

MASCULINITY, VIOLENCE, RESISTANCE: A NEW
PSYCHOANALYTIC READING OF *RAGING BULL*

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Long regarded as a canonical text of recent Hollywood cinema, *Raging Bull* has enjoyed not inconsiderable critical attention. The film's particularized representation of violent masculinity would correspondingly appear to invite psychoanalytic consideration. However, the influential analyses of Pam Cook and Robin Wood excepted, *Raging Bull* has received little detailed or sustained psychoanalytic examination. Attempting to rectify the situation, this article embeds psychoanalytic discussion within a close formal expounding of the text. In part the article builds upon the work of Cook and Wood, but it also significantly addresses the connotations of the seeming masochism of the film's protagonist, Jake La Motta (Robert De Niro): a masochism that in discussions of *Raging Bull* has too often tended to be assumed as axiomatic. Taking a Freudian/Lacanian approach, the article ultimately contends that while *Raging Bull* can be considered, ideologically, as potentially progressive, the film reaches a conclusion that can be regarded, psychoanalytically, as radical.

Keywords: *Raging Bull*, Martin Scorsese, psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, masculinity, masochism.

In its representation of former world champion middleweight boxer Jake La Motta, *Raging Bull* (Martin Scorsese, 1980) can be seen to present almost a psychoanalytic case history of violent masculinity. In psychoanalytically based criticism of the film, Jake's violence has reciprocally been referred to a resistance to perceived threats against that masculinity. Influential have been the arguments propounded by Pam Cook and Robin Wood. Cook reads the film as centred upon "male Oedipal anxieties" (1982: 44), Wood foregrounds its "homosexual subtext" (1986: 109). Yet although these writings have set the parameters for much subsequent discussion of *Raging Bull*, further substantive engagement with the film psychoanalytically has been sparse. Working from within a Freudian/Lacanian framework, it is a sparsity that this article seeks to redress. Masculinity, violence and resistance will continue to be points of reference, and while both the film's Oedipal and homosexual connotations will be revisited, the implications of the masochistic aspects of Jake's representation will also be explored. Such masochism has been recurrently asserted within writing on *Raging Bull*. However, what exactly it might mean psychoanalytically, and what exactly its ramifications might be within the film, have remained largely unexplored.

I

Two scenes in *Raging Bull* are frequently adduced as displaying Jake's masochism. The first is when, having argued with his first wife, Irma (Lori Anne Flax), Jake (Robert De Niro) impels his brother and manager Joey (Joe Pesci) to punch him in the face until his recently suffered cuts begin to reopen. The second is when Jake, in defiance of the well-worn pre-fight injunction on sex, allows his second wife-to-be, Vickie (Cathy Moriarty), to arouse him by kissing his cut and bruised face and body, upon which he drowns his erection with iced water.

In 'The Economic Problem of Masochism', Sigmund Freud posits "three forms" (1991e: 415) of masochism, two of which would appear to be immediately relevant to these scenes. For Freud, erotogenic masochism is the "pleasure in pain" (1991e: 415) that is foundational to all masochism, while feminine masochism is, more contentiously, an implicitly masculine perversion that – with the masochist characteristically passive and receptive before hurt, humiliation and violation – positions him as "female". In both scenes Jake's pleasure in pain is implied. Witness his acceptance of Joey's punches, his wincing reaction to Vickie kissing his injuries, or his self-punishing refusal of climax. Moreover, not only is Jake passive before Joey and Vickie's contrasting attentions, but other elements underscore his "female" positioning. In the scene with Joey, Jake's complaint that he is never "gonna get a chance to fight" heavyweight Joe Louis because of his small, "little girl's" hands invites us to read his getting Joey to punch him as a displaced, coextensive acknowledgment of and punishment for his "femininity". There are also the symbolic connotations of his cuts reopening, his wounds bleeding. In turn, whereas the scene with Vickie opens with a shot showing Jake's legs as he lies on the bed and Vickie opening and standing behind the bathroom door, it closes with a shot showing, with pointed gender inversion, Vickie's legs as she lies on the bed and Jake standing behind and closing the bathroom door.

There are nevertheless complications – theoretical and narrative – that demand attention. In 'Instincts and their Vicissitudes', Freud contends that a sexual instinct is capable of undergoing a reversal "into its opposite" – that is, of changing from activity to passivity – and of turning round "upon the subject's own self": "vicissitudes" that are seen to find exemplary demonstration in the pairing sadism-masochism (1991c: 123, 124). Masochism thus becomes "sadism turned round upon the subject's own ego", a process in which the "person as object" whom the subject exercises "violence or power upon" is "given up and replaced by the subject's self", and in which an "extraneous person is once more sought as object" to "take over the role of the subject" (1991c: 124-25). Jacques Lacan accordingly argues that as the masochistic subject makes itself the object of another, so it is actually the sadist who "occupies the place of the object" (1994: 185). If sadism is hence for Lacan "merely the disavowal of masochism" (1994: 186), then Freud elsewhere declares masochism and sadism as conjoined, that a "sadist is always at the same time a masochist" (1991a: 73). Lacan, moreover, regards feminine masochism "a masculine phantasy" (1994: 192), with respect to which not only does passivity in psychic terms refer to passive aims of always active instincts, but the opposition activity-passivity psychically precedes and is indivisible to that of masculinity-femininity.

Correspondingly, instead of assuming “feminine” passivity, Jake can in both scenes be considered masochistically to affirm his masculine dominance. It is, again, Jake who goads Joey into hitting him, then hitting him harder, with, then without, a tea towel as a boxing-glove: he questions Joey’s courage (“you afraid?”), imputes homosexuality (“faggot”, “You throw a punch like you take it up the ass”), asserts fraternal superiority (“I’m your older brother”), raises his voice and slaps him repeatedly in the face. Such provocation is, moreover, described by Theodor Reik not only as familiar to masochism, but as effacing “the boundaries between masochistic and sadistic conduct” (2002: 249). In turn, Jake *calls* Vickie from the bathroom and *tells* her to kiss his wounds and to remove his trousers and shorts and her panties, and his refusal of his – and Vickie’s – sexual satisfaction can be read as an assertion of control over himself and her. Even so, Jake affirms his dominance in the scene with Joey despite, or because of, his “little girl’s hands”, while in the scene with Vickie he finds it difficult to resist her attentions. There also remain the gendered implications of the scene’s closing shot.

Similar masochistic connotations, and attendant complications, are apparent in the scene of Jake’s fight with Jimmy Reeves (Floyd Anderson) that opens the flashback that comprises most of the film’s narrative. The fight is joined in the penultimate round, at which point Jake is, in the words of the ringside commentator, “well behind” having “taken a lot of punishment”. Indeed, the scene begins with a close shot of Jake being punched in the face. Jake nevertheless rallies and, in the last round, and in an implicit “turning round” from masochism to sadism, knocks Reeves down three times: a violent expression of masculine irresistibility that is enhanced by his preceding, masochistic endurance of “punishment”. However, again complicating matters, Reeves is “saved by the bell”, and Jake loses the bout on points.

Yet, in contrast to Joey, who is furious, Jake does not appear to be overly upset by the defeat, which, while his first, he celebrates as though a victory. Likewise, when Jake loses his second represented fight with Sugar Ray Robinson (Johnny Barnes) “‘cause he’s going in the army next week”, Joey rages and smashes a stool whereas Jake contents himself with bemoaning “I knocked him down, I don’t know what else I gotta do”. In both instances matters other than victory or defeat would seem to be in play. After losing to Reeves, Jake avers to Irma that, unlike the fight judges, “the people” know “who’s the boss”. Jake, moreover, wants to win the world title without the involvement of the Mafia: Joey tells Salvy (Frank Vincent) that Jake “just wants to do things for himself”, and local don Tommy (Nicholas Colasanto), for whom Salvy works, that “he likes to do things his own way ... he wants to make it on his own”. At issue for Jake would appear to be his integrity and self-sufficiency. In Oedipal terms, with Tommy positioned as a father-figure, the implication is of the denial of symbolic castration. Jake’s actual father is only significantly mentioned when Jake tells Vickie when in his father’s apartment that he bought the entire building for his father from his earnings from fighting. This nevertheless constitutes an effective assertion of phallic potency, and its implicit relation of boxing, money and the phallus recalls and reflects back on Jake’s forceful words to Joey about Tommy “taking” his money after Salvy and his associates Patsy (Frank Adonis) and Guido (Joseph Bono) turn up at the gym where Jake and Joey spar. Noteworthy in addition is the track toward Jake’s clenched fist in a bucket of iced water in the dressing-room following the second Robinson fight, the phallic

connotations of which are underscored through its referencing of the erection and iced water incident.

II

In its implication with Jake's masculine affirmation and corresponding Oedipal transgression, masochism would early on in *Raging Bull* appear to suggest a means of psychic-cum-physical resistance. Reik, moreover, writes not only that "defiance" and "rebellion" are the "basis and essence" of masochism, but that "in most cases" masochism constitutes a "symbolic displacement" of castration (2002: 360, 286). *Raging Bull* also situates Jake's resistance within a society in which reactive and violent masculine assertiveness is seemingly endemic. Witness the fights that break out in the crowd during Jake's bout with Reeves and upon the announcement of its result, or the aftermath of a fight that Jake passes through when he follows Vickie as she leaves the St Clare's Church dance with Salvy. Further, that this affords Jake's "pathology" an implicit contextualization is consonant with the preoccupation with cultural and psychosexual determination that is central to Scorsese's authorial discourse (Grist 2000).

However, if in *Raging Bull* boxing is implicitly but a professionalized extension of a more common violence, the representation of Jake's boxing matches is marked by a foregrounded stylization that sets them apart from the encompassing narrative. Similarly, while the film's combination of objective-subjective/documentary-expressionist perspectives is characteristic of Scorsese's filmmaking, and while documentary and expressionist connotations are generated in both boxing and other segments, the stylization of Jake's bouts, as it conveys a heightened, often troubling sense of violence given and received, also provides a more particularized expression of Jake's subjective apprehension. Take the second Robinson fight. Shot with long lenses, on a smoke-filled sound stage and with flames positioned beneath the camera to create a hazy effect, the scene visually combines flattened perspectives, occasionally unclear images and frequently obstructed and/or off-centre framing to produce a sense of uncertainty, confusion and frustration commensurate to Jake's baffled loss of the bout. This returns us to previous matters. For inasmuch as Jake's masochism has been implicated with his coextensive masculine assertiveness and resistance, it is an assertiveness and resistance that remains compromised by fight judges, female sexuality, reopening cuts and "little girl's hands".

Indeed, Jake's clenching of his fist in the bucket of iced water suggests for Lesley Stern "an effort to negate" the last (1995: 22). Moreover, on Jake bemoaning his defeat to Robinson, he muses: "I've done a lot of bad things ... Maybe it's coming back to me". Wanting any particular application, Jake's comments imply an abstract, generalized sense of guilt. Psychoanalytically, the suggestion is of an internalized super-ego and, correlatively, the third form of masochism that Freud posits in 'The Economic Problem of Masochism', moral masochism: a perversion in which the "ego's own masochism" "seeks punishment" from the "sadistic" super-ego or "the parental powers outside" (1991e: 424). The super-ego, however, is installed upon the dissolution of the Oedipal complex, and its presence presupposes symbolic castration. Correspondingly, Jake's

implied denial of symbolic castration, of lack, becomes reconfigured, with better psychoanalytic precision, as disavowal.

As Jake sits with his hand in the iced water, he is in addition shot as reflected in and looking into the dressing-room mirror. Mirrors abound in Scorsese's films, and at least up to *Raging Bull* partake of a consistent implication that renders them an authorial motif. Associated with the assumption of identity and/or accordant estrangement of self, mirrors condense what the films represent as their characters' fundamentally alienating determination (Grist 2000: 24-27). In this, their use evokes Lacan's concept of the mirror stage: the misrecognition of self as other that, typified by the mirror situation, founds the ego and serves as "the source of secondary" – and not least Oedipal – "identifications" (1977a: 2). Consistent with the motif, Jake's dressing-room self-regard implies a (narratively coherent) alienation from self, while earlier Jake and Joey are shown checking their appearance, assuming an appropriate identity, in a mirror before leaving for the St Clare's Church dance. In turn, when Jake pours iced water over his erection, and masochistically protects his pre-fight potency, he stands before and looks into a mirror. But while this further connects the scene to that in the dressing-room after the Robinson match, the suggestion is of Jake "facing down" his determination and, concordantly, his symbolic castration. Vickie, however, also enters the mirror's space, which besides reflects another mirror, and tries to tempt Jake from his sexual denial. Moreover, the preceding bedroom incident between Jake and Vickie is intermittently reflected in a large dressing-table mirror, while another mirror is visible, from a reverse angle, behind Vickie. Compounding matters, Jake checks his appearance in the mirror before leaving precisely to see Vickie at the St Clare's Church dance.

Correlative to Vickie's connection with the mirror motif, her relationship with and marriage to Jake can be read as figuring his Oedipal normalization. Not only is Vickie, in Joey's words, "a neighborhood girl", and thus not "the kind of girl you just fuck and forget about", but, on first meeting Vickie, Jake indicatively takes her to his father's apartment where, close upon his telling her about his purchasing of the building, they seemingly, as they move out of shot, and become visible only as blurred figures reflected, suggestively, in a mirror, have sex on his parents' bed. Such Oedipal connotations clarify the "castrating" inversion of gender positioning in the closing shot of the erection and iced water scene, which takes place predominantly in the same parental bedroom. They similarly inform the montage sequence that summarizes Jake's boxing career and life between 1944-47. For although the summation of six bouts via stills, slow motion and freeze frames serves to express Jake's continuing, irresistible power, the representation of Jake's boxing is subordinated to the "home movie" footage of Jake (and Joey)'s increasing domestication, which describes a conventional trajectory of courtship, marriage(s), house and children. The film, moreover, markedly cuts to the montage sequence from the track toward Jake's fist in the iced water.

It is also only after his marriage to Vickie that Jake is shown to suffer weight problems, initially in the scene in the kitchen of their Pelham Parkway house that follows the montage sequence. With respect to this, as the shot of Jake's fist in the bucket of iced water implies the phallus, so it can yet further be considered an appropriately phallic metonym of his muscular fighting body. Conversely, Jake's weight gain suggests another signifier of symbolic castration: a suggestion complemented, given the film's association of boxing, money and the phallus, when Jake complains to

Joey during the scene about being contracted to fight Tony Janiro (Kevin Mahon) at 155lbs, or else losing \$15,000.

III

When Vickie chips in to suggest that the Janiro match is a good idea because Janiro is an “up and coming fighter” who is “good looking” and “popular”, Jake reacts with jealous anger and, after ordering Vickie from the kitchen, evinces a suspiciousness that can justly be termed paranoid: he asks Joey whether he ever notices “anything funny going on” with Vickie and tells him “to keep an eye on her”. Freud considered paranoia as a defence against repressed homosexuality, and Wood uses the model of paranoia presented in Freud’s case history of *Senatspräsident Schreber* (1991b) as the basis of his unpacking of the “homosexual subtext” of *Raging Bull*. With reference to Janiro, Wood argues that the “threat” Janiro poses to Jake is “not of attractiveness” to Vickie, “but of attractiveness to himself” (1986: 113). This becomes near overt in the subsequent scene at the Copacabana when Jake, upon being called over to Tommy’s table, quips “I got a problem, if I should fuck him or fight him”: this after Tommy himself has asked whether Janiro has “to watch his ass” – to which Jake responds “I think he should” – and Jake has threatened to “open his hole”. Jake’s brutal beating of Janiro – a bout that is represented as a barrage of unanswered blows, mainly to Janiro’s face – would consequently seem to bespeak something more than professional necessity.

Similar homosexual implications are, as Wood points out, apparent in Jake’s relations with Salvy, Tommy and Joey. A character that Jake dislikes implacably, Salvy is also a figure repeatedly implicated with Jake’s relationship with Vickie. Jake first sees Vickie at the neighbourhood swimming-pool as she sits with Salvy, Patsy and Guido and Jake quizzes Joey about her in part in terms of her relationship to them (“She knows them?”; “She go with them?”). Moreover, when Jake asks Joey whether Vickie is the young girl who Salvy “went with”, his words accompany a slow-motion close shot of Salvy. In Scorsese’s films slow motion is a privileged means of expressing subjective perception, and it recurs during the scene at the St Clare’s Church dance, when we are given slow-motion point-of-view shots of Vickie and of Vickie and Salvy as Jake looks across the room, and of Vickie and Salvy as Jake follows them from the dance and watches them drive off in Salvy’s car. The shots emphasize the raptness of Jake’s attention, the focus of which is ambiguous. Both scenes prompt the question of whether Jake is actually or only attracted to Vickie, of whether Vickie embodies in whole or to some degree a displacement of an “inadmissible” desire for Salvy that once more finds expression in hostility.

The question is compounded by the scene at the Copacabana. We see Salvy greet and kiss Vickie from Jake’s point of view, with a slow-motion point-of-view shot employed as Salvy walks toward Jake. Jake can hardly bring himself to shake Salvy’s hand, responds to Joey’s comment that Salvy “looks good” by pretending to spit and questions Vickie incitingly as to whether she is “interested” in Salvy: all of which invites symptomatic interpretation. Further, when sitting with Tommy, and upon a “misheard” comment by Salvy, Jake asks him whether he wants Jake “to get” Janiro “to fuck” him: a query that can be read as having more than one displaced meaning.

Discussing the homosexual connotations of Jake's relations with Tommy and Joey, Wood adduces Freud's contention that Schreber's first homosexual "love-objects" were, incestuously, "his own father and brother" (1986: 113). Jake's "desire" for both Tommy and Joey also again implicitly finds displacement in his relationship with Vickie. The first time Jake sees Vickie as she sits at the swimming-pool she is actually being spoken to by Joey, and Jake's quizzing of Joey in addition establishes that Joey has taken "her out" and tried to have sex with her. Jake's relationship with Vickie is likewise related to Joey by the sight of Jake and Vickie kissing before a photograph of Jake and Joey striking boxing poses in Jake's parents' bedroom; there is as well Joey's recurrent presence in Jake's "home movies". Moreover, if Jake's relationship with Vickie implies what Freud more specifically termed the positive Oedipus complex, then Jake's suggested homosexuality implies the so-called negative Oedipus complex: for the male child, the complementary desire for the father and hostility toward the mother that, as part of the complete Oedipus complex, equally has the potential to inform adult object choice. Implicit in Freud's ascription of Schreber's "incestuous" homosexuality, the negative Oedipus complex is particularly suggested in *Raging Bull* by Jake's intimated "desire" for Tommy, his father-figure. Correspondingly, the insinuatingly tracking, slow-motion point-of-view shots as Jake looks toward Tommy at the Copacabana – including one in which Tommy, significantly, kisses Vickie – could be seen to express the "ambivalent attitude" toward the father that Freud declares "may even" be "attributed entirely" to the negative Oedipus complex (1991d: 372).

Boxing has also itself been seen to have a "homosexual subtext". Joyce Carol Oates, for instance, writes that no sport "appears more powerfully homoerotic" (1994: 30), following which we might again note that *Raging Bull* links penis and fist. Further connotations are thus potential to, say, Jake's battering of Janiro, the photograph of Jake and Joey in boxing poses, or Jake's feminine masochism when punched by Joey, during which Jake imputes homosexuality as he is "at his own request", and in the words of David Friedkin, "being 'banged' by his brother" (1994: 123). Like connotations can be seen to accrue when Jake, in recompense for Joey inviting his "friends" to the gym, pummels Joey to the canvas, an assault that is as much aimed at Salvy, as a pair of cutaways that show him looking increasingly uncomfortable make clear.

IV

When Jake leaves his apartment with Joey for the St Clare's Church dance, Irma vituperatively declaims that they are going to "suck each other off", then shouts after Jake: "You fucking queer. Faggot". At the gym, Guido remarks that Jake and Joey "look like two fags" as they spar. The comedian at the Copacabana (Bernie Allen) is shown making a gratuitous homophobic quip ("Bald-headed fag"). The commentator on Jake's last fight with Robinson even refers to Robinson having Jake, after a spate of punches, "on Queer Street". Such incidents and comments further reflect upon the intimation of Jake's repressed homosexuality, but in their prevalence once more work to place both this and Jake's reactive hostility within an implicitly determining context. Considered with regard to this, that diegetic references to and imputations of homosexuality are invariably derogatory – being used as insults, suggesting

emasculation – impels an interpretative doubling back. For as the positive and negative forms of the Oedipus complex are combined in the complete complex, so the film’s homosexual references and representation of masculine enmity are not only open to discussion in terms of repressed homosexual desire, but can also be read in relation to the assertiveness and violence that are near-definitive of the represented society. Certainly, Jake’s variable animus toward and jealousy regarding Janiro, Salvy, Joey and Tommy – especially as refracted via Vickie – is as much ascribable to fraternal and sibling and (positive) Oedipal rivalry as to homosexual and (negative) Oedipal desire, albeit this is, with a suggestiveness evocative of the overdetermination of the psyche, less a case of either/or than both/and. For Lacan, moreover, paranoia is not a defence against repressed homosexuality but concomitant to the individual’s alienating determination: a determination that in addition has as a “correlative tension”, and with decided pertinence for *Raging Bull*, a no less concomitant “aggressivity” (1977b: 22).

A representative complexity of meanings is accordingly generated by the sequence set in Jake’s Detroit hotel suite prior to his title fight against Marcel Cerdan (Louis Raftis). First, Jake, frustrated at the fight’s 24-hour postponement, responds with jealous aggression when Vickie, at Joey’s suggestion, decides to order a cheeseburger. Then, when Tommy visits, we are given a montage of slow-motion close-ups, from Jake’s point of view, that show Joey’s hands, one of which rests on Tommy’s shoulder, Tommy’s hands, Tommy again kissing Vickie, Tommy’s hands as he lauds Vickie’s beauty, and Vickie and Joey smiling delightedly. A charged series of images, within which the emphasis on hands continues to have particular symbolic resonance, the montage is followed, on Tommy leaving, by Jake nastily confronting Vickie, slapping her in the face and accusing her of “disrespect” and threatening Joey that he will “take care” of him later. Taken as a whole, the sequence can be read irreducibly to connote paranoid jealousy, sibling contention, Oedipal hostility, inadmissible homosexual desire and reactive and/or alienated aggression: with respect to which, mirrors, that largely reflect Jake, are recurrently in shot.

Jake only gets his title chance after he finally accedes to the Mafia and, in specific reparation for Joey beating up Salvy during a second scene at the Copacabana, throws his fight against Billy Fox (Eddie Mustafa Muhammad). Meeting Joey, Tommy complains of Jake: “He’s got no respect for nobody. He doesn’t listen to nobody”. At issue psychoanalytically is, correspondingly, and in contrast to Jake’s earlier phallic resistance, his acknowledgment of Tommy’s “paternal” authority and, reciprocally, his own symbolic castration. If this in turn can be seen to inform Jake’s alienated aggression during the Detroit hotel sequence, as witness his own concern with respect, then the Fox fight and its aftermath present marked contrasts to previously represented matches. Whereas in the Reeves fight Jake masochistically accepts punishment before knocking Reeves down and de facto winning the bout, against Fox Jake’s first punch almost knocks his opponent out, and Jake is subsequently represented as receiving a number of anything but punishing blows before the fight is stopped. Similarly, whereas Jake has been shown previously responding to defeats with seeming self-sufficient calm, in his dressing-room after the Fox fight he cries piteously at his humiliation: symbolic castration can apparently no longer be disavowed. Even so, Jake’s refusal to “go down” makes the fix obvious. The suggestion is of a residual resistance, with the incident in its entirety inviting consideration in terms of moral masochism. As much can be regarded

as implicit to Jake's acquiescence to the demands of the "parental powers" as embodied by Tommy, but it also shines a sidelight on the possible homosexual connotations of Jake's repeated insistence that he does not go down "for nobody". Freud not only regards moral masochism as a guilty displacement of the repressed desire for the father of the negative Oedipus complex, but observes that this familiarly achieves regressive articulation in "the wish" to be "beaten by the father" (1991e: 424). However, consistent with the transgressive affirmation latent to masochism, Freud further argues that "to provoke punishment" the moral masochist must, at an extreme, but with relevance to Jake's not going down, "do what is inexpedient, must act against his own interests, must ruin the prospects which open out to him in the real world and must, perhaps, destroy his own real existence" (1991e: 425).

Nevertheless, having acknowledged his symbolic castration, Jake does, with Oedipal suggestiveness, "obtain" the phallus, win the world championship. But this is quickly rendered hollow as the film cuts from Jake celebrating his victory to his Pelham Parkway house the next year. Serving as an interim narrative climax, the ensuing sequence draws together numerous strands of the film thus far, and from the first emphatically resituates Jake as symbolically castrated: his lack being broadcast whether one considers his impotent attempts at obtaining a picture from his television set as he eats a sandwich and drinks a bottle of beer, his styleless combination of open shirt, baggy shorts and dark socks, or his increasing physical bulk. On Vickie entering the house, Jake's paranoid jealousy promptly appears. He questions Vickie about where she has been, and complains to Joey about his kissing her on the mouth, with Jake's comparison of which to kissing one's mother again evoking his marriage's Oedipal connotations. Annoyed pointedly by Joey complaining about his weight gain, Jake proceeds from asking his brother about what happened when he beat up Salvy at the Copacabana, to asking "Did Salvy fuck Vickie?", to asking eventually "You fuck my wife?" Questions redolent with obsessive, alienated aggression, they can once more be considered coextensively to imply hostile heterosexual contentiousness and displaced homosexual desire, as can his frustrated, agonizing and no less redolently alienated claim that Joey's verbal association of himself with Salvy and Tommy – that Jake, if he is so tough, should "kill Salvy, kill Tommy Como, kill me" – "meant something". Capping things, Joey's words before he leaves compound the implication of Jake's symbolic castration by linking his weight gain and paranoia to putative sexual insufficiency: "Try a little more fucking and a little less eating. You won't have troubles upstairs in your bedroom and you won't pick it out on me and everybody else".

Such connotations are redoubled when Jake goes upstairs to confront Vickie. After again asking where Vickie had been, Jake grabs her by the hair, enquires what happened at the Copacabana, slaps her three times and, grabbing her face in his hands, says: "Did you fuck my brother?" Vickie gets free and locks herself in the bathroom. Jake follows, asking "Why did you fuck Joey?" before breaking through the bathroom door and grabbing and twice slapping Vickie, who responds by tauntingly "confirming" his paranoia: "I fucked all of them.... Tommy, Salvy, your brother, all of them. I sucked your brother's cock ... and everybody else on the fucking street too". Expressed with an irony that Jake, in his paranoid obtuseness, does not "get", Vickie's words nevertheless once more imply a certain sexual inadequacy in Jake. This, moreover, is both complemented by another tacit linking of his weight gain and paranoia ("You're

nothing but a fat pig selfish fool”) and underscored by her closing shot, shouted as Jake, having again slapped her twice and shaped to punch her, leaves the house, that Joey’s “cock’s bigger than yours too” – a comment that, as it connects with the film’s preceding phallic references, takes us back especially to Jake’s “little girl’s hands”.

Where in *Raging Bull* the expressionist stylization of the boxing scenes conveys a frequently unsettling subjective experience of violence, the more objective, documentary representation of violence outside the ring is no less unsettling in its harsh, awkward convincingness. Demonstrated in Jake’s mishandling and slapping of Vickie, such violence is maintained as the sequence proceeds with Jake tangling with Vickie in the street then bursting into Joey’s house where, amid cramped domestic space, he manhandles Joey to the floor, punches him, forces him through a French door, stomps on him and kicks him before punching Vickie, who has followed him into the house, and who, with Joey’s wife, Lenore (Theresa Saldana), has pulled him off his brother, cold. Moreover, while Jake’s assault on Joey is yet again referable mutually to sibling rivalry and repressed homosexual desire, the sequence rather positions both, not to mention Jake’s imputed sexual inadequacy, as symptoms of the symbolically castrating alienation that implicitly underpins masculine assertiveness and violence throughout; notably, when Jake enters Joey’s house Joey is threatening his son at the dinner table with a knife, a violent – and significantly phallic – reaction to domestic uncontrol that recalls his earlier aggressive response to Lenore’s offhand interjection in support of Vickie during the kitchen scene, for which he, like Jake with Vickie, orders her from the room.

Indeed, the misogyny that patently informs Jake’s relations with both of his wives is characteristically situated as a broader and implicitly determining social fact. Hence when the fights in the crowd erupt during and after the Reeves match we respectively see and hear a woman scream and see and hear a woman scream as she is being trampled. Similarly, if the comedian at the Copacabana is homophobic, he is also misogynistic (“C’mon lady, laugh it up. I laughed when you come in”). *Raging Bull* might nevertheless be regarded as being complicit with the misogyny that it represents. Apart from representing women as agents of symbolically castrating domestication, the film would appear to bear out Jake’s suspicions regarding Vickie when Joey sees her with Salvy at the Copacabana when Jake is out of town. However, when confronted by Joey, Vickie vehemently defends herself by indicting Jake’s paranoid jealousy (“I feel like I’m a prisoner”), violence (“I look at somebody the wrong way I get smacked”) and sexual inattention (“He’s got he don’t even wanna fuck me”). Moreover, Vickie’s complaints that she “can’t work” and that she is “20 years old” but expected “to go home and sleep by myself every night” sets her, as she stands speaking before and as reflected in a mirrored alcove, as both agent and victim of the implied cultural and psychosexual order – as are, implicitly, all the characters in the film.

Even so, that Joey should condemn Vickie for being at the Copacabana with Salvy having previously taken a woman other than Lenore to the Copacabana with Jake and Vickie suggests a hypocritical, misogynistic double standard. In turn, having loyally kept “an eye on” Vickie for Jake, Joey proceeds to uphold Jake’s – and his – masculine authority by beating up Salvy: this in another jarring representation of violence as Joey smashes a glass in Salvy’s face inside the club then hits him with a metal post, kicks him and repeatedly jams him in a taxi door outside and despite Salvy’s protestations, which

nothing in the film contradicts, that everything is “innocent”. The consequences of Joey’s actions, however, mordantly illuminate the obdurate dynamics of the represented society. On one hand, Joey’s upholding of Jake’s masculine authority results directly in Jake’s “castrating” cession of the same to Tommy. On the other, his understandable evasiveness and falsehoods and too ready anger when questioned by Jake during the Pelham Parkway sequence fuels Jake’s alienated suspicions and leads to Joey himself suffering an undeserved beating. Not that Tommy exists outside symbolic castration, with his lack being highlighted by, and admitted with regard to, his initial failure to control Jake: “He’s embarrassing me with certain people, and I’m looking very bad. I can’t deliver a kid from my own goddamn neighborhood”. If this further reflects upon Tommy and Jake’s shared concern with respect, it also clarifies the hollowness of his championship victory. For, according to Lacan, no-one can possess the phallus: there is, familiar Oedipal mystifications to the contrary, no phallus to be assumed. As D. N. Rodowick summarizes, “the phallus signifies nothing except the hierarchical organization of power according to patriarchal culture; and castration means nothing except the cultural violence that enforces submission to that authority” (1991: 73).

V

The Pelham Parkway sequence ends with a conciliatory embrace between Jake and a facially bruised Vickie. It cuts to Jake being punched in the face by Laurent Dauthuille (Johnny Turner) in the last round of a title defence. The logic of the editing would appear to suggest that Jake is accepting recompense for his preceding, violent actions. Again, the implication psychoanalytically is of moral masochism. However, from, in the words of the ringside commentator, “losing the title”, and “taking terrible punishment on the ropes”, Jake, in another implicit “turning round” from masochism to sadism, savagely attacks Dauthuille and knocks him out with “13 seconds left”. With the scene recalling the Reeves bout, the suggestion is of Jake’s reversion to his previously resistant, masochistically affirmed self. Jake’s oscillation between guilty self-surrender and defiant resistance in turn shapes the succeeding scenes. Prevailed upon by Vickie to phone and reconcile with Joey – she even dials the number – Jake declines to speak. Jake’s subsequent beating in his final fight with Robinson is nevertheless referred to Joey: the film cuts to the bout from a shot of Jake sitting in the phone booth, then cross-cuts to shots of Joey watching the match on television. Notwithstanding Jake delivering a typical flurry of punches, once more the connotation is of him accepting due reckoning, and, correspondingly, of moral masochism. The displaced, psychic reference of Jake’s suffering is underscored by the expressionist representation of his defeat. Having received a series of heavy blows, Jake, with his arms by his sides, but consistent with the intersubjective dominance that Lacan attributes the masochist, calls Robinson on, at which a simultaneous dolly in, zoom out and reduction of lighting renders Robinson an imposing and near-abstract figure of retribution. There follows a montage that predominantly comprises shots of disturbingly brutal, bloodily punishing blows to Jake’s head, before a climactic punch is shot, via a dolly in to close-up, and as it emerges from an ill-defined, smoke-filled space, as an almost metaphysical fact. Complementarily, Jake’s attempts to hold himself up on the ropes, and the shots of his

blood-spattered legs and bowed, bloodied head, lend his beating an intimation of crucifixion. With the opening of the sequence in addition offering slow-motion, virtually silent and quasi-ritualistic shots of Jake's body being bathed with a bloody sponge, Jake's moral masochism could in the sequence be regarded implicitly to shade into the "Christian" variant outlined by Reik. Indeed, the male subject's habitual acceptance of symbolic castration on the mystificatory promise of the assumption of the phallus can be seen to find an homology in the Christian moral masochist's acceptance of "misery, humiliation, disgrace" on a faith in transcendence, a belief in "what is to come afterward" (Reik 2002: 363). Yet as there is no phallus for Jake to assume, so there is seemingly no available transcendence. After the referee (Harvey Parry) has stopped the fight, Jake – battered, defeated and held up by one of his handlers – "taunts" Robinson: "I never went down, Ray. You never got me down, Ray". A display of empty bravado, it is a pitifully unconvincing attempt at resistant affirmation, that, in its desperation, and given both the correlation of moral masochism with the negative Oedipus complex and Jake's choice of phrase, further lends the commentator's words about Jake being "on Queer Street" more specific point, one that reverberates significantly with respect to the sequence's relation of Jake's battering to Joey.

The sequence's final image is a close-up of blood dripping from one of the ring's ropes. A synecdoche of Jake's "crucifying" defeat, this cuts to "Miami 1956", and scenes that consonantly centre upon Jake's lack. There is a visual emphasis on his now bloated body, whether as revealed as he is interviewed by his swimming-pool, as he sleeps and then sits on a cot in the back room of his club, or as he makes a phone call, gut front shot, from a glass booth. He also indicatively refers his retirement from boxing to his being "tired of worrying about weight all the time". When Vickie likewise speaks to the interviewer of Jake now being at home "all the time", Jake interrupts to mention that he has "just bought" the club. The implication is of an anxious disavowal of domesticity, and its attendant symbolic castration: witness accordingly his club's phallic sign, or the phallic tower of glasses into which he pours champagne. It is further as he sits beside his swimming-pool that Jake is first shown smoking a similarly phallic cigar – a prop that is subsequently almost always present. While that the glib customer (Richard McMurray) and State Attorney Bronson (D. J. Blair) with whom Jake talks at his club should themselves smoke cigars continues the suggestion of a broader, determining context, as does Jake's stage act's indebtedness to that of the comedian at the Copacabana, then Jake's clumsy joshing of both suggests a continued, alienated aggression that characteristically becomes most apparent when questioned about Vickie ("You think I'm gonna bring her 'round here and let you bums get involved with her?"). This correspondingly can be read to imply continued hetero- and displaced homosexual tensions, as can his stage act that, marked – unsurprisingly, given its source – by like alienated aggression ("I haven't seen so many losers since my last fight at Madison Square Garden"), revolves around jokes that, to quote Friedkin, "play on the notion of women being shared by men" (1994: 129).

That as Jake pours champagne into the tower of glasses he is watched by three young women, and that the waitresses at the club are all young and scantily clad, primarily sexual objects, suggests a bolstering of phallic self-esteem. Vickie, moreover, is only 15 years old when Jake meets her. That she does not visibly age during the film

likewise places her as primarily a sexual object. This invites further Lacanian consideration. For while no-one can possess the phallus, within what Lacan terms “the comedy” of heterosexual relations the woman is regarded to be a substitute for – “to be” – the phallus for the man (1977c: 289). Correlatively, however, the man “has” the phallus for the woman, albeit only through “the intervention of a ‘to seem’ that replaces the ‘to have’” (1977c: 289). Such might be considered to inform the conciliatory embrace that closes the Pelham Parkway sequence, Vickie’s complaint at the Copacabana that Jake does not want to have sex with her, or her receptive, on floor response to Jake’s kisses and physical endearments following their dispute over Janiro. Similarly, while the photograph of Jake and Joey “boxing” before which Jake and Vickie kiss refers their relationship to Joey, Vickie’s preceding regard of it also implies her attraction to Jake’s “phallic” potency. Against this, Vickie’s decision finally to divorce Jake can be seen – for all his obvious abuses – to reflect once more on his lack; pointedly, Vickie tells Jake that she is leaving him immediately after he finishes filling his phallic tower with champagne. In addition, where Jake, having watched Vickie being driven from the St Clare’s Church dance in Salvy’s car, uses his own car, with familiar phallic connotation, initially to attract Vickie outside Jake’s club, Vickie, in an expression of symbolically castrating autonomy, drives off herself, leaving Jake standing alone in the parking lot.

Jake’s phallic posturing is further punctured when he is indicted for introducing a 14-year-old, whom he had permitted to prove she was 21 by kissing him on the mouth, “to men”, the homosexual suggestiveness of which is underscored by Jake joking that he “introduced” one of the arresting officers “to men” (Friedkin 1994: 129). Symptomatically, Jake lacks the \$10,000 needed to “get the case dropped”. Thrown forcibly and struggling into a prison cell, Jake proceeds repeatedly to butt, punch and hit his shoulders against a wall while shouting “Why?” and screaming incoherently. An explicitly masochistic “turning round” of sadism upon the self, this results in no self-affirmation, or correlative self-ruination, but only, as it culminates the film’s linking of fist and penis, and embodies another painful, failed actualization of phallic assertiveness, a confirmation of symbolic castration. Tellingly, the scene was originally written as one of unsuccessful masturbation (Kelly 1992: 124). In turn, as Jake sits overweight, in expressionist darkness and speaks while crying wretchedly, there is conveyed a sense of utter alienation from self: “You’re so stupid.... They called me an animal. I’m not an animal.... I’m not that guy”. His words carry corrosively ironic connotations. His earlier annoyance when, upon arguing with Irma, a neighbour shouts that they are “animals” and his calling Joey “an animal” in “explanation” of his brother’s failure to bed Vickie can be regarded a disavowal and a projection. Not only does Jake shout back that he will eat and will kill the neighbour’s dog, but Jake’s boxing nickname is *The Bronx Bull*, and he enters the ring in a leopard-skin robe. Such seeming embrace of his “animality” is, moreover, reflective of a potency that is indivisible from his boxing success and, concordantly, his transgressive phallic resistance. In the cell, by contrast, Jake is agonizingly disavowing a potency long lost.

Scorsese has claimed that the scene sees Jake attain some kind of divine grace (Henry 1999: 91). This is difficult to credit. Apart from the scene’s unyielding painfulness for character and spectator, it cuts to Jake on stage, supporting a striptease act in a New York bar, somewhat chastened and constrained, but with sexually

ambiguous material and alienated aggression intact (“Guy comes home, finds his wife in bed with another guy ..”/ “Give him another drink, piss in it for me”). Transcendence, much less God’s grace, would appear to continue to be unavailable. Further, while the film’s signifiers of Catholicism, such as the religious paintings and objects in Jake’s father’s apartment, the cross over Jake and Vickie’s bed, or the presence of the local priest (Paul Forrest) at the St Clare’s Church dance and in the home movie footage of Joey’s wedding, serve an uncontentious documentary function, the connotations of crucifixion that attend the representation of Jake’s last defeat by Robinson could be considered reflexively to situate religion as another subjecting mystification. This is perhaps unsurprising, for in Scorsese’s *films* the representation of religion and “sacramental” incident is preponderantly ambivalent, contesting and/or an apparent “screen” for more materialist concerns.

An analogously problematic claim is made by Wood regarding Jake’s “reconciliation” with Joey. Jake sees Joey across the street as he leaves the New York bar and follows him to a garage, where he hugs and kisses Joey repeatedly. Wood regards this as Jake savingly coming to terms with his homosexuality, “as an ironic inversion of the notion of the kiss as a privileged climactic moment of classical cinema, epitomising the construction of the heterosexual couple” (1986: 114). Joey, however, first tries to ignore Jake, then is resistant to his attentions, pushing him off and being seemingly eager to escape his bear-like embraces. Although Joey promises to phone Jake, the scene ends with Jake, in a reflection of the scene in which Vickie tells him she is leaving him, standing alone beside Joey’s car.

Wood further posits that it is Jake’s coming to terms with his homosexuality that, through an implicit disjunction of diegetic chronology and narrative logic, enables him in the film’s next, final scene to rehearse his material with a competence lacking in the scene that opens the film in the same dressing-room and on the same night (1986: 114). This is again arguable. In his recitation of Terry Malloy’s “I coulda been a contender” speech from *On the Waterfront* (Elia Kazan, 1954) Jake displays a hesitancy little different to that apparent when running through different material in the opening scene. Moreover, Jake’s cold, emotionally blank rendition of the speech contrasts markedly with Marlon Brando’s original, fluent and heartrending performance. Scorsese has nevertheless contended that such coldness effectively confirms the grace conferred on Jake in the prison cell by suggesting that he is “finally coming to some sort of peace with himself” (Christie and Thompson 2003: 77). However, as Jake intones the speech to his reflection in a dressing-room mirror, this would rather appear to confirm his post-cell, chastened alienation. That in the speech ex-boxer Terry accuses his brother, Charley (Rod Steiger), of betraying him, and particularly of getting him to throw a fight, and thus suggests parallels with Jake’s life, or Jake’s perception of it, likewise implies, once more *pace* Wood, a certain, unresolved animus toward Joey. Yet as Jake addresses himself – literally – as other, it is unclear exactly who it is he is accusing. Charley? Joey? Himself? Some displaced other(s)? Compounding the sense of alienation, the scene presents an unrecognizable De Niro playing an overweight Jake playing Brando playing Terry while rehearsing, in Terrence Rafferty’s words, “a movie-script version of one of the most painful experiences in the fighter’s life” (1983: 186). Despite a brief outburst of vestigial aggression when, prior to going on stage, and in recollection of his dressing-room warm-up before the Cerdan fight, he simulates

punches and chants “I’m the boss”, Jake seems reduced to an empty, symbolically castrated hulk, a logical but disquieting end-product of the alienating psychosexual and cultural determination evoked throughout the film.

VI

The alienation implicit to Jake’s recitation of Terry’s speech is in addition compounded by *On the Waterfront* presenting – via Terry – a textbook example of the very transcendence through Christian moral masochism that *Raging Bull* denies. *On the Waterfront*, moreover, barely dissimulates its underlying Oedipal structuration: Terry’s suffering and transcendence expressly evokes symbolic castration and assumption of the phallus. Yet while this contrasts with Jake’s demystified lack, *Raging Bull* nevertheless implies a nostalgia for a “lost”, potent wholeness even as its impossibility is proclaimed. Instructively, the nearest the film gets to an unproblematic representation of the potent Jake – as he shadow boxes and prowls in his leopard-skin robe in the ring in slow motion – is placed outside the narrative, during the film’s front credits, and accompanied by the yearning, romantic strains of the ‘Intermezzo’ from Pietro Mascagni’s *Cavalleria Rusticana*. Even so, Cook not only regards Jake’s “violence and animal energy” as “the source of both his drive for success and his resistance to exploitation”, but argues that “as such they are validated” (1982: 45). This, however, occurs mainly in the negative, in the frequently worrying painfulness of the representation of Jake’s inescapable, agonized and symbolically castrated alienation, and of his increasingly futile, destructive and self-destructive responses to and disavowals of the same. Further, in this painfulness, in the film’s representation of the existential and psychic consequences of the narratively implied structures of cultural and psychosexual determination, there lies an at least potential ideological progressiveness.

Raging Bull, moreover, concludes offering connotations that are psychoanalytically radical. For as Jake is at the last represented as alienated, symbolically castrated and addressing his self as other before the dressing-room mirror, the closing scene – which concludes with the sight of the now “empty” mirror – can be read as stripping bare any illusions regarding the entirety or coherence of the self. In this, the scene intimates the unsparing end point of Lacanian psychoanalysis, that of the subject’s “traversing” or “going through” the fantasy, its enabling of the individual to confront finally the chasm at the heart of all subjectivity (Lacan 1994: 273-74). The succeeding title combines a Biblical passage from John 9, that, concerning a man regarded “a sinner”, concludes on the phrase “once I was blind and now I can see”, with a dedication to Scorsese’s film professor at New York University, Haig Manoogian. Scorsese has acknowledged that the title is self-referential, that both Jake and Manoogian were figures who helped him “to see more clearly” (Henry 1999: 99). If such explanation reflects once more upon the film’s religious significations, then the quoted passage might likewise be taken as having a reflexive reference to its presumed spectator, whom the film potentially allows to see more clearly the relationship of masculinity, violence and resistance. Functioning subjectively within culture outside of psychosexual determination and accordant, alienating lack is, in psychoanalytic terms, impossible. However, the specificities of that

determination, while founded upon a constitutive void, are, like the resultant, determined self, not essential, but materially, historically contingent, capable of being changed. But before change comes perception, comes seeing. Hence the power, and the worth, of *Raging Bull*.

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