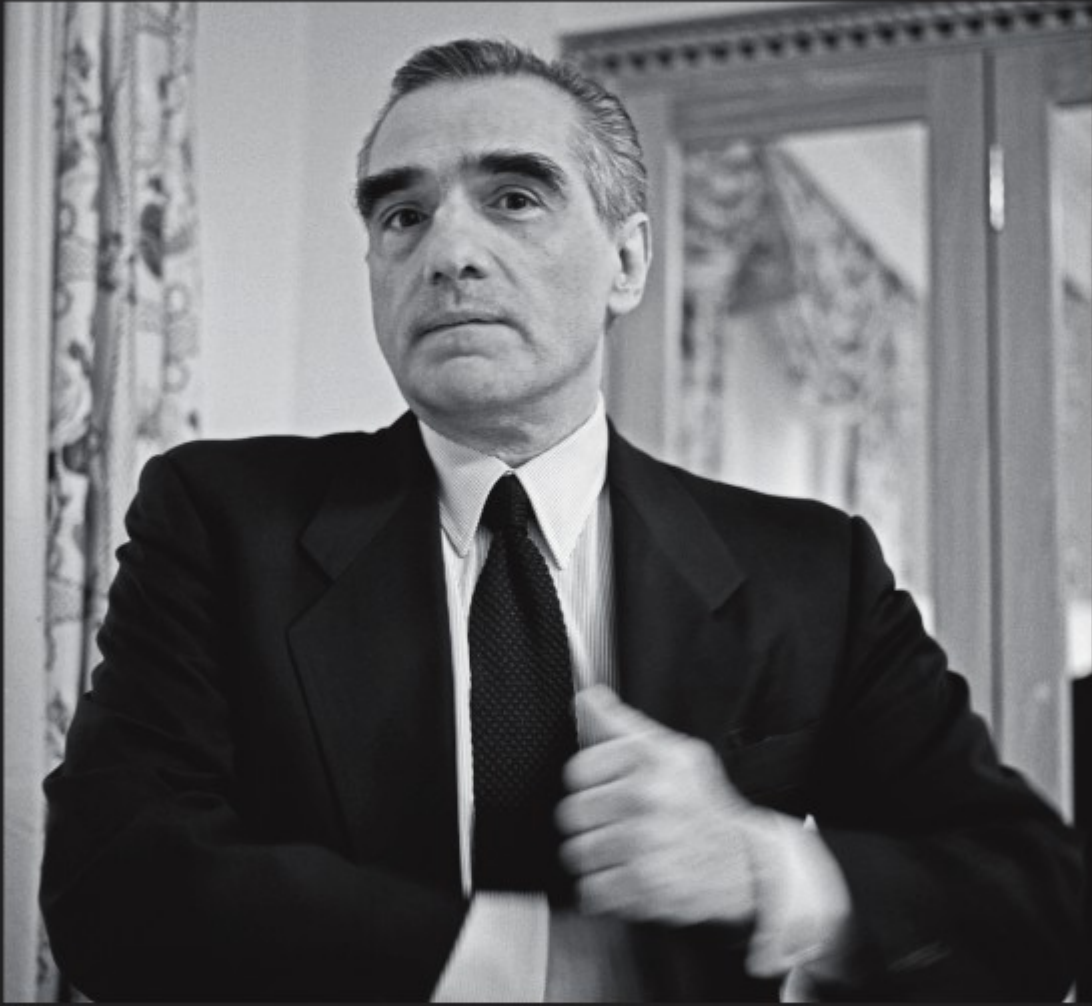

SCORSESE



by EBERT

Scorsese
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(Roger Ebert)

Scorsese by Ebert

FOREWORD BY *Martin Scorsese*

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Roger Ebert is the Pulitzer Prize-winning film critic of the *Chicago Sun-Times*. Starting in 1975, he cohosted a long-running weekly movie-review program on television, first with Gene Siskel and then with Richard Roeper. He is the author of numerous books on film, including *The Great Movies*, *The Great Movies II*, and *Awake in the Dark: The Best of Roger Ebert*, the last published by the University of Chicago Press.

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Dedicated to Marty, obviously.

. . . New talents abound these days —
Bogdanovich, Coppola, Friedkin — but
I would propose, as an educated hunch,
that in ten years Martin Scorsese will be a
director of world rank.

He's not only that good but he's that
adept at taking the stuff of real life and
handling it at the realistic level while
somehow informing it with deeply affect-
ing symbolism. He does it as fluently (al-
though not yet as stylishly) as Fellini; and
because his obsessions seem more deeply
felt, I think his work will turn out to have
greater gut impact. Fellini's genius has
always been in his broad strokes, in his
showmanship; Scorsese goes for the in-
sides. If it seems premature or reckless to
mention Fellini (by my notion, one of the
handful of living directorial geniuses) with
Scorsese, who is a kid from Little Italy,
then let it sound that way: I stand on it.

Roger Ebert
Chicago Sun-Times
November 1973

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Foreword

By Martin Scorsese

Movies, like any other works of art—or presumptive art—don't change. DVD “director's cuts” aside (and there are, I think, legitimate debates to be had about them), most movies are destined to live their lives in the form in which they were first released. But the people who watch movies do change. They grow up—or at least grow older—and their perceptions of a particular movie change. Movies we loved as young people sometimes seem less lovable when we revisit them years later. The opposite is also true; sometimes we need more experience to appreciate fully the subtlety of movies we saw for the first time in the distant past. What's true of us, as individual moviegoers, is also true of the world at large. It changes, too, and it is sometimes true, especially of visionary films, that they have to wait for their time to come.

Because movie critics are obliged to go on the record during the heat and haste of a movie's initial release, they are pretty much stuck with their first impressions, even though, as time goes by, they, too, may well have a radically changed opinion of a film. It is therefore brave of Roger Ebert to publish this collection of pieces unedited, to set whatever revisionary ideas he has about the films he discusses apart from his original texts. It is also brave of him to confine this collection of reviews, interviews, and reflections to a single director. That's an implicit and inherently controversial endorsement of that director's style and sensibility—food for the critic's critics to feast on.

Since my work is the subject of this book I'm deeply flattered by

the careful attention Roger devotes to it, though in all modesty I must wonder if it is worthy of such an extensive treatment. But Roger is a first-rate reviewer—observant, knowledgeable, forthright, and deeply serious about the movies. He is always worth reading, no matter what you think of his subject.

(xiv) We have known each other since 1967, when I took my first feature, *Who's That Knocking at My Door*—it was then entitled *I Call First*—to the Chicago Film Festival and he wrote a very positive review of it. It was a modest little film, shot on a shoestring, by a group of us who were no more than semiprofessionals at the time. It was not widely released or reviewed, but Roger saw something in it that most people did not. He made a personal connection with it, based on the fact that we were both marked by our relationship with the Catholic Church, in which we had both been raised. His was the Irish church, mine, the Italian. But we had both, at one point in our young lives, aspired to a priestly vocation and we had both failed in that ambition. We were also marked, as Harvey Keitel is in that film, by another sort of torment, which is a sexual one—the well-known tendency of some men, especially those raised in the church, to see women either as Madonnas or as whores, a topic Roger writes about more than once in these pages. It is, of course, symbolic of what was for young Catholic men of our generation a much larger issue: the spiritual idealism, the church vs. the realities—or should I say the temptations?—of growing up on big city's *Mean Streets* (to borrow a phrase).

I'm not saying that that issue was the sole basis for the relationship that developed between Roger and me over the years. But it did establish an emotional contact point between us, a shared, sub-aesthetic understanding, that enabled him to see, and appreciate, things in my movies that were perhaps not so obvious to other reviewers. But I think it was in the realm of aesthetics that we bonded perhaps more closely. We were both kids who, I think, wanted to escape the noisy, contentious worlds of our families and friends, wanted to lose ourselves in fantasies that were, if not always more pleasing, then more all-consuming—for at least couple of hours (usually it was many more) every week. Most kids use the movies for that purpose—or at least

they did a half century and more ago. But only a relatively small number of them develop the passion for them that we shared. We know movies in our bones. We can discuss them by the hour, often enough in shot-by-shot detail. We continue to go back to them again and again. We refer to them constantly in our work. And, naturally, in our conversations. They provide the central metaphors—hundreds of them—for our lives. This is not just a matter of being able to quote their most famous lines. It's a matter of being able to analyze closely a camera set-up or an edit—looking, sometimes perhaps absurdly, for their deeper meanings.

We are not intimate friends, Roger and I. But we are certainly long-standing ones. This is not as unusual as it may seem to some people. Filmmakers and film critics often establish such relationships. They are not based on self-interest; they are based on mutual interests, of the kind I've been describing. I can't imagine a critic or a director connecting in this way if they loathed each other's work. Or if there were fundamental disagreements about the nature of movies or about their most basic feelings about film.

(xv)

That said, I must also say that the pieces I most enjoyed in this collection are the ones in which Roger registers his doubts about some of my movies. I'm thinking, for instance, of his writings about *The King of Comedy*. Or his politely phrased doubts about *Kundun*. Or his feelings that my attempts to make more mainstream movies like *The Color of Money* or *Cape Fear* are not my best work. It's the same with some of his enthusiasm. I'm still not as high on *Who's That Knocking* as he is. And his enthusiasm for *After Hours* and, perhaps, *Bringing Out the Dead* is something that puzzles me a little bit (his pieces on those films are critical minority reports). But that's not important. I think all a filmmaker dare ask of a critic is that he take the work seriously, wrestle with it earnestly, write about it—and his responses to it—soberly.

It is not important if a critic "likes" or "doesn't like" a movie. What is important is that he engages with it fully, brings to his responses the conviction, the passion, that the director brings to the film's making. Opinion is evanescent, but the work abides. Ideally, the kinds of first

and second impressions in this volume simply begin a dialogue that will last for years—decades—to come. In the end, history is the only critic that counts, and it's important that the dialogue out of which its judgments arise begins with the kind of emotionally alert, historically informed, intellectually honest writing that Roger Ebert has collected here. I continue to feel in some ways unworthy of his attention, but honored that it has so often settled on me. I hope our long-standing dialog continues for a very long time.

Introduction

We were born five months apart in 1942, into worlds that could not have differed more—Martin Scorsese in Queens, me in downstate Illinois—but in important ways we had similar childhoods. We were children of working-class parents who were well aware of their ethnic origins. We attended Roman Catholic schools and churches that, in those pre-Vatican II days, would have been substantially similar. We memorized the Latin of the Mass; we were drilled on mortal sins, venial sins, sanctifying grace, the fires of hell; we memorized great swathes of the Baltimore Catechism. We were baffled by the concept of Forever, and asked how it was that God could have no beginning and no end. We were indoors children, not gifted at sports: “That boy always has his nose buried in a book.”

We went to the movies all the time, in my case because television came unusually late to my hometown, in Scorsese’s because to begin with his father took him, and then he went on his own, sometimes daily, watching anything and learning from it. He became fascinated by the details. I saw the story, he saw the films. He has spoken again and again of a single shot of Deborah Kerr in Powell and Pressburger’s *Black Narcissus* that arrested his attention. Something had happened there, and he couldn’t see what it was, or how it was done. Years later, he was to enlist Powell as a consultant, and discover the answer to his question. By then, he was already one of the greatest directors in film history.

I had been a film critic for seven months when I saw his first film, in 1967. It was titled *I Call First*, later changed to *Who's That Knocking at My Door*. I saw it in "the submarine"—the long, low, narrow, dark screening room knocked together out of pasteboard by the Chicago International Film Festival. I was twenty-five. The festival's founder, Michael Kutza, was under thirty. Everything was still at the beginning. This film had a quality that sent tingles up my arms. It felt made out of my dreams and guilts.

(2) I had little in common with its loose-knit confederation of friends in Little Italy, but everything in common with J. R., its hero, played by Harvey Keitel. I, too, idealized women but shied away from their sexuality. In high school there were some girls I dated and some girls I furtively made out with, and they were not the same girls. I associated sex with mortal sin. I understood why J. R. could have nothing more to do with a young woman after he discovered she had been raped. She had been touched in a way that meant J. R. could not touch her, and he blamed her. I identified with the camaraderie of the friends J. R. ran with. Drinking had melted my solitary shyness and replaced it with shallow bravado. I identified with the movie's rock and roll, and indeed *I Call First* was the first movie I recall seeing with a sound track that was not a composed score, but cobbled together from 45 rpm records. The energy of the cutting grabbed me with such opening shots as when the street fight broke out and the hand-held camera followed it down the sidewalk. Everything about that movie stabbed me in the heart and soul. I had seen great films, I had in truth seen *greater* films, but never one that so touched me. Perhaps it was because of that experience that I *became* a film critic, instead of simply working as one.

I describe these feelings not because you are interested in me, but because I am interested in why I feel a lasting bond with this director. Since that first day, Scorsese has never disappointed me. He has never made an unworthy film. He has made a few films that, he confided, he "needed" to do to get other films made, but those films were well made, and if it is true, for example, that *After Hours* was done simply to keep him busy and distracted after the heartbreak of the first cancellation

of *The Last Temptation of Christ*, it is also true that *After Hours* is one of his best films. He has fashioned the career of an exemplary man of the cinema, not only directing important films, but also using his clout to “present” or co-produce films by such directors as Antoine Fuqua, Wim Wenders, Kenneth Lonergan, Stephen Frears, Allison Anders, Spike Lee, and John McNaughton. He has founded the Film Foundation, dedicated to film preservation. He has produced and hosted long documentaries about American and Italian films. He has been a leading citizen of Movie City.

One of Scorsese’s strengths is a technical mastery of the medium. Like Orson Welles long before him (who allegedly watched Ford’s *Stagecoach* one hundred times before directing *Citizen Kane*), he learned his art not only in classrooms at New York University, but by the intense scrutiny of other directors’ films. He talks often about the *Million-Dollar Movie* that would play every day for a week on a New York television station. He would watch it every day, all week. Once when I told him I had seen his personal print of Renoir’s *The River* at the Virginia Film Festival, he told me he watches it at least three times a year. When Gene Siskel visited him during a low time in the 1970s, he took him into a screening room (in a basement, as I recall) and said he spent most of every day down in there, watching movies. He does not copy other directors, he does not do homage, but he absorbs and transmutes. Wikipedia observes that he often introduces his blonde heroines in idealizing slow-motion shots, in possible tribute to Hitchcock. I am as certain as I can be that his style reflects the feelings his protagonists have about those women. Jake LaMotta would have seen Vickie for the first time in slow motion even if Hitchcock had never made a film.

Scorsese has worked with the best cinematographers, recently Robert Richardson and Michael Ballhaus, but his look is always his own. In shots without obvious movement, he nevertheless likes a subtly moving camera, because he believes movement suggests voyeurism and a static camera indicates simply a gaze—but he is not afraid to gaze. The divinity of Christ or the Dalai Lama has a tendency to hold his camera in unmoving frames. Or notice the gradual acceleration of the

cutting pace in *GoodFellas*, as a leisurely criminal lifestyle turns paranoid. There are rarely shots that call attention to themselves merely for the sake of the shot; yes, *GoodFellas* has the famous unbroken take through the Copacabana, and *Raging Bull* the walk from the dressing room into the ring, but how many moviegoers are conscious of them? What Scorsese's camera says to me is not "look how I see this," but "look with me at this." He is urging the enterprise forward into the next moment of the narrative, not pausing to draw attention to the last. Even that shot in *Taxi Driver*, the sideways move away from the pay phone to look down a long, empty corridor, is not a stunt but a reflection of a subjective loneliness.

(4)

Of all directors of his generation and younger, he may make the best use of rock music in his films. His first film was scored with rock records, he was a supervising editor on *Woodstock*, he has done documentaries on The Band and Bob Dylan, and was working in late 2007 on a Rolling Stones concert tour. He uses period music for *New York, New York* or *The Aviator*, and he evokes a time period with Dean Martin (whom he once planned to make a film about), but you sense that he edits with rock in mind; it is worth remembering that he met his longest-serving collaborator, the great editor Thelma Schoonmaker, on *Who's That Knocking*, and worked on *Woodstock* with her. Michael Wadleigh, one of the cinematographers on *Knocking*, became the director of *Woodstock*. I remember sitting next to them on the floor of a New York loft and watching takes of that film while they were both vibrating like fans at a concert. Also on *Who's That Knocking* was his classmate Mardik Martin as a director's assistant, who went on to work on several screenplays with Scorsese. All kids starting together.

His protagonists are often awkward outsiders who try too hard or are not sure what to say. Travis Bickle; Rupert Pupkin; Max Cady in *Cape Fear*; Tommy DeVito in *GoodFellas*; Newland Archer in *The Age of Innocence*, who has no idea how to behave when he experiences real love; Vincent Lauria in *The Color of Money*; Frank Pierce in *Bringing Out the Dead*; Howard Hughes; even Jesus Christ, who is not the soul of tact. Scorsese is uninterested in conventional heroes. He often

tells the story about sitting in his family's apartment in Little Italy and watching through the window as gangsters came and went at the social club across the street. Some of those memories are reflected in the opening scenes of *GoodFellas*. Scorsese's protagonists are not the guys with the shiny cars, although they are common enough in his movies. His identification is with the kid in the window.

He has been the embodiment of independence without making "Sundance films" or "indie films." Apart from the low-budget early films, he has always tended toward pictures as big as they need to be, or sometimes (as with *Gangs of New York*) bigger. It is the classic-studio period that engages his imagination. He can write screenplays, but hasn't often filmed his own solo work; after collaborating closely with his writers, he does his own writing with his camera. After outgrowing an early 1970s indie image of long hair, a beard, and scruffy jeans, he has become an expensively dressed man; like the Hollywood giants of the golden age, he exudes fashion and power. Still he is "Marty"—friendly, rapid-fire in speech, enthusiastic, funny, democratic, informal. I remember a night during an early New York Film Festival when he and I and Pauline Kael sprawled in a hotel room, drank, and talked movies until dawn. There was real enthusiasm. Years later, after his award at the Wexner Center in Columbus, he ended up in the library of a millionaire's mansion outside of town, with film students at his feet. Same kind of conversation. Same Marty.

I sense he has never made a film that does not speak to him on some fundamental level. Even when he expressed ambivalence about *The King of Comedy*, asking himself some days why he was even on the set, his finished film was fashioned into a Scorsese picture. If he had initial reluctance about the subject matter, he must have warmed to it as the De Niro performance grew, and he thinks it contains De Niro's finest work. The events and materials of *After Hours* might have made an entirely different kind of film in other hands, but he was quite willing to describe it as a reflection of his state of mind after everything went wrong with the first production of *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Even *Kundun*, the film I think owes least to his lifelong interests and inner compulsions, is a reflection of yearning for peace and certainty.

It is purely speculation, but I wonder if the Dalai Lama is the Scorsese protagonist he would most like to be.

He is a man of fierce energy, of inner fires burning high. He works hard, is endlessly curious, is intoxicated by great films, does not procure screenplays and film them, but uses screenwriters as collaborators to argue over ideas. Paul Schrader, who has worked with him so long, speaks of him as like a chess opponent who does not mind losing a piece to a good move. He likes the game. He doesn't bully writers, but engages with them. I wonder if he is too social and verbal to sit alone in a room and write a screenplay, as Schrader does by nature. I think for him writing, talking, and creating are associated processes.

(6) This book is the record of an association with Scorsese that began when, as it happened, I wrote the first review he ever received. We met before he was famous and successful. Once he took me to the Feast of San Gennaro in Little Italy, and we ate in a neighborhood restaurant where he pointed out certain clients as of more than routine interest. He sent me drafts of two screenplays, titled *Jerusalem, Jerusalem* and *Season of the Witch*, intended to be the first and third films in the J. R. trilogy, "which will probably never be made but which fill out my obsessions with J. R. and his world." The *Witch* screenplay later became *Mean Streets*, which makes it clear that J. R. and Charlie were, in his mind, the same person.

In the *Jerusalem* treatment, the hero, Charlie, spends time at a religious retreat at a seminary, and is deeply impressed by a sermon telling the story of a young couple who were to be married in two weeks. One night, however, they could wait no longer, and had sex before marriage. Driving home, they were killed in a fiery crash, and went to hell. This story helps explain J. R.'s reluctance to sleep with The Girl (never named) in *Who's That Knocking*. During the sermon, J. R. envisions images from pornography, including a couple embracing on the altar. This juxtaposition of the divine and the profane also expresses itself in *Taxi Driver*, when Travis takes Betsy to a hardcore movie. Charlie in *Jerusalem* finds that warnings against sexuality bring it into his mind, and he "harbors" such thoughts. "Harboring impure thoughts" would have been one of the sins he was warned against in

Catholic school, if Scorsese's was anything like mine, and I have a feeling that it was.

I Call First, which began as a student film at NYU and was co-produced by his beloved mentor, Haig Manoogian, was released as *Who's That Knocking at My Door* a year after its Chicago premiere, when the distributor Joseph Brennan insisted on the title change and asked Scorsese to shoot the scene with J. R. and the prostitute, which supplied the poster art. Like all young directors, he could hardly see another film on his horizon. Then exploitation producer-director Roger Corman, who gave so many major directors (Francis Ford Coppola, James Cameron, Jonathan Demme, Ron Howard) their first or second films, hired him to do *Boxcar Bertha*, and Scorsese was on board. Not a Scorsese-type story, but make what you will of the crucifixion imagery.

(7)

We have never become close friends. It is best that way. We talk whenever he has a new film coming out, or at tributes, industry events, or film festivals. We have dinner. We sense things in common. But I do not take him for granted. I consider him the most gifted director of his generation, and have joked that I will never stop writing film reviews until he stops making films.

Gene Siskel would ask me, "When are you going to write your Scorsese book?" and I would agree that I had to. But I am not a long-form writer. I started as a full-time professional newspaperman (not an intern) at the age of fifteen, and have spent fifty years writing pieces of hundreds or thousands of words in length. That is my distance. After a fruitful collaboration with John Tryneski and Rodney Powell of the University of Chicago Press on the book *Awake in the Dark*, they observed that I had been writing about Scorsese from the first day, had interviewed him many times, and could compose a book of this nature.

The book includes my original reviews of the films, unaltered; the interviews I did with Scorsese at the time; "reconsiderations" of six films that I thought needed a second look (or, in the case of *The Last Temptation of Christ*, as you will see, really a first look); and longer, later pieces I wrote about *Mean Streets*, *Taxi Driver*, *Raging Bull*, *GoodFellas*, and *The Age of Innocence* for my series of "Great Movies" essays that

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