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Excessive Love

And if, when turned, towards it she incline,
 Love is that inclination; it is nature,
 Which is by pleasure bound in you anew
 Then even as the fire doth upward move
 By its own form, which to ascend is born,
 Where longest in its matter it endures,
 So comes the captive soul into desire,
 Which is a motion spiritual, and ne'er rests
 Until she doth enjoy the thing beloved. (*Purg.* XVIII)

Lust and avarice

In the treatment for Scorsese's uncompleted project entitled *Jerusalem, Jerusalem!* J.R. goes to confession and works up the courage to admit to 'self-impurities', and the boys are asked to write private petitions which should 'contain their resolutions for making their life more Christ-like' (in Kelly 1980: 44–5). When Scorsese was at school, the *Baltimore Catechism* was the summary of doctrine that Catholic pupils would have been taught, including entry 275: 'When do thoughts about impure things become sinful?' and the answer: 'Thoughts about impure things become sinful when a person thinks of an unchaste act and deliberately takes pleasure in so thinking, or when unchaste desire or passion is aroused and consent is given to it.' James Martin (2010a) asks, 'How many children who memorized the Baltimore Catechism concluded that spiritual life was not an invitation to a relationship from a loving God but a series of complicated rules from a tyrant God?'

Scorsese received an education that taught the doctrine of Original Sin which, in the theology of St Augustine, was linked 'inextricably with sex'

(Turner 1993: 79). Andrew Greeley argues that the sexual attitudes of St Augustine 'have done enormous harm. Moreover, his shabby treatment of his concubine when he decided to give up sexual pleasure shows him to be a chauvinist and a cad. It will not do to say, as Augustine's admirers argue, that his behavior must be judged in the context of his times. At no time and in no culture is it justified for a follower of Jesus to treat another human being that way' (Greeley 1990: 93).

In Scorsese's student production *What's a Nice Girl Like You Doing in a Place Like This?* (1963), the main protagonist Algernon/Harry (Zeph Michelis) sits at his typewriter to write his 'Confessions' – an exercise that St Augustine famously undertook and in which he included the celebrated prayer to the Lord: 'Give me chastity and self-control, but not just yet' (*Confessions* Book 8, IV:17). These sentiments might well have been appreciated by J.R. in *Who's That Knocking at My Door*, although (as with Charlie in *Mean Streets*) there is no certain indication that he will mend his ways and become a saint in later life.

According to Andrew Greeley: 'In theory Catholicism says that sex is good, but in practice the Church has yet to shake the Platonist notion that sex is dirty' (Greeley 2000: 57). It is a theme that Scorsese has addressed in his films, admitting that there is a lot of Catholicism in 'the sexual aspects' of *After Hours* (in Occhiogrosso 1987: 100) in which Paul is 'privy to a secret he is far too naïve to comprehend' (Keyser 1992:152). He has eaten the apple of the Tree of Knowledge and now he is going to suffer. In *Mean Streets* Charlie speaks of a dream in which he ejaculates blood over his lover Teresa, linking sex with death. As the couple lie together on white sheets – their arms outstretched in a semi-cruciform position – he explains that he will sleep with her but says he cannot love her. Ebert suggests 'that for Charlie the crimes of gangsters (extortion, beating, killing) were insignificant compared to crimes involving sex. He felt more guilt about his lust for the girl Teresa than for taking a man's restaurant, his family's livelihood, away from him' (2008: 13). Scorsese points out the guilt that Charlie feels because of his love for Teresa as well as Johnny: 'And so that, along with his own feelings about leading a spiritual life, he calls down upon himself a kind of suffering' (in Schickel 2013).

In *Jerusalem, Jerusalem!* J.R. listens to a sermon on hell and damnation – offering an intertextual link to James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, although it was only in retrospect that Scorsese read the book and realized, 'My God, it's the same thing' (in Lourdeaux 1990: 232). Scorsese's invented sermon is about 'Marriage and Sex' and includes the story of a young unmarried

couple (whom the priest claimed to have known all their lives) who were killed while having sex in a car. J.R. is then upset when his friend Mikey tells him that another priest recounted exactly the same event at a different retreat – revealing that it is ‘just a story’ rather than a personal recollection (as the priest indicated), and leaving him with a sense that he has been cheated.

The anecdote itself then eventually features in *Mean Streets* when Charlie and his friends discuss the retreat sermon as they play pool. Tony says that he had heard the story before from a different priest and, responding to Charlie’s dismay at this fact, adds that he has to understand that the Church is ‘a business. It’s work. It’s an organisation’. Charlie explains that he was angry because he had been told a lie by ‘guys’ who were ‘not supposed to be guys’. Scorsese was expressing ideas that would come more to the forefront in the paedophile scandals when respect for priests (once taken for granted in Catholic communities) would be undermined. The point is made crudely in *The Departed* by Frank Costello when the clerical collar is a target for ridicule in a narrative set in Boston – one of the cities in the United States in which the abuse cases came to light, as highlighted by the Investigative Staff of the *Boston Globe* (2002) and the film *Spotlight* (McCarthy, 2015). The honour once accorded to priests by the faithful – as witnessed by the arrival in Japan of Rodrigues and Garupe in *Silence* – has been dealt a blow in recent years.

Roger Ebert suggests that the story of the young couple in *Jerusalem, Jerusalem!* also helps to explain why J.R. is reluctant to have sex with the Girl in *Who’s That Knocking at My Door* (2008: 6). Alongside the narrative concerning J.R.’s unconsummated relationship with the Girl, the film also treats expressions of sexual desire among his friends, and attitudes towards women in general. When J.R. and the Girl discuss the merits of *Rio Bravo*, the Girl says that she liked Feathers (Angie Dickinson), whom J.R. denounces as ‘a broad’. Their conversation is suddenly interrupted by a sex scene, in which a naked J.R. is cavorting with attractive nude women in a loft apartment. During the encounter, J.R. lies stretched out on a bed in the centre of the room, so that he appears to have become a (willing) sacrifice at the hands of the women, with his smiling face indicating that he has no inhibitions. After sex, dressed in a waistcoat and tie, J.R. throws playing cards onto the woman on the bed as if to signal that he is ‘a player’.

On one level, the scene appears to be incongruous until it is explained that it was added as a moral compromise at the instigation of ‘soft porn’ distributor Joseph Brenner so that Scorsese could get wider exposure for his film. The episode was shot in Amsterdam and Scorsese had to smuggle the 16mm film

'through customs in the pockets of his raincoat' (Keyser 1992: 24) when he returned to the United States – so it would have been another reason to go to confession if Scorsese had still been a practising Catholic at the time.

As this scene was a late addition, Keitel clearly looks older than in the earlier episodes with his friends that were shot some time previously – but this fact fits well with the idea that it is a fantasy in J.R.'s head. In his reminiscences about meeting the Girl on the ferry, J.R. was never a smooth operator. It seems unlikely that the awkward fellow has been transformed into the confident man engaged in sex games (with French actress Anne Collette who had worked with Jean-Luc Godard, no less), except in his own imagination. It also raises the issue of how to distinguish between fantasy and fact in Scorsese's films – a theme that is addressed in *The King of Comedy* and, most obviously, *The Last Temptation of Christ*.

At another party in 'the real world', Gaga brings along Susie and Rosie, two 'broad' in the eyes of J.R. and his friends. The girls are in a bedroom and engaged in amorous activity (with a man each) while the others wait outside – in a manner that Scorsese will replicate in Magdalene's brothel in *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Treating the girls like prostitutes and believing that they are next in line for their services ('I Call First' was one of the original titles of the film), the young men become tired of waiting and launch an attack, causing the girls to leave in tears. *Who's That Knocking at My Door* is a form of Purgatory in which the protagonist reviews his imperfect life – with most of the imperfections connected to sex.

While the film was 'a movie about sexual repression in an age of sexual revolution' (Stewart 2014), Scorsese's next full-length feature was more in line with a spirit of sexual freedom. It is recorded that Dante's friend Guido Cavalcanti 'rebuked him in a sonnet for wasting his talents' (Reynolds 2006: 17), just as filmmaker John Cassavetes criticized Scorsese for making *Boxcar Bertha* according to producer Roger Corman's 'exploitation' rules that required regular nudity and violence in the narrative. It was a low-budget production that was filmed on a limited strip of railway track and, as Scorsese admitted, the audience may have had 'the impression that the railroad lines formed a closed loop! The characters are always in the same place, the way they are in a dream. It's very strange, this circularity' (in Wilson 2011: 33). It is evidently a visible indication that the protagonists are currently 'going nowhere' despite their attempts at forward motion.

Bertha (Barbara Hershey) is a good natured young woman who falls into a life of crime through misadventure and is deceived into joining a brothel

(at which Scorsese himself is a client who is willing to pay \$15 for company). Although she did not go to church much as a child, Bertha is happy to pretend to be a missionary (in comparison to the real missionaries in *Silence*) who has dedicated her life 'to the black heathens' in order to help her friends escape from prison. On another occasion, Bertha covers herself with stolen jewellery in an exhibition of playfulness that differs from the outright avarice that Ginger manifests in *Casino* when her eyes fall upon the expensive gifts with which Sam attempts to buy her affections.

Bertha is eager to protest her innocence as if aware that an account of her life may be recorded. She is keen to counter her bad reputation as a common whore, to claim that a shooting in which she was implicated was an accident, and that 'the other stuff's a lie'. The actions of Bertha and her compatriots are confused as they manifest examples of interracial harmony and outer acts of criminality. Bertha's lover Bill (David Carradine) sees himself as a Union man who gives his loot to the strike fund. Sartoris (played by John Carradine – the father of David Carradine in real life) is the patriarchal figure who owns the railroad and speaks of God: 'In the words of the Lord: I shall vomit forth that which is lukewarm'. The film contains several biblical references in the dialogue that Scorsese inserted himself (see Wilson 2011: 35). Sartoris suggests that Bill should not lay up 'treasures on earth', at which Bill shows himself familiar with the Bible by responding, 'Where thieves break through and steal.' However, Bill prefers to promulgate a kind of 'liberation theology' and 'a preferential option for the poor' in a world in which the rich 'are depicted as greedy, smug, and – through the activities of their minions – murderous' in comparison to the poor who 'are seen as predominantly warm, accessible, and thereby attractive' (Bliss 1995: 17). When Sartoris points out that the New Testament passage continues: 'But lay yourselves up treasures in heaven' (Mt. 6.19-20), Bill indicates the dichotomy: his Bible is his gun and, as he is very much interested in laying up 'treasures on earth', Heaven can wait.

In *Taxi Driver* there is a 'Heaven on earth moment' with the introduction of Betsy, who is 'a goddess who could make an ugly world beautiful' (Kelly 1996: 88). Scorsese himself is visible on screen as an admiring bystander in the scene when Betsy glides by in slow motion in the daylight, and she will have her own romantic theme music to enhance the moment. She is initially 'an angel' for Travis until she rejects him in response to his ill-conceived decision to take her to the cinema to see a double bill of 'exciting adult hits'. At this point, Travis turns against Betsy with the response: 'You're in hell and you're going to die in hell. Like the rest of

them.' When he watches a soap opera that deals with emotional rejection, Travis kicks over his television set.

After the Girl in *Who's That Knocking at My Door* and Betsy in *Taxi Driver*, the next beautiful blonde to find herself the object of lust is Vickie in *Raging Bull* – who offers another 'Beatrice moment' when Jake first spots her beside a swimming pool. In the words of the actress who plays her, Vickie is 'a character seen entirely through Jake's eyes' (in Kelly 1996: 131). Cathy Moriarty describes the scene in the bedroom when Jake brings Vickie home: 'Marty had all these little touches, like the crucifix over the bed. Even in the scene where I look at the picture, on the dresser there were rosary beads, a little medal, a crucifix, and a holy water container. It was very important for Marty to include those things. He knew exactly what he wanted on the set' (in Kelly 1996: 131–2).

When Jake shows Vickie the photograph of himself and Joey in boxing pose, there are rosary beads draped over the frame as if to sanctify their fraternal relationship, but it is an early indication of trouble ahead. **(Figure 6.1)** There is a photograph of Joey's wedding that is spliced into the scene when Jake returns home with his new bride – a subliminal message that Joey is an interloper in his brother's marriage (see Wernblad 2011: 37). A triangle of jealousy is created, which extends to Jake's suspicion that his friend Salvy (Frank Vincent) is also having an affair with his wife. La Motta is caught up in the Madonna – whore complex: 'It amounts to a man having such low self-esteem that he (a) cannot respect a woman who would sleep with him, and (b) is convinced that, given the choice, she would rather be sleeping with someone else' (Ebert 2008: 65).

Figure 6.1 Catholic men with troubled lives in *Raging Bull*.

Scorsese's tragic lovers

Among Scorsese's characters there are many tormented personalities (whether their desire is for people or material goods), but the most distinguished pair are Newland Archer and Countess Ellen (Michelle Pfeiffer), who suffer for their adulterous but unconsummated passion in *The Age of Innocence*. (**Figure 6.2**) They have the elevated status of Dante's famous lovers Paolo and Francesca who are placed in the *Inferno* as their attraction ends in adultery, although it is notable that they are in the upper regions of Hell: 'Some people, hearing the frequent warnings by Christian clergy about the evils of fornication and adultery, have come to assume that, in the Christian scheme of things, this is the most serious of sins. Dante and the whole medieval tradition thought otherwise' (Royal 1999: 56).

Francesca falls in love with her brother-in-law Paolo, and she recounts the day that they succumbed to their feelings:

One day we reading were for our delight
Of Launcelot, how Love did him enthrall.
Alone we were and without any fear.
Full many a time our eyes together drew
That reading, and drove the colour from our faces;
But one point only was it that o'ercame us.
When as we read of the much-longed-for smile
Being by such a noble lover kissed,
This one, who ne'er from me shall be divided,
Kissed me upon the mouth all palpitating.
Galeotto was the book and he who wrote it.
That day no farther did we read therein. (*Inf.* V)

Figure 6.2 Scorsese's Paolo and Francesca: Newland and Ellen in *The Age of Innocence*.

When Francesca's husband discovers the lovers, he kills them both, but their love binds them together in death within the *Inferno*:

Love, that on gentle heart doth swiftly seize,
Seized this man for the person beautiful
That was ta'en from me, and still the mode offends me.

Love, that exempts no one beloved from loving,
Seized me with pleasure of this man so strongly,
That, as thou seest, it doth not yet desert me. (*Inf.* V)

In the original Italian, each stanza begins with the word 'Amor', and the couple believe that it is 'love that brought them to a single death' (Reynolds 2006: 133). As C. S. Lewis suggests in *The Four Loves*, when lovers explain that 'Love made us do it', their 'confession can be almost a boast. There can be a shade of defiance in it. They "feel like martyrs"' (1960: 136). Speaking of the relationship between Newland Archer and Countess Ellen in *The Age of Innocence*, Scorsese stated, 'Sometimes when you fall in love you can't see what other people see. You become as passionate and obsessive as Newland, who can't see what is going on around him. That's the theme of *Taxi Driver* and of *Mean Streets*' (in Christie 2005: 215). Robert Casillo points out: 'In many ways, the difference between Scorsese's Italian American films and *The Age of Innocence* is that between a lower-class village-based Mediterranean society, where emotions lie close to the surface, and a Northern European Protestant high society, where control of affect is *de rigueur*, and where one dreads to become a public spectacle' (2015: 161).

When Ellen enters the frame during a performance of Gounod's *Faust* – with its themes of wasted lives, lost love and devilish pacts – Scorsese sought for a technique to highlight the moment by presenting her to the audience through the opera glasses: 'so finally we decided to dissolve between each set of three frames. I settled on that effect because I saw how you began to notice people, with the glitter of their jewellery, and then this incredible woman appears in a blue dress, and the blue is very different from what everyone else is wearing' (in Christie and Thompson 2003: 186–7). Notably, the hair colour of the female protagonists has changed in the transfer from Wharton's novel to the screen: May Welland has dark hair and Ellen is now blonde. Interestingly, Reynolds writes of Dante's 'screen-love' – a woman to whom he addressed poetry in order to disguise the true target of his affections (Reynolds 2006: 22). The term obviously has cinematic connotations and works particularly well in the case of *The Age of Innocence* when Newland's marriage to May is an attempt to 'screen' the real object of his desire. In *The Age of Innocence*, Newland gives May lilies,

the symbol of purity associated with the Virgin Mary; and he sends Ellen yellow roses, which have a Marian link to Mary as Queen of Heaven.

In Canto XXVII of *Paradiso* 'the heavens assume a red hue' and 'in what seems something of a spiritual reach at this level of perfection, Dante suggests that the heavens are turning red here out of embarrassment for what the times have wrought upon the worship of God' (Royal 1999: 229). Scorsese mentions how the wall seems to blush red in *The Age of Innocence*:

We did the wall turning red on the set, but the image we dissolve to was normal color and the red went away too quickly; it was like a jump in color. The only way to do it was to smooth out the red optically over the dissolve, and as the full image comes in and the other image is fading out, gradually lose the red also. ... I was interested in the use of color like brush-strokes throughout the film, the sensuality of painting, how the characters expressed themselves by sending each other flowers. The flowers could be sensual, but they couldn't allow themselves to be overtly sensual, so it just didn't seem right to fade to black. (In Smith 1999b: 202-203)

Ellen says that she has been away 'so long I'm sure I'm dead and buried and this dear old place is Heaven' but there are repeated images of flames – from candles, lighted cigars and blazing fires – that offer a conflicting message that this is a living Purgatory (if not Hell). Indeed, Newland asks, 'Why should we bury a woman alive if her husband prefers to live with whores?' while he himself feels that he was 'being buried alive under his future'. Newland and Ellen are captured in an 'iris in' – as if caught in a spy glass – as they attend a performance of *The Shaughraun*, in which the play's female protagonist, who is wearing a cross, rejects her lover 'out of a sense of higher duty' (Casillo 2015: 170). The narrative 'is centrally concerned with offering, then closing off, avenues of escape' (Nicholls 2004: 30). There is, for example, a scene with May and Newland in which 'two masses of blackout converge from both sides of the frame, engulfing them in darkness' (Casillo 2015: 158).

On one occasion Newland accuses May of being cruel, when she suggests that Ellen would be better returning to her estranged husband: 'Even demons don't think people are happier in Hell.' When May worries that he will catch his death by leaning out the window on a cold night, Newland realizes (via the narrator's voice-over): 'I am dead. I've been dead for months and months.' He even thinks wistfully that May might die and set him free. Scorsese's films are often about 'the passion of a man forced to choose between what he wants, and what he knows is right' (Ebert 2008: 138). It is notable that May is wearing her wedding dress as Newland contemplates betraying her. The coals tumble from the fire onto the hearth as if to offer a warning of fiery torment in the Afterlife.

The film offers an example of the 'scapegoat mechanism' explored by René Girard, as love transforms Ellen into a Girardian motif: 'This person is accused falsely of having violated those prohibitions which, before the crisis, the community had deemed sacred He or she thus becomes society's scapegoat, whose miraculous elimination through unanimous violence renews social order' (Casillo 2015: 135). Scorsese explains some of the symbolism of the dinner table when the Roman punch was 'like having a triple high mass for a funeral rather than a regular low mass' (in Christie 2005: 213). At the farewell meal for Ellen, Newland is described as 'a prisoner in the centre of an armed camp' – an image that has both military and Old Testament connotations. At the key moment when Newland finally realizes that he is trapped (as his wife reveals that she is pregnant and he cannot leave her), Scorsese films May getting up from a chair 'in three cuts, three separate close-ups, because I thought he'd never forget that moment for the rest of his life' (in Christie and Thompson 2003: 192).

Ricoeur asks the question: 'Do not the marriage rites, among others, aim to remove the universal impurity of sexuality by marking out an enclosure within which sexuality ceases to be a defilement, but threatens to become so again if the rules concerning times, places, and sexual behaviour are not observed?' (1967: 29). Newland begins to bend those very rules but does not ultimately break them. When Ellen expresses her thanks for his advice (not to pursue a divorce) she is briefly backlit and bathed in a heavenly glow. It becomes clear at the end that Newland has given up the woman whom he loved out of duty to his family, as Scorsese explains: 'Now whether he's passive earlier in the film or not, that's something else. But his decision – I admire it' (in Schickel 2013). Nicholls argues that 'the male melancholic appears at the end of his narrative as if in a state of grace, strangely beautiful in his self-sacrifice' (2004: xii).

Newland and Ellen do not consummate their love: 'That was the real reason I wanted to make the film – the idea of that passion which involved such restraint,' explained Scorsese (in Christie 2005: 216). Ellen asks Newland, 'Don't you see, I can't love you unless I give you up?' When the couple part in Boston, Scorsese ensured that they each appear to dissolve from the screen: 'There, it's that he never wants to take his eyes off her and she fades away. He puts his head down and he fades away, like his soul goes with her' (in Smith 1999b: 203). In the words of the narrator: 'Whenever he thought of Ellen Olenska, it had been abstractly, serenely, like an imaginary loved one in a book or picture. She had become the complete vision of all that he had missed.' It is an emotion with which Dante could identify.

Newland becomes 'a dutiful and loving father, and a faithful husband' and he mourned the death of his wife, who 'died thinking the world a good place, full of loving and harmonious households like her own'. When he is a widower, Newland travels to France and discovers that Ellen is living in Paris. More surprisingly to him, he learns that May had known the truth all along and realized that he had suffered. Newland's son reveals: 'Once, when she asked you to, you gave up the thing that you wanted most.' The narrator recounts that Newland is soothed by the knowledge that 'after all, someone had guessed and pitied. And that it should have been his wife moved him inexpressibly'.

However, he does not feel able to meet Ellen again, although the invitation is given, and he sits alone in the Parisian square outside her apartment and gazes up at her window. Scorsese uses cuts rather than pans in this scene because the latter movement of the camera would tie the two people together: 'They can't be together the way they were before. They'll always be together in their hearts. But one cannot ignore the complete separateness of the jump. It's got to be a brutal cut straight to the window' (in Smith 1999b: 214). Newland ponders on the moment when Ellen was standing on the pier and gazing out to sea, and when he had promised himself that he would go to her if she turned around before the sailboat passed the lighthouse. In reality, she never did. Now, in his fantasy, she turns to look at him in the glowing sunlight – it is a heavenly image.

The poet ends *Purgatorio* because of lack of space – a practical barrier with which Scorsese might sympathize, given the pressures on a director to bring in a film on time and under budget:

If, Reader, I possessed a longer space
 For writing it, I yet would sing in part
 Of the sweet draught that ne'er would satiate me;
 But inasmuch as full are all the leaves
 Made ready for this second canticle,
 The curb of art no farther lets me go. (*Purg.* XXXIII)

However, Dante's decision to stop writing takes him on to *Paradiso*, in which optimism reigns. Thomas Merton proclaims that, in spite of sin, 'the human race can still recover, each time, and can still produce men and women who overcome evil with good, hatred with love, greed with charity, lust and cruelty with sanctity' (Merton 1998: 142). These themes have also been addressed by Scorsese in cinema, as the final section of this monograph will illustrate.