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 autobiography, 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 “politiqe 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of middlebrow and popular criticism, auteurism was – in academic terms – virtually a dead language, having been superseded in film studies by a combination of post-structuralist and historical methodologies. Seeming to provide a more rigorous account of the construction 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’ journals like Film Comment and CineAction. In the past decade, not only have James Naremore (1990), Timothy Corrigan (1991) and Dudley

L. Grist, The Films of Martin Scorsese, 1963-77
© Leighton Grist 2000
Andrew (1993) respectively proclaimed auteurism’s tenacity, refigura-
tion 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 femi-
nist 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 inter-
vention 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 estab-
ished film criticism that tended to dismiss Hollywood as a commercial
and industrialized ‘assembly line’ inimical to personal, ‘artistic’ expres-
sion. However, by focusing upon Hollywood, auteurism foregrounds
the central problem of assigning individual authorship within a collab-
orative, 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).