Lack of Consequences in Martin Scorsese's Worlds

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What's always fascinating about Martin Scorsese's films is how his characters seem to go through moments of change or growth but never really face the kind of consequences we expect. They lie, cheat, steal, and kill, but by the end, they're fundamentally the same people. Their journeys aren't about redemption or transformation; they're about survival or, more often, stagnation. Take Henry Hill in *Goodfellas*. He betrays his crew to stay out of prison, but even in witness protection, he's still the same guy, yearning for the thrill and chaos of his mob days. Or look at Jordan Belfort in *The Wolf of Wall Street*. He spends a short time in prison for defrauding countless people, only to come out just as shallow and opportunistic, reinventing himself as a motivational speaker. Scorsese's characters face plenty of challenges, but they almost never undergo the punishment or meaningful change we have been taught to expect from stories like these.

This essay examines the protagonists of five Martin Scorsese films: Taxi Driver, Goodfellas, Raging Bull, The Wolf of Wall Street, and Casino. In *Taxi Driver*, Travis Bickle is a Vietnam veteran whose loneliness and frustration with the world spiral into a violent quest for redemption. *Goodfellas* follows Henry Hill's rise and fall in the mob, showing the allure of that lifestyle but also its ultimate emptiness. In *Raging Bull*, boxer Jake LaMotta's jealousy and rage destroy his relationships and leave him completely isolated. *The Wolf of Wall Street* tells the story of Jordan Belfort, a stockbroker whose greed drives his meteoric rise and spectacular downfall. Finally, *Casino* looks at Sam "Ace" Rothstein, a casino manager whose obsession with control unravels his life through betrayal and chaos. While these characters face moments of

reflection or temporary change, none of them experience meaningful consequences for their actions. By the end, they stay fundamentally the same, with arcs that feel incomplete and hauntingly unresolved.

In *Taxi Driver*, Travis Bickle is this lonely, disillusioned Vietnam vet who is disgusted by what he sees as the moral decay of New York City. He's a fascinating character because he's so convinced he's the righteous one, even as he spirals into violence. His anger is summed up perfectly when he says, "I think someone should just take this city and just... just flush it down the f***in' toilet." He tries to connect with Betsy, this campaign worker, but when she rejects him, his frustrations boil over, and he turns his focus to Senator Palantine as a symbol of everything wrong with the world. When that plan falls apart, he shifts gears again and decides to "save" Iris, a teenage prostitute, by slaughtering her pimp in this incredibly violent outburst. The irony is that this act, driven by delusion and anger, is celebrated as heroism. In the film's epilogue, Travis is hailed as a vigilante, completely sidestepping any real consequences for his actions. And yet, when the film ends, it's clear nothing has really changed for him. His loneliness, his anger, his inability to truly connect with anyone, it's all still there. The cycle will just repeat itself, and that's what makes his story so unsettling.

In *Goodfellas*, Henry Hill's arc follows a similar pattern, Henry Hill's life of crime is marked by theft, extortion, drug trafficking, and high-profile heists like the 1967 Air France robbery and the 1978 Lufthansa heist. His involvement in organized crime spans years, culminating in his arrest in 1980 for drug trafficking. Yet, despite the seriousness of his crimes, Henry avoids significant punishment by turning informant, testifying against his associates, and entering the Witness

Protection Program. On the surface, this might seem like a turning point, but Henry's core character stays unchanged. He is still deeply attached to the thrill of the gangster lifestyle. "I'm an average nobody... get to live the rest of my life like a schnook,"[i] he says, mourning the loss of power and glamour rather than reflecting on the harm he caused. This lack of true transformation defines Henry's story. He does not reject the gangster life out of guilt or moral growth but simply because his circumstances no longer allow it. While his legal escape lets him sidestep prison, there is no deeper reckoning. Henry's frustration with his new, mundane life shows how little he has changed internally, leaving us with a character who survives but never evolves.

Then there's *The Wolf of Wall Street*. This is the story of Jordan Belfort, a stockbroker who built his empire on greed and fraud. His firm, Stratton Oakmont, ran "pump and dump" schemes that defrauded investors out of nearly $200 million. Even though Belfort's crimes ruined countless lives, his punishment barely scratched the surface. He served only 22 months in prison, and instead of disappearing from the public eye, he turned his infamy into a business. By becoming a motivational speaker, Belfort managed to profit off the very crimes he committed. His mindset is clear when he says, "Let me tell you something. There's no nobility in poverty." [ii] Scorsese does not hold back in showing how flawed the world really is, where charm and privilege let people like Belfort avoid real accountability. By the end, he is still the same unapologetic man, proving that for some, consequences barely exist.

Casino follows a different kind of character: Sam "Ace" Rothstein, based on a real-life casino manager, Frank Rosenthal, who ran multiple Las Vegas casinos for the Chicago mob. Rothstein is deeply involved in organized crime, skimming millions in unreported casino profits to funnel

directly to Midwest Mafia bosses while defrauding the government. He runs the Tangiers Casino without a gaming license and uses bribery to keep local officials and law enforcement on his side. His partnership with Nicky Santoro, a mob enforcer, only increases the chaos as Nicky's violent methods lead to more problems than solutions. Everything eventually collapses. Rothstein's marriage to Ginger falls apart in addiction and betrayal, his friendship with Nicky ends in violent fallout, and the casino empire crumbles under corruption and scrutiny. In the end, Rothstein avoids prison and death, but he is forced to leave Las Vegas and start over. Returning to San Diego, he begins betting on sports again, exactly how he started. Scorsese shows that, for all Rothstein's ambition and efforts to control everything around him, nothing really changes. He ends up right back where he began, proving that some people's lives run in unbroken cycles, no matter how much they seem to gain or lose along the way.

And then there's Jake LaMotta in *Raging Bull*. He's not part of any criminal empire, he's a boxer whose entire life is defined by jealousy and anger. He abuses his wife, Vickie, and pushes away his brother, Joey, until he is left with nothing but the ruins of his personal and professional life. What makes Jake different from some of Scorsese's other characters is that he shows moments of self-awareness. In one of the most powerful scenes, he stands in front of a mirror and recites Marlon Brando's famous "I coulda been a contender"[iii] line from *On the Waterfront*. It is raw and heartbreaking, a moment where Jake finally seems to acknowledge just how much he has thrown away, his career, his family, and his dignity. But even in this moment, Jake doesn't change. He knows what he has lost, but he doesn't do anything to fix it. Scorsese doesn't give him redemption or a way to rebuild. Instead, Jake is left alone with his regrets, stuck in the same

destructive cycle that caused his downfall in the first place. Sometimes recognizing your flaws isn't enough to change them, and that is what makes Jake such a tragic character.

Scorsese's characters live in a world where moral accountability is rare, and personal growth is often brief or incomplete. For instance, Travis Bickle's isolation in *Taxi Driver* starkly contrasts with Jake LaMotta's moments of self-awareness in *Raging Bull*. Travis, despite being hailed as a hero by society, is trapped in a cycle of alienation and violence. His worldviews stay rigid, and there's no indication that his internal struggles will ever resolve. Jake, on the other hand, does experience flashes of reflection, like when he recites the iconic "I coulda been a contender" line. Yet even with this recognition of his failures, Jake makes no effort to repair his relationships or grow from his mistakes. As Scorsese noted in his essay *The Persisting Vision*[iv], "Cinema is the invocation of life, in an ongoing dialogue with life." Both Travis and Jake seem frozen in time, their stories capturing a moment of their existence without offering any resolution or transformation.

When comparing Jordan Belfort in *The Wolf of Wall Street* and Sam Rothstein in *Casino*, the theme of systemic failure becomes even more pronounced. Belfort's brief prison stint and later reinvention as a motivational speaker expose a justice system that is not equipped to hold people like him accountable. Similarly, Rothstein escapes death and imprisonment, returning to his roots as a sports bettor in San Diego. Both men are products of environments where privilege and charisma outweigh morality. As Scorsese said in *Il Maestro*[v], "It's about the choices you make in the creation of the whole picture." In these films, the characters' choices reveal the rot in the systems that allow them to thrive, even as their personal arcs stay hauntingly incomplete.

However, something that is especially striking in Martin Scorsese's films is how much harsher the fates of secondary characters can be when compared to the main figures at the center of the story. Even though the protagonists often seem to escape with their core personalities and habits intact, those around them end up suffering consequences that feel far more severe. Let's consider Casino, where Sam Rothstein manages to avoid prison and even returns to his old routine after losing his empire. Meanwhile, Ginger McKenna, who tries to assert her own will and break free from the corrupt world around her, spirals into drug addiction and misery before finally meeting a tragic end. Her death by overdose is not only sad but also brutally final, underscoring that these peripheral lives can crumble in ways the main players rarely face. Nicky Santoro, who is brash and violent, pushes his luck until he provokes lethal retaliation. His demise, a vicious beating followed by being buried alive, is a far cry from the situations that characters like Rothstein fall back into.

In Goodfellas, this contrast is just as visible. While Henry Hill avoids lengthy prison time by becoming an informant, his associates suffer in ways that feel more direct and painful. Tommy DeVito, who is too impulsive for his own good, believes he will be rewarded for his loyalty, only to be shot in the head without warning. Paulie Cicero and Jimmy Conway find themselves locked away, stripped of the influence and freedom they once enjoyed. These secondary characters, who live by the same rules as the protagonists, never seem to find the strange form of survival or continuity that the main figures do. Instead, their endings are harsher, more violent, and devoid of any sense of lingering hope. In a world that refuses to offer clean redemption arcs, it is those on the sidelines who bear the brunt of the most brutal consequences.

What's even more unsettling is that four out of the five guys we've been talking about are based on real people, which shows how unfair and unjust the real world can be. Henry Hill existed outside the movie screen, he actually turned informant, dodged serious prison time, and then faded into witness protection without ever really having to face the harm he caused. Jake LaMotta was a real boxer who truly did tear apart his own life, not just some fictional character designed to provoke our pity. Jordan Belfort really was a scheming stockbroker who paid only a tiny fraction of what you'd expect for ruining countless lives, then turned his infamy into a thriving business. Sam Rothstein's story mirrors that of Frank Rosenthal, a real-life casino operator who skimmed profits, dodged the law, and basically ended up back where he started. It's one thing to watch these arcs unfold on film and think it's just a director's bleak take on humanity, but when you realize it actually happened, it becomes that much harder to dismiss. These aren't just scripted tragedies or cautionary tales, but they're drawn from our own world, where charm, connections, and money can buffer people from any real consequences. It makes you wonder if our expectations of justice and accountability are just comforting illusions.

So what are we supposed to take from all this? Does Scorsese point a finger at a society that fails to punish those who deserve it, or is he saying that some people are fundamentally incapable of change, especially those who lack even a basic sense of decency? Scorsese's films don't spell it out neatly, but part of what makes his work so captivating is the depth of his understanding of the human spirit. He's known as a master technician, which he is, but beneath that craft lies a questioning Catholic who genuinely believes in grace and redemption, even as he shows us people who never achieve it. Sometimes he is moved to tears by their struggles, as with Jake LaMotta's heartbreaking self-reflection in front of a mirror, and other times he is laughing at

their absurdity, as in the chaotic excess of The Wolf of Wall Street. His empathy and insight allow him to portray reprehensible characters in ways that feel both brutally honest and strangely compassionate. Ultimately, maybe he's not just condemning society or these flawed individuals, he's pointing to the messy reality of how systems fail and how some people just will not change. That failure can feel tragic, comical, or both. Either way, any technical prowess on Scorsese's part flows from his profound recognition of these human limitations. He refuses to offer simple answers, leaving us to grapple with the question of who is truly at fault and whether anyone is ever truly capable of something better.

In the end, Scorsese's characters never fit into the neat arcs we expect, and that's exactly what makes them stick with us. People like Travis in Taxi Driver stay trapped in the same cycles of alienation, Jake in Raging Bull knows he has messed up but never fixes anything, and Jordan Belfort in The Wolf of Wall Street or Sam Rothstein in Casino keep on thriving in systems that never really hold them accountable. As Scorsese points out in The Persisting Vision, cinema is not about wrapping things up with a perfect little bow but about showing us fragments of life that together reflect how complicated we all are. His films remind us that the world does not always punish the guilty or reward the good, that people can recognize their flaws yet still refuse to change, and that justice often feels like an illusion. Instead of offering any simple answers or tidy resolutions, Scorsese leaves us confronting these questions ourselves. By doing this, he forces us to see the messy realities beneath our familiar stories, the flawed nature of human beings, and the systems that let them slip by. When the credits roll, we are left not with comfort but with the uneasy understanding that life, just like the world he puts on screen, rarely plays out as we think it should.

[i] https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Goodfellas
[ii] https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0993846/quotes/
[iii] https://martin-scorsese.fandom.com/wiki/Jake_LaMotta
[iv] Scorsese, Martin. "The Persisting Vision: Reading the Language of Cinema." The Film Foundation, 12 Aug. 2013, www.film-foundation.org/the-persisting-vision.
[v] Scorsese, Martin. "Il Maestro: Federico Fellini and the Lost Magic of Cinema." Harper's Magazine, Mar. 2021, www.harpers.org/archive/2021/03/il-maestro-federico-fellini-martin-scorsese/.