Culture

"Mr. Scorsese," Rebecca Miller's five-part documentary out now on Apple TV+, traces the famed director's career exploration of blasphemy and salvation, devotion and rejection, sin and grace. (Apple TV+)

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Near the end of "Silence," Fr. Sebastião Rodrigues (played by Andrew Garfield) lowers his foot towards the fumi-e, a tablet containing the likeness of Jesus that he has to defile in order to renounce his faith and save his life. The worn face of Christ looks back at him, and at us, in a moment that encapsulates the body of work of director Martin Scorsese, who has always confronted the dichotomy between blasphemy and salvation.

Now, in a brand new documentary, we see how Scorsese himself has lived with the same paradox, the push and pull between devotion and rejection, sin and grace, not as a problem to solve, but as the very rhythm of life.

"Mr. Scorsese," Rebecca Miller's five-part documentary out now on Apple TV+, isn't a hagiography but a portrait of a restless man, filmed at home and in his office among books and memories, as he recalls the crises that shaped him. From being "cast out" of his childhood home in Queens and sent to the violence of the tenements near Houston Street, to befriending a young priest, poetically named Father Principe, who inspired him to seek his vocation beyond societal expectations, Miller highlights the spiritual canvas over which Scorsese has painted his life.

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At one point, Scorsese recalls a period when financiers and studios had turned him away. Upon the idea of never working again, he thought he'd go to Europe and make films about the lives of the saints. But rather than saints, he found Jake LaMotta and Howard Hughes. What has mattered to Scorsese throughout his career hasn't been the purity of the subject but the depth of the struggle.

For Marty, as he's lovingly called by friends and admirers, cinema itself became liturgy, a place where the sacred and the profane could meet, where questions

posed by theology could be contemplated through images.

Looking closer at Scorsese's filmography, especially the latter chapter in his creative life, you could very well identify a spiritual library. "The Aviator" begins with a young Hughes (Leonardo DiCaprio) looking toward the heavens, convinced that perfecting an aircraft will deliver him transcendence. He's trying to design a flying cathedral, his obsessive behaviors more like rituals than a descent into madness.

Scorsese never condemns Hughes. He recognizes the divine in the need to create, and understands how being unable to find the muse is akin to feeling abandoned by God.

Archival photo of Leonardo DiCaprio and Martin Scorsese on the set of "The Aviator" (Apple TV +)

"I didn't know how to create anymore," he explains about the years leading to "Raging Bull," which led to his vanishing under the spell of addiction. Recognizing obsession as a form of worship, Scorsese makes the case that obsession itself can

be as merciless and exhilarating as God.

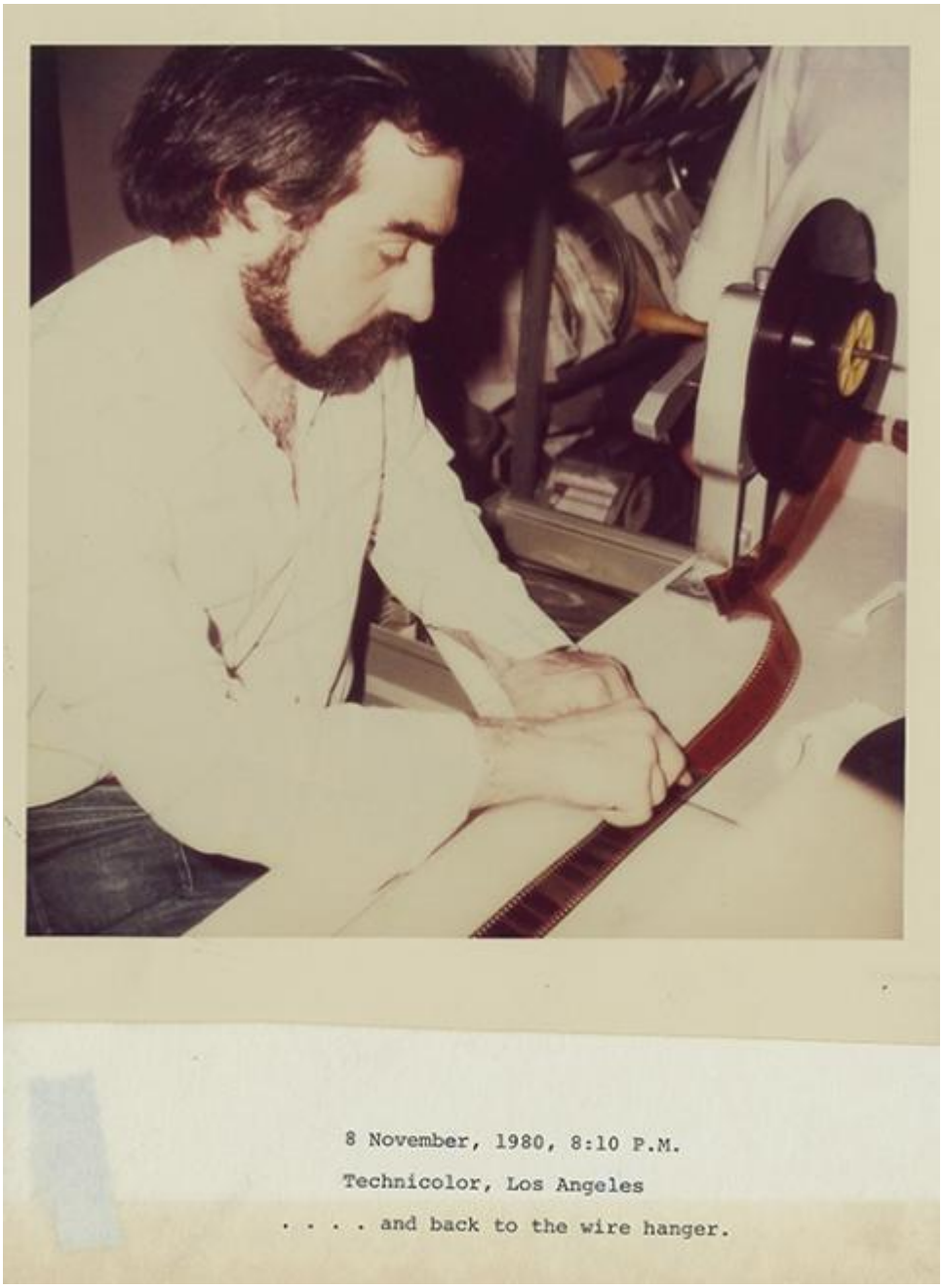
"Hugo," his 2011 family film, stands as an oddity in a body of work that features some of the most violent, expletive-laden films in the American canon. In "Hugo," a boy (Asa Butterfield) winds the gears of a broken automaton that reveals a hidden secret: It's capable of drawing an image of the Méliès moon pierced by a rocket. For the child, machines become a balm for grief; for the director, restoration becomes a form of prayer. God here is found in reparation, the sacred is in forgotten reels of film being cared for. "Hugo" established Scorsese as the custodian of cinema's soul, one who has championed underappreciated cinema internationally.

The mood shifts in "The Wolf of Wall Street," in which money is god. In a scene set at the bottom of Mount Sinai, Jordan Belfort (DiCaprio) raises his arms, drunk on greed, to a crowd that chants along with him. Belfort's altar is the trading floor, where he enacts the gospel according to acquisition. Fueled by rituals of debasement of those he sees as inferior, Belfort worships an unforgiving being, turning the film into more than satire. Like the prophets of old, Scorsese warns us about the perils of worshipping a false god.



These fragments converged in "Silence," where Rodrigues' desperate stillness is broken by a voice that whispers from the fumi-e, telling the conflicted priest to "trample." The moment reminds us of the paradox of faith: Betrayal holds the seed of forgiveness. With "Silence," Scorsese continued what he had set out to do in "The Last Temptation of Christ": to explore Jesus "so we can get to know him better."

When we arrive at "The Irishman," which echoes the earlier "Goodfellas" and "Casino," we see an elderly Frank Sheeran (Robert De Niro) alone in a nursing home, his door left ajar like a confessional that no one enters. Having lost everyone he loved to his own betrayals and violence, Frank sits in a silence more final than anything Rodrigues knew. Here, God isn't thunderous or vengeful, but quiet and adamant. Scorsese doesn't judge, instead he lingers in that silence showing us the profound loneliness of a man who never mustered the courage to ask for forgiveness.




Archival photo of Martin Scorsese editing film featured in "Mr. Scorsese" (Apple TV+)

God becomes justice in the inexorable "Killers of the Flower Moon," as Mollie Burkhart (Lily Gladstone) witnesses greed and racism swallow her entire family. Although human justice was never fulfilled in the case that inspired the film, Scorsese reminds us that theology doesn't live in the abstract, but in the bodies and families that carry unhealed wounds. Telling the story is in itself an act of justice.

Woven through these films are threads of death and resurrection. Scorsese himself nearly died twice — once due to addiction, once a near-drowning — and with each new chance at life he continued digging at the question that we've held since the beginning of time, the question which opens "Mr. Scorsese": "Who are we?"

His ex-wife Isabella Rossellini describes Marty as a "saint/sinner," a man both grounded in the chaos of life and elevated by questions larger than life. Miller's thorough documentary confirms that Marty is a theologian who wears jeans and flannel rather than robes.

It's not until the last episode that Francesca, Scorsese's youngest daughter, appears. Her arrival is quiet but decisive; she calls herself a "miracle baby" born in 1999 to parents in their 50s, and with those words Scorsese's cinema seems to transform. The films are no longer just the questions and confessions of a curious artist, but letters, fragments of faith, left behind from a father to a daughter; a library containing the many shapes that God can take before our eyes; tomes not to solve belief, but to honor questions as the sustenance of faith.

By the end of "Mr. Scorsese," the director chuckles at the futility of trying to master belief. "By the time you understand your faith you'll be dead," he says, not with despair but with humor. For faith, like cinema, is always meant to be unfinished business.

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