Silence (2016)

Written by Jay Cocks and Martin Scorsese; directed by Martin Scorsese
(Los Angeles, CA: Paramount, 2017), DVD.

“Lord, I fought against your silence. It was in the silence that I heard your voice.” With these final words of the Jesuit *Padre* Sebastião Rodrigues, Director Martin Scorsese (b.1942) explains the meaning of the title of his movie. This title is identical to the 1971 film by the Japanese director Masahiro Shinoda (b.1931). Both movies are adaptations of a novel, *Chinmoku* (“Silence” in Japanese) (New York: Taplinger, 1969), by the Catholic writer Shūsaku Endō (1923–96) who was also a co-writer of *Chinmoku*’s screenplay. Interestingly enough, in their reviews of Scorsese’s film, critics have given little attention to its Japanese antecedent. In order to fill this gap, I’ll attempt here a selective comparison of the two films.

The difference between Shinoda’s and Scorsese’s adaptation does not lie in the movies’ plot: a mission of two Portuguese Jesuits, Rodrigues and Francisco Garupe, to find their mentor Father Ferreira who was thought to have apostatized (or renounced his Christian faith) as a result of the persecutions, including torture and crucifixion, that the Japanese authorities inflicted on the Christian communities in the villages surrounding the harbor city of Nagasaki (incidentally, the same city on which the Americans dropped an atomic bomb some three hundred years later in August 1945). Except for the initial and final scenes, which provide more historical context to the story and perhaps more interpretative nuance, the sequence of scenes in both movies is almost identical.

Beyond the obvious disparity in cinematographic technique, the difference between the two adaptations lies, in my opinion, in the way they highlight different aspects of the same story. Scorsese, advised by several Jesuit official and unofficial consultants (including James Martin, S.J., whom I interviewed for the 4.2 issue of the *Journal of Jesuit Studies* [doi: 10.1163/22141332-00402001]) focuses more on the true meaning of Jesuit ministry rooted in Ignatius of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises*. Rodrigues’s spiritual journey—as he visits clandestine Christians in a few villages—is a journey of being transformed by the needy fishermen and peasants, men and women, whom he serves through sacraments of baptism, Eucharist, and confession, which in the soteriological (or salvific) self-understanding of the Catholic Church of the time were the exclusive gates to *paraíso*, or paradise. Rodrigues is moved by his flock’s perseverance and devotion, even if—as he writes to his superior in Macao Alessandro Valignano—he worried that “they value the poor signs of faith [like crosses, icons, and rosaries] more than faith itself” (o:38). For Rodrigues, the

most transformative opportunity—it seems—is the ability to forgive through sacramental absolution his guide Kichijiro. He does it, even if somewhat reluctantly, “seventy times seven”—the last time after his own apostasy, when stripped of his arrogant identification with Jesus of the Garden of Gethsemane and with Jesus of the *via crucis* (way of sorrows), he is now able to offer what should have been the core of his ministry—love. This is an apex that evokes the conclusion of another film about Jesuit missionaries, Bruce Beresford’s 1991 *Black Robe* (which is a namesake of the course I teach on Jesuits in film at Boston College).

Just like in Beresford’s narrative about the Jesuits bringing Christianity to the Amerindians of New France, or Canada, both Shinoda’s and Scorsese’s story show an apparently insurmountable conflict between the presumably universal and only true message of Christian salvation and the local cultures of the natives. This clash is best represented in Inquisitor Inoue’s parable about the Japanese daimyo of Hirado and his four concubines (1:42:48) and his description of Christianity as an ugly barren woman who should never become a wife (1:46:51). Shinoda, however, seems to highlight this conflict even more.

The lack of music (if we do not count the religious chant of the faithful, either Christian or Buddhist, and music of nature) in Scorsese’s adaptation represents *Deus’s* (or God’s) silence. Composer Tōru Takemitsu’s (1930–96) soundtrack in *Chinmoku*, which mixes contrasting exotic noise with harmonic Iberian guitar music, functions as an expression of incompatibility between East and West. The sound of the strong wind and of waves striking the boulders of the inhospitable coast of the Japanese island, which accompanies the first scene of the Jesuit arrival there, is yet another way by which Shinoda conveys his message of the cultural conflict. Despite blatant errors in the historical preface to the movie, the writers of the screenplay for *Chinmoku* got one point right: the first Jesuit missionaries led by St. Francis Xavier (d.1552) arrived in Japan protected by the guns of the naval power of Portugal. And colonial Portugal—the Jesuit *Padre* Sebastião Rodrigues’s homeland—was in Inquisitor Inoue’s parable one of the four symbolic concubines, an ugly barren woman Japan was unwilling to marry.

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