

The Western Revisited in Martin Scorsese's Taxi Driver
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One need only peruse his impressive filmography to realize that Martin Scorsese's corpus spans several decades and extends across as many genres. As a veteran filmmaker (and self-professed cinephile) Scorsese must understand that the Western is the oldest Hollywood genre which, like all genres, is defined according to specific motifs, iconography, conventions and themes (Mast, 468). In fact, by deliberately invoking the codes and conventions of the Western to underpin *Taxi Driver* (1976), he demonstrates his virtuosic mastery of the genre. To be sure, Scorsese's film not only resuscitates this particular kind of narrative, but it goes so far as to mimic one of the most celebrated Westerns of all time, John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956).

As Robert Warshow contends, "the popular genre film makes connections both with its filmic past and within the temperaments of its contemporary viewers" (Mast, 430). Though they were made some twenty years apart, each film is the product of similar sociohistorical circumstances. The postwar ethos of American cynicism following Korea and World War II underlies *The Searchers*; while *Taxi Driver* manifests the seething resentment in the wake of Vietnam. It is not surprising, then, that each film features as its central protagonist a returning war veteran who seeks respite from an overwhelming sense of anomie and patent loneliness. This is not to suggest that *Taxi Driver* is merely a modern day remake of *The Searchers*, although the narrative and basic thematic structure of Scorsese's film does appear to be virtually identical to Ford's classic. It is just that the generic similarities that exist between the two films are much more interesting than are their differences.

Using Warshow's analysis of the Westerner as a framework, it becomes explicitly apparent how *Taxi Driver* qualifies as a Western in the same sense that *The Searchers* does, regardless of their obverse cinematic environments: Scorsese's film takes place in New York City of the mid-1970s, instead of the more "classical" setting of the American West, during the period following the Civil War. If, as Jean-Loup Bourget asserts: "genre creativity is defined by exactly the manipulation of past motifs to create a new work" (Mast, 431), then Scorsese has ingeniously reworked the ritual qualities of the Western in order to establish *Taxi Driver* as a new version of Hollywood's oldest genre. In this way, *Taxi Driver* mobilizes the Western's theme of violence as a necessary corollary of individual self-expression, in order to expiate the widespread feelings of male culpability following Vietnam.

Genre theory deals with the way in which a work may be considered to belong to a class of related works (Allen, 139). If we look at *Taxi Driver* in relation to *The Searchers*, we can identify several parallels which connect the two films and ratify them as being

constitutive of a common genre: namely, the Western. For example, although the landscapes of the two films could scarcely be more different, each functions unmistakably as a living presence. In both films, it is a symbolic landscape Ford's wilderness emerging as a scepter of the unconscious, Scorsese's New York as a vision of hell. Both films feature meticulous cinematography, which expertly captures the protagonist's expansive environment, as if describing his emotional physiognomy. In both cases, this reinforces the similarities between the main characters, and supports their codification as "Westerner". Just as Warshow submits:

The Western hero, by contrast, is a figure of repose. He resembles a gangster in his being lonely and to some degree melancholy... his loneliness is organic, not imposed on him by his situation but belonging to him intimately.

(Mast, 454)

On a general level, Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) and Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro) are both loners, two of the most isolated characters in the entire range of American film. In fact, Travis, in his voice over narrations, describes himself as "God's lonely man". Each is first seen wearing the uniform of a war that has ended. In fact, each figure is a veteran of the defeated side (the Confederacy in the Civil War, the United States in Vietnam), and his exact whereabouts and activities in the intervening years are left unexplained. Clearly, both Ethan and Travis are compulsive wanderers, unable to rest.

The resemblance between the two characters is telling of the profound influence that *The Searchers* has had on *Taxi Driver*. Indeed, Scorsese's familiarity with Ford's film is indisputable. In Scorsese's *Mean Streets* (1973), the main character (Charlie) and his girlfriend (Teresa) have a long discussion about *The Searchers* (Kolker, 166). Certainly Travis is fashioned in the image of the paradoxical Ethan, and placed in a similarly paradoxical relationship with his society. Both characters are hero and antihero, the concept of the doppelgänger or 'dark side' of the hero being emblematic of both figures. It seems appropriate, then, that Travis takes a job driving cab because he cannot sleep. He is trapped between two antithetical worlds: the world of the day and the world of the night. Moreover, he is consciously aware of the conflict that rages within him. He attempts to explain his sinister tendencies to Wizard (Peter Boyle): "I've got all these thoughts, you know bad thoughts... I feel like I'm gonna do something bad". This same fear of uncontrollable rage is given expression in *The Searchers* when Martin exclaims that he is "afraid of what Ethan might do if he gets to Debbie first". As can be seen, the characters of Ethan and Travis have a great deal in common.

Focussing specifically on *Taxi Driver*, it is interesting that Travis possesses yet another feature of the Western hero. That is, he is pathologically misunderstood by others. As Warshow confirms: "The Westerner at his best exhibits a moral ambiguity which darkens his image...this ambiguity arises from the fact that, whatever his justification, he is a killer of men" (Mast, 458). This idea is directly articulated in *Taxi Driver* when Betsy (Cybill Shepherd) tells Travis that he is "...part truth, part fiction, a walking contradiction". This pithy statement is symptomatic of Travis' ambiguous position within a society where others constantly suspect "him to be a pimp, drug dealer or even a

narcotics agent." At one point Sport (Harvey Keitel) mistakes the naive Travis for an undercover cop, saying, "I'm clean officer, c'mon".

That others do not understand him is complicated by the fact that Travis does not quite understand himself, except when the moment arises when he must choose violence.

The image of the single man who wears a gun on his thigh... tells us that he believes in violence. But the drama is one of self restraint: the moment of violence must come in its own time and according to its special laws or else it is valueless"

(Mast, 466)

Clearly, the scene in the groceries where Travis guns down the armed robber is redolent of the classic showdowns between good and evil in the Western.

As Peter Boyd contends, the Western parable is carried even further by Scorsese and scriptwriter Paul Schrader through both the action and the dialogue of the film. On Travis' first visit to the brothel he is tauntingly addressed, both by Sport and the old man inside, as "cowboy", because of his boots. But when he returns at the end (to kill Sport) he does so as an Indian, complete with Mohawk haircut, the resemblance further reinforced by Sport's long hair and Indian hairband. In the end, the "cowboy" reveals himself as an "Indian", just as Ethan, and the end of *The Searchers*, displays the Indian side of his character in the scalping of Scar. Travis' tendency toward violence complies with Warshow's interpretation of the Westerner. "There is no suggestion, however, that the [Westerner] draws his gun reluctantly" (Mast, 457). To be sure, Travis' ruthless shooting of Sport occurs with mercurial conviction. As in *The Searchers*, the pivotal action of *Taxi Driver* involves the violent attempt to rescue a womanchild who has been abducted or seduced into an alien world of the wilderness or the night, and to wreak vengeance on her abductor. This is not just a coincidence of plot, but a defining aspect of the Western in general: "The Westerner could not fulfill himself if the moment did not formally come when he can shoot his enemy down. But because the moment is so thoroughly the expression of his being, it must be kept pure... he must wait" (Mast, 457). Like the Westerner, Travis becomes a "hero" as a result of his violent act(s) instead of being villainized for being a crazed vigilante. That Scorsese contrives this resolution of plot in a modern context demonstrates the ability of the Western to defy traditional categorization.

The resolution of *Taxi Driver* recuperates the Western's pattern of valorizing violence, for neither Travis nor Ethan (for that matter) can be dismissed as simply an aberrant individual. However severely alienated from their respective societies, both are also paradoxically representative of those societies, and their private psychoses are therefore symptomatic of a more general social malaise. So, it seems, that the act of violence is somewhat like an act of expression an instance in which the Westerner defines himself most clearly. As Warshow concludes: "he fights not for advantage... but to state what he is" (Mast, 457). Thus, violence committed by the Westerner can be seen as a type of confession, a purgation, after having long suffered because of self imposed and societal repression.

Accordingly, it is within the post-Vietnam context that Scorsese revisits the Western. Enlisting its structural and thematic conventions, *Taxi Driver* attempts to give a voice to the distressed and frustrated returning Vietnam veteran. However, by having Travis return to the street just as Ethan has to return to the desert *Taxi Driver* offers no lasting solution, only sympathy. That a Westerner like Travis is even allowed expression is Scorsese's attempt to absolve the guilty conscience of the returning war veteran, even though he is unable to alleviate his feeling of loneliness.

The whole conviction of my life now rests upon the belief that loneliness, far from being a curious phenomenon, is the central and inevitable fact of human existence.

(Thomas Wolfe, *God's Lonely Man*)

I'm God's lonely man.

(Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver*)

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