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ReFocus: The Films of William Friedkin, by Steve Choe. University of Edinburgh Press, 2023, 210 pp.

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The era of New Hollywood ushered in a revolutionary epoch in cinema. Film directors in the late 1960s and 1970s created cinema that challenged rules and conventions around form and content, particularly as the studio system and censorship apparatuses collapsed, while also contributing art that participated in and reflected the tumultuous social, political, and generational shifts underway in American culture. At the same time, the cinema of New Hollywood planted the seeds of its own demise, wherein the duality of its excesses and commercial success opened the door to the era of the blockbuster and corporate conglomeration, which ultimately supplanted it.

The director William Friedkin (1935–2023) epitomised New Hollywood perhaps more than any other. Friedkin was brash, brazen, and intractable, and pushed to make films his way with an iron will and combustibility. Friedkin crested the wave of New Hollywood quickly, achieving enormous critical and commercial success with *The French Connection* (1971) and *The Exorcist* (1973) in succession, but also experienced the end of the era in equally dramatic fashion with a string of expensive disappointments in the late 1970s and early 1980s, such as *Sorcerer* (1977), *The Brink's Job* (1978), and *Cruising* (1980). While these films, notably *Sorcerer* and *Cruising*, would be critically re-evaluated in subsequent decades, Friedkin did not experience quite the same later renaissance as fellow New Hollywood colleagues like Martin Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola. Nonetheless, Friedkin continued to direct films until his recent passing in 2023, and enjoyed the accolades of theatrical and digital reissues of his paramount work, as well as the reassessment of his previously neglected films.

Steve Choe's volume in the Edinburgh University Press ReFocus series is a significant new contribution to the re-evaluation of Friedkin's body of work. In this volume, Choe sets Friedkin's cinematic work in its social, political, and cultural context, situating his early and mid-career films within the grain of the post-1960s upheavals in American life and the film industry, and his later films within the horizon of the changing landscapes of Reaganism, corporate America, and post-9/11 domestic life (8–9, 54). Choe argues that Friedkin's work, despite a perceived unevenness, has a consistent through line: Friedkin's films, across these shifting contexts, constantly "test the limits of what it means to be a moral human being in postwar American life […] and habitually gravitate toward the delineation of moral contradictions and ethical ambiguities" (7). In this, Choe sees Friedkin as a filmmaker committed to the moral and humane character and nature of cinema, even—or especially—while employing it to interrogate the more cynical and nihilistic dimensions of the institutions and systems of American society, instantiating a kind of dark, ethical cinema

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interrogative of incessant inconsistencies and contradictions. Friedkin's work, in sum, can be seen, as Choe does, as probing the national self-image as a force for good in the wake of Vietnam, Watergate, Iran-Contra, variegated economic crises, and the War on Terror, etching a career-long character study of institutional struggle with decadence, malaise, and malfeasance. Choe's assessment of Friedkin, here, chimes nicely as a focused application of Jonathan Kirshner's laudable work on New Hollywood, including Friedkin, particularly in relation to the national political crises of the time.

Like Kirschner, Choe structures his analysis thematically rather than chronologically, working through Friedkin's oeuvre around a constellation of topics and spaces. This allows Choe to showcase more overtly the interwoven themes and consonances across Friedkin's body of work and to demonstrate a persistent quality to his cinematic interrogations where sets of themes surface repeatedly, such as the porosity between criminality and enforcement, the shades of civil and individual corruption and corruptibility, and the cracks in institutions dedicated to social and political justice. The systematic repetition of these themes lends weight to Choe's argument that Friedkin was a decidedly moral filmmaker, drawn not only to exposing political and social fissures, but also illuminating the spaces of the inverted twists that moral righteousness and indignation themselves are susceptible to, as seen mostly clearly in *The French Connection*, *Cruising*, *To Live and Die in LA* (1985), *Jade* (1995), and *Rules of Engagement* (2000). Choe caps his analysis with a focused disquisition on *The Exorcist* and *Sorcerer* as exceptionally moral films that take failure, doubt, and trauma seriously, offering a quasi-apophatic hope in cinema itself as a social force amid the horizon of collapse of key institutions of government, family, economics, and secular and religious authority (164–200). Both films display the power of cinema to be the vehicle for meditation on transcendental themes like faith and fate when other media and institutions no longer sufficed, and to be able to do so in evocative ways that further illuminate the paradoxical and ambiguous spaces of modern life. In this way, Choe's argument aligns Friedkin's work with Bill Nichols's notion of social cinema and, in a qualified sense, with Paul Schrader's account of transcendental film.

In addition to Choe's thematic analysis of Friedkin's work, a key asset of the volume is the extensive use of interview and archival material. While Choe makes ample but judicious use of Friedkin's 2013 autobiography along with film commentaries and published interviews, the volume is significantly enhanced by new research access to the Friedkin Papers in the Margaret Herrick Library at the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences and the author's own personal interviews with the film director. The former is especially salient as it enables important contextual and material-historical details relating to production and process to surface, as well as offering glimpses into correspondence and perspectives from colleagues and fellow filmmakers, such as David Lynch. Friedkin's own opinions and insights shine through in an unvarnished way, too, facilitating an important and timely autoethnographic retrospective of his achievements and frustrations. These elements, as well, subtend a vital if somewhat muted aspect of Choe's presentation of Friedkin: that he was a more radical filmmaker than he is often acknowledged or thought to be. The social and political dimensions of his cinematic work have a radical shape in their historical and cultural context; but, even more, as Choe's work shows, Friedkin's approach to experimentation with form, technique, and content within the basic framework of commercial cinema was more daring and advanced than he was credited for, often as the radical experimentation was effaced by box office underperformance apart from *The Exorcist*.

The book does have a couple of noticeable limitations, though they should not be considered deficiencies or critical lapses in the book as a whole. On the one hand, while Choe's thematic approach is quite helpful and generates important frameworks for reading Friedkin's cinematic work topographically, the grid itself does not quite cohere and facilitates some slippage. One example is the location of *The French Connection*, which is grouped into the category of melodrama alongside Friedkin's first films like *The Night They Raided Minsky's* (1968), *The Birthday Party* (1968), and *The Boys in the Band* (1970) (Chapter One). Although Choe is able to delineate the logic of this choice for *The French Connection*, it would be equally if not more applicable to centre that film in one of the other chapters on "policing the police" (Chapter Two) or "criminal desire" (Chapter Three). Of course, as with the best of Friedkin's work, there is an imbricate character that resists easy classification, and the choice does not detract or diminish from the quality of Choe's unpacking of the film itself. On the other hand, the limitation in coverage that is most salient for readers in the wake of Friedkin's recent passing is that a few films are left out of the work entirely: *The Brink's Job* (1978), *Deal of the Century* (1983), *The Guardian* (1990), *Blue Chips* (1994), and *The Devil and Father Amorth* (2017). These films, of course, fall outside the parameters of the thematic framework Choe posits, thus the elision is organic to the structure itself. Yet, these films have some significance to Friedkin's cinematic work in that they each represent both an artistic gamble with respect to genre and are attempts by him to regain commercial viability within the constraints of the system following major commercial and/or critical failures. That these did not make the cut for this volume means that additional work will need to be done alongside Choe's to offer a comprehensive view of Friedkin's career. Such additional assessments will also need to examine Friedkin's early and late career television work, and the myriad unproduced and unrealised projects—the latter of which are a burgeoning area of film studies.[1]

Overall, Choe's volume will be heralded as a significant, serious contribution to the ongoing reassessment and appreciation of Friedkin as one of the landmark filmmakers of post-1960s American cinema. The value of this volume lies in not only its delineation of a topography to Friedkin's work as a whole, but also his validation as a radical filmmaker, whose experimentation with form and process coalesced with social and political consciousness across multiple epochs of turmoil, tumult, and excess in American life. Although Friedkin was not able to recapture or reascend to the apex he reached in the early-to-mid 1970s, his work, like that of Kubrick's, is continually subject to critical and cultural re-evaluation, and their artistic and cultural merits retrospectively recognised. Choe's book will, no doubt, prove to be an essential and pathbreaking tool in the archaeological task ahead of regrounding and recentring the social, political, historical, and artistic salience of Friedkin's work for American cinema and society.

Note

[1] See, for example, James Fenwick's *Unproduction Studies and the American Film Industry*.

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Blue Chips. Directed by William Friedkin, Paramount, 1994.

The Boys in the Band. Directed by William Friedkin, National General Pictures, 1970.

The Brink's Job. Directed by William Friedkin, Universal Pictures, 1978.

Cruising. Directed by William Friedkin, United Artists, 1980.

Deal of the Century. Directed by William Friedkin, Warner Brothers, 1983.

The Devil and Father Amorth. Directed by William Friedkin, LD Entertainment, 2017.

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