

TAXI DRIVER (1976)

“You talkin’ to me?”

Major Credits:

Director: Martin Scorsese

Screenplay: Paul Schrader

Cinematography: Michael Chapman

Music: Bernard Herrmann

Cast: Robert De Niro (Travis Bickle), Cybil Shepherd (Betsy), Jodie Foster (Iris), Harvey Keitel (Sport/Matthew), Peter Boyle (Wizard)

Background:

Taxi Driver is the product of a remarkable collaboration involving the director, writer, and actor. De Niro had previously appeared in Scorsese’s powerful *Mean Streets* (1973) and has starred in eight of his films to date. He researched the role by renewing his New York taxi license and driving a cab for a month before production began and lost fifteen pounds preparing for the part. An accomplished film critic and scholar, Schrader later wrote the screenplays for *Raging Bull* (1980) and *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988). All three creative artists have remarked about how they personally identified with Travis’ extreme alienation while they were working together on *Taxi Driver*. The film also reflects the confluence of three historical influences: 1) disaffection and disgust following the Viet Nam war, a succession of assassinations (Schrader was inspired by the recent publication of the diaries of Arthur Bremer, the would-be assassin of presidential candidate George Wallace), and widespread racial tension, pornography, and drug abuse; 2) an era of unprecedented and escalating violence in the movies (*The Wild Bunch*, *The Godfather*, *The Godfather, Part II*, as well as Scorsese’s own *Mean Streets*); 3) a time when New York seemed the epicenter of American decadence, political corruption, and urban blight.

Taxi Driver also reveals the marks of several literary and cinematic forebears. Schrader wrote one of the definitive essays on film noir, and Michael Chapman’s cinematography captures the dark urban landscape and prevailing paranoia of the genre. Travis is a modern existentialist antihero, the descendant of such figures as Dostoyevsky’s Undergound Man, Sartre’s Roquentin (*Nausea*, the book Schrader had most recently read prior to writing the screenplay), and Camus’ Meursault (*The Stranger*). In addition, Scorsese likened his protagonist to Ethan Edwards, the role played by John Wayne in Ford’s *The Searchers*, whose other major characters, his niece Debbie and the Comanche chief Scar, closely parallel Iris and Sport.

Cinematic Qualities:

1. moving camera: Note how Scorsese occasionally uses the tracking shot in unusual ways, leaving his protagonist briefly behind, as when Travis exits the garage after his job interview or when he calls Betsy from a pay phone in an apartment building.
2. high angle shots: Scorsese violates point-of-view in a number of bird’s eye shots, culminating in the crane shot after the climax.

3. dissolves: Watch for several dissolves such as the long shot of Travis walking on the street toward the camera very early in the film that violate the conventional function of indicating a transition in time and space.
4. voiceover: The traditional function of voiceover narration is to provide authoritative commentary on the visual action, but Travis's diary withholds at least as much as it reveals. Compare with Holly's narration in *Badlands*, which preceded *Taxi Driver*.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Does the film offer any social, political, historical, or psychological explanation for Travis's breakdown?
2. Scorsese's recurring interest in salvation through alienation and suffering (see *Raging Bull* and *The Last Temptation of Christ*) stems from his Catholic upbringing as well as his reading of writers like Dostoyevsky, whose *Underground Man* and *Crime and Punishment's* Raskolnikov resemble Travis. Identifying himself as "God's lonely man," Travis sets out on his mission as an avenging angel intent on rescuing Iris, the Magdalen figure, from her degraded life. (Note the prominence of candles in Iris's room.) Is there a religious message underlying the apparently nihilistic vision of *Taxi Driver*?
3. What is the function of the film's denouement, including Travis's celebrity and the final cab ride with Betsy?
4. Nearly every scene reflects Travis's point of view and dissociated personality except the sequence in which Sport slow dances with Iris. What is the thematic function of this seemingly incongruous scene?
5. Many critics and scholars, including admirers of Scorsese's work, have criticized the film's climax as a capitulation to the exploitations of violence prevalent in the cinema of the mid-seventies. Schrader's script defines the scene as "the psychopath's Second Coming." How is the final reckoning foreshadowed, and does the presentation express an artistic and thematic design?