

# Hell on wheels

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Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* has to be one of the most disturbing films ever made. Working with the metaphor of the city as sewer, Scorsese catches the sin-stained sensations of New York's teeming streets, where prostitutes, pimps and pushers parade under the scrutiny of Travis Bickle, the cruising cab driver who is a kind of contemporary Quixote. For Travis (beautifully played by Robert De Niro), the city is a pile of filth that someone ought to clean up.

Although references are made early in the film to Travis's headaches, his honorable discharge from the marines, and his compulsive need for long hours of work, the depth of his sickness is unveiled slowly. Shortly after he is rejected by a female image of purity, Betsy (Cybill Shepherd)—somewhat innocently, he takes her on the first date to one of the porno films he habitually attends—the universal alienation Travis experiences becomes clear. When he confesses to a fellow cab driver known as Wizard (Peter Boyle) that he has been getting terrible thoughts, he is advised to fornicate. What these terrible thoughts are becomes more clear after he buys a small arsenal and practices daily with the weapons. He is frustrated in his attempt to assassinate Palatine, a presidential candidate; but later he massacres three criminals involved with a drug and prostitution ring—in one of the most violent slaughter scenes ever filmed.

Make no mistake about it: up to this point in the film, the extraordinary talent of Scorsese is evident again and again. In the past critics have wondered if the young director's gifts were limited; even though his *Mean Streets* (1973) was widely acclaimed, this depiction of young hoodlums in Little Italy was similar in locale and characterization to Scorsese's earlier *Who's That Knocking at My Door?* But then the critical reception accorded *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974) confirmed that Scorsese could handle a wider world. His flexible talent is most evident if one contrasts *Taxi Driver* with the best film he has yet made, *Italianamerican*. That the same man could have made both films is amazing. In *Taxi Driver* the sophisticated use of lighting, color camera angle and editing make the city streets so real that a

viewer can feel fear even before violence occurs; in the documentary *Italianamerican*, Scorsese tenderly turns his camera on his own parents for 45 minutes and allows them to talk to and about one another, their family, their neighborhood, and Mrs. Scorsese's homemade meatball sauce. Though initially I found them hilarious, by the end of *Italianamerican* I had fallen in love with Scorsese's parents—and the magical talent of their 33-year-old son did it all.

Building to the climactic bloodbath, the vision of evil in *Taxi Driver* is almost overwhelming. Months ago Pauline Kael in a talk to the American Film Institute mentioned that Scorsese is particularly adept at depicting evil because of his Catholic background. Kael's comments are especially interesting in relation to *Mean Streets* and *Taxi Driver*. The earlier film (whose script he coauthored) calls upon Scorsese's memories of a Catholic boyhood. The main character, Charles (played by Harvey Keitel, who has turned in several fine performances under Scorsese's direction), is a small-time hoodlum but a Catholic with strong guilt feelings—a fascinating specimen of the crippled conscience. Modeled partly on Scorsese's own early Catholic self-understanding, Charles is a mass of contradictions: committed to the rackets but believing the church's teaching, sleeping with his girlfriend but attending the sacraments, a small-time thief dreaming of the big time but morally driven to help his hoodlum pal, the semimoronic Johnny-Bay (played by De Niro). Though Charlie's Catholic conscience is confused, it gives a realistic, human coloring to the evil depicted in *Mean Streets*.

The evil on the streets of *Taxi Driver* is of another sort altogether. While the screenplay was authored not by Scorsese but by the brilliant Paul Schrader, Scorsese's treatment of the material allows us to attribute the film's vision of evil to him as well. *Taxi Driver*'s fetid world is a Sartrean hell from which there is no exit. And, as with Sartre's play, this film overstates its case—the total absence of good mars the depiction of evil.

Prior to the slaughter scene are two episodes crucial to the film's interpretation. In the first, the 12-year-old prostitute Iris (Jodie Foster) is dragged out of Travis's cab by a man who then throws Travis a \$20 to forget the incident. Instead the bribe seems to burn within Travis's twisted conscience, and rather than spend the bill he keeps it separate from his other money. In the second key scene Travis uses the \$20 to buy time with Iris so that he can persuade her to change her life style. The paying of the money to the pimp, who doesn't know how Travis has used the time, foreshadows the ultimate "redemption" of the 12-year-old by Travis's slaughter of

three mafiosi in order to liberate her from their game. Travis emerges as a contemporary redeemer, a modern mad messiah. Schrader and Scorsese seem to be saying that the contemporary city is so fouled up that the only Christ it deserves is a psychopath.

Its epilogue makes *Taxi Driver* a flawed film. Immediately after the slaughter scene, the camera pans the bulletin board in Travis's room where he has posted newspaper clippings and a letter from the young prostitute's parents. We are astonished to learn that Travis has been acclaimed a hero and that the parents are grateful to Travis for redeeming their daughter from a life of sin. We then see Travis back at his taxi stand. He gets a fare, and it is Betsy. Because of his publicized heroics, Betsy is now ready to enter a relationship. Travis dismisses her with a casual farewell and drives off, the absurd hero *par excellence*.

The epilogue doesn't work on two levels: as a realistic ending to a story and as a thematic underlining of a vision of contemporary life. The epilogue doesn't work at the end of a supposedly realistic narrative because we are asked to believe too much. Travis had shaved his head Mohawk-fashion for his mission and had been chased by Secret Service men on the morning of the attempted assassination. How could the psychopathic Travis both survive the investigation of the massacre and go unidentified as the assassin even though his picture appeared in the newspaper as a hero? It won't pass.

The epilogue fails thematically because Schrader and Scorsese—by making Travis a contemporary savior—engage in cinematic overkill. Moreover, by depicting the pervasiveness of evil as it does, the epilogue weakens the film's earlier images of evil.

To put the problem another way, if everything is evil, then nothing is evil. Complete absence of good makes the depiction of the bad unreal. With his exceptional talent Scorsese can jolt us, scare us, depress us, but he can't convince us.

If, as Kael has said, Scorsese's capacity to portray evil is rooted in his Catholic upbringing, then it must also be true that he remembers only part of the Catholic view. For he seems to have forgotten, at least in *Taxi Driver*, that evil is only evil if there is grace.