

Taxi Driver and The Male Fantasy

Over the past couple of years, men worldwide have been identifying with male figures with extreme views. For example, the rise of Andrew Tate (with his opinions of male superiority and outdated stereotypes) and Clavicular (pushing the idea that the masculine physique must be pushed over one's health). This pattern spread to the world of film with the trend of male movie goers who are attaching themselves to identities like Tyler Durden from David Fincher's *Fight Club* and Patrick Bateman from Mary Harron's *American Psycho*. These viewers are misinterpreting the critique of these masculine roles and instead using these films as fuel for their own male fantasies. This is causing a disruption of healthy media discussion while allowing more radical ideas to cultivate in both digital and in-person discourses globally. To avoid going on about how this current trend of male movie goers are conversing toxic ideology, the focus should be seeing why this type of interpretation exists. In order to do so, it's necessary to dive into one of these misunderstood films, which criticizes these types of male viewers. The previously discussed films are ones that criticize some male fantasies that using both conventional and unconventional methods of storytelling, but the subject of this essay predates them both. In Martin Scorsese's 1976 film, *Taxi Driver*, he both deconstructs and criticizes the male fantasy. He does this by allowing his character, Travis Bickle, carry out Bickle's fantasy while Scorsese picks it apart. Martin Scorsese's dissection reveals the true nature of this media literacy problem.

The typical male fantasy caters to the viewer's male gaze or satisfies their craving for escapism and desires that film can provide. In film, this can be described as the male characters view females as objects and the female characters' actions cater to the male's desires due to the male production behind said film. Laura Mulvey, who introduced the male gaze theory to film

discussion stated in a 2024 British Academy article, “But, as the cinema is a supremely visual medium, these gender inequalities were inscribed into the visual style of cinema itself, and how its stories were structured. It was not simply a matter of content, but of film form. Female performers, that is the female stars, were visualized with all the spectacular attributes of the cinema itself, but also highly sexualized and endowed with a quality that I called ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’. The male performers, the male stars, on the other hand, tended to control the story and responded to the ‘woman as spectacle’ with a dynamic, active and erotic gaze,” (Mulvey 4).

There is really no way to filter these movies out in our content consumption which craves escapism from the hardships of reality. The majority of films are created for an audience of male movie goers which are curated by men. This practice allows similar types of fantasies in film to be regurgitated over and over again allowing male viewers across the globe to chase this stylized fantasy.

The majority of the blockbuster hits are essentially male fantasies. In American westerns, the male cowboy acts stoic and either wins over the female love interest or saves the town (or both) then rides/walks away into the sunset. In superhero films, Batman does the saving and gets the girl, but not really because he’s the Batman and he needs to keep his vigilante lifestyle. To quote Christopher May’s 2017 TED Talk, “In other words, almost all films and series from the USA are male productions, from Lord of the Rings and Star Wars to Game of Thrones. The major stories that influence us the most are nothing but male fantasies”, (May). The male fantasy or the appeal to the male gaze is pretty much the norm in pop culture, so it’s no wonder that the current male movie goer ignores criticism relating to themselves in media. There are so many variations of this male fantasy in different media throughout time. When these fantasies are idolized in our pop culture, there are people who truly use these fantasies to fuel their actions.

This idea is what Paul Schrader (writer of *Taxi Driver*) and Martin Scorsese brings to light in *Taxi Driver*.

Martin Scorsese is known for his deconstruction of crime, violence, and masculinity. For example, *Shutter Island*, *Goodfellas*, and *The Wolf of Wall Street* allow their characters to live out their fantasies, then at the end Scorsese either denies the characters their fantasies or reveals the truth behind it. Martin Scorsese also makes points by fulfilling characters' fantasies to make a point (Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* and *King of Comedy* for example). Even *Taxi Driver*'s screenwriter, Paul Schrader, deconstructs masculinity in his own movies including *Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters*. Think of *Taxi Driver* as Scorsese's and Schrader's new wave response to the male fantasy and the male gaze. Specifically, it's a response to the western genre and those who want to enact a sort of savior complex onto their surroundings. Travis Bickle is a character who tries to enact his own fantasy throughout the film. A good example is the "Are you talking to me" scene. He is looking at himself and projecting a tough guy image onto himself. One that does not get pushed around (this is all a response to getting rejected). The majority of the film is him essentially attempting to roleplay in his own male fantasy. Does he save Iris out of the best interest of her own wellbeing or is he doing it for himself? Of course, he's doing it for himself. Similar to Travis, some male moviegoers view a film and they want to project certain masculine and destructive images they see on the big screen. With this trend of current male moviegoers, they romanticize the destructive aspects of this male fantasy. In Suyogya Bhandari's 2022 article he best stated, "'Literally me' refers to a sub-genre of movies and by extension the character(s) where the individual relates to certain qualities. 'Literally me' is one of the, if not the fastest, expanding culture whose primary subscribers seem to be exclusively young men.... Bickle is the archetypal example of the 'Crisis of Masculinity' and now he is gaining his masculinity back.

Now Travis Bickle is literally me,” (Bhandari 2-11). This further cements the separation between societal norms and reality with their projected image (consider the current rise of “male loneliness epidemic” and how this view even impacts some men’s deviations towards extreme viewpoints).

Similar to the current trend of viewers, Travis views women as objects for his fantasy. When they do not comply with his fantasy then he acts violently. In an interview conducted by Roger Ebert, when asked about the male attitude in his film, Martin responded, “The goddess-whore complex. You’re raised to worship women, but you don’t know how to approach them on a human level, on a sexual level. That’s the thing with Travis, the DeNiro character – the taxi driver. The girl he falls for, the Cybill Shepherd character – it’s really important that she’s blonde, a blue-eyed goddess,” (Ebert 18). It’s important to know that Travis views women more as objects rather than real people. In this case, Travis is attempting a pursuit of a fantasy projected on Betsy (Cybill Shepherd’s character), but when his image of Betsy gets tainted, he reacts with violence in the form of attempted political assassination of Charles Palantine (who Travis was aware that Betsy was working for him in his election campaign). It’s a revenge attempt that only develops Travis as an untrustworthy narrator and a fickle protagonist. If the current trend of male movie goers shares this fantasy of women being objects to save then this will prevent them from forming healthy and stable relationships with the opposite sex. The extreme cases that reflects Travis’s attitude in action are ones like Ricardo López’s (Björk’s stalker who committed suicide after sending a letter bomb in response to her dating another man) or even John Hinckley Jr.’s (who attempted to assassinate Ronald Reagan in an attempt to gain favor of Jodie Foster).

To go back to this film being a new wave take on the male fantasy, it's essentially a satire of Western male fantasies. There are very surface level references to cowboys and Native Americans throughout the entire film. The pimps dress in stereotypical Native American clothing, and whenever Travis is called a cowboy, the audience can see the satisfaction on his face being called that (this is after the rejection in which Travis is desiring to save Jodie Foster's character, Iris). Despite larping as a cowboy, Travis Bickle's most depraved and violent form (towards the end of the film) ironically has mohawk (a more stereotypical representation of Native American in Western media). The ending can also be seen as an almost parody of a Western ending. Travis picks Betsy up in his cab and drives her home. She tells Travis that she heard him saving Iris, and Travis is acting stoic and modest for the first time in the film. He drops her off at her place and drives away, almost reminiscent of the traditional hero going into the sunset. The difference however is that the imitated hero is flawlessly well intentioned (in most cases) and Travis is more performative in an attempt to be a hero. Sounds all nice and good on paper, but thanks to the context of Travis's deprived fantasies and awkward interactions, it's more fuel to Travis's fantasy. By giving us a dive into Travis's psyche and perspective, the film encourages the audience to question Travis's true morality and narrative view. This deconstructs the conventional hero by presenting an unconventional hero, not to explicitly call Travis a hero, but from Travis's perspective, he is one. Early in the film he kills a robber and the ending shootout he kills three men, two of which were in front of Iris in order to get her out of prostitution. Yet, at the same time the viewer knows that this same character considers half of the city as scum, he stalks Betsy, and tries to kill Palantine. Travis Bickle is not well intentioned.

The entire film is a response to the traditional stereotypes of the Hollywood- produced male fantasy. In the same Ebert interview Scorsese also stated that his film is, "Feminist.

Because it takes macho to its logical conclusion. The better man is the man who can kill you. This one shows that kind of thinking, shows the kinds of problems some men have, bouncing back and forth between the goddesses and whores. The whole movie is based, visually, on one shot where the guy is being turned down on the telephone by the girl, and the camera actually pans away from him. It's too painful to see that rejection," (Ebert 29). The entire film is a mixture of what Travis wants others to see and the reality of it all (think of it as a back-and-forth conversation between the director and the character). He 'saves' Iris against her will, but he objectifies women. Travis reunites with Betsy, but he stalked her and even took her to an adult theater for a date. The audience should think about what is and is not on the screen in front of them when watching this film. This is pretty much the opposite of what audiences are trained from the exposure of mass-produced and mass-marketed male fantasies. The audience is trained to root for the protagonist, yet there's not one in *Taxi Driver*. Travis Bickle's narrative is structured to alienate himself from the audience. Yet, despite *Taxi Driver* and many other films criticizing the male fantasy the Travis Bickle mentality continues to be prevalent among viewers. The male fantasy can be seen in today's blockbusters, but it feels like more male viewers take the surface level aesthetics to heart.

The reason why *Taxi Driver*, out of all films deconstructing and critiquing the male fantasy, does this approach best is due to it being a mediation of men pursuing this fantasy. The majority of these films are based inside the character's fantasy (*American Psycho* for example), but *Taxi Driver* is more blatant in the separation in Travis's fantasy versus reality. These "media illiterate" male viewers, like Travis Bickle, are ignoring the critique and only emphasizing the parts that validate their own fantasy. If Travis Bickle is a walking contradiction, then so are some of the viewers who watches these films. This has been a very common dilemma since the French

New Wave. If you put one of these types of male viewers in front of a French New Wave film like Godard's *Breathless*, how much do you think he would take from the film? Cinema should be a conversation between director and viewer, but that conversation can only happen if the viewer is listening or is open to listening. Despite this film standing against the test of time, new viewers are finding ways to consider *Taxi Driver* as something to relate to. This explains that no matter what the film's era or background, some viewers will misinterpret the film. With this "Literally Me" movement spreading throughout social media, men are finding ways of connecting Travis's lonely plight to their own lives.

This current problem of current male media illiteracy is linked to social media usage. In a study of how social media shapes concepts, MyKalia Young states that, "Generation Z, unlike Millennials, has grown up with social media as an omni-present force in their lives. This cohort's relationship with social media is less transitional and more central to their identity development," (Young 4). Imagine this, you're a teenage boy in a developed suburb and you see an edit of *Taxi Driver* while you are scrolling on your phone. It's the scene of Travis Bickle getting in shape to assassinate Palatine to his monologue of how he's going to cleanse the filth out of the city. Without any context, this is inspiring. You, too, do not particularly like the city, and you also enjoy the concept of self-improvement for a better cause. So, you start following the influencer, Clavicular to get tips to maximize your look. Then you start watching influencers who push this idea that colleges and filth are attacking your lifestyle. In order to stop this from happening you must conserve this lifestyle from change. One can see how cases like these circulate current discourses and how they are pushing more men toward increasingly radical ideas. Social media shows the user what they interact with the most and if it's a more negative view of society then the algorithm will push content that will further cement their negative views. In that same

scenario, let's say you finally got around to watching *Taxi Driver* and other films like it (*American Psycho*, *Drive*, 2019's *Joker*) and it supports your views of the world. Similar to Travis Bickle, you interpret the world more negatively, and it will fuel your fantasy. There are more of a handful of films that can be viewed surface level and the viewers would have great understanding of the film, yet some films like *Taxi Driver* needs it viewers to interact with it more to understand it full thesis. There are going to be people who will misinterpret the film in some cases like John Hinckley Jr. In an Independent article, it describes that, "In Hollywood, a young man called John Hinckley Jr would watch *Taxi Driver* for the first time. In the character of Iris, and by a warped extension Jodie Foster, he would see his salvation. He began to dress like Travis Bickle, wearing army clothes and boots and keeping a diary just like Travis did. He became obsessed with Foster," (Pollard 4). In this reality mimicking movement, John related his own situation to Travis's, and essentially reenacted Travis's action in the film and get to understandably jailed. It's not the Scorsese or Schrader's fault for depicting Travis as is in the film, but rather the viewers who find him relatable vault for not understanding the satire.

To ask for a grand mediator (or someone who dictates what should and should not be discussed) of art and film discussion is highly unrealistic in preventing the spread of media illiteracy. The beauty of discussion is that one may talk to another with a different view from theirs. Unfortunately, the media illiteracy movement is destroying any meaningful conversations that we may have. Some are hardwired to ideas and are not open to accepting difference in opinions creating more rigid beliefs and views. Of course, there's going to be good and bad stances depending on the topic, but having the inability to understand or change beliefs is a danger to both in and of academic settings. In Oscar Wilde's *The Decay of Lying: An Observation*, he states that, "Life imitates art far more than Art imitates life," (Wilde 55). Art is

the lens through we view the world. The way we look at art is the same way we look at our politics, our relationships, and other people. If someone like Travis Bickle has such a finite view of the world then that vision needs to be expanded. In this situation, it would be appropriate to reapproach the way we teach analyzing media in both the university setting and the school setting.

In a study against algorithm- biased influence, Sally Tayie, a media researcher suggested, “News exposure influences user agency, emphasizing the need for learners to critically engage with content and reflect on its broader societal impacts. Media literacy, as a counterbalance, equips students to recognize bias, seek diverse perspectives, and navigate algorithmically curated information responsibly. By integrating case studies, simulations, and algorithmic transparency into curricula, educators can use this model to foster critical thinking and balanced discourse,” (Tayie 7). If social media cements users’ beliefs to only keep users on their platform, then educators need to normalize critical thinking and challenge students’ view of what’s beneath a presented narrative. Teach students the why and how something has happened rather than the what. Students will gain nothing if a teacher or a professor just restates what has happened in a novel or a movie. Even through socialization, introducing different themes and views in media (and even a variety of media) can help students’ perceptions grow. The only way to combat the media illiteracy crisis is to encourage both current and future generations to think more critically about what they content they consume.

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