

## Exhibition Review

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*Martin Scorsese.*

Curated by Kristina Jaspers and Nils Warnecke.

Organized by the Deutsche Kinemathek—Museum für Film und Fernsehen, Berlin.

Museum of the Moving Image, Astoria, New York.

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In 2011, when curators Kristina Jaspers and Nils Warnecke first approached Martin Scorsese about mounting an exhibition devoted to his work, he wasn't enthusiastic. Early in his career, Scorsese proclaimed that movies were his "whole life and that's it," and that devotion has not dissipated after more than fifty years as a filmmaker (Thompson and Christie, 1989). Perhaps recent projects like *Hugo* (2011) and *Silence* (2016), as well as the World Cinema Project, developed in 2007 to preserve neglected films outside the United States, made him feel unready to view his work retrospectively. He's curated film series, exhibitions, documentaries, and Criterion collections. In the documentaries *My Voyage to Italy* (1999) and *A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese through American Movies* (1998), Scorsese offers both analysis and veneration when recounting his favorite movies on both sides of the Atlantic. Maybe all these experiences taught Scorsese that any exhibition might reduce his work to a series of greatest hits devoid of critical engagement and contextual layering. Once Scorsese agreed to the exhibition, he did so with one *proviso*: no biographical linearity. In refusing the obvious chronological tale of struggle to success, Scorsese challenged the curators to create an exhibit that would be as daring as his own storytelling.

Scorsese made artifacts from his personal collection available, and the curators mined the resources of the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin, where both the Robert De Niro Collection and the Paul Schrader Collection are housed. To accommodate the more than six hundred items they gathered, the curators chose an organizing motif that used familiar tropes such as "Brothers," "Lonely Heroes," and "Men and Women" to focus on Scorsese's films; "New York" to examine the landscape of his youth and many of his movies; "Cinematography," "Editing," and "Music" to delve into the technical side of moviemaking; and "Cinephile" to examine Scorsese's lifelong love affair with movies, in particular his efforts to preserve at-risk films.

Movie memorabilia, such as a pair of red pointe shoes worn by Moira Shearer in Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's *The Red Shoes* (1948), one of Scorsese's favorite movies, and items from the director's oeuvre, like Robert De Niro's boxing gloves from *Raging Bull* (1980), seemed obvious inclusions.

Letters from other directors, including Frank Capra and Leni Riefenstahl, sprinkled throughout the exhibition contextualized other filmmakers' admiration for his work on and off screen. Capra and Riefenstahl wrote notes in 1980 thanking Scorsese for his efforts in demanding a more resilient film stock. Capra's typewritten note reads like a backhanded compliment; although Capra "was a great fan of guys who not only come up with brilliant ideas, but also follow through with them," he also expresses disappointment that he was not asked "to become part of [Scorsese's] enterprise." Riefenstahl's handwritten note is perhaps shocking to those who only see her as the director of the artistically complex Nazi propaganda films *Triumph of the Will* (1935) and *Olympia* (1938). She sent "a million thanks for [Scorsese's] initiative regarding our films—the problems of fading colors." Scorsese's choice to make this note public may be viewed as controversial, like the addition of his presentation (with Robert De Niro) to Elia Kazan of an honorary Oscar in 1999, but the public commitments to these artists are consistent with his desire to celebrate those whose moviemaking skills he admires even if their politics and personal beliefs clash with his own and those of other people.

There are two objects from his early life that speak to his lifelong passion for movies in subtle, yet powerful, ways. While there are storyboards throughout the exhibition, his first, drawn when he was eleven years old, is a Cecil B. DeMille-scale epic about Rome, complete with a vision of actors Richard Burton and Alec Guinness in starring roles. The storyboard shows the young Scorsese's creativity and meticulousness in the careful crafting of each frame. The second is a clip from *Italianamerican* (1974), a documentary about his parents. Both Catherine and Charles Scorsese are steeped in storytelling tradition, but the selected clip serves as an important reminder that Scorsese was always interested in preservation. His first memories are not of movies but of the apartment in Manhattan's Little Italy where his mother and father raised him. The way he lovingly engages them in conversation and his patience for their rhythms suggest how he created The Film Foundation in 1990—his love for his family and movies are neither simple nor linear, and these two loves are linked to his creative process and historical projects.

While the curators did eschew a simple biographical narrative, they often missed deeper contexts. One example of this absence is in the placement of *The Shave* (1967), Scorsese's final short film before he graduated New York University. This film was almost hidden as museumgoers entered the exhibition. Mounted on a side wall, it was dwarfed by the section devoted to Scorsese's Italian American Roman Catholic upbringing. *The Shave* appears without commentary or description beyond name and year of creation. Standing as his protest against the Vietnam War, *The Shave* opens on a pristine white bathroom. A young man enters to shave, but instead of a simple narrative arc, the young

man cuts his face until he and the bathroom are covered in blood. The film ends with the young man slitting his throat. This film lays the foundation of his decision to tackle the dark side of already difficult subjects, including Roman Catholicism and Italian American culture. Instead of integrating *The Shave* as the foundation of such films as *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Raging Bull* (1980), *The Color of Money* (1986), *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), *The Aviator* (2004), *The Departed* (2006), and even *Hugo*, it hangs at the front of the exhibit as something patrons move quickly past.

In the same way, clumping all of his overtly religious films together, the curators missed an opportunity to examine some of the ways in which Scorsese's work is rooted in the spiritual and symbolic modes of religious discourse. While he has made *Silence*, *Kundun* (1997), and *The Last Temptation of Christ*—films that tackle religiosity head-on—the protagonists in many of his films regularly have crises of faith. Additionally, the crucifixion scene in *The Last Temptation of Christ* (which is incidentally a shot-for-shot repetition from the 1972 Roger Corman-produced *Boxcar Bertha*) is indicative of Scorsese's obsession with crucifixion symbolism: The motif is repeated in other movies from *Taxi Driver* and *The King of Comedy* (1982) to *The Aviator*, *The Departed*, and *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013), where characters appear to self-crucify; the curators never mentioned, much less examined, this obvious theme.

Lastly, Thelma Schoonmaker, his classmate at New York University, his editor for many of his films, and director Michael Powell's wife, barely appears in the exhibit. The "Editing" section is sequestered to a back wall at the end of the main exhibit with only one panel devoted to Schoonmaker, which makes her contribution seem like an afterthought. Her commitment and connection to Scorsese's vision are barely acknowledged let alone drawn upon throughout the exhibit. While much is made of De Niro's and Leonardo DiCaprio's collaborations with Scorsese, the longest-standing moviemaking relationship he has had is with Schoonmaker. She has worked on no fewer than twenty-three films with Scorsese and received three Oscars for her editing work on his films. Why did the exhibit minimize her important and vital connection to his work?

In general, the exhibit largely ignores the contributions women have made to Scorsese's career. For example, while re-watching *Italianamerican*, I was struck by Catherine Scorsese's question at the end of the documentary: "Is he still taking this?" referring to the cameraman. And then, without changing tone or attitude, she looks into the camera and says, "I'll murder you. Won't get out of this house alive." When watched alongside Joe Pesci's performance in *Goodfellas* (1990), it seems no accident that Scorsese's mother plays Tommy DeVito's mother or that Pesci's performance is humorous until it turns deadly. It would have been interesting to see connections made between the roles played by Barbara Hershey, who starred in *Boxcar Bertha* and *The Last Temptation of*

*Christ*, Jody Foster and Cybil Shepard in *Taxi Driver*, Ellen Burstyn in *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974), Cate Blanchett as Katharine Hepburn in *The Aviator*, Lorraine Bracco in *Goodfellas*, and Vera Farmiga in *The Departed*. This analysis could have revealed that the women in Scorsese films are more than just supporting players.

While seeing so much of Scorsese's work in and about the movies in one place is gratifying, this exhibition could have done more with the objects they so carefully and lovingly gathered together. The curators followed, mostly, Scorsese's admonition to avoid biographical linearity, but they overlooked the intertextual and collaborative nature of Scorsese's aesthetic. By placing *The Shave* and the Italian American section at the entrance to the exhibit—a small, uninviting passageway—they gave Scorsese's beginnings short shrift. Additionally, the "Music" section had its own floor separate from the rest of the exhibit, which may have been to keep the music from interfering with the clips of movies being shown in different sections in the main exhibit; however, Scorsese was a forerunner in using contemporary music to illuminate both plot and character, and this section didn't seem like a deliberate addition to explore Scorsese's use of contemporary music in film. The same thing occurred with the section on those who have shaped Scorsese's style. From the red shoes worn by Moira Shearer to movie posters for iconic films such as *I Vitelloni* (1953) and a video loop of Scorsese's favorite films, the exhibit showcased Scorsese's personal collection and preference instead of providing deeper contexts for how these movies not only influenced the director, but how he referenced them in his own work. If music references, directorial influences, *italianità*, and women's impacts had been used as foundations rather than relegated to separate but unequal status, Scorsese's abiding connection to his Italian American roots and his collaborative camaraderie between past and present and men and women in the film industry could have revealed a complicated and nuanced movie history of one of the United States' most prominent Italian American citizens. Instead, while interesting, the exhibit fails to do what Scorsese has always done: collaborate, excite, and influence.

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#### Work Cited

Thompson, David and Ian Christie. 1989. *Scorsese on Scorsese*. London: Faber and Faber.