DIRECTORY OF WORLD CINEMA

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PAUL SCHRADER
The Infant and the Cadaver

Popularly known as the screenwriter of Taxi Driver (Martin Scorsese, 1976), Paul Schrader's work in cinema extends well beyond this seminal collaboration with Martin Scorsese and Robert De Niro, from his beginnings as a film critic to his continued career as a director. When asked how his background as a critic influenced his work as a film-maker he uses a telling example to outline the two modes of approaching the cinematic medium. Responding cautiously, he explains that for him the analytical impulses of the critic may be as much for good as bad, maybe in fact more for bad. Because a critic in many ways is like a medical examiner. You know, you open up the cadaver, and you want to see how and why it lived. And a writer, a film-maker, is, on the other hand, much like a pregnant woman. You know, you're just trying to keep this thing alive and nurse it and feed it and hope that it comes out alive. And so you have to be very careful not to let the medical examiner into the delivery room. You know? Because he will kill that baby. He'll just tear it apart and say, 'Oh, this is an interesting baby!' Rip! [qtd in Museum of the Moving Image 1999]

As explicitly proposed in these two scenarios, a film may be treated as an infant in delivery, or a deceased body prepared for autopsy. An overly binaristic division to be sure, but relatable to those involved in the pursuits of generating and studying artwork, and illustrative of the suspension of self-doubt necessary for any creative endeavour. It's also instructive for approaching Schrader's body of work. Whether directing his own scripts or writing scripts for films directed by Scorsese, Peter Weir and Sydney Pollack, or adapting stories from Russell Banks, Elmore Leonard, Ian McEwan, Harold Pinter and his brother Leonard Schrader, his projects offer compelling visions of what cinema can be in the present moment. Working almost exclusively in the Hollywood system, these personal, often tortured views of life in America in which a protagonist is set on a self-destructive path, knowing or unknowingly taking action that is harmful to themselves, and ultimately against their best interests. Following Schrader's suggestively gendered distinction between the 'pregnant mother' film-maker and male 'medical examiner' critic, his projects often centre on the male psyche and demonstrate an obsession with self-analysis that opens up to larger cultural anxieties of the time. Within the film industry this has led him towards character studies, often classified as biopics (Raging Bull [Martin Scorsese, 1980], Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters [1985], Patty Hearst [1988], Auto Focus [2002]). Their conclusions usually court an act of violence, negotiating a cathartic moment of sacrifice, redemption or transcendence. These structural and thematic concerns are integral to his own critical texts on other film-makers, and offer a suitable entry into both practices. As the above excerpt demonstrates, Schrader is endlessly self-critical in his many candid interviews, going so far as stating he probably shouldn't have done this or that film. However, his work on-set is all the more fascinating for its analytical dissection and unique theoretical foundations, his work on the page enlivened by their creative application.
Named after his mother's two favourite biblical figures, Paul Joseph Schrader was born 22 July 1946 in Grand Rapids, Michigan to parents Charles and Joan Schrader. Raised in a strict Dutch Calvinist community, Paul and his older brother Leonard were famously prohibited worldly entertainment, and did not see any films until their late teens. Paul in fact cites a reliance on the craft of storytelling around the family dinner table as an important component of his creative development, claiming in public appearances and lectures that

screenwriting is part of the oral tradition, not part of the literary one. And that a movie is something that is told, and it has to be told. And that you tell and you outline and you re-tell, and you do this over and over. (qtd in Museum of the Moving Image 1999)

The first film he saw, The Absent-Minded Professor (Robert Stevenson, 1961), did not impress; however Wild in the Country (Phillip Dunne, 1961) starring Elvis Presley, left a mark. While enrolled at Calvin College with the intention of becoming a minister, Schrader took film courses at Columbia University in New York City in the summer of 1967. While there, a fateful encounter with critic Pauline Kael compelled him to redirect himself towards film criticism as a career. He became assistant editor at the Calvin College Chimes (edited by his first wife Jeannine Oppewall) before being ousted in the midst of its political activities, and after graduating became one of the first fellows at the American Film Institute's (AFI) Center for Advanced Film Study in Beverly Hills. After resigning in protest to AFI's dismissal of much of its research staff, he enrolled in UCLA's Film Master's programme through Kael's influential recommendation, and produced the thesis that would become the book Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer (1972). Turning to film-making against Kael's wishes and open doors, having broken up with Oppewall as well as the woman he'd left her for, he wrote Taxi Driver in a very low place.
The film was a touchstone in the second wave of New Hollywood, as well as a breakthrough for the kind of transcendence Schrader had described in *Transcendental Style in Film*. In it he focused on the austere works of Yasujiro Ozu of Japan; Robert Bresson of France; and Carl Theodor Dreyer of Denmark, arguing towards recognition of a common film form emerging across cultures that strives to express the holy or ineffable, offering ample references to earlier means of artistic-religious expression. Perhaps providing justification for his own works’ forays into pornography, violence and ‘low’ genre in the commercial medium of film, here he stresses that in each age the transcendental finds its proper level and style, and that ‘Sometimes that style uses more abundant means, sometimes more sparse means’ (Schrader 1972: 168).

Taxi Driver’s violent catharsis, in which self-imposed isolation leads De Niro’s veteran protagonist to murderous action against opposite poles of the social spectrum: a presidential candidate and a pimp abusing a child, could be interpreted as a violent twist in Schrader’s theorization of transcendence. It also began a handful of films spread across his career that tell strikingly similar stories as each negotiates these common problems of violence and transcendence. This loose series works in the existentialist tradition of Sartre and Camus, featuring a Dostoevskian antihero he’s variously described as The Peepor, The Wanderer, The voyeur and The Loner (Kouvaros 2007). They resemble each other not due to a shared character or continuous history, but a common soul tracked across four decades of life. Composed of 1976’s Taxi Driver, American Gigolo (1980) and Light Sleeper (1992), the cycle was casually referred to as ‘the man in a room’ trilogy until its fourth installment, *The Walker* (2007), made it a tetralogy. As Schrader has explained, when ‘the man’ is in his twenties he’s angry and working as a taxi driver (Robert De Niro as Travis Bickle), in his thirties he’s narcissistic and a prostitute (Richard Gere as Julian Kaye), in his forties he’s anxious and a drug dealer (Willem Dafoe as John LeTour), and in his fifties he’s superficial and a society walker (Woody Harrelson as Carter Page). Light Sleeper bookends Taxi Driver, as the man has now moved to the back seat of the hired car as he travels New York delivering drugs. The *Walker* bookends American Gigolo, with the man brought out of the closet, now a gay Washington DC socialite accompanying married women to parties, much like the Los Angeles activities of American Gigolo’s prostitute (Kouvaros 2007).

As their names subtly indicate, they exist in an unmoored state (Travis – ‘travel’; LeTour – ‘tour’; Carter; ‘Page’). As Schrader has commented, they each perform an important service for people, but once it’s done they don’t matter to them and become non-people, disappearing. As such, these passive characters see life from the outside, they drift about, watch the high and the low, the educated and the vulgar, and they’re sort of detached from it all. Really quite pure at an intellectual level. It’s like the character in *Taxi Driver* says, ‘I’ll take anybody, it doesn’t matter to me.’ It’s that kind of cold detachment that allows them to be part of the world but not really in it, and to be incorporeal in a way, like souls that are looking for a body to inhabit. (Jackson 2004: 232–33)

That detachment allowed for a stunning perspective within the Vietnam era in *Taxi Driver*, while *American Gigolo* offered a compelling view of sex and consumption in the 1980s, and *The Walker* connected to the ongoing pristine facade and hidden machinations of Washington. However, Light Sleeper’s historical resonance as well as narrative and thematic significance within Schrader’s body of creative and critical work has largely been overlooked; shocking, as he’s repeatedly called it his most personal film (qtd in Museum of the Moving Image 1999). As Roger Ebert wrote at the time of its release, ‘In film after film, for year after year, Paul Schrader has been
telling this story in one way or another, but never with more humanity than this time' (1992). A brief examination of this remarkable and flawed film should provide a fitting summation to this essay on the work of this film-maker/critic.

Set over a long Labor Day weekend during a sanitation strike, Light Sleeper is the only film Schrader has shot in New York to date. Mid-level dealer John LeTour runs drugs to clients around Manhattan, sitting in a hired car observing the nocturnal city and addicts he encounters. A former user himself, he's come clean approaching middle age, and works out of the entrepreneurial Ann's (Susan Sarandon) stylish apartment along with Robert (David Cronin). Dealing in powder cocaine rather than the newer, demanding crack, the three friends are posed as remnants of spiritual New Age counterculture, with Ann considering a switch to dealing natural cosmetics rather than coke. John encounters his former romantic partner Marianne (Dana Delany) on the street by chance; however, she's resistant to his interests in her life, as she's also 'gone clean'. A death brings about an intimate reunion between the two, and another compels John to violent action, and eventual acceptance of a new chapter of his life.

Schrader based the film on his own former drug dealer in New York, from years earlier. He'd been thinking of a mid-life crisis follow-up to Taxi Driver and American Gigolo, and all but given up when 'John' came to him in a dream in September 1990. He wrote the first draft in two weeks, and had finished by Christmas, starting shooting the following March (Macaulay 1992). Schrader tracked down the full trio of the real-life subjects for John, Ann and Robert, even having Dafoe go on deliveries with his counterpart. While only Robert is characterized as gay in the film, both men were homosexuals. John later tragically died from AIDS (Schrader 2003). Throughout, John appears in his bare New York room, a mattress on the floor next to a desk. Dafoe reads his journal in voice-over, everything from memory tricks to remember users' names, to the realization that he's done with the dealing business. A moody soundtrack by Michael Been offers another level of narration, quasi-religious lyrics running as counterpoint to the drama and rich imagery by DP Ed Lachman. Garbage bags fill the streets, and a sense of dread and alienation pervades the film, beyond its characters' preoccupation with luck in the face of police surveillance, health and forced redirection of life paths.

The conclusion, which follows an act of revenge on John's part, has been discussed as Light Sleeper's crucial flaw. Not surprisingly, this has been expressed most critically by Schrader himself, feeling he'd written himself into a corner, and could only find a means of catharsis through violence. Yet this deadlock may prove Light Sleeper to be Schrader's best film, his critical and creative impulses in constant motion.

Joel Neville Anderson

References


Notes

1. While these are most often set in America, he’s also ventured elsewhere, as with Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters, The Comfort of Strangers (1990), Dominion: Prequel to the Exorcist (2005) and Adam Resurrected (2008), plus his screenplays for The Last Temptation of Christ (Martin Scorsese, 1988) and The Jesuit (Alfonso Pinocda Ulloa, 2014).
The Editor


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