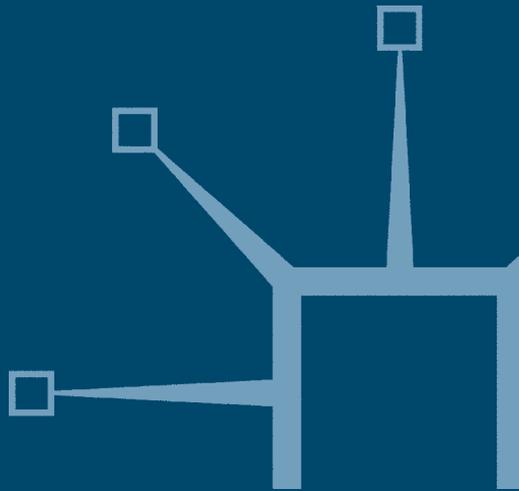# The Films of Martin Scorsese, 1963–77

Authorship and Context

Leighton Grist

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Authorship and Context

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1
Introduction: Martin Scorsese, Authorship, Context

In analysing the work of a film director the issue of authorship is often inescapable. It becomes pressing when discussing the early work of Martin Scorsese. Firstly, the films have been posited not only as the expression of a personal worldview, but as constituting displaced auto-biography, a post-Romantic means of understanding the self through the aesthetic objectification of experience: 'If my films aren't quite autobiographies, there are certain feelings in the characters which I identify with … if I were disinterested in the characters or couldn't relate to them, I couldn't make a film about them' (Taylor 1981: 294). Secondly, Scorsese has admitted auteurism as an influence on his career: 'They told us at film school that we had to like only Bergman … . Sarris and the "politique des auteurs" was like some fresh air' (Pye and Myles 1979: 191). As late as 1993, Scorsese was describing direction as 'using the lens like a pen'; an account that recalls Alexandre Astruc's influential pre-auteurist concept of the *caméra-stylo*.[1]

However, as an approach to cinema, auteurism has been a contested practice. In the seventies and eighties, while it became a commonplace of middlebrow and popular criticism, auteurism was – in academic terms – virtually a dead language, having been superseded in film studies by a combination of post-structuralist and historical method-ologies. Seeming to provide a more rigorous account of the construc-tion of meaning, such were seen institutionally to have enacted, following Roland Barthes, the death of the author.[2]

But concern with authorship was less killed off than discursively marginalized. Author-centred film studies courses continued to be taught, and auteurist articles continued to appear in 'progressive' jour-nals like *Film Comment* and *CineAction*. In the past decade, not only have James Naremore (1990), Timothy Corrigan (1991) and Dudley

Andrew (1993) respectively proclaimed auteurism's tenacity, refiguration and revival, but work on authorship has begun to re-appear in *Screen*, historically a prime conduit of post-structuralist thought; albeit this has largely occurred under the vindicating aegis of gay and feminist criticism.[3] Latterly, however, the possibility and very fact of film authorship have been problematized and even denied from within the contrasting realms of analytic philosophy and newspaper journalism.[4] It would therefore seem to be as appropriate a time as any to return to the debate over authorship. For while the primary focus of this study is the discussion of Scorsese's early films, it also seeks to enact an intervention in that debate, to reconstitute authorial analysis on a more theoretically sound basis, one that accepts and integrates many of the challenges that would appear to question its validity.

Auteurism is fundamentally a critical practice that seeks to obtain meaning from a group of films through the examination of stylistic and thematic features that can be related to a single creative figure, usually the director.[5] As John Caughie notes, within its 'distinguishable currents' – *Cahiers du cinéma/la politique des auteurs* in France, *Movie* in the UK, Andrew Sarris in the USA – auteurism, while differently inflected, 'shares certain basic assumptions' (1981c: 9).[6] Most notably, that a film is more probably of value if it is controlled by its director, and that for a director to be considered an *auteur* – or author – his or her work has to evince a stylistic and, above all, thematic consistency. Before auteurism, author-directors had been heralded within, for example, European or Japanese art cinema, but only occasionally, in exceptional instances of control of 'genius', within Hollywood: witness Charlie Chaplin, John Ford or Orson Welles. Auteurism stressed the incidence of authorship across the generality of Hollywood directors.

This emphasis on Hollywood was in part an incitement of established film criticism that tended to dismiss Hollywood as a commercial and industrialized 'assembly line' inimical to personal, 'artistic' expression. However, by focusing upon Hollywood, auteurism foregrounds the central problem of assigning individual authorship within a collaborative, technically determined, highly regulated and largely generic medium. Early auteurist analyses are often guilty of an essentialist Romantic celebration of autonomous, all-embracing creativity. This also had connotations for the evaluation of films. The aim of Romantic-orientated criticism tends to be the discovery of the author in a work. Hence the 'second premise' of Sarris's conception of 'the *auteur* theory', that proclaims 'the distinguishable personality of the director as a criterion of value' (1962: 7).

While Romantic essentialism is common within early auteurism, it is not a monolithic trait. In the article, 'La politique des auteurs', André Bazin sought to correct the 'excesses' of auteurism from within the pages of *Cahiers du cinéma* itself. He attacks the tendency to use personality as a measure of value – '*Auteur*, yes, but what *of*?' (1957: 155) – and declares the necessity of considering the influence of context when analysing a filmmaker's work. He thus confronts the difficulty of adducing authorship within a collaborative, institutionalized form. Writing about Hollywood, he notes the significance of the 'vigour and richness' of the 'cinematic genres' (*ibid*.: 153) and suggests that personnel other than the director can contribute to a film's quality. Further: 'The American cinema is a classical art, but why not then admire in it what is most admirable, i.e. not only the talent of this or that filmmaker, but the genius of the system, the richness of its ever-vigorous tradition' (*ibid*.: 154). Bazin similarly raises the significance of environment and culture on a filmmaker's work: 'the individual transcends society, but society is also and above all *within* him. So there can be no definitive criticism of genius or talent which does not first take into consideration the social determinism, the historical combination of circumstances, and the technical background which to a large extent determine it' (*ibid*.: 142).

Bazin's institutional and ideological contextualization of the *auteur* foreshadows certain foundational criticisms of auteurism that attended developments in structuralist and post-structuralist theory. Moreover, in positing the filmmaker's ideological determination he confronts another Romantic assumption that informs much auteurist writing: that of the unified, freely creative and even self-determined individual. Since Freudian psychoanalysis revealed the self to be the fissured site of conflicting, often unconscious impulses, the notion of the unified, autonomous personality has become difficult to sustain. This difficulty has been heightened by subsequent developments in psychoanalytic and Marxist theory, within which bodies of thought the individual's psycho-sexual conditioning has increasingly been seen to be imbricated with its ideological constitution, the marks of its – again, often contradictory – material, historical situation.[7]

The introduction of structuralist ideas into Anglophone film criticism has been ascribed to a group of British critics dubbed the *auteur*- or cine-structuralists. Influenced by the structuralist analyses of folktales and myth by the likes of Vladimir Propp and, especially, Claude Lévi-Strauss, *auteur*-structuralism sought to divorce auteurism from Romantic idealism. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith defined *auteur*-structuralism's project thus:

'to uncover behind the superficial contrasts of subject and treatment a structural hard core of basic and often recondite motifs. The pattern formed by these motifs, which may be stylistic or thematic, is what gives an author's work its particular structure, both defining it internally and distinguishing one body of work from another' (1967: 10). As these motifs could be, to quote Peter Wollen, 'conscious or unconscious' (1972: 113), the *auteur*-structuralists felt that they had circumvented the problem of Romantic authorial intentionality.

Auteur-structuralism foundered upon its insufficient critical and theoretical design. Critically, despite the claim that motifs could be 'stylistic or thematic', *auteur*-structuralism rather emphasizes thematic structures to the extent that they overwhelm the crucial consideration of *how* the structures are realized, weighted and presented to the spectator through, say, *mise-en-scène*. Theoretically, *auteur*-structuralism's appropriation of Lévi-Strauss was unsupportably instrumentalist. Lévi-Strauss's writing on myth stresses the trans-individual, cultural creation of meaning; a concept far removed from *auteur*-structuralism's relation of meaning to a single individual.[8] In a tacit acknowledgement of the theoretical deficiency of *auteur*-structuralism, Wollen, in his 'Conclusion' to the revised edition of *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, states that the authorial structures previously designated 'conscious or unconscious' were now 'unconscious, unintended' (1972: 167), with the *auteur* relegated to the role of 'unconscious catalyst': 'Fuller or Hawks or Hitchcock, the directors, are quite separate from "Fuller" or "Hawks" or "Hitchcock", the structures named after them, and should not be methodologically confused' (*ibid.*: 168). However, while accepting that authorial analyses are, like the results of any exegetic process, critical constructs, to deny the director any conscious intention is as unsustainable as affording the *auteur* total creativity.

Another of *auteur*-structuralism's problems lay with structuralism as an analytic practice. In its revelation of explanatory, underlying relationships structuralism inclines toward essentialist prescription. *Auteur*-structuralism effectively replaced one ahistorical ideal (the Romantic artist) with another (the immutable structure). Moreover, in an ironic reflection of auteurist Romantic excess, for *auteur*-structuralism anything filmically exterior to the authorial structure tends to be disregarded, being dismissed in Wollen's initial formulation of authorship as '"noise"' 'inaccessible to criticism' (1972: 104, 105).

Wollen's 1972 'Conclusion' yet suggests another way forward: '*auteur* analysis … does no more than provide one way of decoding a film, by specifying what its mechanics are at one level … . Beyond that, it is an

illusion to think of any work as complete in itself … . Different codes may run across the frontiers of texts at liberty, meet and conflict within them' (*ibid.*: 168–70). This approaches a post-structuralist position, from which texts – no less than the individual or the social formation – embody 'a structured play of forces, relations and discourses' (Caughie 1981b: 1) each of which can be related to specific historical conjunctures. Rather than a film being regarded as the site of a single, discrete meaning, it is posited as a text constituted by an (ideologically determined) 'heterogeneity of structures, codes, languages' (Heath 1973: 89). These cross the text in various configurations of meaning, none of which embodies an all-embracing statement.

Already denied autonomous subjectivity, the author as punctual, much less sole, source of meaning would thus appear to be radically displaced, even rendered redundant. Redemption is nevertheless offered from within post-structuralism via the 1970 'collective text' by the Editors of *Cahiers du cinéma*, 'John Ford's *Young Mr Lincoln*'. Reflecting both theoretical developments and the revised critical position of *Cahiers* following *les événements* of May 1968, the piece constructs *Young Mr Lincoln* (Ford, 1939) as 'a play of tensions, silences and repressions' (Caughie 1981c: 14) between its constituent elements, not least of those between its ideological and institutional determination and the operation of what is called Ford's authorial inscription – a term for the film's authorial connotations that has been variously re-worked in post-structuralist criticism as the authorial code, sub-code or even Metzian 'sub-system' (Nowell-Smith 1976: 30). Extending this, we can posit a model of 'situated' film authorship wherein, while the fact of stylistic and thematic links between the films of many directors is admitted, any film text remains a complex structured by multiple determinants. Authorship, yes, but also genre, budget, narrative structure, studio policy, historical situation and so on. Moreover, authorship itself is likely to be multiple rather than single, attributable not just to the director but to the input of other involved personnel. Any of the text's elements or inputs can be separated or analysed in isolation or in combination with any of the others. But while each is determined by and brings the text into a (frequently displaced and highly mediated) relation with its broader cultural context, it also mutually interacts with and disrupts the text's other elements and inputs to produce an historically specific collocation of structures, representations and determinants.

As this model of film authorship aligns auteurism with post-structuralism, so its emphasis on material determination both confronts

the ahistoricity of much auteurist writing and intersects with the interests of the historical criticism that has emerged as part reaction to, part continuation of post-structuralism.[9] The model likewise rescues the author from both Romantic idealization and Barthesian obsolescence. The author instead survives as one of a number of active elements that cohere in the creation of meaning. Hence for *Cahiers'* reading of *Young Mr Lincoln* the agency of Ford's inscription would seem to be central in problematizing the text's putatively reactionary intent: 'The film's ideological project … finds itself led astray by the worst means it could have been given to realise itself (Ford's style, the inflexible logic of his fiction)' (1970: 43).

But is the notion of inscription, or that of code or sub-code, adequate to account for this authorial agency? Robin Wood notes a 'certain ambiguity' about what inscription 'actually means': 'it can easily become synonymous with "direction", or even "visual style" … and that is not enough' (1989: 19). In turn, critical analyses of the author as code or sub-code tend – whatever their theoretical underpinning – reductively to overprivilege the semiotic, frequently rendering the author as just 'an effect of the text' (Heath 1975: 37). Compounding this, the terms 'code' and 'sub-code' semantically evoke a fixity and predictability that – perhaps revealingly – occludes an understanding of authorship, and representation in general, as a *process*. A more apposite concept-cum-designation is that of an authorial *discourse* that is *inscribed* by the text.[10] To a degree, this plays off Michel Foucault's assertion that the author is 'a function of discourse', a designation that serves 'to characterize the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society' (1969: 124). However, Foucault is less concerned with how the 'author-function' (*ibid.*: 125) in relation to discourse affects the construal of textual meaning than how it acts within the broader discursive regime and its regulation of power. Following the work of linguist Emile Benveniste, the notion of discourse – that Benveniste describes as 'every enunciation assuming a speaker and a hearer, and in the speaker the intention of influencing the hearer in some way' (1966: 242) – can be seen further to highlight the sense of the way in which authorship inflects a text's address and, correspondingly, the placing of the spectator in relation to that text. Caughie elucidates: 'discourse involves notions of the text as a production and a productivity … with someone speaking and someone spoken to, and with the positioning of the one by the other. For authorship, to talk of the film as discourse opens it up to questions of the way in which it positions its subjects (enunciating and spectating), and to questions of rhetoric' (1981d: 294).

Reframing authorship as a discourse accordingly encompasses not only repeated authorial concerns, but *how* these concerns are represented and weighted. While this marries the thematic and the stylistic, analysis of authorship as discourse – centring upon its textual inscription – likewise obviates dispute over what is 'intended' or 'unconscious'. With the authorial discourse engaging in a constant interplay with a text's other determinants, the concept also easily accommodates a director's involvement in pre- or post-production. This is important when discussing the films of modern American directors like Scorsese, who tend to have a greater 'hands-on' input throughout a film's making than many directors during the classical period.

Neither does the concept of authorial discourse invalidate the pertinence of the author as a biographical individual. As the authorial discourse presents certain concerns and emphases that are invariably ideological, so they can be related to an individual that is the product of particular material forces. This allows us to consider the significance of the often foregrounded biographical reference of Scorsese's work without reducing it to a 'Romantic' outpouring of self. It can instead be read as an expression of and reflection upon a specific socialization; not least as a central concern of Scorsese's authorial discourse is his characters' ideological and psycho-sexual determination.

This brings us to the sub-title of this study: *Authorship and Context*. The following chapters will be focused upon variously detailed analyses of Scorsese's fictional films, ranging from his student shorts to the big-budget *New York, New York* (1977). The analyses will centre on how the texts' constituent elements interact to create meaning, thereby occasioning consideration of the stylistic and thematic consistencies that shape Scorsese's authorial discourse. These meanings and consistencies will of necessity be read in relation to discussion of the films' industrial, institutional and filmic determination. The films analysed were made within a heterogeneity of production practices – student filmmaking, exploitation cinema, independent production, major studio finance and distribution – each of which differently inflects and (dis-)places Scorsese's authorial discourse. Hence the study's chapter per film or production context structure.

No less than meanings and consistencies, the films' contextual determinants are ideologically informed. Consequently, the subsequent readings cannot be restricted to their authorial or cinematic placement, but will encompass the films' wider historical context; one marked by the acute social and political upheaval of sixties and seventies USA.

The time similarly sees upheaval within Hollywood – numerous crises and changes resultant upon the end of the studio system and the beginnings of Hollywood's renewed, conglomerated dominance. Within this situation, the study specifically traces the genesis, institutional appropriation and consequent rejection of New Hollywood Cinema: that phase of art cinema-influenced, variously oppositional filmmaking, that Scorsese's work typifies, and that, as it embodies both an expression of and response to factors impelling Hollywood's sixties decline, is now widely considered to comprise Hollywood's final 'golden age', 'the last time Hollywood produced a body of risky, high-quality work – as opposed to the errant masterpiece' (Biskind 1998: 17).

Social, political and institutional upheaval have been seen to interact as Hollywood, having ceded its position as the central proponent of the dominant ideology to television, sought, through New Hollywood Cinema, to address an emergent younger, vaguely Left-liberal and cine-literate audience. In turn, the period of New Hollywood Cinema, with its art cinema reference, sped the recognition by Hollywood of the director as *auteur*, with the majors increasingly perceiving author-directors to be key elements in the financing and selling of films. It is with respect to this that Corrigan claims auteurism's refiguration. Writing from a postmodernist position, Corrigan stresses the *auteur* 'as a *commercial* strategy for organizing audience reception', arguing: 'Since the early 1970s, the commercial conditioning of this figure has successfully evacuated it of most of its expressive power and textual coherence' (1991: 103, 135).

At the risk of being (not too uncomfortably) lumped with 'neoromantic Marxist critics of postmodernism who cling longingly to the high-modernist conception of filmmaker as expressive artist' (*ibid*.: 106–7), for myself this goes far too far. This evokes other issues. Namely, why Scorsese? And why his early films? Taking the latter first, the films discussed – with the exception of *Taxi Driver* (1976) – have in general lacked the substantive critical treatment enjoyed by some of Scorsese's later projects. Further, Scorsese's experience of different production situations offers a paradigm for that of many other filmmakers associated with New Hollywood Cinema.

Beyond this, the choice of Scorsese's films invariably raises the question of evaluation. Although it is a nonsense to confuse value with the fact of authorship, V.F. Perkins accurately observes: 'The term "author" when used of a film director is almost inevitably a term of acclaim: it is an honorific title – like "artist" – at least as much as it is description' (1990: 59). While Scorsese's early filmmaking shares certain elements

with that of other New Hollywood Cinema directors, it is both distinctive and distinguished. To account for this to an extent requires recourse to an older critical language, one that deals with 'such values as eloquence, subtlety, vividness and intensity' (*ibid*.). Certainly, what are claimed to be the most accomplished of Scorsese's films here discussed – *Mean Streets* (1973), *Taxi Driver* and *New York, New York* – imply the criterion of cinematic excellence that Perkins outlines in *Film as Film*: 'The great film approaches an intensity of cohesion such that its elements do not operate solely to maintain or further the reality of the fictional world, nor solely to decorative, affective or rhetorical effect' (1972: 131). The three films demonstrate how, at its best, Scorsese's work affords a heightened fusion of style, narrative and subject matter through which the films' concerns are represented and worked through with a rare, almost confrontational, emotional and intellectual intensity. While these qualities are apparent to a lesser or less extensive degree in the other films analysed, all bear witness to the significance of context to their making and meanings. Thus, to return to Foucault, this study seeks to investigate not only 'the expressive value and fundamental transformations' of Scorsese's authorial discourse, but 'its mode of existence', the 'modifications and variations' of its 'circulation, valorization, attribution, and appropriation', and how, further, it is 'articulated on the basis of social relationships' (1969: 137).

Authorship and context.