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The Wild Side: An Examination of Jake LaMotta's Spectrum of Animalism in *Raging Bull*

Martin Scorsese's black-and-white, boxing, biopic *Raging Bull* (1980) portrays the protracted self-destruction of middleweight champion Jake LaMotta. Within the film, professional ascension, short-lived triumph, and retirement are intertwined with a perpetually tumultuous personal life resulting from Jake's animalistic tendencies. Fundamentally, Jake lacks self-control. He is overwhelmingly driven by the three chief primordial desires: sustenance, self-preservation, and reproduction. His sole problem-solving mechanism is physical violence. And yet even Jake is occasionally capable of employing the kinds of higher-order ideals, such as long-term planning and love, which typify the human experience. Consequently, Jake lies somewhere along a spectrum stretching from enlightened *Homo sapiens* to mammalian brutes. Throughout his life as a boxer, husband, and overweight comedian, Jake's feral behavior breeds consistent suffering whereas happiness is confined to rare moments of restraint in which Jake temporarily slides towards the spectrum's human pole.

Throughout the film, boxing is a catalyst for Jake's animalistic behavior. A sport that, prior to artistic interpretation, is already reminiscent of primal clashes between alpha males, is further steeped in zoomorphic imagery from the outset. The film begins with a slow-motion shot of Jake, alone in a boxing ring, warming up prior to a bout. Through the ring's ropes Jake is seen bouncing around, bristling with violent energy, like a caged bull preparing to charge. His hooded leopard print robe, a garment he continually dons, envelopes him in predatory symbolism. The

occasional camera flashes, as the audience looks on, captivated by the apex predator mere feet from their seats. Even Jake's fighting style, predicated on gluttony for punishment and an uncanny ability to maintain consciousness, is brutish in quality. In his prime Jake toyed with his prey for multiple rounds, soaking up body shots, before launching an indefensible barrage of strikes to secure victory. However, in his final bout with archrival Sugar Ray Robinson, victory is supplanted by a twisted form of animalistic pride, as Jake's primary goal. In the thirteenth round, clearly outmatched, Jake backs himself against the ropes, lowers his gloves, and invites Robinson to pummel him. The camera performs a dolly zoom as it centers on the winded Robinson from Jake's first-person perspective, thereby emphasizing the protagonist's delirium. Backlit and wild-eyed Robinson appears to have mutated into a theriomorphic form as he descends on the defenseless LaMotta. Blood gushes from lacerations on Jake's face, drenching the ropes in crimson. A shot to the nose splatters the nearby audience. Still Jake refuses to fall. He would rather die in the ring, propped up by the ropes to remain upright, than go down. When the closing bell rings, Robinson's demeanor relaxes, his eyes grow soft, and his grimace dissipates as he returns to human form. While both partake in bestial competition, Robinson can compartmentalize the inhumanity required for boxing success. Furthermore, he understands that long-term consistent triumph occasionally requires going down to shield the body from permanent damage. Such sentiments are alien to the animal-like Jake who staggers over to Robinson after the fight to proclaim, "Never went down Ray," as if to declare victory from a perverted subhuman perspective (01:40:32). Meanwhile, Jake's wife Vickie watches in horror from the crowd as her lover voluntarily subjects himself to blunt force slaughter.

In fact, it is through Jake's relationship with Vickie that the animalistic spectrum's full range is elucidated. In a scene evocative of beasts gathered around a watering hole, Jake first

meets his future wife at the community pool where she is surrounded by other men. Fueled by lust, he proceeds cautiously, querying his brother about Vickie's relationships, careful not to encroach on another man's territory. Eventually, the pair embark on an awkward date where Jake's capacity for humanity is first made visible. Stilted romantic gestures such as asking Vickie to move closer and sit on his knee are signs of a man who rarely practices compassion. Nonetheless, his efforts are imbued with an endearing earnestness best exemplified by the guidance he provides Vickie on how to swing and grip a mini-golf club, his hands gently guiding hers from behind. Jake again controls his feral urges when, soon before an upcoming fight, he invites Vickie to partake in foreplay. Many boxers, including Jake, believe abstaining from sex prior to a fight will bolster testosterone, aggression, and hence performance. Admirably, in the heat of the moment, Jake overcomes a primordial desire and resists Vickie's advances. Even after she doggedly follows him into the bathroom, he remains steadfast in his abstinence, opting instead for delayed gratification in the form of an increased chance at victory, a mental calculation of which no animal is capable. The couple ultimately gets married, and the associated events are relayed via a montage sequence of grainy home videos depicting Jake and Vickie together and happy. In stark contrast with the film's overwhelmingly black-and-white aesthetic the shots of laughter, loving play, and lighthearted shenanigans are bathed in soft hues. This unexpected use of color emphasizes that only Vickie was capable of nudging Jake towards the human side of the spectrum. Tragically, however, Jake's feral nature ultimately shatters his sole chance at joy as symbolized by harsh cuts to black-and-white animalistic boxing footage interspersed throughout the otherwise painterly sequence. Their marriage becomes marred in unreciprocated domestic violence, as Jake grows paranoid about Vickie's potential infidelity. Plagued with insecurity, the prospect of other men encroaching upon his wife, routinely

provokes violence, Jake's sole problem-solving mechanism. His domestic abuse culminates when, after menacingly backing Vickie into a corner, her fight-or-flight response is triggered, causing her to lash out in retaliation. Vickie, however, in contrast with her calumniating husband, fights with words when she lyingly sneers, "I fucked all of them. Tommy, Salvy, all of them..." (01:30:24). She proceeds to liken him to a swine, thereby sending Jake, the boxer once equated to an apex predator, even further down the animal hierarchy. Jake slaps her twice with an open hand before storming off to beat his brother. Vickie attempts to halt the familial mauling which earns her a sucker punch to the jaw. With this blow, slaps have become punches, and the last of Jake's restraint vanishes, irrevocably banishing him to the spectrum's animalistic pole.

With any capacity for humanity gone Jake soon retires from boxing, buys a nightclub, and pursues a career as a comedian where his inner animal is fully unleashed. Jake struggles with overeating throughout the film as if driven by a primal desire to gorge while food is plentiful and accumulate fat stores in preparation for an inevitable famine. After casting aside the allure of boxing success, his only higher-order goal, Jake balloons in size. Sanctioned violence within the ring and degenerate domestic abuse within the home are replaced with an insatiable appetite for food and women. He leverages his status as the owner to prey on underage girls, unconcerned with the human construct that is the age of consent. Consequently, Jake finds himself in legal trouble and ultimately the Dade County Stockade. While being led to his cell by two officers, he thrashes about like a bull en route to the corral. Once inside, he endures an unmitigated mental collapse. Resorting again to violence, the only language Jake truly imbues with meaning, he self-punishes by repeatedly punching and headbutting his chamber's unforgiving walls. Similar to the opening scene Jake is once again alone in a cage. However, unlike in the boxing ring, there is no audience lauding his animalistic tendencies. Indeed, Jake's greatest asset in the ring is his

greatest liability once the closing bell sounds. “I’m not an animal. I’m not that bad. I’m not that guy,” he wails in a vain yet surprisingly self-aware attempt at self-comfort (01:56:30). Flashing forward, the film concludes with Jake preparing to take the stage at a comedy gig. “I’m the boss. I’m the boss. I’m the boss,” he quietly chants while simultaneously performing a quick flurry of punches, precisely the same pump-up routine he previously employed prior to fights. Now, however, alone in the dressing room without his brother wrapped in protective padding to brave the punches, such a ritual seems pathetic. The routine is unchanged, and Jake remains animalistic, but he is now alone, having allowed his inner animal to drive off those he loved most.

The profound loneliness of *Raging Bull*’s final scene is the culmination of decades worth of persistent self-destruction. The scene encapsulates the cruel irony of Jake’s life; the bestial qualities which propelled boxing success were the very characteristics responsible for his personal downfall. However, the true tragedy lies in the fleeting exhibitions of Jake’s humanity. Jake is capable of being human, of sliding away from the spectrum’s feral pole, but he lacks the self-control required for permanent change. Ultimately, Jake’s life is a protracted fight with the single opponent he could never defeat: himself.

Works Cited

Scorsese, Martin, director. *Raging Bull*. United Artists Corporation, 1980.