

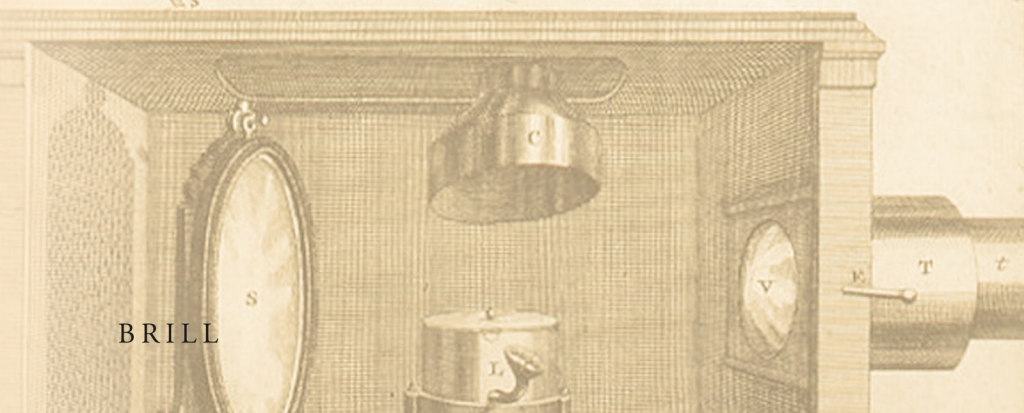
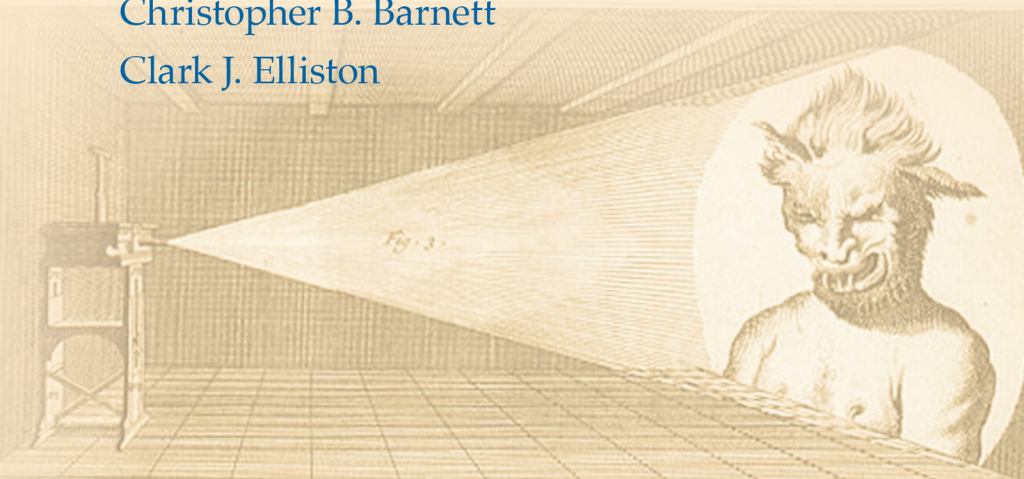
STUDIES *in* RELIGION *and* the ARTS

SCORSESE AND RELIGION

Edited by

Christopher B. Barnett

Clark J. Elliston



BRILL

Scorsese and Religion

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*For students past and present,
for friends and colleagues,
with whom we have discussed religion and film
and through whom we have gained much insight,
we dedicate this book
in hopes of future conversations*

*Ex nihilo nihil fit
—Lucretius*



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Acknowledgements

Academic books often have a lengthy genesis, slowly coming into focus after conference panels, course seminars, workshops, and the like. That was not the case with this project. When Martin Scorsese released *Silence* in December 2016, we each marveled at the fact that Scorsese's long and varied interest in religion had not received more focused attention in the scholarly world. We had just completed the anthology *Theology and the Films of Terrence Malick* (2016) and enjoyed the process so much that a volume on Scorsese not only made good sense but sounded like fun. A proposal was drafted; emails were dispatched; phone calls were made. *Voilà!* We had a plan, contributors, and an exciting new project underway.

Much of the credit for this quick process goes to Martin Scorsese himself – a filmmaker of singular vision, whose oeuvre ranks among the very best in cinematic history. Indeed, it was not difficult to find persons who wanted to contribute to this book, and that is a testimony to the enduring power of Scorsese's films. At the same time, however, a proper academic book entails much more than enthusiasm. Thus we also would like to thank all the people at Brill, including our editor Tessa Schild and, above all, James Najarian and Eric Ziolkowski, who oversee Brill's *Studies in Religion and the Arts* series. Their interest and investment is much appreciated. The same is true of our respective universities and departments, who have provided the moral support and the tangible resources needed to complete this endeavor. Finally, we would like to thank the various individuals who have contributed this project, whether indirectly (as in each of our families) or directly (as in students with whom we have discussed the subject matter). To whatever extent this volume is successful, we owe them our gratitude; to whatever extent it is lacking, the fault is our own.

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Introduction

Christopher B. Barnett and Clark J. Elliston

That Martin Scorsese is one of the finest directors in the history of cinema is certain. Indeed, one could reach this conclusion in any number of ways. Scorsese has received eight Academy Award nominations for Best Director—top among living directors and tied for second (with Billy Wilder) among all directors since the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences began presenting the award in 1929. Such accolades situate Scorsese at the head of the cinematic establishment, but he is equally venerated among the *avant-garde*. In 2007, the British periodical *Total Film* named Scorsese the second greatest director of all time (behind only Alfred Hitchcock),¹ and the *American Film Institute* listed three of Scorsese's films among the 100 best American films, including *Raging Bull* (1980) in fourth place.² Already in 1998, well before Scorsese released recent classics such as *The Departed* (2006) and *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013), the celebrated critic Roger Ebert professed, "There is no greater American filmmaker right now than Martin Scorsese, and hasn't been for some time, perhaps since Welles and Hitchcock and Ford died."³

Yet, despite all of Scorsese's accomplishments, "surprisingly few books have been written on his work."⁴ Revered by cinephiles, he has been less popular among academics. Moreover, when Scorsese *has* received scholarly attention, there has been an understandable if exaggerated accent on certain aspects of his background and interests, whether his upbringing in Manhattan's Little Italy or his attraction to stories about organized crime. As a result, other aspects of Scorsese's filmmaking have been underemphasized. For example, while commentators have frequently noted the religious ideas and imagery in Scorsese's oeuvre, comprehensive and focused treatments of such matters are scarce—a deficiency that this volume hopes to redress.

To be sure, from the start, Scorsese's films have involved religious questions. Ebert notes that Scorsese's debut *Who's That Knocking at My Door* (1967) centers on a protagonist who "embodies Scorsese's own Catholic obsessions,"

1 Total Film, "Greatest Directors Ever—Part 2," *GamesRadar+*, August 20, 2007, <http://www.gamesradar.com/greatest-directors-ever-part-2/>.

2 "AFI's 100 Greatest Films of All Time," *American Film Institute*, accessed December 13, 2017, <http://www.afi.com/100Years/movies10.aspx>.

3 Roger Ebert, *Scorsese by Ebert* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 218.

4 Aaron Baker, "Introduction: Artistic Solutions to Sociological Problems," in *A Companion to Martin Scorsese*, ed. Aaron Baker (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 3.

many of which “would inspire Martin Scorsese for the whole of his career.”⁵ Broadly speaking, these “obsessions” include themes such as faithfulness, purity, redemption, and suffering. But such a general list does not begin to address the idiosyncratic nature of Scorsese’s vision—the tension between Catholic piety and Mob loyalty in *Mean Streets* (1973), the pain of spiritual trial in *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), the exploration of religious non-violence in *Kundun* (1997), not to mention the director’s groundbreaking use of camera-work and soundtrack. Nor, finally, does it address the depth and the intimacy of Scorsese’s personal involvement with Catholicism: “I wanted to be a priest. My whole life has been movies and religion. That’s it. Nothing else,”⁶ he once remarked.

“Movies and religion”: the task of the present volume is to tease out the coupling of these two elements in Scorsese’s life and work. That Scorsese himself conjoins the two already indicates that this is not so much an ancillary facet of Scorsese’s career as one approaching its very core. The issue, then, is not whether this study is warranted; it is how it will proceed. In particular, the groundwork must be laid for calling this volume *Scorsese and Religion*, rather than, say, *Scorsese and Theology* or *Scorsese and Catholicism*. For once this question is settled, it will be clear that terms such as “theology” and “Catholicism,” while germane in certain cases, do not do justice to the breadth of Scorsese’s interaction with religious issues and themes.

1 Scorsese and Religion

The term “religion” is often traced to the Latin verb *religare* (“to bind fast”) and, in turn, to the noun *religio* (“respect for the sacred,” “fear of the gods”). At its root, then, “religion” suggests a connection or even an obligation to the divine order—a meaning instantiated in the Middle Ages, when persons taking monastic vows became known as “religious.” And yet, this particular use of “religious” only scratches the surface of how the term is employed: “In terms of usage religion is usually defined as ‘having dealings or relations with the sacred,’ and this in the broadest possible sense so as to include speculative, aesthetic, and ethical religious acts.”⁷ Indeed, according to Thomas Aquinas, “the name

⁵ Ebert, 21.

⁶ Quoted in Mary Pat Kelly, *Martin Scorsese: A Journey* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1991), 6.

⁷ Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, *Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd edition (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 437.

‘religious’ may be given to all in general who worship God,⁸ and that is why he treats the subject in a section on the cardinal virtue of justice, rather than among the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. For Aquinas, in a way that is not entirely at odds with modern Protestant thinkers such as Karl Barth, religion and theology are by no means identical. Whereas the latter focuses on understanding and interpreting God’s self-revelation, the former concerns the basic human attitude toward the divine.

With this distinction in mind, the reasons for entitling this volume *Scorsese and Religion* come into focus. First, in a negative sense, it is clear that Scorsese does not explicitly “do” theology in his films. Scorsese is neither a clergyman nor a scholar, and his films do not feature clear-cut dogmatic professions⁹ or abstract metaphysical arguments. Of course, that is not to suggest that theology, qua discipline, is reducible to such modes of discourse. The word itself is taken from a pair of Greek terms, *theos* (“God”) and *logos* (“word” or “speech”), and thus theology, in its most basic form, concerns communication about God. There is scope, then, for viewing Scorsese as a Catholic layperson who addresses his audience as one formed by and in dialogue with the Catholic theological tradition.¹⁰ Indeed, some of the chapters in this volume will examine Scorsese’s work precisely from this standpoint.

8 Thomas Aquinas, *ST*, II-II, q. 81, a. 1, ad. 5.

9 In point of fact, the opening sequence of *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), perhaps Scorsese’s most unambiguously theological film, renounces any authoritative or doctrinal purchase: “This film is not based upon the Gospels,” a disclaimer reads, “but upon this fictional exploration of the eternal spiritual conflict.”

10 Notably, in a 2017 address to the Italian Theological Association, Pope Francis encouraged Catholic theologians to interpret the Gospel with “faithful creativity,” particularly in light of the “unprecedented challenges that involve humanity today, such as: the environmental crisis; the development of neuroscience or technology that can alter human beings; ever greater social inequalities or the migration of whole peoples; and relativism in theory and practice” (Quoted in Carol Glatz, “Pope Francis: Theologians Should Be ‘Faithful and Anchored’ to Teachings of Vatican II,” *America: The Jesuit Review*, December 29, 2017, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2017/12/29/pope-francis-theologians-should-be-faithful-and-anchored-teachings-vatican-ii>). Theology, then, is to be in conversation with culture, and Pope Francis explicitly links this emphasis to the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. For example, in *Gaudium et Spes*, one of the council’s most important documents, it is said that “the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel. ... We must therefore recognize and understand the world in which we live, its explanations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics (Pope Paul VI, *Documents of the Second Vatican Council: Gaudium et Spes*, The Holy See, December 7, 1965, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html). This statement aptly summarizes how Scorsese might contribute to theology and, indeed, be seen as a kind of theologian. For a recent text that takes an approach

At the same time, however, other contributions neither can nor should do so—a point that gestures toward the positive reason for the title of this book. In a number of Scorsese's feature narrative films,¹¹ he depicts characters and concerns in a way that is best deemed "religious." In other words, to draw on Aquinas's language above, Scorsese deals with religion as an aspect of human being writ large, as something that exceeds Christian doctrine and is of "cardinal" (or "basic") importance to all human cultures and relationships. This perspective is obvious in films such as *Kundun*, which centers on Tenzin Gyatso, the fourteenth Dalai Lama and thus the political and spiritual leader of Tibet. It can also be seen more generally in several of Scorsese's other films, which explore issues and raise questions about human freedom, mortality, and responsibility and set them over against the possibility of a divine order—an order that may help or may judge but nevertheless stands as a real, if shadowy, Other in relation to human affairs. Here one might think of *Taxi Driver* (1976), which plumbs the depths of human sin and the ostensibly sacrosanct desire to put it to justice, or *Gangs of New York* (2002), which shows that religious identity is bound up with communal identity and, alas, with internecine conflict. In short, Scorsese's cinematic vision cannot be reduced to a Catholic *Weltanschauung*; his films are not for Catholic audiences alone, nor do they narrate the world from a narrowly Catholic standpoint. And yet, one would be hard-pressed to find a Scorsese film that does not touch on the religious in some fashion.

In short, when considering the relation between Scorsese's cinema and religion, a few points have to be kept in mind. First, Scorsese was raised as a Roman Catholic and continues to acknowledge the influence of Catholicism on both his life and work: "It's always in you," he remarked in a 2016 interview, "My search for faith has never really ended from when I became aware that there was such a thing as faith and started to look at how it's acted out in your daily life."¹² Second, his Catholic background notwithstanding, Scorsese's interest in

of this kind, see Catherine O'Brien, *Martin Scorsese's Divine Comedy: Movies and Religion* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

11 This volume will indeed focus on Scorsese's feature narrative films, though at times it will touch on Scorsese's documentary filmmaking and his various short films. The decision to concentrate on Scorsese's feature narrative films is pragmatic: given Scorsese's long and diverse career, there is simply not enough space to delve into all of his cinematic endeavors, which by no means stop at film direction but extend into acting, film production (both in the motion picture industry and on television, perhaps most famously with HBO's acclaimed series, *Boardwalk Empire*), and screenwriting. Beyond this practical consideration, however, there is also the simple fact that Scorsese's standing and influence especially lie in feature narrative films such as *Taxi Driver*.

12 Gabrielle Donnelly, "Scorsese Interview: Catholicism Is Always in You," *Catholic Herald*, posted December 22, 2016, <https://catholicherald.co.uk/issues/december-23rd-2016/martin-scorsese-interview-catholicism-is-always-in-you/>.

and treatment of religion extends well beyond the confines of Catholic teaching and themes. Third, any thorough scholarly account of Scorsese's work must attend to *both* sides of his filmmaking—namely, his Catholic roots and his attentiveness to religion writ large. As will be seen, this volume intends to meet just these objectives.

2 The Volume's Structure

Scorsese and Religion seeks to address Scorsese's religious vision across three distinct yet related parts. Part 1, "Catholicism and Scorsese," will concern the foundation of Scorsese's interest in religion—namely, his relation to the Catholic Church. Marc Raymond will detail Scorsese's Roman Catholic background, including his time as a junior seminarian in New York City. Gueric DeBona, in turn, will explore how Scorsese's films display a distinctly "ecclesial imagination." The upshot will be a better understanding of Catholicism's influence on the *auteur*, both on a personal and on an artistic level.

Part 2 is entitled "Religious Influences and Themes in Scorsese's Cinema." As the title indicates, its overarching goal is to highlight the religious breadth of Scorsese's corpus. Consequently, the contributions in this section will be discursive, touching on a variety of films and taking an expansive, more topical perspective. Christopher B. Barnett will show that the Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky stands as a major influence on Scorsese's filmmaking. John McAteer and Cari Myers will each consider Scorsese's well-known use of violence: McAteer will explore how it evinces a tension between classical tragedy and the Christian understanding of original sin, while Myers will relate it to the thought of French theorist René Girard. M. Gail Hamner will ponder the "woman question" in Scorsese's films, contemplating the extent to which his works effectively critique the abuse of women. All told, religious angst, violence, and sexual tension are arguably the core themes of Scorsese's project; thus this section can be seen as a kind of summa of the filmmaker's art, laying the groundwork for the more focused studies that ensue.

Indeed, Part 3 "Scorsese and Religion: A Selective Filmography" will consider several of Scorsese's films on an individual basis, examining their respective approaches to religion. Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch takes on Scorsese's most controversial film, *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), arguing that it is best understood as part of his longstanding attempt to portray and to realize the redemptive power of suffering. Kerry San Cherico will contend that *Kundun* is not just a biopic of the Dalai Lama, but also belongs to an ongoing attempt on Scorsese's part to understand how religion might bring one, in the language of the dharmic traditions, to "liberation." Gerard Loughlin will read *Bringing*

Out the Dead (1999) as a palimpsest, that is, as a “text” bearing traces of prior texts—in this case, *Taxi Driver* and *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Evinced in Scorsese’s palimpsestuous vision is a refined theology: whereas Scorsese once portrayed suffering itself as redemptive, *Bringing Out the Dead* evokes a compassion reminiscent of Julian of Norwich. Stephen Mulhall will contend that it is Scorsese’s *recent* works—particularly his 2010 thriller *Shutter Island*—that offer a more nuanced and thus more successful way of commenting on human vice. Clark Elliston will argue that Scorsese’s *Hugo* (2011) is a film about film’s capacity to transform: the cinema as such is not redemptive, but it provides a context in which questions of human meaning can be explored, weighed, and ultimately resolved in friendship with others. D. Stephen Long will focus on Scorsese’s black comedy *The Wolf of Wall Street*, reading it through the lens of Nietzsche’s proclamation of the death of God: God is absent from the film, but that is just why it is significant as cultural-cum-theological commentary. Finally, Darren Middleton and Mark Dennis will analyze *Silence* (2016), Scorsese’s latest feature narrative film.¹³ Adapted from Shusaku Endo’s eponymous novel, *Silence* has been hailed as a “passion project”¹⁴ for Scorsese, and indeed Middleton and Dennis will show that its reception as a film *about* faith and *of* faith is suggestive of another redemption—that of the filmmaker himself.

In short, this volume will show that Scorsese’s artistic “re-presentation” of reality brings together various religious influences (Catholicism, existentialism, Buddhism, etc.) and topics (violence, morality, nihilism, etc.). The overarching claim is not that Scorsese attempts to harmonize these sources and themes, nor is it to suggest that Scorsese’s significance can be reduced to religion. What *is* being asserted is that Scorsese cannot be properly understood without considering the ways that his religious interests are expressed in his filmmaking. In developing this point, this volume expects to contribute to Scorsese studies, religion and film, and, ultimately, to the interface of religion and the arts in general.

13 As of this writing, Scorsese is in post-production with his latest film *The Irishman*, based on Charles Brandt’s true crime book, *“I Heard You Paint Houses”*: Frank “The Irishman” Sheeran and the Inside Story of the Mafia, the Teamsters, and the Last Ride of Jimmy Hoffa (2004). Starring Robert De Niro, Al Pacino, and Joe Pesci, *The Irishman* marks Scorsese’s return to the crime film genre. However, it is not scheduled to be released until the fall of 2019 at the earliest.

14 Paul Elie, “The Passion of Martin Scorsese,” *The New York Times*, November 21, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/27/magazine/the-passion-of-martin-scorsese.html>.

PART 1

Scorsese and Catholicism



The Catholic Scorsese – or How a Seminarian Turned to the Movies

Marc Raymond

(W)hen I was a little younger, there was another journey I wanted to make: a religious one. I wanted to be a priest. However, I soon realized that my real vocation, my real calling, was the movies. I don't really see a conflict between the church and the movies, the sacred and the profane. Obviously, there are major differences, but I can also see great similarities between a church and a movie house. Both are places for people to come together and share a common experience. I believe there is a spirituality in films, even if it's not one which can supplant faith ... It is as though movies answered an ancient quest for the common unconscious. They fulfill a spiritual need that people have to share a common memory.¹

Thus concludes *A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese Through American Movies* (1995), one of an increasing number of history of cinema documentaries Scorsese has made over the past couple of decades. This essay will trace Scorsese's role as a film historian and critic and its link to his religious upbringing, in which the sacred and the profane indeed mix and in which the great cinematic canon does in fact supplant the Catholicism of Scorsese's youth. However, the connections between the church and the movies never disappear, partly because the very film canon that Scorsese helps consecrate has roots in the Catholicism of the French New Wave and the *auteur* theory Scorsese encounters in the seemingly secular institution of New York University in the 1960s. Thus, while Scorsese's intense childhood faith dissipates, his theological fascination finds an outlet in the film medium, which can be seen both in his fictional works such as *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) and *Silence* (2016), as well as his vast work as a historian and critic: *A Personal Journey* and *My Voyage to Italy* (2001), as well as the analysis of popular music in the films

1 Martin Scorsese and Michael Henry Wilson, *A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese Through American Movies* (New York: Hyperion Press, 1997), 166.

The Blues (2003), *No Direction Home: Bob Dylan* (2005), and *George Harrison: Living in the Material World* (2011). Although this recent work may seem less directly religious than some of his features, close analysis shows the continued importance and influence of Scorsese's Catholicism on these secular exegeses. In particular, the interplay between the sacred and the profane and the importance of blasphemy would remain a key thematic and deeply influence how Scorsese interprets his documentary subjects.

Scorsese opens *A Personal Journey* with a personal anecdote about seeing the film *Duel in the Sun* (1946) with his mother when he was a young child:

I remember quite clearly – it was 1946 and I was four years old – when my mother took me to see King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun*. I was fanatical about westerns. My father usually took me to see them, but this time my mother did. The movie had been condemned by the Church. 'Lust in the Dust,' they dubbed it. I guess she used me as an excuse to see it herself.²

This early film memory highlights not only the particularly vivid film experience ("deliriously vibrant color, the gunshots, the savage intensity of the music, the burning sun, the overt sexuality"³) but also the context of that viewing. It was a "condemned" text that, paradoxically but not at all surprisingly, led to his religious, Catholic mother (so Scorsese retrospectively interprets) actually desiring to see a western she would have otherwise ignored. Scorsese describes watching the actual movie in almost religious terms:

It was all quite overpowering. Frightening too. The final 'duel in the sun,' where Jennifer Jones shoots Gregory Peck, was too intense for this four-year-old. I covered my eyes through most of it. It seemed that the two protagonists could only consummate their passion by killing each other.⁴

This overpowering and frightening experience would remain in Scorsese's memory. It serves as a foundational moment in his appreciation of cinema's power. I also argue that the film's status as a "banned" text added to or perhaps even completely created this moment in his mind. For while Scorsese grew up a deeply religious Catholic, he also grew up within the world of New York City in the 1940s and 1950s, eventually entering into New York University in the 1960s. While it may be tempting to see these contexts as distinct and even

² Scorsese and Wilson, 14.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

competing, I argue, as does Scorsese himself, that they are complementary, forming an intense dialectic that shapes the filmmaker and cinephile Scorsese becomes.

When analyzing how Scorsese structures *A Personal Journey*, the importance of the *auteur* theory is immediately obvious, as the sections are organized around the film director: “The Director’s Dilemma,” “The Director as Storyteller,” “The Director as Illusionist,” “The Director as Smuggler,” and “The Director as Iconoclast.” While this may seem to simply reflect the fact that Scorsese himself is a director and thus naturally focuses on this aspect of filmmaking, the influence of the *auteur* theory extends beyond the mere fact of Scorsese’s role in the film production. Andrew Sarris and his seminal 1968 book *The American Cinema* has a huge influence on *A Personal Journey*, which can be traced back to the popularity of these ideas during Scorsese’s formative years at NYU. Of the fourteen directors in Sarris’ “Pantheon,” ten are discussed via a film clip by Scorsese (Charlie Chaplin, John Ford, D.W. Griffith, Howard Hawks, Buster Keaton, Fritz Lang, F.W. Murnau, Max Ophuls, Josef von Sternberg, and Orson Welles). More tellingly, fifteen of the twenty filmmakers in Sarris’ second tier category, “The Far Side of Paradise,” are included (Frank Borzage, Frank Capra, George Cukor, Cecil B. De Mille, Samuel Fuller, Michael Mann, Vincente Minnelli, Otto Preminger, Nicholas Ray, Douglas Sirk, Erich von Stroheim, Preston Sturges, King Vidor, and Raoul Walsh) and ten of the twenty-one filmmakers in the third and more obscure tier “Expressive Esoterica” receive attention (Budd Boetticher, Andre De Toth, Allan Dwan, Tay Garnett, Phil Karlson, Joseph H. Lewis, Alexander Mackendrick, Arthur Penn, John Stahl, Jacques Tourneur, and Edgar G. Ulmer). By contrast, Scorsese includes only three of the eleven directors in Sarris’ dismissive “Less Than Meets the Eye” category (Elia Kazan, William Wellman, and Billy Wilder) and just one of eighteen directors of the even more damnable “Strained Seriousness” category (Stanley Kubrick). Sarris had a great impact on Scorsese and the formation of his taste, as can be seen by comparing Scorsese and Sarris to the more popular American Film Institute list: nine of the eleven directors from the “Less Than Meets the Eye” category have films in the Top 100 (John Huston, Kazan, David Lean, Joseph L. Mankiewicz, Lewis Milestone, Carol Reed, Wilder, William Wyler, and Fred Zinneman) and twenty-two of the hundred films are from directors in the “Less Than Meets the Eye” and “Strained Seriousness” categories. Only six of the fourteen “Pantheon” directors are included (Chaplin, Ford, Griffith, Hawks, Hitchcock, and Welles), four of the twenty from “The Far Side of Paradise” (Capra, Leo McCarey, Ray, George Stevens), and three of the twenty-one from “Expressive Esoterica” (Stanley Donen, Robert Mulligan, Penn). Scorsese takes his cue from an *auteurist* like Sarris rather than the more popular and well-known classics.

When Scorsese claims that his influences are “not necessarily the culturally correct ones,”⁵ he is only slightly correct. While there are many obscure filmmakers in the documentary they are not unknown to the devoted auteurs, and had been championed by Sarris decades earlier. By the time of Scorsese, these previously scorned artists had already gained a certain status, but for Scorsese’s narrative it is important that they retain a touch of the disreputable and blasphemous.

Furthermore, Sarris himself emerges from French criticism coming out of the *Cahiers du Cinéma* in the 1950s and their espousal of the “politique des auteurs” (literally, a policy of authors), led by François Truffaut’s 1954 manifesto, “A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema.” In this now famous essay, Truffaut denounces the French cinema’s “Tradition of Quality” and its emphasis on the writer and literary values, countering that true cinematic art could only be made by “men of the cinema” such as Robert Bresson, Jean Renoir, and, most radically, Hollywood directors such as Alfred Hitchcock and Howard Hawks.⁶ This began the “cult of the *auteur*” in which future and aspiring cineastes like Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Eric Rohmer, Claude Chabrol, and others repeatedly praised the work of blatantly commercial filmmakers (previously seen as low art) over the respected literary films of their own country. However, probably due to the later political radicalism of Godard as well as the more leftist politics of the associated Left Bank group (Chris Marker, Alain Resnais, Agnes Varda), their Catholicism was often ignored. They desired to distance film from the social and political concerns of the time, as John Hess argued in his two-part critique in *Jump Cut* in 1974:

La politique des auteurs was, in fact, a justification, couched in aesthetic terms, of a culturally conservative, politically reactionary attempt to remove film from the realm of social and political concern, in which the progressive forces of the Resistance had placed all the arts in the years immediately after the war.⁷

Part of this process was the praising of Hollywood directors, and the success of the French New Wave brought an imprimatur to these views when they were applied in America by Sarris.

5 Scorsese and Wilson, 14.

6 François Truffaut, “A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema,” *Cahiers du Cinéma* no. 31 (January 1954); reprinted in Bill Nichols, *Movies and Methods Volume 1* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976): 224–237.

7 John Hess, “*La Politique des Auteurs* (Part One): World View as Aesthetics,” *Jump Cut* no. 1 (1974): 19.

In clarifying the definition of *auteur* according to the *Cahiers* critics, Hess found it had very little to do with film technique. Rather, it concerned content rather than form. The *Cahiers* group focused on a single tale: an isolated character placed within an extreme circumstance eventually finding acceptance, understanding, and redemption. As Hess argues:

Auteur criticism was, in fact, a very complicated way of saying something very simple. These critics wanted to see their own perception of the world on the screen: the individual is trapped in solitude morale and can escape it – transcend it – if he or she comes to see their condition and then extend themselves to others and to God. Whenever the auteur critics saw this tale on the screen, they called its creator an auteur.⁸

The aesthetic concerns (realism, *mise-en-scène*, and acting) had to do with how a director presented this interior life of isolation and eventual transcendence: “The most important determinant of an auteur was not so much the director’s ability to express his personality, as usually has been claimed, but rather his desire and ability to express a certain world view.”⁹ This world-view needed to be able to express art’s autonomy, to be divorced from the social and political world. The criticism of the “Tradition of Quality”, although argued on aesthetic grounds, had a great deal to do with objectionable content, such as Truffaut’s criticism of blasphemy and homosexuality in these films. As a result, the revolution of the New Wave and the *auteur* theory was easily assimilated because it was essentially about art rather than politics, about the expression of a sincere Catholic vision of the world. That a Catholic such as Scorsese would be drawn to this vocation as an alternative to priesthood is understandable, as he himself would eventually become part of this canonization as well as contributing to its perpetuation in his documentary work.

Hess’s essay is a necessary correction to the myth of the *Cahiers* group, but like most corrections it overstates the case in the opposite direction. Catholicism can certainly produce a worldview centered on transcendence and the spiritual, but it can also have associations with social protest movements, as history has shown. The films of the New Wave, even those from the relatively more reactionary Truffaut, were hardly devoid of social awareness and protest, however much they were also about the genius of the director. The application of the *auteur* theory in America by Sarris and others was much more apolitical, as Peter Biskind has argued:

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

By the time Sarris began to write, the pages of American newspapers and magazines had been made safe for democracy. The lefties, radicals, fellow travellers, independents, anarchists, pacifists, and general riffraff who had infected the press with their pink prose in the thirties and forties had been flushed out by almost a decade of witch hunting ... All Sarris had to do was to conduct a mopping-up operation, and he saw to it that auteurism would play the same role in America that it had played in France; the American 'Tradition of Quality' that it was used to demolish was precisely the Jacobs, Rotha, Griffith, Macdonald, Agee group that Warshow had already softened up. More so than Warshow, Sarris saw them as a 'tradition,' and attacked them directly.¹⁰

To the extent that Scorsese was influenced by Sarris, and he clearly was, *A Personal Journey* can also read as a celebration of spirituality divorced from social context. Describing Frank Borzage's *Seventh Heaven*, Scorsese argues, "romance would lift them from the physical to the spiritual ... For the lovers, reality itself is immaterial."¹¹ He summarizes Edgar G. Ulmer's *Detour* as follows: "Lured by the prospect of sinful pleasures, he ended up suffering hellish retribution."¹² And in discussing film noir as a genre, he claims, "There is no reprieve in film noir. You just keep paying for your sins."¹³ But this is only one aspect of Scorsese's view of American cinema. He is also interested, perhaps like his mother in his youth, in the rebel filmmakers who took on social themes and dared to break the rules of the system. This is why Scorsese, unlike a critic/filmmaker like Truffaut who was obsessed with purity and thus often more reactionary, felt an affinity for the rulebreakers of the cinematic world.

This can be seen most clearly in the section, "The Director as Smuggler," which Scorsese introduces as follows:

We have looked at the rules, at the narrative codes, at the technical tools. And have seen how Hollywood filmmakers adjusted to these limitations; they even played with them. Now is the time to look at the cracks in the system. What slipped through these cracks has always fascinated me.¹⁴

10 Peter Biskind, "American Film Criticism (Postwar)," in *Gods and Monsters: Thirty Years of Writing on Film and Culture From One of America's Most Incisive Writers* (New York: Nation Books, 2004): 106–107.

11 Scorsese and Wilson, 78–79.

12 *Ibid.*, 110.

13 *Ibid.*, 113.

14 *Ibid.*, 98.

The idea of smuggling in contraband, including radical political ideas, was a large part of being a genuine Hollywood artist for Scorsese. However, I argue it is the idea of breaking the rules itself that holds the appeal, rather than any actual concrete politics. Thus, Scorsese can celebrate blacklisted filmmakers like Abraham Polonsky while also seeing a HUAC collaborator like Elia Kazan as an “iconoclast” and even making another separate documentary on his career, co-written and directed with Kent Jones, *A Letter to Elia* (2010). The key is to be distinctive, to break with the consensus, to be unique, and this involves producing daring and even taboo imagery. One of Scorsese’s most passionate discussions in *A Personal Journey* involves, fittingly, the coming together of religious imagery and the gangster in Raoul Walsh’s *The Roaring Twenties* (1939):

The gangster had become a tragic figure. Walsh even dared to end his film on a semireligious image that evokes a ‘Pietà.’ It was actually the inspiration behind one of my student films, *It’s Not Just You, Murray*. And I would like to think that *GoodFellas* comes out of the extraordinary tradition spawned by *Scarface* and *The Roaring Twenties*.¹⁵

The “daring” here by Walsh is connected to the idea of blasphemy, which Scorsese has had a continuing fascination. This can be seen most obviously in his 1988 film adaptation of Nikos Kazantzakis’ 1955 *The Last Temptation of Christ* but which can be traced in his non-fiction work as well, as we shall see in his treatment of Bob Dylan. This is also why Scorsese deliberately chooses to celebrate the popular genre work in American cinema as well as the artists who create this work. This overturning of tradition allowed a place for an artist like Scorsese: the New York “outsider” working within the Hollywood system.

My Voyage to Italy, Scorsese’s similarly lengthy examination of the impact of the Italian cinema on his work, offers a fascinating companion piece to *A Personal Journey*. *A Personal Journey* has Scorsese sitting in a black room, directly addressing the viewer and delivering a series of lectures, a point emphasized by the repeated visual motif of each separate section being introduced by writing on a chalk board. Scorsese is the teacher and professor here, even as he discusses subject matter that traditionally was seen as being unworthy of this kind of attention and analysis. Little of that anxiety over creating a canon exists in *My Voyage to Italy*, since the film and directors examined are already clearly enshrined in the art cinema tradition. There is no justification needed, and as a result Scorsese is much more relaxed, avoiding the high seriousness with which he delivers the material in *A Personal Journey*. Instead of the empty studio setting of the previous film, Scorsese films *My Voyage to Italy* on location

¹⁵ Ibid., 47.

in his old neighborhood in New York City. *My Voyage* is the more personal of the two documentaries, with Scorsese delving more deeply into his own family history and relating this to the films. Scorsese first watched many of the Italian classics at home, on television, surrounded by family members, who saw the films almost like home movies from the old country. Despite the less than ideal viewing conditions Scorsese argues that the emotions of the film, heightened by the strong family connection, came through.

Another major difference between the two films is that Scorsese spends a great deal more time on individual films in *My Voyage to Italy*. In *My Voyage* Scorsese considers 33 films by 11 different directors, compared to *A Personal Journey*, which features 92 films by 57 different directors, despite the fact that the films are of comparable length (*My Voyage* is actually 21 minutes longer, 246 minutes as opposed to 225). As opposed to the commercially based Hollywood films, the art films of Italian cinema presumably have a slower pace that demands respect, even within an introductory overview. The tone and volume of Scorsese's voice is noticeably different, speaking in a hushed and reverential manner. If part of the appeal of the American films was their disreputable and even blasphemous nature, the Italian films and the masters who created them are treated with a kind of awe. They evoke a spiritual "aura" that the American films, due to their mass culture associations, are incapable of achieving. They are treated by Scorsese much like the museum paintings described by Walter Benjamin in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" and not as the works of mass art that they in fact are. The emphasis on the spirituality of the films is part of this process. Again, "sacred and the profane" are interconnected, but the emphasis has shifted to these sacred texts and away from the contexts. Thus, the controversy over the work of Roberto Rossellini, whose film *The Miracle* was considered blasphemous and censored in New York, is underplayed in favor of his work's spiritual expression.¹⁶ Likewise, Rossellini's films with Ingrid Bergman, in which Scorsese finds an almost ancient, primal resonance, especially in *Voyage to Italy*, ignores the scandal of their adulterous relationship that led to Bergman being denounced by the United States Senate. Overall, it is a work about the text and its personal, emotional impact, which is akin to a religious experience, but lacks the interest in going beyond the canon and into disreputable and profane genres and directors that give the American cinema documentary so much of its energy.¹⁷

16 The controversy over *The Miracle* eventually led to the Supreme Court decision, *Wilson Vs. Bursytn*, that granted films First Amendment protection.

17 See Alberto Pezzotta, "A Journey Through Italian Cinema," *Senses of Cinema* no. 26 (May 2003), http://sensesofcinema.com/2003/feature-articles/journey_italian/.

Following his work in film history and preservation, Scorsese has been most active as a cultural historian within the field of music, making documentaries on such iconic figures as Bob Dylan (*No Direction Home*, 2005) and George Harrison (*George Harrison: Living in the Material World*, 2011) as well as producing a series on the history of blues music, the first of which he directs (“Feel Like Going Home”: *The Blues*, 2003). It is telling that Scorsese would choose to turn his attention on music as a cultural form. As Pierre Bourdieu has argued:

For a bourgeois world which conceives its relation to the populace in terms of the relationship of the soul to the body, ‘insensitivity to music’ doubtless represents a particularly unavowable form of the materialist coarseness. But this is not all. Music is the ‘pure’ art par excellence. It says nothing and has *nothing to say*. Never really having an expressive function, it is opposed to drama, which even in its most refined forms still bears a social message and can only be ‘put over’ on the basis of an immediate and profound affinity with the values and expectations of its audience. The theatre divides its public and divides itself. The Parisian opposition between right-bank and left-bank theatre, bourgeois theatre and avant-garde theatre, is inextricably aesthetic and political. Nothing comparable occurs in music (with some rare, recent exceptions). Music represents the most radical and most absolute form of the negation of the world, and especially the social world, which the bourgeois ethos tends to demand of all forms of art.¹⁸

Bourdieu’s arguments here refer primarily to classical music and its class associations. It does not apply to the context of American popular music, which is the cultural history Scorsese has been in the process of telling over the past decade. It is difficult to argue that musical genres such as folk, blues, and rock have no social meaning. On the contrary, this music seems to be impossible to comprehend without this social context. *The Blues* and the documentaries on Dylan and Harrison are not lacking in historical context and reflect Scorsese’s general fixation on historical material. Nevertheless, I argue that Bourdieu’s comments on music as a “pure” art apply to Scorsese’s work on music culture. The notion of music’s purity works to downplay the social as much as possible, and instead becomes one of the “countless variations on the soul of music and the music of the soul.”¹⁹ While Catholicism specifically is no longer anywhere

18 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 19.

19 Bourdieu, 19.

to be found, its influence on ideas of the spiritual remain important. At the same time, Scorsese's movement away from both the Catholicism and the cinephilia of the film history documentaries produces artifacts neither as passionate nor as insightful as the earlier work. Instead, we receive a more traditional kind of canonization, albeit one with a continued fascination with blasphemy.

"Feel Like Going Home" is an intriguing text, as is the whole seven-part series Scorsese produced. It is the type of project one associates more with a Ken Burns than a cinematic *auteur* with Scorsese's reputation. It is the least personal of his documentary work to that point. His previous documentaries, even when not dealing with film history, tend to be about people Scorsese knows personally, such as his parents in *Italianamerican* (1974), his friend Steven Prince in the underground cult item *American Boy* (1978), or his friend Robbie Robertson in his first foray into cultural history, *The Last Waltz* (1978). Because the "home" and "roots" Scorsese explores in "Feel Like Going Home" are not his own, he makes the journey through an on-screen surrogate, the African-American musician Corey Harris. Throughout the film, Scorsese uses both his own voice and the voice of Harris to weave a particular narrative out of this material. This interweaving of voices is both deliberate and rhetorical. After the opening discussion of music and the work of archivists John and Alan Lomax, Scorsese retreats and gives the narrative to Harris. All of the interviews and interactions in the film, both with blues musicians in America and musicians in Africa, are conducted by Harris (Scorsese only appears on screen very briefly in a group shot). The story becomes a personal journey, much like Scorsese's cinema histories, as he himself acknowledges: "I've made two documentaries on the history of cinema – one on American movies, then another on Italian cinema. And I decided early on that I wanted them to be personal, rather than strictly historical surveys ... For the blues series, I decided to do something similar."²⁰ The difference with the blues documentary revolves around issues of authenticity. Scorsese is an Italian-American filmmaker, which legitimates his voice in his cinema documentaries. With an African-American musical genre, Scorsese lacks this cultural sanction. Harris, as a young African-American blues musician, fills this gap. Harris states at the beginning of the film that "to know yourself you need to know the past," and the narrative becomes his movement through the history of blues music. Scorsese re-inserts his voiceover when such blues legends as Robert Johnson are recalled, associating himself with their "rebel" genius. This pattern continues in his documentaries on Dylan and Harrison.

20 Martin Scorsese, "Feel Like Going Home," in *Martin Scorsese Presents The Blues: A Musical Journey* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2003), 64.

No Direction Home focuses on Dylan's early career, ending with his last tour before his motorcycle accident in 1966. The film explores, through interviews with Dylan and many other contemporaries, the rise of Dylan as an important political voice in the culture and his subsequent rejection of this label. It is a conventional work, using talking heads to offer viewers a history of the time period through one of the sixties' most important figures. Its main distinction, like in *The Blues* series, is the access Scorsese had to archival material. Once again, Scorsese himself is almost entirely absent and the personal voice is given primarily to Dylan himself. Even while presenting other voices and perspectives, such as that of Joan Baez, the film accepts Dylan's position as primarily an artist and only secondarily a social being. This mythology is one Scorsese himself embraces. This is the likely reason that Scorsese does not conduct the interviews with Dylan himself. Scorsese positions himself with, rather than against, Dylan. At one point in the film, Dylan has the following exchange with the off-screen interviewer:

Interviewer: What about the scene were you sick of?

Dylan: People like you. (Laughs) You know, just being pressed and hammered and expected to answer questions. It's enough to make anyone sick really.

Scorsese clearly refuses this position. Despite his role as cultural critic, Scorsese wants to align himself with Dylan, not with Dylan's critics. In fact, the interviews in the film were produced and filmed by Michael B. Borofsky rather than Scorsese himself. He inserts his own voice into the film only once. In voiceover, Scorsese reads the speech Dylan gave upon receiving Thomas Paine Freedom Award from The Emergency Civil Liberties Union. This speech is given special importance in the film as one of the first signs of Dylan's rejection of the label of protest singer. Scorsese's use of his own voice at this point acts as an indicator, once again, of his sympathies for Dylan's rejection of politics in favor of art. Despite the presence of other more political artists in the film, the overall function is to support the rights of the artist above all other values.

The final section of the film details Dylan "going electric" and seemingly betraying the folk music movement. How Scorsese presents this material is indicative of his view of artistic genius and consistent with his fascination with rebellious figures. In presenting the now infamous Dylan electric performance at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival, Scorsese includes clips of Dylan stating that he did not want to "become one of the crowd," while Joan Baez notes how rock music was seen as something depraved by the folk community. Thus, Newport is seen as the sacred ground that Dylan's electric performance defames, a

blasphemous gesture that Scorsese clearly romanticizes as the work of a true artist unwilling to be confined. Before ending with footage of an audience member in Manchester yelling “Judas” at Dylan, Scorsese makes a curious break with chronology. He inserts a title card indicating Dylan was in a serious motorcycle accident upon returning from his European tour. He then cuts backstage in Manchester a year earlier, in which Dylan talks about being “back from the grave.” It is then that we get the “Judas” remark as well as Dylan’s defiant response: “I don’t believe you. You’re a liar.” And then his profane instructions to the band, “Play it fucking loud,” followed by launching into “Like a Rolling Stone,” over which the end credits play. The idea of Dylan being both Christ as redeemed (rising from the grave) as well as a Judas figure can be seen as reflective of Scorsese’s religious background and obsessions. It should be recalled that one of the more radical aspects of *The Last Temptation of Christ* is the reinterpretation of Judas, seen not as a betrayer but as someone who is needed for the Christ narrative, someone who also has to sacrifice, in his case not his body but his reputation. Although Dylan of course rejects the Judas comment, which in this case is clearly meant as an insult, Scorsese views Dylan as a similarly heroic figure as the Judas from *Last Temptation*, as well as a true rebel artist unwilling to be seen as part of any movement.

In terms of hagiography, Scorsese goes even further with *George Harrison: Living in the Material World*, made a decade after Harrison’s 2001 death and which treats Harrison with a reverence bordering on saintliness, especially in its conclusion. It is mostly a fairly conventional talking heads documentary, and it may seem strange for Scorsese to have made such a film. However, there is one surprising connection between Harrison and Scorsese, beyond the interest in spirituality, and it is the cinema. In 1978, the funding for Monty Python’s *Life of Brian* fell through, just before filming was scheduled to begin, due to concerns from the production company over its controversial, blasphemous subject matter. At this point, Harrison stepped in, mortgaging his house to finance the movie and setting up a production company, HandMade Films, which would go on to produce many other important films in the decade to come. *Life of Brian*, like *The Last Temptation of Christ* but nearly a decade earlier, enraged many Christians in its satire on the life of Christ. Monty Python member Eric Idle, in an interview, argues that Harrison “enjoyed the scandal,” a signal of his artistic nature and willingness to challenge norms. It also aligns him with Scorsese as someone who takes religious and spiritual ideas seriously without falling into dogma, something that Scorsese derides in cultural expressions as well.

Despite his faults, Harrison represents this ideal figure: a man described near the conclusion as having an “aura” (as his friend Jackie Stewart claimed)

and whose spirit lit up the room upon his death, according to his widow. The final image Scorsese provides is video of Harrison behind flowers in the garden of his residence at Friar Park, and the image brings to mind another religious figure central to Scorsese's imagination, St. Francis of Assisi. Scorsese not only praises Rossellini's *The Flowers of St. Francis* (1950) at length in *My Voyage to Italy*, but the character of Charlie in *Mean Streets* (1973), a Scorsese surrogate, holds up St. Francis as a role model. Thus, although Harrison, like Scorsese later in his life, was more interested in spirituality rather than a specific religion, he is paid the ultimate homage in Scorsese's film by a comparison to a Catholic saint. For Scorsese, culture itself, and especially cultural figures represented in these lengthy non-fiction works, continue to be interpreted and understood through a religious lens. However, this work is at its most politically resonant when Scorsese moves beyond hagiography and focuses on the importance of profane artists and their challenges to the social order.

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No Way Out: Martin Scorsese and the Ecclesial Imagination

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Anyone even vaguely familiar with Martin Scorsese and his films would not find the cover of the January-February 2017 issue of *Film Comment* at all unusual. With an enormous wooden cross towering in the background, Kerry Brown photographs the silver-haired director on the set of *Silence* (2016), with right arm gesturing up, even as he gazes prophetically heavenward. The photograph represents an icon suitable for our greatest living American filmmaker, who has arguably made his enigmatic spiritual journey the centerpiece of his work. In an extensive series of interviews over the years,¹ Scorsese has thoughtfully reflected on his now familiar autobiographical account of a young Catholic Italian-American's discernment between priesthood and filmmaker growing up on the streets of Little Italy in New York. In so doing, he has opened up a window into a wider discussion of spirituality, Christian anthropology, and even ecclesiology.

In discussing the director's Catholic ecclesiology I intend to move beyond the rather conventional and naïve subjective categories towards what Paul Giles calls "the intertextual politics of cultural Catholicism." In Giles's view, personal ideas concerning the meaning of ethnic or religious identity tend "to refer conceptual questions inward, to the upbringing of the writer or subsequent issues of personal belief, rather than outward to the more complex business of how such variations become disseminated and inflected within the larger, amorphous structure of culture and society."² In other words, I want to affirm and acknowledge an objective horizon present in Scorsese's films in order to examine his ecclesiology, or how to understand the "the interstices of the text," since "it is not an interiorized but an externalized phenomenon, a series of signs that can be interpreted by the observer only in relation to other

1 Perhaps the most concise for our purposes here is the interview Scorsese did with Peter Occhiogrosso in 1987. See "Martin Scorsese: In the Streets," in *Martin Scorsese Interviews*, ed. Robert Ribera, rev. ed. (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2017), 85–97.

2 Paul Giles, "The Intertextual Politics of Cultural Catholicism: Tiepolo, Madonna, Scorsese," in *Catholic Lives, Contemporary America*, ed. Thomas J. Ferraro (Durham: Duke UP, 1997), 121.

kinds of worldly events.”³ Scorsese’s films remain artifacts of a society and a Church in transition. How that transition evolved and under what circumstances remains largely speculative; I am proposing that Scorsese absorbed a somewhat reactionary, progressive post-Vatican II ecclesiology, which was one of several emerging at the time, something like the way that Avery Dulles suggested that there were at least five dominant models of the Church in accessible 1974.⁴ Scorsese has been perhaps the foremost representative agent of his generation of Catholics coming of age in the 1960’s and 70’s, narrating his cinematic texts inside a system of discursive texts operating within a complex web of collaboration among culture, autobiography and social forces, including theologies of church.

We are at a distinct advantage when examining Scorsese’s ecclesiology from the perspective of the cinematic culture-text: Scorsese’s emergence as one of the most exciting American filmmakers in the 1970’s coincides with a turbulent period in both America and Roman Catholicism. In retrospect, Scorsese’s films appear as brilliant and astonishing footprints representing his generation and the New Hollywood’s distrust of authority, institutions, and organized religion. I suggest here that Scorsese, like so many of his generation of early baby boomers, is caught between the old and the new—especially when it comes to the Church. Like many Italian-Americans, he was raised and nurtured in the once infallible structures of an institutional Roman Catholicism whose very interior space and architecture was being questioned in the mid-1960’s. For some Catholics coming of age during this radical period, there remained a marked trace of institutional formation, even in the midst of cultural rebellion and experimentation. On the one hand, there is a pre-Vatican II order of constricted and ethnically-defined initiation rites and rituals constructed around the family and the geography of the local parish, alongside the American hierarchy’s efforts “to restore, preserve, or build a Christian culture meant to permeate civilization with the Christian spirit and struggle against the prevailing and pervasive influences of secularism and communism both at home and abroad.”⁵ But on the other hand, there co-existed a very different religious culture in the mid-1960’s: a post Vatican II America which historian Charles R. Morris describes as “the end of Catholic culture.”⁶ To those immigrants who

3 Ibid., 125.

4 See Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1974; rev. 1987).

5 Patrick W. Carey, *Catholics in America: A History* (Westport: Praeger, 1993; rev. 2004), 94.

6 Charles R. Morris, *American Catholic: The Saints and Sinners Who Built America’s Most Powerful Church* (New York: Random House, 1997), 255–281. See also, Philip Gleason, “Catholicism Since 1945,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Religion in America*, ed. Philip Goff (Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2010), 491–507.

brought the traditional European Church with them to America, the Second Vatican Council's reforms, particularly the liturgical renewals, largely stripped the former order of much of its classical meaning. Jesuit theologian Bernard Lonergan would identify the seismic transition and the evolving debate between the old and the new precisely as "the transition from a classicist worldview to historical-mindedness."⁷

Religion and its upheavals were not isolated sociological phenomena, but signifiers of an evolving culture of ambivalence, a society in crisis by the late 1960's and 70's. As Patrick Carey puts it, the phenomenon of the 1960's and 1970's was not limited to religion, but "radical protests against American involvement in Vietnam, rising racial tension and hostilities in large urban areas, student rebellions on college campuses, changing sexual morals and movements toward sexual emancipation, and the campaign for women's liberation magnified the impact of Vatican II's institutional reforms."⁸ Like many college-educated baby boomers, Scorsese was horrified by the growing violence and U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia, eventually directing a documentary, *Street Scenes* (1970) about Vietnam anti-war protesters. The Church itself was caught in the web of political turmoil brewing in the U.S. Scorsese told Guy Flatly in 1973 that shortly after his marriage in 1965 he left the Church because, "There were problems about mortal sin, certain sexual things. But what really did it was sitting in a church in Los Angeles and hearing a priest call the Vietnam War a holy war."⁹ Throughout his cinematic corpus, I will argue, Scorsese exploits this gap between the old and the new order through a kind of winding roadmap of Catholic ecclesiology, with characters who are persistently and equivocally haunted by powers—institutions, families, God—that are both confining and reassuring, restricting and liberating. Such tensions contribute to what Amy Taubin claims is fundamental to understanding Scorsese films: "ambivalence is central to his style."¹⁰

For the remainder of this short discussion, I focus my attention on three periods from Scorsese's cinematic output. Mostly because of limitations of space, I have identified a particular film which in my estimation best represents Scorsese's cinematic expression of the cultural politics of Catholicism during a particular period. I call these stages and the films which represent

7 Quoted in Mark S. Massa, S.J., *The American Catholic Revolution: How the '60s Changed the Church Forever* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 13.

8 Carey, 115.

9 Ribera, 6.

10 Peter Brunette, ed., *Martin Scorsese Interviews* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1990), 140.

them texts of displacement (*Mean Streets*, 1973), transgression (*The Last Temptation of Christ*, 1988), and integration (*Silence*, 2016).

1 *Mean Streets* and the Films of Displacement

Film historian David A. Cook fittingly titles his fine analysis of the American cinema between 1970–79 *Lost Illusions* in order to characterize the collapse of a “Hollywood Renaissance”—roughly from 1967–1975—which was captivated by a socially conscientious *cinema d’auteur*.¹¹ That brief period would soon be eclipsed by the advent of the supernova blockbuster, together with the ascendancy of Reaganism in the 1980’s. Influenced powerfully by the French New Wave, Scorsese, along with Robert Altman, Stanley Kubrick, Francis Ford Coppola and others were the first generation produced by professional film schools; they shaped what Robert Phillip Kolker has called “a cinema of loneliness” in American film culture. Working at the margins of a film industry—then teetering on financial and artistic uncertainty—each of the young American film directors working in the New Hollywood of the late 1960’s would bring their own unique style and vision to one of the most electrifying and tempestuous periods in American history. With an encyclopedic knowledge of the history of cinema and a cinematic style (heavily influenced by his mentor, John Cassavetes), “Scorsese is interested in the psychological manifestations of individuals who are representative either of a class or of a certain ideological grouping; he is concerned with their relationship to each other or to an antagonistic environment. Scorsese’s films all involve antagonism and struggle, and constant movement, even if that movement is within a tightly circumscribed area that has no exit.”¹²

We can sense the tension of entrapment, or what Kolker calls “antagonism and struggle,” as a kind of subtext between the two cultures of Catholicism throughout the course of Scorsese’s work and most explicitly when it comes to dealing with conventional institutions in general. But the Church’s ecclesial conventions set the stage notably in *Mean Streets*. As Roger Ebert puts it, the

11 See David A. Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970–1979* (New York: Scribner’s, 2000), 67–157.

12 Robert Phillip Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness: Penn, Kubrick, Scorsese, Spielberg, Altman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980; rev. 1988), 162–163. See also, Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex-Drugs-and-Rock and Roll Generation Saved Hollywood* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), esp. 225–254; and Marc Raymond, “How Scorsese Became Scorsese: A Historiography of New Hollywood’s Most Prestigious Auteur,” in *A Companion to Martin Scorsese*, ed. Aaron Baker (Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 17–37.

film is not really about gangsters, “but about living in a state of sin. For Catholics raised before Vatican II, it has a resonance that it may lack in other audiences. The film recalls days when there was a greater emphasis on sin—and rigid ground rules, inspiring dread of eternal suffering if a sinner died without absolution.”¹³ We certainly get glimpses of religious symbols in an early film like *Boxcar Bertha* (1972), where the main character (David Carradine) is crucified on a train. But Charlie Cappa, the protagonist and narrator in *Mean Streets*, inhabits a consciousness that is itself stretched out on a cruciform for the whole film. He understands himself as a man trapped inside a Church with its statues, prayers and candles but who longs to work out his salvation outside its confines. But those confines are more savage than Charlie realizes. In Robert Orsi’s words, the Church is “completely enmeshed in the structures of power.”¹⁴

One instance in *Mean Streets* of this pervasive ecclesial presence occurs early on in film with the jarring and brassy intercutting between Charlie’s activities and the huge Italian festival of San Gennaro. “‘Religion-in-action’ cannot be separated from other practice of everyday life, from the ways that humans do other necessary and important things or from other cultural structures and discourses.”¹⁵ “Religion in action”—the festival in Little Italy celebrating a saint whose blood liquefies (a fitting metaphor for Charlie who must find his salvation in the streets) every time the same year—threatens to break into Charlie’s world, even though he is already part of the very religious and cultural practice he attempts to resist. By way of introducing the character, Scorsese positions Charlie in the midst of devotional prayer, but the pious man immediately undermines his own practice when he tells God: “As you know I’ve just come out of confession. And as a penance they gave me ten Hail Mary’s and ten Our Fathers. Now between You and me: You know how I feel about such things. Hail Mary’s. Our Father’s. No imagination. I know, Lord, I am not worthy to eat Your flesh, not worthy to drink Your blood. But if I’m going to do penance at all, I’ll do it the way I think it should be done. By me according to my own trespasses. You know what I mean. I decide my own penance.” For Charlie, “You don’t make up for your sins in church. You do it in the streets. You do it at home. All the rest is bullshit and you know it.”

Scorsese’s ecclesiology—anti-institutional yet riddled with its promise and hope of soteriology—pervades *Mean Streets* in order to give expression to existential antagonism, ambivalence and profound resistance. As Pauline Kael

13 Roger Ebert, *Scorsese by Ebert* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 268.

14 Robert Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880–1950*, rev. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), xxxix.

15 Ibid.

wrote of Charlie when the film was released, “whatever he does in his life, he’s a sinner.”¹⁶ Charlie’s original sin follows him wherever he goes, a fallen man attempting to work out redemption that seems always just out of reach. I would suggest, however, that in addition to the pervasiveness of sin that structures Charlie’s consciousness, there is an underlying sense of liberation creeping stealthily under the surface. Charlie refuses to do penance the priest gives him, but at the same time he possesses an earnest desire to repent. Just not in Church. Scorsese draws out an incarnational theology precisely without an ecclesial structure to support it—one lived “in the streets” in much the same way that the 1960’s and 70’s would purchase a claim on civil rights, the war on poverty and the violent protests concerning the conflict in Southeast Asia. The institution is jettisoned for the sake of a new order, in a collapsed eschatology which locates salvation in the present tense, a theology of liberation in Lower Manhattan. In a certain sense, Charlie articulates the Church’s doctrine on incarnational theology without the Church: he attempts to integrate the pew and the street on his own terms. Ironically, though, while cutting himself free from structures of the Church, he winds up being its most important symbol—the suffering redeemer, or the symbolic representation of Christ, word made flesh. This transformation may mean that there is more to the protagonist in *Mean Streets* than a sense of being caged by sin. Then again, Charlie is more enmeshed in the Church than he realizes: its theology also can be a source of liberation, the paradox of the suffering redeemer. While eschewing the Church as an institution mediating the sacraments (in particular the Sacrament of Reconciliation), Charlie becomes the principle mediator for all those he desires to save.

Charlie’s entrapment in both ecclesial and cultural circumstances allows his narrative in *Mean Streets* to express an evolving incarnational theology—minus its doctrinal baggage. Charlie becomes a self-fashioned Cain stuck in Little Italy (with its Saint Gennaro festival continually reminding the spectator of the socio-ethnic boundaries of the neighborhood confining all who live there), cursed to pay for his sins not by conventional ecclesial practices but on his own terms. Trying to redeem his girlfriend, Theresa (Amy Robinson) and, of course, Johnny Boy (Robert De Niro), will earn all of them bloody wounds by the end of the film. After Charlie learns in Volpe’s Bar that Johnny Boy has defaulted with payments meant to reimburse a loan from Michael Longo, he says, “Ah, yes, I thank You, Lord, for this sign. I give thanks, O Jesus, for this opportunity to do penance as I see fit.” It is a remarkable paradox that Charlie’s own resistance to the institutional Church and its rules would also be the occasion for

16 Quoted in Ebert, 268.

Christ-like atonement. Although Charlie maintains a certain interest in eventually taking over the restaurant business, his singular motivation throughout the film remains rescuing his fellow outsiders to the exclusion of his own success. That may sound self-sacrificial; and it certainly is, except that the self-gift is on Charlie's own terms. Nevertheless, in the course of his own search for penance on the streets, Charlie would, in a certain sense, articulate the Church's own new mission in the 1960's, which deliberately adopted a "servant model" ecclesiology after centuries of understanding itself as a hierarchical magisterium with a history of institutional, worldly interests. Indeed, Charlie mirrors the progressive Church of the Streets, the birth of a "liberation theology" or a "preferential option for the poor."¹⁷ And indeed, Charlie-as-servant-to-the-marginalized seems much less interested in his future financial security than with the risky efforts at saving Johnny Boy. The rejection of the family or organization in *Mean Streets* finds a kind of salvific redemption.

Appropriately enough, Theresa and Johnny Boy are themselves locked in the ethnic solitude of the neighborhood from which Charlie attempts to rescue them. Theresa faces the dilemma of wanting to move out of the neighborhood but her illness (she is epileptic) and other pressures keep her perpetually confined and almost always on the edge. Gesturing at his redemptive efforts, Charlie stretches out his arms in a cruciform on the headboard after he and Theresa have been sleeping together. Johnny Boy, for his part, will play only by his own rules. This alienates him from everyone except Charlie; Johnny is an unpredictable sociopath caught between the moral ambiguity of childhood and adulthood. As a sign of his own self-destructive confinement it is fitting that in one of the opening shots we see Johnny Boy blowing up a mailbox. This self-destructive and adolescent prank destroys communication with anyone outside the neighborhood. Theresa (herself juggling consciousness and seizure as an epileptic) and Johnny Boy are both character reflectors, mirroring Charlie's own psychological position as someone who has one foot in the Church and the other in the streets; one life with his neighborhood chums at Volpe's and the other dreaming of an expanding restaurant business. As the plot progresses, Charlie becomes so thoroughly displaced that he becomes one of a threesome of outsiders—literally outside the neighborhood. His attempts to rescue have only led to the near destruction of those he would save. In a marvelously self-reflexive moment in the film, Scorsese adds a brilliant touch near the conclusion. Although Scorsese has supplied the voice/over for

17 Catholic Latin American Bishops expressed this doctrine at Medellín and Puebla as a crucial teaching when the expression became a focus of the World Synod of Catholic Bishops in 1971.

Charlie's consciousness, he now plays the assassin (Jimmy Shorts) firing from Michael's Imperial as Charlie attempts to flee with Theresa and Johnny. As if to disassociate himself (quite literally) from the subjective consciousness of the film, Scorsese allows Charlie's displacement to be complete, free from attachments even to the narrator's consciousness. And that is where we leave them: stranded; wounded but alive in the night, shuttling from the mean streets of New York to yet another liminal place: the hospital. By the end of the film, the audience itself is caught within the unknown fate of the characters. We are still left with Scorsese's divided consciousness, a screen split between the past and the present, attempting to murder Charlie and his companions as the very consciousness of the film's center in order to free himself from its structure.

Mean Streets was not the first Scorsese film to use displacement as a way of articulating ecclesial and cultural anxiety in the late 1960's and into the 1970's. In *Who's That Knocking at My Door?* the protagonist is, like Charlie, caught in between two worlds, but the struggle is a more than a conventional trope about the tug between the carnal and the sacred. J.R. is trapped like Charlie (and George Baily, I might add, in perhaps the most famous Hollywood instance of this struggle of self-entrapment—Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*) between two worlds, as is orphaned Bertha in *Boxcar Bertha*. The characters are disclosed inside the space that incarcerates. But there would be more like these to come: those who are searching for love and a career in a rather traditional plot convention (Alice Hyatt, Jimmy Doyle and Jake LaMotta) and those who are at the edge of sanity in full frontal resistance and antagonism to convention (Travis Bickle and Rupert Pupkin). In a fascinating and ancillary topic too extensive to expand here, acting style plays a crucial link in Scorsese's films of displacement, with De Niro as the signature piece in this cluster of these films. Johnny Boy anticipates both the fully displaced personality of Travis Bickle the ex-Marine and vigilante, and then the disintegrated LaMotta. But De Niro's edgy performances in all of Scorsese's most important films become signifiers of culture-wide disillusionment, the angry and displaced Church and America in the 1970's.

2 *The Last Temptation of Christ* and the Films of Transgression

In the midst of a blockbuster era what better form of resistance is there than to renegotiate one of the most popular genres in the Hollywood canon: the biblical epic? Scorsese's ecclesiology took its most radical turn in an iconoclastic representation of Christ himself, for which the director received lethal threats and critical scorn from a variety of religious groups, including French

bishops. But for film historian Stephen Prince, *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) deepened an already widening divide of “alienation between Hollywood and large segments of the public, and it was intensified by the fact that the American film tradition was a thoroughly secular one.”¹⁸ Scorsese had originally planned to shoot a film about Christ in 1983 as an intimate character study, but found himself a few years later in a little different territory. The original psychodrama eventually transformed into *The Last Temptation*, a substantial and controversial narrative indicative of an iconoclastic ecclesiology. Paramount, which backed the film, withdrew its support after pressure from United Artists and the Christian Right. Eventually, Universal pictures produced the film, although that did not stop either the hostile response of Moral Majority or the refusal of “several prominent exhibition chains from booking the film after its production.”¹⁹ Naïve criticism that greeted Scorsese’s adaptation of Nikos Kazantzakis’s *The Last Temptation of Christ*, most of it hurled from the Christian Right, failed to grasp the larger issues the director raises in the film, especially Christological ones.²⁰ Moreover, the film explicitly declaims any connection with the Gospels and says its narrative is taken from the Kazantzakis novel, drawing the discussion into an intertextual debate about a secular source text.²¹ In the end, Scorsese raises an issue both with theological importance and one well within boundaries of Catholic patristic discussions regarding Christ’s consciousness.²² Scorsese unapologetically champions a Christology which strives for integration and condemns Gnostic Docetism, or a dualism that supports a complete subjugation of Christ’s humanity to his divinity. Read from a strictly traditional theological perspective, however, Scorsese is playing with Christological dynamite dating to the early Church and settled at Chalcedon.²³ At the same time, the incendiary depiction of the God-Man allowed the director to explore his interest in the iconoclasm through the use of the male antihero and his relationship with both ecclesial and cinematic ideology.²⁴

18 Stephen Prince, *A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood Under the Electronic Rainbow, 1980–1989* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 365.

19 Ibid., 364.

20 See Thomas R. Lindlof, *Hollywood Under Siege: Martin Scorsese, the Religious Right, and the Culture Wars* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008).

21 See my discussion of adaptation, intertextuality, and the biblical epic in Guerric DeBona, OSB, *Film Adaptation in the Hollywood Studio Era* (Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 11–20.

22 Also see Criterion’s re-release of the DVD with Scorsese’s commentary (2000).

23 For a good survey on the patristic thought leading up to the Council, see Richard Norris, Jr., *The Christological Controversy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1980).

24 See Giorgio Bertellini and Jacqueline Reich, “Smuggling Iconoclasm: European Cinema and Scorsese’s Male Antiheroes,” in *A Companion to Martin Scorsese*, ed. Aaron Baker (Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 38–52.

The Church's teaching on the incarnation, which affirms that God's entrance into human history in Christ occurred in the person of Jesus who was both fully God and fully human, permits Scorsese the language for upending the *status quo*. To lay bare the ideological workings of America and the Church in the 1980's meant disclosing a suspect ecclesiology unfolding in the central consciousness of Christ. As Scorsese says of the novel, "[I] found the representation of Christ, stressing the human side of His nature without denying that he is God, the most accessible to me. His divine side doesn't fully comprehend what the human side has to do; how He has to transform Himself and eventually become the sacrifice on the cross—Christ the man only learns about this a little at a time."²⁵ Orthodox ecclesiology struggled to ascertain the Christological vision in the film of a Christ who is both fully human and fully divine when Dafoe's Christ appears to explore his humanity while dancing at the edge of doubt, despair, and temptation—often in graphic and shocking detail to the traditionally-minded. The psychological exploration of the divided Christ, fully human and fully divine, leaves ambiguous Jesus's own self-doubts, even of his calling to be the Messiah. At the same time, we might keep in mind that this Jesus is Scorsese's typical protagonist, born of the 1960's and caught in an ambiguity. But unlike Charlie Cappa, Jesus is not struggling with sin; his problem is reconciling his very self. The opening sequence, done in a *cinéma-vérité* style with a mobile camera shot from above, was imagined by screenwriter Paul Schrader as a God-like point-of-view shot with Christ sprawled on the ground in pain with "God as a vicious headache" that would not go away.²⁶ Unlike its biblical predecessors, Scorsese's Christ has a lot of self-examination to do, seemingly conflicted on multiple levels. He is a Messiah scrutinizing others as much as he is himself self-scrutinized. In addition to his nightmarish encounters with cobras and the like, Judas (although eventually becoming a trusted friend) tantalizes him politically and abuses him physically. Mary Magdalene appears to be battling for Jesus' attention to God, even as he works out his call as Messiah. He even does this sometimes, according to one critic, in homoerotic ways, which, in my estimation, seems more than a bit of a stretch of the cinematic text. At the same time, such interpretations points once again to the ambivalence of the protagonist which might be read in a number of ways.²⁷

Scorsese's Christ is an obvious theological extension of the alienated Charlie Cappa and the protagonists whom I have suggested form a kind of constellation

25 Christie and Thompson, 116.

26 See DVD Commentary, *The Last Temptation of Christ*.

27 Daniel S. Cutrara, "The Last Temptation of Christ: Queering the Divine," in *A Companion to Martin Scorsese*, ed. Aaron Baker (Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 420–441.

of displaced persons. If we were searching for an embodiment of Christological ambivalence working itself out theologically and dramatically, it is Dafoe's Jesus. As with *Mean Streets*, Scorsese structures *The Last Temptation* around a central consciousness and its psychological dynamics. And the Scorsese/Schrader depiction of Christ fits quite well into the central characters we have seen before: the God-Man could not be more existentially and theologically more displaced since, paradoxically, Christ's human will and intelligence was fully present alongside his fully divine will and knowledge. But there is more. This Christological grammar becomes closely entwined with conventional Hollywood spectatorship, which Scorsese also dismantles. The narrative challenges the cinema of illusions that has supported the aura of divinity. In critiquing the industry's connection of glamour and glitz with religious aura, the director breaks into bourgeois conventional constructions of the sacred—which paradoxically are based on secular structures like media. In this regard, *The Last Temptation of Christ* levelled an iconoclastic portrait not only on a genre but the Hollywood of the 1980's, whose top box office sales and market tie-ins at the time were largely driven by science fiction fantasy (*E.T.*, and the *Star Wars* franchise), nostalgia (*American Graffiti*, *Back to the Future*), and the superhero genre (*Superman*, *Batman*). The barren desert of Morocco, where technology was deliberately simple and kept to a minimum, would be a far cry from *Star Wars* and its brethren, replete with special effects anticipating the CGI platforms of feature films in the 1990's and beyond. The Christ tortured and coming to his true vocation foils the Secular Savior, Batman, whose double identity is never reconciled but rather reinforced by secrecy, gadgets, and familiar Hollywood romantic tropes.

The Last Temptation breaks new ground as an iconoclastic expression of Scorsese's resistance to the ideological currents and tensions of the Reagan era, reinforced by a blockbuster mentality in Hollywood. Indeed, the *Last Temptation* is nothing if not a rewriting of a Hollywood genre which, beginning with Paramount's sensational production of Cecil B. DeMille's *King of Kings* (1927), staged an illusionist "savior on the silver screen." Hollywood's epic tradition turned to a more traditional and more divine Jesus; it built its religious epics from highly consumable and friendly Renaissance inspired photography that closely modelled devotional portraiture. In contrast, Scorsese brings a gritty feel to the production, scraping off any glamour which might bestow a pseudo-divine aura to the film. Willem Dafoe's Christ has all the realistic presence of any character in *Mean Streets* or *Raging Bull*, including an accent which could place the actor on the streets in any of the director's contemporary New York films. Instead of the traditional Church hymns which accompany DeMille's soundtrack, Scorsese used a soundtrack of contemporary music with a somewhat

jarring non-Western feel composed by Peter Gabriel. Cinematographer Michael Ballhaus shoots a landscape of dusty realism and dizzying camera shots, such as those used during the crucifixion scene.

By his own reckoning, Scorsese found his ultimate inspiration for the *Last Temptation* in Pier Paolo Pasolini's *The Gospel According to Matthew* (1964) and the Italian realism of the early Roberto Rossellini. "This European style," says Scorsese, "gave me the key to be able to make *The Last Temptation of Christ*. The images have to resonate and be very, very strong."²⁸ Pasolini operated outside the confines of the Hollywood system; his *cinéma-vérité* style and confrontational, deglamorized Jesus fit Scorsese's iconoclastic confrontation of both Hollywood and its supporting culture. Scorsese himself said that the strategy when shooting the Sermon on the Mount scene "is the reduction of the crowds and not their increase, which made the film look more realistic." In fact, Schrader said that Scorsese used this first foray into extended exterior location and geography "to represent a spiritual state."²⁹ To those accustomed to a cast of thousands in Hollywood biblical epics, *The Last Temptation* came as something of a disappointment, especially since a display of crowds endorsing the Savior of the World bolstered the popular view that Jesus's charismatic character drew thousands.

Hardly supporting ideological conventions for church spectacles, Scorsese sets a transgressive mood throughout the film. This subversion of the conventions of the biblical epic equally resists the ideological pull of the Reagan years. Scorsese uses his own interpretation of both Gospel text and Kazantzakis to transgress familiar semiotic codes of the way the Church has seemingly allied Jesus with the *status quo*. At the same time, Scorsese's intense exploration of the mystery of the incarnation suggests a representation of the God-Man who is doing his atonement for humanity "in the streets." As an articulation of Christ resisting traditional religious institutions and Jewish authority, Scorsese reflects the uneasy relationship the Church has with marshalling its own authority in the 1980's over and against prophetic, and largely Latin American, voices. If Scorsese's rethinking of traditional ecclesiology serves his narrative interests, then it also suggests a shrewd reading of the Catholic Church, which, by the late 1980s was powerfully reinstated into orthodoxy by Pope John Paul II. Yet, as something of a counterpoint to Rome, the U.S. Bishops published pastoral letters on economic justice and war and peace in 1983.

As I view his films subsequent to this revision of the biblical epic, Scorsese's period of transgression would encompass a remake of a classic *film noir*

28 Christie and Thompson, 136.

29 See DVD commentary.

dealing precisely with violation/transgression (*Cape Fear*, 1991), the betrayal of the organization and friends (*Goodfellas*, 1990), the shocking scandals underneath the Gilded Age's New York high society in the adaptation of Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* (1993); and loyalties and social transgressions in the *Casino* (1995) and *Gangs of New York* (2002). But no Scorsese film would ever match *The Last Temptation of Christ* for its unpardonable trespass on the most sacred image of all—Jesus Christ. Until we meet two Jesuit missionaries who do exactly that.

3 *Silence* and the Films of Integration

The movement of Scorsese's protagonists as they are squeezed between loyalty to the institutions which support them (Church, family and nation) and their ambivalent need to remain outside those structures deepens in his last few films. I name this section of Scorsese's work the "films of integration," because over the past 15–20 years Scorsese appears to have brought to ground zero the marginalized experience of characters caught between two worlds. These cinematic texts move away from institutional power and towards inner freedom. In a way, Scorsese has already prepared us for Fr. Rodrigues's terrifying journey from the safety net of the traditional institutional Church into the unfathomable silence of God, in which traditional religious symbols and signs are abandoned for the sake of charity. Coming full circle, we are close to the symbolic ecclesiology of Charlie Cappa's Lower Manhattan. As represented in the *Last Temptation*, Jesus becomes the paradigm of the utterly free subject, fully alive, who both faces the ultimate negation of silence in complete poverty on the cross and yet remains true to the Father's will. In some sense, then, *Silence* is the natural progression of an ecclesiology begun in Little Italy and now culminating in 17th century Japan, utterly evacuated from all externals—from power, from symbol, from everything except love. Far from being an apostate, Fr. Rodrigues begins to inhabit and internalize Christ in his very person until that image of the self itself becomes ashes.

Before *Silence*, Scorsese will explore the other "temptations" of protagonists who have been less successful at freeing themselves from their own self-inventions and illusions. My reading of these films is that Scorsese maximizes the way in which institutional power dwarfs the human subject. This occurs to practically absurd proportions. *The Aviator* (2004) is a kind of exposé of the disintegration of one of the most notoriously eccentric and liminal figures in Hollywood history, Howard Hughes. Hughes becomes alienated and neurotically estranged as a recluse from the society that once celebrated his achievements

as a director and an innovator. As Scorsese imagines him, Hughes is a disintegrated man more and more marginalized from society and himself. In the end, Hughes becomes a parody of himself, a kind of cultural fetish famously (and deceptively) celebrated in a fraudulent autobiography by Clifford Irving. Paradoxically, the more reclusive he becomes, the more Hughes is entrapped in media spectacle. *The Departed* (2006) stages multiple clashes of institutional loyalties. The film principally explores the fate of two moles, one a mob agent infiltrating the Massachusetts State Police Department, while the other a police officer gaining covert access to the rival organized crime gang. Who can you trust? Answer: nobody. Even the most untrustworthy and despicable character in the film, Frank Costello, has viperous sentiments for the Church and its pederast priests, as if to justify himself as one more worthy of trust than the Church. No institution provides a moral high ground in the film. *Shutter Island* (2010) appears to involve the spectator in a familiar narrative concerning the conspiracy and betrayal of an institution (Ashecliffe Hospital for the criminally insane) against its patients. But the traditional story (and its characters) is upended when the audience learns that its own trust has been betrayed. It learns that the detective is really one of the hospital's notorious criminal patients and the whole thing has been staged for therapeutic purposes. We cannot even trust traditional story conventions. Similarly, *Hugo* (2011) appears to be a story about an orphan searching for a home in a Paris train station over and against the institution (represented by an intrepidly diligent cop), but its deeper exploration concerns the boy's nightmare of losing his humanity and becoming absorbed into the robotic machinery of modern machine—even as he is hounded by a half mechanical policeman with a Doberman. The enemy in this Dickensian plot is the institution of industry, threatening to eclipse the human subject altogether.³⁰ *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013) explores the rise and fall of a Wall Street stockbroker whose fraud and deception produce seemingly countless turns until he is wiretapped and arrested by the FBI. The film's huge financial and popular success is testimony to Scorsese's ability to tap into the same institutional distrust millions of Americans experienced following the stock market crash of 2008. Together with the meltdown of the subprime mortgage industry the previous year, distrust of U.S. financial institutions flourished. How much can you count on the (Wall Street) establishment, or indeed any institutional establishment, in the face of change and human corruption?

A turning point for Scorsese's antagonistic relationship with ecclesiological institutions appears to have come 20 years ago with the release of *Kundun*

30 See Gueric DeBona, "Hugo and the (Re-)invention of Martin Scorsese," in *A Companion to Martin Scorsese*, ed. Aaron Baker (Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 459–479.

(1997), which narrates the story of the 14th Dalai Lama from 1937–1959. Almost singularly unique among Scorsese's protagonists, the Dalai Lama is what the director referred to as a "passive character" who must endure the price of political exile. Unlike *Mean Streets* or *Goodfellas*, there is no voice-over or interior monologue to establish the character's identity. Unlike the portrait of Jesus in *The Last Temptation of Christ*, where there is an obvious and interesting contrast theologically and dramatically, there is nothing ambiguous about the Dalai Lama or the choices he makes. He himself is literally fated and willed into existence as the bearer of Enlightenment. We are instead left with the helpless political fate of the people of Tibet, poised to be swallowed up by Communist China. As Scorsese recalled, "It all pivots on Mao's line, 'Remember, all religion is poison.' When the Dalai Lama told me about that meeting, he said he put his pen down and kept his eyes down and just looked at those enormous shiny shoes of Mao's, and he realized that these could stamp out Tibetan culture."³¹ Clearly, what was at stake here was not an ecclesiology or an institution, but the life of the soul, which attains peace precisely in recognizing that life and its choices are illusory. This conviction seems to have taken Scorsese in a slow but more radicalized direction, mindful (even more so than before) of the way any institution might crush the spirit. At the same time, the Dalai Lama, much like Jesus, rejects the illusion of self-will and remains interiorly free. As Scorsese reflects on the *Kundun*, he says:

As a Christian, I really believe that the future of being human is love and compassion. I just believe it, whether there is a God or not. And I see these people practicing this belief. Not every one of them, obviously; there were fighters, Khampas, and the monks had guns. I'm firmly entrenched in the Judeo-Christian tradition, but I think a religion like Tibetan Buddhism is intriguing because they're literally acting out and living this philosophically. I'm fascinated by the one person in the world who is full of compassion and full of love, the idea of this enlightened being who has unconditional love for all sentient beings.³²

To what extent anyone might be able to live out this compassion—even at the cost of desecrating the predominant representation and symbol of that love—is the timely subject of *Silence*. Although Scorsese had wanted to make the film for decades, a film of missionary Jesuits struggling with apostasy could not have a more contemporary ring. His abiding interest in images of religion,

³¹ Christie and Thompson, 214–215.

³² Ibid., 224. See also Michael H. Wilson's documentary on the making of *Kundun*, *In Search of Kundun with Martin Scorsese*, 1988 (DVD).

ritual, and the sacred would surface here in high profile, echoing *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *Kundun* as well as other films in his canon.³³ In *Silence* the images themselves, much like Scorsese's ambivalent protagonists over the years, are now placed in a version of final jeopardy. Based on Shusaku Endo's celebrated 1966 novel, the film interrogates the relevance of an institutional Church in the modern world, especially in regard to its ecclesial missionary activity and global evangelism. Moreover, echoing the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Pope Francis has reminded the world that the Church does not exist for its own sake as an institution but for "the People of God." And further, "There are ecclesial structures which can hamper efforts at evangelization, yet even good structures are only helpful when there is a life constantly driving, sustaining and assessing them."³⁴

Scorsese himself could have written these lines—or perhaps something close to them—as he explores the complexities of Christian evangelization in 17th century Japan. While a more extensive analysis of *Silence* can be found in the present volume, it is worth underlining some significant details of the film relative to the development of Scorsese's ecclesiology. On one level, the tension in the film is governed by an ecclesial ambivalence in the era of post-colonialism: is Christian evangelization a kind of violence to the very understanding of enculturation? That question eventually faces the two Jesuits, Frs. Sebastiao Rodrigues and Francisco Garupe as they set out to find their mentor, Fr. Dante Ferreira, in Japan in 1633. Refusing to believe that his teacher has apostatized, Rodrigues clings not only to that ideal but to an image of Christ he has prayed with and which becomes a recurrent vision throughout the film. It is the image of Christ, as well as the construction of Ferreira as an ideal, that is continually at risk throughout the film. While Japanese Christians are compelled into desecration of sacred Christian images by Inoue, the Grand Inquisitor, Rodrigues must come to terms with his illusions of Christ in the face of human suffering. In confronting Ferreira, Rodrigues learns that the older Jesuit apostatized not because his life was in danger, but because other Christians were screaming in agony upside down over a torture pit filled with excrement. Eventually, Rodrigues would follow his mentor on the same path and apostatize for the same reason, violating the sacred image of Christ himself for the sake of charity. In Ferreira's mind, Japan is a "swamp" where Christianity, even

33 See David Sterritt, "Images of Religion, Ritual, and the Sacred in Martin Scorsese's Cinema," in *A Companion to Martin Scorsese*, ed. Aaron Baker (Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 91–113.

34 Pope Francis, *The Joy of The Gospel: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation* (Frederick: Word Among Us Press, 2013), 28.

during the days of St. Francis Xavier, could not take root; it was all an illusion. In the end, he tells Rodrigues, they are not martyrs to Christ but to Rodrigues himself and his own Christian ideals and teachings. As the Inquisitor says to Rodrigues, “the price for your glory is their suffering.”

The film goes to great length to disclose the ambivalence of signs and images and how difficult it is to trust them. We want to identify Kichijiro as a Judas figure who seemingly betrays his family, friends, and the Christianity he knows but then he remains steadfast in the end. Rodrigues sees the flight of an eagle as a sign from God that they are headed on the right path, only to see they are being spied on. A young Japanese couple understands paradise as what is happening now, only to be disabused of such a notion by Fr. Garupe and the horrible death they must endure. In the end, Rodrigues must deconstruct himself as a Catholic priest for the sake of the very charity which remains at the root of Christian faith. These equivocal signs suggest the plurality of meaning available to the interpreter, free from an essentialist point of view. The way of negativity, the pathway of silence, seems to be the only sign that is incapable of being invested with the aura of illusion. At the same time, however, the spectator must face the most ambivalent image of all: the cross. While Rodrigues moves away from a traditional ecclesial portrait of the suffering Christ, he himself begins to look more and more like the portrait of Jesus throughout the film, with his long, entangled hair and emaciated face mirroring the suffering Christ. He clings only to a tiny handmade representation of the crucifix, which he puts in his clothes in the course of the film and which his Japanese wife secretly puts in his hands at the end of the film, just before he is cremated in the Buddhist custom. The only “ecclesial image” we are left with is the apostate Rodrigues himself, *imago Dei*, and the imprint of the God who “emptied himself, taking the form of slave” (Philippians 2:7), completely divesting himself from the power of divinity. Yet this image itself is annihilated into smoke. Charlie Cappa becomes an image of the Crucified in the streets, but maintained the symbolic wounds of Christ. Rodrigues is reduced to silence without a trace.

In the end, *Silence* is something of a return to the beginning: salvation is found not in the sacred place of the Church and its penances, but in the streets, with Charlie Cappa and striving for salvation among the sacred people of God. As Scorsese would say in an interview in 2013, “I don’t know if I any longer accept the idea of an inherent sinfulness in human nature. I think in the process of living, we may need redemption just from being who we are. But the idea of original sin, that we are already guilty to begin with, is obviously in the films I make and in who I am.”³⁵ At the same time, Scorsese raises an interesting

35 Ribera, 228.

question about the Church in the modern world, ecclesial colonialism, and the fate of the new evangelization. Should the Church, to paraphrase Dante Ferreira, interfere with another man's spirit? If the Church offers cultures the respect they deserve, then what is the place that proselytizing holds in spreading the teaching of Jesus? In the spirit of the Second Vatican Council and particularly the post-conciliar decree on *Humanae Personae Dignitatem* (1968), Pope Francis has put his finger on this particular question when he speaks of the Christian community engaging in "the culture of encounter."³⁶ In fact, Pope Francis invited Scorsese to participate in the Synod on Young People and the Faith in October 2018. With competing ideologies struggling for power in the global community, the ecclesial frame of reference Scorsese renders becomes openly dialogical rather than aggressively hegemonic. For Pope Francis: "Evangelization also involves the path of dialogue. For the Church today, three areas of dialogue stand out where she needs to be present in order to promote full human development and to pursue the common good: dialogue with states, dialogue with society—including dialogue with cultures and the sciences—and dialogue with other believers who are not part of the Catholic Church."³⁷ Or perhaps the contemporary Christian, driven by the kindness of Jesus and the Buddha, must find resolution not in a religious structure and its illusions or ideologies but in silence. In some sense, Scorsese seems to have taken up the challenge of what it means to live in a radicalized post-Vatican II world, free even from the comforting ecclesial symbols and hallmarks that ancestors brought with them to America. If the invitation is to live in the space of interior freedom rather than the temple, then like Jesus Scorsese has driven out the idolatry from our midst. Instead, the only alternative becomes an internalization of Christ himself, the living temple, unrepresented by anything except faith, hope, and love. For Martin Scorsese, that path seems the only way out—the road of lost illusions.

Perhaps the ambivalence that marks Scorsese's texts (as well as an attempt to find a reconciliation), and his own original struggle between a vocation to the priesthood and filmmaker has been internalized, if not entirely resolved by the end of *Silence*. The great inferno which consumes Rodrigues and his secret crucifix reminded me of nothing as much as that other great conflagration which envelopes a secret sled at the end of Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane*

36 Pope Francis has used this expression frequently in interviews. See also, "On Dialogue with Unbelievers," in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, OP (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1975; rev. 2014), "True pluralism," the document says, "is impossible unless men and communities of different origins and culture undertake dialogue," 1002.

37 *Ibid.*, 166.

(1941). As Rodrigues's crucifix and Kane's "Rosebud" both turn to ash, the fires lay claim to the illusive nature of both our ecclesial and cinematic symbols, which can never outweigh our sacred stories or the lives behind them.

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PART 2

*Religious Influences and Themes in Scorsese's
Cinema*



Dostoevskian Elements in Scorsese's Cinema

Christopher B. Barnett

In 1989, three of America's most celebrated film directors—Woody Allen, Francis Ford Coppola, and Martin Scorsese—released *New York Stories*. A so-called “omnibus film,”¹ *New York Stories* included three short movies, each set in New York City. Taken as a whole, this venture was not wholly successful: “New York Stories’ consists of three films, one good, one bad, one disappointing,”² pronounced Roger Ebert, referring to Scorsese’s, Coppola’s, and Allen’s contributions respectively. *The Washington Post*’s Hal Hinson posted a similar review, arguing that, while Allen’s piece is a “genuine success” and Scorsese’s shows off “his esthetic muscle,” Coppola’s is simply “a mystifying embarrassment.”³ Given this mixed reception, not to mention the film’s underwhelming box office performance,⁴ it would seem that *New York Stories* represents little more than an homage to a bygone cinematic genre—one that, even if an interesting experiment, nevertheless fails to stand as an outstanding addition to the careers of its makers.

Despite such a verdict, *New York Stories* remains a notable contribution to Scorsese’s oeuvre. Not only does it display Scorsese’s willingness to experiment with cinematic form—Allen had first pitched the idea for *New York Stories* in 1986, suggesting that it might recapture the spirit of Italian omnibus films such as *L’amore in città* (1953) and *Boccaccio ’70* (1962)⁵—but it also underlines Scorsese’s interest in and indebtedness to the great Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–81). While Scorsese alludes to Dostoevsky’s thought throughout his films, *New York Stories* makes the connection explicit: Scorsese’s contribution to the project is a forty-minute short entitled “Life Lessons” based on Dostoevsky’s novella, *The Gambler* (1867). It was an adaptation that had been germinating for two decades. As Scorsese put it in a 1988 interview, “This is another one of those things that I’ve wanted to do for a long time, since I read ‘The Gambler’ in 1968.”⁶

1 Vincent Canby, “Film View: Anthologies Can Be a Bargain,” *New York Times*, March 12, 1989.

2 Roger Ebert, “New York Stories,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 3, 1989.

3 Hal Hinson, “New York Stories,” *Washington Post*, March 3, 1989.

4 According to IMDB, *New York Stories* had a budget of \$15,000,000 but only grossed around \$11,000,000 domestically. See “Box Office/Business for *New York Stories*,” *imdb.com*, n.d., http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0097965/business?ref_=tt_q1_dt_4, accessed November 17, 2016.

5 Vincent LoBrutto, *Martin Scorsese: A Biography* (Westport: Praeger, 2008), 289.

6 Caryn James, “Scorsese’s Passion Now: Dostoyevsky,” *New York Times*, October 20, 1988.

If “Life Lessons” stands as the most obvious example of Dostoevsky’s influence on Scorsese, there are subtler points of connection—points that this chapter will explore in two overarching ways. First, it will trace those places in which Scorsese’s canon manifests a direct Dostoevskian influence. Here “Life Lessons” will certainly merit attention, as will *Taxi Driver* (1976). The latter, Scorsese’s fifth, and arguably most impactful, feature film borrows significantly from Dostoevsky’s 1864 novella, *Notes from Underground*.⁷ In establishing these unambiguous links between the two *auteurs*, a second way of understanding their relationship will emerge. As will be argued, a number of key Dostoevskian patterns or themes turn up in Scorsese’s films: (i) the notion that the modern city is an “urban jungle” (or, in Scorsese’s idiom, a series of “mean streets”) in which alienation, poverty, and violence reign; (ii) the suggestion that, despite the wasteland of modern urbanity, the human search for transcendence has not been eliminated and may even be intensified; and (iii) the implication that the human person is thereby faced with a free yet terrifying choice to either seek the transcendent good or to succumb to the void of nihilism.

Each of these perspectives will be explored in the works of Dostoevsky and of Scorsese alike. In turn, it will be shown that the American filmmaker might be rightly seen as a successor to the Russian novelist, notwithstanding their different artistic media. Moreover, this connection will undergird the claim, echoed in the secondary literature on Scorsese, that he is a profoundly “moral” filmmaker. For Scorsese, as for Dostoevsky, the depiction of human brutality, depravity, and despair—especially in the context of modernity—is ultimately a negative critique, highlighting what has been lost, albeit with a glimmer of hope for something better.

1 Dostoevsky’s Direct Influence on Scorsese

In September 2011, word leaked out that Martin Scorsese was hoping to make a full-length adaptation of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Gambler*. According to Torsten Reitz, this interest was hardly a surprise, given Scorsese’s “longtime fascination with the works of [the] Russian writer.”⁸ As Reitz continues:

7 See, e.g., Brad Balfour, “Martin Scorsese and Paul Schrader: We’re Looking at *Taxi Driver*,” *PopEntertainment.com*, March 15, 2012, <http://www.popentertainment.com/scorseseschrader.htm>. More will be said about the influence of *Notes from Underground* on *Taxi Driver* below.

8 Torsten Reitz, “Scorsese Hopes to Adapt Dostoevsky’s ‘The Gambler,’” *themovingarts.com*, September 19, 2011, <http://www.themovingarts.com/scorsese-hopes-to-adapt-dostoevskys-the-gambler/>.

Even before 1976's "Taxi Driver," which clearly owes to Dostoevsky's "Crime and Punishment" and, more notably, "Notes from the Underground," the director had wanted to adapt "The Gambler" for the screen. In the early 1970s, he was shell-shocked when "Taxi Driver" screenwriter Paul Schrader gave his version of the novel to Brian De Palma instead of him.⁹

Hence, that Scorsese's "Life Lessons" would draw on *The Gambler* roughly a decade later only confirmed "Scorsese's passion for Dostoevsky."¹⁰ This was not a fleeting attraction but one that persisted from Scorsese's first cinematic endeavors to the 1980s and, indeed, on into the 2010s—in short, the entire span of his career.

That is not to suggest that Scorsese's indebtedness to Dostoevsky is transparent in each of his films. On the contrary, the influence is often implicit and broadly thematic rather than explicit and specifically narrational. Still, two Scorsese films can be said to be directly related Dostoevsky's work—*Taxi Driver* and "Life Lessons." The former is widely considered to be one of Scorsese's masterpieces and, indeed, one of the masterpieces of world cinema,¹¹ whereas the latter is a minor work in the Scorsese canon. Yet, taken together, the two films provide a strong indication of what drew Scorsese to the Russian novelist.

1.1 *Taxi Driver: From the Underground Man to Travis Bickle*

Scorsese began filming *Taxi Driver* in 1974, and, while he had already found success with *Mean Streets* (1973) and *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974), he was nevertheless facing a low budget and a "tight shooting schedule."¹² "My films haven't made a lot of money," Scorsese commented in a 1976 interview, "right now, I'm living off my next film."¹³ With that in mind, it is intriguing that he would make *Taxi Driver* his fifth feature film. After all, given its dark subject matter and extreme violence, it seemed more likely to flop than to garner critical and popular acclaim. As the film's screenwriter, Paul Schrader, observed: "I wish we had a dollar for every time we were told it would never be a success at

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 The British Film Institute recently polled 358 directors about the greatest films in cinematic history—a poll in which *Taxi Driver* ultimately finished fifth. See British Film Institute, "Directors' Top 100," *bfi.org.uk*, 2012, <http://www.bfi.org.uk/films-tv-people/sightandsoundpoll2012/directors>.

12 Mary Pat Kelly, *Martin Scorsese: A Journey* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1991), 87.

13 Quoted in Roger Ebert, *Scorsese by Ebert* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 43.

all. This screenplay was turned down by everybody."¹⁴ Scorsese harbored similar reservations: "I never thought *Taxi Driver* would make a dime,"¹⁵ he once noted.

Taxi Driver, then, was very much a passion project—what Vincent LoBrutto has referred to as "a psychiatric X-ray of Scorsese."¹⁶ Ironically, though, the impetus for the film came from Schrader, who has traced its origin to a period of personal desperation in the early 1970s: "[I was] living more or less in my car in Los Angeles, riding around all night, drinking heavily, going to porno movies because they were open all night, and crashing some place during the day."¹⁷ He was eventually admitted to the hospital for an ulcer,¹⁸ and, during his stay, he conceived of *Taxi Driver*: "[T]his metaphor occurred to me of the taxi cab, this idea of this man in this metal coffin floating through the sewers of the city, who seems to be in the middle of society but in fact is desperately alone."¹⁹ Thus Schrader insists that *Taxi Driver* "came from the gut," in contrast to "the way people write scripts today—you know, with a market in mind."²⁰ And yet, *Taxi Driver* bore a resonance that would extend well beyond Schrader's personal travails. Many would come to view it as a representation of "the disintegration of the moral and physical state of America,"²¹ and precisely this wider application rendered it "a true classic."²² As Michael Bliss notes, "Of the Scorsese films that feature Robert De Niro, it is *Taxi Driver* that commands the most respect."²³

How did this happen? How, in other words, did the forlorn, alcohol-fueled vision of Schrader achieve the status not only of a cinematic classic but of a parable about life in the modern city? The most basic answer to this question lies in the fact that Schrader and, subsequently, Scorsese recognized that *Taxi Driver* and its antihero, Travis Bickle (played with anguished volatility by De Niro), belong in a long line of modern works of art. Various touchstones have been mentioned over the years, from Albert Camus's novel *The Stranger* (1942) to Robert Bresson's film *Pickpocket* (1959). However, Schrader and especially

14 Quoted in *ibid.*

15 Richard Goodwin, "Cabbin Fever," in *Scorsese: A Journey Through the American Psyche*, ed. Paul A. Woods (London: Plexus, 2005), 64.

16 LoBrutto, 193.

17 Quoted in Kelly, 89.

18 *Ibid.*

19 Quoted in Balfour, "We're Looking at *Taxi Driver*" (2012).

20 Quoted in *ibid.*

21 LoBrutto, 189.

22 Michael Bliss, *The Word Made Flesh: Catholicism and Conflict in the Films of Martin Scorsese* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 1995), 47.

23 *Ibid.*

Scorsese have consistently linked *Taxi Driver* to Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*. "[W]hen I got this idea [for *Taxi Driver*]," Schrader recalls, "I knew there were two books I wanted to reread. I had recently read *Notes from Underground*, so I reread it."²⁴ That Schrader's script, then, directly appropriates certain themes from Dostoevsky's novel is likely. Scorsese himself also made this connection. As he explains:

Paul wrote *Taxi Driver* out of his own gut and his own heart in two-and-a-half terrible weeks. I felt close to the character [of Travis Bickle] by way of Dostoevski. I had always wanted to do a movie of *Notes from the Underground*. I mentioned that to Paul and he said, "Well this is what I have—*Taxi Driver*," and I said, "Great, this is it."²⁵

Indeed, even the influence of *other* artworks on *Taxi Driver* echoed Dostoevsky. For example, Schrader acknowledges the influence of Bresson's *Pickpocket*, noting that he borrowed from its narrative structure: "I saw [*Pickpocket*] and I loved it and I wrote about it repeatedly, and I said 'I could make a movie like that. That's just a guy in his room, then he goes around and he writes in a diary and he goes back to his room. I could do that.'"²⁶ However, as Scorsese adds, *Taxi Driver's* "connection to *Pickpocket* is also a connection to Dostoevsky too,"²⁷ since Bresson's film is widely considered to be based on Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866).²⁸

Consequently, the question is not *whether* Dostoevsky influenced *Taxi Driver* but *how*. Here the most salient point of connection is *Notes from Underground*—a work that anticipates *Taxi Driver* in form as well as in content. With regard to form, both works center on a lonely and desperate first-person narrator, whose isolation erupts in anger and violence toward others. Despite the cultural and chronological variance between nineteenth-century St. Petersburg and 1970s New York City (for example, Nevsky Prospect has become

24 Quoted in Balfour, "We're Looking at *Taxi Driver*" (2012).

25 Quoted in Kelly, 90–91.

26 Quoted in Balfour, "We're Looking at *Taxi Driver*" (2012).

27 Quoted in *ibid.*

28 *Pickpocket's* credits do not acknowledge that the film is based on *Crime and Punishment*, but, according to Tony Pipolo, "nearly every scholar has taken [that] for granted," (Tony Pipolo, *Robert Bresson: A Passion for Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 126). He adds, moreover, that Bresson was an "avowed admirer of Dostoevsky," clarifying that "although *Pickpocket* is not a thorough rendering of Dostoevsky, its theme, principal characters, specific interactions, and much of its dialogue are lifted directly from his novel," (*ibid.*, 127).

42nd Street, horse-drawn carriages have become motorized taxi cabs, and so on), there are further points of narrational overlap. While “the main narrative line of Part II”²⁹ of *Notes* is the attempt of the anonymous protagonist (commonly referred to as the “Underground Man”) to rescue a young prostitute named Liza, the climactic point in *Taxi Driver* is Bickle’s attempt to rescue a young prostitute named Iris. Both stories follow disaffected outcasts who lash out against the hypocrisy of their respective societies—a hypocrisy characterized by the superficial confidence of bourgeois officials on the one hand and the horrifying moral decay surrounding them on the other. This righteous indignation isolates both the Underground Man and Bickle, encouraging each figure to view himself, albeit in different ways, as an arbiter of justice in a world given over to sin.

Of course, the thematic links between *Notes from Underground* and *Taxi Driver* ensue from their formal similarities. So, it would hardly be surprising to say that each work is concerned with topics such as self-consciousness, illness, and boredom.³⁰ Yet, if a single theme could be said to unite *Notes* and *Taxi Driver*, it would be that of “urban loneliness,” especially in the industrialized West. More will be said about this topic below—indeed, it is a Dostoevskian theme that recurs throughout Scorsese’s oeuvre—but here it is sufficient to flag its centrality in *Notes* and in *Taxi Driver*.³¹ The Underground Man is a bureaucrat living in Saint Petersburg, who, despite working in a public office, is “solitary to the point of savagery.”³² “I had no friends or acquaintances,” he adds, “[I] avoided talking to people, and buried myself more and more in my hole.”³³ The Underground Man’s alienation stems in part from his conviction that, although his workaday colleagues are “stupidly dull and as like one

29 Richard Peace, *Dostoevsky’s Notes from Underground*, Critical Studies in Russian Literature (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1993), 36.

30 See, e.g., *ibid.*, 3–35, which concerns the principal motifs of *Notes from Underground*, Part I. With regard to *Taxi Driver*, Bliss notes that Bickle is a “self-reflective figure,” who is “self-conscious enough” to keep a diary, in which he tries “to express verbally and understand intellectually exactly what is driving him,” including the creation of “objectionable windmills at which to tilt in order to justify his own directionless existence,” (Bliss, 47, 49).

31 Notably, in a 2016 interview, Scorsese confirms that *Taxi Driver*’s key theme is “loneliness;” he also agrees that New York City is a “very important character” in the film. See “‘Taxi Driver’ Cast Reunite To Mark 40th Anniversary of Iconic Film,” YouTube video, 6:39, published and posted by “TODAY” (NBC television program), April 22, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SoSsh67drok>.

32 Fyodor Dostoevsky, “Notes from Underground,” in *The Best Short Stories of Dostoevsky*, trans. David Magarshack (New York: Modern Library, 1992), 158.

33 *Ibid.*

another as so many sheep,"³⁴ they get along better in modern society precisely because of their insipid philistinism. In contrast, the Underground Man views himself as "more intelligent, more highly developed, more noble than anyone else," and yet, since he does not readily conform to the latest styles and trends, he is "in the eyes of all those high society people ... just a fly, an odious, obscene fly."³⁵ This internal juxtaposition of pride and humiliation brings the Underground Man to the point of violence on a number of occasions—for example, he imagines challenging a haughty army official to a duel³⁶—but he lacks the determination to go through with it. Instead, as the novel comes to an end, he remains alone, "losing touch with life" and "nursing [his] spite in [his] dark cellar."³⁷

Bickle's circumstances resemble those of the Underground Man, though, famously, Schrader and Scorsese envision a different ending for their protagonist. At *Taxi Driver's* outset, Bickle is looking for work as a cab driver in New York City; he admits to the personnel officer that he is an insomniac and spends nights alone, frequenting pornographic cinemas and bumming around the city in subways and buses. The administrator is taken aback by Bickle's bluntness but, citing a need for drivers, offers him a job. Soon we are introduced to Bickle's reflections on life in the city, which, like those of the Underground Man, are as bleak as they are condemnatory. Commenting on those whom he sees on his late-night excursions, Bickle states: "All the animals come out at night: Whores, skunk pussies, buggers, queens, fairies, dopers, junkies, sick, venal. Someday a real rain will come and wash all this scum off the streets." Ironically, however, it is these sorts of persons that most resemble him and, indeed, are most willing to accept him. In contrast, the powerful and the beautiful—represented by Senator Charles Palantine (Leonard Harris) on the one hand and his campaign worker, Betsy (Cybill Shepherd), on the other—are repulsed by Bickle. Hence, much like the Underground Man, Bickle fantasizes about avenging himself on those who reject him, but, when his plan backfires, he violently attacks New York City's "open sewer" of drugs and prostitution. Yet after killing Iris's pimp (Harvey Keitel) and his henchmen, Bickle turns the gun on himself. There are no more bullets in the chamber—his life spared by a stroke of fate—but the gesture underscores what Bickle says about himself earlier in the film: "Loneliness has followed me my whole life. ...There's no escape. I'm God's lonely

34 Ibid., 160.

35 Ibid., 170.

36 Ibid., 168.

37 Ibid., 258.

man.”³⁸ This isolation intensifies in the very last scenes of *Taxi Driver*, when, in a moment of paradox, Bickle emerges from his killing spree as a hero—a savior of a young girl from the city’s underworld. Only Bickle knows the malevolence of his true intentions, and now he must work to suppress the fury still lurking within.

Thus the similarities between *Notes from Underground* and *Taxi Driver* are hard to miss: both works explore the psycho-spiritual despair of a man estranged from, and subsequently outraged by, life in the modern city. Of course, differences can be found—the plots are not identical—but it is nonetheless clear that Schrader and Scorsese were attracted to Dostoevsky’s first-person critique of modernity. They sought not to glorify a character such as Bickle but, rather, to force audiences to confront what he represents. As Scorsese puts it, “All I can do is try to present, as closely as possible to the truth, what we’re like as I see it. ...It’s disturbing but then, life can be disturbing.”³⁹

1.2 “Life Lessons”: *The Symbiosis between Art and Passion*

As noted above, the impetus for Scorsese’s “Life Lessons” can be traced back to the late 1960s, when the young *auteur* first read Dostoevsky’s short novel, *The Gambler*. But why would Scorsese be drawn to this work? Unlike *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) or even *Notes from Underground*, *The Gambler* is not considered one of Dostoevsky’s masterpieces. Indeed, it tends to be more famous for its connections to his personal upheavals.

In the summer of 1863, Dostoevsky traveled around Europe with his mistress,⁴⁰ a university student and aspiring writer named Apollinaria (Polina) Suslova. Now into his forties, and already celebrated as a literary and social icon,⁴¹ Dostoevsky was “flattered by [Suslova’s] attention” and “dazzled by her beauty and sensuality.”⁴² What’s more, she provided an escape from the domestic and financial straits into which he had fallen.⁴³ And yet, while Dostoevsky’s passions for the young woman smoldered, Suslova’s romantic feelings

38 As indicated by the epigraph to *Taxi Driver*’s script, Schrader adapted this quotation from Thomas Wolfe’s essay, “God’s Lonely Man.” See Thomas Wolfe, “God’s Lonely Man,” in *The Hills Beyond: A Novel* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2000), 186ff.

39 Carmie Amata, “Scorsese on *Taxi Driver* and Hermann,” in *Scorsese: A Journey Through the American Psyche*, ed. Paul A. Woods (London: Plexus, 2005), 68.

40 Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Miraculous Years, 1865–71* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 170.

41 Kenneth Lantz, *The Dostoevsky Encyclopedia* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2004), 428.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

“began to wane” before and during their European excursion.⁴⁴ Suslova fell in love with a Spanish medical student and “proved unwilling to restore him to his previous status as lover.”⁴⁵ Dostoevsky’s correspondence over the next few years indicates that he obsessed over rekindling the affair, but Suslova remained impervious to his attentions. Increasingly desperate and still in debt, Dostoevsky channeled his experience into *The Gambler*—a story first conceived while traveling with Suslova but not completed until 1866, when, facing a deadline, Dostoevsky dictated the novel to his stenographer (and future wife), Anna Snitkina.⁴⁶

The Gambler’s basic premise is taken from Dostoevsky’s European jaunt with Suslova. Though narrated by a young scholar, Aleksei Ivanovich, the plot centers on a tempestuous heroine, Polina, who is being wooed by various suitors including Aleksei himself. When Polina falls into arrears, Aleksei begins gambling in order to help her and, improbably, has a run of good luck at roulette. But Polina rejects his winnings, and so Aleksei absconds to Paris, where he ultimately squanders his money. In an ironic conclusion, a devastated Aleksei finds out that Polina loved him after all.

Obviously, then, *The Gambler* contains elements from Dostoevsky’s own life, but it would be inaccurate to say that it is primarily autobiographical.⁴⁷ Rather, it serves as a vehicle for Dostoevsky to explore the dynamics of desire—in particular, a romantic relationship in which feminine eroticism both stokes and stymies male ingenuity. This is hardly a theme limited to *The Gambler*. Commentators such as the theologian Paul Evdokimov have suggested that Dostoevsky’s novels oppose male and female in such a way that the purpose of the latter is simply to drive the former to his destiny.⁴⁸ As Rowan Williams puts it, “It is quite true that Dostoevsky practically never portrays happy couples ... and that he constantly upsets the conventional novelistic expectations of his era by refusing us marital happy endings.”⁴⁹ Williams goes on to add that such tendencies may very well imply a “negative theology” in Dostoevsky’s understanding of relationships, whereby “the significance of eros is defined largely by the tracing of its absence or perversion.”⁵⁰ This is a provocative suggestion, particularly in light of the sublime moments in works such as *Crime and Punishment*

44 Frank, 26.

45 Ibid.

46 Lantz, 154.

47 Ibid., 155.

48 Paul Evdokimov, *Dostoïevski et le problème du mal* (Lyon: Ondes, 1942), 406–407.

49 Rowan Williams, *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith, and Fiction* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2008), 178.

50 Ibid., 179.

and *The Brothers Karamazov*. But it would not seem to apply to *The Gambler*, which is a more “characteristic product in that it depicts humanity under strain.”⁵¹

In any case, “humanity under strain” is a phrase that suits much of Scorsese’s work, and “Life Lessons” is no different. It centers on a prominent New York painter, Lionel Dobie (Nick Nolte), whose turbulent love affair with a younger woman, Paulette (Rosanna Arquette), drives his artistic creativity. Paulette does not love the older Lionel, preferring younger and trendier men, but she is prepared to benefit from the relationship, both in terms of her material well-being and her contacts in New York’s art world. Conversely, Lionel is obsessed with Paulette, not because of who she is, but because her beauty and caprice arouse him sexually and, in turn, creatively. The tension between them continues to mount until Paulette finally leaves Lionel, albeit not before he finishes another masterful set of paintings for an exhibition. And yet, as “Life Lessons” comes to a close, Lionel is already wooing another woman, whom we now realize is “the latest in ... a long series of beautiful young ‘assistants’ who have come to share the room up on the balcony in his loft, and study his lessons in life.”⁵²

If Dostoevsky’s critical engagement with modern society inspires *Taxi Driver*, his understanding of romantic relationships—which finds expression in his novels but is perhaps most prominent in the story of his own life—inspires “Life Lessons” and, indeed, other Scorsese projects. As Scorsese explains:

There are scenes in *The Gambler* that are quite extraordinary about [Dostoevsky and Suslova’s] relationship, the humiliation and love and battles between the two. So, over the years, I was trying to work out something with that. I found that elements of their relationship found their way into my movies. In *Raging Bull*. A little bit in *Taxi*, which was Schrader’s thing. And in *New York, New York*, a lot of it! The difficulty in being with each other, the difficulty of loving.⁵³

Scorsese, then, reads Dostoevsky much like Evdokimov and Williams: just as the Russian author reveals the “amount of pain in a relationship, and how the pain works for and against the people,” so Scorsese avoids what he calls

51 Ronald Hingley, Introduction to *Great Short Works of Fyodor Dostoevsky* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), xi.

52 Ebert, 108.

53 Chris Hodenfield, “You’ve Got to Love Something Enough to Kill It’: Martin Scorsese; The Art of Noncompromise,” in *Scorsese: A Journey through the American Psyche*, ed. Paul A. Woods (London: Plexus, 2005), 181.

“transcendental sentimentalism” and, instead, depicts how lovers often “*need the pain,*” which is “the truth of the situation.”⁵⁴

Ultimately, then, the title “Life Lessons” not only refers to Dobie’s tutelage of Paulette—a point made in the film itself—but also to what Scorsese gleans from Dostoevsky’s writings and, in turn, strives to convey to his audience. Neither *auteur* portrays misery as an end in itself, yet both show that human experience is fragile, even vicious, and that happiness is won only at great cost. When Scorsese summarizes Dobie’s message in “Life Lessons,” he also is summing up the gist of many of his films: “You’ll get life lessons from me,” Scorsese recaps, “And they’re emotionally murderous. They’re like beatings.”⁵⁵

2 Dostoevsky’s Influence on Scorsese: An Expansive View

Thus far, this chapter has demonstrated that (i) Fyodor Dostoevsky stands as a key influence on Martin Scorsese’s ideas and interests and (ii) this influence is most direct in two of Scorsese’s films, *Taxi Driver* and “Life Lessons”—useful insights establishing, among other things, Dostoevsky’s continuing impact on Western culture and Scorsese’s philosophical attraction to existentialism. With regard to the latter, and following a frequent observation,⁵⁶ it is clear that existentialist themes crop up in Scorsese’s work. Indeed, one might view Scorsese as an inheritor of existentialism or even as a translator of existentialism into celluloid.

If Dostoevsky is one of the key bridges linking Scorsese with existentialism, then it is also true that Dostoevsky’s existentialism should not be confused with “existentialism” as typically understood—namely, a humanist philosophy centering on the arbitrary and often dark freedom of the human will. Of course, similarities between Dostoevsky and later existentialist thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre exist. Yet Dostoevsky, along with persons such as Søren Kierkegaard and Gabriel Marcel, stands as an example of *religious* existentialism

54 Ibid., 181–183.

55 Ibid., 182. It is curious, too, that Scorsese suggests that Dobie is a kind of surrogate for him: “I wanted to be a painter,” he once noted, “Painting was my first great love. ...I was always fascinated by the richness of the color, the texture. That’s what got me.” Quoted in Ebert, 107.

56 George Cotkin claims that Woody Allen gives “the strongest presentation” of existentialism “in American culture today,” though he also lists Scorsese as a key figure in this regard: see his *Existential America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 345. Also see, e.g., Les Keyser, *Martin Scorsese* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), 69–70, and Pauline Kael, *When the Lights Go Down* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1979), 132.

rather than its atheist iteration. Indeed, George Pattison has argued that “religious existentialism is a phenomenon *sui generis* and not a mere derivative of secular existentialism,” not least because the “major figures of religious existentialism were pursuing a set of questions and concerns that arose almost inevitably out of the confrontation between religion and modernity.”⁵⁷ According to Pattison, this confrontation led religious existentialists, however different in other respects, to emphasize a few common themes. First, they were suspicious of modern ideologies of progress,⁵⁸ perhaps especially when such notions sought to frame “progress” in economic or sybaritic terms. Second, and in a related vein, they “questioned the view that the satisfaction of material needs and comforts and the fulfillment of political hopes ... could satisfy the human quest for meaning.”⁵⁹ It is no use, moreover, to rely on “willpower alone to sustain the project of giving value and purpose to existence,”⁶⁰ since the human will is itself compromised, even fallen. From where, then, does meaning arrive? Ultimately, their rigorous “path of negation” finally leaves “only the cry of Job and the faith that in the midst of suffering and loss of meaning somewhere and somehow there is a meaning to be found.”⁶¹ In the end, this apophatic inclination situates the religious existentialists in close proximity to the mystics, insofar as they call attention to the inadequacy of human attempts to master the divine. Thus they devotedly await “the beginning of a new [world] even if it is realized that this new world can never be expressed or explained in a simple, direct way.”⁶²

Pattison situates Dostoevsky among the “anxious angels” of religious existentialism, and, in light of the Russian’s influence on Scorsese, it seems logical to ponder the degree to which the broad themes of religious existentialism are manifest in Scorsese’s films. Several Scorsese films indeed have a basis in Dostoevsky’s novels, and a number of elements from religious existentialism (including Dostoevskian literature) recur throughout Scorsese’s oeuvre. This section cannot exhaustively study the issue, but it does explore a few such elements, each featuring prominently in both Dostoevsky’s writings and Scorsese’s films. Not only will this deepen the awareness of Scorsese’s ties to Dostoevsky, but, more broadly, it will present Scorsese as a religious critic of modernity.

57 George Pattison, *Anxious Angels: A Retrospective View of Religious Existentialism* (London: Macmillan Press, 1999), 2.

58 *Ibid.*, 3–4.

59 *Ibid.*, 4.

60 *Ibid.*

61 *Ibid.*, 5, 7.

62 *Ibid.*, 5, emphasis in original.

2.1 *The "Mean Streets" of the Modern City*

In June 1862, Dostoevsky departed Saint Petersburg for a ten-week tour around Europe.⁶³ It was his first (but not his last) visit to what he dryly called "the land of holy wonders."⁶⁴ He kept a journal during his travels, eventually publishing it in the February 1863 issue of *Time*—a monthly magazine published by his brother, Mikhail. Entitled *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*, this series of articles is less of a travelogue than an opportunity to reflect on "the source of the ideas which, [Dostoevsky] believed, were corrupting Russia."⁶⁵ One of the main objects of Dostoevsky's criticism was the modern European city, which, in his view, instantiated and fortified the dominance of bourgeois values.

It is by no means an accident that the fifth chapter of *Winter Notes* is entitled "Baal," a generic reference to the fertility god of the Canaanites and the Phoenicians, whose cult, as described in the Hebrew Bible,⁶⁶ proved treacherously alluring to the Israelites. Dostoevsky suggests that the modern European city is also a temptation to be resisted. Paris typifies one aspect of this temptation. It is, Dostoevsky notes, almost mechanical in its self-regarding affluence: "What comfort," Dostoevsky quips, "what conveniences of every kind for those who have a right to conveniences, and, again, what order, what a *calm of order*, so to speak."⁶⁷ While Dostoevsky mocks Paris, he recoils in horror at London—a city "as immense as the sea; the screeching and howling of machines; the railroads built over the houses (and soon under the houses); that boldness of enterprise; that seeming disorder which in essence is bourgeois order in the highest degree."⁶⁸ Indeed, London is a kind of Asherah pole built to honor the modern West: people "from all over the world" come there, merging into "a single herd" united by the "gigantic idea"⁶⁹ of industry and progress. At the same time, however, Dostoevsky goes on to detail scenes of debauchery, despair, and exploitation, paying sustained attention to the prostitution along Haymarket in Westminster: "I noticed mothers who were bringing their young daughters into the business. Little girls around twelve years of age take you by the hand and ask you to go with them."⁷⁰ Ultimately, then, the triumphs and tribulations

63 David Patterson, Introduction to *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions* by Fyodor Dostoevsky, trans. David Patterson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), vii.

64 Quoted in *ibid.*

65 *Ibid.*

66 See, e.g., 1 Kings 16:29–33.

67 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*, trans. David Patterson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 36, emphasis in original.

68 *Ibid.*, 37.

69 *Ibid.*

70 *Ibid.*, 40.

of London are of a piece; in fact, Dostoevsky almost accords a certain respect to London, since the Londoner “does not make a cowardly attempt, as the Parisian does, to reassuringly convince himself, to hearten and tell himself, that everything is peaceful and prosperous.”⁷¹ The reign of Baal may bring success, but it is a success built on the “poverty, suffering, grumbling, and torpor of the masses.”⁷²

Winter Notes represents a pivotal point in Dostoevsky’s authorship, inasmuch as it immediately preceded the string of novels that would come to define the Russian author, starting with *Notes from Underground* and concluding with *The Brothers Karamazov*. Moreover, three of these novels—*Notes from Underground*, *Crime and Punishment*, and *The Idiot* (1869)—would be set in a major city, namely, St. Petersburg. During Dostoevsky’s lifetime, St. Petersburg served as Russia’s capital, but one might argue that its primary significance was symbolic: “St. Petersburg is ... the mystical and mysterious point at which Europe becomes Russia and Russia becomes Europe.”⁷³ The city’s connection to the major cultural centers of Europe was by no means accidental. Tsar Peter the Great viewed its location on the western edge of his empire as ideal for the modernization of the Russian people—a kind of window “through which technology and new ideas could flow.”⁷⁴ By Dostoevsky’s era, St. Petersburg “had overtaken Moscow as the center of Russia’s intellectual life,”⁷⁵ though, perhaps precisely for this reason, Dostoevsky grew increasingly disgruntled about his adopted hometown. While early stories such as “White Nights” (1848) find romance in the city’s canals and midnight sun, later works such as *Notes from Underground* and *Crime and Punishment* highlight its pollution and poverty, as well as its capitulation to the corrupting influence of European ideas and mores. In his 1880–81 notebooks, Dostoevsky puts it starkly: “Petersburg is nothing, the [Russian] people are everything.”⁷⁶

Dostoevsky’s ambiguous relation to the modern city—astonishment at its almost sublime grandeur on the one hand, dread over its implicit (or even explicit) nihilism on the other—has an analog in Scorsese’s cinema. This connection has already been discussed with regard to films such as *Taxi Driver* and “Life Lessons,” both of which are set in New York City and represent different aspects of urban life. These two films only scratch the surface. Scorsese is well

71 Ibid., 42.

72 Ibid.

73 Bruce Lincoln, *Saint Petersburg and the Rise of Modern Russia* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 5.

74 Ibid., 3.

75 Lantz, 375.

76 Quoted in *ibid.*, 378.

known as a poet of the modern metropolis; he celebrates the raw and often brutal vitality of the city even as he laments its influence on morality and religion. The majority of Scorsese's films explore the situation of modern urbanity, including (but not limited to) *Who's That Knocking at My Door* (1967), *Mean Streets* (1973), *New York, New York* (1977), *Raging Bull* (1980), *After Hours* (1985), *Goodfellas* (1990), *The Age of Innocence* (1993), *Casino* (1995), *Bringing Out the Dead* (1999), *Gangs of New York* (2002), *The Departed* (2006), *Hugo* (2011), and *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013). Moreover, only a handful of these works are set outside of New York City. As Dostoevsky is to St. Petersburg, so is Scorsese to New York City—inextricably associated with his hometown and yet, perhaps for just that reason, one of its staunchest critics.

Key to Scorsese's treatment of the city is his depiction of urban despair and violence is frequently paralleled by an acknowledgment of religion's lack of influence in the city. This theme unites most (if not all) of his urban films, though Scorsese does not treat it in univocal fashion. In some cases, he depicts cities as godless places. *Taxi Driver*, for example, portrays New York as a kind of hell, bereft of decency and, in turn, of anything like a community dedicated to moral truth. As R. Barton Palmer explains:

[Bickle] can find no exit from this unredeemed community where he has been confined. His only hope is apocalyptic: that it will all be washed away someday by a clean rain, a violent end to pervasive iniquity that will also destroy him (as his attempted suicide after rescuing Iris indicates). ... It seems clear that his world does not offer the prospect of salvation for those not called to election.⁷⁷

A similar point could be made about *After Hours* (1985), which follows an unhappy office worker, Paul Hackett (Griffin Dunne), into the bowels of Lower Manhattan, where he undergoes a series of escalating yet ostensibly random ordeals. Though a black comedy, whose protagonist is ultimately saved by an unexpected blessing, *After Hours* nevertheless depicts New York as a depraved and hopeless city: "The streets of SoHo are dark and deserted. Clouds of steam escape from the pavement, as they did in Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*, suggesting that Hades lurks just below the field of vision."⁷⁸ Scorsese adds to this dimension by featuring two sculptures in the film, both of which resemble Edward Munch's 1893 painting *The Scream*—a work that has been described as a

77 R. Barton Palmer, "Scorsese and the Transcendental," in *The Philosophy of Martin Scorsese*, ed. Mark T. Conrad (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 245.

78 Ebert, 82.

symbol of “the unbearable pressures of modern life on individual people.”⁷⁹ Fascinatingly, Munch’s favorite writer was Dostoevsky,⁸⁰ in whose novels Munch observed the tension between faith and unbelief with which he struggled himself.⁸¹ *After Hours*, too, highlights this conflict. It is as if God’s presence has fled from Manhattan, leaving Hackett to suffer among the diabolical hordes. Thus he come to resemble “Job of the Old Testament,”⁸² which, in one memorable scene, Scorsese highlights by having the camera simulate the so-called “God’s Eye View” as Hackett screams to the heavens: “What do you want from me? What have I done?”

In other films, however, Scorsese portrays cities as places where the trappings of religion persist but not its transformative power. Here, in other words, religion is subservient to the city and its socio-political interests rather than the other way around—a motif that typifies Scorsese’s rendering of religious life in America. This issue arises in works such as *Goodfellas* and *Gangs of New York*, as characters take part in sacramental rites (Holy Matrimony in *Goodfellas*, the Eucharist in *Gangs of New York*) or publicly observe an external aspect of Christian life (the celebration of Christmas in *Goodfellas*, the invocation of “the Christian Lord” in *Gangs of New York*), even as their conduct otherwise contradicts the meaning of such religious practices. Scorsese highlights this point in *Goodfellas*, when, after a major heist, the mobsters celebrate with a Christmas party and one of the robbery’s chief architects, Henry Hill (Ray Liotta), brings home “the most expensive [Christmas] tree they had”—a snow-white artificial tree, which the Hill family strews with red ornaments. As the scene concludes, Scorsese’s camera creeps closer and closer to the decorations, which evoke the bloodshed that has defiled the peace and purity of the holiday. Another notable contemporary example is found in *The Departed*, when local gangster Frank Costello (Jack Nicholson) confronts two Catholic priests in a restaurant. After crudely referencing the recent sex abuse crisis in the Catholic Church, which was particularly severe in the film’s setting of Boston, Costello adds, “May I remind you, in this Archdiocese, God don’t run the bingo.” The older priest cowers in disgrace, while his younger colleague expresses defiance. But Costello has the last laugh, when he intimates that he has had

79 Fred S. Kleiner, *Gardner’s Art Through the Ages: The Western Perspective*, 15th ed., vol. 2 (Boston: Cengage, 2017), 746.

80 Sue Prideaux, *Edvard Munch: Behind the Scream* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 49.

81 Ibid. Prideaux adds that Munch was particularly attracted to “the story of Ivan the atheist brother” in *The Brothers Karamazov* and could even be said to have lived “vicariously through the progress of Ivan’s loss of faith” (ibid.).

82 Ebert, 83.

sex with a nun in their company. The point is clear: Costello neither acquiesces to a morally-compromised Church nor respects that which has been promised to God. The Church stands, but it has been rendered impotent, perhaps even ridiculous.

Such instances populate Scorsese's oeuvre, though it might be argued that only one of his films actually *centers* on this tension between Church and city—namely, *Mean Streets*. A voiceover makes this point clear from the very start: “You don’t make up for your sins in Church,” Scorsese himself states, “You do it in the streets.” Whether or not this claim is true becomes the defining theme of *Mean Streets*. Set in Manhattan’s Little Italy neighborhood, where Scorsese grew up, the film chronicles a world determined by small-time criminality, barroom brawls, and unpaid debts; it is, as Roger Ebert states, a “film of everyday reality.”⁸³ Scorsese here assumes Dostoevsky’s role in *Winter Notes*, holding up a mirror to quotidian life in the modern city. Yet, *Mean Streets* also shows that the world of the streets is shadowed by another world, ever present in the background, haunting the film’s protagonist Charlie (Harvey Keitel). This is the world of the Church and, in turn, the sacred. Throughout *Mean Streets*, Charlie encounters signs of God’s presence, some of which he disdains (the penance assigned to him by a priest) and some of which he fears (the prospect of eternal damnation), but the unremitting moral compromises of life on New York’s “mean streets” ultimately do not allow for reconciliation with God. As Charlie comes to realize, punishment is the lone possibility—a point that Scorsese consistently underscores by having Charlie place his hand over an open flame.

Mean Streets thus presents a darker moral-cum-spiritual vision than Dostoevsky’s great urban novel, *Crime and Punishment*. “The clearest fact about Charlie,” notes Pauline Kael, “is that whatever he does in his life, he’s a sinner,”⁸⁴ whereas Rodion Raskolnikov—the protagonist of *Crime and Punishment* and, like Charlie, a tormented young man—eventually moves toward moral and religious healing. Interestingly, however, even Raskolnikov’s redemption does not come in St. Petersburg, where crime and punishment have the last word, but in Siberia, where he does penance in the work camps and reads the New Testament in his prison bunk. For Dostoevsky, as for Scorsese, the allure of the modern city is matched only by its corruption—a critique that negatively reveals the promise of religious life, even as it warns that religion, too, often succumbs to the pressures and temptations of secular urbanity.

83 Ebert, 271.

84 Quoted in *ibid.*, 268.

2.2 *Sublimity and Transcendence in Dostoevsky and in Scorsese*

George Pattison has argued that, for Dostoevsky, the quandary facing modern persons is not only that they are living amid “a materialistic, objectifying and strictly this-worldly philosophy of life,” but also that “anything—such as the Church—that might claim to offer an alternative to this philosophy is itself ambiguous.”⁸⁵ In other words, Dostoevsky depicts a world “determined by the situation of nihilism,”⁸⁶ and yet, in a number of works, he treats nihilism as an occasion for the *renewal* of religious faith. How is this “post-nihilistic”⁸⁷ move possible?

As an artist, rather than as a philosopher or a theologian, Dostoevsky attends to the full range of the human condition, even to those concerns or questions that may seem superfluous to the “immanent frame”⁸⁸ of modern thinking. One such question has to do with the meaning (or meaninglessness) of life in the face of inevitable death. It is a theme to which Dostoevsky repeatedly turns, often in the most harrowing tones. For example, in *The Idiot*, the ailing and suicidal Ippolit Terentyev ponders the significance of Hans Holbein the Younger’s painting, *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (ca. 1521). According to Ippolit, it is a work that exposes the cold futility of earthly life:

Nature appears to the viewer of this painting in the shape of some enormous, implacable, and dumb beast ... in the shape of some huge machine of the most modern construction, which has senselessly seized, crushed, and swallowed up, blankly and unfeelingly, a great and priceless being... . The painting seems precisely to express this notion of a dark, insolent, and senselessly eternal power, to which everything is subjected, and it is conveyed to you involuntarily.⁸⁹

For Ippolit, the darkness of this power cannot be escaped; thus it is best “to assert [one’s] freedom in the face of death”⁹⁰ by choosing to kill oneself—a

85 Pattison, 79.

86 Ibid.

87 Ibid.

88 This phrase is Charles Taylor’s and is thus anachronistically applied to Dostoevsky. Still, Taylor’s definition of “immanent frame” accords quite nicely with Dostoevsky’s observations that Western society in the nineteenth century had come to understand human life “as taking place within a self-sufficient immanent order; or better, a constellation of orders, cosmic, social and moral ... orders [that] are understood as impersonal,” (Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007), 543).

89 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage Classics, 2001), 408.

90 Pattison, 81.

notion that Dostoevsky would entertain again in *Demons* (1872). Further, as Pattison adds, it is not only that death augurs “the extinction of one’s own consciousness” but, rather, that it stands as a barrier that sustains “the brokenness of human relationships.”⁹¹ That the living are divided from the dead is experienced as a source of both torment and sorrow—a theme that Dostoevsky explores in various works, from novels such as *The Insulted and Injured* (1861) and *Crime and Punishment* to short stories such as “A Gentle Creature” (1876).

And yet, while Dostoevsky refuses to gloss over “the reality of a bleak, cruel life characterized by suffering,”⁹² he also refuses to give this reality the last word. Particularly from *Crime and Punishment* onward, he underlines the possibility of a transcendent dimension to reality—one not perceived by everyone, but which transforms those who are attuned to it. Nowhere is this tendency clearer than in “The Russian Monk,” the sixth book of *The Brothers Karamazov*, which Dostoevsky frames as the “last talk”⁹³ of the Elder Zinovy Zosima, recorded (and possibly expanded upon) by his young disciple, Alyosha Karamazov. In this account, Zosima tells of his older brother Markel, who as a young man came under the influence of modern “freethinking,” so much so that he concluded that belief in God is “all nonsense” and even “swore at God’s Church.”⁹⁴ But he soon became mortally ill, and, out of consideration for his pious mother, he began to participate again in the Church’s sacramental life. What started as a concession produced a “change in spirit,”⁹⁵ and Markel’s agonizing encounter with death cast a new light on existence. Whereas he previously was “hot-tempered and irritable by nature,” seeking to justify himself before others, now he came to see that “life is paradise, and we are all in paradise, but we do not want to know it.”⁹⁶ People fail to perceive life’s goodness because they fail to perceive the transcendent dimension of reality. Preoccupied with immediate gratification, social distinctions, and this-worldly power, they lapse into sin. However, if they would humbly and sincerely acknowledge their sin, they would come to admit that “each of us is guilty before everyone,”⁹⁷ thereby freeing them to receive the world as a gift. Zosima recalls Markel pleading with creation itself:

91 Ibid., 82, 81.

92 P.H. Brazier, *Dostoevsky: A Theological Engagement* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2016), 84.

93 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Knopf, 1992), 286.

94 Ibid., 287–288.

95 Ibid., 288.

96 Ibid.

97 Ibid., 289.

And suddenly, looking at [the birds] and admiring them, he began to ask their forgiveness, too: "Birds of God, joyful birds, you, too, must forgive me, because I have also sinned before you." None of us could understand it then, but he was weeping with joy: "Yes," he said, "there was so much of God's glory around me: birds, trees, meadows, sky, and I alone lived in shame, I alone dishonored everything, and did not notice the beauty and glory of it at all."⁹⁸

Markel's new way of looking at reality changes Zosima's life as well, and eventually the great Elder centers his own teaching on "heedful, active love"⁹⁹ and self-abnegation, not only because these qualities are imitative of Christ,¹⁰⁰ but also because they open one to the ways in which life is interconnected, whether visibly or invisibly. As Zosima states, "All is like an ocean, all flows and connects; touch it in one place and it echoes at the other end of the world."¹⁰¹

Ultimately, then, Dostoevsky "suggests that it is when we come face to face with death that we can best realize the value of life."¹⁰² In this way, he anticipates a similar point of tension in Scorsese's oeuvre. As has been seen, Scorsese's films certainly feature an existentialist concern for the corruption of earthly affairs and for the ways in which death stalks and finally engulfs human life. And yet, Scorsese also demonstrates a Dostoevskian longing for the sublime and the transcendent. For example, in *Raging Bull* (1980), widely considered one of his masterpieces, Scorsese tells the story of the American boxer Jake LaMotta (Robert De Niro), who, despite winning the World Middleweight title in 1949, was as well known for his tumultuous life outside the ring as for his accomplishments in it. Scorsese does not treat LaMotta's story in straightforward fashion; *Raging Bull* is not a sports biopic but a "search for redemption through blood."¹⁰³ Scorsese explains, "It's really a straight, simple story, almost linear, of a guy attaining something and losing everything, and then redeeming himself. Spiritually."¹⁰⁴ This spiritual redemption, much like Markel's in *The Brothers Karamazov*, stems from a new way of looking at the world—a kind of revelation. For most of the film, LaMotta "is all macho posturing, Ur-man

98 Ibid., 289.

99 Ibid., 319.

100 Ibid., 317–318.

101 Ibid., 319.

102 Pattison, 82.

103 Richard A. Blake, S.J., "Redeemed in Blood: The Sacramental Universe of Martin Scorsese," *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 24, no. 1 (1996): 2–9.

104 Quoted in Lawrence S. Friedman, *The Cinema of Martin Scorsese* (New York: Continuum, 1997), 113.

at this most sadomasochistic;¹⁰⁵ he lives to impose his will on others, both athletically and sexually. But this desire to dominate and its concomitant craving for violence has a flipside: LaMotta knows that he is a sinner, knows that he deserves to suffer for the pain he has inflicted upon others. Intriguingly, the American writer Joyce Carol Oates has even cited LaMotta as the kind of boxer who fights “as a means of assuaging guilt, in a Dostoyevskian exchange of physical well-being for peace of mind. Boxing is about being hit rather more than it is about hitting.”¹⁰⁶ *Raging Bull* reflects just this insight, particularly in the scene when LaMotta, backed against the ropes and exhausted, lowers his arms and urges Sugar Ray Robinson to pummel his face. Yet, losing a title-fight to Robinson is only the beginning of LaMotta’s penance: his marriage dissolves; he faces multiple criminal charges; and, finally, he is imprisoned. It is at this point that LaMotta “hits rockbottom”¹⁰⁷ and, stripped of both his identity and his freedom, comes to accept his humanity. “I am not an animal,” he bellows, in a scene that was imposed by Scorsese on the script.¹⁰⁸ Realizing that he is more than a collection of primal instincts, that he is indeed a spiritual being, LaMotta moves on to repair his relationship with his brother and, perhaps even more improbably, to develop a comedy routine that closes the film. A world once met with furious violence is now seen with resigned humor, and so it makes sense that Scorsese concludes *Raging Bull* with a quotation from the Gospel of John: “So for the second time [the Pharisees] summoned the man who had been blind, and said, ‘Speak the truth before God. We know that this fellow is a sinner.’ ‘Whether or not he is a sinner, I do not know,’ the man replied. ‘All I know is this: once I was blind, now I can see.’”¹⁰⁹

Yet, if *Raging Bull* gestures toward the transcendent in negative fashion, depicting a life largely but not ultimately turned away from the good, the true, and the beautiful, Scorsese’s 1999 film *Bringing Out the Dead* represents a precarious attempt to seize the transcendent. The film centers on Frank Pierce (Nicolas Cage), an ambulance driver and paramedic who works the graveyard shift in Manhattan in the early 1990s. The job has taken a toll on Pierce, who is especially distressed that he has not saved a patient in months. On the surface, then, *Bringing Out the Dead* stands as a companion piece to *Taxi Driver*, inasmuch as Pierce assumes Travis Bickle’s quest to save “‘lost sheep’ ... from

105 Ibid., 116.

106 Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing* (Garden City: Dolphin/Doubleday, 1987), 25.

107 Friedman, 122.

108 Ibid.

109 John 9:24–26. *Raging Bull*’s final credits specify that this translation is from the New English Bible.

a degrading imprisonment within a corrupt material world."¹¹⁰ But there are key differences as well. Whereas *Taxi Driver* focuses on Bickle's desire to be a hero, Pierce views himself as a failed hero. He has visions of recent patients: one a young woman who died in his care, the other a heart attack victim whose revival amounts to a "living purgatory of irreversible brain death and constant heart failure."¹¹¹ Perceiving himself as one who gives life, Pierce is visited by the ghosts of the dead. He is a transgressive figure, attempting to do more than he can and to be more than he is. He improperly relates to the transcendent by attempting to manage it.

What Pierce needs, then, is a new way of seeing the world and his role in it. As Scorsese observes, "When you bring somebody back to life, you feel like God, you are God. But one has to get past the idea of the ego and the pride. Hey, the job isn't about bringing people back to life, it's about being there, it's about compassion for the suffering, suffering with them."¹¹² Pierce comes to this realization when he allows the heart attack victim to "die by subverting any further heroic measures."¹¹³ He no longer tries to be God and thus finds peace in his finitude. He overcomes by surrendering; he gains his life by letting it go: the very *logos* of Christ's cross, an image of which is featured on the promotional poster for *Bringing Out the Dead*. Notably, this paradoxical yet hopeful conclusion deviates from the novel on which it is based.¹¹⁴ As R. Barton Palmer explains, "For the film's Frank ... redemption is more than the bottom falling away, a temporary relief from engagement with others Scorsese's Frank is provided with a more lasting and substantial connection to life and the material world."¹¹⁵

Palmer attributes this modification to Scorsese's affection for Robert Bresson—a comparison pregnant with significance.¹¹⁶ After all, Bresson was a Catholic filmmaker who made theological themes central to his oeuvre. Yet, with regard to the present topic, what is especially striking is that Bresson himself adapted three Dostoevsky stories (*Crime and Punishment*, "A Gentle Creature," and "White Nights") for the screen (*Pickpocket*, *Une femme douce*, and *Quatre nuits d'un rêveur* respectively). To connect Scorsese to Bresson, then, is to connect Scorsese to Dostoevsky—a point that, as noted earlier, Scorsese himself has acknowledged. Like their Russian predecessor, both filmmakers

110 Palmer, 234.

111 *Ibid.*, 235.

112 Quoted in Ebert, 233.

113 Palmer, 234.

114 Joe Connelly, *Bringing out the Dead* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998).

115 Palmer, 236.

116 *Ibid.*

trace the human desire to wrench theological meaning from suffering and death—indeed, to become aware of the transcendent in the midst of a world that often seems desperately immanent.

3 By Way of Conclusion: Scorsese as (Religious) Existentialist

Dostoevsky clearly constitutes a key influence on Scorsese. Scorsese directly bases several films on works by Dostoevsky and regularly utilizes Dostoevskian motifs—namely, the environmental squalor and moral decay of the modern city, along with the possibility of relating to the transcendent despite the frailty of the human condition. Much of Scorsese's work, then, confronts the viewer with the problem of *choice*. Films such as *Taxi Driver* and *Raging Bull* pose a variety of questions about the world and its meaning for the individual. Is it possible for a person to change, or is one ultimately subservient to biological or societal forces? Is the *nihil* of death the final arbiter of human purpose, or does some illuminating yet mysterious good transcend human affairs and, in turn, the threat of nonbeing? In raising such questions, Scorsese's films force the viewer to do the same and, potentially, to arrive at a decisive answer.

This “decisive” aspect of Scorsese's filmmaking is reminiscent of existentialism. As John Macquarrie puts it, “Existentialist writings abound in allusions to decision, choice, commitment, engagement, resoluteness, and the like.”¹¹⁷ More specifically, existentialism plumbs the depths of human action, casting light on what persons desire as well as on what they fear. Thus it concerns self-actualization, albeit not in such a way that self-actualization is depicted as a predictable “enlargement of [one's] powers.”¹¹⁸ On the contrary, for the existentialist, “the stress on decision means a corresponding stress on the intensiveness of life rather than its extensiveness. Every decision is a decision against as well as a decision for; and every decision limits the range of possibilities that will be open for future decisions.”¹¹⁹ To understand “decision” in this way is to understand that life is risky at best, tragic at worst—all the more so when the decision is for or against transcendence, as is characteristic of the religious existentialism of Dostoevsky.

Hence, if one were to view Scorsese as a kind of theologian, his connection to Dostoevsky is indeed germane and informative. To be sure, both Dostoevsky

117 John Macquarrie, *Existentialism: An Introduction, Guide and Assessment* (London: Penguin, 1972), 182.

118 *Ibid.*

119 *Ibid.*

and Scorsese put forward the so-called “eternal questions”¹²⁰ of theology. At the same time, however, they do not approach these questions as catechists, dogmaticians, or even as intellectuals. Rather, they are storytellers, who leave “readers to make their own judgments on the aporia raised”¹²¹ by their works. Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin popularized this way of reading Dostoevsky and argued that Dostoevsky does not impose a single perspective on his works but exhibits “a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices.”¹²² Here again, something similar could be said about Scorsese’s films, which bring together different characters in the mode of what Bakhtin terms “carnival.”¹²³ Unlike some “religious” filmmakers such as Mel Gibson, Scorsese does not depict the world in allegorical fashion, as if it were the site of a standoff between “good” and “evil.” On the contrary, Scorsese suggests that good and evil, sacred and profane, clean and dirty interlace in surprising and provocative ways.¹²⁴ Yet, this interlacing is not purposeless but instead highlights the raw and even vulgar life of the streets (or, as Bakhtin puts it, “the public square”¹²⁵), where the exchange of ideas and *Weltanschauungen* occurs familiarly and freely. In this encounter with “the real world” Scorsese demands the existential participation of the audience,¹²⁶ much as Dostoevsky did in his works a century before.

In a 1997 interview with Roger Ebert, Scorsese admitted that he is loath to link his films with existentialism: “In fact, I don’t know what it is,” he quips, “I only had one philosophy course at NYU and I didn’t do very well in it.”¹²⁷

120 Pattison, 87.

121 Ibid.

122 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 6, emphasis in original.

123 Ibid., 177.

124 See *ibid.*, 123, 126.

125 Ibid., 130, emphasis in original.

126 This chapter’s overarching focus on “Dostoevsky and Scorsese” has invited the connection to Bakhtin. Nevertheless, it is worth adding that Scorsese’s approach to filmmaking might also be put in conversation with the thought of another twentieth-century theorist—namely, the Jesuit theologian William F. Lynch, who was particularly interested in the role of the imagination in religious life. For Lynch, because the “analogy of being” [*analogia entis*] is central to Catholic doctrine, Catholicism is invested in the imagination’s formation and refinement. Indeed, the imagination is the faculty by which one comes to rightly understand reality, namely, as an interconnected tapestry that must be respected on its own terms. Lynch juxtaposes this ability to let entities “emerge” with a univocal imagination that seeks to impose a predetermined meaning on things. See, e.g., William F. Lynch, *Christ and Apollo: The Dimensions of the Literary Imagination* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1960). Also see Gerald J. Bednar, *Faith as Imagination: The Contribution of William F. Lynch, S.J.* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1996), 67–68.

127 Quoted in Ebert, 173.

However, later in the interview, the topic returns to existentialist thinking. Ebert notes that the earnestness of “existentialism [and] the existential hero” has become passé, replaced by the insouciance of postmodern irony. Then he relays a comment that Scorsese’s collaborator Paul Schrader had recently made: “‘With my work,’ Schrader said, ‘there’s no quotation marks. I really mean it.’”¹²⁸ Scorsese’s response, given his lack of familiarity with existentialism as an academic subject, gestures toward his longtime indebtedness to religion in general and to Dostoevsky in particular—an artist known for “his impassioned yet complex exploration of the shadow side of the human situation and his search for God in that darkness.”¹²⁹ Fittingly Scorsese adds, “‘Yeah, [Schrader] means it. So do I.’”¹³⁰

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128 Quoted in *ibid.*, 176.

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The Problem of Violence in Scorsese's Films: The Catholic Gangster as Tragic Hero

John McAteer

The problem of violence in Scorsese films is not that his movies are more violent or more graphic than other movies. In fact, they are much less graphic than typical horror movies (in terms of on-screen gore) and less violent than most superhero action movies (in terms of on-screen violent acts or even the number of deaths). Yet Scorsese's films – his gangster films in particular – do *seem* more violent. This is because Scorsese is such a good filmmaker that he is able to make the violence in his films more shocking. It affects us more, demanding to be noticed and thought about. The real problem of violence is that Scorsese does not take violence lightly; after all, Scorsese's films are *about* violence. Interpreting *what* these films reveal about violence is the primary problem.

Though many of his other movies explore the theme of violence as well (most notably *Taxi Driver*, *Cape Fear* and *Shutter Island*), this chapter focuses on Scorsese's gangster movies, which take place within the social worlds of the Italian and Irish mob, primarily in New York City. Scorsese's gangster films are tragedies in the same tradition as *Medea* and *Macbeth*. Most of these films are about people trying to escape their entanglements with the world of the mafia. The heroes of these films try to be good, but are eventually destroyed by the sins of their forefathers. Yet Scorsese's approach to tragedy is more Shakespearean than Greek, more Catholic than pagan. That is, rather than being doomed by fate or an ancestral curse, Scorsese's heroes are destroyed by their own choices.

Scorsese dramatizes Catholic ideas of original sin (being born into the mafia culture), penance (the attempt to counteract the effects of sin with good deeds), and the self-destructiveness of sin. All of these ideas have roots in St. Augustine of Hippo. For Augustine, sin operates like an addiction, and only the intervention of God's grace breaks this addiction and makes it possible for us to act in accordance with our own good. Scorsese's tragic vision is quite similar, but perhaps falls short of orthodox Catholicism insofar as all forms of Christianity are grounded in the hope of redemption. It seems significant that in Scorsese's gangster films, no one ever actually succeeds in escaping the cycle of violence. In these quasi-Catholic tragedies the heroes are always ultimately, if not inevitably, destroyed.

The only redemption Scorsese seems to recognize is cinema itself. Scorsese believes that if he can transfigure violence through film, he can give it meaning. Hence cinema seems to operate sacramentally for Scorsese, the outward and visible sign of the motion picture image effecting an inward and spiritual transformation in the audience. Through film we can come to see the world more clearly, including the emptiness of violence, which might otherwise seem glamorous. And film can redeem violent people by helping us understand and humanize those who might otherwise seem like monsters.

After exploring the aesthetic techniques Scorsese uses in his own films to critique the glamorous representation of violence in classic Hollywood gangster films (thereby making his films seem much more violent than similar films by other directors), I use Aristotle's theory of tragedy and Augustine's theory of sin to show how Scorsese's films can be read as quasi-Catholic tragedies. I then conclude by suggesting how, through his tragic approach to the gangster genre, Scorsese's cinema might embody a kind of redemption for violent people.

1 Redemptive Violence

Scorsese's work generally falls into two periods, the De Niro period and the DiCaprio period. Scorsese made eight films with Robert De Niro between 1973 and 1995, including four that took place within the world of the Italian-American Mafia: *Mean Streets* (1973), *Raging Bull* (1980), *Goodfellas* (1990), and *Casino* (1995). He went on to make five films with Leonardo DiCaprio between 2002 and 2013, including two films about Irish mobsters: *Gangs of New York* (2002) and *The Departed* (2006).¹ One important difference between the De Niro films and the DiCaprio films is that *Gangs of New York* and *The Departed* are much more violent than any of the earlier films. This is partly due to the evolving cultural standard of acceptable depiction of violence – *Casino* was already more graphic than any of Scorsese's previous films – but Scorsese's aesthetic of violence seems to have changed since the turn of the millennium as well. Whereas Scorsese's early films were interested in the contrast between film and reality, his newer films slide more toward the sort of exaggerated Hollywood-style violence he critiqued in his De Niro cycle.

In *Mean Streets* and *Goodfellas* Scorsese is critiquing Hollywood violence. Intertextual allusions have been common in American cinema since the 1970s. Yet whereas, for example, the references to pulpy grindhouse exploitation

1 Scorsese's forthcoming film *The Irishman* (2019) is an interesting hybrid, since it marks Scorsese's return to working with De Niro, except this time De Niro will play an Irish mobster.

films in Quentin Tarantino's work seem meant to foreground the artificiality of his own films so that we experience them as pastiche and collage, Scorsese uses references to classic cinema to critique the artificiality of Hollywood and to showcase his own realism by undermining earlier films' representations. He wants us to see how our understanding of gangsters – indeed how real life gangsters' understanding of themselves – has been shaped by Hollywood clichés, and how these unrealistic representations distort the characters' sense of morality and their understanding of the consequences of violence in real life. This is why he is so concerned to make his violence more shocking than Hollywood violence.

In *Mean Streets* there are three scenes where characters watch violent Hollywood movies. At one point, the film's protagonist Charlie (Harvey Keitel) and his gangster friends rip off some naïve kids for \$20, and they all have the same idea: "let's go to the movies." They go to a western (*The Searchers*), and the on-screen violence spills over into the movie theater as the people behind them get into a fist fight, which Charlie's group finds hilarious. Afterwards they go to a bookie to collect their winnings. Charlie's self-destructive friend Johnny Boy (Robert De Niro) acts disrespectfully (insulting people for no reason) so the bookie refuses to pay. Charlie tries to negotiate, but suddenly the bookie punches someone and a brawl breaks out – looking at points not dissimilar to the fight from the western they had watched. Later, when Charlie and Johnny Boy need a place to hide out, they go to the movies again and watch a violent horror film (Roger Corman's *The Tomb of Ligeia*). At the end of the film, after Johnny Boy is shot and his car crashes, Scorsese cuts to the mob boss watching a similar scene in an old gangster movie where someone has been shot in a car (from *The Big Heat*). In each of these scenes, Scorsese is playing up the way real-life gangsters' lives mirror the violence in Hollywood movies.

Scorsese might also be commenting here on the way our memories of our own lives are mediated through Hollywood clichés. The opening credits for *Mean Streets* are 8mm home movies under familiar pop music, establishing an air of realism and nostalgia, but also suggesting the power of film to mediate our memories of reality. Scorsese employs a similar technique in *Goodfellas*. The first section of that film is a flashback to the protagonist Henry Hill (Ray Liotta) as a teenager. At least five times during this flashback section of the film Scorsese utilizes freeze frames during key scenes, often violent ones. The freeze frame technique simulates the way intense images and moments stick in our memories, but it is also the sort of self-conscious use of cinematic technique popularized by the French New Wave, which draws attention to the fact that we are watching a movie and thus emphasizes the way cinema constructs memory and even life. Similarly, *Goodfellas*'s toughest gangster character

Tommy (Joe Pesci) is depicted as someone who cannot tell the difference between Hollywood and real life. At one point he attempts to re-enact a violent scene from a western (*The Oklahoma Kid*) and ends up shooting a kid in the foot. Later the same kid insults him and Tommy casually shoots him to death. This shows how Tommy (and by extension Henry and the other gangsters) sees himself as a movie character, but also demonstrates the lack of realism in Hollywood movies. When real-life gangsters act out the movies, the consequences are much worse than they are in the Hollywood fictions. Yet the characters in *Goodfellas* neither notice nor care that people are getting really hurt.

But if the characters do not see how their lives differ from the Hollywood gangsters they idolize, Scorsese makes sure that his film viewers do. Hollywood clichés condition viewers' expectations about genre films, and Scorsese plays on these expectations using a method we can call "the false build up." Scorsese slowly builds expectations for a violent event, then defuses the tension by making it seem like the violence has been avoided, before finally hitting the audience with an unexpected burst of violence that shocks viewers because it catches them off guard. It is all the more shocking because it comes at the moment the audience least expects it, just after breathing a sigh of relief. Scorsese employs the false build up many times throughout his body of work. Arguably the entire narrative of *Taxi Driver* is built this way. The plot seems to be moving increasingly toward the assassination of a political candidate that never happens. Then, just after we think Travis (Robert De Niro) has abandoned his violent plan, he suddenly kills another character, a pimp (Harvey Keitel) who exploits underage girls. Travis's decision comes apparently out of the blue, and when the outburst of violence finally comes it is shocking, lacking any build up or music. As Travis makes his way down the hallway of the pimp's apartment building, Travis shoots multiple people several times before they die, and there is a large amount of blood shown. The impact of the scene is heightened partly because of its contrast with traditional Hollywood movies (like those watched by the characters in *Mean Streets* and *Goodfellas*) where people typically die from one bloodless gunshot. In the end Travis is hailed by the newspaper as a "hero," but the viewer knows that he is profoundly unstable. Scorsese's ability to make Travis's actions shocking demonstrates that violence is not really as glamorous as the media portrays it to be.

Goodfellas, too, utilizes the false build up technique several times, most notably when Henry calls Tommy "a funny guy." Henry is trying to give him a compliment, but Tommy pretends to take it as disrespect. There is genuine tension where the audience worries that violence will break out for no reason (as it has before in the film). But then Tommy says he was just kidding about being angry, and the tension releases. Then Tommy really does explode and

starts beating another man while people continue to laugh because they assume Tommy is still kidding around. The scene follows the same false build up structure as *Taxi Driver*. Here again the violence is shocking, because it is unexpected. Moreover in *Goodfellas* Scorsese adds the element of humor – not just in this scene but throughout the film. The combination of humor and violence both makes the violence seem starker in contrast and also makes us feel bad for laughing, thereby making the violence seem worse than it would apart from the humor.²

In general Scorsese attempts to make the violence in *Mean Streets* and *Goodfellas* shocking and horrifying for the audience while portraying it as banal for the characters. But starting with *Casino*, Scorsese has moved away from this approach to violence. *Casino* does involve a few truly extreme scenes of violence – most notably scenes where the gangster Nicky (Joe Pesci) has a man's head put into a vise and where Nicky is almost beaten to death with a baseball bat before being buried alive. But for the most part the violence in *Casino* is filmed in Hollywood style: slow motion gun shots and explosions but usually without any blood. Often in *Casino* Scorsese groups scenes of violence into sequences so that they happen one right after another in increasing intensity and explicitness with a kind of bloody exclamation point at the end. This gives the violence an operatic feel too stylized to seem very shocking.

In *Gangs of New York* he maintains a bit of this operatic feel, but this time he achieves his effect by making the violence extremely graphic. The film begins with a street fight between two New York City gangs in the mid-1800s. At first Scorsese films it like a typical Hollywood fantasy movie, and the initial battle scenes are no more graphic than *The Lord of the Rings* or *The Avengers*. The first round of attacks show no blood, despite the fact that many of the combatants are using knives and even swords. But as the sequence progresses the violence increases in bloodiness, made extra visible since the street is covered in white snow. People's limbs are broken or chopped off in truly horrific ways. Here Scorsese gives the scene the feel of a real war, not just a street fight. Later, by the close of the gangs' graphic and gory final battle at the end of the film, the streets are literally covered with blood like some sort of surreal Hieronymus Bosch hellscape.

By the time he gets to *The Departed* Scorsese uses violence as an ordinary punctuation mark in his editing – often a comma or a semicolon more than the exclamation point he employed in *Casino*. Throughout the movie we see short

² Another example from *Goodfellas* is the sequence in which Jimmy kills Morrie (Chuck Low), a wig shop owner. Here Scorsese makes use of unreliable voiceover narration to fool the audience into a relaxing before hitting us with a burst of unexpected violence, followed by a bit of comic banter.

flashes of violence – people being shot, strangled, beaten to death with sprays of blood, blood-stained dead bodies, etc. – usually intercut with other scenes. For example, at one point the film's protagonist Billy (Leonardo DiCaprio) is in a psychologist's office talking about how his undercover police work requires him to lie and use weapons. The scene is intercut with him participating in his first murder. The violence is bloody, but the editing renders it less shocking than it might have been in a different context.

With *Gangs of New York*, *The Departed*, and (to a lesser extent) *Casino*, Scorsese's aesthetics of violence is operatic and stylized so that, although bloodier, it is no more shocking than the typical Hollywood violence he critiqued in films like *Mean Streets*, *Taxi Driver*, and *Goodfellas*. But while his aesthetic of violence has changed throughout the years, Scorsese's films maintain a consistent intention in their depictions of suffering. Scorsese's gangster films portray a world in which those born into sinful systems have little hope of escape. No amount of penance can repay their debt, and there seems to be no redemption for violent people in Scorsese's cinematic world. Yet Scorsese's films critique violence, showing it to be empty and self-destructive. This they share with classical and Renaissance tragedies.

2 The Tragic View of Life

We often use the literary term “tragedy” very loosely to describe any sort of disastrous event, whether in real life or in fiction. Even when we are focusing on literature, many readers still tend to think of tragedies simply as stories with unhappy endings. But in fact tragedy is a specific genre of literature that originated in ancient Greek drama. If *Hamlet* or *Death of a Salesman* are tragedies, they are insofar as they resemble Greek tragedies like *Oedipus the King* in some relevant way.

Aristotle defined tragedy as a form of drama aimed at “accomplishing by means of pity and terror the catharsis of such emotions.”³ The reference to the emotion of pity implies that tragedies are stories of suffering. Yet the mere representation of suffering itself is not necessarily tragic. Modern horror and action films, for example, present suffering as pure spectacle and are designed to arouse the audience's sense of excitement and even desire.⁴ Tragedies, however, evoke an emotional response Aristotle called “pity and fear”.

3 Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Richard Janko (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 7.

4 Compare Classicist Edith Hall's argument that Roman gladiatorial games would not have been considered tragic, even though they sometimes involved a theatrical element. See Hall, *Greek Tragedy: Suffering under the Sun* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 5.

Unlike other representations of suffering, tragedy frames its characters' suffering in a way that asks audience members to contemplate its meaning and to reflect on their own reaction to the suffering depicted, and, indeed, to real-life suffering. In short, tragedies are stories *about* suffering.⁵ Viewing a tragedy, an audience feels pity for the suffering hero, but they also feel fear "born of a recognition of the uncontrollability of the forces in human life that have brought the suffering on its victims."⁶ The element of "uncontrollability" leads to "mortal bafflement at the workings of the universe."⁷ The baffling universe here need not be conceived as predestined. Greek tragedies are not invariably about fate, but they do suggest a fundamental irrationality in the world at the basis of life. In the tragic view of life justice is not guaranteed. Classical tragedies involve virtuous characters who end up in misery due to no fault of their own. This is what Martha Nussbaum called "the fragility of goodness" or "the vulnerability of good people to ethically significant reversals."⁸

This is, of course, one central reason Plato did not approve of tragic literature. Plato thought tragedians presented a morally false view of the life. In the *Apology* Socrates says "a good man cannot be harmed either in life or in death."⁹ Plato believed that bodily pain or imprisonment is morally irrelevant. The only true harm a person can suffer is harm to one's soul, which he believed is entirely under one's own control. Goodness is therefore invulnerable. Aristotle disagreed, which is why Aristotle thought tragedy is morally beneficial, leading to a "catharsis" or a clarification of our moral cognition.¹⁰ Thus tragedy reminds us about the various ways in which one's goodness is not entirely under one's own control.

3 Toward a Catholic View of Tragedy

Early Christianity followed Plato over Aristotle on this issue. The morality play is the quintessentially Christian dramatic form, not tragedy. In a morality play, misery is due to vice and happiness is due to virtue – a view which corresponds

5 Ibid., 6.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., 11.

8 Martha C. Nussbaum, "Tragedy and Self-sufficiency: Plato and Aristotle on Fear and Pity," in *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics*, ed. Amelie Oksenberg Rorty (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 263.

9 Plato, *Apology*, trans. G.M.A. Grube, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 36.

10 Nussbaum, 281.

to the Platonic tradition. Influential Christian Platonist Augustine of Hippo agreed with this tradition that true goodness is invulnerable to harm. For example while he argues in *City of God* that suffering is unavoidable in this life due to original sin,¹¹ this does not prevent us from achieving true happiness in this life. Ultimate happiness will be found in Heaven, but if we live in hope of Heaven, directing all our love toward God's final order, we can be said to be happy in this life.¹² Even if we suffer, virtue is able to make good use of that suffering, for example giving us greater love for the future peace we hope to experience in Heaven.¹³

We can see this theory illustrated in the story of the death of Augustine's friend Nebridius in *Confessions* Book IV. Augustine is overcome by grief, and he attributes this to his inordinate love of a finite good. He loved his mortal friend "as if he would never die."¹⁴ "Misery," Augustine concludes, "is the state of every soul overcome by friendship with mortal things and lacerated when they are lost."¹⁵ This implies, however, that if we loved something immutable, then we could never lose it and therefore could achieve lasting happiness. Augustine, of course, finds this immutable good in God. "Our heart is restless until it rests in you [God],"¹⁶ he says, and "wherever the human soul turns itself, other than to you [God], it is fixed in sorrows," because finite things lack the kind of permanence and stability that can only be found in God.¹⁷ If we love finite goods "in God," however, they "acquire stability by being established in him."¹⁸

A truly virtuous person would thus be invulnerable, because all human suffering is due to sin. Sin, on Augustine's view, is an "immoderate desire" for a lower good over a higher good.¹⁹ This definition has practical consequences. Lower goods are unstable apart from God and are therefore subject to loss; consequently they can be harmful when pursued immoderately.²⁰ But more fundamentally, disordered desire is itself a state of misery in that the disordered soul lacks the harmony which itself constitutes happiness. Thus sin is its own punishment: "the punishment for every disordered mind is its own

11 Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, trans. R.W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Book XIV, Chapter 25, pages 627–628.

12 Ibid., Book XIX, Chapter 20, pages 949–950.

13 Ibid., Book XIX, Chapter 10, page 932.

14 Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), Book IV, Chapter 6, page 59.

15 Ibid., 58.

16 Ibid., Book I, Chapter 1, page 3.

17 Ibid., Book IV, Chapter 10, page 61.

18 Ibid., Book IV, Chapter 23, page 63.

19 Ibid., Book II, Chapter 5, page 30.

20 Ibid., Book III, Chapter 8, page 47.

disorder.”²¹ In other words sin is self-destructive, and therefore virtuous action – what later theologians called “penance” – can overcome the self-destructive effects of sin and help us develop the sort of virtue that would make us invulnerable to suffering.

Despite this Platonic emphasis on individuals’ personal responsibility for their own misery, Augustine understood that sin resembles an addiction more than the sort of miscalculation Plato took it to be. Augustine took seriously the idea of inherited sin, which implied that individuals are born already with a propensity toward sin, a propensity not of their own making. In *City of God* Book XIII Augustine tells the story of creation in which God originally made the entire cosmos in complete harmony with itself based on God’s own good laws of nature. Humanity, in the form of Adam and Eve, was also created good. For Augustine badness is a matter of disorder, which can only occur when a will (with human or demonic) freely chooses to create disorder out of God’s good order.²² When Adam freely chose to turn against God’s will, he separated himself from harmonious relation to God. This separation is spiritual death.²³ Moreover, Adam’s offspring inherited this same disorder, since, Augustine argues, Adam’s offspring could not possess a moral order Adam himself did not have to give.²⁴ Thus all human beings, being descendent from Adam, inherit Adam’s sinful disorder, a state that Western theological tradition has come to call “original sin.” This disorder will inevitably lead to the complete separation of soul from body that constitutes physical death.

Thus on Augustine’s view, while death is a kind of “punishment” for our sin, it is also a “natural consequence” of being born in a disordered state.²⁵ In this disordered state, we are born “ignorant” of God’s will.²⁶ We develop sinful habits in infancy, long before we have the cognitive capacity to know right from wrong,²⁷ such that by the time we learn God’s will we have become so “enslaved” to our habits of sin that it becomes difficult even to choose to do right.²⁸ Our only hope is to submit our will to God and receive the grace to overcome these sinful habits.²⁹ If we remain in a state of misery, it is due only to our own free choice not to turn to God for help.

21 Ibid., Book 1, Chapter 12, page 15.

22 See Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), Book 1, Chapter 11, page 17.

23 *City of God*, Book XIII, Chapter 2, pages 541–542.

24 Ibid., Book XIII, Chapter 3, pages 543–544.

25 Ibid.

26 *On Free Choice of the Will* III.18

27 *Confessions* I.7

28 *Confessions* VII.5

29 *On Free Choice of the Will* III.19

While Augustine's doctrine of original sin might seem to suggest a tragic dimension to the human condition, he remains firmly in the Platonic tradition. Augustine's doctrines of free will, the self-destructiveness of sin, penance, and grace imply that suffering can always be redeemed, that goodness is ultimately invulnerable, and, consequently, that classical tragedy assumes a false world view. But Augustine's view of original sin also allows for a kind of Christian semi-tragic literature. When Shakespeare (following pioneering contemporaries like Thomas Kyd and Christopher Marlowe) attempted to revive classical tragedy for the Renaissance era, he had to make it work in a Christian cultural context. Shakespeare still has characters lament the irrationality of life (particularly in *Macbeth* and *King Lear*), but he links their suffering more closely to their choices and character defects – the so-called “tragic flaw” described by A.C. Bradley.³⁰ On Bradley's view Shakespearean tragedy always links a hero's fall with human sin, and always includes among the causes the hero's own choices. Bradley writes, “The calamities of tragedy do not simply happen, nor are they sent; they proceed mainly from actions, and those the actions of men,” adding that the hero “always contributes in some measure to the disaster in which he perishes” and that “the main source of these deeds is character.”³¹ The hero in a Shakespearean tragedy reflects “a fundamental tragic trait” (or tragic flaw) which is both the source of his heroic greatness and ultimately of his fall, following some error of judgment or unlucky circumstances.³² Thus, unlike their Greek predecessors, Shakespeare's tragedies are not fatalistic.³³ Shakespeare's world is a Christian world in which suffering is due to human sin, not the capriciousness of the gods (regardless of what Macbeth and Lear claim in the midst of their self-caused suffering). At the same time, Bradley insists that it is not quite right to claim that Shakespeare's tragic heroes “deserve” their suffering.³⁴ Instead the suffering is excessive in relation to the hero's sin. While in the end a moral order does reassert itself in destroying evil, nevertheless such defeat of evil is tragic in that it “involves the waste of good.”³⁵

This is a Christian view of tragedy, but it is not “pure” tragedy in the classical sense. Shakespearean tragedy may present suffering as a “painful mystery,”³⁶ but it is not ultimately unjust or irrational. There is always the hope of redemption; divine providence may make good come from evil. At the very least we

30 A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: MacMillan, 1912).

31 *Ibid.*, 11, 12, 13.

32 *Ibid.*, 20–21.

33 *Ibid.*, 29.

34 *Ibid.*, 32.

35 *Ibid.*, 37.

36 *Ibid.*, 39.

must be able to hope that God will compensate the suffering hero in an eternal rest. Yet, as George Steiner argues,

[W]here there is compensation, there is justice, not tragedy. The demand for justice is the pride and burden of the Judaic tradition. Jehovah is just, even in His fury. Often the balance of retribution or reward seems fearfully awry, or the proceedings of God appear unendurably slow. But over the sum of time, there can be no doubt that the ways of God to man are just. Not only are they just, they are rational. The Judaic spirit is vehement in its conviction that the order of the universe and of man's estate is accessible to reason. The ways of the Lord are neither wanton nor absurd.³⁷

To be a fully orthodox Christian tragedy, then, redemption must be possible. Characters can't simply be destroyed by fate or even bad luck. As Augustine argued, though we are born in sin, we can choose to turn to God, and God's grace can enable us to be happy even amidst our suffering.

4 The Gangster as Tragic Hero

The most Catholic of Scorsese's gangster films is *Mean Streets*, which dramatizes the ideas of original sin and penance. The film begins with a voice over a black screen: "You don't make up for your sins in church. You do it in the streets. You do it at home. The rest is bullshit, and you know it." Immediately the protagonist Charlie (Harvey Keitel) awakes as if from a dream. He is haunted by the need to make up for his sins, but he rejects typical acts of penance such as reciting the prayers "Our Father" or "Hail Mary," because he thinks "they're just words." As another character tells him, "It's all bullshit except the pain."

Charlie believes his primary act of penance is looking after his self-destructive friend Johnny Boy (Robert De Niro). Johnny Boy certainly gets Charlie into plenty of trouble through his disrespectful treatment of the various loan sharks and other mafia connections Charlie makes for Johnny Boy, including Charlie's uncle Giovanni, a mob boss. Giovanni warns Charlie against associating with Johnny Boy, saying it is honorable to help your friends but honorable people also stick with honorable people, and Johnny is not honorable. This is a classic tragic dilemma: Charlie must choose between his loyalty to Johnny Boy and his loyalty to Giovanni. Charlie, moreover, is not responsible for creating this dilemma. Johnny Boy's family has a longstanding friendship

37 George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961), 4.

with Charlie's family. Just as we are all born into a state of original sin, Charlie was born into a situation where he must be disloyal to one of his kin. In the very next scene after Giovanni's warning, Charlie holds his hand over the flame of a stove, feeling its pain. He says "fine," resolving within himself to continue helping Johnny Boy as an act of penance, knowing that suffering will follow.

Goodfellas emphasizes personal responsibility (sin is its own punishment). At the start of the film protagonist Henry Hill (Ray Liotta) reflects, "As far back as I can remember, I always wanted to be a gangster." When he begins to get involved in the mafia, he confesses, "It was there that I knew that I belonged. To me, it meant being somebody in a neighborhood full of nobodies." People treat him better when he joins the mafia, and Henry feels like he has "respect." But Henry gets caught up in drug addiction and spirals out of control until the mob boss Paulie (Paul Sorvino) cuts him out of the mafia, and Henry's friend Jimmy (Robert De Niro) decides to have Henry killed. Henry feels he has no other way to save himself than to testify against Paulie and go into the witness protection program. Henry is set up with a new life in the suburbs and becomes what he calls "an average nobody," precisely what he entered the mafia to avoid in the first place. The movie ends with him closing the front door to his new home which is overlaid with the sound of a prison cell closing. Henry has survived, but his new life is far from a happy ending.

At first glance *Goodfellas* seems closer to a morality tale than a tragedy. Henry is, after all, far from an innocent victim, but the film can be read as tragedy along the lines suggested by Robert Warshow's 1948 essay about classic Hollywood gangster movies "The Gangster as Tragic Hero." On Warshow's analysis gangster films are a critique of the fundamental optimism of the American dream: "the gangster speaks for us, expressing that part of the American psyche which rejects the qualities and the demands of modern life, which rejects 'Americanism' itself."³⁸ Gangster films always take place in the big city, which Warshow reads as a symbol of "the modern world."³⁹ The city is a place of upward mobility that attracts those driven by a desire for success, but the city is also a place of crowds where the individual disappears into the masses. Thus in the city "one must emerge from the crowd or else one is nothing."⁴⁰ Yet the very aggression that allows the gangster to assert himself as an individual is also what leads to his downfall: "The gangster's whole life is an effort to assert

38 Robert Warshow, "The Gangster as Tragic Hero" in *The Immediate Experience: Movies, Comics, Theatre and Other Aspects of Popular Culture*, Enlarged Ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 100.

39 *Ibid.*, 101.

40 *Ibid.*, 102.

himself as an individual, to draw himself out of the crowd, and he always dies *because* he is an individual; the final bullet thrusts him back, makes him, after all, a failure.”⁴¹ Warshow rejects the idea that gangster films are morality tales. Instead he takes the gangster genre to expose a tragic structure at the heart of the American dream:

[T]he gangster is doomed because he is under the obligation to succeed, not because the means he employs are unlawful. In the deeper layers of the modern consciousness, *all* means are unlawful, every attempt to succeed is an act of aggression, leaving one alone and guilty and defenseless among enemies: one is *punished* for success. This is our intolerable dilemma: that failure is a kind of death and success is evil and dangerous, is – ultimately – impossible.⁴²

It is easy to apply this reading to *Goodfellas*. At the end of the story Henry has a nice house in the suburbs. To all appearances he has achieved the American dream. But he has also become “an average nobody.” Insofar as the American dream is synonymous with the middle class, it is about the sort of conformity that might as well be a prison. The mafia lifestyle offers a way to become “somebody” instead of a “nobody,” but the price of success is to opt out of the American system. Henry and his friends look down on ordinary law-abiding citizens as “suckers.” Seeing how easy it was for the mafia to control the government post office in the neighborhood where he grew up, Henry wonders in retrospective narration, “How could I go back to school after that and pledge allegiance to the flag?” The mafia undermines American civic virtue. “To me,” Henry says, “being a gangster was better than being president of the United States.”

Yet *Goodfellas* does not completely follow Warshow’s framework. Henry’s downfall is not simply due to his success. This is a Catholic tragedy in which Henry is undermined by his own sin. According to *Goodfellas*, once you opt out of the traditional system of morality, your values become warped. To the gangsters, being a “good fella” (a good and virtuous person) just means being “one of us.” Likewise doing “the right thing” just means following the “rules” of the mafia, as when Henry says that after stealing half a million dollars from Air France “we did the right thing,” by which he means “we gave Paulie his tribute.” Even Henry’s wife Karen (Lorraine Bracco) says, “Being together all the time made everything seem all the more normal.” But once doing whatever

41 Ibid., 103.

42 Ibid.

you want becomes “normal” – once you step outside the system of morality to become an individual – it is difficult to sustain the new alternative code of gangster ethics. Henry ends up killing the wrong person – a “made” man from an important family who disrespected him – and eventually starts dealing drugs as well (contrary to mafia policy), which he is unable to hide from the boss. Thus Henry violates both traditional morality and gangster rules. His downfall is due to a tragic flaw of hubris, thinking he was above any sort of law. As viewers, we cannot help thinking that Henry both earns his fate and could have avoided it had he not chosen to join the mafia in the first place.

Casino is more pessimistic. The film's protagonist Ace (De Niro) tries to escape his entanglement in the mafia system in order to become a legitimate businessman, but he cannot get free of his past. Ace's situation mirrors the Catholic view that, apart from the miraculous intervention of grace, we are all trapped by the original sin into which we are born. Ace has a gift for sports gambling which is illegal in most places but flourishes in Las Vegas. He says anywhere else he would be considered a “low-life” or even a criminal, but in Vegas he was a respected businessman: “For guys like me, Las Vegas washes away your sins. It's like a morality car wash.” He compares Las Vegas to Lourdes, the Catholic pilgrimage site whose water is believed to have healing properties.

But Las Vegas has a darker side, too. According to Ace, “the only kind of guys who could get you that kind of money” to buy a casino, were the mafia. So the town rests on crimes buried – sometimes literally – in the desert beneath it. Ace tries to keep this side of the business hidden from his legitimate business partners who “don't want to know” where the money comes from and “don't ask” about his use of gangster methods like intimidation and bribery. But Ace's old friend Nicky (Joe Pesci) from his pre-Vegas days has other plans. Nicky sees Vegas as a new territory for being a gangster. Nicky says Ace got so busy running his casino that “he forgot what we were doing out here in the first place. ... We're supposed to be out here robbing.” But Ace tells Nicky “I don't want to be involved in anything you're talking about, okay? I just want to run a square joint, that's it.” Unfortunately Ace cannot stop Nicky, because Nicky is a “made” man in the mafia.

As Nicky engages in brazen gangster behavior around town and Ace gets involved with Ginger (Sharon Stone), an ex-prostitute with a drug problem, the FBI shuts down the casino and arrests the mafia bosses. As we watch the demolition of some of the old-fashioned casinos, Ace laments that “the big corporations took it over” and made Las Vegas look “like Disneyland.” He complains that it has gotten less personal and service has been replaced with being treated as a number. The movie ends with Ace moving to San Diego where he continues to work as a bookie. “I wound up right back where I started,” he says.

He is alive and working, but he is alone in his mansion, watching horse races on TV and making phone calls. He seems lonely, even imprisoned, as he stares directly into the camera.

Casino is a tragedy, a lament for the death of the American Dream. For Ace, the West was a "Paradise," a place people could move to start a new life and start over. In Las Vegas working people could get rich "selling people dreams for cash." But family ties to the past's old ways (Nicky's mafia) and old addictions (Ginger's drugs and pimp), make it impossible for Ace to succeed. Nicky and Ginger are greedy, incapable of being happy with what they have, always wanting more money and more power. Ace's paradise thus collapses, replaced by impersonal corporate capitalism, and Ace ends up imprisoned in the old life he had before he moved out west. Though Ace survives an attempted assassination, he is symbolically dead. This is a truly tragic story in the Shakespearean mode. Having made his initial choice to take money from the mafia, he is doomed. Past sins are inescapable.

As a critic of modernity, Scorsese is exploring the plight of immigrant communities. Immigrants from Italy, Ireland, and elsewhere attempt to bring their traditions into the new country with violent results. These communities create alternate moralities in conflict with mainstream society. Those who want to pursue legitimate work in these contexts (most notably Charlie in *Mean Streets* and Nicky in *Casino*) end up being destroyed by their mob connections. As a moralist, Scorsese's films are about the self-destructiveness of violence (always with masculinity and ethnic conflict in view). Yet despite the sense that it is theoretically possible for someone to escape the mafia, it seems significant that none of Scorsese's protagonists ever actually does escape. The DiCaprio films lean into this latent pessimism. *Gangs of New York* and *The Departed* emphasize the element of being haunted and destroyed by one's relationship to the past.

Gangs of New York is in part about the hereditary cycle of violence which the film suggests lies at the foundation of the American ideal. The film depicts a street war between recent Irish Catholic immigrants to New York City in the mid-1800s and the so-called "Natives" of English Protestant descent who were born in America. One character says the war between the English and the Irish "is 1000 years old or more. We never expected it to follow us here. It didn't. It was waiting for us when we landed." The film's protagonist Amsterdam (Leonardo DiCaprio) says "The past is the torch that lights our way. Where our fathers have shown us the path, we shall follow." He is fighting to avenge his father who was killed by the leader of the Natives, Bill the Butcher (Daniel Day-Lewis). For his part Bill is trying to honor his own father's death in the War of 1812. He does not respect immigrants because they have not given blood for America.

The Departed follows two young police officers who grew up in the same mob-run neighborhood in South Boston. Colin (Matt Damon) is an orphan

who was recruited into the mob at a young age and sent to infiltrate the police as a corrupt cop. Yet he has ambitions to be a politician in City Hall (he talks about leaving the police to go to law school in another city). His friend says "Forget it. Your father was a janitor, and his son's only a cop." His parentage militates against such ambition – not to mention the fact that his ties to the mob are pointing him in a different direction. Colin's character is a foil to Billy (Leonardo DiCaprio), the other young cop from the same neighborhood. Billy's father was the only non-mobster in his family. Unlike most of his relatives, Billy seemed to escape the temptation of the mob by becoming a cop, but in the police academy he is recruited to go undercover in the mob. One's family history is not so easy to escape as he thought. So Billy the cop pretends to be a gangster, while Colin the gangster pretends to be a cop. But deep down, Billy really is a violent guy whose cover as a gangster brings out the worst in him, and Colin really wants to escape his gangster background and live a normal life. Colin never consciously joined the mob in the first place. He was an orphan taken in by the mob boss. When finally killed he actually seems relieved; his ambitions had already been ruined. In the end both men's lives are destroyed by their entanglement in the mob. They both want to do the right thing – Billy more so than Colin who is reluctant to give up the benefits of his gangster lifestyle – but they cannot escape their social context.

Here Scorsese expresses a Greek view of tragedy. The De Niro-era gangster films are Shakespearean, because, while their heroes might inherit a role within an evil system, they are ultimately destroyed by their own sins. The DiCaprio-era heroes are destroyed despite doing the right thing. Yet in both eras, Scorsese seems to emphasize the predicament of original sin at the expense of the possibility of redemption. As with Charlie in *Mean Streets*, redemption is something a character must earn for himself through non-religious acts of penance. Therefore, while dramatizing the Catholic ideas of original sin, penance, and the self-destructiveness of sin, Scorsese's approach to tragedy lacks hope for his protagonists' redemption and thus ultimately falls short of Catholic orthodoxy.

5 Sacramental Cinema

One element of tragedy not yet fully discussed above is its ability to ennoble its subjects. Nussbaum argues that this was a unique feature of Sophoclean tragedy not necessarily included in the work of other classical playwrights: "On the whole Sophoclean tragedy is dedicated to the assertion of unbending virtue in the face of a hostile and uncomprehending world, and dedicated, too, to manifesting that human virtue has not in fact been altogether extinguished

by the obstacles that menace it.”⁴³ Nussbaum’s interpretation arises out of her interest in tragedy as a drama of *eudaimonia* (happiness or flourishing). She shows that the Greek tragedians agreed with Aristotle’s claim that virtue alone cannot guarantee happiness apart from external goods which depend in large part on factors outside our control. But even if we accept Nussbaum’s claim (as I have in this chapter) that tragedies are fundamentally philosophical explorations of human suffering, this does not entail that all tragedians ask precisely the same questions about human suffering, much less that they all give the same answer to those questions. We need not believe a character is positively honorable before we can feel tragic pity for him or her. All we need is a sense that the hero’s suffering is undeserved or excessive. The response of pity and fear caused by contemplating such undeserved suffering might be enough to ennoble a tragic hero. Steiner argues that this is a general feature of tragedy: “in the very excess of his suffering lies man’s claim to dignity. Powerless and broken, a blind beggar hounded out of the city, he assumes a new grandeur. Man is ennobled by the vengeful spite or injustice of the gods. It does not make him innocent, but it hallows him as if he had passed through flame.”⁴⁴ And Scorsese seems to be aiming at a similar conclusion through his tragic gangster films. Perhaps the best example is *Raging Bull*.

Raging Bull is not obviously a gangster film, but it does take place in the same world as Scorsese’s gangster films. As much as the film’s protagonist Jake LaMotta (Robert De Niro) wants to make it as a boxer on his own, he cannot escape entanglement with the mafia. The film ends with a quote from the Bible: “Whether or not he is a sinner I do not know. ... All I know is this: once I was blind but now see.”⁴⁵ For Scorsese the film *Raging Bull* allows us to see Jake LaMotta without judgment. The camera humanizes him, despite truthfully depicting his flaws. It is not that the film shows Jake to be a good person. On the contrary, the film emphasizes his animality. Not only is his boxing name “the Raging Bull,” but he wears a leopard print robe, and multiple characters accuse him of being “an animal.” Outside the boxing ring he bullies his brother and abuses his wives, ready to fly into a rage at any moment. Toward the end of the film, when he is hitting rock bottom, he ends up in jail, punching and banging his head against the brick wall yelling “I’m not an animal!” Yet for all that, Scorsese manages to reveal something hidden beneath Jake’s brutality – a spiritual reality that transfigures his suffering into penance.

Scorsese overlays Jake’s life with a Catholic frame in much the same way he did with Charlie in *Mean Streets*. He establishes Jake’s training regimen as

43 Nussbaum, 285.

44 Steiner, 9–10.

45 See John 9:25.

a kind of asceticism reminiscent of the Catholic practice of self-flagellation or “mortification of the flesh.” Jake abstains from sex before a fight in order to stay focused, even going as far as to pour ice water on his groin when his young wife Vickie tempts him. As they kiss, Scorsese composes the shot so that the couple is framed on each side by portraits of Jesus and Mary. Likewise Scorsese interprets Jake’s real-life strategy of “playing possum” as a kind of mortification. Jake waits until the final round to attempt a knock out, often suffering extreme punishment in prior rounds. This strategy sometimes backfires early in his career when he doesn’t get the KO before the final round ends. Toward the end of his career, when he fights Sugar Ray Robinson for the championship, he takes a beating without hitting back. Scorsese shoots the scene with liberal amounts of blood. At one point blood even splashes on the boxing match’s spectators, both implicating them (and us, by extension) in the fight and perhaps also recalling the Catholic rite of *asperges* in which the priest sprinkles the congregation with holy water symbolizing sacrificial blood.⁴⁶ In another shot, Jake is leaning on the ropes, his bloody arms stretched out in imitation of a crucifixion. He loses the match but boasts to Robinson, “you never got me down.” Like the crucifixion of Christ, his loss is a kind of victory. The sequence ends on a close-up of blood dripping off the ropes.

None of this Catholic imagery makes Jake the equivalent of Christ or even a Christ-figure *per se*. But it opens a new way of thinking about boxers and perhaps media stars in general: they suffer for us. As with tragic heroes, they suffer for our pleasure. Scorsese establishes this as a theme of *Raging Bull* from the opening scenes. The film starts with Jake, now retired from boxing, preparing for a standup comedy performance. The punchline of his speech is, “That’s entertainment.” Scorsese immediately cuts to Jake 20 years earlier in the boxing ring getting punched in the face: violence as entertainment. Scorsese then implicates the viewer in this bargain as a riot erupts and the violence spills over into the audience watching the boxing match. We can blame Jake LaMotta or Robert De Niro or Martin Scorsese for their dramatization of violence, but we keep watching, and our culture keeps reenacting the same violence in real life that these entertainers depict on screen. We are just as violent as we claim they are, and we are entertained by their acts of violence.

Yet violence is not a unique preoccupation of Scorsese’s. Violence has been part of dramatic entertainment all the way back to the beginning. The first true dramas were the Greek tragedies, and before that we had narrative poems like the *Iliad* and the *Gilgamesh* epic – stories of death, murder, and war. Hollywood works in this same tradition, and we have seen that Scorsese’s gangster films can be read as tragedies. Like those films *Raging Bull*, too, portrays

46 See Psalm 51:7, cf. Leviticus 14:51.

a man trapped in a violent system (both the mafia and the system of American masculinity more broadly), though it hints at a kind of redemption not clearly as visible in films like *Goodfellas* or *The Gangs of New York*. It is clear that *Mean Streets* and *Raging Bull* (not to mention Scorsese's more directly religious films *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *Silence*) use explicit Catholic imagery to frame the way we interpret their violence. They aim to open our eyes to the emptiness of violence. But, as quasi-Catholic tragedies, all of Scorsese's gangster films, even the less explicitly religious ones, are open to this redemptive reading. Insofar as Scorsese's gangster tragedies open our eyes to their protagonists' hereditary entanglement in a self-destructive system of violence reinforced by Hollywood's glamorization of the macho gangster lifestyle, these films humanize their heroes and generate tragic fear and pity instead of simple condemnation. Even if none of his heroes escapes their predicament, Scorsese's tragic cinema transfigures their misery into a heroic sacrifice which reveals to viewers the emptiness of violence and the restlessness of the human heart apart from God.

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Violence and Redemption in Scorsese's Films: A Girardian Reading

Cari Myers

Turning and turning in the widening gyre, the falcon cannot hear the falconer; Things fall apart; The center cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, the blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned; the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.

“The Second Coming,” W.B. Yeats



1 Girard's Theory

The mimetic model begins with human need – an inherent “lack” within an individual and the search to meet that need.¹ How humans respond to their unformed nature determines their path. We may turn to God and allow God to form and shape us. Or, we may turn to others and desire what they possess in an effort to seek our own completion. If we choose another human as the model for our own personal evolution, we seek someone who seems to possess what we lack. This lack is often evidenced through one of the seven deadly sins, and specifically in Scorsese films, through lust, pride, envy, greed, or wrath. Why would a human choose to follow another human in order to fill this void and not God? Is this not a clear choice? Charles Bellinger gives a persuasive answer:

He subconsciously construes the other person as a representation of that which he is trying to kill within himself To attack the Other, the Enemy, becomes a psychological need for the sinful person, as he seeks to avoid becoming *another to himself*, that is, a new self. The most basic root

¹ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 145.

of ill will toward others is ill will toward the self that one is in the process of becoming.²

The inner emptiness of each human thus inspires the mimetic process. Each of Scorsese's films under analysis here features protagonists cursed with some innate flaw, some basic human sin, which sets the story at the beginning of the Girardian mimetic cycle.

Mimesis is the often unconscious or instinctive awareness that someone else has something that I believe I need. This awareness emerges from comparison; I examine my existence and discern what I believe is missing. I then register this lack against another person's possession. I then take steps to obtain what she has or desires, and imitate her in some way in order to obtain it.³ Depending on the character and motivation of the person I choose to imitate, mimesis may be either positive or negative. If I choose to imitate Jesus, my mimetic desire may be very positive: "What Jesus advocates is mimetic desire. Imitate me, and imitate the father through me ... the only way to avoid violence is to imitate me, and imitate the Father."⁴ Alternatively, rivalry constitutes the negative potential of mimetic desire. According to Girard, mimetic desire is thus a "pharmakon – a medicine and a poison"⁵ and can either create illness or cure it. The healing or destructive potential of imitation rests entirely on the quality of the mimetic object.

Rivalry develops when more than one person desires the same thing. A mediator is the person with whom I am in mimetic relationship. My rival mediates reality to me. This makes us "interindividuals"; our identity is construed by the other or model, and we are a conglomerate of mimetic relationships.⁶ There are two types of rivalry occurring in the Girardian model: internal and external. External mediation exists "when the distance is sufficient to eliminate any contact between the two spheres of possibilities of which the mediator and the subject occupy the respective centers."⁷ Internal mediation, on the other hand, exists when "this same distance is sufficiently reduced to allow these two spheres to penetrate each other more or less profoundly."⁸ The closer the relationship between the people competing for the same object, the more potential exists for a violent outcome.

2 Charles Bellinger, *The Genealogy of Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 67.

3 René Girard, *The Girard Reader* (New York: Crossroad Herder, 1996), 39–42.

4 *Ibid.*, 63.

5 *Ibid.*

6 René Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel. Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 10.

7 Girard, *Violence*, 39.

8 *Ibid.*

Girardian motifs occur frequently in the films of Scorsese: "the value of Girard's schema to Scorsese's Italian American films is that their religious, social, and cultural values ... provide an especially rich and dramatic breeding ground for the phenomena Girard describes."⁹ For example, Scorsese portrays the cost of mimetic violence through the prominent motif of feuding brothers or twins.¹⁰ Scorsese depicts this fraternal and internal mediation in three films considered here: *Raging Bull*, *Casino*, and *The Departed*. Across such films "feuding fraternal 'doubles' symbolize the collapse of familial, social, and ritual order through undifferentiated violence."¹¹ Often, these fraternal groups are childhood friends if not actual relatives, and in more recent movies, such as *The Departed* and *Shutter Island*, Scorsese explores even more intimate conflicting doubles: dual identities. This rivalry for the same object leads to envy, conflict and for Scorsese, violence. Scorsese's *The Departed* (2006) offers the audience a study of Girardian dualities. Each major character has a counterpart, and the two figures are sides of the same coin. Costigan (DiCaprio) and Sullivan (Damon) represent the same man, traveling in opposite directions. Costigan works for police captain Queenan (Sheen) and infiltrates the mafia in order to bring down an Irish mobster, Costello (Nicholson). Sullivan, on the other hand, works for Costello and infiltrates the Special Investigations Unit in order to protect Costello's interest. Both Queenan and Costello serve as surrogate father figures for the two main characters.

Neither man knows the other, though Madolyn (Farmiga) knows them both. Around her, Costigan and Sullivan circle, looking for the other. Neither man realizes that Madolyn knows them both, and that secret is the catalyst for their downfall.

Because the relationship is more intimate and thus of greater value, the dissolution of the relationship results in greater violence. In such mimetic rivalries, the members must decide whether the object of their desire is more important than the relationship with the other. For example, in *Raging Bull*, Jake (De Niro) and Joey (Pesci) are brother figures who compete over a shared object of desire, Vickie (Moriarty). This constitutes the greatest act of violence; one breaks with the other and replaces the person with the desired object. When Jake accuses Joey of sleeping with Vickie, Joey has finally had enough. After years of reassuring Jake that Vickie is faithful to him, that he never slept with her, he finally confronts Jake on his lack of trust: "How do you ask me that? I'm your brother and you ask me that? I'm not gonna answer that. It's

9 Robert Casillo, *Gangster Priest: The Italian Cinema of Martin Scorsese* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 108.

10 Girard, *Reader*, 74, 146.

11 Girard, *Violence*, 254.

stupid. It's a sick question and you're a sick fuck and I'm not that sick that I'm gonna answer it ... I'm not staying in this nuthouse with you. You're a sick bastard, I feel sorry for you, I really do." When Joey leaves, Jake goes upstairs to confront Vickie and she snaps and tells him what he wants to hear: "Yeah I sucked his cock! I sucked all their cocks – what do you want me to tell you? His cock is bigger than yours!" After this outburst, Jake walks down to Joey's house and beats him in front of his family. Vickie tries to pull him off Joey and receives a blow that leaves a nasty bruise on her left jaw. As Jake has neglected other relationships, he has come to depend more on Joey. As Girard asserts, the closer the relationship between two people in competition for the same object, real or imagined, the greater the potential for a violent outcome. This explosive scene marks the end of the brothers' relationship for many years and the final evolution of the rivalry between enemy brothers. Yet, there is also a profound spiritual aspect to mimetic desire: "the distance between mediator and subject is primarily spiritual."¹² Expanding the relational dimension to the spiritual plane creates an even greater arena for rivalry – and introduces the concept of rivalry with one's self.

Similar to the dynamic in *Raging Bull* between Vickie and Joey, *Casino* revives the warring brother motif in De Niro's Ace and Pesci's Nicky. Ace's struggling and drug-addicted wife, Ginger (Stone), seeks comfort and counsel from Nicky. At first, Nicky is helpful and serves as a release valve from the tension in Ace and Ginger's marriage. Nicky tries to help Ginger out of her addiction: "Take it easy with this shit, will you? I mean, this can only make matters worse. You're a beautiful girl. You don't want to ruin your looks. I've seen a lot of girls get shot to hell from this stuff." Ace tells Nicky to stay out of his personal life, and eventually, perhaps inevitably, Nicky and Ginger begin an affair, which becomes Las Vegas's worst kept secret. Even Ace is in on the secret this time and confronts Ginger on where she had been during the day: "I just hope it's not someone who I think it might be. I just hope it's not them." Unfortunately, it is as he suspects and both men now desire the same woman. Their mimetic rivalry accelerates, enflamed by Nicky's recklessness and greed. When rivalries begin to escalate, the violence expands into larger society and can take two forms: "the violence 'all against all'" or "the violence 'all against one.'" The former leads to social disintegration, the latter brings back social order."¹³ Scorsese's films provide ample evidence of both outcomes. For example, *Casino* and *The Departed* portray "all against all" violence, and *Shutter Island*, *Cape Fear* and *Raging Bull* portray "all against one" violence.

¹² Girard, *Violence*, 254.

¹³ Bogumil Straczek, "René Girard's Concept of Mimetic Desire, Scapegoat Mechanism and Biblical Demystification," *Seminare. Poszukiwania naukowe*. 2014 (35), 51.

In order to stem the cycle of violence, rivals must find a victim to relieve the pressure of the conflict: a scapegoat. Girard describes the function of the scapegoat within the mimetic process as follows: "The desire to commit an act of violence on those near us cannot be suppressed without a conflict; we must divert that impulse, therefore, toward the sacrificial victim, the creature we can strike down without fear of reprisal, since he lacks a champion."¹⁴ The scapegoat needs to be vulnerable in some way, or otherwise be marked as "Other." Only then can the community justify its condemnation of the "guilty" scapegoat. The scapegoat mechanism functions according to the Caiaphas principle in John 11:50: "You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish."¹⁵ As long as the community can convince itself that the scapegoat carries the sins of the community, then the community can remain willfully ignorant of its violence. The sacrificial scapegoat thus preserves communal harmony and cohesion.¹⁶ Moreover, the scapegoat relieves social tension through the declaration of a common, and alien, enemy.

Consequently, the sacrifice of the scapegoat brings peace, albeit temporarily. In *Casino*, Nicky represents everything that had gone wrong with the mafia's Las Vegas operation, and his death functions as a type of scapegoat mechanism, thus releasing the escalating violent tension. However, the mafia takes no chances and attempts to destroy any evidence of their activity in Las Vegas. Ginger is given a lethal overdose, and Ace only survives a car bomb because he had metal plates installed under the driver's seat of his car. Why is Ace left alive? Is it because of his virtue? Because of his skill as a casino boss or as a handicapper? Perhaps as far as the mafia is concerned, Ace is absolved from his sins by the deaths of Ginger and particularly Nicky. Nicky is no innocent victim, yet his horrific death pays the price for Ace's involvement, however meager, and Ace is rewarded with his life. Nicky is Ace's scapegoat, and Nicky carries the responsibility for and the aftermath of the failed casino on his shoulders alone.

Scorsese offers far better nesting scapegoat metaphors in *Shutter Island*. The mental hospital on an island is filled with society's scapegoats, and within that hospital is Complex C for the most violent offenders, and within those violent offenders is DiCaprio's Teddy. At the end of the film when he is facing a lobotomy, Teddy asks, "Which would be worse – to live as a monster? Or to die as a good man?" Scorsese allows the audience to interpret whether Teddy has lost

14 Girard, *Reader*, 83.

15 Straczek, 51.

16 Girard, *Reader*, 78.

his mind and is a lost cause, or whether Teddy is willingly submitting himself as a sacrifice, thus saving others from himself.

The mimetic cycle is accelerated by the presence of the *skandalon*, or stumbling block. Elaborating on the biblical pattern of mimetic desire and scapegoating, Girard presents Satan as both scapegoat mechanism¹⁷ and preeminent *skandalon*.¹⁸ Satan is,

the living obstacle that trips men up, the mimetic model insofar as it becomes a rival that lies across our path ... the *skandalon* designates a very common inability to walk away from mimetic rivalry which turns it into an addiction. The *skandalon* is anything that attracts us in proportion to the suffering or irritation that it causes us.¹⁹

In the Scorsesian catalogue, the *skandalon* is often a woman, often a blonde woman, who seems to bring out and breed the worst in the men engaged in the mimetic cycle.²⁰ The Gospels reveal the pervasive power and the ultimate fallacy of mimetic violence. In Jesus the cycle is both revealed and overcome. Jesus was not a sacrifice killed on the cross because a blood-thirsty God demanded death to appease divine wrath. Instead, "Jesus has to die because continuing to live would mean a compromise with violence."²¹ Mark Heim takes up this hopeful idea and further states,

Blood is not acceptable to God as a means of uniting human community or a price for God's favor. Christ sheds his own blood to end that way of trying to mend our divisions. Jesus's death isn't necessary because God has to have innocent blood to solve the guilt equation. Redemptive violence is our [humanity's] equation. Jesus didn't volunteer to get into God's justice machine. God volunteered to get into ours. God used our own sin to save us.²²

17 Girard, *Reader*, 161.

18 *Ibid.*, 198.

19 *Ibid.*, 161.

20 There are multiple Scorsese films featuring blond-haired female *skandalons* that could be included in this study. Scorsese's pattern of two close leading men who enter onto a conflict is often mediated or exacerbated by a woman both men desire. Consider, for example, Cathy Moriarty as Vickie in *Raging Bull*, Sharon Stone as Ginger in *Casino*, and Vera Farmiga as Madolyn in *The Departed*. This is one Scorsesian marker that is most compatible with Girard's mimetic cycle.

21 Girard, *Reader*, 187.

22 Mark Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans Publishing, 2006), xi.

Girard rejects the common belief that the wrathful violence of God was satisfied by the victimization of humanity. Rather he inverts the equation: the wrathful violence of humanity was satisfied by the voluntary victimization of God. Only the Son of God can save us from ourselves.

For Girard, the mimetic ritual serves to temporarily reconcile and reorder the community, to “‘trick’ violence into spending itself on victims whose death will provoke no reprisals.”²³ Eventually, however, the community will collapse back into mimetic rivalry and require another scapegoat. In Scorsese’s films, these “victims” often take the form of gangsters or drug addicts or corrupt cops. Their deaths are defensible because of their moral lack, revealed through the presence of the seven deadly sins.

Scorsese asks difficult questions about the nature of violence and violence permeates many of Scorsese’s films:

As Lucifer challenged God, his model, for his possessions, so in Scorsese’s films those who pretend to god-like autonomy are bound to attract not only imitators but violent rivals. Just as the rivalry between God and Satan caused the angelic host to divide themselves into factions, so in Scorsese’s cinematic world such rivalries draw other people within their violent orbit With the spread of random undifferentiated violence, more and more people are endangered, formerly accepted limits and boundaries collapse, and a small scale example of sacrificial crisis, complete with doubles of violence, comes into being. This situation typifies the climactic moments of several of Scorsese’s films.²⁴

Scorsese’s cinematic violence often radiates throughout a film until the climax, in which the violence resolves in a culminating violent act. For Scorsese, this final act artificially resolves the cycle of violence, rolling the credits over the real-life consequence of an even greater violence in response. In this violent, climactic moment of Scorsese films, violence solves violence. Thus all violence is not condemned. There exists good violence and bad violence, and the good drives out the bad.²⁵ The scapegoat in the film temporarily resolves the conflict, but once the cycle has begun, Scorsese suggests that “expulsive violence of whatever type cannot pacify society in the long run, so that the violent cycles must begin again.”²⁶ Scorsese seemingly depicts a blood-thirsty God who

23 Girard, *Violence*, 37–38.

24 Casillo, 114.

25 Heim, 115–116.

26 Girard, *Violence*, 122.

destroys bad violence with good violence on the Cross and thus promotes redemptive violence as the answer:

Violence can be redeemed from senselessness to purpose, and can have a redemptive effect on others, both the perpetrators and recipient. It does, and must, always function like a parable, to shock and subvert our preconceptions, not for mere effect, but to change our perceptions and reactions, in particular those which many religious traditions often offer us and leave is simply comfortable.²⁷

Consequently, many Scorsese films include a Christ-like scapegoat who attempts to disrupt the cycle of violence. For Scorsese, all are trapped in the cycle of violence, especially Jesus. Yet Scorsese uses his films to extend grace to his audience. His warring brothers and cycles of violence serve as cautionary tales to those of us on the cusp of our own mimetic rivalries.

2 Beyond Violence – So what of redemption?

If the theology of Scorsese as seen in his film catalogue states that human redemption must travel the path of sacrifice and suffering due to the innate character of humans, and that violence is the means by which humans work out their salvific end, then we are faced with two Girardian possibilities to explain Scorsesian redemption.

Death is the inevitable end for all, but the choices made in life influence its timing and means of arrival. For Scorsese, violence is Girardian *pharmakon* – poison for his performers, but medicine for us. A simple conclusion, option number one, arises: The actors are sacrificed to teach the audience a lesson. Behold the inevitable result of violence, greed, and lust! As a scapegoat, the victim must not be understood as innocent. In fact, “in order to be genuine, in order to exist as a social reality, as a stabilized viewpoint on some act of collective violence, scapegoating must remain unconscious.”²⁸ Noting Scorsese’s continual focus on the fundamental sinfulness of his characters, does he unconsciously offer up societal scapegoats that society unconsciously accepts?

²⁷ John David Graham, “Redeeming Violence in the Films of Martin Scorsese,” in *Explorations in Theology and Film*, ed. Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz (Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 1998), 93.

²⁸ René Girard, “Generative Scapegoating,” in *Violent Origins: Walter Burkett, René Girard and Jonathan Z. Smith on Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation*, ed. R.G. Hamerton-Kelly (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1987), 78.

The actors are not redeemed by the violence of the film, so that the audience may be. Indeed, Scorsese, the ersatz priest, cannot resist a confessional and cautionary tale. As the god-like creator, he offers his catalogue up as a societal scapegoat, a blood thirsty orgy of violence, sex, greed, rage and jealousy delving into the worst humanity has to offer, culminating in explosive acts of violence in order to warn us, to save us from ourselves: "There, but for the grace of God, go I."

Scorsese wants us to relate to these flawed characters, to grow to care about them. This affection makes the lesson much more poignant and memorable. From LaMotta we learn that the path of rage and jealousy leads to isolation and self-loathing. In Jake's final fight he loses his title to his nemesis, Sugar Ray Robinson. At this point, Jake only has Vickie left and is declining in both health and athleticism. The fight with Robinson is a blood bath. Scorsese says that, "Jake used everybody to punish himself ... he takes the punishment for what he feels he's done wrong."²⁹ Scorsese researched *Raging Bull* by attending two matches at Madison Square Garden, where he was struck by two images which feature prominently in Jake's losing battle with Robinson: the blood-soaked sponge and the pendulous drops of blood on the ropes.³⁰ During the fight, Jake invites punishment by lowering his arms and taunting Robinson. He lowers his hands and drapes his arms over the ropes, completely open to the suffering Robinson inflicts on him. Does he invite Robinson's victory over him to pay penance and make amends? For himself or for the perceived unfaithfulness and betrayal of his wife and brother? After the fight is over, Jake stumbles over to Robinson in the ring, eyes swollen shut, speech slurred by swollen lips and mouth guard, and tell him, "You didn't get me down, Ray. You didn't get me down." In Jake's mind, he has taken the worst life has to throw at him and he stayed on his feet. His greatest competitor did his best, and Jake is still standing. Perhaps that is his redemption – Jake has survived the violence of his life, of Sugar Ray's fists, and has endured it. The debate is whether or not he has overcome it. Perhaps Jake's redemption does not come from being the most violent, from hitting the hardest or the fastest or the most, but in the fact that he took the worst from the champion and he is still standing. Perhaps he is stronger than the violence, and he has finally realized he does not need to meet violence with violence to survive.

But the film does not stop there. The last scene of *Raging Bull* shows us Jake in his dressing room, shadow boxing. He is isolated and a parody of his former

29 Martin Scorsese, *Scorsese on Scorsese*, ed. Ian Christie and David Thompson (New York: Faber and Faber, 2003), 80.

30 Ibid.

self, left to convincing himself in the mirror with Marlon Brando's speech from *On the Waterfront* that "He could have been a contender." Jake no longer has opponents to fight – only himself. Jake's cycle of violence has tightened so much that it has squeezed out everyone except himself. As Jake steps away from the mirror, we hear him chanting over and over, "I'm the boss ... I'm the boss ... I'm the boss" The audience can only wonder at the extent of his kingdom. Redemption eludes Jake LaMotta, but the competitive violence remains. Redemption, however, is made available to the audience. De Niro and Scorsese deliver a cautionary tale of the bondage of jealousy and rage, and offer an unflinching look at the cycle of violence allowed to run to its inevitable conclusion. The final title card is from John 9:24–26, when the Pharisees question the previously blind man who Jesus healed: "Speak the truth before God. We know this fellow is a sinner." The man responds, "Whether or not he is a sinner, I do not know. All I know is this: Once I was blind and now I see." Scorsese does not judge LaMotta, but reveals LaMotta's inevitable unhappiness and loneliness. The specific message of this passage pleads with the audience to open their eyes, to see the destructive course of LaMotta's life, to make different choices, much like Joey did when he left Jake to spin within the mimetic cycle and chose to invest in his family.

From Ace and Nicky, we learn that greed and lust lead to lonely, unfulfilling old age or worse, a hole in a corn field. The Girardian mimetic relationship is no mystery here. Nicky follows Ace to Las Vegas because Ace is both competent and can supply Nicky with a nice living. Ace also has no interest in active Mafia participation, so the opportunity to create a Las Vegas branch of the Chicago mob lays open to Nicky. All goes according to plan until Nicky's greed, temper, and desire for power erode Ace's finely-tuned system. Eventually, every casino in Las Vegas bans Nicky and their partnership continues clandestinely. Ace foresaw this: "It wasn't long before what I was afraid was going to happen, happened. Nicky managed to get himself banned from every casino in Las Vegas. From then on I could not be seen talking to him anywhere in Vegas or anywhere near it." Nicky then begins an independent operation as a thief.

Ace's flaw is that he desires a relationship of complete trust: "When you love someone, you've gotta trust them. There's no other way. You've got to give them the key to everything that's yours. Otherwise, what's the point? And for a while, I believed, that's the kind of love I had." He believes he can do without true love, but he must be able to trust. Several times during *Casino*, Ace asks Ginger if he can trust her. Initially she hesitates, but her duplicitous answers become easier as she descends deeper into her addiction.

The bosses in Chicago recognize that Nicky is beyond their control and order his murder. Nicky and his brother are badly beaten and then buried alive.

Mob violence solves Nicky's violence. As Ace explains: "They had enough of Nicky. They had enough. I mean, how much more were they gonna take? So, they made an example of him and his brother: they buried them while they were still breathing." Ace chooses to leave the violent life of the casino and goes on to flourish as a sports handicapper in San Diego where he is left in peace.

From Billy and Colin, we learn that betrayal and pride lead to the loss of every intimate relationship we value, especially the relationship with ourselves. *The Departed* presents an escalation of the cycle of violence to the point that, in Scorsese's own words, "Good and bad become very blurred ... it's a world where morality doesn't exist, good doesn't exist, so you can't even sin any more as there's nothing to sin against. There's no redemption of any kind."³¹

The film's tension escalates as both sides begin to suspect they are compromised by a mole, and both sides try to find the mole before theirs is discovered.

The redemption violence, often satisfied by the death of a scapegoat, in the case of *The Departed* should culminate in the defeat of the mob boss, Frank Costello. But the corruption runs so deep, the body count must escalate until there remains only one primary character standing. In a scene close to the end of the film, Scorsese tightens the cycle of mimetic violence so that bodies begin to fall in almost comedically rapid succession. This all happens in such shocking rapid succession the audience is left stunned and confused.

The Departed plays with the idea of dual identities, examining the small choices that accumulate into a life direction, what causes a man to choose a life a crime, to betray his community, and what motivates a man to do the right thing. Scorsese denies us the answer provided by a scapegoat and instead allows the mimetic cycle of violence to run all the way to completion. The inevitable end is that no one survives, except for Dignam, who has been absent for much of the action.

If Scorsese's characters are condemned to spin in his ever-widening gyres of violence and revenge, they are only condemned so that we may be saved. In Girardian terms, therefore, Scorsese's characters serve as redemptive scapegoats to satisfy the bloodlust and innate wrath of his audience. He sacrifices his characters to their vices and the societal scapegoat mechanism on our behalf. For this reason, Scorsese celebrates violence, wallows in it, and makes the audience drink every bitter drop of cinema through colorful character

31 Ed Pilkington, "A History of Violence," *The Guardian*, October 6, 2006, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2006/oct/06/awardsandprizes.martinscorsese> (accessed December 28, 2017).

relationships, sparkling dialogue and feats of cinematography, so we may return to our lives better for having survived the sermon.

But is that all that is occurring? Is Scorsese simply feeding into the negative potential of mimetic rivalry? On the surface, what seems to be at play in Scorsese films is the understanding of redemption through substitutionary atonement, or, the sacrifice of one so that another may live, and specially in Christian circles, a secret pact between God and God's Son that requires Jesus's murder on the Cross in order to satisfy the wrath of God. What Girard plays with in contradiction to substitutionary atonement is the agency of the scapegoat and his or her ability to choose self-sacrifice. According to this understanding, Jesus did not die as an innocent victim, but rather as someone who rebelled against the social order in which he lived.³² In Girard's view, the Bible undermines the power of the scapegoat mechanism. God is nonviolent and does not demand sacrifices from humanity.³³ The God of Christian Scripture stands on the side of the victim against the prescribed social order. Rather than the persecutor's view the gospels are told from the point of view of the victim: "Because Jesus, the victim, is innocent, the guilt of the persecutors is revealed ... The Gospels are revelatory texts, uncovering self-deception."³⁴ The scapegoat mechanism is so entrenched in humanity that humans are unable to understand "nonrivalrous love" or innocent suffering, and this distortion is the work of Satan.³⁵ According to Girard, the only way for the inevitability of human violence to be confronted was through the direct intervention of the Spirit in Jesus. Jesus is the true model for Scorsesian redemption because Jesus stopped the mimetic cycle of violence and chose another path. Schwager states that because Jesus refuses to engage in mimetic desire, he interrupts the cycle of violence, and does not allow it to continue to escalate:

Here is where the ethical demands of Jesus begin. They show the only possible way to a true victory over enmities. Where evil is repaid with evil, and where one answers violence with violence, one remains under the spell of mimesis. In this case it is completely secondary whether the first blow was justified or not, for it always leads to a counter-blow and sets in motion the spiral of aggression ... As Girard analyses it, every blow cries

32 Johan S. Vos, "The Destructive Power of Atonement Theology," *Neotestamentica*. 2006 (40.2), 397.

33 Girard, *Scapegoating*, 92–95.

34 Straczek, 52.

35 Girard, *Reader*, 279.

out to be imitated. Thus one has already secretly give in to violence when one gets involved in a frontal battle with it.³⁶

The self-sacrificial act begins with Jesus's refusal to yield to mimetic pressure, and therefore "Jesus alone acts as God would like all humans to act."³⁷ Girard is creating an important distinction, and second salvific model, for the study of Scorsese and redemption: the initiative for self-sacrifice comes from God, not from the human scapegoat mechanism. The wrath requiring appeasement is not that of God; it is that of humanity. In the death of Christ, God used the scapegoat mechanism to overthrow it.³⁸ The cycle of violence is not interrupted by the popular choice of an innocent victim whose guilt must be believed in order to purify the community. The cycle of violence is interrupted by a willing participant who resists mimetic pressure. In this way, Jesus unmaskes and denounces the system by revealing its flawed inner workings.

In Girardian terms, it is important to restate that while "desire" means to want something or someone else, "mimetic desire" means to "desire something or someone that the model desires."³⁹ The cycle of violence may be interrupted not only by the death of a scapegoat, but by someone within the system who choose to sacrifice his or her desires. In this way, the interrupter chooses love, and chooses to sacrifice self over the other: "Only where mimesis is neutralized is the spread of evil checked. That is why it is absolutely necessary not to resist evil with evil."⁴⁰ In Girard's theology, God saw that no one else would sacrifice themselves rather than the other in the human cycle of violence, so God chose to do it God's self. In this way, in preferring to die rather than kill as dictated by the mimetic cycle, Jesus fulfilled God's requirement for humanity.⁴¹ Humans are innately violent, and for both Girard and Scorsese, there are two ways to channel the human violent tendency: to vent it onto another, or to endure it. In Scorsese films, there have historically been two types of characters: those who commit the violence and those who suffer from it. Perhaps Girard introduces a third option to the Scorsese index: the character who chooses to not act on his or her own violent tendencies and resists the mimetic pressure. For Girard, this is a great act of self-sacrifice and purification, and suggests a new iteration of Christ-figure.

36 Raymund Schwager, S.J., *Must There be Scapegoats? Violence and Redemption in the Bible* (Gracewing: New York, 2000), 173.

37 Girard, *Reader*, 280.

38 Vos, 383.

39 Girard, *Reader*, 280.

40 Schwager, 174.

41 Michael Kirwan, *Girard and Theology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 78–79.

Scorsese likewise invites non-traditional Christ-figures to interrupt the Girardian mimetic cycle by “sacrificing the sacrifice.”⁴² The Scorsesian Christ-figure is not always the one who dies for someone else, but the one who internalizes the violence, resists mimetic pressure and walks away from the rivalry. This Girardian mimetic resister is Teddy in *Shutter Island*, Ace in *Casino*, Amsterdam in *Gangs of New York*, and perhaps Henry in *Goodfellas*. Redemption does not come from the sacrifice of life, redemption comes from the sacrifice of violence. In the Scorsesian catalogue, violence is everywhere all the time. It is in the air the characters breathe; it is part of their ethos. Everyone is capable of violent behavior, sometimes of great violence, if they are scared enough, or angry or sad enough, or if they feel cornered. Young women are capable of lighting a man on fire if they feel threatened, and children are capable of brandishing knives at the enemy if they witness the death of their father. In particular, the men in Scorsese’s films are men capable of great violence, who either get crushed beneath the wheels of the mimetic cycle or choose something over violence. Perhaps for Scorsese, redemption means choosing the path other than violence – or the path of redemption only appears *through* violence. Either option, as revealed in the question Teddy asks Chuck at the end of *Shutter Island*, requires a sacrifice: “Which would be worse: To live as a monster, or to die as a good man?” This choice does not mean that these men are no longer violent, it means that they are performing the requirement of God for humanity. They are enduring their innate violence rather than unleashing it onto another and channeling the violence into another choice. They interrupt the mimetic cycle by refusing to escalate the spinning gyre another rotation.

The men who survive Scorsese’s films, who are redeemed, always make a choice beyond violence in the end. They do not necessarily win a fight or defeat an enemy, they just choose something else – a lobotomy, San Francisco, sports handicapping, hosting seminars on sales techniques, or simply entering witness protection. The violence does not disappear; the violence is transformed. Resisting the desires of violence is a form of conversion, a rebirth. Violence is always about something else – greed, lust, power, sex. If it is true that vices lead to violence, then virtue leads to redemption. The path to redemption means choosing the virtuous over a vice—family, peace, love, friends, security, compassion. In this choice, they get to live, and sometimes they get to thrive. In *Raging Bull*, Scorsese leaves the question of Jake’s redemption unanswered, but Joey gets to walk away from Jake’s escalation and choose a quieter life for himself. Joey decides he is no longer able to maintain a close relationship with Jake and chooses to invest in his family. In *Casino*, Ace narrowly escapes the

42 Ibid., 77.

whirlwind of death and destruction in Las Vegas and chooses instead to retire from the greedy world of the casino boss, returning instead to where he began: as a sports handicapper. In *Gangs of New York*, Amsterdam's final killing of Bill might be viewed as an act of mercy, and the grave he creates for Bill next to his own father is an intentional act of compassion, and Amsterdam gets to create a new life with Jenny. Arguably, Henry Hill earned redemption by choosing his own safety and security, and a hopeful future for his family, by turning on the mafia in *Goodfellas*. The choices of these men earn them a chance at a different life, outside of the mimetic cycle. In *Shutter Island*, the Warden (Levine) offers some very Girardian reflections on the nature of violence and moral order. When a storm sweeps through over the island, The Warden asks Teddy if he enjoyed God's gift of violence. Teddy responds that he thought God only gives us moral order, to which the Warden responds, "There's no moral order as pure as this storm. There's no moral order at all. There's just this: can my violence conquer yours?" In the end, Teddy proves the Warden wrong and conquers violence by refusing to reciprocate. Teddy chooses the ultimate virtue and elects to die rather than to kill. This is his redemption. *The Departed* leaves us with a lesson on what happens when no one sacrifices the mimetic pressure to desire what someone else desires and chooses to redirect their internal violence; the mimetic cycle keeps spinning and the violence accelerates.

Scorsese teaches us that violence is a terrible master, but properly channeled, it may be an excellent servant. His films show us that violence is within us all in some form, but redemption is still possible. We behave as Jesus modeled, as God requires, when we resist violent mimesis by absorbing our innate violence and turning the instinct into something else. As Schwager concludes, "Everything depends on breaking through reciprocity of evil and violence."⁴³ In the Girardian sense, only those who are able to endure the violence, to internalize and master it, to sacrifice the venting of violence on another, to actively make another choice through violence, are able to achieve redemption.

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Scorsese as a Critic of Modernity: The Woman Question

M. Gail Hamner

1 Introduction

It is my hope that this essay, while focusing on the early films of Martin Scorsese, will also shed light on why the modern state has had so much trouble acknowledging and granting human rights and citizen rights to its internal others. If Scorsese is to be positioned as a critic of modernity, he should be seen effectively to critique the core contradictions of modernity, which I see as the fundamental inability of powerful White men to grant equitable personhood and citizenship to women and non-Whites.¹ Since Scorsese's early films center more heavily on male/female relations than on White/non-White relations I have organized my essay around how the Woman Question plays out in his films.

The Woman Question is a form of social critique that derives from Christian Europe's nineteenth-century wrestling with its internal Jews. When Karl Marx wrote "The Jewish Question" in 1844, his readers readily understood that he was addressing a well-known socio-political contradiction that had nagged Europe for decades.² Christian polities had long restricted where Jews could live, build synagogues, and attend schools, as well as what professions they could pursue and practice, on grounds that non-Christians did not hold the values and beliefs of their powerful, political leaders. The logic of marginalizing

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- 1 For two important sources for my line of argumentation, please see Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Barrows Lectures) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007) and Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2004). For a similar argument from an influential but non-European perspective, see Timothy Mitchell, *Questions of Modernity* (Contradictions of Modernity) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000). Each of these books differently demonstrates how the successes of European and North American modernity rely materially, politically, economically, and sexually on discounting and not-seeing women and non-Whites.
 - 2 Karl Marx, "The Jewish Question," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker, 2nd edition (New York: Norton, 1978), 26–46.

and constraining Jewish participation in society and politics began to unravel, however, when socio-religious restrictions were lifted somewhat by the French Revolution and, later, by Napoleon. When adherence to Christian propriety was no longer *always* required to demonstrate socio-political propriety, the modern and yet still dispositionally Christian state faced the difficult question of how to incorporate Jewish difference. The “Jewish question” became shorthand for the range of problems entailed in countering social stereotypes and making Christian rights and privileges fully available to non-Christians.

The so-called “Woman Question” and “Race Question” also emerged in the mid- to late-nineteenth century United States in paralleled resonance with the “Jewish Question.”³ Women and Blacks spotlight different socio-political contradictions within the modern state, but which also rested on social stereotypes. Women, for instance, were marked as sentimental instead of rational, charged with childcare instead of statecraft, and were thought to require only such education as to charm men and rear children. How could such limited persons feasibly take on a greater public presence and responsibility? Why should their separate voices matter, when they could be well represented by their husbands, fathers, or brothers? For their part, dominant culture posited slaves and former slaves as too animalistic, too lazy, and too ignorant to merit freedom, much less prove to possess the moral capacity required of citizens. Though a few, true anti-racists did resist these hegemonic stereotypes, most racists and even well-intentioned advocates for abolition assumed that non-whites required the moral guidance and life support provided by whites. Evinced by these “Questions,” modernity stages a battle for and against the avowed ludicrousness of thinking women and non-whites could ever live as independent, rational, and productive citizens.

In light of this ongoing battle of modernity, what is the role and function of women in Scorsese’s films? The dataset is unfortunately not as large or complex as we might wish. In his essay on *Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore* (1974), Aaron Baker notes that the film is unique among Scorsese’s forty-odd feature films in having a female protagonist.⁴ *Alice* does provide a strong vehicle for Ellen Burstyn and her mid-1970s feminism, but the latter is a wobbly (new-born) White feminism.⁵ Critical literature on *Alice* foregrounds Burstyn’s

3 See, e.g., Wendy Brown, “Tolerance and/or Equality? The ‘Jewish Question’ and the ‘Woman Question’” in *differences* (2004) 15 (2): 1–31.

4 Aaron Baker, “*Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore* and *Italianamerican*: Gender, Ethnicity, and Imagination,” in *A Companion to Martin Scorsese*, ed. Aaron Baker (New York: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 117.

5 I capitalize “White” and “Black” as a way of indicating that racial categories are not natural but historical and political. See, e.g., Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the world and me* (New York:

pleasure and satisfaction at finding Scorsese a director willing to learn about “what women want,” but decades later, I suggest the film better evidences the difficulty of visually and practically challenging the affective and ideological constructs of one’s own time. Indeed when put in line with Scorsese’s other, male-dominated films, *Alice* seems most productive in presenting something like the logical ground for the necessity of feminist critique. It is interesting to note that Baker’s essay does cite a sharp feminist critique of the film. Written by Karyn Kay and Gerald Peary for *Jump Cut*,⁶ this critique does not quite get to a discussion of Alice’s career goals or how she might become independent from men because it cannot quite get over the undertow of the film’s opening sequence, shot in sepia and reminiscent of *The Wizard of Oz*. They write, “Our Alice is grown now, with singing career abandoned for man, marriage and child. It’s the old story. She is trapped as surely as Dorothy was caught in Oz.”⁷ This critique reveals the radical fringe of 1974 feminist movement, even if the film must be seen as exemplifying the movement’s center. Thankfully, the center has shifted. Today, mothers have better childcare options, more job and educational opportunities, and less stigma for raising children outside of marriage, even if we still are caught in sticky contradictions between social reproduction (children) and social production (careers).⁸ It is, in fact, the stolid persistence of that basic contradiction that leads me to bracket Kay and Pearson’s strong critique and peer more closely at something else in this film, something quite disturbing and, I argue, something rooting Scorsese firmly within modernity even as he tries to challenge it.

Let us look more closely at that sepia-toned prelude. As young Alice (Mia Bendixon) walks slowly up the farm’s dirt path, cradling a doll and singing, she is positioned behind wooden fencing as if already completely boxed in by her family structure. The camera shifts to an older man feeding chickens, and then to silhouetted bodies inside the house readying the dinner table. A cut back to Alice shows her talking to her doll and assuring herself of her singing talents.

Spiegel and Grau, 2015), 7: “Americans believe in the reality of ‘race’ as a defined, indubitable feature of the natural world. ... But race is the child of racism, not the father. And the process of naming ‘the people’ has never been a matter of genealogy and physiognomy so much as one of hierarchy.”

6 Karyn Kay and Gerald Peary, “*Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore*: waitressing for Warner’s,” *Jump Cut* 7: 5–7. Cited in Baker, 121.

7 Ibid.

8 See M. Gail Hamner, “Work and Life in the Balance,” *Religious Studies News*, January 26, 2015: <http://rsn.aarweb.org/columns/work-and-life-balance>; accessed February 20, 2018. These better options are disproportionately available to educated women from already well-off families. Poverty is more widespread and harder to get out of today than it was in the 1970s.

A woman wearing a dress and apron leans out of the front door and calls to Allie. Hearing no response, she yells, “Alice Graham, you get inside this house before I beat the living daylights out of you.” Alice is not shocked by the command, but it does incite her to move more quickly toward the house.

“Before I beat the living daylights out of you....” The intrusive threat of violence is telling, particularly in such a brief (two-minute) prelude and even if the threat is merely rhetorical. Here is the voice of Alice’s mother—standing in, I argue, for the norms of feminine obedience within the hegemonic nuclear family. Throughout the film, Alice is positioned on the receiving end of patriarchal violence. The real disappointment of the film is not that Alice ends up with a husband and gives up her career dreams, but that *in doing so* she submits to a compromise with the persistent and diffuse violence against women that patriarchal family arrangements normalize. In other words, my disappointment is not that the individual, Alice, was not able freely to actualize her goals, but that the film does nothing to address the structural violence of (White) men against both female and non-white bodies.⁹ Despite its female protagonist, *Alice* is still ultimately about men. It is still about the needs of White men to dominate and control women and minorities as their other, and to use them as the repository of affective repair and religious virtue.

Looking broadly at Scorsese’s first seven films (from *Who’s That Knocking on My Door* to *Raging Bull*), this chapter will examine how White men use White women’s bodies, and less centrally, Black men’s and women’s bodies, as externalized pivots by which to navigate their anxious commitments to White male power through aggressive claims about truth, patriarchy, and heteronormativity. I use the word “pivot” because Scorsese’s male characters *need* emotional and sexual intimacy with women even as they apparently need to beat and control them. This push-pull dynamic on female and non-White bodies and for the benefit of White men is, I argue, essentially the *gestalt* of modernity. The question of Scorsese’s *critique* of modernity, then, is a question of how he engages this gendered and racialized pivot, and to what effect.

2 Modernity

My claim about some essential *gestalt* of modernity merits some explanation since the term modernity, like religion, canopies an unwieldy range of

9 I have put “White” in parentheses here to indicate that patriarchy and male violence are not restricted to White men; and yet White male anxiety is, I will show, central to Scorsese’s films.

concepts, theoretical orientations, time periods, and valuations. We can start to narrow our understanding of modernity by constraining it within the time period of film, which is often considered a prototypically “modern” technology. Film’s novel fusion of chemical-dependent photography, mechanics, light, and electricity burst onto the socio-cultural scene of the late 1800s. This Gilded Age timestamp and film’s mechanical and electrical qualities situate modernity within the full blossoming of nineteenth century industrial capitalism. This designation does not ignore pre-cinematic instances of image-making and storytelling but it does claim film as a significant *technological* permutation that took on cultural significance at a definite time by mediating new experiences and new aesthetics.

Changes in technology are usually accompanied by changes in subjectivity, and the technological explosions associated with nineteenth-century capitalism are no exception.¹⁰ Two examples are salient here: the American intensification of cotton production in the early 1800s and what Foucault discusses as the production of docile bodies through disciplinary power. Nineteenth-century capitalism has rightly been designated “racial capitalism” to underscore the fact that the sharp rise in nineteenth-century American wealth and power was made possible by a slave-anchored political economy that was itself

10 Theorizing the relationship between technology and subjectivity has been the purview of twentieth-century philosophers and media theorists. Perhaps the discourse began with Walter Benjamin’s 1936 essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” which links the distracted consciousness generated by film to the fascistic aestheticization of politics. The assertion that new, fast, reproducible technologies change human consciousness (and thus human subjectivity, social action, and politics) is repeated with noteworthy differences by Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their 1944 essay, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” and Martin Heidegger’s 1953 essay, “The Question Concerning Technology.” The assertion that technology has the capacity to incite changes in human thought and action is the basis of Sergei Eisenstein’s film theory. See Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1949). See also, Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Boston: MIT Press, 1994 (1964)), for a theory about the subjective and political consequences of extending human consciousness through technologies. More recent scholarship includes: (1) media theory, which considers how music and film affect human understanding of self and body, such as, e.g., Richard Leppert, *Aesthetic Technologies of Modernity, Subjectivity, and Nature: Opera, Orchestra, Phonograph, Film* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015); (2) political economy that focuses on the speed and persistence of modern technology for producing an overstimulated and exhausted human population, e.g., Teresa Brennan, *Exhausting Modernity: Grounds for a New Economy* (New York: Routledge, 2000); and (3) Black critical studies which considers how art and music, particularly jazz, has been a venue for expressing and influencing the development of Black subjectivity, e.g., Fred Moten, *Black and Blur (consent not to be a single being)* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

supported by the legal (internal) and colonial (external) possession, torture, and marginalization of non-white bodies.¹¹ Heeding a recent injunction from Ta-Nehesi Coates, I suggest we shift racial capitalism to *racist* capitalism in order to stress that the anchoring of modernity by the injustice and inhumanity of the Atlantic slave trade is not a casual descriptor but *the* principal material condition of nineteenth-century American capitalism.¹² For my purposes, the point of this history is to recognize that to be a secure citizen of standing and prominence in nineteenth-century society was to be a property owning White man and, therefore, linked directly or indirectly (through the banking or trade industries) to the intensifying slave economy of the 1810s to 1840s. Citizen subjectivity emerged materially and financially from an otherness that was phenotypic, unethical, and dehumanizing despite its official legality.¹³

In *Discipline and Punish (Surveiller et Punir)* Foucault critiqued the production of docile bodies required for industrial capitalism. He accounts for the effectiveness of these new practices or “technologies of self” by reaching back to a different timestamp of modernity, the era in which feudalism bent and broke into the modern citizen-state and the modern citizen-subject began to emerge. In responding to these events, modern philosophy echoed bourgeois rejection of divine kingship and organized itself against rational and ethical dependency. Kant’s short essay, “What is Enlightenment?,” for instance, exhorts readers to leave aside ancient concerns about the good and the true, and to consider how attention to the urgent matters of the present can construct an exit (*Ausgang*) from rational and ethical “minority,” meaning the legal immaturity that mandates unreflective submission to external authority such as parents, priests, and teachers. It is not surprising that legal and civil references to minority legal status and personal immaturity are attached to specific types of bodies. White, land-owning men are able fully to attain “majority,” while children, women, immigrants, colonials, slaves, and other non-white non-citizens remain compromised—minor, immature—in their rational and

11 See also Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2017), p. 2: “Blackness and race, the one and the other, represent twin figures of the delirium produced by modernity.”

12 Ta-Nehesi Coates, Foreword to Toni Morrison, *The Origin of Others* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), xi: “When we say ‘race’ as opposed to ‘racism,’ we reify the idea that race is somehow a feature of the natural world and racism the predictable result of it.”

13 Edward Baptist calls the early nineteenth-century cotton plantations of Mississippi and Alabama “labor camps,” a description that is so apt I hope it completely replaces the euphemistic language of “plantation.” See Edward Baptist, *The Half has Never been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), e.g., xxvi, 56, and *passim*.

ethical capacities. Of this group, only White male children have a reasonable chance of finding an exit from immaturity since immigrant assimilation is always partial, and even if a slave manages to buy himself out of slavery, he remains a non-white non-citizen. Again, citizenship and a robust sense of selfhood fall by definition and prescription to White men.

The invisible omnipresence of “minorities” amid the strivings of White men toward their “majority” is indicated in Foucault’s late discussion of “the art of self-government.”¹⁴ This art is composed of technologies (practices and habits) that comport the self toward rational thought and ethical autonomy, and which *also* rely on cultivating technologies of governing others. The task of becoming autonomous, in other words, is never a solitary task but requires the mediations of both tutelage and tutoring.¹⁵ To put this in blunter terms than Foucault would use, the entrenchment of practices and ideologies that support (White) male rights and (White) land-owning citizenship stand quite materially on the ground of particular relations of governing (non-White) others.¹⁶ The White male entitlement to control (govern) others—a control that simultaneously performs the autonomy of the controller—constitutes the “pivot” I mentioned above in my thesis. Women and other minorities are socially rewarded for serving as externalized pivots by which White men navigate their anxious commitments to White male power through aggressive (controlling) claims about truth, patriarchy, and heteronormativity.

In sum, the normative work ethic of nineteenth-century capitalism—the ethical orthopedics of punctuality, reliability, responsibility and efficiency—normalized the protection of private property (including slaves) and the deference to the rational capabilities of White land-owning men above everybody else in America. This is the political economy that undergirds the “modern” technology of film. Religion and sentimentality gurgle and flow through this solidifying civil society in three ways: first, as those retrograde forces opposite and detrimental to the dynamics of secularization and urbanization;

14 Michel Foucault, “Governmentality,” in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality, with two lectures and an interview with Michel Foucault*, eds. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 91.

15 See the discussions of Kant and tutelage in Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1982–1983*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2010), particularly 1–40.

16 See Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York, Pantheon Books, 1984), 32–50; Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); Sylvester Johnson, *African American Religions 1500–2000: Colonialism, Democracy, and Freedom* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

second, as the beloved but impracticable Christian virtues upheld by women and fostered in private, domestic spheres; and third, as the primitive religious or irrational exoticism of non-whites and immigrants (particularly slave Christianities and non-Protestant religions).¹⁷ Talal Asad has nicely summarized this affective economy as the feeling of secularism vs. the secular.¹⁸ “Modernity” thus also designates an epoch in which religion is supposed to be outgrown, relegated firmly to the private sphere, or decisively managed in its public expression and influence.¹⁹

3 Scorsese and the Gaze

In *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive*, Mary Ann Doane notes that film provides a salient means of studying modern dimensions of human life and culture, not only because film was a novel technology but also because film literally put on screen many of the new visual and practical parameters of modern life. Doane references specific technologies such as industry timecards and railroad timetables to argue that the emergence of cinematic technologies of representation functioned as a catharsis for pressures generated by the intellectual abstractions and by the material coercions of labor and social life.²⁰ “The theory of rationalization,” she writes, “does not allow for the vicissitudes of the affective, for the subjective play of desire, anxiety, pleasure, trauma, apprehension.” She argues that, “the rationalization of time characterizing industrialization and the expansion of capitalism was accompanied by a structuring of contingency and temporality through emerging

17 I am omitting the abolitionist complication of thinkers such as Harriett Beecher Stowe, who pushed for the end of slavery on the argument that Africans are naturally docile, spiritual, and obedient, and therefore better Christians than Whites. See Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Nation Books, 2016), particularly Part III, 161–262.

18 Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2003), 16–17.

19 For more on how modernity does not eradicate religion but seeks to manage its public expression, see Elizabeth Shackman-Hurd, *Beyond Religious Freedom: The New Global Politics of Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015); Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Tisa Wegner, *Religious Freedom: The Contested History of an American Ideal* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2017); and Timothy Tyson, *The Blood of Emmet Till* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017).

20 Mary Ann Doane, *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 10–14.

technologies of representation—a structuring that attempted to ensure their residence *outside* structure, to *make tolerable* an incessant rationalization.”²¹ Though it might sound counterintuitive, Doane is suggesting that film viewers, mentally stupefied and bodily reduced to little more than a rote tool, find in film the means of reconnecting with their human bodies and *feeling*, again, at least enough to return to another day in the (industrial and neoliberal) grind. Leo Charney introduces a similar insight on the emergence of cinematic representation by describing modernity as that time in which Europeans and North Americans realized the gap between what is sensed and what is thought. Citing Martin Heidegger and Walter Benjamin, Charney notes that the experiential split between feeling the present but being able to think only what is now past (what Heidegger terms “a falling into lostness”) is partially redeemed through a “valorization” of the sensing and sensual body. In terms of film, what we see represented on screen indicates our perpetual loss of the present moment but also and simultaneously turns us to our bodies to *feel* power or control.²² As a supplement to Doane and Charney, I submit that for most of filmic history, the body that feels power or control through the cathartic representative technologies of film is primarily the White male body.

I posit this connection between political economy, subjectivity, and film spectatorship in order to set up a frame for examining the Woman Question in Scorsese’s early films. Like the Jewish Question of the past, the Woman Question recognizes fundamental contradictions between human rights and particular rights. In the case of nineteenth-century Jews, this included the contradiction between their right to university education and access to good careers, and their right to practice religion when and as they see fit. Women’s particularity is not essentially religious but sexual and emotional (even still today). Indeed, as the Jew was ideologically reduced to religion (and its problems of ritual, liturgical, and normative differences), so the woman was and is ideologically reduced to her sexuality (and its problems of attractiveness, availability, and motherhood) and to her emotional perspicacity, which is granted at the cost of rational acuity (e.g., the claim that women cannot fly planes, or fight in the military, or win the Presidency because they are perceived to be too emotional).²³ I witnessed and grappled with the Woman Question as

21 Doane, 11; emphasis added.

22 Leo Charney, “In a Moment: Film and the Philosophy of Modernity” in *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, eds. Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 281, 286.

23 Sexuality and emotionality are connected through menstruation. The period of failed or missing pregnancy (the period marking a failure to live up to the “natural purpose” of being a woman) is also the period of heightened emotion that marks her as least like a man.

I watched Scorsese's first ten films chronologically over two days. I felt strongly how Scorsese presents and grapples with a very specific articulation of American masculinity, at once conflicted about his Whiteness and maleness, and anxious about whether he (ever) can merit the promises those markers hold out in American culture. These male characters feel entitled to control the women they love and frustrated by their inability to control them. They anxiously seek to close the gap between entitlement and reality.

I focus on the first seven of Scorsese's films under the assumption that *Raging Bull* exemplifies his mature style and that these are the films in which the agitations around masculinity, religion, women, and secularism are most acute.²⁴ Three of these seven films deal explicitly with Italian Catholic immigrants to the United States: *Who's that Knocking at my Door*, *Mean Streets*, and *Raging Bull*. The other four engage American masculinity in a series of case studies: the communist agitator in *Boxcar Bertha*, Alice Graham's husband and boyfriends in *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, a Vietnam veteran in *Taxi Driver*, and an Irish saxophone player in *New York, New York*. From the point of view of the first set of three films, Scorsese critiques modernity by critiquing the place and function of Italian Roman Catholic formation within the racist, capitalist, and normatively Protestant society of the United States. This religious hegemony, together with White masculinity, erected the scaffolding of assumed American secularity and positioned non-Anglo-Saxons and non-Protestants as exotic or as otherwise possessing a difference that needed explanation and justification.²⁵ Scorsese pushes against the exoticism of Catholic identity and

24 Also, I confess that watching Scorsese in sequence over many days was very hard to bear. I could not stomach the on-screen violence against women and the nauseating misogyny, even with the insight that Scorsese is presenting these as cautionary tales, as parody, or as critique. Clearly, I am not the intended viewer.

25 In other words, the religious freedoms granted at the level of the nation—a freedom Marx termed the “political emancipation” of American civil society—were undercut by the reduction of American power and prestige to White (Anglo-Saxon) Protestant sensibilities and comportment. For Marx's phrase, see “On the Jewish Question” in Robert Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: Norton, 1978). For historical texts that have grounded this scholarly question in the twentieth-century, see E. Digby Baltzel, *The Protestant Establishment: Aristocracy and Caste in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987 (1964)); Horace Kallen, *Culture and Democracy in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2017 (1924)), particularly Chapter II, “Democracy versus the Melting Pot”; and Leonard Silk and Mark Silk, *The American Establishment* (New York: Avon Books, 1981). For more recent scholarship that examines the assumed Christian foundation of U.S. law and policy, see Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance* (New York: Beacon Press, 2004). For contemporary scholarship that attends to various, specific ethnic groups, see Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno, *Are Italians White?: How Race is Made in America* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Noel

against the socially scripted choice between staying in the Italian neighborhood and accepting a not-quite-white identity, and leaving the neighborhood in order to assimilate more fully into the norms and assumptions of “secular” (White, Anglo-Saxon Protestant) American culture. His male protagonists’ Catholic identity introduces a series of contradictions that are played out on and through women and minorities, but are never resolved. From the point of view of the second set of four films, Scorsese critiques modernity by showing over and again the horrific costs of seeking to belong to and find security within a dominant White masculinity. The men of these films—a communist union organizer, Irish saxophone player, Vietnam vet, and Alice’s working class partners—all reject or leave behind formal religious affiliation. And yet each man’s sexual and aggressive attention to the women in their lives oscillates with—pivots around—his longing for recognition by the larger WASP culture of America.

4 Roman Catholicism, American Civil Society, and White Masculinity

Let us start with the place of Roman Catholicism and women in *Who’s that Knocking* (*WK*) since it is not as well known as *Mean Streets* (*MS*) and *Raging Bull* (*RB*).²⁶

4.1 Who’s That Knocking At My Door (*WK* 1967)

Plot summary: The camera consciousness of this film stays with the young, unemployed Italian Catholic man, J.R. (Harvey Keitel), who oscillates between

Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, *Secularisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); and David R. Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America’s Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs* (New York: Basic Books, 2006). It can be cogently argued that race anxiety of this kind slowly dissipated after the 1960s. See, for instance, Noah Feldman’s rousing article, “The Triumphant Decline of the WASP,” *The New York Times*, June 27, 2010. A recent *New Yorker* article on the rising number of hate groups, tracked by the Southern Poverty Law Center, might mute Feldman’s triumphalism a bit, however, and suggest that strong forces in the United States still correlate Whiteness with Humanness and non-Whiteness or not-quite Whiteness as non- and not-quite Human. See Charles Bethea, “Hate Patrol,” *The New Yorker*, March 5, 2018.

26 *RB* is based on Jake LaMotta’s published memoir, and LaMotta also served as consultant to the film. The film’s cinematographic and affective patterns show the conflict between Italian Catholicism and a larger (WASP) American culture but its presentation differs from *WK* and *MS*.

fighting and drinking with his male buddies and deepening his relationship with “the Girl” (Zina Bethune), an independent, educated woman with her own apartment outside the neighborhood.²⁷ J.R. will not make love with the Girl but has no trouble having sex with “broads.” When the Girl tells him her former boyfriend raped her a few years back, J.R. becomes angry and verbally abusive. He agrees to marry her “anyway,” but she will not live as his compromise. A scene in a church sanctuary ensues, and the film ends with J.R. and his friend Joey (Lennard Kuras) saying goodnight to each other.

WK opens with a jarring popular music track playing over a scene of a middle-aged woman (Catherine Scorsese) preparing dinner. In the right foreground stands a white porcelain statue of the Madonna and Child crowned with halos and positioned as if observing the mother’s loving, domestic care. In case viewers miss its importance, Scorsese adds a frontal close-up of the Virgin that dissolves slowly into the mother actively doling out sausage calzone to her five children. The camera cuts outside and the music track shifts to the jabber of a radio disc jockey. Credits begin to interweave the images. We see J.R. (Harvey Keitel) and his friends, none of whom are religiously marked, confront another group of young men, many of whom have darker skin. One wears a crucifix that he prominently lifts and kisses just before the two groups start to pound and kick each other in a fight that appears either unprovoked or the continuation of an earlier provocation. The credits roll on. The camera cuts to a high-angled, God’s-eye-view of a butcher inside a shop window, chopping to the beat of a new song on the soundtrack. The camera pulls back and tracks to pick up J.R. and a friend strolling past. They enter “Ward 8 Pleasure Club: Private.” The bar displays girlie posters and stenciled walls. The sequence ends with a shot of Keitel’s character (as yet unnamed) neatly trapped inside the bars of an upside down barstool. From the fluid dissolve between holy icon and mortal mother, to its chaotic violence in the streets and then static entrapment in a secular bar—the sequence succinctly counterpoises holy encouragement to sexual titillation and shows J.R. compactly trapped in the middle.

This opening sequence bifurcates along two modalities of otherness: one inside the home, where a shared faith is sexually divided, and one outside the home, where a shared faith is racially divided. Since the film attends to J.R.’s desire for the Girl, who symbolizes a cosmopolitan secularity by which WASP culture masks itself, I suggest we consider the opening’s brief and un-repeated gesture to racial otherness as aligning the film around anxiety over Whiteness, that is, over which version of Catholicism can successfully “become White” by assimilating into larger American culture. We also can see how

27 The character of the Girl is not given a name.

affect loops with otherness in this opening. Loving smiles and care thread into female difference in the home, while the spaces and establishments outside of the home pose the worry and anxiety raised by racial difference and the taboo titillation of sexual license. The world of the home is relatively static, with movement restricted to the mother's hands, while the worlds of street and bar are chaotic, the men using full bodied and repeated movements to establish their place. Domestic stability allows the Catholic mother to unleash currents of nourishment and blessing, while the instability of street and bar force the friends to share fraught currents of animosity, aggression, camaraderie, and sexual exploration. Darker-skinned Catholics in the neighborhood elicit violent competition, while camaraderie among the male friends comes at the cost of committing to constant one-upmanship, crude humor, and objectifying relations to women. Viewers have not yet been introduced to the heart of the film—J.R.'s relation to the Girl—but the opening clearly sets up how J.R.'s world oscillates unsteadily around attachment to domestic comfort, thrill of erotic temptation, and violence—both physical violence among men and fierce control over “broads” or women he uses sexually.

Viewers see J.R. at the bar, and the camera flashes back to his meeting the Girl and their budding relationship. Importantly, the Girl lacks any religious markers and I contend she is more than a stereotypical “Virgin” drawn to match J.R.'s expectations for women. It is true that in scenes shot in J.R.'s parents' bedroom, the Girl is visually aligned with the room's crucifixes and icons, and that J.R. often avers that he cannot have sex with her since she is not a “broad” (a “whore” or sexually active woman unfit for respectable marriage). But the alignment matches J.R.'s expectations, not the Girl's personality. She is not Catholic. She buys French film magazines, reads F. Scott Fitzgerald, listens to Dinah Washington and Stan Getz, and makes money enough to afford a nice apartment in the City without a roommate. Moreover, she never discusses her family, and she is so unfamiliar with Catholic domestic rituals that she uses a “holy candle” to light the dinner table. More than signaling some rarified ideal of womanhood (the Virgin), she is a metonym for J.R.'s desires for secular culture, desires that teeter confusedly—unsteadily—alongside his affective and relational commitments to his Italian Catholic neighborhood.²⁸

28 An astute reviewer of this essay noted my hesitancy to nuance the specific resources within Catholicism that Scorsese's male protagonists both draw upon *and ignore* in wrestling with their contradictory attachments to and desires for religious authenticity and acceptance in the broader, secular culture. I am not Catholic and not a moral theologian, and so I have attempted to stick close to the film texts themselves for indexical evidence about what shapes a protagonist's sense of his faith, and also what lures him away from the institutions priorities (but still attaches him to Catholicism) and toward secular cul-

Anthony D. Cavaluzzi argues that J.R. can't focus on his relationship to the Girl because he so desperately needs the acceptance of his friends.²⁹ While he is with his friends, however, J.R. thinks constantly of the Girl. The overlay of memory-images of being with the Girl during scenes of J.R.'s life in the neighborhood hardly indicates his lack of focus on the Girl and their relationship, but instead underscores his inability to think of anything else! J.R. has a divided and conflicted focus. He cannot feel settled and affirmed in the neighborhood, and cinematographically seems frustrated and trapped there. Emotionally he stands on the borderline of his neighborhood, pivoting between his attachment and obligation to the domestic and religious values that formed him, and his excitement and investment in the larger American world and story. "Everybody should like Westerns," he tells the Girl. "Solve everybody's problems if they liked Westerns." Though J.R. and the Girl spend some time talking about *The Searchers*, and later chat after seeing *Rio Bravo*, the problem-solving ability of Westerns is left unexplained. Westerns are prototypically racist and are built on a Protestant redemption narrative and the logics and aesthetics of White male supremacy.³⁰ Westerns produce an affectively powerful film-form that

ture (and hence away from Catholicism). In the opening of *WK*, for instance, the tight framing—even collapse—of the mother with the statue of the Virgin suggests an understanding of "womanness" and female sexuality that is properly located in the home and under the sacrament of marriage. The cinematographic connection between the girl and the crucifixes and icons in the parental bedroom do not dissolve, as they did with the mother, but stand as a visual restatement of the problem facing J.R., who is attracted to a woman who does not fit into the understanding of womanness and female sexuality with which he was raised, and in fact, this not-fitting is precisely what attracts him to her, even as it challenges him.

29 Anthony D. Cavaluzzi, "Music as Cultural Signifier of Italian/American Life," in *A Companion to Martin Scorsese*, ed. Aaron Baker (Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 280.

30 This fact is generally assumed in critical literature on the Western. See, e.g., Andrew Patrick Nelson, *Still in the Saddle: The Hollywood Western 1969–1980* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015), 6, which proves the point by highlighting a few exceptions: "Whereas earlier Westerns celebrated America's westward expansion following the Civil War, these [more recent] pictures inveighed against the violence, racism, and greed of the frontier experience." See also Nelson, 21: "The Western's ideological baggage includes racism and imperialism," implicitly referring to the inherent White supremacy of the Western genre, since it was predominantly White property-seeking or property-owning men who perpetrated imperialist racist violence in the late nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries. See also David Lusted, *The Western (Inside Film)* (New York: Routledge, 2003), which examines racism against Blacks, Indigenous, and Jews in Westerns. Lusted cites Andrew Sarris' *The John Ford Movie Mystery*, which asserts that "racism can never be dissociated from the romance" of Western films. Lusted and Scott Simmon both refer to *redemption* as a major thematic in the Western genre. See Scott Simmon, *The Invention of the Western Film: A Cultural History of the Genre's First Half-Century* (New York: Cambridge

ties strong White masculinity to a sacrificial violence necessary for a thriving and expanding nation. It is possible that J.R. senses, without conscious will or thought that Westerns model how to look and act like a “real” American for the ethnic outsider. It could be that he feels (but does not think) the connection between the genocidal racism in Westerns and the contemporary pressure to eradicate ethnic difference as the sacrifice required for easy access to secular America. Other cultural elements that we see in J.R.’s relationship with the Girl, but not in his Italian neighborhood, include cars, golf, popular music, American literature, and that French cinema magazine. This is a pretty good list for glossing White-dominated secular culture, and J.R. and the Girl patch together their relationship by the terms of this cosmopolitan veneer.

J.R.’s problem is not a lack of focus on the Girl, then, but an attraction for her that erupts as felt anxiety and dislocation. J.R. feels wrenched between his Italian Catholic upbringing that tags him as an immigrant other, and the lure of secular (WASP) America that opens to him through the Girl’s independence and cultural capital, and through his own ability to pass as “White/not-quite.”³¹ The fact that scenes with his friends are constantly interrupted and spliced with memories of his time with the Girl demonstrates his dislocation over and again. J.R. feels himself in *both places* at once (the neighborhood and larger America), and J.R. feels *himself* in both places at once (he feels resonance, recognition, and belonging). The filmed (visual) dislocation expresses J.R.’s affective dislocation and his anxiety about himself and his future. Other moments in the film underscore this affective economy, and I will focus particularly on one pair of visual repetitions (before and after the Girl recounts her rape to J.R.) and one narrative digression.

University Press, 2003) and this redemption typically follows the Protestant redemption narrative of a strong savior whom individuals love and believe in and who saves residents from a peril brought about in part by their own sins. The savior cannot stay with the residents but his [sic] actions serve as model and witness for their own individual morality. More recently and more popularly, see Leah Williams, “How Hollywood Whitewashed the Old West,” *The Atlantic*, October 5, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/10/how-the-west-was-lost/502850/>, which begins: “As movie genres go, the Western is a workhorse. It draws from a well of cultural symbols meant to capture the essence of America, including the freedom of the open frontier and the righteous self-determination of man. Standing tall inside this cinematic shorthand is the cowboy himself, a figure commonly understood to be an excellent shot who rides horses and who, above all, is white.”

31 This is my mutation of Homi Bhabha’s “not white/not quite” in “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” *Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis* (Spring, 1984), pp. 125–133 (quote on 132), and Matt Wray, *Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

First the digression. After J.R. and the Girl view *Rio Bravo* and he regales her with the moral difference between a girl and a “broad”—a discussion that is itself interrupted by a long “sex scene” that shows J.R. coupling with a series of beautiful women (accompanied by “The End,” a haunting track by Jim Morrison and The Doors)—Joey and J.R. drive with a friend (Phil Carlson) to Copake, NY. The camera transitions smoothly to this unmotivated narrative digression, cutting from the cab carrying J.R. and the Girl to the car carrying Joey, J.R. and their friend. As in other scenes, the friends gather at a bar, drink to excess, and banter. But then the unnamed pal convinces them to take an early morning hike to the top of a mountain to watch the sunrise. We see them scramble up the incline, the City boys lagging behind their country companion. At the summit Joey complains nonstop, but J.R. and their friend fall silent. For a full minute, the camera swings through a series of dissolves, from the back of the trio to a closer shot from the side, to Joey, to J.R., to the horizon, back to J.R., back to the horizon, then to Joey, to the trio, to J.R. and finally to the rising sun itself. This fluid and seemingly unmotivated sequence sutures the friends through the formal logic of the dissolves, threading them together as peers and equals; but it also fragments them by separating their views of the horizon and also by pitting Joey’s endless chatter against J.R.’s silence. J.R. absorbs the quiet, sublime beauty of the vista and sunrise, and he opens himself to it. The camera captures a beautiful sensitivity on Keitel’s face here, unlike any other shot in the film.

What is the point of this narrative digression? It serves absolutely no purpose to the plot and could be removed without consequence to the film. Indeed, the scene is not about plot, but affect. It constitutes the affective fulcrum of the film by creating a moment in which viewers can glimpse J.R. as he might be—as he ambivalently yearns to be—outside the conflicting social and religious pressures of his neighborhood. Viewers can here understand J.R. as someone fully belonging to the neighborhood and yet not determined by it. He is shown to be a young man who can give himself over to new experiences and value them for whatever they have to offer. Importantly, the novelty and beauty that stun him are *not* Catholic but something akin to Transcendentalism. The scene figures J.R. in a Thoreauvian vein that captures a familiar and ideologically powerful American, White, and masculine attentiveness that links sacrality of land and landscape to spiritual and moral capacity. Joey, on the other hand, simply complains.

Formally, this one-minute sequence of dissolves on a hilltop in Copake is repeated at the end of the film in a sequence of dissolves in a Catholic sanctuary that harbors the film’s message. Before I get to that argument, however, let me turn to the pair of repetitions that also expose J.R.’s dislocation and anxiety.

Images from the screening of *Rio Bravo* segue seamlessly to a party that critics refer to as the “Watusi” scene after the title of the Ray Baretto song on the soundtrack. J.R. and his friends are goofing around in an apartment, and then react with guffaws and fear to a gun that suddenly appears and is passed among them. At one point a stranger takes the gun, loads it with bullets, and nabs one of the friends aggressively. Scorsese here inserts a triple repetition shot in slow motion. J.R. and five of his friends are laughing and stumbling backwards away from the gunman. His friends fall off the screen, and J.R. raises his hand, stretching his index finger toward the gunman (Figure 6.1). As he lifts his hand the shot dissolves back to the six friends. The stumbling action repeats itself. This time J.R. is alone on screen again, his finger is fully raised and he has more of a laugh on his face before the camera dissolves back to the group of six. The third time, J.R. fully assumes the pointing pose and laugh before the camera cuts. Like the mountain top sequence, this slow motion repetition is about affect, not plot. Even though J.R. is where he belongs, in the peer group that loves and accepts him, he clearly feels alone, different, and easily alienated from it.

The second slow-motion repetition occurs after the digression to Copake. Sitting at his parents’ table, the Girl recounts having been raped a few years back. J.R.’s verbal response is startlingly aggressive and ugly. The Girl stands and quietly leaves his parents’ apartment, and as in the “Watusi” scene, her exit is repeated three times in slow motion (Figures 6.2 and 6.3). The shadowed door-closing is punctuated each time on the soundtrack and the third time accompanied not by J.R.’s profile in the foreground but by a still image of her flailing body being forced back to the car for rape. Again the technique is affective, not narrative. Poignantly but wordlessly the repetition conveys J.R.’s confused desperation about the Girl’s departure and his confused response to her traumatic narrative. Here, what parallels the repetition of the “Watusi” scene is the slow-motioned repetition of her *departure*, not her account of rape, because while the departure is agonizing to J.R., her rape is undigestable. And yet, the conjunction of the last door closing with the image of assault enables viewers to grasp affectively that to J.R. her rape *is* her leaving and also, I contend, his felt loss of access to life in secular (WASP) America.

As the Girl narrates her rape to J.R., Scorsese recreates it in images. It is unclear whether the footage represents the Girl’s memory-images or J.R.’s imagination-images; either way, the director forces the audience to witness the frightening and brutal assault on the Girl as her body is lifted, thrown, dragged, and mounted. Perhaps because these visuals are so disturbing (to me?, to female viewers?, to victims of sexual assault?), J.R.’s verbal attack in response to her account of the rape was unbearable to me, and doubly so when he repeats the verbal abuse in her apartment. J.R. here gives in to an all-too-familiar



FIGURE 6.1 J.R. (Harvey Keitel) in *Who's That Knocking at My Door*



FIGURE 6.2 J.R. (Harvey Keitel) in *Who's That Knocking at My Door*

victimization of the victim, which positions the man as the real victim, wounded by woman whose rape causes him grief. I do not think it can be reduced to a narrow Catholic prejudice about virgins as marriageable and whores as tainted. If anything the mandate for female purity—the so-called double standard for men and women—persists as a *shared* quality between Italian Catholicism



FIGURE 6.3 J.R. (Harvey Keitel) in *Who's That Knocking at My Door*

and larger American culture. The affective registers of the film suggest that the problem posed by the Girl's rape is not that she is now impure and unable to accede to the Virgin/Mother iconology with which the film opened, but rather it compromises her role as the lure of modernity, the rationality of which depends on a strict control of women and minorities. More bluntly, it is not J.R.'s religious piety but his desire to assimilate fully into White culture that pushes him to reject the person who most symbolizes that culture for him. Hence J.R.'s angry rebuttal at the Girl's apartment, when she rejects his pathetic "agreement" to "marry her anyway." "You'll always find a way to bring it up," she moans, to which he barks in outrage: "*I'm* to blame? Because I feel the way any *reasonable* guy would feel, I'm to blame for this?" Reasonable. This film is not about a Catholic obsession with female purity and domestic bliss, but cagily maps the unsettled affective registers of masculinity within modernity. It navigates the "White/not-quite" anxiety of immigrants who feel a need to prove themselves to larger, White culture, and it shows how women and minorities form for men the material externalization of that slash, a pivot that spins around racial anxiety.

How does the final sequence in the sanctuary fit into this argument about *WK*? Earlier, I suggested that the rapid montage in this sequence repeats the affective dynamics of the mountaintop dissolves in *Copake*. Instead of using the camera to extract and expose J.R.'s difference from his friends, however, this final sequence uses quick cuts between still shots to show up J.R.'s inability to move out of an anxiety over social position to a position of empathy or

compassion. The sequence begins with J.R. entering a confessional, a simple act that is itself interrupted multiple times with flashbacks of J.R. and the Girl kissing. We hear J.R. praying, and then a congregation praying faintly in the distance, while the camera jumps through a number of still shots of Catholic icons (the Madonna and Child, the Pietà, St. Lucy, and Christ crucified), interspersed with five images from the Girl's rape and one from J.R.'s sexual escapades. The film's title track, "Who's that Knocking at My Door" starts up and the still shots narrow to the crucified Christ, the Pietà, and Christ's stigmata, with only an occasional image of Mary and the Madonna and Child. Images of the confessional booth and altar appear here, too, as if to underscore the institutional and moral weight of Catholicism. J.R. kisses a small crucifix, and then we see sculpted figures of souls in hell and the Pietà. He kisses the crucifix again and blood flows out of his bottom lip. Directly after a shot of the sacred heart of Jesus, the montage suddenly shifts. Nylon stockings on a thigh are torn followed by a flash image of the mother from the film's opening. A close-up of Mary's hand zooms back to the entire Pièta, cuts to the confessional and then to J.R. A sound of shattering glass replaces the music, followed by the struggling cries from the Girl as she's raped. Finally, the camera settles on an extreme close-up of the Girl's two eyes. A loud scream saturates filmic space and the camera cuts to the face of Christ's body on the cross and then zooms back for the sonic length of the scream to a full shot of the crucifix.

How do we understand this sequence? It is important to note that the Girl's rape disrupts the Virgin-Whore dichotomy. She is not a virgin but also not a "broad." Through the traumatic wound of her rape the Girl offers J.R. a completely different path, a different future and different means of relating to women. She tries to show him that the cost of his desire for White masculinity is very high. The shift from Mary to Christ in the sanctuary montage sequence can signify either a particular demand that J.R. release his mortal stereotypes about women in order to be "like Christ" for the Girl, or a universal claim that Christ's divine compassion, incarnate in human flesh, reveals a universal human capacity for compassion. Either way, the message can be reduced neither to the Girl and her sexuality, nor to J.R.'s demand for an ideal female purity, but instead reframes the film as a critique of J.R.'s desire to assimilate to Whiteness. The image of the Sacred Heart directly before the succession of ripped stockings, mother, eyes, scream, and Christ points to the film's wrestling with the dictates about modern masculinity in America. White men are expected to dominate otherness in order to prop up their own rational autonomy, but the Sacred Heart proffers from within Catholicism (which, as we have seen, tends to uphold and reinforce patriarchal relationships) an alternative model of male-to-female relationship. The Sacred Heart signals a compassionate,

even “non-modern” form of masculinity, just as the Copake mountaintop sequence suggests a “secular” parallel—an ethical and sensual masculinity oriented around the sublimity and sacrality of nature that might also oppose the dominating and racist logics of modernity. This final sanctuary sequence demonstrates that J.R.’s Catholic tradition does provide resources of compassion, that *might* establish his relation with the Girl on a completely different footing. By linking the Girl’s traumatic rape and Christ’s Sacred Heart, the film suggests resources internal to Catholicism for potentially rethinking gender relations. These resources do stand in subordinated tension with the film’s opening connection between the Virgin Mary and the mother, and it is possible to read the film as critiquing Catholicism for yielding so easily to predictable and reified relations between women and men, instead of availing itself of its own, potential radicality. Whatever the reason, J.R. cannot bring himself to use these non-patriarchal resources for Catholic compassion. He remains mired in his ambivalent desire to accede to White masculinity, and as such, the film posits but does not transcend the tight constraints modernity scripts for masculinity.

After the powerful sanctuary sequence, ending with the full crucifix, the camera settles on a freeze frame of J.R. and Joey on the street. It is a slightly high-angled shot at nighttime. Joey says “Alright, I’ll talk to you tomorrow, ok?” J.R. replies, “yea, I’ll see ya tomorrow, huh?” And that is that. The film leaves J.R. in stasis, formally indicated by the freeze frame.

The very fact of the Girl in J.R.’s life stands as Scorsese’s critique of modernity. Where viewers might expect a clear and simple opposition between the lure J.R. feels for secularity and the faith and comfort he finds in his Catholic neighborhood, the Girl in fact calls into question the terms of sexuality in *both* modern White secular (WASP) America and in J.R.’s Italian Catholic neighborhood. In other words, Scorsese’s film images Catholicism as a neighborhood sociality that opposes secular America only in the particular manner in which it controls women’s sexuality. Reminiscent of those moments in a Flannery O’Connor story when God’s grace floods the scene but somehow still remains untapped and unavailable to the story’s characters, Scorsese’s scenes at Copake and in the sanctuary posit available resources that J.R. *might* but *cannot* use to rethink his own masculinity and his relationship to the Girl. Because J.R. feels but cannot act on these alternative resources, he is kept swinging around the pivot that mandates he build his masculinity around his control of women. In the end, therefore, Scorsese’s critique of modernity remains troubled and partial. It is presented, and then foreclosed. J.R. does not gain a life with her love and will not pursue his (admittedly ambivalent) desires to leave the neighborhood and accede to secular culture. For her part, the Girl will not forge a life with J.R. on startling new terms of compassion and mutual love. Moreover, the

film's pervasive, arbitrary, and persistent verbal and physical violence appear to win out over all else. The lure of modernity as the aggressive acting out of anxiety about masculine status wins out over the Girl's lure towards a (proto-feminist) critique of modernity. *WK* posits the power and promise of a shift from Mary to Christ as the power and promise of generating intimate relationship not through sexual and gendered stereotypes but through imitating the compassion Christ shows to every human being. Perhaps because of the patriarchy that structures Roman Catholicism, Scorsese's sanctuary montage shows J.R. in touch with a tradition that at once suggests and prevents redemption, as well as the capacity to live into a different articulation of masculinity. Instead, J.R. prefers to keep women as the pivot of his anxiety, and his Catholicism remains merely oppositional to secular America and not transforming of it. Scorsese, as a critic of modernity, is here also the prophet of its tragedy.

4.2 Mean Streets (MS 1973)

MS is similar to *WK* in its suffocating focus on a small neighborhood (New York's Little Italy) and on a small, frenzied group of male friends who perpetuate a constant eruption of physical violence. The message of *MS*, however, is completely different. Though a woman again symbolizes possible egress to the larger, secular culture of America, in *MS* this egress is coded in parallel with the mafia as an ambiguous, threatening desire. Moreover, both the world of White America and the world of mafia power mandate brutal lines of exclusion: for the mafia, of people unfit to be one's friends or associates, and for secular America, the intermittent but alluring presence of impotent Others represented by Black, Jewish, homosexual, and homeless bodies. The problem of *MS* is not whether and how to assimilate into White secular America, but the counter-modern problem of how to find a liveable life in the neighborhood without relinquishing Catholic morality, which here stands in for a code of life rooted in St. Francis of Assisi, one that transcends egoic desire and that yearns for gentle relationality and universal truth. Because Charlie fails in his search for this liveable and attentive faith, *MS* fails substantially to critique modernity by imaging an alternative. Instead, the film chugs along on the strength of two familiar dynamics of religion within modernity: as oppositional to secular society (the "mean streets" of the film's title) and as best relegated to the domestic (female, private) sphere.

If *MS* is not critical of modernity in offering an alternative or deconstruction, it nonetheless effects a critique of modernity by mapping its sharp contradictions. Taking a clue from Robert Casillo's comparison of mafia families to New York City elite families, I read the mafia's functioning values in *MS* as

a portal oriented toward secular (White) culture.³² Charlie's anxious desire to satisfy both mafia and his girlfriend, Teresa (Amy Robinson) shows succinctly the impossibility of attaining respect as a secular White man *and* living faithfully. The "streets" (standing for mafia and secular society) are built and paved with a violence and disregard for the O/other that trouble Charlie's Catholic faith, perhaps in part because the Catholicism in this film accedes too much to the logic of those mean streets.

Starring Harvey Keitel as Charlie, *MS* again features an agonizing relationship with a woman. Just as the Girl in *WK* is marked by the traumatic wound of rape so Charlie's girlfriend, Teresa, is marked by the traumatic wound of epilepsy. Whereas both J.R. and the Girl recognize the social rules that blame women for being sexually assaulted, in *MS* Charlie allies with Teresa against his mafia uncle (Cesare Danova) who labels Teresa "sick in the head" and tells Charlie "to not get involved" with her or with her cousin, Johnny Boy (Robert De Niro). "That whole family has problems," he cautions. In other words, Charlie knows but does not accept the brutal lines of exclusion enforced by the mafia, and he believes his Catholic faith should empower a compromise between his love for Teresa and his obligations to his uncle.

WK and *MS* each tells the story of a man (J.R., Charlie), and each uses a woman as its central axis, that is, as the physical and affective pivot around which the man's desires and frustrations spin. The Girl remains ambiguous in *WK*, but Teresa knows full well the risks and opportunities Charlie is juggling. As such, Teresa's epilepsy is clearly ironic. She is the film's most levelheaded, rational, and no-nonsense character; she wants Charlie to opt for a steady, bourgeois life of work and love—whether in or out of the neighborhood—and to refuse a life that teeters persistently between world and church. Teresa repeatedly threatens to get an apartment "uptown," i.e., away from her parents and out of Little Italy, a threat that illuminates Charlie's avenue of escape to secular America. Teresa does not perceive herself as a problem but tells Charlie that his life is "crazy," that her cousin Johnny Boy is "crazy," that Charlie is "crazy."

Uncle Giovanni, however, flips the craziness onto Teresa. It is she who is mentally compromised, he tells Charlie, and he refers to Teresa's desire to move out of the neighborhood as a "problem" without solution: "What am I suppose to say to [her parents]? Lock her up?" The Uncle's response enacts a kind of

32 Robert Casillo, "Mobsters and Bluebloods: Scorsese's *The Age of Innocence* in the Perspective of his Italian American Films," in *A Companion to Martin Scorsese*, ed. Aaron Baker (Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 133–172. See the section, "Mobsters and Bluebloods," which begins, "The resemblance between Mafia families and New York high society is more than superficial" (37) and which makes explicit reference to *Mean Streets*.

moral synergy between mafia and secular (WASP) America, for though it might seem absurd to liberal American culture to lock up a willful daughter, it does not seem so far-fetched as a stereotype about retrograde immigrant families. Giovanni orients himself toward liberal, secular culture and away from the stereotype that immigrants control their daughters' sexuality at all costs. Charlie, as we might predict, stands in the middle. He wants Teresa and he wants his Uncle's respect. He finds Teresa's threat to leave the neighborhood more frustrating than frightening because it prevents his hovering in the middle, without landing solidly on the side of church or world. He tells Teresa she's "crazy," to do what she likes but leave him out of it. Teresa's desire to move out of the neighborhood, however, is a rational and correct summing up of her options, since she is expected to abide by mafia and Church mandates but appears to value neither. Charlie, of course, values both—and also Teresa. Her push to leave the neighborhood raises the stakes of his desire to find a compromise between his faith and his secular ambitions.

Like J.R., then, Charlie is unemployed and caught between two worlds, his idiosyncratic rendering of the moral world of Catholicism and the utilitarian world of the mafia.³³ Also like J.R., Charlie relies on his close-knit group of friends and yet distinguishes himself from them, this time by actually taking some of the moral dictates of Catholicism seriously. Candle flames and lighted matches afford Charlie reminders of the fires of hell, which, he says, cause the horrible pain of flesh and worse pain of the spirit. Indeed, physical burns are objective correlates for the spiritual burns Charlie feels as he, again idiosyncratically, seeks penance "on the streets" instead of from a priest. Because the film's action takes place over one day, its story functions as one long prayer of contrition, for which the anarchic antics of Charlie's friend, Johnny Boy are like

33 There is a scene in *MS* comparable to the Copake scene in *WK* in that it could easily be excised from the film without any effect on the plot. Charlie and Teresa are on a waterfront with a pier. Before they begin, again, to argue about whether to leave the neighborhood, Teresa asks Charlie what he likes. He answers, "I like spaghetti with clam sauce. Mountains. Francis of Assisi. Chicken with lemon and garlic. John Wayne." The list is remarkably similar to factors shaping J.R.: food, nature, John Wayne. With Charlie, however, St. Francis forms the literal center of this swirling list of "likes." Teresa and Charlie proceed to argue, and Charlie ends the scene by claiming that Teresa's ethic ("You help yourself first") is "all wrong. Francis of Assisi had it all down. He knew." As with the Copake scene, the import of this equally liminal waterfront scene is that it demonstrates ethical and spiritual depth in the two protagonists, with Charlie differing from J.R. in explicitly drawing on a strand *within* Catholicism that is both extraordinary and idealistic in its modeling of compassion toward all of creation, even if it, still, does not explicitly counter the institution's patriarchy. Quotes transcribed from http://www.script-o-rama.com/movie_scripts/m/mean-streets-script-transcript-keitel.html, accessed March 1, 2019.

rosary beads—material reminders to say a prayer in the pursuit of penance or, in Charlie's case, to act on behalf of his friend *as* his penance. The structure of *MS* is thus ritualistic, a fact also indicated by the outdoor parades and music for the Feast of San Gennaro saturating the film's background. In addition, the film is structured as a flashback. The opening credit sequence includes a home movie that shows a future Charlie and Teresa, married and celebrating the baptism of their baby boy, Christopher. The body of the film must take place *before* these events.

The film's flashback and ritualistic structure are important for considering the Woman Question in Scorsese. Their shared inversion—the future comes before the present, and penance comes from outside not inside the church—doubles Charlie's failure to resolve the contradiction between the lived practice of mafia membership and the lived practice of Catholicism. On the other hand, Teresa's presence in the home movie suggests the irritation and challenge she poses has somehow been neutralized. Although the film's last scene is ambiguous, we can speculate that Johnny Boy died (since he does not appear in the home movie), a loss that enables Charlie to reach an agreement about Teresa with his Mafioso uncle (who *is* in the home movie), and also leads Charlie—reluctantly—to return the sacrament of penance to the church. The plot is unclear, but the affective and power dynamics are not: the film keeps Charlie stuck in the contradiction that his street-oriented penance set out to transcend (failure) and therefore does not enact a critique of modernity but does map the terms of such a critique through its articulated pressures to tame and cage those positioned as O/other to racist capitalism.

This tendency toward domestication is incarnated in *MS* by a tiger. The club owner, Tony (David Proval) eggs Charlie and his buddies into a back room and uncovers a large cage. There sits the tiger. The gang is at once astounded and put off. The beast is a sign of the kind of raw power they wish to possess, but it also is otherness, an alien and threatening presence. The scene is frankly bizarre, and reminiscent of the Copake scene in *WK* in the way it exudes affect more than meaning. Here in *MS*, however, the affective economy does not single out Charlie but shows the friends' shared affective orientation toward difference. Watching the men sidle up to the tiger, Tony warns: "Nobody can go near him but me. I'm the only one who can feed him." He also begs their confidence since he doesn't have a license for it. The tiger is alluring menace, caged by force, singled out for control, and only semi-legal: it stands *tout court* for the Otherness within modernity that supports the power and dominance of Whiteness. The scene conveys with distilled clarity the need within modernity for (White) men either to control or to utterly ignore (and thus passively tower over) what differs from them. Consider, for instance, how the reaction to

the tiger duplicates Charlie's inner monologue about Diane (Jeannie Bell), the Black stripper in Tony's club. Staring at her from his chair, in a room drenched in red light, he muses: "You know something? She is really good looking. I gotta say that again. She is *really* good looking. But she's black. You can see that real plain, right? Well, there's not much of a difference anyway, is there? Well, is there?" Notice the pattern of attraction, repulsion, and then a floating thought that perhaps Diane's danger might be downplayed and thus controlled. In fact, Charlie does pursue a date with Diane on the pretext of asking her to work as hostess for his "new restaurant" (the one he hopes his Uncle will give him), but he chickens out at the last moment, asking himself, "What, am I crazy?" and telling the cab driver to "take me back to where you picked me up; I'm sorry." Tony has a cage for his tiger, but Charlie has nothing so sturdy and certain to tame the Otherness of Diane. It is as *unreasonable* for Charlie to date Diane as it is *unreasonable* for J.R. not to be bothered that another man has raped the Girl.

In *MS* Jewish women also stand for the sexual Other. In first scene with Johnny Boy, he brings two "bohemian" women from the Village—Heather Weintraub and Sarah Klein—and later we hear Tony and Charlie speculating on whether a woman (Joyce) seated farther down the bar is or is not Jewish. These women are all coded as sexually loose and as subsisting in nothing but their sexual availability. In contrast, Teresa is a fleshed out personality, rational and compassionate, even though she also gives sex freely to Charlie, a fact that leads Charlie to intimate that he cannot marry her. At this suggestion, Teresa explodes in anger. As another contrast, Charlie's mother remains off-screen and invisible but she leaves money, pressed shirts, and notes of love. In-group women, in other words, create relationship and family, not exotic, sexual opportunity. Two other snippets of otherness appear briefly in *MS*. First, after a gunman creates chaos in the club, the friends pile into Michael's car and head uptown. In the melee two gay men wriggle their way into the car with the friends, much to Michael's discomfort. One of these, Sammy (Ken Sinclair) catcalls men on the streets and hangs out the window, panting for sexual connection. Irritated and discomfited, Michael finally stops the car and tosses the two homosexual men out on the street. Second, after stiffing two young out-of-towners, the friends decide to go to the movies. At a stoplight, a homeless man tries to earn some coin by cleaning Michael's windshield. Annoyed at the man's persistence, Michael gruffly rolls up his window and drives away. Titillating curiosities (the Jewish women), embarrassing spectacles (the gay men), and misfit irritants (the homeless man): these Other others define the outer contours of what Charlie must domesticate and dominate if he is to accede to the economic and social power of the secular. Charlie's problem is that he wants this power, but also wants the moral integrity offered by his understanding

of Catholicism, a faith orientation that draws from the minoritarian orientations of St. Francis of Assisi, which specify compassion and care for creatures who are the socially marginalized or unvalued. *MS* maps the constraints of modernity and alludes to underused (and undervalued) resources within Catholicism that could set Charlie on a different life course, but instead, Charlie succumbs to modernity's dictates. He pulls Teresa back into the neighborhood and into domesticity, and he becomes something like a tiger in a larger cage, pacing with anxiety about his White male status.

4.3 Raging Bull (RB 1980)

Raging Bull, one of Scorsese's best-known films, is a biopic of the middleweight boxer, Jake LaMotta (1922–2017). Because of its biographical frame, *RB* might be explained away as the idiosyncrasies of one Italian-American man, and not a morality tale about American male immigrants who wish to “make it” in American society. But when viewed alongside *WK* and *MS*, *Raging Bull* appears to close out a very particular arc: first, the Catholic boy who will not leave the neighborhood despite his White/not-quite desires and ambivalences about his faith, then the Catholic boy who will not leave his faith despite his White/not-quite ambitions with the mafia and his ambivalences about the Catholic institution; and finally the Catholic boy who changes his name, leaves the neighborhood, and retains almost nothing of his faith, only to find himself lost and wrecked on the shoals of American society.

Though the opening credit sequence is shot in slow motion and accompanied by classical music instead of Rock-n-Roll, we are introduced to LaMotta through the ropes of a hazy boxing ring in a manner reminiscent of the shot of J.R. through the barstool in *WK*. After the credits, a title card situates us in “New York City 1964,” and takes us into LaMotta's nightclub dressing room. Like in *MS*, therefore, either the body of the film can be seen as a flashback or the opening scene functions as foreshadowing. It is noteworthy that in both of these temporally disjunctive introductions the man, Jake, is as elusive as he is physically present. In the credit sequence he hops and bobs at a distance from the camera that prevents a clear shot of his face. In the dressing room sequence, viewers see clearly the aging, corpulent man, but his recitation—almost a rap—reveals nothing about him and he is oddly positioned in the room. Why does Scorsese film him at such an angle to the mirror that nothing of LaMotta's body is reflected? Why would LaMotta practice his lines facing a corner, and not the mirror? In both sequences the cinematography insistently shows a full presence that is empty, a heavy materiality that conveys no knowledge of the human person and even refuses the filmic tropes that use mirrors to signify brokenness or a quest for self-knowledge. Here is a man, perhaps even a successful man, but he is not filled or fulfilled by his success.



FIGURE 6.4 Anonymous woman trampled after the LaMotta-Reeves fight in *Raging Bull*



FIGURE 6.5 Anonymous woman trampled after the LaMotta-Reeves fight in *Raging Bull*

After his dressing room recitation, the film jumps back to 1941 when LaMotta fights with Jimmy Reeves. In one of the most disputed fights in boxing history, Reeves is ultimately declared the winner, and true to journalistic accounts of the declaration, the boxing fans go into an uproar. Scorsese's organization of this scene is noteworthy. Starting with a long shot of the arena, we hear a woman's piercing scream. The camera falls into the crowd and frames a smartly

dressed woman (apparently uncredited) facedown on the floor and getting stampeded by the crowd (Figures 6.4 and 6.5). What a curious image to choose as the centerpiece of this male-saturated sport, with its male-dominated audience and angry reaction to the fight's outcome, and yet it aligns perfectly with this chapter's argument that violence against women (and minorities) is the central plank guaranteeing White male dominance within modernity.

Almost as if to underscore the structural necessity of violence against women, the angry crowd melts into a domestic dispute at the LaMotta household. Jake is eating loudly and demanding his steak. His wife (Lori Anne Flax), tired of the verbal abuse, starts to yell back: "You want your steak? You want your steak?" Jake angrily shoves the table over and accosts his wife. He grabs her neck and pushes her toward their bedroom. She enters and slams the French doors. Not surprisingly, the wife (she is not given a name) does not calm down. She continues to rant and cry in the bedroom as Jake tries to talk with his brother, Joey (Joe Pesci). Annoyed, Jake shouts, "If you break anything, I swear to God, I'm gonna come in there and kill ya." Joey takes this in stride, as do all the men in this film. We never see this wife again. Joey soon introduces his brother to Vickie (Cathy Moriarty), a "girl from the neighborhood" who hangs out at the local pool. She agrees to go for a drive with him, and in the car the two remain divided, with the frame of the front windshield splitting the screen in half. As in *WK* and *MS*, when Vickie and Jake are sexually intimate we can see Catholic iconography on the bedroom walls, but none of it seems cinematographically significant, and soon the film shifts to a fast-moving montage that cross-cuts between Jake and Vickie's wedding, the early years of their marriage, babies and toddlers, and a series of fights in Jake's increasingly successful career. These marriage clips contain no religious imagery and are filmed in color like early home movies, whereas the fight scenes remain in black and white. The effect, for me, is the affective suggestion that it is the increasingly modern, secular, "normal" life with Vickie and the children that provides Jake's real identity and success, and that undergirds his steady gains in the boxing world.

The anticipated division is never far off-screen, however. The film's opening arena fight and domestic dispute position women as both battered and fundamentally anonymous, appreciated like service animals for their beauty and fecundity, and feared for their limited agency to betray their men and cause them dishonor. Vickie is no different. Jake boxes, and she feels boxed in. She wants to go out, to have drinks and socialize without being accused of being unfaithful. In one scene, Vickie enters a nightclub with Salvy (Frank Vincent) and other Mafioso men and their women. Jake's brother happens to witness her socializing from the bar and he ends up beating Sal ferociously. Interestingly, before the fight, as Vickie sits down at the table, we hear her say, "I'm not

Italian. I don't care." It is difficult to discern the context of the remark or why her words—of all the conversation at that table—are the only ones to stand out well enough to be deciphered. But from the perspective of this chapter, it is hard not to use this sentence to align Vickie with the Girl from *WK*, that is, as a non-Catholic woman who exists as the pivot around which Jake's desires for assured masculinity and American success spin. Just as the Girl refuses marriage on the terms J.R. offers, so Vickie eventually leaves Jake. In both films, the woman's departure is the end of the story. *RB* finishes back in the dressing room from the initial post-credit sequence, but this time Jake faces the mirror as he practices his lines. His image is boxed inside the mirror's rectangle by a line etched in the glass, so that the camera finally comes to express the existential questions that split-images and reflections so succinctly evoke in film, as viewers hear him reciting the famous lines from *On the Waterfront* (Kazan, 1954): "I could'a been a contender." Perhaps Jake cannot see or feel himself except through the hazy refractions of popular culture and social expectation. Even so, he *is* an American man. Successful, handsome, and alone. He remains so committed to entitled access to women and entitled violence against them that any robust sense of self or robust intimacy in relationships seems profoundly foreclosed. I would call *RB* the most powerful of Scorsese's morality tales about modernity and masculinity except he provides no indication of any egress from its destructive terms.

5 White Masculinity and the Spectacle of Violence

We now turn more broadly, and more quickly, to *Boxcar Bertha* (*Bertha* 1972), *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (*Alice* 1974), *Taxi Driver* (*TD* 1976) and *New York, New York* (*NY* 1977).

When earlier I discussed *Alice* as the only Scorsese feature film that stars a woman, some readers may have wondered about *Bertha*. Produced after *WK* and released the year before *MS*, *Bertha* is hardly about the title character (played by Barbara Hershey). The film includes her, of course, and even tracks her at times when it leaves behind other characters; but the character that drives the plot is the union organizer, railroad buster, and Bertha's lover, Big Bill Shelly (David Carradine). Perhaps because the film is based on *Sister of the Road*, Ben Reitman's 1937 novel that fictionalizes his own hobo life by ventriloquizing it through a woman, the film unthinkingly enacts the same bait and switch. Certainly the film is not feminist. The first and last image of Bertha show her gazing up, first at her father in his crop-duster plane and last at Bill (Figures 6.6 and 6.7).



FIGURE 6.6 Boxcar Bertha (Barbara Hershey) in *Boxcar Bertha*



FIGURE 6.7 Boxcar Bertha (Barbara Hershey) in *Boxcar Bertha*

I am most interested in how Bertha is positioned solely as sexual release, sexual possession, and sexual bait, even though the men in her boxcar coterie—Bill Shelly and Von Morton (Bernie Casey)—do *not* exert violence against her or fight over her. Instead of sexual violence, the film centers on social violence against non-capitalists (typified by the socialist, Bill) and blacks (typified

by Von), with Bertha's assumed sexual availability both exacerbating and ameliorating this violence. I would make more of her friends' non-misogynist non-violence, except that, again, the film is not *her* film, and her role remains that of a body reduced to sexual capacity or, better, reduced to the capacity for sexual exchange.

The film is remarkable for the way it maps the terms of modernity in reverse. Here is a black man who hobbos to be free of Jim Crow, a socialist who attempts to be free of capitalist emasculation, and a woman who seems free of the excruciating traps of both marriage and market, even if she does still live primarily by sexual parlay, quick wit, and luck. The three friends present the underside of racist capitalism, the desire for a robust and fully human life (what an early Marx once termed species being), but how can we quantify or describe the content and status of their freedom? As I see it, their lives demonstrate that the only kind of freedom available within racist capitalism is a freedom bounded by what Achille Mbembe calls capitalism's "logic of enclosure."³⁴ It is a friable freedom, precarious and preyed upon. Watching their downward spiral is like watching a morality play scripted by Marx's Mr. Moneybags, since their attempt to live outside or at least struggle persistently against racist capitalism is shown as *barely* possible, to require nearly *bare* life, and to be a very short-lived experiment. That Scorsese considers the enterprise noble or even humanly salvific is shown by positioning Bill as a Christ-figure. This framing is not subtle or brief but forms the crux of the film's climax. At a long-delayed reunion Bill tells Bertha that he will work and fight against the railroads until he dies. Just then, gunmen hired by those same railroads viciously attack Bill and handcuff Bertha. Without warning or dialog, the camera cuts to the inside of a boxcar and narrows focus to the sharp end of a nail splitting the car's wooden panel. The gunmen are hammering through Bill's hand, stringing him up to crucify him. The boxcar—metonym of the railroad industry or capitalism itself—is Bill's cross, the means by which society's dominant powers painfully destroy those who call power into question. The camera cuts to a frontal shot of Bill, strung up and screaming in agony, and then to an overhead shot that could easily have been sliced from a passion play (Figure 6.8).

This unexpected God's eye angle seems to pull the film's absent God into a quite visceral presence, even if only for one ambiguous moment. It is

34 Mbembe, 62. This "logique de l'enclos" particularly references the slave logic of the plantation and colonization. The enclosure refers to the physical barriers within which spectacular fantasies and inhuman practices were wrought against the black (le Nègre) body. Mbembe makes clear early in his book, however, that under the global capitalist dynamics of neoliberalism, most of the world is "becoming black" (19).



FIGURE 6.8 Big Bill Shelly (David Carradine) as Christ-figure in *Boxcar Bertha*



FIGURE 6.9 Big Bill Shelly (David Carradine) in *Boxcar Bertha*

ambiguous because it remains possible to read this scene in secular terms; and yet the sequenced and familiar cinematography of crucifixion matches so well the familiar imagery of Christian passion plays that it evokes a theological (or at least cosmic or universal) conclusion. Is Bill the film's Christ-figure *because* he is the White man? Does he symbolize the Whiteness created and sanctified by racist capitalism? Or is Bill the Christ-figure because he used his White privilege to fight directly against racist capitalism? Does the film code as sacred

his unionizing against the railroads and dying for his socialist resistance? Does Bill show a Christ-like grace in his friendship and love for a woman and a black man? I pose these questions because almost nothing in the film text itself offers an explicit explanation. The exception is a single visual anticipation earlier in the film, when Bill lingers next to a church mural's image of Christ (Figure 6.9). The film portrays Von as stereotypically as it crafts Bertha's character. Von plays a harmonica, gets called ugly names by White policemen and quietly bends to the wishes of the Whites around him. He seems clearly to value Bertha and Bill's friendship, despite these stereotypes. In his final act he shoots every one of the railroad gunmen who attacked Bill and Bertha and then releases Bertha from her handcuffs. Does this act prove him a lackey or a free man? What even could *count* as free for Von under the dictates of racist capitalism? Bertha does not thank him, and the camera lingers with him only for a moment, framing him in golden light between two train cars as the train begins to roll away. The camera cuts to Bertha as she jogs beside the accelerating train, moaning soft, impotent pleas for the train not to take Bill away (it seems an eerie foreshadowing of Hershey's role as Mary Magdalene in *The Last Temptation of Christ!*). But the camera leaves her behind, too, and stays with the moving train, Bill's body fading into a small corner of the screen. All that is solid melts in the air... .

BB captures the terms of modernity by pointing the camera at its shadowed rejects, and yet still centers on Whiteness, and still relies on women and blacks to serve as pivots. They are not pivots of desire and anxiety resolved by violent control, however, but rather pivoting extensions of Bill's socialist critique into a small community. As nodes of adulation, Vonn and Bertha allow viewers to feel the justice and mourn the failure of Bill's short-lived experiment.

Let me jump from *BB* to *New York, New York* (1977), from a film teeming with Scorsese's youthful talent to a mediocre film produced primarily for the director's love for Liza Minnelli. *New York, New York* centers on Robert De Niro as the Irish saxophone player, Jimmy Doyle, even as the film lovingly obsesses over Minnelli as star singer, Francine Evans. From its very first scene, Jimmy takes center stage. The film opens on V-J Day. A crowded street is going wild with excitement and celebration. Someone tosses a shirt out of an open window and the camera tracks its wafting fall to the street. Shoes walk over it repeatedly, and then the camera stays with a pair of brown and white oxfords, pausing when they pause, and then panning up the white pants and blue Hawaiian shirt to Jimmy Doyle's face, looking to his right.

The film's ending parallels these two shots. Jimmy walks away from the club where Francine has just performed. He stops as if to ponder his situation, looking to his left, and then the camera pans down to his black shoes backlit by a streetlight-drenched puddle. Interpret the shoes as you will—perhaps they

posit the question of where Jimmy is going, or perhaps they signify his nomadic and solipsistic pursuit of success—but the film's bookended images of his face clearly centers the story on him. Jimmy is not a likeable character (at least not to me). Francine is sequentially his date, work partner, lover, and wife, but he never tires of conscripting her words and actions. From their very first encounter, Jimmy comes on hard to Francine and will not take no for an answer. The harassments and assaults continue throughout the one hundred sixty-three minutes of the film.

On the upside, Francine does put her career ahead of her marriage. When it is offered, she takes her record contract and son and leaves New York. Her album is a hit, and she embarks immediately on a six-year tour (little of which is shown in the film). On the downside, Francine remains single and in love with Jimmy. In the last scene, she heads toward the club exit to meet him for Chinese food, and only at the last minute does she hesitate and turn away. I interpret this as proving that nothing in the film *critiques* Jimmy's behavior as aberrant, as opposed to merely unbearable. Nothing frames his behavior as hard-wired into the misogynistic structure of White capitalism *and therefore* wrong. Even more depressing is the fact that Jimmy's character seems basically unchanged. The ending registers as sad (indexed by the rain) but not tragic or pathetic, as is *Raging Bull*. By mirroring the film's beginning, the ending shows us a Jimmy Doyle who is just as selfish, violent, and clueless as ever.

The comparison of *New York, New York* with *Alice* is stark, though neither is satisfactory. Taken together, the films reproduce the social contradiction women face between career and family, between substantial financial independence and substantial emotional connection. *Alice* may afford a gentler viewing experience by drawing on the narrative catharsis of Hollywood romance, but if I had to choose, I think I would rather step into Francine's life. The pair of films reinforces the gooey allure of domestic subordination precisely by the fact that *Alice* is such a better film. *Alice's* rich character development, humor, terrific acting, and familiar love story lure women into a positive comportment toward self-sacrifice in upholding patriarchal norms, while the excruciatingly boring slog of *New York, New York* works against such a positive comportment toward financial independence and career success. The latter film's mediocrity compounds the distaste many felt in 1977, and still feel today, toward the image of an aggressive, creative, intelligent, and successful professional woman.

The story and production of *Taxi Driver* (1976) beg for extensive commentary and have received it. It is regularly cited as the best of Scorsese's films. I am certain that the experience of watching these films in chronological order has negatively affected my impression of *TD* since the similarity of Travis

Bickle's character to every other Robert De Niro character (Johnny Boy, Jimmy Doyle, Jake LaMotta) obscured for me the film's excellent critique of social isolation, paranoia, and sense of purposelessness that so many veterans feel. De Niro's character in *TD* is tragic, unsociable and unlikeable. He gives pause to the women he approaches, whether the porn theater concession stand operator (Diahnne Abbott), Betsy (Cybill Shepherd), or Iris (Jodie Foster), and he soon instills anger, disgust, or fear. Like *New York, New York*, *TD* starts and ends with images of Bickle's eyes and face; and like *Raging Bull*, the use of mirrors in these shots does not accord with self-knowledge. Instead, the foggy opening shots and kaleidoscopic lights at the film's end suggest irreparable diffusion and diffraction—the opposite of rational coherence. This film, too, is a man's film. It is Bickle's story and it is a story that relies on women as the pivot of his desires and frustrations, the targets of the misguided and self-appointed purpose he develops.

The structure of the film thus does not deviate from the basic argument of this chapter, which is that the films of Scorsese demonstrate the painful terms of modernity that are structured by (White) men's need to dominate and control women and minorities as their other and to use them as the repository of affective repair and religious virtue. When Bickle recalls seeing Betsy (Cybill Shepherd) for the first time, he says she “appeared like an angel out of this filthy mess.” The mess is not simply urban chaos, but the “whores, skunk pussies, buggers, queens, fairies, dopers, junkies” that, he says, are like “animals who come out at night.” He looks to Betsy for care and intimacy, and yet he sees no contradiction—no solidarity with the animals in the street—in his habit of going to pornography films after his shift driving taxis in the City. In fact he appears so innocent about the taboos of bourgeois mores, or so mentally derailed by his stint with the Marines, that he takes Betsy to this same porn theater after successfully cajoling her out on a date for coffee and pie. Her rejection seems to baffle him and he can find no relief for his profound loneliness. At one point he says famously, “I am God's lonely man,” but Travis is hardly Charlie from *Mean Streets*. He is, in fact, Charlie's opposite: not looking to do penance but to wreak vengeance.

I wish to end this chapter with a brief reflection on the children in *Alice*, *TD*, and *New York* (children are merely background in the other four films I have considered) as possible sites of change. If the task of history is not only to record the past but also to account for what stays the same and what has changed (and how), then Tommy, Audrey, Iris, and Jimmy Jr. might be our best clues for seeing how the brutal terms of modernity's White masculinity—at least in its misogynistic proclivities—might be teased apart and undercut.

Jimmy Jr. (Adam David Winkler) is barely a character in *New York*, and yet he does speak. In the film's penultimate scene, Jimmy and Francine make small talk about their son's talent for drumming and each jumps to claim his talent's genetic origins. Then Francine sends Jimmy over to "talk to the kid" before he leaves. Jimmy Jr. is a sweet-faced boy who stares up at his father with open admiration. His father criticizes the clothes Francine bought him and then asks, "Who do you think you look like more, me or your mother?" The boy avers that he looks like his dad, adding that he tries "not to look like girls." This adulating identification might not seem hopeful, but it is Francine who is raising this child and it is she who will likely give more to the development of his talent than his father. It is possible—perhaps not likely, but possible—that Jimmy Jr.'s overweening admiration might attenuate as he matures, that he might come to resonate with and support his mother's struggles for creative expression. Perhaps because Francine does still love Jimmy, their son might be able to see the relationship more objectively and (perhaps) find his way in the world with less misogyny and less violence, even if his Whiteness is not decisively countered.

In *TD*, a young Jodie Foster plays the prostitute, Iris. Foster was twelve-years-old during the shooting of *TD* and thirteen at its release; she is cast as twelve and a half years old. The character of Iris is very much like the character of Audrey in *Alice* and it is easy to see why Scorsese hired her twice. She is absolutely convincing as a neglected child too worldly-wise for her years. At the end of the film her parents send Travis a note that ends as follows: "She's back in school and working hard. The transition has been very hard for her, as you can well imagine. We have taken steps to see she never has cause to run away again." We may disagree about Bickle's pursuit of Betsy and his final vigilante actions, but it is indubitably true that Iris, by running away from home, sends a clear signal to her parents that something is amiss. Her young love for the pimp, Smoke (Harvey Keitel), her too-early sexual initiation, her sexual exploitation and drug-use—all of these are experiences that she will carry back to her bourgeois life in New Jersey, and they will filter into her life and inform her future, even if we are not given seeds for imagining the shape that different future will take.

Finally I return to *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*. In Tucson, Alice's son, Tommy (Alfred Lutter III) meets Audrey (Jodie Foster) at a guitar lesson. Audrey carries herself like a tomboy and speaks with casual matter-of-factness about her mother's work as a prostitute near the local Ramada Inn. Her real name is Doris but "she likes 'Audrey' better." She calls many things "weird," including the city of Tucson, a kid in their guitar class, and the science teacher at her school. It is not a very precise term but it might be enough to encourage

Tommy to look at people and places in a new way. Audrey also offers Tommy the chance to “get high on Ripple.” He declines, but after fighting with David and his mother, Tommy takes Audrey up on her offer. They get drunk on the cheap wine and trade stories about “bastard” fathers. Seeing Tommy’s sadness, Audrey bundles them out the door to find something to do. Apparently, what they find are the police. The reason for their arrest is unclear in the film, but the scene does bring Alice and Audrey face-to-face. Audrey introduces herself to Tommy’s mother and explains the arrest as “a big mistake.” When Audrey’s mother addresses her as “Doris,” Alice looks confused and stares at them as they walk toward the exit. At the door, Audrey turns, gives a military salute and calls out, “So long, suckers!” Audrey is my favorite character. She and Tommy are the film’s eyes of the future: what kind of genders will they be? what kind of parents? how will they relate to authority or social norms?

The children in *Alice*, *TD*, and *New York* express small, even infinitesimal, signs of possible change in modernity’s structure of White masculinity. Even these hints of change tend to target misogyny and masculine violence. They do not touch the racism that is equally constitutive of modernity, and do not address the religious dynamics that work to ameliorate modernity’s poison. As I noted at the outset, U.S. society has made clear structural and policy changes to begin to address misogyny but has made little progress in addressing structural racism. Indeed, what policy and structural changes were once in place (integrated schools, affirmative action, voting rights act) have been systematically challenged over the past half-century and remain under threat.³⁵

35 For reflection on school resegregation see Gary Orfield, “Gary Orfield Documents the Resegregation of America’s Public Schools,” *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 24 (Summer 1999), 48–49; Ginny G. Lane and Amy E. White, “The Roots of Resegregation: Analysis and Implications,” *Race, Gender & Class*, 17: 3/4 (2010), 81–102; Sean F. Reardon, Elena Tej Grewal, Demetra Kalogrides and Erica Greenberg, “Brown Fades: The End of Court-Ordered School Desegregation and the Resegregation of American Public Schools,” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 31: 4 (Fall 2012), 876–904; and Beverly Daniel Tatum, “America is more diverse than ever before, but its schools are growing more segregated,” *L.A. Times*, September 12, 2017. Since 2013, eight U.S. states have banned race-based decisions on college admissions, effectively challenging the broad consensus on affirmative action. See Halley Potter, “What Can We Learn from States That Ban Affirmative Action?,” *The Century Foundation*, June 26, 2014, <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/what-can-we-learn-from-states-that-ban-affirmative-action/>. Accessed March 20, 2018. For an account of the U.S. Supreme Court’s 2013 undercutting of the 1964 Voting Rights Act, see Ryan J. Reilly, Mike Sacks, and Sabrina Siddiqui, “Voting Rights Act Section 4 Struck Down by Supreme Court,” *HuffPost*, June 25, 2013. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/06/25/voting-rights-act-supreme-court_n_3429810.html. Accessed March 20, 2018. For a more recent look at how the courts are continuing to compromise the Voting Rights Act, see Lyle Denniston, “New Threat Rising to Voting Rights Act,” *Constitution Daily* (National Constitution Center),

To pose the Woman Question in regard to Scorsese's films carries us into the gory guts of America's history and enables us to see how Scorsese's focus on masculinity functions as both a depiction of and warning about the toxicity bred by the anxious pursuit of White masculinity as the preeminent sign of social success. The religious dimensions of his films work in two ways. In the first, women are positioned as religious sites of purity and affective healing in ways that simply double down on the White masculine dominance that defines modernity. In the second, however, and what maintains Scorsese's compelling salience, the films pull from and angle against Catholicism in ways that heighten modernity's contradictions and complicate the desires and actions of his troubled male protagonists. Scorsese is not a feminist and he remains relatively unschooled about the racism endemic to our society, and yet he skillfully feels the contours of modernity's terms and contradictions and he sends his protagonists directly into the breach. That recognition or transformation says less about Scorsese and more about the tenacious bulldog bite of racist modernity, which differently implicates us all.

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PART 3

Scorsese and Religion: A Selective Filmography



The Last Temptation of Christ: Scorsese's Jesus among Ordinary Saints

Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch

The Last Temptation of Christ (1988) is one of the most controversial films in the history of cinema. Martin Scorsese's long struggle to see this picture realized and the vehement reactions his decidedly human depiction of Jesus inspired are well documented.¹ Many theologians and theologically sensitive film critics have castigated the film for what they deem its heretical Christology. Lloyd Baugh, for example, accuses Scorsese of going far beyond his source material to diminish the character of Jesus and to suggest "a profound and unbridgeable gap between his humanity and his being the Son of God."² Steven Greydanus charges the filmmaker with producing a portrait of Christ that "is utterly antithetical to Christian belief and sentiment," a representation not merely emphasizing Jesus' humanity but "effectively contradicting his divinity."³

Nevertheless, a few commentators have defended Scorsese's theological vision. According to Christopher Deacy, "*The Last Temptation* does not deny Christ's divinity, but, in contradistinction to the traditional Christ epic, it stresses the *unity* between the divine and human natures such that, as an example and pioneer, Christ can fulfill the function of redeemer through already having undergone what it means to be fully human."⁴ Graham Holderness also

1 See, for example, Lawrence S. Friedman, *The Cinema of Martin Scorsese* (New York: Continuum, 1997), 152–54. The film's source material, Nikos Kazantzakis's novel *O teleftaios peirasmós* (1951), was equally controversial. The Greek Orthodox Church nearly excommunicated Kazantzakis as a result of this novel, the Catholic Church placed it on the Vatican's Index of Forbidden Texts, and conservative Protestants in the U.S. attempted to have it banned from local libraries (Darren J.N. Middleton, ed., *Scandalizing Jesus: Kazantzakis's The Last Temptation of Christ Fifty Years On* (New York: Continuum, 2005), xvi).

2 Lloyd Baugh, "Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*: A Critical Reassessment of Its Sources, Its Theological Problems, and Its Impact on the Public," in *Scandalizing Jesus: Kazantzakis's The Last Temptation of Christ Fifty Years On*, ed. Darren J.N. Middleton (New York: Continuum, 2005), 188.

3 Steven D. Greydanus, "*The Last Temptation of Christ*: An Essay in Film Criticism and Faith," *Decent Films*, 2000, www.decentfilms.com/articles/lasttemptation.

4 Christopher Deacy, *Screen Christologies: Redemption and the Medium of Film* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001), 87.

applauds Scorsese, maintaining that in *Last Temptation* “flesh and spirit can find a possible, though never easy or painless, reconciliation. This truly is, as far as the world of art is concerned, incarnation or the Word become flesh.”⁵

These diametrically opposed evaluations of Scorsese’s Christology raise questions concerning how any filmmaker (or artist or novelist, for that matter) might portray Jesus as both God and man. Might this be too much to ask of an audiovisual medium with an average two-hour run time when theologians have grappled for centuries to adequately articulate what Kierkegaard famously called “the absolute paradox” of the incarnation? Christian doctrine affirms the hypostatic union of two natures (divine and human) in the one person of Jesus, who is of one substance with the Father. Moreover, the Council of Chalcedon proclaimed “the Christ in his humanity is like us in all things except sin.”⁶ One wonders whether this kind of Jesus can make a plausible, or even very interesting, film character.

Questions might also be raised about Jesus’ understanding of his own identity and purpose. Simon Gaine recently asked whether Jesus was “blessed from the very first moment of the incarnation with the vision of the essence of the triune God in his human mind?”⁷ He notes that while Catholic theologians up to the late 1950s followed Aquinas in answering this question in the affirmative, post-conciliar theologians express concerns that this view might compromise Christ’s humanity. As early as 1961, Karl Rahner contended that such a view seemed “to be contrary to the real humanity of and historical nature of Our Lord.”⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar worried “that to introduce the beatific vision into Christ’s soul would render it no longer a credible human soul.”⁹ These theologians—much like Scorsese—preferred to speak of Jesus’ self-understanding in terms of growth and maturation (cf. Luke 2:40).

Scorsese charged into this “doctrinal minefield with reckless abandon”¹⁰ when he chose to make his Jesus film an intimate character study rather than a traditional epic. Unlike an epic film marked by reverence and pageantry, a character study requires a protagonist susceptible to temptation who undergoes development within a dramatic storyline. Scorsese complained that biblical epics like *The Greatest Story Ever Told* or *King of Kings* suffered from an

5 Graham Holderness, *Rewriting Jesus: Christ in Twentieth Century Fiction and Film* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 51.

6 Simon Gaine, *Did the Savior See the Father? Christ, Salvation, and the Vision of God* (London: T&T Clark, 2015), 144.

7 *Ibid.*, 3.

8 *Ibid.*, 4.

9 *Ibid.*, 129.

10 Holderness, 47.

“antiseptic quality, ... a hermetically sealed holiness that didn’t teach us anything new about Jesus.”¹¹ Shot in his usual documentary realist style enhanced by moments of expressionistic distortion, Scorsese’s film was intended to “tear away at all those old Hollywood films ... and create a Jesus you could maybe talk to, question, get to know.”¹² Prior films had treated the Christ like a sacred object that could be seen and experienced only from an external point of view, while his consciousness remained an inaccessible sacred space. Scorsese violated this taboo by giving viewers direct access to Jesus’ thoughts and emotions. The result is a depiction of the incarnate Christ as a fully round character who struggles, doubts, and evolves over the course of the film.

In the pages that follow, I will argue that Scorsese’s Christology—as explicitly depicted in *Last Temptation*, but anticipated in earlier Christ-figure films—coheres in many ways with post-conciliar discussions of Jesus’ nature and messianic self-consciousness. First, I will briefly consider the ways in which many of Scorsese’s earlier films anticipate important themes in *Last Temptation*. This analysis reveals the filmmaker’s sustained theological preoccupations and provides an interpretive context for the cinematic portrait of Jesus that he ultimately creates. I will then situate *The Last Temptation of Christ* within Scorsese’s larger body of work as an *auteur* director and analyze the Christology this film creates.

1 Ordinary Saints or Jesus on the (Mean) Streets

Though often dismissed by critics as an artistic misstep, *Last Temptation* was for Scorsese perhaps his most important film, one he had anticipated making since he first storyboarded the Stations of the Cross at age ten.¹³ One might even say that Scorsese spent the first two decades of his professional career making secular drafts of *Last Temptation*.¹⁴ The Catholicism of his childhood provided a conceptual framework for his notions of sin, suffering, and redemption, as well as a set of visually moving images associated with crucifixion and

11 Both of these 1960s Jesus films receive a brief mention in a conversation between cinephile J.R. (aka Charlie) and “the Girl” in Scorsese’s *Who’s That Knocking at My Door?* (Ian Christie and David Thompson, eds., *Scorsese on Scorsese* (London: Faber & Faber, 1996), 133.

12 David Ehrenstein, *The Scorsese Picture* (New York: Carol Publications, 1992), 109.

13 Richard Blake, *After Image: The Indelible Catholic Imagination of Six American Filmmakers* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2000), 26.

14 Richard Corliss, “Body and Blood: An Interview with Martin Scorsese,” *Film Comment* 24, no. 5 (September–October 1988): 42.

martyrdom. These ideas captured Scorsese's imagination and shaped almost every picture he made. Throughout his oeuvre, though especially in *Last Temptation*, we see the filmmaker striving to depict an accessible, genuinely human Christ(-figure) who struggles to reconcile spirit and flesh.

Several of Scorsese's earlier films cohere thematically with *Last Temptation*. Especially notable is an early semi-autobiographical trilogy (consisting of the unfilmed screenplay *Jerusalem, Jerusalem!*, *Who's That Knocking on My Door?*, and *Mean Streets*), which explores one man's struggle between flesh and spirit as he ages from adolescence into adulthood.¹⁵ In addition, *Taxi Driver*, *Raging Bull*, and *Last Temptation* (all written by screenwriter Paul Schrader) are often considered together. Schrader himself has described these three collaborations as a triptych on the theme of purgation through suffering.¹⁶ In all of these films, we find recurring motifs that would find full expression in *Last Temptation*.¹⁷

First, all of these films operate from the subjective viewpoint of tortured, alienated protagonists who are torn between carnal and spiritual desires. Charlie Cappa (Harvey Keitel), the protagonist in the *Mean Streets* trilogy,¹⁸ confesses to a priest his struggle with masturbation as an adolescent, is unable as a young adult to have sex with his girlfriend amid the religious artifacts that fill his parents' bedroom, and in later adulthood guiltily engages in an affair with his single neighbor. *Taxi Driver*'s Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro) regularly visits a pornographic movie theater, yet he is disgusted by the sex and filth that he sees from the driver's seat of his cab and longs to clean up the city. *Raging Bull*'s Jake LaMotta (De Niro) cheats on his wife but ritually abstains from sex while preparing for a fight.

It is notable that all of these films exhibit a tendency to reduce "sin" to sins of the flesh—a sexual temptation represented by pinup posters, exotic dancers, prostitutes, and other promiscuous "broads." Each male protagonist

15 Scorsese described *Mean Streets* as a "religious statement" that asks whether one can be a saint in a fallen world where violence and suffering are the norm (Friedman, 12).

16 Ibid., 63. Scorsese and Schrader later return to this theme in *Bringing Out the Dead* (1999), and Scorsese revisits it without Schrader in *Silence* (2016).

17 Because these films are thoroughly discussed elsewhere in this volume, I will not do so here. I assume that readers are familiar with the storyline and content of these films.

18 This character was called J.R. in *Jerusalem, Jerusalem!* and in *Who's That Knocking on My Door?* *Mean Streets* changes the protagonist's name to Charlie, which I will call him throughout this chapter for the sake of clarity. Harvey Keitel plays the character in both realized films. Although *Jerusalem, Jerusalem!* remains unfilmed, the script includes production notes that permit us to visualize the form it would have taken. It is described in detail by Robert Casillo, *Gangster Priest: The Italian American Cinema of Martin Scorsese* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 133–141.

dichotomously stereotypes female characters as either immoral whores or virginal saints.¹⁹ When Charlie's girlfriend in *Who's That Knocking?* confides that she had once been raped, he questions the veracity of her story and considers her "defiled" due to her lack of virginity. Likewise, his older incarnation in *Mean Streets* cannot conceive of his promiscuous neighbor as a potential wife because of their own sexual relationship. To him, "broads you mess around with" are not women you marry. Travis Bickle idealizes Betsy (Cybill Shepherd), a beautiful woman in a white dress, as an untouchable angel separate from the urban corruption that surrounds her. But when she rejects him, he abandons her to "die in a hell like the rest of them," and a twelve-year-old prostitute, named Iris (Jodie Foster), replaces her in his imagination as an innocent he must rescue. LaMotta is also unable to relate to women beyond the virgin/whore complex and remains ever suspicious that his wife might be cheating on him.

Second, each of Scorsese's protagonists comes to understand redemption as inextricably connected to suffering. Throughout the *Mean Streets* trilogy, Charlie identifies strongly with the Passion of Christ and Christian martyrdom. As he passes through the Stations of the Cross as an adolescent, his imagination conjures a modernized Passion story in the streets of Lower Manhattan's East Side. At the end of *Who's That Knocking?*, a broken-hearted Charlie contemplates religious statuary in a church. Scorsese cuts from one statue to another, favoring sadomasochistic images of penitential suffering. Particularly striking is St. Lucia holding her eyeballs on a plate having plucked them out to avoid breaking her vow of chastity.²⁰ When he kisses the wounded feet of Christ, the young man's lips come away bloody. In *Mean Streets*, Charlie resolves that pain is the only true penance and holds his finger over a flame whenever confronted by temptation. He also appoints himself the personal savior of a reckless young delinquent, Johnny Boy (De Niro), whom he views as the cross that he must bear. The trilogy ends with symbolic crucifixion when, trying to help Johnny Boy flee from a loan shark, Charlie is shot through the palm of his hand. In *Taxi Driver*, Travis Bickle undergoes (and inflicts) enormous physical suffering to save young Iris from a life of prostitution. *Raging Bull's* Jake LaMotta seems to

19 *Who's That Knocking at My Door?* includes a scene that clearly associates motherhood with the Virgin. In it the image of an Italian mother (played by Scorsese's own mother) is reflected in mirror by a statue of Madonna and Child as she prepares a dish traditionally served on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. Catherine O'Brien, *Martin Scorsese's Divine Comedy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 128.

20 *Ibid.*, 19.

accept blows in the boxing ring almost subconsciously as punishment for the sins he commits outside the ring.²¹

Lest audiences miss this motif of redemption through suffering, Scorsese carefully imbues his ordinary saints with religious significance that identifies them in a variety of ways as very human Christ-figures. In *Mean Streets*, Charlie officiates at a mock Mass during a party before he and a friend launch into a playful recitation of the Passion narrative. An earlier version of the screenplay for this film reveals that Scorsese originally intended that the party be a masquerade, which Charlie would attend dressed as the crucified Christ.²²

Scorsese exercises more subtlety with his Christ-figuring in *Taxi Driver* and *Raging Bull*. Seeing himself as a righteous man trapped in a sin-filled world, Travis Bickle passes prophetic judgment on the inhabitants of New York. He describes the city and its people as “sick” and “venal” and longs for a day when “a *real* rain will come and wash all the scum off the streets.” He dubs himself “God’s lonely man” (quoting Thomas Wolfe), and his loneliness deteriorates into psychosis. Travis grows into his redemptive role as he develops a strong but distorted sense of personal morality. A vague desire to “do something, ya’ know?” slowly evolves into resolved and deadly purpose. He purchases a small arsenal of guns and undergoes a ritual of purification before undertaking what he has gradually come to understand as his messianic role. He is God’s agent, willing to sacrifice his own life to rescue Iris, whose situation epitomizes for him all that is wrong in the city.

It is debatable whether the inarticulate Jake LaMotta in *Raging Bull* ever comes to understand himself as a suffering Christ-figure. Scorsese, however, clearly sees the character in Christological terms, choosing to use boxing as an analogy of “the soul’s struggle for redemption.”²³ Scorsese’s camera movements and sound editing invest the film’s fight scenes with surreal religious associations. Trainers minister to LaMotta like priests, mingling water and blood as they sponge his battered body and anoint his many wounds. He voluntarily endures inhuman beatings as a form of crucifixion. His blood dripping from the ropes becomes sacramental.

Finally and most importantly, these films illustrate what has come to be celebrated as Scorsese’s sacramental vision.²⁴ His films reveal a world in which

21 Deacy, 121–22.

22 Casillo, 213.

23 Ibid., 228.

24 See, for example, Richard A. Blake, “Redeemed in Blood: The Sacramental Universe of Martin Scorsese,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 24: 1 (1996): 1–20; Michael Bliss, *The Word Made Flesh: Catholicism and Conflict in the Films of Martin Scorsese* (London:

“the spiritual is always immanent in the material, and the material always ready to split open to disclose its spiritual content.”²⁵ Spirituality and materiality continually interpenetrate in the cinematic imagination of this Catholic director. This would doubtless be a crucial consideration once Scorsese turned his directorial attention to the person in whom divinity and humanity were united, but a sacramental worldview is just as discernible in his earlier films.

Therefore, youthful Charlie’s visions of the Passion are concretized in the familiar and particular setting of the East Side. Scorsese’s New York stands in for the “Jerusalem” of the screenplay’s title.²⁶ Likewise, young Charlie is repeatedly distracted from the old priest’s moralizing by the beautiful landscape of the retreat center. This recognition of the spiritual in the material world provides a much-needed check on (perhaps even a critique of) the guilt-driven dualism of the priest’s penitential theology.

As an adult, Charlie rejects the Church’s penance in favor of making up for his sins “in the streets.” It is the streets, the tenements, the bar, and the boxing ring—not the Church—that provide the redemptive arena for all of Scorsese’s Christ-figures. In fact, the sacred is expressed most clearly and hopefully in Scorsese’s early films through the easy camaraderie of his male characters, especially when they are joyfully reciting the Mass with ordinary items—a scene that occurs in *Jerusalem, Jerusalem!* as well as *Mean Streets*.²⁷

The absence of such camaraderie in *Taxi Driver* and *Raging Bull* suggests the tortured isolation of these protagonists. Travis cannot connect with other taxi drivers at an all-night diner; he can only sit among them in awkward silence.²⁸ LaMotta destroys a potentially redemptive relationship with his brother, Joey (Joe Pesci), when he beats him senseless in a jealous rage. Scorsese shoots

Scarecrow Press, 1995), 92; Leo Braudy, “The Sacraments of Genre: Coppola, DePalma, Scorsese,” *Film Quarterly* 39: 3 (1986): 17–28.

25 Holderness, 51.

26 The title of the film (*Jerusalem, Jerusalem!*) is taken from Jesus’ lament over the holy city in Matt. 23:37 and Luke 13:24.

27 Scorsese borrowed this action from the opening scene of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, where the irreverent Buck Mulligan recites the Mass over a bowl of lather before shaving. In *Jerusalem, Jerusalem!*, the boys imitate the Mass with cups of tea in a Japanese restaurant. Scorsese empties the scene of its impiety and pairs it with joyous Vivaldi music making this a sacred moment bridging “the ecclesial and everyday worlds,” (Casillo, 134).

28 This situation appears to change in the film’s heroic coda. However, I read those scenes as a subjective wish-fulfillment fantasy sequence in which all the people in Travis Bickle’s life hail him as a hero. In this sense, it parallels the fantasy sequence at the end of *Last Temptation*. For a different interpretation of this sequence as a kind of “resurrection” for Travis see Deacy, 117–18.

LaMotta claustrophobically confined in a phone booth, after failing to reconnect with his brother through a telephone call. The ropes of a boxing ring or the walls of a cell also cut him off from the rest of the world, much as distorted point-of-view shots through a cab's rain-speckled windshield signify Travis's isolation.

These secular drafts, all of which were commercially successful and critically acclaimed, prepared Scorsese to tackle the one film project he had anticipated since the age of ten. In the ordinary saints Charlie Cappa, Travis Bickle, and Jake LaMotta, the director worked through many of his longstanding religious preoccupations. In *Last Temptation*, he created a "saint of blasphemy" based on the model that he had worked out in earlier films.

2 The Saint of Blasphemy

According to Paul Schrader, "Marty is fond of saying that *Taxi Driver* is my film and *Raging Bull* is De Niro's and *The Last Temptation of Christ* is his."²⁹ While *Last Temptation* might be closest to Scorsese's heart, it cannot be adequately understood apart from the rest of his film oeuvre, especially the projects discussed above. In them, the director cinematically fleshed out his notions of sin, suffering, and redemption. Yet Scorsese's exploration of flawed, alienated protagonists, who are torn between flesh and spirit and driven toward martyrdom, finds its apotheosis in *Last Temptation*.

While Scorsese affirmed Jesus' divinity and dual nature, he believed that the Catholic teachings of his youth—like traditional gospel films—had neglected Jesus' humanity, presenting a Christ so divine that he practically "glowed in the dark."³⁰ For such a Jesus, ordinary human temptations would present no challenge at all. Scorsese wanted to explore the Savior's full humanity by showing him struggle to resist temptation and experience uncertainty over his identity and purpose. This is what drew him to Kazantzakis's novel as source material. "I thought this neurotic—even psychotic—Jesus was not very different from the shifts of mood and psychology that you find glimpses of in the Gospels," he explained.³¹

The film opens with a selective quotation from the preface of Kazantzakis's novel. Given the importance of this epigraph for understanding the film that follows, it is worth quoting in full:

²⁹ Friedman, 8.

³⁰ Christie and Thompson, 124.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 116–17.

The dual substance of Christ—the yearning, so human, so superhuman, of man to attain God ... has always been a deep inscrutable mystery to me. My principle anguish and source of all my joys and sorrows from my youth onward has been the incessant, merciless battle between the spirit and the flesh ... and my soul is the arena where these two armies have clashed and met.

This quotation suggests that for Scorsese the film is as much an exploration of human nature as it is of the two natures of Jesus. Taking very seriously the incarnation, Scorsese (like Kazantzakis before him) assumes that Jesus' full humanity meant that he was subject to the same carnal/spiritual struggle that all human beings face. The full divinity of Jesus only makes him more tortured by the clash of those metaphorical armies, not less susceptible to human temptations. In other words, Scorsese's Christology is more Antiochene than Alexandrian insofar as the director accentuates Christ's humanity without denying his divinity.³²

Scorsese's Jesus (Willem Dafoe) is the director's most tortured and alienated protagonist. As in previous films, audiences are invited to share his point of view. The director employs a variety of devices to produce the film's intensely subjective feel. Because Scorsese keeps his camera in close proximity to his characters, Jesus frequently occupies much of the screen. Point-of-view shots make audiences see the world as he does. We are privy to his interior monologues and visions. We also share moments of aural subjectivity as Jesus hears ambient noises fade away or the footsteps of a potentially malevolent force following him. Movements of a shaky handheld camera communicate Jesus' disorientation. "I wanted to express the energy that Jesus had, that I wanted Willem to have, so we adopted a very fluid and almost nervous way of moving the camera," Scorsese recalls. "Because He was unsure of Himself, the camera would be hiding and creeping around Him, caught between following Him and, at the same time, trying to pull back enough so that you could see the landscape."³³

The film's opening shots express the strain that the incarnate Jesus experiences as he gradually becomes aware in adulthood of his divine nature and purpose. The camera rushes through an olive grove before, at the shriek of an eagle, cutting to bird's-eye (aka God's-eye) shot of Jesus lying on the ground

32 Scorsese's Antiochene theology was noted by Deacy, 86.

33 Christie and Thompson, 139.

in a fetal position.³⁴ A second cut shows Jesus at ground level with his nondescript brown robe blending into the landscape. These juxtaposed shots view Jesus from the dual perspectives of heaven and earth—visually representing his divine and human natures, while his prostrate form indicates that he has not yet fully apprehended his divinity.

Indeed, he seems to experience divinity as an unseen, antagonistic presence haunting him. It causes him to writhe upon the ground like a man possessed or in the throws of a seizure. In voiceover, Jesus claims that the feeling begins as “very tender, very loving.” But the human man is soon overwhelmed, and the tender feeling morphs into a painful sensation like a wild bird clawing at his scalp. “And then I remember,” he says. Exactly what he remembers we are not told. We do not hear the voices that Jesus later claims to have experienced, but we do hear the footsteps of an invisible stalker trailing behind him just before another seizure begins. The writhing Jesus once cries out “God!” and in voiceover avows, “God loves me. I know He loves me. I want Him to stop. I can’t take the pain.” Jesus clearly associates these attacks with his peculiar relationship to God, which he finds overwhelming at the beginning of the film.

He attempts to resist the dawning awareness of his divinity through ascetic practices—fasting, scourging himself, and wearing a nail studded belt. He also attempts to drive God away—“I want Him to hate me!”—by making crosses for the Romans. Yet, even these early scenes visually foreshadow his eventual redemptive purpose. Jesus measures a cross that he is fashioning by stretching his own arms across the beam. With his back to the camera, marks from self-flagellation remind viewers of the scourging he will one day endure. When he assists the Romans in crucifying a seditionist, he carries the crossbeam on his own shoulders through a jeering crowd in an ironic foreshadowing of the *Via Dolorosa*. Blood splatters across his face as the Jewish loyalist is nailed to the cross.³⁵

Like post-conciliar Catholic theologians, Scorsese suggests that the incarnate Jesus’ self-understanding developed only gradually.³⁶ Throughout most of the film he seems beset by doubts and uncertainty. Other characters repeatedly

34 Scorsese’s limited budget on *Last Temptation* only allowed the use of a jib-arm with a height limit of seven feet for high angles (O’Brien, 132).

35 This scene is one of many in which Scorsese appropriates and ironically revises iconic scenes from earlier Jesus films. Here an image (Jesus carrying a cross through a jeering crowd) that is typically associated with pathos-filled triumph becomes in *Last Temptation* an example of Jesus’ unconscious rebellion against his messianic calling.

36 A lapsed Catholic, Scorsese notes that he last went to confession in 1965. “I’ve been confessing most of the time since then on film,” he later recalled (David Resin, “Interview with Martin Scorsese,” *Playboy* (April 1991): 57).

ask him questions focused on his identity and purpose. Who are you? What kind of man are you? Are you sure? Are you ready? His answers are always faltering and hesitant. "I don't know. I'm struggling," he says. And struggle he does. When Judas (Harvey Keitel) confesses, "I thought you might be the one," Jesus seems surprised and incredulous at the suggestion.

He seeks spiritual direction first at a desert monastery and later from John the Baptist.³⁷ Jeroboam, one of the monastery brothers, enviously points out that Jesus' experience of God differs from his own. "God actually makes himself known to you!" he marvels. "I don't know what God wants from me. ... Sometimes I think I feel Him but I'm never really sure. But you always know!" Jesus merely scoffs at the idea that his situation is enviable and confesses to an acute awareness of his own sinfulness, which his exceptional intimacy with God only highlights.

Some critics of the film, like Steven Greydanus, objected strongly to the notion of a Jesus who is sinful and requires forgiveness, claiming that here Scorsese diverged irreversibly from orthodox theology.³⁸ But for Scorsese, Jesus must have had the potential to sin to be truly human. Moreover, the "sins" he confesses at the monastery are almost all internal emotions (pride, fear, lust) not translated into external action. He shares humanity's fallen state but retains the choice of whether or not to act upon his baser desires. In the words of theologian Brian Hebblethwaite, he is through the incarnation "subjecting himself to the limitations of real humanity in order to achieve his purposes of revelation and reconciliation."³⁹ For Scorsese, this makes Jesus more relatable. "He believes He's the worst sinner in the world," the director explained. "I felt this was something I could relate to: this was a Jesus you could sit down with, have dinner or a drink with."⁴⁰

Moreover, Jesus' sojourn at the monastery is bracketed by miracles confirming that he is no ordinary man. First, the monastery's dead master greets him upon arrival like an honored visitor. "I know who you are," the dead man pronounces mysteriously. At the end of the segment, apple seeds that Jesus tosses to the ground instantaneously become a fruit-bearing tree. These miracles

37 The monastery is anachronistically portrayed like a settlement of the early Christian fathers, whereas the John the Baptist scene resembles a Pentecostal revival (Stephenson Humphries-Brooks, *Cinematic Savior: Hollywood's Making of the American Christ* (Westport: Praeger, 2006), 93).

38 Greydanus, "The Last Temptation of Christ."

39 Brian Hebblethwaite, *The Incarnation: Collected Essays in Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 22.

40 Christie and Thompson, 117.

begin to convince Jesus to accept the messianic role that he does not yet fully understand.

When Jesus leaves the monastery, he enters the first of three successive stages in his evolving messianic self-understanding. As he slowly comes to terms with his identity and redemptive role, Kazantzakis's/Scorsese's Jesus transitions from pity for humanity (Love), to a prophetic demand for justice (The Ax), to a full realization of his true purpose (The Cross). These stages are cumulative and progress in a logical order to reveal the paradox between God's love for and judgment of a fallen world. Only the cross can resolve this paradox and set such a world to rights.

Having progressed to the love/pity stage in his self-understanding, Jesus stops a mob from stoning Mary Magdalene (Barbara Hershey) for sleeping with Romans and working on the Sabbath (cf. Jn 8:1-11). "I used to think God was angry too, but not anymore!" he tells them. "He used to jump on me like a wild bird and dig his claws into my head. Then one morning He came to me. He blew over me like a cool breeze and said 'Stand up.' And here I am." Delivering his longest sermon, Scorsese's Jesus tells the Parable of the Sower before moving into a colloquial version of Luke's Beatitudes. He identifies the sower's seed as love and those who receive and express it as blessed. His audience, however, misconstrues his message and begins a riot calling for Roman blood.

This ill-fated sermon is one of many scenes in which Scorsese articulates his (Antiochene/post-conciliar) Christology by appropriating and re-visioning iconic moments from more traditional (Alexandrian/pre-conciliar) Jesus films. In Nicholas Ray's *King of Kings*, for example, Jesus stands authoritatively atop a mountain to deliver his first sermon with ponderous solemnity to an enraptured multitude. Scorsese locates Jesus in a more intimate setting, and places him on the same level as a much smaller crowd. He speaks haltingly, "seeming at times to plead for approval from his audience."⁴¹ Rather than gaze at Jesus in enraptured silence or raise questions that are easily and authoritatively answered, the audience in *Last Temptation* jeers at Jesus and fundamentally misconstrues his message. In contradistinction to the glow-in-the-dark Jesus of traditional cinema, Scorsese's Christ is unambiguously human.

Jesus' messianic consciousness and message continue to evolve after his encounter with John the Baptist. Scorsese films this scene with disturbing zooms, oblique camera angles, jump cuts, pounding music, and frenetic movement. But, as Jesus and the Baptist come face to face, the music and singing

⁴¹ Deacy, 86.

fade to leave only the sound of rushing water.⁴² The Baptist insists that love is not enough; God demands action born from anger at injustice. “Look around you—plague, war corruption,” he argues. “The tree is rotten. You have to take the ax and cut it down!” Unconvinced, Jesus goes into the desert to demand answers from the God of Israel but instead meets Satan, who tempts him in three forms.

The first desert temptation takes the form of a snake that speaks seductively with Mary Magdalene’s voice.⁴³ “You’re afraid of being alone,” she says. “You’re just like Adam. He called me, and I took one of his ribs and made it into a woman.” An earlier vision at the monastery had featured twin snakes (representing the carnal and spiritual forces warring inside Jesus) that also spoke with Magdalene’s voice. More snakes and other reptiles decorate her home/brothel, and her body is adorned with leafy tattoos. These images are, of course, drawn from Genesis 3 and the long interpretive history that associates Eve (and, thus, all women) with temptation.

In keeping with the virgin/whore dichotomy in Scorsese’s other films, most of the women in *Last Temptation* (excluding Jesus’ mother) become ciphers for the flesh that he must deny. Both film and novel are structured around traditional dualisms: spirituality/sexuality, suffering/pleasure, and male/female. But Scorsese goes beyond the novel in making sex, marriage, and domesticity Jesus’s primary temptations.⁴⁴

The film places female nudity on display, subjecting Magdalene and others to the voyeuristic gaze of male characters, while obscuring male nudity.⁴⁵ This tendency is especially evident in the film’s famous brothel scene. Whereas in

42 Similar auditory hallucinations occur later in this film, just before the fantasy sequence on the cross and in *Taxi Driver* when Travis Bickle sits among his fellow cabbies in an all-night diner. For Travis (and film audiences) all sounds fade out except that of tablets fizzing in a glass of water.

43 Scorsese follows the novel in making Magdalene and Judas childhood friends of Jesus. It is strongly implied that Jesus was betrothed to Magdalene and that she became a prostitute after he broke the betrothal. For this reason, Jesus feels responsible for Magdalene’s circumstances. The biblical Mary Magdalene is described neither as a prostitute nor as a promiscuous woman.

44 According to Margaret Miles, *Last Temptation* “reflects a modernistic reduction of all sins to sins of the flesh,” (Margaret R. Miles, *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies* (Boston: Beacon, 1996), 37). However, I understand the film to include domesticity as part of Jesus’ temptation both here and during his final vision from the cross. Marriage and family would constitute divergence from his messianic purpose.

45 Scorsese avoids frontal male nudity in the film’s two crucifixion scenes and at the vigil for the monastery master. He has no such reluctance to display female nudity in ways that go beyond the demands of the novel. Peter T. Chattaway, “Battling the Flesh: Sexuality and Spirituality in *The Last Temptation of Christ*,” in *Scandalizing Jesus: Kazantzakis’s The*

the novel Magdalene's customers wait in an outside courtyard, Scorsese places them inside her chambers where they sit in silence watching her have sex with one client after another. Repeated point-of-view shots underline the voyeurism as the camera cuts from attentive faces to the sexual acts performed before them. Only a thin veil of material separates Magdalene's bed from her audience, connecting this sequence visually to the pornographic movie theater scenes in *Taxi Driver*.

Scorsese explained his choice to place Jesus inside the brothel by saying:

[T]he point of the scene was to show the proximity of sexuality to Jesus, the occasion of sin. ... And I wanted to show the barbarism at the time, the degradation to Mary. It's better that the door is open. Better there is no door. The scene isn't done for titillation; it's to show the pain on her face, the compassion Jesus has for her as he fights his sexual desire for her.⁴⁶

This extended scene suggests Jesus's conflicted desires as he watches the carnal temptations on display. Yet, he refuses to indulge his sexual desires just as he resists the first desert temptation.

The second desert temptation takes the form of a lion that speaks in the voice of Judas. The lion of Judah offers power and an earthly kingdom, which Jesus easily resists. The use of Judas' voice in this scene is interesting. Just as Scorsese associates femininity with temptation, he associates masculinity with power. Scorsese's Jesus is defined in part by comparison to a very masculine Judas. To an extent *Last Temptation*, like *Mean Streets*, is a buddy film with complimentary characters that are opposites in every way. Where Judas is articulate, confident, and physical, Jesus is tongue-tied, indecisive, and passive. Scorsese reduces the other disciples to an indistinct mass, so that Judas becomes Jesus' closest confidant as well as his conscience and enforcer.⁴⁷ Jesus seems dependent on and sometimes even submissive to his friend. Judas often occupies a dominant position within the frame during their conversations, standing over Jesus or cradling him in his arms like a child or a lover.⁴⁸ Like

Last Temptation of Christ Fifty Years On, ed. Darren J.N. Middleton (New York: Continuum, 2005), 166–67.

46 Richard Corliss, "... And Blood," in *Martin Scorsese Interviews*, ed. Peter Brunette (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 121.

47 Humphries-Brooks, 85–86.

48 Some interpreters describe the relationship between these two male characters as homoerotic. See, for example, Baugh, 179. However, Casillo convincingly argues that physically affectionate behavior among men is typical of Italian American culture, as well as

Charlie in *Mean Streets*, Judas assumes responsibility for his rather helpless friend, even though it means defying orders from the mob/Zelot nationalists to do so.⁴⁹

One might reasonably wonder whether both Keitel's Judas and Dafoe's Jesus function as aspects of Scorsese's onscreen alter ego, as did Charlie and Johnny Boy.⁵⁰ Judas represents a more traditional model of masculinity as opposed to the relatively passive and effeminate Jesus. The former struggles to free Israel from Roman oppression, whereas the latter wallows in soul-searching angst. The two argue over whether Jesus' ministry should prioritize freeing the body (Judas) or the spirit (Jesus). Judas, thus, represents another carnal temptation (specifically, the use of physical violence in socio-political reform), which Jesus must overcome.

The third desert temptation takes the form of a flame which Jesus first calls "archangel" and then "Satan." This temptation appeals to Jesus's vanity, tempting him to misuse his divine powers to rule the world at Satan's side. When Jesus again resists, he sees an apple tree whose fruit is filled with blood. At the foot of the apple tree is the ax that represents the second phase of his messianic evolution.

Jesus wields this ax in the famous bleeding heart scene for which there is no parallel in the novel. Scorsese adds an expressionistic feel by drenching the scene in red light. Jesus emerges suddenly from the darkness, startling his disciples. Removing the heart from his chest, he invites them to join him in a war against Satan.⁵¹ Blood, always an important symbol in Scorsese's films, drips from the organ into a pool below staining the water red. "I believed in love. Now I believe in this!" he shouts as he lifts the ax. Thus, Jesus takes on the Baptist's prophetic mantle and the identity of a militaristic messiah.

of ancient Near Eastern culture. He claims that Scorsese's predilection toward masculine friendships is more properly termed homophilic rather than homoerotic (Casillo, 163).

49 Judas is sent by fellow nationalists to assassinate Jesus whom they view as a Roman collaborator. Instead he becomes Jesus's first and closest disciple, although he threatens to kill him should he stray from a messianic path. Later another nationalist (Saul) assassinates Lazarus. Scorsese depicts this illicit anti-Roman organization much like the mob in his gangster films.

50 Ebert equates Judas with Scorsese, noting the Keitel was his screen proxy in earlier films (Roger Ebert, *Scorsese by Ebert* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 104).

51 Catholic sacred heart iconography represents Jesus's redeeming love. Baugh criticizes Scorsese for literalizing and misinterpreting both this imagery and transubstantiation at the Last Supper where the wine seems literally to become blood (Baugh, 75.) However, this criticism overlooks the possibility that expressionistic scenes like this one are visionary departures from the characters' everyday reality.

The first battle in this war against Satan targets demons and illness. In a surrealist scene paired with slow motion and rhythmic music, Jesus performs several exorcisms before collapsing with exhaustion into the arms of Judas. However, the miracle worker is immediately rejected in Nazareth. A well-to-do crowd dismisses him as the son of Mary and jokes that he must have been driven insane by unspent semen.⁵²

The next major transition in Jesus' messianic consciousness begins with the raising of Lazarus. Although this miracle appears only as a second-hand report in the novel, Scorsese transforms it into one of the film's longest sequences.⁵³ We hear tumultuous sounds of mourning, as Jesus bids his disciples to remove the stone. Scorsese does not shy away from the reality of human decomposition, directing the cast to react as though a horrible smell emerges from the tomb. The darkness of the cave and the sound of buzzing flies further highlight the specter of death. The next shot is framed from inside the grave as Jesus commands Lazarus to rise. A decomposing hand shoots out toward him and almost pulls Jesus into the tomb before Lazarus emerges in grave clothes. These almost gothic elements and Dafoe's expression of fear and astonishment depart from the usual cinematic staging of this iconic scene. Scorsese explains his intention for these unconventional choices: "The minute Christ raises Lazarus, He knows that He is God. And with Lazarus's hand clasping His, pulling Him into the tomb, it gave a sense of death pulling Him in, an image of the struggle between life and death. Death which He will—despite being God—have to suffer as a man."⁵⁴ It also helps him begin to realize what his own messianic vocation will cost him.

Armed with knowledge of his divinity, Jesus takes the action that will lead to his death: cleansing the temple. Scorsese divides this action into two separate sequences. The first confrontation with temple priesthood seems designed to provoke. Jesus rejects the law and, proclaiming himself the Saint of Blasphemy, claims identity with God.⁵⁵ The second ends with stigmata, foreshadowing the

52 Jesus's celibacy mirrors the sexual frustration of many Scorsese protagonists. According to Schrader, the first three films he wrote for Scorsese are "all of the same cloth: they're about lonely, self-deluded, sexually inactive people," (Friedman, 153–54).

53 Scorsese claims to have written this all-important scene himself (Christie and Thompson, 143).

54 *Ibid.* Whereas the scene typically is intended to confirm Jesus' divinity for audiences, Scorsese makes the scene of moment of self-realization for Jesus.

55 The temple courtyard flows with sacrificial blood licked up by dogs. Much has been made of the film's numerous images of animal slaughter and sacrifice. Scorsese has expressed fascination with the association between bloodletting and religion. He describes the move from human sacrifice to animal sacrifice to Jesus's crucifixion to the sacrifice of the Mass as a "civilizing" of religions (*Ibid.*, 118).

cross. When the temple assault does not result in quick and easy martyrdom, Jesus directs a reluctant Judas to betray him, revealing in flashback that he has been convinced through a vision of the prophet Isaiah (Scorsese) that his sacrificial death is necessary for humanity's redemption.⁵⁶

In this pivotal scene, Scorsese makes his post-conciliar Christology explicit. Judas complains, "Every day you have a different plan! First it's love, then it's the ax, and now you have to die! What good could that do?" Jesus responds, "At first I didn't understand myself ... I can't help it. God only talks to me a little at a time. He only tells me as much as I need to know. ... Now I finally understand! All my life I've been followed—by voices, by footsteps, by shadows. And do you know what the shadow is? The cross. I have to die on the cross and I have to die willingly." At this point in the film, he finally embraces his messianic role as expressed by a selective quotation of Isaiah 53 (verses 4a and 7): "He has borne our faults, he was wounded for our transgressions, yet he opened not his mouth. Despised and rejected by all, he went forward without resisting like a lamb led to the slaughter." Jesus even realizes that resurrection will follow in three days.

However, this does not lessen his humanity as illustrated in Gethsemane, which Scorsese links visually and thematically to the film's first scene. Once again the camera moves through an olive grove as we follow Jesus into the garden. Again the camera angle shifts to a God's-eye view looking down upon his kneeling form. But instead of cutting abruptly to an earthly shot, this time the camera tracks slowly downward to create a head-and-shoulders shot as though God has descended from heaven to sit before His son. Indeed, Jesus prays, "Father in heaven, Father on earth, the world that you've created, that we can see, is beautiful. But the world that you've created that we can't see is beautiful too. ... I don't know which is more beautiful."

Scooping up two handfuls of earth and inhaling its fragrance, he echoes the Eucharistic words, "This is my body too." These words did not appear in the novel but were added by Scorsese to what is perhaps the most sacramental moment in the film. Along with camera angles and *mise-en-scène*, they overcome Kazantzakis's irreconcilable dualism between spirit and flesh, heaven and earth.⁵⁷ Scorsese's Jesus does not leave behind his connection with the earth as he becomes aware of his divine nature and purpose. He never renounces the created world and all its pleasures in order to embrace an abstract divinity.

56 Scorsese often appears in cameo roles in his films as the instigator for his protagonists' redemptive action. He plays the shooter in *Mean Streets*, the jealous husband in *Taxi Driver*, the make-up artist in *Raging Bull*, and Isaiah in *Last Temptation*.

57 Holderness, 51.

The film moves quickly toward crucifixion. The redemptive suffering Jesus undergoes throughout the film, reaches a crescendo at the cross. Scorsese makes full use of his directorial art to accentuate the agony of his protagonist aesthetically. Prior to Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, Scorsese's *Last Temptation* was the bloodiest and most graphic Passion ever shot. Yet, unlike Gibson, Scorsese does not focus on blood and gore for its own sake. The wounded Jesus becomes an object of devotion, considered from all angles, as the camera pans and switches from full-shot to close up. Scorsese films the *Via Dolorosa* in slow motion to the accompaniment of wailing music. To imitate the visual aesthetic of Bosch's sixteenth-century painting *Christ Carrying the Cross*, Scorsese tied ropes around the jeering crowd surrounding Jesus "so they could only move one step at a time."⁵⁸

The infamous final temptation sequence is introduced by another auditory allusion. Noise crescendos as the camera turns ninety degrees onto its side and Jesus shouts, "Father! Why have you forsaken me?" Sudden silence descends as the crowd is muted and the Tempter appears. Here Scorsese makes several significant changes to the novel. First, he imagines the Tempter as an angelic little girl rather than a being that constantly changes form. After removing the crown and nails, she kisses Jesus' wounds (echoing Catholic devotional practice) and leads him away from the cross. Magdalene too anoints Jesus' wounds and bathes him in a reverse *pietà*. These redemptive elements in Scorsese's film are all absent from novel. Graham Holderness notes "the poetic impact of this moment ... has all the beauty of a renaissance deposition together with the highly charged eroticism of medieval Catholic martyrology."⁵⁹ Green vistas replace the previously barren landscape, and languid long shots replace tormented close-ups. What is deceptive illusion in the novel becomes a sacramental moment in the film, depicting the "reconciliation of spirit and flesh in a sacramental vision of a re-enchanted world."⁶⁰

In the fantasy sequence, Jesus lives out his life as an ordinary man married first to Magdalene and then to the sisters, Mary and Martha. Only on his deathbed, does Judas recall him to the cross where he must fulfill his messianic role. The elderly Jesus struggles back toward the cross, begging God to accept him although he was tempted to forsake his redemptive duty. He abruptly awakens from this death-throes fantasy on the cross. As he dies triumphantly, red and white lights fill the screen to the sound of ululation and bells. Scorsese later

58 The crucifixion scene was inspired by details in *Biblical Archaeology Review* and Da Messina's fifteenth-century painting *The Crucifixion* (Christie and Thompson, 138).

59 Holderness, 61.

60 *Ibid.*, 57.

revealed that this ending came about entirely by accident when the crucifixion footage was exposed to light.⁶¹ The resulting damage was so striking he decided to leave it in as a symbol of resurrection.

3 Scorsese's Christology

Scorsese's moral sensitivity and obsession with guilt and penance are evident in all his films. More than anything, this personal vision sets him apart as an *auteur* filmmaker. An examination of his larger body of work reveals that the protagonists in Scorsese's films tend to be flawed and tortured, torn between spiritual and carnal desires. Yet, the director resists imagining a stark dualism between flesh and spirit. Spirituality and materiality also interpenetrate one another in his films. Divine things can only be revealed in and through the material world. All the more so in *Last Temptation* is Jesus' divinity revealed in his humanity and in the effort he must exert to overcome human temptations.

Cinematic depictions of Jesus will inevitably court controversy. However, the strangeness of *Last Temptation* has been magnified by the tendency to interpret this picture primarily within the Jesus film tradition. Seen within the context of its director's larger oeuvre, the film comes into focus as a corrective to the mostly divine Jesus of Scorsese's youth. In its place Scorsese crafts a Jesus who is fully human as well as fully divine. This is a Jesus more or less in keeping with the Antiochene trend of post-conciliar Catholic Christology.

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⁶¹ O'Brien, 149.

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Scorsese's *Kundun* as Catholic Encounter with the Dalai Lama and His Tibetan Dharma¹

Kerry P.C. San Chirico

1 Introduction

It may seem odd to begin a chapter dedicated to Martin Scorsese's *Kundun* (1997) with recourse to words about, not the Dalai Lama, but George Harrison. Yet, in the 2011 Scorsese documentary of Harrison, Terry Gilliam reflects on what he considers to be the most significant animating force in Harrison's life, one for whom Hindu meditative practices and devotion were more than a passing 60's fancy:

I've always been intrigued by George's quote spirituality, which is absolutely essential to him—you know, "Living in the Material World" [the title of a Harrison album]. So he was caught living in these two worlds—a very spiritual world and a very material world. And they're both, I think, related in the sense that they're both about finding the beauty in the real world, to make the world as beautiful as it can be. And that's what I think he was doing in Friar Park. He created such exquisite beauty there, but there was nothing airy-fairy about it. It wasn't about snapping his fingers and having somebody else do it for him. He had to do the work.

This bind of living in two worlds, of being "caught," is a thread weaving through many of Scorsese's films. *Kundun*, the biopic of the fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, plays upon this thread. We may term this two-world bind as the very struggle for salvation, or more properly when speaking of dharmic traditions,² liberation. This struggle has long fascinated (even haunted) Martin Scorsese. This "doing the work" is nothing less than the hardscrabble life of

1 I would like to thank Tibetologists Joel Gruber and Gregory Hillis for their invaluable contributions to this essay.

2 Dharmic traditions are those born on the Indian subcontinent and include the concept of dharma, a word that can mean "duty," "cosmic order," "righteousness," and, in contemporary Indian languages, "religion."

faith, variously construed, with diverse means of attainment, and often leading to the creation of something beautiful in the process.

In the following essay we explore Martin Scorsese's *Kundun*, a film representing the life of the fourteenth Dalai Lama from his birth to his escape from Chinese-occupied Tibet at the age of twenty-three in 1959. The essay places Scorsese within a broader context of Western and Catholic encounters with the East generally, and with Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism specifically. We query the influence of Orientalism on the director and this work, released at the height of the Dalai Lama's popularity. Finally, we note certain affinities or "sensibilities" between Catholicism and Tibetan Buddhism, a common ground felicitous to produce this perceptive, sensitive, and ultimately tragic story. Throughout, we take for granted that, contrary to being a thematic outlier, the film is aligned with other films created before and after *Kundun*. These films are often implicitly religious in nature. Like the figures he examines, Scorsese is "doing the work" to make sense of this world for himself and his audience by attempting to create something beautiful, arguably, unto liberation. And we "read" *Kundun* as one Catholic's rendering of the most famous Buddhist figure of the last three generations.

2 Religion as Worldview, Worlds in Film

In an essay exploring the life of a Buddhist leader by a director deeply influenced by Catholicism, there are diverse theoretical ways to investigate the living encounter of which *Kundun* is the consequence.³ In my estimation, a less fruitful path is the attempt to somehow discern the state of Scorsese's religious commitment in terms of his fidelity to the Catholic catechism or to whether he was taking communion in a Catholic parish at the time of *Kundun*'s production (it is more than likely that he was not.) Then, having established his faith or lack thereof, one could assert that Scorsese's is unworthy of being called a "Catholic filmmaker." Alternatively, I argue Scorsese maintains a broadly Catholic "worldview." Worldviews help us to see, they help us to think, to interpret. They prepare one to encounter and engage with an environment. Negatively, worldviews can also prevent us from seeing, they can obscure our vision. This is important in inter-religious encounters because humans take in new ideas and experiences through older ones. In terms of *Kundun*, there were certain ideas, ideals, and practices that Scorsese was well prepared to see due to his

3 There are, of course, limitations to the ocular metaphor. See Thomas Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 13–20.

Catholic upbringing in a particular time and place. Consider, for example, how participation in ritual prepared the filmmaker to appreciate not just religious ritual, but the ritualistic nature of filmmaking. The Catholic Church provided the director with, to use the words of anthropologist Clifford Geertz, both a model of life and a model for life,⁴ the merging of a vision of the world with tools (worship, ritual, morality, art) for living in that world. In sum, rather than being like clothing that one can don or remove at will, religious worldviews are more like the biological lenses through which we encounter, make, and re-make our worlds.⁵

There is no simple way to unsee or to unthink a world. By his own estimation, Scorsese was shaped so thoroughly by the religious worldview in which he was raised that it could not be easily undone. In other words, while one can be a former Roman Catholic, one will always be a former *Roman Catholic*.⁶ Perhaps the only way to undo one's religious upbringing is by recourse to another worldview so totalizing that it answers similar questions in different ways or abandons old questions in favor of new ones altogether. Yet I would contend that even with the most successful conversions (for that is what we are speaking about), there always remain traces, stubbornly attendant shadows.⁷

I employ the term worldview to connote more than doctrine or beliefs. In the following pages, when one reads substantives like "Catholicism" or "Buddhism" one should understand these in terms of worldview, a category that includes within it beliefs, practices, social institutions, norms, moods, motivations, and histories that are ever in relation and in flux. These are not monoliths; by definition they are porous. They converge with, separate from, and

4 See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Perseus Books, 1973).

5 I am here reflecting a shift by many in Religious Studies towards a more capacious "Worldview Studies," beginning with Smart (1981) and now continuing with Droogers and van Harskamp (2014), and Taves (2017).

6 No doubt, the same can be said of other religions now deemed "world religions." Interestingly enough, because the Catholic Church understands baptism to effect an ontological change in the person, it cannot be undone. One is, then, marked for an eternity.

7 No doubt, modern atheism, or the belief that the world only operates in what philosopher Charles Taylor calls "the immanent frame" devoid of transcendence, can answer those five questions said to constitute any worldview. In other words, the modern world is unique in that one can plausibly live without reference to a transcendent realm, say, of God, or of the non-theistic Buddhist dhamma (Sanskrit: *dharmā*). So powerful is the eclipse of transcendence in this secular age that even those who do believe in an end beyond this world tend to understand the immanent experience as *the* place of human fulfillment. In modernity belief and unbelief are real possibilities existing side-by-side—and even in a tension dwelling within a human subject. See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007).

contradict other meaning systems. The Catholic worldview is at the forefront of Scorsese's *oeuvre*.

3 Film Synopsis

Kundun is the story of the fourteenth Dalai Lama from early childhood to age twenty-three when he escapes from Chinese-occupied Tibet to India in 1959. Told from the perspective of the religious leader, it pairs the emerging cognizance of the subject as the Dalai Lama, a human emanation of Avilokateshvara,⁸ the Buddha⁹ of Compassion, with his recognition of the looming Chinese communist storm gathering on the eastern horizon.

Kundun visually represents Tibet accurately as a land of sweeping landscapes and subtle hues, of deity-adorned shrines, prayer wheels, and low-ceiling assembly halls. The film oscillates between the macroscopic view through use of the wide-angle shot and the microscopic view through the close up focus on the protagonist's eyes. It is, as Scorsese once explained, "a small film on a big canvas."¹⁰ Here a telescope is used as a device with which to explore this movement back and forth, outside and within the subject. As a child in his Potala Palace Gyatso looks down through the device to spy a kingdom he will someday inherit, if briefly. He is fascinated with gadgets (film projectors, automobiles, automatic windows), metonyms of modernity, which serve as insinuations of an outside world both wondrous and life-threatening. The teenage leader-in-waiting is portrayed as a man of his times, signaling impending change upon accession to the throne. "The Dalai Lama is a modern man, just like the thirteenth Dalai Lama," his chamberlain explains," as the 16-year old

8 In order to avoid confusion, I have deliberately avoided the use of diacritic marks for Sanskrit and Tibetan words throughout this essay. For the most part, sources referenced throughout have not employed the same format, which explains the differences in spelling.

9 Throughout this essay, when "Buddha" is spelled in capitals, it is referring to the historical Buddha, known as Shakyamuni ("sage of the Shakya clan") and Siddhartha Gautama, born in modern day Nepal in the 5th century BCE. When "buddha" is written without capitalization, it is referring to those beings who have, following the bodhisattva path, realized enlightenment. "Bodhisattva," literally "enlightened being," is one who is on the path to buddhahood and is seeking the enlightenment of others while not yet a buddha. On a popular level, though, the terms buddha and bodhisattva are virtually interchangeable. Buddhadharma refers to the Buddhist path of liberation.

10 In Michael Henry Wilson, *In Search of Kundun with Martin Scorsese (À la recherche de Kundun avec Martin Scorsese)*, 1998. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I7Pmpcg8tUk&list=RDI7Pmpcg8tUk&t=4> (Accessed September 29, 2017).

signals his dissatisfaction with the pomp that effectively cuts him off from his people. "We must do away with all this," he snipes. Of course, we must remember that the thirteenth Dalai Lama and the fourteenth Dalai Lama are understood by many to be essentially the same being. This matter-of-factness about reincarnation renders the story of Tenzin Gyatso different from so many in the Western world. A lifetime is but one chapter in a potentially endless book.

Composer Philip Glass's haunting score, a fusion of his characteristic arpeggios and ostinatos and the Tibetan *Dungchen* and chant, foreshadows the impending Chinese occupation and Gyatso's eventual harrowing escape. As the audience, we know how this story will end and where it leads. We know an older Nobel Laureate Dalai Lama, spiritual and secular leader of a government in exile, bearer of Buddhist wisdom, apostle of compassion to the world. Here in the film, the score's steady drone moves the viewer and the protagonist episodically¹¹ but ineluctably forward, with years often marked by title cards. We begin with the test of his bodhisattva identity by monks in 1937 when he is just a toddler, and end with the escape necessary to save his people.

Having reached the Himalayan border after a fourteen-day trek, the desiccated protagonist dismounts his yak: "Kundun, you must walk to India; we have won," his chamberlain explains. Turning back to those who led him to safety, he sees them, for a moment, transformed: a premonitory vision reveals their impending death, corpses draped over blood-smeared horses. The film cuts back to the present, and he raises his hand in blessing to the living men as if to say, "I bless you to die." An earnest Indian officer approaches in perhaps the film's most poignant scene:

"With all respect, Sir, may I ask, who are you?"

"What you see before you is a man, a simple monk," the Dalai Lama replies.

"Are you the Lord Buddha?" The officer continues.

"I think I am a reflection like the moon on water. When you see me—and I try to be a good man—you see yourself."

11 In his rather tepid if respectful three out of four-star 1997 review, film critic Roger Ebert asserted, "The film is made of episodes, not a plot." On the contrary, I would argue that the film's narrative arc is constituted by the sum total of these discrete episodes. And with regard to plot, Scorsese, who Ebert christened the greatest living American director on more than one occasion, notes that plot can be overrated. Not just plot but mood, he argues, is critical, a fact which highlights the importance of Philip Glass's haunting score. See Martin Scorsese, *Jefferson Lecture*, John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Washington, D.C., April 1, 2013. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sQ3YGZ8Xs_E&t=1075 (Accessed November 27, 2017).

In the final scene the young man unpacks that telescope, the newest exile in India spying the Himalayas whence he came. The outro explains, “The Dalai Lama has not yet returned to Tibet. He hopes one day to make the journey.” Finally, as in the film’s first moments, the word “Kundun” appears as a moonlight reflection on water and then fades away, a visual harkening to the Buddhist doctrines of impermanence and emptiness¹²—and to the paradox of the Dalai Lama’s vocation and mission, to which we shall return.

4 Backstory

Kundun involved years of preparation before eventual filming for two-and-a-half months in Morocco. At a Hollywood meeting to discuss a Dalai Lama biopic, her agents provided screenwriter Melissa Mathison with a list of several directors’ names—Scorsese’s name was noticeably missing. As the screenwriter tells the story, Scorsese’s mention was met with incredulity. This was, after all, the director of *Mean Streets*, *Raging Bull*, *Taxi Driver*, and most recently, *Goodfellas*. “I’m not saying he wants to do it, but I know he’s gonna get it,” she explained. “I knew he’d understand the society, the moral code, the journey, and the spirituality of it.”¹³ Eventually Scorsese was introduced to the Dalai Lama to discuss the possibility of a film in 1991 or 1992. Scorsese explains,

I think I met him first in Washington. By that point I had learned a lot about what had happened [to the Dalai Lama and Tibet], and actually

12 Impermanence, or *anicca* (Sanskrit: *anitya*), one of the three marks of existence in Buddhism, is the teaching that all things and events are fundamentally impermanent, subject to change and decay. The desire for permanence, or a grasping at that which is fundamentally is not, causes suffering and keeps one in the karmic cycle of life, death, re-birth, and re-death. Emptiness, or *sunatta* (Sanskrit: *shunyata*), as explained in Mahayana, or “great vehicle” Buddhism of which the Tibetan schools are a part, teaches that all phenomena arise because of causes and conditions external to them. Any “thing” lacks essence or self-nature but arises interdependently with other “things.” Mahayana distinguishes itself from Theravada or “doctrine of the elders” Buddhism by tending to speak of emptiness in more positive terms, e.g. by referring to emptiness as pure, existent, and the greatest wisdom. The goal of all Mahayana practices (commitment to the liberation of others through compassion, meditation, deity yoga, tantra, etc.) is to see reality as it truly is—and in Mahayana terms that means recognizing impermanence, the lack of an essential, unchanging self, and thus the fundamental fallacy of self and other. An awakening to these realities constitutes a being’s liberation. As the mind is the locus of delusion regarding the nature of reality, it is likewise the focus of practices unto liberation.

13 *In Search of Kundun with Martin Scorsese*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I7Pmpcg8tUk&list=RDI7Pmpcg8tUk&t=4> (Accessed September 29, 2017).

I was struck by the good feeling that I had around him. I sensed something emanating that was, ah, ah that had to do with positiveness not a negative thing that was emanating, which you know, the pictures I make, usually we revel in the negative emanations from people; here it was more positive things coming out. That was pretty interesting to me. I was very moved by the first meeting. And as we left I shook hands for maybe a few seconds. But what happened, I was looking at him and first the room faded away. And there was a real consciousness of the now, of the present. You could hear your heartbeat. And I knew once I had that meeting, I knew I was gonna have to make the picture at some point. Somehow. I mean I still can't quite believe it, that we are here, in all places, in Morocco.¹⁴

Those who saw only violence, decadence, moral ambivalence in Scorsese's work are not paying close enough attention. As he explains,

And so I've always been fascinated by people who are living a spiritual life, or who try to live—who really are the hard-liners, like someone who believes totally in non-violence, compassion, kindness, and tolerance, which is apparently, extremely revolutionary. It's extremely revolutionary. Jesus was killed, Mahatma Gandhi was killed, Martin Luther King was killed, the Dalai Lama is considered I don't know what in China. It's still probably the most revolutionary idea I think, of all our existence, from the very moment we became human beings. I think that's going to be the big change. One has to ultimately go that way, because if you're not going to go that way, the other way doesn't work. And so I was always interested in people living on that hard line of living a life in the spirit, and in the case of the Dalai Lama, representing compassion.¹⁵

And so Scorsese and Mathison began the reiterative process of editing the screenplay. In a 1998 interview on *Brian Linehan's City Lights*, Scorsese explains the process:

We did fourteen drafts ultimately and finally in draft thirteen or fourteen we found ourselves back at draft one and two. Which meant that we went in the circuit, in a way, rethought everything, and came back to the original

14 Ibid.

15 Frontline. *Dreaming of Tibet*. Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/tibet/interviews/scorsese.html> (Accessed October 11, 2017).

concept ... Then beyond that, I said, let's go even further. Let's go with the literal point of view of the child as he grows ... I think it automatically takes the audience and puts you with him. Start on the detail, forget the why of Tibet ... Start with the eyes opening up in the morning, running out to see his father, having breakfast ... No attempt at all of trying to temper everything by placing a Western observer in the film to translate for us who these people are. They're people. Just jump in, hang on, if you care about them—care about him—it might have an emotional impact by the end of the picture. The key there was being as much as possible seeing everything from the Dalai Lama's eyes, through his point of view. Even to the extent of implying that Tibetan society and government was not necessarily Shangri-La, was not necessarily utopia ...¹⁶

But for all this work, with a few notable exceptions, *Kundun* received mostly muted responses from mainstream critics.¹⁷ While all praised Roger Deakins' cinematography, Dante Ferretti's production and costume design, and Philip Glass's score (all would subsequently win major film awards),¹⁸ many believed *Kundun* to be undermined by a love-is-blind adoration of screenwriter and director for their protagonist. Lack of critical distance, one-dimensional acting from those portraying the Dalai Lama, and a supposed lack of the Buddhist insider's understanding led Owen Gleiberman of *Entertainment Weekly* to call *Kundun* "an empty-shell epic, a Western sinner's pious ode to the decorousness of Eastern mysticism."¹⁹ Such appraisals, coupled with the perceived dissimilarity to most of the Scorsese canon, has rendered *Kundun* one of the *auteur's* least considered films. This is unfortunate, particularly as we here treat Scorsese

16 This last point bears mention, for *Seven Years in Tibet* was also released in 1997. Like *Kundun*, it featured a young Dalai Lama. Unlike *Kundun*, however, the story is told through the eyes of Heinrich Harrer, an Austrian Nazi mountain climber who escaped a British Indian internment camp at the outbreak of World War II. While it is unclear whether Scorsese is making a backhanded criticism of a competing film, at the very least it reflects the creative differences between Scorsese and French director Jean-Jacques Annaud.

17 Art historian and critic Simon Schama called the film an "undersung masterpiece." Simon Schama, "Clio at the Multiplex: What Hollywood and Herodotus Have in Common," *The New Yorker*, January 19, 1998, 41. Critic and writer Stanley Kauffmann takes Schama to task for this estimation, calling *Kundun*, unlike *Last Temptation of Christ*, "nervously bland, a series of respectful episodes," (Stanley Kauffmann, *Regarding Film: Criticism and Comment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 207).

18 The only award to be won by Scorsese for *Kundun* was the unambiguously titled "Truly Moving Picture Award" by Heartland Film, 1997.

19 Owen Gleiberman, "Kundun," *Entertainment Weekly*, January 09, 1998. <http://ew.com/article/1998/01/09/kundun-2/> (Accessed January 11, 2018).

as one representative of “Catholic filmmaking.” Keeping in mind that Mathison was a practicing Buddhist involved in the Tibetan cause, I argue that in *Kundun* we can glean a particular kind of filmic inter-religious encounter and a living Christian theology of Buddhism –not in the rarefied air of monastery or classroom, but in the creative process of Western cinema, created in the minds of artists, on the ground, and in the cutting room.

Many have written of the “Catholic imagination.” In the field of theology, David Tracy has done most to explicate what he calls the anagogical imagination,²⁰ that conception of the cosmos which, through use of metaphor, at once points within phenomena, then through and beyond them to reveal the God “in whom we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). The priest and sociologist Andrew Greeley, intent to borrow this theory from Tracy in order to test it empirically in Catholic treatments of art, space, desire, hierarchy, and community, argues persuasively of the Catholic imagination as “the pervasive religious sensibility which inclines Catholics to see the Holy lurking in creation.”²¹ “As Catholics,” he continues, “we find our houses and our world haunted by a sense that the objects, events, and persons of daily life are revelations of grace.”²² We will explore the underpinnings of this sensibility below. Yet in this essay we will focus on *how* practically the Catholic worldview and its attendant imagination influenced the artistic vision manifest in *Kundun*. I suggest there are at least four ways. First, such engagement follows from attention to ritual and its power to convey meaning based on Catholic devotional experience; second, from the personal experience of moral and even extra-ordinary affective qualities in his meetings with the Dalai Lama—that is, from the experience of a kind of charisma; third, from the discovery of a shared commitment to justice; and fourth, from a shared sense between Christian and Buddhist that a human life should be dedicated to love and compassion. Grounding all four, I would argue, is the teaching that the world is somehow charged with the divine—even as the “divine” is differently understood between Roman Catholic Christianity and the Geluk sect of Tibetan Buddhism. We find, then, that both share, in different ways to be sure, an enchanted imagination.

Before engaging most seriously with what appears to me to be a shared sense of “charged” ground of phenomenal existence, we must first do what

20 See David Tracy, *The Anagogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1981).

21 Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 1.

22 Ibid.

critics failed to do—understand Scorsese as part of a long Catholic and Western history of engagement with Tibetan Buddhism and Tibet. For when judged by this better measure, *Kundun* can be understood as much more than “an empty shell epic” or the failure of a religious outsider.

5 Tibet in the Western, Catholic and Scorsese Imaginations

...Or is it that you fail to recognize one of your own dreams when you see it?

Mr. CHANG, *Lost Horizon* (1937)

In a 1998 interview on the PBS documentary program *Frontline*, Martin Scorsese is asked, “What is our Western view of Tibet?” That question is not so simple as it first appears, for the director is rightly assumed to be not just a Westerner, but one qualified both to represent “the West” and who could offer an educated response about Western cultural history in relation to Tibet. The question itself correctly suggests that the Western impression is hardly straightforward. Scorsese’s response is even more telling, for he answers in a way revealing *how* he thinks, which is *through* film as a body of knowledge and as a temporal marker:

I think it’s obvious that the first associations with Tibet in the West has always been based on James Hilton’s book “Lost Horizon.” But in “Lost Horizon” they don’t use the word “Tibet” I believe. I may be wrong in the book, but certainly not in the film. And in the “Razor’s Edge,” a film that is based on the Somerset Maugham book, and it’s quite an enjoyable film, the one with Tyrone Power. But you know, there’s been also a line with that Shangri-La idea, there’s something that’s been very hidden and secret, forbidden. Not forbidden like the forbidden city of China, Beijing, which had a violence attached to it... But in Tibet you had a sense of something peaceful and something magical and spiritual. And I think a part of everyone one of us, I can’t speak for everyone of course, but a part of many people felt almost secure that sort of thing existed, that ultimately—it’s almost like a romantic notion of going to a place and cutting away everything else and just dealing with the spiritual side of life, I guess.²³

23 Martin Scorsese, *Frontline*, “Dreams of Tibet,” Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/tibet/interviews/scorsese.html> (Accessed October 11, 2017).

By his reference to Tibet as Shangri-La, Scorsese alludes to one of the more common traps/tropes befalling Westerners engaging Tibet, Tibetans, and, in fact, Buddhism: romanticism. For Shangri-La, a Tibet stand-in created by James Hilton in his 1933 bestseller *Lost Horizon*, is as much an ideal as a land beyond the Himalayas in Inner Asia. In the book and later in Frank Capra's film (1937), Shangri-La is a place of unrivaled peace and the wisdom lost to Western modernity in the wake of both the Great War and the Great Depression.²⁴ Shangri-La, this fictional metonym for Tibet—has long occupied the Western imagination.

Scorsese, as creator of a religio-cultural product, stands within a long line of Western and specifically Catholic encounters with Tibet. The relationship of Roman Catholicism to Tibetan Buddhism dates back to Marco Polo, the Crusades, and to other Western encounters with traditions that were long designated simply as "idolatry." Latin Christians knew of what we would now denominate "religious others," but they had neither the data nor an expansive vocabulary to describe them. They also knew—or thought they knew—of Christians in distant lands. For centuries, cut off from the rest of the world and indeed from eastern (Greek, Syriac) Christianities, Latin Christians heard of a shadowy Christian king to the east known as "Prester John" (or John the Priest). At various times his fabulous kingdom had been located in Ethiopia, India, or East Asia. The advent of this legend may stem from distant reports of the St. Thomas Christians of the Malankara Coast of India or to an Indian episcopal embassy to Rome in the days of Pope Callixtus II (c. 1065–1124 CE).²⁵ Tales of Muslim defeat in the east were ascribed to this Prester John or to his children; these were likely confused accounts of the defeat of the Seljuq Turks by the *Buddhist* Mongol khan Yelu Dashi in Katwan, Persia in 1141 CE. None of

24 *Lost Horizon* is much disputed as a film. Praised as the clearest distillation of Frank Capra's social vision: egalitarianism undergirded by the injunction, voiced through the High Lama, "Be kind," it also reflects the fantasy of benevolent imperialism. For the purpose of this essay, perhaps the most important feature is the fact that the aforementioned High Lama, the creator of Shangri-La, turns out to be not a Buddhist at all, but a two hundred year old Belgian Catholic missionary, Fr. Perrault. We learn that "Fr. Perrault is Shangri-La." Is this a suggestion that the highest form of Buddhism, the most idyllic, is in fact an unbridled Catholicism free from the vicissitudes of the Western world—a Christian fulfillment theology of religions wherein all other traditions are subsumed? Is the author arguing that Shangri-La can only be accomplished in Asia? Like Jesus and Buddha on the Silk Road, is this simply a confused Buddhist-Christian mash up? Is it neither Buddhist nor Catholic, an oasis for the Perennial Philosophy transcending and surpassing all known religions? The film raises more questions than it answers. See Elizabeth Rawitsch, *Frank Capra's Eastern Horizon: American Identity and the Cinema of International Relations* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2015), 93–114.

25 David Bentley Hart, *The Story of Christianity: An Illustrated History of 2000 Years of the Christian Faith* (London: Quercus, 2007), 169.

this should surprise us. Mixed up and retold stories of Jesus, Buddha, saints, and bodhisattvas were common along the medieval Silk Road, given certain affinities between two traveling missionary traditions promising liberation/salvation through the efficacious works of superhuman beings.

Beginning in the 17th century, Jesuit missionaries²⁶ substantially increased knowledge of Asia among Europeans. While tales of the fabulous and grotesque certainly continued, there was also a steadily growing critical knowledge of other “religions”²⁷ and their similarities and differences with what was deemed true religion.²⁸ Among the Jesuits, Matteo Ricci ministered in China, Francis Xavier in India, Alexander de Rhodes in Indonesia, Guy Richard in Siam, and Ippolito Desideri in Tibet. There were others; the Capuchins, for example, served as the primary missionary Catholic order in Tibet. Of course, the *raison d’être* for these intrepid missionaries was not inter-religious dialogue for its own sake but conversion of nations to Christ and to the Church, by then conceived in a Tridentine manner.

By the 19th century, Protestants had taken up the Gospel cause, importing anti-Catholic polemic as Protestant empires replaced Iberian ones. Catholics had earlier noted with horror certain similarities (an organized priesthood, elaborate rituals, scholasticism) their tradition shared with Tibetan religion. Now, given their own doctrinal commitments, Protestants easily criticized this empty ritualism, this Tibetan “popery” or “Lamaism.” Such denigration of Lamaism (“Tibetan Buddhism” would not be named until the 20th century) appears to preclude appreciation, but in fact, it is another side of the same romantic coin. For if as degenerate as some reported, why is the 19th century Western relationship with Tibet a continuing tale of misguided and often fatal attempts to enter what remained a forbidden capital (Lhasa) in a forbidden country?²⁹ The promise of lucre and souls is not enough to explain Western interest. In short, the West’s relationship to Tibet as with the rest of the mystic

26 See Donald S. Lopez, Jr. and Thupten Jinpa, *Dispelling the Darkness: A Jesuit Quest for the Soul of Tibet* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017) to learn of the Jesuit missionary to Tibet Ippolito Desideri. The book contextualizes the priest-scholar and translates significant excerpts of his apologetical treatises, which reveal a subtle understanding of Tibetan Buddhist doctrine and the Tibetan language in meaning and form.

27 For a seminal examination of the development and historical contingency of religion as a universal category, see Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

28 For examination of the genus “religion” and the development of the category “world religions,” see J.Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 269–284.

29 Peter Bishop, *Dreams of Power: Tibetan Buddhism and the Western Imagination* (London: The Athlone Press, 24).

East oscillates between approbation and opprobrium. This is a dangerous tryst given Western global hegemony of the last four centuries. Of course, we are speaking about features of Orientalism.

Orientalism is the term Edward Said irrevocably converted from the neutral (predominantly) Western study of the Orient to an ideologically driven means of control over Asia in the Western colonial period and subsequently.³⁰ Control is exercised through knowledge production and representation by the West over the East and is, as a form of power, entwined with Western imperialism. In the hands of the Westerner, Asia becomes the Occidental foil. At various times, the Orient is represented as irrational, authoritarian, superstitious, decadent, ahistorical, and pre-modern (in a negative way), in contrast to the rational, democratic, scientific, historical, and progressive West. Alternatively, in certain quarters and in different times, Asia becomes by some Euro-American alchemy mystical, spiritual, sagacious, and pre-modern (in a positive way)—in short, *better* than the materialistic, hyper-rational, and bellicose West. In either case, Asia is never allowed actual existence. It serves the self-identity of the West. As a result, the Asian cannot be understood on her own terms but must fit certain pre-trodden ideal types. Failure to do so can have a number of results—from simple Western bemusement to charges of inauthenticity, parody, and rejection. Orientalism is a hall of mirrors where one can rarely—no matter birthplace—be understood on his own terms. According to Said, the West sets the terms and acts. The Oriental can only react. The East–West dyad is perennial, genetic, and metaphysical. And of course, given its location, Tibet is part of this Manichean world.³¹

Thus did the Land of Snows ebb and flow in the Western imagination for a millennium, depending on its conditions of encounter.³² In the last decades of the 20th century, renewed Western interest in Asia and Asian religions propelled by Beats then Beatles, disillusionment with inherited Abrahamic religion, and anti-communism combined to create fertile conditions for Tibetan

30 See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977).

31 A historical example of this schizophrenia is the way that Tibetan Buddhism has flipped in its Western estimation between the 19th and 20th centuries. Throughout the 19th century, Western Buddhologists treated Tibetan Buddhism as degenerate, contaminated by the indigenous Bön religion and animism. By the late 1960s and 1970s, the understanding had been reversed, with Tibetan Buddhism exalted as a form of Buddhism uncontaminated by Western imperialism (Donald S. Lopez, ed. *Religions of Tibet in Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 33).

32 For an examination of the way representations of Tibet, Tibetan Buddhism, and Tibetans have developed in and through the American comic books over the last half century, see Joel Gruber, "The Dharma of Dr. Strange: The Shifting Representations of Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism within a Comic Book Serial," *Implicit Religion*, 18: 3 (2015).

Buddhism to become trendy. By the 1980s, the figure of the Oriental Monk³³ had become a recognizable symbol in the West. Whether hirsute guru or bald monk, he was generally robed, mysterious, foreign, affable, “enigmatic, ancient, and deep.”³⁴ Perhaps most importantly, he—and it is usually a male—was unthreatening.³⁵ In 1989, the fourteenth Dalai Lama won the Nobel Peace Prize. By then, movie stars, often Buddhist practitioners themselves, had adopted the Tibetan cause. Along with *Kundun*, other 1990’s big budget Tibetan-themed films included Bernardo Bertolucci’s *Little Buddha* (1993) and Jean-Jacques Annaud’s *Seven Years in Tibet* (1997),³⁶ stories told with various levels of acquaintance with Tibet and the Buddhadharma. A quarter century later, one can rightly call the Free Tibet Movement a failure even though Western interest in Buddhism continues.³⁷

Not surprising given his early biography, Scorsese’s own first encounter with Tibet was mediated through film—but it was not Capra’s aforementioned *Lost Horizon*. What makes the less significant *Storm Over Tibet* (1952) noteworthy is its use of actual documentary footage of a country still seven years from Chinese occupation. Scorsese explains:

33 Jane Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). The author understands the Oriental Monk as an overdetermined symbol of American Orientalism, fully formed by the time of the Dalai Lama’s Nobel Peace Prize. She explores the development of this iconic Western figure of the East through careful exegesis of Daisuke Suzuki, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, and the fictional Kwai Chang Caine of the 1970s television program *Kung Fu*. She explains: “The term Oriental Monk is used as a critical concept and is meant to cover a wide range of religious figures (gurus, bhikkhus, sages, swamis, sifus, healers, masters) from a variety of ethnic backgrounds (Japanese, Chinese, Indian, Tibetan) (6).

34 *Ibid.*, 37.

35 *Ibid.*

36 Khyentse Norbu’s *The Cup* (1999) is here excluded, as it was a relatively low-budget Bhutanese film.

37 It is debatable whether these films accomplished anything positive for the Free Tibet movement, something that Scorsese himself admits, but it did bring increased attention to its subject matter. The film garnered enough criticism from the Chinese government prior to release that The Walt Disney Company hired former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to mollify Beijing lest the communist government stymie international distribution. In 2000 the Clinton administration signed into law P.L. 106–286, granting permanent normal trade relations (PNTR) to China, effectively ending a major bargaining tool for the US and its allies to change Chinese human rights practices, including Tibetan occupation. This occurred at a time when the Dalai Lama was arguably at the apex of his international fame, and, of course, *after* the Tiananmen Square massacre. The granting of MFN status to China should keep us from overestimating the power of film in shaping foreign policy. A more sober view is that global markets are ultimately the more formidable driver of public policy.

The first time I ever heard about Tibet was in the early '50s. It was a Columbia movie. It was called *Storm Over Tibet* directed by Andrew Martin. I think he shot footage in Tibet in the '30s; then they intercut some backlot scenes in Hollywood. I'll never forget the black and white images, the *authentic* documentary images that he had in that picture. The art, the religious rituals—there's something so beautiful and surprising. But I remember seeing on the cover—the front page of one of the newspapers, it had to be the *New York Times*, I think—of the Dalai Lama leaving in 1959, and being struck by that. The Dalai Lama was not only the spiritual leader of Tibet but also the secular leader. I think I realized that the survival of his entire culture was threatened when he was forced to go into exile. I remember the newsreels. He looked very young to me to be the leader carrying such responsibility; I think he was in his early 20s. Still being pretty much nonpolitical and not understanding what was going on, but [I was] seeing what appeared to be the disintegration of the society, which was so fascinating.³⁸

Note how this interview reveals film as a gateway beyond his parochial, lower eastside upbringing and an early appreciation for art and ritual then being shaped by life in his local Catholic parish, that other force beckoning to the world beyond the Italian tenement. Finally, Scorsese here demonstrates his talent for disinterested observation in pursuit of understanding the human experience. An anthropologist could just have easily uttered the final sentence.

Having briefly recounted a Western genealogy of Tibet with special attention to the Catholic encounter, from Marco Polo to Scorsese and *Kundun*, we can see that no such encounter takes place *de novo*. The ideologies, images, histories, representations, and indeed fantasies are inherited, though not all need be accepted and extended. Scorsese, as a child of the West and Latin Christianity, stands within this genealogy and continued it in the last years of the 20th century. And so we must ask, to what extent does Scorsese fall into the Orientalist trap of romanticism? I would suggest that he extends rather than upends a romantic Orientalist representation in the assertion that, as *Kundun's* opening intertitle declares, "In war torn Asia, Tibetans have practiced non-violence for over a thousand years." As it happens, this statement is patently false. Perhaps Tibet has been more nonviolent when compared to its neighbors to the west (Europe, Persia), south (India), and east (China), but violence has played a role throughout Tibetan history, and indeed after the advent of Buddhism

38 *In Search of Kundun with Martin Scorsese*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I7Pmpcg8tUk&list=RDI7Pmpcg8tUk&t=4> (Accessed September 29, 2017).

between the seventh through ninth centuries CE. Thus, to speak of Tibet as being a “non-violent land for more than a millennium” is evidence of Western longings and well-intentioned if faulty juxtapositions against bellicose Chinese. Not only does Tibet share a violent history with the rest of the world, previous Dalai Lamas have advocated violence as a means of preserving Tibet and the Buddhadharmā, two entities whose fates are perceived as intertwined.³⁹

Yet nonviolence is central to the teachings of this Dalai Lama. How then might we understand this apparent contradiction? Like Christianity, Buddhism has shown itself to be amazingly adept at crossing regional and cultural boundaries. One of the central teachings of Mahayana Buddhism making the tradition particularly flexible is the doctrine of skillful means, or *upaya/upayakausalya*. First evidenced textually in the *Lotus Sutra*, skillful means is defined as Shakyamuni Buddha’s ability to adapt his teaching to the level of the hearers. More broadly, it refers to adaptations deemed contextually expedient for extension of the Buddha’s teaching and the consequent alleviation of suffering. A historian can cite this doctrine as the tradition’s way to deal with the reality of multiple and often-contradictory schools and teachings. This makes a virtue out of a necessity, while an insider can cite this doctrine as further proof of the compassion at the heart of the Mahayana tradition. “Any adaptation whatsoever, provided it is animated by the Buddha’s compassion and wisdom, and is suitable for the recipient, is a part of or relatively acceptable to Buddhism.”⁴⁰ Therefore an activity can be justified if understood to be necessary for the preservation of the dharma. And this reality, not total nonviolence, was the case in Tibet for millennia. As Gruber and Soboslai explain, “Tibet’s most prominent leaders have often been monastics, and at times they have

39 In the absence of centralized state power, Tibetan religious leaders often assumed responsibility for law enforcement and military protection. As a result, monks came to play the dual roles of spiritual and physical warriors, at times constituting a force numbering in the tens of thousands. Tibetan Buddhism is constituted by numerous differing and often acrimonious sects who over the centuries have allied themselves to different princely powers. In the sixteenth century, compelled by a perceived threat to his Geluk sect, the 5th Dalai Lama (1617–1682) joined with the Mongolian army leader Gushri Khan (1582–1655) against an alliance of Khalka Mongolians and the Tibetan Kagyu sect. At one point, the 5th Dalai Lama performed certain magical rites for the successful defeat of his enemies in war. With his subsequent victory, the fortunes of the Geluk sect were significantly changed, lending it and all subsequent Dalai Lamas unparalleled power and prestige. The 5th Dalai Lama engaged in warfare, in a land in which violence was common. Joel Gruber and John Soboslai, “Bodhisattva, Dharmaraja, and the Bodhisattvas,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (Vol. 86: 3).

40 Paul Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*, 2nd edition (New York: Routledge, 2009), 151.

killed, sanctioned killing, and deemed armed conflict necessary.”⁴¹ The case of the 5th Dalai Lama is an object lesson in the use of violence for the protection of Tibet and Buddhadharmā.

This Dalai Lama believes that in this day and age, a policy of non-violence is the surest way to eventually win freedom for Tibet and to preserve the Buddhadharmā as he understands it. In other words, non-violence is an *upaya*, the skillful means to save Tibet and to preserve Buddhadharmā, but not a perennial doctrine suitable for all contexts. This is a far cry from the perception, reinforced by *Kundun*, that Buddhism is inherently, perennially nonviolent. The point is that Tibet has never been a completely nonviolent kingdom, but a kingdom whose highest ideal was liberation, which today necessitates nonviolence.

This particular misrepresentation about Tibet and Tibetans frames the entire biopic. It does not, in my estimation, marginalize the whole work. It is hyperbolic, but not cynically so, reflecting the common representation of Tibet since its subjugation by China. Of course, one could critique certain mistakes of ritual. But this is picayune, and rather irrelevant considering how seriously the *auteur* takes authenticity in the form of historical verisimilitude. After all, most of the monks in the film were not actors but actual displaced Tibetan monks conducting real rituals. Ultimately, criticizing Scorsese for errors of ritual performance, as claimed by some, is like criticizing Leonardo Da Vinci for Jewish seder inaccuracies in *The Last Supper*.

Critic Kenneth Turan noted that the choice of using four actors to portray the Dalai Lama ultimately makes it difficult to relate to the character, particularly when most were inexperienced children.⁴² Tenzin Thuthob Tsarong, the young adult Dalai Lama, seems to lack emotional range. His affect renders the leader a divine cypher or a Vulcan-like stoic, oddly inconsistent with those children portraying the younger Dalai Lamas or the public Dalai Lama most of us have come to recognize. Mao Zedong is more a diabolical caricature mouthing Marxist clichés than a fully developed character. Gestures are made to Tibet's feudalism, but not enough to show that the Chinese may have had a point, even if their imperialistic, destructive, and paternalistic methods were utterly loathsome. Where Scorsese could have focused more on the machinations of his court and the inherent complexities of mixing state politics and religion, he instead offers mere intimations of intrigues encircling the young Dalai Lama.

41 Ibid., 765.

42 Kenneth Turan, “Kundun’ Lacks a Certain Presence,” *The Los Angeles Times*, December 24, 1997.

Perhaps what separates this film from others made before and after *Kundun* is that for a director who often revels in the moral ambivalence within human life (e.g. *Mean Streets*, *Taxi Driver*, *Goodfellas*, etc.), *Kundun* is remarkably sincere in its moral vision and in its representation of the fourteenth Dalai Lama as a moral exemplar. This explains, in part, why many critics were less than enthusiastic about the film. As any actor will argue, a morally virtuous character is harder to play than a “complicated” one. But that doesn’t mean one should not try, and neither should we be loath to admit, when honest, that many of us, including film critics and scholars, prefer that complication. After all, holiness requires some real work.

This may, in the end, be the reason why Scorsese’s *Kundun* lacks the *same kind* of moral ambivalence (even depravity) as those films that include more explicitly Christian themes. The moral gray ground is the more personally existential for Scorsese in a way that it simply cannot be for *Kundun*. Clearly, Scorsese understands the Dalai Lama to be the better being, human or otherwise, than he is. Thus, Scorsese’s respect for the Dalai Lama and his message comes to the fore and the director exhibits charity for the other, a fact not mitigating artistic excellence.⁴³ Not that the Dalai Lama’s life lacks a certain ambivalence: in the film as in life he ultimately decides he can do more for Tibet and the Buddhadharmas outside the country than within it. Scorsese seizes on this tension to drive the film’s narrative to some effect. In real life, Tenzin Gyatso has carried the twin imperatives of passing on the dharma and attempting to free Tibet into his old age. The great irony (and tragedy) of the Dalai Lama’s life is that he and his country are a victim of his success. In universalizing Tibetan Buddhism so as to keep it alive, he has made it possible to separate the tradition from a Tibet that is today further from freedom than it was at the time of his escape. So while Tibetan Buddhist lineage traditions have been passed beyond Tibet to India and the West, a free Tibet, the one Scorsese first encountered in film and newsreel, is likely lost forever.

Scorsese takes pains to demonstrate that the fourteenth Dalai Lama’s story is fundamentally one of human loss and the irretrievable loss of a beautiful culture. Yet to his credit he resists sentimentality and makes it a human story

43 This tension, the aforementioned “bind”—mentioned by Terry Gilliam about George Harrison—in many Scorsese films often involves knowing the good but not having the will to accomplish it. In *Kundun* the bind involves living a committed nonviolent life of compassion as leader of a nation while fighting a world power willing to violently overtake the country and thwart that leader at every turn. In *Last Temptation*, the bind involves a perceived tension between Christ’s divine and human wills.

by focusing on the person of Tenzin Gyatso.⁴⁴ This filmic decision mitigates the excesses of Orientalist romanticism while reflecting Scorsese's Christian humanism.

We may judge *Kundun* by another criterion as well: intention. In Buddhist moral philosophy, all actions are to be judged by the intention of the subject. "The Buddha taught that all thoughts, words, and deeds derive their moral value, positive or negative, from the intention behind them."⁴⁵ By this criterion, at least, Scorsese's work was a success, for his intention had been to honestly tell the story of the Dalai Lama and thereby convey the plight of Tibet. This he accomplishes, despite the ideological force of his Western, Orientalist cultural inheritance. As ideologies are broken in fits and starts, *Kundun* does, in this scholar's estimation, move away from tired clichés about the mystic East, as comparing *Kundun* with *Lost Horizon*—or even *Seven Years in Tibet*—makes clear.

6 Worlds of Presence: When Catholic Sacramentalism and Geluk Deity Yoga Meet

"The earth is charged with the grandeur of God," writes Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;/ It gathers to a greatness,
like the ooze of oil/ Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?/
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;/ And all is/ seared with trade;
bleared, smeared with toil;/ And wears man's smudge/ and shares man's
smell: the soil/ Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.⁴⁶

This sense of the cosmos as charged "like shining from shook foil" reflects a Catholic (and Orthodox) sacramentalism grounded in the Incarnation: God takes on human flesh, thereby uniting humanity with divinity, the created material realms with the godhead. The implication is that divinity is encountered in innumerable ways, most notably in the consecrated body and blood of Christ, but also in the sunset, an act of kindness, in suffering, and in other

44 One senses in such filmic choices Scorsese's empathy for his subject. Scorsese, as a child constrained by asthma to observation from above, also embodies the hope for freedom from physical restraints.

45 Richard Gombrich, *What the Buddha Thought* (Bristol: Equinox, 2013), 13.

46 Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Poems and Prose* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2008), 27.

human beings. Thus, to realize such a world as charged with God's glory and grandeur is to see it refulgent with God. This sense of divine immanence, reflecting Scorsese's Catholic worldview, is perhaps the single most important factor in understanding his direction of *Kundun*. In one stroke, it provides the interpretive key explaining his use of ritual as a conveyor of meaning and beauty, his openness to figures outside the Catholic fold who demonstrate certain divine-human attributes (love, compassion) like Tenzin Gyatso, his focus on an individual's struggle for liberation, and, finally, to a latent universal theological anthropology where one human story can represent many. This key is more usefully specific and less callow than saying something like, "Scorsese's religious and the Dalai Lama's religious, so it makes sense."

This incarnational view of reality shares certain affinities with a central feature of Tibetan Buddhism. Here we must attend to the Geluk sect's understanding of "three bodies," or *trikaya*. For, according to the teaching, Buddha did not only have one body but three. The lowest form is the *nirmanakaya*, the so-called sheath of transformation, which people encountered in time and space in South Asia in the 5th century BCE. Then there is the *samboghakaya*, the "body of enjoyment," which was recognized by others with the eye of faith. Finally, there was the *dharmakaya*, the body of Truth, Reality itself, the Absolute. The *dharmakaya* is all-pervasive, free of all cognitive and moral obscurations, omniscient, perfect, luminous. Just as the historical Buddha bore all three bodies, so too do the other buddhas, including the aforementioned Avlokateshvara, the emanation we know as the Dalai Lama. "Kundun," after all, means "the presence" (*sku mdun*), the presence of Avlokateshvara, the Buddha of Compassion, whose aim is to liberate all sentient beings. Yet, for all the honor given this Kundun as a buddha emanation, he is not to be understood as essentially different from any other human being; neither is he somehow ontologically distinct from all reality. After all, if the *dharmakaya* is all-pervasive, then we too dwell within it, are "it." Here our language fails us, for when reality is properly conceived, there is no subject-object duality, no "this" and "that," no "self" and "other"; rather, there simply *is*. How, then, to awaken to see things as they are, to realize, as they say, the "mind of buddha"?

A common tantric *sadhana*, or "means of accomplishing," in the Geluk sect is the two-part practice of deity yoga. It begins with the creation stage when the practitioner visualizes each aspect of the deity in his mandala, carefully and methodically identifying himself with all the deity's attributes. One's mind, body, and speech become that of the deity, one's environment becomes his abode. The practitioner becomes filled with a bliss characterized by freedom from attachment, and gradually becomes established in the desire to liberate all beings. In the completion stage, the practitioner moves toward recognizing

the emptiness that pervades all forms, including the world of their meditations. The goal of this advanced practice is total identity with the deity, ultimately seeing oneself in the *dharmakaya*, or “truth body” form and its proper relationship with one’s *nirmanakaya*, or physical body in time and space. We have thus returned to a kind of “charged earth” referred to above.

One famous tantric sadhana used to identify with Avilokateshvara is attributed to the great Tibetan polymath Tangton Gyelpo, excerpted below. Among other meditation practices, the practitioner is to:

...Think that I and all sentient beings are praying to him, in one voice:
 Lord,
 You are unmarred by fault,
 And white in body hue.
 The perfect buddha ornaments your crown,
 And you see beings with compassionate eyes.
 A bow to you, Avilokateśvara.
 Recite that three, seven, or as many times as possible.
 As a result of this one-pointed prayer, Light beams radiate out
 From the body of the noble one,
 And purify defiled karmic appearances and confusion.
 The outer container becomes the Land of Bliss.
 The inner contents—the body, speech, and mind of beings—
 Become the perfected form, teachings, and heart-mind of
 Avilokateśvara.
 Appearance and sound turn into indivisible awareness-emptiness ... ⁴⁷

In the end, any sense of separation from this deity is effaced. One is Avilokateshvara, and the world is transformed by the insight that comes with the practice. We thus return once again to the “charged ground” mentioned above. The affinities (though not identities) between Catholic sacramentalism stemming from a belief in divine immanence and deity yoga based on the pervasive, luminous, and ultimate *dharmakaya* provide an implicit ground of encounter between the two Catholic Christian and Geluk Buddhist traditions. They are

47 Janet Gyatso, trans. The Direct Transmission of the Great Adept Tangton Gyelpo, King of the Empty Plain, Entitled *For All Beings Throughout Space*, in “Chapter 16: An Avilokateśvara Sadhana,” *Religion of Tibet in Practice*, ed. Donald Lopez (Princeton: Princeton University Press: 1997), 270. See also Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Tayé (‘jam mgon kong sprul yon tan rgya mtsho’), *Creation and Completion: Essential Points of Tantric Meditation*, trans. Sarah Harding. Commentary by Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1996).

not the same, the differences are real,⁴⁸ and we do violence to both when we argue identity. But there is enough common ground for understanding and empathy to ultimately facilitate a successful film collaboration.⁴⁹

7 Conclusion

Kundun is a film of its time. It reflects modernized, de-territorialized Tibetan Buddhism in a period of Western romanticism with Buddhism and things Eastern. It is also a time of religious de-institutionalization and attendant religious defensiveness often manifest in the form of fundamentalism, a time of globalization, a time of Chinese return to international stature and economic clout in the wake of the bloodiest century in recorded history, and a time when the Catholic Church is actively re-formulating its own self-understanding following the Second Vatican Council. *Kundun* at once extends certain Orientalist representations of Tibet while bringing the story of a repressed culture to a mass audience through careful recreation. It does this by exploring a most remarkable Buddhist leader who had become by the time of its production, arguably, more archetype than a real person representing a subjugated people. It is a film honorable in its intentions.

Yet this is not a Buddhist film *per se*. It is a film created by a person shaped by a Western Catholic worldview, about a man who is a Buddhist from a particular Buddhist country. It is a film employing certain Buddhist images (mandala), tropes (dream tales, reincarnation, impermanence), gestures towards a cyclical conception of time, rituals (the Nechung oracle, the opera festival of 1950), and morality (compassion, non-violence). However, there is a subtle yet significant difference between a Buddhist film and a Buddhist-inspired film.⁵⁰

48 The primary difference, of course, is that more orthodox Christian traditions have looked askance at a theological vision which *ultimately* elides the ontological difference between creature and Creator, though Christian mystics have indeed crossed such boundaries, to their opprobrium.

49 Not that Catholic and Buddhist metaphysical affinities were ever made explicit by either Scorsese or the Dalai Lama. If they were, I have found no mention of them. They are simply a point of entry, of understanding, allowing for artistic collaboration.

50 For an examination of Buddhism and film see Francisca Cho, "Buddhism," in *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film*, ed. John Lyden (London: Routledge, 2009), 162–177. Scorsese is always humble about his knowledge of Tibet and Buddhism, while he admits to interest in Christianity and Buddhism, he explains: "I'm not an authority on Tibet, I'm not an authority on Buddhism. All I know is the story of the people, the boy, I guess somebody who lives and represents a way of life, maybe we can learn a lot from, maybe do a little better with ourselves. I don't know," (*In Search of Kundun with Martin Scorsese* (*À la*

But here we must be careful, for it is the universality of traditions like Buddhism and Christianity that transcend such particularities. So it bears mention as we close this essay that religious worldviews are more processes than “things,” more like meandering, crisscrossing rivers than stone fortresses. The traditions—what we have here rebranded “worldviews”—are abstractions constituted first and foremost by living and breathing persons for whom such religious labels can be quite irrelevant.

One can of course critique the film for not being Buddhist enough, but this is to misunderstand Scorsese's aim. He examines a person—a special person or more than a person—in his historical, political, and religious context. He does so in a manner that makes sense to the filmmaker and in a way remains evocative of the subject. Ultimately, the director is asserting that the Dalai Lama's importance lies not in his possible identification with a buddha, exotic as that seems to Western ears, but in a commitment to love, compassion, and non-violence that is radically contrary to this world's norms. In the Dalai Lama's life Scorsese discerns a nonviolent path forward that could save the human species from itself. Scorsese knows violence well; he also knows its opposite. This brings us back to the most trenchant words of the protagonist at the film's climax: “I think I am a reflection like the moon on water. When you see me—and I try to be a good man—you see yourself.” One need not believe in the Buddhist ontology of emptiness to see that in the creative hands of Scorsese, Tenzin Gyatso's story is related to our own. According to the Dalai Lama, through the concept of deity yoga detailed above, it is essentially the same. The contention of the Dalai Lama *and* Scorsese, arriving from different theological and philosophical directions, is that being human not only allows empathy, but also pushes the boundaries of human aspirations. Links to divinity—variously conceived—provide intimations of the fullest extent of human possibility, which is salvation, or at least a vision thereof. For artists and those who appreciate them, this film's production should be considered no small *vijaya*, victory.

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Pity and Pardon in Scorsese's Palimpsest, *Bringing Out the Dead*

Gerard Loughlin

Bringing Out the Dead is like a palimpsest, a text written upon another, partly erased text, where some of the first still shows through. It is a film projected on other films, with earlier images behind or beneath its own: images written upon images. The film's second shot—in a sequence of shots intercut between the main titles—is a close up of its protagonist's weary eyes, bathed in the red and jaundiced light of passing vehicles. These eyes almost immediately recur, in another close-up, just before the director's credit. "From the very first close-up of his face, we know that he's already gone, completely gone."¹ The film is narrated from behind those eyes, showing us what they see, the world as it appears and feels to the paramedic, Frank Pierce (Nicolas Cage).² (Fig. 9.1) But the first close-up repeats the second shot of *Taxi Driver* (1976), Martin Scorsese's third main feature,³ the film that established him as a new excitement in American cinema, an excitement that has never gone away.⁴

The second shot in *Taxi Driver* is a close up of the eyes of Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro), scanning the streets of New York, likewise washed in a red

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- 1 Martin Scorsese, *Scorsese on Scorsese*, eds. Ian Christie and David Thompson (London: Faber & Faber, 2003), 238. (Hereinafter cited as *Scorsese*.)
 - 2 Paul Schrader, the writer of the film, wanted a younger man to play the part of Frank, preferably Edward Norton. But in the end, Cage was an admirable choice, delivering one of his finest performances. See Schrader in *Schrader on Schrader and Other Writings*, ed. Kevin Jackson (London: Faber and Faber, 2004 [1990]), 226. (Hereinafter cited as *Schrader*.)
 - 3 Scorsese's first main feature was *Mean Streets* (1973), and before that he had made *Boxcar Bertha* (1972), which was not his own project, and *Who's That Knocking at My Door* (1969), which was his own, but a student project with a limited release. *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974) came between *Mean Streets* and *Taxi Driver*.
 - 4 Robert Kolker, who doesn't understand the theological interest of *Bringing Out the Dead*, and thinks the film merely "marking time," nevertheless sees in it Scorsese's "willingness always to push his camera into the face of reality to reveal a more real cinematic face and body behind it, a violent and struggling body, trapped in spaces it barely comprehends and wants still to struggle against. In that body's movements within a space filled with tension and violence lie some of the great gestures of contemporary film" (Robert Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness: Penn, Stone, Kubrick, Scorsese, Spielberg, Altman*, 3rd (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000 [1980]), 246).



FIGURE 9.1 "He's already gone, completely gone." Frank Pierce (Nicolas Cage) in *Bringing Out the Dead*



FIGURE 9.2 Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro) in *Taxi Driver*

glow (Fig. 9.2). Like Frank, Travis too will narrate his film, through the diary that we see him writing—one of the many things that the screenwriter of both films, Paul Schrader, borrowed from Robert Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951) and *Pickpocket* (1959).⁵ Like Bresson's thief (Michel), Schrader's Travis

⁵ Schrader more directly overwrites Bresson's *Pickpocket* in his films, *American Gigolo* (1980) and *Light Sleeper* (1992). Bresson's film is itself an audacious reworking of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866), and somewhere beneath *Taxi Driver* is Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1864).

and Frank are voyeurs, observing society from both a physical and emotional distance. In interview, Scorsese has played down the similarities between the two films, quoting Schrader: “You know, Marty, they’re going to say [*Bringing Out the Dead* is] like *Taxi Driver*. But it’s twenty-five years later and we’re both different.”⁶ Indeed they were and are: director, writer, and films are different, but also similar and the similarities are figured from the first. As in *Taxi Driver*, *Bringing Out the Dead* has a second shot of Frank’s strobed eyes, but now just after rather than just before the director’s credit.

Both films view the city—New York—through windows, through the window screens of Travis’s taxi and of Frank’s ambulance. The cinema—the window through which we are watching—is inside these films. Their protagonists are alone, isolated, even as they are surrounded by others in the city, like the viewer in the dark of the cinema, a singularity in the multitude of the audience.⁷ Both films display the artifice of their cinematic construction through meta-textual moments, of which the presence of their director is the most obvious. Scorsese plays characters in both films—seen in *Taxi Driver* and unseen in *Bringing Out the Dead*, but heard as one of the dispatchers, sending Frank out onto the streets of Hell’s Kitchen, the west side of midtown Manhattan.⁸ “Ladder 4, respond to a 10–22, four-flight residential, 417 West 32. 6–3 Boy, men’s room Grand Central, man set his pants on fire. Bad burns. 7–7 David, at 177 West 24, there’s a woman who says a roach crawled in her ear. Can’t get it out, says she’s going into cardiac arrest ...”⁹

In between the two New York films, we must interpose a third, seemingly very different film. This is *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), Scorsese’s long-nurtured retelling of the novel by Nikos Kazantzakis.¹⁰ One might think the only connections between this film and the others are the accents of its characters, which are unapologetically American, unashamedly New York in the

6 Scorsese, 237. Nevertheless, Schrader also admits to Travis being present in Frank; a person drifting “on the edge of urban society, always peeping, looking into the lives of others.” See Paul Schrader, *Collected Screenplays Volume 1: Taxi Driver, American Gigolo, Light Sleeper* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), vii.

7 See further Jacques Derrida, Antoine de Baecque and Thierry Jousse, “Cinema and Its Ghosts: An Interview with Jacques Derrida,” trans. Peggy Kamuf, *Discourse* 37, nos 1–2 (2015): 22–39 (29).

8 Scorsese had also appeared in *Mean Streets*, as a hitman shooting at his lead actors.

9 Paul Schrader, *Bringing Out the Dead* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), 3. The order of these calls is slightly different in the film, the man with burning pants coming after the woman with a roach in her ear. But delivered deadpan they establish the tone of unacknowledged comedy that runs throughout the film.

10 Nikos Kazantzakis, *The Last Temptation*, trans. P.A. Bien (London: Faber and Faber, 1975 [1961]).

case of Harvey Keitel (Judas). Yet there is a sense in which *Last Temptation* is the understory of *Taxi Driver* and *Bringing Out the Dead*: the film over which they are written. Scorsese's Christ is another lonely man, obsessed with the suffering of both himself and others.

Of course, the appearing of one film in another occurs in the eye of the beholder, the mind of the viewer.¹¹ But then what we see on a screen is always a mixture of what the screen reflects of its projected image and how that image falls on the screen of our mind, across which have played impressions of other films and viewings. It is in the mind's eye that we see the first film in the second, and the first and second in a third, and so on. It is in the mind's eye that our perception is palimpsestuous. And this addresses rather nicely how Thomas De Quincey (1785–1859)—who first theorized the palimpsest—thought of the medieval scribe's overwriting of earlier, scrubbed parchments. De Quincey was not the first person to refer to the palimpsest, but he was the first to attend to it as both layered artifact and metaphor, as a “membrane or roll cleansed of its manuscript by reiterated successions” and as a process in the mind.¹² Having rehearsed the marvels of “rude monastic chemistry”¹³ which enabled, though imperfectly, the medieval cleaning of ink from vellum, and so the overwriting of one text upon another—a “knightly romance” upon a “monkish legend” and the legend upon a “Grecian tragedy”¹⁴—De Quincey affirms the human brain as “a natural and mighty palimpsest.”¹⁵

Such a palimpsest is my brain, such a palimpsest, O reader! is yours. Everlasting layers of ideas, images, feelings, have fallen upon your brain softly

11 And other film-makers have written over Schrader's and Scorsese's work, for example Lynne Ramsay's remarkable *You Were Never Really Here* (2017) overwrites *Taxi Driver*, and may even contain a nod to *Bringing Out the Dead* in the sighting of an ambulance on what is an otherwise *Taxi Driver* night-time street.

12 Thomas De Quincey, “The Palimpsest” in *Suspiria de Profundis* (1845); in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater and Other Writings*, ed. Robert Morrison, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 130–138 (131). For more on De Quincey's inauguration of the “substantive concept of the palimpsest” see Sarah Dillon, “Reinscribing De Quincey's Palimpsest: The Significance of the Palimpsest in Contemporary Literary and Cultural Studies,” *Textual Practice* 19, no. 3 (2005): 243–263. The use of “palimpsestuous” follows that of Dillon and evokes the phenomenon in which “otherwise unrelated texts are involved and entangled, intricately interwoven, interrupting and inhabiting each other,” and it can be usefully distinguished from the “palimpsestic,” the historical process of “layering that produces a palimpsest” (245).

13 *Ibid.*, 134.

14 *Ibid.*, 137.

15 *Ibid.*, 135.

as light. Each succession has seemed to bury all that went before. And yet in reality not one has been extinguished.¹⁶

The laying down and layering of memories is aptly seen as the impress of light. De Quincey tells his reader that “countless are the mysterious handwritings of grief or joy which have inscribed themselves successively upon the palimpsest of your brain,” as “light falling upon light.” These “endless strata” are covered up by “forgetfulness,” but can be revived, disclosed, at the hour of death, when in a fever, or through the taking of opium. “They are not dead, but sleeping.”¹⁷ The taking of opium was the practice by which De Quincey sought to bring the past back to the living through induced dreaming. As we shall see, this palimpsestic return of the dead—extolled by De Quincey—is the very thing that Frank Pierce is seeking to escape. But Frank is caught within Scorsese’s film, and “movies,” for Scorsese “are really a kind of dream-state, or like taking dope.”¹⁸ Frank is living within the palimpsest, and so are we when viewing it, and seeing within it the previous films over which it has been lain, as light upon light.

1 Hell’s Kitchen

“There’s no plot as such, but there’s excitement in the situation of the people, and the dark humor needed to survive in that world.”¹⁹ That world is, as already noted, New York’s Hell’s Kitchen, as it was in the early 1990s before Mayor Rudy Giuliani (mayor from 1993) introduced a zero tolerance policy on crime, and as recounted in Joe Connelly’s novel, *Bringing Out the Dead* (1998), a story based on Connelly’s own experiences of working in the Emergency Medical Services (EMS). There are some incidents that do not make it from the book to the film, and some experiences did not make it from Connelly’s life to his novel.²⁰ Book and film are linear but episodic, with the book longer and less structured than Scorsese’s movie.²¹ And perhaps it was the interest in situation rather than story, a lack of narrative drive, that led the film’s producers to

16 De Quincey, 135.

17 *Ibid.*, 137.

18 *Scorsese*, 54.

19 *Ibid.*, 231.

20 “[T]he hell night that’s shown in our film is nothing compared to what Joe Connelly told us about his experiences working in EMS” (*Scorsese*, 233). Schrader claims to have spent some time “riding around on an ambulance, which was very entertaining” (*Schrader*, 224).

21 On the linearity of the film see *Schrader*, 224.

restrict its distribution,²² aware that it doesn't offer audiences what they might expect of a Scorsese picture, expect by way of development and resolution. As Scorsese noted of a film like Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, you watch *Bringing Out the Dead* not for plot, but for mood. "Mood and, er, mood. Mood. Camera movement. Elegance. Just like listening to a piece of music."²³

There is a lot of music in *Bringing Out the Dead*. Some sequences were edited to particular pieces, and some sequences were cut from the film because the music rights were not forthcoming.²⁴ *Taxi Driver* had a score by Bernard Hermann (1911–1975), immortal for his work with Alfred Hitchcock,²⁵ bringing just the right tone of noirish sleaze to Bickle's world. Frank's world is underscored by Elmer Bernstein (1922–2004), with music that is sometimes comforting, sometimes unsettling. It is reminiscent of Hermann's, but not so noticeable, because the music that dominates from the credit sequence onwards is that which plays in the lives of the characters, in Frank's life, which is to say in Scorsese's life, the music he grew up with. The film's "main score" is Van Morrison's "T.B. Sheets" (1967), which Scorsese had been listening to since the 60s, and had always wanted to put in a film.²⁶ "So it's the middle of the night and you're driving, with that harmonica and those drums, and Van Morrison's repetitions and phrases going through your mind. You're sipping a little bourbon or Scotch and those traffic lights keep changing, and that's how you slip in and out of the hallucination."²⁷ Film for Scorsese is hallucination, fantasy taken for reality, and both *Taxi Driver* and *Bringing Out the Dead* display this. There is a raw, almost documentary look to much of *Taxi Driver*. It is, as Scorsese remarks of the film, a cross between the "New York *Daily News*" and "Gothic horror."²⁸ A taxi appears out of the steam from the underground of

22 This restriction, at least in the UK, is noted in Christopher Deacy, *Faith in Film: Religious Themes in Contemporary Cinema* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 20. Schrader notes that "character studies" should ideally be "plotless, dwelling on the complexities and contradictions of human behaviour, guiding the viewer to one of several conclusions," but that such ambition is "unrealistic in the commercial cinema" (Schrader, *Screenplays*, viii).

23 Mark Jolly, "A Terrible Beauty" in *Scorsese: A Journey Through the American Psyche*, ed. Paul Woods (London: Plexus, 2005), 240–250 (249).

24 *Scorsese*, 240–241. Scorsese has said the same of other films. "Mean Streets featured the music I grew up with and that music would give me images" (*Scorsese*, 45).

25 *The Trouble with Harry* (1955), *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956), *The Wrong Man* (1956), *Vertigo* (1958), *North by Northwest* (1959), *Psycho* (1960), *Marnie* (1964).

26 *Scorsese*, 239. Schrader thought that more contemporary music should have been used, "techno and rap, instead of that music from the seventies and eighties—it would have made the film seem less old-fashioned" (Schrader, 226).

27 *Ibid.*, 238–239.

28 *Ibid.*, 54.



FIGURE 9.3 Frank's growing attraction to Mary Burke (Patricia Arquette) conveyed in a dissolve between two shots

New York streets, and Travis does not so much walk as glide toward the door of the taxi company where he will be taken on as a driver. With the actor on a dolly and filmed from behind, the audience for a “split second” wonders what is happening.²⁹ Scorsese has remarked that he doesn't think “there is any difference between fantasy and reality in the way these should be approached in a film. Of course, if you live that way you are clinically insane. But I can ignore the boundary on film.”³⁰ And the boundary can be ignored because film reality is fantasy, the illusion of reality.

Both films have dissolves on action, ellipses in what might otherwise be single shots, drifts of attention and reminders of the subjective gaze. (Fig. 9.3) And both films use slow motion, so subtle sometimes as to go unnoticed—the shot of Travis in his taxi gliding to a halt opposite the office where Betsy (Cybil Shepherd) is working, or of Rose (Cynthia Roman), just steps away from her death, walking past the carcasses hanging outside the meat market, orange-red against the grey snow of the street.³¹ But then *Bringing Out the Dead* also under-cranks, speeding up the film,³² mainly in scenes of life on the streets, of cars and trucks at night. Some of the formally framed, night-time shots of the roads, with the ambulances and other vehicles hurtling towards or away from the camera, are reminiscent—in their almost abstract, hallucinatory quality—of nothing so much as some of the shots in the “star-gate” sequence at the end of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968).

29 Ibid., 54.

30 Ibid., 60.

31 Scorsese had already used dolly shots and slow motion in *Mean Streets*.

32 *Scorsese*, 241.



FIGURE 9.4 Our Lady of Perpetual Mercy

Bringing Out the Dead, being a well-budgeted film, has many bravura shots: whip-pans, swooping crane shots, shots that flip over, and the complex orchestration of camera and characters. Choreography replaces editing. Unlike *Taxi Driver*, the editor on *Bringing Out the Dead*—as she has been on every Scorsese film since *Raging Bull* (1980)—was Thelma Schoonmaker, so that every shot and cut between shots works to articulate the action, the drive, and the themes of the film.³³ Every shot is caressingly caught by cinematographer Robert Richardson. He renders the film's deep colors—the greens of the hospital, the reds of the drug dealer's apartment, the white highlights of the night time streets—with painterly, chiaroscuro effect.³⁴

The novel provides more backstory than the film for the protagonist Frank Pierce, but otherwise Paul Schrader's script is remarkably faithful to the book, taking most of its dialogue from the novel, but paring it down and, crucially, making its ending less bleak. The plot, such as it is, concerns Frank's encounter with the Burke family. Mr. Burke (Cullen Oliver Johnson) has suffered a cardiac arrest, and Frank and Larry (John Goodman) are about to pronounce him dead when he shows signs of life and they take him, unconscious, to Our Lady of Perpetual Mercy Hospital (also known as Our Lady of Perpetual Misery).³⁵ (Fig. 9.4 and 9.5) Over the next several days, as Burke continues to code, Frank develops a relationship with the daughter, Mary Burke (Patricia Arquette).

33 For how Scorsese and Schoonmaker work together see the interview with Schoonmaker in *Projections 7: Film Makers on Film-Making*, eds. John Boorman and Walter Donohue (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), 22–28.

34 Robert Richardson had previously worked with Scorsese on *Casino* (1995) and would work with him again on *The Aviator* (2004), *Shutter Island* (2010) and *Hugo* (2011).

35 Schrader, *Bringing*, 8.



FIGURE 9.5 Joe Connelly (uncredited) is brought into the hospital as a patient

Mary was not always the dutiful daughter. She has been a drug taker in her time, and when her father's dying becomes too much for her she retreats to the hospice of Cy Coates (Cliff Curtis), who provides a drug induced sleep. Frank follows her to this place and then rescues her from it. Later, Frank is called to an incident where Cy, trying to evade rival drug dealers, has leapt from his apartment to the balcony beneath, and has impaled himself on its railings. Frank finds himself comforting a man who is responsible for much of the drug-related misery in the neighborhood. The film ends with Frank going to tell Mary that her father has died. So, it is hardly a story at all. It is in the telling that the film has its power, and it's in the move from the script—at least as published—to the completed film that the most significant transformation of Connelly's original narrative takes place. It is not a transformation in terms of plot or character or, indeed, of situation or mood, but of *theology*.³⁶

The back story that Schrader jettisons is largely concerned with Frank's failed marriage, with how he met his wife and how he lost her. We learn this story through the course of the novel. It shows us that Frank was once a more sociable, less lonely person. Nevertheless a lonely person is what he has become, and the film shows us that loneliness, not least through Frank's voice

36 This is not to say that Connelly's book is without theology or at any rate without religious resonance. From its very first line we know we are in hell, in Hell's Kitchen, and in its first paragraph Frank Pierce tells us that he'd "walked the seven blocks to work" with his "shaking hands actually clasped together in the act of praying for a quiet night." The rest of the book is an asking for that quiet night, which seems never to arrive. Joe Connelly, *Bringing Out the Dead* (London: Warner Books, 1998), 1. Schrader says that he tried to cut the Catholicism from the book and was surprised by how much remained in the finished film. "I kept some of it in, and some of it snuck back in, and some of it I didn't even recognise" (Schrader, 224).

over. The very sharing of his thoughts confirms his isolation. This of course identifies him with “God’s lonely man,” Travis Bickle.³⁷ And loneliness is the condition of hell. In Dante’s *Inferno*, the damned “live exclusively within their own stories, admitting no larger narrative into which their own stories are inserted and from which they acquire meaning, for they have no desire to live within any narratives other than those they themselves have composed, not even those of fellow human beings.”³⁸ Yet, with that said, we have to acknowledge that both Travis and Frank do attempt to tell their stories with others. But Travis fails because he attempts to include others within his own story, whereas Frank, as we shall see, succeeds because he accepts inclusion within another’s story, in a larger narrative than his own. And in this sense we would have to say that Frank’s Hell’s Kitchen is in fact a *purgatorio* and not an *inferno*. It is a place where one can learn how to tell one’s story within a larger tale, in a comedy of redemption. Denys Turner suggests that Dante’s hell and purgatory are “one and the same place, inhabited by one and the same set of ‘facts’ of sin,” and that “what differentiates them is the wholly different theological stories the repentant and the unrepentant tell of those facts.”³⁹ Scorsese’s mean streets are similar: hell for some and purgatory for others. They are places where self-stories close in upon their narrators or where they open to others’ narration, embraced in the arms of other lives.

2 Palimpsestuous Figures

Mark Jolley has written that Frank Pierce is “the closest thing to a saint” among Scorsese’s protagonists.⁴⁰ It is preferable to casting him as a “Christ figure,” the almost inevitable personage of so much writing on “religion and film,” even though Frank is in many ways a prime candidate for such categorization. But instead of reaching for the Christ figure, we might better reach for that of the saint, since a saint is a Christ-like person, someone seeking to follow the way of

37 Travis, in voice-over: “Loneliness has followed me all my life. The life of loneliness pursues me wherever I go: in bars, cars, coffee shops, theatres, stores, sidewalks. There is no escape. I am God’s lonely man” (Schrader, *Screenplays*, 106–107).

38 Denys Turner, *Julian of Norwich, Theologian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 110. It is in part because of his isolation that Travis—as described in Schrader’s script—takes Betsy to a pornographic movie on their date. “He is so much a part of his own world, he fails to comprehend another’s world. Compared to the movies he sees, this is respectable” (Schrader, *Screenplays*, 48).

39 Turner, 111.

40 Jolly, 242.

Christ. They do so, however, in their own circumstances, even though it might lead to the enmity of others: a return of violence for proffered peace.

A Christ figure is a palimpsestuous figure, an over-writing of the life of Jesus, as told in the gospels and later tradition, by a more recent or contemporary character. In such a way the later inscription betrays aspects of the earlier, with the earlier showing through and giving depth—spiritual resonance. Thus Christ's story shows in Frank's to the degree that Frank wants to save others and suffers in so doing. Indeed, one might describe *Bringing Out the Dead* as the passion of Frank Pierce. It is set over three days—a Thursday, Friday and Saturday, which is more clearly signaled in the film than in the novel—with Frank suffering more the more he seeks to relieve the sufferings of others. But though it might be tempting to find correlates with the main incidents in the gospel story,⁴¹ the last supper of Maundy Thursday, the crucifixion of Good Friday, the silence of Holy Saturday, followed by the rising early on the Sunday morning, there would be something forced in doing so.

The invocation of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday, suggests another way of seeing the film, as not so much an overwriting of Christ's passion as set within the Church's enacted remembrance of that passion (the liturgy of the Easter triduum, the prayerful recollection of the last three days before the resurrection). On each night, and the film is very much one of nights, Frank is paired with a different co-worker: with Larry (John Goodman) on Thursday, Marcus (Ving Rhames) on Friday (Fig. 9.7), and Tom Wolls (Tom Sizemore) on the Saturday. The world of the film, like that of the novel, is a Catholic one. Frank grew up on 43rd and went to "Holy Cross." Mary went to "Sacred heart." Both remember Mimi's pizzas, which came with a "little plastic" Madonna or Saint Anthony in the middle.⁴² Frank's mother thought he looked like a priest and Mary's mother thought she would be a nun. "I didn't want to be a nun. I just wanted to run away. Sister Mary or Mary the Junkie. Didn't matter to me."⁴³ Frank's colleagues call him Father Frank.⁴⁴ He wants to be a good Catholic, but wants to be one, like Charlie in *Mean Streets*, on the streets. It is there, if anywhere, that he is going to be a saint.

41 The gospel "story" is only perceived through the over-writings of the four canonical gospels. On the relationship between the canonical gospels and the gospel story see further Gerard Loughlin, *Telling God's Story: Bible, Church and Narrative Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999 [1996]), Ch. 2 (29–63).

42 Schrader, *Bringing*, 52–3. In the novel, Frank grew up on Fifty-second and went to Blessed Sacrament, while Mary went to Holy Name; and it was Joe's pizza that they ate. See Connelly, 188–189.

43 Schrader, *Bringing*, 54.

44 Connelly, 272.

It is not that we see Christ in Frank but that we see Frank wanting to be like Christ, if unconsciously. Frank just wants to do his job, which he partly sees as saving people from themselves, from the streets, and partly—and increasingly—as bearing witness to their sufferings. “I was a grief mop. It was enough that I simply showed up.” Frank testifies not to a creed, but to values implicit in his actions towards colleagues and to the people he rescues from the streets, in acknowledgment of their suffering. If he is a saint, he is an anonymous one. It is in his witnessing of suffering and in his suffering at doing so, because of his failure to relieve others’ distress, that he is a witness, a “martyr.” The martyr along with the saint gets lost to view when we look only for Christ figures in the movies.⁴⁵ But we might think that there is an element of self-regard in Frank’s distress at others’ suffering, for it is not so much distress about others’ suffering as distress about his failure to help them. As we shall see, it is in letting go of this self-regard, this need to save, that Frank finds his own salvation. But it is not his own achievement. It arrives as a gift.

Frank is a possible saint, a martyr, but not a Christ figure. Travis Bickle, in *Taxi Driver*, over whom Frank’s character is written, has sometimes been identified as such a figure. But such an identification is a misidentification, even though it is one that Scorsese himself partly invited.⁴⁶ Considering how Christ, or something of Christ, has been seen in Bickle, and why this is a mistake, allows us to better see the saint and martyr in Frank, as well as the theological difference of *Bringing Out the Dead* from its predecessor.

Like Frank, Travis is a man of the streets. Like Frank he rides the streets at night, looking out from his taxi at the detritus of the city, its “garbage and trash.”⁴⁷ Unlike Frank, whose gaze is compassion, Bickle’s eye condemns. Filled with rage, he sees a world that needs to be cleansed of all the “animals [who] come out at night,” the “whores, skunk pussies, buggers, queens, fairies, dopers, junkies,” the “sick, venal” people.⁴⁸ Remarkably, he conceives the idea of killing Senator Charles Palatine as a way of bringing this about,⁴⁹ and having failed, he attempts the lesser feat of rescuing the 12 year-old prostitute, Iris

45 Of course, Scorsese’s great film of witnessing is *Silence* (2016), in which Fr. Sebastiao Rodrigues (Andrew Garfield) goes to Japan in order to bear witness to Christ. He comes to witness—to endure—the witnessing (martyrdom) of others, and must question what his own witness achieves. In the end, his own silence becomes a witness to the silence of God, to an infinite compassion for *all things*.

46 See *Scorsese*, 62.

47 Schrader, *Screenplays*, 12.

48 *Ibid.*, 13.

49 This part of the story was inspired by Arthur Bremer, who in 1972 shot and paralysed the Governor of Alabama, George Wallace (1919–1998).

(Jodie Foster), from Sport (Harvey Keitel), her pimp. It is the desire to cleanse the streets, to rescue Iris, that leads some to see Travis as a savior figure. It is his near death, his loss of liberty, for a time, that is his passion: the suffering that his saving brings.

The problem with wanting to see Travis as a redeeming figure is that he seeks to free Iris by murdering Sport and then, when the cops close in, by attempting to kill himself.⁵⁰ He thus becomes the very inverse of Christ, who does not kill but is killed. Travis does not die but instead murders several other people. Yet some read the film's final shootout as a "purgative ritual."⁵¹ And Christopher Deacy has said that "the means by which Travis carries out his redemptive mission is congruous with the more conventional form of redemption in Christianity." Somehow, for Deacy, Christ's "suffering and violent death on the Cross" is replayed in Travis' wounding in the course of murdering Sport.⁵² Even if there is something sacrificial in Travis' bid to rescue Iris, it is no more than a *risking* of his life, since he doesn't die and by the end of the film is returned to his life on the streets as a taxi driver. *Pace* Deacy, there is very little that is "analogous" between "Travis's redemptive mission" and "Jesus' [sic] becoming incarnate and bearing the sins of humanity in order to fulfil his redemptive mission."⁵³ Deacy shows some recognition that the analogy fails in a footnote where he observes that some scholars have argued that Jesus sympathized with Zealot concerns. He resembles a first-century freedom fighter against the Roman occupation of Palestine, and so a redeemer who "not only *suffers* violence" but has "the capacity to *inflict* it."⁵⁴ But this is not the Jesus of the gospels, not the Jesus of the Christian tradition, and not the Jesus who, as the incarnate Son, abjures all violence, who tells Peter to put away his sword (John 18:11) and entreats for the forgiveness of his killers (Luke 23:34).⁵⁵ Unlike Travis, he refuses to destroy those who would destroy him.

Deacy suggests that Travis achieves some degree of redemption by the end of *Taxi Driver*.⁵⁶ But if redeemed, Travis's New York would have become

50 There are other problems as well, such as Bickle's racism. See Amy Taubin, *Taxi Driver* (London: BFI Publishing, 2000), 15–18.

51 Lawrence S. Friedman, *The Cinema of Martin Scorsese* (New York: Continuum, 1997), 82.

52 Christopher Deacy, *Screen Christologies: Redemption and the Medium of Film, Religion, Culture and Society* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001), 117.

53 *Ibid.* It is the Word (*Logos*) that becomes incarnate in human flesh (*sarx*), in the man Jesus.

54 *Ibid.*, 179 n. 81; emphasis in original.

55 It is also not the Jesus of *Last Temptation*, where it is Judas (Harvey Keitel) who is the Zealot.

56 *Ibid.*, 118.

purgatory rather than hell, and yet he is in the same place at the end of the film as at its beginning, with the film's ending an arbitrary point in a repeating story. "*Taxi Driver* is circular. At the end of the narrative Travis has not been changed, he's been revealed."⁵⁷ Even Betsy, the girl who Travis courts unsuccessfully, does not escape. At the end of the film she willingly gets into Travis' cab, excited by his celebrity, and though she will then get out, we last see her as a receding figure in Travis' rear-view mirror, trapped in his gaze. "Hell's stories," Turner observes, "cannot be completed, for the damned refuse to complete them."⁵⁸ All they can do is tell them again and again. Purgatorial stories are also incomplete, though not due to repetition but because they are completed in paradise, which is unnarratable.⁵⁹

Contra Deacy, there are no grounds, let alone "substantial" ones, "for seeing in *Taxi Driver* a potent illustration of the redemption of the individual from a state of sin and alienation, which corresponds to significant integral elements of Christian teaching."⁶⁰ However, there are grounds for seeing such an outcome in *Bringing Out the Dead*. There will be a day after the final day in the film, but it is hard to think that it will be the same as those that have gone before. The later film must be projected upon the earlier if we are to see Travis saved; we must look at Travis and see Frank.

And to make sense of that claim we must let a much earlier text come into view; an actual text, rather than a film, though it is a text of visions, of showings, and of what was seen in them, the appearing of yet earlier writings, now newly perceived.

3 Being Seen: Julian's Shewinges

In the fifty-first chapter of her "shewinges" (revelations), the English mystic and theologian, Julian of Norwich (c. 1343–1416) has a vision of a lord and his servant. The lord looks upon his servant with "rare love and tenderness" and dispatches him on an undertaking, which the servant is only too eager to complete. But he has no sooner set off than he falls into a "deep ditch" and injures himself. He is so encompassed that he cannot even turn his head to see the

57 Schrader, *Screenplays*, viii; see also *Schrader*, 120. Scorsese, who reminds us that Travis was a Vietnam war veteran, relates his violence to the war's effect, and notes that "although at the end of the film he seems to be in control again, we give the impression that any second the time bomb might go off again" (*Scorsese*, 62).

58 Turner, 112.

59 *Ibid.*

60 Deacy, 118.

lord on whose mission he has been brought low, and there is no one else to help him. He is alone.⁶¹ Julian is much perplexed by this vision, and it takes almost twenty years for her to come to a fuller realization of what she has seen: the disclosure of its “inner significance” through attending to all its “details and circumstances.”⁶²

Julian comes to see, to understand, that the lord is God and the servant Adam. She has seen “one man and his fall” but understands that in him God sees everyone: “In the sight of God everyman is one man, and one man is everyman.” Though fallen, the lord still loves his servant, but the servant cannot turn his head to see his still loving lord. It is the servant who changes, not God.⁶³ God, the lord, ceaselessly regards his servant with love, “especially when he fell.” Julian continues:

The merciful gaze of his loving eyes ranged the whole earth, and went down with Adam into hell; his continuing pity kept Adam from eternal death. Mercy and pity dwell thus with mankind until at last we come to heaven.⁶⁴

As Julian goes on looking at the lord and the servant, at the way they are dressed, she gains deeper insights into both. She notices that the servant is dressed in a white coat, but one that is “old and worn, stained with sweat, tight and short, coming just below the knee, threadbare, almost worn out, ready to fall apart any moment.”⁶⁵ She thinks this odd for such a servant, dressed as if he has been working for a long time, and yet, she becomes aware, a servant who is being sent out for the first time. And what is he being sent to do? Then she realizes. He is to be a gardener, “digging and banking, toiling and sweating, turning and trenching the ground, watering the plants the while.” He is to tend the garden, to grow fruit for food, and to bring them to his lord, “and serve them to his taste.”⁶⁶ And then Julian understands that the servant is not only Adam, not only Everyman, but also the second Adam, Christ, the Son, the Second Person

61 Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, translated and introduced by Clifton Wolters (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966), Ch. 51 (141–142).

62 *Ibid.*, 143–144.

63 *Ibid.*, 144.

64 *Ibid.*, 145.

65 *Ibid.*, 146.

66 *Ibid.*, 147.

of the Trinity; the lord is God the Father, and the love between lord and servant is the Holy Spirit.⁶⁷

Thus Julian arrives at her audacious double vision of the servant as both Adam and second Adam, with one superimposed upon the other, like a projected palimpsest. We see both at once, both doing the same thing, but differently. "When Adam fell, God's Son fell."⁶⁸

Adam fell from life to death, first into the depths of this wretched world, and then into hell. God's Son fell, with Adam, but into the depth of the Virgin's womb—herself the fairest daughter of Adam—with the intent of excusing Adam from blame both in heaven and on earth.⁶⁹

Adam fell fro life to deth: into the slade of this wretched worlde, and after that into hell. Goddes son fell with Adam into the slade of the maidens wombe, which was the fairest doughter of Adam—and that for to excuse Adam from blame in heven and erth—and mightly he fetched him out of hell.⁷⁰

The servant is a doubled figure, both Adam and second Adam, shown to Julian as one man and shown by Julian to us as the means by which God works the salvation of the world. For when the Father sees sinful, fallen Adam he sees only "his own dear Son, Jesus Christ,"⁷¹ and in seeing his Son he sees saved humanity. All are "included in Christ's humanity; for he is the head, and we are his members." "Jesus is everyone that will be saved, and everyone that will be saved is Jesus."⁷² We are saved by a palimpsest, by being over-written; by having Christ projected upon us.

67 Ibid. Thus Julian will come to see the gardener's *white* coat as Christ's "flesh; its being *single* the fact that there is nothing separating Godhead and human nature; its *tight fit* is poverty, its *age* is Adam's wearing of it, its *sweat stains* Adam's toil, its *shortness*, the work the servant did" (148; emphasis in original).

68 Ibid., 147.

69 Ibid., 148.

70 Julian of Norwich, *The Writings of Julian of Norwich: A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman and A Revelation of Love*, eds Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), Ch. 51 (283).

71 Ibid., 148.

72 Ibid., 149. Julian was writing for fellow Christians, for members of the Church—Christ's body—and so she is careful to allow that not all may be saved. In the Son the Father sees those who are saved, those who are risen from the dead in the rising of Christ. Yet there is also a suggestion that all may yet be saved, for Julian notes that "the way to heaven for those of us who are not yet members is by longing and desire" (Ch. 51, 149). Julian, of

Julian's Christ saves neither by taking on a punishment due others, nor by satisfying through suffering an honor that Julian's God has no sense of having lost. Those are all misunderstandings of the God—the lord and the servant and the love between them—of which Julian, through her shewinges, was vouched understanding. It is the refusal of these alternative soteriologies as in a sense idolatrous that makes Julian's thinking so radical, and so apt for understanding *Bringing Out the Dead*. The film similarly seems to turn from such soteriologies, from the soteriology in *Taxi Driver* and even *The Last Temptation of Christ*, though in the latter it is already on the turn.

The soteriologies Julian refuses are idolatrous because they imagine God within the order of sin, as if God too were governed by sin's law. They imagine a God who takes affront when his will is flouted, his love spurned, his proffered friendship refused. But Julian sees a God who is nothing like this. She sees a God who is not angry, and so has no need to forgive. "I could see no sort of anger in God, however long I looked." It is we who are angry, not God. But being ourselves angry, we think God must suffer anger too, and so we seek God's forgiveness. And God's forgiveness is assured and consists in not being angry and so in not needing to forgive, but instead and always willing our peace. "Thus I saw God to be our true peace, who keeps us safe when we are anything but peaceful, and who always works to bring us to everlasting peace."⁷³ This is the peace of the father in the parable of the prodigal son, the father who offers no rebuke and no forgiveness, but simply runs to his son and celebrates his return (Luke 15:11-32), telling his other son: "this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found." Or, as Julian has it, "the soul to be saved never was dead, and never will be."⁷⁴

On Julian's account, divine forgiveness is not a "trade-off,"⁷⁵ not an economy that returns pardon for repentance, but is rather an absolutely unconditional gift, the very madness that Jacques Derrida sees in a pure forgiveness which forgives the unforgivable. It arrives from "the undiscoverable place of

course, is famous for teaching that all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well (Ch. 27, 103-104), and Clifton Wolters thinks that she trembled on the "brink of universalism" (Julian, 36) but did not step over, remaining on the side of Church teaching. The mystery of universal salvation is enclosed in the mystery of sin and sin in the mystery of grace. See further Karen Kilby, "Julian of Norwich, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and the Status of Suffering in Christian Theology," *New Blackfriars*, vol. 99 no. 1081 (May 2018): 298-311.

73 Julian, Ch. 49 (138).

74 Ibid., 139.

75 Turner, 125.

forgiveness,” from an “ethics beyond ethics.”⁷⁶ Divine forgiveness—as Julian sees it—is the very thing of which Derrida can only “dream”: “forgiveness without power: *unconditional but without sovereignty*.”⁷⁷ For in forgiving through not forgiving, God exercises no power over us, changes nothing that we have done or failed to do, but simply sees Christ when seeing us, and invites us—through Christ—to see ourselves likewise. This still might seem impossible, but it seems to be something like what Julian envisaged—and even as she acknowledged its seeming impossibility⁷⁸—and something like what we might just glimpse in *Bringing Out the Dead*. “The troubles and sorrows, caused by our perversity, the Lord Jesus takes, and lifts up to heaven where they are transformed to things of delight and pleasure greater than heart can think or tongue can tell.”⁷⁹

4 Ghostly Sights

“It was the neighborhood I grew up in and where I had worked most as a paramedic and it held more ghosts per square foot than any other.”⁸⁰ The film *Bringing Out the Dead* differs most from the novel and published script in its theology, and this theology is most evident in certain scenes and certain recurring images and encounters. The latter are Frank’s meetings with the ghosts of the departed. There are more such encounters in the novel than the film, and not least with Mr Burke, whose ghost Frank can see even before Burke’s

76 Jacques Derrida, *Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (London: Routledge, 2001), 36.

77 *Ibid.*, 58.

78 “The normal teaching of Holy Church and, indeed, my own experience, told me of the blame of sin which has been hanging over us, from the time of Adam until we reach heaven. It was the more surprising that I should see the Lord God regard us with no more blame than if we had been as pure and holy as his angels in heaven. Between these two opposites my mind was extremely perplexed.” Julian, Ch. 50 (139–140).

79 Julian, Ch. 50 (139). The radicality and challenge of Julian’s vision is indicated by Denys Turner, who, while showing us how the parable of the prodigal informs Julian’s thought, nevertheless, at the last, shies away from her vision of pure forgiveness (beyond forgiveness) and introduces a “trade-off” into the parable: “All the father needs is that his son should openly admit to his transgression of the trust placed in him, and that admission alone is enough to elicit his father’s compassion” (Turner, 127). But in fact—in both parable and Julian’s development of it—the father has compassion for his son as soon as he sees him, “still far off” (Luke 15.20), long before anything is said by either one. The son sees only his fault, the father only his son.

80 Schrader, *Bringing*, 8.



FIGURE 9.6 A sighting of Rose in *Bringing Out the Dead*

body has given it up.⁸¹ Burke appears at the window of his apartment even as Frank is readying to take his body to hospital, a spirit that is kept waiting for the expiration of his body, called back from departure by each application of the defibrillator paddles.⁸²

Frank's ghosts are themselves palimpsests, for what he sees are the faces of the dead upon those of the living, and in the film he principally sees the face of Rose upon every passing prostitute on the streets. (Fig. 9.6) Unlike Iris in *Taxi Driver*, Rose is the prostitute who is not saved. She loses her life despite Frank's best and increasingly frantic efforts: an inexplicable incompetence costing him vital moments. The return of Rose is but one of the "mysterious handwritings of grief" that have inscribed themselves upon the palimpsest of Frank's brain,⁸³ an "exorcism" of "shadows," as De Quincey would have it, since an exorcism—De Quincey claims—is not so much a "banishment to the shades" as a "citation" from them, a "torturing coercion of mystic adjurations."⁸⁴ Frank is such a torturing character.

In one scene, Frank and Marcus attend a virgin birth. In a derelict building they find a young Hispanic couple, Carlos and Maria. She is in labor. "No, no, that's impossible," Carlos cries. "We are virgins."⁸⁵ When Frank tells Carlos that

81 In *Last Temptation*, Jesus arrives at a monastic community and is greeted and shown to his cell by the ghost of the Abbot, whose funeral is already underway.

82 Connelly, 13. In the film, Frank imagines that if he was to turn and look he would see Mr. Burke standing at the window (Schrader, *Bringing*, 6).

83 De Quincey, 137.

84 *Ibid.*, 134.

85 Schrader, *Bringing*, 59.

Maria is not dying but having twins, Carlos exclaims: "It's a miracle."⁸⁶ A very similar scene occurs as the nativity in Philip Pullman's *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ* (2010). For in Pullman's retelling, as indeed in the gospel (Matthew 1.20-21), Joseph like Carlos is troubled by his wife's pregnancy, though she insists that she has never been touched by a man. "It was an angel that came to me, because God wanted me to conceive a child!"⁸⁷ An angel who, in "order not to frighten her, ... had assumed the appearance of a young man, just like one of the young men who spoke to her by the well."⁸⁸ And Pullman's Mary, like Scorsese's Maria, gives birth to twins, to Jesus and Christ, the weaker of the two, who becomes Mary's favorite and who she privately names by the Greek for Messiah.⁸⁹ Maria's first born is also a strong healthy boy, but his twin, born second, is a girl, who Frank rushes too late to emergency care. "*Hell is here. Hell is right now.*"⁹⁰ In Schrader's script, Frank looks at the baby and sees Rose's face. But in Scorsese's film Rose takes the place of Maria. Either way, it is Rose who Frank is rushing to save.⁹¹

Scenes of life and death—of life snatched from death, and the exhilaration of doing so—are repeated throughout the film. Marcus is overjoyed at saving the "little baby boy": "I felt like I was twenty-one again. A call like that makes me want to go back to three nights a week, not two, start running again, cut down on the drinking."⁹² Earlier Frank has recalled, in voice over, how "[s]aving someone's life is like falling in love, the best drug in the world."

For days, sometimes weeks afterwards, you walk the street making infinite whatever you see. Once, for a few weeks I couldn't feel the earth. Everything I touched became lighter. Horns played in my shoes; flowers fell from my pockets ... You wonder if you've become immortal, as if you saved your own life as well. God has passed through you, why deny it: that for a moment there, why deny for a moment there, God was you.⁹³

86 Schrader, 62; Connelly, 210.

87 Philip Pullman, *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2017 [2010]), 8–9.

88 Ibid., 7.

89 Ibid., 21.

90 Connelly, 213; italics in original.

91 In the novel Frank does not see Rose but thinks: "This is Rose's baby, or Rose as a baby—the reason I was called" (Connelly, 212). It is the second thought that is conveyed in the script, but the first that is literalized in the completed film.

92 The lines in the film are slightly different from those in the script. See Schrader, *Bringing*, 64–65.

93 This monologue is slightly longer in the script; see Schrader, *Bringing*, p.38.

The son born of Maria is the second miracle of the night, for earlier Frank and Marcus were called to a nightclub where a young man—Frederick Smith, aka I.B. Bangin (Harper Simon)⁹⁴—had collapsed. Marcus declares him dead, though it’s a heroin overdose and an injection of Narcan will revive him.⁹⁵ Marcus, however, gets everyone to hold hands, to pray for his resurrection. “Dear Lord,” Marcus cries, “here I am again to ask one more chance for a sinner. Please Lord, bring back I.B. Bangin, Lord. You have the power, Jesus, you have the might, you have the super light, to spare this worthless man.”⁹⁶ And indeed the Lord does, for Frank injects him with the Narcan, and I.B. Bangin sits up, a shock to himself and everyone else. “What happened?” he asks. “You fucking died, you stupid bastard,” his girlfriend replies. “I warned you.” As Frank takes Frederick to the ambulance, Marcus—cigar in hand—insists it was not their work but the Lord’s. “The first step is Love. The second is Mercy.”⁹⁷ God had been passing through them. (Fig. 9.7)

Perhaps the most surreal sequence in the film, the one that literalizes its title, and which is neither in the novel nor in Schrader’s published script, is Frank’s hallucination of raising the dead from under the ground of Hell’s Kitchen. “This is the city at night, when you could swear that things come up out of the street.”⁹⁸ The sequence occurs in a scene that is in both Connelly’s novel and Schrader’s script, set in the Oasis, the apartment where Cy Coates provides



FIGURE 9.7 “You have the power, Jesus, you have the might, you have the super light.”

94 He has the moniker of Riot in the novel; see Connelly, 168.

95 Narcan is a trade name for naloxone hydrochloride, used in the treatment of opioid abuse.

96 The lines in the script are slightly different; see Schrader, *Bringing*, 45.

97 Schrader, *Bringing*, 46.

98 *Scorsese*, 239.



FIGURE 9.8 The Oasis in *Bringing Out the Dead*



FIGURE 9.9 Bringing out the dead

rest from the pains of hell; a latter-day opium den. (Fig. 9.8) Waiting for Mary, Frank takes some of the “Red Lion” proffered by Cy: “You can’t imagine how relaxing it is.”⁹⁹ Frank at first seems to fall asleep, but then is struck by dreams and hallucinations that bring him to his feet.

Frank’s hallucinations, initially cut to the strains of “Rang Tang Ding Dong” by The Cellos—“I am a Japanese Sandman” Cy lip syncs—are vivid, nightmarish visions of life on the streets. Though all along Frank is sitting in Cy’s apartment, he sees a prostrate man, dragging himself across an interchange on his elbows, oddly speeding up, followed by altercations on the city’s night-time streets, all viewed from within Frank’s ambulance. Frank then stands up, and we cut to a low angled shot of him walking down a cobble street at night, with an arm suddenly rising from the ground, reaching for life, which Frank takes, pulling a man to his feet. (Fig. 9.9) Similar shots follow, intercut with close-ups

99 Schrader, *Bringing*, 73; Connelly, 253.



FIGURE 9.10 Bringing out the dead

of Noel (Marc Anthony), shaking his bloodied dreadlocks, in slightly slowed motion. Noel reappears throughout the film, crazed and crying for a drink of water, but drinking so much that it might well kill him.

Earlier, Noel had run against the window of the ambulance, covering it in his blood, begging to be killed and then laying down in the road. Frank goes to him, promising to kill him once they have gotten to the hospital. “We have rules against killing people on the street. It looks bad. But there’s a special room at the hospital for terminating. A nice quiet room with a big bed.”¹⁰⁰ This joke, death as medicine, as relief, will recur later in the film, more seriously. There is a point-of-view shot from where Noel is lying, his arm upstretched with Frank leaning over to help him up, as a premonition of his hallucination, of leaning down to raise the dead. Morrison’s “T.B. Sheets” is again on the soundtrack—“I want a drink of water, get me a drink of water.” Soon the raised dead are everywhere, with some helping others to rise from the ground (Fig. 9.10).

And then we cut to a snow-filled street, and it is the day when Frank encounters an asthmatic and collapsing Rose, rushes to her with Larry and struggles to get a tube down her throat and into her lungs—“before they close up and her pulse stops and she goes flatline”—and each time failing.¹⁰¹ “You’re in the stomach!” Each time. “Stomach again.”¹⁰² Larry pushes Frank aside and takes over and “intubates her easily. Air moving in and out of her lungs now, only now it doesn’t matter.”¹⁰³ “Rose. My name. Rose.” This is the scene which has

¹⁰⁰ Schrader, *Bringing*, 9.

¹⁰¹ Connelly, 254–255.

¹⁰² Schrader, *Bringing*, 75.

¹⁰³ Connelly, 258.

haunted Frank: the day when he lost her, lost his confidence in saving lives, his joy in living. In novel, script and film the drug fueled dream scene ends with Frank standing, screaming, awakened, and going and finding Mary in the back room of Cy's apartment, and taking her out, over his shoulder, "firemanlike."¹⁰⁴

The sequence of Frank raising the dead is "all Scorsese."¹⁰⁵ It is neither in the book nor the script. It is a moment when Frank is most Christ-like, for of course it repeats the descent of Christ into hell. It is the harrowing of Hell's Kitchen. "He went down to hell, and there he raised up from the lowest depths that great mass which was his by right, united to him in high heaven."¹⁰⁶ And the sequence is itself palimpsestuous, since Frank's hoisting of the dead from below ground and back into life is itself a projection of images upon shots of the night time street. It is also very like a scene in *Last Temptation* where Christ comes upon the possessed, seemingly living in holes in the desert ground, from which they clamber to have their demons dragged from them. (Fig 9.11)

However, the most resonate theological moment in *Bringing Out the Dead* is its final scene. And to fully appreciate its allusions we must pay more attention to another palimpsestuous text, which is another film and—of course—another Scorsese/Schrader collaboration, namely *The Last Temptation of*



FIGURE 9.11 Raising the possessed in *The Last Temptation of Christ*

104 Ibid., 257.

105 Schrader, 226.

106 Julian, Ch. 51 (150).

Christ.¹⁰⁷ And here we might be most tempted to see Frank as a Christ figure, but a figure of Scorsese's Christ rather than the Christ of the gospels. If there are no figures of Christ in these films, there are his ghosts. The ending of *Bringing Out the Dead* replays not the ending of *Last Temptation*, or not directly, but the crucial scene of the last temptation, when the young girl, the angel—Satan—appears to Jesus, and tempts him to give up the cross, to choose life and not death, and to live out his days, growing old with Mary Magdalene and later Mary and Martha, and the children he has fathered with them.

5 Pietàs

Julian's revelations are notorious for the vividness with which they show the sufferings of Christ.¹⁰⁸ Even in the story of the lord and the servant we are told that the latter's "*coat ready to fall apart*" stood for the "assault, the flogging, the thorns, the nails, the pulling and pushing, the tearing of his tender flesh." Julian had already seen, she reminds us, "how his flesh had been torn from the skull and had hung in pieces. Then the bleeding had stopped, and it began to dry up, and adhered again to the bone."¹⁰⁹ And yet the final, dominant note is one of joy.

Now the lord sits, not on an earthly desert, but on his throne in heaven, as he should. Now the Son stands, no longer a servant before the lord, bowed, shabby, and half-clad, but straight before him as his Father, clothed in rich and blessed amplitude, crowned with priceless splendor. We are his crown, the crown which is the Father's joy, the Son's honor, the Holy Spirit's pleasure, the endless, blessed wonder of all heaven. ... Now sits the Son, true God and true Man, at rest and in peace in his own *city*, that city prepared for him in the eternal purpose of the Father. And the Father in the Son, and the Holy Spirit in the Father and in the Son.¹¹⁰

In Scorsese's film such joy, or at any rate peace, begins to arrive for Frank through the figure of Mary Burke. "And when he comes out the other side

107 The fourth film collaboration between Scorsese and Schrader was *Raging Bull* (1980), in which Robert De Niro's Jake LaMotta has been seen as another Christ figure in the line of Travis Bickle.

108 See Julian, Chs 16 and 17 (87–90).

109 *Ibid.*, 150.

110 Julian, Ch. 51 (151); emphasis in original.



FIGURE 9.12 Charlie (Harvey Keitel) before the Pietà in *Mean Streets*

at the end, it's through the grace that he's given through Mary."¹¹¹ She is—as Robert Kolker notes—the means of “Bressonian grace” in the film, recalling the return of Jeanne (Marika Green) to Michel (Martin LaSalle) at the end of *Pickpocket*.¹¹² Of course, the naming of Mary Burke, in book and film, is not accidental. The figure of Mary, the mother of Jesus, has been present in Scorsese's cinema from the beginning. An early scene in *Mean Streets* (1973) has Charlie (Harvey Keitel) walk into a church in order to kneel before the main altar and address God and the audience, in voice over, and then stand before an image of the *pietà*, the maternal pity: Mary cradling her dead son in her arms, a witness to his suffering. Charlie is reminded of hell's fires by the votive candles burning in front of the statue. (Fig. 9.12)

The *pietà* recurs throughout Scorsese's films, and *Bringing Out the Dead* ends with one, with Frank held in the arms of Mary Burke. Earlier *pietà*s are seen in *Last Temptation* and, indeed, in *Bringing Out the Dead* itself. After Christ, in *Last Temptation*, has come down from the cross he finds himself, not

¹¹¹ Scorsese, 233.

¹¹² Kolker, 219.



FIGURE 9.13 Pietà in *The Last Temptation of Christ*; Mary Magdalene (Barbara Hershey) cradling Jesus (Willem Dafoe)

in the arms of his mother, but in those of Mary Magdalene (Barbara Hershey). (Fig. 9.13) In *Bringing Out the Dead* it is Frank himself who becomes the consoling pity, in the scene where he attends the shooting at Cy Coates' apartment. Cy, fleeing rival drug dealers, has impaled himself on one of the uprights of the balcony railing two floors below.¹¹³ Cy is both the crucified Christ and a staked vampire. (Fig. 9.14) Both understories are present in the one shot of Cy with a spear through his side, the latter an apparent incongruity, yet entirely appropriate for this false savior, who sucks the life from his clients as they sleep in his oasis.¹¹⁴

When the cops and Frank approach Cy's apartment they find Kanita (Sonja Sohn) lying dead in the doorway, her blood mingling with the water that is flowing out across the hallway from the shattered fish tank inside. As they enter the apartment, a tracking shot moves along the corridor, a surreal image of a sodden purple carpet with still flapping fish upon it. This presages the conjunction of religious and horror imagery in the staked but flailing Cy. "And at once blood and water came out" (John 19:34). Dealing with horrors, Scorsese's films often show traces of the B-movie horror genre. Near the end of *Mean Streets*—itself a horror show—Charlie and Johnny Boy (Robert De Niro) go to see Roger Corman's *The Tomb of Ligeia* (1964).¹¹⁵ The appearance of the latter is

113 Cy's apartment is on the 16th floor, he has landed on the railings of the 14th.

114 Schrader, *Bringing*, 71.

115 Johnny Boy is apparently terrified by what he sees on screen: a final conflagration, the flames of which recall those that Charlie plays with throughout the film, remembering

a joking acknowledgement that it was Corman who helped get Scorsese's film made,¹¹⁶ and there is a similar reference to that debt, and the genre of gothic horror, in the purple carpet and crimson walls of Cy's apartment in *Bringing Out the Dead*. They recall the technicolor rooms in Corman's *The Masque of the Red Death* (1964),¹¹⁷ its title strangely presaging the "Red Death" that Cy's rivals have been peddling on the streets.¹¹⁸

As the cops use an acetylene torch to cut the railing free, Frank holds Cy in his arms. He saves him from falling when the railing is finally cut through and it is suddenly clear that Cy, unlike Frank and the police men, is not secured by ropes. As Frank holds Cy's head above the ground, fourteen stories below we see the sparks from the torch cutting the metal. They shower behind Cy's head, and then, in a hallucinatory moment, fireworks shoot across the night sky, the Empire State building in the background. "Isn't it beautiful?" Cy cries. "When the fire starts to fall, then the strongest rule it all. Love this city."¹¹⁹

In the collected writings of theatre and film director, Lindsay Anderson (1923–1994), there are a few grudging remarks about Scorsese. In the most perceptive, Anderson notes that Scorsese had "made comedies, but seems quite without the vision that elevates humor to satire."¹²⁰ Whether or not satire is an elevation, one can certainly agree that Scorsese is not a satirist. Anderson's observation points to the humanity of even Scorsese's darkest comedies, such as *Bringing Out the Dead*. Scorsese works to show us that even the most awful of people have souls. "They *do* have souls, and that's the problem. And that's what keeps bringing me back to these people and to their stories."¹²¹ As Thelma Schoonmaker notes, Scorsese has always been aware that no matter how awful "some of these people may be, they also are human beings, they have feelings.

the pains of hell. Earlier in *Mean Streets*, Charlie, Johnny Boy and Tony (David Proval) have a happier time when they go to see *The Searchers* (1956).

116 Scorsese, 39–41.

117 Nicolas Roeg was the cinematographer on *The Masque of the Red Death*, and a scene from the end of Roeg's *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976) overwrites one from Corman's movie.

118 The Red Death is named as such in Connelly's novel.

119 Schrader, *Bringing*, 94.

120 Lindsay Anderson, *Never Apologise: The Collected Writings*, ed. Paul Ryan (London: Plexus, 2004), 484. Certainly, *Bringing Out the Dead* has all the ingredients for a satire on American health care, for something like Anderson's own satire on the British National Health Service, *Britannia Hospital* (1982), but such is not Schrader's or Scorsese's interest.

121 Martin Scorsese interviewed by Thierry Jousse and Nicolas Saada in *Projections* 7, 8–21 (17).

I think one of the reasons his movies last is because he is able to deal with the humanity of the people, no matter how horrible they are."¹²²

Frank knows that Cy is a drug dealer, that for all his claims to be providing a “refuge from the world out there” he is selling addiction, not relief.¹²³ Mary has “seen him hurt people,” believes that “Cy or Tiger or one of those other goons put a bullet in Noel’s head.”¹²⁴ Voices from the street below call out “Let him go!” while one of the cops observes that if Cy falls, “I don’t think anybody’ll be crying too much.”¹²⁵ Yet Frank, undeluded, holds Cy with tender care. Later, in the hospital, Cy observes that Frank saved his life, and Frank merely replies, “Yes, I know.”¹²⁶ Even if we think there is some ambivalence in the look with which Frank holds Cy on the balcony, we also see the drug dealer being held: pity enacted. (Fig. 9.14) Just as the Father seeing Christ when he looks at Adam does not mean that Adam’s sin is undone, his fall not real, so Cy’s past is not approved, or annulled, when Frank saves him from falling. Frank sees both the drug dealer and the man who has to be held.

It is mercy that Frank shows Cy, in the sense of *misericordia*—the Latin best capturing the idea of compassion that is at the heart of the virtue. And this virtue is indeed Frank’s character, since—as Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) teaches—*misericordia* “comes from one’s heart being miserable (*miserum cor*),



FIGURE 9.14 Pietà in *Bringing Out the Dead*: Frank cradling Cy

122 Thelma Schoonmaker interviewed by Nicolas Saada in *Projections* 7, 27.

123 Schrader, *Bringing*, 71.

124 *Ibid.*, 77.

125 *Ibid.*, 92–93.

126 In the script, Frank replies: “Then tell me, Cy, why don’t I feel good about that?” See Schrader, *Bringing*, 94. Frank has more compassion, more mercy in the movie.

at the sight of another's distress."¹²⁷ Thomas, following Aristotle, says that we pity those who suffer through no fault of their own, those afflicted by uncalled for ills. We may doubt this of Cy, thinking he has brought his misfortunes upon himself, and so more deserving of punishment than pity. But Thomas observes that there is a sense in which "fault itself is punishment" and that this is something unlooked for by sinners, something that goes against their will, and that this elicits mercy.¹²⁸ It is not only the suffering of innocents that incites pity. Jesus, as Thomas reminds us, had compassion on sinners.

Mercy—*miseriordia*—becomes Frank because Frank is sad (*tristis*), and sadness, according to Thomas, has to do with how much we feel the afflictions of others as our own, as we do with our friends. And with those not so close we may yet realize that what has befallen them may befall us, and so we feel for them also. Only those who think themselves beyond misfortune have no pity for others. *Miseriordia* springs from fellow feeling,¹²⁹ and as a virtue¹³⁰ it is the greatest, since it "involves the giving from one's abundance to others." Mercy is "something proper to God,"¹³¹ making us God-like. And mercy is proper to God because God creates out of mercy; the bringing of being out of non-being is a kind of compassion.¹³² Frank performs something analogous when he acts with pity towards Cy, who has little or no claim upon it.

Frank also acts out of mercy when he kills Mr. Burke, or, rather, when he allows Mr. Burke to die. Ever since Mr. Burke was brought into hospital, at the beginning of the film, he has been on the point of passing over, but he is repeatedly stopped and brought back by the application of the defibrillator. He is shocked into continuing life, though unconscious; except Frank can hear him pleading for release. "The family wants us to keep him alive," the doctor tells Frank. "The wife wants to believe in miracles, we keep him alive. Shock him Frank. He'll come back. He always comes back." "Don't do it," Burke implores. But Frank applies the paddles. "You son of a bitch."¹³³ But then, toward the end of the film, Frank knows that he must release Mr. Burke, release his family; save Burke's life with the gift of death.

127 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 34 Charity (2a2ae 23–33), trans. R.J. Batten O.P. (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1975), 2a2ae, 30, 1, *responsio* (209).

128 *Ibid.*, 2a2ae, 30, 1, *ad primum* (211).

129 *Ibid.*, 2a2ae, 30, 2, *responsio* (213–214).

130 Mercy—pity, compassion—is a virtue because it can be regulated by reason. *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae, 30, 3, *responsio* (217).

131 *Ibid.*, 2a2ae, 30, 4, *responsio* (221).

132 *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, 21, 4, *responsio* (85).

133 Schrader, *Bringing*, 81.

In the novel, Frank switches off the machines that had been keeping Burke alive. "One at a time I pulled each plug and waited in the new silence for the final rise of his chest. ... I checked that the plugs were out. I hit the power switch and looked in the back for the final cutoff button."¹³⁴ But the process is more intimate in the film, with Frank taking on Burke's suffering and then releasing it, as if dying in Burke's stead. Frank transfers the electrodes monitoring Burke to himself, and then puts Burke's respirator in his own mouth, breathing for Burke, so that Burke can slip away without the machines noticing. When they do, when Frank has reattached everything to the now dead body, it is too late for any more resuscitations, and no amount of electric shocks will bring Burke back. "He just coded," the nurse tells the doctor.

Joe Connelly's novel ends with the death of Mr. Burke, and Frank going home to sleep, comforted—it would seem—by the ghost of Rose, who gets into bed beside him. "She wasn't cold at all but hot, and her heat went everywhere through the bed. There was only a slight smell, but after five years on the job I was used to it, and this was nothing."¹³⁵ Perhaps this is one of the hookers from the streets, erased and rewritten by Rose. But in Schrader's rewriting, Mary was not at the hospital when her father dies, so Frank goes to her apartment to tell her: "He's dead, Mary. Your father passed."¹³⁶ But Rose is present. In the cut back from Frank to Mary, it's suddenly Rose, not Mary, in the doorway. "Forgive me, Rose." And Rose replies: "It's not your fault. No one asked you to suffer. That was your idea."¹³⁷ And this is the point when Frank is freed from the past that has been haunting him throughout the film, or that he has been haunting. It is not so much that Frank has been haunted by Rose as that he has been haunting her; living in the past so as to evade the present. He saved others, but he couldn't save himself (Mark 15:31; Matthew 27:42).

But there is another haunting here, another, earlier text showing through. When Satan comes to Christ, as he hangs upon the cross, she explains—the young angelic girl who removes the nails from his hands and feet, who kisses his feet as countless devotees kiss the plaster feet of Christ on Good Friday, creeping to the cross—that he doesn't need to suffer. "I don't have to be sacrificed?" "No, no you don't." "I'm not the Messiah?" "No, no you're not." In the *Last Temptation*, however, Christ refuses the refusal of suffering and returns to the cross. But in *Bringing Out the Dead*, Frank gives up on suffering, accepts that suffering saves no one, and in doing so—in accepting, not so much

134 Connelly, 338–339.

135 Ibid., 343.

136 Schrader, *Bringing*, 108.

137 Schrader, 109.



FIGURE 9.15 Pietà in *Bringing Out the Dead*: Mary cradling Frank

Rose's forgiveness, but that there is nothing to forgive—receives a benediction. Mary, standing in the doorway, asks: "Would you like to come in?" And he does. And then we cut to a shot of Frank lying against Mary, asleep in her arms. It is a *pietà*, an image of *misericordia*—though of course Frank is not dead but sleeping.¹³⁸ The room brightens, as if the sun is rising, filling the scene with light, and Bernstein's music is also rising, reaching a resolution, and then, with bird song also audible, there is a burn out to white—just as at the end of *Last Temptation*—a reminder that we have been watching a film, a celluloid palimpsest. (Fig. 9.15)

Frank's falling asleep is a sort of resurrection, the other side of the passion he has endured through the preceding three days, and so perhaps it is a repetition of the *Last Temptation*. But it seems more like a refutation than a repetition, a denial that suffering is necessary for salvation. Frank has been failing to see that no one other than himself has asked him to suffer, just as Jesus has mistaken his own idea of suffering for God's.¹³⁹ Frank has failed to see that all is already forgiven, that there is nothing to forgive. He cannot change the past, he cannot bring Rose back from the dead, except as a palimpsestuous

138 Given that Frank is sleeping we might think of other medieval *Andachtsbilder* (devotional images), for example of John, the beloved disciple, resting on Christ's breast, or of the soul in the embrace of wisdom. See further Jeffrey F. Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary: Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), 130–131, 202–203.

139 This is not stated directly by the angel, but the angel's claim that Jesus does not need to suffer, that he is not the Messiah, answers to the question, from earlier in the film, as to whence comes his growing fear that he must set his course towards Jerusalem and Golgotha.

ghost, but he can come to see the past differently, just as Christ—in Julian's theology—does not change but overwrites Adam, so that Adam is now seen as second Adam.

De Quincey was not the first person to think the memory a palimpsest. For already, in the age that produced palimpsests on a regular basis, Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) had likened the memory to such a text.¹⁴⁰ His sermon “On Conversion” (1140) addresses the problem of purifying the memory, of pumping out the “cesspit.”

How can I forget my own life? Take a thin piece of poor-quality parchment which has soaked up the ink with which the scribe has written on it. Can any skill erase it? It is not merely superficially colored; the ink is ingrained. It would be pointless for me to try to clean it. The parchment would tear before the marks of wretchedness were removed.¹⁴¹

How then to overwrite the past without destroying it? How to “give place to another peace, without forgetting, without amnesty, fusion or confusion?”¹⁴² It can be done, Bernard believes, through God's forgiveness. “His pardon wipes out sin, not from the memory, but in such a way that what before was both present in the memory and rendered it unclean is now, although it is still in the memory, no longer a defilement to it.”¹⁴³ The idea that the memory of past misdeeds can be overwritten, not rewritten, by God's word of pardon is implicit in Bernard's account, which relies—as Mary Carruthers notes—on the idea that memory consists of both a mark and an “intention”: a feeling. It is both effect and affect. “What forgiveness changes is that *intentio*, the emotional direction ... towards the memory images that still exist in one's mind, including all those personal memories that make up ‘my life.’”¹⁴⁴ It is Frank's intention towards his past that changes at the end of *Bringing Out the Dead*, through the word of pardon that he hears on the lips of Rose. The pity expressed in Mary's arms is the pity—the compassion, the mercy—that he gives himself, that he allows himself to receive. “Have mercy on your own soul if you want God to have mercy

140 Bernard of Clairvaux, “On Conversion” in *Selected Works*, trans. G.R. Evans (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 65–97, xv.28 (87).

141 *Ibid.*, xv.28 (87).

142 Derrida, 50.

143 Bernard, xv.28 (88).

144 Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400–1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 97.

on you,"¹⁴⁵ Bernard teaches. "The soul, when it is really at peace with itself, is at once united to God,"¹⁴⁶ Julian affirms.

Scorsese's most audacious move—the move of his palimpsestuous filmmaking—is to suggest that we must look to Frank Pierce if we are to see not only Travis but Christ himself saved, and saved from himself; which is to say from a tradition that has seen suffering as necessary for salvation—a tradition to which Scorsese has been all too prone, but which, in *Bringing Out the Dead*, he rethinks if not entirely renounces.

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¹⁴⁵ Bernard, XVI.29 (88).

¹⁴⁶ Julian, Ch. 49 (139).

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Martin Scorsese's Screening Room: Theatricality, Psychoanalysis, and Modernity in *Shutter Island*

Stephen Mulhall

Even a cursory survey of the critical literature on Martin Scorsese suggests that a number of shared assumptions underlie its more local disagreements: that Scorsese's imperial phase ended around the time of *Casino* (1995), that this non-accidentally coincided with the end of his long collaboration with Robert De Niro and the beginning of his equally long collaboration with Leonardo DiCaprio, and that most of his subsequent non-documentary work manifests a loss of aesthetic force that reflects his personal transformation from exciting, experimental outsider to respectable member of the Hollywood establishment. The most recent edition of a book which contains one of the strongest critical accounts of Scorsese's work makes these assumptions explicit:

[Since *Kundun* (1997)] Scorsese has ... attempted to redeem himself as a commercially viable film-maker ... The period of intense cinematic experimentation seems to have ended with *Goodfellas* ... He has ..., in the process, adopted Leonardo DiCaprio as a replacement for Robert De Niro as his container for fictional characters. The difference in the on-screen presence of these two actors is interesting and reveals a lot about Scorsese's change in perspective on his work [sic]. Under his direction, De Niro is always full of a menace that threatens, and often succeeds, in spinning out of control [sic] ... He is the director's surrogate, not so much as a character but as a force of directorial assault on the very basic conventions of film-making. The delirium of Scorsese's early films is tied into the out-of-control delirium of the characters that De Niro and Scorsese create. This is impressed upon the films' mise-en-scene, which in turn further defines the characters.

DiCaprio is an actor of a different order. His characters are largely passive and slow to anger, where De Niro is agitated and ready to spring. DiCaprio seems always somehow hurt, not so much physically (although he takes massive punishment ... in *Gangs of New York*, is almost killed in a plane crash in *The Aviator*, is shot to death in *The Departed*, and suffers wrenching hallucinations in *Shutter Island*) as emotionally. He is a recessive

presence. Whereas De Niro's body is always on display ... – his body can be figured as the screen on which the film is projected – DiCaprio doesn't have a body. He is a face only, often impassive, pained or quizzical, rarely angry, and not psychotic, though he gets close in his portrayal of ... Howard Hughes and ... Teddy Daniels [in *Shutter Island*]. But even here, he seems surprised by his behaviour instead of fomenting it or being a victim of it. De Niro's characters seem always in need of restraint; DiCaprio's seem to need a push. De Niro's characters seethe from within; DiCaprio seems always to be impersonating someone ...

[*The Departed's*] closure leaves a void. The rat on the railing outside the window of Sullivan's apartment is a sign of the small stature of the characters ... Rats all of them, they do not rise to the tormented comic status of the characters of *Mean Streets* or *Goodfellas*. They are rather reflections, pale in more than one way, of the mobster spirit that animated the earlier films.¹

This revealing passage exudes an air of disappointment whose source is explicitly acknowledged to be Scorsese's distancing of himself from 'the mobster spirit' of his earlier films, from the menacing delirium embodied in De Niro's seething, psychotic agitation. Indeed, the pleasure that Kolker seems to have derived from the transgressive violence of Scorsese's early assault on the basic conventions of film-making, and so on his audience (hence on Kolker himself), is so powerful that it destabilizes both his grammar and his attempts to justify his nostalgia for them. For many of his (implicitly derogatory) characterizations of DiCaprio as an actor (and so of later Scorsese as a director) are not only immediately qualified but decisively undermined thereby. He claims that DiCaprio tends to be hurt emotionally rather than physically, but then cites the extensive physical punishment inflicted on him in each Scorsese film in which he has appeared; he claims that DiCaprio is never psychotic – except in two of the four roles under consideration (and a good case could be made for the impending threat of madness in the other two); and he claims that whereas De Niro has and is a body, indeed one upon which his films with Scorsese are projected, DiCaprio is merely a face – despite the fact that in *The Aviator*, DiCaprio's body repeatedly and literally becomes a screen on which film is projected.

To cap it all, Kolker's concluding dismissal of all the characters in *The Departed* as small, pale reflections of the tormented, clown-like, macho gangsters

¹ Robert Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 256–257, 260–261. Hereafter 'CL'.

of fond memory comes only a paragraph after he describes DiCaprio's character in that film as having "romantic urgency," as "tormented," and as "the unhappy soul in this film, fighting against his own doubt and his fears of discovery in a world where everyone is out to get everyone else," (CL, 260). In other words, a male character is no sooner acknowledged as vulnerable and prone to self-doubt but willing to suffer in a good cause than he is deemed essentially unworthy of our attention as viewers or our acknowledgement as human beings. This kind of writing certainly helps to explain why those who praise Scorsese are as often subject to feminist critique as is the object of their praise; but it also suggests a peculiarly damaging lack of self-awareness on the part of those prone to such slippages of logic and morality.

After all, the orthodox justification of Scorsese's early attentiveness to gangster machismo is that it exhibits not a gleeful indulgence of their violence, but rather a morally driven critical evaluation of their, and so our, impulse to glamorize (and so to be seduced by, and to identify with) it. And yet even those who most clearly recognize this implicit critique appear blind to its reflexive implications – to the fact that they, and we, are equally prone to glamorize the cinematic violence of Scorsese's early assault on the basic conventions of gangster films. Why is it, for example, that the only alternative directorial stance Kolker can envisage to such violent assaults on convention is one which entirely identifies with them – as if anyone who ceases to practice the delirious transgression of cinematic convention is fated to mere commercial conformity, whereas the continued practice of deconstructing convention is essentially incapable of deteriorating into sheer conventionality?

My counter-suggestion is that the later Scorsese is attempting to establish less delirious, more pained and quizzical, modes of interrogating the cinematic conventions that have always been at issue in his work – forms of questioning that do not so easily subvert their own moral purposes, because they do not risk reinforcing the very impulses they aspire to undermine; that collaboration with DiCaprio (whose persona is not so much passive as receptive or suffering, capable of being driven to the point of madness) is an essential component in the development of that more mature exploration of delirium (both masculine and cinematic); and that this collaboration reaches a certain kind of culmination in *Shutter Island*.

This particular film accordingly must be analyzed with an eye to the earlier stages of Scorsese's collaboration with DiCaprio (thereby locating their fourth joint enterprise as itself the result of an evolution); but it will also be oriented by aspects of DiCaprio's distinctive identity as a movie star that have been established elsewhere. Particularly relevant is DiCaprio's role in another film released in 2010 – *Inception*, directed by Christopher Nolan. Appreciating the

multiple analogies of plot, genre and form detectable between these two films turns out to be essential to understanding the particular interest of *Shutter Island*, the specific physiognomy of Leonardo DiCaprio's stardom, and Martin Scorsese's late directorial style.

Although this angle of approach does directly engage with the central questions of theology and religion, or with the films in which Scorsese most directly engages with them, it may help us to see that there is a sense in which his treatment of these matters is not restricted to films such as *The Last Temptation of Christ* or *Silence*. For what those films centrally examine is Christianity's vision of the redemption of the human spirit as a matter of aspiring to absolute self-sacrifice or self-abnegation – a practice of dying to the self that paradoxically constitutes that self's fulfilment rather than its betrayal or erasure, insofar as it imitates God's willingness to withdraw Himself in order that creation have the metaphysical room to unfold. And if the argument of this paper holds water, it might be said that Scorsese's shift of directorial focus from De Niro's transgressive aggression to DiCaprio's suffering receptivity reflects his growing realization that his excoriating portrayals of the pathologies of masculinity (and thereby of humanity) required (and sometimes adumbrated) an implicitly Catholic conception of how they might be overcome, and that their persuasiveness could only be enhanced by narratives that display how these pathologies were intensified by the culture of modernity, diagnosed by the therapeutic practices of psychoanalysis and confronted in modernist art.

1 Scorsese's DiCaprio: Theatricality, Projection, Suffering

DiCaprio's first film with Scorsese was *Gangs of New York* (2002), which excavates the prehistory of the gangster scene so central to Scorsese's early career. The same ethnic solidarities and conflicts, easy resort to violence, and codes of masculine honor that shaped the protagonists of *Mean Streets*, *Taxi Driver* and *Goodfellas* also structure this film; but whereas those early films were eagerly consumed as an unprecedented exercise in urban realism, Scorsese's willingness to honor the historical facts about mid-nineteenth century New York generates a profoundly theatrical mode of cinema. Theatrical occasions are certainly pivotal to the film's plot: Amsterdam Vallon saves Butcher Bill's life at a performance of "Uncle Tom's Cabin," and makes his first attempt on that same life (as well as suffering Bill's contemptuously non-lethal retribution) at a cross between a variety show and a religious liturgy at the Chinese Pagoda. But such incidents also exemplify the basic representational mode of the film: this is why Monk sarcastically describes Amsterdam's behavior as "so bloody

Shakespearean" (ironically identifying Shakespeare as the author of the King James Bible), and why Butcher Bill is a villain for whom melodrama is the only viable mode of discourse and action. For everyday life in this New York is a carnival of expressive costume and behavior, epitomized in the tribal uniforms of the Dead Rabbits and the Natives gangs; and politics is an orgy of ludicrously transparent corruption. The struggle between Butcher Bill and two generations of the Vallon family infuses the plot of *Hamlet* with a New World blend of religion, politics, and ethnicity (presented by Amsterdam's voice-over as consisting of some half-remembered events and dreams).

The film's central concern is thus the nature of the relation between theatricality, realism and reality. If, in mid-nineteenth century New York, ordinary life was theatrical, then theatrical representations of it are strictly speaking exercises in realism rather than melodramatic failures. Since our current cultural circumstances (ones in which selfhood is increasingly affirmed by its performance, particularly to cameras) strongly resemble those of Butcher Bill, a certain kind of cinematic theatricality might be the only viable way of apprehending something truthful about – hence of retaining contact with – the contemporary reality of self and world. If, however, "theatricality" – as a term of criticism for failures of actorly and directorial realism – is in these ways historically shifting (both context-relative and provisional), then when Daniel Day-Lewis doubles down on what one might call "De Niro delirium," he forces us to ask whether De Niro's ways of being Johnny Boy, Travis Bickle and Jake LaMotta – however successful in achieving the effect of reality in the 1970s and 1980s – might look in retrospect more like a mere performance. Such performances may seem too restrained in their performativity (one might say too methodical) to constitute an artistically valid means of capturing the true theatricality of current reality.

DiCaprio's relation to this project is built into his role. His character's haunting by the ghost of his father, his Hamlet-like absorption into a reluctantly-inherited obligation to revenge, emphasizes his relative youthfulness as an actor. His hesitancy and self-sabotage, together with the extremity of physical punishment it brings down upon both his body and his titanically pretty face (which Bill brands with a knife and beats to a pulp with his own forehead), suggests that sadism will always seek out its masochistic other. Stardom based on youthful good looks is something for which that star must be seen to atone before his desire to develop into a genuine film actor can be taken seriously. DiCaprio here pays his dues to a melodramatic re-incarnation of the actor whose mantle as Scorsese-collaborator he aspires to inherit, and his director assigns a highly qualified and problematic victory to the aspirant.

For just as Bill's death – although achieved by Amsterdam – is essentially facilitated by wider social forces beyond the control of either protagonist

(cannon fire from authorities quelling the Draft Riots), so Scorsese's willingness to draft DiCaprio acknowledges that a mode of acting (the method of actor disappearing into character) that had reliably engendered an effect of reality might become ineffective in new cultural circumstances. One response would be to seek the reality of selfhood by more fully embracing such performativity (call this the Day-Lewis solution); another would be to question the temptation so to respond – to interrogate the sources and the costs of aligning masculinity with performativity in this way. Amsterdam's essentially unsatisfying triumph over Bill suggests that Di Caprio's actorly individuality inclines more towards Hamlet-like self-questioning.

In *The Aviator* (2004), DiCaprio offers a genuine impersonation (thereby inviting Kolker's dismissive critical perception), but one whose interwar Hollywood context supplies a world of men and women whose vocation is to impersonate real human personality. This ascent to stardom depends upon appearing more fully themselves than other mere mortals. Moreover, the real person DiCaprio incarnates is indelibly marked by his childhood (through his mother's paranoia about uncleanness), and his body suffers damage so serious that he is never again fully at home in the world. He is forced to acknowledge limitations on his creative abilities (in film-making, flight, and sex). His Howard Hughes follows a mythological trajectory invoking Icarus and Prometheus that links hubristic imagination with punitive madness; and DiCaprio optimistically hopes that his character's melting wings will allow him to fly above the critical weather.

Scorsese's film situates Hughes' film-making as primary amongst his many interests and abilities: the director's God's-eye view is at least as divine as transcending the bonds of earth or dating movie goddesses. His three best-known films (*Hell's Angels*, *The Outlaw*, and *Scarface*) fully acknowledge his other main modes of self-expression – flight, women and the borderline between entrepreneurship and criminality. The sadomasochistic arc of his rise and fall recurs repeatedly to the site of his screening room – the space in which he exercises hyperbolic hermeneutic responsiveness to his movies and gradually succumbs to paranoia about the world's ability to make an overwhelmingly malevolent impact on him (embodied in Scorsese's camera when it adopts the viewpoint of, and so animates, a towel and a door-handle whose combined threat to his hygiene immobilizes him in a public bathroom).

This implies that the very receptivity which makes him such an effective creator of deliriously kinetic images of flight, sex, and violence (as well as such a successful plane designer and such an attractive partner to some of the most self-reliant women in Hollywood) is also what renders him vulnerable to reality, which he apprehends as not only animate but persecutory. That directorial

ability works wonders on the screen, in the construction of exhilaratingly dramatic spectacle whose reality effect overwhelms the jaded perceptions of cinemagoers; but in his personal life that sensibility generates ritualized defense mechanisms that preserve his fragile subjectivity at the price of severing it from the real world.

The pivotal screening room scene comes late in the film, when the world really is persecuting Hughes: suffering the lingering effects of a huge crash, under attack by a vengeful senator for failing to deliver planes promised for the wartime US air force, at risk of losing control of TWA, and having lost the love of both Katharine Hepburn and Ava Gardner, he sets up home in this cinematic space, whose dimensions fluctuate from frame to throbbing red frame, oscillating between claustrophobic and agoraphobic – demanding further paroxysms of ritual placation. Juan Trippe, Pan Am's owner, encapsulates this array of threats in a conversation conducted through the room's closed door, at the culmination of which Scorsese switches to a split screen. Hughes' perception of the tenuousness of the door's protection is enacted in the blurriness of the split, and in the inverse mirroring of the camera movements in each space – the one on Trippe pans from right to left before sinking to look at him from below, the one on Hughes tracks his movement from left to right before rising to look at him from above. When the conversation ends, Scorsese shows Hughes writhing on the floor amidst drifts of tissues, piles of half-eaten food and ranks of urine-filled milk bottles, with projected images from *The Outlaw* covering every inch of his naked body.

Hughes has repeatedly interposed his body between the projector and the screen, so that his burned skin has borne the hot, clean deserts of the Wild West; he has even looked straight back into the projector's lens. Hitherto, however, his interpositions have been realistically subordinate to the fixed relation between projector and screen: to break the stream of light, he has had to stand upright within it. Now, his body displays those images despite being wrongly placed to account for them as created by the room's projector: just as Scorsese's split screen reinforced and questioned the boundary between the inside and outside of Hughes' screening room, and thereby its place in the wider world, so Hughes' culminating delirium finds a melodramatic mode of expression that destabilizes his place within it. Since Hughes' body is now the screen, his position is determining that of the projector: it is as if it had begun to follow him around, at once subordinate to him for its own purpose and yet subjecting him to the necessity of supporting the image it projects. This implied or fantasized projector is now the exemplary embodiment of that persecutory function. But what is the nature and source of this threat?

Because these images are of the external world, the cinematic world they make visible on his skin seems like a glimpse into the world inside him, his

interior life. To see these images – they are, after all, his own creation – is to see that which makes him who he is. But what makes it possible to see them at all is his body, the aspect of his being through which he participates in material reality as such. His writhing response to being forced to display them declares that they are causing him pain, persecuting him to the point at which he (and we) lose our orientation with respect to the wider world, the screening room it contains, and the embodied mind within it. Hughes is being driven mad by his own creative expression: his mind is persecuting his body, subjecting it to an imaginary threat to its physical integrity while projecting the source of that threat onto the outside world. His way of giving expression to himself thus threatens the condition of its own possibility; and since that condition is what connects him to reality more generally, the implicit *telos* of this masochistic threat is that he will sever himself from that reality and seal himself inside his own subjectivity – insulated by his own projections.

DiCaprio thereby continues his own masochistic project of suffering punishment for his own bodily gifts. It remains unclear, however, whether this delirious image of his skin as a screen connects this form of masochism and the essentially receptive mode of acting, or a negative judgement of its potential (insofar as the images derive from a far-from-excellent film). Here, much depends on whether we privilege the proximate fact that Trippe's intervention spurs Hughes to re-enter the real world and vanquish his primary oppressor at the Senate hearings, or emphasize the scene's proleptic envisioning of the long, drawn-out decline of Hughes' later decades. Regardless, this venture into acting as impersonating real people is not repeated until the *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013) – if we discount the blatant fictionality of this purportedly factual autobiographical narrative. This might be because Cate Blanchett's complementary impersonation of Katharine Hepburn received more praise than DiCaprio's, or because that success arguably depended upon the fact that she was impersonating not just a film actor but a movie star – someone possessed of a strong (indeed, an inherently mimetic) physiognomic signature. DiCaprio might reasonably have concluded that it would be more straightforward to focus on developing his own cinematic signature.

In *The Departed* (2006), Jack Nicholson takes over the Daniel Day-Lewis (and so the theatricalized De Niro) role. Frank Costello has two sons warring duplicitously for his duplicitous affection: DiCaprio plays Billy Costigan, the mole planted by Boston police in Frank's organization, and Matt Damon plays Colin Sullivan, the mole planted by Costello in the Boston police. As each works to subvert their nominal employers, they gradually become aware of each other's existence, and struggle to disclose each other's identity – at first as a means to their true employer's ends, but eventually as an end in itself. As the

plot unwinds, Costello's departure from the scene becomes just another step towards the film's true climax – the direct confrontation between Costigan and Sullivan, which will determine the nature and fate of both men (the actors as well as their characters).

Scorsese emphasizes that his primary interest is in this triangular family dynamic throughout the film, most adeptly when Costigan tracks Costello to a meeting with Sullivan – in yet another screening room, this time a pornographic movie theater. Costello arrives disguised as a dirty old man, sits in the row in front of Sullivan and makes masturbatory noises before turning to expose a huge rubber penis protruding from his raincoat (as much a nod to Nicholson's persona as to Costello's increasingly out-of-control state). Costigan observes from a distant seat, and so cannot hear Sullivan respond to Costello's pantomime of self-abuse by reporting that he has been tasked to unearth the mole in the police – in other words, “to find myself.” Afterwards, Costigan follows Sullivan, desperate to see his face: the camera tracks them through neon-lit night-time streets, emphasizing the similarity of their self-effacing clothing – jackets over hoodies, baseball caps pulled low. Then – like Cary Grant at a fateful moment in *North by Northwest* – Costigan is startled by headlights, Sullivan ducks around a corner, and Costigan loses him.

He pauses outside a Chinese restaurant, the camera examining him from inside. A wind-chime hangs outside, between him and the street corner: it resembles a chandelier, with dozens of vertical rods or strings arranged in concentric circles, each securing a series of thin, elongated mirrors, all swaying slightly in a breeze. The first time Costigan looks at it, he sees only fragmented, overlapping images of his face and eyes staring back at him. He looks again, and as the wind-chime is agitated by a more violent movement of air, he sees his own reflection retreat to the outer fringes of the mirror-curtain and disappear, while the image in the more central mirrors resolves into a similarly fragmented rear view of Sullivan's head and torso that ripples outward as he walks away.

Costigan is back on the trail, and Scorsese's uninsistent equation of the mirrors with the screen that displays them allows him subtly to convey a multitude of messages. Since an air's breath is enough to turn Costigan into Sullivan, only a hair's breadth divides them. This prompts each to hunt down and eliminate the other, thereby insisting on their non-identity, although Sullivan's presence more actively threatens to eliminate Costigan's. Costigan is DiCaprio (whose wholly distinctive eyes initially dominate the mirrors). Damon's Sullivan is essentially elusive (not just unaware of but turned away from his own projected image, in flight from others because in flight from himself), whereas DiCaprio's Costigan is able to confront himself in close-up. Only by being willing to look

again at what his exposure of himself on screen reveals can he overcome his internal relation to Damon's Sullivan, and so achieve his moral purposes.

The presence of Costello, and so of Nicholson, as the facilitator of this pursuit helps to further specify the differences between Damon and DiCaprio as sons of this cinematic father. Nicholson's Costello embodies a tragi-comic fusion of self-confident charm with violent transgression. He deprives his audience of the ability confidently to distinguish the real presence of these qualities from their mere performance – leaving them and us unable to tell whether Costello's seductive insanity or insane seductiveness is a means to his manipulative ends or a genuine expression of his nature. We are inclined to suspect that for him performance and reality are indistinguishable. Damon inherits the charm, but under pressure it detaches itself to reveal a morally hollow interior, an absence of self. DiCaprio inherits the propinquity to madness, but in his case the initial performance of delirious violence (the attack on the bar customer that is his entry ticket to Costello's circle) turns into a genuine risk of insanity, a loss of self.

These differences shape their evolving relationships with the central female in the story: Vera Farmiga's Madolyn Madden, a clinical psychiatrist (what else, given that name?) employed by the police to help traumatized officers. Damon's Sullivan initially attracts her because of his charm offensive and apparently bulletproof self-confidence, and ultimately repels her when the act falls apart. DiCaprio's Costigan eventually wins her sustained loyalty because of his vulnerability, or rather his growing willingness to acknowledge that vulnerability, and thereby to sustain his own existence without depending entirely on her (as when he reacts to her first attempts to express her feelings for him by cautioning her to give herself time to reflect, mirroring herself to herself therapeutically). Sullivan's death – like that of Costello – certainly carries little affective charge, beyond a certain relief that he need no longer perform his existence; Costigan's, by contrast, is fully shocking and tragic, precisely because he has finally begun to make a life for himself that is genuinely worth living. Scorsese thereby projects DiCaprio as beginning to acknowledge that the approach by which he will live or die as an actor and a star is essentially and actively passive. It is receptive at once to the world and the gaze of the camera, and thereby open to acknowledging that the path to sane individuality goes through the acknowledgement and overcoming of the seductions of insanity.

2 Nolan's DiCaprio: Skepticism as Cursed Marriage

Female counterparts to DiCaprio's characters gradually grow in complexity and significance in his Scorsese collaborations. To understand Michelle Williams'

key role in *Shutter Island* (2010), however, we must relate it to another, apparently very different DiCaprio film – Christopher Nolan's *Inception*.

DiCaprio plays Dom Cobb, the leader and primary architect of a team of “extractors” (who introduce targeted individuals into dreamworlds Cobb designs and constructs with a view to locating and extracting commercially valuable secrets by tapping into their victims' subconscious). Cobb's motivation for the extraction project that structures the film is his desire to return to his children in the United States, and more specifically his client's promise to nullify the criminal charges that prevent him from doing so; and a series of flashbacks explain why he is solely responsible for them.

Cobb married another architect named Mal (Marion Cotillard); they had two children, while continuing to explore the world of dreamsharing, and in particular the concept of dreams nested within dreams. On one occasion, they went down so many dream levels they encountered Limbo – “raw, unconstructed dream space – infinite and empty.” This realm maximizes their joint creativity, rendering it godlike; however, because at each succeeding dream level brain function accelerates (and so the perceived passage of time slows) by a factor of twenty, they experienced their residence in Limbo as lasting for fifty years (and as capable of continuing without end). Mal's accepts this offer: she creates a safe in which to hide her version of the totems by means of which extractors check the reality of any given world in which they find themselves, thereby (as Cobb puts it) “deciding to forget that our world wasn't real.” By contrast, Cobb tires of this divine mode of being, and gets Mal to agree to return to reality (something that could only be achieved, as with any upward transition between dream levels in the world of *Inception*, by killing themselves) by locating her safe, opening it, and activating her totem. Thus recalled to Limbo's unreality, Mal is catapulted back to reality with her husband.

However, Mal brings back with her the idea that her world is not real, an idea which applies itself parasitically to the real world of their marriage and even to their children, whom she interprets as projections in a dream of her husband's to which she is currently being subjected. Her real children, however, exist out of reach on the next level up: “I'm their mother; don't you think I can tell the difference?” Eventually, she decides to compel Cobb to participate in another joint suicide pact, their only route to the “real” real world by arranging things so that, if he refuses to join her when she leaps from a hotel room window, he will be arraigned as her murderer. She jumps, but he does not; he escapes to Europe just before his arrest, although only by abandoning his children. But every time he subsequently enters a dream world, his projection of Mal bursts through from his subconscious to disrupt the team's plans with a coldly violent hostility.

Elsewhere, I have argued that this portrait of a marriage is a cinematic dramatization of the trauma that philosophy treats as the intellectual problem of

skepticism, the advent of which (most famously in Descartes' *Meditations*) heralds the advent of modernity in the history of philosophy.² That problem traditionally takes two forms: skepticism about the reality of the external world, and skepticism about the reality of other minds. In Stanley Cavell's influential interpretation, the latter is an allegory of the former (not just a distinctive instance of the more general desire to secure certainty about the reality of what lies outside oneself, but a way of drawing out the extent to which an external world skeptic thinks of his relation to that world as if it were inter-personal). One ground for that idea is the grammar of the concepts of belief and doubt on which the skeptic relies: since their primary use is to characterize one's relation to the claims of others (we believe or doubt others' testimony, and so believe what they tell us), the skeptic's employment of them to characterize one's relation to the external world places that world in the position of a speaker, someone lodging a claim on us. This is a vision of the world as not only animate, but as making claims upon us. It recasts external world skepticism as having an affective as well as a cognitive significance – quite as if a loss of conviction in the reality of that world would place it past our caring as well as beyond our knowledge. If one detects a flavor of insanity in such visions (the incipient madness recorded by Scorsese when he projects Howard Hughes' paranoid animation of towels and door-knobs), this merely echoes Descartes' originating awareness that taking skepticism seriously requires distinguishing its engendering from the fantasies of madmen, and so acknowledging its uncanny intimacy with reason's other.

Mal gives expression to just such a skeptical paroxysm – initiating a mutually uncomprehending argument about the reality of their present world, in the course of which her skeptical hypothesis turns out to be irrefutable by her husband. She finds herself capable of doubting that her children are hers; her passion to reach a genuinely real reality is such that she is willing to abandon her children and force her husband to choose between suicide, incarceration and exile in order to attain it. More specifically, she wants Cobb to choose death (and so real life) with her over life with their children (but without her). She thereby recapitulates in reality what she had already declared in limbo, by locking away her knowledge of its unreality in order fully to inhabit a world of unending, mutually satisfying creative collaboration with her husband alone – a world without room for children. This is the fanaticism of love: Cobb can truly be hers only if nothing and no-one else stands between them – only if they are everything to each other, exemplary of the world as such in a world that is utterly subject to their essentially single will.

2 Stephen Mulhall, "Sharing a Dream of Scepticism: Parasitism, Plagiarism and Fanaticism in Christopher Nolan's *Inception*," *Harvard Journal of Philosophy* XIX (Spring 2013).

The issue of children carries further significance if one takes seriously Cavell's further claim that Shakespearean tragedy dramatizes what Cartesian meditations present as an intellectual problem, and that *The Winter's Tale* in particular raises the question of whether, and how, skepticism is inflected by gender. For if Leontes gives expression to skeptical doubt in the form of jealousy, then it is a doubt about whether his child is really his (a doubt he recites in good Cartesian fashion by looking for specific physiognomic features possessed by both, then ruling out the testimony of others, then considering his dreams, all the while insisting that he is being reasonable). But such a doubt is not one to which the child's mother has access (as Cavell puts it, "What would it look like for Hermione to doubt whether her children are hers?"): it is the doubt of a father, a man's anxiety. This might mean that skepticism as such a not a female business at all, or at least not the business of the feminine aspect of human character more generally. Or it might mean that skeptical doubt will, in the feminine case, take either another object (say, the father of the child rather than the child) or another passion (say, fanatical or unconditioned love rather than hyperbolic doubt).

Inception patently puts pressure on this reading of *The Winter's Tale*. For it emphasizes that Mal's skepticism finds expression in a doubt as to whether her children are hers, and thereby provides an answer to Cavell's rhetorical question: Mal is what it would look like if Hermione doubted whether her children were hers. But we cannot simply conclude that Mal is giving expression to the masculine side of her (and of human) character. On Cavell's account, although the object of Mal's doubt is definitely masculine (the children as opposed to their father, and as subject to the telling of specific differences), her passion – being an exemplary instance of obsessive or fanatical love, a drive towards an unconditioned form of its fulfilment that amounts to a refusal of finitude – is equally definitely feminine. By combining masculine hyperbolic doubt with feminine hyperbolic love, Mal projects each inflection of skepticism as internally related to the other, as the feminine is to and for the masculine.

This is confirmed by the fact that, even though Mal is the one possessed by the skeptical idea who destroys her husband and children as a consequence, Cobb implanted it in her in Limbo. Mal's subjection to skepticism, and her family's subsequent subjection to it, is thus ultimately her husband's responsibility: the idea is his, although she gives it expression and application. Mal lives out her husband's skepticism. His consequent persecution by the monstrous hostility of his projections of Mal amounts to a further acknowledgement of his own guilt about that originally sinful act of inception. Cobb has deprived her of a voice and a life of her own; and yet she endlessly re-appears within him as an articulate and persecutory self-projection, as someone who knows

everything he does and so must in some sense speak for him. She gives expression to an aspect of himself that he cannot not know but that he nevertheless refuses to acknowledge – call it the feminine register or tone of his own (human) voice. Her implacable hostility shows that he experiences this aspect of himself as essentially beyond his control, and as having lethal designs on his subjectivity.

Acknowledging Cobb's guilt does not, of course, require absolving Mal. It is, after all, she who first denies the unreality of Limbo; and he acts only in response to her hyperbolic attempt to make their relationship infinite and all-consuming, thereby denying their finitude. Indeed, any attempts to divide responsibility between them overlooks the most significant thing about their marriage – the fact that the boundary between them is one that neither finds it possible to draw. Just as their creations in Limbo are essentially joint affairs, so neither seems well-placed to claim any idea about themselves or their world to be theirs as opposed to their partner's. Ownership of their accursed skeptical idea is not ultimately settleable, because neither Mal nor Cobb has succeeded in acknowledging the separateness of the other's mind, and so the other's independent reality. That is why Cobb's inability to mourn takes the form of his mind being ineradicably inhabited by Mal; and that is why his redemption involves acknowledging that the Mal he encounters in his nested dreamworlds is not Mal herself – not the real, independent person whose separateness is definitively established by the fact that her death does not cause or constitute his. Only when Cobb acknowledges himself as alive can he confront the current consequences of his love for his dead wife.

3 Shutter Island: Modernity and Madness

If we consider *Shutter Island* as synthesizing Scorsese's interpretation of DiCaprio's star persona with Nolan's surprisingly complementary intervention, its basic structure and purpose come more clearly into focus.

Scorsese's recurrent trope of a screening room (a space for the presentation of performances, theatrical, cinematic and otherwise), which has expanded from its nineteenth century seed via Hughes' isolation ward to contemporary Boston, here swallows up the whole world of the film. *Shutter Island's* protagonist – Andrew Laeddis – comprehends every aspect of life in Ashecliffe Hospital for the Criminally Insane in terms of an elaborately structured fictional projection that he has composed to defend himself against self-knowledge. He adopts the persona of a Federal Marshal named Teddy Daniels, and the island's other inhabitants agree to perform corresponding roles (in the hope that working through it will reveal “how untrue, how impossible it is”).

However, this means that Laeddis is constantly presented with evidence that his environment is untrustworthy and threatening: his non-professional actors all manifest unease in delivering their lines and following his stage directions, opening a gap between themselves and their performances which he interprets as betraying some secret, malevolent purpose. However, as each hypothesized plot is worked through and falsified, "Teddy" overwrites it with another, shifting the genre of his fantasy from detective thriller to gothic horror to political conspiracy. This just means that his fellow-actors increasingly lose their place in his palimpsestic script, and as Teddy adds wholly hallucinated individuals to his cast, his world's wholehearted commitment to accommodating itself to his projection only reveals its increasingly threadbare fictionality, and eventually the real reasons for its creation.

Since Scorsese frames the film entirely from the fictional Teddy's point of view, he places the viewers of this film in Laeddis' subject position. They are initially and enjoyably suspicious in familiar ways within the film world, then disturbed by the regular use of subtly discordant back-projections, then increasingly disoriented by the repeated (increasingly rushed and ragged) invocation and disavowal of very different sets of generic conventions through which we are apparently forced to (re-)interpret it, and eventually deeply skeptical of the competence of the acting and the coherence of the directing that underpins it. But in truth, a sufficiently attentive viewer is given everything necessary to make quite fine discriminations between fantasy and reality at crucial moments, and ultimately to recognize that the distinction between fantasy and reality is under interrogation throughout.

For example: one "patient" Laeddis interviews requests a drink of water (so that she can convey him a message without the authorities seeing). Although a glass is brought to her, when she raises her arm as though to drink from it there is nothing in her hand. If that kind of ordinary sequence of events can unostentatiously but undeniably fall apart, then Scorsese has duly warned us not to take anything Laeddis perceives as veridical. Likewise, when Laeddis has his conversation with his second, entirely hallucinated version of Rachel Solando, Scorsese stages it as a shot/reverse shot sequence across a fire at night. But the flames appear in the right-hand half of the screen both when "Teddy" is speaking and when "Rachel" is; this violation of cinematic grammar subtly but unmistakably projects the filmic space as a fantasy. Furthermore, when Laeddis recalls liberating Dachau during his military service, he is shown committing two acts of retributive violence: first he discovers the camp commandant severely injured after unsuccessfully trying to commit suicide. He moves his gun out of his reach and watches him suffer an agonizingly drawn-out death. Second, he participates in the execution of the remaining guards. But this second flashback sequence subverts its own reality effect, as Scorsese presents

it by using a tracking shot that extends far longer than it could if the line of guards were really as short as the concluding shot shows. So we should not be surprised to learn from Dr. Cawley in the concluding lighthouse scene that, although Laeddis was present at Dachau, it is not clear whether his oft-recounted memory of shooting the guards corresponds to anything real.

More generally, this lighthouse scene gives a perfectly coherent account of the reality underlying everything shown in the film. In this respect, Scorsese handles his material as magisterially as Nolan. Just as Nolan links Cobb's multi-layered dream-worlds to the broader cultural context of modernity by invoking and interpreting Cartesian skepticism as registering a continuing human preoccupation, so Scorsese carefully sketches in the social context of the events on Shutter Island in such a way as to project Laeddis's subjection to fantasy as a representation of the underlying truth of his times. The key layers of that context are World War II and in particular the Holocaust; the activities of HUAC; and the contemporary warfare in psychiatry between surgical, drug-based and psychoanalytic approaches. Laeddis' vengeance-filled memories of Dachau underline its concrete disproof of the idea of an objective moral order, and implicate the Allies in the Nazi's willingness to treat other human beings as vermin. HUAC exemplifies the fact that early 1950s American political culture really was paranoid to its core, and constituted the reality of the world accordingly; and although Dr. Cawley's commitment to role-playing (his willingness to inhabit Laeddis' dream-worlds) declares his willingness to treat violent paranoid fantasies as having their own psychological reality (hence as humanly meaningful), his looming defeat foreshadows the dominance of attitudes which reduce them to mere symptoms of physical malfunction or chemical imbalance, and so reduce people to their bodies.

If we trust Dr. Cawley, then the truth of Laeddis' defensive fantasy world lurks exactly where Nolan would expect to find it – in the fact that Scorsese's DiCaprio (for the first time in their collaborations) is married. More precisely, Laeddis *was* married: he murdered his wife after she killed their three children while in a psychotic condition that he refused to acknowledge (an act of passive aggression mirrored in his memory of leaving the Dachau commandant to die). She now haunts his dreams in ways which both facilitate and obstruct his defensive project of locating a missing patient named Rachel Solando. In fabricating this woman, he has plagiarized real sources: "Rachel" is the name of his only daughter, and "Rachel Solando" an anagram of the maiden name of his wife – Dolores Chanal. His need for Rachel Solando to be missing is underlined when, after the hospital comes up with a flesh-and-blood candidate for her, he hallucinates another woman of the same name (the whistle-blower for the brainwashing program). But the fact that this necessarily absent presence bears the name (mangled and mingled) of his wife and daughter indicates that

the real object of his desire is his significant female other (the flesh of his flesh, and its procreation). That she is a projection of his own fractured mind further indicates that she goes proxy for the feminine aspect of himself – an aspect that he makes every effort to deny, expel, and render inaccessible. This is why the immediate trigger for his murderous act after discovering his dead children is his wife's refusal to stop talking. Scorsese is telling us that he shoots her in order to render her mute, and that this epitomizes his more general tendency to ignore what she kept on trying to tell him about her own psychological condition. And (as George Noyce warns him in Ward C) it is only when he breaks through the defenses erected by his own fantasies that his haunting projection of her vanishes: he has no further need of that internal female voice because in confessing the truth about himself, he is using the feminine register of his own.

This register is figured as a kind of active passivity. It is essentially receptive, willing and able to suffer reality's most penetrating and traumatic aspects. Achieving and maintaining such receptivity, however, is a hugely demanding task, and it results in a radically creative reconfiguration of the terms in which Laeddis is currently living (or rather in which he is enduring a living death). It is tempting to deny the spontaneous or productive dimension of this receptivity – to think of it as merely passive, essentially inimical to activity, let alone aggression. This is why many viewers of *Shutter Island* never really acknowledge the repeatedly asserted fact that Laeddis is the most homicidally violent person on the island, and why critics like Kolker cannot acknowledge DiCaprio as complicating rather than jettisoning the acting inheritance of early Scorsese's De Niro. But to issue such denials is to adopt Laeddis' delusional stance, which defensively projects his own violence on others, and the world outside him. To overcome such defensive strategies means acknowledging that this feminine receptivity is no less prone to death-dealing violence than the masculine registers of human being with which Scorsese and De Niro were so insistently preoccupied. What the later Scorsese's collaboration with DiCaprio allows him to study is the way in which the delirium of masculine violence is both opposed and matched by its feminine counterpart. It is DiCaprio's ability to suffer the camera's insistent declaration of his distinctively feminine masculinity that makes the collaboration so enriching.

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Reinventing Human Experience: *Hugo* and the Theological Possibilities of Film

Clark J. Elliston

1 Introduction

Martin Scorsese's *Hugo* (2011) both challenges popular expectations of a "Scorsese film" and affirms his noted passion for film history. *Hugo* contains neither shocking violence nor overt religious imagery—two hallmarks of Scorsese's work. Indeed, few would easily identify the *auteur* behind *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Raging Bull* (1980), and *Cape Fear* (2006) as one and the same with the director of *Hugo*. In turn, *Hugo*'s disjunction generates reflection on Scorsese himself: what, if anything, does the artistic vision behind *Hugo* tell viewers about Scorsese's own understanding of film?

This essay argues that *Hugo* highlights two key aspects of Scorsese's developing legacy. First, *Hugo* emphasizes the profound ambiguity of the technological city in Scorsese's work. While film itself remains intrinsically technological, and thus modern technologies possesses significant positive power for change, the viewer cannot avoid the equally dehumanizing character of technological and urban life. Second, and going beyond the clear appreciation for film history, Scorsese's *Hugo* illuminates the transformative, and even redemptive, power of film.¹ Film not only connects persons but channels creativity. Human life *sans* relational and creative expression leads to dehumanization and suffering.

Prima facie these concerns are not theological. Yet, Scorsese's films relentlessly portray broken and flawed human beings. Their anger, their sadness, their existential angst: each of Scorsese's masterpieces wrestles with the fundamental alienation of humankind. This alienation animates much of Christianity's own discourse on human being. Although redemption through Christ grounds the entire Christian tradition, human life in the world always contends with alienation. Yet art—and in the case of *Hugo*, film—uniquely reflects humankind's own creative impulse, an impulse received from the very image of God.

1 Scorsese adapted the film from Brian Selznick's Caldecott-winning graphic novel, *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2007).

This creative image, though broken in human existence, shines forth through *relationship*. Thus the redemption evident in *Hugo* proceeds not from film *per se*, but from the creative and relational space opened up by film. Paradoxically, relation with “otherness” overcomes alienation from others. Through the unexpected lens of a children’s novel, Scorsese depicts this alienation while clarifying a possible (though not necessary) path towards redemption.

2 *Hugo* within Scorsese’s Work

That Martin Scorsese adapted a children’s novel defies expectation almost as much as Selznick’s novel itself defies typical children’s literary convention. Upon its release in 2007, *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* immediately garnered high praise: “It is wonderful...the result is a captivating work of fiction.”² Subsequently awarded both the Caldecott Medal and a “#1 New York Times best-seller” label, Selznick’s work weaves together traditional narrative storytelling with copious illustration. The illustrations themselves disrupt the typical act of reading by imaging the narrative through close-ups and almost animated stills (the final collection of illustrations *are* stills). The novel thus stands at the nexus of narrative storytelling and filmmaking in its method. Moreover, the narrative itself suggests a fundamental question regarding filmmaking: what does, or what can, cinema do?

Precisely this talent for depicting the power of human experience makes Scorsese “a director of world rank.”³ Specifically, a given talent for presenting the male, guilty, and alienated conscience marks Scorsese’s directing career. As commentators have noted, and Scorsese himself has acknowledged, his ability to portray the inner life follows from his own personal reflections and experiences. As Lawrence Friedman notes, “[It] is guilt, conceived in masturbation and prolonged in mature symptoms of sexual bad faith, that is a recurrent motif, perhaps *the* recurrent motif, in Scorsese’s life and art alike.”⁴ Charlie Cappa (*Mean Streets*, 1973), Travis Bickle (*Taxi Driver*, 1976), Jake LaMotta (*Raging Bull*, 1980), Jesus (*The Last Temptation of Christ*, 1988), and Billy Costigan (*The Departed*, 2006) all find themselves isolated, locked within vortices of guilt and regret. This alienating guilt, so pervasive throughout Scorsese’s characters,

2 John Schwartz, “Children’s Books,” *nytimes.com*. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/11/books/review/Schwartz.t.html> (accessed July 19, 2017).

3 Ebert, iv.

4 Lawrence Friedman, *The Cinema of Martin Scorsese* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 11, emphasis in original.

manifests through desperate acts of anger and violence.⁵ The fusion of Italian-American Catholic sensibilities (particularly regarding sexuality), social norms both in an outside of organized crime, and cathartic violence characterizes many of Scorsese's most acclaimed works.⁶

Hugo defies this sketch of Scorsese's film motifs. Guilt certainly plays a role in the narrative; Méliès suffers for earlier decisions. Yet, *Hugo* largely lacks these existential hallmarks of Scorsese's most representative work. Nowhere does one find cathartic rage, overtly religious imagery, or sexual frustration. Obviously this follows from its adaptation from a children's novel. This departure from Scorsese's "classic" filmmaking does indicate, however, that *Hugo* demands adjusted interpretive lenses. More problematically for this essay, while Scorsese's former protagonists each wrestled with religion (albeit in strikingly diverse ways), *Hugo* displays no clear religious impulse.⁷ Indeed, if saviors exist in *Hugo*, they exist in gears and wheels.

5 Despite the obvious parallels with existentialist philosophy, itself immensely popular during Scorsese's rise to prominence, and also in spite of the intensely personal character of Scorsese's films, he presents himself as entirely ignorant of these parallels. Indeed Scorsese credits Paul Schrader as the philosopher of the pair; unsurprisingly their collaborations (*Taxi Driver*, *Raging Bull*, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, *Bringing Out the Dead*) most echo existentialist themes. Cf. Ebert, 172–173.

6 Scorsese's filmography is sufficiently diverse to resist overarching thematic claims. Indeed one can fairly easily distinguish between Scorsese's "personal" works and ones written for studios. *The Color of Money* (1986), for example served as a "vanity project" for Paul Newman: one in which Scorsese (and Newman) put up a third of their salaries as collateral with the studio. Vincent LoBrutto writes, "Scorsese accepted the challenge. He had already had his salary cut to make *After Hours* and in the heart of the director he was paying for his sins of excess on *New York, New York* and the failure to get *The Last Temptation of Christ* into production," (Vincent LoBrutto, *Martin Scorsese: A Biography* (Westport: Praeger, 2008), 278).

7 This religious impulse within Scorsese's films is well-documented. Within Scorsese's most personal works, religious motifs abound, if not directly from the minds of his characters. Even in Scorsese's exploitation film *Boxcar Bertha* (1972), David Carradine's Bill Shelly dies crucified as a flawed Christological figure. Charlie Cappa ponders the pain of Hell through a candle, and Jake LaMotta (problematically) sleeps with the crucified Christ watching over his bed. Throughout Scorsese's work women reflect the particular tension of the "Madonna-Whore" syndrome: "Since the maternal ideal of the Virgin Mary was held as the highest ideal of womanhood, and since Italian American males desired a woman who most closely approximated this ideal, chastity was deemed essential in an unmarried woman. Otherwise, a woman was scorned as the virtual equivalent of a prostitute," (Robert Casillo, *Gangster Priest: The Italian American Cinema of Martin Scorsese* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 90). Even in *Taxi Driver*, the "least Catholic" of Scorsese's films, Scorsese notes the deployment of the goddess-whore complex and Travis Bickle's ultimately edited-out self-flagellation prior to purgation (Casillo, 82; Ebert, 44–45).

3 The Automaton

In addition to participating in the vast urban machinery of the modern city, Hugo pursues a unique relationship with mechanical technologies. More specifically, Hugo's past, present, and future lies in a machine: an automaton Hugo obtains from the wreckage of the local museum. Far from random salvage, the automaton was a personal project of Hugo's father. The automaton was designed to write a message on paper, and both Hugo and his father wonder about the message. Indeed, while working one night in the museum attic on the automaton, his father perishes when a fire breaks out. After being taken in by his uncle, Hugo, in the midst of an escape from the station, discovers it in the burnt remains of the museum. It had been their shared passion: "They remained optimistic that it could be fixed, and they talked about what the automaton might write when it was working again. Hugo and his father began to think of the automaton as an injured animal that they were nursing back to health."⁸ Lying in the wreckage "like an accusation," the automaton reminds Hugo of his loneliness. Out of love for his father, he takes it back to the station. There he hears a voice telling him to "fix it." He resolves to try, if only so "at least he wouldn't be so completely alone."⁹ Despite their original intention of "nursing" the automaton back to health, the roles reverse, and the automaton offers hope for the heartbroken Hugo—hope that *he* might be nursed back to health.

Hugo's care for the automaton extends beyond sentiment; he believes in, and even desires, a mechanical universe. As indicated above, he views the world as "one big machine." For Hugo this amounts to a declamation of love: the machine represents perfect design. It fulfills a specific role and does so efficiently.¹⁰ Not only does Hugo's world glory in technological efficiency, but so do human beings. "[Hugo] had often imagined that his own head was filled with cogs and gears like a machine, and he felt a connection with whatever machinery he touched."¹¹ In sharp contrast to such complete and pure efficiency, his Uncle Claude, "yelled at Hugo, rapped his knuckles when he made mistakes, and forced him to sleep on the floor." Moreover, he was old and a drunkard, the very epitome of waste. Hugo's life actually improves when his uncle fails to return one night.

8 Selznick, *Invention*, 121.

9 *Ibid.*, 131.

10 Consider also Hugo's assessment of the station's users: "When he saw them from above he always thought the travelers looked like cogs in an intricate, swirling machine. But up close, amid the bustle and the stampede, every just seemed noisy and disconnected," (*Ibid.*, 142).

11 *Ibid.*, 126.

The automaton thus becomes the central focus of Hugo's life, for it lies at the nexus of Hugo's two loves—his father and machinery. He becomes obsessed (not unlike his own father) with the automaton:

Hugo had continued thinking about the note that it would eventually write. And the more he worked on the automaton, the more he came to believe something that he knew was completely crazy. Hugo felt sure that the note was to answer all his questions and tell him what to do now that he was alone. The note was going to save his life ... Maybe Father, while he had been working on the automaton up in the attic of the museum, had changed the little mechanical parts just enough so that it would make a new note, one meant just for Hugo.¹²

This profound attachment to the automaton makes the burning of the notebook by the toy booth owner virtually impossible to endure: "He had grown to love it. He felt responsible for it. Even if it didn't work, at least at the train station he had it nearby."¹³ Devoid of meaningful human contact, Hugo's world becomes exclusively mechanical; he lives for machines and at least one machine exists for him.

4 Hugo and the Others

Despite his hopes for it, the automaton utterly fails Hugo. After finally whirring to life, the automaton makes indecipherable marks on the page. Crushed, Hugo realizes the futility of his belief in a message from his father: "All his work had been for nothing. Hugo felt broken himself."¹⁴ While never delivering a message, the automaton instead draws a picture. At the moment when all is revealed, the automaton draws a fantastical picture from a favorite film of his father's. At this juncture in the narrative the automaton ceases to play a substantive role, and the real story begins.

While Hugo lives surrounded by others, he relates intimately with no one. With his father and uncle gone, and the Station Inspector and toy booth owner threats to his freedom, Hugo lives a solitary life. Then he meets the first of his two eventual companions, Isabelle. Though older (and stronger) than Hugo, she becomes his friend in adventure. More importantly, she becomes every

¹² *Ibid.*, 132–133.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 138–139.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 250.

bit as entwined in the mystery of the automaton as Hugo. From the outset the parallels between the two are clear: she too is an orphan, a concealed observer, and a thief. On a snowy night after losing his notebook to the toy booth operator, she is also a light in the darkness. The story reveals her to be the goddaughter of the toy booth owner, and she promises to assist Hugo in regaining his notebook. Despite her apparent helpfulness, she worries Hugo. After meeting in a bookstore to discuss the fate of his notebook, Hugo thinks her strange and possibly untrustworthy. Yet her presence, and the information she provides, demands action. Principally, she serves as an “other” for Hugo. She challenges and motivates him: “She was standing there with her hands on her hips, looking at him with an expression he couldn’t quite place ... for a brief moment, quite unexpectedly, his heart sank.”¹⁵ Hugo’s burgeoning friendship with Isabelle requires him to reflect on himself in entirely unexpected ways. She also constitutes the gateway to Hugo’s eventual relational network.

Isabelle introduces Hugo to Etienne, a young man with whom Isabelle shares a passion for films. Hugo hides from them the fact the he too loves movies, and indeed attended a film with his father every year on his birthday. Moreover, they invite him into a world he had never entered—the world of the station bookstore. Although Hugo has never been inside the bookstore before, he loves books. Yet the memories integrating books, rather than the books themselves, spark his interest. Books remind him of school (and thus schoolmates) and his father’s own reading of fairytales.¹⁶ Here again the fantastical world of storytelling foments new relationships, except the book gives way to film as the medium of connection. Etienne works at the movie theater and secretly lets Isabelle in for free. He immediately connects with Hugo over film and invites him to stop by the theater with Isabelle. But Etienne too challenges Hugo. Just as Hugo prepares to steal a book, Etienne intervenes:

He knew that Monsieur Labisse lent books to Isabelle, but Hugo didn’t want to just borrow this one. He wanted to own it. He slipped it under his arm and inched toward the door ... Etienne reached beneath the eye patch and pulled out a coin, which he handed to Hugo. ‘That’s the only magic trick I know,’ said Etienne. ‘Go buy the book.’¹⁷

Though this moment receives no greater attention, it stands as a pivotal point. Hugo experiences in Isabelle and Etienne something entirely apart from his

15 Ibid., 169.

16 Ibid., 146–147.

17 Ibid., 186–187.

recent experience: friendship with others. They inspire, and even demand, that Hugo reflect on himself and his surroundings. They hold him to account for his actions, as intelligible and well-intentioned as they may be. The relational connection desperately lacking in Hugo's life, a desperation unalleviated by machinery, is inadvertently provided directly by Etienne. Most critically as we will see, Etienne and Isabelle bear Hugo's burdens with him.

Through Isabelle Hugo's relationship with Papa Georges—or, for Hugo, the toy booth owner—changes. Throughout the vast majority of the narrative, Papa Georges poses a formidable threat to Hugo. Yet, he offers glimpses of more depth than his reactive and gruff demeanor suggests. When he claims to have burned Hugo's notebook, Hugo notices tears in Papa Georges' eyes. He rightly ascertains that Hugo possesses talent with mechanical things. Though he forbids Isabelle to attend movies, he reveals himself to be an accomplished magician and teaches Hugo basic card tricks. While he knows Hugo steals his toy parts to fix the automaton, Papa Georges does not stop him. Yet Papa Georges also hides a profound fragility; stresses of a certain sort incapacitate him. He bears memories which bring him sadness and guilt, and Mama Jeanne, Isabelle's godmother and Papa Georges' wife, fervently protects him from such memories.

The two great mysteries of Hugo coalesce in Papa Georges. When the automaton draws the picture of the rocket in the eye of the moon, it signs the image "Georges Méliès." Upon recognizing the name of her godfather, Isabelle returns and confronts her godmother. Once upon a time, Papa Georges was Georges Méliès, an influential and transformative early filmmaker. Indeed his 1902 film, *A Trip to the Moon* [*Le Voyage dans la Lune*], had been a favorite of Hugo's father. One of Méliès's many works had been the automaton—an object in which magic and machine were united. After a traumatic reckoning in which Méliès confronts his work for the first time in decades, reconciliation begins. The films reveal his past and yet point towards an unexpected future: the overdue celebration of his work by those who had presumed Méliès deceased.

For Hugo too reconciliation occurs. The Station Inspector finally catches Hugo when the corpse of Hugo's uncle is discovered at the bottom of a river. Yet, it is Méliès and Isabelle who bring out the truth: Hugo had been maintaining the clocks and living within the station. Though briefly incarcerated, the Méliès family takes Hugo into their home. The story closes with the fulfillment of almost all of Hugo's dreams: he again attends school, sees film regularly, attends the World's Fair, and performs magic. Hugo has returned from the margins of the city into the center and is no longer invisible. Most of all, he is no longer alone; he again belongs to a family. Redemption, for Hugo understood in terms of restoration of relationship, remains yet possible.

5 *Hugo* and Scorsese Reconsidered

As indicated from the outset, *Hugo* seems to be an odd Scorsese film. As a director known for plumbing the depths of the maladjusted American male, *Hugo* seems to offer little. Still, despite the obvious incongruence between viewer expectation and viewer reception, *Hugo* serves as a quintessential Scorsese film. Three aspects of *Hugo* support this claim. First, while *Hugo* trades less in anger and sexual frustration than Scorsese's masterpieces (which is to say, not at all), themes of alienation and existential loneliness abound. Second, and perhaps as a function of his own decidedly urban context, Scorsese acknowledges the ugliest aspects of the modern city. Third, though not every Scorsese film concludes as positively as *Hugo*, Scorsese allows for cinematic catharsis, even if that catharsis includes copious violence. So while *Hugo* remains indeed unconventional fare for the committed Scorsese enthusiast, the dissonance might be less than expected. Finally, one might ask about the character of film itself, a question *Hugo* seems to imply: what about film, if anything, can "redeem"? Or, from where does the aforementioned catharsis emerge? I will discuss each of these points below.

Alienation of individuals, from society, themselves, or their group, haunts Scorsese's films. Several of Scorsese's most acclaimed films feature prominent characters (if not protagonists) largely isolated from others. Scorsese's triad of films, *Raging Bull*, *Taxi Driver*, and *The Last Temptation of Christ* all wrestle with "redemption through destruction."¹⁸ However, isolation serves as a precursor to, and even reason for, all such redemptive violence. *Raging Bull's* Jake LaMotta, obsessed with sexual purity, rejects any who present even the possibility of infidelity. Against his rigorous standard and increasing paranoia, all eventually stand under his accusation. Even his brother, otherwise his most faithful friend, becomes suspect and is beaten for it. Unsurprisingly, he has no one in the end. *Taxi Driver's* Travis Bickle clearly struggles to connect with others and explicitly affirms that "loneliness has followed me my whole life."¹⁹ Indeed Arthur Bremer, the would-be assassin of presidential hopeful George Wallace and Robert De Niro's inspiration for Bickle, also struggled with others: "Kids laughed as they saw my bumpy head [from his mother's beatings]. They were having fun and something was funny. I wanted to have fun. I laughed.

18 Friedman, 63.

19 Bickle's date with Betsy reveals his utter lack of social awareness. He takes his "Madonna" figure, clad in white and ethereally beautiful, into a porn film for their date. Yet far from being lascivious, Bickle persistently and persuasively announces his innocence. He simply gauges wrongly what sort of film someone like her would like to have seen.

Then they laughed harder.”²⁰ Bickle, as “God’s lonely man,” bears a simmering distaste for the masses, though they surround him daily. The coming apocalypse will rid the world, or at least New York, of the human waste that characterizes the modern city. And Travis Bickle will play a role in that cleansing.²¹ Jesus of Nazareth offers the final image of Scorsese’s (and Schrader’s) isolated anti-hero. If ever there were “God’s lonely man,” Scorsese’s Jesus embodies him. Alone bearing the oppressive calling of God, Jesus convulses under God’s inspiration and rejects the ministrations of those around him. He masks his desire for community through sexual voyeurism (like Bickle), while remaining strictly sexually pure. Ultimately he too redeems in an orgy of violence.

Themes of alienation abound in *Hugo* as well. Clearly violence plays no part, and thus the motif of redemptive violence disappears.²² Yet, *Hugo* too presents figures broken by their worlds. This wounding separates them from those around them, yielding profound isolation. Hugo, as an orphan, exhibits the human need for connection; he repeatedly notes his abandonment and the fact that he has no one. Yet he also observes his own desire for others, and in this way demonstrates far more self-awareness than Jake LaMotta or Travis Bickle, both of whom see others as a nuisance or even danger. Hugo misses the small relational pleasures of life together: “He missed being read to.”²³ Reflecting on his father’s own practice, Hugo at least knows that part of his life is broken. LaMotta and Bickle, in contrast, have no such awareness. Indeed, they are truly American anti-heroes; they are creatures of their own making, without perceived need of others.

The lack of reciprocal relation to others, and the ensuing chaos, resonates with the Christian narrative of the Fall. Strikingly, the communality of human beings receives primary attention in the biblical narrative: “Then the LORD God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as a partner.’”²⁴ A vocation is thus given to humankind, a vocation with and for others. Moreover, as the arc of creation proceeds from chaos to increasing order, so life isolated from others thus reflects descent towards primeval chaos.²⁵

20 “Arthur Bremer’s Notes from the Underground,” *Time*, May 29, 1972, 27.

21 Friedman describes it well: “[Bickle’s] vision of the excremental city, extrapolated from soldiering in Vietnam and magnified by taxi driving in New York, casts himself as its scourge and redeemer;” (Friedman, 63).

22 Although it falls outside the purview of this essay, one might ask whether the violence is redemptive at all.

23 Selznick, *Invention*, 147.

24 Gen. 2:18, NRSV.

25 To be sure, solitude possesses a crucial place in Christian practice. To be silent and solitary before God, away from “the world” offers much. However, even this is balanced by

True existential solitude overwhelms the self and threatens it with dissolution. This solitude represents what Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls “being-in-Adam,” the existence of the self for oneself:

The thirst [for life] takes a strange form. For what causes despair in Adam’s situation is just this, that Adam lives out of Adam’s own resources, is imprisoned within Adam, and thus can want only Adam, can hanker only after Adam; for Adam has become Adam’s own god ... it is just this solitude, this resting in oneself, this existing in and of oneself, that plunges Adam into infinite thirst.²⁶

Hugo’s desire for others stems from this innate and primal desire for community. He is not yet hardened by life so as to reject others from afar. Instead, he responds with surprising tenderness to the realization that others might care for him. Upon finding a toy he repaired stowed away in Papa Georges’ toy booth, “Hugo liked that he had kept it...he found himself smiling as he turned the blue mouse over in his hands.”²⁷ More critically, he responds by sacrificing on their behalf. When Papa Georges needs medicine that the family cannot afford, Hugo manages the toy booth with Isabelle until the money is earned. Further, he makes multiple attempts to reconcile Papa Georges’ past with his present, even though those efforts ultimately destroy what he had protected for so long: his identity as the clock-keeper at the station. These small acts demonstrate that despite his fear of discovery, Hugo desires relationship with others above his own safety. He genuinely wishes the best for Papa Georges and his family. His desire for others leads him not towards himself but outward towards the world around him.

If the viewer experiences the loneliness of solitude through Hugo early in the story, the internal alienation of the self within itself finds expression through Papa Georges. Once a promising and talented filmmaker, Méliès gave

communal ritual and practice. The isolation of the ego, the self set up as its own god, however, reflects a much different sort of solitude. That solitude represents “being-in-Adam,” the existence of the self for oneself: “The thirst [for life] takes a strange form. For what causes despair in Adam’s situation is just this, that Adam lives out of Adam’s own resources, is imprisoned within Adam, and thus can want only Adam, can hanker only after Adam; for Adam has become Adam’s own god ... it is just this solitude, this resting in oneself, this existing in and of oneself, that plunges Adam into infinite thirst,” (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 3 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 143).

²⁶ Ibid., 143.

²⁷ Selznick, *Invention*, 306.

up his movie business during a series of professional and personal hardships. He works at the toy booth utilizing his considerable mechanical talents repairing toys. Any mention of his past life evokes immediate and negative reaction. He forbids Isabelle to attend movies, a prohibition she ignores. When Hugo and Isabelle confront Papa Georges with his past, he breaks down and becomes bedridden with a high fever. Papa Georges exists as one at war with their past. To again invoke Bonhoeffer (and also the biblical witness), Papa Georges is the “double-minded man.” Bonhoeffer writes, “Only the person who combines simplicity with wisdom can endure. But what is simplicity? What is wisdom? How do the two become one? A person is simply who in the confusion, the distortion, and the inversion of all concepts keep in sight only the single truth of God. This person has an undivided heart, and is not a double-psyche, a person of two souls.”²⁸ While Bonhoeffer here refers to Christian discipleship, the sentiment remains equally true for vocation. A Christian notion of vocation stems from the assertion that all are gifted by God for work in God’s kingdom. Yet gifts are bestowed by an infinitely diverse God and are thus multifaceted. Papa Georges was *meant*, and even destined, to be a filmmaker.²⁹ His relinquishing of this vocation leaves him at odds from himself, fleeing his own creative power.

Second, *Hugo* subtly highlights the alienating power of the modern and technological city. Scorsese offers alternative visions of city. In past films, Scorsese’s New York remains intimately comfortable, divided by clearly demarcated boundaries and social norms. Based on his own childhood in Little Italy, the city provides the backdrop for the family. Friedman notes of Scorsese’s early life: “The family, more than any other institution, wove the fabric of everyday life. What better than Mama’s spaghetti as the symbol of Italian family—and communal—culture?”³⁰ If the family gives meaning to the home, the world of organized crime gives meaning to the neighborhood. Here again the city organizes; both family and gang rely on the city to circumscribe boundaries and expectations.³¹ Certain streets are “off limits” and venturing there comes with

28 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 6 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 81.

29 Consider Hölderlin’s own artistic vocation: “But when what’s holy, dear to me / the Poem’s accomplished, my art perfected / Then welcome, silence, welcome cold world of shades! (Friedrich Hölderlin, “To the Fates” in *Selected Poems and Fragments* (New York: Penguin, 1998), 7).

30 Friedman, 21.

31 Cf. LoBrutto, 11: “Little Italy was a cement and tenement environment, ruled by the *capo* bosses, and contrained by invisible but impenetrable borders, rigid class distinctions resistant to change, and a suspicion of the outside world.”

peril. Others are protected as one's own. Just as in the family, the urban gang provides clear expectations. Scorsese's many films featuring organized crime detail as much; the viewer notices when characters within these worlds defy these expectations. In *Goodfellas* (1990), mobster Tommy DeVito foreshadows problematic defiance of such social norms when he shoots a subordinate for innocently teasing him. Later he further violates the social order by killing a superior, a transgression which demands satisfaction. Whether family or gang, for Scorsese the city (and particularly New York), circumscribes expectation.

Yet the city destroys as much as it creates. While it gives context to family, understood literally or professionally, the city's organization grinds away those who resist it. Scorsese's characters suffer under immense pressure as they navigate this particular world. *Mean Streets*, *Raging Bull*, *Taxi Driver*, *Goodfellas*, *Bringing Out the Dead* (1999), and *The Departed* all feature central figures withering under the city's gaze. Unsurprisingly, Travis Bickle again provides the starkest depiction of the city's crushing potential. Bickle's New York lacks all of the social connectivity of family, but retains the detachment of a machine producing goods and waste. Bickle's world driving a cab during long nights exposes him to this underside of the technological city. Bright neon lights blur in a rain which fails to wash away the "filth" and suggests Bickle's emotional descent. People are reduced to creatures of Dionysian excess, following their desires behind the insignificant gaze of the cab driver.³² Most critically, these desires corrupt innocence. Indeed the corruption of Iris, a young prostitute, motivates Bickle's ultimate revenge.

Hugo displays the same alienating potential of the modern, technological city. Selznick's *Hugo*, as an arguably "steampunk" novel, glamorizes the technological; it celebrates the industrial past and highlights the mechanical.³³

32 Cf. Ebert, 47. The depiction of the city as a locus of moral decay finds much support in biblical literature. From the very beginning of Hebrew thought the city serves as a refuge for moral complexity. Upon slaying his brother Cain, as the first murderer, "founds a city," (Gen. 4:17). Though God protects Cain, he is marked by his transgression for the rest of his life. Two other prominent cities, Sodom and Gomorrah, receive well-known judgment for their transgressions (Gen. 19:24). Cities appear as their own moral entities and correspondingly receive praise and judgment. In the New Testament Jesus laments the fate of Jerusalem (Matt. 23:37), while Babylon represents absolute moral decay in the Johannine apocalypse (Rev. 18). Scorsese even references Jesus's lament in his script, *Jerusalem, Jerusalem!*

33 Cf. Tammy Mielke and Jeanne LaHaie, "Theorizing Steampunk in Scott Westerfield's YA Series *Leviathan*," *Children's Literature in Education*, 46 (2015): 242–256. "Based on its play with time and culturally accepted considerations of the past, present, and future, steampunk is part of the postmodern literary movement; mixing alternative realities with fantasy, and engaging with technologies, both real and imaginary," (244).

Scorsese's *Hugo* equally exhibits a steampunk aesthetic, replete with careful attention to the clockworks of Gare Montparnasse. This technological concern extends beyond mere aesthetic; rather, mechanization and technology form the very core of Hugo's world. His work, his memory, and indeed even his being finds its genesis in the mechanical workings of the train station. While the reader (and viewer) observes Hugo's locomotion through the tunnels and chambers of the station as distinctively claustrophobic, the opposite holds for Hugo. He feels anxiety not in the cramped confines of service tunnels, but in the station surrounded by people and especially when leaving the station altogether. Hugo remains, like another Parisian hero Quasimodo, an *observer* of others.³⁴ Since his perpetually inebriated uncle disappears, he maintains the clocks and has one goal: "Most of all, Hugo would do his best to remain invisible."³⁵ He thus watches carefully an old man and his toy shop, as well as the station inspector's office. Apart from the purchasing of coffee or stealing children's toys for parts, Hugo's primary encounters with the world occur through a particular lens, a lens of mechanical clocks.

Hugo's urban location makes possible his relative anonymity. His freedom from the orphanage (originally his greatest fear) relies on his invisibility in an industrial urban world. This invisibility creates distance, insofar as he possesses a panoptical view of the entire station.³⁶ In addition to the "god-like" perspective from the clocks, his vantage point offers wonder as well:

"Sometimes I come up here at night, even when I'm not fixing the clocks, just to look at the city. I like to imagine that the world is one big machine. You know, machines never have any extra parts. They have the exact number and type of parts they need. So I figure if the entire world is a big machine, I have to be here for some reason." ... They watched the stars, and they saw the moon hanging high above them. The city sparkled

34 Here again, Scorsese's own experience reflects this impulse: "[In Little Italy] someone was always looking and waiting. Charles taught both of his sons the omerta, the Sicilian code of silence. Always be wary, keep an eye out—when asked, you saw nothing and said nothing. Marty especially took the watching and listening lesson to heart. He became an observer of human behavior and a historian of street life" (LoBrutto, 22).

35 Selznick, *Invention*, 132.

36 Consider Michel de Certeau: "The person who ascends to that height [of New York's original World Trade Center] leaves behind the mass that takes and incorporates into itself any sense of being...His altitude transforms him into a voyeur. It places him at a distance...Must one redescend into the sombre space through which crowds of people move about ...?" (Michel de Certeau, "Walking in the City," in *The Certeau Reader*, ed. Graham Ward (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 102).

below, and the only sound was the steady rhythmic pulse of the clock's machinery.³⁷

While the beauty of the city inspires, the threat of the city exists in the orphanage. On several occasions Hugo laments his eventual fate in the orphanage, likening it implicitly to death. After finding out that the toy booth owner had burned his notebook and, "all his dreams...disappeared in that pile of ash," he contemplates turning himself in the Station Inspector. The Inspector would inevitably turn him into a place of no return—the orphanage. In a quintessentially modern and urban institution, the orphanage's mission itself is technological: it takes marginalized persons and transforms them into productive members of society.³⁸ At the same time, the orphanage also signifies absolute dehumanization, a point from which children never return. The Station Inspector's office serves as a potent reminder of this terrifying possibility: "Looking through the numbers, Hugo could see the Station Inspector's desk, and in the corner of the office, the cage of a small jail cell that sat waiting for any criminals caught in the station...a few times he had even seen boys no older than himself in the cell, their eyes red from crying. Eventually, these people were taken away, and Hugo never saw them again."³⁹ Hugo lies beyond the borders of civilization, despite his proximity to it. He steals toys and food, no longer receives education, and lives in isolation. The orphanage, then, would serve to reintroduce him to civilization. Perhaps worst of all, no one protects him from this fate.

Only in such a context could his uncle go missing, never cash further paychecks, and yet have his absence go unquestioned. Such an urban world operates like any good machine, autonomously and efficiently. Hugo, for his part, must be both. And he is—Selznick tells the reader and Scorsese shows that Hugo possesses the same mechanical gifts as his horologist father.⁴⁰ He maintains

37 Selznick, *Invention*, 378.

38 Though Foucault does not mention orphanages by name, clearly they fit under the title of "disciplines." He writes, "The disciplines function increasingly as techniques for making useful individuals ... They become attached to some of the great essential functions: factory production, the transmission of knowledge, the diffusion of aptitudes and skills, the war-machine," (Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 211). Note the distinctively modern texture of the disciplines; the goal is less on moral purification or social good than on technological productivity and efficiency. Hence the cultivation of "factory production" and efficient deployment of the "war-machine."

39 Selznick, *Invention*, 80.

40 *Ibid.*, 116. "Hugo was good with clocks too. The talent ran in the family. Hugo's father had always brought home broken clocks for his son to play with, and by the time he was six, Hugo was able to fix just about anything."

clocks, deconstructs and repairs mechanical toys, and eventually surpasses even his father's work on an automaton. So while Hugo lives on the borders of society, he is embedded within it, ensuring its continuation and observing it from within.⁴¹

Third, while *Hugo* departs from the expected Scorsesean "style," it nevertheless traces the trajectory of Scorsese's persistent concern with the power of film. *Hugo* reflects both Scorsese's personal history with filmmaking, as well as the conviction that film can in some way redeem human life. Scorsese's films are above all personal; they wrestle with Scorsese's fundamental experiences. They do not detail amorphous "human experience," and indeed Scorsese has resisted projects extending beyond the pale of his experience. Ebert noted as much in an interview with Scorsese: "When you look at your films, I think we see a group of films that are intensely personal...And then somebody asked you when we were talking to the students yesterday if you'd ever make a western. And I found your answer to be so revealing because your answer was you didn't know what a Western had to do with you."⁴² This is no less disturbing given the controversial and violent character of several Scorsese films. Yet here again Scorsese does not flinch. Famously Schrader wrote *Taxi Driver* during a period of isolation and depression while living alone in Los Angeles, and Scorsese echoes such a connection with aspects of Bickle's experience.⁴³

Scorsese's connection with his art began much earlier. His father, Charles, religiously attended the movies whenever possible and often take young Marty along. Given his own asthma, films provided the context for enjoyable—and safe—family entertainment.⁴⁴ The entire family were such enthusiasts that they saw the vast majority of films released. LoBrutto observes:

Marty couldn't get enough of the movies. There were only so many films playing in his vicinity and Charles made certain Marty saw every one ... from the earliest age, the archivist and historical champion of the cinema

41 Selznick notes on several occasions Hugo's bestial tendencies. Not unlike the proliferation of animals within cities, often unnoticed by the populace, Hugo lives more intimately with the station than any of its customers. He maneuvers in long-forgotten tunnels, dark and dank. His one connection with the outside world is a skylight which allows for minimal sun exposure. He is in no small way akin to the rodents that infest cities. Selznick writes, "Hugo growled like a dog ... had to climb up a long dark staircase and slithered through an opening ... like a wild animal, Hugo escaped ... he quickly locked the cage, which Hugo had always feared so much ... sat there like an animal, wet and shivering ... " (Selznick, *Invention*, 50, 76, 415, 453, 455).

42 Ebert, 160.

43 Friedman, 62.

44 LoBrutto, 17.

was alive in Marty Scorsese. He watched everything and paid serious attention to all of it, soaking in film history.⁴⁵

Equally importantly, the Scorseses were one of the earliest families in their neighborhood to own a personal television. As early networks did not repeat domestic films, international films were shown to fill the airtime.⁴⁶ Thus Scorsese gained exposure to classic European films that would later guide his artistic vision.

No less than Scorsese, *Hugo* celebrates the history of cinema. As a work of historical fiction, *Hugo* affirms Méliès's work as a significant departure from its era's cinematic convention. Yet it also suggests that *something* about film possesses redemptive potential. At the culmination of the narrative, Méliès changes. His once dour demeanor gives way to the gentle visage of a grandfather.⁴⁷ More critically, he no longer flees from his past. Upon Hugo's awakening after a near miss with an onrushing train, he sees Méliès wearing the cape from *A Trip to the Moon*. Yet, Méliès does not resume filmmaking; that part of his life has closed. So filmmaking itself neither heals nor "redeems" Méliès. Instead, his transformation follows from overdue appreciation of his work. Though many of his films are lost, his remaining films are catalogued and preserved. This appreciation, following decades of development, affirms Méliès' vision of the cinema as a "factory of dreams."⁴⁸ His vocation, a calling to bring the imagination to life, is finally accomplished through the recognition of his achievement.

In an altogether different way, Scorsese too finds himself again through film. While Scorsese's initial motivation to make films followed from his childhood experiences watching films with his family, filmmaking arguably saved his life. In 1978, Scorsese suffered a complete physical and mental breakdown. Cocaine, marital problems, and overwork all contributed, leaving Scorsese near death.⁴⁹ At the nadir of Scorsese's career, Robert De Niro pushed for final clarification

45 Ibid., 18.

46 Friedman, 13.

47 Sir Ben Kingsley describes this in his initial reading of Méliès: "For Georges, remembering his past would be too painful. So there was a kind of blackness to him in that toy booth. He's a sleepwalker, and nothing must wake him up," (Brian Selznick, *The Hugo Movie Companion: A Behind the Scenes Look at How a Beloved Book Became a Major Motion Picture* (New York: Scholastic, 2011), 73).

48 As Méliès notes in his acceptance speech, "I address you all tonight as you truly are: wizards, mermaids, travelers, adventurers, and magicians. You are the true dreamers," (Selznick, *Invention*, 506). Cf. also Selznick, *Hugo*, 47.

49 LoBrutto, 217: "Like others in the American New Wave he fell prey to ego and hubris, taking on projects like *New York, New York*, fueled by obsession, power and not personal fulfillment, and misguided ambition."

about whether or not they would make *Raging Bull*. Recognizing how his own penchant for self-destruction rivaled Jake LaMotta's, Scorsese convalesced and prepared to pour himself into the film.⁵⁰ Scorsese envisioned *Raging Bull* as a story of redemption: "Martin Scorsese decided to save his own life and he would make a movie to do it."⁵¹ Yet Schrader, who wrote the screenplay, demurs on the redemptive aspects of *Raging Bull*, citing that the only form of redemption emerges through the suffering of the protagonist. This question of redemption through suffering, so provocatively displayed in several Scorsese films, invites the final question: what kind of redemption can film ultimately provide?

6 The Redemptive Power of Film

Already two options emerge: first, the public affirmation of his passion provides Méliès with some semblance of redemption. This redemption appears through his radically different way of being with others, evidenced both in his demeanor and in his selfless adoption of Hugo at the end of the narrative. Second, Scorsese's redemption follows less from public acclaim than from filmmaking's power to force self-reflection and even self-confrontation. As indicated in LoBrutto, Scorsese had depicted his own obsessions cinematically but failed to confront them personally.⁵² Filmmaking "saves" Scorsese by enabling him to come to grips with his own self-destructiveness. Scorsese offers some insight into this question while addressing his relationship with Roger Ebert:

But I think it was in the realm of aesthetics that we bonded perhaps more closely. We were both kids who, I think, wanted to escape the noisy, contentious worlds of our families and friends, wanted to lose ourselves in fantasies that were, if not always more pleasing, then more all-consuming—for at least a couple of hours (usually it was many more) every week. Most kids use the movies for that purpose—or at least they did a half century and more ago. But only a relatively small number of them develop the passion for them that we shared ... They provide the central metaphors—hundreds of them—for our lives. This is not just a

50 Friedman notes that, far from being convinced of *Raging Bull*'s success, Scorsese envisioned it as the "swan song" of his career (Friedman, 115). It was in this sense a *sacrificial* filmmaking process.

51 LoBrutto, 219.

52 *Ibid.*, 217–218.

matter of being able to quote their most famous lines. It's a matter of being able to analyze closely a camera set-up or an edit—looking, sometimes perhaps absurdly, for their deeper meanings.⁵³

While Scorsese emphasizes the escapist element of moviegoers, this cannot account for the *transformative* power of film, since every foray into an imagined world requires cold re-entry into one's real world.⁵⁴ Scorsese thus provides a secondary, and more persuasive, second option: films offer unique opportunities for meaning-discovery in the world. Films present otherness in a way few mediums can. While the other person embodies the quintessential "other," films present otherness in a more subtle fashion. Whereas human sociality remains plagued by the recognition that the other person may be *against* us, film offers no such immediate threat. Indeed art, and specifically cinema, requires that one open themselves to the artifact. The fact that cinema requires the "suspension of disbelief" implies such a vulnerability on the part of the viewer. Precisely in suspension of the self is the power of film revealed. Emmanuel Levinas, ever the advocate for the primacy of the other, asks provocatively, "In [the face] the infinite resistance of a being to our power is affirmed... Can things take on a face? Isn't art an activity that gives things a face?"⁵⁵ The poetic act, the act of creating or discovering meaning, requires just such a suspension of the self.⁵⁶ So film aesthetics, like ethics, demands that the modern, technological impulse towards mastery be infinitely deferred.

53 Ebert, xiv–xv, emphasis added.

54 One might liken this to the very experience of finishing a summer matinee film in the theater; departure from a cool, comfortable theater ultimately requires exiting into the blinding, harsh light of the afternoon sun.

55 Emmanuel Levinas, "Is Ontology Fundamental?" in *Entre Nous*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Continuum, 2006), 9. For a resonant theological reading of the ethical relation, see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 54: "The I comes into being only in relation to the You; only in response to a demand does *responsibility* arise ... This demand is absolute," (emphasis in original).

56 Humankind's fundamental creativity follows from its creation in the divine image. As God creates out of God's own being, so humankind creates not accidentally but purposefully as a result of its own generative being. And just as God's own creation defies utilitarian justification, and instead proceeds out of ontological excess, humankind's poetic action defies simple calculation of benefits. Of course, humankind's creativity finds its root in God, otherwise it only parodies God's generativity, since God's generativity follows from perfect enjoyment within the Trinitarian being. Humankind thus "uses" art, not to secure another purpose, but as an indirect form of worship. Augustine states that only the Trinity can be "enjoyed" as an end in itself, and all other things are "used" as lenses

In a world geared towards self-determination and mastery, the potency of this vulnerability to another, whether person or work of art, cannot be overstated. The power of art lies in its ability to check the tendency of the self towards domination. This capacity of film alone justifies an elevated place among human activities. However, the deferral of mastery only achieves so much. In addition to slowing the human impulse towards self-projection, the practice of this self-deferral leads to fuller relationality. By habitually opening oneself towards another, in the form of film/art, one prepares oneself for encounter with the other.⁵⁷ Simone Weil communicates this most clearly through her account relating school study and attention to God: “Although people seems to be unaware of it today, the development of the faculty of attention forms the real object and almost the sole interest of studies.”⁵⁸ Attention, as the complete devotion of the soul to a thought, accomplishes more than simple recollection of an idea. Instead, it prepares the soul itself for contemplation of all reality. Thus attention cultivates two primary orientations: first, an orientation of the soul towards the immediate subject of thought, and second, an orientation towards God as the ultimate recipient of such contemplation.

The result of such attention is again two-fold. First, the sheer difficulty of attending to an object with the single-mindedness required demands and generates humility.⁵⁹ Human beings relentlessly flee towards illusory worlds of their own making rather than contemplating the true reality of their existence. Weil writes, “Humility has as its object to eliminate that which is imaginary in spiritual progress. There is no harm in thinking ourselves far less advanced than we are...there is great harm in thinking ourselves more advanced, because then opinion has an effect.”⁶⁰ Attending to our place in the world, given this concern for reality rather than illusion, remains profoundly difficult. Second, the practice of attention spills over into all areas of human activity, including ethical engagement with another. Attention for Weil yields an almost supernatural

through which human beings better love God. Cf. Augustine, *On Christian Teaching* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 9–10.

- 57 However, engaging art does not necessarily imply a corresponding openness to another, in the same way that though film *can* be art, all film is not *necessarily* art. While the precise line between film-as-art and film-as-entertainment remains forever contentious, most would concede degrees of artistic intent and reception.
- 58 Simone Weil, “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God” in *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 57.
- 59 *Ibid.*, 59–60.
- 60 Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr (New York: Routledge, 2008), 53.

perception of the other, not in an acquisitive or grasping way, but in joining the self's vulnerability with the vulnerability of the other. The result of attention in this context is community—not the joining of power, but a mutual service borne from weakness. The humble attending to film, then, does not actively redeem. It remains human work, incomplete and partial even in highest expression. Yet it does prepare: the thoughtful and patient consideration of film can attune human beings to notes in the world otherwise unheard. In this sense, one can affirm with Scorsese that watching films is indeed a search for deeper meaning. As the other person with us embodies at least part of that meaning, film-going constitutes an ethical exercise.

7 Conclusion

Hugo occupies a strange place in Scorsese's filmography. At once it serves as a visible departure from the films that earned him his greatest acclaim. Yet despite this divergence, I have also argued that *Hugo* is the quintessential Scorsese film. It invokes several of Scorsese's central motifs: the fundamental alienation at the heart of human life, the power of the modern, technological city in effecting this alienation, and the positive and even redemptive power of film.

While Scorsese depicts the dehumanizing power of alienation with gritty commitment, he often refrains from the inverse: the healing power of community with others. This is precisely what *Hugo* highlights: while the technological city alienates, human community unites. Georges Méliès does not find redemption through the reinvigoration of his filmmaking career. Instead, he finds redemption through the integration of his life and his work. *Hugo*, for his part, finds redemption not through the technological brilliance of the automaton, but through integration in a family. Far from incidentals, these aspects of the narrative frame the larger contention that film itself does not redeem. Film trains one to see the world more fully, to detect the movements of the world which imbue it with meaning and lead one towards another.

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The Wolf of Wall Street and Economic Nihilism

D. Stephen Long

In his *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, French Economist Thomas Piketty states that income inequality is too important to be left to the economists.¹ He writes,

To be sure, it would be a mistake to underestimate the importance of the intuitive knowledge that everyone acquires about contemporary wealth and income levels, even in the absence of any theoretical framework or statistical analysis. Film and literature, nineteenth century novels especially, are full of detailed information about the relative wealth and living standards of different social groups, and especially about the deep structures of inequality, the way it is justified, and its impact on individual lives.²

Piketty turns to the elegant novels of Jane Austen and Honoré de Balzac for detailed information about nineteenth-century inequality. Scorsese turns to Jordan Belfort's inelegant *The Wolf of Wall Street* to show us something similar about inequality in the twenty-first century.

Neither Scorsese nor Belfort have the statistical and longitudinal analysis present in Piketty's monumental work, but Piketty's work on inequality helps us understand how Belfort's brokerage firm, and its nihilistic practices, are not only possible but all too predictable. Few people will wade through Piketty's massive tome with its charts, statistics, fundamental laws, and generalized predictions. Many might sit down to view Scorsese's film to be entertained and discover something similar to what Piketty has shown us. Simon Kuznets was wrong. Markets seldom self-regulate. Wealth is not an indicator of merit, and those willing to affirm a world where nothing matters but power may very well be the ones most likely to earn unfathomable income from capital built up at the expense of others.

1 This chapter is a revised version of "Will Power Set You Free?" in D. Stephen Long, *Truth-Telling in a post-Truth World* (Nashville: Foundery Books, 2019).

2 Piketty, Thomas, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: Belknap, 2014), 2.

Scorsese's work is neither moralistic nor heavy-handed. He simply shows the excess of economic nihilism without ethical commentary, but manifesting that excess is itself an ethical achievement that preoccupied Scorsese since at least *Mean Streets*. Reflecting on that movie some years after he wrote, "*Mean Streets* dealt with the American Dream, according to which everybody thinks they can get rich quick, and if they can't do it by legal means they'll do it by illegal ones. That disruption of values is no different today and I'm interested in making a couple more pictures on the same theme."³ *The Wolf of Wall Street* shows us the "disruption of values" that the American Dream can take. The opening scene in the film, taken directly from Belfort's memoirs (it would be a mistake to call them a confession; there is little remorse shown in this disturbing tale of greed and excess), captures well the utter nihilism to which Belfort's fabricated Stratton Oakmont firm had descended. To encourage his employees, Belfort and the upper administration decided to have a contest tossing "midgets" wrapped in Velcro toward a Velcro bullseye. For Belfort, these people are less than human. In his autobiography, he admits that he has some reservations about tossing midgets, but his reservations are not based on ethical considerations. It is that they are "pound for pound ... stronger than grizzly bears." Before he agrees to this dehumanizing act, only one of many that occurred daily at Stratton Oakmont including the regular degradation of women, he wants a "game warden who can rein in the little critter if he should go off the deep end."⁴ Even after his conviction for money laundering, Belfort's seems incapable of acknowledging the humanity of those he abused, swindled, or betrayed. He always had, and still seems to have, an economic rationale for his behavior. What is most disturbing about his economic nihilism is that no rational justification is necessary in the first place. One of his top administrators tells him that if there is negative press, they can justify the midget throwing event by telling the public that they are increasing job opportunities for the "less fortunate." But, says the administrator, they most likely will never need to justify it because "no one'll give a shit."

"No one'll give a shit." However inelegant, it explains the cultural context that made Belfort and his enterprises possible. To put it in philosophical terms, they traded on nihilism, the assumption that laudatory ideas such as truth or goodness or beauty had already devalued themselves and would have little to no bearing upon their actions. Nietzsche recognized and lamented that with nihilism the "beyond" would disappear in art. He wrote, "With profound sorrow one admits to oneself that, in their highest flights, the artists of all ages have

3 David Thompson and Ian Christie, eds., *Scorsese on Scorsese* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1989), 47.

4 Jordan Belfort, *The Wolf of Wall Street* (New York: Bantam Books, 2008), 67.

raised to heavenly transfiguration precisely those conceptions which we now recognize as false.” An art with a “metaphysical significance” will disappear, and all we can do is narrate how it “once existed.”⁵ Narrating what once was is the only source of consolation that remains, for Nietzsche at least brought to our attention what was being lost. Belfort’s memoir is as far from Augustine’s *Confessions* or Dante’s *Divine Comedy* as Walmart is to a baroque cathedral. To his credit, Scorsese captures this loss of theological and metaphysical significance in his film. *The Wolf of Wall Street* a movie marked by its lack of beauty, truth, or goodness. Unlike many of his other films in which a metaphysical or theological significance can be viewed and pondered, no such gaze is possible in the retelling of Belfort’s life. There is only vulgarity, manipulation, and vice. So what is the point in narrating it? It serves best to demonstrate, so I will argue, the incomplete nihilism Wall Street lets loose in late modernity.

The following essay places *The Wolf of Wall Street* in the context of Nietzsche’s parable of the madman who announces the death of God. Of course, viewing the film through the context of Nietzsche’s parable is a rather arbitrary pairing. I am not making the case for any direct relationship between Nietzsche and Belfort’s autobiography, Terence Winter’s screenplay, or Scorsese’s production. There is no direct causality. What makes for the comparison is, as Piketty noted, that film and literature offer a glimpse into the justification and impact on wealth inequality not always matched by statistical tables and economic theories. Nietzsche noted the negative impact the dominance of the marketplace was having in his day and gestured toward its consequences into the future. Belfort’s life, and the social and economic conditions that made it possible, gain a luminous clarity in the context of what Nietzsche saw coming into existence. The unintelligible becomes intelligible. Winter and Scorsese invite us to look upon Belfort’s life without theological or ethical commentary. God, as I shall argue below, is absent from this film. Yet it is the absence of God that makes the film theologically interesting because it depicts before our eyes what at least one life looks like when the horizon is wiped away and God is dead.

I hope to make my case for *The Wolf of Wall Street*’s theological interest through three movements. The first sets the film in conversation with the opening scene in Nietzsche’s parable. Like the film, it begins in the marketplace. The marketplace in which the film begins, the trading floor at Stratton Oakmont, exemplifies a basic premise in economics – value is created by creative destruction. *The Wolf of Wall Street* is a tale of “creative” destruction, or at least a tale of disrupting economic flows and reorienting them toward the

5 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, cited in *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs Von Balthasar*, eds. Edward T. Oakes, SJ and David Moss (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), vii.

brokers whose job it is to disrupt them. The term “creative destruction” is indebted to Nietzsche, so the first movement in the essay explores this connection. The second movement takes up different forms of nihilism, complete or incomplete, and argues that the similarity between *The Wolf of Wall Street* and Nietzsche’s parable is found in an incomplete nihilism by which those in the marketplace have not taken account of the metaphysical or theological significance of what they have done. It is incomplete because Belfort has replaced the artistic “beyond” with a calculative rationality of greed (*pleonexia*) formerly recognized as a vice. Such vice prevents him from seeing what was most obvious: the “cold breath of empty space” encircling him. Viewers see it all too clearly; for from the first scene we know where the film is headed. There is very little suspense, and yet the viewer cannot help but get caught up in a delight of destruction that keeps one’s attention focused on what Belfort and his friends cannot see – the destruction they wreak on others will inevitably turn upon themselves. They need a “madman” to point it out to them, to let them see what they cannot see. In one sense, Scorsese can be understood as such a madman showing us what the world looks like when the horizon has been wiped away. The final movement asks the question what this film accomplishes with its excess, hyper-pace, and exhausting debauchery. If it is a form of incomplete nihilism, should viewers come away from it seeking to complete nihilism? Perhaps that is preferable to the unacknowledged, incomplete nihilism greed generates. In the end, I will disagree with Nietzsche and Belfort’s vision of the world. Even in this film with its intense attention to the dominance of the will to power, at least one moment emerges that cannot be rendered intelligible by its dominance. It is that moment, I will suggest, in which God appears for a brief moment.

1 First Movement: Creative Destruction and Nihilism

Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly: “I seek God! I seek God!”—As many of those who did not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. Has he got lost? asked one. Did he lose his way like a child? asked another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? emigrated?—Thus they yelled and laughed.⁶

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, “*The Gay Science*,” in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), 95.

If I were to cinematically depict Nietzsche's opening vignette in "the Madman," two parallel scenes would suffice: first, the opening scene of *The Wolf of Wall Street* on the trading floor at Stratton Oakmont and second, Belfort's first day on the trading floor at L.R. Rothschild at the opening bell of the stock market. The two scenes are nearly identical. The pace is frenetic; the language is coarse; laughter, manipulation and pandemonium dominate. All that is missing is a madman who seeks God in such godless places. He would, of course, seem completely alien. Madmen seeking God belong in churches, not trading floors. Placing Nietzsche's madmen in either of these scenes provides a sense of how odd the beginning of Nietzsche's parable is. Why has he come to the market-place to seek God?

Among Scorsese's films, seeking God is more a theme of *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) or *Silence* (2016). It is a theme also present in some of his earliest films such as *Taxi Driver* with its theme of reconciliation (1976) or *Mean Streets* (1973), a film Scorsese explicitly associated with his quest for God. Scorsese states:

In *Mean Streets*, the main character Charlie tries to live a Christian life; he goes to church, does confession, listens to all the philosophy within the edifice of the church. But outside in the street, life is ruled by the gun. So how does one live a good Christian life in a world of this kind? All these themes have been churning inside me for years, and have finally reached a special combination in *The Last Temptation of Christ*.⁷

Scorsese is no stranger to seeking God. As he stated, "My whole life has been movies and religion; that's all, nothing else."⁸ One would be hard pressed, however, to find God in *The Wolf of Wall Street*; religion and the quest for God are remote if not absent topics. There is no juxtaposition between the church and the mean streets. There is no madman crying out for God. Rather than seeking God, it depicts a soulless, animalistic, secular will to power that reduces life to money.

The term "God" is not absent in the film. It broke records in its use of vulgar language, and most invocations of God are for the purpose of cursing. There are a few parodies on prayer. When he first sees his second wife, still married to his first, he prays, "God please help me. How can I fuck this girl?"⁹ On another

⁷ Thompson and Christie, xxv.

⁸ *A Conversation with Martin Scorsese on Faith and Film*, <https://fullerstudio.fuller.edu/conversation-martin-scorsese/> (Accessed June 29, 2017).

⁹ All quotations from the film come from Terence Winter's screenplay. It can be found at http://www.paramountguilds.com/pdf/the_wolf_of_wall_street_screenplay.pdf (Accessed October. 16, 2017).

occasion when he glimpses that his life is out of control because of his drug use he says, “They say God protects drunks and babies. I was praying the same held true for drug addicts.” Belfort hired a plane to retrieve him, his wife, and friends from a shipwreck, but it exploded, killing three people before it arrived. He interprets this as a “sign from God” that he needs to change his life. When the founder of Benihana’s is arrested for money laundering, opening an investigation that would also lead to similar charges against Belfort, he questions, “Why would God be so cruel as to choose a chain of fucking Hibachi restaurants to bring me down?” After his arrest, he “thanks God” that his wife is waiting for him outside the courtroom. These are the only five uses of the term “God” in the film other than curses, expletives, or expressions of delight – “omigod.” Yet – we know Scorsese associated “going to the cathedral and to the movie theatre at an early age,” and thus should not be too quick to view *The Wolf of Wall Street* as something other than a religious quest.¹⁰ It is precisely in the absence of God that this film makes God all the more present. Scorsese shows us something similar to what Nietzsche demonstrated in his parable of “the Madman” – the implications of a world absent from God. It is a world of incomplete nihilism made possible by creative destruction.

The economist Joseph Schumpeter is often heralded for his unique understanding of the production of economic value through the role played by the entrepreneur and creative destruction. The latter term was not unique to Schumpeter. It was mediated to him from Nietzsche by way of economist Werner Sombart.¹¹ The similarities between Schumpeter’s analysis of the working of markets and Nietzsche’s interpretation of Western culture are striking. For that reason, it comes as no surprise that Nietzsche has the madman announce the death of God in the marketplace. He arrives in the marketplace with his lantern early in the morning telling those assembled that he seeks God. They are enlightened business persons who know that there is no God so they laugh, asking if God is lost, hiding, afraid of showing himself to them, out on a voyage, or has emigrated. What is noteworthy about this opening scene is the utter lack of vexation on the part of the participants in the marketplace about God’s death. The madman is tormented by its possibility and what it will mean for future generations. The assembled participants in the marketplace are unperturbed; they find it amusing. God may be dead, but it has no implications for their activities. Everything continues without the slightest hindrance.

¹⁰ Thompson and Christie, 118.

¹¹ See Hugo Reinert and Erik S. Reinert, “Creative Destruction in Economics: Nietzsche, Sombart, Schumpeter,” in *Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900): Economy and Society* (New York: Springer, 2006), 55–85.

One might say that the death of God in Western culture occurred not because of any heroic deed or revolutionary struggle. Perhaps it is best understood as the work of accountants. Schumpeter thought capitalism was the most dynamic form of economic production available to us, but it was unsustainable because of its cultural effects. Capitalism does not keep to its limited economic sphere, but invades all aspects of life. Unlike Keynes, and like Marx, Schumpeter thought capitalism was contradictory. Its contradiction was not found in a class conflict between capitalists and the proletariat. It was found in its sociological consequences. He wrote,

Capitalist practice turns the unit of money into a tool of rational cost-profit calculations, of which the towering monument is double-entry bookkeeping. Without going into this, we will notice that, primarily a product of the evolution of economic rationality, the cost-profit calculus in turn reacts upon that rationality; by crystallizing and defining numerically, it powerfully propels the logic of enterprise. And thus defined and quantified for the economic sector, this type of logic or attitude or method then starts upon its conqueror's career subjugating – rationalizing – man's tools and philosophies, his medical practice, his picture of the cosmos, his outlook on life, everything in fact including his concepts of beauty and justice and his spiritual ambitions.¹²

The accountant is central in Schumpeter's analysis because he can place everything on a cost/benefit ledger. This subjugating logic invades domains it should not, such as education, when defined by outcome assessments and ROI (return on investment). It invades the family, when spouses and children are only defensible in terms of the benefits they bring. It invades religion. God becomes an investment from which one expects a return. Once the value of education, family, or religion are placed on the cost/benefit ledger they can no longer be what they once were. The "value" now given to them compromises what they were before. For Schumpeter, this capitalist logic is generative in economics, but destructive in cultural spheres outside of it. Capitalism contradicts itself because it destroys the very cultural values necessary for its longevity, devaluing them because of double-entry bookkeeping. The accountant's ledger subjugates everything to its instrumentalist rationality. God dies not from heroic acts, but the banal calculations of the accountants.

¹² Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 123–124.

It is hard to imagine that accountants are the source for nihilism, but Schumpeter identified them as the source for creative destruction, linking them to the term he inherited from Nietzsche. Because profits tend toward zero through circular flow, value is generated when the flow is disrupted through the ceaseless destruction of old forms of life. The flow fails to reach its course when an entrepreneur sees a new combination of the services of labor and nature and redirects them, destroying old and creating new combinations. What the entrepreneur interjects will eventually be followed by others, and in turn the circular flow will once again reach its course, diminishing profit to zero. Another entrepreneur comes along and interjects something new and the circular flow is disrupted again, only to reestablish itself. Profit arises through this incessant destruction of old combinations and creation of new ones. It does not arise because someone creates something, but because they redirect circular flows.

Jordan Belfort is an entrepreneur bent on creative destruction. Initially involved in selling meat, his first company went bankrupt. He took the skills learned in selling and translated them into his work as a broker. After his arrest and incarceration, he leverages those same skills to become a motivational speaker. He sells selling. In Scorsese's film, Belfort learns to leverage his skills at creative destruction from Mark Hanna, a senior broker with L.F. Rothschild. Hanna tells him that their primary concern is not with their clients, but with redirecting the flow of money from their clients into their own pockets. They accomplish that not by building something or creating something but by selling an illusion. No one knows, Hanna states, "not Warren Buffet or Jimmy Buffet" what a stock will do. Their task is to "pretend they do." They are selling confidence, a virtual reality, an illusion, and the point is to keep the illusion going until it cannot be sustained. Once the illusion is no longer sustained, the circular flow of money reaches zero; there is no profit to be made. Then, it must be replaced with another illusion. Belfort takes these lessons to heart and leverages his previous life to sell penny stocks at fifty percent commission.

Belfort's worldview is nothing but that of double-entry bookkeeping; it is the only thing that matters. It is not inconsequential that he is the child of accountants. Early on in the film he describes himself in these terms: "My name is Jordan Belfort.... I'm a former member of the middle class, raised by two accountants in a tiny apartment in Bayside, Queens." It is just a passing reference, but then everything is nothing but a passing reference in this film. It lets the viewer know that his world is the world of accounting. Belfort is not an accountant, but all his interactions embody the instrumental logic Schumpeter identified. His world is simple; it is about making sure the ledger always works in his favor and that means turning everything into a commodity that can be placed on one side or the other of that ledger.

He also tells us who he is by giving an account of his life. Notice the language used: "In addition to Naomi [his wife] and my two perfect kids, I own a mansion, private jet, six cars, three horses, two vacation homes, and a one-hundred and seventy-foot yacht." The hyper-pace of the film does not give one pause to contemplate what he just said. There is no one who counters him by interjecting an ethical question, "Wait, did you just use the same verb to describe your relationship with your wife and children that you use for your horses and homes?" There is no time for ethical or theological deliberation. The next scene, the next excess, arrives before one can take a breath. Nonetheless, the language he uses describes his cost/benefit rationality perfectly. His wife and children, like his cars, horses, homes, yachts, and jet are things to be owned. All of Belfort's life inhabits the marketplace.

2 Incomplete Nihilism and Greed

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. "Whither is God?" he cried; "I will tell you. We have killed him – you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying, as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space?¹³

The madman's quest for God ends in the marketplace. It is here, not on Good Friday in a worship service, that he announces Nietzsche's famous line, "God is dead and we have killed him." He indicts the persons in the marketplace with murdering God and is vexed by the fact that they do not recognize the significance of the deed. Nihilism describes that deed; it is when the highest values devalue themselves, when they no longer have any hold on us. They do no work. "God" in the marketplace is like that; the term makes no difference.

Schumpeter did not invoke the term "nihilism" to explain creative destruction. Nor did Sombart or Nietzsche coin the phrase. It was first used by F.H. Jacobi against J.G. Fichte who radicalized the notion of will in Kant to such an extreme that it became understood as "the essential element of infinite and

13 Nietzsche, *Science*, 95.

unrelenting self-assertion and negation.”¹⁴ Jacobi referred to this act of will as “nihilism.” It fits well the economics of creative destruction and the plot, or lack thereof, of *The Wolf of Wall Street* – unrelenting self-assertion and negation define Belfort’s life. Scorsese captures this nihilism well. Unlike his other films, *The Wolf of Wall Street* lacks narrative coherence. In an interview Scorsese stated, “There isn’t any plot, really.”¹⁵ The story line, inasmuch as there is one, is consistently interrupted by gratuitous sex, drugs, and dehumanizing activities. Most of it has no purpose other than the will to pleasure or power. There is only excess; unbridled greed consumes everything, including the proponents of unbridled greed. It is a depiction of life when the basest aspects of Wall Street are the social form of existence rendering everything else intelligible. It is about what happens when the highest values have already been devalued. Viewers, and we are all turned into voyeurs staring at its excess, know from the beginning it is headed to a very bad conclusion, but there really is no conclusion. It ends as it begins with Belfort telling us “sell me this pen.” We have gone full circle without making any significant progress.

Heidegger picked up the term nihilism and distinguished incomplete from complete or accomplished nihilism.¹⁶ Incomplete nihilism is when the highest values, such as God, truth, or beauty are replaced with some other “highest value” such as reason, history, culture, civilization, or humanity as an emancipatory subject. Complete or accomplished nihilism, on the other hand, is when “we meet the meaninglessness of the world in the wake of the diminished effective power of higher values not with denial and an overeagerness to revalue the world but with acceptance.”¹⁷ Furthermore, there are two forms of accomplished nihilism – passive or active. Passive complete nihilism ends in despair; it accepts the meaninglessness of the world through a resignation that says thus the world is and nothing new or different will arise. Active complete nihilism, which is Nietzsche’s position, is a transitional stage when one actively seeks the destruction of the higher values for the sake of “a whole new conception of value itself.”¹⁸ The higher values are not substituted with something

14 Michael Gillespie, *Nihilism before Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), xvii.

15 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nCbrN6svWRw>.

16 Martin Heidegger, “The Word of Nietzsche,” in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1977), 67.

17 See David Toole, *Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo: Theological Reflections on Nihilism, Tragedy, and Apocalypse* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998), 36.

18 *Ibid.*, 37. Toole follows and comments on Heidegger’s argument in “The Word of Nietzsche.”

else, instead we move beyond good and evil to a different conception of value altogether.

The traders in the marketplace, in both Nietzsche's parable and Scorsese's film, represent incomplete nihilism. The highest value, God, has been devalued, but such devaluation is not disruptive. God's assassins do not see what their own actions have accomplished. For this reason, the madman "pierces them" with his glance and asks them a series of questions. First, he wants to know how it was that they of all people killed God. Killing God is nothing short of drinking up the sea, wiping away the horizon, and unchaining the earth from the sun. To accomplish such acts, one would have to be a god. These are phenomenal acts of will, but the traders in the marketplace have met them with indifference. They laugh and carry on business as usual, throwing midgets at targets knowing that "no one'll give a shit," but failing to ask why, what has changed that we can throw midgets and no one cares? There is no vertigo, no sense that they have lost all direction and that the coldness of an "infinite nothing" is pressing down on them.

Nihilism is incomplete when the highest values devalue themselves and no one is paying attention to its significance. The marketplace is the best site for incomplete nihilism because its hyper-paced, frenetic activity delays the attention necessary to see what has taken place. For the *Wolf of Wall Street*, calculative rationality now substitutes for the previously higher values. It leads to a self-absorbing greed. Belfort explains the trading floor at Stratton Oakmont this way: "It was a madhouse, a greed-fest, with equal parts cocaine, testosterone, and body fluids." The spread sheet has become the divine oracle. Belfort periodically emerges from his office to a waiting crowd and reads from it. "I'd like to read you something. Month end, March 1991. \$28.7 million in gross commissions – all in Stratton issues. Not bad for penny stocks boys, not bad for dumpin' penny stocks." Having heard this word, they respond with their "weekly act of debauchery," which is usually something dehumanizing.

Alasdair MacIntyre correlates the modern obsession with economic growth with the ancient vice of *pleonexia* or greed. He thinks we have distorted *pleonexia* by defining it to taking more than one deserves. This distorted interpretation overlooks the depth of depravity *pleonexia* entails. It is a disposition to acquisitiveness in which "continuous and limitless economic growth is a fundamental good."¹⁹ *Pleonexia* is the inability to be satisfied; it demands more and more until it consumes the demanding subject itself. It is a constant state of discontentment requiring new acquisitions, whether spouses, jobs,

19 Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 111–112.

properties, experiences, or money. It has no end, either in the sense of “cessation” or “goal.”²⁰

Thomas Aquinas takes up Aristotle’s *pleonexia* and interprets it as the “capital vice” to which he gives the name *avaritia* (avarice). It is a “capital” vice because it is ordered to a false happiness that cannot be satisfied and thus gives rise to many other vices. It is “capital” because it is an “origin” for these other vices, generating them in an ever-increasing multiplicity in pursuit of false and elusive happiness. Like all vice, it trades on a genuine good: the happiness all people desire. There are “three conditions” according to Aristotle for true happiness. It must (1) “be a perfect good” and (2) “sufficient of itself” and (3) “accompanied by pleasure.”²¹ It is an “excellence” that is desired, but there are conditions in which each of these go wrong, and the result are “capital” vices. Pride is the capital vice that falsely views the glory of the self as the perfect good. Gluttony is the capital vice that takes “the sense of touch in food or sex” as the excellence to be pursued. *Avaritia* is the capital vice that finds the accumulation of temporal goods, “assured chiefly by money,” as the only object sufficient in itself. *Avaritia* generates other vices because its end is illusory.²² Money cannot be an end in itself; it is only a means to something else. When it becomes an end, then it desires the impossible – “continuous and limitless economic growth.”

The similarity between Thomas’s understanding of capital vices and the demands made on us by capitalism are striking. Although economists like John Maynard Keynes suggested that capitalism would create such an efficient system that the working week would be reduced to fifteen hours per week, the exact opposite occurred. Far from delivering us from the curse of labor, capitalist ideals have intensified labor over the past seventy years. The work week has become a longer, more intense, and all-consuming global reality.²³ Correlating dignity with work has only increased works’ insatiable demands, and as Jon Malesic reports, led to disastrous consequences for modern life. He writes, “Lots of Americans have bullshit jobs, ones that have little tangible effect on the world but are nevertheless all-consuming, demanding that workers attend meetings throughout the day and chat on Slack after hours.”²⁴ When economic productivity and continuous economic growth become ends in

20 See Oliver O’Donovan, *Entering into Rest: Ethics as Theology*. Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2017), 28–29.

21 Aquinas, *De Malo*, 13.3. <http://www.corpusthomicum.org/qdmo8.html#63244>.

22 Ibid.

23 See <http://www.businessinsider.com/tech-productivity-is-a-lie-2015-3>. Accessed 10/11/2017.

24 <https://newrepublic.com/article/141664/america-must-divorce-dignity-work>. Accessed 10/11/2017.

themselves, then they are capital vices. They require more and more of us until there is nothing remaining but the frenetic activity of productivity and growth. Jordan Belfort's life, and Scorsese's depiction of it, shows us the disastrous consequences. Belfort is *homo economicus*, nothing more. Scorsese is the madman piercing us with his gaze, making us look upon this reality. It is horrifying even while it is titillating, repulsive in its attractiveness. If there were no attractiveness to it, it would not work. Belfort tells us that the way he makes his brokers successful is by enticing them to be like him: "I need them to want to live like me." At the same time, the only way he can entice them to live like him is to make sure that his way of living is out of reach for them. If he is to elicit the desire for more from them, he must first acquire it himself and keep it out of their reach. *Pleonexia* knows no limits.

Nietzsche saw well the unremitting assertion of will present in commercial society. In his fascinating work, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, David Graeber traces the origins of debt from antiquity. He debunks two myths about debt. First, he contests the myth of barter, a myth present in Adam Smith and others that ancient people did not use money but had a barter economy. Money, according to this myth, becomes a rational instrument allowing for progress beyond primitive, barter societies. Graeber shows us that there is no evidence for this myth. Second is the myth of "primordial debt." In this myth, debt is the origin of society. There was always money, and it was used to create indebtedness, which in turn gave rise to obligations that then make society possible. Nietzsche drew on this myth, suggesting that "barbarian law codes" that allowed cutting off body parts for compensation were forms of debt. It was this sense of debt that forms the imagination behind primitive communities. All of life is conceived in terms of debt and repayment, and it literally consumes the human body. As Graeber notes, however, Nietzsche's "premise is insane" and not backed by any evidence. The myth of primordial debt also lacks evidence. Graeber suggests that Nietzsche knew this and used his analysis to show what the world would be like if the calculating rationality of bourgeois society truly were the basis for society.²⁵ Graeber suggests that society assumes cooperation, not calculation. Accountants can never generate human societal bonds by the means of their trade.

Graeber's analysis does not imply that politicians, business persons, citizens and others cannot imagine the world solely in terms of cost/benefit ratios. Indeed they can, but it requires an assertion of will that demands they overlook the cooperative bonds that make us human. When that happens, the world is understood primarily as an antagonistic marketplace where each person attempts to gain advantage over the other. Take for instance a well-known and

25 David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2014), 75–80.

widely discussed op-ed written by Gary Cohn, chief White House Economic Advisor, and H.R. McMaster, National Security Advisor, explaining Donald Trump's "America First" policy. They write, "The president embarked on his first foreign trip with a clear-eyed outlook that the world is not a 'global community' but an arena where nations, nongovernmental actors, and businesses engage and compete for advantage."²⁶ The conservative commentator David Brooks suggests that this ideology clarifies the difficulty of contemporary politics. Brooks states, "Far from being a band of brothers, their world is a vicious arena where staffers compete for advantage."²⁷ Brooks makes the case that this ever-present ideology gets human nature wrong; it assumes the normativity of selfishness and greed, rather than cooperation. Cohn and McMaster's description of "America First" bears a family resemblance to the trading floor at Stratton Oakmont. If it becomes our politics, then it will be all-encompassing because it knows no limits, no end, no cessation to human action.

3 Complete Nihilism or Beautiful Furniture

What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed; and whoever is born after us – for the sake of this deed he will belong to a higher history than all history hitherto.

Nietzsche's madman silences the incomplete nihilism of the participants in the marketplace. Their atheism has not transvalued anything. The "greatness of their deed" goes unrecognized, and the madman leaves recognizing that he has come too early. They do not realize that to complete nihilism they will need not merely to replace the higher values with something like calculative rationality, but to build something completely new, completely different. What would it mean for Belfort to complete his nihilism? Perhaps it would be to show us that the world is indeed as Cohn and McMaster's asserted, an agonistic battle for comparative advantage. Belfort could show it to us just as Sophocles showed us the tragedy of our world in *Oedipus Rex*. Sophocles presents a

26 Gary Cohn and H.R. McMaster, "America First Doesn't Mean America Alone," *Wall Street Journal*, May 30, 2017. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/america-first-doesnt-mean-america-alone-1496187426>.

27 David Brooks, "Donald Trump Poisons the World," https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/02/opinion/donald-trump-poisons-the-world.html?_r=0 (Accessed October 16, 2017).

tragedy in which everyone attempts to do what is just and yet Oedipus still kills his father, sleeps with his mother, and his own children are his brothers and sisters. Oedipus cannot look upon such a world; he does not have the strength to do so. But in showing us this tragic reality, Sophocles also gives us something more for we as spectators look upon it and rather than fleeing the theatre and gouging out our eyes, we are moved. We express how beautiful Sophocles has made this horrible tragedy, and that is what allows us to go on – “the artistic taming of the horrible.”

Could *The Wolf of Wall Street* be read as a completed nihilism? Does Belfort’s autobiography and Scorsese’s film make Belfort’s debauched life beautiful without blinking from its debauchery? For that is what it would entail if it were to function as an artistic taming. We would have to see it not as a comedy but a tragedy. We would desire to look away and weep rather than gaze upon it and laugh. The only redemption would be to show us the tragic character of existence and yet give us an artistic vision that while acknowledging that this is the way the world is and this is all that the world will ever be, we can find a way to say yes to it. But Belfort does not say yes to a tragic world. He does not even see that he is in a tragedy; his story is comedic, or better burlesque – a burlesque comedy, though, without redemption.

Perhaps the most sinister moment in the film is one of the final clips. Belfort has spent twenty-two months in federal prison and paid \$100,000,000 in fines. After his release, he discovers a new way of selling things by becoming a motivational speaker. Just as he leveraged his failed enterprise of selling meat into his successful Stratton Oakmont stock brokerage firm, now he is going to use those same skills to sell us another illusory product as a motivational speaker – his expertise on selling. He has seen nothing, learned nothing, and made nothing beautiful. His final words in the movie return him to an earlier episode when he first gathered his friends to teach them how to be stock brokers: “Sell me this pen.”

The day Belfort became a licensed broker for Rothschild was “Black Monday” – the day the stock market crashed. Rothschild was undone and Belfort was unemployed. He took a job selling penny stocks with “Investor Center” and realized that given the large margins in penny stocks (fifty percent versus one percent for blue chip stocks), the accountant’s ledger clearly favored even near-worthless penny stocks. He also realized that the same skills his boyhood friends developed to sell meat and weed would translate nicely into selling penny stocks.

Belfort gathers his friends together at a diner to invite them to join him in a new venture, to start their own brokerage firm selling penny stocks. He instructs his friends in the “art” of selling by taking out his pen and saying, “Sell me this pen.” Then, to sell them on the idea of selling, he says, “Every person

you are on the phone with, they want to get rich and they want to get rich quickly. They all want something for nothing.” Here is what makes possible the profits from garbage penny stocks: everyone is a profit maximizer. His friend, nicknamed Sea Otter, interrupts Belfort’s lesson stating, “There was this one time I was selling pot to this Amish dude He says that he only wants to make furniture.” After his comments, two powerful things happen – there is a brief moment of silence and shared expressions of confusion. These two things are telling because the hyper-pace of the film does not give many opportunities for either silence or confusion. Everyone is always talking, hustling, dealing, and even in the midst of this chaos, no one is ever confused as to what he or she is doing. It all makes sense. The world is completely intelligible. People are profit maximizers and recognizing this leverages one’s comparative advantage as a profit-maximizer.

Sea Otter has momentarily complexified this world; he once met an Amish fellow whose purpose in life was not profit maximization but the construction of beautiful furniture. The friends do not get what he is talking about. One says, “I don’t understand.” Belfort also questions him, “What are you talking about.” Sea Otter explains himself: “I’m not putting words in your mouth or nothing but you just said that everybody wants to get rich.” He is providing a counterfactual argument. There is at least one Amish dude who makes furniture to make furniture and not to get rich. He takes delight in the beauty of furniture. If this is true, then everyone is not a profit maximizer. The world would not appear as simple as Belfort suggests. Then Sea Otter provides another example, “Buddhists, too, they don’t give a shit about money.” Is it possible that there are people in the world who do what they do for something other than profit, who make furniture because it is beautiful?

Oliver O’Donovan argues that moral agency requires the necessity of an end. Without an end, there can be no practical activity and thus no practical reason. Like Sea Otter, O’Donovan uses making furniture to express his point. He writes, “A carpenter enjoys working with wood; but ‘working with’ wood involves designing and executing pieces of furniture; if one did not enjoy finishing a table, one would not enjoy working with wood. All acquired practices like those of crafts and professions depend on a clear idea of what counts as finishing a task. But there is no finishing without stopping.”²⁸ Practical action cannot come to an end if there is no completion, no rest.

Neither incomplete nor complete nihilism, and thus neither Belfort nor Nietzsche, can rest. There is no end, only a circulating return – “sell me this pen.” If *The Wolf of Wall Street* portrays the ceaseless “progress” required by capitalism, greed, and nihilism, then the only possible moment of redemption could have

28 O’Donovan, 29.

occurred when Sea Otter, tacitly proving O'Donovan correct, punctures that activity. Not everyone is ruled by what rules Belfort and his friends. Beauty has not been eclipsed. If we still see beauty, then the possibility of glimpsing God's glory remains because beauty, as Hans Urs von Balthasar suggests, is an attribute of God.²⁹ The fact that we can point to an end, an activity that finishes and brings delight to its maker suggests that there is still a "beyond." Here is a sign of creation that cannot be placed in the accountant's ledger, a work of art that is more than a commodity.

But there is neither time nor space for thoughtful deliberation in *The Wolf of Wall Street*. After the momentary confusion that results from Sea Otter's comment, Chester returns us to their simple world by saying, "Man I could sell weed to anybody, get a convent full of nuns fucking wasted." If nuns can be sold something like weed, no one is exempt from Belfort's maxim: everyone seeks his or her profit. What if there is no one to buy furniture because it is beautifully and wonderfully made? What if there is no one who still delights in furniture as furniture? What if everything is placed on the ledger and only understood in terms of its capacity for economic growth, for the unceasing lure for profit? What if Chester is correct and Sea Otter is wrong? Then there is no rest for there is no end, only constant activity. If this is correct, then the best we can do is announce the death of God. But in so doing we should at least look upon the world as we have made it and be confronted with saying yes to it. Scorsese's *Wolf of Wall Street* at its best shows us that world and how difficult it would be to say yes.³⁰

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The Global Afterlives of *Silence*

Darren J.N. Middleton and Mark W. Dennis

1 Introduction

Art sometimes generates more heat than light. When *The Last Temptation of Christ* first appeared in 1955, Christian clergy and laity alike attacked Nikos Kazantzakis's novel. Certain sections of the Greek Orthodox Church panned it, the Vatican placed it on its Index of Forbidden Texts, and evangelical Protestants quarreled with its allegedly blasphemous account of a human, struggling Messiah who succumbs to Satan's final snare—the temptation to happiness—while on Golgotha's cross. The sentiments surrounding this novel, at least in the first few years, were very strong. When Martin Scorsese decided in the 1980s to adapt *The Last Temptation of Christ*, some Christians expressed even stronger feelings. Like the novels upon which they are often based, films sometimes elicit fury, and this is because they dare to question—explicitly or implicitly—Christianity's traditional theological overlay.

On occasion, though, art generates more light than heat. Although he was nominated for, but did not win, the Nobel Prize in Literature, Shusaku Endo, a Japanese Roman Catholic novelist, secured other honors during his lifetime. Those awards include the Tanizaki Prize for Japanese Literature, which he won in 1966 for *Silence*, the story about Jesuit priests in 17th-century Japan that many Japanese and Western critics regard as his masterpiece. Scorsese turned to Endo's fiction after concluding work on *The Last Temptation of Christ* and, after several years struggling to secure funding, the director worked with Paramount Pictures and released his adaptation of Endo's novel in 2016. No protests followed. And the critics appeared appreciative, even celebratory, in Japan as well as the West. After recapping Endo's acclaimed novel, and Scorsese's long-standing interest in filming it, we move to discuss selected reactions to the film in Western and Japanese media. Such reviews are markers of the immediate afterlife of *Silence*. And focusing on the reception of *Silence* is our way of approaching the subject of Scorsese and religion, showing how his film has been variously read through the lens of Roman Catholicism, kenotic Christology, theological anthropology, nature-mysticism, cross-cultural missions, martyrdom, cultural alterity, and wrestling painfully with spiritual doubt. Questions

of faith surface in Scorsese's *Silence*, just as they did with *The Last Temptation of Christ*, but this time around several reviewers did not deride his adaptation; rather, they came to see Scorsese's *Silence* as an instructive portrayal of searingly honest and touchingly humane faith, marked by modern relevance as well as historical verisimilitude.

2 From Page to Screen

Shusaku Endo's *Silence* depicts the beleaguered Christian discipleship of Fr. Sebastian Rodrigues, a Portuguese Jesuit priest who travels to Japan in the mid-seventeenth century. He goes to the archipelago not only to minister to the *kakure kirishitan*, or "hidden Christians," who are forced to conceal their faith in an era of brutal persecution of that faith, but also to search for Fr. Christovao Ferreira, his mentor. Fr. Ferreira was a key figure in the early Jesuit mission in Japan, and the reader learns through his letters of the initial success of these efforts.¹ But those letters become more and more anguished. And then they abruptly stop. Word eventually reaches Lisbon that the Japanese military government had suddenly cracked down on the missionaries and that Fr. Ferreira may have apostatized while being tortured by the authorities. After the crackdown began, Christians were forced to renounce their faith by stepping or spitting upon an image of Christ that had been placed on the ground before them. This act and its object are both known as the *fumie* (the word is sometimes rendered *efumi*), "to step on an image." Those who refused were tortured or executed: some were hung upside down in an excrement-filled pit, eventually bleeding to death through tiny slits made on their temples and foreheads. Others were boiled alive in the water of the Mt. Unzen *jigoku*, or "the hell of Mt. Unzen," while some were crucified at sea.

Fr. Rodrigues and another priest eventually arrive on the archipelago with the help of a drunken, weak-willed Japanese man, Kichijiro, whom they meet in Macao. In Japan, Fr. Rodrigues witnesses the persecution of the hidden Christians and is angered by the silence of God in the face of their immense suffering. To buoy his spirits, Fr. Rodrigues often imagines a beautiful, blue-eyed face of Christ as he endures hardships in a land described as dark and foreboding, hostile and unforgiving. Japan's inhospitability comes not only from its harsh natural terrain but also from the people: the samurai, their devilish leader Inoue,

1 On the Jesuits in Japan and the Japanese Christians they served, see John Dougill, *In Search of Japan's Hidden Christians: A Story of Suppression, Secrecy, and Survival* (Boston: Tuttle Publishing, 2015).

and a group of unnamed Buddhist monks, who appear to Fr. Rodrigues as undifferentiated and lifeless, indistinct and flat characters who continually harass the missionaries.

After being betrayed by Kichijiro for 300 silver pieces, Fr. Rodrigues is taken to prison where he meets his teacher in a dramatic scene in which Fr. Ferreira explains that the rumors were true—he had apostatized. His act was motivated not by weakness or cowardice, however. It was, he tells his student, an act of compassion for the Japanese Christians who were being tortured. By waving his hand to signal his apostasy, they had been spared. His decision was, therefore, a selfless act of pure faith that, while condemned by the Roman Catholic Church, expressed the true or authentic teachings of Jesus. Although initially critical of his teacher's act, Fr. Rodrigues soon finds himself facing the same dilemma. And in his direct encounter with the suffering of the *kakure*, he looks to the still silent image of Christ placed by the authorities beneath his feet, and sees a dirty, stained image, not the blue-eyed face of Christ that he had imagined again and again in his mind's eye. At this moment in which imagination and material reality collide, in this mediated immediacy, Christ breaks the agonizing silence. Endo writes:

The priest raises his foot. In it he feels a dull, heavy pain. This is no mere formality. He will now trample on what he has considered the most beautiful thing in his life, on what he has believed most pure, on what is filled with the ideals and the dreams of man. How his foot aches! And then the Christ in bronze speaks to the priest: 'Trample! Trample! I more than anyone know of the pain in your foot. Trample! It was to be trampled on by men that I was born into this world. It was to share men's pain that I carried my cross.'

The priest placed his foot on the *fumie*. Dawn broke. And far in the distance the cock crew.²

Given this novel's religiously intense and existentially dramatic material, Scorsese was immediately drawn to it. Paul Elie dramatizes the moment:

A man was on a train in Japan, reading a novel set in Japan. The train slid past the mountains, bound for Kyoto, where the man, bearded, bright-eyed, was headed. The year was 1989. The train was a bullet train.

² Shusaku Endo, *Silence*, trans. William Johnston (New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, 1979), 171.

The man on the train was in a quandary, and the man in the novel he was reading was in a quandary; and as he read the novel, it emerged that his quandary and the one in the novel were essentially the same.

The man in the novel was Sebastian Rodrigues, a Portuguese Jesuit priest sent to Japan in the 17th century. He was there to minister to Japanese Catholics suffering under a brutal regime and also to find out what had happened to his mentor, a priest rumored to have renounced the faith under torture.

The man on the train was Martin Scorsese. He was in Japan to play the part of Vincent van Gogh in a movie by Akira Kurosawa, another master filmmaker. He was also there to move past a brutal battle in America's culture wars over a picture of his, "The Last Temptation of Christ."

The film had been pilloried by conservative Christians for a dream sequence in which Christ has sex with Mary Magdalene. In depicting Christ's life as a doubt-ridden struggle between his human and divine natures, Scorsese had intended to make a film that was at once an act of doubt and an act of faith. In the novel he was reading, the priest was shown profaning an image of Christ, and yet the act was an act of faith.

The train slid past the mountains. Scorsese turned the pages. This novel spoke to him. All at once he saw it as a picture he would like to make.³

Traveling the Tokaido Shinkansen line, Scorsese embraced *Silence* and then savored the chance to adapt it. But it would take him twenty-five years to film and then release his nearly three-hour historical period drama.⁴ Scorsese tried writing a script around 1990. One year later he partnered with Jay Cocks, his friend, and together they acquired the rights to adapt Endo's novel.⁵ Cocks and Scorsese decided to co-screenwrite. But they paused halfway through because, as Scorsese puts it, "I didn't know what I was doing."⁶ At the time, though, Scorsese knew that he owed other films to various studios, so he became sidetracked by different, albeit award-winning projects. When the time came to shoot *Silence* in 2014, several legal problems created their own torpor, and in

3 See: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/27/magazine/the-passion-of-martin-scorsese.html> (Accessed November 30, 2017).

4 See: <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-silence-martin-scorsese-profile-20161205-story.html> (Accessed November 30, 2017). Also see: <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/features/martin-scorsese-interview-death-drug-addict-silence-953300> (Accessed November 30, 2017).

5 See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T73RegzodsU> (Accessed November 30, 2017).

6 See: <https://www.americamagazine.org/arts-culture/2016/12/06/exclusive-martin-scorsese-discusses-his-faith-his-struggles-his-films-and> (Accessed November 30, 2017).

early 2015, a Taiwanese construction worker was killed after a set collapsed during pre-production in Taipei.⁷ Scorsese now likens the challenge of adapting Endo's *Silence* to a "pilgrimage" that required "a lot of sacrifices."⁸ Scorsese's frequently uneasy journey eventually took him to Rome. In late November 2016, he screened his *Silence* before 300 Jesuit priests and brothers gathered at the Pontifical Oriental Institute, and many of them "praised the film's sensitivity," according to Zac Davis.⁹

Although it is hard for us to imagine Scorsese screening *The Last Temptation of Christ* at the Vatican in 1988, and perhaps this teaches us the difference that over a quarter-century makes, *Silence* and *The Last Temptation of Christ* are united, for the most part, by the way they calibrate the issue of faith and doubt. A struggle to believe links both films. And yet, Scorsese thinks the way he rendered Jesus's troubled spirit stands in contrast to how and why he filmed Fr. Rodrigues's edgy interiority:

When you talk about why did it take me so long to be able to attempt to put it on the screen, that's the issue: the inside out. It wasn't the obvious story. It really was deeper, as I was saying yesterday to somebody. They'd asked again about 'Last Temptation.' They said, "Do you think this was a direct offshoot?" I said, "Well, no. 'Last Temptation' was where I was at that time in my own search, and that left off on one track, and this took up another track. This went deeper." But I realized after that film, for myself, that I had to go deeper, and it wasn't going to be easy. I don't say I have gone deeper. I'm just saying that I had to try.¹⁰

Most things he tried succeeded, critics agree. And the burden of the following section, which sees us investigate selected North American and British film reviews, involves noting and then appraising those moments where it seems Scorsese goes for Christian theological depth in his adaptation of Endo's classic story. We then probe and evaluate reviews from Japanese media in the section following.

7 See: <http://www.rollingstone.com/movies/news/one-dead-two-injured-after-set-collapse-on-martin-scorseses-film-silence-20150131> (Accessed November 30, 2017).

8 See: <https://www.americamagazine.org/arts-culture/2016/12/06/exclusive-martin-scorsese-discusses-his-faith-his-struggles-his-films-and> (Accessed November 30, 2017).

9 See: <https://www.americamagazine.org/content/dispatches/scorsese-rome> (Accessed November 30, 2017).

10 See: <https://www.americamagazine.org/arts-culture/2016/12/06/exclusive-martin-scorsese-discusses-his-faith-his-struggles-his-films-and> (Accessed November 30, 2017).

3 North American and British Reviews

Scorsese has had a long apprenticeship to Christian themes, especially his Catholic and even sacramental imagination; he is deeply invested in showing how the sacred commingles with the everyday. *Silence* fulfills this apprenticeship, numerous English-speaking critics declare, and this section uses their words to show how this is so. We briefly attend to three themes: faith as troubled commitment, human nature as divided interiorly, and the self-emptying or kenotic Christ. Only space precludes exploring such themes fully.

Scorsese's *Silence* underlines the notion of faith as troubled commitment in an ambiguous world. We witness this struggling spirituality throughout the film, certainly in Fr. Rodrigues (Andrew Garfield), who seems frustrated by places and people who dispute the doctrines he internalized in Lisbon. Fr. Rodrigues's letters to his Portuguese Jesuit superiors, which chronicle his anguished theodicy, are frank appeals for religious meaning as he wonders how to model Christian presence in a hostile, non-Christian land. The relentlessly duplicitous former Christian Kichijiro (Yosuke Kubozuka) tests the limits of Fr. Rodrigues's pastoral sensitivities by publically and repeatedly recanting his faith and then returning to Fr. Rodrigues for confession and absolution. Moments before men linked with the disconcertingly composed Inoue (Issey Ogata) capture him, Fr. Rodrigues sees visions of Christ in himself, although this sight does not console him. Later debates with Inoue's interpreter (Tadanobu Asano), about Europe and Asia as well as Christianity and Buddhism, only serve to agitate Fr. Rodrigues's vocational identity.¹¹ Even Japan's ecology of place hints at Fr. Rodrigues's troubled faith. Reduced visibility, brought on by sea fog or low-lying clouds, together with the damp, close air, haunts Fr. Rodrigues, evoking an unnerving mix of loneliness and disquiet. Furthermore, the ubiquity of mud in Scorsese's film appears to be the director's tropological nod to Endo's own struggle to see how the seeds of faith grow in Japan's "mudswamp."¹²

It is Fr. Rodrigues's climactic encounter with Fr. Ferreira (Liam Neeson), and the act of trampling a bronze replica of Jesus underfoot, that engages Fr. Rodrigues in serious questioning of God. Why is faith so hard? Why is God silent? What would Jesus do? Such questions evade easy answers, if they come at all, and several reviewers uphold Scorsese's subtle, unsettling depiction of discipleship's messiness. "The tendency for any religious person is to seek definitive

11 See: <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/when-god-silent> (Accessed November 30, 2017).

12 Endo, 146–153. Also see William Johnston, "Translator's Preface," in Endo, vii–xviii.

answers for the greatest, most troubling existential questions, and I was confronted [in *Silence*] with the suffering that can happen on the path to faith, and the doubt that has to be part of that," Alissa Wilkinson notes.¹³ Emma Green applauds such ambiguity. Unlike 2014's *God's Not Dead* and 2016's *Risen*, *Silence* "treats faith not as a simple point to be made, but as a heart-wrenching puzzle." Green concludes:

This is the power of *Silence*: It leaves no protagonists free of moral burden, and proposes no firm conclusions to the ambitious questions it takes on. Artistically, it's difficult to pull off—to architect a nuanced, respectful interrogation of moral, religious questions in a way that's compelling and accessible. But the truly counter-cultural coup is that Scorsese has legitimized these questions as fair game for sophisticated, mainstream art. God's silence is not just a matter for church halls and cathedrals, Scorsese has declared. Any moviegoer can grapple with the meaning of Jesus's blank stare.¹⁴

Whatever else *Silence* accomplishes, it lays bare Scorsese's suspicion of no-loose-ends answers to theological questions, Stephanie Zacharek maintains. "*Silence* makes no clear value judgment between belief and doubt. It's a movie in the shape of a question mark, which may be the truest sign of the cross."¹⁵

Talk of the cross leads us to Scorsese's model of Jesus as redeemer of sinful, wasting souls like Kichijiro, whose failed faith and strangely repentant heart illustrates a view of human nature as divided interiorly. "Christ did not die for the good and beautiful," Fr. Rodrigues informs us. "It is easy enough to die for the good and beautiful; the hard thing is to die for the miserable and corrupt."¹⁶ Often inebriated, the unreliable Kichijiro comes across as Fr. Rodrigues's own personal Judas—a cagey and deplorable wretch who saves his own skin by abandoning his faith, only to then scamper after Fr. Rodrigues, the film's *alter Christus*, begging his forgiveness. Kichijiro is weak when he wishes he could be strong. Yet Fr. Rodrigues resembles Kichijiro by the close of *Silence*, since they share faith as troubled commitment, just as Jesus and Judas seem linked as

13 See: <https://www.vox.com/culture/2016/12/21/14005760/silence-review-spoilers-martin-scorsese-andrew-garfield-adam-driver> (Accessed November 30, 2017).

14 See: <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/12/martin-scorsese-silence-theology-art-jesuits/510827/> (Accessed November 30, 2017).

15 See: <http://time.com/4605641/silence-martin-scorsese-review/> (Accessed November 30, 2017).

16 Endo, 38.

co-redeemers in *The Last Temptation of Christ*.¹⁷ Intriguingly, Tom Shone spots a pattern in Scorsese's cinematic carpet:

“Christ did not die for the good and the beautiful, he died for the miserable and the corrupt,” says Rodrigues, stating an article of Jesuit faith that could encompass Scorsese's own collection of on-screen sinners: the petty mafiosi of *Mean Streets*, paying their penance on the streets; the biblical specter of Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver* offering man-made deliverance; the boxer Jake LaMotta in *Raging Bull*, soaking up punishment like a bloodied martyr.¹⁸

Since this theological anthropology is supposed to speak to our messiness, it need not scandalize. Consider, for a moment, that Kichijiro is the character in *Silence* with whom Endo most closely identified.¹⁹ Endo felt Kichijiro's self-doubt in his own heart, and he often said that he too would have apostatized to escape pain and suffering. “Catholic history books recorded only the brave, glorious martyrs, not the cowards who forsook the faith. They were twice damned: first by the silence of God at the time of torture and later by the silence of history. Endo vowed he would tell the story of the apostates—and through novels such as *Silence* and *The Samurai* he kept that vow,” Philip Yancey writes.²⁰ Scorsese closely identified with Endo, certainly with the Judas-like Kichijiro, and especially with life's other Kichijiros, the walking wounded:

You are put to the test: how much can you take before you crack? How could you judge another person for falling out of grace, when you haven't been put to the test? And even if you've been put to the test and you make it, in a true Christian sense, the Kichijiros have to be accepted too—they have to be ‘forgiven’ by the priests and the people around him. If you've ever had a family member or a loved one who's got an addiction of some kind ... They clean up and they go back on. What do you do with them? They come back, they've cleaned up for a while. Next thing you know,

17 See: <http://www.sfchronicle.com/movies/article/Scorsese-s-Silence-an-intense-meditation-10829088.php> (Accessed November 30, 2017).

18 See: <http://www.newsweek.com/martin-scorsese-masterful-silence-533101> (Accessed November 30, 2017).

19 Van C. Gessel, “*Silence* on Opposite Shores: Critical Reactions to the Novel in Japan and the West,” in Mark W. Dennis and Darren J.N. Middleton, eds., *Approaching Silence: New Perspectives on Shusaku Endo's Classic Novel* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 33.

20 Philip Yancey, *Soul Survivor: How Thirteen Unlikely Mentors Helped My Faith Survive the Church* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 276.

they rob the house. They're back on the stuff. Bail 'em out, you get 'em out again, they bring friends over to rob the house. Then what do you do?

It reminds me of when I was about 8 years old during the Cold War. The most frightening thing was the image of the POWs who had been brainwashed. Like, their souls were taken away. They came back and they were shunned by society. And was that the right thing to do to them? Where was the compassion? What about their suffering? This, for me, is something that is troubling, and I guess that's why the material has always been so important to me.²¹

While those who reviewed Scorsese's material also found it important, everyday cinemagoers chuckled, especially at Kichijiro's servile repetition of the process of falling from grace. Linnet Moss, however, finds theological significance in all things, including such misplaced humor:

What these audiences don't grasp is that they are laughing at themselves, for Kichijiro represents the human condition, the inability of anyone to be completely free from sin. For the community of Hidden Christians in Japan, whose choice was to step on the *fumie* regularly, or be tortured to death, Judas was a figure of special meaning. When every Christian is also an apostate, a betrayer of Christ, Judas' weakness, and Christ's direction to Judas ('Friend, do what you came to do,' MT 26:50) receives a different interpretation.²²

Perhaps watching Kichijiro on film, like reading him on the page, involves holding up a mirror to ourselves. Jeffrey Overstreet thinks so:

Some Christian moviegoers are already concerned about *Silence* too, saying it is too easy on those who 'turn Judas' against Christianity. It is more difficult—but perhaps more enlightening—to recognize, as Rodrigues does, that we should not be quick to judge a Judas-like traitor, but to see Kichijiro as an honest portrayal of our own fickle hearts. This can disillusion us of a pious Christianity that looks down its nose on those

21 See: <https://www.filmcomment.com/article/martin-scorsese-silence-interview/> (Accessed November 30, 2017).

22 Moss is a college professor with a blog, not a professional film critic, and her brief yet insightful commentary helped us theologize the nervous laughter we heard from the different audiences we saw the film with in the first few months of 2017. See: <https://linnetmoss.com/2017/01/12/shusaku-endos-silence-on-page-and-screen/> (Accessed November 30, 2017).

whose sufferings we don't understand. It can drive us to evangelize *by example*—by confessing to one another, by forgiving one another. Prone to wander, as we are. Prone to leave the God we love.²³

Endo and Scorsese emphasize Christ as the answer to all that is broken or wrong with the world, including humanity's inner conflict, and yet theirs is not a triumphalistic vision; rather, they uphold how redemption surfaces as the silencing of Fr. Rodrigues's ego via the model of the kenotic or self-emptying Christ. Like God, Christ appears to be absent, at least for the greater part of the film, leaving Fr. Rodrigues alone with his spiritual quandary. Should he safeguard his own faith's integrity and thus hasten his congregation's suffering or should he betray Christ publicly and thus save his people from persecution? Eventually, Christ breaks his silence. And he reminds Fr. Rodrigues, moments before he tramples on an ironic symbol of Christ's mediated immediacy, the *fumie*, that he first came into the world to serve others. He encounters Fr. Rodrigues in his betrayal and his parish in their weakness, entering into such suffering with them. Endo's Christ pours out his self, loves wastefully, and thus becomes the fellow-sufferer who understands. Speaking in soft tones and with loving admonition, this kenotic Christ works through Fr. Rodrigues's excruciating moment of Ignatian contemplation, indicating that "It is all right to trample."²⁴ Scorsese films Fr. Rodrigues's difficult apostasy in balletic or slow motion, helping us take in more of the moment's theological and existential depth. Christ breaks his silence. He speaks invitingly. And Fr. Rodrigues's own self is silenced, as he pours out his ego—his hopes and fears—and imitates Christ, allowing the anti-Christian authorities to trample on his integrity, so that he might redeem the Christians suffering in a nearby pit.²⁵ A shift in the narrative form in Endo's novel hints at this silencing of Fr. Rodrigues's ego, and Scorsese runs with this idea, giving us less and less of Fr. Rodrigues's voice as his film unfurls. Indeed the Dutch trader, not Fr. Rodrigues, finishes the story. Fr. Rodrigues's kenosis appears complete. In a scene that is in the film but not

23 See: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2017/january-web-only/truth-of-faithless-characters-in-film.html> (Accessed November 30, 2017).

24 Scorsese avoids William Johnston's harsh translation of this scene in Endo's novel. The tone of Endo's Japanese is much softer than Johnston implies. Also, readers must forgive us for playing the aural sleuth but, in the same scene in Scorsese's film, Christ's soft, inviting voice sounds rather like the voice of actor Ciarán Hinds, who appears at the outset of the film as a senior Jesuit priest in Portugal. If the voice of Christ indeed belongs to a voice of the Catholic Church, the Mystical Body of Christ, then another critic should probe the ecclesiological significance of this intriguing voiceover choice.

25 Van C. Gessel gifted us with this insight. See Gessel, 33–36.

in the novel, though, we see Fr. Rodrigues's widow, undetected by the anti-Christian authorities, lean into her husband's coffin and place a crucifix in his hands—Scorsese's way of gesturing to the weighty theological sentiments expressed in the novel's last few lines: "Even now I am the last priest in this land. But Our Lord was not silent. Even if he had been silent, my life until this day would have spoken of him."²⁶

"We did it [screened *Silence* at the Vatican, late November 2016] in what used to be an old chapel, Palazzo San Carlo," Scorsese tells Nick Pinkerton. "Above the screen was a beautiful life-sized crucifix—just the figure of Christ, no cross. We watched the whole film under the arms of Jesus. The day before we had shown it to Jesuits from all over the world, including a lot of Asian ones, and their reactions were pretty strong."²⁷ James Martin, S.J., *America's* editor at large and a consultant for Scorsese's film, and David Collins, S.J., a historian at Georgetown University (USA) and also a consultant on the film, were in the audience the day before the Vatican screening, so we reached out to them over e-mail in the summer of 2017. "If it is true that Scorsese's work may best be read theologically," we wondered, "then what type of theologian does Scorsese's adaptation of *Silence* show him to be?" Their responses were pretty strong, yet they remain appropriate to use here, as this section's concluding words, since they capture two of the many ways people respond to this gifted filmmaker. Although Collins thinks of Scorsese as theological rather than as a theologian, for example, Martin holds that *kenosis* is the key to the meaning of Scorsese's film. Collins writes:

The title 'theologian' suggests to me a certain kind of expertise and institutional position that I would be hesitant to impute to Mr. Scorsese and which I suspect he would himself shy away from. Mr. Scorsese is a person with a sophisticated feel for the fundamental human issues that religions so effectively grapple with and for the particular ways that Catholics and their church (prelates, theologians, and people) do so. He could not possibly have been attracted to or worked so effectively with a novel of the theological complexity of Endo's *Silence* except as a person of reflective, committed, and tested faith. He is by profession and vocation an artist. Wouldn't it be enough to say that he is an artist of deep and probing faith? In a similar way I might point to a painter like Georges Rouault, a composer like Oliver Messiaen, a writer like Flannery O'Connor ... I wouldn't

²⁶ Endo, 190.

²⁷ See: <https://www.filmcomment.com/article/martin-scorsese-silence-interview/> (Accessed November 30, 2017).

bother calling any of them a theologian, but all of them expressed through their proper metiers depth, sophistication, and familiarity with God and the human condition. 'Theological,' yes. 'Theologians,' no.²⁸

Still, Martin wonders:

There are a number of ways to distinguish Christian theologians, but I would suggest that Martin Scorsese's theology, at least in his film *Silence* is one that is distinctly 'Christological,' that is, always focused on the person of Jesus Christ. *Silence*, both the novel but especially the film, makes no sense without an understanding not only of the main character's relationship with Jesus, but also of Jesus himself.

In essence, the film is a love story between Rodrigues and Christ, with one side of that relationship not responding to the other, or rather responding only with silence. It is as if a pair were separated by a great distance, and one person wrote endless letters to the other and received no response. Rodrigues's love for Christ is shown in various ways cinematically: first, through the sheer physical effort expended by Rodrigues (and his fellow Jesuit Garupe) in following what they feel is Christ's mission for them (to find their friend Ferreira); second, the occasional but vivid images that the main character sees, in his mind's eye, of one of his favorite paintings of Christ; and third, his ardent confession that Christ 'fascinates' him. That is the fascination of one in love.

Rodrigues, as portrayed by Andrew Garfield, even looks like a traditional 'Christ figure' in Scorsese's film, with his long hair, gaunt face, and unkempt beard. And of course Rodrigues, as a Jesuit priest, patterns his entire life after that of Christ's, and is even criticized for doing so by Ferreira. The irony of this critique, lost on far too many reviewers of the film, was that in following Christ, Rodrigues is not exalting himself, but humbling himself. Ferreira questioning Rodrigues is like Pontius Pilate questioning Jesus. The one who seems in command of the facts actually knows little of the truth.

Most of all, it is that final image that reveals the Christological focus of the film. At the conclusion, the wife of Rodrigues slips into the dead man's hands his beloved crucifix. This brilliant final image, not found in the novel, signals to the viewer many things at once: Rodrigues's fidelity to Jesus; the wife's knowledge of that fidelity, and Jesus's fidelity to Rodrigues. There are indications in previous scenes of Rodrigues's

28 Personal e-mail to the authors, July 29, 2017.

continuing belief in Jesus, even after his public apostasy, the most important being his praying to him. (After all, why would he pray to someone in whom he didn't believe?)

In the end, it is just Rodrigues and Jesus, together, as they were at the beginning, have been, and will be forever.²⁹

4 Japanese Reviews

The January 21, 2017 release of *Silence* in Japan was highly anticipated not only because of the popularity of Scorsese's films in the country but also because of the high quality of the Japanese cast he had assembled to play key roles in the film. In October 2016, Scorsese traveled to Japan to receive the Praemium Imperiale, which is considered the country's highest cultural honor and which recognizes career achievements in film and other creative categories. The award was created by the Japanese royal family in 1989 in memory of Prince Takamatsu (1905–1987), the younger brother of Emperor Shōwa (1901–1989), who was an ardent supporter of the arts. The award has been given to other internationally acclaimed filmmakers, including Ingmar Bergman, Francis Ford Coppola, Federico Fellini, and Akira Kurosawa.

While in Japan to receive the award, Scorsese participated in several interviews about the film, including one with Ryunosuke Endo, the novelist's son. That interview began with Endo congratulating the director on winning the Praemium Imperiale. After expressing his gratitude for winning the award, Scorsese explained how Japan had greatly influenced his work, including his adaptation of *Silence*. Endo described how deeply his father admired the director, mentioning that the novelist was, because of his scholarly interests in French culture, frequently watching French, but rarely American, films. Endo recalled, "But in 1976, when I was twenty, one day [my father] came home and said, 'Today, I watched a really interesting American film. You too should watch *Taxi Driver* right away!'"³⁰ He added that his father quickly became a Scorsese fan, and so it was natural for him to want the director to adapt *Silence* for the silver screen.

Endo also asked Scorsese why, despite all the difficulties he experienced in bringing the film to fruition, he had not simply given up. The director replied that it was because the novel deals with the essentials of faith itself, adding

29 Personal e-mail to the authors, July 14, 2017.

30 See: <https://dot.asahi.com/aera/201611100251.html> (Accessed December 21, 2017). All translations here, and elsewhere, belong to Mark W. Dennis.

that it was also because he “wanted to depict a country that had a culturally distinct worldview, where the sense of daily life and faith was different.”³¹ He also described working on the film as a form of refuge wherein he became fully immersed in the worldview created by Endo, which made him ponder, in turn, what is most important in life. Scorsese added, “I would also like people to think about cultural difference and to notice how important it is to have feelings of respect for one another.”³² Endo remarked in conclusion:

You spoke at the beginning [of the interview] about good and evil; my father also spoke a lot about this topic. Amidst good is evil, just as within evil lurks that which is good. We cannot simply separate good from evil, and human life, he would say, is to grapple amidst this [condition]. Since listening to you is just like listening to my father, I’ve come to understand why he entrusted the making of the film to you.³³

Scorsese returned to Tokyo for the film’s release in Japan in mid-January 2017, appearing with the Japanese cast and giving several interviews. Soon after its release, a substantial number of reviews appeared in newspapers, magazines, and on movie web sites. These reviews were generally quite positive, often referring to Scorsese as a “master” director and the film as a great accomplishment. Kiichi Fujiwara offered one such review, describing *Silence* as “deep and beautiful,”³⁴ and arguing that it is the director’s most accomplished work since *The Age of Innocence*. He concludes, “It seems as if from the first [scene] to the last, the entire film was present in the director’s mind; no scene seemed to be out of place.”³⁵ And like Endo’s son, a number of critics appreciated how the director had persevered in making the film, taking the great effort he had made as a sign of his admiration for Endo and his work, with Satoshi Ogawa praising the director’s “tenacity” and “emotional attachment” to the novel.³⁶

Several reviews focused on Scorsese’s respect for and creative debt to famed Japanese filmmakers, such as Akira Kurosawa and Kenji Mizoguchi. A blogger writing under the name T.F. Sebastian observed how, for instance, a fog scene in *Silence* reflected a similar scene in Mizoguchi’s *Ugetsu*. He also observed how Scorsese had clearly been influenced by Kurosawa’s films, adding that the

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 See: <https://mainichi.jp/articles/20170116/org/oom/010/999000c?ck=1> (Accessed December 21, 2017).

35 Ibid.

36 See: <https://style.nikkei.com/article/DGXMZO11783670X10C17A1000000?channel=DF280120166614&style=1> (Accessed December 21, 2017).

American director was especially careful to depict the scenery of Kurosawa's native Japan.³⁷ As an example, he noted how Scorsese had had native plants brought from Japan to the set in Taiwan to recreate the precise atmosphere of the Nagasaki area. And Ogawa compared Scorsese's *Silence* to Kurosawa's work, observing, "After seeing the completed film, it was easy to mistake it for a Kurosawa film from years ago."³⁸

Indeed, in an interview with Taiji Okamoto, Scorsese mentioned how he had been introduced to Japanese culture through his interest in Mizoguchi's and Kurosawa's films. Even so, he felt that he needed to engage in an extended study of the country's rich culture to successfully adapt Endo's novel. These efforts were reflected in, for instance, the film's musical score, which relied mainly on the sounds of nature. Scorsese told Okamoto:

I thought about the musical score for a number of years. At first I considered trying out the tones of the *shamisen* and the *biwa*. But if I had gone in that direction, then it would have been nothing more than the "interpretation of a Westerner who had been influenced by Japanese film." So I decided to abandon that plan after hearing from experts that one would not have heard the sounds of a *shamisen* in the poor villages of Nagasaki. Finally, I decided to use the sounds of the mountains and birds as well as the sounds of footsteps at the jail.

The Japanese attitude toward nature is unlike that of Westerners who are infatuated with splendid music. [The Japanese] have the sense that "We were born amidst nature, and we will return to it. We are part of nature." I was very much moved by this [attitude]. I was also fascinated by the Japanese view of life and death that feels the pathos of the falling cherry blossoms.³⁹

Scorsese also admitted to Okamoto:

If I had made [the film] when I was younger, it would have been a different story. At first, I felt empathy for Fr. Rodrigues who travels to Japan imagining a 'glorious martyrdom.' Over time, however, my interest

37 See: <http://izu-biz.com/2016/12/22/post-1205/> (Accessed December 21, 2017).

38 See: <https://style.nikkei.com/article/DGXMZO11783670X10C17A1000000?channel=DF280120166614&style=1> (Accessed December 21, 2017).

39 See: <http://www.sankei.com/premium/news/170121/prm1701210020-11.html> (Accessed December 21, 2017).

shifted to the character of Kichijiro (Yosuke Kubozuka), who repeatedly betrays Rodrigues. But the servile and irritating Kichijiro is [in each of] us. In the film, he asks, 'Is there a place in which the weak can live?' If there are those who are strong, there must also be those who are weak. It's not necessary for everyone to be strong.⁴⁰

The performances of Kubozuka as Kichijiro and the rest of the Japanese cast were given high praise in many of the Japanese reviews but also by Scorsese himself. He stated, "All the actors were completely believable. But because a better performance would come about each time they acted, they developed the habit of saying on the set, 'This one was good wasn't it. Let's do one more.' Even though they were held back by their difficulty in communicating in English, they gave splendid performances."⁴¹ The director also recalled the excellent performance of Shinya Tsukamoto who played the role of Mokichi, a hidden Christian who was crucified at sea with Ichizo (Yoshi Oida). "As he was saying his lines he was, in fact, being covered over by waves [that kept crashing in], making it dangerous to continue filming. Even so, he would say, 'Let's try it one more time!' But we got in a panic and wrapped up the shoot. Andrew [Garfield] and the rest of the American cast and crew were emboldened by his bravery."⁴² While these performances were praised by Scorsese and Japanese critics, Issey Ogata's performance as Inoue, the magistrate who convinces Fr. Rodrigues to apostatize, was singled out in several reviews as being particularly memorable, with some wondering if it might even garner an Oscar nod for best supporting actor (the film received only one Academy Award nomination for cinematography).

Shinobu Abe praised Scorsese's respect for Japanese culture and his Japanese cast from a different angle, writing:

In some foreign films in which Japanese [characters] appear, it isn't always the case that Japanese [actors] play these roles; rather, we see many scenes in which [non-Japanese] actors speak strange Japanese, giving us an uncomfortable feeling. In this film, those sorts of scenes are almost completely absent. While we could say this is trivial, those sorts of scenes can influence our appreciation of a film in unexpected ways. In this production, it was, just as the director had said, "We will try hard to make the

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

film as accurate as possible." I felt the director's respect for the original work and for Japan; this is a wonderful point.⁴³

Several reviewers discussed *Silence's* position as the third of Scorsese's directly religious films that include *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *Kundun*. Others addressed the director's own religiosity, taking up his unsettled relationship, not unlike Endo's own, with Catholicism. Perhaps the most extended inquiry into his views on Catholic teachings appeared in an interview with the Jesuit Fr. Antonio Spadaro, editor of *La Civiltà Cattolica*, which appeared in the *Mainichi Shimbun*.⁴⁴ In response to Fr. Spadaro's question about whether the director distinguished between his faith in God and the Catholic faith, Scorsese explained that he sought to investigate the many culturally-inflected paths to understanding God, while recognizing that his own path was that of a Catholic. And while he expressed his belief in Christ's resurrection and the substance of Catholic teachings, he claimed to be neither an expert in the church nor a theologian qualified to offer pronouncements on the Trinity.

Having been asked to identify the character in *Silence* he found most interesting, the director pointed to Kichijiro, explaining, "Kichijiro is always weak and is someone who harms himself, his family, and many others. But it is Kichijiro who is with Fr. Rodrigues at the end. We come to understand that he becomes, in a sense, Fr. Rodrigues's teacher. Precisely because of that, Fr. Rodrigues thanks him in the final scene."⁴⁵ Believing that the novel was really about discovering the face of Christ, Fr. Spadaro asks Scorsese: "For you, what is the face of Christ? Is it the face in the *fumie* that Endo depicts, or is it the Christ of magnificence and glory?"⁴⁶ The director responded by explaining his decision to use El Greco's painting of Christ in the film instead of Piero della Francesca's because he imagines Christ's face as always being tranquil and joyful. Fr. Spadaro also asked Scorsese, "Even if God remains silent, do you feel him close by?"⁴⁷ The director responded, "When I was young, there was a holiness when I attended mass. In *Silence*, I try to convey that [sense] in the scene of the mass with the villagers in the Goto islands."⁴⁸ Scorsese also recalled to Fr. Spadaro that he had, during the decades from conceiving to completing the film, "lived amidst the story itself. Something was triggered inside causing

43 See: <http://trendy.nikkeibp.co.jp/atcl/column/15/1031828/01900076/?rt=nocnt> (Accessed December 21, 2017).

44 See: <https://mainichi.jp/articles/20170126/mog/oom/200/002000c> (Accessed December 21, 2017).

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

me to think deeply about faith. For me, it remains as a memory like it was a pilgrimage.”⁴⁹ In response to Fr. Spadaro’s question about the story’s physical and emotional violence, Scorsese stated that it is important to show violence in film because, while we can identify those who engage in violent acts, “we should never misunderstand that we ourselves could never do so. We cannot deny that we all have the potential to perpetuate violence; for me, violence is part of being human.”⁵⁰ But Scorsese also mentioned in these interviews the troubled history of Christian missions, telling reviewers, “The torture of the hidden Christians was certainly a form of violence, but the missionaries who came from the west also, in the same way, engaged in violence, didn’t they? The Christian teachings they brought with them to Japan believed, ‘This alone is universal truth.’”⁵¹ He added that in the film, Fr. Rodrigues brought this sort of arrogance with him to Japan but that it was slowly destroyed as he finally came to “experience benevolence and become a true Christian. In other words, instead of spreading the faith from the top, through an authoritarian approach, it was taught through a feminine guise; that is, Christianity with a feminine face. That was the best way for the Japanese to accept the teaching. And I think that that is what attracted the hidden Christians to the Christian teaching.”⁵²

One of the most enlightening reviews of the film came from an interview between Tomofumi Kimura and Muneya Kato, a Japanese writer who maintained a close teacher-student relationship with Shusaku Endo for some thirty years. Kato met Endo when the former was a student at Keio University, Endo’s alma mater, and when the novelist was serving as editor of *Mita Bungaku*, one of Japan’s most distinguished literary magazines. Kato, who would later serve for more than a decade as the magazine’s chief editor, wrote a biography of his teacher. In the interview, Kato mentions accompanying Endo to the United States in 1991 when the latter received an honorary doctorate from John Carroll University, a Jesuit institution, located in the suburbs of Cleveland, Ohio. It was during this trip that Endo and Scorsese met to discuss the director’s adapting the novel, although Kato did not attend the meeting. Kato recalled Endo’s telling him that he was delighted to learn that Scorsese had expressed interest in turning the novel into a film.

Having seen the film, Kato was effusive in his praise of the final product, telling Kimura:

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

51 See: <https://style.nikkei.com/article/DGXMZO11783670X10C17A1000000?channel=DF280120166614&style=1> (Accessed December 21, 2017).

52 Ibid.

More than anything else, I was moved by how deeply the director understood the novel. Although there has been a great deal of literary criticism on *Silence*, this film is superior to all of it. This is the first time that anyone has displayed this splendid level of accuracy in understanding the true meaning of *Silence* as a [literary] work. To be honest, I think that the film is incredibly powerful.⁵³

To follow up, the interviewer asked for specifics about why he felt so strongly that the director had understood “the true meaning of the work.”⁵⁴ Kato answered by discussing how Scorsese had skillfully depicted the story and dealt with two key regrets that Endo had expressed about *Silence* some twenty years after completing the novel.

The first regret concerned readers becoming confused over whether Fr. Rodrigues had actually abandoned his faith. Kato recalled how his teacher had imagined that because the apostasy scene was so intense, many readers may have come away with the impression that the priest had given up the faith. The final section however, composed in an ancient Japanese writing style, makes it clear that he had not. This latter reading was justified, Kato reasoned, since the priest was forced repeatedly to write in a book the Japanese word “*korobu*” (literally, “to fall down,” but a term that signified the act of apostasy), meaning that we should infer that the priest had not apostatized. Unfortunately, many readers did not understand this crucial event because of the opaque ancient Japanese style in which that material was written, or, as was the case with the interviewer himself, simply skipped over it, thereby significantly altering the meaning of the story. Kato added that Endo was also concerned with the inability of many Japanese to understand the significance of the phrase “the cock crew.” He told the interviewer that while Christians would immediately recognize this phrase’s association with Peter’s denial of Christ, many Japanese readers of *Silence* did not. Kato adds that despite this denial, Peter became pre-eminent among the disciples as he “went to Rome and built the first church. That is significant. In other words, while Rodrigues tramples upon the *fumie*, he is the same as Peter. Even though [the former] apostatizes, he is restored to life. And so it is not the case that he abandoned his faith.”⁵⁵

Kato identified his teacher’s second regret as having to do with the change of the novel’s original title, *The Scent of a Sunny Place*, to *Silence* because

53 See: <http://business.nikkeibp.co.jp/atcl/interview/15/238739/012700229/> (Accessed December 21, 2017).

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

Shinchōsha, the publisher, believed the original title would not promote sales. But Endo worried that the revised title could lead readers to erroneously surmise that God had, in fact, remained silent, even though Endo wrote the novel, “with the intention of showing that God did not remain silent.”⁵⁶ Kato praised Scorsese for dealing sensitively with these regrets of Endo, observing: “First, Rodrigues did not abandon his faith. Those who have seen the film will have no doubt about this issue. That became clear in the splendid final scene. Although that last scene does not appear in the novel, it cannot be called anything but splendid because it extracts Endo Shusaku’s authentic intentions.”⁵⁷ Kato identifies additional evidence that God had not, in fact, remained silent. For instance, not only does Fr. Rodrigues hear the words of Christ speaking to him from the *fumie*, the novel concludes with, “Even if he had been silent, my life until this day would have spoken of him.”⁵⁸ Kato adds, “Endo would say repeatedly it is not God’s existence but, rather, his activities; thus, rather than being concerned with God’s existence or non-existence, he focused on the ways in which God would appear through people’s lives. I think that this was brought out splendidly in the film.”⁵⁹ Endo was invested in probing how God may be sensed enigmatically, transcendent of human agency yet somehow toiling on the side of good by inspiring women and men to love wastefully. In Scorsese’s film, God’s mystery may best be seen during the devotions of the seaside martyrs, around Fr. Rodrigues’s spiritual agony as he hears and then broods over Christ’s voice in his prayer, and with the widow’s gesture of a small wooden crucifix at her husband’s Buddhist funeral.

Kato also expressed his disappointment with the decision of William Johnston to translate the *fumie* scene with an imperative, which masks the softer tone of the original Japanese. Van C. Gessel, who has translated several of Endo’s works and who served as a script consultant for the film, suggests a more accurate translation is, “It is all right to trample.” Kato mentioned in the interview that he was thus curious to see how Scorsese would render that pivotal scene. The former concludes, “It was magnificent. In the film I think it was, ‘It’s all right ... Step on me.’ It was changed [in the film] to this sort of gentle expression, meaning ‘It’s okay to step.’ Naturally, even though the director had read the English translation, he changed the expression in that scene; I admire his sensitivity.”⁶⁰ And Kato offered high praise for Gessel’s scholarly gifts, wondering if he had, perhaps, advised Scorsese to render the crucial *fumie*

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid.

scene in this way. For his final assessment of the film, he told the interviewer, “Director Scorsese has almost perfectly realized in film the intentions of Endo Shusaku.”

5 Conclusion

In our 2015 anthology *Approaching Silence*, several contributors examined the relationship between Endo’s original Japanese novel and its English translation as well as its adaptations for the stage and screen. In the collection, *Approaching* connotes our collective effort to help our readers draw closer to *Silence*, the novel’s single-word title that suggests a state or condition—that is, a lack of sound. The volume’s individual chapters reveal the multivalence of this term, including God’s *silence* in the face of human suffering but also, writes Van. C. Gessel, the *silencing* of the protagonist’s ego as he witnesses, and ponders his own role in causing, that suffering among Japan’s “hidden Christians.” And while that word choice was meant to suggest our movement toward a deeper engagement with the novel, we also understood *Approaching* to signify that which was drawing near to us, from a reverse angle, in relation to George Steiner’s arresting metaphor of the *pilot fish*. Steiner thinks the role of the literary critic is like the “pilot fish, those strange tiny creatures, which go out in front of the real thing, the great shark or the great whale, warning, saying to the people, ‘It’s coming.’”⁶¹ Our use of the word *approach* therefore invoked this metaphorical role of these fish that signal something quite substantial is coming this way—in this case, the fiftieth anniversary of the novel’s publication in Japanese but also the *arrival* of Scorsese’s adaptation of the novel for the silver screen. We further probed the meaning of *it* as a pronoun standing in for *the real thing*, concluding that Endo’s *Silence*, like any great literary work, opens out to the multiple readings advanced by our contributors.

We can apply this same sort of thinking to Scorsese’s magnificent film, which has *arrived* on both sides of the Pacific. As we now look back on its release through the lens of these English and Japanese-language reviews, we can say that Scorsese’s adaptation of Endo’s novel also opens out to multiple *readings*. The reviews we have cited above represent just a small portion of the “pilot fish” who have offered their opinions of the film as professional movie critics, theologians, bloggers, or Scorsese fans. Although some reviewers, especially English-language critics, have found fault with the film’s length

61 Cited in Darren J.N. Middleton, “Endo and Greene’s Literary Theology,” in *Approaching Silence: New Perspectives on Shusaku Endo’s Classic Novel*, eds. Mark W. Dennis and Darren J.N. Middleton (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 71–72.

and other elements, we concur with Kato Muneya's assessment that the film is "incredibly powerful," and imagine it will, like a fine Suntory whisky, age wonderfully, revealing its nuanced flavors as time works its ineffable magic.

After a meeting with Muneya Kato in Tokyo, Kittitian-British novelist, playwright, and essayist Caryl Phillips related to Endo's student, "to my mind Endo's great gift to his readers, Japanese or otherwise, is to dignify ambiguity."⁶² However critics *read* the film ten or twenty years hence, we view it right now as a masterwork that skillfully dignifies the ambiguity of faith as troubled commitment in a complex and violent world and, in so doing, raises profound questions about cultural alterity that resonate for us in the present day. We also see it as a masterpiece of filmmaking because of the spellbinding performances Scorsese elicits from Issey Ogata and the rest of the fine cast as well as the gorgeous cinematography, historical precision, and uncommon sound track. So too, Scorsese's masterful rendering of the *fumie* scene, shot in slow motion, reveals the excruciating pain of Fr. Rodrigues as he performs this most human and seemingly simple act. To step forward. As we see him tumble to the earth, we fully enter Endo's story through Scorsese's lens, bearing witness to the motive power of a deep faith.

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62 Caryl Phillips, *Color Me English: Migration and Belonging Before and After 9/11* (New York: The New Press, 2011), 213.

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