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**The Construction of Identity Through Gender
in the Work of Martin Scorsese**

by

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INTRODUCTION

The central characters in the films of Martin Scorsese all struggle to construct their identities through the socially accepted structures of gender. The construction of gender in a patriarchal society, however, can only be fully understood through Freud and therefore the central characters in the films I have chosen to discuss (Mean Streets, Taxi Driver, Raging Bull and The King of Comedy) can only be understood through the same means. Freud developed a language through which we can explore many of the problems in our emotional lives by investigating the unconscious. In relation to our gender identities, we still use Freud's description of the construction of masculinity and femininity which also serve as signs of difference. Masculine is generally understood as active and positive and feminine as lacking or negative. To understand these terms fully and the construction of gender in the patriarchal society in which we are living, it is useful to understand the Freudian mechanism through which boys become men and girls become women, this being known as the Oedipus Complex. Juliet Mitchell describes the Oedipus Complex in Psychoanalysis and Feminism as:

the repressed ideas that appertain to the family drama of the primary constellation of figures within which the child must find its place.

(Mitchell, p.63, 1974)

The root of gender identity lies in the early experiences of the child (in relation to both parents) within a nuclear family in a patriarchal society. Freud learned to explore the child's early sexual life through self-analysis and discovered a hostility in children who later became neurotic towards the parent of their own sex, which is the very first hint of the Oedipus Complex. His account of the Oedipus Complex implies that the male child begins life

with an advantage over the female child as his primary love object (his Mother) is heterosexual. During the Oedipal period this attachment to the mother becomes sexualised and their father is seen as a rival for their affection and love. These are the two elements of the Oedipus Complex; the attraction to and love for the mother and the jealous hostility towards and death wishes against the rival father. There is a point at which the boy recognises himself as male and therefore must dis-identify himself and detach himself from the mother and identify with the father out of fear of castration through continued identification with the opposite sex (the already castrated sex, the female). By doing this, the little boy preserves his heterosexuality and establishes his masculinity. Freud saw a girl's path towards femininity as less straightforward, as her first love object is of the same sex and in order to establish a heterosexual attachment she must continue to identify with her mother, while shifting her sexual love for the mother to the father. The change of love object from the mother to the father comes from a realisation that she can never possess the mother as she lacks a penis and she blames her castration on her mother. The little girl's change to the father is therefore motivated by resentment from the realisation that she does not possess a penis. Here we find the fundamental reason for the use of the Freudian term of masculinity as possessing and positive, and femininity as lacking and negative.

In Freud's opinion, the female does not establish an identity quite separate from that of the male. The same term, "castration" is used for both male and female.

this concept - to prove the turning-point in Freud's final comprehension of the psychological effect of the anatomical distinction between the sexes, and really his last word on the history of human subjecthood is 'castration'.

(Mitchell, p.72, 1974)

The boy identifies with the father and represses his sexual love for the mother out of fear of castration, while the girl makes the father the object of her love when she realises her castration and that she can never possess the mother because she lacks a penis. Here the formation of both heterosexual gender identities is centered around the phallus.

The boy fears that identification with the mother will result in a loss of masculinity and therefore identifies with the father and represses his "feminine" characteristics and behaviour as he is conditioned to fit in with the socially constructed norms of masculinity. This fear of identification with "the other" results in a lack of comprehension of "the other" (the female) and would explain Freud's own explanation of female sexuality in terms of the phallus rather than the female genitals. Freud, as a man, was himself a product of a patriarchal society as is Martin Scorsese and all of the characters in his films. This would explain the treatment, or lack of treatment or exploration of female characters in both the work of Freud and Scorsese.

CHAPTER ONE

Women are never fully developed characters in Scorsese's films and are usually only used as an explanation or extension of the male characters' masculinity. We only ever see the female characters through the eyes of the central male character and are denied access to her beyond the point of view of the male protagonist to which we are constantly subjected.

Freud claimed that the rejection of the mother by the boy during the Oedipus Complex has severe implications for the adolescent boy or young man who undertakes close, intimate sexual relationships with adult women and this is certainly true in all the films I have chosen to discuss. As Scorsese's career as a filmmaker developed, this element of his films becomes clearer. In his earlier work however, it would seem that he himself was possibly quite confused about his feelings and attitudes towards the opposite sex. Mean Streets (1973) is one of these earlier works and is often considered Scorsese's most personal work.

The film is centered around Charlie (played by Harvey Keitel), a tough but moral member of the Italian community in New York and his protection of his girlfriend Teresa's (played by Amy Robinson) trouble-making and aggressive cousin Johnny Boy (played by Robert De Niro).

Teresa is never a fully developed character and, as with many women in Scorsese's films, she is only ever seen through the eyes of the central male character. We can clearly see Charlie's confusion about his feelings towards Teresa. He loves her but he sleeps with her and therefore cannot admit his love for her. By sleeping with her she becomes a sexual commodity and he can no longer see her as a person because in Charlie's eyes there are only two kinds of women; whores you screw and virgins you love and marry. The

virgin (the mother) and the whore (the sexual commodity) are two very separate women. The confusion Charlie feels because of this deeply embedded belief results in his indecision and his inability to resolve his feelings towards his girlfriend. Freud would argue that this notion of two separate female identities (the virgin and the whore) happens at the Oedipal moment when the little boy detaches himself sexually from the mother out of fear of castration through the continued identification with the already castrated sex and as punishment from his rival father. The mother and wife are no longer seen as the object of sexual desire, but rather as symbols of home, family and love. Because of this the little boy suppresses his sexual desire for the mother (as he realises it is wrong) and associates this feeling with another (an opposite) "type" of woman; the whore. By sleeping with Charlie Teresa becomes this "type" of woman in his eyes and he loses any respect for her he may have had. Charlie refers to Teresa as just a "cunt" when she asks him if he loves her.

The father figure in Mean Streets is Charlie's Uncle, the local powerful mafioso, Giovanni. Charlie respects and fears Giovanni and desires to be just like him. He realises his uncle would not approve of his relationship with Teresa and therefore keeps it as secret as possible. His decisions are constantly burdened with the wish to please his uncle (father) and a concern to maintain his position within the Italian community. A scene which demonstrates this and provides a valuable insight towards understanding Charlie's paranoia is when he questions whether or not it really matters that Diane (played by Jeannie Bell) a rather striking looking topless dancer, is black. This scene defines the relationship between Charlie's thoughts and his world. He obviously finds this woman extremely attractive and the fact that she is black means so little to him that he makes a date with her. He realises however, that he would lose respect and it would hurt his reputation to be seen with her and therefore does not keep his date with her. Charlie's efforts to obey the rules of his society and be accepted by the patriarchy keeps him in an almost constant state of indecision and incomprehension of what is going on around him.

Another of Scorsese's characters who remains in a constant state of incomprehension of the environment he lives in is the main protagonist of Taxi Driver, Travis Bickle (played by Robert De Niro). Travis is a lonely outsider,

unable to integrate into the society in which he lives and instead views it through the windows of his taxi-cab and through his crazed perceptions.

Christopher Sharrett refers to Freudian theory in The American Apocalypse: Scorsese's Taxi Driver, when he writes;

That Travis respects, yet decides to kill Palantine can be seen as part of the same Oedipal dilemma that causes Travis to write letters to his parents containing flowery and misleading accounts of his life in New York.

(Sharrett, p.59, 1986)

Palantine (played by Leonard Harris) is the Presidential candidate for whom Betsy (played by Cybill Shepard), the woman of Travis's dreams works. Travis's next attempt to kill is successful. This time it is Sport (played by Harvey Keitel), the pimp of the young prostitute Iris (played by Jodie Foster) Travis has decided to save. On both occasions he has targeted the surrogate fathers of the two women in his life; Betsy, the angel whose full figure reminds us of the mother and Iris the thirteen year-old prostitute (angel and whore). Travis's hatred of Sport and Tom (a colleague of Betsy's) grows from his view of them as romantic rivals who stand between him and the two women in his life.

In the work of both Freud and Scorsese, women are defined in terms of men and are always placed in a passive role. Both women in Taxi Driver are not so much characters as further creations of Travis's crazed perceptions. Like all Scorsese's films Taxi Driver is about men and the contradictions of masculine identity. Women appear only as signs and markers of the boundaries of the masculine upon whom the male characters project their "lack".

It might be possible to dismiss Scorsese's work as sexist and regressive because of the belittling attitudes to women it describes but these films cannot be dismissed as the director's hang-ups. In her essay Masculinity in Crisis? Pam Cook, commenting on Raging Bull, says that;

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 arena of

sexual politics, retreating into retrograde romanticism and anti-intellectualism.

(Cook, p.46, 1982)

Judith Williamson however asks the all-important question in relation to Scorsese's films "but do liberating films have to show liberated people" (Williamson, p.154, 1986). Rather than criticising the confusions represented in films such as Raging Bull, audiences should see and understand that by exploring certain attitudes Scorsese is not necessarily advocating them but merely showing society as it really is. The important element is that we can see situations and characters clearly for what they really are.

In an interview with Judith Williamson Scorsese expresses how difficult it is for him emotionally to continue making films such as Raging Bull;

So I'm not asking anyone to go and sit through my primal situation. That's what it's about. They should know that's what they're gonna be in for.

(Williamson, p.156-157, 1986)

The issues and characters in Scorsese's films are deeply personal to him and are based on his experiences as a man growing up in an Italian-American community, in an intensely patriarchal society. He is dealing with issues, relationships and characters that he really understands but the feelings and conflicts he describes are by no means confined to him, they are universal themes and have the potential to expose and express a truth and reality to most audiences.

Raging Bull is the true story of the 1949 middleweight boxing champion Jake La Motta (played by Robert De Niro) and his gradual decline into a pathetic grossly overweight loser. The film is packed with possessive, violent and belittling attitudes towards women but the film forces the spectator to see them and gives an insight into the central male character and masculinity that could never be achieved were these attitudes suppressed. In Raging Bull we can see that it is precisely the suppression and repression of those feminine impulses and characteristics (as Freud described), that results in a lack of comprehension of the self and others. This confusion is expressed by Jake La Motta through physical violence in the boxing ring and both mental and physical abuse of his wife Vickie (played by Cathy Moriarty) at home.

As in Taxi Driver we are subjected to the male protagonist's point of view. We have no access to the female character and know very little about what she does, how she feels and what she thinks. We see Vickie through Jake's eyes and his view of her is a prolonged eroticised gaze, confirming identification with him as desiring subject. When Jake first sees Vickie she is with a group of local Mafia henchmen. These are the godfathers, the local patriarchy against whom Jake will increasingly turn his aggression. In her article on Raging Bull Pam Cook points out an event central to the conflicts and confusions within Jake;

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.

(Cook, p.43, 1982)

We see the kiss through Jake's eyes in slow motion, prolonging the kiss, Vickie's smile and eye contact with Tommy, further fuelling Jake's paranoia and jealousy. The desire for Vickie's body coincides with the wish to kill the father figure. Jake is constantly challenging the power of the father by refusing Tommy's help and trying to climb the social ladder through becoming a boxing champion. He is also forever punishing the female through constant physical abuse. When Jake sees Tommy and Vickie together the feelings he has had to suppress since childhood emerge as paranoid jealousy as a result of his desire for both the male and female; his heterosexual desire for Vickie and his displaced homosexual desire for the father figure.

Robin Wood in his short piece on Scorsese made some very important insights into the character of Jake La Motta. He points out that Jake's paranoic personality can only be understood through Freud. For Wood, central to Raging Bull is;

Freud's discovery of universal, constitutional bisexuality and its repression in our culture in the interests of constructing the social norms of 'masculinity' and 'femininity'.

(Wood, p.486, 1979)

The consequences of its repression can be seen through the story of Jake La Motta but as Wood points out later;

More directly relevant to the film is Freud's assertion that every case of paranoia, without exception, has its roots in a repressed homosexual impulse.

(Wood, p.487, 1979)

The primary love objects would be the father and brothers (Jake and Joey) and the root of paranoia would be the denial of homosexual attraction. Raging Bull demonstrates the disastrous consequences for both men and women of the repression of bisexuality in our society.

In Raging Bull as in Taxi Driver and Mean Streets there are only two types of women; the kind you fuck and forget about and the kind you don't or can't. Joey (played by Joe Pesci) describes Vickie to Jake as "not the kind of girl you just fuck and forget about". Her pure and innocent look and her full maternal figure confirm that she is in fact, the other kind of woman; the angel or the mother. Jake occasionally speaks to Vickie as if she is his mother and he is a little boy and enjoys being taken care of and mothered by her. After a fight, Jake asks Vickie to kiss his scars and bruises; "Give me boo boo kiss, make it better".

Jake however insists on a controlling distance from his wife. He has no wish to identify with the female out of fear of castration, the loss of masculinity. He feels a need to keep his distance which results in his confusion and often violent behaviour. Vickie remains the passive female character throughout the film. She receives all the verbal and physical abuse until she quietly leaves. The balance of power in the marital bond remains with the man and the most the woman can do is withdraw passively.

When Vickie finally leaves Jake the maternal body returns to the film in the form of insulting language aimed at other men, "fuck your mother" "your mother takes it up the ass". Other curses are homosexually turned against Jake's opponents earlier on in the film. Jake feminises one of his opponents, placing him in a passive sexual role when threatening to fuck his ass.

In all of the three films I have mentioned women are mere objects or possessions reinforcing the male protagonist's own idea of their masculinity. Masculinity however only exists because of femininity; "a man is a man because a woman is his negative other - not a man." (Kirby, p.34, 1990) For the stereotype that defines masculinity, there must be an equivalent to define

femininity and that must at least be present in order to protect the masculinity within the films. For all that is inherently masculine and male in the anatomical sense (big balls, big penis, big muscles) the opposite is inherently feminine (lack of penis, weakness and vulnerability). If the female representative in a film possesses a full womanly figure or is referred to as having "big tits" we acknowledge all the associations that this brings to consciousness and the unconscious. By referring to the male character as having "big balls" we acknowledge all the associations this brings to mind (all that is masculine). For the exaggerated size of the male phallus (the exaggerated masculinity), there must be an exaggeration in the female body (the exaggerated femininity). By making the anatomical difference between the sexes so obvious, the difference between male and female is reinforced, protecting masculinity by so clearly portraying its difference from its opposite, femininity; "the self-certainty of the masculine subject is predicated on the repression of the feminine." (Kirby, p.15, 1990)

Of all Scorsese's films however The King of Comedy (1982) is the most clearly defined in terms of Freud as it dramatises the Oedipal moment. There have certainly been many ways in which his previous films can and in some ways must be discussed in terms of Freud. Certainly all the desires, frustrations and paranoia which Freud describes have become a large part of all Scorsese's central male characters. It must be however that by 1982 Scorsese had reached an understanding of these fears and anxieties. The King of Comedy is a powerfully coherent critique of the nuclear family. Robin Wood makes an important comment on all Scorsese's films; "In each case, the subject is remorselessly followed through to a point where it reveals and dramatises the fundamental ideological tensions of our culture." (Wood, p.486, 1979)

Again in The King of Comedy, Robert De Niro plays the central character Rupert Pupkin, a would-be stand-up comedian who is obsessed with becoming famous and appearing on a leading American chat show. His friend Masha (played by Sandra Bernhard), is obsessed with the chat show's host Jerry Langford (played by Jerry Lewis). Jerry Langford, the symbolic father, is shown to us here as lonely, empty and inadequate. We are permitted to glimpse into his life when he returns "home" after work to his big, white, lonely, sterile New York apartment. We can gather that he has no wife or

family life. Both patriarchy and celebrity are shown here to be empty, shallow formations.

The children (Rupert and Masha) both behave in typically Oedipal fashion. She wants to screw the father while he wants to be the father. Rupert's natural father is completely absent and is only mockingly mentioned in Rupert's monologue on Jerry's show at the end of the film. The father is represented instead by Jerry Langford throughout the film and the rejection of the mother is painfully obvious as she is reduced to a mere off-screen voice (spoken by Scorsese's own mother).

Rupert lives in a fantasy world which he often confuses with reality. He imagines a conversation with Jerry in which he has been invited to his summer house and is so convinced that the conversation actually took place that he turns up at the summer house uninvited with Rita (played by Diahnne Abbott), an old school friend who he suddenly decides he wants to marry. As with all women in Scorsese's films Rita is a complete mystery to us. We know very little about her and are denied any opportunity to get to know her character. She is present in the film for as long as she is necessary and once she has witnessed Rupert's television appearance (his success) she has served her purpose and we see no more of her. Rupert brought Rita to Jerry's house to gain his (the father's) blessing and approval of the woman he very dubiously loves. When the outraged Langford tells them to get out, Rupert with the help of Masha resorts to kidnapping Langford to gain his moment of fame, his "big break" on Langford's chat show.

After the successful kidnapping we witness the hatred in rivalry of "brother" and "sister". Rupert is constantly opposing his "real relationship" with the star to her "fantasy world". This develops into an extremely comic bickering partnership between the siblings. Jerry is reduced to immobility in order to be loved by Masha. He is bound hilariously head to toe in adhesive tape while Masha dances around him in what R. P. Kolker describes as "a delirium of lost repression". (Kolker, p.212, 1988)

She reveals to us her Oedipal desire for Jerry when she says;

I don't even know how to play golf. I played with my parents once, my dad... but... I love you. I've never told my parents that I love them. Of course they never told me that they love me either, which was fine by me... but I love you.

This confession is followed by Masha undressing and singing "You're gonna love me / Like nobody's loved me." She does whatever Jerry tells her to as if she was a small child and he was her father; "Masha, take the tape off. Good Masha." This is followed by Langford smacking her across the face as if she has been a naughty girl, before he makes his escape.

In Rupert's fantasy conversations with Jerry the son is always in control. The son (Rupert) is the dominant character while the father (Jerry) begs and pleads with the son as he needs his help. The father admires and respects the son and is dependant on him. There is a complete role-reversal of the father/son (Jerry/Rupert) relationship that actually exists outside Rupert's fictional world. Rupert wants to be in the father's position of power and authority. When Rupert finally gets his moment of fame on Jerry's chat show his (incredibly unfunny) routine is exclusively concerned with childhood and his parents. Rupert regresses into childhood fantasies when he believed throwing up was a sign of maturity. By finally minging to vomit on his father's shoes (the shoes he wishes metaphorically to be in) he has finally become a man and for the first time his father gives him attention.

CHAPTER TWO

He is a commercial filmmaker and violence of some kind has always been part of his mise-en-scene, part of the way in which he understands the world.

(Kolker, p.199, 1988)

Violence is part of Scorsese's mis-en-scene and a large component in the social and cinematic construction of masculinity. On the one hand we recognise activity and strength, bravery and virility as masculine traits but on the other hand, often witness their physical outlet in displays of aggression and violence. We find such displays of violence throughout the films of Martin Scorsese.

In his article on Mean Streets Michael Open suggests that the film describes an; "urban paranoia" which "requires the vomiting of violence to quell it." (Open, p.17, 1977) One of the first violences we witness in Mean Streets is when we recognise Charlie's masochistic tendencies as he holds his hand over a candle flame in a church to ease his guilt and pay for his sins, while Johnny Boy is introduced to us with a "boom!" as he pops a cherrybomb into a post box.

Johnny Boy is the character in Mean Streets who, more than Charlie points towards Scorsese's later protagonists with their tendency towards violence, both physical and emotional which they themselves cannot understand. He is like a time-bomb about to explode and the music in the film seems to be trapped inside his body as he jingles and jerks around, speaking in a quick-talking ethnic slang (Italian-American) charged with rhythm and colour.

There is a build-up of little violences in the film which suggest an approaching apocalypse and eventual disaster. One of these violences and an example of how the men in this society relate to each other is the fight that breaks out during the scene in the pool room. The fight starts over one character calling another a "mook". No-one knows what a "mook" is, but as it is obviously not a compliment a brawl ensues.

The eventual climactic bloodbath which concludes the events of Mean Streets comes about as a direct result of Charlie's indecision and inability to act. He pays for his impotence. His struggle with the conflicting codes of church and mafia has rendered him incapable of acting decisively. He hesitates moments too long which results in an explosion of blood in which Johnny Boy is fatally wounded while Charlie and Teresa are seriously injured. The image which is perhaps the most shockingly violent in this final scene is when Johnny Boy sticks his head outside the car window having been fatally wounded in the neck.

Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumin in their introductory essay to their book You Tarzan suggest that Robert De Niro is;

regarded as an actor who could carry off parts in which men were represented as uncouth, hard drinkers, tough fighters, hot-tempered and congenitally programmed to treat women badly.

(Kirkham and Thumin, p.10, 1993)

The use of De Niro himself (as the star persona) is an important element of the visual construction of the character. He represents the butch, strong, streetwise, sexy male. However the significance of physical strength (which De Niro personifies) in the portrayal of an ideal masculinity is criticised in Raging Bull and Taxi Driver where the strength of both men is merely a means for them to work out paranoid personal obsessions. We can see neither the sexually naive, mentally deranged Travis nor the brutally violent and paranoid Jake as an ideal of masculinity.

Throughout Raging Bull Jake La Motta either gives or receives abuse (in the boxing ring, in a domestic space or on stage in a cheap nightclub). Jake is the physically stereotypical ideal masculinity. He uses his body (his phallus) and its strength to display and prove his potency to the world. Violence is a means for him to escape his body (his prison) by using the body to give or

receive pain. On the one hand violence is validated as an essential component of masculinity as it provides the means for Jake to resist a corrupt and repressive social system which situates Italian immigrants on the lower steps of the hierarchical ladder of society. Boxing (violence as a sport) allows Jake the opportunity of money, power, respect and recognition he would never otherwise achieve in such a hierarchically unfair system. Violence on the other hand however is severely criticised as wrong and meaningless as Jake's violent behaviour becomes so excessive and so self-destructive that it must be condemned. Through the combination of special effects within the image and on the soundtrack the violence in Raging Bull seems so real that "sometimes we almost literally get a punch in the eye". (Cook, p.40, 1982) Cook continues;

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.

(Cook, p.39, 1982)

If the spectator finds the portrayal of violence in Raging Bull "profoundly disturbing", then surely the film has successfully critiqued this violence. Judith Williamson describes Raging Bull as a film;

about a strutting, obsessive boxing champion whose every gesture seems to embody all that the modern liberation-seeker casts out in disgust, a picture with repeated scenes of almost unbearable violence.

(Williamson, p.154, 1986)

She continues to say it is not for "those striving to avoid the nastier aspects of masculinity in themselves or others". (Williamson, p.154, 1986) She believes however that by showing this nastier side of masculinity Scorsese is in fact critiquing machismo and the pressure imposed by society on its male members to display physical strength and violence. Jake La Motta can by no means be described as a liberated man. He is in fact, victim to socially constructed gender representation and full of confusion and frustration tries desperately to establish a very male identity through socially accepted

violence. We can thereby deduce that it is repressed desire and a struggle for social acceptance which results in his identity crisis.

Throughout *Raging Bull* domestic scenes are juxtaposed with violence in the ring until we learn to flinch in anticipation. Jake's aggression for fighting is fed through the manipulation of his domestic life. When Jake wins the championship he loses the means (his obsession with the championship) to control his jealousy and as a result he destroys his family life and loses any love he ever had. In a central scene from the film, after Jake has won the championship, he is in his living room with his brother Joey trying to fix the television set by hitting it. Confronted with something he cannot fix through hitting he turns his aggression in a completely different direction and accuses his brother of sleeping with his wife. This episode concludes with Jake beating both his wife and his brother. When the time comes for Jake to defend the championship he has lost the means (his family) to fuel his aggression for a fight and therefore loses the title to Sugar Ray Robinson. Again as in Mean Streets, Scorsese has prepared us for this bloody climax through the build-up of little violences and tensions within the film.

La Motta's male pride has never allowed him to take a full beating no matter how much blood has poured from his face and how many punches his body has taken he refuses to "go down". The last fight in the film is where Jake finally confronts his sins in his masochistic wish to be punished. Shooting techniques (hand held camera, slow motion) distort our notions of cinematic time and space and strengthen the emotional impact of the fight.

At the end of the fight and after countless blows from Sugar Ray, Jake falls back against the ropes arms outstretched as if waiting to be crucified. Sugar Ray steps back waiting for Jake to fall, but of course, he does not fall. He just hangs on to the ropes and the camera cuts to Jake as he stares (in slow motion) into the face of his punishment and invites his opponent to finish him off. At this point the film virtually stops. There is no sense of action and a feeling of apocalypse approaches as Sugar Ray raises his fist into the air above Jake's head and as it drops and hits Jake we feel all the impact as it ploughs into his face and tears it apart in an eruption of bloodletting.

Despite the beating Jake has taken, he remains standing. He is covered in blood and can barely open his swollen eyes when he approaches Sugar Ray after the fight. "Ray, Hey... Ray. I never went down Ray. You never got me

down Ray." Jake's machismo will not allow him to give in. He will not be feminised.

Although masculinity is established through aggression and violence in the character of Jake La Motta, we mourn its loss when it is denied to us. When Jake at the end of the film is stripped of his stereotypical physical masculinity he becomes a pathetic fat slob. He loses his aggression and paranoia and sadly along with this he loses all traces of his former physical beauty. This is not to suggest that there is no possibility for masculinity without violence, it merely defines this character's associations with his own masculinity and confirms violence as one of the required components of masculinity in his society.

The King of Comedy at first sight, may seem a slighter work than its predecessors due to the use of the flat television (shot/reverse shot) shooting technique, the lack of physical violence and the surprising alteration of De Niro's character from the strong, streetwise, virile male to the would-be stand-up comedian Rupert Pupkin. However as Robin Wood writes;

The King of Comedy constitutes one of the most rigorous assaults we have on the structures of the patriarchal nuclear family and the impossible desires, fantasies, frustrations, and violence those structures generate: an assault, that is, on the fundamental premises of our culture.
(Wood, p.487, 1987)

Although the film lacks the visceral impact of Scorsese's other films, violence is very much present but is experienced through the disturbance generated in us from Rupert's insistence to gain his desire (to be a stand-up comedian) in any way he can. Rupert's obsession with becoming a celebrity permits him to intrude into the life of the star Jerry Langford in a way which would be embarrassing to any normally inhibited person.

After Rupert's insistence in pestering Jerry fails to elevate him to celebrity status, he kidnaps the star and we witness the most violent yet farcical image in the whole film. In an overhead shot, Rupert rapidly circles Jerry whilst taping him to a chair, rendering him immobile in order to gain his desire. In another disturbing yet humorous scene Jerry walks through the city receiving recognition and being called to by members of the public. This recognition begins fairly innocently with people waving and saying hello but becomes increasingly threatening as people become less inhibited. A woman

using a public phone stops Jerry to ask for an autograph and then asks him to speak to her sick nephew on the phone. When he refuses and walks away she screams viciously after him "I hope you get cancer! You should get cancer". At this point we notice Masha who follows Jerry as he walks around, stalking him as if he was her prey which results in a short chase until he finally manages to escape into the television studios where he works.

Of all Scorsese's films however the one which displays the most disturbing level of physical violence is Taxi Driver. Kolker believes the display of physical violence throughout the film to be, "enormous and insistent enough to create a very real nausea." (Kolker, p.200, 1988)

The disturbance felt by the audience of Taxi Driver is very much intended by Scorsese as a critique of the belief in the American myth of regeneration through violence. Taxi Driver proved to be what Robert B. Ray in A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema called, "the most popular corrected movie in the American cinema since Citizen Kane" (Ray, p.349, 1985) By using the term "corrected" movie, Ray is describing the strategy of a film which appears to promise traditional Hollywood narrative (a right wing movie) while in fact, it critiques and challenges Hollywood paradigms and myths from within the film's narrative and on its own terms;

Taxi Driver seemed to fit comfortably into the Right cycle's basic variant, what Pauline Kael called, 'the street westerns'. In fact, with its New York setting, violent loner hero, and standard revenge plot, it clearly traded on the surprising popularity of Death Wish (1974).
(Ray, p.350, 1985)

These subtle "corrections" Scorsese used in Taxi Driver were, in fact functional to the film's narrative and therefore remained almost invisible, adhering to the American cinema's fundamental assumption that style should serve narrative. By abiding by the stylistic rules of Hollywood cinema Taxi Driver had avoided scaring off the "naive" audience and could then attack that audience's sustaining belief in the "continued applicability of Western-style individual solutions to contemporary complex problems." (Ray, p.351, 1985)

The film, as had been promised, proceeded to follow the pattern of the Western. Through Scorsese's control of audience point of view, we identify Travis as our hero who is a traditionally reluctant individual hero-type,

confronted by evil who acts on his own to rid society of the enemy (or in Travis's own words "whores, skunk pussies, buggers, queens, fairies, dopers, junkies... sick... venal.") Travis's appearance links him with Western heroes. He wears jeans and cowboy boots and his background is mysterious yet with an element of violence. When applying for a job as a taxi driver it is mentioned that he had been a marine during the Vietnam War. Violent action in the traditional Hollywood Western and war movie suggested strong codes of honour (fighting for a cause; a woman or a country), however films relating to the Vietnam War or films made after the war express a disillusionment with government and criticise violence as barbaric and meaningless.

Senator Charles Palantine represents a legal institutional solution to society's problems, which as in all westerns is represented as inadequate. Palantine is the community man too weak to deal with the real problems of society, whose speech (representing patriarchal government) sounds incredibly shallow;

We came up with our slogan 'we are the people' when I said 'let the people rule'. I thought I was being overly optimistic. I must tell you that I am more optimistic than ever before. The people are rising to the demands that I have made of them. The people are beginning to rule.

Audience identification with Travis as the only one who can solve society's problems has been established. The people of society are powerless in the face of evil as they must abide by their own laws. The autonomous cowboy (in this case Travis) represents ideal masculinity in the Western and it is only he who can carry out the action necessary to restore peace to the community.

We are kept in very close identification with Travis throughout the film as we wait for him to act and wish for him to "clean up the whole mess, just flush it down the fuckin' toilet" (Travis speaking to Palantine). We see everything through his eyes and the environment he inhabits therefore appears to us just as ugly and depressing as it does to him. We accept Travis to this point as the only truly moral force in the film. Hints have been given throughout the film however to suggest Travis's madness and disintegration; the jump-cuts that accompany his preparations for the shoot-out, his attraction to porno movies and his inability to connect this with the "sick" and

"venal" he so objects to on the streets. Travis is drawn to pornography and violence (his purchase of guns and the Western movies he watches on T.V.). Christopher Sharrett points out that Travis accepts pornography and violence as a given of the natural world; "Travis is a moralist who watches only pornography" (Sharrett, p.58, 1996). Most troubling of all however, is his complete and extreme isolation; "There is no escape; I'm God's lonely man."

As Scorsese has kept the film's style and altered tone functional to the narrative, these hints go unnoticed (and if noticed, preferably ignored in the interests of identifying a hero in the film). Up to this point, the audience expects to be comfortably situated outside the frame of the cinema screen, able to identify a hero and will him to play out the traditional Western shoot-out. By doing this Scorsese has already succeeded in implicating the audience in any resulting violence.

Now Scorsese can bluntly reveal Travis's madness to us. He tells us our hero is psychotic through his attempted assassination of Palantine. The camera pans slowly from the podium through the crowd moving at knee level and finally stops on a pair of legs, obviously Travis's. Then very slowly the camera moves up his body, to the waist, then to the jacket bulging with guns, and at last to his head, horribly shaven in a mohawk haircut. The shock we feel is incredible. Travis is revealed to us as recognisably insane.

Kolker believes that, "killing is his major impulse, and that urge connects itself to Iris only after the attempted assassination fails". (Kolker, p.200, 1988) It is true that killing is Travis's "major impulse", but because of his chosen targets his killing can be seen as the death wish against the surrogate fathers of both women in his life and his hatred of the patriarchs of the two worlds he is caught in between (the middle-class world of Palantine he has tried to fit into and the world of "whores" and "skunk pussies" that surrounds him which he so detests).

When Travis goes to rescue Iris from this detestable world we notice the Indian guise he has adopted which compares him to Sport, whose long black hair held in place by a headband, slanted eyes and high cheekbones make him look significantly like the traditional Western red-skinned enemy. With his new mohawk haircut Travis is now the same as Sport. Scorsese is deliberately scrambling the generic sign-system of the Western, critiquing our movie-inherited notions of good and evil.

The violent climax of Taxi Driver which follows the initial confrontation between Sport and Travis outside the brothel is awful and realistic in its awkwardness. This long bloody climax is what we willed Travis to get to. He traditionally rescues the passive female (Iris), while ridding society of its spoilers (Sport her pimp, the attendant for the brothel and her mafioso customer). We however are not satisfied (as we initially expected to be). The violence we witness is profoundly disturbing and our "hero" tries to commit suicide after the killings.

Traditionally, after the ritual shoot-out at the end of the Western movie, the hero makes the heroic choice to leave town, rather than stay because of the temptations of family life and the love of a woman. The hero is therefore redefined in terms of his masculinity (autonomy), as opposed to aspects of community (femininity). He does not wish to settle down and be feminised. In this respect Taxi Driver still relates to the traditional genre upon which it is based.

Travis remains outside society but unlike the hero of the traditional Western, has failed to restore peace to the community. He has been revealed to us as insane (even suicidal), ironically hailed as a media hero for rescuing Iris (which reflects our own ability to see Travis the killer, as a hero) and he menacingly continues to view society through the windows of his taxi-cab. Nothing in fact, has changed. The city still looks as ugly and filthy as it did before Travis's ritual killing criticising the spectator's belief in the Hollywood/American myth of regeneration through violence.

CHAPTER THREE

At the end of Taxi Driver, for perhaps the first time in the film Travis recognises his own insanity as he catches a glimpse of his own eyes in his mirror and looks away again quickly. He has perhaps recognised his own madness in his mirror just as he had formerly misrecognised himself as a movie-hero. At one point Travis equates us with his mirror image directing his gaze at the camera which now functions as his mirror. He reshapes his identity through us (society) or everything that is other than himself. Through us then, he becomes what he perceives to be his ego ideal and what he perceives to be expected of him as a man.

How Travis (and each of Scorsese's other central characters) shapes his identity through his mirror or a specular image received from everything other than himself can be discussed through the work of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan.

Lacan's work in psychoanalysis developed out of Freud's and was concerned with the formation of identity, of the ego, or in his preferred term, the "I". Lacan's "Mirror Stage" is the process of self-identification which affects babies between six and eighteen months when the baby greets a reflected (or specular) image with jubilation as his likeness. For Lacan, the child's identity is a likeness reflected back from everyone and everything else (all that s/he is not) beginning as it were with the parent who introduces the baby to language and its meaning. The identity is formed through communication and dialogue between the subject and the other. Lacan believes this kind of I, achieved in an exchange with the other is the only one a person can ever have.

The infant is captivated by the coherent form promised to it by the mirror and the idea of the body as imaginary unity. Lacan however calls this recognition of the body as a whole (a totality) a misrecognition (meconnaissance). He believes the ego is a fiction based on a fundamental misunderstanding.

Scorsese's male protagonists strive to become their ideal ego (and at the same time assert their masculinity) through some kind of obsession and performance. They constantly try to assert their masculinity through performance to maintain the specular image society gives to them. The public recognition of these characters as they wish to be seen reassures them for a time but this image of themselves needs to be constantly reassured and defended against everything which might shatter the illusion. "They hurt themselves and others in their obsessive need to perform and to be recognised as somebodies". (Page, p.137, 1993)

After the initial joy felt during the Mirror Stage, the child retroactively perceives the inadequacy of what came before the image of totality. The Mirror Stage is a fleeting moment of jubilation before anxiety sets in;

In other words, the self is constituted through anticipating what it will become, and then this anticipatory model is used for gauging what it was before.

(Gallop, p.81, 1985)

For Lacan the self is a hole surrounded by something. The human subject originates not in presence and identity, but rather in a lack or absence which Lacan terms "manque a etre". The need for recognition Scorsese's characters seek, through performance, therefore describes their lack.

Travis Bickle passively lives through the repetitive cycle of his life in the ghetto he so despises until he feels the instinctive urge to act; "I feel I am destined to achieve some great thing.... I just wanna go out and really... really do something." He makes a purchase of black market guns immediately after a romantic failure. The guns become an expression of his masculinity (his phallus). Easy Andy (who sells the guns to Travis) describes his weapons in terms of endearment if they are small or admiration if they are large. Travis cocks and points his gun at images of women on the T.V. screen and at a romancing couple seated on a bench outside. In a porn cinema he shapes his

fist into a mock gun and shoots. Outside the brothel Travis invites Sport to "suck on this" before shooting him in the stomach. With the use of a gun Travis becomes potent, which in turn reveals to us his impotence.

The most violent "image" in Taxi Driver is verbal. A customer (played by Scorsese) asks Travis to stop and wait outside the house where his wife is having an affair with a black man. The customer asks Travis if he has ever seen "what a forty-four magnum pistol can do to a woman's face? I mean, it'll fuckin' destroy her. Just blow her right apart... Now did you ever see what it can do to a woman's pussy? That you should see."

This grotesque character is perhaps a mirror image of Travis (and significantly Travis only sees him through his mirror). We have already witnessed Travis's racism (in the threatening way he views the black characters in the film) and we can see both his and the customer's use of the gun as a substitute phallus and expression of frustration in relation to their sexuality.

Travis purchases the guns and reorganises himself by transforming his body into an armoury and his thought processes into those of an assassin: an identity he has borrowed from a popular expression of masculinity, the cowboy, a Western movie hero. Travis misrecognises his madness as the actions of a hero. By watching and confronting himself in the mirror, he rehearses a street version of the Western showdown, practicing fast-draws and psyching himself up for the real thing. Like Jake La Motta in *Raging Bull*, he rehearses in private to prepare for a performance. He draws on movie imagery in both the poses he assumes and the language he uses in the mirror sequence: "Huh? Huh? Faster 'n you son-of-a-bitch... saw you comin'... shit-heel."

His mirror image portrays him as both his own antagonist and ideal ego. Each image reinforces the other until they become the identity he has desired to realise, the identity he wants others to see and recognise, but at the same time this dual-image of himself ultimately divides him. His identity is split; he is both cowboy and Indian; "he is both God and self-abasing devil". (Sharrett, p.62, 1986) Sharrett calls the famous "you talkin' to me?" sequence, where Travis practices in front of his mirror with his guns; "the grossest inversion of the Lacanian 'Mirror Stage'"; (Sharrett, p.60.1986)

I'm standing here... you make the move... you make the move. You talkin' to me? You talkin' to me? You talkin' to me? Well I'm the only one here... who the fuck do you think you're talkin' to?

The equation between camera and mirror in this sequence literally describes Lacan's notion that the mirror is what comes between the subject and everything that is other than himself and that the specular image is a fiction created by society.

Like Travis, Jake La Motta in Raging Bull reshapes his material body in order to control his identity. His muscular body defines masculinity and his ego ideal is the champion. Jake misrecognises himself through the role society lays out for him as a male and through the conditioning he experiences in his environment which shapes his anticipated identity. At the end of the film reduced in stature and stripped of all his former physical evidence of masculinity an overweight Jake La Motta bangs his head and fists in frustration against the wall of a prison cell. For the first time we can feel pity for this character, who finally seems to recognise the prison his body and his maleness had become for him. He perhaps realises his initial misrecognition and divorces himself from that ugly aggressive identity he formerly personified; "I'm not an animal... I'm not that guy".

Unlike Jake, when Rupert Pupkin realises his anticipated self he is perfectly happy to continue living in his fictional life. His idea of who he is in perfectly exemplifies Lacan's misrecognition of the self which happens during the Mirror Stage. The entire plot of the film centres around Rupert's desire to face the camera and perform. American television culture has shaped Rupert's identity and it is fittingly through television that he realises this "self" and in effect, becomes it. Television and particularly American talk show television culture acts as Rupert's mirror, bouncing back glamorous and tempting images of stardom and fame. This is the culture Rupert has absorbed and surrounded himself with. This makes up his environment through which he is given his identity. Rupert misrecognises himself as a talk show comedian or more precisely he misrecognises himself as Jerry Langford.

He needs to perform and be recognised while asserting his masculinity (through his monologue on Jerry's show) and achieving his ideal ego in the only way he can. Without the camera and the television as a medium Rupert's ideal ego; the celebrity, does not exist. His ego is based upon the whole

notion of public recognition without which he is nothing but an autograph hunter. In The King of Comedy, as in most of Scorsese's films there is a need to reconcile fantasy and reality as Rupert constantly vacillates between his fictional world of celebrity and friendship with Jerry and the reality of his life as a would-be stand-up comedian. In the film (as in the Mirror Stage) the fictional life takes over as the more favourable identity, until Rupert cannot tell reality from fantasy. Both his and Masha's relationships with Jerry are completely, insanely, disturbingly fictionalised. Masha's interest is revealed ultimately as simple desire while Rupert's obsession; "bypasses this for a form of pre-sexual narcissism". (Jenkins, p.13, 1979) Rupert's obsession with Jerry is the obsession with himself, his own image. He has found his identity through Jerry and his love for Jerry is therefore the love of his own "self".

Rupert realises his desire to become a nationwide celebrity which further emphasises the shallowness of stardom and the disturbing capacity of the world in general to misrecognise a madman as a suitable image to celebrate on the television screen;

The lone disenfranchised individual is once again taken by the public to be important, heroic - or, in this instance, at least, entertaining - and is thereby absolved of his madness.

(Kolker, p.209, 1988)

CONCLUSION

Scorsese belongs to the radical filmmakers of post-classical Hollywood cinema who challenge and critique cinematic conventions through generic transformation and expose the flaws and problems of patriarchal systems.

The alternative cinema provides a space for a cinema to be born which is radical in both a political and aesthetic sense and challenges the basic assumptions of the mainstream film... to highlight the ways in which its formal preoccupations reflect the psychical obsessions of the society who produced it.

(Mulvey, p.805, 1985)

Laura Mulvey has been highly influential in linking together; "psychoanalytic perspectives on the cinema with a feminist perspective on the ways in which images of women figure within mainstream film." (Neale, p.2, 1983) Mulvey's article has precipitated an ongoing discussion of gender, sexuality, representation and cinema and because this discussion has been largely undertaken by feminists, it has tended overwhelmingly to centre on the representation of women, whereas the images and functions of heterosexual masculinity within mainstream cinema until recently have been less discussed.

An assumption has been made in the past that because men stood in the more advantageous position in the patriarchal system, they could not possibly also be victim to social conventions and gender norms. Questions are now being asked as to the problems that arise from the assumption and assertion of the masculine norm. It is precisely this question Scorsese asks

through placing masculinity in crisis and locating the male as also a victim within the patriarchy.

Feminism adopted the language of psychoanalysis to explore the construction of gender and distribution of power in patriarchy because in order for any new or revised social systems to develop we must first understand the terms of the existing one. Scorsese's characters allow for an understanding of the confusions and paranoia experienced by men in an attempt to fit into and dominate their environment. A space has been created for men to identify and sympathise with the pressure these characters feel to fit into the artificial ideal of masculinity.

Scorsese's films form a commentary on a wide range of socio-sexual, political, universal realities and by revealing these realities through unglamourised representation he successfully critiques them. We, the cinema audience feel disturbed by the characters and events the films describe. In the four films, Mean Streets, Taxi Driver, Raging Bull and The King of Comedy Scorsese questions and critiques such issues as; television and the media, patriarchal government, the nuclear family, the social constructions of gender, classical Hollywood narrative and the American myth of regeneration through violence.

According to Lacan the cinematic representations of gender (which form a large part of our society) in many ways form the grounds of our identities. Scorsese deconstructs conventional cinematic representations of gender however much more work needs to be undertaken in this area to offer society a more favourable relationship between both genders than that offered by existing patriarchal systems.

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