

FILM REVIEWS

Martin Scorsese's 'Silence'

Only in the real world do humans possess free will, whereas any film about the nature of belief effectively requires the director to play god, forcing them to answer the very questions they often set out to raise. Despite this paradox, in the history of cinema, there have been many great films about Christian faith - though not nearly enough: Carl Theodor Dreyer's "Ordet," Robert Bresson's "The Diary of a Country Priest," Jean-Pierre Melville's "Leon Morin, Priest." Now, add to that Martin Scorsese's "Silence," which marks the culmination of a nearly 30-year journey to adapt Japanese novelist Shusaku Endo's tale of a 17th-century Jesuit missionary faced with the dilemma of whether to apostatize.

And yet, judged in broadly cinematic terms, "Silence" is not a great movie, despite having been directed by one of the medium's greatest masters at a point of great maturity (this is the last film one might expect to immediately follow the bacchanalian excess of "The Wolf of Wall Street"). Though undeniably gorgeous, it is punishingly long, frequently boring, and woefully unengaging at some of its most critical moments. It is too subdued for Scorsese-philes, too violent for the most devout, and too abstruse for the great many moviegoers who such an expensive undertaking hopes to attract (which no doubt explains why Scorsese was compelled to cast "The Amazing Spider-Man" actor Andrew Garfield and two "Star Wars" stars).

Still, viewed through the narrow prism of films about faith, "Silence" is a remarkable achievement, tackling as it does a number of Big Questions in a medium that, owing to its commercial nature, so often shies away from Christianity altogether. Considering the dominant role religious belief plays in the lives of so many, it's surprising, even scandalous, that so few films face the subject head-on. "Silence" is the largest, most serious-minded examination of faith since Terrence Malick's "The Tree of Life," rounding out a trilogy on the subject from the director of "Kundun" and "The Last Temptation of Christ."

At the core of "Silence" lies the dilemma: What does it mean to apostatize? Though the screenplay (which Scorsese adapted with Jay Cocks, his collaborator on "The Age of Innocence" and "Gangs of New York") intends for us to consider this question on some deep teleological level, the film would do well to engage with it first in more literal terms.

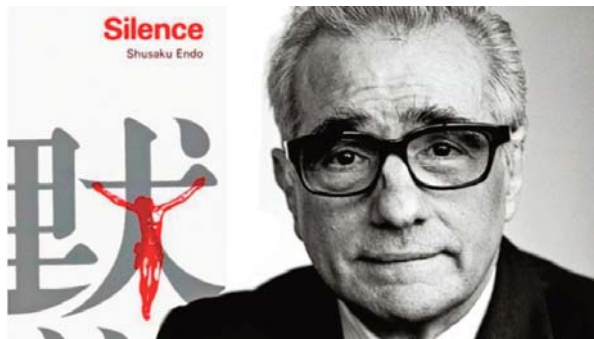
For those not already versed in the finer points of Christian dogma, "apostasy" is the act by which someone renounces his faith, represented in the particular context of this film by placing one's foot upon a fumi-e. Here, apostasy is the weapon by which 17th-century Japanese officials, threatened by European colonial powers and the missionary faith they brought with them, sought to combat the spread of Christianity among peasants receptive to the notion that their suffering might be lifted in heaven.

Insight

In Scorsese's comparably low-key "Kundun," the future Dalai Lama learns the Four Noble Truths of Buddhist teaching. "What are the causes of suffering?" his teacher asks, to which his pupil responds, "Pride. Pride causes suffering." This is a priceless insight, and one that Garfield's character, a presumptuous young "padre" named Sebastiao Rodrigues, might do well to learn. Though Rodrigues imagines his greatest obstacle to be God's silence (he prays constantly, and yet He never responds), the story hinges on the character's seemingly unbreakable arrogance - a dimension significantly downplayed in Garfield's self-effacing performance. Instead, the actor focuses on Rodrigues' doubt, as reflected in the dense clouds of fog and mist that permeate much of the film.

If "Apocalypse Now" was a modern twist on "Heart of

Darkness," then "Silence" could fairly be viewed as Scorsese's own take on that paradigm. Call it "Soul of Murkiness." Together with another Portuguese priest, Francisco Garpe (Driver, who looks the part, his lean, angular face reflecting the severity of classic religious icons), Rodrigues petitions his Jesuit superior (Ciaran Hinds) to let them travel to Japan to investigate the fate of their mentor, father Cristovao Ferreira (Liam Neeson) - who's effectively the film's AWOL Kurtz. Their only clue is a long-delayed letter, which tells of unspeakable torture practices visited upon Christian priests and converts alike in an attempt to discourage the spread of the religion, coupled with rumors that Ferreira ultimately apostatized and now lives with a wife as a Japanese.



For the sincerely devout Rodrigues, the mission represents an opportunity to do good, offering salvation to the savages, but also a shot at glory. He makes the journey - which, in a two-hour-and-41-minute movie, passes in the blink of an eye - in full awareness that he could be martyred for his actions. With martyrdom comes divine reward (including the possibility of special visions, a privileged place in heaven, and eventual sainthood), and in Endo's novel at least, he yearns for the opportunity.

The reality that awaits Rodrigues and Garpe is every bit as hellish as they had imagined, and then some, and Scorsese renders these scenes of torture - boiling water drizzled over exposed flesh, women wrapped in straw and set on fire - with the same unflinching detachment Pier Paolo Pasolini did the sadism of his infamous, incendiary final film, "Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom." And yet, Rodrigues persists, consciously risking his safety in order to locate and serve the "Kakure Kirishitan" (or "hidden Christians"), who have been forced underground by these terrible punishments, inquiring as to Ferreira's whereabouts with each fresh encounter.

The first Japanese missionaries encounter is a wily ex-Christian named Kichijiro (Yosuke Kubozuka), whose sneaky, social-outcast behavior suggests the way Toshiro Mifune might play the role of Gollum. Kichijiro has apostatized once already, and he will again before the movie ends, repeatedly betraying his faith and returning to beg forgiveness. Generally speaking, the casting of the Japanese characters favors actors who look like ghoulish exaggerations - like the rude caricatures found in

Tintin comics, their teeth and fingernails smeared in grime. Compared with the humanely depicted natives of Roland Joffe's more conventionally accessible/satisfying "The Mission," the Japanese here come across as frighteningly "other," almost animalistic. An unnerving inquisitor named Inoue (Issey Ogata) has a wheedling voice and faux-gracious manner that suggests the Japanese equivalent of Christoph Waltz's Nazi colonel in "Inglourious Basterds."

This style of representation marks a troubling, but no

doubt deliberate choice on Scorsese's part - especially compared with Garfield's bare-chested, fabulously coiffed Rodrigues. Underscoring where our sympathies are expected to lie, the missionary outsiders all speak English (with wildly varied Portuguese accents), while the comparably heathen locals communicate in subtitled Japanese. Unlike Endo's own big-screen adaptation of his novel, filmed by Japanese director Masahiro Shinoda in 1971, here, the local becomes the "other" - especially since the second half of the film concerns the two priests' captivity and the sadistic attempts to convince them that Japan is a "swamp" where their religion "does not take root."

Rodrigues is prepared for martyrdom, but not for the Japanese inquisitor's more diabolical scheme, which involves torturing other Christians until he apostatizes. Worse still, Rodrigues watches as his cohort achieves the martyrdom he seeks (in a horrific beachfront scene that rings strangely hollow). Through it all, Rodrigues continues his appeal to God, praying for guidance, but receiving only ... silence. Until he doesn't.

Challenging

The film's last hour is by far its most challenging, as Scorsese goes out of his way to avoid some of the sweeping, free-associative techniques Malick has innovated for spiritual cinema, turning instead to the austere model of Bresson, Dreyer, and others that "Last Temptation" screenwriter Paul Schrader once described as "transcendental cinema," in which powerless protagonists struggle against forces beyond their control. Whereas Endo's novel allows omniscient access to Rodrigues' deep internal conflict, the film leaves audiences at arm's length, forcing us to scrutinize Garfield's face for psychological insights that, for most, are too complex to expect us to interpret on our own.

For non-believers in particular, when Neeson resurfaces, his arguments, intended as the cruelest temptation, will instead sound perfectly logical. What Ferreira describes as "the most powerful act of love that has ever been performed" feels like a no-brainer, with no catharsis to ease the anti-climax. From the Crusades to the Spanish Inquisition, when one considers all the cruelty that religion has exerted on the world, it seems almost unfair to focus on this footnote in world history, where priests were punished for their beliefs, the way early Christians were thrown to the lions.

And yet, these paradoxes surely aren't lost on Scorsese, who has created a taxing film that will not only hold up to multiple viewings, but practically demands them. Here, as ever, he brings an arresting visual sense to the project, reteaming with production designer Dante Ferretti and DP Rodrigo Prieto to create evocative widescreen tableaux, shot on celluloid and shrouded in mist and shadow, while relaxing some of his flashier techniques (with its Peter Gabriel score and aggressive cutting, "Last Temptation" feels dated today in a way that the director clearly intends to avoid here).

What little music "Silence" does contain is featured so faintly as to be almost subliminal, leaving ample room for engaged audiences to personalize the viewing experience, while frustrating those grasping for clues as to the precise emotional reaction Scorsese intends. That's a risky move, as is the dramatic way he breaks the silence in the end. Those who put their faith in Scorsese may find it challenged as never before by his long-gestating passion project. — Reuters



Pandora

By Maggie Lee

Clearly influenced by the Fukushima nuclear meltdown in March 2011, South Korean disaster blockbuster "Pandora" is the film no mainstream Japanese director dares to make. Imagining, with harrowing realism, a man-made disaster gone catastrophic, writer-director Park Jung-woo's uncensored depiction of political incompetence taps right into his compatriots' current mood of anger and mistrust toward their government in the midst of President Park Geun-hye's impeachment. Resisting the temptation to entertain or offer pat optimism, Park's commitment to a cause is what gives the yarn its stark power. The first Korean picture acquired by Netflix, it's sure to go gangbusters locally, as well as heat up niche overseas markets.

A genre that makes ample use of Korean cinema's leading edge in visual and special effects, disaster movies have always been safe bets at the domestic box office. While the first wave of such films, like "Haeundae" or "The Tower," have been pure action-entertainment, the genre has recently taken on an increasingly political edge with hits like "Train to Busan" and "The Tunnel" lambasting government indifference to citizens' suffering, in response to botched crisis management of the Sewol Ferry Accident.

South Korea is one of the world's major utilizers of nuclear power (24 plants in nine cities across 28 counties, according to closing titles), with most plants located in the southern part of the country, which has been prone to earthquakes. The fact that the government has announced no back-up measures post-Fukushima, and instead is pushing to build 10 more reactors, has sparked a strong anti-nuke movement. Due to the project's controversial nature, the production was in development for four years, and failed to gain access from any plant to shoot on site. Though set in an unnamed town in the southern province of Gyeongsangnam-do, domestic audiences will easily relate the action to Wolsong and Kori power plants in Gyeongju and Busan, respectively.

The film starts with a heavy allegorical ring as a couple of tykes gaze at a nearby nuclear reactor, calling it by turns a rice cooker, something that will make the country rich, and "a box that when opened will bring big trouble" - referring to the title's Greek origin. Opposing views about nuclear power are presented by a stand-off between anti-nuke protesters and workers at Hanbyul nuclear plant.

One of the workers is mechanic Kang Jae-hyuk (Kim Nam-gil), whose father and brother were employed at the plant and died due to accidents there. Neither his mother, Ms Seok (Kim Young-ae), who runs a diner with her widowed daughter-in-law Jung-hye (Moon Jeong-hee), nor his g.f., Yeon-ju (Kim Joo-hyeon), who's a PR officer for nuclear energy, want him to venture outside the city, yet job prospects are limited; according to one local's remarks, since the reactor has been built, the city has seen "no fishing, no farming, no tourists."

Soon enough, a 6.1 earthquake strikes, causing radiation to leak from a cracked cooling valve. As the workers, fearing for their own safety, hesitate to fix it, other valves burst, spraying radiated water everywhere and overheating to the point of explosion in parts of the plant. Every troubleshooting endeavor by maintenance engineer Chief Park (Jung Jin-young) is vetoed by the boss, for fear of the plant being decommissioned.

Unlike standard Korean disaster movies that pad out almost half the film with comic bantering among minor characters, "Pandora" gets straight to the point about the underlying risks of nuclear power. With thorough technical exposition, the film tracks how facilities can easily malfunction and inexorably devolve. Also atypical of Korean blockbusters, visual effects here are not employed to create pyrotechnics that are of tangential importance to the story. Instead, leading VFX company Digital Idea visualizes the full-metal anatomy of the nuclear reactor, from its looming outer form to the steampunk-like machinery inside with a grim realism that makes the meltdown so galvanizing to watch.

Also certain to stoke emotions are scenes of staggering government inefficiency, especially the prime minister's overbearing control over president Kang Seok-ho (Kim Myung-min), which seem to have real life parallels. The cabinet's ploys to cover up the disaster by refusing to evacuate citizens in the vicinity and even locking them up to stop mass panic recall the captain and crew's self-preserving crimes in the Sewol Ferry tragedy.

Park's pandemic thriller "Deranged" already fused corporate conspiracy with government ineptitude, but "Pandora" goes further than any Korean film in disparaging a government or leader so thoroughly, and expressing such devastating collective helplessness. Not only does every move to contain the danger worsen it, the turning point culminates in a lame-duck speech by Kang begging for volunteers to "sacrifice themselves on behalf of this weak government." Comparing the scene with recent official apologies president Park made, Korean audiences will surely wonder how the lines between parody, fiction, and reality are blurred.

While reports of health issues caused by the Fukushima fallout have not publicly surfaced in Japan, the film almost revels in the grisly portrayal of suffering caused by radiation, at times risking descent into Gothic horror with close-ups of charred skin, pus-oozing boils, and spewing blood. While Jae-hyuk's romance and family drama are subsumed under the wider events, the final scenes indulge in a round of breast-beating, hysterical wailing, and thundering patriotism. Still, given the intense seriousness sustained earlier on, the film somehow must cater to the need of local audiences for cathartic melodrama. — Reuters

Sugar Mountain

Billed as a wilderness survival thriller, "Sugar Mountain" is in fact more of a potboiler involving a romantic triangle and ill-conceived fraud scheme. None of those elements grow very compelling over the course of Aussie director Richard Gray's Alaska-set feature, which is polished without ever achieving much in the realm of suspense or emotional involvement. The moderate marquee value of Jason Momoa and Cary Elwes (though the former has only a few scenes) should help smooth access to home markets. But in any format there's unlikely to be great excitement over this middling drama, which opened on 10 US screens (as well as in Toronto) on Dec 9.

The West brothers have lost their mother to lung cancer, but inherited her business catering to sporty visitors in the titular resort town. (The film was primarily shot in and around Seward, a fishing port and tourist destination in southwestern Alaska's Kenai Peninsula region.) Unfortunately, they're going under, with the bank impounding the boat their charter trade depends on for overdue payments.

It's blustery, short-attention-spanned Miles' (Drew Roy) bright idea that they solve these financial woes by staging a disappearance in the nearby frozen mountains, then sell the "miraculous survival" story to the media for big bucks. Nice-guy sibling Liam (Shane Coffey) is not at all thrilled by this plan, especially since it requires him to express covetous jealousy over Miles' loyal girlfriend/co-conspirator Lauren (Haley Webb) for whom he has secretly pined since childhood. This play-acted fraternal conflict will up the publicity stakes when Miles allegedly "vanishes" during a hike, raising the possibility of foul play.

Everybody falls for the ruse at first, including Lauren's police-chief father (Elwes), who orchestrates search parties to roam the sub-zero wilderness. But of course, best-laid-plans soon unravel in part due to the discovery that Miles has significant gambling debts owed to a menacing local character (Momoa), but also because his absence opens a space which the long-repressed attraction between Liam and Laura rushes to fill (via a somewhat ludicrously overblown sex scene).

Meanwhile, it begins to look like Miles' faked mortal-peril scenario might well have turned into the real thing. Originally set in his and the director's native Australia, Abe Pogos' screenplay is compli-

cated enough. But Gray's execution arrives at a middle-of-the-road tenor that lacks (among other things) the tragic sense of inexorable cruel fate seen in "A Simple Plan" or grotesque black comedy in "Fargo," to name a couple better films about ordinary people whose seemingly harmless criminal-fraud schemes turn very harmful indeed. Despite a fairly eventful narrative, the proceedings feel a bit turgid, as the character dynamics seldom surprise, and not much tension accrues, with disappointingly scant screen time given over to Miles' wilderness sojourn. (John Garrett's widescreen lensing of the spectacular local scenery is handsome, but despite its hook, this is a movie largely driven by indoor arguments.)

Even a brief, panicked encounter with a bear is oddly tepid as staged here. By the time "Sugar Mountain" springs a belated burst of action - including a car chase and one subsidiary figure's not-dead-after-all revival the effect feels more desperate than exciting, with a soap-operatic plot revelation heightening the strain. It's all meant to be bitterly ironic in the end, but "Mountain" simply doesn't have the depth to pull that off. Though ultimately frustrated in creating fully dimensionalized figures, the actors do decent work. Those who tune in for "Aquaman" star Momoa, however, will be irked to realize his bad guy (while key to the story) only appears in three or four scenes. — Reuters



The Bounce Back

There's good-looking in the way that regular folks are, there's good-looking in the way that movie stars are, and then there's good-looking in the way that two lead actors of "The Bounce Back" are - too model-perfect luscious for their own good (or, at least, for the good of a movie). They're prefab human jewels without flaws, easy on the eyes in a distracting Platonic-ideal-of-Beverly Hills way. Shemar Moore, who co-produced the movie and stars in it, is a former fashion model and daytime-soap stud - he spent 10 years on "The Young and the Restless" - who with his dreamboat eyes, ladies'-man smile, and awesome cover-dude abs is so handsome and sexy that even playing someone who's supposed to be handsome and sexy, he's a bit too hunktastic.

His character, Matthew Taylor, is a self-help author with an ardent following of lovelorn women. He has written a book, "The Bounce Back," that's climbing the bestseller charts, and it's about taking control of your romantic life by leaving the past behind. The pain, the self-doubt, the hidden trauma that made you who you are - Matthew's advice is to throw all that pesky stuff into the trash. Invent yourself anew, he says. Believe!

"The Bounce Back" is an example of just how L.A. an indie film can be. The reason I draw attention to Moore's look is that even though he isn't a bad actor, his Chippendale's single's-bar Lothario sheen is far too present. Matthew is supposed to be a writer hawking a hard-won philosophy, and he talks about it with mellow and thoughtful conviction, but the vibe Moore puts out is: "Follow my lead! If you can look like the personal-workout trainer of the year (or become romantically involved with him), you'll achieve success."

Matthew's opposite number - but his perfect cosmetic counterpart - is Kristin Peralta, a therapist played by Nadine Velazquez (best known for her role on "My Name Is Earl"), who with her Barbie bangs and Valkyrie cheekbones looks like the world's first shrink who also offers makeovers. (Come to think of it: That could be an industry.)

Appearing on a talk show with Matthew, she has a bone to pick with his book, because she thinks it's a fraud. That makes sense: Her job isn't to bury the past but to excavate it. Their on-air verbal tussle strikes sparks, and so they begin to get invited onto other shows as a dueling duo. It's Team Freud (Kristin) vs Team You Are Whoever You Say You Are (Matthew). The movie itself is like "Adam's Rib" crossed with the now-defunct Jerry Springer dating game show "Baggage."

"The Bounce Back" was co-written, directed, and edited by Youseff Delara, and for a while he creates some lively screwball tension. Moore and Velazquez are sharp enough



performers to bring off that time-honored romcom thing: They convince you they truly dislike each other. Which, of course, only makes their attraction more necessary to deny, and therefore hotter. Matthew does tell Kristin she has beautiful eyes (which is sort of like informing a starfish that it has five points), but his real love lyric comes a little later on when he says, "If someone's going to rip me to shreds on national television, I'd like it to be you."

They go on TV, and rip each other to shreds, but they also hang out (the love montage is the two of them on tour, sipping champagne in first class and shopping at street vendors), until, of course, there's a hopeless misunderstanding that pits them against each other. And then there's the hurt they're concealing. Matthew, despite the fact that he's a relationship guru, has never gotten over his divorce; Kristin is still smarting from a romantic betrayal six years before.

What the two need is each other's therapy: She has to read his book and stop living in the past, and he requires a little psychiatric soul massage to realize that he is living in the past. "The Bounce Back" parses on a moist sensitive "human" level, but you watch it thinking: There's a reason why Tracy and Hepburn movies never hinged on therapy, and didn't feature actors whose exteriors looked a lot more exciting than their inner lives. — Reuters