



MARTIN SCORSESE'S  
**AMERICA**

— ELLIS CASHMORE —

AUTHOR OF *TYSON: NURTURE OF THE BEAST*



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AMERICA**

ELLIS CASHMORE

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# 1

## INTRODUCTION – GRAND, DARK, AMERICAN VISION

*It seems stupid to have discovered America only to make it a copy of another country.*

There is a scene in *No Direction Home*, Martin Scorsese's documentary about Bob Dylan, in which Joan Baez recalls Dylan's scathingly reporting how scholars and highbrow critics were in the 1960s deconstructing the meanings of his lyrics and assessing the profundity of his vision. "All these assholes, they're gonna be writing about all this shit I write," Dylan told Baez.

Baez, one-time muse and folk artist in her own right, suggests that Dylan took pleasure from the earnest interpretations of his songs, most of that pleasure deriving from the fact that the interpretations bore no resemblance to what he had in mind when he wrote them. Baez remembers Dylan scoffing, "I don't know what the fuck it's about and *they're* gonna write what it's about."

I guess I'm going to do something similar with Scorsese:

I'm set to write what his films are about, possibly in a way he won't recognize himself. Scorsese might be a fearless filmmaker who has steadfastly pursued his own goals, often in defiance of Hollywood traditions. But I'm less interested in him as an individual, more as a creator of a vision. His personal morality, his motives, his intentions, his aspirations rarely reveal a sense of purpose beyond creating art. Scorsese has never said he is trying to create a body of work that will tell us what he thinks of America. But it does exactly that.

Scorsese has the reputation of being a preeminent filmmaker. Rightly so. But can he enrich our understanding of America's history, the values that unite it and the divisions that cleave it apart? In a sense, the answer is implicit in his reputation: one of the reasons he is so widely acknowledged is that his work dramatizes and documents America in a way that's both enjoyable and edifying.

We can understand history and contemporary culture through all sorts of creative artists as well as historians and social scientists; their aesthetic and scholarly work always offers a scope, an opportunity to examine something or somewhere. Since 1501 when the Italian merchant and explorer Amerigo Vespucci sailed along the west coast of South America, turned north and looked into the distance, there have been any number of visions of America. The very word "America" is thought to derive from the Latin form of the explorer's Christian name, *Americus*. A land named after its first visionary became the source of countless other visions. Scorsese's America is just one of them.

Despite his popular reputation as a furnisher of thrilling and ruthless tales of gangster life, Scorsese is an eclectic director, delving into novels, biographies, historical documents, and especially other films. As well as his chronicling Italian Americans' attempts to chase the American Dream, he has dramatized such subjects as ethnic animosities in the

nineteenth century, the morbidity of living in the twentieth-century metropolis, and the crumbling confidence in mainstream institutions, such as the family, the legal system, and big government. He's captured the swarming egotism of America and the rewards and punishments offered by attempts either to escape or embrace it. His documentaries are often knowledgeable and enlightening reports on American popular culture and the struggles that both tear and repair it. America's history, its torments and its crises; the people who build it and those who break it. They're all there. Scorsese has put together a vision of America.

When you stand back and ponder, "What *kind* of America is Scorsese visualizing?"

How can we interpret his films in a way that allows us to see a single image rather than numerous, fragmented impressions?"

**"Scorsese is fascinated by reckless obsessives."**

DAVID COURTWRIGHT, *JOURNAL OF AMERICAN HISTORY*

you scratch your head and reflect on the assortment of different subjects, periods, and genres Scorsese has essayed.

Two writers have offered their own ways of characterizing Scorsese's America: as an obsessive society and one that is endlessly collapsing and restoring itself, always in the grip of violent change.

First, David T. Courtwright's summary: "Scorsese is fascinated by reckless obsessives." Gusting through every film there is what Courtwright, in his 2005 analysis of *The Aviator*, calls "the hurricane of obsession." Obsessive people, that is, in an obsessive society. Scorsese brings this to life through both his characters and the environments in which they live and die.

Obsessives sometimes give way to their obsessions, taking their own lives or those of others, doing things that land them in trouble or arranging their own lives in a way that doesn't so

much invite problems as drags them in. But most of the time, they just incorporate their obsessions into their lifestyles in a way that nobody else notices. We see them everywhere, probably without knowing it. They're in supermarkets, sitting next to you on the subway or in a plane, working at the desk facing you at work or in the library. They're people preoccupied with something or someone to a troubling extent. Troubling, that is, for them and everyone around them.

Scorsese makes films about them. In doing so, he contrives to make films about the society in which they operate and which gives rise to their obsessions. "From his first feature film, *Who's that Knocking at My Door?*, Scorsese has been an observer of life on the margin," writes Esther B. Fein, "and the movies he has directed since then . . . have studied that viewpoint from different angles, and through different lives."

Gentle psychopaths, tortured lovers, and avaricious gangsters share space with vengeful malefactors and woebegone wannabes, in what David Bromwich calls the "Scorsese Book of the Disturbed." They are united only by the compulsive resolution that fires their pursuits and by the unbreakable spirit that eventually condemns them.

It sounds like a world of misfits. But it's not: *everyone* in America is an obsessive in one sense or another. Everyone fusses over things that would either amuse the Dalai Lama or make him despair: like goods, revenge, or public acclaim. Everyone wants to be a winner of some kind. Success is a very American preoccupation.

Scorsese is a kind of annalist of the obsessive society, where material possessions and physical comfort are valued, where the pursuit of individual improvement is rewarded, and where male prerogative is respected as if a favorite ornament that has been fixed in position for so many generations that we dare not change it.

Why should these be regarded as obsessions? After all, America didn't invent materialism, any more than it created the individual and vested in him – I use the masculine pronoun deliberately – a sense of purpose and desire for self-improvement. Yet, it was in America that these were changed into unquestioned values, principles to guide a population's conduct and to reward as beneficial. In themselves, they aren't obsessions; they become so when they intrude on the mind of independent citizens, motivating them to the kind of behavior that upsets not just other people but the entire social order of which they're part. This leads us to the second way of characterizing Scorsese's America.

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In reviewing *Gangs of New York* in 2003, James Parker proposed another dominant feature of what he considers Scorsese's "amateur sociology." Setting aside whether Parker equates "amateur" with lack of scholarly rigor rather than ineptitude, his point is that Scorsese's storytelling condenses complex information into comprehensible narratives about a society that's always shifting. For Parker, Scorsese's work provides us with a model of "threatened or collapsing order."

The "order" he refers to is an arrangement of codes, rules, protocols, and laws in which everything is in its correct or appropriate place and in which people are disposed to act toward each other according to patterns or accepted norms. Orders exist everywhere there are humans: gregarious creatures that we are, we establish and maintain stable and predictable ways of conducting our lives that allow others to do likewise. So why, in Scorsese's conception, or at least Parker's interpretation of his conception, are they under threat?

Parker doesn't expand his point, but I'll make inferences in the chapters to come. Orders don't stand still like buildings:

**Codes and constitutions  
creak in *The Age of  
Innocence*, they crack up  
in *Taxi Driver*, they renew  
and restore themselves in  
*The Color of Money*.**

they are continually under threat or in imminent danger of collapse. Some repel or absorb the threats and give the impression of continuity, if not rock-solid stability, while others actually do cave in. Scorsese

essays both forms. In *Casino*, we witness the final throes of a criminal order established on the principles of greed, ambition, and capital accumulation. A near-perfectly calibrated system, but with inbuilt hubris, contrives its own demise.

In a parallel universe we find Bob Dylan's onetime backing band reminiscing on sixteen years spent on the road, rising from barroom gigs to packed stadiums, meeting blues legends and entertaining groupies, but sensing, as Robbie Robertson puts it, "the beginning of the beginning of the end of the beginning" as they prepare for *The Last Waltz*.

America is full of orders collapsing, while others emerge. Codes and constitutions creak in *The Age of Innocence*, they crack up in *Taxi Driver*, they renew and restore themselves in *The Color of Money*. Collapse lurks around every corner and new orders are never far away. This is certainly a way of approaching Scorsese's take on American society. And the idea of an entire society racked with obsessive thoughts is also full of promise.

Scorsese has offered pictures of an ever-changing America in which people are sometimes raving, more often just passionate about whatever stirs them. But there's always a connection between the people and the world around them; Scorsese makes us see that it isn't just around them – it's actually inside them too.

Scorsese's characters are often, to use Fein's phrase, on the margin, or what Gavin Smith, Donald Lyons, and Kathleen Murphy call "the edge of America." By elaborately exposing what Smith and his colleagues anoint "chosen people plucked willing or not out of anonymity and inertia," Scorsese shows a society that both commissions and condemns the same actions – in roughly equal proportions – and invites a perspective, or a way of seeing something we might already know but would probably not want to acknowledge.

Richard Blake, in 2005, captured the uneasy relationship by likening the director to a torturer: "Scorsese has peeled back the eyelids of his audiences and forced them to watch the sordid, cruel realities of urban life that most of us would rather not see" (p. 25).

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Cliff Froehlich of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* believes that Scorsese's films "vary wildly in quality and content." Yet, Froehlich argues, despite the variations, the films "display key traits that distinguish the director's entire oeuvre . . . unified by his recurring themes."

Froehlich doesn't spell out what he sees as Scorsese's "recurring themes." But the challenge is there: what are the themes that repeat themselves, reappearing in different guises time and again, giving Scorsese's films an identity as an integrated *oeuvre*? The obsessive society and its collapsing orders provide shape and direction for Scorsese. But, to follow Froehlich's point, there is an unusually wide range of subjects, and to make sense of them, we need to identify distinct themes. I'll deal with a theme in each chapter, though, as the readers will soon recognize, several of the themes blur into each other, into patterns.

Considering that Scorsese's films cover over 160 years of American history, there is a surprising continuity of style and

thematic consistency in his work, though understandable changes of emphasis as he, like the rest of us, has matured. Scorsese's history might be imperfect, but it's provocative and, for this reason, I haven't tried to identify breaks or interruptions: for work of such breadth, there are actually few. In this book, I'm more interested in the coherence of Scorsese's cinema and what it tells us about the way he understands and perhaps wants us to understand America. Next, I'll outline the chapters and, in the concluding chapter, I'll stand back to see how they all crystallize into the patterns.

*Chapter two.* Success is integral to America. It's almost as if Americans are under obligation not just to be successful, but to exhibit that success. They have found the perfect ideal. Scorsese's elemental *GoodFellas* is a kind of primary film in this respect. In this film, which was released in 1990, Scorsese restored what had been something of a guiding light in his films of the early 1970s. The hunger for achievement, or rather the actions it has excited, has helped shape many films of radically different sensibilities, from *Citizen Kane* to *The Wizard of Oz*. In Scorsese's hands, it becomes an inspiration, though not for the noble. Scorsese heroes are not engaged in a metaphoric search for the great American grail.

The American Dream and the way it motivates the quest not so much for money but for the type of "success" money represents is obviously dominant in Scorsese's America: here, reprobates, fraudsters, extortionists, and miscellaneous other scumbags vie with wholesome, doe-eyed youths whose pursuit of the Dream will end in tears. In fact, everybody's endeavor ends in tears.

This is an America that, for all its democratic ideology and Christian doctrine, upholds a culture in which the vast majority of those who chase the Dream will be broken by it. If there is one brutal argument propounded by all Scorsese's films, this is it. Everyone chases the dream, some



by legal means, others by other, more innovative methods. In *GoodFellas* and other films, Scorsese dispenses with simplifications such as law and order, opting instead to see the two as tendencies rather than absolute poles; tendencies that don't necessarily lead in different directions.

*Chapter 3.* I examine Scorsese's understanding of the sometimes symbiotic relationship between, on the one hand, the forces of law and order and, on the other, the forces of criminality. The gray area in which cops and criminals coexist in mutual tolerance is what really arrests Scorsese's attention. There are no good guys and bad guys in America: just people who see themselves as the former, but whose actions suggest they are the latter.

Lurking everywhere in Scorsese's work is an individual urgently trying to assert, or reassert, his individuality in the teeth of monsters who feed on such peculiarities. Individuals are quirks, oddities, their foibles those of fugitives and eccentrics. Scorsese doesn't make horror films, of course; but he does make films in which corporations, organizations, syndicates, and even whole cities try to swallow and digest individuals in their strivings for uniformity. Never a romantic, Scorsese resists the quieting message that individualism can never be suppressed for long. In his America, it is frequently consumed by larger, more powerful entities that thrive on sameness.

Crime, for Scorsese, is a caricature of power: an exaggerated version of what law-abiding people do en route to becoming powerful. Actions and omissions that constitute offenses and are punishable by law are little different from the everyday behavior of powerholders.

*Chapter four.* There's no evidence that Scorsese has ever read David Riesman's book *The Lonely Crowd*, which was a study of the changing American psyche in the 1950s. But there is an irresistible comparison: many of Scorsese's insular, tormented, and, sometimes, haunted men could have

been cut-and-pasted from Riesman's research. Chapter 4 focuses on how characters such as Travis Bickle exemplify the lonely man in the lonely crowd.

"*Mean Streets* and *Taxi Driver* contain a reality of urban America that I don't think we'd seen before," says Patricia Finneran, director of The American Film Institute's Silverdocs festival (quoted by Kelly Jane Torrance). There are any number of movies about grimy, unstable city life with its ubiquitous violence. But Scorsese offers an unusual angle of vision – through the eyes of existential anti-heroes accountable to no one, not even themselves, segueing from disorganization to utter derangement.

Bryan D. Palmer detects a tension in Scorsese's effort to link the individual with society. "Robert De Niro's drift into pathology in *Taxi Driver*, while powerfully evocative as a representation of social crisis in the 'post'-1960s decade of the 1970s, never manages to shake loose of a fundamentally alienated individuality" (p. 321).

*Taxi Driver* shares with *Bringing Out the Dead* and *After Hours*, as well as Scorsese's television program "Mirror, mirror," a scope on living in and through the modern metropolis. Specifically, how living in city environments affects the way we think and how we react. At times, there is almost a duel between the public city and the private inner world of its inhabitants. All of the films considered in this chapter can be seen as master classes in the relationships between individuals and their environments. In Scorsese's eyes, those relationships are often confrontational.

*Chapter 5.* Scorsese spikes most of his work with a shot of racism or ethnic rivalry of some kind, and *Gangs of New York* engages full-on with issues of racism in the New World of the late nineteenth century. As Palmer argues, there is an unsettling conflict in this film. It's unsettling because it's so familiar even today.

Racism resurfaces, in different forms, in several other Scorsese films, especially his not-so-affectionate backward glances at Italian-American ethnic bonding. Issues of inclusion, exclusivity, segregation, and prejudice appear in different guises, which I explore in Chapter 5. Again, the conflict between the demands of individuals and those of the groups to which they notionally belong or perhaps no longer want to belong are addressed by Scorsese in a way that forces us to think of the politics of race and ethnicity.

Many of Scorsese's films reveal Italian-American culture, usually not in the best of lights. His efforts at addressing other aspects of American ethnicity are often overlooked. Yet, ethnic cultures and the racism they either suffer or incite are, on inspection, germane to Scorsese's version of America.

*Chapter 6.* The conflict between social or public presentation and individual or private lives is imagined in several works, dramatically in *New York, New York* and documentarily in *No Direction Home*, for example. The exploration of Dylan's career offers Scorsese raw material with which to examine public personae – the aspects of people's character that are presented and, in turn, consumed by audiences. It is a theme that surfaces repeatedly in Scorsese. *The King of Comedy* is Scorsese's masterwork in this respect. Was there ever a more penetrating cultural prescient?

Chapter 6 deals with what's been called Scorsese's "fascination with the US entertainment industry": his treatment of fame, the industry that promotes it, and its effects on both the famous and their fans. For Scorsese, the rise of entertainment as an industry rather than a pastime is seen as a sublime development in American culture. Turning entertainment into a product that can be traded on the market was a pioneering gambit in the late eighteenth century, something Scorsese broaches when, in *Gangs of New York*, he features the

visionary P.T. Barnum plying his wares among the masses. But, it is in *The Aviator* that Scorsese is able to engage with the very medium he uses to project his own vision.

In the 1920s, American culture changed dramatically. Quite apart from the underworld changes wrought by Prohibition, there were adaptations to new markets in consumer goods. The cults of glamour and celebrity resonate today, of course. In *The Aviator*, Scorsese uses Howard Hughes as his prism to disperse rays of light on the almost fetishistic pursuit of profit in a country that needed, as President Warren G. Harding affirmed, “less government in business and more business in government.” Hughes’ Midas-like capacity to turn a profit is tested, though not destroyed, during his attempts to muscle his way into Hollywood.

Scorsese’s evident fascination with the entertainment industry is nothing to do with introspection: his interest seems to be with externalities – the consequences of the commercial activity that affects entire societies. Everyone in America – everyone – is, in some way, affected by entertainment.

*Chapter 7.* The family. It’s a capstone American institution, of course, though, as with everything else in Scorsese’s America, perilously close to collapse. When you think of the multiple challenges to it that have been launched particularly since the tumultuous decade of the 1960s, the family shouldn’t really exist at all, at least not in the traditional, nuclear sense. Its ability to change has enabled the traditional family to survive decades of cultural upheaval and still retain its appeal.

*Cape Fear* was Scorsese’s remake of a 1960s film and, as a way of understanding how the portrayal of the family reflects the changed cultural climate, I compare the two versions in Chapter 7. It might surprise some readers that, of the two, Scorsese’s version presents the more traditional, even a reactionary, model of the family in America.

Gender is a concern for Scorsese: every one of his films set in America deals with some sort of disoriented or disorienting relationship between women and men. There is little comfort in his depiction. Women are not always, as critics of Scorsese sometimes point out, helpless appendages; but there is a sense in which they are perpetually seeking something in men that men either can't or won't provide. This helps Scorsese's disillusionment with the family.

**Every man in every Scorsese film enjoys rights that he hasn't so much earned as inherited. Scorsese shows how this cultural inheritance has shaped the way we understand manhood in America.**

*Chapter eight.* Men themselves are often excessively self-absorbed scions of privileges. Scorsese's entire project has been described by Paul Arthur as a "mapping of masculine prerogative." This sounds an apt summary: nearly every man in every Scorsese film enjoys rights that he hasn't so much earned as inherited. Scorsese shows how this cultural inheritance has shaped the way we understand manhood in America.

So, what does it mean to be a man? Scorsese has an answer of sorts and Chapter 8 examines it. Critics often name *Raging Bull* as his most compelling essay in brutal, red-blooded manhood. It might well be; but in several other films, Scorsese reveals a slightly more nuanced conception of manhood, as we will see. Yet, in a way, validating manhood is in evidence in all Scorsese's films; and, by validating, I mean corroborating, backing up, and authenticating. In every film, men are busily confirming that they are real men. Why? In Chapter 8, I'll start to answer the question, though the full answer is brought into the open during Chapters 9 and 10.

*Chapter 9.* A criticism often leveled at a director whose mainstay is men is that his women are one-dimensional. Some critics suggest female characters are just men's appurtenances in Scorsese films: accessories that can be proudly exhibited, but exchanged when their use value wears out. It's a common misconception but one that I'll put to the sword in Chapter 9, where I show that Scorsese has a well-developed understanding of the changing role of women in the twentieth century and beyond. It might not be the same understanding as many other artists and writers, but it's one worthy of serious consideration.

Examining the way in which Scorsese has tackled the disappearance of one kind of femininity and the emergence of another takes me to historical works like *Boxcar Bertha* and more contemporary films such as *The King of Comedy*, where we discover women who are either self-conscious mavericks or rule-breaking individualists. They always seem constrained, as we will see. Scorsese's depiction of women who, while not exactly feminists, defy convention and tread their own paths provides an insight into how he sees women in America.

It's a surprise to learn that Scorsese's America accommodates rule-breaking women who make demands, disobey orders, and stop at nothing in their efforts to get their own way. It's not such a surprise when calamities, personal or cultural, intervene. It doesn't matter whether they're singers who want a family as well as a career, celebrity idolaters, ex-hookers, or free spirits trying to keep body and soul together: bad luck, destiny, or, more usually, circumstances have a way of deflecting them from their path.

*Chapter 10.* The problem for women – and they do have a problem in Scorsese's America – is that they get suckered into believing in romantic love. It's illusory: impossible to attain, no matter who you are. Scorsese enhances our understanding of the way romance works against the best interests

of women, at the same time gifting men with a means of protecting their prerogatives.

Man–woman relations are rarely harmonious affairs in Scorsese’s work. In every film, there is a lesson on how women contrive to bring about their own unhappiness. Chapter 9 shows how different women respond to the ideal of romance in different ways. Whatever the response, Scorsese thinks romantic love is ruinous. His ethos has been called “anti-romance,” a description I find wholly appropriate.

With his sour and, at times, rancid conception of romance, Scorsese has subverted Hollywood conventions and got away with it. But, there is an uncomfortable conservatism in his work and one that makes it seem that, for him, there is little use in trying to resist forces that seem elemental but are really cultural. Women can strive all they like to be free and autonomous, but, in the end, the irresistible lure of romantic love will bring them into check. Women, no matter what they say or do, are looking for love. And this is their undoing.

*Chapter 11.* So much of Scorsese’s films are about money, you could be forgiven for thinking that he worships Mammon. Or he could just be depicting a culture that honors it. One thing that Scorsese is at pains to disclose is that the pursuit of money is not an entirely irrational one.

**Money confers a certain quality on its owners: it means they are successful.**

Money confers a certain quality on its owners: it means they are successful. The reverse of this is arguably more important: they’re not losers. *The Color of Money* centers on the pursuit of the green stuff, but provides Scorsese with a framework in which he explores many of the themes that dominate his wider work.

The concluding chapter addresses these and brings together the three recurrent features that permeate Scorsese’s

compositions, giving his America structure, bearing, and orientation.

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Does Scorsese *intend* to project a vision of America? Maybe not. But there is an incident that reminds us of the gulf between intentions and results and how, in a sense, the former matter far less than the latter. It concerns *The Last Waltz*, Scorsese's document of The Band's valedictory concert in San Francisco. Cinematographer Michael Chapman became involved in a dispute with Scorsese over how to light Robbie Robertson's number "The weight."

Chapman insisted it was a Protestant song and that, as a Catholic, Scorsese didn't understand the Gospel influences ("Go down, Miss Moses, there's nothing you can say. It's just old Luke, and Luke's waiting on the Judgment Day"). Scorsese wanted him to use the colors violet and yellow, suggesting a Catholic intonation in the song. Robertson had no say in the matter, but listened approvingly. "I liked everything they were saying because I had never thought of any of it . . . the song is about the guilt of relationships, not being able to give what's being asked of you," said Robertson (on pp. 115–16 of Mary Pat Kelly's *Martin Scorsese: A journey*).

It underlines the discrepancy between what artists and writers mean to express and what they actually do express, or how others respond to their expressions. Like Dylan, Robertson didn't recognize the meanings attributed to his work by others. Maybe I am about to attribute meanings that Scorsese won't recognize; though he might have got used to this over the years.

Take *New York, New York*, which even Scorsese himself admitted had problems and took a mauling from most critics. But not from David Thomson, who, in the *New York Times*,



hailed it as “one of Mr. Scorsese’s greatest achievements . . . his most penetrating study of the relations between men and women.”

So, while this book is called *Martin Scorsese’s America*, I anticipate that readers might object to my assumption that every film is part of an effort to advance a personal vision. After all, Scorsese himself has either scripted or co-scripted only a minority of the films he has directed. Following his own *Mean Streets* in 1973, he didn’t write another screenplay until *GoodFellas* in 1990. Since then he has relied on other writers in all but a few films.

All films are a little like the great Frankenstein experiment: once the parts are stitched together and the voltage is turned up, they take on a life of their own and leave behind their creator, or creators – after all, there are scriptwriters involved, often more than one, and they, in turn, rely to some extent on source materials like novels or nonfiction books (I include a Filmography on pp. 269–72). Then there are editors who are responsible for the final cut that eventually makes it onto the screen, as well as countless other contributors to the end product. Any film is mediated not just by a director’s own vision, but by countless other filters, the most purifying of which is commercialism.

So, why is it *Scorsese’s* vision? Any vision, no matter how singular or even idiosyncratic it may be, is always a product of several forces, and not even a director as influential as Scorsese can control all of them. But, as director, he approves, rewrites, and often interpolates material to suit his own ends. It would be naïve to believe Scorsese would allow a film to bear his name and imprimatur without complete satisfaction that the end product faithfully recorded exactly the vision he wants others to experience and the words he wants others to hear.

Scorsese may not like the pontifical tirades directed

against Irish, Jews, or blacks, or the bile-spill of a war-damaged taxi driver, or the misogynist boasts of rock 'n' rollers. But he knows they are parts of America and his audience have to experience them. The words have what Raymond Williams, in his *Culture and Materialism*, called “an ambiguous relationship to naturalism” (p. 129). He meant that, film, like other art, often strives to be lifelike and historically and socially accurate; but it always conveys a “*reconstructed* environment.” Scorsese puts the words, sentiments, and feelings in his films because his naturalistic style of representation commits him to giving a vivid picture with explicit detail.

Some of Scorsese's films are carefully nurtured and painstakingly developed, while the rest are projects initiated by others. *GoodFellas* is an example of the former, *Cape Fear* the latter. Some will argue in response that there can't be consistency in his work. I disagree: I hope to persuade the reader that there is a thematic continuity and an evenness of texture that allow us to investigate his work as a whole, an *oeuvre* in fact.

Naturally, no director can control how audiences will interpret, understand, or read a film. Scorsese occasionally explains what he was trying to convey and suggests the significance of particular scenes, characters, or events. But he can't make us *see* his vision. And yet, the impression remains: Scorsese seems to have been absorbed with ideas and thoughts that inhabit the mind and by an environment that encourages such ideas and thoughts and excites compulsive behaviors, preoccupations, passions, infatuations, fetishes, crazes, and phobias. His collective work implicates us in five generations of social history. And there *is* social history. It isn't a textbook history, or even a historical memoir, but there is an account of living, even if it is living at the margins of American life.

It is an account that combines brutality, corruption, religiosity, xenophobia, addiction, irrepressible strength, and incapacitating weakness.

Scorsese has been our guide through a dark world of nineteenth-century crypto-fascism to a fetishistic twentieth century in which goods, fame, money, and power are held to have magical power.

**“A grand, dark, American vision, a portrait of the facts beneath the headlines.”** MICHAEL WILMINGTON, *CHICAGO TRIBUNE*

As the title of this book suggests, my belief is that, taken collectively, Scorsese’s films offer a model of American society – a society pockmarked by history and disfigured by contemporary flaws. Obviously, his work is that of a dramatist rather than an analyst, though there is no privileged way of envisioning America. Scorsese has “a grand, dark, American vision, a portrait of the facts beneath the headlines,” as Michael Wilmington, of the *Chicago Tribune*, puts it.

Other writers have inferred from Scorsese’s films that his endeavors are emblematic. “Scorsese is interested in characters who are representative either of a class or of a certain ideological grouping; he is concerned with their relationships to each other or to an antagonistic environment,” discerns Robert Kolker in the 2000 edition of his *A Cinema of Loneliness* (p. 179). “Scorsese’s films all involve antagonism, struggle, and constant movement” – characteristics of cultures in the throes of change, we might add.

Some of Scorsese’s films offer metaphors, others reflections, still others morality plays. On occasion, he offers microcosms, miniature versions of larger places and events into which he thrusts human affairs that have relevance to nearly all of us. Some of his admirers may object to my dealing with him this way – as a social commentator rather than entertainer. After all, Scorsese works in the film industry, not education.

But entertainment and education are not necessarily in opposition, nor even separable. Many, many films are entertaining because they edify and enlighten, not by providing factual information or offering theoretical knowledge (though, of course, some do), but by provoking audiences into thinking about facets of life in new ways. Scorsese is far from alone in this type of endeavor, of course, though his range, consistence, and productivity tend to distinguish him.

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If Scorsese can be approached as a social commentator, we should ask whether he is a good one. Writing for *Time*, Richard Schickel frowned on Scorsese's efforts: "*Mean Streets* first showed the conflict between Scorsese's natural gift for human observation and his attraction to social and psychological statements. Unfortunately, social comment does not come easily to him, and the strain shows" (p. 189 in Kelly's 1980 collection of reviews).

Over the course of this book, I'll seek to show that this relatively early (1976) verdict was rash. I believe Scorsese has assembled a corpus of work that illustrates how entertainment can be integrated with comment on society without

**"I consider *GoodFellas*, with its encapsulation of a quarter-century of American life, and feel as if I'm observing a car wreck from the point of view of the passenger seat." STUART KLAWANS, *THE NATION***

showing signs of strain. In this sense, I agree with Bryan Palmer's verdict on *Gangs of New York*, in which "it is impossible not to engage with the politicised meanings of collective historical process, however unsettling they may be" (p. 321).

Scorsese's ability to produce this type of engagement in many other of his films rests on his way of bringing subjective

states to the fore. As Raymond Durngat stresses, in his article “Between God and the *GoodFellas*,” “he [Scorsese] discerns *experiences*, abstracted from reality, yet heightened, and woven into a stylized yet illuminating logic” (p. 24).

Events and processes, whether an undercover sting in Boston, an impossibly extravagant aircraft project in Tinseltown, or a paramedic’s twisted descent into Hades, are dependent on what goes on in the minds of men – and all but a couple of Scorsese’s principal characters are men – specifically on values, motivations, and knowledge.

Ideas, for Scorsese, do not spring fully formed from the fertile imagination: they have origins in everyday encounters, in surroundings, contexts, and circumstances; in short, society. Perhaps this is what Parker has in mind: it certainly distinguishes Scorsese as a sociologist among directors. Never



*When Frank Costello expresses his hope, “I don’t want to be a product of my environment. I want my environment to be a product of me,” he misunderstands the extent to which he has been affected by living in contemporary America. (© Kobal)*

content to examine the progression of an idea through a plot or series of plots, Scorsese tries to suggest connections, some of which he makes, others of which he leaves like orphaned children, as we will see in the chapters to follow. But he always tries to humanize society and socialize humans. So, when, Frank Costello, in *The Departed*, expresses his hope, “I don’t want to be a product of my environment. I want my environment to be a product of me,” he misunderstands his own predicament. He already is inescapably a product of his environment; and, while he apparently doesn’t realize it, he’s helping build that environment – and contributing to its destruction.

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Clearly, abstracting subjects and themes from an artist’s work is artificial: in the flow of Scorsese’s films, the themes collide and flow over each other. My effort has been not to dismantle the pictures, but to represent them in a different and illuminating way. This is an alternative approach to examining his films individually, though one of Scorsese’s films is so densely packed with clues about his thinking it deserves special attention.

“It is as if Scorsese knew reality is never objective because there is always a subject experiencing it,” suggests Maurizio Viano, in his 1991 review of *GoodFellas*. “Experience, moreover, is never a passive reception of stimuli but an activity – an activity that Scorsese mirrors” (p. 48).

Stuart Klawans, of *The Nation*, makes a related point about the same film, though using more gruesome imagery: “I consider *GoodFellas*, with its encapsulation of a quarter-century of American life, and feel as if I’m observing a car wreck from the point of view of the passenger seat” (p. 539).

*GoodFellas* approaches a distillation: it’s close to an “essence of Scorsese’s America” and, as such, commands more consideration than any other film, particularly in Chapter 2, but

elsewhere in the text as well. Similarly *Cape Fear* occupies most of the attention in Chapter 7. But there's no film-per-chapter organization. I'm interested in the overall vision and the thematic approach I've taken means that, unlike other books on Scorsese, I don't cover the films one-at-a-time.

There are several other books that have analyzed Scorsese in this film-by-film manner, and the reader will find many of them quoted in the text and fully referenced in the Bibliography. Scorsese has been anatomized in other ways too. For example, there are philosophical musings, psychoanalytic dissections, ethnic-theological investigations to complement the many in-depth penetrations of his films. Again, the reader will find these in the Bibliography.

There's much to learn and pleasure to be gained from examining the relationships between Scorsese's films and the many, many others that have influenced, if not inspired, them. Several books have traced connections between, for example, the red-imbued deserts of King Vidor's 1946 *Duel in the Sun*, and the prologue sequence in *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*; or the set-piece ballet that punctuates the drama of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's 1948 *The Red Shoes* and the "Happy Endings" Broadway production that didn't make the final edit of *New York, New York* on its initial release.

Every Scorsese film, like every other film, and, indeed, every other work of art, is a product of intertextuality: in terms of style and structure, arts draw on themselves; nothing stands alone, not even the works of astounding originality. So, while I'm not ignoring the cinematic influences, I'm more interested in how social influences play in Scorsese's film. My purpose is not to evaluate Scorsese's debt to other

### **Is Scorsese a conservative commentator or a commentator on a conservative society?**