

Meaning well is still the opposite of art

Affliction, directed by Paul Schrader

David Walsh, Joanne Laurier
6 March 1999

Affliction, directed by Paul Schrader, screenplay by Schrader, based on the novel by Russell Banks

Paul Schrader, the director and screenwriter of *Affliction*, has been working in films for more than two decades. His filmwriting credits include Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Raging Bull* (1980) and *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), Brian DePalma's *Obsession* (1976) and Peter Weir's *The Mosquito Coast* (1986). He has directed about a dozen films, including *Blue Collar* (1978), *Hardcore* (1979), *American Gigolo* (1980), *Cat People* (1982), *Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters* (1985) and *Patty Hearst* (1988).

Schrader is obviously possessed of a serious intellectual temperament. That temperament has unfortunately not generally been matched by a corresponding ability to dissolve his Large Subjects (pornography, the unions, prostitution, religion, terrorism, alcoholism and male violence) and Themes (the conflict between idealism and corruption, the choice between emotional detachment and confrontation, the possibility and cost of redemption, the legacy of patriarchal oppression, the thin line between sanity and madness, and others) into poetic form. His works tend to have the character of filmed concepts. In our view, *Affliction*, while it has truthful moments and performances, suffers from this same essential weakness.

The film is based on a novel by Russell Banks, who often writes about physical and moral deterioration in present-day New England. In *Affliction*, we encounter Wade Whitehouse (Nick Nolte), a small-town New Hampshire sheriff, as he is about to unravel. His ex-wife dislikes and badgers him, his daughter is estranged from him, his employer bullies him, his abusive father continues to haunt him. A shooting, coupled with his mother's death, sets off a series of events that deepens Whitehouse's unhappiness and feeds his frustrations. Eventually, he explodes.

Nolte has obviously put a good deal of thought and effort into his portrayal of Whitehouse. Sissy Spacek (as his girlfriend) is fine as well. James Coburn's performance as the bitter, brutal old man is at least memorable, if unmodulated. One might say, in general, that the acting is the least of the problems in most contemporary films.

There is no doubt something accurate and chilling about Coburn's character. Such individuals exist, and New England, one of the oldest continuously settled regions in the US, has more than its share of them. Its decaying mill towns, victims of protracted and painful decline, can be havens for backwardness and its inevitable complements, drunkenness and physical abuse.

Moreover, there are socially acute touches in *Affliction*. Property is being bought up in the area as part of a development scheme that will make a handful of people rich. As the town clerk observes, "In a year or two, you're not going to recognize this town." One of the

representatives of new money is a corrupt union official. Meanwhile most of the town's residents are barely making ends meet. Schrader and Banks paint a generally bleak picture.

This is a serious attempt, in other words, to grapple with serious matters. As in many of his artistic efforts, however, Schrader seems less interested in the overall dramatic coherence of his film than in making a point, and not necessarily the most profound one. In a review of *Taxi Driver* more than 20 years ago a critic noted the absurdity of Robert De Niro's character (who at this point in the film still had his wits about him) taking respectable, middle class Cybill Shepherd to a Times Square movie theater showing hard-core pornography--on their first date, no less! That is typical, sadly, of Schrader's finesse.

Taxi Driver, *Raging Bull* and *Hardcore*, in particular, are works obsessed with violence and sexual exploitation and society's "dark side," without having much that is coherent to say about those subjects. Life in America is not always easy to make sense of, but Schrader, obviously an intelligent person, has not done enough to clarify matters. He has preferred to wade in, shouting and wildly waving his arms about, before he has thought things through.

There are numerous instances of the director's heavy-handed tendencies in the new film. It may appear trivial, even pedantic, but the first aspect of *Affliction* that might disturb the moviegoer is the weather. The opening sequence of the film takes place on Halloween, October 31, yet the town is buried in snow, and not newly fallen snow either. Schrader explains: "I wanted a continuity of snow because this is a kind of drama that plays itself out in the cold.... So we ended up shooting the film in Quebec to get a nice deep winter, which we got." That there are generally still a few leaves on the trees by the end of October in New Hampshire, and very little snow, if any, on the ground, did not deter the director. He wanted to drive home the notion of "coldness" to his audience (as if that were dependent on two feet of snow on the ground) in such a manner that no one would miss the point. Hence the mid-winter weather in late autumn. Another example of the "Schrader touch."

The relationship between Whitehouse and his ex-wife Lillian seems somewhat implausible. Is it credible that this man teetering on the edge of the abyss, whose entire life has apparently been played out under such circumstances, ever shared a life with this pious, upper middle class type? Nor is it clear why the sweet-tempered, *self-confident* Margie (Spacek) stays attached to Wade, much less why she agrees to move in with him and the notoriously alcoholic and violent Glen Whitehouse (Coburn). We see no other evidence of masochistic tendencies on her part. Too many elements in the film are exaggerated or distorted to create an effect and uphold the director's view of things.

In the end, this feels manipulative.

The area of the film that raises the most serious problems involves Wade's younger brother, Rolfe (Willem Dafoe). He functions as narrator and quasi-commentator. As far as the spectator is concerned, Rolfe seems like an afterthought. The film's characters tend to fall into two categories: those who are drunk, violent or aggressive and those who are passive and dull. Rolfe falls into the latter category. As played by Dafoe, he is more or less a cipher. Rolfe's principal function is to encourage Wade to pursue his theory that an apparent hunting accident was really a gangland hit.

Schrader, however, following Banks, views Rolfe as a central character, perhaps *the* central character. He suggests that the relation of the two brothers is crucial. "You have in this case two siblings of an abusive parent," he told interviewer Cynthia Joyce in *Salon*. "One of those siblings will be selected out for the violence, in this case the older one. The relationship with the younger boy to his brother will be very complex, because on [the] one hand he's very grateful that his brother took the blows for him. On the other hand, he's jealous, because in that kind of family structure, violence equals attention equals love.... Everyone else in town gives the older brother good advice. You know, forget your custody suit, forget the hunting accident. But his brother walks in and says, 'I think you were right about that murder,' and encourages his delusions."

Schrader's observations are legitimate and perhaps psychologically valid. The only difficulty is that his conception of the relationship finds virtually no dramatic materialization in the film. To make the connections he suggests, and fill in the intermediary steps, from the evidence provided by the film, would require an Auguste Dupin--Poe's amateur detective in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*. We listen to Rolfe's somewhat enigmatic narration; we witness one scene of child abuse, during which Wade presumably is knocked down; we see Rolfe show up for his mother's funeral and encourage Wade's theory about the shooting--and from this we are apparently supposed to deduce the sort of emotional relationships Schrader outlines. It simply won't do. This is a failure of the artistic nervous system. The brain is emitting signals, but they are not being received or at least carried out by the limbs.

A dichotomy between idea and realization is a recurring difficulty in Schrader's work. In an indirect manner, the director acknowledges this himself. During the course of the interview referred to above, Joyce notes that Schrader has said in the past that he "never really made the movies" that he "would have approved of as a critic." The director responds: "I wrote a book on a kind of transcendental style of cinema, a spiritual style--very rarefied stuff. And, what I meant was that I don't feel equipped to make films in that style myself. That sort of style eschews psychological realism, and I work very much in the arena of psychological realism.... So that, when I started making films, I had to acknowledge the fact that really, what I felt the need to create and what I appreciated as a critic were not necessarily the same thing."

I find this an odd stance. It is not difficult to conceive of an artist continuing to work for a period of time in one mode after having been exposed to another, perhaps more highly evolved aesthetic approach. Under such conditions there would be an inevitable time lag, as the artist's inner being strives to "catch up" to what he or she now prefers at the conscious level. But decades of work carried out in a style that one does not consider to be the most advanced or penetrating? This seems a set of circumstances designed to provoke frustration, inner conflict and even personal bitterness. Unhappily, in Schrader's film there is always this sense, that he would rather be making something

with more intellectual status attached to it. Thus, for example, the ill-fated, pretentious film about the Japanese writer, Yukio Mishima. Schrader would rather be making a European art film, but there is insufficient evidence that he has the ideas or social outlook that animate such work at its best.

There is a point to raise in regard to Banks's writing. *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997, directed by Atom Egoyan), also based on a novel by Banks, and *Affliction* have one common plot strand: the belief held by central characters in a "conspiracy" that proves to be groundless. In Egoyan's film, a number of townspeople engage an attorney, in the aftermath of a tragic bus accident, to sue those deemed responsible. It turns out no one is, the accident is simply that, an accident. In *Affliction* something similar takes place.

If, as seems likely, Banks is concerned about a certain kind of amorphous (potentially reactionary) paranoia, which in fact helps individuals *avoid* facing up to certain painful realities about their lives, one can go along with his point. But there are definite limits to it. In both stories there are reasonable grounds for believing in a conspiracy. Wade Whitehouse certainly has legitimate concerns. Malevolent and predatory social elements *are* at work in society, and pushed too far, Banks's argument can simply encourage acceptance of the culture of "individual responsibility" and self-blame--in which the less wealthy alone are encouraged to take part--that currently finds support in official circles.

Affliction is a difficult film to write about, because, despite its worthy intentions, it strikes one as somewhat arid and ungenerous. Schrader has left behind some of his youthful recklessness and excess, but the new, self-conscious caution contains its own dangers. When his film slows down, it tends to drag. This only encourages the suspicion that the previous sound and fury was at least in part an attempt to compensate for confused ideas and an inadequate dramatic sensibility. Schrader--like Scorsese--has never worked out for himself the driving forces behind the irrational and obsessive behavior he obviously recognizes and feels drawn to depict in contemporary life. In Schrader's films the aesthetic argument rarely goes beyond isolated impressions, some of which individually have value, arbitrarily pulled together. It is the sense that his work is a tenuously organized intellectual construct and not an attempt to confront life as it presents itself that, in our view, weakens *Affliction*.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact