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Gangs of New York

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Abstract

This is a review of *Gangs of New York* (2002).

Gangs of New York begins with martyr-like suffering in the dark, a sharp and distinct noise that almost splits the pitch-black frame. Darkness is soon replaced by the gleaming eyes of Vallon, Irish priest, who scrapes his face with a razor blade, drawing blood, as he prepares for battle. He hands the blade to Amsterdam, his young son, hardly 12 years old, who starts to swipe it against his tattered coat, when his father stops him. "No. Never," the priest reprimands, "The blood stays on the blade, son." Indeed, blood remains, and pain ensues aplenty.

Shortly after, Amsterdam witnesses the murder of his father by Bill the butcher, the chief of a tribe of Native Americans. Sixteen years later, Amsterdam leaves Hellgate reformatory and returns to Five Points, N.Y., to carry out his revenge. Out of naivete and misguided mischief, he becomes the butcher's son figure, then, exacerbated by his own grief, murders him.

Amsterdam's quest for justice kills his need for purity, which he exhibited as a child in his desire to cleanse the blood off the blade. Once set on revenge, the boy enters a world of rampant depravity. Nineteenth-century New York is indeed, in Scorsese's able hands, a den of thieves and prostitutes that, Amsterdam tells us, may some day become a city. More aptly, the island resembles a modern Sodom and Gomorra, where savagery rules.

Cinematically and story-wise, *Gangs* is a rather blunt allegory of the battle between good and evil, where biblical allusions abound. The first image of the Five Points, where priest Vallon and his tribe "Dead Rabbits" live, is all but heavenly: rugged stones are enveloped in haunting dark red, while anger-laden faces grin and tighten at the overwhelming sound of drums. The evil-inspiring gloom of the tribe's lodgings is, however, starkly counteracted by the purity of the silent white roofs encircling the snow-covered battleground. Similarly, the heinous fighting of the gangs is visually redeemed by the warriors' receiving of the host.

The Christian crucifix itself takes centre stage in two frames. At first, it looms above Amsterdam's bowed head minutes before he leaves the reformatory; in a later scene, it witnesses Amsterdam's struggle with one of Bill Cutting's accomplices. Its presence does not redeem Amsterdam. Quite the contrary, right after leaving the institution Amsterdam ruthlessly throws the Holy Bible into the ocean, and after killing Bil's man, he crucifies the corpse in the public square.

Amsterdam's rejection of the Christian God, and his simultaneous obsession with it, is shared by Bill Cutting, the butcher who kills priest Vallon. Like Amsterdam, Bill speaks and acts with the exuberance and boldness of a self-centred and uninformed proselytiser. His God is the God of vengeance, whom he obeys and bows to. After murdering an elected official, Bill confronts the New

York Mayor with the verses of Revelation 3: 15-16: "I know your works; I know that you are neither cold nor hot. So, because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth." By quoting the passage, he assumes the identity of a God, so that the final battle between himself and Amsterdam becomes a fight between deities. The complexity of the scene is further aggravated by Bill's insistence in calling himself "New York": man's egotism and self-worship are thus matched by the assumed omnipotence of nations and political establishments. The fight is blood-curling: as Amsterdam stabs Bill to death, his face drips with the blood of his victim, so much that he becomes almost unrecognisable. In the end, Amsterdam muses, it makes no difference whether you are an enemy or a friend.

Bill's death frees Amsterdam from the vengeance he had promised his father. He buries the priest's blood-stained razor-blade, and leaves the final frame of the film pondering on the fleeting nature of human life. After much pain and strife, he considers, our lives are swept away unmercifully. Indeed, he exits silently, in an almost humble manner, while the camera focuses on his father's grave, slowly disappearing in a cleverly crafted sequence of New York tableaux.

With images of atrocity and prostitution, Scorsese guides us through hell, cleverly inferring that Five Points is in all of us. Deliverance comes when Amsterdam tastes his enemy's blood and does not distinguish it from his own. He

becomes aware of his responsibility in the city bloodshed, and his burying of the blade is his act of contrition. His silent profession of guilt is echoed and expanded to mankind, as New York assumes its modern shape, turning Gangs into a cinematic version of *Everyman*. Redemption is, however, still far-fetched: the skyscrapers replace wooden houses, yet no visible signs of change are present. Savagery is merely substituted with the urban jungle.

Stylistically, the film is outstandingly beautiful; the poignancy of the story is tremendous, and most of the performances outstanding. Nonetheless, the violence is quite overwhelming at times, and the brothel scenes border on pornography. Overall, this is conspicuous food for thought, but only for viewers with strong stomachs and discerning minds.