

**TAXI DRIVER: In pursuit of control...  
masculinity / gender and its representation.**

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**'The conflation of sexual imagery, misogyny and violence is pervasive and perverse throughout *Taxi Driver*. Male sexuality is displaced'.**

**Page.**

**An analysis of the representation of masculinity offered by *Taxi Driver*.**

Control – to be in control. *The Pocket Oxford Dictionary* (1984) offers this meaning: -

**Control** - *power of directing or restraining, self-restraint; means of restraining or regulating; switches and other devices by which machine is controlled; place where something is controlled or verified; standard of comparison for checking results of experiment; personality said to direct actions and words of spiritualist medium.*

2. *have control of, regulate; serve as control to; check, verify...in control in charge; out of control unrestrained, without control; under control being controlled, in order. (1).*

I shall offer my argument and show evidence of how I feel masculinity is represented in the film *Taxi Driver*, by people either wanting, gaining, having, losing, pursuing, refusing or needing to be in **control/controlled** – of themselves, others or both.

Also I shall highlight how some of the various strands of the meaning of the word (as featured in the dictionary quote above), are reflected in/on, the characters

from the film and the contradictions in their actions. **Control** is ever-present throughout the film.

The main male character of Travis Bickle (played by Robert Di Nero) is in pursuit of 'control'. I find the choice of occupation for the main character interesting - a 'Taxi Driver'. A 'people carrier' driving around the city, he has the choice of stopping for the fare or not, it's his decision, he has a sense of control, he's in the 'driving seat' (pun intended).

He tours the streets of New York, his monologue commentary over the top of a bluesy/jazz soundtrack is reminiscent of 1940's / 50's black and white 'While The City Sleeps' type of 'Crime Inc' documentary/drama's, or even a Humphrey Bogart – 'Phillip Marlow' type delivery. There are certain scene's that are similar to and resemble cinematography used in John Huston's 1950's film *The Asphalt Jungle*. The slow cruising around the streets, the taxi scene where the politician leans forward to find out Travis's name, the evening shots of rain soaked streets etc.

Travis Bickle puts down everything that walks the neon lit side walks of New York, "*All the animals come out at night, whores, scum, pussies, buggers, queers, fairies, dopers, junkies – sick, menial. Someday a real rain will come and wash all the scum off the streets.*"(2). The opening credits of the film have the steam rising from the street depicting the heat (hot and volatile, unpleasant, polluting the air), then the taxi slowly cruises through it dispersing it. The close up of Travis Bickle's eyes scanning the street have his face shrouded in the red

neon lights from the street. Red being a very dominant colour and featuring at specific times throughout the film. His first encounter in the film is with his boss at the taxi rank office. The boss asks him about his driving licence and Travis replies *"it's clean, like my conscience"*(3), at which the boss pulls him up about his frivolity. 'Travis frowns and apologizes saying *"Sorry Sir"*(4) Travis's attempt at a joke and to become accepted backfires and he's left slightly humiliated by the dressing down from the boss. This is his problem – being accepted, he's a loner. The boss controls this situation and Travis feels 'less than a man'. He later redeems himself slightly when he comments in his diary *"I can take in \$300, \$350 a week, sometimes more if I do it off the meter"*(5). He's massaging his own ego with an 'I'll show him who's really in charge of me' by operating a fare dodge and pocketing the money himself.

As he drives around he's picking up prostitutes with their clients, the clients telling him to hurry up and get them to their desired destination. The monologue we hear comes from Travis's thoughts that he his writing down in his diary. He writes how on completion of his shift he has to *"clean the cum off the back seat"*(6). He's degraded and disgusted by this.

He first notices Betsy (Cybil Sheperd) walking down the street. He describes her writing in his diary, *"She appeared like an angel out of this filthy mess, she is alone, they cannot touch her"*(7). She's dressed in a white dress (angel like) and glides along in slow motion. The slow motion shots are used to some effect in the

film. The cruising of the taxi, Betsy's walk, close ups on Travis's eyes scanning the streets, there's also an interesting shot when Travis passes his hand over the top of Betsy's desk, it's in slow motion, Travis's hand invading Betsy's space and dominating. These shots prolong our gaze. It reflects the amount of subtly suggested voyeurism in the film. Looking on through windows, windscreens, mirrors etc, there's a tremendous amount of subtle voyeuristic traits in the film. When Betsy notices Travis watching her from the taxi parked outside the campaign office, she puts on her glasses to look at him, again one character 'viewing' another. She feels intimidated by Travis and a male work colleague approaches him. Travis drives off. Betsy's work mate uses the line "*I'll play the male role in this relationship and ask him to move*"(8). He offers to take 'control' of the situation but Betsy playfully cuts in "*good luck*" (9).

Travis's voyeurism affects Betsy's control over her feelings, he makes her uncomfortable. In the book *Screening The Male* (1993) Steve Neale comments on two ways of looking at masculinity – voyeuristic and fetishistic (10). He refers to Laura Mulvey's article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' from *Screen* (1975). 'Mulvey locates them solely in relation to a structure of activity/passivity in which the look is male and active and the object of the look female and passive' (11).

Travis enters the promotion campaign office where Betsy works to ask her out for coffee and pie. He has smartened his appearance up and is wearing a 'red' velvet jacket. He is very dominant in his approach to Betsy. She too in this scene

is wearing a 'red' dress and is not as submissive to Travis's actions as she appeared in the earlier scene. She 'coolly' tells Travis that if he's around later she'll meet him for coffee. Travis views his act of asking Betsy out as some kind of 'noble' act, as 'saving her' he says "*I'm here to protect you*"(12) and poses as a strong man with his fist clenched and his arm tensed. Betsy's nervousness of him begins to wane. He is very complimentary to her but is very 'anti' her male work colleague. He mentions, "*having the courage to talk to her*"(13). Her nervousness turns to intrigue with him and she comments on him reminding her of a 'Kris Kristofferson song called 'Walking Contradictions' (14). Betsy begins to warm to his odd charm but has also sensed uneasiness from his earlier actions; this is the contradiction in his actions. His psyche also shows this contradiction in him seeing himself as 'the good knight' fighting the evil society of the streets, but at the same time he frequents 'blue movie parlours'. He fantasizes about how his 'masculinity' can 'do something'. He seeks a 'noble identity' but his attempt to communicate with Betsy is on par with the time he asks for advice from taxi driver colleague Wizard. They talk to one another but they do not communicate. Steve Neale (1993) comments on how cinema uses these contradictory tendencies to represent masculinity and refers to John Ellis's book *Visible Fictions* (1982) 'Cinema draws on and involves many desires, many forms of desire. And desire itself is mobile, fluid, at points even contradictory. Moreover, there are different forms of identification. Ellis points to two such forms, one associated with narcissism, the other with fantasies and dreams.'(15).

In Travis's encounters with people who have strong personalities, are in 'control', he shows different identities. When the taxi drivers are having a break in a local delicatessen Travis joins them. The guys are talking about women passengers, Wizard is telling a story of climbing in the back of his cab with a woman and 'giving it to her', he is very aggressive in his description. Travis listens in "*I jump in the back seat and whip it out and say 'do you know what this is – she says it's love, I'm gonna' fuck her brains out. She goes wild and gives me a \$200 tip and her phone number in Acapulco*" (16). This whole scene is dominated by males, there are no female characters other than in the narrative and in that they are submissive to dominant male masculine sexual aggression and supposedly 'loving it'. Wizard asks Travis how it's 'hanging', Travis shows awkwardness at this until he realizes he means 'how are you doing'. Travis's alienation again shows through, he doesn't understand the streetwise slang and terminology. Travis's gaze wanders around the room and takes in a couple of black guys both dressed up like pimps. Black representation in the film is very derogatory, but I would suggest that this is Travis's representation of them. He resents and envies what he sees as their power over women, their power and control. That they have to Travis's way of thinking 'got it right' compared to Travis and then later on in the film the guy in the back of Travis's taxi (Scorsese himself), who's found out his wife's having an affair with a black guy. He's followed her in Travis's taxi and is watching her silhouetted figure in the window. A black male having the power and control over his wife. Scorsese's character calls the guy a nigger. He takes his loss of control in his relationship with his wife out on Travis in the taxi. He

shouts at Travis for turning his meter off, Travis turns it back on. He yells at him for writing on his pad, so he stops writing. He is controlling Travis's actions through fear. Travis at this point in the film has lost his relationship with Betsy. The guy tells Travis he's going to kill his wife. Travis adjusts his rear view mirror to look at him. *"I'm gonna' kill her with a 44 Magnum pistol. You ever seen what a 44 Magnum pistol can do to a woman's face? Damn near fucking destroy it, just blow it apart. Now did you ever see what a 44 Magnum can do to a woman's pussy? Now that you should see. That you should see. You must think I'm pretty sick or something."*(17).

This scene is very powerful both in its artistic delivery and in its content and importance to the story. I've already commented on earlier examples of control and voyeuristic traits in the film, but this particular scene shows a much more powerful representation, with Scorsese's manic intimidating delivery fuelled with misogyny, Travis's submissive response to his demands and the fact that he just 'looks' through either his rear view mirror at Scorsese's character, or his side window at the silhouette of the guy's wife through the apartment window.

This scene ignites Travis's helplessness and bitterness at his own (as he sees it) loss of masculinity and respect. He had taken Betsy to a blue movie show and she had walked out in disgust at him for taking her there as a date. He couldn't understand her disgust. It's interesting that this scene has black couples together watching the same movie. As she stormed out of the cinema and climbs in a taxi she says *"We're just different"*(18). He tries calling her but she doesn't respond. The scene where Travis is talking on the phone to her and the camera pans



away to a long empty corridor represents the gulf between them. You only hear Travis's voice during the call as well. He goes along to the campaign office that Betsy works at and is escorted out by her male work colleague. He tells Betsy 'she's in hell' then as he walks away we hear the monologue of his comments to his diary "*I realize now how much she's just like the others – cold and distant. Many people are like that, women for sure, they're like a union.*"(19). His misogynist feelings towards Betsy and women in general are then contradicted later in the film when his feelings for Iris bring him to return to his 'saviour' and 'good Samaritan' role, albeit in his head

His desire 'to do something' to be a 'man' and make women respect him finally overpowers his mental state and he loses control of reality. He comments, "*Suddenly there is change*"(20). He purchases arms (guns); this coincides with him arming his body through the process of fitness and diet. He shapes his body to become 'fighting fit'. The focus of his retribution being Betsy and her admiration for Senator Palantine. Yvonne Tasker also featured in *Screening The Male* suggests that cinema's depiction of 'man and muscle' this toning of the body, represents power, 'The performance of a muscular masculinity within the cinema draws attention to both the restraint and the excess involved in 'being a man,' the work put into the male body and the poses that it strikes.'(21). One automatically now thinks of Travis in front of the mirror and the famous "*You talkin' to me*"(22). As Travis asserts 'control' over his body by disciplining his diet, working out, even self-mutilation is evident in sustaining pain when he holds

his clenched fist over a flame. He perceives this as gaining his masculinity. The film shows his progression through this period by gradually showing him with more guns strapped to his body. He becomes the ultimate fighting machine; he becomes one with his armoury. The body aid he makes to attach a gun hidden up his arm that he can present by snatching his arm out represents this. He loves the power, he loves himself – narcissism is presented to us by Travis in front of the mirror.

This 'muscular presentation' of masculinity / control over women can also be seen but more subtly in the character that Harvey Keitel plays (Matthew or Sport) - Iris's pimp. He's dressed in a white vest when we see him, his muscular frame toned, not excessive as depicted in a film like Rambo, neither is Travis, but they are toned, lean and mean. It's also worth noting that his dress is very much in the style of a 'black pimp', the wide brimmed hat and his 'jive talk' representative of this.

Iris (played by Jodie Foster) is a twelve year old prostitute in the film. Throughout the film Travis has had brief encounters with Iris. She jumps into his cab and tells him to drive away quickly only to be grabbed back out by Matthew. She walks out in front of the cab at one point and Travis slams the brakes on. She is like a startled rabbit caught in the spotlights. She is completely out of it. Travis follows her and her friend as they pick up a couple of guys and go off into the night. He makes contact with her a few days later and is disgusted that she is working the streets. He's disgusted with Matthew her pimp and the way that he pokes fun at

him. Iris becomes his crusade, to save her from the streets and return her to her childhood. After his attempt at 'doing something' at Senator Palentines speech is aborted, due to his now totally striking appearance (mohican style haircut) bringing his actions to the attention of the Secret Service officers, he runs away and only just evades being caught, he switches his attention to Iris and saving her from the clutches of Matthew.

The ending was surprising; Travis kills Matthew and a couple of his associates in trying to release Iris. Travis gets shot up bad himself and looks about to die when the scene flows into one showing a letter from Iris's parents thanking him for helping her, she's returned to them and has gone back to High School. There's also newspaper cuttings' reporting on him as 'the hero'. We then see him back outside the delicatessen with the other taxi drivers and he gets a fare in his cab. The fare turns out to be Betsy who tells him she read all about him in the paper. He's again looking at Betsy in the back using the rear view mirror, she too looking at him using the mirror. He drops her off and drives away. Some people don't buy this ending. Is it another fantasy/dream of Travis's as he is dieing?

To conclude I'll apply my analysis findings to sections of the dictionary quote on the word **control**.

*'Power of diverting or restraining, self restraint, means of restraining or regulating, switches and other devices by which machine is controlled'* – Travis 'something happening' – he turns into a fighting machine. He can't regulate

control, he can't restrain. Both Travis and Scorsese's character have lost control of a relationship and want to regain it. To reassert their masculinity.

*'Place where something is controlled or verified'* – Travis feels in control, feels comfortable with taking Betsy to a porn cinema. Matthew controls the hotel/brothel. The Secret Service controls the crowds at the Senators speech. They gain control.

*'Personality said to divert actions and words of spiritualist medium'* – Travis 'diverts' Betsy's actions for a short period. Although she resists and refuses his directive, for those that go along with the films ending Iris conforms to his directive and returns to her home.

*'Have control of, regulate...In control – in charge; out of control – unrestrained, without control; under control – being controlled, in order'* - Travis wants control – loses regulation of his feelings, of his control. He wants to take charge 'do something'. Betsy doesn't respond to his 'control' in a submissive way – she refuses. Travis becomes 'out of control'. The end is open to interpretation, does Travis 'gain control' of Iris or is it his last fantasy?

Ken Page in his article *Going Solo* comments, 'De Niro uses his body to project his character's inner turmoil and lack of control' (23). A similar comment from Jonathan Rutherford (1996) mirrors the aspect of masculinity being about controlling emotions with 'reason and thought'. Wanting, having and losing control without reason and thought having an affect on masculinities representation not only in film but in society as well. He states, 'A history of

masculinity is the struggle to tame and subdue the emotional and sexual self and to recognize the ascendant and superior nature of reason and thought' (24).

The representation of masculinity in *Taxi Driver* is in the pursuit of having and being 'in control'.

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- 2). *Taxi Driver* (1976).
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