Underworld in Martin Scorsese and Ram Gopal Varma's Cinema: A Comparative Content Analysis of their Directorial Aesthetics based on Select Films

Ajay Kasana and Dr. Narendra Kaushik

Abstract: Martin Scorsese and Ram Gopal Varma have their own vision to showcase the mafia world on the silver screen. If Scorsese along with Fritz Lang, Brian De Palma, Takashi Miike, Francis Ford Coppola, and Quentin Tarantino is considered the master of gangster cinema in English, Japanese and German films Varma, Mahesh Manjrekar, Apoorva Lakhia, and Anurag Kashyap have largely portrayed the cool Mafiosi in their films in Bollywood. But nothing quite comes close to *GoodFellas* (1990) whose inspiration reflects in about a dozen films and television shows. Similarly, Varma is called an agent provocateur largely because of *Satya* (1998). Like *GoodFellas*, *Gangs of New York* (2002) is also about underworld and based on a non-fiction book. In the case of Varma, he followed *Satya* with *Company*, a film also about the rise and the end of the underworld. This research study aims to understand the process of direction and the stories of the sample films of Martin Scorsese and sample films of Ram Gopal Varma. It is to analyze the difference and similarities between their craft. The four key elements to be analyzed are portrayal of the characters, fascination of the two directors for the underworld, taking cinematic liberty to tell the story and relevance of the story in today's time.

Keywords: Direction, Martin Scorsese, Ram Gopal Varma, portrayal of character, cinematic liberty.

1. Introduction

Direction, according to Milne Library (mil), an open access platform owned by Geneseo's research, is a combination of cinematography, acting, editing, blocking, and setting. To put it in other words, the director is the most creative person in a movie.

"The director leads the viewer so the viewer gets the most out of the movie. The director wants the viewer to see the story from a particular point of view. Like a stage director, a movie director tells the actors how to play a particular scene, sets the scene for a specific type of mood, and moves the actors around for a particular effect. In the above definition, the word setting is referring to the specific atmosphere created by the props, location, scenery, and costumes."

The style of Martin Scorsese's and Ram Gopal Varma's filmmaking can never be written, understood or analyzed without knowing about the aesthetics of their direction. Since the release of the first Indian Film '*Raja Harishchandra*', the Indian Cinema has always emphasized on direction. In films, the Direction and the Cinematography walk hand in hand.

1.1 Direction as a communication tool.

Direction constructs very strong imagery with interesting storytelling techniques. It helps in combining the process of filmmaking as head of the team. 'The director gives the viewers a proper perspective.' (AKINTAYO, 2017).

'In this communication we state our ideas about how to use movies to improve our classes and we illustrate them with some concrete examples of scenes which can be used in a University-level class' (Rodríguez-Muñiz, 2010).

1.2 Screenplay in films.

Screenplay in films has evolved rapidly. All these years screenplay writing has played a very important role in making films. However, in spite of this, script has not received much attention in academia. "Most producers and directors acknowledge the crucial role of the screenplay, yet the film script has received little academic attention until recently, even though the screenplay has been in existence since the early twentieth century" (Nelmes, 2010)

The development of a film screenplay is a complex and collaborative process, beginning with an initial story and continuing through drafting and financing to the start of the shoot. And yet the best ways of understanding and managing this process have never been properly studied" (Bloore, 2013).

2.0 Review of literature

This section of the study, reviews, analyzes and summarizes the related literature about the genre direction, scriptwriting, cinema, and lights. This reviewed literature is presented chronologically here, in which both theoretical and applied types of research studies are included.

Babalola argues that direction can be very interesting and rewarding. A stage director must necessarily be artistically and technically savvy for play production. He says that directors now seek means to explore in multimedia through different experiments. The author has also described about his visions by showing different work links of famous directors like Peter Brook, Lev Dodin, Robert Lepage etc. on how they use their creativity to fulfil the hungry needs of audience. (Babalola, 2017)

Maszerowska described the influence and role of light and contrast patterns in the cinema reading. The paper talks about the different perceptions and processes of usage of light and contrast with motion pictures to recognize its relevance in film transitions and adaptations. (Maszerowska, 2012)

Mateer described about Cinematic Virtual Reality (CVR) in which media fidelity has been approached. He argued that CVR allows to interact with the world to create reality by creating compelling stories and new type of filmmaking. He talked about the transportation theory used to create the concepts. (Mateer, 2017)

Kozlovic describes the references of Christian cinema which is said to be frequently ignored in educational institutions. The paper talks about the three popular Christian focuses that is cross imagery, cruciform poses and pieta stances. On the basis of these tree taxonomic categories, it is concluded that these are legitimate and entertaining pop culture's looks promising. (Kozlovic, 2007)

Eliashberg, Hui, and Zhang argue that movie industry uses a process called green-lighting to choose one script among thousands to turn into movie. This process is largely a guesswork based on experts' experience and intuitions. The paper proposes a new approach to help studios in profitable green-lighting decisions which includes domain knowledge, natural-language processing techniques, and statistical learning methods which forecasts a movie's return on investment (ROI). (Jehoshua Eliashberg, 2005)

3.0 Research Methodology

This is a qualitative analysis based on content analysis research method. It comprises the films of Martin Scorsese's *Good Fellas & Gangs of New York* and the films of Ram Gopal Varma's *Satya & Company*. The directional content of these films will be deconstructed and evaluated based on four prominent variables i.e. given below;

The parameters of analyzing the direction:

- Portrayal of characters.
- Fascination about underworld.

- Taking Cinematic Liberty.
- Relevance of the story.

This content analysis will extract the differences and similarities of the sample films of Martin Scorsese and Ram Gopal Varma. The researchers will design a coding sheet to summarize the key directional elements of the sample films.

3.1 Research Questions:

RQ1: What are the differentiators of Direction between Martin Scorsese's and Ram Gopal Varma's films?

RQ2: How different is the portrayal of characters in their sample films?

RQ3: How much obsession or fascination do Martin Scorsese and Ram Gopal Varma have with Underworld?

RQ4: How much cinematic liberty has been taken in sample films of Martin Scorsese and Ram Gopal Varma?

3.2 Research Objectives:

The objectives of the research study are as follows;

RO1: To explore the sample films of Martin Scorsese and Ram Gopal Varma.

RO2: To assess the brilliance of direction of Martin Scorsese's sample films.

RO3: To evaluate the gut-wrenching characters of Ram Gopal Varma's sample films.

3.3 Hypothesis

H1: Brilliant directional treatment of characters is the contribution of Martin Scorsese's films.

H2: The gut-wrenching characters used in Ram Gopal Varma's films are wild, over-the-top, and angry than in Martin Scorsese's sample films.

H3: The cinematic liberty is way lesser in cinematic universe of Martin Scorsese's sample films than of Ram Gopal Varma's sample films

3.4 Research design: The nature of the Research study is Qualitative Research method.

3.5 Types of variables: Four independent variables are used in this research study i.e., Portrayal of characters, Fascination about underworld, Taking Cinematic Liberty, Relevance of the story.

3.6 Sample design: The detail about the elements of the Sample Design is as follows.

3.6.1 Universe: The Universe of the Research Study is so huge here. The Direction Aesthetics: Martin Scorsese's and Ram Gopal Varma's Films.

3.6.2 Sampling Element: The Sampling Element of the Research Study are all the Direction aesthetics and its adaptations in Martin Scorsese's and Ram Gopal Varma's filmmaking.

3.6.3 Selection of Unit Sampling: The Direction Aesthetic of either Martin Scorsese or Ram Gopal Varma films is the Unit Sampling of the Research Study.

3.6.4 Sampling Technique: The Selection of the samples is based on the Purposive Sampling technique. Therefore, the researchers selected four movies which are based on Direction Aesthetic of Martin Scorsese's and Ram Gopal Varma's films.

4.0 Data analysis and interpretation:

The Content Analysis method is applied here to analyze the data, consequently. The content of this Qualitative Research Study are four films i.e., *Gangs of New York, Good Fellas, Satya* and *Company*.

This Research study comprises three independent variables i.e., Portrayal of characters, Fascination about underworld, and Taking Cinematic Liberty, Relevance of the story. Based on the data and the variables, the Narrative Analysis method of Qualitative Research study is used to interpret the content of the sample films.

4.1 The difference in Direction of both the filmmakers:

Famous movie director Werner Herzog said while talking about direction that – An idea comes and you see it, you hear it and you know it that's all where the process of filmmaking begins. A director is like a captain of the ship it doesn't matter whether the ship is big or not it's filled with people or empty if a captain can control it, drive it then only it will reach the destination which is audience's heart and mind. And every director is different in their process of thinking is different in their way of approaching is different in dealing with the actors is different that's why movies are called a director's baby, because they nurture with their sweat and blood. Everybody has their ways to achieve a perfect way of storytelling and making audience to believe in the world they have created.

Martin Scorsese: Martin Scorsese expresses himself in visual images in narrative cinema. There are certain tools which he uses and those tools become part of vocabulary tracking in or out

handling left and right the use of close-up opposed to medium shot. He uses all these elements to make emotional and psychological points. Scorsese tends to build stories that take place in model worlds be it Wall Street or an organized crime but his characters can be destructive and obsessive. More than anything else, Scorsese loves flawed characters. For example take Travis Bickel from *Taxi Driver*. Travis is surrounded by an immoral world. He is an isolated and complicated man who is driven into madness by the world around him but yet is determined to take charge. Next thing about the vision of Scorsese is production design of his films. Scorsese often places his stories in authentic world and surrounds them with raw, gritty, and realistic imagery, - real apartments, real restaurants, and real villages. This grounds his narratives in our world. The detailing in sets and dresses of the characters are on point, that if you see a garage, you know you had been there, when you see characters dress you know someone who dresses like this. Third point about Scorsese's filmmaking is sound design. Scorsese often uses sound design to help mask or even punctuate cuts with a pop of flashbulbs and when something is really important Scorsese uses richest sound that is silence. Martin Scorsese makes films that are both authentic and also cinematic. He is drawn towards authentic stories and often uses real life accounts for his films.

Ram Gopal Varma: Ram Gopal Varma was a pioneer of gangster genre in India. He started a whole new league for the films with *Satya* and *Shiva*. He usually drives on his instinct. He is very hyper and obsessive. His basic tool to start a movie is obsession or passion about something that is why you can see that type of variety in his career. Ram Gopal Varma's stories starts from a rage or passion towards a specific subject, whether it is *Satya*, *Company* or *Rangeela*. Ram Gopal Varma's characters are gut-wrenching and funny. Varma loves to put a character in circumstances where he questions society norms and system and takes decisions which are not at all favorable for him but in anger he takes these. Take Chandrakant Nagre (Chandu) from *Company*. He is short tempered, rages against oppression and is looking for a chance to be in a better situation. So, when things get little tense between him and his boss Malik, he forms a rival gang because of two things fear of oppression and greed of power.

Next thing is production design of Varma's films. Varma creates a realistic world with real locations. You cannot even point a single thing that looks out of place. He loves to create his own world where you would be amazed, shocked but cannot question him. His films are very believable and it is because of the amazing production design. Third subject will be sound design, Varma's cinema is very chaotic so is its sound. Indian audience thrives on action and sound if you

are loud than people will listen. Silence is not used in his movies. He believes that silence is boring. Ram Gopal Varma's movies are full of loud sound of guns and evil laughs.

4.2 Portrayal of the characters:

Origin of the any story is an idea. To take our story to the viewers, we need strong characters who they can relate to or can feel what the characters are feeling. Portrayal of the characters totally depends on the director; writer has written the character now it is up to him how to portray that character. Portrayal of the characters will lead your story into different direction. It will connect the story with the audience. If a character is written very well but does not flash out due to weak portrayal then it will lose his appeal.

Characters in Martin Scorsese movies are the soul of the story. The characters are so very well executed that the parametres of good and bad no longer matter. Audience sympathizes with the character. For example, the main character in *GoodFellas* Henry Hill is well flashed out. We witness his journey from childhood to adulthood. He comes from family that can barely meet its basic necessities. There are six-seven members in his family who live in a small apartment. We feel for him. When Henry starts working with the local gang and starts earning money and respect from the society and travels from being oppressed and needy to making money and oppressing others, we kind of feel proud of him. We start seeing ourselves into the character because somewhere we want to break boundaries. So when Henry Hill becomes a powerful gangster and does all the notorious things we enjoy it. We do not care whether the things he does are wrong or right. The flawed character destroys himself and in the end we feel bad about him. He is responsible for his deeds but we still sympathize with him. The character is portrayed by Ray Liotta.

Ram Gopal Varma, on the other hand, portrays characters slightly differently. Varma and Scorsese surely have many common approaches but they also have some differences. Varma portrays characters in a unique way. He goes deep into their psyche and explores the darker thoughts of the characters. We have seen many gut wrenching characters in his film. His characters are flawed and many times self-destructive. They do not fear to show their dark side. They are not kind and have no mercy for people. As he portrays characters from real life stories, he studies about the characters' behavior but surely adds his own thought to make them interesting and presentable on the screen. For example, in *Company* the character named Malik, portrayed by actor Ajay Devgan, is loosely based on Underworld don Dawood Ibrahim. His companion is Chandrakant Nagre, a character based on Chhota Rajan and played by Vivek Oberoi. So, the character of Malik has some nuances of Dawood Ibrahim and his life story but he

also has Ram Gopal Varma's print. For example the look and personality of Malik is quite different. His manner of speaking and reacting towards situations is also different. The relationship Malik has with Saroja is 'atmospheric', and not based on Dawood's life. Ajay Devgan looks convincing as Malik but you cannot say it is based on Dawood Ibrahim. But the portrayal of character is too dark and scary. Malik does not say much but his eyes speak a lot. He looks cool and composed and by looking at him you cannot make out that he is an underworld don. But when he is angry or dealing with rival gang members, he is very scary. For Varma, Dawood Ibrahim is indeed a template in delineation of Malik but he also invests him with his own shades.

4.3 Fascination with the Underworld:

People say an idea comes from obsession or fascination about something. Some directors are fascinated with a certain thing which makes them create cinema of that certain kind. Directors love to discover and create that topic again and again. They follow a genre and are associated with it. They stick to this genre because they are known for it. For example, when you hear Christopher Nolan, you instantly think about the grand scale sci-fi movies names like Interstellar or Tenet in Bollywood if you hear about Rohit Shetty, .you know his genre is comedy. Martin Scorsese and Ram Gopal Varma are fascinated with the underworld so much that they are best known for this genre. They have for long been working on underworld and gangster movies.

Martin Scorsese: Although Martin Scorsese has also made films of other genres as well, music documentaries being a particularly fruitful niche, the *GoodFellas*, Casino and The Irishman director will always be attached to the Mob and those around it. But what began Scorsese's fascination with the genre, and what inspired him to create his own unique style within it? We think we may have found the answer, well 15 of them. .During a conversation with *Daily Beast* back in 2010 (Scorsese, 2010), Scorsese looked back at his career and took note of the vital films in the genre of gangster flicks that he had seen. It is a pretty impressive list encapsulating not only the style, violence, and brutality of his subjects but also portraying his characters with the humanity they deserve. He was inspired to do the following with his love of these classic films.

The final film on his list, *Point Blank* from 1967, also helped shape the films of his future, as Scorsese suggests: "This was one of the first movies that really took the storytelling innovations of the French New Wave—the shock cuts, the flash-forwards, the abstraction—and applied them to the crime genre. Lee Marvin is Walker, the man who may or may not be dreaming, but who is looking for vengeance on his old partner and his former wife. Like Burt Lancaster in the *I Walk*

*Alone (*1948), another favourite, he cannot get his money when he comes out of jail and enters a brave new corporate world. John Boorman's picture re-set the gangster picture on a then-modern wavelength. It gave us a sense of how the genre could pulse with the energy of a new era." There you have it, 15 films that inspired Martin Scorsese to become the most prominent director in the history of gangster films.

Ram Gopal Varma: Ram Gopal Varma's 1998 film *Satya* and Bhiku Mhatre's defiant "Mumbai ka King Kaun?" marked a new beginning in the Indian film industry. It was soon followed by *Company* (2002). In fact, British filmmaker Danny Boyle says both *Satya* and *Company* with their "slick, often mesmerizing portrayals of the Mumbai underworld" were a major influence on his Academy Award-winning film *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008). After all these years, Varma's fascination with the underworld is unabated. His recent release, *D Company*, is based on—no points for guessing—gangster Dawood Ibrahim. The filmmaker is honest enough to admit that he is completely obsessed with the Mumbai underbelly.

With his first hit in Hindi cinema—Shiva (1990), the remake of his 1989 Telugu film Siva—Varma became a force to reckon with. Influenced by the philosophy of Ayn Rand, Friedrich Nietzsche, besides the likes of James Hadley Chase and Frederick Forsyth, he was that different breed of a filmmaker—one who made masala films with a philosophical core. *Rangeela, Daud, Kaun, Mast*, and of course, the Godfather's adaptation *Sarkar* had the Hindi film industry vying to be a part of his filmmaking world. About D *Company* he said "Basically whatever has been created so far has been in small segments or imaginary sequences of Dawood's life. My film is actually a biopic. A lot of research has gone into it," he says, adding with childlike awe, "What you must understand is that he was like an entrepreneur when Mumbai had gangs. There was the Byculla gang and the Golden gang. He put an organizational aspect to his business—which was crime—and called it D *Company*. He studied and educated himself on both the shortcomings and achievements of every gangster who ruled Mumbai at that time. The film starts somewhere in 1980 and finally ends with gangster Chhota Rajan's arrest in 2015 in Bali. It is nearly a three-decade story." The following information proves Ram Gopal Varma's fascination and obsession of the underworld: 1 – His film production house name is *Company* and outside his office it is written in big statue height words along with a gun. 2 – He keeps a statue of two dogs in his office which he named as Dawood and Rajan.

4.4 Cinematic Liberty:

Cinematic liberty is freedom a creator takes to do something which is extraordinary to make his story interesting, more presentable, and grand on screen. These might include songs picturised on grand sets, fight sequences shot in air, superhero stories. If someone is making biopic on someone or making story on real life characters then the creator can add some changes here and there or majorly to make story good. He may give fictional names to the characters to avoid a controversy. Martin Scorsese also took a bit of cinematic liberty in his movies. But he is known more for his originality. Scorsese changes minor names or situations or add something because a person cannot portray whole life exactly the historical or fiction character lived. In *Gangs of New York,* Scorsese's story is loosely based on the real incidents. He added many situational characters to make it package. On the other hand, Ram Gopal Varma takes a lot of cinematic liberty in his films, and we also cannot fault him for this. Society in India is such that some group or the other take offence to a film and start protests against it. In movies like *Satya*, *Company*, *Sarkar* and many more, Varma never uses real names and add more incidents to make the story more absorbing. But this kills the originality of the script.

4.4 CONCLUSION

Based on the narrative analysis of the Research study, the conclusions are as below;

1. Both Martin Scorsese and Ram Gopal Varma have an obsession with the underworld.

2. The characters in Martin Scorsese's gangster films, particularly *GoodFellas,* are suave, sleek and sophisticated. They wear suits, drive around in luxury cars and live in flashy bungalows. Scorsese's Mafiosos are from the developed world.

3. In Ram Gopal Varma's cinema, on the other hand, the characters are more rooted in the Mumbai realty – they stay in chawls, look unkempt, and live like any other lower middle class people. These gritty characters lead anonymous lives unless they are in their dens or engaged in encounters.

4. Both Scorsese and Varma take cinematic liberties to make their stories more engaging. But Scorsese's films are adaptations of literature (Gangs of New York is based on Herbert Asbury's 192 book The Gangs of New York and GoodFellas draws from Nicholas Pileggi's Wiseguy) while Varma's *Satya* and *Company* are largely written by professional film writers and partially based on his interaction with Mumbai gangsters.

5. Ram Gopal Varma's cinema does have some similarities with Martin Scorsese's cinema - one of them being their love of mobs.

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Ajay Kasana

Department of Journalism and Mass Communication,

JECRC University, Jaipur

Orcid Id: 0000-0001-9514-0724

E-mail: ajaykasana248@gmail.com

Dr. Narendra Kaushik

Department of Journalism and Mass Communication,

JECRC University, Jaipur

Orcid Id: 0000-0002-4117-5005

E-mail: narendra.kaushik1@jecrcu.edu.in