

The struggle for identity and commoditization in society in taxi driver



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In his analysis of *Taxi Driver* as a revisionist western, Robert Ray places *Taxi Driver*'s protagonist Travis Bickle squarely in the mould of the solitary heroes of the western genre. He notes the unspecified origins of Travis as well as the character's initial "disinterest" in getting involved with what he considers the venality and decay of New York City (352). Perhaps also like these western heroes, Travis is directionless in his life. In addition to fighting his profound loneliness and his apparent psychosis, Travis struggles to find and maintain a real identity in an environment which is increasingly problematic for him. Under the backdrop of the commoditization of people, politics, and sexuality in 1970s America, Travis strives for self-actualization and to carve an identity out for himself distinct from his profession. At the outset of the film, Travis is introduced as an unemployed newcomer to New York applying to be a taxi driver. He exhibits a certain amount of detachment in the interview for this job. When asked, point-blank, why he wants to become a driver, he merely replies, "I can't sleep nights" and, later, "I ride around nights mostly. Subways, buses. Figured, you know, if I'm gonna do that, I might as well get paid for it." Travis' dispassion in applying for the titular position of the film is compounded by the lack of clearly-defined goals in his life. Montages in the first act show Travis seemingly wandering New York at night in his taxicab, staring expressionlessly at people on the street. Travis' moral intentions are equally uncertain. He virulently rails against the "whores, skunk pussies, buggers, queens, fairies, dopers, junkies" of New York, yet he also regularly patronizes porno theaters. In one early scene, Travis, in a voice-over, reveals his lack of direction: "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 someone should become a person like other

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people.” Later in the film, Travis tries to explain his feelings to his coworker Wizard: “ I just want to go out and, and, you know, like, really, really, really do something... I just want to go out and really, you know, I really wanna... I got some bad ideas in my head.” Travis’ attitudes and behavior represent more than just the loneliness or the psychosis which partially define his character. Instead they are symptomatic of a broader yearning for identity and purpose in society. Travis’ slim backstory — he served in the Marines in Vietnam — reinforces this interpretation. Many veterans returning from Vietnam in the 1970s struggled to integrate into a both society which viewed their efforts negatively and a nation which was engulfed in economic crises, political instability, and social upheaval. Traumatized by their experiences in war, post-traumatic stress disorder was another major stumbling block for many young men in building post-war lives. While Travis does not seem to take any special interest in being a taxi driver at any point in the film, he is ultimately tied closely to his job. The relationship between one’s work and one’s identity is bluntly stated by Wizard in his monologue as he lectures an advice-seeking Travis: Look at it this way. A man takes a job, you know? And that job – I mean, like that – That becomes what he is. You know, like – You do a thing and that’s what you are. Like I’ve been a cabbie for thirteen years. Ten years at night. I still don’t own my own cab. You know why? Because I don’t want to. That must be what I want. To be on the night shift drivin’ somebody else’s cab. You understand? I mean, you become – You get a job, you become the job. One guy lives in Brooklyn. One guy lives in Sutton Place. You got a lawyer. Another guy’s a doctor. Another guy dies. Another guy gets well. People are born, y’know? I envy you, your youth. Go on, get laid, get drunk. Do anything. You got no choice, anyway. I mean, we’re all fucked.

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More or less, ya know. [emphasis added] Travis dismisses Wizard's ideas, saying " I don't know. That's about the dumbest thing I ever heard." Yet Travis is indeed ultimately characterized by his job as a taxi driver. At the end of the film, a series of newspaper headlines refer to Travis as a " Taxi Driver" or " Cabbie" and erroneously (particularly in Robert Ray's estimation) appraise him as a hero during the film's surreal coda. The characters and events of the film are seemingly reduced to a very shallow and inaccurate urban fable — " hero taxi driver kills Mafia members and saves child hooker" — the particulars of which (e. g., Travis' first assassination attempt) are glossed over in favor of an improbable happy ending featuring various one-dimensional characters plucked from the street. There is, then, a metonymic relationship established in the film between a person and his profession. Furthermore, some of these relationships are arguably more sinister and damaging than the relationship between Travis and taxi driving. The commoditization of people — from a child prostitute to a United States Senator — is key latent theme throughout the film. The character of Senator Palantine is presented as a rather uninspiring presidential hopeful offering a vague message of change and unconvincing platitudes about empowerment as embodied by his campaign slogan, " We Are The People." Robert Ray calls Palantine " another in the long line of good-hearted community men shown by the western to be too weak to deal with the real problems" (353). Within the film, Palantine is mostly a virtual presence, represented largely by his campaign staff and his posters which appear sporadically in the background of various scenes. The audience only actually " meets" Palantine in a candid setting once: when the Senator, by pure happenstance, appears in Travis' cab. In this scene, Travis encourages Palantine to " flush" the " filth and

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scum” of New York “ down the fuckin’ toilet.” To this Palantine can only meekly respond, “ Well, I think I know what you mean, Travis. But it’s not going to be easy.” Palantine only appears two other times: via a TV interview and on stage at the rally towards the film’s end at which Travis makes his assassination attempt. Palantine is depicted as being packaged for mass consumption by his media-savvy campaign employees. Even Palantine’s name — a portmanteau of “ pal” and “ Valentine” — is evocative of this “ branding” of politicians. (His opponent, whose name appears on a poster but is unseen in the film, has the pleasant moniker of “ Goodwin.”) The film’s views of Palantine’s downtown campaign office partially depict the internal mechanism of this marketing. In one scene, Tom encourages his colleague Betsy to “ emphasize the mandatory welfare program” in the Senator’s platform. This exchange follows: Betsy: First push the man, then the issue. “ Senator Palantine is first of all a dynamic man, an intelligent, interesting, fresh, fascinating—” Tom: You forgot “ sexy.” Betsy: “- man.” No, I did not forget “ sexy.” Tom: Listen to what you’re saying. You sound like you’re selling mouthwash. Betsy: We are selling mouthwash. [emphasis added]The original version of this scene as written in Paul Schrader’s original screenplay includes a longer rumination on the marketing of people in politics and media. Betsy rhetorically asks Tom why CBS News has the highest ratings, explaining: You want to know why CBS has the highest ratings? You [think] their news is any different from NBC, ABC? It’s all the same news. Same stories. Same order usually. What, you thought they had good news for people, right? You thought that’s why people watched CBS? I’ll tell you why people watch CBS. Cronkite. The man. You got it? Not the news, not the issues, the man. If Walter Cronkite told people to eat soap, they’d do it. We <https://assignbuster.com/the-struggle-for-identity-and-commoditization-in-society-in-taxi-driver/>

are selling cars, goddamn it (15). [emphasis added] This depiction of Palantine as an empty suit cynically marketed like mouthwash by his campaign staff composes the political backdrop of the film, where the commoditization of politics through mass media is a critical part of the environment of 1976 New York. The reduction of Palantine to a commodity whose vaguely-defined personal characteristics take precedent over his issue positions is apparent in Travis' relationship to the candidate. Travis, when offering to volunteer for Palantine in order to meet Betsy, is asked how he feels about the Palantine's position on welfare; Travis replies: " I don't really know the Senator's stand on welfare, but I'm sure it's a good stand." Even after Betsy breaks things off with Travis, Travis retains an inexplicable fascination with the candidate. His obsession is expressed visually through the walls of his small apartment shown coated with Palantine posters and newspaper clippings about the candidate, as if the Senator were Travis' favorite band. Notably, Travis' interest appears to lack any kind of depth of comprehension of Palantine's agenda. In the realm of Travis' mind, Palantine is thus reduced to an object of irrational fetishism. Sexual commoditization is another important theme in the film. Iris is a teenage runaway and child prostitute under the aegis of her panderer Matthew, whom she calls " Sport." She is literally held in sexual bondage by her pimp; the audience meets Iris in the midst of an impulsive escape attempt, which ends with Matthew violently removing her from the back seat of Travis' cab and " tipping" Travis \$20 for his " trouble." Later, when Travis tries to rescue her, Iris insists that she's not being treated poorly by Matthew and tells Travis that she " must've been stoned" during her escape attempt. Later still, in a scene peculiar for its absence of Travis, Iris and Matthew dance very tenderly with each other

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as he whispers soothing assurances of love to her; she seems genuinely mollified by him. As a drug-addicted child prostitute, Iris is extremely powerless, and her clingy subordination to Matthew is thus unsurprising; she herself admits that, “ When I’m not stoned, I got no place else to go. They just protect me from myself.” She is essentially held as a slave, and her rationalization of this — her belief that she is still in control of her own destiny and can leave at any time, yet simply chooses not to — is nothing short of an outgrowth of her desperation caused by her dependence upon Matthew to survive. Iris, acting much the same way as hostages and women trapped in abusive relationships do, has bonded with her exploiter and captor to the point where she appears to actually “ love” him. Being a child prostitute, Iris’ sexuality is effectively commoditized to the extent that it destroys her personality. Iris “ markets” herself in flamboyant costumes, described as “ floppy, Janis Joplin clothes” in the script (59). Additionally, Matthew’s act of giving Travis a 20 dollar bill represents a payment for Iris herself. The effects of this are so severe that Iris refuses to even acknowledge her own real name, preferring instead to go by the deprecating sobriquet “ Easy.” Ironically, Iris has an obsession with eyewear and often wears sunglasses, even at night, that obscure her own eyes, which appear hollowed from drug abuse. It is no coincidence that the people Travis ultimately perseveres to kill — Senator Palantine and the men who pimp Iris — share responsibility for the very commoditization of people, politics, and sexuality in the film. Is this what Travis refers to when he rambles about “ the scum, the cunts, the dogs, the filth, the shit?” Are both Palantine and Matthew equal purveyors of social decay? In many ways, Travis’ identity crisis mirrors the identity crisis which faced the U. S. in the middle of the <https://assignbuster.com/the-struggle-for-identity-and-commoditization-in-society-in-taxi-driver/>

1970s. Like Travis, the American people were traumatized by the Vietnam War. Moreover, the nation was disenchanted with politics by the improprieties of the Nixon administration, and the growing pornographic industry — especially as depicted in the film — forced society to question the impact of mass media sexuality. Works Cited Ray, Robert. *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985. Schrader, Paul. *Taxi Driver*. Reproduced at “Taxi Driver Script at IMSDb.” The Internet Movie Script Database. Accessed 13 May 2008.