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Two Filmmakers Adrift on Life's Mean Streets

By JOY GOULD BOYUM

"The land of Thou Shalt Not," D. H. Lawrence dubbed America, putting his finger on our Puritan pulse as he studied our classic literature. What Lawrence had located, of course, was the overwhelming concern with sin, the fearful preoccupation with the forces of evil running through much of American art which, as part of our Puritan heritage, still continues to surface today.

Consider the work of filmmaker Paul Schrader which, in kind if not in quality,

On Film

"American Gigolo"

"Just Tell Me What You Want"

shares with its Puritan forebears their obsession with the dark and dreadful, the satanic and the seductive. In film after film—from those he's written, like "Taxi Driver," to those he's also directed, like "Hard Core"—Schrader continually leads us down to the grimy underside of society, there to reveal the hidden blackness of the human soul. Repeatedly, his protagonists are sent on lurid journeys through neon-stained nighttown streets, where passing through porno shops and leather bars, they and we with them encounter man at his most corrupt and degraded.

Clearly, a Paul Schrader movie is never very easy to take. And while neither of course are the sin-drenched worlds of his

Puritan fathers, there's a crucial difference. For unlike a Hawthorne or Melville, let's say, Schrader never really puts evil into any clear perspective, never lights it with the kind of moral vision needed to supply true dramatic tension and perhaps more important, to justify treating of it in the first place. We have sensed this confusion in Schrader before, but never have we felt it so sharply as in his recent "American Gigolo."

Indeed, it's hard to tell just what Schrader is really after here in his tale of Julian Kay, paid companion of wealthy, lonely women. At the outset, it would seem that he intends to expose and condemn the man and his way of life. We are given image after image which tell of Julian's vanity (he spends hours poring over his wardrobe); his materialism (he not only dresses in silk and drives a Mercedes, but bargains hard with his clients); and his self-absorption. Yet at the same time, Julian (especially as played by the sympathetic Richard Gere) emerges tender and sensitive, a man whom we are to believe truly finds pleasure in giving pleasure to others. More importantly, he is shown to have more value, more moral fiber if you will, than anyone around him and certainly more than the desperate, faithless women who pay for his services.

And so, when Schrader makes it clear that Julian is headed for a fall (continually and heavy-handedly photographing him in the imprisoning shadows of Venetian blinds) and has him framed for a murder

he did not commit, we cannot be sure whether or not these are the wages of sin or the makings of martyrdom. And all the more so in that the situation seems imposed rather arbitrarily. Nor can we make sense of Julian's reprieve at the end—or rather, redemption, given the final scene's religious overtones. From what has Julian been saved? From corruption? What then of his goodness? From some internal agony? Why then don't we see him suffering? Or merely from death? It's hard to say.

What makes matters even more confusing is the source of his redemption: the sadly needy wife of a California Senator who first seeks Julian's services, then falls in love with him, finally lies to save him and who lacks credibility throughout. Among other things, this wife is played by Lauren Hutton: if this desirable woman must hire a paid companion, what hope is there for the rest of us? Less hope I suppose, than finding any justification for our immersion in this unsavory world other than the filmmaker's peculiar fascination with it.

To move from Paul Schrader's "American Gigolo" to Sidney Lumet's "Just Tell Me What You Want" is to move from a kept man to a kept woman. It remains nevertheless in "the land of Thou Shalt Not." For though Lumet's movie is offered to us as an essentially lightweight romantic comedy, it's one with a strong moral edge to it, and one that ultimately emerges, sadly enough, as off-putting as Schrader's.

There isn't a great deal of moral distance, after all, between taking the gigolo as hero, as Schrader does, to celebrating, as does Lumet, the double-dealing businessman. He is in this case Max Herschel, a pushy, loud-mouthed tycoon whose wheelings and dealings the film traces. As played by Alan King, he seems blueprinted by the American Nazi Party.

Still, Lumet would have us applaud Max, rationalizing away his faults by showing us how vital he is, how witty, how warm, how human. Max may have a string of mistresses half his age, but just think—he sends them to college and pays for their orthodontia. Max may also turn some dirty business tricks, but business. Lumet reminds us, is business. Besides, as we are told by Max's wise old friend Seymour Berger (awkwardly done by Keenan Wynn): "Show me the man who can't be bought, and I'll show you a man who's never had an offer."

As proof of the pudding, when Max's favorite mistress, Bones (Ali McGraw), ups and marries an idealistic young playwright, Max (with Lumet's help, of course) shows how easily this pure young man can be bought. But it isn't only this that drives Bones back to Max. For, as Lumet would have it, nothing—not youth, good looks nor intelligence—is nearly so sexy as money.

It's a mean-spirited vision all right, and given Lumet's hard-hitting, aggressive style, there is little relief from it. Except, that is, the relief we can find in the recognition that Lumet's vision, like Schrader's, is a good deal meaner than the world it's focused on.