

BFI FILM

CLASSICS



TAXI DRIVER

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Amy Taubin





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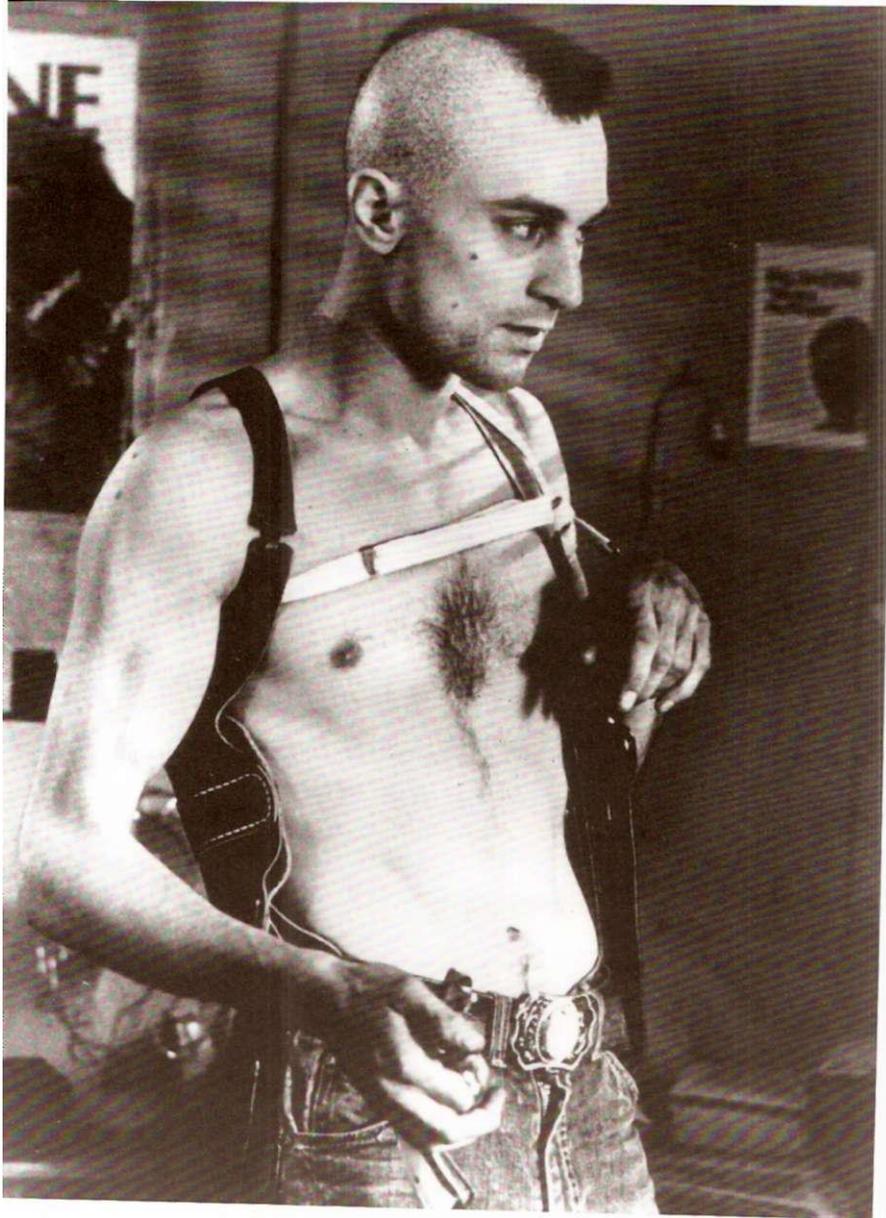
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*To Paul Pavel (1925–1992),
who understood dreams too well to bother about movies.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Really, it is not violence at all which is the 'point' of the western movie, but a certain image of man, a style, which expresses itself most clearly in violence. Watch a child with his toy guns and you will see: what most interests him is not (as we so much fear) the fantasy of hurting others, but to work out how a man might look when he shoots or is shot. A hero is one who looks like a hero.

Robert Warshow, 'The Westerner'

The person who made that slanderous movie about cab-drivers should be taken out and shot.

Anonymous New York City cabbie, quoted by film critic Vincent Canby in the *New York Times*

I felt like I was walking into a movie.

John Hinckley III, explaining his state of mind during his attempted assassination of former US President Ronald Reagan

Perhaps the place to begin is with John Hinckley III, the man who, in 1981, tried to shoot President Ronald Reagan so that, as the defence explained at his trial, 'he could effect a mystical union with Jodie Foster', the actress who played a preteen prostitute in Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* and who, at the time of Hinckley's assassination attempt, was a freshman at Yale University. Hinckley's action assured *Taxi Driver* a privileged position in cultural history, making it the only film to inspire directly a presidential assassination attempt. That the assassination failed is only fitting, since *Taxi Driver* is a film steeped in failure — the US failure in Vietnam, the failure of the 1960s counterculture and, most unnerving, at least to 49 per cent of the population, the failure of masculinity as a set of behavioural codes on which to mould a life.

Or perhaps the place to begin is a decade earlier, with Arthur Bremer, who, in 1972, attempted to assassinate Alabama Governor George Wallace, but merely succeeded in paralysing him from the waist down. The front page stories about Bremer, along with Sartre's *Nausea*, Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* and Robert Bresson's film *Pickpocket* (1959), directly inspired Paul Schrader's *Taxi Driver* screenplay.¹

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Schrader read the Bremer coverage while he was in a Los Angeles hospital, recovering from a gastric ulcer, at what he describes as the low point in his life. He was twenty-six years old, his marriage had broken up, the affair that broke up the marriage had broken up, he had quit the American Film Institute where he had been a fellow and he had been living in his car and drinking heavily. He said that when he checked in to the emergency room, he realised that he had not spoken to anyone for weeks. No wonder his imagination was captured by Bremer, who was also totally isolated and living in his car while he stalked various political heavyweights. Coming of age in the aftermath of a decade of political assassinations (JFK, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy), Bremer had convinced himself that the surest and fastest way for him to get the attention he was starved of was by assassinating a famous politician. When he failed to penetrate Nixon's security, he turned his attention to Wallace.

Bremer kept a diary. Parts of it were found in his car and parts in an apartment where he'd lived before taking off on the journey that would land him, at age twenty-one, in the penitentiary with a sixty-three year sentence. The diary wasn't published until 1974,³ but passages from it made their way into the news stories. Schrader, who was already wedded to the first-person, voice-over narrative, found it fascinating that Bremer, an undereducated, lower middle-class, midwestern psychopath, would talk to himself in his diary just like a Sorbonne dropout in a Robert Bresson film.

Schrader got out of the hospital and wrote the script of *Taxi Driver* in about ten days.³ 'The theme,' he says, 'was loneliness, or, as I realised later, self-imposed loneliness. The metaphor was the taxi, a metal coffin on wheels, the absolute symbol of urban isolation. I'd had this song by Harry Chapin in my head, about a cab driver who picks up a fare and it turns out to be his former girlfriend. And I put all that in the pressure cooker of New York City.' And who was Travis Bickle? Was he Arthur Bremer? 'Travis Bickle,' Schrader replied, 'was just me.'

In case there's anyone who doesn't know, *Taxi Driver* describes one stiflingly hot summer in the life of Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro), an alienated ex-Marine who drifted to New York shortly after the end of the Vietnam War. This background sketch may or may not be true, since we have only Travis's word for it. With small exceptions, the film is told from Travis's point of view and he is, to put it mildly, an unreliable narrator. Travis takes a job as a cabbie. Unable to sleep at night, he cruises

in his taxi through a city that seems to him a hell. He becomes obsessed, in turn, with two women: Betsy (Cybill Shepherd), a campaign worker for a presidential primary candidate, and Iris (Jodie Foster), a twelve-year-old prostitute. Betsy is the Madonna Travis wants to turn into a whore, while Iris is the whore he wants to save.

The seemingly desultory narrative is rigorously divided into three acts. In the first, Travis's rage is diffuse; he rides around in his cab, more a witness than a man of action. In the second, he finds a mission and an object for his rage. ('One day, indistinguishable from the next, a long, continuous chain. And then, suddenly — there is change,' he writes in his diary.) In the third, he puts his homicidal fantasies into action, taking aim at one father figure (the presidential candidate) and, when that attempt fails, turning his gun on another (Iris's pimp Sport, played by Harvey Keitel). The carnage that ends *Taxi Driver* is devastating, but it's also voluptuous — as voluptuous as anything in American movies - and all the more so because of the sense of repression that pervades the film until this moment. The entire film has been built so that this eruption of violence would seem both inevitable and more horrific than anything we might have imagined.

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The slaughter is the moment Travis has been heading for all his life, and where this screenplay has been heading for more than eighty five pages. It is the release of all the cumulative pressure; it is a reality unto itself. It is the psychopath's Second Coming.

Paul Schrader, *Taxi Driver* screenplay⁴

I like the idea of spurting blood. It reminds me ... God, it reminds me... it's like a purification... you know, the fountains of blood ... like in the Van Morrison song... 'wash me in the fountain'. But it's realistic, too. The guy that puts the blood ... I said, give me a little more, he said that's going to be a lot, I said that's okay.

Martin Scorsese, March 1976, a month after *Taxi Driver* opened in **the United States**⁵

Soon after Schrader wrote the first draft of *Taxi Driver*,⁶ he showed it to Brian De Palma, who passed it on to the producers Michael and Julia Phillips. They optioned the script for \$1000 and began peddling it to the studios. There were no takers. The script was considered too dark, too

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violent, its protagonist too unsympathetic. Scorsese was hot to direct the film, but the Phillips shrugged him off. *Mean Streets* (1973) changed their minds. Still, their commitment to Scorsese hinged on his ability to convince one of his *Mean Streets* stars, Robert De Niro, to play Travis. Financing remained elusive for two years. It wasn't until De Niro won an Academy Award for his performance in *The Godfather Part II* and Scorsese's direction of *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* resulted in an Oscar for Ellen Burstyn that David Begelman, then president of Columbia, gave the Phillips a green light. Begelman loathed the script, but he couldn't refuse so much certified talent. *Taxi Driver* was financed originally for \$1.3 million and wound up costing \$1.9 million. Scorsese, Schrader and De Niro worked for next to nothing. Their up-front fees totalled \$130,000. Scorsese and De Niro also had points in the picture, and, since the film grossed about \$17 million in 1976 and ranked twelfth on *Variety's*, box office chart, they may have seen some small profit.

The violence Begelman found so disturbing in *Taxi Driver* had been working its way into Hollywood studio films for roughly two decades. Hitchcock raised the ante with *Psycho* (1960), which like *Taxi*



12 Schrader, Scorsese, De Niro

Driver, crossed the psychological thriller with the horror film. In *Alfred Hitchcock and the Making of Psycho*,¹ Steven Rebello writes that Hitchcock wanted to make a film to herald the new decade of the 60s. He had been tracking the box-office success of the low-budget horror films produced by American-International and Hammer Films. He was also slightly envious of all the attention that had been paid to a French-language art film, Clouzot's *Diabolique* (1955), with its gruesome corpse-in-the-bathtub scene. The trick, as Hitchcock saw it, was to adapt a declassé piece of material (a pulp novel about a real serial killer), fill it with Hollywood stars and have it released by a major studio.

Although *Psycho* inspired an underbelly of slasher films, the studios were slow to follow Hitchcock's lead. The next major studio film to scandalise the Hollywood establishment and the middlebrow critics was *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), which not only glamourised the eponymous outlaws, but also eroticised gun violence. Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* followed two years later.

Bonnie and Clyde and *The Wild Bunch* opened against a background of the war in Vietnam and 'the war at home' — the civil rights and anti-war struggles. By 1968, the television networks, which had at first cooperated with the Pentagon by suppressing images of American dead or wounded, were pumping images of the escalating horror of the war — bodies that bled and burnt when assaulted by automatic weapons, bombs and napalm — into American households, where they were consumed as a regular part of the dinner hour. The imagery of the war and of the violence at home gave a moral justification to the film-makers, who now claimed it was their obligation, rather than their indulgence, to show the brutality of US culture. Also, in 1966 and again in 1968, the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) revised its rating code. More violence was allowed on screen, but age restrictions were placed on audiences.

The bloody nightmare of Vietnam surfaced not only in Hollywood movies, but also in avant-garde films and European art films. If *The Wild Bunch* was imprinted on Scorsese's retina, so too was Stan Brakhage's autopsy film, *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* (1971), and Jean-Luc Godard's *Weekend* (1967) and *Pierrot Le Fou* (1965). Indeed, it's *Taxi Drivers* extraordinary hybridity that partially accounts for its influence on two generations of film-makers and artists.

There's a 1983 photograph by David Wojnarowicz (arguably the greatest and certainly the most subversive American artist of the 80s)

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which appears on the cover of the catalogue for his 1999 retrospective at New York's New Museum.⁸ Wojnarowicz is seated in a chair, facing the camera. His right hand, with the index finger extended as if it were a gun, is pointed at his head. It's a mirror image of De Niro's gesture at the end of the massacre in *Taxi Driver*. Wojnarowicz's hand, however, is not covered in crimson. Instead, it's painted blue and his face is painted yellow - an homage to the ending of *Pierrot Le Fou*, where Belmondo, having just shot the woman he loves and bent on killing himself, paints his face blue and wraps yellow and red dynamite around his head.

Wojnarowicz made the connection between the suicidal, alienated anti-heroes of the two films, both driven mad by the time in which they lived, and between the striking use of primary colours in both films to describe a nightmare narrative — a male anxiety dream of castration and death. While there are no two more film-literate raiders of the image bank than Godard and Scorsese, their aesthetics, politics and methodology have little common ground. When Scorsese borrows the jump-cut strategy of *Breathless* (1959), it's not to shake up conventions of linearity or to throw a monkey wrench into habits of identification, but to reveal the gaps and disconnection in Travis's jumbled psyche.

If *Taxi Driver* owes something to French film of the 50s and 60s, it's even more influenced by American film noir, the genre the French New Wave adored. The stylistic influence is obvious in the first person voice-over narration, the expressionist camera angles and movements, and Bernard Herrmann's moody, jazz-inflected score. Unlike many of the neo-noirs that followed in its wake, however *Taxi Driver's* relationship to classic noir is more than stylistic. Like film noir, *Taxi Driver* is rooted in post-war trauma. What World War II was to noir, Vietnam is to the story of Travis Bickle.

In his influential 1971 essay 'Notes on Film Noir', Schrader describes how soldiers returning from World War II found a society 'less worth fighting for'. This disillusionment is directly reflected in such early noirs as *The Blue Dahlia* (1945) and *Dead Reckoning* (1946). Schrader's prophecies - that 'as the political mood hardens, the noirs of the 40s will become increasingly attractive' and that 'the forties may be to the seventies what the thirties were to the sixties' - proved true.⁹

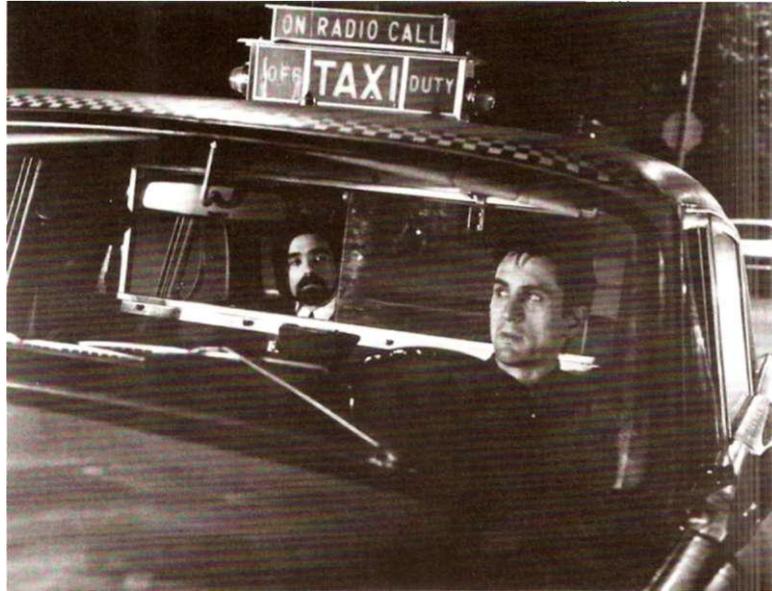
The essay suggests but doesn't quite nail down the expression in film noir of an anxiety surrounding masculinity itself. That anxiety, which surfaced in the aftermath of World War II, was brought to the fore

again in the 70s as a result of the feminist movement and the attention it focused on the construction of gender. The figure of Travis Bickle is an emblem of that masculine anxiety, and, as such, exerts enormous influence on the films of the next two decades, particularly on those of the 90s, a decade in which the 'white male backlash' and 'white male paranoia' became prime media topics.¹⁰ While Scorsese's *Mean Streets* — with its insider connection to a subculture never before depicted so accurately on the screen - arguably has been the most influential film worldwide for the generation of film-makers that followed, it's the character of Travis Bickle who opened the door to the new anti-hero, with his pathological relation to violence as the answer to the castration anxiety he barely troubled to hide.

The Vietnam war also intensified America's obsession with lethal weaponry. Americans have always cherished their constitutional right to bear arms, but the media coverage of the fighting gave guns a wider social currency than ever before. American gun fetishism is reflected in a century of movie making, beginning with the notorious shot at the end of Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), in which a black-hatted bandit stares down the audience, pulls the trigger of a revolver aimed straight at the camera and disappears in the smoke of the blast. In the early 70s, the .44 Magnum replaced the cherished .38 as the weapon that made the man. *Taxi Drivers* ode to the .44 Magnum ('You should see what a .44 Magnum can do a woman's pussy, that you should see ...') is spoken not by Travis, but by a psychopathic passenger played by Scorsese himself. As an example of gun-craziness, it's a jump up from the speech that John Milius wrote for *Dirty Harry's* Harry Callahan (Clint Eastwood): 'But seeing how the .44 Magnum is the most powerful handgun in the world and that it would blow your head clear off, you got to ask yourself — Do I feel lucky, today? Well, do ya, punk?''¹¹

Critics of *Taxi Driver* regard it as an arty but right-wing offshoot of the vigilante films of the 70s, among them the *Dirty Harry* series, Phil Karlson's *Walking Tall*^(m) and Michael Winner's *Wish* (1974). But that critique ignores Travis's blatant psychopathology and his connection to the noir anti-hero. While the film evokes sympathy for Travis, it never suggests, as a vigilante film would, that he does the right thing. It's more to the point to think of *Taxi Driver* as an attempt to reclaim - for the embattled white male - the urban landscape that had been revitalised by the blaxploitation films of the early 70s. In that sense,

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Schrader and Scorsese's project mirrors, however unconsciously, Travis's desire to clean the scum off the streets.

This is not to say that the director and screenwriter of *Taxi Driver* are racist in the way that Travis is. Rather it is that they are not above the impulse to protect what they consider their turf. Framed by the windows of his cab, New York looks to Travis like a movie. The entire cast of *Superfly* (1972) seems to have been assembled in Times Square. Seen through Travis's eyes, however, they're deprived of the agency and subjectivity they briefly enjoyed in the blaxploitation genre. They are once again objects, used merely as 'local colour'.

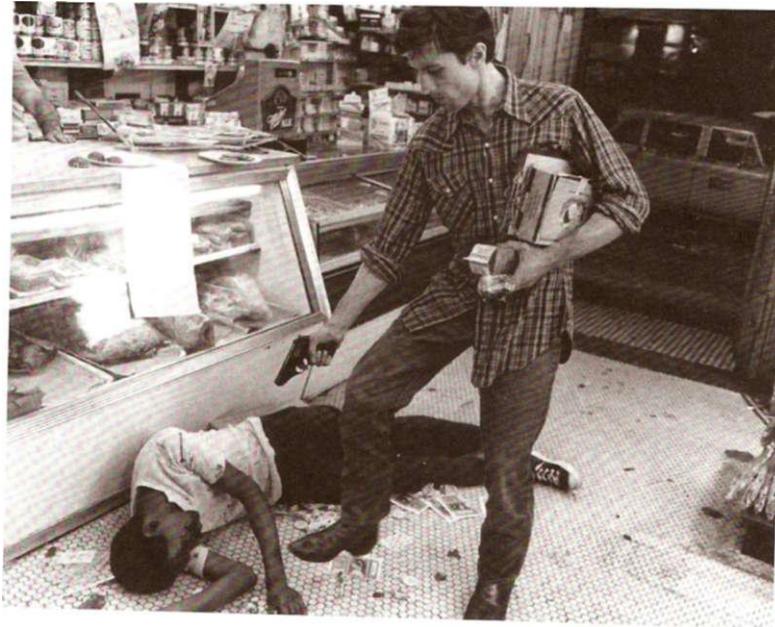
'You know the black man you see raging in the street late in the film, I wanted that to be the opening shot,' says Scorsese. 'But there was no way I could do that. It would have seemed too racist.'¹¹²

Racism is the problem with which *Taxi Driver* never quite comes to terms. And this evasion prevents it from being a truly great film, while allowing it a popularity that it otherwise would not have achieved. 'There's no doubt,' says Schrader, 'that Travis is a racist. He's full of anger and he directs his anger at people who are just a little lower on the

totem pole than he is. But there's a difference between making a movie about a racist and making a racist movie. I love to make movies about people who are disapproved of by society because I feel if you can get people to identify with a character they don't think is worthy of identification, then you open them up in some way and who knows what happens once they open up.¹³

Travis's racism is evident to anyone who looks at the film carefully. It's there in his body language when he's hanging out with a group of cab drivers, one of whom is black; it's there in his eyes when he's looking through the window of his cab at the action on the street. It is there, most overtly, when he shoots a skinny black junkie who's trying to hold-up a neighbourhood deli. It is not merely that Travis shoots to kill; it's the way he looks down at the dying man — as if the guy were not even human.

That particular scene is as close as the film comes to directly dramatising Travis's racism. Elsewhere it's displaced onto other characters (the psycho passenger played by Scorsese who's in a fury because his wife's lover is 'a nigger') or suppressed. In Schrader's



Travis guards the dying thief

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original script, Sport (Iris's pimp) is black, as are the other men that Travis massacres in the hotel. 'When Marty and I started working together,' says Schrader, 'we got to the scene where Travis shoots Sport and we just looked at each other and we knew we couldn't do it the way it was written. We would have had fights in the theatre. It would have been an incitement to riot. There wasn't even a discussion about it. At that point, Marty sent me out to find "the great white pimp", but I never found him.'¹⁴ What Schrader discovered instead was that streetwalkers like Iris were traded exclusively by black pimps. So much for *Taxi Driver*'s much-lauded documentary-style depiction of New York.

On his way to the 1976 Cannes Film Festival where *Taxi Driver* would win the Palme d'Or, Schrader stopped in Paris to interview Robert Bresson, who was one of his film-making idols.¹⁵ Bresson asked him if he was pleased with *Taxi Driver* and Schrader responded: 'Yes, although it was not directed the way I would have directed it. I wrote an austere film and it was directed in an expressionistic way. I think the two qualities work together. There's a tension in the film that's very interesting.'

The tension between Scorsese's and Schrader's frames of references gives the film an ambiguity of meaning and affect. This ambiguity allows for a variety of readings and makes the film attractive to a wide audience. *Taxi Drivers* appeal has something to do with the fact that Travis is largely a cipher that each viewer decodes with her or his own desire, and, also, with the fact that the more reprehensible aspects of Travis's character are played down by the film. Because of the disconnection between Travis's implicit racist fantasies and his explicit homicidal action, the effect of the film is the inverse of what Schrader claims. Travis winds up being more 'worthy of identification', precisely because the film deflects the consequences of his racism.

I suspect, too, that many viewers respond not to Travis's alienation per se, but, rather, to Scorsese's own sense of being an outsider in a glamorous city - expressed, not through character or narrative, but through *mise-en-scene*. Scorsese describes *Taxi Driver* as a mix of gothic horror and tabloid news, but it also has a high-end noir glamour. It's the glamour of New York that Bernard Herrmann's bittersweet theme expresses — a glamour that has rubbed off on the city from a hundred movies in which the sound of a soaring saxophone promises danger and love. Herrmann's score makes the film more pleasurable, but it's an uneasy fit with the first person construction of the narrative. At times it

seems expressive of Travis's madness, but just as often it evokes experiences that are outside of Travis's reality.

Scorsese and Schrader were both raised in religious households: Scorsese as a Roman Catholic in New York, Schrader as a Calvinist in the Midwest. They agreed on the Christian allegorical aspect of Travis's story, but Scorsese sees him as a 'commando for Christ who goes too far; he has to kill you to save your life', while Schrader focuses on the problem of determinism and chance. Travis, however, is neither a Catholic nor a Calvinist. For the most part, he seems to have no interest in any religion. Although churches are everywhere in New York, he never notices them (and therefore they're absent from the film). But there's something in his language and, of course, in his dramatic trajectory that suggests the influence of an apocalyptic strain of Christianity, the kind of fundamentalist belief in the second coming that made Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* the best-selling non-fiction book of the 70s.¹⁶

The difference between Schrader's and Scorsese's vision of Travis Bickle is encapsulated in their perspectives on John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956), the picture that is the ur-text for *Taxi Driver*, as well as for many other 70s films. When Scorsese talks about *The Searchers* in the context of *Taxi Driver*, he focuses immediately on the last shot: the lone figure of Ethan (John Wayne) walking away from the house and out onto the prairie, his back to the camera. 'The isolation, it must be unbearable,' says Scorsese.¹⁷ He's reminded of an encounter he had in China with a young film student who'd seen *Taxi Driver* and told him that he understood Travis's loneliness because he was a very lonely person himself. Scorsese advised him to try to put some of his loneliness into his films. The student came back few days later and said that he'd followed Scorsese's advice, but that it didn't make him feel any less lonely. 'No,' said Scorsese, 'making a picture doesn't make the loneliness go away.'¹⁸

The scene in *The Searchers* which Schrader remembers most is 'John Wayne telling Jeffrey Hunter not to look'.¹⁹ Ethan has come back from the canyon where he has found and buried the body of Debbie's older sister, who has been killed and most likely raped by the Comanche warrior Scar and his raiding party. What Ethan actually says to the men riding with him is: 'Long as you live, never ask me more.' If ever there was an invitation to viewers to let their imaginations run wild, that line is it. The rape fantasy aroused by Ethan's refusal to speak drives the rest of the narrative. *The Searchers* adds a blatant

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psychosexual component to the mix of fear and guilt that, in 'enlightened westerns', characterises the settlers' relationship to Indians. It's Ethan's fantasy of Scar making Debbie (Natalie Wood) his squaw that impels his seven-year pursuit.

Schrader's Travis Bickle is Ethan Edwards split open. In *The Searchers*, Ford finally shows the fissures in the masculine ideal he monumentalised. Ethan, too, is a man come home from a war in which he fought on the losing side. A racist who can't accept the defeat of the Confederacy and a misogynist who regards women as property and miscegenation as the ultimate crime, Ethan is also uncommonly courageous and loyal. In the end, his better side prevails, but, consumed with guilt, he can't allow himself to stay with the family he's reunited. Says Schrader, 'This is a man who's deprived of the pleasures of hearth and home because he has blood on his hands.'²⁰

Ethan, the lone wolf, becomes Travis, the psychopath, trying to work out on his own what it is to be a man. Isolation intensifies his pathology. Quoting Thomas Wolfe, Schrader dubs him 'God's lonely man'. Like Ethan, Travis is driven by fantasies of rape and revenge in which he plays many parts. Schrader says a lot of pressure was placed on him (although not by Scorsese) to change the scene in which Travis takes Betsy, the woman he worships as 'an angel', to a porn movie on their first date. He was told that no one could be that stupid. On an unconscious level, however, Travis wants to rub Betsy's face in the muck and show her how bad he is. Although he could never admit it to himself, taking Betsy to a porn movie is a violation, a psychological rape. When Betsy gives him the cold shoulder, he redirects his desire towards Iris. This is where the model of *The Searchers* kicks in. Travis makes it his mission to rescue Iris from Sport — the hippie pimp who wears Indian beads and a bandana — even if it costs him his life.

In addition to his desire to 'forge a magical union with Jodie Foster', John Hinckley claimed, as part of his insanity defence, that sometimes he almost believed himself to be Travis Bickle, that he identified with Travis's loneliness and isolation, and that the movie, which he had seen fifteen times, had driven him mad. As the linchpin in their defence, Hinckley's lawyers screened *Taxi Driver* for the jury. Hinckley was found not guilty for reasons of insanity and was committed to a mental institution. In 1999, he began a programme of limited and supervised release. (As an example of the inequity of the US justice system, Arthur

Bremer, who could not afford anything approaching Hinckley's high-powered defence, was judged to be sufficiently sane to be responsible for his actions and is rotting in jail where he'll probably die.)

Whether the jury believed that Hinckley was mad to begin with and that *Taxi Driver* was merely icing on his paranoia, or whether they believed the film itself was the cause of his madness, is unknown. But what I would claim is that *Taxi Driver's* power derives from its most hallucinatory scenes - the massacre in the hotel at the end and the 'You talkin' to me?' sequence where Travis challenges his mirror image. Both of these scenes involve some derailment of Schrader's screenplay and, indeed, of Scorsese's carefully storyboarded production plan.

Threatened with an X-rating because the film was too bloody, Scorsese, rather than making cuts, had the scene printed so that the blood appears less red. When Travis gets out of his cab to begin his 'rescue' mission, it's as if he's walking into one of the porn movies he watches obsessively when he can't sleep, but which has never before brought him release. Finally his murderous desire is as one with his action and his paranoid vision is so encompassing it colours the *mise-en-scene* itself.

The hallucination that Travis enacts in that scene—and which results in real death — is the hallucination of masculinity. It's the search for that image of ideal masculine wholeness that subtends the entire history of the movies. It's also what makes Scorsese's raids on the cinematic image bank not merely an aesthetic exercise in reflexivity, but also an expression of a dilemma that's both personal to Travis and bigger than Travis himself.

'A hero is one who looks like a hero,' wrote Robert Warshaw in 'The Westerner'. But by the mid-70s, the ideal image of white masculinity was not merely fissured as in *The Searchers*; it had broken to bits under the pressure of the feminist and civil rights movements. In this context, Travis's paranoia can be read as a hyperbolic version of the doubts and defensiveness the average guy was feeling - continues to feel - about being a man.

The emblematic scene in which Travis confronts his own image in the mirror doesn't exist at all in the published version of the screenplay; in the shooting script, it's indicated only by a one-line description/'Travis talks to himself in the mirror.' De Niro improvised the scene, drawing on the routine of a stand-up comic he'd seen in a downtown club. Scorsese, who was worried that the monologue would be inaudible because the location was so noisy, kept the camera running while De Niro repeatedly challenged and drew his gun on his own reflection.

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The issues of identity and identification played out in this scene are insanely entwined in Travis, who, as a paranoid, has problems with boundaries and with splitting. When Travis looks in the mirror, he sees himself and he sees the other on whom he's projected everything he despises in himself. Thus, what Travis is doing when he 'is working out what it is to shoot or be shot' is rehearsing a murder that is also a suicide.

It's an action in which the audience is wildly implicated. The angle at which Travis takes aim at himself is only about ten degrees removed from the angle at which he would be shooting directly at the camera, that is, at us. Travis's disassociation, moreover, reflects the latent madness in the situation of viewers who lose themselves in a film, experiencing the fear and desire, love and hate of the character on screen as if it were their own. When the character is madly confused about his identity, identification packs a double whammy.

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Taxi Driver was shot in the summer of 1975 in what Scorsese recalls as 'forty days, forty nights'. Because the budget was tight, the production had to be rigorously preplanned. As with his previous films, Scorsese storyboarded every sequence. Six weeks before production began, Schrader wrote a final draft of the script. This is the version that is published by Faber and Faber. It differs from the film itself both in the order of scenes and in the dialogue. Some of these changes occurred when Scorsese worked with the actors on the set. Others were made during the editing process.

All film shoots are difficult, but *Taxi Driver* presented particular problems, the largest of which was New York itself. The summer of 1975 was extremely hot, the economic downswing was taking a heavy toll in both the private and public sectors, unemployment was high, the city's infrastructure was crumbling, and the underground economy of drugs and prostitution was booming.

Among the many reasons that *Taxi Driver* has become a classic is that it testifies to both a vanished New York (chequer cabs, rotary phones, typewriters and 3 a.m. coffee at the Belmore Cafeteria) and an absolutely contemporary anomie. The film's love/hate relationship with the city plays into the fantasies of both New Yorkers and those who project from afar their fears, loathings, hopes and desires. In 1996, when a restored print of *Taxi Driver* made the rounds of museums and



repertory houses in celebration of its twentieth anniversary, the disjunction between the New York depicted in the film and the actual New York was not nearly as great as it is today. The economic boom of the late 90s speeded up the rate of gentrification. The old Times Square district, which is geographically at the centre of the film and also at the core of Travis's paranoid vision, has been almost completely torn down and rebuilt as a monument to the corporate media culture — to Time-Warner, Disney, Bertelsmann and Conde Nast. Today, it's not the danger of pushers and pimps that makes long-time New Yorkers paranoid, but the dehumanisation of the very heart of the city — the sense that it has been taken over by the ultra rich, the automatons that toil for them and the type of tourist that prefers this urban Disneyworld to the neon nether world of porn theatres and strip joints.

Scorsese was no stranger to the old Times Square. As a teenage film buff, he ventured away from his neighbourhood of Little Italy (a neighbourhood which also all but disappeared in the 90s, metamorphosing into the trendy boutique and condo enclave dubbed Nolita) to watch western and horror double-bills in the run-down movie theatres that lined 42nd Street. As a film student and fledgling director, he

TAXI DRIVER

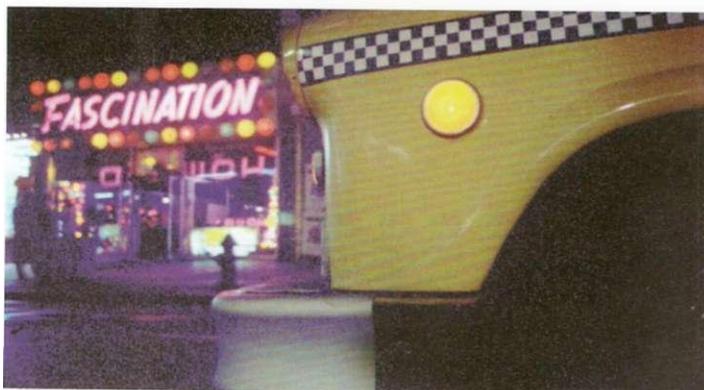
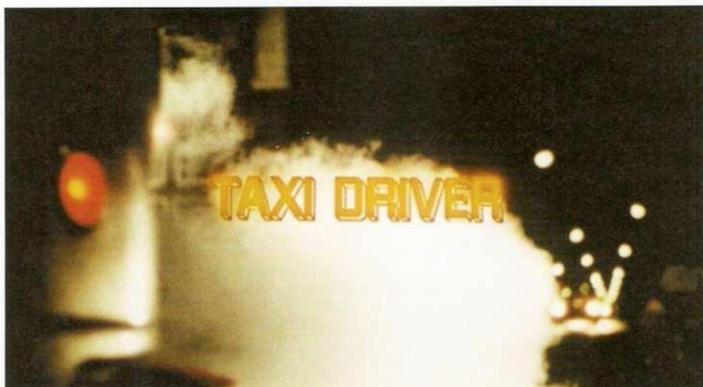
also frequented the labs and production houses clustered in the Times Square district, some of which are still thriving today.

Applying the lessons he learned in the Catholic Church, Scorsese describes Travis's perambulations of the Times Square red light district as 'putting himself in the occasion of sin'. That's not Travis's terminology, Scorsese says, since Travis isn't a Catholic. Rather, it's a way that he, Scorsese, could get a handle on Travis's actions. Scorsese might have used that same phrase to describe his own adolescent Times Square adventures (some of his most cherished memories are of films that were banned by the Church) and, even more significantly, the enormous change in his life when, having left Fordham University where he was studying for the priesthood, he enrolled in film school at NYU.

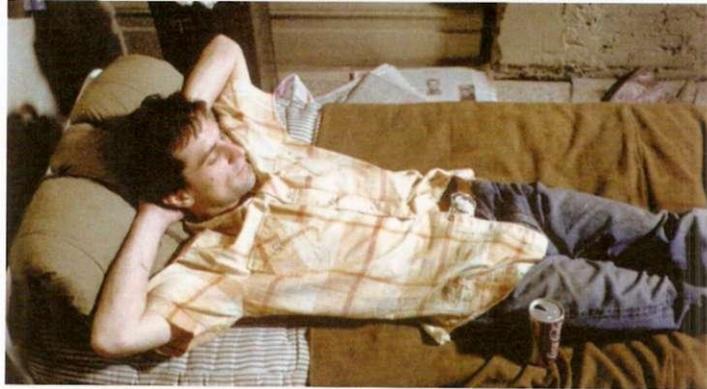
If the New York of *Taxi Driver* is a verisimilitude in the eyes of the Church, it's also outside the control of another patriarchal authority — the Hollywood studio system. It wasn't only Schrader's script that disturbed the Columbia brass. The studios, in general, view any location that's more than an hour away by plane from Los Angeles as potentially dangerous. The more geographical distance a director puts between himself and the studios, the more that director might be tempted to break their rules. Because of his identification with New York, Scorsese was already viewed as something of a wild card, although, paradoxically, *Mean Streets*, his definitive New York movie prior to *Taxi Driver*, involved less than a week of New York location shooting.

Scorsese's ambivalent relationship with genre and to the studio system which functions as a surrogate father meshes with Travis's oedipal trajectory - with, on the one hand, his killing of the father and, on the other, his longing for organisation and for a normal life. All of Scorsese's loners yearn for some kind of orderly life from which they've been exiled or which no longer exists. *Taxi Driver* honours many fathers, from John Ford to Alfred Hitchcock, but it doesn't obey their rules. There's no way it can. Even if Scorsese were not subversive by temperament, the studio system that generated those rules had collapsed by the mid-70s. Still, what makes *Taxi Driver* an ur-text for the independent film-makers of the 80s and 90s is precisely its fraught relationship to an idealised Hollywood past.

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TAXI DRIVER



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