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Media and Society

Final Response Paper

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1. Taxi Driver: Alienation & Crises of Masculinity in the Urban City

Many film directors have created cities that were metaphors on a male's thoughts, fears, fantasies and masculinity. An audience's literal way of seeing what the main character is feeling and thinking, is through the eyes of its city, which becomes a projection of the protagonist's reality. Throughout the semester the films we've discussed, explored these metaphors and themes and in several ways the landscapes of the urban cities we've encountered became a secondary character of its own. The one film I will discuss that greatly explores these topics is Martin Scorsese's masterpiece *Taxi Driver*. A Vietnam vet named Travis Bickle decides to take on a full time job as a graveyard shift cab driver to occupy his time, because of his trouble obtaining sleep. Travis is a lonely, disconnected and alienated individual, who tends to seem much smaller and unimportant in scale, when in contrast to the large landscapes of his urban city of New York. Travis tries to interact with others he comes in contact with most importantly women, but instead the women in the story not only reject his advances, but also become a catalyst for his new found identity and his threatened masculinity, which eventually leads to violence.

In chapter 8 of the book *Cinematic Cities* Elizabeth Mahoney writes on how the urban city in *Taxi Driver* encodes itself in front of its audience and it can be a way for its main protagonist to reveal his masculinity which is threatened or in crises. “The post-modern city has been conventional theorized as a site of difference, fragmentation, conflict, and plurality...it has also tended to be represented in spatial rather than temporal terms” (Mahoney, 8). Martin Scorsese brilliantly presents the city of New York in *Taxi Driver* as seen through the deranged eyes of Travis Bickle. Travis projects the urban city as a sick society of repressed violence and immorality, full of street hoodlums who only come out at night to create havoc on the innocent. In the words of Travis Bickle: “Whores, skunk pussies, buggers, queens, fairies, dopers, junkies, sick, venal. Someday a real rain will come and wash all this scum off the streets.” The way Scorsese frames the visual look of the city gives it a nightmarish noir like vibe with a touch of the western and urban melodrama. Scorsese brilliantly shoots the city with a harsh red tint along with a haunting jazz score by the legendary Bernard Herrmann as the cab emerges from the mysterious smoke and mist of the streets, quickly giving the mise en scene a feeling of unease and claustrophobia.

Scorsese not only creates a disturbing portrait of the urban city of New York society in the mid 1970's but also combines it with the current political issues of its time, which also can be looked at as a form of explanation to why Travis Bickle is the way he is. Richard Martin writes, “*Taxi Driver* reinvents noir in a context more suited to the sociopolitical realities of mid-seventies America...it is informed by an understanding of political paranoia, economic deprivation, inner-city decay, and the violence of the seventies.” *Taxi Driver* was released after a bleak decade of great political violence and drastic culture changes along with the public's heightened feelings of anger and paranoia of their own very governments. After the United

States lost the war in Vietnam, the Watergate scandal caused the resignation of Nixon, and the horrific crimes of the Manson murders, the country seemed to lose much of the innocence it once had. The character of Travis Bickle became iconic and identifiable to many Americans at that confusing time in American history, so identifiable that the film was later linked to the assassination attempt of President Ronald Reagan in 1981 and of the shooter's obsession with actress Jodie Foster.

Travis is an unbalanced and psychologically disturbed man in a world of pornography, racism, and paranoia as he drives throughout the city of New York, taking his anger and frustration out on the city and the people who inhabit it. His only satisfaction seems to be his job as a cabbie, attending midnight porn movies, and being sprawled on his bed within his empty apartment writing down his thoughts and feelings in a personal diary such as: "All my life needed was a sense of someplace to go. I don't believe that one should devote his life to morbid self-attention, I believe that one should become a person like other people." Travis is a very disconnected and antisocial individual who seems either uninterested or incapable in interacting with any of his co-workers. "Loneliness has followed me my whole life. Everywhere. In bars, in cars, sidewalks, stores, everywhere. There's no escape. I'm God's lonely man..." In a brilliant scene Travis takes a seat in a coffee shop next to his other fellow cab drivers who are discussing outlandish cab stories to one another. When one of his co-workers starts trying to make simple chit-chat with Travis, Scorsese creates a surreal shot of Travis getting completely lost in thought staring lifelessly at his coffee cup bubbles (which also seems to be a slight homage to Jean-Luc Godard's *Two or Three Things I Know about Her*).

Travis's skewed perceptions on the African American race and the female gender is just the roots of Travis's dilutions. Travis has several direct moments in which he views African

Americans with a sudden look of disgust and contempt, using them as the potential blame for the deterioration of the urban city. In one particular moment in the film, Travis approaches his co-worker Wizard for a personal talk which is in reality a cry for help, (This probably was the one true moment within the film in which Travis could have been saved) when one of the black men within the diner calls out to Travis as a “Killer” and even points his finger at Travis making a reference of a gun. A moment later the camera follows Travis’s frightening gaze as he watches the black man leave the diner and make his way down the street. Travis’s skewed perceptions and hatred towards the black race are obvious as Travis believes that every black man in the city of New York plays either the role of a pimp or a criminal.

When it comes to the female gender Travis eventually takes it upon himself to approach the upscale and classy Betsy who seems to be the opposite of the lower class society that Travis seems to despise. All goes well until Betsy suddenly rejects Travis when he inappropriately takes her to a porno movie. Her anger and sudden rejection at him becomes an attack on Travis’s masculinity and character which leads Travis into believing that Betsy is just like all the others in society who are: “Cold and distant. All people are like that. Women for sure. Their like a union.” I’ve always wondered why he associated Betsy with something like a union, but I believe a union suggests a ‘community’, or ‘a group of people coming together’ which is something Travis looks at as not pleasant, because throughout his whole life he has felt he’s never quite belonged. Because of Travis’s inability to win Betsy over, his initial racism, delusions and anger greatly increase and he takes it upon himself to focus on Iris a young prostitute who is dominated and controlled by her powerful pimp Sport. Throughout his isolation Travis’s delusions begin to take hold and manifest itself into a new character and identity which takes the shape of a heroic and macho savior for the young and confused Iris, while at the same time slowly losing more touch

with reality. This new persona that Travis creates takes the form of a classic gunslinger or Dirty Harry caricature, as this new persona not only gives him the masculine characteristics that he believes he originally lacked to win Betsy over, but it gives him the aggressive male confidence to achieve winning over Iris.

“Freedom, the very nucleus of the American dream, is dependent on individual socioeconomic choices that inform and shape one's identity. But Travis's lack of a distinct identity compels him to cut and paste together what he believes is a heroic identity from an external menu of personages such as the "gunslinger" and the Indian. In actuality, what he does is stitch together a postmodern antiheroic identity that is nostalgic and pop culture-oriented, evidenced by the Mohawk haircut that he sports in the penultimate sequences because he possesses no internal self” (Iannucci, 1).

Since the beginning of the film Travis was already a ticking time bomb ready to blow, but Betsy and Iris became the major catalysts for Travis's complete meltdown, as Scorsese suggests a sort of connection between the two women and their psychological influence on Travis and his unstable psychosis. In his alienated world of racism and paranoia Travis feels a sort of personal connection to the two female characters, as Betsy is the one that Travis personally lusts for but cannot obtain, and Iris is the one he can obtain but doesn't care to have. “Because of his deformed view of New York in general, the audience can identify how Travis also distorts gender, as Betsy and Iris each serve as agents for his behavior...Scorsese's narrative technique of blurring one scene into the next suggests a subtle relationship between Betsy and Iris as counterparts” (Iannucci, 3). Travis's new form of confidence and masculinity with this

newly created persona, will finally give Travis a chance to make up for the fact that he failed with Betsy by saving Iris from her predatory pimp Sport.

There is another important moment in the film in which Travis has a bizarre encounter with an unstable passenger (played by Martin Scorsese himself) who forces Travis to pull over to the side of the road. The passenger points up to an apartment window light in one of the buildings and the passenger informs Travis that his wife is up there having an affair with an African American man. The passenger then goes into a detailed rant on how he is going to kill his wife, what kind of gun he will be using when committing this crime, and the effects the gun will do to her body. This is the first real moment that violence has become a major subject in Travis's story, and we watch Travis sit quietly by in the driver's seat while the audience tries to contemplate what Travis might be thinking about at that very moment. These early scenes I believe seem to leave a large impression on Travis's current stability and in many ways could be his first steps that lead him into believing violence might be the only real way to solve a problem.

Throughout the second half of the film Travis begins his downward spiral obsessing most of his time and energy on two individuals: the Presidential candidate Charles Palantine, who is a man that Betsy seems to respect and cherish, and the pimp Sport who is a psychically intimidating man that Iris seems to be dependent on. In Travis's distorted viewpoint he seems to lump Palantine and Sport together in one group, summing them up as not only the cause of society's problems, but as negative influences on the two women he wants to rescue. For instance, Palantine seems to influence Betsy with his educated charisma and speech which is something Travis greatly lacks. Sport uses more charm, and is more of a threat psychically. "In

essence, Scorsese suggests that a battle is slowly brewing between Travis and Sport over the construction of masculinity” (Iannucci, 4).

In one of the most iconic scenes in the film Travis begins to practice his inevitable confrontation of Palantine and Sport by rehearsing in front of his apartment mirror. The essence of his masculinity is suggested with the weapons he had purchased, as he spins his guns around and practices his quick draw similar to the masculine cowboys he probably saw on TV as a young boy. Travis’s obsession with guns and violence can be stemmed from the cowboys and Indians that every young American boy idolizes on the screen, but it also can come from his traumatic days serving in the Vietnam War, in which the film does not go into much detail in exploring. With these scenes of Travis practicing his quick draw for the upcoming showdown, Scorsese interestingly combines the classic genre of the western with the dramatic moments of the urban loner. Law enforcement official Robert Warshaw states "Watch a child with his toy guns and you will see: what most interests him is how a man might look when he shoots or is shot ... a hero is one who looks like a hero" (Iannucci, 8).

Travis first attempts to assassinate Palantine but fails to do so and so he quickly heads out to confront Sport that very same night. What is the essential *mon e mon* scene of the film, Travis and Sport get into a heated discussion with one another and when Sport threatens Travis when Travis mentions Iris, Travis eventually pulls out his pistol and shoots Sport. After taking a quick moment to rest on the apartment steps to consolidate what he just did, (which was a brilliant improvisation by De Niro) Travis decides to enter Sport’s apartment and commit a bloody and disturbing shootout between several of Sport’s right hand men. Being severely injured in the shootout, Travis decides to rest (after failing an attempt at suicide) and slowly bleeds to death, but not before the police arrive to view the bloodbath that Travis had created. Interestingly

enough some viewers when watching *Taxi Driver* come away from the film perceiving Travis as either a heroic vigilante or an unbalanced psychopath.

“The aftermath of carnage is visible as the camera dwells on the blood that splattered on the walls and the floor near Sport's body. Travis has purged himself by killing this street scum, but his fate is unsettled and his ‘heroism’ is still in question. Immediately following the gunfire, Scorsese's use of the overhead tracking shot invites the audience to retrace all of the events in slow motion. In effect, the camera permits the viewer to identify the scene in the aftermath where Travis will become a hero. Evidently, this crime scene becomes a blueprint — a blueprint for his heroism and Travis's delusion becomes a reality” (Iannucci, 9).

The conclusion of *Taxi Driver* is greatly debated and interpreted differently by audiences and critics. Some look at Travis’s sudden status as a hero by the media as either the reality of Travis’s ironic fate, or just the hallucinations of a dying and diluted man. I look at the conclusion of the film as more of a fantasy because it would make more sense realistically with the context of the film. Travis believes he achieved his goal of saving Iris by ridding her of Sport and his henchmen which also became an achievement in his masculinity that he felt was originally in crisis earlier in the film. The horrific act that Travis committed within Sport’s apartment feels like a heroic accomplishment for Travis as he now embodies the courageous characteristics of such heroes like John Wayne or Gary Cooper, in which he rode in, defeated the bad guy and saved the damsel in distress. “The hallucination that Travis enacts in that scene — which results in real death — is the hallucination of masculinity ... it's the search for the ideal masculine” (Iannucci, 9). Travis believes he finally achieved his masculine fantasy through violence and

continues to fantasize about it as he slowly bleeds to death, conjuring up the idea that he will be praised and rewarded in the paper, and that Betsy will now respect and desire him.

Taxi Driver is a gothic tale of Americana about a man who feels lost within himself in a large urban city that only seems to ignore and disregard him. The film can also suggest that Travis is a forgotten and ignored victim of the working class American through the evil rise of Capitalism within our cities. Although Travis lives in highly populated city, he is still unable to establish normal relationships and becomes a loner and wanderer; a victim of his own isolation. The iconic line in the film: “You talkin to me? Well, I'm the only one here,” is the most honest line Travis says in the film. He is the only one there and yet he is in desperate need to share some kind of contact with someone, even if it means conjuring up a fantasy world of his own. They're several homage's to classic films in *Taxi Driver* whether its John Ford's *The Searcher's* or Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*. Interestingly enough, Travis Bickle seems to have more characteristics of an unstable character like Norman Bates, but believes he is a heroic character like John Wayne (Iannucci, 9). In one of the greatest shots of the film Travis is on a pay telephone begging Betsy to accept a second date with him. While Travis is being pathetically rejected, the camera slowly pans to the right and looks down a long, empty hallway. That particular shot Scorsese says in the DVD commentary is the most important shot of the film, because it sums up Travis Bickle and the alienated life that he encompasses perfectly within the urban gritty landscapes of the city.

Work Cited

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