

Part One

# The Pious Auteur

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# How Scorsese Became Scorsese

## A Historiography of New Hollywood's Most Prestigious Auteur

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There are few filmmakers in the world more well known than Martin Scorsese, which makes writing any kind of overview of his work especially difficult. Scorsese's biographical history is by now very familiar to the culture, as are many of his films, and there seems little debate that Scorsese is a supremely talented and historically important director. Thus, what I'd like to offer is a kind of revisionist look at his biography, or, perhaps, a historiography of Scorsese's biographical history. How has the Scorsese narrative been developed, and why has the story been told this way? Connected to this, what has been left out by this particular approach? This chapter aims to both give an overview of Scorsese's vast and impressive work as well as offer a review and critique of the critical literature on Scorsese to this point.

Scorsese was born in November 1942 in New York's Little Italy, and his Italian-Catholic identity has been emphasized in numerous studies. As a child, he suffered from asthma, which prevented him from physical activity and led to his love of cinema. This biographical detail does contextualize Scorsese, but from a very personal perspective. What is often overlooked is the importance of where and when Scorsese came of age. If the French Cinematheque and postwar social conditions gave birth to the French New Wave auteurs, New York of the 1950s certainly contributed to the filmmaker Scorsese would become. Within the history of cinema exhibition, it can be argued that there is no time and place quite as rich and varied, and almost certainly not in America. The apex of Classic Hollywood was reached by 1946, and it was already beginning its decline as Scorsese reached film-going maturity. But this led to Hollywood experimenting with different styles and formats (color,

widescreen), so that the 1950s can be seen as a Golden Age aesthetically if not commercially. And as Hollywood was in decline and closing theaters, the art-house cinema circuit was just beginning, with New York as the epicenter (see Wilinsky, 2001). Even local television, often considered the enemy of film, added to Scorsese's education by replaying old Hollywood films and, more importantly, films from the Italian Neorealism movement. As Scorsese explains in his 1999 documentary, *My Voyage to Italy*, his large extended family would often watch these rather terrible prints of such classics as *Paisan* (Roberto Rossellini, 1946) and *La Terra Trema* (Luchino Visconti, 1947) on local Italian television, and despite the poor quality the impact was still felt. Without this particular convergence of forces, it is highly unlikely a cinematic outlier like Scorsese would have emerged.

This extends to Scorsese's formal education in cinema. Across the United States in the 1960s, more and more children were attending university, including many who came from working-class backgrounds. At the same time, film programs were opening and expanding rapidly, as the 1960s explosion of world cinema created widespread demand in what was now considered the most important art form of the twentieth century. Scorsese entered New York University (NYU) in 1962 and eventually moved into the Film department, completing his master's degree in 1966. He made two acclaimed short films, *What's a Nice Girl Like You Doing in a Place Like This?* and *It's Not Just You, Murray*, both of which are hybrid works combining elements of popular entertainment such as Hollywood and vaudeville with a playful, New Wave sensibility. They are calling cards, not unlike the numerous independent films that flood film festivals today. The only truly experimental work Scorsese has made was 1967's *The Big Shave*, a short completed outside of NYU with financial support from Jacques Ledoux, curator of the Cinémathèque Royale de Belgique in Brussels. The resulting six-minute short was not only Scorsese's most experimental work but also his most overtly political. The differences between this film and Scorsese's earlier shorts can be related to their differing institutional contexts. Scorsese did not produce *The Big Shave* within the academic institution, and the film differs dramatically from those earlier shorts. Rather than being a New Wave exercise in Hollywood revision, *The Big Shave* exists as a narrative in only the barest sense: an unknown man shaves in front of a mirror in an all-white room until he cuts himself and is covered in blood, all to the tune of Bunny Berigan's version of "I Can't Get Started." The film then ends with two title cards: "Whiteness by Herman Melville" and "Viet '67." The film won the Prix L'Age d'Or at the Festival of Experimental Cinema in Belgium, and belongs to what Pierre Bourdieu refers to as a field of restricted production (see Bourdieu, 1993), a field Scorsese would abandon when he chose a career in Hollywood.

Also coming out of the NYU context is Scorsese's first feature film, *Who's That Knocking at My Door*, aka *Bring on the Dancing Girls*, *I Call First*, and *J.R.*

Originating in 1965 as a master's thesis film, it would evolve with multiple titles over the next few years, reaching its final form in 1969 with the addition of a nude scene, dictated by a distributor but fitting very well thematically with the original film. It marked Scorsese's first attempt at, as Leighton Grist puts it, "entering the marketplace, (and) developing a style" (Grist, 2000: 24). Subsequent writing on the film, which is rather substantial compared with the writing on the short films, emphasizes the work as an apprenticeship for the masterpiece to come, *Mean Streets* (1973), and hence judges the film in relation to this more professional standard: "*Who's That Knocking at My Door* presents a patchwork of jerky transitions, unintegrated stylistic contrasts and varying standards of cinematography and picture quality" (Grist, 2000: 31). Grist's comments represent a wide consensus on the film as technically crude because Scorsese still had not learned to "properly" channel his talent. This critical community shares the conviction that great filmmaking negotiates between the two extremes of Hollywood and the avant-garde. It is in this aesthetic, which will become increasingly popular throughout the years, that Scorsese's reputation will be built.

For a different perspective, consider former NYU and Scorsese student Peter Rea's illuminating comments on both films:

I think *Who's That Knocking* has some of the most creative things he's ever done. I think it blows away *Mean Streets*. The use of slow motion when it is going across the people laughing, and, I just think there are things in that movie that are so powerful. I mean he's jump-cutting, he's playing with the medium and having fun with it. Of course I think *Mean Streets* is great as well. I went to L.A. after NYU, I was there for a brief period of time, and he (Scorsese) was cutting *Mean Streets*. And one of his other students was there working on it as well. So I saw an early cut of it. I saw a lot of stuff that I thought was amazing but they cut out of the movie. Kind of outrageous stuff, dream sequences. (author's interview)

Rea, as primarily a filmmaker and a production teacher, appreciates very different aspects of Scorsese's work than those within the academic interpretative community because he belongs to this field of cultural production himself. The changes in style from *Who's That Knocking at My Door* to *Mean Streets* are best considered not as a maturation (which implies a clear hierarchy) but as a shift in the type of audience that appreciates each respective work. The vagaries of production and distribution that are used to denigrate *Who's That Knocking at My Door* apply equally to *Mean Streets* or any other work of art: "Since most artists want the advantages of distribution, they work with an eye to what the system characteristic of their world can handle. What kinds of work will it distribute? What will it ignore? What return will it give for what kind of work?" (Becker, 1982: 94). With this in mind, it is useful to compare the two films with the reception of John Cassavetes's *Shadows*, a film that went through two different versions and thus can be considered as two separate texts. The

first cut of the film, which unfortunately is no longer available to be screened, was praised by Jonas Mekas as a great example of underground cinema and was used by Mekas to promote the idea of a New American Cinema. However, when Cassavetes re-edited the film in order to de-emphasize formal experimentation and focus more on characterization, Mekas rejected the film as overly conventional. For Cassavetes, the second version represented a maturation of his filmmaking, rejecting the overindulgence in cinematic style of the first version. A similar split in critical perspective is seen with *Who's That Knocking at My Door* and *Mean Streets*. The later film may be more mature, but it is also more widely acceptable and intelligible in terms of style. To place this opposition within a hierarchy, as most critics of the two films have, works well as an auteurist narrative of growth, but also justifies and defends a certain approach to cinema (namely Hollywood, however "New") while rejecting another (experimental). Throughout his career, Scorsese's work will repeatedly be used to mediate different ideas and notions of what cinema should be. And although Scorsese is often seen as an outsider to Hollywood, this mediation usually takes the form of an implicit justification of its approach to cinema.

A failed project from this period also has served to reinforce this narrative. Scorsese's first "professional" directing job actually took place two years before his move to Hollywood and four years before his directing job for Roger Corman, *Boxcar Bertha* (1972). In 1968, Scorsese was hired to direct *The Honeymoon Killers*, scripted by Leonard Castle. But after a week of shooting, Scorsese was fired from the job and replaced by Castle himself. The film was released in 1970 and has developed a significant cult following, eventually being released by the prestigious Criterion Collection DVD company. Scorsese's comments on this incident reveal a great deal about the cultural field of filmmaking:

I had been fired from *The Honeymoon Killers* in 1968 after one week's shooting, and for a pretty good reason too. It was a 200-page script and I was shooting everything in master shots with no coverage because I was an artist! Since the guys with the money only had enough for a \$150,000 black and white film, they said we just couldn't go on; there would have to be close-ups or something. Of course, not every scene was shot from one angle, but too many of them were, so that there was no way of avoiding a film four hours long. That was a great lesson. From 1968 to 1972 I was very much afraid I would get fired again. So when I started on *Boxcar Bertha* I drew every scene, about 500 pictures altogether. (Thompson and Christie, 1996: 34)

Scorsese's comment here that he was an "artist" is clearly meant to be self-mocking, but is also a conventional parody of the self-important experimental filmmaker who will not submit to the demands of working in the industry. Given that Scorsese was making these comments retrospectively in order to

position his own subsequent career, they served as a self-justification more than a self-critique. Because of the auteur theory, the idea of producing art within the system was considered possible, and art was no longer contingent on being separate from commercial concerns. When Scorsese looked back on his younger filmmaking self as pretentious and unreasonable, he implicitly passed judgment on others who insist on this point of view. Moving from New York and independent filmmaking and into the world of Hollywood commercialism can be read as “selling out” to the system. Scorsese’s comments argue against this by seeing financial interests as inevitable to the making of film. What was a very clear professional and ideological decision by Scorsese is turned into “common sense.”

Before leaving NYU for Hollywood in the fall of 1970, Scorsese worked as an instructor at the university, was a key part of the editing team on the landmark documentary *Woodstock*, and organized the collective documentary *Street Scenes 1970*. This film documented the protests that occurred in May 1970, first concerning the bombing of Cambodia and then the student shootings at Kent State. *Street Scenes 1970* is one of the lost artifacts of Scorsese’s career and, ironically, the cause of this missing piece of Scorsese’s history is Scorsese himself. If *Street Scenes* is mentioned at all by Scorsese critics, it is usually seen as an anomaly or curiosity, especially given the less political nature of the rest of his career. What is not mentioned is how Scorsese has exercised tight control over his personal print of the film, which is the only one currently known to exist. He has thus effectively suppressed it, despite his reputation as a preserver of film history. And the reason for this suppression is not the political content; rather, it is an authorship controversy over the film that occurred after it played at the New York Film Festival in September 1970. Many of the collective felt Scorsese was receiving credit as the film’s auteur, despite it being made as a group project with Scorsese as supervisor and editor, not director. Scorsese’s sensitivity over this issue, still lingering decades later, has caused him to make the film unavailable even to researchers. This is unfortunate because the film is an important document in a key and still relevant American historical moment, and because it distorts the more political nature of Scorsese’s pre-Hollywood career.

For example, without *Street Scenes*, *Boxcar Bertha* has been read not as a politically radical text (one of the more overtly radical of Scorsese’s career, in fact), but as a stepping-stone on the road to further greatness (Figure 1.1). *Boxcar Bertha* stands as Scorsese’s entrance into Hollywood as a director because of its unambiguously commercial nature, even if it was made on the margins of this industry. It is an example of a Roger Corman-produced “exploitation” film, one of the many in the lovers-on-the-run genre. These same qualities excluded the film from serious consideration as art, as the now often told Scorsese anecdote shows:



**Figure 1.1** Working-class hero crucified. *Boxcar Bertha* (1972). Directed by Martin Scorsese. Produced by American International Pictures (AIP).

I showed *Boxcar Bertha* in a rough-cut of about two hours to John Cassavetes. John took me back to his office, looked at me and said, 'Marty, you've just spent a whole year of your life making a piece of shit. It's a good picture, but you're better than the people who make this kind of movie. Don't get hooked into the exploitation market, just try and do something different.' Jay Cocks, who was then the *Time* film critic, had shown him *Who's That Knocking at My Door* and he had loved it. He said I must go back to making that kind of film and was there anything I had that I was really dying to make. I said, 'Yes, although it needs a rewrite.' 'Well, rewrite it then!' (Thompson and Christie, 1996: 38)

The frequency with which this story gets told and retold proves its symbolic value to the narrative that is Scorsese's career (see Keyser, 1992: 37 and Grist, 2000: 61–62). The story both praises and critiques Scorsese, stressing his immense talent as an artist as well as the failure of that talent to be properly realized within the exploitation market. It features Cassavetes in the role of supportive yet critical mentor/father, guiding the young disciple to his proper place as an artist, stressing the importance of "personal" work. Although the exploitation market was the contemporary equivalent of the Classical Hollywood "B" film that Scorsese so admired, it was not the place, according to Cassavetes, in which serious, personal work could be accomplished. "Personal" work for Cassavetes meant stories about people, not about film technique, as in auteurism. As previously discussed, Cassavetes's first film, *Shadows*, had an early version that was more experimental in technique that he eventually abandoned for a second version that was more focused on the characters and



their relationships. He argued that, “the first version was an interesting film from a technical point of view, but it had nothing to do with people” (Carney, 2001: 80). Throughout the rest of his career, Cassavetes would continue to follow this principle, and although he would become an almost mythical figure within the context of “independent” cinema, he would be relatively ignored by Film Studies as a discipline and marginalized within the canon (see Kouvaros, 2004). Scorsese avoids this marginalization by virtue of his closer ties to Hollywood, a closeness foreshadowed by his involvement with Corman and Corman’s own relationship vis-à-vis the major studios.

What was left behind was the more overtly political material dealing with the oppression of the working class, racial minorities, and women, to which Scorsese would never really return. It would take ideological critics to draw out implicitly in Scorsese’s Hollywood films what was explicit in *Boxcar Bertha* and some of the earlier student work. With the essential disappearance of *Street Scenes 1970* from Scorsese’s oeuvre, the politics of *Boxcar Bertha* can seem very antithetical to his career arc. But read as the first film after *Street Scenes*, the early credit sequence of *Boxcar Bertha*, detailing the clashes between the police and the workers, can be seen as a direct continuation of the police–student battles featured in the earlier documentary. And while it was a commercial picture, its political agenda was politically to the left of anything coming out of Hollywood. It features a group of heroes that includes a communist union leader, an African-American justifiably fighting racism with violence, and a woman who lives freely with different lovers and even as a prostitute without being punished for her lifestyle. Its villains are rich, powerful white men and their underlings. And while the character of Bertha and the actress Barbara Hershey are still treated as sexual objects for the voyeuristic gaze of the camera (after all, this is exploitation filmmaking), there is an argument to be made that Bertha is a more progressive female character than any of the women in Scorsese’s future pictures. Although labeled a “whore” by those in power, Bertha is constantly seen as sympathetic despite her breaking of the social conventions of womanhood. The constantly lauded movement of Scorsese away from this exploitation material and back into more personal work constantly overlooks the fact that a more progressive social vision was abandoned as well.

It is with *Mean Streets* that Scorsese begins to establish himself as an auteur with a personal vision. But what is often ignored is how much of a Hollywood film *Mean Streets* is, and the fact that given the American context, Scorsese’s movement into making films for Hollywood was a necessary contingency for his eventual canonization. Although *Mean Streets* is produced independently, it was made for studio distribution and has a technical polish and generic grounding that *Who’s That Knocking at My Door* lacked. Scorsese rewrote an earlier draft of the script, at that point titled *Season of the Witch*, following Cassavetes’s advice in 1972. In the process, Scorsese attempted to remove some of the more

explicit cultural signifiers that would confuse a mainstream audience. Following the advice of his then partner Sandy Weintraub, the daughter of the studio executive Fred Weintraub who first brought Scorsese to Hollywood in 1970 to edit *Medicine Ball Caravan*, Scorsese worked to streamline his sensibility to fit the marketplace: “I took out a lot of religious stuff – it was still called *Season of the Witch* at this stage – and put in things like the pool-hall scene” (Thompson and Christie, 1996: 38). What results is a curious mixture of elements that allows *Mean Streets* to be discussed as an authentic, personal vision of New York’s Little Italy as seen through one of its own members while eliminating some of the more obscure religious and ethnic specificity. The two titles of the film, the original *Season of the Witch* and the subsequent *Mean Streets*, encapsulate this duality. Understanding the title *Season of the Witch* requires a deep knowledge of Italian culture, as Robert Casillo argues:

The title *Season of the Witch* has its merits and is arguably preferable to the present one, being more closely related to the film’s themes, narrative and characters. Such an argument, however, depends partly on the likely possibility that Scorsese grasped the significance of witches, witchcraft, and the related belief in the evil eye or *malocchio* in both southern Italian and Italian American society. . . . Its unsuitability lies in the fact that, while witches have a specific significance in southern Italian society and its earlier Italian American off-shoots, these meanings would have been lost on most American viewers. (Casillo, 2006: 486, 491)

However, Casillo ignores the fact that more than just the title of the film had changed. Although the specific references to Italian Catholic culture are still present in the film, they are no longer of central importance to the film’s meaning. The change to the title *Mean Streets* was not isolated; it was part of a larger movement within the script and film as a whole to make the film more socially intelligible to a wider constituency.

The reference to Raymond Chandler in the title is merely one of many allusions the film makes to American popular culture, especially Hollywood cinema, as an attempt by Scorsese to locate *Mean Streets* within a filmmaking tradition. The characters in the film may be from a culturally specific group, but this culture has now been transformed by its connection with the world of mass entertainment represented by Hollywood cinema. Scorsese’s own comments on the film stress these twin influences: “[A]t the same time as giving this accurate picture of Italian-Americans, I was trying to make a kind of homage to the Warner Brothers [sic] gangster films” (Thompson and Christie, 1996: 43–45). In fact, the film is full of references to Hollywood that situate *Mean Streets* as the New Hollywood film it was trying to be. There are three clips shown from other films, *The Searchers*, *The Big Heat* (Fritz Lang, 1953), and *The Tomb of Ligeia* (Roger Corman, 1964). Two Hollywood World War II films, *The Pride of the Marines* (Delmer Daves, 1945) and *Back to Bataan* (Edward Dmytryk, 1945), are referenced in the dialogue, and one scene features a poster

for *Point Blank* (John Boorman, 1967). The variety of films here and how they are deployed speaks to *Mean Streets* as a film consciously trying to position itself within a group of ambitious Hollywood films reworking the conventions of its past.

*Mean Streets* received almost unanimous support from the mainstream press and was the first Scorsese film to receive widespread critical attention. But the few negative notices of the film strongly convey the critical environment and how *Mean Streets* was positioned within it. These reviews also indicate the direction Scorsese would turn in his subsequent work. Richard Schickel's review for *Time* is ambivalent, noting both admiration for the film's realism and dissatisfaction with the lack of connection to the characters: "It is impossible to care as deeply as he does about people whose minds and spirits are stunted" (Schickel, 1973: 102). Because of this inability to relate to the characters, Schickel concludes that, "one leaves the film with the sense of having endured a class in social anthropology rather than an aesthetic experience." One recalls here Andrew Sarris's argument that truly great cinema needed to be de-contextualized from its social and historical milieu. The connection is not accidental. In 1973, Schickel produced the television series *The Men Who Made the Movies*, featuring seven Classical Hollywood filmmakers: Alfred Hitchcock, George Cukor, Howard Hawks, Vincente Minnelli, King Vidor, Raoul Walsh, and William Wellman. This series would have been inconceivable without the influence of auteurists like Sarris, and the selections greatly reflected the overturn in critical taste Sarris promoted (all but Wellman were highly regarded by Sarris in his rankings). For Schickel, these classical filmmakers offered aesthetic experiences not on display in *Mean Streets*, and they grounded their personality in their formal style rather than their social milieu. Despite the mainstreaming of the text, *Mean Streets* remained too grounded in sociology for many auteurists.

In 1974, following the critical success of *Mean Streets*, Scorsese would make his first film financed by a Hollywood studio. This was very much a film of the period: how the personnel were assembled, how the film was shot, and how the genre of the woman's melodrama was dealt with were indicative of how New Hollywood worked (see Grist, 2000: 98–122). The driving force behind the film was Ellen Burstyn, who was coming off a major hit, *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973). Burstyn had a script written by Robert Getchell and she and Warner Bros. were looking for a director. As Scorsese describes the situation, "because I was receiving a lot of scripts now, Sandy Weintraub read it first and said it was really interesting. I thought it was a good idea too, dealing with women for a change" (Thompson and Christie, 1996: 49). At one level, the film was a calculated move on Scorsese's part, as he has admitted. However, I would argue that it was not quite that simple. *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* cannot be explained as a Hollywood mass cultural product to be defined in opposition to the modernist rigor of Scorsese's "masterpieces."

Rather, it needs to be seen, as do all Scorsese's films, as playing an important role in establishing Scorsese's reputation, and its mass culture status was paradoxically both a detriment to its critical reputation while playing an important role in establishing Scorsese's eventual high art status.

Discussions of the film's style show a split between critics seeing Scorsese's use of technique as a concession to the classical style of Hollywood and others maintaining that the film's style provides a self-reflexive commentary in the best tradition of a Hollywood auteur. The academic journal *Jump Cut* featured a series of articles on the film critiquing the lack of directorial control exhibited by Scorsese working within a genre context, with one article comparing the film unfavorably to newly discovered auteur favorite Douglas Sirk, whose "controlled poetic visual style (black-and-white Cinemascope) seem striking contrasts to Scorsese's intuitive cinematic ramblings. . . (I)t is Douglas Sirk who should be honored as a truly worthy women's director" (Kay and Peary, 1975: 7). The comparison here to Sirk is no doubt negative, but it nevertheless shows how, within academic film journals, Hollywood was no longer seen as beneath serious consideration. If Sirk can be taken seriously, then theoretically at least, so could a film such as *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*. The problem the film has from this perspective is not its Hollywood conventions. Rather, it is the lack of deliberate artifice to render those conventions critically. The film is at once too Hollywood and too realistic. It is tied to genre conventions while stylistically following the new codes of realism, especially in regard to mise-en-scène and performance. It is therefore not surprising that the sequence most commented on and most admired is the opening, with its deliberately artificial Classical Hollywood studio look. In addition, Christine Geraghty, writing in *Movie*, makes an argument for the use of style in the film as expressing the tensions inherent in the social situation, not unlike the use of style in classical melodrama: "There is, I think, a tension in the film between the emphasis on choice and freedom which is used to create Alice as a character and the control which the men represent. This tension is expressed in the mixing of styles in the film, the effect of which is to underplay the resolution of the narrative" (Geraghty, 1976: 42). Within this review, one can see the seeds of Scorsese's eventual canonization, combining the traditional auteurist argument with ideological criticism. Scorsese's subsequent films would all build on this foundation, offering up ever more convincing examples of Scorsese's uniqueness both as an artist and as a critic of American culture, with the two often intimately linked.

Following the financial and industry success of *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (the film won an Academy Award for Ellen Burstyn, which Scorsese himself accepted in her absence), Scorsese returned to New York City to film *Taxi Driver*. Produced by Hollywood independents Michael and Julia Phillips, Scorsese was packaged along with screenwriter Paul Schrader, who had just sold his script for *The Yakuza* (Sydney Pollack, 1974), and lead actor Robert De Niro,

who had just won an Academy Award for *The Godfather Part II* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974). *Taxi Driver* would make Scorsese's reputation both critically and financially, combining the cultural prestige of *Mean Streets* with the box-office success of *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*. This can be attributed to its combining of previously successful elements. The film's mixture of expressionism and realism along with its New York City location recalled *Mean Streets*, but it further assimilates these elements with a lead character foreign to this environment. There is a strong contemporary strain through the references in Schrader's script to the would-be political assassin Arthur Bremer along with the film's implicit use of the social movements of the 1960s: feminism, the sexual revolution, civil rights, and the counterculture. References are made to such New Wave favorites as *Diary of a Country Priest* (Robert Bresson, 1950) and *The Searchers* (previously referenced by Scorsese in earlier films), with a score conducted by Bernard Herrmann, famous for his work with Welles and Hitchcock. Finally, the sensational elements of violence and sex connect the film to the exploitation movie, with the film's look even recalling many of the earlier films of 1970s Blaxploitation (Taubin, 1999: 16–19). As much as the quality of the filmmaking itself, these factors contributed to *Taxi Driver* becoming Scorsese's first acknowledged masterpiece.

Moreover, the film was able to appeal to two different sets of film critics: the auteurist critics and the ideological critics (see Staiger, 1985). Auteurists typically focused on the theme of transcendence. As John Hess describes it, "the individual is trapped in solitude . . . and can escape it – transcend it – if he or she comes to see their condition and then extend themselves to others and God" (Hess, 1974: 22). The films that are cited as directly influencing *Taxi Driver* the most, *Diary of a Country Priest* and *The Searchers*, share this plot formation, and can likewise be read as films about the central hero's redemption. *Taxi Driver* is certainly a difficult film to read in this manner because its central character is so obviously unstable, but nevertheless the anecdotes of cheering audiences reveals a continuing identification with Travis Bickle. Scorsese recalls that he

was shocked by the way audiences took the violence . . . I saw *Taxi Driver* once in the theatre, on the opening night, I think, and everyone was yelling and screaming at the shoot-out. When I made it, I didn't intend to have the audience react with that feeling, 'Yes, do it! Let's go out and kill.' The idea was to create a violent catharsis, so that they'd find themselves saying, 'Yes, kill'; and then afterwards realize, 'My God, no' – like some strange Californian therapy session. That was the instinct I went with, but it's scary to hear what happens with the audience. (Thompson and Christie, 1996: 63)

These comments were made many years after the film, and differ strikingly from Scorsese's discussion of the film at the time, especially in regard to the ending. In an interview published in the *Village Voice* at the time of the film's

release, Scorsese commented that, “I like the idea of spurting blood, it reminds . . . it’s like a . . . God, it’s . . . it’s really like a purification, you know, the fountains of blood” (Goldstein and Jacobson, 1976/1999: 68). Clearly, from both these comments and the title of the article itself (“Martin Scorsese Tells All: Blood and Guts Turn Me On!”), *Taxi Driver* traded very much on the audience’s desire for violent spectacle. Originally, Scorsese related this violence to the idea of religious purification and transcendence. His comments on the film years later reveal how the film’s reception within academic circles as the work of an auteur shaped Scorsese’s more cautionary explanation of its conclusion.

The most prominent of these ideological readings is from Robert Ray’s *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema 1930–1980*. This ideological overview of American cinema concludes with a chapter discussing *Taxi Driver* and Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Godfather*, and it is important to stress this connection. If there is another filmmaker from this era that can be said to challenge Scorsese’s place as the key artistic figure, it is Coppola. With films like *The Godfather*, *The Conversation* (1974), and *The Godfather Part II* (1974), Coppola emerged as both a commercially and critically acclaimed filmmaker as well as a director making subversive films within the Hollywood system. Ray’s analysis of the two films challenges this assumption about Coppola’s ideological progressiveness in relation to Scorsese, and would be one of the first of many arguments about Scorsese as a radical auteur working within the Hollywood system. For Ray, *Taxi Driver* was an important artistic achievement because of its ideological intervention. It was a film that followed the conventional plot of the “Right” cycle of vigilante films only to “correct” that audience’s assumptions. It thus lured the popular, “naïve” audience and achieved popular success (crucial to being politically consequential) while at the same time “attack(ing) that audience’s sustaining myth, the belief in the continued application of western-style, individual solutions to contemporary complex problems” (Ray, 1985: 351). *The Godfather*, however, was more compromised. It may have “corrected” the “Left” cycle of films by showing its outlaw hero gangsters as being part of the corrupt capitalist system, but it ultimately failed to be truly progressive in its politics. Ray goes on to acknowledge that the sequel made Coppola’s original anticapitalist message more explicit, but nevertheless claims that the critiques “operated squarely within the traditional American mythology, working variants on frontier imagery and the ideologically determined platitude, ‘It’s lonely at the top’” (Ray, 1985: 344). This argument encapsulates an overall movement that would see Scorsese recognized and discussed as a great artist not only for the artistic quality of his films, but for his ideological progressiveness as well. If, as Ray claims, there was both a naïve and ironic audience within America at the time, it can also be said that there were naïve and ironic film critics. *Taxi Driver* succeeded not only with the naïve auteur critics who were interested in themes of transcendence and redemption, but with

the ironic ideological critics as well. Scorsese's next films would continue this trajectory. Thus, even commercial failures such as *New York, New York* (1977) and *The King of Comedy* (1983) would ultimately become respected works within his filmography, examples of Scorsese's rebellious genius and ideological radicalism.

While working in Hollywood during the 1970s, Scorsese still managed to direct three documentaries: *Italianamerican* (1974), a profile of Scorsese's parents, *American Boy* (1978), a profile of the actor Steven Prince, and *The Last Waltz* (1978), a concert film and profile of the musical group The Band. All three can be seen as complementary to the fiction films of the period (Thompson and Christie, 1996: 78). *Italianamerican* is often discussed in relation to *Mean Streets*, reinforcing both the autobiographical and anthropological nature of Scorsese's first Hollywood film. *American Boy* has a direct relation to *Taxi Driver* in that Steven Prince plays the character of the gun dealer in that film. Furthermore, both films can be linked thematically in their exploration of marginal, disturbed figures. Finally, *The Last Waltz* is, like *New York, New York*, an elegy for a lost musical era. In all of these cases, the documentaries work to authenticate Scorsese's feature films, which are already immersed in a discourse around their "realism" and "truthfulness," despite their status as Hollywood texts. Thus, Scorsese's documentaries of this period did more than simply complement his fiction films. They acted to distinguish Scorsese as an important filmmaker even among critics who are dismissive of Hollywood films in general, including otherwise critically acclaimed films such as those of Scorsese himself. More than any other filmmaker of his era, Scorsese has been able to sustain the idea that he was making authentically personal films from his own cultural experiences, even while working from within the Hollywood framework. However admired filmmakers like Robert Altman and Stanley Kubrick may be for their unique, modernist film styles, critics do not link their filmmaking back to their personal roots to the same extent.

In 1980, following a personal crisis in which he almost died from a drug overdose (see Biskind, 1991/1999), Scorsese made the film widely considered his masterpiece, *Raging Bull*. This film both completed the formation of Scorsese's critical reputation and marked Scorsese's first public campaign into film preservation. The linking of these two events is important. Looked at retrospectively, the fact that *Raging Bull* is now considered Scorsese's masterpiece can seem rather natural, a seemingly organic progression. When viewed in context, a clearer picture of how the film became Scorsese's most acclaimed work can be reached. On a textual level, *Raging Bull* was similar to *Taxi Driver* in being a film about transcendence and redemption while also being seen as an ideological critique of masculinity. Auteur critics could admire the beauty of the images and the truth of Scorsese's portrait of this man seeking transcendence, and could even transfer a reading of the character of Jake LaMotta to the director himself. Thus, while LaMotta may or may not be redeemed at

the conclusion, the final end credits, featuring the Biblical quote, “Once I was blind and now I can see,” and dedicated to Scorsese’s late mentor Haig Manoo-gian, makes clear that Scorsese himself has achieved redemption through this character. At the same time, ideological critics found the film even more clearly (if still implicitly) critical of the culture, especially when compared with the blockbuster cinema of George Lucas and Steven Spielberg. The key reading in this regard is Robin Wood’s piece in *Movie*. Using psychoanalytic theory, Wood sees the film through its homosexual subtext and argues that LaMotta’s paranoid violence is a result of this sexual repression. For Wood, the film’s greatness lies in its implicit ideological critique of the culture of masculine violence (see Wood, 2003: 219–231). Once again, Scorsese’s work could be read from two different perspectives, both of which had a large influence on the making of the film canon.

But perhaps just as important was the overlapping of *Raging Bull*’s release with Scorsese’s first sustained work in the field of film preservation. In the fall of 1980, Scorsese launched a campaign against Kodak over the issue of color preservation. His interest in film archiving and preservation has been well chronicled, documented and celebrated, and given him a tremendous amount of cultural prestige not only within the film community but also within the general culture. The initial reception of *Raging Bull* provides an early example of how Scorsese’s activities outside of filmmaking have had a positive influence on the rise of his critical reputation. The linking of the release of the film with the color preservation campaign meant that reviews of *Raging Bull* were appearing simultaneously with articles on Scorsese’s color fading petition. The fact that *Raging Bull* was shot in black and white was even seen as a protest by Scorsese against the industry. Increasingly throughout the following decades, Scorsese would associate himself with the film preservation movement, starting The Film Foundation (and later The World Film Foundation) and working to restore and re-release many past masterpieces. (See Laura Ruberto’s chapter in this volume.) While this work is definitely important and worthwhile, it has also been a huge benefit for Scorsese’s cultural prestige, a fact that often goes unremarked.

I would argue that this dedication to film preservation allowed Scorsese to negotiate his way through the difficult period following *Raging Bull*. Scorsese’s next film, *The King of Comedy*, was a box-office disaster, which was followed by the production shutdown of his attempted adaptation of *The Last Temptation of Christ* in 1983. At this point, Scorsese decided to return to New York and make the independent film *After Hours*, which worked as yet another calling card for a rebuilding Scorsese, showing studios he could work quickly and within a budget. He followed this with *The Color of Money*, a sequel to *The Hustler* with Paul Newman and Tom Cruise. Again Scorsese worked quickly and under budget and produced a box-office success. But the reviews were not as enthusiastic, and it appeared that Scorsese was being assimilated into the



Hollywood mainstream, along with other New Hollywood mavericks like Francis Ford Coppola and Brian DePalma. This is why Scorsese's archival activities are so important, allowing him to maintain some cultural capital even as he had to make his way economically back into the studio system. And because Scorsese had shown himself to be a reliable director once again, Universal studio signed Scorsese to a multi-film contract and agreed to back a low-budget version of *The Last Temptation of Christ*, which was finally released in 1988. Universal realized that the film would be controversial and that Christian groups would protest what they saw as a blasphemous portrayal of Jesus. While it may not be unusual for a studio to use a director's star power to promote a film, in this case it was an absolute necessity. In order to sell *The Last Temptation of Christ* as a serious prestige picture rather than just another for-profit commodity, Universal had to make sure that Scorsese's reputation as a great auteur was secure.

Moreover, Scorsese benefited from the protests against *The Last Temptation of Christ* by receiving widespread critical support, with even those reviewers who weren't enthusiastic about the film wanting to endorse his right to free expression. The solidarity critics felt with Scorsese ideologically meant that criticism of the film needed to be muted or ignored, at least at the initial stages (see Riley, 2003: 83–84). Subsequently, *The Last Temptation of Christ* has proven to be a far less acclaimed film than initial responses seemed to indicate. For example, in the most recent *Sight and Sound* poll (2002), neither a single critic nor a filmmaker voted for the film. It is not considered to be as accomplished as an aesthetic text as was initially thought, and ranks far below Scorsese's now canonical films. But in terms of Scorsese's overall critical reputation, an argument can be made that *The Last Temptation of Christ* is the most important film of his entire career because of the particular contingencies involved. Any discussion of Scorsese as a mainstream, Hollywood director was now entirely absent, despite the fact that *The Last Temptation of Christ* was a studio film and that its very status as a Hollywood film accounts for a great deal of the controversy. The film's visibility led to the protests against it and revolved around the century-old debate about Hollywood, entertainment, and art. One of the many ironies of the reception of the film is that critics threw their support around Scorsese and Universal studio as the defender of free speech: "(T)heir (film critics') identification with Scorsese as an artist supports their underlying skepticism toward institutionalized power of all forms, particularly those of the Christian persuasion" (Riley, 2003: 84). The institutional power that gets ignored, of course, is Hollywood itself. The debate over *The Last Temptation of Christ* was not, primarily, one of free speech. Rather, it was a battle between two rival institutions, Hollywood and the Church, over their respective powers of influence. In the popular press, the religious protestors merely replaced the studio system as the enemy of artistic freedom. If Hollywood had refused to make the film, as they already had in 1983, there would have been no criticism

of the studios for suppressing artistic freedom. In fact, most of the discussions of the 1983 shutdown of *The Last Temptation* now focus on the religious protest that forced Paramount's decision, rather than the studio's refusal to invest in an unreliable director like Scorsese. Only after Scorsese proved his ability to make commercially viable films cheaply and under budget did Universal decide that he could be used as a "prestige" commodity. The film was also part of a larger deal Scorsese signed with Universal, and clearly, the studio felt that even if they lost money on *The Last Temptation*, they would make money later with other films. This proved to be the case with *Cape Fear* three years later.

Coming in 1988, *The Last Temptation of Christ* was Scorsese's last feature film of the decade (his short "Life Lessons," was a contribution to the anthology film *New York Stories* in 1989). In 1990, critics at both *Premiere* and *Time* voted *Raging Bull* the best of the decade. The discussion of *Raging Bull* echoed many of the defenses of *The Last Temptation*, with Scorsese being praised for making an uncompromising film that defied convention. For many, the idea that Scorsese was now the uncompromising artist of his generation was established by his determination to make *The Last Temptation of Christ*. The praise Scorsese received just for making the film reflected back onto his previous masterpieces, especially *Raging Bull*. Without the controversy over *The Last Temptation of Christ* and the subsequent uncritical backing of the popular press that turned Scorsese into a martyred genius, it is unlikely his ascendancy to the post of greatest filmmaker of his generation would have occurred. *The Last Temptation*, along with Scorsese's work within film preservation, allowed him to effectively mediate his move into the Hollywood mainstream.

*GoodFellas* is the last Scorsese film to be canonized as one of his masterpieces, along with *Mean Streets*, *Taxi Driver*, and *Raging Bull*. Much of the praise focused on authenticity and realism, of Scorsese being the only man capable of truly capturing and knowing this material because of his own Italian-American background. The film was not only overwhelmingly successful with critics upon initial release, but was taken seriously as high art by scholars. This can be seen in its high standing in the *Sight and Sound* poll and by the discussion of the film by Robert Kolker in the third edition of his New Hollywood study *A Cinema of Loneliness* (Kolker: 2000). Unlike mainstream critics, who praised the film's realism, Kolker compares *GoodFellas* to Laurence Sterne's eighteenth-century novel *Tristram Shandy* and other modernist texts (Kolker, 2000: 201). For Kolker, *GoodFellas* is not only a detailed historical fiction about gangsters, but also a deconstruction of the whole genre, a sophisticated and knowing examination of cinema history. *GoodFellas* manages to both appeal to critics seeking traditional storytelling as well as scholars like Kolker interested in more challenging representations. The key is that in an increasingly post-modern age, Scorsese was seen as holding onto his modernist credentials, which has allowed his continued prestige compared to the next postmodern generation of directors, such as the Coen brothers and Quentin Tarantino.

Most of the artistic debates of the last couple of decades have centered on this divide, with the use of pastiche as the key dividing point.

With the widespread critical and commercial success of *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994), this postmodernist pastiche reached the mainstream of film journalism. In terms of its impact, *Pulp Fiction* has much in common with *GoodFellas*, despite the much greater box-office success of the former. *Pulp Fiction* was very popular with mainstream critics, and quickly became one of the most canonized films of the decade. However, unlike *GoodFellas*, *Pulp Fiction* also received a backlash due to its status as the representative of postmodernism within the context of American commercial cinema. These criticisms came from mainstream critics, from fellow filmmakers, and from academics. As Jeffrey Sconce has detailed, the postmodern sensibility of many “independent” filmmakers began to be heavily critiqued as “nihilistic” within the popular press (Sconce, 2002: 349–369). As the most recognizable member of this group, Tarantino in particular was often singled out. Filmmaker Paul Schrader, the screenwriter of *Taxi Driver* and other Scorsese films, has been the most vocal in his distinction between modernist and postmodernist approaches. Roger Ebert describes the difference as follows: “The existentialist hero wonders if life is worth living. The ironic hero is greatly amused by people who wonder about things like that. And there you have the difference between the work of Paul Schrader and Quentin Tarantino” (Ebert, 1997). In the same article, Schrader describes his understanding of the ironic or postmodern view of art: “Everything in the ironic world has quotation marks around it. You don’t actually kill somebody; you ‘kill’ them. It doesn’t matter if you put the baby in front of the runaway car because it’s only a ‘baby.’” Ebert agrees, stating that the postmodern scene isn’t about the baby, it’s “about scenes about babies.” It is this postmodern irony that would be so often accused of nihilism in the following decade.

This accusation of nihilism would extend beyond the journalistic realm detailed by Sconce. In the same book in which he praises the self-reflexivity of *GoodFellas*, Robert Kolker also argues against the rise of postmodern cinema. Furthermore, for Kolker, Tarantino and *Pulp Fiction* stand “as the acme of postmodern nineties filmmaking” (Kolker, 2000: 249). Kolker sees Tarantino as representing the worse tendencies of postmodernism and at the same time revealing more general problems with this aesthetic: “*Pulp Fiction* is without theory or consequences, or it’s about laughing both off, and this itself is a great paradox within the postmodern. Postmodernism theories abound, but, unlike modernism, the works that are theorized eschew theory themselves because they deny significance. They posit only their images, sounds, or words within their closed narrative worlds, snubbing a quest for resonance, history, politics. Modernism is the enemy of complacency, postmodernism its accomplice” (Kolker, 2000: 250–251). These modernism–postmodernism debates are hardly exclusive to the American cinema, of course, but they do function here in a

very specific manner. What results is the creation of a past “Golden Age” of American cinema represented by the 1970s and filmmakers such as Scorsese at the expense of more recent American films and filmmakers. It allows the continuation of a “great divide” between the modernism of the past and the postmodern mass culture of today. By being associated with this past Golden Age, Scorsese’s more recent work has been able to avoid the negative connotations associated with postmodern art practice, even if his own work can be argued to have many of these same characteristics. David Bordwell, in *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies*, borrows the term “belatedness” from Harold Bloom in order to describe the problem of a director trying to achieve something distinctive in the face of established masterpieces from the past. This is certainly something Scorsese had to conquer in his rise as an auteur, but today’s filmmakers are in an even more difficult position, having to compete, “not only with Old Hollywood but with New Hollywood and with New New Hollywood” (Bordwell, 2006: 25).

After the controversy over *The Last Temptation of Christ* and the overwhelming critical response to *GoodFellas*, Scorsese’s reputation and his essential canon had been established. The last couple of decades have been about consecrating that reputation and cementing his status as the emblematic New Hollywood auteur while constantly negotiating this cultural capital within the economics of the Hollywood system. His 1990s films were generally well-received, with a few even seen as among his greatest work by some critics (Scorsese scholar David Ehrenstein called 1995’s *Casino* Scorsese’s greatest work, while respected critic Jonathan Rosenbaum championed 1997’s *Kundun* as Scorsese’s greatest). The fact that he was continually denied Academy consideration was almost seen as proof of his greatest. In discussing Scorsese’s lack of industry recognition circa 1996, long-time collaborator Harvey Keitel stated, “Maybe he is getting what he deserves, exclusion from mediocrity” (Biskind, 1991/1999: 196). More importantly, Scorsese solidified his place within the film culture as a historian/preserver with his two four-hour plus documentaries on cinema history: *A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese through American Movies* (1995) and *My Voyage to Italy* (2001). Although these works are about celebrating the American and Italian masters that came before him, they are centered and organized around Scorsese himself. *A Personal Journey* is explicitly designed as a film class with Scorsese as instructor, right down to the use of a chalkboard motif in the visuals. *My Voyage to Italy* is more casual and personal in its presentation, but nevertheless concludes with Scorsese stating: “I saw these movies, I didn’t read about them or learn about them in school, and they had a powerful effect on me, and you should see them. Thank you.” His role as educator is reinforced by his own success as a filmmaker, but this role as historian of the cinematic past has equally consolidated Scorsese’s prestige.

Scorsese would continue this trend of educational documentaries on culture into the next decade, with his series *The Blues* (2003) (Scorsese produced all

seven parts and directed one himself, “Feel Like Going Home”), *No Direction Home* (2005) (on Bob Dylan), *A Letter to Elia* (2010) (on film director Elia Kazan), *Public Speaking* (2010) (On writer Fran Lebowitz), and *George Harrison: Living in the Material World* (2011). This was combined with other cultural activities, such as producing the Modern Library’s reprinting of four key film texts, guest editing an issue of the magazine *Civilization*, and often serving as a public intellectual on matters of cinema within the popular press. All of these works turned Scorsese into such a prestigious figure that he could smoothly move into the Hollywood mainstream without a noticeable loss in prestige. This highbrow reputation as artistic genius allowed Scorsese to attempt to exchange some of this surplus symbolic capital in order to solidify his place economically within the industry. This took the form of a continuous attempt by Scorsese to secure his first Academy Award for Best Director. This began with *Gangs of New York* in 2002, followed by *The Aviator* in 2004 and eventually to final success in 2006 with *The Departed*. For a filmmaker such as Scorsese, an Academy Award is not needed to cement his reputation. On the contrary, with the lack of an Academy Award, he joined other previously acknowledged masters of American film: Stanley Kubrick, Alfred Hitchcock, and Orson Welles. Film critics and especially film scholars have learned to regard the Academy Awards with a great deal of suspicion as an evaluating body. The list of Academy Award winning directors who have little to no cultural prestige is enormous. Winners from the past three decades include: Ron Howard, Sam Mendes, James Cameron, Mel Gibson, Robert Zemeckis, Kevin Costner, Sydney Pollack, Richard Attenborough, Warren Beatty, and Robert Redford. That Scorsese himself lost the Best Director Award for *Raging Bull* and *GoodFellas* to two actors, Redford and Costner, respectively, has been consistently used as a reason why the Academy Awards lack taste distinction. The desire for Academy acceptance was an attempt by Scorsese to fully solidify his place as a Hollywood insider. To achieve this, Scorsese willingly risked his reputation as an uncompromising artist.

The eventual presentation of Scorsese with the Best Director Oscar in March 2007 was telling. Three of his fellow veteran filmmakers of the New Hollywood, Francis Ford Coppola, George Lucas, and Steven Spielberg, came to the stage. The moment this occurred, it became obvious to anyone in the know who would be announced the winner and that this was carefully staged theater. Scorsese was thus finally inducted into the Hollywood “inside” with his fellow New Hollywood directors. Scorsese’s acceptance speech tellingly made reference to the importance of film preservation and protecting Hollywood’s great tradition. Scorsese was both placing himself in this tradition while also referencing his own work as a cultural historian. Even as he was accepting this symbol of middlebrow respectability, Scorsese attempted to remind his audience that his true passion was not his own filmmaking but the whole of film culture. As much as possible, Scorsese worked to mitigate

the move to the mainstream of Hollywood production, a move signaled shortly before his Oscar win by his signing of a major production deal with Paramount studio, the first such production deal Scorsese had in several years. This long-awaited victory for Scorsese had little to do with either the quality of his film, *The Departed*, or with cultural prestige, especially within film culture as a whole. Paradoxically, it represented a risk of cultural status.

As far back as Scorsese's first studio film, *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, the question has been asked: "Has Martin Scorsese Gone Hollywood?" (Farber, 1975: C1). The answer to this question is much more complex than at first glance. This is because the idea of Hollywood is a complicated one, especially in the contemporary environment. There are now many different variations of the term: Classic Hollywood, Old Hollywood, New Hollywood, Post-Classical Hollywood, and even Independent Hollywood. In addition, Hollywood is now theorized in many different ways within the Film Studies discipline. If Hollywood was simply a place, there could be a simpler answer to the question: Martin Scorsese went to Hollywood in 1970, and he became a studio filmmaker in 1974. Since then, he has made most of his work, especially the films on which his critical reputation rests, for the major studios. But Hollywood is more than a place. It symbolizes something much more, and what it symbolizes is neither simply embraced nor rejected by Scorsese. Rather, it is a concept and idea that Scorsese has and continues to negotiate. Thus far, the negotiation has been very successful, and his reputation as the iconic New Hollywood director seems to be very secure as he moves toward the twilight of his career.

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