

The Narcissistic Masculinity of Travis Bickle: American 'Reality' in Martin
Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*

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Declaration

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this assignment/thesis is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

Signature:.....

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Summary

In this thesis, I examine the way in which Martin Scorsese's 1976 film *Taxi Driver* can be read as a critical investigation of post-World War II American masculinity. Drawing on Susan Faludi's arguments regarding the post-World War II American 'masculinity crisis', I highlight specifically how *Taxi Driver* addresses American masculinity in the context of ideals of heroism, of the myth of the Wild West, of the Vietnam era, and of the increasingly influential role that the popular media play in shaping conceptions of masculinity. In the process I indicate that *Taxi Driver* exposes, and critiques, an association in modern American society between masculinity and what analysts have termed the 'myth of regeneration through violence'.

Opsomming

In hierdie tesis bestudeer ek hoe Martin Scorsese se 1976 film *Taxi Driver* geles kan word as kritiese studie van Amerikaanse konsepsies van 'manlikheid' in die tweede helfte van die twintigste eeu. Binne die raamwerk van Susan Faludi se werk ten opsigte van die moderne Amerikaanse 'manlikheidskrisis' lig ek uit hoe *Taxi Driver* Amerikaanse manlikheid ondersoek, met spesifieke verwysing na ideale van heldhaftigheid, na die Amerikaanse mite van die wilde weste, na die Vietnam-era en die invloed van die Vietnam oorlog, en na die toenemend belangrike rol wat die media speel in die konstruksie van opvattinge van 'manlikheid'. In my argument dui ek daarop dat *Taxi Driver* 'n assosiasie in moderne Amerikaanse samelewing tussen opvattinge van 'manlikheid' en die sogenaamde 'mite van hernuwing deur geweld' uitwys en kritiseer.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

It was almost as if there were no peace unless one could fight well, kill well (if always with honour), love well and love many, be cool, be daring, be dashing, be wild, be wily, be resourceful, be a brave gun. And this myth, that each of us was born to be free, to wander, to have adventure and to grow on the waves of the violent, the perfumed, and the unexpected, had a force which could not be tamed...Indeed a quarter of the nation's business must have depended upon its existence.

Norman Mailer, 1963

What has become of the horseman, the cow-puncher, the last romantic figure upon our soil? For he was romantic. Whatever he did, he did with his might. The bread that he earned was earned hard, the wages that he squandered were squandered hard... Well, he will be among us always, invisible, waiting his chance to live and play as he would like. His wild kind has been among us always, since the beginning, a young man with his temptations, a hero without wings.



Pectora cobstant cunctis rebus

Owen Wister, preface to *The Virginian* (1902)

Since its release in 1976, Martin Scorsese's classic film *Taxi Driver* has attracted a great deal of attention, both academic and popular, both laudatory and critical. Among the vast numbers of overviews and analyses of *Taxi Driver*, many point out the film's treatment of the identity of the 1970's American subject, and some specifically point out that the film examines modern American conceptions of masculinity. In this thesis I propose to indicate in detail the full extent to which *Taxi Driver* serves as such an examination of modern American masculinity. For, with the benefit of thirty years of hindsight – thirty years which have, moreover, yielded a sizeable body of analyses regarding what has become known as an American 'masculinity crisis' – Scorsese's film can be read as an extensive, multifaceted interrogation of post-World War II American masculinity, an interrogation which, furthermore, corresponds specifically with recent

insights pertaining to this 'masculinity crisis'.

In order to analyze *Taxi Driver* in this way, I will draw on the discourse concerning American conceptions of masculinity generally and on recent discourse concerning the American 'masculinity crisis' in particular. In this latter regard, I will draw chiefly on the work of feminist journalist Susan Faludi, who examines a crisis in post-World War II American masculinity in her book *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the Modern Man* (2000). Perhaps the crucial basic premise of Faludi's argument is that American society's conceptions of masculinity (in other words, its expectations of acceptable and commendable male behaviour) have become unrealistic and dysfunctional in today's social reality. She proceeds to sketch the proportions of the 'masculinity crisis' in terms of such notions as the influence of the media on conceptions of masculinity, the effects of the Vietnam War on the psyche of the American male, the phenomenon of 'celebrity' or 'ornamental' masculinity, and the display value of violence in connoting masculinity.

Using Faludi's argument as a central paradigm, with reference to numerous additional analysts of American masculinity and American popular culture (Anthony Clare and Richard Slotkin, most notably), I will discuss how *Taxi Driver* can be read as exposing and investigating this American 'masculinity crisis'. Through the portrayal of its central character, Travis Bickle, *Taxi Driver* can be understood as interrogating such notions as American society's conceptions of male heroism, the important role of the Wild West frontier (and of the more recent 'frontier' of Vietnam) in American society's conceptions of masculinity, and the increasing importance of mediated representations of reality (films, for instance) in shaping society's understanding of reality – and specifically, here, society's conceptions of masculinity – in post-modern culture. I will indicate in detail how such an interrogation on the part of *Taxi Driver* coincides rather neatly with Susan Faludi's views on post-World War II American masculinity.

I will analyze *Taxi Driver* through the lens of masculinity crisis theory, thus, in much the same way that a film like Sally Potter's *Orlando* (1992), for example, can be read according to feminist theory. *Taxi Driver* can be seen to investigate American society's conceptions of masculinity, and the ensuing problematic implications of such conceptions, in a similar way that many 'feminist' films did (and do) the same for society's conceptions of femininity. However, unlike some other firmly established

paradigms (for example, mainstream feminist theories), the paradigm of masculinity crisis theory has not yet quite been canonized in the academic world; moreover, as I have noted, I propose to draw predominantly on a specific strand of masculinity crisis theory that has been expounded in recent years by such writers as Susan Faludi, a strand which may be even less well established. Therefore, a separate chapter will be reserved wholly for the explanation of the specific paradigm of masculinity crisis theory that I will refer to during the course of the thesis.

This separate explanation will comprise the second chapter of the thesis, and will draw on arguments, as I have suggested, set forth by various current and recent masculinity crisis theorists. The work of Susan Faludi will inform the central argument most crucially here, though there will be additional reference to numerous other analysts of the American masculinity crisis like John Beynon and Anthony Clare. The discussion will also incorporate views of scholars of popular American culture and American history, including Richard Slotkin and Thomas Engeman. The chapter will examine the nature of the masculinity crisis through discussion of the most evident social symptoms of the crisis, and will include a discussion of notable causes of the crisis that have been identified by masculinity crisis theorists. I will highlight how the crisis has been informed by American ideals of heroic masculinity (specifically, the 'rugged individual' heroic type), by the importance in American popular and ideological imagination of the notion of a frontier, by women's rise in power, and by the way in which the American media, most notably the institution of Hollywood, perpetuates and encourages possibly dysfunctional conceptions of masculinity. Even more importantly, I will emphasize the argument – proposed by Faludi – that violence, or what I will specifically call 'ornamental violence', has come to stand as a key signifier for masculinity in America.

The largely sociological matter of the masculinity crisis having been treated, the discussion will move, in the third chapter of this thesis, to a formalist analysis of Martin Scorsese's film, *Taxi Driver*. In this chapter *Taxi Driver* will be discussed out of the context of the masculinity crisis, and simply in technical terms (in other words, in terms of narrative, style, editing, sound and pacing). While not yet addressing the object of this thesis – namely *Taxi Driver's* investigation specifically of the American masculinity crisis – such an isolated discussion will have the advantage of highlighting important and quite relevant technical matters in due detail. All the points highlighted in this chapter, it must

be stressed, will be referred to later in the thesis and will help to form crucial foundations of subsequent arguments.

These two chapters (the second exclusively concerning the masculinity crisis, and the third exclusively concerning the film, *Taxi Driver*) will provide the framework for the rest of the thesis, which will proceed to examine the ways in which *Taxi Driver* actually exposes and investigates the American masculinity crisis. The predominant theme throughout all subsequent discussion will be the constructed nature of Travis Bickle's masculine identity, a kind of identity that I describe here as 'narcissistic masculinity' – or the "callous, lonely, and figuratively violent" behaviour that is sponsored by the American "reality" (Wennerberg online, citing Freedman & Millington).

The fourth chapter will discuss *Taxi Driver's* investigation of the American public's conceptions, through the medium of film, of masculine heroism. This discussion will include a brief perusal of America's popular Hollywood portrayals of heroism over the past century and will then indicate how *Taxi Driver* interrogates the 'virtues' of the archetypal Hollywood 'action/adventure' hero, and how the film thus queries his functional place in today's society. Special attention will be given to the historical importance of violence, of 'vigilante' attitudes, and of heroic loneliness in American conceptions of heroism. Throughout this chapter, the discussion will draw on notions concerning the American masculinity crisis, as set forth in the second chapter.

The fifth chapter will examine how *Taxi Driver* investigates the important role that the 19th-century 'Wild West' frontier has played in the American public's worldview over the past century, and how the film explores ways in which that notion of a frontier has resurfaced in recent times, most notably during the Vietnam War. The chapter will include special reference to John Ford's 1956 Western film *The Searchers*, the narrative of which will be indicated as having served as a basis for that of *Taxi Driver*. According to a discussion of similarities between the two films, and of further references in *Taxi Driver* to the mythic Wild West, I will show how *Taxi Driver* critically examines the undying roles that memories of the wild frontier and its cowboy inhabitants play both in the imagination and in the ideology of the modern day American public. I will also illuminate how *Taxi Driver* relates such issues specifically to the Vietnam War, a war which constitutes, according to many scholars, one of the most important themes in the

film. Throughout this discussion I will indicate that in its treatment of the notion of the frontier in American society, *Taxi Driver* draws attention to the way that this notion has been extremely influential in shaping American conceptions of masculinity.

In the sixth chapter I will show how *Taxi Driver* explores the relationship between image and reality. I will propose that *Taxi Driver* recognizes and investigates the post-modern notion that images, gestures, media representations and other 'fake' reconstructions of reality are becoming more and more important in shaping the individual subject's understanding and experience of actual reality. I will emphasize how such an investigation has specific relevance in masculinity crisis theory, and will indicate in what ways *Taxi Driver* interrogates specifically the male subject's predicament in a post-modern society in which the representation of reality has come to be so important in defining our experience of that reality. The representation of reality particularly through the powerful medium of American film will be of cardinal relevance to this discussion.



CHAPTER 2

THE AMERICAN MASCULINITY CRISIS

In recent years much has been made among sociologists, feminists, gender studies pundits and academics in general about an alleged masculinity crisis that has befallen today's Western men, with particular interest, it seems, being invested in the men of America. The notion of such a masculinity crisis has attracted a good deal of academic interest and serious social concern, on the one hand, but the idea has also become the object of scorn and ridicule. American men (and men the world over), some critical thinkers will say, are still in such a more generally advanced social position than women are that to pay them such separate attention (attention that entails the dramatic word 'crisis') is exaggerated and oversensitive. Whether the matter actually constitutes a crisis or not – a question which will be touched on but not answered during the course of this thesis – it is a pivotal thematic issue in the film *Taxi Driver*. One could say that the majority, if not all, of the other significant topics addressed in the film – including racism, misogyny, class discrepancy, American gun culture, the relationship between the post-modern subject and his environment, the decay of moral values in an urban environment, violence in the United States, the role of the Western in the twentieth century, and the Vietnam War, to name but a few of the most widely noted of such topics – are in some way subservient and complementary to the one overarching theme of American masculinity in crisis. For this reason, the following separate introductory chapter is devoted wholly to the explanation of that crisis.

The first part of this chapter will consist of a brief and basic explanation, through a definition of terms, of what exactly I mean by 'American masculinity crisis'. I will then discuss some of the most evident symptoms of the crisis that have received attention from masculinity crisis theorists. Special attention will be given to two specific symptoms that will be of particular relevance in this thesis: the extent of male violence in American society, and the modern phenomenon of ornamental masculinity.

In the next part of the chapter I will proceed to discuss some of the factors that have shaped the masculinity crisis. I will point out specifically the importance of the 'rugged individual' ideal of masculinity that has permeated American society for years, as well as the influence that the idea of a frontier has had in conceptions of American masculinity

over the years. Moreover, I will discuss the role that women have played, often as scapegoats, in shaping the masculinity crisis; and finally, I will discuss the all-important role that the media – most notably the Hollywood film industry – have played in shaping the masculinity crisis.

In the final part of the chapter I will discuss some of the complex implications that the masculinity crisis has had and still has in recent and current American society. Discussion will include some ways in which men (and sometimes society generally) have sought to deal with the masculinity crisis, and will point out the potential pitfalls – pitfalls that can be understood to result in a worsening of the crisis – that may occur if solutions are sought too rashly. The complex nature of the problem will thus be illustrated. I will then reintroduce the two previously discussed symptoms of male violence and ornamental masculinity into the argument, and will elucidate how these two apparently divergent ‘branches’ of the problem can actually be understood, according to the notions discussed throughout this chapter, to be quite intimately interlinked in complex ways. In the process, I will discuss the importance of the ‘myth of regeneration through violence’ in American society, and I will indicate that, possibly as a consequence of this myth, there seems to be a rising tendency among American men to display their capacity for violent behaviour – a phenomenon that I will call ‘ornamental violence.’

It should be made clear that this chapter is not intended to constitute a sociological investigation; I merely wish to sketch the particular paradigm of masculinity crisis theory that I will refer to throughout the thesis, as it has been explored and investigated by theorists from various fields (including sociology, psychology and gender studies). Throughout this discussion of the masculinity crisis, I will draw chiefly on the arguments of feminist writer Susan Faludi; and my contention is neither to justify nor to disprove her argument, but simply to extrapolate it in my own terms (with further reference to additional relevant theorists and arguments) and to highlight some key points that will be particularly important later in the thesis.

A DEFINITION OF THE TERM ‘AMERICAN MASCULINITY CRISIS’

Before discussion of the American masculinity crisis can begin, it will be essential to define the exact meaning of the term ‘American masculinity crisis’ as it will be used in

this thesis. Numerous writers simply refer to 'the masculinity crisis', without further specification. This is as vague, and can consequently be as confusing and misleading, as referring to something like 'the social crisis' of today. Many such writers could be alluding to something wholly different than what is at issue in this thesis. I have attached the label *American* masculinity crisis here to be more specific; undoubtedly many of the writers on the matter, writing from America to an American audience, mean the same thing, but do not need to specify in that way. For further clarification this next section will explain exactly what is meant by the term by breaking it down to its three components (American, masculinity and crisis) and thus the scope and the nature of the matter will be defined.

Most importantly, the masculinity crisis here is a crisis of *masculinity* today. Men are in a crisis which concerns their own and others' conceptions of their masculinity. In this regard the fundamental issue appears to be, as Susan Faludi explains at length in her work *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the Modern Man*, that the previously more or less well-defined traditional masculine social roles of the Western world have become less and less clear in recent times (Faludi singles out the second half of the twentieth century). Masculinity (or 'masculinities', as some scholars specifically use the plural to emphasize that there is no one universal 'masculinity') is a malleable construct, 'interpolated by cultural, historical and geographical location' and subject to many different conceptions (Beynon 1) – and the range of such conceptions in the Western world has broadened to such an extent that Western men are increasingly unsure of how to claim their 'masculinity'. They are uncertain as to how they must live and act in order to feel like – and exhibit themselves as – 'real' men (Beynon 52-56). Consequently, they may also become confused as to their very role in modern society, with various consequences, as will be explained in more detail later.

This is not to say that women in today's society do not have their own fair share of related problems to cope with. One could certainly discuss at length all kinds of femininity crises, including some that exist in much the same way and even with some symptoms similar to the masculinity crisis that is discussed here. However, there are particular aspects related distinctly to masculinity that inform the masculinity crisis, and consequently, it is not simply called a crisis of modern society as a whole. There seem to be unique ways in which the masculinity crisis has come into existence and in which it

manifests itself that reveal its distinct connection to men. Thus, one could say that masculinity crisis theory simply focuses on more or less half of a broader social crisis that has been singled out for practical purposes, because that particular half lends itself to a specialized, separate investigation. In a similar vein, one may add that in spite of its distinct relation to men and to conceptions of their masculine identity, the masculinity crisis most definitely affects not only men, but women too – in some ways perhaps even more drastically so, indirectly, than it affects men.

Calling the crisis one of masculinity *today* may also be misleading here. Masculinity crisis theorists certainly do not wish to contend that masculinity the world over, or even specifically in America, has always been in a state of healthy balance, only to plummet suddenly into a terrible crisis towards the end of the millennium. But though some of the symptoms of the crisis, like men's general propensity for violence, can be seen as age-old problems, even such symptoms (as well as the other more easily identifiable uniquely late twentieth-century traits, like the increasing tendency of men to attach great importance to the image they exude, which will be discussed presently) manifest themselves distinctly in today's society. In other words, the crisis of today can be understood as a unique problem that is somehow tied to the society in which it currently exists and is an offspring of the historical context of that society. Put differently, one could say, hypothetically and perhaps even truthfully, that there has always been and always will be a masculinity crisis in any human society (Beynon 90-92) – but, importantly, that such a crisis is malleable; it changes its face, its symptoms, as society changes. Accordingly, the late twentieth century (or, more specifically, post-World War II) 'version' of this perhaps timeless masculinity crisis can be singled out historically, and will be treated here specifically as a problem that is symptomatic of our times.

Moreover, the crisis as it will be dealt with in this thesis is an *American* masculinity crisis. In other words, the demographic location of the crisis (already established in the masculine realm) is further narrowed to the country and culture of America. Of course, this still does not narrow it down very precisely, for there exist many different kinds of people and varied cultures within America, and 'American' is itself a very broad term. One may add for further clarification that the target demographic of most of what has been written on the masculinity crisis (and of what will be discussed in this thesis) appears to be predominantly the middle class, white, and maybe to some extent rather

the conservative than the liberal male population of America – although, as I will point out, many of the issues under discussion seem to be related to a pervasive popular culture that has come to be associated with American society generally.

It should additionally be made clear that calling the crisis at hand the American masculinity crisis is not to say that masculinity is only in crisis in America. Far from it: in fact, the American masculinity crisis probably pales in comparison to some of its lesser documented counterparts (for instance, let us say a South African lower-class masculinity crisis, where in township areas to rape is widely considered to be a normal masculine trait, by men and women alike – Epstein online). It is also in no way implied that the American masculinity crisis has implications only in America, and only to citizens of America. Like so many things American, it may well be subtly exported and spread all over the world through the media and otherwise; if it has in fact become an inherent part of American culture, as some analysts (like Faludi) would have it, it may well consequently become a part of global Western culture. Moreover, a crisis in such a powerful country as America – especially a crisis so intricately related to the military attitude and the foreign policy of that country (more on this later) – most definitely has a very important indirect bearing on the rest of the world. However, as I will read Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* with the particularly American masculinity crisis in mind (with its own quite unique history and its own interesting and sometimes devastating social implications specifically within America), this 'version' of what one could call a global crisis will be singled out in this thesis, unfortunately at the cost of giving attention to important masculinity-related issues of other countries and cultures.

Finally, the word 'crisis' in this context has attracted much attention. Many critical thinkers, feminists and otherwise, and also men in general who feel confident that their kind is doing fine in today's society, have criticized the use of this word for its exaggerated, dramatic nature (as opposed to less urgent words like 'problem' or maybe 'depression'). It is important in this regard to bear in mind where the crux of the problem lies. Masculinity crisis analysts, including Susan Faludi and Anthony Clare, seem to suggest that men's uncertainty about their roles in American society does not necessarily pose a crisis in itself – but that men's resultant attitudes and behaviour, in trying to conform to traditional societal conceptions of masculinity, can be understood to constitute the 'crisis' concerned.

Whether this process is merely a matter of sociological interest, or whether the issues at hand actually constitute a 'crisis' that deserves such a severe term, is a semantic issue and not worthy of much further interest. More relevant here is an elucidation, labels aside and simply by way of illustration, of the nature and the proportions of the problem itself, as they have been sketched by masculinity crisis analysts. A thorough analysis of *Taxi Driver* necessitates such a discussion; for, as I will argue, an investigation of the masculinity crisis can after all be regarded as the fundamental project of the film itself. Thus, hopefully, as the film *Taxi Driver* will be discussed alongside references to current findings regarding the alleged American masculinity crisis, enough theoretical ground will be covered for the reader to decide for him- or herself just how critical the matter really is.

SOME SOCIAL SIGNS OF THE CRISIS

Now that the basic terms have been briefly explained (henceforth any talk of the 'masculinity crisis' or even simply 'the crisis' will refer to the specified late twentieth-century American masculinity crisis as explained above), a more thorough discussion of the crisis can be established. A useful point of departure here may be a question that has often been posed to advocates of the notion of a masculinity crisis by various critics, sometimes with scornful undertones: what evidence is there to indicate the severity of the crisis, if we assume (with numerous journalists and scholars) that there is a 'crisis' in the first place?

Popular statistical findings may suggest the simplest of such evidence. Various sources have drawn attention to the notion that men today have much higher rates of drug abuse, alcoholism, and stress-related diseases than women (Beynon 77; Faludi *Stiffed* 6), and are more inclined to engage in otherwise self-destructive or dangerous activities such as gambling and general risk taking (Clare 3) – though some such symptoms may well be due to the fact that men still occupy most of the high-stress, high-responsibility positions in society. Moreover, men generally die at a younger age than women. And not only do they die earlier, they are also four times more likely to commit suicide than women; indeed, according to veteran psychiatrist Anthony Clare, the 'rise in number of young men killing themselves in much of the developed world has been rightly termed

an epidemic' (Clare 3). Such suicide figures are moreover merely regarded as the 'tip of an iceberg of male depression,' an iceberg that is emerging more and more into public knowledge, but that is most likely still mostly hidden – due to men's tendency, socially contrived, to be 'either too proud or too emotionally constipated to admit when their feelings are out of control' (Clare 3).

Furthermore, special attention has been focused, in many recent popular publications concerning the American masculinity crisis, on America's men of tomorrow, possibly for the sake of dramatic emphasis (Beynon 75, Faludi *Stiffed* 6). Boys are 'twice as likely as girls to take Ritalin or be in special classes for bad behaviour;' 'girls earn more A's, boys drop out of high school more often,' and boys 'fall farther behind girls in reading and writing than girls do in math and science' (a finding of which much has been made in recent gender discourse – Zernicke online). Boys are less likely to attend college in the first place, and when they do, they are also more likely to drop out before finishing (Zernicke online).

Finally, it has been argued that 'men have been left behind by the feminist movement' (Beynon 78). In the light of rising women's liberation in the labour world, men are to a lesser and lesser extent ideally conceived of as the sole or even primary breadwinners in their families, rendering them less 'necessary' than before (Beynon 87). Additionally, men are becoming redundant even as partners and fathers, as women are increasingly 'asserting that they can conceive and rear children on their own' (Clare 100).

Though much has been made of such notions by the media, these findings are not exceptionally alarming (Faludi refers to these aspects of the 'crisis' as the 'male-crisis-lite' – Faludi *Stiffed* 6). It seems that the men who are experiencing such a crisis will simply have a slightly harder time than their contemporary women to fit comfortably into society and – in a very hypothetical world of gender equality – to earn success in that society; they will also die a little younger, but none of this is the stuff of a serious crisis. Even if it were, men would still have countless other advantages, social and otherwise, to make up for such setbacks. According to numerous analysts, the seriousness of the American masculinity crisis, and the implications that such a crisis has for the rest of society, are visible elsewhere. Men's growing insecurity about their 'masculine' role in society is understood by Susan Faludi, Anthony Clare and John Beynon, among others,

to be intimately connected to men's incredible propensity for violence in today's American society. The import of the matter in this regard should emerge from a brief perusal of recent research on violence in America, as it has been highlighted by the scholars mentioned above.

The extent of male violence in America

In the first place – and it should come as no surprise, though the thought remains striking - human violence 'is an activity engaged in almost exclusively by men;' almost 90 percent of all violent activity the world over is perpetrated by men (Clare 38). It may be added for the sake of clarity that what is meant by 'violence' here is behaviour purposefully leading to the serious physical injury or death of another human being. Not only is female violence quite scarce; when it does occur, it is often itself a consequence of male violence. In cases concerning women who have committed homicide, the victim of the female killer is literally more often than not a man who has repeatedly abused her (Clare 38).

What may be more surprising, given the United States' status as a civilized first world country with widespread access to education and a widely respected, authoritative legal system, is the fact that the US murder rate (if this may serve as some barometer for propensity towards violence) is one of the highest in the world (Clare 40). Of all the industrialized, democratic countries – let us say, first world countries – the United States is one of the most violent and by far the most homicidal, with homicide rates that are twenty times as high as the country with the least cases of homicide, Japan (Clare 40). These notions gain even further weight when one considers that robbery-related violent crime constitutes less than 20 percent of all violent crime committed in the US (Clare 40-41). In other words, if the desperation of poverty is to be any justification for violence as a means towards an ends – and it most certainly is at least a widespread cause, justifiable or not, of violence the world over (Gilligan, in Splitter online) – it is so to a very small extent in the United States. If the high rate of violence in South Africa (and other third world countries) attests to a great national class discrepancy, where desperation drives thousands to violence as a means of gaining what they can acquire by no other means, for instance – with the national police force in addition being riddled with corruption and economic inefficiency, and consequently largely incapable of policing such behaviour – what reason can there be for such a high rate in the United States?

The answer to this question is mystifying. In the United States, 'aggravation' is the most common cause of violence (Clare 40-41).

One concludes that a frightening number of men in the United States are somehow inclined to behave violently and to kill to an extent that is remarkable even when viewed in relation to the worst of international rates of violence and homicide, and that they do so for reasons that are unclear at best ('aggravation,' it must be emphasized, being the most common identified cause of violence). Violence is a tremendous problem in the United States, and it is a male problem. Some assure themselves that male violence is not a sign of an 'indictment of masculinity,' claiming that 'most male violence is perpetrated against other men,' and sometimes also that 'women are just as violent' (Clare 44). The first instance, though true, is no comfort, and the second is neither true (it is ludicrously far from the truth), nor frankly would it be much comfort even if it were. And even if most violence is perpetrated by men against other men, a fact that by no means excuses such violence, there is still an incredible amount of violence perpetrated by men against women – most frequently, by men against their own spouses. One may consider simply the frightening fact that in the United States 'domestic violence is the leading cause of injury among [women] of reproductive age' (Clare 42).

Of course, it may be added here, neither the general widespread commonality of violence in society (even particularly in American society), nor specifically men's overwhelming involvement in such violence, are patently new phenomena, and I do not wish to imply that it is necessarily a worse problem today than it was fifty or five hundred years ago – but the fact that it has always been around in no way makes it an excusable or acceptable (or, as it may appear, a 'natural') aspect of human and male behaviour. Human society has always found ways to condone violence, in various cultures, maybe even at times with due justification (though ascertaining whether or not this is true is beyond the scope of this thesis), and so too has today's Western, 'civilized' society. There may be no fundamental difference between the state of such affairs today and a few centuries ago. However, the fact that such tendencies have been around for the span of humanity's existence no less than today – to such an extent that one can easily venture to say that violent behaviour has come to appear to be an essential part of human, if not male, nature – should surely draw attention to the urgency of the matter, instead of somehow becoming a justification or a smokescreen for it.

Masculinity crisis theorists have certainly recognized the urgency of the matter. Susan Faludi, Anthony Clare, and John Beynon, among others, have tied the phenomenon of male violent behaviour specifically to the existence of a masculinity crisis that entails men being unsure of their roles in society. According to the arguments set forth by these theorists, many men feel pressured, for various reasons and sometimes even without being aware of it, to act violently (even in situations where violence is not needed) in order to 'reclaim' or visibly express their masculinity (Beynon 82; Faludi *Stiffed* 37). This matter will be explained in further detail at the end of this chapter.

Ornamental masculinity

Alongside the most unfortunately evident problem of male violence, some masculinity crisis theorists point out an equally evident, though probably far less destructive (in its immediate practical ramifications) symptom of the masculinity crisis; one which, as opposed to the age-old issue of male violence, has only recently emerged as a problem in Western society. It has received perhaps as much attention by masculinity crisis theorists as the problem of violence; this may be because it is a matter that is most obvious – for its very nature entails its display in society. It is the notion that masculinity has, as femininity before it, become increasingly enmeshed in ornamental culture; in other words, men are attaching more and more importance to the way they present themselves in society. Indeed, men's (and society's) very conception of masculinity – that malleable notion of what it means or requires to be a man – is increasingly determined by a *display* of masculinity: to *look* like a 'real' man is to be one (Faludi *Stiffed* 34-36). Accordingly, modern men are placing great importance on the way they look in order to achieve various goals in society, such as gaining personal confidence, social standing or professional success (Beynon 14; Mayer 38-40).

While a preoccupation with appearance is not necessarily dysfunctional in itself (and can probably be quite healthy, in moderation), analysts have suggested that the matter may be more problematic than meets the eye. According to feminist thought, an emphasis on the ornamental aspects of Western women (let us exclude from the argument the vast range of non-Western, third world issues addressed by feminism) has created all sorts of problems for the 'fairer sex' in modern society, pressuring women young and old to live up to unrealistic expectations and reducing their identity in such a way that they are in

many cases perceived by society and, more problematic still, by themselves, as ornaments, often as little more than 'sex objects'. Feminism has struggled against such conceptions of female identity for many years, and it would seem that it has made good headway in its mission. Susan Faludi notes that women have 'shucked off' such conceptions as 'demeaning and dehumanizing' (Faludi *Stiffed* 39); in other words, there is at least an awareness that such conceptions are problematic. While many women of the Western world may yet place great emphasis on putting themselves on display (by means of all kinds of make-up, perfume, jewellery and clothes) rather than proving themselves in some other way to gain various types of standing in society – and while they are in all probability still largely encouraged to do so – there certainly seems to be a growing consciousness of the problems associated with such conceptions of femininity among both women, mainly, and society as a whole. The ball has been set in motion, thus, rolling in the direction of a world free of such problematic conceptions.

This is why the matter at hand, that concerning men, is so disconcerting – and it is also one of the reasons why the masculinity crisis has ironically attracted much attention from concerned feminist analysts (like Susan Faludi) who are already familiar with the problem: for with regards to conceptions of masculinity, the ball is also in motion, but rolling the opposite way (Faludi *Stiffed* 39). Men are increasingly attaching importance to the way that they appear, flaunting themselves as spectacles in a culture where 'manhood is displayed, not demonstrated' (Faludi *Stiffed* 35) rather than being integral, if hardly noticed and acclaimed, contributors to society. And, according to Susan Faludi, this is a complex problem; for it is not simply that men have become self-absorbed, 'as contemporary wisdom would have it,' but rather that 'the culture they live in has left men with little other territory on which to prove themselves beside vanity' (Faludi *Stiffed* 35). 'Where we once lived in a society in which men in particular participated by being useful in public life,' observes Faludi, 'we now are surrounded by a culture that encourages' its men to play 'decorative or consumer' roles instead of 'functional public roles' (Faludi *Stiffed* 35).

Recent findings in studies on cosmetic surgery offer strong support to such notions. Analysts have found that, generally, men of the Western world are increasingly 'unhappy with the way they look' (Mayer 38). Moreover, such insecurities are evidently so distressing that men are turning to cosmetic alteration, a process previously almost

exclusively reserved for women with similar grievances, or for victims of serious accidents – a process that used to be reserved for the ‘moneyed elite’ but which has now become a ‘mass-market activity’ (Mayer 38). For various reasons – including the ‘siren voices of the media and of a deeper collective unconscious’ – men today are being inspired to attend clinics, beauty parlours and specialized private centres in order to have reconstructive surgery, on a wholly unprecedented scale; so much so that experts on the field propose that cosmetic surgery today is ‘for men as much as for women’ (Mayer 38, 39). And, predictably, as women may contend that it is for the eyes of men – the so-called ‘male gaze’ – that they have been so concerned with their projected image, so too do men now often attribute their growing fixation with their looks to women. In their insecurity, such men often believe that women are as obsessed and thus as dissatisfied as themselves with their (the men’s) looks, in many cases without justification (Mayer 38).

Looks are increasingly becoming not only important to men as an end in themselves, but also as a necessary means to professional ends in a changing world. Mark Jennings, a male banker, speaks of himself and colleagues who have undergone cosmetic surgery as a result of the pressures of their professional environment (an environment which has never been associated necessarily with the importance of good looks). ‘It is important to *look* your best,’ he says, ‘*like* you can take it in your stride’ (Mayer 41 – my emphasis). In many similar professions, in the corporate world, for instance, cosmetic surgery is used as a ‘professional tool’ because, according to Professor of Psychology Jonathan Cole, actual human interaction (on a professional level) is decreasing to the point that the persons involved ‘see each other but they don’t [really] interact... the only way to make an impact is through the visible self’ (Mayer 42).

The problems issuing from such matters are almost self-explanatory. If the display value of a man – his ‘market-bartered individuality’, as Susan Faludi calls it (Faludi *Stiffed* 38, 39) – becomes more important than his functional or societal value, then it is easy to surmise that one may be left with a culture that has no real measure of a man’s worth beyond the shallow and easily manipulated values connoted by his appearance (Beynon 94; Faludi *Stiffed* 39). As has been noted, feminist perspectives emphasize that this kind of ‘ornamental’ or ‘celebrity’ culture has plagued women for decades, keeping them subservient to certain dysfunctional gender roles and inhibiting their ability to contribute

functionally to society (Faludi *Stiffed* 38-39). It is clear from the arguments set forth by masculinity crisis proponents that the same kind of thing is increasingly happening to men – that they ‘are “gaining” the very world women so recently shucked off as demeaning and dehumanizing,’ and that this may have grave implications for men’s undeniably important functional role in society (Faludi *Stiffed* 39).

These two symptoms – namely the issues of male violence and ornamental masculinity (or ‘narcissistic masculinity’, as Beynon terms it – Beynon 102) – have largely been regarded in recent masculinity crisis studies as two of the most important facets of the masculinity crisis. I will assume, along with the studies in question, that these two symptoms are at least the two most evident, and possibly also the most problematic and socially dysfunctional, manifested offshoots of the masculinity crisis. In the remainder of this thesis they will be treated accordingly.

THE HISTORY AND CAUSES OF THE MASCULINITY CRISIS

It seems that men, unsure of their ‘masculine’ place in society, increasingly turn towards violent behaviour in some instances, and that alternatively they are increasingly inclined to focus on their image, and to displaying themselves in society rather than proving themselves by means of their actual social behaviour. How did this all come about? Why are men feeling so insecure about their place in society in the first place? In order to better understand the workings of the crisis, it may be sensible to investigate its roots, by tracing its history in society, and by considering the most striking causal factors that may have contributed to its existence. It should be noted that there are still many varying and conflicting views as to what the most important causes and influences have been in this regard; only the most relevant of such views will be included here for the sake of brevity.

The fundamental and most obvious cause of the masculinity crisis, it is clear from any study on the matter, seems to be very simply that men’s power in the Western world is in decline. In the first place, men as a social group are losing their relative power (within the bigger picture of society in its entirety) in the wake of feminist achievements and in the face of increasingly equal gender rights (Beynon 86, 87); individual men, moreover, are finding it increasingly hard to ‘express’ autonomous ‘power’ in a society that is

increasingly governed by large companies and complex corporate and economic systems, and in which the faceless individual plays a part that is acknowledged to a lesser and lesser extent (as Karl Bednarik argues in his *The Male in Crisis*). A part of the problem here, in both these related regards, may well be the fact that men have enjoyed disproportionate amounts of power in the first place. This seems to have fostered certain expectations – expectations that, apparently, are turning out to be unrealistic in modern society.

The story of men's power and, perhaps more crucially, their justification in holding that power (and thus the self-respect that may accompany such power) can be understood to hinge largely on the supposition that there are certain important tasks to be fulfilled in a functional society that only men can perform (as opposed to women), or at least, that they can perform decidedly better. Bill and Anne Moir discuss such a supposition, and its potential merits, at length in their subversive and interesting book *Why Men Don't Iron*. Tasks that require muscle-work, for instance, have traditionally been assigned to men, rather sensibly so – for men are generally physically much stronger than women; perhaps less sensibly, tasks that require rational thinking, and tasks that require mathematics in particular, have also been assigned to men, under the assumption that men are naturally better suited to cope with such tasks (an assumption that has strongly been contested in recent gender discourse, as Bill and Anne Moir continually point out – Moir & Moir 25, 26, 105-111) There seems to be an additional traditional supposition that men are generally better suited for long-term responsibilities, for instance, high-responsibility company jobs that require persistent commitment; for men do not have the all-important priority of child-birth and child-rearing (though they will hopefully play a part in this latter responsibility, if in most cases a lesser part than their female companions).

These and other similar fundamental suppositions regarding men's place in society – some of which are almost certainly rooted in reality, tied to natural facts, and some of which have been exposed as social myths, institutionalized in society's believed reality – these suppositions have helped to shape societal expectations for men's behaviour, in other words, their ideal social role. Recently, however, in part because the 'factual' roots of some of these core suppositions are being exposed as the stuff of social myth (Beynon 2, 13, 14; Moir & Moir 25, 26), and in part because society has literally changed, through technological and other means, in ways that render some of men's

traditional distinctive advantages almost completely redundant (most notably so in the industrial sector – Beynon 14), Western men’s ideal social role appears to be changing rapidly. They no longer need to be nearly as physically strong, as stoical, or as independently capable as before (Beynon 13, 14; Clare 7). It is clear that ‘those men – and they have been the majority – who have defined their lives, their identities, the very essence of their masculinity in terms of professional and occupational achievement,’ and have ‘prided themselves on the work that only they as men could do,’ are faced with problematic questions regarding those same notions of life, identity and the ‘very essence of masculinity’ (Clare 7).

In the meantime – and this is where the crisis may get really confusing to some of its subjects – men are peppered with messages by the media, on the one hand, to consciously adapt to these social changes, i.e. to embrace new roles (masculine roles that will be dismissed by traditionalists as stripped of their very ‘masculine’ aspects) and to somehow be free of old-school associations of masculinity; and on the other hand, they are still being fed – now as ever before – ideals of that very same type of rugged, stoical, domineering masculinity, whether through films, television advertisements, billboard posters, and popular culture in general.

The history of the ‘Rugged Individual’ ideal of masculinity

Such an independent, stoic, domineering ideal of masculinity – and it is the prevailing ideal of American masculinity today no less than a century ago (Faludi *Stiffed* 10-12) – has a long, winding history that reveals much of American culture and ideology, and which is worthy of brief discussion to contextualize current American conceptions of masculinity. One may start by noting that this ideal has not always been the favoured one in America’s history. In America’s early frontier days, over two centuries ago, the adaptable ‘man of the community’ was appreciated (even in heroic terms) as much, if not more, than the ‘loner in control’, the rugged, independent individual who did not need the help of others (Faludi *Stiffed* 10). In early 19th-century America manhood was equated with ‘social usefulness’, and men were ‘judged by their contribution to the larger community’; conversely, the men who rode out for adventure, ‘untethered from public life’, were ‘regarded as only half a man’ (Faludi *Stiffed* 11). In their time these men – like the now canonically heroic Davy Crockett – were seen as ‘frontier wastrels’, men who

were 'wasting the resources of the Inland Empire, destroying forests, skinning the land' (Parrington in Faludi *Stiffed* 11).

During the industrialization period of the nineteenth century a shift came about in this paradigm of ideal masculinity. The same wastrel who had been seen as a killer with no social purpose acquired a new status as an 'emblem of virility': in the new emerging America where the ethic of social usefulness was slowly being replaced by an 'ethic of solo ambition', 'to be a man increasingly meant to be ever on the rise, and the only way to know for sure you were rising was to claim, control, and crush everyone in your way' (Faludi *Stiffed* 11). And so, figures previously tainted with the stigma of being outcast, outlaw and outsider came to be renowned as heroes: dominating, ruthless men like the mentioned Davy Crocket, 'Wild Bill' Hickock, Jesse James and Captain Carver were hoisted onto a gilded stage and into public popularity.

Over the next century or so the ethos of solo ambition became firmly embedded in capitalist American culture, and it has managed to carry with it the somehow complementary central frontier myths of the 19th century – Western myths that would be refabricated and perpetuated endlessly during the 20th century by the all-powerful, all-popular rise of American mass media (most notably Hollywood) and with further help from the spin of a host of shrewd politicians (most notably, as I will explain in detail in the fifth chapter, J. F. Kennedy; perhaps slightly less prominently, Ronald Reagan, and, currently, George W. Bush, as Joost Raessens observes in his study of Bush's projected 'cowboy' image – Raessens online).

During this time the masculine ideal of the rugged, domineering individual has wavered only slightly in times of uncertainty (during the 1920s depression, for instance, when dandified 'metro-male' ideals briefly became popular – Todd online) and has generally remained as stalwart as its nature requires. The heroes that subscribe to the 'so-called "American spirit" of rugged individualism' have become a 'permanent part of the American imagination,' and indeed, a part of its conception of what a man should be like (Freed online). The frontier of the 19th-century Wild West may have made way for the tamed, civilized and increasingly urban environment of the twentieth century, but the key mythical figure (born into and moulded by the wild frontier in the first place) which occupies that changing territory has remained more or less the same. Towards the end

of the twentieth century, in a milieu in which the reality of that ideal type became less and less socially functional, the man 'soaring above' society instead of being an integral part of it, the man 'in the driver's seat', 'controlling his environment', in competition with those around him instead of working with them – and he will fight if he must (sometimes even if he mustn't); that man has continually been (and still is) the unchallenged 'prevailing American image of masculinity' (Faludi *Stiffed* 10). The confounding ambivalence here is that not only does this ideal set a standard that may be dysfunctional the more it is actually reached and enacted by the men of today's society, but that furthermore is almost impossible to reach in the current social environment – and that thus places expectations way beyond the capacity of Joe Public, emphasizing the decline of his social competence and of his power in society.

The importance of the frontier in conceptions of American masculinity

In this light, one can begin to see how the receding of the American wild frontier environment, mentioned above, has played a role in the masculinity crisis. The American frontier was perceived by the pioneers as a wild wasteland, filled with dangerous animals, hostile Indians and all kinds of other unpredictable dangers. According to traditional conceptions, it was a wilderness that had to be tamed in order for Western civilization to flourish, and its taming required nothing less than courageous, able men who were willing to explore, to risk their lives, to endure hardships, and to fight and kill (Calder xii, xiii). As Susan Faludi repeatedly observes, conceptions of American masculinity have etched themselves against the hard backdrop of this frontier in a way reminiscent of the image of the rugged movie cowboy in silhouette against the open skyline of the wild desert. Eventually, once the historical frontier had been 'closed' at the end of the 19th century and had become a mere concept that inhabited the imagination of the American people, masculinity would increasingly become much harder to define.

It is important, when discussing this dilemma, to consider the extent to which the idea of the frontier has actually managed to survive and become firmly embedded in the imagination of the American people in the century that followed. The American frontier was officially closed, if such official endings are possible to conceive of, at the very end of the 19th century (Slotkin 3), and this time marked the last days of the real cowboys and gunslingers who would remain so prevalent, in glorified, fictive form, in the century of dime novels and films that succeeded them. The masculine paradigm that was

connoted (and, arguably, required) by the 19th-century frontier relies centrally on the promise of a 'common mission, a clear frontier with an identifiable enemy... and a calling to protect a population of women and children' (Faludi *Stiffed* 299). Such a paradigm seems to have left the legacy of masculinity that was to be yearned for and relished in the imaginations, and, in fact, in the behaviour of American men for more than a century after the closing of the frontier. It dictated by far the majority of popular representations of masculinity (in films and dime novels) that would emerge in the first few decades of the twentieth century (Calder xi-xiii). Though it has undergone some superficial changes (in terms of how it manifests itself in today's popular culture, for instance), the fundamental myths at the heart of this paradigm have arguably not waned much in popularity and influence since then up to this day, as Douglas McReynolds argues in his "Alive and Well: Western Myth in Western Movies."

If ever there was a time in the twentieth century when such a masculine paradigm, let us call it the masculine paradigm of the frontier, found a significant functional place in American society, it must have been during the time of the Second World War. All the elements required for that paradigm to appear functional were present; indeed, the horrendous nature of the situation (with Hitler and the Nazi regime posing a threat specifically to an entire ethnic group and generally to the stability of world peace) can be understood to have *necessitated* such a paradigm (Von Marschal 6). A mission was conceivable during this time which concerned the American nation as much as it concerned the rest of the world. This mission centred on a clearly conceived and defined frontier, a battleground where the 'good guys' and the 'bad guys' were clearly distinguishable. There was an identifiable enemy – an enemy so obviously and simply threatening, characterized in the person of Adolf Hitler and in the Nazi empire, that there was no doubt as to the virtue of the final mission (Von Marschal 6). Indeed, the mission itself was a calling to protect whole populations of women and children, American (pre-emptively) and otherwise. Quite simply, in the minds of the American public, the men of America had to go and fight against a ruthless and evil enemy in order to preserve world peace; there was little ambiguity about the matter (Von Marschal 6). America's victorious involvement in that war, easily and more or less wholeheartedly understood by its society as heroic and noble (in spite of controversial incidents like the bombings of Dresden or of Hiroshima), managed to embed the idea of a frontier and all that it connotes firmly into the collective consciousness of American society (Faludi *Stiffed* 17-

20) – a society that was in all probability quite eager to have the values of its past and of its nostalgic celluloid world revalidated in reality.

Since that time, the frontier paradigm of masculinity has been upheld in American society, promised to young American men by means of many more sources than the Wild West films that initially ensured its survival; it has become an institutionalized paradigm, endorsing an ideology and a framework for behaviour that seems to have come to be expected of men (Faludi *Stiffed* 19). But after the Second World War, current critical thinkers like Susan Faludi argue, there would be no more real tests of this type of manhood; there would be no more such frontiers. Korea, the McCarthy campaign against communism, the war in Vietnam (most importantly, here), the rest of the Cold War, and, currently, the ‘war on terror’ and the protracted war in Iraq, to name the most significant examples of more recent ‘frontiers’, did not and do not contain the crucial elements required in the frontier paradigm. The missions themselves and the enemies involved have not been clearly defined; victory did not depend on as clearly defined a goal. The men involved in these wars could often not know who they were really protecting, what they were fighting for, and why they were killing people whose causes they did not even understand (Von Marschal 6). In fact, some critical thinkers assert that at least some of these wars exploited the traditional frontier paradigm – even if it has in reality been losing its place in society exceedingly already shortly after the Second World War – in order to coax men to fight without question for reasons that they themselves were not clearly aware of (Faludi *Stiffed* 298-300; Kashani online). In any event, the fact remains that for better or worse American conceptions of masculinity have continued to be informed quite crucially by such ideas of a frontier to this day. Because this kind of masculinity may actually have a much less significant place in society than the men of today are led to believe, it is evident that the clarity of their role in society is further confounded. As Faludi observes, ‘the old paradigm of enemies and frontiers is nearing the end of its usefulness... we need a new way to seek social progress and to revitalize our public life’ (Faludi *Scenes* online).

Women’s role in the crisis

Women have played an important part in the shaping of the masculinity crisis – though not in the way that many men would conveniently like to believe. It seems almost natural that with men’s power on the wane, they have been quick to target women as a

scapegoat group. In the wake of the feminist movements of the past century and the slow rise in women's occupation of more powerful corporate, political and other positions, there was a powerful reaction – known among feminists, and indeed proclaimed by male anti-feminists, as a 'backlash' (which is described in detail by Susan Faludi in her 1991 book, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women*) – among men who felt that women were unfairly stripping them of their power within society.

Of course, that power (which men almost exclusively possessed in corporate and political sectors before the rise of feminism, and which they actually still largely possess, though to a far lesser extent – Zernicke online) was and indeed still is being stripped from men in some measure in order to achieve a greater measure of gender equity. And this may well be a very important contributing factor to the current masculinity crisis, considering furthermore that many traditional conceptions of masculinity have postulated men's power specifically over women as one of the very core characteristics of manhood (Clare 5). The man 'wears the pants' in a household, it is still often said, for example. Whether or not such power is taken away (or redistributed, as feminists would prefer to say) in an *unfair* fashion, however, is a wholly different question. The social climate within which men's 'backlash' complaints contend for plausibility, in a time of increasingly varied types of feminist consciousness, has changed to such an extent that men's negative reaction to their loss of power in this regard can be seen as something of a pathetic response. Let men give up their excess power willingly, or at least gracefully, feminists (and in fact most women, and even many men) will say, until gender equality is achieved; for such equality is still years if not decades away (which indeed it is: 'by almost any statistical measure, men are still ahead of women' – Zernicke online).

Be that as it may, not all men agree on the point. 'Like colonists seeing their empire crumble,' notes Anthony Clare, 'they don't like what is happening' (Clare 4). Some men disagree with feminism so vigorously, in fact, that 'backlash' sentiments and similar attitudes have generated a great upsurge of paranoid chauvinism and misogyny over the past three or four decades which, of course, in turn elicited stronger reactions from feminist movements – and so on (Clare 4-6). The tension between men who literally feel threatened by the rise of women's power in society (and the subsequent decline of their own), and the women who feel that they deserve the equality that so seems to threaten such men, at the cost of whatever crisis those men consequently undergo, still exists

quite evidently in modern Western societies. It informs the masculinity crisis in no small means, adding an insidious dimension of misogyny that at best threatens any achievement of gender equality, and at worst accounts for some of the domestic violence that is so extensively present in American society, as women are 'feared, despised, sometimes even destroyed because of what men perceive women to be doing to them' (Clare 5).

The role of the media

The notion that popular media like television and film are increasingly affecting the nature of socialization in Western society, in particular the socialization of impressionable young people, has received much attention and generated much debate during the past few decades. There are countless arguments and whole books devoted to whether or not, or to what extent, the media can be held accountable for influencing human socialization and behaviour (Brody online; Faure 35, 42, 65; University of Pennsylvania online). Numerous subsequent debates have emerged concerning the extent to which censorship should be applied in the media, say, in film, to limit or curb this process of 'detrimental' socialization. Some of the most prominent of such arguments have proposed, for instance, that televised representations of violent behaviour may socialize viewers into believing that such violent behaviour is normal, natural, or even 'right' (Beynon 57, 64; Slocum online; Splitter online), and there is ongoing debate concerning to what extent such representations should be censored (Splitter online).

Such debates are ongoing and, in spite of numerous studies, there seems to be no conclusive evidence suggesting either that people are indeed affected by the media to such a drastic extent that their behaviour stems directly from media influence, or, contrarily, that this is doubtless *not* the case (Faure 35; Slocum online; Splitter online). However, masculinity crisis theorists (John Beynon and Susan Faludi, most notably here) seem to imply that, at least in terms of men's socialization in masculine roles, the media do most definitely play a crucial role. Beynon notes that cinematically mediated representations of masculinity 'often have a more powerful impact than the flesh-and-blood men around the young' (Beynon 64). The often unrealistically idealized, 'highly crafted, alluring and accessible' role models of the screen, continues Beynon, exert a great influence not only on the way that young men visualize themselves ideally – in

other words, how they would like to 'be' (or act, or look like) – but also on the actual 'way they act in daily life' (Beynon 64). Following this argument, it seems natural that if men are unsure of their place in society, and are increasingly unsure of what kind of behaviour they should assume is appropriately 'masculine' in a changing world, they will doubtless be heavily influenced by the media, among other sources, in constructing 'new' acceptable paradigms of masculine behaviour. Furthermore, in a world where masculinity is increasingly defined according to an ornamental exhibition of visible attributes (as I have noted previously), it can be expected that men will very likely look to 'images' (read 'media representations') of masculinity for their masculine 'role models', or paradigms of masculinity.

In this regard, Susan Faludi suggests that the media play a particularly crucial part in shaping the 'narcissistic' aspects of the masculinity crisis, noting that it is because of 'the media and society's susceptibility to its messages' that masculinity is defined, for instance, according to 'images that men project rather than their actual work' in the first place (Faludi in Golod online). Furthermore, the media encourage many of those traditional 'masculine' traits that have, according to masculinity crisis theory, become increasingly dysfunctional in modern society. Through advertisements (starring Joe Camel, the Marlboro Man and other hyper-masculine men) and films (starring typecast heroes like John Wayne, Clint Eastwood, Sylvester Stallone and countless others), for instance, the 'rugged individual' ideal of masculinity has been advocated to excessive proportions – and without any clear signs of waning – in the past fifty years (Beynon 57). Susan Faludi notes specifically how the 'John Wayne character' has been an influential benchmark of the continually promoted 'manly man' ideal of masculinity, and remains so even at the turn of the century (in Gaddo online).

SOME COMPLEX IMPLICATIONS OF THE CRISIS

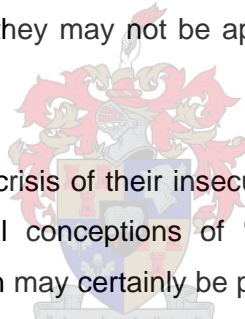
Together, such contributing factors have shaped the state of confusion and insecurity that is regarded as the American masculinity crisis. It is a social condition in which men are pushed to ask themselves what their role in society really is; to ask, in particular, whether they will shed the still widely encouraged old-school notions of rugged, aggressive masculinity in the face of media and other pressure (and at the possible risk of being humiliated by their peers), and – equally importantly – if they do rid themselves

of such arguably dysfunctional conceptions of masculinity, in what ways, and with what ideal roles, will these conceptions be replaced? Rash attempts to find solutions to these questions without careful consideration of the sensitive, complex nature of the problems around which they revolve hold many potential pitfalls, and the ensuing social ramifications can be (and, as this thesis contends, have been) severe. This next section will examine some such ramifications.

In the new world of reconceived perceptions of gender, some brave American men have attempted to subvert or exceed traditional conceptions of masculinity, refusing to let such notions define them and going along with feminist admonitions, such as the one that suggests that men should 'get in touch with their feminine side.' More and more men, embracing 'nurturing new man-ism', are now challenging patriarchal conceptions by rearing their children at home while their wives work as breadwinners, for instance, and many more are taking over at least some basic chores that have traditionally been assigned to women, like washing the dishes and mending clothes (Beynon 77, 119-121). Ironically, such efforts seem to fuel public recognition of a crisis of masculinity, as these men are widely criticized for losing the grip on their manhood and are themselves labelled exponents extraordinaire of the crisis, instead of being recognized (as they surely see themselves) as men who are trying to challenge and alleviate the crisis. Indeed, even some (rather controversial) experts in the field of gender studies have criticized these efforts, proposing that the behavioural tendencies and expectations of men – whether biologically determined or socially learned tendencies – are so firmly embedded in our society that individual men who challenge these institutionalized constructs in their day-to-day behaviour will merely plunge themselves into their own crises, and in the process be ostracised from society (an argument developed throughout Anne and Bill Moir's *Why Men Don't Iron*). Such an argument seems to be plausible if one considers that the behaviour of these new 'nurturing' men is often frowned upon by their peers (Zernicke online).

Another critical writer, James Heartfield, asserts in a lengthy article that there is no such thing as a modern American masculinity crisis – and that the only real crisis here springs from the fact that men attempt to change their lives because they *think* that they are in crisis in the first place. Heartfield contends that the solutions conceived of in order to deal with the alleged masculinity crisis – as those solutions, discussed above, that have

been suggested by some feminists – actually have a dysfunctional effect on society. ‘Men are called upon to act the part of the victim, by getting in touch with their emotional side,’ he states and proceeds to sketch how such anti-traditional re-conceptions of masculinity can have an unnecessarily negative effect on men and on their ability to function in society (Heartfield online). While Heartfield’s fundamental assertion (that there is no masculinity crisis) is in total opposition to the premise of this thesis, his reasoning beyond this assertion is often quite sound and it does shed light on the sensitive nature of the problem and the dangers involved in attempting to solve it too. In the light of Heartfield’s arguments, it may also be observed here – as Matt Hannah, another analyst of American masculinity, emphasizes – that masculinity crisis theory does not intend to construct traditionally ‘masculine’ traits such as strength, determination, independence, or even aggressiveness as *necessarily* negative or dysfunctional in modern society. Since such traits have largely come to be regarded as ‘natural’ or essential to male behaviour, however, and since they are thus likely to be applied even in situations where they may not be appropriate, they are constructed as problematic (Hannah online).



Men may attempt to address the crisis of their insecurity about their place in society by progressively shedding traditional conceptions of ‘rugged’, aggressive, domineering masculinity; and such an approach may certainly be problematic, as Heartfield suggests. In many instances, though, men go about addressing the problem in quite the opposite way. Throughout the past few decades, since the hype about masculinity crisis first started appearing on tabloid covers in the late 80s and early 90s, movements have emerged that rally men to ‘reclaim their masculinity’ by emphasizing and embracing traditional conceptions of masculinity (Faludi *Stiffed* 15). Such movements – some of which, such as those of Robert Bly, became incredibly popular – coerced men to get back in touch with the ‘primordial mainsprings’ of their manhood. Popular books instructed men to ‘reconnect with the Wild Man “lying at the bottom of their psyche” or “The King Within”’ (Faludi *Stiffed* 15). Leaders of the more extreme movements would have their followers congregate in woods, get naked, chant and dance around fires, in order to rekindle nostalgic memories of times when masculinity was still ‘easier’ to define. One of the most extreme of these movements – a movement led by Robert Bly – became particularly popular; Bly’s enthusiastic literature (for instance, his book *Iron John*) concerning his proposed solutions for the masculinity crisis actually topped the

American bestsellers list for numerous years in the 1990s (Freed online; Zernicke online). Less extreme movements that 'encourage men to reassert their traditional roles as providers and caretakers' have been as popular. Even in some of the therapy groups for perpetrators of domestic violence, 'intended to offer men "alternatives to violence," they are told that there is no alternative [to their dominant roles in society]: they must be at the helm' (Faludi *Stiffed* 10). It is certainly an open and very delicate, complicated question whether such approaches actually help men to deal with their crisis, or plunge them even deeper into it.

It is evident that such a reassertion of traditional masculine values often hinges on display value rather than utilitarian value, most clearly so, for instance, in the strange rituals that men are encouraged to perform in the woods. Since traditional conceptions of masculinity are becoming arbitrary, proponents of these movements seem to suggest that the only thing left to do for men is to act out a performance that accords with such traditional conceptions. As Susan Faludi puts it, 'the man in crisis need only picture himself a monarch, pump up, armour himself, go up against the enemy, and prove that he's in control' (Faludi *Stiffed* 15). In this way men can at least feel or *look* masculine in a traditional sense, thus nurturing their bruised confidence. But such a line of thinking, tied to the previously discussed rise of ornamental masculinity, may have more serious implications than might be apparent to its proponents. I will discuss such implications in this next (final) part of the chapter. It is also at this point that what I have regarded as the two chief symptoms of the masculinity crisis – male violence, and ornamental masculinity, which have hitherto been treated as separate, even divergent issues – will be shown to be problems that are intimately interrelated, the one aggravating the other.

ORNAMENTAL VIOLENCE

Let us return briefly to the problem of male violence in America: that destructive behaviour which has become (or has always been) so common in American society and which, as has been established, finds its cause today chiefly in the 'aggravation' of potentially violent individuals. Analysts have gone to great lengths to discover the roots of the problem, considering social factors such as American gang activity; drug availability, use and trafficking; racism; the increasing breakdown of families; the widespread availability and social popularity of alcohol; the same of guns; and, last but

not least, the increasing predominance of violent entertainment (Splitter online). One could argue, furthermore, that men's physical strength gives them a particular capacity for violence, and it is widely believed that biological factors (such as the effect of testosterone) cause men to be more aggressive and to have a 'natural' inclination towards violence (though this argument is contested in current debates and is the object of much scientific scrutiny – IANSA online; Emedicine online).

There is an additional important consideration that may help, according to masculinity crisis theory, to explain male violent behaviour in the light of what has been discussed in this chapter – a consideration so obvious, in fact, that it can easily be overlooked because of its simplicity. Men feel that they are *expected* to be violent (Faludi *Stiffed* 37). It has been mentioned that traditional conceptions of masculinity have harnessed the platonic 'ideal man' with an ability and willingness to fight, to defend himself, his family and his property. This active fighting spirit, be it physical or gun-wielding, seems in many ways to have been one of the most crucial factors distinguishing between masculinity and femininity in American society. And it is still encouraged – not much less so today, one could venture to say, than in previous times – in spite of the influence of critical gender studies and a growing awareness of the obviously destructive implications of such conceptions of masculinity.

The myth of regeneration through violence

One needs to consider, in this regard, the importance of what analysts have termed the 'myth of regeneration through violence' in American society. Richard Slotkin has indicated that throughout the birth of the American nation, 'the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor for the American experience' (Slotkin in Freed online), and that the 'use of violence has been integral to the construction of a distinctly American mythogenesis' (Freed online). In the American frontier environment, Slotkin argues, violence was a necessary evil for the progress of civilization; consequently, in frontier terms, violence has been 'exalted as a kind of heroic ideal' (in Freed online). It was essential to the expansion and the survival of Western society. According to Slotkin, the 'myth of regeneration through violence' that was so crucial in frontier times continues to evolve, with undying influence, through American society into present day (Freed online).

The myth of regeneration through violence is, furthermore, regarded as being intimately associated with 'virulent masculinity' (Freed online). In this sense, a capacity for violent action becomes one of the key attributes of masculinity. Such gender-related assumptions appear to accompany the myth of regeneration through violence into its current manifestations in American society. As Faludi notes, violence is still – and in fact increasingly – a means of establishing masculine identity in American society (Faludi *Stiffed* 32, 37). Even from a young age, boys are generally socialized as masculine in terms of violence. One need but consider the apparently nondescript fact that in America (and elsewhere) young boys are widely encouraged to play with toy guns, 'playing' in an imitation of killing one another.

If the myth of regeneration through violence continues to be an important facet of American society, then it certainly relies on the media to retain its importance. In fact, the prominence of the myth of regeneration through violence comes as no surprise if one considers the extent to which it has been (and still is) promoted in film and on television. Scores of Hollywood films have relied on the myth of regeneration through violence to structure their very narratives; Westerns, war films, police dramas, detective stories, science fiction films, fantasy films, and 'action/adventure' films generally – stories of 'old-fashioned male heroism' which are as prevalent as ever before – have almost invariably posited 'rugged individual' protagonists who have to solve problems by using violent means (Beynon 128). 'The ideal man of our films is a violent one,' notes Joan Mellen in her *Big Bad Wolves: Masculinity in the American Film*; 'film after film has insisted that the masculine male is he who acts – and kills – without a moment's thought' (Mellen 3, 9). Bernie Heidkamp points to the large numbers of American films and television series – even, ironically, some of those that can be read as critical investigations of American violence – that are in fact, regardless of the intentions of their authors, 'ahistorical outlets for classically violent representations of masculinity to be glorified' (Heidkamp online). Indeed, the myth of regeneration through violence – intimately associated with conceptions of masculinity – seems to have become, and appears to remain, the very central formula according to which Hollywood productions are generally conceived (Beynon 128).

The display value of male violence

It is clear that violent behaviour, promoted in American society by the undying 'myth of

regeneration through violence', continues to serve as a prominent 'masculine' trait; a trait according to which masculine identity may be expressed. And if modern men cannot find a worthy cause for 'regenerative' violence – a worthy frontier, for example, with an enemy that needs to be vanquished – then, it seems, they will prove their masculinity by at least *displaying* violence, even in the absence of a context in which it is justified. As I have indicated, masculinity crisis studies propose that the model according to which masculinity is proven in today's society is increasingly an ornamental model. Moreover, the most obvious (or the most easily displayed and recognized) form in which ornamental masculinity manifests itself, according to the previously discussed traditions of American society, is aggressive, violent behaviour. Susan Faludi notes that 'violence uses all the *visible* aspects of male utility: strength, decisiveness, courage, even skill' – and thus has great display value in connoting and asserting masculinity – but that, for all practical ends, 'its purpose is to dismantle and destroy' (Faludi *Stiffed* 37). 'Violence stands in for action,' she asserts, but it is a 'threatening mask that hides lack of purpose' (Faludi *Stiffed* 37). Nevertheless, after the Second World War, as men's 'utilitarian qualities were dethroned, as their societal roles diminished, violence more and more came to serve as the gang leader for a host of rogue masculine traits' (Faludi *Stiffed* 37).

Thus, violence as a kind of arbitrary performance seems to have become the most readily accessible signifier for men to use when they want to display their masculinity and, as has been noted, in modern society such a *display* of masculinity has been less and less distanced from an actual *proving* of one's masculinity. Like male physical strength, male capacity for violence has become 'just another element in the make-up of the male narcissist' (Beynon 128) – and it has become perhaps *the* element in that make-up. Towards the end of the twentieth century, notes Faludi,

every outlet of the consumer world – magazines, ads, movies, sports, music videos – would deliver the message that manhood had become a performance game, and that male anger was now part of the show. An ornamental culture encouraged young men to see surliness, hostility, and violence as expressions of glamour, a way to showcase themselves without being feminized before an otherwise potentially girlish mirror (Faludi *Stiffed* 37).

'Whatever troubles the American man,' Faludi notes, describing popular assumptions, can be 'cured' through a display of such a glamorously aggressive masculinity, 'by

prevailing over imaginary enemies on an imaginary landscape' (Faludi *Stiffed* 15). And in the absence of a 'real' frontier context, men seem to have found such makeshift enemies in order for their violence to be displayed. In the most extreme cases, 'a handful of men would attempt to gun down enemies they imagined they saw in family court, employee parking lots, McDonalds restaurants, the U.S. Congress, the White House, a Colorado Schoolhouse, and, most notoriously, a federal office building in Oklahoma' (Faludi *Stiffed* 32, referring to the most famous recent cases of senseless displays of violence in day-to-day American society). One may consider the gang members in Los Angeles who only kill or act violently, as a rule, when someone is watching – and most definitely if they are being filmed (as they were in the riots of 1992, or as famous Eight-Tray 'Crip' gangster Kershaun Scott was when he 'confirmed his passage into manhood' by killing a man and wounding four more on national television) – because the only reason for their violence is, literally, that they wish to display their ability for it, in order to prove themselves in gangster terms (Faludi *Stiffed* 476). One may consider also the 'body count' phenomenon in Vietnam, which entailed soldiers competitively keeping count in points of how many enemies they killed, in order, primarily and originally, to provide their American authorities with figures, but eventually also in order to prove themselves to their peers and direct superiors in a war environment that had become subject to ideas of individually orientated 'celebrity masculinity' (Faludi *Stiffed* 331). This is a phenomenon that inspired at least some of the extensively documented killing of innocent Vietnamese (bodies, innocent or not, that could be added to the 'body count' lists), most famously – but not exclusively – in the incident at My Lai where American soldiers had a 'contest to see who could score the most dead civilians' (Faludi *Stiffed* 331).

These are merely some of the more famous examples, quoted by Faludi, of violence displayed in a society that increasingly endorses ornamental masculinity. Many cases of domestic violence, most commonly perpetrated by men against their spouses, can also be seen as ornamental violence. Most obviously, cases in which men beat up their spouses in (self-confessed) attempts to reassert their manhood can be regarded as such displays of violence. Cases of this nature make up a considerable proportion of total domestic violence in America (Faludi *Stiffed* 7-9). The men perpetrating such violence can be seen as literally displaying their violent behaviour to their spouses in order to make clear that they (the perpetrators) are 'real' men: dominant, capable of violence

and, in other words, masculine according to traditional conceptions.

In conclusion, some of the most important insights of the masculinity crisis theory which I have invoked here may be highlighted. Theorists suggest that the construction of masculine identity in American society can be a problematic process, one that has potentially grievous implications. It is clear that it is becoming increasingly difficult, in a changing social and economic environment, for American men to define themselves in 'masculine' terms; moreover, those very terms are becoming quite ambiguous. Masculinity crisis theory indicates that it can be dangerous to allow such men apparently easy solutions to their identity crisis by encouraging them to live up to traditional conceptions of masculinity. It postulates, furthermore, that new trends of ornamentally displayed masculinity are potentially dysfunctional, especially if the 'masculinity' that is to be displayed is signified by imitations or even acts of violence.



CHAPTER 3

A DISCUSSION OF KEY FORMAL ELEMENTS IN TAXI DRIVER

Few films in recent decades have exposed and investigated the aspects of late twentieth-century American masculinity, dealt with in the previous chapter, as brutally and thoroughly as Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976). In its thirty years of existence the film has received an enormous amount of critical acclaim and academic attention (as well as no shortage of negative publicity, for its sheer display of pathological violence). It has even undergone recent remastering, which testifies to its continuing relevance in modern times – in fact, one could venture to say that the same problems that *Taxi Driver* tackled thirty years ago are still quite significantly embedded in the society of today, perhaps even more so now than ever before. In this chapter the narrative and thematic content of *Taxi Driver* will be discussed in order to create a framework that will be used in later chapters to explore how issues regarding the American masculinity crisis are approached in the film.

SYNOPSIS

The overt narrative of *Taxi Driver* concerns the life of Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro), a rather anti-social American returned to New York from the Vietnam War in the mid-seventies. He takes up a job as a taxi driver, simply because he has no qualifications for anything better and because he is able, even eager, to work long hours through the night, since he finds it hard to sleep. During his night shifts, while driving shady characters through the streets, he witnesses the corrupted, crime-related and often literally filthy lifestyles of the hookers, pimps and criminals of downtown New York (which was as dirty and corrupted in the pre-Giuliani seventies as it is now relatively clean and law-abiding). This exposure slowly drives Travis into a deep and obsessive dissatisfaction with the society that surrounds him.

Travis's bleak view of the world around him worsens as the film progresses and eventually it becomes evident that he has reached a kind of delirium, his thoughts occupied only by the 'filth' that he witnesses nightly. But when it seems that his mind has reached a point almost of psychosis, his calm, repetitive, dreamlike (or nightmarish) drives through the streets creating a feeling of dangerous foreboding – an impression that he will erupt at any moment to 'cleanse' the world of its corruption, as he himself

warns – he spots Betsy (played by Cybil Shepherd), a beautiful blonde woman who works as a representative for a presidential candidate, and who stands out from the corruption and filth of the city ‘like an angel’ in Travis’ world. His obsessive mind now shifts its attention to her, and in spite of his social naivety he manages to entice her into joining him for a film at the cinema after a surprisingly charming, competent coffee-shop conversation. The ensuing date at the cinema is a disaster, though – because of Travis’s ignorance or inexperience in these matters he ends up, quite confidently, taking her to watch pornography (which he is used to watching, habitually). Obviously Betsy loses all interest in him immediately, in spite of his apologies. After this setback Travis tries tenaciously to win back her attention, but to no avail – she quickly begins to regard him as a stalker. His resolute efforts to see and woo her simply drive her to see him more clearly for what he later undoubtedly turns out to be – an obsessive, psychologically disturbed, socially maladjusted individual.

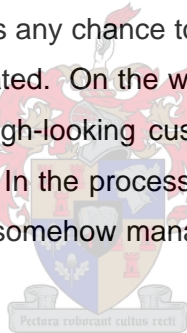
After a number of failed efforts with Betsy – though not necessarily because of this – Travis returns to thinking about cleaning up the streets. He buys an arsenal of weapons – including a Magnum .44, the infamous ‘Dirty Harry’ handgun – from an illegal weapons dealer called Easy Andy. Travis then starts busying himself with rituals of self-improvement – he does push-ups, he holds his hand over a flame as if to test or increase his pain threshold, he makes ‘dum-dum’ bullets (marking them with crosses, using a knife, in the style of soldiers in Vietnam), he mimics drawing his weapons while watching himself in a mirror, and he does target practice at a shooting range. Though it seems at first that this is all for show, we soon realize that he is quite serious about putting his guns to use. When he happens upon what appears to be a routine hold-up at a small-time convenience store, Travis shoots and probably kills the young black would-be robber, and flees the scene.

Perhaps with new wind in his sails, Travis now turns his attention to a twelve-year-old hooker who works under the name of Iris (a young Jodie Foster) whom he has noticed working on the street, and whom he believes to be exploited by her pimp and by the corrupted underworld society of which she has somehow become a part. As he did with Betsy, Travis takes Iris out to a coffee shop (after getting to her under the pretence of being a potential ‘costumer’), and has a more or less functional conversation with her, trying to convince her that she deserves a better life than the one she is currently

leading. She seems quite content with her situation, though, and while she is not repulsed by Travis, she is uninterested in his efforts to change her life for the better.

After this second 'rejection', Travis sets out – arsenal at the ready, hidden beneath his army jacket, with his hair shorn very suspiciously into a Mohawk style - to assassinate presidential candidate Palantine (the very politician represented by Betsy). His attempts are thwarted by the president's security guards, though, who either recognize him from a previous casual encounter, or simply notice his extremely suspicious appearance, and he is forced to retreat.

In a trade-off reminiscent of the way that he substituted Betsy for Iris, Travis now proceeds to exchange the apparently unattainable target of Palantine for one with a lower and more accessible profile: Iris's pimp, Sport (Harvey Keitel). Travis manages to kill Sport – walking up to him outside his brothel, exchanging a few words, and then suddenly shooting him before he has any chance to defend himself – and he then enters the brothel, where Iris's room is located. On the way up to her room he encounters and kills both the timekeeper and a tough-looking customer of Iris, who, it later turns out, happens to be a 'reputed Mafioso'. In the process Travis takes a bullet in his neck and another in his shoulder, and yet he somehow manages to survive the ordeal (at least, in a literal reading of the film).



It is revealed in the next scene that Travis's killing spree has earned him heroic status in the eyes of society – he has saved Iris from her evil environment, the headlines read, and returned her safely home to her parents, in the process duly ridding the community of a group of thugs. In the ensuing and final scene it turns out that even his former object of affection, Betsy, now takes an interest in him, most probably due to his newly established status as public hero. However, after she gets into his cab and tries to make social contact, he rejects her – by professionally letting her leave his cab after the ride and not giving her any more attention than a regular fare – and instead drives off into the dark, misty streets, alone. It may be added here, for the sake of later discussion, that many readers of the film have tended to regard these last scenes – everything that happens after Travis's killing spree, during which he is, after all, rather seriously wounded – as merely the playing out of a self-aggrandizing fantasy in the dying Travis's mind.

DISCUSSION OF THEMES AND STYLISTIC DEVICES

Travis's dissociation from reality

Right from the beginning of the film, Travis's dissociated, dreamlike psychosis is probably the most easily noticeable key thematic element in the film. The mood is set already in the opening shot: a New York cab drives slowly, almost ghost-like, through a hazy cloud of smoke or vapour, moving towards the viewer and passing by right next to the camera. The shot is done in slow motion; furthermore, it is shot with a telephoto lens – and these two techniques 'confuse each others' effects' so that the viewer is 'not sure of what distortion [they] are seeing, if any' (as pointed out by Westerbeck, 137). The resulting effect is surreal; it is almost as if the taxi, itself ghostlike, passes through an ethereal, dreamy world, detached from the sane reality of the viewer.

Only a little later in the film, after a basic introductory scene where Travis applies for his job as taxi driver, the same mood is picked up, this time through the perspective of Travis himself (a perspective that will be maintained throughout virtually the entire film). A lengthy sequence of shots portrays Travis's impressions of the city nightlife as he drives through its streets; we see what he sees, looking out from the inside of his cab at the blurring of red lights, at the low-life characters walking around the streets, and at the incessant, slowly billowing vapours that seem to be a part of the New York street atmosphere. In some shots the camera is mounted on the moving cab itself, its frame including parts of the car's body – with the resulting effect that the hazy, moving city background seems like an independent, constantly dynamic reality, existing in pointed contrast to that of the (in terms of the camera's reality) unmoving cab. In others, we see only a part of the cab, and such shots are interlaced with shots exclusively of the cityscape; and thus an impression is created that Travis in his cab is in an isolated dream-state, completely dissociated – or protected even – from the grizzly and sordid world that he witnesses through his wind-screen and his rear-view mirror.

Travis's isolated dream-state implies his alienation from reality, which appears at many times like a dream to him. This state is further pronounced by an elaborate repetition of key shots and images within this first lengthy montage sequence. His faceless passengers climb in and are dropped off, one after the other, the meter dropping every

time in monotonous succession; the cityscape is unchanging, the same scenery floating by his cab time after time; and in one particular sequence, the eye of the camera moves slowly over a red traffic light again and again, the exact same shot repeating itself numerous times. Impressions of this endless and unchanging repetition are also emphasized by Travis's voice-over diary: his words are pronounced slowly and monotonously, almost as if he is in a constant drug-induced state. His voice trails slower and slower to the end of the sequence, and he mentions that he works fourteen hours a day, seven days a week – in other words, almost his entire waking life.

Travis's complete absorption in his nightly excursions seems to form an integral part of what soon becomes apparent is not merely an isolated, alienated existence, but one which is increasingly tainted with obsession and delusion. He becomes so immersed in the dirty world of the streets that he cannot tear his thoughts away from it, and soon he thinks of himself as 'God's lonely man,' judging left and right – 'all the animals come out at night: whores, skunk pussies, buggers, queens, fairies, dopers, junkies; sick, venal' – and promising that 'one day a real rain will come and wash all this scum off the streets.' When he drives his car through the water spray of a broken fire hydrant, it seems as if he attempts to purge himself (and his cab) of the 'filth' that he continually witnesses, even within his cab (as he notes, he sometimes has to wash all kinds of stains, even blood, off his back seat), and he repeatedly emphasizes the cleansing power of water and of rain, emphasizing the dirty, corrupt nature of the city and its inhabitants. His pessimistic obsession finds a different outlet only when he first spots Betsy, who emerges from this dirty world as a saint-like individual, bathed in sunlight and in an innocent-looking white dress. From this moment on, it seems as if Travis's delusional views reach slightly schizophrenic proportions – his knowledge of and preoccupation with the evil, hellish city, on the one hand, contrasts starkly and extremely with his preoccupation with the pure and heavenly Betsy, on the other. 'Nothing can touch her,' he writes in his journal, and the written letters are slowly traced with the camera as he clearly pronounces the separate words for special emphasis.

Music in Taxi Driver

With regards to such a schizophrenic perspective on Travis's part, the score of *Taxi Driver* deserves mention. Throughout the first few sequences, composer Bernard Herrmann's music haunts the already surreal New York nightscape, adding to its

gloomy, dreamy quality by means of 'discordant, growling sustained low notes played mainly by brass instruments' and military-like 'flurries of rat-a-tat snare-drum percussion' (Rosenbaum online). Such music represents the dark side of Travis's perceived world, associated with the dirty streets, the low-lives and criminals, and everything else that Travis perceives to be 'sick' and 'venal'. This music alternates, in the opening scene, with an opposing musical theme: a 'lush, jazzy ballad of romantic yearning' that is as languid and dreamy, but light and classy instead of gloomy and foreboding, and which only resurfaces again later in the film, upon Betsy's first entrance.

These two themes (referred to as the 'heaven' and 'hell' themes – Rosenbaum online), interchanged time and again in different scenes, comprise the score of the film, and each represents a different pole of Travis's perceived reality. Their contrast emphasizes Travis's intense, split preoccupations with what is pure, on the one hand, and what is impure, on the other. The 'lush, jazzy' 'heaven' theme is played after Travis perceives Betsy and repeatedly throughout the time that he courts her, and again after he talks to Iris, finding a new kind of peace in his life; the 'discordant' 'hell' theme, in contrast, marks the many foreboding scenes in the film where Travis's psychosis and his mounting inclination towards a violent eruption is most visible. It may be added here that in Herrmann's wily and subtle score even the 'heaven' theme contains a slightly discordant, 'oddly polytonal' bridge that, according to musically versed writer Jonathan Rosenbaum, is evident and elaborate enough to suggest 'something of Bickle's dissociated state of mind' (Rosenbaum online).

The use of point of view

Travis's fragmented, dissociated perception of reality is further emphasized by means of clever manipulation of point of view throughout the film. Scorsese uses quite intricate games of viewer identification and dissociation, effecting a fragmented view of Travis's reality even on the part of the viewer. From the beginning of the film we adopt Travis's point of view: after the introductory emerging-taxi sequence we see his eyes, in slow-motion close-up, followed by a shot of what he sees through the windshield. Throughout the rest of the film, there are few sequences where Travis is not personally implicated as a catalyst character in the narrative: the scene where Sport seduces and dances with Iris, most pointedly, as well as a brief scene where Sport is dealing drugs outside the brothel. It must be stressed that these scenes can quite comfortably be read as merely

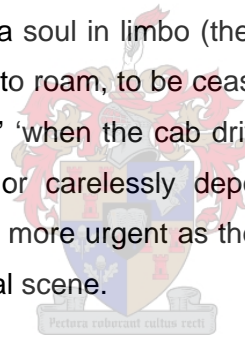
delusional fantasies that play out in Travis's mind, and may in other words be even less objectively removed from his perceived reality than any other scene in the film. Other scenes that appear to have different primary characters, like the scenes where Betsy and her co-worker have their absurd conversations in the electioneering office, also only occur while Travis is sitting outside in his Taxi, watching, maybe even listening. Thus, virtually the entire reality of the film – everything that the viewer 'experiences,' from start to finish – is connected to Travis's point of view, and subject to his state of mind.

Yet at the very same time, an impression is created in many shots that this is *not quite* Travis's point of view; and thus that even he himself does not have a single, balanced perspective. André Caron points out that Scorsese violates the 'rule of point of view' three times, in three key shots of Travis' hands, effecting a technique that Caron calls 'displaced subjectivity'. When Travis receives the forms at his job interview, when he gives money to the female clerk at the porno theatre, and when he elaborately moves his hand over Betsy's desk at her office, the shots are taken at a 'slightly off' angle, not quite from Travis's point of view but so close to it that we are led to perceive it as such – as if the camera were 'hovering beside Travis,' or as if Travis were 'beside himself or his perceptive vision' were 'outside of his body' (Caron online). In other shots the same kind of thing is happening; for example, in the shot at the end of the brothel shootout, the camera trails away from Travis's mutilated body almost as if it assumes the viewpoint of his soul leaving his flesh – and thus, it is as if he looks at himself, his viewpoint outside his body. Also, in brief instances throughout the film, the camera assumes views of Travis via other characters, most notably in the foreboding sequence where a group of rough-looking black youngsters pass Travis and the point of view is rapidly interchanged back and forth from his view of them to their view of him, and also similarly in the scenes where Travis interacts with Betsy, Iris and Wizard respectively (Caron online). Thus – as Caron puts it – Scorsese, having 'forced our identification with Travis through the use of point of view... entertains at the same time a sudden distancing process created by the juxtaposition of diverging views on the character (Betsy's, Iris's, Wizard's)' (Caron online). In his study of *Taxi Driver*, Martin Weinreich similarly points out such a process which simultaneously permits 'proximity and separation' with regards to Travis's character (Weinreich online). Through such violations of traditional filmic point of view techniques (or, perhaps, an extensive manipulation of paradoxes that are really inherent in the play of spectator-character identification and dissociation that exists in most films),

the unease that already pervades any viewing of *Taxi Driver* is further accentuated, and the volatility of Travis's state of mind is underscored.

Pacing, rhythm and repetition

Although the camera seems to be, at the same time, both a part of and removed from Travis' own schizophrenic perception, it still remains the viewers' only coherent window into Travis's mind – through what Travis experiences, as it represents *his* window onto the world. In this sense, it is more than a filmic vehicle that supplies us with information; it becomes an entity in itself, almost like an independent character. From the very start, the camera 'is as restless as its character's mind;' it is like a 'restless eye' (Jacobs 136). Obviously this is representative of Travis's own restless eyes – as the camera so often represents those very eyes – but it seems at times as if the camera has its own restlessness, even when Travis is sitting relatively calmly and when it appears as if the camera has broken away from portraying his literal point of view (literally, what he sees). The camera 'explores rooms like a soul in limbo (the Bellmore Cafeteria, the apartment in the final shootout), condemned to roam, to be ceaselessly moving, never fastening on anything permanent or balancing;' 'when the cab drivers converse, it shuffles back and forth, peering at opaque faces or carelessly deposited trash' (Jacobs 136). This 'ceaseless movement' grows ever more urgent as the film progresses, the pacing of the shots accelerating towards the final scene.



Complimentary to the accelerating rhythm of the camera work, the element of repetition is employed to similar ends. Repetition has already been mentioned earlier, though its use in previous discussion was to facilitate a languid, dreamy rhythm in the first part of the film. As the film picks up speed (with a steady acceleration of editing pace, and with the foreboding narrative signs of Travis's violence accumulating), there are various further instances of repetition of key shots and themes. Sometimes such repetition, while doubtlessly purposefully designed by Scorsese, seems quite arbitrary: for instance, the scene where Betsy challenges her co-worker to light a match with just two fingers is mirrored, for no apparent reason, in a later scene in the brothel shootout, where Travis shoots all but the same two fingers off a man's hand (Westerbeck 138). Similarly, the scene where a man wildly runs through the street, repeatedly yelling 'I'll kill her, I'll kill her,' is mirrored in the brothel shootout when the timekeeper, having lost his fingers, yells 'I'll kill you, I'll kill you' over and over while wildly chasing Travis. There is also the

repetitive portrayal of a certain 20 dollar bill, which is introduced when Sport tosses it to Travis while pulling Iris out of his cab at their first encounter, and which is repeatedly observed by Travis – on the front seat of his cab, where he left it – until he finally returns it where it came from, by using it to pay the timekeeper for Iris's time.

Elements of repetition also exist in scenes that are foreshadowed by important counterpart scenes earlier in the film; for example, when Travis tells fellow cabbie Wizard about his inclination toward doing 'something bad,' foreshadowing his later violent outburst, he is bathed dully in the same ominous red light in which the whole of the final shootout scene plays itself out. In this scene he is casually called 'killer' by both Charlie T and by Wizard, in a foreshadowing of his eventual behaviour. It has also been noted how composer Bernard Herrmann repeatedly employs certain musical notes and sound effects in scenes of the film that may be linked in significant ways (Caron online). A jarring sound that resounds in the scene where Travis talks into the mirror, for instance, is heard again in the later shootout scene. Such repetition provides clues for attentive viewers, indicating links between certain scenes (like the shootout scene and the mirror monologue that foreshadows it).

Perhaps most importantly in this regard, Travis's final killing spree is foreshadowed by various gun-pointing gestures. People who seem threatening to Travis, like Charlie T and Sport, for instance, point their fingers at him in gun-simulating motions (and making shooting sounds), and Travis himself repeatedly shapes his hand like a gun, pointing at one stage at the movie theatre screen, and finally, after the climactic shootout, at his own head. Once he actually acquires his arsenal of guns, Travis makes these gestures more 'real' by motioning in a similar way, but now with his *real* guns – once again, at a screen (that of his television), and also at his mirror. This repetition of gun-pointing gestures – gestures that seem to become more and more 'real' as they move from hand-signs to actual gestures with guns – foreshadows the shootout scene, where the gestures become quite real, as the guns are actually used to shoot people.

There are also important thematic repetitions in the narrative structure of the film. Most notably, Travis's successive involvement with the two women in his life, Betsy and Iris, and his reaction to his rejection in each instance (a less literal rejection in Iris's case) embodies a clear repetition in the narrative. Travis courts Betsy, seems to get through

to her, but is rejected; in response, after having a brief interaction with the man most prominently and obviously connected to her – Senator Palantine – he sets out to kill that man. Similarly, Travis courts Iris, seems to get through to her at first as well, but is also rejected – she does not desire his help; in response, again after having a brief conversation with Sport, the man in Iris's life, he sets out to kill that man.

In the first place, this narrative repetition casts a shadow on Travis' dubious motives for killing (or plotting to kill), for it seems that he is set on killing, one way or another, with whatever motives he can muster to justify his behaviour (whether in the name of Betsy or Iris – or whichever girl or whatever other reason may be next). It also poses the open-ended question – will Travis's killing stop, after the credits have rolled? His violence having been set in motion, as illustrated by the rhythmic repetition of the causes and effects of his at first potential and then very real violence, there is no telling what he will do next; for his delusion is shown to be incessant, permanent, and it is quite possibly only getting worse. An ingeniously subtle musical reference in *Taxi Driver* supports such a view. Four distinct musical notes are heard at the very end of *Taxi Driver's* credits – the same notes, specifically, that play when Travis listens to the speech of his assassination target, Palantine, and when he enters the deli moments before killing the black robber. They are the same ominous notes that play at the end of *Psycho* (also scored by Herrmann), when Norman Bates, arch-villain, smiles at the camera (Caron online).

Finally, on a stylistic note, the use of repetition both of singular instances and of whole narrative sequences throughout the film creates a rhythm that accentuates the overall impression of Travis's gradual, downward-spiralling movement – through isolation and an increasing psychosis – toward his arguably inevitable violent killing spree at the climax of the film. As Laurence Friedman observes, 'menace,' through the use of this repetition, 'marks the rhythm of *Taxi Driver*' (Friedman 67). Menacing, foreboding intimations of violence slowly precede, and eventually become, actual violence as Travis lives himself increasingly into his delusions and sinks into his psychotic role of 'God's lonely man'.

By means of these various filmic techniques, Scorsese not only emphasizes the themes of dissociation, loneliness, alienation and the blurred tension (in Travis's world) between

reality and unreality (or delusion). He goes one step further, and infuses the film with the very impressions of such feelings, with the intention (or at least, the effect) of literally immersing the viewer into Travis's world – conveying the character's nuances of experience throughout the length of the film and thus giving his audience a direct glimpse of Travis's twisted worldview. This in itself makes for quite an interesting viewing experience – but though these formal filmic elements will prove to be of value as points of reference for discussion later in the thesis, standing alone they are by no means the stuff of an extraordinary film. If a reading of *Taxi Driver* limited itself to what has been discussed here, it would be no more than, in Laurence Friedman's words, a 'study in abnormal psychology;' an albeit potentially interesting and stylishly executed investigation of the life of a deluded person – and as Friedman himself contends, along with the vast majority of readers, the film most definitely has much more to offer than that (Friedman 61-62).

INTERTEXTUAL ALLUSIONS IN TAXI DRIVER

In order for the really interesting aspects of Scorsese's work to be discovered, a very careful, analytical reading of the film is required. But even more important in such a reading is a consideration of context: not simply the context of the film's production milieu (it was released shortly after the Vietnam War, for instance), which itself deserves due attention, but most significantly its broad context in the history of film. For anyone who has a familiarity with the history of (mainly) American films during the few decades preceding *Taxi Driver* may notice, even on a superficial reading of the film, that it contains sly allusions to other films. The more acutely versed cinephile may further notice that it is not merely a matter of one or two haphazard allusions: in fact, the film is riddled with intertextuality, with reference upon reference to all kinds of varied films (as well as some non-film texts) that may have caught Scorsese's attention in some or other way. A consideration of these allusions follows.

Firstly, there are general allusions of style in *Taxi Driver*, in other words, not specific instances in the film but rather a pervasive current of style and technique that appear to pay homage to the directors of, and contributors to, other films. Patterson and Farber note, for instance, 'the jamming of styles [in *Taxi Driver*]: Fritz Lang's expressionism, Bresson's distanced realism, and Corman's low-budget horrors' (Rosenbaum online). Even more generally speaking, as numerous writers have pointed out, the narrative of

Taxi Driver reads remarkably like that of a typical pre-1960 Western (specific correlation with the narrative of John Ford's *The Searchers* of 1956 has been explored extensively; this will be discussed in detail later). The character of Travis Bickle, before he is read with the slant of allegorical interpretation that may be applied by serious viewers, comes across much like a typical Western hero and also notably like a *film noir* hero (Westerbeck 138). The style of many sequences in the film additionally supports a *noir* atmosphere, most obviously the brothel shootout at the end. The effect of the voice-over diary, the film's jazzy, languid soundtrack, the lighting employed in numerous scenes, and the hazy, slowly billowing vapours in the streets all contribute to this atmosphere.

Perhaps more importantly, there are many specific allusions to other films in *Taxi Driver*. These include direct references (such as to *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* which is playing at a movie house which Travis drives past), allusions suggested by similarities in actual scenes and events happening in the film or in the behaviour of Travis, as well as specific formal allusions (a mimicking of style in certain shots, of camera techniques, and even musical references). Specific references to existentialist filmmaker André Bresson are apparent: there is the 'camera gesture that lingers, like Bresson's, at waist level,' Travis eats bread soaked in apricot brandy which 'mimics the eucharistic diet of bread soaked in wine on which the hero of *Diary of a Country Priest* must live' (Westerbeck 138), and Bresson's pickpocket, in the film of that name, 'rehearses his crimes ritualistically' as does Travis (Thurman). Jean-Luc Godard also receives some attention: Patterson and Farber point out that the slow shot of Travis staring at his fizzing Alka Seltzer is a direct reference to Godard's *Two or Three Things I Know About Her*, in which a cup of coffee is framed in the same way. The same analysts also read the shot of Bickle's handwriting flashed across the entire screen as a homage to Godard (Rosenbaum online). Scorsese further mimics 'several Mike Snow inventions' of filmic technique, including 'the slow Wavelength zoom into a close look at the graphics pinned on a beaten plaster wall, and the reprise of double and triple exposures that ends *Back and Forth*' (Patterson and Farber, in Rosenbaum online). Also, there is tribute to Irving Lerner: Travis exercises alone in his apartment, a clock ticking by in the background 'like a time-bomb,' in a scene that has an almost exact counterpart in Lerner's *Murder by Contract* (1958); furthermore, in that same film, the 'protagonist/killer describes the impact of various types of ammunition' much like the obsessive passenger character (played by Scorsese himself) does rhetorically in *Taxi Driver* (Thurman online).

Scorsese himself has spoken of his indebtedness to Francesco Rosi's *Salvatore Giuliano* (1962) in the depiction of his crime scene after the brothel shootout (Thurman online).

There are numerous allusions to Alfred Hitchcock's films, films which obviously helped shape Scorsese's appreciation of cinema. At one point, 'De Niro's cab almost collides with the two child-whores – just as Janet Leigh's fearful *Psycho* thief nearly overruns the man from whom she's stolen a bundle' (Rosenbaum online). The 'reverse track down a staircase from the *Frenzy* brutality' is also attributed to Hitchcock (Rosenbaum online), as is the beginning of that same slaughter scene (which alludes to Hitchcock's *The Man Who Knew Too Much* of 1956 – Thurman online). Scorsese himself has stated that Hitchcock's *The Wrong Man* (1956) 'inspired his point of view shots for Travis,' and the opening close-up shot of Travis' eyes is reminiscent of Hitchcock's 1958 film *Vertigo* (Sparknotes online). Composer Bernard Herrmann is also at work in this game of allusions: there are numerous musical references to the score of Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), the music of which is also Herrmann's work, as well as to another film that Herrmann scored, Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* of 1941 (Thurman online).

Moreover, John Thurman points out further allusions in *Taxi Driver* to *Citizen Kane* (the title of Thurman's article is headed 'Citizen Bickle'). According to Thurman, the scene in *Taxi Driver* where a shot pans in close-up over the diary entry 'they cannot touch her' 'reproduces almost exactly the visual introduction of Rosebud in *Citizen Kane*,' where a similar shot pans across the words 'I first encountered Mr. Kane in 1871.' Both shots are associated with a 'flashback scene;' the order of the two subsequent shots has simply been reversed in *Taxi Driver*. In both films the sequence of shots makes use of dissolve, and both feature a lyrical Herrmann score in the background; in addition, both Betsy and Rosebud have the same symbolic significance of unattained love (Thurman online). Another similarity between the two films occurs in that same *Taxi Driver* scene: Betsy wears a white dress (this is notable, for in the script it is described as yellow), and she is only briefly seen by Travis, just like the girl that Kane's associate Bernstein nostalgically talks about in *Citizen Kane*. Later on in *Taxi Driver*, at the Palantine rally, there is a sign that reads 'Pedestrians Only,' reminiscent of the sign in the opening of *Citizen Kane* famously stating 'No Trespassers;' also, in this same scene, Bickle – applauding the presidential candidate – claps off-beat, apart from the crowd, reminiscent of Kane's

lonely clap after his untalented wife has given her public opera performance (Thurman online).

The most notable single scene in *Taxi Driver* with regard to allusions, however, is the gun-buying scene, where Travis peruses Easy Andy's arsenal, inspecting and fondling each hand-gun. These weapons each have referential value in that they were used by significant popular Hollywood movie heroes: the Walther PPK as well as the 'pocket-sized .25 automatic' were the favourite weapons of James Bond, the 'snub-nose Smith and Wesson .38' was the signature weapon of Mickey Spillane's *noir* hero Mike Hammer, and most importantly, the .44 Magnum was famously used by the popular Eastwood antihero in *Dirty Harry* (Sharret in Friedman 81). In employing such a host of intertextual references, this scene presents a 'kind of condensed repository' of American popular film culture (Sharret in Friedman 81). One may note the significant (though perhaps not surprising) notion that guns are used to represent such a repository.

Finally, but not least importantly, the character of Travis Bickle himself is an embodiment of allusions to other protagonists (or at least, central or main characters, for 'protagonist' is a tricky term in any discussion of *Taxi Driver*) in films made before 1976. After buying the guns, he 'mounts the .25 automatic on a retractable spring he wears up his sleeve, the trick of riverboat gamblers and Robert Conrad in *The Wild Wild West*,' during further preparation and training, he tumbles backward, pulling a knife out of his boot, 'mimicking the death of Jim Bowie at the Alamo' (Friedman 81). Travis's very name refers also to one of the Alamo defenders (Friedman 81). Furthermore, as John Thurman points out, Travis' brothel shootout 'replicates and parodies famous last stands ranging from the conventional – Custer's at the Little Big Horn, Doc Holiday's at the OK Coral – to the revisionist – Pike's in Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969), McCabe's in Robert Altman's *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971)' (Thurman online). In a direct reference, some of the words Travis says into the mirror in the famous mirror-monologue scene are literally quotations from George Stevens' *Shane* of 1953 (Thurman online; Internet Movie Database: *Taxi Driver* online). Beyond the noted connection of the .44 Magnum, further links between Travis and the Eastwood character Dirty Harry have also been indicated (Thompson online); it is easy to see overt similarities between Harry's and Travis's general vigilante attitudes towards crime, and their violent behaviour in addressing the problems they feel so strongly about. In his overview of Scorsese's work, Leighton Grist

emphasizes the point, suggesting that *Taxi Driver* can be 'read as a direct response' to *Dirty Harry* (University of Pennsylvania online).

It is clear that *Taxi Driver* can be regarded as a 'tissue of quotations' (Thurman online); the film, and specifically its central character, are to an extent collages of popular films and icons that came before them. Writers have speculated about the function of such elaborate intertextual play, with various conclusions. 'Many of *Taxi Driver's* references are limited in application to the one-time quotation of a specific incident in another film,' John Thurman notes in his "Citizen Bickle, or the Allusive *Taxi Driver*. Uses of Intertextuality;" 'these isolated references may deepen the film's meaning, but are essentially little more than a showing of appreciation' (Thurman online). The references are 'limited in scope,' he continues later, after providing an impressively extensive list of intertextual allusions, 'being unrelated to any recurrent substructuring of the narrative' (Thurman online). A surprisingly thorough internet study guide on *Taxi Driver* states, in a similar vein, that the 'complex web of influences' visible in the film are a 'medley of carefully considered responses to previous artistic visions of similar subjects' – but does not suggest that this 'web of influences' has any further function (Sparknotes online).

The references in *Taxi Driver* may certainly 'deepen the film's meaning' and they are most definitely 'carefully considered responses' to important films of Scorsese's youth – but one wonders if this is the extent of their purpose, as some analysts seem to suggest. Other writers have read more purposeful functions into Scorsese's allusions. In his analysis of *Taxi Driver*, Matthew Iannucci proposes that the intertextual references invoked by Travis's character and by his behaviour have special significance. 'Travis's lack of a distinct identity compels him to cut and paste together... a postmodern antiheroic identity that is nostalgic and pop culture-oriented,' Iannucci suggests, 'because he possesses no internal self' (Iannucci online). Laurence Friedman describes how the use of intertextual allusions in *Taxi Driver* emphasizes that 'Travis is a pastiche of the movie clichés that he evokes and enacts, an empty reflector of the equally empty popular culture that created him' (Friedman 84).

Such speculation may inform a more complex reading of *Taxi Driver*. It is implausible that Scorsese's intertextual games (being so numerous, and so thoroughly imbedded throughout the length of the film, in its every aspect – in the central character, the film's

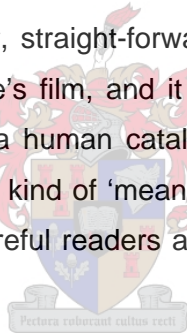
style, narrative, camera technique and even its music) should be limited in function to a mere appreciative nodding of the head, as it were, to the great auteurs that shaped his cinema experience. An investigation towards a more purposeful function of *Taxi Driver's* allusions – perhaps the kind of function that Friedman and Lanucci seem to be hinting at – may yield important clues as to the finer intricacies of Scorsese's film. In such a reading, I will propose – with Friedman – that Travis is a 'pastiche of movie clichés,' a character who is no more a person involved in a story than he is a referent involved in an interplay of references.



CHAPTER 4

TAXI DRIVER'S INVESTIGATION OF AMERICAN CELLULOID HEROISM

As has been established, the character of Travis Bickle can be read as an all but empty signifier within a film that consists largely of a collage of intertexts. In such a post-structuralist reading he (or 'it,' meaning the character of Bickle specifically as concept, and not as a realistic person) mainly points to or connotes meaningful instances from other films, and has little intrinsic 'meaning' as a plot-driven character. One may conceive that what the signifier Travis Bickle points to is more meaningful than the actual character himself, and that everything that Travis does – his behaviour and his very existence as a character in a narrative – may be intended merely to invoke that which he refers to, and implicate what he refers to in the discourse of his actions and their consequences. Such a reading is supported by significant dissimilarities between Paul Schrader's script for *Taxi Driver* and Scorsese's final product: the Travis Bickle of Schrader's script is a much simpler, straight-forward, plausible character than the 'unbelievable' one we see in Scorsese's film, and it has been pointed out that Scorsese sacrificed Bickle's believability (as a human catalyst in what is on the surface a very traditional film narrative) for another kind of 'meaning' (Friedman 65) – a 'meaning' that may hopefully be understood by careful readers and that will be brought to light during the course of this thesis.



Travis's status of purposeful signifier, if he is read in such a way rather than regarded merely as a plot-driving character, invites a closer look firstly at what he refers to. Specific instances and characters in pre-1976 films that Travis alludes to have been highlighted: Jim Bowie and Colonel Travis of *The Alamo*, the protagonist of *Shane*, Custer, Doc Holiday, *The Wild Bunch's* Pike, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller's* McCabe, and, most notably, Ethan Edwards of *The Searchers*. By implication – by choosing for his arsenal the guns that they so famously used – Bickle's character also refers, very importantly, to the more recent heroes James Bond, Mike Hammer and Dirty Harry. By referring to so many cultural icons of Hollywood's past – by being, as one may put it, a referential collage of them – Travis seems to embody a good part of the multitude of heroes who have found purchase in America's imagination for the past century. It is a multitude that becomes faceless in its number but that can, in spite of this, be reduced more or less to a single archetype: *the* predominant 20th century American fictive hero.

Of course, talking of a 'single' archetype in such a simplistic manner here may seem rather shallow. Certainly, over the course of a hundred years the widely (and diversely) populated United States has been subjected to an unqualified host of quite dissimilar and even starkly contrasting heroic types that have captured different peoples' fancy at different times. What is implied by referring to a single, overarching heroic archetype of 20th-century America, however, is that there actually exists in this wide spectrum a specific cluster of heroic types that overshadow all others in the influence that they have exerted on minds across the whole of America (and beyond) to such an extent that such simplistic talk may not be unjustified. These types can be found in the overwhelming majority of the 'action/adventure' films that form what is and has always been 'by far the largest movie genre' in America (a collective genre that includes the sub-genres of 'westerns, science fiction, detective and police dramas, martial arts, super heroes, natural disasters, and finally, military life and war movies' – Engeman online). They are derivatives of the predictable cowboy, 'lone ranger' and frontier soldier 'rugged individual' types (accompanied nowadays by very similar modern action-hero counterparts). Even the morally tainted anti-heroes (or heroes who rely on traits that are traditionally considered to be flawed or even villainous – Wikipedia: *Anti-hero* online) who became popular during and after the Second World War can be included in the broad connotation of this cluster of heroic types. All these different specific kinds of heroes are often so similar in their essential defining characteristics that one may rightly refer to them collectively as a single heroic archetype (as I intend to do in this chapter): *the* American heroic archetype of the 'rugged individual'. The original rugged individual type is described, concisely, as a 'product of his rough environment,' exhibiting the 'individualistic traits the frontier supposedly cultivated: strength, curiosity, resourcefulness, restlessness, fearlessness, combativeness, independence, and, of course, violence' (Engel 22). The numerous slightly differently presented rugged individual heroic types that this original frontier figure has spawned in Hollywood over the years all still subscribe to those essential traits of rugged stoicism, being anti-social, manifesting a 'lone' independence and, above all, displaying a rather casual disposition towards violence.

THE HISTORY OF AMERICA'S POPULAR CELLULOID HEROES

In the world of American film this kind of heroic character type has had numerous manifestations over the course of the past century, manifestations that were often defined according to the historical context of their times. Popular celluloid ideals of American heroism moved, ever malleable, from their cowboy mainsprings at the beginning of the twentieth century, through a phase of uncertainty in the great depression when the 'grape-fruit-in-the-face' rugged individual type was competing with a very dissimilar type: the dandified, tidy, city-bound hero who relied not on brawn or endurance, but on graceful charisma and an understanding of the feminine psyche in order to make his way through urban society (Todd online).

This heroic type flourished for a while, but soon lost its appeal to the definitive return of the cowboy type in time for World War II. In fact, after the 1930s the 'dandified' or sensitive male type would increasingly portray villains instead of heroes, and apart from slight hints of his character in more recent heroes who are both rugged and charming – the timeless James Bond, most famously – he has been all but forgotten. Notably, during the same time of the dandy's popularity, the anti-heroic gangster type – a type that was later quite firmly established in the niche of *film noir*, and that has remained popular to this day (see Robert Rodriguez' *Sin City*, or Lee Tamahori's *XXX 2: State of the Union*, both of 2005) – made its entrance into Hollywood (Todd online).

In 1939, as the economic depression waned and the American public became increasingly aware of the prospect of entering the Second World War, Hollywood's studios churned out a record number of box-office hits. This time marked the start of a decade that would see an 'explosion of war films and Westerns' that would 'circulate new yet more classical archetypes of masculinity' (Todd online). During the World War II era (1939-1945), the hyper-masculine heroes of such films found unprecedented purchase in the American imagination. They replaced almost completely the dandy and any similarly emasculated heroes. Clean-cut, hyper-masculine, patriotic heroes with boy scout ethics vied for popularity with equally hyper-masculine, chauvinistic, anti-heroic vigilante types that were blown up to almost parodied, larger-than-life size with the arrival of *film noir* (Todd online). A prime exponent of the Western genre that regained popularity in this era, John Ford's successful classic *Stagecoach*, served at this juncture not only to put the Western film back on the map of American popular culture, but it also put actor John Wayne firmly on this map – and needless to say, 'whether playing

cowboys or military commanders, Wayne's laconic, conservative, and macho heroes have influenced popular representations of masculinity ever since' (Todd online). Other stars like Jimmy Cagney and Clark Gable played exaggeratedly macho men opposite emasculated, 'diminutive and refined' villains, setting the heroic standards (in the successful films such as *Gone With The Wind* and *The Roaring Twenties* – both 1939) of trends to follow.

With America's engagement in the war, Hollywood became increasingly involved in churning out war films that served to inspire the war effort. The heroes who typically populated such films ranged from 'reluctant warriors' who 'hate war but fight nonetheless,' to the 'gung-ho' heroes (heroes who are eager to fight) portrayed in films that more overtly romanticized war (Kashani online). Whether they did so apparently or subtly, these propagandistic films shared the intention of justifying the war (to those who may have doubted the wisdom or nobility of America's involvement), and of coercing public opinion to conform with the American government's stance while inspiring morale and buttressing the patriotism of those whose loved ones were fighting abroad. Howard Hawke's *Sergeant York* (1941), starring Gary Cooper, was the first notable example of such films; films like the self-evidently titled *Gung Ho* (1944) followed. After the war had ended, Hollywood continued to provide celluloid portrayals that would help the American public to deal with the actual memories of war. *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949), starring John Wayne (who was nominated for an Oscar for his portrayal of a tough marine Sergeant), and *Battle Cry* (1955) are the most prominent examples of such films (Kashani online). It may be noted that, even if many of these films portrayed the virtues of brotherhood and teamwork, as displayed by the 'grunt' soldiers who worked and fought together, they still reserved a special heroic status for individual heroes – typically the tough, no-nonsense leaders of the groups of grunts (for instance the patently anti-social John Wayne character in *Sands of Iwo Jima*).

At the same time vigilante heroes and anti-heroes, like the hard-boiled men who were portrayed in *film noir* (Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer, most notably), became immensely popular in the years during and following the war (Wennerberg online). It was in these tumultuous times that 'the popularity of the anti-hero has seemingly boomed,' as 'pulp fiction and noir detective stories of the mid-20th century' increasingly portrayed characters 'that lacked the glorious appeal of previous heroic figures'

(Wikipedia: *Anti-hero* online). In other words, the distinction between heroes and villains became increasingly blurred. This was also evident in the Westerns of the post-war years. No more would 'smiling, smooth-faced, white-hatted' cowboy heroes (like Roy Rogers) oppose their 'bristly, frowning black-hatted' villains (Calder 112). In one of the classic filmic examples of such a confounding of distinctions, John Wayne, not generally noted for the complexity of his roles, played the tainted anti-hero Ethan Edwards in John Ford's rather subversive but exceedingly influential Western *The Searchers* (1956), a film that will be discussed at length later in this thesis.

Director Alfred Hitchcock capitalized on similar trends. His popular films of the fifties contained protagonists, many of them played by Cary Grant, who would 'occasionally perform unsavoury acts and yet still remain in the audience's sympathy' (Wennerberg online). Hitchcock played around with his audience's expectations of heroism, experimenting with dark heroes and charming villains, thus all but destroying the traditional comfortable boundary between hero and villain. His audience's responses were revealing; they seemed to take a liking to even the darkest anti-heroes-cum-villains. When Grant 'played a suspected murderer in *Suspicion*, he maintained the audience's sympathy;' even Norman Bates, the arch-villain of *Psycho*, had a charisma about him that made him somehow disarmingly likeable, a trait of the character that may well have given the film its horrifically poignant edge (Wennerberg online). In such ways Hitchcock questioned the state of post-war American masculinity and the American public's conceptions of heroism.

While a trend arose during this time among filmmakers to interrogate the values of their society by positing anti-heroic characters as protagonists, the American public seemed to welcome such characters more and more – perhaps to the extent that the original critical intentions of many such filmmakers may have been lost on their audiences. On the other hand, positive responses to nuanced and even downright immoral or evil characters may simply have been a part of the games that clever filmmakers like Hitchcock played with their audiences. These responses can also be seen in a contextual light; one may consider that during the Second World War, and increasingly afterward, with the rising crime rates of 1960s and early 1970s America and new laws protecting the rights of criminals (Thompson online), America's social climate called for a kind of hero who might use any means necessary to achieve his ends – even if it meant

breaking the law or using traditionally villainous, amoral methods to vanquish his foes.

THREE ICONIC HOLLYWOOD ANTI-HEROES

Regardless of such considerations, the implication in the world of popular film seems to be that a market opened up for a new kind of popular hero in the years after the Second World War. This new kind of hero was an anti-hero who still possessed most of the traditional traits and values of the 'rugged individual' cowboy type, but who was much more prepared to compromise his ethics than were his forebears. Three definitive examples of this kind of post-World War II anti-heroism, I will argue here, can be found in the characters of James Bond, Mike Hammer and Dirty Harry Callaghan. In spite of their numerous explicitly anti-heroic traits, all three of these characters have been the star heroes in numerous popular, successful films, and have enjoyed lasting popularity since their conception on celluloid. More importantly, to the point of this discussion of *Taxi Driver*, they are the three heroes who are specifically alluded to in the scene where Travis buys his guns – which, as has been noted, is one of the most important intertextual moments in *Taxi Driver*. The guns that Travis buys are symbolic, as the specific models have each come to be associated, in popular culture, with a famous hero (most explicitly so in the case of Dirty Harry and his Magnum), as I have indicated in the previous chapter. In this next part of the chapter, I will discuss each of the three heroes in turn, indicating their place in American popular culture; and in the subsequent section, I will explain their relevance to *Taxi Driver*.

James Bond

James Bond, to whom the Walter PPK and the pocket-sized .25 automatic handguns are famously attributed, is probably the most famous of the three fictional heroes under discussion here. He was initially a British pulp hero, gracing the pages of Ian Fleming's novels, before he was turned into the film hero that most modern audiences know so well. Although the earliest Bond films cannot be counted as Hollywood films, not having been made in America or exported primarily to an American audience, Metro Goldwyn Mayer soon bought production rights to the Bond franchise and exported the character of James Bond to an eagerly awaiting American public (Connor online). Already in the sixties and increasingly in the early seventies, James Bond films were custom designed for an American audience – an audience which enjoyed them to such an extent that over

the past four decades, some famous Hollywood actors have played Bond's part, and almost two dozen official Bond films have been made, most of them highly successful in America (Connor online). During this time both the nuances of Bond's character and the styles of the films became so Americanized that it is sometimes hard to recognize his British roots in these elements of the films. Without a doubt, even already by 1970, James Bond had become firmly embedded as one of the most prominent heroic icons in American popular culture (Mellen 261).

James Bond's essential character traits have not changed during his transatlantic transition. He is a commander in the military and an international spy, and his government employs him in the most dangerous and important of missions, in the name of his 'queen and country'. Consequently, he gets himself into many tricky situations where he has to fight and kill the henchmen of his enemies, in order to attain his goals and – almost always – to protect the Western world from destruction or domination by dictatorship. James Bond's adversaries vary from film to film; the main villains of his films are usually the typical fictional enemies of the free world: communists; powerful, wealthy madmen; or evil genius scientists. Invariably, they are intent on taking over the world. Charged with the crucial responsibility of stopping these villains, Bond does not hesitate to kill their henchmen – in some cases, as in an instance in the film *Dr. No*, even when he knows that they have no more ammunition left and are completely at his mercy. Any of the usually urban and densely populated environments in which Bond finds himself, it seems, he may regard as a battlefield, where the laws (or lack of laws) of war apply, and where it is morally admissible to kill people even if it is not absolutely necessary. His military superiors endorse and encourage his view in this regard: they have granted Bond a 'license to kill' (which actually gets revoked in one of the films, *License to Kill*), and he is at once judge, jury and executioner when he dispenses his fatal justice (often rather haphazardly).

In spite of this ruthless propensity towards violence – a trait which is actually an essential part of his very character and, moreover, probably a reason for his character's popularity among action-loving audiences – James Bond manages to appear like quite a suave gentleman. He always manages to woo the women he wants, and he often charms women who work for his enemies in order to acquire information. Even so, or maybe because of this, he is an adamant chauvinist. Not only is he a womanizer, but he

treats his women like objects, at worst, or like incredibly pathetic people, at best (as he does very blatantly, for instance, in *Diamonds Are Forever*). Moreover, he is sometimes inclined simply to hit women – even those who appear to be working *with* him – for no clear reasons (for example, in *In Her Majesty's Secret Service*).

Another distinguishing trait of James Bond is that in spite of his obvious charisma, he has no real friends, male or female (outside of his strictly professional relationship with his colleagues Moneypenny, 'Q,' and 'M'). He sometimes allows the various female sidekicks of the respective Bond films to help him in his missions, but they invariably also serve the more important role of being the objects of his amorous desires, and are usually not crucial to the plot of the films – unless they get into trouble and he has to save them. In most of his films James Bond prefers to carry out his missions by himself, as far as it is possible; he is one of those many 'lone heroes' who do not need or want help from others. He also wishes to live his life alone, dissociated from society and from any real social relationships (amorous or not) – perhaps due to the nature of his profession, or perhaps simply because he does not need to relate to other people (Mellen 261, 262).

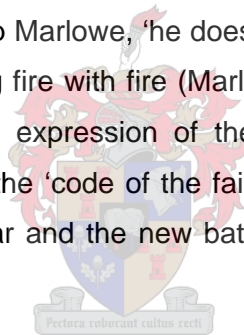
It is clear that while he appears suave on the outside, and while he certainly possesses great physical strength, a resourceful, intelligent mind and various useful skills, James Bond is an unpleasant person by many measures. Nevertheless, the test of time has proven that he is one of the most well-loved heroes in American popular culture (Connor online).

Mike Hammer

Mike Hammer, the private detective who famously used the snub-nose Smith and Wesson .38, is one of the most popular heroes to have emerged out of the *film noir* era of the fifties. Like Bond's, his character has been the protagonist of many popular films, most notably Robert Aldrich's famous, critically self-reflexive *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955) and the 1963 film *The Girl Hunters*, in which Mickey Spillane – the author of the original Mike Hammer novels – played the part of Hammer himself (Cady online). Additionally, Hammer also had his very own television series in the 1950s, and another modern, upgraded series in the 1980s, which reached a much larger audience (Marling online). While Mike Hammer found great popularity in the medium of film, this popularity is

dwarfed by the character's popular success in 'pulp fiction' book form. Due to Mike Hammer, his quintessential heroic creation, Mickey Spillane was, in 1995 still, one of the most widely read and translated writers in the world, 'having sold two hundred million books' – and at the turn of the century, 'seven of Spillane's books were still among the top-selling fifteen fiction titles' of the previous century (Marling online). The character of Mike Hammer may not be as popular among modern audiences as the ever-iconic James Bond, but he certainly had his time of definitive popularity, both in book and film form.

Not unlike Bond, the character of Mike Hammer has the tendency to take the law into his own hands when it comes to combating criminals – even if he does not possess a 'license to kill.' The very first Mike Hammer novel (made into a film in 1953) was called *I, The Jury*, and indeed, Hammer lives up to the title (Cady online; Marling online). He is an excessively violent hero 'who can play as nasty as the villains' (Cady online); unlike his predecessors Sam Spade or Philip Marlowe, 'he does not really solve crimes,' but rather matches crime with crime, fighting fire with fire (Marling online). His enemies are more often than not communists – an expression of the American sentiments underlying McCarthyism – and in his world, the 'code of the fair fight [has] been destroyed by the horrors of the [Second] World War and the new battle against the sneaky reds' (Cady online).



Mike Hammer shares James Bond's chauvinism. He is downright misogynistic; he habitually 'attacks stereotyped sex kittens, always lower class,' and moreover, Spillane's plots usually provide him with a female arch-villain – the typical *film noir* 'femme fatale' – whom he must kill, often quite violently (Marling online). In terms of social relationships, Hammer is a womanizer, reluctant to see women as anything more than objects, and because of his nature as a 'hard-boiled,' hard drinking, 'tough guy' type of private detective, he is also reluctant to have casual friends or social connections beyond those that are useful to his ends of combating crime (Marling online).

Dirty Harry

Detective Harry Callaghan, better known as 'Dirty Harry,' is one of the most controversial film heroes of his time. Played in all his films by Clint Eastwood, who has often been typecast as a vigilante-type anti-hero, Dirty Harry was the protagonist of Don Siegel's

initial *Dirty Harry* (1971) and of four sequels that followed throughout the next two decades. He famously toted the Smith and Wesson Model 29 .44 calibre 'Magnum' revolver in all his films, and both Harry's character and his gun have become integrated into American popular culture.

The character of Dirty Harry is a cynical, tough detective who does not willingly take orders from his authorities, and who, like Bond and Hammer, combats crime by readily violating the laws that he is apparently sworn to protect. In this sense, historically, the character presented a reaction to a complicated public debate that was raging at the time of the first film's release. In the late 1960s a liberal Supreme Court instated a number of new rulings that protected the rights of accused criminals. One such ruling, known as the Miranda decision, 'required arresting officers to read a criminal his rights;' another, the Escobido decision, 'protected against unreasonable search and seizure' (Thompson online). It was widely believed that such laws impeded the capacity of the American police force to combat crime effectively, as criminals could more easily get away with their crimes and had less to fear from police officers (Thompson online).

Both the Miranda and Escobido legal decisions are directly alluded to in the film *Dirty Harry*, and Harry clearly defies these rulings: he breaks into the room of his nemesis (the film's primary villain) without a legal warrant, and later, after shooting the same antagonist in the leg from behind, Harry proceeds to torture him by applying pressure to the wounded leg with his own foot, in order to acquire information. When confronted about his questionable methods after the illegal search and torture, Harry states, sarcastically: 'Well, I'm all broken up over that man's rights.' Towards the end of the film he actually throws his police badge away in defiance of the laws that restrain him from dispensing what he regards as real justice. Predictably, Harry's brutal and unlawful behaviour eventually seems to be at least partially justified, as he manages to save the day at the end of the film, killing his nemesis and saving the lives of a busload of kidnapped schoolchildren.

By positing such an anti-hero in the tense social climate of the early 1970s, when the rising problem of crime seemed to elude a clear moral solution, *Dirty Harry* seems to ask the question: 'What sort of protagonist do we want for this problem?' (Thompson online). Audiences' responses to the Harry character have been extremely varied, which is a

testament to the complex issues that the film addresses. American film critic Pauline Kael (among many others) labelled the film as ‘fascist’ because of the terrible behaviour of its anti-heroic protagonist (Thompson online), whereas an obviously popular response among the general public has been that Harry’s unlawful methods are justified by their ends – combating crime in a society which is not institutionally equipped to do so. A more careful, alternative reading may posit that the film is an interrogation of the Harry character, and that Harry is simply employed, in all his moral complexity, in order to underscore the complex nature of the problems that the film addresses.

Whatever the filmmakers’ intentions, and regardless of the academic criticism that the film has received, the fact remains that Harry’s character has become extremely popular – in spite of, or perhaps because of, his almost inhumanly brutal, immoral, no-nonsense approach to crime (Mellen 25). He has served as a blueprint for many anti-heroes to follow and has reshaped the entire genre of the ‘police procedural story,’ relieving it of its previous standard white-hat (or morally impeccable) heroes (Mellen 25; Wikipedia: *Dirty Harry* online). *Dirty Harry* has become an American cult icon, and his famous line, ‘Do you feel lucky, punk?’ (which is actually misquoted), has become widely known and repeated as a cult catch-phrase. President Reagan, who was renowned for reasoning in Hollywood terms, would even use another famous *Dirty Harry* line – the ‘make my day’ taunt – in one of his presidential speeches in the eighties (Reference.com Encyclopedia online).

Dirty Harry’s character has become iconic, but the gun that he used – the .44 Magnum – has become perhaps even more popular and iconic than the character himself. Throughout the film, Harry’s Magnum is ‘lionized as an all-powerful instrument capable of sending assailants flying wildly through the air;’ of course, in reality, the gun – though powerful – is ‘far less dramatic than depicted’ in the film (Wikipedia: *Dirty Harry* online). Notably and very interestingly, after the release of *Dirty Harry* in 1971, the sales of the Smith and Wesson Model 29 .44 Magnum increased dramatically in the United States, so much so that it became the most popular handgun (Friedman 81; Wikipedia: *Dirty Harry* online). Not only the character, but also specifically the gun that he used became popular among the film’s audiences. It is not surprising that the first *Dirty Harry* sequel was actually named *Magnum Force* (1973), capitalizing on the .44 Magnum’s rising popularity and diverting emphasis from Harry’s character to another, perhaps equally

important 'character': his gun.

It may be noted with this in mind that Scorsese uses the icon of the .44 Magnum in various ways in *Taxi Driver* in order to place special emphasis on the connection between Travis Bickle and Dirty Harry. If the gun-buying scene in *Taxi Driver* serves as a 'condensed repository' of allusions to recent popular heroes, then Dirty Harry is singled out here as the one hero that may be most significant to *Taxi Driver's* discourse – for though Travis buys all of Easy Andy's guns, it is Harry's handgun, the Magnum .44 mentioned above, that Travis specifically asks for. It is also the gun that Travis is seen with in numerous scenes (including most of the first mirror scene, and the scenes where he simply sits in his apartment, gun in hand) that build up towards the climactic shoot-out, and it is this gun that he eventually uses most prominently in his killing spree. The Magnum .44 serves as a link between the two films in additional ways: there is a fairly direct reference in *Taxi Driver* to *Dirty Harry*, for instance, when Scorsese's character graphically describes what damage a Magnum .44 can do (specifically, to a woman's face and to her 'pussy'), as does Dirty Harry in the first of his films (telling an adversary that his .44 Magnum would 'blow your head clean off'). Moreover, throughout *Taxi Driver* – especially in the first and last shots in which the gun is seen, which are both slow, panning close-ups – the Magnum is portrayed as gloriously as it is 'lionized' in *Dirty Harry*, and in both films it is treated with exaggerated reverence by the characters who wield it.

TRAVIS BICKLE'S HEROISM

It should be evident that there are certain key attributes that are shared by Dirty Harry, Mike Hammer and James Bond. These heroes are aggressive men and they are inclined to use excessive violence in order to achieve their goals. They are also anti-social, preferring to live their lives and achieve their goals without the help of society and its laws. In fact, they often break society's laws, trusting their own conceptions of justice rather than leaving such matters to the institutions of the community. In this regard they are 'vigilante' heroes, or 'citizens who take the law into their own hands, meeting out "frontier justice" when they perceive that the actions of established authorities are insufficient' (Wikipedia: *Vigilante* online). Though the three heroes discussed here are arguably the prime post-World War II exponents of such a violent, lone, vigilante

heroism, most of these attributes are shared by the myriad of heroes that preceded them. If one examines the most common and most popular American screen heroes historically then violence, lone independence and (maybe less prominently, but increasingly after the Second World War) vigilantism have arguably been the defining traits of American filmic conceptions of heroism.

It can hardly be a coincidence, then – given the allusive nature of *Taxi Driver* – that these very attributes turn out to be three of the most important defining attributes of Travis Bickle's character. It has been established that Bickle is connected to numerous specific American popular heroes through various intertextual devices, and I have suggested that he can be read as being representative of the most prominent heroic archetypes in American popular culture generally. In the next part of this chapter, I will explain how Bickle's character refers to and comments on the quintessential 'rugged individual' American popular hero specifically in terms of his violent behaviour, lone independence and vigilantism. This discussion will include reference to many heroes who have been representative of mainstream American heroic standards over the years – but it will reserve specific reference to the iconic heroes of James Bond, Mike Hammer and Dirty Harry, as Scorsese seems to implicate these heroes particularly in *Taxi Driver* by means of the gun-buying scene, and as they have indeed been predominantly representative of post-World War II mainstream American heroic standards.

Violence

Violence has always been an obvious defining trait – in fact, it has probably been *the* obvious defining trait – of mainstream American film heroes. Whether they have been cowboys, 'wilderness scouts, bank robbers, hardboiled detectives,' 'vigilante cops,' or, of course, war heroes, violence has generally been the *modus operandi* of the most popular American heroes (Mellen 9; Splitter online). Today, it seems obvious and hardly worth drawing attention to that of the American Film Institute's list of the twenty most popular and influential heroes of the past century, 12 of the male heroes listed (including James Bond, Dirty Harry, Will Kane, Shane, Han Solo and Indiana Jones - AFI) subscribe to a willing and sometimes eager recourse to violence. Violence has become such an important facet of American heroism, in fact, that one commentator states that the 'real "hero" of American popular stories and movies has become violence itself' (Splitter online). Laurence Friedman notes, similarly, that one of the most distinguishing

factors of the American male hero (compared to his European and Eastern counterparts) is his 'instinctive recourse to violence,' and that the violence of American heroes can in fact be regarded as a 'conceivable expression of national identity' (Friedman 74, 77). Jenny Calder goes so far as to propose that 'American heroism appears to be built only on anonymous dead' (Calder 205).

The basic premise of American film violence has not changed much over the years; men are depicted fighting with their fists, or, much more frequently, shooting with guns, often killing each other. The hero of a film almost always perpetrates most of the violence displayed in the film. But the way in which such violence has been portrayed, and the moral climate within which it finds justification and/or attracts censorship, has certainly changed over the course of the twentieth century. Most notably, the violence of many post-World War II heroes has become different, in important ways, from the kind of violence that their forebears employed. Dirty Harry, James Bond and Mike Hammer – to name but the three benchmark examples – all employ violence excessively, sometimes even almost sadistically. I have indicated that as social conditions changed during and after the war, so did the ethical paradigms within which a hero could justify his violent behaviour; as Jenny Calder suggests, 'licensed mass killing' fosters a 'particular kind of amorality' (Calder 33). It is no surprise, therefore, that Dirty Harry, Mike Hammer, James Bond, some of Hitchcock's anti-heroes and all kinds of other excessively violent post-war heroes did not necessarily lose their appeal through their immoral violent behaviour (and indeed, sometimes even seem to have gained popularity through such behaviour). It is quite clear that the myth of regeneration through violence, as it has been perpetuated through the behaviour of popular Hollywood heroes, is still very much alive in the imagination of the American public.

Moreover, as film technology improved over the course of the century, special effects studios could supply directors with more visceral and sometimes almost ludicrously graphic depictions of violence, much to the delight, it would seem, of the typical American moviegoer (Faure 35, 65, 78). The demands of the entertainment industry set the standards for the kind of spectacular killing, for instance, that Dirty Harry administered with his all-powerful, 'lionized' Magnum; his targets would fly wildly and dramatically through the air when shot – completely unrealistically – to give the violence an almost parodied, but somehow entertaining edge (Wikipedia: *Dirty Harry* online).

Taxi Driver seems, on the surface, to subscribe to the same formulaic violence that has served to bring many American films great popularity. Though its hero does not commit any actual violence throughout most of the film, the brothel shootout (which has aptly been dubbed 'The Slaughter' by scriptwriter Paul Schrader – Friedman 83) at the end of the film more than makes up for Travis's initial passivity. Even if Travis only kills three people in this scene (which is a relatively small number, considering Travis's convictions, or compared to many other violent films), the scene is literally surrealistic in its bloody depiction of violence. Laurence Friedman points out that 'such effects as the impressionistic lighting and acute camera angles, as well as the sound of trickling blood, the slow motion close-up of fingers blasted off an old man's hand, the bloody finger Travis presses to his head, and so forth,' all contribute to give the violence a surrealistically spectacular effect (Friedman 83). Travis's violence, condensed into this one scene (barring his brief and relatively nondescript earlier violent encounter in the convenience store), is at least as spectacular and as unrealistic as the violence of any of the contemporary heroes of the seventies – even that of Dirty Harry's Magnum.

Though almost all of Travis's violence is condensed into this one climactic scene, latent violence haunts every moment of the rest of the film. As Schrader suggests, 'everything in *Taxi Driver* set the stage for this moment [referring to "The Slaughter"]' (Friedman 83). I have noted, in the previous chapter, how a foreboding atmosphere of latent violence is subtly created through various filmic techniques (like the repetition of key themes) as the film progresses towards its climax. Moreover, Travis himself repeatedly tells the viewers (via his diary) and some of the characters in the film of his intentions, foreshadowing his actual violence. He tells Palantine, for instance, that the next president should 'clean up the whole mess... just flush it down the fuckin' toilet,' implying simply getting rid of the criminals and the morally questionable 'scum,' obviously by violent means. And he literally tells Wizard of his personal intentions: 'I just wanna go out and really...really do something...I really got some bad ideas in my head.' Wizard replies, 'relax, killer,' unwittingly foreshadowing Travis's later behaviour.

Violence is subtly foreshadowed not only in Travis's actions and in his words, but through the film's portrayal of general New York city life as well. According to Laurence Friedman, 'because it is *Taxi Driver's* contention that violence is as native to the

American character as it is to Travis's, intimations if not actual incidents of violence fill nearly every frame' of the film (Friedman 77). *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, which in its time was an extremely graphic filmic portrayal of violence, plays at a movie theatre in the background that Travis drives past. A criminal is arrested by police in the background of the shot when Travis talks to Wizard. Later in the film, there is a shot of two very old men simply fighting, rather brutally, in the background, for no apparent reason; in another equally apparently inconsequential scene, a prostitute fends off some young thugs by beating them with her handbag. As has been noted, at one point in the film, 'a man zigzags through the streets inexplicably yelling 'I'll kill her, I'll kill her, I'll kill her' (Friedman 78). The jealous passenger character's threatening description of how he wants to kill his cheating wife with a .44 Magnum – arguably a scene that marks a turning point in the film, with regards to Travis's violent convictions, and which is followed by Travis's buying the guns – pointedly foreshadows the violence that is to come. The numerous expressive gun-imitating gestures made by the hands of various characters, including Charlie T, Sport, and Travis himself, add to the foreshadowing. It is clear that real violence, as well as latent signs of violence, surround Travis in almost every scene.

It may thus seem almost logical, in a grim kind of way, that Travis turns to violence in order to give purpose to his life and in order to achieve a meaningful identity. Some time after Betsy rejects him, when his life seems to have become utterly meaningless, Travis decides to buy the guns, and it is noteworthy that he marks this turning point in his voice-over diary: 'suddenly, there is change.' It is a change that, in time, appears to give meaning to his life. Indeed, the violence that he achieves by means of his guns 'functions as a means through which Travis's identity crystallizes;' it serves as the primary trait according to which he identifies himself, and, ironically, according to which he is recognized and accepted by society (Matthew online). As is evident from his celebration as a hero after 'The Slaughter,' the 'commitment of violence drastically alters the manner in which society must view Travis (and consequently how he must view himself)' (Matthew online). Thus, Bickle is literally an embodiment of the 'myth of regeneration through violence,' which Richard Slotkin also calls a myth of 'self-renewal' or, significantly, 'self-creation through acts of violence' (Slotkin in Freed).

I must mention that this identification through violence in Travis's case hinges crucially

and specifically on the construction of a *masculine* identity (though few writers on the subject even note this, perhaps because it seems so obvious). Violence, as has been noted, has widely been regarded in American society as at least one of the most important defining attributes of masculinity, and it almost certainly has been the most overt, predominant defining trait of the most popular American male film heroes. Thus, through a heroic display of violence, Travis's identity is able to 'crystallize' – specifically in masculine terms, for the heroic display of violence essentially connotes masculinity.

Considering the overly simplistic (and rather unrealistic, or at least exaggerated) process of Travis's successful construction of an identity by means of the enactment of violence – and bearing in mind the exaggeratedly spectacular and unrealistic portrayal of his violence – one may infer that Travis's violence is intended to be a parody of American film violence. Certainly, many analysts of *Taxi Driver* have read it this way. It has been noted previously that the 'Slaughter' scene parodies famous last stands that have been depicted in American films; moreover, this scene can be read as a specific parody of displays of film violence, and of the very concept of regenerative violence in film. As Laurence Friedman remarks, 'the ending of *Taxi Driver* points to the futility of violence... and because [Travis's violence] springs from madness, violence is not only futile but insane;' consequently, 'the brothel shootout parodies and rejects the myth of resolution/regeneration through violence so dear to American hearts' (Friedman 74). The numerous filmic intertextual references in *Taxi Driver* – many of which, like the gun allusions, or the allusions to violent heroes, invoke previous filmic treatment of the myth of regeneration through violence – seem to support the notion that the 'Slaughter' scene may in fact be a gross parody of American film violence.

Travis's 'Lone Hero' syndrome

The appeal of the lonely hero in American film can be traced back to the first movie heroes, namely frontiersmen (or 'cowboys'). In the Western myth, which has produced so many such fictional heroes, 'loneliness is a persistent theme,' so much so that 'loneliness and intolerance' almost invariably accompany 'courage, skill, and authority' – those other essential cowboy traits (Calder 2, 3). Many of the first fictive frontier heroes were patently solitary characters, most notably Fennimore Cooper's Hawkeye (who is 'both proud and melancholy in his solitariness') and the famous and aptly named Lone Ranger hero (Calder 3). The silhouette of a lonely cowboy riding into the sunset has

become as clichéd as the image of the lone rider dwarfed by the mountainous desert of monument valley, his solitude emphasized by the expanse of the landscape surrounding him.

Such 'lonely and rugged' frontier heroes have 'captured the imaginations of the millions exposed to American culture,' and they have certainly influenced the standards of twentieth-century American heroism. Even in war films, where teamwork and brotherhood are usually celebrated, there is often a particular individualistic, anti-social character who dominates the rest and is celebrated as a particularly prominent hero because of his individualism (for instance, John Wayne's character in both *Sands of Iwo Jima*, and *The Green Berets* of 1968). Many of the famous heroes that are alluded to in *Taxi Driver* are such lone heroes; I have discussed the ways in which Bond, Hammer and Dirty Harry, for example, are antisocial, independent and solitary by nature – as befits their American style of heroism.

In a certain way Travis Bickle appears to embody the trait of heroic solitude. He proves to be as independently capable of attaining his primary goal (of violently 'ridding the streets' of the 'scum' that is represented by Sport and the men in the brothel) as the next American action hero, without the help of other people. His ability to 'go it alone' in this regard is actually quite remarkable, as he dispatches three mean-looking, armed antagonists (one of whom is moreover a 'reputed Mafioso') by himself, and – according to a straight-forward reading of the film – manages to survive the ordeal. Travis's exaggerated, rather unlikely achievement reflects the Hollywood tendency to portray heroes who can easily beat the odds of such a shoot-out situation without the help of others (once again, Dirty Harry, Mike Hammer and James Bond are all ready examples of such heroes).

Though the ability to act alone and independently affords Travis a traditional heroic 'happy ending' at the end of *Taxi Driver* – as it has done for so many action heroes – his lone behaviour here needs to be considered in context of the rest of the film. From the start of the film, Travis is lonely and unable to associate with those around him. It has been pointed out (in the previous chapter) that Scorsese goes to great lengths to express, via numerous filmic devices, Travis's alienation and his dissociation from the social reality around him. This alienation is clearly visible in Travis's interaction with the

people around him: it seems that he tries to associate with them, but is unable to. Travis 'resents that the people in his cab pretend he doesn't exist' (Sparknotes online), and his distance from social reality is emphasized by the notion that he has conversations with these passengers – even the relatively functional conversation with Senator Palantine – through the rear-view mirror of his cab, instead of face to face. He struggles to have meaningful conversations with strangers generally; and when he does manage to engage in conversation, there is often miscommunication. When he tries to have a rather civil conversation with the female clerk at the porno cinema, for instance, she becomes so agitated that she calls the manager, and when he tries to make a little joke with Betsy – describing his sign that says, 'organizised' – she clearly doesn't get it, even after he tries desperately to explain. After presidential candidate Palantine rather emphatically asks Travis about his views on the city and Travis goes into a graphic tirade about 'flushing' the filth of the city 'down the fucking toilet', Palantine seems confused (and his companion seems threatened), and he merely manages to reply, with almost certain dishonesty, 'I think I know what you mean'. Even the conversations that Travis has with his fellow cabbies – who are as close to 'friends' of Travis as anyone else in the film – seem to be fraught with misunderstandings. In the most personal and potentially meaningful conversation that Travis has with another man throughout the entire film, fellow cabby Wizard seems to really try to give Travis some (rather philosophical) advice – but Travis simply dismisses it, saying that Wizard's insights are 'about the dumbest thing I've ever heard'. Moreover, significantly, Travis's most famous (and arguably the most important) 'conversation' in the film, from the second 'mirror' scene ('you talkin' to me'), is actually a monologue, as he talks to himself in the mirror. He even emphasizes his loneliness in this 'dialogue' with his reflection, saying, 'are you talkin' to me? Well, I'm the only one here'. He is not merely the only one in the room at that time, but really the only one in his entire lonely world.

It is important to note that Travis's loneliness is not self-imposed, and it is not a thing that he wishes – in fact, he seems desperately to want to surmount it. He overtly notes, in his voice-over diary, that 'I do not believe one should devote his life to morbid self-attention, but should become a person like other people'. But try as he might, he cannot achieve this aim. His loneliness and his inability to connect with people is most evident in his failed attempts to court Betsy; and his ensuing frustration, disappointment, and tenacity in trying to reconnect with her attests to the importance that he actually attaches

to connecting with people. Travis's sentiments in this regard are emphasized in the scene where he calls Betsy from a payphone; as he talks, increasingly desperate and disappointed, the camera moves sideways, away from him, and shows us a long, empty hallway, representative of Travis's extreme loneliness.

As the narrative of *Taxi Driver* progresses, Travis seems more and more resigned to his loneliness, for better or for worse. Indeed, loneliness becomes one of the primary traits according to which he regards himself: 'I am God's lonely man,' he writes in his diary in the later stages of the film. His very identity comes to revolve around it. As Laurence Friedman points out, Travis's 'longer and longer hours behind the wheel reflect his steady retreat from the external world into an internal one, increasingly of his own making' (Friedman 76). In his increasingly delusional state, Travis sees his loneliness as being connected to a kind of destiny that he attributes to himself; he seems to regard himself as a solitary, avenging angel, a lone hero who is intended to 'clean the streets'. In a sense, thus, he gives his state of loneliness a purpose, or, more accurately, he tries to justify his alienation from society by seeing himself in 'lone hero' terms, and by seeing that society in xenophobic terms, envisioning its people – who refuse to accept him – as his enemies. 'Here is a man,' he proclaims melodramatically in his voice-over diary (in a tone remarkably reminiscent of the clichéd voice-over of a typical action film preview), 'who wouldn't take it any more, a man who stood up against the scum, the cunts, the dogs, the filth.' This kind of reaction of lashing out at those who rejected him is exemplified by Travis's behaviour after he comes to terms with his rejection by Betsy: he goes to her office and rather abusively tells her that 'you're in Hell and you're going to die in Hell like the rest of them.'

Thus, when he conceives of himself as a 'lone hero,' Travis's life (which he spends, in the first part of the film, popping pills, watching porn, drinking, and aimlessly wandering or driving) appears to gain the meaning that it has previously lacked, and that it is so obviously devoid of after his rejection by Betsy. Accordingly, the 'heroic' killing spree at the end of the film can be read, ironically, as a desperate and delusional attempt to manifest the purpose that Travis *assumes* he has in life, rather than as the noble display of heroism it is interpreted as being by the newspaper articles on his wall. It is notable that after the shootout, once he has the chance to be accepted by society, Travis does not change his recently adopted attitude of 'purposeful' solitude: he actually chooses to

reject Betsy, and rides off in his Taxi like a lone cowboy at the end of a Western film – thus living himself completely into the ‘lone hero’ role that he has assumed.

Bearing this in mind, it is clear that, though he is portrayed very typically according to traditional ‘lone hero’ conceptions during and after the pivotal shoot-out scene, Travis is a ‘lone hero’ in a wholly different way than those lone heroes whom he emulates and with whom his character is associated by allusion (Bond, Hammer, Harry and the many other Hollywood action heroes and cowboys). In fact, Bickle’s version of such heroism can be read as a parody of its more traditional counterparts. In traditional heroic narratives, a hero’s patent dissociation from society is usually either a necessary (or at least useful) subservient means to the hero’s goals, or an inevitable symptom of his heroism. The heroic lifestyle of the lonesome, nomadic cowboy, for instance, can hardly tolerate social ties – thus he rides alone into the sunset. Similarly, the power and ensuing responsibility of more recent vigilante heroes (such as Spiderman) requires – to such heroes’ frustration – that they cannot commit to social engagements. On the contrary, Travis’s ‘heroic’ behaviour is a ridiculous justification – a hypocritical excuse, really – for his desperate, frustrated loneliness, instead of his patent loneliness in some way being a subservient means to his goals (which are hardly heroic in the first place).

Vigilantism

Over the years vigilantism has become quite a popular heroic trait in American filmic depictions of heroism. I have noted that, in an expression of social sentiments, American heroes during and after the Second World War became increasingly inclined towards vigilantism, partially as a consequence of the turmoil of the war and also because of changing American laws and social circumstances. Dirty Harry’s character probably embodies the ultimate filmic representation of this vigilantism, as he is a policeman who quite explicitly defies the laws that he should serve – even if he does so in order to carry out what he perceives as ‘real’ justice. The American popular culture of the years following the war is rife with other examples of popular vigilante heroes, most notably an array of heroes (and superheroes) portrayed in dime novels and comic books (Wikipedia: *Vigilante* online).

Though the middle of the twentieth century saw such an increased expression of vigilante sentiments in American popular culture, this is not to say that the concept of

vigilantism was not as important or influential throughout many decades before this time. Indeed, vigilantism, along with (and interrelated to) other key American values like independence, democracy, individualism and regenerative violence, has been a crucial shaping concept in the history of American society. In the nineteenth century 'vigilante committees and people's courts' were 'spontaneous expressions of the American spirit of democracy'; 'they showed that men in isolated communities could cope with a difficult social problem without waiting for formal action from the outside' (Wayne Gard, quoted in Calder 125). In the 1850s, during the California Gold Rush, the 'San Francisco Vigilance Movement' was in many respects an independent, socially institutionalized organization, committed against crime and corruption – even if its members 'arguably created more lawlessness than they eliminated' (Wikipedia: *Vigilante* online). In 1888 Theodore Roosevelt related, 'with a certain pride, how "notorious bullies and murderers have been taken out and hung, while the bands of horse thieves have been regularly hunted down and destroyed in pitched fights by parties of cowboys"' (Calder 125-126). Vigilantism was, to a certain extent and in certain contexts, institutionalized.

This 19th-century spirit of vigilantism, though it certainly may have had its necessary place in certain less civilized areas, obviously set the stage for all manner of problems to arise. Even as the rougher areas were civilized and became controlled by institutions of law, many American citizens still chose to keep the law in their own hands, often expressing a 'deliberate flouting of statutory laws and of elected officials who...were able and ready to handle the situation' (Calder 125). Such attitudes gave rise to what became known as 'Southern vigilantism', which escalated to the point where lynch mobs were formed. In some instances, these lynch mobs had more power, for all practical purposes, than the law they subverted (in one case, for example, a suspected arsonist in Kansas was lynched without trial in spite of the presence of a mayor, sheriff and county attorney – Calder 125).

The struggle that the institution of law had in its establishment on the Western frontier was particularly precarious in this context, for not only did it face the difficulties of the criminally fertile ground of the uncivilized, expanding frontier; but moreover it 'could be seen as challenging the basis of the frontier ethic, that frontier people could look after themselves, do things their own way without the interference of the envious [civilized] East' (Calder 125). The pioneers of the frontier and their kin had suffered many

hardships, and they had done so without the help of institutions and civil bodies which had for years not even existed in their world, yet that now threatened to change the very foundations of their way of life. Many of them 'felt they had won the right of independent action' (Calder 125), and that institutionalized law was a threat to this hard-earned prize. It is clear that vigilantism, as an 'expression of America's spirit of democracy,' had firmly embedded itself as one of the key values at the hearts of many Americans who were living on the frontier. It has certainly remained an important notion, tied to the very history of the 'winning' of the frontier, throughout the development of American society. The widespread availability of guns to the citizens of America is as lucidly clear a testament to the importance of vigilantism in America as one could ask for (Family Violence Prevention Fund online). And in the world of popular film, vigilantism has never ceased to be a heroic quality; in fact, it frequently poses as a justification for heroic violent behaviour, as in the many 'action movies' that 'disguise the dirty roots of actual social conflict, while teaching...the superiority of force to the rule of law' (Engeman online).

Travis's behaviour towards the end of *Taxi Driver* seems to reflect the American vigilante spirit. Already in the hold-up scene in the convenience store, Travis acts the vigilante by shooting the would-be robber – to the apparent satisfaction of the shopkeeper, who proceeds to beat the limp body of Travis's victim (who actually seems to be dead already). Even before this scene, when Travis buys the guns from Easy Andy, he clearly does so with his violent objectives in mind, all the time knowing that the gun-buying transaction is quite illegal. One may infer that he is a conscious vigilante, breaking the law in order to dispense a kind of justice – like removing the 'scum' from the streets – that the institutions of law are so clearly unable to dispense. Of course, when he finally kills the men in the brothel, he is once again breaking the law – committing murder – but also finally dispensing the 'justice' that he has conceived of previously. In this sense, Travis would qualify as a typical vigilante hero, similar to Dirty Harry, who is prepared to break some laws in order for justice to prevail.

However, even if such a kind of vigilantism were morally acceptable in a crime-infested society – and the varied responses to films like *Dirty Harry* have certainly indicated that this is an open question – the nobility of Travis's vigilantism would still be questionable, at best. The fact that he is as adamant (and simply less successful) in his mission to kill

presidential candidate Palantine as he is to kill the 'scum' of the brothel, suggests that his target is really arbitrary, despite his ranting and raving about 'cleaning up the streets' earlier in the film. His motives, it seems, are not necessarily noble; he wishes simply to indulge in the act of killing, regardless of who his target is. Accordingly, the fact that he ends up killing criminals is possibly merely fortuitous, and so too is his consequential celebration as a hero in his society.

The questionable nature of Travis's heroism

It is clear that both the method of Travis's heroism, as well as his motives in the first place, are questionable at best. This is evident in his behaviour in the 'Slaughter' scene, and is emphasized if one considers his 'heroic' killing spree in the context of his character throughout the preceding length of the film. As Laurence Friedman summarizes, 'while Sport and the brothel crew qualify as evildoers, Travis is badly – and deliberately – miscast as the knight in shining armour... that Travis survives the bloodbath he creates is as likely to guarantee the persistence of evil as its elimination, since the film seems to suggest that Travis is likely to kill again' (Friedman 84). Travis is not only an anti-hero – he is, in fact, a villain. Revealingly, in the American Film Institute's list of the most prominent heroes and villains of the films of the twentieth century, Travis is listed on the 'villains' list – as opposed to anti-heroic characters like Dirty Harry, who scores high on the 'heroes' list (AFI).

Besides the actual villainy that is, ironically, displayed in Travis's very 'heroic' behaviour, there are more subtle clues throughout the film that may attest to Travis's construction as not merely an anti-heroic, but a villainous character. Travis's construction in relation to Sport is most revealing in this regard. According to readings asserting that *Taxi Driver* is a narrative reworking of *The Searchers* (a notion that scriptwriter Schrader himself attests to – Rosenbaum online), Travis serves 'as an updated version of John Wayne's Ethan Edwards' and Sport 'stands in for Scar', the Comanche chief (Rosenbaum online). Accordingly, Travis *could* be seen to represent the 'cowboy' hero – the 'good guy' – whereas Sport represents the evil Indian, or the 'bad guy'. The roles of the two characters are similarly constructed through their portrayal in the film: Sport is immediately constructed as the 'bad guy' via the black hat that he wears in his first few appearances in the film, and later on he certainly looks like an American Indian, with his tanned body, his long, black hair, and his headband. Notably, perhaps due to Travis's

cowboy boots, Sport calls Travis 'cowboy' (in another scene, the timekeeper also calls Travis, 'cowboy'). However, in their final confrontation, these roles seem to be confused. Travis now wears his hair in a Mohawk style, as reminiscent of an American Indian as Sport's attributes; 'go back to your own fucking tribe,' says Sport, emphasizing the resemblance. Moreover, Travis shoots Sport in cold blood without giving him a chance even to anticipate the attack – in a way quite in contrast to the 'ethical' code of the cowboy hero, who is supposed to wait until his opponent draws his weapon. Thus, in this scene, Travis is constructed as a traditional villain (or Indian, in frontier terms); and Indian is pit against Indian 'in a bizarre configuration of Western symbolism' (Friedman 69).

Travis's construction as a villain is further suggested in numerous scenes where he is shown to walk from right to the left (across the screen). In the first scene where we see him walking across the screen, for instance – just after he applies for his taxi license – he moves from right to left, elaborately and faster than the camera's panning movement (the camera actually has to catch up with him), while the cabs drive by from left to right in pointed contrast to his movement. In numerous subsequent scenes depicting Travis walking in streets, the same movement, from right to left, is emphasized. Travis's movement in this regard is antithetical to the traditional movement or positioning of protagonists in films. It has become traditional in Western films that individual 'good guys' are positioned to the left of their opponents in classical face-off scenes (Rosenbaum online), and the protagonist armies of war films usually march from left to right (as Leni Riefenstahl classically displayed in her *Triumph des Willens*) or charge their enemies from the 'left' (of the screen, as one can see in such battle scenes as *Saving Private Ryan's* classic opening, for instance, or all those many battles of the *Lord of The Rings* trilogy). This left to right movement follows the natural way that the Western eye reads, and seems naturally 'right'; accordingly, Travis is depicted as moving the 'wrong' way (Rosenbaum online), and thus the audience is given clues to his antagonistic nature. It is similarly noteworthy that Travis, when shaking hands with the Secret Service agent at the Palantine rally, does so with his left hand – another clue to his 'sinister' character.

Travis's heroism is celebrated according to the overt story portrayed in *Taxi Driver* – but given his construction as a villain, this heroic celebration can really be read (and has

widely been read) as a critical comment on society's conceptions of heroism. I have indicated that Travis's exaggerated, surrealistically graphic violence appears in its excess to be a parody of traditional filmic displays of violence. Moreover, both Travis's loneliness and his vigilantism subscribe to traditional heroic discourses quite overtly in key ways, while at the same time these 'heroic' attributes can easily be exposed as based on much less noble motives than the typical loneliness or vigilantism of popular American heroes. It is quite plausible, thus, to conceive of Travis's heroism – specifically in terms of his violent behaviour, his loneliness, and his vigilantism – as a parody of popular American filmic depictions of heroism. Certainly, Travis's explicit association (via numerous intertextual allusions) with a multitude of popular film heroes supports such a reading. He appears to be an exaggerated embodiment of the flip sides of American heroic values, at best – a worst-case scenario of Hollywood heroism.

Thus, in keeping with the trends of many post-World War II films, *Taxi Driver* blurs the traditional lines between hero and villain. Hollywood's popular heroes, *Taxi Driver* seems to suggest, have become so similar in their defining attributes to the villains whom they have traditionally opposed that there remains no real distinction. In other words, *Taxi Driver* poses more or less the same questions that have implicitly been highlighted by films containing anti-heroic protagonists (for instance, *Dirty Harry*, and many of Hitchcock's films) – but it does so utterly self-consciously, literally equating heroism with villainy and thus interrogating American society's conceptions of heroism with unprecedented criticism.

Society's response to Travis's heroism

According to such a reading, the exaggeratedly positive and thus (hopefully) rather unrealistic reaction of *Taxi Driver's* New York society to Travis's brothel massacre, at the very end of the film, can be read as an investigation of American society's reception of popular filmic depictions of heroism. In a standard reading of the film, simply according to its overt narrative, Travis survives the brothel shootout, and he is consequently celebrated as a hero. Iris's parents write Travis, to thank him; the media glorifies him; and even Betsy becomes interested in establishing the connection with him that she has so stubbornly denied previously. In other words, everything goes right for him. It is a perfect happy ending, as befits a hero. Bearing in mind what has been discussed in this chapter, such an exaggerated, unrealistically happy ending is most likely intended to

emphasize the parody of Travis's heroism – and moreover, to parody society's celebration of his heroism. Certainly, numerous analysts of the film read it as such (Caron online; Friedman 86).

In an alternative reading of the film's ending, Travis actually dies. Similar to the last part of Scorsese's later film *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) or the second half of Robert Enrico's classic *Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* (1962), all the events portrayed after a certain key moment of the film (the brothel shootout, in *Taxi Driver's* case) can be read as the delusional fantasy of a dying man. Travis's symbolic act of 'shooting' himself with his outstretched finger – after he tries, unsuccessfully, to really shoot himself with his (empty) gun – can be read as a symbolic clue to such an interpretation; moreover, Travis's wounds (gruesome bullet-wounds in his neck and shoulder) certainly seem quite fatal. According to this reading, everything that happens to Travis after the 'Slaughter,' including the celebration of his heroism, is a figment of his psychopathic imagination. What seems to be implied, thus, is that Travis's heroism is tolerated – and celebrated, even – in the delusional mind of a psychopath. The gloriously heroic aspects of his behaviour are merely Travis's fantasy.

Scorsese leaves it completely up to the viewer to decide whether or not Travis actually survives or not. As I have indicated, there are clues that suggest that Travis may have died, but, on the other hand, there is no real evidence confirming that he did. The varied responses by scholars and reviewers to *Taxi Driver's* ending are a testament to this ambiguity; it seems, furthermore, that most many write on the subject are reluctant to take a stance, conceding, perhaps indolently, that either reading is valid (Caron online; Wood 54).

It is interesting, with this in mind, to compare what is likely implied by the two possible endings. The first version implies that society actually celebrates Travis as a hero; the second implies that Travis's celebration as a hero only occurs in his delusional, psychopathic mind. The open-ended interchangeability of these two endings invites readers to consider a parallel interchangeability of their respective implications – and thus, a comparison is invoked between Travis's psychopathic mental state and a perhaps equally pandemic state of American society (and its conceptions of heroism).

Taxi Driver can be read as a scathing critique of society's reception and glorification of its Hollywood heroes, as the film parodies society's tendency to respond positively to violent, amoral heroes, and as it implies, by means of the comparison mentioned in the previous paragraph, that a psychosis similar to that of Travis himself may lie at the heart of such a tendency. Indeed, such a severe critique may not be unwarranted. The heading of this part of the chapter, *Society's response to Travis's heroism*, is purposefully ambiguous: it refers both to the fictional New York society's response to Travis (in the narrative of the film), as well as to actual American society's response to the Travis character of the film *Taxi Driver*. For, surprisingly, *Taxi Driver's* American audience frequently responded to the Travis character rather similarly to the fictional American society, portrayed in the film. As Paul Schrader himself points out, Travis was read as a hero, and glorified as such, by many who saw the film in the seventies; 'when the film ended, people applauded,' as 'audiences related to this sick, unbalanced individual' (Schrader 111). General 'reports from screenings of the film' were that the 'audience was cheering Travis on' (Saravia online); he was thus actually cast as he cast himself, a hero. It is noteworthy that Travis has found widely favourable reception and lasting recognition as a glorified popular cult icon to this day, inspiring T-shirts, posters and various other merchandise, probably directed mainly at young men. The portrayal, in *Taxi Driver*, of American society's glorification of a psychopathic hero, may thus (ironically) not have been as exaggerated as a critical reading of the film would suggest.

It is clear that the 'hero' portrayed in *Taxi Driver* (meaning both Travis Bickle, as well as the associated predominant filmic heroic type of the American twentieth century, to whom *Taxi Driver* alludes), embodies a host of those traditional masculine qualities that have been shown (in the second chapter) to constitute some of the core problems of the masculinity crisis. He is domineering, anti-social, socially independent (sometimes to the point of ignoring the law) and violent. The directors of many films that portrayed the more recent versions of this heroic type, may have intended such a representation to be problematic, with the further intention of investigating American masculinity or related concepts by means of complex anti-heroes. Regardless of their intentions, however, these directors' portrayals of anti-heroes have often served to make various kinds of anti-heroes exceedingly popular. This was the case with Robert Aldrich's 1953 version of Mike Hammer, a film that was supposed to show that Mike Hammer is a 'real stinker' and maybe more of a villain than a hero (Cady online). It may as well have been the

case with the character of Dirty Harry – who, one may assume, was at least supposed to pose certain questions about American notions of heroism, but who seems to have been wholeheartedly celebrated as a hero by a large part of the American public, just like Travis Bickle is in *Taxi Driver's* narrative. And it may even, most ironically, be the case with *Taxi Driver* itself.

To conclude this chapter, it may be sensible to emphasize that the kind of heroism invoked in *Taxi Driver* seems to coincide fairly closely with some of the formulaic, and problematic, masculine roles that have been proposed as solutions to the masculinity crisis over the years. The behaviour that Travis employs in order to gain his masculine identity is perfectly reminiscent of Faludi's previously mentioned description of such rash, formulaic approaches: according to 'reclaiming masculinity' movements, 'the man in crisis need only picture himself a monarch, pump up, armour himself, go up against the enemy, and prove that he's in control' (Faludi *Stiffed* 15). It also coincides with society's generally upheld ideals of 'rugged individual' masculinity, ideals that, as Faludi points out, have continued to dominate American conceptions of what a 'real' man behaves like (see the second chapter). Even though one must bear in mind that a society's actual ideals of masculinity and its filmic heroic portrayals of masculinity are by no means *necessarily* the same, it seems that in the case of American society, they seem to be quite similar. Certainly, through Travis Bickle *Taxi Driver* suggests that the construction of a masculine identity by means of popular heroic standards of masculinity may be highly dysfunctional (this process of construction will be discussed in more detail in the sixth chapter of the thesis). Accordingly, *Taxi Driver* interrogates at once American society's conceptions of heroism, and at the same time also its conceptions and its ideals of masculinity.

CHAPTER 5

TWO GREAT AMERICAN FRONTIERS: THE WILD WEST AND VIETNAM

I indicated in the second chapter that some prominent theorists implicate the absence of a legitimate ‘frontier’ in late twentieth-century society in the American masculinity crisis. The post-World War II American environment (social, geographic, and political) has been relatively devoid of what Susan Faludi calls ‘frontier’ situations, or situations where men are presented with the task – or the opportunity, even – to ‘prove’ their masculinity, according to prevailing traditional conceptions of masculinity. More accurately, the situations that did in fact seem to present such opportunities, for instance and most notably the Vietnam War, were fraught with great ambiguity as to the nobility of the cause concerned and the honour in the ‘task’ itself, and did thus not provide the sense of closure that may otherwise have assuaged the insecurities of American men with regards to their masculine self-identity and security. Moreover, the utter lack of closure in this regard (most evidently in the case of the Vietnam War) is seen as having, if anything, simply further damaged any such sense of masculine confidence in the male population of the United States (Faludi *Stiffed* 378-380).

In this chapter I will explain how *Taxi Driver* addresses this aspect of the masculinity crisis. I will first discuss how *Taxi Driver* can be read as a Western film and how it invokes notions pertaining to the ‘Western myth’ of the 19th-century American frontier and to the romantic cowboy characters of that time. I will then indicate how the film, by posing as an anachronistic, modern, urban ‘equivalent’ of a classical Western, exposes a certain potentially dysfunctional nostalgia for the Western frontier – a nostalgia that lies, as I will emphasize, at the heart of American society. I will refer specifically in this section to the symbolic value of guns in American society; for guns seem to function as continual reminders of the values, still largely revered, of America’s frontier times, and specifically of the kind of regeneratively violent masculinity that appears, one may argue, to have had a functional place in those times.

In the subsequent section of the chapter I will discuss how *Taxi Driver* comments on American society’s attempts to find or construct a new ‘frontier’ in the twentieth century, a frontier according to which society could understand and express itself and according to which conceptions of masculinity could be established (or, rather, maintained). In this

sense, I will indicate that the character of Travis Bickle can be read as not only an American individual but rather, metaphorically, as representative of America as a nation – a reading that has been employed by various analysts of the film. I will point out the correlation, for example, between the xenophobia of Travis Bickle and a xenophobia inherent in America's 'quest' for a new frontier. I will then extensively discuss *Taxi Driver's* treatment of the Vietnam War as such a new American frontier, with specific reference to the way that the construction of the Vietnam 'frontier' has been telling of the American masculinity crisis. During the course of this discussion I will point out how reading Travis Bickle as representative of the American nation exposes the notion that it is not merely the masculinity of certain individual American men that is in crisis, but, as some more politically inclined theorists have pointed out, the very 'masculinity' of the American nation as a whole – for it is a nation that has been described (and that I will describe), in metaphoric terms, as a 'masculine' nation.

It may be necessary to add here, for the sake of clarity, that the 'Western myth' of which some analysts like Jenni Calder speak (and which will be of prime importance in this chapter) is really a set of related myths, one of the most prominent of which is the myth of regeneration through violence. In line with the arguments of Calder and others I will often refer here simply to a single, general 'Western myth', meaning really that complex system of myths (including the fundamental myth of regeneration through violence) that came into existence during and after the 19th-century milieu of Western expansion across the frontier of America's so-called Wild West, and that deal with that time and that process.

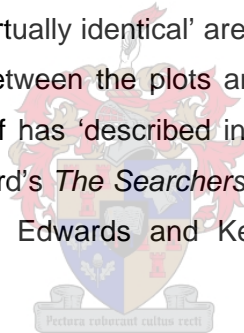
TAXI DRIVER AS A WESTERN

Numerous writers have pointed out the resemblances between *Taxi Driver's* narrative and that of a typical classic Western film. Laurence Friedman notes that the form of the Western 'structures the narrative' of *Taxi Driver* (Friedman 84); and various writers (for instance, Ben Famiglietti and Jenni Piston) have written whole articles specifically on the extent to which this appears to be the case. Ben Famiglietti proposes that Scorsese 'deliberately invokes' the 'codes and conventions of the Western to underpin *Taxi Driver,*' and he credits Scorsese with the achievement of updating the old form of the Western: 'Scorsese has ingeniously reworked the ritual qualities of the Western in order

to establish *Taxi Driver* as a new version of Hollywood's oldest genre' (Famiglietti online).

Taxi Driver and The Searchers

The most obvious clue towards establishing a connection between *Taxi Driver* and the form of a Western film lies in *Taxi Driver's* rather overt and widely documented reference to John Ford's famous Western, *The Searchers* (1956). 'The parallels between the two films have been treated extensively and now seem fairly self-evident,' writes John Thurman (Thurman online); and indeed, many writers seem simply to assume the connection between the two films as if it were quite obvious. Friedman expressively notes that *The Searchers* holds a 'sovereign position' among the many influential films that have informed *Taxi Driver*, as *Taxi Driver's* plot mimics that of Ford's film; and Famiglietti goes so far as to say that 'the narrative and basic thematic structure of Scorsese's film does appear to be virtually identical to Ford's classic' (Famiglietti online). Such a statement is debatable; 'virtually identical' are strong words – but it is undeniable that there are clear similarities between the plots and the characters of the two films. Scriptwriter Paul Schrader himself has 'described in detail how many aspects of [*Taxi Driver's*] plot are suggested by Ford's *The Searchers*, with Bickle serving as an updated version of John Wayne's Ethan Edwards and Keitel's pimp standing in for Scar' (Rosenbaum online).



The clearest similarities lie in the basic plot of the two films. Both essentially concern the 'violent attempt to rescue a womanchild who has been abducted or seduced into an alien world of the wilderness or the night, and to wreak vengeance on her abductor' (Famiglietti online). In *The Searchers*, Ethan Edwards (played by John Wayne) is on a quest to find his niece, Debbie, and to rescue her (though the audience is kept guessing about his actual motives) from the Comanche Indian tribe that has abducted her and specifically from the Comanche chief, Scar, who has made her his 'squaw', it seems. Ethan's rugged, unpleasantly tough and sometimes even immoral 'cowboy' character, his quite overt racism towards Indians, and the dangerous nature of his quest, all connote the use of violence, and indeed it is (as has been the tradition in Westerns) by means of violence that Edwards and his allies eventually rescue Debbie and kill Scar. In spite of Wayne's uncharacteristically anti-heroic character, thus, the film adheres to the age-old Western formula of regeneration through violence, and in this sense it is a rather

typical Western. It is clear that *Taxi Driver's* narrative has many parallels here: Travis's character mimics that of Ethan, Iris is a substitute for Debbie, and Sport stands in for Scar. Sport has made Iris his 'squaw' even at her young age and lured her into his 'wilderness' (the world of prostitution) in a way reminiscent of Scar's abduction of Debbie, and Travis, as does Ethan, goes on a violent quest to rescue Iris (Debbie) – even if he is unsure if she wants to be 'saved' or not – and to kill Sport (Scar). In certain ways, thus, the two narratives can be understood to be very similar portrayals of the myth of regeneration through violence.

It is clear that at least some of the characters in the two films (Ethan and Travis, Debbie and Iris, Scar and Sport) display similarities regarding their respective places in the narratives of the films. Moreover, specific distinct similarities (in personal traits) between the characters of Ethan and Travis are evident. Most obviously, the two characters are equally lonely. Their loneliness is greatly emphasized in both films; Travis's extreme loneliness – discussed at length in the previous chapter – mirrors that of Ethan as he walks, pointedly alone, into the scene at the beginning, or, famously, into the bright, isolated expanse of desert at the end of *The Searchers*. Both Ethan and Travis are clearly racists, Travis towards blacks (it is clear from the way he looks suspiciously at the black people he encounters, revealing a 'deep-seated fear and hatred of black men' – Sparknotes online) and Ethan, very overtly, towards Indians. Also, they are each first seen wearing a uniform of a war that just ended; both are veterans for the defeated side (Famiglietti online). In a way, thus, they are both – aptly – introduced as warriors.

In both films, furthermore, the audience is given clues that the main characters may end up doing something horrible. It has been pointed out that Travis's eventual violent behaviour is foreshadowed throughout *Taxi Driver*; similarly, in *The Searchers* the audience is constantly kept guessing – right until the end – whether or not Ethan wants to save or actually kill his abducted and 'tainted' niece. Wayne's young sidekick Martin actually mentions that he is worried about what Ethan might do when they actually find Debbie. In similar vein, in both films the distinction between the cowboy 'protagonist' (Ethan and Travis) and the Indian 'antagonist' (Scar and Sport) is meticulously blurred and finally even obliterated. The scene in *Taxi Driver* where 'cowboy' Travis becomes an 'Indian' in his lethal confrontation with Sport is clearly intended to mimic Ethan's confrontation with the already slain Scar – a most memorable scene where Ethan,

supposedly the cowboy, actually scalps his nemesis, and thus represents an Indian (Friedman 84).

Finally, the settings in the two films – though overtly, desert as opposed to city, they are quite opposed – each function as an influential entity that greatly affects the characters concerned (Famiglietti online). In both cases, in Ford's film literally and in Scorsese's symbolically, the landscape (the 'landscape' of the city, in *Taxi Driver*) represents an inhospitable wilderness that shapes its inhabitants into violent beings. *Taxi Driver's* New York city and the crime that seems to have become a part of it replace and come to embody the wild, open and dangerous Indian-occupied desert portrayed in *The Searchers* via Ford's Monument Valley. The dangerous, hostile nature of both these landscapes is emphasized in the respective films through overwhelming red imagery: the 'ominous red sky' and the 'red landscape' in Ford's film, and the sharp, imposing red lights ('taillights, traffic lights, and the reflection of the Bellmore Cafeteria's red lights on Travis's body') that seem to pervade *Taxi Driver's* New York (Piston online).

Travis the cowboy

Besides the distinct similarities between *Taxi Driver* and *The Searchers* (and specifically between Travis and Ethan), the character of Travis Bickle embodies a host of traits that have come to be generally associated, largely through the many Hollywood Westerns of the past century, with the cowboy type of the frontier myth. There are intertextual references in Travis's behaviour (on top of those to *The Searchers's* Ethan) to other film cowboys; as I have indicated in the third chapter, Travis mimics cowboy figures such as Doc Holliday and characters from *The Wild Bunch* and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* in his execution of the brothel shootout. In the mirror rehearsal scenes Travis mimics Jim Bowie, and he literally quotes the protagonist of *Shane* – a film that, along with *The Searchers*, has been one of the most important and exemplary Westerns of the twentieth century (Engeman online). Also, as has been mentioned, Travis is literally called 'cowboy' both by Sport and by the timekeeper, who says, 'come back any time, cowboy,' after Travis gives him the money.

Moreover, as Laurence Friedman observes, Travis employs a 'self-conscious appropriation of cowboy-and-Indian motifs' (Friedman 69). His cowboy boots are most obvious in this regard; and he also walks like a cowboy, with his legs in wide arcs like

someone who frequently rides horses. Notably, Travis's loneliness, which has been shown to establish his character as an ironic portrayal of a general Hollywood hero, associates him specifically with the archetypal cowboy hero. 'The movie cowboy is the... loneliest man in the world' (Waswo 297); Travis, then, being 'God's lonely man,' invokes a clear reference to the movie cowboy's supreme loneliness. As the movie cowboy's loneliness is emphasized by the vast, empty landscape surrounding him, so too is Travis's loneliness underscored by his landscape, the city – for, ironically, even if that city is filled to a claustrophobic extent with people, this only serves to emphasise Travis's loneliness, as he cannot relate to them.

Furthermore, Travis is, like many of the most popular cowboy heroes before him, a 'mysterious stranger.' Being mysterious and unknown, and perhaps accordingly being unpredictable and possibly dangerous, has been an appealing trait of numerous famous cowboy-type characters. The 'romantic possibilities of the wayfaring stranger are enormous,' notes Jenny Calder in her *There Must Be A Lone Ranger*, 'as each new Western hero emerges on the screen, the challenge of mystery comes with him' (Calder 177). Sergio Leone's 'man with no name,' for instance, played by Clint Eastwood in the 'Spaghetti Westerns' of the sixties, is 'tantalisingly independent' and mysteriously appealing for the reason that we do not know his past, not even his name (Calder 177). Shane, whom Travis quotes in the mirror scene, is the 'best of all possible examples of the mysterious stranger;' we do not initially know his history or his capacity for action, as it is only 'darkly hinted that Shane has killed' (Calder 18). Travis has the exact same air of mystery and potential danger about him; we are told that he is a Vietnam veteran, and it is thus likely (or 'darkly hinted') that he has killed and can handle a gun, but we do not know at all what the rest of his history is. On the other hand, we do not know for certain if he even ever served in combat, or if his assertion about his Vietnam service is even true in the first place – it may be merely another one of his delusional fantasies.

THE WILD WEST IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICA

Travis is clearly constructed as a modern-day cowboy, a gunslinger who finds himself, rather anachronistically, in claustrophobic, populated 1970s New York instead of in the open, desolate, wild desert of 19th-century America. Travis's cowboy-like behaviour is as anachronistic, for in his modern, urban context, the same violent behaviour that in the

wild frontier – or at least in the myths of the wild frontier – would have been justifiable, even normal, becomes instead criminal.

This portrayal of a cowboy devoid of the wild frontier that justifies his violent ways – that perhaps even justifies his very lonely, rugged existence – draws attention to an interesting and very important phenomenon of American society. For, as may have become evident in the discussion concerning American portrayals of heroism (in the previous chapter) and as has been briefly noted in discussion of the masculinity crisis (in the second chapter), the idea of the wild frontier and the idea of the cowboy figure that inhabits it – as well as the numerous key myths that surround these ideas – have continued to be extremely important in American society, regardless of how much that society (and its environment and institutions) has actually changed over the years.

The Wild West in American popular culture

In the first place, the frontier of the Wild West has served as the cornerstone for American popular entertainment of the twentieth century, inspiring at first a myriad of pulp dime novels, and later, increasingly, innumerable films from Hollywood (Calder xi-xiii). It served as the most prominent theme in the majority of films of the first half of the century, with John Ford's exemplary Westerns providing the American – and the global – public with action-packed, exciting and extremely popular re-presentations of the mythic West (Waswo 302). The Western theme continued to be significant after the Second World War and through the seventies (see Sergio Leone's widely popular 'Spaghetti Western' trilogy), and still manages – though to a lesser extent – to be a popular theme in mainstream Hollywood films to this day (McReynolds 46). *Posse*, *Tombstone*, *Dances with Wolves*, *The Quick and the Dead*, *Open Range*, *Maverick*, *Bad Girls* and *Wyatt Earp*, all films made during or after the 1990s, are only some of the most important recent examples of mainstream Westerns.

Moreover, there are few mainstream American film genres and filmic character types that do not owe some debt to the influence of the Western film genre, its cowboy characters and the myths that it dealt with (Engeman online). The Western itself has been reworked in many different modern forms, and accordingly, 'many of the characteristics of the traditional Western hero have been moving into the contemporary world' of entertainment (Calder 214). Some films, disguised in various generic forms,

are at heart really little more than Westerns, adhering to the same typical narrative formulas and characters. George Lucas's extremely popular *Star Wars* series, for instance, has been described – by Lucas himself – as the product of a 'desire to reconstruct the cowboy hero for a modern audience' (Engeman online). His *Star Wars* films fundamentally read like typical Westerns – the vast desert has simply been turned into vast outer space, the horses and the horse chases transformed into space-ships and space-ship chases (and battles), and some of the guns into 'light sabres'. These are all changes that are really inconsequential to the basic narrative drive of the films, and they simply constitute a different (and a rather original, clearly appealing) fantastic façade for the story.

Most of the popular Hollywood representations of the Wild West deal with the half century or so from the beginning of the Civil War to the end of the 19th century; 'those years have yielded most of what has characterized the Western' (Calder xii). Clearly, these 'brief years of heyday' of the West have been 'studied, loved and enjoyed' (Calder xi), through popular entertainment and otherwise, to such an extent that the 'Western myth continues to live after a hundred years and more repetition than any other basic myth in the world's history' (Calder xiii). In the process, the Western myth has become so crucial to American society's conceptions of itself and to its understanding of the world that it continues to shape American ideology to a remarkable extent – even on a political level, as it 'nourishes' the very 'aggressive patriotism of America herself' (Calder xiii). Richard Slotkin, author of *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America*, has written extensively on the ways in which politicians have used the idea of the wild and hostile Western frontier to 'tap a vein of latent ideological power' – in such crucial projects as, for instance, motivating the American public in favour of the Vietnam War (Slotkin 3 – this will be touched on in detail later).

Nostalgia for the Western frontier

A plausible explanation for the undying popularity and influence of the Western myth, is that there exists a certain nostalgia in American society for the times when the West, in other words, the American frontier, was still 'wild'. Of course, the highly romanticized popular portrayals of the Wild West in Western films would account, in part, for the perpetuation of such a nostalgia; certainly if the reality of those times were depicted more frequently, such films – and the very idea of the Wild West – would scarcely have

been as popular today as they have turned out to be. It seems that filmmakers (like Ford) know how to draw on society's romanticized, nostalgic notions of the Western frontier, and to feed their audiences the kind of myths that they (the audiences) already have in mind. It is important, thus, to emphasize that the myths of the Wild West probably differ drastically from the reality of those times (as Jenni Calder so extensively elaborates in her book *There Must Be A Lone Ranger*). In the following discussion, society's 'memory' of the Wild West – as such a memory has been shaped and distorted over the years by all kinds of factors, notably the film industry – will be the primary object of discussion, as opposed to the actual frontier that existed over a century ago.

The idea of a nostalgic yearning for an untamed, hostile frontier, as the wilderness and the desert – and even budding towns – are depicted in Western films, has a specific relevance to masculinity crisis theory. The nostalgia for the Western frontier appears to be closely associated with a correlating nostalgia for the specific masculine paradigm that has a crucial place within the milieu of the mythic Western frontier. It is, of course, the paradigm of the original American 'rugged individual', the violent, stoical and lonely cowboy – a character who is at home in the wilderness of the frontier, and whose decisive and frequently violent ways are justified by it. If films and other popular portrayals may serve as an indication, society seems to yearn for a milieu when such a kind of masculinity still had a relatively clear legitimacy. Today, as ever before, TV shows and films continually 'rekindle the appeal of hard men combating the challenges of the great outdoors' (Beynon 128).

Jenni Calder suggests that the yearning for such times in which men were shaped by the adverse circumstances of the Western frontier into the mould of the 'rugged individual' type – times, moreover, during which such a transformation was clearly meaningful, if not essential for a man's survival and for the protection of civilization – is a key factor in the undying popularity of the Western myth in American society (Calder xii-xiii). 'There were just men on the last frontier,' notes Calder; 'there were heroes of skill and courage... there were situations in which action had meaning' (Calder xiii). John Wayne himself has said, about his ideologically slanted film *The Alamo*, that he made it 'to remind people not only in America but everywhere that there were once men and women who had the guts to stand up for the things they believed' (in Calder 197). Clearly, the Western hero, meaningfully surrounded by the vast Western wilderness, is a

useful and easily accessible 'reminder of past glory, of a period when the wild summoned the best out of men' (Calder 3). According to the Western myth, the harsh frontier 'shaped' men into heroic figures, and it was a dangerous process. 'At the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man,' Frederick Jackson Turner noted a century ago; 'he must accept the conditions which it furnishes, or perish' (in Calder 10). The romantic nature of this dangerous process causes the Western myth to enjoy lasting popularity – and it has certainly supported the perpetuation of the masculine type of hero of that myth, namely the Westerner, or, as he is more commonly known, the cowboy.

One of the central problems in the crisis of modern American masculinity appears to be that such banally simple, relatively clear, and apparently absolute 'tests' of manhood of the frontier no longer exist for men to prove their masculinity in easily recognizable ways. According to Susan Faludi – and according to this reading of *Taxi Driver* – the nostalgia for such tests of manhood poses numerous problems. American men arguably still tend to see themselves, in some ways, in terms of the kind of masculine paradigms that have been perpetuated and emphasized through the myth of the Western frontier. As Faludi notes, 'the promise of a frontier' is a crucial factor in what she describes as *the* 'national male paradigm' of America (Faludi *Stiffed* 26). Moreover, the men concerned may expect or seek the same kinds of 'tests' that existed in the Wild West (tests that 'summoned the best out of men') in order to prove their masculinity. Though the 'elements of the old formula for attaining manhood' – that formula which is endorsed in the Western myth – have 'vanished in short order' in modern times (Faludi *Stiffed* 30), the formula itself still exists, and it sets a strong and an arguably unrealistic standard. The frontier has disappeared, in other words, but the 'cowboy' – or the platonic masculine ideal that the cowboy connoted – remains.

It becomes evident, then, how these notions of the masculinity crisis are explored in *Taxi Driver* through comment on the Wild West and through Travis's construction as a cowboy character. Travis is an embodiment of the problem discussed above: a cowboy without a frontier, or, at best, a cowboy with a new kind of urban 'frontier', which is in crucial ways dissimilar to the frontier of the Wild West, and which does not justify his 'cowboy' behaviour. Because his actions connote dishonourable, criminal behaviour, and because he seems, in his cowboy persona, so pointedly out of place in the modern environment of New York, it is possible to read Travis as a purposefully constructed

perversion of the classic cowboy character (as much as he is a perversion of general Hollywood heroic ideals – discussed previously – which stemmed largely from the original ‘cowboy’ heroic archetype in the first place). His subscribing, like any other cowboy, to the central myth of the Wild West – the myth of regeneration through violence – can likewise be read as a perversion of that myth, in the context of the Western myth.

According to this reading, the classic cowboy character – represented quite awkwardly here by Travis – is so dysfunctional in modern society that he becomes a caricature, on the one hand, but he also becomes quite a dangerous threat to the lawful institutions of society (that were largely missing in the Western frontier), on the other. Most importantly, the cowboy without the frontier is constructed, through Travis, as a psychopath. His attitudes and actions, which are really nothing extraordinary for a cowboy (Travis would likely not have stood out as a villain or even as a delusional character if *Taxi Driver* had in fact been set in the 19th-century Wild West), become psychotic out of the context of the frontier environment. It is important to bear in mind here that Travis ‘shows no inclination to go home;’ despite his ‘hatred for New York,’ his frontier, he ‘never invokes home or anyplace else as a viable alternative to the excremental city’ (Friedman 73). He seems to indulge, in his obsession, in his frontier and in his ‘mission’, disregarding any purpose that this mission might serve for the community – similar to the ‘wastrel’ that replaced the functional frontiersman in that paradigm shift which I discussed in the second chapter.

Taxi Driver and America’s gun culture

The psychosis of the ‘cowboy’ (and of the values that he connotes) and the problems related to the perpetuation of the Western myth in modern American society are most succinctly symbolized in *Taxi Driver* through the portrayal of guns and through Travis’s relationship to guns. Through reference to guns, also, the masculinity of the cowboy type is specifically investigated – and the psychosis, thus, of the Western paradigm of masculinity as it continues to exist and exert influence in modern society. For the gun has arguably been the defining symbol of the cowboy in the Western myth – and many analysts have pointed out in particular its symbolic value in connoting the cowboy’s masculinity.

The symbolic importance of the gun in American culture (in the context of the Western myth, mainly, as well as otherwise) will need to be contextualized in order for the argument to proceed. In the first place, the gun has become a crucial symbol of the myth of regeneration through violence. In frontier times, it was a necessary tool for the frontiersman not only to 'protect himself against the hazards of the country,' but moreover to clear the path for civilization, and to protect the settlers from the hostilities of the wild frontier (Calder 105). It was, thus, not merely an instrument of violence but, much more importantly, an instrument necessary (as necessary as the violence that it implies) for the progress and regeneration of civilized Western society, and it has become a key symbol in connoting that progress and regeneration (Calder 105, 106).

Interestingly, the term 'regeneration through violence' may be more meaningful here than the mere implication of violence protecting and helping the progress of society would lead one to believe. For the gun as symbol not only connotes regeneration through violence, but also regeneration (of society) *per se*: in other words, virility, or, more specifically, man's capacity to procreate, and thus to literally help his society to grow and expand. In the Western myth the gun is seen as *part* of a man, in the sense that it is essential to him and to his survival, but also in the sense that it literally defines his masculinity – his very sex. It is 'the most overt symbol of masculinity,' notes Jenni Calder; it is 'an adjunct of the body... by implication sexual... the gun is an essential feature of the man's manliness' (Calder 113). 'The cowboy unarmed is de-sexed' – as Zane Grey's fictional Lassiter character says, 'gun-packin' in the west since the Civil War... is the difference between a man and somethin' not a man' (Calder 113, 114). In this sense, the gun has (also conveniently because of its shape) come to be associated, symbolically, with a phallus - a 'suggestiveness' which, interestingly, may even have 'facilitated the cowboy's appeal at a time when the cinema refrained from explicit sex' (Calder 113).

The importance of guns as symbols, phallic or otherwise, in the Western myth has helped foster a 'gun culture' in American society which has remained prominent to this day. In spite of the waning of the wild, hostile frontier, the myth of regeneration through (specifically) *gun* violence is still a crucial shaping factor in American society, and guns remain the key symbols within this myth. As Jenni Calder notes, 'the idea that the gun is a vital tool necessary for the Westerner has never died' (Calder 105). 'The gun culture is

self-perpetuating even without the kind of justification that the “good man with a gun” [portrayed in classical Westerns] lends it,’ she suggests; ‘it has perpetuated itself into 1970s without any difficulty’ (Calder 120). Other analysts concur: David Kopel, a current American pro-gun lobbyist, illustrates the ‘degree to which guns have permeated American consciousness’ by describing a host of more than twenty diverse American figures of speech which are ‘loaded with gun metaphors’ (Kopel online), and highlights the facts that ‘the United States protects the right to bear arms far more vigorously than other nations do’, and that ‘America is the only nation not to license handguns’ (Kopel online). Kopel proceeds to discuss the undying popularity of guns particularly in the light of their actual waning usefulness in a civilized, law-abiding modern environment. ‘Although few Americans today hunt for their food as their ancestors did,’ he argues, for instance, ‘the sporting popularity of guns in America maintains a link with the frontier heritage’ (Kopel online). Once again, thus, a nostalgia in American society for its ‘frontier heritage’ is evident – here in the symbolic (almost *exclusively* symbolic) value of guns in certain situations.

In accordance with the masculinity crisis theory that I sketched in the second chapter, American society’s – and particularly *male* American society’s – fascination with guns (as symbols) can be understood in a relatively similar light. The gun, as symbol and not as actual tool, is a perfect instrument for the ‘display of violence’; it does not even have to be real violence, but merely the implicit threat – the mere idea – of violence. I have elaborated on how the display of violence has become a signifier of manhood, in a modern society increasingly devoid of clear signifiers of manhood – and what easier way to connote masculinity in such a society than to ‘wear’ (or own) a gun? If the myth of regeneration through violence still serves as a key myth in society’s understanding of masculinity, and if, in post-modern times, superficial images or ‘symbols’ are becoming more and more important as substitutes for the reality that they are supposed to symbolize, then the gun – as chief symbol of the myth of regeneration through violence – is a perfectly convenient substitute for ‘real’ masculinity. It is a speculative argument by its very nature, but one need merely consider again the boost in sales of the Magnum .44 after *Dirty Harry*. The Magnum .44 is not a generally useful handgun (the American police specifically have not officially used it because of its clumsy size and because its shells can easily cause collateral damage – Wikipedia: *Dirty Harry* online), and it is certainly no more useful for protective purposes than most other guns. Easy Andy even

tells Travis, in *Taxi Driver*, that the Magnum .44 'might be a little too big for practical purposes'. But the fact is that it is a big gun, one of the biggest handguns in the world, and if guns connote masculinity or virility, then the Magnum literally towers above the rest. The implications of the symbolic value of guns as phallic symbols in this regard are self-evident; a big gun here can be understood to connote a big penis – an idea that may appeal to many of those men who find themselves insecure about their masculinity. As Joan Mellen notes, Harry's Magnum serves as a 'surrogate penis, gigantic and under his complete control, a fantasy of the terrified and the impotent' (Mellen 296).

It can be no coincidence that there is such acute emphasis specifically on this same Magnum .44 in *Taxi Driver*, which was made only five years after *Dirty Harry* and thus in the wake of the remarkable rise in the sales of that gun. The character played by Scorsese, the jealous passenger, first points out the Magnum .44 to Travis – glorifying its powerful properties rather graphically – and Travis then later specifically asks Easy Andy, the weapons dealer, if he has one of these particular guns in stock. It is also the gun which Travis is most often seen with, both while 'rehearsing' and also while in action. When he first holds it in his hand, in Andy's presence, he feels it and looks at it as if it were some kind of religious artefact, and this impression is maintained throughout the rest of the film. Andy glorifies the gun, noting that it is used to kill elephants in Africa, and he dramatically exaggerates, 'it's a real monster... it'll stop a car at a hundred yards... put a round right through the engine block.' Even to the audience, the Magnum is constructed as a somehow super-natural object worthy of great reverence, as the 'first and last shots of the .44 Magnum are slow close-ups panning from the handle to the barrel' (Sparknotes online). Moreover, Travis seems to become more and more attracted to the gun as the film progresses; later on he holds it in his hand even while watching television, lost in thought. Travis's general intimacy with guns, bordering sometimes on what appears to be a mystical connection, is further emphasized in the first mirror rehearsal scene: here, Travis actually attaches a gun to his body – connecting it to a device that propels it out from under his jacket, along his arm – and the gun thus literally becomes an 'adjunct' of his body, emphasizing a kind of connection between him and the weapon.

The timing of the point in the narrative of the film where Travis buys his guns is probably no coincidence, either. Travis is arguably inspired to buy guns by the jealous

passenger, who first points out the Magnum .44, but perhaps more importantly, Travis decides to buy the guns specifically after he is rejected by Betsy. It appears that the guns may be some kind of substitute for her; a substitute, perhaps, for sex. Such a notion is reinforced in various other instances in the film, as guns (and gunplay) are equated or related to sex in different ways. Laurence Friedman notes how Travis is 'inspired by the look and feel of the .44 Magnum – perhaps more than he would have been by any woman, Betsy included' (Friedman 81); and when Easy Andy presents Travis with the Magnum, he says, 'isn't that a little honey,' highlighting the parallel between gun and woman. Also, when Travis practises shooting with the Magnum .44 at the shooting range, 'with each blasting discharge from the Magnum, Travis's body shudders and shakes in an imitation orgasm that likens the .44 Magnum to the penis' (Friedman 82). Immediately after this scene, Travis watches pornography in the cinema, with a female moaning and the words 'harder, harder' audible in the background, and he shapes his hand in the image of a gun, pointing at the screen. After this scene, in a sequence comprehensively entitled 'Foreplay to Gunplay' by Paul Schrader in his Screenplay, 'the feigned ecstasy of a female voice' then 'fades into Travis's voice-over back in his apartment where a tracking shot slowly moves towards Travis, holding his Magnum in his hand' (Friedman 82). And in the very scene of the Magnum .44's introduction, Scorsese's character asks, 'did you ever see what a .44 Magnum can do to a woman's pussy' – already emphasizing the simile with the phallus, and drawing a parallel between gun violence and sex. When Travis shoots Sport, he exclaims, 'suck on this,' invoking the same simile between the gun and the phallus. Finally, in an almost imperceptibly subtle reference that connects guns with sex, Iris, who as prostitute can be read as a symbol of sex, first introduces herself to Travis under another name, her prostitute name: 'Easy' – which is also the name of the gun dealer, 'Easy' Andy.

In *Taxi Driver*, thus, the gun becomes a symbol for the phallus and a symbolic substitute for the sex that is absent in Travis's world; in this way, it is constructed as a symbol of masculinity. It is important to consider that it becomes a defining symbol of Travis's masculinity only after he fails with Betsy: his masculinity hurt and his self-confidence and sense of manhood shattered, Travis turns to guns and to violence in order to nurse his personal 'masculinity crisis', and thus attempts to adopt quite literally the myth of (personal) regeneration through violence. Consequently, the gun symbolizes a kind of desperate masculinity that acts only as a substitute for the 'real' thing, and which, in light

of Travis's eventual behaviour, is shown to be dysfunctional.

In this regard the symbol of the gun also emphasizes the perversity of the cowboy character (or caricature), and of the Western myth of which he is a part, in modern society. While the gun is a functional symbol of regeneration through violence in the Western myth, its functional legitimacy may be contained within – and limited to – the parameters of this myth, and it may indeed become dysfunctional in the context of modern society – in the same way that the myth of regeneration through violence itself may lose the legitimacy that it enjoys (within the Western myth) when it is actually applied in modern society. Travis acts the modern cowboy; he 'reinvents himself as a gunslinger' (Friedman 69) and he literally performs the myth of regeneration through violence as any 'cowboy' would – he does so, moreover, in a film the narrative of which is constructed almost identically to that of a classic Western. With this in mind, the portrayal of Travis's personal psychosis and the immorality of his behaviour expose a parallel psychosis and immorality extant in the Western myth and in related assumptions concerning the inherent value of regeneration through violence. Accordingly, through its construction of Travis as a gun-toting 'cowboy' in modern society, *Taxi Driver* can be read as critically examining the notions that these myths and assumptions should retain such overwhelming purchase in modern American society, and should still influence American society's conceptions of masculinity to such an extent as is apparently the case.

NEW FRONTIERS

I have mentioned that the myth of the Wild Western frontier has been refabricated and perpetuated in America throughout the past century, via such narrative forms as popular dime novels and, increasingly as film became a prominent medium, Hollywood films. I have also suggested that the continuing popularity and potency of the myth may be related to a nostalgia in American society for the times – and particularly, the kind of heroes, and the kind of legitimate heroic behaviour – that constitute its subject. It is highly interesting in this regard to observe how the Western myth, and the concept of a frontier so central to it, has actually influenced American society's *weltanschauung* and the political ideology of the very nation (no less than the public's understanding of such political matters) in the twentieth century.

The promises of World War II

First, it needs to be emphasized that the Second World War presented a 'new frontier' to the American people. At the cost of many lives and in the most grievous fashion – for it may seem insensitive to consider the matter so clinically in this regard – the atrocities of this time necessitated an envisioning, on the part of the American public and of the world at large, of a new 'frontier' that needed to be conquered; a frontier similar, in certain ways, to the frontier of the Wild West. The 'wartime front' (mainly in Europe and Japan) became the new frontier landscape, the 'clear and evil enemy' – previously the Indian – was now predominantly the Nazi (as well as, to a lesser extent, the Japanese soldier), and the civilization to be protected, previously the settlers, was a whole population of 'working war wives' and children (Faludi *Stiffed* 26). The American myth of regeneration through violence, which had been perpetuated along American society's imagination through the popular media for the first half of the twentieth century, found at this point what could arguably be described as its most legitimate function in reality; for while World War II was a milieu of great horrors and terrible violence, at the same time, as Susan Faludi puts it, it was a 'crucible of courage against a clear and visible enemy' the likes of which would not be possible in any even remotely similar successive situations, like Vietnam for instance (Faludi *Stiffed* 29).

In the process of this critical time, during which some of the central tropes of the Western myth were revalidated as integral to the progress and the very survival of American (and global) society, it is no surprise that the Western myth (including specifically the appeal of the idea of a frontier and the related myth of regeneration through violence) remained as prominent as ever before in the imagination of the American public. I noted in the previous chapter how Hollywood churned out an unprecedented number of films – particularly Westerns – during the tumultuous times at the start of the war, fuelling public consent to the necessity of the myth of regeneration through violence and at the same time feeding on the increasing popularity, in such times, of sentiments connoted by the Western. Moreover, the related masculine paradigm of the 'ruthlessly forceful', aggressive, and domineering man, which had previously been described by president Roosevelt (in 1932) as having had its 'place in developing a pioneer country' but having become 'as likely to be a danger as a help' (in Faludi *Stiffed* 20), again found its place in reality. America and its men were called upon

to 'play their part', to 'dominate the world, or else confess a pitiful impotence' (the influential words of Henry Luce, founder and editor of *Time* and *Life* magazines, in Faludi *Stiffed* 22) – and this argument, rash and dangerous as it may seem, 'had its merits in a nation reluctant to respond to Hitler' (Faludi *Stiffed* 22). America's subsequent victory in the war managed to seal the merits of such an argument; and indeed, it would influence America's conceptions of masculinity for years to come – for at the end of the war, V-day arguably constituted *the* definitive American 'national moment of masculine certainty' (Faludi *Stiffed* 19).

According to Susan Faludi, such a definitive 'moment of masculine certainty' unfortunately implied numerous promises to America's men of the future, the men who would grow up in the wake of World War II during the second half of the century. The standards of a specific kind of masculine paradigm were set, and they would prove to be less useful and functional than the men who were subjected to them afterward were led to believe. The fact that such 'promises' of masculinity were not (or could in fact not be) fulfilled, provides the basis of Faludi's argument – the very title of her book, *The Betrayal of the Modern Man*, already implies promises broken. To her, the crucial factor in this 'betrayal' is that 'the frontier, the enemy, the institutions of brotherhood, the women in need of protection – all the elements of the old formula for attaining manhood had vanished in short order' after the Second World War (Faludi *Stiffed* 30). The problem, it appears, is as much this 'vanishing' as the notion that America and its men would not concede the absence of these elements, and perhaps search for an alternative formula. As Faludi notes, throughout the few decades following the war there would be a search instead for a new frontier, for a new enemy, for new 'situations in which action still had meaning' (in Jenni Calder's words), and for new tests of the same traditional kind according to which manhood could be proven (Faludi *Stiffed* 20-25).

Xenophobia and the search for a new frontier

Such a search manifested itself, it is no surprise to learn, in sometimes rather haphazard sentiments of xenophobia; a specific kind of xenophobia, moreover, that one can describe as more than merely a 'fear for the other' but as the process, furthermore, of constructing the other as an enemy. 'All the pillars of the male paradigm had fallen, except the search for the enemy,' notes Faludi. 'What began in the 1950s as an intemperate pursuit of Communists in the government bureaucracy, in the defense

industries, in labor unions, the schools, the media, and Hollywood, would eventually become a hunt for a shape-shifting enemy who could take the form of women at the office, or gays in the military, or young black men on the street, or illegal aliens on the border' (Faludi *Stiffed* 32).

It may be mentioned here that xenophobia of some kind or another had really been a part of American culture – and indeed, of any patriotic culture – since long before McCarthy's inquisitions. As Jenni Calder suggests, 'patriotism needs an enemy, not just a disruptive individual, but something that can embody a threat to a community, society, the entire nation' (Calder 200). Calder is speaking here specifically of the ethnic groups of 'enemies' that have populated America's popular Westerns, be it Indians or (later, in the Westerns of the sixties) Mexicans (Calder 200). The 'use of racial characterization in the presentation of a faceless, dispensable, subhuman foe' has been a crucial structuring current in Western films (Calder 202) – and in countless other Hollywood genres, it might be added – and 'the use of Indians,' for example, as a 'dispensable mass of subhumanity' in film has continued well into the late stages of the twentieth century (Calder 202), in spite of some critical and some self-reflexive Westerns like Ford's rather atypical *Cheyenne Autumn*. Indeed, xenophobia can be understood to be a crucial part of the Western myth (as enemies, real or imagined, are an essential feature of any frontier, the original Wild West naturally being no exception), and can thus be conceived of as forming a part of America's patriotic history itself. But the xenophobia of post-World War II America, if one follows Faludi's argument, contained a unique kind of strained desperation; there was literally a search for an enemy – for *any* potential enemy – because the prospect of there being no enemy was a threat in itself. It threatened to expose the betrayal of those 'promises' made at the end of the war, and the fault lines of that tried and tested American formula for attaining manhood.

Travis Bickle, ever the embodiment, in *Taxi Driver*, of Faludi's male in crisis, illustrates such a kind of xenophobia in his behaviour throughout the film. From the start of *Taxi Driver* the city is constructed – through Travis's subjective perception – as a kind of frontier (I have already indicated the simile of New York as an 'urban wilderness'), and its inhabitants are depicted, according to the elaborate descriptions of 'sick, venal scum' in Travis's voice-over diary and through a general impression of hostility that is emphasized in numerous scenes, as Travis's enemies. Almost all the black people

whom Travis encounters are constructed in such a way: when Travis walks or drives past groups of black people, they look at him threateningly; when he meets Charlie T, the black man in the cafeteria, Charlie T seems to Travis to pose a threat – he jokingly makes a gun-imitation gesture at Travis – and Travis eyes him suspiciously. In the same scene Travis looks at a group of black people in the cafeteria while his fellow cabbies are talking to him, and he becomes so immersed in eyeing them, so obsessed with their apparently threatening nature, that the conversation becomes a murmur in the background until someone summons him from his paranoid reverie, saying, ‘Travis?’

The city and the seething mass of its people are even presented to us, as viewers, in a threatening way, as imposing red lights, shady characters and threatening glares abound in almost every shot of the dark, ominous streets. As has been noted, such impressions can be read, throughout the entire film, to represent Travis’s perspective, and everything we see is potentially subject to his delusional state of mind. Indeed, the camera, a ‘restless eye’ which ‘shuffles back and forth, peering at opaque faces or carelessly deposited trash’ (Jacobs 136), seems at times to be as obsessively intrigued by the ‘filth’ of the city as Travis himself. It is plausible, then, that the hostility of the city (and of its inhabitants) is as exaggeratedly portrayed to us as it is distorted by Travis’s paranoia.

In Travis’s world such a paranoid xenophobia makes sense, in a certain way. It has been noted that Travis only manages to establish a meaningful identity by means of violence; no matter how he tries in different ways, it is only through his violent action at the end of the film that his identity ‘crystallizes’ and that he ironically becomes accepted by society. In order for his violent action to be in any way legitimate – and of course, its actual legitimacy is quite debatable, but to all appearances of *Taxi Driver’s* narrative it is legitimate at least in the fictional New York of the film – one can assume that it needs to be perpetrated against evil personages, against legitimate ‘enemies’. If his victims could not be understood in such terms, his action would not have been justified, and he would likely not have achieved the hero status that he does (whether in ‘reality’ or in the fantasy of his own deluded mind). So in order for Travis to successfully establish his identity through violence, he first needs to find such ‘enemies’ – and the whole of the film, everything that builds up to the violent climax, and specifically every scene where Travis observes some threatening person, gesture, or impression, can be seen as a

search on Travis's part for potential enemies. In this sense, he is a cowboy without a frontier, and thus without legitimacy or meaning, until he manages to construct the world around him as a frontier and see the people in it as his enemies – only then can he exist meaningfully.

It is easy to read Travis's behaviour as representative of the hateful xenophobia, the search for an enemy, that Faludi describes as a feature of post-World War II masculinity. He constructs his masculinity, as modern American men, according to Faludi, are encouraged to do: 'by prevailing over imaginary enemies on an imaginary landscape' (Faludi *Stiffed* 15). It is telling, furthermore, to consider Travis's construction of a frontier in this regard. It seems that Travis needs the effect of violence in order to achieve a meaningful masculine identity; he needs a viable frontier, in turn, to legitimize that violence. One can consider, accordingly, the masculinity crisis as Faludi would have it. The frontier (both of the Wild West and of World War II) has receded and all but disappeared in the second part of the century, but the paradigms for establishing masculinity that were based on the frontier and its myth of regeneration through violence, have remained. As Faludi points out, men (and American society as a whole) have found it difficult to conceive of alternative ways of establishing their masculine identity – and thus, they have tried to understand their new, changed world in the same old frontier terms, and have sometimes attempted to envision situations and enemies to lend credibility to such an understanding – 'by prevailing over imaginary enemies on an imaginary landscape' (Faludi *Stiffed* 15). In this way, they have, like Travis, continued to rely largely on a key traditional way of establishing manhood – namely, through the myth of regeneration through violence.

'INDIAN COUNTRY': VIETNAM, THE NEW FRONTIER

With the advent of the Vietnam War (I will speak of it as a single war, referring generally to America's engagement in Southeast Asia) during the 1960s, a new opportunity seemed to present itself to American men according to which the type of manhood connoted by the frontier paradigm of masculinity could indeed be achieved or proven. Vietnam, to all appearances, was the frontier of the next generation; the chance for the sons of World War II fathers, as Faludi notes, to realize their hereditary 'promises' (Faludi 291-293). The myth of regeneration through violence, it seemed, was to become

legitimate once again, and would thus legitimize in turn that paradigm of masculinity inherited from frontier times (and reinforced during World War II) that can be understood to have increasingly lost its place in modern society.

Indeed, American society and, moreover, specifically the administration of President Kennedy, would envision and sketch Vietnam in frontier terms – often literally in the frontier terms of the classic ‘Wild West’ – quite consciously. As Richard Slotkin notes, ‘the symbolism of a “New Frontier” set the terms in which the [Kennedy] administration would seek public consent to and participation in its counterinsurgency “mission” in Southeast Asia’ (Slotkin 3), and it ‘shaped the language through which the resultant wars would be understood by those who commanded and fought them’ (Slotkin 4). Richard Waswo notes that ‘the language and behaviour of American Generals and G.I.s in Vietnam often descended directly from the history and [notably] cinema of Indian-fighting’ (Waswo 332). American society as a whole, both the public at home on American soil as well as the soldiers abroad, came to see Vietnam as the ‘New Frontier’ – to such an extent that Vietnam was known as ‘Indian Country’, search-and-destroy missions, to the soldiers involved, as a game of ‘Cowboys and Indians’, and a ‘massive military escalation’ at one point in the war, for instance, was euphemized as ‘moving the “Indians” away from the “fort” so that the “settlers” could plant “corn”’ (Slotkin 4). ‘Fighting dirty’ – an important, acknowledged style of warfare that ‘was expected to prove itself in the field’ in Vietnam – was known by the Green Berets as fighting ‘like the Indians’ (Slotkin 504). The radio call sign of the ‘Ranch Hand’ pilots – who were crucial in the war in that they sprayed defoliating toxins like Agent Orange on the jungle, ‘taming the frontier’ – was ‘cowboy’ (Waswo 334). It may be added that one of the most prominent (and one of the only) films about Vietnam produced during the Vietnam era, John Wayne’s pro-war *The Green Berets* (1968), clearly recognized the value of Wild West terminology in making the war understandable to the American public, as it rather elaborately constructs the Vietnam scenario in terms of ‘cowboys and Indians’ motives (Smith online).

It may be noted that in their use of the frontier metaphor, Kennedy and his advisers ‘certainly understood that they were invoking what was a venerable tradition in American political rhetoric’ and that they were ‘tapping’ a ‘vein of latent ideological power’ (Slotkin 3). Decades earlier, numerous previous presidents, including Andrew Jackson, William

Harrison, Abraham Lincoln and even Teddy Roosevelt had already drawn on their 'frontier origins' and on an inherent American public appreciation of the frontier in order 'to increase their popularity' (Engeman online). Moreover, the frontier metaphor was not simply employed in the Kennedy administration as a reaction to the Vietnam situation; it had been prepared as an ideological tool independently. 'The exchange of an old, domestic, agrarian frontier for a new frontier of world power and industrial development,' Slotkin notes, 'had been a central trope in American political and historiographical debates since the 1890s' (Slotkin 3) – but it was only on Kennedy's inauguration day (in 1961) that the frontier metaphor would be employed so prominently and purposefully. Kennedy made the 'New Frontier' the very motto of his administration, in terms of 'conquering the frontier of space' and 'containing communism', right from the beginning (Engeman online). On that Inauguration Day in 1961, Kennedy spoke of Communism's threat, of 'the prey of hostile powers,' of the 'hour of maximum danger,' of a 'long twilight struggle,' of a nation that he defined, and encouraged, to 'pay any price' and 'oppose any foe' (Faludi *Stiffed* 25). It is evident that for Kennedy and his advisers, the metaphor of the frontier was a 'complexly resonant symbol, a vivid and memorable set of herotales – each a model of successfully and morally justifying action on the stage of historical conflict' (Slotkin 3). It may not be implausible to propose that in a certain sense, the Vietnam War came very conveniently, and was also manipulated very carefully, in terms of how the American public understood it, to support and strengthen that metaphor.

Alas, the Vietnam War would not present the same kind of clear-cut frontier that it was initially constructed as by both those involved in it and those witnessing it, indirectly, from the sideline back on American soil. 'It was seldom a matter of visibly massed armies attacking and defending particular positions,' notes historian Richard Waswo; consequently, 'finding the guerrilla enemy' – and, more importantly, 'recognizing him when found' – posed a very serious problem (Waswo 327, 328). As a result, there were massive bombings with collateral damage, 'the levelling of villages in areas of high guerrilla activity'; many more American troops were required than expected; and actual victories – or even progress of any kind – were so scarce that they had to be constructed for the American public by means of 'falsification reports' and other methods of misinformation (Waswo 328, 329). The increasing pressure on the American military for proof of progress, and the moral problems that such issues posed in the field, was

revealingly ‘translated into a rule-of-thumb expressed by one soldier as: “anything that’s dead and isn’t white is a VC [Vietcong]”’ (Waswo 331).

Accordingly, neither did the Vietnam frontier provide clear justification for the paradigm of masculinity that was arguably required to assuage the insecurities of America and its men. In fact, notes Susan Faludi, the signs that the ‘masculine paradigm of a common mission, a clear frontier with an identifiable enemy...and a calling to protect a population of women and children... had failed would nowhere be so evident as in the nation’s deadly and protracted engagement in Vietnam’ (Faludi *Stiffed* 293). The Vietnam War was ‘hardly the crucible of courage against a clear and visible enemy’ that was faced by the soldiers of World War II (Faludi *Stiffed* 29); ‘it was impossible,’ thus, ‘to fashion a meaningful masculine drama’ out of Vietnam ‘because there were no meaningful threats or even meaningful potential conquests’ (Faludi *Stiffed* 331). Incidents of atrocities such as that at My Lai, where American soldiers killed scores of innocent Vietnamese civilians, accompanied by numerous other reports of American soldiers killing or brutally torturing unarmed Vietnamese and raping young girls, cast a further shadow of doubt across the nature of the Vietnam ‘frontier’, and, moreover, on the psyche of the men involved in the mission (Faludi *Stiffed* 331-333). Furthermore, the fact that soldiers returning from their duty in Vietnam were frequently received by the American society not as heroes but, conversely, as failures on the one hand and as immoral criminals, on the other (Faludi *Stiffed* 299, 379), served to emphasize the downfall of previous paradigms of heroic masculinity (and the ‘betrayal’ of the ‘promises’ of World War II) – and so the Vietnam era can be underscored as a watershed mark in the American masculinity crisis.

Vietnam in Taxi Driver

The character of Travis Bickle succinctly embodies the psyche of the American male in Vietnam. Travis’s connection to Vietnam is made obvious from the start of *Taxi Driver*. He is presented to the audience as a returned Vietnam veteran; he himself plainly mentions his military experience in his initial job interview (he says he was honourably discharged in 1973, two years before America’s withdrawal from Vietnam). Not much is mentioned about Vietnam throughout the rest of the film, but there are further subtle references that emphasize Travis’s Vietnam history. His jacket, for instance, is of marine issue; there is a marine duffel bag that hangs in his apartment; the Mohawk

hairstyle that he sports towards the end of the film connotes Vietnam experience (it was 'a popular haircut for American soldiers to wear in combat' after the 101st Airborne paratroopers made it their signature in World War II, and it became a common haircut for Vietnam Special Operations commandos – Russell online; Sparknotes online); and he makes 'dum-dum' bullets with his knife in the style of an experienced Vietnam soldier. More importantly, perhaps, the mere fact that we are told that Travis was in Vietnam, even if we are told so only briefly, can be seen as a crucial factor in Travis's personality, in his behaviour, and thus in the very narrative of the film. Scorsese himself has 'invariably invoked the Vietnam War as *the* key to Travis's pathology' (Friedman 85). It is a useful key, indeed; for reading *Taxi Driver* – and specifically Bickle's character – with Vietnam in mind illuminates various of the points that have been discussed in the previous section of this chapter.

In the first place, the striking analogy between Travis and Ethan Edwards of *The Searchers* (discussed previously) points towards a parallel analogy between the frontier of Vietnam and the frontier of the Wild West. Travis, the Vietnam veteran, is associated with Ethan and is generally constructed as a cowboy, and thus by implication the comparison is drawn between Vietnam and the Wild West, and between the soldiers of Vietnam, and the cowboys that populated the Wild West. As has been noted, Travis and Ethan both wear the uniforms of the losing side of a war that just ended, and the psychosis of Ethan the cowboy is quite possibly as related to his war experience (and maybe specifically to the failure of his side) as that of Travis is related to his experience in Vietnam.

Travis's enemies, moreover, are constructed like a 'faceless' ethnic group, similar to the Indians of the Wild West or, notably, to the Vietcong of Vietnam. Almost all the threatening characters in the New York Streets (and even in the cafeteria) are black, and in fact in Schrader's screenplay even Travis's three final 'enemies' in the brothel shootout were black people (a proposition that Scorsese changed merely in order not to shock his audience with too extreme racial issues – Internet Movie Database: *Taxi Driver* online). It is probably no coincidence that the first individual black person whom Travis meets – and whom he clearly feels threatened by – is called 'Charlie T'; this may well be an allusion to Vietnam – a likening, specifically, of the black people of Travis's world to the Vietcong of Vietnam – for 'Charlie' was the American codename for the

Vietcong (Waswo 331). It has also been suggested, by one analyst, that the incessant red imagery in *Taxi Driver* – which, in Western terms (such as in the film *The Searchers*), could be seen as connoting the dangerous presence of Indians – here similarly connotes the threat of the ‘red’ communism that constituted the ‘enemy’ in the Vietnam war (Piston online). It seems that in Travis’s world, perhaps only in his deluded mind, the frontier of Vietnam exists even in the streets of New York; and it exists, moreover, as a contemporary embodiment of the frontier of the Wild West.

Travis’s strict and essential adherence to the myth of regeneration through violence is as telling in the context of post-Vietnam America. The myth of regeneration through violence was greatly emphasized in popular Hollywood portrayals of Vietnam (most notably Wayne’s *The Green Berets*); its value was desperately sold to an increasingly sceptical American public, as well as to the soldiers themselves (Whaley 170). It is, of course, a myth that is central to any war. A product, then, of a nation which was encouraged by Kennedy to ‘pay any price’ and ‘oppose any foe’ (Faludi *Stiffed* 25) and whose men were sent to prove their indiscriminate resolve accordingly in Vietnam, Travis has come to see the world essentially in terms of the myth of regeneration through violence, even after the war had ended. Travis’s recourse to violence in his quest for identity is most revealing here; it seems that his imperative method of achieving a solution to his problems (of not being accepted by society, and of feeling as if he lacks a purpose in life) hinges rather instinctively on the myth of regeneration through violence. Additionally, one may note the specific scene where Betsy’s assistant starts arguing with Travis, urging him to leave after Travis tells Betsy that she will ‘die in Hell like the rest of them’. Travis immediately adopts a ludicrously threatening fighting stance – indicating that he is unwilling or incapable of discussing the matter (which is not even serious), but can only see it literally in terms of a battle; in terms, in other words, of the myth of regeneration through violence.

In this sense Travis can be read as an embodiment of the traumatized psyche of the returning Vietnam soldier. According to a psychoanalytical reading of this kind, one can consider that Travis has recently come home from fighting in a violent and relatively senseless war – a war, moreover, around which much of his national identity and his very conception of masculinity has largely been shaped – into a society that rejects him. Travis is a ‘returning war veteran who seeks respite from an overwhelming sense of

anomie and patent loneliness' (Famiglietti online), 'informed by a kind of "failed masculinity" that rose to the public consciousness following the return of the armed forces from Vietnam' (University of Pennsylvania online) – and because he can find no acceptance in his society, he appears to have no alternative but to continue subscribing to the very paradigm of understanding the world (in terms of the myth of regeneration through violence) that he inherits from Vietnam. The fact that he continues to wear his marine jacket even in his day-to-day life reveals his sentiments in this regard.

Accordingly, as Jason Katzman argues in his work on the filmic treatment of the Vietnam Veteran, 'Travis's New York' is constructed – through his subjective perception – as a 'battleground analogous to Vietnam, where the lone soldier fights to survive' (University of Pennsylvania). 'Hacking in New York is little different,' for Travis, 'from soldiering in Vietnam', and in these terms he can also justify his violent behaviour – for as 'his visions of the excremental city' are 'extrapolated from soldiering in Vietnam', he conveniently 'casts himself as its scourge and its redeemer' (Friedman 62, 63). Thus, Travis 'replays the purgation through violence scenario enacted in Vietnam', even after the closing of the war (Friedman 72). One may note the reminiscence here of the way the myth of regeneration through violence has been 'enacted' for decades in American popular culture after the closing of the original 'Wild West' frontier.

Travis Bickle as allegory for the American nation

There is an additional, slightly more complex way of understanding *Taxi Driver's* treatment of Vietnam. I have discussed how Travis can be read as an individual who comes out of the quagmire of Vietnam, whose psyche is consequently traumatized, and whose warped masculinity and psychopathic behaviour can thus be understood as a product of the Vietnam War and of the terrible implications it held for those American men who were involved in the war. In alternative readings, numerous commentators have interpreted Travis's character rather more metaphorically, suggesting that he represents America as a nation, and that his experience and behaviour as an individual character allegorically reflect that of America on a national level. Laurence Friedman, for instance, observes that *Taxi Driver*, through Travis, 'allegorized the American experience in Vietnam: detached isolationism followed by violent, and ultimately ineffective, intervention' (Friedman 77). In his coverage of Hollywood's treatment of Vietnam, Jason Katzman similarly notes that 'Travis's choice of violent action relates to

America's decision to go to war' (University of Pennsylvania). Thus Travis becomes a symbol, an allegory, as it were, and his psychosis exposes a parallel psychosis on the part of America as a very nation, specifically in its policies regarding the War in Vietnam.

In this sense, it is interesting to consider the American masculinity crisis in a similar light, applying the paradigm of masculinity crisis theory not to the individual American man but to the American nation as a whole. This may seem far-fetched, but such an approach has actually been employed quite sensibly by various analysts of both the masculinity crisis and also of American political history. Susan Faludi is not the first to observe, for instance, that 'the United States came out of World War II with a sense of itself as a *masculine* nation' (Faludi *Stiffed* 16). Anthony Rotundo, a prominent analyst of American masculinity, notes that

symbols of right and wrong manhood have...become lodged in our [American] political consciousness and in the decision-making culture of our great institutions. These symbols make certain choices automatically less acceptable, and in doing so they impoverish the process by which policy is made. We are biased in favour of options we consider the tough ones and against those we see as tender; we value toughness as an end in itself. We are disabled in choosing the wise risk from the unwise, and tend to value risk as its own form of good. In this manner we are hurt by the cultural configuration of manhood (Anthony Rotundo, in Hannah online).

The United States 'has a culture of masculinity', argues Matt Hannah, following Rotundo's argument (Hannah online). In context of the masculinity crisis, notes Hannah, 'the already powerful frontier myth encourages men to link their individual efforts at establishing masculinity with national military actions, and thus both to "masculinize" the meaning of "America" and to "Americanize" the meaning of "masculinity"'. Consequently, 'a distinctly American discourse of masculinity plays an at times very important role both in shaping U.S. policy and in maintaining support' for its political agendas; moreover, 'specifically "masculine" attitudes and decision-making preferences' are 'taken for granted' by American society, and are considered as simply 'natural' or 'realistic' in the 'realm of international relations' (Hannah online). Such sentiments came to light particularly after World War II, suggests Susan Faludi, noting for instance how Henry Luce, influential founder and editor of the prominent American *Time* and *Life* magazines, envisioned 'America as a masculine nation whose manifest destiny was to

loom like a giant on the global stage' after the war ('we must dominate the world,' he wrote, 'or else confess a pitiful impotence' – Luce in Faludi *Stiffed* 22).

The American nation can thus be understood as a nation that sees itself in masculine terms, and that is indeed, according to some analysts, conceivable in such terms. The American masculinity crisis, then, can be conceived of as a crisis not only of individual American citizens, but as a crisis that afflicts America as a very nation. Though traditionally 'masculine' qualities like toughness, assertiveness, aggressiveness and domineering attitudes are, as Matt Hannah emphasizes, not *necessarily* dysfunctional either in the behaviour of individual men or in the outlook of an entire nation, such a set of attitudes may become highly problematic when it is considered inherently 'natural' or 'realistic'. Thus, Hannah's argument suggests, it is imperative for America as a nation – as it is for its individual men specifically – to consider such qualities as merely optional approaches to seeing and dealing with matters, among a wide spectrum of alternative approaches (some of which, like talking things out gently instead of rushing into a situation aggressively, may be considered 'weak', 'wimpish', or more traditionally 'feminine' – Hannah online). America's 'culture of masculinity, which encourages [American society] to conceive of conflicts in terms of tests of strength or prowess between two combatants playing by the same rules, as in the stereotypical western gunfight,' can be seen as 'dangerously' narrowing the 'range of individual male behaviours' and, moreover, the very 'policy options available to [America's] government leaders' (Hannah online), and thus the 'masculinity' of America as a nation is exposed as being problematic.

With such considerations in mind, it can come as no surprise, suggests Hannah, that American men generally have a far greater pro-war attitude than their female counterparts. In recent polls concerning Bush's 'War on Terror', for instance, Hannah points out that American men were generally twice as enthusiastic for 'pre-emptive' action to be taken against terrorists than they were for homeland security to be improved instead, whereas women, generally much less optimistic about waging war, were slightly in favour of the latter, less aggressive alternative. Hannah proposes that what 'keeps men wedded, even in the face of all sorts of negative consequences, to such a stable pro-war attitude' is the fact that they are 'trapped in their thinking by the culture of masculinity' that has been described above (Hannah).

When Travis is read as a metaphorical representation of the American nation, his conceptions of masculinity and his resultant behaviour are quite revealing in the light of this discussion. If the character of Travis is an allegory for America's intervention in Vietnam, then Travis's masculinity can be seen to represent the 'masculinity' of the American nation (not just of the men of the nation, as I have explained, but of the nation as a whole). The particular ways in which Travis's masculinity is in crisis (he is unsure, for instance, of how to 'prove' his masculine identity), and the problematic way in which he reacts to this crisis (basically, in a 'heroic' display of violence), can thus be read as representative of a parallel crisis and resultant 'behaviour' (the violent invasion of Vietnam) of America on a national level.

The similarities between some of Travis's attitudes, and correlating American post-World War II sentiments, are particularly striking in this regard. In the time following World War II, notes Richard Slotkin, 'war was identified as the supreme expression of American values, in which the society "as one man" assumes the moral burden of a struggle for justice and against a great evil' (Slotkin 497). In the sixties such an emphasis on martial capacity was emphasized; the very 'style of the Kennedy administration was to advocate an admiration of the "willingness to use military power"' (Slotkin 501). Slotkin explains how Kennedy constructed himself in traditional 'heroic' terms and, through his administration, envisioned America (and encouraged America to envision itself) as a 'heroic' nation (Slotkin 500-502), a process that is reminiscent of Travis's similar construction of himself in popular heroic terms. Moreover, a *publicly visible* capacity and resolve for 'heroic' and forceful action was, in Kennedy's vision, evidently as imperative to America's national identity during this time as the use of publicly visible violence is to Travis's individual identity; as Slotkin notes, 'it was important that the [Kennedy] administration be *perceived* as being disposed to act forcefully' (Slotkin 502, my emphasis).

It is clear, at least from the insights of those quoted here, that after World War II and during the Vietnam era, America's very identity 'crystalized' through 'violence' – on a national level – as much as Travis's identity does, on a personal level. The psychotic 'war' (and the questionable motives for this war) that Travis wages against the 'scum' of New York, then, can be understood as an allegory for what may have been, according to

such a reading, an equally psychotic war (with equally questionable motives) in Vietnam. And the violent process of such a war – in keeping with the myth of regeneration through violence – can similarly be understood as constituting an endeavour according to which masculinity, which in both Travis's and America's case is in a kind of a crisis, is to be reclaimed (or, at best, maintained).



CHAPTER 6

IMAGE AND REALITY IN TAXI DRIVER

I have indicated that *Taxi Driver* is rife with allusions to other films, and that the character of Travis Bickle, specifically, is largely constructed in a way that invokes intertextual references to numerous significant screen figures of Hollywood's past. Through his status as such a referent, Travis can be read as being a parody of Hollywood's key heroic figures – and as being a critical parody of American celluloid portrayals of heroism generally – as I have shown in the third chapter of this thesis.

However, Travis's construction as a pastiche of movie references can be understood to serve a further significant purpose. It has been hinted that Travis Bickle forms his very personality by 'cutting and pasting' together a heroic identity 'from an external menu of personages' that he appropriates, judging by the numerous filmic references, mainly from the world of film (Iannucci online). The way in which Travis understands himself – his very identity – and moreover, the way in which he perceives the social reality within which he exists, are largely based, according to such a reading, not on Travis's life experience, but instead on his experience of the world as it has been represented to him through the popular media.

Such a premise invites a detailed reading of *Taxi Driver* in terms of the influence that mediated representations of reality (for instance, television, film, billboard advertisements, and all the various forms of images that permeate American popular culture) exert on American society's actual interpretation and understanding of reality.

This chapter will expound such a reading, and in keeping with masculinity crisis discourse, special attention will be devoted to *Taxi Driver's* investigation of how media representations of masculinity have determined society's – and specifically men's – conceptions of what it means to be a man. I will first briefly discuss, drawing on various sources (including Susan Faludi and Richard Slotkin), in what ways and to what extent American society's conceptions of 'reality' can actually be understood to be shaped by popular media. Discussion will include specific reference to popular representations and conceptions of masculinity, to political and ideological issues related to the Vietnam era, and to the 'hyperreal' figure of John Wayne, which, I will suggest, is not only a very

interesting but a highly important element in any discussion regarding American popular culture's representation and construction of 'reality' generally and masculinity specifically. The discussion will then centre on *Taxi Driver's* treatment of such matters, with particular reference to Travis's postmodern constructed identity, to the film's emphasis on images and gestures that prefigure 'reality', and to the importance, in Travis's world, of public performance and displayed action.

REPRESENTATION AND REALITY IN AMERICAN CULTURE

I indicated, in the second chapter, that masculinity crisis theorists single out the media – most notably the medium of film – as an important factor in shaping society's and men's conceptions of masculinity, often, it is argued, in a dysfunctional way. Society's very perception and interpretation of reality – and thus also its understanding of what it means to be a 'real' man – is partially formed according to media constructions (for instance, role models in advertisements – say, the Marlboro Man – or film stars, like John Wayne).

Such a tradition of mediated reality has age-old antecedents in American culture. Indeed, since before the so-called American century, since even before the advent of film and Hollywood, there existed a profound tension in American culture between reality and its representation, the one influencing the other in a cyclic relationship. At the end of the nineteenth century myths of frontier heroes were fabricated even as those same 'heroes' still roamed the wild frontier. At the very same time that they were taming the west, notes Jenni Calder, 'civilization devoured the frontier's men of action, and fed back its own idea of what a hero should be' (Calder xi). The 'relationship between the fact and fiction of the West has been incestuous,' she continues, and it soon reached the point where 'real men become immortal heroes of fiction and movie stars become, for their public, genuine Westerners' (Calder xi). The reality of the Wild West, less romantic as it was than the glorified, fictional representations that have shaped the Western myth that would pervade the American century, seems to have been replaced as far as the general public is concerned, by those fictional representations.

Mediated reality in the Vietnam era

This 'incestuous relationship,' as Jenni Calder calls it, between fact and fiction (between

truth and myth, between reality and representation), has most certainly remained prevalent in American society and popular culture. It is perhaps most evident, historically, in the few decades following World War II. The Vietnam era specifically constituted a stage upon which this relationship would be played out most prominently, as both the American soldiers and the American public would interpret Vietnam – perhaps for lack of a better paradigm for making sense of such a confusing era – in Hollywood terms.

Susan Faludi discusses the matter at length in her chapter, “Gone to Soldiers, Every One”. ‘As boys,’ she notes, the American Century’s sons ‘had imagined themselves in the shoes of Hollywood warriors,’ and ‘as soldiers, they found themselves cast as the stuntmen brought in to do the action shots, while audiences somewhere presumably watched and applauded’ (Faludi *Stiffed* 332). Many of the grunts in Vietnam ‘spoke of their experiences as “unreal” or “like a movie”’ (Faludi *Stiffed* 332). One of the most famous examples here is the description of a soldier, one of the members of the Charlie company involved in the My Lai atrocities, ‘who struck a pose that morning in My Lai, “firing his weapons from his hip, cowboy-movie style”’ (Faludi *Stiffed* 332, citing Seymour Hersh). One may additionally consider that the American medical staff in Vietnam actually gave the official name ‘John Wayne Syndrome’ to a condition (not uncommon among the American soldiers in Vietnam) that is described as a ‘soldier’s internalization of an ideal of superhuman military bravery’ and combat prowess, and ‘invulnerability to guilt, and grief’ (Slotkin in Smith online). It is a condition which was surely – as its darkly humorous name suggests – in part caused by soldiers’ interpretations of their combat scenario, via expectations that were moulded by Hollywood long before they ever set foot in Vietnam. And not only to the individual soldiers, but also to the American public at large, Vietnam ‘often seemed like a movie while it was happening – “war as performance,” as historian Marilyn Young has called it’ (Faludi *Stiffed* 359).

In fact, the power that popular culture’s representations of reality (the ‘reality’ of Vietnam, in this case) clearly had in ‘substituting’ that reality, or, more accurately, in shaping society’s understanding of reality, was quite sensibly exploited by the proponents of pro-American ideologies during the Vietnam era. *The Green Berets*, which (in novel form) was largely promoted to the American public even before the famous film of the same name was ever made, reportedly ‘induced so many enlistments of young men hoping to

become Green Berets that the Selective Service was able to suspend draft calls during the first four months of 1966' (when the book was published – Smith online). The subsequent film of 1968, made by (and starring) none other than John Wayne himself, drew heavily on frontier terminology, and further idealized Vietnam in terms that the American public – increasingly doubtful as to the virtue of America's involvement in Vietnam – could comprehend (Wikipedia: *The Green Berets* online). The film 'established the image of the Vietnamese as "Indians," and allowed for 'the depiction of the Americans as "cowboys" – in other words, the good guys, in white hats' (Smith online). Interestingly, a *Time* review has noted the specific similarities between *The Green Berets* and a standard Western, pointing out that the South Vietnamese 'even talk like movie Sioux' (Smith online).

Thus, the Vietnam war, which arguably depicted an inexplicably horrible reality to the American public 'back home,' was presented to that public according to a less horrific, familiar paradigm that would make America's very involvement (as a nation) in Vietnam easier to understand. Moreover, the individual American soldiers in Vietnam – men who were as a matter of fact executing a great amount of ruthless violence in a country that America had invaded, for causes, justifiable or not, that those men themselves often did not comprehend – these soldiers are constructed, via such a representation, simply as cowboys, and thus their behaviour is legitimized according to the simplistic formulas of the Western myth.

In the American political world, the tremendous influential power of popular films was similarly acknowledged (as it still is, to this day). As has been discussed in the previous chapter, President Kennedy (among many other American leaders) invoked the notion of the frontier in order to gain popularity and in order to legitimize his political aims. Kennedy quite sensibly relied on Hollywood in this regard; he 'gave his character historical resonance' by drawing on myths (including the Western myth) which had specific 'reference to contemporary movie genres' (Slotkin 497). 'His campaign identified him with the heroes of the combat film,' and the supposition was that his 'audience' (or his public) would 'actively identify with him, as we identify with the protagonist of a movie' (Slotkin 497). This kind of heroic leadership, which relies on Hollywood's undeniably strong influence in American popular culture, would be taken to the extreme years later, in the political campaigns of Ronald Reagan and, more recently,

Arnold Schwarzenegger – both of whom appear to have relied almost exclusively on their previous Hollywood stardom in order to gain public popularity and credibility. The popularity of both these ‘stars’ in the world of politics attests to the incredible influence that Hollywood extends even to the purely political sphere. One may note, as an important afterthought here, that in the cases of all these leaders – Kennedy, Reagan and Schwarzenegger – their credibility as leaders seems to hinge specifically on the exuding of a heroic masculinity that identifies them with the typical ‘rugged individual’ Hollywood action hero.

John Wayne, who has been mentioned several times in this chapter (this is no coincidence), deserves special notice here. During the time of Kennedy’s campaign for presidency, and increasingly as the sixties (and the Vietnam War) progressed, Wayne became more than just a major Hollywood star; he became an incredibly ‘powerful cultural icon,’ perhaps the most powerful American cultural icon embodied by any person before and during the Vietnam era (Slotkin 512). In this sense, Wayne has become emblematic – literally – of the blurring between reality and representation in American culture. Wayne’s ‘identification with war and with the West linked him with a highly specific set of myth-historical referents,’ and ‘over time he became identified with those referents – came to be seen, not as a player in cowboy and combat pictures, but as an authentic representative of “the Old West” or of “the American soldier”’ (Slotkin 512). Though he ‘never served a day in the military,’ the ‘movie-myth that developed around Wayne became a more than adequate substitute for his lack of real military experience’ – to such an extent that his ‘mythic figure’ has become more than ‘merely a representation’ but a ‘valid substitute for and even an improvement on the real thing’ (Slotkin 513). In the same way that Reagan, who had also not served any military time, would slyly draw on his movie ‘war experience’ (as an actor in war films) in order to invoke heroic warrior connotations (Faludi *Stiffed* 360), Wayne became a ‘real’ cowboy and a ‘real’ soldier – more authentic to the American public even than the actual cowboys of the nineteenth century or the actual soldiers of World War II or Vietnam – because of the amazing pre-eminence of popular Hollywood representations, in the mind of the American consumer, over the reality that they supposedly represent. And like Reagan and Schwarzenegger, Wayne exploited his movie stardom in order to promote his (rather proactive) conservative political agendas – for instance his gung-ho support of the Vietnam War (Slotkin 513) – which again attests to the acknowledged power that

popular film supplies in shaping political thought. The almost absurd extent of the 'confounding of myth and reality' in American popular culture (and in American political and military reality) in this regard is most clearly evident in 'Congress's authorization of a John Wayne medal' for military prowess, which literally identified John Wayne, the 'lifelong civilian,' as the 'embodiment of American military virtue' (Slotkin 513).

Postmodernist perspectives

Recent postmodern discourse has included much discussion of such a peculiar relationship between 'image' (or representation) and reality, concerning specifically the increasing pre-eminence of representations of reality, in modern Western society, over the reality that is supposedly represented. The work of Jean Baudrillard, a noted postmodernist, has been particularly influential in this discussion. Baudrillard argues that simulacra, meaning copies or 'fake' representations of real objects or events (billboard images, for instance, or filmic representations), have become so pre-eminent in postmodern society that they can be understood to replace the 'reality' that they originally signified (Powell 48-55). According to Baudrillard's argument, 'the simulation, the simulacrum, becomes the real;' and this new 'reality' – which is constructed of a multitude of signs and images – Baudrillard calls 'hyperreality', an order of reality that is 'more real than real' (Powell 56, 58). With reference, for instance, to the mythic figure of John Wayne, such a discourse can sensibly be applied – for Wayne (the screen star, and thus, the simulacrum, signifying ideas of 'cowboy' or 'soldier') has indeed 'become reality,' posing as a more authentic version of reality even than reality (real cowboys or soldiers) itself.

In the context of American conceptions of masculinity, this postmodern paradigm is of further relevance. The popular media's simulacra of masculinity (Wayne, Eastwood, the Marlboro Man, the modern Calvin Klein model) can arguably be described as having surpassed most other measures of determining or even conceiving of 'real' or proper masculinity (insofar as such a concept is actually conceivable at all). In the decades after World War II, for example, John Wayne can be understood to have represented (or *been*) not merely a 'hyperreal' cowboy or soldier, but the very 'hyperreal' ideal of American manhood.

With this in mind, one may observe Baudrillard's 'reinterpretation of the thesis of

“regeneration through violence” which is so central to American conceptions of masculinity (Freed online). Baudrillard notes that film and video have become the vehicles in which the myth of regeneration through violence is perpetuated in modern Western society (Freed online); consequently, the disproportionate prominence which the myth of regeneration through violence enjoys within these media – and the powerful influence, furthermore, that these media exert in society – cause the myth, as simulacrum, to be understood as reality, and thus, as a necessary or natural discourse (particular to American culture or to American masculinity), instead of as part of a specific interpretation of reality. Such notions seem to be quite applicable to the process of ‘reality construction’ in American culture. The myth of regeneration through violence is undoubtedly a crucial part of innumerable Hollywood representations of reality, and, again with reference to the iconic figure of John Wayne, it has clearly come to be associated with Wayne’s very persona, and with the specific construction of ‘hyperreal’ masculinity that he connotes. It can be no surprise, then, that analysts like Faludi identify the masculinity crisis specifically in terms of an association between masculinity formation and the myth of regeneration through violence that is clearly derived, to a large extent, from America’s popular culture.

THE PRE-EMINENCE OF REPRESENTATION OVER REALITY IN TAXI DRIVER

In *Taxi Driver* the tension between representation and reality is explored in numerous ways. Most importantly – and the matter has been touched on in previous chapters – the character of Travis Bickle embodies the postmodern subject whose understanding of reality is determined, to a large extent, according to media representations.

Travis and mediated reality

This is suggested most overtly in Travis’s relationship with television, a symbol of popular media representations if ever there was one. In the numerous scenes where he is depicted watching television, Travis seems quite obsessed with what he watches. In one such scene, where Travis watches Palantine talking on television, the camera slowly zooms in onto the television screen, until one cannot even see that it is a screen at all, as the picture on Travis’s television becomes that on the viewer’s television. The slow zoom, focussing on the screen, emphasizes Travis’s obsession with the television. Then, an imposing sound is heard, like the static of television, growing louder and

louder, and suddenly, the screen shows only static before the scene abruptly cuts to the next, where the static sound is replaced by the 'heaven' theme – as if Travis has abruptly been summoned out of his obsessive fixation with the television. Moreover, later, when Travis rocks the television, kicking it over and destroying it (perhaps by accident), he holds his head as if in pain and repeatedly mutters, 'god damn' – revealing how important the television was to him.

It is not implausible to consider, with this in mind, that the most meaningful social 'interaction' that Travis has – apart from his brief attempt at courting Betsy – is derived from the medium of television. Likewise, it is evident from his taking Betsy to a 'naughty' movie, that he does not know much about dating and romantic social interaction beyond what he has seen on the screens of the pornography theatre. Travis's entire understanding of socialization, thus, is largely constructed according to the popular media representations of reality that he consumes, instead of according to actual experience of reality.

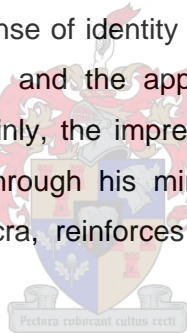
Travis's behaviour when interacting with women is telling in this regard. He buys Betsy flowers and gifts, 'following the proper protocol for courting women' as might have been seen on television; he takes her to a movie – as he might have learned from television as well – though, unfortunately, he never learnt the full protocol in this regard, but only the concept, for the particular movie he takes her to is, of course, a 'naughty' movie (Matthew online). Similarly, he reprimands Iris because of her lifestyle, saying 'a girl *should* be living at home,' she *should* be 'going to school, *should* be dressed up and going out with boys' – thus emphasizing that he regards social behaviour according to a general template of what is acceptable or expected, much like what one could learn from mainstream television.

Even in his day-to-day life, Travis seems to be experiencing the world in a way reminiscent of one who consumes images produced by the media. While driving passengers around, he 'mediates reality' (in a way reminiscent to the watching of television), perceiving his passengers through the mirror, and the world outside through his windshield (Friedman 80). He is constantly separated from the world which he so obsessively observes by a layer of glass (mirror or windshield), which acts as an insulating screen, and which perhaps also helps him to distance himself so

judgementally from the 'scum' of the streets. A notion is effected, thus, that the entire world around Travis consists of nothing but simulacra, as if the reality of New York has become replaced by an amalgam of media images.

Travis as a construction of simulacra

The pervasiveness of simulacra in Travis's world certainly affects his sense of identity. During the course of *Taxi Driver's* narrative, Travis continually appropriates images from the external world in order to construct his identity, which seems to crystallize increasingly as the violent ending of the film draws near. He is driven to buy the guns that he uses to achieve his eventual violent identity, for instance, only after the ideas are proposed by the psychotic passenger who first tells him of the .44 Magnum, sketching the 'image' of the gun rather graphically in his rhetorical depiction of what it could do to a woman's face and 'pussy'. Also, after he talks with the Secret Service agent, Travis similarly appropriates the shades that the agent wears, if only for a while (when he goes to assassinate Palantine). Travis's sense of identity construction, then, seems to hinge to an extent on the direct mimicking and the appropriation of (often rather arbitrary) simulacra that he observes. Certainly, the impression that the New York streets and their inhabitants exist to Travis, through his mirror and his windshield, as a mere amalgamation of mediated simulacra, reinforces his status as such a consumer of images.



Not only the simulacra of Travis's immediate surroundings are important in this regard. The numerous scenes where Travis obsessively watches television and pornography invite further scrutiny of his relationship with the simulacra of the popular medium of film. The extensive use of intertextual allusions in *Taxi Driver*, and specifically of those allusions that through Travis invoke references to important Hollywood characters (as discussed in the third chapter), will again become crucial in this discussion. When considered as a pastiche of filmic allusions (to figures like Dirty Harry, Mike Hammer and Ethan Edwards), the character of Travis can be understood to be nothing more than a construction of consumed media images. Like the soldier in *My Lai* who struck a cowboy pose while in a combat situation, Travis relates his behaviour to images of the films he has seen. In fact, his very identity is constructed by fragmented references to popular media icons, haphazardly stitched together.

Moreover, as has been noted in the fourth chapter, Travis's identity is 'stitched together' in such a way specifically according to media representations of heroic (or anti-heroic) characters, and his masculinity is shaped to mimic the 'heroic' masculinity of such characters. Accordingly, Travis's masculine identity can crystallize only through an enactment of the myth of regeneration through violence, because that myth is so central to the masculine identities of all those heroic characters. The 'hyperreal' simulacra of the media (embodied here by the heroic figures whom Travis emulates, as well as by the very myth of regeneration through violence which they promote), which have come to replace reality and 'real' identity in Travis's world as much as in postmodern society generally, provide the only route according to which Travis can claim his masculine identity.

TRAVIS'S MASCULINITY AS AN ORNAMENTAL RECITAL OF THE MYTH OF REGENERATION THROUGH VIOLENCE

It is of further interest to note that during his adoption of a heroic identity, Travis himself becomes a simulacrum similar to those that he has appropriated in the process of constructing his identity. Travis's enactment of the myth of regeneration through violence as a way to claim his masculine identity can be read as nothing more than an enactment; a performance, thus, or an overtly displayed recital, instead of an actual meaningful action. His behaviour, then – the very behaviour that establishes his identity – is a representation (or a simulacrum) of regeneration through violence, rather than an actual legitimate example of regeneration through violence.

In order to understand Travis's behaviour and identity in this way, it is necessary to consider various aspects of his 'route' (via regeneration through violence) towards establishing identity. Violence, it has been noted, surrounds Travis throughout most of the film, even if he does not (initially) behave violently himself. Images and intimations of violence pervade his world, existing as part of the multitude of mediated 'simulacra' that he perceives from the insulated confines of his cab. There are also specific instances where violence literally takes the form of a particular simulacrum or sign, such as in the numerous scenes where people whom Travis regards as threatening point their hands at him in the gesture of a gun.

Such simulacra of violence slowly seem to become more 'real' as the film progresses. Travis himself, at first, makes gun gestures with his hand (for instance, in the porno theatre); these gestures, initially merely simulacra of the violent act of shooting, become increasingly real when Travis actually buys the guns from Easy Andy. The guns are still not loaded, though, and even when Travis makes shooting 'gestures' with the real guns in front of his mirror, such violent gestures are still simulacra. Later in the film, there are scenes where Travis actually discharges the loaded guns in the shooting range. Even though he is now actually shooting bullets – lending the increasingly 'real' shooting gesture of violence a further dimension of 'reality' – he is merely shooting at fake targets, and not at potential victims, and so, the violent gesture remains a simulacrum.

When Travis so brutally engages in actual violence, in the final 'Slaughter' scene which is prefigured by all the intimations of actual violence mentioned above and which is clearly the culmination of Travis's simulated rehearsing, it may seem that the violence anticipated throughout the film finally becomes 'real'. Indeed, this is as real as it will get. However, even this violence can be read as yet another 'rehearsal', a gesture of violence, a simulacrum. Laurence Friedman notes that 'like the famous "You talkin' to me?" sequence that prefigures it, the brothel shootout is the intimation of an action' (Friedman 84). 'Travis's confrontation with his mirror image in the earlier scene,' Friedman argues, 'rehearses his showdown with Sport, another mirror (Indian vs. Indian) confrontation' (Friedman 84). The brothel shootout, then, is a rehearsal like that crucial previous one (and like the many other instances of 'rehearsal' that precede it); the violence of the 'Slaughter' is as much an imitation of an action, a simulacrum, as it were, as those many imitations of violent gestures throughout the film. Such a notion is emphasized by the role of the media in establishing the shootout as an important event: even as the camera zooms away from Travis and out of the brothel, journalists and onlookers flock towards the building, and almost immediately thereafter a shot pans across the newspaper clippings which describe the violent incident to the world, making it (and its hero, Travis) a media simulacrum, to be consumed by the public.

The construction of Travis's identity via an enactment of regeneration through violence, then, can be understood to hinge primarily on a *display* of violence. He becomes 'a person like other people' only because the media make him and his behaviour visible to the public, turning him into the kind of violent hero of popular culture that he himself used

as model for his identity, and into a simulacrum, a media image, which in turn will be exported by the media for mass consumption. This process is prefigured in the mirror rehearsal scenes, where Travis already seems to be aware, self-consciously looking at himself in the mirror while imitating violent actions, that a *display* of violent action will allow him to claim his identity; that he will become an image like the images that he has consumed, and that his violence will be a *visible* signifier that establishes his identity. It is interesting in this regard to note that in the second mirror rehearsal scene, where Travis says, 'you talkin' to me,' the person that we see – throughout the entire scene – is not Travis, but his reflection. His left hand holds the gun (instead of his right, as in all the other scenes), and the emblem is on the wrong side of his jacket. In this, arguably the most important (and definitely the most famous) scene in the film, Travis's image replaces the 'real' Travis, and it thus becomes hyperreal, as we see only his reflected copy, his simulacrum.

Since his very identity is constructed from simulacra, it almost seems to make sense that Travis should himself be constructed, in *Taxi Driver*, as a kind of simulacrum. In context of masculinity crisis theory, such a construction of identity, which feeds on the simulacra of the media in the first place, and strives, at the same time, to become a simulacra itself in order to achieve legitimacy or meaning, perfectly embodies the kind of problematic process of identity formation which Faludi investigates. Travis's masculine identity is based on Faludi's 'ornamental masculinity' – both in the sense that he eagerly appropriates mass media images of 'manhood', and in the sense that he strives to become such an image himself – and the 'ornamental' or displayed violence which he employs in order to establish his masculine identity, corresponds exactly with the dysfunctional ornamental violence which Faludi identifies as one of the key issues of the masculinity crisis (as discussed in the second chapter).

Thus, Travis's violent quest for achieving individual agency as the 'scourge' of the New York streets can be read as a critical comment on the media-informed construction of masculinity in postmodern American society. The critique, according to such a reading, concerns firstly the fact that the media have become so predominant – as *Taxi Driver* seems to suggest – in shaping conceptions of masculinity. At the same time, it concerns the notion that in a society where this is the case – where conceptions of masculinity are indeed informed largely by the media – the mainstream media representations of

masculinity, which frequently connote masculinity with the myth of regeneration through violence, may furthermore be highly dysfunctional (as I indicated in the fourth chapter).

The product of such a state of affairs, *Taxi Driver* seems to suggest – dramatically exaggerating the point through its detailed depiction of a delusional, violent psychopath – is Travis Bickle. And in the light of the pre-eminence of ‘hyperreality’ in America’s Vietnam era discussed earlier in this chapter – in the light, perhaps, specifically of the ‘hyperreality’ of John Wayne (who is so prominently alluded to in *Taxi Driver* via Bickle’s mimicking of the Ethan Edwards character, and who succinctly embodies the myth of regeneration through violence and associates that myth specifically with American masculinity) – the dramatic exaggeration that is Travis may seem frighteningly familiar. After all, not only Travis but scores of men across America ‘appropriated’ the .44 Magnum after it was portrayed as such a glorious simulacrum in *Dirty Harry*. One may note, in closing, that the point was made to a macabre extent when American psychopath John Hinckley, in the ultimate act of irony, modelled his famous assassination attempt on Ronald Reagan – years after *Taxi Driver*’s release – on Travis Bickle’s behaviour (Friedman 86, 87). Travis has, thus, indeed become a ‘hyperreal’ simulacrum, perpetuated via the media in his turn to shape the behaviour of the men of America.



CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

It is evident that *Taxi Driver* can be read as a multi-layered investigation of post-World War II American masculinity. The film constructs its central character, Travis, in such a way as to examine the very process of identity construction of the modern American subject, a process which, it is implied, hinges largely on the influence of media representations of reality. The film furthermore portrays the American heroic myth of regeneration through violence as a pathway to achieving a specifically masculine identity which, according to this reading, is shown to be dysfunctional (in an ironic travesty of a classic 'happy ending'). The film's projection of the myth of regeneration through violence as an apparently easy or straightforward paradigm according to which Travis can achieve a 'functional' masculine identity, which he so sorely lacks throughout most of the film, can be read as a critical comment not merely on Travis's behaviour, but also on American conceptions of 'heroic' behaviour generally. In the process, the very myth of regeneration through violence – which has served as a cornerstone for American society's establishment in the nineteenth century, for Hollywood's popularity in the twentieth century, and for conceptions of American masculinity throughout, to this day – is interrogated.

Taxi Driver's investigation in this regard clearly correlates with recent discourse on the post-World War II American 'masculinity crisis', most notably so with the theories proposed by the feminist writer Susan Faludi. *Taxi Driver's* critical examination of American heroic ideals of masculinity, of the undying influence of the Western myth and the myth of regeneration through violence (both of which have been extremely influential in establishing conceptions of 'proper' masculinity), of the specific relevance of such issues in the light of America's war in Vietnam, and of the crucial role that the media play in adapting or maintaining specific ideals of masculinity in American society, coincides fairly precisely with – and is firmly supported by – the theory of a masculinity crisis as Faludi has set forth. The film, then, transcends its historical moment, and retains its importance even in a current reading, as the issues that it addressed thirty years ago are still – perhaps more so than ever before – under critical examination by an increasing number of scholars of the 'masculinity crisis'.

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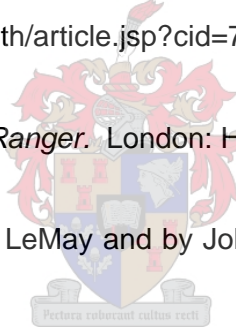
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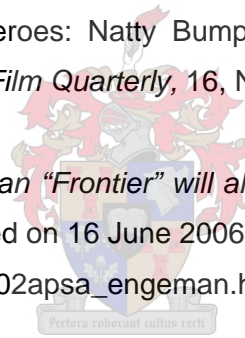
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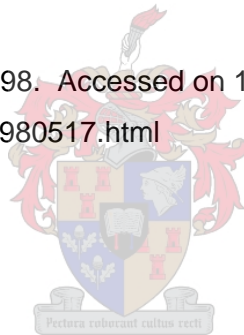
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