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Hell on Earth

Midway upon the journey of our life
 I found myself within a forest dark,
 For the straightforward pathway had been lost.
 Ah me! how hard a thing it is to say
 What was this forest savage, rough, and stern,
 Which in the very thought renews the fear.
 So bitter is it, death is little more;
 But of the good to treat, which there I found,
 Speak will I of the other things I saw there. (*Inf.* I)

Finding himself lost in a gloomy forest at the start of Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, the Pilgrim is heartened when he sees the sun and believes that he has found an escape route, only to be thwarted by a panther, a lion and a she-wolf who impede his path. As a result, he 'must begin by descending into an understanding of the evil in which he has become unconsciously entrapped before he will be free for the ascent' (Royal 1999: 41).

In *Inferno*, which is the first part of his epic journey into a landscape of sin and redemption, Dante presents a vision of human existence in which 'Hell abides both in the afterlife and on Earth. ... Hell is as much a spiritual condition as a physical space of bodily punishment' (Parker and Parker 2013). On the cinema screen Martin Scorsese has also succeeded in depicting an earthly environment in which men and women perform the type of evil deeds that ensure that Hell becomes 'a metaphor of present human experience' (Deacy 2012: 129), and the kind of state in which people currently live 'rather than simply a punishment imposed from the outside' (Casey 2009: 289). With the odd exception, Scorsese's films do not feature the Afterlife itself, but his protagonists are already living an Eternal Life that begins at birth according to Christian teaching: 'The coming of the kingdom of God cannot be observed, and no one will announce, "Look, here it

is," or, "There it is." For behold, the kingdom of God is among you' (Lk 17.20-21). St Paul writes of Heaven as appearing 'to embrace both a future reality and a spiritual sphere or realm that coexists with the material world of space and time' (in Deacy 2012: 79).

Catholic teaching 'affirms the existence of hell and its eternity. ... The chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God, in whom man [*sic*] alone can possess the life and happiness for which he was created and for which he longs' (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1993: 1035). There are passages in the Bible that make explicit reference to Hell as the destination for people who have lived a wicked life: Isa. 66.22-24; Dan. 12.2; Mt. 18.6-9; 25.31-46; Mk 9.42-48; 2 Thess. 1.6-10; Jude 7, 13; and Rev. 14.9-11; 20.10, 14-15. All artistic visions of Hell depend 'on a dialectic, the essential content of which Dante exposed, and this he carried out with extreme and relentless clarity, even though it was not he who invented the dialectic' (Balthasar 1986: 90).

Indeed, the forerunners of Dante's *Inferno* have been identified in a number of literary and religious texts, including the pagan poet Virgil's descriptions of the Underworld in the *Aeneid* as a place of torment. There have been visions that included the 'immersion of souls at different levels in foul rivers or marshes or streams of blood' (Reynolds 2006: 140) that had a major influence on Christian theologians; and in the apocryphal third-century *Apocalypse of Paul*, the Archangel Michael shows St Paul 'the souls of the godless and sinners' in a hellish landscape of flames and ice, where people are immersed in 'a boiling river of fire' and 'a pit of pitch and sulphur' (in Elliott 1993: 633-5). By giving sermons on Hell in the fourth century, St Basil and St John Chrysostom 'only popularized a doctrine that was understood since the beginning of Church history both by simple believers and ... by many theologians, as the straightforwardly literal interpretation of the "two-fold judgment" in Mt. 25 and other New Testament statements' (Balthasar 1988: 64). For St Augustine, 'hell was an everlasting site of punishment from which no-one was exempt but for the grace of God' (Deacy 2012: xi), and Book XXI of *City of God* focuses on punishments in Hell.

There are images in Scorsese's film *Silence* about the persecution of Christians in seventeenth-century Japan that would not be out of place in Dante's visualization of the Underworld. Shusaku Endo's novel, which Scorsese has adapted for the screen, has a historical basis as it relates to a real-life Jesuit missionary called Christovao Ferreira (1580-1650) who went to Japan during the rule of Inoue Chikugo (c.1584-1661), the Inquisitor who was dedicated to rooting out Christianity. Founded by St Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556) in 1540, the Jesuit order strove 'for the defense and propagation of the faith and for the

progress of souls in Christian life and doctrine' (in Dougill 2015: 12). Francis Xavier (1506–52) arrived in Japan in 1549 and saw a promising opportunity to spread the Gospel. In a letter written on 5 November 1549, he wrote that the Japanese 'are a people of very good manners, good in general, and not malicious; they are men of honor to a marvel, and prize honor above all else in the world' (in Boxer 1993: 37). By 1590 there were 136 Jesuits in Japan (Boxer 1993: 114), usually dressed as Buddhist priests.

Oda Nobunaga (1534–82), who strove to unify Japan, was a major influence, and extended his patronage to the Christians although he himself did not convert (Dougill 2015: 51). The atmosphere in Japan began to sour when the ruler Hideyoshi turned against the Christians and accused them of 'disrupting social harmony through forced conversions and the destruction of temples' (Dougill 2015: 59). On 24 July 1587, there was an edict to expel the missionaries from Japan (although the religion itself was not banned) and, as few of the priests departed, the Jesuits made 10,000 new converts in 1589 (see Dougill 2015: 65). However, when Hideyoshi heard a suggestion that the Catholic priests had come to Japan 'as the king of Spain's advance guard' (in Dougill 2015: 78) and that the converts were 'being used as a "fifth column"' (Boxer 1993: 151), the bloodshed began. Twenty-six Christians were crucified in Nagasaki on 5 February 1597, with the bodies of the martyrs being pierced with spears. One was San Felipe de Jesus (whose image is seen in Max Cady's cell in *Cape Fear*), the first Mexican martyr. In 1612 there were 300,000 Christians but that number had halved by 1625.

Ferreira himself went underground in 1614 to carry out his mission until his arrest. It is recorded that he apostatized after being tortured in 'the pit', a form of torture that the Japanese employed:

The victim was tightly bound around the body as high as the breast (one hand being left free to give the signal of recantation) and then hung head downwards from a gallows into a pit which usually contained excreta and other filth, the top of the pit being level with his knees. In order to give the blood some vent, the forehead was lightly slashed with a knife. Some of the stronger martyrs lived more than a week in this position, but the majority did not survive more than a day or two. (Boxer 1993: 353)

Evidently, the persecution of Christians by the Samurai is an extreme case, and critics of the film *Silence* did not fail to point out the macabre treatments that were used during the Inquisition to encourage devotion to the Catholic faith in medieval times. Indeed, there are rumours that there was one piece of equipment

called a 'Judas chair' which involved lowering a naked prisoner 'onto what was in effect a sharpened pyramid, fixed on top of a stool' so that 'the weight of the body was pressing down onto the spike' (Stanford 2015: 173). However, the historically verifiable Japanese 'pit' would certainly find a home in Dante's *Inferno*, in which many gruesome physical torments are described as people are pushed into holes:

Out of the mouth of each one there protruded
 The feet of a transgressor, and the legs
 Up to the calf, the rest within remained.
 In all of them the soles were both on fire;
 Wherefore the joints so violently quivered,
 They would have snapped asunder withes and bands. (*Inf.* XIX)

After his apostasy, Ferreira took the Japanese name Sawano Chuan. He was reportedly present at the interrogations of Japanese Christians, and he is said to have written a tract called *A Disclosure of Falsehoods* that criticized the Catholic faith (see Dougill 2015: 143–4). The record of the real Ferreira's burial was destroyed when the atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki in 1945, but there were Chinese sailors at Macao who 'testified that prior to his death he had revoked his apostasy, dying a martyr's death in that pit which had previously conquered him' (in Endo 1969: xiii) although there is no other evidence to support this assertion. Taking this story as a foundation, Endo adds the fictional characters of the young Jesuit priests Francisco Garupe and Sebastian Rodrigues, who travel to Japan to discover the fate of Ferreira, who was once their highly regarded teacher.

The film opens with the sound of insects, reaching a deafening crescendo before falling into silence. It evokes the description of Scorsese's experience of a Catholic retreat when he was a teenager: 'I was also a city boy, so anything in the country, a noise, seemed scary. It became like an auditory hallucination where I heard crickets that got louder and louder and louder until they made me feel like I was going to burst' (in Keyser 1992: 21). The cut to silence in the auditorium is dramatic. It is then that a Dantean vision appears on screen. In Canto XXXI of *Inferno*, the poet writes:

As, when the fog is vanishing away,
 Little by little doth the sight refigure
 Whate'er the mist that crowds the air conceals,
 So, piercing through the dense and darksome air,
 More and more near approaching tow'rd the verge,
 My error fled, and fear came over me.

In the opening scene of *Silence*, terrifying forms of human suffering emerge through the mist as decapitated heads gradually come into view. Ferreira (Liam Neeson) is led into the scene of horror, so that his vantage point initially reflects that of the cinema audience. The first words in English are spoken by one of the prisoners – ‘Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ’ – as five men are being tortured.

Dante had envisaged the wicked souls in his *Inferno* suffering in scalding water:

We with our faithful escort onward moved
Along the brink of the vermillion boiling,
Wherein the boiled were uttering loud laments. (*Inf.* XII)

In *Silence*, the boiling water is dripped onto the prisoners’ flesh through ladles filled with holes so that the liquid pours out more slowly and painfully, and a priest cries out in anguish as his skin is burnt red. When the victims are taken down from the stakes, the action evokes a Deposition scene in a New Testament film in which Jesus’s body is lifted down from the cross.

In Scorsese’s first full-length film, *Who’s That Knocking at My Door*, the central protagonist J.R. enters St Patrick’s Old Cathedral and the camera focuses on the wounded bodies of the plaster statues of the saints. There is St Lucia (**Figure 1.1**) with her eyeballs on a plate – a popular female martyr who reportedly plucked

Figure 1.1 The statue of St Lucia in St Patrick’s Old Cathedral – an image of sainthood in *Who’s That Knocking at My Door*.

out her own eyes rather than renounce her vow of chastity; and the *Pietà*, in which the Virgin Mary holds the corpse of Jesus in her arms. In *Silence* Scorsese is now depicting the living flesh of the future saints (as a person may be canonized who has died for the Catholic faith) in the throes of martyrdom. The voice-over of Ferreira underlines the horror: 'The Japanese call them "hells," partly I think in mockery, and partly, I must tell you, in truth.' The obvious irony of the 'Hell' revealed in *Silence* is that the people writhing in torment are devout Christians, rather than 'the damned' who fill Dante's *Inferno*. Ferreira recounts: 'Some remained on the mountain for thirty-three days.' The gruesome images in *Silence* are not purely the result of Endo's and Scorsese's fantasy but are inspired by historical records that confirm that thirty-three Christian prisoners were killed and sixty others tortured (Dougill 2015: 110) in the boiling waters (120 degrees) of Unzen between 1627 and 1633.

However, Scorsese's own version of misery is not restricted to such obvious scenes of torment, as Hell may take many different forms in the human imagination. Tony's Bar, which is a primary location in *Mean Streets*, has been described by many critics as a hellish setting with its predominantly red lighting. In fact, Michael Powell – whose use of colour in *The Red Shoes* (Powell and Pressburger 1948) had inspired Scorsese – actually wrote to the director and told him that he 'had used too much red' (in Stern 1995: 18). When Charlie (Harvey Keitel) enters the bar with his hands raised in a mock priestly blessing, the mobile camera ensures that 'we begin to feel drunk and dislocated ourselves, as if we were under water in a red grotto or gliding around one of the upper circles of hell' (Denby 2005: 38). The environment has an air of immorality, ranging from the picture of a nude woman amid a background of leaves – an Eve-type figure who symbolizes temptation – to the semi-naked dancing girls whom Charlie joins on stage with a finger-clicking swagger. George the bouncer is walking around with a flashlight, as an indication that illicit acts may be taking place in the even darker shadows.

In the Book of Job 'the netherworld is characterized primarily by extreme darkness' (Balthasar 1988: 180), and the fear of a place of 'outer darkness' is continued in the New Testament (Mt. 8.12; 22.11-14; 25.30). In Scorsese's films an infernal environment may be represented by the low-lit rooms in which gangsters plan their murders in *Casino*; the rainy streets of Manhattan at night in *After Hours* (1985); the screening room into which Howard Hughes (Leonardo DiCaprio) is pursued by his demons in *The Aviator* (2004); or the stormy river that serves as the climactic location in *Cape Fear*, when the cinematographer Freddie Francis had to use 'customer's moonlight' so that he

could make the scenes ‘absolutely pitch black but so that everybody can see it’ (in Stern 1995: 199).

Nevertheless, Scorsese’s hellish settings are, arrestingly, not always dark: indeed, Murray Pomerance argues that ‘when his narratives do not fill nocturnal moments they are structured furtively, as though they do’ (Pomerance 2015: 313). Hell may be represented by the cold, grey housing estate in suburbia in *GoodFellas* to which Henry Hill (Ray Liotta) is exiled as part of the Witness Protection Programme when he gives evidence against his fellow gangsters; the dazzling lights of a casino in Las Vegas; the Five Points in *Gangs of New York* where Protestants and Catholics strive to slaughter each other in daylight in the inappropriately named Paradise Square in nineteenth-century New York; or the illuminated trading floor of Stratton Oakmont, the stockbroker firm owned by Jordan Belfort in *The Wolf of Wall Street*.

Notably, given Scorsese’s Italian heritage, one of the entrances to the Underworld was believed to be Mount Etna and ‘sailing to Sicily’ became a euphemistic term for going to Hell (Turner 1993: 102). Consequently, the animated work of art featuring a volcano on the wall of the drug den in *Bringing Out the Dead* provides a suitable backdrop for the ‘trips’ that are experienced in its vicinity, given that the effect of drug taking is often compared to a voyage into an otherworld – an adventure that is captured in Rimbaud’s poem ‘Le Bateau ivre’ in which the poet loses ‘control of his vomit-stained body, his boat, to the drug or drink which carries him higher and faster down the river’ (Turner 1993: 229). It is an image that recalls Henry Hill’s sweat-stained face in his drug-fuelled panic as he drives through the streets in *GoodFellas* in fear of arrest, pursued by a helicopter; or Jordan Belfort’s uncoordinated attempt to crawl down the steps to reach his Lamborghini and careen home from the Country Club while high on Quaaludes in *The Wolf of Wall Street*.

The boat journeys through the mist made in daylight by (supposed US Marshal) Teddy Daniels (Leonardo DiCaprio) to the asylum in *Shutter Island* and by the Jesuit priest, Rodrigues, at night in *Silence* are also reminiscent of images of the mythical Charon, who cries, ‘Woe unto you, ye souls depraved!’ and transports the dead across the river in Dante’s *Inferno*:

Hope nevermore to look upon the heavens;
I come to lead you to the other shore,
To the eternal shades in heat and frost. (*Inf.* III)

Scorsese manages to fuse these elements together in *Silence* with a threatening drum beat that accompanies Rodrigues as he is rowed through the darkness to

the Japanese island of Goto. The sense of fear that Rodrigues feels is reflected in the anxiety of Dante's Pilgrim in Canto VIII:

My Guide descended down into the boat,
 And then he made me enter after him,
 And only when I entered seemed it laden.
 Soon as the Guide and I were in the boat,
 The antique prow goes on its way, dividing
 More of the water than 'tis wont with others.
 While we were running through the dead canal,
 Uprose in front of me one full of mire,
 And said, 'Who 'rt thou that comest ere the hour?'
 And I to him: 'Although I come, I stay not;
 But who art thou that hast become so squalid?'
 'Thou seest that I am one who weeps,' he answered.
 And I to him: 'With weeping and with wailing,
 Thou spirit maledict, do thou remain;
 For thee I know, though thou art all defiled.'
 Then stretched he both his hands unto the boat;
 Whereat my wary Master thrust him back,
 Saying, 'Away there with the other dogs!'

When a group of Japanese men appear in the sea in *Silence*, reaching out their hands towards his boat through the mist, Rodrigues is likewise afraid. It is only when the strangers make the sign of the cross, clinging onto the side of the boat, that the priest realizes that they have come to welcome him.

On Rodrigues's second journey to the islands when he is fleeing for his life, his fear is intensified: 'Father in Heaven, praised be Your name. I'm just a foreigner who brought disaster. That's what they think of me now.' Reynolds points out that a 'tale of a journey across the sea to an unknown island was almost as widespread in folklore as the tale of the underground journey into Hell' (2006: 245). When Rodrigues arrives on the beach he cuts a lonely figure, as if shipwrecked (**Figure 1.2**).

The opening shots of *Taxi Driver*, in which the taxicab emerges through the steam, offer a twentieth-century version of this watery journey. The river Styx of Dante's *Inferno* is replaced by the city streets as Travis Bickle drives the shadowy passengers through New York in the 1970s, and dollar bills and a ticking meter substitute the payment given to the mythical boatman. In the legend of Charon,

Figure 1.2 Rodrigues's hellish journey to Goto in *Silence*.

'one had to pay him a coin or be condemned to wander the banks for a hundred years' (see Wernblad 2011: 60); and the failure of Paul Hackett (Griffin Dunne) to pay his fare, when his \$20 flies out the taxi window, certainly appears to sentence him to roam through the dark, rain-soaked streets of SoHo in *After Hours* in which the clouds of steam that escape from the pavement would indicate 'that Hades lurks just below the field of vision' (Ebert 2008: 82).

In Dante's *Inferno* there are also desert sands that might evoke the terrain of Nevada, with the twinkling lights of Las Vegas in *Casino* as 'a glittering, festering latterday Babylon' (Christie 1999: 222). Sam Rothstein, who runs the casino called The Tangiers, describes the city as a 'morality car wash' that reportedly promises its own form of healing as 'Lourdes does for hunchbacks and cripples'. However, his vision of 'paradise on earth' is darkened when events take a downward turn and Las Vegas is transformed into 'Sodom and Gomorrah' (Christie 1999: 224) from his own perspective, as well as for the ordinary people who are liberated from their cash – a fate undergone by some of the residents of Dante's Hell:

Man may lay violent hands upon himself
 And his own goods; and therefore in the second
 Round must perforce without avail repent
 Whoever of your world deprives himself,
 Who games, and dissipates his property,
 And weepeth there, where he should jocund be. (*Inf.* XI)

At the end of *Casino*, there is an image of ruination as the old gambling houses are razed to the ground – not by fire and brimstone and the wrath of God but by

Figure 1.3 The world of Stratton Oakmont: Heaven or Hell in *The Wolf of Wall Street*?

the developers. Scorsese saw the scene in apocalyptic terms: 'I'm not asking you to agree with the morality – but there was the sense of an empire that had been lost, and it needed music worthy of that. The destruction of that city has to have the grandeur of Lucifer being expelled from heaven for being too proud. Those are all pretty obvious biblical references' (in Christie 1999: 332–3).

Controversially, the stockbrokers appear to be having a whale of a time in *The Wolf of Wall Street* during their bacchanalian dwarf-tossing contest in the offices of Stratton Oakmont. In his autobiography, the 'real' Jordan Belfort describes his firm as 'a little slice of heaven on earth' (2007: 51). Yet, when his onscreen manifestation, Leonardo DiCaprio, takes to the microphone to rally his troops during his weekly 'act of debauchery', the entwined bodies of his employees (**Figure 1.3**) are eerily reminiscent of the suffering souls who writhe in agony in Dante's *Inferno*:

Of naked souls beheld I many herds,
Who all were weeping very miserably,
And over them seemed set a law diverse.

Supine upon the ground some folk were lying;
And some were sitting all drawn up together,
And others went about continually. (*Inf.* XIV)

When Belfort travels to Geneva to hide his ill-gotten gains, he is informed by the Swiss banker Jean Jacques Saurel (Jean Dujardin), 'From a financial standpoint, you are now in heaven' – although he is carrying out the type of fraud that would see him condemned to the lower reaches of Dante's *Inferno*. In the words of John Milton in *Paradise Lost* (1667): 'The mind is its own place, and in itself/Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n' (2003: 9).

Fire

According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, ‘Immediately after death the souls of those who die in a state of mortal sin descend into hell, where they suffer the punishments of hell, “eternal fire”’ (1993: 1035). Fire is obviously a common dimension in the Underworld and the ‘pool of fire’ in the Book of Revelation (19.20, 20.10, 21.8) is a memorable image for Christians. The New Testament has several descriptions of Hell fire (Mt. 5.22) and of the unquenchable fire (Mk 9.43). In *City of God*, St Augustine wrote of ‘a lake of fire and brimstone’, and Thomas Aquinas also preached ‘a real fiery Hell with physical torments’ (Turner 1993: 89). In his own era, Dante would have seen public executions, including death by fire, as his Pilgrim will recall later when he reaches *Purgatorio*:

Upon my clasped hands I straightened me,
Scanning the fire, and vividly recalling
The human bodies I had once seen burned. (*Purg.* XXVII)

Given that Scorsese was raised in the pre-Vatican II era, it is the ‘fire and brimstone’ motif once popular in Catholic preaching that marked his early years. The apparitions of the Virgin Mary to three children at Fatima in Portugal in 1917 were a powerful tool for Catholic sermons, given that the young seers had a terrifying vision of Hell as ‘a sea of fire. Plunged in this fire were demons and souls in human form like transparent burning embers, all blackened or burnished bronze, floating about in the conflagration’ (in Apostoli 2010: 60). These Marian visionaries provided Catholics with a new prayer (‘Save us from the fires of Hell’) to add to the traditional Rosary devotion, as well as a warning from the Virgin Mary about the Soviet threat: ‘If my requests are heeded, Russia will be converted, and there will be peace; if not she will spread her errors throughout the world, causing wars and persecutions of the Church’ (in Apostoli 2010: 74).

During the air raid drills in the Cold War era, the pupils at Scorsese’s school would take shelter in the catacombs under St Patrick’s Old Cathedral and pray the Rosary. After the Second World War, nuclear attack remained a genuine concern for American citizens – ‘We were told that this was what the fire of Hell would be like,’ explains Scorsese (in Keyser 1992: 8) – with evidence of the effects of atomic weapons being fresh in the memory. In *Kundun*, the young Dalai Lama watches footage of the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and hears the news reporter repeat the words of a scientist: ‘An atom bomb explosion is the nearest thing to doomsday one could possibly imagine.’

As a young boy, Scorsese would observe the world from his apartment's outdoor fire escape – a practical metal structure that is notable in New York tenements as a visual reminder of the danger of fire in confined spaces. Indeed, conflagration is a repeated theme in Scorsese's filmography, beginning with his Roman-epic-inspired amateur effort entitled *Vesuvius VI* (1959) in which his friends performed in togas made of bed sheets. Reportedly, the words 'Directed by Martin Scorsese' in the credits ignited in flames – a special effect that was created on (and unsurprisingly damaged) a coffee table (see LoBrutto 2007: 57). In the treatment for the uncompleted *Jerusalem, Jerusalem!* there is a priest who delivers a sermon on the dangers of sex before marriage, relating the tragic tale of a young engaged couple who give in to their sexual urges two weeks before their wedding and are killed while making love in a car: 'As fate would have it, the trucks collided, sliding an infernal mass of flames into the car parked on the side of the road. The young couple was killed ... burned to death in each other's arms.' If the film had been made, the sermon would have been accompanied by shots of 'a conglomeration of flame and steel and what we can make out of two writhing flaming bodies' (in Kelly 1980: 53–4). Instead, the priest's warning becomes an anecdote in *Mean Streets* that reveals Charlie's struggles with his Catholic faith. Pauline Kael looks at the gangsters in *Mean Streets* and thinks: 'They know they're going to burn in eternity, so why should they think about things that are depressing?' (in Kelly 1980: 166).

Throughout Scorsese's filmography, the fiery concept develops with variations in scale and intensity, ranging from the small votive candles in *Who's That Knocking at My Door* to the burning pyres on which Christians are executed in *Silence*. When storyboards were released before the completion of *Silence*, it was noticeable that flames figured prominently in the main apostasy scene. In Scorsese's second full-length feature, the exploitation movie *Boxcar Bertha* (1972), one of the characters named Rake (Barry Primus) sets fire to his drink and his associate, Bill (David Carradine), blows out the flame – an action that is also taken up in *Mean Streets* by Charlie, who is clearly concerned by thoughts of the pain of Hell. Standing in a church, Charlie reaches out and touches a candle flame with his finger (**Figure 1.4**) as a reminder of the physical suffering that is to come if his vision of Hell turns out to be real: 'The burn from a lighted match increased a million times. Infinite. Now you don't fuck around with the infinite. There's no way you do that.' (As an aside: the interior scene appears to have been shot in St Joseph's Church at 218 E 12th Street Los Angeles, which burnt down in September 1983, adding a fiery footnote (see Metzler 1983).)

Figure 1.4 Charlie ponders on the fires of Hell in *Mean Streets*.

Charlie goes on to explain a key distinction: ‘The pain in hell has two sides: the kind you can touch with your hand; the kind you can feel in your heart’; and his voice continues: ‘Your soul, the spiritual side. And you know, the worst of the two is the spiritual.’ The theme persists throughout the film: Charlie will later torment himself by holding his hand over an open flame in a restaurant kitchen; and he goes to the cinema with Johnny Boy (Robert De Niro) and watches *The Tomb of Ligeia* (a Roger Corman film starring Vincent Price) in which fire also features.

While the concentration on Hell fire ‘probably comes from [James] Joyce. But we did hear sermons like that – the sermons about sex, for instance’ (in Schickel 2013), Scorsese reveals that the idea for Travis to burn his arm over a flame as he gets into training in *Taxi Driver* came from screenwriter Paul Schrader. Scorsese himself admits: ‘You see, that’s why I said it’s almost as if I’d written it. He’s a Calvinist and I’m a Roman Catholic – it’s very interesting’ (in Morrison 2005: 74). Travis will create his own hellish environment in his living space when he sets fire to the flowers that were ‘returned to sender’ by his (very short-lived) girlfriend Betsy (Cybill Shepherd), while Howard Hughes will burn his clothes when Katharine Hepburn (Cate Blanchett) eventually ends their relationship. The fires of cremation are an outer manifestation of the men’s inner torment. There is also an image of singed flesh that finds an outlet in *After Hours* when Paul Hackett meets a young woman named Marcy (Rosanna Arquette) whose skin is reportedly covered in burn marks. As Paul massages the shoulders of Marcy’s roommate, Kiki (Linda Fiorentino), he recounts a childhood memory of a visit to a hospital Burn

Ward when he was forced to wear a blindfold, but he uncovered his eyes and saw ... (Frustratingly, the audience never finds out as his massage has sent Kiki to sleep.)

In *Cape Fear* the central antagonist, Max Cady, is set alight with lighter fluid in the climactic scene on a boat, so that he jumps into the river to extinguish the flames. In the story of paramedic Frank Pierce, *Bringing Out the Dead*, the ambulance dispatcher (voiced by Scorsese himself) reads the list of current cases over the radio, including a man who has unfortunately 'set his pants on fire' in the men's room at Grand Central (although the background to this incident is never revealed but it is presumed that the patient was wearing his trousers at the time if an ambulance is required). More poignantly, Hugo's father is killed in an accidental fire at the museum in the children's film *Hugo* (2011), leaving his child an orphan.

While the pain of burnt skin was touched upon in *Mean Streets*, death by fire reaches an apogee in *Silence* as burning alive was a common form of execution for the Christians in seventeenth-century Japan. The victims were sometimes loosely tied in the hope that they would 'jump and hop around in a ludicrous manner' for the amusement of the spectators (Boxer 1993: 349). When the priest's Japanese guide, Kichijiro (Yosuke Kubozuka), reveals that his family (unlike himself) had refused to renounce their faith, the audience sees one of his relatives tortured in this way, while the others are fastened to a stake or bound in straw mats and set alight. Having stayed to witness the death of his loved ones, Kichijiro remembers the horror of the scene: 'Wherever I go, I see the fire and smell the flesh.'

Like John Martin, who illustrated the works of John Milton, Scorsese manages to convey 'the sense of vast underground gloom lit by dim fires but all somehow enclosed' (Turner 1993: 188) at the beginning of *GoodFellas*. There is a reddish ambience when the gangsters are engaged in criminal activity at night, which points to the use of red as 'an obvious reference to blood and hell ... but it is also used to establish a theme of carnality and ruthlessness' (Ennis 2015: 193). In *Inferno*, Virgil tells the Pilgrim:

But fix thine eyes below; for draweth near
The river of blood, within which boiling is
Who'er by violence doth injure others. (*Inf.* XII)

There is a sense of this fiery bloodbath in the opening scene of *GoodFellas*, which serves as a flash forward to the burial of gangster Billy Batts (Frank Vincent). At first there appears to be life after death when Henry and his friends hear sounds coming from the boot of the car in which the body of the (supposedly)

murdered man is stowed. There is a red glow on Henry's face as he explains, 'As far back as I can remember I always wanted to be a gangster,' so that there is an incongruity between the appalling violence (as Batts is stabbed and shot) and The Dream (better than being president) alongside the lyrics of a song about 'rags to riches'.

It later becomes clear that during his early forays into crime in *GoodFellas*, Henry is often accompanied by smoke and flames as he pours petrol into the cabs owned by business rivals and sets them alight; or when he burns the Bamboo Lounge to the ground for the insurance. Harry Nilsson's song 'Jump into the Fire' is heard during Henry's last day as a wiseguy as an appropriate musical accompaniment. The horror will be magnified when Henry has to unearth the putrid body of Batts at a later stage – a nauseating event that evokes the stench from the tomb when Jesus raises Lazarus in *The Last Temptation of Christ* but without the attendant miracle resurrection. Terrible smells are an unpleasant and memorable feature of the journey through Dante's *Inferno*.

In *Casino* there are many religious references, including the Holy of Holies (the Count Room), but in this shiny, glittering Hell the fires burst forth unexpectedly. Sometimes there are figurative explosions of anger by Nicky (thereby recalling the violent outbursts of Tommy in *GoodFellas*). However, there is also a literal fire caused by the car bomb that appears to kill Sam 'Ace' Rothstein at the start. Giuliana Muscio claims that the fiery flames in the opening credits indicate 'both the director's obsession with the flames of hell of his Catholic upbringing and of the impersonal yet pulsating new world of gambling of the 1980s' (2015: 269). The vision of flames is accompanied by Bach's *St Matthew Passion* so that 'a tumultuous drama of crime, love, money, and violence becomes a heartfelt religious allegory' (Sterritt 2015: 99). In *The Aviator* Howard Hughes escapes from the flames that dramatically engulf his plane but, like Sam Rothstein, his delayed entry into the Afterlife does not leave him in an earthly paradisiacal existence.

The city as inferno

Dante's Lower Hell is a city called Dis that creates a landscape made up of towers, gates and bridges in which there are eternal flames. In *Gangs of New York*, the final image of the Twin Towers has an additional poignancy, given that the buildings were destroyed in tragic circumstances with ostensibly a religious cause at the heart of the terrorist act. The visual effects supervisor, Michael Owens, reveals

that there was some debate about what to do with this image (i.e. 'including no towers, having the towers be there and then fade out, and cutting the shot entirely') as the film was to be released after the attack: 'The movie is not about September 11; it's about New York City and its people, and about how those two entities made it what it was at that time' (in Kredell 2015: 350).

The Jesuits – whose connection with Scorsese is evidently seen most clearly in *Silence* – played a part in changing the scenery of Hell by adding 'urban squalor' (Turner 1993: 173). One of the most vivid images of misery is seen in *Gangs of New York* when the camera pulls back to reveal 'the inside of a tenement, with families stacked on top of one another in rooms like shelves' (Ebert 2008: 237), or enters into the catacombs below the city. There is an operatic scale that brings home the extent of the suffering for the poor citizens in the Bowery.

Scorsese has explained that he experienced himself the poverty-stricken area of the Lower East Side but that the situation had been much worse in the past: 'Elizabeth Street at the turn-of-the-century was noted in New York as the highest rate of infant mortality, and that was because of cholera and all these diseases. ... And there was an underworld element that was there that was brought over from the old world' (in Martin 2016). In the film, these labyrinthine caves are revealed as a 'torch-lit Hades' (Ebert 2008: 235). Amsterdam Vallon (Leonardo DiCaprio) leaves this Underworld to be incarcerated in the Hellgate House of Reform. It is an environment in which people have the kind of 'eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth' mentality (Mt. 5.38) that runs counter to Christian teaching.

In exploring ideas about the Afterlife, Turner also indicates the influence of William Blake, who presented 'the negative side of the industrial revolution; in "London" and "Jerusalem" the city slums are represented as Hell for the neglected poor' (Turner 1993: 222). The presence of unlicensed animals in cages in the bar in *Mean Streets* provokes an oblique reference to Blake's poetry – Tony (David Proval) wanted a tiger because of 'William Blake and all that' – and serves as 'the infernal image of beings trying desperately to break out, but remaining, in the end, trapped by what surrounds them' (in Kelly 1980: 151). The fact that Tony's bar is called 'Volpe's' (the Italian for a fox) continues the animal theme.

Prue Shaw (2014) notes the influence 'of the moral squalor of Florence' in 1300 in Dante's description of Upper Hell: 'The gluttons lie on the ground under a relentless barrage of icy rain, hail and snow. The ground they lie on stinks.' A Scorsese audience might easily think of New York here as represented in *Taxi Driver* or *Bringing Out the Dead*, given that the latter film (released in 1999) is set in an earlier era before there was an effort to cleanse the streets in the 1990s

by Mayor Rudy Giuliani, so that the impression remains of 'a moral and spiritual rollercoaster ride' through the urban inferno (see Jolly 2005: 241). Dante's Pilgrim is also struck by misery that awaits him:

Soon as I was within, cast round mine eye,
And see on every hand an ample plain,
Full of distress and torment terrible. (*Inf.* IX)

Commenting on the shooting of *Taxi Driver* on its fortieth anniversary in 2015, Scorsese recalled a headline in the *Daily News* in 1975: 'Ford to City: Drop Dead.' He explained: 'Apparently, the city felt like it was falling apart, there was garbage everywhere, and for someone like Travis, who's come from the Midwest, the New York of the mid-'70s would *be* hell – [that] must have prompted visions of hell in his mind. But one thing I can tell you: We didn't have to "dress" the city to make it look hellish' (in Ebiri 2015). The taxi in *Taxi Driver* has also been compared to 'the snout of a huge beast rising up out of some subterranean lair' (Stern 1995: 47), prowling through the streets, with the grill forming its angry jaws; and sometimes the streets are observed through the 'eyes' of the Taxi as there is no windscreen to distort the audience's view. Travis reports in voice-over that 'the animals come out at night,' but here he means human beings, making no distinction between prostitutes, drug addicts and homosexuals in his condemnatory comments about his surroundings.

Paul Schrader envisioned Travis Bickle 'as a sort of a young man who wandered from the snowy waste of the midwest into an overheated New York cathedral. My own background was anti-Catholic in the style of the Reformation and the Glorious Revolution' (in Kelly 1996: 90). In the hands of Scorsese, the city becomes a tenebrous labyrinth, which the cinematographer Michael Chapman saw as 'a decadent vision of Catholicism'; while Scorsese himself remarked: 'I think there is also the sense of the camera sliding or crawling all through the streets, oozing with sin' (in Occhiogrosso 1987: 101). Travis describes New York as 'an open sewer' that is 'full of filth and scum' – the blood and semen that he wipes from the back seat of his vehicle are the residue of the sins of lust and violence that he appears to witness passively.

As the taxi makes its appearance accompanied by Bernard Herrmann's threatening music, the red glow of the light on the extreme close-up of Travis's eyes ensures that the hellish environment is certainly discernible. Jack Kroll remarks that Dante had a word for it: 'the city as inferno' (in Kelly 1980: 186). Pauline Kael noted that Travis 'hates New York with a Biblical fury: it gives off the stench of Hell, and its filth and smut obsess him' (in Kelly 1980: 183). Schickel

bucks the trend by remarking: 'The backgrounds against which [Travis] moves never transcend the documentary category, never fuse into an artful vision of urban hellishness' (in Kelly 1980: 189) – but it is a view with which most critics disagree.

'The Jesuit Hell was unbearably, suffocatingly, repulsively crowded' (Turner 1993: 173) – it is the Hell that is found in James Joyce. In *Taxi Driver*, the slow motion and distorted images of the coloured lights through the wet windscreen of the taxi offer a dream-like quality as if the vision is melting. The people crossing the New York streets are bathed in a red glow as if they, too, are in Hell; and the words 'Directed by Martin Scorsese' are imprinted against the red fog as if the filmmaker is also not immune to the danger. Later the taxi passes a cinema that is showing *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *The Return of the Dragon* – both violent films of death – while the neon lights spell out the word 'Fascination'. Despite the razzle-dazzle of Times Square, 'God's lonely man' is travelling through a world that he describes as 'sick, venal' and he hopes for the day that 'a real rain will come and wash all the scum off the streets'. But while the rain and water from the hydrants could be seen as cleansing, there is little sense that the situation has improved.

The steam is still visible on the screen as Travis enters the Taxi firm – as if to confirm that the office is part of a Dantean Hell. On the peeling wall there is advice about how to deal with personal injury accidents because, as in the *Inferno*, the pain never stops. In response to Travis's sleep deprivation, the Personnel officer suggests pornography rather than a healthy cure. Once out in the daylight after his shift, Travis avoids the sunshine and remains on the shady side of the street, and he goes to the cinema to see an X rated movie – seeking the darkness even during the day.

In *The Age of Innocence* set in nineteenth-century New York, Countess Ellen (Michelle Pfeiffer) expresses surprise at the idea that the city is 'a labyrinth', given that the design is supposedly so straight with the cross streets. However, 'Scorsese's New York films primarily take place within the tangled streets of old New York and the residential neighbourhoods of the outer boroughs. The meanness of Scorsese's streets can be read largely as a function of their opposition to the grid' (Kredell 2015: 336). As Robert Casillo remarks, Scorsese's audience has the opportunity to ponder on Prov. 2.15 and 21.8 that warn that 'the way of the guilty is crooked' (2006: 203).

Difficult journeys are a common theme. When the painting by Lionel Dobie (Nick Nolte) is finally revealed in *New York Stories: Life Lessons* (1989), the artist has created a darkened structure called *The Bridge to Nowhere* – another

construction that would cause delay. The streets of SoHo in *After Hours* are also transformed into a terrifying maze for Paul Hackett when he leaves his place of work in search of female company: 'You think you're going to heaven, but it's hell that awaits you!' explains Scorsese (in Wilson 2011: 123); and the director would cut repeatedly 'to extreme close-ups for no reason, just to build up paranoia and anxiety – total anxiety' (in Kelly 1996: 185). Paul has a feeling of entrapment and futility in his computer job, with its programs and codes; and it might be appropriate for the grand gates that lead into his office building to bear the sign found at the entrance to Dante's Hell: 'All hope abandon, ye who enter in!' (*Inf.* III).

Paul's outing to meet Marcy is beset by obstacles, just as in *The Divine Comedy* when Virgil and the Pilgrim are told (incorrectly) by one of the devils that one of the bridges has been broken as they cross the Malebolge in the eighth circle, lengthening their passage through the *Inferno*:

Then said to us: 'You can no farther go
Forward upon this crag, because is lying
All shattered, at the bottom, the sixth arch.
And if it still doth please you to go onward,
Pursue your way along upon this rock;
Near is another crag that yields a path.' (*Inf.* XXI)

The name 'Bridges' is crossed out on the intercom sign outside Marcy's apartment building despite the fact that Kiki Bridges is actually in residence. David Sterritt regards the events in *After Hours* as 'Paul's dark night of the soul' (2015: 100) and finds parallels with the myth of Orpheus, and James Joyce's *Ulysses* when Bloom follows Stephen Dedalus into Nighttown (Sterritt 2015: 101); while the story of Lot and his wife might provide a biblical reference (Sterritt 2015: 103). Indeed, the Old Testament link would fit with the idea of Paul as a twentieth-century Job, crying out, 'I wanted to meet a nice girl and now I've got to die for it.' Scorsese himself appears on screen operating a search light in the Club Berlin, playing his part in Paul's persecution: 'As in a medieval miracle play, I put him through torture,' explained the director (in Wilson 2011: 124). Yet, while Scorsese was 'engaged by the game, the trap, the maze' of *After Hours* (in Stern 1995: 74), the filming was having a cathartic effect off screen. Amy Robinson, one of the producers, saw the film as 'a creative way for Marty to exorcise his demons' (in Kelly 1996: 189) after the aborted attempt to make *The Last Temptation of Christ* in 1983; and Scorsese himself claimed, 'It's renewed my faith' (in Peachment 2005: 148).

Filming the Underworld

Dante once explained ‘that the need to find a rhyme never forced him to say something he had not intended to say, but that he made language do things it had not done before, things that other writers were not able to do’ (Shaw 2014). One might compare this approach with Scorsese’s efforts to capture a particular effect on screen, such as the overhead shot after the bloodbath in *Taxi Driver* in which the ceiling of the building was removed in order to position the camera; or when cinematographer Michael Ballhaus devised ‘a terrifyingly fast crane move’ to capture the keys falling through the air in *After Hours* (Ebert 2008: 86).

Scorsese’s films are, of course, admired for some particularly extended camerawork, including the Steadicam shot in *Casino* that takes the audience into the inner sanctum of The Tangiers to the theme of ‘Moonglow’. The fallout from the days in which the young Scorsese took refuge beneath St Patrick’s Old Cathedral in school drills to prepare for an atomic attack is clearly visible in his artistry: ‘The camera movement in a lot of my films certainly comes from creeping around those catacombs, with the sound effects of the echoing rosary’ (in Keyser 1992: 8). Indeed, Robert Kolker argues that Scorsese’s films involve ‘constant movement, even if that movement is within a tightly circumscribed area that has no exit’ (2011: 189).

The common reference point for aficionados of Scorsese occurs in *GoodFellas*. In *The Divine Comedy* the precipitous journey through Hell on the back of the monster called Geryon is considered to be Dante’s ‘greatest feat so far in imaginative visualization’ (Reynolds 2006: 161):

I seated me upon those monstrous shoulders;
I wished to say, and yet the voice came not
As I believed, ‘Take heed that thou embrace me.’

But he, who other times had rescued me
In other peril, soon as I had mounted,
Within his arms encircled and sustained me,

And said: ‘Now, Geryon, bestir thyself;
The circles large, and the descent be little;
Think of the novel burden which thou hast.’

Even as the little vessel shoves from shore,
Backward, still backward, so he thence withdrew;
And when he wholly felt himself afloat,

There where his breast had been he turned his tail,
And that extended like an eel he moved,
And with his paws drew to himself the air. (*Inf.* XVII)

One might compare this famous descent to the celebrated tracking shot as Henry and his girlfriend Karen (Lorraine Bracco) enter the Copacabana that forms part of a moral downward spiral.

Scorsese describes the Copacabana as ‘the top of the line for Henry – it was Valhalla’ (in Schickel 2013); and the extended sequence ‘is not simply a cameraman’s stunt, but an inspired way to show how the whole world seems to unfold effortlessly before young Henry Hill’ (Ebert 2008: 282). When Karen is whisked through the kitchen on her date with Henry, the audience is rightly enthused by the magnificent Steadicam shot by Larry McConkey just as the young woman is dazed by the speed, the warm greetings, the slick exchange of gratuities and the apparent smoothness of her *beau*. However, while the spectator is justifiably impressed by the filmmaker’s technical prowess, Karen is erroneously blinded by Henry’s *modus operandi*. Perhaps a truly significant player would have led his girlfriend to the front of the queue ‘above ground’ (as happens in the aforementioned Scorsese tribute in *The Sopranos*), rather than guided her through the service entrance past the mural of a tropical paradise (a pale echo of the Garden of Eden). (**Figure 1.5**) They enter the subterranean passages and witness a man eating his sandwich, a couple canoodling in the shadows, and the ‘behind the scenes’ kitchen with its heat and aromas. It was

Figure 1.5 The entrance to the Underworld in *GoodFellas*.

reportedly Michael Ballhaus who suggested that the actors go into the kitchen because 'the light is beautiful'; and McConkey points out that they 'structured events within the shot that covered the limitations of not being able to cut in order to give it pace and timing' (in Mulcahey 2015). The young woman is entering a murky world in which the snowy white cloth that covers the table is a misleading sign of purity. *GoodFellas* foregrounds 'an ironic disjuncture' (Haggins 2015: 446) through the use of voice-over; and 'Karen's experience of being drawn to Henry parallels the spectator's attraction to this cinematic world' (Haggins 2015: 449). After Henry marries Karen, her seat will be taken by another woman on Friday/girlfriend nights and one act of deception leads to another. Scorsese himself admits that the film had 'the sense of going on a ride, some sort of crazed amusement-park ride, going through the Underworld, in a way' (in Smith 1999a: 155), and the Copacabana is the entry point for Karen.

There are many 'cells' within Scorsese's filmography, offering further entrapment within the outer hellish setting. The camera pans around Travis Bickle's accommodation as he writes his diary in *Taxi Driver*, taking note of the door that is covered with cracks and scratches, the bars at the window and the bare light bulb. Later, the young prostitute Iris (Jodie Foster) takes Travis into a building with a narrow stairway and dingy walls covered with graffiti, and he has to pay an additional \$10 to the Gatekeeper if he wishes to rent a room for sex. Paul is encased in papier-mâché in *After Hours*, as if he is buried alive. In *GoodFellas*, Tommy thinks that he is to become a 'made man' but he is taken to a basement and shot in the head as revenge for the murder of Billy Batts, with the wood panelling on the walls prefiguring his coffin; and in *Casino* Nicky is buried in a hole in the desert by the men he once considered to be his friends.

While Travis, Paul, Tommy and Nicky are supposedly free men, there are several protagonists who find themselves officially incarcerated in Scorsese's filmography from *It's Not Just You, Murray!* onwards, including *The Last Temptation of Christ*, *Cape Fear*, *The Departed* and *Hugo*. Some prison cells are more appealing than the others. In *GoodFellas* the gangsters live a comfortable life, bribing the guards and dining on supplies that Karen smuggles in under her coat. Indeed, one of the criticisms of Scorsese's treatment of the stockbrokers in *The Wolf of Wall Street* is that Jordan Belfort's incarceration appears to take place at a tennis club.

However, there are examples of more terrifying forms of captivity, evoked by the period of paranoia during the McCarthy era that overhangs *Shutter Island*, in which the criminally insane are sent to Ashcliffe hospital. Its gloom is enhanced

by the threatening music, the oncoming storm and the fact that there is only one way on and off via the dock. Teddy and his 'partner' Chuck Aule (Mark Ruffalo) pass a cemetery with a broken sign: 'Remember us for we too have lived, loved and laughed' – an inscription that would not be out of place in Dante, where the sixth circle of Hell looks like a cemetery:

The sepulchres make all the place uneven;
 So likewise did they there on every side,
 Saving that there the manner was more bitter;
 For flames between the sepulchres were scattered,
 By which they so intensely heated were,
 That iron more so asks not any art. (*Inf.* IX)

Teddy notices the electrified perimeter and remarks that he has 'seen something like it before.' The archways and iron gates would certainly evoke a concentration camp (which Teddy saw during his wartime service) as well as the city of Dis in *The Divine Comedy*. In *Shutter Island* the most dangerous patients are held in Ward C, an old Civil War fort made of grey stone that looks like a prison rather than a hospital, and the groaning of the inmates recalls the misery in Dante's *Inferno*:

And now begin the dolesome notes to grow
 Audible unto me; now am I come
 There where much lamentation strikes upon me. (*Inf.* V)

Sometimes the incarceration is self-imposed, as in *The Aviator* when Howard Hughes's mother feeds her fear of infection with her own rules on quarantine; or when her adult son locks himself away in his screening room with his bottles of urine. In the novel of *Silence*, Endo's description of Rodrigues in prison could relate to the appearance of Howard Hughes at his lowest ebb: 'Now he felt more keenly than ever what a vagabond he was, his hair and beard grown long, the flesh hanging loose around his bones, his arms thin like needles' (Endo 1969: 103). However in comparison to the self-inflicted trauma endured by the billionaire, there is the terrible (and sometimes terrifying) environment of the onscreen jail in which Rodrigues is held in *Silence*, although it does not manifest the full horror contained in the historical reports that the Japanese prisons were the scenes of death from hunger and disease: 'There was no wind or breeze which could penetrate the dank and dark central cage, so that the heat and stench were insupportable' (Boxer 1993: 349).

Gnosticism offered the belief that human beings are in Hell 'even as they proceed about their daily life' by drawing on the myth of Sophia, a misguided angel who tried to imitate God and, consequently, gave birth to the Demiurge or Lower God who created the troubled planet on which we reside (Turner 1993: 46–7). While Scorsese does not wander down that kind of heretical route, which suggests that the world is under the power of the devil, he provides many memorable examples of 'Hell on earth'.