

## On Blue Collar - Kino Fist



Film theory on Paul Schrader's car noir, Blue Collar.

In this world...a man himself is nothing. And there ain't no world but this one.

You're wrong there, Top. I seen another world.

- Terrence Malick's The Thin Red Line

Blue Collar's determined refusal of the mythic is evident from the very start. A series of shots of an assembly line set to Beethoven's 'Hard working man,' the title sequence plays with and undercuts the conventions of heroic representation, freeze framing and then allowing the image to curdle, holding on it a little too long as the track clanks emptily in the background. A reflective pause, just long enough to deliberately sour the iconicity. The whole film takes place in that gap.

This is Blue Collar's founding gesture, a pointed ambiguity, a refusal of the foreclosure of either sentiment or dogmatism. It's neither a hymn to the authenticity of the working man, nor a paean to the historic majesty of the industrial process. Blue Collar wants you to understand that for all the power of solidarity and wit, all the pride and skill, all the tenacity, all the beauty that a sentimental eye of any disposition might find, there is a slow, empty pulse of panic behind it all that resolutely resists aestheticization. This integrity spills over into Schrader's mid-Atlantic style, spare but without longeurs, the camerawork and framing discrete and unfussy without sliding over into cinema verite, all melodrama skilfully sidestepped. While Springsteen and Mellencamp on the radio might address your fears and sell you the Capraesque romance of the small man against the mighty Corporation, the dream of escape, the open highway, 'Thunder road,' the only Promised Land that the working stiffs in Blue Collar are going to case is the local Union Office and its unguarded safe. No-one is going anywhere here and there is only one real concern, money, and the desperate need for more of it.

I take home two-ten a week man, goddamn. I gotta pay for the lights, gas, clothes, food... every fuckin' thing, man. I'm left with about thirty bucks after all the fuckin' bills are paid. Gimme a break, will ya mister?

There is no heroic individualism, no swaggering, no idea that the blue collar tough guys 'really live.' Pryor and Keitel have to lie to their wives to go out on a rare debauch and money worries run all the way through their attempts to get their rocks off, culminating in a despairing, early morning confessional on Smokey's couch. And it's precisely Smokey's superspade toughness, how badass he is, how prepared to go against the system, that has him killed.

Blue Collar won't let you escape the ugly reality of borderline poverty's constant pressure, the bills that just won't add up, the needs that can never be met. Its most telling symbol comes with Keitel's daughter who has tried to make the braces that he can't afford to buy her even though he's working two jobs, out of wire. The constant pain of it, like a metal barb in your flesh.

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In Blue Collar the factory itself is largely an irrelevance, it isn't lingered over, there's no sense of its being exotic or exciting, fetishized. It's mundane, background. The director's and the character's eyes are aligned and this is one of the ways in which Blue Collar manages to maintain fidelity, in locating us directly within the men's concerns rather than trying to appeal to any extra-diegetic or meta-critical level.

The only moments of overt directorial commentary are in the title sequence, the montage of machinery drowning out Smokey's attempt to escape, a highly symbolic, impersonal murder in which it is the factory itself that is used as a weapon of destruction, and again when the film freeze-frames in the final shot, a deliberately composed socialist-realist tableaux, which might be entitled 'The Workers Divided' and over which Smokey's justifiably famous lines are reiterated:

They pit the lifers against the new boy and the young against the old. The black against the white. Everything they do is to keep us in our place.

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Blue Collar has two highly sympathetic black leads, unusual enough for a Hollywood movie (the bad guys are exclusively white), but also two roles in which the blackness is largely incidental. Again we're back in the characters' world. Bounded by their position as workers, there are no racial distinctions, none of the grueling attempts to address the 'issue' of race that characterizes more recent Liberal Hollywood. Blue Collar, made in 1978, is colour-blind in a way that is inconceivable in contemporary cinema.

In the final scene of Keitel and Pryor hurling racial abuse at each other, the implication, along with the quote that overlays it ('they pit the young against old...') is that identity politics begins to appear once economic solidarity is undermined, that identity politics is at best a form of misrecognition, just one more potential weapon in the bosses arsenal. Blue Collar's guiding assumption runs counter to most Hollywood: under the thin veneer of self-interest lies a deep, primal reserve of solidarity and understanding which must be actively broken up and partitioned. You thought you were both just workers but actually you're a nigger and he's a honky. The essence of the three-way relationship in Blue Collar is solidarity, and if that solidarity dissolves it is not due to an irruption of the inevitable human venality à la Treasure of the Sierra Madre and a million others, or due to the countermanding claims of race and blood, it is concerted and imposed. The shock and tragedy of the final scene is the recognition that once the epithets start flying around, the bosses really have won.

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The fatal flaw for almost all of Schrader's characters is belief not that moral action is possible in an irredeemably corrupt world, but in the myth of the heroic individual, so remorselessly recycled throughout American culture. It's a form of tragic moral naivete. The naivete is a failure to recognize the systemic nature of the problem, the necessity of others. Within the 'Night Workers' series, the concluding, tentative redemption that Schrader lifted from Bresson's *Pickpocket* sees the central character begin to realize his dependence on others, a move toward a recognition of his social character rather than the traditional atonement-as-redemption of standard Hollywood fare. In *Blue Collar* that dependence is already there, the tragic naivete of the group in question resides not in their misunderstanding the nature of reality but in failing to understand its scale and power. In *Blue Collar* there simply aren't enough of them.

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