

# Film essay – martin scorsese



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Born November 17th, 1942 in New York, Martin Scorsese has had varied success in box-office's around the world. While several of his films made such an impact on critics and the world of film in general that they are often in Top 100 Movies of All Time lists, others, while critically acclaimed, have flopped. After several short films and four feature-length movies, Scorsese produced *Taxi Driver* (ranked 33 on the Internet Movie Database's top 250 films) in 1976, and this, being his first major success, is one of the movies I will be discussing in assessing his impact on film and arguable categorisation as an auteur.

While his next big project *Raging Bull* is often described as one of the biggest films of the 1980's, the other two films I decided to use in discussing the topics above were *Goodfellas* (1990) and *Casino* (1995), because I feel the frequent similarities between the two could be discussed as to whether such similarities are the mark of an auteur or simply Scorsese trying to re- create the success of *Goodfellas* with *Casino*. With one of the biggest films of each decade from the 1970's to 1990's (*Taxi Driver*, *Raging Bull* and *Goodfellas* respectively), and this decades hopefuls of *The Gangs of*

*New York* (a project he had in mind back in 1977) and *The Aviator* (set for release in 2004), Scorsese has made a substantial contribution to the world of film making, bringing the gangster/crime genre right back up to speed with *Goodfellas*, widely acclaimed as the best gangster movie since *The Godfather*, this also showing he was not a 'one-trick pony' in that he could direct films to a high standard across more than one genre (*Raging Bull* more of a drama than a crime film).

So is Martin Scorsese an auteur? The auteur theory suggests that the best films have the imprint of an auteur, that it can be established who directed a film as soon as you've seen it without having to look at the credits. The first and most noticeable link between Scorsese's films is the casting, with Robert De Niro in the majority of his feature films to date, including Scorsese's first hit Mean Streets. Joe Pesci also stars with De Niro in Raging Bull, Goodfellas and Casino.

While this in itself is not a particularly thorough example of auteurism, it does link to the fact that different actors and quality of actors bring different feels and prestige to a film, and if the same atmosphere is created in each Scorsese film because of this then the casting of a movie can become an aspect of auteurism. For example, De Niro not only brings the quality of being on Hollywood's 'A' list for decades, but also brings a certain aura to a film no matter what kind of role he's playing that is distinctive of certain actors, particularly when directed in the right way.

Another element that is recognisable in Scorsese's work is the chronological manner in which certain films of his are conducted. Of course many directors have the date scenes set appear on the screen before it happens, as does he, but the way in which Scorsese often likes to start several of his films with a scene, then explain the build-up to the events in it throughout the film and play the scene again towards the end.

This is an interesting contribution to film-making because it allows directors to bring audiences into their film with a captivating or thrilling opening scene before going on to tell the story and keep the audience intrigued as to how

what happened in that scene came about. This happens in Goodfellas, Casino and, to the best of my knowledge, in Raging Bull. Put the effect of that as explained above and the popularity of those films he used it in and you have a fascinating contribution to world cinema and another aspect of auteurism in Scorsese's work.

Thirdly there is the distinguishable use of music, usually relevant to the film (operatic music in the films consisting of mafia mobsters i. e. Goodfellas, Casino), but it the methodical use of it, with none at all during most talking scenes, some during meaningless scenes i. e. when someone is driving, and then a burst of it during significant (mainly violent) scenes, that is significant to Scorsese pictures more than ny other one director.

Yet Scorsese chooses to use a rather more minimal amount in Taxi Driver, and this could be because he was still finding himself as a director when that film was made and the similar theatrical styles of music on the trailer for his up and coming movie Gangs of New York further suggests that music is important to Scorsese films in general and is another possible auteuristic trait in his work. One of the main and first things I noticed to come under this category of auteurism however is the narrative.

It is just as important to his films in the likes of Goodfellas nd Casino as the actual dialogue. It is possible to tell by the sheer amount of narrative used and the direction it takes the film in, the way one of the main characters' voices is always on hand to explain why certain things in the film are happening, which is sometimes needed in complicated ' mob' movies, that this is the work of Scorsese.

Finally, the most obvious trait of all, which is to such brute proportions that could only be achieved in such an effective manner by Scorsese and perhaps Quentin Tarantino, is the violence. The sheer excessiveness of someone getting beaten to death with a baseball bat in all three of the films I studied in researching this (Taxi Driver, Goodfellas and Casino) and countless other people being shot (usually in the head) with as much blood as possible coming out of them is to the degree you wouldn't see much even in the horror genre or from many other directors.

This gives films an added controversial edge which obviously attracts audiences as has been proven by Scorsese films and many before him, but in a manner which is rarely tried in recent times and so is another positive contribution to film making to show other directors that shying away from controversy won't always make their films successful, quite the opposite. However the auteur theory also represented that any work of art should symbolise the vision of the artist.

Once again Scorsese has films that could represent this, namely a one-man mission to clean up the streets of Manhattan in Taxi Driver and Bringing Out the Dead, and the bringing down of mob empires ruling towns in Goodfellas and Casino. His films always seem to have a somewhat righteous ending, with Ray Liotta's character Henry Hill surviving under the witness protection program after alling into the world of the Mafia at a young age and, in the end, giving up the people and the drug-ridden world he had come to rely on in the process in Goodfellas.

Then there is De Niro's Travis Bickle surviving and seeming happy with his work again after saving 12 year old Iris (Jodie Foster) from the world of prostitution in Taxi Driver. De Niro's character in Casino also ends up back where he started after lying and cheating his way into money throughout the film and have it all crumble back around him. Having discussed the positive contributions and auteurist traits within his films, I will now begin to talk about the possible negative contributions and the things in his films that could go against him being described as an auteur.

The main criticism of Scorsese and his work is that his films are too similar. Casino is seen as a re-working of Goodfellas by many critics. Indeed the characters are similar, Joe Pesci plays Tommy in Goodfellas and Micky in Casino, both of whom are livewire's with short fuses who do not hesitate to brutally murder someone for speaking out of turn. De Niro is the hierarchy with plenty of money in both films who is only controlled by the real mob leaders who are not seen in the films much.

Also the women in the main character's life play the same kind of role. Henry's mistress Sandy in Goodfellas and Sam Rothstein's wife Ginger in Casino are both self-destructive, on drugs or drink throughout most of their scenes, and both of the male characters end up treating their women (Henry's wife Karen in this case) in the same disrespectful manner at some point in the films. The main themes are similar in both films. Greed, power and corruption are the major ethics in both, the only difference being the way in which it is achieved.

As flexible as Robert De Niro may be as an actor, and however successful the Scorsese/De Niro connection has been with audiences, there has also got to be a limit on how many films Scorsese can have him as the lead without the audience getting the feeling of repetitiveness. This he seems to have solved though with Nicholas Cage starring in his 1999 film *Bringing out the Dead* and Leonardo Di Caprio heading the cast of his Christmas 2002 release *The Gangs of New York*.

Therefore one of his more negative contributions of a director casting the same people tirelessly is being resolved. In relation to his main criticism also *The Gangs of New York* is set back in 1863, so he is ambitiously trying to reconstruct how New York came to be in the pessimistic light he obviously views it in nowadays through his other films, making the film quite different from his others in that respect at least.

Another of his main criticisms is that his movies are cold and mechanical, that where emotion should be in his films there is intensity. Indeed there is a lot of violence in his films and very little emotion and indeed the characters Scorsese portrays are meant to be cold and unfeeling, particularly in his gangster efforts. In *Taxi Driver*, Travis obviously likes Betsy a lot and cares for Iris but instead of showing emotion he practically stalks Betsy and proves he cares for Iris by risking his life to get her out of prostitution.

Although this too could also be explained by the character, Travis seems to be very mixed up and not sure what his aim in life is, he's tired of being lonely hence his pursuit of Betsy and he wants to do something good with his life by breaking Iris free of the rotten world she is in. The main flaw in his

possible auteur status is that, but for the lead cast member, Taxi Driver and the two gangster films are so different it is difficult to see a link between them. In Goodfellas and Casino there is violence every few scenes, the scenes are short and fast moving, and the plot is multi-layered.

In Taxi Driver there is violence in about three scenes altogether, each individual scene is longer in general with more dialogue and less progression of the film's events, and hence there are only three main events on the film, Bickle trying to seduce Betsy, attempting to assassinate a candidate for president, and getting Iris out of trouble. So rather than one continuous multi-layered plot it is instead a chronological sequence of events. In conclusion, I think Scorsese is a master of his field and has contributed greatly to the world of film making.

In Goodfellas he brought the gangster movie to a whole new level, with the likes of Quentin Tarantino's Pulp Fiction (1994) and Reservoir Dogs (1992) trying and succeeding to cash in on the then reformed genre. With such new ventures, as in this case, he has given other directors a kick-start by introducing a genre that has been out of fashion for some time and helping new faces like Tarantino was then direct a film in the genre they want to do it in without being afraid that it won't succeed for the reason it's been out for so long at least. I also think that Scorsese is not afraid of a challenge.

He brought out Raging Bull, a supposed "boxing movie", a year after the second of the five "Rocky" movies came out and, as far as film critics are concerned, outclassed them all. Therefore he can not only introduce fading genres back into the limelight, he can also exceed in genres that are already



popular at the time and show other directors that there is more than one way even to make a boxing movie, with him doing a biopic on actual boxer Jake LaMotta and concentrating more on his domestic life than life in the ring, as opposed to the fictional “ Rocky Balboa” that focused mainly on his career.

However I do believe that Casino was simply an imitation of Goodfellas, perhaps Scorsese trying to regain his crown after the success of Pulp Fiction and Reservoir Dogs. I don't think that the similarities pointed out earlier in the text are examples of im being an auteur in that respect, I think they have the same outline with a different format, simply another way of telling a story about the life of gangsters and what happens to those who get too greedy with it, with the star of the film surviving at the end when everyone else is either dead or in prison.

For this and the similarities between Taxi Driver and Bringing out the Dead I don't believe that he can be categorised as an auteur, more of a brilliant director who has had great success with some of his films, but has tried in vein to re-create that success with others.