

Brattle Theatre Film Notes: TAXI DRIVER

USA, 1976. Rated R. 101 min

Cast: Robert De Niro; Cybill Shepherd, Peter Boyle, Jodie Foster; Music: Bernard Herrmann; Cinematographer: Michael Chapman; Producer: Julie Phillips, Michael Phillips; Director: Martin Scorsese

It is difficult now to see many of the great American films of the 1970s. I don't mean to suggest the decade's staple films are hard to find on video and DVD, in revival theaters and on television. On the contrary, the movies that defined post-Vietnam, post-Watergate America, the films that reshaped Hollywood and refreshed a moribund industry with their frankness and ambition, are all too available. These movies, their characters and signature lines and scenes, have become, in many cases, as familiar to us as our own lives, and have transcended mere entertainment, even mere art. *The Godfathers*, *Raging Bulls* and *Chinatown*s have become truly iconic, as unassailable as the era that produced them. And for this reason they have become difficult to see as films. Lavish enough praise and solemn reverence on any movie and it becomes lost beneath the layers of myth and legend, and the fullness of its accomplishments becomes difficult or impossible to experience.

This of course can happen to any picture from any era, but it seems a particular shame in this case, because if ever a cinematic aesthetic was meant as an immersive experience, it is the gritty, fearless primacy of the so-called "maverick" filmmakers of 1970s America. If the era began (as Peter Biskind supposes) with *Easy Rider* and effectively ended with *Raging Bull*, it could reasonably be said to have peaked with *Taxi Driver*. And it is a film that makes reverence for the period perfectly understandable, particularly in comparison to the pap now churned out by Hollywood. Watching it now stirs an undeniable pang of sadness at what we've lost. Did Hollywood really make films like this? Were Scorsese and De Niro (both now enjoying adulation of

which they seem hardly deserving) really this good? It seems impossible, but there they are, exploring New York's mean streets and Travis Bickle's (De Niro) psyche with an unflinching eye.

Bickle (as we all know by now) is a Vietnam veteran with an insomnia problem and a need to be useful. Taking a job as a cabbie, he cruises a pre-Guliani New York City of whores and pimps, junkies and hoods, appalled at the corruption and filth he sees and longing for judgment and retribution. "Someday a real rain'll come and wash all this scum off the streets," he tells us in his disaffected narration. Feeding Bickle's burgeoning rage is his loneliness, a condition he sees as terminal. "Loneliness has followed me everywhere," he tells us. "I'm God's lonely man." He fixates on a pretty young cam-



paign worker, Betsy (Shepherd), a vision in white. When that sours, he becomes determined to rescue an underage prostitute, Iris (Foster), from her sordid life of sexual degradation.

The images most closely associated with the film are of Bickle, his hair in a Mohawk and a deranged glint in his eye, wielding his pistols. These still and publicity photos grace T-shirts, postcards and dorm room posters, and for many people define Bickle's character. But taken out of the film's context, reduced to a pop cultural simplicity, they are misleading. Looking past the film's reputation (which is based mainly in its gruesome climactic gun battle, surely one of the bloodiest and most unnerving ever filmed) and the tangle of its legend, we see that Bickle's essence

is not savagery, but sadness. In many ways he's like a child, naive enough not to know what moonlighting is when asked by his boss, or to anticipate the error of taking Betsy to a porn film on their second date. In his ill-fitting corduroy jacket and tie, with his awkwardness, his earnest way of speaking, his confusion at the other cabbies' joking, he is an innocent. And this childlike simplicity allows him to see things in a simplified way (surely an attractive idea to many people in the insanity and ambiguity of the mid-1970s).

Increasingly withdrawn from a world shot through with an almost Biblical sense of corruption, he comes to consider himself an avenger, "a man who would not take it anymore." In a small but essential scene, we watch Bickle watching "American Bandstand" on television, his Magnum clasped loosely in his fist. The song playing is a slow one, and on the screen couples sway and turn in the shadows. Bickle slumps in his chair and with his toe absently tips the crate on which the television sits, leaning it back further, further still, seemingly taking no notice, until finally it passes its tipping point and crashes over, the screen going dark with sparks and a few wisps of smoke. It is the kind of scene that would look like nothing on a script page, but which Scorsese and De Niro imbue with meaning and portent. Bickle leans forward in his chair, taking his head in his hands, cast out of the world of young love and music and promise.

Incredibly, it has been 27 years since *Taxi Driver* was made. That's 27 years of pop cultural distortion, 27 years of reducing its complexities and mysteries to easily digestible photo stills and catch phrases ("You talkin' to me?"). Closely watched, it is as powerful as ever. Yes, it is disturbing, violent and perhaps even unpleasant at times. But it is also a vivid, moving portrait of the effects of loneliness and isolation on the human spirit.

- Written by Lawrence Fahey