Pity and Pardon in Scorsese's Palimpsest,

Bringing Out the Dead

Gerard Loughlin

Durham University

Bringing Out the Dead is like a palimpsest, a text written upon another, partly erased text, where some of the first is still showing through. It is a film projected on other films, with earlier images behind or beneath its own: images written upon images. The film's second shot—in a sequence of shots intercut between the main titles—is a close up of its protagonist's weary eyes, bathed in the red and jaundiced light of passing vehicles. These eyes almost immediately recur, in another close-up, just before the director's credit. "From the very first close-up of his face, we know that he's already gone, completely gone."[1] The film is narrated from behind those eyes, showing us what they see, the world as it appears and feels to the paramedic, Frank Pierce (Nicolas Cage).[2] (Fig. 1) But the first close-up repeats the second shot of *Taxi Driver* (1976), Martin Scorsese's second main feature,[3] the film that established him as a new excitement in American cinema, an excitement that has never gone away.[4]

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1 Martin Scorsese in *Scorsese on Scorsese*, eds Ian Christie and David Thompson (London: Faber & Faber, 2003), 238. (Hereinafter cited as Scorsese.)

2 Paul Schrader, the writer of the film, wanted a younger man to play the part of Frank, preferably Edward Norton. But in the end, Cage was an admirable choice, delivering one of his finest performances. See Schrader in *Schrader on Schrader and Other Writings*, ed. Kevin Jackson (London: Faber and Faber, 2004 [1990]), 226. (Hereinafter cited as Schrader.)

3 Scorsese's first main feature was *Mean Streets* (1973), and before that he had made *Boxcar Bertha* (1972), which was not his own project, and *Who's That Knocking at My Door* (1969), which was his own, student project and which got a limited release.

4 Robert Kolker, who doesn't understand the theological interest of *Bringing Out the Dead*, and thinks the film merely "marking time", nevertheless sees in it Scorsese's "willingness always to push his camera into the face of reality to reveal a more real cinematic face and body behind it, a violent and struggling

Fig. 1 – "He's already gone, completely gone." Frank Pierce (Nicolas Cage) in *Bringing Out the Dead*

Fig. 2 – Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro) in *Taxi Driver*

The second shot in *Taxi Driver* is a close up of the eyes of Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro), scanning the streets of New York, likewise washed in a red glow. (Fig. 2) Like

body, trapped in spaces it barely comprehends and wants still to struggle against. In that body's movements within a space filled with tension and violence lie some of the great gestures of contemporary film." Robert Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness: Penn, Stone. Kubrick, Scorsese, Spielberg, Altman*, third edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000 [1980]), 246.

Frank, Travis too will narrate his film, through the diary that we see him writing—one of the many things that the screenwriter of both films, Paul Schrader, borrowed from Robert Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951) and *Pickpocket* (1959).[5] Like Bresson's thief (Michel), Schrader's Travis and Frank are voyeurs, observing society from both a physical and emotional distance. In interview, Scorsese has played down the similarities between the two films, quoting Schrader: "You know, Marty, they're going to say [*Bringing Out the Dead* is] like *Taxi Driver*. But it's twenty-five years later and we're both different."[6] Indeed they were and are: director and writer and films are different, but also similar and the similarities are figured from the first. As in *Taxi Driver*, *Bringing Out the Dead* has a second shot of Frank's strobed eyes, but now just after rather than just before the director's credit.

Both films view the city—New York—through windows, through the window screens of Travis's taxi and of Frank's ambulance. The cinema—the window through which we are watching—is inside these films, their protagonists alone, isolated, even as they are surrounded by others in the city, like the viewer in the dark of the cinema, a singularity in the multitude of the audience.[7] Both films display the artifice of their cinematic construction through meta-textual moments, of which the presence of their director is the most obvious. Scorsese plays characters in both films—seen in *Taxi Driver* and unseen in *Bringing Out the Dead*, but heard as one of the dispatchers, sending Frank out onto the streets of Hell's Kitchen, the west side of midtown Manhattan.[8] "Ladder 4, respond to a 10-22, four-flight residential, 417 West 32. 6-3 Boy, men's room Grand Central, man set his pants on fire. Bad burns. 7-7 David, at 177 West 24, there's a

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5 Schrader more directly overwrites Bresson's *Pickpocket* in his films, *American Gigolo* (1980) and *Light Sleeper* (1992). Bresson's film is itself an audacious reworking of Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866), and somewhere beneath *Taxi Driver* is Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1864).

6 Scorsese, 237. Nevertheless, Schrader also admits to Travis being present in Frank; a person drifting "on the edge of urban society, always peeping, looking into the lives of others." See Paul Schrader, *Collected Screenplays Volume I: Taxi Driver, American Gigolo, Light Sleeper* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), vii.

7 See further Jacques Derrida, Antoine de Baecque and Thierry Jousse, "Cinema and Its Ghosts: An Interview with Jacques Derrida", trans. Peggy Kamuf, *Discourse* 37, nos 1-2 (2015): 22-39 (29).

8 Scorsese had also appeared in *Mean Streets*, as a hitman shooting at his lead actors.

woman who says a roach crawled in her ear. Can't get it out, says she's going into cardiac arrest …".[9]

In between the two New York films, we must interpose a third, seemingly very different film. This is *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), Scorsese's long nurtured retelling of the novel by Nikos Kazantzakis.[10] One might think the only connections between this film and the others are the accents of its characters, which are unapologetically American, unashamedly New York in the case of Harvey Keitel (Judas). Yet there is a sense in which *Last Temptation* is the understory of the other films, *Taxi Driver* and *Bringing Out the Dead*, the film over which they are written. Scorsese's Christ is another lonely man, obsessed with suffering, with the tribulations of others and of himself, merited and unmerited.

Of course, the appearing of one film in another occurs in the eye of the beholder, the mind of the viewer.[11] But then what we see on a screen is always a mixture of what the screen reflects of its projected image and how that image falls on the screen of our mind, across which have played impressions of other, earlier films and viewings. It is in the mind's eye that we see the first film in the second, and the first and second in a third, and so on. It is in the mind's eye that our perception is palimpsestuous. And this answers rather nicely to how Thomas De Quincey (1785-1859)—who first theorized the palimpsest—thought of the medieval scribe's overwriting of earlier, scrubbed parchments. De Quincey was not the first person to refer to the palimpsest, but he was the first to attend to it as both layered artefact and metaphor, as a "membrane or roll cleansed of its manuscript by reiterated successions" and as a process in the mind.[12]

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9 Paul Schrader, *Bringing Out the Dead* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), 3. The order of these calls is slightly different in the film, the man with burning pants coming after the woman with a roach in her ear. But delivered deadpan they establish the tone of unacknowledged comedy that runs throughout the film.

10 Nikos Kazantzakis, *The Last Temptation*, trans. P. A. Bien (London: Faber and Faber, 1975 [1961]).

11 And other film-makers have written over Schrader's and Scorsese's work, for example Lynne Ramsay's remarkable *You Were Never Really Here* (2017) overwrites *Taxi Driver*, and may even contain a nod to *Bringing Out the Dead* in the sighting of an ambulance on what is an otherwise *Taxi Driver* night-time street.

12 Thomas De Quincey, "The Palimpsest" in *Suspiria de Profundis* (1845); in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater and Other Writings*, ed. Robert Morrison, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 130-138 (131).

Having rehearsed the marvels of "rude monastic chemistry"[13] which enabled, though imperfectly, the medieval cleaning of ink from vellum, and so the overwriting of one text upon another—a "knightly romance" upon a "monkish legend" and the legend upon a "Grecian tragedy"[14]—De Quincey affirms the human brain as "a natural and mighty palimpsest".[15]

> Such a palimpsest is my brain, such a palimpsest, O reader! is yours. Everlasting layers of ideas, images, feelings, have fallen upon your brain softly as light. Each succession has seemed to bury all that went before. And yet in reality not one has been extinguished.[16]

The laying down and layering of memories is aptly seen as the impress of light. De Quincey tells his reader that "countless are the mysterious handwritings of grief or joy which have inscribed themselves successively upon the palimpsest of your brain", as "light falling upon light". These "endless strata" are covered up by "forgetfulness", but can be revived, disclosed, at the hour of death, when in a fever, or through the taking of opium. "They are not dead, but sleeping."[17] The taking of opium was the practice by which De Quincey sought to bring the past back to the living through induced dreaming. As we shall see, this palimpsestic return of the dead—extolled by De Quincey—is the very thing that Frank Pierce is seeking to escape. But Frank is caught within Scorsese's film, and "movies", for Scorsese "are really a kind of dream-state, or like taking dope."[18]

For more on De Quincey's inauguration of the "substantive concept of the palimpsest" see Sarah Dillon, "Reinscribing De Quincey's Palimpsest: The Significance of the Palimpsest in Contemporary Literary and Cultural Studies", *Textual Practice* 19, no. 3 (2005): 243-263. The use of "palimpsestuous" follows that of Dillon and evokes the phenomenon in which "otherwise unrelated texts are involved and entangled, intricately interwoven, interrupting and inhabiting each other", and it can be usefully distinguished from the "palimpsestic", the historical process of "layering that produces a palimpsest" (245).

13 De Quincey, 134.
14 De Quincey, 137.
15 De Quincey, 135.
16 De Quincey, 135.
17 De Quincey, 137.
18 Scorsese, 54.

Frank is living within the palimpsest, and so are we when viewing it, and seeing within it the previous films over which it has been lain, as light upon light.

Hell's Kitchen

"There's no plot as such, but there's excitement in the situation of the people, and the dark humor needed to survive in that world."[19] That world is, as already noted, New York's Hell's Kitchen, as it was in the early 1990s, before Mayor Rudy Giuliani (mayor from 1993) introduced a zero tolerance policy on crime, and as recounted in Joe Connelly's novel, *Bringing Out the Dead* (1998), a story based on Connelly's own experiences of working in the Emergency Medical Services (EMS). There are some incidents that don't make it from the book to the film, and some experiences that didn't make it from Connelly's life to his novel.[20] Book and film are linear but episodic, with perhaps the book, because longer, more plotless, less structured, than Scorsese's movie.[21] And perhaps it was the interest in situation rather than story, a lack of narrative drive, that led the film's producers to restrict its distribution,[22] aware that it doesn't offer audiences what they might expect of a Scorsese picture, expect by way of development and resolution. As Scorsese noted of a film like Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, you watch *Bringing Out the Dead* not for plot, but for mood. "Mood and, er, mood. Mood. Camera movement. Elegance. Just like listening to a piece of music."[23]

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19 Scorsese, 231.

20 "[T]he hell night that's shown in our film is nothing compared to what Joe Connelly told us about his experiences working in EMS." Scorsese, p.233. Schrader claims to have spent some time "riding around on an ambulance, which was very entertaining" (in Schrader, 224).

21 On the linearity of the film see Schrader, 224.

22 This restriction, at least in the UK, is noted in Christopher Deacy, *Faith in Film: Religious Themes in Contemporary Cinema* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 20. Schrader notes that "character studies" should ideally be "plotless, dwelling on the complexities and contradictions of human behaviour, guiding the viewer to one of several conclusions", but that such ambition is "unrealistic in the commercial cinema." Schrader, *Screenplays*, viii.

23 Mark Jolly, "A Terrible Beauty" in *Scorsese: A Journey Through the American Psyche*, edited by Paul Woods (London: Plexus, 2005), 240-250 (249).

There is a lot of music in *Bringing Out the Dead*. Some sequences were edited to particular pieces, and some sequences were cut from the film because the music rights were not forthcoming.[24] *Taxi Driver* had a score by Bernard Hermann (1911-1975), immortal for his work with Alfred Hitchcock,[25] and bringing just the right tone of noirish sleaze to Bickle's world. Frank's world is underscored by Elmer Bernstein (1922-2004), with music that is sometimes comforting, sometimes unsettling. It is reminiscent of Hermann's, but not so noticeable, because the music that dominates from the credit sequence onwards is that which plays in the lives of the characters, in Frank's life, which is to say in Scorsese's life, the music he grew up with. The film's "main score" is Van Morrison's "T.B. Sheets" (1967), which Scorsese had been listening to since the 60s, and had always wanted to put in a film.[26]

"So it's the middle of the night and you're driving, with that harmonica and those drums, and Van Morrison's repetitions and phrases going through your mind. You're sipping a little bourbon or Scotch and those traffic lights keep changing, and that's how you slip in and out of the hallucination."[27] Film, for Scorsese is hallucination, fantasy taken for reality, and both *Taxi Driver* and *Bringing Out the Dead* display this, though also hide it. There is a raw, almost documentary look to much of *Taxi Driver*. It is, as Scorsese remarks of the film, a cross between the "New York *Daily News*" and "Gothic horror"[28]. A taxi appears out of the steam from the underground of New York streets, and Travis does not so much walk as glide toward the door of the taxi company where he will be taken on as a driver. With the actor on a dolly and filmed from behind, the audience for a "split second" wonders what is happening.[29] Scorsese has remarked that he doesn't think "there is any difference between fantasy and reality in the way these should be approached in a film. Of course, if you live that way you are clinically insane.

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24 Scorsese, 240-241. Scorsese has said the same of other films. "*Mean Streets* featured the music I grew up with and that music would give me images" (Scorsese, 45).

25 *The Trouble with Harry* (1955), *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956), *The Wrong Man* (1956), *Vertigo* (1958), *North by Northwest* (1959), *Psycho* (1960), *Marnie* (1964).

26 Scorsese, 239. Schrader thought that more contemporary music should have been used, "techno and rap, instead of that music from the seventies and eighties—it would have made the film seem less old-fashioned." Schrader, 226.

27 Scorsese, 238-239.

28 Scorsese, 54.

29 Scorsese, 54.

But I can ignore the boundary on film."[30] And the boundary can be ignored because film reality is fantasy, the illusion of reality.

Both films have dissolves on action, ellipses in what might otherwise be single shots, drifts of attention and reminders of the subjective gaze. (Fig. 3) And both films use slow motion, so subtle sometimes as to go unnoticed—the shot of Travis in his taxi gliding to a halt opposite the office where Betsy (Cybil Shepherd) is working, or of Rose (Cynthia Roman), just steps away from her death, walking past the carcasses hanging outside the meat market, orange-red against the grey snow of the street.[31] But then *Bringing Out the Dead* also under-cranks, speeds up the film,[32] mainly in scenes of life on the streets, of cars and trucks at night. Some of the formally framed, night-time shots of the roads, with the ambulances and other vehicles hurtling towards or away from the camera, are reminiscent—in their almost abstract, hallucinatory quality—of nothing so much as some of the shots in the "star-gate" sequence at the end of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). (Figs 4-7)

Fig. 3 – Frank's growing attraction to Mary Burke (Patricia Arquette) conveyed in a dissolve between two shots

30 Scorsese, 60.
31 Scorsese had already used dolly shots and slow motion in *Mean Streets*.
32 Scorsese, 241.

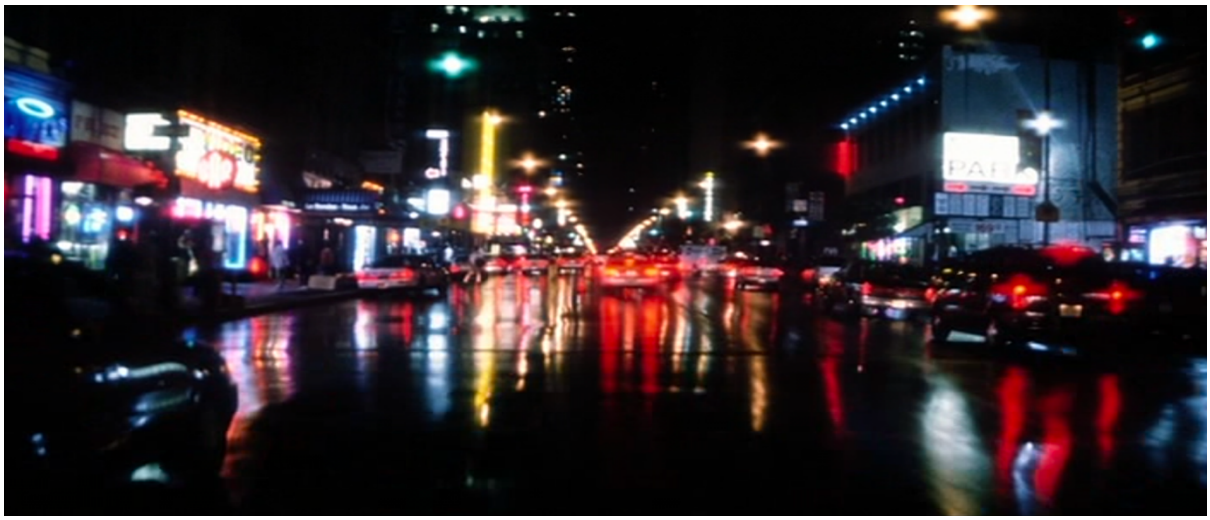

Fig. 4 – Night-time street from early in *Bringing Out the Dead*

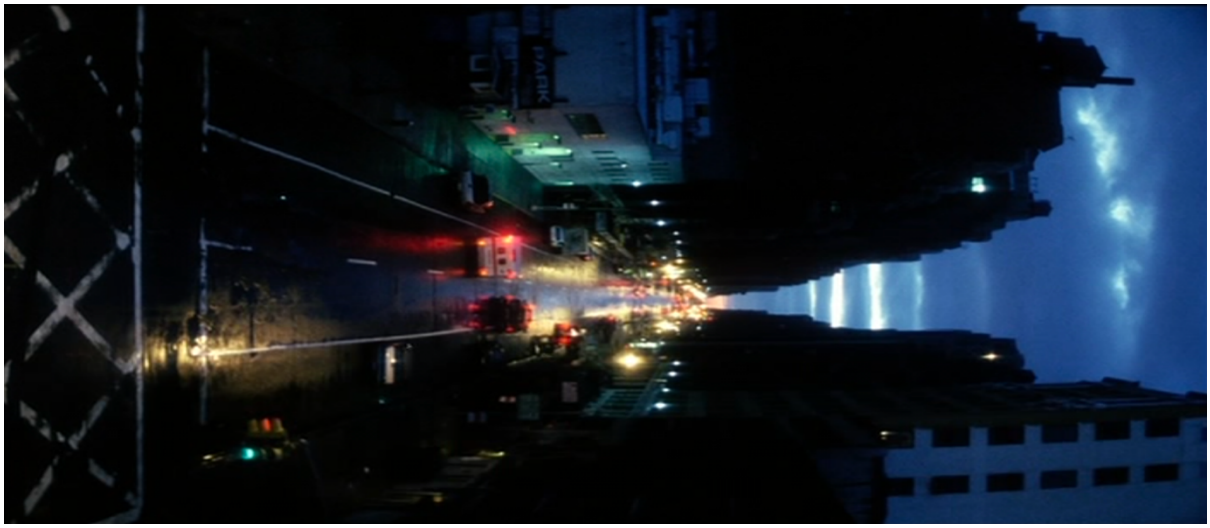

Fig. 5 – Lateral night-time street scene from *Bringing Out the Dead*

Fig. 6 – Night-time street scene from later in *Bringing Out the Dead*

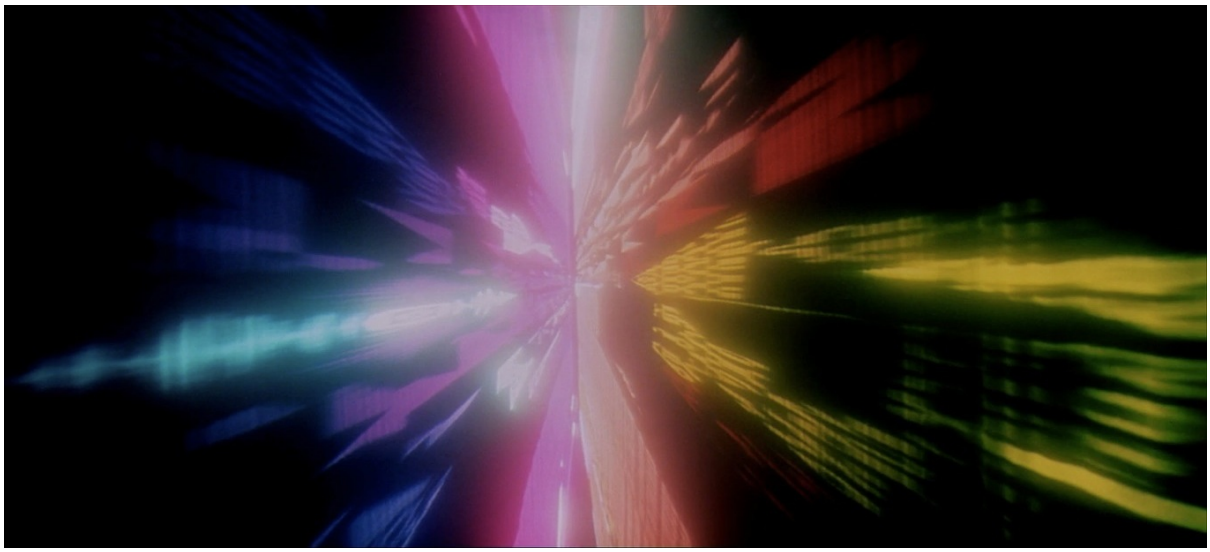

Fig. 7 – Star gate from *2001: A Space Odyssey*

Bringing Out the Dead, being a well-budgeted film, has many bravura shots, from whip-pans to swooping crane shots, shots that flip over, and the complex orchestration of camera and characters, both moving through a scene, choreography replacing editing. Unlike *Taxi Driver*, the editor on *Bringing Out the Dead*—as she has been on every Scorsese film since *Raging Bull* (1980)—was Thelma Schoonmaker, so that every shot and cut between shots works to articulate the action, the drive, the themes of the film.[33] And every shot is caressingly caught by cinematographer Robert Richardson, the film's deep colors—the greens of the hospital, the reds of the drug dealer's apartment, the white highlights of the night time streets—rendered with painterly, chiaroscuro effect.[34]

The novel provides more backstory than the film for the protagonist Frank Pierce, but otherwise Paul Schrader's script is remarkably faithful to the book, taking most of its dialogue from the novel, but paring it down and, crucially, making its ending less bleak. The plot, such as it is, concerns Frank's encounter with the Burke family. First with Mr Burke (Cullen Oliver Johnson), who has suffered a cardiac arrest, and who Frank and Larry (John Goodman) are about to pronounce dead, when he shows signs of

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33 For how Scorsese and Schoonmaker work together see the interview with Schoonmaker in *Projections 7: Film Makers on Film-Making*, eds John Boorman and Walter Donohue (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), 22-28.

34 Robert Richardson had previously worked with Scorsese on *Casino* (1995) and would work with him again on *The Aviator* (2204), *Shutter Island* (2010) and *Hugo* (2011).

life and they take him, unconscious, to Our Lady of Perpetual Mercy Hospital (also known as Our Lady of Perpetual Misery).[35] (Figs 8 and 9) Over the next several days, as Burke continues to code, to have cardiac arrests, Frank develops a relationship with the daughter, Mary Burke (Patricia Arquette).

Fig. 8 – Our Lady of Perpetual Mercy

Fig. 9 – Joe Connelly (uncredited) is brought into the hospital as a patient

Mary was not always the dutiful daughter. She has been a drug taker in her time, and when her father's dying becomes too much for her she retreats to the hospice of Cy Coates (Cliff Curtis), who provides a drug induced sleep. Frank follows her to this place and then rescues her from it. Later, Frank is called to an incident, where Cy, trying to

35 Schrader, *Bringing*, 8.

evade the attentions of rival drug dealers, has leapt from his apartment to the balcony beneath, and has impaled himself on its railings. Frank finds himself comforting a man who is responsible for much of the drug related misery in the neighborhood. The film ends with Frank going to tell Mary that her father has died. So, hardly a story at all. It's in the telling that the film has its power, and it's in the move from the script—at least as published—to the completed film that the most significant transformation of Connelly's original narrative takes place; not a transformation in terms of plot or character, or, indeed, of situation or mood, but in terms of *theology*.[36]

The back story that Schrader jettisons is largely concerned with Frank's failed marriage, with how he met his wife and how he lost her. We learn this story through the course of the novel. It shows us that Frank was once a more sociable, less lonely person, but a lonely person is what he has become, and the film shows us that loneliness, and not least through Frank's voice over. The very sharing of his thoughts confirms his isolation. This of course identifies him with "God's lonely man", Travis Bickle.[37] And loneliness is the condition of hell. In Dante's *inferno*, the damned "live exclusively within their own stories, admitting no larger narrative into which their own stories are inserted and from which they acquire meaning, for they have no desire to live within any narratives other than those they themselves have composed, not even those of fellow human beings."[38] Yet, with that said, we have to acknowledge that both Travis

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36 This is not to say that Connelly's book is without theology or at any rate without religious resonance. From its very first line we know we are in hell, in Hell's Kitchen, and in its first paragraph Frank Pierce tells us that he'd "walked the seven blocks to work" with his "shaking hands actually clasped together in the act of praying for a quiet night". The rest of the book is an asking for that quiet night, which seems never to arrive. Joe Connelly, *Bringing Out the Dead* (London: Warner Books, 1998), 1. Schrader says that he tried to cut the Catholicism from the book and was surprised by how much remained in the finished film. "I kept some of it in, and some of it snuck back in, and some of it I didn't even recognise" (Schrader, 224).

37 Travis, in voice-over: "Loneliness has followed me all my life. The life of loneliness pursues me wherever I go: in bars, cars, coffee shops, theatres, stores, sidewalks. There is no escape. I am God's lonely man." Schrader, *Screenplays*, 106-107.

38 Denys Turner, *Julian of Norwich, Theologian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 110. It is in part because of his isolation that Travis—as described in Schrader's script—takes Betsy to a pornographic movie on their date. "He is so much a part of his own world, he fails to comprehend another's world. Compared to the movies he sees, this is respectable." Schrader, *Screenplays*, 48.

and Frank do attempt to tell their stories with others. But Travis fails because he attempts to include others within his own story, whereas Frank, as we shall see, succeeds because he accepts inclusion within another's story, in a larger narrative than his own. And in this sense we would have to say that Frank's Hell's Kitchen is in fact a *purgatorio* and not an *inferno*. It is a place where one can learn how to tell one's story within a larger tale, in a comedy of redemption. Denys Turner suggests that Dante's hell and purgatory are "one and the same place, inhabited by one and the same set of 'facts' of sin", and that "what differentiates them is the wholly different theological stories the repentant and the unrepentant tell of those facts."[39] Scorsese's mean streets are similar: hell for some and purgatory for others. They are places where self-stories close in upon their narrators or where they open to others' narration, embraced in the arms of other lives.

Palimpsestuous Figures

Mark Jolley has written that Frank Pierce is "the closest thing to a saint" among Scorsese's protagonists, and a saint—or would-be saint—is not a bad way to think of Frank.[40] It is preferable to casting him as a "Christ figure", the almost inevitable personage of so much writing on "religion and film", and this even though Frank is in many ways a prime candidate for such categorization. But instead of reaching for the Christ-figure, we might better reach for that of the saint, since a saint is a Christ-like person, someone seeking to follow the way of Christ, to live as he did, but in their own circumstances, and even though it might lead to the enmity of others, to a return of violence for proffered peace.

A Christ figure is a palimpsestic figure, an over-writing of the life of Jesus, as told in the gospels and later tradition, by a more recent or contemporary character, and in such a way that the later inscription betrays aspects of the earlier, the earlier showing through and giving depth—spiritual resonance. Thus Christ's story shows in Frank's to

39 Turner, 111.
40 Jolly, 242.

the degree that Frank wants to save others and suffers in so doing. Indeed, one might describe *Bringing Out the Dead* as the passion of Frank Pierce, since it is set over three days—a Thursday, Friday and Saturday, which is more clearly signaled in the film than in the novel—with Frank suffering more the more he seeks to relieve the sufferings of others. But though it might be tempting to find correlates with the main incidents in the gospel story[41]—the last supper of Maundy Thursday, the crucifixion of Good Friday, the silence of Holy Saturday, followed by the rising early on the Sunday morning—there would be something forced in doing so.

The invocation of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday, suggests another way of seeing the film, as not so much an overwriting of Christ's passion as set within the Church's enacted remembrance of that passion—the liturgy of the Easter triduum, the prayerful recollection of the last three days before the resurrection. On each night—and the film is very much one of nights—Frank is paired with a different co-worker: with Larry (John Goodman) on Thursday (Fig. 10), Marcus (Ving Rhames) on Friday (Fig. 11), and Tom Wolls (Tom Sizemore) on the Saturday (Fig. 12). The world of the film, like that of the novel, is a Catholic one. Frank grew up on 43rd and went to "Holy Cross". Mary went to "Sacred heart". Both remember Mimi's pizzas, which came with a "little plastic" Madonna or Saint Anthony in the middle.[42] Frank's mother thought he looked like a priest, and Mary's mother thought she would be a nun. "I didn't want to be a nun. I just wanted to run away. Sister Mary or Mary the Junkie. Didn't matter to me."[43] Frank's colleagues call him Father Frank.[44] He's really just wanting to be a good Catholic, but wanting to be one, like Charlie in *Mean Streets*, on the streets. It is there, if anywhere, that he is going to be a saint.

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41 The gospel "story" is only perceived through the over-writings of the four canonical gospels. On the relationship between the canonical gospels and the gospel story see further Gerard Loughlin, *Telling God's Story: Bible, Church and Narrative Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999 [1996]), ch.2 (29-63).

42 Schrader, *Bringing*, 52-3. In the novel, Frank grew up on Fifty-second and went to Blessed Sacrament, while Mary went to Holy Name; and it was Joe's pizza that they ate. See Connelly, 188-89.

43 Schrader, *Bringing*, 54.

44 Connelly, 272.

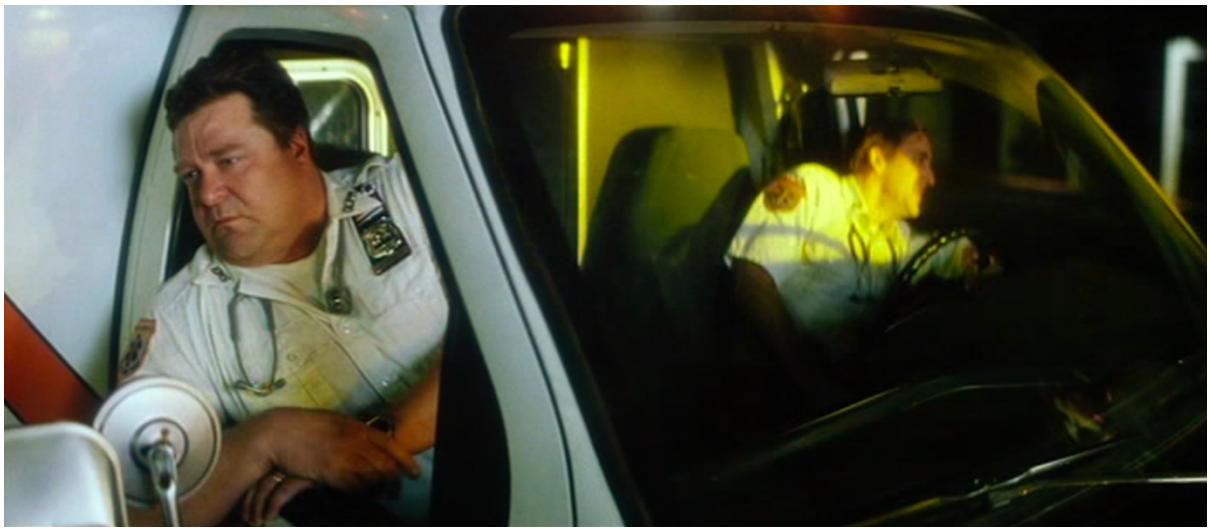

Fig. 10 – Larry (John Goodman) with Frank

Fig. 11 – Frank with Marcus (Ving Rhames)

Fig. 12 – Wolls (Tom Sizemore) with Frank

It is not that we see Christ in Frank but that we see Frank wanting to be like Christ, but not in a conscious way. Frank just wants to do his job, which he partly sees as saving people from themselves, from the streets, and partly—and increasingly—as bearing witness to their sufferings. "I was a grief mop. It was enough that I simply showed up." Frank is not a witness who testifies to a creed, except unknowingly, to values implicit in his acting towards colleagues and to the people he rescues from the streets, in his witnessing of their suffering. If he is a saint, he is an anonymous one. It is in his witnessing of suffering and in his suffering at doing so, because of his failure to relieve others' distress, that he is a witness, a "martyr"—another figure, along with the saint, who gets lost to view when we look only for Christ figures in the movies.[45] But we might think that there is an element of self-regard in Frank's distress at other's suffering, for it is not so much distress about others' suffering as distress about his failure to help them. As we shall see, it is in letting go of this self-regard, this need to save, that Frank finds his own salvation. But it is not his own achievement. It arrives as a gift.

Frank is a possible saint, a martyr, but not a Christ figure. Travis Bickle, in *Taxi Driver*, over whom Frank's character is written, has sometimes been identified as such a figure. But such an identification is a misidentification, even though it is one that Scorsese himself partly invited.[46] In considering how Christ, something of Christ, has been seen in Bickle, and why this is a mistake, we will better see the saint and martyr in Frank, and the theological difference of this film from its predecessor.

Like Frank, Travis is a man of the streets. Like Frank he rides the streets at night, looking out from his taxi at the detritus of the city, its "garbage and trash".[47] But unlike Frank, whose gaze is compassion, Bickle's eye condemns. Filled with rage, he sees a world that needs to be cleansed of all the "animals [who] come out at night", the "whores, skunk pussies, buggers, queens, fairies, dopers, junkies", the "sick, venal"

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45 Of course, Scorsese's great film of witnessing is *Silence* (2016), in which Fr Sebastião Rodrigues (Andrew Garfield) goes to Japan in order to bear witness to Christ and comes to witness—to endure—the witnessing (martyrdom) of others, and the calling into question of quite what he is witnessing and what his own witness—to Christ and to them—achieves. In the end, his own silence becomes a witness to the silence of God, to an infinite compassion for *all* things.

46 See Scorsese, 62.

47 Schrader, *Screenplays*, 12.

people.[48] And remarkably, he conceives the idea of killing Senator Charles Palatine as a way of bringing this about,[49] and when he retreats from this, having attracted the attention of security, he attempts the lesser feat of rescuing the 12 year-old prostitute, Iris (Jodie Foster), from Sport (Harvey Keitel), her pimp. It is the desire to cleanse the streets, to rescue Iris, that leads some to see Travis as a savior figure. It is his near death, his loss of liberty, for a time, that is his passion: the suffering that his saving brings.

The problem with wanting to see Travis as a redeeming figure is that he seeks to free Iris by murdering Sport and then, when the cops close in, by attempting to kill himself.[50] He thus becomes the very inverse of Christ, who does not kill but is killed. Travis does not die but instead murders several other people. Yet some read the film's final shootout as a "purgative ritual".[51] And Christopher Deacy has said that "the means by which Travis carries out his redemptive mission is congruous with the more conventional form of redemption in Christianity." Somehow, Christ's "suffering and violent death on the Cross" is replayed in Travis' wounding in the course of murdering Sport.[52] Even if there is something sacrificial in Travis' bid to rescue Iris, it is no more than a *risking* of his life, since he doesn't die and by the end of the film is returned to his life on the streets as a taxi driver. *Pace* Deacy, there is very little that is "analogous" between "Travis's redemptive mission" and "Jesus' [sic] becoming incarnate and bearing the sins of humanity in order to fulfil his redemptive mission."[53] Deacy shows some recognition that the analogy doesn't hold in a footnote where he observes that some scholars have argued for Jesus as Zealot-friendly, if not indeed a Zealot himself, a first-century freedom fighter against the Roman occupation of Palestine, and so a redeemer who "not only *suffers* violence" but has "the capacity to *inflict* it."[54] But this is

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48 Schrader, *Screenplays*, 13.

49 This part of the story was inspired by Arthur Bremer, who in 1972 shot and paralysed the Governor of Alabama, George Wallace (1919-1998).

50 There are other problems as well, such as Bickle's racism. See Amy Taubin, *Taxi Driver* (London: BFI Publishing, 2000), 15-18.

51 Lawrence S. Friedman, *The Cinema of Martin Scorsese* (New York: Continuum, 1997), 82.

52 Christopher Deacy, *Screen Christologies: Redemption and the Medium of Film*, Religion, Culture and Society (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001), 117.

53 Deacy, 117. It is the Word (*Logos*) that becomes incarnate in human flesh (*sarx*), in the man Jesus.

54 Deacy 179 n. 81; emphasis in original.

not the Jesus of the gospels, not the Jesus of the Christian tradition, not the Jesus who, as the incarnate Son, abjures all violence, who tells Peter to put away his sword (John 18.11) and entreats for the forgiveness of his killers (Luke 23.34).[55] Unlike Travis, he refuses to destroy those who would destroy him.

Deacy suggests that Travis achieves some degree of redemption by the end of *Taxi Driver*.[56] But if redeemed, Travis's New York would have become purgatory not hell, yet he is in the same place at the end of the film as at its beginning, with the film's ending an arbitrary point in a repeating story. "*Taxi Driver* is circular. At the end of the narrative Travis has not been changed, he's been revealed."[57] Even Betsy, the girl who Travis courts, unsuccessfully, doesn't escape. At the end of the film she willingly gets into Travis' cab, newly excited by his celebrity, and though she will then get out, we last see her as a receding figure in Travis' rear-view mirror, trapped in his gaze. "Hell's stories", Turner observes, "cannot be completed, for the damned refuse to complete them."[58] All they can do is tell them again, and again. Purgatorial stories are also incomplete, but not due to repetition, but because completed in paradise, which is unnarratable.[59]

Contra Deacy, there are no grounds, let alone "substantial" ones, "for seeing in *Taxi Driver* a potent illustration of the redemption of the individual from a state of sin and alienation, which corresponds to significant integral elements of Christian teaching."[60] However, there are grounds for seeing such an outcome in *Bringing Out the Dead*. There will be a day after the final day in the film, but it is hard to think that it will be the same as those that have gone before. The later film must be projected upon the earlier if we are to see Travis saved; we must look at Travis and see Frank.

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55 It is also not the Jesus of *Last Temptation*, where it is Judas (Harvey Keitel) who is the Zealot.

56 Savage, 57

57 Schrader, *Screenplays*, viii; see also Schrader, 120. Scorsese, who reminds us that Travis was a Vietnam war veteran, relates his violence to the war's effect, and notes that "although at the end of the film he seems to be in control again, we give the impression that any second the time bomb might go off again" (Scorsese, 62).

58 Turner, 112.

59 Turner, 112.

60 Deacy, 118.

And to make sense of that claim we must let a much earlier text come into view; an actual text, rather than a film, though it is a text of visions, of showings, and of what was seen in them, the appearing of yet earlier writings, now newly perceived.

Being Seen: Julian's Shewinges

In the fifty-first chapter of her "shewinges" (revelations), the English mystic and theologian, Julian of Norwich (c. 1343-1416), has a vision of a lord and his servant. The lord looks upon his servant with "rare love and tenderness" as he sends him on an undertaking, which the servant is only too eager to complete. But he has no sooner set off than he falls into a "deep ditch" and injures himself, and is so encompassed that he cannot even turn his head to see the lord on whose mission he has been brought low, and there is no one else to help him. He is alone.[61] Julian is much perplexed by this vision, and it takes almost twenty years for her to come to a fuller realization of what she has seen, the disclosure of its "inner significance" through attending to all its "details and circumstances".[62]

Julian comes to see, to understand, that the lord is God and the servant Adam. She has seen "one man and his fall" but understands that in him God sees "Everyman and his fall". "In the sight of God everyman is one man, and one man is everyman." Though fallen, the lord still loves his servant, but the servant cannot turn his head to see his still loving lord. It is the servant who changes, not God.[63] God, the lord, ceaselessly regards his servant with love, "especially when he fell". "This lovely gaze displayed a wonderful and fitting blend of compassion and pity, of joy and blessedness."[64]

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61 Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, translated and introduced by Clifton Wolters (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966), ch. 51 (141-2).

62 Julian, ch.51 (143-4).

63 Julian, ch.51 (144).

64 Julian, ch.51 (145).

> The merciful gaze of his loving eyes ranged the whole earth, and went down with Adam into hell; his continuing pity kept Adam from eternal death. Mercy and pity dwell thus with mankind until at last we come to heaven.[65]

As Julian goes on looking at the lord and the servant, at the way they are dressed, she gains deeper insights into both. She notices that the servant is dressed in a white coat, but one that is "old and worn, stained with sweat, tight and short, coming just below the knee, threadbare, almost worn out, ready to fall apart any moment."[66] She thinks this odd for such a servant, dressed as if he has been working for a long time, and yet, she becomes aware, a servant who is being sent out for the first time. And what is he being sent to do? Then she realizes. He is to be a gardener, "digging and banking, toiling and sweating, turning and trenching the ground, watering the plants the while." He is to tend the garden, to grow fruit for food, and to bring them to his lord, "and serve them to his taste."[67] And then Julian understands that the servant is not only Adam, not only Everyman, but also the second Adam, Christ, the Son, the Second Person of the Trinity; the lord is God the Father, and the love between lord and servant is the Holy Spirit.[68]

Thus Julian arrives at her audacious double vision of the servant as both Adam and second Adam, with one superimposed upon the other, like a projected palimpsest. We see both at once, both doing the same thing, but differently. "When Adam fell, God's Son fell."[69]

> Adam fell from life to death, first into the depths of this wretched world, and then into hell. God's Son fell, with Adam, but into the depth of the Virgin's womb—

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65 Julian, ch.51 (145).
66 Julian, ch.51 (146).
67 Julian, ch.51 (147).
68 Julian, ch.51 (147). Thus Julian will come to see the gardener's *white* coat as Christ's "flesh; its being *single* the fact that there is nothing separating Godhead and human nature; its *tight fit* is poverty, its *age* is Adam's wearing of it, its *sweat stains* Adam's toil, its *shortness*, the work the servant did" (p. 148; emphasis in original).
69 Julian, ch.51 (147).

herself the fairest daughter of Adam—with the intent of excusing Adam from blame both in heaven and on earth.[70]

Adam fell fro life to deth: into the slade of this wretched worlde, and after that into hell. Goddes son fell with Adam into the slade of the maidens wombe, which was the fairest doughter of Adam—and that for to excuse Adam from blame in heven and erth—and mightely he fetched him out of hell.[71]

The servant is a doubled figure, both Adam and second Adam, shown to Julian as one man, and shown by Julian to us, her readers, as the means by which God works the salvation of the world. For when the Father sees sinful, fallen Adam he sees only "his own dear Son, Jesus Christ,"[72] and in seeing his Son he sees saved humanity, for all such is "included in Christ's humanity; for he is the head, and we are his members." "Jesus is everyone that will be saved, and everyone that will be saved is Jesus".[73] We are saved by a palimpsest, by being over-written; by having Christ projected upon us.

Julian's Christ does not save by taking on a punishment that is due others, by substituting for them, nor by satisfying through suffering an honor that Julian's God has no sense of having lost. Those are all misunderstandings of the God—the lord and the servant and the love between them—of which Julian, through her shewinge, her example, was vouched understanding. It is the refusal of these alternative soteriologies

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70 Julian, ch.51 (148).

71 Julian of Norwich, *The Writings of Julian of Norwich: A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman and A Revelation of Love*, edited by Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins (University Park" Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), ch.51 (283).

72 Julian, ch.51 (148).

73 Julian, ch.51 (149). Julian was writing for fellow Christians, for members of the Church—Christ's body—and so she is careful to allow that not all may be saved. In the Son the Father sees those who are saved, those who are risen from the dead in the rising of Christ. Yet there is also a suggestion that all may yet be saved, for Julian notes that "the way to heaven for those of us who are not yet members is by longing and desire" (ch.51, 149). Julian, of course, is famous for teaching that all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well (ch.27, 103-104), and Clifton Wolters thinks that she trembled on the "brink of universalism" (Julian, 36) but did not step over, remaining on the side of Church teaching. The mystery of universal salvation is enclosed in the mystery of sin and sin in the mystery of grace. See further Karen Kilby, "Julian of Norwich: Hans Urs von Balthasar, and the Status of Suffering in Christian Theology", *New Blackfriars*.

as in a sense idolatrous that makes Julian's thinking so radical, and so apt for understanding *Bringing Out the Dead*, which similarly seems to turn from such soteriologies, from the soteriology in *Taxi Driver* and, indeed, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, though there it is already on the turn.

The soteriologies that Julian refuses are idolatrous because they imagine God after the order of sin, as if God too were governed by sin's law. They imagine a God who takes affront when his will is flouted, his love spurned, his proffered friendship refused. But Julian sees a God who is nothing like this. She sees a God who is not angry, and so has no need to forgive. "I could see no sort of anger in God, however long I looked." It is we who are angry, not God. But being ourselves angry, we think God must suffer anger to, and so we seek God's forgiveness. And God's forgiveness is assured and consists in not being angry and so in not needing to forgive, but instead and always willing our peace. "Thus I saw God to be our true peace, who keeps us safe when we are anything but peaceful, and who always works to bring us to everlasting peace."[74] This is the peace of the father in the parable of the prodigal son, the father who offers no rebuke and no forgiveness, but simply runs to his son and celebrates his return (Luke 15.11-32), telling his other son: "this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found." Or, as Julian has it, "the soul to be saved never was dead, and never will be."[75]

On Julian's account, divine forgiveness is not a "trade-off",[76] not an economy that returns pardon for repentance, but is rather an absolutely unconditional gift, the very madness that Jacques Derrida sees in a pure forgiveness which forgives the unforgivable. It arrives from "the undiscoverable place of forgiveness", from an "ethics beyond ethics".[77] Divine forgiveness—as Julian sees it—is the very thing of which Derrida can only "dream": "forgiveness without power: *unconditional but without sovereignty*."[78] For in forgiving through not forgiving, God exercises no power over us, changes nothing that we have done or failed to do, but simply sees Christ when seeing

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74 Julian, ch.49 (138).
75 Julian, ch.50 (139).
76 Turner, 125.
77 Jacques Derrida, *Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (London: Routledge, 2001), 36.
78 Derrida, 58.

us, and invites us—through Christ—to see ourselves likewise. This still might seem impossible, but it seems to be something like what Julian envisaged—and even as she acknowledged its seeming impossibility[79]—and something like what we might just glimpse in *Bringing Out the Dead*. "The troubles and sorrows, caused by our perversity, the Lord Jesus takes, and lifts up to heaven where they are transformed to things of delight and pleasure greater than heart can think or tongue can tell."[80]

Ghostly sights

"It was the neighborhood I grew up in and where I had worked most as a paramedic and it held more ghosts per square foot than any other."[81] The film of *Bringing Out the Dead* differs most from the novel and published script in its theology, and this theology is most evident in certain scenes and certain recurring images and encounters. The latter are Frank's meeting with the ghosts of the departed. There are more such encounters in the novel than the film, and not least with Mr Burke, whose ghost Frank can see even before Burke's body has given it up.[82] Burke appears at the window of his apartment even as Frank is readying to take his body to hospital, a spirit that is kept waiting for the

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79 "The normal teaching of Holy Church and, indeed, my own experience, told me of the blame of sin which has been hanging over us, from the time of Adam until we reach heaven. It was the more surprising that I should see the Lord God regard us with no more blame than if we had been as pure and holy as his angels in heaven. Between these two opposites my mind was extremely perplexed." Julian, ch.50 (139-140).

80 Julian, ch.50 (139). The radicality and challenge of Julian's vision is indicated by Denys Turner, who, while showing us how the parable of the prodigal informs Julian's thought, nevertheless, at the last, shies away from her vision of pure forgiveness (beyond forgiveness) and introduces a "trade-off" into the parable: "All the father needs is that his son should openly admit to his transgression of the trust placed in him, and that admission alone is enough to elicit his father's compassion" (Turner, 127). But in fact—in both parable and Julian's development of it—the father has compassion for his son as soon as he *sees* him, "still far off" (Luke 15.20), long before anything is said by either one. The son sees only his fault, the father only his son.

81 Schrader, *Bringing*, 8.

82 In *Last Temptation*, Jesus arrives at a monastic community and is greeted and shown to his cell by the ghost of the Abbot, whose funeral is already underway.

expiration of his body, called back from departure by each application of the defibrillator paddles.[83]

Frank's ghosts are themselves palimpsests, for what he sees are the faces of the dead upon those of the living, and in the film he principally sees the face of Rose upon every passing prostitute on the streets. (Figs 13 and 14) Unlike Iris in *Taxi Driver*, Rose is the prostitute who is not saved, whose life is lost despite Frank's best, increasingly frantic, efforts, an inexplicable incompetence losing him vital moments. The return of Rose is but one of the "mysterious handwritings of grief" that have inscribed themselves upon the palimpsest of Frank's brain,[84] an "exorcism" of "shadows", as De Quincey would have it, since an exorcism—De Quincey claims—is not so much a "banishment to the shades" as a "citation" from them, a "torturing coercion of mystic adjurations".[85] Frank is such a torturing character.

83 Connelly, 13. In the film, Frank imagines that if he was to turn and look he would see Mr Burke standing at the window. Schrader, *Bringing*, 6.

84 De Quincey, 137.

85 De Quincey, 134.

Fig 13—The first appearance of Rose (Cynthia Roman) in *Bringing Out the Dead*

Fig 14 – A later sighting of Rose in *Bringing Out the Dead*

In one scene, Frank and Marcus attend a virgin birth. In a derelict building they find a young Hispanic couple, Carlos and Maria. She is in labor. "No, no, that's impossible", Carlos cries. "We are virgins."[86] When Frank tells Carlos that Maria is not dying but having twins, Carlos exclaims: "It's a miracle."[87] A very similar scene occurs as the nativity in Philip Pullman's *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ* (2010). For in Pullman's retelling, as indeed in the gospel (Matthew 1.20-21), Joseph, like Carlos, is troubled by his wife's pregnancy, though she insists that she has never been touched by

86 Schrader, *Bringing*, 59.
87 Schrader, 62; Connelly, 210.

a man. "It was an angel that came to me, because God wanted me to conceive a child!"[88] An angel who, in "order not to frighten her, … had assumed the appearance of a young man, just like one of the young men who spoke to her by the well."[89] And Pullman's Mary, like Scorsese's Maria, gives birth to twins, to Jesus and Christ, the weaker of the two, who becomes Mary's favorite, and who she privately names by the Greek for Messiah.[90] Maria's first born is also a strong healthy boy, but his twin, born second, is a girl, who Frank rushes to emergency care, but too late. "*Hell is here. Hell is right now*."[91] In Schrader's script, Frank looks at the baby and sees Rose's face. But in Scorsese's film Rose takes the place of Maria. Either way, it is Rose who Frank is rushing to save.[92]

Scenes of life and death—of life snatched from death, and the exhilaration of doing so—are repeated throughout the film. Marcus is overjoyed at saving the "little baby boy". "I felt like I was twenty-one again. A call like that makes me want to go back to three nights a week, not two, start running again, cut down on the drinking."[93] Earlier Frank has recalled, in voice over, how "[s]aving someone's life is like falling in love, the best drug in the world."

> For days, sometimes weeks afterwards, you walk the street making infinite whatever you see. Once, for a few weeks I couldn't feel the earth. Everything I touched became lighter. Horns played in my shoes; flowers fell from my pockets … You wonder if you've become immortal, as if you saved your own life as well. God has passed through you, why deny it: that for a moment there, why deny for a moment there, God was you.[94]

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88 Philip Pullman, *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2017 [2010]), 8-9.

89 Pullman, 7.

90 Pullman, 21.

91 Connelly, 213; italics in original.

92 In the novel Frank does not see Rose but thinks: "This is Rose's baby, or Rose as a baby—the reason I was called." (Connelly, 212) It is the second thought that is conveyed in the script, but the first that is literalized in the completed film.

93 The lines in the film are slightly different from those in the script. See Schrader, *Bringing*, 64-5.

94 This monologue is slightly longer in the script; see Schrader, *Bringing*, p.38.

The son born of Maria is the second miracle of the night, for earlier Frank and Marcus were called to a nightclub where a young man—Frederick Smith, aka I. B. Bangin (Harper Simon)[95]—had collapsed. Marcus declares him dead, though it's a heroin overdose and an injection of Narcan will revive him.[96] Marcus, however, gets everyone to hold hands, to pray for his resurrection. "Dear Lord", Marcus cries, "here I am again to ask one more chance for a sinner. Please Lord, bring back I. B. Bangin, Lord. You have the power, Jesus, you have the might, you have the super light, to spare this worthless man."[97] And indeed the Lord does, for Frank injects him with the Narcan, and I. B. Bangin sits up, a shock to himself and everyone else. "What happened?" he asks. "You fucking died, you stupid bastard", his girlfriend replies. "I warned you." As Frank takes Frederick to the ambulance, Marcus—cigar in hand—insists it was not their work but the Lord's. "The first step is Love. The second is Mercy."[98] God had been passing through them. (Figs 15 and 16)

Fig. 15 – "You have the power, Jesus, you have the might, you have the super light."

95 He has the moniker of Riot in the novel; see Connelly, 168.

96 Narcan is a trade name for naloxone hydrochloride, used in the treatment of opioid abuse.

97 The lines in the script are slightly different; see Schrader, *Bringing*, 45.

98 Schrader, *Bringing*, 46.

Fig. 16 – “The first step is Love. The second is Mercy.”

Perhaps the most surreal sequence in the film, the one that literalizes its title, and which is neither in the novel nor in Schrader’s published script, is Frank’s hallucination of raising the dead, dragging them out of the earth, from under the ground of Hell’s Kitchen. “This is the city at night, when you could swear that things come up out of the street.”[99] The sequence occurs in a scene that is in both Connelly’s novel and Schrader’s script, set in the Oasis, the apartment where Cy Coates provides rest from the pains of hell; a latter-day opium den. (Fig. 17) Waiting for Mary, Frank takes some of the “Red Lion” proffered by Cy: “You can’t imagine how relaxing it is.”[100] and Frank at first seems to fall asleep, but then is struck by dreams, hallucinations, that bring him to his feet, or to his feet in his dreaming.

99 Scorsese, 239.
100 Schrader, *Bringing*, 73, Connelly, 253.

Fig. 17 – The Oasis in *Bringing Out the Dead*

Frank's hallucinations, initially cut to the strains of "Rang Tang Ding Dong" by The Cellos—"I am a Japanese Sandman" Cy lip syncs—are vivid, nightmarish visions of life on the streets, of a prostrate man, dragging himself across an interchange on his elbows, oddly speeding up, to be followed by altercations on the city's night-time streets, viewed from within Frank's ambulance, though all along Frank is sitting in Cy's apartment. But then Frank stands up, and we cut to a low angled shot of him walking down a cobbled street at night, with suddenly an arm rising from the ground, reaching for life, which Frank takes, pulling the man to his feet. (Fig. 18) Similar shots follow, intercut with close ups of Noel (Marc Anthony), shaking his bloodied dreadlocks, in slightly slowed motion. Noel reappears throughout the film, either out on the streets or restrained in the hospital, crazed and crying for a drink of water, but drinking so much that it might well kill him.

Fig. 18 – Bringing out the dead

Earlier, Noel had run against the window of the ambulance, covering it in his blood, begging to be killed, and then laying down in the road, hoping to be hit by passing traffic. Frank goes to him, promising to kill him once they have gotten to the hospital. "We have rules against killing people on the street. It looks bad. But there's a special room at the hospital for terminating. A nice quiet room with a big bed."[101] This joke, death as medicine, as relief, will recur later in the film, more seriously. There is a point of view shot from where Noel is lying, his arm upstretched, Frank leaning over to help him up, a premonition of his hallucination, of leaning down to raise the dead. (Fig. 19) Morrison's "T.B. Sheets" is again on the soundtrack—"I want a drink of water, get me a drink of water." Soon the raised dead are everywhere, with some helping others to rise from the ground. (Fig. 20)

101 Schrader, *Bringing*, 9.

Fig. 19 – Frank raising Noel from the street

Fig. 20 – Bringing out the dead

And then we cut to a snow filled street, and it is the day when Frank encountered Rose, collapsing, an asthmatic, rushing to her with Larry, struggling to get the tube down her throat and into her lungs—"before they close up and her pulse stops and she goes flatline"—and each time failing.[102] "You're in the stomach!" Each time. "Stomach again."[103] Larry pushes Frank aside and takes over and "intubates her easily. Air moving in and out of her lungs now, only now it doesn't matter."[104] "Rose. My name. Rose." This

102 Connelly, 254-55.
103 Schrader, *Bringing*, 75.
104 Connelly, 258.

is the scene by which Frank has been haunted, the day when he lost her, lost his confidence in saving lives, his joy in living. In novel, script and film the drug fueled dream scene ends with Frank standing, screaming, awakened, and going and finding Mary in the back room of Cy's apartment, and taking her out, over his shoulder, "firemanlike".[105]

The sequence of Frank raising the dead is "all Scorsese".[106] It is neither in the book nor the script. It is a moment when Frank is most Christ-like, for of course it repeats the descent of Christ into hell. It is the harrowing of Hell's Kitchen. "He went down to hell, and there he raised up from the lowest depths that great mass which was his by right, united to him in high heaven."[107] And the sequence is itself palimpsestic, since Frank, ranging across the road, grabbing outstretched arms to hoist the dead from below ground, back into life, is itself a projection of images upon shots of the night time street, as if a double exposure, a superimposition. It is also very like a scene in *Last Temptation* where Christ comes upon the possessed, seemingly living in holes in the desert ground, from which they emerge to have their demons dragged from them. (Fig 21)

Fig. 21 – Raising the possessed in *The Last Temptation of Christ*

105 Connelly, 257.
106 Schrader, 226.
107 Julian, ch.51 (150).

However, the most resonate theological moment in *Bringing Out the Dead* is its final scene. And to fully appreciate its allusions we must pay more attention to another palimpsestuous text, which is another film and—of course—another Scorsese/Schrader collaboration, namely *The Last Temptation of Christ*.[108] And here we might be most tempted to see Frank as a Christ figure, but a figure of Scorsese's Christ rather than the Christ of the gospels. If there are no figures of Christ in these films, there are his ghosts. The ending of *Bringing Out the Dead* replays not the ending of *Last Temptation*, or not directly, but the crucial scene of the last temptation, when the young girl, the angel—Satan—appears to Jesus, and tempts him to give up the cross, to choose life and not death, and to live out his days, growing old with Mary Magdalene and later Mary and Martha, and the children he has fathered with them.

Pietàs

Julian's revelations are notorious for the vividness with which they show the sufferings of Christ.[109] Even in the story of the lord and the servant we are told that the latter's "*coat ready to fall apart*" stood for the "assault, the flogging, the thorns, the nails, the pulling and pushing, the tearing of his tender flesh." Julian had already seen, she reminds us, "how his flesh had been torn from the skull and had hung in pieces. Then the bleeding had stopped, and it began to dry up, and adhered again to the bone."[110] And yet the final, dominant note is one of joy.

> Now the lord sits, not on an earthly desert, but on his throne in heaven, as he should. Now the Son stands, no longer a servant before the lord, bowed, shabby, and half-clad, but straight before him as his Father, clothed in rich and blessed amplitude, crowned with priceless splendor. We are his crown, the crown which

108 The fourth film collaboration between Scorsese and Schrader was *Raging Bull* (1980), in which Robert De Niro's Jake La Motta has been seen as another Christ-figure in the line of Travis Bickle.

109 See Julian, chs 16 and 17 (87-90).

110 Julian, ch.51 (150).

> is the Father's joy, the Son's honor, the Holy Spirit's pleasure, the endless, blessed wonder of all heaven. … Now sits the Son, true God and true Man, at rest and in peace in his own *city*, that city prepared for him in the eternal purpose of the Father. And the Father in the Son, and the Holy Spirit in the Father and in the Son.[111]

In Scorsese's film such joy, or at any rate peace, begins to arrive for Frank through the figure of Mary Burke. "And when he comes out the other side at the end, it's through the grace that he's given through Mary."[112] She is—as Robert Kolker notes—the means of "Bressonian grace" in the film, recalling the return of Jeanne (Marika Green) to Michel (Martin LaSalle) at the end of *Pickpocket*.[113] Of course, the naming of Mary Burke, in book and film, is not accidental. The figure of Mary, the mother of Jesus, has been present in Scorsese's cinema from the beginning. An early scene in *Mean Streets* (1973) has Charlie (Harvey Keitel) walking into a church in order to kneel before the main altar and address God and the audience, in voice over, and then standing before an image of the *pieta*, the maternal pity: Mary cradling her dead son in her arms, a witness to his suffering. Charlie is reminded of hell's fires by the votive candles burning in front of the statue. (Fig. 22)

111 Julian, ch.51 (150-151); emphasis in original.
112 Scorsese, 233.
113 Kolker, 219.

Fig. 22 – Charlie (Harvey Keitel) before the Pietà in *Mean Streets*

Fig 23 – Pietà in *The Last Temptation of Christ*; Mary Magdalene (Barbara Hershey) cradling Jesus (Willem Dafoe)

The *pietà* recurs throughout Scorsese's films, and *Bringing Out the Dead* ends with one, with Frank held in the arms of Mary Burke. Earlier *pietàs* are seen in *Last Temptation* and, indeed, in *Bringing Out the Dead* itself. After Christ, in *Last Temptation*, has come down from the cross he finds himself, not in the arms of his mother, but in those of Mary Magdalene (Barbara Hershey). (Fig. 23) In *Bringing Out the Dead* it is Frank himself who becomes the consoling pity, in the scene where he attends the shooting at Cy Coates' apartment, where Cy, fleeing rival drug dealers, has impaled himself on one of the uprights of the balcony railing two floors below.[114] Cy is both the crucified Christ and a staked vampire. (Fig. 24) Both understorys are present in the one shot of Cy with a spear through his side, the latter an apparent incongruity, yet entirely appropriate for this false savior, who sucks the life from his clients, as they sleep in his oasis.[115]

Fig. 24 – The staked Cy Coates (Cliff Curtis)

When the cops and Frank approach Cy's apartment they find Kanita (Sonja Sohn) lying dead in the doorway, her blood mingling with the water that is flowing out across the hallway from the shattered fish tank inside. (Fig. 25) As they enter the apartment, a tracking shot moves along the corridor, a surreal image of a sodden purple carpet with still flapping fish upon it. This presages the conjunction of religious and horror imagery in the staked but flailing Cy. "And at once blood and water came out" (John 19.34).

114 Cy's apartment is on the 16th floor, he has landed on the railings of the 14th.
115 Schrader, *Bringing*, 71.

Dealing with horrors, Scorsese's films often show traces of the B-movie horror genre. Near the end of *Mean Streets*—itself a horror show—Charlie and Johnny Boy (Robert De Niro) go to see Roger Corman's *The Tomb of Ligeia* (1964).[116] The appearance of the latter is a joking acknowledgement that it was Corman who helped get Scorsese's film made,[117] and there is a similar reference to that debt, and the genre of gothic horror, in the purple carpet and crimson walls of Cy's apartment in *Bringing Out the Dead*. They recall the technicolor rooms in Corman's *The Masque of the Red Death* (1964),[118] its title strangely presaging the "Red Death" that Cy's rivals have been peddling on the streets.[119]

Fig. 25 – "And at once blood and water came out" (John 19.34)

As the cops use an acetylene torch to cut the railing free, Frank holds Cy in his arms, saves him from falling when the railing is finally cut through and it is suddenly clear that Cy, unlike Frank and the police men, was not secured by ropes. As Frank holds Cy's head above the ground, fourteen storeys below, we see the sparks from the torch

116 Johnny Boy is apparently terrified by what he sees on screen: a final conflagration, the flames of which recall those that Charlie plays with throughout the film, remembering the pains of hell. Earlier in *Mean Streets*, Charlie, Johnny Boy and Tony (David Proval) have a happier time when they go to see *The Searchers* (1956).

117 Scorsese, 39-41.

118 Nicolas Roeg was the cinematographer on *The Masque of the Read Death*, and a scene from the end of Roeg's *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976) overwrites one from Corman's movie.

119 The Red Death is named as such in Connelly's novel.

cutting the metal, showering behind Cy's head, and then, in a hallucinatory moment, fireworks across the night sky, the Empire State building in the background. "Isn't it beautiful?" Cy cries. "When the fire starts to fall, then the strongest rule it all. Love this city."[120]

In the collected writings of the British theatre and film director, Lindsay Anderson (1923-1994), there are a few grudging remarks about Scorsese. In the most perceptive, Anderson notes that Scorsese had "made comedies, but seems quite without the vision that elevates humor to satire."[121] Whether or not satire is an elevation, one can certainly agree that Scorsese is not a satirist. Anderson's observation points to the humanity of Scorsese's comedies, even his darkest, such as *Bringing Out the Dead*. Scorsese works to show us that even the most awful of people have souls. "They *do* have souls, and that's the problem. And that's what keeps bringing me back to these people and to their stories."[122] As Thelma Schoonmaker notes, Scorsese has always been aware that no matter how awful "some of these people may be, they also are human beings, they have feelings. I think one of the reasons his movies last is because he is able to deal with the humanity of the people, no matter how horrible they are."[123]

Frank knows that Cy is a drug dealer, that for all his claims to be providing a "refuge from the world out there" he is selling addiction not relief.[124] Mary has "seen him hurt people", believes that "Cy or Tiger or one of those other goons put a bullet in Noel's head."[125] Voices from the street below call out "Let him go!", while one of the cops observes that if Cy falls, "I don't think anybody'll be crying too much."[126] Yet Frank, undeluded, holds Cy with care, tenderly. One might say that he is doing his job, that he looks on Cy with a professional eye. That he is not without anger and contempt. Later, in

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120 Schrader, *Bringing*, 94.

121 Lindsay Anderson, *Never Apologise: The Collected Writings*, edited by Paul Ryan (London: Plexus, 2004), 484. Certainly, *Bringing Out the Dead* has all the ingredients for a satire on American health care, for something like Anderson's own satire on the British National Health Service, *Britannia Hospital* (1982), but such is not Schrader's or Scorsese's interest.

122 Martin Scorsese interviewed by Thierry Jousse and Nicolas Saada in *Projections 7*, 8-21 (17).

123 Thelma Schoonmaker interviewed by Nicolas Saada in *Projections 7*, 27.

124 Schrader, *Bringing*, 71.

125 Schrader, *Bringing*, 77.

126 Schrader, *Bringing*, 92-3.

the hospital, Cy observes that Frank saved his life, and Frank merely replies, "Yes, I know."[127] Even if we think there is some ambivalence in the look with which Frank holds Cy on the balcony, we also see the drug dealer being held: pity enacted. (Fig. 26) Just as the Father seeing Christ when he looks at Adam doesn't mean that Adam's sin is undone, his fall not real, so Cy's past is not approved, or annulled, when Frank saves him from falling. Frank sees both the drug dealer and the man who has to be held.

Fig. 26 – Pietà in *Bringing Out the Dead*: Frank cradling Cy

It is mercy that Frank shows Cy, in the sense of *misericordia*—the Latin best capturing the idea of compassion that is at the heart of the virtue. And this virtue is indeed Frank's character, since—as Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) teaches—*misericordia* "comes from one's heart being miserable (*miserum cor*), at the sight of another's distress."[128] Thomas, following Aristotle, says that we pity those who suffer through no fault of their own, those afflicted by uncalled for ills. We may doubt this of Cy, thinking he has brought his misfortunes upon himself, and so more deserving of punishment than pity. But Thomas observes that there is a sense in which "fault itself is punishment" and that this is something unlooked for by sinners, something that goes

127 In the script, Frank replies: "Then tell me, Cy, why don't I feel good about that?" See Schrader, *Bringing*, 94. Frank has more compassion, more mercy in the movie.

128 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol.34 Charity (2a2ae 23-33), trans. R. J. Batten OP (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1975), 2a2ae, 30, 1, *responsio* (209).

against their will, and that this elicits mercy.[129] It is not only the suffering of innocents that incites pity. Jesus, as Thomas reminds us, had compassion on sinners.

Mercy—*misericordia*—becomes Frank because Frank is sad (*tristis*), and sadness, according to Thomas, has to do with how much we feel the afflictions of others as our own, as we do with our friends. And with those not so close we may yet realize that what has befallen them may befall us, and so we feel for them also. Only those who think themselves beyond misfortune have no pity for others. *Misericordia* springs from fellow feeling,[130] and as a virtue,[131] it is the greatest, since it "involves the giving from one's abundance to others". Mercy is "something proper to God",[132] making us God-like. And mercy is proper to God because God creates out of mercy; the bringing of being out of non-being is a kind of compassion.[133] Frank performs something analogous when he acts with pity towards Cy, who has little or no claim upon it.

Frank also acts out of mercy when he kills Mr Burke, or, rather, when he allows Mr Burke to die. Ever since Mr Burke was brought into hospital, at the beginning of the film, he has been on the point of passing over, but he is repeatedly stopped and brought back by the application of the defibrillator, shocked into continuing life, though unconscious; except that Frank can hear him pleading for release. "The family wants us to keep him alive", the doctor tells Frank. "The wife wants to believe in miracles, we keep him alive. Shock him Frank. He'll come back. He always comes back." "Don't do it", Burke implores. But Frank applies the paddles. "You son of a bitch."[134] But then, toward the end of the film, Frank knows that he must release Mr Burke, release his family; save Burke's life with the gift of death.

In the novel, Frank switches off the machines that had been keeping Burke alive. "One at a time I pulled each plug and waited in the new silence for the final rise of his chest. … I checked that the plugs were out. I hit the power switch and looked in the back for the final cutoff button."[135] But the process is more intimate in the film, with Frank

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129 *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae, 30, 1, *ad primum* (211).
130 *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae, 30, 2, *responsio* (213-14).
131 Mercy—pity, compassion—is a virtue because it can be regulated by reason. *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae, 30, 3, *responsio* (217).
132 *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae, 30, 4, *responsio* (221).
133 *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, 21, 4, *responsio* (85).
134 Schrader, *Bringing*, 81.
135 Connelly, 338-339.

taking on Burke's suffering and then releasing it, as if dying in Burke's stead. Frank transfers the electrodes monitoring Burke to himself, and then puts Burke's respirator in his own mouth, breathing for Burke, so that Burke can slip away without the machines noticing. (Fig 27) When they do, when Frank has reattached everything to the now dead body, it is too late for any more resuscitations, and no amount of electric shocks will bring Burke back. "He just coded", the nurse tells the doctor.

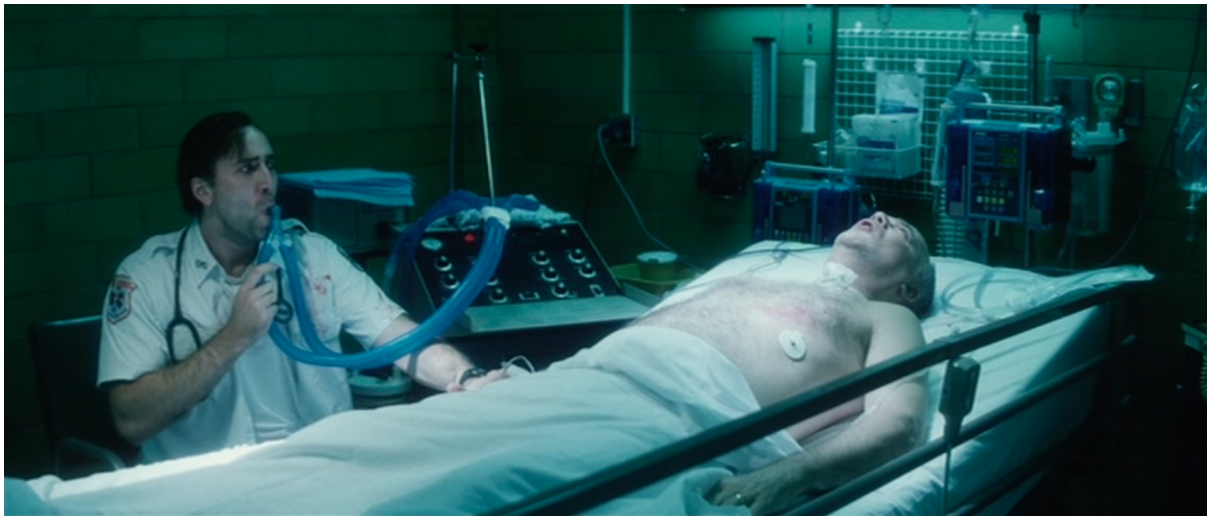

Fig. 27 – Frank breathing for Mr Burke (Cullen Oliver Johnson)

Joe Connelly's novel ends with the death of Mr Burke, and Frank going home to sleep, comforted—it would seem—by the ghost of Rose, who gets into bed beside him. "She wasn't cold at all but hot, and her heat went everywhere through the bed. There was only a slight smell, but after five years on the job I was used to it, and this was nothing."[136] Perhaps this is one of the hookers from the streets, erased and rewritten by Rose. But in Schrader's rewriting, Mary was not at the hospital when her father dies, so Frank goes to her apartment to tell her: "He's dead, Mary. Your father passed."[137] But Rose is present. In the cut back from Frank to Mary, it's suddenly Rose, not Mary, in the doorway. "Forgive me, Rose." And Rose replies: "It's not your fault. No one asked you to suffer. That was your idea."[138] (Figs 28-30) And this is the point when Frank is freed from the past that has been haunting him throughout the film, or that he has been

136 Connelly, 343.
137 Schrader, *Bringing*, 108.
138 Schrader, 109.

haunting. It is not so much that Frank has been haunted by Rose as that he has been haunting her; living in the past so as to evade the present. He saved others, but he couldn't save himself (Mark 15.31; Matthew 27.42).

Fig. 28 – Mary opens the door to Frank

Fig. 29 – “Forgive me, Rose.”

Fig 30 – “It’s not your fault. No one asked you to suffer. That was your idea.”

But there is another haunting here, another, earlier text showing through. When Satan comes to Christ, as he hangs upon the cross, she explains—the young angelic girl who removes the nails from his hands and feet, who kisses his feet as countless devotees kiss the plaster feet of Christ on Good Friday, creeping to the cross—that he doesn't need to suffer. "I don't have to be sacrificed?" "No, no you don't." "I'm not the Messiah?" "No, no you're not." In the *Last Temptation*, however, Christ refuses the refusal of suffering and returns to the cross. But in *Bringing Out the Dead*, Frank gives up on suffering, accepts that suffering saves no one, and in doing so—in accepting, not so much Rose's forgiveness, but that there is nothing to forgive—receives a benediction. Mary, standing in the doorway, asks: "Would you like to come in?" And he does. And then we cut to a shot of Frank lying against Mary, asleep, in her arms. It is a *pietà*, an image of *misericordia*—though of course Frank is not dead but sleeping.[139] The room brightens, as if the sun is rising, filling the scene with light, and Bernstein's music is also rising, reaching a resolution, and then, with bird song also audible, there is a burn out to white—just as at the end of *Last Temptation*—a reminder that we have been watching a film, a celluloid palimpsest. (Fig. 31)

Fig 31 – Pietà in *Bringing Out the Dead*: Mary cradling Frank

139 Given that Frank is sleeping we might think of other medieval *Andachtsbilder* (devotional images), for example of John, the beloved disciple, resting on Christ's breast, or of the soul in the embrace of wisdom. See further Jeffrey F. Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary: Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), 130-131, 202-203.

Frank's falling asleep is a sort of resurrection, the other side of the passion he has endured through the preceding three days, and so perhaps it is a repetition of the *Last Temptation*. But it seems more like a refutation than a repetition, a denial that suffering is necessary for salvation. Frank has been failing to see that no one other than himself has asked him to suffer, just as Jesus has mistaken his own idea of suffering for God's.[140] Frank has failed to see that all is already forgiven, that there is nothing to forgive. He cannot change the past, he cannot bring Rose back from the dead, except as a palimpsestic ghost, but he can come to see the past differently, just as Christ—in Julian's theology—does not change but overwrites Adam, so that Adam is now seen as second Adam.

De Quincey was not the first person to think the memory a palimpsest. For already, in the age that produced palimpsests on a regular basis, Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) had likened the memory to such a text.[141] His sermon "On Conversion" (1140) addresses the problem of purifying the memory, of pumping out the "cesspit".

> How can I forget my own life? Take a thin piece of poor-quality parchment which has soaked up the ink with which the scribe has written on it. Can any skill erase it? It is not merely superficially colored; the ink is ingrained. It would be pointless for me to try to clean it. The parchment would tear before the marks of wretchedness were removed.[142]

How then to overwrite the past without destroying it? How to "give place to another peace, without forgetting, without amnesty, fusion or confusion?"[143] It can be done, Bernard believes, through God's forgiveness. "His pardon wipes out sin, not from the memory, but in such a way that what before was both present in the memory and

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140 This is not stated directly by the angel, but the angel's claim that Jesus does not need to suffer, that he is not the Messiah, answers to the question, from earlier in the film, as to whence comes his growing fear that he must set his course towards Jerusalem and Golgotha.

141 Bernard of Clairvaux, "On Conversion" in *Selected Works*, trans. G. R. Evans (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 65-97, XV.28 (87).

142 Bernard, XV.28 (87).

143 Derrida, 50.

rendered it unclean is now, although it is still in the memory, no longer a defilement to it."[144] The idea that the memory of past misdeeds can be overwritten, not rewritten, by God's word of pardon is implicit in Bernard's account, which relies—as Mary Carruthers notes—on the idea that memory consists of both a mark and an "intention", a feeling. It is both effect and affect. "What forgiveness changes is that *intentio*, the emotional direction … towards the memory images that still exist in one's mind, including all those personal memories that make up 'my life.'"[145] It is Frank's intention towards his past that changes at the end of *Bringing Out the Dead*, through the word of pardon that he hears on the lips of Rose. The pity expressed in Mary's arms is the pity—the compassion, the mercy—that he gives himself, that he allows himself to receive. "Have mercy on your own soul if you want God to have mercy on you",[146] Bernard teaches. "The soul, when it is really at peace with itself, is at once united to God,"[147] Julian affirms.

Scorsese's most audacious move—the move of his palimpsestuous film-making—is to suggest that we must look to Frank Pierce if we are to see not only Travis but Christ himself, saved, and saved from himself; which is to say from a tradition that has seen suffering as necessary for salvation—a tradition to which Scorsese, in his films, has been all too prone, but which, in *Bringing Out the Dead*, he rethinks if not entirely renounces.

144 Bernard, XV.28 (88).
145 Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400-1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 97.
146 Bernard, XVI.29 (88)
147 Julian, ch.49 (139).