

Travis & Jared

by Jack Nelson

"Catch you later copper," the pimp says to the cab driver after he settles on \$15 for fifteen minutes with an adolescent hooker.

"I'm no cop," Travis protests.

"Well if you are, it's entrapment already." Matthew gestures a 'frame up' looking at Travis through a tiny rectangle he makes with his fingers.

"I'm hip."

"Funny, you don't look hip . . ." the pimp (Harvey Keitel) says laughing at him.

"Go have a good time." He slaps the cabbie on the shoulder to send him on his way, but Travis just stares at him through his aviators shaking his head 'no.' "You're a funny guy," Matthew says rocking back and forth on the stoop swinging his arms like a desperate comic playing the Borscht Belt in July ". . . but looks aren't everything."

Funny is one thing *Taxi Driver* isn't, but this scene stands out as a thematic asterisk on the portrait of a psychopath. Along with another humorous raiment — the poster in Travis' apartment "One of these days I'm gonna get organiz-ized" — they reminds us about the film's tragic-comic structure. Our anti-hero returns to the same situation he was in at the beginning of the film — driving a cab at night. (fig. 1). Things happen, notably during the 'Shooting Gallery' scene, but the epilogue carries us back into the confines of an unchanged society. It's structurally daring and, frankly, unbelievable.

Fade up on press clippings celebrating Travis' act of bravery, and the voice of Iris' father reading a "Dear Mr. Bickle" thank you letter for saving his daughter. Cut to Travis' cab in the front of the cue at the St. Regis Hotel. Who jumps in but the former object of his unrequited affection: Betsy. We're re-introduced to the tonic effect a cab ride can have. Based the news coverage, she inquires about injuries Travis sustained in the shoot out. He says the papers

sensationalize stuff like that and as far as his recovery from being shot in the neck and arm: "there's a little stiffness." He's even more ineluctable than the man she dubbed a 'walking contradiction' at their initial meeting over coffee and pie. We sense the flicker of her latent desire as she eyes Travis in the rear view mirror. This man, inter-posed by a Promethean burden of righteous madness, offers his heart on fire to her, she refuses, and he attempts to shoot the man she works for -- the presumptive Republican nominee for the Presidency, Charles Palantine. He fails, and then executes a blood sine cura on behalf of a teenage hooker leaving three dead and himself alive only by two strokes of luck: both guns he tries to shoot himself with are empty. It's so preposterous that one still laughs at the audacity of Scorsese and Schrader's 70s zeitgeist film.

The inertia of the story would have us conclude that Travis died on that couch. Iris never got the money because she wouldn't have been there to receive it. Even if she did, it would not have prevented her from continuing her life of dissipation, and Palantine won his party's nomination. The conclusion of the film is one of the toughest amalgamations of an irreparably shattered world back into that self-same world. Travis' 'good deed' goes unpunished; the law is as complicit with injustice as it is with justice. The viewer's worldview is that '*we are a nation of laws . . . no man is above the law . . .*' etc. We implicitly believe in the rule of law — our Nation was founded on it — but the ending turns this principle into social equivocation. It assaults our belief in the way things work. How does the film not topple over? How do the actors and filmmaker maintain such balance of pique and tone? Does the Director's marshalling of Paul Schrader's script, his deliberate sceneography and editing, the economy of emotion, his blending of a subjective voice (Travis' journal entries) and objective events make it a masterpiece . . . not to mention DeNiro's tour de force performance? Perhaps. At times, we're aware that DeNiro's scene partners are acting while he is just 'being.' We realize Travis isn't acting because someone else is — it's a sublime transition from dramaturgy to quixotic human truths.

Jared Lee Loughner didn't study method acting, but he's no more or less believable than Travis Bickle. This parallelism doesn't overstate the importance a 34-year-old film that defines the archetype of a modern psychopath. Common traits between them include social alienation, estrangement from women, a history of drug or alcohol abuse followed by a choice to moderate consumption, a disregard for the rule of law and personal contact with their intended political targets. They are psychopaths who become realized through acts of violence, but their ideologies differ. Travis is a radical reformer -- someone who believes that the system, while broken, is existentially acceptable. Loughner is a nihilist: the system is illegitimate and needs to be attacked or destroyed to protect the liberty of the individual. They also differ in emotional capacity. Travis exhibits an extremely distorted sense of altruism, but he's capable of empathy. Based on biographical details and post-incident photos, Jared Loughner shows little or no emotional capacity, no sense of consequence or guilt.

"Psychopaths are not disoriented or out of touch with reality, nor do they experience the delusions, hallucinations, or intense subjective distress that characterize most other mental disorders," writes Dr. Robert Hare, in *Without Conscience*, the seminal book on the condition. "Unlike psychotic individuals, psychopaths are rational and aware of what they are doing and why. Their behavior is the result of choice, freely exercised (D. Cullen, April 20, 2004, Slate.com)

DeNiro's character nearly assassinates Senator Charles Palantine because of emotional propinquity. An insouciant Cybill Shepherd plays a campaign aide whom Travis pursues romantically, but his prospects crumble on their first date when Betsy walks out on the screening of an intellectual porn film. "Taking me to a place like this is about as exciting as saying 'let's fuck,'" Betsy seethes before taking off in a cab. He tries apologizing, but she shuns him. His violent ideation increases after an outburst at Palantine Campaign Headquarters: "you're in a hell . . . you're going to die in a hell . . . like the rest of 'em," Travis blurts as one of Betsy's co-workers

attempts to get him out the door with threats of calling the police. His subsequent journal entry confirms his tempered misogyny, "I realize now how much she's just like the others: cold and distant. There are many people like that — women for sure -- they're like a union."

Travis' decision to assassinate Palnatine seems like pachinko logic — displaced, refracted and focused rage that ultimately makes sense in the execution.

"Madness is the attempted liberty of people who feel themselves overwhelmed by giant forces of organized control. Seeking the magic of extremes. Madness is a base for of the religious life (S. Bellow, *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, p. 146)."

Travis recoils against the system he sees as corrosive to his prospects with Betsy and focuses his rage on the man she works for, Charles Palantine. His animus is less about the politician than about what he represents. He meets the Senator by chance when the candidate and his aide jump in Travis' cab on the way to a fundraiser. "What is the one thing about this country that bugs you the most?" Travis dodges the subject of politics, but Palantine presses him "oh, there must be something?"

"Whatever it is, you should clean up this city here. This city is like an open sewer — it's full of filth and scum. Sometimes I can hardly take it. Whoever becomes the President should really clean it up . . . someone really needs to clean it up — know what I mean? Sometimes I go out and I get headaches it's so bad, you know? It's like, they just never go away, you know? I think the President should just clean up this whole mess here — flush it right down the fucking toilet."

The candidate and his aide warily measure this populist rage and pay the fare. Shaking hands, Travis tells the Senator that he's a good man and that he's sure he's going to win. Travis' disgust with state of affairs mimics some of the attitudes being bandied about in our own 'toxic political atmosphere' — health care, immigration, the birther movement, bailouts, the role of the Federal Reserve . . . There's no shortage of hot button subjects to get the faithful and the

fringe as lathered up as Travis Bickle except they're not listening to a psychopath mouthing off in a film. The vitriol comes from a section of our media establishment: i.e. Savage Radio, The Daily Kos, Glenn Beck, Rush Limbaugh, et. al.

The Right's defense against claims that overheated rhetoric instigated Jared Lee Loughner's descent into lethal action against a group of innocents gathered in Tucson is correct: the media doesn't kill people, psychopaths with guns do. It's curious that life imitates art, but art and its corollaries — media, communication and aesthetics -- don't affect our temperament; in fact, they do, but the filter of reason is available to those who have the sense to use it. Jared Loughner's ability to reason will be the difference in whether he gets life or a death sentence.

"Now I see clearly my whole life is pointed in one direction — there never has been any choice for me."

This is Travis' last entry before he gives himself a Mohawk and drives to Columbus Circle to shoot Palantine. The deterministic musing could have easily been Loughner's as he took undeveloped film of himself posing in a G-string with a Glock over his privates to Walgreens for prints. In the film, the Senator's security cordon spots a fanatic moving through the crowd as the candidate makes his way to the motorcade; they flush him out and give chase, but he eludes them. The scene didn't play out that way at the Safeway in Tucson where Representative Giffords was set to conduct another installment of "Congress on Your Corner." Whether Loughner blamed her as the embodiment of an illegitimate government, for his inability to hold a job or her personally is inconclusive. It is done. The senseless act reverberates through our collective conscience, and two main narratives are emerging: 1) an accumulation of a forensic level of detail about the chronology leading up to this attack (the climax of which will be the trial and sentencing of the accused shooter), 2) Gabby Giffords' long-term rehabilitation. Each update further elides the violence into a murmuring narrative of our collective grief. Like James Brady, she's sure to become the symbol for legislation limiting the size of magazines gun owner can legally

purchase and possess — the realpolitik minimum of what passing legislation might accomplish. Banning semi-automatic handguns or mandating more intensive background checks will run afoul of the Second Amendment and the gun lobby. Without enforcement, laws are like apologies: a consolation for those not directly affected and condescension to those who have. Alas, even the victim must be a peacemaker. For those, other than the Congresswoman, who lost their lives or have wounds they'll never forget, it was a random act of violence, but there was nothing random about Jared Lee Loughner's intention. He had formed a 'relationship' with his primary target.

Loughner wrote the Congresswoman in 2006, and received a form letter reply. At a constituent gathering in 2007, the future assassin reportedly asked Representative Giffords "what is government if words have no meaning?" She replied in Spanish and moved on further incensing him according to friends. Loughner's question may stem from the writings of a far right anti-tax group that believes the government uses the rules of grammar to brainwash US citizens. One of the leading proponents of this idea is :Judge: David-Wynn: Miller. (P. Walker, guardian.co.uk, 10 Jan. 2011). His website is a concatenation of anti-statist wanderings in an arcane code "for the workings of the quantum-math-communication and language are for the stopping-claims of theft, cheating, fraud, slavery and war (dwmlc.com).” This author infers that Judge Miller believes the US Government is the perpetrator of such claims. Loughner stakes out territory on the lunatic fringe of what government, ipso facto, is and Travis Bickle articulates an equally preposterous view that the President should cleanse a city with a mini-pogrom. Reality and art are different: *Taxi Driver* is a film about a psychopath, and Jared Lee Loughner is a psychopath. The 'Art' designation, however, doesn't protect the artist from ideological persecution. Pundits declared John Hinkley's attempt on President Regan a copycat crime inspired in part by Hinkley's fixation on Jody Foster's character in *Taxi Driver*. Irrespective of their politics, Messrs. Limbaugh and Scorsese might agree on the need to protect the freedom of expression. A free

society cannot socially engineer its way into preventing psychopaths or terrorists from lashing out. At best, we can reduce the frequency and mitigate the consequences of their acts.

The similarity between Bickle and Loughner breaks down when it comes to how they process matters of the heart — how they deal with emotions. Loughner's heart isn't even there, it's all in his head: the plan, the conspiracy theories, the lucid dreaming, the paranoia and the hyperinflation of self. He is simply without conscience. Travis Bickle is a Romantic anti-hero; a man incapable of love who gives his heart to one woman completely and another platonically. He imagines himself a Dark Prince searching for a Lady to be his patron — he longs to be a Champion, if not of her, then for her; if not for her, than for her cause. Betsy's rejection stings Travis especially because she refuses to accept that 'the system' is a form of social oppression putting her in danger. The greater his insistence, the more distant she becomes. Betsy is worthy of a Champion, but she chooses the man who would be King (or President), Charles Palantine.

Iris, nee 'Easy,' is a child who has not yet squandered her opportunity to be a Lady. At their Diner Symposium, Travis works on Iris' sense of denial that she's in trouble, that she is being used by a lothario as a means of income and his occasional pleasure. The idea of going to a commune in Vermont occurs to her after Travis makes a plea not only for her future but for other girls as well:

"You can't allow him to do the same to other girls. You can't allow him to do that. He's the lowest kind of person in the world. Somebody's got to do something about him. He's the scum of the earth — he's the worst sucking scum I have ever seen . . . "

This hyper-altruism is more reminiscent of Barnett Slepian's murderer, James Charles Kopp, whose extreme adherence to the sanctity of life at conception prompted his assassination of an abortion doctor. In one character, then, we have two psychopathic archetypes: one who attempts destructive acts of violence to rid the status quo of a systemic 'evil' (assassinating a politician) and another who attempts constructive acts of violence on behalf of the

other to save them (justifiable homicide). Iris innocently asks Travis if he would go to the commune with her. He declines on personal grounds; he says he's "going a way for a while — doing some work for the government" (assassinating a Presidential Candidate)! Like Matthew, Iris wonders if Travis' taxi driver identity isn't dissimulation, only this time he lets it stick because it's a noble lie.

"Are you a narc," Iris asks?

"Do I look like a narc?" Travis responds.

"Yeah," she says.

"I am a narc," he admits.

"God, I don't know who's weirder — you or me."

Travis mails her \$500 in cash before he goes off to shoot Palantine, fails, escapes and subsequently shows up at the flophouse to free Iris. Travis kicks off his spree with a laconic ejaculation "suck on this" as he plugs Matthew point blank in the belly. Then, the film breaks into song. Violence is a leitmotif that marks movements in the film's visual score (as opposed to Bernard Herrmann's musical score). Travis' now iconic "You talking to me?" monologue — a solo whilst the orchestra lays out. His 'citizen's action' of shooting the robber at the bodega -- a duet between Travis and the shopkeeper who interprets the theme even more stridently; he pummels the dying robber with a pipe after telling Travis, "Get out of here . . . I'll take care of this." The attempt on Palantine's life at Columbus Circle is antithesis: Travis, the soloist, transforms into a Mohawk sporting psychopath who doesn't need to play one note. He stands there clapping while Senator Palantine tosses platitudes into the crowd. If this were an opera, Palantine would deliver an aria opposite Bickel who would merely clap to incite the orchestra to rain down a fusillade in response. During the visual climax, Travis shoots Matthew down twice, shoots a mobster, the brothel's room minder repeatedly and as a coup de grace he tries to shoot himself with two different empty guns. That moment of self immolation behind him, Travis sits on the couch, puts a bloody finger to his temple and mouths 'bang, bang, bang' in slow motion to the policeman who's sighting him down the barrel of his service revolver. The film's visual

coda: 'fuck you, America.' This too is the message behind of Jared Lee Loughner's ubiquitous grinning mug shot.

The epilogue forces a world that's been turned inside out back into shape; thus, our preoccupation with what happened while life moves on. Our minds run over the cracked wadi in a valley that once flowed with righteous water turned bloody, a lingering preoccupation to consider when our meditative resting potential emerges, when we can survey that which looks the same but can never be the same. Travis' last act of chivalry concludes the scene where he drops Betsy off at her brownstone. "How much was it," she asks? He just flips the meter and comps the fare. The drive off is tantamount to Minor Threat's 'Straight Edge' chorus: "(I) don't drink, don't smoke, don't fuck." Many (past) punk rock icons unconsciously pay tribute to Travis Bickle's ethos with their music and their looks (Crass, Discharge, Effigies, Black Flag, etc.); now, the tonsured look is the hallmark of a digital apparatchik . . . a technical or cultural innovator. As Travis tools down a lamp lit avenue there's montage of disparate night shots seen in the cab's mirrors and from his point of view. An intercut of his eyes in a state of alarm set off by an orchestral string pad reminds us of the danger out there (that's in here, within us). *Taxi Driver* reasserts its undeniable nature, its uncomfortable matters of psychological fact, when events in our world turn eerily reminiscent and terribly tragic.

