

# "The Card Counter," Reviewed: Paul Schrader's Furious Vision of American Corruption

The ongoing agonies of the Iraq War provide a dramatic context for political outrage.

By September 13, 2021

The writer and director Paul Schrader's film "[First Reformed](#)," from 2017, featured America's war in Iraq as a crucial part of its backstory: the protagonist, a minister played by Ethan Hawke, is the father of a soldier who was killed there. In Schrader's latest, "The Card Counter" (which opened Friday), the Iraq War is backstory that's thrust dramatically into the foreground: the protagonist, played by Oscar Isaac, is a veteran of the war and both one of its wrongdoers and one of its victims, and in the course of the film this past surges destructively into the present tense. The two movies are animated by revulsion at the prevalent American ethos and an absolute existential despair over the possibility of any corrective or practical redress. Although "The Card Counter" is more tonally restrained than "First Reformed," it expresses the same rage, and it dramatizes what the previous film only suggested—namely, that these pathologies in American life, exemplified in the immoral war, lead inevitably to political violence.

The protagonist—who was born William Tillich and now calls himself William Tell—is introduced, in his own voice-over, as a former convict who spent his eight and a half years in prison teaching himself to count cards. The crime for which he was sentenced was torturing Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib. Now he's free, but he continues to be tormented by guilt; he has no sense of having adequately paid for his crime. His version of freedom is a self-imposed routine of self-deadening self-punishment, a sort of living

death in suspended animation: he travels obsessively from casino to casino, playing blackjack and poker for relatively low stakes (and winning relatively low sums), to avoid attention from security. He sleeps in motel rooms that he reduces to a prisonlike austerity, removing pictures from walls and wrapping the furniture in white sheets (which fill the suitcase that he drags from town to town). In his off-hours from cards, he writes in his diary, obsessively returning to the subject and the context of his crimes. At one casino, he meets a woman named La Linda (Tiffany Haddish), the head of a stable of gamblers who play for high stakes, financed by private backers with whom she brokers deals.

La Linda tries to recruit William, but he demurs, refusing to be indebted to any backers. He likens gambling debt to guilt, calling both a "weight" that's hard to bear—and, unlike debt, he says, a moral weight can never be lifted. Nonetheless, he tries at least to put his grim exertions to good use. At a security-industry conference taking place at a hotel where he's gambling, William drops in on a speech by the retired Major John Gordo (Willem Dafoe), a private contractor who ran the torture regime at Abu Ghraib and trained him there; in the hall, William meets Cirk Balfort (Tye Sheridan), the son of another soldier whose life Gordo ruined. Cirk (whose name is pronounced "Kirk") has made it his life's mission to get revenge against Gordo, but William decides to rescue Cirk from this doomed mission, an effort that involves taking Cirk on the road with him and joining forces with La Linda, after all, in the hope of winning big enough to pay Cirk's outstanding college loans, get him back into school, and help him reconcile with his estranged mother. Instead, William ends up drawn toward the looming figure of Gordo and into a vortex of violence.

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Schrader has had a career-long obsession with the nature of obsession itself. He makes films about people who do whatever they do, however profane, with an absolute devotion that amounts essentially to religious,

Christian inspiration. In the case of William, that devotion is a strange kind of asceticism, a stripping down of his life in order to fill the time that remains with a rote emptiness—eight to twelve hours a day, he says, six or seven days a week, playing cards in the sunless, cheerless, impersonal glare of casinos—which leaves him nothing to contemplate but his sense of guilt and the cold rage that goes with it, aimed at the insidious workings of the broken country of which he's the ready-made agent and fall guy. But the possibility of human connection—which William has been scrupulously, fanatically, desperately avoiding—offers him both temptation and redemption. His attempt to pull Cirk back onto the track gives William's self-scourging routine a sense of purpose that he thought he'd lost. From the start, his relationship with La Linda has the spark of a romantic connection, but William, in his self-denying isolation, won't act on it—until he's goaded by Cirk to do so, in a deal made under high pressure. The terms of that romantic bargain would seem absurd were they not dramatized with an intensity that shudders with high personal and political stakes.

What pulls "The Card Counter" back from the bounds of such absurdity is the passionate fury of its cinematic symbols. There are flashbacks to William's time participating in torture at Abu Ghraib, which are filmed as expressionistic nightmares; fascinating extended riffs on strategies of gambling, which William delivers with the robotic chill of a technical manual; a horrific history lesson, by way of meditations in William's diary, on the origins of the torture program. "The Card Counter" denounces more than a misguided war; it decries the inherently corrupting militarization of American society at large, and also the political hubris that goes with it. (The closest thing to a villain at the card table is a rival poker player in an American-flag T-shirt whose fans, with each hand he wins, leap up, chanting, "U.S.A.!") Above all, the film decries the impunity that the war's masterminds and the country's leaders enjoyed while William and other frontline grunts took the blame.

It's that notion of the prevailing order's insidiously hermetic system of self-

protection that gives "The Card Counter" its furious energy. Despite its tamped-down tone, the movie evinces enough despair and rage to nearly tear apart its sense of dramatic and aesthetic continuity; its sense of restraint keeps the movie from screaming. Schrader cuts from shot to shot and scene to scene as if tracing crudely covered wounds, the unhealed scars from the amputation of vital parts of the soul. Yet the movie isn't only an accusation; it's a self-accusation, a story of William as an all-too-apt candidate for the job he was given at Abu Ghraib. His guilt issues not only from what he did but also from who he is, from the recognition that his propensity for sadistic violence and indifference to suffering was already there, within him, merely awaiting activation. Whereas [Clint Eastwood's "American Sniper"](#) suggested that martial virtue is too precious to be squandered on an unnecessary war, "The Card Counter" goes further, implying that the sense of military pride and nationalistic principle that drove Americans such as William to enlist in the wake of 9/11 contained the seeds of the war's crimes, and that the effort was bound to be perverted by the self-serving figures in power.

One of Schrader's crucial symbolic gestures in "The Card Counter" involves his protagonist's pseudonym: William Tell, of course, is the hero of Swiss legend who won his fame as an expert marksman not only for the intrepid feat of shooting an apple off his son's head with an arrow but, above all, for killing the tyrannical official who'd cruelly forced him to do so. On the other hand, Tillich is the name of a celebrated Lutheran theologian, Paul Tillich, an anti-Nazi German who, when Hitler came to power, emigrated to the United States. In effect, "The Card Counter" is the story of how a Tillich becomes a Tell—how a principled person endures in an indecent regime, how a person on a spiritual quest is compelled by circumstances to transform that passion into revolutionary violence. "The Card Counter" isn't advocating any such thing; Schrader isn't relying on his characters as mouthpieces. Rather, the violence is a metaphor that reveals a society-wide pathology in simplified and clarified form, and also the complicity in unspeakable acts that every American shares.

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