The Hands That Built America: A Class-Politics Appreciation of Martin Scorsese’s The Gangs of New York

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What is your money-making now? What can it do now?
What is your respectability now?
Where are your theology, tuition, society, traditions, statute-books now?
Where are your jibes of being now?
Where are your cavils about the Soul now?

‘Song of the Broad Axe’, 142–6.
Walt Whitman, Chants Democratic, II

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 The Gangs of New York, a $120 million epic inspired by Herbert Asbury’s 1928 ‘informal history’ of the same name, commences with a fictitious 1846 gang battle in the 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.

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

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1 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.
2 Asbury 1928.
Braveheart and Mad Max, the weaponry eerily reminiscent of some working-class street-warfare equivalent of the gynaecological instruments of Dead Ringers.3

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 them always in mind. As he prepares for the impending battle with a meticulous toilet, 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 toward this fundamental historicisation. Jami Bernard of the New York Daily News ends her review, ‘Scorsese & the Age of Violence,’ with brief, if historically misguided and somewhat pejorative, allusion to what she claims is The 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 triumphant story of moral progress and enlightenment, but rather a blood-soaked revenger’s tale, in which the modern world arrives in the form of a line of soldiers firing into a crowd.’

But such gestures toward the reciprocities of past and present hardly abound in the reviews, most of which are incarcerated within the pageantry of specific personas: Daniel Day-Lewis’s riveting role as the Butcher, the rage level appropriate to the theatrical rendition supposedly primed by Day-Lewis blasting his eardrums non-stop with Eminem; Cameron Diaz’s miscast beautification of a ‘bludget’, the female pickpocket, Jenny Everdeane; and the rather unfortunate Leonardo DiCaprio, the film’s ‘star’ and narrator, Amsterdam Vallon, who finds himself ironically outclassed and overshadowed by the rough-hewn Day-Lewis and his mesmerising performance. While most critics swoon over the stunning Five Points set, constructed on the grounds

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