

A+

Good!

Violence, Redemption and Scorsese

Martin Scorsese has produced films that use violence and religious themes. *The Last Temptation of Christ* is, of course, an obvious example. Scorsese also mixes violence and religious ideas in films that are not overtly religious. At first glance, a person viewing such films as *Taxi Driver*, *Raging Bull*, or *Cape Fear* may not see anything religious in them at all. However, the idea of redemption through violence and sacrifice is the central theme that runs through Christianity. Scorsese, having a deeply ^{Catholic} religious ~~Christian~~ background, incorporates this idea into his films.

Although Scorsese had an early love of the cinema, before becoming a director, he went to seminary school to become a priest (Dougan 18). In Little Italy, the New York neighborhoods where he grew up, there were two vocations to choose from, the priesthood or organized crime (Dougan 15, 16). Because he was both a firm believer and small and sickly, he leaned toward the priesthood. Scorsese did not last in seminary due to distractions of music and women, but the influence of the church did last and showed in his work. Such influence can be seen in the character Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver*.

Travis (Robert De Niro) does not appear to be a religious man. He never goes to church, and spends his spare time at porn theatres. However, he calls himself "God's lonely man," and wishes another flood would wipe the streets clean of corruption (Taxi). He uses religious imagery to describe people and surroundings as well. Betsy (Cybill Shepard) "appeared like an angel out of the open sewer," and Travis compares working in her office to "living in hell" (Taxi). Even the politician Betsy works for, Senator

I like the way you go to the point

Palantine, has a name with a history in Catholicism. The Palatine Guard was a military unit of the Vatican City, and was disbanded in 1970 (Wikipedia). Travis imagines Palantine as another guard of morality, and decides to make a martyr out of him, redeeming the streets through violent action.

Roman reference
(?)

When Travis fails in his assassination attempt, he becomes the martyr, the Palatine Guard. Scorsese speaks of Travis in a similar manner saying, "Travis is a commando for God, in a sense. And look at the saints. He's full of their same energy, his just goes off in a different direction. He sees something ugly or dirty and he has to clean it up" (Keyser 81). He focuses his righteous attention on the child prostitute Iris (Jodie Foster). He will sacrifice his life to save Iris, redeeming him and returning her to a virginal condition. The final shootout to save Iris is a bloodbath, described by Scorsese as "a blood sacrifice" (Keyser 82). After the bloodbath and his recovery, Travis does seem to be redeemed in Betsy's eyes, and more at ~~peace~~ with himself. However, the amount of violence involved is supposed to invalidate his redemption. Instead, society hails Travis as a hero, sending the message that it is corrupt and immoral, still in need of redemption.

God

I have
wouldn't
perpetrate
violence

Jake La Motta (Robert De Niro) in *Raging Bull* is another character in need of redemption. He is violent, jealous, controlling, rude, obnoxious, and does not seem to have any redeeming qualities throughout the whole film. That did not stop Scorsese from describing the character's journey as one of redemption. This premise may be even harder to take than Travis Bickle's story. Jake does not seem to be capable of redemption. When he is violent and abusive with his family, religious iconography is usually in the scene. Inside the bedroom in which Jake abuses his wife, there is a cross

above the bed. There are pictures of Jesus and Mary outside the room, and the picture of the brother he beat up and estranged is draped with a rosary and cross.

On the outside, he seems defiant to ^{God} and everyone else. However, he is in his own private hell of guilt. This can be seen from the highly symbolic scene in which Jake is in a sauna trying to lose weight before a fight. He asks the trainer, "Give me a little piece of ice, just a sliver for my tongue . . . Come on, I'm dyin'" (Raging). Compare that scene to a parable Jesus told in the Bible, as a rich man in hell "called and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me and send Lazarus to dip his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in anguish in this blazing fire'" (New World Translation, Luke 16.24). Jake knows that he is not living as he should, and seeks punishment for his sins in the ring.

Jake's penance comes to him in the form of violent blows to the head. In his last fight against Sugar Ray Robinson, he even takes on a Christ-like appearance. His corner man bathes him with a bloody sponge, and while massaging his muscles presses down on his side, reenacting Christ's wound. Jake's cut man, while greasing his brow, seems to give the sign of the cross above his head. When Jake is on the ropes, he practically begs for more punishment, and Sugar Ray, backlit like a divine messenger, dishes out punishment as if from above. Scorsese described this scene as Jake's "Golgotha," the place where Jesus was crucified (Keyser 113). After that last fight, Jake is still a jerk, but he has worked out his need for punishment and redemption, and is more at peace with himself. Even though Scorsese acknowledges that Jake is still not likeable, he "wanted to show there was hope for the resolution of the soul, to show it simply with an unsympathetic character" (Keyser 120). Scorsese ends the film with a scriptural quote

maybe just realistic Italian iconography

✓
punishing self

good!

Wow!
Good.

that refers to Jake, saying that he was once blind, but now could see. Jake has been tested, and redeemed (at least to himself).

sort of

In *Cape Fear*, Robert De Niro plays not the one to be redeemed, but the redeemer. This may seem unusual, for the film is a basic revenge plot, with De Niro as the villain. Max Cady (De Niro) tries to exact revenge on Sam Bowden (Nick Nolte), the lawyer that sold him out. However, like so many other films, Scorsese introduces a religious element. He says that, "Cady was sort of the malignant spirit of guilt, in a way, of the family – the avenging angel. Punishment for everything you ever felt sexually. It is the basic moral battleground of Christian ethics" (Keyser 216). Richard Corliss, film critic and writer, called Max the "evil twin to Jesus in Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*" (Keyser 216). One could also imagine him as the evil Sugar Ray Robinson from *Raging Bull*. He says of his victim, "I don't hate him at all. Oh, no, I pray for him. I'm here to help him" (*Cape*).

a punishment
enforced
by God

Max compares his help to the biblical story of Job. Job's faith was tested to the point where he lost everything, even though he was a good man. His victims, Sam Bowden and family, are essentially good people that have made mistakes, and are not very appreciative of Max's show of concern with their spiritual welfare. They can, however, see him as a crucible, a test of strength. Leigh (Jessica Lange), Sam's wife, says of the ordeal, "I'd like to know just how strong we are, or how weak. But I guess the only way we're gonna find that out is just by going through this" (*Cape*). When the test is finally over and Max sinks into the river, Sam has his own redemptive moment. His hands were covered with blood. He is now a violent killer, something that he has

! saying

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