The Tragedy of the Knight of Faith: The Kierkegaardian Tension of Scorsese's Cinema

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ABSTRACT: The cinema of Martin Scorsese has often been analysed in connection with themes concerning faith, Catholic and Italian American identity, masochism, and sense of community. In this paper, through film-philosophical methods of analysis, we aim to demonstrate how the films of the legendary director enact and produce storyworlds pervaded by a tension similar to the one Søren Kierkegaard expressed in his existentialist writings. Indeed, one of the tenets of film-philosophy is that audio-visual media do not function as representational instruments, symbolically structuring themes through narratives and character dynamics. Rather, films and TV series (among other forms of expression) generate, in an affective and experiential manner, systems of ideas, complex moral and ethical dilemmas, and existential viewpoints with which viewers interact in a direct and creative manner. Empathising with the self-sacrifice of the unlikely martyr played by Jake LaMotta or feeling the collapsing certainties of a missionary in seventeenth-century Japan are thus occasions to encounter particular *conceptual personae*. These characters, we argue, embody unique and specific iterations of Kierkegaardian knights of faith: existentialist figures whose doom does not take place in a classically tragic world, but rather in ambiguous film ecologies where the desire for wholesomeness constantly clashes with mortality and finitude.

I don't want to be a product of my environment. I want my environment to be a product of me. Years ago, we had the Church—that was only a way of saying we had each other. (Frank Costello, *The Departed*)

As Kierkegaard says, nothing distinguishes the knight of the faith from a bourgeois German going home or to the post office. (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 2005, p. 199)

INTRODUCTION

One of the most critically acclaimed and popular living filmmakers, Martin Scorsese continues to influence debates around the status and evolution of the seventh art, highlighting the importance of specific artistic figures and trends in film history. The Italian American director, a living symbol of the New Hollywood and its legacy, has also been the subject of a wide array of academic analyses aimed at classifying his work within the evolution of the film genres or at identifying recurring themes and aesthetic patterns.[1] Many times, Scorsese's work has rightly been associated with issues concerning spiritually inflected masochism, guilt and redemption, macho culture, and self-destructive models of toxic masculinity,[2] along with gangster anthropology and the underworld in contemporary society.[3] His filmography embodies both a celebration of Hollywood cinema history, with its rich and varied global roots and interconnections, and a critical journey through the core elements defining North American identity and culture. The complexity and conflictual nature of the melting pot and of the United States as a nation of immigrants are central features of the cinematic ecologies of the auteur, whose Italian roots are frequently displayed and discussed. In addition, the tension between community and individuality appears to define the characters inhabiting Scorsese's storyworlds, informing their behaviour and their (a)morality. To become somebody, you have to be part of a community, Henry Hill (Ray Liotta)—not unlike many fellow gangsters in Scorsese's films—clearly states in *Goodfellas* (1990), whereas "nobodies" are those who accept living without showing the proper level of detachment from contextual rules and conventions.

We argue that it is precisely in this conflict between community and individuality that it is possible to recognise one of the main tenets of Scorsese's film-philosophy, a conceptual and ethical riddle that informs a highly distinctive perspective on faith, guilt, pity, and the existential worldview. With this paper, we assess facets of the director's work as expressions of a singular film-philosophy; at the same time, we do not rely on a strict notion of individualised authorship. To use a famous Deleuzian formula, when referring to Scorsese's worldview in relation to specific characters and concerns, we are referring to a set of experiential coordinates: of patterns, recurring stylistic motifs, and interactive situations with which we associate a name, a signature.[4] However, this association does not imply the identification and correspondence between the work and the living "genius"; it instead describes an affective and conceptual plane to which we as scholars creatively relate to by analysing, connecting, and discussing its recognisable fundamental dynamics. Indeed, with the aim of further emphasising the complexity and openness of the concept of *authorship* and of highlighting the collective work behind the realisation of Scorsese's filmography,[5] we follow Karen Perlman's suggestion to use the label "et al." for any audio-visual achievement.[6] Likewise, we aim to give centrality to aesthetic and thematic characteristics of the movies we discuss as the central feature producing this particular film-philosophy, which emerges, again, as an experiential construct rather than an intellectual and intentional elaboration.

As noted above, Scorsese's characters clearly embody an individualist and self-centred (if not maniacally narcissistic) attitude: they all—and his criminal figures even more so—want to distinguish themselves from the crowd and affirm their subjectivity at the expense of weaker, less capable, or less deserving competitors while aiming at a self-realisation that is inextricably linked with the American dream of economic success and with the purpose of finding emancipation from a humble or unremarkable starting condition. Not coincidentally, most of Scorsese's gangster films follow a typical genre-related trajectory of the rise and fall of villainous figures with specific personal dreams and goals; viewers may recognise and judge these characters as amoral or gratuitously violent and destructive in fulfilling their purposes while simultaneously ascribing to them and their conflicts a compelling tragic status and personal complexity. That said, these recurring emotional and dramatic arcs should not be explained and resolved by centering our attention exclusively on their conventionality and adherence to longstanding expressive canons. As noted above, in Scorsese's films these paths of self-realisation (and annihilation) are very much connected to the aspiration of belonging to a specific group, of finding a space within an alleged community of "winners." There thus appears to be a fatal paradox here: instead of pursuing their allegedly individual desires and dreams, these characters, with their manic criminal behaviour, are simply adapting to contextual expectations. They are criminals because they operate within a communal belief system with its own internal scale of values that is intended to allocate existential punishments, guilt, and rewards. Thus, Scorsese's gangsters are also different from the romantic criminals of Jean Pierre Melville and Michael Mann, who are obsessed instead by the necessity to adhere to idealised identity models of male chivalry with a related strict code of honour and professional *ethos*. These latter figures, in their individual struggles, more closely resemble classical tragic heroes in their total conflict with the reality surrounding them. The mobsters of *Goodfellas*[7] or *Mean Streets*,[8] on the other hand, more than embodying the aristocratic image of outlaws capable of emancipating themselves from conventional behavioural rules and moral standards, struggle to find their space in a particular social ecology while claiming their uniqueness and exceptionality.[9]

Success and failure, then, are not simply interior struggles or matters of personal realisation; at least, they are not solely perceived as such and need to be evaluated in accordance with larger social categories. To be a goodfella, one needs to have faith and—while not exactly striving to adhere to some notion of transcendence or spiritual wholesomeness—still believe that they will resolve their existential angst by performing all the actions necessary to reach this desired state of completion and self-fulfilment. Talking *sub specie aeternitatis* in voice-over, the professional gambler Ace Rothstein (Robert De Niro) in *Casino*[10] comments that when he and fellow gangster Nikki Santoro (Joe Pesci) were appointed by the Midwest bosses to run one of the largest casinos in Las Vegas, they were given "paradise on earth";[11] not coincidentally, the relentless process that leads these and other characters to lose the sweet delights of the Garden of Eden (the film starts off on the notes of Johann Sebastian Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*) is described as a tragic fall from grace that in the end becomes the last time street guys like them would be given something that valuable to manage.[12] In Scorsese's storyworlds, then, the language and logic of the sacred and the profane continuously mix and hybridise with the most disturbing and chaotic, if not carnivalesque, effects,[13] to the point of blurring the distinction between holiness and sin and of presenting every sinner as an aspiring saint, and vice versa.

It would be possible to solve this ambiguity and conflict by addressing Scorsese's cinema as based on a fundamental rejection of clear moral standards and paradigms. This expressive strategy would allow viewers to negotiate their ethical standpoint and align with antiheroes and antiheroines without necessarily looking down on them and even feeling empathy for them.[14] At the same time, the acknowledgement of this experiential and emotional complexity does not account for the specificity of the dynamics we analyse in depth below, particularly for the accentuated and repeated connection between apparently irreconcilable realms. Individualism and communitarianism, faith and materialism, and even moral debauchery in fact exist as inseparable existential tensions in these films. The dialogical coexistence between these emotional and conceptual patterns has the effect of displaying characters who seem very proactive and self-assured if not completely or pathologically unempathetic in their decisions to harm others for their personal benefit. In doing so, they also operate in a rather passive if not highly conditioned way, following particular types of community expectations or adhering to a certain standardised notion of success. It does not matter whether the gangsters and he-men constellating Scorsese's films are highly conscious or completely unaware of their need to stay in touch with a common faith; they nevertheless try to attain some sort of salvation by following the rules and dynamics inscribed in their belief apparatus. This apparently paradoxical tension becomes less enigmatic if we consider it intrinsically connected with a complex existentialist dilemma that brings together considerations of faith and spirituality with reflections on the human condition in the modern world. In the process, we also see how it is possible to find persistent affective and philosophical tensions determining all the characters of Scorsese's cinema, from those more openly pervaded by spiritual anxieties to his more mundane materialist gangsters.

SCORSESE AND KIERKEGAARD: THE RIDDLES OF MODERNITY

Our analysis of the spiritual conundrum and crisis pervading Scorsese's filmography is based on the identification of a common ground between the director's cinematic scenarios and figures with some of the *conceptual personae* and threads of Søren Kierkegaard's existentialist philosophy.[15] Far from suggesting an exact correspondence between the two worldviews, we seek to establish a dialogue between them by identifying shared tensions and points of interest;

thus, the work of the Italian American director can also be situated among longstanding philosophical and spiritual concerns.

Kierkegaard shaped his thought around the challenges and enigmas that define the modern condition, locating their origin in the alleged triumph of a secular mindset at the expense of all-encompassing metaphysical and religious worldviews.[16] The rise of the so-called modern age with all its ostensible transformations (political, economic, and philosophical) implies the progressive dismissal of all systems that evoked the centrality of transcendent forces and agents in favour of rationalist or humanistic methods to understand reality and its dynamics. The sacred and mystical aspects of existence are, in accordance with these mutations, to be limited to minor if not irrational manifestations of human experience and replaced by clear, logical, and reproducible categories that are to guide intellection and action.[17] However, this disenchantment does not give way to the rise of an unabashedly materialist attitude—at least in the common-sense utilitarian meaning of the expression. Instead, the longing for ultimate meaning and a unifying explanation of the world remains a quintessential aspect of human experience. This same angst is associated with the intrinsic sense of despair and lack when not fulfilled or held off by supposedly efficient philosophical systems aimed at providing abstract rationalisations for existence and its riddles and, thus, fatally failing to achieve this goal. The "Death of God," then, does not provide solutions or a clear pathway for the emancipation of the human from its intrinsic fallibility and partiality. Indeed, as Friedrich Nietzsche pointed out, this need for meaning led to the building of new altars and, specifically, of an anthropocentric ontology.[18] The need for metaphysical conciliation thus informs the construction of new earthly faiths that ultimately detach thought and human experience from their immanent and dynamic dimensions. Kierkegaard addresses the inextinguishable persistence of faith in *Fear and Trembling* and *Repetition*, both published in 1843, in relation to the emblematic figure of the Knight of Faith.

One defining marker of this figure is that her inner conflicts do not fit the classical tragic regime of thought. The Knight of Faith is not affected by a dooming dissonance between personal aspirations and desires and the value system defining the surrounding social ecology; therefore, she is not afflicted by ethical dilemmas about the proper conduct to follow and does not aggrandise the need to rebel against contextual rules as symptomatic of an alleged personal superiority or to mark a unique identity.[19] Instead, the Knight of Faith embodies the pure marvel and passion associated with the acceptance of the mystery of existence and of its alleged ultimate meaning and her impotence in relation to this existential gap.

The religious figures from the biblical canon that most closely resemble this figure are Abraham and Job. Both are faced with the absurdity of their own faith by challenges that put their self-interest in conflict with the nature of the divine, especially given that their trials involve the sacrifice of their own loved ones. Abraham, for instance, is stopped by divine intervention in the process of sacrificing his beloved son Isaac, as God had asked him to do; yet, notwithstanding the intensity of their challenges, they do not display any particular opposition or resistance to these cruel divine deliberations. The relation to the sacred they express, Kierkegaard emphasised, is at once individual (a matter between me and God) and universal, or at least transcending common ethical and rationalist categories.20 With their actions, these Knights of Faith uncritically accept the mystical nature of the world and thus highlight, on one hand, their submission and abandonment to an unfathomable force dominating their lives and, on the other, reveal something deeper about the human condition: the complete imponderability of reality. The only things that we can grasp about our existence are connected with the

acknowledgement of its necessity and its absolute and unavoidable mystery (here, again, is the fatal paradox of believing in the absurd precisely because of its imponderable nature).[21] To deny that we are determined by external forces or to live by replacing this absurd dilemma with other mundane and ultimately unsatisfactory purposes is to fool ourselves or to put off the question indefinitely. Thus, the irrational faith of Abraham and Job becomes emblematic of the unavoidable Kierkegaardian question concerning the modes with which to cope with this tormenting metaphysical angst. We can also appreciate, again, the ways in which this affective and philosophical tension departs from a classical tragic condition; in fact, these figures of the religious canon do not embody any heroic quality or individual exceptionality.22 Abraham and Job, like any other wilful Knight of Faith, may seem weak or even pathetic in their irrational abandonment of themselves to their own beliefs and the implications thereof. At the same time, they do not experience any substantial split with the world surrounding them or the pressure to cope with expectations that they receive as alien to themselves. As a matter of fact, their faith—no matter how absurd its ways may seem—expresses their connection with and search for entanglement with reality. For this reason, the Knight of Faith is a passionate and even sensuous figure who never tries to deny the bodily nature of her experience but openly accepts its intrinsic emotionality. In addition to the non-classical tragedy of the Knight of Faith, fatally living in a state of quasi-mystical abandonment to superior forces that can very well be intended as immanent and material, the Knight of Infinite Resignation is a related figure in Kierkegaardian philosophical theatre. Whereas faith in the will of a superior agent drives the former, the Knight of Infinite Resignation instead embraces a sort of *amor fati*—that is, the acceptance of everything that happens as an expression of the endless becoming of reality—and therefore embodies a willingness to be open to this same process, to allow herself to transform and adapt to it.[23] Every transformation of the real, no matter how possibly upsetting or traumatic, displays a potentiality for the Knight of Infinite Resignation, who by accepting those transformations is able to get in touch with new aspects of herself. Therefore, this additional figure takes a unique step in her entanglement with reality by perceiving it as an undetermined source of power to be experimented with and tested. On a marginal note, we could thus suggest a connection between the Knight of Infinite Resignation and the Nietzschean übermensch (overman); this conclusion is based on the fact that these conceptual personae overcome the anthropocentric illusion of a world dominated by human rationality and highlight the necessity and power connected with a physical and immanent acceptance of reality and its movements.[24]

Deleuze would also argue that the essential difference between the Knights of Faith and of Infinite Resignation resides in the adherence of the former to a classical form of *ressentiment* (“resentment”). Abraham and Job never evolve or mutate; their attachment to the world is deprived of affirmative strength and the power to form new connections. Therefore, their link with reality, though constant, is informed by a quintessential passivity that makes them incapable of responding creatively to the transformations of the world surrounding them or the possibilities inscribed in “new encounters.”[25] In fact, the Knight of Faith—and certain aspects of Kierkegaard’s philosophy take this route to some extent[26]—is informed by a sort of ascetic ideal, with the constant embrace of challenges and practices that continuously confirm the adherence to a belief system. To become an actor of infinity instead means to abandon this ideal in favour of a ballet, of the capacity to find expression of the infinite (and its movements) even in the most mundane and banal everyday actions.[27] What is more, these qualities imply the necessity to “generate new values” and thus abandon any canonical belief system in favour of an immanent faith, of the embrace of an infinite plane of becoming of reality and actively

renouncing any ultimate existential solution.[28] These brief commentaries on certain facets of Kierkegaard's existentialism are particularly interesting in how they connect spirituality and belief with a longing for a connection with the world and because they allow us to think about faith in ways that defy traditional religious categorisations. As we have observed, faith and belief do not need to be connected with explicitly coded divine or supernatural figures; rather, they describe the absurdity of existence and an unavoidable desire to remain in the sensuality of experience and connect to the world.

It is precisely on this point that we can detect one of the clearest connections between Kierkegaard's philosophical system and Scorsese's filmography. As already noted, the characters inhabiting the cinema of the Italian American filmmaker are all, in one way or another, strong believers in common faiths. Sometimes, these beliefs are clearly connected with identity markers and the necessity to affirm ethnic belonging, especially in the context of multiracial urban environments and their related sectarian conflicts. When thinking about *Gangs of New York*,[29] for instance, the racist Natives group and the mostly Irish immigrant Dead Rabbits faction fight each other and deploy their respective Christian denominations (Protestant and Catholic) as simply another sign of their incompatibility. The adoption of specific sacred symbols or dressing codes, then, explicitly becomes a way to separate groups and to stress conflictual racial dynamics rather than highlighting some specific spiritual concern. Indeed, at the same time, members of both parties share the same code of conduct and values to the point of being able to establish emotional and affective bonds. However, the search for ultimate meaning and the trials of faith, as we have seen, do not necessarily limit themselves to classically sacred and holy practices. As Kierkegaard demonstrated, belief can be mundane and banal, and we can identify its movements in the most common daily activities. However, the simplicity and conventionality of faith do not deny its intensity, the passionate bodily dimension associated with it, or its connection with the profound absurdity of the modern condition—particularly when it comes to investigating the link between individual knights of faith and the aspiration to belong, to be recognised in a community of believers. No one can help us better understand this complex bond than Scorsese's unholy gangsters and violently sinful priests. These figures are suspended between the pursuit of unrepentant, individual success, the desire for wider recognition within their community, and loftier aspirations—a combination of goals that is ideologically, existentially, and experientially untenable. Such a deadlock is often pictured by Scorsese through an emphasis on the protagonists' suffering bodies, as we see in the next section. The focus on the physical display of these characters will also act as one of our main concerns when it comes to the stylistic and expressive strategies of the film-philosophical system we are examining.

SCORSESE'S KNIGHTS OF FAITH

As noted above, the recurrence of spiritual themes and tensions in Scorsese's filmography has been widely debated.[30] Indeed, he has never shied away from confronting the notion of the divine in his films, starting from works which explicitly focus on religious figures like Jesus in *The Last Temptation of Christ*,[31] the Dalai Lama in *Kundun*,[32] and Jesuit priests in *Silence*.[33] In particular, *Silence*,[34] based on the 1966 novel of the same name by Shūsako Ēndo, deals with Sebastião Rodrigues (Andrew Garfield) and Francisco Garupe (Adam Driver), two travelling monks in seventeenth-century Japan who search for their missing mentor, Cristóvão Ferreira (Liam Neeson) to help him evangelise the local population. The film primarily follows Sebastião and his tormented relationship with his faith. At the same time, it features varied and repeated images of missionaries and converted Christians being cruelly tortured by Japanese authorities

who are trying to force them to abandon their beliefs. This exhibition of physical suffering is mirrored by the main character's inner angst about reaffirming his adherence to the Christian ideals he aims to fulfil. Sebastião's bodily tortures and pains—which he witnesses and endures—are presented to the audience as reiterations of Christ's Passion, of the very trials experienced by the Son of God in order to reach transcendence and save humanity. In this sense, torture may be perceived by viewers as the welcomed and blessed suffering through which a character measures her closeness to God. One recurring image that accompanies Sebastião's inner and physical torment is the face of Christ from El Greco's *Veil of Veronica* (1700), a perfect rendition of the ideals of wholesomeness, purity, and earthly transcendence.[35] The contradiction between God becoming human and using His body as a crucial experiential link to achieve redemption and deliver universal salvation is a tormenting and damning reference point with which to compare oneself. Sebastião never abandons the desire to achieve or correspond to this divine image. However, he cannot help but betray, fail to reach, and ultimately distance himself from it. This tension does not detract from the genuine beliefs of the character; indeed, the impossibility of fulfilling the gap between Christ and humanity and the continuous failure to achieve this goal is precisely what maintains Sebastião's passion and spirituality.

Significantly, not even Christ is exempt from experiencing such painful conundrums in Scorsese's work. In *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Jesus (Willem Defoe) appears to fail to adhere to his own image, as throughout the film we see him puzzling over his faith, struggling with carnal desire, and even radically transforming the practice of his own beliefs at every turn. It is only on his deathbed, after having passionately loved and married Mary Magdalene (Barbara Hershey) and built a family with the sisters Mary and Martha, that Jesus accepts his destiny as the Son of God and dies on the cross to redeem humanity. Scorsese offers us here "an intimate character study rather than a traditional epic,"[36] a portrayal of Christ as eminently, unforgivably human, which unsurprisingly has produced diametrically opposed assessments.[37] To reinforce the connection between the sacred and the profane, Paul Schrader pointed out that, if the film is indeed blasphemous—as argued by many critics and members of the public—it is so "insofar as it suggests that it is not God who does create us (mankind), but it is we through our striving who create him, and that Jesus was creating God."[38] As an emblematic Knight of Faith, Jesus constantly longs for higher meaning and purpose, using his own body as the recipient of tortures, pains, pleasures, and sins (the film features vivid sex scenes and moments of sadomasochistic violence) to try to get in touch with the divine. The path of faith, as we have seen with Kierkegaard, is a sensuous and bodily journey, with spirituality again framed as an immanent and intense phenomenon.

The way of Golgotha in Scorsese's filmography, then, remains an endless path marked by failures, interruptions, and continual deviations. This combination of suffering, defeats, falls from grace, and fatal condemnation to repeat the same type of actions is made explicitly manifest in the boxing ring in *Raging Bull*.[39] From the striking opening sequence of the film, viewers are invited to join the melodramatic, chaotic, and violently self-destructive struggles of Jake LaMotta (Robert De Niro) as he gets ready for this inner fight to the sounds of Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana*. The faith, angst, and torment of LaMotta, however, do not take the form of traditional adherence to Christianity or classical spirituality. As a matter of fact, the signs, symbols, and practices of Catholicism are displayed almost exclusively as identity and cultural markers of the Italian American community of the Bronx in the 1950s. Moreover, one could add that the main characters' behaviour in the film—their endless display of physical, verbal, and misogynistic violence (with homophilic and homoerotic tensions associated with the macho

culture embraced by Jake and others)[40]—contrasts sharply with the faith's key principles. On the other hand, this same brutality, Robert Casillo would argue, can be observed as an implication of the religious codes and familial obsessions that imbue the moral and behavioural background of the character, exasperating male competition and requiring the constant humiliation and subordination of women.[41] At the same time, when looking closely at the story events and their dramatic evolution, we can state that this same tension towards violence and self-destruction is associated with an endless search for ultimate accomplishment.

In an early sequence, we see Jake masochistically inviting his brother and sexual rival Joey (Joe Pesci) to repeatedly punch him in the face in order to demonstrate his capacity to endure pain while complaining that he can never become the number one boxer in the world because of his relatively small size. Even though he is convinced of his inherent superiority, Jake nevertheless believes he is doomed to a life of disappointment and endless striving for recognition. He manages to win the world championship in his class (middleweight) and, while this moment is displayed as a solemn and heartfelt event (with the opening's musical theme returning in an extended form), no final sense of achievement is associated with it. On the contrary, this moment is followed by the most dramatically intense sequences of the film, in which we see the protagonist's pathological jealousy violently exploding against his wife and brother. Likewise, after this catastrophic event, an endless downward spiral of decay follows the realisation of LaMotta's lifelong dream, leading to the end of his boxing career, the shattering of familial bonds, and financial and legal troubles. Apart from the classic narrative dynamic of rise and fall, there seems to be an inherent push towards self-destruction that accompanies LaMotta's trajectory across the film, even in his late unsuccessful career as stand-up comedian: a drive and desire that counters any sense of realisation and satisfaction. The ring, like the stage, is not the space where the character accomplishes goals but rather the setting where he can repent his sins and fury (as the Bronx's raging bull), where he can suffer and endure humiliation and pain, and where, at the same time, he can claim his exceptionality as the ultimate fighter. This dark interconnection between masochism, self-flagellation, and aggrandising narratives[42] finds its most explicit iteration in the long rivalry with the apparently more balanced figure of Sugar Ray Robinson (Johnny Barnes). In their third and final match, unequivocally dominated by Robinson, LaMotta leaves himself at his adversary's mercy, welcoming his terrifying blows while standing on the ropes in a crucified Christ pose.[43] After this display of needless violence and the referee stopping the fight, we find LaMotta still taunting his opponent, arguing that he was never actually knocked out.

This purposefully obtuse stance, however, makes LaMotta another clear example of a paradoxical Kierkegaardian faith. In suffering and the continuous trial of his bodily resilience (and later in public humiliation), the raging bull can continue aspiring to that impossible redemption and sense of wholesomeness that otherwise appears to defy him at every turn. The system of beliefs here nonetheless corresponds with the possibility of being publicly recognised as a champion, as "number one" ("I'm the boss," he keeps repeating in the final sequence while preparing for his latest show), while knowing that this achievement remains vague and impossible, if not unattainable.

In *Cape Fear*, we observe a further iteration of this combination of search for redemption and physical suffering, starting with the opening images of the film: the protagonist's body is foregrounded as we see Max Cady (De Niro) exercising in a small cell before being released from prison. The camera lingers on the numerous tattoos constellating the character's back and chest: as our eyes scan the man's suffering and trialled physicality, we are able to map the

values so deeply ingrained in his belief system as to be literally inscribed on his flesh. An enormous cross in particular catches our attention: hanging from each arm are the scales of justice, whose poles “Truth” and “Justice” have the ring of Old Testament retribution. Together with that, the small makeshift library and photos on the cell walls reinforce the idea that we are dealing here with a fanatic character, maniacally dedicated to self-improvement and the fulfilment of personal purposes. The inner and bodily torment of Cady, who believes he has been wrongfully sentenced to fourteen years of hard prison for sexual violence, justifies and reinforces the righteousness of his cruel and perverse retribution against his former lawyer, Sam Bowden (Nick Nolte). This latter character is, at least in Cady’s peculiar system of justice, guilty of having willingly compromised his legal defence by hiding mitigating evidence. In Cady’s eyes, this makes Bowden an abject traitor to the sacred duty of a lawyer to zealously represent his client. One of the—perhaps unanticipated—consequences of Cady’s persecution of the upper-middle class Bowden family is, rather disturbingly, to reveal the hypocrisies, mild violence, and abuses that hide within the walls of this most ordinary American household. Apart from the ambiguous relation between holiness and sin (if not pure malignity in Cady’s case) that we see reiterated in the disturbing moralised violence operated by the villain, self-martyrdom again becomes a vehicle for self-aggrandising dynamics.[44]

The villain-martyr is powerfully committed to a mission as emissary of a superior sense of justice that everyone is supposed to recognise and embrace and dies evoking the Promised Land (chanting in Aramaic), a redemption that is constantly negated to him but to which he nevertheless keeps looking at with an insatiable longing. Cady sees his misfortunes as signs of a divine project and performs his crimes as sacraments or expressions of his faith, since he seems through these acts to highlight the need for a shared ethical order and sense of justice to emerge and regulate behaviour, even though he would be excluded from any such system. Indeed, one could even argue that all his vengeful machinations are meant to *convert* Bowden, drag him down to the level of a sinner and criminal, and to make him aware of his own need for faith and belief. Cady, in his foolish and tormenting revenge, is a pure zealot (he also quotes an entire passage from Angelus Silesius’s mystic philosophy)[45] who compares himself to Virgil guiding Bowden to the deepest circles of Hell. Ironically, his zealotry appears to be intrinsically connected with his radical immorality since it motivates the need for justice and stable legal principles, as if the greatest sinner were the one who is truly capable of understanding the value of retribution and the person who has the greatest right to demand it.

As for the figures of Kierkegaard’s theatre, the final moment of resolution and relief is constantly denied to Scorsese’s protagonists, who interpret what happens to them as a manifestation of a superior force and welcome their own annihilation and destruction. The painful search for meaning and accomplishment may seem to find a disturbing (re)solution in the case of *Taxi Driver*,[46] in which the lonely anti-hero Travis Bickle (De Niro, again) answers to his existential angst by becoming an unlikely urban avenger. However, when accomplishing the righteous purpose of saving the young sex worker Iris (Jodie Foster) with the aim of re-establishing a clear moral (gendered and racial) order in a decaying New York, we see Travis pointing a now fully unloaded gun to his head, indicating suicide as the ultimate outcome of his existential goal. Not coincidentally, in the film’s closing moments, our sociopathic main character, having survived the final shootout and now publicly acknowledged as a hero, enjoys only partial gratification in this recognition and promptly returns to his obsessions and search for existential fulfilment by iconically adjusting the rear view mirror of his taxi.

The latter examples of Scorsese's Knights of Faith we have encountered may seem very detached from any model of spirituality and, as we have discussed, display a willing embrace of brutal, at least partly materialistic, and often misogynistic attitudes. Nevertheless, the actions they perform are carried out with the aim of achieving redemption and recognition. Whether we are talking about success or "becoming number one," justice and retribution (no matter how distorted these concepts may appear), or life purpose, these characters experience these goals and existential motivations as endless efforts without any possible closure. These more mundane faiths also share the same metaphysical absurd flaw identified by Kierkegaard, that is they are not supported by logical justifications of sorts. Their strength resides, rather, in the fact that they indicate a connection with the world and entail practices and a lived experience in which the tormented flesh of the faithful is actually the core of the spiritual journey. For the same reason, it is possible to extend the dynamics of Kierkegaardian existentialist religiosity to gangsters and other examples of Scorsese's believers, for whom money, individualism, and the American Dream constitute a constantly moving, even though fading and collapsing, heaven.

THE COLLAPSE OF FAITH: EMPTY RITUALS AND FUGAZI.

In the previous section we observed how it is possible to detect signs of a tormented spirituality even in characters like Jake LaMotta and read his fights in the ring as akin to experiences of martyrdom. At first glance, however, it is difficult to imagine the same tension pervading films like *The Wolf of Wall Street*,[47] where we see the protagonist, Jordan Belfort (Leonardo DiCaprio), and his fellow broker-fraudsters do nothing but relentlessly consume drugs and conspicuously indulge in luxurious pleasures and sexual adventures. However, the very excess foregrounded in the film tells us something more about the American Dream of economic realisation as a modern and secular faith and about the idea of the individual which resides at its core.

In one of the most memorable dialogues of the film, we see the only proper moment of mentoring and guidance Belfort receives, delivered by Mark Hanna (Matthew McConaughey). As a seasoned broker with one of Wall Street's most distinguished firms, Hanna should be the one with insights and a clear vision of their profession and work environment. Instead, he states that nobody understands the Market, especially brokers, stressing that they have no financial or ethical responsibility to generate anything or to imagine any tangible economic prospect ("we don't build shit, we don't create anything," he emphasises).[48] The only real ethical concern is to put meat on the table and to keep the Ferris wheel going forever because the very idea of the money, growth, and financial investments are nothing per se but a *fugazi*: fairy dust, dream matters that move from one place to another in order for "The Market" to exist. The stock Market is ultimately displayed as the real religious authority of the film. Not long after this moment, viewers witness the unravelling of Black Monday in 1987 (the largest one-day crash in Wall Street history) as a completely unexpected—even metaphysical—phenomenon. All the brokers, including and more than anybody else Hanna, cannot fathom the nature of this event; they make up excuses for their clients on the phone and try to buy extra time until all the exchanges are dramatically closed, to the stupefaction of everybody on the hectic trading floor, which suddenly becomes silent. As for an act of God, transactions are interrupted, as if the Market has expressed an intangible sign of its will. The camera displays these particular events from a top down perspective (medium-long shot) in order to emphasise the disconnection between this materialist deity and its own worshippers, their existential alienation and passivity.

In their *sins* and ludicrous consumerism continuously exhibited up to the point of being disconnected from any idea of pleasure and enjoyment (masturbation is described as a medical

prescription, while sexual intercourses are displayed as demented, mechanical, and unerotic), these brokers could be compared to priests serving a popular mundane deity. Jordan and his pals' excesses are the modes in which their faith is manifested and performed and, after all, money themselves, is described as the most powerful of all drugs. It does not buy you "things"; it makes you a better person, it allows you to be recognised as somebody, and it makes you invincible. The ludicrous pitching session sequences, the various motivational speeches delivered by Jordan to his followers at Stratton Oakmont headquarters, and the infinite idiotic parties that involve orgiastic rites also present a similarity with expressions of a fanatic liturgy. These are moments in which the believers ecstatically come together to celebrate their cult of money and success, sinning in celebration of the Market that allows them to be among the winners, while everyone else outside the community deserves to be victims of their plots and frauds. Jordan describes his society as the *Mayflower*, the quintessence of the American Dream itself, the place in which everyone can become somebody (at the expense of others and of social existence altogether), where you deal with your problems by becoming rich, and this process is more compelling than being wealthy and satisfied. In a way, with their mystic reliance on Market decisions, the protagonists of the film seem to adhere to Walter Benjamin's considerations in "Capitalism As a Religion":[49] a cult with no theology that understands the existence of things only in their relation to capital. This secular cult is based on hope of fulfilment that comes from economic achievements; however, for this very same reason, it exists as a harsh religion continuously creating envies, debts, and guilts to be atoned for by continuously showing economic, performative (and, thus, moral) adequacy.

In this framework, even the financial success and apparent triumph of these characters become passive acts of belief. The final images of the film reinforce this point by showing us an audience of worshippers looking in awe at Jordan (and the camera), who is now out of prison and has become a public figure, teaching them how to sell financial junk. By making us as viewers observe the admiring crowd, this ending effects an experiential reversal that displays our own enjoyment of the main character's misdeeds. Thus, we are invited to reflect on our own aspirations and dreams of an upward economic move that we can understand as beliefs and values that we share with the *wolves*. These existential purposes become common expressions of a shared secular faith. Believing deeply in the individualist myth, the Market, or becoming a winner is not, from the philosophical and existential point of view, particularly different from embodying the zealot's code of vengeance expressed by Max Cady: in both cases the harmful consequences of actions carried out in the name of a superior force dominating and informing the existence of living beings are considered irrelevant or are righteously justified. Just as the Bowden family should expect retribution, so do the losers of the economic arena deserve to be deprived of their money in favour of those who know "how to spend it better." Jordan Belfort, as the Knight of Faith of the Market God will never genuinely reconsider his beliefs; momentary setbacks and misfortunes are only new occasions to make money, to allow the Ferris wheel to keep moving—he even teaches people how to behave as he did—and to push his vices to extreme consequences. As a matter of fact, Jordan shows a self-destructive drive (while, interestingly, masochistic sexual experiences are the only ones he seems to remember) and a propensity to avoid rational and calculating choices, as a broker should, careening willingly towards financial and legal troubles.

While *The Wolf of Wall Street* displays the grotesque dynamics defining the secular faith in capitalist morality, at the same time, the film seems to signal a collapse and failure in this same system of belief. Nothing is left to us as viewers but a bitter sense of grotesque and dark humour about the foolishness and destructiveness of the American Dream; from this we also

understand the dumb-comedy tone of the film itself, its tendency to emphasise slapstick situations against any glamorous or dramatic configuration of this particular philosophical storyworld and of the Knights of Faith at its centre. Even though the dramatic element is downplayed here in comparison to other case studies, a sense of existential failure still accompanies the experience and highlights not simply the amorality of the characters; it also reveals, through the display of excesses, the darkest and most disempowering consequences of a faith that is deprived of any aura or idea of futurability.

More explicit than *The Wolf of Wall Street* in signalling the collapse of the beliefs in the American Dream is *The Irishman*,[50] which appears to follow the trajectory of many of Scorsese's gangster films. However, the rise and fall of Frank Sheeran (De Niro) as hitman and man of confidence for his two father figures—the mobster Russ Bufalino (Pesci) and the infamous union leader Jimmy Hoffa (Al Pacino)—are associated with a cold, disenchanted look at the events. As with the previous film, a glamorous aesthetic to describe a criminal community and underworld is abandoned with the unique effect, in this case, of displaying an unprecedented stiffness. This aesthetic peculiarity is to be connected with the journey of the main character, which begins with finding a community, purpose, and bonds with the Mafia and the Teamsters Union. This sense of belonging (again, being among winners) is reinforced by rituals (such as the very Christian sharing wine and bread with Bufalino) or by continuous shows of affection. However, in the name of this faith and of the alleged code associated with it, Sheeran will passively accept the need to kill Hoffa, to progressively undermine his relationship with his family (particularly his daughter Peggy [Anna Paquin]), and to arrive at a miserable old age: alone, abandoned, incapable of communicating or understanding his choices. Even though he feels some regret, he is unable to recognise any of his misdeeds, instead he pretends to have acted in good faith while waiting fearfully for death to come. The passivity of Sheeran's faith is reinforced by the austerity of Rodrigo Prieto's cinematography, which makes artful use of brown and grey. These aesthetic choices and patterns are more evident in the final hour of the film, in which Sheeran's loneliness and failure resemble existential despair, making the experience a sort of *Wild Strawberries* for gangsters.

CONCLUSION

This article has put forward an argument for the exploration of theoretical resonances between Kierkegaard's Knight of Faith and Scorsese's protagonists across a number of films, from *The Temptation of Christ* to *Silence*, from *Taxi Driver* to *Raging Bull* and *Cape Fear*, and finally, from *The Wolf of Wall Street* to *The Irishman*. Throughout, we have highlighted how Scorsese's protagonists are, in spite of their persistent devotion to reality, unable to adapt creatively to the changes in their environment because of their innate passivity. Initially, this passivity does not deny these characters their fleshy nature, allowing them to embody passionate faiths and beliefs. In fact, we have used the physicality of these figures, relentlessly displayed in their suffering and sins, as the main aesthetic reference point for this film-philosophical journey. The excessive tone determining the initial case studies, however, is progressively substituted by a cold and disenchanted look as we move towards more recent works, highlighting the collapse of secular beliefs in success, individualism, and, more generally, the American Dream. There is no doubt that a form of disenchantment pervades in fact the latest work of the Italian American director. In *The Irishman*, in particular, his characters appear to be defeated by life and passively waiting for death. Perhaps as a result of the director's own weariness with the seductions of faith, in the latest works, the Knights of Faith's connection with the carnal and sensous aspects of our experience becomes increasingly more tenuous—with the result that a bursts of

passions, more vital impulses give way to certain detachment and abstraction. The solution proposed by Scorsese for resolving this deadlock is once again reminiscent of the work of Kierkegaard, in that the move that it suggests is not towards transcendence but rather towards infinite resignation as a form of intense creation.

Notes

1. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 199

2. Aaron Baker, "Introduction: Artistic Solutions to Sociological Problems," in *A Companion to Martin Scorsese*, ed. Aaron Baker (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons Ltd, 2015), 1–12.

3. Christopher B. Barnett and Clark J., Elliston, "Introduction," in *Scorsese and Religion*, ed. Christopher B. Barnett and Clark J. Elliston (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 1–8.

4. Giorgio Bertellini and Jacqueline Reich, "Smuggling Iconoclasm: European Cinema and Scorsese's Male Antiheroes," in *A Companion to Martin Scorsese*, ed. Aaron Baker (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons Ltd., 2015), 43–44.

5. Gilles Deleuze, "The Brain Is the Screen," in *The Brain Is the Screen: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Cinema*, ed. Gregory Flaxman (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 365–73.

6. What is more, the longstanding participation in this filmography of editor Thelma Schoonmaker and cinematographers Robert Richardson, Rodrigo Prieto, and Michael Ballhaus, not to mention the partnership with Robert De Niro and other actors, is widely known and has been addressed in scholarship—on this, see, for instance, Colin R. Tait, "When Marty Met Bobby: Collaborative Authorship in *Mean Streets* and *Taxi Driver*," in *A Companion to Martin Scorsese*, ed. Aaron Baker (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons Ltd, 2015), 292–94. Along this line of thought, we are not going to analyse in depth the facets of the collaboration between Scorsese and Paul Schrader, even though we acknowledge that their collaboration is largely grounded on the existential themes and subjects discussed in the paper.

7. This Guy Edits, "Be a Filmmaker Who Edits," 21 August 2021, https://www .youtube.com/watch?v=jAfjpEfxl1M.

8. Et al., Martin Scorsese, *Goodfellas* (1990; United States; Warner Bros). DVD.

9. Et al., Martin Scorsese, *Mean Streets* (1973; United States; Warner Bros). DVD.

10. Though other scholars do situate Scorsese's gangsters within the tragic canon. See, for instance, John McAteer,"The Problem of Violence in Scorsese's Films: The Catholic Gangster as Tragic Hero," in S*corsese and Religion*, 72–90.

11. Et al., Martin Scorsese, *Casino* (1995; United States; Universal Pictures). DVD.

12. McAteer, "The Problem of Violence in Scorsese's Films," 86.

13. Robert Casillo, *Gangster Priest: The Italian American Cinema of Martin Scorsese* (London: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 382.

14. Ibid., 212, 343.

15. Greg M. Smith, “Gangsters, Cannibals, Aesthetes, or Apparently Perverse Allegiances,” in *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion*, ed. Carl R. Plantinga and Greg M. Smith. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 217–38.

16. Among scholars who have proposed a dialogue between film and Kierkegaard’s philosophy are Lisa Trahair, “Belief in this World: the Dardenne Brothers’ *The Son* and Søren Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*,” *SubStance* 45(3) (2016): 98–119; and Robert Sinnerbrink, “Love Sick: Malick’s Kierkegaardian ‘Weightless’ Trilogy,” *Paragraph* 42(3) (2019): 279–300.

17. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, “Introduction,” in Søren Kierkegaard, *The Essential Kierkegaard*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), ix–xii.

18. Kierkegaard, *The Essential Kierkegaard*, 6; 396. See also Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” *Daedalus* 87(1) (1958): 111–34.

19. Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (London: Continuum, 1983), 150–56; Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, trans. Adrian Del Caro, ed. Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 9–11; 65–69.

20. Kierkegaard, *The Essential Kierkegaard*, 99–101.

21. Ibid., 101.

22. The famous maxim *credo quia absurdum* (“I believe because it is absurd”), attributed to Tertullian’s *De Carne Christi*, may be the paradigmatic formulation of this paradox.

23. Kierkegaard, *The Essential Kierkegaard*, 100–01.

24. Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 27–30; Kierkegaard, *The Essential Kierkegaard*, 95–99.

25. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 279–82.

26. Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 36–38.

27. Ibid., 36–37.

28. Kierkegaard, *The Essential Kierkegaard*, 97.

29. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 282; Kierkegaard, *The Essential Kierkegaard*, 96.

30. Et al., Martin Scorsese, *Gangs of New York* (2002; United States; Miramax). DVD.

31. Christopher B. Barnett, “Dostoevskian Elements in Scorsese’s Cinema,” in *Scorsese and Religion*, 45–71.

32. Et al., Martin Scorsese, *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988; United States; Warner Bros). DVD.

33. Et al., Martin Scorsese, *Kundun* (1997; United States; TouchStone Pictures). DVD.

34. Et al., Martin Scorsese, *Silence* (2016; United States; SharpSword Films). DVD.

35. One may notice the ironic coincidence, in our analysis associating the film with philosophical concerns, that the pseudonym used by Kierkegaard for the release of *Fear and Trembling* was Johannes de Silentio.

36. Ironically, the image of Christ's perfect and divine face is also evoked in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879) in relation to the existential impossibility of achieving closeness to God (1992, pp. 268–69, p. 272). See Barnett, "Dostoevskian Elements in Scorsese's Cinema," 45–71, for a discussion of Dostoevskian elements in Scorsese's filmography. Fyodor Dostoevsky, The Brothers Karamazov, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, intr. Malcolm V. Jones (London: Vintage Classics, 1992), 268-269, 272.

37. Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch, "The Last Temptation of Christ: Scorsese's Jesus among Ordinary Saints," in *Scorsese and Religion*, 152.

38. Lloyd S. J. Baugh, "Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*: A Critical Reassessment of Its Sources, Its Theological Problems, and Its Impact on the Public," in *Scandalizing Jesus? Kazantzakis's The Last Temptation of Christ Fifty Years On*, ed. Darren J. N. Middleton (New York: Continuum, 2005), 173–92; Christopher Deacy, *Screen Christologies: Redemption and the Medium of Film* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001).

39. TIFF Originals, "The Last Temptation of Christ Is Blasphemous | Paul Schrader | TIFF 2019," 11 December 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rPhYqk g9mC8.

40. Steffen Hven, *Enacting the Worlds of Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 17–19.

41. Et al., Martin Scorsese, *Raging Bull* (1980; United States; Chartoff-Winkler Productions). DVD.

42. Et al., Martin Scorsese, *Cape Fear* (1991; United States; Amblin Entertainment). DVD.

43. Casillo, *Gangster Priest*, 239–41.

44. Ibid., 146; 212.

45. Ibid., 209.

46. Ibid., 249.

47. Ibid., 176.

48. "I am like God, and God like me. I am as large as God. He is as small as I. He cannot above me, nor I beneath Him be."

49. Et al., Martin Scorsese, *Taxi Driver* (1976; United States; Columbia Pictures). DVD.

50. Et al., Martin Scorsese, *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013; United States; Red Granite Pictures). DVD.

51. Francesco Sticchi, *Mapping Precarity in Contemporary Cinema and Television. Chronotopes of Anxiety, Depression, Expulsion/Extinction* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2021), 24.

52. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913–1926*, ed. Marcus Bollock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 288–91; Elettra Stimilli, *Debt and Guilt: A Political Philosophy* (London: Bloomsbur, 2018), 88–97.

53. Et al., Martin Scorsese, *The Irishman* (2019; United States; Netflix). DVD.