

HUMANITIES 2900/PEACE & JUSTICE 5000
THE CATHOLIC CINEMA OF MARTIN SCORSESE
Spring 2006 / Dr. Paul Wright
4:00-5:15 on Tuesdays and Thursdays in Tolentine 416

I. Contact Information

My Office: SAC 271

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II. Course Description

“I’m a lapsed Catholic. But I *am* a Roman Catholic—there’s no way out of it. ... When I went to church as a kid, they would from time to time have these things they called a ‘Mission.’ Priests and nuns who had worked as missionaries in places all over the world would come and tell their stories. They would bring these giant crucifixes and stand right in front of the altar and talk—scary hellfire-and-brimstone stuff. What they were doing was really *theater*. It was a holdover from the medieval period, when the church would have miracle plays that told about the lives of the saints, and dramatized tales from the Bible. Eventually these plays got a little bawdy, and had to be done outside the Church. Everybody enjoyed watching Noah get drunk and his wife beat him with a broom instead of paying attention to the religious implications of the story. But for me the important thing has always been this notion of theater—and, by extension, film—stemming from something being done in front of the altar.”

—Martin Scorsese, qtd. in David Ehrenstein, *The Scorsese Picture*

We will explore Scorsese’s films in light of his agonistic relationship to his own Catholic identity. By his own admission a “lapsed Catholic,” Scorsese has devoted his cinema to philosophical and spiritual questions about the nature of American freedom and the pursuit of success mandated by late capitalism. The films we will be studying are *Goodfellas*; *Taxi Driver*; *Raging Bull*; *After Hours*; *Gangs of New York*; and *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Our method will be to combine discussions of Scorsese with readings drawn from across the disciplines, including: Fyodor Dostoevsky, C.S. Lewis, Graham Greene, Sigmund Freud, Hermann Hesse, Hannah Arendt, Thomas Merton, Herbert Asbury, Herbert Marcuse, and William Vollmann.

III. Course Objectives

- We will examine the translation of Catholic themes into the cinema of one of America’s foremost directors of the last thirty years, with attention paid to the elements of autobiography at work in Scorsese’s films, as well as to the broader cultural critique developed by the director. We will examine how, over the years, this critique has been informed by or has revisited specifically Catholic questions about the nature of sin, violence, community, faith, and God.
- We will also touch on the particular roles played by ethnic Roman Catholics in America from the nineteenth-century to the present, something key to the

- Scorsese corpus. By addressing the various identities adopted and adapted by Catholics in America, we will find our way to something more than mere sociological insights. More importantly, we will see how Catholics have responded to the particular ideological demands placed on them by America's evolving conventions of success—from Weber's Protestant ethic to contemporary consumer culture. We will not merely describe these developments as sociological phenomena, but we will interrogate them philosophically and even theologically, with a broader question in mind: What do we as Americans ultimately believe community to be? Do our communities have any spiritual content, or do they merely amount to the tactical cooperation of mutually predatory competitors?
- We will ask what it would mean to claim for Scorsese's work a spiritual integrity that nonetheless coexists with profound doubts about God and about the very possibility of human decency, let alone goodness. Scorsese's work will be viewed through the lens of other key texts from across the disciplines, and in this sense will be treated as "catholic" in the sense of touching on universal human questions. In this light, Scorsese's films will be appraised as media that have brought into American popular culture a shared vocabulary for talking about the nature of freedom in America and of responsibility in a criminal, absurd, and/or fallen world.

IV. Syllabus and Module Descriptions

The Perverse Ecclesia of *Goodfellas*

Text: Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*

Goodfellas is Scorsese's archetypal depiction of a "wiseguy's" seduction into a community of crime that is both subversion and celebration of capitalism's vision of the good life. *Goodfellas* was the *Godfather* without that film's Shakespearean dimensions of tragedy; instead, it brought the crime film to the level of the foot-soldiers who do the dirty work of an increasingly dysfunctional criminal bureaucracy. C.S. Lewis's *Screwtape Letters*, with its infernal civil servants and its sustained reflection on the dynamics of temptation, makes for a perfect companion-piece to *Goodfellas*; yet, Lewis relies on a theological discourse of sin that *Goodfellas* eschews, or at the very least sublimates. What Lewis and Scorsese share is the conviction that we instrumentalize one another into damnation, whatever institutions make claims on us. The question then becomes whether any institution is truly worthy of our allegiance, or whether we merely surrender to perverse substitutes for genuine community.

1/17 Introductions: *Scorsese on Scorsese (SOS)* (Foreword, Introduction, Ch. 1)

1/19 *SOS*, ch. 7—Screening of *Goodfellas*, Falvey Viewing Room Three, 7-9:30

Pertinent Comparisons: *Mean Streets*; *Casino*; *Who's That Knocking at My Door?*

1/24 Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*

1/26 Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*

God's Lonely Man: *Taxi Driver* and Scorsese's "Cinema of Loneliness"

Texts: Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*
Thomas Merton Reader (excerpts)

What Robert Kolker describes as Scorsese's "cinema of loneliness" finds its primal embodiment in *Taxi Driver*. DeNiro's Travis Bickle, who at one point in the film dubs himself "God's Lonely Man," is the viewer's proxy for a descent into isolation, desperation, and the moral vacuum they potentially create, particularly in a world alienated from its ideals and its pretenses alike. Not only is Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* clearly written in the same vein, but it was in fact Scorsese's original intention to adapt *Notes*, a project which eventually evolved into *Taxi Driver*. Scorsese, Dostoevsky, and Thomas Merton each squarely face our most tortured and destructive efforts to connect to a world grown increasingly cold and out-of-reach—all the more so for our desire to control that world and shape it in our own images.

- 1/31 *SOS*, ch. 3—Screening of *Taxi Driver*, Falvey Viewing Room Three, 7-9
Pertinent Comparisons: *King of Comedy*
- 2/2 Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*
- 2/7 Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*
- 2/9 *The Thomas Merton Reader* (excerpts)

Existentialism and Capitalism: The Evil of Banality in *After Hours*

Texts: Hesse, *Steppenwolf*
Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (excerpts)
Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (excerpts)

In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Hannah Arendt wrote compellingly of the "banality of evil" she saw on display in the trial of that infamous Nazi bureaucrat and Holocaust facilitator. In many senses, Scorsese's *After Hours* inverts and riffs on that formula as it depicts a callous yuppie's descent into the madness of an underground New York hiding in plain sight in the mid-1980's, a setting not unlike America's more recent boom times just prior to September 11. Scorsese's black comedy exists in an alternative funhouse reality in which Herbert Marcuse's "one-dimensional man" is brought to light and found wanting. Scorsese essentially asks whether the workaday American can at last be saved not merely from his own banality, but moreover from his resignation to the impoverished narcissism it engenders. Hesse's *Steppenwolf* offers a similarly warped journey into a consciousness deadened by routine and conformity to a bankrupt cultural order.

- 2/14 *SOS*, ch. 5—Screening of *After Hours*, Falvey Viewing Room Three, 7-8:45
Pertinent Comparisons: *Cape Fear*
- 2/16 Hesse, *Steppenwolf*
- 2/21 Hesse, *Steppenwolf*
- 2/23 Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (excerpts)
Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (excerpts)

“A City Is Defined by its Loves”: Scorsese’s Earthly City and the Catholic Denizens of *Gangs of New York*

Texts: Asbury, *Gangs of New York*

Augustine, *City of God* (excerpts)

Mumford, *The City in History* (excerpts)

Augustine suggests in *City of God* that any city, nation, or community “is defined by its loves.” Scorsese’s recent film *Gangs of New York* exemplifies this dictum in light of the bloody forging of the American secular state during the period leading up to the Civil War. Both the film and the historiography upon which it is based give us a glimpse of Old World Catholic identity as it collides with the American experiment in its most nightmarish aspects. More than simply a nineteenth-century *Goodfellas*, Scorsese’s under-appreciated *Gangs* asks what it means and has meant to be Catholic in America, as well as what it means for immigrants to join a community intent on distinguishing its newcomers from its natives (themselves newcomers not so long ago). While *Gangs* does echo many of Scorsese’s other meditations on the nature of violence and crime, it is also a departure in its attention to the historical dimensions of these themes and to the cultural importance of the city as the locus for the best and worst of which human societies are capable. We will also look at the film in light of Lewis Mumford’s account of the origins of human cities as religious and economic hubs that rely for their survival on the transmission of history and tradition.

2/28 SOS, ch. 11—Screening of *Gangs of New York*, Falvey Viewing Room Three, 6-9
Pertinent Comparisons: *The Age of Innocence*

3/2 Augustine, *City of God* (excerpts)

Mumford, *The City in History* (excerpts)

FRIDAY 3/3: SHORT ESSAY DUE BY EMAIL AND HARD COPY NO LATER THAN 5PM

3/7 & 3/9: NO CLASS—MID-TERM BREAK

3/14 Asbury, *Gangs of New York*

3/16 Asbury, *Gangs of New York*

The “Sweet Science”: Habitual Violence and the Outer Limits of Redemption in *Raging Bull*

Texts: Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*

Vollmann, “On the Aesthetics of Weapons” & “On the Morality of Weapons” (excerpts)

Scorsese’s avowed masterpiece illustrates the effects of a lifetime of habituated violence and the paranoia of a soul seemingly without means for suppression of that violence. DeNiro’s channeling of boxer Jake La Motta raises fundamental questions not only about our *potential* to self-destruct, but also about our apparent and overwhelming *desire* to do so. Our readings explore some compelling and competing explanations for

this urge, ranging from Freud's discussion of atheism and the death-instinct to theological arguments about our collective and individual alienation from a loving Creator. This module will ultimately address the possibilities (or impossibilities) of redemption, be it in psychological or spiritual terms.

3/21 SOS, ch. 4—Screening of *Raging Bull*, Falvey Viewing Room Three, 7-9
Pertinent Comparisons: *Bringing Out the Dead*

3/23 Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*

3/28 Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*

3/30 Vollmann, *Rising Up and Rising Down* (excerpts)

Man's Lonely God: Scorsese's Reluctant Messiah in *The Last Temptation of Christ*

Text: Greene, *The End of the Affair*

The Last Temptation of Christ, a film Scorsese has called his most personal film, harnesses the desperate energy of his loner cinema at its most ambitious and controversial. Not surprisingly perhaps, Scorsese's Jesus has been compared to *Taxi Driver's* Travis Bickle—each figure a desperate loner filled with anger, regret, self-doubts, and messianic impulses; each film leaving open the possibility that its protagonist has justified claims to be a savior of one sort or another. In some respects, if Travis is “God's Lonely Man,” Willem Dafoe's Jesus is (and must choose to be) “Man's Lonely God.” In terms of texts that might illuminate this incredibly provocative and thoughtful film, I have opted *not* to read Kazantzakis's original novel with the class, although it will of course be on reserve for those interested. I made this decision in part because of the novel's daunting length in an already loaded course, but more importantly, I think Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair* actually makes for a stronger and more subtle point of comparison. *Last Temptation* gives us a Christ who must come to grips with his humanity and the necessity of foregoing its everyday comforts in the service of something greater than his own contentment. Similarly, *End of the Affair* gives us Sarah, a woman wrestling with the existence of God and with what that might mean for her own life choices as she ponders breaking off a long-term affair she has pursued with Bendrix, someone equally tormented about his faith, who comes to jealously see God as the “other man” keeping him from his lover Sarah. Greene's novel takes seriously the gravitational pull of our desires, much as Scorsese's film does, and in both cases we are asked to reflect on whether our desires can ever truly be our own—and whether they *should* be.

4/6 SOS, ch. 6 and appendix—Screening of *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Falvey Viewing Room Three, 6-9

Pertinent Comparisons: *Kundun*

4/8 Greene, *The End of the Affair*

4/11 Greene, *The End of the Affair*

4/13 **NO CLASS—EASTER BREAK**

Scorsese's Film Education: Vocation and the Director

4/18 SOS, ch. 8—Screening of *A Century of Cinema: A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese through American Movies*, Falvey Viewing Room Three, 6-8

Pertinent Comparisons: *The Last Waltz*; *No Direction Home*; *The Blues*

4/20 *A Century of Cinema*, Falvey Viewing Room Three, 6-8

Oral Presentations and Final Projects

4/25 Oral Presentations

4/27 Oral Presentations

5/2 **NO CLASS—ATTEND FRIDAY CLASSES**

5/4 Oral Presentations

MONDAY 5/8: FINAL PROJECTS DUE BY EMAIL AND HARD COPY NO LATER THAN 5PM

V. Requirements and Grading Policies

Course requirements—*committed* attendance and participation in seminar discussion; a short essay early in the term; a 2-page reaction to a Scorsese film *not* on our syllabus; an oral presentation; and a research paper built on the foundation of the oral presentation.

Attendance & Participation (30%)

Short Essay (25%)

Oral Presentation (15%)

Final Research Project (30%)

VI. Explanation of Formal Requirements

It should come as no surprise that your writing will be a very significant component of the course, especially as a means of coming to grips with our topic. There will be a short 5-page essay early in the term whose purpose will be to make sense of Machiavelli on his own terms; this essay will be assigned just prior to our move towards Machiavelli's reception in the centuries since his death. The defining assignment of the term, however, will be the 10-15 page research project that will close out our course. This project will examine in scholarly depth some aspect of Machiavelli's reception, perhaps tackling something discussed in seminar, but just as easily the paper could explore some completely different dimension of Machiavelli's influence (perhaps his legacy in a genre, discipline, culture, or historical period we did not discuss in class). Students will construct their research projects in consultation with me, and they will be expected to work closely with me in drafting that project over the last half of the semester.

Additionally, students will be expected in the final week of class to deliver to the seminar an oral presentation on their research projects. The benefits of this exercise will be twofold: 1) to have students share their work with their colleagues who would otherwise be unlikely to appreciate it if the project were simply "turned in" at the end of the semester; and 2) to receive critical feedback and advice not only from me, but also from their peers. These goals are in essence consistent with my larger expectations for discussion in the class, where I anticipate that students will take responsibility for

creating a dynamic seminar whose purpose is to refine our collective thinking on a difficult topic.

VII. Plagiarism, Cheating, and Miscellaneous Nastiness

- **An academic integrity violation will result in failure for the course, without exception.**
- There is a profound difference between learning and copying from others, whether they are your classmates, internet entrepreneurs, or long-dead scholars. Learning involves hard work, even when following in others' footsteps. It includes giving credit where credit is due, and it goes a long way towards my earlier advice about acknowledging limitations. By acknowledging the sources of our ideas, we both put them in their proper context and intellectually raise the bar for ourselves. Cutting and pasting from the net, lifting from books, forging, having others take tests, etc.—these are all unnecessary, self-defeating, and subject to severe measures from me and any other self-respecting instructor. Lastly, you only do yourself a disservice when you disregard the conventions by which we recognize the hard work of others—cheating only shows that you do not belong in a community wherein we appreciate rather than exploit one another.
- Believe it or not, ethics is at heart pragmatic. You can accomplish much more through integrity, propriety, and the admission of intellectual indebtedness than you can cutting corners and kidnapping the expressions and ideas of others. In fact, I insist that cheating wastes more time than doing the work oneself.
- Having said all this, I understand that in many cases, especially with plagiarism, things get rather ambiguous. Many students stumble into plagiarism rather than will it; we can discuss how to avoid these more innocent (but no less harmful) errors. And of course, when in doubt, talk to me. I will gladly help out.

VIII. Additional Resources and Advice

In order for all of us to get the most possible out of our time together, the following resources will prove indispensable:

- The *Villanova Writing Center*, located in Dalton Room, Old Falvey 202 (Ph. 519-4604). Writing consultations are available by appointment or on a walk-in basis, but it is best to make appointments, particularly at peak times. Make an appointment now in anticipation of your term paper; if you wait too long, it's very possible that no appointments will be available come late November. Don't hesitate to go—no one's writing is too polished to benefit from a consultation, nor is anyone's writing too irredeemable. Naturally, you will also be consulting closely with me in the process of writing the paper.
- It is the policy of Villanova to make reasonable academic accommodations for qualified individuals with disabilities. If you are a person with a disability and wish to request accommodations to complete your course requirements, please make an appointment with me as soon as possible to discuss the request. If you would like further information or are uncertain whether you are eligible for such accommodations, contact the *Office of Learning Support Services* at 519-5636, or visit the office in Geraghty Hall. Note that disabilities can include learning impediments as well as physical limitations.

- Take advantage of my office hours. In terms of the readings and understanding our subject, it is invariably the case that an office visit clarifies misunderstandings that would otherwise go uncorrected. Let me know right away if anything is impeding you in dealing with the demands or reaping the rewards of the course. I will keep an open mind if you will likewise keep me up-to-date on matters of importance to you, stressful or otherwise. I am thrilled to hear your good news as well as any problems or complaints.
- Take note of your classmates at all levels of experience. You will likely learn as much from one another ultimately as from me. Don't let unhealthy forms of competitiveness or preconceptions about one another muddy the waters—consider and treat one another with the respect and toleration merited by colleagues.

IX. Texts and Other Resources

Note: While we do have texts to be purchased at the university bookstore, some of our readings this semester will be electronic reserves. These readings can be found by going to the “My Classroom” webpage for our course and following the link called “E-learning tools,” which will in turn take you to “Electronic Reserves.” Please look there for any readings marked with an asterisk such as this—*. *Be sure to print out the appropriate .pdf file, read it before class, and bring it with you to class—This is standard procedure for all electronic reserves this term.* Note there will also be a collection of optional texts on reserve that might prove useful in your writing this term.

Here are the required texts available for purchase at the university bookstore. Please acquire the edition listed here (make sure the ISBN matches, particularly if you choose to order texts online, etc.).

Course Texts

1. Thompson & Christie (eds.), *Scorsese on Scorsese: Revised Edition* (Faber & Faber, ISBN 0571220029)
2. Lewis, C.S., *The Screwtape Letters* (Harper San Francisco, ISBN 0060652934)
3. Dostoevsky, Fyodor, *Notes from Underground* (Vintage, ISBN 067973452X)
4. Hesse, Hermann, *Steppenwolf: A Novel* (Picador, ISBN 0312278675)
5. Asbury, Herbert, *The Gangs of New York: An Informal History of the Underworld* (Thunder's Mouth, ISBN 1560252758)
6. Freud, Sigmund, *Civilization & Its Discontents* (Norton, ISBN 0393301583)
7. Greene, Graham, *The End of the Affair* (Penguin, ISBN 0142437980)
8. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (excerpts to be provided via pdf online)
9. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (excerpts)
10. Augustine, *City of God* (excerpts)
11. Mumford, *The City in History* (excerpts)
12. Merton, Thomas, *The Thomas Merton Reader* (excerpts).
13. Vollmann, William, *Rising Up & Rising Down: Some Thoughts on Violence, Freedom, & Urgent Means* (excerpts)

Scorsese Films for Screening (asterisked titles are also available from Falvey)

1. *Goodfellas*

2. **Taxi Driver*
3. *After Hours*
4. *Gangs of New York*
5. **Raging Bull*
6. **The Last Temptation of Christ*

Reserves and Supplemental Readings (asterisked titles are available on reserve at Falvey)

1. Blake, Richard A., *Street Smart: The New York of Lumet, Allen, Scorsese, & Lee*
2. **Bliss, Michael, The Word Made Flesh: Catholicism and Conflict in the Films of Martin Scorsese*
3. **Ehrenstein, David, The Scorsese Picture: The Art & Life of Martin Scorsese*
4. **Friedman, Lawrence, The Cinema of Martin Scorsese*
5. Hayes, Kevin (ed.), *Martin Scorsese's Raging Bull (Cambridge Film Handbooks)*
6. **Kazantzakis, Nikos, The Last Temptation of Christ*
7. **Kolker, Robert Phillip, A Cinema of Loneliness: Penn, Stone, Kubrick, Scorsese, Spielberg, Altman*
8. **Lombardo, Patricia, Cities, Words, & Images: From Poe to Scorsese*
9. **Lourdeaux, Lee, Italian & Irish Filmmakers in America: Ford, Capra, Coppola, & Scorsese*
10. **Martin, Richard, Mean Streets & Raging Bulls*
11. **McDonnell, Thomas P. (ed.), Thomas Merton Reader*
12. Middleton, Darren, *Scandalizing Jesus: The Last Temptation of Christ Fifty Years On*
13. Miliora, Maria T., *The Scorsese Psyche on Screen: Roots of Themes & Characters in the Films*
14. Nicholls, Mark, *Scorsese's Men: Melancholia & the Mob*
15. Nyce, Ben, *Scorsese Up Close: A Study of the Films*
16. Riley, Robin, *Film, Faith, & Cultural Conflict: The Case of Martin Scorsese's The Last Temptation of Christ*
17. **Scorsese, Martin & Wilson, Michael, A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese through American Movies*
18. Usai, Paolo Cherchi, with foreword by Martin Scorsese, *The Death of Cinema: History, Cultural Memory, & the Digital Dark Age*
19. Woods, Paul A., *Scorsese: A Journey Through the American Psyche*