Paul Schrader's Screenplay of Taxi Driver: A Critical View

An Honors Thesis (ID 499)

By

Brian Bauer

Thesis Director

Richard D. Brown

Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana
May 1979

Spring 1979
Paul Schrader's Screenplay of *Taxi Driver*:
A Critical View

An Honors Thesis (ID 499)

By

Brian Bauer

Thesis Director

Dr. Richard Brown

Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana
May 1979

Spring 1979
The major problem I encountered in writing this critical commentary on Taxi Driver was the inaccessibility of the actual screenplay of the film. Filmmakers have a tendency to guard jealously their properties even after they have been produced and released. The screenplay of Taxi Driver is unpublished and the only copy available for study is in the Research Library of the American Film Institute in Los Angeles. Even there the screenplays are not allowed to be photocopied or removed from the library. This lack of availability presents a major problem because quite often a screenplay differs greatly from the finished film. Consequently, I have had to rely on interviews, reviews, and articles, as well as my own memorial reconstruction of the film for significant details; this critical material provides more than enough information for determining Paul Schrader's actual contributions to the film.
Whenever a specific quotation from the film is cited, it comes from my own memory of Taxi Driver, which I have seen several times. If the film reference is footnoted, then the quotation comes from a particular source.

B.B.
People are strange when you're a stranger,
Faces look ugly when you're alone.
Women seem wicked when you're unwanted,
Streets are uneven when you're down.

-Jim Morrison-
Paul Schrader's Screenplay of **Taxi Driver**:  
A Critical View  
by Brian Bauer

Paul Schrader is currently one of the most successful young screenwriter-directors in America. His films seem to have found the fine line between artistry and popular appeal in an otherwise totally commercial film industry. While Schrader's films are primarily known for their extraordinary outbursts of violence, they are also pregnant with various themes involving psychological and social implications. Films such as *The Yakuza, Taxi Driver, Blue Collar*, and most recently *Hardcore*, display a "mixture of sex, violence, social commentary and personal anguish to impress everyone from the crassest mogul to the editor of the most esoteric film journal."¹

Of all of his screenplays, the most successful, both commercially and artistically, has been *Taxi Driver*. In 1976, the year of its release, *Taxi Driver* grossed over 11 million dollars as well as winning the Grand Prize as best film at the Cannes Film Festival. Schrader's screenplay, directed by Martin Scorsese and starring Robert DeNiro, is an existential horror story about a psychotic killer who ironically becomes a hero through a twist of fate. *Taxi Driver* proves Schrader's abilities as a screenwriter; it is a penetrating portrait of loneliness and frustration turned to violence, and it is also a film about films, laden with
references and allusions to other films as well as commenting on film and its relationship to society; therefore, the film can be said to have an "aesthetic" theme as well.

Before getting into a discussion of the career of Paul Schrader, and more importantly, before presenting a critical view of *Taxi Driver*, his best and most personal representative work, one should take a very brief look at the commercial film industry, the nature of film as a collaborative art, and the screenwriter's special contributions.

When considering the nature of film, especially in America, one should remember that while cinema may be the newest art form, it is also an industry. Films are very expensive to produce, and it is very difficult to convince an investor to take a chance on a film with little or no popular appeal. First and foremost, films are made to make money. In Hollywood the worth of a film is judged primarily by the box office receipts. Admittedly, few producers in the film industry are concerned with creating a lasting work of art; rather, they are concerned with producing what the public will buy.

The challenge to artists in the commercial film industry, then, is to make a film that is financially successful as well as artistically valid. Paul Schrader explains his approach to the challenge in this way:

I believe a film has to have a high line and a low line... for you to get enough people to make it financially viable.
In *Taxi Driver* the high line was this existential character, and the low line was violence. In *Blue Collar* the high line was Marxist analysis, and the low line was [Richard Pryor's](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Pryor) exploitation and get-back-at-the-Man rage. In *Hardcore*, the high line is theology, and the low line is pornography.² Schrader is an artist, but he is also familiar with the practical aspects of surviving in Hollywood.

A second point to consider about the nature of filmmaking is that unlike most of the other arts, which are done by a single artist, film is a collaborative art done by several artists working together. The writer, director, actors, cinematographer, film editor, set designers and many others all combine their talents in the making of a film. Screenwriter Dudley Nichols thinks that this specialization "tends to destroy that individuality of style which is the mark of any superior work of art."³

The person who is responsible for drawing all of the elements together is the director. He is usually the one who imposes a "style" on the work, and for this reason the film is often referred to as a "director's medium." In the early sixties several French film critics, including François Truffaut, developed a critical theory emphasizing the director as the dominant creative force. This theory, known as the "Auteur theory," was popularized in this country through the criticism of Andrew Sarris.⁴ However, the auteur theory can only be applied to a few directors, such as Charles Chaplin, D.W. Griffith, Orson Welles,
Jean Renoir and Alfred Hitchcock, most of whom write their own screenplays. In general, the director can be considered an "interpretive" artist. It is the screenwriter who is the "creative" artist.

The screenwriter provides the foundation on which the film is built. A screenplay is not actually a finished product; "It is a step, the first and most important step, in the process of making a film." The screenwriter is the one who creates the film's plot, character, dialogue and themes. Here is how Nichols describes the work of the screenwriter:

It is the writer who is the dreamer, the imaginer, the shaper... If the ultimate film is to have any significant content, throwing some new glint of light on life, it is the writer who will have to create it.

After the "blueprint" of the film is laid out in the screenplay, the screenwriter's job is done, unless he is to be on the set during filming in order to rework scenes and dialogue when problems arise. Now it is the director's responsibility to realize the screenplay in cinematic terms. At this stage a screenplay can be destroyed or made better, depending on the talent of the director, as Paul Schrader explains:

Every director obviously changes the script, changes you, in a way fucks you. But that fucking is also a creative process, just as fucking in real life is. And if you can get fucked by good, talented people, then you'll be happy with the child that emerges.
Before Schrader even thought of becoming involved in the creative process of filmmaking, he wanted to become a minister. Brought up in a strict Calvinist family in Grand Rapids, Michigan, Schrader became interested in films while studying for the ministry at Calvin College. One summer while attending Columbia University to study film, he met Pauline Kael, the prominent film critic for The New Yorker. After talking with Kael several times she advised him, "You don't want to be a minister, you want to be a movie critic." 

Several years later, after graduating from Calvin, Schrader contacted Kael and she helped him get into the UCLA film school. During his time at UCLA Schrader wrote film criticism for The L.A. Free Press, Coast, L.A. Times Calendar, and radio station KPFK. He was the editor of Cinema from Volume 6, number 1, in 1970, to Volume 8, number 1 in 1973, and in 1972 he published an entire book of film criticism titled Transcendental Style In Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer.

After graduating from UCLA, Schrader decided to give up film criticism and try his hand at screenwriting. He was one of the first people admitted to the American Film Institute's Center for Advanced Film Studies as a screenwriting fellow. He resigned from the AFI in protest after they removed their research and critical studies staff.

Schrader's first script, written in 1971, was Pipeliner, a somewhat autobiographical screenplay that was designed to be made for under $100,000. It was "about a dying man who goes home to
northern Michigan for sympathy and ends up fucking up the lives of everyone around him." Schrader could not sell the screenplay, but in the process of trying to sell it he learned the commercial side of filmmaking.

At the same time he was unable to sell Pipeliner, Schrader's marriage broke up and shortly thereafter the affair that caused that break up also fell through. As Schrader comments:

I got to wandering around at night; I couldn't sleep because I was so depressed . . . After the bars closed, I'd go to pornography . . . I was saved by an ulcer: I had not been eating, just drinking. 15

While in the hospital for his ulcer, Schrader began formulating the concept that would eventually become Taxi Driver. Two things happened which brought it all together: Harry Chapin's song Taxi, about a lonely taxi driver who runs into an old girlfriend, and the incident involving the shooting of George Wallace by Arthur Bremer. 16 Schrader wrote the screenplay in 1972 and left it with his agent. Taxi Driver was not produced until 1975-76.

Soon after leaving the hospital Schrader was contacted by his brother Leonard with a film idea. Leonard, who was a teacher in Japan, had the idea to do a film based on the yakuza gangster films of Japan. They wrote a screenplay about an American who gets involved with the Japanese underworld. The film, The Yakuza, ends in an obligatory climax in the yakuza film tradition: "A tour de force fight scene where all the accumulated obligations
are expiated in a grand finale of blood letting." The screenplay was written in 1973 and sold for an incredible $300,000. This sale was the encouragement Schrader had needed.

The Yakuza was directed by Sidney Pollack (Jeremiah Johnson, Three Days of the Condor) who called in script doctor Robert Towne (Chinatown, Shampoo) to do some re-writing. The film was unsuccessful both commercially and critically. The problem with the film as Schrader sees it was that Pollack directed against the grain of the script.

I wrote a violent, underworld film about blood, duty, and obligation. He made a sort of rich, romantic, transcultural film. Once Schrader had sold the screenplay he lost any creative control over the film. He was beginning to realize that if he wanted his scripts directed the way he visualized them, he would eventually have to get into directing himself.

Schrader's next screenplay, also written in 1973, was originally titled Déjà Vu but was retitled Obsession for release. Directed by Brian De Palma (Sisters, Carrie, The Fury), Obsession is a Hitchcockian story of a man who falls in love with a woman who looks just like his supposedly dead wife. Schrader says that the screenplay was greatly changed and the finished film is more De Palma's than his. Obsession broke even at the box office and met mixed reactions from the critics.

Schrader had hoped to direct his next screenplay in order to gain more control over the final film and become a "complete"
filmmaker. Since he still lacked the adequate power in the industry to make such a condition, he eventually had to give up the idea of directing in order to sell the screenplay. Written in 1973, this screenplay was titled Rolling Thunder. The final version of the film changed his original concept greatly. Schrader had intended "to make a movie about a certain racist psychology, which could work both as an exploitation film and with an interesting psychological edge."\(^{19}\) Instead, the film was a standard Vietnam-veteran's-revenge-story that was all exploitation and no psychology. Rolling Thunder is easily the worse film yet made from a Schrader script.

Of Schrader's early work, Richard Corliss writes:

Schrader's early screenplays were obsessed with aberrant psychological movement: from just the other side of normal, on out to the edge where aggressions explode into crimson orgasms of destruction.\(^{20}\)

For even a better understanding of these early screenplays, here is Schrader's own assessment:

. . . what I'm concerned about in films and in real life is redemption, because I do believe in purging and a kind of transcendence, either through contemplation or action. In Taxi Driver and Yakuza, it's a redemption through action, self-destructive action.\(^{21}\)

With the release and success of Taxi Driver in early 1976, Schrader finally had the power to direct one of his own screenplays. His directing debut came with the highly underrated Blue
Collar, co-written with his brother Leonard in 1976. A film with a pseudo-Marxist conclusion, Blue Collar is the tale of three down-and-out auto workers who try to rob their own union. In the process they are slowly destroyed or taken into the system; one sells out to the union and becomes a foreman, one tries to expose the union and is thus rejected by it, and one is murdered by the union. The final shot of the film is a freeze frame on the two once friendly survivors ready to fight each other with blood in their eyes. In voice-over is a comment made earlier in the film by the worker who was murdered:

Everything they do, the way they pit the lifers against the new boys, the old against the young, the black against the white, is meant to keep us in our place.22

Unfortunately, Blue Collar was a victim of poor distribution and a misleading advertising campaign that pushed the film as a Richard Pryor black exploitation vehicle rather than the important and complex film that it is. Critical reaction to Blue Collar was favorable and the film made several "ten best" lists.

Schrader also wrote and directed his most recent film, Hardcore. Originally titled The Pilgrim, Hardcore is a modern Pilgrim's Progress about a "hardcore" Calvinist businessman from Grand Rapids named Jake Van Dorn, who searches the alien world of pornography to find his missing daughter. Hardcore was inspired by one of Schrader's favorite films, John Ford's classic western The Searchers.
Andrew Sarris writes that:

*Whereas John Wayne's Ethan Edwards [in *The Searchers*] scours the Old West for the Comanche chieftain who has kidnapped his niece, George C. Scott's Jake Van Dorn discovers a new wilderness of depravity in his quest for his runaway daughter.*

Schrader also incorporates what he calls *The Searchers'* ending, "where you go right up to the moment of violence and then, rather than have it, you turn around and have a moment of forgiveness."

Written in '76 and released in 1979, *Hardcore* has been relatively successful at the box office, but the critics have been highly critical of the film. *Hardcore* lacks the unity of *Blue Collar* and the psychological motivation of Van Dorn's daughter is somewhat muddled, as is the eventual lesson learned by Van Dorn during his dark journey.

Schrader's other work includes three as yet unproduced screenplays. *Quebecois*, written in 1973, is "about a French-Italian gang war in Montreal." *The Havana Colony*, written in 1975, is about "the fall of Havana and a man who thinks he's Humphrey Bogart in *Casablanca*; at the end he realizes he's Marlon Brando and it's been *Last Tango* all along - the story of a man coming to love while the city falls around him."

*Hank Williams*, written in 1976, is a biography of the famous country singer.

Also written in 1976 are *The American Gigolo*, about a "high priced male hustler who gets entangled with a senator's wife and a sadomasochistic murder," and is currently in production with Schrader as director, and *Old Boyfriends*, co-written with
Leonard Schrader, about a young woman's comical revenge on three men who rejected her when she was younger. *Old Boyfriends* has just been released with *Nashville* writer Joan Tewkesbury directing.28

According to Richard Corliss, Schrader was also approached by director Steven Spielberg to write the script for *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. However, they disagreed on the major thrust of the film. Schrader conceived the film as a spiritual science-fiction life of a twentieth-century Saint Paul, while Spielberg wanted to emphasize the idea of a government cover-up of an alien landing. Elements of both end up in the finished film, although Schrader receives no screen credit.29

James Monaco has written that

> Of all the hip young screenwriters of his generation, Schrader not only has the darkest vision by far, but also has been able to impress upon his films the most sharply-defined personal stance.30

Schrader's "personal stance" emanates from the influence of seemingly unrelated film styles. One of these styles is a distinct European "aesthetic" influence from directors he admires as a critic, such as Robert Bresson and Carl Dreyer. Lacking the commercial film's glossy look, this "Art Film" style is austere. These films are carefully planned to reveal different dimensions and aspects of philosophical themes. For Bresson, at least, the theme is usually existentialistic. The other stylistic influence is "craziness, pure idiosyncrasy, completely anti-social
films" with "random brutality all around,"\(^3\) as exhibited in film noirs and films such as *Kiss Me Deadly* (Robert Aldrich, director) and *Mean Streets* (Martin Scorsese, director). These films are often expressionistic in style and reveal the darker, violent side of man. Both of these influences are prominent in *Taxi Driver*.

After being treated for his ulcer in 1972, Schrader left the hospital determined to change his lifestyle. He had several undeveloped story ideas in his mind at this time: the tumultuous recent events in his personal life; the lonely taxi driver character who picks up his old girlfriend as a fare, from Harry Chapin's song *Taxi*; and the psychotic would-be political assassin Arthur Bremer, who shot presidential candidate George Wallace because Bremer wanted to "be somebody." Schrader had just decided to leave for Los Angeles when the metaphor for *Taxi Driver* fell into place:

... I realized that was the metaphor I had been looking for: the man who will take anybody any place for money; the man who moves through the city like a rat through a sewer; the man who is constantly surrounded by people, yet has no friends. The absolute symbol of urban loneliness. That's the thing I'd been living; that was my symbol, my metaphor. The film is about a car as a symbol of urban loneliness, a metal coffin.\(^3\)

Schrader wrote the script in fifteen days, gave it to his agent, and left Los Angeles. He and his brother Leonard then wrote and sold *The Yakuza*. Finally, a year after he had completed *Taxi Driver*, producers Michael and Julia Phillips and Tony Bill
bought the option on it. The producers worked together with Schrader in choosing a director and an actor to play the pivotal role of Travis Bickle. At about this time Schrader saw director Martin Scorsese's Mean Streets, which co-starred Robert DeNiro. He knew that both the director and actor would be perfect for Taxi Driver. The producers agreed. 33

A graduate of New York University Film School, Martin Scorsese is one of the top directors of the "new Hollywood." His credentials include several short films; Who's That Knocking At My Door (1969), a low budget film which has early versions of characters who later appear in Mean Streets; Boxcar Bertha (1972), a Roger Corman produced exploitation film; Mean Streets (1973), an electrifying low budget allegory about a man trying to "make it" in New York City's Little Italy; Italianamerican (1974), a documentary concerning Italian immigrants; and Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore (1974), an uneven film about a thirty-five-year-old housewife for which Ellen Burstyn won an Academy Award as best actress. After directing Taxi Driver, Scorsese directed New York, New York (1977), a popular and critical failure despite the presence of Robert DeNiro and Liza Minnelli, and The Last Waltz (1978), possibly the finest rock documentary ever made. He is currently working again with Robert DeNiro on Raging Bull, a film about boxer Jake LaMotta. Scorsese's films have been currently described by Diane Jacobs:

The themes of guilt, loneliness, innate violence, and frustration crop up again and again in Scorsese's work, [sic] the director has demonstrated a versatility
of mood and style, the ability to find humour and compassion as well as tragedy or melodrama or irony in human behavior. 34

Basically a "kinetic" director, Scorsese varies his style according to the type of film he is making. In Mean Streets and Taxi Driver he uses a style that seems halfway between naturalism and expression, but in New York, New York he adopts the romantic style of thirties and forties musicals. Schrader says he chose Scorsese for Taxi Driver for these reasons:

I saw in Marty's work what I didn't have in the script; that sense of vibrancy, a sense of the city. What I think happened was that I wrote an essentially Protestant script, cold and isolated, and Marty directed a very Catholic film. My character wandered in from the snowy wastelands of Michigan, to the fetid, over-heated atmosphere of Marty's New York . . . 35

In his interview with Robert Bresson, published in Film Comment, Schrader comments that he had written an austere script that was directed in an expressionistic manner. 36

Just as Schrader's ideas filtered through the talents of Martin Scorsese, they also filtered through the talents of Robert DeNiro, who is possibly the finest American screen actor to surface in the last fifteen years. He first came to prominence in 1973 as the dying baseball catcher in director John Hancock's Bang the Drum Slowly. That same year he played Johnny Boy in Scorsese's Mean Streets. In 1974 DeNiro won the best supporting actor Academy Award for his portrayal of the young Vito Corleone

His many roles are varied types of characters, yet DeNiro brings to each performer an incredible intensity and believability. His characterization of Travis Bickle is a tour de force performance that possibly no other actor could have done as well. His performance in *Taxi Driver* won him the National Society of Film Critics best actor award, the New York Film Critics best actor award, and a best actor Academy Award nomination. Schrader credits DeNiro with adding "the schizophrenic quality of the character, which is not in the script." Schrader wrote Travis "going crazy in a more linear fashion than the character Bobby acted; his characterization zigs and zags."

In the true fashion of the democratic art of film, the combined talents of Schrader, Scorsese, and DeNiro are what make *Taxi Driver* a success. Schrader explains their intention in making *Taxi Driver* this way:

> We were all young enough to want to do something that will last. DeNiro told me, when we were talking about whether the film would make any
money, that he felt it was a film people would be watching fifty years from now, and whether everybody watched it next year wasn't important. 39

*Taxi Driver* was filmed in 1975 and released in early 1976.

This unique film centers almost totally on Travis Bickle; he is in all but two scenes. The point of view of the film is subjective. The audience sees the world as the psychotic Travis sees it. Colin Westerbrook, Jr. explains the effect of this subjective style:

*Taxi Driver* works on us by a kind of synaesthesia, confusing the impressions we get in one situation with the sense we have of another. Mingling sensations until they become indistinguishable, the cause of one seeming to produce the effects of another...[this film succeeds] by playing upon our perceptions until we can no longer tell certain experiences apart. 40

Just as Travis eventually enters his psychotic fantasy world, the audience is encouraged through the use of subjective point of view to enter the fantasy world of the film. This conflict of reality and fantasy is a major theme of *Taxi Driver* that is appropriately reflected in the style.

The opening scenes of the film serve to develop the character of Travis Bickle by showing him in his day-to-day routine. In published script extracts, Schrader describes Travis this way:

Travis Bickle, age twenty-six, lean, hard, the consummate loner...[his]...smile, around his dark eyes, in his gaunt cheeks, one can see the ominous
stains caused by a life of private fear, emptiness, and loneliness. He seems to have wandered in from a land where it is always cold, a country where the inhabitants seldom speak. . . . Travis is now drifting in and out of New York City night life, a dark shadow among darker shadows. Not noticed, no reason to be noticed, Travis is one with his surroundings . . . . He has the smell of sex about him: sick sex, repressed sex, lonely sex, but sex nonetheless. He is a raw male force, driving forward; toward what, one cannot tell. Then one looks closer and sees the inevitable. The clock spring cannot be wound continually tighter. As the earth moves toward the sun, Travis Bickle moves toward violence. 41

Travis cannot sleep nights so he gets a job driving a taxi. During the day he watches soap operas on television and goes to pornographic movies. He keeps a journal in which he writes his thoughts. These journal entries are like crude soliloquies that reveal Travis' state of mind to the audience. He writes, "Loneliness has followed me my whole life, in bars and cars, sidewalks, everywhere. There's no escape. I'm God's lonely man." 42

Travis sees New York City as a living hell. It is an open sewer filled with human scum that surface when the sun goes down. "All the animals come out at night," he writes in his journal. 43 The city is a metaphor for a crumbling, dehumanized society, made so by industrialization and the impossibility of true human communication. Travis can no more escape the city
than he can escape his loneliness; there is no exit.

One day Travis’ routine is broken when he sees a woman dressed in white who is to him a vision of ideal beauty. Cool and aloof, Betsy (Cybill Shepherd) is a campaign worker who works for Charles Palantine (played by film and art critic Leonard Harris), a presidential candidate. Betsy represents a chance for Travis to end his loneliness and transcend the futility of the city. He clumsily asks her for a date and she accepts because she is fascinated by his strange behavior. She tells him that he reminds her of a Kris Kristofferson song: "He's a prophet, he's a pusher . . . He's a walking contradiction, partly truth and partly fiction." Travis is indeed a "walking contradiction": he has trouble distinguishing reality from fantasy, truth from fiction.

On their second date, Travis takes Betsy to a pornographic movie. Insulted and upset, she runs out of the theatre and out of Travis’ life. Some critics cite this scene as being implausible, forcing one to ask the question: Why would Travis take his "ideal" Betsy to a pornographic film? These critics seem to have missed the point of the scene: it develops his psychological self-destructive nature that later becomes magnified when Travis goes on his suicidal mission to "free" the young prostitute Iris.

After a violent episode at Palantine headquarters, Travis finally accepts the fact that Betsy will have nothing to do with him. This is the crucial scene of the script. At this point
the script can be neatly divided in half. Almost all of the scenes in the first half have a comparable scene in the second half. This division clearly marks a change in Travis. He no longer seeks redemption through Betsy; she is "like everyone else." He now seeks redemption through violence. He is substituting violence for sex.

This movement from sex to violence is also reflective of a movement in American films. In the late sixties films concerned with aspects of sex were popular, but in the early seventies the interest in sex was substituted with an interest in violence. Films with sexual themes, such as Carnal Knowledge (Mike Nichols, director), Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice (Paul Mazursky, director), and Last Tango in Paris (Bernardo Bertolucci, director), gave way to films with violent themes, such as The Godfather (Francis Ford Coppola, director), A Clockwork Orange (Stanley Kubrick, director), and Death Wish (Michael Winner, director).

This movement in film is reflected in Taxi Driver through fragments of film titles on theatre marquees seen in the background. As Julian Rice points out, early in the film the titles in the background reveal sex films such as "Swedish Marriage Manual" and "Anita Nymphet," but after Travis' violent outburst the fragments in the background suggest violent films, such as "Mafia," "Blood," "Killer," and "Charles Bronson." Thus, it can be said that Taxi Driver reflects and comments on a trend in recent cinema as well as reflecting American society.

In a scene that roughly parallels the earlier scene when Travis gets his job, Travis buys a small arsenal of handguns.
The scene treats the guns as objects of worship. Diane Jacobs writes that "Travis's affection for guns, like Hedda Gabler's, borders on the pornographic." 46

Next, Travis becomes interested in a fourteen-year-old prostitute named Iris (Jody Foster). While Betsy is "a goddess from the haut monde, Iris is a lost soul from the demi-monde, a demonic reincarnation of the untouchable Betsy, even looking vaguely like her." 47 Like Betsy, who has a surrogate father image in Palantine, Iris has a surrogate father image in her pimp, Sport (Harvey Keitel). Palantine and Sport are representative of different levels of society, but they are alike in that both of them use people. Travis' first "date" with Iris in a coffee shop corresponds with his first meeting with Betsy. Travis tries to convince Iris to leave the city and return home to her parents, but she enjoys the life she leads.

The actual incident that motivates Travis to violence comes when he picks up a distraught man (played by director Scorsese) who hires Travis to park in front of an apartment building. The passenger has a .44 magnum and says he is going to kill his wife for cheating on him. He says to Travis:

"Did you ever see what a .44 can do to a woman's face, cabbie? Did you ever see what it can do to a woman's pussy, cabbie? I'm going to put it right up to her, cabbie. Right in her, cabbie. You must think I'm real sick, huh?" 48

The passenger is also substituting violence for sex; his .44 literally becomes his phallus. Schrader explains that "the idea
of the scene was that the man in the back seat would never kill anybody, but that the man in the front seat would . . . . The man in the back seat gets his energy off; Bobby never does.

Up until this point the audience has been sympathetic towards Travis, but when he begins to stalk Palantine and goes into a ritualistic training program, the audience begins to back off. Finally, Travis has totally entered his fantasy world. He shaves his head into a Mohawk and then attempts to kill Palantine at a political rally, but he is foiled by secret service men. Sport is then substituted for Palantine. Not able to save himself, Travis tries to save Iris and kills Sport and his friends in a horrifying shoot-out sequence. Westbrook writes about this scene:

Earlier the film shows us Travis' life in a way that proposes the madness and alienation with which he sees reality. Now reality itself seems to possess such madness. As Travis acts out his demented fantasies, the world unaccountably begins to accommodate and conform to them.

This scene is not meant to be realistic; rather, it is a psychopath's fantasy. The "realistic exterior sound is cut off; the color goes out of whack; the sense of time goes out of whack - slow motion, twisting, turning." Schrader wanted the scene even more bloody than it was:

I would have loved to see sheets of blood, literally, flowing down the walls - blood it [sic] would have taken an army to have gushed. Throw realism aside.
The room should be bathed in blood, because that's what was happening in the character's mind... a crazy, suicidal glory, the whole exciting sickness of it.52 Travis had intended to kill himself after "freeing" Iris. He wants to die, but his gun is out of ammunition.

Ironically, Travis becomes a hero in a sort of "epilogue" which many critics have viewed as an unrealistic cop-out ending. The camera pans over several newspaper clippings proclaiming "Taxi Driver Hero." Travis has recovered from his wounds and seems "stable" again. He has expelled the demons from his system for now. Betsy even seeks out his cab in an attempt to win back the hero's affections. Travis, however, no longer needs Betsy. In the final shot, Betsy, seen in the rear view mirror, merges with the images in the windshield as the neon colors of the night mix together: the real world has merged with the fantasy world. He has finally defined himself in an absurd, violent way. Pauline Kael writes, "It's not that he is cured but that the city is crazier than he is."53

Critical reaction to Taxi Driver has been mixed. Some critics have objected to the excessive gore and apparent glorification of violence. Others have objected to the "epilogue" and various plot implausibilities. The critics who favor the film have praised its truthfulness and immense power as well as DeNiro's incredible performance. The fact is, most critics, even those who praise the film have missed its primary focus.

Rather than being a defense of violence, Taxi Driver is a comment on violent films and the "reality" the media creates,
as well as a comment on American society. Travis is a "walking contradiction, Partly truth and partly fiction:" he complains about the filth and trash around him, yet he is no better than those he despises when he goes to pornographic films and acts violently; he is appealing in his futile courtship of Betsy, yet he is appalling in his attempted assassination and violent outburst; he wears cowboy boots while sporting a Mohawk Indian haircut. In Travis, Schrader has fused the film hero and the modern villain.

What Schrader seems to be saying is that it is not the romantic hero, the pacifist, who is eventually forced into violence, as in Death Wish; rather, it is the psychotic loner at a loss in a dehumanized, mechanized society, who eventually explodes in violence. By mixing the characteristics of the film "revenge hero" with images of an obviously sick man, Schrader has destroyed the pretense of media "reality" by twisting it upon itself. The reality the media presents is not real at all; it is fantasy, and those who try to live that fantasy are sick. Part of Travis' problem is that he cannot enter the "reality" the media presents. This is excellently shown in the scene where Travis watches American Bandstand on television and sees an empty pair of cowboy boots amongst the happy teenage dancers.

This idea of fantasy/reality and the media is further reinforced by the images of the windshield and the rear view mirror. As long as Tra is watches the world through these "screens," just as the audience watches the film on a screen, he is safe. But when he breaks through these safety barriers and enters the
the world he sees, he becomes an actor in his own fantasy and "... he paradoxically achieves that more vital reality which the film "viewer" theoretically craves."\textsuperscript{54} Travis is too ignorant to understand the significance of his situation. He is merely striking out in a last ditch effort to redeem himself by rising above his fate. The audience can see the significance and horror of his actions. Schrader says that Travis "... is to be understood, but not tolerated. I believe in capital punishment: he should be killed."\textsuperscript{55}

In \textit{Taxi Driver}, Schrader has adopted an existential theme from his influences:

\begin{quote}
Before I sat down to write \textit{Taxi Driver}, I reread Sartre's \textit{Nausea}, because I saw the script as an attempt to take the European existential hero, that is, the man from \textit{The Stranger, Notes from the Underground, Nausea, Pickpocket} [Robert Bresson, director], \textit{Le Feu Follet} [Louis Malle, director], \textit{A Man Escaped} [Bresson, director],\textsuperscript{56} and put him in an American context. In so doing, you find that he becomes more ignorant, ignorant of the nature of his problem.\textsuperscript{57}
\end{quote}

This ignorance, says Schrader, is partially because of the "immaturity and youngness" of America. The self-destructive impulse, "instead of being inner-directed, as it is in Japan, Europe, any of the older cultures, becomes outer directed."\textsuperscript{58} Travis' world has no meaning, so he must create meaning in the only way he knows how: through violence.

As mentioned earlier, Arthur Bremer was a prominent influ-
ence on the character of Travis Bickle. There are several striking similarities between Bremer and Travis. While stalking Wallace, Bremer attended rallies wearing a Wallace campaign button, and he even put a Wallace sticker on his apartment door; Travis wears a Palantine button at the rally and decorates his room with Palantine campaign material. Bremer decided to kill Wallace the day his girl friend broke up with him, just as Travis is first motivated to violence by being rejected by Betsy.

One of the most memorable shots in Taxi Driver occurs when the camera slowly reveals Travis at the Palantine rally with a Mohawk haircut and a hideous, macabre smile on his face; Bremer also shaved his head, and a Newsweek article on Bremer quoted a television producer on the scene of the Wallace shooting as saying about Bremer, "That smirk of his was almost spine-tingling." 59

Another similarity between Bremer and Travis is that they both kept journals. Bremer's journal entry that reads, "One thing for sure, my diet is too soft. Weakens my posture, maybe affects my insides, too. I am one sick assasin. Pun! Pun!" 60 is similar to Travis' entry that says, "The smell of flowers makes me sick; I think I got stomach cancer." Schrader has taken this idea of spiritual sickness as being represented physically through some illness such as stomach cancer from Robert Bresson's Diary of a Country Priest. 61 This same type of idea is also seen in the first lines of Dostoevsky's existential Notes from Underground: "I am a sick man ... I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man. I believe my liver is
Another influence on Travis' character is the character of Ethan Edwards, played by John Wayne, in John Ford's *The Searchers*. Not only are Travis and Ethan similar, but *Taxi Driver* and *The Searchers* are similar in "basic narrative and thematic structures . . . ." Although Schrader has not acknowledged *The Searchers* as an influence on *Taxi Driver*, he has said, "Only the mad John Ford appealed to me: *The Searchers*, the Ethan Edwards half of him, which I love." David Boyd points out that both Travis and Ethan wear the uniform of a war recently fought and lost: Travis wears an army jacket from Vietnam with a patch on the shoulder that reads "King Kong Killer," and Ethan wears the Civil War coat of the confederate officer. Both are paradoxical characters that combine aspects of the hero and the anti-hero. With each of them "vengeance is actually a projection, a public enactment, of their search for private purgation."

In both *The Searchers* and *Taxi Driver* the environment is a dominant antagonist. Monument Valley is representative of the unconscious, while *Taxi Driver*'s New York City is a vision of hell. Also in both films the "private action" involves rescuing a "child-woman" who does not want to be rescued (Debbie in *The Searchers* and Iris in *Taxi Driver*) and "wrecking vengeance on her abductor" (the Indian Scar in *The Searchers* and the pimp Sport, who wears an Indian headband, in *Taxi Driver*), and in doing so, committing acts just as vicious as those they oppose.

The most prominent stylistic influence on *Taxi Driver* is the
French director Robert Bresson. The film is steeped in cinematic allusions to the films and style of Bresson, who is one of Schrader's favorite directors. Not only is the stomach cancer borrowed from Diary of a Country Priest, but Travis' meal of milk, bread, and brandy as an "alcoholic parody of the sacrament" is also an allusion to that film. Schrader has referred to the scene where Travis practices with his guns in front of a mirror in his apartment as the "Pickpocket scene. ... It's also The Condemned Man Escaped scene, where you see the poetry of mechanical organization." Other Bressonian touches include the attention to detail of the daily routine of life, the diary/journal format, and the use of Bresson's "doubling" technique that "... makes a single event happen several times in different ways," usually by using "interior narration" in which "the main character narrates the on-screen action in a deadpan narration which is often only an audio replay of what the viewer has already witnessed [or will witness]." An example of this in Taxi Driver is the scenes when Travis narrates his journal entries as the camera shows a close-up of his hand writing in the journal and then cuts to show the event being narrated, as when Travis first sees Betsy.

Yet another stylistic influence on Taxi Driver is the film noir genre. While not truly film noir, Taxi Driver, like film noir, "operates on opposite principles, the theme is hidden in the style, and bogus themes are often flaunted ("middle class values are best") which contradict style." Travis exhibits characteristics of both types of film noir hero and seems to
bridge the film noir hero with the existential hero. The "good hero" in film noir, exemplified by the Raymond Chandler detective, "... knows how to move through the city at night, but he is also a man who knows enough not to get involved with most women." This hero is usually emotionless, as Travis is most of the time, keeping his emotions bottled-up inside. However, in his relationship with women, in this case with Betsy, Travis is more like the film noir "bad hero," exemplified by the typical James Cain character who gets into trouble because of his excess of emotion which gets him involved with the blonde, "bitch goddess" type of film noir woman:

Film noir is full of appallingly seductive women of deceitfully angelic appearance ... Noir films both celebrate these women as icons of idealist fantasy and loath them as incantations of an insatiable and debilitating sexuality.

This is basically the way Travis views Betsy. She can be considered a modern version of the "bitch goddess."

In combining elements of existentialism, Bressonian technique and style, cinematic history and allusion, and film noir, Schrader has created a script that must be counted as one of the most important thematic and stylistic films of the seventies. Schrader has said that "Taxi Driver is a very rich piece of juvenilia, but it is juvenilia, it is an adolescent, immature mind struggling to identify itself." It was written at a time when Schrader could not "distinguish between pain in the work and pain in my life." Nevertheless, as this study has shown, Taxi
Driver is an important, powerful, and complex portrait of a psychopath and the society that produced him and made him an ironic hero.
ENDNOTES

1 Stephen Farber, "Hardcore: Cinematus Interruptus [Review]," New West, 26 Feb. 1979, p. 70.


5 Nichols, p. 75.


7 Nichols, p. 87.


9 No dates are available concerning this period of Schrader's life, although it is probably around 1966-67 that he met Kael.

11 Ibid.


13 Thompson, p. 6. No date is available, but probably 1971-72.

14 Ibid. p. 8.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid. p. 11.


18 Thompson, p. 10.


21 Thompson, p. 10.

22 James Monaco, "Blue Collar [Review]," Take One, March 1978, p. 10.


24 Thompson, p. 19.

25 Ibid., p. 9.
26 Ibid.

27 Farber, p. 70.

28 For more information on Tewkesbury and Old Boyfriends see "Dialogue on Film: Joan Tewkesbury," American Film, March 1979, pp. 35-46.


30 Monaco, p. 9.

31 Thompson, p. 18.

32 Ibid., p. 9.

33 Ibid. p. 11.


35 Thompson, p. 13.


37 Thompson, p. 14.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid., p. 13.


Quoted in Jack Kroll, "Hackie In Hell [Review]," Newsweek, 1 March 1976, p. 82.

Quoted in William Gallo, "Taxi Driver [Review]," Film Heritage, 11, no. 3 (Spring 1976), p. 27.


Jacobs, p. 128.

Westerbrook, pp. 137-38.


Thompson, p. 13.

Westerbrook, p. 138.


Ibid.


Rice, p. 113.
55 Thompson, p. 14.

56 French title, Un Condamné à Morte S'est Échappé.

57 Thompson, p. 10.

58 Ibid.


60 "Guilty and Sane," Newsweek, 24 August 1972, p. 23.

61 French title, Le Journal d'un Curé de Compagne.


64 Thompson, p. 18.

65 Boyd, p. 28.

66 Ibid., p. 25.

67 Ibid., p. 27.

68 Schrader, Transcendental Style, p. 75.

69 Thompson, p. 11.

70 Schrader, Transcendental Style, p. 71.
71 Ibid. Also see Susan Sontag's essay on Bresson in Against Interpretation (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1966).


73 Westerbrook, p. 138.


75 Thompson, p. 9.

76 Ibid.


"Yakuza-Eiga, A Primer." Film Comment, Jan.-Feb. 1974, pp. 9-17.


REVIEWS

Taxi Driver


Blue Collar


Hardcore


Brian Bauer
Honors Thesis (ID 499)
Dr. Brown
May 1979