

Scorsese's *The Departed*: Stop and think

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The Departed, directed by Martin Scorsese, screenplay by William Monahan

The Departed, the newest film by veteran American director Martin Scorsese, is a blood-spattered account of an attempt by law enforcement authorities to make headway against the Boston underworld and the latter to resist it.

At the heart of the story are two young men, each leading a dangerous double-life: Billy Costigan (Leonardo DiCaprio), a Massachusetts state policeman who goes undercover in the crime gang operated by Frank Costello (Jack Nicholson); and Colin Sullivan (Matt Damon), a protégé of Costello's, who has successfully infiltrated the state police's Special Investigations Unit. Each ends up being assigned by his respective bosses to find the other.

Costigan works under the direct supervision of Capt. Queenan (Martin Sheen) and Sergeant Dignam (Mark Wahlberg), the most foulmouthed of the film's many foulmouthed characters. The pair challenge Costigan's working class credentials and toughness, before assigning him to penetrate Costello's outfit. Convinced that the crime boss has a mole of his own in their ranks, Queenan and Dignam insist on keeping Costigan's identity a tight secret.

Sullivan, for whom Costello has been something of a father figure since childhood, works in a newly formed elite unit under Captain Ellerby (Alec Baldwin), whose purpose is "to smash, or marginally disrupt, organized crime" in Boston, in the words of the latter's cynical "orientation" speech.

To complicate matters further, Costigan and Sullivan end up falling for the same woman, a police psychiatrist, Madolyn (Vera Farmiga). Both start to crack under the strain of the situation. Angry and unstable to begin with, Costigan, who already has been tortured by Costello as a kind of initiation rite, is legitimately terrified of being discovered and killed. He can't sleep and swallows handfuls of sedatives. Sullivan, meanwhile, is under immense and continuous pressure from Costello, who threatens him with dire consequences if he's unable to uncover the "rat" in the operation. By the end of *The Departed*, virtually none of its leading figures are left alive.

The story's structure (originally filmed in Hong Kong as *Infernal Affairs*, or *I Want to Be You*, in 2002) has possibilities. In the proper hands, a drama about two such "moles," and their respective inner and outer struggles, might shed some light on various things. The police and organized crime, with their peculiar symbiotic relationship, are not the least insignificant institutions in contemporary America. Moreover, Boston working class neighborhoods, among the oldest in the country, contain a great amount of human drama.

Scorsese and screenwriter William Monahan, however, are working along different lines. They have fashioned something violent, turgid and empty out of the material. Given the trajectory of Scorsese's career, this is not entirely unexpected. The film is cruder, more caricatured than the already brutal *Goodfellas* and *Casino*, and matches the misanthropy of *Gangs of New York*.

Scorsese explains his predilection for violence merely as the result of his experience growing up in a New York working class neighborhood in which organized crime operated. "That's part of what and who I am and somehow it channels itself into my films. I see it as almost absurd, sometimes, but that's just the absurdity of being alive," he told the press recently.

The filmmaker, who once considered the priesthood as a vocation, has never taken the trouble to trace violence in the US to its roots in history and social relations, to the essential harshness of American class society. He prefers, self-servingly, to see violence as a part of fallen human nature, which both enthalls and disgusts him. Scorsese has a fixed, frozen view of life and human character that has not evolved or deepened in more than three decades of making films.

Insofar as political events work on him, they simply solidify his bleak views. Scorsese explains that *The Departed* is in part his response to the September 11 attacks and subsequent events, including the actions of the Bush administration. He told an interviewer from *cinemablend.com* that the film takes place "in a moral Ground Zero in a way.... [I]t's a world where morality no longer exists.... I think for me it just is a sadness and a sense of despair since we've been in this situation since September 11th and somehow this all came together and that's what kept me going in depicting this world sort of like a moral Ground Zero."

He told the British *Guardian*, "Because I guess there's an anger, for want of a better word, about the state of affairs. An anger that hopefully doesn't eat at yourself but a desire to express what I feel about post-September 11 despair. My emotional response is this movie. It became clearer and clearer as we did it, more frightening. It came from a very strong state of conviction about the emotional, psychological state that I am in now about the world and about the way our leaders are behaving."

Scorsese may be quite sincere about the depth of his feelings, but they haven't, unhappily, brought him any closer, for example, to understanding or depicting the real driving forces of the war in Iraq or the assault on constitutional rights. He is very easy on himself in this regard. There is no indication that he has studied or even thought intensely about the economic and social processes that have brought American society to its present pass.

Serious artists do something other than merely registering their

despair (or joy) at events or assembling their impressions and intuitions and passing them on. Unfortunately, Scorsese's facility and early success with such methods in the 1970s deceived him into thinking they were sufficient to sustain a serious body of artistic work. This hasn't proven to be the case.

It's simply not good enough for Scorsese to look at his own work and find the presence of certain features "absurd," as though he were a passive instrument of external forces. This is an abdication of responsibility. Art contains the element of the unconscious and instinctive, more than science, but it does not only or even primarily contain that. No one does anything important in art, science or politics unless he or she understands the world in an important manner and struggles to bring it intellectually under his or her control.

Like figures in any field, artists have to stop and think before they act or create. Their responsibility is to bring out what is not immediately seen or felt, to fight their own "natural" tendencies (which are not "natural," but the result of social influences), to criticize the world and themselves remorselessly, *even if this process is very difficult, even torturous or unpopular, at times*. As Oscar Wilde observed, "It is through the voice of one crying in the wilderness that the ways of the gods must be prepared." This has not been Scorsese's path. He has chosen, in the most general sense, to "go with the flow." He is not to blame for the generally reactionary or stagnant climate that has prevailed in the US over the past quarter-century, but he bears some degree of guilt for accommodating himself to it.

If Scorsese is troubled, perhaps horrified, by the way "our leaders are behaving," why has he made a film that seems to indict humanity in general for its depravity? Isn't it an odd response, if "our leaders" are the primary problem, to turn one's cameras on a working class area and paint it as little more than a nest of vicious cutthroats? (This is the second film in recent years, following *Mystic River*, that represents a calumny against these Boston neighborhoods and their populations.) Clearly, whether he understands it or not, Scorsese is being pulled by some powerful gravitational force in society.

The artistic results are terribly weak. *The Departed* is poorly made, with its contrived and artificial dialogue, crude psychology, implausible events and ceaseless, gratuitous brutality. What does the succession of beatings, torture and killings, interspersed with snarling insults and obscenities, add up to? How is this productive or helpful to anyone? For some, this is still identified with "hard-hitting realism." When the shock effect of the killings and language wears off, and that occurs, it must be said, quite quickly, the incidents and four-letter words are merely tiresome. It's possible to argue, in fact, that the noise and violence are organized in part to obscure the essential vacuousness of the goings-on. The events and locales and people are deeply unreal, constructs organized to confirm Scorsese's superficial, disoriented view of things.

In Scorsese's early films (*Mean Streets*, *Taxi Driver*), confused as they may have been, the bloody denouements carried a certain weight, they were at least deeply felt and meant to be deeply felt. They emerged from and spoke to a sense that something was quite wrong with the world. Now the deaths are ritualistic and

perfunctory. The director doesn't seem to care very much for the characters he dispatches, so why should we? At one point, Costello shoots a woman in the back of the head, and then mutters to himself: "She fell kinda funny." Is this "black humor" à la Tarantino? It simply seems unhinged.

Scorsese claims to be appalled by the violence in life and in his own films, yet he continues to glamorize sociopaths. It's distasteful to have to say, but he seems to suffer from a disease that has afflicted more than one vicarious onlooker of what he or she takes to be the "heart of darkness" at society's core: a morbid fascination with the thug, under the mistaken assumption that the individual who is not afraid to use his fists or his firearms is somehow "freer" than the timid petty bourgeois standing on the sidelines.

And the film is widely celebrated.

Scorsese's continued decline is not the only one on display in *The Departed*. The deterioration in Jack Nicholson's career and performances is also fairly obvious. Of course, again, the process is not entirely under his control, neither in the general sense nor in regard to the specific weakness of the Costello role.

A great hoopla is made in *The Departed* about this supposedly legendary Boston crime boss, but he turns out to be a garden-variety psychopath. There is nothing extraordinary about him, except his indulgence in excess, which is not particularly believable or intriguing either. Executing people on the beach, up to his elbows in blood in another scene, bringing out a severed hand in a restaurant, showing up at a porno theater with a dildo...is this someone we should be fascinated by? What interests Scorsese and Nicholson, who personally overhauled the role, may not interest everyone.

Nicholson was one of the finest performers of his generation, a generation radicalized by the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War and determined to see the American film industry delve more closely and critically into life in the US. Most memorably, there are his performances in *Easy Rider*, *Five Easy Pieces*, *The Last Detail*, *Chinatown*, *The Passenger*, *The Shining*, *Reds* and *The Two Jakes* (which he also directed), among others.

It is difficult, however, to swim against the stream, to fight for serious work in bad times. It's easier to give in to all sorts of things, above all, massive, massive amounts of money (\$10 million or more for each film). Nicholson has made mostly innocuous or poor films, including a series of unfunny, inane comedies, for years now. It's caught up with him. His acting seems blurred and bombastic.

The Departed does no credit to anyone involved.



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