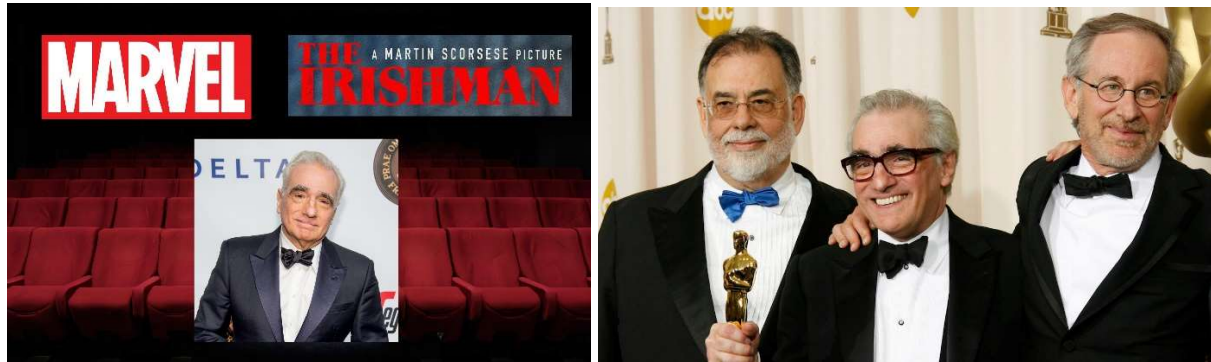


## The Basics of Content vs Film Form

By Jamie Trapp



**Martin Scorsese “back in my day we walked 5 miles to school...uphill both ways!”**

Within the last couple of years, film legend, Martin Scorsese has leveled several critiques against the state of the modern film industry. These critiques include but are not limited to the simultaneous decline in the quantity of “art films” with the increase in the quantity in Marvel and superhero films, the movie viewing public’s appetite for big budget films, and the increase in streaming services such as Amazon using content driven algorithms in recommending movie picks to customers. Each of these critiques are worth examining in depth but for the purpose of this article I will focus solely on the last one; streaming services focusing on Content.

Scorsese is one of the greatest and most respected film directors of all time. He has an incredibly deep and consistent filmography, is brilliant behind the camera, and has made three films in particular that are frequently brought up in the discussion of the greatest films ever made in *Taxi Driver*, *Raging Bull*, and *Goodfellas*. Scorsese came up with an explosion of American filmmaking talent in the 1970s along with other legends such as Francis Ford Coppola, Terrence Malick, Woody Allen, Brian De Palma, and Steven Spielberg. The photo above shows Scorsese in the middle with Coppola on the left and Spielberg on the right.

Regardless, of Scorsese’s ability and talent as a filmmaker he is still human after all. And it is only natural for older people to lament about the “good old days”. People like to believe things were once better than they are now, call it nostalgia or selective memory if you want.

Because of this it would be easy for some to simply dismiss Scorsese's complaints as nothing more than the grumblings of an old man resisting change. But this would be inaccurate. Scorsese is still going strong and just two years ago released what many people myself included consider to be a flat-out Masterpiece in *The Irishman*. Scorsese is still very much involved in the industry and works with people of all ages; he is hardly an isolated old man screaming into the abyss. Looking at some of the complaints offered by Scorsese I think he has an interesting point of view. To look into this further we need to understand what Scorsese means regarding content.

## **Content vs Film Form**

When evaluating or analyzing a film just about everything can be broken down into one of two groups, content, and form. Generally speaking content is what a film depicts while form is how that content is depicted.

### **Content -**

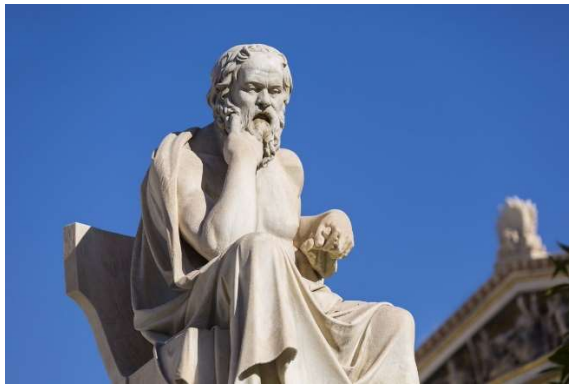
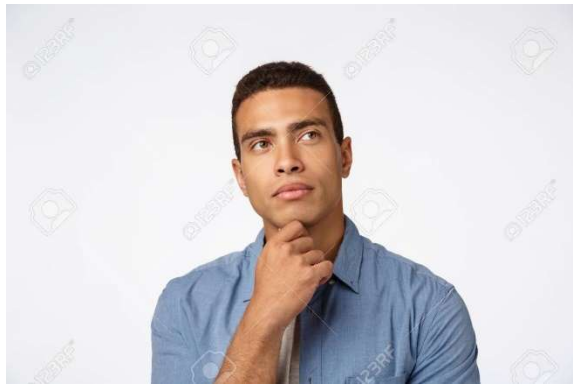
**What a film depicts including the subject matter, characters, plot/storyline, etc.**

### **Film Form -**

**How that content is depicted including camera techniques, story structure, visual motifs, etc.\***

\* Additionally film form considers how the different elements of the film relate to one another. However, for the purpose of this article we will focus only on the stated definition above.

## Decisions... Decisions...Decisions



When it comes to making a film really everything can be viewed from the perspective of decision making. Once a filmmaker decides on what the film will be about and has a screen play prepared, the process of filming can be viewed as a series of decisions to make. Consider a battle scene in a movie where you have two massive armies fighting on a battlefield. Now consider some of the different ways this generic film scene can be depicted. The filmmaker could use long shots of uncut action, say 35-45 seconds for an average shot or they could use quick edits, say every 3-4 seconds to create a more frenetic atmosphere. The director could use close up shots to increase the viewers intimacy with the characters, thus making the deaths feel more personal. The director may focus on a couple of particular characters, frequently cutting to them, or could instead shoot the battle in a way that is more focused on the totality of the armies and less on individual characters. Filmmakers can use a variety of techniques to film the same basic scene by making decisions based on camera angles, shot length, lighting, color, camera movements, music, etc. The same battle scene can be depicted in an infinite number of ways.

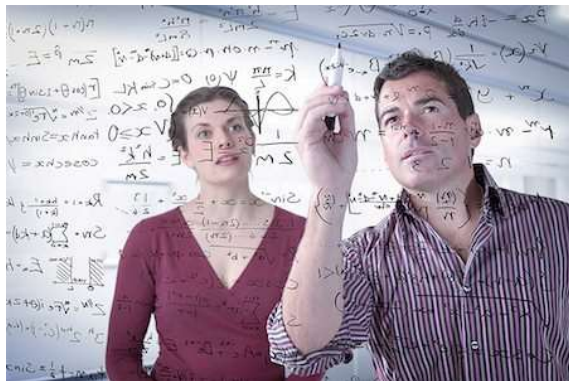
## It is Form NOT Content that Makes a Film Great

Consider Quentin Tarantino's superb debut film, *Reservoir Dogs*. The film centers around a jewel heist. And yet, interestingly, the actual heist itself is never shown to the audience. Tarantino uses a flashback structure that gives information about each of the characters backstories. We see the planning of the robbery and the aftermath of it but again, not the actual robbery itself. The narrative structure, the way we are given information about each character dispersed throughout the film, these are all formal decisions made by Tarantino. Just like the war scene example above, the heist depicted in *Reservoir Dogs* could have been

conveyed in an infinite number of ways. *Reservoir Dogs* is a great film not because Tarantino tells a story of a jewelry heist but because of how Tarantino tells the jewelry heist.

Many great directors and film critics alike believe that what a movie is actually about has little to do with its overall quality. Similar to my prior article in which I explain why the accuracy of a movie does not matter much in regard to its overall quality or merit, what a movie is ultimately about has little to do with its overall quality or merit. For instance, *The Godfather* which is routinely ranked as one of the greatest films ever made is a fascinating film that follows the life of the fictional Corleone crime family. The subject matter was certainly fascinating, the 1<sup>st</sup> film was released in the early 1970s, when the mafia was still a novel concept in film. However, the subject matter is not what makes *The Godfather* one of the greatest films of all time. There have been countless movies made about the mafia, some absolutely amazing while others god awful and many somewhere in between.

## Streaming Service Algorithms



At their core great film directors are artists, how they depict a particular subject, is what matters to them more than the actual subject itself. Circling back to Scorsese's criticism of modern streaming services such as Amazon, it should be clear as to why he would take issue with their use of subject based algorithms. When a person creates a user ID/account on say Amazon Prime or Netflix, these streaming services track every movie you watch. This leads to the service using algorithms based on prior viewing tendencies to suggest which TV shows and movies the user is likely to be interested in based largely on subject matter. This makes sense from a business standpoint, as these services want to make suggestions, they believe their customers are likely to watch based on their past decisions; this is basically how all



online commerce operates. When browsing for something to watch on Netflix or Prime you will often come across a row of films with a description above it such as "If you liked Movie X you may like the following Movies" or "Movie suggestions for Freddy." As stated above this all makes sense from a business standpoint. However, Martin Scorsese is an artist far more than he is a businessman, so it makes sense from his point of view as well. Martin Scorsese is an intelligent man, and he certainly understands why streaming services focus on content. None the less he encourages people to seek out films that interest them rather than relying strictly on streaming suggestions. Scorsese believes that is key in motivating people to expand their horizons and take risks in seeking out a wide variety of films rather than watching the same types of films over and over. Scorsese's longevity speaks for itself, the man has been making quality films pretty much non-stop for over 50 years and has a legitimate claim as one of the best 4 or 5 directors of all time. That he has successfully been able to change with the times for this long is a strong indication that these are much more than the grumblings of an old man. I for one would not doubt Scorsese.