



**MARTIN SCORSESE**

A BIOGRAPHY

Vincent LoBrutto

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A Biography

*Vincent LoBrutto*

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To Vincenzo LoBrutto, Marie LaLomia, Michael Stabile, Lucy LaRosa,  
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## INTRODUCTION

This biography is a critical, cultural, and psychological investigation where the work of Martin Scorsese is the spine and soul of the man.

Since the era of auteur criticism, a tradition has been established of mining a director's canon of films for themes, personal artifacts, clues, and codes that would reveal and define the creator. This approach makes for fascinating reading and discussion but is inherently treacherous for a biographer. In my biography of Stanley Kubrick (a filmmaker who greatly inspired and influenced Martin Scorsese), intensive research into the life and work of Kubrick (1928–1998) led me to conclude that the auteur methodology might have provided some answers about Kubrick, the man, but that to purport direct connections between thematic properties of Kubrick's films and the facts and reality of his life would have been an auteurist trap to fall into—by mistakenly assigning attitude, behavior, and personality traits “found” in the films to its maker.

If Kubrick was cool and analytical, Martin Scorsese is red-hot and emotional. Scorsese is a personal filmmaker. Every one of his films contains his DNA in varying degrees. Scorsese's films are informed by the finite areas directly related to his life: Italian and Italian-American culture, Catholicism, New York City, the movies, film history and film grammar, and family—blood relatives and the brotherhood of the cinema. The signposts, autobiographical references, thematic allusions, personal views, and the mirror of film history are there to be identified, read, decoded, and explained.

The genesis of this book began in 1997 when my then literary agent suggested I follow up *Stanley Kubrick: A Biography* with one on Martin

Scorsese. At that time I was considering several directorial subjects; Scorsese had not been on my list for a reason. When “Why don’t you do Scorsese?” rang in my ears, the question triggered a number of high-voltage emotions.

I have always admired Martin Scorsese’s ferocious talent as a film director. In my estimation Scorsese has ascended to the mantle held by the late Stanley Kubrick as the greatest living-at-work filmmaker. The consideration to write a biography of Martin Scorsese was a weighty one. The first Scorsese film I had seen was *Mean Streets* in its initial 1973 release. I was twenty-three years old and in my third year at the School of Visual Arts Film School. From the opening shot through the final frame, I watched the screen and kept silently repeating, “How can this guy know me so well?” Watching *Mean Streets* was a revelation. The dark secrets Italian-Americans knew about themselves and their culture were exposed like raw nerves. My objectivity was invaded by a truth teller who had the courage and cinematic gifts to put our ethnic culture up on the screen. Decades of stereotyping in film and television were shattered when Scorsese explored his heritage and tribal rights in *Mean Streets*, *GoodFellas*, *Casino*, and *The Last Temptation of Christ*.

For me, viewing these works is an anxiety-provoking albeit liberating sensation as part of my psyche and blood-membership in ethnic and popular culture is exposed. The suggestion to “do Scorsese” tested a sense of commitment that resonated well beyond a sense of professionalism.

As I learned more about Scorsese, the points of connection were startling. A series of similarities have provided me with unique insight into Martin Scorsese. I am an Italian-American, a baby boomer, and a native New Yorker with Sicilian roots. I was an East Coast film student, then independent filmmaker, film editor, filmmaking and cinema studies educator, and have been passionate and obsessive about motion pictures since my first 8mm effort in 1967.

The research for this book began back in 1973 after that screening of *Mean Streets* in its debut run. I clipped and filed all the articles I could find concerning Martin Scorsese, read books as they appeared, saw the movies as they arrived, and followed his career through a particularly close-looking glass.

Direct research began in 1997. I quickly found that the paradigm I used to write *Stanley Kubrick: A Biography* would not get me where I wanted to go. After many outlines and plans, it became crystal clear that it was Scorsese’s films that would lead me on a path to reconciliation concerning the nexus between Scorsese’s work and life.

For oral history the reader is encouraged to examine *Martin Scorsese: A Journey* by Mary Pat Kelly and *Scorsese on Scorsese*, edited by David Thompson and Ian Christie. These are revealing and valuable books.

This biography is not consistently linear. The films are the spine of the book; the biographical aspects grow out of the making of those films. My aim is to connect the content, aesthetic style, and cultural and autobiographical riches in Scorsese's cinematic career to his physical and spiritual life.

Thus, this is a biography where the life lived and the director's films in all aspects constantly intersect. Focus on the films is not thematic critical interpretation—when there is film analysis it is intended as a reader's guide to Scorsese's work process designed to offer an informed opinion and to illuminate Scorsese's lifebreath as it transforms and absorbs into each Martin Scorsese Picture.

Many Italian-Americans and other immigrant-rooted cultures have lived an outsider's existence. As many Scorsese films document, America is a wondrous melting pot, but also a country of turf designation, tribal structure, and ancestral tradition. As author, I think of my role as an outsider who has been an insider on this endeavor. I am not a friend, colleague, or associate of Martin Scorsese's, but in the true definition of the Italian term, I believe we are *paisans*, brought together by what the noted scholar Richard Gambino calls "the blood of my blood."



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PART 1  
Turf, 1880–1959



## My Voyage to Little Italy

Of all the regions in Italy, it is Sicily that reflects the Italian nature and spirit. Sicily is an island where the sun bakes the skin, and passions run deep. It is the fabled home of the Cosa Nostra and of rich food flavored with deep red tomatoes and ripe garlic. Rome, Naples, and Florence brought sophistication to the Italian character, but Sicily exudes the raw emotional intensity that is all we understand to be Italian. Sicilians speak in dialects derivative of Arabic and Greek imported by the civilizations that invaded them throughout history. The Sicilians treasure family and are wary of government. They live by a code of honor known as the *omerta*. The rules of the *omerta* are strict but unwritten, passed down from father to son, and from mother to daughter. They define respect, retribution, redemption, and right and wrong. The Sicilian is born into a closed society; he walks among us but is loyal only to his family and to God. The code is the invisible bible. Trust no one but *la famiglia* and your *paisans*.

Martin Scorsese's paternal grandfather, Francesco Scorsese, was born in Polizzi Generosa, Sicily, around 1880. Polizzi Generosa lies near Palermo, the capital of Sicily. Francesco Scorsese's mother died when he was only six or seven years old, and the boy felt rejected when his father remarried. Francesco was taken in and later adopted by a neighboring farmer. Working in the fields, Francesco began to dream about America, the land of the free, and the land of opportunity. Throughout the Mezzogiorno, the area comprised of the provinces of Abruzzi, Campania, Apulia, Lucania, Calabria, and Sicily, Italians shared the dream of a better life. The citizenry lived in anguish. Taxes were imposed on grain—the staff of life—and suffering from lack of food and life-threatening malaria and cholera caused a pervasive distrust of the government. The stage was set for a mass

exodus. Francesco was a *contadino*, a member of the peasant class of farmers, fishermen, and artisans. He worked hard on the land of his adopted father. The farmer had plans for Francesco. He wanted him to work the homestead and marry one of his daughters, but nineteen-year-old Francesco Scorsese was determined. With every swing of the scythe his desire to leave for America grew. Resisting the offer of land and family, he boarded a ship and arrived in America just at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Martin Scorsese's paternal grandmother, Teresa, was also born in Polizzi Generosa. Teresa was an excellent cook who made classic dishes of the region that set the standard for the family's future generations. Teresa's putensa sauce featured oil-cured olives, finely chopped Italian plum tomatoes, fresh basil, and grated locatelli cheese. She made succulent bra-ciole by pounding steak until it was paper thin, then stuffed the meat with toasted bread crumbs, finely chopped salami and hard-boiled eggs, minced garlic and parsley, and freshly grated cheese, topped with her homemade tomato sauce. Her ricotta pie was full of the fresh, textured, creamy cheese and flavored with sugar, vanilla, cinnamon, candied fruit, and chocolate chips. The petite and strong-willed young woman had set out for America in a small boat. After a month battling angry seas, starvation, and disease, Teresa saw the great green lady and the torch—she was in America.

Martin Cappa, Scorsese's maternal grandfather and his namesake, was born in the town of Ciminna, Sicily. Like Francesco, Martin never knew his mother and was cared for by a family who took him in. When he came of age, the tall, dashing, and elegant man with a handsome face and handlebar mustache became a soldier in the cavalry.

Domenica Cappa was also born in Ciminna, Sicily. One day she heard the sound of cavalry horses passing by her house. She ran out onto the low balcony and watched the soldiers as they rode by. Suddenly, the deep-lidded eyes of the regal young woman caught the glance of a handsome cavalry soldier. Martin Cappa rode close to Domenica. He was wearing a blue uniform, and a hat with a large, white plume. They looked deeply into each other's eyes and fell in love.

After a twenty-two day courtship Domenica and Martin were married. Their daughter Sarah was born in 1912. Martin got caught up in the New World fervor and left for America to find a new life for his family. He began writing to Domenica to join him but she feared the trip and continually resisted. Frustrated, Martin wrote a final plea, threatening to leave her if she didn't come immediately. Domenica and Sarah got on the next boat, but only because her brother was by her side. When they were ready

to sail, Domenica turned and panicked when she realized that her brother was gone—she had been tricked. The trip was long and arduous.

Francesco, Teresa, Domenica, and Martin made the same trip as thousands of Italian immigrants yearning for a better life; they had the clothes on their backs, a few belongings, and the culture of the old world. The odyssey was a shared experience. They didn't know what it meant to be Italian-American; they were Italian-born and would become the first transplanted generation. Setting foot on the streets of New York was the beginning of their American experience. For a majority of Italians it was a place to lay down roots. The earliest arrivals settled in Lower Manhattan; then there was a surge north to Mulberry Street. The Mulberry District, as it was known, became the largest Italian enclave in the United States. Once an affluent area, by 1845 it had deteriorated into a hub of organized crime. The narrow cobble-stoned streets were dominated by river gangs, with names like Swamp Angels and Slaughter Housers, who robbed and murdered the rich. Police would only patrol the Mulberry District in platoons of six or more. The Brewery was a complex of apartment buildings in the heart of Mulberry where thieves, murderers, pickpockets, beggars, prostitutes, and degenerates of every variety committed mayhem. When the Brewery was torn down in 1853 laborers carried out sacks of unidentified human bones discovered in the walls and infamous cellars. The Bend was a Mulberry section described by immigrant historian Jacob Riis as "a purgatory of unrelieved squalor. An inferno tenanted by the very dregs of humanity." Men, women, and children were crammed into damp basements, leaky garrets, sodden cellars, drafty outhouses, and stables converted into crude dwellings. Mulberry's Bend was eventually torn down by the New York Tenement Housing Commission in 1892. In June 1901 The Bend was converted into Mulberry Park. As Italians arrived in the Mulberry at the turn of the century, conditions were improving. Determined to make a new life as Italian-Americans, the cultures of the *Mezzogiorno* and the underworld history of the District shaped and influenced their immediate situation and the destiny of generations to come.

Italian bastions formed all over the five boroughs of New York. Italian communities developed in the likeness of the region, village, or section of a village in Italy from which the immigrants had migrated. Italian settlements sprung up in Boston, San Francisco, New Orleans, and across America, but the Mulberry District was the Mecca. It surpassed all others in population and business enterprises. Mulberry became synonymous with Italian-American life and was referred to by most as Little Italy.

New York's Little Italy is located on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, delineated by Mulberry, Mott, Prince, and Spring Streets. The Irish had

been the first to immigrate to the District. As Italians arrived in large numbers, at first there was resentment, and then, the Irish began to relocate around the borders of the neighborhood. The district truly transformed into a Little Italy. Within this small number of blocks the Italians simulated their homeland by creating a village mentality with sharply drawn boundaries. The Sicilians traveled from the southern tip of Italy's boot to declare Elizabeth Street an American home. The Neapolitans planted their flag on Mulberry Street. Class distinctions were clearly demarcated; the Northern Italians felt superior, the Sicilians were a worker class. Little Italy was ruled by a *capo* system brought over from the old country, rather than a city government or the federal government of the United States. A *capo* is a boss, the chief, a leader, and the man in charge. In Italy the *capo* was a landowner. In America, the Sicilians answered to the *capos* of the neighborhood that controlled their streets. You kept your mouth shut and your eyes open. Everyone answered to the *capo du tutti* who earned his respected position out of fear.

The seeds of Martin Scorsese's destiny were planted by his grandparents when the two families independently settled on Elizabeth Street. Francesco, a proud man with no formal education (but with a strength of character) worked as a laborer. At twenty-one he married Teresa in the old Saint Patrick's Church, which presided over Little Italy on an entire city block. The Scorsese's moved to 241 Elizabeth, and the Cappa's chose the fourth floor of 232 across the street. Martin Scorsese's father, Charles (whose name was really Luciano) was born to Francesco and Teresa in about 1913. Martin Scorsese's mother, Catherine Cappa, was born in about 1912.

At one point fourteen people lived in the three-room Cappa apartment. All nine children resided in the living room. An aunt, uncle, and their son occupied the bedroom, and the kitchen was in the middle. Fanny Scorsese, Charles' older sister, lived beneath the Cappa's. Charles liked to stay at his sister's, and, therefore, was a frequent visitor in Catherine's building.

Martin Cappa was a scaffold worker and traveled to Springfield, New Jersey, to find work. He was away from his family from Monday through Friday, returning only on weekends. His hard labor yielded forty-five dollars a week, a good wage at the time. But the labor took its toll. An arm injury put Martin out of work for an extended period. Domenica was an expert seamstress and began to stitch pants to make up for the lost income. One of her patrons was Daddy Browning, a New York millionaire whose clothes were custom-made at Arnhem's on Ninth Street. Like many Italian-American women, Domenica worked at home doing piecework, trying to survive in a free-enterprise democracy. Domenica

taught Catherine and her sister Sarah the craft. The girls watched their mother as she meticulously worked up the seams of high quality pants, while simultaneously watching over her smaller children.

Francesco Scorsese worked in shipyards for the New York Steam Company, and in the fruit and vegetable business. The Italian diet was fortified by fresh fruit and vegetables considered exotic by many Americans of the era. Fennel, broccoli rabe, bulbs of garlic, eggplant, squash, and ruby-red plum tomatoes, which were the staple of Italian cuisine, were sold on carts and in specialty stores. The fruit and vegetable business was a predominantly Italian occupation for the first half of the century. During World War I Francesco did hard labor in the hull of ships. At New York Steam, Francesco had as many as one hundred workers under his supervision. But Francesco wanted to be his own boss. After leaving the job he opened and closed at least ten produce businesses, often losing money on the deal. Italian women would carefully inspect each head of garlic. Everything was sold loose. A *signora* would handpick just enough fresh mushrooms, *efughi*, for the night's dinner.

One of Francesco's business endeavors was a grocery store on the ground level of their Elizabeth Street apartment. His family was infuriated over the decision. New York Steam kept asking him to come back to work, but Francesco refused and remained self-employed.

Teresa Scorsese was a strong-willed woman. Nine people lived in their small four-room apartment. To supplement the income, there were two boarders while Charles was growing up. Teresa cooked for them and hand-washed their clothes. Conditions were spare and there was no real furniture in the household. During the day, beds were upright so family business and chores could be conducted. At night, beds were taken down and there was little room to walk around.

Charles Scorsese and Catherine Cappa grew up in Little Italy—it was their neighborhood and Elizabeth Street was their block. The street was crowded with people, storefronts, and pushcarts. First the neighborhood had been Irish; then Jewish businessmen came in. Every store and basement was taken over for enterprise. In the morning the pushcart peddlers lined up on the shady side of Elizabeth Street. In the afternoon when the sun shifted, the peddlers switched to the other side. The neighborhood had a Five and Dime, a shoe store, a dry goods shop, and many Irish bars. Charles enjoyed going to Schimmel's for potato knishes and coffee. Chinatown was on the other side of Canal Street. Catherine graduated from junior high school but could not continue. The family couldn't afford it, so Catherine sewed in a doll's clothing factory until she was seventeen, when she began working in a dress factory on Second Avenue. There she

sewed dresses for twenty-five cents apiece. Later, Charles' brother introduced her to Mr. Silverman, The Jersey King, who manufactured dresses made of Jersey fabric. This was a better job and for more money. Catherine worked for The King for thirty-nine years.

Charles worked as a clothing presser in the days before steam lines made the job simpler. Charles applied his trade with a sixteen-pound iron, a bucket of water, a sponge, and a cloth. He was a top-notch presser. Charles was given samples of dresses and was expected to make each dress look perfect. He found the job a satisfying challenge. Pressing was seasonal work dependent on the garment industry's calendar. Off-season, Charles got unemployment for nineteen weeks. While Charles was collecting his checks, he hung out with friends, all pressers, in a pool room on Elizabeth Street. Charles didn't make much money at first. He was a perfectionist and only the hurried hands made money at piecework. Later his reputation brought him to the International Dress House where he pressed fine gowns for twenty dollars an hour.

Charles and Catherine lived across the street from each other. They often saw one another as they went about their business. Charles became smitten with the teenage Catherine. He began a courting campaign. Charles didn't have a balcony but he turned his fire escape into a veranda, where he serenaded his lady playing a guitar and singing Italian arias. On their first date they strolled by a Second Avenue dress shop window and Charles bought Catherine a brown woolen dress with a leopard collar. This first purchase established a tradition; Charles began to give Catherine samples he got from his boss at International Dress House. Catherine, a size five who weighed ninety-four pounds, would never have to buy a dress for retail again.

Charles and Catherine spent Sundays in Washington Square Park, where Charles and his friends played guitars and ukuleles. Their courtship matured and in June 1934, they married.

The Cappa apartment was too small for a wedding celebration, so the party was held on the roof. To Italian-Americans living in New York City, the roofs of their crowded apartment buildings represented freedom, a tar beach in the warm weather, a place to get air, to be alone, or with a friend, or loved one. Relatives and friends of the Scorsese and Cappa families gathered on the roof, the men in their best suits, the women in their best dresses. Charles and Catherine, now husband and wife, made a grand entrance up the stairwell and through the heavy door and were applauded with cheers and handfuls of rice. It was an urban image—Catherine in her white wedding dress, Charles in his tuxedo—the black tar, Elizabeth Street apartment buildings in the background, and behind those the

skyline of New York. This was an Italian football wedding. A long table held stacks of wrapped sandwiches full of Genoa salami, prosciutto, cappocola ham, and mortadella cold cuts. Long streams of pink crape paper flowed from a pole decorating the festive and sacred event. Guests grabbed sandwiches and made trades by calling out, "I've got a cappocola," "I've got a salami," and tossing the specialties like a football. A traditional wedding cake was served. A local priest congratulated the couple. Some guests ate while standing on their feet, and others sat down on the slanted periphery of the roof. Photos were taken of the bride and groom, the women of the family, and the men of the family. All had a great time. Charles and Catherine Scorsese were ready to begin a life and a family together.

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