a cabbie, and *Raging Bull* (1980) is not about boxing. Both characters are self-deluded, sexually frustrated and inactive, unsure of their sexuality and afraid to confront it. Their misdemeanors toward women stems from the assignment of the Madonna-whore dichotomy in which they perceive women. Also, Bickle and LaMotta are loners, rejects, anxious young men, unable to confront their demons. They are isolated, damaged, have the need to save others, and they most often fail, in this way remaining absolutely detached. These characters want to be saviors, but first and foremost, they need to save themselves. The driving force of their actions is an underlying violent urge which they have to overcome one way or another. However, both are unsuccessful, as they only seemingly, partially redeem themselves, and the films' ambiguous endings leave us unsure.

Although the two films considered here are about transcendence and redemption, they can also be viewed as a critique of masculinity and the violence traditionally associated with it. Travis Bickle is hailed a hero by the media, but the audience cannot in any way accept him as one. Seeing the bloodbath and its consequences, we can only pity his *modus operandi* and declare him a lunatic. Furthermore, LaMotta's acts of violence have succeeded to alienate everyone who ever cared about him, thus making him only an accomplished boxer, but otherwise a profoundly miserable and graceless man. The question remains, when will masculinity cease being associated with violence? Scorsese does not provide the answer.

Furthermore, the two characters analyzed here display a behavior deeply affected with religion. They endure pain or intentionally hurt themselves in order to atone for their sins, and are obsessed with their spiritual purpose in life. Travis Bickle believes himself to be an avenging angel who will act out God's rage against the scum of New York. Jake LaMotta allows his opponents to brutally punish him in the boxing ring in order to make up for what he did to Joey and Vickie. In a way, Scorsese identifies with his characters; he transmits his artistic sensibility onto them, informed by violence, religion, and a deep understanding of film history, thus making his protagonists a projection of himself. These were extremely important and very personal projects for Scorsese, which made him redeem himself as well.

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