
Boxing: Raging Bull And Cinderella Man - An Analysis Of Two Renowned Sports Films

The boxer, as portrayed in film, embodies the virile working-class hero who seeks unrelenting power and control at the expense of his personal well-being and often his relationships with others. During his struggle for social acceptance and dominance, his body—viciously wounded—is commoditized as a disposable byproduct of the sport. He is faced with balancing his competitive individualism and title-seeking quest with self-sacrifice for the common good. Within the boxing ring, he stands alone feeling isolated, exposed, and embattled. However, the utter brutality and hardship associated with boxing is borne not only by the pugilist, but also by those around him. He struggles with both public and private matters that motivate him to become a prizefighter. Boxing films are not merely about one's rise and fall, but about "exposing the body in order to reveal the fundamental struggles of the soul" (Grindon, 2011). In addition to navigating these internal conflicts, he commonly experiences a masculinity crisis involving his romantic affairs with women. The masculine traits of a boxer entice him to remain loyal to the manly ethos of his profession. On the other hand, this often comes at the expense of successfully courting a woman. Thus, the two are constantly at odds from beginning to end. These are merely a few ways in which the pugilist grapples with his identity issues and struggles for acceptance.

Raging Bull

As one of Hollywood's most admired sports films, Martin Scorsese's *Raging Bull* (1980) explores the troubled life of a boxer and batterer whose self-destructive tendencies ruin his body and alienate those closest to him. Jake LaMotta—a volatile, beastly personality both in and out of the ring—is a repugnant and unlikeable protagonist whose violent nature appears throughout every facet of his personal and professional life. He prefers to use physical action to protect his insecurities and shortcomings as a boxer, husband, father, and brother. As a result of his emotional immaturity, LaMotta channels his internal anger from his personal life into the ring when fighting opponents. While the actual boxing matches are abbreviated in the film, they serve as the vehicle for depicting LaMotta's issues with sexuality, ethnicity, violence, working-class life, and self-esteem, among others. Through jealousy, paranoia, and fear, LaMotta destroys all of his relationships and becomes a bloated ex-champ whose life spirals out of control.

Jake LaMotta's animalistic and gritty temperament represent a central theme in *Raging Bull* that manifests in both his boxing environment and personal life. LaMotta was a bull in the ring and a pig outside of it. He even wore a leopard print robe before his fights. His moments of rage terrorized his opponents as well as his loved ones. When analyzing the film through the lens of Stuart Hall's *Encoding and Decoding*, viewers decode a message that goes beyond the fact that boxing is a violent sport; rather, they perceive LaMotta as a beastly figure both in and out of the ring. Hall offers insight into the relationship between media and their audiences by examining how messages are encoded by producers and decoded by consumers. While audiences may interpret a different meaning of the intended message, the media rely on understanding their audience's perspective in order to develop a more effective message. The

encoder uses certain symbols that are easily understood by the receiver. In *Raging Bull*, Scorsese wants the viewer to understand that LaMotta was a product of the society in which he lived. With most of the film taking place immediately following the conclusion of World War II, LaMotta was part of a community where gaining acceptance meant fighting and beating people mercilessly. The encoded messages and symbols used to support this premise are subtle yet incredibly intentional, particularly regarding fight scenes. During the boxing bouts, the music that accompanies the violent exchanges is layered with screams, grunts, and animal noises. The ring is a slaughterhouse and LaMotta represents a primitive, rabid beast who is incapable of expressing his emotions without resorting to violence in order to assert his dominance over others. Viewers are intended to perceive LaMotta and the sport of boxing as relentlessly ferocious to the point that it becomes primitive. It demonstrates to the consumer that LaMotta is ruled by a great deal of powerful emotions that he is unable to control or understand. Music and sound are appropriately used throughout the film to add another layer of messaging that the viewer may not immediately recognize but proves to be instrumental in our understanding of the protagonist and the sport in which he competes.

There are a number of other ways in which Scorsese brilliantly communicates the message to audiences. For instance, Scorsese employs bleak black and white photography throughout the film. He does this for a few reasons. First, it perfectly fits the subject and time period of the film—the 1940s and 1950s—when color television was not yet mainstream. Second, it serves a functional purpose that enables Scorsese to isolate the soul of the troubled protagonist. Audiences are forced to perceive the film through the lens of the time period. The black and white photography aestheticizes the film and lifts viewers out of the present and transports them into the appropriate era. Another way Scorsese influences the message is through the use of slow-motion. Particularly during fight scenes, when slow-motion is used, the audiences perceive that the film is being taken out of objective reality. It places the viewer in the subjectivity of LaMotta's mind. This is an effective technique for decoding the message as it shows the audience a more violent depiction of the blows exchanged in the ring.

Jake LaMotta is a deceptively complex character whose sexual insecurities and masochist behaviors are reasons for his professional and personal pitfalls. *Raging Bull* is not a boxing movie as much as it is a story that explores the darker elements of masculinity and human psychology. The sport and type of athlete matter a great deal. Boxers were perceived as macho-like figures that were the epitome of what it means to be a man. It requires never-ending individual effort and hardship to fight another warrior capable and willing to endure the same challenges. However, LaMotta's sexual insecurities and emotional immaturity prove that premise wrong—it is entirely a myth. Once true, the narrative has been altered over time to convince consumers of its veracity (Barthes). If LaMotta's case is closely examined, on the other hand, one can see how he clearly does not live up to those characteristics. LaMotta's relationship with Vickie is an instrumental narrative in the film. LaMotta fears he is not sexually adequate enough to be in a relationship with such an attractive woman. By the same token, he feels he must assert his hyper-masculinity as a boxer in every way he can. He seeks to suppress his feminine features (such as "little girl hands") and even implores his brother to punch him in the face repeatedly to demonstrate his tolerance for pain. This narrative is a function of the lower-class Italian community in which he grew up as well as the time period. During the 1940s and 1950s, men asserted, or attempted to assert dominance and control over women in society. A limited and narrowminded understanding of gender roles was pervasive because that was the culture at the time. As Garry Whannel points out in *Media Sports Stars: Masculinities and Moralities*, the growth of sports media has given athletes a high degree of

cultural visibility, particularly as it pertains to masculinity and morality. Boxing is the ultimate combination of competitive individualism and masculinity. Thus, during the 1940s and 1950s, men (particularly LaMotta) associate masculinity with aggression, violence, and authority. However, the audience sees how toxic the narrative around hyper-masculinity can be. It degrades relationships, communication skills, and notions of self-worth. Finally, LaMotta is far from being a hero and role model. Joseph Campbell's analysis of the term 'hero' concludes that the hero's actions define him. Clearly, LaMotta's deplorable behavior alone precludes him from being considered a hero. LaMotta does, however, rise to Celebrity status given his boxing accomplishments including winning the middleweight championship. Given LaMotta's violent nature throughout the film, he is unquestionably an anti-hero and a protagonist who—through his actions—continues to undermine himself and others.

Cinderella Man

Cinderella Man (2005) depicts the rags-to-riches story of boxer James Braddock who overcomes financial hardship caused by the Great Depression and ultimately wins the heavyweight championship. During the late 1920s, Braddock was considered a highly ranked fighter until he broke his hand in competition. With his career decimated by injury, Braddock could no longer support his family, so he began working as a laborer at the docks. With only one day's notice, Braddock was given a second chance and fought John "Corn" Griffin, a formidable heavyweight contender. To everyone's surprise, Braddock emerged victorious and his road to a comeback began. Braddock earns the opportunity to fight the heavyweight champion, Max Baer, for the title. Baer is well-known for having killed two other boxers during fights and many suspected Braddock would become the third. As the underdog, Braddock defeats Baer and not only becomes a boxing champion, but also the champion of the downtrodden masses.

When analyzing *Cinderella Man*, it is important to consider the time period in which it is set. During the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s, the United States experienced its most harmful period of economic hardship—the Great Depression. In the film, the media is used to establish the time period and help the viewer understand the magnitude of the Depression. The film calls attention to the plight of working-class individuals during a time of hopelessness and despair. Seemingly all faith in institutions was lost. Thus, sports became a vehicle for diverting attention away from misery. Sports, and boxing in particular, was instrumental in lower-class culture because it served as a method of escapism from their problems. Heavyweight champions, in fact, were seen as superstars and larger than life figures. They often represented the struggle of the poor and thus, were champions of the common man as much as they were boxing champions. James Braddock precisely characterized this cause. As an aspiring boxer whose career was interrupted by hardship, Braddock was undoubtedly the underdog in his quest to become a heavyweight champion.

In *Cinderella Man*, the media play a vital role in shaping the message that is consumed by the general public. As the gatekeepers of all information, the media have significant influence in developing and communicating the message (Lazersfeld & Merton). During the early twentieth century, the introduction of radio transformed media production and consumption. While newspapers were mostly considered local media, radio elevated sports media to a national scale and helped usher in the "golden age" of sports. Radio announcers offered poetic insight, using metaphors and anecdotes that were both relatable and engaging. The explosion of radio

during the 1920s and 1930s enabled fans to experience sporting competitions in real time. Broadcasters, while each retained a unique style, all shared the ability to recreate the excitement at the stadium or arena for listeners at home. Many overdramatized and exaggerated, but it unquestionably made sporting events widely accessible across the country and contributed to the formation of myths (King Football, 39).

One scene in particular that showcases the influence of radio is when Braddock fights John “Corn” Griffin. While fighting in front of a sold-out crowd at Madison Square Garden Bowl, many more are listening live on the radio. Before the fight, the radio announcer lays a foundation of expectations. He tells the audience that Braddock is expected to last no more than two rounds and is up against a five-to-one favorite. Immediately, the audience perceives Braddock as an underdog. With each subsequent description, the announcer offers very colorful and playful language filled with similes and metaphors. He uses phrases such as “Griffin storms out of his corner”, “six minutes of fury”, “Braddock is trying to hold back an avalanche”, and “he’s just a piece of meat and Braddock is carving him up”. Audiences, huddled around the radio, hear descriptions that more closely resemble a battle than an actual boxing match. This is entirely intentional by the radio announcer as he seeks to provide a sense of fantasy and myth associated with the competition.

Additionally, as presented in the film, the media portray James Braddock as a hero among the working-class. Prior to his title bout with Baer, a headline in the local newspaper reads, “Fairy Tale Fight for James J. Braddock?” The story continues, “boxer Jim Braddock has come back from the dead to change the face of courage in our nation. In a land that is downtrodden, Braddock’s comeback is giving hope to every American. People who are ready to throw in the towel are finding inspiration in their new hero, Jim Braddock.” This is precisely how the media creates and disseminates a particular narrative. Fortunately for Braddock, the story is very positive and classifies him as the quintessential “people’s champ”. As the common man hero, Braddock’s underdog story is further solidified and his quest for the heavyweight title becomes even more improbable.

Comparing & Contrasting the Two Films

When comparing *Raging Bull* and *Cinderella Man*, there is one key similarity that sticks out in both films. Professional sports, and boxing in particular, are highly commoditized forms of entertainment (Tudor, 12-13). The athletes that compete in professional sports are incredibly replaceable and often short-lived. As shown in each film, the boxer represents exploited labor in an organized competition. Even when they succeed or fail, they seemingly can never escape exploitation. *Rollerball* perfectly resembles this problem with sports as it demonstrates the power of owners, regulators, commissioners, and other executives in relation to the athletes. Those that actually compete are at the behest of powerful people who run or otherwise control the sport. In *Raging Bull*, Jake LaMotta was under pressure from the New York Mob such that he intentionally threw a fight. By the same token, James Braddock must adhere to the power of a corrupt boxing commission that organizes fights. As such, boxers have very little agency in their decisions and typically have no other choice but to follow the demands of the few individuals who wield power.

The two films, while both follow the life of a boxer, are vastly different for a variety of reasons. Of course, there are obvious differences such as the time period, trajectory of protagonists, and

relevant themes, among others. However, one point of difference that stands out is the relationship the boxers have with their wives. The presence of a female significant other is ubiquitous in Hollywood films. But in *Raging Bull* and *Cinderella Man*, wives play a crucial role in the understanding of the male protagonist. Certainly, the personalities of Jake LaMotta and James Braddock are polar opposites. As an abusive and repulsive character, LaMotta must constantly assert his dominance over his wife Vicki. His sexual insecurities are on display when LaMotta cannot tolerate other men complimenting or otherwise flattering Vicki. As such, LaMotta is motivated by his desire for control, a common theme throughout *Raging Bull*. James Braddock, on the other hand, is driven by his family as he tries to do everything in his power to ensure he provides for them. Braddock's wife, Mae, pushed back on the idea of him returning to boxing following an injury and particularly before the fight against Baer. However, she is incredibly supportive and proves to be paramount to his success. Thus, while Braddock may be a less interesting character compared to the boastful, self-destructive, and repugnant Jake LaMotta, he nevertheless remains motivated by those closest to him.

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