

# Martin Scorsese and British Cinema – The Lowdown

— Written by *John Parrot* On 17th February 2012

Last Sunday Martin Scorsese was awarded the BAFTA fellowship. He opened his acceptance speech by saying that “British cinema is something that was formative for me”. It was films from the UK, alongside American and Italian movies, that moved and influenced the great director when he was growing up. But how could the director of *Taxi Driver*, *Raging Bull* and *Goodfellas* have been formed by films from this country?



Surely British films had too few guns and too many stiff upper lips to influence a director as visceral as Scorsese? No, he told BAFTA, British films showed him something that was “more exotic, more foreign and they seemed to be in a language that was familiar but enigmatic, intriguingly enigmatic.” He is even working on a documentary about film from the UK (he has already made films about [American](#) and [Italian movies](#)).

The Scorsese family lived in New York City where both his parents worked in the Garment District. From the age of three Martin’s dad, Charles, regularly used to take his son to the pictures where they watched Westerns together. But it was in 1948, when he reached the age of six, that the family bought a 16-inch TV. In the early days of television, the Hollywood studios were suspicious of this new medium and reluctant to let their films be shown on it. British distributors had no such qualms, so the young Martin got to see lots of British films. The key movies he remembers include Alexander Korda’s exotic *The Thief of Baghdad*, his brother Zoltan Korda’s *The Four Feathers* and *Elephant Boy*.



*Rex Ingram as the Djinn in [The Thief of Baghdad](#)*

Perhaps the most seminal of all Scorsese's early influences are the films of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger (and their production company The Archers), who he also name-checked during his acceptance speech. He first encountered their films on that small black and white television too. It was a TV series called Million Dollar Movie which showed the same films on weekday evenings and weekends that allowed him to avidly rewatch movies and build an appreciation for the way they were put together.

The dream-like operatic fantasy [The Tales of Hoffman](#) (1951) is Powell-Pressburger film that particularly captivated the young Scorsese. From the opening home-movie sequence of *Mean Streets* playing out to The Ronette's Be My Baby, music (often classic British rock) has been central to his movies. He has said *The Tales of Hoffman* was key to this, "even now there's hardly a day when the score of that picture doesn't go through my mind". The film taught him about the relation of the camera to music, and it influenced not only the musical sequences in *New York, New York* but also the fights in *Raging Bull* and even the close-ups of Robert De Niro's eyes in *Taxi Driver*.



*Moira Shearer is Vicky Price in The Red Shoes and some other fella*

Woozy and exaggerated, Scorsese's films have a very distinctive look and feel. Another Powell-Pressburger dream-like fantasy, this time situated in the world of ballet, fed into this: their 1948 classic *The Red Shoes*. He was nine when he saw the film and "the mystery of it, the hysteria of the picture" cast its spell on him. Not only did Scorsese help with the seven-year restoration of the film at the [UCLA's film preservation unit](#), but he even had a Cossack shirt made-up similar to the one worn by the film's impresario Lermontov to wear to the opening of the Powell-Pressburger retrospective at New York's Museum Of Modern Art in 1980.

One of the stars who sent their best wishes to Scorsese on Sunday night was Sir Christopher Lee. A bit strange you might think, given that although the actor has the Guinness world record for having acted in the most film roles ever, he has only performed in one directed by Scorsese (*Hugo*). It turns out Hammer Horror films were another key influence on the director.



*Some guy with fangs... Christopher Lee as Dracula*

It was the striking, over-the-top, visual quality of Hammer Horrors that Scorsese and his friends loved. That and the actors: Christopher Lee and Peter Cushing in *The Curse of Frankenstein* in 1957 and then *Dracula* a year later made a clear impression on him. He liked the way Lee seemed to be a likeable and sophisticated Dracula, approachable almost. Scorsese's love of Hammer carried on into the Sixties, when the metaphysical discussions about the nature of the human soul in *Frankenstein Created Woman* rang (or tolled) bells. After all, this is the man who has said "my whole life has been movies and religion. That's it. Nothing else."

Christopher Lee and Peter Cushing aren't the only British actors Scorsese has expressed a sort of spot for. According to a [new book](#), he planned his first (unmade) film when he was only 11-years-old. It was to be a "fictitious story of Royalty in Ancient Rome" and would star Richard Burton and Alec Guinness, as well as Marlon Brando and Virginia Mayo. He has gone on to work with a host of British actors, including Daniel Day-Lewis, Ray Winstone, Ben Kingsley and Emily Mortimer.



*Jack Cardiff filming The African Queen*

As well as director's, Scorsese's BAFTA speech included thanks for the "the peerless craftsmanship of the British crews". One name sticks out as a particular influence: Jack Cardiff. The cameraman's cameraman, he was one of the earliest in the UK to master three-strip Technicolor and make it his own. Cardiff shot the *African Queen* with John Huston, *The Prince and the Showgirl* (the film at the heart of *My Week With Marilyn*) as well has working with Powell and Pressburger. Scorsese is one of those seen extolling the man's work in Craig McCall's documentary *The Life and Work of Jack Cardiff, Cameraman*.

From "You lookin' at me?" to "As far back as I could remember I've always wanted to be a gangster" Scorsese's films are eminently quotable. His films have muscular, taut and quintessentially American dialogue. At first glance there is a great gulf between the bloody mayhem of *Goodfellas* and the cool hilarity of *Kind Hearts and Coronets*. But Scorsese claims that Robert Hamer's Ealing comedy was crucial for finding the tone and voice of his film. Another British screenwriter and director he admires, also a protégé of Ealing, is Alexander Mackendrick.



*Albert Finney smokes a fag in Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*

With his love of music and vivid visual imagery, it is no surprise that Scorsese was one of the voices **praising Ken Russell** after he died last November. However, it's not just the fantastical and whimsical that attracts him to British cinema. His new British film documentary is said to feature a good dose of kitchen sink dramas from the Fifties and Sixties. These films were of course informed by Italian new-realism, one of his other formative influences. This admiration has carried into his working life and has included working with Freddie Francis, the cinematographer on *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, a remake of Karel Reisz's *The Gambler* is also reportedly in the works.

The cliché goes that the British, or at least the English, are a rather a repressed lot – or they were – but Scorsese's favourite films from this country are filled with colour and passion, despite being made in the greyest, most austere of eras – the Forties and Fifties. Nowadays it is probably truer to say we are more cynical than staid, and certainly our tradition of "film poets" hardly seems to chime with the current jaded times. But still these cinematic dreamers continue to pop up: Danny Boyle, Lynne Ramsay, Terry Gilliam, even Christopher Nolan. Ground-breaking filmmakers such as Scorsese cannot be said to be simply the sum of their influences, but his inspirations are clearly visible throughout Scorsese's films. How could we imagine Scorsese's films without their kinetic feel for music and image he learned from *The Tales of Hoffman*, their fearless approach to the lurid learned from Hammer Horror, or even the signature colour red in homage to *The Red Shoes*? While the traces of John Ford and Vittorio de Sica might be more clearly visible in his films, Powell, Pressburger and many other eccentric geniuses within the world of mid 20th Century British cinema also stand as seminal influences on Scorsese's work.

Sources include *Scorsese on Scorsese* by Ian Christie and Simon Schama's article *Martin Scorsese: Good-Fella* in The Financial Times, 30 October 2009 reproduced in *Scribble, Scribble, Scribble: Writing on Ice Cream, Obama, Churchill and My Mother*.

See Martin Scorsese's BAFTA fellowship acceptance speech here:

Read the transcript:

"It is such an honour, I think that holding this award is such an honour and actually getting it is like a dream. For me British cinema was something that was formative. Italian and British movies were the first movies that I ever saw that weren't made in America. The Italian films were familiar to me, more familiar, closer to home, closer to what I knew and lived in New York.

"The British films were more exotic, more foreign and they seemed to be in a language that was familiar but enigmatic, intriguingly enigmatic. British films were then, what they are still for me still right now, a bit of a mystery and a great marvel.

"The rich tradition of British also embraces for me the peerless craftsmanship of the British crews who helped me with dedication and extraordinary imagination when we were making the film Hugo here at Shepperton, a film which all of us who worked on it can I hope be proud. I am particularly honoured to have worked alongside them, as I am to be here tonight holding this award. I would like to hope this BAFTA award gives me visiting privileges to that same rich tradition of British tradition that inspired your great film poets.

"The BAFTA award also has great resonance because it is the first award that I have ever shared with Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. I think of them as two of those great poets, and as the Knights Templar of the British cinema, well The Archers of the tradition actually. It is the highest and most profound honour for me to stand with them tonight, and with you. I thank you."