

SIX BOOKS ABOUT SCORSESE

DAVID STERRITT

Does anyone keep track of how many books are published each year about particular filmmakers? I'm against turning film appreciation into contests—box-office duels and Oscar races give me the willies—but looking at the expanding crop of books about Martin Scorsese's life and work, I can't help wondering how many have appeared so far, how many countries and languages they represent, and whether Scorsese might someday outstrip Alfred Hitchcock as the director of choice for critics and scholars. His body of work is less than half the size of Hitchcock's as of now, but his creativity and productivity are going strong, and so is the enterprise of chronicling and commenting on the Scorsese saga. Recent installments vary a great deal in thoughtfulness and readability, but their differences of tone, approach, and methodology are themselves a reminder of how artistically rich and critically inexhaustible the works of an authentic artist always are.

Scorsese's back story has been told so often that his admirers know it by heart. Many of its tellers have followed the same general lines, though, skimming over some issues while pounding incessantly on others. Hence the ubiquitous theory that Scorsese's visual aesthetics and world view were installed in his psyche by a handful of factors in his early years—the sickly childhood in Little Italy; the hours spent viewing movies with his father and watching neighborhood mobsters from his window; the fascination with sin, salvation, and ritual that made him consider becoming a Roman Catholic priest. While these experiences obviously relate to Scorsese's central themes, no shortlist of influences can single-handedly account for the variety of genres he's worked in or the full-bore intensity that surges through almost every film. This said, however, religion is a constant in his pictures, often in veiled and allusive ways. Roger Ebert illuminates this, and many other things, in *Scorsese by Ebert*, a collection of reviews and interviews written between 1967 and 2008.

Ebert is certainly cut out for this job. Another working-class Catholic born in 1942, he wrote the first review Scorsese ever received, instantly catching the religious overtones of

I Call First at the Chicago film festival a year before the picture's final version, retitled *Who's That Knocking at My Door*, became Scorsese's debut theatrical release in 1969. Like many commentators, Ebert sees particularly compelling interest in *The Last Temptation of Christ*, the adaptation of Nikos Kazantzakis's novel that slogged through several years, two studios, and swamps of fundamentalist protest before reaching the screen in 1988. More than most other critics, though, Ebert homes in on resonances between this hugely difficult production and the psychological drive that kept Scorsese plugging away at it when conventional wisdom said it would never get made. The reason for this doggedness, Ebert suggests, goes way beyond the religiosity in Scorsese's make-up, important though that is. When he made *The Last Temptation of Christ* he was making a movie not just about Jesus but about himself, using Christ's inner struggle as a vehicle for confronting and exploring his own spiritual conflicts, which have been anything but theoretical. Consider what Scorsese said to Ebert in a conversation about living with his current girlfriend after one of his divorces: "I am living in sin, and I will go to hell because of it." Ebert asked him if he really, truly believed that. "Yes, I do," was the reply (103).

With this in mind, it isn't hard to see the self-doubting savior played by Willem Dafoe as the same presence that haunts J. R. in *Who's That Knocking at My Door* and Charlie in *Mean Streets* (1973). Both of those characters are stand-ins for Scorsese, and both are played by Harvey Keitel, whose portrayal of Judas in *The Last Temptation of Christ* leads Ebert to suggest that Judas is another Scorsese surrogate—the mortal man walking beside the Messiah, "worrying about him, lecturing him, wanting him to be better, threatening him, confiding in him, prepared to betray him if he must. Christ is the film, and Judas is the director" (104). Insights this original on many films, including underappreciated ones like *The King of Comedy* (1982) and *After Hours* (1985), make this book a model of Scorsese criticism.

Ebert's writing on Scorsese and religion heightened my appreciation for a remarkable scene described by Thomas R. Lindlof in *Hollywood Under Siege: Martin Scorsese, the Religious Right, and the Culture Wars*. It transpired in 1982,

when Paramount chairman Barry Diller asked Scorsese why he wanted to film Kazantzakis's novel and Scorsese solemnly replied, "Because I want to get to know Christ better." The chairman "didn't expect that answer," Scorsese remarked later. (I'll bet he didn't.) "What I was thinking of," Scorsese added, "is that . . . the act of making the film has to do with religion itself—*self-knowledge*. Which is not exactly what a Hollywood studio has in mind" (49).

Whatever he thought about Scorsese's search for self-knowledge, Diller ended this meeting—which also included studio president Michael Eisner and production chief Jeffrey Katzenberg—by saying, "Let's make the movie." At the end of 1983 the same executives met with Scorsese to say, in effect, "Let's *not* make the movie," so worried were they by budget increases and escalating protests against the studio and MCA, its parent company. For a while all seemed lost, but thanks to Scorsese's truly passionate belief in it, *The Last Temptation of Christ* proved as impossible to kill as its main character. *Hollywood Under Siege* chronicles its fitful progress without losing sight of the drama, humor, irony, and absurdity that constantly surrounded Scorsese's long, hard struggle to put his vision on the screen.

Four years after Paramount bailed, Universal picked up the project with a low-end budget, and Lindlof's account of the principal photography in Morocco is riveting. The incredibly tight schedule left literally no room for delays or adjustments. Eventually the team started gathering at each day's first location in the pitch of night, ready to start shooting when the first ray of sun appeared. Scorsese stopped looking at dailies to save the cost of shipping film to New York and back, and bad weather forced him to change the crucifixion timetable from eighty-plus setups in three days to fifty-five setups in two days. Here were images that Scorsese had been dreaming of, refining, and endlessly replaying in his mind for a third of his life, and now the adventure of making them real had, Lindlof writes, "devolved into an exercise in brute efficiency" during which crucial components had to be captured in "only a few chaotic hours" (120).

Back in Hollywood, meanwhile, storm clouds were gathering in the form of renewed protests by Christian conservatives who were not pleased that this particular Christ had been resurrected. The efforts to stop the film's release are the heart of Lindlof's book, and he recounts the battle in harrowing, sometimes uproarious detail, from Universal's proactive attempts to elicit support from media-savvy evangelical leaders (nice try) to publicity stunts organized by the likes of the Reverend R. L. Hymers, Jr., whose earlier deeds of Christlike compassion included leading a public prayer for the deaths of two United States Supreme Court justices because they

BOOK DATA

- Scorsese by Ebert* by Roger Ebert. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008. \$25.00 cloth; \$16.00 paper. 297 pages.
- Hollywood Under Siege: Martin Scorsese, the Religious Right, and the Culture Wars* by Thomas R. Lindlof. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2008. \$32.50 cloth. 394 pages.
- Gangster Priest: The Italian American Cinema of Martin Scorsese* by Robert Casillo. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006. \$85.00 cloth; \$39.95 paper. 600 pages.
- The Philosophy of Martin Scorsese*, ed. Mark T. Conard. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2007. \$35.00 cloth; \$19.95 paper. 256 pages.
- Martin Scorsese's "Raging Bull"*, ed. Kevin J. Hayes. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2005. \$85.00 cloth; \$26.99 paper. 164 pages.
- Martin Scorsese: A Biography* by Vincent LoBrutto. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008. \$44.95 cloth. 444 pages.

favored reproductive freedom. It would take many pages to retell even the most striking episodes in these campaigns and countercampaigns, but mention must be made of the bitter anti-Semitism that repeatedly surfaced among the faithful, as when Hymers led a group chanting "Paid for with Jewish money!" to MCA chairman Lew Wasserman's home. The warfare was international in scope—thirteen countries officially banned the picture—and as ferocious on the protestors' side as it was anxiety-ridden in the studio's camp.

Apart from its value to Scorsese studies, *Hollywood Under Siege* is important for its larger social and cultural implications. The evangelical right's distinctive blend of cultural paranoia and self-righteous zeal acquired uncommon power in the second half of the 1980s, partly because the Christian right needed to compensate its wounded ego for Ronald Reagan's failure to deliver on social issues like abortion and school prayer. Additional impetus came from the rise of politico-religious demagogues like Jerry Falwell and James Dobson and the exponential growth of right-wing radio. When fundamentalists looked for causes to rally around, Scorsese's film about their personal savior was an all-too-obvious target. Hollywood was so skittish in its aftermath that studios hired the left-wing PR consultant Josh Baran to deploy "field crisis teams" (312) before opening potentially sensitive movies such as *Do the Right Thing* (Spike Lee, 1989) and *The Handmaid's Tale* (Volker Schlöndorff, 1990).

Lindlof waxes too optimistic at the end of his narrative, happy that *The Last Temptation of Christ* is “no longer captive to the agendas or polemical discourses of either the political left or right” (316). It’s true that Scorsese’s picture is no longer being co-opted by partisans looking for a fight, but this is because it has outlived its usefulness, not because a tide of reason and rationality has swept across the land. I have no doubt that equally idiotic culture attacks are yet to come; after all, only ten years have passed since New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani launched his ignorant vendetta against Chris Ofili’s sacramental “elephant dung” painting of *The Holy Virgin*, and there’s no shortage of people who want to make America an officially Christian country. All of which means that the controversies over Scorsese’s picture still carry lessons worth learning.

I’ve given a lot of space to *The Last Temptation of Christ* because no other film consumed so many years of Scorsese’s life or revealed so many of his deepest passions. Yet there’s a vital facet of his art that the picture doesn’t represent—the rich stories of Italian American life on which his reputation mainly rests. Robert Casillo studies these in *Gangster Priest: The Italian American Cinema of Martin Scorsese*, again placing Scorsese’s conflicted Catholicism at center stage.

Scorsese’s early plan to become a priest was not entirely based on selfless spirituality; as he has acknowledged more than once, he was seduced in part by the church’s theatricality—its icons, music, and rituals—and he suspected that as a priest he would have more of an “inside line” (95) to salvation. He enrolled at a junior seminary school in 1956 but flunked out a year later, bushwhacked by low grades, poor discipline, and compulsive thinking about girls, girls, girls. Still, the influence of Catholicism remained extremely potent for him; despite his guilt about adolescent sexual thoughts and masturbation, he reported later that he “constantly” felt he was “communicating directly with God” and “having spiritual experiences.” After listening to stern Jesuit sermons during a religious retreat, for instance, he had what Casillo describes as an episode of “guilt and mysticism” (96). That night the country noises outside seemed like an “auditory hallucination” and “smudges on the window become like the face on the Shroud,” he recalled years afterward. Eventually he got up and prayed in a “special grotto,” but he remained so distressed that a priest said he should see a Catholic psychiatrist. This sounds like excellent advice to me, and in fact Scorsese started psychotherapy that lasted seven years.

The point here is not that teenage Marty had a dark night of the soul, but that this experience and others like it affected him so strongly that his definition of “living the good life” still

means “practicing the tenets of Christianity” (97). Although he left the church in the early 1960s, Casillo shows that he weaves Catholicism into virtually all aspects of his pictures, from the blood-red interior of a *Mean Streets* bar to the ubiquitous gambling in *Casino* (1995) that signals the possibility of grace abruptly entering the most humble slot-player’s life. Scorsese’s films can’t be understood without the keys provided by his idiosyncratic Christianity—not the intellectual Jesuit variety but the more haunting and elusive kind that Flannery O’Connor calls “wise blood,” wholly instinctive and all the more unshakeable for that.

Gangster Priest takes its title from two thematic archetypes that shape Scorsese’s films about Italian American characters, neighborhoods, and ethnic attributes. It begins by etching Scorsese’s close emotional ties to the first and second generations of Italian American immigrants, whose values he absorbed through cultural osmosis in his parents’ household and the Sicilian American neighborhood where the family lived. Casillo then gives a detailed account of Italian immigration to the U.S. from the 1870s on (Scorsese’s grandparents arrived soon after 1900) and discusses numerous folkways and mores that loom importantly in Scorsese’s films. These include *famiglia*, Sicilian style, which places trust in the family unit more than the individual or state; *omertà*, the practice of reserve and silence except among family and friends; wariness toward education; preference for oral and visual rather than written communication; and more. Along the way Casillo notes the appeal of city life for escapees from agrarian poverty, critiques the sociological claim that “amoral familism” has fostered civic apathy among southern Italian immigrants, and parses the semiotics of Catherine Scorsese’s homemade tomato sauce. He also studies Scorsese as an example of and an exception to the typical patterns of third-generation Italian American culture, with especially knowledgeable pages on the Mediterranean masculinity cult with its attendant values of honor and shame.

The remainder of the book offers painstaking analyses of the five movies—*Who’s That Knocking at My Door*, *Mean Streets*, *Raging Bull* (1980), *GoodFellas* (1990), and *Casino*—that constitute the Italian American portion of Scorsese’s *oeuvre*. The pivotal theorist in these chapters is René Girard, who contends that social and religious desire are grounded not in instinct but in imitation; that the sacred and the violent are inextricably linked; that breakdowns of social order and “sacrificial crises” are typically resolved by the selection and elimination of scapegoats; and that the priestly rituals associated with this practice allow the community to purge its collective guilt through disguised mimesis of the crisis that called the guilt into being.

Casillo reaps good dividends from Girard's theories, as when he applies the concept of the *turba*, the "all-engulfing vortical chaos" (165) of sacrificial crises, to aspects of Scorsese's camerawork and mise-en-scène, and when he links two laughter-surrounded murders in *GoodFellas* to the joy induced by exterminated scapegoats. The book's treatment of the *Imitatio Christi* tradition, interpreted by Girard as a call for the repudiation of mimetic conflict and social violence, elicits very productive insights with respect to *Raging Bull*, which Scorsese took on at a time of personal crises—the 1977 failure of *New York, New York*, drug dependency, fears of professional catastrophe—in an attempt "to diagnose and to exorcise his own demons of anger, retaliatory violence, and masochism" (393). In passages like these, *Gangster Priest* is an exceptional work.

I must add, however, that Casillo's privileging of Girard has the effect of crowding out other approaches that could have cast light on this material; a bit more investigation of psychoanalytic thought, for instance, might help him grasp the overlap between homosociality and homosexuality, and might modify his unsupported notion that "the whole tired apparatus of repression and the Freudian conception of the unconscious" (242) are unproven and outdated. More fundamentally, the undeniable focus that Casillo gains by zeroing in on the Italian American movies is countered by the exclusion of other films. Surely it's reasonable to explore the Italian American films' relationships with other Scorsese pictures, which also have roots in his Italian American sensibility; yet works as crucial as *Taxi Driver* (1976) and *The Last Temptation of Christ* receive a mere five references apiece, recent films like *Gangs of New York* (2002) and *The Aviator* (2004) fewer still. Occasional facts given in the book also raised my eyebrows—for one small example, why is "Season of the Witch," the working title of *Mean Streets*, attributed to Mike Bloomfield and Al Kooper, who covered the song in 1968, rather than Donovan, who wrote and popularized it two years earlier? But these flaws are outweighed by Casillo's overall achievement, which is imaginative, erudite, and comprehensive.

The Philosophy of Martin Scorsese, edited by Mark T. Conard, hails from the growing field of essay books using items from popular culture as launching pads for philosophical musings. (What hath Slavoj Žižek wrought?) Deborah Knight notes the hazards of this enterprise at the beginning of her contribution to it: "Scorsese is . . . not a philosopher [and] narrative fiction filmmaking . . . is not directly assimilable to the practice of philosophy. Fiction films do not operate by means of reasons and arguments" (93). Knight then carves out a modest exception, allowing that certain films can be

taken as illustrating some philosophical point. I agree with Knight's position, and I'll enlarge her exception a bit by saying that certain films go beyond *illustrating* a philosophical point to usefully *testing* or *exploring* it. These three things are what the best essays in Conard's collection do.

The volume has three sections: "Authenticity, Flourishing, and the Good Life," dealing with such matters as vigilantism in *Taxi Driver* and the good life in *GoodFellas*; "Rationality, Criminality, and the Emotions," applying Blaise Pascal to *The King of Comedy* and Friedrich Nietzsche to *Cape Fear* (1991), among other things; and "Vision, Salvation, and the Transcendental," treating such topics as the moral universe of *Casino* and reluctant saviors in *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *Bringing Out the Dead* (1999). All of the subjects and most of the essays are interesting. My favorites include Richard Gilmore's witty analysis of "Art, Sex, and Time in Scorsese's *After Hours*," which would be better still if Gilles Deleuze came into it, and Jennifer L. McMahon's existentialist take on the same fascinating film in "After Hours: Scorsese on Absurdity." Conard weighs in thoughtfully with "Mean Streets: Beatitude, Flourishing, and Unhappiness," and R. Barton Palmer contributes an intelligent essay on "Scorsese and the Transcendental," although it's puzzling to see *Mean Streets* and *Taxi Driver* labeled "genre projects" as opposed to "auteurist films," and to find *GoodFellas* and *Casino* called "more obviously commercial than any of [Scorsese's] other projects," as if, say, *The Last Waltz* (1978) and *The Color of Money* (1986) were more of those "auteurist films."

The volume would be stronger if all of its writers were equally well versed in film studies and philosophy. Some essays don't have much of the latter: Knight's paper, "The Age of Innocence: Social Semiotics, Desire, and Constraint," is genteel cultural criticism of the 1993 movie, and Judith Barad's work on "The Ethical Underpinnings of *Kundun*" draws primarily on writings by the Dalai Lama, the 1997 film's real-life protagonist, noting parallels with the Stoics here and there. Conversely, film scholarship runs thin in some essays. Exhibit A is "The Cinema of Madness: Friedrich Nietzsche and the Films of Martin Scorsese," which Jerold J. Abrams begins with a series of statements that the maddest of cinema scholars would never come out with: "Martin Scorsese is the greatest director alive. Every film scholar knows that . . . [His] paradigm [films] are about violence, typically gang violence . . . Inevitably, aficionados leave it at just *Mean Streets* and *Taxi Driver*: the early masterpieces. That's my view too. And future film scholars will, no doubt, look back as well and claim that Scorsese simply defines the genre of gangster cinema" (75). Where would one begin to correct this—with the overblown parts, the reductive parts, the flat-

out wrong parts? And then there's "Flying Solo: *The Aviator* and Libertarian Philosophy" by Paul A. Cantor, which is in a class by itself. I find some elements of libertarian thought quite suggestive, but Cantor espouses all the other ones, tipping his hat at one point to Ayn Rand, whose notions even Alan Greenspan eventually slunk away from. In the first paragraph we find the anti-Semitic Charles Lindbergh hailed as "the quintessential all-American hero" (165) and in the last we learn that "one does not have to be a morally good man in order to serve the public good" (184). That's entertainment?

Martin Scorsese's "*Raging Bull*", edited by Kevin J. Hayes, presents a smaller group of essays that's also more consistent, thanks in part to its concern with a single film. Todd Berliner's examination of "Visual Absurdity in *Raging Bull*" bears a slight resemblance to McMahan's aforementioned work on *After Hours*, but uses intensive shot, frame, and sound analysis to unpack the "unobtrusive nonsense" that Scorsese carefully built into his purposefully punch-drunk tour de force. It's a smart essay with just two drawbacks: the conclusion is less than exciting—elements of conventional style help viewers cope with mismatched cuts and inexplicable noises—and Berliner seems to assume that moviegoers take in films one image at a time rather than in multi-image clumps that get differentiated and sorted out only with repeated viewings. The best essay is "Raging Bull and the Idea of Performance" by Michael Peterson, who draws from performance studies (a neighboring field too rarely consulted by film scholars) to probe the film's dual nature as a drama about both Robert De Niro and the nominal protagonist. In the process it offers an implicit critique of gaze theory à la Laura Mulvey, and the essay would be better still if this were made explicit and emphatic. In any case, Mulvey regains her ground when Peggy McCormack recycles her work in "Women in *Raging Bull*: Scorsese's Use of Determinist, Objective, and Subjective Techniques." Rounding out the essays, Leger Grindon writes on "Art and Genre in *Raging Bull*" and Mark Nicholls makes a semi-persuasive case for *Raging Bull* as a dialogue with Vincente Minnelli's melodrama *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1952) while discussing the Scorsese picture's melancholia. Reprints of half a dozen journalistic reviews complete the book.

Last and least, it's my unpleasant duty to report that *Martin Scorsese: A Biography* by Vincent LoBrutto is by far the weakest of this crop of books. One problem is its structure, with endlessly long rehashes of some films (*Who's That Knocking at My Door*, *Mean Streets*, *Cape Fear*) and hasty, flimsy glances at others (*After Hours*, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, *Casino*). Another problem is that it's hardly a biography—after occasional cryptic references to Scorsese's vari-

ous wives, for instance, a brief chapter called "Five Marriages" pops up just before the end, as if the author remembered to stick in a few words on the subject just before his deadline at the printer. But the biggest problem is the prose, replete with misspelled words (felatio, au currant), misspelled names (Zanadu, Robert DeNiro, Katherine Hepburn), redundancies ("Scorsese's gangster trilogy is an epic triad"), and locutions like "one of the highest divorce rates in American human history" (356)—as opposed to American space-alien history, I suppose. Scorsese deserves better. The collective message of these books is that the more deeply and persistently critics, theorists, and historians delve into his works, the more they find there. The gangster priest is proving to be a filmmaker for the ages.

DAVID STERRITT, *Film Quarterly's* Chief Book Critic, appeared with Martin Scorsese on *Nightline* to discuss *The Last Temptation of Christ* in 1988.

JOHN BELTON

***The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft*
by Anne Friedberg**

The late Anne Friedberg's project in this book is tremendously ambitious. Through the vantage point of new media, she returns to 1970s apparatus theory to write a history of vision and visibility ("the social, psychological, and historical habits of vision") from the fifteenth century to the present. Exploring discursive metaphors employed in art history, architectural history, film and television studies, and new media, she lays out an historical trajectory that traces the evolution of virtual imaging from window to frame to screen and then to Windows (Microsoft's trademarked operating software). As virtual imaging evolves or changes so does the subjectivity of the spectator. If the spectator of Alberti's "open window" (which is associated with the symbolic form of artificial perspective) is a single viewer fixed in space and framed by a virtual window, that of the graphic user interface of Windows involves multiple views and perspectives, positing a fragmented (and potentially mobile) viewer. The relations among viewer and view constantly shift as the nature of the apparatus changes from window to frame to camera obscura, still and movie photography, television, and computer.

Following Walter Benjamin, Jonathan Crary, and others, Friedberg argues that human sense perception changes with its mode of existence and that the cinema marks such a change, as does the advent of the personal computer. The fixed position of the viewer of a painting gives way to the