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Taxi Driver: The Psychopathic Hero and the Rescue Romance: How Jealousy Drives the Narrative Along (M. Scorsese, USA, 1976)

Taxi Driver ... has been re-released to mark its 20th century anniversary. But it hasn’t aged so much as triumphantly metastasized. Since the mid-70s, the movie has become presciently emblematic of our emotionally diseased, violence-prone culture.

(Howe, 1996)

Taxi Driver remains one of the most acclaimed films in the history of cinema. One can point to the iconic status of Travis Bickle, played by Robert De Niro, whose masculinity, both then and now, captures for his audiences the narcissistic instabilities of the tough Hollywood hero (Bainbridge and Yates, 2005). The complexity of De Niro’s performance as the troubled anti-hero Travis anticipates more contemporary images of ambiguous masculinities, which are a feature of the other films discussed in this book. The film works as a critique of chivalric noble jealousy, exposing its violent underpinnings through the depiction of Travis’s paranoid desire to save the woman from the evil third party. Taxi Driver was first released in 1976, and reissued in 1996 (for the cinema and on DVD). It remains significant for contemporary discussions about changing debates about masculinity in cinema because it was made at a moment when more traditional images of heroic masculinity were being overtly challenged. As the 1976 press reviews suggest, the success of the film was connected to the specificities of that historical moment in the West, when white patriarchal authority was being undermined by a number of forces associated with feminism, black civil rights and the Vietnam War.

However, Taxi Driver still has relevance for male audiences today and its themes resonate with contemporary popular debates about the crisis
of masculinity. The more recent positive press reviews that accompanied its re-release at the cinema and on DVD testify to its continued popularity. For example, in a DVD review, John Larsen (1999) argues that *Taxi Driver* ‘has become so ingrained in the pop psyche that it is hard to avoid it. I know people who still use the “talking to me” bit in their everyday lives’.¹ *Taxi Driver* is now viewed as a ‘classic’ film, and reviews and personal retrospective accounts of first viewings can be found on a number of internet ‘classic’ movie sites.² *Taxi Driver* can provide insights into contemporary discourses and fantasies of masculinity, and the press reviews in 1976 and 1996 also contribute towards a discussion of psychosocial changes that have taken place since the moment of its release.

Male sexual jealousy provides a driving force behind the narrative and occurs at key dramatic points in the film to alert us to Travis’s psychosis. A central element of the film’s narrative of jealousy is the ‘Rescue motif’, a term used by Freud (1910) to refer to the male fantasy of rescuing distressed women from a third party. Although the depiction of Travis’s heroism reproduces the narrative pleasures of the traditional male gaze, it also works critically to alert us to the violent underpinnings of chivalric masculinity, which may mask a more violent wish for revenge. The portrayal of Travis’s jealousy is related to the representation of his misogyny and racism as the film re-enacts a number of social, political and psychological conflicts that existed in the 1970s and the threat presented by the ‘other’ to the white male cuckolded psyche.

**Masculinity under siege: the psychopathic jealous hero**

*Taxi Driver* was released during a period of enormous social and political change in the Western world. It was made in 1976, a year after the United States pulled out of the Vietnam War. Political corruption associated with Watergate was also a strong factor for the American audience and the film is imbued with the failure and guilt of that experience for Americans (Taubin, 2000).³ Against that socio-political backdrop, *Taxi Driver* can be grouped alongside those films influenced by the counter-culture of the 1960s and early 1970s, which drew on radical political discourses and images to critique the old myths and stereotypes of the traditional Hollywood cinema and society. The film’s director Martin Scorsese was part of a group of young directors of the time, who wanted to produce a new kind of cinematic experience that challenged the old Hollywood tropes and methods of film making. The