

OPINION

Mindless Audience Reaction by David Beard

Audience reaction to **Taxi Driver** has shattered the sensitive ends of this moviegoer's nervous system.

The following is not an incidental attack on the film. My attack is upon the mindless way in which the North American audience has reacted to it. For **Taxi Driver** marks a point of departure in criticism. It has separated the media-mind from the reading mind. The former insists on being led, the latter on calling a halt for examination. My attack is directed at those whose enthusiasm over this film is a result of their inability to make any sort of balanced judgment on the matter.

Generally, however, these members of the audience do not read, so my remarks are addressed to the converted, and thus a self-defeating exercise – perhaps.

First off, let us give the movie its due. **Taxi Driver** has two powerful forces behind its creation, the scriptwriter and the director; the former a man of the intellect, the latter one of action. Add to these:

- a) excellent performances from the cast
 - b) impressive photography – albeit lacking in restraint
 - c) striking direction in some scenes
- and you have a clear line of defence against my kind of attackers.

Of course the media-conditioned mind would be quite satisfied with such observations, even without the psychological softening effect of the publicity campaign. Not just the conventional spread, but an article from *The New Yorker* by Pauline Kael reproduced in *The Sunday New York Times* – one full page. (Kael is surely passing into the promotional world of movies – she is, perhaps unwittingly, contributing to the hype.) The review alerted the following elements:

- a) the theorists
- b) the love-haters of violence
- c) the cultists (director-actor followers)
- d) the avid consumers, both inside and outside the USA, of New York paranoia.

And a large part of movie audiences are media-conditioned. TV shows have taught them when to respond and what to respond to in the shows. Now they no longer need the prompt card. They know and congratulate themselves that they know. A performer said to me recently that it is next to impossible to give a sincere performance today. Under these conditions it is impossible for an artist to mature and be a successful artist. **Taxi Driver** caters, then, to the media-conditioned self-congratulatory audiences who can't be brought to see the movie's monumental shortcomings.

The film begins with an intended symbol, the baptism of the taxi. It is blatant – the media-mind feels superior; he's in the know. Aided by his awareness of the advertising, he knows who will drive the cab. Hence what is dirty (wrong) will be clean (right). The soundtrack issues the message of the lonely musician in the lonely night expressing (via Bernard Herman's dreadful score) the isolation of the soul. (I half-expected Fred A. and Cyd C. to dance down Broadway.)

It is our taxi driver's environment, dark-lonely. A little out-of-focus lens-work and in-focus steam from the sewer finishes the "touches". We'll see and hear

all this over and over. We know! Yet at this point an audience should know that the film has begun to fail. It is a set-up. It points: not suggests. We are now under attack.

Our hero is to be developed. Travis (one who travels) is an insomniac. His solution? To drive a taxi at night. He keeps a diary. We are directed to understand that he is antisocial, narcissistic, a vagabond, he perceives reality except for his social responsibilities, etc. – in short, he is a psychopath. Thus established, he begins to behave in an unpsychopathic manner. He seeks a fair, clean maiden. He observes her boss, the would-be presidential candidate – a clean leader. But he finds that they are tainted – clean garbage. Scene change – to dirty garbage. New York has them in abundance – pimps, prostitutes, the lot. Then in the dirty garbage he finds one who only appears to be garbage. A white maiden; a teenage hooker. But she is surrounded by her evil garbage-keeping men. The taxi driver will release himself and free her in one pure act of violence. He will cleanse in a baptism of blood (violence as human car wash). He has done what a psychopath cannot do. He has made a moral choice. He has felt for another. He has distinguished in social terms the difference between garbage and goodness. The film has failed to remain true to the character. It has not even maintained the level of acceptable pulp.

What compounds that issue? It pretends to transcend pulp. **Death Wish** kept to its premise and succeeded on its own terms. Travis is never anything but a thing, a common criminal at this point in the movie. The media-mind readily accepts the tired myth of "man saves whore". We are asked to believe that Travis is fulfilling his role as "the while knight on his horsepowered charger saving the damsel from a fate worse than death". That she is a teenage hooker makes it a romantic notion and acceptable to an audience who can identify with this victim.

Again the production values get in the way when Travis gets to his bloodbath scene. The set is tricked up by manipulation, obvious and contrived. The scene of violence is ludicrous. Peckinpah has cured the curable of this type of scene. It is ploughed into us, at us, by all the technical means available; at this point acting is unnecessary. It is embarrassing – it is silly.

Now what follows is totally unconvincing. Travis survives. The teenage hooker is returned to her family. Travis is a hero accepted by society. He is loved and wanted – a letter from her parents. White garbage is seen again. She seems interested, but Travis has risen above the merely neurotic. He is pure.

And so the media-conditioned mind was taken to the laundry. Let Schrader (the scriptwriter) have the penultimate word. In an interview (*Film Comment*) he is quoted as saying, "**Taxi Driver** is a very rich piece of juvenilia, but it is juvenilia; it is an adolescent, immature mind struggling to identify itself." Schrader and Scorsese are not lightweights in the movie business, but if the mindless viewers give standing ovations to immature and sloppy movies, how can the artist mature? He can't. □

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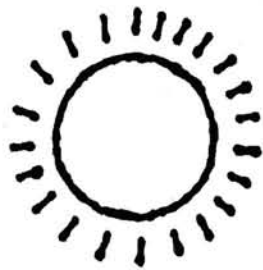
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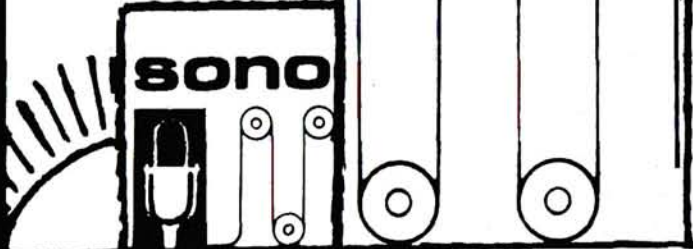


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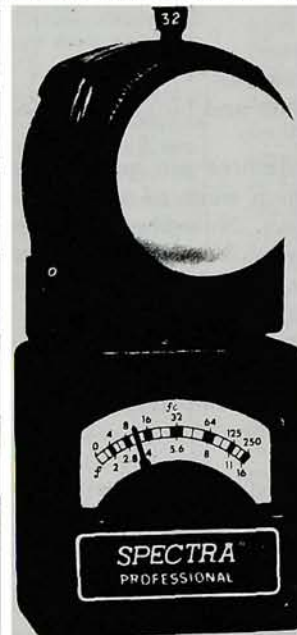
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