

Miguel Ángel Huerta Floriano; Juan Medina-Contreras

The Transcendental Style in the Films of Paul Schrader: Grace and Redemption in FIRST REFORMED (US 2017), THE CARD COUNTER (US 2021) and MASTER GARDENER (US 2022)

2025

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/24352>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Huerta Floriano, Miguel Ángel; Medina-Contreras, Juan: The Transcendental Style in the Films of Paul Schrader: Grace and Redemption in FIRST REFORMED (US 2017), THE CARD COUNTER (US 2021) and MASTER GARDENER (US 2022). In: *Journal for Religion, Film and Media*, Jg. 11 (2025), Nr. 2, S. 127–145. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/24352>.

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer Creative Commons - Namensnennung - Nicht kommerziell - Weitergabe unter gleichen Bedingungen 4.0/ Lizenz zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu dieser Lizenz finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a creative commons - Attribution - Non Commercial - Share Alike 4.0/ License. For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>

The Transcendental Style in the Films of Paul Schrader

Grace and Redemption in FIRST REFORMED (US 2017), THE CARD COUNTER (US 2021) and MASTER GARDENER (US 2022)

Abstract

The career of Paul Schrader is an unusual case in the often-pragmatic US film industry. Schrader coined the term “transcendental style in film” as a theorist in the early 1970s, and when he became a filmmaker shortly thereafter, he tended to create redemptive stories of a distinctly spiritual nature, evidently influenced by his strict Calvinist upbringing. This article examines Schrader’s filmography several decades later, offering a film analysis of the trilogy known as *Man in a Room*, which consists of FIRST REFORMED (US 2017), THE CARD COUNTER (US 2021), and MASTER GARDENER (US 2022). The study first established the qualities of the transcendental style, to provide a basis for determining whether the aesthetics and narratives of Schrader’s later films reveal a concern for the transcendent. We determine that the trilogy explores the internal conflicts of middle-aged men who are burdened with a strong sense of guilt and who end up accepting the grace that arrives through (romantic) love. Furthermore, all three films contain defining elements of the transcendental style, although the filmmaker’s desire to reach a mass audiences causes him to use filters typical of commercial cinema and to draw significantly on the sociopolitical circumstances in which the protagonists live.

Keywords

Paul Schrader, Transcendental Style, *Man in a Room* Trilogy, Grace, Redemption, Disparity, Stasis, FIRST REFORMED (Paul Schrader, US 2017), THE CARD COUNTER (Paul Schrader, US 2021), MASTER GARDENER (Paul Schrader, US 2022)

Biographies

Miguel Ángel Huerta Floriano is Associate Professor at the School of Communication of the Pontifical University of Salamanca, where he also served as Vice-Chancellor of Strategic Coordination. His research concerns fiction genres in audiovisual media and Film production and aesthetics.

Juan Medina-Contreras holds a PhD in Communication. Since 2015, he has been an assistant professor at the Faculty of Communication at the Pontifical University of Salamanca, where he teaches courses in the fields of Audiovisual Communication and Journalism.

Introduction

The final scenes of *AMERICAN GIGOLO* (Paul Schrader, US 1980) and *LIGHT SLEEPER* (Paul Schrader, US 1992) epitomise many of the qualities that have made Paul Schrader unique in US filmmaking: at the end of both films, the protagonists find redemption. The Calvinist understanding of grace had been firmly embedded in Schrader during his strict upbringing. These personal experiences permeated his approach as a film critic and analyst, notably in his approach to other filmmakers' work – thus the final minutes of these films clearly pay tribute to French director Robert Bresson.¹ Indeed, it is impossible to think of Paul Schrader without considering the “transcendental style”, a term he coined in the thesis he wrote for his Master of Arts in Film Studies, which he completed at UCLA in 1970. His book *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* was published in 1972 and has served as a foundation for interpretation of Schrader's works in the many studies that have focused on his filmography. Among his most emblematic films are *AMERICAN GIGOLO*, *LIGHT SLEEPER*, *MISHIMA: A LIFE IN FOUR CHAPTERS* (US 1985), and *AFFLICTION* (US 1997).

This article is a product of our interest in knowing whether Schrader's spiritual inclinations were still alive two decades later, in an age when a technological revolution had brought about the digitisation of the processes of creation and production. Specifically, we sought to answer this question through analysis of the *Man in a Room* film trilogy, comprising Schrader's *FIRST REFORMED* (US 2017), *THE CARD COUNTER* (US 2021), and *MASTER GARDENER* (US 2022). Our goal was to determine whether the presence of the aesthetic and narrative qualities of transcendental style reveal a continuing interest in the transcendent.

An Atypical Personality: The Universe of Paul Schrader

Paul Schrader's use of film to explore the spiritual was shaped in part by his childhood. Born on 22 July 1946 in the city of Grand Rapids, Michigan, Schrader was raised with the orthodox principles of the Christian Reformed Church, a branch of Dutch Calvinism, of which his parents were members. As a result, he faced years of physical punishment. He was also prohibited from

1 Schrader 1969.

going to the cinema.² Schrader studied at Calvin College, where he trained to become a pastor and developed a fascination with the figure of Saint Paul.³

After he left Grand Rapids, Schrader developed a strong interest in the world of cinema. Before becoming one of the most important screenwriters and directors of the generation that saved Hollywood in the 1970s, he developed a theoretical corpus influenced by a religious perspective. Among the multitude of articles he published as a critic and analyst was one, a treatise on the Western films shot by Budd Boetticher for the production company Ranown, that is especially relevant for this study. Throughout the text, Schrader connects the mythology of the Western genre with principles of Calvinism. He proposed that the characters played by actor Randolph Scott were guided by the theological concept of Grace, which is accessed not through actions, but through decisions.⁴ In his search for utopian cinema, Schrader was more drawn to idealism than to redemption earned by good deeds, a Catholic teaching.

Schrader's work as a screenwriter and director also evinces strong spiritual influences. His script for *TAXI DRIVER* (Martin Scorsese, US 1976) demonstrates a fascination with lonely male protagonists burdened with existential emptiness who end up completely or partially redeemed. This interest became something of an obsession, as can be seen in two films that define his film universe, *AMERICAN GIGOLO* and *LIGHT SLEEPER*. The endings of these two films are an homage to *PICKPOCKET* (Robert Bresson, FR 1959), a production by French director Robert Bresson, undoubtedly one of Schrader's film heroes. However, the cinephilia that characterises many of his creative works has been fed by cultural paradigms not so far removed from the Hollywood tradition; he may challenge these models, but he never severs himself from them.

Moreover, the contradictions in the idea of a young man on the way to becoming a minister subsequently cultivating a passion for firearms, alcohol and cocaine help explain the stylistic heterogeneity of Schrader's films. Although his early works fitted within in the studio environment of their time, studios that included Universal, Columbia, Paramount, and RKO/Universal, by the end of the century he was already aware that he was on the fringes of Hollywood.⁵

2 Biskind 1998, 287–288.

3 Jackson 2004a, 3.

4 Schrader 1970, 28.

5 Navarro 1998, 40.

His film writing was powered by a range of factors: the combination of apparently antagonistic opportunities; the repetition of formal strategies; the ritualisation of the protagonists' actions; the symbolism of the settings; the proliferation of characters tortured by existential conflicts; the subversion of tradition; and the persistence of topics such as guilt, loneliness, problematic sexuality, redemption, and unhealthy family relations.⁶ He has continually intertwined and blended such potentially incompatible elements. Thus his films hold space for sudden endings that without warning refer to the transcendental style of Ozu and Bresson.⁷

Schrader recognised the paradoxical nature of his work when he talked about his mission, vision, and values as a filmmaker:

I have the evangelical impulse, which is the need to go out and preach to as many people as possible, and to reach all of them. I also know that the true way to reach them is via a method that is uncommercial. But when you are working in a mass medium you have to accept the restrictions of a mass audience, which means millions of people, because to make a movie you need to deal with a minimum of two or three million units.⁸

The Transcendental Style in Film: Key Features

With his discussion of “transcendental style”, Schrader joined the exclusive club of creative filmmakers who have produced influential texts that address film theory. Here we refer to this particular style in order to establish whether spiritual awareness was a factor during the most recent period of his filmmaking career.

In the first pages of *Transcendental Style in Film*,⁹ Schrader proposed the following ideas: (1) artists from different cultures use a common style to reveal the sacred, (2) this style is a product of the desire to have their art express the metaphysical, (3) this universal style can only be identified by the knowledgeable viewer, as it can involve timeframes and be related

6 Huerta Floriano 2008, 49.

7 Bachman 2020, 28.

8 Jackson 2004b, 29.

9 We have worked with the reprint published in 2018, which contains a new introduction entitled “Rethinking Transcendental Style”.

to camera angles, dialogue and editing, deployed to transcendental aims; analysis of films, sequences, and shots is necessary in order to extract the universal from the specific, (4) the transcendental style should not be mistaken for religious cinema, which is much smaller in scope.¹⁰

For Schrader, “the Transcendent is beyond normal sense experience, and that which it transcends is, by definition, the immanent”.¹¹ Thus, writing of Heinrich Wölfflin, Schrader recorded that style is “a general representative form” and that as Wölfflin’s use of style is “concerned with what is universal rather than particular in the various means of expression... it is ideally suited to describe a style which seeks to express the Wholly Other through divergent cultures and personalities”.¹² Schrader noted that while Japanese filmmaker Yasujiro Ozu cultivated the transcendental style in his films, in his case “the transcendental style had to be extricated from the culture”; in Bresson’s films, by contrast, “this had already happened to a large degree: Bresson is alienated from his contemporary culture”.¹³ In his in-depth study of the French director’s work, Schrader identified a number of components of the transcendental style: “the everyday”, which is seen as cinematic attention to detail in a kind of “surface-aesthetics”, or “quasi-documentary approach”;¹⁴ “disparity”, which “injects a human density into the unfeeling everyday, an unnatural density that grows and grows until, at the moment of decisive action, it reveals itself to be a spiritual density”,¹⁵ and finally, “stasis”, which is “the quiescent, frozen, or hieratic scene which succeeds the decisive action and closes the film”.¹⁶

The transcendental style in Bresson’s films is defined, Schrader proposes, by the aesthetic of elimination that opposes dramatised events, neutralises the storyline impact of the film, and negates the influence of the audience’s feelings on the final result. The style can be applied via the rather inexpressive and automatic performance of the actors, as well as the reduction of the expressive power of the camera, use of basic compositions and single angles, non-didactic editing that avoids emotional climaxes, and mostly natural sounds that reinforce the coldness of reality.

10 Schrader 2018, 35–36.

11 Schrader 2018, 37.

12 Schrader 2018, 40.

13 Schrader 2018, 87.

14 Schrader 2018, 88.

15 Schrader 2018, 97–98.

16 Schrader 2018, 108.

Furthermore, the filmmaker duplicates events and employs pleonastic dialogue and also interior narration, a technique in which the characters describe the action that is being seen, or has already been seen on screen, with restrained expressiveness. The principal characters become estranged as they inhabit a cold, objective world, yet their conflicts are related to spiritual passion. Thus, “they do not respond to the environment, but instead to that sense of the Other which seems much more immediate”.¹⁷

In a culmination of the disparity process, the stories lead the audience to “the decisive action”, an event that departs from restraint and breaks the rules of the ordinary: “There is a blast of music, an overt symbol, and an open call for emotion”.¹⁸ The decisive action has been preceded by “decisive moments”, which foretell the final act. Generally accompanied by music, these resolute moments lead the protagonist to his or her passion, perhaps culminating in a miraculous event that propitiates the decisive action, “which can effect a ‘transformation’ in the spectator’s mind”.¹⁹

At the end of the journey, the transcendental style includes a stasis that “represents the ‘new’ world in which the spiritual and the physical can co-exist” as part of “a larger scheme in which all phenomena are more or less expressive of a larger reality – the Transcendent”.²⁰ While Schrader recognises that Bresson’s stasis might be overvalued as something that evokes transcendence, Bresson himself expressed a desire to make the audience a participant in something greater, something that “transcends immanent experience and may be called, if only for practical purposes, the Transcendent”.²¹

Paul Schrader’s *Man in a Room* Trilogy and the Transcendental Style

At the start of the 21st century, Paul Schrader acknowledged his longstanding interest in the idea of a man adrift, a man who observes others from the fringes of urban society. He would like to have a life, but does not know how to get one: “I have written about him when he was in his twenties, angry,

17 Schrader 2018, 102.

18 Schrader 2018, 105.

19 Schrader 2018, 108.

20 Schrader 2018, 108.

21 Schrader 2018, 109.

and a taxi driver; when he was in his thirties, narcissistic, and a gigolo; and when he was in his forties, anxious, and a drug dealer”.²² This acknowledgment was made by Schrader in reference to the protagonists of TAXI DRIVER, AMERICAN GIGOLO, and LIGHT SLEEPER. He adds that he eventually stopped writing about that type of man, given the increasing difficulty of obtaining financing for films about protagonists with existential conflicts.

Between 2017 and 2022, three films written and directed by Schrader were released as the *Man in a Room Trilogy*. Although the characters are not all urban dwellers, the protagonists of FIRST REFORMED, THE CARD COUNTER, and MASTER GARDENER are once again “solitary characters grappling with sin and redemption”.²³

In the documentary PAUL SCHRADER: MAN IN A ROOM (Alex Ross Perry, US 2020), the filmmaker examines his career and highlights FIRST REFORMED as one of the four films that he considers his best work. This film delves into the world of religion through its protagonist, Reverend Ernst Toller (Ethan Hawke), who serves as the pastor of a small church in Snowbridge, in the state of New York. Toller is a former army chaplain whose son died in the Iraq war. The pastor is preparing for the reconsecration of the church on its 250th anniversary, along with the members of its small congregation, who include Michael (Philip Ettinger) and his wife, Mary (Amanda Seyfried), who is pregnant. Michael, an environmentalist who wants Mary to have an abortion, ends up committing suicide. After this devastating event, Toller embraces the environmentalist cause and decides to carry out an attack during the reconsecration ceremony using an explosive vest that belonged to Michael. He aims to eliminate the political, religious, and economic leaders of the region, whom he considers accomplices in climate change. However, Mary’s sudden appearance at the last moment compels Toller to suspend the attack.

In the second film of the *Man in a Room Trilogy*, THE CARD COUNTER, William Tell (Oscar Isaac) is a professional gambler. He has taken up this new occupation after spending more than eight years in a military prison for participating in the torture of inmates at Iraq’s Abu Ghraib prison, where he served as a soldier under the name Tillich. Tell travels to various casinos where he wins small amounts of money through card counting. His life changes when he accepts a proposal made by La Linda (Tiffany Haddish),

22 Schrader 2002, vii.

23 Zuckerman 2023.

who represents a group of investors who finance poker players. He agrees to help young Cirk (Tye Sheridan), the son of an army comrade who committed suicide after being made a scapegoat in the Abu Ghraib scandal. Cirk is killed during a raid on the home of Gordo (Willem Dafoe), an Iraq War contractor who is subsequently tortured by Tell. In prison once again, the protagonist is visited by La Linda.

MASTER GARDENER closes the *Man in a Room* Trilogy. Its protagonist, Narvel Roth (Joel Edgerton), is the head gardener at Gracewood, the huge estate of Norma Haverhill (Sigourney Weaver). Norma has given Narvel a second chance after he collaborated with the authorities by testifying against the other members of a white supremacist organisation to which he belonged. Norma tasks Narvel with teaching gardening to her mixed-race grandniece, Maya Core (Quintessa Swindell), who has a drug problem. Norma eventually sacks both Narvel and Maya, believing they are in a sexual relationship, which becomes a reality only after they have left Gracewood and after Maya overcomes the trauma of seeing the Nazi tattoos all over Narvel's body. The pair return to Gracewood to rebuild the vandalised gardens and start a new life together.

Austerity and Emptiness as an Expression of the Everyday

The plots of all three films are driven by lonely, middle-aged men who feel guilty about past events and live their ordinary lives without much emotion. The relevance of everyday life is expressed in the occupations of the main characters, which in two instances are specified in the title of the relevant movie: card counter and master gardener. In this aspect these two movies follow in the footsteps of TAXI DRIVER and AMERICAN GIGOLO, the films from Schrader's oeuvre that were most heavily influenced by Bresson's transcendental style. The title FIRST REFORMED does not make similar reference to the protagonist's occupation, although it has similar impact, for, in Schrader's own words, the "occupational metaphor" is significant in his most symbolic films in expressing personal problems that are a reflection of a "social malaise".²⁴

To create the universes of a pastor, a gambler, and a gardener, Schrader uses three gradually wider formats, namely 1.37:1, 1.66:1, and 2.39:1 respectively. As a result, it seems as if the spatial limits of the trilogy become larger,

24 Balsom 2023.

a progressive enlargement to which we will return. The film that uses almost square proportions is also the one that most closely adheres to the transcendental style described by Schrader in 1972. The aesthetic austerity of the format extends to other parameters for much of the footage of *FIRST REFORMED*, which in style and substance is reminiscent of both *JOURNAL D'UN CURÉ DE CAMPAGNE* (*DIARY OF A COUNTRY PRIEST*, Robert Bresson, FR 1951) and, most of all, *NATTVARDSGÄSTERNA* (*WINTER LIGHT*, Ingmar Bergman, SE 1963).²⁵

The beginning of *FIRST REFORMED* is a statement of intent, with the credits projected in white typography on a black background and the silence suddenly giving way to the ambient sounds of a barking dog, squawking birds, the gentle chirping of songbirds, and the creaking of wood. The opening shots of a church facade continue beyond the point of being purely informative, and the slow-moving editing invites contemplation by the viewer. In short, the aim is to recreate the everyday life of Reverend Toller, whose voice-over narrates what he writes in his diary, where he intends “to set down all my thoughts and the simple events of my day factually, and without hiding anything” (00:03:30).

The film contains an abundance of static shots, framed through basic compositions that tend to constrain and unbalance the main character. Schrader also forgoes the rhetorical power of staging and often resorts to long takes that begin and end with empty scenes. On more than one occasion the camera relies on an image of closed doors, which serve as a symbol of Toller’s existential drama. The silence, along with the spaces that are progressively more devoid of decorative elements, require the audience to be attentive, as the plot unfolds with little formal emphasis to provide direction (fig. 1). As Sobczynski astutely observes, “Films like this do not do that—they go the other way. When you get kind of interested in them, they start leaning back by withholding stuff. They withhold an editing pace that you expect, courage that you expect, music that you expect”.²⁶

The restrained performance by actor Ethan Hawke contributes to the sobriety of the film. His inexpressive gestures and slow movements ensure that his particular *via crucis* transcends realistic physical action to delve into the territory of internal conflict.

Inexpressive acting is one of the formal aspects shared by *THE CARD COUNTER*, *MASTER GARDENER*, and *FIRST REFORMED*. Oscar Isaac and Joel

25 Lorenz 2019, 139–143.

26 Sobczynski 2018.



Fig. 1: Toller appears to be constricted by the compositional setting on an empty stage. Film still, *FIRST REFORMED* (Paul Schrader, US 2017), 01:17:41.

Edgerton also work with minimalism in their portrayals of William Tell and Narvel Roth respectively, equally wounded by guilt about the past that is heightened by the present circumstances. Like the pastor, the professional gambler and master gardener take refuge in an ascetic existence, whether in transient homes such as the series of motel rooms whose furniture Tell ritually covers with cloth, or in humble shelters like the simple cabin with hardly any furniture where Narvel lives at Gracewood.

The three characters all lure themselves into sacrifice, whether an attempted suicide bombing, a duel to the death by torture, or a return to violence in response to conflict. The narration of everyday life in *THE CARD COUNTER* and *MASTER GARDENER* is highly significant, especially in the detailed descriptions of card games and horticulture as occupations with ritual components. In these two films, however, Schrader's evangelical desire to reach out to a mass audience leads him to a rather less sombre stage setting than in *FIRST REFORMED*. The filters of commercial cinema become more frequent, and the austerity of the transcendental style is dropped in a

good number of scenes. In a way, the first film of the trilogy leans towards a style that aligns more closely with Deleuze's concept of *l'image-temps*²⁷ whereas several parts of the other two films correspond more to his notion of *l'image-mouvement*,²⁸ with the camera moving in complex choreography, the editing becoming more expressive, and the angles growing slightly more forced, according to the dramatic demands of each scene. The cinematic effects are particularly radical during the Abu Ghraib flashbacks in *THE CARD COUNTER*, which are filmed with a fisheye lens that distorts perception and, combined with long takes recorded with a Steadicam, generate an immersive subjectivity of great intensity.

Furthermore, the use of sound also contains notable stylistic differences, particularly in relation to music. In *FIRST REFORMED*, music is mostly sourced from the diegesis of the two churches depicted in the film, with Lustmord's score for the levitation scene an exception. In contrast, a more mysterious tone accompanies *THE CARD COUNTER* and *MASTER GARDENER*, shaped by the intricate and highly crafted use of synthesisers and sound effects by composers Robert Levon Been and Devonté Hynes.

Overall, the filmmaker often draws on specific styles that evoke the transcendent sense of Bresson's master staging. One such example is provided by the frequent appearance of half-empty frames with minimal decoration in *THE CARD COUNTER*, especially in the prison environment, or the shots in both films that last for a long time, during which the space is abandoned by the characters, taking the audience away from the tension of the plot and inviting them to engage in self-reflection.

Restrained Disparity: From the Socio-Political Context to Decisive Moments

The transcendental style is evident when the main characters are not responsive to their environment but instead are driven by spiritual passion. Thus Bresson's films are defined by a distancing from his contemporary culture, which gives his style universal and paradigmatic value.

On that count the *Man in a Room* Trilogy is less transcendental as it is driven by responses to the social and political circumstances in which Schrader

27 Deleuze 1985.

28 Deleuze 1983.

lives. *FIRST REFORMED* is about growing awareness of the catastrophe of climate change, to the point where the protagonist becomes obsessed with the question, “Will God forgive us?”, in reference to the damage done to creation. *THE CARD COUNTER* makes the Abu Ghraib abuses explicit in its flashbacks, and it uses footage from the archives of government officials such as former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in reinforcing the idea that Tell “has taken upon himself to bear the weight of the entire nation’s sins through his self-imposed suffering”.²⁹ As for *MASTER GARDENER*, it re-enacts the racial tension that continues to plague the United States, and Narvel’s flashbacks and tattoos reinforce the idea of a past trauma that is alive in the present. Adams has written of *FIRST REFORMED* as portraying “the escalating reality of contemptuous distrust expressed throughout American life in the aftermath of 9-11, the Iraq War, and the Great Recession of 2008 and 2009”,³⁰ a judgement that could be extended to the other works in the trilogy too.

However, fundamental aspects of disparity are restated by Schrader in all three films. One of them is interior narration, a technique also used by Bresson, particularly in the form of a kind of “doubling”,³¹ which emphasises everyday life in order to give it a density that will reveal itself as spiritual. As in Bresson’s *JOURNAL D’UN CURÉ DE CAMPAGNE*, the main characters in Schrader’s trilogy keep diaries that can account for the audience’s access to their interior narration. At times, the voice-over duplicates what can be seen in the handwriting; more commonly, the utterances provide an explanation of the actions viewed on screen. Such is especially the case, both audibly and visually, during the scenes that describe card games or gardening work, placing a strong emphasis on the characters’ everyday lives.

Moreover, the stories contain segments that accord with what Schrader described as “decisive moments” and “decisive actions”, inherent components of disparity. Thus a sequence in the last act of *FIRST REFORMED* breaks the formal austerity of the film: dreamlike tone occurs when Mary lies down on top of Toller to share one of the “magical mystery tours” she used to do with Michael. The communion of the two bodies gives way to levitation and flight through a star-filled sky, snow-capped mountains, a lush forest, and crystal-clear waters, all accompanied by a moving camera and mysterious music (fig.2). However, this religious man is not yet ready to fully accept the

29 Slaymaker 2021.

30 Adams 2020.

31 Schrader 2018, 98. The author has used the term as coined by Susan Sontag.

grace that Mary represents, so the idyllic landscapes suddenly give way to images of traffic jams, tire graveyards, factories billowing smoke, and other environmental calamities.

The symbolism that predisposes the protagonists to later accept their fate also presides over the decisive moments of *THE CARD COUNTER* and *MASTER GARDENER*. In the former film, La Linda takes Tell for a walk through a “city all lit up at night” (fig.3). In a garden embellished with millions of coloured lights, namely the Garden Glow at the Missouri Botanical Garden, they share secrets and hold hands. In the latter film, Narvel and Maya cross a road surrounded by flowers that expand to take over the asphalt while they stick their heads out of the car and scream with ecstatic happiness (fig. 4). The colourful and idealised romanticism of these three moments is a refuge of peace for the characters and a prelude to the final acts.

The decisive moments foretell the decisive actions that close the three films. Schrader noted that the ending of *PICKPOCKET* “concerns the progression of a soul from confinement to freedom” and concludes “with an inexplicably spiritual act... an unpremeditated act of love”.³² The endings of the films that make up the *Man in a Room* Trilogy have very similar attributes.³³

Bresson’s influence is clearest in *THE CARD COUNTER*, thanks to La Linda’s visit to the prison where Tell is confined. He has brought physical confinement upon himself, which La Linda’s unconditional love counteracts as she moves her finger across the glass that separates the two lovers in an attempt to make contact (fig. 5). The saving visit is even more explicit in *FIRST REFORMED*, when Mary’s sudden appearance averts Toller’s suicide. The pastor then embraces Mary and kisses her desperately while the camera envelops them in a circular tracking shot (fig. 6). *MASTER GARDENER* takes a similar approach: the main character in this film bursts into the last scene and heads towards the porch of his cabin to engage in a loving dance with Maya, while the camera slowly moves back and observes them from a distance (fig. 7).

With the exception of *FIRST REFORMED*, Schrader has not created here the extremely cold and distant worlds more typical of the transcendental style. But the outcomes of the three films each provide a “miraculous event”: the miracle lies in the romantic expression of men who seem to have no feelings. The audience is confronted by an act with spiritual overtones: the characters have accepted grace through love, which leads them to redemption.

32 Schrader 1969, 35.

33 Balsom 2023.



Fig. 2: Toller and Mary soaring over a dreamlike landscape. Film still, *FIRST REFORMED* (Paul Schrader, US 2017), 01:23:24.



Fig. 3: Tell and La Linda take a walk, enveloped in lights, in a decisive moment. Film still, *THE CARD COUNTER* (Paul Schrader, US 2021), 01:15:22.

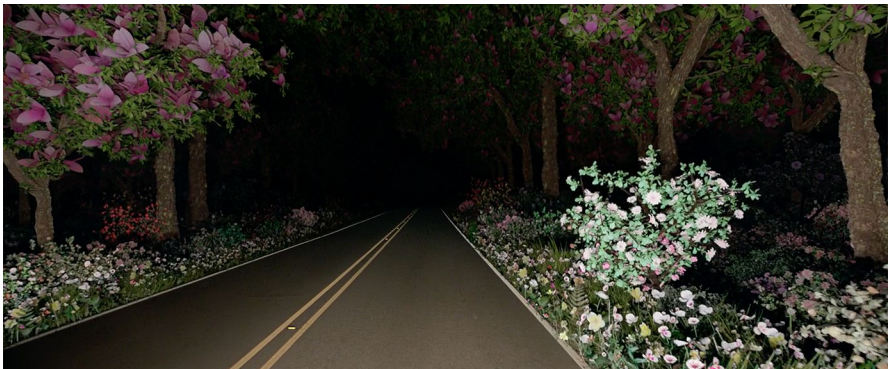


Fig. 4: A road surrounded by flowers is the scene of Narvel's decisive moment. Film still, *MASTER GARDENER* (Paul Schrader, US 2022), 01:28:08.

Fig. 5: Tell and La Linda's prison encounter is reminiscent of Bresson's decisive actions. Film still, THE CARD COUNTER (Paul Schrader, US 2021), 01:47:08.



Fig. 6: Toller accepts Mary's love in a decisive action. Film still, FIRST REFORMED (Paul Schrader, US 2017), 01:48:30.



Fig. 7: Narvel and Maya are engaged in a loving dance in the last scene. Film still, MASTER GARDENER (Paul Schrader, US 2022), 01:45:30.



Stasis as an Expression of the Transcendent

Stasis is the culmination of the viewer's journey, who according to the transcendental style must move from empathy to understanding. *FIRST REFORMED* interrupts the long embrace of Toller and Mary, the circular tracking shot, and the background music with a song, *Leaning on the Everlasting Arms*, which is being played inside the church, and then suddenly cuts to black. An emptiness with neither visual aspects nor sound takes over the screen for a considerable number of seconds; only then do the credits start to scroll. Here, then, is unmistakably the stasis of the film.³⁴ Schrader's gesture encourages the viewer to move from feeling emotion to contemplating the profound meaning of the film, whose ending offers the possibility of the coexistence of the physical and spiritual worlds.

The filmmaker uses similar resources with the same intention in the final scenes of the other two films of the trilogy. The last scene of *THE CARD COUNTER*, which has fingers reaching for contact with the glass (see fig. 5), remains motionless for a full minute before the credits start to roll. It continues in the same way for another three minutes, right up to the final chords of *Mercy of Man*, the title song with its theme of redemption, performed by Robert Levon Been.

The solemnity of stasis as a way of allowing the transcendent to arise is repeated at the end of *MASTER GARDENER*, which nearly leaves the two protagonists suspended in time and space, as they dance at the entrance to the cabin for a considerable period of time before the film fades to black. Mereba's *Space and Time* was chosen with good reason as the title song, and in observing the lovers from afar, the audience is invited to reflect on the shot's extended duration and, by extension, on temporality and space.

Conclusion

More than half a century after he coined the term "transcendental style", Paul Schrader is evidently still fervent about the concept. His interest is not purely theoretical, for this fascination has influenced his most personal films: the *Man in a Room* Trilogy, shares aspects with the most emblematic films of this director-screenwriter. Examples such as *TAXI DRIVER*, *AMERICAN*

34 Verstraten 2021, 79.

GIGOLO, and LIGHT SLEEPER share this style with works such as JOURNAL D'UN CURÉ DE CAMPAGNE and PICKPOCKET, directed by Robert Bresson, the exemplary practitioner of the transcendental style.

Over his long career, Schrader has adapted to the changing times and taken advantage of digital technology, primarily to gain a certain degree of independence.³⁵ In terms of the deeper intentions of his works, however, he has continued to explore the inner conflicts of middle-aged men who carry a strong sense of guilt and in the end fully accept the grace through romantic love, as is seen in particular in recent final shots that explicitly reference his most personal films of earlier decades.

Nevertheless, there is an evolution in the trilogy: redemption is the consequence of accepting the unexpected appearance of two women, one in FIRST REFORMED and another in THE CARD COUNTER, while in MASTER GARDENER the woman's arrival is a result of actions taken by the main character. We have good reason to assume that here lies the reason the filmmaker has gradually expanded the format in his films, starting from square and moving to more panoramic, a symbol of the liberating evolution of three distinct characters who appear to be the same type of person.

We must also note, however, that the trilogy is characterised only by the qualities of the transcendental style. Yes, we see a focus on the importance of everyday life as displayed through rather inexpressive performances, interior narration, and ritualised gestures that emanate from the "occupational metaphor". And decisive moments and decisive actions are significant to the structure of the stories, while the solemn endings, in accordance with the guidelines of stasis, force the viewer to move from emotional empathy to an understanding of the profound meaning generated by this type of film with spiritual overtones. But additionally, Schrader's well-known talent for reaching a mass audience, together with his respect, although nuanced, for the limitations inherent in the commercial nature of the US film industry have led him to use some of the filters from commercial cinema, especially in THE CARD COUNTER and MASTER GARDENER. Such techniques include camera movements, extradiegetic sound, rhetorical and emotional editing, and stylised lighting, with the aim of adding certain aesthetic features rather than eliminating them altogether as is characteristic of Bresson's films.

Unlike Bresson, the Calvinist director does not shun the social and political circumstances of his time. Although the ecological crisis in FIRST

35 Hammond 2023.

REFORMED could possibly be read as a MacGuffin,³⁶ the narrative places emphasis on the scientific data that obsesses first Michael and later Toller, highlighting its significance in the dramatic construction.³⁷ A similar argument can be made for THE CARD COUNTER and MASTER GARDENER, as the traumas experienced by the protagonists, whether caused by the Iraq War or by involvement in a white supremacist organisation, are not merely a backdrop to their stories – the frequent flashbacks explicitly reveal the impact of past experiences on the characters' present lives.

In short, Schrader continues to display an eclectic flexibility that has helped him survive in a pragmatic and highly demanding industry. While keeping in mind the reality of the current situation, he is also able to attend to the spiritual dimension that underlies the transcendental style. And a final thought: by having fully developed some of his most characteristic traits, Schrader has remained an atypical director who continues to pursue a cinematic style that pays heed to the transcendent.

Bibliography

- Adams, Richmond B., 2020, "Somebody Has to Do Something!": Mainline Protestant Moral Ambiguity in Paul Schrader's FIRST REFORMED, *Filmint.*, 3 September 2020, <https://t.ly/KIScJ> [accessed 12 December 2024].
- Bachman, Erik M., 2020, Schrader and Style, in: Moore, Michelle E. / Brems, Brian (eds.), *ReFocus. The Films of Paul Schrader*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 17–32.
- Balsom, Erika, 2023, The Gospel of Paul Schrader, *Sight and Sound*, 21 July 2023, <https://t.ly/Ss36N> [accessed 12 December 2024].
- Biskind, Peter, 1998, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls. How the Sex-Drugs-and-Rock 'N' Roll Generation Saved Hollywood*, New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Deleuze, Gilles, 1983, *Cinéma 1. L'image-mouvement*, Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit.
- Deleuze, Gilles, 1985, *Cinéma 2. L'image-temps*, Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit.
- Hammond, Caleb, 2023, Paul Schrader Says Shooting THE CARD COUNTER Digitally Helped Him Retain Final Cut, *MovieMaker*, 31 January 2023, <https://t.ly/v2b8R> [accessed 12 March 2025].
- Houser, Heather, 2020, *Infowhelm. Environmental Art and Literature in an Age of Data*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Huerta Floriano, Miguel Ángel, 2008, *Paul Schrader*, Madrid: Akal.
- Jackson, Kevin, 2004a, Background. The Road from Grand Rapids, in: Jackson, Kevin (ed.), *Schrader on Schrader & Other Writings*, New York: Faber and Faber, 3–15.
- Jackson, Kevin, 2004b, The Critic. L.A. Free Press to Transcendental Style, in: Jackson,

36 Tupitsyn 2023.

37 Houser 2020, 2–5.

- Kevin (ed.), *Schrader on Schrader & Other Writings*, New York: Faber and Faber, 16–32.
- Lorenz, James, 2019, Film Review. FIRST REFORMED (Paul Schrader, US 2017), *Journal for Religion, Film and Media (JRFM)* 5, 1, 139–143, <https://doi.org/10.25364/05.4:2019.1.11>.
- Navarro, Antonio J., 1998, Entrevista a Paul Schrader, *Dirigido por* 271, 38–40.
- Schrader, Paul, 1969, Movies Paul Schrader, *Los Angeles Free Press*, 2 May 1969, 32–36.
- Schrader, Paul, 1970, Budd Boetticher. A Case Study in Criticism, *Cinema* 6, 2, 22–29.
- Schrader, Paul, 2002, *Collected Screenplays 1*, London: Faber and Faber.
- Schrader, Paul, 2018 [1972], *Transcendental Style in Film. Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*, Oakland: University of California Press.
- Sobczynski, Peter, 2018, The Silence: Paul Schrader on FIRST REFORMED, *RogerEbert.com*, 14 May 2018, <https://t.ly/e825l> [accessed 12 December 2024].
- Slymaker, James, 2021, Eyes Wide Shut: The Legacy of Abu Ghraib in Paul Schrader’s THE CARD COUNTER, *Filmint.*, 6 November 2021, <https://t.ly/nsGEV> [accessed 12 December 2024].
- Tupitsyn, Masha, 2023, Introduction, in: Schrader, Paul, *First Reformed*, Brooklyn: Archway Editions, 7–20.
- Verstraten, Peter, 2021, “Words Don’t Come Easy”: The Transcendental Style of Paul Schrader’s FIRST REFORMED, *Image [G] Narrative* 22, 1, 70–81.
- Zuckerman, Esther, 2023, Living with the Men of Paul Schrader’s ‘Man in a Room’ Trilogy, *The New York Times*, 21 May 2023, <https://t.ly/mjGF3> [accessed 12 December 2024].

Filmography

- AFFLICTION (Paul Schrader, US 1997).
- AMERICAN GIGOLO (Paul Schrader, US 1980).
- FIRST REFORMED (Paul Schrader, US 2017).
- JOURNAL D’UN CURÉ DE CAMPAGNE (DIARY OF A COUNTRY PRIEST, Robert Bresson, FR 1951).
- LIGHT SLEEPER (Paul Schrader, US 1992).
- MASTER GARDENER (Paul Schrader, US 2022).
- MISHIMA: A LIFE IN FOUR CHAPTERS (Paul Schrader, US 1985).
- NATTVARDSGÄSTERNA (WINTER LIGHT, Ingmar Bergman, SE 1963).
- PAUL SCHRADER: MAN IN A ROOM (Alex Ross Perry, US 2020).
- PICKPOCKET (Robert Bresson, FR 1959).
- TAXI DRIVER (Martin Scorsese, US 1976).
- THE CARD COUNTER (Paul Schrader, US 2021).