

# Scorsese's film *Cape Fear* is gleefully subversive

by Mattia Magnatta

With all the critical acclaim accorded *GoodFellas*, director Martin Scorsese created his own career pressure — he directed a film to which all ensuing Scorsese pictures would inevitably be compared.

No longer. By challenging the traditional boundaries of the suspense-thriller genre Scorsese's latest film, *Cape Fear*, sets a new precedent.

The plot of *Cape Fear* is deceptively simple. Max Cady (Robert De Niro), who has just been released from prison, is literally on a mission from God, out to terrorize the lawyer, Sam Bowden (Nick Nolte), who he believes is responsible for his 14 year prison term. From this simple premise the narrative spirals outward, with Scorsese the giddy navigator.

Perhaps *Cape Fear*'s greatest achievement is the way in which it juxtaposes the schlocky "blood and guts" action with subtle psychological tension. This is due as much to Scorsese's dark revisionist sensibili-

**film**  
**Cape Fear**  
starring Robert De Niro and Nick Nolte  
directed by Martin Scorsese  
produced by Universal Studios

ties as to the Spielbergian notion of film as two-hour roller coaster ride. In the post-*Silence of the Lambs* world, the psychopath is not only capable of brutal physical violence but, to make matters worse, is well read, eloquent and charming.

De Niro portrays the "Bad Guy" writ large, an explosive amalgam of every memorable evil incarnation that has stalked the silver screen. The brutality of Travis Bickle (*Taxi Driver*), the seductiveness of Satan (*Angel Heart*) and the indestructible qualities of The Terminator are all embodied in the character of Max Cady.

Add a muscular, well-defined physique, a southern drawl and a thorough knowledge of law, philosophy and religion and the audience is presented with the quintessential Walking Nightmare.



Robert De Niro (left) and Nick Nolte star in Martin Scorsese's tense remake of the 1962 film *Cape Fear*. Scorsese takes the clichés of the suspense-thriller and, in a self-conscious manner, transforms them into a scary film.

In true manipulative fashion, only Scorsese knows where the picture will end up, and the path it will take.

Craftily employing suspense-thriller techniques such as weird, diagonal camera angles and abrupt zoom-ins

in a self-conscious manner, Scorsese transforms these banal clichés.

He then subverts the inescapable elements of the suspense-thriller: predictable plot lines and one-dimensional characters. In a reversal of roles, Bowden, the lawyer, finds himself forced to resort to illegal behaviour in order to eradicate Cady while Cady defends himself with due process of the law.

In one of the most tense and sexually charged scenes ever committed to celluloid occurs Danielle Bowden, the lawyer's daughter, meets Cady for "drama class." This especially long take not only showcases the exceptional talent of Juliette Lewis, but also demonstrates editor Thelma Schoonmaker's excellent sense of timing.

*Cape Fear* is infused with a Hitchcockian sense of suspense and tension due in large part to a rescored of Bernard Herrmann's powerful original score and Henry Bumstead's meticulous production design; both men collaborated with Hitchcock.

Amid all this talent, it is easy to overlook Jessica Lange's brilliant performance. Don't. Everything in *Cape Fear* is included for effect, and the effect is gleefully subversive.

## Throughout his career, Scorsese's been challenging

by Stephen Balsky

Much cinematic garbage was churned out in the late 1980s and 90s; the number of box office bombs well exceeded the number of memorable films. Directors never cease to amaze me with their half-assed attempts to cash in on the popularity of stars by equipping them with a pencil-thin plot and inane dialogue.

One Hollywood director stands out, however, a man whose films consistently provide intense, often violent images with guaranteed blockbuster performances: Martin Scorsese.

Although his 1989 release, *Goodfellas*, was robbed of the best picture Oscar, his gritty portrait of a Mafia neighbourhood was graced by Joe Pesci's manic, brilliantly psychotic hood, Tommy. This performance nabbed Pesci the best supporting actor award, and was a stepping stone to his current starring role in *The Super*.

*Goodfellas*, like most Scorsese flicks, mixes fluid camera work and fast pacing to ensure viewer interest throughout. Scorsese's shots and angles enhance the paranoid fears and intensity that is so difficult to capture on screen: Ray Liotta's drug bust near the end of *Goodfellas* is one example.

*Taxi Driver*, Scorsese's homage to New York City slum life, was a 1970s masterpiece. Robert DeNiro (a Scorsese regular) put forth a mesmerizing performance as the emotionally tortured Travis Bickle. His one-man assault on pimp Harvey Keitel is bloody and repellent; but, at the same time, it is astounding.

**film**  
From *Boxcar Bertha* to *Goodfellas* and his latest, *Cape Fear*, director Martin Scorsese has displayed genius

The realism of *Taxi Driver* was the driving force behind John Hinckley's attempted assassination of Ronald Reagan. *Taxi Driver* is not for all tastes; it has been accused of being "too dark" to enjoy. I, however, find

this urban horror story a must-see for film fanatics.

A later Scorsese effort, *After Hours*, contains his characteristic kinetic camera and tense atmosphere. A paranoid yuppie, Griffen Dunne, is plunged into SoHo's dark side in the wee hours of the night and forced to deal with losing his wallet, a murder rap and an odd assortment of characters trying to track him down.

*After Hours*, being the closest thing Scorsese has done to comedy, has rich performances, ranging from Rosanna Arquette's sultry female lead to Teri Garr's bizarre comrade of Dunn's. *After Hours* is a neatly packaged, hip comedy that doesn't have the emotional intensity of Scorsese's other efforts, yet is still enjoyable.

Many critics panned the controversial *Last Temptation of Christ*, claiming it was sacrilegious, pretentious and draggy. It did not lack the trademark knockout performances, however, from Willem Dafoe and Harvey Keitel.

For video junkies, some of Scorsese's other works are available for purchase or rental. Among these are *Boxcar Bertha*, *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, *Mean Streets*, *The Last Waltz* (his rockumentary on The Band) and the brilliant *King of Comedy*.

In a world where films are currently made as tax write-offs, it is pleasurable to know that there is at least one genius at work.

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