

## **Martin Scorsese's *Raging Bull* (1980) by Aidan Dolby**

### **Slide 1:**

My name is Aidan Dolby, I am a PhD researcher at York St John University and in this lecture, I will give a brief overview of Martin Scorsese's *Raging Bull* (1980), considering the film's use of genre alongside the film's broad range of microelements used.

### **Slide 2: Scorsese and *Raging Bull*: Artist flare, Boldness and Experimentation**

To kick us off I thought we would look at some establishing factors of the film and information about the film. So, as I prior mentioned, the film was directed by Martin Scorsese and released in 1980. The film was written by and adapted by Paul Schrader and Mardik Martin from Jake LaMotta's 1970 memoir *Raging Bull: My Story*.

The film is distributed by United Artists, which at the time of its release was a subsidiary of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, so a conglomerate studio.

*Raging Bull* is Martin Scorsese's 7<sup>th</sup> feature film - Scorsese's extensive filmography which offers rich visual tapestry of American cultures, ideologies, histories and beyond really. Taken as a whole, Scorsese's filmography cover over 160 years of American history.

In his book *Martin Scorsese's America*, Ellis Cashmore remarks,

Scorsese has offered pictures of an ever-changing America in which... there's always a connection between the people and the world around them; Scorsese makes us see that it isn't just around them – it's actually inside them too.

Now considering this quote from Cashmore, I feel like this quote nicely encapsulates, Scorsese as a filmmaker, and his films as cultural reflectors, and how these films themselves, have created new histories of American culture.

### **Slide 3: *Raging Bull* as a 'Boxing Film'**

So, in thinking about *Raging Bull* and genre, I want to consider *Raging Bull* as a Boxing film, this label is due to the film's boxing focus, with boxing being a key ingredient used by Scorsese throughout this film.

The Boxing film is a subgenre of the Sports film genre: a rough definition of the sport film, is where a sport, sporting event, or an athlete is featured prominently in the plot of the film.

Here we can see how *Raging Bull* aligns with the defining tropes of a sports film, and a boxing film. The boxing film subgenre is an already established subgenre before the 1970s and 1980s, it was a popular model of American cinema between the years of 1930 and into the 1950s, before its popularity declined.

However, this subgenre noticeably went through a revival period in the 1970s, with the likes of some of the onscreen films, we have *Fat City* from 1972, the film which arguably kicked off the revival for the boxing film, then we get the likes of *Rocky* (1976) and *The Greatest* (1997) alongside numerous other boxing focused narratives, produced and released by various studios during the 1970s. With *Raging Bull* arguably coming along at the end of this intense period of Boxing focused releases.

Whilst *Raging Bull* adheres to defining elements of the sports film genre, and shares similarities with the onscreen boxing films, *Raging Bull* is much more than a boxing film, and rather uses Boxing as a narrative device, rather than the sole focus of the film.

#### **Slide 4: Much more than a boxing film**

Similarly, Thomas Sontinel remarks in his book *Masters of Cinema: Martin Scorsese* (2010):

‘At the opposite pole from sporting epics like *Rocky* (1976), which were starting to flood onto American screens, *Raging Bull* is a story of self-destruction.’

Similarly Esteemed film critic Roger Ebert remarked in his review of Scorsese film that,

“*Raging Bull*” is not a film about boxing but about a man with paralyzing jealousy and sexual insecurity, for whom being punished in the ring serves as confession, penance and absolution. It is no accident that the screenplay never concerns itself with fight strategy. For Jake LaMotta, what happens during a fight is controlled not by tactics but by his fears and drives.

So, bearing this in mind, and bearing in mind the narrative arc of the film, really we see that Boxing only takes half of this film's focus, the other half is on the personal life, and the dramas of Jake LaMotta's himself.

#### **Slide 5: Raging Bull as a Bio-pic**

Now as mentioned a few slides earlier, this film is based on a memoir from Jake LaMotta himself, therefore this film also falls under the umbrella of a biopic.

Jule Selbo defines the Biopic as:

a story based on a real person, living or dead. The narratives include the elements in his or her life that are deemed dramatic and story-worthy. The best bio-pics, in most cases, do not try to tell a subject's story from birth to death but focus on a certain section or sections in that subject's life, usually a pivotal time that resulted in a life change.

That's what we have here from Scorsese, we have a twenty-to-twenty-five year roughly period, where we see Jake LaMotta in his prime, and we get him in his demise. What this allows us to witness is, how both his success and demise are pivotal to his life and character and resulted in life change.

Thinking about Selbo's definition of a Bio-pic, which again Raging Bull adheres to elements of, we are left with thinking about the film as a hybridized genre film. By this, I mean this film is a biopic and a boxing film. This hybridizing aids in Scorsese telling the story to its fullest, exploring both LaMotta's career and personal life. Scorsese ability to balance the two is one of the films strengths.

### **Slide 6: Exploring micro-elements – Cinematography**

In terms of thinking about some key micro-elements which Scorsese uses throughout the film, cinematography is perhaps the foremost important when looking at Raging Bull.

Why did Scorsese record the film in Black and white?

This is for a few reasons, but perhaps the most important reason is for stylistic filmmaking reasons, during the seventies and into the eighties, there was no other sports films genre which looked like Scorsese film. Some would argue there still isn't a sports film with as much artist flare as Raging Bull. This hints at Scorsese artist flare, boldness and ability to experiment with film. This stylistically device sets apart Scorsese film from the sea of other boxing focused films released during the decade.

Also through the film, Scorsese uses a variety of camera angles and techniques – ECU's, CU's, MCU's, to reinvent and experiment with how the boxing films had been shot and captured before. Whilst filming the fight scenes Scorsese devised a new method of filming fights.

### **Slide 7: Exploring micro-elements – Editing**

Another key micro-element utilized by Scorsese is editing. Throughout the film, Scorsese uses a range of editing techniques. Establishing an innovative editing technique, alongside the film's editor, Thelma Schoonmaker. The innovative editing techniques used play on the space of the boxing ring and the fighting itself, to enhance the sense of claustrophobia and emersion in the fighting scenes.

The use of Slow-mo is also utilized by Scorsese, and is primarily reserved for when female protagonists are onscreen, to enhance their subjectivity.

### **The Activity:**

Thinking about the already discussed micro-elements of film, what other micro-elements do you think are worth analysing and mentioning when discussing Raging Bull?

Micro-elements Key:

Mise-en-scene

Sound

Cinematography

Aesthetics

Editing

Performance