

Mar 14

FILM / Once Upon a Time in Film Scoring / Silence / Sean Woodard

Film (2017-posts/category/Film)



Image © Nathan Alan Schwartz

Silence (2016)

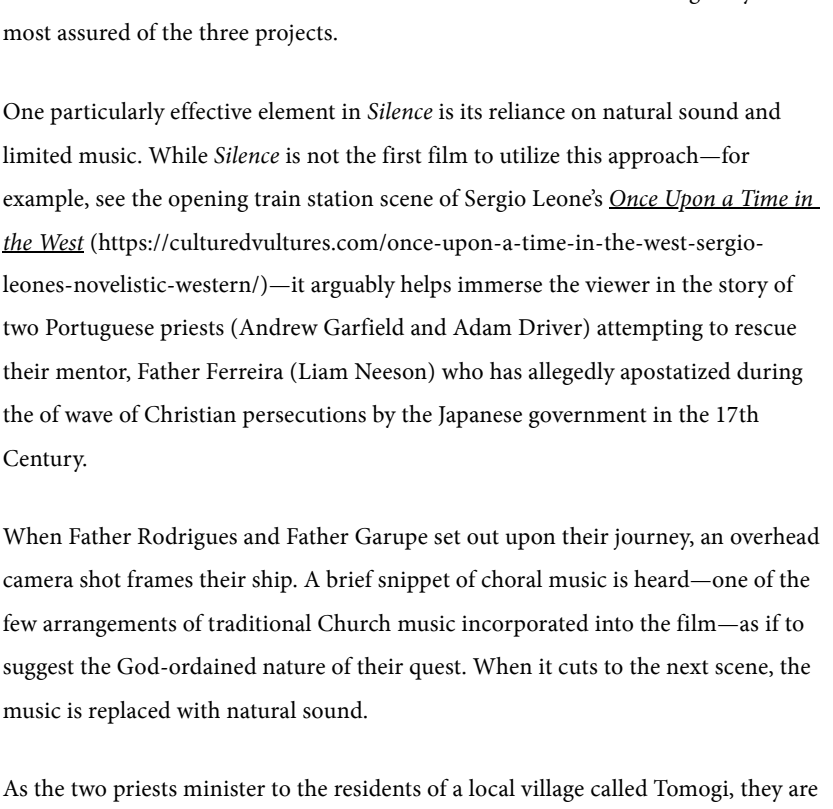


Image © Paramount Pictures

Martin Scorsese's passion project in adapting Shusaku Endo's novel of the same name was about 25 years in the making. Upon release, it was met with critical acclaim but had disappointing box office returns. However, Scorsese's film connected with audiences on a personal level. While *Silence* was not the director's first exploration of faith on film—he had previously released *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *Kundun*—Scorsese's meditation on sacrifice and doubt is arguably the most assured of the three projects.

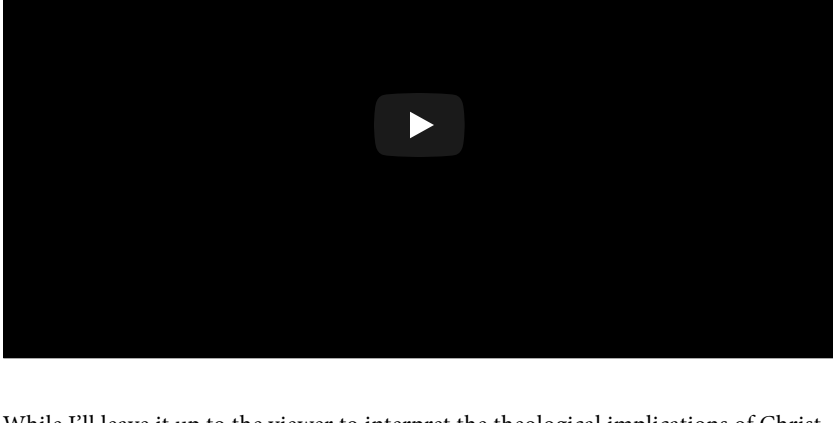
One particularly effective element in *Silence* is its reliance on natural sound and limited music. While *Silence* is not the first film to utilize this approach—for example, see the opening train station scene of Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* (https://culturedvultures.com/once-upon-a-time-in-the-west-sergio-leone-s-non-diegetic-western/)—it arguably helps immerse the viewer in the story of two Portuguese priests (Andrew Garfield and Adam Driver) attempting to rescue their mentor, Father Ferreira (Liam Neeson) who has allegedly apostatized during the of ware of Christian persecutions by the Japanese government in the 17th Century.

When Father Rodrigues and Father Garupe set out upon their journey, an overhead camera shot frames their ship. A brief snippet of choral music is heard—one of the few arrangements of traditional Church music incorporated into the film—as if to suggest the God-ordained nature of their quest. When it cuts to the next scene, the music is replaced with natural sound.

As the two priests minister to the residents of a local village called Tomogi, they are faced with tribulations and the constant fear of capture. Three people are apprehended by samurai when the village leaders refuse to disclose the priests' hiding place. These prisoners are then subjected to abject torture. Their tormentors pour scalding water upon their bodies and tie them to crosses. This imagery recalls Christ's crucifixion on the cross at Golgotha, along with two criminals, one of which was penitent. As the tide rises and waves crash upon the bodies of the men, one named Mokichi begins singing the Latin chant hymn, "Tantum Ergo Sacramentum." The text translates as follows:

*Down in adoration falling / Lo! The sacred Host we hail, Lo! O'er ancient forms departing / Never rises of grace prevail; / Faith for all defects supplying, / Where the feeble senses fail. / To the exulting Father / And the Son Who reigns on high / With the Holy Ghost proceeding / Forth from Each eternally / Be salvation, honour, blessing / Might, and endless majesty / Amen.*

In an [interview](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2017/01/18/films/shinya-tsukamoto-song-silence/) (https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2017/01/18/films/shinya-tsukamoto-song-silence/) with the *Japan Times*, Shinya Tsukamoto, the actor who portrays Mokichi, stated that , "At first we weren't going to have a song, but I thought it was definitely necessary, so I did some research and made a presentation about why it was needed. . . I thought (the song) went pretty well." The inclusion of the hymn definitely adds gravity to the scene. Mokichi's display of faith shows his acceptance of martyrdom, as he follows the saints before him who had been persecuted in the name of Christ.

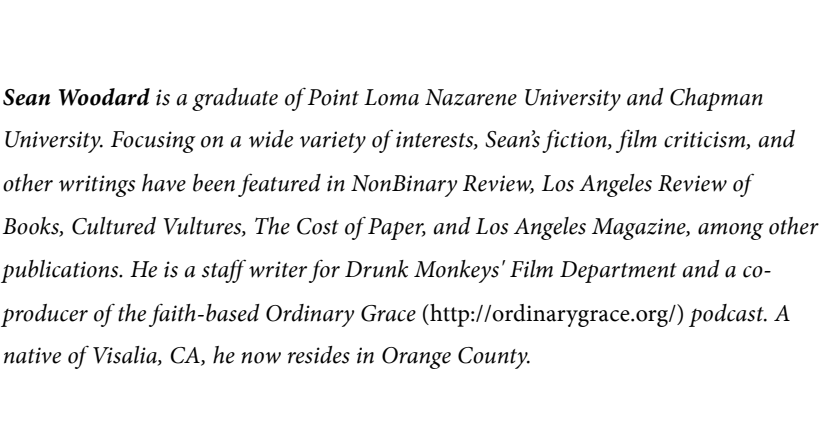


While there are other instances where music briefly appears —including a flute melody that plays during a scene after Father Rodrigues is captured to emphasize the foreign nature of the country in which he is evangelizing—the majority of the film relies on sounds of nature. This lack of music allows the viewer to easily connect with Father Rodrigues and how he navigates his surroundings. But it also mirrors his growing doubt. He admits, "I pray, but I am lost. Am I just praying to silence?"

When Rodrigues is forced to deface a *fumi-e* depicting the image of Christ in order to save other Christians, the intrusion of Christ's voice speaking has a greater impact. The voiceover of Rodrigues' thoughts and Christ's answers are amplified, shattering the silence.

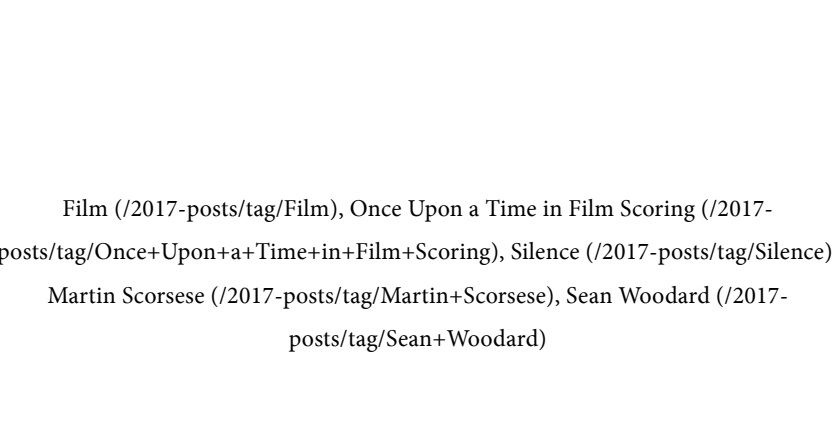
Rodrigues: "Lord I fought against your silence."

Christ: "I suffered beside you. I was never silent."



While I'll leave it up to the viewer to interpret the theological implications of Christ advising Father Rodrigues that it is acceptable to step on His image in this instance, this direct communication dispels Rodrigues' doubt in God's presence.

For people who have never seen the film, I highly recommend it. Perhaps the silence may speak to them as well, especially during this period of Lenten reflection.



*Sean Woodard is a graduate of Point Loma Nazarene University and Chapman University. Focusing on a wide variety of interests, Sean's fiction, film criticism, and other writings have been featured in NonBinary Review, Los Angeles Review of Books, Cultured Vultures, The Cost of Paper, and Los Angeles Magazine, among other publications. He is a staff writer for Drunk Monkeys' Film Department and a co-producer of the faith-based Ordinary Grace (http://ordinarygrace.org/) podcast. A native of Visalia, CA, he now resides in Orange County.*

Film (2017-posts/tag/Film), Once Upon a Time in Film Scoring (2017-posts/tag/Once+Upon+a+Time+in+Film+Scoring), Silence (2017-posts/tag/Silence), Martin Scorsese (2017-posts/tag/Martin+Scorsese), Sean Woodard (2017-posts/tag/Sean+Woodard)

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