MEAN STREETS
AND
ABSENCE

Johnny Boy (Robert DeNiro), Teresa (Amy Robinson), and Charlie (Harvey Keitel) in Martin Scorsese’s Mean Streets (1973)

Angelo Restivo
“che fece per viltà il gran rifiuto.”

—inferno, III

When Mean Streets was released in 1973, many critics contrasted it to Francis Ford Coppola’s film of the year before, The Godfather. While both films took Italian-American criminals in New York’s Little Italy as their nominal subjects, some critics saw Mean Streets as a kind of antidote to Coppola’s glamorous, big-budget epic. Martin Scorsese, they noted, had made a “small” film.² His characters were small-time hoods, cut off from the imperial family which subsumed Coppola’s characters. And stylistically, Scorsese eschewed many conventional, high-budget filmmaking practices, often employing the hand-held camera and relatively simple sets and lighting. In a period when American cinema was attempting to assimilate the more radical practices of European filmmakers—particularly those of the New Wave directors—Scorsese’s film seemed more immediately radical, more obviously “new.”

As its title suggests, The Godfather is situated securely under the mark of the paternal. The first crime we see—a crime which establishes decisively the power of Don Corleone—is a dismemberment: a recalcitrant movie producer awakens to discover a bloody, severed horse’s head in his bed. The story thus unfolds in the shadow of a castration. But far from being unsettling, this centrally inscribed castration actually provides a kind of security, since the spectator has been “taken in” by the family and is thus accorded its protection. As long as we are on the father’s “good side,” we can comfortably enjoy the power that accrues to he-who-possesses-the-phallus. Mean Streets, in contrast, presents us with a world of sons cut off from the father. The only paternal presence in the film is the uncle of the film’s main character Charlie; and while this paternal figure is clearly powerful, and clearly promises to pass some of his power down to Charlie, he is not centrally inscribed in the narrative and is in fact seldom seen. Thus, when castration emerges in Mean Streets, it is much more destabilizing than in The Godfather, both for the film’s characters and also self-reflexively, at the level of the film’s narration.

Mean Streets centers on four young Italian-American men, following them through typical days and nights in New York’s Little Italy. The “documentary-like” quality of the film is created in part by Scorsese’s frequent use of what Marsha Kinder has termed the cinematic “pseudo-iterative”: that is, a mode of narration that suggests repeated, typical, everyday activities of the characters.³ This narrative mode is very explicit in the opening credits, which are superimposed over home movie footage; and it continues as the film introduces the four main characters in four vignettes: Michael (Richard Romanus) trying to unload a stolen shipment of what he thinks are German camera lenses; Tony (David Proval) discovering a patron of his bar is shooting up in the john; Johnny Boy (Robert de Niro) blowing up a mailbox; and Charlie (Harvey Keitel) praying in church. Each of the first three vignettes ends with a subtitle giving us the character’s name, causing us to read the sequence as being in the iterative. The final sequence gives us Charlie’s name in subtitle at the beginning, thus suggesting that the narrative line is about to commence. And yet here, Charlie’s voice-over continues into the next scene, a slow-motion tracking shot in Tony’s bar, which unexpectedly sustains the iterative, thus postponing the commencement of the narrative. In fact, the film will continue to slip into the iterative throughout, giving us a sense that the camera is simply fleshing out the initial home movie.

The thin thread that drives the plot is the money that Johnny Boy owes Michael, a debt that Johnny Boy—in a passive-aggressive way—refuses to take responsibility for. Throughout the movie, Charlie acts as mediator, placating Michael and imploring Johnny Boy, all the while convincing both himself and everyone around him that the reason he is protecting Johnny Boy is because of distant family ties. In the end, Johnny Boy publicly humiliates Michael, and as Charlie and Teresa (Johnny Boy’s cousin) try to get him out of the city, Michael pulls up beside their car and orders a hit man to shoot them.
Bloody and wounded, the three stagger down the street as the sound of an ambulance wails in the distance.

The fact that the hit man is played by Martin Scorsese is telling in light of the film’s loose, episodic construction. For even though the director is, in this scene, a God-like presence, ironically he is taking his orders from one of his characters. This reverses the usual notion of the director, suggesting once again that the characters are driving this story. Furthermore, Scorsese doesn’t kill them (an act which would close off any possible future for these characters), but only wounds them. What all of this suggests is that Martin Scorsese is one with the characters here; he inhabits their world. And thus, whatever control he exerts upon the narrative can be seen as exhibiting the same unconscious logic that binds the characters to their world.

All of the foregoing considerations are crucial to understanding a chain of sequences that occurs about half an hour into the film. The beginning of this chain of sequences is marked by the emergence of castration in the text; curiously, though, the action then veers off into the episodic, giving the sequences the feel of a comic/lyrical interlude. However, given the director’s complicity with these characters, I submit that a close reading of these sequences will reveal the unconscious operations at work in this “repression,” and will indeed help us to understand more clearly the economies of power and of desire in the relations between men.

In “Historical Trauma and Male Subjectivity,” Kaja Silverman argues that what allows the male subject to confuse the phallus and the penis, what allows him to deny the castration that marks entry into the social order, is “the endless circulation of a wide variety of ideal paternal images and sounds” in the dominant fiction. To this I would only add that these signifiers will “work” only within a discourse which orchestrates that circulation in certain ways. The presence of the “Father,” as in The Godfather, is one way to achieve this seamless construction of the male subject. In Mean Streets, the absence of the father—both narratively and stylistically, if you will—creates an insecurity which always threatens to surface. Or, to put it another way, the absence of the paternal position sets all four men adrift—and sets the narrative adrift as well!—and allows them to evade the kinds of responsibilities that are necessary to assume that paternal position. The men of Mean Streets refuse to acknowledge castration, and that accounts for their aimlessness, their self-indulgence, and their irresponsibility.

The sequences I will examine begin with a shooting in the men’s room of Tony’s bar. Before the shooting, all four of the main characters have fallen into a kind of anomic which at one point almost erupts into violence. Charlie half-heartedly tries to get a card game going, but no one wants to play. Thus, the scenes to be considered emerge out of a “not knowing what to do,” an unarticulated desire. Then,

(1) castration emerges, when a young man marked by effeminacy shoots a drunk in the men’s room.

(2) There is a succession of “escape” scenes, as Charlie and Johnny Boy make their way to Charlie’s apartment after the shooting. These scenes are highly episodic: the two men encounter a wildly exaggerated homosexual, they spar with garbage can lids, they talk of their past.

(3) Charlie and Johnny Boy end up sharing a bed at Charlie’s apartment. Charlie goes to the window, where he spies upon Teresa, naked in the window across the way. There is then an abrupt shift to Charlie and Teresa making love in a hotel room.

Now, this chain of sequences is odd in many ways. A conventional reading would peg it as a kind of perverse “lyric interlude,” the kind of thing usually accompanied (in the popular cinema of the 70’s) by a rock ballad as the characters are taken from point A to point B. For the shooting does not advance the narrative by creating any causal chains: it is, in fact, an extended interruption in the causal chain. What is happening is this: the shooting has unleashed in the narrative an anxiety, and the narrative then must expend all its energy in re-binding this anxiety. Only when this is accomplished can the narrative “advance.”
The Eruption of Castration

The sequence begins when a young man enters the men's room and stops inside the doorway. He stands looking at a drunk who is at the urinal.

Now, the odd thing here is that the very framing of the point-of-view shot of the drunk creates a tension between exposure and concealment: we are looking at him from the back, but as he lolls to and fro at the urinal, he presents the spectator with a profile that should "expose" him. Scorsese submits to a (probably necessary) censorship here, having the drunk only "pretending" to be holding his penis, and relying on the distance and the movement to blur the whole issue. But what this in fact does is present the spectator with a castration; it unleashes an anxiety in the narrative that will only be contained at the end of this chain of sequences. The shot asks us to pretend the man is intact, the way we might do when looking at a Ken doll. We refuse to admit "it's" not there, refuse to acknowledge the castration. Finally, the duplicity of this point-of-view shot is extended into the close-up of the young man looking at him, suggesting as it does an erotic interest that is never consummated as such.

Next, the young man reaches behind his neck and frees his shoulder-length hair, heretofore hidden by his upturned collar. Now, the young man is also marked with castration. Just as the drunk is exhibiting himself and showing nothing, the young man "takes out" what he had kept hidden—his womanly hair. There is confusion now as to who possesses the phallus.

Until, that is, the young man pulls up a gun and shoots the drunk in the back. On one level, the appearance of the gun increases our confusion, by locating two contradictory signifiers (womanly hair, manly gun) in the same person. On
another level, however, it anchors the scene, by providing it with its most important, heretofore missing element: the phallus.

In the direction of this scene so far, Scorsese is paying homage to Bertolucci, by quoting a very telling scene from Il Conformista (The Conformist, 1970): the one in which the chauffeur Pasqualino lures the boy Marcello into his room, ostensibly to let the boy see his pistol. In Bertolucci’s film, the chauffeur uses a cap to hide his long hair; when he entices Marcello into his room, he dons an Oriental kimono, removes the cap, shakes out his long hair, and places the pistol between his legs. It is a reenactment of the Oedipal scene, with Pasqualino taking on the roles of both mother and father, both seducing the boy and being slain by him. And this scene is pivotal to the film: it marks the point where all development in Marcello has been arrested, the point where his problematic relationship to his own sexuality begins.

Thus it is highly significant that Scorsese cites this scene here. It is as if Scorsese has chosen not to minimize the initial intimations of castration as some sort of exigency of production, but indeed to assert that that is what this scene is going to be about. For the scene abounds in exhibitionism, but without that underlying conviction that exhibitionism requires; until, that is, the gun rises into the frame.

We have yet to deal with the last element in the scene so far—the shooting. The drunk, to put it bluntly, “takes it from behind.” He has not noticed the young man come in, and his odd behavior while standing at the urinal—if indeed “standing” is the right word, given how he seems barely able to keep himself upright—suggests he is completely wrapped up in some sort of erotic space. Intoxicated, swaying left and right, his hand on a non-existent penis, he represents a complete regression into the infantile. The film thus connects loss of control, infantile regression,
passivity, homosexuality, and "Woman"—all of this engendered by the initial intimations of castration. We might say that the project of the following sequences is to sort all these elements out, in such a way as to enable the characters to continue the story.

The importance of this cluster of ideas to the universe of this film can be further seen if we consider the film's climax, those scenes leading up to Scorsese's performance as the hit man. The crisis is precipitated when Johnny Boy, who has been consistently delinquent in paying off his debt to Michael, finally loses control and publicly humiliates Michael. By telling Michael that he has shown him to all the world to be a "jerk off," Johnny Boy has committed an unforgivable transgression, one that causes the director himself to enter the film and end it. We can thus see the amount of repression that comes into play at any attempt to make explicit the unconscious logic that binds the characters to their world.

This first sequence ends as the wounded drunk latches onto his killer and doesn't let go. The two struggle through the bar and finally fall into the street, as the stunned patrons look on. The young man continues to be marked by effeminacy: at one point in the struggle, he breaks free and fires rather indecisively into the drunk, but then stands passively, as if waiting for the drunk to grab him again. Although we have no idea what this shooting is about, it begins to look like a lover's quarrel.

**Variations on a Theme**

Tony ushers the patrons out a side window. Michael, Johnny Boy, and Charlie walk to Michael's car, and seemingly from out of nowhere, two other men ask for a ride. One of these men, Sammy, is exaggeratedly homosexual, and as the car moves through the streets, Sammy begins yelling out obscene propositions to the men on the sidewalk.

The sudden introduction into the narrative of these two quite unnecessary characters (and especially Sammy) is the kind of thing that would peg the scene as transitional, as "light." And yet here, the scenes seem to be unfolding under the sway of a dreamwork. In fact, we could say that the director is taking advantage of the situation to "play around."

For Sammy is less a character than a mark of difference, a logical deduction drawn from the earlier scenes. Effeminate to an extreme, clad in a loud, primary-yellow raincoat, he attends to the people and situations around him only through his insistent and indiscriminate desire, much the way an infant sucks on anything. In him, the passive has become active. He is, in fact, the embodiment of that infantile regression already hinted at in the murder scene; and this is the reason he is reviled.

But to stop here would be to stop short. Johnny Boy, on the surface so completely different from Sammy, nevertheless is characterized throughout the film as recklessly irresponsible, putting his own gratification above the debts he owes everyone. Charlie rationalizes that his constant looking after Johnny Boy—to such an extent that it would be called, in today's jargon, "enabling behavior"—is a cross he bears out of family obligations. But in reality he longs to escape his own obsessive need for control by merging with Johnny Boy. There is a sense throughout the film that, if only these two were one, an inner harmony would be achieved.

By "doubling" Johnny Boy's character in the figure of Sammy, homosexual desire is split in two. On the one hand we have an idealized desire that seems to promise so much; on the other hand, we have the "monster" that will result if that desire is ever realized. And this is nothing if not the problematic uncovered by Michel Foucault in his analysis of homosexual desire in ancient Greece. In *The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault argues that, while homosexuality was an integral part of the patriarchal system of ancient Greece, the boy's "position" (literally and figuratively) was highly problematic: he became the recipient of the phalus, but the very position of recipient was seen as "feminine." Practically speaking, this destined homosexual desire to become increasingly idealized, increasingly "Platonic." This problematic is (unconsciously) reproduced in this sequence of the film, as a way to "bind" the homosexual desire that has so suddenly emerged.

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87 Spectator
Teresa and Charlie make love

When Johnny Boy and Charlie leave the car, the narrative line becomes a series of attempts to deal with the problematic that homosexual desire has introduced into the text. First, Charlie and Johnny Boy are walking down a side street, when Charlie stops at a shop window, calling Johnny Boy over to look. We don’t see the shop window, but there is apparently a gun on display, for Charlie says, “That’s one of those little jobs the cops carry in their socks.” Now, if police carry guns in their socks, it is to provide back-up in case they find themselves disarmed, or in case their “regular” guns are rendered somehow unusable. Thus, Charlie is suggesting that authority, power, credibility come only from the ability to produce the phallus which we don’t really possess. It is as if to say, “Always keep one hidden—it may be small, but you never know when you’ll need it.”

Curiously, Johnny Boy then says that a cop once hit him on the head with a small gun like that, and Charlie jokes that Johnny Boy has never recovered from the hit. Johnny Boy has been touched by the phallus, from whence his irresponsibility.

Finally, this section of the film comes to an end with Charlie and Johnny Boy attempting to idealize the desire by containing it within traditional forms. They spar affectionately in the street, and end up employing garbage can lids as “shields.” In its suggestion of gladiatorial combat, this scene is recycling antique representations of masculinity.

“Cherchez la Femme”

The action jumps to Charlie’s apartment, where the two have already arrived and are getting ready for bed. The opening shot of the sequence is a long, hand-held take, the
construction of which is quite interesting. The first half of the shot follows Johnny Boy as he moves from the kitchen to the bedroom; the second half mirrors this movement, as it follows Charlie from the bedroom to the kitchen. In the middle of the shot, the two share Charly’s bed.

In structural terms, the actions “finding one’s way home and going to bed” ought to be conclusive: the scene should end. But here it cannot, for given the train of associations that have been activated since the killing, there is no way this scene can be viewed innocently. The two simply cannot stay in bed together. So Charly goes to the kitchen, where he counts his stashes of money in the cookie jar. Now, these shots of the money-counting make no narrative sense. But viewed in light of the unconscious forces generated by these entire sequences, and given Johnny Boy’s continual money problems, we can say that Charlie must check to see that he hasn’t “been screwed.”

Charlie returns to the bedroom. He and Johnny Boy make a few wisecracks, then he crouches at the window and peeks out from a raised slat of the blinds. He watches Teresa, who stands naked in a window across the way.

With the introduction of the woman, we can properly say that these sequences reach a resolution, that the anxiety generated by the shooting is finally bound. At first, though, it seems as if the appearance of the woman is a compensatory mechanism: as if she comes into play only after Charlie’s real desires lead only to impasse.

As Charlie watches Teresa, he begins a voice-over monologue that continues over an abrupt scene change to a hotel room in the afternoon, where Charlie and Teresa are making love. Conventionally, such a cut smoothed over by voice-over would suggest the entry into memory or dream. Here, however, it marks the end of the dream: later, when they leave the hotel room, we understand not only that time has jumped forward, but also that the narrative has been freed of the anxiety that had been governing it for so long. (And, significantly, it is at this point, after the love scene in the hotel, that Charlie gives an “explanation” of the bar shooting.)

Charlie’s voice-over narration is this: he is recounting to Teresa a dream he had, in which they were making love and he ejaculated tremendous amounts of blood. The mark of castration, which began this chain of sequences, here comes closest to becoming manifest. And it is precisely because of the presence of the woman that this can happen. In the universe of Mean Streets, the woman serves to perpetuate the illusion that the man’s phallus is intact. When Teresa asks Charlie why he can’t get serious with her, Charlie’s blunt answer—“Because you’re a cunt”—tells all.

Soon after this there is a startling jump cut: Charlie raises his arm and, his hand made into a mock pistol, “shoots” Teresa, as a gunshot is heard on the soundtrack. This new shooting echoes the earlier one, and corrects it. The phallus is now situated “where it belongs.” And even if that “where” is as arbitrary as a pointed finger, it doesn’t matter so long as the finger points at a woman. The castration has been effectively displaced. The anxiety created by the initial gunshot is now bound. The narrative can resume.

1 “Who from cowardice made the great refusal.” Dante refers here to Celestino V, placed in the antechamber of hell for having renounced the papacy to pursue a private asceticism.