

# Mean streets

by [John Petrakis](#) in the [December 18, 2002](#) issue

Martin Scorsese's obsession with pain and suffering--and, more to the point, martyrdom--dates back to his breakthrough 1973 film *Mean Streets*, whose main character repeatedly puts his hand into a burning church candle to see what the flames of damnation will feel like. This fascination with violence continued in *Taxi Driver* ("Someday a real rain will come and wash the scum off the street"), *Raging Bull*, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, *Goodfellas*, *Casino* and *Bringing Out the Dead*. In all these films, Scorsese has emphasized that for a man on a mission, especially a holy mission, the cheek-turning teachings of the church don't matter. Actions speak louder than words, and bloody action speaks loudest of all. He doesn't condone the violence, or even attempt to explain it. It's just there.

*Gangs of New York* has been over 20 years in the making. Based loosely on the quasi-historical 1928 novel by Herbert Asbury, it's about the conflicts between Manhattan's Irish immigrants and the locals. The tale begins in 1846, with a bloody street battle between the Nativists, commanded by Bill "the Butcher" McCutty (Daniel Day-Lewis), and the Irish, led by a rough-and-tumble priest (Liam Neeson) who has no qualms about living or dying by the sword. The priest perishes at the hand of the Butcher, an act of brutality that is witnessed by the priest's young son.

At this point in the film, it looks as if Scorsese and his three credited screenwriters are going to follow a traditional story of revenge. The boy grows into a man by the name of Amsterdam Vallon (Leonardo DiCaprio), who returns to the city 16 years later to kill the man who killed his father. But Amsterdam is more Hamlet than Charles Bronson (who faced a similar dilemma in Sergio Leone's magnificent *Once Upon a Time in the West*, a film that has clearly influenced *Gangs of New York*). Amsterdam's hesitation leads to the many complications of the film's second act in which Amsterdam, while assuming the role of the Butcher's protégé, falls in love with a beautiful pickpocket (Cameron Diaz).

This epic has two major stars. One is the neighborhood, which is beautifully shot (in Rome, not New York). Known as "Five Points" for the intersection of five streets, it

not only breeds desperation and brutality, but seems to stand by and observe, playing the role of silent witness.

The other star is Day-Lewis. Bill the Butcher would stand out in any case as a most complex and determined villain, but Day-Lewis, in his return to acting after a five-year hiatus, elevates him to mythic status. Day-Lewis's performance is so powerful, so layered and ultimately so disturbing that it keeps everyone and everything else in its shadow. His final exit is strangely reminiscent of the death of Shakespeare's Richard III, only here it inspires not existential confusion about the extent of his villainy but a belated realization that he has outlived his time, and that "progress" has arrived in the form of bigger, more powerful weapons, along with the men who desire to use them.

It is revealing that in preparation for the final (and dramatically inevitable) rumble between Amsterdam and the Butcher, they both reject firearms in favor of knives and axes, weapons that force you to play a more active role in the killing.

By the end of the film, Scorsese risks losing control of his grand vision by including all sorts of true-to-life subplots, most notably the antidraft riots of 1863. A mob turns on the homes and businesses of the wealthy who can buy their way out of serving in the Union army. Along the way, the mob kills the blacks it encounters.

But Scorsese, true to his talent and experience, is able to keep it all together, leading to a stirring coda that reveals the development of the Manhattan skyline as seen from the deteriorating graves of Bill, Amsterdam and the rest. It concludes with a shot of New York of more than a year ago, with the twin towers of the World Trade Center still looming. Yes, violence breeds violence, Scorsese declares, adding that if history is any lesson, this too shall pass.