

Production Slate

[Queuing](#) | [Affliction](#) | [Hold You Tight](#) | [Gordon Parks](#) | [IDA/Kodak](#)

Affliction (U.S.)

Director: Paul Schrader

Cinematographer: Paul Sarossy, CSC

Evidenced by his script for Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*, writer/director Paul Schrader is no stranger to the plight of self-destructive protagonists. When one considers his directorial efforts **Patty Hearst**, **The Comfort of Strangers** and **Light Sleeper**, it's apparent that his interests lie with characters who could be considered odd even by offbeat standards. With his adaptation of the Russell Banks book **Affliction**, Schrader tackles yet another "crushed romantic" in the guise of hard-luck case Wade Whitehouse (Nick Nolte), the lone cop in the one-horse town of Lawford, New Hampshire. A perennial loser, Whitehouse is troubled by a traumatic childhood that's left him mired in the abuse of both alcohol and his loved ones. But when a baffling hunting accident claims a visiting businessman's life, Whitehouse seeks the truth, only to uncover his own inner conflicts.



Small-town cop Wade Whitehouse (Nick Nolte), his abusive father, Glen (James Coburn), and bookish brother (Willem Dafoe) pay their last respects to the deceased in **Affliction**, a film based on the novel by Russell Banks.

Though Banks's novel is set in New Hampshire, Schrader opted to shoot most of the \$6.3 million film in the countryside outlying Montréal, Québec to safeguard the production against the possibility of an abnormally warm winter season. He says, "I wanted snow continuity — I did not want to get burnt with having to work around a thaw. When you get up through Qué, particularly around this mountain [St. Hillaire], it socks in heavy and hard all winter long. You don't have to worry about an early spring. Additionally, of course, the economic factors [a lucrative exchange on Canada's deflated dollar] are very, very helpful." He also found the local crews to be quite acclimatized to the inclement weather, since they tend to service productions shooting in Arctic areas. This hardiness came in handy during the one week of night exteriors, when temperatures dropped to -40°C with the wind chill factor. To match the mountainous terrain of New Hampshire, Mount St. Hillaire was filmed from multiple vantage points. In the resulting footage, the surrounding flatlands appeared to be in a valley. In pulling off this geographical illusion, the filmmakers even went so far as to cheat reverse coverage by having vehicles travel in the opposite direction.

For perspectives on snowbound shooting, Schrader referenced such pictures as **The White Dawn** and **Map of the Human Heart** in his preparatory talks with director of photography Paul Sarossy, CSC (**Speaking Parts**, **Exotica**, the upcoming **Felicia's Journey**), who earned Best Cinematography honors for **Affliction** at last year's Valladolid Film Festival. In February of 1997, when the Canadian cameraman embarked on this 35-day shoot, he had just finished a film complicated by issues of severe snow conditions. Coincidentally, that project was an adaptation of another Russell Banks novel — Atom Egoyan's **The Sweet Hereafter** (see Prod. Slate, AC

Dec. '97) — which endured five days of exteriors in the wilds of Merritt, British Columbia. Notes Schrader, "With the color of snow cover, you have a world of white, which is very tricky because of all the bounce. For contrast, I wanted to make the interiors like caves where people hibernated during the harsh winter. That indicates a certain coloration in the production design and that a lot of the lighting should come in from the outside."

The director preferred that exteriors be biased blue in contrast to the warmly lit interiors. Sarossy, who shot the picture with Panaflex GII and spherical Primos, using Fuji F-500 8571 for nights and day interiors, and F-125 8531 for day exteriors, explains that this dynamic "was established in a scene that finds Wade visiting his parents on their remote farm. Having run out of heating fuel, the interior needed to look cold. Whatever light was coming in from the wintry outside was only half-corrected with an 81EF filter. As a result, the tungsten interior lights are half-warmed. With no correction, the outside goes even bluer.



Director Paul Schrader and actor Nolte brave the frigid elements while on location in Montréal, Québec.

"Blue was important in dealing with one of our trickier sequences — a car-chase scene at night. Generally, these scenes pose no great lighting problems, but ours was to take place in the inky blackness of a forest road winding up a mountain. It's the classic cinematographer's dilemma: what light source can you justify in the unlit countryside? If it's the moon, it must equally cover vast stretches of scenery, which is easy enough if your scene is on a single location. However, in a chase lasting several minutes, you cover a vast region, which would be difficult to light in a convincing fashion.

"The solution was to begin the scene in the last moments of dusk, and play it day-for-night, letting the geography be shown in the dim twilight. Paul [Schrader] happily solved the end of the sequence by having the final confrontation set in front of a heavy vehicle storage depot ringed by security lights. The trick was finding an appropriate point to transition between the two. This was created with herky-jerky close-up shots of the drivers photographed using poor man's process in a neighboring garage."

Wade's fragmented psyche is conveyed visually via several techniques. The cop's reconstruction of the hunting "accident" is seen in black-and-white to indicate his paranoid perception of the event. His haunting impressions of childhood manifest themselves in grainy, desaturated, low-angle shots which Schrader describes as "somewhere between memory and a home movie." Comments Sarossy, "Originally, Paul wanted to do the childhood sequences in Super 8, the theory being that its look recalls the Fifties, the period of [Wade's childhood]. However, I worried that Super 8 would look too distinctive and therefore be restrictive. I then convinced Paul to use a technique that we had done on [French-Canadian director Denys Arcand's] **Love and Human Remains**, which entailed shooting in 16mm and then rephotographing its projected image. This would give us a greater amount of control over the image."

Adds Schrader, "In the case of handheld 16mm with a lot of zooms and jerky pans, it's almost impossible to follow focus perfectly, so we have shots where the focus is always changing — it's very rough-and-tumble. When doing those shots, I would sometimes give [either Sarossy or camera operator Robert Stecko] a little push so the shot wouldn't be too smooth. The 16mm footage was photographed at two stops over, and then printed down. We then projected it with a long throw onto a screen, and rephotographed it in 35mm with a zoom. We would sometimes override the zooms on the 16mm footage with yet another zoom. That way, we could be move

forward exponentially, zooming in so fast that grain is literally popping in front of your eyes by the time you are zooming in the second time. You get a reasonable shock because the grain almost goes to pieces, creating a sense of terror and fear."



The troubled Wade reveals his personal demons to his ever-tolerant girlfriend, Margie Fogg (Sissy Spacek). Schrader decreed that all interiors should be lit like caves where people hibernated during winter.

Having honed his directorial skills prior to the days of video assist, Schrader believes that the camera operator's purpose is to make the final call on the shot. He prefers to work in the English style, with the operator handling composition and framing while the cinematographer concentrates on the lighting. Opines the director, "In some ways, an operator is the person closest to the performers. He's actually watching the performers live, through that flickering eyepiece. Often you can use your operator to communicate certain things to the actors, because they feel that the operator will tip them off if something is going wrong." Typically, Sarossy operates his own camera, and this methodology required some adjustment on his part.

Aside for the jittery gyrations captured during Wade's childhood flashbacks, camera movement was kept quite minimal. Schrader explains, "For a number of films I was under the influence of Bernardo Bertolucci and that type of stylized world. But now with the proliferation of MTV and commercial-driven cinematography and direction, those games aren't as fun any more because everyone is using them. The currency has become so debased that it seems like self-serving gamesmanship. With **Affliction**, I made a very conscious effort to step back and not do as much with the camera. At this point, in the evolution of directing, probably the most radical thing one can do is to put the camera on a tripod."

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