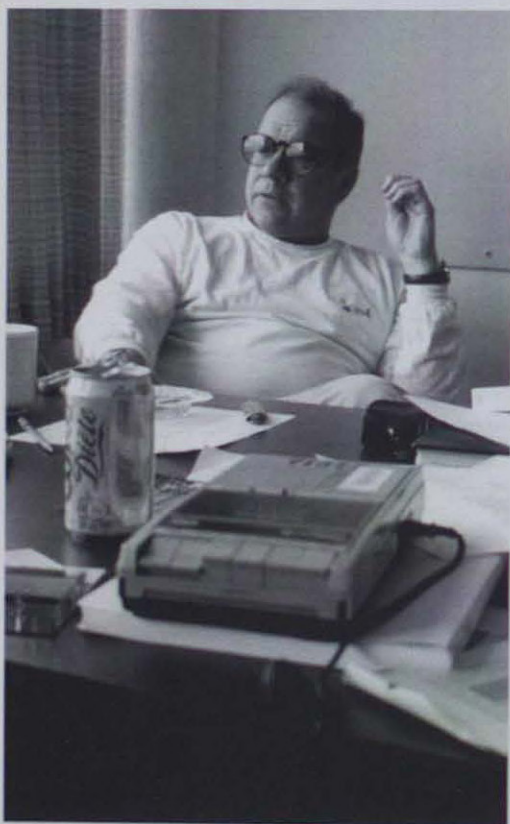


An Interview with Paul Schrader

Erica Goldstein



Paul Schrader is a screenwriter and director whose work includes *Taxi Driver*, *Raging Bull*, *American Gigolo*, *Mosquito Coast*, and, most recently, *Touch*. He was in Montreal in January 1997 working on his current film *Affliction*.

The Fifth Column: The reason I'm here is because Anne Pritchard [Montreal production designer] suggested that you might like doing an interview for an architecture magazine. She told me that your house was designed by Peter Eisenman.

Paul Schrader: [laughs] No, not my house. That was a loft that I had before the current apartment. I went through a period where I was following architecture closer than I am now. I was on a number of architectural juries, Michael Graves' class and Stanley Tigerman's class. I was coming back on the plane with Peter. We were talking about my loft. After that he designed this free-standing office in my loft. Like much of his work, it evolved and was driven by mathematics.

So that was the first time you met him? You weren't friends with him before?

I think I'd met him before. Actually, I sort of got involved and interested through an old friend of mine Kitty Hawkes, who was married to Michael Graves for a while.

Were you interested in what they were doing with architecture? Did you start getting into the architectural dialogue?

Oh, yeah, yeah. I don't have much to say on the subject at the moment because I'm not current. But at that time I was paying much more attention to what was being written and built.

I think the screenplay and the architectural drawing are very much related. A lot of architects draw on this connection—Rem Koolhaas, Steven Holl. There seems to be a correlation between architecture and film. Do you agree?

Well, obviously, it's graphic. But architecture is also drama. Grand architecture such as the Gothic church was built on the fore-notion of drama—taking people through a space that will induce certain emotional feeling. And in fact I remember discussing with

an architect about whether a person is the same if they stand under an arch or if they stand under a post and lintel. I think the person is somehow different.

Do you know that Eisenman said that he aspires to do what David Lynch does? There's an article entitled "The David Lynch of Architecture."¹ Eisenman feels that they both explore themes of alienation, anxiety and chaos. Can you compare yourself to an architect in that way?

Let me think. I've never thought in that direct a fashion. In different films I've been interested in different architectures. I did a film in Italy where I was fairly interested in Islamic architecture—trying to make Venice look eastern, make it look like Istanbul. Let me back up a little bit. I came from a background where the Christian reform church was Dutch Calvinist. In that background, ideas were considered a province of words. If you had something to say, you said it in words. It wasn't until I was an adult, this is when Charles Eames came into my life, and when I fell under his influence, that I learned that images, and in this context shapes, are also ideas. THAT was a revelation to me. It was a new way of seeing the world. And so my interest in architecture and the visual came from that point on.

And then a secondary influence came from a very brilliant production designer, a man named Nando or Ferdinando Scarfiotti who had been working with Bertolucci on *The Conformist* and *The Last Tango*. I brought him over to the US; we did *American Gigolo*. So what Eames had put into my head as a theory, Nando had put into my head as fact. He was a true visual artist; he had designed operas for La Scala. I once asked him why he was never tempted to go into architecture. He said he loved the idea that he could build these things, rooms, edifices, and then they would film them and tear them down. He said, "I love that. I would hate to be an architect who'd have to drive around and see my old ideas still standing" [laughter].

I read "Poetry of Ideas."² The article was written in 1970; you talked about what you admired in Eames' work. Do you think the article has fared well? Do you still think as highly of him now as you did then?

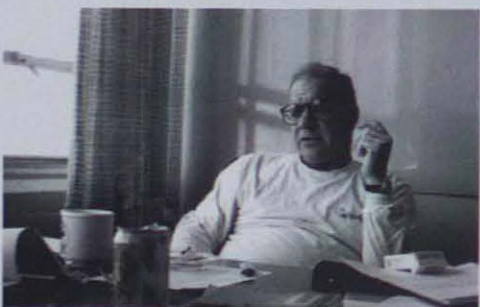
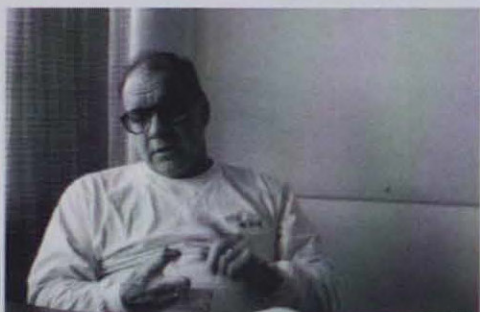
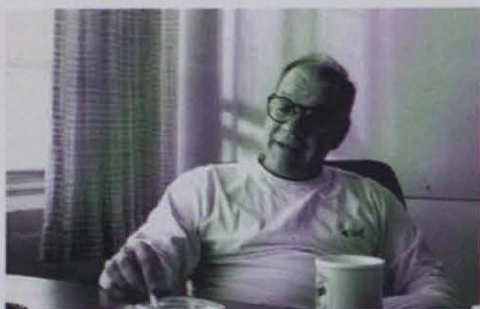
Well Charles had a number of things going for him besides being an architect. He was a very charismatic man, and he influenced a lot of people on a

personal level. You couldn't really be around him for very long without being affected by him. He was also a renaissance man in that he was not only doing chairs and buildings, but he was also doing films and slide shows and photographs and toys. He had a fabulous workshop down in Venice, California, where it was just the world of visual ideas. The reason I stayed in his world is because my wife at the time ended up as his head designer. I knew a lot about the workshop and I was in and out of it all the time.

Do you think that, in your movies, you have tried to emulate some of those things that you admire most?

Well, the clean-ness, the pristine-ness, the value of shapes which is a volume over clutter. In so many films you see, the set decorators think that if you put a lot of junk in a room, somehow, it's better or more real. It's probably more real; people do live with a lot of visual clutter in their lives. This room [motioning around] is full of visual clutter and the eye doesn't know what to do with this room. But when you film you have to instruct the eye, you have to teach the eye what's right. You can create visual worlds by instructing the eye in shot after shot, location after location, on what to look at. So the volume of the room is very important, and the placement of critical shapes so that the eye is trained to appreciate the sort of symmetry you're after, or the asymmetry you're after. Often this just means less of everything. You just put enough things in the room so that people aren't taken aback that the room is just so bare. Sometimes you see a movie and the set is so bare that you are knocked out of the scene because you realize that no one can actually live like that. You have to put enough in there so that people buy into the illusion that it is real life they're watching, but not so much that their eye doesn't know what to do. The moment you see a scene, you should instruct the eye just like a painter instructs the eye where to look first, same with an image. Then when you splice, the eye... lets say I have directed your eye here, you counter balance up there somewhere. When I lay the splice, I know that's where your eye is going to be; so that you should be able to pick up and follow through on that so that it seems harmonious.

It's not conscious, you do it, and that's what makes your movies flow?



I think that's what makes all good movies flow. The master of all of this was Antonioni, who used actors as architecture.

I also read your article about Robert Bresson and Pickpocket.³ Bresson is in complete control. You just talked about how Antonioni uses actors as architecture. How about Bresson?

Bresson, in many ways thought of actors as objects in which he would invest his deep feelings, by the cadence of the imagery. I don't have the temperament or perhaps the talent to do that. I believe in actors more than Antonioni or Bresson. They are too aesthetic for my taste or for my abilities.

You praised Pickpocket to an extreme; you really loved it. Have your tastes changed?

No. My critical taste is not necessarily what I am best at. The critic was headed one way, and the filmmaker went slightly off on another way. I didn't make films to follow up on any critical theories I had. I made films to explore certain emotional and psychological dilemmas.

I have some questions about film versus architecture. How is architectural space rendered in your movies? I was thinking about Taxi Driver and Mosquito Coast as two movies where specifically...

I can't really take credit for, I didn't direct either of those films.

But you wrote the scripts...

When you write you don't write architecture. All you do when you write is you write theme, character, dialogue, plot. There's nothing visual, I do not think visually.

When you wrote Taxi Driver, the way I see it, inherent in the script are ideas about urban evil.

Those are all seen from a character's point of view, they are not visualized, those are literary ideas. If I were to direct that, then I would have to sit down and find the visual equivalent of that, which Scorsese did. The film *The Comfort of Strangers* is from a novel by Ian McEwan. Harold Pinter wrote the script and I

directed. That was an attempt to take a story, a rather perverse story, and very spare kind of dialogue, Harold Pinter dialogue, and find an architecture to make that work. I was presented with a very rotten piece of apple and the goal was to shine it up and make it look like a religious apple so that the hero would be tempted to bite in and find himself with a mouthful of worms. That was a case where architecture was very important. Also the film *Mishima*, set in Japan, is all about architecture. It's about a hyper-designed man with a hyper-designed life, where the intellect is creating all these compartments. [As a screenwriter] I really don't think visually.

But when you direct, you do think visually.

Yes.

Which movies did you direct, other than The Comfort of Strangers, in which you felt the importance of the visual imagery?

Well, *American Gigolo* was the first film that I directed in which image was primary. I did two films before that which were just illustrated stories, *Blue Collar* and *Hard Core*. When I came to do *American Gigolo*, what the characters wore, how they stood, the shape of the room, and the colour of the palette were as important or maybe more important than the scenes. The film is just driven by visuals. That was the start of my thinking in those terms.

So that's how you control, being a director you feel you have more control over the visual aspect than the screenwriter.

Screenwriter, the visuals really aren't any of his business. When I write, even for myself, I never bother with visuals.

It's just writing a story.

You just say "interior, living room, day." Boom, write the scene. You don't think about what that room's going to look like. You're just writing character, you're just writing drama. Then, when you come to it visually, you say "what's this room going to look like?" Sometimes I put little directions in the script just to make it seem a little more real. The production designer reads the script and thinks somehow I meant

that seriously. And I say "no, don't take any of that seriously!" For the one we're doing right now [*Affliction*], it starts in Scandinavia. The Scandinavian aesthetic, that's where the research lay, trying to create a kind of world with that framework. The idea for *Touch*, which comes out the 14th [of February, 1997], was to do a kind of pop ballad, a muted pop ballad; colour planes and hard edges.

Between directing and screenwriting, which do you prefer? Are they just different?

Yes.

And when you do both at the same time, do you have conflicts?

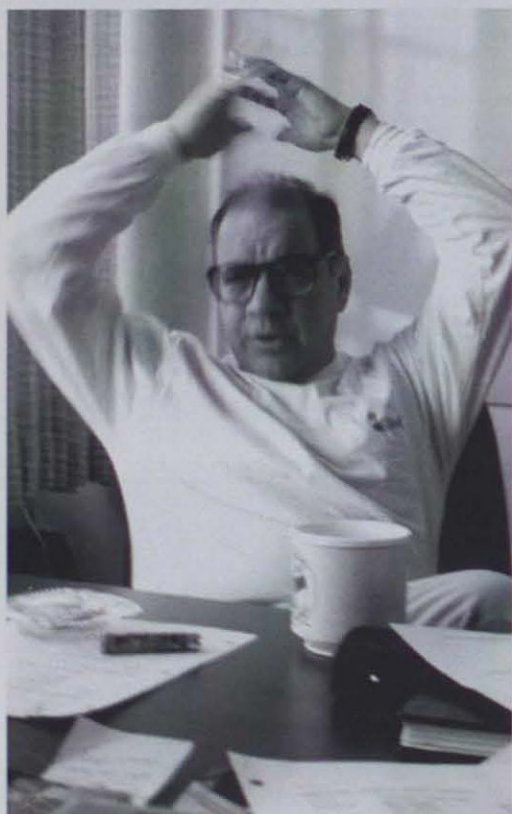
Well, you have to be careful. The writer always lies to the director and vice versa. And so when you are both, it's a problem because the writer is lying to the director. The writer is saying, "you can pick this as a director." And the director is saying, "I can pick this." And it's true, because he's the director. There's a trap in doing both jobs.

You were talking about the movie you're doing now, Affliction. Where is it set?

New Hampshire.

I was thinking about how architecture is related to site. Even though the architect tries to deny it sometimes, it's hard to deny, it's somehow related to site. How do you then reconcile shooting a movie in Montreal which is set in New Hampshire? Is the movie not tied to New Hampshire?

The reason I'm up here in Montreal is threefold. One is it's a snow picture. I get about a guaranteed month more of snow. I was shooting with a separate unit in New Hampshire on Saturday and there wasn't much snow out there. I need this extra protection of latitude so that I don't get caught. So originally I decided to come up here so that I could have a guarantee of another month of snow. Secondly, there's something called the zone in films which is the area which you can shoot from the film-making centre, that the crew lives at home and pays their own room and board. You go outside the zone, you house them, you feed them. So that if I shot in New Hampshire, I



would bring an entire crew to New Hampshire and I would put them up and we would shoot the movie. That's a very expensive proposition, and for this story the budget wasn't there. So by going out to the end of the zone here, which in this case is St. Hillaire, Howick, Blainville, I can get suitable locations. By judiciously selecting angles and sites, I can emulate the mountainous country in New Hampshire and still be in the zone.

There's no conflict then, shooting in Montreal and pretending it's New Hampshire.

Well, you're always pretending at some base level. Everything about a movie is pretend. Everything you see on a screen is pretend. The clothes are pretend, the props are pretend. Everything is fake. And everything is designed and chosen. People who aren't involved in films are always sort of shocked when they find out that every little thing in a film, from the fray on the edge of a cuff to where the ash-tray sits on a table is a decision. Everything is a decision, nothing is ever found, everything is always placed and decided upon. So you create a reality wherever you shoot. Often you're shooting interiors and exteriors. You shoot the exterior in one place. The character walks inside-cut; you're in another location for the interior. Movies are a mishmash of images that are held together by an over-riding visual principle, so that faking Beloeil for a small town in New Hampshire is not that big a stretch.

Are you shooting anything in the city of Montreal at all?

I think the interior of a town hall, where we found a church that has a good auditorium. We're shooting the school as the exterior of the town hall, and then we're shooting the interior of the church as the auditorium.

I never noticed that interiors and exteriors don't match. I'll have to look out for that in the future.

We go to great pains to try to make that all match. The window treatment and all that. Sometimes you have to hang curtains to hide the fact that the windows aren't matching the outside. Often the volumes are a little bit different.

Can I switch topic to technology? Eisenman is quoted as saying that "children grow up as instant replay junkies,"⁴ and, "how can you make contact with an individual in a mediated culture in which every message gets faxed? How can you make architecture relevant to reality?"⁵ My question is how do make YOUR art relevant in this reality?

That's a good question, sometimes you don't [make art relevant]. We live in a kind of cuisinart world in which everything is thrown into the blender and spun around together. Following the old principles of art, the hierarchy is drawn. The notion that wood is somehow more valuable than formica, the notion that the handmade is more valuable than the machine-made, the notion that the classics have more primacy than pop-art, all these things are being called into question. In fact, the very linear-ness of art has been called into question with the primitive being tooth and jowl with the classic. What seems to matter now in the arts is not so much an historical, linear imperative, but just how things are thrown together at any given moment. In that way, art has become ironic rather than existential. Movies are now into the irony of art. The thing that is called deconstruction in architecture is called ironic art, in movies it's retro. The template of it all was *Pulp Fiction* where everything was in quotation marks. My feet are still somewhat in the 19th century, or more maybe in the 20th century. The existential hero of our century, he was born at the end of the 19th century with Dostoyevsky and has carried pretty much through until very recently. He's starting to die off now. I don't know quite what replaces the existential man. I'm not convinced that ironic art or deconstructed art is really that satisfying and really can replace the existential art. The question of existential art is "should I exist?" The question of ironic art is "who cares?" I'm not at all convinced that art is condemned to this whole ironic world, that there aren't some values that keep circling back and around.

You just want to keep doing what you're doing.

Yeah, try and keep things rooted to character. The visual world is another world. You can do that in a kind of hip, ironic way. *Touch* is a very ironic film. [The visuals are] very hip and contemporary. *Affliction* is an existential film. I'm on the bridge between these trends; I don't know where I feel most at home.

Even retro film is sort of past. Tarantino hasn't made a successful film since *Pulp Fiction*. He can't do it again, he can't put everything in quotation marks because it won't work anymore.

Right. Others have done it about a dozen times since. But you can see it's already worn thin.

Do you think that they'll ever be another Pickpocket, anything like Pickpocket? Do you think audiences can take that now?

Will the existential hero make a comeback? Certainly not in that old-fashioned way. Not anymore.

Did you ever want to do that type of film? Bresson or Tarkovsky or Cassavetes, because they were independent, they weren't relying on anything, they were able to do whatever they wanted.

There is a kind of patronage system which is harder and harder to come by. Tarkovsky and Bresson are very odd examples because they were outside the constraints of commercial cinema. There is almost no one left today that is outside the constraints of commercial cinema. Maybe Kubrick.

Those directors were not concerned that their movies would be seen.

That's a luxury that's very hard to find anymore.

You want to talk to people.

Well first of all, it's a mass media. Why get involved in a mass medium if you don't respect mass communication? Even in the lower budget films, a lot of people see those movies, millions and millions and millions of people. You are speaking to a mass audience. Why pretend you're not? I suppose if you have the luxury, if you're independently wealthy and you can just make.... I suppose if an architect wants to spend ten million dollars of his own money building a fabulous building...

Philip Johnson!

...no one's going to stop him. If you can afford to, you can work that way.

So how do you define your art? Do you feel that your movies are purely entertainment or do you aspire to something greater? How do you distinguish making a movie from just making money?

Basically it comes down to boredom. I just get so bored with most art. Most movies are boring, most books are boring, most everything is boring. If something keeps my interest, it usually has some quality, has something to say, some fresh approach to problems. Because I think that art is problem solving. That was one of the first things I think I learned from Charles Eames. Problem solving. When you come at an artistic challenge, come at it as problem solving. What's the problem? I need to make a chair. Ok, how big are people's butts? What is a person's posture? Let's think of it as the problem, and out of solving the problem, the aesthetic arises. The same thing with film, if you can get an interesting problem to solve, a thematic or psychological problem to solve, the aesthetic is all about that. I think that one of the things that happens when an artist dies is that they stop solving problems and they just start repeating the aesthetic. The truth is that most artists have a short creative life. Ten, fifteen years is a good, healthy stretch. Yet they keep being artists. The rare artist can re-invent himself and have several creative lifetimes in one lifespan. But mostly, an artist is sort of hot, in the right space at the right time, for maybe seven, eight years and then another buffer of six, seven years after that. And then he starts faking it.

Do you think you're faking it now?

Well, I think that's a valid question. The movie I just did I adapted from a book. The movie I'm doing now I adapted from a book. Why am I adapting these books? Maybe it's because I don't have anything new to say myself. Maybe that's why I'm using other people's themes and problems.

So the problem solving is now directing.

Yes, it's the screenwriting and directing.

Do you think there is anything new to say?

There's always something new to say. The thing is that once you've said it yourself, how do you

reconfigure your situation so that it becomes fresh? You can't just say the same thing over again.

1. John Seabrook, "The David Lynch of Architecture," *Vanity Fair* 54.1 (January 1990): 74-9, 125-9.

2. Paul Schrader, "Poetry of Ideas: the Films of Charles Eames," *Film Quarterly* (spring 1970); rpt. *Schrader on Schrader and Other Writings*, ed. Kevin Jackson (London: Faber & Faber, 1990): 94-107.

3. Paul Schrader, "Pickpocket I," *LA Free Press* (April 25, 1969), "Pickpocket II," *LA Free Press* (May 2, 1969); rpt. *Schrader on Schrader and Other Writings*: 38-45.

4. Peter Eisenman, "Strong Form, Weak Form," *Re: Working Eisenman*, (London: Academy Editions, 1993): 51-53.

5. Herbert Muschamp, "Moral Fiber," *Interview* 11.4 (April 1991): 51.

Erica Goldstein, B.Arch McGill '96, is presently fulfilling her dreams working alongside Nicolas Cage in a new Brian de Palma film *Snake Eyes*, scheduled to be released in Summer 1998.

Much thanks to Daisy Goldstein for organizing the photos, and to Anne Pritchard for suggesting that life goes on after Cronenberg.

