



## Movie Club

### Taxi Driver (1976)

1. The film originated as a response by screenwriter Paul Schrader to John Ford's [The Searchers](#) (1956) (Bozzola, L., "[Taxi Driver \[Synopsis\]](#)", All Movie). What similarities do you find between the two films? Both feature lone, driven protagonists who dedicate themselves to saving a woman they consider to be in peril. Both characters are arguably mistrusting of the wider world. Both are veterans of problematic wars that divided the nation (The American Civil War and the Vietnam War). Both believe they have a singular responsibility or duty to undertake their actions. There are also differences. In *The Searchers*, both the Native Americans and the settlers are depicted as being reciprocally cruel. But in *Taxi Driver*, the cruelty and corruption portrayed is less about reciprocity than inescapability. But what else would you consider similarities or differences between the characters or the films? Are they similar in terms of mentality, moral outlook? What meaning do these similarities and differences provide? How would you characterise Schrader's response to *The Searchers* (approving, negative, troubled, conflicted)? How does the final product of Schrader's script alter your viewing of *The Searchers*?
2. Much of the film dwells on Travis' isolation. He opines that "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." The cinematography adds to this, portraying Travis driving around in his taxi as a lone vessel through the city. It becomes a microcosm, separate from the city, yet very much a part of it. Added to this is a strong voyeuristic quality. It opens with shots of the city and Travis' eyes gazing from side to side. Throughout the rest of the film we see Travis become a watcher. He observes rather than enjoys the erotic films he frequents; he sits in his cab and watches Betsy at her desk; he leers at passers-by; and moves his mirror when a passenger informs him he is going to kill his adulterous wife rather than turn around and engage with him. The only time he becomes the object rather than the viewer is when the secret service singles him out before his attempted assassination of Palantine. But their eyes are hidden, where Travis' are always in full view, open to the world they observe, wanting to participate. When he does try to make connections, they are awkward, clumsy or inappropriate, like his interactions with and final date with Betsy, his angst filled conversation with Wizard, or his payed for chat with Iris. What do you make of Travis' connections with different groups and people? Does he ever seem to share a bond with another individual or group? What about Wizard, how would you define their relationship? How would you classify his relationship with Iris?

3. Accompanying his loneliness (or perhaps as a result of it) is Travis' lack of identity:

*The days go on and on... they don't end. 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. (Emphasis added)*

To complicate things, Travis seems to view a good life as one absent from vice, and absence of "morbid self-attention", rather than a thing in itself. When being called a square by Iris he asserts that "You're the one that's square, man. I don't go screwing fuck with a bunch of killers and junkies like you do. You call that bein' hip? What world are you from?" He then gets advice from Wizard, his unsure confidant, that when "you get a job you become the job." This leads him to eventually take on the role, both as duty and as personality, of the vigilante believing that "now I see this clearly. My whole life is pointed in one direction. There never has been a choice for me." He moves from wanting to "become a person like other people" to believing he has never had a choice of what he will become. What is the interplay of Travis' loneliness and his lack of identity? Is his obsessing over himself also a form of morbid self-attention? Would Travis see it that way? Does Travis ever become a person?

4. Taxi Driver brings together two older cinematic traditions. Like other vigilante films, and as mentioned earlier, it has links with the western with "its depiction of the good man versus the bad, but it is set not in the lawless years of the 1870's West but in the late twentieth century urban environment of New York City or Los Angeles" (Novak, G.D., "[Social Ills and the One-Man Solution: Depictions of Evil in the Vigilante Film](#)", 1987, p.3). But equally, through its focus on the seedier elements of the city and its depiction of a lone individual against a corrupt world, it has strong elements of neo-noir. This "film noir version of John Ford's late Western [The Searchers](#) (1956), align[s] Travis with a mythology of American heroism while exposing that myth's obsessively violent underpinnings" (Bozzola, "[Taxi Driver \[Synopsis\]](#)"). Travis' isolation sees him identify two "evils". The first is the most obvious, the street criminal, represented by Sport, who is not only a pimp, but a pimp dealing in underage girls like the twelve year old Iris. The other is a less obvious wrong doer, the corrupt government that seems to allow the former to thrive, represented by Palantine. Through Travis' loneliness and his reactionary views Palantine also becomes an enemy. Although never explicitly revealed, Palantine's response to Travis' ranting indicate he is more a 'bleeding heart-liberal', shocked by Travis' reactionary views. This posits Travis as the lone defender of the honourable, by taking out both the "scum" but also those who are part of the corrupt system that is responsible for the current state of the world. Evil extends from "the punks in the alleys to the Mayor's Office." (Novak, "[Social Ills and the One-Man Solution](#)", p.4). He sees the solution in an idea that "had been growing in my brain for some time: TRUE force. All the king's men cannot put it back together again." He means to assassinate Palantine, and then becomes a force for good killing street criminals. Is this a rational view, or the result of a lonely individual who is trying to makes sense of the world? How successful is his use of force, both against Palantine and Sport? How do these filmic traditions of the western and film noir come together to form a coherent story?

5. What do you make of the ending (both the shootout and the five-minute epilogue)? Narratively it is both incongruous but has a consistence, depending on your interpretation. The change to de-saturated colours during the shootout was originally imposed by the censors (to reduce the red of the blood and thus the impact of the violence), but Scorsese has expressed that he feels it improves the film (although Michael Chapman, the cinematographer, still regrets the change). It, along with the jump cuts in the scene, gives it something of a dreamlike quality, making it less of a real gun fight and more something someone would envisage. The five-minute epilogue has been much discussed, with the congratulations to Travis and the longing looks from Betsy leading some to wonder:

*Is this a fantasy scene? Did Travis survive the shoot-out? Are we experiencing his dying thoughts? Can the sequence be accepted as literally true? ... I am not sure there can be an answer to these questions. The end sequence plays like music, not drama: It completes the story on an emotional, not a literal, level. We end not on carnage but on redemption, which is the goal of so many of Scorsese's characters. (Ebert, R., "[Taxi Driver \[Review\]](#)").*

It is highly probable that it is a dying dream, given Travis' previous indications of fantasising and role playing (the famous "you talkin' to me" scene, his longingly watching soap operas and couple dancing to romantic music on the television—an extreme form of make believe—and his letter to his parents with its talk of "sensitive work for the government"). In essence we see that from the first half of the film to the second, Travis moves from being the voyeur to fantasist. Others have clearer interpretations of the ending, and focus less on the "did it happen" and more on what it means:

*Scorsese and writer Paul Schrader append the perfect conclusion to Taxi Driver. Steeped in irony, the five-minute epilogue underscores the vagaries of fate. The media builds Bickle into a hero, when, had he been a little quicker drawing his gun against Senator Palantine, he would have been reviled as an assassin. As the film closes, the misanthrope has been embraced as the model citizen—someone who takes on pimps, drug dealers, and mobsters to save one little girl. (Berardinelli, J., "[Taxi Driver \[Review\]](#)", Reel Views)*

Neither Scorsese nor Schrader see it as a dream sequence, and view it instead as Travis being a "ticking time bomb". Scorsese references Travis' frantic glance and adjustment of the mirror while driving as though Travis is looking for his next target. Schrader alternately sites the images of the hustle and bustle of the city linking with the beginning of the film, expressing that the last frame "could be spliced to the first frame, and the movie started all over again" and that "he's not going to be a hero next time." (Schrader, P. "[I am Paul Schrader Writer of Taxi Driver](#)", Reddit). What interpretation do you find best explains the ending? Why? Does Travis receive the redemption Ebert writes about? Do the different interpretations, the different endings, alter the message of the film? Does it matter what Scorsese or Schrader intended the ending to be/mean?