

**Martin Scorsese and Film Culture:
Radically Contextualizing the Contemporary Auteur**

by

Marc Raymond, B.A., M.A.

A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Institute of Comparative Studies in Literature, Art and Culture:
Cultural Mediations

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ABSTRACT

Martin Scorsese and his films have been analyzed extensively since he began making films over four decades ago. Much of this scholarship has focused on formal analysis of the films themselves. Contextual analysis has been either concentrated on his religious and ethnic background or on the historical context of New Hollywood cinema from which he emerged. Scholarship has ignored Scorsese's broader activities in the culture, thus neglecting the ways in which these position his feature films. To fully comprehend Scorsese as a cultural figure, a more radical contextualizing is required. The purpose of this dissertation is to use historical and sociological approaches, particularly those of Pierre Bourdieu, to offer a corrective to the prevailing scholarship, not so much in terms of what has been written, but rather what has not been written. Each chapter focuses on an area of Scorsese's career from a different perspective than has dominated thus far. Chapter One deals with Scorsese's early career before he moves to Hollywood. Instead of analyzing these films in relation to the rest of Scorsese's oeuvre, this chapter places a greater emphasis on the university environment in which Scorsese was immersed. Chapter Two explores the critical environment around the films Scorsese made during his first decade in Hollywood. The chapter eschews formal analysis and/or critical interpretation in order to consider the contingencies involved in the gaining of cultural esteem. Chapter Three offers the most thorough revision of previous Scorsese scholarship. Instead of briefly skimming over the films made during the 1980s, this chapter argues that this decade was critically important to Scorsese's eventual canonization. This is not because of the films themselves, but because of Scorsese's other

cultural work, most notably his move into film preservation. Chapter Four continues this approach by analyzing Scorsese's documentaries on cinema history together with his fiction films on past worlds. The final chapter examines what "Scorsese" as a cultural marker has come to represent in contemporary cinema. The main argument is that it is extra-textual factors rather than the films themselves that have led to Scorsese's prestigious position as an artist.

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Personally, I am very fortunate to have a number of great people in my life. My oldest friend Dave Musgrave visited many times over the years and always left me feeling better than before he came. Andrew Wilkes was my most constant companion over my ten years in Ottawa, and he and his wife Angie remain two of my closest friends. James Missen was a great and supportive colleague and an even better friend. The times spent at his family's cottage in Boshkung Lake helped relieve the stress of the dissertation experience, especially during a particular difficult time in June 2006. And I could not have asked for a better friend and colleague to support me through this process than Nick

Nguyen. Over these many years, we have talked endlessly about cinema (and probably every other topic), and his many insightful ideas about my topic have made this text much richer than it would have been otherwise.

I am also lucky to have a large and loving family. I spent many wonderful times, especially during the holidays, with my father and his family in Barrie. Despite the physical distance between us, my grandmother in Halifax remains close to me in spirit. Most of all, I need to thank my mother. For many years during my childhood, my family home consisted of only my mother and myself. I am forever grateful for her strength in being able to give me a wonderful childhood despite the immense strain she was under. She was and still is both a great parent and a great friend.

Lastly, this project would not have been completed without the emotional strength that my wife Lisa provided. We married over seven years ago, just before I started this journey. She moved to Canada, away from her home and family in South Korea. She adjusted to a new language and culture, worked many jobs below her educational qualifications, and yet always maintained her joy for life. She went on to finish her education degree and become a Canadian citizen. In many ways, her accomplishments over the years of our marriage far surpass my own. She is both a loving partner and a role model for me as a person. This dissertation is dedicated to her.

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INTRODUCTION:

MARTIN SCORSESE AND FILM CULTURE

This dissertation examines the work of the American filmmaker Martin Scorsese. With few exceptions, this research covers Scorsese's career in chronological order and is structured by Scorsese as an object of study. In this way, it is similar to most of the critical literature written about Scorsese thus far. However, it differs in almost every other way. Unlike other studies, a textual analysis of the style and themes of Scorsese's feature films is not emphasized. Scorsese the auteur is less significant to this work than Scorsese's place in the field of cultural production. Scorsese as a filmmaker is less important than Scorsese as a cultural figure. Because of the vast amount of cultural activities in which he has been involved, it is more productive to examine the relationship among all of Scorsese's various projects and how this has formed the figure known as "Scorsese" today. The purpose of this analysis is to both explain the various connotations that have developed around the idea of Scorsese and how these associations developed over the course of his career. The main argument is extra-textual factors rather than the films themselves that have led to Scorsese's prestigious position as an artist.

The concerns of the dissertation deal with two broad areas. The first is the general reception of Scorsese and his work over the past few decades. I am specifically interested in examining how Scorsese's reputation has influenced the ways in which his relationship to cultural institutions such as universities and film archives has been mediated. The second broader concern is with applying a different methodological approach to Scorsese in order to produce a broader understanding of his place within American culture. In particular, there is a need to move beyond formal, critical approaches to his feature films

that have dominated even the scholarly work undertaken so far. While these approaches have produced certain knowledge about Scorsese, they have also largely ignored many other questions that arise when the focus is shifted away from exclusively textual analysis. By using alternative models, particularly sociological models of aesthetic taste, a greater understanding of Scorsese's entire cultural output, including his feature films, can be reached.

Throughout the dissertation, there is reference to the dichotomy of modernism/postmodernism. In using these terms, I do not wish to reinforce these binaries but rather simply to acknowledge their continuing cultural force when discussing taste evaluation. The idea of modernism in this dissertation is specific to a particular field of cultural production: narrative film in America since 1967. This is the period in which Scorsese becomes a Hollywood director, and this modernist discourse will subsequently shape how his work is received and interpreted. This modernist ideal is heavily involved in the creation of what has been dubbed the "New Hollywood" cinema, which is usually cited as beginning in 1967 with the films *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967) and *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, 1967) and continues to be used in connection with the period of the late sixties/early seventies, often to define that era as distinctive in quality as compared to the postmodernism of the current era. Thus, a brief history and explanation of "modernism" in American narrative film is needed in this introduction for two reasons: to make it clear how modernism is being defined in this study and to help establish why a different approach is warranted.

During the 1970s, two English language film journals contributed to the rise of modernism, but in two very distinct ways. The journal *Screen* developed the idea of

“political modernism”.¹ Influenced by such thinkers as Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, Louis Althusser and perhaps most importantly Bertolt Brecht,² *Screen* developed the theoretical side of modernism. However, *Screen* all but ignored the contemporary American cinema of the time, with the exception of a single essay.³ The journal that concerned itself with contemporary American narrative film was not *Screen*, but *Movie*. Less theoretical than its counterpart, *Movie* dealt with “film as film”⁴ and concentrated on film criticism following on the method of literary New Criticism.⁵ Within literary studies New Criticism and the high modernist approach was in decline, and *Screen* theory represented this shift within the discipline of film. However, at the same time, the academic study of cinema was just beginning. Many scholars continued to use the method of close textual reading to establish the discipline. Thus, there were entire issues of *Movie* dealing with European modernists such as Ingmar Bergman and Jean Luc Godard, the Japanese modernist Nagisa Oshima, and classical filmmakers such as Alfred Hitchcock and Elia Kazan.⁶ Hitchcock is an interesting case in that he, along with Orson Welles, is usually held up as the most modernist of the classical directors.⁷ By the mid-

¹ See D. N. Rodowick, *The Crisis of Political Modernism: Criticism and Ideology in Contemporary Film Theory* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988) for a more detailed history and exploration of this strain of modernism.

² *Screen* 15, no. 2 (1974) (“Special Number: Brecht and a Revolutionary Cinema”) and 16, no. 4 (1975) (“Brecht and the Cinema/ Film and Politics”) are both issues dealing with Brecht.

³ Steve Neale, “New Hollywood Cinema,” *Screen* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1976): 117-122.

⁴ The title of *Movie* critic Victor Perkins’ book on the art of film: V.F. Perkins, *Film as Film: Understanding and Judging Movies* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972).

⁵ New Criticism was first formulated as an approach in the late thirties/early forties with two publications: Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Poetry* (New York: Holt, 1938) and René Wellek and Austin Warren, *The Theory of Literature* (New York: Harcourt, 1942). It would dominate literary studies up until the rise of deconstruction. For a useful discussion of this shift, see François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States* (Translated by Jeff Fort) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008): 47-53.

⁶ *Movie* no. 19 (1972) is a special issue on Kazan. Tellingly, there is no mention of HUAC or the blacklist in any of the essays.

⁷ Robert Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness: Penn, Stone, Kubrick, Scorsese, Spielberg, Altman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000): 17-18.

seventies, *Movie* had shifted interest to contemporary American film. Starting with issue number 21 in 1975, *Movie* devoted a section of each publication to a continuing series titled "American Cinema in the 1970s." In order to have this cinema taken seriously, the discourse of high modernism was used. By this, I refer to a discourse that uses modernism as a critical tool to read a text rather than as a theoretical tool to criticize classicism.⁸ Indeed, *Movie* was often critical of *Screen* theory.⁹

It is important to emphasize these two different types of modernism. New Hollywood cinema and the films of Martin Scorsese are not obviously modernist. Compared to previous art practices, such as the novels of James Joyce or the paintings of Jackson Pollack, the Hollywood Renaissance was a very classical movement.¹⁰ There was not a radical consideration of cinema's formal procedures in these films. Stylistic breaks with the past were usually brief and predominantly tied to story. A notable (and often noted) example is from Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* and its allusion to a sequence from the more clearly modernist *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1967). As Robert Ray describes:

In Godard's sustained series (nearly 3½ minutes), the shots of the coffee cup had issued not from the main character's point of view, but from that of a stranger without narrative consequence. As a result, the close-ups of the coffee's surface had provided no character insights, but only the occasion for a mediation on subjectivity, objectivity, language, and, not incidentally, the role of objects as links between two shots taken from different angles. Scorsese's single, relatively brief shot, on the other hand,

⁸ I would associate this "critical modernism" with critics like Clement Greenberg and T.S. Eliot, who in their respective essays, "Modernist Painting" and "Tradition and the Individual Talent", helped to establish the modernist critical discourse from a conservative rather than radical perspective.

⁹ See Andrew Britton, "The Ideology of *Screen*: Althusser, Lacan, Barthes," *Movie* 26 (Winter 1978/79): 2-28.

¹⁰ By as early as 1985, there appeared two book-length studies of American cinema that challenged this notion of New Hollywood as radical departure: Robert B. Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema 1930-1980* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985) and David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and Janet Staiger, *Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

prompted no abstract musings; instead, it graphically suggested the hero's self-absorption and growing isolation.¹¹

Nevertheless, there emerged at this time a discourse that defined New Hollywood as modernist. This was not so much because of the films themselves but rather because modernist art had become so associated with artistic value. While some academic critics were interested in the avant-garde (such as academic/filmmakers like Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen), there remained a desire to extent ideas of high modernist practice to more mainstream cinema.

Robert Kolker's *A Cinema of Loneliness* is the most explicit example of a critical study of New Hollywood directors explicitly defining this period as modernist.¹²

Kolker's book has undergone three editions, first in 1980, then 1988, and most recently in 2000, and it remains the most important book on the era because it so strongly defines the dominant approach to this cinema. The validity of his argument is less important than its effect and influence. Kolker argues that the New Hollywood was the first extended period in which a modernist sensibility can be located. But this modernism is the creation of critical method more than the artistic practice itself. This can be seen from Kolker's own explanation of his approach:

I find it impossible to talk about the events and the characters of films as if they had an existence separate from the formal apparatus that creates the fiction they inhabit... The nature of conventional is to present a clean and concentrated view of life. Even if this view is made to include ambiguities and questions, it is always neater than anything perceived in the loose and open narratives that constitute daily life. Modernism in literature tried to rectify this by foregrounding narrative processes and making reading as complex as the reading of ordinary experience. Some of the filmmakers under discussion here do the same. To understand what they are up to, I want to return cinematic fiction to its proper place as artifice, as something

¹¹ Ray (1985), 350-351.

¹² Kolker (2000), xiii.

made, and to reduce the emotional aura that most American film narratives create in the viewer, in an attempt to understand the sources of that aura.¹³

The emphasis on formal elements and the downplaying of emotion are indeed modernist, but it is a modernist approach to interpretation rather than a modernist artistic practice.

This is not to argue that New Hollywood cinema completely lacked these elements. But the creation of American modernist film required both critics and filmmakers, as Kolker himself acknowledges: “There has been no direct joining of forces of critic and filmmaker, but there has been an occasional paralleling of inquiry and an acknowledgment on both sides that film is a serious business.”¹⁴ The joining of forces between critic and filmmaker are more important than Kolker realizes. In fact, they were crucial in the forming of American modernist film. To use Pierre Bourdieu’s terminology, modernist discourse has become the “habitus” of film academics and reviewers alike.¹⁵ This modernist discourse led to New Hollywood directors rarely being approached in any other way.

In order to move away from the discourse of modernism in aesthetic debates, a sociological theory of art and artistic production is needed. The key figure in this field is Pierre Bourdieu, partially because Bourdieu lies outside these modernist/postmodernist debates. As opposed to poststructuralists and postmodernists, Bourdieu launches his critique of modernism at the whole of the artistic institution itself. As an alternative, Bourdieu calls for a sociology of the aesthetic and its institutions that breaks with this

¹³ Kolker (2000), 14.

¹⁴ Kolker (2000), p. x.

¹⁵ Randal Johnson usefully summarizes the concept of “habitus” as follows: “The habitus is sometimes described as a ‘feel for the game,’ a ‘practical sense,’ (*sens pratique*) that inclines agents to act and react in specific situations in a manner that is not always calculated and that is not simply a question of conscious obedience to rules.” Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (edited and introduced by Randal Johnson) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993): 5.

modernist tradition. Bourdieu begins the postscript to his massive volume *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* with the following:

The reader may have wondered why, in a text devoted to taste and art, no appeal is made to the tradition of philosophical or literary aesthetics; and he or she will no doubt have realized that this is a deliberate refusal.

It is certain that the 'high' aesthetic, both that which is engaged in a practical form in legitimate works and that which is expressed in writings intended to make it explicit and present it formally, is fundamentally constituted, whatever the variants, against all that this research may have established – namely, the indivisibility of taste, the unity of the most 'pure' and most purified, the most sublime and the most sublimated tastes, and the most 'impure' and 'coarse', ordinary and primitive tastes.¹⁶

Bourdieu argues that in order to effectively critique the category of the aesthetic, the critic must break with the field of the aesthetic altogether. Otherwise, the traditional categories continue to dominate the discussion.

The alternative that Bourdieu offers is a "radical contextualizing" that moves beyond the categories of the aesthetic. I take this term from Randal Johnson's description of Bourdieu's practice in his introduction to *The Field of Cultural Production*:

Bourdieu's theory of the cultural field might be characterized as a radical contextualization. It takes into consideration not only works themselves, seen relationally within the space of available possibilities and within the historical development of such possibilities, but also producers of works in terms of their strategies and trajectories, based on their individual and class habitus, as well as their objective position within the field. It also entails an analysis of the structure of the field itself, which includes the positions occupied by producers (e.g. writers, artists) as well as those occupied by all the instances of consecration and legitimation which make cultural products what they are (the public, publishers, critics, galleries, academics and so forth). Finally, it involves an analysis of the position of the field within the broader field of power.¹⁷

These are the areas this dissertation will examine. Bourdieu's work allows Scorsese to be theorized beyond aesthetic categories and even beyond his own place in the industry.

¹⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (translated by Richard Nice) (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1984): 485.

¹⁷ Bourdieu (1993), 9.

Radically contextualizing Scorsese requires a thorough study of how the many aspects of film culture interact with each other in the production of any individual figure in the cultural field. Bourdieu's approach has become more influential in recent years within the Film Studies discipline, as can be seen in the work of such scholars as Barbara Klinger and Karen Frances Gracy.¹⁸ But Bourdieu's influence remains minor, and is especially absent from studies of individual authors. This is due to the seeming paradox of using a broad theory of culture that de-emphasizes the artistic field while dealing with a discourse such as auteurism, which concerns itself primarily with the text itself. Scholars favouring Bourdieu tend to see studies of individual directors as unnecessary and even old-fashioned, while scholars attracted to the work of a single filmmaker choose to ignore the more sociological approach of Bourdieu in order to concentrate on individual filmic examples of their chosen director.

This has been especially true of work on Scorsese. The objective of this dissertation is to use historical and sociological approaches to offer a corrective to the prevailing scholarship, not so much in terms of what has been written, but rather what has not been written. While Bourdieu is the key theorist to this work, there are other sociological models drawn upon, most notably Howard Becker and Herbert Gans.¹⁹ More importantly, Michel Foucault's writings provide a historical model for the whole notion of authorship. In Chapter Four, Foucault's essay on genealogy is used specifically in relation to Scorsese's historical efforts. But the whole dissertation is indebted to Foucault's post-structuralist approach, particularly the removing of subjectivity from its

¹⁸ See Barbara Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); and Karen Frances Gracy, *Film Preservation: Competing Definitions of Value, Use, and Practice* (Society of American Archivists, 2007).

¹⁹ Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); and Herbert J. Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste* (New York: Basic Books, 1974).

central position and the need to subordinate it to structural systems and discourses.²⁰ More specifically, Foucault's influential essay, "What is an Author?," provides a questioning and skeptical analysis of the whole notion of the author and what this seeming common sense term ultimately signifies. Foucault's concept of the "author function" is not concerned with the author's factual relationship to a text, but rather what social and cultural roles the authored work fulfills. It stresses the social construction of authorship.²¹ My analysis of Scorsese's texts aims to demonstrate how Scorsese's authorship has structured these various works, and how Scorsese himself has become a text with various connotations and meanings.

Using these methodologies, each chapter of the dissertation focuses on an area of Scorsese's career from a different perspective than has dominated thus far. Chapter One, "Scorsese and the University," deals with Scorsese's early career before he moves to Hollywood. Instead of analyzing these films in relation to the rest of Scorsese's oeuvre, this chapter places a greater emphasis on the university environment in which Scorsese was immersed. As a result, this chapter gives a different perspective on Scorsese's first fiction films and provides the first detailed study of the documentary *Street Scenes 1970*. Chapter Two, "The Formation of Scorsese's Critical Reputation," explores the critical environment around the films Scorsese made during his first decade in Hollywood. The chapter eschews formal analysis and/or critical interpretation in order to consider the contingencies involved in the gaining of cultural esteem. Chapter Three, "Scorsese and

²⁰ This is consistent in Foucault's work from *The Birth of the Clinic* (translated by Alan Sheridan) (New York: Vintage, 1973) forward to his other analysis of various other institutions. It is worth noting that Foucault's one "author" study remains the most marginal to his overall work. See Foucault, *Death and the Labyrinth: The World of Raymond Roussel* (translated by Charles Ruas) (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1986). A fine and succinct summary of Foucault's work can be found in Gary Gutting, *Foucault: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

²¹ Gutting, 11-12.

the Fall of the Hollywood Renaissance: The Negotiation of Cultural and Economic Capital,” offers the most thorough revision of previous Scorsese scholarship. Instead of briefly skimming over the films made during the 1980s, this chapter argues that this decade was actually of prime importance to Scorsese’s eventual canonization. This is not because of the films themselves, but because of Scorsese’s other cultural work, most notably his move into film preservation. Chapter Four, “Histories of Cinema and Cinematic Histories: Scorsese as Historian,” continues this approach by analyzing Scorsese’s documentaries on cinema history together with his fiction films on past worlds. The final chapter, “What is Scorsese?: Scorsese’s Role in Contemporary Culture,” examines what “Scorsese” as a cultural marker has come to represent in contemporary cinema.

Despite the large period of history and vast number of topics broached in the dissertation, I believe that the work remains coherent. This is partially because of Scorsese himself. Not every or even most filmmakers of the past few decades would require such a broad range of subjects, and being able to filter all of these topics through Scorsese has hopefully led to a multi-faceted work that is of historical interest beyond Scorsese as an individual. At the same time, Scorsese did not create this cultural field, and without it “Scorsese” would simply not exist. There are many places throughout the study where I comment on the liminal position of Scorsese and of a certain duality that he has had to reconcile. This duality can be extended to my approach as well. This is both a broad history of American film culture over the past several decades and a study of one particular individual. It is perhaps this contradiction that has kept most of the studies of Scorsese so narrow in scope, limiting context merely to Scorsese’s ethnic and religious

background and events within the film industry. To continue this mode of analysis would be to ignore or downplay the vast number of cultural activities in which Scorsese has been and continues to be involved. This study does the opposite by downplaying the feature films themselves, especially the texts that have made Scorsese's reputation and been subjected to numerous readings. Paradoxically, it is both a more comprehensive analysis than previous work on Scorsese as well as relatively impoverished as a study of a filmmaker's oeuvre. This is not to evaluate the dissertation over previous Scorsese scholarship. Rather, it is to make a case for the need for a work on Scorsese that matches the breadth of Scorsese's own activities.

CHAPTER ONE

SCORSESE AND THE UNIVERSITY

One of the goals of this dissertation is to analyze Scorsese's films and his career beyond the formal features of his work. An examination of Scorsese's relation to academic institutions is a fruitful place to begin. The reception and mediation of Scorsese's cultural work within academic and popular circles can be traced back to this university connection. But the university also offers an opportunity to examine Scorsese within a very different environment than the profit-driven world of Hollywood where he would eventually work for the majority of his career. Pierre Bourdieu has analyzed the field of cultural production as comprising two sub-fields: "restricted production, in which the producers produce for other producers, and the field of large-scale production, which is *symbolically* excluded and discredited."¹ In Scorsese's case, this division amongst the two sub-fields is emphasized geographically: he attended New York University from 1960 to 1965 and worked part-time as an instructor until 1970, when he moved to Los Angeles to pursue a career in Hollywood. This part of Scorsese's biography is emphasized within the literature on Scorsese and the university, which emphasizes NYU's role as an intellectual breeding ground that would help make Scorsese "distinct":

The significance of Scorsese's NYU education is pre-eminent in his biographical legend. His time in film school allowed Scorsese to focus his talents and merge the elements in his life into an artistic sensibility from which he has not wavered. The perception of NYU as the site of unique film training in the sixties, and as distinct from the more industry-oriented programs on the West Coast, helps to position Scorsese as one who has always existed in a somewhat ambiguous relationship with the Hollywood

¹ Pierre Bourdieu, "The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic Field Reversed," in *The Field of Cultural Production*: 39.

mainstream. Scorsese's postgraduate employment as an instructor at NYU further cements his Manhattan cinephile reputation.²

Potter acknowledges NYU as a prestige institution and the role it played and reiterates romantic, auteurist discourse ("an artistic sensibility from which he has not wavered"). Ultimately, Potter's lack of detail and examination in the comment reflects his broader aims of textual analysis over context, a recurring trend in Scorsese literature.

This chapter will seek to illuminate the complex relationship between Scorsese and the university, as well as between the university and Hollywood with the aim of "radically contextualizing" Scorsese. With this goal in mind, a different set of questions needs to be addressed. What was the reputation of NYU at the time? Did this help establish Scorsese's reputation in a way that would not have been possible if Scorsese had been a west coast graduate such as Francis Ford Coppola or George Lucas? Potter's statement certainly makes sense retrospectively and Scorsese's "New York-ness" has been important in the making of his critical reputation, but was this the case at the time? Can Bourdieu's concepts of restricted and large-scale production be mapped onto NYU and Hollywood in the unproblematic way that has been so often implied within the literature? And finally, how do these questions impact on how Scorsese's filmmaking activities at NYU are understood?

To address these questions, a brief overview and timeline of Scorsese's university career is required. In 1960, Scorsese entered NYU, eventually becoming a film major and continuing on to complete a Master's degree. Scorsese's filmmaking career began with his work at this institution: the short films *What's a Nice Girl Like You Doing in a Place Like This?* (1963), *It's Not Just You, Murray!* (1964), the feature *Who's That Knocking At*

² James Cole Potter, *Martin Scorsese and the Poetics of Post-Classical Authorship* (PhD dissertation, Northwestern University, 1998): 58-59.

My Door? (a.k.a. *J.R.* and *I Call First*) (1966-69), and the collective student documentary *Street Scenes 1970* (1970). The current availability of these titles differs significantly, and these differences are telling. *Who's That Knocking At My Door?* is the only one of the titles on DVD, released both individually and as part of a box set by Warner Bros. The short films are available for rental on 16mm through Kino International (an art cinema distributor) and for screening at such institutions as the George Eastman House in Rochester. They have also become available in pirated form on such internet venues as YouTube. *Street Scenes 1970*, however, is a very difficult film to see. There is no video rental distribution at all. The accessibility of the film (through the Museum of Modern Art) is restricted by Scorsese himself, since it is part of his own personal collection. Because of this limited access and associations with art cinema distribution, it is tempting to consider Scorsese's university career as operating within the sub-field of restricted production in which symbolic power takes precedence over economics. And this has certainly been how NYU has been positioned within the cultural field, an association from which Scorsese has also benefited. However, this assumption needs to be examined more closely. How has this rhetoric around NYU been formed, and how accurate is this portrait of NYU as distinct from the more industry-oriented programs of the West Coast?

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY IN THE 1960s

Part of this image of NYU rests on its geographical location away from Hollywood. Its association with the East Coast and especially New York City has been perceived as more authentic culturally than the artificiality of Los Angeles as represented

by Hollywood.³ The economic power of Hollywood as a field of large-scale production serves to reduce its cultural and symbolic capital while increasing the prestige of those institutions and individuals most distanced from it.⁴ Here, the economic hierarchy is reversed. In an article on Scorsese at NYU, Allan Arkush, who was one of Scorsese's students in 1969/70, both confirms and contradicts Potter's assessment of NYU as an artistic rather than industry training ground.⁵ Arkush begins his article by stating:

In winter of 1969 I was a junior at N.Y.U. film school. I was a very, very serious film student. The cinema was not fun, it was art. If it was entertaining, it was frivolous and my days of frivolous movie-going were behind me. The cinema had to have subtitles and my pantheon consisted of Bergman, Antonioni, Resnais, Kurosawa and, most of all, Godard. All of my student films were homages to Godard.⁶

Arkush's comments on the "seriousness" of NYU at the time are supported by Scorsese's own recollections regarding the head of the school, Haig Manoogian:

(The first film class) was a three-hour course, once a week, called 'The History of Motion Pictures, Television and Radio'. Most of the kids took the class because they thought they wouldn't have to do anything much except watch films and get two credits for it. But Haig was brutal! He would talk so fast – even faster than me – and he described everything in great detail from the very beginning ... Haig would come on stage, hit you with a lecture for one-and-a-half hours, then show a film. Once he showed Stroheim's *Greed* and a student asked why there was no music. Back came the answer, 'Do you think this is a show? Get the hell out!' He would weed people out, semester after semester. The idea was to be as serious about it as possible – serious in the sense that you could argue, laugh and joke about the films, but you really had to be there for the love of cinema.⁷

³ This dichotomy ignores the vast amount of non-Hollywood production within Los Angeles. See David E. James, *The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

⁴ Of course, another irony here is that Hollywood's economic capital was actually located in New York.

⁵ Allan Arkush, "I Remember Film School," *Film Comment* 19, no. 11 (November 1983): 57-59.

⁶ Arkush, 57.

⁷ *Scorsese on Scorsese* (edited by David Thompson and Ian Christie) (London: Faber and Faber, 1996): 13-14.

This reputation of NYU as an institution of art over industry is further enhanced by anecdotes involving the poverty of the school's equipment. Arkush explains:

At that time, the highly respected 'N.Y.U. Film School' consisted of four small rooms on the eighth floor of a building a block and a half from Washington Square Park. We had four moviolas that ate student films at an alarming rate and only one camera capable of sound. The Éclair's main drawback was that it stripped the emulsion from color film ... Haig Manoogian coped as best he could but all he could offer was enthusiasm and a Bell & Howell Filmo. The Filmos were virtually indestructible cast-iron cameras that had to be wound up with a door knob because all the keys had disappeared years ago.⁸

This coexistence of serious intent and poverty of equipment positioned NYU as closer to anti-commercial filmmaking (documentary, experimental) than the Hollywood industry.

Arkush's article makes the point that Scorsese as an instructor helped to change the situation at NYU, both in terms of the school's equipment and in terms of what was regarded as worthy of study. Arkush recalls Scorsese helping to lead a student protest for better equipment and "better" courses, one of which was "American Movies", taught by Scorsese himself.⁹ Arkush describes this course with Scorsese in very loving terms, stating that "those Tuesday afternoon classes changed my view of movies forever. I went

⁸ Arkush, 57. This description of the poor state of equipment in the early years of NYU is supported by the comments of Peter Rea (author's interview, September 10, 2004): "At the time we were making these films with equipment that was just, ... (exasperated sigh) (long pause). Well, it was hard. Nowadays we're shooting with "Arriflex S"s, "Arri-S"s, and we still have problems with those. But in that class, we used what is called a Filmo, which is an incredibly sturdy small camera. The 35 (mm) equivalent is called an "Eyemo", the 16 is called a "Filmo", and you could dropkick that thing off a building and it would still shoot. But it's a parallax camera, not a reflex camera, so you're not really looking through the lens. So you were not exactly sure how you framed things up. There were no batteries so you had to wind the things up. And the things were broken so they had no door panels on the sides of them, and you got about 27 seconds a shot. Maybe 25. You were supposed to get 30. And we cut on upright Moviolas, which were fine, but 16 (mm) is pretty fragile. We used a guillotine splicer, we don't have them anymore, but they were kind of dull, so every time you made a splice you had to clean out the splice very carefully with a razor blade, so that the tape wouldn't go over. Because anything caught would tear on the upright Moviola. (sigh) Sometimes you'd see more slugs than you'd see shots where we'd replace the breakage in the film."

⁹ Scorsese mentions this himself in *Scorsese on Scorsese*: "In 1969 I went back to NYU as an instructor – Haig (Manoogian) gave me the job because I was broke – and at this time there was a film criticism class in which the teacher would give the students a film like *Wild Strawberries* or *Nights of Cabiria* and a book to read that complemented it. The students got angry with the teacher and there was a kind of uprising, so we revamped the schedule and said, 'Now look at these American films by Ford and Hawks, they're wonderful!'" (21)

to work for Roger Corman, because the films screened in Marty's class helped me see the kind of movies I wanted to make."¹⁰ Arkush has over forty director credits to his name over the past thirty plus years, the large majority of them for network television series.¹¹ Another student of Scorsese's, Ezra Sacks, spent years in Hollywood working as a screenwriter. Three of these screenplays were produced: the Universal film *FM* (John A. Alonzo, 1978); the United Artists feature *A Small Circle of Friends* (Rob Cohen, 1980); and the Goldie Hawn comedy vehicle *Wildcats* (Michael Ritchie, 1986).¹² Thus, in addition to "auteurs" such as Scorsese, Oliver Stone, Spike Lee, and Jim Jarmusch, NYU has also produced individuals who have felt comfortable working anonymously within the industry. Furthermore, both Arkush and Sacks have cited Scorsese as being a primary inspiration for them and their filmmaking careers. NYU's actual legacy, like that of most film schools, is more mixed in its focus on artistic and industrial issues than its reputation would suggest.

An examination of the actual course catalogue offered by NYU, circa 1970, shows a mixture of art and industry, as well as a mix of filmmaking practice and theory. NYU featured an undergraduate program as well as two separate programs at the graduate level: a production-centered program administered through the Institute of Film and Television, and a scholarly and critical program administered through the Graduate School of the Arts and Sciences.¹³ The graduate program in production listed five objectives, two of which are fairly compatible with the image of the school as one focused on aesthetics: "To provide students the opportunity to develop their creative

¹⁰ Arkush, 58.

¹¹ Arkush's filmography is available at the Internet Movie Database (imdb.com).

¹² imdb.com

¹³ Thomas Fensch, *Films on the Campus* (New York: A.S. Barnes and Company, 1970): 307-325.

talent through intensive class experiences and actual production experience” and “to provide lectures and seminars in aesthetic, historical and critical studies so that students may be aware of the best of the past and present as it may be applicable to the future.”¹⁴

But the objectives also include the following:

Because individual responsibility in the professions of film and television requires not only artistic expression but also entrepreneurial competence, the studies will provide students with the basic knowledge to deal creatively with professional structures and procedures ... (and) through lectures, to introduce technological advances of the near and distant future, as a preparation for changes that lie ahead.¹⁵

This explicitly stated emphasis on the pragmatic details of working in the industry places NYU, despite perceptions, as a rather typical film school: emphasizing artistic expression, but stressing that this can be achieved within the industry. This is exactly the path that Scorsese himself has followed, and all of this is not merely coincidental. As Arkush states, Scorsese as an instructor at NYU went a long way towards integrating the study and appreciation of popular cinema into the curriculum:

Marty entered the room wearing a cowboy hat and firing a cap gun in the air ... We were going to see a John Wayne western in which the Duke plays a racist bastard. ‘If you leave the room, you fail the course,’ Marty said. Big groan. *The Green Berets* was in release, and only Richard Nixon was less popular than John Wayne ... Marty guarded the exit with his cap gun. ‘This movie is called *The Searchers* and you will never see a better western.’ The projector started. The black screen opened into a doorway to Monument Valley, and a chill went up and down my spine. When this shot is repeated in reverse at the end of the picture, I was crying. The class applauded loud and long. Marty beamed with pride and fired several shots in the air. He had us hooked and he knew it.¹⁶

It is important, of course, not to fall into the trap of seeing this strictly in terms of Scorsese’s individual influence. By the late 1960s, the auteur theory had begun to

¹⁴ Fensch, 310.

¹⁵ Fensch, 310-311.

¹⁶ Arkush, 59.

influence critical taste within the United States, primarily through the work of Andrew Sarris, who wrote weekly articles in the *Village Voice*, published his book *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions* (1968), and taught courses at New York universities (mostly Columbia but briefly at NYU as well). But Scorsese was part of this legitimizing function, representing a certain generational shift within the NYU community.

Arkush's article makes it clear that when he began as a film student, the great divide between high art and mass culture was firmly in place. Scorsese's comments confirm that this was the attitude adopted by many of the senior instructors in the faculty, including his mentor, Manoogian:

Although Haig produced my first feature, we didn't agree on films. When I had to write a little treatise on a film, I choose *The Third Man*. He gave me a B+ and said, 'Forget this, it's just a thriller.' But we did agree that films should be personal.¹⁷

Scorsese also acknowledges the influence of the cultural scene happening around him and the adversarial relationship between this new taste formation and the critical stance of the NYU faculty:

At this time the new American Underground was emerging, and since our campus was in Greenwich Village we had access to all of these films. Jonas Mekas was writing his *Village Voice* column every week, while Andrew Sarris was deploying the *politique des auteurs*, imported from the French *Cahiers du cinema*, in *Film Culture* magazine. Then *Movie* magazine appeared from Britain with its list of great directors, and there were Hawks and Hitchcock at the top. The professors were totally against these critical views, but what we learned was that the new critics liked John Wayne movies, but they weren't just John Wayne movies, but John Ford and Howard Hawks working through him. What had impressed us as good when we were young had impressed other people too.¹⁸

The question one may ask, then, is how did Scorsese function within this environment whose tastes are seemingly at odds with his own? For as Scorsese mentions, his first

¹⁷ Scorsese on Scorsese, 14.

¹⁸ Scorsese on Scorsese, 18.

feature film was actually produced by Manoogian, and he was even brought in as an instructor in 1969, a position he held until he left for Hollywood in the fall of 1970. In Bourdieu's terms, how did Scorsese accumulate this level of symbolic power within this institution, especially given these differences in cultural taste?

STUDENT FILMMAKING AND THE NEW YORK UNDERGROUND

To offer an explanation, a third critical grouping needs to be introduced: the New American underground cinema, which operates much closer to Bourdieu's idea of a restricted field of cultural production than the university. As Bourdieu explains, academic institutions, while certainly operating outside of the field of large-scale production in artistic endeavors, can also be seen as a hindrance to a field defining itself as truly autonomous or disinterested:

At least in the most perfectly autonomous sector of the field of cultural production, where the only audience aimed at is other producers (as with Symbolist poetry), the economy of practices is based, as in a generalized game of 'loser wins', on a systematic inversion of the fundamental principles of all ordinary economies: that of business (it excludes the pursuit of profit and does not guarantee any sort of correspondence between investments and monetary gains), that of power (it condemns honors and temporal greatness), and even that of institutionalized cultural authority (the absence of any academic training or consecration may be considered a virtue).¹⁹

Thus, training in filmmaking at the university level implies a certain "apprenticeship" for the mainstream industry rather than a concern with film as an aesthetic experience.

Student films are not aimed at the public at large, but yet they appear to lack the autonomy of an avant-garde practice like the New American cinema led by Jonas Mekas,

¹⁹ Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*: 39.

in which opposition to the values of the mainstream cinema is explicit. Like student filmmaking, there is an emphasis on the personal, but the personal filmmaking of the underground defines itself negatively, as being anything but Hollywood: “Our movies come from our hearts – our little movies, not the Hollywood movies.”²⁰

Furthermore, the place of the avant-garde within American film culture and its various institutions during the 1960s is unique. Frequently, experimental art relies on cultural institutions as well as government funding to sustain itself, in the case of film as well as other cultural forms.²¹ However, beginning in the post-war period and continuing into the 1970s, avant-garde film in New York was denied the support of the Museum of Modern Art and, after its formation in 1965, the National Endowment for the Arts as well. This is despite the fact that these institutions were in general funding abstract, non-commercial artistic expression:

These institutions continually frustrated avant-garde filmmakers by excluding them from new avenues of funding. While the NEA, MoMA, the Rockefeller Foundation, and other institutions devoted themselves to funding avant-garde art in every other medium, they supported Hollywood film.²²

Through this exclusion, the restricted field of cultural production represented by avant-garde film was formed, however “accidentally”.²³ Because the New American Cinema group and other avant-garde collectives and individuals could not rely on institutional funding, they had to define themselves as anti-institutional. Because of the logic of restricted fields of production, the unintended result was an increase in this avant-garde’s

²⁰ Jonas Mekas, “Where Are We – the Underground?” in *The New American Cinema: A Critical Anthology*. 20.

²¹ Examples from film history alone are numerous; most prominent would be the Soviet Montage movement of the 1920s.

²² Peter Decherney, *Hollywood and the Culture Elite: How the Movies Became American* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005): 162.

²³ Decherney, 161.

cultural capital. This is because the avant-garde has always had a highly problematic relationship with cultural institutions, as Decherney points out: “Can the avant-garde have a museum at all? Or do museums necessarily rob art of its avant-garde status?”²⁴ Indeed, once an archive for experimental cinema was founded at Anthology Film Archives in 1970, the prestige of the avant-garde as anti-institutional was lowered, and through the changing structure of the New Hollywood the avant-garde found a home in the more traditional institutions by which it was previously denied.²⁵ The fact that this anti-institutional stance of the filmic avant-garde in the 1960s was always a fiction, that Mekas and company constantly sought institutional support and also created their own institutional structure through patronage,²⁶ is ultimately not the issue. What is important is to understand the multiple fields of film production at this time, how they operated, and how Scorsese is situated within this culture.

Scorsese mentions this New American cinema group²⁷ in the context of the new film culture of the sixties. It is a curiosity of this time and place that Sarris and Mekas were writing for the same weekly paper, the *Village Voice*, often side-by-side. Sarris and Mekas, in opposing ways, stressed film as a serious art form rather than simply as mass culture. Mekas did this in fairly traditional ways, emphasizing the high modernist values of the experimental movement over the mass culture of Hollywood. Sarris, however,

²⁴ Decherney, 165.

²⁵ Decherney, 196-212.

²⁶ See Decherney, Chapter 6, “The Politics of Patronage: How the NEA (Accidentally) Created American Avant-Garde Film”: 161-203.

²⁷ It should be mentioned that the terms New American Cinema and American Independent Cinema were both co-opted by the Hollywood industry, with the New American Cinema being associated with the term New Hollywood or the Hollywood Renaissance of the 1970s and the term American Independent Cinema being associated with the continuation of the tradition of the Hollywood Renaissance by non-studio firms in the 1980s blockbuster era, where the type of films made during the 1970s were no longer possible. As will be discussed in later chapters, Scorsese was a very prominent figure in both movements. See the anthology *New American Cinema* (edited by Jon Lewis) (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998) as well as two books by Geoff King: *New Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) and *American Independent Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

called on the avant-garde's own relationship to film as an anti-institutional art that could yield genuine artistic experiences due to its very lack of pretensions. The key critic in this regard, and Sarris's chief influence, was Manny Farber, the modernist painter/ film critic who participated in the development of the New York school of painters only to quickly turn on that school when it began courting the favour of cultural institutions: "Farber's cult sensibilities simply prevented him from supporting artists who seemed to be proudly courting fame and acceptance at the expense of artistic integrity."²⁸ As a film critic, Farber championed what he called "underground films" and "termite art" over what he described as "white elephant art". Farber's idea of "underground" was much different than Mekas. Farber wanted films that lacked artistic ambition, especially if that artistic ambition was aimed at the mass audience.²⁹ For Farber, low budget Hollywood action movies represented a freedom from the bondages of official art.

Andrew Sarris drew on Farber's cultism and the *Cahiers du Cinéma*'s auteurism and established a new film aesthetic and canon in which Hollywood cinema was appreciated as high art.³⁰ Only within film culture, and only at a time in which postmodern movements like Pop Art challenged the notion of what art meant, could such a theory actually take hold. Despite championing the most mainstream of films, Sarris could position himself as having vanguard tastes and accuse the avant-garde as being outdated and "boring".³¹ But within American cultural institutions, Sarris's approach

²⁸ Greg Taylor, *Artists in the Audience: Cults, Camp, and American Film Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999): 35.

²⁹ See in particular: Manny Farber, "Underground Films: A Bit of Male Truth," *Commentary*, 1957. In *Negative Space: Manny Farber on the Movies* (New York: Praeger, 1971): 12-24; and Manny Farber, "White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art," *Film Culture* 27 (Winter 1962-63): 9-13.

³⁰ See Taylor, "Chapter Five: From Termites to Auteurs: Cultism Goes Mainstream," in *Artists in the Audience*: 73-97.

³¹ Andrew Sarris, "Avant-Garde Films Are More Boring Than Ever," in *Politics and Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978): 196-206.

was not really original. MoMA had a long tradition, going back to World War II, of supporting Hollywood, as had the university system and early programs at Ivy League schools such as Columbia and Harvard.³² By championing movies, figures like Iris Barry at MoMA had already “altered an idea central to the modernist definition of art: that art shared nothing in common with mass culture.”³³ The important point here, however, is to emphasize that the relationship between modernism and mass culture “altered” but hardly disappeared. The avant-garde could still rely on an anti-mass culture rhetoric to advance its claims. In his 1986 study *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, Andreas Huyssen discusses how the rise of postmodernism in the 1970s challenged the modernist idea that high art had to be separated from the contamination of mass culture, but also notes that this attempt did not have any lasting effect:

Modernism’s insistence on the autonomy of the art work, its obsessive hostility to mass culture, its radical separation from the culture of everyday life, and its programmatic distance from political, economic, and social concerns was always challenged as soon as it arose ... There has been a plethora of strategic moves tending to destabilize the high/low opposition from within. Ultimately, however, these attempts have never had lasting effects. If anything, they rather seem to have provided, for a host of different reasons, new strength and vitality to the old dichotomy. Thus the opposition between modernism and mass culture has remained amazingly resilient over the decades. To argue that this simply has to do with the inherent ‘quality’ of the one and deprivations of the other – correct as it may be in the case of many specific works – is to perpetuate the time worn strategy of exclusion; it is itself a sign of the anxiety of contamination.³⁴

Indeed, because of (not despite) the rise of auteurism, art cinema and the legitimizing function of such cultural institutions as MoMA and The Film Society of Lincoln Center,

³² Peter Decherney, “Overlapping Publics: Hollywood and Columbia University, 1915,” “Mandarins and Marxists: Harvard and the Rise of Film Experts,” and “The Museum of Modern Art and the Roots of the Cultural Cold War,” in *Hollywood and the Culture Elite: How the Movies Became American*: 41-62, 63-96, and 123-160.

³³ Haberski, 83.

³⁴ Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986): vii.

the avant-garde strengthened its hold during this period as the truly vanguard movement. It is only in the early 1970s, the time in which Scorsese moved into Hollywood filmmaking, that this situation shifts once again.³⁵

SCORSESE'S NYU SHORT FILMS

The relationship between the avant-garde and student filmmaking at this time was quite close, despite the philosophical differences regarding the industry, not unlike the relationship between Scorsese and senior faculty like Manoogian at NYU. Often, student films and the avant-garde would be conflated. David Thompson and Ian Christie note that this was the case with Scorsese's early short films, which Sarris considered as part of the underground movement:

The collectivity of Independent Cinema is not worth writing about. Only individual films. I have liked Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising*, Andy Warhol's and Ronny Tavel's *The Life of Juanita Castro*, Adolfo Mekas's *Hallelujah the Hills*, Peter Goldman's *Echoes of Silence*, several works by Stan VanDerBeek, Carmern D'Avino, and Robert Breer in the more abstract categories. Martin Scorsese's short films reveal a wit capable of talking features.³⁶

While being condescending to the movement as a whole, Sarris acknowledged a certain potential in Scorsese for "talking features," which for Sarris meant work aimed at a wider audience, preferably Hollywood. The notion of Scorsese placing himself as a filmmaker between two worlds, being inside Hollywood making films while also seeing himself as an outsider to the industry, had its roots in his early formation at the university, which itself shares these same traits. NYU as a student filmmaking center encouraged

³⁵ Decherney, 196-203.

³⁶ Andrew Sarris, "The Independent Cinema," in *The New American Cinema: A Critical Anthology* (edited by Gregory Battcock) (New York: Dutton, 1967). Quoted in *Scorsese on Scorsese*, 22.

“personal” filmmaking while also preparing students for a potential career in the industry. The university system thrived on having its students win awards for their films in order to increase their level of prestige and symbolic power, as is often the case within restricted fields. These awards also served as a way into the Hollywood system for the individual participants. Scorsese’s eventual status as a critically acclaimed yet also famous and well-known Hollywood director provided an ideal example for NYU to promote. It followed a long history, out of which Scorsese emerged, in which cultural institutions, not only MoMA and the NEA but the university as well, supported Hollywood film and social realist documentary over formal experimentation.

Both of Scorsese’s early short films, *What’s a Nice Girl Like You Doing in a Place Like This?* and *It’s Not Just You, Murray*, were honored at the 1965 National Student Film Festival,³⁷ giving Scorsese the prestige he needed to have his Master’s film project turned into a feature film and to be able to teach at the institution himself. The National Student Film Festival itself shows the place of student filmmaking within the cultural field. The event was co-sponsored by the National Student Association, the MPAA, and, by 1964, Lincoln Center, which also began, in 1963, the New York Film Festival.³⁸ Along with other cultural institutions like MoMA and the NEA, the New York Film Festival snubbed the avant-garde from 1963-1965. Although they reached out in 1966 with a special programming of “independent” filmmakers, the festival as a whole came to represent the type of bourgeois, middle-brow culture the avant-garde opposed.³⁹ Its exclusion from the New York Film Festival only confirmed the avant-garde’s position

³⁷ Fensch, 323.

³⁸ Raymond Haberski, *It’s Only a Movie!: Films and Critics in American Culture* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001): 173.

³⁹ Decherney, 181-182.

“as anti-institutional art, which follows the entrenched avant-garde logic that defines museums and cultural institutions as vitiating mortuaries of art and pits them against the organic, political world of artistic production.”⁴⁰ It is from within this field of large-scale cultural production that student films, despite their low budgets and artistic aspirations, ultimately operated. Much like the New York and other film festivals around the world, the Student Film Festival was a place to earn cultural capital that could be used for further career advancement within the Hollywood industry.

Besides Sarris’s brief mention of Scorsese’s early shorts, there was little critical attention paid to these works, and subsequent accounts (which are few, given the limited availability of the prints) discuss the films as apprenticeship work for Hollywood and as miniature examples of Scorsese’s later films. There is a strong autobiographical reading given to each retrospectively that calls on future knowledge of Scorsese as a filmmaker and a personality. But what these short films also reveal is a connection to the classical cinema of Hollywood that is much closer to the art cinema of Europe, particularly the French New Wave and its genre revisions, than to the avant-garde of New York. *What’s a Nice Girl Like You Doing in a Place Like This?* shows the twin influences of the French New Wave and popular television comedy such as “Sid Caesar’s Your Show of Shows”, while *It’s Not Just You, Murray!* combines elements of Classical Hollywood gangster films with a New Wave-style deconstruction of this very genre, combined with an ending borrowed from Federico Fellini.⁴¹ As the 1992 *Sight and Sound* review states: “*It’s Not Just You, Murray!* is not an experimental film, but it is vigorous and refreshing.”⁴² In

⁴⁰ Decherney, 183.

⁴¹ See *Scorsese on Scorsese*, 15-18, as well as the descriptions in the filmography, 218-219.

⁴² Jill McGreal, “*It’s Not Just You, Murray!*” in *Scorsese: A Journey Through the American Psyche* (edited by Paul A. Woods) (London: Plexus Publishing, 2005): 17.

other words, the film is a youthful reinterpretation and reexamination of popular cinema rather than a rejection of it. A similar note is sounded in Jonathan Romney's take on *What's a Nice Girl Like You Doing in a Place Like This?* for the same *Sight and Sound* issue:

First, Scorsese is working here as an urbane hipster in love with the myths of New York life, but also out to parody films that naively glamorise the city, and to signal his allegiance to the sophisticated, dislocated European school of urban filmmaking. And secondly, here is a Scorsese who brushes neurotic unease aside as simple material for a skit, while clearly signaling the fascination which that unease exerts. The spectacle of Scorsese learning to handle cinema is also the spectacle of his recognizing the love-hate nature of his relationship with it. In the final analysis, the 'meeting cute' of the title is less between Harry and his wife than between a boy and his camera.⁴³

With this review, Romney situates the film within Scorsese's personal history as an obsessive cinephile, as well as within the trajectory of Scorsese's career and its ambiguous relationship with mainstream entertainment. Leighton Grist's reading of the two films takes this argument further:

That Murray and Joe are shown directing the coda's action, and that Murray can be described as an 'extra', raises another reflexive connotation offered by the short's allusiveness. For, as the film implies that Murray has been dominated by Joe, so it suggests that Murray has been dominated, metaphorically, by cinema ... In *What's a Nice Girl Like You Doing in a Place Like This?* Harry's end as he is absorbed by the painting is, in Harry's words, 'fraught with peril'. While the films display a delight in cinema, they also suggest a suspicion of its possibly amoral, possibly deracinating, possibly dehumanizing seductiveness.⁴⁴

While these readings of the films are perceptive and convincing, a question arises: what "cinema" is being referred to here? Should we collapse all cinemas into one singular

⁴³ Jonathan Romney, "What's a Nice Girl Like You Doing in a Place Like This?" *Sight and Sound*, no. 6 (June 1992), 57; in *Scorsese: A Journey Through the American Psyche* (ed. Paul Woods) (London: Plexus, 2005): 15-16.

⁴⁴ Leighton Grist, *The Films of Martin Scorsese, 1963-77: Authorship and Context* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 2000): 20, 22.

notion, or is there a one specific type of cinema that is to be regarded with suspicion due to its seductiveness? To address this question, the context of NYU is needed.

As mentioned earlier, according to Scorsese, the aesthetic position of Haig Manoogian and other senior faculty at NYU was highly critical of Hollywood mass entertainment and disagreed strongly with the view that the personal expression they so valued could exist within such a system. Manoogian was part of a cultural perspective known as the mass culture critique, of which Hollywood was a particularly common example. The sociologist Herbert Gans has summarized the 'mass culture critique' as having a number of major themes, all of which apply to Hollywood cinema: (1) Mass culture is produced solely for profit and thus is completely beholden to the audience rather than personal expression; (2) Mass culture borrows from and thus debases high culture, both the product and its individual (for example, Hollywood's luring of the great novelists William Faulkner and F. Scott Fitzgerald); and (3) Mass culture has negative effects on both the audience as individuals (producing mindless automatons) and on society as a whole (can lead to totalitarianism).⁴⁵ While Scorsese has stated that he disagreed with this sentiment and instead aligned himself with the cultural movement in which Hollywood would be taken seriously, there is an element of this critique in his early films. The use of the Warner Bros. gangster genre in *It's Not Just You, Murray!* recalls the early work of Godard in both celebrating **and** critiquing this style of filmmaking. Scorsese may have intended the critique to be more general and include all

⁴⁵ Herbert Gans, "Chapter One: The Critique of Mass Culture," in *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste* (New York: Basic Books, 1974): 17-64.

types of filmmaking,⁴⁶ but the standard type of cinema felt to be detrimental at this time was Hollywood. This critique would be especially pronounced with his first feature film.

WHO'S THAT KNOCKING AT MY DOOR?

Who's That Knocking at My Door? began as a graduate project at NYU. It also marked Scorsese's first attempt at, as Leighton Grist puts it, "entering the marketplace, (and) developing a style."⁴⁷ Or, to phrase it differently, Scorsese was developing a style in order to enter the marketplace. Subsequent writing on the film, which is rather substantial compared to the writing on the short films, emphasizes the work as an apprenticeship for the masterpiece to come, *Mean Streets* (1973), and hence judges the film in relation to this more professional standard:

Who's That Knocking at My Door? presents a patchwork of jerky transitions, unintegrated stylistic contrasts and varying standards of cinematography and picture quality. Some incidents imply a lack of finance or opportunity for reshooting ... Yet if *Who's That Knocking at My Door?* bears the scars of its production, it equally suffers from a lack of *beneficial* constraint that marks it, pejoratively, as a student-cum-independent film. Too often Scorsese's direction displays a self-indulgence and lack of control that diversely implies over-eagerness and/or immaturity.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ A mention here should be made of *Peeping Tom* (Michael Powell, 1960), in many ways the ur-text of all critical, self-reflexive films about the dangers of movies. Although Scorsese claims not to have seen the film until 1970, he heard of it when it played in New York in 1962 and knew many people who did see it, including Jim McBride. The film is said to have influenced McBride's *David Holzman's Diary* (1968) (in which direct cinema is the subject of critical reflection), and certainly Scorsese has acknowledged its importance: "I have always felt that *Peeping Tom* and *8 1/2* say everything that can be said about the process of dealing with film, the objectivity and subjectivity of it and the confusion between the two. *8 1/2* captures the glamour and enjoyment of film-making, while *Peeping Tom* shows the aggression of it, how the camera violates. These are the two great films that deal with the philosophy and the danger of film-making."

(*Scorsese on Scorsese*, 18-20)

⁴⁷ Grist, 24.

⁴⁸ Grist, 31. For a contemporary review that echoes these sentiments on the film as overindulgent, see "Almost Making It," *Time* (September 19, 1969): 95-96.

Leighton Grist's comments represent a wide consensus on the film as technically crude because Scorsese still had not learned to "properly" channel his talent.⁴⁹ This view contrasts drastically with one prominent early account of the film by Roger Ebert, who viewed an early version (titled *I Call First*) at the Chicago Film Festival in 1967. Ebert's review is worth quoting at length:

As a technical achievement, it brings together two opposing worlds of American cinema. On the one hand, there have been traditional films like *Marty*, *View from The Bridge*, *On the Waterfront* and *David and Lisa* – all sincere attempts to function at the level where real lives are led and all suffering to some degree from their makers' romantic and idealistic ideas, about such lives. On the other hand there have been experimental films from Jonas Mekas, Shirley Clarke and other pioneers of the New York underground. In *The Connection*, *Shadows* and *Guns of the Trees*, they used improvised dialogue and scenes and hidden and handheld cameras in an attempt to capture the freshness of a spontaneous experience. Both groups have lacked the other's strong point. The films like *Marty* are technically well done and emotionally satisfying, but they lack the flavour of actual experience. Films like *Shadows* are authentic enough, but often poor in technical quality and lacking the control necessary to develop character and tell a story. *I Call First* brings these two kinds of films together into a work that is absolutely genuine, artistically satisfying and technically comparable to the best films being made anywhere. I have no reservations in describing it as a great moment in American movies.⁵⁰

To unpack Ebert's remarks here, the film has to be looked at relationally, not only in regards to the different styles of filmmaking but in terms of the different and rapidly changing conceptions of art.

Ebert is positioning Scorsese here as Scorsese himself will situate his career: as in-between the world of Hollywood and independent filmmaking. For Ebert, *I Call First*

⁴⁹ In fact, for Andrew Sarris, this lack of discipline or maturity remained as late as *Raging Bull* in 1980: "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." Andrew Sarris, "Mean Fighter from Mean Streets," in *Perspectives on Raging Bull* (edited by Steven G. Kellman) (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1994): 55.

⁵⁰ Roger Ebert, "I Call First," *Chicago Sun-Times* (November 17, 1967); in *Scorsese: A Journey Through the American Psyche*: 19.

represents the best of both worlds. It is an aesthetically rich film that has a coherent story and a controlled use of technique. This is in marked contrast to the view of the film as an amateurish and self-indulgent debut feature -- a viewpoint that has come to dominate discussions. Instead, Ebert admires the film's ability to be technically competent and authentic without sacrificing storytelling. Ebert's review provides the standard description of the film's plot and thematics, but additionally makes special note of two relatively non-narrative sequences: "Two scenes -- one in a bar, another at a party -- are among the most evocative descriptions of American life I have ever seen."⁵¹ Compare this with Grist's comments on the same material:

Consider the scene that shows a drunken J.R., Joey and Gaga after J.R. breaks with the girl. Centred on a long, static front-on take, the characters' inebriated antics, as they laugh inanely, throw napkins and annoy each other, are allowed to drift until the scene teeters on the brink of actualizing rather than representing irritating behaviour.⁵²

The presence of such scenes, whether viewed positively or negatively, shows the film's debt to independent filmmaking and the aesthetic of personal expression. Ebert is able to relate this personal expression to a broader conception of "American life" while Grist sees an irritating self-indulgence, but both share the conviction that great filmmaking negotiates between the two extremes of Hollywood and the avant-garde. It is in this aesthetic, which will become increasingly popular throughout the years, that Scorsese's reputation will be built.

Like *What's a Nice Girl Like You Doing in a Place Like This?* and *It's Not Just You, Murray!*, *Who's That Knocking At My Door?* negotiates between a fascination with Hollywood and a critique of that very cinema, as evidenced by the two direct references

⁵¹ Ebert (1967), 20.

⁵² Grist, 32.

to Hollywood westerns: *The Searchers* and *Rio Bravo* (Howard Hawks, 1959). In particular, the film shows how J.R.'s central psychological problem, the inability to see women as anything other than "virgins" or "whores", is not only part of his Italian Catholic background but is present in the Hollywood cinema that he loves. Ironically, it is this very cinephilia that allows J.R. to have a conversation with his eventual girlfriend in the first place, an indication of how cinema was gaining in cultural prestige during the sixties. J.R. recognizes a still of *The Searchers* in the Girl's (she is not given a name in the film) French magazine (a clear reference to auteurism's origins) and is able to use this cultural link as a way to bridge the obvious class differences between them, if only temporarily. During the final confrontation at her apartment, their cultural backgrounds are made very apparent through her high culture music and literary choices (jazz records, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night*). And as the sequence concludes, the girl tells J.R. to "go home", echoing their first meeting when they discuss a scene from *The Searchers*. As Grist argues, J.R.'s investment in the star image of Wayne implies another factor in his determination.⁵³ J.R. discusses *The Searchers* and *Rio Bravo* without ever recognizing the racism and sexism of Wayne's lead characters. Given the contempt for Hollywood at the time felt by senior faculty at NYU as well as the general liberal disdain felt towards a figure like John Wayne, Scorsese's film can be easily read as a critique of the dangers of this mass culture and the harm it can inflict on individuals who consume it. But at the same time, it can be argued that Scorsese is not so much criticizing Hollywood films as much as those who take an uncritical view of this cinema. Thus J.R. does not see *The Searchers* as problematizing the lead character's racism or *Rio Bravo* as undermining the initial sexism towards the female lead, whom J.R. can only see as a "broad". The

⁵³ Grist, 40.

problem lies not with Hollywood, but with an uncritical audience that is unable to appreciate the complexity of the films. Or, to phrase it differently, with a view of Hollywood as mass culture rather than art, a perspective that Scorsese, as a future maker of Hollywood films, had a vested interest in changing. Read retrospectively, the film is much more interesting as an example of the kind of high art/low culture negotiation of the period than as a simple fledgling tale in the saga of an auteur.

Before concluding my discussion of the film, a brief analysis is needed of the film's relation to the distribution system, with this being Scorsese's first commercially released project. After failing to find distribution for the film following its showing at the 1967 Chicago Film Festival, Scorsese received an offer from Joseph Brenner Associates, who agreed to release the film if Scorsese added a nude sequence. Grist argues that this compromised the film's integrity: "The need to include a nude scene plainly highlights the constraints that impinged upon the film's production, and Scorsese cut the scene almost contemptuously into the middle of a conversation between J.R. and the girl."⁵⁴ While clearly the vagaries of distribution altered the film, Grist is focusing only on the types of obvious influences (such as a direct demand from the distributor) rather than the more implicit type of restraint always found in the distribution of art works. From one perspective *Mean Streets* can be seen in auteurist terms as representing a maturation of the young Scorsese, which is how Grist and almost all book length studies of Scorsese frame the film:

Mean Streets made Scorsese's reputation. As an individual text, the film presents an intensively resonant correlation of style, structure and meaning. As an example of film authorship, it bodies forth the maturation of Scorsese's authorial discourse. The film, however, is no less paradigmatic of New Hollywood Cinema, and needs also to be discussed

⁵⁴ Grist, 31.

in relation to that particular phase of filmmaking and the debates that surround it.⁵⁵

Full credit is to be given to Grist here for acknowledging the film's context (something rather rare in commentary on the film), but nevertheless Grist's chapter serves as an endorsement of Hollywood, whose constraints allowed Scorsese to mature. This is unlike the economic forces that compromised *Who's That Knocking At My Door?*, in large part because the constraints of *Mean Streets* promote a certain aesthetic that Grist and, as I will argue in the next chapter, most critics often uncritically accept.

For a different perspective, consider Peter Rea's illuminating comments on both films:

I think *Who's That Knocking* has some of the most creative things he's ever done. I think it blows away *Mean Streets*. The use of slow motion when it is going across the people laughing, and, I just think there are things in that movie that are so powerful. I mean he's jump-cutting, he's playing with the medium and having fun with it. Of course I think *Mean Streets* is great as well. I went to L.A. after NYU, I was there for a brief period of time, and he (Scorsese) was cutting *Mean Streets*. And one of his other students was there working on it as well. So I saw a cut of it, an early cut of it. I saw a lot of stuff that I thought was amazing but they cut out of the movie. Kind of outrageous stuff, dream sequences.⁵⁶

Rea, as primarily a filmmaker and a production teacher, appreciates very different aspects of Scorsese's work than those within the academic interpretative community because he belongs to this field of cultural production himself. The changes in style from *Who's That Knocking At My Door?* to *Mean Streets* are best considered not as a maturation (which implies a clear hierarchy) but as a shift in the type of audience which appreciates each respective work. The vagaries of distribution that Grist uses to denigrate *Who's That Knocking At My Door?* apply equally to *Mean Streets* or any other work of art:

⁵⁵ Grist, 61.

⁵⁶ Peter Rea (Author's Interview) (September 10, 2004).

Since most artists want the advantages of distribution, they work with an eye to what the system characteristic of their world can handle. What kinds of work will it distribute? What will it ignore? What return will it give for what kind of work?⁵⁷

With this in mind, it is useful to compare the two films with the reception of *Shadows*, a film that went through two different versions and thus can be considered as two separate texts. The first cut of the film, which unfortunately is no longer available to be screened, was praised by Jonas Mekas as a great example of underground cinema and was used by Mekas to promote the idea of a New American Cinema. However, when Cassavetes re-edited the film in order to de-emphasize formal experimentation and focus more on characterization, Mekas rejected the film as overly conventional.⁵⁸ For Cassavetes, the second version represented a maturation of his filmmaking, rejecting the overindulgence in cinematic style of the first version. A similar split in critical perspective is possible with *Who's That Knocking At My Door?* and *Mean Streets*. The later film may be more mature, but it is also more widely acceptable and intelligible in terms of style. To place this opposition within a hierarchy, as most critics of the two films have, works well as an auteurist narrative of growth, but also justifies and defends a certain approach to cinema (namely Hollywood, however "New") while rejecting another (experimental).

Throughout his career, Scorsese's work will repeatedly be used to mediate different ideas and notions of what cinema should be. And although Scorsese is often seen as an outsider to Hollywood, this mediation usually takes the form of an implicit justification of its approach to cinema.

⁵⁷ Howard Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982): 94.

⁵⁸ For a full discussion of the two versions of *Shadows*, see George Kouvaros, *Where Does It Happen?: John Cassavetes and Cinema at the Breaking Point* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2004). As Decherney points out, in one of the ironies typical of this period of film culture, "the popularity of this second version (of *Shadows*) gave Mekas the momentum he needed to turn his call for a new generation of filmmakers into an organized movement"; 177.

THE BIG SHAVE

After making *Who's That Knocking At My Door*, but before finding distribution for the film, Scorsese received financial support from Jacques Ledoux, curator of the Cinémathèque Royale de Belgique in Brussels, to make a six-minute short.⁵⁹ The result was Scorsese's most experimental and most overtly political work to that point, *The Big Shave* (1967). The differences between this film and Scorsese's earlier shorts can be related to their differing institutional contexts. The fact that Scorsese's only completely experimental work of this period is financed from Europe rather than any American institution is a reflection of the lack of institutional funding available in America at this time. Similarly, Scorsese did not produce *The Big Shave* within the academic institution, and the film differs dramatically from those earlier shorts. Rather than being a New Wave style exercise in Hollywood revision, *The Big Shave* exists as a narrative in only the barest sense: an unknown man shaves in front of a mirror in an all-white room until he cuts himself and is covered in blood, all to the tune of Bunny Berigan's version of "I Can't Get Started." The film then ends with two title cards: "Whiteness by Herman Melville" and "Viet '67". The film won the Prix L'Age d'Or at the Festival of Experimental Cinema in Belgium, and clearly belongs to that particular field of restricted production.⁶⁰

Not surprisingly, the film has been de-politicized by many Scorsese scholars (and Scorsese himself) and brought into line with the auteurist orthodoxy: "Consciously it was

⁵⁹ Scorsese on Scorsese, 26.

⁶⁰ Scorsese on Scorsese, 26.

an angry outcry against the war. But something else was going on inside me. It was a very bad period.”⁶¹ The fact that Scorsese’s comments depoliticizing *The Big Shave* are repeatedly used in criticism around the film points to a general tendency towards the intentional fallacy still present in even academic writing, but it also reflects a more specific trend in Scorsese scholarship to write a coherent narrative about Scorsese as both a filmmaker and a subject.⁶² In all of these examples, the various authors begin by mentioning the Vietnam context, and then finish by quoting Scorsese’s remarks about the film’s personal rather than political nature, thus rhetorically privileging the latter. One need not deny the veracity of Scorsese’s comments to question their particular relevance to a consideration of the film. The hermeneutic maneuver of Scorsese and these auteur critics removes the social context, which allows the film to be seen as a timeless expression of a (male) artist’s angst. This positioning allows this formally experimental work to be placed within the tradition of the avant-garde that emphasizes art as personal expression and which can easily and safely be placed within an institutional context. This is especially the case in the United States, where the links between organizations like the Museum of Modern Art and the Central Intelligence Agency during the period of the Cold War have been well-established.⁶³

However, as Peter Wollen has argued, historically there are “two avant-gardes”. One emphasizes personal expression, usually derived from other art forms (particularly painting), and the other focuses on political expression (often with ties to the theatre and

⁶¹ Mary Pat Kelly, *Martin Scorsese: A Journey* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2004): 57.

⁶² For example, this quote is referenced in Grist, 23; Andy Dougan, *Martin Scorsese: The Making of His Movies* (London: Orion, 1997), 29; and Les Keyser, *Martin Scorsese* (New York: Twayne Publishing, 1992), 24. In addition, *Scorsese on Scorsese* states that “*The Big Shave* emerged from a spell of deep depression (when Scorsese apparently had difficulty shaving!),” 26.

⁶³ Decherney, 123.

literature but with a greater emphasis on cinematic specificity).⁶⁴ *The Big Shave* is best approached from the latter of these traditions. The film is made by a filmmaker born in America, where an explicitly political avant-garde did not really exist, but within a European context with a long and continuing tradition of combining artistic experimentation with political activism. Furthermore, as an outsider to this context, the European avant-garde Scorsese would have been most familiar with would be precisely this political avant-garde of Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov on through to contemporaries like Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet. And, fittingly, the film won the Prix L'Age d'Or, named after Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dali's 1930 example of political avant-garde provocation. And while the film shows the tendency towards abstraction especially prevalent in American avant-garde painting since World War II, best exemplified in the institutionally celebrated work of Jackson Pollock, there are also two title cards, "Whiteness by Herman Melville" and "Viet '67", that clearly cue the contemporary viewer (in lieu of any direct access to Scorsese's personal mental state) to the film's political relevance. Lawrence S. Friedman's analysis of the film is rare in making this political aspect (rather than Scorsese's personal crisis) the focus of his comments:

Melville's whiteness, famously incarnated in the whale that Captain Ahab so single-mindedly stalks in *Moby-Dick*, evokes the destructive futility of an obsessive quest that resembles America's in Vietnam. An obscure object of desire, the white whale ultimately resists definition, sharing its inscrutability with that of America's longest war whose aims grew cloudier rather than clearer with time.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Peter Wollen, "The Two Avant-Gardes," in *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter-Strategies* (London: Verso, 1982): 92-104.

⁶⁵ Lawrence S. Friedman, *The Cinema of Martin Scorsese* (New York: Continuum, 1997): 41.

The very abstractness of the film thus provides an apt political metaphor for the vagueness of the war itself, and thus works in the best tradition of an avant-garde that works, to quote Godard, “to make films politically” rather than just make political films.

If Scorsese had submitted the film for a week-long anti-war rally with stock footage of the war included, as he once imagined, the film would have had a much more explicit but also less evocative message, as well as owing more to the social realist documentary tradition rather than the avant-garde. The fact that the film has the form it does owes not so much to Scorsese himself as to the very field of cultural production in which he made the work. The film’s “Americanness” (rather than its “Scorseseness”) makes it a rather unusual specimen within this experimental field. Made by an American about an American political controversy with a literary allusion to a great American novelist, the film is nevertheless unthinkable outside of its European context. The reference to Melville is thus particularly appropriate. Melville is an American author who is known less for his storytelling ability and more for his philosophical investigations, which have put him more in the category of a European sensibility, often as a precursor to the rise of French existentialism. And as most cinephiles like Scorsese know, the director Jean-Pierre Grumbach would take on Melville as his pseudonym, an identification that actually begins before his directorial career. It was his alias during his involvement in the World War II French Resistance.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Rui Nogueira, *Melville on Melville* (New York: Viking Press, 1971): 19.

WOODSTOCK

In 1969, while Scorsese was still teaching at NYU, he joined with a group of NYU alumni and students, led by director Michael Wadleigh (who worked as a cinematographer on *Who's That Knocking At My Door?*), to film the Woodstock music festival. Scorsese acted as Assistant Director on the shoot and over the next several months worked with Wadleigh, Thelma Schoonmaker and others in editing the film, often staying up all night and teaching morning classes the next day at the university.⁶⁷ Although the resulting film is one of the major counter-cultural events of the sixties, anecdotes around Scorsese's involvement in the film stress his outsider status. Schoonmaker comments that: "Marty, of course, was very amusing talking about it. He said he brought his cufflinks. He brought his cufflinks to Woodstock because he thought it was maybe going to be that kind of thing!"⁶⁸ Similar comments have been made about *Who's That Knocking At My Door?*, stressing how odd a film about sexual repression seemed in the middle of the sexual revolution.⁶⁹ These examples de-emphasize any social environment that may be said to have influenced Scorsese during this period. Because Scorsese was outside of this context, his work can be constructed as timeless and universal. And because Scorsese's subsequent work in Hollywood did not relate to this counter-culture in any direct manner, it becomes tempting to read this as personal indifference and to view *Woodstock* as simply a job.

A notable exception in this regard is again Friedman, who sees *Woodstock* as part of a politically committed period in Scorsese's career that would undergo a

⁶⁷ Peter Rea (Author's interview).

⁶⁸ Kelly, 56. This anecdote is related in Keyser, 30.

⁶⁹ Kelly, 48.

transformation when he moved to Hollywood: “Changing times, shifting priorities, economic imperatives – or ‘utter hopelessness’: whatever the cause(s), the ensuing cinema of Martin Scorsese lacks the political urgency of *The Big Shave*, *Woodstock*, and *Street Scenes*.”⁷⁰ Friedman’s work is important in recognizing the politics of this period, but he still insists on framing these films within “the cinema of Martin Scorsese.” Thus the collective nature of the *Woodstock* project is downplayed and, following from James Monaco’s early book on the New Hollywood,⁷¹ the success of *Woodstock* is attributed to Scorsese. Discussing a review of the film by Jonathan Rosenbaum,⁷² Friedman writes:

Yet even as Rosenbaum celebrates *Woodstock*’s cinematic flair, he unintentionally begs the question of its attribution. *Woodstock* turned out to be a one-shot triumph for its putative director, Michael Wadleigh, whose filmmaking career it pretty much began and ended. Martin Scorsese, Rosenbaum parenthetically – and somewhat disingenuously –notes at the end of his article, ‘was one of the film’s main editors as well as assistant director.’⁷³

A flawed and yet unfortunately common auteurist logic is at work here. Because Scorsese went on to have a more successful career in Hollywood after the film, it is argued that he must have been the main creative force behind the project.

In order for *Woodstock* as a film to be labeled as an “authentic” piece of art, its maker must be deemed worthy. A masterpiece needs a master: “If we judge the artist on the basis of the work, we must know who really did the work, and therefore (who) deserves the judgment we make of its worth and the worth of its makers.”⁷⁴ Within the art world of film that now exists, the question of who the authentic artist actually is

⁷⁰ Friedman, 44.

⁷¹ James Monaco, *American Film Now* (New York: Zoetrope, 1984): 153.

⁷² Jonathan Rosenbaum, “The Way It Was,” *Chicago Reader* (August 12, 1994): Section 1, pg 10.

⁷³ Friedman, 41-42.

⁷⁴ Becker, 22.

assumes importance, even within obviously collective activity. For if one is not an artist, one is simply personnel:

It is unfeeling to speak of the people who cooperate in the production of art works as 'personnel' or, worse yet, 'support personnel,' but that accurately reflects their importance in the conventional art world view. In that view, the person who does the 'real work,' making the choices that give the work its artistic importance and integrity, is the artist, who may be any of a number of people involved in its production; everyone else's job is to assist the artist. I do not accept the view of the relative importance of the 'personnel' involved that the term connotes, but I use it to emphasize that it *is* the common view in art worlds.⁷⁵

This issue of artistic authenticity within the collective nature of filmmaking is most evident in the last project Scorsese embarks on at NYU before departing for Hollywood: *Street Scenes 1970*. Indeed, the issue of collectivity above all else explains the film's controversial status within Scorsese's oeuvre.

STREET SCENES 1970

In May 1970, while an instructor at New York University, Martin Scorsese helped to organize a series of short films about the war protests that had erupted following the invasion of Cambodia and the student shootings at Kent State. The New York Cinetracts Collective was formed to produce newsreel shorts documenting the political struggle, including an eventual trip to document a march on Washington the following weekend. The Collective consisted mostly of students but also volunteer professional filmmakers and others sympathetic to the enterprise. Over the course of that summer, Scorsese supervised the editing of the footage into a 75-minute feature length film that premiered at the 1970 New York Film Festival in September. Following this screening, the film

⁷⁵ Becker, 77.

traveled to various festivals and was in circulation throughout the 1970s, but never received a commercial release and eventually fell into obscurity, despite the involvement of such a high profile figure as Scorsese. A reconsideration of this film, including both its production and reception, is needed, as well as an examination of the reasons for its marginalization.⁷⁶

The film premiered at the New York Film Festival in September 1970. As a result it received a review in the *New York Times*, which praised the film for its “frightening vitality of actuality as recorded on raw film” and its “balanced, accumulative tone of utterances, from all sides.”⁷⁷ But because the film failed to receive a commercial release, there were no other reviews or comments on the film outside of festival settings. There remain no full-length articles on the film, only the occasional brief discussion in books on Scorsese’s work. In many cases, the film is only described in passing or as part of a filmography.⁷⁸ The two exceptions to this would be Lawrence S. Friedman and Les Keyser, both of whom discuss the film in slightly more detail and in relation to the context of the time. Friedman, for example, sees the film as part of a brief period of

⁷⁶ The most striking example of the marginalization and even exclusion of the film from Scorsese’s history can be seen in the recent retrospective held at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. This (nearly) exhaustive program featured every feature film, documentary and even commercial directed by Scorsese, but tellingly did not include *Street Scenes 1970*. There are also texts on Scorsese that do not include the film at all, even in their filmography: for example, Michael Bliss, *The Word Made Flesh: Catholicism and Conflict in the Films of Martin Scorsese* (Lanham, Md: Scarecrow Press, 1995) and, even more surprising, given its title, Richard A. Blake, *Street Smart: The New York of Lumet, Allen, Scorsese, and Lee* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2005).

⁷⁷ Howard Thompson, “*Street Scenes 1970*,” *New York Times* (September 15, 1970): 52. This review is reprinted in Mary Pat Kelly, *Martin Scorsese: The First Decade* (Pleasantville, NY: Redgrave Publishing Company, 1980): 163.

⁷⁸ For example, see David Ehrenstein, *The Scorsese Picture: The Art and Life of Martin Scorsese* (New York: Birch Lane Press, 1992): 39, 210-211; Leighton Grist, *The Films of Martin Scorsese, 1963-1977: Authorship and Context* (Basingstoke, Eng: Macmillan, 2000): 44; Marie Kathryn Connelly, *Martin Scorsese: An Analysis of His Feature Films, with a Filmography of His Entire Directorial Career* (London: McFarland, 1993): 160; and Marion Weiss, *Martin Scorsese: A Guide to References and Resources* (Boston: G.K. & Hall, 1987): 55-56. Weiss offers the most detailed of these summaries. The recent Scorsese biography similarly ignores the film except for a very brief mention. See Vincent LoBrutto, *Martin Scorsese: A Biography* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008): 115.

“political urgency” in Scorsese’s work that his subsequent films would lack, and sees the project as perhaps instigating this move away from the overtly political:

Although *Street Scenes* was screened to some acclaim – whether due to its intrinsic merit or its political timeliness remains unclear – at the 1970 New York Film Festival, it soon dropped from sight. Since its limited release – it is now nearly impossible to find – Scorsese has further downplayed his role in *Street Scenes* and resisted its inclusion in his filmography. More significantly, the documentary may have soured him on political filmmaking ... whatever the cause(s), the ensuing cinema of Martin Scorsese lacks the political urgency of *The Big Shave*, *Woodstock*, and *Street Scenes*.⁷⁹

Similarly, Keyser describes the extremely political environment of the period that Scorsese himself had helped create: “Instructor Scorsese had so embroiled himself in diverse political film projects that his house had become an impromptu commune for the dissidents and radicals.”⁸⁰ Keyser states that the film’s conclusion represented an end point for Scorsese politically as well: “Scorsese’s editing in this last sequence, the only part of the film he shot himself, suggests an end to any age of reason.”⁸¹ The fact that Scorsese left NYU for Hollywood shortly after the film’s premiere only enhances this linear chronology of *Street Scenes 1970* marking a break within Scorsese’s career, symbolizing his move away from the political.

What is most noticeable is the film’s absence from texts emphasizing interview material with Scorsese himself. The interview collection *Scorsese on Scorsese* (edited by Ian Christie and David Thompson) (London: Faber and Faber, 2003) includes a brief description of the film by the book’s editors, but no direct comments by Scorsese. The edited collection *Martin Scorsese: Interviews* (edited by Peter Brunette) (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1999) contains no references to the film, and former

⁷⁹ Friedman, 44.

⁸⁰ Les Keyser, *Martin Scorsese* (New York: Twayne 1992): 31.

⁸¹ Keyser, 32.

Scorsese assistant Mary Pat Kelly's two collections of interviews with Scorsese and his various collaborators, *Martin Scorsese: The First Decade* and *Martin Scorsese: A Journey* (New York: Thunder Mouth's Press, 2004), contain only a brief description by Kelly and a few comments by actor/participant Harvey Keitel, as well as a reprint of the original *New York Times* review. Again, there are no direct quotations from Scorsese. In a recent interview published in *Film History*, Scorsese was asked if he was ever interested in collective documentary filmmaking. He answered negatively, thus denying his own history with *Street Scenes 1970*.⁸²

The only interview collection to contain Scorsese's actual comments on the film is *Martin Scorsese: Entretiens avec Michael Henry Wilson* (Paris: Centre Pompidou/Cahiers du Cinema, 2005), a series of interviews conducted with Wilson, longtime critic for the journal *Positif* (where most of the interviews were first printed) and eventual Scorsese collaborator on the documentary *A Personal Journey With Martin Scorsese Through American Movies* (Martin Scorsese and Michael Henry Wilson, 1995). The first of these interviews is from May 1975, held at Paris and Cannes, at which time Scorsese was promoting *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974). In this interview, Scorsese makes the following statement about his experiences with the film:

The only scene that I "directed" is the violent discussion at the end of the film, in a room in Washington where we were stranded on the last day after an exhausting week of shooting. It was like we were cut off from the world, most of us had been seriously molested or gassed, and I was sick like a dog... Harvey Keitel was there, he had brought us some photos. Like all of us, he was filled with rage, he couldn't stand all this waiting and powerlessness. As well, since it was the end of the school year, everyone had dispersed. There was no one around to show the miles of footage that we shot. I was rebuked by the dean of the university since we lost \$16,000 of equipment. He insisted that I put a form to this mass of

⁸² Raffaele Donato, "Docufictions: An Interview with Martin Scorsese on Documentary Film," *Film History* 19, no. 2 (2007): 204.

material. The best documents were brought in by Don Lenzer, who had worked on *Woodstock*: I could have used his shots as they were. I edited throughout the night over a period of ten days, trying to give a formal structure to the ensemble, swearing that I would not let myself embark into a political film if I could not direct it from one end to the other. When I showed the film to the participants, they hated it: they didn't find that it was contestable enough. They felt betrayed, they didn't recognize what they had lived through. However, I believe that the film was honest: I showed the sad reality, the anger, the frustration, the irresponsibility, the general sentiment of powerlessness. It didn't concern the Weathermen, the real radicals, but the average student, the sons of families, the weekend leftists. And that was something that they did not want to admit. I was extremely bitter, and the film ended on a very pessimistic note, in the middle of a sentence, by a brutal fade-out. Each time that we projected the film, the spectators, even the non-engaged students, spontaneously pursued the debate in the room, the arguments of the discussion in Washington. That was the only merit of *Street Scenes*.⁸³

This bitterness on Scorsese's part thus becomes an obvious explanation as to why he dissociated himself from the film over the years. These comments indicate that Scorsese sees the film as having merit only as a tool to provoke political discussion, strongly implying that the film lacked aesthetic distinction and providing one explanation for his distancing of himself from the project.⁸⁴

The only other comments made by Scorsese on the film are included in a long essay profile by Bella Taylor.⁸⁵ In this piece, Taylor includes a number of quotations from Scorsese on *Street Scenes 1970* taken from her own personal interview:

I always make it very clear that while the film was my idea, I didn't shoot most of it. I only filmed one small segment of it, but, of course, edited it along the lines of what I wanted it to say.

⁸³ Michael Henry Wilson, "J'ai dû prendre une autre voie pour survivre: Des premiers courts métrages à *Alice n'est plus ici* (Paris/Cannes, May 1974)" reprinted in *Martin Scorsese: Entretiens avec Michael Henry Wilson* (Paris: Centre Pompidou/ Cahiers du Cinéma, 2006): 29-31 (translation by Nick Nguyen); originally published in *Positif* no. 170 (June 1975) : 8-23.

⁸⁴ Of course, even if it is true that the film only had value as a political tool, this need not be considered to have the negative connotations that Scorsese implies. There is a very honourable tradition of such films.

⁸⁵ Bella Taylor, "Martin Scorsese," in *Closeup: The Contemporary Director* (edited by Jon Tuska) (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1981): 293-368.

I used footage that showed nobody knew what to do, neither radicals or [sic] conservatives. Everybody was yelling at everybody, and the picture ends in the middle of an argument because that was when the film literally ran out! I just left it that way. I thought, 'Perfect,' it was God-sent.

I wanted to show the humanistic, rather than the political, nature of the issue. All I wanted to show was that no side had the answer. At the end, all we saw was utter hopelessness ... not futility, but the impotence of the people. They were just sitting around and just arguing and arguing.⁸⁶

All of these comments are selected by Taylor to validate a fairly standard auteurist discourse. Crucial to this is the separation of true "artists" from the world of politics: "Like many artists, Scorsese deplors the brittle, humorless provincialism of the politically-minded. He detests the dogmatic thinking of those who can only see the 'rightness' of their cause."⁸⁷ The major problem with Taylor's piece, however, is that it does not contain or include proper citations. There are vague statements of the film being "condemned by left and right alike, as well as some of the students who shot footage for the film,"⁸⁸ but no actual names are used. It seems as if Taylor is simply paraphrasing comments on the film, perhaps from Scorsese himself. It does not appear that she did any actual research into the film and its various participants. Furthermore, it is very clear that the film is being downplayed within Scorsese's overall oeuvre while Taylor attributes what praise is given to the film to Scorsese himself. For Taylor, *Street Scenes 1970* stands as the final film of Scorsese's university career before he removed himself from politics and entered into truly "artistic" filmmaking. Given the few comments that

⁸⁶ Taylor, 315.

⁸⁷ Taylor, 315.

⁸⁸ Taylor, 315.

Scorsese has made on the film, Taylor's piece influenced future writers, who frequently cite her quotes from Scorsese.⁸⁹

Instead of relying solely on Scorsese's own comments and on an auteurist/teleological argument that sees Scorsese's distancing of the film purely in terms of his eventual political disengagement, I wish to re-examine the film's production and reception through interviews with other participants: NYU students Harry Bolles, John Butman, Peter Rea, and Nick Tanis, as well as the professional filmmaker Don Lenzer. While interviews with participants who are recalling events from over thirty years ago are obviously not going to reveal any absolute truth (as if it exists in any case), collectively they give a much more detailed and nuanced account of the production as well as suggest another interpretation for why Scorsese dissociated himself from the film.

To begin, the extremely politicized time period of the late 1960s/ early 1970s needs to be emphasized, since this had a direct impact on the environment at NYU and even within the film production classes at the time. When I asked John Butman if the reception of *Street Scenes* was as heated and debated as Taylor describes in her article, he answered: "Everything was contentious at that time, to the point where political debates kept taking over classes, which annoyed me because I was rather apolitical and simply interested in learning about film technique."⁹⁰ Furthermore, it was Scorsese who was regarded as the instructor most sympathetic to those on the political left:

Scorsese was very much the superstar of the school at that time, having won prizes for his short films, which he screened in class, as well as

⁸⁹ For example, Taylor's piece is quoted in Keyser, 32; Friedman, 44; and Robert Casillo, *Gangster Priest: The Italian American Cinema of Martin Scorsese* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006): 100. Casillo goes so far as to use Scorsese's comments to argue for the importance of Catholic divine providence in Scorsese's work: "This sense of dependence on chance, regarded ultimately as a divine manifestation, is even revealed in Scorsese's film-making practice, as witness the conclusion of his 1970 political documentary *Street Scenes*, which breaks off abruptly because the film ran out."

⁹⁰ John Butman (author's interview) (October 18, 2006).

having directed a feature film, *Who's That Knocking At My Door?* It was also well-known that he was the protégé, so to speak, of Haig Manoogian, one of the senior members of the faculty. Manoogian taught that other section of the course I was taking with Marty, and I actually went to both classes, because I was interested. And their approaches were quite different. Although I personally liked Marty's approach, I know some students who wanted more information about the technical aspects of filmmaking, lenses, for example, things like that, which Marty never really covered, at least directly. Manoogian was a much better teacher for that sort of knowledge. So there were two groups, one that favored Marty's approach, one more interested in Manoogian's method. The group that was with Marty tended to be the hipper group, although of course I'm biased in this regard. I also think they were more politically engaged. Manoogian's taste was also much more traditional; I remember, for example, a scenario for a bank heist film I proposed that he rejected. Manoogian was very interested in films with documentary roots. He was rather anti-Hollywood, anti-genre; he was quite interested in the idea of the "New York film," documentary films, or fiction films dealing with the reality of New York ... You have to remember that our class was very radical, both politically and aesthetically. Mario Bava, for example, was a big favorite, and Marty was very supportive of these views, very willing to listen as to why Bava was a great director. And at times politics seemed to hijack the discussion in the film courses, which I was somewhat ambivalent about.⁹¹

Far from being the apolitical artist described by Taylor, Scorsese was at the vanguard of the NYU faculty, both aesthetically, in his championing of commercial cinema over the objections of senior faculty like Manoogian, and politically, in his tolerance of political debate within a film production context.

It is this environment that led to the production of *Street Scenes 1970*, a film that began with the idea of producing a series of short films on the political situation following the United States' invasion of Cambodia (with the subsequent shootings at Kent State eventually contributing to this unrest as well as distracting from the original outrages). Harry Bolles recalls the impetus of the film as follows:

So, on April 30th, I believe, Nixon gave his speech on the Cambodian invasion, and there was this very quick and spontaneous uprising on

⁹¹ Harry Bolles (author's interview) (November 11, 2006).

campuses across the U.S. And the idea developed in the film school to create a series of short newsreels called Cinetracts, modeled on the political filmmaking in France in the late 1960s and of course the Soviet cinema of the 1920s. There was even a French student in the class, Didier Loiseau, who had been involved in the events of May 1968 in Paris. And there were some non-students involved in the project as well, like Don Lenzer, a young cameraman who'd worked with the *Woodstock* shoot. And our goal, unlikely as it sounds today, was to be 'the information arm of the revolution,' and we called ourselves the Cinetracts Collective.⁹²

This description of the film's origins is supported by Peter Rea's recollections. However, Rea cites Scorsese as the main organizing source of the project:

Marty's inclination was that he wanted to start something called Cinetracts. If you look at *Street Scenes 1970* you'll see Cinetracts in the credits. His first inclination is that he wanted to film everything that was going on and then make short films, like political tracts. So he just utilized whatever resources we had equipment-wise and sent everyone out to shoot, whatever kids were interested.⁹³

Thus it is questionable at this early phase of the production how large a role Scorsese played in the organization of the project, but Scorsese, as a faculty member, was certainly crucial in giving students access to the equipment as well as protecting them from institutional interference: "The administration of NYU was not immediately supportive of any of this activity, which disrupted classes and put equipment at risk, and Scorsese was the one who really worked to stand in between the students and the administration."⁹⁴

The situation on the NYU campus following the invasion of Cambodia and the Kent State shootings was extremely tense and bordering on widespread police intervention. On May 5, 1970, a day after the Kent State shootings, a group of more than 150 radicals led by a non-tenured professor, Dr. Robert Wolfe, and a graduate teaching assistant in Physics, Nicolas Unger, had taken over the university's main frame computer

⁹² Harry Bolles (author's interview).

⁹³ Peter Rea (author's interview) (September 10, 2004).

⁹⁴ Harry Bolles (author's interview).

in the basement of the Courant Institute of Mathematical Sciences.⁹⁵ According to Nick Tanis, since the computer was owned by the Defense department and leased to the university, it was an obvious target.⁹⁶ While this was only one of many incidents across the country, it had a more direct connection to the NYU film school given the involvement of Haig Manoogian in the negotiations. Both Nick Tanis and Harry Bolles recall the incident:

Haig Manoogian and the president of the School of the Arts student body, a film student whose name I've forgotten, were part of the University Senate (a group formed in response to student unrest the previous year) tasked with negotiating with the protestors who had locked themselves into the computer rooms. Their goal was again to keep the police off campus. The negotiations were successful. The protestors left, allowed to walk away through a crowd outside on Mercer Street past a phalanx of police. The negotiating team went in to examine the computer. According to the *New York Times* article, "they found a burning gasoline-soaked fuse leading to the computer complex." The police accompanying the negotiators extinguished the fuse. If it had exploded as planned, the negotiating team would have been seriously injured. I wonder if this distraction kept Manoogian away from the department for a long time, enough time for the students and Scorsese to have organized a film unit which was dedicated to covering the unfolding events.⁹⁷

There is a story that I remember almost as a dream -- like so much in this period, the telling of it comes out seeming wholly improbable, and the objective evidence these many years later seems not to exist. At some point, the students had linked arms and surrounded some objectionable NYU building -- objectionable, I suppose, for its relation to the "war effort," computer analyses, I think. There was among the students a rumor that a bomb had been planted somewhere within the building, and there was a search going on inside to defuse it in time. I remember feeling quite ambivalent about standing in front of a building that was likely at any moment to explode. Eventually -- and anti-climactically -- we dispersed, but the rumour was that the bomb had been found, in the final moment (of course), by none other than Haig Manoogian.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Lesley Oelsner, "2 Indicted in Raid on N.Y.U. Center," *New York Times* (July 30, 1970): 1, 54.

⁹⁶ Nick Tanis (author's interview) (March 25, 2007).

⁹⁷ Nick Tanis (author's interview).

⁹⁸ Harry Bolles (author's interview).

It seems here that Bolles's account is the story as told and retold and thus turned into hyperbole and myth, "almost as a dream". Nevertheless, the involvement of Scorsese's mentor Manoogian is appropriately symbolic: Manoogian as representative of the establishment, to the point where the story evolves to his actual finding of the bomb. Symbolically, Manoogian may have been functioning as symbolic establishment/ father figure to some students like Bolles, even though he had little actual administrative power. Nick Tanis recalls Manoogian acting much more as a mediating figure trying to bring the two sides together. Scorsese finally left NYU to accept an editing job on *Medicine Ball Caravan* (Francois Reichenbach, 1971), but he has also claimed that he was fired by NYU: "I was offered a job teaching film in NYU; I got very involved in political films and the students were practically living in my house. Also I was away a lot of the time trying to set up projects on the outside. So I ended up getting fired from that as well."⁹⁹ It should be noted, however, that whatever problems Scorsese had with NYU administration, he and Manoogian apparently remained close (and it was not Manoogian who was responsible for Scorsese's firing). Manoogian participated in a panel discussion held during the first Scorsese retrospective in 1977, and was interviewed by Scorsese's assistant Mary Pat Kelly for her two books on Scorsese's career. And, of course, *Raging Bull* is dedicated to Manoogian's memory.

In regards to the actual shooting taking place at this time, Nick Tanis recalls that while there were a large number of student and professional crews filming, only some planned on producing actual cinetracts: "While crews were scouring the city, covering every major event we learned about, some of us, inspired by the cinetracts in Paris, began

⁹⁹ Martin Scorsese, "Confessions of a Movie Brat," in *Anatomy of the Movies* (edited by David Pirie) (New York: Macmillan, 1981): 135.

making short films. Our intention was to emulate the French and project these films on the walls and in storefronts.”¹⁰⁰ As early as May 21, 1970, there was a notice in the *Village Voice* on the Cinetracts initiative:

During the May, 1968, revolution, French student film-makers developed the cinetract, a new genre of short, punchy political film designed not just to inform but also to radicalize. A group at NYU, called Film Students for Peace, are [sic] using the same approach to cover college strikes and student-worker clashes. Right now they’re still in the preliminary stage of organization, gathering help, equipment, and especially money needed for processing and distribution costs. (Contributions to Film Students for Peace can be sent to 51 West 4th Street, Room 65, New York 10003.)

I asked Nick Tanis, one of the group’s spokesmen, if there really is a point in showing radicalizing movies to already radicalized college audiences. Tanis explained that his group wants to set up storefronts throughout the city and nearby suburbs, where NYU students would show their cinetracts and rap with anyone interested in any aspect of the American crisis.¹⁰¹

However, this initial goal of the project was never realized: “none of these short films were ever screened because none were ever finished.”¹⁰² Instead, Scorsese and others began to assemble the vast amount of footage into a feature length documentary.¹⁰³

This began less than a month after the footage was originally shot, as the following press release dated June 2, 1970 makes clear:

The New York Cinetracts Collective, an association of Film students and professionals, have shot over 55,000 feet of film, documenting strike activities on and off campus. Camera crews were sent around New York City, and to Washington, New Haven, and Atlanta. Some of the footage has already been shown on television: Channel 31 and Channel 13. The group is preparing a feature length film and several shorts.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ Nick Tanis (author’s interview).

¹⁰¹ Howard Smith, “Notes” *The Village Voice* (May 21, 1970): 21.

¹⁰² Nick Tanis (author’s interview).

¹⁰³ In his journal entry of May 28, 1970, Nick Tanis noted that they had 55, 000 feet of film. Although he now believes that this “seems like an exaggeration,” it is nevertheless clear that there was an enormous amount of footage and that the resulting film would have had a very high shooting ratio.

¹⁰⁴ New York Cinetracts Collective press release (June 2, 1970).

Eventually, the idea for several shorts was abandoned and only the feature film remained. This shift from several short films projected in public spaces towards a feature length film that would be shown at festivals was a move away from its original political purpose. Indeed, the film seemed to be heading in the opposite direction from the key French figure of May 1968, Jean-Luc Godard, who abandoned festivals and his own authorship to make political films within the Dziga Vertov Collective. But even Godard could not erase his authorship that easily. The same year as *Street Scenes* played the New York Film Festival, there was a screening of *Wind From the East* (Dziga Vertov Collective, 1970).¹⁰⁵ Not surprisingly, the film was hailed as a “Godard” film. In other words, political films could circulate within the festival only if attached to a name director. More telling is the film that played opening night, François Truffaut’s *The Wild Child* (1970), a popularly humanist drama by the now thoroughly integrated Truffaut. The Tradition of Quality had come full circle.¹⁰⁶ Once *Street Scenes 1970* enters into this arena, the original intention of the filmmakers to be “the information arm of the revolution” became dramatically altered.

Most of the footage to be edited into this feature came from the street demonstrations, captured cinema verité style by the various filmmakers. There were also

¹⁰⁵ 1970 New York Film Festival Program (Film Society at Lincoln Center)

¹⁰⁶ In a now famous 1954 diatribe, the young Truffaut chastised the French mainstream “Tradition of Quality” for lacking cinematic vitality. See François Truffaut, “A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema,” *Cahiers du Cinéma* no. 31 (January 1954); reprinted in *Movies and Methods Volume I* (edited by Bill Nichols) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976): 224-237. However, by 1968, the formerly united Young Turks of the French New Wave, Truffaut and Godard, had moved in opposite directions, with Truffaut embracing and Godard rejecting the commercial art cinema. By the time of *The Wild Child*, Truffaut represented respectable, quality, middlebrow entertainment, the very type of film he once railed against. The main differences were that the “cinematic” innovations of the New Wave were now assimilated, and the political dimension of the former Tradition of Quality was now gone. For a critique of the politics of the New Wave and of Truffaut in particular, see John Hess, “*La Politique des Auteurs*,” *Jump Cut* nos. 1 and 2 (May-June, July-August 1974), available on-line at <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC01folder/auturism1.html> (Part 1) and <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC02folder/auteur2.html> (Part 2).

clearly staged scenes, most notably the film's conclusion, but also at least one or two other sequences. Both Nick Tanis and Harry Bolles describe these scenes, and their details are so close that one wonders if they are discussing the same scene but remembering it differently:

On the night word got out that the United States had invaded Cambodia in the spring of 1970, a group of students and Scorsese made the first short film. I've never seen the footage but I was told about it the next day or so. The camera was set up in the control booth of one of our small recording studios, Studio "C". A student acting as a newscaster was reading a story when he was mobbed by a group of students acting, as I remember the story, as police shutting down the news.¹⁰⁷

I remember the filming of a sequence that appears early in *Street Scenes 1970*: one of the students, Harry Narunsky, was in a sound booth reading Nixon's speech about Cambodia, while behind his words there is a big pounding on the door, and eventually a group of students bursts into the booth and overwhelm him, Narunsky/Nixon. Narunsky was a very tall, thin fellow, nothing like Nixon at all, not in look or voice, and it made this something more than a skit, it had an aesthetic element that was very proper for this period.¹⁰⁸

These sequences imply very different politics: one suggests a fight against government repression of free speech, the other a more radical overthrow of those in power. Given that it is a first-hand recollection, Bolles's account is more likely to be accurate, although whether or not this sequence is in the final film is questionable. Such scenes indicate that the film is more than a direct cinema observation of the events. It suggests the style of what Bill Nichols refers to as an interactive mode of documentary practice:

The (interactive) mode introduces a sense of partialness, of *situated* presence and *local* knowledge that derives from the actual encounter of filmmaker and other. Issues of comprehension and interpretation as a function of physical encounter arise: how do filmmaker and social actor

¹⁰⁷ Nick Tanis (author's interview).

¹⁰⁸ Harry Bolles (author's interview).

respond to each other; do they react to overtones or implications in each other's speech; do they see how power and desire flow between them?¹⁰⁹

The filmmakers of *Street Scenes* situate themselves within the action, interacting with the local context of the street as well as reflecting on their own experiences and their implications.

This notion of interactivity is especially applicable in the experiences of one of the small student crews consisting of Harry Bolles (camera) and Josh Stein (sound).

Bolles recalls his experience filming in the Wall Street area in the middle of a mostly pro-war, pro-military crowd and a particularly dramatic encounter that took place:

Suddenly a man got up on the statue, and ripped up a small American flag, and threw the pieces into the crowd. Not surprisingly, this drove the crowd into a frenzy – that seemed to have been the point! -- and they were trying to get at him. So I'm filming this, and I see this guy, through my viewfinder, come around from the side to try to get at this man in front of the statue, and I'm yelling to him to watch out, which is futile of course from where I'm filming, there's no way he could hear me. And this other guy comes around and punches the man in the head, causing him to fall into the crowd, and I remember screaming at this, even as filming. And I honestly don't know what ended up happening to the guy.¹¹⁰

Bolles filmed this scene as an observer, unable to influence or directly interact with the events. Yet he spontaneously responded with a scream to the man being attacked. In doing so, he situated himself as a local participant, revealing his own sympathies and transforming his observational direct cinema shooting. Unfortunately, this scene is not in the finished film because of another event occurring shortly afterwards:

We decided to get out of there, and went west a bit to Broadway and coming up the street somehow is a parade of war supporters. And as they are coming, we decide to start shooting, thinking, stupidly, that this would be a great shot. And as I'm shooting this approaching parade, I see these couple or few people break off from the main section and come right over

¹⁰⁹ Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991): 44.

¹¹⁰ Harry Bolles (author's interview).

to us. I'm watching this through my viewfinder, which gives it a distanced feel so I don't do the right thing which would have to been to get the heck out of there. Several guys come over and want our footage, which maybe they thought was incriminating. They rough us up a little, kicking us, and take the footage, breaking the camera as they twisted off the film magazine. We still had the sound recording, but the footage was gone. We eventually made it to a Red Cross station and got medical attention.¹¹¹

Here, the distance of the observational filmmaker was broken down in the most violent of ways – a metaphor for the very real conflict and division within the country as a whole. But Bolles's comments also reveal how the camera distanced even the filmmakers from the very danger they entered, ignoring the very social interaction in which they were obviously participating.¹¹²

Although the visuals captured by Bolles were lost in the interaction, the incidents remain in the finished film, providing key drama to the conclusion of *Street Scenes*. This sequence takes place in a Washington hotel room, and is the scene Scorsese claims to have "directed," although he was not the cameraman. By directed, it can be assumed that Scorsese was the one responsible for planning the scene and choosing the participants involved: Scorsese himself, Jay Cocks (Scorsese's friend and then critic at *Time*), actress Verna Bloom (Cocks's partner and one of the stars of Wexler's protest semi-documentary *Medium Cool*), actor Harvey Keitel (who had already starred in Scorsese's debut feature, *Who's That Knocking At My Door?*), and students Harry Bolles, Josh Stein, Bruce Tabor, Dan Schneider, and Deborah Litmar. Another student, Ed Sumner, shot the footage.¹¹³

Because Bolles and his crew partner Josh Stein were involved in this violent and dramatic incident, they were asked to talk about this experience:

¹¹¹ Harry Bolles (author's interview)

¹¹² A parallel can be drawn here to the contemporaneous *Medium Cool* (Haskell Wexler, 1969), in which a distanced, objective cameraman gradually becomes aware of his political responsibility.

¹¹³ Harry Bolles (author's interview).

I think in the hotel room conversation Marty asked me about getting beaten up – or maybe he asked Josh – and the telling of that story is backed up very vividly with screams and shouts – mine! – but it really is something of a cheat, because those are the sounds we recorded as the fellow at Washington’s statue was being attacked. I think I was much quieter when those fellows were beating me up. ¹¹⁴

Thus the double absence of visual material recorded and then lost is reconstructed aurally through both the recollections of Bolles and Stein as well as the now re-contextualized scream of Bolles. The originally recorded observational scenes have now been thoroughly constructed as fiction and even as metaphor for the failure of the Washington trip:

Most of us found rides going down to Washington, DC, where a big protest was being held, one of many, of course, in that period, but this one related directly to the Cambodian “incursion” and followed on the heels of the Kent State killings, which really were an enormous distraction from the initial impulse, “out of Cambodia!” Scorsese went down, too, and played very much the role of generalissimo, directing the distribution of assignments and equipment. I was with the crew with the best equipment, and we spent the day of the protest waiting for an interview with Nixon, cooling our heels in the White House, all this great equipment going completely to waste. What a shame. ¹¹⁵

The notion of failure is here doubled: the inability to retain the original footage because of direct violence by the pro-war protestors, and the inability to attain footage because of the indifference of a pro-war government. Thus the experiences of Bolles and Stein were reorganized by Scorsese to express the futility felt at the time.

The hotel room sequence concludes with a discussion of the current situation that reflected the discouragement of the failed revolution but also the continued devotion of the participants:

We went back to the hotel that evening with this incredible feeling of depression and futility, a feeling that seemed to be shared by everyone

¹¹⁴ Harry Bolles (author’s interview).

¹¹⁵ Harry Bolles (author’s interview).

around us at the protest. I wondered about these scores of thousands of people, heading back across the country in this depressed mood, so terribly different from just a week earlier, when we thought ourselves to be in the vanguard of “the revolution.” Much of this mood permeates the conversation in the hotel room that appears as the last scene of *Street Scenes*. It was a wide-ranging conversation, in which most of the participants insisted on their devotion to this revolution; one of the questions was whether Verna Bloom would go South to work on Peter Fonda’s *The Hired Hand* or stick around to support this uprising. Bruce Tabor spoke solemnly, urging his fellows to “Watch the sky!” Marty was the moderator.¹¹⁶

Most accounts of this sequence stress the depressed mood and the lack of consensus, particularly because this is what Scorsese emphasizes in his few interviews on the film. The reading offered by Scorsese and critics following his lead is only partial and very much informed by the idea of authorship. The abrupt ending in which the camera runs out of film reflected Scorsese’s retrospectively defined feelings of the futility of the political situation (and thus of political filmmaking). Bolles argues that there was still commitment from those involved and reads the conclusion not in terms of the form of the film (the abrupt ending) but in terms of its content. Fellow participant Nick Tanis recalls the scene in a similar fashion:

We had more crews, nine, in DC than any of the networks. The final scene of the film took place in our hotel room. An exhausted group, which could have included Harvey Keitel, Jay Cocks and Verna Bloom as well as Scorsese and a number of students, sat around the room and debated the events of the last few weeks. The concluding line of the film, as I remember it, came from a student who has since passed away, Bruce Tabor, “Watch the skies! Watch the skies!”¹¹⁷

The advantage of this reading of the film is that it emphasizes the collective and political nature of the enterprise rather than a de-contextualized reading that sees the ending only in terms of Scorsese’s later work.

¹¹⁶ Harry Bolles (author’s interview).

¹¹⁷ Nick Tanis (author’s interview).

Another sequence earlier in the film similarly resulted from the loss of visual footage of an event and forced Scorsese to rework the documentary sound and image:

We had footage of the demonstration in Washington which took place in early May. One scene was of a theatrical protest by Pratt Institute students (I recognized a friend from Pratt in the demonstration). They poured animal blood over their bodies and held up animal organs as they marched screaming. I think we ran out of film footage but still had sound so Scorsese followed the shots of them with a short paint on film sequence of red dye on clear leader.¹¹⁸

This sequence shows both the collective nature of the project and the mixture of usually distinct modes of filmmaking characteristic of this time and place: a highly theatrical piece of performance art being captured by the observational documentary camera and then visually commented on through techniques borrowed from experimental cinema. If this description of the scene recalls Brakhage, it also recalls Scorsese's earlier film *The Big Shave* (1967). Like that earlier film, most critics of *Street Scenes* have similarly read it solely in terms of how *Street Scenes* fits within Scorsese's career. It seems to me that Scorsese has distanced himself from this particular project, not because of the politics of the film, as most have argued, but rather because of controversy over the authorship of the film.

Of all the footage that ended up in the final film, there is unanimous consensus that professional cameraman Don Lenzer captured the most striking material. In addition to Scorsese, both Nick Tanis and Peter Rea recall, after more than thirty years, the quality of Lenzer's work on the film:

The scene Lenzer shot took place on Wall Street on the steps of Federal Hall, early May, 1970. Lenzer, shooting with an Éclair NPR, was walking in front of a group of protestors on the steps just behind the spot George Washington stood when he took the oath of office as first President. The shot was a medium hand-held tracking shot of individuals, holding signs

¹¹⁸ Nick Tanis (author's interview).

and shouting slogans to the masses below which filled the intersection of Wall and Broad/Nassau Streets. The camera, on the steps with the protestors, began to pan away from this line of sign holders and zoom out over the crowd toward the corner of a building at the intersection. As the camera settles on the crowd going up Wall Street toward Broadway, a huge American flag appears from behind the building. The crowd opened and a group of counter-demonstrating construction workers pushed their way through the crowd. Lenzer followed the flag and without cutting zoomed out to record the workers arriving at the foot of Federal Hall in an attempt to disrupt the demonstration.¹¹⁹

Lenzer went out and shot footage that was just phenomenal, interviews, he had a great sound person with him, Jay Freund, and he and Jay went out and got amazing footage, stuff that was just astounding. Just at the right place at the right time. They were in the middle of Wall Street, which was packed wall-to-wall with demonstrators, and there were these construction workers with these huge American flags like the Marines landing on Iwo Jima, as if you went to work everyday with a huge American flag.¹²⁰

That this scene captured by Lenzer would remain so vivid in the memories of those who first saw it attests both to Lenzer's skill and to the iconicity of the image of the American flag being raised. With this one image, Lenzer was able to capture the myth-making power of the original Iwo Jima photograph as well as de-familiarize the image by showing how its iconography was now being used to support an entirely new war.

It is hardly surprising that Lenzer, an experienced cameraman, would capture the most compelling footage, but this cannot be attributed solely to technical skill. It also needs to be explained in terms of Lenzer's approach to filming the demonstrations. In the following comments, Lenzer explains both how and why he got involved in the project as well as his cinematic inspiration for what he filmed:

I became involved in the project through friends I knew at NYU. My partner at the time, editor and soundman, Jay Freund, and I volunteered our services when we heard that students at the film department, unlike striking students at other universities who were opposing the war in Viet Nam by shutting their schools down, decided to go into the streets and use

¹¹⁹ Nick Tanis (author's interview).

¹²⁰ Peter Rea (author's interview).

their skills and film equipment to oppose the war. That seemed like a radical and creative idea. I was already working as a professional filmmaker at the time. Jay and I used our own equipment to do the filming, and what we concentrated on were interviews with pro-war demonstrators – among them were a lot of “hard hats”, who were working on the construction of the World Trade Towers. We felt that was much more interesting than simply shooting footage of the protestors or interviewing the anti-war people. A substantial amount of what we shot ended up in the final film that played at the New York Film Festival that September. At the time, I was very much influenced by the work of Chris Marker. In particular, his film *Le Joli Mai* (1963) and its use of experiential encounters very much influenced what I shot, and I was somewhat pleased when Richard Roud, director of the Festival, noted the connection. Of course, looking back now I think there was a certain amount of arrogance involved in identifying with Marker’s work, since I think he’s one of the most original and brilliant of all documentary filmmakers. After we shot, we simply handed the footage over to the people responsible for putting the film together. I had no hand in the editing of it at all. At the time I was very much in favor of the idea of a collective film, of the documentary as a collaborative work.¹²¹

Lenzer’s comments reveal both his main influence in how and what he filmed, as well as why he was interested in participating in the film: to engage in a collective political project. But when this collection of footage was turned into a feature length film and then entered into the New York Film Festival, the collective dimension was downplayed.

In the original festival program sent out to members of the Film Society at Lincoln Center, the program notes for *Street Scenes 1970* read as follows:

Cinéma Verité is not dead yet. This is a film about the demonstrations on Wall Street and in Washington this spring. But its virtue is not just that it shows us what the media didn’t. Like Chris Marker, director Martin Scorcese [sic] is committed without being blinkered. He does not pretend to know what truth is. His truth, yes; but truth, no. Even the interviewees whose opinions are least sympathetic to him come out as recognizable human beings. Doubtless, this is because Scorcese [sic] is an artist.¹²²

¹²¹ Don Lenzer (author’s interview) (December 15, 2006).

¹²² 1970 New York Film Festival Program (Film Society at Lincoln Center). Lenzer attributes these notes to the festival director, Richard Roud, but technically there is no official author credited. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume Roud was responsible for the content of the program.

The emphasis here is very much on Scorsese as the author of the film, with no mention of the collective nature of the project. Even the influence of Marker is attributed, rather erroneously, to Scorsese. Understandably, Lenzer was upset at this distortion of the film and its collective nature, despite his pleasure in seeing the film receive a public screening:

I had mixed feelings. Of course I was happy the film was shown at the festival. But at the same time I was angry - I felt that Richard Roud, in his program notes, gave most of the credit for the project to Scorsese. And I felt that the nature of the project was fundamentally a collaborative one - that was so much a part of the times - and that this aspect of it wasn't emphasized. Now, I don't believe that Scorsese himself promoted this idea or tried to take credit for the film. In fact, he wrote me a long letter apologizing after he found out I was upset. I never responded at the time, which I regret now. But I think Marty was sincere, and in any case I don't think it represented anything intentional on Marty's part.¹²³

Lenzer's opinion that Scorsese did not intentionally try to take credit for the film seems accurate according to most of the evidence. Nick Tanis stressed that Scorsese was very supportive throughout the making of the film: "He urged people to make short films and trusted very inexperienced students to go out and make this film. At every stage along the way, he included as many people as he could in planning and executing the film."¹²⁴ In addition to writing Lenzer a letter apologizing for the program notes, it also appears that Scorsese corrected the organizers of the festival. When the advertisement appeared in both the *New York Times* and the *Village Voice* the week before the festival, the program note had been rewritten:

Cinéma Verité is not dead yet. This film about the demonstrations on Wall Street and in Washington this spring tells you what the media forgot to. It was made by a group of concerned students and professional filmmakers called the New York Cinetracts Collective; they are committed without being blinkered. Even the interviewees whose opinions are least sympathetic to the Collective's political position come out as recognizable

¹²³ Don Lenzer (author's interview).

¹²⁴ Nick Tanis (author's interview).

human beings. Doubtless this is because postproduction director Martin Scorsese [sic] and the other filmmakers are artists.¹²⁵

This rewritten program note stresses the collectivity of the project instead of Scorsese as author and removes the previous reference to Chris Marker, although it is telling that Scorsese's name is still the only one given. What this controversy demonstrates is the incompatibility of the original nature of the project with the demands of a feature length film. The festival organizers clearly felt the need to fit this collective film into an auteurist box. The rest of the collective needed to be reduced to the status of "personnel" in order for an artist to be celebrated and the film to fit into the art world of the festival circuit.

This authorship controversy around *Street Scenes* appears to be the major factor in why Scorsese has been reluctant to discuss the film and why he has sought to distance himself from the film as much as possible. The explanation usually given stresses that the main controversy over the film was of a political nature. While none of the interviewees mentioned anything about the political debate around the film, both Harry Bolles and Peter Rea recall the authorship controversy:

There did end up being a debate around the authorship of the film, not necessarily in the *auteurist* sense, but literally in terms of ownership. I remember Don Lenzer in particular was upset that Scorsese had turned this student footage into a feature film with Scorsese as the editor/producer. His attitude was that it wasn't Scorsese's film.¹²⁶

Marty did not want to associate himself with the film because there was one article, I'd have to get my memory straight, that set him up as the director of it, and he really wasn't the director of it. He was the director of post-production, but he wasn't in the field with the camera crews, he wasn't telling people what to shoot. He just assembled the whole thing. So people were saying that he was taking credit for this thing, well, they

¹²⁵ See festival advertisement in *The New York Times* (September 6, 1970), D5; and *The Village Voice* (September 3, 1970), 40.

¹²⁶ Harry Bolles (author's interview).

really weren't, but he felt it that way. So he felt awkward positioning himself as the filmmaker. It wasn't the politics of the film, if anything it was too mild as far as he was concerned.¹²⁷

This explanation of why Scorsese distanced himself from the film is much more convincing than the political explanation. It would hardly be damaging, given the counter culture of the time period, to have been involved in a political protest documentary, even one in which all of the participants were not satisfied with the end result. While there is no direct evidence that there was political debate around the film besides Scorsese's own account, I do not question the truthfulness of this claim but rather its significance. It is quite clear that at the time there was political discussion about everything, and that the film, no matter what its form, would not be able to avoid this. But a controversy over the authorship of the film and over taking credit for the work of others would be far more damaging to Scorsese's desired image as prestigious auteur.

Two incidents occurring years after the film's initial screening provide additional evidence that Scorsese remained sensitive over the authorship of the film and any suggestion that he was selfishly profiting from it. Nick Tanis recalls the final meeting he had with Scorsese over the film:

The last conversation we had about *Street Scenes 1970* took place just after the release of *Mean Streets* (fall of 1973). Again if my memory is correct, I saw Marty at an early screening of his film. He asked me to join him at his hotel room to tell me that *Streets Scenes 1970* had made a small profit. He wanted someone connected to the project to discuss his plan for the money and to give him approval on what to do with the money. I believe he donated the money to the NYU Department of Film and Television.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Peter Rea (author's interview).

¹²⁸ Nick Tanis (author's interview).

Scorsese's gesture here is a noble one and is true to the initial collective impulse behind the project, but it also speaks to an anxiety over him profiting from the film, either culturally or, in this case, economically. Decades later, this same anxiety was still present:

Just to give further perspective on his feelings, just flash forward like 20 some years. I don't know how many years ago now it was, maybe 5 or 6 years ago, they were having a special retrospective of his work up at the Walter Reade Theatre in Lincoln Center, and the whole theme was Scorsese's films and the films that were influencing him. So I went and I saw him. I went up and we talked and, in his mind, I'm his ex-student. I've had a whole career, I've produced films, I've done all this stuff, you know, but in his mind. So we're talking and I said that I'd love to see *Street Scenes*, I haven't seen it in so many years. He said he had a copy, but that I'd need to rent it, he wasn't going to rent it to screen it himself. Now here's a man who in that period of time has directed a body of work that is considered to be, you know, one of the premier American film directors, right. And he's still uncomfortable about a student film that someone said he may have taken credit for!¹²⁹

Scorsese's unease towards *Street Scenes* continues today due in part to Scorsese's infrequent comments on the film (including none since the 1981 interview with Bella Taylor), and Scorsese's tight control over his own print of the film. The print is housed as part of Scorsese's collection at the Museum of Modern Art, but to view the film one needs the permission of Scorsese's office.¹³⁰

The film today functions very much like a "lost" film, a work that failed to be preserved and exists only through contemporaneous reviews and/or later recollections. Ironically, as I will discuss in later chapters, Scorsese is known today for his commitment to film history and to preserving the cinematic past even as he plays a role in repressing a part of his own history. Of course, there are other examples of directors denying access to

¹²⁹ Peter Rea (author's interview).

¹³⁰ In June 2005, I wrote a letter forwarded to Scorsese's office through MoMA requesting to screen the film for research purposes. In April 2007 I sent a follow up letter. I have yet to hear a response. I do not conclude from this that a screening of the film through Scorsese's office is impossible, but rather that the access to the film is severely restricted and regulated.

their own work in the interests of preserving a certain image. One example would be John Cassavetes, who refused to allow his original cut of *Shadows* (1959) to be seen, despite its historical importance in the creation of the “New American Cinema”. For years this first version of *Shadows* was felt to be lost, but recently Cassavetes’ scholar Ray Carney discovered a print and even screened it at the Rotterdam Film Festival without receiving permission from Cassavetes’ estate. Cassavetes’ wife Gena Rowlands has filed suit to keep the film from being screened, insisting that the film is the intellectual property of Cassavetes and that he did not wish that early version (which she considers a work print) to be shown publicly.¹³¹ While the ethics of this can be debated, the situation of *Street Scenes 1970* is somewhat different and perhaps even unique so far in film history.

Scorsese’s ownership of the film as the textual “author” is not being used to keep the film from being seen. On the contrary, Scorsese has actually tried to disavow his connections to the project and the film’s authorship controversy is the main impediment to greater access to the print. Because of his role as an archivist, Scorsese is able to control access to his print of the film, and with a film with so few known prints and no commercial distribution, this has significantly reduced the already limited access to a film that was made, as a collective, to contribute to the public discourse and debate around the United States and its role in foreign countries.

One cannot help but note an obvious contradiction regarding Scorsese and *Street Scenes 1970*. Scorsese’s involvement in the film has probably saved it from the dustbin of history, linking it to the work of an “important” filmmaker in the “Great Man”

¹³¹ Discussion of the controversy over the relative merits of the two versions of *Shadows* can be found in Ray Carney, *Cassavetes on Cassavetes* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2001). On the recent controversy involving Carney and Rowlands, see Marshall Fine, *Accidental Genius: How John Cassavetes Invented the American Independent Film* (New York: Miramax Books, 2006): 225-229.

tradition that is still very much with us. At the same time, the fact that Scorsese now owns and controls a print of the film as an archivist has limited the film's distribution and access. *Street Scenes 1970* marked a clear break in Scorsese's career, being the last project he was involved with before moving to Hollywood. Unfortunately, this divide has caused the production and reception of *Street Scenes* to be distorted. A similar teleology would continue to influence the reading of individual Scorsese projects. Additionally, the divide between New York and Hollywood would reoccur throughout Scorsese criticism. In leaving behind the New York film and university community, Scorsese was certainly risking the small reputation he had build as a talented young director. For the first time, Scorsese had literally "gone Hollywood". Figuratively, this question of "going Hollywood" would continue to structure the remainder of his career.

CHAPTER TWO

THE FORMATION OF SCORSESE'S CRITICAL REPUTATION

This chapter will examine Scorsese's move from NYU to Hollywood, from student filmmaker to professional director. I will consider how and why Scorsese emerged as *the* canonized director of his generation, drawing on the connections made between the university and the field of film culture discussed in the last chapter. While most studies of Scorsese emphasize the formal qualities of the films as evidence of Scorsese's greatness, particularly his three most lauded (*Mean Streets*, *Taxi Driver*, and *Raging Bull*), I will shift focus away from Scorsese as auteur and towards the critical environment of the period. This will allow for a broader understanding of the period and Scorsese's place within that environment, as well as offer a fresh perspective on the films themselves. Although a consideration of Scorsese's critical reputation and his more recent films will continue throughout the rest of the study, this chapter will concentrate on the period from *Boxcar Bertha*, Scorsese's first professional directing effort in 1972, until *Raging Bull*, the film many consider Scorsese's masterpiece.

In the first chapter I described the field of the filmic avant-garde in America while Scorsese was at NYU in the 1960s. A change occurred in the position of the avant-garde within American film culture in the early 1970s. As previously discussed, experimental cinema suffered from a lack of institutional support from the post-war period through the 1960s. Beginning in the late 1960s, this situation changed due to a number of factors related to the breaking down of the high art/mass culture boundaries. A key figure in this regard, in the world of film as well as the world of art, was Andy Warhol, whose 1967

The Chelsea Girls became the first experimental work to reach a mass audience.

Although this commercial success was an aberration, it did help to initiate greater institutional support:

While Warhol used his breakthrough to move into more popular sexploitation filmmaking, other avant-garde filmmakers began to gain some recognition from museums and galleries. After fighting off the avant-garde for decades, MoMA capitulated in 1969 and began to invite individual avant-garde filmmakers to appear with their films in the Cineprobe series. In other words, MoMA finally adopted the artist-as-exegete model of avant-garde exhibition that its curator Iris Barry had unwittingly helped to create a quarter century earlier by rejecting *Meshes of the Afternoon*.¹

Given the previous adversarial relationship between cultural institutions such as MoMA and the avant-garde community, it was not surprising that experimental filmmakers were suspicious of how their work would be used within a museum context. This led to the creation of the Anthology Film Archives, financed by avant-garde patron Jerome Hill as both “*an avant-garde film museum and a museum of avant-garde film.*”² However, with Hill’s death in 1972, funding for Anthology diminished. By 1973 the full incorporation of avant-garde film into the world of museum, foundation and government subsidy was well under way, with even the NEA now giving support.³ The previously separate fields of Hollywood and the avant-garde, although still quite distinct, were converging.

The journal *Artforum* provides another sign of this changing cultural field. Starting in late 1966, *Artforum* began to employ the cult critic Manny Farber, as well as to publish articles on cinema by the NYU film scholar Annette Michelson. In contrast to Farber’s earlier dismissal of any kind of “art cinema”, he now wrote approvingly of directors such as Jean-Luc Godard (even before Godard’s eventual rejection of art cinema)

¹ Decherney, 197.

² Decherney, 202.

³ Decherney, 203.

and even Ingmar Bergman, particularly *Persona*.⁴ Farber's praise of *Persona* echoed Susan Sontag's enthusiasm for the film in her influential 1966 text *Against Interpretation*, a series of essays which argued for sensual experience over textual interpretation and dismissed the notion of cultural authority, at least in terms of the texts themselves.⁵ Farber no longer felt the need to praise films only that avoid being self-consciously artistic, especially in a film world in which Andy Warhol was a popular success and Hollywood films like *The Graduate* were becoming more and more self-conscious:

While he [Farber] would never lose his interest in – or respect for – gifted filmmakers, he nonetheless now implied that the source of cinema's value lay at least as much in the transforming perception of the beholder as in the caliber of aesthetic decisions made by an artist. When *Charlie Bubbles*, *Loving*, and *Back and Forth* are all of comparable formal interest, comparative discernment has given way to the critic's creative exploration of a medium.⁶

Despite the fervent and polemical evaluative stance of much of his writing (especially his early writing), Farber even stated in an interview, echoing Sontag and the Pop sensibility of the period, that evaluation was of little interest to him.⁷ Farber's writing in this later period reflected this belief, and in many ways flattened the high/low distinctions among art works (although displacing these distinctions onto critics as artists).

Similarly, Annette Michelson's writing for *Artforum* included both theoretical pieces, such as her review of André Bazin's *What is Cinema?*,⁸ and her enthusiastic analysis of the Hollywood studio film/auteurist masterpiece *2001: A Space Odyssey*.⁹

⁴ Taylor, 127.

⁵ Raymond Haberski, *It's Only a Movie! Films and Critics in American Culture* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2001): 140-141.

⁶ Taylor, 131.

⁷ Quoted in Jonathan Rosenbaum, "They Drive by Night: The Criticism of Manny Farber," in *Placing Movies: The Practice of Film Criticism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995): 59.

⁸ Annette Michelson, "What is Cinema?" *Artforum* 6, no. 10 (Summer 1968): 67-71.

⁹ Annette Michelson, "Bodies in Space: Film as 'Carnal Knowledge,'" *Artforum* 7, no. 6 (February 1969): 54-63.

Although her writing favored the political avant-garde sensibility of a European materialism, as the review of Bazin demonstrates, Michelson saw Hollywood films like Kubrick's as embodying the ideal of cinematic form. This was despite the fact that, as Greg Taylor has argued, the guiding hand of the actual artist no longer seems necessary:

She has subtly allowed Kubrick's film to be discussed as an artwork, regardless of the auteur's guiding hand ... Michelson's perspective actually eliminates the absolute need for the organizing artist as an agent putting aesthetic forces into play; while as an art critic, Michelson may still want to credit the director, as a theorist she has no real need to do so. Her own authority as a highbrow intellectual will suffice.¹⁰

Eventually, high theory would enter academic film study and make the notion of evaluation seem very old-fashioned and essentially useless.¹¹ The avant-garde entered the academy and was even celebrated for its political progressiveness, but the notion of "high art" having any cultural authority was now rejected: "both artist and work are in effect rendered peripheral, relics from another, simpler age."¹² Structuralist films were celebrated as theory rather than as art, as were Hollywood films. Of course, taste formation still occurred during this period, but what was eliminated is the notion of an avant-garde art that could claim cultural authority. Instead, this authority was for the taking. It was within this climate that Scorsese becomes a professional filmmaker.

CAHIERS DU CINÉMA AND ITS INFLUENCE

The change in the status of the avant-garde would prove important in transforming American film culture. But this field can only be understood by tracing its

¹⁰ Taylor, 133.

¹¹ Taylor, 147.

¹² Taylor, 149.

history back to the immediate post-war years in both America and Europe. From this point, Scorsese's emergence as the most critically acclaimed director of his generation can begin to be contextualized. A number of critics have noted the mixture of American and European influences on Scorsese and his cinematic style, but have not examined these connections beyond the texts themselves and considered the broader development of film culture. There has been a tendency to see these influences as dialectical rather than dialogical. It is much more fruitful to examine the commonalities rather than the divisions between classical and modernist styles and approaches instead of insisting on the division between Hollywood and Europe.

A good place to start is with the auteur theory as espoused by the critics at the *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Since many *Cahiers* critics would become filmmakers themselves, this journal is often associated with a European, modernist sensibility (New Wave innovation as opposed to Hollywood convention). This argument can only be made at the level of the text itself: *Les Quatre Cents Coups* (François Truffaut, 1959) and *À Bout de Souffle* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1959) as breaks with the classical style of Hollywood. When looking beyond the film texts and at the level of the broader culture in which works are discussed and consumed, these distinctions begin to immediately break down. These French critics were the most influential of all in removing Hollywood from the realm of "mass culture" and having these films taken seriously as art. Part of this was recognizing a certain modernist complexity in Hollywood directors, but also of critical importance was *how* these films were discussed. As Greg Taylor argues, the notion of the Arnoldian critic who served as an aesthetic and moral guide to great art was challenged within American film criticism as early as the 1940s with writers such as Farber and Parker

Tyler, who worked very much as artists/critics. This same approach to film criticism can be seen clearly in the criticism of Godard, a good example being his review of Douglas Sirk's *A Time to Love and a Time to Die* (1957).¹³ Taking on this Wildean approach to film aesthetics is not surprising given that Godard and many of the other writers for *Cahiers* were interested in moving beyond being critics and towards being filmmakers, eliminating the boundaries separating the two. As Godard stated in an interview shortly after completing his first feature film: "Today I still think of myself as a critic, and in a sense I am, more than ever before. Instead of writing criticism, I make a film, but the critical dimension is subsumed."¹⁴

With the *Cahiers* group, there is already an interpretive community rejecting the notion of Hollywood mass art versus high European modernism. But what is often forgotten about this group (probably due to Godard's later politicization) is the degree to which they de-politicized and de-socialized French cinema, calling for a certain brand of modernist criticism that argued form over content. Thus the main aesthetic criticism labeled against the "Tradition of Quality" so despised by Truffaut was that it was a cinema of writers, not directors. It lacked the concern with the formal specificity of the medium that was a prerequisite of modernist high art. But at the same time, Truffaut angrily denounced the screenwriters Jean Aurenche and Pierre Bost for having an attitude of high art elitism towards the cinema as a mass medium. The filmmakers of the Tradition of Quality were thus both elitist snobs who valued literature over film, and philistines when it came to the notion of film form. It would be inaccurate to reach any conclusion that characterized the *Cahiers* group as early cinematic postmodernists who

¹³ *Godard on Godard* (translated and edited by Tom Milne) (New York: Da Capo Press, 1972): 134-139.

¹⁴ *Godard on Godard*: 171.

wanted to demolish the notion of high modernist art. Rather, the argument centered around whether literary high art produced cinematic high art, or if cinema had to develop its own aesthetic specificity, a very modernist notion that was only radical in its application to a culturally negated art form like film, not in the application itself.

Before continuing, I should note how this relates directly to Scorsese and his historical position. For if the French influenced how Americans viewed their own cinema, European cinema had a profound influence on the postwar American film culture, particularly in major cities like New York in which Scorsese was raised. Consider the brief DVD introduction Scorsese gave viewers to *The Golden Coach* (Jean Renoir, 1953), a film Scorsese helped to restore (and the film that Truffaut names his production company after). In this short clip, Scorsese stated that he is neither a Hollywood director nor a European director, but rather somewhere in between. The same lack of clear distinctions along these binaries can be seen in Scorsese's description of the film. He focused on the emotional effect the film has, thus emphasizing its popular dimension rather than its intellectual (read political and social) sophistication. At the same time, the medium specificity is stressed through the admiration of the film's use of Technicolor. It is insufficient to simply state that Scorsese was influenced by the European cinema. What specifically within European cinema influenced him? What was the ultimate effect of this influence on not only Scorsese but on American culture as a whole?

To answer these questions, we need to return to the auteur theory, but from a different vantage point. John Hess, in his two-part critique of "La Politique Des Auteurs" that appears in *Jump Cut* in 1974, argues that despite the aesthetic innovation and sense

of youthful rebellion associated with the movement, the French New Wave itself, especially the *Cahiers* group, actually worked towards de-politicizing French cinema:

La politique des auteurs was, in fact, a justification, couched in aesthetic terms, of a culturally conservative, politically reactionary attempt to remove film from the realm of social and political concern, in which the progressive forces of the Resistance had placed all the arts in the years immediately after the war.¹⁵

Part of this process was the praising of Hollywood directors, and the success of the French New Wave brought an imprimatur to these views when they were applied in America by Andrew Sarris. Similar to the process of de-politicizing the French cinema, Sarris sought to change the focus in American film criticism from the sociological approach of critics such as James Agee. This had already been started in America through the blacklist years of the 1950s, and was supported by Cold War apologists like Robert Warshow. Sarris used this cultural environment to shift the American film canon, as Peter Biskind argues:

By the time Sarris began to write, the pages of American newspapers and magazines had been made safe for democracy. The lefties, radicals, fellow travellers, independents, anarchists, pacifists, and general riffraff who had infected the press with their pink prose in the thirties and forties had been flushed out by almost a decade of witch hunting ... All Sarris had to do was to conduct a mopping-up operation, and he saw to it that auteurism would play the same role in America that it had played in France; the American 'Tradition of Quality' that it was used to demolish was precisely the Jacobs, Rotha, Griffith, Macdonald, Agee group that Warshow had already softened up. More so than Warshow, Sarris saw them as a 'tradition,' and attacked them directly. His strategy, borrowed from the French, was to dump the silents, whether Russian or American, the 'art films' so dear to the old guard, and privilege 'movies' instead, claiming they were true 'art'.¹⁶

¹⁵ John Hess, "La Politique des Auteurs (Part One): World View as Aesthetics," *Jump Cut* no. 1 (1974): 19. Available online at <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC01folder/auturism1.html>.

¹⁶ Peter Biskind, "American Film Criticism (Postwar)," in *Gods and Monsters: Thirty Years of Writing on Film and Culture From One of America's Most Incisive Writers* (New York: Nation Books, 2004): 106-107.

The field of American cinema popular criticism thus became seemingly less free of sociological concerns while making possible cultural legitimacy through popular forms.

Of course, this criticism was still ideological and even sociological, as it had been in France. Hess asked the question what an auteur was according to the *Cahiers* critics, and found that it had very little to do with film technique. Rather, it was a question of content rather than form. The *Cahiers* group was attracted to a single tale: an isolated character placed within an extreme circumstance eventually finding acceptance, understanding, and redemption. As Hess argues:

Auteur criticism was, in fact, a very complicated way of saying something very simple. These critics wanted to see their own perception of the world on the screen: the individual is trapped in solitude morale and can escape it – transcend it – if he or she comes to see their condition and then extend themselves to others and God. Whenever the auteur critics saw this tale on the screen, they called its creator an auteur.¹⁷

The aesthetic concerns (realism, mise-en-scene and acting) had to do with how a director presented this interior life of isolation and eventual transcendence: “The most important determinant of an auteur was not so much the director’s ability to express his personality, as usually has been claimed, but rather his desire and ability to express a certain world view.”¹⁸ This world-view needed to be able to express art’s autonomy, to be able to be divorced from the social and political world. Thus the criticism of the “Tradition of Quality”, although argued on aesthetic grounds, had a great deal to do with objectionable content, such as Truffaut’s criticism of blasphemy and homosexuality in these films. As a result, the revolution of the New Wave and the auteur theory was easily assimilated because it was essentially about art rather than politics.

¹⁷ Hess, 19.

¹⁸ Hess, 19.

Likewise, Sarris was superficially concerned with aesthetics and argued explicitly for its separation from social and political concerns: "I still find it impossible to attribute films and directors to any particular system or culture. If directors and other artists cannot be wrenched from their historical environments, aesthetics is reduced to a subordinate branch of ethnography."¹⁹ On closer inspection, Sarris, like the New Wave critics, was not only or even primarily interested in aesthetics. His own writing was just as ideologically charged as the sociological criticism, only it was beneath an aesthetic argument: "The adoration of American film meant the adoration of American ideology. The action films auteurs liked were clean, mean, tough, and generally right wing. The films they didn't like were 'liberal'"²⁰ Sarris's reviews, such as his harsh critique of *Dog Day Afternoon* (Sidney Lumet, 1975), were often purely sociological, just from a different political perspective:

It suddenly became clear that there was good sociological criticism and bad sociological criticism. Good sociological criticism wasn't sociological at all; it was redefined as 'aesthetic,' and it was practiced by 'us'; bad sociological criticism was practiced by 'them.' 'Us' in this case meant centrists like Sarris.²¹

This is important to keep in mind because the influence of Sarris, like that of the New Wave critics, was enormous, both in the field of film criticism and amongst filmmakers themselves.

In the case of Scorsese, who was both a filmmaker and a film teacher during this early period, the influence is doubled. Scorsese, as an instructor, followed Sarris' lead in both content and style, initiating an early course on "American Movies" at NYU. Former

¹⁹ Andrew Sarris, "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962," in *The Primal Screen* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), 46. Reprinted from *Film Culture*, No. 27 (Winter 1962/63).

²⁰ Biskind, 109.

²¹ Biskind, 110.

student Harry Bolles recalls Scorsese approaching the material in a manner reminiscent of Sarris:

In 1968, I took a class with Martin Scorsese, who I thought was a very exciting teacher. His method was to reveal how excited he was about film, and hope that this excitement transferred to the students. He would mostly just talk about films he had seen recently, either on television or in the numerous revival houses in New York at that time. His method was very similar to that of Andrew Sarris, whose book *The American Cinema* had just been published and which was a very popular text amongst film students. I was personally very excited by the book; I read and re-read it over and over at that time. It was very fun and accessible and made you interested in the subject. I had a similar response to Marty's class and his style as a teacher.²²

Even at this early phase, Scorsese responded to Sarris' views on American cinema while also popularizing them with a new generation of film students. While he cannot be said to have the same influence as the critic turned directors of the French New Wave, the purpose was comparable: to open a space within the culture for his filmmaking within a Hollywood context.

Sarris's position was challenged almost immediately, but from an apolitical stance. The most vocal challenger was the film critic Pauline Kael. The resulting war between Sarris and Kael and their respective supporters concealed the fact that both had worked towards a similar goal: to remove politics, sociology, and "ideology" (which were all equated) from the realm of artistic discussion. As Peter Biskind explains:

They created an illusion of intellectual ferment when there was none, and disguised the extent to which the dead hand of ideological conformity ruled popular film reviewing and academic scholarship. The faux warfare between Sarris and Kael also disguised the extent to which Sarris's auteurism and, for want of a better term, Kael's eclecticism, between them totally dominated the critical landscape. Even now, after academic film scholarship has inhaled the intoxicating fragrance of such exotic flowers of French culture as structuralism, semiotics, and Lacanian psychoanalysis, and auteurism has fallen into disrepute, we forget that to a

²² Harry Bolles (Author's Interview)

remarkable degree it still determines the lay of the land, dictates which films will be examined from a semiotic, feminist, or psychoanalytic perspective, which directors will get monographs from the British Film Institute or will be included in the college curricula.²³

Kael's main objection to Sarris was in terms of taste. She accused him and his followers of being elitist, of wanting to transform popular film into high art. For this same reason, Kael opposed the academic study of film. But Kael critiqued the emerging postmodern sensibility of a Sontag or a Warhol, which seemed to want to eliminate the high/low culture distinction. Within the circle of film criticism, the idea of high art may have been transforming, but it was hardly eliminated.

“CONTINGENCIES OF VALUE” AND “THE POLITICS OF FILM CANONS”

An awareness of the ideological implications behind aesthetic discourses is necessary to explain and account for the rise in Scorsese's reputation during this period. Whatever value as art one may want to assign to Scorsese's films, that value is highly contingent. This is not to say that the aesthetic worth of Scorsese's films is purely relative or that all other films could be praised with the same validity, but rather that there are no pure or absolute evaluations:

While the radical contingency of all value certainly does imply that no value judgment can be more valid than another in the sense of being a more accurate statement of *the* value of an object (for the latter concept then becomes vacuous), it does not follow that all value judgments are equal or equally valid. On the contrary, what does follow is that the concept of 'validity' is *inappropriate* with regard to evaluations and that there is no nontrivial parameter with respect to which they *could* be 'equal'. This is not to say that no evaluations can be better or worse than others. What must be emphasized, however, is that the value – the 'goodness' or 'badness' – of an evaluation, like that of anything else

²³ Biskind (2004), 100-101.

(including any other type of utterance), is *itself* contingent, and thus a matter not of its abstract 'truth-value' but of how well it performs various desired/able functions for the various people who may at any time be concretely involved with it.²⁴

The case being made here by Barbara Herrnstein-Smith is that the evaluation of any work cannot be separated and divorced from its social value and social function. This is not to claim that evaluation simply reflects the political values of the time in any straightforward fashion, but rather that art has a use-value within society and is praised for the functions it performs for certain groups (either dominant or marginal) within that society:

An assertion that some object (for example, some artwork) is good, great, bad, or middling can, no matter how magisterially delivered or with what attendant claims or convictions of absoluteness, usually be unpacked as a judgment of its *contingent* value: specifically, as the evaluator's observation and/or estimate of how well that object, relative to others of the same implied category, has performed and/or is likely to perform certain particular (though taken-for-granted) functions for some particular (though only implicitly defined) set of subjects under some particular (unspecified but assumed) set or range of conditions.²⁵

These contingencies or conditions are usually unspoken or sometimes even denied. For example, there are the continued claims for the "universality" of certain artists.

These arguments of "universality" are connected to another common concept within evaluation: the notion of "timelessness". As the argument is conventionally told, art that survives must have lasted because it says something "essential" about the "human condition". But as Herrnstein-Smith argues, this idea, so central to canon formation, is fundamentally flawed:

What is commonly referred to as the 'test of time' is not, as the figure implies, an impersonal and impartial mechanism: for the cultural institutions through which it operates (schools, libraries, theatres,

²⁴ Barbara Herrnstein-Smith, "Contingencies of Value," *Critical Inquiry* 10 (September 1983): 22.

²⁵ Herrnstein-Smith, 20.

museums, publishing and printing houses, editorial boards, prize-awarding commissions, state censors, etc.) are, of course, all managed by persons (who, by definition, are those with cultural power and commonly other forms of power as well), and, since the texts that are selected and preserved by 'time' will always tend to be those which 'fit' (and, indeed, have often been *designed* to fit) their characteristic needs, interests, resources, and purposes, that testing mechanism has its own built-in partialities accumulated in and thus *intensified by* time.²⁶

For these reasons, canons have a strong tendency to be self-perpetuating. Once an artwork achieves classical status, it is much less prone to the risk of non-survival than other works. This is the case even when features of the canonized work tend to conflict with the political and social values of a particular society:

When the value of a work is seen as unquestionable, those of its features that would, in a noncanonical work, be found alienating – for example, technically crude, philosophically naïve, or narrowly topical – will be glozed [sic] over or backgrounded. In particular, features that conflict intolerably with the interests and ideologies of subsequent subjects (and, in the West, with those generally benign 'humanistic' values for which canonical works are commonly celebrated) – for example, incidents or sentiments of brutality, bigotry, and racial, sexual, or national chauvinism – will be repressed or rationalized, and there will be a tendency among humanistic scholars and academic critics to 'save the text' by transferring the locus of its interest to more formal or structural features and/or allegorizing its potentially alienating ideology to some more general ('universal') level where it becomes more tolerable and also more readily interpretable in terms of contemporary ideologies.²⁷

And while Herrnstein-Smith is primarily referring here to literature, it is evident that within the area of film this timelessness is even more problematic. Because of the fragile nature of the medium, a great deal of film history, barely a century old, has been lost. The movies that do survive tend to be works that have had a degree of critical acclaim. For this reason, film canons are thus even more self-perpetuating than those in most other cultural fields.

²⁶ Herrnstein-Smith, 29.

²⁷ Herrnstein-Smith, 28.

There is not a huge body of literature around the subject of film canons and axiology, and Janet Staiger's 1985 essay, "The Politics of Film Canons," remains the most thorough discussion of the topic. Drawing on the work of Herrnstein-Smith and others, Staiger argues that Film Studies as a discipline needs to address questions around its own evaluative activity:

By what standards do we make value judgments? What are the political implications of various standards? What ends do these standards promote? How do we, if we are to make selections based on value, choose among the standards? If evaluative standards are for the social good, who determines the social good? Are standards for the society at large, for segments of the society, for individuals? What about those outside a particular hegemonic culture?²⁸

To answer these questions, Staiger considers the two groups of critics (or, to use Stanley Fish's term, "interpretative communities")²⁹ that helped shape the formation of the film canon as it stood at the time: the auteur critics and the ideological critics. Auteurism was the methodology that helped secure film as a legitimate art form worthy of academic study, leading to the establishment of Film Studies as an academic discipline. The auteur critics were concerned with three main criteria of value: (1) universality and endurance; (2) personal vision; and (3) consistency of statement. The Romantic auteur critics were concerned with the elevation of their chosen group into an elite category (the "Pantheon") which often took on spiritual overtones, "as if they were members of a spiritual priesthood."³⁰

²⁸ Janet Staiger, "The Politics of Film Canons," *Cinema Journal* 24, no. 3 (Spring 1985): 11.

²⁹ Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretative Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).

³⁰ Staiger, 13.

The problem, however, was that what gospel was being preached was of much less importance (at least overtly) as long as the criteria of universality, endurance, personal vision and consistency across a group of films was maintained:

The question of *what* is being said is generally ignored. Sarris does not seem to care what gospel is preached as long as it appears universal to him, seems a personal statement, is consistent and coherent, and is presented in good faith. Romantic auteurs seldom delve into the ideologies of their auteurs' work. Griffith's films may be claimed to transcend their time and place and to indicate a personal and coherent vision, but their racist, misogynist, and reactionary vision can be neatly eliminated from the discussion when historical, social, gender, and political effects are removed from the agenda. Romantic auteurs may respond by arguing that, of course, they do not approve of racism, misogyny, or reactionary politics; yet they do not remove these auteurs from the canon. Rather the disturbing ideological statements are downplayed to the 'higher' goal of finding romantic geniuses. The solution is not, however, to censor such films from our classrooms but to reconsider the criteria that we use for evaluation and the process of evaluation itself.³¹

The reconsideration of the criteria used for evaluation and the process of evaluation itself were precisely the questions that were asked by the ideological critics who overtook the discipline by the 1970s. After the political upheaval of May 1968, the editorial stance of the *Cahiers du Cinéma* shifted from its former auteurism to an avowedly Marxist stance. The new group of critics, led by Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni, critiqued dominant filmmaking practices for supporting and reinforcing bourgeois ideology, and explicitly called for a new agenda for the magazine. The editorial piece, "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism," was published in the October 1969 issue of *Cahiers*, and it outlined the new purpose of ideological film criticism:

The question we have to ask is: which films, books and magazines allow the ideology a free, unhampered passage, transmit it with crystal clarity, serve as its chosen language? And which attempt to make it turn back and

³¹ Staiger, 14.

reflect itself, intercept it, make it visible by revealing its mechanisms, by blocking them?³²

This editorial signaled the turn in film criticism towards issues of ideology which would dominate Film Studies as a discipline throughout the 1970s.

But, as Staiger argues, despite this seemingly dramatic shift in emphasis, the auteur critics and the ideological critics often discussed the same films and filmmakers. This relates to Herrnstein-Smith's argument that canons have a strong tendency to self-perpetuate. Although the ideological critics did champion previously marginalized work, their work was primarily aimed at rescuing films and filmmakers who were previously discovered by the auteur critics. Although Comolli and Narboni outlined seven different categories of films to be analyzed by the film critic, by far the most influential of these has been the now infamous "category e": "Films which seem at first sight to belong firmly within the ideology and to be completely under its sway, but which turn out to be so only in an ambiguous manner."³³ Comolli and Narboni argue that through film style, certain directors can transform content that seems very conservative into a critique of itself. In the case of films in "category e", the critic's task becomes to point out how certain formal aspects of film style can call into question the apparent ideology on the surface. The reason "category e" becomes so influential is because it allowed auteurism, which was previously at the forefront of film criticism, to continue despite the change within the politics of the time. Many film critics, who tended to be left-leaning, needed a way to justify their aesthetic tastes, and category (e) allowed these critics to salvage their favourite films of the past by claiming them as "subtly subversive." This is not to claim that this criticism is wrong or incorrect, merely that this way of reading Hollywood films

³² Comolli and Narboni, 23-24.

³³ Comolli and Narboni, 27.

has a history. Ironically, the method of Comolli and Narboni, two Marxist critics, has rescued the centrist methodological approach. We will see the influence of both auteurist and ideological critics in the making of Scorsese's reputation, and as further evidence of self-perpetuation, these two interpretive communities will strongly influence Scorsese's own documentaries on film history which will be discussed in Chapter Four.

BECOMING A PROFESSIONAL: *BOXCAR BERTHA*

Right from the beginning of Scorsese's career, one can see an example of the contingencies discussed by Herrnstein-Smith. Scorsese's first "professional" directing job actually took place two years before his move to Hollywood and four years before his directing job for Roger Corman, *Boxcar Bertha* (1972). In 1968, Scorsese was hired to direct *The Honeymoon Killers*, scripted by Leonard Castle. Before this film, Scorsese had worked only on student films and the experimental short *The Big Shave*. But after a week of shooting, Scorsese was fired from the job and replaced by Castle himself. The film was released in 1970 and has developed a significant cult following, eventually being released by the prestigious Criterion Collection DVD company. Scorsese's comments on this incident reveal a great deal about the cultural field of filmmaking:

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

very much afraid I would get fired again. So when I started on *Boxcar Bertha* I drew every scene, about 500 pictures altogether.³⁴

Scorsese's comment here that he was an "artist" is clearly meant to be self-mocking, but is also a conventional parody of the self-important experimental filmmaker who will not submit to the demands of working in the industry. Given that Scorsese was making these comments retrospectively in order to position his own subsequent career, they served as a self-justification as well as self-critique. Because of the auteur theory, the idea of producing art within the system was considered possible. Art was no longer contingent on being separate from commercial concerns. When Scorsese looked back on his younger filmmaking self as pretentious and unreasonable, he implicitly passed judgment on others who insist on this point of view. Moving from New York and independent filmmaking and into the world of Hollywood commercialism can be read as "selling out" to the system. Scorsese's comments argue against this by seeing financial interests as inevitable to the making of film. What was a very clear professional and ideological decision by Scorsese is turned into "common sense".

Boxcar Bertha stands as Scorsese's entrance into Hollywood as a director because of its unambiguously commercial nature, even if it was made on the margins of this industry. It is an example of a Roger Corman produced "exploitation" film, one of many lovers-on-the-run genre films meant to capitalize on the unexpected success of *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967). These same qualities excluded the film from serious consideration as art, as the now often told anecdote told by Scorsese about the film shows:

I showed *Boxcar Bertha* in a rough-cut of about two hours to John Cassavetes. John took me back to his office, looked at me and said, 'Marty, you've just spent a whole year of your life making a piece of shit. It's a good picture, but you're better than the people who make this kind of

³⁴ Scorsese on Scorsese, 34.

movie. Don't get hooked into the exploitation market, just try and do something different.' Jay Cocks, who was then the *Time* film critic, had shown him *Who's That Knocking at My Door?* and he had loved it. He said I must go back to making that kind of film and was there anything I had that I was really dying to make. I said, 'Yes, although it needs a rewrite.' 'Well, rewrite it then!'³⁵

The frequency with which this story gets told and retold proves its symbolic value to the narrative that is Scorsese's career.³⁶ The story both praises and critiques Scorsese, stressing his immense talent as an artist as well as the failure of that talent to be properly realized within the exploitation market. It features Cassavetes in the role of supportive yet critical mentor/father, guiding the young disciple to his proper place as an artist, stressing the importance of "personal" work. Although the exploitation market was the contemporary equivalent of the Classical Hollywood "B" film that Scorsese so admired, it was not the place, according to Cassavetes, in which serious, personal work could be accomplished. "Personal" work for Cassavetes meant stories about people, not about film technique, as in auteurism. As previously discussed at the conclusion of Chapter One, Cassavetes's first film, *Shadows*, had an early version that was more experimental in technique that he eventually abandoned for a second version that was more focused on the characters and their relationships. He argued that, "the first version was an interesting film from a technical point of view, but it had nothing to do with people."³⁷ Throughout the rest of his career Cassavetes would continue to follow this principle, and although he would become an almost mythical figure within the context of "independent" cinema, he would be relatively ignored by Film Studies as a discipline and marginalized within the

³⁵ Scorsese on Scorsese, 38. The anecdote also appears in *Martin Scorsese: A Journey*, 68.

³⁶ Scarcely any account of *Boxcar Bertha* fails to retell this story. For examples, see Keyser, 37; and Grist, 61-62.

³⁷ Cassavetes on Cassavetes (ed. Ray Carney) (London: Faber and Faber, 2001): 80.

canon.³⁸ Scorsese avoids this marginalization by virtue of his closer ties to Hollywood, a closeness foreshadowed by his involvement with Corman and Corman's own relationship vis-à-vis the major studios.

Although Corman began as a low budget alternative to Hollywood, he was at the same time fulfilling a role within the system that Hollywood had abandoned: the "B" film. After the breaking up of vertical integration throughout the 1950s and the loss of their guaranteed distribution, major companies no longer produced nor exhibited "B" films as it had previously. This caused the differences between low budget "B" films being made within the confines of the Production Code and the exploitation films made outside of the system to disappear.³⁹ Corman was one of the low-budget producers who emerged from this split and provided cheap, low budget genre films using exploitation material that appealed to the increasingly youth oriented market. Gradually, Corman and low budget exploitation would integrate into Hollywood. The New Hollywood films of the "Hollywood Renaissance" (what Geoff King has dubbed "New Hollywood Version I"⁴⁰) like *Bonnie and Clyde* and especially *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969) relied on previously taboo (for Hollywood) subjects of sex, violence, and in the case of *Easy Rider* drugs for their breakout success with the youth audience. The New Hollywood films of

³⁸ Cassavetes scholar George Kouvaros discusses this explicitly: "A personalized approach to filmmaking, such as the one advocated by Cassavetes, was held up as the mark of an alternative independent vision that could challenge the operations and products of the major studios. In the three decades following, the privileging of the 'people' over the film itself or filmmaking came to take on more negative connotations, highlighting both the difficulty of trying to position Cassavetes's work and the director's own stubborn refusal to engage in critical discussion of his films. His apparent disregard for film also seemed to place his work at odds with the emerging discipline of film studies, which during the '60s and '70s spread across university campuses and led to the rise of a number of specialized film journals." Kouvaros, *Where Does it Happen?: John Cassavetes and Cinema at the Breaking Point* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004): 3.

³⁹ For a detailed discussion of this breakdown, see Eric Schaefer, "Conclusion: The End of Classical Exploitation," *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!: A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999): 325-342.

⁴⁰ Geoff King, "New Hollywood Version I: The Hollywood Renaissance," in *New Hollywood: An Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002): 11-48.

the “Blockbuster” cycle (what King refers to as “New Hollywood Version II”⁴¹) relied on the generic elements and exploitation marketing strategies favoured by Corman. Eventually, there would no longer be a place for Corman. Hollywood, with films like *A Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick, 1971) and *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972), was pushing the boundaries of sex and violence, and later blockbusters such as *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977) and *Raiders on the Lost Ark* (Steven Spielberg, 1981) were using similar advertising strategies, all with the huge budget of a Hollywood studio behind them.

Boxcar Bertha served as an important work for Scorsese (as with similar films by other New Hollywood directors) by displaying his ability to work successfully within a commercial system, delivering a film on time and on budget. More importantly, it began to establish the niche within which Scorsese could operate within the changing conditions of New Hollywood: as a filmmaker who took film violence as a subject matter. The few early reviews that do exist of the film concentrate on the film’s treatment of brutality.

Roger Ebert comments that:

Director Martin Scorsese has gone for mood and atmosphere more than for action, and his violence is always blunt and unpleasant – never liberating and exhilarating, as the New Violence is supposed to be. We get the feeling we’re inhabiting the dark night of the soul.⁴²

Likewise, Jeremy James praises the depth of Scorsese’s violence, his ability to fill the picture “with a paranoid and ultimately justified dread, a constant sense of impending

⁴¹ King, “New Hollywood Version II: Blockbusters and Corporate Hollywood,” in *New Hollywood: An Introduction*: 49-84.

⁴² Roger Ebert, “*Boxcar Bertha*,” *Chicago Sun-Times* (July 19, 1972); reprinted in *Scorsese: A Journey Through the American Psyche*: 22.

atrocity.”⁴³ Even though the criticism was not always positive, it created a debate over representations of violence that has continued throughout Scorsese’s career. As Les Keyser discusses:

The torrid erotic pace of *Boxcar Bertha* is matched by the ceaseless violence. The contemporary reviewer for *Variety* complained that the whole enterprise was ‘not much more than an excuse to slaughter a lot of people.’ With mind-numbing regularity there are plane crashes, stickups, fistfights, episodes of torture, and finally the film’s pièce de résistance, a crucifixion so daring in its execution and so horrible in its effect that Jeffrey Lyons, writing for *Rock*, declared it ‘should have been cut.’ On the other hand, Arthur Winston, writing for the *New York Post*, saw the final crucifixion as proof of Scorsese’s ‘ability to stage certain episodes without squeamishness,’ arguing further that Scorsese is ‘so very strong with the crucifixion you feel this is part of a better, bigger picture. ...[T]he picture you were thinking was in shorthand expands to the heroic dimensions of tragedy.’ This dichotomy of critical reactions foreshadows the great debates about violence in *Taxi Driver* and *Raging Bull*; some viewers always feel Scorsese overdoes the blood-and-gore, while others see the physical violence as part of a grander vision.⁴⁴

Boxcar Bertha serves as an effective bridge in Scorsese’s career, a work with “limits” of “possibilities” in which he nevertheless “succeeds”.⁴⁵ The film anticipates the debates over violence that would continue within Scorsese’s work, debates that would also be central in discussions of the New Hollywood. In the end, Scorsese did and did not take Cassavetes’s advice. He moved away from the exploitation ranks of Corman and into more “personal” (i.e. more autobiographical) material with his next film, *Mean Streets*. But he never left the more exploitative material of sex and violence behind, which

⁴³ Jeremy James, “A Director Whose Violence Has Depth,” *Chicago Sun-Times* (November 19, 1972): Section 3, page 8 (reprinted from the *Los Angeles Times*). Curiously, James compares the film to Jean-Luc Godard’s *Vivre Sa Vie*, a rather odd comparison to say the least. This would seem to indicate that James was familiar with Scorsese’s previous work, *Who’s That Knocking At My Door?*, and its New Wave stylistics.

⁴⁴ Keyser, 35. Quotes from the following reviews: “Review of *Box Car Bertha*,” *Variety* (June 30, 1972), 11; Jeffrey Lyons, “*Boxcar Bertha*,” *Rock* (September 25, 1972), 8; and Archer Winston, “*Boxcar Bertha*,” *New York Post* (August 17, 1972), 32.

⁴⁵ Ebert (1972), 23.

allowed him to work within an industry in which these elements were increasingly felt to be imperative to box office success.

SCORSESE BECOMING “SCORSESE”: *MEAN STREETS*

The key for Scorsese, as can already be seen in the debates around *Boxcar Bertha*, was his ability to persuade critics that his use of violence served a purpose beyond exploitation while at the same time not alienating critics by being too personal or esoteric. In the previous chapter, I discussed the reception of Scorsese's first feature film, *Who's That Knocking At My Door?*, which despite some early positive notices has generally been seen as a technically crude and overindulgent apprenticeship work. The film was positioned very much in the tradition of the New York independent film, with a strong New Wave, European influence. Even the references in the film to John Wayne, the most American of all movie icons, begin with a picture of Wayne in a French magazine. It is clear that if Scorsese had remained in New York, attempting to make small, personal independent films in the tradition of Godard or even Cassavetes, he would not have the reputation he has today as the greatest filmmaker of his generation. Within the world of film, especially American cinema, it is not quite accurate to say that the cultural field is the economic field reversed. Surely, cultural capital relies on the symbolic function of prestige that is difficult to achieve with a great deal of box office success. Steven Spielberg, despite all of his economic success and even his recent Academy Awards, has not achieved the kind of highbrow esteem bestowed on Scorsese. Even Classical Hollywood entertainers like John Ford and Alfred Hitchcock did not achieve canonical

status until their careers were in decline, with their respective masterpieces, *The Searchers* (1956) and *Vertigo* (1958), not entering the *Sight and Sound* polls until 1982, over twenty years after their initial release. Nevertheless, the films that make up the canon of American cinema are all very commercial in nature, films that were made as part of the Hollywood system.⁴⁶ American silent films, once considered the pinnacle of cinema as a visual art, have fallen off the list, with no silent appearing since *The General* placed tenth in 1982, a fate that has not befallen their European counterparts *The Battleship Potemkin* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1925) and *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (Carl Theodor Dreyer, 1928). As silent films have become increasingly seen as esoteric and difficult, the tendency has been for critics and scholars to remove them from the core of the American film canon. The two mangled masterpieces of Hollywood, *Greed* and *The Magnificent Ambersons*, have not appeared since 1982, representing an increasing trend to justify and celebrate the Hollywood studio system as a positive rather than negative influence on film art. This same impulse lies behind the campaign to have *Citizen Kane* situated as a Hollywood rather than an independent film, attempting to explain the film's greatness in terms of its collaborative nature, the "genius of the system."⁴⁷ As Jonathan

⁴⁶ The American films that have appeared in the *Sight and Sound* Top Ten polls are all Hollywood productions: *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941), *Vertigo*, *The Searchers*, *The General* (Buster Keaton, 1925), *Greed* (Erich Von Stroheim, 1924), *The Magnificent Ambersons* (Orson Welles, 1942), *Singin' in the Rain* (Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, 1952), *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968), *City Lights* (Charlie Chaplin, 1931), *The Gold Rush* (Charlie Chaplin, 1925), *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972), *The Godfather Part II* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974), *Intolerance* (D.W. Griffith, 1916), *Sunrise* (F.W. Murnau, 1927), *Dr. Strangelove* (Stanley Kubrick, 1963), and *Raging Bull* (Martin Scorsese, 1980).

⁴⁷ See Pauline Kael, "Raising Kane" *New Yorker* (February 20, 1971) and (February 27, 1971), reprinted in *For Keeps* (New York: Dutton, 1994), 232-325; and Robert Carringer, *The Making of "Citizen Kane"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

Rosenbaum argues, there is a lot at stake in this labeling, because once *Citizen Kane* is recognized as a studio film, we arrive at a platonic ideal of Hollywood.⁴⁸

Given this climate, Scorsese's movement into making films for Hollywood was a necessary contingency for his eventual canonization. Although *Mean Streets* is produced independently, it was made for studio distribution and has a technical polish and generic grounding that *Who's That Knocking At My Door?* lacked. Scorsese rewrote an earlier draft of the script, at that point titled *Season of the Witch*, following Cassavetes's advice in 1972. In the process, Scorsese attempted to remove some of the more explicit cultural signifiers that would confuse a mainstream audience. Following the advice of his then partner Sandy Weintraub, the daughter of the studio executive Fred Weintraub, who first brought Scorsese to Hollywood to edit *Medicine Ball Caravan*, Scorsese worked to streamline his sensibility to fit the marketplace:

I dug it [the script] out and showed it to Sandy Weintraub, who was my partner at the time. She said she thought a lot of the stories I told her about Little Italy were far funnier than anything in it. So I took out a lot of religious stuff – it was still called *Season of the Witch* at this stage – and put in things like the pool-hall scene. After rewriting the script, I started sending it out to everyone – and that was *Mean Streets*. After all the different titles it had over the years, this was suggested to me by Jay Cocks, from Raymond Chandler's 'Down these mean streets a man must go.' I thought it a little pretentious, but it turned out to be a pretty good title.⁴⁹

What results is a curious mixture of elements that allows *Mean Streets* to be discussed as an authentic, personal vision of New York's Little Italy as seen through one of its own members while eliminating some of the more obscure religious and ethnic specificity.

The two titles of the film, the original *Season of the Witch* and the subsequent *Mean*

⁴⁸ Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Chapter Ten: Orson Welles as Ideological Challenge," in *Movie Wars: How Hollywood and the Media Conspire to Limit What Films We Can See* (Chicago: A Cappella Press, 2000): 178-179.

⁴⁹ *Scorsese on Scorsese*, 38.

Streets, encapsulate this duality. Understanding the title *Season of the Witch* requires a deep knowledge of Italian culture, as Robert Casillo argues:

The title *Season of the Witch* has its merits and is arguably preferable to the present one, being more closely related to the film's themes, narrative and characters. Such an argument, however, depends partly on the likely possibility that Scorsese grasped the significance of witches, witchcraft, and the related belief in the evil eye or *mal occhio* in both southern Italian and Italian American society ... Its unsuitability lies in the fact that, while witches have a specific significance in southern Italian society and its earlier Italian American off-shoots, these meanings would have been lost on most American viewers.⁵⁰

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

The reference to Raymond Chandler in the title is merely one of many allusions the film makes to American popular culture, especially Hollywood cinema, as an attempt by Scorsese to locate the *Mean Streets* within a filmmaking tradition. The characters in the film may be from a culturally specific group, but this culture has now been transformed by its connection with the world of mass entertainment represented by Hollywood cinema. Scorsese's own comments on the film stress these twin influences: "[A]t the same time as giving this accurate picture of Italian-Americans, I was trying to make a kind of homage to the Warner Brothers [sic] gangster films."⁵¹ In fact, the film is full of references to Hollywood that situate *Mean Streets* as the New Hollywood film it was trying to be. There are three clips shown from other films, *The Searchers*, *The Big*

⁵⁰ Robert Casillo, *Gangster Priest: The Italian American Cinema of Martin Scorsese* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006): 486, 491.

⁵¹ *Scorsese on Scorsese*, 43-45.

Heat (Fritz Lang, 1953), and *The Tomb of Ligeia* (Roger Corman, 1964), two Hollywood World War II films, *The Pride of the Marines* (Delmer Daves, 1945) and *Back to Bataan* (Edward Dmytryk, 1945), are referenced in the dialogue, and one scene features a poster for *Point Blank* (John Boorman, 1967). The variety of films here and how they are deployed speaks to *Mean Streets* as a film consciously trying to position itself within a group of ambitious Hollywood films reworking the conventions of its past.

The attitude is certainly not purely celebratory; the references to World War II films show a clear disconnect between that war and the one currently raging in Vietnam. This point is made explicit by the presence of the Vietnam veteran who is presented with an American flag and an allusion to John Garfield in *The Pride of the Marines*: “Get ‘em in the eyes, get ‘em right in the eyes.” Charlie makes this reference to a physically disabled veteran of World War II, but is completely oblivious to the actual man he is addressing, a psychologically damaged veteran of the Vietnam War. This damage is revealed when the man turns violent and attacks a woman at the party, having to be physically restrained and calmed down by the words, “You’re in America, Jerry.” The mythology of Hollywood and its war propaganda is revealed as inadequate for people to comprehend their current social and political reality. But at the same time, the references are used to suggest a continuity with the past, made especially apparent by the more recent films alluded to, *The Tomb of Ligeia* and *Point Blank*. The Corman film was, according to Scorsese, included as a thank you for getting Scorsese’s professional career started.⁵² But more than this, it presents the film as part of an American commercial tradition, even as it is working to re-imagine that legacy. *Point Blank* cements this idea, since it is a film that already uses an experimental formal approach to traditional genre

⁵² *Scorsese on Scorsese*, 39-41.

material, suggesting an artistic direction that had been opened up and which *Mean Streets* was following.

But ultimately, *Mean Streets* would not move into the heavily formalized, non-linear editing style of *Point Blank*, a film with clear echoes of Alain Resnais' experiments with narrative, *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (1959) and *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961). Despite its stylistic flourishes, *Mean Streets* is concerned with assimilating into classical filmmaking to a much greater extent than Scorsese's earlier *Who's That Knocking At My Door?* Part of this is its larger budget. Despite being made independently and in less than a month, *Mean Streets* nevertheless was made according to professional standards, not as a student film put together over a number of years like *Who's That Knocking At My Door?* With the larger budget and commercial interests came a film style that removed many of the non-classical elements, especially the New Wave inspired jump cuts and flash forwards. Despite Roger Ebert's claim that *Who's That Knocking At My Door?* managed to combine the Cassavetes style independent film with a mainstream sensibility, it would really take *Mean Streets* to effectively make this transition. One of the biggest supporters of the film was Ebert's mentor Pauline Kael, who admired the film for both its personal nature and for its lack of formalism. The film was a "triumph of personal filmmaking"⁵³ in which Scorsese showed the audience what he knew:

No other American gangster-milieu film has had this element of personal obsession; there has never before been a gangster film in which you felt that the director himself was saying, 'This is my story.' Not that we come away thinking that Martin Scorsese is or ever was a gangster, but we're so affected because we know in our bones that he has walked these streets and has felt what his characters feel.⁵⁴

⁵³ Pauline Kael, "The Current Cinema: Everyday Inferno," *New Yorker* (October 8, 1973): 157.

⁵⁴ Kael, 161.

According to Kael, Scorsese was able to combine this with a cinematic style that was at once expressive and naturalistic:

The picture is stylized without seeming in any way artificial; it is the only movie I've ever seen that achieves the effects of Expressionism without the use of distortion. 'Mean Streets' never loses touch with the ordinary look of things or with common experience; rather, it puts us in closer touch with the ordinary, the common, by turning a different light on them.⁵⁵

Crucial for Kael is the idea that truly great films must be immediately accessible and not lose touch with the "common" or the "ordinary."

Kael combines this populism with a taste for modernist art, as she was harshly critical of auteur critics and their attempts to make high art out of genre films. Hence the comparison of *Mean Streets* with a modernist movement like Expressionism within a review that stresses the film's everyday naturalism. She concludes her review by claiming that *Mean Streets* is "a blood thriller in the truest sense."⁵⁶ James Naremore, in his book *More Than Night: Film Noir and Its Contexts*, draws out the connection between modernism and melodrama in the noir genre, dubbing many of these thrillers "blood melodramas."⁵⁷ Noir discourse was starting to form at the particular historical moment. In 1972, future Scorsese collaborator and former Kael disciple Paul Schrader published his influential "Notes on Film Noir" in *Film Comment*.⁵⁸ In this piece, Schrader argues for the aesthetic greatness of the noir films but in rather non-auteurist terms similar to Kael. For Schrader, dark modernist impulses combined with American pop culture to produce a high point of Hollywood cinema. This noir discourse would

⁵⁵ Kael, 160.

⁵⁶ Kael, 162.

⁵⁷ James Naremore, "Chapter 2: Modernism and Blood Melodrama: Three Case Studies," *More Than Night: Film Noir and Its Contexts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998): 40-95.

⁵⁸ Paul Schrader, "Notes on Film Noir," *Film Comment* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1972): 8-13.

extend beyond critical writing and into the films of the New Hollywood: *The Long Goodbye* (Robert Altman, 1973), *Thieves Like Us* (Robert Altman, 1974), *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974), and *Night Moves* (Arthur Penn, 1975), along with Scorsese's *Mean Streets* and *Taxi Driver*, began a noir revival during this period. But crucially, all but Scorsese's films are revisionist genre films. Only Scorsese aims to keep this tension between realism and expressionism that defined noir as an aesthetic movement. In other words, this noir revival cycle was all modernism and very little melodrama, a modernism without the vernacular quality. Scorsese's had the ability to locate his modernist aesthetic vision within a naturalist, everyday setting that was at once ethnically specific without being obscure.

Beyond Kael's glowing review, *Mean Streets* generally received almost unanimous support from the mainstream press and it was the first Scorsese film to receive widespread critical attention.⁵⁹ But the few negative notices of the film strongly convey the critical environment and how *Mean Streets* was positioned within it. These reviews also indicate the direction Scorsese would turn in his subsequent work. Richard Schickel's review for *Time* is ambivalent, noting both admiration for the film's realism and dissatisfaction with the lack of connection to the characters: "It is impossible to care as deeply as he does about people whose minds and spirits are stunted."⁶⁰ Because of this inability to relate to the characters, Schickel concludes that "one leaves the film with the sense of having endured a class in social anthropology rather than an aesthetic experience." One recalls here Andrew Sarris's argument that truly great cinema needed to be de-contextualized from its social and historical milieu. The connection is not

⁵⁹ See Weiss, 88-90, for a useful overview of the film's reviews.

⁶⁰ Richard Schickel, "A Closed Circle," *Time* (November 5, 1973): 102.

accidental. In 1973, Schickel produced the television series *The Men Who Made the Movies*, featuring seven Classical Hollywood filmmakers: Alfred Hitchcock, George Cukor, Howard Hawks, Vincente Minnelli, King Vidor, Raoul Walsh, and William Wellman. This series would have been inconceivable without the influence of auteurists like Sarris, and the selections greatly reflected the overturn in critical taste Sarris promoted (all but Wellman were highly regarded by Sarris in his rankings). For Schickel, these classical filmmakers offered aesthetic experiences not on display in *Mean Streets* and they grounded their personality in their formal style rather than their social milieu. Despite the mainstreaming of the text, *Mean Streets* remained too grounded in sociology for many auteurists.⁶¹

From the opposite perspective, John Simon's negative review of both the film and its supporters sees a crass and adolescent spirit keeping the film from reaching a high aesthetic quality:

The enthusiastic reception of *Mean Streets* may be due in part to its being largely child's play, and rather sloppily written, improvised, acted, photographed and edited child's play, at that. But in a period when movie-making has reached a high plateau of soulless slickness and glitter, when any number of directors can put together neat little scenes into a triumph of the art of assemblage – the only trouble being that the entire thing is hollow and pointless – a movie oozing amateurishness from every hole in the plot and every crevice in the continuity may come across as endearingly genuine, unassuming, and direct.⁶²

The high modernist Simon, who looks down on the medium of film in general as lacking the aesthetic quality of other arts, sees an inferior mass culture product that passes itself off as folk art relative to its debased competitors. Simon points out the film's inferiority to Federico Fellini's "masterpiece" *I Vitelloni*, stating that Scorsese lacks Fellini's

⁶¹ For instance, the film was even reviewed by the sociologist Herbert Gans. See Gans, "Mean Streets: A Study of the Young Working Class," *Social policy* 4 (Jan-Feb 1974), p. 59-60.

⁶² John Simon, "Films," in *Esquire* (January 1974): 18.

humanity and structure. For Simon, the few examples of film art that do exist come not from Hollywood but from the European cinema, not from mass culture but from high modernism, with the great divide continuing to separate them. But even as Simon maintained his place as a prominent critic throughout the 1970s, his aesthetic position was becoming more and more outdated. Similar to Scorsese and his students at NYU overtaking the previous aesthetic positions held by senior faculty like Haig Manoogian, Simon's idea of great cinema needing to possess a modernist purity was being replaced by critics as seemingly opposed as Kael and Sarris and their respective disciples. The main danger facing Scorsese's reputation at this point was the possibility of being seen as an ethnic filmmaker of sociological films. He thus needed to appeal not only to Kael and her critical followers (for example, Roger Ebert) but to auteur critics who took Hollywood genre cinema seriously. His next films would move increasingly in this direction.

“HAS MARTIN SCORSESE GONE HOLLYWOOD?” (PART ONE):

ALICE DOESN'T LIVE HERE ANYMORE

In 1974, following the critical success of *Mean Streets*, Scorsese would make his first film financed by a Hollywood studio. As Mary Pat Kelly puts it, what would be “his first real Hollywood movie.”⁶³ *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* was very much a film of the period. How the personnel were assembled, how the film was shot, and how the genre of the woman's melodrama was dealt with were all indicative of how New

⁶³ Kelly, *Martin Scorsese: A Journey*: 80.

Hollywood worked.⁶⁴ The driving force behind the film was the actress Ellen Burstyn, who was coming off a major hit, *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973). Burstyn had a script written by Robert Getchell and she and Warner Bros. were looking for a director:

John Calley, who was head of production at Warner Brothers [sic], told me about the script and he thought it was a good one for me to do: nobody would expect it from me. Because I was receiving a lot of scripts now, Sandy Weintraub read it first and said it was really interesting. I thought it was a good idea too, dealing with women for a change.⁶⁵

At one level, the film was a calculated move on Scorsese's part, as he has admitted in certain interviews: "I needed to do something that was a major studio film for a certain amount of money and to prove that I can direct women. It was as simple as that."⁶⁶

However, I would argue that it was not quite that simple. *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* cannot be explained as a Hollywood mass cultural product to be defined in opposition to the modernist rigour of Scorsese's "masterpieces". Rather, it needs to be seen, as do all Scorsese's films, as playing an important role in establishing Scorsese's reputation, and its mass culture status was paradoxically both a detriment to its critical reputation while playing an important role in establishing Scorsese's eventual high art status. Following the release of the film, Stephen Farber published a cautionary article in the *New York Times* concerning the fate of the talented young filmmakers of the

Hollywood Renaissance:

More than ever before, the movie studios are terrified to try anything new. They want to repeat past successes, and they have found a new generation of filmmakers willing to oblige them. During the sixties young directors dreamed of becoming the American Bergman or Fellini. Today's young

⁶⁴ For an extended analysis of the film as a text of the period, see Grist, "Into the Mainstream: *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*," in *The Films of Martin Scorsese, 1963-1977: Authorship and Context*: 98-122.

⁶⁵ *Scorsese on Scorsese*, 49.

⁶⁶ Anthony DeCurtis, "The *Rolling Stone* Interview: Martin Scorsese," *Rolling Stone* no. 590 (1990), 108; quoted in Grist, 103.

filmmakers are more likely to emulate Peter Bogdanovich, the film-buff-turned-director who has built his career on clever reproductions of the genre movies of the thirties and forties.⁶⁷

Farber's piece is intriguing from a number of perspectives. First, this is written in 1975, in the middle of the so-called last Golden Age of Hollywood, before the releases of *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975) and *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977) would move Hollywood into the blockbuster era. Farber's comments show how contemporary discussions of Hollywood at this time often paint a very different picture of the period than later, more nostalgic recollections. Second, the opposition Farber sets up here between the genuine, pure artistry of a Bergman or Fellini and a genre filmmaker like Bogdanovich is mapped onto Scorsese's first two Hollywood films, with *Mean Streets* representing the work of "an unconventional artist" and *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* showing Scorsese having "capitulated to Hollywood." The dichotomy between authentic art and commercialism is strongly upheld here by Farber, ignoring the challenges made over the preceding decade to overturn this notion of aesthetic purity. Farber sees in Scorsese both the qualities of a genuine artist as well as those of a Hollywood showman:

[There is a] profound tension in Scorsese's temperament. At his best he is an intransigent artist committed to unvarnished truth on the screen; but, like Peter Bogdanovich, he is also a film buff with a taste for Hollywood showmanship and an abiding affection for kitsch. Scorsese is going to have to come to terms with those conflicting impulses before he makes too many more movies.⁶⁸

Looking back on this article, Farber both realized the dangers inherent in Scorsese's commercialism while misrecognizing the cultural field as it had developed. The very qualities Farber admires in *Mean Streets*, such as cultural authenticity, were seen as being overly sociological in nature and of possible detriment to notions of universality so key to

⁶⁷ Stephen Farber, "Has Martin Scorsese Gone Hollywood?" *New York Times* (March 30, 1975): C1.

⁶⁸ Farber, C13.

canonization. To move into Hollywood genre filmmaking was an attempt to further reduce (although not eliminate entirely) Scorsese's ethnic specificity as well as appeal to a critical community invested in the notion that a true auteur can work within Hollywood's genre system.

Discussions of the film's style show a split between critics seeing Scorsese's use of technique as a concession to the classical style of Hollywood and others maintaining that the film's style provides a self-reflexive commentary in the best tradition of a Hollywood auteur. The radical journal *Jump Cut* featured a series of articles on the film critiquing the lack of directorial control exhibited by Scorsese working within a genre context, with one article comparing the film unfavourably to newly discovered auteur favorite Douglas Sirk:

Scorsese's previous work shows clearly that he has rare talent which can be controlled by a creative, personal force. In *Alice* we have the betrayal of the style and content we have the right to expect from a topflight director.⁶⁹

Sirk's controlled poetic visual style (black-and-white Cinemascope) seem striking contrasts to Scorsese's intuitive cinematic ramblings. It is *Tarnished Angels* which should be revived, to serve as paradigm of movies about women left alone with children. And it is Douglas Sirk who should be honored as a truly worthy women's director.⁷⁰

The comparison here to Sirk is no doubt negative, but it nevertheless shows how, within academic film journals, Hollywood was no longer seen as beneath serious consideration. If Sirk can be taken seriously, then theoretically at least, so could a film such as *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*. The problem the film has from this perspective is not its Hollywood conventions. Rather, it is the lack of deliberate artifice to render those

⁶⁹ Russell E. Davis, "Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore: Under the Comic Frosting," *Jump Cut* no. 7 (1975): 4.

⁷⁰ Karyn Kay and Gerald Peary, "Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore: Waitressing for Warner's," *Jump Cut* no. 7 (1975): 7.

conventions critically. The film is at once too Hollywood and too realistic. It is tied to genre conventions while stylistically following the new codes of realism, especially in regards to mise-en-scene and performance. It is therefore not surprising that the sequence most commented on and most admired from the film is its remarkable opening with its deliberately artificial Classical Hollywood studio look. In addition, Christine Geraghty, writing in *Movie*, makes an argument for the use of style in the film as expressing the tensions inherent in the social situation, not unlike the use of style in classical melodrama:

There is, I think, a tension in the film between the emphasis on choice and freedom which is used to create Alice as a character and the control which the men represent. This tension is expressed in the mixing of styles in the film, the effect of which is to underplay the resolution of the narrative.⁷¹

Within this review, one can see the seeds of Scorsese's eventual canonization, combining the traditional auteurist argument with ideological criticism. Scorsese's subsequent films would all build on this foundation, offering up ever more convincing examples of Scorsese's uniqueness both as an artist and as a critic of American culture, with the two often intimately linked.

But ultimately, with *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, this interpretive approach would remain marginal due to the film's strong association with the social movement of feminism, which would ground the film in a specific time and place. It does not transcend its time period, partly because the film itself is difficult to place within Scorsese's subsequent work and partly because the way in which feminism is dealt with is overdetermined by the economic structure of Hollywood itself. Much of the film's critical attention at the time debated its status as the first Hollywood picture that explicitly confronted the feminist movement. In addition to the reviews of the film, most

⁷¹ Christine Geraghty, "American Cinema in the 70s: *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*," *Movie* no. 22 (Spring 1976): 42.

of which mention the film's relation to the women's movement, the feminist scholar Marjorie Rosen interviewed Scorsese for *Film Comment*⁷² and discussed the film along these lines. There were promotional pieces arranged by the studio in *Ms.* magazine, which had just been purchased by Warner Communications.⁷³ All of this served an important purpose for Scorsese. It established his name within the mainstream press beyond the niche market provided by *Mean Streets*. Scorsese had now become a player within the industry, and he had shown he was capable of working within a genre system. But the film's sociological interest as a film of the moment, promoted by the studio and the popular press, denied the film its personality as a "Scorsese" picture, despite Scorsese's best efforts to discuss formal elements in interviews. In the 2004 documentary *Scorsese on Scorsese*, Scorsese would try once again to remove the feminist elements of the film and focus on its personal connections. He compared the relationship of Alice and her son with that of himself and his own mother. Responding to the feminist criticisms of the film, Scorsese simply shrugged his shoulders and stated, "that's me." The documentary is directed by Richard Schickel, and like his film series *The Men Who Made the Movies*, its purpose is to emphasize Scorsese as auteur. In this documentary, Scorsese films that do not do this well, such as his studio project *The Color of Money* (1986), are dropped altogether. Films like *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* are discussed from a very particular, personal point of view, very unlike how they were originally conceived and mediated within the culture. As much as possible, context is stripped away.

⁷² Marjorie Rosen, "New Hollywood: Martin Scorsese Interviewed," *Film Comment* 11, no. 2 (March-April 1975): 42-46.

⁷³ See Kay and Peary, 5.

TRANSCENDENCE, REDEMPTION, IRONY (TAKE ONE):

TAXI DRIVER, SCORSESE'S FIRST MASTERPIECE

Following the financial and industry success of *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (the film won an Academy Award for Ellen Burstyn, which Scorsese himself accepted in her absence), Scorsese returned to New York City to film *Taxi Driver*. Produced by Hollywood independents Michael and Julia Phillips, Scorsese was packaged along with screenwriter Paul Schrader, who had just sold his script for *The Yakuza* (Sydney Pollack, 1974), and lead actor Robert DeNiro, who had just won an Academy Award for *The Godfather Part II* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974). *Taxi Driver* would make Scorsese's reputation both critically and financially, combining the cultural prestige of *Mean Streets* with the box office success of *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*.⁷⁴ This can be attributed to its combining of previously successful elements. The film's mixture of expressionism and realism along with its New York City location recalled *Mean Streets*, but it further assimilates these elements with a lead character foreign to this environment. There is a strong contemporary strain through the references in Schrader's script to the would-be political assassin Arthur Bremer⁷⁵ along with the film's implicit use of the social movements of the 1960s: feminism, the sexual revolution, civil rights, and the counter-culture. References are made to such New Wave favorites as *Diary of a Country Priest* (Robert Bresson, 1950) and *The Searchers* (previously referenced by Scorsese in earlier

⁷⁴ *Taxi Driver* cost 1.3 million and grossed 21.1; *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* cost 1.8 million and grossed 17.6, making them roughly equivalent in financial terms.

⁷⁵ Arthur Bremer attempted to assassinate presidential candidate George Wallace on May 15, 1972. Afterwards, his diary was discovered and published. Bremer's connection to the film, as well as his distance from the character of Travis Bickle, is eloquently discussed in Amy Taubin, *Taxi Driver* (London: British Film Institute, 2000): 38-40.

films), with a score conducted by Bernard Herrmann, famous for his work with Welles and Hitchcock. Finally, the sensational elements of violence and sex connect the film to the exploitation movie, with the film's look even recalling many of the earlier films of 70s blaxploitation.⁷⁶ As much as the quality of the filmmaking itself, these factors contributed to *Taxi Driver* becoming Scorsese's first acknowledged masterpiece.

An examination of the contemporary writing on the film is revealing in two ways. There was a lack of critical praise as compared with *Mean Streets* amongst the mainstream press, and there was an enormous volume of writing about the film in cinema-specific publications. There are a number of rather negative or at best mixed reviews, which extends to the reception at the Cannes Film Festival, where it was awarded the top prize of the Palme d'Or amidst booping at the press conference announcement.⁷⁷ The mixed or negative reviews included such prominent names as Andrew Sarris, Manny Farber, Stanley Kauffmann, Richard Schickel, David Sterritt and Jonathan Rosenbaum, with only Pauline Kael and Roger Ebert amongst prominent critics giving the film an enthusiastic reception.⁷⁸ One could conclude that the film's subsequent reputation is an example of Kael's enormous power as a critic at that time, but that would be simplifying matters. There are many films and filmmakers exalted by Kael who no longer hold a great deal of critical prestige (for Exhibit "A", see "DePalma, Brian").⁷⁹ I would instead posit that it is the film's transcendent thematic combined with an incoherence towards this theme that accounts for the film's ability to maintain its

⁷⁶ Amy Taubin, "God's Lonely Man," *Sight and Sound* 9, no. 4 (April 1999): 16-19.

⁷⁷ "Taxi Driver Named Best Film at Cannes Film Festival Amid Booping," *New York Times* (May 29, 1976).

⁷⁸ A useful (although not exhaustive) list of both popular and academic contemporary reviews of the film can be found in Weiss, 96-100.

⁷⁹ An argument and analysis of DePalma's failure to be perceived as an important auteur can be found in Robert Kapsis, "Coping with the Hitchcock Legacy: The Case of Brian DePalma," in *Hitchcock: The Making of a Reputation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992): 188-215.

popularity with audiences and critics alike. In fact, even those reviewers that dislike the film, especially those in the cinema-specific journals, contribute to the film's reputation by debating its artistic and, more crucially, its ideological merit. Of all Scorsese films, *Taxi Driver* splits critics interested in aesthetic merit and those concerned with issues of ideology, not unlike the classical film on which it is loosely based, *The Searchers*. Thus the film's "incoherence" led both to its mixed critical reception and its eventual canonization.

The theme of transcendence in *Taxi Driver* is established initially by screenwriter Paul Schrader's interview in *Film Comment*, in which he discusses the influence of Bresson's *The Diary of a Country Priest* on the structure of the screenplay.⁸⁰ Schrader had already written a PhD dissertation titled *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (1972) in which he had outlined his ideas about transcendence and film form. What Schrader's book emphasized was the spiritual qualities of the three directors while removing each of them from their social and historical specificity:

Yasujiro Ozu in Japan, Robert Bresson in France, to a lesser degree Carl Dreyer in Denmark, and other directors in various countries have forged a remarkably common film form. This common form was not determined by the film-makers' personalities, culture, politics, economics, or morality. It is instead the result of two universal contingencies: the desire to express the Transcendent in art and the nature of the film medium. In the final result no other factors can give this style its universality.⁸¹

While Schrader is claiming this style in relation to the spiritual, there are clear associations with the canon formation of both the *Cahiers* critics and Sarris, both of whom also link aesthetics with spiritual experience beyond historical, political or cultural

⁸⁰ Richard Thompson, "Screen Writer: *Taxi Driver*'s Paul Schrader," *Film Comment* 12, no. 2 (March-April 1976): 7-19.

⁸¹ Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972): 3.

context. Schrader does make cultural distinctions, however broad and highly contentious they may be, such as his claim that transcendental style could only be commercially successful within a Japanese (and Oriental) culture.⁸² But this transcendental core remains imbedded into *Taxi Driver* and has allowed this particular reading of the film to survive despite the obvious social context that even Schrader himself analyzes:

I saw the script as an attempt to take the European existential hero, that is, the man from *The Stranger*, *Notes from the Underground*, *Nausea*, *Pickpocket*, *Le Feu Follet*, and *A Man Escaped*, and put him in an American context. In doing so, you find that he becomes more ignorant, ignorant of the nature of his problem ... We don't properly understand the nature of the problem, so the self-destructive impulse, instead of being inner-directed, as it is in Japan, Europe, any of the older cultures, becomes outer-directed. The man who feels the time has come to die will go out and kill other people rather than kill himself.⁸³

Schrader here is being culturally specific while criticizing this tendency for obscuring the true nature of the problem, which is existential (which, for Schrader, is linked with the transcendental). Schrader is thus critical of Bickle's violence towards others, but not in the context of that violence, since for Schrader the problem is ultimately metaphysical rather than social.

What Schrader was able to contribute to the story was the single tale that the *Cahiers* critics consistently celebrated: the central hero experiences isolation, which is then followed by an extreme circumstance ending with acceptance, understanding and redemption. As John Hess describes it, "the individual is trapped in solitude morale and can escape it – transcend it – if he or she comes to see their condition and then extend themselves to others and God."⁸⁴ The films that are cited as directly influencing *Taxi Driver* the most, *Diary of a Country Priest* and *The Searchers*, share this plot formation,

⁸² Schrader, 17.

⁸³ Thompson, 10.

⁸⁴ Hess, 22.

and can likewise be read as films about the central hero's redemption and transcendence.

Taxi Driver is certainly a more difficult film to read in this manner because its central character is so obviously unstable, but nevertheless the anecdotes of cheering audiences reveals a continuing identification with Travis Bickle. As Scorsese recalls:

I was shocked by the way audiences took the violence ... I saw *Taxi Driver* once in the theatre, on the opening night, I think, and everyone was yelling and screaming at the shoot-out. When I made it, I didn't intend to have the audience react with that feeling, 'Yes, do it! Let's go out and kill.' The idea was to create a violent catharsis, so that they'd find themselves saying, 'Yes, kill!'; and then afterwards realize, 'My God, no' – like some strange Californian therapy session. That was the instinct I went with, but it's scary to hear what happens with the audience.⁸⁵

These comments were made many years after the film, and differ strikingly from Scorsese's discussion of the film at the time, especially in regards to the ending. In an interview published in the *Village Voice* at the time of the film's release, Scorsese commented that, "I like the idea of spurting blood, it reminds...it's like a...God, it's...it's really like a purification, you know, the fountains of blood."⁸⁶ Clearly, from both these comments and the title of the article itself ("Martin Scorsese Tells All: Blood and Guts Turn Me On!"), *Taxi Driver* traded very much on the audience's desire for violent spectacle. Originally, Scorsese related this violence to the idea of religious purification and transcendence. His comments on the film years later reveal how the film's reception within academic circles shaped Scorsese's more cautionary explanation of the film's conclusion.

⁸⁵ Scorsese on Scorsese, 63.

⁸⁶ Richard Goldstein and Mark Jacobson, "Martin Scorsese Tells All: Blood and Guts Turn Me On!" *Village Voice* (April 5, 1976); reprinted in *Martin Scorsese: Interviews*: 68.

While Pauline Kael celebrated *Taxi Driver* for its refusal to make a “moral statement” about its lead character,⁸⁷ many others saw problems with the film’s ideological underpinnings. This is especially the case within the cinema-specific journals, beginning with Patricia Patterson and Manny Farber’s essay in *Film Comment*. Patterson and Farber begin the essay by praising the film’s aesthetic quality, not unlike Kael’s appreciation of the film’s acting and expressionism, although with considerably more impressionistic flourish. To give one example:

The hero’s taxi is mostly seen in abstract effects pulling up or taking off, the windows awash with ingeniously engineered colored lights; in one quick spray of inserts, there is a rhythm series of the same stop light, seen close by a camera crew that must have been stop-light high at midnight with its equipment almost hugging the light fixture. With its nearly abstract shots of the cab slowly moving like the *Jaws* shark through liquidy situations, the use of lush-soft, often reddish lighting for the effect of New York’s street jungle, and a floating camera style that finds funny angles of perception, the movie is filled with a spooky, exploratory beat.⁸⁸

This description recalls the earlier film criticism of Farber in which his own skills as a critic describing a film mean more than the evaluation of the film itself. But the essay mixes this approach with a strong critique of the film’s fetishization of gun violence and attitudes towards women and racial minorities: “its immoral posture on blacks, male supremacy, guns, women, subverts believability at every moment.”⁸⁹ Jonathan Rosenbaum similarly expressed reservations about the ideology of the film despite its aesthetic qualities.⁹⁰ Thus, despite the film’s aesthetic quality and appeal to the apolitical

⁸⁷ Pauline Kael, “Underground Man,” *The New Yorker* (February 23, 1976); reprinted in *For Keeps* (New York: Dutton, 1994): 684-685.

⁸⁸ Patricia Patterson and Manny Farber, “The Power and the Gory,” *Film Comment* 12, no. 3 (May-June 1976): 27.

⁸⁹ Patterson and Farber, 30.

⁹⁰ Jonathan Rosenbaum, “Journals,” *Film Comment* 12, no. 4 (July-August 1976): 2.

transcendental theme, *Taxi Driver* was in danger of being seen as an ideologically reactionary piece.

Slowly, and due to the context of later films, the blame for the film's reactionary elements was shifted almost exclusively to Schrader. Scorsese began to be seen as the classical "category e" filmmaker, subverting the originally conservative material through his own auteurist style. The beginnings of this argument can be seen in very early reviews of the film. Michael Dempsey, writing in *Film Quarterly*, noted a contradiction between Schrader's Calvinist concern with Bresson and the transcendental as opposed to Scorsese's Catholic expressionism.⁹¹ This contrast between Schrader and Scorsese was seen by Robin Wood as leading to the film's status as an "incoherent text."⁹² Wood argued that this contrast was not so much religious as ideological, placing the blame for the film's reactionary elements on Schrader alone. This is done by reference to their other films, with Wood referring to Schrader's overall oeuvre as being "quasi-fascist" while Scorsese is seen as "relatively open to social issues".⁹³ This ideological reading of the film in reference to its two auteurs is echoed in Leighton Grist's more recent account:

The script represents Travis after the massacre as more definitely 'cured' and concludes with Travis and Betsy reaching a tentative accord. Following his model of transcendental style, and crowning, not undermining, the narrative's religious connotations, Schrader's script implies the achievement of 'stasis', the attainment of a state of grace. That this was, at some level of intention, Schrader's aim is suggested by the evidence of his other work, but in particular *American Gigolo* and *Light Sleeper* ... the killings (in these films) are not critically reflected upon. Instead, the killings are largely – and problematically – dismissed and justified as necessary for the protagonists' redemption.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Michael Dempsey, "Taxi Driver," *Film Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (Summer 1976): 37-41.

⁹² Robin Wood, "The Incoherent Text: Narrative in the '70s," *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986): 50-55; originally published in *Movie* 27/28 (Winter 1980/ Spring 1981): 24-42.

⁹³ Wood, 51.

⁹⁴ Grist, 155.

In contrast, Grist sees Scorsese as offering “a discursive appropriation through which the text not only inscribes Scorsese’s stylistic and thematic emphases, but would appear seriously to compromise the script’s implicit spiritual and redemptive trajectory.”⁹⁵ In particular, Grist points out that it is the final massacre that “salutarily ‘corrects’ our identification with Travis.” The credit for this correction is given completely to Scorsese.

Grist’s reading of the film relies heavily on the interpretation of *Taxi Driver* offered by Robert Ray in his influential text *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980* (first published in 1985). This ideological overview of American cinema concludes with a chapter discussing *Taxi Driver* and Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Godfather*, and it is important to stress this connection. If there is another filmmaker from this era that can be said to effectively challenge Scorsese’s place as the key artistic figure, it is Coppola. With films like *The Godfather*, *The Conversation* (1974) and *The Godfather Part II* (1974), Coppola emerged as both a commercially and critically acclaimed filmmaker as well as a director making subversive films within the Hollywood system. Coppola’s work was seen as both aesthetically and ideologically challenging.⁹⁶ Ray’s analysis of the two films challenges this assumption about Coppola’s ideological progressiveness in relation to Scorsese, and would be one of the first of many arguments about Scorsese as a radical auteur working within the Hollywood system. For Ray, *Taxi Driver* was an important artistic achievement because of its ideological intervention. It was a film that followed the conventional plot of the “Right” cycle of vigilante films only to “correct” that audience’s assumptions. It thus lured the popular, “naïve” audience and

⁹⁵ Grist, 129.

⁹⁶ See, for example, John Hess, “*Godfather II*: A Deal Coppola Couldn’t Refuse,” *Jump Cut* no. 7 (1975): 1, 10-11; reprinted in *Movies and Methods Volume I* (Edited by Bill Nichols) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976): 81-90.

achieved popular success (crucial to being politically consequential) while at the same time “attack(ing) that audience’s sustaining myth, the belief in the continued application of western-style, individual solutions to contemporary complex problems.”⁹⁷ *The Godfather*, however, was more compromised. It may have “corrected” the “Left” cycle of films by showing its outlaw hero gangsters as being part of the corrupt capitalist system, but it ultimately failed to be truly progressive in its politics:

For all of Coppola’s talk of anticapitalist analogies, the movie demonstrated the durability of Classic Hollywood’s paradigms. In effect, *The Godfather I* was the *Casablanca* of the 1970s. Not surprisingly, the film’s conventional style, period setting, attention to detail, devotion to storytelling, abundance of stars, big budget, and enormous length together provided the model for the wave of conservative movies that followed it ...Not only did *The Godfather I* fail to radicalize the American Cinema, it ultimately made it more reactionary, spawning the blockbuster complex that reduced the industry’s flexibility by fixating its attention on a very few pre-sold, lavishly produced, heavily promoted films.⁹⁸

Ray goes on to acknowledge that the sequel made Coppola’s original anti-capitalist message more explicit, but nevertheless claims that the critiques “operated squarely within the traditional American mythology, working variants on frontier imagery and the ideologically determined platitude, ‘It’s lonely at the top.’”⁹⁹

The validity of Ray’s argument concerning the two films and their ideological relationship to the American cinema does not concern me here. Rather, what is of interest is how this argument encapsulates an overall movement that would see Scorsese recognized and discussed as a great artist not only for the artistic quality of his films, but for his ideological progressiveness as well. If, as Ray claims, there was both a naïve and ironic audience within America at the time, it can also be said that there were naïve and

⁹⁷ Robert B. Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985): 351.

⁹⁸ Ray, 343-344.

⁹⁹ Ray, 344.

ironic film critics. To return to Staiger's discussion of film canons, *Taxi Driver* succeeded not only with the naïve auteur critics who were interested in themes of transcendence and redemption, but with the ironic ideological critics as well. Scorsese's next films would continue this trajectory, and would both suffer and benefit from shifts occurring within the American film industry and the broader culture.

SCORSESE'S FIRST "FAILURE": *NEW YORK, NEW YORK*

Following the box office popularity of *Taxi Driver*, Scorsese was given the freedom to undertake his first big budget picture, *New York, New York*. The film represented the first clear disappointment of Scorsese's professional career, unpopular both at the box office and with critics. With very few exceptions, the film was received negatively within the popular press at the time of release. This included publications like the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker* that had previously received Scorsese's work favorably.¹⁰⁰ Vincent Canby's review was particularly telling, suggesting that the failure of the film was intimately linked with Scorsese being given too much directorial freedom.¹⁰¹ Many subsequent career studies of Scorsese or overviews of New Hollywood would echo these comments. Les Keyser's discussion of Scorsese's career saw *New York, New York* as the beginning of "the most frenzied and self-destructive period of his life."¹⁰² Peter Biskind's book *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls* would add to this argument: "Fuelled by an I-am-a-genius ego and surrounded now by an adoring circle of friends, with *New York*,

¹⁰⁰ For a partial listing of reviews of the film, see Weiss, 100-105.

¹⁰¹ Vincent Canby, "Let's Call It the Accountant's Theory of Filmmaking," *New York Times* (July 10, 1977): 11.

¹⁰² Keyser, 97.

New York shaping up as an unprecedented triumph, Scorsese had begun to change.”¹⁰³

The director-as-celebrity model that had brought such power to the directors of the New Hollywood had as its dark mirror a resentment of this idea of the rebel auteur. Following the failure of the film, Scorsese was compared to Peter Bogdanovich, both for their failures with big budget musicals (in Bogdanovich’s case, *At Long Last Love*) and for their marital infidelities and scandals. Just as Bogdanovich had been criticized for his extra-marital affair and subsequent working relationship with actress Cybill Shepherd, Scorsese and actress Liza Minnelli were attracting gossip columnists with their romance.

¹⁰⁴ This only increased with Scorsese agreeing to direct Minnelli in the theatrical production “The Act.” Scorsese wisely backed out of this production at the last minute, breaking off his association with Minnelli and avoiding the tarnished reputation of Bogdanovich. Nevertheless, *New York, New York* is included in a group of films that represent the excesses of the auteur generation and its eventual fall, an early forewarning of the eventual disaster of *Heaven’s Gate* (Michael Cimino, 1981) and, to a lesser extent, *One From the Heart* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1982).

But at the same time, the very “failure” of *New York, New York* upon initial release has been used to justify its success on an artistic level. This begins with the film’s reissue in 1981, in which the “Happy Endings” musical number is restored. This reissue is received much more favorably, which Scorsese himself explains as follows:

I think the reviews were better (in 1981) because by that time the industry had changed. In 1977, a week or so after we first opened, *Star Wars* opened. The whole industry went another way. It became megabucks. I’m not condemning it, and I’m not criticizing it either. *Star Wars* was a wonderful film. It started a whole new way of thinking, and of looking at

¹⁰³ Peter Biskind, “Extract from *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*,” in *Scorsese: A Journey Through the American Psyche* (edited by Paul A. Woods) (London: Plexus, 2005): 94.

¹⁰⁴ See Keyser, 97-99, for a detailed consideration of this period in Scorsese’s personal life.

films. It's just that people became interested in something else entirely, and *New York, New York* looked hopelessly old-fashioned.¹⁰⁵

This comparison with *Star Wars*, which initially worked to the film's disadvantage, has become a sign of *New York, New York* and Scorsese's authenticity. As Leighton Grist argued, "it is ... precisely the film's artistic success that helps explain its commercial failure."¹⁰⁶ Despite Scorsese's claims to the contrary, this has come at the expense of blockbuster films like *Star Wars*. It is not simply that *Star Wars* made more money than *New York, New York* and thus must not be aesthetically interesting (although this mass culture critique still has some influence, as evidenced by Grist's statement). *Star Wars* was also seen as ideologically reactionary, and it is this factor as much as its popular appeal that has led to *Star Wars*' lack of cultural prestige. Conversely, *New York, New York*'s lack of commercial success was increasingly linked to its ideological critique of both the Hollywood musical and the romantic myth of the heterosexual couple it embodied.

The best example of this can be seen in the Winter 1986 *Movie*. This special issue on "Reaganite Entertainment" contains a lengthy piece by Andrew Britton on the poor state of the American film industry, a critique that links the lack of aesthetic quality with a lack of ideological critique.¹⁰⁷ Following this lead piece, there are a number of articles devoted to Scorsese, most of which focus on Scorsese's ideological challenge to this very "Reaganite entertainment" that the issue as a whole works to critique. *New York, New York* is regarded as a key text in this regard, partly because of its firm generic basis:

¹⁰⁵ *Martin Scorsese: A Journey*, 111.

¹⁰⁶ Grist, 163.

¹⁰⁷ Andrew Britton, "Blissing Out: The Politics of Reaganite Entertainment," *Movie* 31/32 (Winter 1986): 1-42.

Scorsese's reworking of genres in *New York, New York* and *Raging Bull*, his 'complicated turning inside out of old forms,' seems to have produced his most radical and positive statements. The old forms, because of their traditional nature, have provided him with subject matter concerning the basic institutions in our society that need reworking (the family system, the role of the artist, cultural organization, etc.), subjects which he has been able to inject with his own personal sensibility which has developed in his non-generic films and is clearly derived from his life experience and environment.¹⁰⁸

Bryan Bruce's argument here vividly shows the combination of auteurist and ideological readings which form the basis of *Movie* criticism of this time. It is telling that the use of genre enhances Scorsese's own authorial obsessions. This is not unlike the older Hollywood auteurs, who were increasingly being reclaimed as radical by auteurist/ideological critics.

This strategy of associating Scorsese with the previous Hollywood auteurs who are privileged as subversive can be seen most clearly in two articles, one by Richard Lippe in *Movie* and another by Susan Morrison in a special issue on Scorsese in *CineAction!*, a journal initiated by a collective consisting of former *Movie* critics Richard Lippe and Robin Wood. Lippe made explicit the connections between Scorsese's film and the work of Vincente Minnelli:

Minnelli doesn't need to parody the musical tradition because he believes in its potential to communicate the complex issue of the individual's attempts to confront and expose restrictive societal positions. It is this kind of belief in the tradition and a desire to extend it rather than an interest in nostalgia (*That's Entertainment*) or parody (*All That Jazz*) that is the basis for Scorsese's *New York, New York*.¹⁰⁹

Scorsese is being compared favorably here to another generic deconstruction, *All That Jazz* (Bob Fosse, 1979), with Lippe positively noting the modernist continuity with tradition in Scorsese's film versus the postmodern parody of Fosse. This is echoed in

¹⁰⁸ Bryan Bruce, "Martin Scorsese: Five Films," *Movie* 31/32 (Winter 1986): 94.

¹⁰⁹ Richard Lippe, "New York, New York and the Hollywood Musical," *Movie* 31/32 (Winter 1986): 97.

Morrison's comparison of *New York, New York* with *Written on the Wind* (Douglas Sirk, 1956):

Unlike *Written on the Wind*, *New York, New York* does not have a conventional melodramatic content. What sets this film firmly within its time period, the mid-'70s, is the freedom that its director had in regards to flaunting the conventions of classical Hollywood film. Untied to a studio system, imposed script, or even need to please/appease the public, Scorsese put together a film whose narrative strips away ideological pretense to function as an obvious critique of society's values.¹¹⁰

These readings by Lippe and Morrison both link Scorsese with the classical era, differentiating him from his contemporaries, while at the same time emphasizing Scorsese's ability to go further in his ideological critique than previous filmmakers. Despite its initial box office and critical disappointment, *New York, New York* ultimately proved to be anything but a "failure" to Scorsese's critical reputation.

AUTHENTICATING THE FICTION: SCORSESE'S 70s DOCUMENTARIES

While working in Hollywood during the 1970s, Scorsese still managed to direct three documentaries: *Italianamerican* (1974), *American Boy* (1978), and *The Last Waltz* (1978). The first two were roughly hour-long films of a highly personal, non-commercial nature. The last was a large concert film that has become famous as one of the finest films in the "rockumentary" genre as well as being the subject of parody in *This is Spinal Tap* (Rob Reiner, 1984) and *The Last Polka* (John Blanchard, 1985). But what all three have in common is their status as complementary texts to Scorsese's fiction films of the

¹¹⁰ Susan Morrison, "Sirk, Scorsese, and Hysteria: A Double(d) Reading," *CineAction!* no. 6 (Summer/Fall 1986): 24.

period.¹¹¹ *Italianamerican*, an extended interview with Scorsese's parents, is often discussed in relation to *Mean Streets*, reinforcing both the autobiographical and anthropological nature of Scorsese's first Hollywood film. *American Boy*, a profile of Scorsese's friend Stephen Prince, has a direct relation to *Taxi Driver* in that Prince plays the character of the gun dealer in that film. Furthermore, both films can be linked thematically in exploring marginal, disturbed figures. Finally, *The Last Waltz* is, like *New York, New York*, an elegy for a lost era. In the case of *New York, New York*, the form being examined is the Hollywood musical and, more generally, the big band era. In *The Last Waltz*, the nostalgia is for a much more recent past represented by the career of The Band and, metaphorically, for the first era of rock and roll music. In all of these cases, the documentaries work to authenticate Scorsese's feature films, which are already immersed in a discourse around their "realism" and "truthfulness," despite their status as Hollywood texts.

The place of the non-fiction film within the canon is pertinent to the discussion here. Rarely are documentaries considered as "art" in the same way as fiction films. As a result, they are often excluded from the canon of "Greatest Films." For example, the *Sight and Sound* poll has never included a documentary film in its Top Ten. The few documentaries that do get taken seriously as art are highly aesthetic in their construction: *Berlin, Symphony of a City* (Walter Ruttmann, 1927), *The Man With a Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1928), and, most infamously, *Triumph of the Will* (Leni Riefenstahl, 1934) and *Olympia* (Leni Riefenstahl, 1938). But at the same time, there is the viewpoint that documentaries are the peak of cinematic achievement, completely rejecting the

¹¹¹ This connection is made explicitly in *Scorsese on Scorsese* when the editors write: "*American Boy* (is) something of an objective correlative to *Taxi Driver*, just as *Italianamerican* had been to *Mean Streets*." (76)

inauthentic nature of most fiction films. Realist critics like André Bazin would praise documentary filmmakers such as Robert Flaherty, especially his *Nanook of the North* (1922) along with fiction filmmakers such as Jean Renoir and the Italian Neo-Realists for their faithfulness to cinema's true nature as a photographic device capturing reality. Within this transvaluation of cinematic aesthetics, documentary filmmakers like Riefenstahl would be critiqued along with other cinematic movements like Soviet Montage and German Expressionism that likewise manipulated reality.

The generally non-commercial nature of documentary films also conferred upon them a cultural status distinct from that of the fiction film, particularly Hollywood. There have been exceptions to this, from travelogues like *This is Cinerama* (1952) to the *March of Time* newsreels, but these have usually been seen as distinct from the classical definitions of documentary.¹¹² This situation changed slightly in the seventies, with some documentaries receiving theatrical runs and gaining some small measure of commercial success, such as *Hearts and Minds* (Peter Davis, 1974), *Grey Gardens* (Albert and David Maysles, 1976), and *Harlan County U.S.A.* (Barbara Kopple, 1976).¹¹³ Nevertheless, the concept of a mass audience documentary would not emerge until decades later with Michael Moore. As William Rothman describes the situation:

In the seventies, a handful of documentaries enjoyed relatively significant theatrical runs, and a larger handful reached audiences nationwide through public television ... But audiences for documentary films were usually small, and sometimes quite specialized. Except on the occasions in which they were screened at the venues in major cities and college campuses around the country that were open to the work of contemporary

¹¹² Best exemplified by Bill Nichols and his modes of documentary practice. See Nichols (1991).

¹¹³ It is hardly coincidental that all three are part of the Criterion Collection DVDs, since their limited commercial runs gives them a similarity to the art cinema favoured by the collection.

independent filmmakers, most documentaries received little or no public notice.¹¹⁴

If documentaries can be considered to have a similar status as Cassavetes-style independent films, Scorsese's continued commitment to this form in the seventies can be seen as another mediation on his move away from New York and towards Hollywood.

Thus, Scorsese's documentaries of this period did more than simply complement his fiction films. They acted to distinguish Scorsese as an important filmmaker even amongst critics who are dismissive of Hollywood films in general, including otherwise critically acclaimed films such as those of Scorsese himself. James Monaco's judgment of Scorsese's career was reflective of this view. He began by crediting Scorsese as editor with the true artistic achievement of *Woodstock*, and noted that Scorsese did a similarly fine job editing the massive amounts of footage from *Street Scenes 1970*. Monaco continued by arguing:

Documentary work has provided Scorsese with a second, hidden career ever since... They may be less publicized than his Hollywood features, but they indicate an important second side to his personality as a filmmaker. There's no better example of a contemporary director seriously crippled by trying to accommodate himself to the system of commercial film production than Martin Scorsese. If he'd been left to his own devices, his films, I think, would be a lot more interesting than they are.¹¹⁵

Monaco continued his section on Scorsese by chronicling the various weaknesses he saw in the fiction films, only to return to the documentary form in his conclusion:

There's no doubt Martin Scorsese is an exceptionally interesting and imaginative director, but for more than ten years now he's been setting self-destructive traps for himself, then stepping smartly right into them. He's capable of a great deal more, one surmises. In 1974 he shot a forty-eight-minute essay (originally meant to be a part of a television series)

¹¹⁴ William Rothman, "Looking Back and Turning Inward: American Documentary Films of the Seventies," in David A. Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2000): 419.

¹¹⁵ James Monaco, *American Film Now* (New York: Zoetrope, 1984): 153.

called *Italianamerican*. Basically a documentary visit with his parents, it had many of the qualities missing from the feature films he has made since *Mean Streets*. The people weren't characters, they were people. The film wasn't a self-conscious parody of movies dead and gone, but honest and straightforward. Scorsese spoke for himself rather than hiding behind the pretentiously anxious film-noir mask. *Italianamerican* was relaxed, broadly humorous, not excessively ambitious, direct.¹¹⁶

Obviously there was a much different taste culture being represented here than that of the *Movie* critics. For Monaco, Hollywood was seemingly incapable of allowing for the free expression of an artistic sensibility. But even for a critic as harshly critical of the contemporary mainstream film as Monaco, Scorsese retained a level of authenticity through this work in documentary. More than any other filmmaker of his era, Scorsese has been able to sustain the idea that he was making authentically personal films from his own cultural experiences, even while working from within the Hollywood framework. However admired filmmakers like Robert Altman and Stanley Kubrick may be for their unique, modernist film styles, critics do not link their filmmaking back to their personal roots.

The first Scorsese retrospective, held at La Guardia Community College in May 1977, provides a concrete example of how Scorsese's films were established as being authentic even amidst Scorsese's move into Hollywood filmmaking. The program, titled *Going to Look for America: The Urban and Ethnic Experience Through the Films of Martin Scorsese* and organized by Scorsese's assistant Mary Pat Kelly, included a number of panels discussing Scorsese's films and included such participants as: Scorsese childhood friend Dominic Lo Faro; Scorsese's mentor Haig Manoogian; Professors Allen Mendelbaum and Marco Miele, both specialists in Italian culture; film critic Stanley Kauffmann; actors Peter Boyle, Amy Robinson, and Robert Shields; and Scorsese's

¹¹⁶ Monaco, 161.

parents. Eventually, this material would be collected by Kelly into the book *Martin Scorsese: The First Decade*, published in 1980, which included an Introduction by filmmaker Michael Powell. This introduction serves very much as an imprimatur, conferring upon Scorsese the status of an artist, “the Goya of Tenth Street,” as Powell states.¹¹⁷ The rest of Kelly’s text similarly works towards consecrating Scorsese’s art, reprinting a number of reviews of the films as well as working documents such as storyboards from *Raging Bull*.

But in addition to this discussion of Scorsese as an artist, there was equal attention paid to Scorsese’s position as an ethnic minority filmmaker in America. This was hardly unique to the time period. One of the major distinguishing features of the New Hollywood was the greater presence of ethnic minority both in front of the camera (Dustin Hoffman, Al Pacino, Robert De Niro, etc) and behind it (Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, Michael Cimino, Woody Allen, etc). But Scorsese was able to maintain his connection with the working class Little Italy background from which he emerged. The program itself was organized around the idea of Scorsese as an authentic voice emerging from his community. By far the most interesting of the panels in the program deals with Scorsese’s “Neighborhood Films,” which are debated by Manoogian, Kauffman, and Professors Mandelbaum and Miele. This panel differed from the rest by including much more debate and critique around Scorsese’s work, as opposed to the autobiographical and hagiographic descriptions offered in the rest of the book. Kauffmann was especially critical of the idea of Scorsese as a great artist: “I come here tonight to talk about Scorsese after having shown a second film by a twenty-four-year-old man called Bertolucci – *Before the Revolution*. And Scorsese begins to look like warmed over

¹¹⁷ Kelly (1980): 3.

pasta.”¹¹⁸ The discussion then moved onto the topic of Scorsese’s early films, particularly *Mean Streets*, as anthropology, with Professor Miele critiquing the film’s limited scope: “From the point of view of films of great success which have a universal appeal, I would like to say that films that portray a little corner, a ghetto, as you call it, can’t really travel very, very wide in the world.”¹¹⁹ However, at this point in the panel, an audience member interjected and challenged this interpretation. Mario Carcaterra, identified as a fifty-five-year old butcher, defended the film and its cultural specificity:

You’ve got the wrong idea about what the picture ...actually you know, people live in ...the Lower East Side ...I come from what they call Hell’s Kitchen ...I lived in Hell’s Kitchen ...I’ve also lived downtown where you’re talking about now. What I’ve seen in this picture here is not fake. It’s the truth. In them days, I’m talking about, you know, in the twenties, thirties, forties, and fifties, I don’t have no education, and I don’t understand some of the words you’re using ...but reading stories ...reading and actually being born in these places here ...in what we call the slums – you know what I mean? – that’s two different things....¹²⁰

The inclusion of this audience member in Kelly’s book functions rhetorically within the chapter as a whole to defend Scorsese’s work. Carcaterra’s profession and the grammatical errors of speech confer both an authenticity on this man as representative of the working class and, metonymically, on Scorsese’s film as a truthful and legitimate expression of New York’s Little Italy. It is hardly coincidental that this man appears during the only chapter in this book in which Scorsese’s work is intellectually challenged to any degree. The idea of reading about this place, as presumably the professors do, is considered false, as opposed to living in these places, as this man and Scorsese do, which

¹¹⁸ Kelly (1980): 73.

¹¹⁹ Kelly (1980): 78.

¹²⁰ Kelly (1980): 80.

is real. Because of this, Scorsese's work is inoculated against intellectual criticism by virtue of its truth value.

Beginning with films dealing with his own childhood background and then continuing through his documentary work, Scorsese's works were legitimated as truthful and authentic visions even as Scorsese was taken seriously as an artist of great formalist beauty. Within a single text, he was often considered worthy of comparison to a great master painter and praised for the photographic directness of his depictions of his own ethnic milieu. Although Scorsese was not yet firmly established as the outstanding filmmaker of his generation, he already demonstrated his ability to appeal to very different aesthetic traditions and positions. This versatility would prove crucial to the ascendancy of his prestige. But it would also take efforts and events beyond the context of even the films and their aesthetics to eventually solidify Scorsese's artistic reputation. The films up to and including *Raging Bull* continue to be Scorsese's most acclaimed. But without Scorsese's work within the culture in the coming decades, it is unlikely that these films would be received as the greatest American films of this generation.

CHAPTER THREE

SCORSESE AND THE FALL OF THE HOLLYWOOD RENAISSANCE: THE NEGOTIATION OF CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC CAPITAL

This chapter will examine Scorsese's career during the decade of the 1980s, beginning with *Raging Bull*, released in 1980, and continuing on to *The Last Temptation of Christ* in 1988. The time period in between these two landmark films has been downplayed and rarely analyzed, often leaped over quickly and dismissed as a transition period. This argument is convincing if one looks only at the films and their marginal place within Scorsese's canon: *The King of Comedy* (1983), *After Hours* (1985), and *The Color of Money* (1986) are relatively ignored when compared to Scorsese's other, more acclaimed works. When analyzed contextually, this period is crucial due to Scorsese's ability to maintain and even strengthen his place as a prestigious auteur, despite numerous career setbacks. Through his involvement in projects such as film preservation, Scorsese survived the decade with his cultural capital intact, a feat that few of his fellow filmmakers of the New Hollywood accomplished.

TRANSCENDENCE, REDEMPTION, IRONY (TAKE TWO):

RAGING BULL

To begin, I want to return to the formation of Scorsese's critical reputation, which was completed with *Raging Bull*. Also, it was through *Raging Bull* that Scorsese made his first public campaign into film preservation. The linking of these two events is

important. Looked at retrospectively, the fact that *Raging Bull* is now considered Scorsese's masterpiece can seem naturalized, a seemingly organic progression. When viewed in context, a clearer picture of how the film became Scorsese's most acclaimed work can be reached.

Initial reaction to *Raging Bull* was, like that to *Taxi Driver*, hardly unqualified enthusiasm, although certainly it differed from the mostly negative reaction to *New York, New York*. While there were many positive reviews, including the previously antagonistic Stanley Kauffmann, it received mixed notices from such prominent critics as Andrew Sarris and David Denby, and a very dismissive pan from Pauline Kael.¹ Negative comments on the film tended to center around the portrayal of the lead character, Jake LaMotta, who was seen as too alienating and unlikable a protagonist. Much criticism also centred on Scorsese's failings as a storyteller. This actually prompted one of the film's defenders, Janet Maslin, to address the criticisms in an article two months after the initial release, arguing that the puzzling nature of the lead character was actually an aesthetic choice rather than a failure.² This was the first of many subsequent pieces within both the academic and popular press to defend the film against its detractors. These pieces generally fall into one of two categories: defenses of the film on grounds of its spiritual dimension, and defenses of the film as ideologically progressive. Like Scorsese's previous "masterpiece", *Taxi Driver*, the film was largely seen as either a story of redemption or an ironic critique of violent masculinity. The ascendancy of *Raging Bull*

¹ Stanley Kauffmann, "On Film," *New Republic* (December 6, 1980): 26-27; Andrew Sarris, "Mean Fighter from Mean Streets," *Village Voice* (November 19, 1980): 55; David Denby, "Brute Force," *New York* (December 1, 1980): 61-63; Pauline Kael, "Religious Pulp or the Incredible Hulk," *New Yorker* (December 8, 1980): 217-218, 220, 222, 225.

² Janet Maslin, "When Puzzles Become Provocative," *The New York Times* (February 8, 1981): 21, 23.

over *Taxi Driver* as Scorsese's greatest film can partly be attributed to its ability to serve both of these narratives more convincingly.

The spiritual dimension of the lead character, Jake LaMotta, has often been emphasized by Scorsese himself in many interviews. Most dramatically, he has stated that, "*Raging Bull* is about a man who loses everything and then regains it spiritually."³ For Scorsese, LaMotta's profession as a boxer allowed him this greater access to the spiritual dimension of life:

He's on a higher spiritual level in a way, as a fighter. He works on an almost primitive level, almost an animal level. And therefore he must think in a different way, he must be aware of certain things spiritually that we aren't, because our minds are too cluttered with intellectual ideas, and too much emotionalism. And because he's on that animalistic level, he may be closer to pure spirit.⁴

But precisely because he is on this higher level of spirituality, LaMotta's redemption is left fairly ambiguous at the film's conclusion. The film closes with LaMotta alone in his dressing room, as he was at the film's opening, and there is no traditional character growth as is typical of the Hollywood bio-pic. In fact, there is no clear indication that LaMotta has learned anything. Without the closing Biblical quote, it is doubtful how much of a spiritual dimension would be read into the character. The film's final end card reads as follows:

So, for the second time, (the Pharisees)
summoned the man who had been blind and said:

"Speak the truth before God.
We know this fellow is a sinner."

"Whether or not he is a sinner, I do not know,"
the man replied.

³ Kelly (2004): 119.

⁴ Kelly (1980): 32-33.

“All I know is this:
Once I was blind and now I can see.”

John IX, 24-26
The New English Bible

**Remembering Haig P. Manoogian, teacher;
May 23, 1916 – May 26, 1980
With Love and resolution, Marty.**

This quote gives the film this spiritual element while also anchoring it firmly within Scorsese’s authorship. Unlike *Taxi Driver*, which is a film discussed as both a Scorsese and a Schrader film, *Raging Bull* is Scorsese’s own. The final quote emphasizes this, while also connecting LaMotta to Scorsese, suggesting that even if LaMotta himself did not necessarily learn anything in the course of the narrative, Scorsese learned to see through his artistic treatment of the character. Hence the bold text signaling out the line, “Once I was blind and now I can see,” and connecting it graphically with his own dedication to his film teacher Manoogian.

Scorsese reworks the classic tale of the *Cahiers* critics: a character faces alienation and achieves grace. It is arguable if the character has achieved redemption, but this is ultimately not as important as the fact that Scorsese has redeemed himself. This redemption is transferred from the character and onto the auteur, but nevertheless remains a key thematic. The fact that Scorsese continued exploring this narrative contributed, as much as his skill as a filmmaker, to his critical reputation. This is particularly the case with his reception in France, not surprisingly given the origins of this spiritual auteurism in that country. Throughout the 1970s, Michael Henry (later Michael Henry Wilson) published articles on and interviews with Scorsese for *Positif*. In a piece written before the release of *Raging Bull*, Henry argued that Scorsese is the greatest of the American

filmmakers of his generation because he deals with larger, spiritual issues in his work.⁵ After years of featuring little coverage of Scorsese, *Cahiers du Cinéma* published a number of pieces on Scorsese around the release of *Raging Bull*, including Pascal Bonitzer's essay that compared Scorsese with Dostoevsky in his handling of dark, spiritual themes.⁶ This was part of a larger movement within *Cahiers* as a whole, in which the "Red Cahiers" period of the 1970s was replaced with the move into the mainstream of the 1980s.⁷ The solitude of the lone figure striving for spiritual transcendence, the foundational tale of the original auteur critics of the 1950s, was once again taken seriously as the highest expression of cinematic art, and Scorsese was the filmmaker recounting this tale most consistently.

However, this spiritual theme of *Raging Bull* was not the only reading. The ideological critics looked at the film very differently, ignoring the themes of transcendence to instead focus on the issue of masculinity. The key reading in this regard is Robin Wood's piece in *Movie*, which was later reprinted in his study *Hollywood From Vietnam to Reagan* (originally published in 1986 with a revised version in 2003 featuring a still from *Raging Bull* on the cover). Previously Wood considered *Taxi Driver* aesthetically and ideologically unsatisfying because of its close reliance on the transcendence narrative, which he felt derived from the contributions of screenwriter Schrader. With *Raging Bull*, Wood argued that this spiritual dimension was largely downplayed in favour of a psychological portrait of a representative masculine figure:

If one rejects the film's invitation (at best half-hearted, and deriving, one may assume, more from Schrader than Scorsese) to read it in terms of a

⁵ Michael Henry, "Un Patrimoine Spirituel," *Positif* no. 229 (April 1980): 2-13.

⁶ Pascal Bonitzer, "La Solitude Sans Fond," *Cahiers du Cinéma* no. 321 (March 1981): 4-9.

⁷ Emile Bickerton, "Adieu to Cahiers: Life Cycle of a Cinema Journal," *New Left Review* 42 (November-December 2006): 92.

movement towards salvation, one must accept the invitation to read it in terms of a character study (though 'case history' might be the more felicitous term). The film's fragmented structure can be read as determined by La Motta's own incoherence, by Scorsese's fascination with that incoherence and with the violence that is its product. That audiences are also fascinated, not merely appalled, by La Motta, testifies to the representative quality that the film's apparent concentration on a single individual seems to deny. If we can make sense of La Motta we shall make sense of the film's structure and, simultaneously, be in a position to explain the fascination that La Motta and the film hold for our culture at its present stage of evolution.⁸

Wood defended the film aesthetically from critics who argued that the film does not display a coherent narrative by arguing that its structure can only be understood from an ideological perspective. Using psychoanalytic theory, Wood sees the film through its homosexual subtext and argues that La Motta's paranoid violence is a result of this sexual repression:

The narrative of *Raging Bull*, then, has its own internal correspondences and interrelationships. Far from being a rambling and structureless stringing together of moments or a mere character study, it is among the major documents of our age: a work single-mindedly concerned with chronicling the disastrous consequences, for men and women alike, of the repression of constitutional bisexuality within our culture.⁹

For Wood, the film's greatness lies in its implicit ideological critique of the culture of masculine violence. Although Scorsese does not discuss this reading in interviews to nearly the same extent as he affirms the spiritual reading, he did affirm Wood's reading of the film: "The title of my chapter comes from Martin Scorsese himself: he told me in a conversation that, though he was not aware of it at the time, he now saw that *Raging Bull* has a 'homosexual subtext.'"¹⁰

⁸ Wood (1986/2003): 223.

⁹ Wood (1986/2003): 231.

¹⁰ Wood (1986/2003): 222.

Wood's inclusion of this remark is telling. Wood acknowledges in his writing on Scorsese that he is not an explicitly political filmmaker, that instead it is his greatness as a creative artist that leads him to expose the ideological cracks in the system:

The films express no overt political commitment; one cannot take from them any coherently articulated Marxist critique of capitalism or feminist critique of patriarchy, and they give no reason to suppose that Scorsese would subscribe to either of these ideologies... Yet every subject available must inevitably be structured by the major conflicts within the culture; what distinguishes the major artist is not an explicit ideological stance but his/her ability to pursue the implications of a given subject rigorously, honestly and without compromise, until its basis in those conflicts is revealed.¹¹

This interpretative model can be seen in Comolli and Narboni's discussion of "category e" films in their influential "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism." But like Comolli/Narboni, the ideological criticism of Wood does not break with older models of auteurism and thus proves the point of Janet Staiger that film canons have a strong tendency to self-perpetuate. Wood continues to insist on the author as the major creative force, and even feels the need to validate his own reading through Scorsese's comments. Although Wood rejects the reading of the film that would focus on the spiritual elements typical of traditional auteurism, he nevertheless restricts and limits the meaning of the film through his need to construct Scorsese as a radical filmmaker.

In a perceptive essay written for *Screen* in 1981, Pam Cook challenged the notion that *Raging Bull* was a radical critique of masculinity. Cook's point was that although the film presents the disturbing results of masculine violence, it also views the loss of masculinity through the prism of tragedy:

What interests me is the film's appeal to some feminists, who have seen in its explicit representation of violence as a masculine social disease a radical critique of masculinity. While I agree that *Raging Bull* puts

¹¹ Wood (1986/2003): 232.

masculinity in crisis, I don't think it offers a radical critique of either masculinity or violence, even though it is profoundly disturbing. The film's attitude towards violence is ambiguous. On one hand, it is validated as an essential component of masculinity, making possible resistance to a corrupt and repressive social system. On this level violence is seen as inseparable from desire, and is celebrated. On the other, the tragic scenario of *Raging Bull* demands that the hero be shown to be the guilty victim of his transgressive desires: his violence is so excessive, so self-destructive that it has to be condemned... I would argue that the tragic structure of *Raging Bull* has consequences for its view of masculinity: masculinity is put into crisis so that we can mourn its loss. I believe my pleasures in the film are traditional, and I want to mobilize some of them in the interests of contributing to feminist debate. Must we always justify our pleasure, our fantasies, as 'progressive', or condemn them as 'reactionary'? I'd rather see them non-moralistically as fertile ground for discussion of the more difficult and painful aspects of our desires in relation to our politics.¹²

What Cook confronts is the film's ability to appeal to two sets of critics, the auteurist and the ideological, who will each interpret the film according to their own set of criteria.

Cook critiques the ideological critics for failing to account for the film's tragic structure and the way in which masculinity is both criticized and affirmed. Viewed retrospectively, Cook's brief article foretells the reception of *Raging Bull* and the various ways in which it has been used within popular culture.

Cook's recognition of the pleasure offered by the film's tragic structure and the way in which La Motta can be seen as both a victim and even a hero by the film is borne out by the use of *Raging Bull* as an iconic representative of the period of the Hollywood Renaissance. Peter Biskind's description of the film combines an admiration of the film with nostalgia for the lost Golden Age of New Hollywood:

(Raging Bull) was very much a movie of the seventies, very much a beached whale on the shores of the new decade. It was an actor's movie, a film that valued character over plot, that indeed contained no one to 'root for'. With its unromantic, black and white, in-your-face tabloid look, its ferocious violence, and its pond scum characters layered with ghostly images of Italian Renaissance pietas and echoes of *verismo* operas such as

¹² Pam Cook, "Masculinity in Crisis?," *Screen* 23, no. 3/4 (1982): 39-40.

Cavalleria Rusticana and *Pagliacci*, it was the furthest remove from the smarmy, feel-good pap of the coming cultural counterrevolution. Scorsese had refused to get with the program, had made an anti-*Rocky*, thumbed his nose at *Star Wars*, and he would pay for it.¹³

The film's tragic structure, its elegiac quality that Cook felt heavily qualified the film's critique of masculine violence, served the film very well in its role as the last great film of the Hollywood Renaissance. Just as Scorsese had served as a surrogate for La Motta over the whole question of spiritual redemption, he also stood in for La Motta's stubborn defiance in the face of defeat. In the documentary film of Biskind's book, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls* (Kenneth Bowser, 2003), a clip from *Raging Bull* is used as a conclusion. The scene is the final fight shown in the film, in which La Motta is pummeled repeatedly by his rival, Sugar Ray Robinson. The documentary voiceover introduces the clip by stating, "Scorsese let out one last howl of defiance." This is followed by La Motta standing up to a series of punches until the fight is finally stopped. La Motta triumphantly says to Robinson, "You never got me down, Ray". Within this context, Scorsese is similarly seen as never giving in to the studio system, continuing with his vision uncompromised. This same scene can certainly be interpreted as being critical of La Motta's senseless bravado, as an ideological critic would read the scene. But the film's tragic structure and La Motta's tragic nobility also allow for the film to be appropriated as a fitting conclusion to the Hollywood Renaissance narrative.

Cook proved to be just as accurate in her analysis of the role cinephilia plays in the pleasure offered by the text of *Raging Bull*. Although often ignored by ideological critics, the role of visual pleasure in the film is vastly important to its meaning. As Cook argues:

¹³ Biskind (1999), 399.

Then there is the film's visual pleasure: the excitement of a *mise-en-scène* which alternates between long, reflective shots which allow us to contemplate the scene in safety, at a distance, and explosions of rapid montage which assault our eyes and ears, bringing us right into the ring with the fighters.¹⁴

This "assault" on our eyes and ears is suggestive of an aspect of *Raging Bull* that is usually ignored. In giving the audience the spectacle of violence, *Raging Bull* was not as far away from the blockbuster cinema of Spielberg/Lucas than might first appear. In her recent study of cinema in the home, Barbara Klinger argues that there now exists what she labels the "hardware aesthetic." This aesthetic evaluates films "through the lens of hardware priorities" with special attention paid to "technological considerations". This involves "a rereading of films through the ideology of the spectacular, and the triumph of a particular notion of form over content."¹⁵ Klinger argues that "in these estimations of films, sound and image may displace other tried-and-true priorities in critical criteria, such as auteurism and existing canons."¹⁶ This would seem to be an overstatement, in that the academic canon seems likely to ignore most of the blockbuster films praised by this aesthetic. But with a film such as *Raging Bull*, the presence of fight sequences carefully designed to dazzle the senses have definitely contributed to the film's reputation.

A comparison of the recent DVD releases of both *Raging Bull* and *Taxi Driver* is instructive in this regard. The emphasis in the *Raging Bull* release was clearly on the technical achievement of the film, with four mini-documentaries on the film's various stages of production. One documentary focused solely on the fight scenes. One of the

¹⁴ Cook, 40.

¹⁵ Barbara Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006): 75.

¹⁶ Klinger (2006), 83.

film's audio commentaries featured Scorsese and editor Thelma Schoonmaker, who similarly devoted much of their discussion to the technical intricacies of the film. The DVD of *Taxi Driver* differs significantly, although the disc designs are almost identical (despite being released by different companies). While there are storyboards of the notorious final massacre and the typical behind-the-scenes features, the *Taxi Driver* DVD focuses much more on intellectual discussions of the film and its meanings. The DVD features an audio commentary by Professor Robert Kolker and another commentary by screenwriter Paul Schrader, a former film critic and scholar. These contrasting DVD releases are mirrored by the reception of the two films critically. Despite *Raging Bull*'s current recognition as Scorsese's masterpiece, *Taxi Driver* remained the Scorsese film most popular with film critics in the recent *Sight and Sound* poll. *Taxi Driver* received six votes from critics, compared to three for *Raging Bull*. It is amongst the filmmakers polled that *Raging Bull* has earned its reputation, finishing tied for second in the 1992 poll and tied for sixth in the 2002 poll. Amongst filmmakers, it outnumbered *Taxi Driver* thirteen to six.¹⁷ Filmmakers as a group are much more likely to share the "hardware aesthetic" noted by Klinger, admiring the formal achievement of films to a greater extent than critics. But at the same time, they continue to hold to the standards of traditional canons. Films like *Citizen Kane*, *Vertigo*, and *The Rules of the Game* continue to appear on both lists. Thus the impact of the hardware aesthetic on traditional canons is subtle. Canons are far too self-perpetuating to be subject to radical overhaul by new technology. That said, *Raging Bull* has clearly lent itself to the digital home theatre environment and its desire for sound and image spectacle, and these elements have helped to increase its reputation.

¹⁷ <http://www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/topten/poll/>

SCORSESE'S FIRST PUBLIC FORAY INTO FILM PRESERVATION:

THE KODAK CAMPAIGN AND *RAGING BULL*

Related to this notion of cinephilia is another major factor in *Raging Bull*'s critical reception, and the aspect of Scorsese's career that will be the subject of the rest of this chapter: his involvement in film preservation. Shortly before the release of *Raging Bull* in the fall of 1980, Scorsese launched a campaign against Kodak over the issue of colour preservation. Scorsese's interest in film archiving, although well chronicled, documented and celebrated, has yet to be the subject of any significant scholarly work.¹⁸ This is a rather large absence given the tremendous amount of cultural prestige these activities have given to Scorsese, not only within the film community but also within the general culture.¹⁹ Scorsese has been constantly celebrated and rewarded, both literally (1991 American Cinematheque Award²⁰, 1995 American Society of Cinematographers Board of Governors Award²¹, the International Federation of Film Archives Film Preservation Award²²) and symbolically, by his association with film preservation. However noble Scorsese's efforts may be, they have a history. Or, rather, they are a part of at least three distinct histories: (1) the history of Scorsese's role within film

¹⁸ Potter briefly mentions Scorsese's work in preservation as part of a broader discussion of Scorsese's position as a cinephile/historian/arbiter of taste (375-376).

¹⁹ The examples on this subject are numerous. The following are a sampling of articles within the mainstream press: Matthew Flamm, "Raging Scorsese: Director's Obsession Saves Films," *New York Post* (June 10, 1992), 23; Henry Sheehan, "Scorsese Presents: *The Proud Ones* is the Latest Fruit of His Effort to Help Preserve Classic Films," *Boston Globe* (June 21, 1992), 101, 103; David Handelman, "Score One for Scorsese," *TV Guide* (September 27, 1997), 32-36. The caption to the article reads, "AMC (American Movie Classics) and the famous director team up to make a case for film preservation with a marathon of suspense classics."

²⁰ "Acceptance Speech: Martin Scorsese, American Cinematheque Award, The Moving Picture Ball, March 22, 1991 (Scorsese File, Museum of Modern Art). Jeannie Williams, "Scorsese honored by actors, critics," *USA Today* (March 25, 1991): 2D.

²¹ "ASC honors Scorsese," *Variety* (February 6, 1995): 18.

²² "Archive Honor for Scorsese," *New York Times* (October 3, 2001): E6.

preservation; (2) the history of Scorsese's critical reputation; and (3) the history of film preservation itself.

At the 1979 New York Film Festival, Scorsese made public the problem of colour fading.²³ The campaign against Kodak began in the summer of 1980 and continued into the Fall, using the release of *Raging Bull* as extra publicity for the cause. The American press began to report on the story in trade journals such as *Variety* and *Box Office* and film magazines such as *American Film* and *Film Comment*, with the story eventually reaching the mainstream press with pieces in the *Washington Post* and *The New York Times*.²⁴ Each piece reported on both the problem of colour fading and Scorsese's petition letter sent to Kodak, sent June 12, 1980, complete with signatures from many in the industry.²⁵ Scorsese extended this appeal beyond Hollywood with a letter addressed to his European colleagues in *Positif* in the summer of that same year.²⁶ Follow up articles appeared later in the year in both *Positif* and *Cahiers du Cinéma*.²⁷ The campaign proved enormously successful, with Kodak eventually changing to a colour stock considerably less vulnerable to fading. The fact that Scorsese embarked on this campaign at this particular point in his career had major consequences for the growth of his critical reputation. This would seem to be coincidental. There is no evidence that Scorsese calculated this move to further his career, and his devotion to film preservation appears to

²³ Kelly (1991): 277.

²⁴ R.M.M. Wiener, "Scorsese Asks Industry Help to Save Films," *Box Office* (May 12, 1980): 1, 4; Richard Harrington, "Old Movies Never Die – They're Just Fading Away," *Washington Post* (July 20, 1980): 1, 8-9; and Robert Lindsay, "Martin Scorsese's Campaign to Save a Film Heritage," *New York Times* (October 5, 1980): 19-20.

²⁵ The petition included over 100 names from the industry as well as representatives of cultural institutions such as the New York University, University of Southern California, University of California (Los Angeles) and University of California (Berkeley) film departments, among many others.

²⁶ Martin Scorsese, "À mes amis et collègues: Au sujet de nos film," *Positif* no. 232-233 (July-August 1980): 126-127.

²⁷ Serge Le Péron and Serge Toubiana, "Le Journaldes: Auviala fait le point," *Cahiers du Cinéma* no. 316 (October 1980): i-iii; Lorenzo Codelli, "Fade out de Martin Scorsese," *Positif* no. 237 (December 1980): 54.

be sincere. Nevertheless, it has become a major factor in how Scorsese is now viewed as a public figure, becoming a key aspect of his persona and influencing how his films would be received in the years to come.

Although the campaign against colour fading marks Scorsese's first public foray into film preservation, his career as an archivist can be traced back even further. I would trace this interest back at least to July 1977, when Scorsese presents a special award to the director Michael Powell at the Telluride Film Festival.²⁸ The next year, Scorsese claims that he was asked to help present a new release print of Powell's *Peeping Tom* (1960):

In 1978, I was approached by a New York distributor, Corinth Films, who needed some money to re-release the film (*Peeping Tom*) with a brand-new print. I agreed to put up \$5,000 on condition that the poster and print said, 'Martin Scorsese presents ...', because I wanted to have this honour – and get my own 35 mm print.²⁹

Thus Scorsese's earliest public efforts within preservation are as a "presenter", a role he continues with greater frequency as his career progresses forward.³⁰ But, as Scorsese indicates, this interest in preservation is closely linked to another passion: collecting. If Scorsese's collecting can be considered an early version of his work in preservation, Scorsese had been an amateur archivist a long time before he chose to make this a part of his public persona.³¹ It was in the interest of preserving his own personal collection that Scorsese first made contact with the Museum of Modern Art, coinciding with the preservation efforts involving colour fading.

²⁸ Kelly (1980): 204.

²⁹ *Scorsese on Scorsese*: 20.

³⁰ See Howard Feinstein, "The Newest Film Fad: the Presenter," *The Los Angeles Times* (March 6, 1996): F3.

³¹ In addition, Scorsese's desire to preserve on film the Italian-American community of his youth in his early work can be seen as an extension of his interest in preservation. I will take this issue up further in Chapter Four, "Scorsese and the Presentation of History".

One of Scorsese's assistants at the time was Mark Del Costello, an employee at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Costello believes he was hired in part because of his experience at MoMA, and one of his first jobs for Scorsese involved working on the colour preservation campaign and collecting and cataloguing on video as many films as possible. Costello claims that Scorsese's personal collection had grown to such an extent that he was having difficulty paying for the amount of storage space required to house his assets, which results in his interest in developing a relationship with MoMA:

Scorsese's collection was actually quite small – maybe only 30 titles (16mm). His posters collection in the flat file cabinet took up more space than his films did. It was his video collection that was massive (5000 videos of films recorded from broadcast television and 500 videos made from film to video transfer). He would borrow from various sources prints of films that were not in circulation or distribution on video and have video dubs made. His storage facility was mainly filled with personal "stuff". The "stuff" that we had hoped MoMA would store included sets, props etc. from his films. Scorsese saw MoMA as a place where he could deposit his films and posters and ephemera and avoid the cost of storage while still maintaining ownership. He also saw that he could possibly gain access to MoMA's collection of films and its facilities – such as the screening room. I broached the subject of Scorsese "collaborating" with MoMA and MoMA receiving his "collection" on deposit loan with the Film Department administrator Mary Lea Bandy. She was enthusiastic about the opportunity to open a relationship with Scorsese, believing that a working relationship with Scorsese was a coup in getting the "New Hollywood" generation engaged.³²

For MoMA, Scorsese represented a key figure within the New Hollywood, an individual who would prove valuable if the institution wanted to keep a partnership with the now globalized Hollywood conglomerate. As Peter Decherney explains:

Collaborations between Hollywood and cultural institutions belong to the golden era of the studio system. Like the other constituent elements of the period, such collaborations were transformed during the transition from the studio system to what has been called the New Hollywood, in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s.³³

³² Mark Del Costello (Author's Interview) (August 20, 2008)

³³ Decherney, 205.

With the focus shifting in Hollywood to a global market, the concern with making movies American by forming relationships with institutions like MoMA was no longer felt to be a priority. In addition, the introduction of more multi-media opportunities for the corporate conglomerates that now owned the studios meant that “cultural institutions lost their monopoly on the traffic of old films.”³⁴ Because it was now cut off from Hollywood, Decherney argues that MoMA had to turn to the avant-garde that they originally rebuffed.³⁵ Hollywood no longer needed the cultural legitimacy offered by cultural institutions like MoMA to the same extent as in the past: “In the New Hollywood, canon formation and the market for the studios’ film libraries is managed by Hollywood with minimal help from museums, universities, or the government.”³⁶ But what Decherney ignores is that while Hollywood studios may no longer focus as much energy on relationships with cultural institutions, individuals from Hollywood, such as Scorsese, were still interested in making these connections. Scorsese’s mutually beneficial relationship with MoMA is thus very much contingent on this particular historical moment. Scorsese was the ideal figure to be associated with MoMA for a number of reasons. He was a native New Yorker. He had a previous association with another New York cultural institution, NYU, which had a long affiliation with MoMA.³⁷ He was both a Hollywood director and a Hollywood outsider. And he had just begun a campaign against colour fading. Decherney overestimates the ability of Hollywood to create its own canon independently. Individuals like Scorsese, through their associations with organizations of cultural legitimacy, can maintain their reputation over

³⁴ Decherney, 209.

³⁵ Decherney, 210.

³⁶ Decherney, 211.

³⁷ Ted Perry went from teaching at NYU to being the head of Film at MoMA.

contemporary figures more popular with the Hollywood establishment. It is in fact Scorsese's ability to mark himself as an outsider to Hollywood even while working with the studios that has allowed his reputation to flourish. His connections with cultural institutions play a key role in making this distinction.

The initial reception of *Raging Bull* provides an early example of how Scorsese's activities outside of filmmaking have had a positive influence on the rise of his critical reputation. The linking of the release of the film with the colour preservation campaign meant that reviews of *Raging Bull* were appearing simultaneously with articles on Scorsese's colour fading petition. The fact that *Raging Bull* was shot in black and white was even seen as a type of protest by Scorsese against the industry: "(At first) we said, no, it's too pretentious to use black and white now. But then it clicked in my mind that colour wasn't going to last anyway – the film stock was subject to rapid fading."³⁸ The problem of colour fading gave Scorsese an excuse to use black and white without appearing "pretentious". Scorsese was thus able to give his film the aura of high art without that choice seeming calculated for such an effect. This is in marked contrast to a number of other films released during the same period, such as *Manhattan* (Woody Allen, 1979), *The Elephant Man* (David Lynch, 1980), and *Stardust Memories* (Woody Allen, 1980). In each case, the decision to shoot in black and white cannot help but be seen as one of aesthetic posturing, using the now rare black and white images to distinguish the films as art.³⁹ *Raging Bull* is not immune to these criticisms either, but given that the film was released in conjunction with the colour fading campaign, with *Raging Bull* often accompanied by a demonstration on colour fading at festivals

³⁸ Scorsese on Scorsese, 80.

³⁹ The case of *Young Frankenstein* (Mel Brooks, 1974) differs because it uses black and white as part of its parody of Classic Hollywood.

throughout North America and Europe, the use of black and white could be argued to have an importance beyond the formal aesthetics of the film.⁴⁰

In particular, the contrast with Allen is illuminating, with the accusation of artistic pretense always much more present in response to Allen's work. This is despite the fact that in terms of overt use of cinematic technique, Scorsese's work is equally as formalist as Allen's. The difference lies much more in how each has been able to sell a notion of his own authenticity. The example of the use of black and white in their respective films of this period is just one instance among many in which Scorsese has been able to position his work as artistically pure in a way in which Allen has not. *Raging Bull* uses black and white for three primary reasons, according to Scorsese's explanations and those of critics given through the years: (1) to protest against colour fading; (2) to capture the realism of the period setting of the film, in which all of the original fight footage would also be in black and white (similar arguments that were eventually made for Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* in 1993); and (3) because Scorsese, cinematographer Michael Chapman, and Scorsese's friend and fellow director Michael Powell all agreed that colour was "distracting" from the images.⁴¹ In all cases, the idea was to offer a justification for the decision that deflected away from any ideas of artistic pretension. This was especially important given that Scorsese's previous film, *New York, New York*, had been received coldly because it was too self-conscious and revisionist. Similarly, Allen was coming off the film *Interiors* (1978), which many regarded as too self-

⁴⁰ "I decided to go on tour with the film around the whole world. At the same time, we decided to take on the film preservation programme about fading colour. I would do two nights on the film, and one on film preservation with Thelma." *Scorsese on Scorsese*, 84.

⁴¹ *Scorsese on Scorsese*, 80.

conscious and arty, particularly in its homage to Swedish director Ingmar Bergman.⁴² Allen, however, did not feel the need to correct this impression, creating two back-to-back films using high contrast black and white images to distinguish the films as aesthetic objects. There was no other explanation, such as with *Raging Bull*, for films such as *Manhattan* and *Stardust Memories* to be shot in black and white other than to consciously create beautiful images. As Allen's career progressed, he felt increasingly comfortable, following his Academy Award in 1977 for *Annie Hall*, to become a cult item, making the films he wanted on limited budgets with a small but loyal following. Scorsese's ambitions were always much higher, and allowed him to be considered as a great artist to an extent that Allen has never achieved.

A class dimension can be added to this, especially as related to Allen and Scorsese's respective visions of New York City. In the last chapter I discussed the way in which Scorsese's Italian background was linked to a broader sense of the city's working class, with a working class butcher quoted as authenticating Scorsese's representations in *Mean Streets*. Scorsese's next New York film, *Taxi Driver*, is even more iconic as a New York film. This is due in large part to its contradictions as a text, contradictions that extend to its depiction of New York itself. As Amy Taubin writes:

Among the many reasons that *Taxi Driver* has become a classic is that it testifies to both a vanished New York (chequer cabs, rotary phones, typewriters and 3 a.m. coffee at the Belmore Cafeteria) and an absolutely contemporary anomie. The film's love/hate relationship with the city plays into the fantasies of both New Yorkers and those who project from afar their fears, loathings, hopes and desires.⁴³

⁴² For example, critic Vincent Canby, normally a huge Allen supporter, critiqued the film by stating: "It's almost as if Mr. Allen had set out to make someone else's movie, say in the manner of Mr. Bergman, without having any grasp of the material, of first-hand, gut feelings about the characters." See Vincent Canby, "Culture Shock," *New York Times* (August 2, 1978): C15.

⁴³ Amy Taubin, *Taxi Driver* (London: British Film Institute, 2000): 22.

The downtown Manhattan on display in Scorsese's work, with its fascination with small-time criminals and the urban poor, became associated with a new realism in American cinema as a whole. Scorsese benefits from this realism while employing a cinematic style in stark contrast to any notion of reality. As Leonard Quart argues:

(T)his cinematic nightmare vision of New York can still make the city seem seductive. Scorsese's city in *Taxi Driver* is perversely beautiful and galvanizing – a rancid night world of steam hissing from manhole covers, hydrants spouting streams of water, and ominous figures shimmering in the oppressive summer heat.⁴⁴

I would argue that Scorsese is able to present this stylized version of New York's underclass because he is a native New Yorker as well as a member of the ethnic community of Little Italy. Without this, *Taxi Driver* risks being seen as at best disingenuous and at worst exploitive.

Allen's vision of New York, by contrast, came to be seen as less authentic because of his associations with an idealized conception of the city. Quart describes this as follows:

His city is basically limited to a large fragment of one borough, Manhattan – though both *Annie Hall* (1977) and *Radio Days* (1986) reconstruct scenes from his central characters' boyhoods in Brooklyn and Rockaway, the other boroughs are usually treated as if they have been severed from the city – an upscale section that runs from the Upper West Side through Central Park to the Village and Soho and from the east 80s to Gramercy Park. There are scenes set on the Columbia University campus with its grand McKim, Mead, and White buildings, but Harlem, Washington Heights, and even the Lower East Side barely make an appearance in his films.⁴⁵

If *Taxi Driver*'s Travis Bickle will go "any place" in the city, Allen limits his geographical points of interest and thus can appear myopic and detached from "real

⁴⁴ Leonard Quart, "Woody Allen's New York," in *The Films of Woody Allen: Critical Essays* (edited by Charles L.P. Silet) (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2006): 15.

⁴⁵ Quart, 16.

world” concerns. This is also true of the more limited racial, ethnic and class base of his characters:

His New York has a narrow social and racial base, it’s limited to an upper-class world of WASPs and Jews who are primarily artists, academics, or media people – people who share his world and values and are able to evoke some empathy from him. In this New York, the poor, African American, and Hispanics play almost no role. In fact, they don’t even have bit parts in Allen’s films.⁴⁶

However false this dichotomy between Scorsese and Allen may actually be, there nevertheless exists a strong impression that Scorsese remained relevant to “real world” (i.e. non-upper class) concerns and Allen did not. When examining their respective careers film-by-film, especially through the 1980s, a persuasive case can be made that Allen’s work was of greater distinction.⁴⁷ But the films themselves simply do not account for actual reputations, which are contingent on many other factors.

The contrast between Scorsese and Allen can be extended to their respective relationships to the directors they admire. Allen’s homages to European auteurs such as Bergman and Federico Fellini were felt to be too direct, obviously imitations rather than original pieces: *Interiors* as an imitation of Bergman, *Stardust Memories* as an imitation of Fellini. Allen’s background in comic parodies such as *Love and Death* (1975), *Sleeper* (1973), *Bananas* (1971), and *Take the Money and Run* (1969) contributed to this reception as well. Scorsese, however, even with such densely intertextual works as *Mean Streets* and *Taxi Driver*, was always received as a more original voice. Scorsese’s relationship with previous directors can best be encapsulated by his relationship with the

⁴⁶ Quart, 16.

⁴⁷ Following *Stardust Memories*, Allen made the following films over the rest of the decade: *A Midsummer Night’s Sex Comedy* (1982), *Zelig* (1983), *Broadway Danny Rose* (1984), *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985), *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986), *Radio Days* (1987), *September* (1987), *Another Woman* (1988), and *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989). Scorsese’s output over this same period, by almost all standards of evaluative criteria, is far less prolific and accomplished.

British filmmaker Michael Powell, whose film *Peeping Tom* Scorsese helped present in 1977. Scorsese's relationship with Powell provides a vivid example of how Scorsese's work in film preservation has worked towards enshrining Scorsese's name in the temple of cinema he wants to protect. Thus Scorsese "presents" Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom*, and in turn Powell wrote an introduction to *Martin Scorsese: The First Decade* in order to provide an imprimatur to the study (as mentioned earlier, Powell actually compares Scorsese to Goya).⁴⁸ Subsequently, Scorsese has written forewords to an academic text on Powell as well as Powell's autobiography, not to mention praises within the popular press.⁴⁹ While Powell's influence on certain shots in Scorsese's career has been acknowledged (such as in Scorsese's various audio commentaries on the Criterion Collection's DVD releases of Powell/Pressburger films), he has avoided making an entire film as an homage to Powell's work. Instead, Scorsese has used his interests in film history and preservation to show his appreciation of past masters, which has in turn led to his cultural prestige being increased.

My previous claim about Scorsese's artistic ambition being high runs counter to most accounts of Scorsese's career. When compared with many of his New Hollywood compatriots, such as Francis Ford Coppola, Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, or Michael Cimino, all of whom favour dramas more epic in scope, Scorsese seemed much more intent on making smaller, more personal and intimate character studies. His one attempt at a project more epic in scope, *New York, New York*, was his first commercial and critical failure. This was precisely because there was too much character study in a form (musical epic) in which this was not expected. But when compared to independent, non-

⁴⁸ Michael Powell, "Introduction," in Kelly (1980): 1-2. Powell also contributed Forewords to *Scorsese on Scorsese*: xiii-xiv, and *Martin Scorsese: A Journey*: x.

⁴⁹ Maureen Dowd, "The Impact on Scorsese Of a British Film Team," *New York Times* (May 18, 1991): 16.

Hollywood directors, Scorsese's artistic ambitions are seen more clearly. By coming to Hollywood and opting out of the independent scene, Scorsese was able to make his name and reputation surpass even one of his mentors, John Cassavetes. Like Allen, although on an even smaller scale, Cassavetes has remained a cult taste. Despite his enormous influence and his prestige as an uncompromising artist, Cassavetes has never achieved the level of canonization of a Scorsese. Cassavetes' work is frequently praised for the performances and for the rawness of the emotions presented, but it is also criticized for the crudeness of the technique and for being over-indulgent.⁵⁰ There is an ideological dimension to this aesthetic critique, an idea that, at least within the American cinema, technical limitations are sufficient grounds for dismissal from the upper pantheon of great films and filmmakers. An "independent" director in America is a figure like Scorsese, a filmmaker making Hollywood films that have both aesthetic polish and artistic authenticity. To see how Scorsese has come to be seen as this authentic ideal, a comparison with his fellow New Hollywood filmmakers is needed. When these comparisons are made, it becomes even clearer that, as I have been arguing, extra-textual forces are a much more important factor than the texts themselves.

SCORSESE AND COPPOLA

The most obvious figure to compare to Scorsese is Francis Ford Coppola, since he is the only filmmaker within the New Hollywood to legitimately challenge Scorsese as

⁵⁰ See Kouvaros (2004) for a detailing of these critiques.

the greatest director of his generation.⁵¹ In fact, Coppola's first two *Godfather* films ranked above any Scorsese film in the recent *Sight and Sound* poll (although the idea of considering the two films as a single work is highly debatable), and in the poll asking critics to decide the greatest film of the past twenty-five years, Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) was the top selection. By 1981, the time at which both Scorsese and Coppola had already made their most critically acclaimed films, it is clear that Coppola was the director with the greater critical reputation. But within the next decade, Scorsese would take Coppola's place as the generation's greatest artist. This is despite the fact that none of the films Scorsese released after *Raging Bull* has been canonized as Scorsese masterpieces. His two most critically acclaimed films continue to be *Taxi Driver* and *Raging Bull*. When one looks at only the films they produced throughout the next decade, Scorsese and Coppola's careers look strikingly similar. After the respective success of *Raging Bull* and *Apocalypse Now*, each had a major disappointment with *The King of Comedy* (Martin Scorsese, 1983) and *One From the Heart* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1982). This was followed by both retreating into lower-budget projects: Scorsese with *After Hours* (1985), Coppola with the pair of S.E. Hinton adaptations: the rather conventional

⁵¹ An objection may be raised here in regards to Stanley Kubrick, the other filmmaker active during the era of the Hollywood Renaissance of the 1970s as having a comparable reputation to that of Scorsese and Coppola. However, I would argue that Kubrick is usually seen as being of a different generation than those of the "film school generation". Kubrick, like Arthur Penn and Robert Altman, began his career in the 1950s, before the fall of the studio system but after the so-called Golden Age of the 1940s. He is very much part of a transitional generation of filmmakers, certainly post-classical (unlike Ford, Hawks, Hitchcock, etc) but at the same time distinct from the New Hollywood. And unlike Penn and Altman, Kubrick had great success prior to 1967, with such films as *The Killing* (1956), *Paths of Glory* (1957), *Spartacus* (1960), *Lolita* (1962) and, most famously, *Dr. Strangelove: Or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1963). Both Scorsese and Spielberg view Kubrick much more as a mentor than as a contemporary. To give an example, Scorsese discusses both Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and *Barry Lyndon* (1975) in his documentary *A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese Through American Movies* (1995), despite his statement that he does not feel comfortable talking about the films of his contemporaries. This indicates that Scorsese sees Kubrick as belonging to a different generation. Likewise, when Steven Spielberg took over the project *A.I.* from Kubrick, it was very much in the role of a disciple taking over for a master.

The Outsiders (1983) and the more experimental *Rumble Fish* (1983). Both then made films to move themselves back into the mainstream of Hollywood: Scorsese with *The Color of Money* (1986), Coppola with *The Cotton Club* (1984), *Peggy Sue Got Married* (1986), and *Gardens of Stone* (1987). Both were involved in a project with the most recognized star of the decade, Michael Jackson: Scorsese directing the video *Bad* (1987), Coppola the Walt Disney World theme-park short *Captain EO* (1986). Both went on to direct a deeply personal project: Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) and Coppola's *Tucker: The Man and his Dream* (1988). These parallels merge when Scorsese and Coppola join with Woody Allen to make *New York Stories* (1989), a trio of short films combined into a feature. Both Scorsese and Coppola then return to their roots in the gangster genre, with Scorsese's *GoodFellas* (1990) and Coppola's *The Godfather Part III* (1990). But despite these parallels, by 1991, Scorsese had managed to greatly increase his prestige, while Coppola's reputation fell dramatically. Is this simply because Scorsese's work was of greater quality? Or are there other factors to consider?

When comparing Scorsese and Coppola, one immediate contrast is in their different visions of cinema's history and future. Scorsese, as evidenced by his work in film preservation, looks very much to the past. The main concern of Scorsese is the preservation of America's cinematic heritage. Thus, when faced with the problem of colour fading, Scorsese both looked to try to preserve films that were in danger of being lost and to petition Kodak to make available a film stock less susceptible to deterioration. Unlike many of his colleagues, including Coppola as well as Lucas and Spielberg, Scorsese remained committed to film as a medium. Coppola, on the other hand, at the same time as Scorsese was undergoing his preservation efforts, was looking forward to

the demise of film and the rise of electronic and digital technology. He believed that this could revolutionize the whole process of producing visual narrative by democratizing the process. Because Coppola had always been far more successful at the box office than Scorsese, he was able to do more than simply use his new system of electronic cinema in his own films. Instead, Coppola purchased production facilities and attempted to challenge the reigning Hollywood oligopoly with his own Zoetrope Studios. Believing he could make better films more cheaply and efficiently, Coppola set his ambitions higher than simply making films:

Coppola immediately announced plans to extensively renovate the facility (renamed Zoetrope Studios), to research and develop new distribution and exhibition technologies (utilizing satellites and high-resolution video), and, by 1982, to release a full slate of feature films to compete with the major studios.⁵²

Whereas Scorsese kept to the more modest (and ultimately less threatening) goal of improving film stock, Coppola's vision was to radically transform movies to the point where the medium itself would be forever altered. In 1982, Coppola stated: "I think electronic cinema is going to make art less expensive to make and available to more people. I think in two years there won't be any more film shot."⁵³

Two things are striking about Coppola's predictions about the future of cinema: he was, in the long run, correct, and he was also massively misguided in his notions of how quickly change would come about. If Coppola made the same statement today about film being obsolete in two years, even after over two and a half decades of advances in electronic and digital formats, he would still most likely be overstating the case. As Jon Lewis has argued at length in his study, Coppola failed to correctly read the environment

⁵² Jon Lewis, *Whom God Wishes to Destroy....: Francis Coppola and the New Hollywood* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995): 1.

⁵³ Lynda Myles, "The Zoetrope Saga," *Sight and Sound* 51, no.2 (Spring 1982), 92; quoted in Lewis, 11.

of Hollywood. This leads to the failure of his attempt to run a studio and challenge the Hollywood power structure, which in turn has greatly affected his critical reputation. Lewis's book on Coppola, in fact, was partly inspired by Lewis's conviction that the history of Coppola and Zoetrope Studios was extremely flawed: "It is the aim of this book to challenge these faulty perceptions of Coppola, *One From the Heart*, and Zoetrope Studios, and in doing so to develop a larger argument regarding the ways in which movies get or don't get made, and directors succeed or don't succeed, in the new Hollywood."⁵⁴ What Lewis argues is that Coppola's failures as a studio mogul have adversely influenced the reputation of the film texts themselves. Coppola positioned himself as a visionary, aligning himself with the future, and when that vision failed, Coppola and his films, by the logic of auteurism, were seen as failures as well. Many of the reviews of Coppola's films since and including *Apocalypse Now* have focused on issues such as the cost of the production at the expense of the movies themselves.⁵⁵

Even Coppola's one major foray into film preservation reveals the fundamental distinction between Coppola and Scorsese. In 1980, Coppola helped re-release the restoration of the silent classic *Napoleon* (Abel Gance, 1927). The rather extraordinary box office success of this release seemed, at the time, even further proof of Coppola's ability to know audiences of the time:

The success of *Napoleon* seems, even in retrospect, a bit implausible. In 1980, when the re-constructed film began its second American run, it was fifty-six years old, silent, and over four hours long. Nevertheless, Coppola figured out a way to market the film. In reissue, *Napoleon* played to standing-room-only audiences in enormous theaters like New York's Radio City Music Hall, the 3,000-seat O'Keefe Center in Toronto, and the Ohio Theater in Columbus, in each case at \$25 or more per seat.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Lewis, 3.

⁵⁵ Lewis, 51.

⁵⁶ Lewis, 79-80.

The film, reconstructed by Kevin Brownlow and the British Film Institute, was first shown to Coppola in 1973 in rough-cut form in London. After the film premiered at the London Film Festival in 1980, Coppola purchased the rights to the film from French director Claude Lelouche. As Lewis argues, Coppola's interest in the project was more than simple philanthropy. First, it gave Coppola an opportunity to appear as a patron of the cinematic arts, which could only help his own posterity and legacy.⁵⁷ Second, it was the type of film that Coppola felt was consistent with his own future work:

By 1980, Coppola had already begun developing a multiscreen version of Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, in which he planned to allude to the dazzling triptych effect Gance had achieved in the last reel of *Napoleon*. He had also begun developing *One from the Heart*, which, like *Napoleon*, he hoped would take shape through technological innovation.⁵⁸

Coppola, even when dealing with cinematic history and its preservation, still was looking towards the future, not the past.

Coppola's role as a producer in the reissue of *Napoleon* initially appeared to be an unqualified, not to mention unexpected, success. However, even early on, there were criticisms being launched at Coppola's involvement in the project:

Despite its success at the box office, 'Coppola's' *Napoleon* met with significant criticism from the very community that had once embraced the *auteur* theory, posting for the first time a kind of warning that, in the 1980s, his prestige and success might eventually become something of a liability.⁵⁹

The controversy over the film was mainly between Coppola and the British Film Institute (BFI), who had actually done the work involved in the restoration. As is often the case when film preservation becomes commercial, the debate stemmed from questions of

⁵⁷ Lewis, 81.

⁵⁸ Lewis, 81.

⁵⁹ Lewis, 80.

authenticity. For the theatrical release, Coppola replaced the BFI commissioned score by Carl Davis, based on available material dating back to the film's first run, with a live orchestra playing a score composed by his father, Carmine Coppola.⁶⁰ Because of a court ruling, the BFI version was licensed for exhibition only in the United Kingdom, while Coppola's version could be shown anywhere. Coppola attempted to diffuse the situation by making sure all of the profits went to the BFI, but this did not quell the dissent. For Coppola as an auteur to be insensitive to the authenticity of Gance's original film seemed paradoxical and even hypocritical.⁶¹ This points to another problem in addition to the issue of authenticity. Coppola's very success was resented:

Many at the British Film Institute, where the film was restored, bristled that Coppola's success had upstaged their hard work. In America, they argued *Napoleon* was just another product bearing the logo 'Francis Ford Coppola Presents.' Coppola, they argued, had somehow become the *auteur* of not Gance's but also *their* film.

In attempting to increase his cultural capital, Coppola had failed to successfully negotiate with the cultural institutions crucial to this prestige. His attempt to handle the situation economically by handing over the profits proved how little Coppola understood this field. A decade earlier, in dealing with the authorship controversy over *Street Scenes 1970*, Scorsese had learned the perils of taking credit for the work of others. Since, he has proven much shrewder in handling his cultural prestige.

This incident involving film preservation and *Napoleon* is a microcosm of a larger problem for Coppola. He began to be seen as a studio mogul even as he was an outsider to the people in Hollywood who had the real money and power. His reputation as a great artist was compromised by his desire to be a great studio head and producer of the work

⁶⁰ Lewis, 83.

⁶¹ Lewis, 82.

of others. Coppola felt he could have the best of both worlds, to be “the studio mogul and resident artist – Zanuck and Welles rolled into one,” as *Newsweek* critic Jack Kroll described Coppola’s situation in 1981.⁶² In reality, both his economic and cultural capital suffered by being combined. Coppola placed too much importance on financial considerations and thus jeopardized the idea that he was a driven and uncompromising artist:

Though he was attracted to the notion of creative autonomy and endeavored to establish a modicum of control over his work, Coppola realized that the only way to secure such power was to establish a position as a major player inside the industry. Such a strategy was at the very least a practical one. But it no doubt struck many other would-be *auteur*-directors that Coppola was all too willing to abandon the romantic notion that the business and the art of making motion pictures could somehow be separate. They’re not, of course. And by the end of the 1970s Coppola seemed quite willing to appreciate that fact.⁶³

However realistic and practical Coppola’s position may have been, it cost him a great deal of his economic and cultural capital. This was only compounded by the actual problems of running a studio. Instead of nurturing an environment of artistic freedom, Coppola proved to be just as interfering as any other studio head. The Zoetrope production *Hammett* (1983) was directed by German art cinema favorite Wim Wenders. Coppola insisted on hiring screenwriters to try to fix the film’s problems rather than allowing Wenders the opportunity to solve the problems on set.⁶⁴ As a result, and echoing the early criticisms of his handling of *Napoleon*, Coppola was seen as betraying a fellow artist.

By the mid-1980s, both Coppola and Scorsese were reeling from box office failures and were forced to capitulate to Hollywood and make safe, mainstream

⁶² Jack Kroll, “Coppola’s Apocalypse Again,” *Newsweek* (February 16, 1981), 79; quoted in Lewis, 9.

⁶³ Lewis, 9.

⁶⁴ Lewis, 89.

commercial fare. But Scorsese came to this situation with his artistic integrity intact. At the same time as Coppola was having problems as a studio head in dealing with *Hammett*, Scorsese was having his first attempt to adapt Nikos Kazantzakis's novel *The Last Temptation of Christ* shut down due to studio reluctance to challenge religious protest groups. Despite the similarities of their actual film outputs, the contextual situations of Coppola and Scorsese could not be more different.

In chapter two, I discussed the work of Robert Ray who, in his study *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980*, compared Scorsese favourably to Coppola in terms of his ability to ideologically challenge Hollywood. Ray's book was released in 1985, during the time period when the reputations of both were moving in opposite directions. Another prominent example of the differing critical trajectories of the two filmmakers can be charted in the first two editions of Robert Philip Kolker's *A Cinema of Loneliness*, the first book-length academic critical analysis of the New Hollywood period. The first edition, released in 1980, includes five representative figures: Arthur Penn, Stanley Kubrick, Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, and Robert Altman. Kolker's method is representative of an approach to this period, similar to that of the *Movie* critics, which sees these filmmakers as representing a brief modernist period in Hollywood. Using this modernist discourse helped establish these films as art and their directors as auteurs, and went a long way to creating the notion of this era as the last Hollywood Golden Age. As Peter Biskind argues:

The 70s was truly a golden age, 'the last great time,' in the words of Peter Bart, who was vice president at Paramount until mid-decade, 'for pictures that expanded the idea of what could be done with movies.' It was the last time Hollywood produced a body of risky, high-quality work – as opposed to the errant masterpiece – work that was character-, rather than plot-driven, that defied traditional narrative conventions, that broke the taboos

of language and behaviour, that dared to end unhappily... The thirteen years between *Bonnie and Clyde* in 1967 and *Heaven's Gate* in 1980 marked the last time it was really exciting to make movies in Hollywood.⁶⁵

Even in this journalistic account, the ideas of the modernist discourse of this interpretive community are clear: reducing the significance of plot, defying traditions, and breaking with convention signal great art. Kolker's approach is thus representative of an entire school of criticism applied to the New Hollywood. The presence of Scorsese and Coppola as the only directors of the film school generation included signaled Kolker's suspicion of this group's modernist credentials, instead favouring older directors such as Penn, Kubrick and Altman.

When Kolker decided to drop Coppola in favour of Steven Spielberg in the second edition of the text in 1988, it was symbolic of how far Coppola had fallen in critical reputation. Conversely, it left Scorsese alone as the key figure of his generation, the last American modernist. Spielberg's inclusion was simply a commentary on the new direction of digital mise-en-scene and the return of Hollywood to formulaic filmmaking. It can also be read as another critique of Coppola, replacing him with Spielberg to imply that Coppola was always more a commercial showman (like Spielberg) than an artist (like Scorsese) to begin with. Kolker's explanation for dropping Coppola from the book's second edition is worth quoting at length:

Coppola, to whom a chapter was devoted in the first edition, has, it seems to me, proven a much less important filmmaker over the course of time. His cinematic imagination, along with his attempts to remain independent, to operate his own studio, produce or distribute other people's films, has failed. In retrospect, his films seem not to bear the amount of analysis first given them, and certainly the work he has produced since the second has

⁶⁵ Biskind (1999), 17.

lacked the insight and careful attention to form that marked the earlier material.⁶⁶

As a justification, this seems rather weak, but it is nevertheless extremely telling. Kolker does not simply say that Coppola's "cinematic imagination" has failed. He follows this by saying that Coppola's "attempts to remain independent" and "to operate his own studio" have failed as well, thus clearly linking the two. There is a strong argument to be made that this extra-textual failure on Coppola's part led to his being dropped from the second edition of Kolker's study, despite Kolker's close attention to textual analysis. If the work Coppola has produced since 1980 has "lacked the insight and careful attention to form that marked the earlier material," the same can certainly be said of Scorsese. In fact, Kolker even acknowledges this. Discussing *After Hours* and *The Color of Money*, Kolker argues that the films "betray a certain exhaustion of imagination" or "a willing surrender of imagination."⁶⁷ Nevertheless, Scorsese was still included in the book, because he was able to maintain his reputation as an artist who was having difficulty adjusting to the system. Coppola, however, was seen as attempting to be the system. Curiously, his films made before 1980, which Kolker felt deserved discussion in 1980, now "seem not to bear the amount of analysis first given them."

My own approach is similar to Lewis's in that I want to re-examine the perceived reputation of a noted New Hollywood auteur. However, in the case of Scorsese, the situation is reversed. Rather than reconsidering extra-textual factors to explain the downfall of a reputation, what is needed with Scorsese is an explanation for how his reputation continued to flourish during the period of the 1980s. Echoing the massive amount of now received knowledge about this moment in Hollywood history, Lewis

⁶⁶ Kolker (1988), xii.

⁶⁷ Kolker (1988), 235.

states: “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.”⁶⁸ Examined purely in terms of their film output, Lewis’s comments about this group of filmmakers seem accurate. In the case of Scorsese, most critics agree that his films made after *Raging Bull* represent a low period artistically, particularly *The Color of Money*, and overall these films have not become canonized alongside *Taxi Driver* and *Raging Bull*.⁶⁹ When looked at contextually, Scorsese was just as successful during this period in maintaining and even building his cultural capital as directors like Lucas and Spielberg were in building their economic power.

After the commercial failure of *The King of Comedy*, Scorsese was faced with a very different Hollywood environment following big budget failures by such auteurs as Cimino (*Heaven’s Gate*) and Coppola (*One from the Heart*). He found this out first-hand when his production of *The Last Temptation of Christ* in 1983 was shut down by Paramount.⁷⁰ This disappointment led to Scorsese making two films in the mid-1980s, *After Hours* and *The Color of Money*. Although on the surface these films seem very remote from each other, they are in fact very complementary texts. And despite the general neglect both receive in Scorsese’s career overviews, they are key films for understanding the reputation Scorsese has today.

⁶⁸ Lewis, 47.

⁶⁹ *The King of Comedy* is beginning to be seen as an exception to this, as I discuss fully in Chapter Five.

⁷⁰ An account of this incident can be found in Andy Dougan, *Martin Scorsese: The Making of His Movies* (London: Orion, 1997): 73-75; for a longer discussion involving interviews with the key players involved, see Kelly (2004): 161-180.

GOING “INDIE”: *AFTER HOURS*

Given the situation as it now existed in Hollywood, Scorsese was faced with one of two options: make a large studio film in which he would have no control, or remove himself from the big budgets of Hollywood and make a film cheaply. He was even offered Hollywood projects such as *Beverly Hills Cop* (Martin Brest, 1984).⁷¹ This runs counter to the idea that Scorsese was struggling to “survive” as a filmmaker, as he put it.⁷² What was in danger of not surviving this period was his critical reputation, “Scorsese” as the name of the auteur rather than Scorsese the actual director. Instead of staying in Hollywood, Scorsese went back to making a small film in New York City. Working for the first time with cinematographer Michael Ballhaus (known for working quickly and cheaply with German art cinema director Rainer Werner Fassbinder), Scorsese shot *After Hours* in 40 days for 4 million dollars, similar to how he put together *Taxi Driver* nearly ten years earlier.⁷³ *After Hours* was thus seen as an “independent film” and would win Scorsese a prize for Best Director at the first Independent Spirit Awards. It was unquestionably a shrewd move for Scorsese to make. Instead of being seen as a failed Hollywood filmmaker such as Coppola, Scorsese was seen as an outsider to the studio industry. Also, by 1985, as the very existence of an awards presentation suggests, the idea of an American Independent Cinema had begun to take shape.

Throughout the early 1980s, numerous younger directors made their films completely outside of the industry: *The Return of the Secaucus Seven* (John Sayles, 1980), *Chan is Missing* (Wayne Wang, 1982), *Stranger than Paradise* (Jim Jarmusch,

⁷¹ Scorsese on Scorsese, 97.

⁷² Kelly (2004): 181.

⁷³ Dougan, 78.

1984), *She's Gotta Have It* (Spike Lee, 1985) and *Blood Simple* (Joel Coen, 1985) to name only the most prominent of these works. But the recognition of these films as part of a larger movement that would eventually be called "American Independent Cinema" depended on other historical factors apart from the films themselves. Most notably, American Independent Cinema rises at the same time as the Hollywood Renaissance is in decline, as Geoff King explains:

The Hollywood Renaissance embraced aspects of 'art' cinema to some extent, but it proved short-lived, the product of a period of transition that soon passed in the later 1970s, with both the consolidation of a blockbuster-centered regime in Hollywood and a political turn to the right in American culture. Space for edgier, more questioning or 'difficult' filmmaking was generally reduced in Hollywood from the end of the decade...Hollywood's loss, in terms of the general narrowing of the horizons of possibility at the heart of the studio-led machine, was to be the gain of a newly consolidating form of independent production and distribution that was beginning to take shape during the 1980s, and into which some of the inheritance of the Renaissance was carried.⁷⁴

There is thus a clear linkage between the independent cinema and the former Hollywood Renaissance, both artistically and in terms of the industry. For although many independent films are financed, distributed and even exhibited outside of the industry, a great many are not. By the 1990s, all of the studios had "independent" studios that they financed. Even early on, a film like *After Hours* is at best co-dependent. Describing the film, Andy Dougan writes:

After Hours was completely independent. (Amy) Robinson and (Griffin) Dunne (the film's producers) had raised the cash through a bank loan secured against a distribution promise from a studio. This meant that Scorsese could do what he wanted with the minimum of interference.⁷⁵

The very contradiction of the film's independent status is evident from this short quotation. The film's production cost may not have come from the studios, but the loan

⁷⁴ Geoff King, *American Independent Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005): 8.

⁷⁵ Dougan, 77-78.

required a distribution deal from Hollywood. This highly qualifies Dougan's conclusion that Scorsese therefore had a minimum of interference.

There are two strains of filmmakers within this independent cinema movement: (1) those using independent cinema to produce a "calling card" in order to work for the studios; (2) those wanting to stay on the margins because they are interested in pursuing a style and/or subject matter that cannot be assimilated into studio filmmaking. Scorsese's goal at the time seems clear: to continue to make Hollywood, not independent, films. He thus was very similar to many other "independent" filmmakers, such as Spike Lee and the Coen Brothers and countless others, who began in independent films in order to move into making bigger budget movies for the studio. It seems clear that Scorsese had no interest in continuing to make low budget films, like some other independents such as Jim Jarmusch and John Sayles. Because of this, Scorsese had to treat *After Hours* as a "calling card" to Hollywood, despite his already established critical reputation. He needed to prove that he could be trusted to work quickly and cheaply while still producing a quality product. Scorsese's goal was to reinvent himself as a director who could be trusted by Hollywood while maintaining his reputation as a prestigious auteur. *After Hours* thus proved an ideal vehicle. It marked continuity with Scorsese's previous work in being set in New York, where all of his films except *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* primarily took place, and in returning to the type of lower budget filmmaking he had abandoned after *Taxi Driver*. Moreover, the film became a critical and commercial success, albeit on a more minor scale:

After Hours was a critical success for Scorsese, winning him the Best Director prize at the Cannes Film Festival in 1986. It was also a modest box-office hit, but its low production cost meant that it actually showed a disproportionately healthy profit. Scorsese was back in business. He had

made a film that had made money – *After Hours* was his first commercial success since *Taxi Driver* – and he had redeemed himself in the process.⁷⁶

The nature of the “success” of *After Hours* is heavily contradictory, and tells us a great deal more about filmmaking in America in the mid-1980s than it does about the film itself.

Despite the fact that *After Hours* is an “independent” film with connotations of art, it is more of a commercial project for Scorsese than most of his other work. Compared with other early films of the “independent” movement, not to mention the experiments of a “Hollywood” director like Coppola on *One from the Heart* and *Rumble Fish*, *After Hours* is rather conventional in both style and subject matter. But rhetorically, it worked perfectly. The reviews of the film mark an interesting contrast to the reviews of Coppola’s work from the same period. It was difficult for a Coppola film to be examined from this period without a reference to how much it cost. Economic matters were indistinguishable from aesthetic concerns. *After Hours* was looked at similarly but from a positive rather than negative perspective. The film’s lack of budget was seen as praiseworthy. The similarities to Scorsese’s first success with *Taxi Driver* were emphasized, despite the fact that the film has little in common with the earlier work other than location. The perception of *After Hours* being an authentic Scorsese work was prevalent at the time. Retrospectively, the film has been seen by most as less important to Scorsese’s overall oeuvre from an artistic perspective. But looked at contextually, *After Hours* was a successful negotiation of both cultural and economic capital. Scorsese’s next film, *The Color of Money*, would provide a much more difficult text to position, and would rely even more on extra-textual considerations.

⁷⁶ Dougan, 78.

“HAS MARTIN SCORSESE GONE HOLLYWOOD?” (PART TWO):

THE COLOR OF MONEY

Of all of Scorsese's feature films, few if any are as neglected as *The Color of Money*, even including such commercial and critical failures as *New York, New York*. Unlike Scorsese's other less appreciated films, critics have not been able to resurrect *The Color of Money* as a subversive, critical text. Commercially, *The Color of Money* was Scorsese's most successful film to date. The production proved to Hollywood that Scorsese was a “professional” director, capable of making a marketable film that was shot quickly and under budget. Given that Scorsese's critical reputation has required that he maintain his status as a director of Hollywood films that would not move him to the margins of the American industry, *The Color of Money* is a rather important film in his career and even in the advancement of his critical reputation. But it unquestionably threatened Scorsese's status at the time. Much as with *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, Scorsese had to deal with the accusation that he had “gone Hollywood”.

Like the term “independent”, “Hollywood” here is not used as an industry term, but rather as a sign of artistic regression. *The Color of Money* is often neglected because it is considered too mainstream and conventional and lacks Scorsese's usual authorial signature. Because of this, it contradicts Scorsese's image of himself as an outsider, an image he has tried to cultivate over the last few decades. For example, the conclusion of the documentary *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls* features an end note stating: “Martin Scorsese has continued to make uncompromising personal films with Hollywood's

money.” Of course, the situation is not that simple. Scorsese has had to compromise a great deal to continue to work in Hollywood over the past decades. By making *The Color of Money* on time and on budget, Scorsese was able to further re-establish himself in Hollywood, where he continues to make films today. This does come at a certain cost to Scorsese’s critical reputation, which is one of the reasons it is often ignored in critical overviews. For example, it is skipped over completely in the Turner Classic Movies (TCM) documentary *Scorsese on Scorsese* (Richard Schickel, 2006). Roger Ebert, one of Scorsese’s strongest supporters, felt Scorsese was not living up to his potential: “If this movie had been directed by someone else, I might have thought differently about it because I might not have expected so much.”⁷⁷ Scorsese’s critical reputation was in danger because of the perception that he was being assimilated into commercial filmmaking. In interviews today, Scorsese tries to talk about the film like his others, downplaying any notion that this was purely a commercial project: “In a way it was an experiment for me, to see what it would be like to make a movie with someone like Paul Newman...The important idea was to make each shot fresh.”⁷⁸ Scorsese has also tried to justify the happy endings of both *After Hours* and *The Color of Money*:

I do think the endings of *After Hours* and *The Color of Money* maybe have a little more hope in them than my earlier pictures. Once you make a decision at a certain point in your life that you’re going to live, when you realize you’ve got to go on, then that glimmer of hope will show in your work.⁷⁹

Scorsese is trying to personalize what is a very industrialized, standardized product by discussing *The Color of Money* in terms of his own growth.

⁷⁷ Roger Ebert, “*The Color of Money*,” *Chicago Sun Times* (October 17, 1986); available on-line at <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19861017/REVIEWS/610170301/1023>

⁷⁸ *Scorsese on Scorsese*, 108-110.

⁷⁹ *Scorsese on Scorsese*, 111.

In fact, the film is very much a Hollywood product of the moment. It is both a star vehicle (for Paul Newman and Tom Cruise) as well as a sequel. Thus the film was marketed at fans of Newman and the original film *The Hustler* (Robert Rossen, 1961) as well as of younger audiences with the presence of Cruise. It bears most of the markers of what Justin Wyatt has described as the “high concept” style of the 1980s. In his book *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (1994), Wyatt argues that beginning in the late 1970s and becoming increasingly popular during the 1980s, a new group of “high concept” films were developed in Hollywood. This is tied to the rise of the “blockbuster” with its emphasis on pre-sold elements, but also includes a difference in style as compared to classical storytelling. Wyatt describes many characteristics of “high concept” style that distinguish these films from their predecessors. First and perhaps most importantly is the influence of advertising on style. The films of high concept are shot with marketing in mind, and many directors of these films begin in television commercials (Adrian Lyne, Tony and Ridley Scott). These filmmakers specialize in creating a distinctive “look”. Because of this, the style of high concept tends to be “excessive”: the films are more about creating visually arresting images of spectacle than in creating tight, well-told narratives. This extends to the style of acting, with many star performances existing for their own spectacle, such as Jack Nicholson in *Batman* (Tim Burton, 1989), rather than to create fully rounded, believable characters. Wyatt differentiates this excessive style from auteurism, arguing that high concept differs from classical auteurs like Douglas Sirk or post-classical directors like Scorsese and their excessive styles. As Wyatt states: “Since the excess represented in the high concept is not driven by a personal vision, the logic of the marketplace is clearly the author of the

style.”⁸⁰ The style is excessive in order to create visuals that can be used to market the film in trailers, posters or, increasingly in the 80s, music videos. With the rise of MTV and music videos in youth culture and with Hollywood marketing strongly to this demographic, movies become more like commercials and music videos. Many high concept films were driven by music: *Flashdance* (Adrian Lyne, 1984), *Footloose* (Herbert Ross, 1984), *Purple Rain* (Albert Magnoli, 1984), *Staying Alive* (Sylvester Stallone, 1983), *The Bodyguard* (Mick Jackson, 1992), and many others.

As a result of the increased focus on the image, characters often become reduced to types. There is a greater emphasis on the look of the actor rather than developing the character, with characters often existing in a void. Hence the popularity of sequels, where character development can be elided altogether. High concept films also tend to foreground their existence as films, referencing other movies, television shows, and other forms of mass culture. This is utilized from a marketing perspective, to give the audience easy reference points, and as a way of transmitting information about plot or character in a shorthand manner: “Since the core moviegoing public share a common body of media knowledge, filmmakers have been able to appropriate this knowledge into the construction of narrative and character.”⁸¹ Of course, this idea of intertextuality and the foregrounding of a film’s status as a film have a history within the art cinema mode of representation. This leads Wyatt to argue that aesthetically, high concept is a combination of classical Hollywood and art cinema techniques. As Wyatt elaborates:

I would posit not only that the art cinema has altered the auteur-driven ‘New Hollywood’ but that some traits of the art cinema have been assimilated into mainstream Hollywood cinema in the form of high

⁸⁰ Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994): 61.

⁸¹ Wyatt, 58.

concept... In contrast to the norms of classical Hollywood, the art cinema foregrounds realism and authorial expressivity in the system of the film. The self-consciousness of high concept suggests that some force ('the author'?) is constructing the style – the configuration of perfect images, stars, music, narrative, and genre – which has become coded across these films. 'Authorial expressivity' is inadequate as an explanation, though, since, as I have suggested, the style exists separate from, and excessive to, the apparent narrative. Rather than being motivated by the vision of a single author, the strong commercial orientation of the style suggests a designation of 'industrial expressivity' as a mark of high concept.⁸²

Thus, in spite of their similarities, there is a huge aesthetic difference between most films of the art cinema and high concept, and this is due to the economic basis of high concept films. High concept uses the art cinema style and applies it to a highly marketable and exploitable premise, fusing style with marketing.

The Color of Money is rarely included in the list of films designated as "high concept" despite the fact that it adheres to many of its characteristics. In addition to the film's use of Cruise and Newman and its status as a sequel, *The Color of Money* is marked stylistically by its ability to be marketed. The film features a pop song written for inclusion in the film for cross-marketing purposes, "It's In The Way That You Use It" by Eric Clapton and Robbie Robertson. Scorsese directs one sequence set to Warren Zevon's "Werewolves of London," very much as if it were a music video, with Tom Cruise as the marketable star image. The "authorial expressivity" of Scorsese as director is subsumed by the "industrial expressivity" of Hollywood. But Scorsese's authorial signature is such that the film is excluded from these discussions. If the high concept nature of *The Color of Money* makes it a film marginalized within Scorsese's oeuvre, the fact that the film is still directed by "Martin Scorsese" makes it inappropriate for discussions about cinema

⁸² Wyatt, 61.

and advertising. As Scorsese's career again makes apparent, the divide between high and low culture remains, despite postmodern attempts to bridge this distance.

SCORSESE AND DePALMA

The question that still needs further exploration is how Scorsese's reputation remains intact despite his seeming capitulation to Hollywood and financial concerns. This extends not only to a film such as *The Color of Money*, but Scorsese's other projects at the time. In contrast to the low budget documentaries Scorsese was producing in the 1970s as a cultural supplement to working in Hollywood, his non-feature film work in the 1980s is much more economically motivated. Scorsese directed a television episode for Steven Spielberg's *Amazing Stories* in 1986 ("Mirror, Mirror), the music video "Bad" for Michael Jackson in 1987, and even commercials for Giorgio Armani in Italy. Nevertheless, his reputation continues to be secured. This is in marked contrast to his peers such as Coppola, Cimino, and Brian DePalma. The comparison with DePalma is particularly relevant here because in 1987, DePalma directs the big budget Hollywood film *The Untouchables*, an adaptation of the popular television program of the same name that ran from 1959 to 1963. Both Scorsese and DePalma had seemingly sold out to Hollywood, unable to make their signature films within the new system of the 1980s. Only DePalma's reputation would ultimately collapse, and to understand why, contextual factors need to be considered. In particular, how Scorsese and DePalma respectively handled their mutual admiration for the great auteur directors of the past determined their

future reputations much more significantly than the formal and aesthetic value of their actual films.

In the period of the late 1970/ early 1980s, Scorsese and DePalma were frequently linked together in popular discourse and in various academic articles. It was stressed that both were New Yorkers who were educated in New York universities: Scorsese at NYU and DePalma at Columbia University and later Sarah Lawrence College, as opposed to the more industry-oriented California schools where Coppola and Lucas were trained. In 1973, both had their first mainstream breakthrough, Scorsese with *Mean Streets* and DePalma with *Sisters*. Before this, it was actually DePalma who was the more well-known and critically acclaimed director. With films such as *Greetings* (1968) and *Hi, Mom!* (1970), DePalma was regarded as an American Godard, an irreverent maverick and avant-gardist with roots in New York's underground scene.⁸³ DePalma had succeeded along with filmmakers like Jim McBride (*David Holzman's Diary*, 1967) and Robert Downey (*Putney Swope*, 1969) in making independent films in New York, outside of Hollywood, and establishing a reputation for himself. With *Sisters*, DePalma entered into Hollywood filmmaking and quickly became one of the more critically acclaimed of his generation of filmmakers. He was often compared to the older generation of Penn, Altman, and Kubrick in his critical attitude towards the cinema of the past, and was a particular favourite of the influential Pauline Kael, whose compares DePalma favourably to his fellow film school graduates. As Robert Kapsis summarizes:

On the surface, it would appear that De Palma was no different from other student filmmakers who have also shown a fascination with old movie conventions and clichés. Not according to Kael, who argues that unlike most student filmmakers, who are 'gullible,' harboring a 'naïve belief in the clichés they parrot.' De Palma lovingly satirizes old movie

⁸³ Robert Kapsis, *Hitchcock: The Making of a Reputation* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992): 190.

conventions 'for their shameless, rotten phoniness.' Instead of simply 'reproducing' the grotesque effects of classic horror-film sequences, he redeems their phoniness through his humor. Like the works of other filmmakers of the seventies whom Kael championed, such as Robert Altman, Arthur Penn, Sam Peckinpah, and Roman Polanski, De Palma's films, in her view, were also deliriously self-conscious and reflexive, especially with respect to old movie genres and conventions.⁸⁴

DePalma was taken seriously as a great filmmaker, a new breed of filmmaker, like Scorsese, fascinated with the formal devices of the cinema and eager to revise past narrative structures.

But what DePalma gradually lost over his years of working in Hollywood was his authenticity, the ability to convince critics that he had maintained his unique individuality as an artist. The major problem he encountered was the fact that he frequently returned to the same genre of his first success, *Sisters*. The suspense thriller genre that so often attracted DePalma meant that he would always be in the shadow of Alfred Hitchcock. DePalma consistently had to deal with the comparisons with Hitchcock and the allegations that he was simply an imitator. This was especially the case with his remake of *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958), *Obsession* (1976), and his reworking of *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960), *Dressed to Kill* (1980). Moreover, Hitchcock's critical reputation started to rise throughout the 1970s and peaked in 1982, when *Vertigo* was first included in the *Sight and Sound* Top Ten poll. Before this, DePalma was able to compete with Hitchcock, with many younger critics like Kael actually arguing that DePalma was superior to Hitchcock as an artist. As Kapsis argues, during the 1970s DePalma's art was often characterized positively in postmodern terms:

For critics like Kael who were practicing a nascent form of postmodern criticism at this time, De Palma seemed very much the prototype of the postmodern artist: out of the junk heap of our pop culture (which unlike

⁸⁴ Kapsis, 195.

the modernists he does not reject), he forged a rich, satirical, and highly reflexive art whose real subject was art itself.⁸⁵

Had postmodernism become the dominant artistic style within canonized circles, DePalma's reputation may have flourished. But despite the arguments of critics like Kael, eventually auteurism became the dominant theory of film history. With this critical shift came a greater respect and admiration for the classical Hollywood cinema, which was no longer seen as simply mass culture "trash". The cinema that came to be respected was either the classical cinema of Ford, Hawks and other auteurs, or the modernist cinema of which Scorsese was often held up as the exemplar.

In contrast to DePalma, Scorsese came to be seen as respectful of the classical cinema, not simply a parodist or an imitator. But during the early to mid 1980s, Scorsese and DePalma had certain similarities in their artistic approaches that were commented on in various journal articles. No less than three pieces grouped together Scorsese and DePalma. John Mariani in *Attenzione* wrote a piece on Scorsese, DePalma, Cimino and Coppola; Leo Braudy in *Film Quarterly* compared Scorsese, DePalma and Kubrick; and Stephen Mamber in the *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* discussed Scorsese, DePalma, and Kubrick.⁸⁶ Mamber's essay is particularly intriguing because of his claims for the postmodern characteristics of three films made by the respective directors in the early 1980s: *The King of Comedy* (1983), *Body Double* (Brian DePalma, 1984), and *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980). Mamber argues that all three films are "nearly identical

⁸⁵ Kapsis, 200.

⁸⁶ John Mariani, "The Four Horseman and the Apocalypse," *Attenzione* (July 1979), 40-44; Leo Braudy, "The Sacraments of Genre: Coppola, DePalma, Scorsese," *Film Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (1986), 17-28; and Stephen Mamber, "Parody, Intertextuality, Signature: Kubrick, DePalma, and Scorsese," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 12, no. 1/2 (1990): 29-35.

in their attention to the following parody-related activities.”⁸⁷ He then lists and outlines the postmodern aesthetics of the films: “intertextual overkill”, “failed artists”, “daring to be bad”, “parodic cultural juxtaposition”, “conflicted obsession”, and “self-parody as signature”. In addition to *The King of Comedy*, Mamber argues that Scorsese’s *After Hours* also fits into this aesthetic category of the postmodern.⁸⁸ Based on the evidence of the films they were making during this period, Scorsese and DePalma seemed very much linked in their stylistic approaches. But when both filmmakers moved into making a mainstream Hollywood film, Scorsese with *The Color of Money*, DePalma with *The Untouchables*, their reputations move in very different directions. To explain this, we must return to the cultural activities Scorsese is engaging in outside of his filmmaking endeavours.

Scorsese’s colour preservation campaign was merely the first of his efforts within the field of film archiving. At the same time as he began this campaign he forged a relationship with the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. Later, despite his critique of Kodak in 1980, he would form a relationship with the George Eastman House archive in Rochester as well. These relationships were initiated because they were mutually beneficial. Scorsese needed the facilities to preserve his extensive collection and for the prestige of being associated with these cultural institutions. MoMA and Eastman House valued Scorsese’s collection and his status as a critically acclaimed director still working within the Hollywood industry. It was in the interest of both institutions to promote Scorsese as both a great artist and a patron of the arts. Despite the fact that these were at least partially economic arrangements, they were not obviously commercial in

⁸⁷ Mamber, 29.

⁸⁸ Mamber, 32.

nature. Unlike Coppola, who alienated the cultural institution supporting him through his commercial promotion of *Napoleon*, which included his own self-promotion as name brand to sell the film, Scorsese positioned himself as the respectful and modest protector of cinematic heritage.

Scorsese's work in film preservation gradually became part of his public persona during this time. For example, a 1987 piece in *The New York Times* reporting a New York City tribute party for Scorsese includes a discussion of his work in film preservation:

As for Mr. Scorsese, the director of such distinctly New York films as 'Mean Streets,' 'Taxi Driver' and 'Raging Bull' modestly expressed pleasure at the impending tribute, diverting attention from himself to Eastman Kodak.

'As you know,' he said, 'I'm very interested in film preservation and the new film stocks and that sort of thing.' And so, he said, he looks upon the tribute to him as his reciprocal opportunity to pay tribute to Eastman Kodak.

'I thought it was time to acknowledge certain advances that Kodak has made in furthering the cause of film preservation,' Mr. Scorsese said. 'As you know, back in 1979 and 1980 I led a campaign. Since then, in the past three years, they have made a stronger film stock available at no extra cost.'⁸⁹

Clearly, by 1987, Scorsese and Eastman Kodak had come to an amicable agreement and were both working towards furthering the prestige of each. The discussion of film preservation provides Scorsese with the opportunity to increase his cultural capital, to make further links with cultural institutions, and appear respectful of tradition rather than a self-promoter. This is reiterated repeatedly by Scorsese in interviews and echoed by journalists and critics. In a piece on *GoodFellas* in 1990, David Ehrenstein states that although Scorsese is "our leading moviemaker", Scorsese himself would be "the last to

⁸⁹ Lawrence Van Gelder, "At the Movies," *New York Times* (June 19, 1987): C10.

admit it.”⁹⁰ This is in marked contrast to both Coppola, as has been discussed, and DePalma as well. Although DePalma has been open about his admiration for Hitchcock, he has also been hostile and critical at times when defending his own films. When *Obsession* was critiqued for being a Hitchcock rip-off, DePalma was openly critical of Hitchcock’s later work, such as *Family Plot* (1976).⁹¹ When similar criticism was directed towards *Dressed to Kill* in 1980, DePalma lashed out at the directors of “message” pictures. Echoing the sentiments of early auteur critics like Truffaut, he critiqued sociologically oriented directors for condescending to audiences of genre films. DePalma defended his own filmmaking by harshly criticizing the work of others, particularly Stanley Kubrick and his horror film *The Shining*. As Kapsis explains: “In a number of interviews conducted shortly after the release of *Dressed to Kill*, DePalma reiterated his hostile views towards certain critics and filmmakers, angering many journalists.”⁹² At a time when Scorsese was cementing his legacy by including himself in the cinematic tradition of the past, DePalma was alienating himself from this very same legacy.

This relationship with cultural institutions would prove especially valuable to Scorsese because of the compromises necessary to continue to work in Hollywood. For example, in September 1986, shortly before the release of the obviously commercial and in many ways industry-authored *The Color of Money*, MoMA held a tribute to Scorsese showcasing his “masterpiece” *Raging Bull* and his debut feature *Who’s That Knocking At My Door?*. In the press release for the event, MoMA stresses Scorsese’s uniqueness as an artist and his place within cinematic tradition: “The virtuosity of his *mise-en-scène* and

⁹⁰ David Ehrenstein, “Wise Guy,” *Image* (September 23, 1990): 9.

⁹¹ Kapsis, 198-199.

⁹² Kapsis, 208.

editing reflects Mr. Scorsese's unique style as well as his passionate knowledge of film history."⁹³ The intentionality of this coincidence is unlikely and irrelevant. The main point is that despite his capitulation to Hollywood, which was expressed in the lukewarm reviews of the press, Scorsese was still able to maintain his critical reputation through the imprimature of museum celebrations. Another example can be seen years later upon the release of *Cape Fear* (Martin Scorsese, 1991), another Hollywood blockbuster that was received unfavourably by many critics. In November 1991, The Brattle Theatre in Boston held a Scorsese retrospective that "confirms" Scorsese as "a major director".⁹⁴ In 1994, George Eastman House held a Martin Scorsese Film Festival (tellingly, the festival was missing *The Color of Money*). In Eastman House's brochure for the event, in addition to noting Scorsese's accomplishments as a filmmaker, his efforts in film preservation were given a full paragraph:

Scorsese has also spent considerable time and energy over the course of his career on film preservation and restoration. In addition, he is an avid film collector and philanthropist, having presented the Eastman House in 1991 with his personal collection of 1,600 American feature films from the 1930s to 1960s for use as a resource for researchers and public film screenings.⁹⁵

Tributes and retrospectives are vital to any reputation. For as the comparisons with Coppola and DePalma show, artists constantly need to be confirmed and reaffirmed and placed within a cinematic tradition. Scorsese's work outside of his feature films in the 1980s was far more successful than his actual cinematic texts in helping to secure his cultural prestige.

⁹³ "Martin Scorsese Recipient of Directors Guild of America: Fiftieth Anniversary Tribute at MoMA September 15" Museum of Modern Art Press Release (August 1986) (Scorsese File, Museum of Modern Art).

⁹⁴ Gregory Flaxman, "Auteur? Auteur?: The Brattle's Scorsese Retro Confirms a Major Director," *The Boston Phoenix* (November 15, 1991): section 3, page 7.

⁹⁵ "Martin Scorsese: A Film Festival" (September 22-December 8, 1994, George Eastman House) (George Eastman House brochure) (Scorsese File, Museum of Modern Art).

GENIUS BY NECESSITY: *THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST*

In 1988, following such commercial projects as *The Color of Money* and Michael Jackson's *Bad* video, Scorsese returned to his long-time project of trying to adapt Nikos Kazantzakis's 1956 novel *The Last Temptation of Christ*. The previous failure to adapt the novel in 1983 was due in large part to the Christian protest against the film, but can also be at least partially attributed to the state of Hollywood at the time. In 1983, studios in general were very reluctant to take risks. Following the problems of such auteur films as *Heaven's Gate* and *One From the Heart*, studios were particularly reluctant to hire "genius" directors like Scorsese, who had unreliable box office results. By 1988 the situation had changed. Scorsese had proven himself to be a reliable Hollywood director by making *The Color of Money* on time and on budget. Scorsese then made a key move by signing with the powerful agent Michael Ovitz of Creative Artists Agency (CAA). Because of this, the seemingly dead project of *The Last Temptation of Christ* was suddenly viable again. As Scorsese describes it: "In a sense, the film had been the laughing stock of cocktail parties in Hollywood until the minute I signed with CAA – then it was made!"⁹⁶ Without Scorsese moving into the Hollywood mainstream, *The Last Temptation* obviously would not have been made. But it is important to realize that the project would not have been possible without a director of Scorsese's status.

In their defense of the film against the attacks of Christian protestors, Universal studio was required to place extra stress on Scorsese as a director of highest artistic distinction. Accusations were commonly being made that the studio was deliberately

⁹⁶ Scorsese on Scorsese, 123.

fueling the controversy and profiting from attacking people's religion.⁹⁷ As a result, Universal launched an advertising campaign that placed special emphasis on Scorsese as an artist who made the film because of his religious convictions and not for profit. For example, Universal's newspaper advertisement reads as follows:

"MARTIN SCORSESE, AMERICA'S MOST GIFTED,
MOST DARING MOVIEMAKER,
MAY HAVE CREATED HIS MASTERPIECE"

Richard Corliss, Time Magazine

On Friday, August 12,
one of the greatest filmmakers
of our time brings us a startling vision.

An extraordinary story,
based on the highly acclaimed
novel by Nikos Kazantzakis

THE LAST
TEMPTATION
OF CHRIST⁹⁸

While it may not be unusual for a studio to use a director's star power to promote a film, in this case it was an absolute necessity. In order to sell *The Last Temptation of Christ* as a serious prestige picture rather than just another for-profit commodity, Universal had to make sure that Scorsese's reputation as a great auteur was well-known and secure.

Because of the censorship debate that surrounded the film's release, Universal and Scorsese ended up being heavily supported by the nation's critical establishment. The almost overwhelming critical support for the *The Last Temptation of Christ* was contingent on the criticism being directed against the film by religious conservatives. As Robin Riley argues:

Almost uniformly, biographers and critics speak positively about Scorsese because his films challenge the status quo of mindless Hollywood entertainment. To them, the fact that the *Last Temptation* was met by

⁹⁷ Robin Riley, *Film, Faith, and Cultural Conflict: The Case of Martin Scorsese's The Last Temptation of Christ* (London: Praeger, 2003): 26.

⁹⁸ Universal Advertisement, quoted in Riley, 27.

religious conservatives with great anger and retribution was evidence of his currency as a great filmmaker. These supporters identified with Scorsese's marginality and noncompliance. For them, Scorsese and his film served as vehicles by which they, as marginal figures, could ignite their creative impulse and ingenuity, and somehow, in the mundane moments of the weekly film review, become mythic figures, themselves loved or hated for their symbolic features and loyalties.⁹⁹

The actual characteristics of the film itself had much less to do with the positive response from critics than the protests from the religious right. There is even evidence to suggest that this was deliberate on the part of at least one critic. After an advanced screening of the film, critic Michael Medved recounts the following story:

I found it impossible to understand the one critic who had snorted the loudest and clucked the most derisively at the afternoon screening we both attended, but whose ultimate report to the public featured glowing praise and only the most minor reservations. ... When I called him to ask about the contrast between his privately expressed contempt and his on-the-record admiration, he proved surprisingly candid in explaining its inconsistency. 'Look, I know the picture's a dog. We both know that, and probably Scorsese knows it too. But with all Christian crazies shooting at him from every direction, I'm not going to knock him down in public.'¹⁰⁰

The solidarity critics felt with Scorsese ideologically meant that criticism of the film needed to be muted or ignored, at least at the initial stages. Subsequently, the film has proven to be a far less acclaimed film than initial responses seemed to indicate. It is clearly not considered to be as accomplished as an aesthetic text as was initially claimed, and ranks far below Scorsese's now canonical films (*Mean Streets*, *Taxi Driver*, *Raging Bull*).¹⁰¹

But in terms of Scorsese's overall critical reputation, an argument can be made that *The Last Temptation of Christ* is the most important film of his entire career because

⁹⁹ Riley, 83.

¹⁰⁰ Michael Medved, *Hollywood VS. America* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 49; quoted in Riley, 84.

¹⁰¹ For example, the most recent *Sight and Sound* poll did not feature a single vote, from either a critic or a filmmaker, for *The Last Temptation of Christ*.

of the particular contingencies involved. Any discussion of Scorsese as a mainstream, Hollywood director was now entirely absent, despite the fact that *The Last Temptation of Christ* was a studio film and despite the fact that its very status as a Hollywood film accounts for a great deal of the controversy. The film's very visibility led to the protests against it and revolved around the century-old debate about Hollywood, entertainment and art. One of the many ironies of the reception of the film is that critics threw their support around Scorsese and Universal studio as the defender of free speech: "(T)heir (film critics) identification with Scorsese as an artist supports their underlying skepticism toward institutionalized power of all forms, particularly those of the Christian persuasion."¹⁰² The institutional power that gets ignored, of course, is Hollywood itself. The debate over *The Last Temptation of Christ* was not, primarily, one of free speech. Rather, it was a battle between two rival institutions, Hollywood and the Church, over their respective powers of influence. In the popular press, the religious protestors merely replaced the studio system as the enemy of artistic freedom. If Hollywood had refused to make the film, as they already had in 1983, there would have been no criticism of the studios for suppressing artistic freedom. In fact, most of the discussions of the 1983 shutdown of *The Last Temptation* now focus on the religious protest that forced Paramount's decision, rather than the studio's refusal to invest in an unreliable director like Scorsese. Only after Scorsese had signed with CAA and proved his ability to make commercially viable films cheaply and under budget did Universal decide that he could be used as a "prestige" commodity. The film was also part of a larger deal Scorsese signed with Universal, and clearly the studio felt that even if they lost money on *The Last*

¹⁰² Riley, 85.

Temptation, they would make money later with other films. This proved to be the case with *Cape Fear* (1991) three years later.

In his book *The New Censors: Movies and the Culture Wars* (1997), Charles Lyons argues that the Christian protest over *The Last Temptation of Christ* was the only really successful attempt to limit the audience for a controversial film. Other such protests against films like *Dressed to Kill* (women's groups), *Cruising* (William Friedkin, 1980) (gay activists), and *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verheoven, 1992) (gay and lesbian groups) failed in their attempts, ultimately giving each respective film much more publicity and increasing rather than decreasing its box office revenues.¹⁰³ The difference with *The Last Temptation* was that the protest group was much larger and it effectively targeted exhibition venues: "Although they were unable to force Universal to withdraw the film from release, religious conservatives were quite successful in pressuring a number of theaters and chains not to show the movie."¹⁰⁴ However, the film was still ultimately successful, both commercially and critically. According to *Variety*, *The Last Temptation* had an eventual \$8.4 million domestic box office combined with \$25.4 million overseas. Thus the film made \$33.8 million.¹⁰⁵ Considering that the film's budget was an estimated \$10 million, *The Last Temptation* certainly made money. The theatrical boycott may have hurt, but the controversy generated also helped at the box office. At the film's premiere engagements, "many in attendance admitted they bought tickets simply to counter the

¹⁰³ See Charles Lyons, *The New Censors: Movies and the Culture Wars* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997).

¹⁰⁴ Riley, 25.

¹⁰⁵ "A Director's Journey: Martin Scorsese's worldwide B.O. track record," (compiled by Anthony D'Alessandro) *Variety* (December 9-15, 2002): A10.

protest efforts of conservatives to prevent its release.”¹⁰⁶ Without the controversy, it seems unlikely the film would have been as successful as it was.

In terms of Scorsese’s cultural capital, it is hard to overestimate the positive impact *The Last Temptation of Christ* ultimately had. Scorsese was seen as a martyr in much of the popular press, an uncompromising artist with an authentic vision. All of the stories about the attempts by the religious protestors to censor his film only added to the impression of Scorsese as a victim of a restrictive cultural institution. The most resonant of these was the widely circulated story that a group of religious leaders led by Bill Bright offered to buy the film from the head of Universal, Lew Wasserman, with the purpose of destroying the negative.¹⁰⁷ For those with knowledge of film history, the similarities with *Citizen Kane* are striking. In 1941, in order to prevent an attack on the studios by the Hearst press, Louis B. Mayer and the other studio heads offered to buy the negative of *Citizen Kane* from RKO with the purpose of destroying it. The linking of *The Last Temptation* with “the greatest film of all time” increased its prestige, and the idea of any group wanting to destroy a film contrasted with Scorsese’s efforts to preserve cinema’s past. Not surprisingly, Universal used this offer from the religious leaders to increase its self-image in the press:

Universal had little to gain from selling the film and did not take the offer seriously. Instead, the studio took advantage of the situation, using it to launch a publicity campaign to refute religious conservatives. Its refusal to sell might alienate some audiences, but a strong rebuttal would elevate the studio’s status among its peers in the film community and reinforce a strong common bond with those who supported constitutional guarantees of free speech.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Riley, 28.

¹⁰⁷ Riley, 66-67.

¹⁰⁸ Riley, 68.

While religious conservatives may have won some battles in having some theatres (and later the Blockbuster video chain) refuse the film, Universal, and especially Scorsese, won the long-term war, not only financially but culturally as well.

To conclude this chapter I would like to return to the beginning and Scorsese's most acclaimed film, *Raging Bull*. Coming in 1988, *The Last Temptation of Christ* was Scorsese's last feature film of the decade (his short "Life Lessons," was a contribution to the anthology film *New York Stories* in 1989). In 1990, critics voted *Raging Bull* the best of the decade.¹⁰⁹ The discussion of *Raging Bull* echoed many of the defenses of *The Last Temptation*, with Scorsese being praised for making an uncompromising film that defied convention. For many, the idea that Scorsese was *the* uncompromising artist of his generation was established by his determination to make *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Although *The Last Temptation* has never been canonized as one of Scorsese's greatest films, the praise Scorsese received just for making the film reflected back onto his previous masterpieces, especially *Raging Bull*. Without the controversy over *The Last Temptation of Christ* and the subsequent uncritical backing of the popular press that turned Scorsese into a martyred genius, it is unlikely his ascendancy to the post of greatest filmmaker of his generation would have occurred. *The Last Temptation*, along with Scorsese's work within film preservation, allowed him to mediate his move into the Hollywood mainstream.

¹⁰⁹ The film topped the following polls: "The Decade's Best" *Premiere* 3 (Nov. 1989): 106-107; and "The Best of the Decade," *Time* 135 (Jan. 1, 1990): 101.

CHAPTER FOUR
HISTORIES OF CINEMA AND CINEMATIC HISTORIES:
SCORSESE AS HISTORIAN

Scorsese's move into the area of film preservation coincided with his role as a chronicler of film history through his archival efforts and the majority of his feature films. Increasingly, Scorsese presents worlds that no longer exist. Since his biblical epic *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), the recent or distant past has been Scorsese's focus: the New York mob world of the 50s, 60s and 70s in *GoodFellas* (1990), the late 19th century New York of *The Age of Innocence* (1993), the 1970s Las Vegas mafia scene in *Casino* (1995), Tibet before Chinese rule in *Kundun* (1997), the mid-19th century Five Points district of *Gangs of New York* (2002), and America (and Hollywood) of the 1930s and 40s in *The Aviator* (2004).¹ Scorsese also made two documentaries on cinema history: *A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese Through American Movies* (1995) and *My Voyage to Italy* (1999); appeared as an authority in numerous documentaries and shorts dedicated to the cinematic past; edited a book series for the Modern Library reprinting four texts of film literature²; and produced a seven-part documentary on *The*

¹ The only feature films set in contemporary times in Scorsese's filmography over the past 20 years are the remakes *Cape Fear* (1991) and *The Departed* (2006) and the New York drama *Bringing Out the Dead* (1999) (which itself was about a past world, since the New York of the film's setting, early to mid nineties, was by then obsolete following the reforms of mayor Rudolph Guiliani). It could be argued that the very fact that they are remakes means they are concerned with re-creating a past world, even if that world is fictitious. This fascination with past worlds can also be seen in earlier Scorsese films: *Raging Bull*; *New York, New York*; the opening of *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*; and *Boxcar Bertha*. However, since *The Last Temptation of Christ* this interest in past world has almost exclusively dominated Scorsese's output.

² The four titles reprinted: James Agee, *Agee on Film: Criticism and Comment on the Movies* (Introduction by David Denby) (New York: Modern Library, 2000); Rudy Behlmer (ed.) *Memo from David O. Selznick* (Introduction by Roger Ebert) (New York: Modern Library, 2000); Stephanie Schwam (ed.) *The Making of 2001: A Space Odyssey* (Introduction by Jay Cocks) (Afterword by Alexander Walker) (New York: Modern Library, 2000); and Vachel Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture* (Introduction by Stanley Kauffmann) (Afterword by Kent Jones) (New York: Modern Library, 2000).

Blues for PBS. Like his work in preservation, Scorsese's role as a historian and an educator was rewarded both officially and unofficially.³ It also neatly coincided with a move within the discipline of Film Studies towards history and away from theory.⁴ This chapter will analyze how and why Scorsese has been presenting history and the evolution of his concern with the past.

PRESERVING (AND ENTERING) FILM HISTORY

Scorsese's early preservation efforts foreshadowed his eventual move into the role of film historian. Throughout the later portion of his career, Scorsese increasingly made the historical past his main concern, while his contemporaries have been criticized for their lack of concern with cinematic history as it relates to their own work. George Lucas, for example, has upset many *Star Wars* fans by re-working the original films using digital technology. Lucas was accused of revising the past and, by not making the original available, eliminating a key piece of cultural history (the versions first screened in theatres). Coppola similarly reworked his 1979 film *Apocalypse Now* into a new version, *Apocalypse Now Redux* (2001). Scorsese, on the other hand, consistently associated himself with the past, with cinema's cultural heritage, and maintained an interest in film as film, on the specificity of the cinematic medium. This has also aligned Scorsese with cultural institutions like the Museum of Modern Art where artistic reputations are made. By having his work celebrated within the high art context of the museum, Scorsese

³ For example, Scorsese has received the William K. Everson Film History Award (2002) from the National Board of Review as well as the Film Heritage Special Award from the National Society of Film Critics for his documentary *My Voyage to Italy* (1999).

⁴ See John Belton, "American Cinema and Film History," in *Oxford Guide to Film Studies* (edited by John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998): 227-237.

maintains and confirms his reputation. For, like any set of beliefs or ideology, the idea of Scorsese or anyone else (like Coppola) as an artist is never permanent and static. It needs to be repeated and reconfirmed, a process that Scorsese's relationship with cultural institutions has enabled.

One of the most extensive of these programs took place at Lincoln Center in 1993, co-sponsored with New York University. The program consisted of Scorsese's films on double bills with the movies that inspired them, along with two lectures, "An Evening With Martin Scorsese," and "The Art of Collaboration: Working With Martin Scorsese." This event both consecrated Scorsese's reputation and marked Scorsese's role, through film preservation, as a contributor to the film canon. Stephen Holden, writing about the event in *The New York Times*, stated:

Along with the universality of Mr. Scorsese's taste, it is his passionate perceptiveness in discerning personal artistic visions and technical feats in the lowliest B movies that gives the series a genuine historic interest ... Mr. Scorsese, who has been a passionate advocate for the preservation of old movies, was adamant about the ultimate worth of B movies and other Hollywood throwaways. 'It's a dangerous situation if you have to start making value judgments about which ones should be saved and which not,' he said. 'Thirty years from now, the film you destroy could have been something that influenced 25 people to make wonderful movies.'⁵

The repeated reference here to Scorsese's "passion" of taste and preservation is somewhat contradictory. Because of Scorsese's "universal" taste, he is able to recognize the value of films otherwise felt to be artistically worthless. At the same time, he worked to downplay the fact that implicit value judgments were made through his selections.

Scorsese also advocated the lack of value judgments in his 1980 preservation manifesto.

Scorsese wrote:

⁵ Stephen Holden, "The Movies That Inspired Martin Scorsese," *The New York Times* (May 21, 1993): C1, C22-23.

NO VALUE JUDGEMENTS: all film must be saved. No committees should decide which film lives or dies, whether or not TV commercials are less important than movie trailers. Preserving only commercially successful films, or Academy Award winners and nominees or film festival winners, is a step in the right direction, but far from enough. -- Very often, as in the case of *THE MAGIFICENT AMBERSONS* or *THE SEARCHERS*, it is only time itself which lets a film's true value shine through.⁶

Scorsese advocated the lack of value judgments but at the same time relied on the cultural authority of more recently canonized works such as *The Searchers*. Scorsese avoided having value judgments placed on his particular selections while making value judgments (based on his "passionate perceptiveness") through these selections.

Noteworthy is the combination of Scorsese's films appearing on double bills with the movies that inspired him. Scorsese chose the influential films himself, and they include the following pairs: *Who's That Knocking At My Door?* and *Shadows*; *Boxcar Bertha* and *Guns Don't Argue* (Bill Karn and Richard C. Kahn, 1957); *Mean Streets* and *Before the Revolution* (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1964); *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* and *Take Care of My Little Girl* (Jean Negulesco, 1951); *Taxi Driver* and *Murder by Contract* (Irving Lerner, 1958); *New York, New York* and *The Man I Love* (Raoul Walsh, 1946); *The Last Waltz* and *The Tales of Hoffman* (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1951); *Raging Bull* and *Rocco and His Brothers* (Luchino Visconti, 1960); *The King of Comedy* and *Station Six Sahara* (Seth Holt, 1963); *After Hours* and *Getting Gertie's Garder* (Allan Dwan, 1945); *The Color of Money* and *Il Sorpasso* (Dino Risi, 1963); *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *Accatone!* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1961);

⁶ Martin Scorsese, "Outline for a Preservation Strategy," (1980) Scorsese File, Museum of Modern Art. There are some historical reasons for this strategy of "no value judgments". At MoMA in the 1930s, Iris Barry had rejected all but two of Buster Keaton's features, *The General* and *The Navigator*, as worthless. These films were thought to be lost for many years before the rejected prints were found in James Mason's projection booth. Raymond Rohauer's exploitation of these films was seen as a rebuke to MoMA's collection policies.

GoodFellas and *Ocean's Eleven* (Lewis Milestone, 1960); and *Cape Fear* and *Night of the Hunter* (Charles Laughton, 1955). Scorsese's choices here were very revealing, with the eclectic mix of highbrow art films with lowbrow genre films. Scorsese positioned himself, as he has in many interviews, as a liminal figure, an "outsider" to both the European art cinema and the world of Hollywood. The deliberately obscure Hollywood films served two purposes. First, they distracted from the self-promotion involved. Scorsese was not only comparing his work only to established masters, but to the ordinary genre films of Hollywood's past. Second, the obscurity of the Hollywood films established Scorsese's authority as an expert in American film history. The selections may have been lowbrow, but their very anonymity granted Scorsese cultural status. Just as the most renowned critics (Manny Farber, Parker Tyler, Andrew Sarris, Pauline Kael, J. Hoberman, Jonathan Rosenbaum) established their brilliance by intelligently discussing lesser movies, Scorsese proved his skill by the very lowness of some of his influences. Scorsese also deliberately chose only two national cinemas, American and Italian (with the exception of the one Powell-Pressburger film). The dominance of Italian art cinema selections over other films from the European art cinema served a clear strategic purpose. Scorsese was careful to maintain his authenticity as an artist. The influence of the Italian films was not simply a sign of his higher university education in film, but rather a product of his ethnic background. The connection with the Italian films was not simply intellectual, but rather emotional. Likewise, the seemingly simple American genre films can be made into works of greater complexity by being associated with Scorsese's movies.

The program was given a further imprimatur through the sponsorship of the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University, who in conjunction with the screenings presented several panel discussions featuring film critics, academics and artists who have worked with Scorsese. In the Lincoln Center press release, the Tisch School Dean, Mary Schmidt Campbell, stated: "Martin Scorsese's commitment to describing modern reality, combined with his reverence for films' historical past, have provided a model for aspiring filmmakers and film lovers around the world."⁷ Professor William Simon, a former student of NYU from the time when Scorsese was an instructor, praised Scorsese as "a director uncompromising in his dedication to authentic portrayal of setting and character."⁸ These comments complement the overall argument of the program, which stressed Scorsese as an "authentic" filmmaker concerned with reality and passionate about film history. Obviously, NYU as an institution and Scorsese as an individual benefit from their mutual association, with Scorsese's prestige giving NYU an advertising platform and NYU's academic capital further legitimating Scorsese's reputation. But it is worth noting that it is the Cinema Studies program, and not the Film production unit where Scorsese had first studied and taught, that co-sponsored the event. Scorsese's interests in film preservation and archiving and in re-discovering works from the past perfectly timed with broader shifts within academia. This small local program at the Lincoln Center would evolve in the next several years into Scorsese's two four-hour documentaries on American and Italian film history. These projects would be part of a broader movement within both academic and popular circles to emphasize the importance of cinema history.

⁷ The Film Society at Lincoln Center press release (Scorsese file, Museum of Modern Art).

⁸ The Film Society at Lincoln Center press release (Scorsese file, Museum of Modern Art).

In fact, this movement had already begun on a smaller scale in the 1980s, as Scorsese was beginning to mount his own, second career as a film archivist/historian. In her chapter on the cable television channel American Movie Classics (AMC), Barbara Klinger examines the causes of the rise of a broader interest in film preservation. Rather than simply celebrating preservation efforts, Klinger seeks to analyze why this became an initiative at this time:

While few would deny film's close relationship to society or the need to preserve it as part of a culture's heritage, we should not overlook the significance of the way in which these issues are explained. The explanation allows the historical enterprise not only to stake certain claims about the importance of classic cinema but also to create a specific narrative of the nation's history.⁹

During the 1980s, the rhetoric used to justify preservation was globalization and the anxieties provoked by the acquisition of American media companies by foreign ownership. This created, according to Klinger, a "general ideological climate of protectionism about American business and underscored the sense that the media embody the spirit of America."¹⁰ This idea of movies being a "uniquely American art form" (as congressman Richard Gephardt argued¹¹) was pushed and led to the creation of the National Film Registry and to the various heritage narratives promoted by such cable channels as Turner Classic Movies and American Movie Classics: "In preservation discourse, Hollywood maintained its cachet as the site of distinctive American products, just as it helped to recall an era when the industry reigned supreme at both home and abroad."¹²

⁹ Klinger (2006), 104.

¹⁰ Klinger (2006), 129.

¹¹ Klinger (2006), 129.

¹² Klinger (2006), 131.

Of course, Scorsese began his efforts into film preservation in 1980, long before these nationalist anxieties influenced the larger dialogue into the importance of film to cultural heritage. Nevertheless, the increase in awareness of preservation at this time certainly helped Scorsese establish himself as a cultural figure. The arguments used by Scorsese constantly stressed the “heritage narrative” that channels such as AMC promoted in their preservation festivals. As early as his first public demonstration of colour fading at the 1979 New York Film Festival, Scorsese stated that “we are committing cultural suicide.”¹³ By the early 1990s, AMC had picked up on this rhetoric and organized a Film Preservation Festival on its channel. Scorsese was the natural choice for AMC when they decided on a prominent spokesperson for this cause. In AMC’s second promotional brochure for the festival, Scorsese was quoted as stating: “Film is history. With every foot of film that is lost, we lose a link to our culture, to the world around us, to each other, and to ourselves.”¹⁴ The quote also graces the front page of the website of The Film Foundation, Scorsese’s non-profit preservation organization. By the early 1990s, the rest of the cultural industry agreed with Scorsese’s film heritage initiative. In 1995, on the occasion of film’s centennial celebration, Scorsese would contribute to a series of national heritage films commissioned by the British Film Institute. It is with this film, *A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese Through American Movies*, that Scorsese would make his first explicit text in the role of a film historian.

¹³ Kelly (2004), 277.

¹⁴ Klinger (2006), 104.

SCORSESE'S AMERICAN HERITAGE NARRATIVE(S)

In looking at Scorsese's three-part documentary on the American cinema, *A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese Through American Movies*, I want to examine both the artist as historian and the film as historiography. In particular, I am interested in the specific era the documentary deals with and the era in which it was made. What does *A Personal Journey* reveal about American film culture and the place of an artist-historian like Scorsese within this culture?

Scorsese's documentary contrasts with other types of aesthetic history, of which, broadly speaking, there are two types: academic and popular. Of course, within these two large and admittedly artificial categories, there are a great variety of approaches. And with a discipline as young as Film Studies, I would argue there is a third category: the pre-academic. These would be early film histories that had academic ambitions but predated the establishment of Film Studies as a separate entity. Among the last and most successful of the pre-academic histories were the so-called "Great Man" histories such as those by Gerald Mast and Andrew Sarris.¹⁵ Around the early 1980s, this approach receded and a new, more "historical" and "objective" history began to take over. Two important publications of the mid-eighties illustrate the turn in aesthetic film history: Douglas Gomery and Robert Allen's *Film History: Theory and Practice* (1985) and, most importantly, David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson's *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (1985). Bordwell,

¹⁵ Gerald Mast, *A Short History of the Movies* (New York: Pegasus, 1971) and Andrew Sarris, *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968* (New York: Dutton, 1968). Among the earliest of these histories would be: Terry Ramsaye, *A Million and One Nights; A History of the Motion Picture* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1926); and Paul Rotha, *The Film Till Now: A Survey of World Cinema* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1930).

Staiger and Thompson move away from the “Great Man” history and concentrate instead on the “average” film and its stylistic characteristics. This has become the dominant academic model with regards to Classical Hollywood, despite some challenges (Robert Ray, Andrew Britton).¹⁶

Popular aesthetic histories of the American cinema are characterized by being mostly documentaries (particularly television documentaries), often with an accompanying book (following the pattern of Kevin Brownlow’s “Hollywood” series for Thames TV), that attempt to tell a history of American film. These became particularly prevalent in the 1990s because of the one hundred year anniversary of the cinema. There was the American Film Institute’s “100 Years, 100 Movies” special that aired in June 1998 on the CBS American television network and counted down the greatest one hundred movies in American film history according to A.F.I. voters. This documentary was followed by a number of “spin-offs”: “100 Years, 100 Thrills” (greatest thrillers special), “100 Years, 100 Laughs” (greatest comedies special), plus a variety of one hour specials dealing with a certain theme. The prime-time network slot in which these documentaries were shown (even if it is during the less important summer schedule) gave them a great deal of exposure and influence (not to mention the promotional tie-in with Blockbuster video). There was the ten-part series titled “The American Cinema” which originally aired on PBS in America, thus targeted at a slightly more specialized audience. However, the fact that the documentary subsequently aired on The History Channel reveals its popular approach. There are numerous other documentaries on the American

¹⁶ Robert B. Ray, “The Bordwell Regime and the Stakes of Knowledge,” in *How a Film Theory Got Lost (And Other Mysteries in Cultural Studies)*. (Bloomington: Indiana U.P., 2001): 29-63; Andrew Britton, “The Philosophy of the Pigeonhole: Wisconsin Formalism and ‘The Classical Style’,” *CineAction!* 15 (1988): 47-63.

cinema that share roughly the same approach to American film as the A.F.I. documentary: multiple talking heads discussing mostly well-known films in the manner of the popular newspaper review. Thus, there is very little analysis and even less history.¹⁷

Scorsese's documentary falls somewhere in between the pre-academic, the academic, and the popular but is also different from all three in certain ways. As a way of examining this documentary as historiography, I want to start by considering Michel Foucault's essay, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History". This essay is somewhat peculiar in regards to Foucault's work as a whole, although it does map out many of his objectives. What is unusual is that Foucault sets up a type of binary, "traditional" history as opposed to "effective" history, or genealogy. Furthermore, it is posited as a "for-against" model that Foucault ordinarily rejects. Nevertheless, the more schematic and binary nature of the essay makes it a useful starting point for a discussion of *A Personal Journey*. In short, I want to consider the question: Is Scorsese's film an effective history according to Foucault's definition?

Surprisingly, given the enormous differences between Foucault and Scorsese, I would answer at least partially yes. For instance, Scorsese's **personal** journey does not make any grand claims at objectivity or distance, something Foucault sees as being a trait of effective history: "It reverses the surreptitious practice of historians, their pretension to examine things furthest from themselves, the groveling manner in which they approach

¹⁷ For a critique of the A.F.I. approach, see Jonathan Rosenbaum, "The AFI's Contribution to Movie Hell or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love American Movies" in *Movie Wars: How Hollywood and the Media Conspire to Limit What Movies We Can See* (Chicago: A Capella Press, 2000): 91-106.

¹⁹ Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (edited by Donald F. Bouchard) (translated by Bouchard and Sherry Simon) (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977): 156.

this promising distance.”¹⁹ This approach of examining things from a distance can be seen in the type of scientific research done by Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*. Robert Ray criticizes this approach in his poststructuralist-influenced essay, “The Bordwell Regime and the Stakes of Knowledge”:

CHC [*The Classical Hollywood Cinema*] dramatically foregrounds its own claims to objectivity. As a book, it is simultaneously modest and vain: not a personally expressive ‘structuration’ (Barthes’ own term for *S/Z*) of film history, but the impersonally accurate *truth* about the Hollywood Cinema, or at least more of that truth than we have had before.²⁰

An example of this scientific method of Bordwell, Thompson and Staiger is their “random sample” approach to American cinema history. This involves putting every feature film made in Hollywood up to 1960 into a computer and getting the computer to give one hundred (that magic number again) films at random which are taken to be an accurate representation of the classical Hollywood style. As Ray points out, this shows an uncritical belief in science to explain an aesthetic form like American film:

What can we say about the Bordwell regime of knowledge? First, given its subject (the Classical Hollywood Cinema), it is curiously blind to its own unquestioning participation in our culture’s hegemonic arrangements between truth and power . . . They have not chosen to examine their own ‘scientific’ methodologies.²¹

This is the problem with formalist analysis in general; it concentrates too much on the text at the expense of other possible factors. In their own way, Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson are very similar to the auteurists they criticize. They simply replace the myth of the artist with the myth of the scientist.

Scorsese’s documentary moves away from this kind of objective distance that characterizes a great deal of academic historiography. However, this objective distance is

²⁰ Ray (2001), 39.

²¹ Ray (2001), 45.

characteristic of most “popular” documentaries as well, even though the techniques of these documentaries are much less sophisticated than Bordwell et al. For what is the survey of “film professionals” conducted by the A.F.I. for their one hundred best list if not a claim for objectivity? Likewise, the discourse of third-person narration combined with talking heads interviews typical of both the A.F.I. and American Cinema documentaries (not to mention countless other non-fiction histories) is very much a discourse of objectivity. Scorsese’s documentary foregrounds his closeness to the material and does not attempt this type of distance. This is characteristic of Foucault’s final trait of effective history:

The final trait of effective history is its affirmation of knowledge as perspective. Historians take unusual pains to erase the elements in their work which reveal their grounding in a particular time and place, their preferences in a controversy – the unavoidable obstacles of their passion.²²

Scorsese’s documentary, if nothing else, both reveals his passion for his subject and foregrounds his own bias:

I can’t really be objective. I can only revisit what has moved or intrigued me. This is a journey inside an imaginary museum, unfortunately one too big for us to enter each room. There is too much to see, too much to remember! So I’ve chosen to highlight some of the films that colored my dreams, that changed my perceptions, and in some cases even my life. Films that prompted me, for better or for worse, to become a filmmaker myself.²³

Scorsese’s foregrounding of his own subjectivity makes *A Personal Journey* a more effective history, according to Foucault’s definition of the term, than most academic or popular histories. The false objectivity of Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson has already been pointed out. But it can even be seen in “Great Man” pre-academic histories like that

²² Foucault, 156-157.

²³ Martin Scorsese and Michael Henry Wilson, *A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese Through American Movies* (New York: Hyperion, 1997), 17.

of Andrew Sarris' *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions* (1968). The book's categorization and ranking of directors ("Pantheon Directors", "The Far Side of Paradise", "Expressive Esoterica", "Fringe Benefits", "Less Than Meets the Eye", "Lightly Likable", "Strained Seriousness," etc.) locates it within an objective, quasi-scientific discourse of classification. It can be argued that the tone is more generally playful, but it is hierarchical in a way that Scorsese's categories are not. The popular documentaries similarly have this objective stance. For example, the A.F.I. documentary includes many different "film professionals" (actors and directors mostly, although there are a few critics) giving their personal views on certain films. However, the variety of opinions framed by the list of films gathered from a survey give the impression of consensus, something beyond merely a subjective opinion. There is an objectivity through multiple subjects framed by an unnamed master discourse: the survey list itself and the (mainly financial) interests it serves.

One particular section of Scorsese's documentary, "The Director as Smuggler," as well as his sections on "The Gangster Film", "The Musical", and "The Western", foregrounds and celebrates films that Foucault dubs "the successes of history". Foucault writes: "The successes of history belong to those who are capable of seizing these rules, to replace those who had used them, to disguise themselves so as to pervert them, invert their meaning, and redirect them against those who had initially imposed them."²⁴ The rules in Scorsese's examples are those of the Hollywood Studio System. While it is important not to overestimate the importance of the films and filmmakers Scorsese discusses, it is important not to dismiss their impact either, nor to dismiss Scorsese's self-conscious foregrounding of these transgressions. As historian Hayden White has noted:

²⁴ Foucault, 151.

“The more historically self-conscious the writer of any form of historiography, the more the question of the social system and the law that sustains it, the authority of this law and its justification, and threats to the law occupy his attention.”²⁵ This can be seen in Scorsese’s approach. There is an obvious identification with those who transgress Hollywood’s rules. He is clearly not interested in the “ordinary” film or filmmaker. Artistry is tied up with the idea of inverting meaning, of breaking with the system. Scorsese makes the following comments near the beginning of the documentary:

What does it take to be a filmmaker in Hollywood? Even today I still wonder what it takes to be a professional or even an artist in Hollywood. How do you survive the constant tug of war between personal expression and commercial imperatives? What is the price you pay to work in Hollywood? Do you end up with a split personality? Do you make one movie for them, one for yourself?²⁶

These are only questions that would be asked by somebody who sees the laws of the system as restrictive and in need of subversion. There are plenty of directors who do not feel this “tug of war” because their personal expression coincides with commercial imperatives (Spielberg is only the most famous and obvious example).

A Personal Journey has another characteristic of a more poststructuralist approach to its historical material. Scorsese does not present a linear history nor does he break up his sections into historical periods, as popular documentaries such as *The American Cinema* or academic histories such as *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* do. Instead, his approach is closer to concept formation. As Robert Ray describes:

The postmodern problem is the reverse of the Middle Ages’: not too little information, but too much. As a partial cure, poststructuralism has

²⁵ Hayden White, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” in *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 13.

²⁶ Scorsese and Wilson, 17.

developed a freer relationship to its objects of study, one that replaces superfluous commentary with demonstrations of concept formation.²⁷

Scorsese arranges his commentary around concepts: the Director as Storyteller, Illusionist, Smuggler, and Iconoclast. This leads to a freer and more open historiography than other contemporary models that have been applied to the American Cinema thus far, without the explicit hierarchy of Sarris. For instance, an early history like Gerald Mast's *A Short History of the Movies* follows a linear progression from "Birth" to "Griffith" to "Soviet Montage" to "Sound" up to "Today". Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson divide their study up in a similar linear progression: "The Formulation of the Classical Style, 1909-1928", "Film Style and Technology to 1930", "The Hollywood Mode of Production, 1930-1960" and "Film Style and Technology 1930-1960". Both of these academic models are quite unimaginative and very traditional in their historiographic approach. Allen and Gomery's *Film History: Theory and Practice* does a good job critiquing the various historical approaches applied up until that point (1985), but their replacement models leave much to be desired, especially their model for aesthetic film history. Allen and Gomery rightly criticize the "masterpiece tradition" of Sarris and Mast as "a brand of film history that is not very **historical** – that is merely film criticism and aesthetic evaluation applied to films in chronological order."²⁸ The problem is Allen and Gomery practice an aesthetic film history that is not very **aesthetic**. Scorsese's approach avoids the extremes of both views and manages to focus on aesthetics without neglecting history, at least until his final section.

There are other ways, however, in which Scorsese follows what Foucault would describe as traditional history. *A Personal Journey* fits the description of what Foucault,

²⁷ Ray, 54.

²⁸ Allen and Gomery, 76.

through Nietzsche, calls “monumental history”: “‘Monumental history’, a history given to reestablishing the high points of historical development and their maintenance in a perpetual presence, given to the recovery of works, actions and creations through the monogram of their personal essence.”²⁹ This program of recovering works through the monogram of their personal essence (i.e. the “vision” of the filmmaker that is so prevalent in Scorsese’s discourse) is a major project of *A Personal Journey*. Also, Foucault notes that traditional history “is given to a contemplation of distances and heights: the noblest periods, the highest forms, the most abstract ideas, the purest individualities.”³⁰ Scorsese is distanced from the material despite his personal involvement: he is examining what he sees as a Golden Age of American Cinema (Classical Hollywood), an age in which he, as an artist, does not belong. He is unable to examine the historical period in which he is enmeshed. At the conclusion of his documentary, Scorsese states:

This is where we have got to stop. We just don’t have the time and space to go any further. Also, we have reached a different era, the late sixties, the years when I started making movies myself . . . I could not really do justice to my friends who are making films, my companions, my generation of filmmakers. Not from the inside.³¹

This reluctance on Scorsese’s part has to do with a traditional notion of what a historian should be; i.e. outside, not inside, of his subject matter. Thus, the myth of objectivity is present here as well.

This brings up the question of Scorsese’s authority. This authority comes not only from Scorsese’s status as a filmmaker, but also from his role as a champion of film preservation. Scorsese has gained a great deal of cultural prestige by helping to preserve

²⁹ Foucault, 161.

³⁰ Foucault, 155.

³¹ Scorsese and Wilson, 165.

America's "film heritage", and this documentary can be seen as an extension of that project. The style and presentation of the documentary both work to reinforce this authority. Scorsese is formally dressed and seated in an empty room talking directly to the camera. The film does not deviate from this straight-forward and conventional talking-head shooting style. Throughout, Scorsese's voiceover acts as a voice of authority, and the film very much resembles a lecture or lesson in film. This is stated explicitly in the review on the DVD's back cover by Janet Maslin and implicitly in the documentary with all credits and chapter titles written on the screen like writing on a chalkboard. In terms of objectivity, the idea of authority offered by a teacher or a professor certainly counts for more in our culture than any other subjective account. This discourse of "learning" is explicitly spelled out by Scorsese at the beginning of Part

Three:

I am often asked by younger filmmakers: Why do I need to look at old movies? The only response I can give them is: I still consider myself a student. Yes, I have made a number of pictures in the past twenty years. But the more pictures I make, the more I realize that I don't really know. I'm always looking for something or someone that I can learn from. This is what I tell young filmmakers and students: Do what the painters used to do, and probably still do. Study the old masters. Enrich your palette. Expand the canvas. There's always so much more to learn.³²

So while Scorsese modestly still considers himself a student, it is he as experienced filmmaker who is passing on his knowledge and advising younger "students". It is also implicit that Scorsese himself will be one of the "old masters" the younger generation studies. In this way, *A Personal Journey* is far from subjective and is by no means outside of the discourse of objective history.

³² Scorsese and Wilson, 120.

Of all the sections in the documentary, “The Director as Iconoclast” is the most problematic. It is here that the “purest individualities” that Scorsese identifies fail to be related to their social system. He notes that some iconoclasts failed (Orson Welles, Erich von Stroheim) while others succeeded (Elia Kazan). The question that is not answered or even approached is: why did some fail and why did some succeed? With Kazan, this is particularly problematic. Kazan was able to become a great director and “forge a new acting style” in *On the Waterfront* (1954) partly because he gained industry security by “naming names” during the blacklist. Scorsese leaves this out of his account, despite the fact that he had discussed the influence of the blacklist on 1950s Hollywood earlier. The respect for Kazan’s artistry blinds Scorsese in his assessment. Similarly, his discussion of Welles and *Citizen Kane* (1941) make no mention of Welles’ leftist politics and his connection to the Federal Theatre Project during the 1930s. Scorsese is content to see Welles as a victim of Hollywood without any further contextual factors being considered: “He actually lost all his privileges a year after *Citizen Kane* on *The Magnificent Ambersons*, which was chopped down and even partially reshot in his absence.”³³ Scorsese thus repeats a familiar story of Welles losing his Hollywood privileges and *Citizen Kane* being his only untouched Hollywood masterpiece. But as Jonathan Rosenbaum has pointed out, this is not the case. *Citizen Kane* is more an independent film made with studio backing than a Hollywood film itself:

People today tend to forget how much of an anomaly *Kane* was as a ‘Hollywood picture’ when it was initially released in 1941; it took many decades of ideological spadework on the part of critics before it was perceived as a Hollywood classic . . . There’s a lot at stake ideologically in classifying *Kane* as a Hollywood picture, because the moment one does, one arrives at a Platonic ideal of Hollywood practice that can be used –

³³ Scorsese and Wilson, 147.

and generally *has* been used – as a way of dismissing the remainder of Welles’s career as a filmmaker.³⁴

Scorsese’s analysis repeats this received notion, and throughout the Iconoclast section he is typically very traditional, repeating the accepted industry opinion.

Scorsese’s conclusion is similarly quite problematic. Although Scorsese says that this is a story without an end, he nevertheless provides a conclusion:

I believe there is a spirituality in films, even if it’s not one which can supplant faith. I find that over the years many films address themselves to the spiritual side of man’s nature, from Griffith’s *Intolerance* to John Ford’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, to Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*, to Kubrick’s *2001...* and so many more. It is as though movies answered an ancient quest for the common unconscious. They fulfill a spiritual need that people have to share a common memory.³⁵

Thus, Scorsese provides a “moral” to the story of the American Cinema. As Hayden White has commented, “the demand for closure in the historical story is a demand, I suggest, for moral meaning, a demand that sequences of real events be assessed as to their significance as elements of a moral drama.”³⁶ This is perhaps inevitable. As White asks: “Could we ever narrativize without moralizing?”³⁷ The form this moralizing takes at the conclusion, however, is mythical rather than social. Scorsese discusses “man’s nature” as an a historically unproblematic notion, and even evokes the Jungian collective unconscious, the *ne plus ultra* of essentialist discourse. Movies are seen as fulfilling and answering an “ancient quest” that is presumably outside and beyond history. This conclusion is especially disappointing given the social dimension of most of the film.

Clearly, despite the presence of some of Foucault’s traits of effective history, *A Personal Journey* is not Foucaultian. But it is, I would argue, an alternative to a great

³⁴ Rosenbaum (2000), 178-179.

³⁵ Scorsese and Wilson, 166.

³⁶ White, 21.

³⁷ White, 25.

deal of both academic and popular historicizing of American cinema. The question is, how much of an alternative, and is this alternative a worthy one to pursue? Although Scorsese does not completely follow a Foucauldian effective history, is this necessarily negative? The one filmmaker who has followed Foucault's spirit in approaching cinema history is Jean-Luc Godard in his ten-part documentary *Histoire d' Cinema*. The heavily deconstructionist strategies employed by Godard are not really open to Scorsese in his film.³⁸ Scorsese operates in an area somewhere between the banality of most popular documentaries, the formalism of most academic histories, and the obscurity of the radical historians. Because of this, Scorsese the artist-historian is in an important position within both film culture and society as a whole. In short, Scorsese is in the position to synthesize a great number of approaches and bridge the gap between certain discourses. To what extent does *A Personal Journey* as historiography do this?

As I've mentioned earlier, Scorsese's discourse operates between two broader trends within American film historiography, the academic and the popular, without really belonging to either one. There is a great deal that is academic about Scorsese's film, which should not be surprising given his university background. There are certainly links between *A Personal Journey* and Sarris' *The American Cinema*. Of the fourteen directors in Sarris' "Pantheon", ten are discussed via a film clip by Scorsese (Chaplin, Ford, Griffith, Hawks, Keaton, Lang, Murnau, Ophuls, Sternberg, and Welles). More tellingly, fifteen of the twenty filmmakers in Sarris' second tier category, "The Far Side of

³⁸ Interestingly, Godard was hired by the British Film Institute to complete the history of French cinema as part of the same series as Scorsese's documentary. Of course, Godard subverted the whole project, which is what the B.F.I. expected (or at least should have). Although they were hired for similar projects, the B.F.I. clearly expected a more conventional and package-able film from Scorsese and likely would not have accepted otherwise. This is not to say, however, that Scorsese could not have varied significantly from the format he did choose.

Paradise”, are included (Borzage, Capra, Cukor, De Mille, Fuller, Mann, Minnelli, Preminger, Ray, Sirk, Von Stroheim, Sturges, Vidor, and Walsh) and ten of the twenty-one filmmakers in the third tier and more obscure “Expressive Esoterica” receive attention (Boetticher, De Toth, Dwan, Garnett, Karlson, Lewis, Mackendrick, Penn, Stahl, Tourneur, and Ulmer). By contrast, Scorsese includes only three of the eleven directors in Sarris’ dismissive “Less Than Meets the Eye” category (Kazan, Wellman, and Wilder) and just one of eighteen directors of the even more damnable “Strained Seriousness” category (Kubrick). Clearly, Sarris has had a great impact on Scorsese and the formation of his taste. Compare Scorsese and Sarris to the more popular A.F.I. list: nine of the eleven directors from the “Less Than Meets the Eye” category have films in the Top 100 (Huston, Kazan, Lean, Mankiewicz, Milestone, Reed, Wilder, Wyler, and Zinnemann) and twenty-two of the hundred films are from directors in the “Less Than Meets the Eye” and “Strained Seriousness” categories. Only six of the fourteen “Pantheon” directors are included (Chaplin, Ford, Griffith, Hawks, Hitchcock, and Welles), four of the twenty from “The Far Side of Paradise” (Capra, McCarey, Ray, Stevens), and three of the twenty-one from “Expressive Esoterica” (Donen, Mulligan, Penn). Scorsese is taking his cue from an academic with cultural capital like Sarris rather than the more popular and well-known classics.

However, I have been misleadingly referring to Sarris as an obvious academic. While Sarris taught courses at Columbia University on film (at roughly the same time Scorsese has attending and then teaching film classes at New York University) and certainly was influential in having film taken seriously as an object of academic study, his approach has basically been dismissed by most academics, especially as history. Even

as a critic, Sarris is seen as rather antiquated. His work lacks the rigour of most academic approaches to film analysis (which have been influenced by the New Critical method) and he is criticized as being too subjective and intuitive. Consider the following passage from Sarris's section on Jean Renoir:

Renoir's career is a river of personal expression. The waters may vary here and there in turbulence and depth, but the flow of personality is consistently directed to its final outlet in the sea of life . . . The fact that Renoir is a warm director and Eisenstein a cold one cannot be explained entirely through forms and themes. Directorial personality is, as always, the crucial determinant of a film's temperature.³⁹

This type of impressionistic writing is not the type of close, formal analysis expected from academic criticism today. Sarris too is situated somewhere between the academic and the popular.

However, the influence of academic writing on Scorsese is not limited to pre-academics such as Andrew Sarris. *A Personal Journey* displays clear affinities to the post-1968 ideological criticism, in particular Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni's immensely influential article, "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism" (first published in October 1969 in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, translated in Spring 1971 in *Screen*).⁴⁰ In this essay, Comolli and Narboni develop their "category e" to describe Hollywood films that "seem at first sight to belong firmly within the ideology and to be completely under its sway, but which turn out to be so only in an ambiguous manner."⁴¹ According to Comolli and Narboni, a sophisticated formal style (imagery) can transform conventional narrative and story material:

³⁹ Sarris, 73.

⁴⁰ While this article is roughly contemporaneous with Sarris, its influence on later academic writing is much more pronounced. In fact, the essay had such an impact that a whole article is devoted to its legacy. See Barbara Klinger, "'Cinema/Ideology/Criticism' Revisited: The Progressive Genre," in *Film Genre Reader III* (ed. Barry Keith Grant) (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003): 75-91.

⁴¹ Comolli and Narboni, 27.

If he [the filmmaker] sees his film simply as a blow in favour of liberalism, it will be recuperated instantly by the ideology; if on the other hand, he conceives and realizes it on the deeper level of imagery, there is a chance that it will turn out to be more disruptive. Not, of course, that he will be able to break the ideology itself, but simply its reflection in his film. (The films of Ford, Dreyer, Rossellini, for example.)⁴²

As Robert Ray perceptively notes, “the need to develop *category e* attests to the persistent appeal of movies that are aesthetically interesting.”⁴³ The influence of “category e” can be seen in “The Director as Smuggler” section of *A Personal Journey*.

In discussing the smuggler, Scorsese states that:

Style was crucial. The first master of esoterica was Jacques Tourneur, who began making his mark in low-budget supernatural thrillers. On *Cat People*, he had a good reason not to show the creature. ‘The less you see, the more you believe,’ he stated. ‘You must never try to impose your views on the viewer, but rather you must try to let it seep in, little by little.’ This oblique approach perfectly defines the smuggler’s strategy.⁴⁴

Scorsese’s echoing of Sarris’ use of the word “esoterica” is not accidental, and there are certainly links between “category e” and “auteurism”, as Ray has noted: “*Category e* promptly filled up with all the old auteurist favorites: John Ford, Howard Hawks, Hitchcock, Nicolas Ray.”⁴⁵ What changed was the method in which the films were described and why the films were celebrated. A social dimension was added to the auteurist mix, something Scorsese is aware of in his discussion of the smuggler: “The fifties. This is a fascinating era where the subtext became as important – or sometimes more important – than the apparent subject matter.”⁴⁶ The use of “subtext” by Scorsese reveals this academic influence. Films have to be read in order to gain meaning; they (the great films, at least) are not reducible to their explicit subject matter.

⁴² Comolli and Narboni, 27.

⁴³ Ray (2000), 92.

⁴⁴ Scorsese and Wilson, 98.

⁴⁵ Ray (2000), 92.

⁴⁶ Scorsese and Wilson, 120.

A Personal Journey is an attempt to bring this academic education to a broader audience. I have argued earlier that Scorsese is set up by the film as an authority, a film teacher lecturing to students. However, the style of the film is very conventional and not at all difficult. It is a very typical talking-head with voiceover technique that is used by many documentaries. To be crude, the style is popular, despite the academic discourse Scorsese occasionally deploys. The film is certainly aimed at a highbrow, cineliterate audience, but it is not aimed exclusively at that audience. The film was made for Channel Four in Britain and played on Turner Classic Movies in the United States. This is a long way from primetime network television, but it is still a broader audience than most academic critical writing will receive. It has also been released on VHS and DVD in North America. As an attempt to contribute to popular film culture, it is an admirable and needed work. As Jonathan Rosenbaum argues:

Like it or not, one of the major activities of any film culture is a labeling of certain films as good and others as bad, and no academic approach can eliminate this activity entirely. At best it can hope to offer some critical training in understanding that activity: at worst it becomes victimized by it. By adopting the stance that the formation of aesthetic canons is beneath its more 'scientific' interests, academic film study effectively clears the way for mainstream huckmeisters to carry out this work without interference or contradiction. It thus becomes all the easier for an organization like the American Film Institute to join forces with the studios in carrying out work that universities should have attended to decades earlier.⁴⁷

Scorsese effectively takes on this challenge to deliver an aesthetic film history and to try to include many filmmakers and films recognized by academic film study within a broader film culture.

But another question remains: has Scorsese crossed what Andreas Huyssen has dubbed "the great divide" between modernism and mass culture? It is here where the

⁴⁷ Rosenbaum, 90.

weaknesses of Scorsese's documentary are most apparent, and where his use of "traditional history" is most problematic. At first glance, *A Personal Journey* can be seen as bridging this gap by showing the artistic merit of a mass culture form (Hollywood cinema). But Scorsese is not really a postmodernist who is trying to erase the division between modernism and mass culture; instead, he is trying to move Hollywood cinema from one side of the divide (mass culture) to the other (modernism). This "unfinished project of modernity"⁴⁸ took place in the 1970s with the institutionalization of cinema in the university and the application of New Criticism to Hollywood cinema, primarily in the film journal *Movie* and with critics such as Victor Perkins and Robin Wood. This modernist discourse remains pervasive today and Scorsese's documentary can be seen as a continuation of this practice. Instead of arguing against high modernity, this discourse argues against "mass culture" despite the fact that Hollywood cinema is obviously, for better or worse, a mass culture phenomenon. The target of this discourse would be Comolli and Narboni's "category a":

The first and largest category comprises those films which are imbued through and through with the dominant ideology in pure and unadulterated form, and give no indication that their makers were even aware of the fact . . . The *majority* of films in all categories are the unconscious instruments of ideology which produces them.⁴⁹

Replace the word "majority" with "mass" and the discourse becomes clear. Further, cinema has another medium in which it can place the label of mass culture: television. It is telling that Scorsese includes a clip from *All That Heaven Allows* (Douglas Sirk, 1955) that uses television as a symbol of mass culture: "If you can't have a life, settle for its

⁴⁸ Jurgen Habermas, "Modernity: An Unfinished Project," in *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity: Critical Essays on the Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (edited by Maurizio Passerin d'Entrèves and Seyla Benhabib) (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1997): 38-55.

⁴⁹ Comolli and Narboni, 25.

imitation – a TV set. This is what Jane Wyman receives from her children as a substitute for her lost love. Television, the movies' rival medium in the fifties, was cast as the ultimate symbol of alienation.”⁵⁰ Sirk (who certainly fancied himself a high modernist) is using television to represent the repression of mass culture. Why television is an imitation of life but cinema (or anything else regarded as “art”) is not is never explained explicitly, but the implication is clear: art transcends the alienation of mass culture.

This modernist basis (and bias) has broader significance and can help explain many of the absences in *A Personal Journey*. For example, the gender bias within *A Personal Journey* also exists in a great deal of modernist discourse, as Huyssen has argued:

The powerful masculinist mystique which is explicit in modernists such as Marinetti, Jünger, Benn, Wyndham Lewis, Céline et al. (not to speak of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud), and implicit in many others, has to be somehow related to the persistent gendering of mass culture as feminine and inferior – even if, as a result, the heroism of the moderns won't look so heroic any more.⁵¹

This masculinist mystique is present in *A Personal Journey*: all of the filmmakers Scorsese discusses are male except for one (Ida Lupino). And while this is symptomatic of the era he is discussing, Scorsese nevertheless endorses this era as a Golden Age and does not critique or even acknowledge the male privilege. A similar unrecognized bias is in regards to race, which is also true of modernist discourse:

There is a growing awareness that other cultures, non-European, non-Western cultures must be met by means other than conquest or domination, as Paul Ricoeur put it more than twenty years ago, and that the erotic and aesthetic fascination with ‘the Orient’ and ‘the primitive’ – so prominent in Western culture, including modernism – is deeply problematic.⁵²

⁵⁰ Scorsese and Wilson, 122.

⁵¹ Huyssen, 55.

⁵² Huyssen, 220.

This awareness of the problem of race is strikingly absent in Scorsese's discussion of Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Broken Blossoms* (1919). Scorsese is unwilling to counter the mystique of the great artist. In fact, he quite disingenuously champions Griffith as a progressive artist in his discussion of *Intolerance* (1916):

Intolerance was a daring attempt at interweaving stories and characters, not from the same period, but from four different centuries. Freely cross-cutting from one era to another, he blended them all together in a grand symphony devoted to one idea – a passionate plea for tolerance. Griffith's passion for history was balanced by his passion for simple people, the victims of history.⁵³

Scorsese does not point out that *The Birth of a Nation* was concerned with people Griffith considered the “victims of history”, i.e. the “innocent” whites terrorized by the “Negroes”, because this would demythologize Griffith to a great extent.⁵⁴ This is not to say that Scorsese ignores race throughout: to his credit, he includes dramatic clips from two important films that do say something about American racism: *The Phenix City Story* (Philip Karlson, 1955) and *Shock Corridor* (Samuel Fuller, 1963). But these are included mainly to show the greatest of these filmmakers. There is no hint from Scorsese that Hollywood cinema has been a tool of ideological oppression along gender and racial lines because this would interfere with his project of recognizing the greatness of American film.

The fact that Scorsese is still entrenched within this modernist discourse and that he fails to break from this privileging of “high art” over “mass culture” is symptomatic of

⁵³ Scorsese and Wilson, 71.

⁵⁴ Added to this is the lack of analysis of whom Griffith deems the villains of contemporary times in *Intolerance*: the women's social reformers. This demonizing was part of a broader anti-feminist backlash of the film and is, not surprisingly, ignored by Scorsese in his rush to idealization.

the greater crisis facing artist-intellectuals in America. Jonathan Rosenbaum describes this dilemma in comments concerning Orson Welles:

Welles was too much of a vulgar entertainer to endear himself to the intellectual establishment. But he was too much of an artist and intellectual to endear himself to the general public unless he mocked and derided his artistic temperament and intellectualism, thereby proving he wasn't on a higher level than his own audience and ratifying his own populism.⁵⁵

One cannot blame Scorsese for not wanting to deride and parody either his own persona or American cinema as a whole, or for wanting to take American film seriously. But this very high modern seriousness is part of the bias against mass culture and in turn against gender and racial others that postmodernism rebelled against. Within an anti-intellectual climate like America, Scorsese as an artist-intellectual is in a double bind.

In his article on being a student of Scorsese's at NYU, Allan Arkush describes Scorsese as a teacher of film history:

When it came to teaching film history, I have never seen his equal. Before every film, he'd pace in front of the class with Andrew Sarris' 'The American Cinema' in one hand. He'd read off paragraphs or lists of pictures by a director. Then he'd act out scenes from a movie and connect all the director's movies with an analysis of theme and style. It was unlike any other film history course I'd ever taken, because it was being taught by a filmmaker, not a literature professor. Marty made me understand why as a child I had loved *Rio Bravo* and *The Horse Soldiers* and taught me how to love them over again. But best, he was entertaining.⁵⁶

In his earliest days as a teacher of film history at NYU, Scorsese is described by Arkush as very non-traditional in his demeanour and style:

The first film of the semester was Sam Fuller's *Shock Corridor*. It was a blunt, brutal, and very forceful introduction to American movies for the artsy-fartsy crowd. The thunderstorm in the corridor of Fuller's mental hospital practically knocked me out of my chair. Marty rewound the reel and we re-screened the fight scene in the kitchen between the journalist

⁵⁵ Rosenbaum, 185.

⁵⁶ Arkush, 58-59.

and the murderous guard. Marty jumped up and down with excitement as he talked about the camera movement that tracked the guard as he is dragged the length of the food-laden kitchen counters.⁵⁷

This image of Scorsese as a teacher is very much at odds with how Scorsese presents himself in *A Personal Journey*. Instead of the hyperactive, frenzied persona described by Arkush, the Scorsese of *A Personal Journey* is very composed, dignified and authoritative in his presentation. At the same time, Scorsese as a historian is a “filmmaker”, not a “literature professor”. The graphics of the documentary are illuminating in this regard: the opening credits are written to mimic a teacher writing on a chalk board, but at the same time produce an exaggerated outline of Scorsese’s profile (a la Hitchcock) that identifies him as the celebrity director he has become. Thus the intellectualism of the enterprise is tempered by Scorsese’s status as a celebrity.

ITALIAN OR AMERICAN FILM HISTORY: *MY VOYAGE TO ITALY*

A comparison between *A Personal Journey* and Scorsese’s Italian cinema documentary, *My Voyage to Italy*, can allow many of the questions of presenting history to be addressed. The most striking difference between the two documentaries is the anxiety over canon formation that is present in *A Personal Journey*, an anxiety that is absent from *My Voyage to Italy*. I have mentioned the composed nature of Scorsese’s delivery in *A Personal Journey*. This is matched by the visuals, which feature Scorsese sitting in a chair against a nondescript background speaking to the camera. In *My Voyage to Italy*, Scorsese is much more relaxed, certainly not the manic figure described by Arkush, but nevertheless avoiding the high seriousness with which he delivers the

⁵⁷ Arkush, 59.

material in *A Personal Journey*. Instead of the empty studio setting of the previous film, Scorsese films *My Voyage to Italy* on location in his old neighbourhood in New York City. *My Voyage* is the more personal of the two documentaries, with Scorsese delving deep into his own family history and relating this to the films. Despite this, it is *A Personal Journey* that includes the disclaimer that this is a personal rather than an objective history. Scorsese's insistence on the film's personal nature is a way for him to disavow the canon formation in which he participates. I would argue that there are two main reasons why this anxiety is present in the American and not the Italian cinema documentary: the films discussed in the Italian cinema documentary are mostly established classics by well known auteurs (at least within cinephile circles); and the films in *My Voyage to Italy* can be easily discussed within a liberal humanist vein, unlike the many problematic films present in *A Personal Journey*.

One immediately noticeable difference between the two films is that Scorsese spends a great deal more time on individual films in *My Voyage to Italy*: 33 films by 11 different directors, compared to *A Personal Journey*, which features 92 films by 57 different directors, despite the fact that the films are of comparable length (*My Voyage* is actually 21 minutes longer, 246 minutes as opposed to 225). As opposed to the commercially based Hollywood films, the art films of Italian cinema presumably have a slower pace that needs to be respected, even within an introductory overview. Even the tone and volume of Scorsese's voice is noticeably different, speaking in a hushed and almost reverential manner. At the conclusion of *My Voyage*, Scorsese addresses the viewer and states the following:

When I started to make this series, as I said earlier, I simply wanted to express my feelings for Italian cinema. I also wanted to get younger

people interested in these movies. Even today, I suppose, history remains something that is handed down, that is between people. In fact, I learned that from watching these movies. So, the best way I have to keep film history alive is to try to share my own enthusiasm, my own experience. And I know that if you're young film history can seem like a chore, it's like doing homework. I mean, usually people get excited about a movie by hearing about it from somebody else. So I'm simply trying to tell you: I saw these movies, I didn't read about them or learn about them in school, and they had a powerful effect on me, and you should see them. Thank you.

Presumably, the cultural prestige that the films have already acquired allowed Scorsese to be bold enough to make such an authoritative statement as "you should see them (these movies)."

The rhetoric on display here indicates Scorsese's desire to be an intellectual in regards to the cinema. In fact, it is only in regards to cinema that Scorsese seems willing to engage larger issue of political and social value. The origins of *My Voyage to Italy* can be traced back to 1993 when Scorsese wrote an angry letter to *The New York Times* regarding a negative piece written on Federico Fellini shortly after his death. The original article complained about Fellini's style getting in the way of his storytelling, but Scorsese extends this to the greater issue of cultural diversity:

The issue here is not 'film theory,' but cultural diversity and openness. Diversity guarantees our cultural survival. When the world is fragmenting into groups of intolerance, ignorance and hatred, film is a powerful tool to knowledge and understanding. To our shame, your article was cited at length by the European press.

The attitude that I've been describing celebrates ignorance. It also unfortunately confirms the worst fears of European film makers.

Is this closedmindedness something we want to pass along to future generations?

If you accept the answer in the commercial, why not take it to its natural progression:

Why don't they make movies like ours?

Why don't they tell stories as we do?

Why don't they dress as we do?

Why don't they eat as we do?

Why don't they talk as we do?
Why don't they think as we do?
Why don't they worship as we do?
Why don't they look like us?
Ultimately, who will decide who 'we' are? ⁵⁸

Scorsese's attempt at intellectual intervention on behalf of liberal humanist values of cultural diversity is nevertheless uniquely American in one respect: the anxiety over the role of being an intellectual. Scorsese's position within American popular culture is rather schizophrenic, and reflects what Andrew Ross has called "the general ambivalence about, if not distrust of, the authoritative role of experts in people's lives."⁵⁹ Scorsese is a prime example of how this ambivalence reflects not only an individual's actions, but how those actions are interpreted and discussed, since "the popular disrespect for experts and intellectual authorities is somehow justified, while at the same time the narrative is intent on reinforcing their authority."⁶⁰

In both his Italian cinema documentary and in his earlier letter to *The New York Times*, Scorsese is very cautious about intellectualizing his defense of these films. The films are always seen as "emotional" experiences for Scorsese. He states that he did not "learn about these films in school" and that his defense of Fellini is not about "film theory". The cultural prestige of the Italian films allows Scorsese to recommend them without qualification, but this recommendation cannot seem like he is giving the audience an education (hence the reference to "homework"). As Alberto Pezzotta has persuasively argued, the methodology of *My Voyage to Italy* reveals "a tendency to view the history of Italian cinema as a series of isolated masterpieces by auteurs, ignoring the wider

⁵⁸ Martin Scorsese, "Why Make Fellini the Scapegoat for New Cultural Intolerance?" *New York Times* (November 25, 1993): A26.

⁵⁹ Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989): 2.

⁶⁰ Ross, 3.

context.”⁶¹ Scorsese’s Italian documentary is very traditional history, especially in the Italian context. But all evidence in the film points to the fact that the documentary is ultimately not concerned with Italian cinema and culture, but rather about American culture and Scorsese himself as an Italian-American. It is not only Scorsese’s anxiety about being an intellectual that is on display, but his anxiety over the acceptance of Italian culture (and by extension Italians) in America. *My Voyage to Italy* opens with Scorsese explaining that he is making this film on Italian cinema because he is concerned that audiences are now only watching American films:

These days it seems as if American cinema is all there is, and that all the other cinemas are secondary, including Italian cinema, and that really worries me. In fact, it’s the reason I’m making this documentary. The fact is I know that if I’d never seen the films that I’m going to be talking about here, I’d be a very different person, and of course, a very different filmmaker.

Scorsese’s argument concerns American culture and his desire to improve this situation with greater diversity. This would include his own films, which he has consistently positioned as outside of the Hollywood cinema, in between the American and Italian cinema. Italian cinema as discussed by Scorsese is not considered in relation to Italian culture. Rather, a few established, canonized classics are used to argue for an alternative to the Hollywood tradition. Because of the large numbers of films and filmmakers examined, the history of *A Personal Journey* is by necessity social and political, however much Scorsese tries to downplay these contexts.

⁶¹ Alberto Pezzotta, “A Journey Through Italian Cinema,” *Senses of Cinema* (January 2003) www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/03/26/journey_italian.html

SCORSESE AS HISTORIAN PART TWO: CINEMATIC HISTORIES

Scorsese has discussed the issue of how he makes history with Columbia University History Professor Simon Schama. At one point, Schama has the following exchange with the moderator Kent Jones:

KJ: In your work, Simon, are you trying to popularize history, and make it more of a narrative form?

SS: Yes, but you know it's like reinventing the wheel. There were many hundreds of years in which history was never anything except popular. Unfortunately, though, the professors came along. [*Laughter*] But yes, I'm sometimes presented as being on a kind of crusade to 'bring the reader back to history.'⁶²

Schama recognizes his pursuit of narrative as a way of making history alive, and notes the influence of narrative forms such as novels, films and poetry on his writing, emphasizing the imaginative work necessary to any historical retelling. This connects him with Scorsese, who similarly emphasizes films that tell history through narrative. What this discussion with Schama reveals is Scorsese's awareness of himself as a historian, not only in his documentaries but also through his fiction films. As Scorsese moved into the role of film historian in the 1990s, this was reflected in his feature films, all of which have been concerned with past worlds. Throughout the decade, these cinematic histories have provided a unity to Scorsese's work on otherwise diverse and divergent material.

In this same discussion with Schama and Jones, Scorsese tries to explain his attempts to deal with historical material in his feature films: "A number of the movies I've made in the past 10 years have been period pieces. What I tried to do in these

⁶² Kent Jones, "Roughing Up the Surface: Simon Schama and Martin Scorsese Talk About How They Make History," *Civilization* (February/ March 1998): 88.

pictures was to show character detail. The detail reflects the civilization.”⁶³ He wants to move away from the historical epic form and move towards a style similar to that Italian filmmaker Roberto Rossellini:

I was so impressed and influenced in the late ‘60s or so by Rossellini’s historical films, starting with *The Rise of Louis XIV*. The king’s absolute power is revealed in his daily eating ceremony, not when he is attending to affairs of state. That’s when I said: This is really history. It’s about people. I’ve always been interested in the way history is recorded.⁶⁴

This can be seen in films such as *GoodFellas*, *The Age of Innocence*, *Casino*, and *Kundun*. Scorsese attempts to break away from the classical mode of history, represented by such epics as *Lawrence of Arabia*: “Audience’s eyes glaze over. Too much historical information is being thrown at them.”⁶⁵ Scorsese instead wants to move into a realism of character and quotidian detail. Within Cinema Studies, there was a similar move towards Film History in this decade, and the next generation of younger filmmakers from the American Independent Cinema scene similarly took up historical concerns. This had consequences for Scorsese’s critical reputation that were both positive and negative over the course of the decade of the 1990s. There was a further canonization of Scorsese’s past films and a devaluation of his current work.

Scorsese’s first work of the decade, *GoodFellas*, can be seen retrospectively as a transitional work. It is the last Scorsese film to be canonized as one of his masterpieces, along with *Mean Streets*, *Taxi Driver*, and *Raging Bull*.⁶⁶ The film’s critical reception at the time was the most overwhelmingly positive of Scorsese’s career. *GoodFellas* swept all of the major critics awards, from the National Society of Film Critics to the New York

⁶³ Jones, 82.

⁶⁴ Jones, 88.

⁶⁵ Jones, 83.

⁶⁶ It received six votes in the recent *Sight and Sound* poll, three from critics and three from directors.

Critics' Circle to the Los Angeles Critics Awards, winning by an overwhelming margin with the National Society of Film Critics in particular (43 votes to 2 for the eventual Academy Award winner, *Dances with Wolves*). The comparison with *Dances with Wolves* (Kevin Costner, 1990) and its win over *GoodFellas* has become part of Scorsese lore along with *Ordinary People* (Robert Redford, 1980) defeating *Raging Bull* and *Rocky* (John Avildsen, 1976) defeating *Taxi Driver*. In particular, the treatment of history in *Dances with Wolves* looks very traditional compared to earlier revisionist westerns, especially its obvious forerunner *Little Big Man* (Arthur Penn, 1970). While being about an earlier historical moment, *GoodFellas* is mainly anti-epic in scope. Instead, it concerns itself with the small, intimate details of Mafia life, drawing heavily on its source material, Nicolas Pileggi's *Wise Guy* (Pileggi also co-wrote the screenplay with Scorsese). It is this realism that so impressed most of the film's critical supporters. Instead of looking at the film in relation to *Dances with Wolves*, a movie of a completely different genre, I believe it is more productive to see *GoodFellas* in relation to the small-scale gangster revival of 1990 that included both *The Godfather Part III* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1990) and *Miller's Crossing* (Joel Coen, 1990). The extreme difference in the reception of *GoodFellas* to these contemporary works is illuminating in terms of the direction Scorsese's career would take for the rest of the decade.

In Chapter Three, I discussed at length the parallels between the careers of Scorsese and Coppola throughout the eighties. This parallel continues with both returning to the gangster film in 1990. However, they return to this genre with their critical reputations very much transformed. Through his work in film preservation, Scorsese was able to maintain a critical distinction despite taking on commercial projects like *The*

Color of Money. Coppola was afforded no such luxury and was seen as a director very much in decline. In 1988, both make personal films meant to signal their artistic “comeback”. The controversy over *The Last Temptation of Christ* made Scorsese into a martyr of the film critics, while Coppola’s *Tucker: The Man and His Dream* was largely ignored after its lack of box office success. Thus, it should come as little surprise that the critical reception of *GoodFellas* and *The Godfather Part III* would vastly differ. How the two films were discussed and respectively praised and critiqued offers an example of how changing contexts can alter reception. It is clear that the conditions for Scorsese’s film to be praised were much more favorable than Coppola’s. That each director produced a film very much in the style of their previous work emphasizes the importance of extra-textual factors. *GoodFellas*, despite its historical setting and rise-and-fall structure in detailing organized crime, follows Scorsese’s interest in the quotidian aspects of his characters and their lifestyles. While not a sequel in any sense, there are connections to Scorsese’s previous *Mean Streets*. *The Godfather Part III* is likewise very much in the style of Coppola’s most well-known work in its epic quality and its continuation of the story of Coppola’s canonized *The Godfather* and *The Godfather Part II*. In the climate of the 1970s, both of these filmmakers and their respective styles were praised and respected, Coppola even more so than Scorsese. By 1990, this situation has altered significantly.

Even the status of *The Godfather Part III* as a sequel had new connotations. In 1974, when Coppola made *The Godfather Part II*, there was a sense that it was a sequel that was made not only for commercial purposes but for ideological ones as well. The film was received not as a cheap attempt to make money, but as a legitimate artistic statement that was even superior to the initial film. John Hess, writing in the radical left

film journal *Jump Cut*, called *The Godfather Part II* “the greatest Hollywood film since *Citizen Kane*.”⁶⁷ The reasons for this assessment are primarily ideological. Hess argues that “the real strength of the film is its demonstration that the benefits of the family structure and the hope for community have been destroyed by capitalism.”⁶⁸ Hess supports this argument with quotations from Coppola himself on the revisionist nature of the film. He quotes Coppola as stating, “I was disturbed that people thought I had romanticized Michael,” implying that the sequel allowed Coppola the ability to fix this mistake.⁶⁹ But by 1990, critics would be more cynical about Coppola’s motives. Part of this is the result of a greater cynicism towards the rise of the “high concept” film during the 1980s, but even more relevant is the fall of Coppola’s reputation by 1990. This downfall is reflected in a greater tendency to see Coppola as a more conventional filmmaker who lacks formal and stylistic rigour. The scholars Robert Ray and Robert Kolker have made this observation about even the original *Godfather* films, and the third film only reinforced this tendency within mainstream criticism. In Bourdieu’s terms, Coppola’s work simply lost its distinction as being uniquely cinematic. *The Godfather Part III* was seen as closer to a Classical Hollywood film like *Casablanca* than a truly innovative work like *Citizen Kane*. Coppola no longer had his modernist credential.

Scorsese, on the other hand, continued to be taken seriously as a creative force, mostly because of contextual factors previously outlined. Thus, when *GoodFellas* was released, the conditions were prepared for its critical success. The film was not only overwhelmingly successful with critics upon initial release, but was taken seriously as

⁶⁷ John Hess, “*The Godfather Part II*: A Deal Coppola Couldn’t Refuse,” *Jump Cut* no. 7 (1975): 1. Available online at: <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC07folder/Godfather2.html>

⁶⁸ Hess (1975), 1.

⁶⁹ Hess (1975), 1.

high art by scholars. This can be seen in its high standing in the *Sight and Sound* poll and by the discussion of the film by Robert Kolker in the third edition of his New Hollywood study *A Cinema of Loneliness* (2001). Kolker compares *GoodFellas* to Lawrence Sterne's eighteenth-century novel *Tristram Shandy* and other modernist texts:

Scorsese has created the perfect latter-day cock-and-bull picaresque narrative about gangsters, which, like Sterne's novel and later modernist works of fiction and film, continually gloss their own status as fictions. At the same time, he created the perfect gloss on the gangster genre. The interaction of voices, narrative spaces, gazes at the camera, winks, nods, and smiles acts to interrogate our response to the history of gangster films. Why do we believe anything we see in gangster films? Scorsese seems to ask.⁷⁰

For Kolker, *GoodFellas* is not only a detailed historical fiction about gangsters. It is also a deconstruction of the whole genre, a sophisticated and knowing examination of cinema history. *GoodFellas* manages to both appeal to critics seeking traditional storytelling as well as scholars like Kolker interested in more challenging representations.

The same could not be said of *Miller's Crossing*, the other gangster film released in 1990. In terms of the reflexivity described and celebrated by Kolker, the Coen brothers in fact go much further in their creation of a world that is clearly a representation based on cinematic models. Everything about the world of *Miller's Crossing* is artificial, including its view of the historical period being recreated. This kind of radical deconstruction alienated many critics who preferred *GoodFellas* and its more balanced mix of quotidian detail and stylistic flourish. Roger Ebert's reviews of the two respective films highlight this difference. In praising *GoodFellas*, Ebert writes that "Scorsese is the right director – the only director – for this material. He knows it inside out."⁷¹ The key to

⁷⁰ Kolker (2000), 201.

⁷¹ Roger Ebert, "GoodFellas," *Chicago Sun-Times* (September 2, 1990); available at <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19900902/REVIEWS/9020301/1023>

the film, for Ebert, is Scorsese's authenticity as an Italian-American director who grew up observing this gangster world. This is borne out by Scorsese's collaborator on the film, Nicolas Pileggi, who praises Scorsese's authenticity through, ironically enough, his earlier movie, *Mean Streets*: "While the wiseguys love *The Godfather*, seeing it as ennobling them, their favorite Mafia movie is Marty's *Mean Streets*... This is a home movie to them."⁷² Scorsese is thus the right director for Pileggi's non-fiction novel because the subjects themselves believed in Scorsese's accuracy in earlier depictions of their world.

By contrast, in critiquing *Miller's Crossing*, Ebert discusses its lack of realism: "*Miller's Crossing* is not quite as successful as it should be ...it seems like a movie that is constantly aware of itself, instead of a movie that gets on with business."⁷³ That being "aware of itself" may be part of the "business" of *Miller's Crossing* never enters Ebert's discussion. It would, however, be the focus of debates over American narrative cinema practice over the course of the next decade. In particular, these debates centered around familiar disagreements on modernist versus postmodernist art practice. With the widespread critical and commercial success of *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994), postmodernist film reached the mainstream of film journalism. Even Roger Ebert was impressed with the film, although he notably placed it second in his year best list behind the documentary *Hoop Dreams* (Steve James, 1994). In terms of its impact, *Pulp Fiction* has much in common with *GoodFellas*, despite the much greater box office success of the former. *Pulp Fiction* was very popular with mainstream critics, and quickly became

⁷² Kelly (2004), 268.

⁷³ Roger Ebert, "Miller's Crossing," *Chicago Sun-Times* (October 5, 1990); available at <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19901005/REVIEWS/10050306/1023>

one of the most canonized films of the decade.⁷⁴ However, unlike *GoodFellas*, *Pulp Fiction* also received a backlash due to its status as the representative of postmodernism within the context of American commercial cinema. These criticisms came from mainstream critics, from fellow filmmakers and from academics. As Jeffrey Sconce has detailed, the postmodern sensibility of many “independent” filmmakers began to be heavily critiqued as “nihilistic” within the popular press.⁷⁵ As the most recognizable member of this group, Tarantino in particular was often singled out. Filmmaker Paul Schrader, the screenwriter of *Taxi Driver* and other Scorsese films, has been the most vocal of other directors in their distinction between modernist and postmodernist approaches. Roger Ebert describes the difference as follows: “The existentialist hero wonders if life is worth living. The ironic hero is greatly amused by people who wonder about things like that. And there you have the difference between the work of Paul Schrader and Quentin Tarantino.”⁷⁶ In the same article, Schrader describes his understanding of the ironic or postmodern view of art: “Everything in the ironic world has quotation marks around it. You don’t actually kill somebody; you ‘kill’ them. It doesn’t matter if you put the baby in front of the runaway car because it’s only a ‘baby’”. Ebert agrees, stating that the postmodern scene isn’t about the baby, it’s “about scenes

⁷⁴ Like *GoodFellas*, *Pulp Fiction* overwhelmingly won the Best Film prize from the National Society of Film Critics as well as top prize at a major European film festival (Berlin for *GoodFellas*, Cannes for *Pulp Fiction*). In the 2002 *Sight and Sound* poll, *Pulp Fiction* received seven votes, as compared to six for *GoodFellas*.

⁷⁵ Jeffrey Sconce, “Irony, Nihilism and the New American ‘Smart’ Film,” *Screen* 43, no. 4 (Winter 2002): 349-369.

⁷⁶ Roger Ebert, “When *Taxi Driver* meets *Pulp Fiction*,” *Chicago Sun-Times* (February 9, 1997); available online at: <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19970209/COMMENTARY/22010337/1023>

about babies.”⁷⁷ It is this postmodern irony that would be so often accused of nihilism in the following decade.

This accusation of nihilism would extend beyond the journalistic realm detailed by Sconce. In the same book in which he praises the self-reflexivity of *GoodFellas*, Robert Kolker also argues against the rise of postmodern cinema. Furthermore, for Kolker, Tarantino and *Pulp Fiction* stand “as the acme of postmodern nineties filmmaking.”⁷⁸ Kolker sees Tarantino as representing the worse tendencies of postmodernism and at the same time revealing more general problems with this aesthetic:

Pulp Fiction is without theory or consequences, or it’s about laughing both off, and this itself is a great paradox within the postmodern.

Postmodernism theories abound, but, unlike modernism, the works that are theorized eschew theory themselves because they deny significance. They posit only their images, sounds, or words within their closed narrative worlds, snubbing a quest for resonance, history, politics. Modernism is the enemy of complacency, postmodernism its accomplice.⁷⁹

These modernism-postmodernism debates are hardly exclusive to the American cinema, of course, but they do function in a very specific manner. What results is the creation of a past “Golden Age” of American cinema represented by the 1970s and filmmakers such as Scorsese at the expense of more recent American films and filmmakers. It allows the continuation of a “great divide” between the modernism of the past and the postmodern mass culture of today. This argument relies on seeing Tarantino and *Pulp Fiction* as representatives of this aesthetic. As even as iconoclastic a modernist as Kolker admits that Tarantino represents only one pole of postmodernism. In contrast, Kolker does see that postmodern style can be a legitimate intervention in the culture:

⁷⁷ Ebert (1997)

⁷⁸ Kolker (2000), 249.

⁷⁹ Kolker (2000), 250-251.

At its best, the postmodern is an attempt to move beyond modernism, beyond the voice of the despairing author seeking coherence of form and structure in the face of an incoherent universe and to move toward an inclusive celebration of the death of meaning in which all art, high and low, is recognized as sharing a community of images and sounds.⁸⁰

In other words, the postmodern can move beyond the great divide of modernism and mass culture. But moving beyond this distinction also has the effect of displacing evaluation as an activity considered worthy of academic attention.

THE END OF EVALUATION (?): CANONIZATION IN THE POSTMODERN AGE

Throughout this study, I have repeatedly referenced the *Sight and Sound* Top Ten poll, conducted once every 10 years since 1952. I have relied on this poll for two reasons: (1) it is the most widely respected effort at canonization in the field of Film Studies; and (2) there is no other alternative academic canon to be found. The very issue of making evaluations has become a far more contentious issue in the last two decades. Even the *Sight and Sound* poll has become more aware of the politics involved in taste formations, even referencing Bourdieu in Ian Christie's introduction to the 2002 survey:

The implications of Bourdieu's work for such exercises as the ten-yearly poll are that we will never understand its mapping of taste unless we get serious about who's being asked to vote and what image of cinema culture they're trying to project. We would also need to think about what use is made of such lists; how they shape repertory cinemagoing (and programming) and video publishing and collecting. And we need to consider what preparation and lifestyle are involved in being able to enjoy, say, *Tokyo Story* and *8 ½* as well as *2001* and *Vertigo* – and what's different about the ways the latter two examples of Hollywood art cinema are appreciated by, for instance, a manual worker and a university teacher. There's no point in denying that this would be shocking for many

⁸⁰ Kolker (2000), 248.

cinephiles, who are precisely the self-deluding aesthetes Bourdieu identified, because cinema embodies for them an idealized vision of a democratic, international culture.⁸¹

Even those organizing the canonization process now recognize that making value judgments is contingent on many factors. Because it can no longer be seen in idealized terms within the academy, evaluation is mostly ignored. Some scholars can surveyed as part of the *Sight and Sound* survey, but academic writing and publishing rarely makes evaluation the focus.

As I discussed earlier, film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum has been very critical of the academy for this failure to evaluate. He argues that this has left the canonizing process in the hands of marketing forces rather than individuals with any knowledge of film aesthetics and history. Rosenbaum's argument is framed within a familiar modernist fear of the "dumbing down" of culture, and as such can be seen as conservative and reactionary in terms of taste. But Rosenbaum's critique of the American Film Institute (A.F.I.)'s "100 Years, 100 Movies" CBS television special is more than simply an elitist backlash. Rather, it is a concern about how uncritical the A.F.I. was of its own list, with films simply selected from the pantheon of successful Hollywood films of the past. As Rosenbaum argues:

(S)electing America's hundred greatest movies has to be an ongoing act of exploration – which can only happen if we stop to consider what we still don't know about the subject and try to set up some channels for educating ourselves. The sad news about the AFI's version is that it proposes we stop looking, go home, and proceed to pick more lint out of our navels for the next few decades.⁸²

Rosenbaum's own response was to set up an "Alternative One Hundred" list of American films, and then to publish his own canon of one thousand great films, *Essential Cinema*:

⁸¹ Ian Christie, "The Rules of the Game," *Sight and Sound* 12, no. 9 (September 2002): 27.

⁸² Rosenbaum (2000), 100.

On the Necessity of Film Canons (2004). The goal of these evaluative exercises is to prevent cinema culture from fossilizing around fewer and fewer films and to stop films that are less marketable from being ignored. This has occurred not only with popular lists like those of the AFI, but also with the *Sight and Sound* list, which in 2002 created a survey of the top films from the past twenty-five years because of the dearth of contemporary films in its poll.⁸³

Rosenbaum represents one of the few liminal figures between the world of academic and critical writing, just as Scorsese is between the worlds of filmmaking and film history. It should also be noted that Rosenbaum's arguments around canonization differ considerably from defenders of the canon in literary studies, such as Harold Bloom. Rosenbaum does not lament challenges to the canon. To the contrary, he encourages them, often from a leftist political perspective. What he argues is instead of having debates around notions of aesthetic value and politics, as was encouraged over two decades ago by Janet Staiger in her article on the politics of film canons, Film Studies has ignored the questions as unimportant. Not surprisingly, Rosenbaum responded positively to Scorsese's American cinema documentary because of its esoteric choices and celebration of lesser-known figures.⁸⁴ Scorsese discusses eighteen of the one hundred films on Rosenbaum's list as opposed to only ten on the AFI's survey. Of course, these choices corresponded with those of Andrew Sarris, the most influential taste maker on the baby boomer generation of which both Scorsese and Rosenbaum belong. Thus the choices were not surprising to cinephiles, but were nevertheless very much at odds with the AFI. Like Scorsese, Rosenbaum challenged the official, "traditional" history of the

⁸³ Nick James, "Modern Times," *Sight and Sound* 12, no. 12 (December 2002): 20-23.

⁸⁴ Rosenbaum (2004), 210-216.

industry to try to promote a more “effective” historical engagement with American film culture. But ultimately, Rosenbaum’s challenge is more radical because he is explicit about his evaluative stance. Scorsese may acknowledge his personal investment, but uses this to disavow the evaluation that is taking place. Because Scorsese is an acclaimed filmmaker, all of the selections are subsumed under his authorship. The films’ importance becomes partially reliant on its significance to Scorsese’s work rather than to the culture as a whole, which is where Rosenbaum’s concern always remains.

The combination of the lack of evaluation and the turn to history in Film Studies has led to the lack of current cinema featuring prominently in the *Sight and Sound* poll. This had a detrimental effect on the critical reception of Scorsese’s work during the nineties. While *The Age of Innocence*, *Casino*, and *Kundun* all received some positive and at times lavish reviews, none of these films have entered the Scorsese pantheon. Even *GoodFellas*, the last acknowledged Scorsese masterpiece, has not received the prominence of either *Taxi Driver* or *Raging Bull*. But this is not to suggest that Scorsese’s nineties films and their mostly positive reception have not been beneficial to Scorsese’s critical reputation. They have allowed Scorsese to accumulate more and more cultural prestige and reinforce his status as a great, if no longer innovative, filmmaker. This has subsequently allowed his “masterpieces” from the last “Hollywood Golden Age” to only grow in stature. No matter what the aesthetic quality of Scorsese’s nineties films, it seems clear they would not be canonized to the same degree as his earlier work. There was a critical consensus that the most exciting work to come out of the American cinema happened prior to the 1980s, and that the contemporary climate was simply not capable of producing films as distinguished.

Furthermore, cinema itself was now seen as reaching its end, with many “death of cinema” declarations in the popular press.⁸⁵ This was reflected in the crisis within film criticism and evaluation, as both Greg Taylor and Raymond Haberski have detailed. Taylor argues that the tradition of vanguard criticism popularized in the 1950s and 1960s led to the “retreat into theory” of the next decades and eventually to the contemporary situation:

Today’s highbrow film critic does not presume to evaluate; he merely explicates and interprets... The serious critic can now assume difficult judgment questions to be ‘beside the point,’ and best left for those common journalists still beholden to readers who insist on getting their money’s worth. Vanguard criticism does not allow the bar to be lowered so much as thrown away – or, rather, disavowed – by those who have cultivated a preference for the aesthetically incomplete, fractured, uncontrolled.⁸⁶

The golden ages of the various new wave youth movement cinemas, including the brief Hollywood Renaissance, also included a critical apparatus shifting away from traditional notions of what constituted film criticism. As Haberski writes in the conclusion to his study of films and critics in American culture, “although movies had accumulated cultural capital, that development had happened at the expense of more traditional notions of art and criticism.”⁸⁷ One of these traditional notions of art and criticism is evaluation and canon making:

The submovements that have driven academic film criticism since the 1970s – structuralism, poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, postmodernism, cultural studies, even cognitive narratology – have not simply directed focus away from traditional artist studies, aesthetic analysis, and canon review; they have made these activities seem naïve and retrograde.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ For example: Susan Sontag, “The Decay of Cinema,” *New York Times* (February 25, 1996); available online at <http://partners.nytimes.com/books/00/03/12/specials/sontag-cinema.html>; and David Denby, “The Moviegoers: Why Don’t People Love the Right Movies Anymore?” *The New Yorker* (April 6, 1998): 94-101.

⁸⁶ Taylor, 151.

⁸⁷ Haberski, 183.

⁸⁸ Taylor, 147.

As a result, the canonization process was left to middlebrow magazines like *Sight and Sound* in England and, less prestigiously, *Film Comment* in the United States. The *Sight and Sound* poll thus remains the closest to an academic canon we have, with the presence of scholars such as David Bordwell. In academia, canon making remains largely an implicit activity.

The implicit nature of evaluation within Film Studies has become even more pronounced with the move away from theory and towards history. Theory may have attempted to overturn past notions of evaluation, but it still retained a certain prescriptive basis in terms of what should be valued in films:

The terms of aesthetic discussion have certainly changed; for highbrows, the art of film now lies largely in the art of seized spectatorship, and the evaluation/canonization of texts is now based on the text's suitability as illustration for theories of spectatorial power (either as object of creative resistance/dominance, or model or an empowering cinema).⁸⁹

Taylor is discussing here the shift that occurs from the principles of auteurship to the standards of ideological criticism. Film theory tended to either praise alternative practices for their emancipation of the spectator or reconsider mainstream films in terms of their ideology. As I argued in Chapter Two, ideological critics were very important to the establishment of Scorsese's reputation. With the move to film history, however, the issue of evaluation has become much more implicit. Scorsese's own work as a film historian and archivist can serve as an example. Scorsese does not position his histories as evaluative, but rather as "personal" favorites that have shaped him as a filmmaker. This is especially the case with the American documentary, as I argued earlier, because of the less canonical status of the films compared those established classics in *My Voyage to*

⁸⁹ Taylor, 148.

Italy. Scorsese has no interest in overtly challenging any established taste distinctions, favoring instead a policy of inclusion. This philosophy extends to his archival work and his call for “no value judgments.”⁹⁰

But canonization is still very much in evidence here. Scorsese’s cultural status enables the films he admires to be featured in his documentary as well as in retrospectives organized around Scorsese and his influences. The result is the canonization of Scorsese and his films as the organizing principle of these projects. Despite the focus on celebrating the past, no films benefit more from Scorsese’s historical interests than his own. They are the central texts. This involves doing history in reverse. It matters more to trace the various influences on Scorsese films than to take a past work and examine how it influenced many subsequent directors. While not explicit, this is hardly work that is free of value judgments.

In the conclusion to his study *Artists in the Audience: Cults, Camp, and American Film Criticism*, Taylor makes an argument for the reintegration of evaluation into the Film Studies discipline:

Contextualizing (and rethinking) their aversion to judicious judgment would afford highbrow film scholars the opportunity to confront some of their prized distinction from middlebrow journalists. More important, it would encourage an acknowledgement and interrogation of those stubbornly modernist aesthetic biases which underlie their appreciation of movies yet also discourage analysis and promotion of elusive and difficult works not illustrative of theory.⁹¹

While Taylor’s prescriptive call for an acknowledgement, contextualization and interrogation of the process of evaluation may be useful or even needed within academic film studies, it certainly would not benefit Scorsese and his critical reputation. The

⁹⁰ Martin Scorsese, “Outline for a Preservation Strategy,” (1980) Scorsese File, Museum of Modern Art.

⁹¹ Taylor, 157.

modernist aesthetic biases Taylor mentions have made a distinction between Scorsese and the current postmodern filmmaking styles. The move towards history and away from evaluation have allowed for a perpetuation of the canon, and Scorsese's status as an artist-historian has subsequently assured his earlier canonized films to continue to garner critical attention. As a Hollywood filmmaker, his works continue to be discussed as examples of ideology and theory, unlike more elusive and difficult art that Taylor suggests would be more prominent in a different context. Scorsese's own non-evaluative stance towards film history and preservation is understandable given that the field of film production as it has evolved has been so beneficial to Scorsese's cultural prestige.

CASE STUDY: SCORSESE AND THE PRESENTATION OF THE *VERTIGO* "RESTORATION"

I want to conclude this chapter by briefly analyzing an example of film history and preservation in which Scorsese was indirectly involved: Universal's 1996 restoration of *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958). Neither Scorsese nor The Film Foundation undertook this project. The role Scorsese played was one of validation, using his cultural prestige in the field of film heritage to legitimate the work done on Hitchcock's original.

The archival work, performed by Robert Harris and James Katz, on *Vertigo* both preserved and restored the film. The preservation met with very little controversy, as it involved copying the film as faithfully as possible as well as treating and storing the original components. The restoration of the film, however, was far more contentious, since it involved making changes to the original formal decisions Hitchcock had made.

As a result, Harris, Katz and Universal were forced to offer justifications for their alterations to the text. When *Vertigo* was first released in its new format, it was accompanied by a documentary, *Obsessed With "Vertigo"* (Harrison Engle, 1997), which originally aired on American Movie Classics (AMC) and has subsequently been included on home video and DVD releases of the film. At the beginning of documentary, Harris and Katz explain why they undertook restoring *Vertigo*, citing three reasons: (1) the "greatness" of the film; (2) the "need" of archival work to preserve the film's original elements; and (3) the desire to re-release the film into theatres. Throughout the documentary, which is essentially a promotional piece for the new version, these three reasons are intertwined into a single argument. Thus the changes that were made to the film for commercial purposes (theatrical release) are justified by reference to Hitchcock as auteur (the greatness of the film) and the deterioration of the original print (the need for the restoration).

The interconnection between these elements can be seen in the structure of the documentary, which alternates between a typical production history of the making of the film and the details of the preservation and restoration process. The production history centers on the figure of Hitchcock as auteur, an artistic genius whose work needs to be preserved for future generations. The details of the preservation and restoration use similar rhetoric, admiring the technical skill of Hitchcock and stating that they want to preserve the "precise visual texture Hitchcock intended." But paradoxically, the restoration preserves Hitchcock by making changes to the original. This is especially the case with the film's sound track. Leo Enticknap argues that this is part of a general concession to commercial interests in sound design: "Whereas many public-sector film

archivists would not advocate the approach taken in this instance, restoration work carried out on a commercial basis will often be geared to a very different set of priorities.”⁹² Because of these alternations, Harris and Katz place an extra emphasis on authenticity. They state that they obtained contemporary recordings of a 1950s police revolver and of the exact cars used in the film.⁹³ And they emphasize that they were trying to honor Hitchcock’s intentions, making the film he would have made today if he had access to current technology. This has commercial motivations as well. Universal believed they could not present the film without modern “enhancement”, but they knew that they could not sell without Hitchcock’s name. This is why the documentary/promotional film is structured the way it is, cross-cutting between selling Hitchcock as an artist and selling the technological process as enhancing that artistry.

The role of Scorsese in the documentary is largely symbolic, and like the rest of the film works at reconciling the different goals of the restoration: the celebration of Hitchcock as auteur and the alternation of Hitchcock’s original vision for commercial purposes. When Scorsese appears as a talking head in the film, the caption below his name does not read “Film Director”, as one may expect. Instead, he is introduced as “Martin Scorsese, The Film Foundation”. Scorsese is not selected only because he is a critically acclaimed and well-known filmmaker, but because he is known for his work in film preservation. He thus helps to legitimate the preservation and restoration work done by the studio for its theatrical re-release. But what is especially curious is that although Scorsese is identified by his preservation work, he is completely silent on the actual restoration itself. Instead, Scorsese praises the film for being so “unabashedly personal”

⁹² Leo Enticknap, “Some Bald Assertion by an Ignorant and Badly Educated Frenchman: Technology, Film Criticism, and the ‘Restoration’ of *Vertigo*,” *The Moving Image* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 137.

⁹³ Enticknap, 137.

in nature and for its “disturbing” qualities. In other words, Scorsese focuses on the film’s authorial signature and its ideological subversion, the two main canonical approaches. Scorsese’s actual words are used to prove the film’s greatness, and his symbolic power and cultural prestige as a film preserver are used to prove the legitimacy of the restoration.

It is very telling that Scorsese is quiet on the actual restoration itself, and I would argue that this is not simply accidental. In this situation, Scorsese found himself in a familiar liminal position. At the time of the *Vertigo* restoration, Scorsese had just signed a contract with Universal studio. He completed *Casino* for the studio in 1995, and had earlier made *Cape Fear* in 1991 and *The Last Temptation of Christ* in 1988. As David Thompson and Ian Christie argue, “(w)hen Universal backed *The Last Temptation of Christ*, there was an understanding that Scorsese would go on to make more commercial film for them.”⁹⁴ One can view Scorsese’s participation in the documentary as similar to his making of *Cape Fear* for the studio as a back payment for *The Last Temptation*. However, while Scorsese does participate in praising Hitchcock and his work, he does not make any comments on the restoration itself. It is important to remember that Scorsese has for many years been an active advocate for “artists’ rights”. On March 15, 1995, Scorsese made a pitch on Capitol Hill for legislation that would grant filmmakers of the right to warn viewers of their objections to films that have been altered for commercial purposes (such as viewings on airlines, home video, and broadcast television).⁹⁵ The *Vertigo* restoration clearly contradicts this proposed legislation. Further evidence of Scorsese’s hesitation about the alterations to Hitchcock’s text can be

⁹⁴ *Scorsese on Scorsese*, 165.

⁹⁵ Dennis Wharton, “Scorsese plugs for artists’ rights on Hill,” *Variety* (March 20, 1995): 20.

seen in his recent short film/ commercial, *The Key to Reserva* (Martin Scorsese, 2007), an extended Hitchcock homage. The parody has Scorsese, playing himself, having discovered a three-page script for an unmade Hitchcock project and deciding to “restore” the film. Scorsese’s dialogue is clearly critiquing the rhetoric of the Universal restoration:

(I’m going to) make my own Hitchcock film. But it has to look, it has to be the way he would have made the picture then only making it now... But the way he would have made it then. If he was alive now making this now, he would make it now as if he made it back then... But his film, not mine, because I couldn’t.

This is meant to be comedic and absurd, but it is also remarkably close to the justification given by Harris and Katz in their argument that they were making alterations to *Vertigo* that Hitchcock himself would have made if he had access to newer technology.

The example of the *Vertigo* restoration shows how Scorsese’s prestige is often used (and/or abused) by the studios for commercial purposes. But Scorsese is also in a powerful enough position that he can use that same prestige to question the legitimacy of the studios and their actions. The liminal position of Scorsese as both Hollywood director and Hollywood outsider has meant that a remarkably high number of issues within the contemporary culture as a whole often have Scorsese playing a key role. This chapter has focused specifically on the issues of film history and preservation, but Scorsese is important to several other areas in the culture as well. This will be the subject of the final chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

WHAT IS SCORSESE?:

SCORSESE'S ROLE IN CONTEMPORARY POSTMODERN CULTURE

To conclude this study, I want to consider the anti-humanist question of what, rather than who, is Scorsese. This final chapter will consider the following questions: what is Scorsese's role within contemporary popular culture? How has Scorsese's role as film educator, director, preserver of the past, and cinema historian positioned him as a cultural figure? How have the postmodern shifts within the landscape of the past decades been negotiated by Scorsese? How has the Scorsese known as a popular media icon today been shaped by these changes? I will also consider the previous chapters and how the issues raised within each are influenced and transformed within the current environment.

I discussed previously how distinctions between high art and mass culture were breaking down in the 1960s, resulting in movies (particularly Hollywood movies) being taken more seriously than before. But this does not mean that these distinctions went away. In his book *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, Andreas Huyssen discusses how the rise of postmodernism in the 1970s challenged the modernist idea that high art had to be separated from the contamination of mass culture, but also notes that this attempt did not have any lasting effect. Thus, while Scorsese as a Hollywood figure has certainly benefited from the acceptance of popular film as a legitimate art form, the great divide remains. Furthermore, Scorsese, as noted in Chapter Two, has come to represent the last Golden Age of American film, which has been implicitly or even at times explicitly linked with modernist high art. Scorsese is often

positioned in opposition to postmodern culture, not only by academics like Robert Kolker but also fellow filmmakers like Paul Schrader. Scorsese's work outside of his feature films, as discussed in the previous chapters, has undoubtedly contributed to this reputation of Scorsese as a serious, modernist alternative by critics who view postmodern culture as a negative, "contaminating" force.

However, what makes Scorsese an intriguing figure is that he continues to circulate within this culture and thus cannot avoid being "contaminated" in some way. *Taxi Driver*, for example, may be something of a canonized museum piece, but it is also a part of the popular culture.¹ While the text itself continues to be the subject of critique and debate, it has also been transformed by its status as a popular cultural object. Many critics continue to simply treat *Taxi Driver* as an autonomous art object and deal with its internal features, but its textual meaning is constantly being negotiated through its status as an iconic film. The film's meaning can no longer (if it ever could be) be judged outside of these mediating influences (cartoons, posters, advertisements). Likewise, Scorsese himself has to be seen not only as a person but also as a text, continually being evaluated and re-evaluated not only by film critics but also within contemporary postmodern culture as a whole.

¹ Witness the numerous reviews of the film upon its 1996 20th anniversary re-release: Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Hell on Wheels," *Chicago Reader* (March 1, 1996), 37-39; Amy Taubin, "A Checkered Past," *Village Voice* (February 20, 1996), 64; and Manohla Dargis, "'It Just Jumped Out of My head Like an Animal': *Taxi Driver*, 20 Years Later," *Los Angeles Weekly* (February 16-22, 1996): 31-32.

TOO SMART, TOO SOON: MARTIN SCORSESE'S *THE KING OF COMEDY* AS PREDECESSOR OF AMERICAN INDEPENDENT CINEMA SENSIBILITY

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?

-Robin Wood²

The King of Comedy was right on the edge for us; we couldn't go any further at that time.

-Martin Scorsese³

I want to begin this chapter by going back to a film Scorsese makes following the critical success of *Raging Bull* in 1980. Released in 1983 to both box office indifference and occasional critical befuddlement, *The King of Comedy* has been one of the noted auteur's most neglected films. This neglect has very little connection to the film's lack of quality; rather, it is intimately related to the contingencies of its reception. Many years after the initial release of *The King of Comedy*, a whole group of films identified by Jeffrey Sconce as "the new American smart film"⁴ were being celebrated as amongst the greatest American films of our time. Not surprisingly, in recent years, the reputation of *The King of Comedy* began to grow.⁵ I want to trace the connections between Scorsese's

² Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986): 260.

³ *Scorsese on Scorsese* (edited by David Thompson and Ian Christie) (London: Faber and Faber, 1996): 92.

⁴ Jeffrey Sconce, "Irony, Nihilism and the New American 'Smart' Film," *Screen* 43, no. 4 (Winter 2002): 349-369.

⁵ By 1990, after the American Independent Cinema had begun to crossover into the mainstream with the huge success of *sex, lies and videotape* (Steven Soderbergh, 1989), *The King of Comedy* started to be re-evaluated, often positioned with other contemporary films that had been overlooked. For example: Stephen Mamber, "Parody, Intertextuality, Signature: Kubrick, DePalma, Scorsese," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 12, no. 1-2 (1990), 29-35; and Timothy Corrigan, "Spinning the Spectator: Fans and Terrorists in the Third Generation (*The King of Comedy*, *The Third Generation*, *My Beautiful Laundrette*)," in *A Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture After Vietnam* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991): 197-227. Most recently, noted film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum included the film in his article, "A Dozen Undervalued Movie Satires," with the telling comment: "I didn't warm to Martin Scorsese's own poisoned

work and these later films of the American Independent Cinema in order to re-situate the former as a key text in the evolution of American commercial art cinema over the past decades.

As a filmmaker, Scorsese is most strongly associated with the era of the New Hollywood Renaissance, usually felt to begin in 1967 with the commercial success of both *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967) and *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, 1967) and continue until 1981 with the commercial and critical disaster of *Heaven's Gate* (Michael Cimino, 1981). Since the fall of the New Hollywood, Scorsese has been seen as one of its most uncompromising survivors, being able to work within the system while maintaining his artistic integrity. Scorsese's relationship with the American Independent Cinema movement, that beginning roughly as the New Hollywood ends, was often ignored.⁶ This is despite the fact that his film *After Hours* (Martin Scorsese, 1985) won the prize for Best Feature at the first annual Independent Spirit Awards in 1986 and the fact that Scorsese and the New Hollywood in general are often regarded as major influences on independent directors.⁷ In fact, the myth of Scorsese as an outsider, despite his working within Hollywood on large budget features, mirrors the place of American Independent Cinema as being outside the Hollywood system even as it is increasingly co-opted by the major studios. Scorsese's recent Hollywood films, such as *GoodFellas*, *The Age of Innocence*, *Casino*, and *Bringing Out the Dead*, air on the Independent Film Channel (IFC), suggesting that "independent" film is often an aesthetic category rather

valentine to the world of show biz the first time I saw it, but it's grown steadily in stature ever since."

http://www.dvdbeaver.com/film/articles/dozen_undervalued_movie_satires.htm

⁶ "The late 1970s and start of the 1980s was a period in which the infrastructure (of American Independent Cinema) began to consolidate," Geoff King, *American Independent Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005): 20.

⁷ For example, see Amy Taubin, "Beyond the Sons of Scorsese," *Sight and Sound* 2, no. 9 (September 1992): 37. Also reprinted in *American Independent Cinema: A Sight and Sound Reader* (Edited by Jim Hillier) (London: British Film Institute, 2001): 89-92.

than a strictly commercial one.⁸ But Scorsese's film with the most direct influence on this movement is not any of these more well-known commercial films or his canonized classics. Instead, the relatively unknown *The King of Comedy* is closest to an American Independent Cinema sensibility.

This sensibility, according to Jeffrey Sconce, emerged in particular force in the mid-to-late 1990s, with such films as *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (Todd Solondz, 1995), *Safe* (Todd Haynes, 1995), *Citizen Ruth* (Alexander Payne, 1996), *The Ice Storm* (Ang Lee, 1997), *In the Company of Men* (Neil LaBute, 1997), *Happiness* (Todd Solondz, 1998), *Rushmore* (Wes Anderson, 1998), *Election* (Alexander Payne, 1999), and *Your Friends and Neighbors* (Neil LaBute, 1999), to list just some of the most telling examples. Sconce notes that in the ten years from 1991 to 2001, this "New Smart Cinema" emerged to the point that it became a marketing strategy:

In 1991, Richard Linklater's docudrama of hipster anomie, *Slacker*, not only captured aspects of this sensibility through its desultory formal structure, but also served as a veritable ethnographic record of the emerging collegiate/bohemian subculture of irony that would so dominate popular taste in 1990s culture. Ten years later, Terry Zwigoff's and Dan Clowes's collaboration on *Ghost World* (2001) updated the slacker lexicon for a new generation while demonstrating the contemporary film industry's complete integration of such disaffection as a marketing target and strategy. 'Accentuate the negative', read the ad campaign.⁹

Released within this particular climate, one could expect *The King of Comedy* to have fared very well, certainly critically if not commercially.¹⁰ But there was no such

⁸ King (2005) defines independent cinema through five considerations, to which he devotes a chapter each: Industry, Narrative, Form, Genre, and Alternative Visions. As he states: "Industrial factors are important, but do not provide the only grounds for definition of the particular varieties of filmmaking to which the label independent has most prominently been attached in recent decades." (9)

⁹ Sconce, 350.

¹⁰ It should be noted that none of the films Sconce mentions were big box office successes. The difference is, however, is that they were made cheaply and aimed at this small demographic; thus they were not considered failures. *The King of Comedy*, however, was made as a studio film with big stars and was intended for a more general audience. As discussed in Chapter Three, Scorsese would shoot his next film,

identified group to target back in 1982, which led to the Fox studio actually shelving the film for a period, eventually releasing it in February 1983.¹¹ Fox had marketing difficulties because the film's audience had not yet been targeted as a demographic. Because there was not yet a "smart aesthetic" (a shared set of stylistic and thematic practices), there was also not a "smart set" (a sociocultural formation informing the circulation of such films).¹²

The King of Comedy can be seen as the dividing point between the New Hollywood out of which Scorsese emerges and the soon to develop Independent sensibility. The film marks a striking stylistic departure for Scorsese: both the documentary style realism of Method performances and locations and the expressive use of the mobile camera, lighting, editing and sound of his earlier work are almost entirely absent.¹³ Both Stephen Mamber and Robert Kolker have commented on this break with Scorsese's usual style:

The Scorsese trick is to ape the flatness of TV style, abandoning the tracking shot mannerisms and elaborate flourish visual effects more generally characteristic of his style. Filming often as if he were shooting a three camera video sitcom, Scorsese was so successful in re-creating a TV style that once more the parody could lapse into indistinguishability from the backgrounded text. TV within the film and film as parodied TV style continually interchange.¹⁴

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

After Hours (1985) much more quickly and cheaply and aim it at a smaller audience. This fiscal responsibility led to Scorsese directing *The Color of Money* (1986), also made relatively quick and cheap and turning a fine profit, allowing Scorsese back into Hollywood filmmaking.

¹¹ Les Keyser, *Martin Scorsese* (New York: Twayne Publishing, 1992): 137.

¹² Sconce, 352.

¹³ For a detailed description of Scorsese as an auteur signature, see Patrick Phillips, "Genre, Star and Auteur – Critical Approaches to Hollywood Cinema," in *An Introduction to Film Studies* (Second Edition) (edited by Jill Nelmes) (London: Routledge, 1999): 202-203.

¹⁴ Mamber, 32.

for some fantasy sequences, remains close to the standard shot/ reverse shot pattern of television and ordinary filmmaking.¹⁵

In addition, at the level of character and performance, the creative vigor also seems to be missing. Instead of the tormented, anguished, violent, yet energetic characters of previous De Niro/Scorsese creations like Johnny Boy of *Mean Streets*, Travis Bickle of *Taxi Driver*, Jimmy Doyle of *New York, New York*, or Jake LaMotta of *Raging Bull*, in *The King of Comedy* we have Rupert Pupkin, a rather 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 Harvey Keitel or Joe Pesci.

Even film critic Roger Ebert, normally a staunch Scorsese supporter, was also confused by the picture:

Martin Scorsese's *The King of Comedy* is one of the most arid, painful, wounded movies I've ever seen. It's hard to believe Scorsese made it; instead of the big-city life, the violence and sexuality of his movies like *Taxi Driver* and *Mean Streets*, what we have here is an agonizing portrait of lonely, angry people with their emotions all tightly bottled up. This is a movie that seems ready to explode – but somehow it never does ... *The King of Comedy* is not, you may already have guessed, a fun movie. It is also not a bad movie. It is frustrating to watch, unpleasant to remember, and, in its own way, quite effective. It represents an enormous departure for Scorsese, whose movies teemed with life until he filmed this emotional desert, and whose camera used to prowl restlessly until he nailed it down this time. Scorsese and De Niro are the most creative, productive director/actor team in the movies right now, and the fact that they feel the freedom to make such an odd, stimulating, unsatisfying movie is good news, I guess. But *The King of Comedy* is the kind of film that makes you want to go and see a Scorsese movie.¹⁶

¹⁵ Robert Philip Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness: Penn, Kubrick, Scorsese, Spielberg, Altman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988): 209.

¹⁶ Roger Ebert, "The King of Comedy," *Chicago Sun-Times* (May 15, 1983); available on-line at <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19830515/REVIEWS/50420001/1023>.

In addition to the stylistic differences noted by Mamber and Kolker, Ebert mentions here both the lack of release and the lack of a “satisfying” conclusion. These comments are intriguing because in many ways *The King of Comedy* has similarities to Scorsese’s previous films, *Taxi Driver* and *Raging Bull*, both of which can also be described as “painful, wounded” movies about “lonely, angry people”. The difference is the sense of release (or entertainment) given to the audience by these films. *Raging Bull*, for example, features the highly expressive, violent fight scenes that act as a catharsis for the audience, allowing for an emotional release (the scene of the audience getting splattered with blood during LaMotta’s final fight is a good example of this).¹⁷ Similarly, *Taxi Driver* ends with a violent climactic shootout in which Travis Bickle slaughters a pimp and his associates in order to save the character of Iris from prostitution, however ironic the film may be about his “heroism”.

The ending of *The King of Comedy* is similarly ironic. But we are not given the element of spectacle in this film that we are given at the end of *Taxi Driver*. Thus the film is even more uncomfortable for the audience, primarily due to its heavy use of the emotion of embarrassment, a theme that has been discussed by both Timothy Corrigan and William Ian Miller.¹⁸ Embarrassment had been used by Scorsese before, most effectively in *Taxi Driver* during the now famous shot in which Scorsese moves his

¹⁷ As discussed earlier, the conclusion of the documentary *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls* stands as an example of how the meaning of this scene can be easily transformed. In the original film it represents the tragic ending of LaMotta’s career and the beginning of his descent, and his defiant “you never got me down” becomes almost comically absurd. However, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls* uses the scene as a metaphor for Scorsese’s own battle with the Hollywood studio system and views the scene triumphantly (complete with the musical opening of Joe Walsh’s “Life’s Been Good to Me So Far”). This seems to confirm Pam Cook’s critique of the film’s tragic structure that mourns rather than celebrates the loss of masculinity. See Cook, “Masculinity in Crisis?” *Screen* 23, no. 4 (September/October 1982): 39-46.

¹⁸ William Ian Miller, “I Can Take a Hint’: Social Ineptitude, Embarrassment, and *The King of Comedy*,” in *The Movies: Texts, Reception, Exposures* (edited by Laurence Goldstein and Ira Konigsberg) (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996): 76-97.

camera away from the 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 a multitude of embarrassing situations. As Corrigan and Miller both discuss, 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.¹⁹

Embarrassment is also contagious; that is, we can catch it from another who does feel it. In these instances it is not the case that we are feeling embarrassed by what the other is feeling embarrassed by --- that would simply be another example of vicarious embarrassment. The contagion of embarrassment is a function of the fact that the display of embarrassment can itself be embarrassing... Certain depicted emotions, like embarrassment, because contagious and vicariously experienceable, prompt the reproduction of themselves in the viewer; other emotions cannot reproduce themselves.²⁰

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 earlier films assaulted the viewer. But this emotion is even more of a confrontation with the spectator than violence. In *Taxi Driver*, Scorsese moved away from Travis Bickle's embarrassment, not his violence. The film was a box-office success, partly, as Robert Ray has argued, because it was able to appeal to the "naïve" audience, who could read the film as another in the *Death Wish* (Michael Winner, 1974) cycle of vigilante films.²¹ With *The King of Comedy*, this "double" reading is not really possible, leading to its commercial failure. It is impossible

¹⁹ Corrigan, 207.

²⁰ Miller, 79.

²¹ Robert B. Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985): 351.

because embarrassment, as opposed to the spectacle of violence, is not something an audience looking for traditional Hollywood entertainment wants to experience.

It is, however, an emotion common to many of the films of the American Independent Cinema movement. Many of these auteurs, from Alexander Payne to Wes Anderson to Neil LaBute, seem to deliberately construct moments in which the audience may cringe and even turn away while watching their films. The master of this type of comedy (if that is even the appropriate term) is Todd Solondz, whose work is designed to produce discomfort: "Solondz makes feel-bad films. In the indie coal mine, Solondz is the canary. So long as someone whose voice is as dystopian as his can continue to be heard, there's still hope."²² His first film to receive a wide distribution, *Welcome to the Dollhouse*, presents the various humiliations of an unpopular junior high school student, shown in a blank, matter-of-fact style that adds to the disturbance. Solondz takes this to a further extreme in his next film, *Happiness*, which most critics consider his masterpiece to date. Not only does Solondz deal with such issues as pedophilia, he also films this pedophilic relationship using the most conventional of cinematic techniques:

A light, airy romantic refrain wells up on the soundtrack as Bill Maplewood catches sight of the object of his desire. Yearning strings play over images of his gaze; a more playful flute trills over two medium close-ups, giving us his point of view. This is a very familiar movie confection, and just a passing moment in *Happiness*. But it is situated in a context that makes it, in its quiet way, extraordinarily transgressive, beyond the bounds of anything that could be conceived in a product of the Hollywood mainstream. The object of Bill's desiring gaze is, of course, a young boy, 11 year-old Johnny Grasso, who he will proceed to drug and (off-screen) anally rape in the following scenes. What makes this brief sequence described above so unusual is precisely the extent to which it relies on cinematic devices of such banal conventionality: the use of music, especially romantic music, to indicate emotional states, and editing based around eye-line match shots to reveal the object of desire and to heighten

²² Peter Biskind, *Down and Dirty Pictures: Miramax, Sundance, and the Rise of Independent Film* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004): 298.

(progressively closer shots of both protagonists are used) the implied degree of yearning. The effect, normal enough in other situations but extremely uncomfortable here, is to implicate the viewer, to some extent, in the economy of desire that is on display.²³

Because of the importance of this ironic tone that puts audience discomfort at the core of the viewing experience, Solondz and many others of the indie movement are difficult filmmakers to discuss and appreciate in purely formalist terms. Their films need to be placed relationally within the culture because so much of their impact relies on an oppositional sensibility rather than an obviously oppositional style.

It is precisely this tone that helps define this “smart aesthetic” that emerges from indie films: “The new smart cinema has for the most part re-embraced classical narrative strategies, instead experimenting with *tone* as a means of critiquing ‘bourgeois’ taste and culture.”²⁴ Crucial to this tone is the notion of irony, of a distance from characters and events that expresses itself as stylistically distinct from the New Hollywood:

A centerpiece of the 1990s smart film might best be termed ‘blank’ style ... a series of stylistic choices mobilized to signify dispassion, disengagement and disinterest. Often this stylistic strategy is manifested most basically through framing and editing patterns. Surveying these films, one cannot help but be struck by the frequent (even dominant) use of long-shots, static composition and sparse cutting. Vibrant editing and camera movement, so pivotal to 1970s American art cinema, would seem to have been usurped in 1990s smart cinema by a preference for static mise-en-scene and longer shot lengths.²⁵

This lack of “vibrancy” is precisely what many felt *The King of Comedy* was missing when it first appeared on the cultural scene; but seen retrospectively, the film is a key transitional text, marking a move away from the stylistic cinematic

²³ King (2005), 197.

²⁴ Sconce, 352.

²⁵ Sconce, 359.

excess of the New Hollywood Renaissance towards the greater minimalism of the independent movement.

At the most obvious level, *The King of Comedy* has grown in reputation as its vision of the madness of America's obsession with celebrity has seemed less like an exaggeration and more like a reality, not unlike that of another noted satire of television, *Network* (Sidney Lumet, 1976), although it lacks this film's histrionics. It has also benefited from its oppositional relationship with the growing development of what Justin Wyatt has termed "high concept" style, which started to emerge at this time and became a dominant tendency in Hollywood by the end of the 1980s.²⁶ As I argued in my discussion of *The Color of Money* in Chapter Three, high concept connected the products of the New Hollywood art cinema with a disreputable and critically disparaged style. This can be seen as influencing independent filmmakers towards a more "blank", ironic approach as a means of differentiating themselves.

The shifting nature of cinematic style and the notion of art during this period of transition are both evident in the following comments made by Scorsese about the film:

When it (*The King of Comedy*) was shown on the first night at the Cannes Festival, I went backstage with Sergio Leone and he looked at me and said, 'Martin, that's your most mature film.' I don't know if it was his way of saying he didn't like it. I guess that comes to mind because over the years my friends and I have had a running joke about slow movies, where the camera doesn't move, as being 'mature'. I read in the *Village Voice* that Jim Jarmusch, who made *Stranger Than Paradise* and *Down by Law* said something like, 'I'm not interested in taking people by the hair and telling them where to look.' Well, I *do* want them to see the way I see. Walking down the street, looking quickly about, tracking, panning, zooming, cutting and all that sort of thing. I like it when two images go together and they move. I guess it may not be considered 'mature', but I enjoy it.²⁷

²⁶ Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994).

²⁷ *Scorsese on Scorsese*, 88.

These comments are compelling for a number of reasons. First of all, the fact that Leone, hardly the most subdued filmmaker, praises the film along these lines points to a certain movement within the cultural field away from the expressionist impulse of 1960s and 1970s art cinema. Second, this shift can be seen personified in the figure of Jarmusch, one of the first independent directors and the one closest to defining a new ironic, postmodern indie sensibility that would eventually emerge. Finally, Scorsese's comments link *The King of Comedy* to this new style while also noting how different he normally is as a filmmaker from the movement as a whole. In terms of position taking, Scorsese has aligned himself with the New Hollywood style, thus leaving *The King of Comedy* in a state of limbo, neither in the style of the New Hollywood but also not made by an independent director. This accounts for the film's original neglect as well as its reconsideration once independent cinema had defined its own position against that of the high concept Hollywood style. As Sconce argues:

The choice to trade in blank irony – a move made by so many filmmakers in the 1990s – exemplifies Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'position-taking', a means of distinguishing one's work in relation to a larger aesthetic and cultural field of production. For 'smart' cinema to exist, after all, someone or something else must be perceived and portrayed as 'stupid', a demarcation that can understandably lead to conflict.²⁸

The advantage current films entering this marketplace have is that this position has been defined and its audience now well established, if still marginal. The films are occasionally controversial, but they nevertheless can find an audience and even use this controversy within the marketplace. There is cultural conflict, but that conflict has now been structured into both the text and the marketing of these movies. It is also mitigated,

²⁸ Sconce, 353.

as Sconce notes, by the popularity of this sensibility on television with such programs as *Beavis and Butthead* (1992-1997), *Seinfeld* (1989-1999) and *The Simpsons* (1989-).²⁹

The conflict created by these ironic films and television shows resulted in the culture wars of the 1990s, in which cultural works made in this ironic style were heavily criticized for a moral relativism. This echoes the response to *The King of Comedy* by Pauline Kael, who felt the film was a sick joke by Scorsese on his own experience with *Taxi Driver* and the resulting assassination attempt on President Ronald Reagan in 1981 by John Hinckley.³⁰ Kael writes:

In an inchoate, under-the-surface way, the material (which Zimmerman wrote in the early seventies) is affected by an offscreen presence: John W. Hinckley, Jr. The story has a basic, generic resemblance to *Taxi Driver* ... Despite Scorsese's pulling away from the implications of the plot, it's pretty hard to watch this movie without, in the back of your mind, thinking of Johnny Carson and other celebrity performers, and of the loonies out there with their hawklike determination to get at the stars. You can't help thinking: *The King of Comedy* is a training film for pests, and worse.³¹

This added context of the film being in possible bad taste following the assassination added to the film's level of discomfort, especially since the film subjects this material to

²⁹ Sconce, 354. With regards to *Seinfeld*, one of the show's stars, Jason Alexander, was very skeptical about the possibility for the program's success. In a retrospective documentary included on the DVD box set (*Seinfeld Volume 1*), he recalls saying to the show's co-creator, Jerry Seinfeld, that the show will never work: "The only people who will like this show are people like me, and I don't watch television." In other words, Alexander felt that *Seinfeld* was "too smart" for television. However, one can explain its success in part to the growing popularity of independent cinema and the growing backlash against "dumb" movies and television. The same year *Seinfeld* premieres, independent cinema has its first major success: *sex, lies and videotape*.

³⁰ Although this incident has become infamous, it is worth recounting briefly. Hinckley, a figure who clearly identified with the lead character of *Taxi Driver*, became obsessed with the film and its young co-star, Jodie Foster. He then attempted to assassinate Reagan to gain her attention, not unlike the assassination attempt in *Taxi Driver*. As a result, Scorsese and his film came under a certain amount of scrutiny and criticism for inciting violence. One should also note the then recent assassination in New York City of John Lennon by Mark Chapman as a further context to the film.

³¹ Pauline Kael, "Jokers," in *The New Yorker* 59 (March 7, 1983). Reprinted in *Taking It All In* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1985): 460-461.

comedy.³² For a recent example, one can cite Gilbert Gottfried's joke about the tragedy of 9/11 a few months after the events, in which an audience member shouts "too soon" after Gottfried's distasteful remark, "My flight made an unexpected stop at the Empire State Building."³³ In fact, as Sconce notes, many commentators cited 9/11 as the end of the age of irony that so characterized the 1990s.³⁴ In the case of *The King of Comedy*, taking place at the outset of the conservative 1980s, the age of irony had not yet begun.

Sconce noted two major themes running through smart cinema: "interpersonal alienation within the white middle class (usually focused on the family) and alienation within contemporary consumer culture".³⁵ These are also the main major points of emphasis in *The King of Comedy*. Robin Wood wrote an extensive analysis of the film's use of irony as a critique of the family and its repressiveness, and has related this to the film's alternative vision in comparison to the mainstream of American film:

The absurdity of Rupert's status as celebrity – the total emptiness of this new signifier of success, stardom, king, father – is firmly held. The emptiness of *King of Comedy* against the plenitude of *Ordinary People* (Robert Redford, 1980): no wonder the public, the establishment press, the Motion Picture Academy, in short, America, preferred the latter. Yet it is the emptiness of Scorsese's film that exposes the illusoriness of *Ordinary People*'s plenitude, by subjecting to analysis the structures through which it is achieved and the cost of the patriarchal process to the human psyche, both male and female.³⁶

As Wood argued, *The King of Comedy* succinctly combined the two dominant themes of 90s indie cinema: the film exposed the banality of both the middle-class family and the media culture in which the simulacrum of identity counts for more than reality. But it was

³² Keyser also notes contemporary reviews by Stephen Harvey in *Inquiry* and Marilyn Beck in the *New York Daily News* that refer to the film as, respectively, Scorsese's "sickest joke" and "most irresponsible film": 134, 138.

³³ This event is recounted in the film *The Aristocrats* (Paul Provenza, 2005).

³⁴ Sconce, 354. Sconce attributes the phrase "the end of the age of irony" to Graydon Carter of *Vanity Fair* and notes that it was quoted in numerous publications in the months following the tragedy.

³⁵ Sconce, 364.

³⁶ Wood, 269.

also one of the only films to question the dominant values of what Andrew Britton, writing in 1986, dubbed “Reaganite entertainment”:

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.³⁷

By the 1990s, an independent cinema sensibility emerged precisely because of the conventionality of Hollywood at this period in history. Without a space available within this system, unconventional films moved into the low budget independent arena. The aesthetic changes from a heightened expressionism to a blank irony, was partly because of budgetary concerns, but also was a reaction to the co-opting of art cinema techniques by the market-driven stylistic of high concept. *The King of Comedy* predated and anticipated these changes; thus, although it remains a stylistic anomaly in Scorsese’s career, the film was a part of a cultural shift in contemporary art cinema. The film remains an important signpost for the future as well as a commentary on the movies of its time.

Unlike Scorsese’s earlier films, by the time of *The King of Comedy* there was no longer an American film culture that encouraged or even allowed for challenging work. As a result, *The King of Comedy* offered no sense of aesthetic release: the audience was not only trapped with obnoxious, unappealing and empty characters, it was also given a style that turns the motion picture into a television screen. One almost expects the final credit to read, like Jean-Luc Godard’s *Weekend* (1967), “Fin du Cinéma.” This sense of American cinema’s dead end was borne out by Scorsese’s following films, *After Hours*

³⁷ Andrew Britton, “Blissing Out: The Politics of Reaganite Entertainment,” *Movie* 31/32 (1986): 2.

and *The Color of Money*. In particular, *The Color of Money* can be seen as very much in the vein of a high concept film with its two major movie stars and its status as a sequel. To return to the quote from Scorsese that begins this section, the “we” that could not go any further at that time was not only himself and his collaborators, but the New Hollywood as well. At the same time, while *The King of Comedy* might have represented an “anomaly” and a “dead end” for Scorsese personally, it also represented a new “departure” for American cinema as well, a departure that would be explored fully with the rise of the American independent film movement.

SCORSESE AND NEW TECHNOLOGY

Scorsese’s relationship with American Independent Cinema is a microcosm for his other interactions with postmodern culture. Scorsese has clear affinities with American indie filmmakers but also needs to make himself distinct from them and align himself with the previous modernist Golden Age of the New Hollywood. This is similar to Scorsese’s relationship with technological changes in the film industry. Scorsese’s attitude to the various media through which cinema circulates shifted as his career progressed. In fact, examining Scorsese’s relationship to technology can be causally explained by his particular status within the industry at various historical moments.

Scorsese is often regarded as a cinema purist, someone with a passion for the medium of celluloid film. This is juxtaposed with others of his generation, such as Francis Ford Coppola and George Lucas, who are more associated with the rise of digital technology. Scorsese, on the other hand, is seen as someone who still cares passionately

about the “film as film.”³⁸ This can be traced to his campaign for color preservation in the early 1980s and his growing reputation as an obsessive cinephile constantly screening the masterpieces of the past. Scorsese’s films seemed to support this reading, with their many references to the materiality of the cinematic image: the opening credits of *Mean Streets* with its home movie projector; the obsessive cinema-going of Charlie in *Mean Streets* and Travis in *Taxi Driver*; the Classical Hollywood homage, complete with Academy ratio, of *Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore*; the musical *New York, New York*, with its deliberately artificial look (and a film Scorsese also wanted to shoot in the old Academy ratio); and *Raging Bull*, with both its black and white cinematography and color 8 mm home movie footage (deliberately scratched and faded by Scorsese to suggest decay). When Scorsese did deal with television with *The King of Comedy*, it was in the form of a satirical critique of the medium. Of all the filmmakers of his generation, Scorsese has associated himself most with cinema as a specific form, and this has been an important influence on his growing reputation.

Other technologies played a huge factor in Scorsese’s moviemaking and in his extra-filmic activity. Scorsese has stated that he consciously avoided the widescreen format during the 1980s because he knew the films would be panned and scanned for video and television.³⁹ Scorsese acknowledged that films no longer circulated exclusively or even primarily in movie theatres. It was only in 1991, with *Cape Fear*, that

³⁸ For example, see David A. Cook, “Auteur Cinema and the ‘Film Generation’ in 1970s Hollywood,” in *The New American Cinema* (ed. Jon Lewis) (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998): 11-37. Cook writes: “Scorsese may be the only director of ‘the film generation’ who still passionately cares about the medium *as such*. This is evident in his own work as from his tireless efforts on behalf of film preservation and restoration, which extend from the resurrection of 70mm epics like *Lawrence of Arabia* (David Lean, 1962) and *El Cid* (Anthony Mann, 1961) to the reissue on videocassette of classics like Michael Powell’s *Black Narcissus* (1947) or Nicholas Ray’s *Johnny Guitar* (1954).” (28)

³⁹ Gregory Solman, “Anamorphobia,” in *Projections 4: Filmmakers on Filmmaking* (ed. John Boorman et al) (London: Faber and Faber, 1995): 29-39.

Scorsese switched to the widescreen aspect ratio (2.35:1). Scorsese argued that the technology of widescreen television was on the way and would make panning and scanning less of a problem, and that laserdisc players would allow home viewers the opportunity to view the films in the correct format. Scorsese was mistaken by about a decade in how long this transition to widescreen televisions and video formats would take. It is also debatable if this was the only reason for Scorsese's decision. By 1991, Scorsese returned to big budget Hollywood films. An action thriller such as *Cape Fear* is typically shot in the widescreen format, and Scorsese's resistance to this may well have caused problems with Universal studio, which supported Scorsese on *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Furthermore, Scorsese would make historical films for most of the next decade and would have had trouble securing the funding needed if he had insisted on not using widescreen. Scorsese justified this decision by turning his attention towards home video technology as a complement to his advocacy of the medium of celluloid.

The same year that Scorsese switched to widescreen filmmaking with 1991's *Cape Fear*, he participated in the laser disc releases of *Taxi Driver* and *Raging Bull*. Scorsese recorded an audio commentary for both films and each disc included a wealth of "supplementary material". This was still an unusual phenomenon within the mainstream industry at the time, leading to an article in *Entertainment Weekly* that included an interview with Scorsese in which he calls tape "antiquated".⁴⁰ Steve Daly's piece on the two films amounts to an advertisement for the laser disc format, and the choice of Scorsese as the figure to promote this was another demonstration of Scorsese's unique position. Scorsese's films were familiar enough with mainstream audiences for a popular entertainment magazine to use them as an example. The Criterion Collection of laser

⁴⁰ Steve Daly, "Technical Knockout," *Entertainment Weekly* (February 15, 1991): 73.

discs at that time released many critically acclaimed films, but none with the mainstream crossover appeal of a figure like Scorsese (the article even mentioned that Scorsese was shooting the remake of *Cape Fear* at the time). At the same time, Scorsese's prestige was such that the laser disc format could be promoted as an elite technology aiming at serious fans of the cinema. Scorsese himself argued that the laser discs are "an invaluable tool for learning"⁴¹ due to the amount of supplementary material provided, citing the Criterion Collection's *The Magnificent Ambersons* as an exemplar. But *The Magnificent Ambersons* was an example of an academic approach to a classic film that had little chance of crossing over into the mainstream.⁴² The Criterion versions of *Taxi Driver* and *Raging Bull* were very different and have all the material that would eventually become standard on DVD editions of today: audio commentary with the director and other members of the creative team; storyboards of sequences; shooting scripts; and interviews with individuals involved with the production.

Also prefiguring DVD is the way in which these Scorsese laser discs offered themselves up as something more than a lesser reproduction of the original cinematic experience. With videotape and the programming of movies on television or cable, there was always the argument that one was watching something different or inferior to the filmic event. Home technology was more convenient, but even casual viewers would not make the argument that it was superior in any other way. By contrast, the Criterion home

⁴¹ Daly, 43.

⁴² The Criterion Collection started making laser discs in 1984 with the release of a special edition of *Citizen Kane*. Their focus was mainly classical Hollywood films and art house staples, with a few rare contemporary films such as *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982), *The Princess Bride* (Rob Reiner, 1987) and *Ghostbusters* (Ivan Reitman, 1984). None of these films had nearly the same level of critical prestige as Scorsese's films.

video releases of *Taxi Driver* and *Raging Bull* offer something different that, as Steve Daly argues, can be seen as superior to the experience of a theatrical re-release:

Each of these laser discs offers a more richly rewarding way to watch and re-watch Scorsese's work than any theatrical reissue could. By lending his voice and archival materials to Voyager's efforts and convincing several key collaborators to contribute as well, Scorsese has helped transform two movies about violent, unsympathetic characters into engaging, thought-provoking, and intensely pleasurable experiences.⁴³

The rhetoric here moved away from looking at home video as an inferior technology to cinema and signaled the move towards a new kind of "home film culture."⁴⁴ Earlier I discussed the emergence of what Barbara Klinger dubbed the "hardware aesthetic" in which films become valued for their capacity to fully display home theatre technology. This has become more prominent as DVD has become more widespread, and can be seen in the DVD release of *Raging Bull*, as I mentioned in Chapter Three. But Scorsese generally was used to promote a very different home video culture that focused both on technological improvement and cultural prestige.

Klinger has used the term "new media aristocrats" to describe the transformation of a low-brow technology like television into the high-brow idea of "home theatre".⁴⁵ As Klinger stated, "public discourse on home theatre define its machines of reproduction as possessing special qualities that bestow 'titles of cultural nobility' on the viewers who use them."⁴⁶ This takes place at multiple levels, involving both economic and cultural capital, and these levels merge effectively with a figure like Scorsese. As early as 1988, Scorsese's cultural prestige was used in advertisements for high-end home theatre equipment. The advertisement for Mitsubishi, titled "Martin Scorsese On Television,"

⁴³ Daly, 74.

⁴⁴ Klinger (2006), 11.

⁴⁵ Klinger (2006), 20.

⁴⁶ Klinger (2006), 20.

began by establishing Scorsese's reputation as an artist: "Martin Scorsese is challenging. Like his pictures."⁴⁷ The advertisement then focuses on Scorsese's preservation efforts, using Scorsese's actual quotes on preservation that he first made during the colour campaign against Kodak. This idea of preservation was linked to television as a medium. Scorsese is quoted as stating:

'I have TV on all the time, in every room. I have a library, American directors, obscure films, maybe 4,000 titles. It appears that my own films may have more of life on home video than in the theater. This means that composition, lighting, size of people in the frame will be affected, as will the choice of black and white or color, mono or stereo.

You have to be sure what you want to say will have as full an impact on the small screen as on the big screen.'

Scorsese's role as a preserver and his role as a collector were transferred from the medium of cinema to the medium of television as an attempt to increase the cultural prestige of the later. Mitsubishi used this as a means of promoting their ability to convert the cinematic vision of great directors to the small screen: "The cinematic visions of filmmakers like Martin Scorsese challenge the manufacturer to offer video equipment capable of capturing the totality of their art in all its subtlety and nuance. Mitsubishi accepts that challenge." The discourse here is similar to the marketing of Criterion laser discs, and the use of Scorsese to fulfill this role shows what Scorsese had already come to represent by 1988: the Hollywood director most associated with film art, and thus ironically an icon with a niche marketability.

Not surprisingly, this made Scorsese a key figure in the promotion of movie cable channels, including classical movie channels like TCM (Turner Classic Movies) and AMC (American Movie Classics). Scorsese also actively joined the Advisory Board for IFC (Independent Film Channel) and was featured on a prominent advertisement for the

⁴⁷ "Martin Scorsese on Television (Mitsubishi advertisement)" *Video Review* (May 1988).

channel with the tagline, “He defined new cinema. Now he’s shaping new television.” Scorsese ended up playing a prominent role in IFC’s attempt to promote itself. He wrote a letter to “film enthusiasts” in New York City to encouraging people to call or write Time Warner and request that IFC be included in its cable package. This included writing to cultural institutions to which Scorsese was affiliated, such as the Museum of Modern Art.⁴⁸ The very existence of channels like TCM, AMC and IFC emphasizes the interdependent relationship of film as a medium to other technology that both enables and threatens its survival. Scorsese’s iconicity served these particular channels so well because he remained a director associated with the film medium through his preservation efforts and his role as a film historian. But it is important to recall the opening of *My Voyage to Italy* as a reminder of how film culture has always had an intimate connection to the private sphere. Scorsese first sees the masterpieces of Italian neo-realism on television. After the opening credits, the film opens with a shot of a television and Scorsese stating, “This is a sixteen inch Victor television set.” Scorsese then describes the experience of seeing the films in this home environment. He emphasizes the inferior quality, but argues that this did not completely dull the impact. Instead they acted as an incentive to see more of the films. He also describes the viewing circumstances, in which many members of the family and the community would gather around the single television set and watch these films from the old country. The private and the public were thus intertwined. What these examples show is that Scorsese’s relationship to new technology, like his relationship to Hollywood, is contradictory. Just as Scorsese has a reputation for being outside of the Hollywood system, he is likewise seen as being devoted to the celluloid tradition. In truth, Scorsese has needed to remain a Hollywood

⁴⁸ Martin Scorsese, “Letter from IFC” (April 1, 1997) (Scorsese Collection, Museum of Modern Art).

filmmaker in order to maintain his critical reputation (with delicate negotiation, of course). And his devotion to film as a medium entails being interested and concerned with home film cultures that so define how films are mass distributed in today's world.

In 2007, Scorsese began an association with the digital movie supplier Direct TV by writing a column for their magazine and website.⁴⁹ Scorsese's introduction to the feature offered a justification for the digital service while paradoxically reinforcing his commitment to the medium of film:

I love movies. That's why I wanted to write this column. I also love to see them presented as well as possible. Obviously, there's no substitute for a good 35mm print, but the reality is that most people don't have access to the archives, museums and film societies in the major cities that show them.

Digital services like Direct TV offer a viable substitute by presenting the films "under the best possible conditions." This includes digital remastering, the correct aspect ratio, a clean soundtrack, and no commercials. The column, titled "The Scorsese Selection," consists of Scorsese choosing a film to recommend to Direct TV suppliers. Scorsese has chosen four films for appreciation: *Colorado Territory* (Raoul Walsh, 1949), *The Asphalt Jungle* (John Huston, 1950), *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980) and *Sweet and Lowdown* (Woody Allen, 1999). Two of these films are from the era of Classical Hollywood that Scorsese has covered in his documentary, but two are more recent films by directors closer to being Scorsese's contemporaries. What these brief critiques show is how Scorsese has used his cultural prestige and his interest in new ways in which film is disseminated to become not only a film historian but also a film critic. Like his dual role as filmmaker/archivist, Scorsese's current position in the culture as artist/critic presents him with a rare amount of power over the field.

⁴⁹ <http://www.directv.com/DTVAPP/global/contentPage.jsp?assetId=2960016>

SCORSESE AS FILM CRITIC

In Chapter Four I discussed Scorsese as a film historian. This culminated with his two documentaries on American and Italian cinema. As I have argued, these two films are primarily histories and their evaluative aspects are downplayed and disavowed. Nevertheless, they are examples of Scorsese's increasing role as a film critic in which Scorsese displays not only his knowledge of film history but also his ability to discuss aesthetics in an intellectually respectable manner. His cinema histories were collaborations with noted film critics. In *A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese Through American Movies* he worked with the long-time critic for *Positif*, Michael Henry Wilson (formerly Michael Henry), and *My Voyage to Italy* was co-written with the prominent critic (and now editor-at-large) for *Film Comment*, Kent Jones. The presence of these critics positioned these histories as more than a simple re-telling of historical content. Rather, these documentaries are highly interpretative readings of both individual films as well as these two national cinemas as a whole. This led to Scorsese being taken seriously as a critical authority, which raises issues because of his simultaneous position as an active filmmaker. One way Scorsese negotiates this conflict is to avoid being critical of films. His role is rather to offer appreciation of films and filmmakers, especially the cinema of the past. Nevertheless, Scorsese does insert his voice into the contemporary film scene as well as debates within film criticism.

One of the Scorsese's first acts of film criticism was a piece in *Film Comment* on "Guilty Pleasures."⁵⁰ Scorsese's entry was the second in this series, following from film critic Roger Ebert's initial article in the previous issue.⁵¹ This essay can be seen as a prequel to Scorsese's American cinema documentary as well as his preservation work. He begins by stating, "This is a film lover's list." Scorsese is establishing that he is arguing not for culturally reputable films but rather for movies that he loves. He admits that some of the films are "bad", such as *The Silver Chalice* (Victor Saville, 1954), but nevertheless have some aspect that recommends them (for *The Silver Chalice* it is the work of Boris Leven, for whom Scorsese hired for *New York, New York*). Often, Scorsese links these movies to his own. He concludes by discussing the obscure film *The Magic Box* (John Boulting, 1951) in relation to its influence on him as a director: "It was *the* film that taught me a lot about the magic of movies...When you're eight years old, it makes you want to be a filmmaker."⁵² Scorsese as critic is, like in his American cinema documentary but even more blatantly, placing his own films as the central organizing principle. But he is also aligning himself with films outside of the critical establishment, often made within the Hollywood genre system or on the fringes of independent "B" film production. In terms of film preservation, it foreshadows Scorsese's contention in his "Outline for a Preservation Strategy" that film preservation cannot have "value judgments" because great movies of the past are not always immediately recognized. Coming in the late 1970s, Scorsese's critical stance is echoing many of the developments of the previous decade, especially the attempt to collapse the boundaries between high

⁵⁰ Martin Scorsese, "Martin Scorsese's Guilty Pleasures," *Film Comment* 14, no. 5 (September/ October 1978): 63-66.

⁵¹ Roger Ebert, "Guilty Pleasures," *Film Comment* 14, no. 4 (July/ August 1978): 49-51.

⁵² Scorsese (1978): 66.

and low taste distinctions. The place of Scorsese himself as a great filmmaker is nevertheless a central concern of the piece.

In 1984, Scorsese contributed a short piece on director David Cronenberg as part of a book published by the British Film Institute.⁵³ Scorsese began his essay by describing the context of seeing Cronenberg's first feature film, *Shivers* (1975), at the opening of the 1975 Edinburgh Film Festival. Scorsese recalled his initial hesitation about the screening:

I never look forward to opening nights at film festivals. They're like fund-raising rallies, and the movies they show on those occasions usually have titles like 'How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman.' They're usually movies that almost everyone can like, at least a little bit.⁵⁴

In other words, Scorsese is stating that most festivals include films that are middle-brow in their aims and Cronenberg's film is the low-brow cult horror antidote to this good taste. He follows this by comparing Cronenberg to high art icons:

Cronenberg's best movies still have the capacity to cause a Jungian culture shock. They're like Buñuel, or Francis Bacon: wit and trauma, savagery and pity. Within what for most people is a restrictive genre, Cronenberg has come up with a vision that is genuinely original. Internal metaphors, external horror.⁵⁵

The comparison of Cronenberg with Bacon recalls Michael Powell's comparison of Scorsese to Goya. In both cases, a more critically established director attempts to legitimate the work of a director working in a violent and disreputable genre (the horror film for Cronenberg, the crime film for Scorsese) by comparing him to a great artist (specifically, an artist from the field of painting, a more legitimate and established art

⁵³ Martin Scorsese, "Internal Metaphors, External Horror," in *David Cronenberg* (edited by Wayne Drew) (London: British Film Institute, 1984): 54.

⁵⁴ Scorsese (1984), 54.

⁵⁵ Scorsese (1984), 54.

than film). By this point, Scorsese was becoming familiar and comfortable with the discourse of artistic criticism and how to position himself and his tastes within it.

In 1987, Scorsese was asked by the popular film magazine *Premiere* to contribute his home viewing recommendations. In this context, Scorsese avoids more mainstream and contemporary films and selects three films that had acquired a great deal of cultural prestige over the preceding decades: *Citizen Kane*, *The Searchers*, and *The Red Shoes* (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1948). A decade earlier, in the more respected film journal *Film Comment*, Scorsese made a point of avoiding the canon. Here, with a less cinema-literate readership, Scorsese introduced the masterpieces of the past to a larger audience. There is also the differing context of Scorsese's career. In 1978, Scorsese was near the height of his artistic reputation, coming off his previous critical success of *Taxi Driver*. Not needing to establish his high art credentials, Scorsese could write about "guilty pleasures" at this time to show his enthusiasm for popular cinema. By 1987, Scorsese was rebuilding his commercial career and had just made his most mainstream project, *The Color of Money*. By discussing such classics made as *Citizen Kane*, *The Searchers*, and *The Red Shoes*, all made within studio filmmaking, Scorsese tried to position his own career as a Hollywood director. The introduction to the article made this link explicit:

The characters that populate Martin Scorsese's movies (*Mean Streets*, *Taxi Driver*, *Raging Bull*, *The Color of Money*) are bombs waiting to go off, and they frequently do, erupting with a torrent of emotion. Each of the movies Scorsese recommends for home-viewing focus on characters who are driven by their passions.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Martin Scorsese, "Martin Scorsese's Video Picks," *Premiere* (October 1987): 91.

As Scorsese moves back into Hollywood and has to make concessions to commercial interests to do so, his work as a film critic aims at reconciling the tension between art and entertainment.

With the death of director John Cassavetes in 1989, Scorsese wrote a tribute piece that was also a work of art appreciation and taste distinction. The brief article on Cassavetes included the familiar discussion of Cassavetes as an “independent” filmmaker and shared stories from Scorsese’s own personal history. Not surprisingly, he recalled Cassavetes encouraging him to abandon genre filmmaking following *Boxcar Bertha* and pursue more personal projects. But Scorsese also defined what he believes an independent filmmaker to be:

The question, ‘What is an independent filmmaker?’ has nothing to do with being inside or outside the industry or whether you live in New York or Los Angeles. It’s about determination and strength, having the passion to say something that’s so strong that no one or nothing can stop you.⁵⁷

This definition was obviously quite self-serving for Scorsese, designating “independent” in aesthetic rather than industrial terms. It also foretold the eventual fate of “independent” cinema over the course of the next decade. Increasingly, definitions of “independent” cinema had less connection to industrial conditions. This reached a peak in 1994, the year in which *Pulp Fiction* becomes a blockbuster success for Miramax. This turns “independent” filmmaking into a bigger business venture that involves more capital investment from studios. Independent studios frequently became a subsidiary of larger studios and removed any actual financial independence from many of the independent films in circulation.⁵⁸ As a result, the meaning of an independent film shifted to matters

⁵⁷ Martin Scorsese, “John Cassavetes, My Mentor,” (1989); available in the booklet for DVD release of the Criterion Collection Cassavetes box set.

⁵⁸ See King (2005), “Chapter 1: Industry”: 11-57.

of textual differences from Hollywood, and these textual differences could be argued and debated according to more subjective criteria. Thus a filmmaker like Scorsese, despite his big budget studio filmmaking, could be claimed as continuing to have an independent sensibility. It is important to note the context of this article, written in 1989, shortly after controversy over *The Last Temptation of Christ*. When Scorsese wrote about having “determination and strength” and “the passion to say something that’s so strong that no one or nothing can stop you,” the connotations are about himself as much as Cassavetes.

Scorsese’s film histories showed the influence of his background in the discourse of film criticism and canon formation, and his film criticism is no different. Many of his pieces put an emphasis on spiritual and transcendent concerns similar to the auteurist approach. On the occasion of a Fellini retrospective at the Film Forum in New York, Scorsese wrote an appreciation piece in *The New York Times* Film section. The title of the article, “Amid Clowns and Brutes Fellini Found the Divine,” indicates the direction of Scorsese’s criticism, in which he emphasizes Fellini’s uniqueness and spirituality:

By the early 50’s neo-realism had become a noun, codified and limited in scope, if not in style. Most of all, Marxist critics had politicized it.

By contrast, Fellini’s autobiographical, spiritual and magical world did not fit easily into an ideology or code.⁵⁹

In order to praise Fellini’s artistry, Scorsese contrasts him with the limitations of neo-realism ideology as “codified” by “Marxist critics.” Scorsese clearly sees this as an appropriation of the films by ideological critics, not something that is inherent in the “style” of the films. Scorsese’s brief analysis of Roberto Rossellini’s *Europa ’51* shows an interpretation of neo-realist style very much at odds with the Marxist approach.

Scorsese writes:

⁵⁹ Martin Scorsese, “Amid Clowns and Brutes Fellini Found the Divine,” *The New York Times* (October 24, 1993): H21.

Europa '51 is a picture of almost no style. Every aspect of Rossellini's artistry is at the service of exploring this question of modern sainthood. As Ingrid Bergman's Irene goes step by step on her journey to a life of selfless devotion – from the death of her child, to a need to reach out and help others, to an ideological and then on to a spiritual commitment – Rossellini's calm concentration, the sense that he's merely (but always closely) observing this woman and the people around her, never wavers.⁶⁰

Scorsese's description of the character's journey, from ideological to spiritual commitment, implies a similar journey critics should take in regards to neo-realism as a whole. The emphasis in Scorsese's work on Italian cinema focuses on the spiritual dimensions of the work and downplays the political.

A similar attention to spiritual concerns can be detected in Scorsese's critical introductions to the work of Jean Renoir, featured on the Criterion Collection DVDs of *The River* (1951) and *The Golden Coach* (1953). The fact that Scorsese chooses to discuss these particular Renoir texts, which are far less political in nature than his 1930s work, is telling. Scorsese discusses the aesthetic value of the films, particularly the use of color in *The River*, and stresses the emotional impact of watching these cinematic experiences. Scorsese admits to not fully understanding Renoir's most political film, *The Rules of the Game* (1939), and thus chooses to concentrate on the work that he can more immediately understand. This strategy of stressing the emotional impact of foreign, art cinema classics was present in his Italian cinema documentary as well.⁶¹ The idea is for the films to be seen as primarily aesthetic experiences that offer something unique to the

⁶⁰ Martin Scorsese, "Europa '51 (*The Greatest Love*)," in *The Hidden God: Film and Faith* (eds. Mary Lea Bandy and Antonio Monda) (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2003): 76.

⁶¹ This tendency to stress the emotional impact of European cinema can be extended into Scorsese's treatment of Michael Powell, both through various audio commentaries as well as introductions to Powell's work. See Scorsese's forewords to Ian Christie, *Arrows of Desire: The Films of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994): xv; and Michael Powell, *Million Dollar Movie* (New York: Random House, 1995): ix. Scorsese can be heard in the audio commentary for Powell and Pressburger's *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1943), *Black Narcissus* (1947), *The Red Shoes* (1948), and *The Tales of Hoffmann* (1951).

viewer, but at the same time not to alienate the potential audience with discussions of politics and social context. This is not an “art for art’s sake” argument, but it does prioritize aesthetic and spiritual readings that celebrate the auteur as a defining, even transcendental agent of meaning.

In addition to this mode of aesthetic justification, Scorsese was also familiar with the mode of ideological critique in his criticism. I have already discussed Scorsese’s use of Comolli and Narboni’s “category e” in relation to his justification for celebrating American cinema. In his written work, Scorsese similarly reserved analysis of a more political nature to Hollywood films and filmmakers. One example is an obituary written for actress and director Ida Lupino. Scorsese discussed Lupino’s acting career but devoted more space to her accomplishments as a director. Scorsese makes a case for Lupino as a “pioneer” who made films critical of the typical middle-class patriarchy of the time:

Her heroines were young women whose middle-class security was shattered by trauma – unwanted pregnancy, polio, rape, bigamy, parental abuse. There’s a sense of pain, panic and cruelty that colors every frame. In ‘Outrage,’ she portrayed rape not in melodramatic terms but in a cool behavioral study of evil in the most ordinary setting... (F)ar in advance of the feminist movement, she challenged the passive, often decorative images of women then common in Hollywood.⁶²

This ideological justification for celebrating Lupino’s work is a common characteristic of Scorsese’s critical perspective on American film. It even extends to Scorsese’s discussion of film actors Robert Mitchum and James Stewart. When both actors died within a day of each other in 1997 (July 1 and July 2, respectively), there were many pieces celebrating

⁶² Martin Scorsese, “Ida Lupino: Behind the Camera, a Feminist,” *New York Times Magazine* (December 31, 1995): 43.

their careers. Scorsese wrote an appreciation in *Premiere* magazine⁶³ that differed significantly from most other accounts, as James Cole Potter has discussed:

Scorsese's article focused on how both Stewart and Mitchum embodied aspects of postwar American malaise. For example, Scorsese's appreciation of Stewart leans more toward the actor's obsessive work with Anthony Mann than to his more optimistic films with Frank Capra. Scorsese seems to have used this opportunity to address *Premiere's* broad readership by offering some genuine sociological film history, rather than another in a series of tributes to Stewart's famously earnest star persona.⁶⁴

Borrowing from ideological work on directors like Anthony Mann and Alfred Hitchcock, as well as more general reconsiderations of postwar masculinity, Scorsese distinguishes his work from other journalistic accounts and reconfirms himself as an authority on film history.

Scorsese's more critical and academic approach to the analysis of cinema also serves to differentiate his work from other prestigious filmmaker/intellectuals within American culture. On July 30th, 2007, both Michelangelo Antonioni and Ingmar Bergman, two of the most prestigious directors of European cinema, passed away. Five days later, film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum published an opinion piece in *The New York Times* that provoked controversy by claiming Bergman's cinematic genius was below other true cinematic masters such as Antonioni.⁶⁵ A week later in the same newspaper, Scorsese would write an appreciation of Antonioni, and Woody Allen would offer a defense of Bergman.⁶⁶ Scorsese's analysis of Antonioni, particularly the landmark film *L'Avventura* (1960), concentrated on Antonioni's stylistic "challenge" to the audience. In

⁶³ Martin Scorsese, "The Men Who Knew Too Much," *Premiere* (September 1997): 70.

⁶⁴ Potter, 374.

⁶⁵ Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Scenes From an Overrated Career," *The New York Times* (August 4, 2007); available online at http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/04/opinion/04jrosenbaum.html?_r=1&oref=slogin

⁶⁶ Martin Scorsese, "The Man Who Set Film Free," *The New York Times* (August 12, 2007); available online at http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/12/movies/12scor.html?_r=1&oref=slogin; Woody Allen, "The Man Who Asked Hard Questions," *The New York Times* (August 12, 2007); available online at http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/12/movies/12alle.html?_r=1&oref=slogin.

L'Avventura, Scorsese argued, “our attention was drawn away from the mechanics of the search, by the camera and the way it moved. You never knew where it was going to go, who or what it was going to follow.” Scorsese’s discussion of Antonioni seemed to align him with Rosenbaum’s previous article on Bergman. Instead of concentrating on aspects of story, Scorsese concerned himself with the cinematic specificity of Antonioni’s greatness rather than the theatrical storytelling skills that Rosenbaum claimed led to Bergman’s acclaim. Allen’s appreciation of Bergman did not rebut Rosenbaum’s claims but rather seemed to support them. Allen concentrated on Bergman’s gifts as a storyteller and entertainer rather than his challenging of cinematic form. He devoted space to discussions of his friendship with Bergman and to descriptions of Bergman’s personality. Allen’s examination never moved beyond the surface of the typical memorial appreciation. Scorsese limits his personal comments to a short paragraph about a dinner he had with Antonioni. The rest of his article describes Antonioni’s filmmaking and the “possibilities” it opened up. Scorsese concludes by stating, “it was his images that I knew, much better than the man himself. Images that continue to haunt me, inspire me. To expand me sense of what it is to be alive in the world.” Through their respective associations with two past directors, Scorsese and Allen reconfirmed their place within American culture: Scorsese as the innovative cinematic genius, Allen as the talented writer-director who lacked distinction in regards to film form.

Scorsese’s work as a film critic, like his interest in film history, has played an important role in how his work is received within the culture. An example of this can be seen in his recent remake of the Hong Kong film *Internal Affairs* (Andy Lau and Alan Mak, 2002). Scorsese’s well-known appreciation of all world cinema, including the films

of East Asia, helped to mitigate the fact that this is Hollywood co-opting another national cinema.⁶⁷ The rather typical Scorsese appreciation of world cinema also served as a justification for the Hollywood remake. Scorsese was not simply a Hollywood director stealing from Hong Kong cinema, but rather a great artist reworking and reinterpreting a cinema that he appreciates and respects. Furthermore, given the amount of influence that Scorsese has had on directors such as John Woo and Wong Kar-Wai, *The Departed* is positioned as Scorsese going back to his filmmaking roots rather than pillaging world cinema to further his own reputation. Scorsese's status as respected film intellectual allows any negative criticism of cultural imperialism common in the discourse on Hollywood remakes of foreign films to be downplayed.⁶⁸ Film criticism has provided Scorsese with another method of mediating his reception in the cultural field.

SCORSESE AS CULTURAL HISTORIAN

Scorsese's emergence as a film critic was one further activity related to his emergence as a film historian. In the opposite direction was another movement. Scorsese emerged as a cultural historian beyond the realm of filmmaking. Like his other cultural activities, this role as cultural historian did not emerge suddenly. It has a genealogy that can be traced back to previous projects. It also has to be considered in relation to Scorsese's status within the Hollywood industry over the past decades.

⁶⁷ One example of this would be Scorsese's introduction to the DVD release of the South Korean film *Woman is the Future of Man* (Hong Sang-soo, 2004).

⁶⁸ For an example of this perspective on Hollywood remakes as cultural imperialism, see Thomas Leitch, "Twice-Told Tales: Disavowal and the Rhetoric of the Remake," in *Dead Ringers: The Remake in Theory and Practice* (ed. Jennifer Forrest and Leonard R. Koos) (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002): 37-62.

The most obvious and extensive field that Scorsese has expanded into is music, making numerous documentaries on the history of both genres and individuals. In 2003, Scorsese produced the seven-part series *The Blues* for PBS, directing the first episode, "Feel Like Going Home," himself. This was followed by the documentary Bob Dylan *No Direction Home* (2005) and The Rolling Stones concert film *Shine a Light* (2008). Scorsese's connections to popular music can be traced back to his first films made at New York University. This includes the soundtrack for his first feature, *Who's That Knocking At My Door?*, as well as his avant-garde short *The Big Shave* and his decision to use rock music to score the collective student documentary *Street Scenes 1970*. Scorsese played an important creative role as editor of the seminal *Woodstock*, and continued this interest in using popular music rather than a traditional score in *Mean Streets* and even, to a lesser extent, with his first mainstream Hollywood product, *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*. In 1978, Scorsese would make his first documentary about rock and roll, *The Last Waltz*, which as its title suggests was self-consciously designed to be an elegy for that period. While *The Last Waltz* was to a great extent a concert film, it was also a work of cultural history with a very specific image-making agenda.

In relation to Scorsese's own image, *The Last Waltz* is an important text. Two details about the shooting of the film illuminate two aspects of Scorsese's persona that were established in this time period and which remain prominent in his biographical legend today. First, unlike most other concert films that came before it, *The Last Waltz* featured a very polished and professional look. It was shot in 35mm (in contrast to the 16mm used *Woodstock* and *Gimme Shelter*, at that time the two most acclaimed concert films) by cinematographer Michael Chapman and a number of other respected

Hollywood cameramen, including Laszlo Kovacs and Vilmos Zsigmond. The film's production designer was Boris Leven, who had designed *New York, New York* for Scorsese earlier and who had worked on Hollywood productions since 1938. Scorsese created elaborate storyboards for each sequence and song number, producing a concert film that had many of the aesthetics of a Hollywood feature rather than a low budget documentary. Also, as Stephen E. Savern has pointed out, "Scorsese's camerawork further confounds the expectations of the genre by essentially eliminating the audience from the film, thus focusing all the attention on the musicians themselves."⁶⁹ This is in stark contrast to earlier concert films, especially *Woodstock*, which is about the crowd as much as or more than the performers. Scorsese's artistry as a director is thus still very much on display, even in a documentary project.

Second, Scorsese made this film while still completing post-production on his big budget Hollywood musical, *New York, New York*. The very act of taking on this project was seen as an irresponsible act by an egocentric director, and would hurt Scorsese's reputation with Hollywood for years to come. But this decision to make *The Last Waltz* also shaped Scorsese's image as a risk-taker, a passionate artist determined to make the films he wanted despite working under studio control. With the publication of Peter Biskind's *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls* in 1998, Scorsese's extensive drug use during this period was documented and linked particularly to Scorsese's irrational decision to try to make *The Last Waltz* before completing his studio project. Metaphorically, this associated Scorsese with the "sex, drugs and rock and roll" lifestyle detailed by the interviews with members of The Band throughout the documentary. Although this

⁶⁹ Stephen E. Savern, "Robbie Robertson's Big Break: A Reevaluation of Martin Scorsese's *The Last Waltz*," *Film Quarterly* 56, no. 2 (Winter 2002/2003): 26.

certainly affected Scorsese negatively at the time within the industry, by 1998 it was ironically beneficial to his reputation as a romantic artist. Despite the fact that Scorsese was now firmly entrenched as a Hollywood director and respected elder statesman, tales of his previous days as a tortured rebel genius allowed the myth of his “outsider” status to continue unabated.

The Last Waltz as a documentary appears to be about the idea of collectivity. The concert itself, of The Band’s farewell concert, features a number of important rock musicians in guest appearances: Van Morrison, Neil Young, The Staple Singers, Bob Dylan, and numerous others. The emphasis is on the communal aspect of rock music, as represented by The Band themselves as a seemingly anonymous collection of great musicians. But as Stephen E. Savern has argued, the documentary is very much an attempt to promote guitarist Robbie Robertson as the star figure of the collective. As Savern states, “*The Last Waltz* does not simply capture an event, it constructs one.”⁷⁰ his construction is all about fostering the idea of the individual over that of the collective:

The Last Waltz represents an exercise in self-mythologizing – through the interviews with their distinctive camerawork and settings and the on-stage footage of the actual concert – for Robertson, and the deconstruction/ destruction of the group as a whole.⁷¹

Savern relates *The Last Waltz* forward to later films in Scorsese’s career, seeing this as “his first exploration of the manner by which image may be manipulated.”⁷² For Savern, this thematic obsession would continue with later films such as *The King of Comedy*, *The Color of Money*, and *Casino*. While I agree with Savern’s overall argument, I would add that *The Last Waltz* looks back as well as forward in Scorsese’s career. Specifically, in its

⁷⁰ Savern, 27.

⁷¹ Savern, 27.

⁷² Savern, 26.

denial of the collective and concentration on the individual, the film looks back to Scorsese's involvement in his first documentary experience, *Street Scenes 1970*. The elimination of the collective in the earlier was largely the consequence of entering the festival circuit in which the auteur was valued. Earlier Scorsese was the figure being manipulated, while with *The Last Waltz* it is Scorsese who is in control of the process, at least at the level of production. The difference between the films is also one of exposure. With *The Last Waltz*, the other members of The Band, notably Levon Helm, have been able to counter the representations put forth by Scorsese and Robertson.⁷³ In contrast, *Street Scenes 1970* remains largely anonymous due to Scorsese's control over the film's accessibility. This is a part of Scorsese's growing prominence as a cultural historian. He not only makes culture but also has a voice in deciding what culture gets exposure.

Following his work in film history and preservation, it is not surprising that Scorsese would choose to turn his attention on music as a cultural form. As Pierre Bourdieu has argued:

For a bourgeois world which conceives its relation to the populace in terms of the relationship of the soul to the body, 'insensitivity to music' doubtless represents a particularly unavowable form of the materialist coarseness. But this is not all. Music is the 'pure' art par excellence. It says nothing and has *nothing to say*. Never really having an expressive function, it is opposed to drama, which even in its most refined forms still bears a social message and can only be 'put over' on the basis of an immediate and profound affinity with the values and expectations of its audience. The theatre divides its public and divides itself. The Parisian opposition between right-bank and left-bank theatre, bourgeois theatre and avant-garde theatre, is inextricably aesthetic and political. Nothing comparable occurs in music (with some rare, recent exceptions). Music represents the most radical and most absolute form of the negation of the

⁷³ See Levon Helm and Stephen Davis, *This Wheel's on Fire: Levon Helm and the Story of The Band* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2000); Helm also appears on an audio commentary track on the DVD release of the film.

world, and especially the social world, which the bourgeois ethos tends to demand of all forms of art.⁷⁴

Bourdieu's arguments here refer primarily to classical music and its class associations. It can be argued that they do not apply to the context of American popular music, which is the cultural history Scorsese has been in the process of telling over the past decade. It is difficult to argue that musical genres such as folk, blues and rock have no social meaning. On the contrary, this music seems to be impossible to comprehend without this social context. Scorsese's series on *The Blues* and his documentary on Bob Dylan are not lacking in historical context. They reflect Scorsese's general fixation on historical material that has obsessed even his feature film production. But I will argue that Bourdieu's comments on music as a "pure" art nevertheless apply to Scorsese's work on music culture. The notion of music's purity works to downplay the social as much as possible, and instead becomes one of the "countless variations on the soul of music and the music of the soul."⁷⁵

Scorsese only directed one episode of the seven-part *The Blues*. The films include: Scorsese's "Feel Like Going Home"; Wim Wenders' "The Soul of a Man"; Marc Levin's "Godfathers and Sons"; Mike Figgis' "Red, White & Blues"; Clint Eastwood's "Piano Blues"; Richard Pearce and Robert Kenner's "The Road to Memphis"; and Charles Burnett's "Warming by the Devil's Fire". It would be unfair to see all the films as being identical in approach or to argue that the social dimension is always downplayed in praise of the spirituality of the blues. Charles Burnett's film (the only one directed by an African-American), for example, is a brilliant piece about the

⁷⁴ Bourdieu (1984), 19.

⁷⁵ Bourdieu (1984), 19.

spiritual and physical contradiction felt by many African-Americans towards blues music. As Burnett explains:

I wanted to put the music in context, too. The blues came out of the South, and the South has its history of struggles, and it seemed to me you can't really separate the blues from their historical context: how people lived, the hardships they experienced, the texture of their daily lives – it was all related.⁷⁶

But Scorsese's "Feel Like Going Home" avoids any serious discussion of the social and political significance of the blues in favor of a familiar "origins" narrative of attempting to find genealogical roots. The social context remains on the surface and any discussion of politics is generally elided. For example, musician Willie King offers an interpretation for the obsession with cruel women in the blues tradition. He sees this as a metaphor for criticizing the white boss who mistreated African-American workers under Jim Crow. Other such instances can be found in the film, but they remain underdeveloped and subordinate to the main theme. As a result, the cultural history on display here is very traditional. Scorsese begins the film with his own voiceover stating, "I can't imagine my life or anyone else's without music. It's like a light in the darkness that never goes out." This is an illustration of the bourgeois attitude towards music that Bourdieu describes. Insensitivity to music is literally unimaginable. This commences Scorsese's search for the roots of this light, which is metaphorically linked to the birth of civilization itself through its eventual return to Africa.

Because the "home" and "roots" Scorsese is exploring are not his own, he makes the journey through an on-screen surrogate, the African-American musician Corey Harris. Throughout the film, Scorsese uses both his own voice and the voice of Harris to

⁷⁶ Charles Burnett, "Warming by the Devil's Fire," in *Martin Scorsese Presents The Blues: A Musical Journey* (edited by Peter Guralnick, Robert Santelli, Holly George-Warren, and Christopher John Farley) (New York: Harper-Collins, 2003): 100.

weave a particular narrative out of this material. On close inspection, this interweaving of voices is very deliberate and rhetorical. After the opening discussion of music and the work of archivists John and Alan Lomax, Scorsese retreats and gives the narrative to Harris. All of the interviews and interactions in the film, both with blues musicians in America and musicians in Africa, are conducted by Harris (Scorsese only appears on screen very briefly in a group shot). The story becomes one of a personal journey, much like Scorsese's cinema histories, as he himself acknowledges:

I've made two documentaries on the history of cinema – one on American movies, then another on Italian cinema. And I decided early on that I wanted them to be personal, rather than strictly historical surveys ... For the blues series, I decided to do something similar.⁷⁷

The difference with the blues documentary revolves around issues of authenticity.

Scorsese is a filmmaker, an American, and has Italian heritage, all of which legitimate his voice in his cinema documentaries. With an African-American musical genre, Scorsese lacks this cultural sanction. Harris, as a young African-American blues musician, is required to fill this gap. Harris states at the beginning of the film that “to know your self you need to know the past,” and the narrative becomes his movement through the history of blues music. Scorsese re-inserts his voiceover when such blues legends as Robert Johnson are recalled, associating himself with their “rebel” genius. When the setting switches to Africa, Scorsese establishes the presence of African music in the blues, but then allows Harris' voice to continue the personal journey narrative line. Harris notes how “many people have gone to Africa searching for musical links with the blues” because Africa is “where everything began”. This very specific journey is ultimately at

⁷⁷ Martin Scorsese, “*Feel Like Going Home*,” in *Martin Scorsese Presents The Blues: A Musical Journey* (edited by Peter Guralnick, Robert Santelli, Holly George-Warren, and Christopher John Farley) (New York: Harper-Collins, 2003): 64.

the service of a universalizing narrative. When Harris states that “if you lose the past, you lose yourself”, the message is intended to resonate beyond his particular situation and circumstance.

At the conclusion, Scorsese once again evokes John and Alan Lomax and their work as preservationists. Anyone familiar with Scorsese’s work in the field of film preservation will note the obvious self-promotion at work here. Earlier in the film, Scorsese claims that John and Alan Lomax were performing “one of the most important things anyone can do. They were preserving the past before it disappeared completely.” Scorsese sees himself operating in this same tradition. He also claims that Alan Lomax was interested in preserving all music, from all over the world. Again, this is at the service of a universalizing discourse made explicit at the conclusion of the film in a conversation between Corey Harris and Mali musician Ali Farka Toure. Discussing African-Americans and Americans, Farka Toure argues that “our souls, our spirits are the same...there is no difference.” The only difference he acknowledges is the commercial demands of America, the need to play to make a living. That this is the final conversation in the film is significant. It plays into another discourse around the blues that is related to the issue of cultural legitimacy. As Andrew Ross has argued:

(B)ecause of the fundamental contribution of Afro-American music to popular taste, any cultural historian of that relationship cannot avoid commenting on the ways in which a discourse about color (‘whitened’ music) is spliced with a discourse about commercialization (‘alienated’ music).⁷⁸

Scorsese’s film is no different here. The idea of a “pure” music free of commercial interests that can be traced back to the “roots” is an important myth that structures the film’s conclusion. Scorsese quotes Alan Lomax and his warning about preserving folk

⁷⁸ Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989): 69.

music: "When the whole world is bored with automated, mass distributed video music, our descendents will despise us for having thrown away the best of our culture." Mass culture is positioned here as inauthentic, echoing Theodor Adorno's account of the culture industry. This is a very modernist account, and would seem contradictory coming from a Hollywood filmmaker such as Scorsese. But it is, as I have argued, a very common strategy for Scorsese. Even as he moves further into high budget filmmaking that is designed to appeal to as large an audience as possible, Scorsese simultaneously validates folk art and his quest to preserve it. This division between high art and mass culture is a false one, as even a cursory glance at the context of the documentary shows. In addition to airing on PBS, the series was packaged in a DVD box set and the music from the documentaries was released in several CD compilations. The modernist influence on cultural legitimacy, however, has never completely vanished, and has been used by Scorsese to maintain his symbolic capital even as he mediates his position within postmodern culture.

Scorsese's documentary on Bob Dylan, *No Direction Home*, focuses on Dylan's early career, ending with his last tour before his motorcycle accident in 1967. The film explores, through interviews with Dylan and many other contemporaries, the rise of Dylan as the most important political voice in the culture and Dylan's subsequent rejection of this label. It is a conventional work, using talking heads to offer viewers a history of the time period through one of its most important figures. Its main distinction, like in *The Blues* series, is the access Scorsese had to archival material. It is markedly different from every other Scorsese documentary in that Scorsese himself is almost entirely absent. In "Feel Like Going Home", Scorsese is forced to downplay his role and

provide an appropriate surrogate in Corey Harris. In *No Direction Home*, the personal voice is given primarily to Dylan himself. Even while presenting other voices and perspectives, such as that of Joan Baez, the film accepts Dylan's position that he is primarily an artist and only secondarily a social being. This mythology is one Scorsese himself embraces. This is the reason, I would argue, that Scorsese does not conduct the interviews with Dylan himself. Scorsese wants to position himself with Dylan, not as any type of an antagonist. At one point in the film, Dylan has the following exchange with the off-screen interviewer:

Interviewer: What about the scene were you sick of?

Dylan: People like you. (Laughs) You know, just being pressed and hammered and expected to answer questions. It's enough to make anyone sick really.

Scorsese clearly does not want to be in this position. Despite his role as cultural critic, Scorsese wants to align himself with Dylan, not with Dylan's critics. In fact, the interviews in the film were produced and filmed by Michael B. Borofsky, not Scorsese.

Scorsese inserts his own voice into the film only once. In voiceover, Scorsese reads the speech Dylan gave upon receiving Thomas Paine Freedom Award from The Emergency Civil Liberties Union. It reads as follows:

I haven't got any guitar, but I can talk though. I want to thank you for the Tom Paine Award on behalf of everyone who went down to Cuba. First of all, because they were all young and it took me a long time to get young. And now I consider myself young and I am proud of it. I'm proud that I'm young. And I only wish that all of you people who are sitting out here tonight weren't here, and I could see all kinds of faces with hair on their head and everything like that, everything leading to youngness. Old people, when their hair grows out, they should go out. I look down to see the people who are governing me and making my rules and they haven't got any hair on their head. I get very uptight about it. There's no black and white, left and right to me anymore. There's only up and down, and down is very close to the ground, and I'm trying to go up, without thinking about anything trivial, such as politics.

This speech is given special importance in the film as one of the first signs of Dylan's rejection of the label of protest singer. Scorsese's use of his own voice at this point acts as an indicator, once again, of his sympathies for Dylan's rejection of politics in favour of art. Despite the presence of other more political artists in the film, the overall function is to support the rights of the artist above all other values.

A final area in which Scorsese's status as a cultural historian can be seen is in the publishing field. Like his work in film preservation, this can take a primarily symbolic form. When *The Modern Library* reissued a series of early film publications, Scorsese lent his name to the project. Like his "presentations" of restored films, Scorsese provided the right balance of artistic respectability and commercial potential. More intriguing is Scorsese's undertaking as "celebrity guest editor" of *Civilization*, the magazine of the Library of Congress. It is not surprising, given the amount of cultural prestige that Scorsese has amassed, that *Civilization* would choose Scorsese for this assignment. But it is notable that he was the first selection in the magazine's "guest-editor" project. The justification of Scorsese as celebrity guest editor is worth quoting:

His fans have their own reasons for helping make him a celebrity. My own is that he's a model modern hero. I might say that he deserves celebrity for directing beautiful, unsettling movies that subvert our fondest assumptions about ourselves, yet leave us with some hope for redemption. But I'd like to claim for him something more – a general sort of heroism, one that we must all strive for now as we leave (or are expelled from) one safe 'traditional' culture/home/occupation/job/style after another. Now we must all become what Scorsese is: a hero (an *auteur!*) of the experimental life.

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A close examination of this explanation reveals its lack of validity. However experimental Scorsese may have been at various points in his career, this has no relation

⁷⁹ Nelson W. Aldrich, "What's Wrong with Celebrity Guest Editors?" *Civilization* (February/March 1998): 11.

to his celebrity status. Yet as logically incoherent as this paragraph may be, its argument is now familiar. Scorsese has been able to establish the discourse about himself. Projects that would otherwise seem completely commercial in nature, such as the television episode he directs for Steven Spielberg's "Amazing Stories", are now regarded by commentators such like Aldrich as proof of Scorsese's constant experimentation.

In his introduction to the issue, Scorsese explains that each article and subject "inevitably refers to the movies."⁸⁰ Despite choosing articles dealing with different areas of culture, the overall structuring principle is cinema. Scorsese argues that this is prompted by film's interdisciplinary character:

Cinema uses multiple artistic elements simultaneously. In each sequence of frames, there is movement, color, sound, performance. If it was film that led me to literature, history and the visual and performing arts, these elements brought me again to the movies – and expanded my horizons.⁸¹

Beyond the subject of film, the real focus of the issue is Scorsese himself. Scorsese contributes a piece of religious art, which he relates to his own works, *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *Kundun*.⁸² The subject of literature spotlights Herman Melville, recalling Scorsese's earlier dedication in *The Big Shave*. The discussion of history has Scorsese in conversation with historian Simon Schama about how they both "make history". There is a list of "Essential Italian Movies" that foreshadows Scorsese's eventual documentary while working to perpetuate the canon. The political writer Garry Wills has an article on the anti-war film *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Lewis Milestone, 1930), but its focus is on the restoration of the film undertaken by the Library

⁸⁰ Martin Scorsese, "From Martin Scorsese," *Civilization* (February/March 1998): 55.

⁸¹ Scorsese, 55.

⁸² Martin Scorsese, "Sacred Images," *Civilization* (February/March 1998): 68-75.

of Congress.⁸³ The film's ideology is mostly ignored. The more important point is the issue of film preservation and Scorsese's continuing devotion to this cause. Terry Teachout's analysis of Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* and its omission from the canon in favour of *Vertigo* makes the argument of aesthetics over politics most explicit.⁸⁴ The title of Teachout's brief appreciation, "The Genius of Pure Effect," is near parodic in its explicit rejection of any notion of the social in artistic evaluation. The overall design of the issue is marked by Scorsese's authorship as cultural historian. There is an admirable concern with history combined with a discourse that emphasizes the spiritual and purely artistic gaze.

"HAS MARTIN SCORSESE GONE HOLLYWOOD?" (PART THREE):

CULTURAL VERSUS ECONOMIC CAPITAL

IN CONTEMPORARY HOLLYWOOD

All of Scorsese's work as a cultural historian over the past decades has provided him with an enormous amount of cultural capital. This highbrow reputation as artistic genius allowed Scorsese to attempt to exchange some of this surplus symbolic capital in order to solidify his place economically within the industry. This has taken the form of a continuous attempt by Scorsese to secure his first Academy Award for Best Director. This began with *Gangs of New York*, followed by *The Aviator* and eventually to final success with *The Departed*. For a filmmaker such as Scorsese, an Academy Award is not needed to cement his reputation. On the contrary, with the lack of an Academy Award, he

⁸³ Garry Wills, "War Refugee," *Civilization* (February/March 1998): 65-67.

⁸⁴ Terry Teachout, "The Genius of Pure Effect," *Civilization* (February/March 1998): 43-44.

joined other previously acknowledged masters of American film: Stanley Kubrick, Alfred Hitchcock, and Orson Welles. In discussing Scorsese's lack of industry recognition circa 1996, actor Harvey Keitel stated, "Maybe he is getting what he deserves, exclusion from mediocrity."⁸⁵ This comment from Keitel effectively summarizes the general attitude to the Academy Awards by even those in the industry. Film critics and especially film scholars have learned to regard the Academy Awards with a great deal of suspicion as an evaluating body. The list of Academy Award winning directors who have little to no cultural prestige is enormous. Winners from the past three decades include: Ron Howard, Sam Mendes, James Cameron, Mel Gibson, Robert Zemeckis, Kevin Costner, Sydney Pollack, Richard Attenborough, Warren Beatty, and Robert Redford. That Scorsese himself lost the Best Director Award to two actors, Redford and Costner, has been consistently used as a reason why the Academy Awards lack taste distinction. The desire for Academy acceptance was an attempt by Scorsese to fully solidify his place as a Hollywood insider. To achieve this, Scorsese willingly risked his reputation as an uncompromising artist.

The first film Scorsese directs that was widely perceived as an attempt to finally win a Best Director Oscar is *Gangs of New York*. Starring box office star Leonardo DiCaprio and the highly respected Daniel Day-Lewis and based on a work on 19th century New York, it seemed to have the necessary pedigree. In addition, Scorsese was working for the first time with producer Harvey Weinstein and the Miramax studio. Weinstein had earned a reputation as a master lobbyist for his pictures, famously earning a Best Picture Award for *Shakespeare in Love* (John Madden, 1998) over the heavily

⁸⁵ Andy Dougan, "Scorsese in the Nineties," in *Martin Scorsese: A Journey* (edited by Mary Pat Kelly) (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1999).

favoured *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998). However, the Oscar bid failed to work. The film's release was delayed more than a year after the events of September 11, 2001. *Gangs of New York* was now considered as too sensitive a topic, which it deals with American tribal violence in New York City. The film also included a final dissolve to a modern New York skyline featuring the now fallen World Trade Center towers.⁸⁶ Over the course of the delay, rumours circulated that Scorsese and Weinstein were arguing over the length of the film, especially given that Weinstein had a reputation for taking control of a film away from a director and producing his own cut. When the film was finally released, the reviews were decidedly mixed. Major critics like J. Hoberman at the *Village Voice*, David Denby at the *New Yorker*, Stanley Kauffmann at the *New Republic*, and Jonathan Rosenbaum at the *Chicago Reader* were negative in their overall assessment.⁸⁷ This combined with a lukewarm box office (a 77 million dollar domestic gross on an estimated 97 million dollar budget)⁸⁸ to damage the film's Oscar chances. It ended up losing the Best Picture Award to *Chicago* (Rob Marshall, 2002) with Scorsese losing Best Director to Roman Polanski for *The Pianist* (2002). Most of the blame for the film's shortcomings was given to Weinstein. Despite Scorsese insisting he had final cut, the press continued to believe that there was dispute over the final form of the work. Peter Biskind, who had already made Scorsese the artistic hero of the Hollywood Renaissance in his book *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*, argued that Weinstein had "humiliated" Scorsese by making him cooperate in the sabotaging of his own film.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Dade Hayes, "Birth of a Nation," *Variety* (December 9-15, 2002): A2.

⁸⁷ A listing of the major reviews of the film can be found at:

<http://www.metacritic.com/video/titles/gangsofnewyork?q=gangs%20of%20new%20york>

⁸⁸ <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0217505/business>

⁸⁹ Peter Biskind, *Down and Dirty Pictures: Miramax, Sundance, and the Rise of Independent Film* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004): 437-469.

Even the backlash for the perceived over-hyping of Scorsese as Best Director was interpreted as Weinstein's usual underhanded marketing strategy. *Gangs of New York* may have failed, but Scorsese was able to escape with his reputation relatively undamaged. Weinstein had provided a convenient scapegoat for the commercial crassness of the enterprise.

Scorsese's next Oscar bid, *The Aviator*, was a more difficult film to position within the Scorsese canon. *Gangs of New York*, despite its flaws, was considered a very personal film for Scorsese that he had been trying to make the film since the 1970s. *The Aviator*, despite its Hollywood connections and obsession protagonist, was held to be a far more commercial project. It was primarily a star vehicle and personal project for DiCaprio, who had an intense interest in the Howard Hughes story. Working with a prestigious director like Scorsese allowed DiCaprio to gain cultural capital that he desired as a "serious" actor. The association with DiCaprio was more problematic for Scorsese. It allowed him to make films on large budgets and become part of the Hollywood establishment, but it also took away from Scorsese's reputation as an uncompromising artist. Not since *Cape Fear* and *The Color of Money* had Scorsese delivered as conventional a film. As a bio-pic, a Hollywood sub-genre that was always popular with Academy voters, *The Aviator* was utterly conventional. Unlike *Raging Bull*, Scorsese included an early scene with Hughes' mother that helped explain his behaviour, not unlike most other biographical films. A similar scene occurs in *Ray* (Taylor Hackford, 2004), released the same year. In fact, *The Aviator* and *Ray* received almost identical reception from critics.⁹⁰ For a director like Scorsese to be received similarly to a purely

⁹⁰ For a summary of *Ray*'s reception, see: <http://www.metacritic.com/film/titles/ray?q=ray>.

commercial director like Hackford was evidence that his search for industry power had the potential to reduce his cultural prestige, which was one of his most marketable traits. His loss of the Academy Award in 2004 to Clint Eastwood is indicative of Scorsese's dilemma. Because Eastwood had always been firmly inside Hollywood as first movie star and then auteur, he could make "classical" films like *Million Dollar Baby* and receive nearly universal praise for his craftsmanship.⁹¹ Scorsese could not make the transition as easily. Having built his reputation on his outsider status, Scorsese risked being labeled as merely conventional for making films in a style similar to Eastwood and other Hollywood directors. To argue that *Million Dollar Baby* is simply a greater film than *The Aviator* is to ignore the contingencies of reception, especially as they revolve around the figure of the auteur.

With his next feature film, *The Departed*, Scorsese was finally able to win the Academy Award and enter into the inside of Hollywood. *The Departed* appeared to have the same problems as Scorsese's previous films. It was a big budget remake of a Hong Kong crime film, *Infernal Affairs*, featuring DiCaprio and Matt Damon in the leads. The limitations of the film were openly acknowledged by Scorsese in an interview with *Entertainment Weekly*:

The question is how close to a personal film can I make in the Hollywood system today — and this is as close as I can get. I don't know if there's room for me and the kind of picture I'd like to make anymore. I may have to do them independently because I like to take risks, and how can you do that when a picture costs \$200 million? There's a lot of money involved and you have a responsibility to the studio.⁹²

For a summary of *The Aviator*'s reception, see:
<http://www.metacritic.com/film/titles/aviator?q=the%20aviator>

⁹¹ <http://www.metacritic.com/film/titles/milliondollarbaby?q=million%20dollar%20baby>

⁹² Chris Nashawaty, "Back on the Mean Streets," *Entertainment Weekly* (Sept. 22, 2006); available on-line at <http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,1537678,00.html>

Despite the film's conventionality, *The Departed* was successfully critically and financially, leading to its industry success with both a Best Picture and Best Director Oscar.⁹³ The title of the *Entertainment Weekly* interview, "Back to the Mean Streets," provides a succinct explanation for this success. Scorsese was returning to the modern day crime drama that had made his reputation. Stylistically, *The Departed* conformed to the Hollywood style of "intensified continuity" as much as Scorsese's other recent Hollywood films.⁹⁴ The major difference was simply content. *The Departed* could not only be marketed as a "Martin Scorsese" film, but it could be discussed as such by film critics. The "authenticity" of Scorsese's earlier work transformed *The Departed* into something beyond its generic and stylistic conventions. To win the Best Director Award, Scorsese needed the crime genre of *The Departed*. To win the Best Picture Award, *The Departed* needed the prestige of Scorsese's authorship.

The Oscar ceremony itself was carefully staged theatre. Typically, the Best Director Award is presented by the previous year's winner. In this case, it would have been Ang Lee, the winner in 2005 for *Brokeback Mountain*. The Academy decided to break with this tradition and have Francis Ford Coppola, Steven Spielberg, and George Lucas announce the winner. Scorsese was thus finally inducted into the Hollywood "inside" with his fellow New Hollywood directors. Scorsese's acceptance speech tellingly made reference to the importance of film preservation and protecting Hollywood's great tradition. Scorsese was both placing himself in this tradition while also referencing his own work as a cultural historian. Even as accepting this symbol of

⁹³ *The Departed* grossed 132 million domestically with a 90 million dollar budget (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0407887/business>). It also received some of the best reviews of the year: <http://www.metacritic.com/film/titles/departed?q=the%20departed>

⁹⁴ David Bordwell analyzes the conventionality of *The Departed*'s style in his essay "The Departed: No Departure": available on-line at: <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=18>

middle-brow respectability, Scorsese attempted to remind his audience that his true passion was not only his own filmmaking but the whole of film culture. As much as possible, Scorsese worked to mitigate the move to the mainstream of Hollywood production, a move signaled shortly before his Oscar win by his signing of a major production deal with Paramount studio, the first such production deal Scorsese had in several years.⁹⁵

To conclude this chapter, I want to examine the event that probably best crystallizes Scorsese and his role in American culture. On March 21, 1999, Scorsese and Robert De Niro presented an Honorary Award to director Elia Kazan at the 1998 Academy Awards ceremony in Los Angeles. Because Kazan had “named names” during the period of the Hollywood blacklist in the 1950s, many vehemently opposed honoring Kazan’s artistic achievements. The controversy made at least one thing clear to Scorsese: “presenting” is not always a neutral, philanthropic enterprise as it was with presenting work done in the field of film archiving. “Presenting” Kazan was more difficult (and potentially harmful to Scorsese’s image) because it required engaging with a rather ugly and unpleasant history that was at once both a part of film culture and the post-war culture as a whole. And while this presentation was the subject of a great deal of controversy at the time, it has been an event about which Scorsese has been silent. Although Scorsese grants a large number of interviews in rather diverse publications, he has not addressed the subject. This is clearly a deliberate refusal on Scorsese’s part, avoiding the question of the Academy’s decision and his role in symbolically justifying the industry. Like Kazan, Scorsese made the decision to cooperate with the Hollywood

⁹⁵ “A Scorsese Tie-In With Paramount in Films and TV,” *New York Times* (November 8, 2006): available on-line at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/08/business/media/08films.html>.

studios even if it meant alienating some of his fellow workers. Almost a decade later, Scorsese was rewarded by the Academy and joined directors like Kazan as Oscar winners.

This Oscar telecast was not the first time in which Scorsese symbolically presented Kazan to the public and praised his artistry while ignoring his politics. In *A Personal Journey*, Scorsese listed and discussed Kazan as one of the directors in his section, "The Director as Iconoclast". In other words, for Scorsese, Kazan was not a man who saved his highly valued Hollywood career by betraying members of his community; rather, he was a defiant rebel against the system. This reading can only be made coherent by stressing the aesthetic and ignoring the social. The final scene of *A Personal Journey* includes a clip of Kazan's *America, America* (1963) during which Scorsese related the film to his personal experience:

When we talk about personal expression, I'm often reminded of Kazan's *America, America*, the story of his uncle's journey from Anatolia to America, the story of so many immigrants who came to this country from a distant foreign land. I kind of identified with it. I was very moved by it. Actually, I later saw myself making the same journey, not from Anatolia, but rather from my own neighborhood in New York, which was in a sense a very foreign land. My journey took me from that land to moviemaking – which was something unimaginable!⁹⁶

The rhetoric here is that both Scorsese and Kazan are outsiders to Hollywood because of their ethnic, New York background. Scorsese's New Yorkness has been used to distinguish him as an artist since his days at NYU, and is something of an illusion and manipulation, just as Scorsese's presenting Kazan as an opponent to the studio system is false and misleading. At the same time, Scorsese remains a liminal figure within the

⁹⁶ Scorsese and Wilson, 165-166.

contemporary film world, both praised for his lack of similarity to this cultural moment and seen as a representative of this point in history.

CONCLUSION

THE NEXT SCORSESE (?):

THE FUTURE OF ARTISTIC REPUTATIONS IN AMERICAN CINEMA

Having covered Scorsese's work up to the current cultural moment, this seems an appropriate place to conclude this study. To return to my introductory paragraph, the purpose of this dissertation has been to offer a different approach to Scorsese than has been available in the scholarship to date. As I have been arguing over the course of each of the five main chapters, the cultural figure that is Martin Scorsese is far more than the sum of his individual films. In fact, when discussing how Scorsese became known as the greatest filmmaker of the last Hollywood Renaissance, the film texts themselves are only one part of a larger interaction of a greater film culture. Because of the vast activity of Scorsese outside of his feature films, he has proven the ideal case study to prove a much larger point about how artistic reputations are made and maintained within the discipline of Film Studies and how the viewer's experience of any film or filmmaker is profoundly shaped by a much larger cultural context. The dissertation is thus not a study of Martin Scorsese as an individual director. It is a sociological study about the forming of reputations in the unique "cultural field" of film and a history of the study of film at the university level since the 1960s.

In order to produce new knowledge on Scorsese and film culture, the main methodology used was the sociological approach of Pierre Bourdieu. Using Bourdieu to study a single cinematic author is an uncommon strategy, but one that was needed within Scorsese scholarship. Certainly, Bourdieu remains under-utilized in the field of Film

Studies, not only within authorship studies but more generally as well, with some previously noted exceptions. This is understandable for many different reasons, one of which is that Bourdieu's own writing on the cinema is both sparse and rather simplistic. There are some statements that are now highly questionable, such as Bourdieu's claim that cinema is neither taught nor directly assessed by the educational system.¹ Chapter One of the dissertation works toward a more complex understanding of the university and the role it performs within film culture. There are obvious statements that leave too much historically unexplained, such as Bourdieu's claim that "(k)nowledge of directors is much more closely linked to cultural capital than is mere cinema-going."² Chapter Two gives a detailed history that expands and explains this statement more thoroughly and within a particular national and historical context. Bourdieu offers empirical evidence on cinema taste and social class, but without specific knowledge of how the world of film art differs significantly from other art forms.³ Chapters Three, Four and Five all concentrate on the negotiation of various types of capital within and between the film industry, cultural institutions, and particular individuals within the cultural field.

This is not to underestimate Bourdieu's influence on the study. Even though Bourdieu's comments on cinema may not be particularly useful, his approach to culture has enabled a new and productive way to contextualize Scorsese in particular and authorship studies more generally. Studies of Scorsese that focus primarily on the films can produce intelligent and informed scholarship, but it is questionable how much they can really add if they are still located within the familiar habitus of the Film Studies discipline. Bourdieu's work is so valuable for Film Studies because it is outside the

¹ Bourdieu (1984), 63.

² Bourdieu (1984), 27.

³ Bourdieu (1984), 271-272.

aesthetic debates that have prevailed in the discipline. Likewise, this dissertation does not approve or disapprove of any particular evaluations that have taken place on Scorsese and his work. Instead, this study seeks to explain and position those evaluations in order to comprehend the phenomenon of Scorsese within this cultural field. If evaluations and perspectives are challenged, it is not because they are incorrect or invalid, but merely because they have reached such a place of dominance that they now go unchallenged and even unnoticed. In each chapter, the method of “radically contextualizing” Scorsese gives an original outlook on the vast amount of texts that are now part of Scorsese’s image as an author.

Chapter One avoids the prevalent narrative of seeing Scorsese’s early works as “immature” versions of his later masterpieces. Instead, I argue that these works need to be seen within the field of limited production, a field with very different standards of evaluation that need to be taken into consideration. This historical approach to Scorsese’s career turns a previously marginalized work, *Street Scenes 1970*, into the central text of the chapter. The analysis of this film is a microcosm of the whole dissertation. While *Street Scenes 1970* is the organizing force to my discussion, the film itself remains largely unknown. The question of textual analysis is not even a possibility, since I have not (and cannot) see the film. But ultimately, this was not a hindrance because the purpose of this dissertation is to examine contextual factors. Through the use of interviews and archival research, the case is made that *Street Scenes 1970* is not simply a minor project notable only for the participation of a major director such as Scorsese. Rather, it is a historically important work, an example of the type of politically committed collective activity typical of this time period. It is much more than a minor

footnote in Scorsese's career, even if the authorship controversy is likely part of the reason why the film remains marginalized today. The analysis of Scorsese's other films and projects follows this approach of examining the films made by Scorsese beyond their textual features. While this de-emphasizes the films as "films," it allows for these much discussed works to be considered anew.

Chapter Two challenges previous discourse on Scorsese in the 1970s. While *Mean Streets* and *Taxi Driver* are the two canonized films of that decade, this chapter argues that Scorsese's other films are just as crucial to his reputation. For example, *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* may not have a huge critical following today, but it was a major film for Scorsese's career as a Hollywood filmmaker. From the opposite perspective, the documentary *Italianamerican* is not viewed as a major aesthetic achievement, but its status as a low-budget, independent and above all personal movie helped to authenticate Scorsese as something more than an ordinary Hollywood director. It is Scorsese's ability to both remain in Hollywood and appear as an industry outsider that is crucial to his critical reputation. Chapter Three expands this argument into the 1980s, a period usually ignored and deemed insignificant by most other Scorsese studies. When looked at contextually, this decade is actually very important to Scorsese's future reputation. To show this, a comparison is offered between Scorsese and his contemporaries, most notably Francis Ford Coppola. The reputations of these two directors moved in very different directions, despite the fact that their respective feature film output paralleled each other. The explanation for this divergence can be found not in the films, but in Scorsese's ability to negotiate his cultural capital through relationships with cultural institutions. By becoming a passionate advocate of film preservation and

artist rights, Scorsese started to make his name synonymous with the canonized work of the past. The aesthetic failings of his films in this era, which has caused this period to be overlooked, are of minor importance. This is especially the case with *The Last Temptation of Christ*. The actual artistic merit of this work is insignificant when juxtaposed to its immense symbolic value as an exemplar of artistic freedom.

Chapter Four concentrates on Scorsese's work as a film historian, especially on his two four-hour documentaries on the history of American and Italian cinema. This work parallels his fiction films made for Hollywood in the 1990s, as Scorsese became exclusively concerned with representing past worlds that no longer exist. As the decade progressed, Scorsese's increasing status as an industry insider with access to large budgets is countered by his growing cultural prestige in areas that extend beyond his films. Scorsese's name now had connotations of not only artistic integrity, but with the preservation of an entire cultural heritage. Chapter Five continues this argument by considering the wide variety of Scorsese's current activities, including his work as a music historian and his ventures in the publishing field. Given this plethora of material circulating around Scorsese and being disseminated in such a wide variety of art forms and media, a concentration on Scorsese's film texts misses the larger picture. Certainly, the fact that Scorsese is now making big budget Hollywood products that are fairly conventional and even lacking in distinction risks his cultural capital. But this is mediated by his other cultural activities in the field and by his own established reputation. The actual style of the Oscar-winning *The Departed* or any other Scorsese work matters much less than its status as a "Scorsese" film. The films Scorsese directs remain aesthetic objects, but they are now determined by Scorsese's authorship and reputation.

In March 2000, *Esquire* magazine ran a feature titled “The Next Scorsese” in which they invited various film critics to pick the greatest filmmaker of the new generation of American auteurs. This article was inspired by the rise of American independent filmmakers who had emerged in the industry over the preceding decade, peaking in late 1999/ early 2000 with a number of critically acclaimed films that were compared to the Hollywood Renaissance of the 1970s. The tagline for the piece ran parallel with half of Scorsese’s face and read as follows:

The most talented new generation of film directors since the auteurs of the ‘70s is upon us. They won’t all last. They won’t all leave a great body of work. And they won’t all continue making ambitious movies. Which one of them will become ... The Next Scorsese.⁴

The criteria for generational greatness, of which Scorsese exemplifies, are longevity, productivity, and integrity. Within the popular entertainment industry, Scorsese had come to represent the industry’s best possible vision of itself and the artistic quality it is capable of delivering. Rather than conducting a poll of film critics, *Esquire* asked a number of individuals writing for popular outlets to give and briefly justify their choices (they did, however, allow readers to voice their opinion in an on-line poll). *New York Times* film critic Elvis Mitchell chose The Wachowski Brothers; *Esquire* critic Tom Carson selected Alexander Payne; *Variety*’s Todd McCarthy chose Paul Thomas Anderson; *Los Angeles Times* critic Kenneth Turan selected David O. Russell; *The New York Observer* critic and auteur founder Andrew Sarris chose Kevin Smith; and, finally, Scorsese himself (Scorsese’s by-line humorously reads “Martin Scorsese is, well, Martin Scorsese”) selected Wes Anderson.

⁴ Tom Carson, “The Next Scorsese,” *Esquire* (March 2000): 217.

Nearly all of the critics concentrate on the question from a purely aesthetic position, trying to determine which current director will keep producing films of high artistic quality into the future. This is not a surprise. As I have argued throughout this dissertation, contextual concerns are often ignored in writings on Scorsese. Intriguingly, the only exception to this is Andrew Sarris, the long-time auteurist. In defending his choice of Kevin Smith, Sarris writes, "Smith's flair for merchandising and recycling the fruits of his labor is one of the reasons I am betting on him to break out of the low-budget ghetto and into the movie mainstream."⁵ Perhaps unwittingly, Sarris is acknowledging here that being considered the "next Scorsese" means mainstream acceptance and exposure, not simply artistic quality and integrity. But the other critics choose to ignore industrial factors and view "Scorsese" as solely an artistic entity.

These choices and their critical defenses provide a microcosm of the now popularly held discourse on Scorsese and his aesthetic distinction. Tom Carson, in his discussion of Alexander Payne, argues that "he's already gone as far as he can go with the poignancy of drabness; it may be time for him to give Omaha a rest."⁶ This can be seen as a reference to Scorsese's own previous need to move away from his particular milieu. Todd McCarthy makes explicit reference to "Scorsese's visual style" and its influence on Paul Thomas Anderson, and one can see similar connections with his argument that Anderson "has demonstrated a natural filmmaking flair, a bent for risk taking, and a predilection for taking actors where they might otherwise never get to go."⁷ Kenneth Turan's comments on his selection of David O. Russell are nearly identical:

⁵ Andrew Sarris, "The Next Scorsese: Kevin Smith," *Esquire* (March 2000): 218.

⁶ Tom Carson, "The Next Scorsese: Alexander Payne," *Esquire* (March 2000): 223.

⁷ Todd McCarthy, "The Next Scorsese: Paul Thomas Anderson," *Esquire* (March 2000): 221.

Russell wants to be both playing by the rules and bending them further than anyone thought to before. His films are audacious and entertaining, Hollywood with a twist, able to deliver traditional satisfactions while precariously far out on a limb. No matter what challenges Russell sets for himself, he seems to have no difficulty carrying them off.⁸

This insider/outsider dynamic that Turan praises in Russell is exactly what has allowed Scorsese to earn his own reputation. Scorsese's critical appraisal of his own choice, Wes Anderson, follows this same discourse. He compares Anderson to both renowned Hollywood director Leo McCarey and French auteur Jean Renoir, echoing his and others strategy of placing Scorsese in the pantheon alongside his influences/idols. He notes that Anderson "has a fine sense of how music works against an image," much like the reputation Scorsese has gained from his use of popular music in modern cinema. Scorsese ends his appreciation of Anderson with the following remark about a scene in *Bottle Rocket* (Wes Anderson, 1996): "For me, it's a transcendent moment. And transcendent moments are in short supply these days."⁹ The importance of "transcendence" to Scorsese's own reputation is echoed here in his explanation of why Anderson has the potential to be the most critically renowned filmmaker of next generation. Subtly, Scorsese also indicates that this generation is not as accomplished as those of the past with his comment that transcendence is in "short supply".

As this dissertation has argued, the question of the "next Scorsese" is a false one. There will never be another Scorsese. I do not mean this in the liberal humanist tradition of individual subjects (especially heroic artists) being completely unique. The argument of the dissertation has been explicitly against this type of reading. There will never be another Scorsese not because of Scorsese's distinctiveness as an artist, but because of the

⁸ Kenneth Turan, "The Next Scorsese: David O. Russell," *Esquire* (March 2000): 220.

⁹ Martin Scorsese, "The Next Scorsese: Wes Anderson," *Esquire* (March 2000): 225.

particular context in which he was situated. The question of the “next Scorsese” presupposes that the next generation of filmmakers will be evaluated in a manner similar to previous eras. As this study has shown, this cannot be presumed. It is not only criteria that change. The very legitimacy of evaluation itself mutates. Scorsese has recognized this and the security of his reputation lies not in the transcendental quality of his films, but in the concrete relationships he has formed with cultural institutions. Thus, when asking who is the “next Scorsese,” the major factor will not be aesthetics or even economics. Rather, it will be the ability of filmmakers to forge the appropriate alliances that will allow their cultural capital to be secured.

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