

***The Wrestler*, by Darren Aronofsky<sup>1</sup>**

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An Italian proverb claims that only those who were once great are allowed to be decadent. *The Wrestler* (2008), the fourth movie by North American director Darren Aronofsky, proves the truthfulness of this saying. Randy “The Ram” Robinson (Mickey Rourke) was, in the eighties, one of the shiniest stars of wrestling. Multitudes worshipped him; his combats inspired a Nintendo videogame; posters and action figures made him famous among youths. However, the sun also sets down, even in glory days. Being over fifty, an age considered to be too old for the majority of sport activities, the idol works in part time at a supermarket, subject to the humiliating behavior of his boss, and, maybe worse, to be recognized by a fan.

Twenty years after his prime, Robinson keeps fighting — but mainly outside the ring. A duel with his scarred body and his exhausted heart; a battle to recover the affection of his disenchanted daughter, Stephanie (Evan Rachel Wood), whom he left in her adolescence, and who is now twenty-two years old. As Randy confesses in one of the most touching moments of this picture:

I just want to tell you, I’m the one who was supposed to take care of everything. I’m the one who was supposed to make everything okay for everybody. It just didn’t work out like that. And I left. I left you. You never did anything wrong. I used to try to forget about you. I used to try to pretend that you didn’t exist, but I can’t. You’re my girl. You’re my little girl. And now, I’m an old broken down piece of meat... and I’m alone. And I deserve to be all alone. I just don’t want you to hate me. (Aronofsky, 2008)

Randy is not alone in his slow fall. His friend, Pam “Cassidy” (Marisa Tomei), a stripper, also faces the sunset of her fame, after having been the favorite of so many men. The similarity between their biographic itineraries generates mutual comprehension and complicity. In an interview dating from January 2009, granted to Sean Axmaker, Aronofsky reflects upon this strategy:

(...) interesting parallels between the two characters: both performing on stage, both having stage names, both wearing spandex, both using their body as their art, both endangered by time and by age as

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affecting the way they make money, and both easily confusing the real world and the fake world.

Not without surprise, Randy appreciates the stripper's company and advice to conquer his daughter's respect and to put an end to his fighting career. In his turn, Pam has compassion towards him, and suggests: "You oughta see the passion of Christ", establishing, therefore, a parallel between Jesus and the wrestler, wounded and crucified in every fight. She also perceives in him a desperate effort to live his quotidian life, between steroids and analgesics. However, faithful to her professional code — or maybe skeptic about romance — Pam discourages him: "Don't get involved with a customer" (Aronofsky, 2008).

At last, the opportunity to gloriously end Randy's career arrives: one last fight with his archenemy, The Ayatolla, a role played by Ernest "The Cat" Miller, a wrestling idol in real-life. It is not simply a battle of fame or failure, but also of life and death. After a recent combat, Randy suffered a heart-attack, was subject to coronary bypass surgery, and advised by his doctor not to go back to the ring. Nevertheless, fighting is not simply what Randy does; it is also what makes him feel alive. As Bruce Springsteen's expressive song, part of the soundtrack, asks:

Have you ever seen a one-legged dog making its way down the  
street?  
If you've ever seen a one-legged dog then you've seen me  
Then you've seen me, I come and stand at every door  
Then you've seen me, I always leave with less than I had before  
Then you've seen me, bet I can make you smile when the blood, it  
hits the floor  
Tell me, fan, can you ask for anything more? (Aronofsky, 2008)

There is no rest for real warriors: waves of applause sweep over the fans, as Randy's last fight is about to begin. He introduces himself with this brief speech:

I just want to say to you all tonight I'm very grateful to be here. A lot of people told me that I'd never wrestle again and that's all I do. You know, if you live hard and play hard and you burn the candle at both ends, you pay the price for it. You know in this life you can lose everything you love, everything that loves you. Now I don't hear as good as I used to and I forget stuff and I ain't as pretty as I used to be but god damn it I'm still standing here and I'm The Ram. As times goes by, as times goes by, they say "he's washed up", "he's finished", "he's a loser", "he's all through". You know what? The only one that's going to tell me when I'm through doing my thing is you people here. (Aronofsky, 2008)

Even though this is a fictional piece of work, Randy shares with numerous real-life athletes, physical pain and personal demons. The director reveals that after viewing this

profoundly realistic movie, fighter Roddy “Rowdy” Piper cried in Mickey Rourke’s arms. *The Wrestler* was filmed in a documentary style, following Randy’s steps on the way to the ring. Establishing a parallel, the same camera will follow him through the dark corridors of a supermarket, on a work day.

This movie is not just about Randy’s last stand; it also represents Rourke’s return to the *plateau*, after several pictures, which convinced neither the critics nor the general audience. As the actor states: “Forget all the other things I was in. (...) This is the best movie I’ve ever made, and it’s the movie I’m most proud of”. Well aware of the difficulties and demands of performing the role of Randy, for six months, Rourke spent countless hours at the gymnasium, training the most popular moves used by wrestlers. The bond of empathy between him and the director positively influenced the artistic result: this movie is superior to *The Fountain* (2006), the imaginative *Pi* (1998), or even *Protozoa* (1993).

This movie suffers from several flaws, mainly in the plot: the interaction between the protagonist and his daughter is predictable; although dialogues are realistic, they are bereft of humor or tension; the parallelism established between Randy and Pam is not subtle.

The most noticeable problem is that there is *not* a deep transformation in the characters’ lives, personalities or beliefs — and the open ending (does the good giant die or win? is this his sacrificial fight) only emphasizes this flaw. True, Aronofsky still disturbs the audience — through his honesty, perfectionism, and the excellent performance of the actors, especially Rourke’s; however, the story of this modern gladiator is far too linear.

*The Wrestler* received nominations for two Oscars (Best Performance by an Actor in a Leading Role for Mickey Rourke, and Best Performance by an Actress in a Supporting Role for Marisa Tomei); the Critics Choice Award for Bruce “The Boss” Springsteen for the title song; and the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival.

Ref.: Aronofsky, Darren. *The Wrestler*. Wild Bunch, Protozoa Pictures, Saturn Films, 2008.