

Citizens of Hell

I'm God's lonely man.
—Travis Bickle, *Taxi Driver*

Taxi Driver unfolds with all the force and inescapable logic of an authentic nightmare—it makes a sense beyond sense (it is Manson's "no sense makes sense"). It puts us squarely and wholly inside the point of view of its steadily deteriorating protagonist and drags us ever deeper into its feverish dementia. Pauline Kael cited Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground* in her review of the film,¹ and both Scorsese and Paul Schrader (who wrote the script) were at the time admirers of Dostoyevsky. Dostoyevsky, like Scorsese, was a deeply religious artist with a genuinely apocalyptic vision of suffering. He saw the criminal mind as having a twisted relationship—or affinity—with that of the saint, and he used madness as his subject because for him it was the most fertile ground in which to develop his ideas about humanity. Like Scorsese (and like Travis, who lacks this artistic release, and so becomes a killer instead), Dostoyevsky saw the world itself as a kind of madhouse, an "everyday inferno," in which we were all burning, alone.

For Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro), isolation and anguish are one. He isolates himself primarily in order to suffer, it would seem, and yet he suffers above all because he is alone. (He writes in his diary, without the slightest irony: "I do not believe one should devote himself to morbid self-attention. I believe one should become a person like other people.") His similarity to Raskolnikov of *Crime and Punishment*, and to the abject, tortured protagonist of *Notes*, is in the way he twists everyone and everything in the world to fit his own sordid vision, turning his madness into a kind of inspiration, and finally, a demonic calling. Raskolnikov is an intellectualized version of Travis—he kills the old pawnbroker out of conceit. His theoretical superiority makes her expendable to his own advancement. This "theoretical superiority" might be known as "the Napoleon complex"; Raskolnikov believes that superior beings (such as Napoleon) have the *right* to destroy inferior ones if it is necessary to the fulfillment of their destiny. Accordingly, he kills the old woman (and by "accident" her young daughter) ostensibly in order to rob her, but actually to test his theory, which of course falls apart at once, taking him along with it. Really, he kills the old woman out of frustration and self-hatred.

Like Travis, Raskolnikov is a solipsist who sees his acts purely in terms of himself, and never in terms of those who are affected by them. There are no victims, as such, in the solipsist's perception, and when Travis destroys Sport and the others, he is, like Raskolnikov, merely lashing out at his own demons, demons which he has, in true schizophrenic fashion, projected onto the world. This is how Travis sees the world and we never get a sense of anything else.

10. Kael called the film "a raw, tabloid version of *Notes from Underground*, in "Underground Man," *When the Lights Go Down*, p.131.

Travis is an authentic movie creation, a killer-saint (self-obsessed martyr) descending into Hell like some pulp Dante to save his Beatrice (in this case, Iris, played by Jodie Foster) from what turns out, in the end, to have been his own demons. The comparison with *The Divine Comedy* is fanciful at best, because Travis is no poet and Iris no saint (she's a child hooker), and the film bears far closer resemblances John Ford's *The Searchers*. Its monstrous loner-hero, a reactionary crusader and self-claimed "lonely man" of God, also ironically invokes both Wayne and, that '70s version of the moral avenger, Harry Callaghan. Scorsese's film has far more dimensions to it than either *Dirty Harry* or *The Searchers*—it depicts Travis's acts not as heroic, or even anti-heroic, but as simply deranged, completely out of proportion, and motivated not by nobility or justice but by madness and rage.

Much has already been written of the parallels between Scorsese's film and Ford's, so I won't go into it too much here, except to mention the key difference, thematically speaking, which is the inclusion of what Scorsese and Schrader deliberately referred to as "the Scar scene."

A word of exposition is required then: *The Searchers* involves Wayne, as Ethan, the lone gunfighter, tracking down his niece, who was taken and adopted by the Apaches when they slaughtered her family, many years before. Ethan is dedicated to tracking her down and destroying the Apaches and—as we discover during the course of the film—his niece as well, whom he considers "contaminated" by the Apaches. When he discovers her, she is married to the Apache "Scar." Ethan kills Scar, but has mercy on his niece—played by Natalie Wood—and spares her life. At the end of the film Ethan is framed in the doorway outside the house of the reunited family and, as he walks away into the desert, the doorway closes on him, shutting out the wandering hero and the desert both. This closing shot is perhaps the single most effective and powerful image depicting "God's lonely man"—the alienation of the popular male action hero—in American movies. As such it sums up, perhaps better than any other image, an entire mood, beyond genre, of modern movies.

The "Scar-scene" which Scorsese and Schrader devised is meant deliberately to correct what they perceived as a central weakness of Ford's film, namely the fact that we are never allowed to see the niece's life within the Apache community, nor asked to imagine her relationship with Scar, nor ever made to feel the slightest sympathy for Scar himself. In *Taxi Driver* this thematic weakness is amended with a specific scene that takes place outside the perceptions of Travis (the rest of the film is almost entirely inside his point of view). The scene gives us Sport (Iris's pimp, played by Harvey Keitel) and Iris dancing together in the seedy, sultry gloom of Iris's apartment; it allows us to see that Sport is no monster (as Travis perceives him to be), and also just why, and how, Iris is so drawn to him and his world, a world which, for all its sordidness, is a necessary refuge for her. Travis's "saving" of her, and his murder of Sport (and the others) becomes accordingly an invasion, an onslaught, on what *he perceives* as iniquity and abomination. But quite plainly, exactly like Ethan in *The Searchers*, he's going after his own demons.

The idea had been building up in my mind for some time: true force. Here is man who would not take it any longer. Here is a man who *stood up*. . .
—Travis Bickle, *Taxi Driver*

These words, for all the conviction with which they are uttered, ring horribly false. For a moment it seems like the film is about to go grotesquely wrong, to degenerate into a macho fantasy of vigilante justice, to become as trite and contrived as Travis's speech. Right after the words "stood up," however, Scorsese cuts to one of the most eloquent images in the film—an overhead shot of Travis, splayed out on his bed, fully dressed and armed to the teeth. He looks like a catatonic rag doll, drained of all vitality, dignity and purpose: a lost soul. This is exactly what he is, of course, and all his bravado, his newfound sense of direction, are reduced by this single image to what they are: an insane man's desperate reaching for sanity, a drowning man's last grasping for the straw that will break the camel's back.

Before Travis decides to vent his religious wrath upon the venal world of street scum, he first directs it at the political candidate Palantine, for no obvious reason other than that he is associated in Travis's mind with Betsy, the vision of perfection who rejects him and turns out to be "like all the rest—in hell." But there may be more to it than this. Travis is split in his moral outrage and his nausea: he can't decide whether to strike at the top or at the bottom of this rancid, irredeemable hellhole "society" (it's his own hell, of course, one that he's made and is now stewing in). He appears to see a "hit" on Palantine as an appropriate response to the candidate's ineffective mincing, and as a fitting challenge for the guerilla skills which he learned in Vietnam, in the marines (where shaving the head into a mohawk, as Travis does here, signifies a kamikaze-style attack mission). Apparently Travis fully expects to die for his action, and it seems fair to say that his motive is really a suicidal one. Lacking the clarity and the courage (and the honesty) to destroy himself, Travis redirects his destructive energy outward, at a more or less random target, knowing that he can thereby bring about his own death. This is one of the film's most profound observations (accordingly it remains hidden, barely even implied, but it's there)—that all violence is essentially a deviant form of violence against the self, and that so many killers are simply failed suicides. Travis does attempt to end his life in a dramatic fashion after the carnage of the finale, but his guns are by then all empty, leaving him no exit.

It is particularly intriguing (and disturbing) to look at these two alternative options of attack, of Palantine and then of Sport and the other hoods, in relation to two real-life events that followed *Taxi Driver* and would appear to have been inspired by the film (in the first case directly, and in the second case only indirectly). These cases are the John Hinckley, Jr. assassination attempt on Ronald Reagan, and the Bernard Goetz shooting of several black youths on the New York subway.

In the first case, Hinckley claimed to be haunted by the film *Taxi Driver* and to have fallen in love with its adolescent heroine, Jodie Foster (he wrote her love letters). In a truly uncanny (and definitely somewhat suspect) case of life imitating art imitating art imitating life (a sort of endless loop, mirrors inside mirrors), Hinckley was somehow "inspired" (or coerced?) to imitate a movie "hero" who was in actual fact a psychopath who in turn was inspired—albeit unconsciously—to act out his own fantasies of heroic behavior, as engendered by a culture gorged on infantile ideas of manliness and heroism as propagated

by John Wayne films and the like (*The Searchers* is an exception, because it includes both irony and melancholy in its vision of the “hero”).² Hinckley’s reasoning (if such it was) was as incoherent as Manson’s—there was no possible relationship between his “love” for Foster and his attempt on Reagan’s life, nor was there any conceivable *heroic* motive for such an act. He merely claimed he’d done it “to prove his love” (I’m guessing here) to Foster. But, as far as relations to *Taxi Driver* go, Travis was never in love with Iris in any case, only infatuated with Betsy, on account of whom he made a go at Palantine. In which case, Hinckley was obsessed with the wrong actress; either that or he made an attack on the wrong “scum”!³ Regardless of the true meaning or motive behind the Hinckley affair, it proved one thing beyond all doubt—*Taxi Driver* was an uncommonly powerful film, the kind that affected people deeply, and, if the media was to be believed, could even incite to murder.

The Bernard Goetz case is another matter, and it establishes something even more remarkable about *Taxi Driver*. At the ending of the movie, Travis’s explosion is interpreted, by tabloid journalism at least, as authentic heroism, and Travis himself is not only exonerated but emerges as a modern-day crusader—a crime fighter along the lines of *Death Wish*’s Charles Bronson or the Batman. This was received by some critics as a dubious “liberty”—an essentially implausible ironic resolution. But certainly it made one ponder the possibility that Travis’s own insane fantasies might not be so aberrational, but merely a product of the society and culture in which he existed. In which case, it didn’t seem so far-fetched that this society would—to the extent that it shared in such fantasies—accept and even embrace Travis as the hero he imagined himself to be. (The movie slips into outright fairy tale in the last scene however, when the ice-angel Betsy “comes back” to him.) Whatever our original feeling about the irony and the insight of this ending, the Bernard Goetz case put any doubts to rest and proved that truth is indubitably stranger—and more twisted—than any fiction.

Goetz exploded one day on a New York subway car, drew a pistol and shot down several young black “hoodlums” who he claimed were trying to rob him; the young men denied this claim and at least one of them has since sued Goetz for damages.⁴ There seems little doubt that (like Travis) Goetz acted out of personal rage and frustration, that he simply snapped one day and started shooting. The media and the general public, however—so satiated and fed-up with the ever increasing crime rate and street violence

² Robert Philip Kolker calls Travis “the legitimate child of John Wayne and Norman Bates,” and writes that “the more deeply he withdraws, the more he comes to believe in the American movie myths of purity and heroism, love and selflessness, and to actuate them as the grotesque parodies of human behavior they are.” *A Cinema of Loneliness*, p. 194.

³ The behavior-mod boys at MKULTRA, or wherever, might have shown more fidelity to *Taxi Driver*’s schemata if they had “obsessed” Hinckley with Cybill Shepherd, instead. So long as we are delving into the folklore of paranoia, it’s of passing interest to note that the 1997 movie *Conspiracy Theory*—which pays homage to *Taxi Driver* in its credit sequence—has no trouble at all linking up Mark Chapman (John Lennon’s assassin) with John Hinckley Jr., as supposed “Manchurian candidates”; the link it posits is via J. D. Salinger’s mysterious novel *Catcher in the Rye*, an idea which comes under similar scrutiny in *Six Degrees of Separation*.

⁴ He was eventually awarded \$43 million in damages. Goetz claimed to have been “threatened” by the teenagers’ “body language,” but when he was arrested, the only words he recalled any of them saying to him prior to the shooting were, “How are you?” In the same interrogation, Goetz admitted that before firing a second round into victim Darrell Cobey, in true Hollywood vigilante fashion he quipped, “You seem to be all right: here’s another.” Three of the teens were found to be carrying long screwdrivers at the time they approached Goetz, however, and partly as a result of this, a grand jury declined to indict Goetz of attempted murder. In 1987, he was found guilty in criminal court of an illegal weapons charge and nothing more.

of New York—reacted with (only slightly qualified) approval. Quite literally, “Here was man who would not take it any longer. Here was a man who stood *up!*” The actual resolution of the case was by no means so simple or unambiguous as that of *Taxi Driver*—Goetz served eight and a half months for possession of an illegal weapon—but (and this is the most important point) in the eyes of the public, or parts of it, he was a hero. His actions were viewed not as the acts of a madman but of a brave and justifiably indignant citizen, albeit a citizen of Hell (where any kind of action may be permitted, so long as it appears sufficiently justified). There’s no telling what kind of man Goetz was (or if he’d ever seen *Taxi Driver*), but like Travis, he may as well be Everyman: just one more downtrodden, dejected nobody with delusions of grandeur (he carried a gun, obviously) who happened to reach the limits of his patience—or his sanity—a little before the rest of us. As Pauline Kael wrote of *Taxi Driver*: “part of the horror implicit in this movie is how easily he [Travis] passes. The anonymity of the city soaks up one more invisible man; he could be legion.”⁵

Scorsese’s vision of New York City as a microcosm of the world, an ordinary inferno burning with ever greater intensity and rage, no longer seems (if it ever did) to be hyperbole. Scorsese is an artist of expressionism, with a visionary gift close to madness, perhaps, but if so that’s exactly what makes him qualified for his subject. *Taxi Driver* is the American Dream exploded—it’s what America looks like when the “Dream” comes true.

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We have reached the turning point.
—Charles Palantine, *Taxi Driver*

As Travis, De Niro gives a cagey, haunting performance; we feel at all times his internal anguish, his growing desperation, his overwhelming sense of isolation. Travis is alienation incarnate, and when he’s up there on the screen, we don’t feel disgust or superiority—our hearts go out to him. What De Niro accomplishes here goes beyond standard screen acting: Travis being a secretive, introverted and above all *lost* soul, most of his work is internal. It’s not a showy performance, like his Johnny Boy (or like Brando’s Kowalski), yet neither is it a work of restrained grandeur like his (and Brando’s) Vito Corleone. Yet it is I think even more remarkable—it’s not only De Niro’s finest performance, it’s one of the finest in the brief history of movies. De Niro and Scorsese work so closely together here that it’s impossible to separate their work. Between the two of them (working from Schrader’s script) they have created a modern archetype—a “hero” for our times. The irony of course is that Travis is both a nobody and an Everyman: he is, if you like, the archetypal stereotype. What Scorsese and De Niro have done however is to make him into a living, breathing person, giving us perhaps the most fully realized picture of a sociopathic killer outside of literature that the arts have yet provided.

The other players in the film, though incidental to Scorsese’s vision and peripheral to Travis’s viewpoint (everyone is peripheral, finally—he’s got tunnel vision and there’s only darkness at the end of it) are collectively inspired, right down to the bit parts given to Peter Boyle and Harry Northup (as Wizard and Doughboy, Travis’s cabbie associates), Cybill Shepherd as Betsy the urban angel Travis becomes

⁵ From “Underground Man,” in *When the Lights Go Down*, p. 133.

obsessed with, Albert Brooks as her nebbish co-worker, and most of all Harvey Keitel and Jodie Foster, as Sport and Iris, the pimp whom Travis pits himself against and the whore whom he “saves.” It’s in the scenes between these characters that we really see Travis more or less as he is: this is *his* world, though he won’t admit it to himself. In his “date” with Iris in the coffee bar (for noonday breakfast—she’s wearing two pairs of sunglasses) Travis, for a brief moment, actually seems to relax and forget all his morbid brooding and become an ordinary person at last. There’s no possibility of redemption here (Iris and Travis are as impossible a couple as Travis and Betsy) but there is something approaching relief.

Conversely, in his meeting with Sport, we get to see Travis as the street warrior he imagines himself to be. (Sport seems vaguely aware of Travis’s fantasies here, he calls him “cowboy” and suspects that Travis is a cop.) In their first scene together (they only have two, the meeting and the stand-off, but they are the high points of the film), Travis seems dazed and bewildered—he hardly seems to know what Sport is talking about (but he registers all right). Sport for his part is amused and just a little bit baffled by Travis. He instantly senses that Travis is not quite all there, but being a pimp he’s used to dealing with weirdos. Yet Sport’s playfulness here ironically helps Travis set him up as his adversary and, finally, his victim. (Sport’s reference to guns and his playful gestures with his fingers—simulating a pistol just as Charlie does in *Mean Streets*—seem to ominously foreshadow the showdown.) When he talks in lurid detail about Iris’s “services” (Keitel improvised the scene) he is tragically unaware of how he is feeding the flames of Travis’s rage, and how these flames will soon devour him. Travis’s demons, once released, turn not on himself but on everyone else. Yet Sport is actually one of the most likeable characters in the film—along with Iris he seems to be the only “real” personality; the rest of them, because they are so irrelevant or repugnant to Travis in his isolation, seem like shadows.⁶

And amid these shadows walks Travis, a man crucified by his own fear and loathing, a martyr to modern alienation, himself no more than a shadow, a suffering phantom with no chains to rattle (the soundtrack rattles them for him). The tragedy of *Taxi Driver*—and of maybe all solipsistic sociopaths driven to violence—is that Travis only becomes real (to himself and to a world of indifference) when he kills. Travis is one of an unknown legion for whom “murder is the only door, through which they enter life.”⁷ And when the film leaves him pacified, vindicated, strangely complacent, chatting with his cabbie buddies, it’s the most disturbing image in the film, because we know that the heat that sent him past boiling point is still on, and that it’s only a matter of time until the next explosion comes.

Travis’s hell of loneliness and enforced celibacy comes from his incapacity to connect with women: either he wants to be saved by them (as in the case of Betsy), or else he wants to save them (Iris). In both cases, there’s no possibility of equality or understanding between them, and he feels betrayed when these women don’t act according to his fantasy-view of them. He says of Betsy, “I realize now she is just like all the rest, cold, distant. Many people like that; women for sure. They’re like a unión.” Travis experiences women as a force unto themselves, gathered together against him, refusing him access

⁶ A particularly disturbing but sickly hilarious performance is given by Scorsese himself as one of these urban fiends—as a jealous husband in the back of Travis’s cab, fantasizing out loud about destroying his wife’s vagina with a .44 Magnum. The joke turns sour however when we see Travis specifying this very model while choosing his arsenal.

⁷ From the Tom Waits song, “Murder in the Red Barn,” on *Bone Machine*.

into their world. But Travis is so isolated inside his own world that all his efforts at communicating—at sharing—are doomed to failure. Only when he literally blasts his way out of his shell and into the real world does the world sit up and take notice. And when Betsy “comes back” to Travis in the final scene, it might be Travis’s ultimate fantasy fulfilled. He’s not only slayed the dragon—he’s won the maiden. And what’s more, he gets to reject her (gently), thereby proving his own superiority, his righteousness. She is “in Hell, like all the rest,” and, now that she realizes it, and comes back to her savior, it is too late, he has moved beyond her. (Iris, on the other hand, always knew she was in Hell, and so was willing to be saved.) The film actively shares in Travis’s fantasy here, as well as his madness and alienation: it’s a poetic fairy tale, written in blood.

Part of the film’s subversion and inversion of the old conventions of the Western hero and moral avenger (a subversion that began with *The Searchers*) can be traced through the superficial details. The “scar,” for example, such as it is, is now on Travis himself—a war wound across his back (he was “stabbed in the back” by America?). Likewise the mohawk. Travis himself has become the adversary, obviously; he’s fallen prey to Nietzsche’s trap—by battling with monsters he has become a monster. He’s been gazing into the abyss so long that it’s all he sees.⁸ Travis sees enemies—corruption—everywhere: “all the animals come out at night—whores, skunks, pussies, buggers, queens, fairies, dopers, junkies.” Travis is a man whose inner hell has spilled out into the world around him. His mentioning having served in the marines (in the opening scene with Joe Spinell) and the scar on his back are the only indications of his war experience, and for those of us who don’t register the symbolism of the mohawk, there’s no overt suggestion that these experiences are responsible for the state of his mind, or for his finally coming off the rails. Yet the film is, I think, the first film to deal—in a nonsymbolic fashion—with the horrors, the psychological consequences, of Vietnam.

Of course, the war is neither seen nor mentioned in the film, but it doesn’t have to be. Travis brings the war with him, and wherever he goes he’s in a state of total paranoia—the “heightened awareness” of his fear and his loathing. Travis has transposed the “gooks” of Vietnam onto the junkies and pimps and pushers of New York City, and he sees them as every bit as alien, inhuman, and threatening as (presumably) he was conditioned and trained to see the Vietnamese. Travis’s internal conflict—his tension and dread—is so intense, so overwhelming, that he *needs* a visible enemy to placate him, provide a means of releasing and directing the pressure. And the bloodbath, when it comes, is Scorsese’s idea of a baptism. The final orgy of killing in *Taxi Driver* is anything but pleasurable to watch, yet it *is* strangely orgasmic in effect. It offers the only relief that the film has to give, to Travis and, by extension, to the audience. Scorsese has taken us too far by now to let us off with anything less than murder, and the massacre is not only Travis’s redemption and damnation, all in one, it is his sexual consummation also.

As Pauline Kael writes, it’s “the only real orgasm he can have.”⁹

⁸ He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster. And when you gaze into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you.” Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 84.

⁹ *When the Lights Go Down*, p. 135. An idea that is also anticipated in *Mean Streets*, when Charlie describes his dream to Theresa: “I come, only I come blood.”