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*Taxi Driver*: Travis Bickle's Impact

*Taxi Driver* unfolds slowly and steadily, like pattering rain flooding the city streets. The streetlights and neon signs reflect in the puddles, the people bustle about, the life and laughter of the city spills onto its well-worn sidewalks. Travis Bickle can look, but he can't touch. He sits in the driver's seat of his taxi cab, doomed to the limitations of the silent observer. *Taxi Driver* is a psychological thriller and a standout film of the Neo Noir genre. It contained many stylistic influences of noir, including a shifty male protagonist, dark lighting, tension building, frank and morose narration, shots of rainy streets at night, and an ominous, tension-filled jazz score.

Travis Bickle is a walking contradiction. He is earnest and endearing, with a childlike frankness to his speech. The first half of *Taxi Driver* shows Travis taking on a job and introduces the first love interest, Betsy, a political campaigner who appears in a white dress "like an angel." Travis comes into her job to speak to her, and their interaction is awkward but charming. She allows him to take her out to lunch. Travis tells us with content that she had a "coffee and a fruit salad dish... She could've had anything she wanted." Yet a sense of insidiousness lurks within him, exposed in the manifesto he writes daily, where he yearns for "a real rain" to "come and wash the scum off the streets."

The more suspicious characters he encounters during his shifts as a taxi driver, the more Travis's darkness is exposed. That darkness comes with a growing sensation of superiority. The second half of the film brings us Travis's darker interest: Iris, a child prostitute. Travis's obsession with Iris is significant for multiple reasons. As we have seen, Travis hates sex workers, and views them as part of the scum that needs to be swept from the streets. So why doesn't Travis hate Iris? Iris is saved from Travis's rage by her age, being only 12 years old.

Travis dreams of being Iris's guardian angel, sweeping her from the filthy streets himself to return home and live the life of a proper young girl. With Iris, Travis's presence becomes less romantic and more fatherly. Iris's loud mouth and perceived independence only add to the strange discomfort of their relationship. Iris is not looking for a father figure. It is Travis who imposes himself upon her. Travis perceives himself as an anti-hero of sorts, a rogue outsider, with a firm belief in an ends-justify-the-means philosophy. He already ends his shifts each night by cleaning semen off his taxi seats. He begins to question what is stopping him from going out and washing the sordid streets that bother him so terribly all by himself.

It could be said that Travis Bickle is the first ever "incel". The word incel, short for involuntary celibate, first appeared in the formation of a dating app for late bloomers created in 1997 by a woman named Alana (last name unknown) to describe "anybody of any gender who was lonely, had never had sex, or who hadn't had a relationship in a long time." (Taylor) Incels nowadays are known as lonely, performative, "hyper-masculine" men who are desensitized to porn and demeaning to women, who they deem "the other".

Travis fits all these characteristics. He frequents porn theaters and talks to Betsy about his "right" to speak to her, which illuminates his roots in feeling

separated and disconnected from women. Next, he takes her to a dirty movie, which results in her disconnection from him. As she walks away, he tells her she is “just like everyone else.” Blanket statements are a large part of incel culture. He redefines her as “cold and distant, and many people are like that. Women for sure, they’re like a union.” A union against him.

Travis’s separation is further solidified by the filming technique of placing Travis behind glass walls: the front windshield of his taxi, the window through which he sees Betsy, the mirror through which he watches his passengers. There is no joy, no shared happiness, in Travis’s day-to-day life. The passengers in his taxi pretend he doesn’t exist, and although it frustrates him, there is nothing he can do. They are not required to acknowledge him.

Happiness surrounds Travis, in television, in people on the street walking and kissing, in Betsy and her boss laughing together at work, in the couples having sex and staining his seats. Connection is close enough he can observe it, but always too distant for him to touch. When Travis meets Iris, he takes on saving her as his mission, even though Iris makes a point to tell him she doesn’t want to go home and doesn’t miss her parents. Him taking on the role of savior is much more about his own need for purpose than her wants or needs.

Travis shaves his hair into a mohawk and dons a green army jacket and sunglasses. He is unrecognizable, smiling with satisfaction like a man finally coming into his own. In shedding his awkward appearance, Travis metaphorically sheds his sense of self-doubt as well. However, it becomes increasingly clear that his newfound confidence may not be a good thing. Travis had practiced the persona of a man in power. Holding his gun in the mirror, Travis spoke strongly and clearly, with a

commanding air when he proclaimed “You talkin’ to me?” This would go on to become one of the most quoted lines of the entire film.

Travis hates black people; he glares at them as he drives in the night. He hates women, and views them as prizes not accessible to him. He hates everyone outside, everyone in the city, they are nothing more than the “scum” on the streets in his mind. In changing his appearance, Travis casts out the man who waits and takes on a calculated new identity: the man who acts. For a character who hates everyone, the man who acts is a dangerous and violent person to be.

At first, Travis sets his eyes on Senator Palantine to bear the brunt of his anger, but as he approaches the Senator at his rally, he is spotted by a Secret Service Agent, and is forced to abandon the project. Travis is not discouraged, and turns his attention to Sport, Iris’s degenerate pimp, and shoots him as he stands against a building. Next in Travis’s line of gunfire is Iris’s creepy timekeeper, followed by finishing the job on Sport, who had not died from Travis’s first shot, and finally moving on to Sport’s big mafia boss. Their bodies fall on top of each other in the bloodstained hallway as Iris looks on and screams. The police arrive to find Travis surrounded by corpses and carnage, prepared to go out with one final bang. But his gun is out of bullets, so he makes a new gun out of his fingers, just like Charlie T. did at the table with Travis’s cab driver friends. Travis has become the aggressor, he is a man to be scared of, just as he himself was once scared of Charlie T.

To the viewer, Travis appears more far gone than ever. However, the citizens of New York don’t see it that way. For the first time in his life, Travis is being recognized, celebrated even. He pins articles that call him a hero to his wall. This is the deepest, darkest layer of New York peeled back in his smile. Travis is an unchecked racist murderer and everyone loves him. Good doesn’t triumph. Travis

encounters Betsy again in the last scene, but he doesn't say much. He simply refuses to allow her to pay for the ride and smiles. Now he is in power. Now he is generous, just like Palantine whom she loves so much. Bad guys win.

This ending acts as a critique on America's tendency to sensationalize "bad guys," such as serial killers, rapist rock stars, and drug lords. Ironically enough, the very glorification *Taxi Driver* was made to warn against, it actually caused. A few years after graduating high school, a man by the name of John Hinckley Jr. watched *Taxi Driver*, and began to model his life off Travis Bickle. He started dressing like Travis, writing regularly in a diary, and making a point to associate with extremist groups, such as Neo-Nazis. In addition, he developed an obsession with Jodie Foster, who played Iris in the film and was growing increasingly popular.

Hinckley left many notes for Foster at Yale where she was studying, despite her requests for him to stop. In a final letter, written in 1981, which was never sent, Hinckley penned, "Jodie, I would abandon this idea of getting Reagan in a second if I could only win your heart and live out the rest of my life with you, whether it be in total obscurity or whatever. I will admit to you that the reason I'm going ahead with this attempt now is because I just cannot wait any longer to impress you. I've got to do something now to make you understand in no uncertain terms that I am doing all of this for your sake." (Goldberg) Hinckley then arrived at the Washington Hilton Hotel where President Ronald Reagan was speaking, and fired 6 shots. Hinckley stated he had seen *Taxi Driver* up to 18 times, and his defense team submitted the film as evidence. It is clear that Hinckley's motives for killing a political figure, in this case Reagan, lie in imitating Travis Bickle's attempted assassination of Senator Palantine.

*Taxi Driver* is not only a statement on psychosis brought on through isolation and exposure to the gritty underbelly of the city, but also a response to the returning Vietnam War veterans, who were abandoned by society upon their arrival. The film is undeniably political, further explored in the imagery of Charles Palantine as the object of Betsy's coveted attention and everything Travis is not. Palantine's campaign slogan was "We are The People". When Travis attempts to assassinate Palantine at the end of the film, he takes on a political role himself, against Palantine, against The People, against everyone. He acts as a lone outsider, a political anarchist.

The cinematic choices in *Taxi Driver* greatly contribute to the unsettling grime of the film. Travis is shifty and evasive, gazing forever into the clouds of smoke that never fully clear from the city streets. Travis's point of view is characterized by lights that waver in the night, streets that open up into wide stretches of seedy activities sheltered in the dark. The method of camerawork used engages us in sympathy with Travis. A notable example of this can be seen in the scene where Travis calls Betsy to try and secure a second date. The camera passes Travis, cutting him out of the frame, and moves without him into the hallway, as if Travis's blunder is too embarrassing to even be caught on video.

Through the shots of him driving in his taxi, Travis's distortions of reality are exposed. The camera makes wide, long sweeping motions, sometimes sweeping so far Travis can no longer be seen in the frame. Watching the camera move in this way feels like moving drunk through the dark. Travis is always in motion, drinking, spinning, panning. He is not capable of stopping, of staying still, his thoughts will eat him alive if he tries. His very job as a taxi driver stems from this need to be constantly in motion. He cannot sit still, so he cannot sleep. He cannot sleep, so he

rides public transit into the night. He rides public transit into the night, so he might as well get paid for it. Thus, it is his inability to be still and present with himself that sets the scene in which *Taxi Driver* unfolds.

There are no real “good guys” in *Taxi Driver*. Betsy was supposed to be the ray of light at the end of the tunnel, but she turned out to be “just like everyone else” in the end. Travis may be the main character, but he is a racist, misogynistic murderer who only hurts himself with his ignorance and patheticism. *Taxi Driver* is a portrait of metropolitan isolation with a poignant and unsettling conclusion: psychopaths walk among us, and more likely than not, they get away with it.

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