

Genre, star and auteur critical approaches applied to Martin Scorsese's *New York, New York*

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INTRODUCTION

Introductory overview

Here we will consider the significance of genre, star and auteur studies in trying to make sense of popular films made within the institution called Hollywood cinema. This will be done by focusing upon them as communication or 'meaning' structures. However, we should keep in mind the importance of the film spectator. If we can see that genre, star and auteur structures work as systems of 'potential' meaning, then we can consider how they become 'actual' in the response of the spectator to them.

The focus will be on a single film—*New York, New York* (1977).

There are several reasons for choosing this film: it exemplifies characteristics of genre, star and auteur which can easily be transferred to other Hollywood films; it is interesting because it is clearly a film of the 'new' Hollywood of the 1970s but pays homage to the product of the studio system of the 1940s; it is provocative for the purposes of this chapter because it demonstrates that the concepts of genre, star and auteur are dynamic, not static, and that critical approaches based on these concepts can be critical and questioning, not just descriptive. In relation to spectatorship, the film certainly makes demands.

And just maybe you will be encouraged to seek out this film which is a key work in appreciating Martin Scorsese as an auteur; a fascinating text in trying to understand the relationship between 'classic' genre and 'postmodern' genre cinema; and a rich example of stars slugging it out using very different performance styles. It is a flawed work—but flawed works are often the most interesting!

New York, New York is a film produced in Hollywood in 1977 by United Artists. It contains 'bankable' elements around which a characteristic Hollywood deal could be struck by producers Irwin Winkler and Robert Chartoff: a director (Martin Scorsese) and two stars (Robert De Niro and Liza Minnelli). Previous remarkable collaborations between Scorsese and De Niro, most recently *Taxi Driver* of the previous year, further guaranteed the financial viability of the project. What was less certain was the box-office potential of a film dressed up as a classic studio system musical. However, the confidence of the backers was clear; they agreed to a budget of \$9 million. In return they got a film 153 minutes long costing \$11 million. Any film of this length will have exhibition problems; in fact the film was first released in a version of (only) 136 minutes and got longer on re-release. The director had enough power to insist that what he considered a crucial scene—one which cost \$350,000 to shoot—be included despite a general perception that the narrative needed to be tighter rather than more expansive. *New York, New York* was a commercial failure, although it has been passionately defended by some critics and audiences.

A study of *New York, New York* could elaborate on some of the stark details outlined in the previous paragraph. The film could be seen in relation to the *institution* which produced it, in this case, the Hollywood industry as it was operating in the second half of the 1970s. *New York, New York* is very much the product of the 'New' Hollywood of independent producers, powerful directors and autonomous stars drawn together in one-off projects. The study could focus on the financing of the project, the power-broking involved during the different stages of production. A study of the marketing, distribution and exhibition of the film would, perhaps, consider the particular challenges presented to the industry in handling a musical—and a strangely somber musical of such length. Of

particular concern might be the perennial conflict between financial restraint and artistic licence, a conflict which would reach a high point five years later with Cimino's *Heaven's Gate*, which brought United Artists to financial ruin. Another area of study could focus on production under the new Hollywood system, making comparisons with production under the studio system—a comparison with particular significance in this case where a deliberate attempt was made to recreate what appears, at least on the surface, to be such a typical studio-system product in a very different production context.

A different approach to *New York, New York* would be one which focuses not on institutional issues but on *film form*: the organisation of narrative, the use of *mise en scène*, editing, cinematography and sound. For example, the narrative of this fictional musical melodrama/biopic is conventionally linear, one event follows the preceding one in a chronological way, conveying in the process a cause_effect_cause_effect pattern. Much more unusual, by comparison, is the film's use of very long sequences, themselves partly the result of an unusual improvisational, documentary-style approach. In editing, the rejection of the master shot—that is, one which provides an overview of the setting and the location of the characters within it—in favour of a rhythm of tracking shots creates, along with the use of colour, a distinctive visual style. The anti-naturalistic look which results is the most obvious challenge in a study of the film's form. Scorsese has said:

In the city streets I'd seen in MGM and Warner Brothers musicals, New York kerbs were always shown as very high and very clean. When I was a child, I realised this wasn't right, but it was part of a whole mythical city, as well as the feeling of the old three-strip Technicolor with lipstick that was too bright and make-up even on the men.

One pleasure of *New York, New York* is in the contrast between this studied artificiality of the film's look and the edgy improvisational acting of its stars, especially Robert De Niro.

A third approach would be to focus on *audiences* for *New York, New York*. This could be done by looking at reviews and critical writing on the film in the period immediately after its release. It could also involve a study of audience response, although doing so over twenty years after the release of a film is fraught with difficulties. A historical approach, looking at the cultural status and significance of *New York, New York*, might tell us a lot, not only about the film but also about attitudes, preoccupations and tastes—and how these might have changed over time.

In choosing to focus on genre, star and auteur studies, it is impossible to isolate these critical approaches completely from a study of institution, form and audience. However, the interaction between them is so complex that it is sometimes necessary and useful to artificially limit the scope of a study. The emphasis here will be on some of the ways in which these three critical approaches enhance our enjoyment and appreciation of a relatively neglected film and, in particular, allow us a better understanding of some of the tensions in the film that makes response to it by audiences so uncertain.

Critical Approaches to *New York, New York*: problems of categorisation

Consider these three statements:

- *New York, New York* is a musical melodrama. It has a generic identity
- *New York, New York* is dominated by two stars who impose their distinctive identities on the film

- *New York, New York* is directed by an auteur, someone who imposes his distinct artistic identity on to the film.

The need to create an identity for a film is obviously crucial from the industry's position in having to sell a commodity. Audiences also need these identities in order to be able to identify what they are being offered, what expectations or 'promises' a particular film appears to contain, and in order to communicate with others about the film. Reviewers and media presenters whose work involves talking about films need to be able to latch on to easily understood identities. (It is significant how often a film with an unclear or ambiguous identity struggles at the box office—for example, Scorsese's (1982) *King of Comedy*.)

Genre, star and auteur are, like narrative and realism, important discourse systems working within and on behalf of the larger discourse system we call 'film studies' or 'cinematics'. A discourse is a mode of speech which has evolved to express the shared human activities of a community of people. So, for example, there is the distinctive discourse of the medical and legal professions, and there is the discourse of different academic disciplines. Film studies has, like other academic disciplines, developed its own language—its own discourse system—to make possible the identification and 'mapping' of that area of human activity and experience with which it is concerned. These discourses enable discussion and debate to occur. For example, in naming things we categorise them: 'a musical', 'a De Niro film', 'a Scorsese film', 'a De Niro-Scorsese collaboration'. Disagreements over categorisations open up critical debate and encourage more detailed analysis. The very names we give things forces critical reflection and doubt—Can we be content with these names and identities? Are they sufficient to represent the film?

In the case of *New York, New York* a major difficulty arises over its *generic identity*. Is it a musical? Could it be better described as a melodrama involving musicians? If it is a musical, can it best be assigned to the sub-genre of musical biopic? Is it a celebration of or a critical reflection on the classic MGM musical, especially with its refusal of a happy ending? (The dismissal by Jimmy Doyle—De Niro—of the lavish 'happy-endings' film within- the-film as 'sappy endings' will be touched upon in the next section.) These interesting questions arise because of a focus on genre. Whether we can agree in some definitive way on what exactly is the generic identity of *New York, New York* is less important than the encouragement that a critical approach through genre study gives to a wide ranging consideration of the film's complexities and ambiguities. If we turn to the star identity of *New York, New York*, the presence of Liza Minnelli brings a number of elements associated with her star image. What precisely are we to make of the fact that the film is consciously re-creating the look of her father's (Vincente Minnelli's) MGM musicals and melodramas, or that her on-screen vulnerability may be informed by knowledge of her mother, Judy Garland? Are either of these important in the final third of the movie which seems designed primarily as a vehicle for Liza Minnelli to 'do her thing'—belt out musical numbers in her distinctive performance style? Is the increasing sassiness of her character/performance—established in her Sally Bowles role in *Cabaret* (1972) primarily there for itself or to provoke the De Niro character and thereby fire the melodrama of the film? In trying to arrive at some critical understanding of Minnelli's contribution to *New York, New York*, we can start from any of the above questions.

Again, the fundamental point here is that the critical approach—here, star study—allows us to enter into a potentially rich and wide-ranging analysis of the film.

David Thomson in his entry on Robert De Niro in his *Biographical Dictionary of Film* writes the following:

'*New York, New York* is so painful a film because De Niro's drive prefers private, sinister ecstasies to the wholesome bliss of the 1940s Musical. He makes the musical noir. In the long opening sequence he "wins" Liza Minnelli not out of sentiment, but because she is the available target that his fierce boredom selects. His Jimmy Doyle overpowers people or ignores them; he cannot deal with them. Thus the abrupt humour, the compulsive routines just like sax solos (he never makes it to sex)—and that steel-trap grin. Communication systems, but not the natural gestures of feeling. How astute it was in *Taxi Driver* to have him talk to himself.'

In addition to genre and star study, *New York, New York* is very much enhanced by an appreciation of the auteur identity Martin Scorsese brings to the film. Without an awareness of the thematic and stylistic preoccupations of this director in his films either side of *New York, New York*, it may appear a far less rich and interesting work. Reference has already been made to his conscious 'homage' to the classic Hollywood musical on the one hand, but his rejection of its easy optimism on the other. The excess and abundance of the classic Hollywood musical is here overlaid by an introverted and dark melodrama of the male-in-crisis. The tension of the film is added to by realist performance techniques on the one hand, and very artificial *mise en scène* on the other. Now, it may be possible to discern each of the above characteristics of the film without any knowledge of Scorsese's other work, but again the point to be made is that the critical approach—here auteur study—opens up these conflicts and emphasises them in a particularly direct way, forcing our critical attention to be paid to them. It is the surprising difficulty that we encounter in working with questions of categorisation and identity that push us on to ask further and more interesting questions about *New York, New York*. This is even more the case when we acknowledge that genre star- auteur work in combination and that our analysis must involve seeing the film as a complex of elements. The combination *musical/melodrama/noir—De Niro/Minnelli star vehicle—Scorsese film* produces a film distinctive from one in which any of these elements are changed. In analysis, knowledge of the identity of each will inform an understanding of the other three.

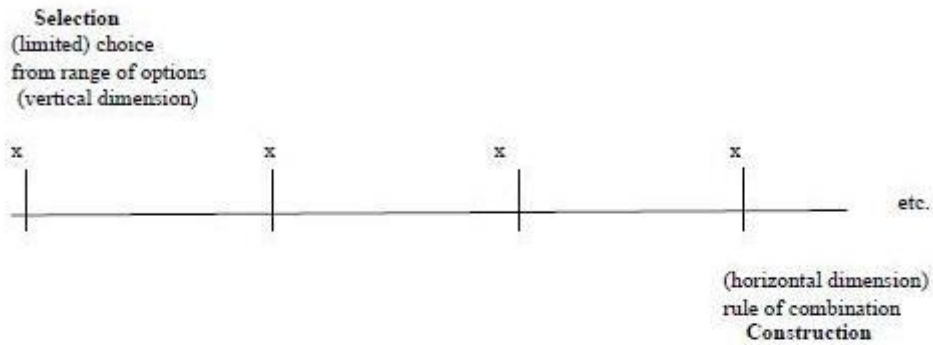
Genre, Star, Auteur Structures

The identification of recurring characteristics has contributed much to the study of genre, star and auteur. In the case of genre it may be iconographic features (costume, weaponry, transportation, etc.) or particular character types. In the case of stars it may be recurring performance features (voice, gesture, movement, etc) or particular character types with which the star is commonly associated. In the case of an auteur it may be particular thematic concerns or an identifiable cinematic style (cinematography, editing, sound, etc.). In the most abstract sense these can be regarded as structures.

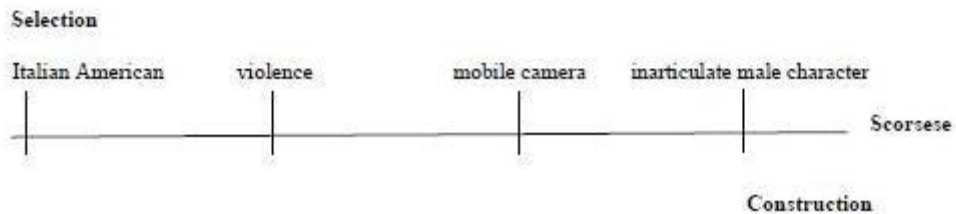
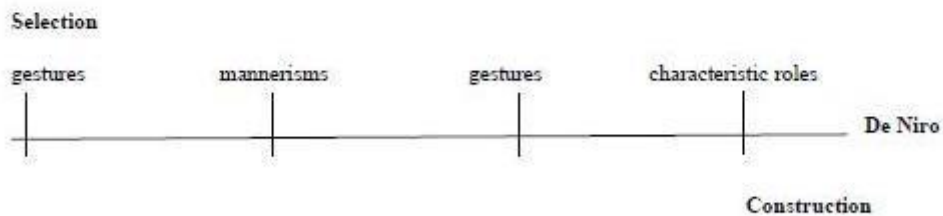
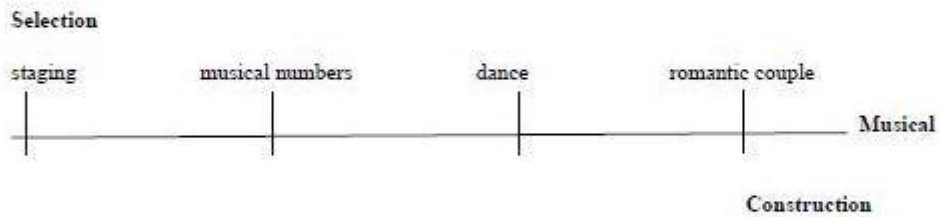
A structure is a combination of elements, governed either explicitly or implicitly by 'rules' which can be identified as a result of study. The elements available for inclusion within a particular structure are limited by these 'rules' which usually appear as based on convention or common sense. If these 'rules' are not adhered to, communication will become problematic. This is most clearly illustrated with language where the grammar of a sentence provides the framework within which particular words can be slotted in according to the limitations imposed by the rules of combination imposed by the grammar.

The following diagram represents the basic elements of a communication structure, whether that communication is verbal, visual or musical. The horizontal axis is the syntagmatic (the rules which govern how words can be combined in sentences, visual images in a composition, notes in a piece of music, etc.). The vertical axis is the paradigmatic (the choice of words, images, musical notes, etc.), which can be selected for a 'slot' (x) within the structure.

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We can translate this into the musical, De Niro and Scorsese as examples of genre, star and auteur respectively:



Most often these structures will reinforce each other in classical Hollywood cinema. Perhaps the best single example is:

the Western – John Wayne – John Ford.

One of the best examples from a more recent period of Hollywood history includes two of our three ‘structures’:

the Gangster – Robert De Niro – Martin Scorsese

We bring with us to the viewing experience expectations about any one of these genre, star or auteur structures. However, as they interact with one another, they may create a film that appears to undermine some of these expectations. Clearly what is odd about *New York, New York* is that De Niro and Scorsese are working with the elements of the musical. In the process the musical is in some key ways altered from the structural template we bring with us. Equally, the genre may disrupt the star or auteur structural templates. What we soon discover is that thinking about genre, star or auteur as structures is not a way of placing the film we are trying to critically understand within a set of straight jackets, but rather it is a way of helping us to visualize a dynamic interactive relationship, in which each of these structures acts as a plate sliding across other plates, generating different kinds of meanings in a creative process. But equally it helps explain why so many people may be disappointed by a film: different elements seem to undermine each other in ways that leave few if any expectations fulfilled.

From the mid 1980s it became commonplace for directors and screenwriters, very aware of popular film formulae, to mix elements from different genres to produce hybrids. See, for example, *Raising Arizona* (Coen Brothers, 1986). It is interesting to consider *New York, New York* as a hybrid genre film from a decade earlier.

PART 1: GENRE CRITICAL APPROACH

The characteristic qualities of a film genre can be studied in isolation. It is possible to list the characteristic choices of signifiers (‘Genre: selecting’) and the characteristic combination of elements (‘Genre: constructing’). On the other hand, there is the opportunity to go beyond the single-genre approach and to play off features of one genre against another (see previous section).

The first approach has clarity but is, arguably, circular. The critic starts off with a check list of conventional features already in place and then demonstrates their applicability by measuring a film or group of films against them. At worst, this reduces genre study to a ‘ticking off’ of features based on an ‘essentialist’ methodology. Like the formal function of genre itself, this critical approach runs the risk of producing a containment and closure of the world it represents rather than an opening up of that world to a more curious gaze. If a genre is seen as free-standing, appearing to make reference only to its own internal ‘systems’, there is little incentive to think beyond this fictional construct to the real world it somehow represents and to ideological issues at the heart of the film.

The second approach is potentially messy and confusing. The ‘check list’ is still used—but only as the launch pad for a much more open, exploratory approach. If genre study is to be of real value it is in encouraging a marauding approach across the *whole* of Hollywood—from Western to techno action-thriller and from road movie to teen comedy. Thomas Schatz is one of several critics who has proposed a more flexible approach to genre classification, an approach which promotes creative and productive comparisons to be made across formal generic boundaries.

A third approach to genre study involves a very different emphasis—away from film texts and their ‘meaning structures’—and towards spectators and their ‘work’. Clearly, genre helps spectators to become orientated, to navigate their way through the world of the film by reference to familiar features. Of particular interest is the pleasure that a genre film offers through offering an experience which is almost entirely predictable while weaving just enough variation and suspense to make it different from the previous encounters which the spectator has had with films of the same genre. The imaginative work of the spectator involves a complicity with the genre, engaging with it through an acceptance of the ways in which it works. If a genre works, it does so because the spectator allows it to. How and why are among the most fascinating questions in film studies.

Awareness today of genre among film-makers and audiences alike is such that it has become a defining characteristic of what is often referred to as ‘postmodern Hollywood’. This takes us back to the ‘hybrid’ genre referred to in the previous section. John Belton in his *American Cinema/American Culture* identifies three characteristics of **postmodern** cinema:

- First, it is based on pastiche of traditional generic material.
- Second, much of the imitation is of images from the past, offered as a nostalgic substitute for any real exploration of either the past or the present.
- Third, this referencing the past reflects another problem the film-maker faces today: not being able to say anything which has not already been said.

The postmodern film-maker struggles to make meaning from what appear as a vast and meaningless assembly of detail—visual, verbal and musical signifiers—in contemporary culture. As Belton comments, ‘in transmitting the reality of their social and cultural context, they reproduce only its incoherence’. This can produce work which is superficially exciting, both thematically and stylistically, but which begs questions about any substantial meaning.

Bricolage is a term used to describe the playful mixing of elements from different artistic styles and periods. This tendency can be found in the way some Hollywood films from the mid-1980s onwards have included self-conscious references, especially generic references, from the vast storehouse of images and memories of film accumulated through the repeated viewing of films from the past. The access to this ‘storehouse’ through television, and particularly through video, has created a genre-literate culture of considerable sophistication. Jim Collins describes the contemporary Hollywood film text as a narrative which operates simultaneously on two levels:

- in reference to character adventure
- in reference to a text’s adventure in the array of contemporary cultural production

The ‘text’s adventure’ can be described as in large part the free use of generic signifiers, disconnected from their conventional paradigmatic use in stable narratives. We may raise the question of the extent to which *New York, New York* is an early example of this idea of the ‘text’s adventure among different generic features.

***New York, New York* as a problematical musical**

Three moments from the film illustrate the demands *New York, New York* makes on its audience:

1. Jimmy Doyle observes a sailor dancing with a girl late at night. The couple is alone and there is no music. This manages to be both a homage to MGM's *On the Town* (1949) and a re-enactment of the kind of masculine crisis and alienation associated with the period immediately following the end of the Second World War. This period produced both film noir, with its dark studies of male entrapment, and the celebratory MGM musicals produced by Arthur Freed.
2. Jimmy Doyle decides to marry Francine Evans (Minnelli)—in the middle of a snowy night (of studio-set artificiality). He drives her to the registry office without having proposed or even explained his actions. The scene that follows has elements of both comedy and romance, but it is uncomfortable, at times embarrassing to watch. Neither the comedy nor the romance promises any meaningful 'integration'.
3. Jimmy and Francine have divorced. Francine is now a movie star. Jimmy goes to see her latest film, *Happy Endings*, which contains Busby Berkeley-style choreography and exuberant display (highlighting in its extravagance the starkness of the musical called *New York, New York* which contains it). Afterwards, Jimmy lightly dismisses the sequence as 'sappy endings'—in so doing dismissing the film's own *homage* to the classical musical. This is followed by the closure of the narrative in which no reconciliation between Jimmy and Francine occurs—no happy ending.

Andrew Sarris wrote of *New York, New York* in *The Village Voice*: 'What is it like? people ask me...is mixed moods and delirious dialectics—two crucial ingredients for box office poison.'

How might a genre-based critical approach (a) explain the difficulties the film has caused, and (b) take us towards a better understanding and appreciation of the film's qualities?

Normally the superficial generic identity of a film will trigger in the minds of audiences certain schemas, and these will be used as mental frameworks for making meaning. The first difficulty to be acknowledged with regard to *New York, New York* is that we are uncertain about what we are being presented with, constantly unsettled by having to adapt the schemas we would normally expect to apply effortlessly in making sense of a Hollywood genre film.

Does breaking the film down into its constituent sub-genres help? For example, we can say that the film contains elements of four different kinds of musicals: the artificial sets and the particularly extravagant 'Happy Endings' sequence place this within the MGM musical of Vincente Minnelli and Stanley Donen/Gene Kelly from the late 1940s and early 1950s; De Niro's role conforms to the big-band era which preceded the MGM musical; Liza Minnelli's role conforms to the individualistic star celebration exemplified in the late 1960s and early 1970s by various Barbra Streisand vehicles; in narrative the film most resembles the musical biography of the 1940s.

Reference to the visual and musical signifiers is not enough. From them alone we find ourselves unable to place this film unambiguously in the musical genre. These do not capture either the comedy or the darkness of the film. We might, instead, be encouraged to describe the film as a melodrama with music. Scorsese himself has emphasised the melodrama:

It could have been a film about a director and a writer, or an artist and a composer. It's about two people in love with each other who are both creative. That was the idea: to see if the marriage would work.

Richard Dyer identifies the distinct ‘product’ of the classic MGM-style musical as feeling—abundance, energy, community. These qualities provide imaginary solutions to a real world of scarcity, exhaustion, manipulation and fragmentation. *New York, New York* singularly lacks this ‘feel-good factor’ and does not offer a ‘utopian solution’ to the problems of living in a real social world. The sets, for example, manage simultaneously to conjure up the colour and style of the classic musical, and at the same time to convey something eerie, often barren. Their obvious artificiality is used to convey distance, disconnectedness, alienation.

The film refuses us the normal ‘leap’ across binary opposites. As a consequence we are refused the normal pleasures that we expect from popular cinema, pleasures that derive from the imaginary overcoming of some of the inherent contradictions and limitations of real life. *New York, New York* may not quite be the world of *Taxi Driver*, but it certainly suggests a world darker and more troubled than anything we would associate with the musical or the romantic melodrama. Indeed, the more one confronts the main conflicts within the film (what Sarris called the ‘delirious dialectics’), the more we are able to appreciate how far removed the whole structure is from one which might be associated with the traditional musical entertainment.

<i>New York, New York</i>	<i>The Hollywood musical</i>
Isolation	Community
Authoritarian	Accommodating
Assertive individuality	Harmonious ensemble
Comedy of embarrassment	Comedy of delight
Anger	Charm
Respected	Celebrated
Self-sufficiency	Family
Energy turned inwards	Energy externalised
Introspective performance	Extrovert performance
Success as meaningless	Success as abundance
Jimmy Doyle (as problematic)	Francine Evans (as unproblematic)

A sensitivity to Hollywood genre will also allow us to see how this film depends for some of its power and effect on its intertextuality, its ‘play’ with the heritage of Hollywood film. As a text *New York, New York* can be said to ‘inherit’ and ‘inhabit’ genre. Sometimes the effect is celebratory, sometimes ironic and sometimes both at the same time—as in the three examples quoted at the start of this section. I would argue that the application of a genre-based critical approach is useful here both in explaining the difficulties of the film and in helping us to think through them.

PART 2: STAR CRITICAL APPROACH

First of all, a star is a *real person*. It may be thought that this obvious fact is hardly worth stating. Surely in star study we are interested in the transformation of the ordinary, the presence in our lives of the extraordinary. While this is true, our interest in these figures is intensified by the sense of their ordinariness. Throughout the twentieth century the cult of the star has depended on a simultaneous sense of the star’s exceptional qualities and the fact that at some level of everyday living they have experiences just like we do and can be communicated with as friends we know. The appeal of the star is, in part, because he or she exists and could, by some quirk of fate, enter our lives. Certainly when a star dies, the loss we feel is for a real person.

Second, a star is a public performer of *roles*. The primary encounter we have with a film star is in the roles they play. We come to know them through their roles—which bring us close to their physical bodies, to characteristic features of their voice, look, gesture. Through their roles we begin to associate them with particular attitudes and ideological positions.

Third, and arising from what has just been said, the star is a *persona*. This involves a merging of the real person and the roles they play, particularly in cases where the star takes on the same type of role repeatedly. This is a figure constructed maybe by fans, maybe by publicists, maybe by the media, maybe by all three working in combination. The persona may indeed represent significant elements of the real person, but not necessarily.

Fourth, a star is an *image*. He or she becomes a sign—a cultural ‘signifier’ of a particular concentration of qualities, most often relating to gender and sexuality. He may represent a particular male image; she a particular female image. Both are likely to be objects of desire. They ‘em-body’ a set of values which are fashionable and which capture the *zeitgeist*—the spirit of the time. The image is the most unstable of the four components of the star listed here. It can shift over time and it can mean different things to different groups in society at the same moment.

One approach to star study is to focus directly on the stars in themselves. This may focus on their valuation within the cinema institution, shifting attention to what are primarily financial and marketing areas. However, their value will depend on the relationship of their persona-image to the wider culture at that particular cultural ‘moment’. The commutation test¹⁰ can lead to a more precise description of what is indeed in one persona-image over another. A variation on the commutation test is to look at a star in transition from one persona-image to another. A spectacular example is offered by Jane Fonda whose career has represented major transitions. These include, rather crudely, a range from Hollywood starlet to bimbo to left-wing political activist to successful businesswoman. A study may consider whether there is a ‘core’ identity which remains across these transitions. (In Fonda’s case, the ‘core’ identity will include paradigms of voice, gesture, mannerism and gesture. The latter can be related specifically to her ‘method’ performances. Beyond these features we can consider more evaluative qualities such as sincerity, competence, independence, and so on.)

A different approach to star study is to subordinate the star to the requirements of the film text, asking what is specific about the contribution of the star. This may put a focus on representation and the particular qualities the star contributes as a ‘signifier’ of meaning. A more particular question might be in relation to the requirements of the film as a generic text. This will raise issues about the star as ‘type’ within the operations of a conventional story form. The work of stars within a genre and the movement of a star across several genres are each very interesting points of focus for the film student. Star study can be advanced through a study of genre. James Stewart’s star persona in Capra melodramas, Mann Westerns and Hitchcock thrillers exemplifies the possibilities of a star study informed by genre. In turn, genre study can be advanced through a focus on stars. One could look, for example, at the shifting dynamic of the Western through a comparative and chronological study of the John Wayne and Clint Eastwood star images.

Yet a further approach to star study is in relation to audiences—and, in a broader context, the culture from which the audience comes. We begin not with the film text but with the meanings the audience brings to the film text. These meanings reflect meanings circulating within the culture and which are symptomatic of that culture. We can start with a very simple question of popularity and extend this into questions of ideology. What, for example, is the significance of Whoopi Goldberg’s

mixed popularity (and meaning) to sections of the black community in the US? What is the significance of Jodie Foster's popularity (and meaning) to the lesbian community?

Communicating in critical, academic terms about stars has proved very difficult. There is pressure to avoid sounding like a gushy fanzine and instead to bring real critical rigour to the 'object' of study. But there is also the counter-pressure to represent adequately the felt presence of the star as a figure of desire and fantasy within popular culture. One productive way forward is to look at stars in relation to performance styles – and this offers a productive comparison in relation to *New York, New York*.

***New York, New York* as Clash of the Stars**

Three more moments from the film:

1. VE Day, the beginning of the film. Jimmy Doyle, loud, brash in manner and dress, moves through the crowd. He decides to chat up a young woman in military uniform, Francine Evans. His approach is aggressive and obstinate though with just enough self irony for him to avoid appearing merely boorish. She is witty and resourceful, a mix of sophistication and street sense. The scene between them is the film's opening sparring match and lasts twelve minutes. It establishes that the drama will revolve around two people, different in so many ways from each other, but most interestingly, different in the way they 'act'.
2. Jimmy is waiting for the pregnant Francine to emerge from the recording studio. He is in a new car. She is astonished to discover this extravagance. Jimmy, as so often, appears shockingly self-centred but also defensive, vulnerable. When Francine asks him if he will spend more time supporting her in her pregnancy, he takes his saxophone and leaves the car, asking if he should break it against the wall. The imagery is clear: he feels he is being threatened with castration by the woman. The intensity of Jimmy's character is wrapped up so much in his masculinity. The 'feminine' seems all the more provocative in Francine's reasonableness, her understated distress. (But to balance this, comedy immediately follows when Francine rather than Jimmy lets rip at a couple impatient for their parking space.)
3. Francine as movie and cabaret star sings 'New York, New York' to her adoring fans. She has been separated from Jimmy for some time. He is in the audience. Compared with his introspective performances on the saxophone, her singing is big and extrovert. Jimmy as spectator is almost impassive although he claps with appreciation at the end along with the rest of the audience. He is on the outside looking in on a world he does not seem able to possess, a world he maybe does not want. He remains wrapped in his self-sufficiency and introspection while Francine is fully 'integrated' into a social world.

How might a star-based critical approach (a) explain the difficulties the film has caused, and (b) take us towards a better understanding and appreciation of the film's qualities? Robert De Niro and Liza Minnelli have a determining effect on the meaning of the film because of the specific qualities they bring with them—of appearance, voice, manner, etc. Jimmy Doyle and Francine Evans would be somewhat different in a re-make starring Kevin Costner and Whitney Houston or, say, John Travolta and Madonna! Beyond this, they bring with them specific meaning associations from their roles in other films/performances and from the personas that developed out of this. Their images in circulation in the mid-1970s would arouse expectations and inform the viewing situation—De Niro's intensity and avoidance of publicity; Minnelli's mix of strength and vulnerability, her 'Garland image'.

The two stars perform within the terms of melodrama. *New York, New York*, in focusing so exclusively on a relationship by reference to psychology and emotion, illustrates Hollywood's typical avoidance of other determining factors—social, cultural, political. However, the film is unusual in demonstrating so vividly two contrasting star performances. First, how the application of the 'method' performance to a melodramatic scenario can produce characterisation of depth: De Niro's Jimmy Doyle has real complexity. Second, how this performance is countered by a much more old-fashioned and increasingly powerful form of star performance from Minnelli in which she 'personifies' a character close to herself. She brings the charisma of her image to bear throughout the film, and not only in her on-screen performances. The explosion of energy after the divorce when she achieves stardom is contained from the beginning in the 'promise' of Liza Minnelli as superstar.

Thus a principal source of interest in the three scenes outlined above, and throughout the film, lies in the interplay between a star (Minnelli) whose personification in the role of Francine Evans is constructed from a traditional Hollywood base in star persona/image and De Niro's method entry into role.

Scorsese has said: 'we were just doing it—rewriting, improvising, improvising, improvising until finally twenty weeks of movie had gone by and we had something like a movie'.

It is uncommon in Hollywood commercial cinema for narrative and character development to be so dependent on the way character evolves through improvisation. In favouring the 'method' approach to performance, the film suited De Niro. By contrast, Minnelli seems much of the time at a disadvantage. Her character seems dominated for much of the film. It has been argued that the film privileges the male point of view, even in the latter part of the film when the Minnelli character appears strong, since her performance is seen through and judged from a male perspective.

Much of the film seems like an interrogation. This extends from the dialogue within the film to one between the film and its audience. We seem to be asked questions by the mix of genre and star elements—what has been described previously as the 'meaning structures' of the film. Certainly the formal contrasts between the two stars intensify this sense of interrogation. We are more aware than usual of these star presences threatening to undermine the illusion of 'reality' we expect from Hollywood entertainment. They question, probe each other in long scenes which produce a **surplus of meaning**. This 'surplus' derives from their different roles; from their different star personas/images, which they bring with them to the film; and from their very different performances.

Narrative, genre and star collectively provide a highly conventionalised form of communication which makes available to an audience two forms of fantasy pleasure. One is the artificial security created by the formal organisation of the film; we know the real world is far less comprehensible and manageable than that constructed by narrative and genre (see the introductory overview to this chapter). The second is the intense personal potential embodied in the star—either for simply existing or more specifically for the resolution of crises. We know the real world cannot be imposed upon or acted upon so directly, so effectively by ordinary individuals.

If *New York, New York* appears to be a relatively 'difficult' film, it is partly because these two forms of pleasure are in limited supply. The narrative and genre elements provide little security, while the 'intense potential' of the stars seems cloaked in unresolved conflict and loneliness. *New York, New York* is a film which asks us to seek pleasure precisely in its unsettling play of different formal features. Star study can make a significant contribution to the understanding of the issues and processes involved.

PART 3: AUTEUR CRITICAL APPROACH

Like a star, an auteur director can be regarded as a 'persona', similarly made up of a combination of a real person and the films which he or she is identified through. The principal difference, of course, is that the auteur director does not appear in films (with notable exceptions, ranging from Hitchcock's on-screen 'signature', to Scorsese's and Tarantino's occasional cameo roles in their own films, to Spike Lee's and Woody Allen's central roles). So, whereas the star-in-role is visible, the auteur-in-role must be 'excavated' through critical analysis.

Whether the focus is on Hitchcock or Scorsese or Woody Allen, an emphasis on the biographical, and especially the more speculative forms of the biographical, is commonplace. What can this film tell us about the real person behind its creation? This is a legitimate activity. However, the emphasis throughout this chapter has been on what we can learn about the film itself as a complex 'meaning system'.

As with genre study, there is a peculiar circularity in the way we go about auteur analysis. In order to 'excavate' the auteur characteristics of any particular film, we need to already have the auteur structure to hand—just as when we identify the generic characteristics of a film, we need to already have available the generic structure, against which the film under scrutiny will be 'checked'. The Scorsese auteur structure is assembled deductively from the films Martin Scorsese has directed. The structure is then applied to the text under scrutiny.

To take another example, a 'Douglas Sirk' film will be read in response to knowledge about the 'Douglas Sirk' auteur structure, and if that knowledge is absent, the auteur structure will not be read at all—it will be a meaning 'potential' left untouched by the reader.

Sirk was thought of in the 1950s as a director of traditional melodramatic 'weepies' set in a bourgeois world. Only with the work of auteur critics such as Andrew Sarris in the 1960s was a different view of Sirk's work put forward: that he was in fact offering a scathing critique of the world depicted in his films. Sarris argued that in visual style and in his 'narrative attitude' Sirk was a remarkable auteur—delivering films to Universal as per contract which appeared to be standard genre product but which were characterised by an individual way of seeing and telling. One of Sirk's celebrated films, such as *Written on the Wind*, may well appear of little or no special interest unless the spectator is aware of the Douglas Sirk auteur structure. The claims made for it as a 'subversive' text rather than as a regular 1950s melodrama and star vehicle require validation through reference to the determining additional meaning structure—'Sirk'—operative within the text. In other words, the film becomes a more significant and interesting text if mediated through the process of auteur criticism.

Some of the surplus of meaning contained in *Written on the Wind* (1956) can be confirmed by reference to its stars, much more by reference to the 'Sirk' auteur structure—and the same can be said of *New York, New York* when an additional level of 'coding', the 'Scorsese' auteur structure, is examined.

Even if the spectator is ignorant of the auteur structure, the simple power of *naming* remains significant. The classification which the auteur name allows means that texts can be differentiated from one another, most particularly in terms of the status which can be conferred upon them. The act of spectatorship will be influenced by the power of the name. This returns us to the auteur as 'guarantee' and 'trademark'. It also returns us to the observation that in contemporary Hollywood nearly all films have placed upon them the name of an auteur, whether or not any auteur structure

has been established behind that name. The name exists purely as a name-tag on a commodity indeed the name-tag is itself a commodity: 'Spielberg'.

Auteur study attempts to establish a recognisable set of thematic and stylistic features (a signified) for the auteur name (the signifier). Increasingly, this is done by the auteur who quite consciously puts in place the components of an identity which his name can then be said to signify. Thus we can trace a transition since the late 1950s, when critics constructed an auteur meaning structure out of a body of films put in place more or less intuitively by a director in active collaboration with other creative individuals within enabling institutional structures. Today the director often strives, self-consciously, to construct a recognisable auteur identity to confirm the commercial and critical existence of the name she or he bears.

The real challenge in auteur criticism is in examining the work of directors whose work is so varied that we are tempted to artificially limit the range and scope of the work for purposes of critical 'neatness'. It is much easier, for example, to develop a 'check list' of Woody Allen characteristics for application to any particular film bearing his name than it is in approaching the work of, say, Oliver Stone.

Overall, we can say that, unlike genre or star structures, an auteur structure does not offer itself so obviously as a schema for the audience to work with. However, additional layers of meaning and response can emerge if we are prepared to study a body of films which have a shared auteur origin.

Scorsese and *New York, New York*

The Scorsese auteur structure can, at least in part, be deduced from films which lie chronologically on either side of *New York, New York* in which Martin Scorsese enjoyed the kind of producer-director control discussed above. Thus *Who's That Knocking at My Door?*, *Mean Streets*, *Raging Bull* and *King of Comedy* offer themselves as texts to be searched for the kind of recurring features which will allow us to construct an auteur structure. *Boxcar Bertha* and *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, films over which Scorsese did not exercise such personal control, are excluded from consideration. (But should they be? Perhaps they are in some respects the most interesting; projects where the director had to 'negotiate' a relationship, an identity with the material.) We discover the following principal thematic preoccupations in two or more of Scorsese's 'auteur' films from his films up to the mid 1990s¹⁴:

- a strong focus on masculinity: on male friendship, on male sexuality and on the ways in which these are threatened or experienced as areas of personal crisis
- more specifically, the male attitude to women as 'other', as unknowable, definable as 'whores' or 'virgins', as the source of the threat to masculinity, as the cause of male paranoia, and consequently as objects of abuse within relationships where the male seeks to assert dominance
- explicitly or implicitly the male character is placed within a framework of guilt, sin, retribution, redemption;
- the male existing within a closed world, either a community (New York Italian) or a mental state of alienation and reality distortion
- this reality distortion is sometimes linked to wider forms of reality distortion within American culture (*Taxi Driver* and *King of Comedy*)

- generally the resolution of internal conflict by means of external violence
- as an extension to this, the dominance of the physical over the verbal—male characters are characteristically inarticulate but physically expressive
- a representation of blacks which reflects either the overt or implicit racism of the protagonists

We also note the following features of form and style recurring in two or more of the above named films:

- documentary-style realism in 'method' performances and locations
- the expressive use of mobile camera, lighting, editing and sound which works against the documentary realism, placing it within a stylised artificiality
- thus, point-of-view is a complex interaction of the spectator's observations of an 'objective' world and the character's 'subjective' perception of that world
- the primary role assigned to soundtrack in the creation of meaning
- the adoption (and subsequent problematising) of generic forms and, in particular, the ambiguity and perplexity of the films' closures

These paradigms, these features observable within the films can be amplified by reference to biographical information concerning Martin Scorsese. So, for example, his close identification with Little Italy in New York City, with its distinctive social formation, may be cited. More specifically, his Catholic background provides useful corroborating evidence, and some (overly neat?) personal statements such as that in which he says that as a boy he wished to be either a priest or a gangster. His immersion from a very early age in film culture helps to explain something of the rich repertoire of styles and images he is able to bring to the screen. His interest in the films of Powell and Pressburger, as well as the more obvious homage to the MGM classic musical, may, for example, advance our appreciation of *New York, New York*.

Keeping Scorsese-the-person at arm's length by working with Scorsese-the-structure in order to make meaning out of *New York, New York* may appear absurdly purist. Biographical information such as that outlined in the previous paragraph clearly contributes to the composite auteur structure which we are applying to the film. However, the question must be considered: what kinds of biographical detail are useful? For example, during the filming of *New York, New York* Scorsese was having a relationship with Minnelli while his nine months pregnant wife, co-screenwriter Julie Cameron, stalked the set. There were also strong rumours of on-set cocaine use. When considering the improvisational approach used throughout the film, is it necessary to probe the madness in this method?

In placing *New York, New York* within an auteur structure called 'Scorsese' it is possible to identify more sharply both stylistic and thematic elements and in so doing move towards a more complex understanding and appreciation of the film. One of the themes which is amplified by application of the auteur structure is the male struggling to find expression and identity within a heterosexual relationship. For example, Jimmy Doyle's saxophone as phallus is most dramatically referred to in

the scene with Francine just before the birth of their baby when he accuses her of provoking him to smash it. (Also referred to above.)

One of the stylistic features which is amplified by the application of the auteur structure is the placing of method performance against the artificiality and visual excess of its studio-bound locations. At the same time, the film does not demonstrate some of the key elements of other Scorsese films, such as the placing of the central character within a Catholic theological context of guilt and redemption (the rejection of 'Happy Endings' actually makes this a less 'redemptive' film than those apparently much bleaker films made on either side of it). The fact that there is not a perfect 'match' between auteur structure and film is perfectly reasonable. The structure offers us a schema. It is enough if we can 'map' some of the features of the film on to this schema. The auteur structure should not wrap the film being studied in a strait jacket.

This superficial sketch of auteurist features of *New York, New York* nevertheless allows some evaluation of the use of auteur study as a critical approach to Hollywood cinema. Most obviously, elements of theme and style become foregrounded, confirming what might otherwise remain a spectator's tentative interpretation of the film's meaning. Perhaps new significance can be read into detail, and a richer appreciation becomes possible of aspects of the film's form. While remaining philosophically and methodologically suspect, an auteur approach offers an additional layer of coherence to the text and helps us to come to terms with some of the text's important 'surplus' meaning. The more auteur structures/identities that enter into general circulation and become visible, the more expectations are raised and fulfilment sought by audiences always on the lookout for patterns of repetition and variation as part of the pleasure of cinema.

ENDNOTE: LATER SCORSESE FILMS AND THE PRODUCTIVITY OF A STRUCTURALIST APPROACH

The challenge to apply a structuralist set of critical approaches to films directed by Martin Scorsese since the mid-1990s may appear more difficult than in the earlier period of his career where most of his films were marked by very clear generic, star and auteur identities. The general critical consensus is that Scorsese's films have become somewhat overblown, lacking the sharpness and distinctiveness of his great work from the mid 70s to the mid 90s. However, we need to remind ourselves that criticism along these lines was levelled at *New York, New York* in 1977 and this essay has tried to demonstrate how, through the application of a structuralist set of critical approaches, a relatively ignored film can be recovered as a complex, rewarding and in many ways very fine film.

Among other recurring observations of Scorsese's later work is that it appears more compromised - his autonomy within the institution of Hollywood seems to have been weakened. Is it more difficult to identify structures in Scorsese's work over the last ten years, and thus, by implication, it is more difficult to adapt the approaches used to explore *New York, New York*?

Certainly the genre critical approach remains appropriate with films such as *Bringing Out the Dead* (1999), *Gangs of New York* (2002) and *The Departed* (2006). The biopic, *The Aviator* (2004) demonstrates how, in an age of ever greater genre hybridity, Scorsese's big budget films remain relatively 'pure' in their generic characteristics and it is interesting to compare *The Aviator* to an earlier biopic - *New York, New York*.

The shift from Robert De Niro to Leonardo Di Caprio, as Scorsese's principal star has been disconcerting to many fans of the earlier films. However, the only question here is does a star critical approach continue to be viable? The answer is surely yes, and even a simple commutation test (see note 10 below), comparing De Niro and Di Caprio, offers significant insights into what may have changed in tone and style in Scorsese's film.

The recurring characteristics that were listed earlier and which, it was argued, made up what we could call the Scorsese 'signature' may be less obvious in the later work. On the other hand, we need to recognize the need to update the Scorsese auteur 'structure', and in so doing we may begin to identify more precisely the shifts and developments in the body of work as a whole.

The three-part critical approach presented in this essay is descriptive, not evaluative. However, if a critical approach offers a level of description which opens our eyes to the film in question, then inevitably our evaluative response to that film will change too. We may admire the film more or less as we gain greater insight into the structures – of genre, star and auteur – that create meaning.

And this must lead to a final word of caution. Once we have opened up a film in ways that allow us to see more clearly how it works intellectually, through its organization of structures and signs, we have still a very long way to go. In particular we will still need to do a lot of work in exploring our own response – which is never just intellectual but also emotional. The critical approaches outlined here and applied to *New York New York* need to be supplemented by others which explore the relationship between image, sound and their impact on the spectator at more 'micro' levels. Often we forget much of the narrative of a film but are able to recall vividly a particular moment which moved or shocked us deeply. How Hollywood films play on our memories, why particular moments in a performance, in the staging of a scene create such powerful affect, is of equal importance to the descriptive mapping that the application of genre, star and auteur structures is often able to achieve.

FURTHER VIEWING

For an excellent introduction to Hollywood cinema and to the personality of Martin Scorsese: *A Century of Cinema: A Personal Journey Through American Movies* (Scorsese, BFI Videos 1995) If you wish to engage in a detailed study of the musical genre, you are recommended to view some of the following films:

The Musical:

The biopic

- *The Glenn Miller Story* (Mann, 1954)
- *A Star is Born* (Cukor, 1954)—also for Judy Garland
- *Evita* (Parker, 1996)
- The star vehicle
- *Funny Girl* (Wyler, 1968)
- *Cabaret* (Fosse, 1972)—also for Liza Minnelli

The MGM product (all of the following were produced by Arthur Freed)

- *Meet Me in St Louis* (Minnelli, 1944)—also for Judy Garland and Vincent Minnelli
- *On the Town* (Donen/Kelly, 1949)

- *An American in Paris* (Minnelli, 1951)
- *Singin' in the Rain* (Donen/Kelly, 1952)
- *Band Wagon* (Minnelli, 1953)

It is interesting to compare the MGM musicals listed above with the Warner Bros. product of the 1930s such as:

- *42nd Street* (Bacon, 1933)
- *Gold Diggers of 1933* (Le Roy, 1933)

Rick Altman in his *The American Film Musical* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Ind., 1987) identifies three categories of Hollywood musical. All but three of the films listed above come from one of those categories, 'The Show Musical'. The exceptions are *An American in Paris* (a 'Fairy Tale' musical) and *Meet Me in St Louis* and *On the Town* (Folk Musicals)

It is also useful to compare Scorsese's *New York, New York* with Coppola's *One From the Heart* (1982).

De Niro and Scorsese

These are the Scorsese-De Niro collaborations:

- *Mean Streets* (1973)
- *Taxi Driver* (1976)
- *New York, New York* (1977)
- *Raging Bull* (1980)
- *King of Comedy* (1982)
- *GoodFellas* (1990)
- *Cape Fear* (1991)
- *Casino* (1995)

To compare De Niro in Scorsese films with his work for other directors, a useful range might include:

- *The Godfather, Part II* (Coppola, 1974)
- *The Last Tycoon* (Kazan, 1976)
- *The Deer Hunter* (Cimino, 1978)
- *True Confessions* (Grosbard, 1981)

- *Once Upon a Time in America* (Leone, 1984)
- *Angel Heart* (Parker, 1986)
- *The Untouchables* (De Palma, 1987)
- *Midnight Run* (Brest, 1989)
- *A Bronx Tale* (De Niro, 1993)
- *Jackie Brown* (Tarantino, 1998)

The study of genre, star and auteur invites list-making. However, it is through the construction of more imaginative lists which go across these obvious categories that critical discussion is opened up. These may be along the lines of a specific critical approach such as that of Schatz's 'Genres of order' and 'Genres of integration'. They may be film lists reflecting combinations of stars and genre or stars and auteur. The vital thing to remember is that interpretation and critical analysis are creative acts. We are free to construct different shapes and patterns out of the vast range of films available to us at cinemas, on video and on television. We should see this as an opportunity for making new and interesting meaning.

<i>Genres of order</i>	<i>Genres of integration</i>
(for example, Western, gangster, science fiction)	(for example, musicals, comedies, melodramas)
Hero	Hero
Individual	Couple or collective—e.g. family
(male dominant)	(female dominant)
Setting	Setting
Contested space (ideologically unstable)	Civilised space (ideologically stable)
Conflict	Conflict
Externalised (expressed through violent action)	Internalised (expressed through emotion)
Resolution	Resolution
Elimination (death)	Embrace (love)
Thematics	Thematics
The hero takes upon (him)self the problems, contradictions inherent in his society and acts as redeemer	The couple or family are integrated into the wider community, their personal antagonisms resolved
Macho code of behaviour	Maternal—familial code
Isolated self-reliance (either through his departure or death, the hero does not assimilate the values/lifestyle of the community he saves—but maintains his individuality)	Community co-operation