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Martin Scorsese's Divine Comedy: Movies and Religion

Abstract

This is a book review of Catherine O'Brien, *Martin Scorsese's Divine Comedy: Movies and Religion*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018.

Keywords

film studies; religion; Catholicism; Martin Scorsese; Dante

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Catherine O'Brien, *Martin Scorsese's Divine Comedy: Movies and Religion*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018.

Martin Scorsese, one of the most vaunted if controversial film directors in postwar American cinema, is known to have claimed, in various forums, that “[m]y whole life has been movies and religion. That’s it. Nothing else” (p. 193). Many cineastes are familiar with the biographical element of Scorsese’s early but abandoned aspirations for the Catholic priesthood, and some would recognize the religious interests motivating certain titles in Scorsese’s canon, such as *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) and *Silence* (2016). More intriguingly, though, is that it can be argued that Scorsese has managed successfully to create a body of work that synthesizes these apparently disparate interests — that is to say, he has created a cinema of religion (and more specifically, a *Catholic* cinema). At first glance, such a claim may appear to some as odd, given the controversy that his filmography generates, especially around the use of violence; at the same time, for Scorsese, cinema is an illuminative tool, “a means of understanding and eventually expressing what was precious and fragile in the world around me,” which would include, perhaps especially so, the flawed and the violent (ibid).

That Catholicism, both as a biographical context and a network of images and rituals, is integral to Scorsese’s visionary work as a film director is not a new revelation. Scorsese himself candidly discusses these across a wide array of interviews, commentaries, articles, and essays. The Pulitzer-Prize winning American film critic, Roger Ebert, a fellow Catholic, in one of his last major publications, *Scorsese by Ebert*,¹ documents, in a collection of personal conversations, review essays, and retrospectives, the texture and suffusion of Catholicism throughout Scorsese’s oeuvre, a point of personal gravitation for Ebert. Film studies and religion scholars are attuned to these dynamics as well, contributing to a substantial and proliferating body of literature on

Scorsese. Many titles explore key aspects of the presence of Catholicism in Scorsese's visual imagination and development as a filmmaker: the recent *A Companion to Martin Scorsese*,² for instance, dedicates several essays to the Catholic dimensions in Scorsese's films, and several monographs devote considerable space to the importance of the Catholic liturgy, pageantry, and imaginarium to Scorsese's visual and dramatic constructions.³ Concomitantly, a number of notable studies, such as Baugh,⁴ Bliss,⁵ Deacy,⁶ and Kolker,⁷ focus on key themes in Scorsese's work that are deeply embedded in the tradition of Catholic dogmatics and ritual. The upshot of this scholarship is that Scorsese's cinematic work is ineluctably interwoven with the flavor of postwar American Catholicism, and is unimaginable apart from that context.

Catherine O'Brien's fascinating new book, *Martin Scorsese's Divine Comedy: Movies and Religion*, contributes significantly to the burgeoning scholarly conversation on the religious and cinematic importance of Scorsese's work. The author, even more, advances the argument that Scorsese is not just a Catholic filmmaker, but the creator of a unique cinematic vision that is a distinct and peculiar form of Catholic cinema. In fact, the central claim of the work is that "Martin Scorsese [i]s a contemporary Dante, with his *oeuvre* offering the dimensions of an onscreen *Divine Comedy*" (p. 5). While the analogy is not entirely original — Scorsese himself, for instance, acknowledges Dantesque dimensions in several of his films, such as *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Raging Bull* (1980), *After Hours* (1985), *Goodfellas* (1990), and *Casino* (1995), and Vincent LoBrutto, in his biography of Scorsese,⁸ borrows liberally from the cantos of Dante in his chapter headings (which the author acknowledges [p. 4]) — O'Brien provides a fresh and substantial reading of Scorsese as generating a cinematic canon that not only translates into a new medium a set of themes and tropes resonant with Dante's epic, but also, when taken as a comprehensive, if unsystematic, whole, is nearly a parallel visionary creation. In this, O'Brien

argues that “Scorsese offers visions of (a Living) Hell; (a Daily) Purgatory, and a striving for Paradise that contemplates the Divine,” intertwined with the presentation of “a range of human virtues, understandable foibles and outright wickedness that would enable a twenty-first century poet to imagine the protagonists’ post-mortem positions in colourful terms, as Dante did” (p. 6).

The nature of O’Brien’s argument generates the structure of the book itself, following the major divisions of Dante’s poem: hell, purgatory, and paradise. Acting in the role of a scholarly Virgil, the author guides the reader on a tour through these major topographies in Scorsese’s filmography and provides intertextual points of contact between corresponding places in Scorsese’s work and the Italian poet. Scorsese’s cinematic work, in this, is not treated chronologically, but thematically and textually, as themes, imagery, character, and story arcs are scrutinized in conjunction with their cartographic and allusive parallels in the *Commedia*. The structure and method of analysis enable the author to put Scorsese’s work in dialogue not just with Dante, as an illustrative exercise, but also with Dante scholars and commentators and an array of Catholic theologians and ethicists, notably thinkers like Herbert McCabe, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Henri de Lubac, Joseph Ratzinger, and Andrew Greeley, as well as the patristic and medieval Catholic tradition. The scope of O’Brien’s analysis of Scorsese’s canon is also nearly comprehensive, covering Scorsese’s earliest work, from his student films, to his most recently completed film, *Silence* — the exception being the occasional documentary work by Scorsese (though these are mentioned at ad hoc points).

The first third of the book contains material that will be most familiar to Scorsese scholars and fans. Scorsese’s ‘infernal’ vision of the underworld of gangsters, thugs, pimps and prostitutes, rapists, miscreants, and alienated and doomed characters is well-trafficked territory. Reviewers and commentators note often, for instance, the Dantesque presentation of New York

as a hellish landscape in *Taxi Driver* and *Bringing Out the Dead* (1999) or the tortured road to perdition taken by Scorsese's characters in a host of films, especially *Mean Streets* (1973), *Raging Bull*, *Goodfellas*, *Casino*, *The Departed* (2006) and *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013). What is notably fresh in O'Brien's presentation is the systematic discussion and analysis of these features across Scorsese's work, which is indexed to the topographical circles of Dante's underworld and his catalog of vices; this analysis is layered, as well, with topical insight from consideration of the tensions between the pre-Vatican II Catholicism of Scorsese's childhood and the interim years of implementation during his early film career, which sheds especially illuminating light on important aspects and details in Scorsese's first features (e.g., *Who's That Knocking at My Door?* [1969] and *Mean Streets*). In this way, O'Brien, creatively and helpfully, brings to the surface the personal nature of Scorsese's cinema as infused by a tradition of imagery and as a documentation of the filmmaker's struggle with the moral teaching and ethical grammar of the Catholic tradition, particularly around sexuality. Even more, at the forefront is Scorsese's intense focus on the complex theological network pertaining to sin, guilt, and suffering: it is not Scorsese's intent to fetishize these elements, nor to create didactic art, but to explore these in a very human and experiential way; Scorsese, in other words, does not wish to pass judgment, but to humanize the characters and experiences without letting them off the hook for their choices (pp. 61-63). This leads, in fact, to one of the more enlightening discussions in this section of the book, in which O'Brien compares the characterization of Judas and Kichijiro in Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *Silence*, where we see, through both characters, the dialectic of betrayal and the possibility of forgiveness; here, O'Brien sees in Scorsese a slight departure from Dante, who places Judas in the lowest circle of hell as the arch-betrayer, whereby Scorsese, following Kazantzakis' novel, presents Judas as instrumental to the plan of salvation

itself (whose effects are shown and reinforced in Kichijiro's cyclical pattern of betrayal and confession/penitence) — O'Brien, rather, portrays Scorsese's humanist Catholic instincts as much closer to those of Balthasar's hopeful universalism (pp. 68-75).

It is the latter two-thirds of the book — on purgatory and paradise — that will be newest and most vital to scholars and researchers. In a certain respect, Scorsese's entire output is an immanentized purgatorial vision: an obsessive examination of characters who internalize (or subject themselves to) intense suffering on wayward and misdirected paths. O'Brien draws out the variegations of purgatorial suffering and the systematic catalog of vices and failed virtues through thick descriptions of Scorsese's characterizations (this dimension is more a matter of story than imagery) and extensive comparative dialogue with Dante, Augustine, and Thomas Merton. Here, O'Brien's analysis not only mines important insights from familiar spaces in Scorsese's work, but yields exceptionally interesting and surprising interpretative disquisitions on *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974) [pp. 92-94], *The King of Comedy* (1983) [pp. 94-97], and *The Age of Innocence* (1993) [pp. 119-123]. While an immanentized purgatorial vision is evident in films like *Mean Streets*, *Raging Bull*, or *Casino*, O'Brien's argument, for example, that *The King of Comedy* is not only about misdirected goals but “a visualization of Purgatory as a waiting room” is critically salient and opens up important cinematic and theological avenues of interpreting the film (p. 95). Moreover, in the final section of the book, the author provides a thorough examination of the paradisiacal, a dimension much unattended and one not often associated with Scorsese's work at all. In this, the author offers an exceptional and extensive examination of a triptych of films: *The Last Temptation of Christ*, *Kundun* (1995), and *Silence* (pp.127-191). The discussion of *Kundun*, here, is particularly interesting, as this film, nearly above all others, seems a strange fit within the larger orbit of Scorsese's filmography. Yet,

O'Brien's Dantean analytic schematic actually illuminates how this story and why this film is organic to Scorsese's filmography and is a natural development, religiously and cinematically, within Scorsese's mid-to-late oeuvre: it is a film that illuminates Scorsese's personal quest to explore fundamental themes of compassion, mercy, and interconnectedness; the use of Dante by O'Brien is especially appropriate here as it provides an intriguing – and salient – way of categorizing these themes and the placement of *Kundun*, as a Buddhist film, within the work of a Catholic director like Scorsese. Concomitantly, O'Brien effectively demonstrates in this section that despite the controversy that surrounds Scorsese's work – particularly the religious controversy from Christian organizations over *Last Temptation* and the renunciations by the Chinese government (as well as some objection by Buddhist communities) to *Kundun*, and the ugliness of subject matter within many of his films – at the same time his work is suffused with compassion, humanism, and even a Jesuit vision of God's mercy and love. For Scorsese, as O'Brien argues, this is at the root of his filmmaking itself — even the dark elements — and as such, “the ritual of filmmaking is akin to a religious ritual... it is like a prayer... [and] you have to go through hell to get there” (p. 151). It is, as Dante's work was, an art of pilgrimage (p. 194).

Where the author establishes the goal of arguing that Scorsese is the creator of a deeply Catholic cinema and has generated a body of work with a vision comparable to that of Dante, the book succeeds admirably. The work provides a robust, interdisciplinary theological exposition of the Catholic doctrinal, moral, liturgical, and ritual dimensions that animate Scorsese's composition of images and characterization. Use of Dante as a structural and systematic lens through which to read Scorsese is particularly effective in generating synchronic analysis across Scorsese's canon of films, as well as yielding surprising and revelatory insights and interpretations. This structure, additionally, has a reverse benefit: the presentation of Scorsese's

work as indexed to Dante provides an imagistic glossary that proleptically illuminates Dante's text alongside the cinematic texts of Scorsese. All of this the author achieves in a style that is clear, accessible, and free of technical jargon and obscurantism. This is not to say it is not scholarly or sophisticated — it is quite sound in both respects; at the same time, it is written in such a way as to be immediately accessible and readable by non-specialists in film studies, religion, theology, or Catholic studies.

If there are weaknesses to the work, for the most part these are limitations imposed by the structure. For instance, the structure, organized around the Dantean categories, excludes chronological or comprehensive examination of particular films and inhibits use as a reference tool. While there are extended discussions and analyses of nearly all of Scorsese's films, these are dispersed throughout the book, and even if one intuits a relevant topical category, the films are not discussed chronologically *within* subcategories, rendering the basic index included in the volume essential (but only just adequate or functional for research and reference purposes — though this is certainly a publisher, not an author, issue). As well, while the author is clearly knowledgeable and aware of the profound web of cinematic influences upon Scorsese as a filmmaker and notes these at appropriate places, the structure of the book restricts narrative space and leaves coverage of film theory and cinematic intertextuality rather thin. Since Scorsese is one of the most encyclopedic filmmakers and much of his work is an extension and interpolation of a vast array of cinematic grammar gleaned from the history of world cinema, this is a notable loss — though an understandable one given the structure and scope of the volume. As such, the book will not displace the standard reference works, textbooks, and biographies on Scorsese, but given its specific purpose, it is a remarkable achievement that offers invaluable interpretative insight. The one area within the work that is topically salient and concordant with

the structure that could be extended is analysis of the shifts in the practice and experience of Catholicism in the wake of Vatican II. Where this is discussed in the book, it is both fascinating and illuminating of crucial aspects in Scorsese's work; at the same time, these observations are often ad hoc, and it is arguable that Scorsese's cinematic work as a whole, not just his early films, is a visual construction of the experiential struggle with the tensions within *both* pre- and post-Vatican II American Catholicism — a struggle contingent on a life that bridges those significant eras. In other words, the religious contours of Scorsese's work are inseparable from his experience of both, and in particular ways are anchored in the dynamics of the theological impulses prior to the Council that animated the path to Vatican II.

Overall, O'Brien's text is a welcome contribution and achieves a unique goal in the scholarship on Scorsese, as well as film and religion. This will be an indispensable text for scholars and admirers of Scorsese alike, and it is a case study in how focused religious interpretation of film should be done. One of the highest compliments that can be paid to the author is that the work not only sheds new light on and offers passionate, fresh interpretation of an abundantly studied filmmaker, but the text itself is as engrossing, provocative, and contemplative as the films that are the subject of its investigation. This is sure to be an essential text for course adoption, students, and even general readers, especially if a paperback edition is made available.

¹ Roger Ebert, *Scorsese by Ebert* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

² Aaron Baker, ed., *A Companion to Martin Scorsese* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2015).

³ Especially noteworthy are Richard A. Blake, *Afterimage: Scorsese, Hitchcock, Capra, Ford, Coppola, De Palma: The Indelible Catholic Imaginations of Six American Filmmakers* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 2000); Robert Casilo, *Gangster Priest: The Italian American Cinema of Martin Scorsese* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press,

2006); Annette Wernblad, *The Passion of Martin Scorsese: A Critical Study of His Films* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011); and Paul A. Woods, ed., *Scorsese: A Journey Through the American Psyche* (London, Plexus, 2005).

⁴ Lloyd Baugh, SJ, *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ-figures in Film* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1997).

⁵ Michael Bliss, *The Word Made Flesh: Catholicism and Conflict in the Films of Martin Scorsese* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 1995).

⁶ Christopher Deacy, *Screen Christologies: Redemption and the Medium of Film* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001) and idem., *Screening the Afterlife: Theology, Eschatology, and Film* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012).

⁷ Robert P. Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness: Penn, Stone, Kubrick, Scorsese, Spielberg, Altman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁸ Vincent LoBrutto, *Martin Scorsese: A Biography* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007).

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