MASCUINITY IN CRISIS?
PAM COOK ON TRAGEDY AND IDENTIFICATION IN ‘RAGING BULL’

A GREAT DEAL has been written about Raging Bull. It has found a place as one of the classics of New Hollywood cinema, and if that sounds like a contradiction in terms, we have only to think of the number of films in Hollywood’s ‘New Wave’ which consciously trade on their own past, calling up classic Hollywood’s golden moments as a way of getting us into the cinema; no mean feat, these days. With the traditional system of production, distribution and exhibition of films in rapid decline, nostalgia and anxiety about the past from New Hollywood is understandable, though not inevitable. Looking back is fundamental to Raging Bull, and to the disturbing pleasures it offers. The decline and fall of its hero, Jake La Motta, provides a pretext for the playing out of a number of anxieties about the irrecoverability of the past. His collapse into impotence is the mainspring of a scenario which evokes profound loss: loss of a great classic cinema, of community values, of family life, of individual energy... A tragic scenario in which the hero’s suffering teaches us something about our own life, and how to accept its terms.

My own cinéphiliac obsession with the film is far from exhausted, and probably never will be. These notes are not an attempt to exorcise my pleasure, or anybody else’s, as much left criticism of Hollywood does, nor do I simply want to confirm it. What interests me is the film’s appeal to some feminists, who have seen in its explicit representation of violence as a masculine social disease a radical critique of masculinity. While I agree that Raging Bull puts masculinity in crisis, I don’t think it offers a radical critique of either masculinity or violence, even though it is profoundly disturbing. The film’s attitude to violence is ambiguous. On one hand, it is validated as an essential component of masculinity, making possible resistance to a corrupt and repressive social system. On this level violence is seen as inseparable from desire, and is celebrated. On the other, the tragic scenario of Raging Bull demands that the hero be shown to be the guilty victim of his transgressive desires: his violence is so excessive, so self-destructive that it has to be condemned. This moralism, combined with the film’s nostalgia for traditional family values, produces a condemnation of violence which comes close to that of the Right. Moreover, I would argue that the tragic structure of Raging Bull...
has consequences for its view of masculinity: masculinity is put into crisis so that we can mourn its loss. I believe my pleasures in the film are traditional, and I want to mobilise some of them in the interests of contributing to feminist debate. Must we always justify our pleasure, our fantasies, as ‘progressive’, or condemn them as ‘reactionary’? I'd rather see them non-moralistically as fertile ground for discussion of the more difficult and painful aspects of our desires in relation to our politics. Raging Bull propels us into that arena.

Pleasure: Cinéphilia

Like all New Hollywood cinema, Raging Bull is directed at a relatively new audience of knowledgeable cinema-goers. TV has given wide exposure to cinema’s history, creating a large popular audience clued-in to the pleasures of recognising authorship, genre etc. This audience coincides with an influx of producers and directors into the Hollywood industry who have college educations in cinema studies. One of the characteristics of New Hollywood that marks it off from classic Hollywood is that it’s produced and consumed by knowledgeable intellectuals. It sells itself on the basis of its reflexivity, calling up classic Hollywood in order to differentiate itself from it. The ‘modernity’ of New Hollywood lies in the way it plays on the known conventions of a past Hollywood to displace it, while retaining the pleasures of homage to the past. Raging Bull is a good example of New Hollywood’s retrospective impulse. Director Martin Scorsese is known as a cinéphile. His anxiety about preserving the cinema’s past is manifested in his preservation of his work in the Scorsese Archives, and one of his reasons for filming Raging Bull in black and white (besides as a conscious reference to Warner Brothers films of the '40s) was as a protest against the deterioration of colour values. The film, which has a minimal story line, is a complex tapestry of allusions in image and sound to a lost popular culture. It offers a challenge to the curiosity and the critical acumen of the cinéphile spectator, a come-on to those of us who are hooked on cinema. Jake La Motta’s life brushes against the history of cinema and popular music at certain moments, drawing us in like a puzzle to a game we can never win.

(Losing the game is crucial to Raging Bull: Scorsese has said that he wanted to differentiate the film from contemporary boxing pics in which the hero wins through (e.g. Rocky II) by presenting a hero who loses everything, who redeems himself through loss, recalling the '40s version of the genre, and returning obsessively to On the Waterfront, to Brando’s performance as the reluctant working-class hero who becomes, in spite of himself, an icon of working-class struggle.)

Then there is the film’s visual pleasure: the excitement of a mise-en-scène which alternates between long, reflective shots which allow us to contemplate the scene in safety, at a distance, and explosions of rapid montage which assault our eyes and ears, bringing us right into the ring with the fighters. Sometimes we almost literally get a punch in the eye. I
The moment of truth as Jake La Motta delivers the decisive blow in a scene from “Raging Bull”,
a United Artists release.

A punch in the eye: the spectator is at ringside in Jake La Motta’s fight scene.
don’t like boxing; but the illusion of ‘being there’, the risk involved, is a real turn-on. The film moves and excites by making the past immediately present, by making us present in history. For women, perhaps, this illusion of presence is doubly exciting, since we are generally represented as outside history. But the price of that pleasure is an identification with masculinity on its terms rather than our own.

Pleasure: the Body

Hollywood films about sport generally centre on the male body (though not always: Pat and Mike, or Ida Lupino’s Hard, Fast and Beautiful, for example) as object of desire. If, as feminist film theory has argued, classic Hollywood is dedicated to the playing out of male Oedipal anxieties across the woman’s body, object of the ‘male’ gaze, what does it mean to place the male body at the centre? The classic Hollywood boxing pic has a ‘rise-and-fall’ structure, an analogy for male sexuality itself. The working-class hero battles his way towards success against opposition from a corrupt, hostile society and his own self-doubts (John Garfield in Body and Soul). The Championship is rarely an end in itself: it represents winning the game against society, becoming a man against all the odds. Of course, the hero can lose, and he must recognise this fact in order to become a real man. The hero of boxing films, who is often too sensitive to succeed, travels a painful Oedipal journey, challenging the power of the Father, punished for the attempt. His body becomes the focus for this struggle: the desire to win, followed by punishment and loss. The boxing pic has often been used as a vehicle for left-wing ideas, and the virile working-class hero is a prevailing image in the iconography of socialist politics. For many political women it has a powerful and complex appeal: as an object of desire, as a focus for identification, and as the fulfillment of a sadistic wish to see it destroyed, to make space for our own fantasies of power, activating the desire of the mother for her child.

Raging Bull plays out this problem of class and male sexuality across the body of Robert De Niro. Much has been made of De Niro’s virtuoso performance, which involved the donning of a false nose and gaining a vast amount of weight to depict Jake La Motta’s decline. I suspect that the actual transformation of De Niro’s body is crucial: for those of us turned on by De Niro, the ‘real’ loss of his beautiful body as an object for contemplation is disturbing, and undermines the sadistic desire to see that body punished and mutilated that the film activates. The loss of the actor’s body, known and desired before the film existed, drawing us to the film with the promise of the pleasure of seeing it, implicates us deeply in the tragic hero’s decline. Whatever power we may have thought we had, through our sadistic gaze at the bruised and battered male body, we lose through identification with the hero’s loss. The pain of our loss motivates us to look back, to seek again the perfect body in all its power and beauty, as the film itself looks back nostalgically to a time
when pure animal energy formed the basis of resistance to oppression and exploitation, identifying that energy with masculine virility.

This ambiguity around the male body is not quite the same as that which surrounds the woman’s body in classic Hollywood, where the active desire of the woman represents a problem which the film sets out to resolve, finally replacing her as feminine, apparently confirming the security of the power of the ‘male’ spectator (The Revolt of Mamie Stover). Raging Bull, like its predecessors in the boxing genre, presents the powerful male body as an object of desire and identification, but moving towards the loss of male power. This loss activates the desire to call it up once more: we mourn the loss, so the founding image of male power, the phallus, is centred yet again. The space for desire which the tragedy promises to open up—the celebration of the overthrow of the phallus—is closed off in the search for the lost object.

![The desired body destroyed: Jake La Motta at the beginning and end of his tragedy.](image)

This fixation on the male body as object of desire has consequences for the representation of the woman’s body in the film. The spectator’s look at De Niro/Jake is direct, unmediated desire, but our access to Vickie/Cathy Moriarty is mediated through Jake’s desire for her. We see Vickie entirely through Jake’s eyes, literally, as the expression of his desire for her is a prolonged eroticised gaze cut in with reverse shots of him looking at her. The effect is to deflect the spectator’s access to the woman’s body, confirming identification with the male hero as simultaneously desiring subject and object of desire. Vickie’s body is marked out as maternal
(even though she is only fifteen) in its mature fullness, and by the fact that when Jake first sees and desires her she is with a group of the mob’s henchmen, the godfathers against whom he will increasingly turn his aggression. Later in the film, a kiss exchanged between Tommy, head of the mob, and Vickie provokes Jake into a jealous rage which is as much an expression of his desire for Tommy as for her. So the film acts out a scenario in which male desire for the mother’s body coincides with the wish to kill the father. Moreover, the anxieties aroused by this double transgression are displaced into male homosexual desire and the impulse to punish the mother who initiated the forbidden desire. The film constantly defers and delays Jake’s sexual encounters with Vickie. The scene of their first coupling, after a long, protracted sequence, takes place in his parents’ bed after they have kissed in front of a photograph of Jake and his brother Joey playfully boxing. Vickie’s body is framed by Jake’s look, by Joey’s look, by the look of the camera in the home-movie sequence, placing her further and further at a distance, until finally she is eliminated altogether. But the maternal body returns in the film, in the language Jake uses to insult other men (‘Fuck your mother,’ ‘Your mother takes it up the ass’...), curses which are homosexually turned against his opponents (Jake threatens to ‘fuck the ass’ of one of them).

The sexual confusion at the heart of Raging Bull does, I think, put masculinity in crisis, raising the question of what it takes to be a man, and what the alternatives to macho male sexuality might be. But precisely because it is a masculine crisis defined entirely in terms of male Oedipal anxieties, desire circulates always around the phallus, returning to it obsessively, blocking off other avenues, alternative expressions of male desire, in its stress on the tragic inevitability of the male Oedipal scenario.

Pleasure: Tragedy

The tragic structure of Raging Bull is, I think, fundamental to the way the film resolves the hero’s crisis. Tragedy is an ancient dramatic form going back at least as far as Greek antiquity. History has radically transformed it since then, but it seems to retain a certain continuity of form and function: through a process of emotional release or catharsis brought about by identification with the suffering of the tragic protagonists, tragedy teaches us something about the world and our place in it. The function of tragedy remains important today, or takes on even more importance because we are living through times of great social unrest and change. Tragedy siphons off the pain and contradictions which are the consequences of that change, teaching us that when things change something may be gained, but we inevitably lose, and we should mourn that loss. Tragedy resists the progress of history, giving us a perspective on how it affects the lives of human beings caught up in it, and enabling us to see certain truths about our own lives. This means it can be mobilised politically, to ask questions about the ‘positive’ aspects of progress, but it can also be used to confirm our feeling that human beings are
inevitably the victims of social forces, over which they can never exert control.

As Raymond Williams points out in *Modern Tragedy*, the Christian tradition of tragedy differs from its secular forbears in two important ways. It lacks the background of a social context against which the action is played out, and it centres the dramatic struggle in an individual tragic hero rather than in ruling families or collective groups. The Christian tradition suggests that the outcome of the struggle, and the suffering of the tragic hero is inevitable, and that our attitude to this inevitability should be one of pity for the hero who suffered in our place. Tragedy moves us to tears, rather than anger or thought. The tragic hero (sometimes, but not often, a heroine: Williams' sole example is Anna Karenina) is compelled by internal and external forces outside his control to act in a way which transgresses social or moral codes, for which he is punished. Punishment and suffering are built into the tragic structure: the hero battles against his fate until he finally redeems himself by accepting it. The notion of the tragic hero suffering in our place is clearly very important to Christian mythology, and without going into the religious symbolism of Scorsese's work, the Christian version of tragedy seems relevant to *Raging Bull*: the rise and fall of Jake La Motta (a traditional narrative structure in classical Hollywood cinema) is close to that of tragedy, which deals with the fall from grace of successful, powerful men and women. However, Jake's fall is not simply a punishment for some unknown crime or guilt, which is the explanation he offers in the film at one point. He comes from the Italian-American immigrant community, and therefore has the misfortune to be caught up in the American Dream which offered success and power at the same time as it insisted on the innate inferiority of the Italian immigrants, locating them as a source of crime and corruption, and of many other un-American activities, such as political unrest. The history of the Italian immigrant community in America is littered with the martyrs of this victimisation: perhaps the most memorable examples are Sacco and Vanzetti. In this context, Jake La Motta appears as another victim-hero caught between his desire to change the conditions of his existence by becoming a champion boxer, and his powerlessness in the face of those who control those conditions. Jake's violence and animal energy are the source of both his drive for success and his resistance to exploitation, and as such they are validated. But in the tragic scenario of *Raging Bull* their social context and motivation is displaced, so that we are left with the private pain of a single individual whose suffering is caused by his innate guilt. Jake reaches rock bottom when, totally isolated from family and friends and unable to gather support from any source, he is thrown into prison on a charge of allowing teenage prostitution in his club. In prison he finally rejects the guilty self that motivated him to violence and social transgression ('I'm not that guy . . .'), and when we next see him he is indeed a changed man, humbler, resigned, but you might also say an empty husk.

Jake's story is about the breakdown of one man and the emergence of another. But as in all tragedy, whatever the positive value placed on
change, and Scorsese has insisted that at the end of the film La Motta has redeemed himself, the breakdown involves loss, and that loss is mourned. Jake’s anger and his animal violence stood for something: a resistance to exploitation, a desire for freedom. Once the anger is gone and resignation takes its place, Jake becomes a pathetic creature, a lumbering animal looking for forgiveness. In the tragic resolution of the film we’re asked to look with pity on this shell of a man who has lost all the attributes necessary to masculinity. Some of us might want to celebrate that loss (schadenfreude, pleasure in another’s misfortunes, is built into tragedy), and there is, I think, a sadistic pleasure in the spectator’s pitying look at Jake at the end of Raging Bull, partly explained by the space opened up for female desire when the powerful male is brought low. But, as the sister of tragedy, melodrama, tells us, there is no desire without the phallus (think of the endings of Written on the Wind and All That Heaven Allows, where the heroines are caught in the consequences of their desire to overthrow the phallus) and though we may take it up we can only do so at the expense of male castration. So where does it leave us? Our desire is folded in with man’s desire for himself, and like him, we mourn the loss of masculinity.

For Scorsese, it seems, the assimilation of the Italian immigrants into American society is a negative blessing involving the loss of the integrity and the unity of that community, and the breakdown of the traditional Italian family. The film looks back to a time when those values were current, a mythic past when primitive animal instinct formed the basis of resistance to oppression and exploitation, pure energy as a principle of change. In identifying that energy with masculine virility, and in continuing to locate feminine sexuality in its traditional place within the family, as entirely maternal, it seems to me to be far from progressive, bypassing the question of female desire, denying the value of many of the changes that have taken place in the area of sexual politics, retreating into retrograde romanticism and anti-intellectualism. But it does raise crucial questions of desire, of the desires of feminist politics in relation to male desires and masculine politics, of the mobilisation of aggression and desire in the interests of politics.

These notes have emerged from a lecture on Raging Bull given at the National Film Theatre in a series of lunchtime lectures organised by BFI Education. Thanks to Jane Clarke, who encouraged me to write about my pleasure in a film we both love.