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THE SPECTACLE OF REDEMPTION: GUILT AND VIOLENCE IN MARTIN SCORSESE'S *RAGING BULL*

Catholicism will always be in every piece, in every work I do.

– Martin Scorsese¹

The most important legacy of my Catholicism is guilt. A major helping of guilt, like garlic.

– Martin Scorsese²

In various guises, a search for redemption is a common feature of many of the protagonists in Scorsese's films: J.R. (*Who's That Knocking at My Door*, 1969), Charlie (*Mean Streets*, 1973), Travis (*Taxi Driver*, 1975), Christ (*The Last Temptation of Christ*, 1988), Henry (*GoodFellas*, 1990), Sam Bowden (*Cape Fear*, 1991), Sam Rothstein (*Casino*, 1995), Frank (*Bringing Out the Dead*, 1999), Amsterdam (*Gangs of New York*, 2002) and Teddy (*Shutter Island*, 2010) are just some of the characters in Scorsese's filmography whose stories of redemption constitute the central conflict of their respective narratives.

This search for redemption usually involves the character going through a violent process to cleanse himself of his faults. Sometimes this takes the form of physical cleansing elements, such as blood in the case of

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¹ Ian Christie and David Thompson, *Scorsese on Scorsese* (London: faber and faber, 2003), 231.

² Diane Jacobs, *Hollywood Renaissance* (London: The Tantivy Press, 1977), 129.

Mean Streets, *Taxi Driver* and *Raging Bull*, and fire in *Casino*. As Michael Bliss says, “this pattern of violence followed by enlightenment continually reasserts itself, a horrifying situation since it makes violence a prerequisite to self-awareness.”³ This is why violence in Scorsese’s films, unlike in those of Sam Peckinpah and Sergio Leone, is presented more from the individual than the social perspective.

This doesn’t mean that all of the characters mentioned achieve redemption. In Scorsese’s explorations of the role of violence in redemption, a spectrum of possible states of grace or damnation range from the clearly redeemed Frank of *Bringing Out the Dead*, to Sam in *Casino* who achieved redemption and then lost it, to Henry in *GoodFellas* who seems immune to any possible redemption.

But of all the characters that undertake this search, perhaps it is the story of Jake La Motta in *Raging Bull* that presents the greatest challenge to understanding redemption’s role in the narratives of Scorsese’s films. Is Jake La Motta a redeemed character by the end of *Raging Bull*? It might seem a straightforward question that would require a yes or no answer, but the reality is that it is a much more complicated issue. If we take the director’s word, then there is no question about it since he has given a very clear answer: “It’s really a straight, simple story, almost linear, of a guy attaining something and losing everything, and then redeeming himself. Spiritually.”⁴ But the problem with this assertion is that it seems Scorsese is alone in thinking that Jake has achieved some kind of redemption, since there is almost unanimity in declaring that although there might have been some change in him, calling this change redemption is a mistake. Take for example scriptwriter Paul Schrader who has commented on the issue: “I don’t think it is true of La Motta either in real life or in the movie [that he has achieved redemption]; I think he is the same dumb lug at the end as he is at the beginning.”⁵

Film critics and film scholars have either reluctantly acknowledged the fact that there might have been some change in Jake but that it shouldn’t be called redemption, or they even bluntly deny that it happened. But the problem with these interpretations is that they are looking at redemption in *Raging Bull* outside of its natural contexts (their understanding

³ Michael Bliss, *The Word Made Flesh* (London: The Scarecrow Press, 1998), x.

⁴ Mary Pat Kelly, *Martin Scorsese: The First Decade* (New York: Redgrave Publishing Company, 1980), 32

⁵ *Schrader on Schrader*, ed. Kevin Jackson (London: faber and faber, 2004), 133.

does not integrate the foundations): of Catholicism, the world of classical boxing movies, and Scorsese's view on redemption as portrayed in his films.

Jake's search for redemption is long and not always successful. I argue that Scorsese uses *Raging Bull* to criticize a ritualistic view of redemption by portraying the beginning of Jake's search as a futile attempt to submit himself to a public spectacle of ritual violence in the boxing ring while visually relating this to the sacraments and the crucifixion. It will only be later—in the loneliness of a jail cell, estranged from his family and without having had to have gone through a rite—that Jake achieves the self-awareness redemption requires.

But before determining Jake's state of redemption, we need to ascertain what redemption is in a Catholic context. Redemption is what brings us back to grace. It is only necessary to be redeemed if we have in some way lost our way and need to get back to it. If nothing else, the story of Adam and Eve shows a central feature of Catholic theology: that man is fallible. The rules of Catholicism point towards the salvation of the soul, but the problem is that the flesh seems to have a tendency to go in the opposite direction. On one hand, we have the quiet whispers of the Spirit that tell us the rules that establish prohibitions for the benefit of our soul, but the problem is that, on the other hand, we have the screams of our flesh, which seem to go in a completely opposite direction, longing for that which is forbidden. The only rule that God gave the first man and woman is that "of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it" (Gen. 2:17), but only 15 verses later, Eve is eating the forbidden fruit, among other reasons because "it was pleasant to the eyes" (Gen. 3:6). Evil is attractive; it lures us with its appeal. When in *GoodFellas* Henry Hill (Ray Liotta) asks Karen (Lorraine Bracco) to hide a gun he has just used to hit a guy, she says this: "I know there are women, like my best friends, who would have gotten out of there the minute their boyfriend gave them a gun to hide. But I didn't. I got to admit the truth. It turned me on."

This appeal will mean that within Catholic theology, flesh and soul are destined to be in a constant battle between them, which translates to an eternal tension in our daily lives. Perhaps it was the character played by Al Pacino in *The Devil's Advocate* (Taylor Hackford, 1997) who has explained this most clearly: "[God] gives man instincts. He gives you this extraordinary gift, and then what does He do? I swear for His own amusement, his own private, cosmic gag reel, He sets the rules in opposition. It's

the goof of all time. Look but don't touch. Touch, but don't taste. Taste, but don't swallow."⁶

That is where man's fallibility lies, in the fact that an internal battle is being waged inside each of us that, unless we make the immense effort that it requires to follow the Spirit, it seems to be destined to be won by the body. "Within me," says Nikos Kazantzakis in the prologue to his novel *The Last Temptation of Christ*, "are the dark immemorial forces of the Evil One, human and pre-human; within me too are the luminous forces of God—and my soul is the arena where these two armies have clashed and met."⁷ At the core of this issue lies the fact that God created man and woman free. Freedom is what gives us the possibility of choosing among the options set forward in front of us, and it is also from freedom that our responsibility as moral agents originates. If we had no choice but to do what we do (be it good or bad), then we couldn't be held responsible for it.

So if we are free agents who can choose between right and wrong, and if the flesh is weak and tends to favor the callings of the instincts in a context in which we should instead follow the callings of the spirit, then the result is obvious: Man is destined to a state of constant frustration. This state of frustration is translated into the unavoidable sentiment of guilt. Guilt is what we feel after we have followed the screams of the body letting ourselves go according to its dictates, and in the silence that follows we start again to hear the whispers of the Spirit. Freedom is also the starting point of guilt, since it only makes sense to feel guilty about something we could have done differently. Guilt is a sentiment that has its eyes in the past. It only makes sense to feel guilty about what has already been done and thus when we feel guilt, what we are doing is looking back at what we have done, thinking that we shouldn't have done it. This may lead to redemption but precedes it.

From what we have said, it becomes clear that guilt is a private emotion, unlike shame, which is a public one. Guilt is felt intimately. If we feel guilty it is because we have become at the same time accuser and accused, condemned and executer, victim and perpetrator. As the Catholic philosopher Paul Ricoeur says:

Guilt becomes a way of putting oneself before a sort of invisible tribunal which measures the offense, pronounces the condemnation,

⁶ Rebecca K. Webb, *A Conflict of Paradigms: Social Epistemology and the Collapse of Literary Education* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007), 126.

⁷ Nikos Kazantzakis, *The Last Temptation of Christ* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1960), 1.

and inflicts the punishment; at the extreme point of interiorization, moral consciousness is a look which watches, judges and condemns; the sentiment of guilt is therefore the consciousness of being inculpated and incriminated by the interior tribunal; it is mingled with the anticipation of the punishment. In short, guilt is self-observation, self-accusation, and self-condemnation *by a consciousness doubled back on itself*.⁸

This means that in a way there is a splitting of the person who, as Ricoeur says, judges himself. This judgment implies knowledge that I have done something of my own free will, that what I have done constitutes a fault, that I could have done otherwise, and finally that the fault is bad enough that it requires some kind of punishment or penance (or both), which will redeem me from my fault. So if we see the fault as a stain,⁹ then redemption is the cleansing of that stain in order to restore the subject back to what the Catholic Church calls the State of Grace. Thus, understanding guilt is essential to understanding redemption, because without guilt there is no possibility for redemption. Guilt is the motivation to achieve redemption; it is the sentiment that arises from the consciousness of being stained and in need of cleansing (and it is requisite for right relations with God and others).

Redemption is so important to Catholic theology that it has its own discipline: soteriology (from the Greek *soteria*, deliverance, preservation). Scorsese's cinema is in its own way a soteriology, not a sacred soteriology but a secular one. In Scorsese's cinema man is free, man is liable, man commits faults and man needs redemption, but it is not through divine grace that this is achieved, but through his own actions here on earth.

In Catholicism redemption is achieved, among other means, through rites, especially that of confessing of the sins to the priest (called the Sacrament of Reconciliation), but this is not the case in Scorsese's cinema. At the beginning of *Mean Streets*, Scorsese introduces us to each character in

⁸ Paul Ricoeur, "Guilt, Ethics, and Religion" in Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics* (Evanston, Northern University Press, 1974), 429.

⁹ Relating guilt with being stained takes us back to early religions and as Walter Burkert says: "The concept of pollution and guilt represent two stages in the evolution of the human mind; of these, the fear of pollution is supposedly more primitive . . . whereas the concept of guilt is more modern and reflects the awakening of self-consciousness. Guilt is related to personalised ethics, whereas pollution somehow harks back to the Stone Age." Walter Burkert, *Creation of the Sacred: Tracks of Biology in Earlier Religions* (London: Harvard University Press, 1996), 125.

short scenes that demonstrate his personality: Tony is at his bar kicking out a guy for dealing drugs, Michael is the not very smart wanna-be Mafioso who is at the docks trying to make a deal selling some stolen German lenses that end up not being lenses or German, Johnny Boy—who is the trouble maker of the group—is in the street vandalizing a mailbox and Charlie Cappa, Scorsese's *alter ego* (Charles is the name of Scorsese's father and Cappa his mother's maiden name), is at church kneeling down in front of a crucifix, having just come out of confession and reflecting on what confession and penance mean to him.

I've just come out of Confession, right, right? And the priest gives me the usual penance, ten 'Hail Marys', ten 'Our Fathers', ten whatever . . . Now, you know that next week I'm gonna come back and he is just gonna give me another ten 'Our Fathers' and another ten 'Hail Marys'. I mean, you know how I feel about that shit. Those things . . . they do not mean anything to me, they're just words. Now, that may be ok for the others, but it does not work for me. I mean, I do something wrong I just wanna pay for it my own way. So I do my own penance for my own sins. What do you say? Ha?¹⁰

It is clear from what Charlie says that Scorsese's soteriology, his theory on redemption, is one that sees in man himself the source not only of the wrongdoing, but also of the possible redemption and therefore the performer of his own penance. "I do something wrong, I just wanna pay for it my own way." It is not in the Church, which means it is not through institutionalized religion and sacraments that redemption will be achieved, but through our actions in the streets.

We shouldn't be mistaken in thinking that because he doesn't believe in a sacred or institutional redemption his views are divorced from religion. While it is true that Scorsese distances himself from God and the Church, the trappings of his thought remain deeply Catholic. It is Jake la Motta in his autobiography who perhaps explains best how this is possible.

My mother, like most Italian mothers, had drummed into me so hard and so often the fear of sin and the law of retribution when I was a kid that it became one of my biggest fears. I don't care how tough a guy is, if you're brought up by a parent who is always on her knees,

¹⁰ Martin Scorsese and Mardik Martin, *Mean Streets*, unpublished script, BFI Library, S18073, 5–6.

praying for forgiveness for having had some silly thought, or for being forced to do some stupid little thing . . . it gets to you, and it sticks with you forever.¹¹

One of the most important contributions of Catholicism in the shaping of Scorsese's view on redemption is violence. It is undeniable that despite the message of the Gospels being one of love, violence plays a central role. If we believe the sacrificial reading of the Gospels, then at the center of Christianity lies what St. Paul called "the scandal of the cross" (1Cor. 1:23 and Gal. 5:11): namely that it was through Jesus' willing acceptance to be sacrificed in the violent act of being nailed to the cross that he redeemed humanity. The argument goes something like this: If Jesus agreed to go through the pains of the Cross to redeem humanity (the Atonement), and if we are supposed to follow Christ, then that means in this version of Catholicism we can also use violence as an instrument in our search for personal redemption.

For a Catholic, the redemptive nature of violence is not only an obvious and daily experience, but above all a visual one. Depictions of the Crucifixion are bloody spectacles to be witnessed by the masses and play an important role in teaching the pain Jesus endured for their sake. It was this reliance on images, in fact, that became one of the main criticisms of the Reformation movement toward Catholicism. It is from this perspective that we must imagine Scorsese's visual understanding of violence and redemption. Being raised in a context where every day you are exposed (in your house, at school, in the church) to these images, it is unsurprising that a Catholic thinks of redemption visually.

Cinema's inherent visuality actually connects it to the older tradition in Catholicism of visual representations. Historically speaking, for Catholics the crucifixion, in particular, and redemptive violence, more generally, is, above all, a visual event. This turn toward visual representations originated in Medieval Christian art when illiteracy was wide spread and therefore painting and sculpture served a pedagogical role. In the 12th century, Durando de Mende (1230–1296) stated that "painting is superior to literature because seeing the scenes it depicts affect our heart with more force than if we read."¹² This belief was still strongly held in the 16th century when Italian Cardinal Gabriele Paleotti (1522–1597), stated: "listening to

¹¹ Jake La Motta, *Raging Bull* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1997), 208.

¹² Edgar de Bruyne, *La estética de la Edad Media* (Madrid: La balsa de la medusa, 2010), 197.

the stories of the martyrdom of a Saint, the fervour and perseverance of a virgin, or the passion of Christ himself is something that moves us. But having the images of the tortured Saint, the martyred virgin and Christ nailed to the Cross in front of our eyes, in living colors, increases our devotion.”¹³ For Scorsese, the suffering of these martyred saints and tortured virgins is represented by the men and women who populate our daily lives.

Raging Bull is one of the best examples of Scorsese’s attempt to portray suffering in a way everyone can relate to. This movie is based on the autobiography of Middleweight Champion Jake La Motta. The idea to make it into a film came from actor Robert De Niro, who read it while filming Bernardo Bertolucci’s *1900* (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1976), but Scorsese discarded the idea because he didn’t like boxing and thought La Motta was a despicable character not worthy of interest. De Niro didn’t give up and again in 1978 he proposed the idea to Scorsese, who was in the hospital. Depression from the failure of *New York, New York* (1977) and excessive use of cocaine had taken its toll on the filmmaker, and the doctors had warned him of the possibility of an embolism if he didn’t change his self-destructive lifestyle. *Raging Bull* would become the project that would help him come to terms with what was happening in his own life. Now that he felt he was hitting bottom, he could relate to Jake. “It had become clear,” said Scorsese to Michael Henry Wilson, “that Jake had experienced before me what I had just gone through. In our different ways, we had both been through it: the Catholic heritage, the sense of guilt, and the hope for redemption. If I said yes to Bobby it is because I unconsciously found myself in Jake. I felt that this character was the bringer of hope.”¹⁴

Unlike the story told in the book, the film doesn’t give an explanation as to why Jake is the way he is. Violence is simply a given fact that contaminates the whole film. Twenty minutes into the movie we have only seen Jake fighting in the ring and violently throwing a table to the floor and screaming at his wife for having overcooked a steak. Where does his rage and violence come from? We as spectators have no answer for that question, only hints. If it isn’t jealousy over Vickie calling Janiro “good-looking” or her kissing mob boss Tommy, it is the frustration over not

¹³ Quoted in Javier Moscoso, *Historia cultural del dolor* (Madrid: Taurus, 2011), 38–39.

¹⁴ Michael Henry Wilson, “Raging Bull” in Peter Brunette, *Martin Scorsese Interviews* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1999), 89 and 90.

getting a shot at the title or the fact that his brother is putting his robe on the wrong way or talking to the mobsters without his consent.

In classical boxing films there is always a clear distinction between the home and the family as the peaceful and virtuous environment and boxing as the corrupted space dominated by violence and populated by the mobsters.¹⁵ But in *Raging Bull* this distinction disappears and all spaces become violent and chaotic, which accounts for why this is such a claustrophobic film. The fact is violence is always there waiting to erupt, making Jake an explosive with a very short fuse: a kamikaze in the sense that he not only destroys himself but those around him.

In his book *Violence and the Sacred*,¹⁶ René Girard makes an important distinction between generative and destructive violence. While destructive violence contributes to the vicious circle of violence that becomes endemic and threatens to exterminate everyone (as in the case of vengeance), generative violence stops that vicious circle of violence (as in the case of sacrificial rites). Jake mistakenly thinks that there is a similar distinction in his life, where destructive violence takes place outside of the ring (especially against his wife Vicky and his brother Joey), and generative violence, sacrificial in nature, which happens inside the ring and is supposed to serve the purpose of redeeming him.

The flaw in this logic is that if the violence inside the ring was indeed generative, then it would have negated the violence outside the ring, when in fact it only served as a catalyst. Jake has a bureaucratic way of looking at redemption that closely resembles that of medieval Christianity, the best examples of which are books called Penitentials. These consist of long lists of sins with their corresponding penances, called tariffs.¹⁷ This bureaucratic view of redemption goes something like this: I have done X, and if I submit myself to the penance Y, I will be forgiven. For Jake, it is as if every blow received in the ring erases a blow given outside of it.

¹⁵ Good examples of this are Joe Bonaparte's home where his father and sister live in *Golden Boy* which contrasts with the mobster Eddie Fuselli's office (Rouben Mamoulian, 1939), or the contrast between the home where Charlie Davis' mother lives and the enormous penthouse he has bought with the money he has earned boxing in *Body and Soul* (Robert Rossen, 1947), or the house where Midge's mother lives and where his brother moves after Midge becomes a corrupted man who cares for no one, and the office of the gangster Harris in *Champion* (Mark Robson, 1949).

¹⁶ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1979), 93.

¹⁷ Cf. Allen J. Franzen, *The Literature of Penance in Anglo-Saxon England* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1983).

Another feature of this bureaucratic view of redemption is the need for it to be a public event. He not only wants to redeem, he wants it to be obvious to everyone that he is accepting the penance for his faults. As such he finds boxing the ideal outlet. Although Scorsese has said many times that *Raging Bull* is not a film about boxing (which is also true of the best films of this genre), it is impossible not to see it as a boxing film. In his book *Knockout: The Boxer and Boxing in American Cinema*, Leger Grindon (who not only considers *Raging Bull* a boxing film, but calls it “the most stellar achievement of the Hollywood boxing film”¹⁸) states that the essence of this genre lies in the fact that it “poses this question: Can rage finally address its cause, or will violence strike the innocent and destroy the boxer himself?”¹⁹ This is precisely the question Scorsese tries to answer in this movie.

Religious redemption is not alien to the world of boxing films and the conflicts it represents. Good examples of this are Terry Malloy’s (Marlon Brando) guilt represented as a sentiment associated with religion through the presence of Father Barry (Karl Malden) in *On the Waterfront* (Elia Kazan, 1954) and *Rocky* (John G. Avildsen, 1976) which not only starts with an image of Jesus holding the host and a chalice in the conspicuously-named Resurrection Athletic Club, but also in the fact that, as Leger Grindon says, this film “evokes a Christian idea of grace, a divine and mysterious gift that allows fallen creatures to become sanctified.”²⁰ Even some boxing movie titles make spiritual references, such as *Body and Soul* and *Somebody Up There Likes Me* (Robert Wise, 1956). None of them, however, have such a strong religious undertone as *Raging Bull*, not only in its use of religious imagery throughout the film, but also in the way Jake’s conflicts are portrayed and resolved.

Both destructive (outside the ring) and generative (inside the ring) violence have corresponding climatic scenes that encompass all the elements that characterize Jake’s understanding. The climatic scene of destructive violence outside the ring starts at Jake’s house. He is moving the TV antenna to get better reception while his brother is sitting on the couch. He asks Joey what happened at the Copacabana²¹ and Joey says “nothing,”

¹⁸ Leger Grindon, *Knockout. The Boxer and Boxing in American Cinema* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2011), 233.

¹⁹ Id., 10.

²⁰ Id., 218.

²¹ While Jake was in the training camp trying to lose weight, Joey went to the night club the Copacabana where he saw Vicky with the mobster Salvy. He reacted violently and hit Salvy

but Jake doesn't believe him. He then accuses Vicky of having had sex with the mob boss Tommy and says he is going to kill him, to which Joey answers in desperation and frustration: "Yeah, kill him. Kill everybody. Kill me while you are at it." This makes Jake think that Joey had sex with his wife, to which Joey takes offense and leaves the house. Jake then goes to the bedroom where Vicky is making the bed and, while violently pulling her hair, asks her what happened at the Copacabana and whether she had sex with Tommy. She takes offense and out of frustration screams at him: "Yes, I had sex with everybody. Tommy, Salvy, Joey." This enrages Jake further; he slaps her, and throws her to the floor and goes to Joey's house, where he is having dinner with his wife and kids. Right there in front of them he beats Joey senselessly and when Vicky tries to intercede he hits her so hard that she loses consciousness.

Paul Ricoeur said that guilt is always "mingled with the anticipation of the punishment,"²² and this is what we see in the last fight with Robinson that comes right after Vicky manages to make Jake get on the phone to apologize to Joey. She dials the number and gives the phone to Jake, but when Joey answers he doesn't manage to say anything. Instead of going through what could be seen as a genuine apology, he chooses to rather submit himself to a process of his own view of bureaucratic redemption.

This last fight with Robinson is the embodiment of Jake's view of redemption as some kind of retributive justice. It isn't surprising that a man, who has shown during the film that he has no other means of expression but violence, finds in crude violence the path to redemption. By caring little for what really happened in that fight and being more concerned with the images portraying Jake's feelings toward it, he manages to portray the futility of Jake's view that the rite itself has any meaning. In an interview Scorsese said that "it's not a matter of literally translating what Jake sees and hears, but to present what the match means for him."²³ And what it means for him is a sacrificial rite that will cleanse his sins with blood.

Sacrifice means ritual. According to Girard, the ritualization of the violence is very important to it becoming of a generative kind since it is the rite that will differentiate one kind of violence from the other. "Beneficial violence must be carefully distinguished from harmful violence, and the

with the door of a cab and then took Vicky home. Trying to avoid problems, Joey decided not to tell Jake about this incident.

²² Ricoeur, "Guilt, Ethics and Religion," 429.

²³ Wilson, "Raging Bull," 95.

former continually promoted at the expense of the latter. Ritual is nothing more than the regular exercise of ‘good violence’.”²⁴

Moshe Halbertal, talking about sacrifices (and for Jake boxing is not only a rite, but a sacrificial one) said that rituals served the purpose of making sure that the animal sacrificed was not rejected by the Deity and so “adherence to detailed routine makes the passage from laying down to acceptance less fraught. Ritual is thus a protocol that protects from the risk of rejection.”²⁵ In *Raging Bull* Jake ritualizes violence in the ring by surrounding it with a routine and a series of events that precedes it so that in his eyes he will convert it into a sacrifice.

Right before the first fight with Sugar Ray Robinson, Jake, who usually abstains from sex before fights (which is an element common to sacrifices across all primitive religions), asks Vicky to kiss him and then tells her to take off his pants. She is worried and asks him if he is sure of what they are doing, knowing he has told her not to “tempt him” before a fight, but he insists. He then kisses her passionately and suddenly walks to the bathroom where he gets a jar with iced water and pours it into his pants. As if desperately needing to draw the distinction between both kinds of violence, Jake takes foreplay to its limits and then literally stops it cold. It seems that he needs reassurance that the violence to come is of a ritual nature.

In the case of the last fight with Robinson, the sacrificial nature of the bout is made patently obvious from the 13th round. As we have said, this fight is portrayed the way Jake sees it, and what does he see? Scorsese stated that “he sees his blood squeezed out of the sponge, his body that they’re preparing for the sacrifice. For him, it’s a religious ritual and he uses Robinson to punish himself.”²⁶

“Does there exist,” asked Rene Girard in *Violence and the Sacred*, “some miraculous substance potent enough not only to resist infection but also to purify, if need be, the contaminated blood [that is, the blood shed in violent fits]? Only blood itself, blood whose purity has been guaranteed by the performance of appropriate rites—the blood, in short, of sacrificial victims—can accomplish this feat.”²⁷ And in his search for a bureaucratic redemption, it is his own blood having been shed during the fight which

²⁴ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 37.

²⁵ Moshe Halbertal, *On Sacrifice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 15.

²⁶ Wilson, “Raging Bull,” 97.

²⁷ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 36.

will cleanse him to make him an appropriate sacrificial victim. “The law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood,” wrote Saint Paul in his letter to the Hebrews, “and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Heb. 9:22). Blood as a cleansing agent is very important in *Raging Bull*, but also in *The Big Shave*, *Mean Streets*, and *Taxi Driver*. With reference to *Taxi Driver*, Scorsese said: “I like the idea of spurting blood . . . it’s like a fountain, washing, the fountain, like in the Van Morrison song, you know. ‘Wash me’, you know, the whole idea of standing in the waterfall?”²⁸

In classical boxing films the fight is usually portrayed from the ring-side view (characterized by the fact that between us and the boxers, there are always the ropes) and with few exceptions (*The Champ* (King Vidor, 1931) and *Body and Soul*), the camera went into the ring with the boxers. When it did, it was done in three different ways: either from the point of view of the referee, using the classical shot-reverse shot of Hollywood classical cinema for dialogues, or from the point of view of the boxer. Since all boxers play a double role in the ring, that of the puncher and the punched, there are two ways to portray their point of view. Those rare times when classical boxing films showed the point of view of the boxer, it was always from the puncher point of view, that is we saw the opponent’s face being hit as if we were the person who was hitting them. But of course in Jake’s eyes he is the sacrificial lamb, the punched, the one who was receiving a punishment, so Scorsese uses for the first time in a boxing film the point of view of the boxer-as-the-punched.²⁹ We see Robinson’s fists in slow motion going towards the camera as if they were going to hit us, and then a big splash of blood that comes from Jake’s right eye and baths the journalists in the ring. Jake’s view as the victim of sacrifice and again the shedding of blood are the visual elements that Scorsese uses to convey the idea of the boxing match as a rite-of redemption-through-blood.

When Catholics think of blood cleansing the sins, images of Christ on the Cross described in the Gospels as “the Lamb of God, which takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29) come to mind. In his desperate search for redemption, Jake sees himself as some sort of Jesus figure going

²⁸ Richard Goldstein and Marc Jacobson, “Martin Scorsese Tells All: Blood and Guts Turn Me On,” in Brunette, *Martin Scorsese Interviews*, 68–69.

²⁹ If we believe Joyce Carol Oates in fact this novelty introduced by Scorsese would mean that for the first time boxing was portrayed as it should be, because “boxing is about being hit rather more than it is about hitting, just as it is about feeling pain . . . more than it is about winning.” Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), 25.

through his own particular path of violent redemption, so much so that Les Keyser calls the last fight with Robinson “Jake’s Golgotha.”³⁰ And just as Jesus accepted the violence inflicted upon him on the Cross, so does Jake accept Robinson’s punches while holding the ropes with both arms, resembling an image of the crucifixion.

Jake makes the boxing ring into the altar where the rite of his sacrifice will be performed, transforming Robinson into the priest who will sacrifice the lamb. But the problem is that this is just a new take on the old view that to redeem we only need the performance of a rite, when the truth is that the rite by itself is useless (interior rebirth is needed). Talking about *Mean Streets*, Scorsese has said that his idea is that:

The practicing of Christian philosophy, Christian living, has to be done in the street, not hiding out in the Church. Not practice it, go inside St Patrick’s Old Cathedral, when you come outside you can act any way you want. And when you go back inside you act OK. You can’t do that. You have to do it in your daily life. And the rest, everything [the priests] tell you, all that business of ritual, is not the main thing. The main thing is your actions. That making up for your sins is an allusion to penance, meaning that after confession you have to go to penance. They give you ten Our Fathers and ten Hail Marys. Oh great, then I can come out and act just as bad as I want. No. The idea is you take the penance, you do it outside, you do it on the streets, you do it with your family, you do it with your friends.³¹

Scorsese has Jake do boxing as a rite in which his suffering and the shedding of his blood are supposed to be sufficient to achieve redemption, when in fact there was no actual change in him. This is so patently obvious that after the bout, having just received a gory punishment that in his view was sacrificial and cleansed him of the fault, Jake approaches Robinson and with pride brags to him that he never knocked him down. To show that this ritual was useless, Scorsese finishes the scene with a shot of blood dripping from the ropes. This was no sacrificial rite; this was a bloody spectacle, but not of redemption and the only thing left of it is blood, nothing more. “For him,” says Scorsese about Jake, “it is a religious ritual and he uses Robinson to punish himself. Everything happens in his head. He

³⁰ Les Keyser, *Martin Scorsese* (New York: Twayne, 1992), 113.

³¹ Lee Lourdeaux, *Italian and Irish Filmmakers in America: Ford, Capra, Coppola and Scorsese* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1990), 241.

thinks he is at the end of his martyrdom, but there again his pride carries him away. When they stop the fight in the thirteenth round, he yells ‘I didn’t hit the floor! I didn’t hit the floor!’ He rebels one more time.”³²

Robinson’s fight is the last fight of the movie, and later we see Jake living in Miami with his wife and kids. He has bought a nightclub that he has called “Jake La Motta’s.” It is clear that Jake is the same person as before, only now he is overweight and has abandoned himself to a life of alcohol and is publicly unfaithful to his wife. He spends most nights in his establishment where he performs a comic routine where he humiliates his patrons. Vicky can not take it anymore and divorces him. For the first time in the film, Jake is alone with no one to blame for his misdeeds. One day the police arrive at La Motta’s and arrest Jake for having introduced a 14-year-old girl to some men who raped her. In order to get away from this, he tries to raise money for the bail and goes to Vicky’s house to get the championship belt. Thinking that the stones on the belt are very valuable, he destroys it with a hammer in yet another example of his self-destructiveness. He doesn’t manage to raise the money and so is thrown in jail.

There, alone in the cell, redemption is waiting for him. He has hit bottom and is completely alone. There is no one to blame but himself and finally guilt stops being about others seeing him receive a punishment and starts being about himself. “When he’s thrown in jail,” said Scorsese, “he’s just faced with a wall, and so with the real enemy for the first time—himself.”³³ It finally becomes, as Ricoeur said, “self-observation, self-accusation, and self-condemnation *by a consciousness doubled back on itself.*” There is no spectacle; no one is there to see it but himself. In the Miami jail, it becomes clear Jake was the protagonist of *Raging Bull*, but also the antagonist. The usual villains of the boxing film (the *femme fatale*, the mobster, the crooked manager) are absent here. Even the mobsters Salvy and Tommy are portrayed as sympathetic characters that never act violently or even raise their voices, and so serve as contrasts to Jake’s self-destructiveness.

While hitting the wall with his hands in a scene reminiscent of *The Champ*, Jake screams “Why? Why? Why?,” and in this new attitude of real

³² Michael Henry, “Nuit Blanche et Chambre Noire,” *Positif* 241 (April 1981): 60 (cit. after: José Gabriel Ferreras Rodríguez, “Good and Evil in the Cinema of Martin Scorsese: A Moral Study of *Raging Bull*,” in *The Wicked Heart: Studies in the Phenomena of Evil*, ed. Sorcha Ní Fhlainn, William Andrew Myers (Oxford, United Kingdom: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2006), 217).

³³ Christie and Thompson, *Scorsese on Scorsese*, 82–83.

guilt, he understands that only he is to blame for all the bad things he has done; he finally becomes accuser and accused. “You motherfucker! Why did you do it? Why? You’re so stupid,” says Jake while for the first time directing his violence towards himself. Remorse, which only looks at the past, becomes repentance, which looks to the future. It is difficult to describe exactly what happens to Jake in the cell, and Scorsese himself has said that “there aren’t any words to speak about it. No words to say what happens in the cell. Not even religious words. He just stops destroying himself.”³⁴

Towards the end of the movie, Jake is performing at the *Carnevale Lounge*, a small, shabby place where he performs a stand-up routine. Unlike before, he doesn’t show rage and when some of the customers start insulting him, he doesn’t respond in anger. It seems that he has come to terms with his violence. He is living with an old stripper called Emma, and his work might not be the best, but we shouldn’t look for redemption in material things—but in an internal change that has consequences in our daily life. In the case of Jake, this means a peaceful life. Leger Grindon said, “self-understanding eludes Jake, though he quiets his rage,”³⁵ but he seems to miss the point that for Jake quieting his rage is precisely redemption.

If redemption came from a comfortable life in a suburban house living with your wife and kids, then Henry Hill in *GoodFellas*, the character most distanced from any possibility of redemption in Scorsese’s filmography, would have been redeemed. There he is, protected by the FBI for having ratted on his friends, with enough money for a comfortable life, living in a nice suburban home and yet he is still complaining that his mobster days are behind him and that when he asks for spaghetti with marinara sauce, he gets noodles with ketchup.

If we compare Jake’s redemption to that of some of the classical boxing films, then we could ask ourselves: Would a redemption like that of Champ (*The Champ*), who had to die in order to redeem himself from a life of alcoholism and to finally allow his son to go with his mother where he will have a good life be a better redemption than that of Jake’s? Or perhaps Midge’s redemption (*Champion*), which seems to have been achieved only seconds before collapsing dead on the floor of the locker room after a bru-

³⁴ Wilson, “Raging Bull,” 93.

³⁵ Leger Grindon, “Art and Genre in *Raging Bull*,” in Kevin J. Hayes, *Martin Scorsese’s Raging Bull* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 32.

tal fight is better than Jake's? "Of course it's not ideal," said Scorsese describing Jake's life at the end of the film, "but he could have fallen even lower. His job isn't degrading; he has stopped destroying himself like so many of his friends. He has survived."³⁶

Raging Bull is a snake that bites its tail. Because of its flashback structure, it is a never-ending story that could be played in a loop. According to Leger Grindon, boxing films of what he calls the noir cycle³⁷ typically use a flashback structure, but its use in this movie has special significance. As we have said guilt is always an experience about the past, which means that from the present we look back to what we have done and realize it was bad. In order for guilt to exist this looking back should always be coupled with the feeling that I could have done otherwise (regret) which in turn generates a sense of inadequacy which should compel us to be different in the future (repentance). What better way to tell a story of guilt and redemption than to use the flashback, an expressive medium that while locating us in a specific present makes us look back to its respective past? In cinematographic terms, we could say that guilt is always a flashback.

Raging Bull begins and ends at the same place where it started: the Barbizon Plaza Hotel's dressing room where Jake is getting ready for his routine. Jake, facing a mirror, rehearses a scene from *On The Waterfront* where Terry (Marlon Brando) confronts his brother Charlie (Rod Steiger) for having made him throw an important fight for the benefit of the mob bosses: "I coulda had class. I coulda been a contender. I coulda been somebody, instead of a bum, which is what I am. Let's face it. It was you, Charlie." Scorsese said that "when he says in the mirror, 'It was you, Charlie,' is he playing his brother, or putting the blame on himself? It's certainly very disturbing for me."³⁸ Taking into account, first, that this scene comes right after Jake has run into his brother in the street and has tried to apologize and reconcile with him and, second, the fact that it was Joey who actually gave some sense of order to Jake's boxing career, I don't think it is accurate to think that he is saying those words to blame Joey. When looking into a mirror, we face ourselves. In my view, it is more plausible to think that Jake is talking to the same person he was talking to in the Miami jail: himself.

³⁶ Wilson, "Raging Bull," 98.

³⁷ Grindon, *Knockout*, 29.

³⁸ Christie and Thompson, *Scorsese on Scorsese*, 77.

The enlightened (at least partially redeemed) Jake is talking to the self-destructive Jake. In a final moment of introspection, Jake still talks to the beast within reminding himself of past days.³⁹ Scorsese said that he was trying to make the audience “feel him finally coming to some sort of peace with himself in front of the mirror.”⁴⁰ Some could say that the ending of the film is anti-climatic, and it might be so. It is certainly not a classic Hollywood ending that neatly solves all conflicts presented, but for Jake it is an ending: an ending to a life of self-destructiveness and of suffering for everyone around him.

**THE SPECTACLE OF REDEMPTION:
GUILT AND VIOLENCE IN MARTIN SCORSESE’S *RAGING BULL***

SUMMARY

Of all the characters that undertake a search for redemption in Martin Scorsese’s films, perhaps it is the story of Jake La Motta in *Raging Bull* that for many reasons presents the greatest challenge to understanding redemption’s role in the narratives of his films. Is Jake La Motta a redeemed character at the end of *Raging Bull*? I argue that Scorsese uses *Raging Bull* to criticize a ritualistic view of redemption by portraying the beginning of Jake’s search as a futile attempt to submit himself to a public spectacle of ritual violence in the boxing ring while visually relating this to the Catholic sacraments and the crucifixion. It will only be later—in the loneliness of a jail cell, estranged from his family and without having to have had gone through a rite—that Jake achieves the self-awareness redemption requires.

KEYWORDS: Raging Bull, Scorsese, redemption, guilt, violence, boxing, absolution, penance, sacrament.

³⁹ It is interesting to think that Pauline Kael’s review of *Raging Bull* was called “The Incredible Hulk,” a story that shows a man hunted by a violent self, embodied in the giant green creature. Pauline Kael, “Religious Pulp or The Incredible Hulk,” in *The Age of Movies. Selected Writings*, ed. Sanford Schwarz (New York: The Library of America, 2011), 652–658.

⁴⁰ Christie and Thompson, *Scorsese on Scorsese*, 77.