



# Thin Ice

## *Coming of Age in Grand Rapids*

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*and others*

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## Opening a Door

PAUL SCHRADER

Paul Schrader has been one of America's most respected screenwriters and filmmakers for almost three decades. After graduating from Calvin College, he earned an M.A. in Critical Studies at UCLA in 1970; the University of California Press published his thesis on the films of Ozu, Bresson, and Dreyer as *Transcendental Style in Film*. He was briefly the film critic for the *Los Angeles Free Press* but put criticism aside when his script for *The Yakusa*, a drama about Japanese gangsters, was filmed in 1975 by Sydney Pollack.

Schrader's landmark collaboration with Martin Scorsese on the noir psychodrama *Taxi Driver* (1976) started a durable creative relationship that also produced *Raging Bull* (1980), *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), and *Bringing Out the Dead* (1998). His notable screenplays for other directors include *Obsession* (Brian de Palma, 1976), *Rolling Thunder* (John Flynn, 1977), and *The Mosquito Coast* (Peter Weir, 1986).

In 1977, Schrader made his debut as a writer-director with *Blue Collar*. He has continued to develop his contemplative approach to often extreme material in *Hardcore* (1979), the unique, Cannes-award-winning film *Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters* (1985), *Patty Hearst* (1988), *The Comfort of Strangers* (1990), *Light Sleeper* (1991), and *Affliction* (1997), based on the story by Russell Banks. In 2006, Schrader completed production on *The Walker*, a conceptual progression of his 1979 classic *American Gigolo*, and in 2007 he will direct *Adam Resurrected*, based on the novel by Yoram Kaniuk. He has written the following reflections specifically for this anthology; the penultimate paragraph is excerpted from his interview with Garry Wills, first published in *Shouts and Whispers* (Eerdmans, 2006).

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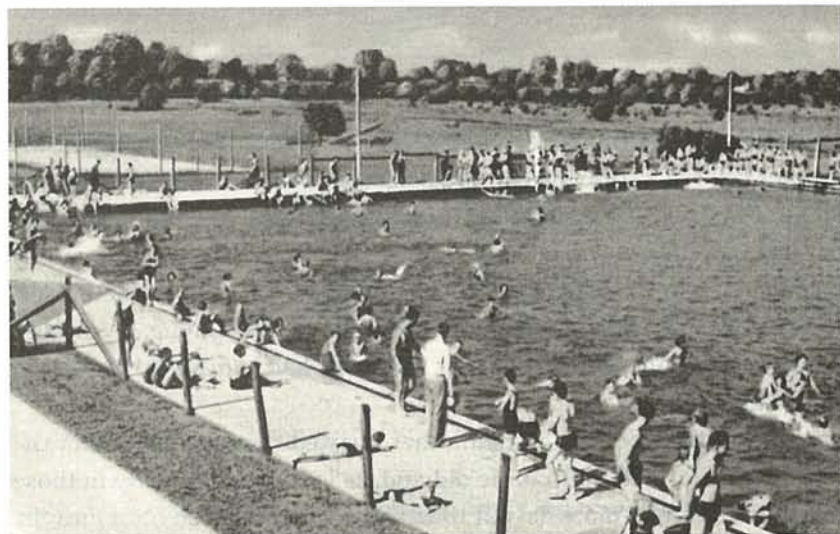
My mother converted my father. From this single event sprang the consequences of my life. They were clerks in Muskegon, Michigan. My mother's parents, the Fishers (anglicized from the Dutch Visser), had emigrated from Friesland. My grandfather had secured unwanted swampland, diked it up, and started a celery farm. My mother's family belonged to the Christian Reformed Church; they still conducted services in Dutch on Sunday afternoons when I was very young. My father's father, a German, not particularly religious, had moved to Muskegon from Canada.

During their courtship my mother insisted that my father join the Christian Reformed Church. He did and, as is so often the case in those situations, became more devout than those who had been born into the faith. Before my older brother and I were born, they moved to Grand Rapids, where my father worked first at Michigan National Bank, then at Michigan-Ohio Pipeline. He had intended to go to Calvin Seminary, but times were hard and he had to drop out of college to support his family before he could even start the seminary.

We lived at various residences on the West Side of Grand Rapids because it made for a shorter drive to Muskegon, where we would go each weekend to visit my mother's family. It was something of an anomaly for us to live there because, at the time, the West Side was primarily Polish and Catholic; the South and East sides were Dutch and Reformed; those caught in the middle tried to keep the town running. We lived on Miller Drive, Escott Street and, later, Ducoma Drive. The house most vivid in my recollection was at 1405 Escott, just a block from Richmond Park and all the mysteries it held for a growing young man.

All the landmarks of my childhood have disappeared or changed function. Twelfth Street Christian Reformed Church is no long Christian Reformed. West Side Christian School, Grand Rapids Christian High, and the Franklin Street campus of Calvin College have all been sold and refitted as other institutions.

My parents, devout Calvinists, subscribed to the church's prohibition of "worldly amusements": these included dancing, drinking, card-playing, theater attendance, and the like. Sundays were reserved for



The swimming pool at Richmond Park drew those growing up on the Northwest Side during the summer months.

GRPL, Library Postcard Collection

church activities. No housework was to be done, nor lawn work or other chores. Sunday morning shoes were polished on Saturday night. Catechism lessons and Bible verses were memorized and tested at meal-times.

My memories of this, surprisingly enough, are quite fond. Sunday afternoons, after the morning worship service, we would often convene at my grandmother's house (my grandfather had died) where my uncles, celery farmers all, would sit around the table and discuss the morning sermon, contesting the minister's exegesis of the text and his delivery of the sermon — before moving on to more mundane matters of farming and church gossip. The “young people” were allowed to sit at the table but not to join in the conversation. I was mesmerized watching these men, their Dutch faces red from the sun, their arms cross-hatched with scars from celery rot, arguing about predestination and throwing around terms like “prelapsarian” — and all the while the smells of cooking and the sounds of female laughter coming from the kitchen. When I consider the adolescence of my own children, whiling away countless hours in

front of multi-channel televisions or video games, I have no doubt who had the better childhood.

The first crack in the well-maintained family-church edifice came with the advent of television. Our family, like other church families, did not have a TV. We were, however, only one of five or six families on the two-block stretch of Escott who were Christian Reformed. My street playmates, as opposed to our friends from West Side Christian School, were Roman Catholic — and they all had television sets. So, under the pretext of playing ball or such, my brother and I would slip over to the Swantacks' house to watch after-school kids' shows. But it would not be long before this leaked out. What galled my mother was not so much that we were watching television, but that the Swantacks had a plaster Madonna atop their television set. That was that. We soon got a TV of our own, in our living room, where my parents could monitor its use.

That crack became a fissure that was never repaired. Once the outside world — its music, jokes, and values — permeated Christian Reformed homes through the airwaves, hope for a cultural separation was a lost cause.

The dark side of those warm memories of sitting around my grandmother's table came out in the conversations my brother and I had with our father. Although he had been unable to enter the ministry, he was determined that his sons would. We would attend Calvin College, of course; that was a given. The issue was whether we would be pre-seminary students or not pre-sem. In a basement study that my father had filled with theological books, the arguments between father and sons would go back and forth — first with my brother, then with me. We won those battles, but not without a cost. The scars remained and were never healed.

That old environment of childhood never goes away. It doesn't matter how far or fast you run, you don't outrun your childhood. Those spiritual issues continue to nag until you find different ways to deal with them or *not* deal with them. And you just keep circling around it. John Wayne once said, “I don't like God much once I get him under a roof.” I've really been very wary of institutionalized religion because I feel it has often been the enemy of spirituality. I do know, though, how I got out of Grand Rapids: the same way a bullet gets out of a gun.

PAUL SCHRADER

For someone who spent twenty years in the fold of Grand Rapids and the Christian Reformed Church, I find myself reflecting remarkably little on those years. There is, however, a warm glow emanating from under the door to my childhood: memories of vacation Bible school, trips to Reeds Lake and the amusement park known as Ramona, sledding down Richmond Hill, door-to-door selling of flowers and candies, picking blueberries, collecting newspapers and salvage iron, nights in the church basement, bicycling with my ball and bat to Alpine Park and beyond. I can feel the chill on the doorknob: if I open the door, that glow will sweep away into the darkness beyond.