

John Raiz reviews *American Gigolo*

by John Raiz

John Calvin was a landmark in the history of religion. When he was a youth of twenty-six he wrote one of the most influential, eloquent, logical and, perhaps, terrifying religious documents ever written—**The Principles of the Christian Religion**. Calvin zealously taught his followers to embrace the medieval doctrine that life can only offer a constant stream of misery and tears. He unwaveringly told his disciples to accept the pagan philosophy that expounded the belief that the greatest benefit anyone could hope for was not to be born, and barring that, the next best thing that could happen would be to die while entering this world. In the Institutes, where we can see just how much a God-intoxicated man Calvin really was, he wrote, "If heaven is our country, what is the earth but a place of exile?—and if the departure out of this world is an entrance into life, what is the world but a sepulcher?" For anyone who hasn't fallen under the spell of his preachings, Calvin is unquestionably a difficult man to love. Nonetheless, even his non-

followers must readily admit that his overall influence on Christianity has been probably even greater than Luther's; of course, Calvin had the major advantage of following in Luther's huge footprints that had trampled many previously unyielding obstacles.

This long prologue about Calvin is triggered by the fact that Paul Schrader's parents were strict Calvinists. In fact, according to one film source, his parents didn't allow him to see a single movie while he lived at home (until the age of 18). Immediately after leaving home, he became interested in movies and landed a job as film critic for the Los Angeles Free Press; later becoming editor of the magazine *Cinema*. Afterward he published a book with the pretentious title **Transcendental Style: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer**. Which, finally, brings us to his career of scriptwriter, and, now, writer-director.

Several common trends run through each of Schrader's scripts: the total inability to dramatize either the physical or psychological aspects of a sexual relationship; his consistently gauche attempts at humor; his complete lack of talent for conveying anything that touches upon being pleasurable. How much, if any, of these shortcomings can be traced to his strict upbringing is impossible to answer. One can merely speculate.

Schrader's first effort was Sydney Pollack's *The Yakuza* (written in collaboration with Robert Towne). This script was a total mess. It was a rambling, unfocused work filled with esoteric nonsense about Japanese gangsters. His initial popularity grew from his next screenplay for Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976) and Brian DePalma's *Obsession* (1976). In 1978, Schrader began to write and direct his own films, starting with *Blue Collar*—his "best" film to date. In his latest effort, *American Gigolo*, which like his previous work *Hardcore*, he once again takes an unhealthy look at the seedy underbelly of society—where violence can erupt at any time.

Julian is a swaggering confident high-priced stud. He's so much in demand by his rich clientele that he can force his "agent" Anne to accept a lower percentage of the take. Julian views himself as some sort of a sexual counterpart to Nietzsche's superman. When a Black procurer cross-examines Julian about his work he haughtily replies that "Some people are above the law".

Julian's second similarity to a Nietzschean hero is his need to live dangerously as if he were literally attempting to follow the iconoclastic philosopher's advice to "Erect your cities beside Vesuvius. Send out your ships to unexplored seas. Live in a state of war." At one point, his agent attempts to warn him that someday he's going to get into trouble because of his attitude and, more importantly, because his rich benefactors will turn on him at the first sign of trouble to protect their own cosmetic skin.

Which is exactly what happens. Out of a clean blue California sky (not L.A., of course) Julian finds himself the victim of a frame. Up to this point, the film deals with the usual Schrader fare, a self-proclaimed outcast moving about the morally infested societal waters trying to keep his chin about the miasma of his trade. Now, *American Gigolo* turns into a poorly told film and a well-worn love story about a well-heeled woman who has everything but a loving husband who throws everything overboard and jumps into the polluted water to save her drowning lover.

Schrader's direction and editing are awful. In the two films which he directed prior to *American Gigolo*, there wasn't a trace of derivative-ness. Oh, how he make up for it here! He borrows heavily from Bresson's pas-

sion for riveting his cameras on inanimate objects.

Schrader also fills his film with an inordinate amount of dolly-in shots. He uses this technique of camera movement so often it becomes both boring and predictable. In a number of shots immediately following a cut he mounts his camera about three feet above the ground. This is the same level that the great Japanese director Ozu used in his first films. In Ozu's films (e.g., *Tokyo Story* and *Floating Weeds*) this camera placement had cultural significance and relevance, because his movies dealt with traditional Japanese themes and this height reflected the eye-level of an average sitting adult. In *American Gigolo* it has no relevance except to communicate a crotch fetish on the director's part. In a number of key scenes, he has his editor (Richard Halsey) cut away from the action before the sequence's relevance and meaning have been established. A specific example: A wealthy Southern widow hires Julian as a chauffeur and when she begins to engage him in personal conversation, the director nervously cuts away from the scene. Why? The premature edit has left the vignette utterly confusing which, of course, provides no additional insights into Julian's character.

Richard Gere, as Julian, is too physically crude and intellectually dense to be believable in the role. Gere doesn't seem capable of conquering English let alone five other languages including Swedish. His physical properties are even weaker. Gere possesses a solid, muscular body, but his physical grace and rather ordinary looks fail to spark any pleasure. In his love scenes, especially the ones with Lauren Hutton, his acting is bumbling and neither his acting nor his looks generate any sexual electricity. On the other hand, Schrader's handling of the love sequences does little to help matters. His camera placements, movements, and editing are so stylized that they cause the scenes to look frozen and overly structured.

Fernando Scarfrotti's (billed as the "visual consultant") production designs are engaging without overly calling attention to themselves; the costumer should have his credit cards revoked for his unappealing selection of suits and ties that Gere is called upon to wear—several of the outfits make him look uncharitably heavy; Giorgio Moroder's soundtrack depends too heavily on an amplified electronic pulsing beat; and, finally, John Bailey's photography is on target about as often as it misses the mark. *American Gigolo* can be seen at the Eric Twin I theater in Lancaster.

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