Reviews and Their Uses as Affective Texts

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Abstract: This article examines the significance of film reviews and their relationship to issues of masculinity, spectatorship and history. The paper uses the film Taxi Driver (M. Scorsese, US.1976) as a case study to discuss the affective, psychosocial significance of film reviews and their relationship to the fantasies of film texts and their mode of address. It argues that fantasies of male jealousy evoked by the film’s mode of address are also present in the film reviews, suggesting the inter-relatedness of the psychosocial fantasies of masculine jealousy across those spheres of analysis. Taxi Driver was first released in 1976, and was re-issued in 1996 for the cinema and on DVD. The paper includes discussion of film reviews from both periods, providing insights into contemporary fantasies of masculinity, and the mediation of memory as constructed through those reviews. The enduring appeal of the film Taxi Driver as a ‘classic’ film, and its troubled protagonist ‘Travis’ are examined in the light of discussions regarding the continuing instabilities of Western masculinities and the alleged cultural backlash against feminism.

Key Words: Nostalgia, fantasy, masculinities, film review, Taxi Driver

Introduction

This article focuses on the importance of thinking about film reviews in the context of history and their relationship to issues of gender and spectatorship. In particular, the paper focuses upon the film Taxi Driver (M. Scorsese, US.1976) to explore the role of film reviews as affective texts and their relationship to the fantasies inherent in film texts and their unconscious mode of address. I argue that the fantasies of male jealousy evoked by the film’s mode of address are also present in the film reviews and can be seen as an indication of broader socio-culturally located anxieties about masculinity. The psycho-cultural method I employ here suggests that reviewers occupy a liminal space between the viewing public and the film institution and suggests the inter-relatedness of the psychosocial fantasies of masculine jealousy across those spheres of cultural analysis.

Taxi Driver (M. Scorsese, US, 1976) was first released in 1976, and was re-issued in 1996 for the cinema and on DVD. The way the anxieties about masculinity are read and inflected in the two different eras of the film’s release also has implications for the
relationship between history and audience reception. The paper includes discussion of film reviews from both periods, providing insights into contemporary discourses and fantasies of masculinity, the mediation of memory as constructed through those reviews as well as a discussion of psychosocial changes that have taken place since the moment of its release. As the earlier press reviews of the time suggest, the success of the film was connected to the specificities of that historical moment in 1976, when Western, white patriarchal authority was being undermined by a number of forces associated with feminism, black civil rights and the Vietnam War. The film and its cultural reception in the press thus provide a useful focus through which to explore fantasies of masculinity and the backlash against feminism.

*Taxi Driver* still has relevance for male audiences today and the more recent positive press reviews that accompanied its re-release testify to its continued popularity. For example, in a recent DVD review, John Larsen (1999) cites its place in the American Film Institute’s ‘100 films of all time’ and argues that *Taxi Driver* ‘has become so ingrained in the pop psyche that it is hard to avoid it. I know people who still use the ‘talking to me’ bit in their everyday lives’. *Taxi Driver* is now viewed as a ‘classic’ film, and reviews and personal retrospective accounts of first viewings can be found on a number of Internet ‘classic’ movie sites. The film’s iconic standing is reflected through the Special ‘Classic’ Edition of the DVD promoted in the US and the UK. The successful release and re-release of films such as *Taxi Driver* in DVD format testifies to the important relationship between consumption, newly mediated visual cultures and the formation of gendered subjectivities. For example, on the gender-differentiated Internet movie database list of ‘Top Titles as Rated by Male Users’, *Taxi Driver* consistently appears in the top thirty-two selections.

This enduring appeal of the film *Taxi Driver* as a ‘classic’ film, and its troubled protagonist ‘Travis’ foregrounds the continuing instabilities of Western masculinities and the alleged 1990s cultural backlash against feminism (Connell, 1995, Segal, 1990). Central here is the iconic status of Travis Bickle (played by Robert De Niro) whose masculinity both then and now, encapsulates in almost parodic form, the narcissistic insecurities that underlie Hollywood myths of the tough hero (Bainbridge & Yates, 2005; Cohan and Hark, 1993) The paper thus includes discussion of De Niro’s star persona and its extra-textual significance as a contributory factor in shaping the film’s meaning for audiences past and present.

The article begins by examining methodological issues regarding film reviews and star publicity and their uses as affective texts. The second half of the paper is devoted to an

**Film reviews and their uses: notes towards a psycho-cultural approach**

The cultural uses and affective meanings of press reviews have received little attention in film, cultural and journalism studies. Yet in the past, cultural studies have usefully studied film journalism more generally. For example, content analysis has charted the numerical occurrence of themes linked to censorship in relation to the film *Crash* (1996) in the UK press (Barker, Arthurs and Ramaswami, 2001). Press reviews have also been used to examine the construction of stars as cultural signs (Dyer, 1998). Dyer’s method enables the researcher to use press reviews to historicise a star by locating him or her as a product of culture. The use of press reviews to place a film in a particular historical context has also been used by film historians (Staiger, 1992; Kuhn, 2002). Kuhn (2002) calls such work ‘context–activated research’, and cites its usefulness in countering the traditional film studies emphasis on studying the film text in cultural isolation. She points to the need to overcome a ‘dualism’ within film studies, between sociological approaches that tend to focus on questions of audience research and the ‘social’ audience, and the tradition which often focuses on the film text and its unconscious meanings.

However, I would argue that it is possible to overcome such dualism through an exploration of the cultural and psychic continuities that lie between the fantasies of the film text and those that can be found in the press reviews. The Cultural Studies focus on negotiation and resistance within audience research means it has lost some of the insights of earlier psychoanalytic approaches to film, as it ignores the emotional or ‘affective’ aspects of cinema and the irrational pleasures of unconscious fantasy. Psychoanalytic theory provides a rich language to explore the complex fantasies and themes evoked both by film text and its cultural reception in the press. I argue that such continuities are evident in both *Taxi Driver*’s depiction of masculinity and jealousy in the cinematic registers of jealous rescue and in the press reviews.

The importance of this form of analysis is twofold. Firstly, the continuities between the film’s affective mode of address and its reception challenge the traditional film studies duality of textual versus audience research (Crofts, 2000). Secondly, the defensive male jealous fantasies played out across the two spheres have implications for the current cultural backlash against feminism as the male crisis of identity is being played out beyond the film
text, in the context of its reception and in the sphere of its consumption. Crucially then, press reviews are as legitimate as cinema itself in pointing to and constituting markers of ‘the road to the cultural unconscious’ (Lebeau, 2001).

Film reviews and related publicity about films and their stars occupy a number of roles in relation to the promotion and cultural consumption of films and the link that exists between a film’s textual mode of address and its reception at social and unconscious levels of spectatorship (Crofts, 2000). Film reviews are related partly to the production and the promotion of the film, and contribute to the ‘informal publicity’ machine of the film industry (Kolker, 1998:13). The publicity around a film helps to create an ‘aura’ and a particular set of expectations around a film for an audience (Kolker, 1998:13). It is often said that whereas reviews of art house films are spread by word of mouth, the reputation of mass entertainment films is more usually related to the promotion and publicity of the film industry itself (Crofts, 2000; Staiger, 1992). This links to a production-led, manipulationist view of consumption, which implies a passive audience (Dyer, 1998:12-14). Reviews, along with accompanying publicity around the stars and the film, are partly an extension of the Hollywood machine itself, and in ideological terms, provide another outlet for the reproduction of Hollywood values (Dyer, 1998:35; Storey, 1996:73). However, as audience studies have shown, this ‘tight-fit’ perspective does not account for the inconsistencies of audience response, and no amount of publicity can make consumers buy tickets for a film that has acquired a negative reputation through word of mouth or through the press (Bauroy, Chatterjee & Ravid, 2003). As the film British film critic Alexander Walker argued, the critics are not as powerful in opinion forming as one might think, and that ‘word of mouth’ amongst cinema audiences is just as powerful as with art house films:

It’s the word of mouth that counts, not the words of critics ….If we’re honest, we’d love to say ‘Go and see the film’ or ‘Stay away’; mostly we have no such power (Walker, 2001, p.13).

And just as audiences do not always respond positively to films in the ways hoped for by the film makers and critics, mainstream critics are not an extension of the film industry and may respond negatively to films that have had vast amounts of promotional money spent on them, as with Captain Corelli’s Mandolin (2001) and Pearl Harbour (2001). However, if the reviewers do praise a film, as for example with Bridget Jones’ Diary (2001), film
companies will use the favourable comments of the reviewer to promote the film (Walker, 2001).

Thus there is no neat relationship between film reviews and the industry as a ‘manipulationist’ model of consumption might suggest (Dyer, 1998:12-14). The relationship between the film reviews and the public is instead a complex mediation between the film text, the spectator and audience response and society. The significance of this relationship can be explored at two levels. Firstly, in terms of their influence upon audiences, one can argue that film reviews create a certain set of expectations around a film, which in turn mediates the relationship between the spectator and the film text (Barker, Arthurs & Harindranath, 2001; Staiger, 1992). Secondly, press reviews also represent an audience of sorts, and may provide a cultural barometer or a ‘gauge’ of how a given film was received at any one time (Barker et al, 2001; Staiger, 1992). Thus, analysing the recurrence of certain textual themes within a collection of film reviews, can tell us something about the cultural values and fantasies that circulate within a culture at any one time. For example, as Crofts (2000:154) argues in his discussion of The Piano and its reception in the international press:

As written texts, reviews offer detailed, condensed, and discursively rich evidences of readings of films […] Reviews have a generic responsibility to summarize and evaluate the film as a whole, as compared with many articles on the film that deal with selected aspects (e.g. dress or pianos). They also have value as indicating broader community responses to film. Given that reviewers are both opinion leaders and responsible to the commonality of their readerships, conceived as broad market sectors with certain reading competencies and forms of cultural capital, reviews give indicative – not definitive – pointers to prevailing discursive assumptions among the communities of those who write and read film reviews.

Whilst one needs to be aware of the specificities of tabloid and broadsheet formats, as the response to films such as Taxi Driver indicates, the emotional anxieties conveyed in broadsheet and tabloid newspapers in relation to gender and jealousy are often very similar, albeit written in a different style.

The emotional content of reviews is also mediated through the inclusion of publicity and comment relating to the films’ stars. The latter are central to the pleasures of cinema-going and the inter-textuality of the film text, the body of the star on the screen and the star’s
public persona as shaped through reviews and related publicity all feed into the construction of meaning for the spectator.\textsuperscript{11} As Phillips (1999: 181) points out: ‘a star is an image’, and a ‘cultural signifier’, and also (usually) ‘an object of desire. The star comes to embody all that a particular culture projects onto him or her.

Dyer (1998:28) argues that stars may embody ‘values that are under threat’. The nostalgic appeal for some reviewer’s of De Niro’s portrayal of Travis’s reactionary chivalry is another pertinent example of the variable, ideological pleasures of identifying with stars. Thus for Dyer and others, the star is a condensed sign of different aspects of society. When the social order is fragmentary and unstable, the star may appear especially ‘charismatic’, working as a kind of narcissistic foil for cultural anxieties. As we shall see, this process was evident in relation to the contemporary nostalgia for De Niro as Travis, who for some male journalists, appeared to embody a lost era of the ‘true’ and really great male method actor (Caroll, 2000; Thomson, 1998b). The fantasies and identifications, which may be invested in stars, can be extremely powerful and charged with emotion.\textsuperscript{12}

\textbf{Film reviews and the new media}

The study of the affective pleasures and feelings involved in spectatorship also need to be examined in the light of developments in the field of new technology, as in the emergence of film reviews and related Fan Sites on the Internet. \textit{Taxi Driver}, for example, attracted a cult following on ‘classic’ Internet film sites. A recurring theme of discussions about the World Wide Web is that it creates a greater democratisation of communication through the creation of Internet creates ‘communities’ (Jones, 1998).\textsuperscript{13} This has implications for the use of film reviews on the Internet, most obviously perhaps in the case of Fan sites, set up and maintained by dedicated fans. One can argue that the absence of the editor creates the sense of emotional spontaneity and community when contrasted with the communication format and content of traditional press reviews (Bruns, 2003; Greenberg, 2004). However, research on book reviews suggests there may be (as in the book industry), a blurring of boundaries between the ‘genuine’ consumer/fan, and that of the marketing companies promoting the film or star in question (Hansell & Harmon, 1999).\textsuperscript{14} The blurring of boundaries also extend to the content of internet reviews, which in terms of style and content, may range from the frivolous to the ‘highbrow’ and ‘serious’, thus bridging the gap between high and low culture. The latter provides a link with descriptions of postmodern phenomena and follows a trend both in...
terms of the growth of crossover films and the kind of film criticism they are likely to attract more generally (Crofts, 2000).  

Nevertheless, the extent to which the form of the Internet determines the content of film reviews is open to debate and more research needs to be done. In the case Taxi Driver, the Internet reviews contained similar themes to those in the press. Any changes in content are arguably more related to changes in social attitude, than to the medium itself. In contrast to the traditional format of press reviews, the content of DVD reviews and fan sites for Taxi Driver and De Niro tend to be written in an overtly subjective style, and often, they contain emotional, autobiographical content, reflecting research which points to the internet providing opportunities for the creation of the new more expressive modes of human identities (Katz & Rice, 2002:266). The internet reviews for Taxi Driver are mainly written by and for men and they often contain memories of when they first saw the film, how it made them feel and so on. As one reviewer put it:

*Taxi Driver* is one of those films that stay with you. Once you have seen it, it never goes away […] I found myself invited to an advance screening of *Taxi Driver* at a small screening room in Hollywood […] I remember the ending being so vivid it hurt. Like anyone who has seen *Taxi Driver* will tell you, the film connects in so many ways (Larsen, 1999).

The labelling and commercial promotion of the film as ‘classic’, reinforces an aura of romantic nostalgia that has emerged around the re-packaging of the film as a DVD. The 1990s reviews that identify sympathetically with Travis also convey a nostalgic desire for a lost era of authentic masculinity as encoded through the star persona of De Niro and his particular intensive brand of method acting.

Robert De Niro is almost radioactive with charisma, and the charm and magnetism of his extended dialogue scenes with Shepherd and Foster have a relaxed directness that later he was, sadly, to lose by acquiring repetitious tics and mannerisms. What a mad and brilliant film it is: 1,000-degree proof Seventies cinema (Bradshaw, 2006).

The nostalgic appeal and fantasy of De Niro as an actor in the 1990s reviews is that he allegedly embodies a particular kind of lost masculinity that also contrasts with what is
perceived to be the more lightweight masculinity of male stars of today who haven’t been through the rigours of the acting studio.\textsuperscript{18} Paradoxically, recent reviews of \textit{Taxi Driver} and the promotional material that accompany the DVD ‘Special Edition’ (1999) convey a nostalgia for an age of 1970s filmmaking before the introduction of new digital technology within cinematic production, which is seen as potentially detracting from the authenticity of the product (Bainbridge and Yates, 2005).\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Taxi Driver} is presented as an authentic museum piece of art, something that is reinforced by the producer’s documentary commentary and the portrait gallery of stars and film crew in black and white, which is included in the DVD (1999) special edition.

Such nostalgia raises questions regarding the complex relationship between the cultural shaping of memory, psychic fantasies of masculinity and a desire to defend against its losses. The social, political and psychological losses of men and masculinity have been discussed at length over the past decade by those in the field of gender studies (see for example Connell, 1995 and Segal, 1990). Such losses have also been articulated in the field of popular culture, particularly throughout the 1990s where the trope of masculinity in crisis has been a recurrent theme (Bainbridge & Yates, 2005; Kirkham & Thumim, 1995).

To explore these issues further, I now turn to a discussion of \textit{Taxi Driver} and its reception in the UK and US press during the 1976 and 1996. The more recent reviews are taken from the internet site \url{http://www.internetmoviedatabase.com}.

\textbf{Taxi Driver; Masculinity under siege}

\textit{Taxi Driver} was made during a period of enormous social and political change in the Western world, a year after the US pulled out of the Vietnam War, and the film is imbued with the failure and guilt of that experience for Americans (Taubin, 2000). \textit{Taxi Driver} can be grouped alongside those films influenced by the counter-culture of the 1960s and early 1970s, which drew on radical political discourses and images to critique the old myths and stereotypes of the traditional Hollywood cinema and society. It is often argued that \textit{Taxi Driver}, with its themes of disillusionment, male suffering and alienation contributed to a more radical and politically progressive Hollywood cinema (Kramer, 1998:297).

Yet despite its ‘art-house’ credentials, some feminist critics suggest that \textit{Taxi Driver} itself contributed to a masculinist right-wing backlash against the cultural uncertainty of the period and the more liberal forces that were pushing for change (Mellen, 1977; Taubin,
One can point to a number of cultural, social and political anxieties in the 1970’s that dented the confidence of white masculinity; something which is represented at overt and covert levels in the film. The perceived threat posed by the increasing demands for equality and independence from women and from black civil rights groups, also underpin much of the film’s depiction of male anxiety and aggression (Mellen, 1978; Taubin, 1993, 2000). Thus one could argue that Taxi Driver falls into the category of a backlash movie, defending the rights and position of hegemonic masculinity under siege, a theme that is echoed in reviews past and present. De Niro’s portrayal of Travis Bickle was a central factor in the film’s success and as Taubin (2000) argues, it was he that made Bickle a figure ‘worthy of identification’. I now turn to De Niro’s performance, the response of the press, and the construction of his star persona.

**Contemporary Nostalgia For Robert De Niro as Taxi Driver**

Taxi Driver was promoted as a ‘star vehicle’ for De Niro (Taubin, 2000:33). The pleasures of watching De Niro together with the meanings derived from his performance are related to the meanings of his star persona and the construction of his image in that promotional context (Dyer, 1998). De Niro emerged as a star at a time when new images of masculinity began to be available in mainstream Hollywood films (Kirkham and Thumin, 1995; Mellen, 1977). In 1976, the film critic Pauline Kael (1976) described De Niro as ‘the greatest living American actor’ and David Thompson (1998:12) reminds us that he was hailed as the ‘American Olivier’ and ‘the greatest actor of his generation’. In contrast to Al Pacino and Dustin Hoffman, De Niro is more classically handsome, and his status back in 1976 as ‘the new’ but ‘shy’ Brando’; affirmed his sexual desirability and status as a screen idol for men and women (Davies, 1976; Kael, 1976).

When Taxi Driver was first released in 1976, Robert De Niro was already a star from Mean Streets (1973) and The Godfather Part 2 (1974), for which he received an Oscar and where his method acting credentials as a ‘real actor’ as opposed merely to a film star had already been established (Davis, 1976:12). By the time of Taxi Driver, De Niro’s image was already associated with a particular kind of tough masculinity, able to defend what was his through violence if necessary. However, the old fashioned theme of vengeance and redemption is conveyed as motivating Travis’s actions and provides a point of identification for the audience past and present.
Dyer (1998:28) argues that stars embody values that are felt to be under threat. Much of the praise from critics in the 1990s is steeped in nostalgia for the ‘early’ De Niro, particularly in his role of Travis Bickle. His early roles appear to embody a lost era of the ‘true’ and really great male Hollywood method actor. In her discussion of De Niro’s performance as La Motta in Raging Bull, Cook (1982) argues that De Niro/La Motta represents a nostalgic ‘ideal’ of lost masculinity and yet at the same time, fails to live up to that fantasy. One can argue that something similar is happening in the contemporary press reviews of De Niro and Taxi Driver when they speak of the young De Niro and his credentials as a real working actor. The disappointment of respected critics about his later roles (Thompson, 1998:12; Thomson, 1998:5) which also touches on the more squalid descriptions of De Niro the man/star, and his involvement with ‘call-girls’, appear to confirm his fall from grace. The desire for the return for the original ‘authentic’ De Niro of the past, was summed up in an article in the following way:

Have you seen this man? And if not, how did you miss him? […] DeNiro should learn to just say no […] It has been about five years since critics and audiences started sounding the alarm bells over De Niro who has rounded the curve toward 60, began taking come comedy and light character roles (Zacharek, 2005).

Critics demonstrate nostalgia for his roles in Taxi Driver, Mean Streets (1973), The Godfather (1974) and The Deer Hunter (1978). The 1990’s reviews of Taxi Driver, universally praise De Niro’s portrayal of Travis, and can be seen in the light of a nostalgic looking back. Broadly then, the nostalgic appeal and fantasy of De Niro as an actor in these reviews (as exemplified in Taxi Driver), is that he allegedly embodies a particular kind of (lost) masculinity that contrasts with what is perceived to be the more lightweight and unprofessional stars of today such as Leonardo Di Caprio, whose hedonistic lifestyle has, according to press reports evoked the fury of De Niro’s erstwhile director Martin Scorsese:

Di Caprio arrived on set last week ton a public roasting in front of cast and extras. The director of Raging Bull, Taxi driver and Goodfellas let loose a 10-minute tirade that left his leading man ‘speechless’, attracted criticism of Martin Scorsese (Carroll, 2000).
The theme of loss is a strong theme in the film reviews from both time periods. This is often expressed in terms of the loss of the real and the depiction of Travis’s struggle to survive in a false and sordid environment and Travis’s search ‘for something human along the rubbish-strewn, neon lit streets with their listless loungers’ evokes sympathy (Shorter, 1976:11). Some relate this loss to the falseness of consumerism and the changing values of an increasingly materialist Western world. As one journalist put it: ‘He’s been (like most of us) deceived by false advertising, phony movie and tv dramaturgy, vote hungry politicians’ (Murf, 1976).

**The jealous ‘rescue motif’: how jealousy moves the narrative along**

Throughout Taxi Driver, white masculinity appears to be under threat from a number of forces in the environment. During the film, the representation of male rivalry, jealousy and misogyny are closely entangled with representations of racism and fear and loathing of the ‘other’. The narrative is structured by the representation of Travis’s jealousy, in which the loss of the woman (Betsy) and male rivalry spur him on to violence. For Travis, it is as if the creation of rivals provides a temporary solution for the refusal to acknowledge or cope with the loss. Although Travis’s jealousy plays a key role in driving the narrative, the audience may not be consciously aware of this. This may be because Travis’s jealousy is not represented in ways that we associate with jealousy as Travis does not whine or overtly express jealous loss. Instead the jealousy is displaced and discharged in a more destructive fashion, through guns and violence. The hidden-ness of the jealousy enables him to be a hero to the public (in the film) and for spectators who are shielded from the more helpless castrating aspects of jealousy.

One definition of jealousy is to protect and (jealously) guard, and in the Romantic tradition, this has certain noble and idealistic connotations (Baumgart, 1990; Van Sommers, 1988). The trope of the man who jealously protects and rescues the defenceless woman in distress is a good example of this. Although one can argue that the discourse of male chivalry has lost much of its social legitimacy, the rescue fantasy of the knight in shining armour still remains a seductive one in the Western cultural imagination (Berman, 1997) and as we shall see, was a recurrent theme of reviews. The so-called heroic wish to rescue a third party echoes the American foreign policy rhetoric of the Vietnam War, which is evoked throughout the film.²¹
Surprisingly perhaps, however outdated in social and political terms, the seductive power of the psychopathic hero Travis remained strong for reviewers past and present. It may be that for some, Travis invites sympathetic identification, partly because of De Niro’s portrayal, and also because of the seductive power of the film’s rescue romance fantasy, which however misguided and violent, works as a displaced solution for contemporary cultural and psychological anxieties about male loss.

**The female objects of rescue and desire**

The representation of Travis’s paranoid world-view conveys a split mode of relating, and the binary construction of woman as whore or Madonna is symptomatic of this. For example, Travis begins by idealising Betsy, however, when she rejects him, she soon becomes a whore who cannot be trusted. This theme is also echoed in many of the 1976 reviews, which found her superficial and ruthlessly ambitious and her character is described in negative terms as ‘a cold femme-fatale’ (Coleman, 1976) and as a ‘class–conscious’, ‘cool socialite’ (Mackie, 1976), who exploits Travis’s naïveté and reviewers show sympathy for ‘Travis’s rejection at the hands of middle class Cybill Shepherd’ (Schnickle, 1976:62). Taubin (2000:21) has since argued that in taking Betsy to a porn film, Travis’s behaviour is akin to a real violation, such as ‘date-rape’. However, in 1976, a number of reviewers show sympathy for Travis whose inappropriate choice of film is seen merely as a careless social gaffe, as one reviewer put it: ‘He makes all the wrong moves and is rejected’ (Hutchinson, 1976). As with Taubin, more recent reviewers are keener to distance themselves from him at this stage of the film. As Schrader’s script notes show, not only does this scene signify Travis’s ‘out of touchness with the real world’, it also demonstrates Travis’s cruelty and a wish to humiliate the wholesome, middleclass Betsy:

There’s something that Travis could not even acknowledge, much less admit: that he really wants to get this pure white girl into that dark porno theatre (Schrader, 2000:30).

The depiction of Travis’s heroic rescue fantasies conveys a sexual guilt and anxiety, which are exacerbated by the connotations of his desire for Iris, the girl-woman prostitute, who is the second object of his rescue fantasy. This tension is also present in the _Taxi Driver_ reviews from both time periods. On the one hand, they point to Travis’s chivalry in rescuing...
the ‘under-age prostitute’ from the pimp and punters. On the other, they write suggestively of Foster’s sexually provocative appearance. Like Travis, they point to her corruption by Sport and the New York streets (Blake, 1976; Rice, 1976). In 1976, Jodie Foster/Iris’s sexual desirability is strongly implied, especially in the tabloids who carry images of her standing suggestively in her infamous hot pants: ‘Baby Doll Hooker in Hot Pants’ (Cashin, 1976:13) ‘Foster says “Taxi Driver didn’t teach me anything I didn’t know already”’ (Blake, 1976:4).

No mention is made of Travis’s possible desire for Iris because this would complicate his potential status as a hero - and ‘our’ possible identification with him – as a vengeful crusader. Thus the public may collude with the character’s defences. In the case of twelve-year old girls, feelings of jealous possession retain their social legitimacy only if they are devoid of sexual desire. If it were otherwise, Travis would be seen as bad as the pimp whom he (and society) reviles. It would also detract from the identification with the romantic image of the celibate knight, who pursues justice for a higher purpose than the reward of physical pleasure. Sexual jealousy depletes this image, and makes Travis less worthy of identification, implying a closer relation to the pimp than perhaps he or we would like.

**Gender and jealous paranoia in the reviews of Taxi Driver**

As we have seen, despite Travis’s psychopathic qualities, many critics past and present, appear to have strongly identified with his character and the depiction of his jealous paranoia and this identification appears to be divided along gender lines. One can argue that the film may hold a different set of pleasures and identifications for the female reader, as female reviewers past and present, appeared to identify less with the character of Travis’s and his point of view and resented ‘the camera rubbing our noses into the congealing blood’ (Kingsley, 1976). There were far fewer contemporary female press reviews of Taxi Driver, which in itself may reflect the popularity of the film as a masculine genre and its ‘classic status’ for male audiences. For example, in 1976, Margaret Hinxman (1976) argued that while she found De Niro’s performance ‘brilliant’, she nevertheless wrote that his character was ‘deranged’ and that his relationship to Betsy was that of ‘voyeur’. More recently, the cultural critic Amy Taubin (2000) argued that the themes of sexual repression, misogyny and jealousy are central to the film’s narrative. In 1996, Taubin (1993: 57) argued that at a recent screening, male reviewers were ‘communing’ with Travis in a way that she, as a female spectator, could not, and she was aware of her ‘non-empathy’ for the character. Taubin refers
in particular to the male identification with Travis’s ‘malevolent gaze, in the armed ‘n’ ready musculature rigid with rage’.

As we have seen, many of the 1990s reviews speak of the film’s power to evoke memories of its first screening, and remain haunted by the violence and blood of Travis’s ‘cathartic’ shoot-out (Beradinelli, 1996; Taubin, 1993; Taubin, 1996). As one reviewer recalled:

The blood was really red, and there was lots of it. I remember this moment so well because on the trip home (Highway 1 through Malibu) we came across a massive paint spill in the middle of the road. The color of the paint was red, and it looked like a nasty accident has occurred just moments before. It kind of cemented the Taxi Driver experience to my brain for life. Of course it wasn’t just the crimson tide that stayed with me (Larsen, 1999).

In the press reviews from both periods, the Freudian sexual symbolism that underpins the notion of cathartic release, combined with the discourse of ‘innate male sexual drive’ (Hollway, 1989), to imply the inevitably and even desirability of Travis’s murderous jealous outburst at the end. Alexander Walker (1976) is one of the few reviewers from 1976, to point to interaction of hatred and revenge that underpins Travis’s jealous rescue fantasy. Walker does not find the massacre at the end an emotional cathartic release, but sees it more in terms of rape fantasy and writes of ‘his impotence armoured by a multitude of weapons’.

Alongside an identification with the depiction of Travis’s ‘cathartic’ violence, many male critics from both eras, also appear to identify with the depiction of Travis’s emotional vulnerability, as if he was just an over-sensitive, ‘socially inept’ man pushed ‘over the edge’ (Cannon, 1997). In both eras, his misogyny and racism is mostly ignored. Instead, they focus on Travis’s social alienation and political exclusion as being the cause of his descent into madness and violence: ‘We have all felt as alone as Travis. Most of us are better at dealing with it’ (Ebert, 2000). This theme of social exclusion speaks of being left out, the very thing which provides the basis of jealous feelings.

In both eras, the themes that framed the response of male reviewers were shot through with the language of paranoid jealousy, in which the themes of betrayal and loss predominate. For example, the environment, which is seen as the cause of Travis’s problems, is summed up by them as ‘deceitful’ (Anon, 1976) and un-trustworthy and in particular, they
point to the betrayal of corrupt and sleazy politicians, and the stuck-up women who are greedy and manipulating (Cameron, 1976; Howe, 1996).\textsuperscript{27} Travis’s misogyny is more often reproduced in the 1976 reviews, where the language of jealousy and class converge, saying that Travis’s emotions are more authentic and ‘sincere’ then those of the ‘superficial’ Betsy, the untrustworthy, ‘class-conscious’ careerist ‘who lets him down’ (Mackie, 1976).\textsuperscript{28}

**Conclusion**

The strong sympathy of male reviewers for the psychopathic qualities of Travis and his emotional vulnerability, resonates with the feminist debate about cinematic depictions of emotional masculinities and the significance of these images for less narcissistic modes of spectatorship and for good-enough, postmodern masculinities (see Bainbridge & Yates, 2005). In cinematic terms, *Taxi Driver*, was distinctive in its break from traditional modes of Hollywood representations of masculinity, and anticipated contemporary postmodern representations of masculinity (Butler, 2000).\textsuperscript{29} As we have seen, *Taxi Driver* is structured and narrated from the point of view of the male protagonist Travis, who is represented as the paranoid and vulnerable victim of forces beyond his control. In many ways, he is romanticised as a lonely hero, who searches for an identity and justice in a world that shows him no kindness. The popularity of the film and the reviews suggest that the film evokes identification with Travis’s paranoid anxieties and the envious fantasies about women and their power to betray men. In contrast to the psychic complexity of more reparative modes of working through emotions, the narrative trajectory of Travis’s jealousy illustrates - albeit in an extreme form, a mode of jealous masculinity characterised by narcissistic illusion. The refusal to acknowledge loss and the temptation to resort to omnipotence and idealisation accompanies more destructive forms of jealousy in *Taxi Driver*, and similar imaginary solutions seem to have been sought by many who have written about the film and perhaps also many others who have seen it, in their understandings of it.

In cultural and psychic terms, it is too simple to relate the film’s mode of address to more negative critiques of hegemonic masculinity, which position the film in relation to a rightwing backlash postmodernity, and argue that we now slip more easily into split and paranoid ways of symbolising the world. *Taxi Driver* retains a radical edge, unsettling the audience, alerting it to the political and sociological conditions of contemporary culture and the legacy of the Vietnam War for men. This critical awareness also plays a part in reviewer’s and audience identification with Travis’s subject position.
In 1976, the reviews suggest that the audience may have been more shocked and moved by the social environment, and they used the sociological language of social exclusion to describe Travis’s plight. However, by 1996, the language used to describe Travis’s story is more psychological, more focused on loneliness, emotional vulnerability and male loss. What both sets of reviews have in common is the assumption that Travis’s violence at the end is inevitable, whether caused by either inner psychological forces or outer sociological ones. In none of these reviews is there the suggestion that Travis could have taken a different path and changed his life. Indeed, there is sympathy for Travis’s narrative of chivalry, which I have argued is underpinned by the fantasy of jealousy rescue, sadomasochism and the projection of sexual desire. Despite the ambiguity of Travis as a character who is both macho and vulnerable, De Niro’s portrayal of Travis the psychopathic hero, remains seductive for those whom the rescue fantasy retains its power. The contemporary appeal of Taxi Driver is I have argued, largely related to De Niro’s depiction of Travis, and to the nostalgia for the lost masculinity within this representation.

Travis’s psychopathic behaviour may be perceived as the perverse and outdated revenge of the male hero who no longer has a place. However, from the point of view of a sympathetic audience, his jealous rescue does enable Iris to go to college, Betsy to admire him and himself to erase the pimps who seem to have all he despises and desires. However outdated in social and political terms, the seductive power of Travis’s fantasy remains strong. As the reviews suggest, Travis invites sympathetic identification, partly because of De Niro’s portrayal, and also because of the seductive power of the rescue motif, which however misguided and violent, works as a displaced solution for cultural and psychological anxieties about male loss, sociologically indexed in the 1970s, more psychologically inflected today. The underlying and continuing instability in the movie hinges upon who it is that actually needs rescuing.

Notes

2 A film’s mode of address ‘refers to the ways in which the text assumes certain responses, which may or may not be operative in different reception conditions’ (Mayne, 2002 p.29).
3 In contrast to film and cultural studies methodologies, which in the past have tended to ignore the role of affect or which focussed only on the film text or audience response.
4 For a synopsis of Taxi Driver, see http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0075314/ 
5 See for example http://www.damox.com/entertainment/movie_review_taxi_driver.htm 
6 See www.imdb.co.uk).
In contrast to the term ‘emotion’ which has more clearly observable and public connotations, the term ‘affect’ is used throughout this paper in a psychoanalytic sense to denote its unconscious roots and its symbolic representation in the cultural sphere as being related to and mediated by unconscious fantasy. For a discussion of the distinction between the terms ‘emotion’ and ‘affect’, see Music, 2001, pp. 3-5 and for a psychoanalytic discussion of ‘affect’, see Laplanche & Pontalis, 1988, pp. 13-14).

For example, see Crofts’ (2000) analysis of The Piano (1992).

I am referring here to the psychoanalytic concept of the primary scene, which lies at the heart of psychoanalytic theories of the unconscious. See Laplanche & Pontalis, 1988, p. 335).

Such a view is echoed in the field of consumer and marketing research, where the influences and predictive role of reviewers are hard to ascertain (Basurop, Chatterjee and Ravid, 2003). However, there is a consensus that the first two weeks are crucial for influencing box office receipts. After that time period, word of mouth begins to have more effect. Such research also argues that while reviews do influence the consumers, negative reviews have more of a powerful effect than positive ones (ibid).

The public construction of stars occurs though promotional material produced by the film industry, PR agencies and by the general publicity surrounding the star (Dyer, 1998, p. 61). The aim of star study is to examine the narrative that has been constructed for public consumption.

The psychoanalytic implications of such narcissistic identifications and their relationship to issues of cinematic spectatorship have been discussed at length in the field of cine-psychoanalysis (Kirkham and Thumnin, 1995; Lebeau, 2001; Neale, 1983).

A defining characteristic of the Internet is its links with other media sources, as a form of communication; it allows ‘many to many’ communication instead of one to many (Jones, 1998; Silverstone, 1999).

Hansell and Harmon (1999) cite the readers’ reviews on Amazon.com as an example, and in the case of film, video and DVD reviews, one can point to the same ambiguities when navigating the links to reviews on the much used internetmoviedatabase.com. In this sense, the independence of such reviews and their relationship to the market needs to be taken into account.

Crossover films are so called because in aesthetic and narrative terms, they draw on aspects of arthouse and popular cinema and are likely to appeal to both sectors of the audience. This crossover appeal may be reflected in the reviews of such films where the style of the prose may contain elements of arthouse and popular discourse (Crofts, 2000; Polan, 2001).

The comparative differences related to the specificities of form, between the Internet reviews of Taxi Driver in the 1990s, and the press reviews of the 1970s, are difficult to ascertain, as the re-release of the film did not attract many press reviews.

See http://www.imdb.com/title/ttoo75314/usercomments

As for example, Leonardo de Caprio, whose image and hedonistic lifestyle when working on set has been contrasted unfavourably with Deniro’s discipline as an actor (Carroll, 2000, p. 26).

See for example, Henkel, http://www.dvdreview.com/html/taxi_driver.htm

However, Taxi Driver also goes against that rightwing anti-feminist backlash. In contrast to other representations of masculinity in films of the 1970s, as for example, in Dirty Harry (1971) or Death Wish (1974), Taxi Driver challenges the kind of traditional macho images of men, where narcissistic masculinity is naturalised and represented unproblematically.

See also Scorsese’s The Big Shave (1967), made as a critique of the Vietnam War.

See also Magill, 1976; Mellen, 1978; Taubin, 1993; Taubin, 1996.

In psychoanalytic terms, the term ‘catharsis’ implies that some kind of positive insight has accompanied the repressed energy that has been released (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1988, pp. 60-61).


Past reviews include: Anon, 1976; Shorter, 1976; for more recent reviews see: Berardinelli, 1996; Henkel, 1999.

Past reviews include Blake, 1976; Malcom, 1976; Shorter, 1976; more recent reviews include Beradanelli, 1996; Cannon, 1997; Ebert, 2000.

For early reviews see also: Christie, 1976; Coleman, 1976; Schickle, 1976; for more reviews see: Henkel, 1999; Fox, 1996.

See also Coleman, 1976; Mackie, 1976; Shorter, 1976).

The work of Tarantino, is most often cited here. For a discussion of this, see Butler, 2000.
References


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**Filmography**


*The Big Shave*, M. Scorsese, US, 1967.

