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# Interview with Paul Schrader

This interview with Paul Schrader, conducted by Todd Berliner, took place on 19 June 2020 as part of the annual meeting of the Society for Cognitive Studies of the Moving Image (SCSMI). It has been edited and condensed for clarity. We are grateful to Mr. Schrader for his participation and permission to publish this transcription, to Professor Berliner for conducting the interview, and to Professor Carl Plantinga for organizing it.

**Todd Berliner (TB):** I'm Todd Berliner, and it is my pleasure to welcome Paul Schrader to our SCSMI conference. Paul Schrader, as I think everyone here knows, is a screenwriter, director, film theorist, film critic. But for those of you who have been living in a shed, I will say that, as a screenwriter, Schrader is perhaps best known for his screenplays for films directed by Martin Scorsese, including *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Raging Bull* (1980), *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), and *Bringing Out the Dead* (1999). But he's written about two dozen produced screenplays and directed almost two dozen films including *Blue Collar* (1978), *American Gigolo* (1980), *Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters* (1985), *Light Sleeper* (1992), *Affliction* (1997), and *First Reformed* (2017). He's also written film criticism and a book of film scholarship—*Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (1972)—as well as several essays on cinema including the persistent “Notes on Film Noir” (1972). I want to thank Paul Schrader for being here.

**TB:** As I was preparing for this interview and looking over the lists of your work, I was struck by one thing, first of all, which is you're not an *auteur*. Unlike many of the directors that you came of age with, you don't seem at all interested in repeating yourself or developing a distinct or consistent style; you seem to come to each project with a new tool kit—different styles, narrative techniques ...

**Paul Schrader (PS):** Well, I think that's a limited definition of *auteur*. And it's one very hampered by lesser artists. You know, [Alfred] Hitchcock keeps doing the same themes all the time, so he's an *auteur*. But then [Stanley] Kubrick is also an *auteur*, and he keeps changing and reinventing himself. The great artists have reinvented themselves. There have been three [Roberto] Rosellinis; there





Figure 1. Paul Schrader's cinematic representation of Yukio Mishima's novel, *The Temple of the Golden Pavillion* (1956), in his film *Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters* (1985)

have been three [Ingmar] Bergmans. And obviously there's been four [Pablo] Picassos. So, most artists have one lifetime. Occasionally someone will have two, occasionally someone will have three, and magically someone will have four. Picasso is the only one I can think of who had four. But two is great. So, I don't know if I've had one or two lifetimes . . . But, to me, authorship—auteurism—is not so much based on stylistic tropes as it is based on thematic tropes: what kind of stories and themes and characters do you keep returning to? And even though your style changes—some are aggressively and gonzo-like florid and some are extremely austere. But they still have the same kind of characters. So, the character in *Taxi Driver*, *American Gigolo*, *Light Sleeper*, *Affliction*, *The Walker*, *First Reformed*, my new film, *The Card Counter* (2021)—it's the same guy. But I go at him in different stylistic ways. So, I would think that auteurship is more related to theme and metaphor and character than it is to whatever visual flourishes you decide are appropriate for any one story.

**TB:** When I look at a film like *Mishima* and a film like *First Reformed*, it's hard for me to see that they're by the same director. It seems like you're playing with a whole different toolkit.

**PS:** No, it's the same story. There was a female journalist who wrote an article last year attacking me for toxic masculinity, and she said, you know, if Mishima had not existed, Paul Schrader would have created him. And I think she was right. The same toxicity that infiltrates Travis Bickle or Reverend Toller . . . this disease of the Abrahamic religions . . . this disease that somehow we can equal Christ's suffering and co-merit our own redemption . . . When in fact, the message of Christianity is just the opposite: Christ suffered for you; you don't need to suffer. But the temptation to suffer and to earn your redemption is so great that it keeps pulling people in, no matter which spiritual thread they follow. Whether they're Jewish, Islamic, or Christian, it's deeply embedded in all the



Figure 2. Ethan  
Hawke as Reverend  
Toller in Paul  
Schrader's *First  
Reformed* (2017)

Abrahamic religions. And so, that's a pathology; it's a pathology of suicidal glory: "Through my suffering, I can achieve—I can merit—my own glory . . . and I don't need Jesus's help, thank you." That's a deep pathology that's inherent in all of the Abrahamic religions. So then you go to the other side of the world and you have essentially a Buddhist culture like Mishima's. And you have a person who is opposite these characters—who is an intellectual, a family man, very successful, homosexual, revered, an artist—and yet there he labors under that same pathology: my own suffering will transmogrify me, I can enter the pantheon through my own will and self-punishment. That's what drew me to Mishima. The same kind of pathology that, you know: "If I cut myself enough, if I flagellate myself enough, if I blow myself up, maybe God will accept that I've earned my redemption." When in fact, that's not at all what God wants.

**TB:** And when you explore these different iterations of this same idea or this same figure, what accounts for how you take the different artistic approaches? Because, clearly, we can see that *Mishima* is much more of a formally maximalist [film]—there's so much going on—as opposed to *First Reformed*, which is much more—can I call it transcendental?—more spare. So, how do you settle on these different formal techniques?

**PS:** Well, it's a question of problem solving. You know? How do I solve this problem? With *Mishima*, I had to go into the novels because you can never . . . An

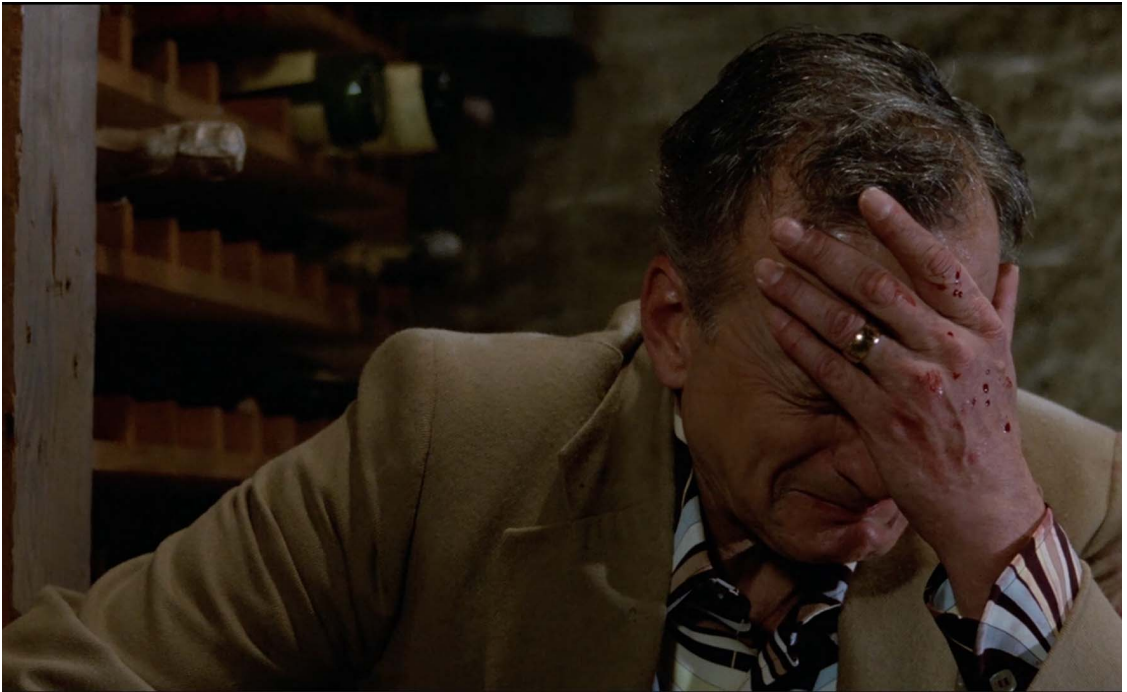


Figure 3: George C. Scott plays a Calvinist businessman from Paul Schrader's hometown, Grand Rapids, Michigan, in *Hardcore* (1979)

author's true life is inside his head, even Mishima's who was very flamboyant in his personal life. But to really get inside his head you have to get inside his books. So, how do I get inside his books? Well, then I have to create a theatrical mechanism. So now, all of a sudden, I'm out there doing that. Another film, *First Reformed*, you say: it has to be minimalist. Just do nothing. Just deny the viewer everything, and make the viewer lean into the screen because you won't give an inch to what the viewer wants. Other films? If you have a kind of a superficial character like a gigolo or a society worker or like *The Comfort of Strangers* (1990), you want to sort of move and enjoy their physical existence. And so, then you don't. And the new film, which I had to stop shooting but to which we'll go back in July and finish, is a very similar film. I think I have defined the essence of what that film is. It's about waiting and about withholding. It's about a man, always a man, who sits in a room, always alone, and he wears a mask, and his mask is his occupation—taxi driver or drug dealer or whatever—and he's waiting for something to happen. Because he knows that something will happen, and he will have an opportunity to transform his life for better or ill. And he's just waiting. And I guess that's the character I have kept returning to.

**TB:** I want to ask about that character as you wrote him in *Taxi Driver* because there is in that movie—and I guess you could probably say the same thing about *First Reformed*—I found that as the movie went on, his mind [became]



Figure 4. Paul Schrader's cinematic representation of Yukio Mishima's novel, *Kyoko's House* (1959), in his film *Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters* (1985)

increasingly unavailable to me and probably to the audience. At the beginning I feel like I know what he wants—he wants love, he wants connection—and by the end he's getting a mohawk, he's shooting people, he tries to kill himself. I just don't know what's going on in that head.

**PS:** It's very calculated. I stumbled on something in *Taxi Driver* . . . the old theory of filmmaking used to be based on what they called the "cut-back" or the "intercut": Meanwhile back at the ranch, here's storyline A and then back to storyline B, and we intercut the storylines. And what I did with *Taxi Driver* was inspired by [Jean-Paul Sartre's] *Nausea* (1938) and [Albert Camus'] *L'Étranger* (1944); [I] burrowed into the head of a single person and saw no other reality than what that person saw. If he didn't see it, it didn't exist. It was a monocular vision. And therefore it was a change in film storytelling because always in film storytelling, you had to have multiple points of view and cross [cut] plotlines. And this had no other plotlines. If your character didn't see it, it didn't happen. There is no other reality except the one in front of his eyes. And what I discovered was if you can burrow into someone—and narration is a very important part of this because you hear their thoughts, so now you're in their mind, you're hearing their thoughts, you have IV tubes in your arms called narration which are feeding you and you can't even taste it but you're still getting fed, and you're sort of living in this person's experience—and after about forty-five minutes you sort of think: "Well this is normal, this is the world, this is my world. I have now identified with this guy." And then, you start to skew. You start incrementally moving, moving, moving, and taking that person out of the realm of identification, into the realm of craziness. So at one

point the audience, maybe about 110 minutes into the film, says: this is no longer a character I choose to identify with but I've invested now over an hour in this guy's life, and I want to see how it turns out. So, even though I'm not comfortable being this guy, I'm not comfortable leaving either. And now you have just opened the trap door that every artist seeks in the reader or viewer's mind. You've opened the trap door of doubt and uncertainty. So, people start trying to put it together: "I don't like the fact that I'm identifying with this guy, but I am ... how do I process that? Do I identify less? Or do I make excuses for my identification?" Well, whichever they choose is great because they are now being active participants in a film fantasy. They are involving themselves. They are saying: "This guy is no good." Hud—Paul Newman in *Hud* (1963)—Hud is good, but gee, he's cool, and I wish I could be him. Well, that twists your brain, and once you twist audiences' brains you never know what's going to happen to them but you know it's going to be interesting whatever it is.

**TB:** You lay these [things] out as if they're absolutely inevitable, but actually—I wouldn't say it's a unique approach, but it's not the normal approach. It's not what a screenwriting manual would say, obviously. So you've obviously developed a way that you want the audience to respond that is complicated and unusual. And I'm wondering if you have any other formal principles that you use—other than the one that you just described.

**PS:** No. It's interior logic. I mean interior logic goes all kinds of places. So, at the end of *First Reformed* is Reverend Toller alive? Is he dead? Does it even matter? It works if he's dead; it works if he's alive. And I've often felt that the last scene of a successful movie occurs on a sidewalk outside the theater where the couple walks out and the guys says, "Well that was kind of stupid!" and she says, "No, no, no, you didn't understand it; here's why it was smart." And now they're having this discussion, and the movie's still going on in their heads as they get into their car. And if it's a good enough movie, it's still going on as they get to the restaurant. That's what a good movie does. It doesn't end when the lights go up. So, that's what you're trying to do. You're involved in a level of mystery. You're saying, "I don't understand; there are things about this story I don't understand." But I embrace them nonetheless. And I felt that if I didn't embrace them, it would be a less interesting story.

**TB:** I want to ask you a few more questions about your process—about how you go about creating these screenplays and movies. You've talked several times about *Taxi Driver* as "self-therapy"—you know, this is a movie early on in your career, you were in a particularly bad place ... But that approach obviously does not necessarily result in a great screenplay—self-therapy. In fact, a lot of bad, narcissistic scripts have probably come out of self-therapy. So, there

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you were early in your career, and you were using the script [for] *Taxi Driver* to deal with something, but you were obviously trying to develop an artistic experience for an audience as well. And I want to know how you balance this.

**PS:** The difference between self-therapy and art is a metaphor. You find that magical metaphor, and you say: “That’s what it is.” So, when I was in the depths of my kind of suicidal enclosure, I imagined this taxicab, and I imagined this kid locked in this steel coffin floating through the open sewers of the city who looked like he was surrounded by people but was totally alone and couldn’t communicate. Alright, so that’s me. I’m the kid in this yellow coffin. Well, then I had a metaphor. And it had nothing to do with being a taxi driver. But it has to do with the metaphorical power of a certain image or concept. And I said to Marty [Scorsese] the first time he showed me the film—and there was a lot of voiceover about loneliness—I said, “Marty, let’s cut back on this loneliness talk. Every time we see that yellow cab, we understand that’s loneliness; that’s what loneliness looks like. And we found the metaphor; don’t try to press it.”

And so that’s the beauty of a metaphor . . . It’s not connected to the thing itself; that’s called a simile. So when you get a good metaphor . . . [*gestures with hands*] Here you have a problem; here you have a metaphor. Now you start rubbing them alongside each other. And you get them closer and closer, but you never let them touch. And at some point they spark. Something jumps from the metaphor to the problem, and vice versa. And then you know you’re alive. So, if the problem is ecological collapse and the metaphor is spiritual crisis—boom. You run those things next to each other, and they’re going to jump; they’re going to lock into each other. A drug dealer, midlife crisis. A gigolo, inability to express love. The new one is a script about a man who’s a profes-

Figure 5. Travis Bickle’s taxicab in *Taxi Driver* (1976), written by Paul Schrader and directed by Martin Scorsese



sional poker player, and the theme is: what if you've done something so deeply unforgiveable that you cannot forgive yourself. Society has put you in jail, and they have let you know. But you don't think you've suffered enough. Now this is opposed to all our current thinking about: "I'm not responsible"... "Donald Trump, Harvey Weinstein" ... "I misspoke." "I didn't mean that." "I shouldn't have put my hand there; it was an accident" No, no, no. This is the opposite: "I did this, and it was a terrible thing I did, and I can never forgive myself." So, you have a guy like this. You have a huge Calvinistic problem—unconscionable guilt. What does such a man do? How does he spend his life? I was watching *The World Series of Poker* and I said, "Well, that's it!" That's what all poker is, that's what all slot machines are: non-existence. He doesn't want to kill himself, but he doesn't want to live either. So what does he do? He finds a zombie-life. A life of watching cards. A life of counting numbers. A life of sitting in front of slots. A non-life. And, therefore, he can exist in limbo, waiting, waiting for something to happen that will either cause him to live or die. And so that's where I find him. And, of course, his sin is that he was the master torturer at Abu Ghraib. And he was sentenced to ten years in jail, and he doesn't feel it was enough. He tortured and killed people because he liked doing it. And now, he's trying to atone, but he doesn't know how to atone so he's waiting, waiting for a signal of atonement just like Reverend Toller is waiting for that kid to show up and say that thing about environmental collapse. You're just waiting for someone to metaphorically crystalize your despair.

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**TB:** You've also directed scripts by other people including Harold Pinter and others—some pretty great screenwriters. How do you find your way into those projects where you haven't generated the idea?

**PS:** Well, you find a way, you know? In the case of *The Comfort of Strangers*, Ian McEwan had a great theme in his book, which is that men and women are inherently incompatible and no amount of socialization can remedy this. That's a great theme. It's in all his books. Harold Pinter has another great theme, which is language is the tool we use *not* to communicate. That's a great theme. So, now I've got a great theme from Ian and a great theme from Harold, and I think: "Well, maybe that's enough. I don't need to add a theme of my own." And then I start getting involved in the film, and I realize there's a third theme, which is Mishima's theme—which is that beauty is in and of itself cruel. And that was my addition—the Mishima theme—which was making this film so deliciously beautiful and making these people so deliciously beautiful, and making that apple so ripe and so glistening that Eve can't stop herself from taking a bite and finding her mouth full of worms. So, that's a way to insinuate yourself into other people's themes.

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**TB:** There's another thing you've done in your career several times, which is that you've adapted novels and non-fiction works. I want to ask you in particular about *The Last Temptation of Christ*, which is a movie I admire very much, including the screenplay. It's based on a [Nikos] Kazantzakis novel that I wouldn't describe as particularly cinematic, though maybe you thought of it that way...

**PS:** No, I didn't.

**TB:** Yet, you found cinematic possibilities in that novel and in the Jesus story that other filmmakers had not seen before ....

**PS:** It wasn't cinematic; it was thematic. Kazantzakis ... There were by my estimation maybe six or seven novels in that book ... But I saw it as a layer cake. There's Kazantzakis's [book], which is Greek Orthodox. Then there's my background, which is Dutch Calvinist. And there's Marty's background, which is Italian Catholic. And I said: Isn't this a fascinating layer cake? A prism through which to perceive Jesus of Nazareth—to see him through the Greek, the Dutch, the Italian prism and enjoy these complexities. So, what I did then was I went through the book, and I wrote down every single thing that happened in the book. And then I put a whole [list] of checks [next to the parts that] interested me thematically, character-wise, visually, comic relief, whatever, sexually, and just kept putting checks, checks, checks. And I looked at all the lists of the checks, and there were probably two hundred scenes that had checks. And I said okay, now let's just pick all the scenes that have the most checks and imagine stitching them together in some fashion ... And it was driven by the metaphor from Kazantzakis that it is not God who finds us; it is we who find God.

**TB:** So, in this instance, it sounds like the process—because you were dealing with a work that was overdetermined—was subtraction. You went through and you took out a bunch of stuff, which [contrasts with how] I've heard you talk about your screenwriting as just the opposite of that. You want to be adding things, you want to be complicating ... But this sounds like you went about it the other way ...

**PS:** Screenwriting is about adding things. So, screenwriting is getting a story that works at seventy pages; then you know it's going to work at ninety. Then you're in the joyous position of adding stuff. Editing is the opposite process. It's a process of reduction ... Cutting a film down is a debilitating and uncreative process. How do you keep continually, day by day, making less of what you created? So, you have to get out of that mindset of less. So, you say to the edi-

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tor: Okay, how many scenes do we have that are absolutely gangbusters? That scintillate? That are alive? How many do we have? String them together. Forget about the narrative tissue. So, we've got maybe seventy minutes of scenes that are absolutely alive. Let's whack those seventy minutes. And then let's sit down and say how much of the other stuff do we have to put in to make those seventy minutes work. And so, addition, even in the editing processes is a much more creative process than subtraction. And once you go through that enormous slash where you reduce 140 minutes into seventy. And you sit there and then you start to imagine, how can this seventy expand? That is a much better creative place to be than when you're sitting there and trying to imagine: how can [I subtract from] this 140?

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