

Scorsese's Cinema of Loneliness

A Film Education Course for the Bryn Mawr Film Institute (March 2007)

Instructor

Paul Wright, Ph.D.

Cabrini College—Dept. of English & Co-Director of the Honors Program

Email: paul.wright@cabrini.edu

“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*

Course Description

We will explore the dynamic cinema of one of America’s foremost directors of the last forty years, with attention paid to the elements of autobiography at work in Scorsese’s films, as well as to the broader cultural critique he has developed. We will examine how Scorsese’s films have been informed by profound questions about violence, alienation, faith, and genuine self-understanding (or self-delusion).

Among the issues Scorsese confronts us with: What do we as Americans ultimately believe community to be? Do our communities serve the personal or even spiritual needs of their members? Or are our individual frustrations and pathologies merely symptomatic of a broader failure to connect to one another? In this light, Scorsese’s films will be appraised having brought into American popular culture a shared vocabulary for talking about the nature of freedom in America and the nature of responsibility in a criminal, absurd, or even fallen world.

Participants will discuss the following films from Scorsese’s body of work: *After Hours*; *Raging Bull*; *Mean Streets*; and *The Last Temptation of Christ*.

Course Schedule

Wednesday, March 7, 6:30-9:30PM

Topic

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

Readings

Hesse, *Steppenwolf* (excerpts)

Merton, "Rain and the Rhinoceros" from *Raids on the Unspeakable*

Film

After Hours (1985), 97 minutes

Note: This film will be screened in class.

Wednesday, March 14, 6:30-8:30PM

Topic

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

Readings

Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (excerpts)

Vollmann, *Rising Up & Rising Down: Some Thoughts on Violence, Freedom, and Urgent Means* (excerpts)

Film

Raging Bull (1980), 129 minutes

Note: This film should be viewed by students prior to class and in conjunction with the distributed readings. Relevant clips will be discussed in class.

Wednesday, March 21, 6:30-9:30PM

Topic

The Perverse Ecclesia of *Mean Streets*

Readings

Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness: Penn, Stone, Kubrick, Scorsese, Spielberg, Altman* (excerpts)

C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (excerpts)

Film

Mean Streets (1973), 110 minutes

Note: This film will be screened in class.

Wednesday, March 28, 6:30-8:30PM

Topic

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

Readings

Kazantzakis, *The Last Temptation of Christ* (excerpts)

Greene, *The End of the Affair* (excerpts)

Screening

The Last Temptation of Christ (1988), 164 minutes

Note: This film should be viewed by students prior to class and in conjunction with the distributed readings. Relevant clips will be discussed in class.

Bibliography for those interested in learning more

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. Middleton, Darren, *Scandalizing Jesus: The Last Temptation of Christ Fifty Years On*
12. Miliora, Maria T., *The Scorsese Psyche on Screen: Roots of Themes & Characters in the Films*
13. Nicholls, Mark, *Scorsese's Men: Melancholia & the Mob*
14. Nyce, Ben, *Scorsese Up Close: A Study of the Films*
15. Riley, Robin, *Film, Faith, & Cultural Conflict: The Case of Martin Scorsese's The Last Temptation of Christ*
16. Scorsese, Martin & Wilson, Michael, *A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese through American Movies*
17. Usai, Paolo Cherchi, with foreword by Martin Scorsese, *The Death of Cinema: History, Cultural Memory, & the Digital Dark Age*
18. Woods, Paul A., *Scorsese: A Journey Through the American Psyche*