

On Paul Schrader  
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I assume that most people under fifty, or is it sixty, have never heard of Paul Schrader. Schrader is a screenwriter and director in his late sixties and still active—at this writing he has a film with Nicolas Cage about to be released—but his prominence was at its peak in the 1970s and '80s, when he received a great deal of attention from critics and film buffs. Schrader is best known for his screenplays for “Taxi Driver,” released in 1976, and “Raging Bull,” 1980, and for writing and directing “American Gigolo,” also in 1980.

I have spent a good amount of time the past couple of weeks looking into Schrader’s life and work and letting it take me where it took me—watching and reading about films, Schrader’s and others’, reading books and periodicals about someone or some topic that came up in the Schrader study, reflecting on my own history and current circumstance, and now I’m writing this thought for my web site. This thought is to share some of the outcomes of my Schrader-focused inquiry, invite you to check out Schrader and his films, and to suggest that you think about whether the sort of thing I did with Schrader would be a useful activity for you.

This isn’t the first time I’ve looked into Schrader. I’ve done it every couple of years or so for the past decade or more and it’s always been worth my time. Each revisit has resulted in new insights, new issues to resolve, and new directions to take in both the personal and professional dimensions of my life. It’s been different each time for me with Schrader because I’ve been different each time. I’d like to think I’ve been more evolved and receptive as a person every new encounter with Schrader, and that that has contributed to fresh and richer, more complex, outcomes for me.

I’ll discuss here some of what’s resulted from my engagements with Schrader, someone I’ve never communicated with or met in person. Until I wrote this last sentence, I’ve never even considered the possibility of dealing with him directly. I need to reflect on what that’s about. A beginning explanation is that I basically see the world, and particularly the prominent people in it, as being over there, as it were, and I’m over here, and never the twain shall meet. Actually, in his writings and films Schrader deals with this sense of one’s alienation from the affairs of the world. His protagonists are

often “men in a room,” as he refers to them: alone, estranged, writing things down in a notebook (as does Travis Bickel in “Taxi Driver”) or, in my case, in a web site.

As I go through the outcomes of my time with Schrader, think about the investigative approach I’ve employed as a strategy for self-directed study generally. As is true of most adults, I’m not in school, and thus don’t have a teacher or curriculum to guide me. If I’m going to learn new things, it will have to be on my own. I enjoy and find gratifying and grow from systematic and concerted explorations on my own. This Schrader-focused study is the way I go at it. I find something concrete—a person, an event, a particular issue or challenge I am confronting in my own life, something that gives me a focus, something that intrigues me, and start somewhere with that, and then let it take me where it will; I just do the next thing, and then the next, and the next, until I feel in equilibrium, or completed, with that inquiry.\*

I always go first to Amazon to see what books are available on any topic. When I find one that seems promising, I check to see if libraries have it. I found everything that emerged from my Schrader investigations this last time available in libraries with no hitches. If some source, a book or an article, I was looking for had been in the library's collection but checked out, I would have had it recalled. If the library hadn't had it in its collection, I would have requested that the library do an interlibrary loan to obtain it. If it had been necessary—again, it wasn't—I would have checked Amazon's used books. As a last resort, I would have purchased a new book from Amazon. The Internet had a lot of things I found useful. With films, I used Netflix and Amazon streaming; perhaps you know of other ways to see films.

With Schrader this last time, I began by streaming “Taxi Driver.” I’d seen it a number of times before, but since I looked at it through the lens of my current consciousness, I saw new things in it. Then I went to the library to get the book by Kevin Jackson, *Schrader on Schrader and Other Writings* (Faber and Faber, 2004). (Several books I will cite are reprints of books originally published much earlier. The Jackson volume is an example—it was originally published in 1990.) I read the Jackson book—which I had read before—out of order. I don’t necessarily start from the beginning of a book and read through to the end. I use the table of contents and index to find what seems most interesting and useful at the moment.

I also don't necessarily stay with a book until I'm finished with it, and then that's that. I'll read parts of it and then go to something else and then come back to it.

As I read in the Jackson book, I stayed vigilant to my being--my mind and body--looking to be, in effect, told what to do next: watch Schrader's film "American Gigolo," read Jean-Paul Sartre's novel *Nausea* (New Directions, 2007, originally published in 1938), whatever it was. Eventually I felt in equilibrium and that it was time to move on from Schrader. By felt, I mean I literally felt--physically, organically, bodily felt. My experience of being alive in the world at this moment in time was "enough of Schrader for now."

Schrader grew up in a strict Calvinist home in Michigan, received an undergraduate degree in English with a minor in theology from Calvin College, and in his early twenties traveled to California to study film in UCLA's graduate film program. He was mentored by one of the two most prominent film critics of the time, Pauline Kael, (the other being Andrew Sarris), and began to write film criticism for, among other outlets, the *Los Angeles Free Press*.

A good place to start to get a sense of Schrader is where I did this last time: watch the classic film he wrote, "Taxi Driver," with a young Robert De Niro playing the protagonist, Travis Bickel. "Taxi Driver" was directed by the excellent director Martin Scorsese, and there is a lot of Scorsese's influence in the film. As well, Scorsese and De Niro re-wrote a good deal of the dialogue in the film. But still, "Taxi Driver" depicts well Schrader's philosophical concerns and the issues he most cares about, and it illustrates his superb talent with theme, character, and narrative (he's less good with dialogue).

A theme Schrader works with in "Taxi Driver" that he carries on in his later films is personal contradictions. At the very same time Travis is writing in his journal about taking better care of his body he is popping amphetamines and pouring peach brandy on his breakfast cereal. How often do we want something, need something, have the goal of attaining something, and then turn around and do things that undercut that? Our adversary isn't "out there" someplace; it is within ourselves. Repeatedly, the lesson comes through from Schrader's films: expel from your life the contradictions between what you say you'll do, what you know you ought to be doing, and what you actually do. You might want to

read Schrader's book. *Taxi Driver* (Faber and Faber, 1990), which describes what propelled Schrader to write the screenplay, as well as gets into his collaborations with Scorsese and De Niro. It's an excellent case study in how art—true, authentic, informed, timeless art—can be created.

To get an overview of Schrader's life, the best place to start is the Kevin Jackson book I referred to earlier, *Schrader on Schrader and Other Writings*. It is made up interviews Jackson did with Schrader and some of Schrader's early film criticism. Schrader is articulate and candid about his process as an artist and his personal struggles and the interplay between the two. Schrader reveals himself to be bright and informed, and committed to rise above the obstacles that block his path in life, including his tendency toward self-destructiveness. Schrader's story demonstrates how one can make productive use of one's limitations and inner and outer conflicts—employ them positively to create a self-expressive and productive life characterized by personal and professional integrity. What especially draws me to Schrader is that his life inspires and guides my own. Perhaps he will serve that same purpose for you.

Some of what I note in Schrader:

He demonstrates that ideas matter in living well. Schrader has sought out ideas and used them to enrich and guide his life. He has taken philosophy seriously, particularly within the frame of existentialism. Schrader is a philosophical man. I seek to be a philosophical man.

I have been inspired by his personal integrity, his commitment to live in alignment with his most cherished principles and ideals. Schrader, as we all must, has struggled to live honestly within the restraints his contexts have imposed on him—in particular, those inherent in commercial filmmaking. To his great credit, he has made as few compromises, as few sell-outs, as can be reasonably expected of a human being. Schrader has lived an honorable life.

A couple of instances of Schrader's integrity, and his character, his courage, from his twenties: He dared to write a negative review of a film that was the darling of the left in the sixties, "Easy Rider," which got him fired from his job as a film critic for an alternative newspaper. The only fallback he had was returning to his old job delivering fried chicken, but damned if he was going to write something he didn't believe in that his bosses would like in order to keep the paychecks coming. Another

example, he was dismissed from the American Film Institute for taking a stand against the position of one of its most powerful members, the filmmaker George Stevens. He took that stand when he was dead broke, and he wound up essentially living in his car. All the way along in Schrader's career, he hung in there doing what he thought was right, and he was willing to pay heavy dues for doing it.

Schrader has been a model to me of doing for a living what you really, truly love to do in the way you really, truly believe in doing it. Schrader loves ideas and he loves film and he loves writing and making films, and, from his early twenties to now in his old age, that's what he has done. He illustrates that you don't have to do something you don't believe in, or that bores you, or that simply isn't who you are, to pay the bills.

Reviewing Schrader's life has underscored for me that we go through life one time, that we have just one shot at it. And it goes by quickly. There is Schrader the young man, and now it is Schrader the old man. Young, old; one chance at it. He authored his life's story in the way he conducted his life. Whatever we do with our one shot at existence will be our story. Schrader did what he did with his shot at existence. What are we going to do with our shot at it?

Schrader has served a *heuristic* purpose for me. By heuristic, I mean he has paved the way for me to learn things for myself.

His book, written in his mid-twenties, at a very young age, *Transcendental Style in Film* (Da Capo, 1988, first published in 1972), got me thinking about how serious ideas—in this case, individual transcendence or transformation—can inform artistic expressions; or any kind of expressions, really. The book focused on three film directors Schrader greatly admired, Yasujiro Ozu, Robert Bresson, and Carl Dreyer. It prompted me to watch some of their films. Of the three directors, I was most taken with Ozu. I wrote a thought on him for this site posted back in August of 2007, "On Three Films That Touched me."

Schrader's encouraged me to read some good books. I have mentioned *Nausea* by Sartre. Schrader has been influenced by the nineteenth century Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevski, especially *Crime and Punishment* and *Notes from the Underground*, so those two books got added to my reading list. Since it influenced Schrader's script for "Taxi Driver," I even read the diary of the

young man who attempted to assassinate presidential candidate George Wallace in 1972, Arthur Bremer (*An Assassin's Diary*, Harper's Magazine Press, 1973).

Schrader reinforced my belief that film is indeed an art form to be taken seriously, and that in the limited time we have at our disposal in our lives, we would do best by ourselves if we took the time to seek out the finest films; this rather than merely pick and choose from the popular entertainments thrust into our awareness at each point in time.

I watched many of Schrader's own films--the one's he wrote, the ones he both wrote and directed, and the ones he only directed. Check IMDB.com for a list of them. They were all good, but in truth, the only one that knocked me out (including "Taxi Driver"—seriously, I thought the 2004 Sean Penn film in this same basic category that few people paid any attention to, "The Assassination of Richard Nixon," was better)--was the 1985 biopic Schrader wrote and directed, "Mishima," about the Nobel Prize-shortlisted Japanese novelist Yukio Mishima, who committed ritual suicide in 1970. "Mishima" is a superb film; plus it has pushed me toward studying Mishima's life and work, which has been of significant help to me both professionally and personally. See my July 2007 thought for this site, "On Mishima."

Schrader's life and art demonstrate that personal pain and upheaval can actually contribute to the quality of one's life, and contribute to the world around us. Schrader's script for "Taxi Driver" is an example. He had gone through a painful divorce, was adrift in his life, and isolated, and drinking heavily, and was consumed with pornography. He found it within him to transmute all of that negativity, channel it toward the creation of what is acknowledged as one of the most riveting screenplays ever written, one that established his career. The lesson: while we certainly don't want personal anguish, it can be a gift. The challenge is to find that gift and make positive use of it. Bottoming out turned out to be a gift to Schrader, and it can be a gift to the rest of us. Look for the gift in life's hits.

Something Schrader picked up on in Bresson's films, and carried on in his own, is the belief that, as tough as things get, they can turn around in a moment. The transcendence experience—a woman's loving touch—of the Richard Gere character at the end of Schrader's "American Gigolo" was taken directly from the ending of

Bresson's "Pickpocket." At the same time, however, Schrader's films demonstrate—and I can't find where he acknowledges this explicitly --that while we *may* break through the aloneness and emptiness and despair in our lives, by no means is it a certainty that we *will*. Comes to mind Bob Crane, the television situation comedy star portrayed in Schrader's 2002 written-and-directed biopic "Auto Focus." Crane ended up bludgeoned to death in a motel room, and died without ever "breaking through." His life just stopped and oblivion for eternity began. What I take from Schrader's films is that all each of us can do is try the best we can to wake up and figure out what's going on with us and our circumstances, and reach out to others and the world around us, and try with all we have to live with honor and decency, and hope for the best in the finite time we have allotted to us on this earth.

If you get the time, check out Paul Schrader. Or I suppose better, find your own Paul Schrader. Schrader is around my age, he's lived through the times I have, I relate to his personal story, and I've been enhanced by the times I've attended to him. But that's just me; someone else may well be better for you. Or is it that you should do two things at the same time: look into Schrader, and at the same time find your own Schrader. Yes, that seems right. Good luck.

\*An example of an event that has been the focus of my investigations the last week, ten days: the Casey Anthony murder case and trial that was so prominent on cable shows and in print media back in 2011. If you didn't follow it back then, Casey Anthony was a young mother from Florida who was tried for murdering her almost-three-year-old daughter. I was glued to CNN and Fox News and read every word about the case and the trial I could get my hands on. As it turned out, to the outrage of most people, and to my surprise, Anthony was convicted of lesser crimes but acquitted of murder. I began with the book written after the trial by Anthony's lead attorney, Jose Baez, *Presumed Guilty* (Ben Bella Books, 2012) and took it from there. In particular, I was fascinated to compare what Baez had to say with what the media at the time told me was going on and what, as a consequence, I presumed was happening and the conclusions I reached about Anthony's guilt or innocence (she was guilty, I had it all figured out—now I'm not so sure). Baez's book led to many "Oh, that's very

different than how I saw it back then” moments for me and led to a lot of thinking about what else that I haven’t experience directly I might think differently about if I were exposed to a different take on it.