

## Chapter Twelve—*Taxi Driver* (Scorsese 1976)



copycat violence & high school shooters  
art/life interpenetration  
didactic art & aesthetic distance  
impressionism  
stylized dichotomous soundtrack  
compromised closure  
*faux raccord*  
the cameo & the seduction  
passenger watching silhouette shot-by-shot & the connecting pan shot  
the god shot as global image pattern  
Scorsese's American Bandstand  
the pan to emptiness  
process shot  
jump cut double take  
marine training as method acting  
countercultural wars  
intentional fallacy

Martin Scorsese's *tour de force film* is not only famous for its spectacular moviemaking and career-making performance by Robert De Niro, it is notorious for allegedly spawning the copycat assassination of President Ronald Reagan in a misguided attempt to get a date with the film's young leading lady, Jodie Foster. *Taxi Driver* (Scorsese 1976), among many other things, is a film about a confused young man who discovers the power of a handgun to soothe a broken heart. There was an epidemic of high school

shootings throughout the mid to late 1990s, which oddly enough nearly disappeared in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in 2001, but recommenced in 2005, moving to Universities like Virginia Tech in 2007, and more recently perpetrated by an expelled neuroscience grad student in a Colorado movie theater during the midnight premiere of *The Dark Knight Rises* (Nolan 2012) and the November 2013 massacre at Newtown Connecticut's Sandy Hook Elementary School. Nearly every shooter has been a young male having difficulty coming of age, and nearly everyone has claimed a broken heart. Authorities and pundits at times wonder if the students are copying their crime from popular culture and earlier news stories. The most infamous of cases still is the "Trench coat Mafia" shooters from Columbine High School who were obsessed with the music and violent videos of industrial metal bands like Nine Inch Nails and Marilyn Manson and experienced little "luck" with girls. In the last few years the attacks have shifted to racially motivated murder sprees such as the June 2015 fatal shooting of 9 adult church leaders and members in the historically black Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Against the backdrop of these apparent copycat teenage revenge assaults, this chapter will consider the interpenetration of art and life that Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* has both performed and undergone, and will go on to suggest what "went wrong" with the director's stated purpose in his attempt to make an anti-handgun film. Screenwriter Paul Schrader combined material from the diaries of real-life failed political assassin Arthur Bremer with his own real-life descent into New York City's underbelly to write the fictional *Taxi Driver* script. Then real-life failed political assassin Hinckley repeatedly viewed and *mis*-read both the film and Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* as inspiration for his failed Ronald Reagan assassination attempt. It is not a coincidence that

the Hinckleys were then family friends with the family of Reagan's Vice President, George Bush. In the film *Travis Bickle* fails to assassinate a Presidential candidate in an attempt to impress a girl, as does Hinckley in real life, which in the end results in a remarkable political and legislative aftermath. This peculiar cinematic and cultural icon teaches us valuable lessons regarding artistic intention, didactic art, aesthetic distance, and finally, the remarkable potential for art and life to dialectically define each other.

Scorsese's psycho-sociological study of "loser" Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro) and of his city interrogates to what extent a killer is shaped and prompted by such active forces as war, work, politics, and the media. That this film depicting a failed assassination then became a prompting force itself in a failed, odd, film-inspired copycat assassination—despite its intended anti-handgun position—broadly illustrates the ambiguous nature of art in general, its virtual inability to account for or guarantee its effects, and its inevitable complicity with social forces such as the media. An examination of a few privileged moments in the film alongside comments the director has made in print, and particularly on the alternate audio track of the Criterion edition of the film, will show how *Taxi Driver* presents the genesis of a killer in a way that compromises the threshold of art and life, and thereby becomes complicit in the events that followed its release.

### **The Specular Trope**

By presenting the first shot of the film's *hero* as if seen in a rearview mirror of Travis' moist eyes reflecting in their whites the lights of the city, an image replicated a number of times in Scorsese's lyrical visualization of neon reflected in water-drenched city streets, the film at once sets loose the specular trope of looking and reflecting--reflecting back one's surroundings and reflecting on oneself or the lack thereof. This first shot of the hero serves

the double function of casting the audience as passengers in Travis' cab looking at him through the rearview mirror, and of signaling Travis' impossible task of facing himself, his loneliness, his alienation. All of the images and events of the film (save a few notable exceptions to which we will return) are translated through the eyes of Travis: it is his film.



Fig. 1 The film at once sets loose the specular trope of looking and reflecting back

Perhaps this initial insight regarding Travis' dominant point-of-view shots explains why Scorsese's rarer "religious overhead shots," as he has called them, fail to accomplish the

judgmental distance he wanted us to feel toward Travis.

### **The High Angle**

Scorsese tells us how intentional these distancing shots were by explaining that from the beginning "Paul wrote the high angle" into the script. He goes on to stress the importance of keeping "Travis separate from everybody else" in "a single frame." If *Taxi Driver* is flawed, it is the ultimate illegibility—illegible not only to Hinckley—of these overhead god shots and isolating single frame gestures intended to denote the film's critical distance from this loser, zealot, and vigilante. Scorsese comments further on *his intentions* toward Bickle: "Whenever I shot Travis Bickle . . . Nobody was in his frame . . . There would be a certain look in his eyes, a certain close-up of his face, shot with a certain lens. Subtle—not too wide, not to destroy it, not to nudge the audience into, 'Hey, this guy's a whacko.' Not that sort of thing. But rather to let it *sneak up* on the audience, like Travis does, and move the camera the way he sees things—all from his point of view" (my emphasis added). "I hope you see it—I see it." Travis is "not cured," he's a time bomb," is that "clear? It doesn't have to be. That's all right." Again, the flaw in communicating his intention is perhaps due to being too "sneaky." Bickle's "whacko-ness" is more than likely missed by most viewers.







Fig. 2 Does a wealth of overhead “God shots” intended to communicate judgmental distance ultimately fail?

Most of the stylistic flourishes, like the slow-motion walk to meet Betsy (along with Tom Scott's plaintive alto sax riff composed by Bernard Herrmann), express Travis' romanticism and not necessarily the filmmaker's. It is no wonder that Travis, the ex-marine, has difficulty reflecting. What other type, class, constituency is as overly represented in the collective media as the stereotyped, emotionally wracked Vietnam veteran? (This is not to

ignore the fact that *Taxi Driver* is one of the first American films from a major studio and director to depict the returning vet.)

### **We Are The People**

Such over-representation leads to saturation and results in a succumbing to the media's image of oneself: "I believe that someone should be a person like other people." In Travis' diary entries we see him struggle to appropriate the bureaucratise of Senator Charles Palantine (Leonard Harris) and journalese of the TV and of the newspapers and paperback books strewn over his bed and the floor of his apartment.



Fig. 3 The media envelops Travis: TV, paperback books, newspapers, magazines, the cinema

Travis' marine training also contributes to his identity struggle. Betsy (Cybil Shepherd) calls Travis a "walking contradiction," and the specularly named Iris (Jody Foster) challenges him to pay attention to himself by looking at his "eyeballs in the mirror," effectively grounding the film's opening and closing image of Travis who can only furtively glimpse himself. The plurality of his personality is asserted when the camera slowly tilts up his body to reveal his "We are the People" button and newly self-coifed Mohawk haircut. Rather than

announcing his support for the "father figure" Palantine whom he intends to murder, the button serves as a nametag; Travis is "we," a plural personality and, as victim of media bombardment, everyman. The near-constant din of Palantine's speeches seems more and more tailored for Travis as they subliminally enter his subconscious. Although Bickle is shown writing in his diary and apparently reads or at least skims books and periodicals, it is important to acknowledge that he is undereducated and this helps explain his susceptibility to suggestion and to class-based frustration over inroads by the counterculture. One of the laudatory articles about Travis' bloodbath that he hangs on his wall specifically describes him as a "working class hero." During his interview for the cabbie job, his future boss and fellow marine, asks him about his schooling:

“PERSONNEL OFFICER: Education?

TRAVIS BICKLE: Some . . . I . . . here, there, you know. (They exchange meaningful looks.)”

When Travis effectuates his "change," Palantine notes: "The people are responding to the demands I've put on them," and "We the people suffered in Viet Nam . . . We have reached the turning point. No longer will we suffer for the few," etc. As Travis is walking down sunny Sixth Avenue we encounter a montage of "documentary" shots of pedestrians and Scorsese's camera singles out a proto-Travis: a young man with closely-cropped hair listening to headphones wearing an army jacket. Walking alone and isolated by his headphones, this uncredited pedestrian is a near graphic match of the army coat clad Travis with his prominent "King Kong Company" arm patch. Schrader and Scorsese assign Travis that patch in order to conjure up another famous anti-hero who hates New York City and must battle its forces alone.



Fig. 4 A proto-Travis is singled out and graphically matches this member of the King Kong Company

While the image of this pedestrian in an army jacket flits quickly by and may not be very noticeable to a first-time viewer, here is another image for Travis to replicate. Scorsese speaks of the "serendipity" that occurs in filmmaking, how one can "get lucky in art," and goes on to say: "We didn't know what was real." We had "real people in the frame." We "couldn't help it."

## A Walking Contradiction in Sound

For the purposes of the film, Travis *is* the people, and the people are susceptible to what the media dictates. As Travis moves through the city, midtown movie marquees broadcast such titles as the brutal slasher film *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, the film about the little guy who stands up to the mob, *Mr. Majestik*, and *The Eiger Sanction*, a film featuring Clint Eastwood as the contradictory art professor/assassin. Over coffee Betsy cites the lyrics to Kris Kristofferson's "The Pilgrim, Chapter 33" to dub Travis a contradiction, "He's a walkin' contradiction, partly truth and partly fiction." (*The Silver Tongued Devil and I*, 1971, Monument.) Travis does not understand Betsy's observation, and buys the Lp for her, which she ultimately returns unopened, saying in a disgusted voice as she closes the cab door on him, "I've already got it."

This contradictory, dichotomous element is announced almost immediately at the beginning of the film by means of the stylized film score. Bernard Herrmann's score is decidedly split between quasi-military drumming and the romantic, noir sax jazz theme—the kind of typical film noir musical accompaniment to a hero's love affair in the big city at night. The non-diegetic drumming often interrupts the non-diegetic jazz theme, expressing the effect the murderous marine training has on Travis' attempts at romantic love. Once Betsy rejects Travis, following the ill-conceived trip to the Swedish sex film, the romantic theme disappears and does not return until Iris agrees to have "breakfast" with Travis. The musical dialogue between these two sonic elements represents the two warring factions inside of Travis Bickle and are artistically combined following the bloodbath, when the tympani pounds with the love theme in a new key and register: Travis has found a violent palliative for his headaches. He can now murder for the love of Iris and be rewarded with

banner headlines and gratitude by her parents. It is rather doubtful, however, that the damsel in distress, Iris, desires to be returned to her parents by her Travis in shining armor. Iris tells Travis point blank: “Why do you want me to go back to my parents? They hate me, I can’t live there.”

### **Hold Me Close**

But the scene in the film (other than Bickle’s furtive glance in the rearview mirror) that seriously challenges the seamless narrative closure sticks out like a sore thumb because Travis is neither in it nor watching it. Alone in their late 60’s postered room, Sport (Harvey Keitel) seeks to calm Iris’ concerns about her prostitution raised by Travis. He puts on a record (“Hold Me Close” Keith Addis/Bernard Herrmann) and begins to slow dance with her, calming her with tender words. The audio allegedly coming from the record is a rather non-diegetic sounding version of the romantic noir theme composed by Bernard Herrmann and played by Tom Scott. It accompanies what appears to be a genuine moment of tenderness—one Travis can only dream about with Betsy, replete with Sport’s record player, something Travis doesn’t own and doesn’t understand. Near the end of the scene, while we continue to see Sport and Iris embrace, kiss, and dance closely to one another, we are startled by the *faux raccord* of gunshots from an automatic weapon. As the sounds of the shots get louder we then discover their source, as there is an abrupt edit to Travis Bickle shooting at a paper-human target in a firing range. This *faux raccord* editing makes it clear that Travis desires to separate the young prostitute from her pimp and foreshadows his doing so through handgun violence, despite the apparent happiness and affection between the couple. This stylized sequence can be cited to support the argument that Iris is content, cared for, and does not wish to be

"rescued" by Travis, thus undercutting his "heroism" and sympathetic persona the film's superficial closure tends towards.



Fig. 5 The *faux raccord* of Bickle's bullets interrupts a moment of tenderness and undermines his heroism

Long before Travis changes, i.e., purchases pistols and decides to rain over the city's filth, Charles T. (Norman Matlock) and Wizard (Peter Boyle) each independently dubs him "killer," and later, Sport rightly takes him for both cop and killer. The effect of identifying Travis this way prompts him, indicates for him what Palantine will call the "good," "right" road. The only true seduction scene in the film, however, occurs between Scorsese himself as "Passenger Watching Silhouette" and Travis. Here is where the prompting of Travis is most evident.



Fig. 6 Charles T., Wizard and Sport each independently intuit Travis Bickle is a “Killer”

### **You Must Think**

The brokenhearted/misogynist passenger who is unmistakably played by the film’s director, Martin Scorsese, directs Travis' gaze and body movements as he plants in the freshly love-spurned taxi driver's mind, through maniacal repetition, the power of a .44 magnum hand gun to soothe a broken heart. Sitting in the back of the cab he encourages Travis to visualize, to ponder handgun violence: "*You should see* what a .44 magnum'll do . .

. *You must think* I'm pretty sick . . . Right? Right?" The cuckolded husband announces that his wife is betraying him with a "nigger," adding to Travis' already developed racism. Most of the scene between the passenger and the taxi driver has been accomplished with each character in his own frame and maintaining a distance. The exchange concludes however, with a stylized left to right pan as if establishing a connection as a result of the mutual pondering of handgun violence. The next shot following this pan is an edit to a close up of the back of Bickle's head as if to indicate that the violent messages are sinking in.





Fig. 7 A lonely hearts club is founded by means of a connecting pan as the message sinks in.

After his act of complicit voyeurism and mutual meditation on such violence, Travis inarticulately explains to Wizard that he now wants to "go out and do something," that he is motivated by the "bad ideas" he has in his head. An unreflective character like Travis (and the model that has emerged from the long line of murderous American young adult males) is a prime subject for such prompting, unable to determine from where his ideas originate and ill-equipped to evaluate those ideas. Although Scorsese is at pains to deny the importance of

Travis Bickle's Viet Nam Veteran status, claiming the film is "not a comment on Vets," and "War does not make psychopaths, he didn't need Viet Nam to create psychopathology," it is fair to mention the identity-crushing nature of military basic training and combat whereby everyone is not only dressed in an identical uniform, but made uniform. The vulnerable Travis takes direction from the passenger, who is also recognizably the director of the film in cameo. There is another telling cameo from Scorsese, this one uncredited, when he is sitting, perhaps even waiting, for Betsy to arrive at Palantine headquarters. Watching Scorsese watch Betsy, very much in the way Travis spies on her from his cab, connects the characters further and subtly associates the director of the film with his own cinematic voyeurism. From this scene on, however, Travis will direct himself in his own movie.



Fig. 8 Connected by their voyeuristic possession of Betsy

Despite the typically reflective and introspective practice of keeping a diary and all of the planning Travis performs, the taxi driver is limited to a somewhat fleeting *rear view*. He sees himself as what he does. Wizard tells him: "You do a thing—that's what you are." We view Travis accordingly in the scene with handgun salesman Easy Andy (Steven Prince) through the open chamber of the .44 magnum that frames one of his eyes.



Fig. 9

WIZARD: "You do a thing—that's what you are."

After murdering the armed robber of African descent in the mini mart, he narrates the entry regarding his lifetime of loneliness, and is then shown closely watching a broadcast of American Bandstand, gun in hand. The first image we see is a black couple dancing closely together. Several times throughout the film we watch Travis witness with envy couples together.

### **American Bandstand**

As Dick Clark's camera weaves through the teenage couples on the dance floor and slowly zooms in for a close up of an abandoned pair of shoes, Scorsese's camera mimics the TV camera's movement, slowly zooming in on Travis and his gun in a graphic match. Here the media presents Travis (and us) with an objective correlative for his loneliness: a pair of empty shoes, which Travis, guided by outside influences, will soon fill.





Fig. 10 Scorsese's camera mimics the Dick Clark's camera movement

### **God's Lonely Man**

The scene that most clearly depicts the taxi driver's loneliness is Travis being rejected by Betsy on the pay phone. The camera holds him in the frame a long time and then almost as if out of embarrassment for him, slowly pans right to the empty hall, creating an off-center or unbalanced composition. This shot depicting "God's lonely man" is notable because it was the first shot Scorsese thought of when preparing the film.



Fig. 11 The camera holds then almost as if out of embarrassment slowly pans right to the empty hall, creating an off-center or unbalanced composition, and a puzzle.

Although Bickle is clearly in his mid-twenties and a veteran of the war, he is very much the adolescent in his relations to women and authority—a relation classically depicted in Salinger's notorious *Catcher in the Rye*. Like Travis Bickle, Holden Caulfield characterizes girls and adults as phonies and despises New York City. They each hire a prostitute for chat instead of sex. It is no surprise that we find Bickle identifying with the teenage dancers on American Bandstand, just as it is no surprise that the assassin of John Lennon identified with Holden (he was found at the murder scene with a well-thumbed copy of *Catcher* in his back pocket) who felt Lennon had sold out to become a phony adult, house-husband. Nor is it surprising that would-be Reagan assassin Hinckley identified with both Bickle (whose story he obsessed over), and Caulfield (he was found at the attempted murder scene with a well-thumbed copy of *Catcher* in his back pocket.) Here we have three (two real and one fictional) impressionable young men, very much like the long list of young adult male killers, who all sought out handgun violence to mend their broken hearts.

The most stylistically provocative and thematically significant scenes in *Taxi Driver* are *not* the undeniably striking, lavishly choreographed, amply miked, blood and limb splatterings. Beginning with the opening shot of the illuminated city reflected in the moist whites of Travis' eyes graphically matched by the neon reflected in the wet city streets, Scorsese goes on to a medial freeze long shot of that wet street, treating it in the lab in such a way that all the colors run and impressionistically blur into one another in order to establish Travis' blurred/romantic vision of himself. The treating of such a shot in the laboratory is known as a **process shot** whereby one or more images are combined or

touched up to create a certain special effect. When we first meet Betsy, the camera effectively moves about her along with virtuosic editing, tracking, zooming, panning, looking at her. It is interesting that Iris, who Travis is able to see more realistically, is not afforded the same swooning, subjective camera.

### **Are You Talkin' To Me?**

But the most outrageous of all stylistic flourishes occurs very near the middle of the film, its turning point, when Travis addresses his image in the mirror, first feigning a confrontation with an absent combattee ("Are you talkin' to me?"), but then presenting himself to himself and to the audience. He momentarily steps outside his "character" as Travis Bickle to direct and narrate himself, delivering lines a la James Cagney: "Listen you fuckers, you screwheads. Here's a man who would not take it anymore . . . Here is someone who stood up. Here is . . ." And here we are presented with the scene taken twice and are challenged to make sense of it. The second take is inserted with a jump cut. What such a stylistic device expresses depends of course on its context. It is the only jump cut in the film, the only acknowledged double take and must therefore express something contextually specific to this scene in this film rather than something as general as the French New Wave film maker Godard's Brechtian attempt at mimesis. Coming as it does near the middle of the film, this jump-cut double-take in front of the mirror has a *mise-en-abyme* effect as if the film was folding in on itself, reflecting upon itself, and at its center a vortex of lost footage (the jump-cut) and an uncanny doubling (the double-take) a la *Vertigo*. Here is Travis as *assistant* director, taking his cue directly from the silhouette watching, Svengali-like Scorsese, and indirectly from the film's numerous *sprachen-figurae*: Palantine, Wizard, Charlie T., Sport, various newspapers, magazines, paperbacks, TV, slasher and porn films,

etc. Travis rises here at the true center of the film to a height of role-playing rather than reflection in this stylized self-presentation.



Fig. 12 The film's unprecedented jump-cut double take creates an abyss at its center

Bickle's creation began in his diary, the site of self-aestheticization; it is from these pages that he draws the film's noir-like narration. The push-ups, sit-ups, chin-ups reprise his marine basic training and serve as physical preparation for the role—he even trains in an inside-out U.S. Marine t-shirt. Here is method acting *par excellence* a la De Niro. Because effectively doubled, Bickle's identity is clearly in crisis and is brilliantly thematized by the dichotomous non-diegetic soundtrack.



Fig. 13 Reprising Marine training as method acting

By shaving his head Travis is also make-up man for his movie of the mind, or rather his *realized* snuff film to which the media will respond with praise, absolution, and banner headlines posting positive reviews. As if a Mohawk warrior seeking to take back his land from the invading filth he describes in both his diary and to Palantine, Travis impersonates a violent version of one of his hated others. Although not listed in his tirade of hated city

“animals” that “come out at night,” longhaired hippies, not unlike Betsy’s coworker Tom (Albert Brooks), are certainly up there on the list along with the “niggers.”

### **I Don’t Get Along With People Like That**

Iris and Sport’s room are adorned with posters of long-haired Mick Jagger, Jimi Hendrix, and an eroticized Kama Sutra Zodiac calendar of sexual positions all representing the anti-Viet Nam war, rock & roll counter-culture Travis most certainly read about and despises. Sport, who was initially written as a black man pimping Iris, was toned down to make a little less obvious and tolerable the film’s intentional racism by assigning him long hair in the way young people wore their Native American inspired hair and headbands and beads, etc. in the late 60s and early 70s. When Iris invites Bickle to join her at a Vermont commune, he declines, explaining: “I don’t get along with people like that,” and that he has seen pictures in magazines of those filthy places. Bickle indirectly impugns the manhood of Betsy’s Afro wearing co-worker Tom when he insists how wrong he is for Betsy because his “energy” goes in “the wrong direction.” This early version of a so-called “metrosexual” is unable to pass Betsy’s match lighting test, but Travis elicits giggles at the sight of him making a muscle. When Betsy hints that she wants Tom to shoo away that peeping tom taxi driver, Tom reluctantly agrees by saying: “I’ll play the male in this relationship. I’ll go out and tell . . .” and is interrupted by Betsy who says “Good luck.” Sport ridicules Travis that he certainly does not look “hip,” and Iris agrees that he looks like a “Narc” and both take him to be a cowboy in contradistinction to the hip Indian look of Sport. Iris ups the cultural ante and distinctions when, in response to his plans to rescue her like a knight in shining armor (or Marine), she asks him: “Ever hear of women’s lib? God are you square!”



Travis trades cowboy persona for Mohawk warrior



Sport impersonates a Hippie



The metrosexual feminized male can't pass Betsy's test



The retro He-Man act elicits a girlish giggle

Fig. 14 Travis trades cowboy persona for Mohawk warrior/Sport impersonates a Hippie/The metrosexual feminized male can't pass Betsy's test/The retro He-Man act elicits a girlish giggle

The other drivers are surprised that Bickle is willing to go to the South Bronx, Harlem and other black neighborhoods. Travis describes an attack on a taxi driver up on 122<sup>nd</sup> Street and Wizard exclaims “Fuckin’ Mau-Mau land!” The camera’s close up on Travis elevates as he looks over at what appears to be the “Black Pimp” section of the Belmore Cafeteria. Prior to gunning down the black man in the convenience store, Bickle stares down another black male who passes by his cabbie hangout.





Fig. 15 "Fuckin' Mau-Mau land"

The culture war is laid out: Hippies, upper middle class white males like Tom and Senator Palantine, Blacks, and . . . women libbers. After confronting Betsy at Palantine headquarters for not returning his calls, Bickle exits violently claiming that Betsy is "like the rest of them." To the left of the frame is a Palantine poster populated entirely with women. As he exits the building, knocking over a woman just outside the door, the audience can plainly read the sign on the adjacent building "Aunt Fish" as his voiceover takes up the misogynistic rant: "I realize now how much she's just like the others. Cold and distant. And many people are like that. Women for sure. They're like a union."



Fig. 16 Just like the rest of them/They're like a union!

### **It's Only a Movie**

It is remarkable that a film, which attempts to critique such a notion of suggestibility as does *Taxi Driver*, should go on to become such an effective suggester to Hinckley. From assassin Bremer, whose story screenwriter Paul Schrader adapted, through Scorsese's Bickle to Hinckley, the film director mediates. If a lesson is to be learned from what took place subsequent to Hinckley's repeated viewings of *Taxi Driver*, it is that film, and its ability to degrade the line between art and life ("it's only a movie!"), is not given to inculcating any

purposive lessons, rather only inadvertent ones. Had the film's critical distance from Travis been more overtly italicized, would the character and Scorsese's anti-handgun stance have been safe from misinterpretation, misapplication? Or more to the point—If Scorsese had been willing to deaden some of the charisma of his favorite leading actor, what Scorsese has called "the sympathetic nature of Bob," the way he was willing to capitulate to the studio in its demand that he reduce the gory color of the final bloodbath, would it have been as rich a work of cinema? And finally, and most to the point, had the Hinckley incident not followed years after the film's release, would *Taxi Driver* still have gained the peculiar aura of danger it still owns today, which undeniably accounts for a significant portion of its richness? In his Saturday radio address (13 June 1998) a few weeks following a recent high school shooting (Jonesboro High School attack), President Bill Clinton blamed the glorification of violence in popular culture, saying Hollywood was culpable for the recent killings by producing movies, television programs and music lyrics that romanticize killing and warp the minds of naive youngsters. "It is no wonder, as scores of studies show, that our children are increasingly numb to violence. They see and hear it everywhere—from TV screens to movie screens to computer screens and in popular music. When mindless killing becomes a staple of family entertainment, when over and over children see cinematic conflicts resolved not with words, but with weapons, we shouldn't be surprised when children, from impulse or design, follow suit."

### **Never Trust the Artist. Trust the Tale**

*Taxi Driver* is an explicit anti-handgun film that inadvertently *promotes* handgun violence, and therefore demonstrates the failure of didactic art. Is Scorsese partly responsible for Hinckley's attempt on Ronald Reagan's life or the harassment of Jody

Foster? Did Salinger contribute to the murder of John Lennon and the attempts on the lives of Reagan and Brady? Are Nine Inch Nails, Marilyn Manson (who has a *Taxi Driver*-esque video) Pearl Jam and Oliver Stone culpable for the killing sprees that circumstantially resulted from exposure to their powerful art? Are metal-rockers Ozzy Osbourne and Judas Priest responsible for the suicides of a number of teenage fans? Ozzy's song "Suicide Solution" it may be important to note, is an anti-suicide tract. Jello Biafra of the former punk band Dead Kennedys has complained that when he and the band would play his anti-slamming, anti-violence in the mosh pit song "Nazi Punks Fuck Off," the most fascist and violent of his fans would totally miss the point and slam into their unwilling, weaker peers. Of course the intensely fast tempo of the drums, the slashing guitar, and hysterical vocal combine to create a perfect song for slamming—and who can really discern those lyrics?. De Niro's charismatic performance, the media's praise, and the illegible critical distance of the overhead shots were effective cues for a defective, obsessive fan. It is perhaps the nature of all art, even self-proclaimed counter-hegemonic art like Scorsese's, Stone's, Biafra's, Ozzy's, or even Bruce Springsteen's (whose anti-Reaganomics song "Born in the USA" was co-opted by the Reagan re-election committee,) to be turned on its head by the hegemonic audience. An insight not only into the ambiguous, up-for-grabs nature of meaning in art can be derived here, but a critique of the intentional fallacy as well. As D.H. Lawrence once said in *Studies in Classic American Literature*, chapter 1, "The Spirit of Place: "Never trust the artist. Trust the tale." The full Lawrence quote follows: "The artist usually sets out—or used to—to point a moral and adorn a tale. The tale, however, points the other way, as a rule. Two blankly opposing morals, the artist's and the tale's. Never trust the

artist. Trust the tale. The proper function of a critic is to save the tale from the artist who created it."

But the saga of Scorsese's anti-handgun film does not end with Hinckley's botched reading of the film and botched assassination. Is it not ironic, poignant, and a little uncanny that a film that begins with a real life event (Bremer's attempted assassination of Governor George Wallace) and writing (Brenner's diary) should mirror that trajectory at the end by resulting in a real life event (Hinckley's copycat violence) and subsequent *writing*. The writing I refer to stems from the actions of another victim of Hinckley's troubled idiocy—James Brady—his tireless campaign with the help of his wife for restrictions on handguns in America. Of course Martin Scorsese is responsible neither for Hinckley's nor Congress' actions, or is he? One thing is clear, the *intended* wish of this film has *sneaked* into our everyday lives in the form of the anti-handgun legislation known as the Brady Bill.