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1

Evolving Authorship, Developing Contexts: ‘Life Lessons’

This book is a follow-up to The Films of Martin Scorsese, 1963–77: Authorship and Context. Covering all of the Scorsese-directed feature films released between 1978 and 1999, and making supplementary reference to Scorsese’s other work, it centres, like its predecessor, on a series of theoretically attuned textual analyses. Once more, these analyses are articulated in relation not only to Scorsese’s authorship, but to a range of informing contexts – industrial, institutional, generic, historical and/or cultural – that reflect back upon, and differently inflect, both Scorsese’s authorship and, implicitly, the issue and potentiality of film authorship in general. Hence, again, the book’s subtitle: authorship and context.

Near indivisible from the propounding of film authorship, auteurism is a critical practice that seeks to obtain meaning from a group of films through the examination of stylistic and thematic elements that can be related to mainly a single creative figure, usually their director. Reciprocally, for most auteurist approaches not only is a film more likely to be of value if it is controlled by its director, but for a director to be considered an auteur – or author – his or her work has to show a stylistic and, above all, thematic consistency. As a critical practice, moreover, auteurism has exhibited an acceptance and integration of challenges and contradictions seemingly undermining of its validity and, through this, sought to position itself on a firmer theoretical grounding. More especially, there can be charted a movement away from a common Romantic essentialism to an acknowledgement of material factors that would appear to mitigate against the possibility of the ascription of individual authorship within what is, particularly when considering commercial film industries like Hollywood, a
collaborative, labour-intensive, technologically determined, variably regulated, frequently generic and predominantly audience-orientated medium. Witness the now familiarly drawn trajectory of auteurism as it is described as traversing a route from its instigation as a distinct critical practice by *la politique des auteurs* of *Cahiers du cinéma*, via the work associated with *Movie* in the UK, with Andrew Sarris in the USA and the detour that was *auteur*-structuralism, to the apparently safe haven offered, critically and theoretically, by post-structuralism.¹

It is the alignment of auteurism with post-structuralism that provides the conception of film authorship operative within this study. For post-structuralism, films – no less than the individual or the broader social formation – constitute ‘a structured play of forces, relations and discourses’ (Caughie 1981b: 1), each of which are a product of distinct material conjunctures. Instead of a film being considered as the site of a single, discrete meaning, it is postulated as a text formed by multiple structuring elements that cross its body offering different configurations of meaning, none of which comprises a definitive statement. Within this idea of film as text, authorship itself becomes a discourse: an historically determined semiotic subset. Framing authorship as a discourse has a number of critical benefits. Discourse is never neutral or innocent, but invariably seeks ideological effect, to address, influence and position. Authorship regarded as a discourse thus embraces both repeated authorial concerns and how these concerns are represented and weighted, thereby marrying – with apt auteurist consistency – the thematic and the stylistic.² Analysis of authorship as a discourse, as it centres on its textual inscription, also occludes pointless dispute over what is ‘intended’ or ‘unconscious’. Beyond such, there can be proposed a model of film authorship wherein, while the fact of stylistic and thematic links between films associated with many directors is admitted, any film text remains a complex structured by multiple determinants. Indeed, authorship is likely to be multiple rather than single, attributable not just to the director but to the input of other involved personnel. Any of a text’s elements can be separated and analysed in isolation or in combination with any of the others, but each mutually inflects and is inflected by the text’s other elements to afford a specific collocation of meanings and affects. Further, as each film text is the product of particular historical, material circumstances, so too are the contours and emphases, and the placing and efficacy, of its authorial discourses.³

This brings us to context. The preceding volume traced Scorsese’s authorial discourse as it emerged and developed specifically within a heterogeneity of production practices and more broadly in relation to
New Hollywood Cinema: that phase of art cinema-influenced, variously oppositional filmmaking that, arising at a time of acute social, cultural and political contestation and institutional uncertainty, enjoyed an uneven flourishing within and on the fringes of the mainstream from the mid- to late 1960s to the mid- to late 1970s.\textsuperscript{4} It also, consistent with its art cinema antecedents, introduced within Hollywood a self-conscious \textit{auteur} cinema.

Contextualizing Scorsese’s filmmaking since 1977 demands recognition of sundry differences. The decline of New Hollywood Cinema is inseparable from interlocking institutional, cultural, ideological, political and epistemological changes that became increasingly apparent as the 1970s became the 1980s. Institutionally the uncertainty that prompted the financing of such filmmaking was annulled upon the majors’ corporate rationalization; culturally, ideologically and politically contestation, and attendant Left-Liberal social and legislative progress, was derailed by a hegemonic shift to the Right; while epistemologically, as modernity shaded into postmodernity, so formally and ideologically questioning modernism became replaced by formally and ideologically quietistic postmodernism – all of which finds condensation in the space allowed New Hollywood Cinema becoming squeezed by an emphasis on blockbuster-cum-high-concept cinema. In turn, the big-budget box-office flops that – including \textit{New York, New York} (Scorsese, 1977) – sped the death of New Hollywood Cinema look retrospectively like films caught between contrasting institutional imperatives.

Yet having seemingly faced institutional obsolescence by the mid-1980s, Scorsese has subsequently maintained a manifest, if uneasy, accommodation with Hollywood, the terms of which have been institutionally and historically contingent, varying both across and within projects. It has been an accommodation aided by the widespread cultural acceptance of the notion of film authorship and, ironically, his cultivation of a particular star image: that of a ‘personal’, New York filmmaker somewhat at odds with the Hollywood institution.\textsuperscript{5} Although economic considerations remain preponderant for the Hollywood majors, they have never been averse to financing films of less than definite economic potential that might garner aesthetic and critical reputation and prestige within both the industry and the broader culture and, through this, alleviate the still negative perception of much of their product. The widespread embrace of film authorship has also yielded the majors material benefit as a means of selling films. In this ironies multiply. For while Hollywood has marginalized \textit{auteur} cinema, its selling of films via author name has led to a profligate and often nominal attribution
of directorial authorship that, as reflected in variations of the ‘A film by …’ credit, and largely lacking any critical or industrial substantiation, has for Richard Maltby rendered authorship in Hollywood ‘a commercially beneficial fiction’ (2003: 49). Not dissimilarly, Timothy Corrigan has proclaimed the auteur as now dominantly ‘a commercial strategy for organizing audience reception’, that auteurs’ ‘commercial status as auteurs is their chief function as auteurs’ (1991: 103, 105).

Corrigan’s arguments have been influential, and have a generalized pertinence, but they are also concerned less with authorship per se than with authorial star image. Admittedly, authorial star images and authorial discourses are rarely utterly discrete, yet neither are they the same thing, having different loci and purposes. Authorial star images reside variably across the cinematic institution, authorial discourses specifically within film texts: authorial discourses are involved primarily with expression, authorial star images with financial exchange. Accordingly, for Corrigan to note that ‘institutional and commercial agencies define auteurism almost exclusively as publicity and advertisement’ (1991: 106) is to state the obvious, and while an authorial star image can, as it ‘precedes and succeeds’ a film text, usurp ‘the work of that text and its reception’ (102, 106), this depends on how the text is read. Too often Scorsese’s films have been read through his star image, with the emphasis on his being a personal filmmaker being translated into reductive biographical interpretations. Moreover, not only is there commonly a disjunction between Scorsese’s in part self-pronounced star image, and his related comments about his films, and the films as texts, but he has conceded that his stress on the personal can be strategic: ‘I just sometimes talk that way because you try to convince everyone that you’re serious about the work you’re doing’ (Wootton 1987: 92).

This is not to claim that Scorsese’s filmmaking is not personal, or that it lacks biographical reference. But the personal and the biographical are more usefully conceived of in terms of motive rather than point, as factors that inform the films’ frequent intensity of expression and involved willingness to work through the often unsettling and layered connotations of what they represent. The films are, as Scorsese implies, most personal in their attempted or achieved seriousness. Such a perception of Scorsese’s filmmaking stands at odds with Corrigan’s assertion that ‘the commercial conditioning’ of the ‘figure’ of the auteur ‘has successfully evacuated it of most of its expressive power and textual coherence’ (1991: 135), as does the proposition, which underpins this study, that Scorsese’s films can be argued to present the stylistic and thematic consistency that has been regarded historically to be constitutive of the
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That stated, the films that this book focuses upon both demonstrate a stylistic and thematic extension of Scorsese’s previous work and present certain different concerns and emphases that reflect back upon, and re-inflect, those apparent earlier. For instance, stylistically, as Scorsese’s filmmaking maintains a modernist remit, they not infrequently partake of a condensed, expressly filmic and reflexive mode of signification, while thematically, where the issue of cultural determination remains important, there is an increasing engagement with matters of politics and class.

To a degree this bears out the conventional auteurist notion of creative evolution, although it needs to be considered less in regard of linear, individual development than conjuncturally, in relation to – once more – particular material circumstances. Similarly, while the modulations apparent within Scorsese’s authorial discourse have a suggestive reference to Scorsese biographically as a working-class (and latterly working-class identified), Italian-American, film-school educated filmmaker who personally and professionally intersected with 1960s counter- and political protest cultures, such, and other biographical intimations, require to be seen less as a Romantic expression of self than as indicative of a peculiar acculturation: with respect to which, the continued thematic concern with determination has an immanent conceptual resonance. It is, moreover, in terms of the author as acculturated individual that the biographical has been returned to the debate attending film authorship. There has been proposed a politics of identification offered by some authors defined according to sexual orientation, gender and/or race that has been positioned as a corrective to the silencing theoretically of marginal ‘voices’ by the proclamation, following Roland Barthes (1968), of the death of the author at the very historical moment those voices were beginning to speak ‘more loudly’ (Staiger 2003: 29). In turn, the writer can but admit a personal investment in and identification with Scorsese as a male heterosexual filmmaker of a contiguous generation, with similar cultural points of reference and from a working-class background. However, it should also be remembered that the author as constructed through auteurist analysis is, while associated with a biographical source, a critical construct and that this construct is reciprocally informed by its analytical perspective, is shaped, to evoke Jacques Lacan, by the desire of the analyst (1973: 158–60). Whatever its ideological efficacy, this politics of identification is, besides, nothing new, but has been implicit throughout the history of auteurism as a critical practice: compare the early auteurist interest in directors such as Alfred Hitchcock, Howard Hawks, Nicholas Ray and Robert
Aldrich, whose films’ representation of a diversely troubled, stoic and hard-bitten masculinity has a perceptible desirous pertinence for the predominantly young, male and bourgeois critics involved.

Auteurism can better be considered as establishing difference amid the generality of film production. A notion that remains most pronounced in Sarris’s auteurist mapping of American cinema (1968), authorship as difference has broader cultural and ideological reverberations apropos of the institutional acceptance and rejection of auteur cinema that partnered the adoption and abandonment of New Hollywood Cinema. For if the fact of auteur cinema has a nagging consonance with the fracturing of ideological consensus and the institutional shakiness that was its enabling context, then its recuperation coheres with the coincident reassertion of Right-wing dominance and institutional stability. However, Scorsese’s subsequent accommodation with Hollywood and his filmmaking’s latter development inhabit a more complex articulation of the ideological and the institutional. On one hand, as the 1980s became the 1990s there was discernible an ideological movement away from the reactionariness that had ensured the election and marked the presidencies of Ronald Reagan, a shift that obtained concrete political expression in the election as president in 1992 of one William Jefferson Clinton. On the other, during the same period Hollywood’s power increased exponentially, a situation that mutually fuelled and was fuelled by its diversification into areas previously comparatively uncolonized, this whether defined, in accord with broader economic developments, globally or in terms of the cinematic institution. Correspondingly, Hollywood’s rapprochement with Scorsese’s filmmaking has been a function of its refound institutional strength, and not, as during its preceding flirtation with auteur cinema, weakness, the ramifications of which have been manifold.

In discussing Scorsese’s work from 1978 to 1999, from The Last Waltz to Bringing Out the Dead, this book will thus seek not only to elucidate the considered films, and through this to demonstrate the theoretically sustainable relevance of the notion of film authorship, but to reflect upon Hollywood cinema and its historical location from the late 1970s to the start of the new millennium. Like its predecessor it seeks to be about authorship and context. As before, the analyses of the films will be founded upon a combination of formalist, psychoanalytic and ideological approaches.

II

‘Life Lessons’, the Scorsese-directed segment of the episode film New York Stories (Scorsese, Francis Coppola and Woody Allen, 1989), offers
a concentrated (43-minute) exemplification of Scorsese's authorial discourse. As such, it enables the introduction of a number of matters germane to this study. It likewise illustrates the need to consider films as individual – and individually, materially determined – texts, and not just chapters in an oeuvre, a factor that has further shaped this book's conception.

The episode film has a quite extensive cinematic history. It has recurred periodically within Hollywood, as witness, say, *O. Henry's Full House* (Henry Hathaway, Henry King, Howard Hawks, Henry Koster and Jean Negulesco, 1952) or *Twilight Zone: The Movie* (John Landis, Steven Spielberg, Joe Dante and George Miller, 1983), as well as within post-Second World War European mainstream and art cinema. Moreover, while within episode films single segments, whatever the films' provenance, are commonly linked through theme, situation and/or source, art cinema examples mitigate and compound that cinema's textual and commercial emphasis on the auteur by presenting projects frequently predicated upon film movements or in terms of co-production. Thus the nouvelle vague-related *Paris vu par .../Six in Paris* (Jean Douchet, Jean Rouch, Jean-Daniel Pollet, Eric Rohmer, Jean-Luc Godard and Claude Chabrol, 1965), or the French-Italian *Histoires extraordinaires/Spirits of the Dead* (Roger Vadim, Louis Malle and Federico Fellini, 1968). Such collocations of talent contrastingly bespeak economic concerns often unacknowledged by the art cinema institution; correspondingly, the usual involvement of auteurs and/or name directors is both disavowed and proclaimed.

*New York Stories* originated with Allen, who first thought of making a film comprising three sections written and directed by himself. On the suggestion of producer Robert Greenhut, consideration was given to combining one section directed by Allen with others directed by Fellini and Ingmar Bergman. This maintained the association of episode films with art cinema, but was a threesome discounted as uneconomic within an American context because of language problems. American collaborators were sought. Late in 1986 Allen contacted Scorsese and Spielberg, who because of other filmmaking commitments was replaced by Coppola. So reconstituted, the project invokes Hollywood's commercial endorsement of authorship, this while it follows its art cinema antecedents in mitigating while compounding its authorial reference.

Few restrictions were placed on the filmmakers apart from setting their segment in New York. Such freedom recalls Allen's inimitable relationship with first United Artists and then Orion: as long as Allen's films were produced for a comparatively low but never specified figure, he
was granted virtual creative autonomy. Orion nevertheless passed on the opportunity to finance and distribute *New York Stories*. While in hindsight this possibly reflected financial problems at Orion, which went bust in 1992, it also attests to the at best variable performance of episode films at the American box office. In early 1987 Scorsese mentioned the project to Jeffrey Katzenberg, then Chairman of Walt Disney Pictures. Touchstone Pictures, Disney's adult film subsidiary, had financed *The Color of Money* (Scorsese, 1986), and ‘had been negotiating’ with Allen ‘to work for them’ (Christie and Thompson 2003: 147). Quickly, *New York Stories* became a Touchstone film. Both Touchstone's negotiations with Allen – whose films, correlative to their unexceptional budgets, had returned to Orion steady but unexceptional profits – and their financing of the triply authored *New York Stories* would appear to have been impelled less economically than by a need to enhance the company's institutional and critical prestige. Although from its formation in 1984 Touchstone had enjoyed economic success, culminating in it being the top-grossing Hollywood operation in 1988, this was based mainly on the production of formulaic, commercial, but low-status star-centred comedies – consider *Ruthless People* (Jim Abrahams, David Zucker and Jerry Zucker, 1986), or *3 Men and a Baby* (Leonard Nimoy, 1987).

Perhaps vindicating Orion's rejection of *New York Stories*, the film, which cost $15 million, took only $10.7 million at the American box office. However, as a film sold on its tripe authorship, it presents for auteurist analysis a compound object. ‘Life Lessons’ offers a number of informing authorial frames of reference. The segment is in part an adaptation of Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel *The Gambler*. Having wanted to shoot an adaptation from the late 1960s, Scorsese in 1973 got Paul Schrader to write a script outline, but its development was subsumed by Schrader's scripting of *Obsession* (Brian De Palma, 1976) and Scorsese's making of the Schrader-scripted *Taxi Driver* (1976), a film that Scorsese has compared to Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* (Christie and Thompson 2003: 62). Two film versions of *The Gambler* predate ‘Life Lessons’: *The Great Sinner* (Robert Siodmak, 1949) and *The Gambler* (Karel Reisz, 1974). Both are composite Dostoevsky adaptations. *The Great Sinner* combines elements of the novel with others from Dostoevsky's biography and his *Crime and Punishment*. *The Gambler* appropriates the motif of compulsive gambling that can be referred mutually to the novel and to Dostoevsky’s biography and, via *Notes from the Underground*, adduces Dostoevsky’s conception of will as constituents of a paean to existential masculine self-assertion reflective of the larger output of scriptwriter (and subsequently scriptwriter and director)
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James Toback. As ‘Life Lessons’ is similarly inflected by Scorsese’s authorial discourse, so like its filmic predecessors it is a composite adaptation, combining elements of the novel *The Gambler*, of the diary of Dostoevsky’s one-time lover, and model for the novel’s central female character, Polina Aleksandrovna, Polina Suslova, and of Suslova’s short story ‘The Stranger and Her Lover’, although this replicates portions of her diary. Further, the repeated integration of elements pertaining to Dostoevsky’s biography into film versions of *The Gambler* arguably relates to the novel being itself regarded as autobiographical.

The script for ‘Life Lessons’ was written by novelist-turned-scriptwriter Richard Price, who had previously scripted for Scorsese *The Color of Money* and the Michael Jackson extended pop video ‘Bad’ (1987). Price was central to the male protagonist of ‘Life Lessons’ becoming – in contrast to the impecunious tutor of *The Gambler*, Aleksei Ivanovich, or, as Scorsese intended, a writer – a successful Abstract Expressionist painter, Lionel Dobie (Nick Nolte), who lives and works in New York’s SoHo. The female protagonist becomes not, like the fictional Polina, the stepdaughter of the male protagonist’s employer, but, implying Suslova, who was an aspiring writer, one of what is implied to be a line of assistants-cum-lovers, Paulette (Rosanna Arquette), for whom Dobie provides room, board, a salary and ‘life lessons that are priceless’. The narrative of ‘Life Lessons’ opens with Dobie having a show opening in three weeks, but being unable to paint. Collecting Paulette at an airport terminal, Dobie is told by her that she has been away with a lover, performance artist Gregory Stark (Steve Buscemi), and that although the affair is over she intends to leave Dobie and to return home. Dobie persuades Paulette to stay with him on a non-sexual basis and begins to paint, albeit tormented by his continuing desire for Paulette. He also strives to discredit Stark, to whom Paulette is still attracted. Paulette finally leaves Dobie, and the segment ends with him procuring her replacement at the opening of his show.

‘Life Lessons’ reflects its literary sources in its reciprocal representation of possessive, self-prostrating masculine desire and variously teasing and dismissive feminine detachment. There are also more specific parallels. The incident in which Paulette induces Dobie to attempt to kiss a cop (Paul Herman) in a police car ‘on the mouth’ in order to prove his love for her replays that in *The Gambler* in which Polina asks Aleksei similarly to insult a baroness. Dobie’s repeated returning to Paulette’s bedroom and his sudden shutting of its window derive from Suslova’s diary, while Paulette’s residual desire for and vindictiveness towards a now disregarding lover, Dobie’s suggestion that his and Paulette’s
relationship continue platonically and Dobie’s fixated admission that he had ‘this impulse’ to kiss Paulette’s foot can be traced both to the diary and to ‘The Stranger and Her Lover’.10

‘Life Lessons’ was shot by Nestor Almendros. Receiving his first feature credit for *Paris vu par ...*,11 Almendros accordingly achieved note working with filmmakers who had emerged via the *nouvelle vague*, although by 1989 he was a well-established Hollywood practitioner. He had previously worked with Scorsese on a 30-second Armani commercial in 1986. Stylistically, Almendros’s input to ‘Life Lessons’ is most apparent in his ‘trademark’ use of available-light cinematography (Heuring and Lee 1989: 60): note especially the scenes shot within Dobie’s spacious, much-windowed loft. While this chimes with the documentary imperative that informs Scorsese’s authorial discourse, such is in ‘Life Lessons’ characteristically situated within a *nouvelle vague*-derivative correlation of realism and stylization, which in Scorsese’s filmmaking finds particularized elaboration in a recurrent collapsing of the stylized with the implication of a reflected diegetic subjectivity that effects an expressionist externalizing of the interiority of characters and situations.12

III

In ‘Life Lessons’ the *nouvelle vague* indebtedness of Scorsese’s filmmaking is immediately suggested by the segment first presenting what is largely a series of iris shots: iris-ins on close-ups of a palette of paint, pots of brushes and a mass of squeezed paint tubes; iris-ins on close-up panning shots of legs and Dobie’s head as he paces; an iris-in on a close-up of a glass containing and a half-empty bottle of brandy; and an iris shot of Dobie that opens out to reveal his loft. The *nouvelle vague* resuscitation of the iris, and other outmoded devices, worked reflexively to foreground film syntax, being reflective of the movement’s emphasis on film as a particular material practice, its modernist concern with the implication of form in the creation of meaning and, concomitantly, the formal contingency of that meaning. The opening of ‘Life Lessons’ carries similar connotations, being consistent with the like emphasis and concern that is implicit throughout Scorsese’s filmmaking. Moreover, much of his work, in its formal and stylistic intensiveness, makes meaning, and demands to be read, explicitly through the ‘language’ of film.

Conspicuous in its anachronism, the iris within ‘Life Lessons’ functions as a point of thematic condensation. Throughout the segment artistic creativity is related – with due and, again, authorially characteristic psychoanalytic suggestiveness – to repressed and displaced
sexuality (Freud 1908). As much is implicit to the structuring of a deal of its incident. On returning from the airport with Paulette, and having learnt of her affair and intention to leave, Dobie stands before a canvas marked with preparatory outlinings. The scene in Paulette’s bedroom in which he persuades her to stay, and swears she no longer has to sleep with him, cuts to a close-up of Dobie inserting a tape into a cassette deck, at which Procol Harum’s ‘A Whiter Shade of Pale’ provides accompaniment as he again stands before the canvas and then, in a tacit sexual displacement, shoots a basketball into a hoop and throws it against a wall. The scene in Paulette’s bedroom in which Dobie shuts its window, and during which Paulette lies on her bed talking on the phone wearing little more than an oversized tee-shirt, cuts to a scene of him painting to the accompaniment of Cream’s ‘Politician’. The scene in which Dobie enters Paulette’s bedroom as she sleeps, during which he speaks of his impulse to kiss her foot and Paulette declares ‘I don’t love you’, cuts to him painting to the accompaniment of Ray Charles’s ‘The Right Time’, while that in which Dobie and Paulette argue over his refusal to confirm or deny her talent proceeds to represent him painting to the accompaniment of Bob Dylan and The Band’s 1974 live version of ‘Like a Rolling Stone’. On Paulette leaving a party with young artist Reuben Toro (Jesse Borrego), and Dobie being shown listening to sounds coming from and seeing silhouetted and glimpsed bodies on and through the curtains of the inside, window-like openings of her bedroom that overlook his studio space, Dobie is represented painting to the accompaniment of Procol Harum’s ‘Conquistador’. The next morning, having poured Toro some coffee, he paints, to Toro’s discomfiture, to the accompaniment of the aria ‘Nessun Dorma’ from Giacomo Puccini’s opera Turandot. Last, having argued conclusively with Paulette, he is once more shown painting to the accompaniment of ‘Like a Rolling Stone’, his efforts increasing in ardour upon her speaking to him as she leaves.

Other elements and incidents offer complementary connotations. A repeated presence behind Dobie in shots of his studio space is one of the inside openings of Paulette’s bedroom: an at times red-lit, at times curtained ‘vaginal’ space broken through the wall that he looks up to longingly and into which he ‘accidentally’ shoots his basketball. (It is swiftly returned.) When Dobie paints to the accompaniment of ‘Politician’ he refers to an open publication showing a photograph of a nude whose framing implies that of Paulette as she lay on her bed as though as a model for his abstract compositions. At the party Dobie tells a tale about his first art sale being some sexual drawings. When, subsequent to his having been shown painting to the accompaniment of ‘Conquistador’,
Dobie is represented standing beneath the noted opening, the shot cuts to a close-up track along the painting he has been working on. Reciprocally, in the previous shot a paint-spattered Dobie is represented frontally looking up and moving towards the opening with a rapt concentration previously reserved for his contemplation of his canvas.

Before Dobie shuts the window of Paulette's bedroom he looks down and we are given, first, an irised close-up, from Dobie's point of view, of Paulette's foot, ankle and, with additional sexual implication, ankle bracelet, then, on the iris opening out, and heightening effect, a dissolve to a tighter close-up of the same. In the scene in which Dobie enters Paulette's bedroom as she sleeps, he again looks down, and we are again given an irised point-of-view close-up of Paulette's foot, ankle and bracelet; Dobie declares his impulse to kiss her foot, and in another irised point-of-view close-up she removes her foot from the iris and under her bedclothes as the iris swiftly moves out. The pairing of shots from Dobie's point of view, of Dobie's look, with erotically fragmenting female representation invites interpretation with respect to the argument concerning subordinating, sexualized objectification propounded by Laura Mulvey in her much-cited article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. However, that Dobie concordantly fetishizes Paulette's foot also takes us – via, should one wish, Mulvey's article (1975: 13–14) – to the writing of Sigmund Freud, for whom fetishism is a means of enabling male heterosexual potency through its disavowal of the threat of castration the female body figures. On specific fetishes Freud also writes that 'pieces of underclothing' are 'so often chosen' as they 'crystallize the moment of undressing, the last moment in which the woman could still be regarded as phallic' (1927a: 354–5). Regarding this, noteworthy are two further close-ups, from Dobie's point of view, in the scene in which he persuades Paulette to stay: one that shows her folding a pair of white panties, the other that shows her placing them in her luggage. The panties are, moreover, similar to those she is shown wearing in a later scene in the loft's kitchen area, during which, dressed otherwise just in socks and an open robe, she suggestively dunks a teabag.

In all this there is some knowing play; Scorsese has acknowledged that in transposing Dostoevsky's fascination with Suslova's foot 'we had some marvellous fun' (Christie and Thompson 2003: 147). However, the adduction of fetishism not only is consistent with but adds an enhancing distinctiveness to the segment's perhaps over-familiar relation of art and sexuality. Both impact critically upon Dobie's need for Paulette to stay: if not rendering his repeated assertions of love for her
dissimulative, then they place his motivations as tangled and in part protectively self-deluding.

The iris in turn serves formally to underline the linking of art and sexuality, fetishism and creativity. Although the opening shots establish narrative concern, character and location, they are also redolent of impotence, of symbolic castration, of lack: the shots of the palette, the brushes and the paint tubes are still lives; Dobie’s legs, which, in terms of Freudian dream symbolism (Freud 1917: 189), are potential phallic symbols, pace uselessly; while alcohol has a familiar cultural standing as a compensatory sexual substitute. The next iris shots – an iris-in on Paulette, once again from Dobie’s point of view, as she arrives at the airport terminal, and those of her foot and ankle – in turn carry mutual sexual and fetishistic connotations, which are referred formally through the iris, and beyond immediate narrative implications, with art, creativity and the preceding intimations of impotence. As much extends to the penultimate iris shot in ‘Life Lessons’: an iris-out held on Paulette as she sits before the painting that she has been working on. Moreover, while for Freud fetishism is a peculiar and ‘rare’ perversion (1927a: 354), for Lacan it is indivisible from heterosexual relations, within which the woman is situated as enabling the man to disavow his symbolic castration by standing in for the phallus (1958: 289–90).

IV

Apart from its specific textual resonances, the relation of Dobie’s singular trouble to broader psychosexual structuration is of a piece with the representation and interrogation of tensions within determined heterosexual masculinity that is a major component of Scorsese’s authorial discourse. A concern with art and the creative process can as well be traced to his first student short film What’s a Nice Girl Like You Doing in a Place Like This? (1963). Like New York, New York, moreover, ‘Life Lessons’ represents a creative couple, and presents twinned stars, but privileges the perspective of the male protagonist. On one hand, with Scorsese having asked Price to write ‘Life Lessons’ from Dobie’s point of view (Kelly 1992: 252), the narrative revolves around Dobie’s problems and actions. On the other, as ‘Life Lessons’ in its stylization works expressionistically to transmit reflected diegetic subjectivity, so the diegetic subjectivity transmitted is Dobie’s.

However, in ‘Life Lessons’ the conveyance of Dobie’s reflected subjectivity is also joined, in a correlation of first- and third-person approaches, with a more detached perception necessary to the segment’s status as,
in effect, a comedy of manners. In this, it suggests a filmic equivalent to what Ronald S. Librach terms the ‘comic modulations’ of the first-person narration of *The Gambler* (1996: 30), wherein Aleksei’s grandiloquent elaborations and equivocations inscribe an ironic, tacitly critical apprehension of character and incident. As a character, Dobie inclines toward a clichéd representation of an Abstract Expressionist painter. Given his drinking, unrestraint, violence and dislike of and disregard for social niceties, the model would appear to be Jackson Pollock – or at least the Pollock of popular imagination. Similarly, much of what Dobie does and says implies – and invites – sardonic critique. Apart from the implication of his pathetic and even self-abasing need and desire for Paulette, witness, say, his lie to his dealer, Phillip (Patrick O’Neal), about Paulette wanting him to pick her up at the airport; his near-farical returning to her bedroom, on the flimsiest of pretexts; his mutual jealousy of Toro and possessiveness towards Paulette; his engineering of Paulette’s being humiliatingly ignored by Stark following Stark’s performance at the Blind Alley; or his physical assault on Stark, in ‘defence’ of Paulette, at a bar, at which shots of Phillip holding his hand to his face suggest such is all too familiar.

Complementing this suggestion of familiarity is the implication that at some level of consciousness Dobie is using his sexual frustration to fuel his art. In the opening scene, Phillip complains Dobie has gone through the same thing ‘every show’ for the past ‘20 years’, while when Paulette says she does not love him, he replies: ‘So what?’ During their final argument, Dobie virtually admits instrumentality – ‘I indulge in love, I indulge in making my stuff, and they feed off each other’ – before adding, unconvincingly, ‘this is selfish’ and asking Paulette, with transparent insincerity and increasing exasperation, whether he should ‘stop painting’ and ‘just be a nice person for you’. However, when Paulette leaves he launches into a self-defence in equal parts robust and pathetic: ‘You think I just use people … You don’t know how involved I get, or how far down I go …’ Indeed, as ‘Life Lessons’ both offers a detached apprehension of and expressionistically compels complicity with Dobie, so the character is both critiqued and vindicated. When, after Paulette leaves, and he furiously paints while muttering about ‘Chippies’ who ‘chip away at your painting’, he suddenly puts a paint-covered hand to his mouth and says ‘Oh God’, the moment carries multiple connotations: guilt, agonized self-realization, but also, given the segment’s intimations of fetishism, fearful desperation.

Dobie, moreover, is granted the voicing of an artistic credo. When Paulette demands he tell her whether she has any talent, and adds that sometimes she feels she should ‘just quit’, he asserts: ‘you make
art because you have to, because you’ve got no choice. It’s not about talent. It’s about no choice but to do it. ... You give it up you weren’t a real artist to begin with.’ In like vein, when Paulette says she will work rather than go to Stark’s performance, Dobie snaps: ‘Don’t use work as an excuse. Your work’s sacred.’ Implicitly, art is that which Dobie will not compromise. When during their final argument Paulette demands ‘Am I good?’, he cannot dissemble, even in his own interests, and, having in their earlier exchange responded to the same query with ‘you’re 22’, says noncommittally: ‘You’re young yet.’

Further, Dobie’s art, and, by extension, his artistic credo, obtain stylistic endorsement, with particular scenes of him contemplating then painting his canvas providing an implication of mutual and compulsive personal and artistic investment. Thus the jump-cut close-ups of Dobie’s head and face then track back to a tableful of paints and brushes when he first stands before the canvas; the dolly towards and around Dobie after he persuades Paulette to stay; the repeated, parallel, closer tracks across loft, painting and table then jump-cut montage of close-ups as he paints to ‘Politician’; the long-held front-on medium shot of Dobie as he paints fervently to ‘The Right Time’; the intensive combination of close-ups, tracking, jump-cuts and tilting, along with cutaways to Paulette, as he paints to ‘Like a Rolling Stone’; and the triple superimposition of the shirtless Dobie as he paints to ‘Conquistador’. Heightening the scenes’ effect is, in most cases, the foregrounded but integrated use of music that is another distinguishing element of Scorsese’s filmmaking. The haunting ‘A Whiter Shade of Pale’ as the camera dollies, the sneering energy of ‘Like a Rolling Stone’ and the string-driven *accelerando* of ‘Conquistador’ are all potently empathetic, and although ‘Politician’ and ‘The Right Time’ function anempathetically, typically the ‘juxtaposition of scene with indifferent music has the effect not of freezing emotion but rather of intensifying it’ (Chion 1990: 8). There are in addition specific correlations of lyrics with situation and image. The lyrical concern of ‘Conquistador’ with disdain become sexual jealousy has a clear pertinence to the Dobie–Paulette–Toro situation. In terms of ‘Like a Rolling Stone’, the correspondence of the song’s refrain with track-ins to the painting to close-ups of faces, a skeletal animal and a knife in a heart borders, in its literalness, on the pretentious and/or ludicrous, yet is salvaged by the mutually enhancing intensity of the song and the montage of which it is a part. This, moreover, not only returns us to the segment’s dual perspective regarding Dobie, but suggests its ultimate weighting. Likewise the later shot of Dobie standing, still shirtless, beneath the opening of Paulette’s room, which is accompanied by
'Nessun Dorma', during which the bathetic disjunction of music and image is mitigated by the entire sequence’s associational linking of the sexual and the creative.

As the scenes validate Dobie’s art, and Dobie as an artist, so they reflexively validate Scorsese’s filmmaking, and Scorsese as a filmmaker. Further, ‘Life Lessons’ doubles the biographical intimations of its source material by suggesting parallels between Dobie and Scorsese. The use of 1960s and 1970s rock and pop and Italian opera, which the repeated shots of Dobie’s tape deck assign as ‘his’ music, reflects like music employed across Scorsese’s work, but especially in the admittedly biographical *Mean Streets* (Scorsese, 1973). When making ‘Life Lessons’ Scorsese was in his fourth marriage, to producer Barbara De Fina, which was at the time rumoured to be in difficulty (Keyser 1992: 188); Dobie states that he has been married ‘four times’. Dobie’s artistic credo, in turn, fits with Scorsese’s star image, as does his stating that New York is ‘the only city’.

Such biographical parallels have undoubted resonance: that is, if they are picked up on. They thus remain supplementary and not essential to the thematic ramifications of the segment’s concerns with art and sex. Nevertheless, as ‘Life Lessons’ impelled Scorsese to ‘examine something in myself’ (Kelly 1992: 247), so his personal engagement can be seen as being implicated in its combination of complicity and critique, and in their weighting – this as the critical and comically pathetic components of Dobie’s representation suggest unflinching self-censure. Similar personal implication is suggested by the segment’s treatment of celebrity, which partakes of a mordant ambivalence. Dobie would appear to be largely disregarding of and uncomfortable with celebrity and its trappings. Consider his initial, uneasy exchange with Phillip, his mainly dishevelled appearance, his spartan, work-dominated living conditions, or his declared hatred of parties. His telling of the party-giver’s reduction of Pollock’s influence to increased real-estate opportunities implies a related critique of commercialization. However, not only does a groomed and formally attired Dobie successfully work the party, but the character is patently untroubled by money worries. Again, much of this might be related to Scorsese personally and biographically. But again the personal and the biographical are better regarded as generative rather than conclusive, as – precisely – motive rather than point.

V

In their concern with heterosexual masculinity, Scorsese’s films have been seen to marginalize their female protagonists, or to be simply
misogynistic. Regarding this, while in ‘Life Lessons’ the representation of Paulette and her relationship to Dobie follows the contours of its literary antecedents, it presents in terms of sexual politics debatably a limit-case within the films this book discusses, albeit one that offers instructive complications and uncertainties.

Narratively secondary, Paulette is also a character whose representation is unsympathetic. With respect to the segment’s sources, she implies less the idealized Polina of The Gambler than the more limited, self-regarding and vengefully vindictive figure revealed by Suslova’s diary and ‘The Stranger and Her Lover’. In her exchanges with Dobie from his meeting her at the airport on, Paulette is often adolescently shrill, impatient and/or spiteful. True, the character is meant to be young, and Dobie is not undeserving of her animus. Her claim during their conclusive argument ‘Sometimes I feel like a human sacrifice’ is, given Dobie’s use of her, understandable, and while her getting Dobie to attempt to kiss the cop is referable specifically to her humiliation at the Blind Alley, it is recompense for his masculine heterosexual posturing and overbearingness throughout. However, not only is Paulette’s urging on of Dobie supercilious, but when, having been halted in his task by the cop’s nightstick, Dobie blows him a kiss, he turns around to find Paulette has left the scene. This adds to his ignominy, but renders Dobie pitiful and her unfeeling.

Paulette is 22, Dobie is 50-something; he has an established artistic reputation, she does not. Not only does the relationship carry father–daughter overtones, but the combination of its sexualization and the fact that Paulette is Dobie’s employee, and he pays for her services, insinuates prostitution. Further, the incident in which Dobie holds a struggling Paulette in the street outside the Blind Alley and speaks dubious endearments recalls the scene in Taxi Driver in which the pimp Sport (Harvey Keitel) closely holds and speaks blandishments to the teenage prostitute Iris (Jodie Foster): in each case the male character is attempting to ensure the female character stays with him. Yet while this reflects negatively upon Dobie, the implication of Paulette’s prostitution is complemented by the suggestion she uses her sexuality to manipulate and taunt him; hence, for example, her returning of Dobie’s look as she leaves the party with Toro.

Matters attain a darker tinge during the scene in the kitchen area. Occurring after, and informed by the connotations generated by, the scene in which Dobie tries to kiss the cop, it opens with a tilt up, from Dobie’s point of view, of the rear of Paulette’s barely clad figure as she makes her cup of tea and him saying, insinuatingly: ‘Is that for me?’
Paulette turns and, faced by her as she dunks her teabag, Dobie asks rhetorically, ‘What’s to stop me from losing control, from just taking you?’, then states matter-of-factly that he could do ‘anything’ because he is ‘nothing’ to her: ‘I could rape you. I could kill you. I could kill myself.’

Although Dobie’s words are defused somewhat by their unemphatic delivery and Paulette’s jokey, yet still teasing, responses, they remain said and, uneasily, hanging. How they are meant to be read is, however, unclear. More definitely critical of Dobie is the choice of the song ‘Politician’, and especially the use of its opening verse, whose lyrics place its eponymous protagonist as a kerb-crawler, or the threateningly shadowed shot as Dobie enters Paulette’s room as she sleeps. The father-daughter implications of Dobie’s relationship with Paulette as well lend a perverse note. Nevertheless, if the undecided implications of Dobie’s relations with Paulette complicate the segment’s reciprocal affirmation and critique of Dobie, then, in that Paulette’s manipulation and taunting is both situated and set as open to question, a similar double and complicating perspective shapes her representation. Correspondingly, her appearance and responses in the scene in the kitchen area might be regarded, with respect to Dobie, while accepting several ideological reservations, as implicitly exculpating. Yet as ‘Life Lessons’ thus ambiguously enters areas that are unsettling, approach the culturally unacceptable and are hardly politically correct, so it functions suggestively in relation to much of Scorsese’s filmmaking as a whole. That noted, the particular emphases of the representation of gender in ‘Life Lessons’ need also to be considered in terms of Scorsese’s collaboration with Price.

VI

Whatever the quality of Paulette’s work, it fits with her subordinate representation that she is never shown painting. In addition, not only does her demanding whether she is any ‘good’ or has any ‘talent’ throw Dobie’s artistic credo into relief, but the cutaways of her as Dobie paints to ‘Like a Rolling Stone’ – a series of track-ins and cuts to mainly closer shots that show her enraptured by his art – function further to ratify that art.

The cutaways besides contrast with the shots of a stony-faced Dobie as he watches Stark’s performance at the Blind Alley. In part attributable to his sexual jealousy, Dobie’s reaction, and its contrast to that of Paulette as she watches Dobie paint, also suggests aesthetic-cum-epistemological evaluation. Stark’s act – in its superficial, affectless
recounting of the quotidian, and its reciprocal collapsing of aesthetic distance – instantiates the postmodernism to which performance art is frequently referred. In this, it not only differs from Dobie's Abstract Expressionism that, betokening the relative autonomy of the aesthetic, reflects abstractly upon the real, externalizes the interior, articulates depth not surface, but, in this difference, is placed implicitly as wanting. Analogous aesthetic evaluation is tacit to Dobie the morning after the party asking Toro whether, evoking another postmodernist phenomenon, he is a ‘graffiti artist’. Moreover, on Toro weakly responding ‘Well, I wouldn’t say that’, he is jolted by the sudden, loud sound of ‘Nessun Dorma’; the subsequent shot of Dobie painting concludes with him standing, smiling, as though he has bested Toro through his art. That Dobie's aesthetic judgement is unanswerably asserted within ‘Life Lessons’ invites another link with New York, New York, wherein the musical opinion of the male protagonist, Jimmy Doyle (Robert De Niro), is similarly favoured. In turn, the privileging of modernism over postmodernism within ‘Life Lessons’ operates reflexively in relation to Scorsese’s filmmaking, implicitly upholds his own modernist practice before the depredations of postmodernism, whether within Hollywood or without.

The privileging of modernism over postmodernism is complemented in terms of character representation. That of Toro bears out Dobie's claim at the party that Toro is there ‘to score and split’, while that of Stark similarly substantiates his contention that Stark is a ‘self-absorbed, no-talent son of a bitch’. Apart from the implicit criticism of his work, which continues when Paulette and her friend (Illeana Douglas) gibe at the bar about him receiving an ‘arts grant’, at the Blind Alley Stark ignores Paulette upon being approached by singer and composer Peter Gabriel, then at the bar he has forgotten that she was even at the venue. Further, whereas Stark's performance speaks of incidental masculine violence, of fighting and possibly killing a man who stands on his foot and smacking another, Dobie at the bar, with further aesthetic and epistemological resonance, and whatever his actions' other connotations, realizes it.

The final scene of ‘Life Lessons’ completes the affirmation of Dobie's art by representing the successful opening of his show. It also presents summary implication of the segment's concerns. That the montage of Dobie having his photograph taken with various personages should include shots of him with Scorsese and British film director Michael Powell, whose work Scorsese has acknowledged as an influence, and who was Scorsese's friend and adviser, maintains the segment’s reflexive
and biographical connotations, while the words of an admirer, played by Price, ‘I look at your stuff, I just want to divorce my wife’, continues the implied relation of art to repressed and displaced sexuality. Compounding this, on Dobie getting a glass of wine, and a panning shot, from his point of view, of the canvas we have seen him paint, there ensues an exchange before the canvas between Dobie and the young woman who has served him (Brigitte Bako) that proceeds to a fragmenting, fetishizing montage of shots – close-ups from Dobie’s point of view of her lips, hand, eyes, neck and ear, succeeded by a point-of-view tilt down her body – and his offering her a job as Paulette’s replacement. The consequent implication of a cycle recurring is underscored formally. Answering the section’s beginning, ‘A Whiter Shade of Pale’ is once more introduced on the soundtrack and, upon a high-angle panning long shot of the show halting, an iris-out fittingly highlights Dobie and the young woman in centre frame, which is held while the crowd is dissolved out before it completes its movement to black. While this formal mirroring of the beginning lends ‘Life Lessons’ an epigrammatic quality apposite to a short narrative, the implication of cyclicity is a repeated constituent of Scorsese’s films’ endings. In part through this, the endings of Scorsese’s films tend mutually to purvey an efficient narrative rounding off and to deny entirely comforting, much less positivistic, closure – to be, as Lesley Stern puts it, ‘indefinite’ (1995: 5).

But not everything in ‘Life Lessons’ is tidied up. When Dobie refers to the photograph of the nude as he paints, also visible in shots of the photograph is another open publication showing photographs captioned ‘1968 Democratic Convention’: namely, a site of 1960s counter-cultural and counter-ideological, and especially anti-Vietnam War, protest. In turn, when walking to the party he says to Paulette that he has not ‘had a knock-around friend since 1968’, then at the party makes an offhand reference to Vietnam. Lacking narrative or thematic development or integration, these few visual and verbal elements, as they evoke a past period of radical political contestation, nevertheless intimate another repressed source of Dobie’s artistic creativity. As such, they similarly have an indicative, and yet again reflexive, resonance for the period of Scorsese’s filmmaking addressed by this study.
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