

Infernally Yours

In *The Departed*, a raucously sordid meditation on the ways of the lower-class Boston Irish, director Martin Scorsese has included a passing tribute to Carol Reed's peerless film, *The Third Man*. Reed's adaptation of Graham Greene's novel concludes with a bitterly disillusioned woman, played by Alida Valli, walking toward the camera along a cemetery path. As she gazes resolutely into the middle distance, her would-be swain, Joseph Cotten, stands waiting for her in the foreground. When she reaches him, she doesn't stop but walks by wordlessly, refusing him so much as a glance. Crushed, he hangs his head, resigning himself to her magisterial rejection.

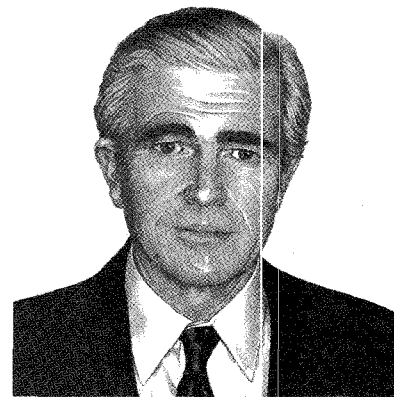
Scorsese's rendition of this *pas des deux* also takes place in a cemetery and is meant to represent another relationship's mournful dead end. Typical of Scorsese, however, he and his scenarist, William Monahan, have not been content with the silence that served Reed's film so eloquently. Instead, they have the young man speak his plaint to the woman. His remark is dramatically gratuitous, since both the lady and the audience know very well what's on his mind. But Scorsese doesn't trust his audience. He insists on announcing it out loud.

This small moment reveals the best and worst in Scorsese's work. His films are fully informed with the tradition that precedes them, and his mastery of his medium is unsurpassed by any other director working today. Despite his manifest gifts, however, he lacks the one that might transform him from a marvelous entertainer into the genuine cinematic artist he so clearly longs to be. In short, he lacks aesthetic tact. He doesn't know when to let up. If there is a top to be gone over, he's your man. The shooting victims in *Mean Streets* didn't bleed; they erupted in geysers of blood. In *Raging Bull*, it wasn't enough to watch punches twist and crumple boxers' faces. We had to watch them spray black blood onto the ringside fans. In *The Last Temptation of Christ*, noth-

ing short of stripping Jesus naked for His Crucifixion would suffice. (Yes, this may have been historically accurate, but there are moments when decorum should prevail over absolute authenticity.) *Casino* gave us a blow-by-blow rendition of Mafia justice, showing us two men beaten nearly to death with baseball bats before their broken bodies were dumped, still breathing, into a grave. Scorsese apparently thinks that excess is the road to the palace of art. It is not surprising, then, that *The Departed* exhibits a similar exorbitance, but it is disappointing. The film has so much to offer otherwise.

The story line has been adapted from *Infernal Affairs*, a Hong Kong film I haven't seen but am told is a superior example of the police-and-gangster genre that the Chinese learned, in part, from Scorsese himself. Like its source, *Departed* concerns a double plot. Two young men are inducted into undercover work by their masters. From the age of ten, Colin Sullivan (Matt Damon) has been groomed by South Boston's notorious mobster, Frank Costello (Jack Nicholson), so that, at the right age, he can join the police force to act as his criminal guardian's mole. Meanwhile, the other young man, Billie Costigan (Leonardo DiCaprio), from the same underprivileged neighborhood as Sullivan, becomes a cop at the same time and finds himself chosen by the Special Investigations unit to become a mole in Costello's crew. In a series of sharply edited montages, we watch the two men carry out their assignments, each taking greater and greater risks to serve his demanding superiors. Every time Boston's finest think they have Costello cornered, Sullivan either warns the crime boss or thwarts the investigation. Meanwhile, Costigan keeps the head of Special Investigations informed of Costello's every move.

As they perform their undercover missions, Sullivan and Costigan are at first unaware of each other's existence. Then, through a series of cell-phone mix-ups, each becomes electronically aware



The Departed

Produced and distributed
by Warner Brothers
Directed by Martin Scorsese
Screenplay by William Monahan

of the other's shadowy presence—and the fatal hunt is on. Sullivan's corrupt Jekyll seeks Costigan's virtuous Hyde, and Costigan returns the favor. With matching physiques, square faces, and crew cuts, Damon and DiCaprio look uncannily similar, like shaven-headed Marine recruits. With each move they make, their mirroring countermissions begin to converge. This makes for a devilishly—even ridiculously—complicated plot filled with many a hairpin turn—about as each uncovers information that threatens to expose the other. They even share the same girlfriend. As you would expect, she is a police psychiatrist named Madolyn, in deference to the encompassing Catholic ethos. Madolyn/Magdalen has a taste for troubled men with hidden personalities. Despite Colin's problems with stress-induced impotence, she finds him all but irresistible. This likely has to do with his brash boast that Sigmund Freud judged the Irish to be "impervious to psychoanalysis," which, of course, they are. Billy, on the other hand, may be even more seductive. With his inner self so buried in his psychic deep freeze, there is no need to cite Vienna's quack-in-chief. One look at Billie's perpetually sweaty squint, and you instantly know he's immune to head shrinkery.

As engaging as the players are, the film suffers from Scorsese's reluctance to settle on a single vision. Using the hyper-real Hong Kong police-and-mobster fantasy as his template, he has awkwardly based his cinematic mobster Costello

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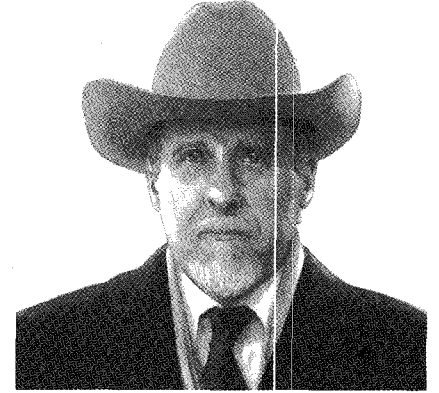
American Parenthood

Overwhelmed by the shame of having a juvenile delinquent for a daughter, Héctor could almost forget that he himself was a convicted criminal and the subject of an investigation by the Immigration and Borders division of the Department of Homeland Security.

The entire business had been a father's worst nightmare, as well as a major multicultural scandal. The Southwestern media, like ravens on the city dump, had been all over the story of how the daughter of an illegal Hispanic immigrant politician had offered deliberate gratuitous insult to Islam and to Muslims the world over. Al Jazeera picked up the incident for a broadcast, so that, for weeks after, Héctor lived in terror of hearing that a *fatwa* had been issued against Contracepción. (In the event, his plan had been to flee with the family into Mexico, where he counted on the reputation enjoyed by the Federales to deter even the toughest Al Qaeda hit team.) The *Valencia County News-Bulletin* and the *Albuquerque Journal* ran front-page stories featuring Contracepción's photograph and drawing death threats from the Muslim community and proposals of marriage (among other things) from the Hispanic one. The school canceled Héctor's computer-repair contract, and the superintendent addressed a specially convened student assembly to reiterate that the Belen Consolidated School District expected its students to "deal effectively with change, value diversity, become life-long learners, and develop into responsible citizens who will have a positive effect on their community, country, and world." Most paining of all was a letter from the White House, reminding the Hon. Héctor Villa that a good Republican speaks ill neither of another Republican nor of the Prophet Muhammad, founder of a religion of love and peace, and signed "W." Excepting Jesús "Eddie" Juárez, who loathed Middle Easterners almost as much as he despised Anglos, the only quarter from which the Villas received support was their church, First Assembly of God, where Bro. Billy Joe preached a fiery sermon attacking Mohammedans and papists as Jesus bashers and invited Contracepción to stand and be acknowledged by the enthusiastic congregation.

Having been suspended from school for the remainder of the semester, Contracepción was also under sentence by the juvenile court to perform six months of community service with a faith-based outreach program run by the shiny new mosque founded in Belen the year before, a ruling that confined her to New Mexico until the following spring. What to do with their daughter after that was a matter of constant discussion for her parents. Héctor argued for sending the child to her grandparents in Namiquipa, where she could learn discipline at home and at school. But AveMaría steadfastly refused to hear of such a thing, insisting that Contracep learn responsibility by staying home and helping with the care of Dubya. Secretly, she'd determined that what the girl really needed to teach her maturity was a boyfriend. In Mexico, thirteen was regarded as being about the appropriate age; in America, it was apparently even lower. Only recently, a neighborhood friend had been boasting about her daughter, aged eight, who'd just found a new boyfriend, a kid of nine. "Oh," the proud mother had assured her, "he's hot!" In fact, AveMaría had someone in mind: Mañuel Orozco, fourteen years old, the son of an immigrant family from Ciudad Chihuahua who also attended Bro. Billy Joe's church. Maybe by summer, she thought, with Contracep on the verge of turning fourteen herself, Héctor would be agreeable to the suggestion—or perhaps the girl would have discovered romance on her own.

Besides Contracepción, the Villas were preoccupied by much else in late fall, so that time passed quickly. AveMaría, in addition to her other responsibilities, had Contracepción to chauffeur to and from the mosque, while Héctor was preoccupied with his business troubles and the bureaucratic inquiries and forms arriving almost daily from the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, all of them needing to be filled out in excruciating detail. Though he'd understood early on that USCIS was simply going through the motions, the process occupied much of his valuable time, while creating in his own mind the humiliating illusion of being some kind of petty criminal, well beneath the attention of (for example) the IRS. What with one



thing and another, it seemed no time at all before the *ristras* were up, the *candelarias* glowing in rows along the flat roofs of the faux-adobe houses, and the Visa and MasterCard billing statements ran three- and four-pages long.

Owing partly to Bro. Billy Joe, Héctor continued to be oppressed by worry in respect of Contracepción. The preacher had been outraged by the juvenile court's action in forcing the girl to work for a mosque, which was tantamount to slaving for Satan himself. He became obsessed with the court's sentence, and it really seemed at times to Héctor that Billy Joe considered the father morally culpable by acquiescing in the penalty—as though, he reflected indignantly, a common American citizen such as himself had any recourse in the matter. "You can't fight City Hall!" was a mantra Héctor had taken to repeating over and over to himself, in self-justification. Though sharing the preacher's distaste for the enemies of God and of the United States, he took comfort, as the weeks passed, from his daughter's increased good spirits. And Contracep had made friends at the mosque: Almost every afternoon lately, she'd found a ride home from work.

One evening after supper, when Héctor was putting the Christmas tree up in the living room, Jesús "Eddie" telephoned from the Taberna Aztlán with an invitation to join him for "a couple drinks." Jesús "Eddie" sounded unmistakably tipsy, and Héctor had succeeded at last in positioning the tree almost exactly as he wanted it in the stand when, perceiving urgency in Jesús "Eddie's" voice as well as befuddlement, he agreed to drive to the *taberna*. There he discovered his friend seated on his favorite stool before the wide-screen TV with his back to the main entrance.

"¿*Compadrito, che pasa?*" Héctor asked,