

SCORSESE ON THE CROSS

America's last best tragedian

By Vince Passaro

I wanted to be a priest. However I soon realized that my real vocation, my real calling, was the movies. I don't really see a conflict between the church and the movies, the sacred and the profane. Obviously, there are major differences, but I can also see great similarities between a church and a movie house.

—Martin Scorsese

On the wall of my kindergarten classroom at St. Aloysius School, among the many typical decorations, hung a gaudily colored print that I used to stare at with fascination. It featured Jesus kneeling in a stone chamber, wrists chained to the wall, head pricked with thorns, back bloody. Behind him stood a centurion: menacing, muscular (I mean really, *really* muscular), leather-clad, wielding an alluring (to a male child) cat-o'-nine-tails studded with shiny bits of metal—the better to tear open the skin of the scourged. I loved this picture, and wished ardently to own it, for reasons much clearer to me now than they were back then.

When I was a little older, I used to practice the Crucifixion at home in my room. I would stand in my underwear, bare back pressed to the cool

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plaster wall, with arms outstretched and one foot on top of the other. I was, to use an expression I didn't then possess, channeling the experience. It was quite a powerful feeling, and like the insane print, it was indisputably erotic. One of the many honed ironies of Catholic culture in America, then far more than now, was that a group so viciously opposed to any expression of eros poured such intense (if unacknowledged) erotic imagery into the heads of its children.

All of which is to say that for any mid-twentieth-century child with a dramatic sensibility and a seriously Catholic upbringing, no narrative can ever surpass the Passion, nor can any scene approach the Crucifixion for its depiction of agony and transcendence. The details of Jesus's final moments are especially haunting, none more so than the cry of abandonment recorded in Matthew and Mark. "And at the ninth hour, Jesus shouted in a loud voice, 'Eloi Eloi lama sabachthani?' which is translated, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'" To a child, this line is frightening and, in its heroic isolation, exquisite. We were taught that the power of the divine, an unimaginable breadth of knowledge and potency, could reside in human suffering. For us, the merger of divine and human was mesmerizing, and beautiful, and extremely important—cosmically important.

So affirms Martin Scorsese in an exchange with the film critic Richard Schickel. The director, born in 1942 and raised in Little Italy with the Church and the movies as his lone sources of authenticity, is trying to account for the enormous controversy that greeted the release of *The Last Temptation of Christ*:

SCORSESE: ... yes, you're talking about [divine] revelation and that's what we have to deal with. But we wanted to talk about those other things—about Jesus, Judas, Mary, too ... Paul Schrader [called it] "the dirty parts." Funny.

SCHICKEL: What dirty parts?

SCORSESE: Well, the concept that Jesus would have sexual feelings.

SCHICKEL: Oh, that.

SCORSESE: This was the big issue.

That's what the critics claim it was.

SCHICKEL: But this character is, for better or worse, half man and half God.

SCORSESE: Oh, no, he's full man and full God ...

SCHICKEL: Whatever.

SCORSESE: That's the beauty of it.

Let's accept him as completely God and completely man, and therefore he's going to feel everything a man feels.

SCHICKEL: Of course.

Schickel says *Whatever* and *Of course* because the distinction seems a trivial matter to him—as does, say, the complexity of the NFL pass

interference rule to someone who doesn't care about football. But to an educated Catholic, his description of Christ as "half man and half God" mentally cues the red light and buzzer that follow the wrong answer on a quiz show. And note Scorsese's follow-up: "That's the beauty of it." For a Catholic artist, beauty actually resides in the incomprehensibility of the thing, in its (to steal the architect Robert Venturi's phrase) complexity and contradiction.

In fact, once the pieties of the candle and the novena have been peeled away, much of Christian doctrine is surprisingly hospitable to paradox. To accept a single being as "completely God and completely man" requires an ironic mind. Scorsese certainly has one, and this aspect of his art has kept him from be-

ing as popular as his studiously sincere and sentimental peers, including George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, and the latter-day Francis Ford Coppola.

As I read *Conversations with Scorsese*, in which Schickel and the director discuss each of his films in chronological order, the imagery of the Crucifixion kept coming to mind, both brutal and (to repeat the word) exquisite. And the more I watched many of these films again, some for the fifth or sixth time, the more I saw the pattern of Scorsese's religiosity played out, over and over, in dozens of intricate and spectacular forms.

Repeatedly Schickel insists that Scorsese's "great theme" is betrayal. Repeatedly Scorsese concurs, talking about the world of his youth and

the kinds of men and women of Little Italy who formed his early understanding of what we call society. We see this world laid out clearly in *Mean Streets*, in which a small-time hood named Charlie (Harvey Keitel) is warned to abandon the two people closest to him: his friend Johnny Boy (Robert De Niro), and his lover, Teresa (Amy Robinson). In the end he is undone by his refusal to betray either of them. But what we detect emotionally from Charlie, and from Scorsese's use of the camera, is his perpetual isolation. Johnny Boy is far too flighty and indirect to be actual company: he is a responsibility, a burden, albeit a burden of love. And Teresa is, well, a girl—someone Charlie wants, but at the same time must keep at bay. By the time the movie ends, he is bloodied and alone.

A similar denouement awaits Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver*, Jake LaMotta in *Raging Bull*, Rupert Pupkin in *The King of Comedy*, and Sam "Ace" Rothstein in *Casino*—with Robert De Niro playing each of these avatars of seething isolation. The same thing can be said of Henry Hill in *Goodfellas*, or Jesus in *The Last Temptation*.

And then there is Newland Archer in *The Age of Innocence*, an adaptation of Edith Wharton's novel of nineteenth-century New York, a decorous story that would seem to preclude the emotional rawness and working-class rage that marks most of Scorsese's work. The film ends with Archer, played by Daniel Day-Lewis, alone on a park bench in Paris. His great love, long separated from him, is unseen in an apartment above. Watching him, you know that he is encased in a social chrysalis of solitude, and cannot possibly climb those stairs. He departs, alone.

Jump ahead to Scorsese's later films and you see that the isolation grows more harrowing. In *The Aviator*, the aging Howard Hughes (Leonardo DiCaprio) sequesters himself in a dark room, nails grown long, hair a snarled mess, surrounded by crumpled tissues and jars of his own urine. In *The Departed*, DiCaprio's character endures the sequestered existence of a long-term undercover cop—and



eventually even this secret, tenuous connection to the civilized world is erased on a crooked detective's computer screen.

Shutter Island finds DiCaprio even more isolated, lost in a guilt-induced dreamscape (we are never more alone than in dreams). At the end of the film, his delusions exposed, he chooses a kind of neurological death over a lifetime of contending with his memories. Obliteration is not a punishment: obliteration will be a relief.

You might even call it a redemption.

His conversations with Schickel suggest that Scorsese wishes to know himself, has endeavored mightily to know himself, but is so tied to the fate of his films that he cannot always distinguish between who he is and what they are. Still, without spelling it out, he conveys the nuanced and contradictory isolation that has defined him as a creature on our planet. Nobody is less alone than a child in an Italian working-class clan. Family is everything, family is all over you. Yet a stroke of imaginative intelligence or artistic ambition will separate you out like leprosy.

Moreover, for a child of Scorsese's background, the world was a rigidly defined place: you do this, you don't do this, if you open your mouth there's going to be trouble. He tells Schickel this story eight ways from Sunday. You don't become a filmmaker, or any other kind of artist—it's unimaginable. The first time Scorsese saw New York University, just a few blocks from where he grew up, was when he went to enroll.

Pondering Scorsese's work, I happened to hear a recent radio interview with Pat Cooper, the eighty-one-year-old Italian-American comedian (also the only Italian-American comedian I ever heard of), in which he described his family's hostility toward his career. They found his work not only incomprehensible but offensive—"being funny" was not a respectable way to make a living. Meanwhile, Cooper's description of the parameters of Italian-American working-class life could have come right out of *Mean Streets*: "You work Monday to Friday, Friday night you get paid, Saturday

you go shopping, Sunday you eat macaroni, Monday you go back to your job. Shut up, raise your kids, and shut up."

Scorsese is an escapee of that world. Nowadays he is commonly regarded as America's greatest living director. In many people's eyes, that elevation took place at the Academy Awards in February 2007. During the weeks leading up to the show, there seemed little doubt that Scorsese, after five previous nominations and no wins, would be given the Best Director Oscar for *The Departed*. The picture—a remake of a Hong Kong police-corruption film called *Infernal Affairs*—is not Scorsese's best. It is not even his sixth best. Still, it is an excellent piece of cinema, deftly infused with his particular kind of psychological tension, and with the considerable narrative complexities always kept clear (which is more than one can say for the original).

When it came time for the award, out onto the stage walked Coppola, Lucas, and Spielberg, three directors of Scorsese's remarkable generation whose films account for ten of the American Film Institute's hundred greatest American movies. (Once Scorsese joined them, the number edged up to thirteen.) It was a moment no less lovely for being so blatantly orchestrated. And the tableau was meant to make a statement: these three had come to celebrate one who must finally, despite his more limited audience, be recognized.

As a gesture, this lacked neither authentic drama nor authentic honor. But it also misplaced Scorsese cinematically. If one could have raised the dead and positioned him amid his true directorial cohort, Scorsese's companions on the stage would have been John Cassavetes, John Ford, and Akira Kurosawa. All three possessed what the presenters at the Oscars never had (Lucas and Spielberg) or long ago relinquished (Coppola): a deep understanding of the tragic, an embrace of it as the highest form of narrative art.

This is the problem with Scorsese. He was supposed to give that stuff up, and he never has. Which brings us back to *The Age of Innocence*.

When Scorsese was filming the final scene in Paris, even his director of photography asked him why Archer couldn't simply go upstairs and embrace his beloved. Scorsese replied: "He can't. He can't go up. That's what she loved about him." How to uphold the tragic vision when our culture has all but expunged it from our consciousness? In a Scorsese picture, no Archer will ever go up the stairs. Tragedy is inherently, necessarily, uncompromising. And it makes much of the audience, and those who market to it, squirm, with its painful and paradoxical insistence that our lives are ruled both by individual agency and the iron dictates of society, family, and fate.

Tragedy is so far off our cultural radar that Scorsese has rarely been accused of it. He has, of course, been accused of many other aesthetic crimes, most commonly that he celebrates violence. This is like saying that Dante celebrates sin, or that Proust celebrates snobbery. Scorsese is not celebrating our condition, he is recognizing it: recognizing what becomes of men separated from God, men who are lost. Don DeLillo, who grew up in a world much like Scorsese's, once described the lingering effects of Catholicism this way: "For a Catholic, nothing is too important to discuss or think about, because he's raised with the idea that he will die any minute now and that if he doesn't live his life in a certain way this death is simply an introduction to an eternity of pain. This removes a hesitation that a writer might otherwise feel when he's approaching important subjects, eternal subjects."

These are the stakes for Scorsese. These are his protagonists: men who will suffer and who cannot face down that eternity of pain. Aristotle, our primary architect of tragedy, understood (as did the authors of the Gospels) that to see and feel deeply the suffering of others helps us to endure our own. This is the redemption that art can offer, and this has been the key to Scorsese's survival. His understanding of these facts is what *actually* makes him America's greatest living director. Just no one can really say so. We've almost lost the words for it. ■