SCORSESE ON SCORSESE

MICHAEL HENRY WILSON
TAXI DRIVER

(1976)

"THERE'S A TRAVIS IN EACH OF US"

Opposite page: "He had become Travis. I had complete confidence in him." Martin Scorsese and Robert De Niro on the set of Taxi Driver (1976).
“Since he wishes to be a saint, he tries to rescue her.”

The storyboard of the scene in which Travis kills a brothel owner in plain view of the horrified Iris.

“Like a zealot who’ll do anything to convert you, even kill you.”

Robert De Niro, Murray Moston, and Jodie Foster.
PARIS, FEBRUARY 1981

Scorsese is back in Paris, one of the stops on his European tour to promote *Raging Bull*. It is such a personal film that he has decided to travel around the world with it. Having almost died of an internal hemorrhage in September 1978 on his return from the Telluride Film Festival, he could not start work on the film until he had recovered from the ordeal that he calls “the most terrible four days of my life.” It was then, and only then, that he could begin to identify with Jake La Motta. So strong became the identification that he added at the end of the screenplay a quotation from St. John’s Gospel, in which Jesus explains to Nicodemus that he has to be “born again of the water and the Holy Spirit,” in order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. *Raging Bull* was his second chance, his promise of rebirth.

After the death of his professor Haig Manoogian, who believed that contemporary films were seriously lacking in “resolution,” Scorsese decided to end *Raging Bull* with the parable of the blind man. He sensed that the madness of La Motta had enabled him to see more clearly: “It’s all about learning to accept oneself.” We should also be grateful to De Niro, who helped Scorsese get a new grip on himself as a director and recover his passion for making movies. This was the era when the career of British master filmmaker Michael Powell was being reassessed. In the United States, Scorsese played a major part in this reevaluation. So did Bertrand Tavernier in France. It was from Powell, who watched Scorsese and De Niro on the set of *Raging Bull*, that we get the most perceptive tribute to the alchemical synergy between the director and his actor: “They have worked together so closely and so long that they can almost be said to have invented each other. Martin’s thought becomes Bob’s actions. The dialogue becomes dense and taut, the looks and gestures are subliminal. Soon they are using a language that dares the audience to stay ahead of them” (from the Introduction to Mary Pat Kelly’s book *Martin Scorsese: The First Decade*).

These were days when Scorsese came fully alive only after midnight. Our interview took place in a suite at the historic Hôtel Crillon, on the Place de la Concorde in Paris, during the long hours of a sleepless night. He still had traces of pneumonia and looked exhausted, but his staccato delivery was as rapid and intense as ever.
Casino is the most complex of all your narratives. It unfolds on several levels: the married couple, the threesome, the Mafia, the city, the system, the city, the vanishing west, the 1970s…

Exactly, they can’t help themselves! They go all the way, to the farthest limit of their nature, no matter what the consequences are. They burn and explode, literally. It culminates in the blowing up of buildings being torn down. We all have such demons in us. When you lose control over them, you’re lost.

Have you ever experienced the gambling fever?

I’ve never been a gambler, but I’ve associated with lots of people who are. What interests me isn’t gambling as such. I don’t even know the rules—

Did the casting of Sharon Stone change the way you approached the character of Ginger?

In fact, Sharon reminded me strongly of Jean, the woman on whom her character was based. For that reason, her contribution was crucial. Besides, Sharon really wanted to outdo herself, to achieve something she had never done before. I auditioned several actresses before her, but when it was her turn, I felt she had tenacity, a desire, a profound need to make that film. I felt she understood the role and would be capable of taking it on. If we were asked to scream for hours on end, she’d do it. If she were asked to drive a car at breakneck speed, she’d do it. She’s a professional and a driving force. She got it. That helped us a lot.

When did you start thinking about Casino?

I was finishing work on The Age of Innocence when Nick Pileggi sent me an article that had appeared in a Florida newspaper in 1982 or 1983. It was about a certain Lefty Rosenthal, his wife Jean, a violent row they had had outside their house, and the unraveling of their marriage over a period of fifteen years. Rosenthal was the man who had run the Stardust Casino in Las Vegas on behalf of the Chicago mafia. Nick told me he had been getting in touch with the subject, but I hadn’t decided what my next film was going to be, but I wasn’t ready at that time to embark on such a project. The first draft of the script goes back to 1992. Nick wrote one or two versions, which I read when I was in London for the release of The Age of Innocence. I recall it that was on January 2, 1994, that I decided to hole up with Nick at the Drake Hotel, which is across the street from my office. The idea was to stay locked up there until the script was written. We had interviews that Nick had recorded with witnesses under FBI protection, including Frank Cullata, who’s played by Frank Vincent in the film. A good part of what Cullata told him ended up in the script. Nick interviewed Rosenthal at length, mostly on the phone, but he didn’t want to be taped. So Nick had to take pages and pages of notes. Every time we needed further details, Nick would go off to do an interview, but it wasn’t always productive. The fact that most of the people weren’t at all keen to talk! At the end of six months, we had a screenplay. It was at that stage that I decided to make the film. At the time I was involved in other projects, such as Orson Welles and Strike. You expose all the mechanisms of that ‘capital city of kickbacks.’ I was fascinated, for instance, by the way the money is skimmed off go. The first hour combines Lang and Eisenstein, the Testament of Dr. Mabuse and Dr. Mabuse. The system, the city, the system before plunging your audience—I wanted them to know where they were going. Vegas isn’t like Tibet: in two or three shots, you can suggest that Tibet is another world where they live and breathe differently. But Vegas is America, a big city given over to spectacle and excess, and it’s hard to know what’s hidden behind those familiar images. Most people take it all for granted. What’s very clear is that everything’s designed so that you never stop gambling. That’s what’s expected of the average viewer. But here are the big-time players and high rollers treated? How do the gangsters work their way into the system? Where does the money that’s skimmed off go? I was fascinated, for instance, by the system for tipping it up at every level, down to the parking valets who have to be greased because they see everything that happens. We called that sequence ‘the capital city of kickbacks.’

The first couple of shots and one of my main characters excel at creating their own hell. Their destinies recall the fable of the frog and the scorpion that Orson Welles liked so much: as they are crossing a wild river, the scorpion stings the frog that could save it from drowning… because it’s ‘his character.’

From the writing stage, I knew this would be a film of at least three hours, an epic film that we knew we wanted to make, that audiences, especially American audiences, would be able to understand. W e called that sequence ‘the capital city of kickbacks.’ It’s a fair analogy,” admits Scorsese, “it’s a fair analogy.”

How did you shape the role of Ace with Robert De Niro?

Rob helped us to shape some sequences and to make this role more coherent. We incorporated into the script the results of our sessions with him. It was the same with Joe Pesci, to a certain extent, but it was Bob who was the principal character and the main thread. Bob spent some time with Rosenthal in Florida. He had to do a lot of preparatory work. It wasn’t easy for him to master all the games offered at a casino. When he took over the Stardust, even Rosenthal didn’t know them all. He was primarily a handicapper. To know how to bet, and how much, is one thing, but running a casino is quite another matter.

The first act of the film is really a forty-five-minute exposition. You reveal the underbelly of the system and the way its economy works before developing your characters.

Casino—105

Let It Love You at First Sight

First impression is a capital sin. "Ginger had only one reason for hanging money."
Scorsese’s annotated shooting script and drawings for The Aviator (2004). Flying the H1 in 1935, Howard Hughes (Leonardo DiCaprio) beat the world record for speed (352 miles per hour), but had to make an emergency landing in a field of beetroot.

Next spread: Mark Ruffalo and Leonardo DiCaprio in Shutter Island (2010).
Spreads from Scorsese on Scorsese showing the opening titles and storyboards of New York, New York; Martin Scorsese directing; film still from Gangs of New York; Martin Scorsese directing Leonardo DiCaprio and Matt Damon; and with Jack Nicholson on the set of The Departed.

GANGS OF NEW YORK (2002)
"THE TIDE OF HISTORY HAS SWEPT OVER THE FILM"