The mean streets of New York have seldom been meaner. Blood does not just run in them, it gallops, spilled by blades and bludgeons that slice and crack the bodies of the past in a violence that is at once ritualised and reverential. Martin Scorsese’s *Gangs of New York*, a $120 million epic inspired by Herbert Asbury’s 1928 ‘informal history’ *The Gangs of New York*, commences with a fictitious 1846 gang battle in Paradise Square, heart of the infamous Five Points district of lower Manhattan, pitting Bill ‘The Butcher’ Cutting and his Protestant ‘Know-Nothing’ nativists against the Irish Catholic immigrant forces of Priest Vallon and the Dead Rabbits.

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1 Whitman 1993, p. 160.
2 This paper was first presented to Toronto’s Marxist Institute in February 2003, and the author is grateful to the audience for its critical comment.
3 Asbury 1928.
Historical Hurt: ‘The Blood Stays on the Blade’

This opening scene of gore and mayhem, in which the white snow is soon stained various shades of red and pink, sets the cinematic stage, with the victorious Butcher withdrawing his knife from Vallon’s chest, affording an opportunity for the close-up gush of spurting blood, a kind of Scorsese ‘money shot’. ‘Ears and noses are the trophies of the day’, proclaims Cutting to the triumphant nativist ranks as the defeated Dead Rabbits stand oddly subdued, the entire combative lot looking, many commentators have remarked, as if they stepped off a set cast midway between Braveheart and Mad Max, the weaponry eerily reminiscent of some working-class street-warfare equivalent of the gynaecological instruments of Dead Ringers. Yet this surreal gladiatorial imagery is introduced by a scene of seeming incongruity, marked by consummate gentleness. A supposedly celibate priest tutors his motherless son about life’s harshness and the need to keep this always in mind. As he prepares with a meticulous toilet for the impending battle, Vallon shaves while his young boy, Amsterdam, watches in the shadows. A father’s hand passes a blood-stained straight razor to his son, who starts to wipe the red residue on the bottom of his jacket. ‘No son, never’, admonishes the priest, who continues with caring guidance: ‘The blood stays on the blade ... Someday you’ll understand’.

This insistence that the historical blood stays on the blade is Scorsese’s under-appreciated accomplishment, a metaphor of history’s hurt that is suggestively extended into a range of complex realms associated with United States class and state formation. To be sure, the odd mainstream critic does indeed gesture towards this fundamental historicisation. Jami Bernard of the New York Daily News ends her review, ‘Scorsese and the Age of Violence’, with a brief, if historically misguided and somewhat pejorative, allusion to what she claims is Gangs of New York’s large truth, ‘that today’s melting pot is yesterday’s witches’ brew’. More insightful, because it offers at least a few words of elaboration upon such a rhetorical one-liner, is A.O. Scott’s New York Times ‘To Feel a City Seethe’. Scott appreciates Scorsese’s ambition, the creation of ‘a narrative of historical change’ constructed ‘from the ground up’. Moreover, Scott grasps the uniqueness of this presentation: ‘There is very little in the history of American cinema to prepare us for the version of American history Mr. Scorsese presents here. It is not the usual triumphalist story of moral progress and enlightenment, but

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4 See the depiction of weaponry in Scorsese 2002, p. 146.
5 For exact dialogue, I rely on Scorsese 2002. All quotes from dialogue in the film are from this source unless otherwise stipulated.