

A Personal Journey as Individual-As-Curator: Martin Scorsese and the critique of 21st Century Cinema

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A curator understands the work that lies in front of them, through rigorous hours gleaning and combing through works in order for a project or exhibition to be fully formed. A curator, like an artist, understands whether or not the message within the construction of an exhibit allows for history and the self to become fused together in order to bring together sold-out crowds. As museums and movie theaters have shuttered, the curator has had to rely on the source materials being within their own homes and workspace. This creates a new approach to the world of curation: dependent on the individual to take ownership of what they are screening and what comes across their minds. The individual's outlook towards cinema should be utilizing all spaces where the filmmaking thrives and comb through the vast libraries available to them. Can the individual rely on themselves to curate a home screening or does the individual need to rely on spaces with numerous screenings, like a movie theatre, to help them navigate? How does an individual-as-curator delve into cinema's past? Can a cinema's past create works that navigate the individual to become a stronger curator? The curator in spaces like movie theaters and museums listens to the patrons of these spaces and has to reconfigure many things, such as: the screening schedule, the type of film that the public wants to see and what type of cinema will the public pay for. A key point in this discussion is the use of the word 'content'.

Presented as a negative (from the mind of master creator Martin Scorsese), content is now made at an incredibly fast rate. In the Harper's article entitled *Il Maestro: Federico Fellini and the lost magic of cinema*, Martin Scorsese writes that "the art of cinema is being ... reduced to its lowest common denominator, 'content' ". He goes on to say that content has left the designated movie theatre space and now has reached a new level, the home viewing. Curation in the home-viewing setting with the use of a streaming platform is helpful to someone who is not interested in purchasing physical media, yet this isn't the audience Martin is talking to. He is speaking universally to everyone, and he understands that his essay is based on a method of helping vs hurting. How content becomes a throw-around word responds to the world of streaming. How many different access points of media there are specifically within the worlds of streaming has not helped audiences at home, it has only hindered the potential of accessing cinema.

How we utilize our wallet to break through that paywall under the formation of streaming content is not helping the audience fully engage with how much is at our fingertips. Content can engage the individual-as-curator as much as it can shipwreck, in the sense that there are many mountains to climb; the real way to navigate is to understand how content will disrupt or help us comb through cinema's past and present. Curating content utilizing both streaming platforms such as The Criterion Channel and MUBI and premium cable channels like TCM are great access points to seeing how curation helps center and navigate the beautiful and treacherous waters of cinema. Before the streaming platforms were alive and thriving, we had brick and mortar stores like Blockbuster Video. In the 1990s with the emergence of Blockbuster Video in many cities across the USA, people could go and rent one or several films and curate their own screening schedule with the three or five days they had for their rental. At the height of Blockbuster's reign, people used to go and browse through each store's options hoping to come home with something new that the consumer had never seen. In the 2000s, we see the emergence of Netflix available for the public as a mail-in service before a streaming service became available. The joy of having something new to watch gives a community, a neighborhood, an audience a reason to return to the store (or service) to see exciting films that come from the big

screen and brought to the small screen. The joy of curation using physical media is based on the consumer and what the consumer considers worthwhile for their consumption. Curation, with the hours it takes to fully form a curated playlist, an exhibition format or film screening, has a wonderful payoff in the long run. The individual-as-curator needs to understand the historical approach to art appreciation, may it be painting, video art, performance art and even cinema-arts.

The appeal of an individual-as-curator allows the consumer to explore new options, as noted by what the streaming platforms and brick and mortar stores have available for the individual. As a curator working in the industry or through a museum space, understanding what an audience wants is always tricky. The curator also understands the world of the museum space as a way to signify a rhythm and a mood throughout the four walls. The curator establishes the differences within the products that have come before them and allows for the audience to walk the path made by the curator, and/or the artist. Martin Scorsese's multitude of projects allows his curator-self to walk with his auteur-self to showcase the power of filmmaking. He does this with his book and film series *A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese with American Movies*. He states: "I can only talk to you about what has moved me or intrigued me" and he says this with the breath and decades of American film beginning with silent film to the late seventies. In the final part of the series he talks straight to us and states that he cannot talk about his confidants and close-knit filmmakers that have bubbled-up during the American new-wave. American new wave which started with 1967's *Bonnie and Clyde* and ended in the early 1980's around the time *The King of Comedy* by Martin Scorsese premiered. Martin Scorsese notes that there are three

essential building blocks to understanding cinema: verbal literacy, visual grammar, and visual literacy. These three modes of deconstructing

cinema allows an audience and a scholar to become one. The wonderment that cinema allows for its audience to absorb has much to do with the confines of the imagination. Martin states in the documentary series that film is like an “imaginary museum,” and continues to say that “we just can’t enter every room, unfortunately, because we just don’t have the time”.

Visual literacy, seen through close-ups, dissolves, and how the micro and macro opening of the iris allows for the audience to see what the director sees on screen. This form of visual literacy is emotional, stabilizing the shot or breathing into the space, with the use of a dolly camera, to inform the audience that this is a significant beat (or moment) for the story to take shape. To know how emotions and ideas are expressed, you also have to realize what spaces allow for these stories to thrive and who is creating the programming for this to take shape. This is one version of how the curator is looking at the past and involving the present day moments as a way to re-share old stories with the contemporary public. No matter how your involvement with the medium of film, you can be a curator of what to watch and how to view film.

The simplest way to approach a media exploration is to think of how genre or decade define moments in cinema. Genres like war in film, feminism and women voices in film or historical moments like the holocaust or period pieces often get grouped together to understand how the protagonist or antagonist is compartmentalized and sold to the audience on film. Decades showcase the political strife or subculture rebellion in how cinema reacts and responds to the moments that become fixated in the everyday language of popular culture. A curated film list can look at the politics of 1968, the cold war of the 1960’s or the AIDS crisis happening in the 1980-1990’s. Film curation also can be a response to the genres that are populated in these decades and what may have slipped under the cracks or who else can see themselves represented on screen. This can be seen in Criterion Channel’s exploration of Black Westerns, crafted in March of 2021. Criterion states: “our Black Westerns series leads the charge, highlighting films that have challenged the myths of the Old West to tell the stories of African Americans on the frontier”. With the seven films in the series that explore masculinity, blaxploitation and documentary, each film garners a discussion within themselves and speak as a collective together. The civil rights movement of the 1960’s brought forward this very discussion and the Criterion Channel understands that this selection offers another discussion to what is happening in America at this very moment. The Criterion Channel is acknowledging this small but diverse collection of films helps another discussion begin of what the old frontier means to a 21st Century audience.

As the individual-as-curator starts to consume and watch all the films they have on their watch list, they soon can start to put together their own curated watch list and screening room. This

proverbial screening room becomes less about the “imaginary room” that Scorsese points at in his documentary, but addresses the possibility to show a list of films to a collective or an audience excited to come together and admire the cinema that has come before them. Take for instance, in 2021 begins the benchmark 40th anniversary of the AIDS crisis. How does an AIDS crisis become relevant to the 21st Century audience? How do we begin to unfurl the weight and loss of so many people affected by this disease? The individual-as-curator takes on the exhausted weight of a crisis and goes to the source material that people know as defining pieces of media. The curator has to swim through the oceans of perspectives that this disease presented to artists and media creators of the time, and this means addressing themes that are still affecting subcultures and communities of the contemporary. Using art to define the self-reflexive meaning

of AIDS like Derek Jarman’s *Blue* (1993) to defining African American gay histories on screen thanks to Marlon Riggs and his film *Tongues Untied* (1989). AIDS was not a white disease and the artwork that would fulfill the curated screening room would have to reflect this as well. No one can erase race and identity, and the goal for the curator is to find balance in the artwork, the

joy and the death that surrounds the disease. It is up to the curator to understand that the artwork living outside of a film print is as crucial to the discussion as is what the apparatus can capture. We can never forget who has come before us, and the appeal of what the camera has captured for audiences new and old. Documentary films like *Common Threads : Stories from the Quilt* (1989), *We Were Here: The AIDS Years in San Francisco* (2011) and *United in Anger: A History of Act Up* (2012) will address the reality and humane reactions to how stories are told, and addressing what a disease does to the human race. The magic of the curated cinema screening room showcases the most power and will translate with each passing decade, as a bookmark of culture and society speaking freely to the magician behind the apparatus.

King Vidor, paraphrased by Martin Scorsese in the 1995 documentary, states that: “the cinema is the greatest means of expression ever invented, but it is an illusion more powerful than any other, and it should therefore be in the hands of the magicians and the wizards who can bring it to life”. A magician, much like a filmmaker, allows for the magic of the visual language at-play to entice the viewer. Verbal language (the script or the textual analysis of a film) allows for the script to be mirroring the stage directing or the facial recognition of emotional language between actors. The verbal language allows the script to be present throughout a well-acted film, embracing the depth and curiosity of an actor’s presence on screen. Elia Kazan, in the Martin Scorsese documentary states: “The camera is more than a recorder — it’s a microscope. It

penetrates. It goes into people. You see their most private and concealed thoughts”. The camera allows for the transition between spectator and a waterfall of emotions to flood the audience watching the actor’s devastation on screen.

Emotions are often a good starting point when curating a show, yet the apparatus attached to emotions offers a stronger curation when we identify an auteur or a significant decade for curation. Martin Scorsese understands both the emotional weight in a film and how significant a decade's work is when showcasing what film can do. Take for example his work with Film Forum and his double feature schedule working with critic Jay Cocks. Utilizing a quote from the Film Forum webpage with his 2019 showcase, Martin states: "When I was growing up, I almost always saw movies paired as double features. Sometimes the pairings made sense, sometimes you'd wonder why they were being shown together, but it was a great way to experience cinema—two films back-to-back start a dialogue, and they illuminate each other...". Understandably, the works featured are noir, western, international pictures and the most contemporary picture being from 1980. Rich with film history, each double feature is cemented in time, emotional weight and offers a discussion for the film goer (or film aficionado) to visit both a cinematic cornerstone like Film Forum and to see several films in all their 35mm glory.

Martin Scorsese and Jay Cocks curated the summer double feature series that Film Forum put on in 2019. Who knows whether or not Martin Scorsese will work with Film Forum again in the summer of 2021, but we have seen him work with other museum and film screening spaces to make sure that both his work gets screened and his art for curation is presented to the New York public. Scorsese, as one of the strongest personas devoted to curating and constantly doing the work of a curator, presents an interesting quandary that he himself is tackling with his own cinema. Curating an exhibition allows for a collective or an artist, much like Martin, to find their love for a subject within the volumes of work that are at their fingertips. An exhibition of paintings, sartorial expression or celebrating cinema allows the curator to peruse through catalogues and criteria that entices the audience to come in and explore the possibilities of said art. A curator combing through cinema allows for the medium to be evaluated through a set of eyes that study and appreciate the art form. Martin Scorsese understands the art of curation and the importance of the movie theatre as a space to learn and teach oneself the joys of visual literacy, visual and verbal language through the decades of work he is consuming and has consumed.

Martin Scorsese understands cinema and through the form, the functionality, and the fandom that he brings to the art form, he understands its importance and the care that goes into filmmaking and film watching. Martin Scorsese states: "we can't depend on the movie business, such as it is, to take care of cinema" (32); In one way Scorsese is right but twenty-first cinema creators would question this line of logic. This can be seen in the way that different institutions have disregarded the use of celluloid in their teaching or how celebrated institutions eliminate the necessary need to explore celluloid and only see digitized cinema at the forefront in creating content for audiences today. In 1990 Martin Scorsese began work creating and crafting The Film Foundation, which came about from realizing the poor treatment of celluloid, worldwide.

Scorsese created a non-profit for preserving cinema that is still able to be saved. The Film Foundation considers education, programming-curation, and historical archiving to be at the forefront of what the foundation stands for. Scorsese and The Film Foundation team are preserving films (900 films, including 23 films seen as culturally significant global cinema) and

thanks to Martin Scorsese's care and tenderness to the cinematic medium, we have access to some of the finest pieces of cinema.

The content that Scorsese is cataloging and distributing is the content that is most joyous to him. Acknowledging that he is saving cinema while also distributing it to make a profit with the intent that his criteria will belong in academia, library shelves and the homes of other film connoisseurs. This is the content Martin Scorsese believes in. Content has a new meaning, beginning with the 2010s going forward. As Scorsese puts it: "...content' became a business term for all moving images...it was linked, of course, not to the theatrical release but to home viewing, on the streaming platforms that have come to overtake the moviegoing experience..." (26). Speaking solely to the curator in question, how they perceive the content is vital to what is happening in the world. What political moments and movements are happening are looked at as a cultural bookmark of time. How does the art world respond to events from the past to counteract a story told in the present day? Cinema as an art form understands the content put out through documentary form or through political moments that signify a change and political shift in people's stories.

The 2020s presents itself with the potential of a new decade through the art of free-form curation. A free-form curation done through dialogues with peers and others in the art-field offers the freedom of individual creation. Artists and thinkers that are utilizing collaboration will help digest a film because only one person can absorb so many ideas. Group screenings and group collaboration, when an idea is at the beginning stages of growth, is a necessary tool for creators and critics today. While the presence of cinema is everywhere (on television, through devices for streaming, and microcinemas), we also should acknowledge spaces that are virtual allowing for screenings to thrive on pay view website-platforms. When these new films bubble up to the surface, will they make an impact, and when they do, will younger audiences see the visual literacy attainable to them from sight and sound? How will younger people experience visual literacy?

The youth of today need to understand the power of the media and the images that they are consuming. Various cinematic forms from independent cinema, foreign and classic cinema allow for new voices to be in discussion with each other, and the presence of curation should always be a part of that discussion. A curator can tell the story and the curator navigates our sight by walking us through a sutured story, with the threads being images and sound. Content is made

from the choices of the individual-as-curator who gets hired for companies and streaming sites like MUBI, The Criterion Channel and Watch TCM. The curator's role is to find those nuggets of cinema's past and display them in all their glory, compiling them thematically for the viewer-at-home. Streaming services actually put care into their content and make the viewer aware of an actor, a genre in film, or a re-visit from an unknown cine-maker who may be overlooked or who deserves a second look, especially in the 21st century. Enabling and encouraging all facets of media and arts consumption will benefit an audience in the future, young or old. If a person chooses to become a curator, they will develop an awareness and deeper understanding of how the study of cinematic history can navigate their viewing and curation potential. The magic that cinema possesses will capture the imagination of a young viewer and can unlock the doors to the newest cinephile and movie maker.

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