His metallic vessel pierces through an eerily thick cloud of steam. His eyes glance slowly, furtively, from left to right to left. Through his windscreen, through the night’s gentle rain, he sees the lights of the city and its traffic blurring and blending, as though all around him, each vehicle, each neon light, has congealed into indistinguishable globules of colour. His vision, our vision, sharpens slightly, enough to reveal pedestrians crossing his path. But the blue and red colours of this night obscure and deny clarity. It is as if he was on another world, in another dimension, somewhere not of this mortal coil. And so begins *Taxi Driver* (1976), a documentation of the thoughts and actions of Vietnam veteran, Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro), as he attempts to clarify his mind, to find himself, having become lost in that blur of humanity some call New York City. But perhaps it is not just New York City. Perhaps Travis could just as easily be in another place, or another time. It is widely accepted by various critics, including Famiglietti (1995), Dirks (1996), Brown (2002), Ebert (2004) and Thurman (2005), that *Taxi Driver* was heavily influenced by John Ford’s Western classic, *The Searchers* (1956). As Famiglietti (1995) states, a characteristic theme of the Western genre is “violence as a necessary corollary of individual self expression”. Travis Bickle certainly regenerates “himself”, as Lubin (2005, p. 28) claims, “through violence like an avenging angel”. As Travis himself admitted, “I fell in love with this obsession attempt to become myself, strengthening himself,” “My whole life has been pointed in one direction. There never has been any choice for me”. Perhaps Travis’s New York City is no different to the mesa- dotted plains of John Wayne’s American West of the late 1800s. Perhaps his yellow taxi is akin to a golden palomino or a silver-white stallion. Perhaps Travis is a modern-day Ethan Edwards (John Wayne), being a veteran of a lost war, as Ethan was; being an outcast who must himself cast out those he sees as “degenerated” in order to become accepted by his community (Thurman 2005). The tale of Travis Bickle, just as that of Ethan Edwards, is a tale of identity crisis. It is a tale of one man’s need to posit himself within a community. It is not a fairytale of sleeping beauties or ‘happily-ever-afters’. It is a tale of irrationality and violence, of impotence and confusion, of blood and politics, of self and society. The relationship between on the one hand, sexuality, violence, and irrationality, and on the other, communal and individual identity has been a common interest expressed in the texts of North American fiction and film. Coming from a decade that screened numerous films of violence and vigilantism, such as *The French Connection* (1971), *Dirty Harry* (1971), *Straw Dogs* (1971), *Death Wish* (1974), *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975), *The Killer Inside Me* (1976) and *Marathon Man* (1976), *Taxi Driver* epitomizes that interest and delineates the anxieties and uncertainties of “a time of enormous change” (Ryan & Keliner 1988, p. 2).

It was a time of economic depression and political deception in the United States, a time when survival became an individual claim to an individual identity within the community becomes more desperate, and more dangerous, as the size and complexity of that community grows. A common malaise of the modern, urbanized society is the feeling of isolation and loneliness, of being lost in a sea of humanity. Travis, like his taxi piercing through the steam that issues from under the streets of New York as though the bitumen was a hot-plate, is like a lone shark swimming through that sea that is more to him like a murky pond of depravity. But unlike a shark in the open ocean, Travis is more like a fish out of water, suffocating in his own madness, choking on the detritus of life he perceives is flooding his urban environment. Kolmer (2000, p. 227) claims Travis is an “alienated urban castoff”. He feels alone and isolated, unable to participate in a society he considers antagonistic, hostile, unseemly and intoxicated:

All the animals come out at night - whores, skunk-pusses, buggers, queens, fairies, dopers, junkies - sick, venal. Someday a real rain’ll come and wash all the scum off the streets.

Travis is not a happy swimmer as he wends his way through the crowded metropolis of New York City. Considered the wealthiest and most glamorous city of the nation, the home of high-flying financiers, media moguls and stars of stage, screen and scene, the home of Wall Street and Broadway, New York City is an icon of capitalist success. But it is not all glitz, glamour and gold. Beneath the towering trophies of this supposed success are the roads of despair, littered with the lives of the lost and lonely. Travis drives down these roads in his taxi-cum-tortoise shell of protection against the cancer of moral decay which he sees all around him. Travis is in the “underbelly of the Dream”, as Graham (2002, p. 167) describes it, and flowing through those intestinal chambers is an “undercurrent of violence” (Graham 2002, p. 168). The newels of the staircase to success in this world are planted on the backs of a people in crisis, a people who had, given the climate of the time, accepted for themselves little hope of achieving that ‘rags-to-riches’ Gatsbian dream that forms the cornerstone of success in a capitalist society. That dream, according to Graham (2002, p. 165), is based on the belief that one must work hard and show “good will toward others” in order to prosper and live that dream. In a society obsessed with self, that dream becomes a nightmare. Director, Martin Scorsese, by giving us Travis’s vision, what he sees through his eyes, through his windscreen, welcomes us to that nightmare. Travis narrates his thoughts, reads to us his diary as he writes, pulling us into his mind as if to feel, to experience, his dilemma: “All my life needed was a sense of some place to go”. The audience is brought into Travis’s world, his eyes, through his windscreen, enables us to empathise with his feeling of being lost and in the dark.

But one day, a light, personified by Betsy (Cybill Shepherd), emerges from the gloom “like an angel out of this filthy cesspool” (Ryan & Keliner 1988, p. 2), offering Travis a chance of redemption. As Famiglietti (1995) states, a characteristic theme of the Western genre is “violence as a necessary corollary of individual self expression”. Travis Bickle certainly regenerates “himself”, as Lubin (2005, p. 28) claims, “through violence like an avenging angel”. As Travis himself admitted, “I fell in love with this obsession attempt to become himself, strengthening himself,” “My whole life has been pointed in one direction. There never has been any choice for me”.

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It was a time of economic depression and political deception in the United States, a time when that nation, formerly considered “the sole wet and power”, found itself embroiled in two violent battles: one in the bamboo jungles and rubber plantations of Indochina; the other in the concrete forests and picket-fence estates within its own territory (Ryan & Keliner 1988, p. 6). ‘Big business’ had its hands in the trouser pockets of the Nixon presidency. In the eyes of ‘big business’, dropping bombs meant printing dollars. While B-52s emptied their payloads on the villages and rice paddies in Vietnam and Cambodia, the American homeland was being fiscally napaled, its borders sucked away by decreasing employment and rising inflation (Lubin 2005). The Sixties and Seventies, decades of disruption for the United States as social unrest and uncertainty washed over the land like a corrosive acid eating away at the collective imaginary. Divisions in society appeared like cracks in an old urn, and through those cracks oozed a “collective obsession” that gave birth to what Lubin (2005, p. iv) refers to as the “Me” decade, a time when “Americans became preoccupied with themselves”.

It was a time of disillusionment and disenchantment. It was a time when survival became an individual pursuit. It was a time in which Travis Bickle found himself lost.
And I think you need something. And if you want to call it a friend, you can call it a friend.

Betsy: Are you gonna be my friend?

Travis: Yeah. What do ya say? It's a little hard standing here and asking...Five minutes, that's all, just outside. Right around here. I'm there to protect ya. Come on, just take a little break.

Betsy: I have a break at four o'clock and if you're here.

Travis: Four o'clock today?

Betsy: Yes.

Travis: I'll be here.

At the coffee shop their conversation is somewhat stilted but she finds him interesting and, as Dirks (1996) states, “eccentric and unusual...ambiguous and misunderstood by everyone” - “a walking contradiction”. She agrees to go with him on a ‘movie-date’. Unfortunately, Travis, in complete innocence and naiveté, takes her to one of the ‘porn’ theatres he frequents on those nights when he is unable to sleep. She storms out of the theatre to the sidewalk, where, amid loitering sex-workers, she says, “Taking me to a place like this is about as exciting to me as saying ‘let’s fuck’.” The venue itself is a space of contradiction with its brightly gold-trimmed foyer and stately glass doors separating the dark theatre of pornography from those ‘ladies-of-the-night’ outside. There would have surely been other more mainstream cinematic options for this evening out, such as The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974), which was screening at a theatre Travis had driven passed earlier. The 1970s was a time, according to Boozer (1999), when “society showed the signs of stress in the disintegration of family and community life”. Hollywood showed violence, horror and the rebirth of the femme fatale as perhaps the most horrific threat to patriarchy, a psychotically feminine castratrice which Creed (1993, p. 123) describes as represented in such films as Sisters (1973), Play Misty For Me (1971) and Last House On The Left (1972). It was cinema for the male gaze. But despite Travis’s ability to see the violence, drug abuse and prostitution around him, he is unable to realise his own complicity in that which disgusts him. As Graham (2002, p. 73) claims:

Always both part of it and alien to it, Travis cannot escape the urban decay that seems to pick away at his psychic and gradually ostracize him.

Further attempts to appease Betsy fail, including a return visit to her workplace from which he is forcibly ejected while he shouts a standing here and asking...Five minutes, that's all, just outside. Right around here. I'm there to protect ya. Come on, just take a little break.

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As though stunned by this apparently successful assassination, Travis pauses on another doorstep before proceeding on to complete his mission, to rescue Iris who is upstairs with a client. The scene that follows, as climactic and deadly as the Gunfight at the OK Corral (1957), is an orgy of violence that Field (2003, p. 2) contends “incorporates blood as an extension of masculine phallic embodiment”. Travis single-handedly ‘blasts away the baddies’ he believes hold Iris captive, like Ethan’s rescue of Debbie from the Comanches in The Searchers. Kael, cited in Field (2003, p. 56), considers this scene to be the “blood-splattering release” of Travis’s “bottled up energy and emotion”, a cathartic ejaculation of blood impersonating semen, the essence of male sexuality. There is certainly a lot of blood, and it is all male. The violence of this scene is, perhaps, as Eadie (2001) proposes, a consequence of Travis’s “manifest failure to perform a correct heterosexual manhood” having been rejected by Betsy and uninterested in ‘making it’ with Iris. Certainly, it is valid to argue that Scorsese and screenwriter, Paul Schrader, have adhered to a Hollywood hegemony by depicting, as Mortimer (1997) states, “the problematics of identity in a postmodern age…linked to…women as characters who both prompt and block the protagonist’s agency”. But the violence is also, as Lubin (2005, p. 20) claims, “a variation of alienation and loneliness”. By venting his frustration, by firing his Magnum, Travis becomes a hero, rather than a traumatised veteran of a lost war. Travis now is lauded by the press and admired as a saviour by Iris’s parents, Burt and Ivy Steensma, who represent parents everywhere in this troubled land. Rather than ride off into a setting sun, as would his Western counterparts, Travis now stands more confidently and more at ease among his peers. No longer does he sit at the edge of the group. The other taxi drivers face him as though he is now the centre of attention, a man to be respected. He has affirmed his masculinity and discovered his identity. In the closing scene, Betsy hops into his taxi. He is only barely polite and nonchalantly shrugs off her concern over what she had read about him in the press. Betsy has lost her ‘angel’ status, becoming just another passenger in Travis’s travels. It would seem he no longer needs an angel. After he drops her off, paying at least some respect to their relationship by refusing to take any money from her for the fare, he drives off, like Ethan on his stallion, into the night. But then suddenly, he readjusts his rear-vision mirror, revealing once again that blur of city lights that signifies the confusion and distortion that has dwelt, and perhaps continues to exist, behind the eyes and in the mind of this lonesome cowboy.

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