

Visual Absurdity in *Raging Bull*

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Visually, *Raging Bull* is almost an artistic fiasco. The film's visual style seems often on the point of falling to pieces. The last fight scene, for instance—in which Sugar Ray Robinson incessantly pummels an exhausted Jake La Motta—depicts images so ludicrous that it's a wonder that viewers can make sense of it. One shot bizarrely shows a punch from the perspective of Robinson's glove as it approaches La Motta's face. Seconds later, one of Robinson's blows causes liquid to spray out of La Motta's head, as though from a sprinkler, and splatter a crowd of onlookers with what looks like a bucket-load of blood. At one point Robinson winds up for a punch in a ridiculously awkward stance, his arm and shoulder stretched in the air behind him, standing like a third-grader pretending to be a fighter: The shot appears more strange because of slow motion cinematography and the curious emergence of smoke surrounding Robinson's body. Such absurd and implausible images permeate the film, especially its fight sequences.

In the pages that follow, I shall set about demonstrating that *Raging Bull*'s visual incoherence and intermittent absurdity are integral to its success as a film and one of the primary reasons that critics and audiences find the film so compelling.¹ Before I do, however, I want to illustrate director Martin Scorsese's commitment to the film by discussing the care with which he constructed its eccentric visual style.

"I put everything I knew and felt into that film and I thought it would be the end of my career," Scorsese said. "It was what I call a kamikaze way of making movies: pour everything in, then forget all about it and go find another way of life."² To prepare the eight elaborate fight sequences, Scorsese and director of photography Michael Chapman mapped out every camera angle, camera movement, and distance of framing, as well as every actor's movement and every punch. Chapman said, "Each shot was drawn out in great detail, almost like Arthur Murray, those weird dance steps they used to draw on the floor. We did that."³ Together, the fight scenes last about nineteen minutes of screen time in the 129-minute movie, but they took ten weeks to shoot in a film that shot for a total of sixteen weeks.

Scorsese and Chapman filmed each fight sequence in a different style. For instance, image-distorting techniques during the third fight (between La Motta and Sugar Ray Robinson) convey throughout an impression of heat: A heavy haze fills most of the frames; figures come in and out of focus; long lenses and slow motion cinematography make the movements of the characters look sluggish; and several shots display a desert-mirage effect, created by putting flames in front of the lens during shooting (figure 1).



Figure 1: Third fight sequence. Fog in the frame and flames placed in front of the lens give an impression of heat.

The sixth fight, which focuses on La Motta's eagerness to win Marcel Cerdon's middle-weight crown, leaves a completely different impression: This sequence has a more lyrical presentation—it's the only fight sequence with operatic background music and without an announcer's commentary—and the quick depictions of the passing rounds make La Motta's victory seem swift and assured. By contrast, the last fight sequence, in which La Motta loses the crown, focuses on the punishment he receives during the bout and seems to go on interminably: Slow motion shots frame the blood and sweat falling off of La Motta's face; at times the action stops and all sounds drop out, except for the sound of the boxer's panting breath; and, for half a minute, discordant images of Robinson's ceaseless punching flash across the screen.

Postproduction took six months (rather than the allotted seven weeks). According to editor Thelma Schoonmaker, producer Irwin Winkler said to her and Scorsese, "'You can't mix this film *inch by inch*.' And Marty said, 'That's the way it's going to be done.' And it *was*."⁴ Her first major narrative film, *Raging Bull* won Schoonmaker an Oscar for editing.⁵ She has attributed the victory to Scorsese's pre-production planning and the director's own editing talents: "I felt that *my* award was *his* because I know that I won it for the fight sequences, and the fight sequences are as brilliant as they are because of the way Marty thought them out. I helped him put it together, but it was not my editing skill that made that film look so good."⁶

The diligence Scorsese used to construct every moment of *Raging Bull* and the critical recognition the film has received, especially for its astonishing fight sequences, prompts this essay's painstakingly close examination of the film's visual style. In order to understand what it is about *Raging Bull*'s visual style that has caused the film to earn such recognition, one needs to consider the film, as Scorsese did when he constructed it, "inch by inch."

Raging Bull was grueling to plan, shoot, and edit partly because it violates the logic of Hollywood's filming and editing conventions, which offer filmmakers a ready-made, time-tested blueprint for keeping spatial relations coherent, for comfortably orienting spectators, and for maintaining a consistent flow of narrative information. As Hitchcock was fond of observing, however, "nothing in the world is as dull as logic."⁷ *Raging Bull* offers an aesthetically exciting alternative to Hollywood's narrative efficiency and visual coherence.⁸ It rejects many of the stylistic harmonies associated with Hollywood cinema, even though it also relies on, and feels stabilized by, some traditional Hollywood structures (such as classical conventions of narration, continuity, and realism) that prevent the film from collapsing into chaos and arch unpredictability. The constant tugging activity between the film's stylistic perversities (elements that pull the film in disparate directions) and stylistic unities (elements that draw together its incongruent pieces) creates myriad potentials for disorder that the film continually checks through visual means.

In order to understand the kinds of incoherences that characterize *Raging Bull*'s visual style, let us first look at the ways in which the film adopts two antithetical techniques for combining images—Eisensteinian visual collisions and fluid visual transformations. Scorsese himself testified to that tension in his work when he said, "I'm torn between admiring things done in one shot, like Ophuls or Renoir, on the one hand, and the cutting of, say, Hitchcock and Eisenstein on the other."⁹ Afterward, we shall see how *Raging Bull* enables spectators to register the film's various incoherences as if they were not incoherences and to understand combinations of images that no mind could reasonably understand.

Raging Bull and "Intellectual Montage"

Interspersed throughout *Raging Bull*, Scorsese uses a type of editing espoused by Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein in his films and writings from the period 1923 to 1930.¹⁰ Instead of maintaining narrative and spatial continuity between shots, as in the American style of editing, Eisenstein constructed his films (especially his earlier films) through a series of conflicting images. Editing, for Eisenstein, should not be fluid but shocking. He based his theory of editing on the same Hegelian dialectic that Marx used to formulate his theory of revolutionary change, and he believed that by combining two disparate shots (the first a thesis, the second its antithesis), a film could create a new concept (a synthesis) through the collision of images, a concept present in neither shot individually. To that end, he intersperses his earlier films with images that take spectators out of the immediately relevant narrative space in order to depict some other area or figure that offers a metaphorical accentuation or contrast to the narrative action. At other times they show a character or an action from various discordant angles or drastically change the subject of the frame from one shot to the next. Eisenstein believed that incongruent combinations of shots would more effectively convey abstract ideas and create more passionate audience responses than the fluid "continuity editing" prominent in American cinema. He called his editing technique "intellectual montage," and film scholars sometimes refer to it as "collision editing."

Raging Bull offers textbook illustrations of Eisenstein's editing method. Perhaps the most straightforward example of a single Eisensteinian edit is the cut from a scene between Jake and Vicki La Motta in their bedroom to a boxing scene between La Motta

and Tony Janiro. In the bedroom scene, Jake questions a groggy Vicki about a comment she made about Janiro:

JAKE. Well, how come you said that thing about Janiro?
VICKI. What'd I say?
JAKE. You said he had a pretty face.
VICKI. I never noticed his face.
JAKE. Well, how come you said that then?

The scene is quiet (they speak softly, and we hear no ambient sounds or mood music) and the pace slow, but our knowledge of Jake's propensity for jealous violence makes the moment tense and pregnant with seething rage. The low-key lighting, which casts heavy shadows across their faces, makes the mood even more ominous (figure 2). As the scene ends, we see Jake brooding on her comments.



figure 2: Low-key Lighting in Bedroom Scene

Suddenly and shockingly, the film cuts to an extreme close-up of a boxer, presumably Janiro, getting punched twice in the face. The cut is precisely timed with the first punch, and we hear loud pummeling and a raucous crowd. The film makes no effort to smooth the harsh transition from the bedroom to the fighting ring: Instead, we move jarringly from a slow to a fast pace, from quiet to loudness, from stillness to movement, and from contained violence to expressed violence. As Eisenstein would have predicted, the two shots, when combined, create a concept present in neither shot individually: La Motta uses boxing to express his anger and jealousy.

Scorsese peppers *Raging Bull*'s fight sequences with numerous visual collisions and cut-aways similar to the one that joins the bedroom scene to the Janiro fight. During the scene of La Motta's fight with Jimmy Reeves, for instance, the film cuts from the action in the ring to a shot of two men (one of them a soldier) fighting in the stands. The juxtaposition of images suggests that the fighting in the ring encourages and participates in a broader interest in violence among boxing fans. The film furthers that idea when it

intersperses shots of fans cheering the most brutal boxing activity, of photographers voyeuristically recording the bout, and of a riot among the fans after the fight.

The most intensely Eisensteinian fight sequence is the title match with Ray Robinson that results in La Motta's loss of the middle-weight crown. During the final moments of the bout, Scorsese packs into 26 seconds of screen time a sequence of 35 discordant shots that break fundamental rules of continuity editing in order to convey a subjective impression of La Motta's brutal experience in the ring.

As Robinson pummels La Motta, who is too tired even to defend himself, shots of the challenger's punches combine in a barrage of inconsistent images. For instance, Robinson's right jab in one shot (figure 3) illogically hits La Motta with a left hook in the subsequent shot (figure 4), and, when the film cuts back to Robinson, his right punch continues to follow through (figure 5). Violating the 30° rule, the film then jump-cuts from the straight-on shot of Robinson (figure 5) to a low-angle shot of him (figure 6).¹¹ The sequence of 35 shots also contains nine violations of the 180° rule.¹²

Figures 3-6: Four consecutive shots from the eighth fight sequence (La Motta vs. Robinson)



Figure 3: Robinson's right



Figure 4: Reverse shot shows La Motta hit with a left hook



Figure 5: Robinson's right punch follows through



Figure 6: Jump cut to low-angle shot of Robinson

Figures 3-6: Four consecutive shots from the eighth fight sequence (La Motta vs. Robinson)

As the sequence progresses from shot to shot, the camera angles and framing do not follow customary editing patterns. Indeed, the combination of shots seems almost random. Consider for example the violations of traditional continuity in the following seven shots. The angle on the action changes with each shot and—rather than only slightly shifting the frame’s “center of interest,” as is the custom in a conventionally edited sequence¹³—the film moves unpredictably from one close up to another, drastically altering the subject of the frame with each cut:

Shot one: Low-angle extreme close-up of the front of Robinson’s face.

Shot two: High-angle shot of La Motta’s head and his left arm on the ropes.

Shot three: Close-up tracking down from La Motta’s trunks to his bloody legs.

Shot four: Close-up of La Motta’s face being punched.

Shot five: Extreme low angle shot of Robinson’s face.

Shot six: Extreme close-up of the left side of La Motta’s face, slightly low angle, as a glove hits his head.

Shot seven: birds-eye shot of Robinson’s head and face.

Later the sequence violates temporal and graphic continuity by portraying five successive shots of Robinson’s gloves hitting La Motta’s face, without any pause between punches, each shot from a different angle, two of them with the camera turned on its side at opposite 90-degree angles (figures 7 and 8).

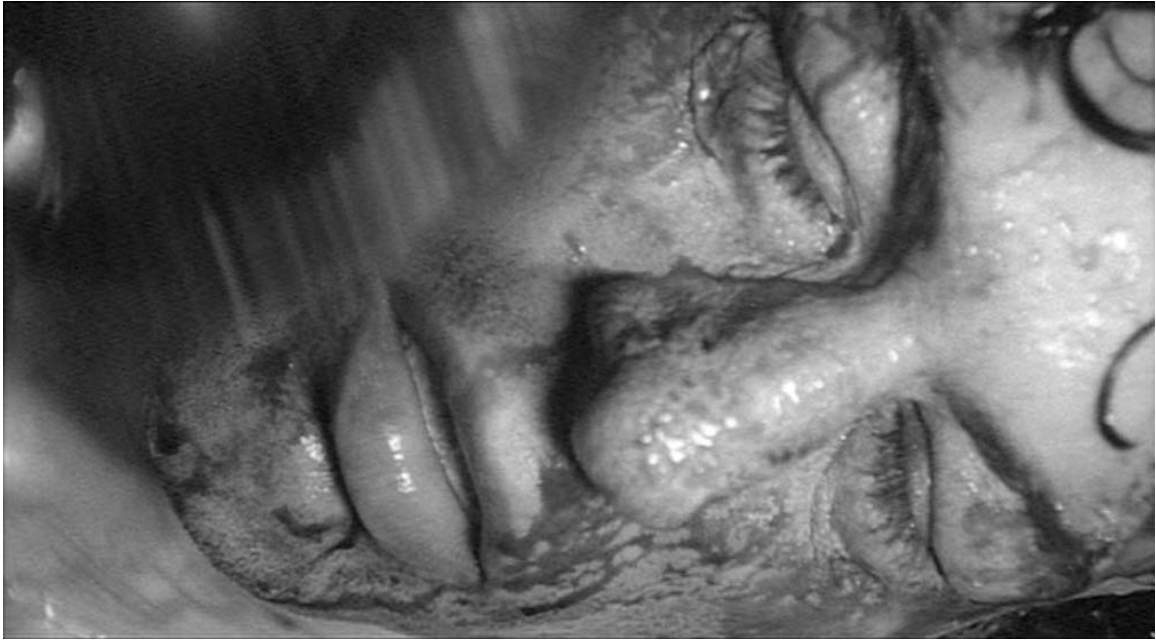


Figure 7



Figure 8

Figures 7-8: Two consecutive shots from the eighth fight sequence, La Motta vs. Robinson

Despite the continuity violations, the sequence does not feel as unconventional as comparable sequences from Eisenstein's films from the 1920s. Eisenstein often takes spectators out of the diegesis in order to create a symbolic association between juxtaposed images. In *October* (1927), for instance, he inter-cuts images of Kerensky

with those of a mechanical peacock, to suggest, through the visual metaphor, the Russian leader's pompousness and posturing.¹⁴ The "collision editing" in *Raging Bull*, by contrast, is more consistent with continuity editing because it does not take the spectator out of the immediate space of the boxing ring. Moreover, as Hitchcock did in *Psycho*'s (1960) shower sequence, Scorsese uses the jarring editing technique to convey the protagonist's subjective experience of the depicted violence: The rapid-fire and disorienting cuts convey the speed and impact of Robinson's blows.¹⁵ Eisenstein uses "collision editing" to convey all sorts of ideas, whereas here Scorsese, like Hitchcock, uses it to convey his protagonist's experience of violence.

Visual Fluidity and *Raging Bull*'s Long Steadicam Shot

Scorsese relishes seamless visual transformations just as much as Eisensteinian collisions. Indeed, the director is known for his long, elegant tracking shots. *Goodfellas* (1990) uses three such shots: 1) Henry Hill's point-of-view shot as he enters a restaurant while characters introduce themselves directly to the camera; 2) the shot entering a refrigerated meat-truck, which begins on a crane above the truck, slowly tracks through the truck's doors, weaves through hanging slabs of frozen meat, and finally stops tracking to film the frozen dead body of a mobster hanging on a meat-hook; and 3) the shot of Henry and Karen entering the Copacabana night club, weaving their way through the back entrance, the hallways, the kitchen, and all the way to their seats, a shot in which the audience's aesthetic excitement mirrors Karen's excitement about her back-door entrance into the club and her date's astonishing privileges.

The long tracking shot of La Motta as he enters the ring before winning the middle-weight crown from Marcel Cerdon rivals any of Scorsese's others in terms of its dramatic impact and dazzling display of virtuoso technique. For this extravagant shot, Scorsese and Chapman took advantage of the recently invented Steadicam camera stabilizing system.¹⁶ First used commercially by Haskell Wexler in *Bound for Glory* (1976), the Steadicam enabled a camera operator to obtain smooth tracking shots using a handheld camera. It cut production costs by eliminating the need to lay tracks or use dollies or cranes and allowed operators to film more easily and smoothly in cars, on boats, moving up and down stairs, etc.¹⁷ Scorsese and Chapman also used the small, lightweight Arriflex 35 BL camera¹⁸ that allowed them, without ballooning production costs, to create complex point-of-view shots and smooth tracking shots, to quickly reorient the camera in the middle of a shot, and to use makeshift rigs in order to, Scorsese has said, "get the cameras flying the way I wanted."¹⁹

The tracking shot of La Motta entering the ring takes full advantage of the beneficial features of the Steadicam and the lightweight Arri BL. I want to focus in particular on the ways in which the shot uses the rig's tractability and smoothness to cause the spectator to adopt the perspective of various "identities" that transform seamlessly as the camera progresses toward the fighting ring.

The shot begins in La Motta's dressing room where we see him warming up for the match (figure 9). The medium shot is confined by the dressing-room walls as well as by the presence of Jake's brother Joey (Joe Pesci) and two trainers. The intimacy of the moment and the tightness of the shot align the spectator with La Motta's entourage, who watch him prepare for the most important fight of his career. As La Motta finishes donning his robe, the camera begins to track backward into the hallway outside the

dressing room. During the backward tracking shot, we see Joey in the front of the frame, La Motta in the middle, and glimpses of the two trainers behind (figure 10). The shot of La Motta and his entourage, as the camera winds through the corridors, is familiar from numerous documentary films (such as *Don't Look Back* [1967] and *Richard Pryor: Live in Concert* [1979]) of singers and comedians as they enter an arena, and, at this point in the shot, the film adopts the look of a performance documentary. (*The Last Waltz*, Scorsese's 1978 documentary of the final concerts of The Band, contains a similar shot through the corridors of a recording studio.) The impression of a documentary film is strengthened when we start to see and hear fans cheering La Motta along, since in such films we generally feel we have privileged access to the performer, traveling with him as he moves through a crowd of fans (figure 11).



figure 9



figure 10



figure 11



figure 12



figure 13

Figures 9-13: Steadicam Shot in *Raging Bull*

Soon, however, we seem to lose that sense of privilege and become one of those very fans. When the camera ducks into a corner and allows La Motta to pass, the backward tracking shot becomes, with hardly a pause, a forward tracking shot, and we now watch the back of the fighter while he enters the crowded arena, moving farther away from us, as other fans increasingly block our view of him (figure 12). As the shot tracks behind La Motta while he walks into the arena, we see a huge, applauding crowd of spectators and an illuminated fight ring in the distance. We can barely see La Motta as he jogs to the left side of the ring and the camera moves to the right. Finally, the camera sweeps into the air, filming the cheering crowd and the fighter as he enters the ring (figure 13).²⁰ At this point, the camera is not limited by the perspective of any individuals in the film, adopting instead the perspective of an omniscient viewer, looking down on the dramatic event. The moment is the visual antithesis of the confined frame that began the shot, yet we have moved here without any abrupt transitions. As the camera takes on its various “identities”—La Motta’s entourage, performance-documentary filmmaker, boxing fan, omniscient viewer—the transformations are always fluid, and one could not demarcate the frames in which each change occurred.

The fluid style of the tracking shot that joins Jake’s dressing room to the fight ring precisely opposes that of the jarring Eisensteinian cuts used to construct the pummeling sequence of the final La Motta / Robinson match. Scorsese’s film combines these antithetical styles (along with several other styles), sometimes within individual scenes. In order to understand the ways in which *Raging Bull* harmonizes its disparate imagery, we should turn to the film’s opening moments, whose visual style is an emblem for that of the entire film. From its very first shots, *Raging Bull* seems to be falling apart stylistically, while a range of visual unifiers hold together the film’s disintegrating pieces.

The First Seven Shots of *Raging Bull*

The first seven shots of *Raging Bull* present three stylistically discordant moments: a dream-like sequence of La Motta shadowboxing, a more documentary-like scene of the aging boxer in a nightclub dressing room, and the intense first fight sequence between La Motta and Jimmy Reeves. Scorsese structures the movements from shot to shot around a series of sharp contrasts (contrasting imagery, tones, and ideas) that create an Eisensteinian sense of graphic contradiction and collision, meanwhile smoothing over the contrasts with narratively incidental elements that help to harmonize the visual conflicts and link the incongruously presented spaces.

In the film’s first shot (after three title cards) we see a fighter shadowboxing in a ring, the opening credits laid on top of the frame (figure 14). The black-and-white, slow-motion shot romanticizes the boxer. He moves with dance-like grace as his leopard-patterned robe gently billows around him, flashbulbs lighting in an airy mist surrounding the boxing ring. The intermezzo from Mascagni’s romantic *Cavalleria Rusticana* plays in the soundtrack. The sequence instills boxing with a sense of lonely grandeur, as the solitary fighter dances around the ring in what metaphorically suggests a warm-up before a bout.²¹



figure 14: Shot One of *Raging Bull*



figure 15: Shot Two of *Raging Bull*



figure 16: Shot Three of *Raging Bull*

Figures 14-16: Shots One through Three of *Raging Bull*



figure 17: Shot Five of *Raging Bull*



figure 18: Shot Six of *Raging Bull*



figure 19: Shot Seven of *Raging Bull*

Figures 17-19: Shots Five through Seven of *Raging Bull*

Nine seconds after the end of the credit sequence, the film makes a striking transition to a shot of Robert De Niro as the aging former-middle-weight-champion rehearsing a poem in his dressing room for a nightclub performance (figure 17). In this fifth shot of the movie, an older-looking, grotesquely overweight De Niro appears in stark contrast to the graceful, svelte and youthful actor of the credits. (The image of De Niro in this shot is made more jarring—and becomes, in 1980, immediately famous—because the actor himself has clearly gained so much weight for the role, pushing Method acting to extraordinary lengths.) The lighting in the dressing room, moreover, looks hard and realistic, as compared to the soft, misty lighting during the credit sequence. Whereas the first shot was romantic and ethereal, shot five appears drab and documentary-like.

The film smoothes the progression from shot one to shot five with several unifying elements. For one thing, the movement from the credits to narrative action has occurred gradually: Shot one depicts title credits that display writing outside of the story's diegesis (figure 14); shot two is an intertitle that also displays non-diegetic writing ("New York City, 1964" [figure 15]) but that refers to story information; and shots three and four depict a street signboard that displays text that appears within the diegetic space of the movie ("An Evening with Jake La Motta" [figure 16] and "Tonight 8:30"). Hence, the film takes spectators from outside the story to the story's interior through four successive shots of written text, and it feels like a natural progression when the fifth shot begins depicting narrative action. Other elements unify the first five shots of the movie. The idea of *preparation for a public performance* joins the shot of La Motta warming up in the ring to the shot of him rehearsing in his dressing room, and both shots reveal La Motta as a solitary, even lonely, figure. Moreover, the image of the younger La Motta shadowboxing reverberates with the poem the older La Motta recites that recalls his previous boxing career, "I remember those cheers, they still ring in my ears...." Finally, La Motta's spoken lines extend over the cut from the shots of the signboard to that of the dressing room, providing a sound bridge from shot three to shot five.

The dressing-room scene, which lasts about one minute, cuts abruptly to a boxing scene that takes place twenty-three years earlier and that could hardly be more disparate in style and tone. Scorsese, however, maintains several graphic consistencies across the cut from the sixth shot of the film (the final shot of the dressing room sequence) to the seventh (the opening shot of the film's first boxing sequence). A medium-close-up of the older La Motta in his dressing room (figure 18) cuts to an almost identically framed medium-close-up of a younger La Motta fighting in the ring (figure 19), and the words "Jake La Motta 1941" in shot seven replace "Jake La Motta, 1964" in shot six. Several other consistencies join the two shots. A metal bar behind La Motta in the dressing room graphically matches the ropes behind him in the fighting ring. La Motta, moreover, still appears alone in the frame, and his spoken line, "That's entertainment," extends over the cut, providing another sound bridge. (Scorsese said that he discovered the cut from the dressing room scene to the first fight sequence "by accident one night at the editing table, when I was in despair about being able to connect Jake's bloated face of the 60s with his young face of the 40s. Two tracks accidentally overlapped and bang!"²²) Shot seven also recalls prior shots in the film: The appearance of written text, "Jake La Motta 1941" (which uses the same non-serif, shadowed, all-capital-letter font of the credits), echoes

the appearance of text in five earlier shots, and the shot of La Motta in the ring connects it to the shot of the same lean, young boxer of the credit sequence.

Nonetheless, the cut to shot seven is extremely jarring. The young La Motta looks trim and focused (figure 19), as opposed to the portly, slightly stuttering La Motta of the dressing-room scene (figure 18). The tone of the film has moved from quiet to loud, from dispassionate to intense, and from placid to brutal. Indeed, as soon as the older La Motta completes his line, “That’s entertainment,” the young La Motta twice gets punched in the face. Shot seven, moreover, has none of the ethereal beauty of the credit sequence that it recalls, depicting boxing not with romance and grandeur but with brutality. Indeed, the credit sequence contains the only images in the movie in which La Motta’s boxing talents appear graceful.

The entirety of *Raging Bull* works similarly to its first seven shots. On the one hand, *Raging Bull*’s disparate styles and colliding images threaten the film with visual incoherence. The film, for instance, mixes in home-movie-style color footage (spliced into each exhibition print *by hand* because the footage used different print stock), still photography, intertitles, and television footage. Moreover, the stylization and visual complexity of the fight sequences contrast with the documentary-like realism of the sequences outside the ring, which, aside from occasional slow-motion effects and heavily low-key lighting, mostly employ straightforward conventions of lighting, editing, and cinematography.

On the other hand, the film’s various harmonizing elements provide continuities from shot to shot and throughout the film. For example, the black-and-white cinematography creates high-contrast images and dramatic shadows in sequences both inside and outside the ring and gives much of *Raging Bull* the look of film noir as well as 1940s press photography, both of which, according to Chapman, influenced the film’s visual style.²³ Moreover, although each fight sequence is shot in a distinct style, all of them keep the camera mostly inside the ring, and most make use of slow-motion cinematography, extreme high- and low-angle shots, and zooms or moving cameras. Furthermore, most of the fight sequences include shots of smoke-filled arenas, heated discussions between La Motta and his crew in his corner, and photojournalists’ incessantly snapping photographs.²⁴ The film also feels stabilized by a narrative purpose that generally conforms to principles of classical Hollywood narration, at least in the first hour and twenty minutes: Our protagonist has a clearly defined goal (to win the middle-weight championship) and must overcome obstacles (mobsters, a boxing scandal, weight problems, and arguments with his brother and wives) in order to achieve it in a definitive climax (the 1949 Cerdon fight).²⁵ Consequently, although *Raging Bull* often risks stylistic disharmony in precarious ways, one generally experiences the film not as avant-garde experiment or salmagundi but as unified.

In the next, final section of this essay, I want to show that *Raging Bull* takes its visual disharmony even to the point of absurdity. I want also to show, however, that the film prevents spectators from recognizing the disharmony and absurdity *as* disharmony and absurdity and enables them to make sense out of visually nonsensical information.

On the Brink of Absurdity: “La Motta vs. Sugar Ray Robinson, Detroit 1943”

The film’s depiction of the first 1943 bout between La Motta and Robinson best illustrates the extent to which *Raging Bull* courts visual and logical incoherence. I

propose to study that incoherence without, as other scholars attempt to do, making it seem more coherent. Robin Wood, for instance, wants to “make sense” of the “film’s [incoherent] structure” in order to “explain the fascination that La Motta and the film hold for our culture.”²⁶ Instead, I want to show that our culture’s fascination with *Raging Bull* results at least partly from the impossibility of making the film “make sense.”²⁷

The entire bout takes 75 seconds of screen time, but three shots—which depict La Motta punching Robinson out of the boxing ring—are particularly dense with illogic; they last five seconds. After describing the sequence of shots, I shall attempt to demonstrate that spectators understand the sequence despite that much of what they understand is plainly absurd.



Figure 20: Shot 1



Figure 21: Shot 2a



Figure 22: Shot 2b



Figure 23: Shot 2c



Figure 24: Shot 3

Figures 20-24: Three consecutive shots from the first 1943 bout between Jake LaMotta and Sugar Ray Robinson

Shot one (figure 20). Low-angle long shot of La Motta driving Robinson from the right side of the ring to the left as the camera tracks left with them.

Shot two (figures 21-23). High-angle, over-the-shoulder shot as La Motta punches Robinson out of the ring (figure 21). The shot is in fast motion, and the camera quickly zooms in from a long shot of Robinson to a medium close-up, as the boxer falls to the floor beyond the ring (figure 22). The camera then tilts up to film a photo-journalist taking a flash photograph from ringside. The frame then turns almost completely white, and, as the whiteness fades, we see the decaying flash of the photographer's camera (figure 23).

Shot three (figure 24). A freeze-frame representing a still photograph, brightly lit, taken from ringside, presumably the photograph taken by the photographer in shot two. La Motta has just punched Robinson, who is in the midst of falling out of the ring.

This dense and rapid series of shots asks an audience to understand a lot that does not make sense. Let's begin with the most illogical shot in the sequence—shot three (figure 24), the brightly lit still frame of La Motta punching Robinson out of the ring. The shot invites spectators to understand that the photograph taken by the photo-journalist in shot two has been developed and is presumably printed in a newspaper the following day. Compounding the temporal displacement, the picture depicts Robinson in mid-air, even though shot two showed the boxer already on the ground (figure 22). Hence, the one-second still shot moves our minds both forward in time (to the next-day's newspaper) and backward (to before Robinson hit the ground) at the same instant.

The sequence's most unfeasible ideas, however, result from our likely impression that the photographer represented in the left side of shot three (figure 24) is the same photographer depicted in shot two (figure 23), in other words the same photographer who presumably *took* shot three, the very shot in which he appears.

It would be perfectly logical to assume that we are looking at a photograph taken by a photographer we have not seen. However, I doubt audiences *do* assume so, since the conventions of continuity editing—which help orient us during the rapid cuts—tell us that the same photographer who is in the picture also took it. On the one hand, the convention of eyeline matches²⁸ suggests that, when shots of a photo-journalist taking a photograph (shot two) are followed by the shot of a photograph (shot three), the photo-journalist (in shot two) must have taken the photograph (shot three). On the other hand, the convention of graphic matches²⁹ tells us that the photographers depicted in the two shots (who look the same and are performing the very same action in what looks like the very same location) are the same. Although in this instance the different editing conventions result in an illogical idea, I suspect one would find it more difficult to mentally insert a new photographer into the sequence than to allow the matches to orient us from shot to shot. In other words, spectators probably prefer nonsense to disorientation, as long as they don't recognize the nonsense *as* nonsense.

Several explanations might account for the feeling of coherence that a close analysis of the series of frames belies. For one thing, the brevity of the sequence invites spectators to make whatever sense they can out of the barrage of images, and, as the

narrative moves quickly forward, one needn't bother figuring out the details of the various temporal and spatial impossibilities. The sequence, moreover, does not *evidently* fail to make sense unless one thinks about it, since spectators would only find themselves presented with the inconceivable notion that the photographer has taken his own picture if they connected two separate assumptions: 1) that the photographer in shot two took the picture in shot three, and 2) that the figure of the photographer and his camera in shot three coincides with similar figures in shot two. The incompatibility of the two assumptions does not prevent them from seeming independently correct. Moreover, the narrative (the film's most forceful unifier), and our investment in our protagonist's efforts to win the bout, provide a stable context capable of distracting us from the film's lapses in visual coherence.

The depiction of the 1943 bout contains several other elements that flirt almost as boldly with visual absurdity. For instance, although filmmakers generally reserve fast motion for comic sequences in movies (such as Keystone Cops chase sequences) and transitions (such as in *Zazie Dans le Métro*), shot two (figures 21-23) uses the technique during a moment of serious dramatic action. Later, after Robinson gets up from the floor, we see La Motta walking back to his corner of the ring. The shot of La Motta begins in real time, moves into slow motion, and then returns to real time again, a stylistic strangeness that is only partly excused by the impression that the film has adopted the subjectivity of La Motta, impatiently waiting for Robinson to stand up and return to the fight.³⁰

Some of the most absurd moments in the scene combine images and sounds in a bizarre way. Whereas the sounds of punches and cheering fans provide a degree of realism—as does the radio-announcer's commentary, which also supplies pertinent story information (“The undefeated Sugar Ray and the defeated Jake at Madison Square Garden,” “in the first knock-down of his career,” etc.)—nonetheless, we also hear narratively incongruous sounds that come across almost comically in the context of a boxing match: booming sounds (like a large animal thumping in the forest), something that sounds to me like an elephant screaming, and a high-pitched screech that fades into the sounds of cheering fans.³¹

One six-second shot contains some of the scene's most strange imagery and sounds. At first tracking La Motta as he punches Robinson from the left side of the ring to the right (figure 25), the camera then tilts up disorientingly and whip pans across the lights of the arena (figure 26). Nothing within the narrative motivates the camera's tilt upward (none of the characters, for instance, looks up into the arena's rafters to provide a narrative “excuse” for filming there), and it feels momentarily reassuring when it tilts back down to the ring, where one expects it to land on Robinson. Instead, it lands on La Motta (figure 27), who now faces the opposite direction and drives Robinson to the *left* side of the ring; the boxers apparently changed places when the camera filmed the lights, and it takes a moment for us to reorient to their new locations. Even more bizarre, as the camera tilts up to the lights and then back down, we hear something that resembles the revving sound of a cartoon character winding up for a punch.



figure 25

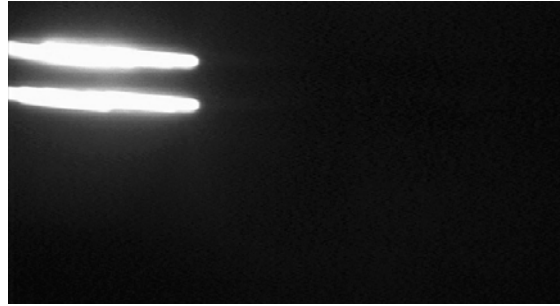


figure 26



figure 27

Figures 25-27: A single six-second shot from the first 1943 bout between Jake LaMotta and Sugar Ray Robinson

Scenes such as the one depicting the 1943 bout between La Motta and Robinson seem intent upon including elements that threaten to make the film absurd and that complicate what would otherwise be a straightforward exposition of the story. The film invites spectators to integrate into their general experience of the scene effects impertinent to the scene's narrative purpose.

Raging Bull's unobtrusive nonsense differs from conspicuously anti-verisimilar aspects in some art films, such as visual distortions in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919), temporal and spatial illogic in *October* (1927), narrative nonsense in *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), or the various absurdities of style and character behavior in *Pierrot le Fou* (1965). Such films advertise their violations of logic and conventional realism and are therefore confined by the limitations imposed on anything (even distortions and paradoxes) that can be fixed and categorized. Watching *Raging Bull*, we understand what we see without noticing that logic would prevent us from understanding it. Because the film seems coherent but isn't, it remains a step removed from perfect intelligibility, and one's efforts to understand it only make the film feel more elusive. Critics often call *Raging Bull* complex, but its complexity is partly an effect of contradiction and absurdity masquerading as coherence. The film seems to have more going on than it really has.

Sequences like the 1943 match between La Motta and Robinson make sense only because we *want* them to make sense, and because incidental harmonies encourage us to temper, disregard, or make do with the film's various absurdities. It takes a confident filmmaker—confident in his talents as well as in the audience's ability to process complex visual information—to flirt so boldly with incoherence. However, while at times *Raging Bull* seems held together only by weak stitching, the stability offered by its

various visual and narrative unities prevents it from separating into incoherent pieces.³² The film invites audiences to conform it to the logic of its more conventional and harmonious features (classical narration, continuity editing, graphic unities, etc.), which provide a solid backdrop against which Scorsese can lay his visual anarchy. Hence, *Raging Bull* asks spectators to perform mental activities more athletic than those performed when watching more coherent works of art: It asks them to make order out of the barrage of chaos the film insists on hitting them with. Spectators do not simply fill in gaps the movie leaves open. In order to understand what they are watching, they must mentally correct the movie so that it depicts not what reason says it is depicting but rather what narrative context says it *must* be depicting. Hence, they make *Raging Bull* into something logic insists it is not: coherent and comprehensible.

Notes

¹ *Raging Bull* is now perhaps the most highly regarded film of the 1980s. In 1981, the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences honored *Raging Bull* with eight Oscar nominations, including nominations for Directing and Cinematography, and the film won Oscars for Editing and Best Actor. *Raging Bull* did not receive many good reviews from major critics at the time of its release, but by the end of the decade several polls of critics ranked it the best film of the 1980s. *Premiere* magazine's poll of 23 "film world notables" gave *Raging Bull* almost twice as many points (105) as the second highest scorer, *Wings of Desire* (59). Similar polls by *American Film* and *Time* also ranked *Raging Bull* the best film of the decade.

² David Thompson and Ian Christie, ed., *Scorsese on Scorsese* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), 77. The film posed problems for the director from the start. At first Scorsese didn't want to make the movie—he hated boxing and had no interest in making a boxing picture—and had to be convinced to do it by Robert De Niro, who desperately wanted to play *Raging Bull*'s protagonist, former middle-weight champion Jake La Motta. The script went through several rewrites by several writers. Based on La Motta's autobiography (written by La Motta, Joseph Carter, and Peter Savage), the screenplay, commissioned by De Niro, started with Mardik Martin (whom Scorsese knew from NYU film school and who had helped script *Mean Streets* [1973] and *New York, New York* [1977]), and was rewritten by Paul Schrader (who wrote the original script for *Taxi Driver* [1976]). The executives at United Artists thought Schrader's script had too little commercial appeal and wanted to kill the project. So Scorsese and De Niro wrote another draft, the final shooting script for the picture (which apparently toned down some of the violence and helped to humanize La Motta) and convinced UA executives to fund it. Several books recount *Raging Bull*'s troubled inception, including Mary Pat Kelly, *Martin Scorsese: A Journey* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1991), 122-27; Steven Bach, *Final Cut: Dreams and Disaster in the Making of Heaven's Gate* (London: W. Morrow, 1985), 163-6; and Les Keyser, *Martin Scorsese* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995), 105-110.

³ Kelly, 132.

⁴ Kelly, 148.

⁵ Before *Raging Bull*, Schoonmaker had worked as editor on several documentaries, including *Woodstock* (1970), and on Scorsese's first independent feature, *Who's That Knocking at My Door* (1968). Their collaboration has been so productive that, since *Raging Bull*, she has worked almost exclusively for Scorsese, editing almost all of his movies, commercials, music videos and television shows.

⁶ Kelly, 150. One of Irwin Winkler's anecdotes about Scorsese illustrates the director's anxious perfectionism in making *Raging Bull*. He found Scorsese in the editing room at midnight on the last day of editing, after the director had taken so long to edit the picture that the executives at UA were concerned about making opening-night deadlines five days later: "He wasn't very happy with one scene in which a minor character, played by Marty's father, orders a drink at a nightclub. Marty said you couldn't hear the words, 'Cutty Sark.' I could hear the line just fine, but he couldn't hear it. At midnight I said, 'Marty, that's it. The picture is over. You have to give it up. If you can't hear "Cutty

Sark,” it’s just too bad.’ He looked at me, and he said, ‘I’m taking my name off the picture.’” Winkler said that he played the “hard-hearted producer” and sent the picture to the lab for printing anyway. Kelly, 149.

⁷ Cited, for instance, in James Naremore, ed., *North by Northwest* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 181.

⁸ Several scholars have discussed the film’s lack of narrative coherence. Robin Wood says, “The film’s fragmented structure can be read as determined by La Motta’s own incoherence, by Scorsese’s fascination with that incoherence and with the violence that is its product” *Hollywood From Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 251. Marie Kathryn Connelly says, “*Raging Bull*’s structure is fragmentary.... Conventional transitions are not provided, and viewers must actively participate in pulling together the materials for themselves and coming to an understanding of the meaning of what has been presented” *Martin Scorsese: An Analysis of His Feature Films, with a Filmography of His Entire Directorial Career* (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1991), 73.

⁹ Andy Dougan, *Martin Scorsese* (New York: Thunder Mouth Press., 1998), 93-94.

¹⁰ David Bordwell draws a distinction between the early theoretical writings of Eisenstein during the period 1923 and 1930 (which emphasized a montage of contradiction and collision) and those of the period 1930 to 1948 (which more greatly emphasized synthesis). According to Bordwell, Eisenstein, in his early writings, “insists that cinematic montage is an act of *collision*.” “Eisenstein’s Epistemological Shift,” *Screen* 15: 4 (Winter 1974-75), 34. By contrast, Bordwell sees a “Romantic aesthetic” in the later writings and films, when Eisenstein embraces “synesthesia or ‘synchronisation of senses’ in accordance with a new theory of the art work: the work as a polyphonic tissue of interwoven ‘lines’” (41).

¹¹ The 30° rule instructs filmmakers to vary the camera position from shot to shot by at least 30°. Violating the rule results in a “jump cut.”

¹² The 180° rule helps to maintain clear and consistent screen space. “The scene’s action ... is presumed to take place along a discernible, predictable line. This axis of action determines a half-circle, or 180° area, where the camera can be placed to present the action.” David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, Sixth Edition (New York: McGraw Hill, 2001), 263.

¹³ According to Bordwell, in a classical Hollywood movie, “[f]rom shot to shot, tonality, movement, and the center of compositional interest shift enough to be distinguishable but not enough to be disturbing.” David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge, 1988), 55.

¹⁴ Bordwell says that “the bird’s stiff movements (it is a *clockwork* peacock) announce the link between Kerensky and those mechanical artifacts that inhabit the Winter Palace.” “Eisenstein’s Epistemological Shift,” 36.

¹⁵ Scorsese said about this portion of the fight sequence, “It’s not a matter of literally translating what Jake sees and hears, but to present what the match means for him, all the while respecting, as much as possible, historical truth.” Cited in Peter Brunette, ed., *Martin Scorsese: Interviews* (Jackson, MS : University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 95.

¹⁶ “Years in development, the Steadicam was a gimbal-jointed camera mount that

attached to the operator's chest and waist by means of a harness; a small video camera attached near the lens fed a high-intensity monitor that acted as a viewfinder, enabling the operator to frame his shots while in motion." David Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2000), 374-5. The filmmakers also used the Steadicam to stabilize the camera during some of *Raging Bull*'s fight sequences.

¹⁷ The Steadicam "cut production costs by making it possible to shoot in tight interior locations, simulate crane shots from improvised ramps or stairs, and turn *any* vehicle—from a helicopter to a galloping horse—into a perfect camera platform since the Steadicam stabilizing devices had a shock-absorbing capacity of two to three feet, as opposed to only a few inches for previous stabilizers." Cook, 376.

¹⁸ The Arriflex weighed 15 lbs. unloaded. It debuted in America in 1972's *Across 110th Street*. Cook, 371. Chapman was particularly pleased to be able to use new Zeiss lenses: "The thing, more or less new I guess, for which I was most grateful on the technological front, was the wonderful set of Zeiss Super Speeds with which we shot [*Taxi Driver* and *Raging Bull*]. They were amazingly accurately calibrated so that 2.8 was really 2.8 and 1.9 really 1.9. Most lenses are nowhere near so true." Michael Chapman, email to author, 6 Nov. 2001.

¹⁹ Kelly, 139.

²⁰ Describing how he got the camera into the air in the last moments of the Steadicam shot, Chapman says, "The Steadicam operator stepped onto a platform rigged on a stage crane which was wheeled into position when the lens had passed it and it thus wouldn't be seen. Then as Bobby [de Niro] walked away and climbed into the ring the grips simply raised the crane and, as I remember, swung it to the right." Michael Chapman, email to author, 7 July, 2003.

²¹ Connelly says about this shot, "The slow motion softens his punches, effecting a grace and lyricism" (74).

²² Cited in Brunette, 93.

²³ To prepare for black-and-white shooting, Chapman and Scorsese screened *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *The Sweet Smell of Success* (1957), as well as Buster Keaton shorts. Chapman says that he also studied tabloid photography from the 1940s to determine the look of *Raging Bull*: "The '40s were the great days of press photography, like the *New York Daily News* and *Life* magazine and photojournalism in the grand manner that we no longer have. And many of the great subjects of that time were prizefighters. There were many, many photographs of Jake LaMotta, for example. He was a very popular subject in his day. So it appeared to Marty and me that this kind of look embodied a certain kind of spirit, of the way those people looked at the world." Cited in Ric Gentry, "Michael Chapman Captures *Raging Bull* in Black and White," *Millimeter* 9: 2 (Feb 1981), 112.

Scorsese has indicated several reasons for shooting *Raging Bull* in black-and-white: He was concerned about the tendency of color-film stock to fade; he wanted to give the movie the feeling of a documentary and to differentiate his film from several other boxing pictures coming out at the same time in the wake of *Rocky* (1976), including *Rocky II*, *The Champ*, *The Main Event*, and *Matilda*; and black-and-white recalls old boxing pictures, such as *Body and Soul* (1947) and *The Set-Up* (1949), of the era in which the film primarily takes place. Chapman offers a somewhat different account: "I wanted

to [shoot in black and white] out of craftsmanship, for professional reasons. And [Scorsese is] an old film scholar and film obsessive; many of the films he grew up on were in black and white. So when he called me about *Raging Bull*, we agreed that this was our chance.” Gentry, 108-9.

²⁴ Chapman says, “There were enormous and elaborately choreographed flashbulb sequences, where the flashes go off all around the boxers in spirals, or shot at 120 frames with just the flashes so it would be like strobe lighting, an incessant beat that became very abstract, as it did in the last fight with Sugar Ray Robinson.” Gentry, 114. Ric Gentry adds that the flashes are “extremely effective at punctuating the drama of the fight, and likewise casting behind and around the fighters an aura of light that is simultaneously reminiscent of released kinetic energy through their violent interaction, as well as a wavering spiritual pulse” (115).

²⁵ David Bordwell says, “The classical Hollywood film presents psychologically defined individuals who struggle to solve a clear-cut problem or to attain specific goals. In the course of the this struggle, the characters enter into conflict with others or with external circumstances. The story ends with a decisive victory or defeat, a resolution of the problem and a clear achievement or nonachievement of the goals.” “Classical Hollywood Cinema: Narrational Principles and Procedures,” in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 18.

²⁶ Wood, 251. Wood says, “Far from being a rambling and structureless stringing together of moments or a mere character study, it is among the major documents of our age: a work singlemindedly concerned with chronicling the disastrous consequences, for men and women alike, of the repression of constitutional bisexuality within our culture” (258).

²⁷ My discussion of the aesthetic value of nonsense is indebted to Stephen Booth’s *Precious Nonsense: The Gettysburg Address, Ben Jonson’s Epitaphs on His Children, and Twelfth Night* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). Booth says that great works of art “are, and seem often to work hard at being, always on the point of one or another kind of incoherence—always on the point of disintegrating and/or of integrating the very particulars they exclude” (35-36).

²⁸ An eyeline match occurs when one shot depicts someone looking at something and the subsequent shot shows what the person sees.

²⁹ Bordwell and Thompson define a graphic match as “two successive shots joined so as to create a strong similarity of compositional elements” (431).

³⁰ Scorsese said that he came up with the idea of sliding into slow motion on the set: “At that point, we overcranked, so that it was normal, twenty-four frames; and then we went to forty-eight within the shot so it became slow motion; then back to twenty-four as he came around to his corner, the neutral corner, to wait. Then bang, cut, and he came back in fighting. That we did on the set.” Cited in Kelly, 136.

³¹ Donald O. Mitchell, a sound re-recording engineer for *Raging Bull*, said that sound-effects editor Frank Warner used “animal sounds such as a lion roar mixed over a man’s scream.” David Weishaar, “Interview With Donald O. Mitchell (Part I)” 9 September 2003, *FilmSound.Org* and *Cinema Audio Society*, <<http://www.filmsound.org/cas/mitchell1.htm>>. Scorsese said about Warner, “He used rifle shots and melons breaking, but he wouldn’t tell us what many of the effects were; he

became very possessive and even burnt them afterwards so nobody else could use them.” Thompson and Christie, 83.

³² Booth says, “Great works of art are daredevils. They flirt with disasters and, at the same time, they let you know they are married forever to particular, reliable order and purpose” (35).