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Martin Scorsese and American Film Genre

by

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A thesis submitted to

the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in Film Studies

Carleton University

Ottawa, Ontario

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**The undersigned recommend to the Faculty
of Graduate Studies and Research acceptance of the thesis**

Martin Scorsese and American Film Genre

Submitted by Marc Raymond, B.A. Honours (Carleton University)

in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts.

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Abstract

This study examines the films of American director Martin Scorsese in their generic context. Although most of Scorsese's feature-length films are referred to, three are focused on individually in each of the three main chapters following the Introduction: *Mean Streets* (1973), *The King of Comedy* (1983), and *GoodFellas* (1990). This structure allows for the discussion of three different periods in the American cinema. The Introduction provides a review of the critical literature and explains why I have chosen to approach the films through genre. The focus on genre provides the opportunity to address the social significance of the films, an area that has been lacking in much of the writing on Scorsese thus far. The first chapter looks at *Mean Streets* and its relation to film noir and the buddy film. Chapter Two deals with *The King of Comedy* as a satire. Chapter Three discusses *GoodFellas* as a gangster film that includes elements of the musical, comedy, and family melodrama. The Conclusion briefly examines Scorsese's output since *GoodFellas* in order to bring the study up to the present. Thus, in short, the purpose of this study is to analyze selected works from Martin Scorsese over three different time periods in their generic contexts in order to show both the significance of the films and what the films say about their historical period.

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Introduction

This study will look at the films of American director Martin Scorsese in their generic context. I have chosen to write about Scorsese for a number of reasons. First of all, his films excite me personally more than those of any other director, and I believe that enthusiasm and interest in one's subject is important. Secondly, I find the literature on Scorsese to be lacking, and I feel that I can make a useful contribution. Thirdly, I believe that a focus on Scorsese can lead to broader discussions on American film over the past few decades. Although I will include most of Scorsese's feature-length films, three will be focused on individually in each of the three chapters: *Mean Streets* (1973), *The King of Comedy* (1983), and *GoodFellas* (1990). This structure will allow me to discuss three different periods in the American cinema. The main reason why I have decided to approach the films within their generic context is so that I can address the social significance of the films. Within the critical literature, there has been a tendency to neglect Scorsese's relation to genre. Thus, in short, the purpose of this study is to analyze selected works from Martin Scorsese over three time periods in their generic context in order to show both the significance of the films and what the films say about their historical period.

The introduction will begin with a review of the literature on Scorsese thus far,¹ and then move on to discuss the methodology of this study. A good place to start a review of the literature on any particular director is to look at the issue of authorship. The writing on Scorsese features a large amount of material on Scorsese's films as an expression of

¹ This review will not be all-inclusive. It will only point to the major trends in the literature that I feel have dominated the criticism of Scorsese's films.

his personality. Examples of this romantic approach to Scorsese's authorship can be found in book-length studies by Les Keyser, Marie Kathryn Connelly, and Lawrence S. Friedman. The studies by Keyser and Connelly are for the most part career overviews, with Keyser in particular paying close attention to biographical and production details concerning Scorsese and his films. These books are for the most part quite pedestrian in their treatment of the films, relying heavily on analysis of characterization and narrative developments and very little on stylistic considerations. For example, Connelly's discussion of *Mean Streets* includes the following: "Sensible, responsible, and content with his life, Tony is a warm and giving person and a good friend to Charlie."² While the rest of Connelly's book is not as embarrassing as this particular line, it is indicative of an overall problem with these approaches, which is the lack of any theoretical underpinning. Also, these studies tend to rely heavily on interview material, leading to the films being a product of the intentional fallacy. As I will discuss in the first chapter, this is a particular problem with the criticism on *Mean Streets*.

The one full-length study on Scorsese that is successful is Lesley Stern's *The Scorsese Connection*. Part of its success can be attributed to her move away from a romantic theory of authorship, instead using Scorsese's films as a starting point for her psychoanalytic approach. The book is rather difficult to come to terms with; it can best be described as part psychoanalytical, part phenomenological, part postmodern pastiche. Its strength lies in Stern's formal analysis of parts of the films (or even of single shots), and her strong application of theory. This approach provides many useful observations on how Scorsese's films operate. The book has its strengths and weaknesses in terms of individual chapters, but coincidentally she does not discuss *Mean Streets* or *The King of*

² Connelly, p.2.

Comedy, and only briefly mentions *GoodFellas* in her short opening chapter. Also, although Stern focuses on the connections between Scorsese's films and the rest of cinema, her approach is one of postmodern allusiveness rather than the study of the films in relation to their particular genre system.

Although the book-length studies have been weak, there has been some useful writing on Scorsese in essays and articles. For instance, the work of Robin Wood and Robert Kolker are two examples of a much more productive use of authorship, the mode referred to by Stephen Crofts as "author as instance of politics and/or pleasure."³ Both Wood and Kolker refer to Scorsese's work in the broader context of their respective book length studies of the New Hollywood. Kolker identifies his project as follows: "To investigate the work of certain individual filmmakers who are at one time special in their style and representative of larger cinematic movements."⁴ Kolker's authorship study is grounded in a recognition of the larger movement of the American cinema during the 1970s, unlike the work of Keyser, Connelly, Friedman, and even Stern. He also puts much more emphasis on the stylistics of the films, particularly mise-en-scene, giving his work much more value as film criticism. This preoccupation with stylistics leads Kolker ultimately to take an authorship-based approach to the New Hollywood:

That Coppola got himself caught up in enormous projects, with a concomitant failure of narrative and structural control, while Scorsese is content with smaller, more experimental works, is as much a matter of personal inclination and emotional response as anything else.⁵

The fact that Kolker uses only five filmmakers in his study of the New Hollywood indicates his bias towards authorship as a critical approach.

³ Crofts, p. 316.

⁴ Kolker, p. xii.

⁵ Kolker, p. 7.

Robin Wood's book on the New Hollywood is much broader in its consideration, including many more films from many more filmmakers. Despite this, Wood's analysis of Scorsese is firmly entrenched in the traditional viewpoint of authorship, in which great art comes from a great artist:

GoodFellas, Cape Fear, The Age of Innocence and Casino reveal an artist in total command of every aspect of his medium – narrative construction, mise-en-scene, editing, the direction of actors, set design, sound, music, etc. Obviously, he owes a great deal to the faithful team he has built up over the years, each of whom deserves an individual appreciation; but there can be no doubt of Scorsese's overall control at every level, from the conceptual to the minutiae of execution, informed by his sense of the work as a totality to which every strand, every detail, contributes integrally.⁶

Like Kolker's, Wood's analysis of Scorsese's films is first rate film criticism, paying close attention to the style and structure of the films he considers. Another authorship approach that is also accomplished film criticism is Richard Lippe's article, "Style as Attitude: Two Films by Martin Scorsese." Likewise, Kolker, Wood and Lippe have in common a traditional approach to art in which creativity, originality and coherence play an important role in evaluation, despite the attention all three pay to economic, historical, and most especially ideological factors.

Connected to the authorship approach is the work done on Scorsese that focuses on his ethnic and religious background. In my opinion, these writings are among the weakest of the essays published on Scorsese, but the large quantity demands some attention. Lee Lourdeaux and Michael Bliss (1995) offer the most extended commentary on Scorsese's Italian ethnicity and Catholicism, but there are also a number of articles on individual films that use an ethnic/religious approach, such as those by Michael Dempsey, Maurizio Viano, R.S. Librach, Jim Hosney et. al., J.F. Maxfield, and Richard

⁶ Wood (1998)(b), p. 456.

Blake. Dempsey is one of the first of many critics to see *Taxi Driver* (1976) as an “incoherent text,”⁷ and explains this incoherence by referring to religious differences between Scorsese, the sensuous Catholic, and Paul Schrader (*Taxi Driver*’s screenwriter), the austere Calvinist. Richard Combs also relates Scorsese’s religion to his style, calling it an “expression-in-repression of Visconti, Michael Powell and even John Ford,” and believes that Scorsese uses this stylistic excess “because it might lead to spiritual success, a transcendence of form (cinematic/religious) over content.”⁸ These two brief articles are of more use than most of the other lengthier pieces using the ethnic/religious approach because they put an emphasis on stylistics and avoid the reductionism that is prevalent in the other pieces. This reductionism is a particular problem when it comes to *Mean Streets*, a film that is profoundly lacking in useful critical writing. Discussions of the film tend to focus on issues of Italian community and Catholic guilt at the expense of all else. More problematically, in addition to being reductive and limited, the essays tend to be very weak critically. Hosney et. al., for instance, have a number of factual errors in their account of the film, showing the absence of a close reading.

This brings me back to the two prolonged works on the subject. Bliss’ book is a reprinting of his earlier work, *Martin Scorsese and Michael Cimino* (1985), with additional chapters added on Scorsese’s later films. Bliss covers fifteen Scorsese features, from *Who’s That Knocking at My Door?* (1968) to *The Age of Innocence* (1993), in little over a hundred pages. As a result, his chapters are for the most part five pages or less, leaving very little room for anything besides a plot summary and a few thematic points, usually in reference to Scorsese’s Catholicism. The extended chapters generally suffer

⁷ Wood (1986), p. 47.

⁸ Combs, p. 128.

from the same reductionism that I have already mentioned, although they are not completely without interest, particularly the extended discussion of *Who's that Knocking at My Door?*, a film that has received very little critical attention.

The best example of the critical impoverishment of the ethnic/religious approach to Scorsese can be seen in Lourdeaux's chapter, from his book *Italian and Irish Filmmakers in America* (1990). Lourdeaux's account seems to me to be of little use, but it is nevertheless frequently cited, and therefore must be considered. The high concentration of interview material that I noted as characteristic of the authorship approach is taken to absurd lengths in Lourdeaux's piece. In addition, he pays heavy attention to a treatment of a film that Scorsese did not even make, *Jerusalem, Jerusalem*.⁹ Needless to say, the essay is not concerned with the actual formal characteristics of the films themselves. Lourdeaux extends his discussion of Scorsese's Italian Catholicism past the early films, leading him to impose ethnic and religious readings on films that do not contain them, such as his discussion of *Taxi Driver*:

Bickel's cathartic violence suggests not just Schrader's righteous punishment of sinners at the hands of an angry God. It matches as well Scorsese's fierce Irish anger at the sexual abuse of a young girl, which dominates here. Whereas the letter from Iris's parents stresses (Italian) familial values, Scorsese focuses mostly on Bickel's (Irish) conscience.¹⁰

There are many problems with this passage, the least of which is his constant misspelling of Bickle's name. First of all, I fail to see what makes Bickle's conscience, let alone his anger at sexual abuse, particularly or uniquely "Irish." Additionally, what makes the family values of Iris's parents "Italian," especially given the fact that they themselves are not Italian? This passage is indicative of the entire piece's failure to deal with the films in

⁹ An early project Scorsese eventually abandoned.

¹⁰ Lourdeaux, p. 251.

a concrete manner, imposing absurd meanings that are not backed up with evidence from the films. Robin Wood, in his essay on *Raging Bull*, provides a critique of the reductionist strategy employed by the ethnic/religious approach:

It is important to notice that the violence, though centered on Jake, is by no means exclusive to him but is generalized as a characteristic of the society, the product of its construction of sexual difference. It will be clear, also, that by 'the society' I mean something wider than the specific Italian-American subculture within which the film is set.¹¹

Wood correctly argues that reducing the films to a particular subculture robs the films of the broader implications that they have.

Not surprisingly, with its rise in the last fifteen years, postmodernism has been an approach used by many critics to tackle Scorsese's films. Kenneth Von Gunden discusses Scorsese's work as a whole, describing him as a "postmodern auteur." This again shows the influence of authorship on Scorsese studies, and in this case the influence is negative, as Von Gunden simply describes the films briefly and gives some of the critical responses to them. He does not give any support to his claim that Scorsese's work is postmodern. His sole evidence for Scorsese's postmodernity seems to be his use of allusion and intertextuality, a very weak claim on which to pronounce Scorsese a postmodernist. Christopher Sharrett tries to include *Taxi Driver* as a work of postmodern narrative film. His claim rests on seeing the film as apocalyptic, which is in turn seen by Sharrett to be a postmodern trait. He also notes the film's numerous allusions and sense of pastiche. Sharrett seems to take postmodernism as an assumption, something natural, "the way things are," without giving sufficient grounds for why a particular idea (the apocalypse) or a particular film (*Taxi Driver*) happens to be postmodern. If *Taxi Driver* is indeed "apocalyptic" and "nihilistic" (and Sharrett does not give sufficient evidence that it is),

does this mean it is postmodern, especially given the fact that, as Sharrett himself points out, both Scorsese and Schrader cite Dostoevsky, a nineteenth century Russian writer, as an influence? This central problem with Sharrett's argument is also a problem in much of the writing on postmodernism in general.¹²

The approach of Timothy Corrigan to postmodernism is quite different and much more convincing:

Within the conditions of contemporary culture, there are many kinds of films that seem to have little to do with postmodernism and many other films that engage that postmodern enterprise in distinctively different fashions (their exceptional variety itself being a signal for some of a postmodern culture). I am consequently not arguing here that 'postmodern movies' are the only kind of movies being made within contemporary cultures or that all viewers watch movies as postmodern spectators.¹³

Corrigan goes on to argue convincingly that Scorsese's *The King of Comedy* and *After Hours* (1985) are representative of postmodernism in film, due both to their formal and thematic elements and, especially in the case of *The King of Comedy*, to their place within the wider cultural context. Stephen Mamber similarly claims *The King of Comedy* as postmodern, citing such characteristics as "intertextual overkill," "failed artists," "daring to be bad," "parodic cultural juxtaposition," "conflicted obsession," and "self-parody as signature."¹⁴ While each of these characteristics could be debated in terms of its postmodernity, taken as a whole Mamber's argument, like Corrigan's, is rather convincing, even if somewhat empty, since he does not enter into a discussion of the significance of this postmodernism.

¹¹ Wood (1986), p. 252-253.

¹² Strinati, p. 241-242.

¹³ Corrigan, p. 3.

¹⁴ Mamber, p. 29-35.

I would like to conclude this discussion of the critical literature on Scorsese by discussing the topic of genre. As I have mentioned, there has been a tendency to neglect Scorsese's relation to genre. However, there are a few articles that address individual Scorsese films with regard to generic context. Richard Lippe (1986), Susan Morrison and Patrick Phillips all consider *New York, New York* (1977) and its relationship to genre. Bryan Bruce looks at both *New York, New York* and *Raging Bull* (1980) as "genre" films. The theoretically implied idea of genre behind all these approaches is similar. These critics are invoking each film's relationship to a well-defined genre (the musical, the melodrama, the biographical film, the boxing film) and showing how Scorsese reverses the audience's expectations, providing a critical revision of the past genres. This approach is the one most frequently used when discussing the use of genre by New Hollywood auteurs such as Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, Robert Altman, Arthur Penn, and others. Looking at the individual films of the New Hollywood through this method is useful, but it needs to be combined with a look at the overall genre system in which each film is located.

My methodology in terms of genre will be similar to Stephen Neale's use of genre as a system. Neale writes:

Genre study is not there to be taught for its own sake, so to speak, nor is it there simply to enrich the pleasures and meanings of individual genre films. Rather, it is there to provide knowledge about the cinema and the way it functions as a social institution.¹⁵

So, although my study will focus on three individual films, my purpose in using genre as a method of analysis is not simply to enrich the pleasures and meanings of the individual films, although hopefully it will do that as well. Instead, I intend to use genre to provide

¹⁵ Neale (1980), p. 63.

knowledge about American cinema and society at the time of each film's release. Mikhail Bakhtin, in his discussion of literature in *The Dialogic Imagination*, writes:

The realm of literature and more broadly of culture (from which literature cannot be separated) constitutes the indispensable context of a literary work and of the author's position within it, outside of which it is impossible to understand the work. ¹⁶

In much of Scorsese criticism, this indispensable context of culture and ideology (from which film, as well as literature, cannot be separated) has been either missing entirely or inadequately dealt with. By looking at the generic system within which the films are located, I hope to give this context to Scorsese's work.

In this context, it is probably useful to say a few things about the use of genre in the New Hollywood. There are two rather contradictory ideas of genre as it relates to post-classical American cinema. There is the idea put forth by scholars like David Bordwell and Henry Jenkins, that genre unites the Old and New Hollywood, despite stylistic changes:

What is fascinating about the elliptical narratives, the abrupt cutting, the unusual camera angles and movements, the jarring juxtapositions of material found in recent films by Francis Ford Coppola, Robert Altman, William Friedkin, Bob Fosse, or Walter Hill (to name only a few obvious examples) is the ways in which these directors have taken formal devices which, in their original art cinema context, were used to establish distanciation and employ them to intensify our emotional experience of stock generic situations. ¹⁷

Thus, style (i.e. excess) is subjugated by genre. The problem with this argument to describe the changes of New Hollywood is that this is not a new development in American cinema. In discussing the classical genre system, Stephen Neale makes the following observation:

¹⁶ Bakhtin, p. 255-256.

¹⁷ Jenkins, p. 114.

Containment can and does allow for (regulated) forms of excess, and (regulated) forms of the display of its process: part of the very function of genres is precisely to display a variety of the possibilities of the semiotic processes of mainstream narrative cinema while simultaneously containing them as genre.¹⁸

Thus, the idea that the generic system works to control excesses of style is not new to post-classical Hollywood. Additionally, the directors mentioned by Jenkins, with the exception of Altman, are very conventional in their use of both style and genre. What about people like Scorsese?

The other idea of genre as it relates to the New Hollywood is the concept of genre-mixing. Again, as Janet Staiger points out, this is hardly new.¹⁹ Genres were never pure. However, purity is not the point:

Genre specificity is a question not of particular and exclusive elements, however defined, but of exclusive and particular combinations and articulations of elements, of the exclusive and particular weight given in any one genre to elements which in fact it shares with other genres.²⁰

Thus, genres are not “pure,” but that does not mean they do not exist. Nor did they cease to exist in the New Hollywood, as has been suggested.²¹ But, as Neale points out, “different periods in the history of the American cinema have been marked by different generic systems.”²² It is precisely the times of change in generic systems that are of interest, which is why the New Hollywood is such a striking period.

How is the genre system different in the New Hollywood? It would be convenient to answer this question by saying that it has changed due to genre-mixing, or to say that it has not changed at all. But things are not that simple. I believe the system did change

¹⁸ Neale (1980), p. 31.

¹⁹ Staiger, p. 5.

²⁰ Neale (1980), p. 22-23.

²¹ Carroll, p. 265.

²² Neale (1990), p. 168.

during the 60s, due to numerous factors: breakdown of the studio system, economic crisis in Hollywood, change in censorship and social mores concerning sex and violence (particularly the latter), political crisis of Vietnam, etc. This time period is defined by its instability, and this instability is reflected in genre. This does not mean that genres disappeared. It is a rare film, even in the New Hollywood, that does not have a generic base. What happens, in general, is a genre revision,²³ a revision that can include the mixing of other genres within a film that nevertheless maintains its dominant base. But, as Bakhtin says about the mixing of chronotopes, this mixing is never neutral: "A merely mechanical mix of these two different times is out of the question. Both change their essential form in this combination."²⁴ What is important is to analyze specific cases, of how genre works within a specific film, and how it affects its meaning. From this, we can learn more about the specific historical context.

My basic argument concerning genre and the New Hollywood is to question some of the assumptions concerning its relationship to the past. The difficulty arises from the static notion of genre that underwrites a great deal of genre theory. Perhaps this is somewhat inherent, given genre's concern with categories, which tend to harden. My method is to use genre in order to illuminate the films, with my choice of films enabling me to provide a commentary on each work's broader significance in terms of American cinema and society.

In my study, there is an obvious tension, in that it is concerned with a specific individual filmmaker and with genre, which embraces the whole system of American film. I could have chosen a director such as Coppola, Altman, or Penn, each of whom

²³ Cawelti, p. 510.

²⁴ Bakhtin, p. 111.

could have provided a more coherent look at the American cinema since the 1960s.

Scorsese is a more difficult case, and for that very reason a more important one. The genre revision of Coppola, Altman, and Penn is not the route that Scorsese normally takes (*New York, New York* can be seen as a possible exception). Instead, he tends to use genre not simply to critique the Old Hollywood, but to challenge and push the limits of the whole generic system, not just of a single genre. This is especially true of *Mean Streets*.

I have also chosen three specific films to focus on: *Mean Streets*, *The King of Comedy*, and *GoodFellas*. These are not the obvious choices. Of all Scorsese's films, it is *New York, New York* that seems to relate most directly to genre, along with (perhaps) *Taxi Driver* and *Raging Bull*. However, there are specific advantages for having chosen these films. First of all, I believe these three films are among Scorsese's most complex, allowing for an in-depth analysis. Also, all three films have been critically neglected, especially *Mean Streets*. By starting my study with this film, I am able to give it the critical attention it deserves as well as comment on the important era of 1970s American cinema. By next focusing on *The King of Comedy*, I am able to examine another historical moment, ten years removed from *Mean Streets*. This causes me to discuss films such as *Taxi Driver*, *New York, New York*, and *Raging Bull* only briefly. I am lead to this because these films have been the ones most discussed by critics, especially as they relate to genre, and because I do not believe an in-depth analysis of any of these films would allow me to say anything more about American film and society that I did not already discuss in relation to *Mean Streets*. The selection of *GoodFellas* gives me the opportunity to look at a film that has not been given a great deal of close attention as of yet, while allowing me to deal with another period, that of the 1990s. By structuring my study in

this way, I am able to deal with the whole scope of Scorsese's career in light of historical developments.

Before moving on to the first chapter, I would like to end this introduction with a comment on my interpretive approach. There has been a particular trend in film studies to avoid interpretive and evaluative criticism in favor of historical, economic and technological research areas, which lead to a descriptive approach. This is particularly true of recent work on the New Hollywood in two anthologies: *The New American Cinema* (edited by Jon Lewis [1998]) and *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* (edited by Steve Neale and Murray Smith [1998]). For instance, Warren Buckland, in his article on the Hollywood blockbuster, makes this approach explicit:

Faced with what is in my view an unhelpful and hostile evaluative stance, it is best in my opinion to suspend aesthetic judgments, and to adopt an analytical and descriptive approach to these films.²⁵

While there may be some use to this method, it is at the opposite end from my own. I believe it is important to evaluate films (or any other cultural product). To purposefully avoid this seems to imply some false objectivity. As Robin Wood has correctly pointed out:

To claim that a film not only cannot but **should not** be interpreted seems to me simply another form of evasion, allowing the critic to sweep aside all possible problems and deflecting any inconvenient questions of value.²⁶

This same bias has influenced some recent genre study as well, focusing on the advertising and reception of genres in order to critique any interpretive genre analysis by critics.²⁷ My approach is to put my opinion of the films in the foreground throughout, and

²⁵ Buckland, p. 167.

²⁶ Wood (1998) (a), p. 248.

²⁷ For example, see Altman, p. 1-41; Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, p. 74-78; Neale (1990), p.166.

to try to support these opinions of the films. I believe that by making my subjectivity obvious and forward, the reader will be in a better position to weigh and judge what he or she believes my biases or critical blind spots to be. I also believe that evaluating and interpreting is crucial to anyone who wants to write with a political viewpoint, which I hope has permeated this study.

Chapter One

With this first chapter, I will be discussing Scorsese's work in relation to the American cinema of the 1970s. In order to sharpen the focus, I will concentrate on *Mean Streets*, the first key film in Scorsese's career. Because of its specific use of genre, I believe this film is the most important of Scorsese's 70s films in terms of larger significance, even though this is not the opinion of the vast majority of critical writing on Scorsese. Criticism has even neglected the film's relation to genre; John Cawelti does not even mention the film (or Scorsese) in his influential article on 70s generic transformation, and Bryan Bruce has called *Mean Streets* a "non-genre" film.¹ This chapter will be concerned with looking at *Mean Streets* in two of its primary generic contexts, that of the "buddy" film and of film noir. In so doing, I hope to give a reading of the film that brings contextual and generic factors (and questions) to the forefront.

Before discussing the film, it is useful to look first at the existing critical commentary on *Mean Streets*. Auteurism and, especially, the ethnic/religious approach have generally dominated, with the two frequently intermingling. Both of these approaches have in common a dependence on interview material as a basis for their claims, often falling into the intentional fallacy. For example, Lawrence Friedman writes the following:

Scorsese once alluded to a 'blueprint for the third part of *Mean Streets*, which is going to be about Charlie when he gets married, settles down, has a couple of kids and lives in Staten Island.' The sequel never got made, but its

¹ Bruce, p. 88.

'blueprint' subverts any doomsday reading of *Mean Streets*.²

It seems to me simply unimportant to an interpretation of the ending of *Mean Streets* that Scorsese thought about a possible sequel. This intentional fallacy is common in auteur criticism, which often seeks meaning in the text solely through the director's personality. The fact that Scorsese has stated that *Mean Streets* is a semi-autobiographical work has of course opened up the floodgates to this type of reading. Scorsese has said of the film:

Mean Streets was an attempt to put myself and my old friends on the screen, to show how we lived, what life was like in Little Italy. It was really an anthropological or a sociological tract.³

This use of *Mean Streets* as autobiographical confession has lead to the film becoming central to those book-length studies of Scorsese that encompass his entire career. *Mean Streets* has been used as a linchpin to look ahead to other films, while those other films are also read into it. Consider the following passage from Les Keyser, whose approach to the film typically combines an auteurist reading with a religious one:

Scorsese's major films are grounded in Catholic teleology; the assassin's bullet can convey the judgment of God, a taxi driver can unleash divine retribution, and a boxer can bear witness to Christ's suffering.⁴

Instead of grounding the film in the personal, the religious, or the ethnic, why not try to approach the film from its position in the American cinema of its time, where it can be dealt with in a concrete manner, not a vague metaphysical one?

Even those critics who take a more contextual approach to Scorsese, such as

² Friedman, p. 38.

³ Scorsese on Scorsese, p. 48.

⁴ Keyser, p. 40-41.

Robert Kolker, still have trouble relating *Mean Streets* to its historical and generic time period. Given this critical background on the film, certain questions arise. Is *Mean Streets* simply unimportant to the American cinema of this period? Are other Scorsese films, like *Taxi Driver*, *New York, New York*, and *Raging Bull* more effectively understood in a wider context, while *Mean Streets* remains an idiosyncratic film that can only be discussed in terms of Scorsese's personality and background? Does its inability to find a "firm generic base" ⁵ rob the film of its potential for social significance (an argument made implicitly about *Mean Streets* by Bryan Bruce and explicitly about Scorsese's films as a whole by Richard Maltby ⁶)? I would answer no to all of the above.

First of all, the film fits into a general thematic of the modern American cinema that Robin Wood has identified:

The protagonist embarks on an undertaking he is confident he can control; the sense of control is progressively revealed as illusory; the protagonist is trapped in a course of events that culminate in disaster (frequently death). ⁷

This thematic adequately describes the basic narrative of *Mean Streets*, thus placing the film strongly within the contemporary cinema of the time. *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *Easy Rider* (1969), *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971), *The Long Goodbye* (1973), *Chinatown* (1974), *The Conversation* (1974), *Night Moves* (1975), and *The Deer Hunter* (1977) are among the most acclaimed of the many films that contain this thematic during the period. In addition, like all of the above films, *Mean Streets* does

⁵ Kolker, p. 178.

⁶ Maltby, p. 368.

⁷ Wood (1986), p. 31.

work within (and against) the American genre system, invoking the gangster film, the film noir, and the buddy film. The question of whether or not it and its companion films of the New Hollywood have a firm generic basis is a major issue of this crucial time in the American cinema. In short, to deal with *Mean Streets* in its context, the question of genre has to be dealt with.

What makes this task of dealing with genre difficult is that the area of genre criticism has become one of the most confused in film studies:

The status of genre as a category is one of the most problematic in contemporary cinema . . . It is not that genres were pure in classical Hollywood, but its status in new Hollywood is perhaps more uncertain and fragmented . . . The reworking of a variety of genres and styles, as parody or pastiche, raises the issue whether these reworkings can themselves evolve, as classic genres did, over time. ⁸

This problem of genre extends into the problem of definition. Is a genre the same as a cycle? a mode? Of course, there is no fixed answer to this question, and critics use the terms in different ways. What they all have in common (genres, cycles, modes, movements, etc.) is that they are categories. But what is also in question is how these categories are formed:

Virtually all contemporary language philosophers agree that people do not form concepts by placing similar things together. Instead, they create networks of relationship, using metaphor, metonymy, and forms of imaginative association that develop over time. ⁹

Here, James Naremore is responding to the trend in genre criticism to focus on the placing of similar things together, rather than using imaginative association. While

⁸ Tasker, p. 223.

⁹ Naremore, p. 5.

Naremore's critique is justified, the one contemporary language philosopher he cites, the linguist George Lakoff, proposes a theory whereby a genre is defined not by a list of characteristics but rather by a central example or prototype.¹⁰ In this view, something (a film, for example) fits into a category (or genre) insofar as it bears a family resemblance to whatever film is held to be a central example of the genre. This view is similar to that of André Bazin's theory of the Western and the centrality of *Stagecoach* (1939).¹¹ This leads to other problems, such as reducing the social dimension of genre criticism by not accounting for the conditions that produced the exemplar (or the conditions that produced the **selection** of the exemplar). It also results in a very static notion of genre, since everything else must measure up to the originary example. Naremore's proposed strategy of using imaginative association is a good one, and particularly of use when it comes to the New Hollywood, but to dismiss similarities out of hand as a basis of genres is both unproductive and unrealistic.

With *Mean Streets*, the neglect in terms of genre is due to the fact that the two genres it most strongly evokes (along with, perhaps, the gangster film) are the buddy film and the film noir. Neither the buddy film nor the film noir has acquired the status of genre as indisputably as the western, gangster, or musical. The buddy film has been thought of as a cycle of films that occurred during the 70s and fizzled out during the early 80s.¹² It is thus too time-specific to be a genre, since, according to this line of thought, a cycle must

¹⁰Lakoff, p. 58-67.

¹¹ Bazin, p. 149.

¹² Wood (1986), p. 229.

endure, or it remains just a cycle. This is roughly the argument of Rick Altman.¹³ It is a problematic definition, not because it denies the buddy film its rightful generic status (which seems unimportant in itself) but because it fails to look at the historical process of genre-formation. There are, for example, plenty of time-bound genres (Jacobean revenge tragedy or Restoration comedy, for example), as James Damico has pointed out.¹⁴ It is also difficult to confine the buddy film to the seventies. Looking back, one thinks of the Hope-Crosby road pictures; looking forward, there are the numerous action pictures that feature male duos. Throw in the fact that the road picture (to which the buddy film is closely related) has become a genre in its own right (to the point of having its own anthology¹⁵), and the isolating of the buddy film as a cycle is even less convincing. This is not to say that the buddy film as it appeared in the 70s was not different from previous and later films of its type. Of course it was, just as the western and gangster film were different in the 30s as opposed to the 70s. That does not mean that its generic thematics are no longer important. With the buddy film, the problem arises from **not** putting similar things together and making connections. This is especially true of *Mean Streets* and its relation to the genre.

With the film noir, its problematic generic status can probably be traced back to the writings of those who first discussed the category. Paul Schrader, for instance, although going a long way towards defining film noir, denies that it is a genre:

¹³ Altman, p. 4.

¹⁴ Damico, p. 97.

¹⁵ See The Road Movie Book.

Film noir is not a genre . . . It is not defined, as are the western and gangster genres, by conventions of setting and conflict, but rather by the more subtle qualities of tone and mood. It is a film "**noir**", as opposed to the possible variants of film gray or film off-white. ¹⁶

When one talks about tone and mood, one is essentially talking about style, since it is through a film's stylistics that tone and mood are conveyed. Schrader is setting up (or adhering to) a limited idea of generic definition that seems unjustified. There seems to me to be no reason why style cannot be included in setting up a generic category. In addition, film noir **does** have conventions of setting and of conflict, as has been discussed by both Vivian Sobchack and Michael Walker, respectively. ¹⁷ In what appears to be almost a rebuttal to Schrader, Richard Dyer makes what I believe to be the strongest case for the existence of film noir as a genre:

A mood is not something that is poured over a film or injected into it but is carried by identifiable aesthetic features at the levels of **structure**, **iconography** and **visual style** that recur from film noir to film noir and thereby identify it as a discrete film kind, and that just such an observable continuity in a batch of films is what makes that batch a genre. ¹⁸

Dyer makes concrete the infamous "mood" of film noir by connecting it to style. But what Dyer does not discuss is the uniqueness of film noir in using visual style as a way of allowing us to classify it as a film genre. Thus if film noir is a genre at the levels of

¹⁶ Schrader, p. 53.

¹⁷ Sobchack discusses the setting of noir using Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope. She argues that film noir is coherent as a genre due to its particular places, such as bars, cocktail lounges, and hotel rooms. Since there is no "place" for home and family in noir, it has no temporal articulation either: no weddings, births or natural deaths.

Walker describes noir as having conventions of conflict such as particular narrative patterns that repeat themselves: the hard-boiled private eye pattern, the femme fatale as destroyer pattern, the paranoid noir pattern, and the heroine and the noir world pattern. Each of these patterns leads to different types of conflict which all define film noir.

¹⁸ Dyer, p. 53.

setting and conflict (as I believe it is), it is also somewhat unusual as well.

It is perhaps this uniqueness of film noir's use of style as a generic feature that makes James Naremore call for a classification system based on "imaginative associations", for it is a category created by critics rather than producers or audiences. It is this particular difference from traditional film genres that makes David Bordwell doubt noir's generic existence:

What is film noir? Not a genre. Producers and consumers both recognize a genre as a distinct entity; nobody set out to make or see a film noir in the sense that people deliberately chose to make a Western, a comedy, or a musical.¹⁹

This argument may be relevant for discussing the original film noirs of the 1940s; however, as early as 1955, with the release of Robert Aldrich's *Kiss Me Deadly*, film noir was clearly a conscious force within the culture. And because of its definitional stylistic features, it was able to enter into other genres in formally and ideologically subversive ways. It is this combination of a challenge to both genre and style and how these interrelate that makes film noir of particular interest in terms of the American cinema, as Robert Ray discusses:

To an extent, the **noir** films represented an eruption into the American cinema's main tradition of values, emotions, anxieties, and behaviour systematically suppressed by Classic Hollywood. Almost every Classic Hollywood genre had its **noir** version, which at once parodied and subverted the ideological basis of the original.²⁰

Ray goes on to give examples of this "noiring": the screwball comedy in *Double*

¹⁹ Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, p. 75.

²⁰ Ray, p. 159.

Indemnity, the western in *Johnny Guitar*, the problem picture in *Crossfire*, the musical in *A Star is Born*. Ray also notes that:

A film noir's visuals often seemed to operate at an entirely different level of intensity, conveying anxieties not suggested by the stories themselves. Individual moments, irrelevant to the plot, stood out as abstract symbols of menace.²¹

The infusion of film noir into other genres either turns them into a film noir, like *Double Indemnity*, in which the noir characteristics become dominant, or "noirs" a classical genre, like *It's a Wonderful Life*.²² Along with a preoccupation with style, this infusion marks the beginning of the transgeneric in the American cinema.

This tendency reaches its conclusion with the New Hollywood, and not coincidentally there is a significant noir revival in the 1970s. And although it shares many things in common with film noir, *Mean Streets* has generally not been thought of as part of this revival. Instead, critics focus on films that are of a more revisionist nature: *The Long Goodbye* (Robert Altman, 1973), *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974), and *Night Moves* (Arthur Penn, 1975) are the three films most commonly cited. This noir revival calls into question Schrader's idea that the genre is time-bound, ending in 1953.²³ It is apparent that film noir had an influence on the auteurs of the New Hollywood, including Scorsese. But while Altman, Polanski, and Penn all work from a generic base that revises or questions the original, Scorsese uses the genre in a looser, more imaginatively associative manner, leading to generic uncertainty, as discussed by Fredric Jameson:

²¹ Ray, p. 160.

²² Wood (1975/1992), p. 475-485.

²³ Schrader, p. 53.

Generic uncertainty raises a question, not so much about the work itself, as rather about the **system** of genres under whose configuration the individual work itself comes into being.²⁴

In the case of *Mean Streets*, the historical system that its generic uncertainty begins to question is that of the classical Hollywood style. Jameson continues:

Generic affiliations, and the systematic deviation from them, provide clues which lead us back to the concrete historical situation of the individual text itself, and allow us to read its structure as ideology, as a socially symbolic act, as a protopolitical response to a historical dilemma.²⁵

Therefore, *Mean Streets*, far from being an unimportant work to discuss in a larger context, can in fact be seen as a socially symbolic act, a radical response to a particular historical dilemma, that of American society in the early 1970s.

What makes *Mean Streets* such a rich and exciting film is how the two genres of the buddy film and the film noir are used interrelationally. One of the few critics to talk about the buddy film (but not in relation to *Mean Streets*) is Robin Wood, who identifies six general characteristics of the genre. I will comment on *Mean Streets*'s relation to each, while at the same time showing how Scorsese's use of film noir solidifies or contradicts each trait:

(1) The Journey. This is perhaps the one characteristic that *Mean Streets* does not obviously share with the other films of the genre, which are generally road movies, and which may lead Wood to state that the film is peripheral to the genre in some ways. However, the journeys in the films are often more metaphorical than literal:

²⁴ Jameson, p. 152.

²⁵ Jameson, p. 157.

The films take the form of journeys with complicated, rambling, usually aimless itineraries -- journeys to nowhere, searches in which the real object of the search remains undefined or uncertain.²⁶

In fact, it is the undefined nature of the journey that differentiates these films from most other narratives. After all, the narrative of the journey is extremely common to the classical Hollywood form. *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and *Stagecoach* (1939) are merely two of the most obvious and famous of the many possible examples. The metaphorical "journey to nowhere" is crucial to defining the buddy film genre, and could also be used to describe the narrative of *Mean Streets*. Also, as Bakhtin has pointed out, the road journey passes through "**familiar territory**." It is the "**sociohistorical heterogeneity** of one's own country that is revealed and depicted."²⁷ While in *Mean Streets* this "country" is isolated into a small community, it nevertheless displays a striking heterogeneity of ethnic and racial minorities and alternative lifestyles, which will be crucial to the meaning of the film.

Compared to the classical Hollywood text, *Mean Streets* links its sequences together in a rather tenuous manner. This is especially true of the first half of the film, which includes many scenes that seem unnecessary to the function of coherent storytelling. This is because the film is more concerned with a metaphorical journey about identity formation rather than classical narration. The linear journey of the classical text is replaced by a voyage full of detours. The trip made by Charlie, Johnny Boy, Tony and Jimmy to the pool hall across town, where they get involved in a brawl, serves little

²⁶ Wood (1986), p. 29.

²⁷ Bakhtin, p. 245.

narrative function. It is included for the purpose of effect and meaning, especially as it relates to characterization, contrasting the dynamic Johnny Boy with the passive Charlie. Another key scene in this regard is the sequence early on in the film in the back of Tony's bar, in which Charlie confronts Johnny Boy about his increasing debts. This partly improvised scene continues for a rather long time, much longer than is needed to convey the narrative information (Scorsese was actually told to cut the scene by Brian DePalma).²⁸ Here, Scorsese is more interested in characterization than narrative movement, allowing actors like DeNiro and Keitel the freedom to display their talents, and in creating strong individual scenes rather than a tight, cohesive story. No wonder he offends the pro-classical Hollywood sensibility of a critic like Andrew Sarris:

Scene for scene, Scorsese may be the most talented contemporary American filmmaker, but wholeness has never been his strong point. Scorsese, like so many auteurs of his generation, cannot tell a story to save his life. His movies explode from the inside like a Jackson Pollock splotch, but the emotional paint often spills over the plot machinery, thus gumming up the narrative flow.²⁹

This "gumming up" of the narrative flow is a characteristic of many of the road films that make up the buddy genre: *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969), *Scarecrow* (Jerry Schatzberg, 1973), *California Split* (Robert Altman, 1974), and *The Last Detail* (Hal Ashby, 1973) are among the most prominent examples.

This idea of a "journey to nowhere" can also be illustrated by looking at the ending of the film. This is the first time in the film that the characters take to the road,

²⁸ Biskind, p. 243.

²⁹ Sarris, p. 55.

trying to run away from the threat of violence. Charlie mentions that he wants to get to Greenwood Lake in order to hide Johnny Boy, but on the way there Theresa questions Charlie as to whether he knows where he is going. Wood notes that “the journey has no goal or its ostensible goal proves illusory.”³⁰ This is certainly true of *Mean Streets*. The journey has no long-term goal, its only purpose being to buy time. And in the end, even this feeble objective is denied, as Michael catches up to the car and has Johnny Boy shot.

(2) The Marginalization of Women. This can be seen quite clearly in *Mean Streets* at the level of structure: the four central male characters (Charlie, Johnny Boy, Tony and Michael) are formally introduced (with titles) after the credit sequence. The one main female character, Theresa, is not introduced until some forty minutes into the film. The other female characters are marginalized even further, present only to show the Italian subculture’s sexism and/or racism (the black stripper, the Jewish women).

This marginalization of women is common to the buddy genre, but it is not common to the film noir, where the femme fatale typically has a large and **active** role. The noir characteristics of *Mean Streets* are extensive, especially on the stylistic level: the tension of the combination of realism (in Method performances and locations, along with cinema-verite hand-held camera techniques) and expressionism (use of mobile camera, lighting, editing, and sound to counter the documentary impulse). *Mean Streets* also features the noir thematics (focus on masculinity and its problems) and setting (the extensive use of Tony’s bar providing an example of noir’s “lounge time”).³¹ However,

³⁰ Wood (1986), p. 228.

³¹ Sobchack, p. 129.

the femme fatale is a notable absence. Lesley Stern has commented on this trend in Scorsese's work as a whole:

The **femme fatale** might not be much in evidence in Scorsese films, but an understanding of the way she figures in masculine fantasy can very usefully illuminate the Scorsese dynamic . . . There might not, in Scorsese, be a **femme fatale** to serve as bad-object before whom the masculine subject feels fascination and fear, but it might be that the bad-object is internalised in the Scorsese hero.³²

Stern is applying this comment to such Scorsese protagonists as Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver*, Jimmy Doyle in *New York, New York*, and Jake LaMotta in *Raging Bull*. In *Mean Streets*, the femme fatale is internalised to a certain degree in the lead character, given Charlie's obsessive guilt, but is also projected onto the character of Johnny Boy, the "bad-object choice" whom Charlie feels he has to save. Their relationship, while displaying characteristics of the buddy film, contains the dynamic of most film noirs, in which the femme fatale is "either turned into a good object, or she is punished, but either way the masculine subject is confirmed."³³ By combining the two genres of the buddy film and the film noir, Scorsese has confused and thrown into question the ideological strategies of each. The buddy film, though not without obvious homoerotic tendencies, rarely sets up one character as a bad object, like the femme fatale, while the film noir attempts to alleviate the masculine anxieties of the male characters by bringing women and their guilt to the forefront. Neither containment strategy works quite as well when a film contains elements of two genres that are basically contradictory in this regard.

³² Stern, p. 26.

³³ Stern, p. 26.

(3) The Absence of Home. This is another characteristic that *Mean Streets* can be seen to lack, given that Charlie lives at home. As Wood notes, this trait also needs to be seen metaphorically:

Home doesn't exist, the journey is always to nowhere. 'Home', here, is of course to be understood not merely as a physical location but as both a state of mind and an ideological construct, above all as ideological security.³⁴

It is clear that this sense of security that home provides (marriage, family) and the fact that it is unobtainable is a central tension of the film. Wood goes on to link this concept of the home with a more general concept of normality:

What is fundamental to these films, as to so much of 70s Hollywood cinema, is the disintegration of the concept of home. That concept could also be named (and one thinks of course of the horror film) 'normality': the heterosexual romance, monogamy, the family, the perpetuation of the status quo, the Law of the Father.³⁵

In *Mean Streets*, these elements of normality are present, but they exist in tension with the all-male groupings, particularly the relationship between Charlie and Johnny Boy. They are most obviously manifested in the characters of Charlie's uncle, the mob boss Giovanni (family, the Law of the Father), and Charlie's girlfriend, Theresa (heterosexual romance, monogamy). But things are not that simple, since the family is criminal and Theresa is "abnormal" by being epileptic ("sick in the head", as Giovanni calls her, over Charlie's mild objection). Giovanni offers Charlie a chance at stability (hence "home") with the (vague) promise of a restaurant, while Theresa offers another home, the apartment she wants Charlie and herself to get "uptown". That these two notions of home

³⁴ Wood (1986), p. 228.

³⁵ Wood (1986), p. 229.

are incomplete and contradictory indicates that the concept of home is indeed perverted and unobtainable.

The notion of home that is absent in the buddy film is also missing in film noir. As Vivian Sobchack puts it: "The loss of home becomes a structuring absence in film noir."³⁶ Once again, this concept of home is metaphorical:

‘Home’ is something not necessarily limited to a specific locale, a specific building. It is an attitude — a way of perceiving the environment . . . Home’s values can extend outward — through the stability of a job, the camaraderie of friends, through places invested with the succoring warmth of the home.³⁷

This unstable atmosphere pervades *Mean Streets*. No one has a steady job (unless small crime counts). The camaraderie of friends is constantly on the edge of confrontation. The most familiar (familial) setting is Tony’s bar, which is drenched in a red filter and is a place of nearly constant violence (the mob-related shooting, arguments between friends, the final blow-up between Michael and Johnny Boy). Scorsese’s use of the noir stylistics adds to and comments on this instability. The constant hand-held camera, lack of balanced compositions and dark night-for-night shooting obscure a clear view of the action and events of the narrative.

However, it is important to develop the meaning of this question of instability further. Most commentators on film noir have focused on the dark elements; however, this does not adequately explain the genre’s fascination. Sobchack hints at a possible reason for the attraction viewers feel towards the genre and its characters:

³⁶ Sobchack, p. 137.

³⁷ Sobchack, p. 165.

Dispossessed, displaced from the culture's 'traditional' signifiers of social place and function, their actions are temporalized as socially problematic, ambiguous, and dangerous (and, of course, often for those very qualities, extremely attractive).³⁸

This attraction to that which is "socially problematic, ambiguous, and dangerous" explains to a certain extent the buddy film genre as well. Without family and home, the functionality of the characters is put into question, just as the functionality of many of the narratives is in dispute. What Scorsese is able to convey in *Mean Streets*, primarily through his stylistic choices, is the undesirability of the sense of security that "home" contains. That home is undesirable is conveyed through style. Here, the noir stylistics that Scorsese employs, in addition to instability, communicate a kind of aesthetic exhilaration. Two examples come to mind: Johnny Boy's frantic run through the city, followed by a hand-held camera, moving in rhythm to the music, trying to keep up with him. The sequence is done with only the available light of the street, often creating a frame that is in almost complete darkness. Instability is part of the meaning, but so is freedom and excitement, a point driven home by Scorsese's cross-cutting of the scene with Charlie and Theresa arguing within the confined space of an apartment (home?). The other example that comes to mind would be the long take of Charlie walking drunk through Tony's bar, eventually passing out. The style here is at once realistic (a real time sequence done with the camera literally strapped to the actor) and expressionistic (the use of multiple colour filters, the nonstop, rhythmic music, the tilted composition as Charlie eventually hits the floor). What these aesthetic choices entail is a risk on Scorsese's part, a willingness to

³⁸ Sobchack, p. 159.

indulge in stylistics that do not simply advance the story; in other words, “style-for-style’s sake.”

The problem with the style-for-style’s sake point of view is that there can never really be style without meaning or effect. There can of course be style without narrative function, but how material is presented necessarily has some bearing on that material.

The style of *Mean Streets* serves to arouse and energize both the material and the viewer:

The music that intermittently grabs and rattles the film . . . isn’t a discrete key-note, but one of several elements **exciting** the frame — flailing violence and delicate gesture, speech and camera rhythms, obscenity and prayer — which mark the film’s unrelenting pulsion.³⁹

Scorsese’s use of style prevents the film from becoming simply about the disintegration of home in an unstable era. It is about that, to be sure, but more importantly it is about the release and liberation that comes with this lack of security. The very instability of the particular historical moment is used by Scorsese. If home was the ideal in actuality as it is in conservative rhetoric, there would be no need for liberation. The situation of the late 60s/early 70s called into question the values associated with home and security. To simplify, *Mean Streets* is about the contradiction that results from this historical dilemma. It can be read as a tale about a character who goes too far (Johnny Boy), or about a character who does not go far enough (Charlie).⁴⁰ And while both interpretations are open, it seems to me that the centrifugal force of Johnny Boy outweighs the centripetal force of Charlie.

³⁹ Penman, p. 10.

⁴⁰ Wood (1998) (a), p. 60-61. In discussing Renoir’s *The Rules of the Game*, Wood writes, “It has always seemed a question to me whether it is a film about people who go too far or a film about people who can’t quite go far enough.”

(4) The Male Love Story. Wood describes the phrase “male love story” in the following passage:

Let us leave the word ‘love’ in all its ambiguity (Howard Hawks, who resolutely denied the existence of any gay subtext in his films, described two of them as ‘a love story between two men’), and simply say that in all these films the emotional center, the emotional charge, is in the male/male relationship, which is patently what the films are **about**.⁴¹

In *Mean Streets*, the central relationship is between Charlie and Johnny Boy, not Charlie and Theresa (as it would be in most traditional narratives). This is borne out not only by the characters’ actions, but also by the narrative structure of the film. Charlie and Johnny Boy’s relationship is established early on in the film, and becomes the determinant in the central conflict of the film and its resolution. It is important to notice how Theresa is first introduced into the film. After a night of wandering the streets, Charlie and Johnny Boy end up at Charlie’s. Curiously, before they go in, Johnny Boy asks, “Your mother’s not home, is she?” When they go up to the apartment, they sleep in the same bed together, Johnny Boy jokingly (?) commenting, “Why don’t you tuck me in, sweetie?” At this point, Charlie gets out of bed and goes to the window, where he sees Theresa undressing. Charlie’s voiceover then provides a transition to the next scene of Charlie and Theresa in bed in a hotel room. This ellipsis, and Charlie and Theresa’s entire relationship, can be read as a displacement for the central male/male relationship, a fact proven later in the film when Charlie leaves Theresa, who is having a seizure, in order to chase after and reconcile with Johnny Boy. There is perhaps no other scene in 70s cinema, even within

⁴¹ Wood (1986), p. 228.

the buddy genre, that more obviously shows the displaced homoerotics of the male duo.

(5) **The Presence of an Explicitly Homosexual Character.** The film's two explicitly gay characters get a ride in Michael's car (along with Charlie and Johnny Boy) in order to escape from the police after the shooting at Tony's. It is not simply the presence of the two homosexual characters that is important, but how they relate to the other characters and to the film's overall structure. The two characters parallel Charlie and Johnny Boy: one character is loud and out of control, while the other is trying to calm him down and keep them both out of trouble. It is immediately after these two characters leave the film that Charlie and Johnny Boy spend the night together, eventually arriving back at Charlie's and leading to Theresa's introduction into the film. As Wood points out:

The overt homosexual (invariably either clown or villain) has the function of a disclaimer — our boys are not like **that**. The presence of women in the films seems often to have the same function: They merely guarantee the heroes' heterosexuality. ⁴²

This observation is strikingly realized in *Mean Streets*. The explicitly homosexual characters provide a counterpoint to ease anxiety over the closeness of the central male/male relationship, which is provided further relief by the appearance of the girlfriend when their closeness (sleeping in the same bed) again provokes anxiety (at least in the mainstream audience, especially the heterosexual male for whom most films are produced).

The presence of explicitly gay characters is also a feature of the film noir, although in classical era noir the homosexuality had to be implied. James Naremore

⁴² Wood (1986), p. 229.

discusses this link between film noir and homosexuality:

The novels of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler were filled with latently homosexual situations (such as the odd relationship between Philip Marlowe and 'Red' Norgaard in *Farewell, My Lovely*), and veiled stereotypes of gays were everywhere apparent in the crime pictures derived from those novels . . . This phenomenon has led Richard Dyer and several other critics to argue that the noir category in general expresses 'a certain anxiety over the existence and definition of masculinity and normality.' ⁴³

Thus the presence of the homosexual characters in *Mean Streets* is double-edged. It avows while disavowing the relationship between Charlie and Johnny Boy, while at the same time the whole strategy of disavowal throws into question the issues of masculinity and normality. This concern with "otherness" that is apparent in film noir, not only with femme fatales and homosexuals but also with racial minorities,⁴⁴ is a key component of *Mean Streets*. The characters frequently use racial slurs to describe the black, Asian, and Jewish populations of the city, showing the anxiety the characters feel, especially in terms of masculinity. Tony's comment on seeing a picture of Michael's girlfriend, "I saw her kissing a nigger under the bridge," illustrates this anxiety quite clearly. The most important relationship in the film in this regard is between Charlie and Diane, the black stripper at Tony's bar. Charlie is obviously sexually attracted to her, and almost (but not quite) goes on a date with her. It is here that Charlie's inability to go far enough is most clearly shown, and the importance of this failure is stressed by Scorsese when he inserts a shot of Diane during the final, tragic sequence of the film.

(6) Death. The ending of *Mean Streets* is ambiguous as to whether or not Johnny

⁴³ Naremore, p. 221-222.

⁴⁴ Naremore, p. 220.

Boy is killed or simply wounded. However, the symbolic function is clear: the deviant, or “bad object,” has been punished, the central bond presumably broken or at least proven to be untenable. As Wood has noted, a central feature of the films is that “the male relationship must never be consummated.”⁴⁵ The problem that the film is trying to solve is that of the buddy problem itself. However, even in the most conservative films of the buddy genre (*Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* [George Roy Hill, 1969], for example), the problem cannot be totally closed off. This is especially true of *Mean Streets*.

The difficulty of closing off the text of *Mean Streets* is the different attitude the film has towards death, which is perhaps connected to its noir sensibility and aesthetics. What is striking about the films of the buddy genre, especially evident in a film like *Scarecrow* (1973), is the overwhelming sense of doom, of the inevitable tragedy that will come to its characters. It is clear in these films that the protagonists are ill-equipped to realize their goals (if indeed they have any). This same sense of doom is evident in *Mean Streets*, especially as it concerns Charlie and his attempt to avoid disaster. What is different about the film is the character of Johnny Boy, who seems to be inviting the risk and the danger associated with death. All of his actions throughout the film emphasize this, but two scenes in particular stand out. After Charlie has given him enough money to appease Michael temporarily, Johnny Boy spends it on drinks and proceeds to insult Michael, humiliating him in front of everyone at the bar. In the next scene, as Charlie is

⁴⁵ Wood (1986), p. 229.

trying to get them out of town, Johnny Boy dances around the car, purposefully delaying the escape, almost inviting death, to Charlie's increasing annoyance. One line Johnny Boy says to Charlie after the final blowup with Michael is telling, "You got what you wanted." Indeed, Charlie and Johnny Boy are so different in outward appearance, one all repression, one all release, that it is hard not to think of them as one character, as flip sides to one another's psyche. If Johnny Boy is the bad object of film noir, he also represents another archetype of noir: the doppelganger. There is no reason for Charlie to help Johnny Boy unless he feels an attraction towards him and what he represents.

With *Mean Streets*, Scorsese was not attempting the genre revision of a Robert Altman or an Arthur Penn. He was not invoking an old genre simply to repeat its patterns with a heavy dose of irony or contempt. In the 1970s, a New Hollywood was replacing the old. It is therefore not surprising that the genre system underwent a process of change and that genre would not have the same relationship to its individual films as in the Hollywood of the past. But this does not mean that genre can be ignored. Genre was not an "endangered species"⁴⁶ at this or any other time. In order to discuss the significance of any film from the New Hollywood, some consideration must be given to genre. As I have argued, *Mean Streets* is no exception. The central thematic tensions and even its aesthetics derive from generic sources. The twists that Scorsese introduces into the genre system were necessary to create the social significance of the film. The film's challenges in terms of genre allow Scorsese the say things that challenge the dominant ideology: the

⁴⁶ Carroll, p. 265.

value of home and family, the division between the homosocial and the heterosexual, the division between racial and ethnic groups, all of which were being challenged by the counter culture of the time. *Mean Streets* represents a dramatization and exploration of these challenges. The problem the film has come across has been an inability of critics to observe or respond to this particular situation:

The historical moment blocks off a certain number of formal possibilities which had been available in earlier situations, all the while opening up certain determinate new ones which may or may not then come into being.⁴⁷

This lack of ability to respond to this “historical moment” may be in part due to a lack of distance. Looking back from the point of view of today, the 1970s can be seen as history, bracketed by the collapse of the Classical Hollywood in the 1960s and the similar collapse of the “director’s cinema” in the 1980s. I would now like to move on to *The King of Comedy* (1983) to see how Scorsese dealt with another time of change in Hollywood, which necessarily means a change in the genre process.

⁴⁷ Jameson, p. 158.

Chapter Two

In this chapter, I would like to focus on *The King of Comedy* (1983). There are a number of reasons for my selection of this particular Scorsese film. First of all, to deal with *The King of Comedy* is to deal with another historical moment in the American cinema, and one that needs commenting on, coming as it does after the crucial period of the 1970s. Along with this comes the issue of genre, and of the changes in the generic system that occurred over the ten-year period between *Mean Streets* and *The King of Comedy*. And most importantly, I believe that an analysis of *The King of Comedy* provides an opportunity to look at Scorsese's particular response to this historical moment. The reasons why Scorsese makes this film at this time and why he approaches it as he does are very revealing and say a great deal about the American cinema at this moment.

Before starting to discuss *The King of Comedy*, I would like first to go back and briefly discuss Scorsese's work since *Mean Streets*. It is this time period (and three films in particular, *Taxi Driver* (1976), *New York, New York* (1977), and *Raging Bull* (1980)) that have received the most recognition and the most critical attention. I do not have space to go deeply into any of these films, nor do I feel it is particularly important to my argument. But I do want to discuss them briefly, as a consideration of these films is necessary to set up my argument on *The King of Comedy*.

Taxi Driver is important to Scorsese's career in that it is his first box office success, and a film that earned him superstar auteur status in Hollywood. Consequently,

the writing on *Taxi Driver* has been more frequent and of higher quality than that on *Mean Streets*. This can be attributed both to the film's box office success and its move into the pop culture ("You talkin' to me?"). Critics have felt less inclined to ignore the film and also more likely to discuss the film in terms of genre, given its relative success (12th at the box office in 1976).¹ Still, like *Mean Streets*, *Taxi Driver* has been called a "nongenre" film,² despite the numerous references to different genres throughout the critical literature:

In addition to its own stylistic diversity, *Taxi Driver*, like other neo-noir texts by Scorsese . . . juxtaposes generic hybridization (film noir, the western, and the horror film), with allusions to high art and references to popular culture.³

Leighton Grist makes a similar argument:

His failure to kill Palantine causes Travis to direct his murderous attention to the pimp Sport (Harvey Keitel). He also exchanges one generic mode of action for another. Instead of an Oedipal rebel, he now becomes the hero of a captivity narrative.⁴

As I said in relation to my discussion of *Mean Streets*, what these critics seem to be pointing out is the lack of a generic base in *Taxi Driver*. In many ways, especially in the use of the noir stylistics combined with various realistic effects (Method performances and New York street locations), *Taxi Driver* is continuous with *Mean Streets*, but there are also important differences. Instead of using the emerging contemporary genre of the buddy film, *Taxi Driver* calls on the classical genre of the western (the parallels with *The*

¹ Ray, p. 349.

² Bruce, p. 8.

³ Martin, p.83.

⁴ Grist, p. 272.

Searchers have been well documented, most comprehensively by David Boyd⁵). While Scorsese uses the generic juxtaposition of film noir and the western to create a powerful and disturbing film, the use of the emergent genre of the buddy film in *Mean Streets* makes that film potentially more subversive and of greater importance in the 70s context.

Scorsese's next film, *New York, New York*, is the one Scorsese film that has been dealt with in terms of genre to a significant degree, perhaps because it is a musical, one of the most recognizable and stylized (and artificial) of all Hollywood genres. Articles by Richard Lippe, Patrick Phillips, Bryan Bruce, and Susan Morrison have all addressed the film's relation to genre, mostly focusing on its ironic treatment of the classical musical. In this way, despite the auteurist markings of the film (the strong focus on masculinity and its problems, the artificial stylization combined with the Method performance of DeNiro), *New York, New York* is quite similar to the generic deconstruction practiced by Robert Altman and Arthur Penn. Richard Lippe concludes his article with the following description of the film:

In the last shot of the film, a deserted New York street at night with rain beginning to fall, there is no celebration: a fitting comment that places the film, like the relationship, in a contemporary context where artifice, art and identity can be expressive, although more often of disillusionment than fulfilment.⁶

This sense of disillusionment is in stark contrast to the expected joyous and fulfilling tone of the Hollywood musical, and indicates that Scorsese was, like Altman, "going down the

⁵ Boyd, p. 24-31.

⁶ Lippe(1986), p.100.

road of genre deconstruction, which, it seemed, the box office would not support.”⁷ And indeed, the film was a major flop, and a major blow to Scorsese and, I would argue, to the American film industry as a whole. After years of challenging films becoming popular successes (if not blockbusters), at about this time the tide was beginning to shift. It is worth mentioning, as Biskind points out, that the film opened at around the same time as *Star Wars*, and its failure can be seen, retrospectively, as a harbinger of things to come.

Scorsese’s next feature fiction film (following the documentaries *The Last Waltz* (1978) and *American Boy: A Profile of Steven Prince* [1978]) was *Raging Bull* (1980), a film often regarded as Scorsese’s masterpiece as well as the masterpiece of the 1980s.⁸ Because of its critical status, *Raging Bull* has been widely discussed, and some of this criticism has looked at the film’s relation to both the boxing film subgenre and the biographical film. Like *New York, New York*, *Raging Bull* can be thought of as an ironic treatment of a usually uplifting genre, the true-life, working class boxing success story, exemplified in *Somebody Up There Likes Me* (1957) and stolen as the basis for Stallone’s highly successful *Rocky* (1976). Also, like *New York, New York*, the film was unsuccessful at the box office, and can be seen as the last hurrah for the New Hollywood, which is generally thought to have reached its conclusion with *Heaven’s Gate* in 1981. It is in this context that *The King of Comedy* has to be seen.

Jon Lewis, commenting on the situation of 1980s Hollywood, makes the following observation:

⁷ Biskind, p.109.

⁸ See Sight and Sound poll (1992)

In the aftermath of *Heaven's Gate*, 1970s auteurs like Martin Scorsese, Robert Altman, Peter Bogdanovich, and William Friedkin, along with Cimino and Coppola, all proved unable to make a smooth transition into 1980s Hollywood.⁹

The King of Comedy can be seen as the film that cemented Scorsese's exclusion from the general climate of Hollywood in the 1980s. It was Scorsese's third straight box office failure, which partially led to his being unable to secure backing for *The Last Temptation of Christ*.¹⁰ *The King of Comedy*, like the last section of *Raging Bull*, can also be seen as portraying Scorsese's exhaustion, the heavy stylization of his previous work giving way to a more subdued form. This can be linked to the general malaise settling over American film in the early 80s. Andrew Britton, in 1986, wrote the following:

With the exception of *Blade Runner*, *Six Weeks* and *The King of Comedy*, it is difficult to think of any mainstream American film released since the spring of 1982 which is of even moderate distinction or which has any other interest than as a document in the history of taste. The virtual disappearance of significant work from the Hollywood cinema over so long a period, and the audience's rejection of such significant work as there is, are phenomena of some importance.¹¹

The question now becomes what is the significance of *The King of Comedy*? How does it comment on the particular historical moment in which it is situated?

The King of Comedy received general neglect not only from audiences, like *Raging Bull*, but also from mainstream reviewers. *Raging Bull*, it must be remembered,

⁹ Lewis, p.47.

¹⁰ I refer here to the 1983 production shutdown of the film, not the eventual film made in 1988.

¹¹ Britton, p.2.

did receive two Academy Awards along with several nominations, plus recognition from the various critics' groups. No such praise was bestowed on *The King of Comedy*, probably because it seemed such a departure for Scorsese, as Robin Wood points out:

The King of Comedy puzzled many people, including many of Scorsese's admirers. Yes, the end more or less recapitulated the end of *Taxi Driver*, but otherwise, how does it relate to the previous films? An anomaly, a dead end, a new departure? Certainly, it seemed at first glance a 'minor' work, more limited in scope and ambition than any of its three narrative feature predecessors, and one of the problems with becoming a superstar director within the prevailing climate is that every work is expected to be 'major.' ¹²

I believe that the film's interest lies not in its similarities to Scorsese's other films but to its differences, not just from his films but from both the contemporary Hollywood cinema **and** the Hollywood cinema of the 70s. I also believe that *The King of Comedy* needs to be discussed in its generic context, which will be my reading of the film.

Unlike *Mean Streets*, which has received mainly pedestrian treatment from critics, *The King of Comedy* has been given a number of thoughtful and provocative readings, from Robin Wood, William Ian Miller, Timothy Corrigan, and Robert Kolker. Wood's reading is primarily ideological, calling the film "one of the greatest, and certainly one of the most radical, American films about the structures of the patriarchal family." ¹³ Wood's reading of the film is well supported and convincing, and while my reading will shift the focus, I agree with Wood on the idea of the radicalism of *The King of Comedy*.

Miller's account of the film concentrates on the sociology of the emotion of

¹² Wood (1986), p. 260.

¹³ Wood (1986), p. 260.

embarrassment, providing an explanation for the discomfort of the film for viewers:

Embarrassment, comedy, stand-up comedians, and the norms of respectable and competent social behaviour, especially as these have to do with the practices surrounding leave taking, conversation and interaction closure all come together in Martin Scorsese's underappreciated classic, *The King of Comedy*.¹⁴

Miller's reading is strong and thorough, though one wishes he would go further to explore the larger implications of the film. However, his essay remains very useful in understanding this very complex work.

Timothy Corrigan discusses *The King of Comedy* in his book *A Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture After Vietnam*, a postmodern study of western cinema, focusing primarily on the 1980s. Corrigan sees the film as Scorsese's "most timely political film"¹⁵ because of its links to terrorism, that postmodern method of political engagement. The problem with Corrigan's account from my perspective is that he seems to acquiesce in the postmodern skepticism of the value of any film:

The question becomes: if a political film operates with some notion of public effectiveness, how does a film become socially and politically effective when its meaning is always wrapped in its reception as a kind of private distraction or a mere public outing? ¹⁶

While this sense of despair can be understood, it does not seem all that useful.

Robert Kolker comments rather briefly on the film in his chapter on Scorsese in his book-length study of the New Hollywood, *A Cinema of Loneliness*. But, typically, he does make acute stylistic observations, such as the following:

¹⁴ Miller, p. 82.

¹⁵ Corrigan, p. 203.

¹⁶ Corrigan, p. 197-198.

Because it is about television, *The King of Comedy* is shot analogous to the flat, neutral television style. The lighting is even and high key; the camera almost always at eye level and largely steady; the editing, except for some fantasy sequences, remains close to the standard shot/ reverse shot pattern of television and ordinary filmmaking.¹⁷

As Kolker mentions, this is obviously quite a stylistic departure for Scorsese, and while Kolker provides some reasons for the switch, what I would like to do is follow up on this observation by analyzing the film closely in order to answer the question of what effect his stylistic choices have.

First of all, however, the question of genre has to be addressed. And an ideal place to start would be by asking what genre does *The King of Comedy* belong to? Has there been any debate? The answer to the latter question would be yes and no. There has definitely not been as much genre confusion with this film as there continues to be with *Mean Streets*. But there has been some. The most obvious definition of the film would be to call it a comedy, which itself raises questions from an auteurist perspective, since Scorsese had never made a comedy up to this point. Throw in the fact that Scorsese has said that although the film is very funny, it is **not** a comedy, and confusion does begin to grow.¹⁸ This confusion results from the tone of the film. Patrick Phillips, commenting on *New York, New York*, makes an argument that also applies to *The King of Comedy*:

The most common form of generic pleasure -- the pleasure of expectations fulfilled -- is replaced by the potentially more thrilling but also potentially disconcerting interrogation of those expectations. . . . Like Scorsese's *The King of Comedy*, and for similar reasons, the film did indeed do badly at the box office. Delirium is far too

¹⁷ Kolker, p. 209.

¹⁸ Scorsese on Scorsese, p. 88.

dangerous a state of pleasure for the spectator keen to receive the conventional reassurances of Hollywood entertainment.¹⁹

I would agree with Phillips that of all Scorsese's other films, the one with the most similarities to *The King of Comedy* would be *New York, New York*. Both use generally uplifting genres, comedy and the musical, and shift the tone to one of discomfort. But there are differences. *New York, New York* is very much a deconstruction of the musical, while *The King of Comedy* does not use the same firm generic base. Like *Mean Streets*, it has been described as a "non-genre" film by Bryan Bruce, and indeed it is not the critique of a specific genre the way *New York, New York* is. The genre the film belongs to, I would argue, is that unique comic variant, satire.

At the opposite end of the satire would be the epic mode. The epic is applicable to this historical moment in that it is the genre, along with the adventure romance, that best describes what Robin Wood refers to as "the Lucas-Spielberg syndrome".²⁰ That the films of these two directors are the predominant ones during the late 70s and early 80s, at the same time as Scorsese is making films such as *New York, New York*, *Raging Bull*, and *The King of Comedy*, reminds us that historical moments overlap, and that the establishment and entrenchment of what Andrew Britton has labelled "Reaganite entertainment" was occurring at the same time as the New Hollywood's period of "the director's cinema" was ending.²¹ Thus, *The King of Comedy* comes on the cusp of a moment of transition. The film, coming as it does not only after Scorsese's recent box

¹⁹ Phillips, p. 139.

²⁰ Wood (1986), p. 162.

²¹ The term "director's cinema" is used by Biskind, p. 410.

office failures but of the failure of Cimino's *Heaven's Gate* (1981) and Coppola's *One from the Heart* (1982), can be seen as a satire that is the result of the fall of the 70s historical moment and the rise of the cinema of the 80s.

In my last chapter, I focused on the importance of *Mean Streets* in its relation to the new generic and historical developments in the American cinema, and how the film was indicative of broader trends in American film at that particular moment. With *The King of Comedy*, the interest is of a different nature, that of an oppositional mode:

The distinction of *The King of Comedy* is precisely that it subjects to rigorous, astringent, profoundly malicious analysis what *Ordinary People* reassuringly endorses and reinforces; the appearance of the film in the context of the 80s, in opposition to the whole movement of contemporary Hollywood cinema, testifies once again to Scorsese's salutary intransigence.²²

What happens in the ten years between *Mean Streets* and *The King of Comedy* moves Scorsese from a central position in American film to a peripheral one, and one that becomes even more peripheral as the decade of the 80s continues. So where does this leave the question of genre? There is one view, articulated by Noel Carroll, which sees genre as threatening to disappear in the early 70s, only to reappear beginning in the late 70s.²³ This is also the argument of Richard Martin:

The dominant tendencies of mainstream films in the post-renaissance era of the mid-seventies to the present represent a return of sorts to the ideological and stylistic (genre-based, continuity, closure) conservatism of much of the classical Hollywood cinema that prevailed prior to the industrial upheaval of the late fifties and sixties.²⁴

²² Wood (1986), p. 263.

²³ Carroll, p. 265.

²⁴ Martin, p. 28.

The problem with this line of argument is that films like *Mean Streets* do not abandon genre; they use generic structures in different ways. In addition, this point of view does not explain why the 1980s Hollywood was so bankrupt of quality compared to the 1950s, which both Martin and Carroll liken it to.

Andrew Britton, in his lengthy and invaluable essay on Hollywood in the 1980s, “Blissing Out: The Politics of Reaganite Entertainment,” puts forth the view that the generic is not what mainstream 1980s Hollywood is all about:

Genre, in fact, seems an entirely inappropriate word to describe the ‘disaster’ movie or post-*Star Wars* science fiction. Whether we think of the Jacobean theatre or the Victorian novel or Hollywood in the ‘forties and ‘fifties, it is apparent that the conventions of a genre exist in a **productive** relationship to the essential conflicts and contradictions of a culture; that is, they are both determined as conventions by those conflicts while also acting as a medium in which cultural contradiction can be articulated, dramatised, worked through. The conventions of Reaganite entertainment exhibit the very opposite of such a relationship. They function, rather, to inhibit articulation.²⁵

Thus, for Britton, genre should be a productive, not a destructive, force in generating complex thematic material. Here Britton is probably overstating the case. He is clearly trying to usurp the term genre from those that would use it to criticize a film, which is not surprising given Britton’s pro-Hollywood sentiments. This does not seem necessary. I think it is clear that genre can be used productively, something Scorsese’s use of genre from *Mean Streets* forward has shown. What begins to take over in the late 70s/early 80s is a use of genre that promotes a formulaic solipsism incapable of producing either the traditional genre masterpieces of the 40s and 50s or the generic reworkings of the 60s and

²⁵ Britton, p. 3.

70s.

All of this may seem a rather long preamble to a discussion of *The King of Comedy* itself, but it is, I believe, necessary for a consideration of what is going on in the film, for *The King of Comedy* is perhaps Scorsese's most complex film to discuss in relation to both genre and its historical moment. When the film has been discussed as a satire, it has simply been presented as a critique of the media and of the American obsession with celebrity. Of course, the film is both of those things, but it is also a great deal more.

The analysis of satire that I would like to engage with is both stylistic and thematic. As was previously mentioned, *The King of Comedy* marks a striking stylistic departure for Scorsese. Both the cinema-verite realist aesthetics (hand-held camera movement to replace editing, natural sound and lighting of location shooting) and the expressionist effects (rhythmic camera movement and cutting, color filters, asymmetrical mise-en-scene, slow-motion point-of-view shots) of the earlier work are almost entirely absent. It seems that Scorsese has retreated into the ordinary filmmaking of television and most mainstream films. Even at the level of character and performance, the creative energy appears to be missing. Instead of the tormented, anguished, violent, energetic characters of previous De Niro/Scorsese creations like Johnny Boy (*Mean Streets*), Travis Bickle (*Taxi Driver*), Jimmy Doyle (*New York, New York*), or Jake LaMotta (*Raging Bull*), in *The King of Comedy* we have Rupert Pupkin, an ordinary, untalented would-be comedian with none of the self-destructive talent of Doyle or LaMotta, nor the inner anguish of Bickle. Even more conspicuous are the supporting actors, Jerry Lewis and

Sandra Bernhard, miles away from the intense Method players of the previous films, such as Joe Pesci or Harvey Keitel. Also, the levels of profanity and violence have been decreased, to the point that this is one of the few Scorsese films that could appear uncut on, ironically, network television. In short, the film seems uninteresting, at least from a stylistic viewpoint.

However, there are a number of key scenes that break with this unobtrusive style, and though they are few, they stand out as a result. Perhaps Scorsese is applying the practice of stylistic economy for the first time. One of the most obvious of these exceptions is the long take of Rupert practicing his monologue in front of a cutout, cardboard audience in his basement. As Rupert begins the monologue, the canned laughter of a television audience starts up, and as the camera slowly pulls away from Rupert, the laughter overwhelms his voice and dominates the soundtrack. All indications are that this is non-diegetic sound (i.e. not an actual tape recorder in the room with Rupert). The question is whether it is motivated from within the mind of the character (as in a voiceover), in which case the question of diegetic/non-diegetic becomes slightly problematic, or whether it is omniscient directorial authority/commentary. This ambiguity is furthered by Scorsese's use of space in the scene. The camera slowly dollies back farther and farther until Rupert is revealed to be in an extremely large and empty room, so large and empty, in fact, that it does not seem to be part of a "realistic" approach to *mise-en-scene*. It also does not seem to be part of Rupert's fantasies, since these are typically shot, throughout the film, similar to the ordinary shot/reverse shot pattern of television. This is precisely what makes the fantasies so difficult to distinguish from the

“reality” of the film’s story. In this case, the sequence seems to be directorial authority/expressivity on the part of Scorsese, an example of the art cinema device of using style to break with and comment on the narrative.²⁶ What makes this stylistic comment so effective is that it relates to the satiric mode that Scorsese practices throughout the film. The sequence manages to show both the emptiness of Rupert’s dream and the unimportance of what he actually has to say compared to what the television technology (the canned laughter) is actually saying for him. It manages to critique the blandness of the television style by both showing it, a comedian performing in front of a cardboard mise-en-scene, and remarking on it, tracking away from and behind the action to provide distance and commentary.

The sequence in which the viewer finally gets to see and hear Rupert’s monologue complements the meaning and satire of the early “rehearsal” scene. Like the earlier scene the monologue is done in long take, breaking the usual rapid cutting of most filmmakers. However, the sequence is less obvious and overt than the rehearsal sequence, since the long take in medium long shot of the standup comedian performing his comedy routine is standard television practice. The interest of the scene is in the context in which it is situated. The sequence is in many ways the climax of the film, since it is both the moment Rupert has been waiting for and the moment the viewer has been waiting for, since it has been denied twice beforehand, first during the rehearsal scene and then right before Rupert actually records the monologue in the studio. It is this piece of elliptical narration

²⁶ Bordwell, p. 720.

in the latter scene that is particularly significant. Scorsese cuts right before Rupert starts the studio monologue and cuts back after the routine is over, even though this is the moment when Rupert gets to perform his monologue in front of a live audience. It is cut because, for Rupert, this is not the big moment. The climax of his fame is only when he appears on television, which is why Scorsese shows the sequence in video, from the perspective of a television viewer, not a film viewer. In his discussion of satire, Frank McConnell calls on Marx's theory of the twice-told tale to describe the genre:

Satire, that is, is always the twice-told tale, repeating as 'farce' what was once told as 'tragedy' or, in our terms, epic. And the point of the repetition is, like the character of the satirist himself, twofold: both to chasten us by reminding us how far we have fallen below the epic scale we try to imitate, and to suggest to us new ways of reinstituting, even in an iron time, the laws and possibilities of the age of gold.²⁷

Nowhere does this better apply than in this sequence from *The King of Comedy*. The monologue is the twice-told tale within the film itself, shown, but not entirely heard earlier, and recorded, but not shown, earlier. It is also told through video, a second hand technology within the film itself. It is if Scorsese felt the need to repeat what was epic in a satiric mode, to remind us how far not only television is from the great film tradition, but how far most other films are as well. The moment of epic triumph for Rupert is shown in an inferior technology, reflecting his lack of awareness at his own mediocrity. But at the same time, it also shows how that technology can be used to creative ends, for it is Scorsese's decision to show the sequence in video, rather than film, that gives it thematic resonance, a reinstituting, if you will, of an age of gold.

²⁷ McConnell, p. 235-236.

The last sequence I would like to talk about in-depth is the very last scene of the film, following Rupert's imprisonment and subsequent fame. Rupert is now the host of his own show and is being introduced for the first time following his release. The long take sequence begins with the camera at a high angle, looking down on the empty stage as the announcer introduces Rupert, and eventually gradually tracks in until Rupert is on stage in full close-up, the announcer still repeating his name over and over. The high angle shot, followed by elaborate camera movement in to close-up, can best be described and explained by the satirical term mock-heroic, the majesty of the technique suggesting an importance that the rest of the film has systematically shown to be hollow, empty and debased. Once again, as in the earlier sequences, Rupert is not as important as the television technology that defines him. Earlier it was the canned laughter of the rehearsal sequence, then the video technology of the performance itself, and here it is the announcer's voice, repeating how "wonderful" it is to see Rupert, who in fact just stands there, doing nothing at all. In fact, the extreme stylization of the sequence has lead some critics to question whether or not it is Rupert's fantasy, and certainly there is enough ambiguity to raise the question. However, the point raised by Scorsese in these three sequences is not only that the media and America's obsession with celebrity need to be criticized, but also, due to the formal aspects of the film itself, that the style of both television and most ordinary filmmaking are empty and vacant as well. Andrew Britton, writing on the film *E.T.* (Steven Spielberg, 1982), released at approximately the same time as *The King of Comedy*, makes the following observation:

An American cinema of which *E.T.* is characteristic prohibits that

active, critical engagement with cultural value, for which Hollywood has been, in the past, consistently remarkable, and which is one of the prerequisites of value in art.²⁸

The King of Comedy can be seen as the opposite of *E.T.* in this way (as Scorsese and Spielberg can often be seen as opposites within the contemporary American cinema), engaging with a critical exploration of the cultural value of the moment.

Although I have focused on three scenes of particular stylistic interest, for the most part, as mentioned by Robert Kolker, the film's style is flat and neutral. In spite of this, the film is far from being a consolatory entertainment, or a "fun" picture, if you will. This results in part from the continuation of many of the thematics of Scorsese's earlier work, such as the negation of the idea(l) of romance that is so central to most Hollywood entertainment, even if it is contained as a mere subplot (hence the notorious "double plot" of Hollywood cinema). *New York, New York* and *Raging Bull* focus on the impossibility of happy heterosexual relations given the inequality between the sexes inherent in patriarchal culture, a point made by both Richard Lippe and Robin Wood.²⁹ *The King of Comedy* goes even further, introducing a romantic subplot and then abandoning it near the middle of the film, proving its lack of importance. Even when Rupert's love interest, Rita, is involved in the film, it is as a status symbol, proving Rupert's fame to himself. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the fantasy sequence of Rupert and Rita's wedding on national television. For Rupert, the fantasy of the sequence is not actually marrying Rita, but in having himself affirmed by his high school principal (and by extension his

²⁸ Britton, p. 30.

²⁹ Lippe (1986), p. 95-100. Wood (1986), p. 245-258.

whole high school). This is confirmed by the fact that the fantasy ends before the wedding vows even take place, the scene ending with the satirical line, “We’ll be back to marry them right after this,” followed by a cut back to reality, such as it is. Once again, it is the technology of television itself, of the spectacle, that matters more to Rupert than the marriage itself.

Another thematic that Scorsese carries over from his two previous feature films is the distance at which the lead character is viewed. Jimmy Doyle, Jake LaMotta, and Rupert Pupkin are not likable lead characters who inspire a great deal of sympathy in the audience. Once again, in *The King of Comedy*, this thematic is extended. In *New York, New York*, the character of Francine is used to counteract the harshness of the Jimmy Doyle character; the characters of Joey and Vicky LaMotta in *Raging Bull* serve a similar purpose. In *The King of Comedy*, the supporting character of Masha is quite obviously crazy and difficult to relate to. Even Jerry Langford, whom Rupert idolizes, is seen as undeserving of this attention, and is so unsympathetic a character that he remains unlikable even after his kidnapping. It is this rigorous distance and the failure to provide the audience with a traditionally “likable” character that makes the film as cold as it is, and, one suspects, why it was disliked by most reviewers at the time of release. This coldness is also crucial to the success of the film’s satire, and Scorsese is to be admired for his uncompromising characterizations.

Along with the thematics of anti-romance and unempathetic characterization, the film is uncomfortable for the audience primarily due to its heavy use of the emotion of embarrassment, a theme that has been discussed by both William Ian Miller and Timothy

Corrigan. The emotion of embarrassment has been used by Scorsese before, most effectively in *Taxi Driver* during the famous shot in which Scorsese moves his camera away from his protagonist as he is getting rejected on the phone, unable or unwilling to watch the humiliation. In *The King of Comedy*, however, Scorsese stays and watches, forcing the viewer to witness the embarrassment. As Corrigan points out, this has a contagious effect on the audience:

For the viewer, the overriding effect of this uncomfortable twisting of comedy is a kind of continuous embarrassment . . . In general, embarrassment can be described as both a psychological and social recognition of and a response to the 'inappropriate' claims of the individual or private group on accepted cultural and public regulations and boundaries . . . Thus, for viewers identifying with the embarrassing party, it becomes a kind of social invasion and contagion.³⁰

In effect, Scorsese is using the emotion of embarrassment as an assault or attack on the audience, in much the same way as the violence of his early films assaulted the viewer. But perhaps the emotion of embarrassment is even more of a confrontation with the viewer than violence; remember, Scorsese moved away from Travis Bickle's embarrassment, not his violence. In fact, *Taxi Driver* was a box-office success, partly, as Robert Ray has argued, because it was able to appeal to the "naive" audience, who could read the film as another in the *Death Wish* cycle of vigilante films.³¹ With *The King of Comedy*, this "double" reading is not really possible, leading to its commercial failure. It is not possible because the emotion of embarrassment, as opposed to the spectacle of violence, is not something an audience looking for traditional Hollywood "entertainment"

³⁰ Corrigan, p. 207.

³¹ Ray, p. 351.

wants to experience. Thus, somewhat ironically, given its PG level content, *The King of Comedy* is perhaps Scorsese's harshest film, the hard-edged satire of an artist at the end of an era.

In the end, what distinguishes *The King of Comedy* is its oppositional mode of satire. The number of great satires that attack both the social and aesthetic values of a culture are extremely rare, especially within the American cinema, and this makes the film of even more value.³² Also, given this period of American cinema, this oppositional mode is needed in order to create a film of value:

Any modern popular American cinema of value will have to be in some sense explicitly controversial and oppositional. It is no longer possible to work with radical incisiveness on the structural conflicts and tensions of American bourgeois culture under cover of the prevailing sense of confidence and security which accompanied the emergence and consolidation of American hegemony.³³

Unlike *Mean Streets* and other earlier Scorsese films, by the time of *The King of Comedy* there was no longer an American film culture that encouraged or even allowed for exciting work. Again, it is worth mentioning the relation between genre and style in the film. If *Mean Streets* offers some sense of alternative due to its exhilarating use of style to counteract its disturbing thematics, *The King of Comedy* offers no such relief. The audience is not only trapped with obnoxious, unappealing and empty characters, it is also given a style that turns the motion picture into a television screen. One half-expects the

³² Examples that come to mind would be Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove: or, How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love the Bomb* (1963) and perhaps Robert Altman's *MASH* (1970) and *Nashville* (1975). The supreme examples in terms of the world cinema would be Jean Renoir's *The Rules of the Game* (1939) and Jean-Luc Godard's *Weekend* (1967).

³³ Britton, p. 42.

final credit to read, like Godard's *Weekend*, "Fin du Cinéma."

This sense of American cinema's dead end is borne out by Scorsese's following films, *After Hours* and *The Color of Money*, both of which "betray a certain exhaustion of imagination" or "a willing surrender of imagination".³⁴ In particular, *The Color of Money*, although not exactly a bad film, is about as uninteresting as anything that has come out of Hollywood in the 1980s. It is clear that even Scorsese was not exempt from the mediocrity of the moment. When Scorsese comments that, "*The King of Comedy* was right on the edge for us; we couldn't go any further at that time,"³⁵ the collective "we" he is using cannot help but have connotations for not only himself and his collaborators, but for the New Hollywood as well.

³⁴ Kolker, p. 235.

³⁵ Scorsese on Scorsese, p. 92.

Chapter Three

In this chapter, I would like to skip forward in time once again to discuss Scorsese's *GoodFellas*, which was released in 1990. I have chosen this film both because of its quality and because I believe it belongs to another period of transition in the history of the American cinema. This transitional phase can be linked historically to two opposing trends: the formulaic "Reaganite entertainment" that I spoke of in the last chapter, and the emerging "independent" cinema that begins to develop during this same period of the 1980s. I will argue that this independent movement, by the time of the release of *GoodFellas*, had exerted a noticeable change in the generic as well as the stylistic system of Hollywood, a change that is reflected in this film.

First, however, I would like to discuss briefly the three Scorsese feature films released in between *The King of Comedy* and *GoodFellas*. The first and most important of these would be *After Hours* (1985). Although I would agree with Robert Kolker that the film is a "minor work" ¹ in and of itself (which is one reason why I have chosen not to discuss it at length), it is important in the history of the independent cinema movement. After his inability to get his project *The Last Temptation of Christ* off the ground, Scorsese turned to this small, independent production in an effort to recover from the fall of the "director's cinema" of the 70s. What results in *After Hours* is a fairly entertaining and even at times disconcerting black comedy, with some stylistic flourishes, such as an early shot in which the camera follows a set of keys being thrown out a window (which can perhaps be attributed partly to the fact that this film is Scorsese's first collaboration with Fassbinder's longtime cinematographer Michael Ballhaus, who would go on to work

on Scorsese's three subsequent features, including *GoodFellas*). But, like many of the early films of the American independent cinema, it lacks substance and in the end is relatively empty (relative, that is, to the films of the 70s). The problem lies in the conventional nature of much of the film's style (with a few exceptions) and with its generic and class affinities. Barry Keith Grant has called the film an example of the "yuppie horror" cycle that occurred during the 1980s.² The problem is that the film fails to interrogate sufficiently this yuppie mentality by not being critical enough of its lead character. Instead, he is seen as a victim of anarchic forces of chaos in the city. The only solution is to run and hide, or maybe move to the suburbs. What makes the film of historical interest is its place at the beginning of the independent movement in 1980s American cinema. *After Hours* won the Best Picture prize at the first Independent Spirit Awards in 1985; Scorsese also split Best Director honors with Joel Coen. Thus, Scorsese can be seen as being at the vanguard of a movement that, by the end of the decade, would have a major influence on Hollywood cinema, including Scorsese's own work.

If *After Hours* is by Scorsese's previous standards a minor work, it is a masterpiece compared to Scorsese's next film, *The Color of Money* (1986), which is without doubt Scorsese's worst film. Again, given the general climate in Hollywood at the time, it is perhaps not surprising that Scorsese made such a conventional, formulaic work. The film is indicative of the 80s in many ways: the presence of star power, both old (Newman) and new (Cruise), in order to sell the film, along with the fact that the film is a sequel (albeit a delayed one) to the Robert Rossen film *The Hustler* (1961). This use of the sequel to guarantee an audience is quite typical of the time period (and of cinema in

¹ Kolker, p. 234.

² Grant, p. 280.

general since this time period).³ Any interest in *The Color of Money* comes from its typicality within the context of the 80s, and its difference in the context of Scorsese's work as a whole. Instead of critically examining his rather conventional source material (as he would later do with *Cape Fear* [1991]), Scorsese simply gives the viewer a straightforward sequel, with thematics out of a *Rocky* film. The old pro trains the young contender only to be betrayed as the youngster becomes jaded, leading to a final confrontation. That Scorsese does not show this finale only proves how uninteresting it actually is. The point has already been made: the audience is supposed to favor Newman's Fast Eddie to Cruise's young Vincent. Stylistically, the film is also a major break from Scorsese's previous work, showing little of the expressiveness of the earlier work nor the discipline and control of the stylistics of *The King of Comedy*.

Scorsese's next film was *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), a project once cancelled back in 1983. The film was a critical success despite the various fundamentalist protests that killed the film at the box office, but I do not believe the film represents a major achievement for Scorsese. The film is Scorsese's contribution to the Biblical epic genre popularized in the late 50s/early 60s in Hollywood with such films as *The Ten Commandments* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1956), *Ben-Hur* (William Wyler, 1959), and *King of Kings* (Nicolas Ray, 1961). And although within this context, as well as the context of contemporary fundamentalism, the film may seem bold and daring, it is still anchored to the epic genre to such an extent that the film seriously lacks energy and is located outside history. Mikhail Bakhtin makes the following comments on the epic:

An absolute epic distance separates the epic world from contemporary

³ This point seems self-evident, but examples would be Stallone's *Rocky* and *Rambo* films, plus the horror series *Friday the 13th*. Although this practice slowed somewhat during the 90s, there are still examples: the horror trilogy (thus far) *Scream* and the series of *Alien* films, to name just two.

reality, that is, from the time in which the singer (the author and his audience) lives . . . (It is) a world of fathers and founders of families, a world of 'firsts' and 'bests'. ⁴

The epic belongs to a "valorized temporal category" ⁵ that is cut off from the present.

This ahistorical problem is especially present when dealing with the Biblical epic, since it deals with **the** Father, **the** first and **the** best. Despite Scorsese's slightly revisionist take on the subject in treating Christ as more human than God, his ultimate point of view coheres with the Biblical story of Christ dying for the sins of humankind. What is even more problematic as far as the epic is concerned is that it robs a work of its energy by being closed off:

Precisely because it is walled off from all subsequent times, the epic past is absolute and complete. It is as closed as a circle; inside it everything is finished, already over. There is no place in the epic world for any openendedness, indecision, indeterminacy. ⁶

While it could be argued that Scorsese tries to inject some indecision into the epic form with his interpretation of Christ's temptations, this indecision is largely reflected through characterization, not through the generic form of the film. Although there may be temporary indecision in terms of character, there is none in terms of the conclusion of the film, which is treated in heroic epic mode. Despite an admirable effort, and at times a striking looking film (which is characteristic of just about all of Scorsese's output), Scorsese is ultimately limited by the generic form he is working in. What remains most interesting about the film is its reception.

After *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Scorsese made the short "Life Lessons" as part of a trilogy called *New York Stories* (1989), with the two other sections directed by

⁴ Bakhtin, p. 13.

⁵ Bakhtin, p. 15.

⁶ Bakhtin, p. 16.

Francis Ford Coppola and Woody Allen. After this, he went to work on *GoodFellas*. However, the year before, 1989, proved to be a pivotal one in American cinema. It is in this year that the independent movement of the 1980s can be said to have reached its first high point with the release of a number of important works: Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*, Steven Soderbergh's *sex, lies and videotape* (the winner of the Palme d'Or at Cannes), Gus Van Sant's *Drugstore Cowboy*, and Michael Moore's *Roger and Me*. For the first time since the late 1970s, American film seemed exciting once again. And although I am not looking to make any direct causal links between this resurgence and the artistic and commercial success of *GoodFellas*, it is of interest that the coincidence exists.

This independent cinema movement that I have been discussing has received some attention of late from critics and theorists. For the most part, the criticism has been somewhat pessimistic in tone, doubting and questioning how truly "independent" the independent cinema actually is. Chuck Kleinhans, for instance, states the following:

The rest of filmmaking exists below, beyond, subordinate to Hollywood. 'Independent', then, has to be understood as a relational term – independent in relation to the dominant system – rather than taken as indicating a practice that is totally free-standing and autonomous.⁷

Peter Biskind writes along similar but even more critical lines:

Without a counterculture to nourish them, without a vigorous set of oppositional values, the independents are independent in name only, always at risk of being gobbled up and corrupted by the studios.⁸

This caution and skepticism is to be understood and appreciated. This seems especially true when one considers the rise of the so-called "major independent", the Weinstein

⁷ Kleinhans, p. 308.

⁸ Biskind, p.435.

brothers' Miramax, which often makes independent cinema seem like "the world according to Harvey and Bob."⁹ However, I believe this discussion of independent cinema has been one-sided, perhaps because of the focus on commercial and institutional relationships, rather than artistic practice. There has been plenty of concern over the corruption of the independents by the major studios, and this concern includes by extension the corruption of artistic practice as well. But what about the influence the independents have had on the studios? Is the influence all one way, or has the dialogue between the two produced changes on both sides? When looking at the cinema of the 90s as compared to the cinema of the 80s in America, it seems difficult to ignore the positive influence that the independent cinema and its directors have had on the American film scene.

When looking at the case of Scorsese and *GoodFellas*, the issue becomes quite complex due to the interlocking connections involved. On the one hand, *GoodFellas* is a major studio release (Warner Brothers) of a well-known genre, the gangster film. But it is also a stylistically excessive film in terms of technique (I will discuss this in full shortly), and mixes genres in a way similar to *Mean Streets*. Is this due to the influence of the independent cinema, whose success had an influence on what the studios would allow, similar to the situation of the late 60s, if to a lesser extent? I would answer partially yes. But the influence is more multi-layered than this, for the independent cinema had its own influences as well. The most prominent of these influences would be the "director's cinema" of the 1970s. Thus, if one argues that Scorsese was influenced by the independent cinema of the 80s, in a way Scorsese is merely being influenced by himself. It makes more sense to say that the historical moment in American cinema had changed,

⁹ Rosenbaum, p. 159.

in large part due to the independent scene, and that *GoodFellas* represents an example of this historical moment, as well as being a comeback film of sorts for Scorsese.

At this point, I would like to discuss the film itself. As I have with *Mean Streets* and *The King of Comedy*, I would like to concentrate on the intersection of style and genre, and how this interaction influences the thematics of the film. The first context in which *GoodFellas* needs to be situated is with the gangster film, one of the most prominent of all American film genres. Robert Warshow, writing in 1948, compared the classical gangster film (*The Public Enemy* (1931), *Little Caesar* (1931), *Scarface* (1932)) to classical tragedy, with the gangster protagonist as tragic hero. The genre also can be seen as a critique of the American capitalist success myth, of its predatory nature and its impossibility:

One is **punished** for success. This is our intolerable dilemma: that failure is a kind of death and success is evil and dangerous, is – ultimately – impossible.¹⁰

Thus there seemed to be something “unAmerican” about the gangster film genre:

The gangster speaks for us, expressing that part of the American psyche which rejects the qualities and demands of modern life, which rejects ‘Americanism’ itself.¹¹

These same tensions of the gangster film as described by Warshow were still of importance nearly 25 years later with the release of the first gangster, as well as New Hollywood, blockbuster: Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Godfather* (1972).

The Godfather is an ideal film to compare to *GoodFellas* in terms of how their respective directors handle the gangster genre. The opening line of Coppola’s film, “I believe in America,” sets up the major thematic of both the first film and its sequel, that

¹⁰ Warshow, p. 133.

¹¹ Warshow, p. 130.

of the parallels between the mob and “legitimate” business. This has led to the widespread conclusion that the films are an implicit attack on American capitalism, which to some extent they are, especially the second film:

Godfather II works out on the level of human relations Marx’s insight that capitalism, even at its best, must destroy human life and associations to exist. Thus, the more vigorously bourgeois society strives to achieve the ideals it has set for itself, the more destructive and corrupt it becomes. And this contradiction is most clearly visible in American gangsterdom, the perfect microcosm of American capitalism.¹²

However, as admirable as the two films are, there is a problem with this vision of *The Godfather* and *The Godfather Part II* as radical works attacking American society, and I believe these problems come down to Coppola’s approach to both genre and style. *The Godfather* and its sequel are in many ways epic films, lengthy, conventionally filmed dramas detailing a past period, obsessively concerned with fathers and sons, with the beginnings of family. While one may read *The Godfather Part II* as a critique of America, it could also be seen as a critique of Michael Corleone, who has lost and destroyed his family by not following in the footsteps of his father, with whom he is paralleled throughout the film. *The Godfather*’s conventionality in terms of genre can be contrasted with Scorsese’s *GoodFellas*.

Although *GoodFellas* is recognizable as a gangster film, and is a part of a mini-revival in the genre that occurred in 1990 with the release of Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Godfather Part III* and The Coen Brothers’ *Miller’s Crossing*, it is different in many ways from the epics of Coppola. *The Godfather* films concentrate on a mafia family through the generations, a trilogy about fathers and sons, that finishes as a tragedy, like the classic gangster films of the past (*Public Enemy*, *Scarface*, *Little Caesar*). With

¹² Hess, p. 89.

GoodFellas, the emphasis has shifted away from the top echelon of the mob to street level gangsters like Henry Hill, an Irish-Italian who can never become a “made man” because of his Irish roots.

This dislocation of storytelling emphasis removes the film from the epic world, while at the same time Scorsese is able to include the more radical insights that the classic gangster film’s thematics revealed. The classic gangster film is able to draw parallels between the criminal world and the world of capitalism, a thematic that Coppola draws on as well. This is certainly present in Scorsese’s film, but because he removes the film from the top of the mafia family to its minor functionaries, the film’s critique runs much deeper. Henry and Karen Hill are presented as a typical middle-class couple, shown as going through the typical middle-class trials and tribulations that are the focus of family melodrama: the idealized courting ritual; the early happiness of marriage; the adultery; the jealousy; the arguments as the marriage “matures”. As a result they are highly accessible characters for the typical mainstream audience, despite the fact that they are a parody of this audience because they are involved in the criminal world. Because the film locates its drama within the middle-class, highly materialistic world of the typical mob member, the parallels between “regular” middle-class life and the life of mob members are heightened. *GoodFellas* works against the epic world by having it “brought low, represented on a plane equal with contemporary life, in an everyday environment, in the low language of contemporaneity.”¹³ However, if Scorsese was able to have the epic “brought low” only through shifting the emphasis to a lower-level gangster, he would not have accomplished a great deal. Scorsese starts with the gangster

¹³ Bakhtin, p.21.

film context, but also includes a number of other important generic modes in order to enrich the text. This has an additional effect on both the style and thematics of the film as well.

One important genre that Scorsese invokes is the musical, in particular the MGM musical of the classical period. Although the film is not strictly a musical in that the characters do not sing and dance, the soundtrack works in a way very similar to that of the musical. In fact, *GoodFellas* is perhaps more of a musical than Scorsese's *New York, New York*:

Richard Dyer identifies the distinctive 'product' of the classic MGM style musical as feeling – abundance, energy, community. Dyer demonstrates how these qualities of the musical provide imaginary solutions to a real world of scarcity, exhaustion, dreariness, manipulation and fragmentation. *New York, New York* singularly lacks this 'feel-good' factor, does not attempt a 'utopian solution' to the problems of living in a real social world.¹⁴

This feeling of energy and abundance is very prominent in *GoodFellas*, and is portrayed in large measure through the use of music, especially in the first half of the film, before Henry first goes to jail. The primarily light, jazzy tunes suggest an idealized time and place, create the feeling of utopia, as Henry's voiceover confirms:

It was a glorious time. And wise guys were all over the place. It was before Apalachin and before Crazy Joe decided to take on a boss and start a war. It was when I met the world.¹⁵

The following scenes of community within the mafia and of Henry's courtship and marriage to Karen enhance this feeling of the classic romantic musical, where the problems of the "suckers", as Henry calls them, are very much imaginary. Of course, the film's characters do not keep this mood throughout, and by the end the feeling of

¹⁴ Phillips, p. 138.

¹⁵ Scorsese and Pileggi, p. 13.

exhaustion prevails, which is reflected in the switch to rock and roll music on the soundtrack.¹⁶ But nevertheless, the energy and pulse provided by the music carries the film and the audience along to the conclusion, giving the film more of a musical feel than any Scorsese feature since *Mean Streets*.

Of course, in a film about gangsters, in which a great deal of violence is shown in graphic detail, the inclusion of elements of the upbeat musical genre cannot help but be comedic and potentially satiric. The opening sequence of the film provides an example: after a scene of grisly violence in which Tommy (Joe Pesci) stabs a man repeatedly in the stomach and Jimmy (Robert De Niro) proceeds to shoot him several times, Henry closes the trunk with the line (in voiceover): "As far back as I can remember I always wanted to be a gangster."¹⁷ At this time, the upbeat, jazzy rendition of "Rags to Riches" by Tony Bennett begins to play on the soundtrack. As Richard Lippe has pointed out, this opening sequence establishes the uneven and uneasy mood of the film.¹⁸ It is this tonality that is the film's most striking feature. This unease concerning genre is connected with the style of the film, as this opening sequence demonstrates. The graphic violence of the scene is countered by three specific features of style. First, the red colour filter, although presumably coming from the tail light within the narrative space, is so bright and dominant as to break with any sort of realism. This is combined with the freeze-frame as the voiceover begins, followed by the upbeat music. This use of genre and style has effects on the themes and meanings of the film, as I will discuss.

¹⁶ It is important not to regard the switch in music as merely a way in which the film just marks the passage of time. Playing The Rolling Stones' "Gimme Shelter" has a much different effect than playing, for example, The Beatles' "Here Comes the Sun," which would also have marked a passage in time.

¹⁷ Scorsese and Pileggi, p. 4.

¹⁸ Lippe (1996), p. 16.

The use of comedy in the film is often of a satiric nature, and is in some ways similar to the use of satire in *The King of Comedy*, although it is not as sustained or as rigorous. The opening sequence is perhaps the best example in the film of satire, considering that it is a flashforward to a pivotal scene that will happen halfway through the film. When this scene is finally presented in its sequential order, there is an odd doubling effect similar to Scorsese's use of satire in *The King of Comedy*. What should be (and to some extent still is) a major dramatic moment in the film is undercut by its inclusion in the opening of the film. Also, it has now been positioned within the context of normality (having to go to Tommy's mother's to get a shovel, and enjoying a meal while the body is still outside in the car trunk). It is this use of comedy that breaks down the epic nature of the gangster film even further:

It is precisely laughter that destroys the epic, and in general destroys any hierarchical (distancing and valorized) distance . . . Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell, look into its center, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it.¹⁹

The use of phrases like doubting, taking apart, exposing and examining a work of art through comedy explains why *GoodFellas* has been described as "almost Brechtian."²⁰ Genres like the musical or the comedy, when combined with a genre like the gangster film, produce an oddity that provides an opportunity for different meanings to be generated. These different meanings are possible not only because of the generic mixing in and of itself, but because this genre mixing opens up possibilities in terms of style.

¹⁹ Bakhtin, p. 23.

²⁰ Lippe (1996), p.16.

In order to discuss the use of style in *GoodFellas*, I would like to focus again on the historical moment of the film. It is interesting to compare changes in a director's style over a period of time.²¹ *The King of Comedy*, for instance, marked a striking stylistic departure for Scorsese, which I believe was caused by the fall of the "director's cinema" in the early 1980s, with the film becoming a satire that reflected the period. *GoodFellas* marks another change in Scorsese's style, but this time in the opposite direction. Instead of his style becoming more restrained in relation to his previous work, as was the case in *The King of Comedy*, with *GoodFellas* Scorsese's style becomes more overt and pronounced than his films of the mid-to-late 80s. This is not to say that there are not stylistic differences between *GoodFellas* and earlier Scorsese works such as *Mean Streets*, *Taxi Driver*, *Raging Bull*, etc. Clearly there are. What I would like to do here is look at the stylization in *GoodFellas* and then comment on its meaning and significance.

As Richard Lippe has pointed out, the overt stylization of the film starts from the film's opening pre-credit sequence. Throughout the film, there are many trademark Scorsese techniques: use of slow-motion, camera movement combined with long take sequences (in particular the Copacabana sequence), use of colour filters (predominantly red), voice-over narration (though in this case it is at times doubled), and, as mentioned, the use of rhythmic music to complement the images and/or editing. In addition, Scorsese adds another technique that becomes an ongoing motif in the film: the use of the freeze-frame. This technique is used at the end of the opening sequence and then repeatedly throughout the rest of the film (nine times in total), in every case accompanied by voiceover narration. This use of the freeze-frame provides an opportunity for Henry to

²¹ This is of particular interest when discussing filmmakers who have worked in other countries as well as Hollywood: Fritz Lang, Jean Renoir, Max Ophuls, etc. However, given the radical changes that occurred in

explain events to the viewer, as the film is momentarily “paused.” But this also distances the viewer to a certain extent, as the freeze-frame cannot help but call attention to itself and to the act of storytelling. Scorsese, in one of the many overt authorial moments, also makes use of a montage sequence of dead bodies, with Henry’s mundane recollection of the events offset by the use of the piano exit from the pop song “Layla.”

It is the ending of the film (approximately the last fifteen minutes) where the overt stylization reaches its zenith, as Lippe has pointed out:

The stylization of the film’s concluding scenes complements the opening credits. In both instances, Scorsese is playful with the material and undercuts the seriousness of the film’s tone.

The conclusion starts with a diner conversation between Henry and Jimmy. As the scene progresses, the background begins to distort, a result of a simultaneous slow zoom/dolly back, even though the characters remain stationary. This shot begins the stylistic abandon of the conclusion, which includes Henry rising from his place in the diegetic world (the witness stand) and walking towards the camera, addressing the audience directly.

Another non-diegetic moment occurs in one of the last shots of the film, a non-diegetic insert of the character of Tommy (long ago dead in the narrative of the story) firing a pistol at the camera/audience.²² In these concluding sequences, as in the opening, style and genre play upon one another. Instead of a conventional ending, in which the gangster is punished for his evil ways (and perhaps repents them) by being killed or going to jail, thus restoring moral order, Henry goes to a middle-class suburb. Of course, for Henry, this is a prison too, as is confirmed by the sound of a jail cell door (instead of a regular

Hollywood from the 70s to the 80s, Scorsese may have felt that he **was** in another country.

²² These moments are discussed by both Lippe (1996), p. 16 and Stern, p. 3.

door) closing at the film's conclusion. Henry, when addressing the viewer, does not repent his lifestyle. Instead, he bemoans its loss:

When I was broke I would go out and rob some more. We ran everything. We paid off cops. We paid off lawyers. We paid off judges. Everybody had their hands out. Everything was for the taking. And now it's all over.²³

Perhaps the most unconventional shot in the film is the one that follows Henry's final comments: the Godardian non-diegetic insert of Tommy firing a gun at the camera.

Instead of answering all the questions and closing off his text, this shot keeps it open, or even reopens it in other directions. Why is the shot there? I read it as an ironic commentary on Henry's nostalgia for his mafia life, showing the violence that came with it. But because it is outside the story world, it remains fairly ambiguous.²⁴ As Lesley Stern observes: "When it comes to the end of a Scorsese film, you can usually expect a degree of critical consternation, or even downright hostility."²⁵ This is certainly the case with *GoodFellas* and its highly self-reflexive ending. If, as Stern suggests, "cinematic desire, in Scorsese, can't be easily extricated from the desire to be a gangster,"²⁶ then the desire to be a gangster cannot be easily extricated from the satirical realm.

So far I have purposely discussed the use of genre and style in *GoodFellas* and only touched briefly on the film's thematics. I would now like to turn to the film's themes and meanings in light of the film's treatment of genre and style. I have touched on the broad anti-materialism theme that is present in the film. In many ways, Henry and Karen Hill are a typical upper middle-class bourgeois couple, with all the materialistic concerns

²³ Scorsese and Pileggi, p. 131.

²⁴ See Stern, p. 2, who links this shot with the "cinema of attractions" of early cinema, as described by Tom Gunning.

²⁵ Stern, p. 6.

²⁶ Stern, p. 10.

that go with that class. This is emphasized throughout the film. Henry is able to seduce Karen through material means: he is able to get a front row seat at the Copacabana while others wait in line, impressing Karen by handing out twenty dollar bills in rapid succession. This scene is accompanied by a long take Steadicam shot that has a similar seductive effect on the audience, as Stern points out.²⁷ Material comforts provide the sole meaning of the couple's existence, and provide them with an excuse to go along with criminality. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the Christmas sequence. After Jimmy has given Henry some money from the Lufthansa heist, Henry comes home announcing, "I got the most expensive tree they had."²⁸ After showing a typical materialistic bourgeois Christmas at the Hill's, Scorsese cuts to the murder of Stacks Edwards. After the murder, the scene is shown again, from another angle and in slow motion, this time accompanied by the same Christmas music used in the previous domestic scene. Once again, the doubled scene works as a distancing effect, critically commenting on the link between bourgeois home life and murder. This critique of materialism cannot help but have historical resonance. Although the film takes place in the 70s, it was released just after the conclusion of the Reagan administration, an era of "trickle-down" economics in which the interests of the upper classes and their material well-being were put at the top of the list. I do not wish to suggest a direct cause-and-effect relation, but the connection is present nonetheless.

A similar thematic is the critical view of marriage and romance in the film, a theme that has received attention from Scorsese in his previous work. In one of the more striking cuts in the film, Scorsese shows Karen hiding a bloody gun in a milk box,

²⁷ Stern, p. 9.

²⁸ Scorsese and Pileggi, p. 95.

followed by Henry's heel coming down on a wine glass, completing their Jewish wedding ceremony. With this one Eisenstein-like editing move, Scorsese shows how male violence is a precursor, almost, in fact, a prerequisite, to marriage in American culture. The following depiction of their marriage is similarly cynical. After a happy honeymoon period, they have a couple of children. Soon after, Henry nonchalantly announces to the audience, in voiceover: "Saturday night was for wives, but Friday night at the Copa was always for the girlfriends."²⁹ Here, adultery is seen as a typical part of bourgeois marriage, which, in fact, it is. This is followed by scenes of domestic violence (not perhaps physical, but definitely emotional) in which the two children watch. (Scorsese shows a similar child's point of view shot in *Raging Bull* and later on in *Casino* [1995]). At the conclusion of the film, titles come up informing us that, "In 1989 Henry and Karen Hill separated after twenty-five years of marriage."³⁰ The film's logic does not make this revelation surprising: the marriage was based on a lifestyle afforded to them by the mob; when the mob leaves their life, so does the lifestyle. Thus, the marriage ends. In *GoodFellas*, Scorsese continues the anti-romance trend prevalent in all of his work, rigorously opposing the mainstream of Hollywood production.

Connected to these two themes of materialism and bourgeois marriage in the film is the issue of class. In this film, class is present as an explicit issue for perhaps the first time in Scorsese's work. Of course, it was never absent. Class is never entirely absent, however much it may be denied or suppressed. In this film, however, it takes on crucial importance. The bourgeois materialistic lifestyle is held up to be the ideal in American society. However, this ideal is cut off from the vast majority of its members. No matter

²⁹ Scorsese and Pileggi, p. 60.

³⁰ Scorsese and Pileggi, p. 131.

that the “ideal” itself is empty and vacant, as the film itself shows. The working class background of Henry, which is shown at the beginning of the film, helps produce the gangster he becomes. Henry makes the following observation after he quits school to work full-time for the mob: “How could I go back to school after that and pledge allegiance to the flag and sit through good government bullshit?”³¹ Of course, for a member of the working class like himself, it is “government bullshit.” The connection to class is made explicit by Karen’s voiceover:

It got to be normal. None of it seemed like crimes. It was more like Henry was enterprising and that he and the guys were making a few bucks hustling, while the other guys were sitting on their asses waiting for hand-outs. Our husbands weren’t brain surgeons. They were blue-collar guys. The only way they could make extra money, real extra money, was to go out and cut a few corners.³²

The rhetoric of this passage is very similar to conservative Republican rhetoric heard in United States politics during the 80s (and today as well), especially the line “waiting for hand-outs.” Henry comes from working-class roots, but once he moves into the middle-class through crime, both he and Karen adopt the ideology fully. Henry describes his philosophy as follows:

For us to live any other way was nuts. Uh, to us those goody-good people who worked shitty jobs for bum paychecks and took the subway to work every day, and worried about their bills, were dead. I mean they were suckers. They had no balls.³³

It should not be surprising that if Henry had no serious moral qualms about going along with murder to keep the money coming in, he would not feel any sympathy towards the working class roots from which he came. Again, his philosophy is consistent with the

³¹ Scorsese and Pileggi, p. 10.

³² Scorsese and Pileggi, p. 47.

³³ Scorsese and Pileggi, p. 20-21.

Reagan era he is reflecting, even if Henry is at least half-aware of the emptiness of that philosophy, especially at the conclusion, where he is bored by the middle-class suburbia that is seen as the ideal.

The last major thematic I would like to discuss is the use of violence in the film, and it is perhaps fitting that I finally discuss this subject, given its centrality in Scorsese's cinema. The issue of violence in Scorsese's films has been controversial at least as far back as *Taxi Driver's* violent shootout. With that film in particular, Scorsese was accused of irresponsibility in his depiction of screen violence.³⁴ The violence was seen as excessive, and the carnage was thought to be glamourized by making the lead character a hero. This judgment has been rightfully challenged by critics who insist that the ending is meant to be ironic.³⁵ The issue of excessive violence was also brought up in relation to *Raging Bull's* brutal fight sequences and scenes of domestic abuse, and with *GoodFellas* the issue arises yet again. One of Scorsese's defenders on this issue is Robin Wood:

[One strategy for showing screen violence] is to make it as explicit, ugly, painful and disturbing as possible so that it becomes quite impossible for anyone other than an advanced criminal psychotic to enjoy it. [This] is Scorsese's method, and he cannot be faulted for it in the recent work.³⁶

As a defense, this is clearly inadequate. While Scorsese does provide distance and irony in his depictions of violence, I do not believe one has to be "an advanced criminal psychotic" to enjoy it. I believe that Scorsese actually positions the spectator to enjoy it, or at least partially identify with it, if only to question their own response afterwards.

³⁴ For merely one of numerous examples of this critical perspective, see Farber and Patterson.

³⁵ This is the argument of Robert Ray: "*Taxi Driver* suggested, however, that the myth of 'regeneration through violence' that lay behind the Right cycle had become inapplicable in modern society. As a solution, it was madness." (p.359) But Ray also acknowledges that the film played to both audiences, the "naïve" and the "ironic," helping account for its box-office success.

³⁶ Wood (1998)(b), p. 456.

This occurs at many points in the film, but two instances come to mind. The first would be Henry's brutal beating of Karen's next door neighbour. The audience's point of view and identification are clearly with Henry: he is defending his girlfriend against someone who has assaulted her. This identification is loosened by the extreme and savage nature of the revenge, and further questioned, as I have mentioned earlier, by the cut from the hiding of the gun to the wedding ceremony. But it is never broken entirely, since the scene is played out to give the audience a vicarious thrill. As Wood himself has pointed out: "It is tension (communicated very directly to the spectator) between identification and repudiation that gives the films their uniquely disturbing quality."³⁷ It is this tension that is crucial to the film's success: a moralistic polemic against violence would not be as effective. The film's interest lies in its contradictions.

The second scene of violence I would like to discuss is the beating of Billy Batts. Once again, sympathy for the victim of the violence is not offered. And while Tommy and Jimmy, who do the actual violence, are both supporting figures revealed to be psychotic, the style of the scene works to position the viewer in favor of the attack. While music plays prominently on the soundtrack ("Atlantis" by Donovan), Batts is thrown to the ground and repeatedly stomped by Jimmy and Tommy, who are photographed at a low angle, stressing their dynamism. In addition, the music acts as a rhythmic counterpart to the scene. Indeed, the scene resembles, at least briefly, an MGM musical number more than a "realistic" dramatic confrontation, although not in the obviously theatrical way Stanley Kubrick stages the "Singin' in the Rain" sequence in *A Clockwork Orange* (1971). This identification is seriously qualified by the later doubled sequence that I discussed earlier in which a badly beaten Batts is stabbed repeatedly by

³⁷ Wood (1998)(b), p. 454.

Tommy, and by Tommy's later actions, such as shooting and murdering the innocent bartender Spider. Nevertheless, Scorsese's use of genre and style in the film works to unsettle the viewer in a way a straightforward indictment would not. As Richard Lippe summarizes:

GoodFellas isn't a comedy and it isn't a 'gangster film' in the conventional sense. Given the film's emphasis on the Liotta character who remains, despite everything, something of the All-American boy, *GoodFellas* can be taken as a heavily ironic but sobering version of the American success story. The film is often funny, energetic, immensely entertaining and an example of cinematic virtuosity.³⁸

That the adjectives "sobering", "funny", "energetic" and "entertaining" can all be used to describe one particular film shows how Scorsese uses genre to change tones, to unsettle rather than comfort the viewer. The "cinematic virtuosity" that Lippe describes is connected to this use of genre, using the style of different genres along with his own techniques to create the disturbances of his film.

I have argued in this chapter for the relevance and importance of *GoodFellas*. To conclude, I would like to compare the film to Scorsese's earlier *Mean Streets*. Although I believe *GoodFellas* is a fascinating and provocative film, I do not believe it is on the same level of achievement as the earlier film. I would argue that this has less to do with Scorsese's diminishing talent (as many critics have claimed) than with the historical moment. I have noted the changes in the cinema of the 90s brought about by the influence of the 80s independent cinema movement. This movement allowed for more experimentation in studio films as it began to infiltrate the market, helping give Scorsese the freedom not afforded him in the 80s. However, this movement remained largely cinematic compared to the changes occurring in American cinema and society in the late

³⁸ Lippe (1996), p. 16-18.

60s/early 70s. No doubt the rising independent movement is connected to problems and divisions in America resulting from the Reagan era. But socially and politically, this change is much less dramatic than the crisis of twenty years before. Thus, *GoodFellas* does not create the same unease in its thematics as *Mean Streets*. *GoodFellas* has much more of a generic base than *Mean Streets*, however much it may complicate the gangster film. It does not touch on the problematic themes and contradictions of the buddy film and the film noir, like *Mean Streets*. This is also reflected in the style of the two films: in spite of the many stylistic flourishes of *GoodFellas*, they remain just that, flourishes or instances. These are mostly concentrated in the film's opening and closing sequences. For instance, the use of the freeze-frame is used six times in the first half hour of the film, but rarely afterwards. The film is not as difficult in its style or as episodic in its structure as *Mean Streets*.

This carries over into the thematics of the two films. By including the genres of the buddy film and the film noir, *Mean Streets* creates disturbances in the social realm that *GoodFellas* does not. A quick comparison of key characters is useful in illustrating the point: however critical the audience may be of Charlie in *Mean Streets*, he remains a character that is trying and attempting to live his life differently from the predatory style of those around him, as his relationship with Johnny Boy and Theresa and the attempted relationship to Diane prove. Charlie is still at an early stage of identity-formation, and is thus a more open character. Henry, on the other hand, does not attempt to go against the dominant lifestyle; he simply takes it to its logical extreme. And while *GoodFellas* may critique that lifestyle (as indeed it cannot help doing, given the parallels drawn between the mob and the middle class), it does not show the alternate possibilities of *Mean*

Streets. This can be shown by comparing Tommy and Jimmy with Johnny Boy of *Mean Streets*. Although wild and reckless, Johnny Boy is much different than the violent psychotics of *GoodFellas*, who show few redeeming features. In addition, the dynamic between the characters is not the same. Johnny Boy exists as a provoking influence on Charlie's repression, while Tommy and Jimmy are only present to represent Henry's extreme and to show the hypocrisy of his character. In short, *GoodFellas* can be seen as limited, not because it does not place the mob in a wider social context, but precisely because that wider social context offers no alternative. The cynicism of *The King of Comedy* is extended upon with *GoodFellas*. In fact, *GoodFellas* can be seen as even more cynical, since even an expressive and exciting style (which was systematically avoided in *The King of Comedy*) can now only reflect the limitations of society, instead of constructive alternatives. This limitation is characteristic of most of the films of the period, even the most distinguished ones, and is why the American cinema, while producing more films of a higher calibre than in the 80s, is not at the same level as the 70s. This is reflected in Scorsese's work in the 90s as well.

Conclusion

Before concluding, I would like to discuss Scorsese's films since the release of *GoodFellas* in 1990 in order to bring this study up to the present. Scorsese directed five more feature films in the decade: *Cape Fear* (1991), *The Age of Innocence* (1993), *Casino* (1995), *Kundun* (1997), and *Bringing Out the Dead* (1999). All of these films were studio pictures with significant budgets, marking Scorsese's return to mainstream Hollywood production. And while it may be too early to look at the historical implications and contexts of these films in the way I have in the previous chapters, it is still possible to look at their generic contexts and the critical and aesthetic success of each.

Cape Fear is of interest in that it is the first remake Scorsese has made, adapting the 1962 black and white thriller of the same name. The connection between remakes and genres is fairly clear; in many ways genre films can act like remakes anyway, employing similar plot lines and situations with subtle changes in story and style. However, Scorsese's film is so different from the original *Cape Fear* that perhaps the term remake is inappropriate. The main difference lies in the character of Sam Bowden, who goes from being an innocent prosecutor to a corrupt defense lawyer who deliberately botched the case of his client, Max Cady. The earlier film is simply the story of a psychotic terrorizing an innocent family. Scorsese's version turns into a revenge story in which audience identification is somewhat divided, despite the obvious menace of Cady's character.

In Scorsese's *Cape Fear*, the simple thriller genre is disrupted by the use of two other genres: the horror film and the family melodrama. It is hard not to see De Niro's Max Cady as "a return of the repressed,"¹ given the guilty associations he has for the Bowden character. This relationship is given further ambivalence due to the use of family melodrama. Far from the happy domestic family of the original *Cape Fear*, the family of this *Cape Fear* is, typically for Scorsese, extremely troubled. Scorsese has crossed the tensions and anxieties of the family melodrama (marital tension, parent-child discord, sexual repression) with the thematics of the horror film, with its multi-layered repressions such as female sexuality, the proletariat, and children.² Scorsese injects the issue of class into the film quite clearly, given Cady's poor, uneducated background, precisely the lack of education that allowed the middle-class Bowden to betray him and which Bowden wrongfully believes will protect him against Cady discovering the betrayal. The film makes explicit the connection between Bowden's wife Leigh and Cady in a speech she makes to him ("I feel we have this connection."). Cady is also linked with Bowden's daughter Danielle, most notably in the sequence in the basement theatre of the school. Cady acts throughout the film as the respectable Bowden's doppelganger, a characteristic feature of the horror film as well as the film noir. Examples of this are numerous throughout the film. Bowden commits two acts of vigilante justice, one in failing to provide Cady with his best possible defense and again later in the film by having Cady attacked, making him a criminal like Cady. Because of Cady's prison education, both are now lawyers. Cady mentions the wife and daughter he lost when he went to jail, a wife and daughter similar to Bowden's. Cady seduces (and brutally attacks) the woman

¹ Wood (1979/1985), p. 202.

² Wood (1979/1985), p. 201.

Bowden was contemplating having an affair with her after Bowden stands her up. Cady's relationship with Bowden's daughter can be seen as a displacement for the incestuous feelings felt by Bowden himself (his wanting Danielle not to dress as scantily around the house because she's "not a kid anymore" is a strong hint in this direction). The film works not so much to inspire sympathy in Cady, who remains vicious and sadistic throughout, as to make Bowden unappealing, thus making identification with either character difficult or incomplete and shifting.

Despite the interesting thematics Scorsese creates through genre, the film does have some aesthetic problems. The use of style and narrative are very straightforward in the film, with the exception of a brief framing device which I will discuss shortly. This is not to say that the film is ordinary. There are typically a number of strikingly expressive shots, such as Cady's walk out of prison and towards the camera, and a highly overt musical score reworked by Elmer Bernstein from Bernard Herrmann's original. However, gone are the many overt stylistic devices of his previous studio work, *GoodFellas*, such as freeze-frames, voiceover commentary, and doubled scenes. This leads to the film running out of creative energy and becoming rather routine for the last portion of the narrative. The film settles into a rather formulaic thriller pattern during the extended finale on the boat. The ending, in which Cady is finally killed and the family reunited, seems pat, especially given Scorsese's normally critical and open conclusions. This is countered somewhat by the final shot, a close-up of Danielle as she concludes her "reminiscence," in which the shot turns into a positive image, followed by the use of a red filter and the menacing opening music. This shot is slightly ambiguous, and certainly marks a reluctance on Scorsese's part to completely close off his text. The disturbance

caused to the family by Cady is not completely erased. Thus, although the film is not one of Scorsese's greatest works, it remains intriguing. It is interesting to compare the film to *The Color of Money*, the last film Scorsese made "to turn the Hollywood buck."³ Like *Cape Fear*, *The Color of Money* is based directly on a previous film with at least one previous character.⁴ Compared to *The Color of Money*, *Cape Fear* is an even more impressive achievement. Its superiority can be explained in part by auteurism (Scorsese was perhaps more interested in this project), in part by genre, and in part by historical circumstance. Whatever the case, the film proved that even with a studio remake, the circumstances were such that Scorsese could once again produce creative work in Hollywood.

Scorsese's next project was a significant departure: *The Age of Innocence* (1993), a rather faithful adaptation of the Edith Wharton novel of New York in the 1870s. The film is a departure for Scorsese primarily in terms of genre. *The Age of Innocence* belongs to the category of literary costume adaptation, exemplified by the work of the Merchant-Ivory team. More broadly, it is a romantic melodrama. In terms of Scorsese's work, the one film it does recall from this perspective would be *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974), the one feature film since *Mean Streets* I have not mentioned. The limitations of *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* have been discussed: an attempt at a "feminist" film that ultimately winds up as a very conservative, romantic love story in which Alice finds happiness not in self-fulfillment but through a man.⁵ Typically,

³ Cook, p. 27.

⁴ It could be argued that *New York, New York* is a remake of the film *The Man I Love* (Raoul Walsh, 1946). However, it does not have the close connections (same character names, in the case of *Cape Fear* same title) as these two films.

⁵ Wood (1986), p. 202-204.

Scorsese undercuts this by making the ending rather theatrical (the crowd at the diner cheering as the couple are united), but nonetheless the film is limited by Scorsese being unwilling or simply unable (given the studio's control) to end the film any other way. But by comparison, *The Age of Innocence* is even more limited, even if it is a more accomplished work than others in the category. Whereas *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* features a contemporary story set in the working class world with a female lead, *The Age of Innocence* is set in the past, in an upper-class world with a male protagonist. Given the film's period setting, whatever social critique it engages in is muted, since it is a critique of a past that is dead. Stylistically, the film is burdened by the unusual use of a third-person narrator (as opposed to Scorsese's usual first-person approach) to deliver some of Wharton's original commentary from the novel, the result of which simply deadens the film. Scorsese seems to be suffering from a problem similar to his adaptation of *The Last Temptation of Christ*: putting his own creativity at the service of a faithful and reverential treatment of his subject matter. While Scorsese's critical view of romance continues, the film is ultimately too self-enclosed to have the desired impact.

If *The Age of Innocence* was a departure for Scorsese, *Casino* had the opposite reception. It was in fact criticized by a number of critics for being too similar to the earlier *GoodFellas*.⁶ And the similarities are apparent. For instance, there are a number of generic similarities: both are gangster films which mix in comic and musical elements. Stylistically, many techniques are shared: the use of freeze-frames and multiple voiceovers, for example, although *Casino* does have some unique stylistic motifs of its own, such as the repeated whip pans and dollies. The first half of *Casino* is almost like an

⁶ Lippe (1996), p. 14-15.

extension of *GoodFellas*, filled with non-narrative sociological detail concerning the mob's organization and many bravura sequences. Two examples in particular come to mind. The first would be Ginger's first appearance, in which she gains Ace's attention. The sequence works like a musical number: the exuberant music of the scene is matched by a striking overhead shot as Ginger throws chips towards the ceiling, followed by a freeze-frame, a musical switch, and a slow-motion tracking shot of Ginger defiantly walking away. It is hard to think of a film sequence that has displayed infatuation at first sight more effectively, and Ginger's irreverent behaviour makes it a strong centrifugal moment. The other sequence of note would be Nicky's stabbing of the man at the bar with a pen. Here the ambivalence around violence that I discussed in *GoodFellas* is perhaps even more apparent. The stabbing is brutal, but at the same time Nicky is defending his friend from an extremely obnoxious character. Again, identification is split. The film makes particular use of this split between the centrifugal forces of Ginger and Nicky and the extreme centripetal force of Ace.

The closeness of Ace and Nicky's friendship is of interest, recalling past relationships like that of Jake and Joey in *Raging Bull* and Charlie and Johnny Boy in *Mean Streets*. The relationship between Henry and Jimmy in *GoodFellas* is somewhat similar (see Henry's comment about missing Jimmy in prison, not his wife), but is not developed to the same extent. Two points of intrigue are worth examining. Consider the opening narration by Ace that begins *Casino*:

When you love someone, you've gotta trust them. There is no other way. You've gotta give them the key to everything that's yours. Otherwise, what's the point? And, for a while, I believed, that's the kind of love I had.⁷

⁷ Lippe (1996), p.18.

During this narration, Ace enters his car, which explodes as his narration ends. The opening narration suggests the betrayal of a lover, which makes sense throughout the film as we watch Ace and Ginger's relationship. However, it is Nicky who bombs Ace's car. A similar disjunction is evident in Scorsese's use of "Camille's theme" from Godard's *Contempt* (1963). It is heard during Ace and Ginger's car ride from the airport after Ginger has attempted to run away, and again during the closing credits. However, the music is first heard earlier in the film during Ace and Nicky's tension-filled meeting in the desert. With these two sequences, Scorsese inserts a degree of ambiguity into the love-hate triangle of Ace-Ginger-Nicky. There is explicit evidence in the film that Nicky cares about Ace, and his affair with Ginger can be seen as a response to Ace turning his back on Nicky's plan to go against the mob bosses. Also, it is clear that Ace is attracted to Ginger for the same centrifugal qualities she shares with Nicky. The relationship between the three recalls that of Charlie, Johnny Boy and Theresa in *Mean Streets*, and remains the key source of the film's thematic resonance.

The problem, or perhaps I should say limitation, of *Casino* lies in its last half, as Scorsese shows the disintegration of the three central characters and of the mob's control over Las Vegas. If *Casino* resemblances *GoodFellas* in its opening half, its tone is quite different over the concluding portions of the film. The film takes on a sombre and even tragic tone, looking for viewer empathy with the characters in a way completely alien to the tone of *GoodFellas*. By making the fall of the three central characters tragic and linking their fall to the fall of mob control of Las Vegas, Scorsese seems to be mourning this loss. The ending provides a rightful critique of the corporate control of Las Vegas that took place during the 80s, but to see the mob's loss of Las Vegas as tragic seems too

socially isolated and enclosed. This problem is not uncommon to many Scorsese films, particularly *GoodFellas* and *Casino*:

The dilemma that [Scorsese's] films so often present is this: what happens when you fall out of love, when the dream ends, when the world you've created so intricately begins to implode? Or, to inflect this slightly differently: how do you sustain the fantasies that inspire energy, action and transformative insights? ⁸

Or, as Stern puts it a couple of pages later: "Cinematic desire, in Scorsese, can't be easily extricated from the desire to be a gangster."⁹ I believe Stern is casting too large a net in seeing this as typical of all of Scorsese's work, but these comments certainly apply to *GoodFellas* and *Casino*. However, in *GoodFellas* Scorsese recognized the absurdity of Henry's nostalgia, particularly illustrated in his use of a non-diegetic insert at the conclusion. With *Casino*, this distance is gone, reducing the overall value of this nonetheless impressive work.

Kundun (1997) marks another unusual project for Scorsese, a film based on the life of the Dalai Lama. It offers a shift in that it is based on the life of an advocate of non-violence, in stark contrast to most of Scorsese's protagonists. However, the film is a disappointment, for some of the same reasons that make *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *The Age of Innocence* lesser works. *Kundun* follows the epic mode of celebrating a real life religious leader. Even more so than *The Last Temptation of Christ*, this leads to a very static film, due to the fact that Scorsese is too respectful of his lead character. With *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Scorsese did at least look in depth at the conflicts within a reverential figure, if not at what the figure stood for, at least displaying Christ in a complex light that upset many. With *Kundun*, Scorsese never examines his character in

⁸ Stern, p. 8.

⁹ Stern, p. 10.

any depth. This extends to the style and narrative of the film. The style is very conventional and the narrative linear and extremely plodding. Scorsese would have more success in exploring a non-violent protagonist with his next film, *Bringing Out the Dead*.

Bringing Out the Dead (1999), Scorsese's most recent film, ends up being a fitting place to conclude this study. Critics have examined the film primarily in relation to one of Scorsese and screenwriter Paul Schrader's previous collaborations, *Taxi Driver*.¹⁰ The film also combines elements of film noir and black comedy in a way similar to *After Hours*. It is, however, a much different film than both. The violence and suffering shown by the film is much more disturbing than that of *After Hours*. The protagonist is quite different as well. Frank Pierce is neither the indifferent yuppie of *After Hours* nor the psychotic figure of *Taxi Driver*. The film does contain both generic and stylistic affinities with Scorsese's previous work, but it can also be seen as a new beginning. This said, one must be wary, as has been common in criticism of the film thus far, about seeing the film as *Taxi Driver* over twenty years later, with its authors (Scorsese and Schrader) now older, less angry, and more complacent than in their youth. This is simplifying the film a great deal. For if the film represents a change from previous Scorsese characters like Travis Bickle, Jimmy Doyle, Jake LaMotta, and Henry Hill, it does recall an earlier one, Charlie from *Mean Streets*.

Both Charlie and Frank are characters looking for a way out of violence and suffering by helping other people. But they are not sainted figures. They are flawed, troubled, and it is stated in both films that their desire to help others is a selfish desire to help themselves: Johnny Boy's "You got what you wanted," remark to Charlie, Mary's

¹⁰ For one example of this trend, see Thompson, p. 12-14.

“No one asked you to suffer, that was your idea,” to Frank. It is significant that Scorsese has returned to the territory of what I believe remains his most progressive work, *Mean Streets* (progressive in the sense of being the most open, generically, stylistically, and thematically). *Bringing Out the Dead* is Scorsese’s most episodic and loosely structured film since *Mean Streets*. It lacks a generic base, calling on the film noir, comedy, social problem and horror genres (which probably helps explain its lack of success at the box office, despite the presence of a major star like Nicolas Cage). It is a stylistically audacious film, showing Scorsese still experimenting with technique. One sequence was shot entirely backwards, then played forward to create a dream-like effect. There is the already much discussed scene in which Frank saves the drug dealer who is impaled on a fence, the sparks against the metal creating a fireworks effect over the city. Thematically, Frank tries to save those around him whom society sees as undesirable, such as the drug dealer and the young drug addict Noel. That he is not heroic at the end, only confused and exhausted, shows the difficulty of the problems. That the attempt has been made is what leaves the future open, if not necessarily optimistic.

All the works I have discussed in this chapter deserve more extended commentary than I have given them. I have ended with them in order to add a slight note of Scorsese-like nonclosure to my own study. I have attempted to give both a broad view of Scorsese’s films in light of their generic and historical contexts, and to focus on three particular films that I feel are important and in need of further discussion than they have received in scholarship thus far. I have attempted to cover three different periods to give a broad, admittedly selective history of American film as it has taken shape over the course of Scorsese’s career. The study is by no means complete, since Scorsese’s career cannot

be encapsulated in so short a space. If there is any completeness, it is in the individual chapters, and they are complete only within the limits of my particular approach. My hope is that they will cause the reader to look differently upon the individual films and perhaps on their historical periods as well. I have included brief comments on the other Scorsese films for a few reasons. First of all, this study, however much I have wanted to contextualize it, is primarily about Scorsese and his films, or, more specifically, about my relationship to Scorsese and his films. Thus an overview seems important to how one reads each individual chapter. Bringing the study up to the present moment is important in situating my analysis within a specific time and place. I believe that my reading of these films would have been different ten years ago, and will probably be different ten years from now, not because I personally would be different (although that would certainly be the case as well), but because my vantage point would be different. This is particularly important to keep in mind when discussing genre, which has the tendency to be static, both in theory and in critical practice. I believe genre can be dynamic, particularly when looked at in the context of a talented filmmaker working over a thirty year career. Finally, concluding this study at the present time is a reminder that Scorsese's career is not over. More projects remain, and Scorsese's relationship with the American cinema will continue. What this relationship will be, and how it will affect our perspective on Scorsese's previous work, will be exciting to watch.

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