

however, *Taxi Driver* preserved its accessibility by locating its revisions within a popular genre and an accepted style. Thus, on its surface, *Taxi Driver* seemed to fit comfortably into the Right cycle's basic variant, what Pauline Kael called "the street westerns."<sup>16</sup> In fact, with its New York setting, violent loner hero, and standard revenge plot, it clearly traded on the surprising popularity of *Death Wish* (1974), a low-budget Charles Bronson movie originally intended for the drive-in trade.

More important, *Taxi Driver's* New Wave borrowings never became either merely cosmetic or utterly freed from the demands of storytelling. In making these stylistic defamiliarizations narratively functional, Scorsese, of course, betrayed Godard's original desire to expose cinematic forms as themselves the perpetuators of ideological attitudes. To suggest style's role, Godard had often employed ways of filming that had no recognizable narrative purpose, but whose very arbitrariness called attention to form itself as a perceptual determinant. *Masculine-Feminine*, for example, followed one nearly six-minute take (of Paul in an amusement arcade) with a laundromat sequence that developed from a series of rapid jump cuts, without in either case making the viewer sense the formal procedure's inevitability or even appropriateness. *Taxi Driver*, on the other hand, softened Godardian ruptures by integrating them into the story, where they recovered most of their invisibility.

Two examples will suffice. In an all-night diner sequence, Scorsese conveyed his hero's intensifying introspection by adopting his perspective to zoom in on a glass of Alka Seltzer until the bubbling water filled the screen in an enormous close-up. This shot came directly from Godard's *2 or 3 Things I Know About Her*, where a steady zoom-in on a cup of coffee had accompanied Godard's own voice-over. Despite their superficial similarities, however, the two sequences remained profoundly different. In Godard's sustained series (nearly 3½ minutes), the shots of the coffee cup had issued not from the main character's point of view, but from that of a stranger without narrative consequence. As a result, the close-ups of the coffee's surface had provided no character insights, but only the occasion for a meditation on subjectivity, objectivity, language, and, not incidentally,

the role of objects as links between two shots taken from different angles. Scorsese's single, relatively brief shot, on the other hand, prompted no abstract musings; instead, it graphically suggested the hero's self-absorption and growing isolation. In another borrowing, Scorsese panned away from his hero's telephone conversation to an empty hallway whose desolate disrepair implied the protagonist's own mental condition. By contrast, Godard's similar shot in *A Woman Is a Woman* had worked against the narrative by reducing it to the caricature of his inserted title:

BECAUSE THEY LOVE ONE ANOTHER, EVERYTHING WILL GO WRONG FOR EMILE AND ANGELA. THEY HAVE MADE THE MISTAKE OF THINKING THEY CAN GO TOO FAR. BECAUSE THEIR LOVE IS BOTH MUTUAL AND ETERNAL.

By making his stylistic departures functional, therefore, Scorsese kept the naïve audience from seeing them as purposelessly "arty." In fact, narrative motivations rendered such departures largely invisible. Thus, when the hero scanned a room filled with blacks, the slight slow motion that made them appear threatening remained unnoticed. Similarly, because the movie offered them as correspondents for its hero's state of mind, the unrealistic, hallucinatory colors, blurred focus, and antimelodic score provoked no challenges to Right filmgoers. Even Scorsese's jump cuts, so visible in Godard, seemed a natural way to express the protagonist's incipient breakdown.

*Taxi Driver*, in other words, abided by the American Cinema's fundamental assumption that style should serve narrative. It also clearly advertised itself as a genre movie. Having thus avoided scaring off the naïve audience, the film could then attack that audience's sustaining myth, the belief in the continued applicability of western-style, individual solutions to contemporary complex problems.

*Taxi Driver's* basic story followed the Right cycle's loyalty to the classical western formula: a reluctant individual, confronted by evil, acts on his own to rid society of spoilers. As played by Robert DeNiro, *Taxi Driver's* protagonist had obvious connections with western heroes. Even his name, Travis, linked him to the defender of the Alamo. Rangy and bowlegged, he wore jeans and cowboy boots. His origins remained unspecified: like Shane,

he merely appeared on the scene, where he lived alone and kept to himself. The story suggested a typical gunfighter's background, mysterious, yet with hints of violence and familiarity with weapons: he had been a marine (the script indicated Vietnam service), and other cabbies called him "Killer." The pimp, Sport, used a more mythologically explicit nickname: "You're a real cowboy," he kidded Travis. "That's nice, man."

Like all outlaw heroes, Travis immediately recognized his new community's problems. Driving a cab through New York, he described what he saw in a voice-over that modernized the stock western line, "What kind of town is this?"

All the animals come out at night—whores, skunk pussies, buggers, queens, fairies, dopers, junkies . . . sick, venal. Someday a real rain'll come and wash all this scum off the street.

Like the standard western hero, however, he remained reluctant to get involved. He was, he told his superintendent, willing to go with his taxi "anytime, anywhere," and in the middle of an obviously decaying city, he expressed only disinterest:

I go all over. I take people to the Bronx, Brooklyn, I take 'em to Harlem. . . . I don't care, don't make no difference to me. . . . It does to some—some won't even take spooks. Don't make no difference to me.

Travis's attempt to connect with a woman fell into the pattern of irreconcilability established by Godard's *Breathless*. A campaign worker for a presidential candidate, the woman was clearly a joiner who destroyed her own mystique with her opening words during their first date: "*Christ*, the organizational problems." Like *Breathless's* Patricia, she was also a culture-monger, inevitably provoking another cross-purposes conversation resembling the Godardian original (Patricia: "Do you know William Faulkner?" Michel: "No, who's that? Someone you slept with?"):

BETSY: You know what you remind me of?

TRAVIS: What?

BETSY: That song by Kris Kristofferson.

TRAVIS: Who's that?

BETSY: A songwriter. "He's a prophet and a pusher, partly truth, partly fiction, a walking contradiction."

TRAVIS: You sayin' that about me?

BETSY: Who else would I be talking about?

TRAVIS: I'm no pusher. I never have pushed.

Clearly, they lived in different worlds. Worse, her campaign job identified her with a legal, institutional solution to society's problems that here, as in all westerns, was represented as inadequate, incapable of taking the decisive action necessary for dealing with what Travis saw on the streets. Betsy's obviously overmatched candidate, Senator Charles Palantine, was another in the long line of good-hearted community men shown by the western to be too weak to deal with the real problems. During a cab ride with Travis, Palantine's failings became clear:

PALANTINE: Can I ask you something, Travis?

TRAVIS: Sure.

PALANTINE: What is the one thing about this country that bugs you the most?

TRAVIS: Well, I don't know, you know, I don't follow political issues that closely, sir. I don't know.

PALANTINE: There must be something. . . .

TRAVIS: Well, whatever it is, he should clean up this city here because this city here is like an open sewer, you know? Whoever becomes the President should just . . . really clean it up, you know what I mean? Sometimes I go out and I smell it—I get headaches it's so bad, you know? So I think the President should just clean up the whole mess here, you know? Just flush it down the fuckin' toilet.

PALANTINE: Well, I think I know what you mean, Travis, but it's not going to be easy. . . . We're going to have to make some radical changes.

TRAVIS: Damn straight.

The movie made obvious the inadequacy of Palantine's hedging, suggesting, like all westerns, the need for decisive action.

*Taxi Driver* followed the *Right* pattern by implying that such action could only come from an individual hero. Arming himself with black-market guns (including Dirty Harry's favorite Magnum), Travis began training, practicing fast-draws like the wounded Brando in *One-Eyed Jacks*. Watching himself in the mirror, he rehearsed a street version of the western showdown:

Huh? Huh? Faster 'n you, son-of-a-bitch. . . . Saw you comin'. . . . shit-heel.

I'm standin' here. You make the move. You make the move. It's your move. . . . Try it, you. . . .

You talkin' to *me*? You talkin' to me? You talkin' to me? Well, who the hell else are you talkin' to? . . . You talkin' to me? Well, I'm the only one here. Who the fuck do you think *you're* talkin' to? Oh yeah? Yeah? O.K. . . .

In this scene, *Taxi Driver* brought into the open the western myth that had sustained *Dirty Harry*, *Death Wish*, *Walking Tall*, and the other cop/vigilante movies of the Right cycle. Like the heroes of those films, Travis would act for an emasculated society. "Listen, you fuckers, you screwheads," he swore to himself, "here is a man who would not take it any more. . . . here is a man who stood up against the scum, the cunts, the dopes, the filth, the shit. Here is someone who stood up."

Up to this point, *Taxi Driver* seemed a standard Right movie, a verification of reasons for law-and-order postures, and a satisfying reaffirmation of western-style responses. From Travis's perspective New York appeared as a jungle: a man ran crazily through the streets shouting almost incomprehensibly, "I'll kill her, I'll kill her, I'll kill her." Two old men fought obscenely on a street corner, one apparently trying to rob the other. Street gangs hurled eggs at Travis's windshield, and teenage girls taunted subteen prostitutes. But most of Travis's rage concentrated on Sport, a pimp who kept a twelve-year-old prostitute named Iris. Trying to persuade her to leave Sport, Travis invoked the outlaw hero's traditional distrust of the law:

IRIS: What should I do? Call the cops?

TRAVIS: The cops don't do nothin', you know that.

IRIS: Sport never treated me bad, honest. Never beat me up once.

TRAVIS: But you can't leave him to do the same to other girls. You can't allow him to do that. He is the lowest kind of person in the world.

Somebody's got to do something to him. He's the scum of the earth. He's the worst sucking scum I have ever seen.

Travis's need to pin all of society's problems on one locatable source (that could be dealt with straightway) represented the typical Right movie's displacement strategy. Given the other views of New York afforded by the movie, Travis's concentration on Sport appeared extreme even for the Right cycle, but the movie

to this point had carefully insured the audience's identification with Travis by holding closely to his point of view. The few scenes not including him, in Betsy's office, merely prepared for his entrance. (The one jarring departure from this circumscribed point of view, Sport's slow seduction-dance with Iris, was added to satisfy Harvey Keitel, who played Sport.)

Scorsese had also structured the film around skillful juxtapositions that encouraged the audience to regard Travis as the one honest, genuine character. One typical sequence set the stage for Travis by showing Betsy and her fellow office worker, Tom, trying to light a match while simulating missing two fingers on one hand: such silliness made Travis's brooding intensity seem a sign of grace. Scorsese then cut directly to a parallel scene, as a gabby driver, the Wizard, told tall tales about screwing a woman passenger in the back seat of his cab in the middle of the Triboro Bridge. Again, Travis's silence suggested depths of feeling unavailable to the others in the movie.

The most telling undermining of attitudes that might have opposed Travis's occurred in a later juxtaposition. Having gone to the Wizard for advice, Travis received the following counsel:

Look at it this way, you know—a man . . . a man takes a job, and that job, you know, that becomes what he is. You know, like . . . you do a thing and that's what you are.

I've been a cabbie for seventeen years, ten years at night, and I still don't own my own cab. You know why? 'Cause I don't want to. That must be what I want, you know?, on the night shift, drivin' somebody else's cab. Understand? You become . . . you get a job, you become the job.

I mean, one guy lives in Brooklyn, one guy lives in Sutton Place, you get a lawyer, another guy's a doctor, another guy dies, another guy gets well, and you know, people are born. . . . I envy you, you—go on get laid, get drunk. You know, do anything. 'Cause you got no choice anyway. I mean, we're all fucked. More or less, you know?

To this speech, a devastating parody of Hollywood's normally sanctified common sense, Travis could only respond, "I don't know; that's about the dumbest thing I ever heard." The very next scene offered nothing better, only a higher-class version of similar rhetoric. At home watching TV, Travis heard Palantine sum up his platform:

We came up with our slogan, "We are the people." When I said "Let the people rule," I thought I was being overly optimistic. I must tell you that I am more optimistic than ever before—the people are rising to the demands that I have made of them. The people are beginning to rule. I feel it as a groundswell. I know it will continue through the primary; I know it will continue in Miami; and I know it will rise to an unprecedented swell in November.

This obviously shallow populism only reaffirmed the audience's attachment to Travis as the one truly moral force of the film.

Throughout its early sections, however, *Taxi Driver* had offered suggestions (typically conveyed by formal disruptions of the invisible style) of Travis's instability. Street scenes filmed from Travis's point of view used swirling, overripe colors accompanied by disquieting music that at times approximated a slightly accelerated heartbeat. An odd doubling effect, borrowed from Godard and Robert Bresson, provided a certain distance, as the sound track contained Travis's voice pronouncing words that filled the screen as he wrote them. Where the Right heroes' stolidness suggested their imperturbability, Travis's off-key platitudinizing implied his coming disintegration. Of Betsy: "They . . . cannot . . . touch . . . her." Of his own condition: "You're . . . only . . . as . . . healthy . . . as . . . you . . . feel." The jump cuts that accompanied Travis's preparations for the shootout further hinted at his fragmenting personality. Thematically, his predilection for porno movies also remained vaguely unsettling, particularly given his pronouncements about New York's venality.

Most troubling, however, was his loneliness, a stranger, more disquieting solitude than that of the other Right protagonists. "Loneliness has followed me all my life," he spoke in a voice-over soliloquy, whose recurring form reaffirmed his condition. "There's no escape; I'm God's lonely man." As an extreme isolate, Travis satisfied perfectly Tocqueville's ultimate predictions for American democracy:

Thus not only does democracy make every man forget his ancestors, but it hides his descendants and separates his contemporaries from him; it throws him back forever upon himself alone and threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart.<sup>17</sup>

As a European, Tocqueville had characteristically distrusted radical solitude. The American mythology, on the other hand,

had habitually portrayed it as the means to grace, and located the origin of sound decisions in the individual, isolated heart (see *Walden*). Thus, neither the Left nor Right films had questioned Patton's self-confident intuition: "I feel I am destined to achieve some great thing." *Taxi Driver*, however, made Travis's version of the instinctive urge less reassuring: "I just wanna go out and really . . . really do something," he confessed to the Wizard. "I just wanna go out . . . I really got some bad ideas in my head."

Subtly warned by these foreshadowing "corrections," therefore, the audience should not have been entirely unprepared when *Taxi Driver* abruptly withdrew its sympathy for Travis with a single shot. After identification with Travis had peaked with his attempts to "rescue" Iris, the film shifted to Columbus Circle where Palantine had begun a speech. Suddenly, the movie confirmed any incipient fears that Travis might represent a distorted version of the Right hero. The camera panned slowly from the podium through the crowd, moving at knee level, finally stopping on a pair of legs, obviously Travis's, stepping out of a cab. Then very slowly (in a shot whose atomization imitated *Breathless's* policeman killing), the camera moved up his body, to the waist, then to the jacket bulging with guns, and at last to Travis's head, horribly shaved in a Mohawk haircut. The shock was terrific. By following the standard Right pattern, *Taxi Driver* had led its audience into an almost complete identification with a hero now revealed as recognizably insane. Like so many of Hitchcock's films, *Taxi Driver* had implicated the audience in any resulting violence, for the audience had willed this hero and trusted his impulses.

In aborting Travis's assassination attempt, however, *Taxi Driver* punished its audience more subtly. Having failed to kill Palantine, Travis turned his rage against Sport. In a long, harrowingly violent climax, he killed the pimp and two of his henchmen, and the camera rose and panned dispassionately over the carnage to show the audience the results of its vigilante fantasies. The final sequence contained still further ambiguities: a slow pan of Travis's apartment revealed newspaper headlines announcing his canonization ("Taxi Driver Battles Gangsters," "Taxi Driver Hero to Recover") and a letter from Iris's parents thanking him "for returning our Iris to us."



Presumably, *Taxi Driver* had fully "corrected" the Right cycle, indicating to the viewer that Travis's "heroism" resulted from chance: he could just as easily have killed Palantine; indeed, he had tried and failed. The movie thus implied that behind the Right cycle's fantasies lay madness. *Taxi Driver*, however, had so carefully reproduced the appearance of a standard Right film that even sophisticated observers missed the "corrections." Many objected to the extreme violence, which, by punishing the audience for eagerly desiring it, had actually provided the crucial revision. Joan Mellen even referred to the movie as "another vigilante film."<sup>18</sup>

In fact, *Taxi Driver* repudiated what Richard Slotkin has described as the basic myth in American culture: the myth of "regeneration through violence."<sup>19</sup> Scorsese's film even represented a modern version of the most traditional incarnation of that myth, the captivity narrative, which Slotkin calls "the first coherent myth literature in America for American audiences" (p. 95). These stories appealed to the Pilgrims' own ambivalent responses to the New World, which they perceived as both an abundant garden and a terrifyingly hostile wilderness. Their need was to subdue the wilderness without becoming like it, to participate in its freedom without yielding to its temptations.

In Slotkin's terms, "the captivity narratives embodied the dark side of the Puritan attitude toward the natural world in general and toward the American wilderness in particular" (p. 146). These stories of women taken prisoner by the Indians (who inevitably represented the unrestrained libido) allegorized sinful falls and saving restitutions. Removed to the wilderness by her captors, the woman prisoner was portrayed as being in hell, and the forest itself, once a symbol of promise, as the equivalent of the Inferno. "All interest in the landscape of the wilderness disappears," Slotkin writes. It is "seen only as a wasteland of starvation and hardship. Natural terrain is suggested in horrific abstractions; the landscape of the Puritan mind replaces the real wilderness" (p. 99).

The rescue of the woman inevitably depended upon violence and swift action, for frequently the captive women, tempted by the freedom of impulse, action, and sexual choice allowed by In-

dian society, wished to remain. The rescue was dangerous, for the hero had to "fight the enemy on his own terms and in his own manner, becoming in the process a reflection or double of his own dark opponent" (p. 563). Thus, the rescue became a perverse marriage-hunt converted into a murderous exorcism.

The paradigm of the captivity narratives exactly fitted *Taxi Driver*. Iris appeared to be held prisoner by Sport, who significantly dressed and looked like an Indian, with high cheekbones, slanted eyes, and long straight black hair held in place by a headband. She was characteristically reluctant to leave her "captivity." Scorsese replaced the real New York with a series of "horrific abstractions" corresponding to the landscape of Travis's mind. The city became a wilderness hell, in which Iris's home with Sport was a particularly terrible corner. Like the Pilgrims, Travis was an emigrant whose experiences confirmed the Right audience's anxieties about American urbanization. Hunting Sport, Travis became like him, violent, unrestrained, even taking on an Indian appearance with his Mohawk haircut. "Go back to your fuckin' tribe," Sport told him, confirming the reference.

*Taxi Driver* suggested, however, that the myth of "regeneration through violence" that lay behind the Right cycle had become inapplicable in modern society. As a solution, it was madness. To the extent that this myth had also provided the basis of Classic Hollywood's thematic paradigm, and the traditional American ideology itself, *Taxi Driver* undertook to challenge the whole of American culture. In doing so, it followed the lead of D. H. Lawrence, whose description of the essential American soul perfectly fitted Travis: "hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer." Similarly, Travis's rantings ("Listen, you fuckers, you screw-heads, here is a man who stood up against the scum, the cunts, the dopers, the filth, the shit") recalled Norman Mailer's description of Sam Croft the Hunter in *The Naked and The Dead*:

A lean man of medium height but he held himself so erectly he appeared tall. His narrow triangular face was utterly without expression. There seemed nothing wasted in his hard small jaw, gaunt firm cheeks and straight short nose. His gelid eyes were very blue. . . . He hated weakness and he loved practically nothing. There was a crude unformed vision in his soul but he was rarely conscious of it. . . .

His ancestors pushed and labored and strained, drove their oxen, sweated their women, and moved a thousand miles.

He pushed and labored inside himself and smoldered with an endless hatred.

(You're all a bunch of fuggin whores)

(You're all a bunch of dogs)

(You're all deer to track)

I HATE EVERYTHING, WHICH IS NOT IN MYSELF<sup>20</sup>

Here, *Taxi Driver* implied, was the reality behind the Right movies, and indeed, the reality behind the Right's continued reliance on unilateral, individualistic responses to complex, contemporary problems. In many ways, *Taxi Driver* allegorized the American experience in Vietnam: detached isolationism followed by violent, and ultimately ineffective, intervention. More immediately, its equation of the impulse to vigilantism with the impulse that led to assassinations put an end to the Right cycle. Had *Taxi Driver* been more popular, or its "corrections" less ambiguous, its critique of the reluctant hero story might have put an end to the American Cinema's "certain tendency" as well.