When Newland Archer walks away from the little square in Paris without going up to see Ellen Olenska again after many years, in the last sequence of Scorsese’s The Age of Innocence, he is encapsulating a great deal of Mark Nicholls’ thesis. Archer prefers to hang on to the beloved ghost from the past than to make contact with the no-doubt altered reality. And speaking of ‘thesis’, this book has all the marks, for better and worse, of a Ph.D. (I don’t know if this is the case): that is, at best, it is very scholarly and it is, throughout, reader-unfriendly in the extreme.

There’s an overloaded opening paragraph, so let’s take things one at a time. What Newland is doing, in not seeing Ellen, is confirming himself, if confirmation were still needed, as the archetypal Scorsese melancholic. He has loved Ellen against all the strictures of his ‘tribe’—upper-crust New York society in the late nineteenth century—but kissing her foot or her wrist is as close as he has come to consummation. And yet, for the melancholic, consummation is essentially a matter of denial, and Nicholls, supported by a battery of formidable theorists, spends his opening chapter in establishing what he means by the melancholic protagonist and the sense in which he sees Scorsese’s as ‘a cinema of melancholia’. He spells out in his Introduction the ‘five central features which are evident, in each of the five films under discussion’ (p.xv), and in this kind of dense writing one is grateful for the odd signpost like this.

The melancholic’s situation requires a sense of tribe or mob, whether of bourgeois conformists or murderous gangsters, from which the melancholic feels himself essentially ‘apart’, even if, in other ways, he is clearly ‘a part’. This quality of estrangement from the surrounding taste-makers, law-givers and meters-out of rough justice, induces in the melancholic a consciousness of his own superiority. In fact, everything about the melancholic’s position does this. All Scorsese’s men, as discussed here, are involved in a passion not requited, and it is important to them that they do not secure the object of their desire. The very notion of denial of the consummation of desire is in itself grounds not merely for separateness but for superiority as well. And in the thesis of this book, informed by psychoanalytic and feminist theory, there is no doubt about the corruptness of the conservative (= patriarchal) social organization which the melancholic can survey from the certainty of his own uncontaminated loss-bearing loftiness, from the distinction of his role as mourner.

The bulk of the book examines these propositions about melancholia in detailed relation to The Age of Innocence, Raging Bull, Taxi Driver, GoodFellas and Cape Fear in that—non-chronological—order, an order explained by Nicholls as being dictated by ‘the way the theme of melancholia unfolds in my analysis’ (p.xv). His treatment inevitably throws up some interesting and unexpected insights and he does argue for and persuade one about the continuities in Scorsese’s agenda and especially in his male protagonists. Significantly, Alice

Doesn’t Live Here Any More is not one of the films analysed (or even mentioned), and it might have been instructive for Nicholls to consider whether a female protagonist fits or resists his template.

He begins with The Age of Innocence because it is the film that inspired his inquiry, and this chapter contains some of his best writing. Newland Archer emerges as a potent representative of the type. He is clearly part of the self-conscious, carefully ordered New York society and at the same time casts himself in the role of observer of the rituals, to which of course he frequently does obeisance. His artistic longings, diffused and eclectic, are emblematic of his difference from, say, Larry Lefferts; but it is the nature of his feeling for Ellen Olenska that cuts him off irretrievably from the rest. ‘[What] he wants, but will not admit to’ is ‘not Ellen but the loss of her’. In relation to the terms of this desire, ‘if the tribe opposed Newland’s fantasy, it does so as part of his own design ...’ (p.31). Nicholls articulates Archer’s strangely muted conflict partly through a brilliantly insightful analysis of the ‘signs’ of his world, well-illustrated in his account of the model of May’s hands: ‘White, soft and delicate, they appear harmless and suggest innocence. The work they have done, however, was swift, ruthless and permanent ...’ (p.39).
The use of Scorsese’s ‘familiar long-take strategy’ (p.34) is contemplated as a device for suggesting to viewers ‘that they are walking with the melancholic through his world’. One of the intermittent strengths of Nicholls’ book is in how he shows Scorsese invoking the screen’s semiotic strategies to create those meanings from which Nicholls in turn derives his. For instance, in the chapter on GoodFellas, he mounts a convincing case for how filmic technique is deployed to isolate Henry Hill, through the use of direct-to-camera address: in the court scene, this involves ‘Henry turning to the audience and away from those (Jimmy, Paulie) who have represented his “walk on the wild side”’ (p.112). For Henry, melancholia has been associated with his status as ‘exile’: longing for the visceral excitement and glamour of the gangster world, he has not fully been able to cut himself adrift from the toils of domesticity. He feels, ultimately, an exile in both worlds, and the film in both narrative and visual terms seeks to render this through processes of decentring.

The other chapters raise in their specific milieux such key notions as that of the individual v. the tribe. In Raging Bull, this is complicated by ‘longing for an idealised past’ (p.47), and the forbidden love scenario by incest and homosexuality. In Taxi Driver, Travis Bickle’s individuality has for opposition nothing less than New York itself and the whole seething, scummy mess of urban life. Nicholls insists on picturing Travis as a “flâneur” and in doing so engages in some of the book’s most opaque locutions: ‘The uncertainty of Benjamin’s flâneur/hero—expressed in moments when he is heroic and when “sham”—appears matched by his own dubi-