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## "The Ties That Bind and Bless the Soul": Grace and Noir in Schrader's *Light Sleeper*

### Abstract

At the end of Paul Schrader's *Light Sleeper*, drug dealer and protagonist John LeTour (Willem Dafoe) sits facing his friend and ex-boss Ann (Susan Sarandon). Awaiting sentencing for an unspecified conviction (presumably dealing and manslaughter), LeTour is still optimistic. He takes Ann's hand, smiles at her and says "I've been looking forward." She smiles back at him and answers, "Strange how things work." As he kisses her hand and the film moves to its final frame, LeTour's romantic voice-over (done by singer Michael Been of the rock group, "The Call") sings an important line in the story:

"All our eyes have seen, all our arms embrace/ All that lives and breathes, each beloved face/ Standing at the door, the book is open wide/ Now I seal my fate, now I step inside."

Both the final exchange between LeTour and Ann and LeTour's final voice-over are paradoxical. LeTour's final statement asserts his participation in time's forward movement. Though the promised action is mere observation, it still ascribes significance to his agency, to its influence on his future. Ann, while desiring the same future as LeTour, attributes to it a different contingency, fate. This coupling of two seemingly incongruent forces is described in LeTour's voice-over. With the line "standing at the door, the book is open wide," LeTour places himself at the point of infinite possibility. But entering that possibility, "stepping inside," hinges on the coupling mentioned above. He must "seal his fate," he must actively engage in the negation of his action. In doing so, he will free himself from his isolation, joining "all that lives and breathes."

It is my contention that LeTour's struggle to reach this point constitutes the film's dramatic thrust. To free himself from his existential paralysis, LeTour must neither passively accept fate nor actively oppose it. He must, by participating in that fate, help transform it into grace, bring meaning to what was previously arbitrary. Schrader brings conflict to this objective through the use of, and play with, film noir tropes: existentialism, the domestic space, the femme fatale and the pursuing past. As neo-noir hero himself, LeTour attains grace by moving past these elements, by shifting from existential detachment to sacred involvement.

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That theme is what partially connects *Light Sleeper* with *Taxi Driver* and *American Gigolo*, Schrader's other "existential man in his room stories,"<sup>3</sup> forming what Schrader has posited as a trilogy:<sup>4</sup>

"This film is like the third installment of a certain character, a voyeur, a drifter. When he was in his twenties he was very hostile and paranoid and was a cab driver. Then in his thirties he was very narcissistic and self-involved and he was a gigolo. And now he's forty, he's...anxious. He hasn't made anything of his life, he doesn't know what will become of his life, and he's a drug delivery boy."<sup>5</sup>

This movement from *Taxi Driver*'s Travis Bickle to *Light Sleeper*'s John LeTour is seen in the two film's respective beginnings. *Taxi Driver* begins with Bickle driving his taxi. Angry and agitated, he cannot remove his attention from the people

around him, the ones he deems "garbage." *Light Sleeper* does not begin with LeTour driving, but being driven. He is not hemmed in by people "resembling" garbage; he is literally surrounded by the garbage left by striking sanitation workers. Unlike Travis, however, he is unmoved; he neither hopes for, nor aspires to be, that "real rain" to "come and wash all this scum off the streets."<sup>6</sup> Neither hostile nor paranoid, he has retreated into "laconic voyeurism;" he is "there but not there."<sup>7</sup>

During this beginning, LeTour begins his romantic voice-over:

I feel this deep down trembling, and the earth beneath my feet  
Shakes the great foundation, and I awaken from my sleep.  
I trust my life to providence, I trust my life to grace.  
But nothing takes away the pain, I can't forget your face.  
Somewhere in this world of shadow, blood and bone,  
I struggle through the day to day, I brace against the storm.  
Thoughts of you pursue me, like an overwhelming tide.  
Something in the air tonight, it will do no good to hide.  
Cause it feels, oh God, the world's on fire.  
Night after night, like a fever it burns.  
I deprive myself of feeling, both a blessing and a curse,  
A love that can't be likened to a single thing on earth.  
Maybe I'll see better when the storm inside has burst.  
Maybe I'll see better when I see your face.

LeTour does not see himself as acting, but being acted on. The earth awakens him from his sleep; thoughts pursue him. He resigns himself to this nihilist position of helpless object. He feels that "nothing will take away the pain," that "it will do no good to hide." So he abandons himself to existence, his only actions being depriving

himself of feeling and rendering himself to "providence" and "grace," hoping they will help the "storm inside burst."

By doing this LeTour sets himself up for what Robert G. Porfirio deems a standard film noir motif, the existential dilemma. For Porfirio, the noir hero's quandary is escaping the self through the self, ethically engaging, and making his mark on, the external forces controlling him:

(The noir hero) must choose, in other words, between "being and nothingness," between the "authentic" and "inauthentic" life. The inauthentic life is the unquestioned one, which derives its rationale from a facile acceptance of those values external to the self. To live authentically, one must reject these assurances and therein discover the ability to create one's own values; in so doing each individual assumes responsibility for his life through the act of choosing between alternatives. And since man is his own arbiter, he literally creates good and evil.<sup>8</sup>

LeTour, initially, does not want to be "his own arbiter." He is comfortable in his "inauthentic" life. Ironically (for a noir hero),<sup>9</sup> that life is a domestic one shared with his drug dealer bosses/parents (Ann and Robert, her homosexual assistant) and his many customer/siblings. LeTour, Ann and Robert perform the family during their business operations. When LeTour returns from a delivery, Ann, playing the mother, expresses maternal concern ("you do look like you're coming down with something" and "sleep tight"). As he leaves to complete some more deliveries, Robert joins in the play. Performing the dad, he reminds LeTour to take out the trash.

For Ann and Robert, this performance is just that. Ann is not as much doting mother as she is Mandelstam capitalist. There is no line between her public space and her private, domestic one. For Ann, this enables her practice of a purer capitalism than the one separated by such demarcation: "These Wall Street kids, they play with fake money all day. Cash is like some theoretical concept; cash just doesn't apply." Ann's quasi-familial connections with her workers and customers (e.g. with her Hasidic 'banker' "Don't go, stay. Come on, we'll order Kosher. We'll talk Zionism.") keep her tied to "material" cash and away from its abstraction. This firm grasp of her capital, as well as the connections (such as the lawyer/gangster Tis) producing it, allows her smooth financial shift from the illegal (narcotics) to the legitimate (cosmetics). Robert's exit from the "family" following that shift ("Robert quit, went back to dealing. I guess he thought he was gonna make more money and work less") showed his true commitment to it.

But LeTour's commitment to it is true; his performance there is not entirely performative. While Ann's public and private spaces converge into a solitary public space, LeTour's form a sole private one.<sup>10</sup> Unlike many noir heroes (e.g. *Double Indemnity's* Walter Neff or *Crossfire's* "Mitch" Mitchell) shunning the domestic space, LeTour explodes it; every customer becomes a relative, every locale an intimate one. This is shown in his delivery tours where he plays familiar nursemaid to one whacked-out buyer ("Eddie, this is no good. You've got to go to bed, sleep

it off") and therapist-figure to another.<sup>11</sup> Though he labors at emotional detachment, his involvement with these connections is apparent. For example, when delivering to two young women at a club, he asks them their plans, hoping for, if not expecting, inclusion. Incredulous and uncomfortable, they answer, "just some party," implying exclusion. LeTour may see his customers as friends and family, but to many of them he is simply their dealer. They maintain the separation of private and public he has blurred.

Though he abides this incongruity with his customers, he cannot do so with Ann She provides him both his (meager) emotional and financial base. He reacts to the impending end of their business relationship like the abandoned son, not released employee. Angry at this abandonment and afraid of its ramifications, he demonizes Ann, positioning her as the imagined femme fatale of his noir drama. This construction both reinscribes and plays with the traditional femme fatale trope.<sup>12</sup> LeTour's blaming Ann for his current instability (among other things), his projecting her fatale status upon her, is not uncommon to the noir hero-femme fatale dynamic:

Not only do such heroes quite clearly have problems in 'relating' to women but they also subject them to a chaotic process of both overvaluation (of their sexuality) and devaluation (of their subjectivity). Consequently, they find it difficult to stabilise their own identities. The femme fatale is often a scapegoat or, to use one of the recurring epithets of the 'tough' thriller, a 'fall guy', for a more extensive and much less easily acknowledged erosion of confidence in the structuring mechanisms of masculine identity and the masculine role.<sup>13</sup>

To avoid the "erosions of confidence in the structuring mechanisms" of his own masculine identity, as well as his financial future, LeTour does "scapegoat" Ann, portraying her move to cosmetics as maternal betrayal. But in doing this he devalues her sexuality while overvaluing her subjectivity. LeTour's entire world is domestic space. By positing her as the destroyer of domesticity, he projects his existential crisis on her agency, securing his desired position of nihilist object.

This position, however, renders problematic Ann's position as femme fatale. The femme fatale is usually associated with patriarchy's attempts to reinscribe the deviant male into its order.<sup>14</sup> She is usually a force of, not against, domesticity. Thus, though LeTour imagines Ann as femme fatale, he actually resents her for not being one, for not tying him to the domesticity he craves. But even this resentment is misguided. LeTour has not merely misinterpreted Ann's abandonment, he has constructed it. Ann never tells LeTour he is unwelcome in her new enterprise. He attributes that rejection to her not asking him to join her. Keeping with his rejection of agency, this helps remove his will from the play of events. Since he cannot affect that play, any impending future cannot be his responsibility; it must come from the wills of others.

This will to powerlessness becomes explicit when he rejects her invitation to join her future business: "look, if you want to come in with us, we can make room." LeTour needs Ann more as scapegoat than benefactor. It better serves his

fear of the future, a quality Schrader deems emblematic of the noir hero: "Durgnat, however, does not touch upon what is perhaps the over-riding noir theme: a passion for the past and present, but also a fear of the future. The noir hero dreads to look ahead, but instead tries to survive by the day, and if unsuccessful at that, he retreats to the past."<sup>15</sup> LeTour had echoed this sentiment in his romantic voice-over. He claims he "struggles through the day to day, bracing against the storm" His claim, however, is a false one. He is not actually struggling "through the day to day," but straining for its preservation. The "storm" is the future demanding his input and agency. He shirks that demand by trusting his life to "providence" and "grace," by ameliorating his quietism into submission to divine will.

His job as drug dealer had allowed this. As delivery boy, his actions, and human contacts, are all determined for him. Where he goes, who he sees, and for how long; these issues are all decided by Ann and her/his customers. Since he has no input in these decisions, he has no emotional involvement in the resulting interactions. Ann's impending move into legitimacy changes this. It will produce a "storm" he cannot shirk. With Ann and Robert no longer ordering him, he can no longer fully render his "day to day." Personal connections will also no longer be determined solely by outside force; they will (partially) hinge on his desire and will.

To avoid this inevitability, LeTour does, as Schrader stated, retreat into his past, his romantic voice-over singing, "I find myself returning home, I'm at the door

again/ I pray that you will comfort me and life will never end." Though many noir heroes either flee their past (e.g. *Dark Passage's* Parry) or become pursued by it (like *Out of the Past's* Jeff Bailey), LeTour's noir hero status is enhanced by this move. Fate, central to film noir,<sup>16</sup> initiates his retreat, reintroducing him to his past lover, Marianne (Dana Delany).

This meeting does more than help spur his flight. At the film's beginning, LeTour's diary voice sermonizes on the supremacy of luck:

There's an element of providence to it all, like rolling numbers. Luck. You're walking down the street. Some guy that looks maybe a little like you does a stickup four hours ago. A cop pulls you in because he's cold and wants to go inside. They grab your stash. Your number's up. You're busted for nothing, for bad luck.

He also focuses on it during his meetings with his psychic (Mary Beth Hurt): "Have I run out of luck. . . is there any luck for me." Thus his chance encounter with Marianne not only assists his flight, it confirms his negation of agency. This is further compounded when he accidentally runs into Marianne again the next day, making him ask Ann, "What are the odds of meeting someone you haven't seen in years twice in two days?" Which she, not free from superstition herself, answers, 'Of it's indicated in your house of relationships, it's pretty high You should have Robert do your chart for you.'

But meeting Marianne does awaken something inside him. While most of his dialogue with her is perfunctory nostalgia<sup>17</sup> ("we were in love, we were happy"), his romantic voice-over following their second meeting reveals both hope and will:

A million stars were circling in the world above my head.  
As I drifted back in memory to all the things we said.  
Turning my attention to the pain that I denied,  
It was never my intention, to ever say goodbye.  
Maybe I could have changed, if only wisdom courted me,  
and not this fear and shame.  
The ties that bind and bless the soul, that bind me up in chains,  
Your love cuts through my weakened heart and memories twist the blade  
I thought of you and nothing more; I needed nothing else.  
I cried the day you left me.  
I never should have allowed myself to feel this way.  
I wonder where you sleep at night; I wonder where you've been  
I envy all your family, I envy all your friends.  
I believe the ancient promises, I believe that I am free.  
But love comes as a great offense, like innocence betrayed.  
I don't think you'll recognize me on the other side of day.  
But I've never felt this way.

LeTour still denies his own agency, both present ("the ties that bind and bless the soul, that bind me up in chains") and past ("if only wisdom courted me, and not this fear and shame"). But while he sees outside forces binding him, he also sees them (i.e. "ancient promises") assuring his agency he no longer avoids. He also looks to the future, anticipating "the other side of day."

But, in Schrader's play with the film noir good girl/femme fatale binary,<sup>18</sup> LeTour discovers Marianne (the "good girl") in Tis' apartment, strung out on

cocaine. After he leaves the apartment, she kills herself, leaping off the balcony in what the New York Post calls a "Fall From Grace."

The word "Grace" is neither coincidental, nor irrelevant to LeTour. Prior to Marianne's death, the "ties" of fate were already "binding his soul." Along with his impending career (and life) change, he is being drawn deeper into a murder investigation also shaking his detachment. Confronted by Officer Guidone of homicide, he is pushed further into choosing some form of active involvement:<sup>19</sup>

"You think you're invisible don't you? You think we don't know you, LeTour? It's the name you use, right?"

"My father's a partner in a very powerful law firm. If you have anything in mind, do it by the book."

(Guidone punches LeTour and pushes him against window): "You!? Who the fuck gives a shit about you? I could grind you right here (slaps him)! In fact, maybe I will. What do you think about that? And nobody would give a fuck. ..Tell me something I don't already know. It's either that, leave town or get your ass busted day in, day out. Got it?"

LeTour's detachment has been delusional. But even exposed he attempts deferment of action, hoping reference to a (perhaps false) powerful father will save him. Guidone, however is not deterred. First chastising LeTour's self-absorption, he finalizes fate's bind on him. Along with Marianne's suicide, this confrontation drives LeTour into necessary action. It helps him shift the "ties that bind" into the "ties that bless," convert fate into "grace".

My use of "grace" here strongly resembles the uses of "grace" within the film and one that comes from Thomas Aquinas's (Question 111, Article 2 of his *Treatise On Grace*, "Whether Grace Is Appropriately Divided Into Operative And Co-operative Grace"):

Grace may be understood in two ways, as the divine help by which God moves us to do and to will what is good, and as a habitual gift divinely bestowed on us. In either sense grace is appropriately divided into operative and co-operative grace. An operation which is part of an effect is attributed to the mover, not to the thing moved. The operation is therefore attributed to God when God is the sole mover, and when the mind is moved but not a mover. We then speak of "operative grace." But when the soul is not only moved but also a mover, the operation is attributed to the soul as well as to God. We then speak of "co-operative grace." In this case there is a twofold action within us. There is an inward action of the will, in which the will is moved and God is the mover, especially when a will which previously willed evil begins to will good. We therefore speak of "operative grace," since God moves the human mind to this action. But there is also an outward action, in which operation is attributed to the will, since an outward action is commanded by the will. . . We speak of "co-operative grace" in reference to actions of this kind, because God helps us even in outward actions, outwardly providing the capacity to act as well as inwardly strengthening the will to issue in act.<sup>20</sup>

When LeTour, in the film's beginning, said (sang) that he trusted his life to "grace," he was referring to an "operative grace" where his will and mind are moved, but are not themselves "movers." In LeTour's existential world, this "operative grace" is mere fate, the "ties that bind the soul." To make those ties bless, LeTour must make that grace true by making it "co-operative," he must himself will the same external movement of his will. He must seal his own fate.

He begins doing so in a scene recreating one from classic film noir. Like Jeff Bailey's phone call to the police at the end of *Out of the Past*, LeTour's to Guidone, informing on Tis, ensures the violent confrontation (common to film noir)<sup>21</sup> that had been approaching him. Prior to this climax, however, he exculpates Ann from both involvement in Tis's scheme and maternal abandonment. Now free from his own paralyzing suspicions, his will can "issue in act."

This act becomes a movement of "co-operative grace" partly through the suffering incurred by it. Ernest Felita discusses this dynamic while addressing Viktor Frankl's theory of logotherapy:

The third way (to discover meaning in our lives),<sup>22</sup> the way of suffering, is the most difficult, and yet the meaning derived from it is, says Frankl, the deepest meaning. This is meaning that can be discovered only when confronted with an inescapable fate, an unavoidable situation, an irreversible loss. What matters above all is one's attitude toward suffering. Man's main concern is neither pleasure nor the avoidance of pain; it is to find meaning in his life. He is even ready to suffer so long as his suffering has meaning. "Suffering ceases to be suffering in some way at the moment it finds a meaning, such as the meaning of a sacrifice."<sup>23</sup>

Such suffering is LeTour's. Confronted with his "inescapable fate, unavoidable situation, and irreversible loss," he finds "neither pleasure nor the avoidance of pain," but meaning.

Yet LeTour's suffering "ceased being" suffering the moment it found meaning. LeTour shows this in the film's final scene. Though his domestic space has diminished in size (he faces five to seven years in prison), it has grown in

meaning. His once insulated, existential diary-voice has expanded outwards, as shown by his letters to Ann. She returns this gesture by visiting LeTour in prison; she helps bring it to fruition in the film's final scene, in particular, its final shot.

Ann is not, unlike *American Gigolo's* Michelle Stratton (Lauren Hutton), a Beatrice figure;<sup>24</sup> is not delivering salvation to the previously damned. In *American Gigolo's* final shot, Michelle's hand tendered deliverance (through plate glass) to a receiving Julian (Richard Gere).<sup>25</sup> In *Light Sleeper's* lengthy one, however, Ann's hand is not the wholly acting subject, nor is it the passive object. Inciting LeTour to movement, it embraces as it is embraced. Ann is no longer LeTour's faux femme fatale, but his cohort in grace, his entry into that "book open wide."

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<sup>1</sup> In Gavin Smith's interview of Paul Schrader, "Awakenings," in *Film Comment* 28.2 (1992), Schrader, commenting on Been's voice-over, says "What I was after was another voice for this a romantic voice. He has his dialogic voice and he has his diary voice, but because he is essentially cut off and a loner, I wanted to get another way into him" (51). In his article "Notes on Film Noir," in the *Film Noir Reader*, ed. by Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight, 1997), Schrader had previously depicted romantic narration as one of "film noir's recurring techniques" (57).

<sup>2</sup> LeTour's romantic voice-over telling of his "inability to shape the events of (his) life to his own design" contributes to his status as noir hero. See Karen Hollinger, "Film Noir, Voice-Over and the Femme Fatale," ed. by Alain Silver and James Ursini, *Film Noir Reader* (New York: Limelight, 1997), 244.

<sup>3</sup> Kevin Jackson, *Schrader on Schrader* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990) 170.

<sup>4</sup> In *The Cinema of Martin Scorsese* (New York: Continuum, 1997), Lawrence Friedman claims that *Taxi-Driver* begins another "trilogy": "The triad of Scorsese/Schrader collaborations beginning with *Taxi-Driver*, continuing with *Raging Bull*, and culminating in *The Last Temptation of Christ* can arguably be read as variations on the theme of redemption through self-destruction" (63).

<sup>5</sup> Kevin Jackson, "Blood on the Tracks," *Sight and Sound* 1.6 (1991) 24.

<sup>6</sup> *Taxi Driver*, directed Martin Scorsese, starring Robert De Niro, Jodie Foster, Harvey Keitel, and Cybil Shepherd. Columbia, 1976.

<sup>7</sup> Schrader, 52.

<sup>8</sup> Robert J. Porfirio, "No Way Out: Existential Motifs in the Film Noir," ed. by Alain Silver and James Ursini, *Film Noir Reader* (New York: Limelight, 1997), 87.

<sup>9</sup> See Deborah Thomas, "How Hollywood Deals With The Deviant Male," ed. by Ian Cameron, *The Book of Film Noir* (New York: Cameron, 1993) 59-60, 68.

<sup>10</sup> This particularly contrasts with *American Gigolo's* Julian Kay (Richard Gere) who was, until meeting Michelle Stratton (Lauren Hutton), committed to keeping the two separate: 'this is my apartment. Women don't come here.'

<sup>11</sup> As one of his customers snorts coke and rambles about Anselm's concept of the *sensus divinitus*, LeTour's diary voice says "they figure you can tell a 'dd' anything."

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Cowie, in "Film Noir and Women," ed. Joan Copjec, *Shades of Noir* (London: Verso, 1996), challenges both the concept of "traditional femme fatale," and femme fatale itself, seeing them as constructs incorrectly limiting film noir to being a "masculine film form" (135).

<sup>13</sup> Frank Krutnick, *In A Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity* (London: Routledge, 1991) 64.

<sup>14</sup> See Ann E. Kaplan, Introduction, ed. E. Ann Kaplan, *Women in Film Noir* (London: British Film Institute, 1980), 4.

<sup>15</sup> Schrader, *Notes* 58

<sup>16</sup> Cowie, 130.

<sup>17</sup> Schrader, in '*Notes on Film Noir*,' has also ascribed nostalgia to the noir hero's state: "Thus film noir's techniques emphasize loss, nostalgia, lack of clear priorities, insecurity, then submerge these self-doubts in mannerism and style" (58).

<sup>18</sup> See Christine Gledhill, "Klute 1: A Contemporary Film Noir And Feminist Criticism," ed. E. Ann Kaplan, *Women In Film Noir* (London: British Film Institute, 1980), 18.

<sup>19</sup> As the agent of external order pushing LeTour into action, Guidone nearly mirrors *American Gigolo's* Detective Sunday.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Aquinas, trans. and ed. A.M. Fairweather, *Aquinas On Nature And Grace* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956), 167.

<sup>21</sup> See Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton, "Towards a Definition of Film Noir," ed. Alain Silver and James Ursini, *Film Noir Reader* (New York: Limelight, 1997), 20.

<sup>22</sup> Parentheses are mine.

<sup>23</sup> Ernest Felita, "Film and the Quest for Meaning," ed. John R. May and Michael Bird, *Religion in Film* (Knoxville: Tennessee University Press, 1984), 118.

<sup>24</sup> In *Schrader on Schrader*, Schrader comments: "Beatrice was always a more compelling figure to me than Milton's Satan, even though Satan is one of the great figures in literature" (167).

<sup>25</sup> *American Gigolo*, directed Paul Schrader, starring Richard Gere, Lauren Hutton, Paramount, 1980.