

# Introduction

## Martin Scorsese and Film Culture

IN MARCH 2007 THREE VETERAN filmmakers of the New Hollywood, Francis Ford Coppola, George Lucas, and Steven Spielberg, came to the stage of the Academy Awards to present the award for Best Director. The moment this occurred, it became obvious to anyone in the know who the announced winner would be. Martin Scorsese was the prohibitive favorite, a veteran of American cinema who had been nominated five times previously without a victory. Like the three presenters, Scorsese was a director associated with the New Hollywood of the 1970s. Furthermore, he was widely regarded as the greatest of that generation and as arguably the best of all living American filmmakers. It became clear that the Oscar ceremony was carefully staged theater. Typically, the previous year's winner presents the award. 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 Coppola, Lucas, and Spielberg 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 referencing his own work as a cultural historian. Even as he was accepting this symbol of middlebrow respectability, Scorsese attempted to remind his audience that his true passion was not his own filmmaking but the whole of film culture. As much as possible, Scorsese worked to mitigate the move to the mainstream of Hollywood production, a move signaled shortly before his Oscar win by his signing of a major production deal with Paramount studio, the first such production deal Scorsese had in several years.

This long-awaited victory for Scorsese had little to do with either the quality of his film *The Departed* (2006) or with cultural prestige, especially within film culture as a whole. Paradoxically, it represented a risk of cultural status. Why this is the case is one of the many curiosities about American cinema that this book explores. As far back as Scorsese's first studio film, *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974), the question has been asked: Has Martin Scorsese gone Hollywood? The answer to this question is much more complex than initially thought because the idea of Hollywood is a complicated one, especially in the contemporary environment. Many variations of the term now exist: Classical Hollywood, Old Hollywood, New Hollywood, Post-Classical Hollywood, and even Independent Hollywood. In addition, Hollywood is now theorized in many ways within the film studies discipline. If Hollywood was simply a place, there could be a simpler answer to the question: Martin Scorsese went to Hollywood in 1970, and he became a studio filmmaker in 1974. Since then, he has made most of his work, especially the films on which his critical reputation rests, for the major studios. But Hollywood is more than a place. It symbolizes something much more, and what it symbolizes is neither simply embraced nor rejected by Scorsese. Rather, it is a concept and idea that Scorsese has had to negotiate.

This study examines the work of Scorsese and, with few exceptions, 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 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 his place in the field of cultural production, and 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, examining the relationship among all of Scorsese's various projects and how this has formed the figure known as "Scorsese" today is more productive. This analysis not only explains the various meanings that have developed around the idea of Scorsese, but also how these associations developed over the course of his career. My main argument is that extratextual factors, rather than the films themselves, have led to his prestigious position as an artist. And because Scorsese is an American director working for the major studios, of utmost importance is how he has negotiated with Hollywood and all of the contradictory connotations of that term.

This book deals 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 has been mediated. This includes not only the commercial sector, such as Hollywood, but also cultural institutions such as the university and film archives. 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, we need to move beyond the 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.

Within film studies and many other fields of culture, the aesthetic debate of the past decades has concentrated on modernism versus postmodernism. This book refers to this dichotomy throughout. In using these terms, I do not wish to reinforce these binaries but rather acknowledge their continuing cultural force when discussing taste evaluation. The idea of modernism in this study is specific to a particular field of cultural production: narrative film in the United States 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 1960s and early 1970s, often to define that era as distinctive in quality as compared to the postmodernism of today. However, 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 Pollock, the Hollywood Renaissance was a very classical movement.<sup>1</sup> 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-cited) 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). Nevertheless, there emerged at this time a discourse that defined New Hollywood as modernist. And 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 extend 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.<sup>2</sup> Kolker's book has undergone three editions, first in 1980, then in 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 of American cinema 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 want to return cinematic fiction to its proper place as artifice, as something made, and to reduce the emotional aura that most American film narratives create in the viewer."<sup>3</sup> 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, which 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."<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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 clearly Bourdieu, partially because he lies outside these modernist/postmodernist discussions altogether. 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, arguing that in order to effectively critique this category, the critic must break with the field of the aesthetic altogether. Otherwise, the traditional categories continue to dominate the discussion. As Bourdieu writes in the Postscript to his seminal work *Distinction*, "The reader may have wondered why, in a text devoted to taste and art, no appeal is made to the tradition of philosophical and literary aesthetics; and he or she will no doubt have realized that this is a deliberate refusal."<sup>6</sup> Bourdieu instead concentrates his attention on "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 taste."<sup>7</sup> To look at culture in any other way is to argue in favor of some ideal, pure, and mythical form that ignores the importance of the social altogether.

He thus offers an alternative of "radical contextualizing" that moves beyond these aesthetic categories. 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.<sup>8</sup>

Bourdieu's work allows Scorsese to be theorized beyond aesthetic categories and even beyond his own place in the Hollywood industry. 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, Karen Frances Gracy, and Michael Z. Newman.<sup>9</sup> 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. Scholars favoring Bourdieu tend to see work on 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. My objective 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, we can draw on other sociological models, most notably Howard Becker and Herbert Gans.<sup>10</sup> More important, Michel Foucault's writings provide a historical model for the whole notion of authorship. In chapter 4, Foucault's essay on genealogy is used specifically in relation to Scorsese's historical efforts. But the whole book is indebted to Foucault's poststructuralist approach, particularly the removing of subjectivity from its central position and the need to subordinate it to structural systems and discourses. 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 commonsense term ultimately signifies. Foucault's concept of the "author function" is not concerned with the author's factual relationship to a text (did he or she write this work or not), but rather what social and cultural roles the authored work fulfills. It stresses the social construction of authorship. 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 focuses on an area of Scorsese's career from a different perspective than has dominated thus far. Chapter 1, "Scorsese and the University," considers the importance of Scorsese's university background to situating Scorsese as a film director. 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. The chapter analyzes the films of this period within the context of the time, not as merely "early" works in the career of a great director. The result is a vastly different appreciation of these films, along with the first extended scholarly work on the documentary *Street Scenes 1970*, a collective protest film Scorsese organized while teaching at NYU.

Chapter 2, "The Formation of Scorsese's Critical Reputation," examines Scorsese's move from NYU to Hollywood, from student filmmaker to professional director. It considers 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 chapter 1. 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*), focus shifts

away from Scorsese as auteur and toward the critical environment of the early 1970s, which allows for a broader understanding of the period and Scorsese's place within that environment, as well as offering a fresh perspective on the films themselves. This chapter concentrates on the period from *Boxcar Bertha*, Scorsese's first professional directing effort in 1972, until *Raging Bull*, the film many consider Scorsese's masterpiece.

Chapter 3, "Scorsese and the Fall of the Hollywood Renaissance," examines Scorsese's career during the decade of the 1980s, beginning with *Raging Bull*, released in 1980, and continuing to *The Last Temptation of Christ* in 1988. The time between these two landmark films has been downplayed in examinations of Scorsese's career, often dismissed as a transition period. This argument is convincing only if one looks 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. But 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 no other filmmakers of the New Hollywood accomplished.

Chapter 4, "Histories of Cinema and Cinematic Histories: Scorsese as Historian," details Scorsese's role as a chronicler of film history through both the majority of his feature films and his archival efforts. Increasingly, Scorsese presents worlds that no longer exist, emphasizing his own role in re-creating these lost worlds. Scorsese also made many documentaries on cinema history; 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 literature; and produced a seven-part documentary on the blues for PBS. Like his work in preservation, Scorsese's role as historian and educator was rewarded both officially and unofficially. It also neatly coincided with a move within the discipline of film studies toward history and away from theory. This chapter analyzes how and why Scorsese has been presenting history and the evolution of his concern with the past.

The final chapter, "What Is Scorsese? Scorsese's Role in Contemporary Postmodern Culture," considers Scorsese within the contemporary postmodern environment, beginning with an analysis of *The King of Comedy* and the emerging independent cinema sensibility. It continues by looking at Scorsese as both a film critic and a cultural historian, and concludes with an examination of his campaign for an Academy Award and his role in the controversy over Elia Kazan's honorary Oscar in 1999.

The concern is with what projects Scorsese has chosen and how Scorsese has negotiated his cultural and economic capital as he has become an elder statesman of the industry.

Writing about any living figure offers a challenge, especially in terms of ending the analysis when work continues to be added to the filmography. In 2011 Scorsese released another feature film, *Hugo*, as well as the documentary *George Harrison: Living in the Material World*. While this study cannot keep up with Scorsese's continually increasing cultural output, it can provide a perspective on which to view this new material. Thus, while most reviewers view *Hugo* as simply an unapologetic love letter to cinema, it can also be viewed more critically as another text adding to a biographical legend that Scorsese has worked very hard to cultivate. After reading this study, I hope readers will be able to see each new Scorsese work in a different light and as something beyond just another text in the work of a canonical auteur.

Despite the many years and vast number of topics broached, the book remains coherent because of unifying presence 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 multifaceted 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. Many places throughout the book 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. Thus the analysis of the films focuses less on textual details and much more how each film figures in the broader scope of Scorsese's career and in turn how Scorsese's career is shaped by the cultural forces around him. As a result, films often overlooked, such as the student films and the more obviously mainstream productions are given equal attention with the canonical masterpieces. Furthermore, as Scorsese career progresses, his numerous documentaries, most of which are confined to footnotes in other studies, are given more weight. So while not a conventional authorship study, *Hollywood's New Yorker* is more about the very subject of authorship than approaches that focus primarily on textual explication.

There is a need for a work on Scorsese that matches the breadth of Scorsese's own activities and helps explain his position within the culture. After more than three decades of working for the Hollywood studios, Scorsese has managed to maintain his image as an outsider despite being thoroughly absorbed into the industry structure. How this situation came to be is the subject of this book.