

Paul Schrader on Making and Watching Movies in the Age of Netflix

The screenwriter and director discusses the future of cinema and the transformation of audiences.

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Paul Schrader is in the midst of one of the most illustrious careers in Hollywood history, but much of it seems to have occurred under the radar. He wrote "Taxi Driver" and "The Last Temptation of Christ" and co-wrote "Raging Bull"; he's directed dozens of films, including "Blue Collar" and "American Gigolo" (which launched Richard Gere as a star), "Mishima" (one of the most ambitious and visionary ever produced by a studio) and "Affliction" (which won James Coburn an Oscar for Best Supporting Actor). Hollywood has a short memory: for his 2013 film "The Canyons" (starring Lindsay Lohan), he turned to Kickstarter for financing. Raised in a strict Calvinist family in Michigan, Schrader has kept the self-sacrificing, self-tormenting passion of rigorous Christianity at the center of even his most secular work—in the righteous fury of

*"Anybody who has a phone can make a movie," Schrader says. "The downside is . . . nobody can make a living." **Photograph by Franck Ferville / Agence VU / Redux***

the working man, the boxer, the sex worker, the parent, and, of course, the artist. With "First Reformed" (2017), which he wrote and directed—the story of a minister (Ethan Hawke) in spiritual and moral agony—he instantly broke through a generational barrier. That film transformed his status: from a hardscrabble survivor of New Hollywood's golden days, he became—like his longtime associate Martin Scorsese—an iconic embodiment of the cinema itself. (The movie also got him his first Oscar nomination, for his screenplay.)

Schrader's identification with the art goes back beyond his career as a filmmaker: he started as a critic (launched on that path by Pauline Kael herself, whom he'd met in 1967) and, in 1972, published a book, "[Transcendental Style in Film](#)," about three directors who remain among his prime influences (Robert Bresson, Carl Theodor Dreyer, and Yasujiro Ozu). It's still a touchstone of cinema studies. Schrader's critical insights are embodied in his movies, whether with ingenious transformations of genre conventions or with direct references to films he loves. (For instance, the ending of "American Gigolo" is a reinterpretation of the ending of Bresson's "Pickpocket.") But, in recent years, he has sustained his critical discourse occasionally (often in the pages of *Film Comment*) and casually, as in a recent [Facebook post](#) in which he discussed the state of filmmaking in the age of streaming. That post caught my eye for what Schrader had to say about the dwindling significance of the feature

film. I spoke to him about why the format still matters and what the ongoing changes in the industry mean for the art of movies—and his own art.

I saw your Facebook post on Saturday, and it got me thinking. You call it an observation about film economics, but it's as much of an observation about film aesthetics. I'm interested in the fact that you have the sense that the feature film is coming to an end because of the rise of streaming series, whether fictional series, documentary series.

Well, it's in remission. And strangely enough, even for me, I find myself watching more documentaries and episodics now. The two-hour format which was so ideally suited to theatrical, we've now trained young people for fifteen months not to see that as a primary way to have audiovisual entertainment. Now, how they come back or if they come back . . . they're certainly not going to come back in the way they once were.

I see four venues for theatrical, and one is extreme spectacle, which is like forty-hour—or like that van Gogh immersive experience that's coming. That you have to go out of the house for. That's a *reason* to go out of the house. Children's movies, of course, because you want to see your kids laugh with other kids. That's really for the parents more than for the kids. And then you have date-night movies, which is horror and a certain kind of teen comedy, and there'll still be a place for that. And then

you'll have what we now call club cinema, which is where you have a membership. This is like the Burns or the Metropol or the [Film] Forum, Angelika, where Martini is the new popcorn. And if you go to . . . is it the Metropol or the Metropolitan?

Metrograph.

Metrograph, I mean. They're event-based. And I think those places will come back. But the normal mall cinema or multi-cinema, I think that's a real struggle. They say that fifty per cent of the restaurants in New York won't reopen. Well, I think that's certainly true also of the movie theatres. And so we are rethinking that whole concept, and it's a rethinking going across the board, because it's also happening to the Oscars. What do the Oscars mean anymore? Does anybody care anymore? Will the festivals have the strength that they used to have? And this idea of the two-hour serious movie, which evolved in many ways as a reaction to television, where the film companies all had agents in New York looking for the new serious book—" 'From Here to Eternity,' we're going to do that." And that's gone now. Nobody's looking for the new serious book. And to make a movie today, a quality movie, let's say a movie like "Hud" or "The Hustler," that movie's just not being made. Now, there is quality long-form, but I think the serious two-hour film . . . I have a film that's opening ["The Card Counter"], which fits in that mold. And I've been thinking of writing a new script after that, and I just find myself wondering, Who will make such a

film? And so I think that this shift, which is the third . . . what's the word for it? Tectonic. The third tectonic shift. The first occurred after "The Birth of a Nation," when you went into the big theatres, and they realized you could make a lot of money putting a lot of people in a dark room without air-conditioning. And, out of that, the movie palaces came and all of that. And then the second shift that occurred, when they had to deal with television—and ironically, this occurred right at the same time as the rise of the intelligent film, the serious film, which started here in this country with people like [John] Frankenheimer and [Arthur] Penn, but was primarily started in Europe with neorealism—and all of a sudden there was another way, another reason to go to movies. You can go to the movies to see a Bergman film. You couldn't see them on television. You can go to the movies to see the serious new film by the artist.

And this became clear to me a couple of years ago when I was talking to my relatives in western Michigan and I asked them, "What movies do you see?" And my cousin said to me, "We see Netflix." And I realized the genius of . . . what's his name?

Reed Hastings?

Yeah, Reed. Because movies had begun as a place to go. And there was a phrase that was used in the olden times called "This is where we came in," meaning we just walked in [without regard to showtimes], and now we sat

through it [as it began again], and, "O.K., this is where we came in." And then after the war and with the rise of television, it started to become not "Let's go see a movie" but "Let's go see a specific movie. Let's go see this movie we've been hearing about." And therefore there was also the rise of film criticism, because how do people know which movie they want to see unless they're reading some criticism? So "Let's see that new movie with so-and-so or from that book so-and-so, or about that . . . let's go see "Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice." Movies that were about something: "An Unmarried Woman." And that saved cinema in a way, because TV wouldn't touch that stuff. And now TV deals in it extensively. I just watched "Mare of Easttown." I mean, that's as dark and as grim as anything in American cinema from the sixties. And what Reed Hastings realized was that you could reverse the formula. You could make it a pool of entertainment so large that people didn't need to go anywhere else. If you just turned on Netflix, what were you feeling like? You want a crime show? You want a documentary? You want a World War Two documentary? You want a sex documentary? You want an exposé? You want a melodrama? You want a classic? If you just go through our menu, and we will use our algorithms to cultivate that menu, you will find something. You don't have to read reviews, and you don't have to check the newspaper. You just go to Netflix and within ten minutes you will find something you want to see. And so Reed reversed the strategy from a specific movie to just going

to Netflix. And so when my cousin said, "We watch Netflix," what she meant was "If we want to watch something, we'll turn on Netflix, and sure enough, we'll find something we want to watch. We don't need to plan ahead."

And it's free. Once you've paid your subscription price, it's free. The differential cost makes it good enough. Good enough for free.

Yeah. Then of course *COVID* exacerbated that, so the few people who were still on the fence about staying home didn't have a choice. And once you get into that mindset, you sit down and you turn on Netflix and you go right to documentaries and start scrolling through the documentaries, because they're very aggressively doing documentaries. They're cost-efficient. They're like reality TV for intellectuals.

How does Netflix favor the series rather than the feature film? I mean, after all, Netflix is producing some really good features that nobody else is making.