

Film is long-time temptation of Scorsese

By A. Richard Langley

In 1976, film director Martin Scorsese crafted a most controversial film in *Taxi Driver*.

A character study of a lonely, psychotic New York City cabbie, it stirred attention with Jodie Foster's performance as a 12-year old hooker.

His *The Last Temptation of Christ*, released in select cities in mid-August, is another controversial work.

On a national level during the past few months, various religious groups have voiced their concern about the film presenting Jesus as a sexual being with human desires and faults.

Local religious groups picketed Universal Studios in Orlando, and for the time being, successfully prevented *The Last Temptation* from playing in Central Florida.

While religious groups protest, the film has garnered generally favorable reviews.

Critic Gene Siskel of the *Chicago Tribune* said, "All of the un-informed protest will only serve to fuel attendance for what turns out to be a very fine, thoughtful and beautifully performed rumination on Jesus and the difficulty of living according to his principles."

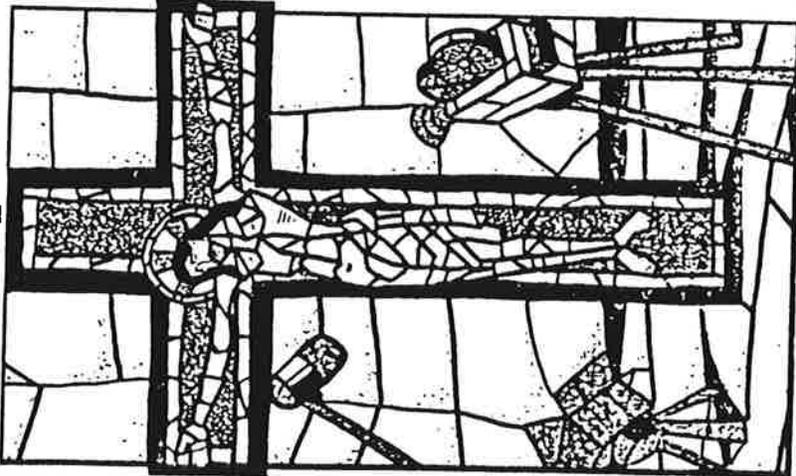
Shot in Morocco on a budget of approximately \$7 million, *The Last Temptation* runs nearly three hours.

The cast, which worked for the minimum union scale, includes Willem Dafoe (Platoon) as Jesus, Barbara Hershey (Hershey) as Mary Magdalene and David Bowie as Pontius Pilate.

Six years in the making, the script by Paul Schrader (*Taxi Driver*) is based on Nikos Kazantzakis' equally controversial 1950s novel on the life of a Jesus who is hesitant to accept his role as the Messiah.

Likewise, for nearly 10 years, studios and producers were wary of backing Scorsese's desire to film the story.

In a recent issue of *People*, he noted that in



1972, while directing Hershey in *Barcar Bertha*, who had urged him to read Kazantzakis' novel.

"I was attracted to it as a psychological portrait of Jesus as a man who has to learn to accept that he is also God," Scorsese said.

The aspect of religion has haunted Scorsese throughout his life and films.

Born a Roman Catholic 45 years ago in New York's Little Italy section, Scorsese was a sickly youth who once considered becoming a priest, but ultimately turned to his first love, movies, and attended New York University.

The *People* profile also mentioned how Scorsese became alienated from the church in the early 70s after hearing a priest defend the Vietnam War as a holy cause.

In his more recognized films like *Taxi Driver* and *Raging Bull*, religious references seep in by depicting individuals who obtain redemption by overcoming their own weaknesses and by eliminating elements (human and environmental) which disturb them.

Although a critically admired director throughout his career, the industry doesn't consider Scorsese a particularly "bankable" director because of the personal emotion he invests into each of his films which are normally small-scale character studies.

After the critical and financial success of *Raging Bull* in 1980, which won Robert DeNiro the Oscar for Best Actor, Scorsese had DeNiro set to play Jesus in a Paramount production of *The Last Temptation*.

It was natural since Scorsese and DeNiro had worked so well together in *Mean Streets* (1973) and *Taxi Driver*.

Their next project together, *The King of Comedy*, became a critical hit, but a financial flop and the duo decided to break off. As a result, *The Last Temptation* was stalled again.

So Adrian Quin (*Desperately Seeking Susan*) was cast as Jesus with Sting playing Pontius Pilate.

Then once again, due to limited commercial potential and religious opposition, Paramount halted production on the film.

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In 1986, Scorsese struck gold with *The Color of Money*, which netted Paul Newman his first Oscar for best actor.

After that, the director had a power base from which to launch his film.

When Paramount backed out, Universal acquired the property, and to divert controversy, decided to call it *The Passion*.

Which brings up the question of why, besides being a fictionalized account of Jesus' life, has *The Last Temptation* provoked such outrage?

Along with blood and violence, the film as previously noted, presents Jesus as a sexual being.

In his review, Jay Boyar, the movie critic of *The Orlando Sentinel*, indicated that during the film's last hour, Jesus has dreams

about leading life as a normal man, including marriage to Mary Magdalene, sex and fatherhood.

It is this sequence which has sparked the controversy surrounding the film.

The point is that whether or not Jesus really did have doubts about his sexuality and ability to lead, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, should be taken as fiction or another perspective on a known situation, a "what if" proposition, and restraints shouldn't be placed on expressing that point of view.

Scorsese already answered challengers of *The Last Temptation*, when he said in the January 1987 issue of *Interview*:

"You can be a born-again Christian and believe in Jesus, and try to live them out, without becoming totally intolerant of other people. That's what this country has got to understand."