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Scorsese's Perfect Storm; Genius Lessons

PRIMAL SCREEN

BY AMY TAUBIN

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RAGING BULL

Directed by Martin Scorsese
Written by Paul Schrader and Mardik Martin
An MGM Distribution release
Film Forum Through August 10

THE TIC CODE

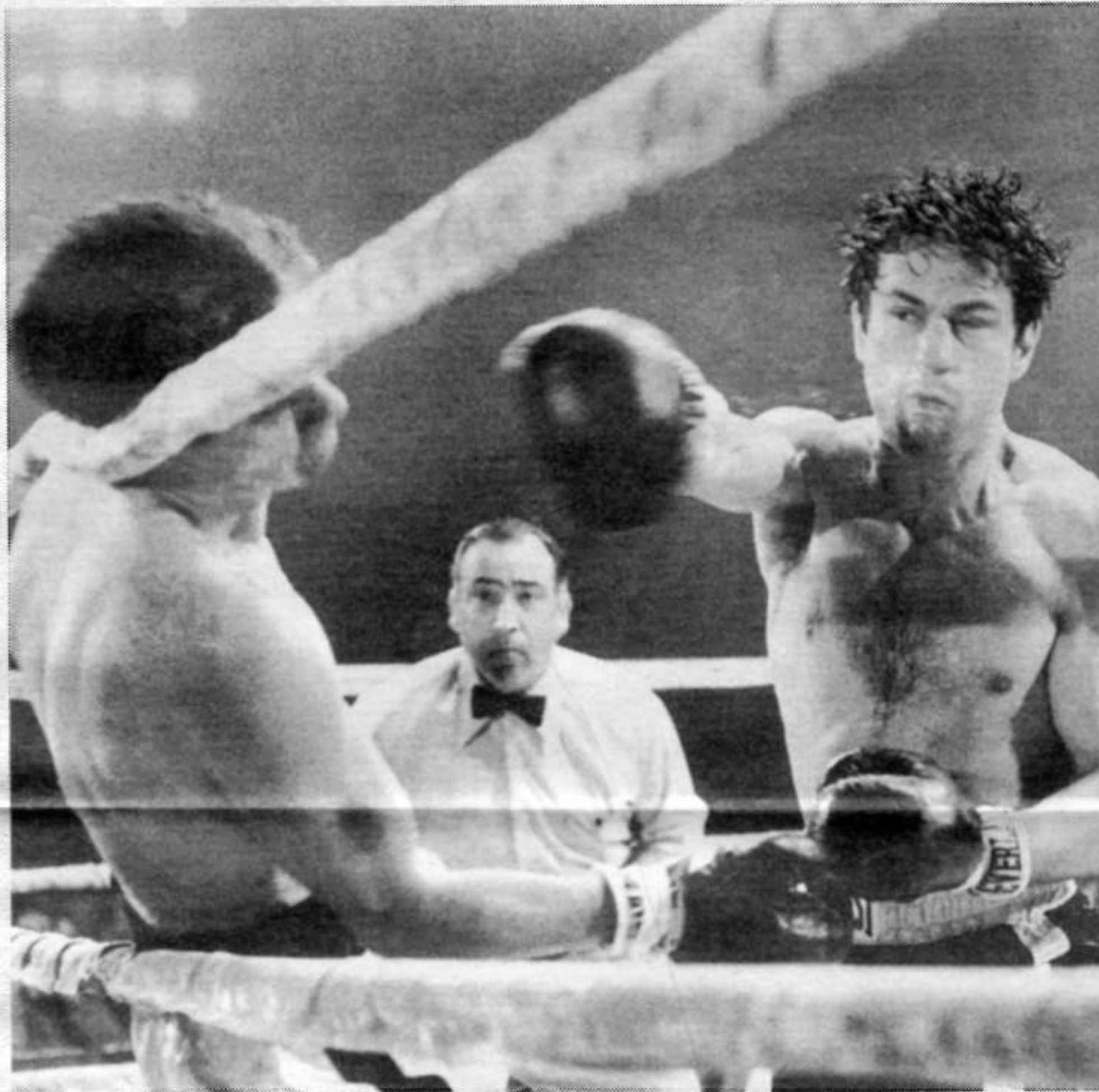
Directed by Gary Winick
Written by Polly Draper
An Avalanche release Opens August 4

An anti-blockbuster about a guy who busts blocks legally for a living, *Raging Bull* makes pain the measure of manhood. Not only pain inflicted, but pain endured. As unsparing of its audience as its protagonist is of his opponents, his family, and himself, Martin Scorsese's biopic of former middleweight champ Jake LaMotta alternates scenes of violence at home and violence in the ring. The film is brutal but also austere, like one of Richard Serra's massive steel sculptures.

In almost all of Scorsese's other movies, there are moments when you sense the dilemma of a director pulled between the desire to make art and the need to be a success (enough of a success to be allowed to make more movies). Even when the films are great, there are compromised moments. But from the first shot in *Raging Bull* of a nearly disembodied Robert De Niro, alone in the ring, jogging in slo-mo, his face obscured by the hood of his robe, like a monk in Rossellini's *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*, you know that for Scorsese, this is the big one, the title fight, and it's only art that's at stake. The sense of risk is palpable and the payoff is exhilarating. There's not a single pulled or wasted punch. The film is a perfect match of form and content.

Raging Bull was originally released in 1980, four years after *Taxi Driver* put Scorsese on the international filmmaking map. It seemed, then and now, the greater of the two films, although its effect on the collective cultural unconscious has been as negligible as *Taxi Driver's* has been profound. Travis Bickle is a perverse everyman, enough of an enigma to allow viewers to see his reflection as their own. The film allows us to disavow the assassin and fetishize the lonely guy.

The violence that Travis takes such pains to bottle up inside him is a way of life for Jake. When he's not striking out with his fists he's screaming "Fuck you" at the world. Rage, guilt, obsessive sexual jealousy, and repressed homoeroticism are experiences that cut across class, ethnic, and historic divides, but their expression is culturally defined. Scorsese's great talent is in showing the dynamics between basic human drives and the cultures that mold them. Jake's destructive impulses—targeted as much against himself as the outside world—make us uncomfortable because they aren't completely foreign to our personal experience, no matter how much we might want to distance ourselves from them. His behavior, however, is utterly specific to his first-generation, Italian American, ghettoized community. Jake may be an extreme case, but his difference from his brother, or from the neighborhood gangsters who want a piece of him, is only a matter of degree. They deride him as "an animal," but the



NOT A SINGLE PULLED OR WASTED PUNCH: DE NIRO IN *RAGING BULL*

only animals that behave like Jake are human.

The narrative, which spans 23 years (1941 to 1964), is pared down to essentials. Jake's tumultuous home life mirrors his battles in the sporting arena; both are projections of a psyche that eroticizes violence. If *Raging Bull* strikes supporters and detractors alike as "primal," it's not only because Jake's fists are his preferred means of expression, but because the film begins at a moment that would have been for Scorsese—who was born in 1944—the primal scene. In Freud's theory of the unconscious, the child's misreading of sex as violence gives rise to the

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neuroses of adulthood. *Raging Bull* shows how that confusion is embedded in real life; it's not just a misperception or a fantasy. Scorsese borrowed the cross from his parents' bedroom to

hang over Jake and Vickie's marital bed, a bit of slippage between the realms of fact and fiction that he compulsively points out in interviews.

Despite an initial flurry of rabbit punches (most of them from the Kael wing of the critical establishment), *Raging Bull* is now treasured as an American masterwork, a fusion of Hollywood genre with personal vision couched in images and sounds that are kinetic and visceral, and closer to poetry than pulp. Its sculptural weight can only be appreciated on the big screen, and the gleaming new print that's been struck in honor of its 20th birthday gives us that opportunity. The print is a luxury rather than a necessity since Scorsese shot in black and white, in part to insure that the film, like its protagonist, would survive. Black-and-white film is subject to scratches and tears, but it doesn't fade, or at least not as disastrously as color does.

The most obvious basis for the film's claim to greatness lies in Scorsese's devastating critique of the very codes of masculinity that shaped him as a filmmaker, and in Robert De Niro's performance, through which that critique is made flesh. But what's most stunning about *Raging Bull* is the tension between 19th-century melodrama and 20th-century psychodrama, the narrative form brought into being by the conjunction of Freudian theory and the mechanics of the movie camera.

The domestic scenes in *Raging Bull*, despite their verbal and physical violence, are shot so statically they could be taking place in a

theater. Even if the actors move, the camera doesn't. Staged melodrama, and its apotheosis in 19th-century Italian opera, is crucial to the culture depicted in *Raging Bull*. That's why Scorsese gives a full screen credit, immediately following the cast credits and preceding the crew credits, to the music: orchestral excerpts from *Cavalleria Rusticana* and two other operas by Pietro Mascagni.

The movies imported the melodrama whole-cloth, but gradually opened up its theatrical space and added a subjective dimension through camera placement and editing. That subjectivity finds its extreme in the uniquely cinematic form of psychodrama. *Raging Bull's* boxing scenes—360 degree whirligigs in which space and time are as fractured and malleable as in dreams, and where Jake confronts a series of opponents who are no more or less than projections of his inner demons—are mini-psychodramas. In the last fight with Sugar Ray Robinson, which ends Jake's brief reign as champion, we see Sugar Ray looming over Jake, delivering blows like Norman Bates's mother in *Psycho*.

Notwithstanding a mise-en-scène so packed with detail that it seems anthropological, the collision of these historically determined, highly stylized forms throws the very notion of movie realism into question. Over the next 20 years, with the possible exception of *The Age of Innocence*, Scorsese has never again treated the history of a form, a medium, and a culture so radically, or made so complicated a meditation on the relations among spectacle, entertainment, and art.