

■ THE FEAST OF SAN GENNARO HAS filled the streets of Little Italy with revellers who are content to guzzle beer, gobble savoury Italian sausages smothered in onions and gamble their weekly salaries on games of chance run by wiseguys. Few of them would realise this New York tradition was immortalised by Martin Scorsese in the 1974 film *Mean Streets*. Or have checked out his latest release, *GoodFellas*, which returned with astonishing sureness of vision to many of the themes and lowlifes he introduced so vividly 16 years ago.

GoodFellas, an exhilarating super-charged romp, chronicling the daily life of a hood named Henry Hill, is a juicy, bloody and endlessly inventive peek into the banality of evil, a ride into the gangster's tunnel of love where a gleeful spin most likely ends

Martin Scorsese is self-conscious about his height and tortured by questions of faith. He has also worked his way through a drug problem and three marriages. KAREN MOLINE spoke to the outsider with the unquiet soul who has made some of the most memorable movies of the century

LITTLE BIG MAN

with a nice little bullet in the brain.

Although it's only a few kilometres uptown from his childhood tenement, the current home of Martin Scorsese is a very long way from the mean streets of Little Italy. Perched in his eyrie 75 storeys above Central Park, where on a clear day you can see the island of Manhattan disappearing magically into the distance, Scorsese sits cuddling his wife Barbara's dog, a white ball of fluff with a red bow drooping into her eyes. "Elaine May asked me what kind of dog she was," he explains, "and when I said Bichon Frise she said, 'Umm, sounds delicious.'" He looks at Zoe, who has just returned, bow-festooned, from the doggie beauty parlour. "Sorry, Zoe," he says, referring to the detestable bow. "I hate that stuff."

Zoe is not the type of dog one would associate with Scorsese, whose previous feature, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, provoked an international tempest of criticism that abated only

when Salman Rushdie's alleged blasphemy provided new fodder for those of a fundamentalist persuasion. Nor is his flat, furnished in rather boring black, white and chrome Decorator Modern, indicative of the sensibility that thrust *Taxi Driver's* Travis Bickle and *Raging Bull's* Jake LaMotta into the madness of despair. A film projector points at the screens hidden in the ceiling, a few glossy hardcover film tomes and stills are neatly arranged on different tables, and pillows that are strewn on the floor and sofa hint at the many evenings spent quietly in the dark, watching movies. Yet the most noticeable feature in this low-key flat is the view, while the most lively object is the owner himself.

Clad in a crisp, navy blue shirt and navy blue jeans, his feet bare, Scorsese watches Zoe attack a chew toy and sinks back into a pile of pillows. This spanking clean and characterless flat is his haven. "I feel out of place downtown. I don't belong anywhere," he

says. "Although being up 75 storeys isn't so bad. It's quiet. It's isolated. To this day I don't like to do anything social. I sit at home, I talk on the phone, and I watch movies." That's when the self-proclaimed workaholic is not working.

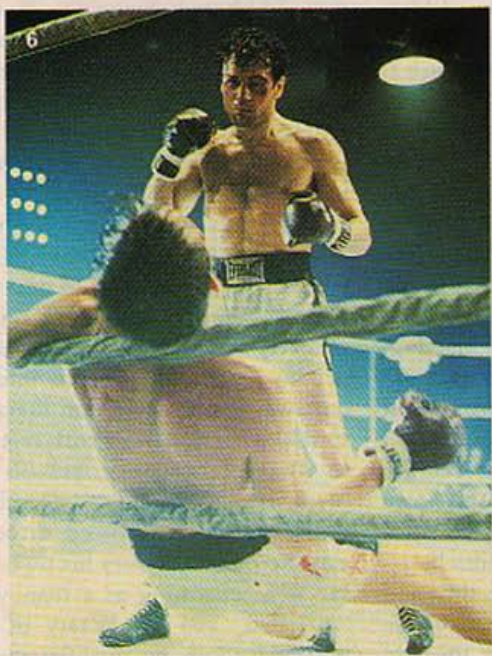
He looks years younger than 48 without his trademark beard. His eyes are wary in the manner of one who is used to fending off criticism, particularly about *The Last Temptation*, yet he laughs often, with infectious guffaws. Impressively film literate, he sprinkles his sentences with references to films of obscurity, yet his comments remain devoid of pedantic self-reference or ham-fisted directorial ego; he often criticises his own work. He is as charming as a man who is "guarded" can be. Weary of being misunderstood, he qualifies many of his sentences with "I guess you might say" or "it's only my opinion". He calls most of his films "experiments".

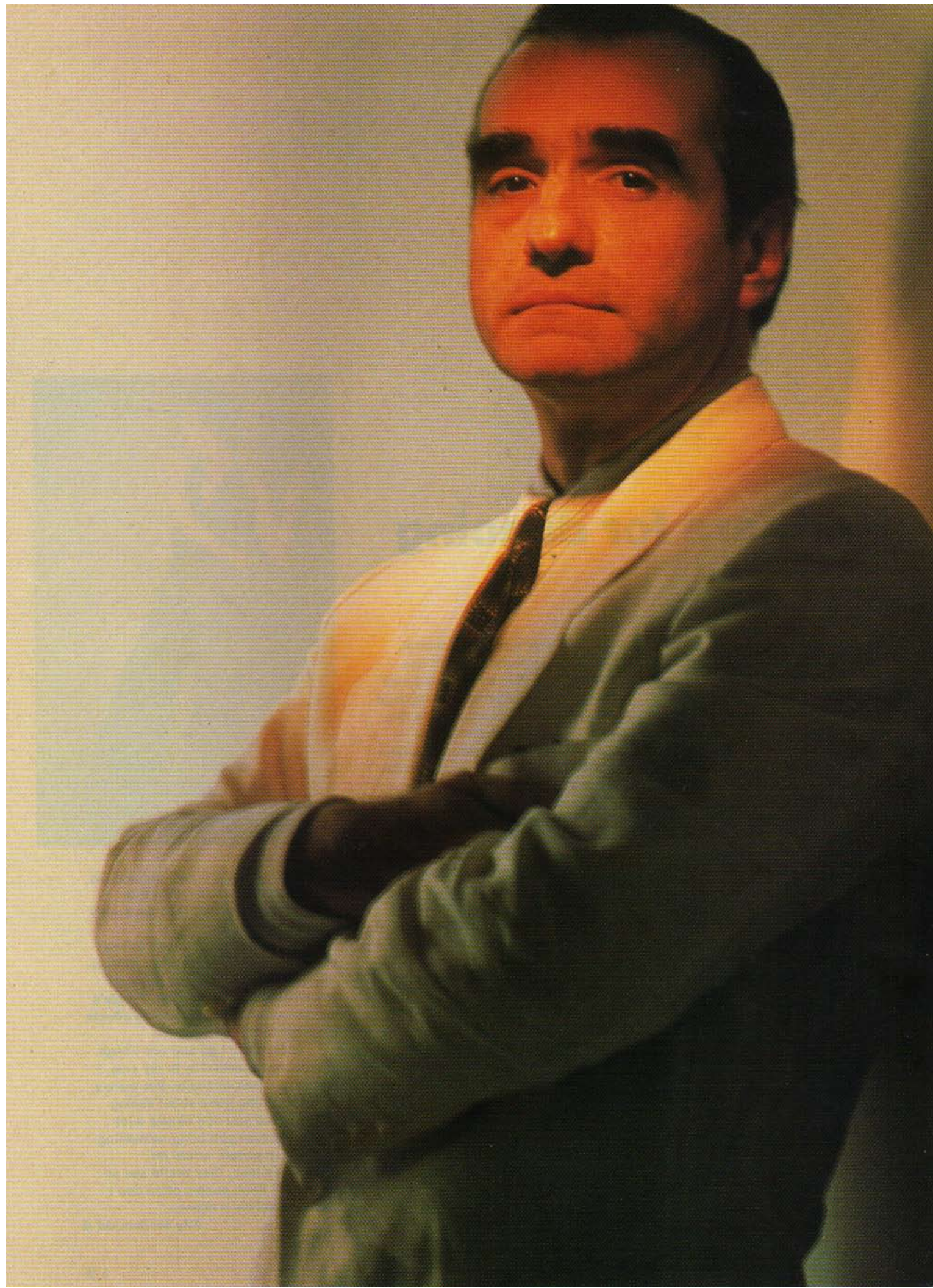
His speech, as rat-a-tat-tat as a ▶

Snaps from the wildside



1. Scorsese on the set of the tempestuous *Last Temptation of Christ*. 2. "Life Lessons" from *New York Stories*. 3. Close friend "Bob" De Niro as an avenging archangel in *Taxi Driver*. 4. The black comedy *After Hours* — a fringe hit. 5. *The Color of Money* — a commercial one. Paul Newman, here with Tom Cruise, won an Oscar. 6. De Niro packs a punch in *Raging Bull*, voted best film of the '80s. 7. A bearded Scorsese (second from right) steers *GoodFellas*.





gangster's Tommy gun, and his diminutive size combine to make him achingly self-conscious.

"Irwin Winkler, he produced *Taxi Driver*, asked me to play a character, a director who was loosely based on Joseph Losey, in his upcoming *Guilty by Suspicion*," says Scorsese, who, primarily to remind himself how hard an actor's job is, has acted in films such as Tavernier's *Round Midnight* and Kurosawa's *Dreams*. This part in a film about Hollywood blacklists explains the recent shave; in the early '50s, beards were for beatniks. "Bob [De Niro] and I have a very good scene together, but there's another, at a party, where I didn't like myself because I talk very quickly. And you'll also wonder what that short person is doing up there on the screen." He laughs. "It's true! I had to look up at all the actors to talk to them."

Short in height, perhaps, but not in stature, Martin Scorsese dominated the best-of-the-decade polls in which critics voted *Raging Bull* the best film of the '80s.

It was sweet vindication for a man whose determination to create very specific films laced with his self-referential obsessions, sensibilities and spiritual dilemmas has led to a career dogged by controversy (the would-be assassin of Ronald Reagan, for instance, was consumed, he said, by *Taxi Driver*), and plagued by financial difficulties as well as personal crises (three divorces and a drug problem in the late '70s, one noted with sadistic glee by Andy Warhol in his *Diaries*).

And it was just reward for a man who has successfully transfused his characters with his own lifelong knowledge of what it means to be the outsider, imbuing their frequently psychotic behaviour with a loneliness so palpable it cannot fail to move.

AT THE beginning of *GoodFellas*, Henry Hill announces that he'd never wanted to be anything but a gangster. Martin Scorsese, son of impoverished Italian-Americans who worked in the garment district, never wanted to be anything but a film director. Severe asthma prevented him from joining in the usual neighbourhood activities; sports were anathema. He grew up, instead, devoted to movies both at the

local cinema and on the telly, and his love for rock'n'roll has resulted in soundtracks laced with memorable tunes. For most of his boyhood he remained a good Catholic who believed he had an inside line to heaven if the nuns liked him and he didn't eat meat on Fridays. But such devotion ended once he enrolled in New York University to study film from 1960 to '65, during the height of the French New Wave and the introduction of Italian and Eastern European styles to students desperate to break the mould of the by then boring Hollywood feature. For Scorsese, who had spent nearly all his life hermetically sealed in Little Italy, it was an eye-opener. "You have to understand just how parochial my viewpoint was," he says now, a little ruefully. "The first time I ever went to Greenwich Village was when I started at NYU. And it was only eight blocks away."

The parochialism of his social experience shaped his first feature film, *Who's That Knocking at My Door?*, made for \$75,000 and starring Harvey Keitel in a role dealing with what are still Scorsese themes. He played a young Catholic tempted by sexuality yet reeling with religious doubts.

Unable to work as a director — like so many of his contemporaries

make *Mean Streets*, the movie which launched his true career after it garnered raves at the 1973 New York Film Festival for its uncompromisingly gritty look at a man (again played by Harvey Keitel) who was unable to reconcile his dreams of redemption with his crooked life as a hood. Scorsese had never forgotten a comment made to him by John Cassavetes, his mentor at the time, about *Boxcar Bertha*. "Marty," he said, "you've just spent a whole year of your life making a piece of shit. Don't get hooked into the exploitation market — just try to do something different."

Although his next feature, *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, starring Ellen Burstyn in what became an Oscar-winning role, was rather more conventional, and a documentary that he made about his parents, *Italian-American*, a delight, *Taxi Driver* was undeniably "something different". Robert De Niro was terrifyingly real as the Vietnam vet whose alienation from life turned him into an avenging archangel on a mission from hell.

Independently produced for only \$1.9 million, the film touched a surprising chord among the emotionally disenfranchised, winning the Palme d'Or at Cannes in '76 and becoming that year's 10th highest-grossing film.

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such as Francis Ford Coppola, Brian De Palma and Peter Bogdanovich, Scorsese found it excruciatingly difficult to break into the Hollywood establishment — he worked as an assistant director and editor on the film *Woodstock* and as a montage supervisor on *Elvis on Tour*. (A love for documentary style has pervaded his work ever since.) He divorced his first wife, who moved to New Jersey with their young daughter Catherine.

Fortunately, the great American B-movie director, Roger Corman, came to his rescue, offering him a script called *Boxcar Bertha*, the sequel to *Bloody Mama*. With it, Scorsese was able to join the Directors' Guild and

Scorsese should have been on top of the world, yet his next production, *New York, New York*, marked the beginning of his slow decline into cocaine use and unhappiness. "If I have any regrets with my career," he says now of his attempt to make a musical in the style of the classics of the '40s and '50s, "it's that I didn't have more control over the experimenting I did in *New York, New York*. It could have been a better movie."

Exhausted and depressed, he nonetheless made *The Last Waltz*, a documentary on the farewell concert of The Band, one many have called the best rock film ever made.

And then there was *Raging Bull*. "I▶

was going through great personal grief," Scorsese says; at this point his second marriage, to producer Julia Cameron, was ending, despite the birth of his daughter Domenica, now 14. His next marriage, to Isabella Rossellini, current inamorata of director David Lynch, at the time a journalist with Italian television, was short-lived. "But I'm surviving, and I put a lot of things into *Raging Bull*," he says. It won Oscars for editing and for Robert De Niro, who gained 25 kilos to play the gone-to-seed boxer, Jake LaMotta.

"It was a tough picture. I don't know if you'd go to see it as entertainment — it's painful to watch, and the emotional impact is pretty strong. I'm not a fight fan. I saw only two fights in my life, for research. And I don't think of the fights in the film as brutal; to me they are dances, choreographed impressions of a fight. They may be overly bloody and sweaty, but that's because I shot them as if you were seeing and hearing them inside Jake's head. Everything is distorted from such a pounding. Shooting fight scenes that way was an experiment."

Shooting a comedy that unfortunately turned out not to be very funny was not an experiment, however, and *The King of Comedy* flopped

when problems began. Religious fundamentalists began a massive protest campaign directed at Paramount's parent company, Gulf & Western. After weeks of indecision, Paramount pulled the plug. (Many costumes ended up in the epic flop *King David*.)

Not one to sulk, Scorsese began looking for scripts. He found *After Hours*, another independent that cost only \$4.5 million. It was a savagely funny black comedy about the misadventures of a computer operator, played by Griffin Dunne, during an evening in Manhattan's SoHo. Although Scorsese was voted best director at the 1985 Cannes Film Festival, *After Hours* was so black that mainstream filmgoers didn't get it. That didn't stop Paul Newman from ringing Scorsese to ask if he'd consider shooting *The Color of Money*, a sequel to *The Hustler*, in which Newman had starred 25 years before.

With his new wife, Barbara De Fina, as one of its producers, and Tom Cruise as its co-star, *The Color of Money* became Scorsese's first commercial hit since *Taxi Driver*, winning Newman a best actor Oscar.

It was time, once again, to attempt *The Last Temptation*. This time, he succeeded. But at a price. Although it was a project that he intended to be

ever, with his next projects: his segment of *New York Stories* called "Life Lessons", starring Nick Nolte as a painter with a midlife crisis; and a follow-up — a commercial — which was barely half a minute long. Scorsese had already been working with journalist Nick Pileggi on *GoodFellas*, adapting his bestseller *Wiseguy* (the title was changed after a TV series of the same name went to air) into a movie script, when he was hired by Giorgio Armani to shoot two ads.

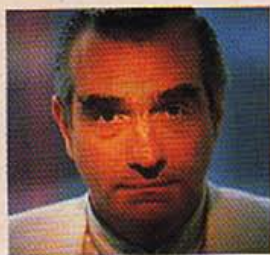
"If I hadn't done the commercials, I wouldn't have found the style for *GoodFellas*," he remarks. "I learned how short a shot can be on the screen for an audience to register the image and understand its meaning. Being able to tell a story in 23 seconds is very very difficult. The commercials crystallised my concept of moving the action much quicker."

That the critically acclaimed *GoodFellas* moves quickly is a vast understatement. Captured by an amazingly fluid camera, filled with zooms, impossibly long tracking shots, freeze-frames, slow-motion, voice-overs, cross-cuts, and every other trick in the book, each second has been deliberately filled to overflowing.

"No doubt the camera is over-busy but I needed that to show the lifestyle," he says. "The style of the film should be shaped from the material; I wanted to give the impression of how they felt, not necessarily depth of character or plot. Living that life and getting smacked up against the wall at the end of it. There are so many seams, so much going on that these characters aren't so typically 'lonely'. They don't have time to be."

"Yet I do criticise myself," he adds, typically. "It has to be 'Where is it all going, what is the style, what is the content, how do the two meet and interrelate?' Can style be content? *GoodFellas* was an experiment in that direction."

Some critics have jumped on the brutality of the film, as well as its subject matter, although in this season of one gangster epic after another, the violence of *GoodFellas* seems shocking solely because of its capriciousness. It is another topic evoking a chagrined smile. "Where is there a rule that says films have to be about good people?"



"Where is there a rule that says films have to be about good people? Every human being has something good, bad and indifferent in them"

badly, although De Niro once again stamped his talent on another social misfit. Still, Scorsese's hopes for a project that he'd been longing to create for years were high. While starring in *Boxcar Bertha*, actress Barbara Hershey gave her director a copy of Nikos Kazantzakis's *The Last Temptation of Christ*, a novel about a Christ who is all too human, and plagued with self-doubt and fear. Paramount finally gave the green light in 1983, locations were scouted out in Israel, casting was underway (with Aidan Quinn as Christ and Hershey as Mary Magdalene), costumes were sewn ...

an affirmation of faith, the few brief moments of Christ's imagined last temptation provoked a bitter controversy that still brings a flash of anger to Scorsese's eyes. "The anger of people who didn't see the film surprised me," he explains. "A whole strata of people wouldn't see it solely because of the controversy..." Funny enough, when the film was shown at the Venice Film Festival, many of the Italians walked out disgruntled. Not because they were offended — but because they couldn't see what all the brouhaha was all about.

Many Italians were pleased, how-

he asks. "If you think about it, it's a very Christian idea that every human being has something good, bad and indifferent in them. And how is a gangster's lifestyle so different from that of a head of government who, during the day, may be responsible for the deaths of thousands of people, and then goes home to his family and is loving and gentle? Ever since *Mean Streets* people have been asking me why I make movies about these people. I can't begin to answer that."

Still, he answered it fairly comprehensively at a recent press conference: "It goes way back to Greek tragedy where the antagonist is more interesting than the protagonist; these villains act out the worst parts of ourselves... we like to live vicariously through these wonderful characters."

Ironically, that he flirts so successfully with these wiseguys imbues *GoodFellas* with an awareness of just how awful that lifestyle really was. "You should see the FBI files on these guys," he said. "It's worse than any *Friday the 13th*. Incredibly gruesome."

Another criticism that has often been levelled at him (as well as colleagues such as Oliver Stone and De Palma) is his failure to depict women as anything other than stock, stereotypical characters, a charge he denies.

"Let me tell you a funny story about *After Hours*," says Linda Fiorentino, who starred as a sculptor with a penchant for the kind of knots one doesn't learn in Boy Scouts. "Marty made me feel that I could do anything, because a great director becomes the safety net for an actor, and you know they'll catch you if you fall. But this day we were shooting a scene where I'm tied up on the floor, and I was really nervous because Marty's parents were on the set and I was wearing a see-through shirt and was a little embarrassed. So we're lining up the shot and I'm lying on my side and Marty says he wants me to meet someone. Brian De Palma bends down and shakes my little finger and says, 'I love the way Marty dresses his women.'"

Scorsese concedes: "Basically I tend to go around the same material constantly; it deals with a certain type of person in a male-oriented world. For the same reason, I often work

with Bob [De Niro] because similar material attracts similar people. If the time comes when I am attracted to material where women are stronger, by all means I'll do it. I believe in constant change."

NEXT on the agenda is the remake of 1962's *Cape Fear*, a thriller starring De Niro as the Robert Mitchum character. It was a script brought to him by De Niro, the John Wayne to his John Ford. "I have a good time with Bob, and we're also very vocal with each other and very private, a haven really. It becomes something sacred during the chaos of filming."

"Maybe," he adds, "Bob thought it would be a good film for me because of its themes of guilt and retribution, who's right and who's wrong, all the things you dread coming back to haunt you and your family. It's fascinating. That might eventually be the key to the picture."

It's certainly the key to his work.

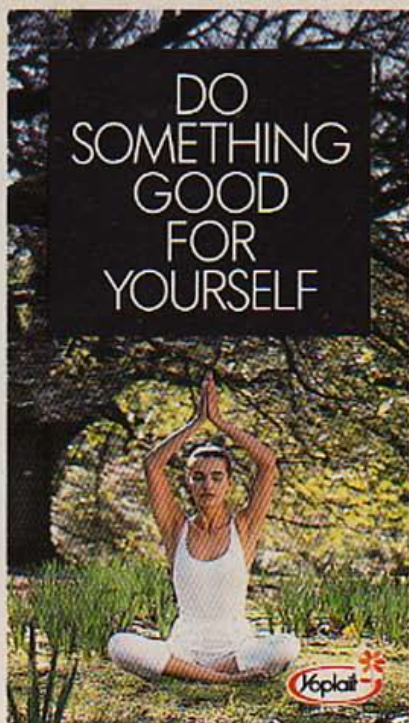
In the meantime, he is content to remain a hermit in his high-rise eyrie, talking on the phone and watching movies. Influenced by the erudition of his much-missed friend and mentor, British director Michael Powell, he is also trying to teach himself to read faster, catching up on literature, historical novels and diaries. "I do feel it's a weakness that I haven't seen enough theatre or read enough literature," he admits. "On the other hand, I was so overwhelmed by images my whole life, it's debatable whether my sensibility would be any different had I read more." He shrugs. Given a reel or a romance, one can make a fair guess at which he would choose.

What no-one can guess is whether he will ever find, hidden between two dusty covers, answers to the questions that have haunted his working days and sent millions of viewers out from darkened cinemas, wondering how to find redemption when there's no-one to show the way.

"The question of faith is one that I don't ever stop thinking about," he says. "What else is there? I am just trying to make some sense out of my life — and failing miserably."

And with that Scorsese laughs. "So, you know, one goes on, I guess. Everyone just goes on." ■

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DO SOMETHING GOOD FOR YOURSELF