Taxi Driver and the Rage of the Incel

by Stanley Yang

Travis Bickle makes the shape of a gun with his bloody hand, puts his finger to his head, and pulls the trigger. His face is not contorted but relaxed, as if he has achieved a kind of release, something close to an orgasm (01:42:47-01:43:11). Having just murdered three men in a brothel, Travis seems to have purged himself of an obsession—but what has he been released from? Martin Scorsese's 1976 psychological thriller *Taxi Driver,* which climaxes with this scene, portrays the tragedy of an alienated man, a veteran who has been rejected by a woman and lives alone in a bleak and heedless New York City. In today's America, though, both the alienated man and the culture that oppresses him and fuels his rage have taken on new forms and meanings, some of them more frightening and dangerous than before.

After watching this movie, I found I nearly sympathized with Travis Bickle, and I was amazed that a work of art could create such an intense and uncomfortable feeling in me. I was perturbed enough to wonder what it meant to enjoy this film today, nearly fifty years after its release. At first, Travis Bickle, played by Robert De Niro, seems to be just a lonely man who needs therapy and a hug. A Vietnam War veteran, Travis is an insomniac who works nights as a New York taxi driver and sees nothing but filth and immorality. He becomes enamored with Betsy, a campaign volunteer for presidential candidate Charles Palantine, but when Travis takes Betsy to a pornographic movie on their second date, she's disgusted and rejects him (00:35:42-00:36:46). After this, Travis becomes increasingly isolated and disturbed. He shows up at the campaign office where Betsy works and insults everyone. He begins to exercise intensely every day, and he becomes obsessed with rescuing Iris, a victim of child sex trafficking, whom he regularly sees while driving around the city. He also develops a fascination with guns: acquiring some illegally, he caresses them in the mirror to feel superior and powerful, imagining himself a hero. He even plans to assassinate Palantine, but instead ends up murdering Iris's pimp and two criminal associates. Afterwards, the newspapers portray him as a hero, but he continues to look upon the world with hatred.

Reviews of *Taxi Driver* when it came out acknowledge the terror of Travis Bickle's violence but also avoid moralizing it. Some reviewers sympathize with Bickle, as I did.

Describing the film as a "brilliant nightmare" that "doesn't tell us half of what we want to know," Roger Ebert ends his review as if he's asking us to feel sympathy for Travis: "He's there, all right, and he's suffering." However, *The New Yorker's* Pauline Kael registers a more particular concern: while the "anonymity of the city" may "[soak] up one more invisible man [who] could be legion," the movie is ultimately about "the absence of sex—bottled-up, impacted energy and emotion, with a blood-splattering release." Sex infuses the film's violence, which "is so threatening precisely because it's cathartic for Travis."

A closer look at Travis Bickle's rage, especially with Kael's focus in mind, reveals the internal contradictions shaping his ideas about sex and gender. Alienated from his surroundings, Travis is lonely, yet he judges everyone. He thinks the city is full of filth, but he goes to porno theaters. He sees women as full of sin, but he also desires them as pure. He describes Betsy, his love interest, as "an angel," and tries to bring her into his life (00:10:10). But the fact that he takes her to see pornography suggests that, despite his fantasy of Betsy's purity, he may see her primarily as a sex object. Travis's savior complex—his urge to be the "strong hero" who salvages Betsy from her current life—is mixed up with his misogyny, which leads him to see sex as the "pleasurable consumption" of a "weak victim" of society ("Misogyny").

Unable to find his voice in the world, Travis increasingly focuses his rage on women, making him much harder to sympathize with as he falls deeper into alienation. In one of the most notorious and disturbing scenes, Travis stalks Betsy at her workplace and, after being kicked out, thinks to himself, "I realize now how much she's just like the others, cold and distant. And many people are like that, women for sure. They're like a union" (00:39:00). Travis's line of thought reflects a misogynistic logic. His comparison of women to a "union" suggests his hatred of women collectively and his fear of their political power. His misapprehensions lead him to be perplexed and enraged when Betsy rejects him.

In today's cultural atmosphere, Travis Bickle might be considered an 'incel,' roaming dark corners of the Internet instead of the streets of New York City. The term incel, derived from the phrase "involuntary celibate," is used by the members of a misogynistic online community who claim they are unwanted by women because they do not meet the standards of a demanding society (Halpin). Self-described incels believe that "the growing numbers of sexually inactive men are a social problem that will result in more killings or an authoritarian men's rights movement" (Halpin). The loose community has been linked to terrorism and several mass killings, including those committed by Elliot Rodger in California and Alek Minassian in Toronto. Before going on his murderous rampage, Rodger declared a "War on Women" for depriving him of sex, and his manifesto is commonly referenced in these online communities (Tolentino).

Recent critics have deepened our understanding of incel ideology as a social phenomenon that stems from alienation, cultural representation, and misogyny. In her essay "The Rage of the Incels," which explores the psychology and the social origins of this community, Jia Tolentino writes that "Women are socialized from childhood to blame themselves if they feel undesirable," and "Men, like women, blame women if they feel undesirable." At its core, incel ideology is built upon the rage that comes from feeling unwanted and misdiagnosing the cause of that loneliness, believing that women are to blame rather than any number of other factors, such as alienation due to technology, wealth inequality due to capitalism, or the ups and downs of life in general. To Tolentino, the core of this ideology is not desire, but misogyny: incels "aren't really looking for sex; they're looking for absolute male supremacy. Sex, defined to them as dominion over female bodies, is just their preferred sort of proof." In other words, the incel response to alienation is to target women with violence, attempting to dominate them because they feel powerless against the other forces oppressing them.

With a deeper understanding of the psychology of incels, Travis Bickle's pathologies become more transparent and perhaps scarier. Today he might be found in a community on Reddit, teeming with like-minded men who stew over feelings of unwantedness and discuss their worst fantasies of terror. In this context, we might conceive of *Taxi Driver* as a study in the radicalization of a terrorist. It asks us to sympathize with Travis, but more to recognize his monstrosity. One recent article on the film even contends that Travis's violence can be more readily comprehended in "the time of mass shootings, MAGA ideology, and the rage of the down-on-his-luck white man scared to death of his imagined obsolescence" (Zoladz). Watching *Taxi Driver* in our age of incel subreddits and near-daily mass shootings, we see a monstrosity that also is contemporary.

This is even more frightening when we remember the indiscriminacy of Travis's rage. In the film, he ends up killing three deplorable criminals, but only after he failed to murder a political candidate. His initial interest in political assassination makes sense, given that Paul Schrader, Taxi Driver's screenwriter, based part of the movie's plot on Arthur Bremer, a mass shooter who shaved his head (as Travis does) and shot presidential candidate George Wallace after being dumped by his underaged girlfriend (Montgomery). But Travis's violence has no real, specific target, as he violently liberates Iris from her captors only after his hero fantasy is rejected by Betsy. One can imagine him at a contemporary music festival, with an assault rifle inside his jacket that could easily kill hundreds of people. Seething with hatred not only of women but all of humanity, he walks boldly through the venue, perfectly camouflaged, smiling, ready for blood.

Todd Phillips's 2019 thriller *Joker* shows us a contemporary version of Travis Bickle. Both Travis and Joker, born Arthur Fleck, are damaged men who blame their failures on

society and find a solution in violence. In a telling echo, the climax of *Joker* has Arthur (Joaquin Phoenix) murdering talk-show host Murray Franklin, who had repeatedly made fun of Arthur on TV, and who is ironically played by Robert De Niro. Like Travis and the archetypal incel Elliot Rodger, Arthur attempts to overcome his humiliation through violence. But while Travis acts alone, Arthur becomes the villainous leader of a band of criminals. *Joker* shows these vulnerable characters turning into a larger radicalized group that terrorizes the existing society.

Such characters fascinate viewers because they reflect something deeply odd in us. On the surface, they are easy to sympathize with: both Travis and Arthur belong to a lower socioeconomic class and suffer from a lack of community and love. But when they find catharsis in violence, audiences are left with feelings of discomfort and unease. There are lessons to be drawn from these movies, but these lessons are complex and difficult. We want to understand these men's violence, to make sense of what causes it and to pity them, but we often don't think as much about the victims. Perhaps this is because the characters' violence is senseless, indiscriminate, and motivated by such intense feelings about their own power and powerlessness that their victims go out of focus. Not to mention that the 'victims' in *Taxi Driver* are sex traffickers, reprehensible in their own right. However, there might also be a more insidious reason: canonical stories of the individual versus society tend to be told from a male point of view. From Frankenstein's creature to Raskolnikov, we have been trained to understand the psychology that ignites this conflict as *human* rather than *male.*

It also matters that Robert de Niro plays the roles of both Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver* and Murray Franklin in *Joker.* As the older De Niro is killed onscreen by a new version of his former character, we see the recurrence of a particular cultural cycle. Travis Bickle is an American incel, but without like-minded Internet friends to confirm and amplify his voice and grievances. *Taxi Driver* is even more frightening now that people like Travis can easily find a community. The problem is deeper than his loneliness and his misogyny: it's his culture, which persists to this day. Tolentino claims that "In spite of everything, women are still more willing to look for the humanity in the incels than they are in [themselves]." If we continue to reach toward and sympathize with these men, we risk continuing to see the world in their terms.

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