

Reviewing martin scorsese



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

More than just a filmmaker, Martin Scorsese is the self-appointed guardian of American cinema history. For him, the cinema of the present is always and necessarily influenced by the past. Scorsese commands immense critical respect; whether juggling big budgets and mainstream connections with large studios, delivering star vehicles and box-office successes, or indulging in more personal projects, Scorsese has retained his reputation as “the quintessential maverick auteur” (Andrew 21).

An independently minded cinephile, his relationship to popular cinema has been an extremely productive one. While best known for the savage but complex exploration of masculinity and violence in films such as the New York-based *Taxi Driver* (1976), the scorching biographical boxing picture *Raging Bull* (1980), the epic gangster narrative *Goodfellas* (1990), or the controversial *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), Scorsese’s output has been extremely varied. This paper reviews three of his films: *Taxi Driver*, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, and *Gangs of New York* (2002).

Religion is a consistent theme in Scorsese’s films: almost all of his major male characters voice a fascination with religion in some form. *Mean Streets*’ (1973) Charlie is obsessed with the idea of his own spiritual purpose. The archetypal selective devotee, his desire to do penance is at odds with his actions: “he acts like he’s doing it for the others, but it’s a matter of his own pride” (Scorsese 48). *Taxi Driver*’s Travis Bickle believes himself to be acting out God’s rage against the lowlife of New York city; *Cape Fear*’s (1991) Max Cady is likewise fixated; while *Raging Bull*’s Jake LaMotta punishes his body both in training and in the boxing ring in an attempt to atone for his sins.

These earlier films seem to be leading towards Last Temptation of Christ's explicit wrestling with Christianity. Attracting intense reactions from some religious groups, the film, based on Nikos Kazantzakis' novel, presents a non-biblical Jesus beset by doubts and fears about his identity and mission, constantly, oppressively tempted by evil. A human being much more than the incarnate Word of God, this Jesus is strongly tempted also sexually, and only by a superhuman effort of the will is he able to achieve a final victory. Scorsese argued that it was his intention to show Christ as a real man rather than as a faultless spiritual being.

Thus, Christ's (Willem Dafoe) inner emotional struggle and the consistently female image of sin converge, if one is to accept Scorsese's interviews, in making the film as much a working through of his own identity as the story of Christ: "Jesus has to put up with everything we go through, all the doubts and fears and anger...he has to deal with all this double, triple guilt on the cross. That's the way I directed it, and that's what I wanted, because my own religious feelings are the same." (Corliss 36)

It is clear that the major objection of the protesters to this film had to do with its long final sequence, in which Jesus comes down from the cross and walks into an earthly paradise, where he marries first Mary Magdalene and then, as a widower, Mary, the sister of Lazarus. By her and her sister Martha, he has a number of children.

The problem is that people who had not seen the film, or who had seen it but not very perceptibly, had no idea that these events happen in a fantasy sequence, a daydream-like temptation to the domestic life carefully formulated by Satan to discourage the crucified Jesus from living fully his

mission of salvation. Moreover, it is a temptation sequence represented by Scorsese as a fantasy, something evident in the film language of the sequence, and as a temptation-fantasy that Scorsese has Jesus overcome: he returns to the cross and dies victorious.

The Last Temptation of Christ can be interpreted in two distinct ways; either it posits Christ as a human being, or it raises Scorsese's vision of masculine identity to an omnipotent spiritual level. Notions of masculinity, a sense of community and the influence of religion on personal identity are all themes common to Scorsese films. In fact, the film suggests an attempt to universalize masculine experience by having these themes transported from the usual urban, late twentieth-century setting to biblical times.

Objections to the film's depiction of Jesus as sexual perhaps served to divert attention away from another more uncomfortable theme; that masculine identity is defined in terms of existential conflict and growing self-awareness, while women remain confined to earth, sexuality and Original Sin. Though Scorsese cannot be simply cast as a misogynist, his personal perspective and belief systems are unashamedly patriarchal, grounded in Catholicism. Women feature mainly on a symbolic level, serving as projections of male spiritual conflicts (even, it might be argued, in *The Age of Innocence*).

Whether novel, romance, myth, epic, or film, narratives have relied on the presence of the "hero" as a sign of the human's search of an ideal. Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* portrays a character, Travis Bickle, who is alternately an inversion, a corruption, and a variation of the idea of the hero. The film constructs a "literary city", an archetypal topos in a story of the mass and

the individual, where the “ mass” creates “ a peculiar kind of anti-community within the dissociatedculture” (Pike 100).

A chain of ironies defines Bickle placed into this setting and defines a new universal truth: anonymity and isolation amid a dense population, an instantaneous repugnance with and attraction for the magnified extravagance and corruption of the city, an estrangement from others which grows with increasing closeness, and an anti-social behavior and a pathologicalpsychologyabsurdly born of the quest for ideals.

In Taxi Driver, Bickle sees metropolitan social order as a material hell in a period of a dying God (or already dead God). He places himself in an adversarial connection with the world in general, and he pursues the ideals of self-realization and spiritual reconciliation in ironically repulsive actions. In addition, Bickle maintains a wicked sense for the sacred, and this distorted piety or holiness is manifest in his discourse suggestive of the confession genre, in his wrath for an immoral society, and in his sympathy for the oppressed and browbeaten (archetypically rendered in the form of a prostitute). Bickle recognizes his status as God’s lonely man. He writes in his confessional mode: “ Loneliness has followed me all my life. The life of loneliness pursues me wherever I go: in bars, cars, coffee shops, theaters, stores, sidewalks. There is no escape. I am God's lonely man.”

The opening montage of Scorsese’s Taxi Driver launches a series of optical themes, and the images of eyes, mirrors, and glass symbolize Bickle’s perception of this spiritually bankrupt and spiritually bereftenvironment. The director manages his editing and camera angles to highlight the protagonist seeing the world through mirrors or glass, particularly the rear-view mirror

and the windshield of the taxi, through which all important characters enter: Sport and Iris in a brief glance in his mirror; Palantine in his rear-view mirror; and Betsy through the sheets of an all-glass office. In general, the film mirrors French Existentialist the influence, and the setting, lighting, and mise-en-scene - especially in the darkness of the film - owe a debt to film noir, contributing to the understanding of the struggle of the protagonist.

Overall, Bickle represents something more than alienation and social disenfranchisement, since God's lonely man suffers in metaphysical misery because of the materialization of a world where the True, the Good, and the Beautiful have lost their meaning. In effect, Bickle is a prophet attacking Babylon, but without any assurance of liberation; he is also Theseus in the maze of the city but with no Olympus and no Ariadne. In this state of spiritual bleakness and spiritual poverty, Bickle retains an intuitive longing for the ideal " but no longer possesses the capacity for identifying, exemplifying or realizing it" (Swensen 267).

While isolation and crises of identity are key themes that permeate many of Scorsese's films, they necessarily include explorations of community, or brotherhood against which the isolation, or level of identification for an individual can be measured. This is one of the major themes of one his most recent films, Gangs of New York.

Obviously, the director's explorations of community and brotherhood stem partly from his commentary on his personal experiences, his sense of his home community and of the people he has known. In most cases this sense of docu-realism extends only so far as setting. This film is concerned not only

with political, social, and economic conflicts, but also spiritual conflict. In one of his interviews about Gangs of New York, Scorsese states:

[During the Civil War] the North and South were fighting for causes. The nativists [whose slogan was “ America for Americans”] and the Irish were fighting for the right to live and the right to live together, but they were dying for it, too. If people believe in something strongly enough they're going to die for it, and that's a major problem in the world today. In the film - as in today's world - religion is used in a militant way. (Scorsese 1)

This film is also a characteristic of violence in many of Scorsese's films: “ The 20th century was arguably the most violent in human history, but the most violent century in American history was the 19th. Poor people, political parties, and gangs would demonstrate, and there was violence constantly.” (Scorsese 2) Alongside the romance of the gangster and of male ritual that is so much in evidence in this film, Amsterdam Vallon and Bill “ the Butcher” Cutting can both be understood in terms of a journey towards salvation through self-knowledge.

The themes in Taxi Driver, The Last Temptations of Christ, and Gangs of New York are dominated by the search for self-awareness: “ the individual is trapped in solitude morale and can escape from it...if he or she comes to see their condition and then extend themselves to others and then to God” (Hess 20). Scorsese's preoccupations are evident in his work and in his many interviews. Shortly after the opening of his film The Last Temptation of Christ, Scorsese, commented, “ I made it as a prayer, an act of worship. I wanted to be a priest. My whole life has been movies and religion. That's it. Nothing else.” (Kelly 6)

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