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THE MASTER GARDENER AND THE TEN GREATEST FILMS OF ALL TIME

OF THE GROUP OF AMERICAN FILMMAKERS known as the "Film School Generation" (Francis Ford Coppola, George Lucas, Brian De Palma, etc.), Paul Schrader is perhaps the hardest to get a clear handle on. His best-known contribution to that cinematic moment of the 1970s was the screenplay to *Taxi Driver* (1976)—a film that really did announce a renaissance but that is usually associated with its director, Martin Scorsese, for whom Schrader would write several more screenplays. The material that he went on to make as a director was sometimes hysterical (the 1979 George C. Scott-starring *Hardcore*), sometimes slow and intensely brooding (the 1992 Willem Dafoe-starring *Light Sleeper*, which I confess a great fondness for), and sometimes utterly unclassifiable and truly singular (the 1985 Ken Ogata-starring *Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters*, which has to be one of the weirdest commercial films of the 1980s). Since the 1990s he has directed a film almost every two years, but nothing has really seemed to land in the same way as his earlier material. He was a creature of the 1970s and 1980s, when the Coppola-led dream of an American cinema that combined the innovation of European art cinema with the resources of Hollywood was at its peak (it petered out after the height of that idealism, *Apocalypse Now*). Only Schrader's old capo Scorsese has really seemed able to sustain a full career at that level of craftsmanship.

After seeing Schrader's latest film, *The Master Gardener* (2022), I found it impossible not to mentally summon that earlier period, even though the narrative seems quite contemporary (spoilers ahead): a quiet gardener named Narvel Roth (played by Joel Edgerton), who turns out to be a now-repentant white supremist, having gone into witness protection after turning on the fellow members of his neo-Nazi militia, becomes entangled with a young mixed-race woman named Maya (played by Quintessa Swindell),

who is trying to break away from a life in a drug-infested part of what looks like New Orleans. The owner of the garden where Narvel works, who is also Maya's great aunt (played by Sigourney Weaver), comes to see that the gentility-inflected entitlements of the old landed gentry are giving way, whether she likes it or not. But the film itself isn't contemporary at all. Really, it's a remake of *Taxi Driver*. Readers will recall that the titular antihero of that film, Travis Bickle (played by Robert De Niro), was, like Narvel, a tattooed journal keeper with (1) a sense that society is going to hell, (2) a penchant for extreme violence, and (3) an inborn instinct to use that penchant to protect vulnerable young women threatened by societal collapse. In *Taxi Driver*, that collapse was embodied by the Manhattan pimp Sport (played by Harvey Keitel), and its victim was embodied by the 12-year-old sex worker Iris (played by Jodie Foster). In *The Master Gardener*, it is embodied by the drug dealers R. G. and Sissy (played by Jared Bankens and Matt Mercurio), and its victim by the early-20s lost girl Maya. In both films it is a climactic explosion of intense violence on the part of the antihero—Travis Bickle in 1976, Narvel Roth in 2022—that brings the film to what seems like a logical conclusion but is in fact the prelude to a difficult-to-read contradiction. Are these critiques of violence and denunciations of the way that the distinctly American version of the extreme right wing can only end in a bloodbath? If so, then they are awfully strange critiques and denunciations, given the viscerally satisfying way they seem to bring both narratives to a close.

The Master Gardener compounds this fundamental problem in *Taxi Driver* by giving us a happy ending (again, spoiler alert). Once all the guns have been fired and legs have been broken, Narvel returns to the estate where he worked and matter-of-factly tells Maya's great aunt, who had been his occasional sex partner, that he and Maya are moving back into the gardener's cabin to live as husband and wife. She says this is "obscene," and he shakes his head gently and responds, just as matter-of-factly, that it's not obscene. What she finds obscene is not entirely clear, but there are clear racial echoes there, and Narvel's gently firm response is a reminder that her old aristocracy is passing and that a new world, after a painful birth, is coming into being. It's a noble sentiment, to be sure, but an odd one given the squalor and violence that the previous reel has presented so vividly. How in God's name are we supposed to read this?

I ask the question that way for a reason. Schrader is a deeply religious filmmaker, as evidenced by the screenplay he produced for Scorsese's *The*

Last Temptation of Christ (1988) and his recent Ethan Hawke vehicle *First Reformed* (2017). In his earlier life as a film critic (on which more in the second section), Schrader also published the book *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (1972), which was an argument for the basically religious quality of the *stylistic* approach taken by these three filmmakers. Schrader's *Wikipedia* entry suggests that he has drifted in and out of organized religion over the years but that today he identifies as a Christian and has attended a Presbyterian church since 2018, seemingly a more or less straightforward return to the Calvinism of his youth. An understanding of his films thus requires a consideration of *substantive* religious matters, as he is definitely not someone who is "spiritual rather than religious." This is why the ending of *Taxi Driver* plays like such an anticlimax, as it is clear when Travis Bickle is celebrated in the media as a kind of avenging angel that these are nothing more than the pomps of the devil (to deploy Catholic vocabulary that would be anathema to the Calvinist Schrader of *Taxi Driver* but very familiar to the Schrader of *The Last Temptation of Christ* a decade later). In *The Master Gardener*, though, the wages of sin (i.e., returning to the violence of his militia days by breaking legs and taking names) are literally a return to the garden and the promise of redemption, as we see, in the words of the KJV's Genesis 2:24: "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh." Schrader's violence-fuelled precursor to gentle images of redemption is an odd vision inasmuch as it is clearly drawing upon narratives that are utterly central to Christianity at the same time that it is radically rewriting the moral teachings of that tradition, which is actually contrary to what was going on in the conclusion of *Taxi Driver*. Schrader's revisiting of that 1970s narrative may be some sort of attempt to intervene in the discourse of contemporary religiously inflected cultural critique. Anyone who follows serious Christian, and especially American Catholic, intellectual cultural critique knows that much of it proceeds from deeply pessimistic assumptions, as the reigning vision of modernity is a basically tragic one. *The Master Gardener*, though, remains invested in redemption as the defining ethos of a Christian worldview.

Taxi Driver and *The Master Gardener* are thus asking similar questions, yet they differ in fundamental ways. *Taxi Driver* asks: when violence becomes inevitable, does this mean that grace is banished because we live in a fallen world and such perfection is always beyond our reach? The an-

swer is yes, as Travis Bickle arrives at a life of pseudo-righteous and morally empty celebrity that seems typically modern. *The Master Gardner* asks in response: is it perhaps that the sin such violence embodies must be ignored *for exactly the same reason*—namely, because we live in a fallen world, and the true reconciliation of a repentant sinner who accepts all of the consequences of his sin is just going to have to wait for the afterlife? I cannot disguise my sense that *Taxi Driver* is the more demanding and morally serious vision of this dilemma, even if I also acknowledge the degree to which many of that earlier film's actual viewers take a kind of visceral pleasure from the intensity of the film's violence (which is also a problem, albeit a much less religiously inflected one, in Quentin Tarantino's films). And yet, I can see that *The Master Gardener* is an attempt to insist upon the centrality of redemption in the religious understanding of the world. Perhaps accepting that is ultimately the greater challenge for a gloomy, tragedy-informed Catholic intellectual like myself. The latter, more optimistic vision is certainly the one that is more consistent with the spirit of the age.

In addition to his book *Transcendental Style in Film*, Schrader remains important in film criticism circles for a series of interventions he has made over the years, mostly in the pages of the now-defunct and greatly missed magazine *Film Comment* (which still persists as a biweekly email that rarely rises above mediocrity). The most significant of these was a lengthy article in the September-October 2006 issue titled "Canon Fodder," which described his unsuccessful attempt to write "a film version of Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon*." The article, which is easily available on Schrader's website (paulschrader.org), remains wonderful reading for the way that he puzzles through the historical, aesthetic, and moral stakes of canon building—issues that are as vexed in cinema as they are in literary studies.

Such considerations feel especially current now because the British film magazine *Sight and Sound* has recently published its once-a-decade "Greatest Films of All Time" poll of filmmakers and film critics. The poll is venerable, having emerged in 1952. It has also been extremely conservative. Until now every poll since 1962 has had either *Citizen Kane* (1941) or *Vertigo* (1958) in the top spot, and *Vertigo* only displaced *Citizen Kane* in 2012. After a tentative attempt to expand the voting pool in 2012, *Sight and Sound* cast its net wider this time, asking a total of 1639 film people of various kinds to take part (including festival types, archive types, academics, etc., as

well as filmmakers, whose votes constitute a separate list).

The result was a massive upset. On the critics' list (which gets the most attention), *Vertigo* and *Citizen Kane* were both displaced from number one by a new champion: Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975). There has been considerable blowback on this from folks no less important than Schrader himself. In December, *Indiewire* reported that Schrader posted on his *Facebook* page that "Akerman's film is a favorite of mine, a great film, a landmark film but its unexpected number one rating does it no favors. *Jeanne Dielman* will from this time forward be remembered not only as an important film in cinema history but also as a landmark of distorted woke reappraisal."

Obviously I disagree. Long-time readers of this chronicle will recall that its second instalment in 2015, which included a tribute to Akerman upon her untimely death, was titled "*Jeanne Dielman* was my *Star Wars*." I think Akerman is one of the truly major filmmakers, which is a claim I'm not ready to make of many Hollywood types (Scorsese would be an exception, as would Coppola up to and including *Apocalypse Now*). She is serious, rigorous, and committed to her medium in a manner that is on a completely different level than Welles or Hitchcock. To put it in a literary way: if Jean-Luc Godard is cinema's James Joyce, then Akerman is its Virginia Woolf. To see *Jeanne Dielman* at the top of the poll is to see a cinema that I recognize as "the real thing" validated.

The business about *Sight and Sound* surrendering to wokeness (or whatever it's being called this week) is another matter. The magazine brought this kind of criticism onto itself when it so preeningly boasted of how much more inclusive it was now, with its parent organization's executive director Jason Wood saying that "canons should be challenged and interrogated, and as part of the BFI's remit to not only revisit film history but to also reframe it, it's so satisfying to see a list that feels quite radical in its sense of diversity and inclusion." Ah yes, very noble. However, there are only 68 critics from Canada on that list of 1639 (4% if my math is to be trusted) and only 26 (1.5%) from Ireland—a country with which the U.K. has had a somewhat complicated relationship, to say the least. Speaking of such countries, India, which has long had the largest film industry in the world despite some COVID-era setbacks, has 52 voters on the list; that's 3% of the total. The U.K. checks in at 692 voters or 42%, the U.S. at 416 or 25%. The list thus shows that, in a drearily typical way, "radical in its sense of diversity and inclusion"

basically means "lots of different kinds of Yanks and Brits." Forgive me if I am not super impressed by the political righteousness of that.

I can also see why such a list may be dismissed as too grandiose, as it gives the illusion of consensus where none could ever really exist. But rather than the nationalist bean-counting I just indulged in, the real pleasure of poring over the roster of invitees is to see the lists of various *individuals*. Seeing that the Irish film historian Ruth Barton included both Jafar Panahi's *This is Not a Film* (2011) and Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's masterpiece *The Red Shoes* (1948) explains a lot about what she brings to her analyses of Irish cinema. The same goes for the broodingly religious Georgian filmmaker Dea Kulumbegashvili (whom I wrote about in my Spring 2021 chronicle) and her inclusion of Jacques Tati's *Playtime* (1967), her countryman Mikhail Kalatozov's *The Cranes are Flying* (1957), and *Jeanne Dielman*. Journals like the Toronto quarterly *Cinema Scope* and Paris' venerable *Cahiers du cinéma* also publish annual "best film" lists (*Cahiers* since 1951, which probably inspired the *Sight and Sound* list) because they stake out a general editorial position and inform readers as to what their writers value in world cinema. Less than an objective assessment of greatness, these magazines are making the subjective nature of their assessments that much clearer.

It is in that spirit that I want to offer my own list here. It's not because I feel hurt that I wasn't invited to participate (I'm sure *Sight and Sound* just lost my email) but rather because these lists allow readers to calibrate their understanding of where critics stand overall. In any case, here are the films, in chronological order, that I'd be most happy to watch over and over and that I'm the most certain doing so would always lead to something new:

Dziga Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929)
Harry Watt and Basil Wright's *Night Mail* (1936)
Agnès Varda's *Cléo de 5 à 7* (Cleo from 5 to 7, 1962)
Pierre Perrault and Michael Brault's *Pour la suite du monde* (For Those Who Will Follow, 1963)
Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975)
Ousmane Sembene's *Ceddo* (1977)
Chris Marker's *Sans soleil* (Sunless, 1983)
Peter Weir's *Witness* (1985)

Gil Cardinal's *Foster Child* (1987)
Jean-Luc Godard's *JLG/JLG—autoportrait de décembre* (Self-Portrait in December, 1994)

In terms of criticism, these films are where I stand. If not exactly the ten greatest of all time, they are certainly, for me, the ten most inexhaustible.