

# Undergraduate Dissertation

## Trabajo Fin de Grado

### Danger Is Black, and Has a Woman Shape: An Analysis of Taxi Driver

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Taxi Driver*, a film that deals with loneliness and veteran trauma, was released in 1976. The 70s were a turbulent decade in the United States of America: some minorities fought for their rights, as was the case of women, and the inherent racism was still present in society. This dissertation attempts to analyse the formal aspects of the film, relating them to the socio-cultural context of the time. These formal aspects will be colour, sound, and subjectivity. Then, the film will be placed in its socio-cultural context. The close analysis and the cultural analysis will permit the reader to understand the role of women and the racism in *Taxi Driver*.

## **RESUMEN**

En 1976 se estrenó *Taxi Driver*, una película que trata los temas de la soledad y los traumas ocasionados por la guerra. La década de los 70 en Estados Unidos fue turbulenta: algunas minorías lucharon por sus derechos, como es el caso de las mujeres, y el racismo inherente todavía estaba presente en la sociedad. Este trabajo tratará de analizar los aspectos formales de la película, relacionándolos con el contexto socio cultural de la época. Estos aspectos formales serán: el color, el sonido y la subjetividad. Después, la película será colocada en su contexto socio cultural. El análisis formal y cultural permitirán al lector entender el papel de la mujer y el racismo en *Taxi Driver*.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Taxi Driver* is a neo-noir drama film directed by Martin Scorsese in 1976. The film was awarded the Palme d'Or at the 1976 Cannes Film Festival. It was nominated for four Academy Awards, and is ranked 52 on AFI's 100 best films of all time (AFI).

The end of the 60s and the 70s brought several changes to the cinema industry. The Motion Picture Production Code, which was published in 1930, was a set of rules which censored some topics: methods of crime should not be explicitly presented, adultery or scenes of passion should not be introduced when not essential to the plot, white-slavery should not be dealt with, complete nudity is never permitted, no film may ridicule any religious faith... (594 - 596). However, the Production Code was eliminated in 1968 along with the collapse of the studio system, which marked the end of Classical Hollywood Cinema and the beginning of the New Hollywood. The main point of this change was that film directors took the prominent role which the studios had in Old Hollywood. As a result, film directors started to be seen as a brand, and a mark of film quality. Some of these directors are Woody Allen, Brian de Palma, Stanley Kubrick, Steven Spielberg, Francis Ford Coppola, or Martin Scorsese.

*Taxi Driver* tells the story of Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro), a war veteran who finds himself lost in New York City. He works as a taxi driver at night because he suffers from insomnia. Throughout the story, the film deals with social topics which have already been analysed by other critics, such as loneliness, violence, or veteran trauma. In this dissertation, I will centre on two aspects which were also very controversial in the seventies and have not received enough attention: the representation of women and racism.

The purpose of the following pages will be to analyse from a formal point of view, to demonstrate how these formal aspects show a representation of women and

race which might be relevant to the understanding of the film in its social context. The methodology of this dissertation will consist of two critical approaches: a close analysis and a cultural analysis of the topics.

The close analysis will be made in accordance with concepts proposed in two books which deal with cinematographic language: *Film Art: An Introduction* (David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson) and *Looking at Movies* (Richard Barsam, Dave Monahan). The first book has a chapter entitled 'Summary: Style as a formal system', which will be used in this dissertation in order to develop the close analysis.

Bordwell and Thompson define style as the "patterned use of techniques across the film" (306). They differentiate four steps in analysing style. The first step is to determine the organizational structure, which serves as a way to understand "how the film is put together as a whole" (306). The second step is to identify the salient techniques used, which are defined as those techniques which the film relies heavily on. Salient techniques depend on the analyst's purpose, so if the analyst wants to illustrate that the film's style is common in one approach of filmmaking, the analysis must determine that the techniques conform to stylistic expectations. Conversely, if the analyst wants to emphasise unusual qualities of the film's style, he has to analyse the more unexpected technical devices. The third step is to trace out patterns of techniques. After having identified salient techniques, Bordwell and Thompson describe two ways of approaching stylistic patterns: the first is the reflection on the analyst's responses and the second is "to look for ways in which style reinforces patterns of formal organization" (307). The fourth step is to propose functions for the salient techniques and the patterns they form. In this last step, "the analyst looks for the role that style plays in the film's overall form" (308).

My close analysis will consist of the second, third, and fourth steps. The salient techniques to be analysed will correspond to three elements of cinematic language that of, colour, sound, and subjectivity.

In order to give meaning to these formal aspects, it is important to provide a cultural analysis, which will be made according to the vision of two books: *Cultural Studies* (Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler) and *Cultural Studies. A Practical Introduction* (Michael Ryan). In the first book, cultural studies are defined as “an interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and sometimes counter-disciplinary field that operates in the tension between its tendencies to embrace both a broad, anthropological and a more narrowly humanistic conception of culture” (4). Grossberg et al. also assert that “cultural studies are thus committed to the study of the entire range of a society's arts, beliefs, institutions, and communicative practices” (4). Michael Ryan adds that “most cultural products or artifacts embody and express the norms of the culture in which they are made” (x). That is, the cultural analysis of this dissertation will be focused on the terms gender, sexuality and ethnicity. The analysis will go beyond the film and will explore the social context in which *Taxi Driver* is set, but focusing on the role of women and the racism towards African-American people.

With the combination of close analysis and cultural analysis, we will be able to relate the film's style to these two themes which concern the representation of women and African-American people.

Firstly, I will make a close analysis, which will be a review of some scenes from *Taxi Driver* which are relevant to the topic. Colour analysis will be made by focusing on the binary opposition between them (red and white, black and green, black and red) and the use of colour palettes. Secondly, the sound will be analysed in terms of the meaning it creates in the scene, and it will be demonstrated how its use gives the viewer

different impressions which might otherwise go unnoticed. Thirdly, subjectivity will be concerned with those aspects such as framing and composition, so I will analyse these in order to transmit how this film's language is used to represent the role of women and racism.

The cultural analysis will begin with a socio-cultural context in which I will explain the situation of women and African-American people in the United States in the 70s. This context will work to situate the action of the film in the society of that time. The cultural analysis will show how women and African-American people are addressed and represented in the film. I will consider the characters' dialogues, their actions, and their behaviour. In the case of the role of women, I will analyse it according to the time the film was released and I will compare it with the roles Betsy (Cybill Shepherd) and Iris (Jodie Foster) play in *Taxi Driver*. In the case of African-American characters, their situation in the film will be correlated with the social context, but taking it to the inherent racism conveyed in the film.

The dissertation will also include some of the most relevant texts written about *Taxi Driver*, such as *A Cinema of Loneliness* (Robert Kolker), *Scorsese on Scorsese* (David Thompson, Ian Christie), *Hollywood Incoherent: Narration in Seventies Cinema* (Todd Berliner), *Portraits of the Postmodern Person in Taxi Driver, Raging Bull, and The King of Comedy* (Barbara Mortimer).

## **2. COLOUR ANALYSIS**

The film opens with a taxi cab going through a huge cloud of smoke which represents New York pollution. The scene gives the impression of New York being a dirty and dangerous place. To get that feeling, yellow with dark colours are mixed in order to show the contrast between the dark tones of the night and the yellow of the taxicab. It is very important to realise that at this point, the viewer does not know anything about the plot, so the appeal is that yellow, a colour which is related to light, seems to be contaminated by black and grey. The viewer's perception of this scene is that the taxi cab is surrounded by a dangerous environment.

The following scene shows blurred images of New York from Travis's perspective. The shot emphasises the contrast between black and colours such as red, yellow, or white, which are produced by the artificial lights of New York's streets. The blurred images are very similar to the view of short-sighted people and might be used to categorise Travis as a short-sighted person in a metaphorical way. Then, the image becomes clearer and a group of people crossing the street are visible. This scene appears with a very saturated red tone mixed with the black of the night. Here, mixing black with red implies a negative connotation, that is reflecting both danger and hate, while the high saturation suggests that the street is even more threatening. With a short dissolve, the camera presents Travis with an extreme-close up shot showing the movement of his eyes. Travis's face is also reflected by red, thereby denoting the evil not only of the New York streets but of Travis himself. Mixing black with red and green can be considered a salient technique, and it gives these colours a negative connotation because of the fact that black stains them.

The following scenes show Travis getting his taxi licence. These scenes use an analogous colour scheme, in which low saturated yellow combines with low saturated brown. The analogous colour palette makes the viewer watch the scene as a whole, while the use of yellow and brown gives New York the appeal of decadence, of a dirty place. This scene lacks the intensity of the previous one because there seems to be no threat at all, that is the reason why Scorsese and Chapman, the director of photography, choose the low saturation.



*Figure 1. In this scene, the colour palette enhances the decadence of New York City*

These scenes appear in the first ten minutes and they represent the tone of the film. However, when Betsy's character is presented, Scorsese and Chapman change the style: instead of repeating low saturated colours, or vivid colours mixed with black, they recreate a scene in which white is the predominant colour. As a consequence, the atmosphere which involves the scene is very bright and supports Travis's words

comparing Betsy with an angel, his ideal woman (figure 2). In this scene, white works to enhance Betsy's beauty as the symbol of the upper classes, thus, the style is saying to the viewer that Travis is very far from Betsy and her society.



*Figure 2. Colour makes the distinction between Travis and Betsy's world*

The following scene shows that Betsy works in Charles Palantine's campaign. Scorsese and Chapman decide not to use white as the main colour, and they replace it with red. Consequently, the office loses the aura of beauty, and so does Betsy, who wears a blue jacket which conceals colour white. In the office, red does not have the same meaning as it has in the streets of New York, but it establishes a parallel between Betsy's office and New York's night. Travis works every day in the most dangerous districts of New York and this danger is conveyed by the colour red, so the office is also coloured red. As a result, Travis is able to talk to Iris because in spite of the fact that they are from different societies, the colour red functions as a bonding bridge to unify both worlds.

Betsy and Travis have a date in a cafeteria. Both costumes share red but with different tones: Betsy's red is more vivid and lighter, and Travis's red is more muted and darker. Travis fits better with the surroundings because his costume is more similar to the interior decoration of the cafeteria, which is brown. The colour palette in this scene (figure 3) could be considered to be analogous, Betsy being the discordant element. This discordance attempts to demonstrate again the differences between Travis and Betsy. Although the conversation may seem to be on the right track, the difference between both characters is unavoidable and becomes more evident on their next date.



*Figure 3. Betsy is the discordant element*

Travis takes Betsy to his world, represented by the porn theatre, while Betsy comes dressed in white, as she does in her presentation. The difference between both scenes is the function of the colour white. In the first one, white enhances Betsy's beauty, characterises her as the ideal woman, and situates her in the upper class of New York. In this one, it puts Betsy and Travis in opposite poles, becoming the final signal that they cannot coexist.

The other main female character of *Taxi Driver* is Iris, the twelve-year-old prostitute. In the first scene she appears, she attempts to enter Travis's taxi, but she is physically removed by Sport. Scorsese and Chapman choose to colour New York atmosphere black and green to recreate this scene because according to Scorsese, in the summertime in New York City, "there is an atmosphere at night that's like a seeping kind of virus" (Thompson and Christie, 54). We associate the colour green with nature, but if we mix it with black, it has negative connotations. In this scene, green mixed with black is a metaphor for dirty money. Sport gives Travis a twenty-dollar bill, which is green and has black details. In conclusion, the prostitution business of the time is condemned by using the twenty-dollar bill to reflect the corrupt society.

In her third appearance, colour gives the viewer more information about Iris's identity. Iris's costume mixes red, pink, and white. These colours sexualise Iris's figure by representing her as a product for men: colour red sexualises Iris, colour white purifies her figure using her age to attract paedophile customers, and colour pink is the mixture of these two colours.

After talking with Sport, Travis goes to the brothel with Iris, and both enter the room, which is coloured as an extension of Iris: the walls are pink, the couch is red, there are red candles. It is very similar to Betsy's presentation because Iris fits perfectly in the environment of the room, the colour being what differentiates the female characters.

Travis and Iris meet again in a cafeteria, the same as Travis did with Betsy. Iris goes to the cafeteria with a pink t-shirt and green glasses. Although pink is the colour which was produced by mixing red with white, denoting sexuality and purity, in this scene, pink is more related to Iris's innocence. Green glasses are a reminder of their first encounter due to the fact that they associate Iris with Sport. She is Sport's property

because he uses her body to gain money for him. When the dialogue advances, Travis persuades Iris to leave that world and return with her parents. Iris seems to accept Travis's proposal and she removes her green glasses and changes them for blue glasses. Blue symbolises Iris's maturity and connects her with Betsy, remember Betsy's blue jacket.

In Travis's massacre, the atmosphere projected is of a dirty place, stained with blood. The colour in the scene is very expressive and realistic because Scorsese wanted "a *Daily News* situation" (Thompson and Christie, 63). The colour palette separates Iris from the massacre, as she appears at the right of the frame dressed in white (figure 4). White connects Iris with Betsy again because Travis's massacre frees Iris from prostitution. So, Iris, who was introduced as the worst kind of woman from Travis's point of view, becomes a character who is similar to Betsy, the ideal woman.



*Figure 4. Colour suggests that Travis has purified Iris with his massacre*

In the end, the viewer knows Iris's fate because her father writes Travis a letter in which it is explained that Iris is safe at home. If we pay attention to the letter, the

paper is white, which confirms Iris's transformation into the ideal woman. What is more interesting about the letter is the colour of the ink. The letter is handwritten with blue ink. In the scene at the cafeteria, Iris changes her green glasses, which associated her with prostitution and dirty money, for blue glasses which symbolised maturity. The colour blue functions to represent Iris's maturity and safety, but also to clarify that she depends on a male figure.

Whether *Taxi Driver* is a racist film or not will be discussed in the analysis of subjectivity and in the cultural analysis. Scorsese and Chapman repeat their salient technique of mixing black and red when some African-American characters appear. This atmosphere makes these characters look dangerous, they look like criminals and potential killers (figure 5). These elements can be seen when Travis is in a cafeteria with his colleagues. He stares at an African-American person who has a costume composed of a black suit, a red bow tie, and a red pocket-handkerchief. His clothes give the impression of a powerful and rich person, in addition these colours give him the aura of being a dangerous character.



Figure 5

In another scene, in the middle of the film, Travis goes to speak with Wizard, his taxi partner. After leaving the bar, Travis finds a group of black people who are bothering two black prostitutes. The colour of the scene is also red, involving Travis and African-American characters. As in the beginning of the film, there are two possible interpretations: the first one is that Travis is reflected by the danger of black people in New York, so he would be understood as a victim of society. The second interpretation is that Travis is the spotlight of the red light, which is a metaphor for Travis's racism. In this case, the second interpretation is the correct one.

Travis commits his first crime by killing a black man who was attempting to rob a supermarket, with no hesitation at all. As it would have been expected according to the film style, the atmosphere of the scene should have been involved in red to support Travis's racism and to represent how dangerous the thief was. However, what the viewer interprets from the scene is a black character who wears a yellow t-shirt, and carries a gun, with no intention of killing the supermarket worker. The yellow t-shirt acts as a link between the African-American character and Travis's job. Scorsese and Chapman relate both Travis and the robber to yellow in order to express that the African-American character is just robbing the supermarket to survive, and does not represent any danger at all. After killing him, some drops of blood stained the dead man, symbolising Travis's racism, which is again reflected by the colour red.

### **3. SOUND ANALYSIS**

The soundtrack of the film was created by Bernard Herrmann, the composer of films such as *Citizen Kane* or *Vertigo*. Scorsese adds that Bernard was not interested "in

scoring a film about a taxi driver” (Rausch, 33). Finally, Scorsese achieved his goal, and Bernard Herrmann became the composer of *Taxi Driver*.

The film starts with a taxicab going through a huge cloud of yellowish smoke. The music that accompanies the scene is “percussive and slowly accelerates in tempo and loudness, not unlike a car engine starting in slow motion” (Kolker, 234). Suddenly, this music ends and the viewer hears the main theme of *Taxi Driver*, which is a saxophone solo, which brings to mind one of the most popular music genres of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the United States: Jazz. This theme, which is very melancholic and reflects Travis’s loneliness, accompanies Travis all the film, but it has more relevance in the first half.

The theme is introduced by a piano and snare drums in Betsy’s first appearance. The introduction purifies Betsy and glorifies her, and the theme produces a feeling of melancholy in the viewer, since Travis seems so far from her, it is a sort of helplessness. Travis’s illusion with Betsy is reinforced by the eight-bar melody of the saxophone because he has arranged a date with her, therefore, the music is perceived to be more inspiring. The date seems to go well, so Travis goes to a music shop to buy Betsy a vinyl record as a present. During the purchase, the theme sounds again with the same purpose and accompanies Travis in his taxicab.

The next date goes wrong, and Betsy appears to have no intention to see Travis again. Travis calls her with a public phone and receives no answer from her. The camera shows Travis in a medium shot while he is attempting to contact Betsy with no success. Suddenly, the camera pans and shows a long corridor which ends with the street. The saxophone theme sounds, and mortifies Travis, reminding him that he has failed and he is alone. In this case, the soundtrack is blaming Betsy for Travis’s failure because the saxophone theme suggests that Travis’s loneliness is the product of Betsy’s

rejection. The viewer feels bad when Betsy does not accept Travis's apologies because the camera and the soundtrack make them feel sorry for Travis.

After the conversation with Iris in the brothel, the theme is played again. Travis recovers the illusion, in this case for saving a twelve-year-old prostitute. However, the melody is reminding again the viewer Travis's solitude and his failure with Betsy.

The following scene is the only one during the movie in which the saxophone theme sounds without Travis's character. The scene shows Sport, who tries to win back Iris, after her conversation with Travis. In a type of seduction ritual, Sport plays music and dances with Iris. It is very surprising to hear that the song which he has played is the saxophone theme because, until this moment, the theme was considered non-diegetic sound, defined by Barsam and Monahan as the sound which is "offscreen and recorded during postproduction, and it is assumed to be inaudible to the characters onscreen" (376). The theme is used again to mock Travis. In this scene, it denotes another one of Travis's failure: Iris is not going to leave Sport and Travis remains alone. The music is blaming Iris for her immaturity, because she has favoured Sport, so the music is highlighting Travis's isolation again.

*Taxi Driver* ends with this melody. Betsy gets into Travis's car and the soundtrack compliments their dialogue. The scene seems to be on the right track, and it signals a reconciliation between both characters. The viewer believes that maybe this time, the music is giving us a happy ending, the ultimate redemption of Travis. On the contrary, the soundtrack does not change its function in the film: Travis rejects Betsy, and the saxophone melody follows him until the end.

The rest of the score is composed of trumpets with snare drums. This score has the function of emphasising Travis's fall into madness, and the film employs the soundtrack and Travis's hair to represent this fall. Travis's hair becomes shorter and

shorter as the film advances and his thoughts become more dangerous. In his zenith, he has a Mohican hairstyle. The music works in the same manner: in the first half of the film, the saxophone theme has more importance than the trumpets theme. However, in the second half, the trumpets with the snare drums become the sound protagonist because Herrmann wants to accentuate Travis's madness.

It is important to remember that the second score gains importance because of Betsy's rejection. It is a music that is produced in his mind, which tempts him to act. The drums remind the drums of war, and Travis recalls his past in the Vietnam War.

#### **4. SUBJECTIVITY**

*Taxi Driver* is a film which deals with topics such as loneliness, morality, or racism. Nevertheless, it is important to understand that if the film has a racist scene, it does not mean that *Taxi Driver* is a racist film. As Robert Kolker claims: "*Taxi Driver* is not a documentary of the squalor of 1970s' New York City but the documentation of a squalid mind driven mad by its perception" (238).

Robert Kolker's statement is crucial to understand the different motifs of *Taxi Driver*. The film could be interpreted as a racist film because every African-American character in the film appears to be a criminal. Kolker adds:

"Neither coincidence nor a reflection of "reality" explains why the only people Travis sees are the mad and the disenfranchised, why the only streets he sees are the stews of the city, why the cafeteria frequented late at night by him and his cronies is populated only by pimps and nodding drug addicts. These are the only people and the only places of which Travis is aware. They constitute the only things he perceives and, since the viewer's perceptions in the film are so restricted to his own, the only things the viewer is permitted to perceive as well" (238).

When Travis arrives at the cafeteria, the composition puts him as far as he can from his African-American partner, thus, it is an indication that Travis does not accept African-American people within society. Wizard introduces Charlie T to Travis. The camera shows Charlie T in a medium close-up, which according to Barsam and Monahan is a shot which “shows a character from the middle of the chest to the top of the head” (234). His challenging look is waiting for Travis’s reaction. Then, the camera shows Travis and he barely looks at Charlie T. This is the first indication of Travis’s racism. The composition shows the distance between Travis and his colleagues. He is separated from them by his position and it is accentuated by the vertical line of the cafeteria window, highlighting Travis’s loneliness. After a short conversation with them, Travis takes a look at the rest of the cafeteria. He frowns and shrugs his shoulders a bit, which means that he does not like what he is seeing. His look and posture are a reflection of hate and fear, so the audience assumes that Travis is looking at the kind of people he rejects. An eye-line match cut is used to show Travis’s view: two African-American people represented as criminals appear in the frame. Travis does not despise them for being criminals, but for their ethnicity, as confirmed with his reaction towards Charlie T.

Later in the film, Travis returns to another cafeteria with his colleagues, and this scene shares a lot of similarities with the previous one. Travis sits as far as he can from Charlie T again. Charlie T asks Travis for the five dollars he owes him. Travis does not answer Charlie’s question but he returns the money, and a close-up shot shows Travis staring at Charlie T defiantly, as though he does not trust him. Wizard tells his colleagues that he leaves the cafeteria and Travis goes with him. There is a shot in which Charlie T calling Travis “killer” and points at him with his right-hand, simulating a gun. Charlie T portrays this action with a smile on his face, attempting to provoke

Travis because he is aware of his racism. The camera returns to Travis who seems upset with Charlie's action. Then, Travis and Wizard leave the cafeteria and they appear in a long shot which permits the audience to see a group of black people near Travis. The next shot is a close-up of one of the group who is looking right to the camera. The viewer understands that this character is looking at Travis, as the camera confirms with point-of-view editing. In the same way as in Charlie's previous scene, we can appreciate the point-of-view editing because the camera pans at the same speed as the character's movement.

The distinction between the scenes is that Travis was the one moving while looking at Charlie T, so it is his point of view. However, in this second scene, it is the unknown African-American character who moves and looks at Travis with no fear, while Travis continues to stare at him. Travis follows him with his frowning look, confirming that his racism is even more radical than it was at the beginning of the film. Taking into account the colour analysis, and how the subjectivity works in this scene, we can conclude that Travis is the one who represents danger. In the end, the colour red just reflects Travis's hate towards African-American people.

The scene which manifests Travis's racism the most, is the one in which he kills the black character who is trying to rob a supermarket. Travis hears an offscreen voice which is asking for the money from the till. When the robber is pointing a gun at the supermarket worker, Travis, who was not in the shot, suddenly appears blurred at the back. He calls the robber, and immediately, he shoots him. From when Travis enters the supermarket until he gets the robber's attention before shooting him, the scene employs a tracking shot, which has the function of showing Travis's steps to create tension, before waiting for the confrontation between both characters. According to Todd Berliner:

“The shot—which both communicates Travis’s intentions to the audience and reveals the gunman’s ignorance of Travis’s presence—seems primed to exploit the scenario’s potential for Hollywood-style action, if, for instance, the robber recognized that Travis had the jump on him and responded violently. In a more typical Hollywood movie, the deadly face-off between the two characters would generate excitement, but here it comes across coldly” (150).

Travis acts in this manner because the criminal was black. After shooting him, the camera uses a high-angle shot, emulating the recording of a security camera. Using this angle does not mean that the viewer is superior to the character, as Barsam and Monahan consider to be the most conventional function of the high-angle shot. In this case, the shot judges Travis’s action and reconsiders Travis’s superiority, who is stepping on the dead body. This is Travis’s first murder in *Taxi Driver*, and the camera makes the viewer aware of what a racist mind with perturbed ideas is capable of.

After analysing these scenes, we can conclude that *Taxi Driver* is not a racist film, but the perception of the society from the point of view of a racist man. All the scenes which show African-American people, portrayed as dangerous characters, are done with point-of-view editing to make it seem that it is Travis’s vision of society.

The other point of this chapter is to analyse how subjectivity represents women’s role in the film. In the colour analysis, I explained that Betsy’s presentation is idyllic because this is how Travis sees her. In fact, the shot of her introduction is very similar to a dream state.

Travis goes to see Betsy at her office and invites her on a date. The whole scene is a dialogue between Iris and Travis. Firstly, Betsy is suspicious of Travis, but after some exchange of words, Travis convinces her. The dialogue is presented with the conventional editing technique shot/reverse shot and master shot. The interesting part is when we analyse the composition in the shots. Travis enters the scene, and a point of

view shot is used to focus on Betsy as his objective, the camera zooms in on Betsy's face as if Travis were only looking at her. At the beginning of the dialogue, the shot/reverse shot shows both characters in the frame, but as the conversation starts to go wrong, when Betsy asks Travis's opinion about Palantine, the framing of the shots becomes closer, what means that the separation between both characters is bigger than before. When Travis gets to the point and asks Betsy to take a coffee, the camera zooms out and both characters seem more united than before, as the frame connects them. The function of zooming in this way is to give evidence that Betsy needs a male figure with her, categorising her as an easy and dependent woman.

In their following date, the dialogue between them is represented in the same way. The beginning of the scene presents a master shot which works to give the viewer a general view of the position of the characters. When the shot/reverse shot begins, it focuses on Travis, and Betsy does not appear in the frame. On the contrary, when Betsy is focused on, Travis appears blurred in the left corner, so the camera does not give her independence. The function is to highlight Travis's loneliness and emphasise that a woman requires a male presence in her life.

After Betsy decides not to date Travis anymore, he attempts to contact her with a public telephone, and the camera pans to show Travis's loneliness, as he disappears from the frame. In an interview with Glen Ade Brown in 2004, Michael Chapman claimed that this camera movement was done to express the embarrassment of the situation, in other words, the purpose of the camera movement is to laugh at Travis. This type of camera humiliation is backed up with the soundtrack. The long hallway leads into the night, so the camera is blaming Betsy for abandoning Travis to a terrible fate. The next shot, with all the roses, is a symbol of failed love and broken dreams. The

viewer understands Betsy's decision, but the cinematography and editing accuse Betsy of hurting Travis.

Iris's introduction is very different from Betsy's. She is presented in the New York night, from Travis's point of view, who considers prostitutes as part of the society he despises. When Iris gets into Travis's car, there is a close-up shot of Travis turning his face to look at his client. The turn is very slow, denoting surprise and repulsion towards her. Sport arrives and removes Iris from the taxi. The camera does not show Sport's face but his body. The viewer sees both bodies through the taxi windows, highlighting Sport's strength and Iris's body. The function of the scene is to show how different Travis's perception is towards two extremes of New York society: the one represented by Betsy and Palantine, and the other one represented by Iris and Sport. In the first case, the camera pays special attention to their faces and expressions. In the second case, the camera pays attention to their bodies.

After Travis's failure with Betsy, he hits Iris with his taxi cab with no damage. Then, Travis follows her and her partner. It may seem that Travis is sexually interested in Iris. The scene uses point-of-view editing because the camera wants to put the viewer in Travis's spot, in order to create the opposite reaction: the viewer does not feel identified with Travis. When Travis appears inside of his taxi, De Niro's performance does not indicate desire; it is something closer to repulsion, the same reaction the viewer has with the point-of-view shot.

Travis goes to meet Iris and has a date with her. The scene is a tracking shot that starts with Travis speaking with Iris and her colleague. Iris tells him that he must talk to Sport, so Iris and the other female character disappear from the frame, and Travis is left with Sport in a medium long shot. The disappearance of the female characters in a

tracking shot is done to emphasise the submission of women towards men, in this case, represented by a young prostitute and her pimp.

Travis and Iris go to the brothel room with different intentions: Iris behaves with Travis as if he were another client, but Travis has no sexual intentions. The dialogue between them combines establishing shots with shot/reverse shot, giving continuity to the scene. In the whole scene, Travis is always above Iris because he is taller than her, but the scene works in a way that Travis's superiority is not only physical but also moral. Iris's shots are done with high-angle and Travis's with low-angle, but when Travis convinces Iris to meet him in a cafeteria, the angle becomes neutral. In conclusion, the angle becomes neutral when a woman accepts a man's decision and becomes submitted to him, instead of acting by her own choice.

This superiority can also be seen in the cafeteria scene, in which the dialogue also appears with the conventional shot/reverse shot and establishing shots. This scene is a parallel with Betsy's, also in a cafeteria: when the camera focuses on Iris, Travis appears in the frame, but when the camera focuses on Travis, Iris does not. The function is to imply that Iris needs Travis with her. Film framing and editing are suggesting again that a woman is dependent on a man.

## **5. CULTURAL ANALYSIS**

The 70s were a turbulent decade in the United States of America. In these years, several groups of Americans fought for equal rights. The Equal Rights Amendment, which was approved by Congress in 1972, promoted: "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex." However, the ERA alarmed conservative activists, who were afraid of the amendment to undermine their privilege as men and the traditional gender roles. This situation was a

huge disappointment to women, so feminist communities and organizations began to appear, such as art galleries, women's health collectives, or abortion clinics.

The protests were against the idea of the dominant masculine model. In Western societies, this type of man was characterised for being strong, powerful, heterosexual, wealthy, capable, self-dependant, self-confident, physically able-bodied, sufficient, respected, and honoured. It is important to notice that in this description, the theory of hegemonic masculinity appeals to only a few men. However, it still dominates the other forms of masculinity and women through power and authority. This is better known with the name of patriarchal dominance. The idea of a man who did not fit the description of the hegemonic masculinity was considered a failure for society (Şenel 21). Due to feminist achievements and the increasing equal rights, men's power in the Western World started to decline and they gradually have been losing their relative power (Beynon 86, 87).

*Taxi Driver* is a neo-noir film. Neo-noir is a cinema genre based on film noir, which was very popular in the decade of the 40s and 50s in Hollywood. Film noir popularised the archetype of the female character known as *femme fatale*, a woman who uses her sexual condition to seduce and manipulate male characters. This character was a reflection of men's fear of the changing situation in the United States after World War II; in fact, "filmmakers were attempting to install distrust of women's changing role in American society" (Garvin, 22). Neo-noir films do not present a *femme fatale* character, but a female character who attempts to reflect the women's situation at the time. According to Kristina Garvin, in *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974), "Polanski deconstructs the idea of *femme fatale* in order to portray the world as it truly is: hostile, unjust, and without an enduring regard for women" (22).

While Evelyn Murray (Faye Dunaway), the female protagonist in *Chinatown*, avoids the stereotypical representation of women character; *Taxi Driver* uses the traditional role of “good girl” in Betsy’s character. Betsy is portrayed as Travis’s ideal woman: blonde, beautiful, innocent. Betsy could be considered the Classical Hollywood muse, and her representation is very similar to Marilyn Monroe’s or Grace Kelly’s. She is a campaign worker for Charles Palantine, and the film denotes that her image is used to attract men to this campaign. Betsy is treated as a manageable character. For instance, Travis praises her beauty and she is very comforted by that, she even gives him a date, despite the fact she knows that he has been spying on her. Although the mise-en-scène makes an effort in showing how different both characters are, everything goes right until Travis takes Betsy to a porn theatre.

Betsy’s environment does not seem to be patriarchal. In fact, her colleague Tom does not denote superiority towards her. Betsy is an independent woman, and she is very far from the traditional women’s role of staying at home taking care of their children. She may seem to embrace the women’s revolution of the time because she is not subordinated to any men. However, *Taxi Driver* puts into doubt the women’s revolution by showing how Betsy’s decisions affect Travis and herself. Barbara Mortimer states that women in *Taxi Driver* do not represent the revolutionary woman fighting for her rights. On the contrary, according to her, what the viewer interprets is that each woman in the film is “associated with the marketplace”: the woman in the porn theatre sells candy and soda to clients (the majority of them are men), Betsy sells a political candidate, and Iris sells her body to paedophiles and works for a pimp (30).

Betsy is presented as a very easy and innocent woman, as she does not see the danger in dating Travis, she accepts his compliments and trusts him. After the porn theatre, Betsy does not want to speak with Travis anymore and she does not answer his

calls. That is the reason why the viewer feels sorry for Travis and blames Betsy for her attitude. Travis's fall into madness is in a way caused by Betsy's rejection, and she is partially guilty of Travis's loneliness. As a consequence, *Taxi Driver* attempts to prove how the "best woman" can harm a man's life. In the time of the women's liberation movement, *Taxi Driver* reflects men's fear of the loss of patriarchal dominance.

If Travis considers Betsy to be the ideal woman, Iris is the opposite: she is a twelve-year-prostitute who works for Sport, her pimp. From the beginning, "Travis identifies Betsy and Iris differently (the angel and the whore), establishing a typically noir distinction between chaste and corrupt objects in a male subjective text." (Fuchs 40).

Iris is a traditional woman character who needs to be saved. New Hollywood cinema also encompasses this type of classical narratives in which a male hero has to rescue a female character. As an illustration, *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977), is a film in which Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill) has to save Princess Leia (Carrie Fisher) from the villain Darth Vader. As in *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956), Travis is a lonely man who saves a girl who does not want to be saved. In *The Searchers*, Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) is an American Civil War veteran who goes to rescue his niece from the Comanches against her will. Similarly, Iris is a character who runs away from her home because she wants to be free. Her figure is a mixture of the innocence of a young girl and the most radical sexualization of women.

Iris reflects the darkest side of men's desire, but she seems comfortable with her job. The room where she takes the clients and her costume combine sexualization with innocence, making her more desirable to paedophiles. When Sport speaks to Travis, attempting to sell her, he uses rude vocabulary saying to Travis that he can do whatever he wants with Iris, that is, treating her as his own merchandise. As Robert Kolker notes,

it is important to understand that *Taxi Driver* is not advocating teenage prostitution, “Scorsese is examining aspects of an ugly world, a nonbourgeois world that has adopted the other’s clichés and revealed them as destructive” (242).

When Travis talks to Iris, he tries to make her leave this world and return to her parents, but Iris is comfortable with her position. Iris’s opinion is not important to Travis, so he kills the men who control her. From this point, he is considered a hero for society. Travis has saved Iris from her sexualized role but has condemned her to be submitted to authority from her father. In fact, the viewer knows Iris’s fate from the letter written by her father, so patriarchal dominance seems not to disappear from Iris’s life.

In conclusion, I have stated that Betsy is the reflection of the male fear of women; Iris is the reflection of how this power, which women ask for in their liberation movement, could harm their own lives. Iris is a girl whose freedom permits her to leave their parents and go to New York, where she becomes a prostitute. It seems that *Taxi Driver* was warning women that the power they desired at that time could turn out to be a double-edged sword.

*Taxi Driver* portrays a racist man in New York City. No information is given that explains Travis’s existential racism. Colour and subjectivity express the hate which Travis has towards African-American people, but the viewer does not know the origin of that racism. It seems that Travis’s racism could be the reflection of the inherent racism which appeared in America at the time.

When World War II ended, African-American people demanded equal rights under the law in the United States. This was named as the Civil rights movement, which started in the late 40s and ended in the late 60s. “The Civil Rights Act of 1957, the first federal civil rights legislation to be passed since 1875, authorized the federal

government to take legal measures to prevent a citizen from being denied voting rights” (Hollis Lynch). The fight for winning equality was long and non-violent. In 1964, the Civil Rights Act, which was signed by President Lyndon Johnson, made discrimination in employment, schools and public places illegal. In the 60s, “militant Black nationalist and Marxist-oriented African-American organizations were created, among them the Revolutionary Action Movement, the Deacons for Defense, and the Black Panther Party” (Hollis Lynch). Some leaders of these organizations were arrested.

“Black Power” became the slogan for the African-American community who wanted a maximization of their economic and political power. The movement, personified by Malcolm X (murdered in 1965) “was stimulated by the growing pride of Black Americans in their African heritage. This pride was strikingly symbolized by the Afro hairstyle and the African garments worn by many young Blacks” (Hollis Lynch).

A great number of African-American soldiers participated in the Vietnam War. Some leaders, such as Martin Luther King shared the point of view that the Vietnam War had been racist, for invading a non-white country. He was assassinated in 1968, after organising a protest march named Poor People’s Campaign, and his murder caused several disturbances.

In the 70s, more opportunities were given for African-American people in employment, schooling, or housing. Some African-American families were allowed to be part of the middle and upper-middle class. In fact, the term reverse discrimination started to appear.

In *Taxi Driver*, African-American people are perceived as a threat from Travis’s point of view. Travis represents the classical white racist in the United States, and he can be considered the personification of a white supremacist. He is suspicious of every African-American character in the film, even his black colleague. He kills a black

person in cold-blood and the following scene, in which the shop assistant hits the dead body with an iron stick, is a reflection of the racism of the time.

As *Taxi Driver* is the view of a racist mind, the camera pays attention only to African-American characters who seem to be dangerous: in the cafeteria, the robber at the supermarket, and the boys throwing things at Travis's taxi.

*Taxi Driver* denounces the racism of American society, indeed, "the pimp in Schrader's original screenplay was black, as are all of the characters that Travis kills. Scorsese, Schrader, and the Phillipses all decided that this element of the screenplay would have to be changed" (Rausch, 32).

## 6. CONCLUSION

*Taxi Driver* tells the story of a perturbed war veteran who works as a taxi driver in New York City. The film focuses on how loneliness can affect a man's life or how veteran trauma is expressed and its consequences. Conversely, this dissertation has been focused on women's role and racism, two topics which were very controversial at the time the film was released. Both communities were involved in times of revolution, and it is very interesting to understand whether the film supports or by the contrary seems to be against these revolutions.

On the one hand, *Taxi Driver* condemns racism through visual language and subjectivity. The film is presented from the point of view of a racist man and it could be interpreted that Travis's ideology is the same as the film. However, *Taxi Driver* employs colour and subjectivity to affirm that those racist concepts belong to Travis's point of view. Travis is presented as a white supremacist who considers African-American people to be a danger in society, which is reflected in the combination of black and red colours. Travis represents white supremacists' fear of equality.

On the other hand, the film does not support the women's rights movement. Colour is used to represent Betsy as the ideal classical woman, and to mark the social difference between her and Travis. Concerning Iris, colour is employed to highlight her as a sexual figure and to condition her decisions towards her fate. The soundtrack reminds the viewer how lonely Travis is because of a woman's fault, and how women's actions transform Travis into a more perturbed character. Subjectivity reinforces the concept of patriarchal dominance making it clear that women need a man in their lives. To conclude, Betsy and Iris represent how dangerous the women liberation movement could be for both men and women.

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