

FILM-PHILOSOPHY

Review: Mark T. Conard (ed.) (2007)
The Philosophy of Martin Scorsese
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Philosophy and popular culture have always by definition tended to exclude one another and so the title of the series published by The University Press of Kentucky, *Philosophy of Popular Culture* (an even more ambitious association given the 'of' in between), may sound oxymoronic. However, the recent trend to have the cultures of high and low coexist in a single volume (consider Open Court's *Popular Culture and Philosophy* series, or Blackwell's *Philosophy and Pop Culture* series) wants to prove otherwise. While we can leave aside the question of whether books pairing rock bands, talk shows or soap operas with Aristotle are capable of discovering philosophical motives under the surfaces of pop narratives, pairing philosophy with film, a theoretically established art form, is certainly a very different matter. With cinema being one of the most rapidly developing arts as well as academic disciplines, the philosophy of film now seeks to re-evaluate the mutual position of the two fields, identify valuable relations or even argue in what ways the former may be replacing the latter.

The Philosophy of Martin Scorsese more often than not 'uses' the films by one of the most notable directors of his generation as textbook examples to facilitate or complicate the understanding of pre-existing philosophical concepts, which seems to be the least interesting approach to film-philosophy relations. The essays are assembled thematically

in three groups: 1. Authenticity, Flourishing, and Egoism; 2. Rationality, Criminality, and the Emotions; 3. Vision, Salvation, and the Transcendental. The films discussed in the first part include *Casino* (1995), *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Goodfellas* (1990), and *Mean Streets* (1973) with some overlapping into the other two parts; the second is easier to guess: *The Age of Innocence* (1993), *The King of Comedy* (1983), and less obviously *After Hours* (1985); and the third one boldly announces *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), *Bringing Out the Dead* (1999), *Kundun* (1997), but also *The Aviator* (2004) and *After Hours* once again. *The Departed* (2006) is not included for obvious temporal reasons. *The Raging Bull* (1980) is not tackled in the volume, neither is the director's documentary body of work.

Despite the challenge the still unexplored field offers, there is little effort in the compilation to bring philosophical discourse and Scorsese's film aesthetics in an innovative, thought-provoking relation. The purely cinematic is mostly disregarded in preference to lengthy philosophical discussions that touch on isolated subjects of the film. The authors themselves usually make it clear from the outset that they seek to 'use' Scorsese's films as 'springboards' for addressing a particular philosophical issue. The director is examined as a devoted and questioning catholic, a supporter of libertarian economics and a free Tibet, and we often lose track of Scorsese the filmmaker. Seldom is he called an artist which seems to indicate what film lovers will find a shortcoming of the collection, which, while relating to diverse aspects more or less relevant to a particular work, manages to cut off its cinematic richness.

Mark T. Conard, the editor, suggests at the beginning of his *Mean Streets* entry that rather than looking for philosophical undercurrents inherent in Scorsese's picture, the film will serve 'as a means to enter into a discussion about unhappiness, given the lack of attention to the latter in philosophical literature' (53). After a compulsory description of the film's characters and actions, he develops an elaborate examination of the concept of suffering and unhappiness in classic philosophy and after, with Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Aristotle, Freud or Sartre at hand. Charlie, for instance, whose becoming a part of the Mafia establishment we follow in the film, is observed through the filter of Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals* and Conard can thus problematize the role of church for Charlie as a means to salvation. Still, there is a growing feeling of departure from the film itself as the analysis proceeds examining in detail terms like beatitude or *dysdaimonia*, and the author, in his otherwise excellent effort, is less and less interested in linking the concepts he explores to Scorsese's picture as such. It is because the analysis is so narrowly circumscribed that it must fail to return to *Mean Streets* what it has borrowed.

Many of the authors fail to provide something that might account for the complexity of Scorsese's artistic achievement and shed new light on it. In a similarly uncinematic attempt, the essay dedicated to *The King of Comedy* by Richard Greene theorizes rationality and irrationality as applied to the actions of the title character, Rupert Pupkin, with little concern for the films' subversive voice. The opening essay entitled 'No Safe Haven: *Casino*, Friendship, and Egoism' by Steven M. Sanders starts with a promising introduction to the film, which, as the author claims, is not so much preoccupied with the practices of the gambling industry as with undertaking 'an expedition to its heart of darkness' (8). It proceeds with arguments for placing *Casino* in the neo-noir tradition, and the main discussion then involves the relationship between the two big fish of the Las Vegas world, Ace and Nicky, and the manifold interpretations of their egoist friendship. In 'Goodfellas, Gyges, and the Good Life', the 1990 gangster film is used to provide new insight into classic philosophy. Dean A. Kowalski asks no lesser question than one posed in Plato's Republic: why lead a morally good life? Can the mythical character of Gyges and his modern cinematic counterpart Henry Hill be truly happy? The display of spectacular mafioso characters further serves as model for Plato's idea of the unbalanced self. Aeon J. Skoble develops a detailed philosophical reading of *Taxi Driver's* ethics of vigilantism. 'I hope,' he writes, 'to use the film to explore the questions of when, if ever, vigilantism is justified, in what way vigilantism is epistemologically or ethically problematic' (25). Travis' debatable actions are examined and Locke's scepticism and comic superhero parallels employed to decipher the ambiguity of Senator Palantine's slogan 'We are the people'. We finally arrive at a general conclusion about vigilantism being left with little new insight into the intriguing cinematic creation of Travis Bickle.

While these essays are certainly successful in rendering specific philosophical issues more accessible with the help of cinema as a medium; whether such analyses push our understanding of Scorsese's work in new directions remains at least disputable. A more interesting strategy in the volume explores philosophical issues that seem to have inspired a number of the director's projects.

In a quite different approach to *Taxi Driver*, which already falls into the second thematic part of the volume, Jerold J. Abrams sees Travis not as a less sane version of a superhero but as a Scorsese/Nietzschean madman, a figure beyond society. The brief sketch of his persona serves to link *Taxi Driver* with later Scorsese's films: *Cape Fear* with its 'inspired and [Nietzsche] educated' madman Max Cady, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, a 'Nietzschean reevaluation of the story of Jesus', *Bringing Out the Dead* with the visionary outsider Frank, and *The Aviator*, portraying the life of a madman. Abrams races through a

number of periods of Scorsese's filmmaking to argue for his madmen, both destructive and creative forces, the 'archetypal creators of civilization'. Besides Nietzsche, Abrams adduces Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* to make a point about Scorsese's vision of Jesus as a 'peer to loonies and addicts' as well as to 'madmen and the gods'. His perception of Scorsese's madmen is opposed and superior to the gangsters, who, as he observes, are technicians, 'never bent on creatively reevaluating the values of humanity' (89). In his inspiring and refreshing reading, Abrams thus celebrates creative madness itself and the Nietzschean greatness of Scorsese's mad characters that are so often understood one-dimensionally. His credit lies in managing to show why Max Cady, for instance, despite his criminal record, still has our sympathy over his petty, social counterparts.

Perhaps the only critical evaluation of the relation between philosophy and cinema or popular culture directly voiced in the book is Deborah Knight's reflection on the grounds for the inclusion of her text in the collection; she positions herself in her introduction to '*The Age of Innocence: Social Semiotics, Desire, and Constraint*' within the film-philosophy debate claiming to disagree with recent views that hold that film can actually 'do' philosophy because, she argues, they 'do not operate by means of reasons and arguments' (93) but through narratives. She then proceeds to elucidate the kind of social codification Scorsese manages to recreate from Wharton's narrative through persistent use of detail.

Interestingly, Scorsese's *After Hours*, rarely counted among his major achievements, is given significant attention and space in the collection. Jennifer L. McMahon gives a lengthy description of the film's events looking for parallels with Sartre's *Nausea* and *No Exit*. She is not, however, interested in immanence and transcendence as Hoffman is in her Sartrean interpretation mentioned below; her target is the notion of absurdity in Sartre and Scorsese and she supports her choice of material partly by depicting "clearly absurd" scenes in the abovementioned works and, perhaps surprisingly, placing *After Hours* along with *No Exit* among dark comedies which have as their 'principal intention to compel a sense of amusement' (123). The author even claims a kind of therapeutic quality to this particular genre believing that both Sartre and Scorsese can, 'help us maintain perspective and psychological balance' (123). The text concludes in line with the view that popular culture can actually get people to think philosophically: 'Clearly, people may well be resistant to the disclosure of absurdity. However, they will likely be less so if this truth is conveyed in a savory form' (124) For those who doubt that Sartre or Scorsese decided to depict existential anxieties "humorously" with the intention to make our lives merrier, a

totally different reading is provided in another treatment of the same picture found in the third part of the collection.

The texts contained in the third part provide the most varied negotiations of Scorsese's apparently more spiritual works. Karen D. Hoffman's *'The Last Temptation of Christ and Bringing Out the Dead: Scorsese's Reluctant Saviours'* delivers a reading of the two pictures through the prism of Sartrean immanence and transcendence. She finds the Nazarene and the paramedic Frank as mirroring one another's image not only in the rhythms their lives are set to: 'When Jesus is tempted by a life of false immanence, Frank is tempted by a life of false transcendence' (155). She emphasizes Scorsese's clear preoccupation with Jesus's inner struggle and the difficulty of actively choosing to become Christ and finally pairs the fate of the two characters as both are lead to redemption.

In 'Flying Solo', the most political essay in the volume, Paul A. Cantor treats *The Aviator* as a demonstration of Scorsese's inclination to libertarian philosophy. Cantor's perception of the film is very much centred on the celebration of America's great entrepreneurial spirit and its heroic side as embodied by Howard Hughes. He turns to the Austrian economist Ludwig von Mises's concepts for theoretical grounds and quotes from Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* to support his reading of the film as a celebration of the free market, a vindication of 'the philosophy of rugged individualism' as opposed to the governmental power and the views of socialist hypocrites, embodied in the film by the Hepburn family.

The second account of *After Hours*, perhaps the finest essay in the collection, offers a reading of Paul's journey that reaches beyond the usual flat description of the story-line and attempts a complex rendering of a cinematic experience. Richard Gilmore introduces Levinas's concept of the way of the same through a perspicacious depiction of Paul's office space and his mode of inhabiting it. He attentively analyses the characters' glances and gestures that signify Paul's different stages on a journey and suggest the film's larger form: the way from totality of the office and home life to the infinity of art; the modification of Paul's mode of being through the struggle of forces and counter-forces, his liberation from the power of the office space by the power of desire. In Gilmore's treatment, the mise-en-scène (including facial expressions or the arrangement of space) and the ethical in the film enter in interaction in one Levinasian reading.¹ The author here suggests a much more

¹ A Levinasian understanding of cinema is provided in an excellent essay 'Beyond Ontology' (2007) by Sam B. Girgus, who also briefly discusses Scorsese's films in the context.

interesting relation between Scorsese's pictures and philosophy, reflecting on art and time in the film (from the capitalist *kronos* time to the ethical dimension of *kairos*). He further draws our attention to a number of themes embedded in the narrative including a mythical one (Paul as a 'proto-Orpheus', his cabdriver having 'the glowing red-rimmed eyes of Charon, the boatman to Hell') (192), a Lacanian one (the significance of the plaster of paris bagel and cream cheese and the papier-mâché man), or a Kafkaesque one (the 'gatekeeper' at Club Berlin). While referring to a number of very different thinkers, the concepts alluded to directly resonate within the film and uncover multiple meanings. Towards the end of his text, Gilmore describes the condition of Paul's transformation in what can also provide a commentary on the relation between film and philosophy:

Art will provide the doorways to alternate realities, but it will take philosophy to get a perspicuous overview of the landscapes, to map the interrelation of the various realities. The meanings emerge only in the transitions. Without the transitions, we are locked in our logics of the same. (207)

The contribution on *Kundun* by Judith Barad, on the other hand, overrides the aesthetics of Scorsese's fiction movie (labelled here as "the true story of the Dalai Lama's childhood and youth") by putting all energy into the discussion of the ethics of Tibetan Buddhism. The film is reduced to play a role - that of an approximation of eastern thought to the western viewer who is, according to Barad, 'too familiar with violent images on television as well as in video games and enjoys violent sports' (212). The only thing that Scorsese's *Kundun* demands from the viewer, Barad argues, is an understanding of Buddhism's ethical beliefs. And because the author sees Scorsese as failing to explain some of the major ideas underlying Buddhist thought which can help us 'to reflect on and apply some of [the film's] insights to our lives' (212), she undertakes the task herself, explaining terms such as compassion, reincarnation and interconnection, inner peace or the Mandala. The films' powers are certainly not underestimated: 'Imagine the change in Western societies if inner peace were prevalent in people! In fact, imagine the change in your own life if you strove for this as your goal' (217)! No formal aspects of the picture are mentioned.

The story of the paramedic Frank is again the main focus in the last entry of the collection and follows a transcendental line that intersects, as R. Barton Palmer shows us, a number of Scorsese's films including the most 'commercial' ones. (One of his aims is to prove the relevance/irrelevance of Schrader's influence in this respect as Scorsese's scriptwriter). Interestingly, just as Richard Gilmore alludes to Dante in his treatment of Paul in *After Hours*, Palmer too invokes the poet, reading Frank's story as a 'Dantean journey through the grim underworld of New York's night town, a depraved public sphere

populated by hordes of the disaffected, the discarded and the dysfunctional' (234); and later, analyzing *Casino*, he sees the ending as 'determined by the iron rule of Dantean *contrapasso*' (238). Like *Bringing Out the Dead*, *Casino* too, claims Palmer, is deeply marked by Scorsese's moralism and transcends the apparent dramatization of 'the harrowing opportunity for moral choice' (238) in a world of reversed moral values. The divine is to be found in the opening scene of the picture where Ace, the only character capable of real love towards others, is blown towards the sky in a car explosion and miraculously survives 'to be preserved for solitude and exile' (240). Frank in *Bringing Out the Dead*, on the other hand, is delivered at the end from solitude to open up a connection with others. The question of active choice is emphasized again in Scorsese's work, just as it is in Bresson: Frank's transcendence is 'willed', not passively awaited.²

Although the book does not draw big conclusions, nor provokes much controversy, the most interesting essays manage to delve into the depth of the director's vision to encounter the high of his motives, melding the spectacular of Scorsese's style with the meaningful. Others employ philosophical discourses that remain rigid in their own language examining cinema from great distance, which hardly fully account for the singularity of Scorsese's films and cinema itself. As a result, there is a strange void created amidst the numerous theories, one that we would wish to contain the soul of Scorsese's pictures. Still, *The Philosophy of Martin Scorsese* is a welcome book in its ambition to shed light on a living director's work from arguably the most difficult angle, the philosophical one. Perhaps the most valuable outcome of such a collection is to be inferred from the recurrence of allusions to some philosophers (Aristotle, Nietzsche, Sartre), and, most significantly, in the gaps that divide the different readings of the same films.

Bibliography

- Deleuze, Gilles (1986) *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Girgus, Sam B. (2007) 'Beyond Ontology: Levinas and the Ethical Frame in Film', *Film-Philosophy*, vol. 11, no.2: pp. 88-107.

² Interestingly, this is for Deleuze one of the valuable relations between cinema and philosophy: the preoccupation with the 'true choice that consists in choosing the choice' (Deleuze 1986, 116).