

The Walker: A shamefaced political critique

By Joanne Laurier
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Written and directed by Paul Schrader

Washington, D.C., is the setting for American director Paul Schrader's new movie, *The Walker*. "Setting" seems to be the operative word. Schrader's work refers only in passing and under duress, so to speak, to the political repression and moral degradation associated with the Bush administration.

Schrader, as his various comments indicate, knows better, but he *chooses* to concentrate on a study of individual psychology rather than address the most compelling and urgent social matters. This somewhat shamefaced social critique weakens his film.

Carter Page III (Woody Harrelson), "Car," is a "walker," that is, an unpaid escort for the neglected wives of the capital's rich and powerful. (According to Schrader, the term was coined to describe Jerry Zipkin, who was Nancy Reagan's walker.) A self-described "gay weathervane," he is useful in a town where knowledge about the secrets of the political elite can be a precious commodity. Above all, he is valued by a group of gossips played by Lauren Bacall, Lily Tomlin and Kristin Scott Thomas.

Car's personality is the film's centerpiece and major preoccupation. Bacall and Tomlin exist essentially to deliver one-liners (which Schrader has apparently collected over the years), such as "He makes obsequiousness an art form," "Marrying for money is the hardest job—you don't get the money, you get to look at it" and "Take a piece of Washington wisdom: don't stand between a friend and the firing squad."

Scott Thomas as Lynn Lockner, the unhappy wife of a US senator (Willem Dafoe), is more integral to the story. Her affair with a lobbyist, subsequently murdered, is the scaffolding over which Schrader drapes his plot. That making waves in Washington's ruling circles is hazardous is driven home when Car becomes the key suspect in the murder. A corrupt judicial system seeks his downfall as he attempts to shield Lynn from the fallout of her liaison with the slain influence peddler.

The "walker" locks horns with Mungo Tenant—a

vindictive federal attorney deeply resentful that Car is the scion of a wealthy Southern dynasty. Car is further wounded by Mungo's admiration for his father, Carter Page II, who was a respected liberal senator. ("When I heard him at the Watergate hearings, I was proud to be a Virginian," says Mungo.) Carter II was apparently neither a good father nor a nice man. Further, Car points out that his father left Congress 20 times richer than when he entered it.

Despite the fact that Tenant is a "baby sleaze who wants to be a big sleaze," Car's lawyer warns him against being cavalier in the face of Tenant's persecution: "Don't f—ck with the feds. After 9/11, they took the leash off—they do what they want."

The film, in fact, has numerous references to the "brutal political climate" in Washington and a "mean crowd" at the helm. It alludes to "whispering campaigns" that destroy careers and even a vice president involved in a possible conspiracy. In addition, Car's Middle Eastern boyfriend Emek (Moritz Bleibtreu) is a paparazzo whose ambition is to break into the art world with giant blow-ups of an Abu Ghraib-like torture victim.

There is more: flickering television screens broadcast Iraq atrocities and a dig at American flag-waving and officially sponsored patriotism. Meanwhile, the gay lovers share a kiss through a metal barrier in Emek's loft that evokes the image of a Guantánamo prison cage.

Car does put himself between a friend and a Washington firing squad. In so doing he discovers that he is not what he initially portrays himself to be ("I'm not naïve, I'm superficial"). Forced to take on a political powerbroker (Ned Beatty) in the present "culture of revenge," Car proves not so superficial but naïve about the loyalty and friendship of those he "walks." He turns out to have more substantive principles than the official advocates of "traditional moral values."

This is how Schrader explains his film: "The script I first wrote in the last year of the Clinton administration and it really isn't a political film now and it was even less of a political film then. It was really a character study. I

set it in Washington because the character became more interesting in Washington because there's really only two cities left where sexual hypocrisy is mandated and I didn't want to make it in Salt Lake so I did it in Washington. He became more interesting. Why is he still there? Why didn't he leave?

"But I still didn't think of it as a political film and then as the years went by, I had to update the script a couple times and each time I looked back at Washington it was more vindictive, a more mean spirited place and in order to retain some verisimilitude I had to make the script a little more political."

This method of building a film "upward" from an individual personality may help account for the fact that *The Walker* tends to be a collection of bits and pieces. Schrader's comments seem to suggest that having chosen to locate his film in Washington he was more or less *obliged*, in order to make his film convincing, to pay some attention to the criminal character of the current regime and the hostility with which much of the population views it. Obligated, but not much more than that.

Social life in some manner intruded on Schrader, in other words, but such a haphazard, improvised, patchwork approach is not likely to produce satisfying results. Society actually needs to be thought about and studied if its essential truths are to be revealed to the artist and, through him or her, an audience. With Schrader's method, one tends to arrive at little more than impressions. He largely adapts himself to what is widely known, without seriously deepening our understanding of the processes that brought about the current conditions or their implications.

Schrader's limited perspective comes through in an interview with *moviesonline.ca* when asked if, as a Writers Guild member, he had been involved in the ongoing strike. "That has zero influence or effect on me," he replied. He may be speaking about the practical impact of the conflict on his filmmaking activities, but, still, that the most significant struggle in the film industry in two decades, or longer, should hold so little interest for someone with more credits as a screenwriter than a director is disturbing.

Schrader's scripts and films, while sincere and serious, have always tended toward the schematic and contrived. He has his themes, or obsessions (moral hypocrisy, paternal abuse, the eternal "loneliness of man"), and creates scripts that "flesh them out," without sufficient reference to concrete social existence or psychological

believability. *The Walker* is not an exception.

Devoid of ambition, political or otherwise, and living off an inheritance, there appears to be no good reason why Car should want to reside in Washington and build a life around being the doormat for a group of harpies. If there is, Schrader has not provided it. There is nothing alluring about the world Car inhabits. A few nice cars and well-appointed drawing rooms don't compensate for the nastiness of their owners. The fact that Car will eventually be betrayed is telegraphed from the first scene around the canasta table. Particularly ludicrous is the sequence with Senator Lockner (Dafoe) and Car talking in staccato about a dirty political scheme. It turns out to be one of the film's many red herrings.

It also makes no sense that a man who has chosen a lover like Emek, apparently determined to protest so conspicuously against the American torture machine, would carelessly amble about with the wives of those who make or accept this policy.

As well, there is the family angle. Car hates his father and is unimpressed with his Watergate credentials. Fair enough. But since Senator Carter II accumulated a fortune by illicit means in Congress more than three decades ago, how is it that Car seems unaware of a far worse atmosphere in the present? Surely overcoming the traumas inflicted by a father, who was after all a profoundly political creature, would presuppose some level of political awareness, if not interest in politics. Car has neither.

None of this adds up. Schrader views plot as "something that will put pressure on a character so you can see the character mutate and move in response to that pressure. But in terms of who done it and when, I don't give a damn." In short, the sordid and destructive state of affairs in Washington is a mere narrative mechanism.

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