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Cover: Image courtesy of The Robert De Niro Collection, The Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin.



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V. 20 N. 1

**ROBERT DE NIRO'S RAGING BULL:
THE HISTORY OF A PERFORMANCE
AND A PERFORMANCE OF HISTORY**

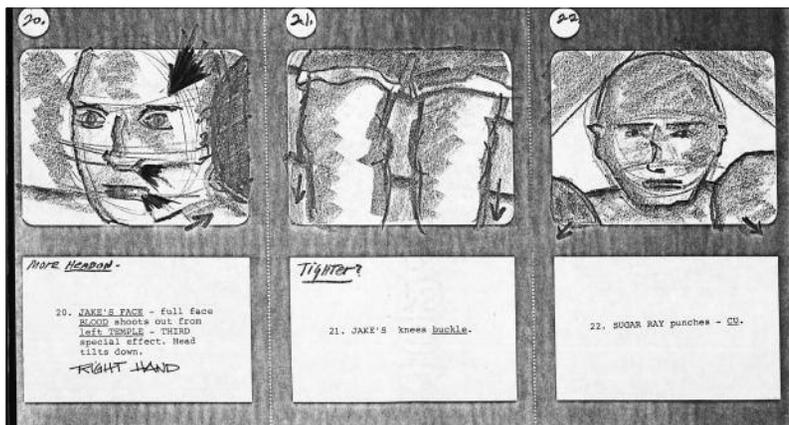
Résumé: Cet article fait une utilisation des archives de Robert De Niro, récemment acquises par le *Harry Ransom Center*, pour fournir une analyse théorique et historique de la contribution singulière de l'acteur au film *Raging Bull* (Martin Scorsese, 1980). En utilisant les notes considérables de De Niro, cet article désire montrer que le travail de cheminement du comédien s'est étendu de la pré à la postproduction, ce qui est particulièrement bien démontré par la contribution significative mais non mentionnée au générique, de l'acteur au scénario. La performance de De Niro brouille les frontières des classes de l'auteur, de la « star » et du travail de collaboration et permet de faire un portrait plus nuancé du travail de réalisation d'un film. Cet article dresse le catalogue du processus, durant près de six ans, entrepris par le comédien pour jouer le rôle du boxeur Jacke LaMotta : De la phase d'écriture du scénario à sa victoire aux Oscars, en passant par l'entraînement d'un an à la boxe et par la prise de soixante livres. Enfin, en se fondant sur des données concrètes qui sont restées jusqu'à maintenant inaccessibles, en raison de la modestie et du désir du comédien de conserver sa vie privée, cet article apporte une nouvelle perspective pour considérer la contribution importante de De Niro à l'histoire américaine du jeu d'acteur.

In 2007, Robert De Niro donated his career's worth of scripts, costumes, memos and research materials to the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin. The Robert De Niro Papers are a veritable gold mine of yet-untapped data, revealing long-sought details about the actor's intensive process. While De Niro may have begun his career under the tutelage of Stella Adler, Lee Strasberg and Elia Kazan, the intensity and commitment that De Niro brought to his portrayal of Jake La Motta in *Raging Bull* (Martin Scorsese, 1980) transformed method acting into something wholly his own, while setting a new standard for screen performance. As the papers reveal, De Niro's famous weight gain was only one aspect of this comprehensive process, which lasted nearly six years and extended into the film's lengthy pre-production. Until principal photography, De Niro supervised almost every aspect of the movie, rewriting various drafts of the script as well as training as a boxer at the hands of the man he was supposed to play.

The ongoing (and rising) prominence of *Raging Bull* as a canonical American film prompts us not only to trace its history through the lens of De Niro's significant participation but to assess how the actor's records expand our contemporary notions of artistic collaboration within the movies. Scratching the surface of De Niro's papers, costumes and correspondence is a daunting task, especially considering that the paper archive alone possesses "one hundred and seventy boxes, sixty oversize boxes, two hundred and seventy four bound volumes, eleven oversize folders for a total of 137.5 linear feet of paperwork."¹ While we have long guessed about the intricacies of Robert De Niro's intense preparation, only now do we have a primary record of what this process entails. Thus, the De Niro papers can change our conceptions of collaboration, film acting, and De Niro's substantial contribution to moviemaking over the past forty years.

The *Raging Bull* file in the Harry Ransom Center contains the actor's personal record of his long process. Each of the boxes holds pieces of a much larger story, arranged chronologically and telling an unfiltered and unequivocal version of the film's making. The archive holds De Niro's own heavily marked copy of Jake LaMotta's memoir, *Raging Bull: My Story* which was sent to the actor by the fighter. It also contains Martin Scorsese's and editor Thelma Schoonmacher's original storyboards that accompany the shooting script, endless script revisions, as well as the congratulatory telegrams and notes following the actor's Academy Award win. In between, the twelve boxes of materials contain almost every newspaper reference to La Motta's career, scorecards provided from old fans, the boxer's personal family album, letters from Vikki La Motta, Al Pacino, and Meryl Streep, as well as depositions from La Motta's rape trial and the lawsuit brought against De Niro by Joey La Motta. The actor's messy handwriting covers nearly every one of these papers, marking De Niro's involvement in virtually every stage of the production. Further, this signature reveals that the actor's research process includes scriptwriting, interviewing real-life figures, making wardrobe choices, as well as actually understanding what a fighter goes through by becoming a credible middleweight boxer.

De Niro's performance in *Raging Bull* provides new insights into his particular manifestation of "the method." With this film, the actor set a new standard for embodied performance, researching the role for nearly six years and writing the real-life history of fallen champion Jake La Motta with his body. As a student of Stella Adler, De Niro incorporated character research—including period detail, accuracy of props, and an awareness of the social milieu—into his portrayal of La Motta. De Niro's meticulous (and perhaps excessive) investigation surpasses comparable expressions of method acting to the point that director Elia Kazan (who he worked with in *The Last Tycoon* [1976]) remarked that he was a more dedicated actor than former method exemplars Marlon Brando and James Dean.² Famously, De Niro insisted that the production shut down for four months so



Original storyboards by Martin Scorsese from *Raging Bull* of the famous Sugar Ray Robinson fight. Scorsese, De Niro and La Motta sought to recreate the fights by viewing actual documented footage first, then rendering it poetically later, as in this vivid scene. Images courtesy of The Robert De Niro Papers, The Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

that he could gain sixty pounds while eating his way across Italy. Based on his research, De Niro felt that La Motta's obsession with weight was the key to understanding the character. Much like a historian would write a book about their findings, De Niro *performs* this history instead, interpreting the facts as truthfully as they apply to his character and acting them out. Upon principal photography, he extended the writing process with his flesh. This performance later became the raw material for Scorsese and Schoonmacher (who won the Academy Award for Best Editing) to shape in the film's lengthy post-production.

THE HISTORY OF A PERFORMANCE: FROM NOVEL TO SCREEN

According to the Harry Ransom Center's website, the "collection includes more than 1,300 boxes of papers, film, movie props and costumes." The *Raging Bull* File alone includes ten revisions of the script, research materials, correspondence between De Niro and other key figures on the production, and, importantly, the actor's hand-written notes in the margins of all of these materials. Inspection of the files demonstrates that the actor is an active collaborator, avid researcher, and consummate perfectionist. The long numbered lists which accompany the actor's personal scripts—containing character insights and revisions to dialogue—present a comprehensive portrait of the actor's career writ large, the likes of which would take years to sufficiently catalogue. Regardless, the *Raging Bull* file provides insight into De Niro's acting process in addition to his unique relationship with Martin Scorsese. The experience of going through these files is less like doing your own research than reading through a historian's already collected materials as the various boxes present a clear, chronological

thread that is relatively easy to trace. Reading the actor's handwriting is the far greater challenge.

The story that the *Raging Bull* file presents begins in 1974 when Jake La Motta sent De Niro his autobiography, *Raging Bull: My Story* with the following inscription:

To Bob De Niro!

According to Pete - the *only* actor in the world that could play my crazy "whacked out" life and make it come *Alive* again...

With love,

Jake La Motta³

The Pete in the inscription was Pete Savage, La Motta's childhood friend, co-conspirator, and a figure who would eventually contribute significantly to *Raging Bull* to the point of earning a Producer credit (and small part) in the film. The novel also begins earlier than the movie, revealing details of La Motta's childhood which consisted of petty criminal acts, a terrible family life and continued bare knuckle brawling.

La Motta's proposition caught the attention of the actor, who underlined this edition of the book on almost every page. In an interview with James Lipton, De Niro stated that while he didn't think that the novel was very well written,⁴ it conveyed a certain honesty as well as presenting certain episodes that the actor thought would make good scenes. More than that, he thought that the boxer's story was very cinematic, as La Motta's recollections were framed in a way that he believed resembled a black and white movie. These highlighted passages later served as material for the film's screenplay, which began at De Niro's behest and ultimately influenced the actor's performance. One such scene was the fighter's recollection of counting ceiling tiles before a fight while coping with dizziness and hunger. Three elements make their way from the novel to De Niro's performance though not necessarily into the final script. One of these is the boxer's obsession with "making the weight" and his revelation that he gained and lost over two thousand pounds throughout his career. The obsession with weight was taken by the actor as the key to portraying La Motta, and provides the rationale for the actor's decision to stop production and gain weight. Second, De Niro took to heart La Motta's struggle with his animal instincts, culminating in the powerful prison scene in which De Niro sobs "I'm not an animal" while hitting the brick walls with his bare hands. Finally, De Niro excerpted dialogue directly from the novel.

De Niro's copy of La Motta's biography also provides the rare opportunity to recreate and revisit De Niro's initial reactions to the material based on his hand-written notes in the margins. These notes often read "good," as if the actor were judging (or, more appropriately, editing) the book's merits. Often whole

dialogue scenes are underlined, with the implication that they would translate well to film.⁵ The “good” theme is elaborated on page 71, which reads “good feeling of frustration” and “rage and of being misunderstood,” as well as on page 144; “good dialogue” and “could be good scene.” This particular sequence is the famous violent confrontation between “Salvy” and “Joey” which erupts in a huge fight at the Copacabana club between actors Joe Pesci and Frank Vincent. At other times, the actor is clearly interested in the possibilities for improvisation and exploration of the character, as is indicated in the note on page 110, which reads “IMP [revise] what have I done to self.”⁶

ROBERT DE NIRO – AUTEUR?

Although De Niro’s significant role in shaping *Raging Bull* has recently been extrapolated by Richard Schickel and Kevin Hayes,⁷ traditional models of *auteur* cinema tend to privilege the director over every other creative role. This model diminishes the substantial work of the actor in the filmmaking process.⁸ As Scorsese’s stock has risen in the intervening decades since the film’s release, *Raging Bull* has become increasingly important to the director’s canon, viewed by many as his most significant achievement in the 1970s. Myriad reviews, retrospectives, and books on the film reinforce this perspective, as almost every one begins with an assessment of the director’s achievement, followed by the scriptwriters, recognizing De Niro’s performance third, despite his much deserved Academy Award win for Best Actor.⁹ The Robert De Niro papers also reveal the important role that the actor played during the scriptwriting phase of the film in addition to establishing his role as a major creative force within the film. Although almost all of the reviews of the film credit Mardik Martin and Paul Schrader as scriptwriters,¹⁰ Scorsese and De Niro actually ended up writing the final draft of the shooting script.¹¹

After he was finished reading the book, De Niro commissioned someone to transcribe all of the underlined passages. This is the next significant document in the *Raging Bull* file, consisting of an envelope which reads, “transferred dialogue from book that’s all” and containing reams of dialogue excerpted from the novel.¹² In 1974, the actor brought this material to Scorsese while the director was shooting *Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore* (Martin Scorsese, 1974). Scorsese expressed reservations about the project, to the point of saying that he wasn’t interested because he couldn’t relate to boxing at all.¹³ Nevertheless, the pair commissioned Mardik Martin (the screenwriter of *Mean Streets* [Martin Scorsese, 1973] and *New York, New York* [Martin Scorsese, 1977]) to write the initial treatment while Scorsese and De Niro worked on other projects. From 1978-9, while shooting *The Deer Hunter* (Michael Cimino, 1978), De Niro actually did a lot of the scriptwriting, working closely with Martin and going so far as to edit his work so that it conformed to the historical record. De Niro and Martin collaborated even further on a later outline, with inserted pages and notes from Mardik

Martin, dated April 18, 1978 and revised November 1st of the same year.¹⁴ This particular treatment has many notes on either side of the pages, suggesting that both actor and screenwriter were in close communication. On this note, Martin submitted his first (incomplete) draft of the screenplay called “Fighter (Raging Bull)” to De Niro, rather than Scorsese. The actor’s comments on the document indicate that he was serving as an editor and co-author at this point, evidenced by his evaluative comments and by his crossing out Martin’s dialogue and replacing it with his own vernacular speech.

To my mind, this writing is one of the most significant revelations of the papers. The files from *Cape Fear* (Martin Scorsese, 1991) and *Casino* (Martin Scorsese, 1995) contain similar rewrites by De Niro as he changes his dialogue to reflect common speech, regional accents and to hone in on particular (and often repeated) rhythms. As these notations are often undated, it is unclear whether this dialogue emerges within the rehearsal process and improvisation (as in De Niro’s most famous scene in *Taxi Driver* [Martin Scorsese, 1976]) or whether the actor is coming up with these rewrites entirely on his own. Nevertheless, what the rewrites reveal is the actor’s extraordinary power to reshape the script to conform to his understanding of his character, particularly in his collaborations with Scorsese.¹⁵

Further correspondence between actor and writer makes it clear that De Niro was the driving force behind the project’s continued momentum, particularly when Scorsese was having trouble directing a stage play, (the Broadway musical *The Act*, starring Liza Minelli) and struggling with his cocaine addiction.¹⁶ Dated 1978, Martin’s letter attests not only to this dilemma, but also to his deference to De Niro. It reads,

Bobby,

I still don’t know if what I’m doing has, at least, the essence of what you want. I haven’t been able to pull Marty away from his present project for comments and advice. In fact, his current experience in stage play has been somewhat painful, so I think he’s hesitating [crossed-out word] getting involved in a process that’s new to him. Also, he’s extremely tired...¹⁷

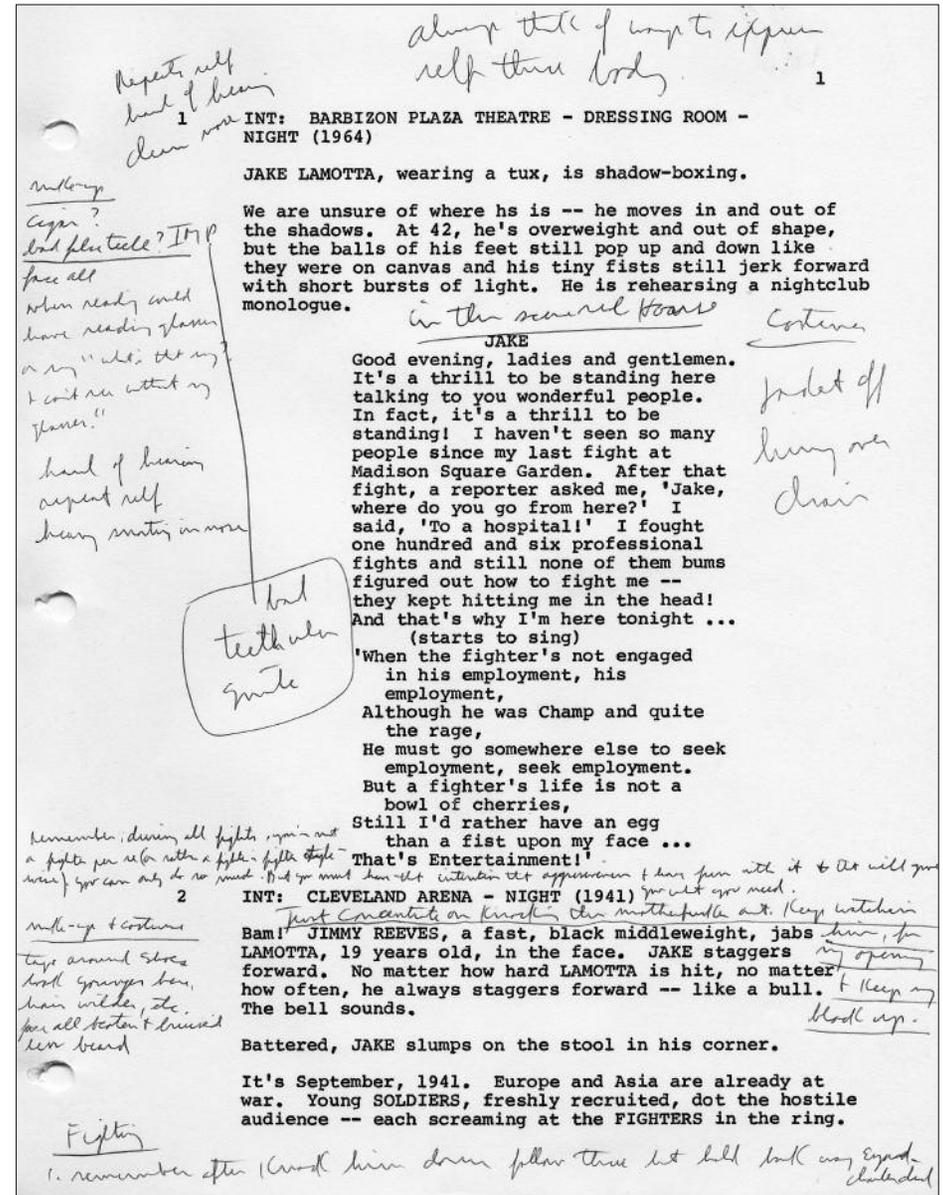
Martin refers to De Niro as the decision maker and also to his desire to personally discuss changes in the screenplay’s structure.¹⁸ Although De Niro had his own career to manage, he was crucially involved in the scriptwriting process which overlapped and extended into his performance in *Raging Bull*.¹⁹

Scorsese recalls De Niro visiting him on Labour Day 1978 after the director had been hospitalized for exhaustion. The actor convinced the director to finally commit to the project and from there the pair worked together on the making of the film.²⁰ Their first decision was to fire Mardik Martin. Afterwards, Scorsese

and De Niro hired Paul Schrader (the screenwriter of *Taxi Driver*) to re-write the screenplay. On July 3, 1978 Schrader submitted his revision of the script to De Niro and Scorsese for their perusal along with a memo attached to the script. This note indicates the changes that he made as a result of their discussions, and also that De Niro was still significantly in charge of the writing process. The note begins, "Bobby - What I gave you this morning didn't really indicate to my satisfaction some of the important character modifications and/or expansions."²¹ Schrader's most significant change was to come up with the film's flashback structure, as well as combining the Pete Savage and Joey La Motta figure, which would get them into trouble when the production was sued after the film's release. True to Schrader's preoccupations, he also rewrote the jail scene to include Jake's attempts to masturbate as he flashes back to all of the women he slept with in his lifetime and which was cut at De Niro's insistence. In Schrader's subsequent draft, De Niro resumed his role of what we might call "historical guardian," crossing out and correcting inaccuracies in addition to writing comments like "is this what happened?"²²

De Niro and Scorsese also actively solicited an extensive amount of collaboration, meeting with the real-life figures from La Motta's life. As the actor recounts, his end goal was to ensure historical (and perhaps personal) accuracy. De Niro also valued the opinions of La Motta and his ex-wife Vikki, spending a weekend in Florida talking to her, sleeping on her couch and actively corresponding with her about the script.²³ One such letter, sent from Vikki to De Niro is dated March 1979, and is a self-proclaimed "letter of uncalled for advice." Addressing De Niro as "Dearest Bob," it is a candid and highly intimate portrait of Vikki and Jake's life together as relayed through the script. Her comments range from the fact that she never used the term "ain't," to how Jake reacted when Vikki used foul language. In addition, she reveals small details such as when certain songs were released or how Jake "might be dishevelled but, a stained shirt I've never seen even while drinking." This correspondence marks not only De Niro's commitment to portraying La Motta accurately, but the trust and goodwill that the real-life figures had for the actor getting it right.²⁴ Collaboration and improvisation were also the key to De Niro's on-screen relationship with Joe Pesci who played his brother, Joey La Motta, and Cathy Moriarty who played his young wife Vicki.

Although De Niro is neither credited with a screenplay nor story credit, the final shooting script reads "Script Revised 2-1-79, M.S., R.D.N," indicating the prominence of the actor's contribution to the screenplay, particularly at this late juncture. This extension of De Niro's performance through the writing process serves as a significant alteration of the historical record. De Niro's desire to "perform" history suggests that the actor's writing process continues onto his body, as seen in his remarkable on-screen transformation and the physical means through which the actor embodies La Motta.²⁵ Consequently, we should ask why



Page one of *Raging Bull* shooting script. De Niro's notes on this page run the full spectrum of props, costumes, motivations and fight techniques, with comments ranging from "always find ways to express self thru body," "remember, I'm not a fighter per se..." and "just concentrate on knocking the motherfucker out," and specific references to the particular fight in opening scene. Image courtesy of The Robert De Niro Papers, The Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

De Niro did not receive a screenwriting credit, as well as asking whether the actor's writing with his body still counts as writing.

THE PERFORMANCE OF HISTORY

Interestingly, after Schrader's revision, De Niro's notation shifted significantly, suggesting that he had become closer to the acting process than the writing phase. These conclusions are based on the shift between De Niro's third person "editing notation" on the earlier Martin drafts to a first person perspective, using the pronoun "I."²⁶ As with the many other versions of the script, the first page begins with a long numbered list containing the actor's questions about the material and his character's motivations. The possessive language is interesting here, as De Niro raises questions like: "What do you think I am losing or winning?" "I have a...sense of humor," "I am thinking this is funny" and "I heckle people" indicating that he had made a significant shift within his process.

Evidence suggests that De Niro's attention to detail on this film is borne of his desire to stick as closely to the historical record as possible. Issues of realism, history, verisimilitude and artistic truth are all important to the way the actor perceived his role on screen. I am characterizing what De Niro does as something akin to a "historical performer," much like people who re-enact historical battles. The actor's ability to recreate Jake La Motta's life within particular historical moments remains the heart of this performance, as well as his commitment to restaging the circumstances that conveyed the truth of the fighter's everyday reality. In this regard, it is impossible to overstate the influence of Stella Adler on Robert De Niro's process, in addition to the teachings she derived from Stanislavski. As opposed to Lee Strasberg's approach, which emphasised "affective memory," or the actor's ability to produce emotions based on his own experiences,²⁷ Adler's technique involved researching the character's social milieu and class, as well as utilizing props and costumes that rooted the actor to these realities. For Adler, this was also a physical process, which De Niro obviously took to heart. In *Raging Bull*, the actor's notation emphasises these physical details, as well as specific clues that denote the character's class and ethnicity. At the same time, De Niro's ability to inhabit the skin of La Motta for years transformed the method into something different than previous performances, inspiring actors of later generations, such as Edward Norton.²⁸ Famously, the actor's tenacious efforts at refining a role have led him to become a licensed cabbie (*Taxi Driver*),²⁹ a competent saxophonist (*New York, New York*),³⁰ a bounty hunter (*Midnight Run* [Martin Brest, 1988]), and a bus driver (*A Bronx Tale* [Robert De Niro, 1993])³¹ to name but a few of his transformations.

The actor's immersion into the life of La Motta was a process that took years. By La Motta's own account, from 1978-79, De Niro trained every day with him in the gym for over a year in order to become fighting fit, no small accomplishment for the thirty- five-year-old actor.³² La Motta recalls that by the end of

the year, De Niro had boxed over one thousand times and could take on real opponents in the ring.³³ The rationale for this exercise was De Niro (and Scorsese's) desire to recreate each fight, punch-for-punch, as related to the actual footage of the "cards" (individual fights) that they had watched.³⁴ Though Scorsese would later stylise these sequences, De Niro's initial desire was to recreate the fights as they occurred. Furthermore, this work explains De Niro's devotion to his craft, particularly as the actor felt he needed to experience the ring and understand what a fighter went through.

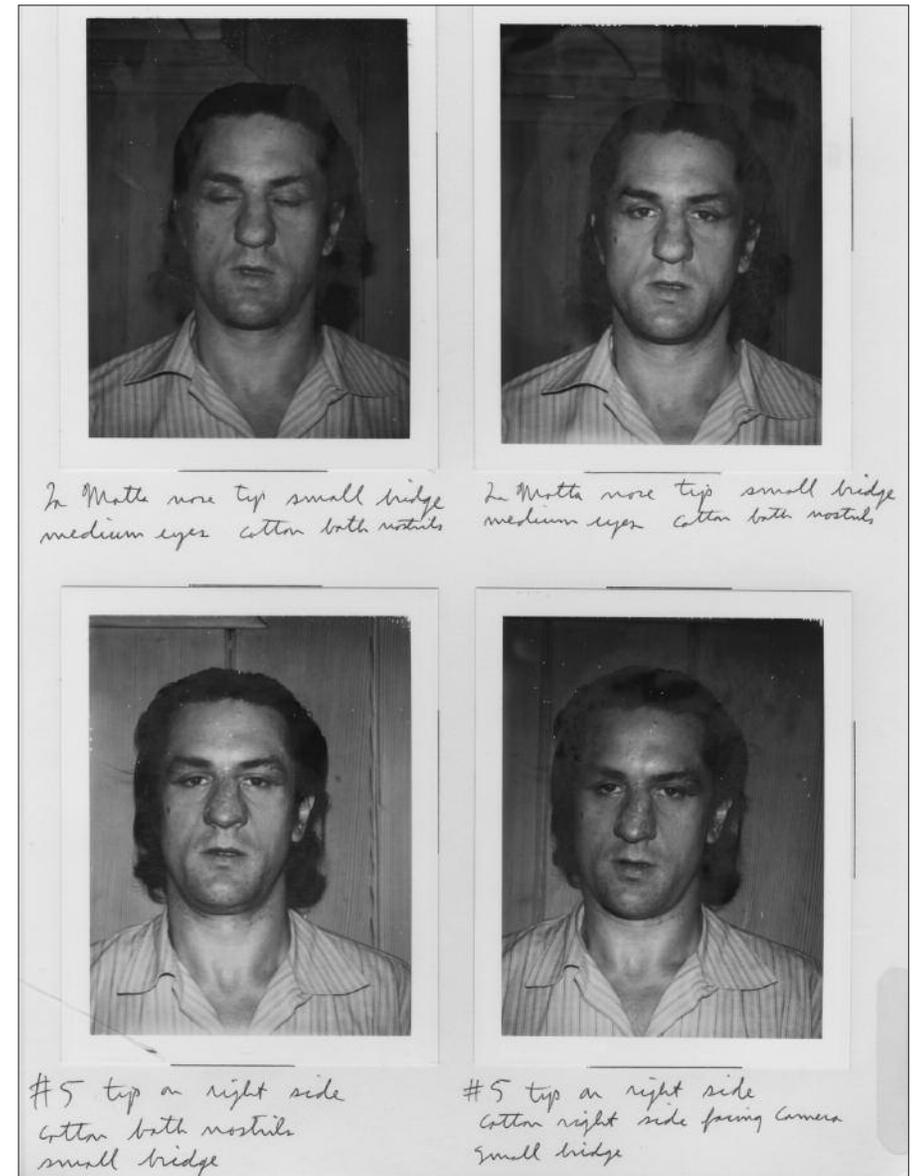
De Niro's notes reflect his concern that he could convincingly portray a boxer, but also that La Motta's obsession with his weight (both gaining it and losing it) was the key to understanding the fighter. His notes on the first page of his shooting script (dated August 17, 1979 – during the shooting of the film) suggests that upon the start of principal photography, De Niro felt he needed to earn the right to be in the ring with the other performers in the film, most of whom were real-life boxers. De Niro motivated himself by scrawling: "[r]emember, during all fights, you're not a fighter *per se* (or rather a fighter in fighter-style...) You can only do so much. But you must have that intention that aggression + have fun with it + it will give you what you need. *Just concentrate on knocking the motherfucker out. Keep watching him, for my opening + keep my block up.*"³⁵ Another note reads, "I know I'm a fighter, I have the right to be a fighter + act like one physically + in every way," illuminating his concern for legitimacy in the ring. Notes pertaining to the shooting of the fight sequences (entitled "Fight Stuff") are also illustrative, ranging from comments about pulling his punches for the camera, to specific details of specific fights. In the recreated Tony Janiro fight, De Niro notes to remember "that little hop, jump with left" and that "I have an air of confidence." De Niro also attempted to recapture La Motta's specific gestures during specific cards, writing "[i]n last Robinson fight clear rubbing of nose in 11th"). These last points reinforce De Niro's and La Motta's desire that the actor perform the particular fights by imitating the precise moves and sequences of punches that La Motta used, and underline his naturalistic and historically-informed portrayal of the role.

The shooting script also contains some keen insights into the actor's thought processes and perceptions about his character. For De Niro, it was important to humanize La Motta and to personally understand why the fighter was such an angry man. De Niro's choice to gain sixty pounds for his later portrayal of a larger La Motta is thus motivated by his greater understanding of La Motta's focus on weight and the relief he felt when he no longer had to be careful about it. The actor wrote: "[sic] this whole scene good contrast to later when older and fatter. [sic] when can't fight it anymore: the weight, dieting, etc. (lost over 4000 lbs.) therefore, in a strange way, more relaxed, more of a clown."³⁶ This gain and loss was reflected in the production's four-month hiatus, whereupon De Niro went to Italy to eat full time in order to gain the weight. According

to Scorsese, the weight gain was De Niro's idea, as was the idea to suspend production.³⁷ In keeping with this theme, perhaps one of De Niro's biggest contributions was setting the stage for the public's perception that gaining or losing weight is seen as the ultimate mark of great acting.³⁸

De Niro's notes on the first page of the script belie the importance of this physical transformation of his character, reflecting the actor's desire to "[a]lways think of ways to express self thru [sic] body..." A final page in the binder lists De Niro's ideas on how to achieve these weight effects, ranging from "heavy breath[ing]" to having "cotton in mouth" to a "bulk of fat" to wearing smaller clothes in order to "accentuate what has to be accentuated."³⁹ De Niro's attention to detail extends to every scene of the film. The actor's notes explain his character's motivations for each act, ranging from small printing that explains, "I'm like an animal, I move like an animal, I maybe grunt like an animal"⁴⁰ to notes extending to props and costumes. These notes range from his ideas about the specifics of materials and looks ("white tux with dinner jacket and black pants" [56]) to one describing La Motta's eating of a sandwich, where De Niro wrote that it was specifically of the "pepper and egg" variety,⁴¹ making him part costume designer and part art director as well. These notes conform to Adler's teachings as well, as De Niro famously harnessed her instructions on using props to define the characters' social status.

De Niro tracked down every imaginable reference to La Motta's career. Some of these documents are the yellowing newspaper clippings that one expects to find in any archive, while others are more obscure, including copies of La Motta's own family album,⁴² bound volumes, correspondences, court transcripts and personal notes to the actor.⁴³ Of all of these findings, the binder that contains the final shooting script provides the most detail, as it is overstuffed with notes, personal letters and script revisions throughout.⁴⁴ Absent are La Motta's own films of the fights, which De Niro and Scorsese watched many times in order to accurately recreate, then stylise within the film. De Niro's voracious research found any and all references to La Motta, no matter how far-reaching or far-flung. Two full boxes are devoted exclusively to these materials, including an impressive array of news clippings taken from the fighter's prime, in addition to (almost) every boxing magazine that mentions La Motta's career, including retrospectives.⁴⁵ Within this file, De Niro has gone as far as to procure an article from the French magazine *Paris-Match*, which he had translated in order to gain insights into Jake's title fight with Marcel Cerdan, entitled "Ah! C'est un nouveau qu'il nous faudrait!"⁴⁶ In addition to these many articles about his boxing career, De Niro's research includes writing about the boxer's post-championship life, including an article from *The Medicine Hat News*, Saturday June 1, 1968, entitled "La Motta, Hunter big hits at Sportsmen's Banquet over 300 to attend,"⁴⁷ as well as books about the art of boxing.



Test polaroids of De Niro as he tries to perfect La Motta's look by stuffing cotton in his nostrils. This page is one of dozens of make-up tests, all of which attest to De Niro's obsessive devotion to minute details. Images courtesy of The Robert De Niro Papers, The Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

DE NIRO AS WITNESS

Perhaps the biggest find in the *Raging Bull* file is the fascinating testimony that De Niro offered when Joey La Motta sued the production. Ironically, the actor only revealed the intricacies of his craft process while under oath. As mentioned previously, De Niro's, Scorsese's and Schrader's biggest departure from the historical record occurred when they combined the real-life figures of Joey La Motta and Pete Savage into a single character which bore Joey La Motta's name. Joey's contention was that the new character represented defamation of character, as the creative team attributed criminal activities to him (including his character's fictional ties to the mafia) when it was actually Savage who had such a history. The lawsuit further questions precisely what De Niro's creative role was in the production of *Raging Bull* and the depth of his agency in the creative process.

While the actor is notoriously elusive as to what his process entailed, a close reading of the document reveals how the actor's unique process straddled different roles, including writer and producer. The intense collaboration was extremely complicated and his preparation broke open the time-honoured categories of filmmaking, prompting the prosecuting attorney to go so far as to ask whether he had "any other function than as an actor in the particular film that we are here about today, *The Raging Bull*"⁴⁸ According to the actor's testimony, De Niro's goal was to present the lives of these people as accurately as possible, while honouring their integrity. Regardless of whether this process can be considered "writing," "producing, or "directing," for De Niro, these roles all contributed to a larger, more complex idea of biographical art, motivated through historical research and input from the real-life figures. In a moving portion of the transcript, the actor succinctly reveals his purposes for putting the film together, extending beyond his own motivations to a bigger ideal of dramatic truth. Here, De Niro stated:

Of course you always try to make it as factual — our intention was to make a movie that's real, about real people, about people that were in some ways looked down upon and Jake was not a favorable-looking character. A lot of people didn't like him. That is what interested us about it and we did the film with much feeling and compassion for him and his brother and his wife and all concerned to make it right...To show their side, to show real people not just stereotyped which you see in all other movies. We did lots of work and it took us years and years to work on this thing, the fight, which we tried to make as factual and accurate as possible.⁴⁹

His desire was always to make the film "factual," "a movie that's real, about real people" and ultimately to do the film with much "feeling" and "compassion" for the characters and the real people that they were based on.⁵⁰ Furthermore:

You try to show the essence of something and make it the way you think it would be, that is what you call a creative thing. I wanted them to see everything so they knew what we were doing and what our ideas were and so they understand. It wasn't so much of a fact or expression and that was the thrust of the whole thing. I said it once and I'll say it again, nobody would have made a movie as good about them with such love and feeling for it...⁵¹

Several key terms are worth mentioning here, particularly De Niro's conflation of "factual" and "real" in addition to the creativity that occurs when putting together a film. Most importantly, De Niro discusses the care with which all parties attempted to put all the material together, complete with the input from all of the real parties involved, including Joey. All of this material forces us to question the nature of filmmaking and collaboration while revealing that the papers present an increasingly complex vision of the moviemaking process.

Analyzing *Raging Bull* from De Niro's perspective allows me to modify previous theoretical models—film authorship, star and performance theory—to create a more nuanced view of performance and collaboration. Despite the advances that have come since Andrew Sarris coined the phrase "*Politique des auteurs*," auteur cinema remains the default position of critics and scholars. A more nuanced view of *Raging Bull* would claim that Scorsese, Schrader, De Niro and Schoonmacher each possessed the auteur function at different times during the production. As the documents attest, De Niro possessed this function first, carrying the baton through the pre-production phase and to his eventual on-screen performance, complicating the notion of who did what and when.

Raging Bull can also be framed as a star text. Following Richard Dyer, we might say that *Raging Bull* provides a rare occasion when the story of De Niro's extensive preparation spilled outside of the text, blurring the lines between private actor and public star.⁵² It is also worth recalling that while Scorsese's star had fallen significantly when the film was released (after the sub-par box-office performance of *New York, New York* as well as his wrestling with personal demons of addiction), De Niro established himself as a considerable acting force in the 1970s, with a solid string of hits and Academy Award and Golden Globe nominations (and wins) for *The Godfather Part II* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974), *Taxi Driver*, *New York, New York*, *The Deer Hunter* and culminating in his Best Actor win with *Raging Bull*.⁵³ Thus, while the film is obviously a Scorsese work, it is simultaneously a De Niro vehicle, representing the best efforts of this fruitful collaboration.

RAGING BULL'S CRITICAL RECEPTION

Raging Bull continues to gain value in the American film canon despite the fact that major critics like Pauline Kael and Andrew Sarris famously panned the film

at the time of its release.⁵⁴ Although it garnered mixed reviews (the praise was high and the criticism was sharp) De Niro's performance was universally lauded, warranting comparisons to Brando and legendary actors of the previous generation. This achievement has gradually been overwhelmed by the film's centrality within Scorsese's canon. *Raging Bull* is now considered a masterpiece of American Cinema, having been canonized within the American Film Institute's famous "100 Years, 100 Movies" list, where it has jumped from number twenty-five, in 1998, to number four within the span of only ten years.⁵⁵

Raging Bull was somewhat of a divisive film at the time of its release. Though its eight Academy Award nominations seem to indicate that it was highly regarded, it lost in almost every category to Robert Redford's *Ordinary People* (Robert Redford, 1980), including Best Picture and Best Director. Critics were divided over whether it was even a likable film, with the major dailies conflicted over the issue. Reviewers agreed that the extreme devotion to his craft that De Niro brought to his portrayal of La Motta was something new and unique. Despite its initial drubbing by critics and defeat at the box-office, it was De Niro's performance—rather than the director's style—that sustained the film in its lean years before its eventual canonization. De Niro's Best Actor Oscar win is not insignificant to this history particularly when his stiff competition in the category included Peter O' Toole (*The Stunt Man* [Richard Rush, 1980]), Jack Lemmon (*Tribute* [Bob Clark, 1980]), Robert Duvall (*The Great Santini* [Lewis John Carlino, 1979]), and John Hurt (*The Elephant Man* [David Lynch, 1980]).

Most important to De Niro, he won universal acclaim from his peers in the acting world, including Jane Fonda, Paul Newman, Meryl Streep, Jack Nicholson, and Al Pacino among many others. In their congratulatory notes to De Niro, each of these figures marvelled at the intense commitment of the actor to his subject and to his craft. In a hand-written note to De Niro, Pacino remarked that the film was "a monumental piece of Art" and an "inspiration" to him. Fonda was "overwhelmed" by De Niro's performance, stating that she had "never seen anything like it" and that he had gone "way beyond any acting I've known about." Newman wrote that he couldn't "remember being humbled by an American actor for many a year" and that De Niro "did that in spades."⁵⁶ The film's subjects—Jake and Vikki La Motta—were equally impressed by De Niro's accomplishment, with the boxer remarking that the actor's "thoughtfulness will always be cherished" and with La Motta's ex-wife stating that De Niro had "transferred the eyes of a young Jake and buried them deeply into [his] soul," which she suggested that the actor actually "stole."⁵⁷

By the end of the 1980s, *Raging Bull's* critical reputation was rehabilitated on the heels of what is largely considered an abysmal decade in the American cinema and in the wake of Scorsese's comeback film *Goodfellas* (1990).⁵⁸ Today, *Raging Bull* is universally acclaimed as Scorsese's American film masterpiece. Ty Burr of *The Boston Chronicle* remarks that "[t]he film that many considered the

finest of its decade, *Raging Bull*, has aged well, and not just because it was filmed in black and white."⁵⁹ It bears repeating that the La Motta performance is held as a high watermark of De Niro's stardom and abilities.⁶⁰ Paradoxically, De Niro's stock as an actor appears to have dropped as low as Scorsese's has ascended since these early successes. Though the actor won two acting Oscars in the 1970s leading into the 1980s (in addition to being nominated for his gripping performance in *The Deer Hunter*), since then he has only been nominated for two more Academy Awards—for *Awakenings* (Penny Marshall, 1990) and *Cape Fear* (Martin Scorsese, 1992).

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, it is the actor's consideration of La Motta's history and his respect of performing it accurately that differentiates this role from others. The emphasis on realism and artistic truth is embodied by his physical transformation within the film and is the culmination of his research process, written, as Taubin has suggested, upon his flesh.⁶¹ Elsewhere, Peterson has characterized De Niro's physical transformation as a manifestation of his "blunt instrument." Peterson suggests that the actor's performance is at its most intense "in its attention to the sharpening of that instrument in the actor's training" and "it's subsequent blunting in his celebrated weight gain."⁶² The implication here is that the net effect of De Niro's performance as received by the viewer consists of an interrelated knowledge on the part of the spectator and actor that what the actor is presenting is real, if only on the level of his physical performance. His closeness to the source material, his access to the real-life figures, and his extended process infuse *Raging Bull* with a unique and significant quality, the likes of which De Niro attempted later in his career, albeit with mixed results. The files reveal that his research becomes most intense when he can base his portrayals on real-life figures, such as Jimmy Conway in *Goodfellas* and Lefty Rosenthal in *Casino*. It is almost as if De Niro is working as a historian, but applying his extensive research to his particular medium, rather than a written report on an era. Thus, the De Niro papers illuminate the depth of the actor's research process, in addition to illuminating the actor's role as a collaborator. De Niro is both a writer and a performer, though his writing begins with the research process and extends to his embodiment as a character on screen. The actor's intense commitment to historical accuracy is a significant part of this process, as is his devotion to interviewing the real-life figures involved in these stories, feeling how they felt and wearing what they wore.

De Niro's work in *Raging Bull* complicates and illuminates our understanding of his creative practice, particularly as the De Niro Papers provide an alternate history that has been lacking in contemporary accounts of the film's canonical status. These primary documents reveal the intricacies of De Niro's elusive process, while cataloguing the extent of labour that the actor expended.

Finally, the papers offer an opportunity to reassess De Niro's significant contributions to American movie-making in the past forty years, particularly as they shed light on his creative involvement in the pre-production, writing and acting phases of a movie's life. In this vein, it is worth considering how De Niro's work extends to issues of film authorship, star and performance theory and history as the actor's involvement eclipses the boundaries between all of these categories.

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NOTES

1. *Robert De Niro: A Preliminary Inventory of His Papers in the Film Collection at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center*, 2008, The Harry Ransom Center website (Hereafter HRC) <http://research.hrc.utexas.edu:8080/hrcxf/view?docId=ead/00481.xml>, (accessed 29 November 2009).
2. Kazan's comparison to Brando and Dean continued, "Brando was a rebel and free spirit, rebelling against the bourgeois spirit of the 1940s and '50s. Dean represented the release of anger against parents—resentment of parents to understand. Jimmy was sulky—unpleasant actually. I didn't like him very much. But De Niro—De Niro is a number of things all at once. He's a street person and yet he's a highly sensitive man. There are a lot of people in him. He finds release and fulfillment in being other people. That's his pleasure, his joy. He's found his solution for living—in work. I've never seen a guy who worked as hard. He's the only actor I've ever known to phone me on Friday and say, 'Let's work all weekend together'" (Kazan quoted in Patricia Bosworth "How Weirdo is De Niro? Patricia Bosworth Goes in Search of the King of Shadows," *Vanity Fair* [October 1987]: 106).
3. HRC—Jake La Motta, inscription to RDN and annotated by RDN. "De Niro Papers La Motta, *Raging Bull: My Story*, HRC De Niro Papers BV235 (accessed 15 November 2009).
4. Robert De Niro, Interview with James Lipton, *Inside the Actor's Studio*, Season 5, Episode 2, original air date 29 November 1998.
5. HRC De Niro Papers BV 235, LaMotta, Jake, with Joseph Carter and Peter Savage, *Raging Bull: My Story* (1970). Inscribed by LaMotta to RDN and annotated by RDN. This occurs on page 51 first, where De Niro's note reads "good dialogue."
6. *Ibid.*, 110.
7. For excellent overviews of the making of the film that highlight De Niro's involvement, see Richard Schickel "Brutal Attraction: The Making of *Raging Bull*," *Vanity Fair*, no. 595 (March 2010): 292-303; and Hayes, Kevin J. "Introduction: The Heritage and Legacy of *Raging Bull*," in *Martin Scorsese's Raging Bull*, ed. Kevin J. Hayes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1-18. As both articles rely mostly on interviews as the basis of their accounts, I have preferred to rely almost entirely on the primary documents' accounts of the production in order to attempt to tell a different version of the story.
8. Cynthia Baron, Diane Carson, Frank P. Tomasulo and Sharon Marie Canicke have all attempted to expand the actor's contribution to the cinema in *More Than a Method: Trends and Traditions in Contemporary Film Performance* (2004), and *Reframing Screen Performance* (2008). These authors all argue that the actor's contribution needs to be taken further than his presence in front of the camera as an extension of the *mise-en-scène*, as in the views of David Bordwell and others.
9. See for example, Hayes' edited collection titled "*Martin Scorsese's Raging Bull*." Kevin J. Hayes, *Martin Scorsese's Raging Bull* (Cambridge University Press, 2005) illustrates this tendency nicely, privileging the director, and reinforcing the auteur perspective in contemporary film studies.
10. See for example, Eric Gerber, *Houston Post*, 19 December 1980 as does Joseph McBride's *Variety* review and Frank De Ford's feature in *Sports Illustrated* (McBride, *Variety*, 12 November 1980; De Ford, *Sports Illustrated* 1 December 1980).
11. This version of the script is dated 1 February 1979 and has both the director's and actor's initials on the title page. HRC De Niro Papers 126. Folders 1 and 2. "Raging Bull MS RDN."
12. This typed document consists exclusively of excerpted dialogue from the book, much of which eventually ends up in the finished film. HRC De Niro Papers, Folder 124.1 "Dialogue Excerpted from *Raging Bull* from Jake La Motta."
13. Martin Scorsese quoted in "*Scorsese on Scorsese*," Martin Scorsese, Ian Christie, David Thompson (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 2003), 76-77.
14. HRC De Niro Papers, 124.6 "De Niro - Raging Bull - Rough First Draft, notes and questions with annotations by RDN and Mardik Martin - Untitled, undated, rough drafts in 3 acts; typescript with notes by RDN and Mardik Martin."
15. As the *Casino* files reveal later on, De Niro collaborated with Scorsese and Nicolas Pileggi from the beginning of the writing process, shaping the narrative as well as maintaining that the script conformed to his own research on the era. This is the subject of my 2010 presentation at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference where I trace the actor's significant involvement as a screenwriter and creative force behind the film. R. Colin Tait "True? True? True? De Niro, *Casino* and Authorship" (paper presented at the annual meeting for the Society for Cinema and Media Studies, Los Angeles, California, 18 March 2010).
16. John Kander and Fred Ebb discuss Scorsese's direction of *The Act* in John Kander, Fred Ebb & Greg Lawrence, *Colored Lights: Forty Years of Words and Music, Show Biz, Collaboration, and All That Jazz* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2004), 146-7.
17. HRC De Niro Papers 126.6 "De Niro - *Raging Bull*, correspondence and RDN notes re: *Raging Bull* Scripts, ca. 1979."
18. *Ibid.*
19. At this point, De Niro was also shooting *The Deer Hunter*, as indicated by his notebook for this film. HRC De Niro Papers, Box 44.4 "RDN's notebook, *The Deer Hunter*."
20. Martin Scorsese quoted in "*Scorsese on Scorsese*," Martin Scorsese, Ian Christie, David Thompson (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 2003), 76-77.
21. HRC De Niro Papers 125.3 "Note from Schrader to De Niro, July 3, 1978" and "Raging Bull" undated screenplay by Paul Schrader, with RDN notes.
22. HRC De Niro Papers, 125.5 "De Niro - Raging Bull, Screenplay Draft with notes, lacks title page, version before 11-1-78 Revision."
23. Jake La Motta, *Raging Bull 20th Anniversary Edition*, DVD, disc 2 extras, directed by Martin Scorsese (MGM Entertainment, November 2000).
24. HRC De Niro Papers, Vikki La Motta, "Letter to Robert De Niro," March 1979.
25. An interesting aside might trace this process to De Niro's portrayal of Max Cady in *Cape Fear*, whose tattoos were selected specifically by the actor for the role.
26. HRC De Niro Papers, Box 125.3 "Raging Bull" undated screenplay by Paul Schrader, with RDN notes.
27. See Lee Strasberg, *A Dream of Passion: The Development of the Method* (New York: Penguin Group, 1987), for an explication of his take on the method.

28. In a 2009 tribute to De Niro at The Kennedy Center Honors, Norton stated that seeing De Niro in action was the reason that he became an actor. Norton, *The Kennedy Center Honors: A Celebration of the Performing Arts*, PBS, originally aired 29 December 2009.
29. To this end, HRC De Niro Papers contain the actual New York City cabbie licence that De Niro got before playing Bickle.
30. "For *New York, New York*, he learned to play the tenor sax with amazing naturalness, so that the instrument seems a part of him just as it does with a real jazz man." Kroll elaborates De Niro's training, stating: "De Niro's teacher was George Auld, one of the outstanding tenor saxophonists of the swing era who appeared with the big bands of Artie Shaw and Benny Goodman, as well as with his own groups, and is still a fine player. De Niro learned the fingering for every number in the film and played the sax to the soundtrack that Auld had recorded while Auld watched him off camera, ready to give Scorsese a slit throat sign if De Niro took a wrong breath or pushed a false finger. Auld rarely had to slit his throat." Auld, quoted in Jack Kroll "'De Niro: A Star for the '70s' in *Newsweek* (16 May 1977): 80.
31. Robert De Niro, Interview with James Lipton, *Inside the Actor's Studio*, Season 5, Episode 8, original air date 29 November 1998. De Niro apparently failed the bus driving test 3 times.
32. La Motta goes so far as to suggest that he believed De Niro could qualify as a Middleweight fighter after his extensive training (quoted in Peterson, 79).
33. Jake La Motta, "The Bronx Bull," *Raging Bull 20th Anniversary Edition*, DVD, directed by Martin Scorsese (MGM Entertainment, November 2000)
34. Ibid.
35. HRC De Niro Papers, Box 200 "De Niro, Robert, notes on shooting script"
36. HRC De Niro Papers, Box 199 "Master Script 'as shot pre-hiatus 8/17/79,'" 55.
37. Quote from Thomas Wiener, "Martin Scorsese Fights Back," *American Film* (November 1980): 34. Similarly, Miles Beller describes the "method" behind De Niro's transformation more fully, explaining that the actor "ate his way across Northern Italy" consuming three "massive" meals daily, followed by "generous amounts of beer and milk." Miles Beller, "De Niro plays the heavy" *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, 14 November 1980.
38. The weight gaining transformations of Tom Hanks in *Cast Away* (Robert Zemeckis, 2000) may be the only other film where the actor gains or loses the weight within the span of the film's story. Other examples of actors altering their body weight for a role include Charlize Theron in *Monster* (Patty Jenkins, 2003), Benicio del Toro in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (Terry Gilliam, 1998), Sylvester Stallone in *Cop Land* (James Mangold, 1997) and George Clooney in *Syriana* (Steven Gaghan, 1995).
39. HRC De Niro Papers, Box 200. Facsimile script Shooting Script with RDN notes. The script can be more accurately described as comprising two elements: the actual script and the myriad notes contained in the binder that holds all of this material. This list can be found on the final page in the large binder that contains all of De Niro's materials related to the shooting of the film (it is not numbered). Tucked into the pockets of the binder are notes and correspondences as well as many post-it notes referring to the actor's decisions during the shooting phase of the film.
40. Shooting Script, 7.
41. HRC Shooting Script, 63. That De Niro kept all of his costumes, including his now famous robe from La Motta's prize fight, is testament to the actor's devotion to detail, as are the costumes, makeup and historical notes that accompany each film in the archives.
42. HRC De Niro Papers, Box 205 "La Motta Family Album."
43. HRC De Niro Papers, Boxes 128-130 include "Research material on La Motta and boxing," "Articles about Jake La Motta," "Court transcripts, Jake La Motta vs. the State of Florida 1957," "Jake LaMotta: Middleweight Champion of the World," "Typescript and list of fights 1941-1954," "La Motta photographs," "Boxing and related group photographs" and "General photographs of private life, night club, celebrities, film appearances, etc."
44. Presently missing from this file are the many interviews that De Niro taped. The archive has not yet catalogued the wealth of audio and visual materials yet, so I can only make guesses as to what they contain from the occasional reference to them in the paper-work.
45. Though the files do not attribute a name to the individual who did this research, it seems fair to make an educated guess and to attribute these findings as coming from La Motta himself—who is shown in pictures with Vikki La Motta putting together a scrap-book. It may also have been an avid fan of the fighter's who De Niro had some correspondence with named "Augie."
46. "Ah! It's a new one that we need!" (HRC Box, 128.5-128.6 De Niro - Raging Bull - Articles about Jake La Motta).
47. Ibid. That such a prominent fighter would attend a small-town Canadian event – in Medicine Hat, Alberta no less! – is testament to the depths to which La Motta's star had fallen before the movie.
48. HRC De Niro Papers, Box 127.8 "Transcript of RDN's deposition re: La Motta, 9 March 1981," 5.
49. Ibid., 67-8.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid.
52. Richard Dyer, *Stars: New Edition* (London: BFI Publishing, 1979), 8.
53. One such article, written by Jack Kroll in *Newsweek*, suggests that De Niro is "A Star for the Seventies" in the same fashion that Marlon Brando and James Dean's performances encapsulated their own eras. Jack Kroll, "De Niro: A Star for the '70s" *Newsweek*, 16 May 1977, 80-86.
54. Former defenders of Scorsese's—*The New Yorker's* Pauline Kael, *The New York Observer's* Andrew Sarris, and *New York Magazine's* David Denby—panned the film. Kael felt "trapped" by the monotony of its realism (Pauline Kael, "Religious Pulp, or The Incredible Hulk," *The New Yorker*, 8 December 1980, 217). Denby called the film a "monumental, crabbed, limited work," which "winds up punishing the audience with its integrity" (David Denby, "Brute Force," review of *Raging Bull*, *New York Magazine*, 1 December 1980). Dave Kehr of *The Chicago Reader* declared, "I can't pan it, but this 1980 fantasy biography of fighter Jake LaMotta seems unquestionably Martin Scorsese's weakest work, at least to that point in his career" which had "little or no dramatic impact" (David Kehr, "Raging Bull," *The Chicago Reader*, 24 November 1980).
55. AFI 100 Years, 100 Movies <http://connect.afi.com/site/DocServer/100Movies.pdf?docID=301> (accessed 8 November 2009). Rottentomatoes.com and metacritic.com both have a collected approval rating of 95 and 98 per cent for the film, respectively, with the former announcing the *Raging Bull's* "universal acclaim"—a rare distinction for any contemporary American motion picture. Rotten Tomatoes, *Raging Bull*, <http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9C06E6D71238F937A25752C1A966948260&partner=Rotten%20Tomatoes>, Metacritic, *Raging Bull*, <http://www.metacritic.com/video/titles/ragingbull> (accessed 8 November 2009).
56. HRC De Niro Papers, Folder 126.8 "De Niro - Raging Bull - Congratulatory Telegrams and Letters."
57. Ibid.
58. Roger Ebert noted that *Raging Bull* was voted "the greatest film of the decade" but though it lost for Best Picture to *Ordinary People*, "time has rendered a different verdict." Roger Ebert, "Raging Bull," *The Chicago Sun-Times*, 10 May 1998. The emphasis is on the Scorsese/De Niro tandem, with much of the credit shifting to Scorsese. Amy Taubin of *The Village Voice* takes this trend a step further, declaring that the film was, in no uncertain terms, a "masterpiece." (Amy Taubin, "Primal Screen," *The Village Voice*, 1 August 2000).
59. Ty Burr, "After 25 Years, Raging Bull Still Packs a Whallop," *The Boston Globe*, 11 March 2005.

60. Burr notes that “it has been a long time since De Niro has turned in a performance this uncompromising; his current run of Focker fathers-in-law and American Express skills can’t begin to compare.” Ibid.
61. Taubin, n.p.
62. Michael Peterson, “Raging Bull and the Idea of Performance,” in *Martin Scorsese’s Raging Bull*, ed. Kevin J. Hayes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 77-78.

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