Scorsese’s Couch

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Mark Nicholls
SCORSESE’S MEN: MELANCHOLIA AND THE MOB
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ARTIN SCORSESE has created some of cinema’s most menacing men. Many of them look exactly like Robert De Niro, one of the director’s favourite actors. A young De Niro became the psychopathic Travis Bickle in Taxi Driver (1976) and the derelict middleweight boxing champion Jake La Motta in Raging Bull (1980). The actor has matured into an array of older women-hating nutters, most notably the sadistic ex-prisoner Max Cady in Cape Fear (1991). Never before have Hawaiian shirts and white slacks been deployed as symbols of such terror.

Bickle, La Motta, Cady and his melancholic target, philandering lawyer Sam Bowden (Nick Nolte), are some of the Scorsese men that Melbourne cinema studies lecturer Mark Nicholls analyses in this compact but densely argued book. The others are Newland Archer (Daniel Day-Lewis), the limpid hero of The Age of Innocence (1993), and gangster Henry Hill (Ray Liotta) in Goodfellas (1990). Nicholls’s study concludes with a brief survey of the development of male melancholia in more recent Scorsese films. He also gestures towards broader examples of male melancholies in the Scorsesean mode, most notably gangster Tony Soprano in the cult television series The Sopranos.

I describe Nicholls’s technique as analysis on purpose. His arguments about Scorsese’s characters are almost entirely psychoanalytic, drawing on the work of Freud, Lacan and contemporary feminist psychoanalytic writers such as Julia Kristeva and Barbara Creed. Readers are expected to have some grasp of often complicated and contestable ideas (such as the suggestion that the lost object of desire at the root of all the trauma suffered by these dysfunctional Scorsesean men is the absent mother).

Therefore, despite the book’s pop-culture packaging, Nicholls does not aim to communicate with the mass audiences who enjoy Scorsese flicks at the local suburban multiplex cinema. Rather, the author targets those familiar with the developing interdisciplinary field of masculinity studies, particularly the sub-specialty of how men are portrayed in film. Within these parameters, Scorsese’s Men is an original and challenging work, filled with provocative insights.

Its aim is ‘to demonstrate how the Scorsesean male melancholic is able to adopt an emotional stance historically seen as feminine yet retain his privileged position of power and authority’, a project that was inspired by The Age of Innocence. Innocence, which is set in Edith Wharton’s mannered world of 1870s upper-class New York, is often seen as an aberration in the generally violent Scorsese canon. For instance, viewers of Innocence are treated to lush close-ups of yellow roses and white gloves rather than the more customary images of biblical tattoos and broken noses. Watching Innocence, Nicholls was struck by the ‘profound sense of melancholy’ surrounding the male lead. Newland Archer was afflicted by an experience of loss (represented by his refusal to claim the woman of his fantasies, Countess Olenska) and this loss was celebrated as a sign of his exquisite sensitivity.

Nicholls saw a connection between Archer and the far less subtle outsider characters played by De Niro, Nolte and Liotta. While Archer is an obvious melancholic, mooning around after Countess O, the other Scorsese men are better at masking their chronic gloominess. Yet all five (Nolte and De Niro in Cape Fear are a kind of analytic pair, with Nolte being the melancholic and De Niro his ‘white trash other’) share a sense of alienation from ‘a corrupt and conservative group’. In Raging Bull, that group is the mob, while in Innocence it is New York’s élite. According to Nicholls’s theory, the melancholics have all suffered a traumatic loss, but they don’t want to stop mourning this loss. Archer, for instance, rejected many opportunities to have what he most wanted, the countess.

Scorsese’s men fetishise their losses, creating fantasy scenarios around them. The melancholics ultimately make a great show of sacrificing their beliefs and conforming to group norms (such as La Motta’s seemingly perverse decision to take a dive in his fight against Sugar Ray Robinson). Finally, Nicholls argues that the whole torturous melancholic performance actually increases the character’s authority and power. Of Archer, Nicholls writes: ‘By taking on the notions of grief, suffering, loss and sensitivity, the male melancholic uses these traditionally feminine attributes in the service of his own cultural validation.’ While this analysis works for the goody-two-shoes Archer, it is rather more difficult to associate the words ‘sensitivity’ and ‘grief’ with a character as diabolical as Max Cady.

After reading Scorsese’s Men, I rented a few movies. Even though I was unconvinced by some of Nicholls’s arguments, I found that his writing greatly enriched my viewing. I could hear an actress such as Michelle Pfeiffer (Countess Olenska) utter a seemingly throwaway line and was able, instantly, to reference it back to something that Freud said in Totem and Taboo. It was nice to put these famous people on the couch.