



Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts

**CAMERA MOVEMENT IN MARTIN SCORSESE'S FILMS:
AN ANALYSIS OF AUTHORSHIP FROM
SCRIPT TO SCREEN**

Chua Xian Jun

**Bachelor of Applied Arts with Honours
(Cinematography)
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This project is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Applied Arts with Honours
(Cinematography)

Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SARAWAK
2013

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ABSTRAK

PERGERAKAN KAMERA DALAM FILEM-FILEM MARTIN SCORSESE: ANALISA *AUTHORSHIP*-NYA DARIPADA SKRIP KEPADA SKRIN

Chua Xian Jun

Kajian ini mengaplikasikan teori *auteur* untuk mengkaji teknik sinematik dalam filem-filem Martin Scorsese, secara spesifiknya pergerakan kamera di dalam *long take*. Beberapa babak yang mengandungi *long take* dalam *Mean Street* (1973), *Goodfellas* (1990), dan *Casino* (1995) – yang mana kesemuanya merupakan arahan Scorsese dengan penglibatan pengarah fotografi serta penulis skrip yang berbeza-beza – telah dianalisa untuk mengenalpasti *authorship* terhadap pergerakan kamera tersebut. Kajian ini kemudian diaplikasikan ke dalam satu produksi filem pendek yang bergenre sama seperti filem-filem tersebut, dengan menggunakan teknik pergerakan kamera seperti mana terdapat di dalam *long take* ini.

ABSTRACT

CAMERA MOVEMENT IN MARTIN SCORSESE'S FILMS: AN ANALYSIS OF *AUTHORSHIP* FROM SCRIPT TO SCREEN

Chua Xian Jun

This research applies the auteur theory to study a specific cinematic technique in the films of Martin Scorsese: camera movement in the long take. Particular scenes with this type of shot in Mean Streets (1973), Goodfellas (1990), and Casino (1995) - all directed by Scorsese but using different cinematographers and writers - are analyzed to assess the true authorship of this camera movement. This research has then been applied in the production of a short film, in the same genre as the three aforementioned films, featuring dynamic camera movement in a long take.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

This research explores Martin Scorsese's authorship in terms of camera movement. According to Brown (2012) there are many types of camera movements in cinematography, such as pan (left or right movement without changing camera position), tilt (up or down movement without changing camera position), dolly (moving toward or away from the subject), tracking (camera moves along from left to right or vice versa), crane (achieve large vertical moves within the shot), and zoom (optical change of focal length without moving camera) – to name the commonly recognized ones.

Indeed, there is a variety of camera movements available to film directors, and, thus, there should be a motivation behind each camera movement. What makes camera movement cinematic is the unique authorship of the person controlling the camera. But, is that person the director or cinematographer? This research explores this question further by investigating the methods and practices used by famed American director Martin Scorsese to add additional layers of meaning, nuance, and emotional context to scenes via movement of the camera. However, out of so many camera movements used by Scorsese, one specific camera movement will be the core of study in this research. Roger Ebert describes one example in Scorsese's 1991 film, *Goodfellas*:

There is another very protracted shot, as Henry introduces us to his fellow gangsters. Henry leads the camera through a crowded club, calling out names as the characters nod to the camera or speak to Henry. Sometimes the camera seems to follow Henry, but at other times it seems to represent his POV; sometimes he's talking to them, sometimes to us. This strategy implicates us in the action. The cinematographer, Michael Ballhaus, did not get one of the film's six Oscar nominations, but was a key collaborator. Following Scorsese's signature style, he almost never allows his camera to be still; it is always moving, if only a little, and a moving camera makes us not passive observers but active voyeurs. (2002)

That is the long take incorporated with fluid and cinematic camera movement that involves tracking, panning, dollying and craning. Throughout the thesis, researcher will adopt the shorthand term of the "cinematic long take" to categorize these similar moments of dynamic camera movement in long takes in Scorsese's films. Other similar scenes to the aforementioned one in *Goodfellas* from Scorsese's works will be analyzed thoroughly, as developed from script to screen, to mainly study his signature style of this fluid cinematic long take.

In 1954 Francois Truffaut first promoted the distinction of the *auteur* with his article "Politique des auteur" in *Cahiers du cinéma*¹. Truffaut argued that directors who have their signature directorial style could be considered an *auteur*. *Auteurs* can be defined according to their frequent applications of personal artistic expression in their films. One might doubt Scorsese being the pivot of this study as there have been so many great film directors in the world like Griffith, Sternberg, Chaplin, Renoir, Visconti, De Sica, Bergman, Welles, Godard,

¹ *Cahiers du cinéma* is a French film magazine founded by film theoretician André Bazin, Jacques Doniol-Valcroze and Joseph-Marie Lo Duca in 1951. Aside from Truffaut, a number of famous film critics who were also directors wrote articles for the magazine, such as Robert Bresson, Jean Cocteau, and Jean-Luc Godard.

Truffaut, Hitchcock, Spielberg, Lucas, Coppola, Allen, Ang Lee, Zhang Yimou, Wong kar-wai, John Woo, and the list can go on. They all are great, but there are reasons this study focuses on Scorsese.

The first and foremost reason is because of the aesthetic values of his craftsmanship. This craftsmanship has been awarded many times throughout his career, including an Academy Award for Best Director in 2007. The richness of his cinematic techniques is represented in one of most recognizable cinematic traits - the fluid camera movement in long take. And last but not least, the majority of his films usually cover mob and crime themes, which meet the genre of the researcher's planned short film titled "Lucky Roll".

Ever since *auteurism* was introduced to the world of criticism, it still serves as a debated theory in film studies. In 1962, Andrew Sarris wrote an article for the New York avant-garde film journal *Film Culture* called "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962". This article introduced the *auteur* 'theory' to English readers and added further development to the premises of Truffaut's idea of *auteurism*. There are those who either agree or disagree, and those who question the worth of this theory. Sidney Lumet, an acclaimed film director once argued against those critics who talk too much about directorial style in his book *Making Movies* (1996):

"What about Matisse? You can always recognize a Matisse." Of course you can. It's the work of one person *working alone!* Movie directors do not work alone. There will be a visual difference if we work with Cameraman A or Cameraman B, Production Designer C or Production Designer D. (p. 52)

Lumet here simply means that every film a director working with different production crews will always have visual differences. Lumet's argument provides the cornerstone of this research into the directorial style of Martin Scorsese's camera movement. Analyzing

Scorsese's personalization of the fluid cinematic long takes from script to moving image, at the same time Lumet's statement will be considered in reviewing the work of Scorsese's cinematographers.

1.1 Problem Statement

David Sterritt (2004) quotes Lewis Cole pronouncing, "Many young filmmakers don't know how to tell stories...because they've grown up with years of movies where narrative is *assumed*, not *developed* so it really communicates". This statement seems like a problem statement, one that has motivated the present researcher to help his fellow young new filmmakers to tell stories in such rich in visual way. This research takes camera movement as its starting point, one of the most important elements in filmmaking, which can also be used to develop a personal stylistic vision. Nowadays there are uncountable cinematic ways of moving camera utilized by different filmmakers, which could be an interesting topic to study. It is good to take one great film director to specifically study his or her personal directorial style in cinematic camera movement. And therefore again, Martin Scorsese is chosen. It is good to study Martin Scorsese's authorship of cinematic camera movement because his work references the history of world cinema in various aspects. His films clearly show their debt to cinematic giants of the past. He studied film at a film school. He made a documentary called *A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese through American Movies* that shows his knowledge of film history. Hence, the motivations behind the execution of each of his camera movements can offer moments of discovery about the past, present, and potential future of the cinema.

On the other hand, the *auteur* theory can be considered as shaky as an unskilled handheld shot. It has encountered much criticism throughout the years. But while the

handheld shot could now be stabilized with effects software like Adobe AfterEffects or physical devices like the steadicam, some people still prefer the shaky version. While *auteur* theory as popularized by Andrew Sarris has been fortified in both academic and popular understanding of film culture, some still choose to oppose the idea of authorship in film. Taking Sidney Lumet's aforementioned argument as the basic problem statement for this study, the researcher will study how the authorship of Martin Scorsese (in term of cinematic camera movement) can be analyzed in a select group of films in which he worked with different cinematographers.

1.2 Research Questions

How can one determine the authorship of Martin Scorsese in terms of cinematic camera movement? An in-depth analysis from script to moving image will attempt to answer this question with specific examples. Authorship can manifest the motivations and emotional subtexts behind every executions of the stylistic cinematic camera movement that Scorsese made for particular scenes in different motion pictures.

Is Scorsese's authority over the camera movement in his films (for this study, focusing on the fluid moving long take) affected by the different cinematographers with whom he worked? Or is his style, or that of his cinematographer? As Sidney Lumet reminds us, a director may work with different cinematographers (and crews) that could change the style of the film. In analyzing the films Scorsese made with different cinematographers, the researcher will look for a distinct directorial style in camera movement that appears throughout these films, ultimately also aiming to provide further clarification of the *auteur* theory.

1.3 Research Objectives

This study takes as a point of departure Truffaut's argument that a film needs an author to reach a level of artistry, and so seeks to find a recurring style of Scorsese handling the camera for his own cinematic way of visual storytelling, via the fluid moving long take. More concerns will be placed on the concept, motivation, and subtext behind each execution for such shots.

Furthermore, the findings of this research hope to guide young and new filmmakers or film students, who are lost in search of a personal way of visual storytelling. This study provides them the cinematic camera movement applied by Martin Scorsese in his films with detail analysis and some samples, so that they could refer and further develop it to be their own directorial style in term of cinematic camera movement, as Scorsese himself has done.

1.4 Research Methodology

An analysis will be done from script to screen, to compare sequences in their original abstract literary form and later concrete visual form. Drafts of the screenplay of his films like *Mean Streets*, *Goodfellas*, *Casino* will be analyzed by picking scenes from of considerable movement that also suggest similarities of Martin Scorsese authorship. Comparing the literary context behind the cinematic one attempts to locate the authorial moment, trying to figure out the motivations or emotional subtext beneath the execution for particular shots.

1.5 Project Scope

As one of the most famous film directors in the history of the medium, much has already been written about Scorsese. This analysis will be situated among theories of camera movement and prior critical perspectives on Scorsese's authorship.

There are many other renowned film directors whose work could benefit a study of camera movement and authorship. Scorsese's directorial style distinguishes itself through other possible avenues of potential research and application: for example, his use of multiple voice-overs for storytelling, visual shifts between documentary and fiction mode, artificial lighting; and editing with an emphasis on music. These stylistic traits, as well as dynamic camera movement in the long take, have been considered and provide reference for the researcher's final project, the short film "Lucky Roll".

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 History of Auteur Theory

Many well-known theories have been discussed over and over again to understand film, such as feminism, realism, formalism, and *auteurism*. Thanks to Francois Truffaut's article in *Cahiers du cinéma*, cinephiles and critics are still questioning the first occurrence of the *auteur*. It is always difficult to confirm the first time of anything - the first dolly shot, the first close-up shot, the first voyeur, or the first appearance of an *auteur*. People just cannot guarantee the first actual existence of everything. Most people believe, in Bill Nichols' translated version of *A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema* (1976), "Well - I (Truffaut) do not believe in the peaceful co-existence of the 'Tradition of Quality' and an '*auteur's* cinema'." was where the term *auteur* first appeared in the writing. But, Michel Ciment, editor of another seminal French film magazine, *Positif*, argued in an interview

The *Cahiers* people with their characteristic sense of self-promotion and public relation have emphasized (wrongly!) that the auteur theory started at *Cahiers* in the Fifties. That's absolutely bullshit. It does not stand. If you read a magazine from 1928, *La Revue du Cinéma* or even Louis Delluc's first magazine *Cinéart* in 1921—what do you find as the body of the table of contents? What do you have? Sjöström, Stiller, King Vidor, Stroheim, Sternberg, Cecil B. DeMille, Griffith, Chaplin, and so on. And you have in Europe Lang, Murnau, Pabst, and so on. In France you have

Abel Gance, René Claire, etc. So the auteur was already the director. I mean it was absolutely obvious! If you look at *M*, you have a “Fritz Lang Movie.” It was not Godard who first said; oh the auteur is now the center of the movie. No! What *Cahiers* did was find new auteurs like Tashlin (who was also recognized by *Positif*!) but they liked for instance directors like Nicholas Ray who were not well regarded in America. When Godard says, we were the first to give the director his place in the canon: it’s absolute bullshit. (2009)

What is obvious is that the earliest occurrence of *auteurism* is still obscure. However, *auteurism* was later used frequently in journals written by a group of young critics from *Cahiers du cinéma – Nouvelle Vague*².

The *Nouvelle Vague* filmmakers believed that filmmakers could have a similar artistic control over a film as an author writing a book, hence the film director can be seen as the “author” of a film (Brody, 2012). This is the central concept of Truffaut’s *auteurism*. An important critic who had a dissenting perspective on the *auteur* theory was Truffaut’s mentor, André Bazin. Sarris, in his 1962 essay, in turn suggests, “It was largely against the inadequate theoretical formulation of *la politique des auteurs* that Bazin was reacting in his friendly critique. (Henceforth, I (Sarris) will abbreviate *la politique des auteurs* as the *auteur* theory to avoid confusion.)” (1962, p. 4). *Auteur theory* has been used as a tool to determine the consistency of visual style and theme that filmmakers intentionally make as the ‘authors’ of their images (Parkinson, 2012, p. 160). Sarris argues, “Ultimately, the auteur theory is not so much a theory as an attitude, a table of values that converts film history into directorial

² Translated as ‘French New Wave’, a group of young critics from *Cahiers du cinéma* who later sparked new waves in the globe, mainly including Francois Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Eric Rohmer, Claude Chabrol, and Jacques Rivette

autobiography. The auteur critic is obsessed with the wholeness of art and the artist.” (1968, p. 30).

Sarris set up three basic premises for *auteur* theory to help fortify Truffaut’s unsystematic formulation of *auteurism*. Those three premises are, as Pauline Kael summarized,

...the first premise of the *auteur* theory is the technical competence of a director as criterion of value... The second premise of the *auteur* theory is the distinguishable personality of the director as a criterion of value... The third and ultimate premise of the *auteur* theory is concerned with interior meaning, the ultimate glory of the cinema as an art. (1963, p. 12)

In 1963, Pauline Kael wrote “Circles and Squares” as an objection to Sarris’s *auteur* theory. In her essay, she stood in opposition to the three premises that Sarris set up, in each subsections namely “Outer Circle”, “Middle Circle”, and “Inner Circle”. According to A. R. Duckworth (2009), “Kael is asserting that the auteur theory venerates directors who repeat uninteresting and obvious devices.”, then describes Kael’s points as follows:

To Kael the “outer circle”, or first premise, of a director’s basic technical competence, is either a weak premise, a commonplace attitude of artistic judgment – and therefore the auteur theory is not as radical or as “fresh” as it seemed to be as a critique of film in 1962 – or a complete misunderstanding of the necessarily talents required for the production of art... The second criterion, and according to Kael the actual premise of the auteur theory, relates to the director’s distinguishable personality... In essence Kael is arguing that the distinguishable personality of a director is a poor choice for criterion of judgment... The third premise, or inner circle, is, according to Kael, ‘the

opposite of what we have always taken for granted in the arts, that the artist expresses himself in the unity of form and content'. (2009)

Kael expressed suspicion towards *auteur* critics. "The *auteur* critics aren't a very *convincing* group... I can only suspect that many *auteur* critics would have a hard time seeing those telltale traces of the beloved in their works." (1963, p. 26). This debate between Kael and Sarris continued after 1963 until their deaths.

Other critics besides Sarris and Kael have attempted to theorize the concept of film authorship. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson outline a few criteria and definitions in *Film Art: An Introduction* (1993),

Author as production worker. Not that the director can do everything or make every choice, but the director's role is defined as a synthetic one, combining various contributions into a whole... **Author as a group of films.** In reaction to the notion of "personality," some have suggested that we regard the idea of the "author" as simply a critical construct. On this account, the critic would group films by *signature* of director, producer, screenwriter, or whatever... The critic would then analyze the patterns of relations within a given group (pp. 38 - 39).

From Astruc to Truffaut, Ciment to Godard; Sarris to Kael, Sarris to Corliss; as well as Perkins, Wollen, Caughie, Crofts, and Kipen - many critics, filmmakers, and institutions continue to debate the usefulness of the term and who can be considered the principal author of film.

2.1 Martin Scorsese's Signature Styles

As Martin Scorsese said, "I (Scorsese) love movies – it's my whole life and that's it." (2003). His films include *Mean Streets*, *Taxi Driver*, *Raging Bull*, *the Color of Money*,

Goodfellas, *Casino*, *the Departed*, *Shutter Island*, and *Hugo*. Cinema has undergone various changes throughout his long career, and he himself has experienced peaks and valleys in his career. Thomas Sotinel writes,

In the dim light of a Manhattan church, the little Italian crook praying in front of a *pietà* passes his hand through a candle flame. More than thirty-five years on, that shot from *Mean Streets* remains indelibly imprinted on the visual memory of anyone who saw it at that time. Since then, the director's career has taken many turns yet it already contains the elements that make Martin Scorsese unique in modern cinema: a keen awareness of his origins, a deep knowledge and love of cinema, and an existential anxiety, embodied in characters who inspire terror as well as compassion. The passing years and their tribulations have enriched Scorsese's subject matter and refined his style, without him ever being untrue to himself. (Sotinel, 2010, p. 5)

Throughout so many films made by Scorsese, following Sotinel, there must be frequent usage of particular techniques, distinguished styles, and internal meanings as in the three premises that Sarris had outlined to allow the audience to identify his directorial styles or authorship. Sotinel (2010) notes one technique, of interest for this research topic, in *Mean Streets*,

He stamped this personal material with the mark of a great director, with confidence in his craft, able to create fluid long shots to capture a chaotic fight in a billiard hall. It's a way of giving shape to movement that doesn't simply accompany the narration but accelerates it. (p. 24)

This fluid cinematic camera movement has also been pointed out by Ebert on his web archive entitled *Great Movie Archive: Goodfellas*:

In the most famous shot in the movie, he takes his future wife Karen (Lorraine Bracco) to the Copacabana nightclub. There's a line in front, but he escorts her across

the street, down stairs and service corridors, through the kitchen area, and out into the showroom just as their table is being placed right in front of the stage. This unbroken shot, which lasts 184 seconds, is not simply a cameraman's stunt, but an inspired way to show how the whole world seems to unfold effortlessly before young Henry Hill. (2002)

Scorsese explains his obsession with everything done in a single shot as an inspiration from Max Ophuls, Jean Renoir, and Kenji Mizoguchi; while at the same time he also admires the editing of Sergei Eisenstein and Alfred Hitchcock's editing (Christie & Thompson, 2003). In *Mean Streets*, says Scorsese, "In the fight in the pool room, I held it long because of the sense of helplessness, the silliness of the whole thing." (Christie and Thompson, 2003, p. 47). In this example then, Scorsese recreates an existing technique and makes it new or personal. In an interview Scorsese revealed for the scene's use of tracking shots and the staging of performance and brutality, Sam Fuller's *Park Row* was a key reference for him because it shows how the violence could be more than what actually happens when the camera is tracking (p. 45). "Doing that one long take creates so much in emotional impact, giving you a sense of being swept up in the fury and the anger, that you begin to understand more why it is happening." (p. 47)

Additionally, aside from Scorsese's fluid long take camera movement, he features unique application of voice-over narration in his films too, another aspect of his signature styles as well. Sotinel shows how this is developed in the scriptwriting:

Scorsese wrote the screenplay together with [Nicholas] Pileggi, showing him some of the early Nouvelle Vague films, including *Breathless* (1960) and *Jules and Jim* (1962), so that Pileggi could adopt the narrative methods of Godard and Truffaut, with their sudden digressions and voice-over narrations that have the status of

characters in their own right. This disjointed narrative style enlarges apparently insignificant incidents and performs acrobatic twists and turns. (2010, p. 59)

Again, a technique he adopted from elsewhere – in this case, *Nouvelle Vague* films – is remade as his own personal signature style.

Thelma Schoonmaker, the editor for many of the Scorsese's films, has described how Scorsese's style influenced her work. She answered: "He likes to experiment, to go in a specific direction with each new project...My style of editing is in fact his." One example she provides is "movement from objective to subjective shots. A shot appears to be shown from a particular point of view, and then the character comes into the shot, which becomes a simple shot of him, even to the point where you then go back to a subjective shot" (Schoonmaker, 1996). Thus Scorsese's authorship extends to not just directing, but influences other personnel as well, and so this study will explore his impact on cinematography of his films.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

This research explores how Martin Scorsese translates narrative from written literary language to cinema language, via an analysis of the progression from screenplay to moving image in certain scenes from Scorsese's *Mean Streets*, *Goodfellas*, and *Casino*. These films all involve his signature cinematic long take. At the mean time Scorsese's authorship over visual style will be considered as for these three films he worked with different directors of photography; Kent Wakeford, Michael Ballhaus, and Robert Richardson respectively.

3.1 *Mean Streets*

This film is a story about a group of people living in the mean streets of Little Italy, a neighborhood in New York City. It opens with a phrase that provides a theme for the entire film: "You don't make up for your sins in church. You do it in the streets. You do it at home. The rest is BS and you know it." Charlie the money collector for loan shark Michael goes through hardships to help Johnny Boy, his buddy who owes Michael a debt. Conflict occurs for Charlie as he stands between the sins, and between Mike and John. It is directed by Martin Scorsese and cinematographed by Kent Wakeford.

One of the cinematic long takes in *Mean Streets* occurs when Johnny Boy seeks for food in refrigerator at the kitchen, and walks to Charlie's room, while later on Charlie walks