

Schrader's Hardcore hard bore

This film review was originally broadcast on CKDU Radio by their resident cinema critic, Tom Ozere. It is reproduced here in cooperation with CKDU's Early Morning radio program.

Francois Trauffaut once said in an interview that a movie should express either the joy or agony of making film; Paul Schrader (who directed the 1978 film **Blue Collar**, and co-wrote **Taxi Driver** with Martin Scorsese) has made a film that expresses nothing but the sheer boredom of filmmaking. **Hardcore**, ostensibly a polemic against the porn world, is a dead and lifeless film about a dead and lifeless subject; form equals content and the audience is the fall guy.

The film opens with a wealth of jumbled images: a celery warehouse; Christmas lights and decorations; snowy streets; Neat white frame houses tell us that we are in the Mid-West. The camera passes in a disinterested way over various idyllic scenes of mid-western life, before settling, equally disinterestedly, on the house of one Jake VanDorn, (George C. Scott) where a celebration is taking place. Jake's family are members of the Dutch Reformation Church, and Schrader shows us Christmas in a Calvinist home. From the way the scenes of opulence and religious solemnity are filmed (dull) Schrader leads us to believe that he is criticizing Protestant white-bread values in much the same way Richler does in **Saint Urbain's Horseman**. However these are the values that Schrader, in an annoying self-righteous way, consistently holds up as being wholesome and good.

A great rent is made in Jake's quiet existence when his only daughter Kristen (Ilah Davis) who, coming from the celery capital of the Mid-West, looks like a long, tall

stalk of celery, and who has even less acting ability than that lowly vegetable) leaves for a Calvinist youth convention in California and doesn't return. Jake leaves for Los Angeles and hires a private detective (Peter Boyle) and then returns to Grand Rapids, to wait and worry in his Mid-Western way. Several weeks later the detective returns bearing an 8-mm hardcore porn movie which stars Jake's daughter.

The film really begins here, as Jake goes to comb the porno joints for Kristen. Pornography is such an intriguing and sensational subject that we sit back waiting to be alternately shocked and titillated by the goings-on in Los Angeles' dirty, great rotten underbelly. Well, it turned out to be a long wait. I didn't feel aroused and there was no apprehensive ache in my stomach, I never had to cover my companion's eyes during the course of the movie. The nudes, both male and female, are photographed in such a casual and aloof manner that they neither attract or repel us. The models are so much meat, but because we're told they're not worth our attention, we don't care that they're meat. Schrader apparently photographed the porno scenes in actual sex shops but he infuses the sets with such glaring lighting that the surreptitious, clandestine, atmosphere we associate with pornography, is lost. It doesn't help that Schrader's sense of staging is so incredibly cliched. For example, everytime Jake travels the strip, or enters a new porno establishment, rock music (composed by Jack Nitzsche) of the most obnoxious kind assails our ears. The music, which starts off with a thudding base and eventually moves in to some of the most piercing guitar I've ever heard, is apparently synonymous with perversion

in Schrader's muddled mind.

Sometimes Schrader's touch is so heavy-handed I had to laugh. Near the end of the film a man named Ratan materializes for the obligatory shoot-out (a gratuitous bit of sensationalism that has neither cause nor effect), is shot, and dies sprawled in the classic porno position—legs spread, every line in the body indicating complete submission—in front of a poster advertising erotic delights. Another monolithic Schrader touch is the casting of Dick Sargent as Jake's brother-in-law, Wes. Sargent played the husband on the TV production **Bewitched** for several years, and Schrader obviously thinks this is reference enough for the sort of wholesome respectability he's after. However, television actors are notoriously bad on the wide screen, and Sargent is no exception. Everytime the camera settles on his face Sargent feels he has to register some important emotion, so he is continually screwing up his eyes, wrinkling his forehead, raising his eyebrows etc.

In the role of Jake, George

C. Scott is only adequate. He has his moments ie. when he first discovers Kristen has become a porn actress, but the part is written in such a way that only requires him to behave like some latter day John Wayne; at one point in the film he actually breaks through a wall.

The other male lead, Peter Boyle, is excellent. In fact his performance throws into relief what is wrong with the Jake character. In his quest for Kristen, Peter Boyle gets his hands dirty, he succumbs to temptation. While Boyle demands perks from the porno entrepreneurs he questions, Scott merely registers his disdain, he remains pure throughout the film, his religious convictions never falter.

Schrader makes no attempt at sympathy with any of his subjects. Even the young whore Nicki (played by Season Hubley who manages to look endearing and innocent even when she is soliciting) is told that she is worthless-human trash. At one point in the film Jake explains his religious beliefs to Nicki (a monologue

that is genuinely more terrifying than any other scene in the movie) and Nicki makes the interesting point that Jake's fundamentalist attitude towards sex is much like her own licentious one; they both think nothing of it. Instead of following up on this Schrader merely has Jake tell Nicki that she's wrong and leaves it at that. Jake degrades Nicki throughout the film, at one point he even slaps her around, and eventually he just discards her.

Well Jake finds his daughter, takes her home, and the film ends happily. However, some questions are left unsolved, such as, why Kristen runs away, why Nicki is left to the tender mercies of the people she has betrayed for Jake's sake, why Paul Schrader, who co-wrote the excellent **Taxi Driver**, would choose to subject movie audiences all over to two and a half hours of unrelenting boredom, and most importantly—why the Hell does Peter Boyle button up his collar when he's on the job?

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