Martin Scorsese as an Auteur: from Goodfellas (1990) to The Irishman (2019)

Vičević, Melanie

UNIVERSITY OF RIJEKA

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

Melanie Vičević

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Supervisor:

Dr Antonija Primorac, Assoc. Prof.

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Abstract

The main goal of this thesis is to examine Martin Scorsese's mature vision of making gangster films by analysing his latest film from 2019, *The Irishman*, in the light of his 1990 gangster classic *Goodfellas.* The analysis will be based on film theory and on the fundamentals of one of the most influential cinema movements from which the term *auteur* derived from, the French New Wave. The history behind the notion of an *auteur* will be further examined before moving onto Scorsese, who is considered to be one of the greatest directors and auteurs of all time. I will illustrate Scorsese as an auteur by reviewing his body of work and all that comes with it; his background, his love for filmmaking, recurring characteristics in his films etc. Finally, by observing various scenes, techniques, depictions of the mob life and ways of storytelling, I will portray *The Irishman a*s Scorsese's matured revision and reflection of one of the greatest gangster films of all time, *Goodfellas.*

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3. Introduction

The film critics of the 1950s' and 1960s' France brought about one of the biggest changes in filmmaking. Their vision of a director as the main artistic force behind a film was essentially revolutionary at that time. Due to an astonishing number of cinephiles all over France, filmmaking had finally begun being treated as art; equal to, say, literature, contributing to the occurrence of the French New Wave. The film magazine *Cahiers du Cinéma* critics described some directors as being auteurs; although that term is widely used today in film theory, it was quite ground-breaking some sixty-five years ago. In its essence, the term 'auteur' represents the director as the main artistic force behind his/her films. An auteur is somebody who is extremely competent as a filmmaker, but is also an artist whose main wish is to convey their ideas, vision and emotions onto the screen; they are entirely immersed in their films and have a recurring set of recognizable characteristics they utilize in their films.

Nowadays, there is a certain number of directors that might be considered auteurs, i.e. beloved by the critics while simultaneously being popular with the wide audience. One of the best examples of such a filmmaker is undoubtedly Martin Scorsese who has been making films for more than half a century:

> Who (...) has more relentlessly and successfully pursued the media limelight in order to promote not just his own films but the American commercial product in general? Yet, with energy and commitment, Scorsese simultaneously also pursues a quite different cinematic identity, that of the European-style auteur eager to express his intellectual and formal obsessions in the practice of what he sees as an art as well as a well-paid craft. (Conard 231-232)

Having emerged from an Italian American background and having been raised in New York's Little Italy in the 1950s, Scorsese's favourite theme to explore throughout his entire

career would be the mafia. Besides observing him as an auteur, this thesis will present him as the master of gangster films, none of which are remotely alike. The focus will be on two of his films; the latest one from 2019, *The Irishman* and a Scorsese classic from 1990, *Goodfellas.* By comparing the two films and analysing Scorsese's choices of portraying the mob side by side, the thesis aims to show the difference 30 years made in his viewpoint on filmmaking in general, and, more specifically, on gangster films. Given that *The Irishman* has been named by many as an elegy to the genre, it will serve as the perfect case study for an examination of the extent to which Scorsese chose to conclude the gangster-genre he has been making virtually since the beginning of his career. I will argue that *The Irishman* is Scorsese's mature revision of and a considered reflection on *Goodfellas.*

4. Auteur Theory

In order to consider Martin Scorsese as an auteur, one must go back to the origins of that notion. It would be a difficult task to introduce auteur theory without understanding the time period and the movement from which it originated. That is why, prior to the analysis of what it means to be an auteur, the importance of the French New Wave will be briefly examined.

4.1. French New Wave and *Cahiers du Cinéma*

The time period is the late 1940s, the place France, and all spheres of life, including art, have been marked indelibly by the deadliest military conflict in history. Since art forms such as literature or painting were undergoing changes, it was only logical that the newest and the least explored art form, film, would experience innovation as well. Due to screenings of previously banned films along with other French, American and international films, many film enthusiasts found their haven within ciné-clubs and journals, where they had the opportunity to discuss and review this, still relatively new, art form. As a result, the film culture started to thrive all over post-war France, and it witnessed a fusion of older generations of critics with new, younger ones. The French New Wave came about gradually thanks to this surge in interest as well as to the numerous new journals where new critics reviewed cinematic efforts from the 1940s on. The film magazine that is usually the most associated with the French New Wave is *Cahiers du Cinéma,* founded in 1951. The most famous French film critics and theorists, most notably André Bazin, Éric Rohmer, Jacques Rivette, Jean-Luc Godard, Claude Chabrol and François Truffaut, started their careers there before daring to reject traditional filmmaking and setting out as ground-breaking filmmakers themselves. Being dubbed so due to their, oftentimes ferocious, criticism, these 'young Turks' are still considered to be one of the most influential filmmakers and theorists of all time. (Neupurt 26-30) By implementing their suggestions and ideas into practice, they

revolutionized filmmaking of that time; those changes and innovations have lingered to this day.

In his comprehensive study of the revolutionary movement, *A History of the French New Wave Cinema*, Neupurt (3) described it in following terms: "The New Wave was first and foremost a cultural phenomenon, resulting from economic, political, aesthetic, and social trends that developed in the 1950s." Critics, especially the *Cahiers du Cinéma* ones, believed that cinema of that time had been yearning for a change; films had lost touch with reality and lacked true emotions. Since there is always room for experimenting in art, that is exactly what the critics and filmmakers did: they experimented with different forms of narration, cinematography and editing. Such changes are easy to notice in some of the archetypal New Wave films, which are considered to embody the movement's manifesto, for example Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* or Godard's *Breathless*: jump cuts, handheld and unsteady cameras, filming on location, amateur actors, improvisation, non-linear narrative, fragmented editing etc. (Bordwell and Thompson 440-448) Another novelty within French filmmaking was a different approach to the director; some directors were deemed to be auteurs of their films, i.e. the main artistic force behind the film. Let us take a closer look at what an auteur denotes and the relevance of this term to Scorcese's output.

4.2. The Notion of an Auteur

Prior to the French New Wave and the idea of an auteur, films were mostly made as film studio products. Because the process of shooting a film was quite costly, film studios – especially Hollywood ones – were the ones that could afford it and invest larger sums of money into projects, making sure they had control over directors as well as their stars – all of whom were hired on contract. Although the great majority of American films of that time admired by the *Cahiers* critics were products of the studio system, "the New Wave critics

singled out Americans such as Nicholas Ray, Orson Welles, Howard Hawks and John Ford" (Wiegand 16) to be authors – auteurs – of their films. It is this focus on the role of the director as the film's author – akin to that of a novelist or a painter – that revolutionized cinema.

Even though the auteur theory is most commonly associated with Truffaut and *Cahiers du Cinéma,* Alexandre Astruc's 1948 piece "The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Caméra-Stylo" in "L'Ecran" serves as almost a preface to one of the most influential and significant film-theory articles ever written: Truffaut's "A Certain Tendency of French Cinema". Briefly put, Astruc puts forward the idea of directors being like writers; a director is an artist whose thoughts and views are expressed through the camera, a modern pen. He makes the following claim about film:

> After having been successively a fairground attraction, an amusement analogous to boulevard theatre, or a means of preserving the images of an era, it is gradually becoming a language. By language, I mean a form in which and by which an artist can express his thoughts, however abstract they may be, or translate his obsessions exactly as he does in the contemporary essay or novel. (Astruc 17-23)

The previously mentioned Astruc's and Truffaut's seminal literary works overlap and complement each other. Astruc identified all arts to be equal, and Truffaut delved into this claim even more. Truffaut, in his 1954 essay "A Certain Tendency of French Cinema", fiercely attacks mainstream French cinema. Namely, he scorns French literary adaptations for being unimaginative and unoriginal. The filmmaking itself was actually praised by Truffaut, but he condemned the films for not having any personal vision and relation to its directors. Essentially, Truffaut puts forward the idea of directors' complete involvement and immersion within their films. "A Certain Tendency of French Cinema" was therefore "the essay that

allegedly launched the ‘politique des auteurs’”. (Grosoli 43) Since then, auteur theory has been discussed and nurtured by many filmmakers and cinephiles; it is also important to note that the expression ‘auteur theory’ was coined in 1962 by the renowned American film critic Andrew Sarris, whose popularization and promotion of the auteur theory, especially in the Anglophone world, was of an undeniable importance. (Bordwell and Thomspon 436-437)

Sarris, in his 1962 essay “Notes on the Auteur Theory”, defined how an auteur could be identified. Firstly, an auteur must have basic competency; what is implied here is the director must be technically skilled. Secondly, an auteur must have a recognizable and personal style; a particular set of recurring characteristics which make the films distinguishably theirs. Thirdly, and this quality may be too ambiguous to fully grasp, an auteur is somebody whose soul and vision come through in the film. Everyone interprets this interior meaning differently, so here is what Sarris (562) himself defined it as: “Interior meaning is extrapolated from the tension between a director’s personality and his material.”(Sarris 561-564) If a director can boast possessing all three qualities, he/she may be described as an auteur. Some of the filmmakers that were generally agreed upon to fulfil these requirements back when ‘la politique des auteurs’ was at its peak were Hawks, Welles, Chaplin, Ford, Rossellini, Buñuel, Vigo, Hitchcock, Ray, Renoir, Fuller.

5. Scorsese as an auteur

The distinguished film critic Roger Ebert (6) described Martin Scorsese to be "a man of fierce energy, of inner fires burning high. He works hard, is endlessly curious, is intoxicated by great films". Consequently, Scorcese's filmography is extensive and well beyond the remit of this thesis. My aim in this section will therefore be to give a brief overview of Scorcese's characteristics as an auteur and to focus on two of his films that best epitomise his style and its development throughout his career: *Goodfellas* and *The Irishman*.

In his 2019 opinion piece published in *The New York Times* entitled "I said Marvel Movies Aren't Cinema. Let Me Explain" there are obvious clues that Scorsese believes he himself is an auteur. "For me, for the filmmakers I came to love and respect, for my friends who started making movies around the same time that I did, cinema was about revelation — aesthetic, emotional and spiritual revelation." (Scorsese n.p.) This is exactly what the French New Wave critics wanted cinema to become. Just like French literary adaptations came under criticism in the 1950s for being trite and hackneyed, although technically well-executed, Scorsese here critiques the Marvel films in 2019 for seeming as if they had all come off of the same assembly line. His problem with them is the fact that such modern film franchises are "market-researched, audience-tested, vetted, modified, re-vetted and remodified until they're ready for consumption." (Scorsese n.p.) Here is where the chief essence of cinema is, according to him, lost; it is because it is not art, it is merely following the same formula and recycling it over and over again. Having said all this, it is easy to note just how similar the French New Wave critics' and Scorsese's outlook on filmmaking is; it is art and should be treated as such. As Lopes points out,

> The *politique des auteurs* narrative includes tropes of personal vision, artistry, technique, risk taking, rule breaking, independence, and being-the-outsider, but also

> tropes of being pragmatic, a player, a negotiator, and a filmmaker who wants to make films demanding large Hollywood budgets. (Lopes 74)

What separates Scorsese from the initial rebellious experiments of the French New Wave is the balance he achieves between artistic autonomy *and* commercial success, as a result of which he is equally beloved by the audience as well as the critics. Throughout his career, he has consistently been making auteur box office hits.

5.1. A Man For All Genres

Having been an active director for more than half a century, it is not surprising that Scorsese developed his own style. Although he is mostly known to the wide audiences for his feature films, he has also made short films, documentaries, commercials and a music video. The themes explored in all of the previously mentioned art forms vary immensely, stretching from a metaphor for the self-destructive presence of the USA in the Vietnam War in *The Big Shave* (1967) to the everyday life of a local mob in *Mean Streets* (1973).

Interestingly enough, most of his documentaries revolve around musicians, such as Bob Dylan, George Harrison, The Band or The Rolling Stones. He is also the director behind, arguably, one of the most famous music videos ever shot; Michael Jackson's *Bad* (1987). His use of rock music in most of his feature films certainly makes more sense when one is aware of his love passion for it. This could indeed be one of the recurring typical features in his films.

> From the first shot of his first feature, Who's That Knocking at My Door (1967), Scorsese has loved to use popular music as a counterpoint to the dramatic moments in his films. He doesn't simply compile a sound track of golden oldies; he finds the precise sound to underline every moment. (Ebert 126)

Scorsese himself has spoken multiple times about the significance of the perfect harmony between the visual scene and the soundtrack accompanying it. This is best epitomised by the way he plays a certain track over a montage, for example in *Casino* (1995) where the full 7-minute version of "Can't You Hear Me Knocking" by The Rolling Stones follows a montage of Joe Pesci's character's criminal career. Another example of his use of a popular track over a montage is "Be My Baby" by The Ronettes in *Mean Streets.* However, out of all of his films, *Goodfellas* might just be the one to contain the most celebrated music moments. The importance and usage of music in *Goodfellas* will be analysed later in the thesis, in an examination of the use of music in juxtaposition to the use of music in *The Irishman.*

A lot of directors mostly work within the limits of the same genre, such as Ari Aster within horror, Woody Allen mostly within romantic comedies, or Christopher Nolan within mind-twisting dramas. Scorsese, on the other hand, is known for his diversity: *The Age of Innocence* (1992) is a romantic period drama and an adaptation of a literary classic; *The King of Comedy* (1983) is a dark comedy; *Raging Bull* (1980) is a biopic; *Cape Fear* (1991) a thriller; *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1998) a religious drama; *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013) a biographical crime black comedy – to name but a few. However, Scorsese's most studied genre and theme has not been mentioned in the examples above. Namely, *Mean Streets, Goodfellas, Casino, The Departed* (2006), *Gangs of New York* (2002) and *The Irishman* are all gangster films. Out of these six films, four of those deal with Italian American subjects, another major theme in Scorsese's films, which is almost always intertwined with the gangster genre.

Being a third-generation Italian American, Scorsese kept in touch with his background throughout his entire career. Italian American characters in his films are always complex characters through which he explores the Italian code of masculine honour within

the Mafia and often contrasts it with principles of being a Catholic. The title of Casillo's book on the Italian American Cinema of Scorsese perfectly encapsulates the destiny that might have awaited Scorsese had he not gotten involved in filmmaking: *Gangster Priest.* Namely, "film was his only salvation from the two stereotypical paths available to a young Italian male in Little Italy in the 1960s: the priesthood or the mafia." (Lopez 75) Perhaps that is why he dedicated much of his filmmaking to such characters who were in awe of the idea of the Mafia, while simultaneously being troubled by its ethic code. Scorsese thus "exhibits many of the characteristic conflicts and ambivalences that come with external as well as internal pressures to resist or embrace acculturation and assimilation." (Casillo 56) This is a crucial part of Scorsese's body of work, and it will be further explored later on, especially when considering *The Irishman* as (possibly) his final elegy for his gangster films.

5.2. Recognizable Style

One of the recurring filming locations Scorsese has used since his first feature film *Who's That Knocking at My Door* (1967) is the place where he grew up, New York City. He was raised in a Sicilian community in Little Italy, as an asthmatic child, unable to participate in sports and play outside like his peers did. Therefore, he found comfort in films and television. He was also a regular attendee of film screenings where he was accompanied by his older brother. It was thanks to this exposure to the mainstream American media that Scorsese, who was up until then living in a sheltered Italian community, slowly began assimilating into the American lifestyle. His bond to the New York City grew stronger as he continued his studies there, going on to attend New York University. (Blake 153-169) As a consequence, The Big Apple carries as much importance as the characters in his films *Mean Streets, Taxi Driver* (1976), *New York, New York* (1977), *The King of Comedy*, *After Hours* (1985), *Goodfellas, The Age of Innocence* (1993), *Gangs of New York* and *The Wolf of Wall Street.*

Moreover, yet another characteristic evident throughout his films is the presence of leading complex male characters, usually deeply flawed, who find themselves in some sort of trouble: emotionally struggling, questioning their morals, making life-changing decisions. It is not rare that these characters are usually antagonists, bad guys who we learn to understand and sympathize with. Travis Bickle from *Taxi Driver* (1976) is the ideal protoarchetype of such a character, although we can find similar male leads in virtually every Scorsese film, such as Jake LaMotta in *Raging Bull*, Newland Archer in *The Age of Innocence*, Teddy Daniels in *Shutter Island*, Sam Rothstein in *Casino*...

When it comes to Scorcese's latest film, *The Irishman*, as soon as the reviews began flowing in, lots of them noticed a lack of strong female characters in it, which was not the case for some of Scorsese's other gangster films – for example, Lorraine Bracco's character in *Goodfellas* or Sharon Stone's character in *Casino*: they are strong and independent female characters whose purpose is not only to add more layers to the male protagonist. Namely, they are both given enough time and space to make a remarkable impression on the viewer, and Bracco's character even does some of the narration. On the other hand, Anna Paquin's character in *The Irishman*, as the protagonist's daughter as well as the most significant female character in the film, says a total of six words in a three-and-a-half-hour film: "Peggy is markedly different from the female roles of Scorsese gangster films past; she is more a tool for expressing the protagonist's moral blindness, and a vehicle that primes audiences to feel certain ways about other characters, rather than a fully drawn person." (Loayza n.p.) This serves to prove Scorsese's affinity towards creating male leads rather than female ones, oftentimes with an Italian American background, since it is easier for him to connect with them.

Finally, there are some technical moves that Scorsese chooses to embed in many of his films. All of these are not there for aesthetic and stylistic reasons only; they affect the

story and how the viewer perceives the characters. Some of such techniques are freeze frames, long tracking shots, slow-motion violence-filled scenes, voiceovers, and montages. The editing style also does not change dramatically, especially considering the fact that the film editor Thelma Schoonmaker has been his long-term collaborator for virtually the entirety of his career.

6. *The Irishman* (2019) as a mature revision of *Goodfellas* (1990)

Upon hearing the news of Scorsese making a new mobster feature film, what was expected by many was an action-packed, violence-ridden, cocaine-fuelled Scorsese classic. Rightly so, since that is what viewers get in his other mafia-themed films. Instead, *The Irishman* turned out to be an epic homage to his own filmography, particularly to his gangster films, but it was anything other than what was expected. The film that I consider to be its perfect foil is a film he made 30 years prior to this one: *Goodfellas.* Roger Ebert, a film critic following Scorsese's work from the very beginning, said the following: "*GoodFellas* is an epic on the scale of *The Godfather*, and it uses its expansive running time to develop a real feeling for the way a lifetime develops almost by chance at first, and then sets its fateful course." (121) This exact same thing can be said about *The Irishman*, but the portrayal of the mafia life is entirely different. I argue that *The Irishman* is a mature revision of and reflection on Scorsese's gangster films, the most celebrated one being *Goodfellas.* Not only is it one of the most famous gangster films ever made, *Goodfellas* also contains more points of reference and overlaps with *The Irishman* than any other mob-centred film.

Curiously enough, both of the films are literary adaptations of mafia-themed biographies; *Wiseguy,* written by Nicholas Pileggi who is, along with Scorsese, also a credited screenwriter, was turned into *Goodfellas*, and *I Heard You Paint Houses* by Charles Brandt became *The Irishman,* only the screenwriter this time was not the director himself, but Steven Zailian. Scorsese's oeuvre is full of literary adaptations, so this did not come as a surprise. This may, however, come as a surprise if we think back to the French New Wave critics' stance on literary adaptions as a safe, but unimaginative choice. Although a fan of the French New Wave directors and their propositions, Scorsese never shared this particular

opinion. In a response piece to a film critic who reviewed *Silence,* Scorsese highlighted the following:

> I also disagree with Mr Mars-Jones's contention that any adaptation of a novel into a film can only amount to a "distortion" or an "exaggeration overall"... some filmmakers really do attempt to translate a novel into sounds and images, to create an equivalent artistic experience. (n.p.)

Goodfellas and *The Irishman* can be described as many things, but unimaginative or safe they are not. *Goodfellas* follow the rise and fall of Henry Hill whose only ambition in life was to become a professional criminal. One of Hollywood's most favourite quotes is undoubtedly the first voiceover line from *Goodfellas:* "As far back as I can remember, I always wanted to be a gangster." (00:02:02-00:02:07) The audience then accompanies Henry Hill on his criminal career journey: from the moment he joins the mob at an early age, we follow him slowly rising within it, gaining more significance, which thus brings more responsibility; his getting married, having children, witnessing gruesome murders, going to prison, betraying his 'colleagues' and finally ending up in a witness protection programme. *The Irishman* has a somewhat similar plot in the sense that Frank Sheeran, an outsider just like Henry Hill, suddenly gets accepted into a new, surrogate family – the mob, though there is a noticeable age difference when this happens for the two protagonists. Sheeran, a World War II veteran, slowly but surely gets involved with the Philadelphia crime families for which he becomes a hitman. Eventually, he also becomes a close friend of Jimmy Hoffa, a shady Teamsters leader (to put it mildly). This is one of the major differences between the two films: while Henry Hill and his colleagues/friends are exclusively in the business of drugs and heists, remaining in their territory, Sheeran and Hoffa's criminal activities are so interwoven with politics that they become inseparable. Finally, Sheeran is given the order to murder Jimmy Hoffa, which is a fictitious part of the film; Hoffa's death, i.e. disappearance,

has not been solved to this day. Sheeran then outlives most of his departed friends and colleagues, and ends up all alone in a nursing home.

6.1. The Glamour and the Power

One of the biggest disparities between the two films has to be in the way Scorsese portrays the lives and the lifestyle that are brought about by being a part of the mob. Whereas the inevitable doom awaits Henry Hill towards the end of *Goodfellas*, *The Irishman* opens up with a discouraging sight of the sorrowful-looking Frank Sheeran in a wheelchair – as old, weak and feeble as one can be. Scorsese used long tracking shots in both films, but they are used to convey entirely different emotions: while in *Goodfellas* they promise a glamorous lifestyle, in *The Irishman* they remind us of death and fleeting passage of time. The fact that Scorsese's outlook on the Mafia has changed in these thirty years is evident from this very first scene in *The Irishman.* By the end of the film, the audience is left with a different impression of the Mafia and Scorsese achieves this with different uses of voiceovers, long takes, soundtrack, pacing and even cinematography.

In one of the most famous scenes in *Goodfellas*, The Crystals's song "Then He Kissed Me" plays over a long tracking shot where we follow our protagonist Henry Hill take his soon-to-be wife out on a date to *Copacabana*. They skip the line by walking through the back entrance; everyone greets Henry; he tips everybody; a table is produced just for them and their needs are instantly catered to. (00:31:32-00:34:37) This iconic scene is an uninterrupted three-minute take which joins together the perspective of the viewer and Karen's perspective as it simultaneously introduces a particular flashy lifestyle, simultaneously promising Karen a new world of glamour if she chooses to marry Henry. As we witness Henry Hill's life unfold, we are seduced and also deceived by the glamour of this lifestyle, its parties, dinners, houses, cars, money, charm, in the same way that Karen was at the beginning of their relationship: all

of that conceals the fact that the foundations of such a life are violence and organized crime. Since we follow Henry's life with the help of his smug voiceover, it really is difficult to detect any sort of remorse. "What I found interesting about Henry in the book was that he was upset but not sorry for the things he had done. At the end, he regrets he's no longer a wiseguy." (Christie and Thompson 160) Though there are points in *Goodfellas* when viewers feel disgusted by the actions of the mob, the realization of it does not hit the viewers as much as in *The Irishman* due to the glamorous depiction of life in the former film. For example, Henry approaches a man who harassed Karen and beats him with a gun. Before the audience gets the chance to be repulsed by Henry's behaviour, Karen says the following: "I know that there are women like my best friends who would've gotten out of there the minute their boyfriend gave them a gun to hide. But I didn't. I gotta admit the truth, it turned me on." (00:41:12-00:41:25) The scene following her realization is their beautiful wedding which outshines Henry's violent act. Another thing which excites the viewer about this lifestyle is Scorsese's brilliant use of contemporaneous music. Be it a scene where Henry is cutting cocaine or where dead bodies are being found all over the city, the soundtrack becomes synonymous with the lifestyle portrayed on screen, thus making it all seem thrilling and alluring.

If we now turn to Frank Sheeran in *The Irishman,* the overwhelming emotions he is feeling virtually throughout his entire criminal career, but especially so near his end, are regret and remorse. Let us also analyse the long tracking shot which is here again used as a perfect opening hinting at and summarizing the entire film. The 1950s tune "In the Still of the Night" by The Five Satins is playing as the camera enters a nursing home, slowly moving through it, looking for a familiar face. The structure and length of this tracking shot is in direct dialogue with another *Goodfellas* long take in which Henry introduces us to the rest of the mob family (00:16:42-00:17:52), where the camera glides through a restaurant for just

over a minute. As the camera moves lively through the restaurant, the audience meets the crew with the help of Henry's voiceover. Everyone greets Henry: he is a part of that community and familiarized with everybody there. Unlike the audience in *Goodfellas,* the audience in the first scene of *The Irishman* does not recognize a single familiar face: we see elderly people who are playing games and spending time with their families or even talking to a priest. There is no voiceover in this long take. The camera movement reflects Frank in his dotage: slowly moving through the nursing home and yearning for conversation with anybody, but everybody is already either busy or uninterested. Finally, the camera approaches our protagonist, and it shakily moves from the wheelchair upwards, conveying the poor state he is in. Instead of powerful, strong, young men we were used to in *Goodfellas,* we get a trembling, decrepit, ill old man in a wheelchair; nothing powerful and glamorous about that. (00:00:21-00:02:07) There is a certain serenity, sadness and loneliness emanating from the first scene, revealing to the audience that the protagonist is nearing the end of his life.

The same feelings are conveyed towards the end of the film, when Frank goes to prison and finally, to the nursing home. In *Goodfellas,* when Henry and Jimmy end up in prison, they are still treated better than anyone else: they bribe the guards; they are able to make money from inside the prison; they eat lobsters and steaks; they can get anything they want. On the other hand, when Frank and Russell end up going to jail in *The Irishman,* they are treated like all other prisoners, which de-glamorizes the depiction of the mob life. In a voiceover, Frank says: "Russell, he had a stroke. Fat Tony, he couldn't control his urine no more. And my arthritis, that started in the foxholes of Anzio, was eatin' away at my lower back now, and I couldn't feel much in my feet no more." (3:00:28-3:00:43) This list of ailments is definitely a far cry from the image of the mob in *Goodfellas.* Frank is now all

alone, with no friends, no family, no power, practically waiting to die because he has nothing else to live for.

6.2. Gangsters and Violence

Both films revolve around a male character, an outsider at the beginning who slowly becomes a part of a new family. This is an overlapping characteristic of both films; the mob is not only their vocation, but also their family. Whereas Henry Hill had always wanted to be a gangster, Frank Sheeran almost accidentally becomes one – it just happens to him. He sees it as a job like any other, which is perhaps why he seems quite indifferent to the murders.

Even though the body count is much bigger in *The Irishman* than in *Goodfellas,* upon watching and re-watching the films, it seemed as if there was more violence in the latter. This is because in *Goodfellas* there is stabbing, slapping, beating, belting, breaking a bottle on one's head, repeated beating with a gun, punching, shooting, stabbing in the head, point-blank shooting... Essentially, Scorsese takes his time with showing these scenes and they are sometimes accompanied by Henry's narration or music. Tommy, for example, is the most impulsive, unpredictable character of them all: he even killed a young man named Spider, who was serving them drinks, for standing up to him. Spider's death served to show how virtually nobody is ever completely safe, since there are always consequences upon even slightly bruising gangsters' fragile egos. Whereas Jimmy finds Spider's death to be an inconvenience, since they will now have to go through the trouble of disposing the body, Henry is visibly shaken. As time goes by, Henry learns to detach himself from feeling anything upon seeing or hearing about death. To give an example, in another *Goodfellas* scene, there is a montage where dead bodies are being found all over the city, accompanied by Eric Clapton's "Layla" and Henry's voiceover, which justified the murders Jimmy had ordered to keep himself safe concerning the Lufthansa heist. Henry shows his indifference

towards the murdered associates when he says: “Anyway, what did I care.” (1:48:29-01:48:31)

> When Scorsese depicts violence, he shows gore, emphasizing not only the moral horror of inflicting pain and taking a life but also the deep and primal bloodlust. He dares viewers to enjoy the scene—and presents this violence in a manner that is not at all judging or condescending but, rather, understanding and sharing the gangsters’ part in the animal element of human life. (Brody n.p.)

Generally speaking, all of the murders and deaths are more exaggerated than in *The Irishman;* murders here seem like hits that simply have to be done, people usually get shot in the head and that is enough. This is yet another reflection that Scorsese masterfully executes in his new film; murders are more frequent, they are often not as ghastly and entertaining as Scorsese presents them to be in *Goodfellas*; they are, sometimes, ordered hits which Frank, apart from Hoffa, never really hesitates to execute, since his belief is that he is just following orders, just like he did in the war. For example, the death of Sally Bugs shows just how scarily easy a minor misunderstanding could cost someone their life. Frank is given an order to murder him, due to the belief that Sally Bugs betrayed them to the FBI. As Frank shoots him from a point-blank range, quickly and efficiently, he explains to us in a voiceover how it was a mistake after all, since Sally did not go to the FBI to disclose any secrets concerning the mob. It is also difficult to detect any regret in killing him at that point in time. Lots of other deaths in *The Irishman* function the same way: somebody is ordered to kill somebody and they do it. In order to be able to kill people, those mobsters must learn to detach themselves from taking away a human being’s right to live.

Freeze frames are another technique which Scorsese utilizes completely differently. In *Goodfellas,* the use of freeze frames is quite diverse. Scorsese himself said: “I wanted images

that would stop because a point was being reached in his life; like ‘everyone has to take a beating sometime’ - freeze — then go back to the whipping.” (Christie and Thompson 154) Therefore, freeze frames are used in various settings when the director wants to make an imprint of a certain moment or a specific scene on the viewer. In *The Irishman,* on the other hand, freeze frames occur when introducing a new character, and along with it the audience receives information how and when they are going to get killed. Seeing how virtually all of the characters will end up murdered in *The Irishman,* that alone is enough to shatter the illusion of mob life as desirable and enticing. However powerful and slick these characters might seem when we first meet them, the time and the manner of their death is an instant eye-opener to the audience.

6.3. The Penultimate Scene and the Ending

In both *Goodfellas* and *The Irishman,* the penultimate act portrays life-changing moments for the protagonists that seal their fates, though Scorsese, once again, frames them as polar opposites. In *Goodfellas,* this is the day when Henry has to balance some obligations and tasks: he has to get his ex-babysitter on a plane to Pittsburgh with a lot of cocaine on her; he is also preparing lunch with his family; he must visit his mistress to fetch the drugs. On top of all that, he is paranoid about the helicopter following him everywhere he goes and the authorities surveilling him. “It’s not a straightforward narrative passage, and it has little to do with plot; it’s about the feeling of walls closing in, and the guilty feeling that the walls are deserved.” (Ebert 127) As if it does not all seem crazy and frantic enough, one must only take a look at the soundtrack to that part: Harry Nilsson’s “Jump Into The Fire”, The Who’s “Magic Bus”, The Rolling Stones’ “Monkey Man”, George Harrison’s “What Is Life” and Muddy Waters’ “Mannish Boy”, all in the span of 10 minutes. Henry is getting more paranoid by the minute, sweating profusely, hurrying everywhere and trying to execute his

plan on time: there is a constant change of locations; Henry drives under the influence; the house is crowded; there is not a single second of silence; the camera is unsteady at times and all of it is followed by the insomniac, dishevelled, erratic, paranoid, cokehead Henry's voiceover. It turns out he was paranoid for a reason, as he does end up arrested.

The penultimate part in *The Irishman* is the one where Frank is told to murder Jimmy Hoffa, his long-time friend and associate. As Hoffa's disrespect towards the Teamster leaders and major crime families was growing by the minute, it was simply a matter of time when the situation was going to escalate. Namely, Hoffa is determined to, once again, be the leader, even though he was warned to stand back multiple times. The part in question here starts with Frank being told to murder Hoffa. The main focus is on Frank and Russell's relationship, though later on, two more characters become part of the murder ploy. Because he had been a close friend of Hoffa's for a couple of decades, one would expect of Frank Sheeran to react a bit more angrily and fiercely. Instead, though not entirely indifferently this time, Frank accepts it like any other hit. The tension is slowly building up, the audience knows Hoffa's about to be murdered any second now, but it is still executed in a much more peaceful manner than the penultimate scene in *Goodfellas.* Not only is there nobody fighting or talking over each other, but there is also no music whatsoever throughout the whole fifteen-minutes sequence. In the penultimate part in *The Irishman,* Scorsese built a complete antithesis to the one in *Goodfellas.* He achieves this by a slower pace, calmer colour-palette filled with cooler colours which are associated as more tranquil, soothing, even sad colours, quiet locations and no music. Both Henry and Frank are dealing with unwanted, stressful situations, but they do not handle them the same way. It may be Scorsese's way of showing how gangsters do not always lead dynamic, energetic lives where everything is overexaggerated, which is something we believe to be the case according to *Goodfellas.* Sometimes orders simply must

be executed, such as Hoffa's murder in *The Irishman,* and they must be done without bringing any extra attention to them.

Finally, the final scenes also differ considerably. Henry ends up in witness protection program and hates who he becomes: "I'm an average nobody. Get to live the rest of my life like a schnook." (02:19:41-02:19:47) He still idolizes the life of a gangster, even after all that had happened. On the other hand, the audience is, at the end of the film, at least somewhat aware of the mafia life not being as glamorous as it perhaps seemed at the beginning. The film ends with the suitable rendition by the rebellious Sid Vicious, "My Way". Originally, the song is performed by Frank Sinatra, but Scorsese decided to use Vicious' punk version of it. Punk subculture is, in its core, based on rebellion and discontent: this reflects Henry's way of life. Although it was not the path his parents had chosen for him, Henry, displeased with what he will become if he does not change his surroundings, decided to join the mob. Ending his story with a rebellious song performed by a, safe to say, madman, was Henry's way of saying he did what he had to do, and that, overall, he loved his life as a mobster.

Then there is *The Irishman,* whose ending I believe to be much more haunting and unforgettable. Frank Sheeran is nearing his death and he has virtually nobody left from friends and family. He is all alone and seems detached from reality: he feels irrelevant and loneliness has already started to consume him. Scorsese managed to portray the life of mafia realistically: in the end, although he was an important player in the mob in his prime, Frank is now all alone, filled with remorse and contemplation of the past events.

7. Conclusion

To be a good filmmaker does not only mean being technically skilful; with the help of a film, directors should offer the audience more than an audio-visual experience. A film should make room for reflection, discussion and contemplation; it should challenge our stances and beliefs. Martin Scorsese, besides making incredibly entertaining and brilliant films, does not allow the viewers to forget about his film the moment they see it. If anything, *The Irishman* lingers with you longer than his deservedly named gangster classic, *Goodfellas,* and this is mainly due to the ending scene. On the one hand, although Henry from *Goodfellas* is now in a witness protection program, his life will go on, since he is still in his thirties, has a wife and children. On the other hand, *The Irishman's* final scene shows Frank, all alone in his room in a nursing home: there is no voiceover or any music. The audience is aware that Frank's end is very near. Although he had done terrible things throughout his life, when we see him as weak and lonely as he is all alone in that room, it is impossible not to have any sympathy for him.

Comparing two of Scorsese's gangster films, *Goodfellas* and *The Irishman* and going into analyses of its similarities and differences just further asserted him as an auteur. The juxtaposition highlights his recognizable style and recurring characteristics, which he uses entirely differently in the two films for a contrasting effect. Although he is known for working with different genres, there are still consistent types of characters, themes and techniques he uses in his films: complex male leads, voiceovers, long tracking shots, memorable soundtrack, Italian American themes, freeze frames, montages – just to name a few. He uses all of the elements above in the two films in question, but very differently. Whereas in *Goodfellas* we might be allured by the gangster lifestyle, *The Irishman* strips it of all the fun and glamour, leaving it the way it is at its core – which is a life based on crime and violence. Also, one of the most prominent auteur characteristics is the fact that Scorsese has

been making gangster films from the very beginning of his career. If it really ends up being Scorsese's last gangster film, this three-and-a-half-hour epic drama, *The Irishman,* is most certainly a beautifully fitting end to this specific genre. Kenneth Turan, Los Angeles' most widely read film critic for decades now, described *The Irishman* in the following words:

> Instead of the high-energy, borderline celebratory atmosphere that clung to films like "Goodfellas" and "Casino," this is an elegiac, brooding gangster film that casts a mournful spell, that intentionally drains its gangland doings of glamour just as Rodrigo Prieto's exceptional cinematography gradually drains the color out of its look. (n.p.)

In conclusion, Martin Scorsese has given the world of cinema multiple masterpieces. Naturally, art is subjective, but in the case of Scorsese, his brilliance is assuredly generally agreed upon by virtually every cinephile there is. He has been an established auteur for decades now, and with every new film he proves, once again, that he has not lost his craft, individualistic ideas and passion for filmmaking. He is still as exciting of a filmmaker as he was thirty years ago and rightly so one of the greatest auters that have ever lived.

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