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## ReFocus: The Films of Paul Schrader

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## ReFocus: The Films of Paul Schrader

### Abstract

This is a book review of Michelle E. Moore and Brian Brems, editors, *ReFocus: The Films of Paul Schrader* (Edinburgh University Press: 2020).

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### Author Notes

Elijah Siegler is Professor of Religious Studies at the College of Charleston. He is the co-author of *Dream Trippers: Global Daoism and the Predicament of Modern Culture* (2017) and the editor of *Coen: Framing Religion in Amoral Order* (2016). He is currently working on a monograph about spirituality in Asheville.

**Moore, Michelle E. and Brian Brems, editors, *ReFocus: The Films of Paul Schrader* (Edinburgh University Press: 2020).**

Assuming a “Canon of Religion and Film” exists, which American film makers are part of it? In other words, which American film makers should all religion and film scholars be conversant in, and should be included on all religion and film syllabi?

This is a difficult question, as it should be. Answers might range from Cecil B DeMille to Woody Allen, from Frank Capra to the Wachowski Sisters.<sup>1</sup> Martin Scorsese should be high on anyone’s list, but if one looks at who wrote the scripts for some of his most religious films (however one defines that term)—*Raging Bull*, or *The Last Temptation of Christ*, or the underseen and underrated *Bringing Out the Dead*—one learns the name Paul Schrader.

Schrader, it turns out, not only has written some of the most religiously significant screenplays in the last half century for Scorsese to direct, but has directed his own screenplays, where religion plays a key role. In Schrader’s second film as writer-director, 1979’s *Hardcore*, a devout Calvinist father from Grand Rapids, Michigan searches for his teenage daughter who has become a porn actress in California. Almost forty years later, Schrader, approaching the age of seventy, wrote and directed another film about a man with strong Calvinist convictions: 2017’s *First Reformed*, about Rev. Ernest Toller, the spiritually bereft pastor of a historic Dutch Reformed church in upstate New York whose congregation is rapidly dwindling. One would not be surprised then that Schrader was raised in the Reformed tradition and studied philosophy and theology at Calvin College in Grand Rapids.

Looking deeper into Schrader’s filmography, one would find that even his films that don’t feature explicitly religious characters, fall comfortably (although “comfortably” is not an adjective that should ever be applied to Schrader’s challenging films and notoriously prickly personality)

into the “Religion and Film” Canon: according to Richard Brody, a film critic for *The New Yorker*, Schrader “makes films about people who do whatever they do, however profane, with an absolute devotion that amounts essentially to religious, Christian inspiration.”<sup>2</sup>

But Schrader is not only a screenwriter and director. He is also a film theorist (and, I would argue, a theorist of religion): his writings appear regularly in *Film Comment* magazine and his monograph, first published in 1972 and based on his Master’s Thesis from USC, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* has been lauded as “indispensable [...] for students interested in spirituality and cinema.”<sup>3</sup> The revised edition has been extensively reviewed in the pages of this journal.<sup>4</sup> Transcendental style, for Schrader, is not merely the “spiritual” (whatever that is) on film, but “like the mass, transforms experience into a repeatable ritual which can be repeatedly transcended.”<sup>5</sup>

So I hope by now I have convinced you that Schrader is certainly one American in this “Canon of Religion and Film.” If I have, then convincing you to read *ReFocus: The Films of Paul Schrader* should be an easy sell. The co-editors, Michelle E. Moore and Brian Brems, have assembled eleven essays, bookended by an excellent introduction and an illuminating interview with Schrader. This volume is not explicitly written from a religious studies or theological perspective, and none of the twelve contributors have a religious studies or theological background (at least judging from the book’s notes)—but rest assured, this edited volume focuses on Schrader’s religious influences from the first page to the last. Quite literally: on page one, the editors quote from their interview with Schrader, about “the Christian dogma which is a lot about the dark night of the soul and the need for redemptive blood.” The last page is Schrader’s filmography in simple list form; reading his titles, one notes the themes of light and dark.

Almost every chapter of this volume contains something worthwhile for the scholar of religion and film, and some chapters are essential. The introduction, by the co-editors, is a valuable overview, with several references to Schrader's interest in theology. Schrader, famously, comes from a "strict Calvinist background" (2) and didn't see his first movie until he was seventeen. The introduction is concerned with Schrader's connection with Scorsese, noting his best and his most well-known are those he wrote for Martin Scorsese to direct (the three mentioned above, plus *Taxi Driver*), even as it makes the case for Schrader "escaping the shadow of his frequent collaborator" (10).<sup>6</sup>

Chapter One, "Schrader on Style" by Erik Backman is hugely important because it is mostly through style not content that Schrader communicates religious themes (with a couple of exceptions, like the films mentioned previously). Style was the bridge between his spiritual life and his filmic output. This chapter mounts an impressive analysis of Schrader's directorial style "in terms of the contradiction between Marxism and Christianity" (25, see also 19 and 27), as well as delving deeply into the contradictions in Schrader's monograph, *Transcendental Style in Film*.

The next chapter, "Movement and Meaning: The 'Unmotivated' Camera in Four Films by Paul Schrader" is less obviously helpful to readers of this journal than the previous chapter, but the three or so pages analyzing *First Reformed* are a helpful supplement to the later chapters which concentrate on this film. Chapter Three, "Late Schrader: From the Canon to the Canyons" includes some productive ideas about the cinematic canon, something Schrader has written and spoken about at length over the years, which could connect well to religious studies scholarship on the same. Chapter Four is a deep dive into Schrader's directorial debut, *Blue Collar*, and its racial politics both on screen and in its making.

In chapter Five, “Prophets and Zealots: Paul Schrader’s Adaptations of *The Mosquito Coast* and *The Last Temptation of Christ*,” Erica Moulton analyzes two literary adaptations, meticulously charting the journey from novel to screenplay to the film itself, using Schrader’s archives as evidence. As the chapter’s title indicates, Moulton emphasizes the religious roles of the two films’ respective main characters. Interestingly, the title character of *The Last Temptation of Christ*, in Schrader’s original script, was more of a kind with Schrader’s other heroes who are “self-destructive, dogmatic men” (95).

Chapter Six, “So ‘I found another form of expression’: Art and Life/ Art in Life in Paul Schrader’s *Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters*” by Thomas Prasch is a wonderful general critical analysis of one of Schrader’s most distinctive films, an experimental biopic of the controversial Japanese author Yukio Mishima. (And my first Schrader film; seeing it in the theater at age fourteen left a lasting impact.) This 1985 film was criticized by scholars of Japan for its lack of historical and political context, but Prasch argues the film works best as a spiritual biography. He further notes (and cites various film critics to the effect) that the character of Mishima conforms to a template in many of Schrader’s scripts, the “man in a room” with a “profound spiritual hunger” quoting John R. Hamilton (108). (See also page 137 for a list of commonalities of Schrader’s main male characters.) Later, Prasch links *Mishima*’s fetishization of Japanese aesthetics to Schrader’s Orientalist approach to Ozu’s cinema, in *Transcendental Style in Film*. Schrader problematically links Ozu to “traditional Oriental art” and Zen to values as filtered through Alan Watts. Prasch mitigates his criticism by noting that *Transcendental Style* came out in 1972, six years before the publication of Said’s *Orientalism*.

The title of Chapter Seven, “Schrader’s Women: *Cat People* and *Patty Hearst*,” written by the co-editor, Brian Brems, may give the false impression that this chapter is not directly related

to the religious nature of Schrader's films. But in fact, the first six pages of this sixteen-page essay is religious film criticism at its best. Brems argues that many of Schrader's male protagonists suffer spiritual desolation but end their films with a shot that suggests spiritual connection; in this Schrader is imitating one of his cinematic heroes, Robert Bresson. (And later Brems notes how many of Schrader's films are "conversion narratives" (134).)

Chapters Eight and Nine are both analyses of single films, 1990's *The Comfort of Strangers* and 2013's *The Canyons* respectively. The former treats its subject as an allegory of the erotic power of fascism. The latter thoroughly reassesses a critically reviled film, arguing that this low budget, crowd-funded thriller starring porn star James Deen and tabloid diva Lindsay Lohan is not a shallow film but a film about shallowness. The set design, author James Slaymaker argues, evokes a voluntary panopticon as the film itself "gazes into the abyss of dehumanization as engendered by late-capitalist excess" (169). And *The Canyons'* ending parodizes the Bressonian endings of so many of Schrader's earlier films.

Chapters Ten and Eleven both deal with *First Reformed*, Schrader's most recent film at the time of the book's publication. One cannot be bothered by this recency bias, as this is the Schrader film of most obvious interest to religion and film scholars. Tatiana Prorokova tackles the theme of "eco-theology." Though she is a scholar of American studies, not religious studies, she has done her homework and quotes important eco-theologians, as well as such "religion and nature" theorists as Evan Berry. Prorokova makes the key point that *First Reformed* "uses climate change as a powerful metaphor to talk about degradation in general—degradation that takes place not only on the levels of nature and ecology, but also on cultural, social, and political levels" (178-179).

Later, Prorokova's lack of training in religious studies comes across in her simplistic treatment of the concepts of sacred and profane. She sees them only in opposition: "Toller is

unclogging the toilet while he says, in voice over, ‘discernment intersects with Christian life at every moment. Discernment. Listening and waiting for God's wish what action must to be taken.’ In this image, Schrader creates a clash of sacred and profane” (184). Any undergrad majoring in religious studies might see the sacred in the profane. And I think Schrader would also see them mutually co-constitutive. Nonetheless Prorokova makes important points about themes of sacrifice, preservation, and creation in this rich film. Although some sentences read as both vague and unclear (“Schrader’s directorial choices, characteristic of transcendental style, which is influenced heavily by *religious thinking*, underline his approach to the *debate between science and theology*” (180, italics mine)), overall, this is a valuable essay and very teachable, I would imagine, in an undergraduate classroom.

The next and last chapter, “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms: Love and Silence in *First Reformed*” by Robert Ribera is a tour de force. It begins with a short spiritual biography of Schrader (190-191) and then uncovers a fascinating trove of references in the film, which deepened my already considerable appreciation for *First Reformed*. Ribera notes that Toller's bedside reading includes the Bible (which Ribera reveals is Schrader’s own childhood Bible), *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and Thomas Merton. Speaking of Merton, the Episcopal Church in Long Island he grew up in (and mentions in his memoir *The Seven Storey Mountain*) stands in for the movie’s titular First Reformed Church. Ribera then makes important comparisons to Ingmar Bergman’s film *Winter Light* and finally analyzes the use of the hymn “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms” which concludes the film (and was also used, to a different but equally powerful effect, at the end of the Coen Brothers’ *True Grit* (2010)). However, in his interview that ends this volume, Schrader notes that such intertextual references are mere “eye-winking... that's play. I mean, that's not real” (220).



While *First Reformed* is undoubtedly Schrader's triumph, I cannot agree with the editors claim that any future films "will likely be codas to *First Reformed*'s powerful conclusion" (9). Schrader's most recent film at the time of this writing, 2021's excellent *The Card Counter* (2021) is no mere coda. And, though not as explicitly religious as its predecessor, with a title character named Tillich and whose back tattoo states "I trust my life to providence; I trust my soul to grace," the religious aspect of the film is not exactly subtle.<sup>7</sup>

Like so many of Schrader's films, *The Card Counter* focuses on an obsessed man who writes in his journal (which we hear in voiceover), while living in a metaphorical prison of his own making. In this case, the man is William Tell (born Tillich), a professional gambler and former torturer at Abu Ghraib prison, played convincingly by Oscar Isaac. Like *First Reformed*, *The Card Counter* is a portrait of spiritual desolation with a violent conclusion and in which the Iraq War is an important part of the backstory. The former is more mystical flavored and the latter plays with stoicism, as we see Tell making the spartan surroundings of a Motel 6 (or "Motel 7" in this film) even more ascetic by wrapping the furniture in white cloth and reading Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*. Film critic Christina Newland calls it "a film so zeroed in on incarceration, literal and spiritual" and notes its "spiritual kinship with Schrader's *First Reformed* in its indictment of the inner rot of the American status quo."<sup>8</sup>

And, as of this writing, the 75-year-old Schrader is shooting *The Master Gardener*, described as being about "a meticulous horticulturist who is devoted to tending the grounds of a beautiful estate and pandering to his employer, the wealthy dowager."<sup>9</sup> Perhaps Schrader's continuing output would merit a second edition of *ReFocus: The Films of Paul Schrader*? I hope so, as this is a truly outstanding volume. Sure, there are some repetitions. For example, the same quote from *Transcendental Style in Film* about how its titular theme seeks to "maximize a mystery

of existence” etc... (See 173, 192). And the plot of *First Reformed* is summarized several times. And the point is made on pages 116, 126 and 216 that Schrader has not made films in the “transcendental style” himself, except for *First Reformed*. But overall, *ReFocus: The Films of Paul Schrader* makes the case, along with his films and his monograph, that Schrader belongs in any canon of “Religion and Film.” This volume is most highly recommended.

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<sup>1</sup> Personally, I think the Coen Brothers should be at the top of the list, and I put together a book to make that case. See Siegler, Elijah, ed., *Coen: Framing Religion in Amoral Order* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Brody, Richard, ““The Card Counter,” Reviewed: Paul Schrader’s Furious Vision of American Corruption,” *New Yorker Magazine*, September 13, 2021 <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-front-row/the-card-counter-reviewed-paul-schraders-furious-vision-of-american-corruption>

<sup>3</sup> A blurb from Kenneth R. Morefield on the back cover of Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* Revised Edition (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> See Gibson, Michael (2020) "Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer (2nd edition)," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 24: Iss. 1, Article 52; and Johnston, Robert (2020) "'Transcendence' in Film: An Ongoing Issue," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 24: Iss. 2, Article 12.

<sup>5</sup>From *Transcendental Style in Film*, as quoted on p. 174 of this volume.

<sup>6</sup> How Scorsese’s Roman Catholic sensibilities mesh with Schrader’s Calvinist ones is a topic that deserves a full treatment in this journal!

<sup>7</sup> In another intertextual moment, his tattoo is a direct quote from the lyrics to the opening song from Schrader’s 1992 film, *Light Sleeper*. See Alisha Graus, “The Card Counter: What Bill’s Back Tattoo Means,” *Screen Rant*, September 11, 2021. <https://screenrant.com/card-counter-bill-back-tattoo-meaning/>

<sup>8</sup> Newland, Christina, “The Card Counter,” *Reverse Shot*, September 15, 2021. [http://www.reverseshot.org/reviews/entry/2821/card\\_counter](http://www.reverseshot.org/reviews/entry/2821/card_counter)

<sup>9</sup> “Master Gardener,” IMDB, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt15342244/>