

# Scorsampling

Maurizio Viano

*Realism is such an ambiguous and loaded word that it is hard to agree on its meaning. I consider my own films realist compared with neorealist films. In neorealist films day-to-day reality is seen from a crepuscular, intimistic, credulous and above all naturalistic point of view. [ . . . ] Compared with neorealism I think I have introduced a certain realism, but it would be hard to define it exactly.*

Pier Paolo Pasolini

*I find that documentaries are so moving, especially if it is the old cinéma vérité style. It is something about the way people are captured. The sense of truth is what gets me. And I always regret that we can never get as close as that when we're working with actors. You re-create those moments and sometimes you do get that certain reality.*

Martin Scorsese

## INTRODUCTION

This essay is part of a larger project that aims to rescue "realism," that "ambiguous and loaded word," from the disrepute into which it has fallen in the last twenty-five years of film studies. Since "realism" has become, for all practical purposes, a synonym for illusionism and virtually all of Hollywood's narrative cinema

is commonly held to be "realistic," film theorists never cease to denounce and scapegoat the illusion of reality as the intrinsic evil of the cinematic apparatus.<sup>1</sup> I understand when I teach my film courses the need to emphasize that movies are not reality, that an image must be read rather than seen—in other words, that the metaphysics of presence regulating the exchange of audiovisual information is indeed dangerous. And I mean *dangerous*, since, as Michael Ryan states, "metaphysics is the infrastructure of ideology."<sup>2</sup> It is my contention, however, that, around the same time as the anti-realist wave, there came a generation of filmmakers who were not 'naive' believers in the transparency of the cinematic sign *and yet* made cinema under the sign of realism. The work of Pasolini is perhaps the most significant example of this phenomenon since, in addition to introducing "a certain realism" which "would be hard to define exactly," he was also a film theorist and dedicated several essays to the relationship between cinema and reality.

I have argued elsewhere that Scorsese's ethnic films can be used as examples of a different relationship between cinema and reality.<sup>3</sup> In this essay, I will use some aspects of Scorsese's first feature film, *Who's That Knocking At My Door?* (1968), as a point of departure for some reflections on this yet undefined—perhaps never completely definable—category, "a certain realism," and Scorsese's participation in it. In order to create something akin to a dialogic structure and incorporate objections to my theoretical effort to chart such a debatable category, I have written this article against (as in a sounding board, not in opposition to) Peter Brunette and David Will's *Screen/play*, a recent and important book that verifies, at last, the potential use of Derrida in film studies.<sup>4</sup> Arguing that film theory has tended to prioritize Lacan over Derrida, Brunette and Wills show that: (a) most of the assumptions underwriting film studies (periodization, genre, canon, etc.) are in fact unreliable, if not false; (b) "the visual occupies a position of primacy with respect to the verbal similar to that which speech occupies with respect to the written" (62) and such primacy is a product of the mimetic fallacy whereby images would bear an analogical relationship to reality and reality would have the logocentric stability derived from the metaphysics of presence; (c) cinema is *writing* (*écriture*) and the filmic text is fundamentally incoherent, for it is impossible to determine what is inside or outside the frame, let alone what the appropriate context for a reading should be; (d) films, in spite of the potential rupture effected

by the advent of audiovisual technology, are still treated in accordance to the rules of what Derrida calls the *postal*, a convenient metaphor for "a model of communication that assumes systems of address based on identity" (185).

According to a common prejudice, Derrida's work would be far removed from "the real world." In fact, his shadow looms large in the psycho-topology of everyday life. On the evening of Friday, December 6, 1991, the announcer of TG1 (TV news presented by the Christian Democrats) started the evening edition by relating the findings of the CENSIS report—the socio-statistical analysis which takes the pulse of Italian society every year. They were not too rosy: According to the 25th *rapporto* CENSIS, Italians "are prey to the demon of deconstruction." The announcement was followed by the "talking head" of the usual "expert" who explained to the public what that meant and suggested a cure: *fede e speranza*. The "expert" blamed the country's instability and impending crisis on cynicism (his synonym for deconstruction), as if corruption and scandals were not enough to understand the Italians' distrust towards the *res publica*. After twenty-five years, the word "deconstruction" had finally trickled down from philosophical heights and entered the Italian language, albeit with negative connotations.

The choice of *Screen/play* as the sounding board for my reading of Scorsese stems from a simple reflection: Derrida epitomizes the epistemological break which makes the very discourse of realism obsolete, naive, and passé. Brunette and Wills would agree with me, however, that the impossibility of an old-fashioned realist plenitude does not prescribe the expulsion of the term "realism" from our critical vocabulary. Rather, it is a matter of rewriting it, writing it under erasure, which is what many films have done. And those are precisely the films that need to be reevaluated against a more supple notion of realism, because they are different from Hollywood illusionism (after all, Hollywood films are *not* made under the banner of realism) and aspire to enter a problematic relationship with profilmic reality—Pasolini used the word "naturalism" to indicate the nonproblematic way in which most films approached reality:

Marty is terribly honest about what he is doing. He does not lie when he makes a movie. He tells it exactly as he sees it. I've done

---

some painting, and very often I'm tempted to do a standard thing to get by. I constantly have to tell myself, "Draw what you see. Don't draw what you think you see." Marty draws only what he sees. (Paul Sorvino, who played Paul Cicero in *GoodFellas*)

No better objection to realism can be imagined than Derrida's, and ideological criticism cannot dismiss the mark that he left on critical theory. In this respect, Brunette and Wills' book is profoundly political and it does not help much to dismiss it from the left as Mas'ud Zavardeh who, in his *Seeing Films Politically*, singles out *Screen/play* as the ultimate example of a conservative post-modernism. One has to accept the challenge posed by Derrida and, in Gramscian fashion, see what his strengths are, and incorporate them. According to Brunette and Wills,

before the appearance of a book like Gregor Ulmer's *Applied Grammatology*, writing on Derrida seemed mostly to remain within a descriptive mode that failed to engage his ideas in such a way as to continue and expand their program, in spite of the fact that his writing often calls for just that. (99)

Here, then, I want to engage some of Derrida's ideas in such a way as to hijack their program as I understand it. More specifically, I will try to show that some aspects of Scorsese's cinematography can be seen and used as falling within Derrida's program.<sup>5</sup>

The results are great. Everything looks really authentic and right. How they do things, the way they move, has to have very special style. And that's amazing in this film [*GoodFellas*]; it all looks real. This is totally different from what I have done so far on other movies. (Michel Ballhaus, director of photography of several films by Scorsese)

Discussing the overarching hold that the postal has had on our understanding of communication and information processes, Brunette and Wills refer to Derrida's book *The Post Card* in which Derrida reads Western philosophy in and from a postcard "which seems to depict Socrates writing under Plato's dictation, a reversal of what we take to be a historical fact" (179-80). Arguing that "the whole philosophical institution is constructed by them," they quote Derrida's remark about Socrates' and Plato's "signing of a pact and forming of a private company with a monopoly over Western thinking, to which we are required to pay our dues for activities as diverse as when we make war or love, speculate on the energy crisis, construct socialism, write novels, open a concen-

tration camp for poets and homosexuals, buy bread or hijack a plane, teach, or piss against a tree"(189). These comments evince a faith in beginnings, in an archaeological trace which would subsequently mold what is to come. The Socrates/Plato connection is, in other words, one of those causes which becomes evident only after we have seen the effect, a cause that did not exist as such when it occurred, but that we can nonetheless visualize after feeling its effect on our bodies and minds. I do not intend to question the legitimacy of such an operation, but I claim my right to use a similar strategy, the right to subject Scorsese to the same telescoping, flattening operation.

WHAT'S THAT KNOCKING IN THE CINEMATIC TEXT?

I chose *Who's That Knocking At My Door?*, his first distributed film—his first film to enter the international "postal" system—as a convenient pathway into of the territory covered by the rest of Scorsese. Seen retrospectively, after twenty-five years of Scorsese, *Who's That Knocking At My Door?* is an excellent example of "a certain realism": it opens its discourse, stakes out its territory, charts its potential functioning in the "postal" system:

We might begin to imagine a type of writing on film whose rhetoric borrows something from the technology of the medium; a rhetoric of cinema (perhaps later of the video clip) informed by angle shots, double takes, shifts of focus and close-ups. (Brunette/Wills, 137)

Of course we do not know when Scorsese's filmography really began—most likely it began with the first films he saw, as a child, when, due to his poor health, he would often go, even twice a day, to the neighborhood theatre running generic pictures as well as Italian films. *Who's That Knocking At My Door?* was not the first film he made, just the first to be distributed.

Scorsese had already completed some other projects at NYU, the most notable of which was *It's Not Just You, Murray* (1964), an all-genres, all-styles, new-wave(s) laced film (with a last sequence patterned after *Eight And a Half's* grand finale).

In *Murray* and *Who's That Knocking At My Door?*, a dramatic version of *Murray*, there was an attempt to portray just the way I was living. But I could not really get it together, and you know the whole story about *Who's That Knocking At My Door?* in terms of the first version being *Bring on the Dancing Girls*, with another girl playing the part. And it was re-shot two years later, in 1967. In 1965

it was *Bring on the Dancing Girls*; in 1967 it was *I Call First*. When it was shown at the Chicago Film Festival, it got good reviews there from Roger Ebert. And then there was a probability of distribution if I put a nude scene in, and I did that in Amsterdam, Holland. The idea [behind *Who's That Knocking At My Door?*] was to actually record the daily life of the neighborhood. It's almost more accurate than *Mean Streets*. *Mean Streets* is everything I did not put into *Who's That Knocking At My Door?* It was re-structured and based on real incidents. *Who's That Knocking At My Door?* is all real too, all based on real incidents. Both films are part of a trilogy, but the first part was never made. It was just written. (Martin Scorsese)

Interestingly, Scorsese regards a semantically ambiguous and visually unsettling film like *Who's That Knocking At My Door?* successful from a realist point of view. According to him, his attempt to portray "just the way I was living" has resulted in a text that "is all real" and "almost more accurate than *Mean Streets*." The fact is that, like *Mean Streets*, *Who's That Knocking At My Door?* has qualities that link it to documentary, the type of cinema which, in his eyes, is more likely to "get that certain reality."

Aware and in agreement with the dictum that "cinema is not the representation of reality but the reality of a representation,"<sup>6</sup> Scorsese does not employ naturalist formulas to depict "the real incidents" of the neighborhood but makes a film as close to documentary as possible—his idea of documentary though. It is important to remember that in his documentaries—most notably *Italian-American* (1974) and *American Boy* (1977)—Scorsese included himself in the picture and entered in a relation with the portrayed material, so that when he says documentary we should think just the opposite of impartial observation. As a point of fact, the quality which Scorsese appreciates in *cinéma vérité* is the absence of narrative structure, its freedom. Talking about his attempt to give a sense of truth about the Mafia hoodlums in *GoodFellas*, Scorsese once remarked:

The idea is to play around and fragment structure, and to make a film that is *almost* in the style of a documentary. It has the style and the freedom of a documentary, where anything can happen, with a lot of narration and voice-over.

Documentary then has a better chance to "get that certain reality" because reality itself is unstructured and "anything can happen." Reality is on the side of chaos. Although he did not exactly say it in Derridean terms, it seems evident that for Scorsese reality has no ontological stability; it is not a pre-existing

given but is being written as we go along. Since reality itself is always-already written, only a text that is aware of its status as rewriting of the already written is entitled to "a certain realism." The irony is that *Who's That Knocking At My Door?* has the freedom of a de-structured text partially because of its troubled genesis. Started in 1965, it premiered two years later and was then distributed, with a new "nude scene," in 1969. So much for conventional realism! *Who's That Knocking At My Door?* was an incoherent text to begin with and only our desire for coherence allowed us to receive it as one text and interpret it as one story.<sup>7</sup>

Once we force it into a narrative mold, *Who's That Knocking At My Door?* tells the story of J. R. (Harvey Keitel), a religion-obsessed, neighborhood guy, who spends most of his time with his male friends, especially Joey (Lennard Kuras) and Sally Gaga (Michael Scala), in a boring yet fun homosocial little niche, talking about "broads," and dreaming about "girls," quarreling, driving uptown, fighting. During the fourth sequence, which shows the guys sitting around, we are informed that J. R. has (had) a girlfriend (Zina Bethune), "the Girl" say the credits. From then on, the film depicts, in a parallel montage/flashback mode, J. R. with the guys and J. R. with the Girl. He meets her on a ferry-boat, talks to her about cinema and takes her to see *Rio Bravo*. He cannot or will not have sex with her, because she is not a broad but a girl. One day, she tells him how once a man whom she trusted raped her (we see the rape scene in a flashback as she tells J. R. the story). In J. R.'s mind the Girl becomes a broad; the Girl is outraged and they seem to split for good. After leaving the girl, J. R. "goes" to church. By the confession booth, his lips bleed, in a phantasmagoria of religious images, while the soundtrack proposes the title song. We see him back in the neighborhood and the film ends, with a shot of J. R. wishing goodnight to pal Joey.

I have a scene where I send Henry off to school. For this scene, Marty said, "What do you do when your kid goes to school? What would you say? What would you feel?" I said, "I'd say, 'Watch how you cross! Drink that milk!'" It's what is real that always works. That's what makes his films so special. (Elaine Kagan, who played Henry Hill's mother in *GoodFellas*)

The first sequence of *Who's That Knocking At My Door?* shows a woman (Catherine Scorsese) baking and serving a stuffed bread to five children, the whole captured in quick shots to the sound of a percussive, grinding noise. The opening shot, before the credits,

frames the statue of a saint and other white small objects on a mirror-topped dresser, the image of the woman being reflected in the mirror. It is worth remembering that in the period spanning the production of *Who's That Knocking At My Door?*, Scorsese made *The Big Shave* (1967), a seven-minute, surrealist short that won the L'Age d'Or Prize. In it, a man shaves and cuts himself more and more, until the sink is replete with blood and his face is one large wound. In addition to functioning as apt origin of a filmography concerned with the (growing?) pains of masculinity, this film is relevant to my argument in that it never shows the man directly but always in the mirror. As *The Big Shave* is in a sense another "first film" (it was completed before the final version of *Who's That Knocking At My Door?*), Scorsese's filmography originates in a mirror. The visual openings of both films were dictated by the desire to inscribe cinema in the deceptive space of mirror reflections. Mirror shots leave you doubting: Are they images of a mirror or of what is reflected in it? The portrayed reality does not exist in and of itself but it always already a trace left on a surface. In the case of *Who's That Knocking At My Door?* the dissemination of visual cues is heightened by the fact that the first shot depicts a statue but also a mirror and, moreover, a woman kneading dough. Furthermore, the woman is not just a character in the diegesis (J. R.'s mother, although, in fact, we'll never see her again) but she is also Scorsese's mother.

In 1991, Irwin Winkler, the producer of *GoodFellas*, made *Guilty by Suspicion*, the story of David Merrill (Robert De Niro), a film director who refuses to "purge himself" during the "red scare" of the late forties and thus becomes one of the "Hollywood ten." Scorsese plays Joe (Joseph Losey?), a communist filmmaker who, unlike Merrill, leaves the USA for England. We see him a few hours before leaving, all packed-up, as he entrusts the completion of his last picture to Merrill, who urges him to rethink his decision. Joe/Scorsese says he can't, and in a laughing tone adds: "It's nothing noble either. I just can't do it. I'd have to stay out of rooms with mirrors for the rest of my life. I like looking at myself too much." Scorsese "left" Hollywood in the name of mirrors.

Scorsese achieves the dissemination of meaning implicit in the mirror-effect also through his innovative use of the soundtrack. In their argument against the coherence of the text, Brunette and Wills remarked that "like spoken language, conventional cinema, through the careful suturing of sound and image, offers an illusory wholeness." While citing Marguerite Duras' *India Song*



and *Son nom de Venise dans Calcutta désert* as examples of texts which fully exploit "the potential for rupture that this suturing implies" (63), they suggest that "such a threat of disunity is apparent not only in what might be called 'experimental' films such as Duras' but also in more conventional, mainstream films." Far from the elitism of films like Duras', Scorsese has tampered with conventional soundtrack practices enough to call attention to his way of handling the aural register: He is one of the precursors of the videomusic clip as we know it today. Musicals, the genre which seems to be more connected with the birth of a videomusical rhetoric, had in fact nothing of its visuals. The associative, fast editing that characterizes video music appeared, rather, with film directors who used music with anti-narrative, poetic purposes (think of *Zabriskie Point's* [Antonioni, 1970] five-minute explosion of the villa to the sound of "Careful with that Axe, Eugene" by a then underground London band called Pink Floyd). Quite perceptively, Rebecca West has pointed out that the church sequence anticipates Madonna's "Like a Prayer."<sup>8</sup> In fact, *Who's That Knocking At My Door?* contains at least three such music videos; that is, sequences in which the soundtrack seems to acquire a primacy over the visual and thus challenge the hierarchy regulating the film experience (one goes to the movies to watch a film, not to hear it).

On closer inspection, *Who's That Knocking At My Door?*, *Mean Streets*, and *Good Fellas* do not have soundtracks in the conventional sense, with major figures having their own themes that work to reinforce, accompany, and enrich their meaning(s). The soundtracks of these films are made of pieces played just once. This may seem to fix meaning by avoiding the dangers contained in iterability—doubling, repeating things twice puts meaning *in abyme* and creates a play of differences inside the text. In Scorsese, however, this practice has a strong anti-narrative thrust—and we know that the first vehicle of ideological illusionism, the element which makes all film look alike, is the narrative form. *Who's That Knocking At My Door?*, *Mean Streets*, and *GoodFellas* can be seen as a series of videomusic clips requiring a "disseminated" appreciation which resists the reading of the film as a cohesive whole. It is true that the sound somehow always works with the image, and the break is never so extreme as in Duras. But the sound/image relationship is subverted, so that, for example, it is a Rolling Stones' song or a Neapolitan aria, instead of images, that are entrusted with the task of capturing "that certain reality."

---

*MAN STREETS*

Scorsese's realist, narrative films (the ethnic ones, *Who's That Knocking At My Door?*, *Mean Streets*, *Raging Bull*, and *GoodFellas*, plus, arguably, *Taxi Driver*) are not so much stories of individual characters (J. R., Charlie, Jake, Henry, Travis) as they are textual trajectories seeking to capture certain realities of masculinity, for example, violence. Scorsese's films are often blamed for their too crude, too "realistic," depiction of violence. In fact, violence is the area in which he's most self-reflexive and innovative. Differently put, male violence, as the diffuse and disseminated referent of his films, can be used as the measure of that "certain operation" to which Scorsese submits realism. A close reading of the second sequence of *Who's That Knocking At My Door?* will clarify my point.

The last shot of the first sequence depicts the mother serving a slice of stuffed bread to five children demurely waiting around the table. The grinding sound that accompanied the entire preparation of the bread vanishes: "OK, it's eight minutes before the big afternoon, it's 64 beautiful degrees out and you're listening to WCHE." A straight cut from the mother with children to the image of someone's lower back with (his) hands clutching a stick follows the change on the soundtrack. Cut to an over-the-shoulder medium shot of five young men standing in a semicircle and looking at the person whose perspective we are sharing and whom we do not see. The second to the left in the group is J. R. Joey, in the middle, has his hands behind his back, presumably hiding the stick. Instead of giving us a counter-shot of the person looking at these five men, we get a medium-close-up of Joey, a patronizing, sly grin on his face. Cut to a close-up of J. R. touching his lips and looking. Its only with the fifth shot that we see who these guys are interacting with. It is a street-kid—a bandanna around his head, a chain with a cross hanging from around his neck—vaguely resembling Scorsese, to the point that some have included him in the cast. Behind him there is a blond man with one hand in front of his eyes. Cut back to J. R. who has a smirk across his face. Cut back to the street-kid who's clearly mouthing a threat, but the synch sound is off, only the DJ can be heard, his voice giving way to "Jenny Take a Ride" by Mitch Ryder and the Detroit Wheels. We then see the street-kid kissing the cross and the fight erupting: Joey takes out his stick and hits (with no pretension to realism) the kid who, very theatrically, tumbles down

toward us. The camera swiftly backtracks while the kid literally rolls on the sidewalk and Joey beats the ground on either side of him. J. R. follows Joey and pretends to kick the kid. There is a ballet-like quality to this shot, with the music giving the fast tempo to what looks like ritual dancing. We then cut to a black frame in which we read: Zina Bethune as the Girl and introducing Harvey Keitel as J. R. We return to the fight, the kid rolling on the ground and camera still retreating to frame him as he turns over and over again. Cut to the other three men beating the blond guy, but here too the fight is obviously fake. Then another black frame, with the word KNOCKING written across the screen. Two seconds later, the words "Who's That" appear in small characters above KNOCKING and, after two more seconds, we read "At My Door," without a question mark, below KNOCKING. We then return to the conclusive shots of the fight which ends with a straight cut to a butcher chopping a piece of meat in a neighborhood store.

This sequence signals Scorsese's passion for a fast-tracking camera, a camera that has constantly to re-frame in order to contain fighting bodies—think of the often quoted and analyzed sequence of the fight in the billiard room in *Mean Streets*. Images threaten to leave the quadrangular space of the frame and force the director to develop a violent camera style. Furthermore, the presentation of the written words of the title plays on the iterable and graftable structure of language. "KNOCKING" is in some ways referential with respect to the fight going on in the film, and it is only when the other words appear that it takes a different meaning, never abandoning the previous one though. This type of violence to which language is subjected encapsulates the de-structuring effected by Scorsese's approach, a de-structuring that aims to multiply the signifying levels so that looking becomes reading.

Finally, the straight cut from mother giving bread to the stick hidden behind Joey's back creates a meaning that only montage can create and anticipates that Scorsese's cinema would rely not only on the *figural* or *semantic* meaning of an image but, above all, on the *syntactic* meaning generated by the (violent) juxtaposition of shots.

Following Ropars-Wuillemuier's astute analysis of Eisenstein's theory, Brunette and Wills argue that montage enacts Derrida's discourse on dissemination, for meaning is created in the absent space of juxtaposed margins rather than in the full presence of center-frame. Scorsese's frequent reliance on quick editing is a further indication of his awareness that, as Brunette

and Wills put it, montage "gives rise to a textual process that undoes the meaning of the individual shots by neutralizing, fragmenting, and making them conflict with one another" (129).

The possible associations generated by the juxtaposition of the image of the mother taking care of the children and that of stick hidden behind Joey's back are indeed many. What interests me here is that the stick that we see is hidden from someone whom we do not see. As we do not see the street-kid who is not seeing the stick, the sequence engenders a sense that *there is something missing from sight*, something, moreover, *which is actively being hidden by somebody*. Joey hides the stick from the kid, Scorsese hides the kid from us. It is a miniature of the theory of "a certain realism" at play here. Conventionally, realism sets out to uncover a meaning which lies hidden behind the surface of appearances. The quintessential realistic gesture is the unmasking of what lies hidden. Scorsese at once believes and modifies this principle: Something is indeed hidden which is important to know (if he had seen the stick, the kid would not have launched into the fight or would have changed his strategy).

What is hidden, however, is not a Kantian *noumenon*; it is something actively kept from sight by somebody, by some body. Insofar as human agency is implicated in the process of hiding, the terrain of realist unmasking is not ontology but ideology. In the above sequence, I take the particular montage effect as an indication that Scorsese's realism is after the violence hidden behind love—and, of course, the love hidden behind violence.

It is important to realize that if Scorsese merely portrayed a violent world, his realism would still be conventional or, to put it in Pasolini's words, "naturalistic." Scorsese's realism, instead, enriches its representation of violence in two ways: self-awareness and self-expression, which are precisely the two elements missing from conventional realism.

While mimetic in its depiction of the neighborhood world, Scorsese's violence is also and above all a genre. *Who's That Knocking At My Door?* makes this point so clearly and effectively that it gives the impression that Scorsese's wishes to rewrite an already existent text, the violent masculinity in and of the movies.

Western films, especially those of Ford and Hawks, were among the cinematic loves of the asthmatic child who spent a great deal of time in the dark of the neighborhood movie-house. By the time he directed his first films, Scorsese knew that his films were not just pointing at an outside world but were, above all,

pieces of cinema, and that his realistic portrayal of the neighborhood and masculinity had to evince awareness of its textuality. He had, in other words, to incorporate the textual self-reflexiveness of modernism into a realistic framework.

In addition to the Brechtian, ballet-like violence of the second sequence, *Who's That Knocking At My Door?* contains several signs of textual self-awareness when J. R. engages the Girl in two discussions about cinema. First they talk about Ford's *The Searchers* and John Wayne, whose picture in the magazine she is reading stimulates their encounter. Then, the second time we see them talking, on a rooftop, J. R. launches into a passionate description of how Lee Marvin displays all the conventional signs of *cinematically represented* evil in Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence*. The function of these scenes is of course partially diegetic: J. R., like most boys, likes what Rebecca West calls "rough and tumble westerns," whereas the Girl barely remembers having seen *The Searchers* and, qua girl, has a different taste in movies. Furthermore, as Michael Bliss points out, the reference to *The Searchers* establishes a parallel between J. R. and Ethan Edwards (John Wayne in *The Searchers*) who "clearly hates the mature Debbie (Natalie Wood) whom he believes as sullied because she has lived (and, the suggestion is made, has had sex with) the Indians who kidnapped her."<sup>9</sup> But the explicit inclusion of westerns acts as a hint at intertextual liaisons that modify Scorsese's text considerably and inscribe his filmography within a hijacked genre—the western turned urban-catholic, the hero vs. outlaw binary opposition collapsing into the portrayal of lonesome borderline figures who are trapped in situations where they face the wreckage of their own epistemological upbringing: the wreckage of binary logic. Western films become the terrain of Western metaphysics. Western metaphysics is a genre. John Wayne as Plato.

When J. R. is unwilling to engage in sexual intercourse, he uses Catholicism as a justification: "You don't fuck girls before marriage."

Next to the Catholic explanation for his refusal to have sex, however, there are other subject positions for a masculinity re(de)flected by the mirror effect—significantly, most of the bedroom scene is doubled by the presence of a mirror. It is the film itself that suggests what they are. We cut from the bedroom to the long and slow-motion, all-male trance'n'dance—another anti-narrative videomusic clip, for the guys practically dance to the pulsating beat of Ray Barretto's "El Watusi."

J. R. and his friends have fun at a homosocial party, with one of the guys pulling out a gun, and everybody laughing, prancing, and pretending to be scared. The joke turns sour, however, when the gun-wielding guy grabs Sally Gaga and threatens to shoot him. One does not know whether to laugh or not. Sally Gaga is devastated by fear but some of his friends are actually having a good time. The sequence climaxes when a shot is fired and a bottle is broken. The gun of course lends itself to the association with the male organ, but, as we shall see, Scorsese's cinema at once uses and deconstructs such a stale equation. No sooner does the gun fire a shot than we cut to still frames from *Rio Bravo* (1959), while gunshots are heard on the soundtrack and the familiar faces of John Wayne, Dean Martin, and Angie Dickinson take viewers to the Western. After the stills from *Rio Bravo* have reinforced the idea of the citational nature of guns and violence, *Who's That Knocking At My Door?* closes the break it had just opened in the narrative and reinserts the quotation in the diegesis: We see J. R. and the Girl leaving a theatre where, it is implied, they have just seen Hawks' classic and are now discussing the character played by Angie Dickinson. "She's nice," says the Girl. "What do you mean nice? she's a broad!"

Girls vs. broads: Once again the West(ern) is the place where male violence takes the form of binary logic. When the Girl asks J. R. what he means by that distinction, he replies that "you do not marry a broad." It seems that J. R. is still trying to explain why he could not have sex with the Girl, which is the other subject positions hidden behind his Catholic justification. Differently put, J. R.'s masculinity depends on the "broad vs. girl" binary distinction, perhaps the only one left in place after the collapse of the hero vs. outlaw one. Catholic masculinity needs this opposition (it should be remembered at this point that in *Mean Streets* Charlie, played by Harvey Keitel, distinguished between "girls" and "cunts"). In the version presented at the Chicago Film Festival, the sequence outside the theatre goes on uninterrupted, with the girl puzzled by J. R.'s binary violence and the film moving on to portray his trip to upstate New York with Joey. This is the place, however, where Scorsese decided to add "the nude scene." He interrupted the conversation between J. R. and the Girl in order to flesh out the concept of broad audio-visually, that is by means of another music video clip. While the soundtrack plays a segment of the Doors' "The End," we see J. R. having sex with different women.<sup>10</sup> This hauntingly beautiful sequence consists of a fast

---

editing of un-sutured (no point-of-view shots linking the images) shots and swirling camera movements around entwined bodies. And it culminates with a naked woman on a bed looking at J. R. who is standing by the window with a deck of card in his hands. In what seems to be the climax of a rock-operatic representation, J. R. bends the deck of cards and lets them go, so that they fly toward the woman who stops looking at him and changes position in the bed, as if hit by J. R. spurt of cards. A conventional reading would take this scene as a proof that J. R. used to have wild sex with broads (and thus he did not have sex with the Girl solely on moral grounds). The fact is, however, that we cannot determine whether the scene was real or just a fantasy: Both readings are legitimate, forcing viewers to take responsibility for their readings and confronting their own interpretive strategies. As in *Eight and a Half* (a film that had a profound influence on Scorsese) *Who's That Knocking At My Door?* shifts from reality to fantasy without giving exact textual clues, and it would make more sense to see this splendid sequence as a product of J. R.'s imagination, a reality which underwrites as well as undermines his masculinity. I think that this "nude scene" merely visualizes J. R.'s fantasies, the fantasy of wild sex with icons of exaggerated femininity which, Fellini *docet*, is inscribed in our (Italian males) imaginary.

The mystification that (as a male) I sensed when J. R. hid himself behind Catholicism has now another explanation that haunts the first, so as to engender two conflicting and yet concurrent and often complementary subject positions: morals and fear, Catholicism and impotence. Next to Catholic guilt is the myth of wild sex and the fear of not attaining the unattainable perfection. Kept from engaging in a real intercourse by his fear of not performing as a mythical stallion, Scorsese's hero often prefers homosocial activities which, at least, allow him to operate within the reassuring boundaries of the binary logic.

Not only does Scorsese use violence and guns to depict the reality of those Italian/American males (reality of the world out there) and hint at the citational status of his films (reality of the text), but he also uses them to give us the means to know him, the director (reality of the author).

To underscore his involvement with the portrayed (ethnic) material, Scorsese employs an array of stylistic and figural devices, the most notable of which are the minor roles that he frequently plays in his films. His presence acts like a signature, with all the attendant effects that signatures have on a text from a

Derridean point of view. Reminding us that "the idea of signature describes the means by which the cohering structures of a text are challenged by its disseminative functions and the rewriting of authorship within that dynamic" (122), Brunette and Wills argue that the type of signature whereby a director plays small roles in his/her films has a "disruptive potential."

In Scorsese's realist films, the disruption is heightened by the fact that he exposes his own involvement with violence. In *Mean Streets*, Scorsese plays the gunman who, at the end of the film, shoots Johnny Boy and Charlie. We see him kissing the gun before shooting, in a gesture that recalls the street kid kissing the cross before the fight. Any simple association gun = penis may of course be employed, here as in *Who's That Knocking At My Door?*, but I would stress Scorsese's display of affection for the gun as an indication of his rewriting a genre *and* a stale association which is inscribed in our critical apparatus probably since the invention of guns. If the kiss to the gun may be seen as a masturbatory practice, it is also a sign of the importance that he attributes to the use of the gun in his films.

In his next film, *Taxi Driver*, guns are virtually deconstructed. Scorsese plays the husband whose wife betrays him with "a nigger," and forces Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro) to watch her silhouette through the curtains of a window, in a scene that mimes the reality of film watching. In one of those moments in which the excess is so obvious and unsubtle as to become sublime—with the sublimity reinforced by the paranoid honesty of self-degradation—Scorsese-as-the-husband-threatened-by-niggers launches into a frantic monologue. Half mocking and half delirious, his voice imitates the staccato delivery of the hysteric. And the silent Travis, in an interplay of eyes looking at the window and in the rear-view mirror, has to sit through this excess of male trouble:

I'm gonna kill her. There's nothing else. What do you think of that? Uh? Don't answer. You don't have to answer everything. (Silence) I'm gonna kill her. I'm gonna kill her with a 44 magnum pistol. A 44 magnum pistol. I'm gonna kill her with that gun. Did you ever see . . . did you ever see what a 44 magnum pistol would do to a woman's face? It would fucking destroy it. It'd blow her right apart. That's what it would do to her face. Now have you ever seen what it would do to a woman's pussy, that you should see. That you should see, what a 44 magnum is going to do to a woman's pussy. That you should see. I know you must think I'm pretty sick or something. You must think I'm pretty sick, right? I bet you think I'm sick. Do you think I'm sick? (Silence) You don't have to answer.



---

I'm paying for the ride you don't have to answer

With this monologue, the text reaches the peak of both extreme identification and distancing. The self-awareness, however, does not efface the sickness but merely writes over it. By putting his signature to the dream of unlimited potency inscribed in the male imaginary, Scorsese at once punctures the fiction and suggests that such imaginary is real: It is a text, with its attendant tropes and patterns of meaning. As a result of this scene, the gun = penis pun—the eternal possibility of masculinity as a W(w)estern text—backfires and comes close to self-erasure. The pun is there and wishes not to be, it is alive but wishes to be killed by an intentional misfiring, its carcass serving as a memento of both what is and should not be, of what is not and should be.

The excess of Scorsese's monologue has the effect to disturb the gun = penis pun, so much so that in the sequence when Travis buys four guns (one of which is, of course, a 44 magnum) the film re-inscribes guns into a wider intertextual chain. The gun salesman (played by Steven Prince, who is the subject of Scorsese's second documentary, *American Boy*) in *Taxi Driver* offers drugs to Travis, thus opening a far more interesting chain of association where guns and violence, the threat lurking behind normality, are associated with addiction. Guns become a signifier that destroys textual illusion, creates personal illusion, an absence looking for what was present, a dream of exteriority. It is the nostalgia for the gun and the West, the binary logic, that makes Travis (as Charlie and J. R.) incapable of dealing with women.

#### KNOCKING ON REALISM'S DOOR

I have argued that *Who's That Knocking At My Door?* stakes out the territory for Scorsese's realism, offering itself as a model which some of his films would follow. It is a realism where the textual trajectory writes a reading of the reality most familiar to him, the ethnic (sub)culture. In order "to capture that certain reality," Scorsese has recourse to disseminative devices. The object of representation—violence and masculinity—is simultaneously enriched and dissolved by the interplay of citational and self-expressive layers. Taken as a whole these choices seem to indicate multiple double gestures: Scorsese is inside narrative but he deconstructs it (documentary effect, use of soundtrack); he is also inside representation but he diffracts it (mirror); finally, he is

inside referentiality but he preempties it by showing its citational, intertextual nature (the multifarious aspects of violence). Guns and, more generally, violence can be conveniently regarded as signifiers of Scorsese's contradictory relationship with the establishment, his being at once within mainstream cinema and outside of it. He uses violence to *épater le bourgeois*, scandalize the average public and atone for his sin of selling out to a system that demands nude scenes (or narrative formulas or famous actors) to distribute his films.

"A certain reality" or "a certain realism": In both cases the word "certain" functions as the obscure signifier of the desire to keep talking about reality. It is as if Scorsese and Pasolini absorbed and internalized the anti-realist critique and were aware that you can no longer say "reality is here, why change it?" *à la* De Sica. Like Derrida, Scorsese knows that no foundation exists to ground realism. Unlike Derrida, though, he does not roam the heights of philosophical speculation; he wants to move the viewer so as to engender "a sense of truth." And even Derrida does that, for in an equally obscure way his words move the reader so as to engender a sense of truth, albeit the-truth-of-a-truth-to-be-deconstructed.

It is worth meeting the works made by "certain realists" on their own ground, instead of trying to prove time and again that their efforts were "naive," that reality does not exist. They know that. But they also insist in using the terms "realism/reality" as practical signals of a certain desire and of a certain textual effect. It is worth, in other words, accepting the impact that the word "certain" has for Scorsese (and Pasolini). With that word they put a distance between "capture" and "reality," showing that it is a matter of distancing, of spacing, of stretching the lips of a wound opened in the texture of a world that no longer tolerates the distinction among imaginary, symbolic, and real—the three of them are real, the reality of a text in the process of being written and rewritten. The word "certain" indicates the space irretrievably opened up by the concept of *différance*, whereby no direct relationship can any longer be envisioned between "capturing" and "reality." In a sense, "certain" is just that, a space added between two terms that will never be joined again. But the word "certain" unites just as much as it separates, implying that these two terms *cannot be united nor separated*.

Insofar as it plays this double role, the word "certain" can be used as a convenient metaphor for the double gesture which is

the uneasy, unstable foundation of the type of realism invoked by Scorsese, a simultaneous participation in and distancing from a discourse which otherwise would be cut loose and spinning in an intertextual vacuum. This double gesture is, in my view, not so distant from the type of double gesture advocated by Derrida:

The radicality of deconstruction thus lies not in its irresponsibility but rather in its very pertinent insistence on interrogating the grounding of its own discourse and that of the institution in general. They [deconstructionists] may continue to assume *within* the university, along with its memory and tradition, the imperative of professional rigor and competence. There is a double gesture here, a double postulation: to ensure professional competence and the most serious tradition of the university even while going as far as possible, theoretically and practically, in the most directly underground thinking about the abyss beneath the university. "Thought" requires both the principle of reason and what is beyond the principle of reason, the *arkhe* and *an-archy*. Between the two, the difference of a breath or an accent, only the enactment of this "thought" can decide. That decision is always risky, it always risks the worst.

1. The most eloquent example of the totalizing argument against realism is perhaps Colin MacCabe's "Realism and the Cinema: Notes on some Brechtian Theses," originally published in *Screen*, vol. 15, n. 2, Summer 1974: 7-17, now reprinted in Colin MacCabe, *Tracking the Signifier* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1985): 33-57. See also John Ellis, *Visible Fictions* (London: Routledge, 1982).

2. Michael Ryan, *Marxism and Deconstruction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP 1982): 117

3. See "GoodFellas," *Film Quarterly*, vol. 44, n. 3, Spring 1991: 43-50. It would have been helpful to sound Scorsese himself on the subject. Although not a theorist, Scorsese certainly has a sense of the debates surrounding the word realism and knows that his cinematic career is somewhat coextensive to the demonization of that term. To the best of my knowledge, no one has pressed him on this topic and I volunteered to do it myself. I have been turned down twice, however, by his agents.

4. Peter Brunette and David Wills, *Screen/play* (Princeton: Princeton UP 1989). All the references to this book appear in the text.

5. I am aware of the problematic nature of such notions as outside/inside. I ask temporary leave, however, from showing constant awareness of the metaphysical underpinnings of the concepts I use.

6. Due perhaps to its rhetorical twist so dear to academic thought, this observation, or, better, allegation has stayed with me since my first readings in film theory and never ceases surprising me for its striking self-evidence and, above all, its usefulness. To the best of my knowledge these are Godard's words, but, unfortunately, I cannot provide readers with the exact reference. If anyone knows it, I would appreciate finding out.

7. Not that reading it like a cohesive story is wrong. For example, Michael Bliss, in *Martin Scorsese and Michael Cimino* (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1985) does a superlative job in analyzing the film's signifying layers, showing that the

film depicts a closed-in, all-male world, in which the idolized mother is in fact a purveyor of death. According to him, *Who's That Knocking At My Door?* unquestionably tells the story of one character. Flashbacks are taken to be memories of something that he lived and cutaway shots always taken as pertinent to his world. The stylistic unevenness, the fractures are not taken to be signs of something perturbing the circulation of information. The music, the melodrama, the framing, the narrative breaches are seen as smart ways employed by Scorsese to tell one story. Again, this is not wrong. It is just not all there is. In a sense J. R./Harvey Keitel is not the protagonist but a visual link in a textual chain. *Who's That Knocking At My Door?* is not a story but an audiovisual collage. And the stylistic unevenness is not the mark of a smart narrative but of a freewheeling video-documentary.

8. Rebecca West, "Scorsese's *Who's That Knocking At My Door?*: Night Thoughts on and Italian Studies in the United States," in *Romance Language Annual* (Purdue U) 1991: 331-38. It is perhaps no accident that Scorsese's film prompted West to write a self-reflexive, autobiographical piece. At its best, "a certain realism" provides viewers not only with a sense of truth regarding the represented world but also with the opportunity to appropriate the text in such a way as to engender self-awareness.

9. Michael Bliss, op. cit., p. 34.

10. Regardless of its diegetic meaning (is J. R. really sleeping around with broads?), this sequence is a self-contained unit which only the presence of Harvey Keitel allows us to refer to *Who's That Knocking At My Door?* In fact it opens up unlimited possibilities. It is no accident that the idea of showing extreme close-ups of someone's face to the sound of the Doors' "The End" was virtually lifted from this film and grafted into the beginning of *Apocalypse Now* by Coppola. One does not have to know the creative vicissitudes of this text to see this scene as both belonging and not belonging to the original. The first time I saw the film I did not know that it had been added onto the film later and yet I perceived it as a separate unity, at once within and without the film, opening up fascinating reverberations of meaning within the diegesis (especially in the light of the lyrics: this is the famous piece where Jim Morrison slurs the word "fuck" in the by now mythical couplet "Father I want to kill you, Mother I want to woahyeeeehhhh").