

BOOK OF THE MONTH

'It must be a virus'

A new book of conversations reveals the great director's demons, says Philip Horne

Scorsese on Scorsese

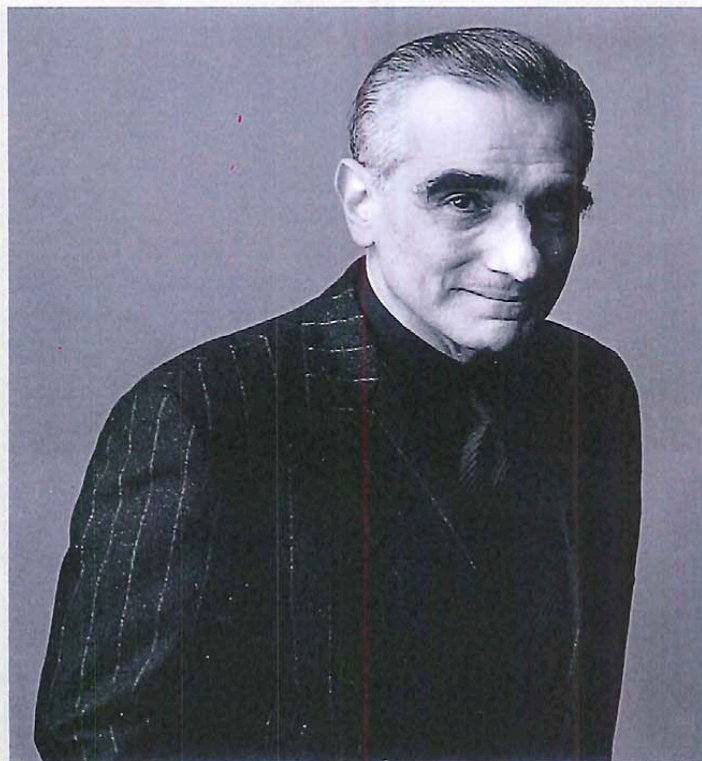
by Michael Henry Wilson,
Cahiers du cinéma, 320pp, £45,
ISBN 9782866427023

First a clarification: this is not the same book as the excellent Faber 'Scorsese on Scorsese', edited by Ian Christie and David Thompson, which went into its most recent edition in 2003, but an updated English-language version of 'Entretiens avec Martin Scorsese', based on interviews originally printed in *Positif*. When you see it – and attempt to pick it up – the difference from its Faber namesake is palpable: Wilson's beautifully produced tome is a hefty slab, requiring a strong coffee table. You could whack a mook with it very satisfactorily.

Fortunately it also serves as a superb – and for aficionados, indispensable – account of the packed life and bewildering, awe-inspiring career of a director who, though now reaching the end of his seventh decade, remains as active and in some ways as innovative as ever (witness the recent 'Hugo' in 3D), as well as a tireless champion of the history of US and world cinema on a number of fronts. Wilson has not only had enviable access in these "ritual interviews" across the years, but has become a friend and collaborator, who co-wrote and co-directed the magnificent 'A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese Through American Movies' (1995).

There's an informal intimacy and digressiveness here, catching particular moments in Scorsese's career, that the Christie-Thompson book – for all its own great virtues – mostly doesn't attempt. A great talker and storyteller – intelligent, self-questioning, tortured, passionate, funny – Scorsese is excellent, stimulating company. And the book is lavishly illustrated with photos, script pages, sketches and other documents from Scorsese's personal archive.

Wilson's tenacity helps certain consistent themes to emerge – Catholicism, guilt, cinephilia (there are innumerable watching tips here), spirituality, the bleakness of America and the world. We're reminded of Scorsese's radical discontent, a disillusion arising partly from early experience of the Mafia, as he said in 1974: "I've seen corruption up close. I've seen it operating every day. After that you can't take the Establishment seriously. It's all a fraud."



Martin Scorsese: "never afraid of what might seem awkward or unusual"

The great early works – 'Mean Streets', 'Taxi Driver', 'Raging Bull' – were especially driven by a sacred rage against the way things are, and some measure of identification with his antiheroes. "There's a Travis [Bickle] in all of us, I'm convinced of that," he said; and later, "One shouldn't behave like Jake [LaMotta], of course, but isn't there something rotten in the world in which we live?" For this driven, visionary director, filmmaking is more an addiction than a cure ("It must be a virus," he says; and elsewhere, "I can't seem to find pleasure in it"). Scorsese nearly died as a result of overwork in 1978; shooting 'Shutter Island' plunged him into "an extraordinary kind of depression that lasted about three months". In 2000, on the set of 'Gangs of New York', he laughs in agreement when someone quotes Alain Resnais: "Directing films is nice, but going to the movies is so much better."

Though Scorsese complains that "the shoot is the phase I enjoy least", there are many euphoric moments recorded here, and he is eloquent about planning (especially camera movements) and editing. "It's when you're editing that you have to find the film's emotional rhythm," he said in 1993. "That's when the material comes to life and become a film." There are two fascinating interviews here with Scorsese's editor Thelma Schoonmaker,

'Shutter Island' plunged him into a depression that lasted three months

in which their complex working method is described in detail. She traces Scorsese's distinctiveness to their early joint training in documentary: "Marty always strives to hunt out the truth in human relationships and is never afraid of what might seem awkward or unusual. He grabs hold of the things that most directors would reject; he builds on them and puts them to good use." This reminds us of how, in the best Scorsese scenes, one is often startled by recognising some gesture, intonation or tic that people really display in life, just not in other people's movies – a core of truthfulness that's often very moving.

There have been many obstacles and frustrations over the years since the success of 'Taxi Driver', "a film that was personal, yet produced inside the system". (Scorsese originally wanted to make Truffaut-like "personal subjects, very fast", and dislikes the new world "dominated by giant corporations with their theme parks and mass-market films".) The record of projects Scorsese didn't complete, or hasn't yet – from 'The Honeymoon Killers' in 1969 to 'Gershwin' and 'Dino' and a sequel to 'Mean Streets' – is mind-boggling. The probably inevitable compromise policy of 'one for them, one for myself' has had obvious drawbacks, and yet Scorsese's steely, decades-long determination to make the films he wants to make (eg 'The Last Temptation of Christ' and 'Gangs of New York') is unabated, so both 'Silence' (from Endo's novel about the Jesuits in Japan) and his long-awaited documentary on British cinema seem realistic prospects. Wilson's labour of love is worthy of its subject's.

United Kingdom " [...] gorgeously produced [...] great news for film fans [...] the illustrative material goes well beyond the usual selection of stills to encompass all manner of storyboards, script pages, visual sources and the like [...] Scorsese [...] is among the few contemporary directors who deserves - indeed, needs - examination like this." Kim Newman, *Empire*, Dec. 2011 "Scorsese's reputation for motor mouth lucidity is only enhanced by this handsome publication [...] [with] perceptive reflections from his long-time editor Thelma Schoonmaker [...] an essential purchase for any Scorsese enthusiast." Neil Smith, *Total Film*, Dec. 2011 "In this very personal book [Scorsese] explains just what drives him [...] he offers insights and analysis into some of the most memorable and influential films of all time." *Daily Express*, Nov. 11, 2011 "[...] revealing and personal [...] a book that is part autobiography, part film production 101.

Gripping, beautifully detailed and fascinating throughout, it's a monograph equivalent of a Scorsese film itself." Carla Seipp, *Dazed and Confused*, Dec. 2011 "Scorsese's [...] dedicated personal vision is brought to life via a series of interview with author Michael Henry Wilson [...] alongside a welter of hand-drawn storyboards, annotated scripts, production notes and on-set photography. ... also reads as a veritable of who's-who of cinema." *Daily Telegraph Saturday Review*, Nov. 19, 2011 "What better way to celebrate [Scorsese's birthday] than with the coolest book ever published on the great auteur as his new movie debuts [...] As the definitive illustrated volume on one of cinema's all-time greats, it's a must for any film buff." *Driven/Urban Daddy*, Nov. 28, 2011 "One of Hollywood's greatest filmmakers discusses not only his own films but also the ones that have inspired him in this impressive collection." *Entertainment Weekly*, Dec. 9, 2011

France "[...] A multifaceted filmmaker, Scorsese appears under all of them in this monograph told in the first person. The richness of the information is equaled by the quality of the edition [...] The loyalty and trust that transpires [between Scorsese and Wilson] throughout this sumptuous book makes it unique." Jacky Bornet, *Culture Box*, France Télévisions, Nov. 21, 2011 "[...] an updated, optimized version of [Wilson's] monumental Scorsese on Scorsese [...] The fans who bought the first edition won't be able to resist acquiring this one as well [...] It is indispensable. Just like the archetypal book of interviews granted by Hitchcock to Truffaut in his time, Scorsese on Scorsese is the most intimate and pertinent plumbing of a major filmmaker in the last forty years [...] [Wilson] had the superb idea of interviewing Scorsese's closest collaborator, his editor Thelma Schoonmaker. In her two interventions, she offers a fascinating perspective on her work with Scorsese. So much so that one regrets that Wilson didn't interview her more recently. Of a rare beauty, it is an ideal Christmas gift. You devour Scorsese on Scorsese like you rarely do with a film book. The greatest compliment you can pay to it is that you immediately want to dive again into the director's films, enriched and armed with new insights." Laurent Pécha, *Ecran Large*, Nov. 12, 2011 "[...] As time goes by, the friendly ties that the two men have woven transform these conversations into an ever deepening dialogue [...] Driven by [Wilson's] virtuoso and compelling writing, this book is one that you both devour like a novel and consult like an exhaustive biography." Melissa Idhazzi, Campus, Nov. 2011 "A work of passion [like Kevin Brownlow's *The Parade's Gone By*] [...] The timid young critic of the first interview [...] becomes a brother to whom you can confide anything [...] That empathy allows the reader to penetrate into the very heart of the work." Emile Breton, *L'Humanité*, Nov. 23, 2011. "[...] The result is a beautiful book that you must have in your library!" M. B., *A Nous Paris*, Oct. 10, 2011 "An ideal gift for the Christmas season [...] It is because of [Scorsese and Wilson's] emotional and professional proximity that these interviews are so compelling, deal in such depth with the creative process and paint the psychological portrait of a true genius of cinema. [...] The interview on *The Last Temptation of Christ* alone justifies reading this book [...] As far as the iconography goes, Scorsese on Scorsese is like the cavern of Ali Baba." Yannick Vely, *Paris Match*, Oct. 24, 2011 " We fell hard for this swell book on cult cineaste Scorsese [...] A beautiful book you will want to offer to any one, whether they care or not for the cinema." Bethsabée Krivoshey, *Glamour*, Oct. 27, 2011 [...] a dialogue conducted with a never-ending passion. This long two-voice roa[d, filled with pertinent questions and illuminating answers, comes to us in this incomparable book. Remarkably illustrated, Scorsese on Scorsese reads like a novel – that of cinema lived from the inside – and can be contemplated like a great film made of all the New York maestro's movies." Alan Spira, *Paris Match*, Dec. 1, 2011 "Gripping [...] Page after page, the historian's pertinent questions allow the filmmaker to dissect his films while conveying in every answer his love for the cinema. To know if a film is well put together, you need to cut the sound, once said Scorsese. To understand what the cinema is about, you need to read this book!" Stéphane Gobbo, *L'Hebdo* 7, Oct. 20, 2011 "RAGING BOOK! 59 euros and 95 cents. You fucked my line? [sic, in English]. Constance Chaillet, *L'Officiel de la Couture et de la Mode*, Dec. 11, 2011

USA " [...] a key reference work for both fans of the director and professionals looking for the keys to the master's work." The Times Picayune, New Orleans, Dec. 2, 2011