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Film R1B

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Camera Height, Masculinity, and Control *Taxi Driver*

The film *Taxi Driver* (1976), written by Paul Schrader and directed by Martin Scorsese, examines the psychological aftermath of the Vietnam War by showing how trauma and dislocation reframe vision and masculine authority once back in civilian life. Experienced by veterans like Travis Bickle, the reframed perspective heavily fractures their relationships with women, leading him to encounters defined by desperate, paternalistic control. Although Scorsese utilizes first-person narrative techniques in order to align the audience with Travis's distorted perspective, he simultaneously uses direct fragmentations of cinematic space and positioning to expose this perspective as a trauma-fueled male gaze. The film presents the female characters, Betsy and Iris, not as traditional Hollywood archetypes but rather as opposing symbols of the untouchable ideal and the sexually exploited, yet both become subjects of Travis's fantasies and desires to impose order. In doing so, Scorsese reveals how Travis's post-war alienation and unresolved masculine crisis drive him to categorize women into extreme binary representations, transforming his search for self-worth into a mission for domination and control over a city he views through the lens of a battlefield.

Set against the background of the early 1970s, *Taxi Driver* is a product of the New Hollywood movement, reflecting a shift away from classical filmmaking towards complex, ambiguous narratives that mirror the era's widespread societal disillusionment. As Thomas

Elsaesser argues in *American Auteur Cinema: The Last – or First – Great Picture Show* , the era is described as "the most violent social and political upheavals…period of intensive collective soul searching" (Elsaesser 37). Writing about the years between 1967 and 1975, Elsaesser emphasizes that protests against the Vietnam War and broader crises of race, gender, and national identity produced a cinema deeply shaped by moral uncertainty rather than heroic resolution. Crucially, he notes that filmmakers of the period "registered the moral malaise, but it did not blunt their appetite for stylistic or formal experiment" (Elsaesser 37). It is crucial to note that Travis is one of thousands of Vietnam veterans returning to a nation that was often hostile or indifferent to their service and trauma. This created an atmosphere of profound betrayal and cultural disconnect. Travis's intense inability to connect socially, his obsessive journal-keeping, and his eventual violent vigilantism are therefore not merely character flaws, but symptomatic reactions to the profound alienation and the loss of a defined masculine identity that the war inflicted. His encounters with Betsy and Iris become the desperate, misguided means by which he attempts to regain the sense of authority and mission he lost when he left the battlefield.

As Elsaesser observes of New Hollywood cinema, filmmakers increasingly placed "aimless, depressive or (self-)destructive characters on the screen" (Elsaesser 37) figures whose inner crises were expressed through form rather than exposition; *Taxi Driver* renders this condition spatially, staging Travis Bickle's encounters as problems of vision and control. One such sequence with Iris highlights how Scorsese presents her world through bodily fragmentation and a congested atmosphere, especially after Travis confronts Sport on the street (1:19:30-1:23:50). This happens as Travis goes up the narrow staircase to go to Iris's room. The sequence opens with a shot of Iris's back as she enters her cluttered, dimly lit room, walking through hanging strings of gems. The camera is positioned at her eye level, moving slightly

behind and following her motion towards the back of the room. Positioning at a neutral level allows the audience to briefly inhabit her world before Travis's intrusion reframes it according to his perspective.

The camera now captures Travis slowly peeking through the door from a slightly low angle relative to him, displaying his head and shoulders. His vertical advantage is a combat-trained posture of assessment, a mode of authority learned in Vietnam and misapplied in civilian intimacy. The camera position establishes a paternalistic mode of observation in which Iris is visually contained below him, while Travis's hesitation can be seen as enhanced awareness for signs of danger. Travis confronts this new environment as though he were entering hostile territory, with surveillance in a space that resists such authority This visual language reflects what Elsaesser describes as New Hollywood's use of moral instability paired with formal experimentation: rather than stabilizing Travis's authority, Scorsese's fragmented framing aligns the viewer with his gaze while exposing its psychological and ethical instability. It is Travis's attempt to reclaim lost authority by treating this social space as a battlefield to be conquered and assessed. When Travis steps into the room, the camera shifts slightly to maintain a frontal view, a medium shot of them standing, capturing both character's upper bodies, with Travis staring behind her. Iris moves across the room, disappears briefly from view, and Travis remains frozen, turning to still stare at her, reinforcing a soldier's habit of scanning space rather than actively engaging. As Travis walks over to Iris, the camera slightly moves with him, showing their interaction from a side-profile while Iris sits down and looks up at him. The low-to-neutral angle keeps Travis's shoulders and head above relative to hers, introducing the dynamic of protection intertwined with domination. Iris's upward gaze mirrors her vulnerability and the situation she is in, and the vertical difference encodes Travis's self-assigned role as a protector, a role inhabited

from wartime expectations rather than actually caring about Iris. Karner's account of Vietnam veterans in ""Fathers, Sons, and Vietnam: Masculinity and Betrayal in the Life Narratives of Vietnam Veterans with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder" helps clarify why Travis's authority in Iris's room takes the form of rescue rather than intimacy. She notes that returning veterans were denied recognition of their masculine status, leaving them "suspended in adolescence" and forced to rely on "teenage means" of proving manhood, now intensified by their training for violence (Karner 4). Unable to access socially legitimate authority, Travis converts Iris into a mission through which he can perform manhood, discipline, and moral clarity. The camera's vertical hierarchy temporarily stabilizes this illusion, allowing Travis to inhabit what Karner describes as a desperate attempt to "recover the father" and restore a lost model of masculine authority.

The camera continues to maintain Travis's low-angle eye level, scanning downward along her body. A while later, when Travis asks her name, Iris initially says "Easy" and only later reluctantly reveals "Iris." She begins to undress, the camera panning down at her at Travis's level, expecting a sexual encounter. Throughout this, Iris occupies the lower frame, still reinforcing her vulnerability and a sense of objectification within his gaze. As Travis immediately tells her to stop and halts her action, the camera frames him slightly from below at almost Iris's eye level, further emphasizing his upright, commanding posture. This side-profile medium shot emphasizes that the vertical disparity remains the primary visual cue. Despite this, Iris stands up to reach towards him, the camera adjusts subtly to near eye level between the two, momentarily flattening Travis's hierarchy perspective and encodes a brief assertion of her agency. However, Travis still occupies the slightly higher portion of the frame, and the camera's positioning ensures that this reversal is temporary and he pushes her hands away, making them sit on the sofa facing each other. Through these actions, Scorsese emphasizes the blurred line

between protection and domination, showing how Travis's "savior" fantasy is tied to his desire for control.

In the closing moments of the scene, both Iris and Travis are sitting down, now facing each other once again, but in a side profile with the upper half of their bodies framed, and the camera holds a slightly low angle relative to Travis. This angle maintains his vertical dominance, but subtly allows Iris to occupy a sufficient portion of the frame to assert her emerging agency, slightly fracturing Travis's perspective. Travis thus stands up with a sigh, saying, "Well, I tried," and begins moving towards the door, his posture and slightly elevated camera angle demonstrating temporal authority being regained. However, the camera immediately captures Iris's response as she stands and places a hand on him all within the same frame, creating a subtle powerful shift. It is a small gesture that shows both her need for connection and her ability to now speak her own agency while still acknowledging Travis's looming presence. Her vertical reach is a clear visual metaphor that breaks the camera's expected behavior: even with an imposed hierarchy, she can challenge Travis's dominance.

She quickly offers a chance to meet up again, sometime tomorrow, further reflecting her mix of desperation and confidence. When Travis agrees to meet her for brunch and gently ruffles her hair, saying, "Sweet Iris," the camera maintains side-profile framing, now holding both figures in the same vertical plane with a slight favor towards Travis's height. This new angle captures the unique dual nature of their relationship. Travis's gesture is tender yet authoritative, suggesting a paternalism formed from control rather than care. Here, the angle and isolation confirm that his physical action is an act of controlled possession, an attempt to force Iris into the role of a dependent he can manage. Iris's upright stance and forward gesture indicate her ability to act within this interaction. It is clear in the end that height and angle encode both of

the character's psychological states: Travis is attempting control and moral purpose, yet Iris's subtle spatial resistance destabilizes his perspective on authority. This moment resolves his alienation, not through genuine social contact, but through a controlled mission, demonstrating that his relationships are battlegrounds where his damaged psyche seeks to impose his trauma-fueled binary classification of women onto the chaotic reality of the city.

Where the Iris sequence briefly gives Travis vertical authority by allowing his Vietnam trained gaze to be used, the encounter with Betsy exposes what happens when the same logic fails to work in civilian spaces (20:20 - 23:20). When Travis enters Palantine's campaign office, the camera lingers near him in a medium rear shot. Compared to Iris's congested room, Betsy's workspace is open, professional, and filled with movement, a space in which military hierarchy no longer produces authority. This environment strips away the visual conditions that once allowed Travis's military-trained gaze to function. The slightly off-center framing reinforces his displacement, as if the room itself resists accommodating him, denying him control through position or height.

Betsy initially appears only at a distance, seated at her desk and surrounded by campaign posters and coworkers that signal community and social belonging, emphasizing the absence of a civilian identity for Travis. When Betsy notices him, Scorsese cuts to a clean medium close-up that frames her securely within the layout of the office. She is visually aligned with order and normalcy. The reverse shot of Travis is starkly different. Harsh, directional lighting exaggerates the sharpness on his face, while the background collapses into blur, isolating him within a psychological void.

This visual contrast produces two incompatible perspectives. Betsy perceives a visitor. Travis perceives a symbolic figure, an "angel" imagined untouched by the city's corruption and therefore in need of protection rather than engagement. As Travis moves toward Betsy's desk, the camera shifts to a slightly high angle down the corridor of campaign volunteers. The compressed depth of field narrows the space around him, visually diminishing his stature and emphasizing his stiff, militarized posture against the fluid movements of those around him. Where camera height allowed Travis to occupy a protector's role in Iris's room, the high angle here renders that posture impossible, forcing the same gaze to operate without power. Deprived of acting as a rescuer, Travis's gaze is now redirected into idealization. Maria Pramaggiore's analysis in "Feminism, Auteurism, and the 1970s, in Theory" helps clarify why Betsy must be transformed into an ideal rather than approached as a subject. Pramaggiore explains that feminist criticism exposed cinema's "in-built patterns of pleasure and identification that impose masculinity as 'point of view'," rendering women spectacles rather than agents (Pramaggiore 229). In the context of *Taxi Driver*, Betsy's professional competence and institutional belonging mark her as a distinctly modern figure, yet Travis's gaze cannot accommodate this autonomy. However, the camera now renders him as Betsy sees him: out of place and overly intense.

When Travis reaches the desk, Scorsese holds a medium shot in which the desk dominates the foreground, forming a literal and symbolic barrier between them. Travis appears only in fragments—shoulder, hands, partial profile—underscoring his inability to fully enter the space Betsy occupies. Even when Travis and Betsy occupy the same frame, the camera stages the characters in misaligned orientations with one turned away from the camera, and shared space never becomes shared perspectives. It crucially signals a transformation in Travis's viewpoint. Betsy is now a figure to be admired and preserved rather than acted upon. The camera thus

frames Travis's attempt not as intimacy but as intrusion shaped by fantasy. Karner's description of post-Vietnam masculinity also explains why Travis's encounter with Betsy produces idealization rather than intervention. Karner writes that veterans returned to a society that rendered them "mute and invisible," stripped of what had once been an "assumed privilege of white American manhood" (Karner 3). In Betsy's office, Travis occupies this marginal position visually: fragmented, diminished, and blocked by spatial barriers he cannot cross. Deprived of the ability to act, he reconfigures Betsy as an "angel" figure, untouched by corruption and therefore to be preserved rather than engaged. Unable to assert authority through vertical positioning, Travis preserves Betsy as an untouchable figure, confirming that his gaze remains structured by control even when stripped of power. His perception collapses her into what Pramaggiore describes as the logic of "to-be-looked-at-ness," a form of visual containment that substitutes distance for interaction (Pramaggiore 229).

Travis's declaration of "I drive by this place a lot, and I see you here" is followed by a tight, slightly low-angled close-up at Betsy's seated height. The camera creeps inward, reproducing a gaze trained for surveillance: hyperfocused, intense, and oriented toward observation rather than dialogue. Scorsese aligns the viewer with this gaze only to expose its distortion. The reverse shot restores distance to Betsy. Her body angles away, her posture subtly leans back, and her eyes flick downward before returning, registering unease the camera grants the audience but withholds from Travis.

When Travis exits the office, a steadicam follow shot centers him in the frame, momentarily restoring a sense of control. The shot's stability is deeply ironic. It imitates a soldier's march, revealing how even a regular interaction is reorganized into imagined mission fulfillment. The imagined victory mirrors the emotions of a wartime mission: progress is felt, but

not actually verified. Through camera angles, spatial barriers, and shot positioning, Scorsese transforms the simple act of approaching Betsy into how Vietnam-trained perception persists even when stripped of authority. The camera never allows their realities to fully align. *Taxi Driver* reveals its central insight: for Travis, relationships are not sites of connection but battlegrounds where authority is sought, denied, and then fantasized.

Together, both the Iris and Betsy sequences demonstrate that Travis Bickle's relationships with women are structured by the same post-Vietnam trauma, despite the camera positioning showing opposite outcomes. With Iris, camera height grants Travis's authority to operate and translate civilian intimacy into a rescue mission. With Betsy, the same gaze remains but is now powerless due to unexperienced barriers and elevated framing. Unable to act as a rescuer, Travis reclassifies Betsy as an "angel" to be protected from the city's continuous corruption. In both interactions, Scorsese uses camera angle and positioning to show how Vietnam trained perception turns women into categories rather than subjects, either a mission to manage or an ideal to preserve. More importantly, the film itself disrupts the way Travis views the civilian world. It exposes his distorted perspective, giving him the illusion of clarity produced by trauma but never actual control.

Works Cited:

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Final Reflection

I incorporated two pieces of feedback from our final meeting. The first was the suggestion to clearly show how Travis Bickle’s experience as a Vietnam veteran shaped his relationships with women, rather than simply telling the reader that Vietnam trauma is important. In a lot of my earlier drafts, I relied too heavily on thematic statements rather than actually tying them into the film’s way of demonstrating it. I definitely made sure to do this in my final paper, and focused on camera height and positioning as a visual representation of the effects of the Vietnam war.

The second piece of feedback was to clearly synthesize the Iris and Betsy analyses instead of presenting them as separate scene readings. They need to support the same argument rather than appearing as parallel examples. So in my final, I reframed the two women as opposing outcomes of the same trauma-shaped gaze. I revised my transitions and conclusion to show how Travis produces different classifications depending on whether civilian space allows his authority to function. Also it helped strengthen my claim about binary representation of women.

Third feedback was from my peer reviews and to provide a brief history of the return from the Vietnam war and the veterans. They suggested I provide a clearer historical context about the return of Vietnam veterans and the social conditions they faced upon returning civilian life. I incorporated this advice by adding a brief contextual section that situates *Taxi Driver* within the New Hollywood era and outlines the broader cultural hostility, alienation, and loss of masculine authority experienced by many returning veterans.

One piece of advice I chose not to fully incorporate was the suggestion that my analysis presented Travis as a contradictory figure, mentioning he was both fearful and dominating. I slightly agree with this, I decided not to frame these as a contradiction that required much of a modification. I strengthened them as aspects of the trauma male gaze to consistently deny Travis as a stable identity. It was a choice to maintain the film’s ambiguity.